

John William Peters (1791–1861): Some Clarifications

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Details of the life of John William Peters have often been hard to establish because his career has been overshadowed by the widespread use and appreciation, among Brethren, of the hymns of his second wife, Mary (*née* Bowly, 1813–1856) whose name is therefore more familiar. This was particularly the case in the article eponymously devoted to ‘Mrs Mary Peters’, in the *Dictionary of National Biography* where, among other errors that have been repeatedly adopted by other writers, the Revd W. B. Lowther egregiously brought the date of Peters’ death forward by nearly thirty years, almost halving the length of his life.¹ The following account is not primarily concerned with the hymn-writer and originated in my correspondence, some thirty-five years ago, with Mr. Robert F. Meade of Quenington, Gloucestershire, who was preparing an article for his chapel magazine in 1982.² Other sources of information have emerged since pursuing those enquiries, and having recently revisited

¹ L. Stephen, and S. Lee (eds.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, [DNB] 23 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1885–1900) 45: 77, art., by W. B. Lowther, ‘Peters, Mrs Mary.’ In revising Lowther’s article, Dr Rosemary Mitchell has begun to correct the record but as she is focusing on the hymn-writer, her version is still misleading in places, H. C. G. Matthew, and B. Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [ODNB], 61 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2004) art., by W. B. Lowther, rev by R. Mitchell, ‘Peters [*née* Bowly], Mary.’

² Mr. Meade’s articles in the mimeographed *Quenington Chapel Magazine* (for July and Sept. 1982, see note 30) seem to be the unacknowledged source for some of the information in Jack Strahan’s piece on Mary Peters in ‘Hymns and their Writers (39)’, *Assembly Testimony Magazine* (May/June 1987), which later appeared in his *Hymns and their Writers*, vol. 1 (Glasgow, 1989) 165–9. More recently, some of this material was used (with acknowledgment to Strahan) by R. Cargill, ‘“A Goodly Heritage” (29): Mary Peters (1813–1856)’ in the *Believer’s Magazine* (June 2015). I gladly acknowledge my debt to Mr Meade with whom, unfortunately, I am now out of touch.

the subject of the Peters family, it seemed worthwhile to summarize what we know about John William Peters as opposed to the unfounded conjectures, which have often confused the story.

To understand John William Peters,³ we have to consider the strange career of his father, the Revd (Matthew) William Peters (1742–1814), the details of whose life were, to say the least, unusual. William was born on the Isle of Wight but grew up in Dublin where he studied design in the school of Robert West. He soon moved to London and for some twenty years pursued a successful artistic career, regularly exhibiting his work in the Royal Academy, of which he became a member in 1777. Some of these years (1762–64 and 1771–75) were spent in Italy, and this was an important influence in his work. His latest biographer, Dr Robin Simon, art historian and critic, claims that ‘no British contemporary had such an Italian manner of painting as Peters, reflecting the old masters he copied.’⁴ Not infrequently there was an erotic element in his pictures, as the *Morning Chronicle* (26 April 1777) observed when describing *Lydia*, which was his most notorious composition.⁵ In later years when he embarked on a career in Holy Orders this aspect of his work was a source of some embarrassment. One of his friends, John Taylor observed that he had ‘often heard Peters deeply lament that he ever devoted his talents to such subjects, not only because they were degrading to his character, but, as far as I could judge, from sincere moral regret.’⁶

Matriculating at Oxford, from Exeter College in 1779,⁷ he was ordained in 1782. For some years he was Chaplain to the Royal Academy and to the Prince of Wales. In 1869 he had become a

³ Unaccountably, his second name is given as McWilliam in John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, 2nd ed., (London, 1907) ii. 891, and the DNB perpetuated this error.

⁴ ODNB, art. by Robin Simon, ‘Peters, (Matthew) William’.

⁵ Alison Conway, *Private Interests: Women, Portraiture, and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709–1791* (Toronto, 2001) 21; cf. Vic Gatrell, *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London’s Golden Age* (London, 2013), passim.

⁶ V. Manners, *Matthew William Peters, R.A.: His Life and Work* (London, 1913) 6.

⁷ J. Foster (ed.), *Alumni Oxonienses... 1715–1886* (Oxford, 1891) iii: 1102.

Freemason and, in addition to being made the grand portrait painter of the Freemasons, became in 1792 the first Provincial Masonic Grand-master in Lincolnshire, though in later years his days in Lincolnshire were clouded by Masonic disputes. In the 1780s the Duke of Rutland and later his widow presented Peters to several livings in the neighbourhood of Belvoir Castle, where he also acted as the duke's artistic curator. Margaret Knowsley, whom he married in 1790, was an heiress, whose fortune further contributed to Peters' wealth. For the last fifteen years of his life he was a prebendary of Lincoln Cathedral, holding, by an ecclesiastical anomaly, the lucrative stall of Langford Ecclesia in the diocese of Oxford.⁸

The income of an artist was then, as now, precarious and it seems probable that William Peters' overriding motive in his career change was financial, and though he seems to have been a fairly conscientious cleric, the life-style in his household could scarcely be described as one of piety. Of William Peters' five children, the eldest, John William was born on 13 March 1791 in London where he was christened in St Anne's Church, Soho.⁹ He attended Oakham School, Leicester Free Grammar School¹⁰ and Richmond School where the scholarly headmaster, James Tate, formerly a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, was famed not only for the success of his students at Cambridge—known as 'Tate's invincibles'—but also for his humane rejection of corporal punishment.¹¹

⁸ One has to bear in mind that in mediaeval times, the Diocese of Lincoln extended much further south than it does today, and that, prior to the time of William the Conqueror, it was part of the see of the Bishop of Dorchester in what is now Oxfordshire.

⁹ <<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-30042/england-birthschristenings-1538-1975>>. His father painted a charming picture of him (aged eleven years) which was sold in June 2000, for £31,550, at auction by Sotheby's and which can be viewed at <<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.137.html/2000/the-british-sale-part-two-100728>>, accessed 19/9/2016.

¹⁰ His attendance at Oakham was during the Headship (1796–1808) of the Revd John Bradford, and at Leicester during the Headship (1802–16) of the Revd Henry St J. Bullen.

¹¹ For Tate and his 'Invincibles', see ODNB, art. by W. Carr, revised M. C. Curthoys; L. P. Wenham, *Letters of James Tate*. *Yorkshire Archaeological Society*

Tate's association with Sidney Sussex may explain why it was from that college that John Peters matriculated at Cambridge in 1810.¹² Graduating (BA 1814, and MA 1817), Peters was ordained in Lincoln as a deacon in 1814 (in which year his father died) and served as a curate in Coston, Leicestershire. He was then ordained as a priest, in Norwich in 1815, at which point he served for two years as the Vicar of Womersley, Yorks, during which time he married Catharine Colclough,¹³ and his daughter Margaret Ann was born and baptized in 1817.¹⁴

As it had been for his father, so it was too, for John William, that the priesthood was a career as opposed to a vocation, and like his father, John William was a pluralist, holding several ecclesiastical positions at the same time.¹⁵ The language of his father's will sounds

Record 128, (Wakefield, 1966) x–xvi. For his 'aversion to corporeal punishments [and . . .] stripes', see the obituary in the *Eclectic Magazine*, Jan 1844, 141.

¹² J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of all known students, graduates and holders of office at the University of Cambridge from the earliest times to 1900*. [*Al. Cant.*] 2 parts, 10 vols, (Cambridge, 1922–54), II. v.100. His younger brother Edmund followed him to Sidney Sussex in 1811 but soon migrated to Oxford where he matriculated from Christ Church in 1814.

¹³ Catharine Colclough (1797–1845) daughter of Sampson and Ann Colclough of Coddington, Notts, married J. W. Peters at Grantham, 18 Apr. 1816, <<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-30043/england-marriages-1538-1973?s=377521571&itemId=2525005-&action=showRecord>>

¹⁴ <<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-30042/england-births-christenings-1538-1975?s=377521571&itemId=63085326-&action=showRecord>>.

¹⁵ Explanatory historical note: With the dissolution of the monasteries at the time of the Reformation, many lay landowners had purchased formerly monastic lands. In so doing they became patrons or impropiators, owning the advowson or right to present (or nominate) a priest to a clerical living, (e.g. a rectory or vicarage) depending on the Bishop's approval. If the priest already had a living, a conscientious impropiator could refuse to present him to a second incumbency, but more often he would turn a blind eye to the plurality of livings and agree, instead, to the appointment by the would-be-incumbent of a curate (whose stipend would usually be significantly less than the income of the living.) A right of advowson (or presentation) could be inherited or sold and it was at just this time (1836) that Charles Simeon founded the Church Pastoral Aid Society to establish a permanent body that could purchase such advowsons, and ensure that only Evangelical clergy would be presented to the livings. This would avoid the situation where an heir with

curiously mercenary when we find William Peters bequeathing ‘to his son John William Peters, the next presentation of the Vicarage of Langford or Langford Ecclesia, in the County of Berks or Oxford, provided he presents it to himself,’¹⁶ but although the son was evidently expected to follow in his father’s footsteps, and did for a time serve as a curate, he was only appointed as the Vicar of Langford in 1825. This was because the previous absentee incumbent, the Rev. James Johnson, did not die until that year,¹⁷ but John William wanted, at once, to take advantage of his late father’s social connection with Langford Ecclesia. Indicating his interest in the locality, he served from 1819–23 as a stipendiary curate in the nearby parish of Southrop¹⁸ and was therefore well placed to be appointed as Rector of Quenington, in 1823, and as the perpetual curate¹⁹ of Ampney St Mary—both villages located a few miles to the west of Langford but east of Cirencester.²⁰

scant concern for the spiritual needs of the parish might inherit an advowson from an impropiator who had been sympathetic to the evangelical cause.

¹⁶ V. Manners, *Matthew William Peters ...* (1913) 35. Langford was in the diocese of Oxford, but in the county of Berkshire.

¹⁷ Clergy of the Church of England Database, <<http://db.theclergydatabase.org.uk>>. The situation is confused for the historian by J.W. Peters’ brief appointment in 1815 as a curate in a Norfolk parish, also named Langford, which is now part of the parish of Ickburgh, just north of Thetford. However, the *Victoria County History* states unequivocally that James Johnson was a pluralist living in Somerset and that in 1825 ‘he was succeeded by his former curate John William Peters;’ see Simon Townley (ed.), ‘Langford Parish: Langford—Pastoral Care and Religious Life’, in *A History of the County of Oxford*, vol. 17 (Woodbridge, 2012), 175–208. ‘British History Online’, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol17/175-208>>, accessed 24/9/2016.

¹⁸ Although there is apparently no baptismal record, it was in Southrop that his son Edmund Henry was born in c.1821 (Census 1861, 1871)

¹⁹ A perpetual curate was effectively an incumbent with the impropiator retaining some of the living’s income.

²⁰ Southrop, Quenington and Ampney St Mary are all parishes in the diocese of Gloucester. The Patron who presented Peters to the Rectory of Quenington was (later Sir) Michael Hicks Beach Esq., of Williamstrip Park, Gloucs. (*Bury and Norwich Post*, 26 Feb 1823).

Looking at these things from a twenty-first century perspective, it is easy for us to be critical of John William's pluralism and feel that his readiness to take on three parishes simultaneously seems to call in question his sincerity as a minister of the Church. If the Anglican Church was, as it claimed to be, a national church, then surely the priest ought to be ready to take pastoral responsibility for *all* the inhabitants of the parish, and three parishes would clearly be an impossible responsibility. However, we should note that this local grouping of parishes was rather different from the practice of many other priests of the time whose parishes were very much further removed from each other. In the world of the Peters family, the parish priest was a gentleman of some social standing. He was more than just an official in the ecclesiastical establishment; he was one of the gentry, part of the *social* establishment, who could be expected to ride with the local hunt and who would sometimes be called upon to serve as a magistrate. For many an Anglican priest the message of Christianity was one of morality rather than doctrinal theology, providing a sort of moral cement that was expected to strengthen the bonds of society encouraging responsible social conduct. As a priest, a member of the clergy would frequently see himself as a cog in the social machinery or a part of the hierarchy of social order, rather than having a pastoral role ministering to the spiritual needs of his flock. This was very much the outlook of the Peters family.

The shock of John Peters' resignation and secession from the Church of England in early 1834 must have been considerable. In an emotional published letter addressed to the parishioners of Langford (and also presumably, though not by name, his Quenington flock) their Vicar sought to explain what he had done and why he had done it.²¹ In fact it is quite possible that some members of his

²¹ John William Peters, *A Letter addressed to Members of the Church of Christ, in Langford, in the county of Berks, by John William Peters, the late incumbent of that parish on his resignation of the living of Langford, and his secession from the Established Church* (Cirencester: Henry Smith; London: E. Palmer, 1834) 8°. [23 pages, preface signed 'Fairford March 1834'], available on-line, at <<https://books.google.com/books?id=XLgHAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA1&lpq=PA1&dq=Peters,+A+Letter+addressed+to+Members+of+the+Church&source>>. Peters appears to have vacated the Rectory at Quenington and moved a few miles south to Fairford

congregations had recently noticed a change in his preaching as his letter explained how his attitude had been changing in the previous two years. He confessed that for a long time he had misjudged his role as minister:

I am well convinced that owing to my own natural love of darkness, I did not comprehend “the light which has come into the world,” [and] during at least sixteen years of the time I have called myself “a teacher”—during that term of years, I was “a blind leader of the blind,” and that both have not fallen inextricably into the ditch of error and destruction, is, owing to the exercise of the sovereign grace of God ...²²

He frankly admitted:

I endeavoured, with others, to lose the sight of, and get away from God and myself, and to forget both in the amusements of hunting, shooting, fishing, or in secular occupations which might divert me from the contemplation of the just judgment of God, and the awful destruction impending over my own soul while under the curse of the law... (*Letter*, p.9).

Though as time went on: ‘I was drawn by degrees from this openly scandalous and fleshly walk, and grew ashamed of the pleasures I had delighted in ...’ (*Letter*, p.11). Previously,

I eagerly accepted the office of a magistrate because it fed my pride— it gave me consequence in the eyes of others, and therefore in my own. I believed that it conveyed an impression that I possessed qualities, which all were not endowed with, or that I had some peculiar claims to distinction, that my title to honour and respect from my equals, and to humble deference from them I thought my inferiors, was sealed by my appointment.

More recently, however,

by the time he addressed his letter to his parishioners. It was here that his youngest son, Samuel, was born a month or two later.

²² Peters, *A Letter*, 9–10. If sixteen years elapsed from his ordination to the beginnings of a change in his outlook, his ‘awakening’ would date from 1831.

I hated myself in it; and though I could not heal the bitter spring, I was enabled to stop that stream from it, and I requested that my name might be erased from the list of Magistrates.²³

Sometime therefore, probably in 1831–2, Peters was persuaded that he ‘had received Christ Jesus as my anointed Saviour and I now earnestly longed to grow in the knowledge of Him... I now read the Bible with a prayer that I might “understand what the will of the Lord is” from his own mouth’ (*Letter*, pp.12–13).

But for a while Peters still ‘placed the fullest confidence in the scriptural character of that [Anglican] church’ treating the Prayer Book ‘as a commentary dictated by the same Holy Spirit under whose influence the SACRED TEXT was indited.’ (*Letter*, p. 13). Only when he closely examined the baptismal service did he realise that its use of the word ‘regenerate’ was at variance with his new-found discovery of the gospel of regeneration. As he could no longer treat all the people in his parish as regenerate, it was impossible for him to declare baptized infants as regenerate, to welcome indiscriminately all his parishioners to the Lord’s Table, or likewise to bury them all ‘in sure and certain hope of a resurrection to eternal life’ (*Letter*, pp.17–20).

We should note that at this stage Peters was keen to emphasize that he was explaining his personal course of action rather than calling on others to do the same thing:

And here suffer me again to observe that I am not writing a defence of the view I take of the offices of the Church of England. I am not professedly calling in question the rectitude of the view which others, who differ from me, take of them. I am only stating my views and the effects they had on me—their correctness is not the matter in question;—their influence, as far as regards the step I have taken, is all I have to set before you.’ (*Letter*, p.14)

²³ Peters, *A Letter*, 12. As late as December 1830 three men from Quenington were committed to Gloucester gaol for machine breaking and one of the magistrates responsible for their committal was ‘J. W. Peters (clerk)’: National Archives, HO 52/7/99.

A year later however, he was adopting a more dogmatic position when he published a sixteen-page tract in which he was critical of what he called 'the sinful position' of the evangelical Anglican clergy.²⁴

Regrettably we have no idea how his wife Catharine, who was 37 years old, and six years younger than him, reacted to his decision. To complicate matters she was expecting their youngest child Samuel,²⁵ but clearly Peters felt some urgency in the matter, otherwise he might have waited a few months. Before his resignation he would have been living in the rectory at Quenington, but now, with the baby not yet born, the family moved a few miles south to Fairford, from where his letter of explanation was written in March 1834.

Although Peters' pamphlet gives the impression that his conversion and change of heart were entirely a matter between him and God, and he makes no mention of anyone being instrumental in his altered opinions, he was in fact one of a considerable number of Anglican clergy who in the early 1830s were quitting the establishment. Many of these seceders came to be associated with the early Plymouth Brethren in whose magazine, *The Christian Witness*, an anonymous writer (probably Benjamin Wills Newton) reviewed Peters' pamphlet. Adopting a characteristically 'Brethren' position 'he welcomed the secession and expressed the hope that Peter (as he called him) and other seceders would not become entangled in any other ecclesiastical system.'²⁶ Which brings us to the difficult question of what the vicar of Quenington became, once he had resigned.

It may have been a coincidence, but in the year of Peters' secession, a local landowner, Jenkin Thomas, who was also a Baptist

²⁴ J. W. Peters, *A Few Words on the Sinful position of the Evangelical Clergy in the Church of England*, by J. W. Peters, late Rector of, now Minister of the Gospel at, Quenington (London : E. Fowler 1835).

²⁵ Samuel was born 26 May 1834, <<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=39fgw&id=I3721>>.

²⁶ *Christian Witness*, 1 (1834), 300–310, cited in H. H. Rowdon, 'Secession from the Established Church in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Vox Evangelica* 3 (1964), 88 n.143.

minister in Cheltenham, registered premises in Quenington ‘for dissenting worship’. Peters seems to have been associated with these dissenters as, in the following year (1835), he was responsible for the registration’s renewal. The Victoria county historian reckoned that these dissenters, who later used a chapel built in 1838, were Baptists²⁷ and this conclusion may seem to be confirmed by the fact that Peters is listed in the *Baptist Magazine* (1834), as one of three ministers who preached sermons to celebrate the first anniversary of the new Baptist chapel at Arlington.²⁸ Although by 1841, he was living once more in Quenington, (categorized by the somewhat illiterate Census recorder as a ‘Descenting [*sic*] Minister,’) we learn (again from the *Victoria County History*) that a house in Fairford was also ‘registered for nonconformist use... by John William Peters, formerly rector of Quenington.’²⁹

There was a Baptistery in the Quenington chapel, which was built for Peters in 1838,³⁰ but he does not seem to have called himself a ‘Baptist minister.’ The Brethren disliked labels like ‘dissenting’ and ‘non-conformist’ which they claimed were divisive, but the writer in the *Christian Witness* who had hoped that Peters would avoid denominational entanglement, may have been reassured by the fact that in his tract of 1835 Peters had avoided any sectarian label and referred to himself as merely the ‘late Rector of, now Minister of the Gospel at Quenington.’ It was only later, however, that Peters became openly associated with the Brethren.

The newly built chapel in Quenington also had a cemetery attached to it and it was here that the body of Peters’ first wife was

²⁷ See ‘Quenington’, in N. M. Herbert (ed.), *A History of the County of Gloucester* 7, (Oxford, 1981), 121–9. ‘British History Online’, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol7/pp121-129>>, accessed 27/9/2016.

²⁸ *Baptist Magazine*, 26 [vol. 9, 3rd series] (Nov. 1834), 482. His sermon was taken from John 1: 4 and it was the first of three sermons given on that day.

²⁹ See ‘Fairford’, in N. M. Herbert (ed.), *A History of the County of Gloucester*, 7 (Oxford, 1981), 69–86. ‘British History Online’, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol7/pp69-86>>, accessed 24/9/2016.

³⁰ [R. F. Meade] ‘A Cotswold Hymn Writer, a Cotswold Parson, and an old Cotswold Village Chapel’, *Quenington Chapel Magazine* [QCM] Pt 2. Sept. 1982.

laid to rest in 1846.³¹ Five years later at the time of the 1851 Census, her widowed husband (aged 58) was listed in the home of his eldest daughter, Margaret Ann, on the Isle of Wight where she had recently moved from Bath with her husband Charles D'Oyley John Lowder (1805–78), a 'practising physician'. John Peters is categorized in the Census as a 'Clergyman without Cure,' and his age is given as 58, when he was actually 59.³² That he chose to spend time in the Isle of Wight was understandable, as all his children had left home and several of them had moved to the Isle as adults.³³

His eldest son John William married a Canadian girl in St Peter's Anglican Church, Cobourg, Ontario in 1846.³⁴ A few years later he was prospecting in the Victoria gold-diggings in 1852, but we know nothing of his subsequent movements. However, on his way to the gold-diggings he was joined by his younger brother Edmund Henry, who had qualified with a doctorate in Medicine at Edinburgh University in 1850. Edmund hated the Australian way of life and returned to England in 1853.³⁵ A few years later he married a Swiss girl Juliette Blanche du Thon (1823–92) whose family appear to have owned property on the Isle of Wight.³⁶ It was here at Ryde that he settled and (with the exception of a few years in the South of France) lived until his death in 1904. In 1858, Edmund's significantly younger brother, Samuel, had married Elizabeth Geraldine du Thon

³¹ Register of deaths, 1837–2007, Cirencester, vol. 11 (1846) 2nd quarter, p. 179; [Meade,] QCM Pt 2. Sept. 1982.

³² Census 1851, Charles D. J. Lowder, Brigstock Terrace, Newchurch, Hants, IOW.

³³ It may be fortuitous, but as we noted earlier, John William's father (the artist and clergyman) was born on the Isle of Wight.

³⁴ She was Sarah Ann McKyes (born 1824, daughter of Willis McKyes and Clarissa née Gillet). John and Sarah Ann's daughter, Annie Peters was born in Ontario c. 1850; <<http://www.genealogy.com/ftm/r/o/a/Carol-E-Roach/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-1219.html>>.

³⁵ The National Library of Australia has a copy of Edmund's journal of this episode at <https://www.nla.gov.au/sites/default/files/blogs/m_830_edmund_peters.pdf>.

³⁶ Juliette's mother (Elizabeth née Lind) was English. For the marriage, in September 1860, Newchurch, IOW, see Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette, 22 September 1860, <<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=39fgw&id=I3718>>.

(1832–1921), whose older sister, Juliette Blanche, would marry his older brother two years later. Samuel, too, moved to the Isle of Wight where he is described in the Census for 1861 as a ‘Farmer of 120 acres, employing a Bailiff, 6 labourers and 3 Boys.’ In later years he moved to Cheltenham but, in his sixties, returned to the Isle of Wight where he died in 1911.³⁷ With no fewer than three of his children in the area, the Isle of Wight would have been a natural place for their widowed father’s retirement, but there were other forces with which to be reckoned.

Mary Bowly

As we noted earlier there are indications that John Peters was striving to be an unsectarian, non-denominational minister, and this would have allowed the Brethren to treat him as a sympathetic ally if not actually ‘one of them’. Quenington is not far from the market town of Cirencester and here a meeting of Brethren had been established by 1839.³⁸ A significant element in their congregation may have been the presence of some former evangelical Quakers who during the 1830s had felt the need to secede from the Society of Friends.³⁹ Richard Bowly was a linen draper, who was a member of a respected Cirencester family, which had played an important part in the Quaker movement for well over a hundred years, but the fact that his daughters did not have ‘birth-right membership’ in the Society, suggests that Richard ‘married out’ of the Quakers.⁴⁰ We may also deduce that by the 1840s Richard Bowly and his family were regularly associated with the Brethren because several hymns written

³⁷ Married in Holborn, London, June 1858. Death reported in *Isle of Wight Observer*, Saturday, 6 May, 1911, 5. See the Ryde Social Heritage Group website: <<http://rshg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/1876-internalfile591.pdf>>.

³⁸ ‘The Brethren have formed colonies at Exeter, Hereford, Worcester, Cirencester...’ ‘The Plymouth Brethren’, *The Eclectic Review* 5 (May 1839), 587.

³⁹ For the divisions in the Society of Friends, in the 1830s, and the attraction that the Brethren movement had for evangelical Quakers, see my ‘Early Brethren and the Society of Friends’, in *The Elusive Quest of the Spiritual Malcontent: Some Early Nineteenth Century Ecclesiastical Mavericks* [Elusive Quest] (Eugene OR, 2015) 32–58.

⁴⁰ [Meade,] QCM Pt. 1. (July 1982).

by his sixth daughter, Mary, were included in one of the earliest Brethren collection of hymns, compiled in 1842.⁴¹ Mary was no mean poet but the emphasis on Christian worship in her verse made her hymns highly suitable for Brethren use. The title of the anonymous collection of fifty-eight hymns by her, published a few years later, was *Hymns intended to help the Communion of Saints*, and this is indicative of the Brethren context in which they were first used.⁴²

We do not know when John William Peters met Mary Bowly, but she became his second wife on 13 April 1852, five or six years after the death of his first wife.⁴³ The wedding took place in the Baptist Church at Cirencester and was performed by George Müller.⁴⁴ There are two possible reasons for the location. It may be that the Brethren assembly was not licensed to perform marriages, but it is also quite possible that in the Brethren disputes and divisions of the late 1840s, when the Bowlys were maintaining their connection with Open Brethren (like Müller), the bulk of the Cirencester assembly took the Exclusive position advocated by Darby. This was certainly the case with Peters' two sons Edmund and Samuel who, when they moved to the Isle of Wight were associated with the Exclusive assembly at Ryde, as also were their children.⁴⁵ It was this assembly that

⁴¹ *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London: D Walther, 1842) was probably compiled by J. G. Deck.

⁴² [M. Bowly,] *Hymns intended to help the Communion of Saints* (London 1847). Curiously there is no mention of this collection or, indeed, of any of Mary Bowly's hymns, in John Andrews, 'Brethren Hymnology', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 28 (Oct. 1956), 208–29, a pioneering essay in this field. For some details and an appreciation of Mary Bowly's hymns see Strahan, 'Hymns and their Writers', above in note 2.

⁴³ We should note that although all her published hymns were probably written after Peters' secession, this was before her marriage, and therefore we must abandon (albeit reluctantly) the romantic image of her hymns being composed 'in the quietude of the old [Quenington] Rectory,' D. J. Beattie, *Stories and Sketches of our Hymns and their Writers* (Kilmarnock, [1934]), 192.

⁴⁴ [Meade,] QCM Pt. 1. (July 1982).

⁴⁵ Cf. the statement of an Exclusive writer: 'Samuel Peters removed to the Isle of Wight, where his children have lived long, cleaving to the Lord,' E. E. Cornwall,

occasioned among the Exclusive Brethren, the Kellyite division of 1879 many years after John Peters' death.⁴⁶

Mary Bowly's earlier support for Müller's work is reflected in the record of his *Scriptural Knowledge Institution* receiving, early in 1847, a gift of '100 copies of [Mary Bowly's] "Hymns intended to help the Communion of Saints"',⁴⁷ and evidently John Peters and his new wife valued the ministry of Müller at Bethesda Chapel, because soon after their marriage they moved to Clifton, Bristol. It was here four years later, on 29 July 1856, at 7 The Mall, that Mary died of pulmonary consumption. Four days later she was buried in Arnos Vale Cemetery where 'the interment certificate was signed by Henry Craik.'⁴⁸ Her widowed husband was still living in Clifton five years later, as a lodger at 316 Meredian Place, describing himself as a 'Clergyman without cure of souls'.⁴⁹ He died a few months later on 11 September 1861 in the home of his son Samuel, at Ryde on the Isle of Wight but his body 'was brought back to Quenington to be buried by the side of his first wife in the graveyard of the chapel that he built.'⁵⁰

The life of John William Peters can thus be seen to extend over a range of religious experience, even though the evidence available to his biographer is limited. For more than half of his life he took the

'The Hymns of Mary Bowly', in *Songs of Pilgrimage and Glory: Notes on the Hymns of Certain Hymn-writers* (London, [c.1920]) Part 1, 63.

⁴⁶ There are several letters to J. N. Darby, relating to the situation in Ryde, from Edmund Peters and his wife, and from Samuel Peters (1878-81) in the University Library of Manchester, CBA, JND/5/216-230; and a letter (1880/1) from Darby to Samuel Peters can be found at <<http://www.brethrenarchive.org/manuscripts/letters-of-jn-darby/letter/>>.

⁴⁷ George Müller, *Brief Narrative of Facts relative to the Orphan Houses and other objects of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad* (London, 1848), 18.

⁴⁸ ODNB; [Meade,] QCM Pt. 1. (July 1982).

⁴⁹ Census 1861. The householder was Elijah Stanley, 'coach trimmer'.

⁵⁰ [Meade,] QCM Pt. 2. (Sept. 1982). His sons, Edmund and Samuel were associated with J. N. Darby and the Exclusive Brethren, and their disapproval of the Bethesda connection may have led them to prefer a Quenington burial for their father, beside their mother. We have no record of the feelings of the Bowly family in the matter.

path of a nominal Christian who, like his father, pursued a clerical career as a way of maintaining his status in the social hierarchy of the English gentry. Around the age of 40, in what some might dismiss as a mid-life crisis, he began to take his clerical responsibilities more seriously and adopted an evangelical position in his ministry. In his own account of this, his changed attitude was the product of biblical study rather than the influence of others, but this was not necessarily the case as he may deliberately have chosen to omit such details. With his secession from the establishment, a year or two later, he strove to maintain an independent (unlabelled) ecclesiastical identity, which brought him into some proximity with the Brethren in the first decade of their existence. With the hardening division of the Brethren in the late 1840s, his sons identified with the Exclusive wing of the movement and in this, they may have been joined, for a while, by their father. A few years later, however, his appreciation of the ministry of George Müller together with his marriage to Mary Bowly, brought him fully into the circle of Open Brethren in Bristol—a position with which his sons were unlikely to approve. The subsequent tension in the family is reflected in his sons arranging for him to be buried next to their mother in Quenington rather than in the Bristol cemetery with his second wife.