

The Settlement of London Yearly Meeting.¹

At the present time, when London Yearly Meeting, after having uninterruptedly held its sessions in the Metropolis since the days of Charles II., is about to meet at Leeds, in Yorkshire, it may be interesting briefly to recite the date and places of some of the early meetings more or less closely connected with the establishment of this the governing body of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Australasia. Details of its origin, as might be expected in any case, and especially under the circumstances of fiery persecution attending the rise of the Friends, are involved in some uncertainty, but it is not difficult to trace in the proceedings of the General Meetings held in various places, some of which were formerly styled Yearly Meetings (an incomplete list of these is given below), and in the periodical gatherings of the preachers or "public Friends," the progress of the movement which called London Yearly Meeting into existence and determined its character. It would appear as if annual gatherings of the "public Friends" were held in London in 1661 and succeeding years, with occasional intermissions, probably through the stress of persecution, and that the first Representative Yearly Meeting met in 1673. In the next four years, meetings of "public Friends" only were held, and the second Representative Yearly Meeting for the whole country followed in 1678. Since that date there has been no intermission in the annual sessions of the Representative Yearly Meeting in London.

The Circular Yearly Meetings, held subsequently in various places, must be distinguished from the Representative Yearly Meeting possessing legislative and administrative functions, whilst the Circular Yearly Meetings were almost exclusively occasions for evangelistic effort.

¹The following authorities may be consulted: Historical Introduction to the two-volume reprint of the *Epistles from the Yearly Meeting . . . 1681 to 1857*, written by James Bowden; Introduction to Part 3 of the *Book of Christian Discipline*, written for the edition of 1834 by Samuel Tuke; John Barclay's *Letters etc., of Early Friends*, 1841; *The Journal of George Fox*, 8th edition; Barclay's *Inner Life*; Beck and Ball's *London Friends' Meetings*, p. 53.

1654.

SWANNINGTON, LEICESTERSHIRE.

“A general meeting. . . . To this meeting several Friends came from various parts.”²

1656.

BALBY, YORKSHIRE.

For the northern counties. Epistle issued “To the Brethren in the North.”

1656.

NEAR SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

1657.

SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

Probably held. George Fox wrote, under 1660, “This Meeting [at Skipton] had stood several years.”

1658.

JOHN CROOK’S, IN BEDFORDSHIRE.

“General Yearly Meeting for the whole nation . . . lasted three days . . . many thousands of people were at it.”³ Probably held at Beckering’s Park, near Ridgmount.

1658.

SCALEHOUSE, NEAR SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

Epistle dated 24th of Fourth month, from “Friends out of the Northern Counties of York, Lincoln, Lancaster, Chester, Nottingham, Derby, Westmoreland, Cumberland, Durham, and Northumberland.”⁴

1658.

CAMBRIDGE.

For the eastern counties.

1659.

HORSHAM, SUSSEX.

Counties of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, and Hants. Epistle.

1659.

CHIPPENHAM, WILTSHIRE.

Wiltshire and parts adjacent.

1659.

BULL AND MOUTH, LONDON.

1659.

SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

For the northern counties. Epistle dated 29th of Fourth Month.

²*Journal*, i. 199; 469n.

³*Journal*, i. 418-427. See *JOURNAL OF F.H.S.* i. 41n.

⁴*Journal*, i. 418n; *Letters*, p. 286n.

1659.
DURHAM.

Durham and adjacent counties. Epistle dated 1st of Eighth Month, and addressed to Friends who were to meet at Skipton on the 5th.

1659.
SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

For the northern counties. Fifth of Eighth Month.⁵

1660.
BALBY, YORKSHIRE.

“Yearly Meeting at that time was held in a great orchard of John Killam’s, where it was supposed some thousands of people and Friends were gathered together.”⁶

1660.
SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

“A General Meeting of men Friends out of many counties, concerning the affairs of the Church.”⁷ Epistle dated 25th of Second Month.

1660.
SKIPTON, YORKSHIRE.

Probably held late in the year.

1661.
KENDAL, WESTMORLAND.

Epistle dated 1st of Ninth Month.

1661.
LONDON.

“From thence [Skipton, 1660], it was removed to London the next year, where it hath been kept ever since, as being looked upon a more convenient place.”⁸ There is not any record of a meeting held this year.

⁵*Letters*, p. 292n.

⁶*Journal*, i. 467-469; ii. 516.

⁷*Journal*, i. 469; 470.

⁸George Fox’s *Concerning our Monthly and Quarterly and Yearly Meetings*, dated Fifth Month, 1689, printed in *Letters*, pp. 311-317.

George Fox mentions in his *Journal* that “general meetings” were held in Westmorland and Devonshire in 1657, in Westmorland in 1660, in Somersetshire, Westmorland, and Cumberland in 1663, in Yorkshire in 1666; and in Cornwall in 1668, and that “general men’s meetings” were held in Staffordshire, Cheshire, Wales, and Worcestershire in 1667, and twice in Somersetshire in 1668, but it does not appear from his reference to them that they exercised any executive functions. The Yearly Meetings held in York, mentioned later in the *Journal*, do not come within the scope of this article.

1662-1665.

No known records of any national gatherings in these years.

1666.

“General Meeting of Publick friends.” Epistle dated Third Month.

1667.

No record of Meeting held.

1668.

“General Meeting of Publick friends.” Second Month.

1668/9.

“General Meeting of Publick friends.” Epistle dated 16th of Eleventh Month, 1668. Margaret Fox says, “In that time I went down into Cornwall with my son and daughter Lower, and came back by London to the Yearly Meeting, and there I met with him [George Fox] again.”⁹

1670.

“The next meeting will be held about the time called Easter, in the year 1670, at London.”¹⁰ No record of the holding of this Meeting, however, has yet been met with. The Index to the first edition of George Fox’s *Journal*, prepared, presumably, by Thomas Ellwood, gives under “Meetings,” a reference to a Yearly Meeting at London, 1670, mentioned on page 349, but this must have been the Yearly Meeting of 1671. Indexes to later editions, except the edition published in 1827 which slavishly followed the first, omit the date in this reference.

1671.

Attended by George Fox just before his departure for America. Epistle dated 13th of Fourth Month.

1672.

Ministers only. Epistle dated 29th of Third Month. The minutes made this year are the first appearing in the thirty-one volumes of Y.M. minutes, preserved in D., which contain the official annual records from that date to 1904.

⁹ Margaret Fox’s *Testimony* to her husband, in his *Journal*, ii. 517. It is not certain, however, whether the reference is to this Y.M. or to the one held earlier in the same year.

¹⁰ From Y. M. Epistle of 1668/9.

1673.

Representatives consisting of six for London, three for Bristol, two for Colchester, and one or two for each of the Counties of England and Wales. Ministers could also attend if they wished. Epistle dated 26th of Third Month.

1674-1677.

Ministers only. Epistles dated 27th of Third Month, 1675, and 12th of Fourth Month, 1677.

1678-1904.

Representatives. Epistles dated 24th of Third Month, 1678, 11th of Fourth Month, 1679, 3rd of Fourth Month, 1680, 24th of Third Month, 1681, from which year to the present time there has been an unbroken succession.

Robert Smith and William Dewsbury.

Att a quarterly meetinge at Erith, the third of the 4th month, 1673.

Robert Smith appeared in this quarterly Meeting, and acknowledged that through some reportes that he receiued in the wronge part their was for a time some prejudice begott in him against William Dewsbury, which occasioned him to speake some thinges reflecting on him behind his backe, wherin he seeth he was to blame ; And for the future hopes so to walke as that he may give no offence in that Matter, nor any thinge of the like Nature, neither to ffriendes of truth nor others. And he desires that all that he hath spoken, that hath not had the Saviour of truth, reflecting on y^e Meetinge Or on any perticuler, May for Euer be put downe in himselfe, and others, so as to die out of their Minds.

ROBERT SMITH.

A true Copy of what he writt his name to :

Wittnesse JNO PEACOCK.

*From Huntingdonshire Q.M. Minute Book, 1670-1699,
deposited in D.*