

## **Bunyan's Brothers: John and Samuel Fenne of the Bedford Congregation, 1656–1705\***

On 29 September 1677 something curious seems to have occurred within the already fraught Restoration career of John Bunyan's Nonconformist church at Bedford. For, as historians have informed us, on this day one of the congregation's leading brethren, John Fenne, appears to have been admitted to the office of chamberlain and as a member of Common Council (one of 'the Thirteen') within the Bedford Corporation, the town's local government.<sup>1</sup> Such news may seem, perhaps, quite unremarkable. After all, some of the most senior members of Bunyan's church had held similarly prominent positions within the corporation prior to the Restoration, including its founders, John Eston and John Grew, both of whom had served as mayor during the 1650s (Eston was in office, in fact, when Charles II was restored in 1660), and some of Bedford's substantial businessmen: the cooper, Anthony Harrington, for example, as well as the grocer, Edward Covington (or Coventon), and the upholsterer, Richard Spensely (or Spencly).<sup>2</sup> These earlier links between corporation and congregation may well make John Fenne's later appointments appear far from unusual. The problem, of course, lies in what Fenne had to do in 1677 in order to accept these offices. As Richard Greaves has reminded us, and in accordance with legislation introduced early in the Restoration to prevent Nonconformists from participating in local government, Fenne could join the corporation only 'after taking oaths of allegiance and supremacy and subscribing the declaration against the Solemn League and Covenant'. Doing so at Michaelmas 1677, the beginning of the corporation's administrative year, Fenne formally 'acknowledged that the king was the lawful head of the Church of England, thus seemingly conceding the legitimacy of the established church'.<sup>3</sup>

How can we understand this puzzling, perhaps even bewildering, turn of events? One way to explain it is by acknowledging that, despite the legislation in place, some Dissenters did continue to hold positions within corporations during the Restoration (as was the case, for example, at Coventry).<sup>4</sup> In Bedford, however, this situation was highly unusual. Between the passing of the 1661 Corporation Act and 1688, when James II would once

again return Dissenters more securely to local government, only one name associated with Bunyan's church can be found listed as holding office in the corporation: John Fenne.<sup>5</sup> As a result, we are left with a political paradox and a congregational conundrum. How, we might ask, could Bunyan – a preacher and writer who 'had repeatedly denounced the Church of England, not least for its persecutory policies and unscriptural worship', as Greaves points out – have maintained communion with John Fenne? Might Fenne's oath-taking have 'triggered dissension' in the congregation, Greaves wonders? From the church's own records, however, there is no sign of contention: Fenne does not appear to have been challenged or reprimanded for taking these oaths. Perhaps, then, we should follow Greaves's more positive interpretation and read John Fenne's position in 1677 as a sign that although '[c]onditions in Bedford itself were probably not very hostile to nonconformity at this point', nevertheless some political pragmatism was still in order. Fenne's taking of 'the requisite oaths', Greaves proposes, both in 1677 and on numerous occasions thereafter, indicates '[t]he congregation's willingness to accommodate such service' and 'suggests Bunyan's tolerance on this issue, perhaps because he recognized the value of having a Dissenter's voice in the corporation'.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Richard Greaves's unparalleled wisdom in such matters, something remains amiss here. Taking the oaths in 1677 presents one problem, but how, we might ask, could Fenne continue to hold office within the corporation (and repeatedly take the oaths in order to do so) during the more trying years of the 1680s, when church meetings appear to have ceased altogether due to intensified persecution?<sup>7</sup> Why, furthermore, would Fenne be removed from office in 1688, when James II was otherwise pushing Dissenters – including other members of the Bedford congregation – to take up positions in corporations?<sup>8</sup> Moreover, what Greaves speculates to have been no more than a 'difference in judgment' within the church could be regarded, in this instance, as something else altogether. Taking oaths that recognise the Church of England is not at all the kind of 'difference in judgement' that Bunyan (or any other member of the congregation) could tolerate. As the excommunication in 1671 of the Bedford upholsterer (and stepson of Richard Spensely), Robert Nelson, would show, forsaking the congregation and conforming to an 'Antichristian' mode of worship would never be accepted, particularly when other members had suffered for refusing to acknowledge what the oaths of allegiance and supremacy confirm: the legitimacy of the Church of England and the king as its rightful head.<sup>9</sup> One such member was John Fenne's brother, Samuel Fenne, tried for sedition in 1669 having been accused of denying the supremacy.<sup>10</sup> Within a year, the Bedford 'cordwainer' (or shoemaker), Nehemiah Cox, was arrested not just for preaching at one of

the congregation's illegal conventicles but for stating seditiously that the Church of England was 'Antichristian as it now standes' and for refusing to accept Charles II as its supreme governor. The venue of the meeting at which Cox was captured in May 1670, along with several other church members, is important for us to note: it was John Fenne's house.<sup>11</sup>

I begin with this knotty little puzzle within the Restoration history of the Bedford congregation because the aim of this essay is, on one level, to resolve it. The problem of John Fenne's oath-taking can be clarified through the revelation of some relatively straightforward details that seem to have been overlooked so far by Bunyan scholars. To set this particular record straight, however, we need to draw on a wide range of documentation in order to review and confirm as well as emend and extend the salient facts we hold not only about John Fenne but also about his brother, Samuel Fenne, joint pastor of the Bedford congregation from 1663 to 1681. Such an investigation is important to undertake, in part, because so little attention is typically paid to these two brothers, despite how vital the work of their Dissenting hands would prove to the Bedford church throughout the first fifty years of its existence. Yet it is also important because examining the extant evidence for John and Samuel Fenne – from the congregation's own manuscript 'church book' to the biographical information provided by local parish registers – can yield a clearer insight into the life of the congregation to which they belonged: how the Bedford church was structured and organised, for instance; how the social and economic status of its members and officers can be identified; and how the church both experienced and survived the turmoil of the Restoration.

As a case study in what might be termed the micro-history of Restoration Dissent – one that draws on an array of archival sources in order to focus in detail on two Dissenters' lives and activities – we may learn more about the internal politics and social composition of the Bedford congregation, as well as about how its members negotiated their Dissenting identities both within and without their church. The history of seventeenth-century religious Dissent was, after all, shaped by the hands of extraordinary people like John and Samuel Fenne: Nonconformists who, unlike their more illustrious colleague, John Bunyan, put nothing into print during their lives and who, as a consequence, have become almost invisible within narratives of Nonconformity typically constructed around its more prominent (and usually published) champions and martyrs. Despite the fact that the names of these men can be found in so many documents from the later seventeenth century, their signatures upon the history of Dissent can still be quite hard to see. It is worthwhile endeavouring to recover these brothers from relative anonymity, therefore, and indeed to

get to know them a little better. By meeting them afresh – shaking their Dissenting hands, as it were – we can draw them out of Bunyan’s shadow and welcome them more clearly into the light of our scholarly enquiries.

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Where we encounter John and Samuel Fenne most vividly is, of course, in the Bedford Church Book: the manuscript volume, currently on display at the Bunyan Museum in Bedford that preserves both the names of church members as ‘visible saints’ and the minutes of the congregation’s (usually monthly) meetings, the latter being recorded from early 1656.<sup>12</sup> Offering unparalleled insight into the interior workings of the Bedford church, its disputes and decisions as well as its principles and its polity, *A Booke Containing a Record of the Acts of a Congregation of Christ, in and about Bedford* – its original manuscript title – makes clear just how central the Fennes were to the oversight of the church from almost the very beginning. The Church Book shows us, for example, the esteem and respect granted to Samuel Fenne from the moment he joined the congregation, given his remarkable – perhaps even meteoric – rise in the church’s pastoral affairs. Admitted as a member at a meeting held on 28 August 1656, within a matter of weeks he had been selected (on 1 October 1656) to undertake with Richard Spensely, a much more established brother, the first general visitation of the congregation’s membership, following a decision ‘that two brethren should be made choice of every monthly meeting, to go abroad to visit our brethren and sisters, and to certify us how they doe in body and soule’. As the Church Book records, over the following eighteen months Samuel Fenne would be involved in much of the church’s core business: vetting others in order to ‘propound’ them as members, investigating ‘scandals’, and visiting either troubled or troublesome brethren, usually in the company of elder colleagues (Eston, Grew, and Harrington), as well as of younger officers and preachers, such as Bunyan.<sup>13</sup> From the moment he was admitted to the congregation Samuel Fenne was, it appears, considered one of its ‘principall brethren’, as the Church Book puts it.<sup>14</sup>

Although John Fenne’s admission to the congregation is not recorded in the Church Book (suggesting that, like Bunyan’s, his membership must pre-date April 1656, when the minutes begin), it is clear that, like Samuel Fenne, he too was held in high regard as one of the church’s ‘principall brethren’ from an early stage.<sup>15</sup> Required on 30 October 1656 to undertake the second visitation of the church with Edward Covington, John Fenne’s duties from this point on proved to be wide, varied, and constant: admonishing the recalcitrant

sheep-stealer, Oliver Dicks, for instance, while communing with potential new members, visiting absentees, and attending the congregation's sick, usually in the company of leading brethren, such as Anthony Harrington (in August 1657) or the church's pastor, John Burton (in August 1658).<sup>16</sup> When Bunyan was 'otherwise employed' in 'being taken off by the preaching of the Gospell', it was to John Fenne that the congregation gave their 'free choyce', electing him deacon in August 1657 in Bunyan's stead. A key position in the church, deacons had the onerous and unenviable duty of overseeing the church's finances and administering charity to the poor: it was a major responsibility, similar to that of parish churchwarden perhaps, and one that John Fenne maintained until his death in 1705.<sup>17</sup> He was also called upon to deal with difficulties. In the late 1650s he was one of the brethren to whom the church turned to address the contentious withdrawal of (the later notorious) John Child.<sup>18</sup> Fenne was commissioned to consult with Child personally in December 1658, and in May 1659 he was appointed one of the 'deputed members' assigned to confer with pastors and officers from 'adjacent' congregations to help resolve Child's case. His fellow 'deputed members' at this conference were, tellingly, all key figures: John Burton (pastor), John Grew, Anthony Harrington, and John Whiteman (a yeoman of Cardington who would subsequently be 'chosen elder' with Grew in January 1659 and later serve with Samuel Fenne as co-pastor from 1663), as well as William Whitbread of Cardington (who, as a member of Bedfordshire's landed gentry, was the most socially prestigious member of the congregation).<sup>19</sup>

What the Bedford Church Book reveals, practically from its first page onwards, is that the credentials of John and Samuel Fenne as active leaders within the congregation's team of 'principall brethren' were firmly established from a very early point – the mid-1650s – and that they were clearly recognised from the beginning as senior. Unsurprisingly, it is around this time that one of the Fenne brothers – though it is unclear which – would, according to Edward Burrough, stand alongside John Child and John Bunyan when debating with Quakers on 23 October 1656. Further insight into the Fennes' religious politics during this period is granted by their involvement in *The Humble and Serious Testimony*. Circulated in April 1657 by, it seems, two of Bedfordshire's most prominent Independent ministers, John Donne and William Dell (both allied directly to the Bedford congregation), *The Humble and Serious Testimony* was a republican call for the continuation of a godly commonwealth ('as opposed to Monarchy'), appealing to Cromwell, in effect, to reject the title of king. John Fenne, along with other members of his church, signed *The Humble and Serious Testimony*. We know this because his tight-lipped

responses to interrogation by the mayor of Bedford, Robert Fitzhugh, were carefully documented at the time and passed on to Cromwell's suspicious agents.<sup>20</sup>

It would be in the political strife of the Restoration, however, that John and Samuel Fenne would be required to demonstrate an altogether more profound commitment to their godly principles. That the church entrusted its survival at the Restoration in large part to the brothers Fenne is made manifest in the Bedford Church Book. When by August 1660 the congregation had suffered a crushing double blow in the simultaneous death of its pastor, John Burton, and exile from its usual meeting place, St John's Church in Bedford, it was to John Fenne, Anthony Harrington, and Edward Covington that the congregation turned to find alternative accommodation: 'a convenient place for our meeting, so soone as they can (we now being deprived of our former place)'. Until another meeting place was eventually settled – over a decade later, when Bunyan and the Fennes, along with a few other church members, purchased in 1672 the 'meeting barn' on Mill Lane, Bedford – the church would remain displaced, with John Fenne evidently offering his own house as a refuge for now illegal 'conventicles'. In October 1660, and as usual alongside the other leaders of the church – Eston, Grew, Whitbread, and Harrington – 'brother Fenne' was once more 'deputed' by the church, this time to consult with other Independent ministers in Bedfordshire – John Donne, William Wheeler, and John Gibbs – over the church's 'future choyce' of pastor.<sup>21</sup>

The Church Book demonstrates in numerous other ways how John Fenne's seniority within the congregation would be reconfirmed throughout the years to come. He was, for example, one of the congregation's chief signatories, subscribing his name to almost all the correspondence issued by the church throughout the Restoration.<sup>22</sup> He would be indefatigable too in seeking to recover members who had withdrawn from the congregation during the first decade of persecution.<sup>23</sup> When in November 1671 the congregation's 'principall brethren' needed to confer on the future pastoral leadership of the church, they would do so at his house. When Bunyan was appointed pastor a month later (on 21 December 1671), at this same meeting John Fenne not only had 'the honourable office of a deacon' re-conferred upon him, 'the Congregation having had long experience of the faithfulnes of brother John Fenne in his care for the poor', he was also called by the church 'to the worke of the ministry', along with other key members whose 'gifts' the church 'did solemnly approve' 'for the furtherance of the worke of God, and carrying on thereof'.<sup>24</sup> Along with Bunyan and other brethren named on this occasion, and following the Declaration of Indulgence, the Fennes would receive their licences to preach in 1672.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Church Book sketches a somewhat less detailed portrait of Samuel Fenne's activities during the Restoration, nevertheless he undertook a more important role during the 1660s and 1670s, beyond visiting those who had withdrawn from fellowship. During the critical period from December 1660 to August 1661 – an evidently tumultuous period for the church, the usually monthly meetings 'having bene for some time neglected, through the increase of trouble', and when days were being set aside 'to seek the Lord, by prayer' – we learn that Samuel Fenne was singularly invited 'to speake a word to us next churchmeeting'.<sup>26</sup> If this rather enigmatic entry signals something of the congregation's faith in Samuel Fenne to help them during the 'troubulous times' of 1660–61, this would be confirmed more openly in December 1663 when the church elected him ('now lately delivered out of prison', as the Church Book tells us) pastor, jointly with John Whiteman. It would be Samuel Fenne, then, who would lead the Bedford church through the first two decades of the Restoration, ministering the Word and Christ's ordinances to his brothers and sisters '(notwithstanding their sore persecutions now come upon them)', as the Church Book notes.<sup>27</sup> When Samuel Fenne died on 12 November 1681, he had served the Bedford congregation as joint pastor for just under eighteen years – marginally longer than Bunyan's period in office – having guided his church through some of the most trying years of what has become known as the 'Great Persecution'. For the first decade of Bunyan's pastorship, Bunyan operated not alone, but alongside Samuel Fenne. Until his death in 1681, 'our beloved Samuell Fenn', as the brethren of Henry Jessey's congregation in London addressed him in a letter of May 1674, would still be known and esteemed as the pastor of 'the church of Christ in Bedford'.<sup>28</sup>

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The impression given so far may well be misleading. Despite the fact that 'Brother Fenne' proliferates more frequently than any other name within the Restoration pages of the Bedford Church Book, the Fennes were by no means the only brethren into whose hands fell the responsibility of upholding the Bedford congregation after 1660: the Church Book shows us as much. Yet what the Church Book also makes evident is that these were the men upon whom the congregation came to rely most heavily as its chief organisers and administrators. Not merely Bunyan's 'companions in tribulation', as John Brown has described them, they worked alongside their Brother Bunyan in the church, but were in no sense subordinate to him: from 1660, the core leaders of the congregation were John and Samuel Fenne.<sup>29</sup> Given that both John Burton, the pastor, and the two foremost (and

locally influential) church members, Eston and Grew, were all dead by 1663, and with Bunyan too held in prison throughout the 1660s, John and Samuel Fenne may have had little choice but to lead the congregation through what had turned, almost overnight, into a political wilderness. To do so, they formed a formidable fraternal partnership, holding between them two key offices in the congregation: pastor and deacon. To echo Richard Greaves's verdict, what would 'hold the widespread Bedford congregation together' not just 'in the years between 1660 and 1672', as Greaves avers, but long after this period, was the Fennes' 'organizational leadership'.<sup>30</sup> It would be the ministry of the brothers Fenne – living models for the kind of pastoral heroism and spiritual fortitude that Bunyan would later shape into the allegorical figures of Great-heart, Stand-fast, and Valiant-for-Truth – that enabled the Bedford church to endure: come wind, come weather.

The Bedford Church Book, then, grants us an almost unequalled view of the living character of Restoration Dissent being put into action before our very eyes by John and Samuel Fenne. The relationship between the Fennes and the Church Book is cemented further too by the likelihood that Samuel Fenne, as pastor, would have been responsible both for maintaining the minutes of meetings, perhaps making many of the entries himself, and for the Church Book's safekeeping. In this sense, the Bedford Church Book could be considered quite literally the product of his, among others', Dissenting hands.

Yet the portrait of the Fennes' committed Nonconformity provided by the Church Book simply makes the conundrum of John Fenne's oath-taking in 1677 (and many times thereafter) all the more difficult to fathom. The solution to this apparent contradiction cannot be found, however, in the Bedford Church Book alone. One of the problems we face, in fact, is that despite its practical purpose as a record of the corporate, month-to-month business of the congregation, the Bedford Church Book remains primarily a spiritual document. Not just a book of the life of the congregation it is also, as Bunyan himself would no doubt see it, a manifestation of the Book of Life: 'that Book wherein is recorded the Rules and Bounds of visible Church-Communion', as Bunyan puts it in *The Holy City* (1665), and 'in which the Lord Jesus hath all recorded that are visible Saints by calling'. Like '*the Lambs Book of Life*' of Revelation 21:27, the Bedford Church Book 'is capable of receiving in a man at one time, and of blotting him out again, as occasion doth require, at another', and it too contains the 'Records and Rules of a rightly constituted visible Church' inscribed upon its pages as an ongoing account 'of visible Church-Communion' founded on 'Christs New-Testament' and 'Gospel-Truth'.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, the Church Book is properly called *A Booke of the Acts of a Congregation of Christ* because its 'acts' are conceived not just as verified deeds and documented actions (as in

Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, or the 'Acts' of the Bedford Corporation), but as part of the activated story of the scriptures.<sup>32</sup> The Bedford Church Book is a continuation, in other words, of the Acts of the Apostles: a living history of the building on earth of the New Jerusalem, as Bunyan and his fellow church members would see it.

For this reason, the portraits of John and Samuel Fenne presented in the Church Book are remarkably replete when it comes to detailing their spiritual identities as brothers in Christ. But what it does not offer – and to a degree what it refuses to offer – is any sense of their secular or civic selves. We glimpse nothing in the Bedford Church Book of the Fennes' occupations, for instance, or of their social status, where they lived, or even how they were related to one another (Roger Sharrock having mistakenly assumed, for example, that they were father and son rather than brothers).<sup>33</sup> The Church Book tells us a great deal about their stamina as Dissenters and 'visible saints', but it does not indicate who or what they were beyond the church. To establish their more material identities, and thereby to unlock too the enigma of John Fenne's apparent oath-taking in 1677, we must turn to other forms of archival evidence lying beyond the pages of the congregation's 'Book of Life'.

The simple fact that both men were, like Bunyan, well known to the authorities throughout the Restoration points us, for example, to sources that confirm for us their social rather than just their congregational identities. One document well known to Bunyan scholars, in this regard, is the 1669 'Episcopal Return of Nonconformists', a survey in which the brothers' occupations and place of residence are recorded as 'John Fenne Hatter' and 'Samuel Fenne Hatter' when listing them amongst the 'Heads and Teachers' of some thirty 'Anabaptists' resident within the parish of St Paul's, Bedford.<sup>34</sup> This record tells us unequivocally what the Fennes were (i.e. hatters as well as Dissenting leaders or 'heads'), where they lived, and how they were regarded (by some at least) in terms of denomination (i.e. 'Anabaptist'). The records of the arrests made at John Fenne's house in May 1670 likewise confirm Samuel and John Fenne in their occupations as 'haberdasher[s] of hats', a detail given more colour in the subsequently published (and anonymously authored) account of their sufferings: *A True and Impartial Narrative of Some Illegal and Arbitrary Proceedings [...] Against Several Innocent and Peaceable Nonconformists in and near the Town of Bedford* (1670). On the Tuesday following the arrests made at John Fenne's house (Sunday, 15 May 1670), this tract informs us, and having marched 'up the High-street [...] with the Souldiers, and some Constables', one 'old *Battison*' (i.e. Thomas Battison, senior: a maltster of Bedford and churchwarden at St Paul's) levied 'the Fine of five pounds upon *John Fen*, the Haberdasher of Hatts beforementioned, at whose house the Meeting was'. '[A]ll the Hats in his Shop' were distrained, we are told, 'and next day [they] carried away

his Household Goods' too, 'because there was but twenty nine Hats in his Shop, besides Hatbands, that they took away'. Battison and his men then proceeded 'to deal the same measure to another Hatter, one *Samuel Fen*, who was also fined five pounds, and dealt with as his Brother before him'.<sup>35</sup>

The provision of such basic personal information, otherwise unavailable from the Bedford church's own records, helps to thicken considerably our sense of who and what the brothers Fenne were, including the fact that, as *A True and Impartial Narrative* makes clear, they were fraternally related. We can put alongside their names a local habitation (they lived and worked at the heart of the town, within the precincts of St Paul's church, Bedford) and an occupation (they were both artisan shopkeepers: hatters, and haberdashers of hats). It would be safe to assume that the Fennes were well known in Bedford. Though a sizable market town, Bedford was still relatively a small urban centre at this time, and the Fennes ran a shop positioned prominently on its High Street.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, and like Dissenters elsewhere during the Restoration, the Fennes must have been socially well-integrated townsfolk, accepted by (rather than isolated from) their conforming neighbours and customers.<sup>37</sup> Like other church members, the brothers Fenne could not have made a living retailing their wares to the visible saints alone: there must have been only so many hats and hat-bands that the elect could purchase. Besides, the non-dissenting population of Bedford appears to have been largely reluctant to see Bunyan's brethren prosecuted and persecuted.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, even this kind of documentation can do no more than confirm what we already know from the Bedford Church Book about the extent of the Fennes' commitment to Dissent. Like Bunyan, they too suffered harassment and imprisonment and, like Bunyan, they continued to preach and minister to the congregation in the face of such experiences. Once again, these facts do no more than return us to our original problem: how could the John Fenne who had his goods and possessions taken from both his business and his home in May 1670, and indeed who would only be released from prison with Bunyan and other local Nonconformists in 1672, following a petition to Charles II, go on to take oaths of allegiance and supremacy before the Bedford Corporation, just a few years later?<sup>39</sup> Could this John Fenne be the same man of conscience – the same 'outstanding nonconformist', as Mullett has described him – portrayed so vividly in the Bedford Church Book, and elsewhere?

The answer to this question is – no: it is not the same person. The mystery of the Bedford congregation's longest-serving deacon inexplicably taking conformist oaths before the Bedford Corporation in 1677 can be explained, quite simply, as a case of

mistaken identity. Despite decades of confusion in this regard, the John Fenne who assumed office in the Bedford Corporation from the late 1670s onwards was not the same John Fenne who belonged to the Bedford church. Albeit both residents of Bedford and both involved in the local hat trade, they happened to share the same name and must indeed have been related, but they were not the same man, and certainly not brothers, or father-and-son either (forasmuch as the corporation office-holder is described at times as ‘John Fenne, the younger’ or ‘junior’, to distinguish him, presumably, from his older kinsman, John Fenne ‘senior’, the well-known Nonconformist).<sup>40</sup> Demonstrating the difference between the two men is valuable, however, not just in clarifying an error that has muddled our understanding of the politics of the Bedford congregation, both internally and externally, for well over a century, but, more importantly, because recognising the immediate family history of Bunyan’s brothers – John and Samuel Fenne – helps to enrich significantly our understanding of their identities, both socially and congregationally.

The key to seeing who and what the Fennes were, and indeed the means of separating our two John Fennes, lies in a quite different kind of documentary source – local parish registers: the registers, that is, recording the baptisms, marriages, and burials of Bedford’s parishioners. These records appear largely to have been sidestepped by Bunyan scholars in part, perhaps, because they are vast and labyrinthine yet incomplete, typically coming to a halt during the Interregnum, but also because we might reasonably expect to find little correspondence between an Independent, non-parochial ‘gathered’ church such as Bunyan’s (particularly one considered by some as ‘Anabaptist’) and the traditional parish business of christening children, conducting marriages, and undertaking funerals. It is worthwhile remembering, however, that the Bedford congregation itself was housed during the 1650s in one of the town’s five parish churches (St John’s), and that its first pastor, John Gifford, was awarded its clerical living by the Bedford Corporation in 1653, following the sequestration of the previous incumbent, Theodore Crowley, thereby becoming part of the Cromwellian ‘state’ church.<sup>41</sup>

There had always been strong links, moreover, between the congregation’s chief personnel and Bedford’s most populous parish: St Paul’s. Founder of the Bedford congregation, John Eston, had been a churchwarden at St Paul’s in 1629 and 1630; fellow founder, John Grew, would become one in 1635.<sup>42</sup> The minister at St Paul’s, John Bradshaw, was John Eston’s son-in-law, having married his daughter, Mary, on 2 May 1639.<sup>43</sup> This early reciprocity between St Paul’s and the Bedford congregation may help to explain why Bunyan would debate with Quakers at ‘*Paules steeple-house*’ in Bedford in 1656, and why too in 1660 John Burton, the congregation’s second pastor, would bequeath

money to the poor of two parishes: St John's and St Paul's, Bedford. The parish register of burials shows that when Grew and Eston died – in 1661 and 1663 respectively – they were interred at St Paul's, as were several other members of the congregation at different points during the Restoration.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, when Samuel Fenne died, he was buried on 14 November 1681 not at his local parish church, St Paul's, but at his congregation's 'meeting barn'. We only know this, however, because these details have been recorded dutifully by a Church of England minister – Edward Bourne, curate at St Paul's – in the parish register of burials ('where we should least expect to find them', as John Brown comments), rather than by any Dissenting hand in the Bedford Church Book.<sup>45</sup>

Bedford's parish registers are not to be overlooked, then, as a potentially valuable source of information regarding the social milieu of the town's Restoration Dissenters. Although the details offered about them remain scant, nevertheless the records of St Paul's, Bedford, help us to position John and Samuel Fenne locally in some quite specific and illuminating ways. They were, for example, the sons of Bedford hatters, Robert and Hannah Fenne, probably the same Robert Fenne (of Bedford) and Anna Jetherill (of Sutton) married in the village of Sutton, Bedfordshire, on 20 January 1625/6.<sup>46</sup> Presumably returning to his own parish of St Paul's, Bedford (this may well be the same Robert Feen baptised there on 29 March 1600) their son, John, was christened in the church on 15 July 1627. Several other children of Robert Fenne (or Feen, as the registers often spell it) would also be baptised at St Paul's: a daughter, Sarah, on 2 August 1629 (more than likely the church member listed but not otherwise identified by name in the Bedford Church Book), and two other sons, Thomas (baptised 28 December 1634) and Robert (baptised 19 February 1636/7).<sup>47</sup>

Samuel Fenne's baptism is not to be found in St Paul's register, and there is no record of his christening elsewhere in Bedfordshire at a point that would make chronological sense (i.e. between 1626, when his parents married, and 1638, the year following his father's death, Robert Fenne being buried at St Paul's on 18 September 1637).<sup>48</sup> Robert Fenne's nuncupative will mentions, but does not name, five children perhaps including a Samuel either already or soon to be born: we just cannot know.<sup>49</sup> Thanks, however, to the 'Bedford Borough Enrolment of Apprenticeships' – the list, that is, of apprentices approved in the town – we know that the Bedford congregation's Samuel Fenne was, in fact, son of this same 'Robt Fenn late of Bedford, hatter', when he was enrolled 'with Hannah Fenn, his mother', also a 'hatter', as an apprentice hat-maker and haberdasher of hats, on 15 January 1648/9.<sup>50</sup> That John and Samuel Fenne were the sons of Robert and Hannah Fenne is doubly confirmed not only by their profession – both

following the family trade as hatters and haberdashers of hats in Bedford – but also by the fact that their mother, Hannah, came to play an instrumental role in establishing the Independent congregation at Bedford which they would later join themselves. As the Bedford Church Book’s ‘Briefe Account of their first Gathering’ shows, ‘Sister Fenne’ – identifiable as ‘Hannah Fenne’, the ninth name in the Church Book’s list of members – was one of the original twelve ‘antient, and grave Christian[s]’ who ‘embodied’ as a church of Christ in Bedford in 1650, alongside John Eston, John Grew, Anthony Harrington, and the first pastor, John Gifford.<sup>51</sup>

This information confirms for us precisely who and what John and Samuel Fenne were and, in John Fenne’s case at least, when he was born. So who, then, was the other John Fenne, sworn in as chamberlain to the Bedford Corporation in September 1677? This John Fenne was the son of William Fenne, the man assumed by Richard Greaves to be the father of the Bedford congregation’s John and Samuel Fenne.<sup>52</sup> Clearly a relation (possibly nephew or cousin) of Robert Fenne, and like him also a local hatter by trade, this William Fenne had a long career within the Bedford Corporation. Chosen as a representative in Common Council for the first time in 1650, he held several offices over the decades to follow, eventually becoming mayor in 1678, and dying in service the following year.<sup>53</sup> No Dissenter, William Fenne appears to have been a loyal Church of England man.<sup>54</sup> Like his fellow parishioner, Thomas Battison, who enforced the fines upon the Fennes in May 1670, William Fenne served twice as churchwarden at St Paul’s, Bedford during the Restoration: first in 1667, alongside Robert Nelson, the same upholsterer eventually excommunicated from the Bedford congregation in 1671, and again in 1674.<sup>55</sup> If William Fenne and his wife, Sarah (not the Bedford church member of the same name), had ever flirted with anti-paedo-baptist ideas during the Protectorate, any such dalliance stopped with the Restoration: they had their five children, all born between 1649 and 1656, baptised at St Paul’s on 25 October 1663 (the eldest, Ann, being fourteen by this point). As is witnessed by an unusual note entered in the register on this occasion by Robert Guidott, then minister at St Paul’s, William Fenne insisted that the birth-dates of his children also be recorded alongside their belated christenings. This entry shows that John, William Fenne’s youngest (and eventually only surviving son), was born on 17 April 1656.<sup>56</sup>

That this is the same John Fenne who would subsequently follow his father both in becoming a churchwarden at St Paul’s (in 1680) and in accepting office within the Bedford Corporation, eventually serving as mayor himself in 1705–6, is indicated by the tallying of two key dates.<sup>57</sup> The John Fenne born in 1656 was duly admitted to the corporation in 1677, first as burgess (possibly according to the corporation’s patrimonial system, wherein

this office could be conferred upon the eldest adult son) and then as chamberlain and member of Common Council, having reached his ‘majority’ that year (i.e. twenty-one years of age).<sup>58</sup> Should we remain at all sceptical about this identification, we need only consider one more important detail. The John Fenne who joined the Bedford Corporation in 1677, and who was briefly ousted from local government when he and several others were forcibly displaced by James II in March 1688, was chosen as mayor of Bedford on 3 September 1705 and sworn in at Michaelmas a few weeks later. Like his father, however, he too died in office. The register for burials at St Paul’s indicates that ‘Mr John Fenne, mayor of this Corporation’ was interred at the church on 18 January 1705/6.<sup>59</sup> Alongside evidence provided by his will, corroborating family relationships indicated in the register of baptisms, the fact that ‘Mr John Fenne, mayor’ is different from the Bedford congregation’s John Fenne is rendered incontrovertible by the fact that the latter who had been a deacon in the Bedford church for almost fifty years died several months before January 1706.<sup>60</sup> Leaving no will, or at least not one that has survived, the Bedford congregation’s John Fenne passed away at some point between 2 May 1705 (when he was appointed for the last time to undertake some church business) and 3 October 1705, when the congregation, noting his demise, respectfully turned its attention to appointing a suitable successor as deacon.<sup>61</sup> If this is the same John Fenne baptised at St Paul’s on 15 July 1627, he must have been around seventy-eight years old when he died.

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As Robert Nye’s fictional biographer, ‘old Pickleherring’, declares in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*: ‘It’s wonderful what you can prove with the facts in parish registers’.<sup>62</sup> In this case, the ‘facts’ embedded in the registers of St Paul’s allow us to prove that the Bedford congregation’s John Fenne was not the man who served the Bedford Corporation from 1677 onwards. Unlike their kinsmen, William and John Fenne, junior, Bunyan’s brothers – John and Samuel Fenne – would never act as parish churchwardens and they would never hold office in local government. As a result, they would never receive the elevated title of ‘Mr’ that being mayor could confer upon otherwise humble hatters.<sup>63</sup> There was, then, no tension or dissension in the Bedford congregation in 1677 – or at any other point – over John Fenne taking oaths: as deacon, he would continue to ‘bear the bag’ for the church, ‘as *Judas* did’ for the disciples, but he was no betrayer of either fellowship or conscience.<sup>64</sup> The unsettling ghost of this notion can now be laid to rest and with it any speculation over how Bunyan and his congregation could possibly have tolerated such a

betrayal. The political unity of the Bedford congregation would never be troubled by this issue: it remained throughout the Restoration united in its opposition to an ‘Antichristian’ Church of England and to any oaths that might otherwise legitimise it.<sup>65</sup>

There remain, however, other important points to be gleaned from this fresh-harvested field of information. It can be helpful simply to recognise, for example, that these ‘principall brethren’ constituted, with Bunyan, the younger cohort of now senior officers within the congregation. Being in their early-to-mid thirties at the beginning of the Restoration (John Fenne and Bunyan having been born just over a year apart) they must have been around half the age of the congregation’s ‘ancient’ founders: Eston, Grew, and Harrington. They were, then, the ‘next generation’ of saints in the church. Hardly hot-headed youths, Bunyan and the Fennes were mature and experienced when the Restoration happened, but, as men in their thirties at this point, they evidently possessed the energy and the stamina needed to hold the congregation together. It is equally valuable to consider the social standing of John and Samuel Fenne, who were not poor men, despite the condescending assessments of their Restoration antagonists. The 1669 Episcopal survey identifies John and Samuel Fenne as teachers of ‘Anabaptists’ ‘of the meanest sort’, while the *The Act Against Conventicles Executed* (a scathing response to the sympathetic account of persecution given in *A True and Impartial Narrative*) contemptuously dismisses them as no more than ‘two beggarly Teachers (to say no worse) both which had no substance to pay one Fine’; ‘the number of Hats’ taken from the two brothers, sneers the anonymous author, hardly amounts to ‘so many as a travelling Furbisher carrieth at his back’.<sup>66</sup>

The problem with such statements is that they are bound to present the likes of John and Samuel Fenne in the worst light possible: that is, as socially ‘mean’ and politically seditious. Yet, despite allegations of them being ‘beggarly’, of ‘no substance’, and of the ‘meanest sort’, there is no reason to assume that the Fennes were any of these things. As artisan shopkeepers, manufacturing and retailing their wares in a shop on Bedford’s High Street, they were not poor or indigent men of the ‘meanest sort’ at all but, quite evidently, of the ‘middling sort’. In the records of Samuel Fenne’s trial for sedition in 1669, his name is followed in one place by a surprisingly more dignified status-marker than that of his occupation as ‘hatter’: ‘yeoman’. Though typically attached to upwardly-mobile freeholders and farmers, this ‘addition’ is not a mistake: as David Cressy points out, respectable urban craftsmen and ‘artificers’, like Fenne, could and did style themselves ‘yeoman’.<sup>67</sup> The Fennes were also householders. The Hearth Tax return for 1671 indicates that, like Bunyan, Samuel and John Fenne were assessed at this point as heads of households with one hearth: they were not, then, exempt from the tax, as would be those

deemed to be poor (though exemption alone did not, of course, entail poverty).<sup>68</sup> While a property with just one hearth may well suggest a very modest standard of living, it is difficult to know what this might actually tell us in terms of the Fennes' personal wealth or social standing.<sup>69</sup> At least one of the Fennes was well-off enough to employ domestic servants, 'brother Fennes maid' (though it is unclear which Fenne, Samuel or John) being propounded 'to walke in fellowship with us' on 30 November 1671, as the Church Book indicates.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, John Fenne's house was capacious enough to accommodate the gang of almost thirty men and women who met there on Sunday 15 May 1670.<sup>71</sup> He was also substantial enough to vote in parliamentary elections, as the 1705 poll for Bedford indicates, pointing again to the fact that, like his junior namesake, John Fenne was an independent householder, and not a poor one at that.<sup>72</sup>

Although the Fennes may have had little 'substance' in May 1670 (though it is impossible to say even this with any certainty), it would not mean that they had always been or would always remain in a position of financial or material stricture. Both 'wealth and the status it brought with it' were 'fragile acquisitions in urban society', and 'might be fairly quickly won [...] and even more quickly lost', it seems. Moreover, as Cressy points out, it was always difficult 'to assign precise economic and social standing to a man described by a trade' in this period, because he was harder to place within any 'traditional hierarchy'.<sup>73</sup> The absence of detailed probate records for the Fennes curtails further speculation in this regard. Yet, what these brothers did have at their disposal was a modest amount of social capital – that is, through their father, Robert Fenne, they had some claim locally to both status and reputation, as well as to valuable connections within what might be termed Bedford's 'godly elite', particularly during the 1650s.<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting, for instance, that Robert Fenne – like John Eston and John Grew – had also been a churchwarden at St Paul's in the 1630s.<sup>75</sup> As historians have indicated, being chosen churchwarden can be a fairly reliable indicator of a man's social standing amongst both the 'middling' and 'better' sorts. Those who accepted the considerable responsibilities (and potential costs) of this office tended, for example, to be married men of independent means, and therefore of a certain reputation and 'substance', while also respected and trusted within church and community.<sup>76</sup> The fact that Robert Fenne was churchwarden at St Paul's in 1635 suggests something significant, then, about his status as a potentially thriving artisan shopkeeper making a name in Bedford, both for himself and his family, in terms of commerce and godliness. Had he not died prematurely, on the eve of the Civil War, the pattern of Robert Fenne's life suggests that he was precisely the sort who, as an independent businessman (and probably therefore a freeman or burgess of the town) may

well have gone on to hold office in the Bedford Corporation, as did some of his peers in the parish: not just his kinsman, William Fenne, but also Anthony Harrington, Edward Covington, and Richard Spensely (all later members of the Bedford congregation, of course, with Spensely having acted too as an overseer of the poor at St Paul's in 1637).<sup>77</sup>

We may even hazard another speculation about the father of John and Samuel Fenne. Had Robert Fenne lived beyond 1637 he may have gone on to help establish the church of Christ that 'embodied' in the town around 1650. We can consider this a fair possibility given that he knew both personally and well the church's founders, John Eston and John Grew, as well as Anthony Harrington. Robert Fenne and John Grew worked alongside each other as churchwardens at St Paul's in 1635, and John Eston would be appointed by Fenne as one of the 'overseers' of his will in 1637, together with George Smith, then minister at St Paul's. Making his wife 'executrix', and leaving the not inconsiderable sum of £12 to each of his five children, along with the godly instruction to his widow to 'bringe them up carefully & conscionably', Robert Fenne's will was 'uttered upon his death bead [*sic*] by word of mouth, before such credible witnesses as have hereunto subscribed their names'; these witnesses were Anthony Harrington, another founding member of Bunyan's church, and George Smith.<sup>78</sup> Although Robert Fenne would neither see nor contribute to the radical congregational venture upon which his colleagues at St Paul's would embark in the 1650s, nevertheless his widow, Hannah, would, alongside two – and possibly three – of their children: John, Sarah, and Samuel Fenne.

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The conclusions to draw from this relatively extended excursion into some of the social aspects of the Dissenting world of John and Samuel Fenne are simple yet also important. These two hatters of Bedford, both instrumental to the survival of their church after 1660, were not of the poorest or 'meanest sort' but of the 'middling sort' in what some social historians would regard an almost classic seventeenth-century sense.<sup>79</sup> Through their father and mother, they were provided with a professional trade and a respectable way to earn a living. Had they not joined the Bedford congregation, the brothers Fenne would have been exactly the type to serve their local parish as churchwardens, as did their father, and perhaps the town's corporation, as did their kinsmen, William and John Fenne, junior. Robert and Hannah Fenne provided their sons too with valuable connections to some of the most influential of Bedford's Puritan elite. The men whom Robert Fenne evidently knew well at St Paul's – John Eston and John Grew – were aldermen and 'Gentlemen': members

of Bedford's civic or municipal elite. They founded the Bedford congregation while holding major offices in the local corporation and while working too as commissioners of the peace under Cromwell's Major-General, William Boteler, thereby helping to enforce (if only for a short time) the Protectorate's godly rule across Bedfordshire.<sup>80</sup> In the 1650s, Eston and Grew actively pursued a godly agenda in Bedford, securing Cromwell's support for the appointment of John Burton as pastor of the Bedford congregation in 1656, and assisting Major-General Boteler in a forcible purge of the corporation later that year. They established for the Bedford congregation a godly network reaching wide across the county as well as upwards socially, having as their allies not only the landed gentleman William Whitbread of Cardington and the well-to-do esquires (and Bedfordshire MPs) Edward Cater of Kempston and Richard Wagstaffe of Ravensden, but also radical ministers, such as John Donne and William Dell.<sup>81</sup>

Given their parentage and the godly connections available to them in the 1650s, it comes as no surprise that John and Samuel Fenne would come to command such esteem within the Bedford church. Their positions as deacon and pastor must have been afforded greater authority, we might think, by their almost dynastic relationship to the church's founders and elders. Either way their social identities point towards the significance of family, kinship, and status and how such factors combined in complex ways in the constitution and composition of a Revolutionary gathered church such as Bedford's. At the very least, the respect granted the Fennes by the church confirms a recognisable pattern of appointment in the congregation's administration, with its select band of 'principall brethren' being consistently chosen from a small group of men qualified to lead by their godliness and, in a way not dissimilar from churchwardens, by status and 'substance'. With the notable exception of the 'tinker', John Bunyan, the most prominent positions within the Bedford congregation – those who would 'share the main representative duties of the church' – would typically be filled by men of the 'middling' and indeed 'better' sort: by 'a small number of key educated and well-off laymen', as Joel Halcomb has described them, well known for 'their godliness and social respectability'.<sup>82</sup> John and Samuel Fenne were certainly amongst them.

The last word of this essay, however, must go to a no less striking figure, yet one even more easily overlooked: Hannah Fenne. Given that so little is known of this woman, it is almost impossible to develop any clear, focused view of her. Yet the details presented in this essay point towards someone both quite remarkable and yet not untypical of the kind of women – those 'sober protestant matrons' and 'forceful individuals' – who formed and supported gathered churches in the seventeenth century and upon whose 'energy and

resourcefulness' their congregations depended.<sup>83</sup> For this was a widow who would bury a son, Thomas, within six months of interring her husband, and yet proceed to run the family business while raising her other four children at the same time. With her deceased husband's friends she would go on to participate in their radical godly experiment, establishing with them a 'gathered' church of Christ in Bedford, founded on the principles of 'Gospell fellowship' and following 'the Congregationall way'.<sup>84</sup> If the 'Sister Fenne' whose pastoral duties are recorded in the Bedford Church Book refers to Hannah (rather than to Sarah), then alongside her sons in the church she too served the congregation actively in the mid-to-late 1650s as a female church officer: an unofficial 'deaconess', perhaps, or 'widow' (in the congregational sense).<sup>85</sup> Either way, the church she helped to embody would come to rely upon her sons, John and Samuel, for strength and leadership throughout the Restoration, having evidently raised them 'conscionably', as her dying husband had wished. Hannah Fenne has received even less attention from historians and scholars than her sons. Yet, as a woman whose hands are more lightly, yet no less clearly, impressed upon the early history of Bunyan's church, it is worth meditating on the evident strength and stamina of her godly convictions. She too deserves some recognition, alongside her sons, and Bunyan's brothers: John and Samuel Fenne of the Bedford congregation.

**Michael Davies**

*University of Liverpool, UK*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times, and Work*, rev. Frank Mott Harrison (London: Hulbert Publishing, 1928), pp. 351–2; M. Mullett, "'Deprived of Our Former Place": The Internal Politics of Bedford 1660–1688', *Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society* [hereafter *PBHS*], 59 (1980), 1–42 (pp. 16–17, 29–30); R. L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 346, 570. John Fenne (or Fenn) was one of two men 'chosen to the office of chamblins of this town' on 3 September and selected as one of 'the Thirteen' Council representatives on 19 September 1677: 'Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–88' (BARS: BorBB2/2), fols. 145, 147–50. On the structure and constitution of the Bedford Corporation and the significance of its distinct offices, see *The*

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*Minute Book of Bedford Corporation 1647–1664*, ed. Guy Parsloe, *PBHRS*, 26 (1949), ix–xxii; C. G. Parsloe, ‘The Corporation of Bedford, 1647–1664’, *TRHS*, 29 (1947), 151–65; Mullett, pp. 1–3. See also J. Miller, *Cities Divided: Politics and Religion in English Provincial Towns, 1660–1722* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 34–44; Ian Archer, ‘Politics and Government 1540–1700’, in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume II, 1540–1840*, ed. P. Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 235–62.

<sup>2</sup> For a sum of these church members’ roles in the corporation during the 1650s, see *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. xxxii–iii, 194, 196, 197, 193, 201. See also Parsloe, ‘Corporation’; M. Davies, ‘The Silencing of God’s Dear Ministers: John Bunyan and his Church in 1662’, in *‘Settling the Peace of the Church’: 1662 Revisited*, ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 85–113. For their roles and activities in Bunyan’s church, see *The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford, 1656–1766*, ed. H. G. Tibbutt, *PBHRS*, 55 (1976), hereafter *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt. Richard Spensely debated with Quakers at St Paul’s, Bedford, on 23 May 1656, alongside Bunyan and John Burton, the church’s pastor at this time. With Burton and John Child (on whom see further below), Spensely would endorse Bunyan’s second publication, *A Vindication of Some Gospel-Truths Opened* (1657); see *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, gen. ed. R. Sharrock, 13 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–1994), I, 121. The wills of Eston, Grew, Harrington and Covington are held at BARS: ABP/W 1663/44; ABP/W 1661–2/236; ABP/W 1697/66; and ABP/W 1683–4/79; Spensely’s will is held at the National Archives, Kew: PROB/11/267/689.

<sup>3</sup> Greaves, *Glimpses*, p. 346; Mullett, p. 16. Fenne may also have been required by the corporation to take the sacrament, which Mullett finds impossible to imagine for such ‘an outstanding nonconformist in the town’ (pp. 16–17). On the 1661 Corporation Act, designed to keep Dissenters out of local government, see R. Hutton, *The Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 158–61; J. Miller, ‘The Crown and the Borough Charters in the Reign of Charles II’, *English Historical Review*, 100 (1985), 53–84, and *Cities Divided*, pp. 156–78; S. K. Roberts, ‘Public or Private? Revenge and Recovery at the Restoration of Charles II’, *Historical Research*, 59 (1986), 172–88; Archer, pp. 254–55.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith J. Hurwich, ‘“A Fanatick Town”: The Political Influence of Dissenters in Coventry, 1660–1720’, *Midland History*, 4 (1977), 15–47; Miller, *Cities Divided*, pp. 156–78, 310.

<sup>5</sup> The backlash brought by the Restoration is clear. None of the church members who served in Common Council before the Restoration would ever do so again after 1660. From 1660, Eston and Grew were fined and essoined regularly for non-appearance. Eston was removed from office in September 1661; Grew died a few months later (*Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. xxxiii, xxiii, 138ff, 146–7). From 1661, all ties between Bunyan’s church and the Bedford Corporation would remain severed until the latter’s remodelling under James II in 1688, on which see below; see also Mullett; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 564–72. During the decade following 1677, Fenne would continue to serve the Corporation regularly as bailiff and one of ‘the Thirteen’, swearing the required oaths each time; see ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–88’, fols. 159, 162, 170, 176, 184, 186, 189, 200, 214, 274–5, 281, 283–4, and ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1688–1718’ (BARS: BorBB2/3), fols. 3v–4ff.

<sup>6</sup> Greaves, *Glimpses*, p. 346

<sup>7</sup> See *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 85–90.

<sup>8</sup> See ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–1688’, fols. 284–99; Mullett; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 564–72.

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<sup>9</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 64. That Robert Nelson was Richard Spensely's stepson is indicated in the latter's will, held at the National Archives, Kew: PROB/11/267/689.

<sup>10</sup> See 'High Sheriff Assize' records (hereafter HSA), held at BARS: HSA 1669 S/21; 1669 S/46; and W. M. Wigfield, 'Recusancy and Nonconformity in Bedfordshire Illustrated by Select Documents Between 1622 and 1842', in *PBHRS*, 20 (1938), 145–249 (p. 179); Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 266–9. Around this time, the church was also having to deal with Humphrey Merrill, a comb-maker of Bedford eventually 'cut off and cast out' on 21 December 1670 for declaring that 'they were not a church', that 'they had their hands in the blood of the king' and 'were disobedient to government'; *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> BARS: HSA/1671 W/84; 1671 S/22; 1671 W/15; 1671 W/6, and see further below. See also Wigfield, pp. 179–83; Mullett, pp. 3–8; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 268–9; K. Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 209–13. Nehemiah Cox, son of the Baptist preacher and controversialist Benjamin Cox, became joint pastor with William Collins of the congregation at Petty France, London, in 1675: see *ODNB*, 'Cox, Benjamin, 1595–1663?'

<sup>12</sup> The original MS, *A Booke Containing a Record of the Acts of a Congregation of Christ, in and about Bedford*, accounts for the period 1656–1821. Entries are made by various hands, including some – between fols. 53–55, 67, 69–72 – by Bunyan himself. As G. F. Nuttall notes, those entries from before 1671 have been 'copied from an earlier [non-extant] book'; see his *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640–1660*, 2nd edn. (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2001), p. 37, and see also Lynch, p. 191. A facsimile of the MS is available, *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting*, intro. G. B. Harrison (London and Toronto: Dent, 1928), as is a transcription, *The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford, 1656–1766*, ed. H. G. Tibbutt, *PBHRS*, 55 (1976), hereafter *Minutes*.

<sup>13</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 23, 27–9.

<sup>14</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 50, 67, 70.

<sup>15</sup> John Fenne was an early member: his is the second name to appear in the second column on the first page of the Church Book's list of members, below 'Sarah Fenne', possibly his sister (see below): *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 24–30.

<sup>17</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 28. The strain of this responsibility on John Fenne is acknowledged in the minutes of a meeting held on 20 August 1669, where 'It was proposed to the Church to consider of some others to be chosen to the office of deacons for tryall, the worke lying too hard on brother John Fenne'. Nevertheless, Fenne was reconfirmed in this role with resounding approval at the meeting of 21 December 1671 (on which see further below): *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 40, 71–2. For views of the office of deacon in gathered churches see especially John Bunyan, *A Discourse of the Building, Nature, Excellency and Government of the House of God* (1688), in *Miscellaneous Works*, VII, 290–91; Nehemiah Cox, *A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of an Elder and Deacons in a Baptized Congregation in London* (1681), pp. 10–15; John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (1645), p. 39; Stephen Ford, *A Gospel-Church: or, God's Holy Temple Opened* (1675), p. 80. See also J. Halcomb, 'A Social History of Congregational Religious Practice during the Puritan Revolution' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009), pp. 66–7, 85.

<sup>18</sup> For John Child's activities in the Bedford church, often working alongside Bunyan and the Fennes, see *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt. With Bunyan he debated with Quakers in Bedfordshire, and subscribed the prefatory note to Bunyan's *Vindication*: see *Miscellaneous Works*, I, 121. On his life and death subsequent to

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withdrawing from the congregation, see *ODNB*; R. Greaves, 'John Bunyan and the Fifth Monarchists', in *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), pp. 141–53; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 76, 78, 89–93, 338, 515–18.

<sup>19</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 32–33. John Whiteman is described as 'yeoman of Cardington' in John Grew's will, where he is named an executor: the will is held at BARS (ABP/W 1661-2/236). For William Whitbread (grandfather of Samuel Whitbread, founder of the famous Whitbread brewery), see *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. 99–100; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 63, 253; Sam Whitbread, *Plain Mr Whitbread: Seven Centuries of a Bedfordshire Family* (Dunstable: The Book Castle, 2007), pp. 3–12; and Davies, 'Silencing', pp. 98 n.35, 101 n. 44, 108. Following the Restoration Whitbread received (on 18 January 1661) a pardon from Charles II, the only member of the church to do so (see BARS: Whitbread Collection, W3411). On Whitbread's position in, and subsequent withdrawal from, the congregation during the Restoration, see *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, and M. Davies, 'Spirit in the Letters: John Bunyan's Congregational Epistles', *The Seventeenth Century*, 24 (2009), 323–60.

<sup>20</sup> A printed version of *The Humble and Serious Testimony of Many Hundreds, of Godly and Well Affected People in the County of Bedford* (dated 14 April 1657) is extant, though without the original signatures. On Fenne's (and others') subsequent interrogation on 24 April 1657, see *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, ed. T. Birch, 7 vols (London: 1742), VI, 228–30. See also Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 88–9, 98; C. Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 93, 97.

<sup>21</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 36ff. For details of the purchase of the 'meeting barn' in 1672, see Brown, p. 215. John Donne was installed as rector of Pertenhall, Bedfordshire, in 1653 but ejected in 1660. During the Restoration, he continued his ministry at Keysoe, Bedfordshire, and was imprisoned frequently alongside Bunyan: see *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. R. L. Greaves and R. Zaller, 3 vols (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982–84), hereafter *BDBR*; *Calamy Revised*, ed. A.G. Matthews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934); Wigfield, pp. 171–72, 177; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 64–5, 88–9, 92–3, 130–31, 142, 267, 287–88. William Wheeler was either rector or curate of Cranfield, Bedfordshire, but was ejected by October 1661 and also suffered imprisonment subsequently: see *BDBR*; *Calamy Revised*; Wigfield, pp. 170–71; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 130, 267; H. G. Tibbutt, *Cranfield Baptist Church 1660–1960* (Bedford: Cranfield Baptist Church, 1961: available at BARS (pamphlets) CRA130/1958), pp. 5–8. John Gibbs became pastor of a congregation in Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, around 1648–53, but was ejected by 1660. He continued to minister in and around Newport Pagnell, including Olney and Cranfield, throughout the Restoration. He contributed a substantial preface to Bunyan's 1658 tract, *A Few Sighs from Hell* (see *Miscellaneous Works*, I, 231–44): *BDBR*; *Calamy Revised*; F. W. Bull, 'John Gibbs', *TCHS*, 10 (1927–1929), 81–7; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 25–8, 97, 130, 288–89. On all three, see also R. Greaves, 'Organizational Response of Nonconformity to Repression and Indulgence: The Case of Bedfordshire', in *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity*, pp. 71–87.

<sup>22</sup> When Bunyan died in 1688 it seems to have been John Fenne who took the lead as chief elder in issuing congregational correspondence: *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 90–1. No doubt he would have been key to securing Ebenezer Chandler as successor to Bunyan in 1690, though Fenne's relationship with the church appears to have been fraught during the initial period of Chandler's pastorship: see *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 95–6.

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 37, 39–42, 46, 48, 51, 52.

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<sup>24</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 70, 71–2.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, p. 217; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 287–9, and ‘Organizational Response’.

<sup>26</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 38–9.

<sup>28</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, p. 160

<sup>30</sup> Greaves, ‘Organizational Response’, pp. 78–9.

<sup>31</sup> John Bunyan, *The Holy City* (1665), in *Miscellaneous Works*, III, 175–8.

<sup>32</sup> For these senses of ‘act’ and ‘acts’, see *OED*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ‘act, *n.*’, esp. definitions I: 1; 2a; 5a and 5b.

<sup>33</sup> R. Sharrock, *John Bunyan* (London: Macmillan, 1954; repr. 1968), p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> MS Tenison 639 (‘Miscellanies Ecclesiastical’), Lambeth Palace Library; conventicles within the Lincoln Diocese for 1669 appear at fols. 201–15: for ‘Bedford St. Pauls’, see fol. 202, where Samuel Fenne and Thomas Cooper are also described as having been ‘lately apprehended teaching at a conventicle’ and ‘committed to Goal for 6 months where they now remaine’. Samuel Fenne is listed too amongst the ‘Heads and Teachers’ of the ‘Anabaptists’ at Cardington, a village just outside Bedford (fol. 202). These details are reproduced in G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity*, 3 vols (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911–14), I, 63–4, but see also II, 858, 859; and Wigfield, p. 177.

<sup>35</sup> *A True and Impartial Narrative of Some Illegal and Arbitrary Proceedings [...] against several innocent and peaceable Nonconformists in and near the Town of Bedford* (1670), p. 8; BARS, HSA/1671 W/84. See also Wigfield, pp. 179–81; Brown, pp. 204–9; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 268–9, Lynch, pp. 209–13.

<sup>36</sup> The estimated population of Bedford in the mid-1670s is *c.* 2000, with over half within the central parish of St Paul’s: see P. Clark and J. Hosking, *Population Estimates of English Small Towns 1550–1851*, revised edn (Leicester: Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester, 1993), pp. 1–2; L. M. Marshall, *The Rural Population of Bedfordshire 1671–1921, PBHRS*, 16 (1934), pp. 144–49. See also M. Reed, ‘The Cultural Role of Small Towns in England 1600–1800’, in *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe*, ed. P. Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 121–47 (p. 123); C. W. Chalklin, ‘South East’ and A. Dyer, ‘Small Market Towns’, in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Vol. II*, ed. Clark, pp. 49–66 (p. 58), and pp. 425–50.

<sup>37</sup> On the widespread social integration of Dissenters during the Restoration, countering the myth (or at least the expectation) that, as religious separatists, they would be socially isolated and self-segregating, see W. Stevenson, ‘Sectarian Integration and Social Cohesion, 1640–1725’, in *Religious Dissent in East Anglia*, ed. E. S. Leedham-Green (Cambridge: Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 1991), pp. 69–86, and ‘The Social Integration of Post-Restoration Dissenters, 1660–1725’, in *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725*, ed. M. Spufford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 360–87. See also Halcomb, pp. 86, 88–115, 116, 128–30, 250–52; and Miller, *Cities Divided*, pp. 132–55. Religious ‘separatism’ did not inevitably entail either religious exclusivity or social isolation, as is suggested, for example, by V. Harding, ‘Reformation and Culture 1540–1700’, in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Vol. II*, ed. Clark, pp. 263–88 (p. 283), and Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, pp. 344–50.

<sup>38</sup> See *A True and Impartial Narrative*; Mullett, pp. 6–7; Hill, pp. 117–18. On the reluctance of local authorities to enforce persecutory legislation, and a prevailing sense of ‘solidarity and moderation’ and

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'common interest' locally, see Miller, *Cities Divided*, pp. 132–55, 310; Archer, pp. 255–56. See also A. Fletcher, 'The Enforcement of the Conventicle Acts 1664–1679', in *Persecution and Toleration*, ed. W. J. Sheils (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 234–46.

<sup>39</sup> See Brown, pp. 176–8; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 287–8; Mullet, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> See 'Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–1688', fols. 145, 281–3, and the electoral poll for Bedford Town taken on 11 May 1705, in which the two men are distinguished as 'John Fenn sen.' and 'John Fenn Hatter': James Collett-White, *How Bedfordshire Voted, 1685–1735 – Volume I: 1685–1715*, *PBHRS*, 85 (2006), p. 73. That there were only two John Fennes in Bedford at this time is confirmed by the Bedfordshire Family History Society's comprehensive 'Surname Index to [Bedfordshire] Parish Registers', 2nd edn (under Fenne and its variants: Feen, Fen, and Fenn).

<sup>41</sup> On Gifford, see *BDBR*; *ODNB*; *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 15–21; *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, p. 91; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 63–6. For Theodore Crowley see *Walker Revised*, ed. A. G. Matthews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948); *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. 38–9, 91 n. 2, 165, 171; Davies, 'Silencing'. It is unclear whether – as would be the case for other churches, such as Bristol's Broadmead congregation – Bedford's 'gathered' church at St John's worshipped alongside or jointly with the traditional parish church, with Gifford serving two congregations as 'vicar' and 'pastor' of the parish and the gathered church. See Greaves, *Glimpses*, p. 65; Halcomb, pp. 101–115; G. F. Nuttall, 'Congregational Commonwealth Incumbents', *TCHS*, 14 (1949), 155–67 (pp. 159–61); C. Cross, 'The Church in England 1646–1660', in *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement*, ed. G. E. Aylmer (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972) pp. 99–120 (pp. 112–20), and *Church and People: England 1450–1660*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 175–95; M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 151–68; G. Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 116–27; J. Barry, 'The Parish in Civic Life: Bristol and its Churches 1640–1750', in *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion 1350–1750*, ed. S. J. Wright (London: Hutchinson, 1988), pp. 152–78; *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640–1687*, ed. R. Hayden, *Bristol Record Society's Publications*, 27 (1974).

<sup>42</sup> BARS, *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, 'St. Paul's, Bedford: transcript of marriages, 1566–1812, plus index' (hereafter 'St. Paul's: Marriages and Index'), pp. 81–3 ('List of Churchwardens and Clergy').

<sup>43</sup> See BARS, *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, 'St. John, Bedford, transcript of baptisms, marriages, and burials, 1602–1812' (p. B24). Mary Bradshaw died just a year later: see *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, 'St. Paul's, Bedford: transcript of burials, 1566–1812' (hereafter 'St. Paul's: Burials'), p. 32. On Bradshaw, see *Walker Revised*; Brown, pp. 68, 192; R. F. Farrar, *Old Bedford*, new edn., introduction and notes by F. W. Kuhlicke (Wakefield: S. R. Publishers Ltd., 1970), pp. 172–76, and xvi (n. to p. 173). For the debate with the Quakers at 'Paules steeple-house', see Edward Burrough, *Truth (the Strongest of all)* (1657), p. 53. Burton's will is held at the National Archives, Kew: PROB 11/600/308.

<sup>44</sup> Grew was buried at St Paul's, Bedford, on 16 December 1661; Eston was buried there on 12 March 1662/3: see 'St. Paul's: Burials'. The same register shows that the following prominent church members were also buried at St Paul's at various points throughout the Restoration: 'Widow Grew' (i.e. Martha, wife of John Grew) on 16 November 1667; Ann, wife of Anthony Harrington, on 10 May 1676; Martha, widow of Richard Spensely, on 15 June 1683; Joan and Edward Covington, respectively on 31 August 1682 and 18 November 1683; and the substantial draper, Mr William Nicholls, Gent., also one of the congregation's 'principall brethren', on 13 March 1707/8.

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- <sup>45</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’, p. 52; Brown, p. 375. Fenne’s death is noted in the Bedford Church Book (dated 12 November 1681), but his place of burial is not mentioned: see *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 86, 225.
- <sup>46</sup> BARS, *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, ‘Sutton’ in ‘Sutton, Cockayne, Hatley, Wrestlingworth, Eyeworth, and Edworth’: transcript of marriages (p. A36).
- <sup>47</sup> BARS, *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, ‘St. Paul’s, Bedford: transcript of baptisms, 1566–1812’ (hereafter ‘St. Paul’s: Baptisms’), pp. 19, 36, 38, 42, 45.
- <sup>48</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’, p. 30.
- <sup>49</sup> Robert Fenne’s will is held at BARS: ABP/W 1637/123.
- <sup>50</sup> This document indicates that another son, Robert Fenne, was also enrolled as an apprentice hatter with his mother, on 21 May 1649. A transcript of ‘Bedford Borough Enrolment of Apprenticeships 1614–1843’ (or ‘Bedford Borough Apprentices’) is held at BARS: 13 BED, pp. 12–13. On widows continuing their husbands’ businesses and training apprentices to do so in early modern England, see M. Prior, ‘Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500–1800’, in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. M. Prior (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 93–117 (pp. 102–10).
- <sup>51</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 17, 214.
- <sup>52</sup> Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 412–13.
- <sup>53</sup> This is possibly the same William Fenne, son of William Feen and baptised at St Paul’s on 9 February 1622/3: see ‘St. Paul’s: Baptisms’. On his career in the Bedford Corporation, both before and throughout the Restoration, see *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, p. 33ff, and (in sum) p. 195, and ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–1688’, where his election as mayor and subsequent death on 24 August 1679 are recorded on fols. 159, 162, 166. He may have been buried on 26 August 1679, though the register, damaged at this point, records the burial of ‘Mr William Fenn, mayor’ as 26 July 1679: see ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’. His occupation as a hatter is confirmed by criminal prosecution records from November 1678, revealing that several hats had been stolen from his booth in Elstow by a local labourer, John Sugar. For details of the case, see BARS, HSA/1679 W/5, W/21–22, W/62–64. It is on the basis of these records that Greaves has assumed that the John Fenne, ‘Gent.’, described in them as William Fenne’s son, is also the church member: see *Glimpses*, p. 413, n. 61.
- <sup>54</sup> See *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, p. xxxiii; Mullett, p. 15; Hill, p. 257; Greaves, pp. 412–13. The notion that William Fenne refused to swear required oaths before the corporation, usually taken as a sign of some kind of dissent, is borne out neither by Fenne’s activities as churchwarden or indeed by the corporation minute books, which show that he had no problem taking oaths, doing so regularly throughout the Restoration.
- <sup>55</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Marriages and Index’, p. 81.
- <sup>56</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Baptisms’, p. 58. William Fenne’s first son, also William Fenne, baptised on 25 October 1663 but born on 10 March 1654, was buried at St Paul’s on 13 June 1669: see ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’, p. 44.
- <sup>57</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Marriages and Index’, p. 81; ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1688–1718’, fols. 78<sup>v</sup>–81<sup>v</sup>.
- <sup>58</sup> See *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, p. ix; Parsloe, ‘Corporation’; Mullett; Collett-White, p. xvii.
- <sup>59</sup> ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1688–1718’, fols. 78<sup>v</sup>–82; ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’.
- <sup>60</sup> The will of ‘Mr John Fenne, Gent.’ and Mayor of Bedford, is held at BARS: ABP/W 1705-6/57. His wife and children appear to have predeceased him, hence his will makes his mother, Sarah Fenne, sole executrix, and bequeaths money to two surviving (married) sisters, Amy and Elizabeth (both also baptised on 25 October 1663). See ‘St. Paul’s, Bedford: Baptisms’, pp. 72, 73, 75; ‘St. Paul’s: Burials’, pp. 57, 59, 71.

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<sup>61</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 129–30.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Nye, *The Late Mr Shakespeare* (London: Allison and Busby, 1998), pp. 1, 54. Of course, ‘facts’ gleaned from parish registers can also prove more frustrating than revelatory, because so often opaque and ambiguous. Of which ‘John Fenne, hatter’, for example, might the Rebecca Fenne buried at St Paul’s on 8 June 1705 have been ‘wife’: ‘the younger’, or ‘senior’? The absence of ‘Mr’, typically attached to the younger John Fenne’s name in the registers, suggests that this may, in fact, have been the church member’s wife, and the same ‘John Fenne sen[io]r’, therefore, who buried a daughter, Mary, at St Paul’s on 7 April 1684 (for which see ‘St. Paul’s, Bedford: Burials’). If this were the church member, then such details would suggest that, like John Gifford, Samuel Fenne, and John Bunyan, John Fenne too was married but to no ‘visible saint’ (i.e. full church member) at Bedford: she had not joined the Bedford congregation as a member and sister. Like Margaret Gifford (wife of John Gifford), Michal Fenne (Samuel Fenne’s wife), and Elizabeth Bunyan (Bunyan’s second spouse), Rebecca Fenne (if she were the wife of John Fenne, senior) remains unmentioned in the Bedford Church Book, and unidentified in the list of members. (Michal Fenne is named as Samuel Fenne’s wife and sole executrix in his will, made 20 September 1681, and proved 6 January 1681/2: two of the witnesses, William Hawkes and William Nicholes (or Nicholls) were fellow brethren in the church. The will is held at BARS, ABP/W 1681–2/80. Two copies of John Gifford’s will, indicating his wife as Margaret, are held at BARS: ABP/W 1655/165; ABP/W 1656/26. A further copy is held at the National Archives, Kew: PROB 11/257/164.) On marital and family relationships among ‘visible saints’, and the expectation for the wives of church members to be ‘good women’, even if not full members, see P. Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 147–8, 152; see also Halcomb, pp. 93–6.

<sup>63</sup> John Ferne’s *The Blazon of Gentrie* (1586) indicates that any ‘person advaunced, into an office or dignity, of publique administration, be it eyther Ecclesiasticall, Martiall, or Civill’ has the right to be recognised as a ‘Gentleman’, including ‘Maiors, Provosts, Viscounts, and Bailiffes, of Cities, auncient Boroughes, and incorporated Townes’; pp. 58–9, 60; M. Goldie, ‘The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England’, in *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850*, ed. T. Harris (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 153–94 (pp. 164–65).

<sup>64</sup> Bunyan, *The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded* (1659), in *Miscellaneous Works*, II, 62.

<sup>65</sup> When Dissenters, including some brethren of Bunyan’s congregation, were admitted to the Bedford Corporation by James II in 1688, they were exempt from swearing the oaths required by the Corporation Act, as were Dissenters assuming office in corporations elsewhere: see ‘Bedford Corporation Minutes 1664–1688’, fols. 288–99; Brown, pp. 351–52; Wigfield, pp. 204–5; Hurwich, pp. 26–7; Mullett, pp. 29–32; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 570–72.

<sup>66</sup> *The Act against Conventicles Executed* (1670), p. 9. This tract may have been penned by the magistrate, lawyer, and wealthy local dignitary, Mr. William Foster, responsible for prosecuting Bunyan and issuing warrants for his and other church members’ arrests in Bedford, both in 1670 and throughout most of the Restoration. See Brown, p. 209; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 134–35, 313–14, 414, 569; Wigfield, pp. 168–69, 177, 196, and (for Foster’s role in the proceedings of May 1670), pp. 179–83 (for which see also BARS, HSA/1671 W/84). Foster was famously present at Bunyan’s arrest in 1660 (for which see John Bunyan, *A Relation of My Imprisonment* (first published 1765), in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp.109–13).

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<sup>67</sup> See BARS, HSA/1669 S/46. See also Dyer, pp. 440–44 (p. 441). On urban artificers and shopkeepers adopting the addition of ‘yeoman’ as ‘a status label outside of agriculture’, see D. Cressy, ‘Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England’, *Literature and History*, 3 (1976), 29–44 (pp. 30, 38–41); K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 31–3, 35; E. J. Carlson, ‘The Historical Value of the Ely Consistory Probate Records’, in *Index of the Probate Records of the Consistory Courts of Ely 1449–1858, Part I: A–E*, eds. E. Leedham-Green and R. Rodd (London: British Record Society/Index Library, 103: 1994), pp. xvii–lix (p. xxx).

<sup>68</sup> See Marshall, *Rural Population*, p. 146. William Fenne, who lived in the same ward as John and Samuel Fenne, evidently had a larger property, with three hearths (p. 146). On the criteria for exemptions from the Hearth Tax, see Elizabeth Parkinson, *The Establishment of the Hearth Tax 1662–66*, List and Index Society: Special Series, 43 (2008), pp. 92–114; Tom Arkell, ‘A Student’s Guide to the Hearth Tax’, in *The Hearth Tax: Problems and Possibilities*, ed. Nick Alldridge (Hull: Humberstone College of Higher Education, 1984), pp. 23–44 (pp. 23–6); and ‘The Incidence of Poverty in England in the Later Seventeenth Century’, *Social History*, 12 (1987), 23–47 (pp. 29–38); and ‘Printed Instructions for Administering the Hearth Tax’, in *Surveying the People*, eds. K. Schurer and T. Arkell (Oxford: Leopard’s Head Press, 1992), pp. 38–64 (pp. 39–41); and ‘Identifying Regional Variations from The Hearth Tax’, *The Local Historian*, 33 (2003), 148–74 (pp. 148–53, 165).

<sup>69</sup> As Roger Fieldhouse has suggested, if it may seem fair to assume ‘that *in general* the more hearths a man had, the more *likely* he was to be of a higher social status and enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle, then the hearth tax can be accepted as a reasonably reliable guide to the social structure of a community’: ‘The Hearth Tax and Other Records’, in *Group Projects in Local History*, ed. Alan Rogers (Folkestone: Dawson, 1977), pp. 72–88 (pp. 80–1). However, this view, promoted too by Margaret Spufford, has been contested by Tom Arkell and Chris Husbands, who remain respectively cautious and sceptical about any attempt to deduce personal wealth and status from Hearth Tax assessments. See further: M. Spufford, ‘The Significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 55 (1962), 53–64; and ‘The Social Status of Some Seventeenth-Century Rural Dissenters’, in *Popular Belief and Practice*, eds. G. J. Cuming and D. Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 203–11; and *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 36–45; and ‘The Scope of Local History, and the Potential of the Hearth Tax Returns’, *The Local Historian*, 30 (2000), 202–221; C. Husbands, ‘Hearth Tax Exemption Figures and the Assessment of Poverty in the Seventeenth-Century Economy’, in *Hearth Tax*, ed. Alldridge, pp. 45–58; ‘Hearths, Wealth and Occupations: An Exploration of the Hearth Tax in the later Seventeenth Century’, in *Surveying the People*, pp. 65–77; T. Arkell, ‘Incidence’, and ‘Regional Variations’.

<sup>70</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 70.

<sup>71</sup> At least twenty-nine people attended this ‘conventicle’, according to the record of arrests made at the time, almost half of whom (i.e. fourteen) were not even members of the church at this time, and only one of whom – the cordwainer, Samuel Holcroft – would subsequently go on to join the congregation (being admitted on 24 October 1671: *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 70). The names of the other thirteen non-members arrested appear neither in the Bedford Church Book’s minutes of meetings nor its list of members: a sign, perhaps, as Miller suggests, that ‘the boundary between “Church” and “Dissent” was vague and permeable’ during the

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Restoration, ‘especially for the laity’: see BARS, HSA/1670 W/84; Wigfield, pp.179–81; *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt; Miller, *Cities Divided*, pp. 132–55 (p. 134).

<sup>72</sup> Collett-White, pp. xvii–xviii, 73.

<sup>73</sup> P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 111; Cressy, pp. 37–8.

<sup>74</sup> On ‘social capital’ see K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 290–95.

<sup>75</sup> ‘St. Paul’s: Marriages and Index’, p. 81.

<sup>76</sup> See E. Carlson, ‘The Origins, Function, and Status of the Office of Churchwarden’, in *Rural Dissenters*, pp. 164–207 (pp. 189–206); J. S Craig, ‘Co-operation and Initiatives: Elizabethan Churchwardens and the Parish Accounts of Mildenhall’, *Social History*, 18 (1993), 357–80 (pp. 362–66); J. Pitman, ‘Tradition and Exclusion: Parochial Officeholding in Early Modern England’, *Rural History*, 15 (2004), 27–45 (pp. 39–43); S. Hindle, ‘The Political Culture of the Middling Sort in English Rural Communities, c. 1550–1700’, in *Politics of the Excluded*, pp. 125–52 (pp. 133–36); Goldie, pp. 164–75. It was unusual, though not impossible, for women to be appointed to ‘major positions’ in the parish, ‘such as churchwarden or overseer’: see B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 294–95.

<sup>77</sup> For Spensely’s identification as ‘Overseer at St. Paul’s Bedford’ in 1637, see BARS, ‘Bedford Apprenticeships 1614–1843’, p. 10. The fact that the widowed Hannah Fenne could employ apprentices when continuing her husband’s business may also indicate that Robert Fenne had freeman status, the rights and privileges of which passed to the widow; see Prior, ‘Women’, pp. 100, 102–110.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Fenne’s will is held at BARS: ABP/W 1637/123.

<sup>79</sup> See especially Wrightson, *English Society*, pp. 49–51, 219, 226–27; J. Barry, ‘Introduction’, in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800*, ed. J. Barry and C. W. Brooks (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 1–27; K. Wrightson, ‘Sorts of People’, in *Middling Sort*, pp. 28–51 (pp. 41–50); Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities*, pp. 289–306. See also H. R. French, ‘The Search for the “Middle Sort of People” in England, 1600–1800’, *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), 277–93; ‘Localism and the “Middle Sort of People” in England 1620–1750’, *Past & Present*, 166 (2000), 66–99; and *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> See *Thurloe State Papers*, IV, 207, 218, 224; Davies, ‘Silencing’. On Boteler, see *BDBR*; *ODNB*; P. H. Hardacre, ‘William Boteler: A Cromwellian Oligarch’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 11 (1947), 1–11; A. Fletcher, ‘The Religious Motivation of Cromwell’s Major-Generals’, in *Religious Motivation*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 259–66; C. Durston, *Cromwell’s Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 38–58.

<sup>81</sup> On the purging of the corporation by Boteler, assisted by his commissioners of the peace and resulting in Grew being appointed mayor, see *Thurloe State Papers*, IV, 632; *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. 95–6; Parsloe, ‘Corporation’, pp. 160–62; Durston, *Cromwell’s Major-Generals*, pp. 87–8; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 66–7. This military-style coup appears to have been motivated, in part, by a dispute within the corporation over the appointment of a successor to John Gifford as minister of St John’s, Bedford. Through Cromwell’s intervention, the living was eventually awarded to John Burton, whose candidacy was supported by Eston and Grew, as well as by Cater and Wagstaffe, plus three other Bedfordshire Independent ministers: William

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Wheeler, John Donne, and John Gibbs (on whom see note 21 above, and all of whom would continue to support the Bedford congregation in the years to follow); see Lambeth Palace Library, COMM. III, vol. 4: 'Register of Admissions 1655–6' (MS. 996), fol. 469; J. M. Murphy, 'Cromwell's Church: State and Clergy During the Protectorate' (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Wisconsin, 1997), pp. 307, 340; *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. 91, 93; *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt. See also Brown, pp. 96–8; Greaves, *Glimpses*, p. 96; Davies, 'Silencing'. The same men (Eston, Grew, Wheeler, Gibbs, and Donne) had also signed a letter, together with William Dell, John Gifford, Anthony Harrington, Richard Spensely, Edward Covington, and a John Bunyan, supporting Cromwell's decision in 1653 to dissolve the Rump Parliament: see *Original Letters and Papers of State Addressed to Oliver Cromwell*, ed. J. Nickolls (London: 1743), pp. 92–3; Brown, pp. 94–6; and Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 64–5. Like Grew, Cater and Wagstaffe served as ejectors for Bedfordshire in 1654, and they worked alongside Grew and Eston as commissioners of the peace under Boteler. Cater and Wagstaffe were installed in the corporation in 1656 as burgesses, along with Boteler and Whitbread, and they would serve as commissioners of the public faith the following year, again with Eston and Grew: see *Minute Book*, ed. Parsloe, pp. xxxiii, 99–100; Brown, p. 85. On Cater, who was knighted by Charles II in November 1660 and made Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1664, see Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), pp. 169–70, 198, 412; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 64–5, 92. William Dell was the 'dominant clerical figure at Westoning [Bedfordshire] in 1656', and probably arranged for John Burton to preach there, along with John Donne; Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 92–3. Dell, rector of Yelden, Bedfordshire, from 1641 to his ejection in 1660, had been chaplain to Sir Thomas Fairfax in the New Model Army during the 1640s and became Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, resigning in 1660; see *ODNB*; *BDBR*. On Dell's influence upon Bunyan, see Greaves, *Glimpses*, pp. 123–26.

<sup>82</sup> Halcomb, pp. 66, 80–1.

<sup>83</sup> C. Cross, "'He-Goats Before the Flocks': A Note on the Part Played by Women in the Founding of Some Civil War Churches", in *Popular Practice and Belief*, pp. 195–202 (p. 195); Capp, pp. 16–17, 22–3, 358–63 (p. 361); K. Thomas, 'Women and Civil War Sects', *Past & Present*, 13 (1958), 42–62 (p. 56). On the importance of widows to seventeenth-century Nonconformist congregations, see B. J. Todd, 'The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered', in *Women in English Society*, pp. 54–92 (p. 76); B. A. Holderness, 'Widows in Pre-Industrial Society: An Essay on their Economic Functions', in *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, ed. R. M. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 423–42 (pp. 425–26); and Turner, *Original Records*, III, 741–57. See also R. L. Greaves, 'The Role of Women in Early English Nonconformity', *Church History*, 52 (1983), 299–311; D. P. Ludlow, 'Shaking Patriarchy's Foundations: Sectarian Women in England, 1641–1700', in *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History*, ed. R. L. Greaves (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 93–123; P. Crawford, 'Historians, Women and the Civil War Sects', *Parergon*, 6 (1988), 19–32, and *Women and Religion*, pp. 119–59; A. Laurence, 'A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England', in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and D. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 345–63; Halcomb, pp. 82–4, 96–9.

<sup>84</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> *Minutes*, ed. Tibbutt, pp. 22–4, 27. On the role of 'deaconesses' and 'widows' in gathered churches see Bunyan, *Discourse*, pp. 291–2; Cotton, *Way*, p. 39. Although the Bedford congregation did not formally appoint widows or deaconesses, other gathered churches did. The records of the church at Broadmead,

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Bristol, detail the duties of such roles; see *Records*, ed. Hayden, pp. 208–9. See also J. Briggs, ‘She-Preachers, Widows and Other Women: The Feminine Dimension in Baptist Life since 1600’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 31 (1986), 337–52 (pp. 337–42); Halcomb, pp. 67–8.