

## THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF JORDANS MEETING HOUSE

It is impossible to estimate the historical importance of the 1688 Jordans Meeting House without reference to the whole area in which it is situated. The Chiltern hills of southern Buckinghamshire had been a place of religious non-conformity and dissent long before the ferment of the seventeenth century out of which the Quaker movement was born. The beech trees, with which the hills were always thickly wooded, created good hiding places for those who did not wish the law to find them, and, especially for Quakers, the little part of Hertfordshire which surrounded Coleshill, and even ran as far south as the edge of the present-day New Town of Beaconsfield, provided a possible sanctuary from the Buckinghamshire magistracy. Accessibility to London was also important for the early Quakers, and is still a great asset.

Many early Quakers were associated in one way or another with the Chilterns in general, and with Jordans in particular. One thinks of course William Penn, who, with his two wives and ten children, lies among the small group of graves in a small burial ground immediately outside the meeting house and in fact pre-dating it; also Isaac and Mary Penington, and Guliema Springett, Mary's daughter by a former marriage, who was the first of William Penn's aforementioned wives. Thomas and Mary Ellwood are also buried there, at whose home Hunger Hill, on the lane to Coleshill (and therefore in Hertfordshire), were held Monthly Meetings for what was then the district of Upperside, for forty years. Thomas Ellwood came from Crowell, in Oxfordshire, and in about 1658 his father brought him as a young man to visit the Peningtons, who were living at that time at The Grange in Peter's Chalfont (nowadays Chalfont St. Peter, but so called by the early Friends because they were wary of saints). On Thomas' second visit to the Peningtons, he went with them to a Meeting at a nearby country house called The Grove, actually just in the next parish of Giles Chalfont (now Chalfont St. Giles). Both these houses still exist, though much altered. Another claim to fame of Thomas Ellwood was that, through Isaac Penington, Thomas became acquainted with John Milton, first going to read to the poet in London, when his eyesight was failing, and later finding him a cottage in the same Giles Chalfont, where Milton could escape the Great Plague in 1665.

Another early Quaker was John Bellers, 1654-1725, who was a

member of Jordans Meeting, and living in Isaac Pennington's old house, The Grange, when in 1695 he wrote his *Proposals for Raising a College of Industry of all useful Trades and Husbandry, with Profit for the Rich, a Plentiful Living for the Poor, and a Good Education for Youth*, which anticipate to some extent later principles of socialism. In 1818, Robert Owen reprinted this pamphlet, claiming it as a forecast of his own scheme for an industrial commonwealth, and Karl Marx called Bellers 'a veritable phenomenon in the history of political economy'. Bellers started his workhouse at Clerkenwell in 1702, separating the children from the elderly before long. The children's school became a Friends' School, moving first to Croydon, and in 1879 to Saffron Walden, in Essex, where it remains to this day, the oldest Friends' School in the United Kingdom.

Another valued visitor to Jordans was the traveller, preacher and lawyer, Thomas Story, who was at the burial of his close friend, William Penn, in 1718, and he continued to visit Jordans Meeting House during the early eighteenth century.

Three early Quakers with particular connections to the pre-revolutionary American states are William Penn, John Archdale and Samuel Jennings. William Penn was the founder and first Governor of Pennsylvania, a tract of land which he received from the English King upon his father's death, because the King owed him a debt which he had no other means of repaying. William Penn was from London, but in 1672 married Guli Springett (Isaac Pennington's stepdaughter) at Chorleywood, and for five years they lived at Rickmansworth. They visited Jordans and the Chalfonts often, and four of their children who died as infants are in the old burial ground. They moved to Sussex in 1677, and William was busy at that period with the "holy experiment" in government, promoting freedom of conscience and friendship between white men and the native Americans. When he returned to England after his four years in Pennsylvania, they were often at Jordans Meeting; two more children and his beloved wife Guli were buried there in the 1690s. William himself died in Berkshire in 1718, and his second wife Hannah joined him in the Jordans burial ground in 1726.

John Archdale and Samuel Jennings were both members of Upperside Monthly Meeting, which met for more than 40 years at Thomas Ellwood's house, Hunger Hill, at Coleshill. John Archdale of Wycombe became a proprietor of the Carolinas in 1680, served as Vice-Governor in 1685, and went there in 1695 to establish a constitution, to settle differences with the native Americans, to appease the different factions among the settlers, and to secure

naturalization for immigrant Huguenots. Upon his return to England, he was the first Quaker to be elected to Parliament, but because he could not swear the oath of allegiance, he could not take his seat. Quakers' rooted objection to the swearing of oaths of any kind, based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, made great difficulties for them in many ways, in the early days.

Samuel Jennings of Aylesbury became Governor of New Jersey in 1683, and was Speaker of the Assembly for five years from 1703. His concerns for the members of Upperside Monthly Meeting, and for its well-being, are documented in the early minutes. He was a good friend of Thomas Ellwood, and in his will (he died in 1709) he left Thomas the sum of twenty pounds to buy "a gelding or otherwise as he shall think fit". Samuel Jennings' daughter married the youngest of the Peningtons' sons, Edward, who was surveyor-general in Philadelphia, and so the trans-Atlantic connection continued.

Before dissenters were allowed to build meeting houses, local Quakers gathered in various homes throughout south Buckinghamshire, and eventually a worshipping group formed at Jordans Farm, which had originally been part of the manor of Grove Place, (afterwards The Grove, as above), and was sold to Thomas Russell, who had already been farming there as a tenant, in 1618. It is interesting that many of the witnesses to the indenture of sale have family names that appear later in local Quaker records. At that time, the farmhouse was probably quite small, but in 1623 Thomas Russell's son William married the girl next door, Cicely Reading of the adjacent farm of Austins, and, probably as a result, in the next year a large kitchen was built onto the old house, and this was of a convenient size to accommodate what George Fox himself later was to describe as "a blessed large meeting". By 1669, William Russell "the younger" (ie the son of Thomas' son William) was holding a "conventicle" in the Jordans farmhouse, to which sixty or seventy people went to worship, with Isaac Penington as their "head or teacher", and here they ran foul of the 1670 Second Conventicle Act, which encouraged informers to spy on such meetings. Thomas Ellwood was instrumental in eventually countering the activities of these informers.

George Fox himself paid several visits to Jordans Farm, sometimes staying with the Peningtons, who eventually moved to Amersham; his last visit was in 1681, by which time Isaac had died, and Mary was to die the following year. When William Penn came to visit, first Jordans Farm, and later the new meeting house, to the

costs of which he contributed, he liked to stay at Stone Dean, on the opposite side of a small lane from Peter's Chalfont which comes down a steep hill to that part of the land of Jordans Farm which was first acquired for a burial ground in 1671, and then an adjacent plot with a chalk dell, probably a lime pit, which was used to build the meeting house as soon as King James II issued the Declaration of Indulgence in 1687.

Building of the meeting house was begun some ten weeks after the Declaration was promulgated, in the summer of 1688, and we are told it was finished in four months; the first meeting for worship was held there on the 30th of September. The unpretentious meeting house itself has not changed very much since that summer of 1688; the exterior is of plain Flemish-bond bricks, with five windows on the western front, and a large window in the northern wall, all leaded lozenge panes in iron casements, set in wooden frames. These windows were restored some years ago, using much of the original glass, and have survived the recent fire. The interior of the meeting-room is whitewashed, and the lower part of the walls are panelled with unpolished deal, which incorporates two long benches along the western and eastern sides of the room. A raised minister's stand was built, probably in 1733, which now partially obscures the large northern window. The red flooring bricks are laid on bare earth; they and the wall bricks probably came from a local kiln. The inside of the Meeting House is most famously represented in James Doyle Penrose's painting called "The Presence in the Midst" c.1913 showing an image of Christ in the midst of a gathered meeting of early Friends. The original oil painting hangs in Friends House and there are many treasured copies all over the world, notably at Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania.

The southern end of the original building was a caretaker's cottage, at a lower level than the meeting-room, and with a gallery above which has been used for various purposes over the centuries, and where the oldest and most precious manuscripts have been preserved. Originally there were stables at the back of the meeting house, with an attic above, extended and converted in 1867. Two rooms were constructed from the stables in 1941, for children's classes, and in 1958 a new extension, carefully designed not to show from the front of the meeting house, provided classrooms and toilets on the ground floor and a flat for the caretaker, who was now serving as warden. This whole area, behind the original meeting house, has been destroyed in the recent fire.

However, it can be seen that the Quaker connections in

Buckinghamshire encompass far more than just the old Meeting House itself - which at the time of its building was proudly named New Jordans. The older farmhouse at the top of the hill, now a guesthouse, has a barn reputed to be built from the timbers of the "Mayflower", and Jordans Village, built across the lane from the farmhouse, was started in 1919 as a social and industrial experiment, where land was to be owned communally, and craftsmen's work to be sold cooperatively. J.D. Penrose lived in Jordans Village and he and his wife are buried at Jordans.

A 1931 letter to *The Spectator* calls Jordans "a well where men come to draw waters of peace. Men of all creeds and no creeds can gather in that austere room where generation on generation of Quakers have gathered before them and taken peace into their souls." And G.K. Chesterton, who lived in nearby Beaconsfield, himself a Roman Catholic, described Jordans as "of enormous significance in the history of my country."

### **The Fire and the consequent damage**

The fire started in the kitchen of the warden's accommodation and spread along the first floor of the rear extension and up into the roof void. The wardens' flat and the library were completely gutted. The wardens themselves were taken to the local hospital with smoke inhalation and minor burns. They were released after a couple of days to stay briefly at Old Jordans with their daughter who was on holiday from boarding school while we sorted out some temporary accommodation for them. The Meeting House itself, which is Grade I Listed, escaped relatively unscathed from the fire apart from the tiled roof and roof timbers. The majority of the ceiling is still in place, however, and most of the window glass is unbroken. The major damage to the Meeting House has been from the water that was pumped in during the considerable time that it took the fire service to put out the blaze. All the movable furniture has been removed and placed in storage and all the exhibition material, pictures, pre-1900 books and documents are being stored and restored locally, in temperature controlled conditions, at the house of John & Sue Smithson.

In the course of removal we discovered a box of original seventeenth and eighteenth century pamphlets which seem to be the residue of the Uppeside Monthly Meeting Library. These have been catalogued and unique copies offered to Friends House Library for its collection.

In relation to the building the first step taken was to make the site safe. This involved taking down the chimney in the rear extension which was in constant danger of falling onto the heads of the

demolition workers. Then the Minister's Stand, the deal panelling around the walls and the Meeting House floor had to be protected from falling debris while the workmen retrieved the roof tiles, many of which had fallen in on to the upper side of the ceiling during the fire. Then all the charred wooden rafters and roof beams were removed leaving the main "A" Frame sections in place to hold the remainder of the building together. The next step will be to erect scaffolding and put a "tin hat" over the building at chimney height in order to protect the remaining fabric from the elements and to enable the inside of the Meeting House to dry out naturally. The loss adjuster accepted the fire officer's report and the insurance company has agreed to pay the insurance claim. A structural engineer and architect have been appointed and a small Meeting House Restoration Team has been set up by Jordans Monthly Meeting which is the responsible body in relation to both the ownership and maintenance of the Meeting House and the employment of the wardens. Andrew Townsend, the architect, has acted as architect/surveyor for a number of historic Quaker Meeting Houses in Britain and other listed buildings owned by Friends such as Charney Manor.

His first sketches for the restoration of the rear extension are expected by the end of May. The best estimate of the time it will take to complete the full restoration is eighteen months.

Meanwhile, Jordans Village has very kindly offered the use of the Village Hall to the Preparative Meeting until we are able to return to the Meeting House. Temporary accommodation has been found for the wardens and their daughter, again in Jordans Village. A collection made right across Jordans Monthly Meeting for the family's immediate needs, since they had lost everything in the fire, has raised more than £1800 so far.

### **Appeal for funds**

We have decided not to mount an appeal until we know the size of the gap between the final cost of rebuilding and the insurance payout. We anticipate that there will be a gap because we wish to take advantage of the gutting of the first floor of the rear extension to put in place some alterations that we were already planning for when the fire happened. This means that we already have a small fundraising team in place and it will be their job, when the time comes, to mount the appeal on behalf of Jordans Preparative Meeting.

*Sue Smithson  
and Hilary Pinder*