

Introduction

When in 1980 Nicholas Ferrar was added to the Church of England's calendar, he was commemorated as 'the Founder of the Little Gidding community'.¹ The twentieth century had indeed seen the establishment of communities, including one at Little Gidding itself, which invoked the Little Gidding example.² Basil Blackstone, who in 1938 published a composite of three early biographies of Ferrar along with a number of letters from the Ferrar Papers, there called him a 'seeker after the perfect community'.³ Clearly the idea of community appealed to many in the twentieth century, including some Anglicans. The Little Gidding they envisioned, however, was still the idealised community portrayed in nineteenth-century novels and in the biographies of Nicholas Ferrar based on the hagiographic notes of Nicholas's brother John. In presenting Ferrar as a creator of community I am not seeking to portray an Anglican saint or to promote a particular version of Anglicanism. I have taken community as a central theme not only because it was central to Ferrar's life but also because it produces a more balanced portrait of the man himself and his family and friends. It brings together both the unusual and strenuous manner of the Ferrars' dedication to God's service that made them different from their contemporaries and the inevitable responsibilities and problems they shared with other families in their seventeenth-century world. Much as they condemned many of its values, they could not escape that world. Instead, through the example of their community life they aspired to instruct it. The theme of community also points up a hitherto unexplored aspect of Gidding's influence on later Anglicanism.

'Community' connotes both a voluntary and a purposeful society, both of which characteristics Ferrar gave to Little Gidding. It is not possible to say from the surviving evidence why or exactly when community assumed such importance for Ferrar though it does reveal what groups influenced his concept of what a community might or should be. The vicissitudes of 1624 from which Nicholas had to extricate the family would have brought those

influences together in the move to Gidding. The printed sources, together with the enlarged collection of Ferrar Papers in Magdalene College (now available online), Cambridge, show how he introduced both voluntarism and purpose as he transformed a family-centred household grateful to God for its deliverance from near disaster into a community dedicated to God's service. As bonds within the household strengthened, Ferrar saw new and larger possibilities for that service. He expanded the community to include family and friends outside the immediate household. He sought to strengthen its bonds by introducing new projects for the community that would make it a more active presence capable not merely of rejecting worldly values but of instructing the world, particularly by its example of temperance. Gidding was to become a 'light on a hill' as John Winthrop's Boston was to be a 'city upon a hill'.⁴ Little Gidding was thus not a static but an evolving community.

The demands of a community exact a price from its members that they must be willing to pay. One member of the community was clearly unwilling to pay that price: John Ferrar's wife Bathsheba, who was at Gidding not by her own choice but by that of her husband. Her rebellious behaviour throws into relief the remarkable willingness of most of the family to sacrifice individual privacy to a highly regulated communal life and also to embrace the additional projects Ferrar introduced after 1630.

This book has a basically chronological structure as befits both an evolving individual and an evolving community. Mary Woodnoth Ferrar, the family's matriarch, had purchased Little Gidding with her dower money in 1624 to help rescue the family from threatened bankruptcy. Two years later the family had decided to make it their permanent home. Those early years at Gidding, up to 1630, make clear the dual demands that Ferrar faced in establishing an expanded household in a new way of life while also attending to worldly business essential to the family's support.

Chapter one introduces the family and gives an account of the education of Nicholas Ferrar and his experience of various communities both at home and abroad that influenced his concept of the 'perfect community'. The chapter concludes with the crises of the Virginia Company and John Ferrar's brush with bankruptcy in the course of which the family acquired the Gidding property and resolved to leave London for a new life together in the Huntingdonshire countryside.

Chapter two recounts the character of this new and carefully structured life in an unusual household headed not by a married couple (though two couples and their children were there) but by the widowed Mary Ferrar and her bachelor son Nicholas. Governing a group of thirty or more required planning and direction from its leader, Nicholas, but also willing consent

from those he led in order to operate smoothly. He was able generally to govern by persuasion rather than by command, thanks not only to his own skill but also to the firm support of his mother and brother. Also crucial for the cohesion of the new household was finding for the younger generation, especially the older Collet nieces, satisfying roles through which they could genuinely contribute to the new household and readily accept their uncle's spiritual direction. To that end he carefully cultivated individual relationships with them and provided them with useful and instructional work, namely the practical task of managing the household and the making of harmonies that combined the four gospel accounts of Christ's life into a continuous and illustrated narrative. Demanding as organising the new household was, however, he could not give his full attention to Little Gidding for he had also to spend considerable time in London tending to necessary family business that included not only matters financial and legal but also the marriage of one Collet nephew and the apprenticeships of two others. The move to Little Gidding, particularly in these early years, was for him no withdrawal from the world.

By 1630 the family was sufficiently settled that Mary Ferrar could write to an old friend in London 'now I begin to live', explaining that her new life in God's service was proving more rewarding than she could have hoped.⁵ Nicholas too was by then able to spend most of his time at Gidding and to devote his energies to introducing those new projects that strengthened the household's sense of community and expanded its horizons of service.

Chapters three to six take up in turn these particular projects to which the community turned its attention in the years from 1630 till Ferrar's death in 1637. Chapter three concerns Ferrar's efforts to expand his community into a 'web of friendship', bringing into the network friends and family outside the household. These included his cousin Arthur Woodnoth, his friend who later became his nephew by marriage, Rev. Joshua Mapletoft, and another particularly close friend George Herbert. The counsel he offered to Woodnoth and Mapletoft reveals in unusual depth the nature of these important relationships and of the spiritual direction Ferrar offered. Of a different sort was his counsel to his brother whose wife Bathsheba had no desire either to join the web of friendship or to accept her brother-in-law's spiritual direction. What effect if any her example had on her Collet nieces remains an intriguing but undocumented question.

Chapters four and five together describe an intensification of the community through activities during 1632 that culminated in a great experiment in temperance that the family hoped would set an example for the world to follow. For this experiment they adopted a diet from George

Herbert's translation of Luigi Cornaro's *Treatise on Sobriety* based on measured quantities of solid and liquid food. At the same time the two men were collaborating on a translation of one of Ferrar's favourite authors, Juan de Valdes, and on adding night vigils to the family's daytime devotions. Ferrar with the help of the Collet nieces also prepared for the printer his friend's volume of poems, *The Temple*. In what they called their Little Academy the family prepared themselves for their experiment by a lengthy discussion of the meaning of temperance that they followed by a pledge to follow Cornaro's diet during Christmastide. The result did not live up to their expectations. During the ensuing two years some continued the diet but others drew back. Both the Little Academy and the community's ambitious hopes for leadership were casualties of this tension between the zealous and the lukewarm. When the Little Academy was eventually reconstituted in late 1634 or early 1635 its membership was reduced to a dedicated quartet of the zealous: Mary and Anna Collet, and Nicholas and John Ferrar, a measure of the changes in the household that those two years had brought.

Chapter six recounts a more successful and enduring outreach to a more exalted world than the Ferrars could ever have anticipated. In 1633 King Charles had borrowed the family's gospel harmony and when he had returned it requested that they make first one and then others for him. For his keen royal reader Ferrar developed harmonies with more elaborate formats and different biblical subjects that required the family to master new techniques. The work of making them, as John Ferrar said, kept both hands and minds occupied with what was good and useful.⁶ Indeed the family continued to produce harmonies up to 1642 when the king on his way north made his first visit to Gidding and watched the work in progress on a splendid volume for Prince Charles.

Chapter seven traces the legacy of Ferrar and Little Gidding from the initial effort of John Ferrar in 1655 to assemble materials for a biography of his brother to the death in 1721 of Dr John Mapletoft, Nicholas's great-nephew and godson. That legacy is twofold: first, the selections from Francis Turner's unpublished biography of Ferrar that preserved the knowledge of both Ferrar himself and the daily life of Gidding and second, the influence of Gidding's example of community. The network that grew out of the web of friendship included men who became leaders of the post-Restoration Church of England and were active promoters of voluntary societies such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge that addressed what they felt as an urgent need to revive piety, promote education and combat vice. Using Little Gidding's example of unquestioned piety and obvious loyalty, they could reassure

those who had feared such groups as subversive of the established church. Acceptance of such societies represented a significant change in a church whose membership after the Toleration Act of 1689 had ceased to be automatic and had become in effect voluntary.

A concluding chapter considers Ferrar as a man and as a spiritual leader. His character was neither simple nor without fault. He was a model of piety, a generous and learned friend, an ingenious and dedicated teacher. Yet he could be at once controlling and self-effacing, open and secretive, wary of spontaneity while valuing voluntarism, a mystic and a micromanager. As a spiritual leader he possessed the authority and persuasive power to convince family and friends to join in his quest for a community that would be not a refuge from the world but an exemplary presence in it.

St Paul admonished the Christians in Rome to 'be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed . . . that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God' (Romans 12:2). No one expected that being 'in' the world but not 'of' it would be easy and that message was for Francis Turner the first main point to be learned from Ferrar's life, that 'the mixt [life] is the best & the hardest'.⁷

What follows here is an account of that mixed life as Nicholas Ferrar organised it and his family and friends experienced it.