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Four Nonconformist Communion Cups

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Notes

FOUR NONCONFORMIST COMMUNION CUPS

Four silver mugs engraved 'Independent Meeting GLOUCESTER' recently appeared on the London market and I was asked to research their history.¹ They were made by John Sutton and hallmarked in London in 1702. He was an important goldsmith having in 1697 entered his mark in the large workers' book of the Goldsmiths Company, of which he was Warden in 1696, 1701 and 1703 and Prime Warden in 1707.

The four cups, which are 10 cm high and together weigh 925 g, exemplify the early nonconformist practice of using domestic-type vessels as communion cups (see Fig. 1) rather than the designs preferred by congregations of the established Church. They are a remarkable survival of the vicissitudes of nonconformity in Gloucester, their original owner being James Forbes, an influential dissenter of the 17th century. Born in 1629, Forbes, an M.A. of Aberdeen and Oxford, began his long association with Gloucester in 1654 when, as part of the Council of State's policy to advance men of Puritan and Independent persuasion, he was appointed lecturer and installed as 'Weekly Preacher' in the cathedral church. At the Restoration of 1660 Forbes was ejected from office amid intolerance of religious nonconformity but he and his congregation continued to meet clandestinely. As a dissenter he was persecuted intermittently for some 29 years, suffering fines, excommunication, imprisonment, and even death threats, and he had to flee Gloucester on several occasions. He returned to the city before the passing of the Toleration Act of 1689 and he continued to foster the Independent congregation, collecting a great library to aid his teaching. He organised the building of a meeting house in Barton Street, opened in 1699, and remained its minister until his death in 1712.² In 1710 he settled on the chapel's eight trustees his theological library of some 1,300 books, 300 pamphlets and other manuscripts, a sum of £90 for charitable use and 'all those four silver cups...to be made use of by the congregation from time to time and as often as the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall be administered'.³

Doctrinal factions having emerged at the chapel by the time of Forbes's death, in 1715 the congregation split. The Presbyterians remained at the chapel (which later in the century became Unitarian) and the Independents left it, taking with them the library and the four cups. The Independents, who formed a separate fellowship, later met in Southgate Street where in 1730, under their minister Thomas Cole, they built a new chapel next to the site of St. Owen's parish church. Under Cole (d. 1742) the meeting became a focus for evangelical revival across the county and was attended by the young George Whitefield before he left Gloucester to play a leading part in the early Methodist movement.

The Southgate chapel, which joined the Gloucestershire Congregational Union formed in 1796, was in time enlarged and eventually, in 1851, rebuilt. However from the late 19th century the fortunes of the chapel gradually declined. The Congregationalists put much of their resources into missionary work, schooling and helping other congregations in the city and county. The upkeep of the Southgate chapel was neglected and its condition deteriorated severely. The situation became

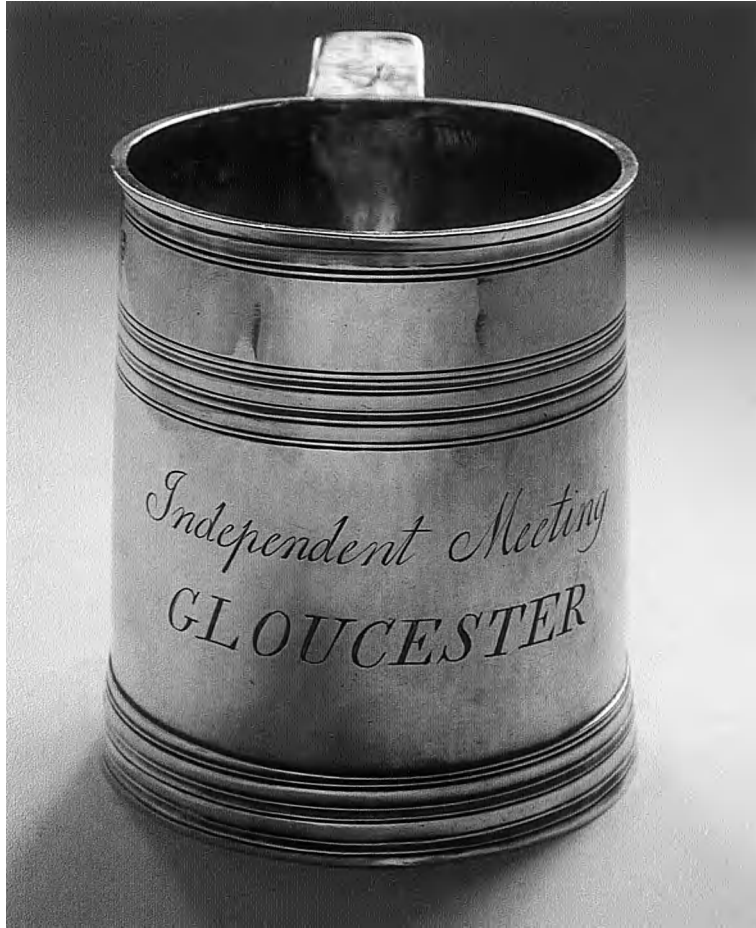


Fig. 1. One of four identical early 18th-century tankards acquired by James Forbes (d. 1712) for use as summions cups at his chapel in Barton Street, Gloucester.

so desperate after the First World War that financial expedients included the sale, in 1923, of the four communion cups which had survived together for some 220 years. Forbes's library was loaned to the city library and was later sold to Toronto University.⁴

The cups were sold by Christie's on 24 January 1923 for £75. Shortly afterwards, in a letter to the curator of Gloucester Museum dated 12 March, William Bruford, an Exeter dealer, wrote that he had recently obtained the four 'tankards engraved Independent Meeting Gloucester' and that he hoped that the museum would buy them for £150. The museum was not able to do this and a later letter from Bruford, dated 2 November 1927, revealed that he had sold them elsewhere. The next and last relevant document that survives in Gloucester records is a letter written in May 1928 by a Cheltenham dealer, H.M. Simmons of 384 High Street, offering the four 'tankards' to Gloucester city council for £250 or a similar figure. The council turned down the proposal as too costly. Simmons's business closed down c.1930.⁵

At the Christie's sale in June 2004 the cups were acquired by John Bourdon-Smith and were sold on behalf of the Pearson family trust of Parham Park. It is thought that the Pearsons, who had been great collectors of silver in the 1920s and 1930s, had owned the cups for a long time, so they probably had bought them directly or indirectly from Simmons. It is remarkable that the cups have survived together. I am happy to report that they have been purchased by Gloucester City Museum and Art Gallery with financial assistance from the National Art Collection Fund and the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

Notes

1. For help in unravelling this tale I thank J. Juřica, author of the section on nonconformity in the Victoria History's volume on Gloucester (*V.C.H. Glos. IV*), and H. Williams-Bulkeley of Christie's, London.
2. *V.C.H. Glos. IV*, 323.
3. Gloucestershire Record Office, D 4270/4/1/5.
4. *VCH Glos. IV*, 323–4; T.J. Lander, *History of Southgate Congregational Church 1660–1972* (1976).
5. Gloucestershire Collection (Gloucester Library), N 6.18.

ANTHONY SALE

RICHARD BIGLAND OF FROCESTER

The antiquary Ralph Bigland probably became acquainted with Frocester and with Anne Wilkins, his future wife, in the early 1730s through his business as a cheese factor in the Berkeley Vale. Her father John Wilkins, also a cheese factor, was the tenant of one of the largest holdings on the Greville family's estate in Frocester. He appears to have lived at the place known as Ferribeas (now Frocester Manor), which his family had held for three generations.¹ The house, which was fairly large in 1737,² was described in 1803 as 'a substantial and well-built Mansion House...suitable for the accommodation of a genteel family'.³ Ralph married Anne in Frocester on 13 June 1737. She died, aged 25, on 3 April 1738 after the birth of a son, Richard, who was brought up by his maternal grandparents. Letters dated between 1738 and 1758 give some details of his upbringing. One of 1753 indicates that 'John Wilkins has come to a Resolution of keeping [Richard] to himself and to learn his own employment'.⁴

John Wilkins died in 1758, and a tabletop family memorial, erected in Frocester churchyard by his daughter Sarah, wife of Miles Oatridge, in 1760⁵ is situated close to the north side of the surviving tower of the demolished church of St. Peter. The memorial includes a coat of arms devised by Ralph Bigland, by then Somerset herald. Ralph wrote that he did not know how John Wilkins had settled his affairs, but hoped 'his uncle & Mr Oatridge' would allow Richard to continue in the cheese trade 'with a reasonable sallary'.⁶ Richard actually inherited from his grandfather a legacy of £200, his plate, furniture and household goods and 'all that Messuage or Tenement in Frocester aforesaid wherein I [John Wikins] now live and all those two messuages or tenements ...in the possession of John Partridge & the widow Aldridge and all that close next adjoining to my said dwelling house and all those two closes called Stanley Leazes and...one acre of land in Nutfield'.⁷ The dwelling house was certainly Ferribeas, listed in 1763 as a messuage with a meadow or pasture named Home Close (17 a.), Stanley and Upper Stanley Leaze (17 a.) and three ridges of arable (1 a.) in Nutfield.⁸

Richard Bigland continued to live in Frocester. As a young man he served as churchwarden between 1760 and 1763, but he later considered himself to be above such mundane local matters.