

Early Friends at Poulner, Hants.

On the borders of the New Forest, just outside the ancient town of Ringwood, there is a little hamlet called Poulner (pronounced *Powner*). It lies on the main road to Southampton, about a mile and a half out of the town, and was the scene nearly two hundred and fifty years ago of a certain great Quaker Meeting. George Fox thus describes the scene¹:—

From thence [we] passed on through the Country, visiting Friends, and having great Meetings; and all quiet and free from Disturbance, (except by some *Jangling Baptists*) till we came into *Hampshire*: Where after we had had a good Meeting at *Southampton*, we went to a place called *Pulmer*, in the Parish of *Ringwood*, where there was to be a Monthly Meeting next Day, to which many Friends came from *Southampton*, *Pool*, and other places; and the Weather being very *hot*, some of them came pretty early in the Morning. I took a Friend and walked out with him into the Orchard, inquiring of him, how the affairs of Truth stood amongst them? . . . It was not yet Meeting-time by about Three Hours; and there being other Friends walking in the Orchard also, the Friend that I was discoursing with before, desired me to walk into a Corn-Field adjoining to the Orchard; and so we did.

Fox continues: "Toward the latter part of the Meeting, a man in Gay Apparel came and looked into the meeting whilst I was declaring"; and went forthwith to Ringwood for the soldiers again, saying that "'George Fox was preaching to two or three hundred people at Pulner,'" and so the soldiers were sent again but only to find the Meeting over, "ending about the third Hour peacably and orderly." Then after this four hours' meeting George Fox rode away twenty miles to "one—*Frye's House in Wiltshire*," whilst the officers and soldiers were "much enraged" at having "missed their prey."

At Poulner is a very large and ancient orchard, bounded on one side by the main road, on another by corn fields, and on a third by a lane. The orchard must have been the same in George Fox's time, for it is surrounded by ancient oak trees on three sides. It forms part of a farm known as Merryweather Farm, and an old lady told some local Friends, that it was traditionally the

¹ *The Journal of George Fox*, 1709 ed., ii. 16, anno 1663.

place of a "great Quakers' meeting."² She remembered when she was a girl seeing an aged lady in a Friends' bonnet, who she was told was the last of the Merryweather family and had been brought up at Merryweather Farm. This however is not quite correct, because the grandson of the aged Friend mentioned told me that her name was Pritchett, but that she was related to the Merryweather family. An inspection of the old books of Ringwood Monthly Meeting shows that for generations both Merryweathers and Pritchetts were prominent Friends, so it is quite possible that the farm took its name from its occupiers, and certainly there is no other place in Poulner so well adapted for a large open-air meeting. The registers of births and burials show that generations of both families were born and buried at Ringwood.

The meeting at Ringwood appears to have collapsed rather suddenly. It was closed in 1824 and two Friends were requested "to inform John Merryweather & family" of the same. Three years later he was buried at Ringwood, aged seventy, and described as "a yeoman," of "Kinson near Poole in Dorset." It may be that his removal was one of the causes of the discontinuance, for he had for years before figured prominently in the Monthly Meeting. The Meeting House, a fine old building, was sold many years ago and is now divided into two dwelling-houses. A little patch of garden in front evidently contains graves, for the inhabitants tell tales of subsidences in the ground. In a field at the other side of the town, a place is pointed out as the "Quakers' burying ground," but the boundary has gone, and, except that its surface is uneven, it is like the rest of the field. Here, without doubt, lie many generations of Merryweathers.

Not the least interesting thing in connection with the subject is that a local Friend told me that before ever he heard of all this, and the first time he passed the orchard, he felt a most decided "stop" in his mind; and so strong was the impression that whenever he passed he felt a curiosity concerning the place, which of course changed into interest when he heard the story.

Brockenhurst, Hants.

HENRY W. SANDERS.

² Several photographs of the orchard and farm-buildings have been sent by H. W. Sanders, and added to the collection in D. [Eds.]