

UNTOLERATED MEETING HOUSES

Have you ever heard said 'Friends are such law-abiding people that they would never, for example, build meeting houses when it was forbidden by law'. I have seen this suggested in print several times; it is one of several fallacies which get trotted out. The fact is that during this period when religious groups dissenting from the established church were being persecuted, we know that Quakers acquired at least 220 meeting houses, which says a good deal about their attitude to the laws of the time. They demonstrated by the quality and quantity and situation of their meeting houses a certainty of the rightness and the future of the movement. These buildings are our subject today.

The printed words of a religious movement may set out its aims and purposes, but its bricks and mortar will help our understanding of its realisation. Buildings are necessarily modified in response to outside circumstances: neither the behaviour of early Friends nor what they wrote seem much influenced by the day-to-day realities around them. To look at the meeting houses which Friends built and acquired during their first few decades may help to illuminate their ideas and intentions in action, and to show how far they were realised.

The period of intoleration began for Quakerism with the establishment of the movement as a settled body, with regularly-held meetings and the earliest property acquired for their purposes, in 1652. Most English and Welsh dissenters were to some degree relieved by the withdrawal of some of these penalties, particularly those relating to the unhampered use of their meeting houses, through the Act of Toleration of 1689. This Act had been anticipated by several events including the Declaration of Indulgence the year before. The year 1687 is thus taken as the closing date. Thus our period covers the first 35 years of the Quaker movement.

In the mid-seventeenth century Quakers presented the government with real anxieties. The new movement held a wide correspondence throughout the kingdom and beyond, and its members had no respect for their betters, nor for magistrates who were charged with preserving the peace as they saw it. It became quite clear that Quakerism had to be stopped. Almost at once penalties were laid upon Friends, some in response to particular testimonies such as the

taking of oaths. The King's Council expressed the very real anxiety it felt, although its choice of words when ordering the demolition of a meeting house in 1670 does appear a little extravagant: 'That the persons who there assemble behave themselves in such a riotous and tumultuous manner, that if their meetings be any longer endured, his majesty's peace and quiet of government will thereby be manifestly endangered'.¹ As Craig Horle wrote in 1988 'By the end of their first decade of existence, the Quakers had developed a collective set of principles which threatened the foundations of the English legal system',² and with them a total disregard for the personal consequences of their actions. To take as typical of many, a report was made to Whitehall in 1676 of Friends in a remote country community in Westmorland: 'The Quakers of Windermere... are grown very peremptory, and presumptuously meet in great assemblies in opposition to the parson, before the church, and intend *nolens volens* to have another meeting on Sunday three weeks'.³ Note where they met, not on one of their abundant remote and discreet fell-sides, but 'before the church', in the sight of the entire community.

Meeting houses were an obvious target in the process of suppression. The 1670 Conventicle Act laid a fine of £20 on any person who allowed 'his or her house, out-house, barn, yard or backside' to be used for holding 'any assembly, conventicle, or meeting, under colour or pretence of any exercise of religion, in other manner than is according to the liturgy and practice of the Church of England'.⁴ This gave some anxiety to those not in membership from whom Friends rented their meeting place. Friends therefore took responsibility for any fine imposed upon their landlord, thus at Ashford in Kent in 1674 (just following a bad period for Kent Friends) when they were negotiating to rent a building, 'and if it should happen that the aforesaid meeting house be hurt or damnified upon the account of truth for Friend's sake then the said Friends to make it good again'.⁵ At Hoddesdon (though rather later) where Friends met in a rented room, they allayed their landlord's anxiety by buying the premises from him. Thus an unforeseen consequence of this provision of the act was to encourage Friends to own more meeting houses, and to rent fewer.

In the same year 1670 King Charles II ordered his surveyor-general Christopher Wren to pull down the seats and pulpits of all dissenting meeting houses in the larger corporations.⁶ Destruction was not sought at that time, only that the buildings should be made useless for its intended purpose. Shortly afterwards total demolition was

required, though it is doubtful whether this often went as far as the really hard work. Time and again the furniture, the doors, windows and roof were removed and sold for drink, or burnt on the village green, and nearly as often Friends repaired the damage. Meantime, they made their public statement by continuing to meet within the walls.

There was nothing secretive or private about these meeting houses, as a reading of contemporary documents makes clear.⁷ The public nature of Quaker worship was taken very seriously. At one time it appeared sensible to Friends of Looe in Cornwall to meet 'on the rocks and sand, to avoid being fined for a house',⁸ but Friends soon stopped as it looked too much like concealment.

The degree to which Quakers were tolerated by the authorities varied greatly from place to place, and this depended as much on local personalities as on the law of the land. Thus in Bristol in 1663 'John Knight entered upon his mayoralty, who pursued the Quakers as earnestly as if the persecution of them had been the chief business of his office'.⁹ Once he was out, Bristol Friends were left pretty much alone for the next twelve years.

Friends worked hard and to some effect to make the laws of property serve them. There is for example the well-known occasion in 1670 when Gilbert Latey put a tenant to live in Wheeler Street meeting house, of which he was the owner,¹⁰ thus making it in the eye of the law a dwelling, and so effectively thwarted the Governor of the Tower of London whose duty it was to despoil it.¹¹ He paved the way for Friends all over the country to obtain the same relief. Meetings also sought the advice of Meeting for Sufferings, and its Book of Cases is a record of Friends' use of the law. Yearly Meeting too gave advice on particular problems, amplifying a similar situation in Warwickshire: 'The advice is, let the Friends with all speed put a tenant into the house and lay four acres of land to it to be in the occupation of the same tenant, and let them let it upon a valuable consideration and receive the rent fairly for it, before sufficient witnesses',¹² thus putting themselves firmly on the right side of common law. In 1683 the ownership of Henley meeting house was transferred to a London Friend, as local Friends could not undertake the hazard of owning it. These aspects of the subject have been invaluable covered by Craig Horle.¹³

The opening of a new meeting house was inevitably seen by the authorities as an occasion requiring a vigorous response, and many instances correspond with the opening of new premises. Official action was usually to lock or nail up the door, occasionally to brick it

up. In 1670 it was reported to Whitehall of Bristol Friends, who had just opened their great Friars meeting house, 'Yesterday the Quakers (who of late met in the street in silence near their meeting place) took the boldness four times to break open the door of their meeting house'.¹⁴ Many similar accounts appear, no riot, no tumult, just plain civil disobedience.

This action against a new meeting house seldom lasted for long. The overall impression is that buildings were let off a good deal more lightly than were people. Bearing in mind however that the buildings stood visible to all year after year, and were known for what they were, they could have been much more harmed. There was of course an opposite view, as was reported of Edinburgh when in 1696 (the Act of Toleration did not apply in Scotland) Friends being locked out of their meeting house, 'The news being carried to the Provost of the City, he said "the Quakers would do more hurt out of doors, than within" and ordered them their key'.¹⁵

As a digression, it might be observed that documents appear scarcely to have been disturbed, though letters in the post were opened. The office which London Friends rented at Three Kings Court from c 1660, where they kept a great deal of potentially subversive correspondence from all over the country, as well as deeds and minutes of meetings, appears not to have been disturbed at all.

The quantity of private hospitality given to meetings was great, its value to the growing movement without price. Mungo Bewley of Cumberland was convinced in 1655, and opened his house to Friends 'and a meeting was settled and kept there by course unto this day... and the son of the said Mungo [still] entertains the meeting at the place aforesaid'.¹⁶ Not until 1713 did his meeting have to find its own premises. Such hospitality was repeated many times over throughout the country and appreciably reduced the need for these meetings to provide their own building.

The quality of construction of these first meeting houses varied much. Well over 50 had to be replaced within 50 years of their erection, some because the meeting outgrew them, others were insubstantial because persecution had discouraged more substantial work. That at Wheeler Street was well known among London Friends as a very flimsy structure, and part blew down in a storm in 1703.¹⁷ On the other hand there were Friends who were building, physically as well as spiritually, for all time. A case in point is at Brigflatts (Yorkshire West Riding) where, apart from the church and the manor house, the meeting house of 1675 was the only building in the area

with a better roof than thatch. The substantial stone-flagged roof had a far longer life, but required much stronger timbers to support it; it was in the forefront of local building technology, which may be difficult to believe as we stand in that ancient and picturesque building.

Another reason for the small number of surviving early examples is the national phenomenon known as the Great Rebuild.¹⁸ At a period during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which varied in different parts of the country, not only were very many small properties rebuilt, but they were rebuilt more or less to the standard of Brigflatts. The construction techniques and materials employed changed from the impermanence of timber and mud walls and thatch to masonry and slate.

The majority of meeting houses were acquired during periods relatively free from persecution, but not all.¹⁹ That at Colchester was acquired in response to persecution rather than otherwise, when in 1663: 'it came in Friends hearts, in the midst and greatest of their fury and abusing Friends (and when about sixty of the richest Friends had been cast into the town prison), to build a very large meeting house, which was an amazement both to the troopers and to the town in general'.²⁰ In the event they bought rather than built, but it was large and it stood beside the parish church. During the initial trial of strength with the authorities, the Mayor 'caused the meeting house to be twice planked and bricked up, which was twice broken up, but at last Friends were forced to meet in the street in the winter in rain and snow, though pretty free from disturbance'.²¹

Given the times and the known consequences of their actions, Friends appear very matter-of-fact in the way they took their decision to build. It was, though, just one of many indications that they were convinced of the rightness of their actions. One Sunday in 1675 at Longford just outside London, Friends agreed 'to stay together after the meeting for worship was ended, to consider by a mutual consent about building of a meeting place on part of the burial ground'.²² It was opened the year after. At Norwich in 1677 'We finding it necessary to provide a house to meet in to accommodate our Friends and people in (that we have at present not being certain, nor the room wide enough), being clearly persuaded in our hearts and minds of the good service therein, we do freely agree to contribute towards the building of a house in the piece of ground our Friends have lately bought of Onias Phillippo'.²³ Friends near Warrington (Lancashire) were assisted by the travelling minister Benjamin Bangs in 1681: 'we... had a meeting at William Barn's in Sankey, on the First day;

whose house being too straight for the meeting, I persuaded Friends to get a meeting house built, which they readily fell in with, and the next day met, and made several handsome subscriptions in order thereto. And the building was soon after got up, which did better accommodate the Friends of the meeting'.²⁴ These travelling Friends were often the catalyst for action.

Generally a meeting would pay for its own meeting house, perhaps with the help of those nearby. At Monthly Meeting at Faringdon (Berkshire) in 1672 'It is also moved that Faringdon meeting house now a-building is like to be large and the charge lies pretty heavy upon Friends thereabouts; that there may be some thing allowed from the body of Friends (ie Quarterly Meeting) to assist them there in, they not being so well able to carry forward the work themselves'.²⁵ At Banbury 'about the year 1657, there was a meeting house built in the said James Wagstaff's back yard in Banbury, at the public charge of Friends, where meetings were constantly kept'.²⁶ These words 'at the public charge of Friends' often appear, emphasising the shared responsibility for the building.

In other circumstances an individual Friend would erect or buy the building and pass it over to the meeting, at a nominal charge. 'It is Thomas Hodson's desire (and that of this meeting also) that the meeting house at Bluntisham in Huntingdonshire should be wholly and fully settled upon Friends very shortly'.²⁷ At Nottingham in 1678 Friend John Reckless sold to Friends a new-built meeting house for a mere £10.²⁸ However, references to a gift have to be taken cautiously, as sometimes quite large sums change hands.

Where a meeting was not up to acquiring a building of its own, it could rent something more or less suitable. The words 'our hired house' appear often, and usually in relation to premises for early meetings, hired on the open market rather than from Friends. There were times however when the latter was convenient, for instance in 1675 at the home of a Berkshire Friend who had in the past been host to the meeting 'Richard Brooks and Oliver Sansom gave an account that they have hired Adam Lawrence's... house in Challow in Berkshire, to receive the meeting that now is at Childray on first days and at Challow 5th days, and Friends are to give twenty shillings a year as rent for it and to provide seats and things necessary for the meeting, and for what partitions are pulled down Friends are to make it as good again when they leave it as it was when they came to it'.²⁹ This they never had to do, as the meeting acquired the cottage, presumably on Adam's death, and later built a meeting house on the site.

Few of the cottages and barns which Friends bought or hired and fitted up lasted long, as most had been built on the wrong side of the Great Rebuild. A barn at Low Bentham (Yorkshire West Riding) bought in 1686 for £11³⁰ lasted for 35 years. Exceptionally, the cottage at Portishead (Somerset), given in 1669, remains a meeting house to this day.

In the mid-seventeenth century there were many dissenting groups, though few are still with us. Most must have had some permanent meeting-places of one sort or another, and it would be instructive to compare theirs' with ours', had sufficient material been available. A review of those few published³¹ shows some quite Quaker-like. This is however a reflection of the lowest common denominator in design and construction, since most congregations were getting away from the formality of the established church, and could aspire to nothing more expensive than simple, straightforward accommodation, which is exactly what Friends were after.

The buildings erected by Quakers for their own use varied much in size and in arrangement during these formative years, while they were seeking to know what best suited their needs. About 50 purpose-built meeting houses are still in existence or are known to us in some degree from records, sufficient to give an idea of how the process began. Usually they were simple, though not always structurally uncomplicated. Hertford is a case in point, where front and back elevations differ for no apparent reason, requiring an internal column where the two roof structures meet.

At Bristol, Friends made a bold statement when in 1670 they erected a large and substantial building, seating by today's standards some 800 people. It stood high, with a steep pitched roof surmounted by a great central turret and weather-vane. Their intention was clear, that it should be seen and known for what it was. Friends were stronger in Bristol than anywhere outside London, and lived at peace with the authorities for most of the time, though, as we have seen, with a few intense periods of persecution. Many other meeting houses, though smaller in scale, were able to declare their presence with style, whether in town or village. Adderbury in Oxfordshire, Earls Colne in Essex, and Hertford, for example.

The large London meeting houses could not match this presence, as they were built on deep and tight back-land sites with seldom an elevation to show. Further, they were generally on leasehold sites, and thus the building was subject to the approval of the landlord, often a city livery company.

Aside from the few large city meeting houses, a common feature of

this time is their small size. The general run of early meeting houses were cottage-sized, say 30' by 20' inside or thereabouts, and seating (nowadays) about 100 people at most. What surprises about this is the apparent acceptance that they sufficed at that time of enthusiastic growth. It seems to flow against contemporary Friends' expectation of universal appeal as expressed in some of their writings, and may thus show a more ready acceptance of physical limitations. There were times, particularly in the nineteenth century, when optimism in seating capacity ran far ahead of reality. Surely this if any was the moment when that should have happened.

Most of these buildings were inevitably without architectural pretensions: typically a door and two or three windows on the front wall under the eaves, the other walls blank. The precise furnishing is not now always apparent, but from the start most were provided with a small facing bench, and several were divided by a timber partition for the separate women's business meeting, though its universal acceptance came rather later. In this simple way Friends satisfied their need for a space within which to worship and to conduct their affairs. The stand, particularly, seldom survives in its original form, and about 1717 Hertford meeting house was seriously altered in order to put in larger facing benches. After Longacre (London, 1679) had been in use for fifteen years, a Friend was asked to make a stool for ministering Friends to stand on.

The ordinary seating is more often mentioned in connection with destruction than otherwise, and usually in a standard form of words, unreliably suggesting a well-furnished building. At Thaxted (Essex), where Colonel Turner 'locked and nailed up the meeting house door there, which next day they opened up again taking away the forms, benches and stand... and burnt them'.³² Occasionally there are more positive references, as at Cobham (Surrey) where Friends were preparing temporary accommodation until their new meeting house was built in 1677: 'It was then ordered that James Becket according to his desire be allowed money from Kingston meeting to buy forms and benches to put in his house for the use of Friends for [Cobham] meeting that is to be at his house'.³³ Most meeting houses started out furnished with forms only, and later added arm-rests and backs to a few, thence referring to them as benches. The variety of ways in which local joiners tackled this job is a fascinating subject in its own right. Kingston (Surrey) meeting ordered two 'with backs to them' in 1688, which gave a good deal of (unspecified) unease among its members.³⁴ Similarly, chairs seldom found acceptance, and at Aberdeen they were removed in 1688, 'by reason of any contenting about them'.

Then as now, more went on in a meeting house than worship alone, and Friends were not so exclusive about how it was used, as they later became. The use of the place as a dwelling combined the two purposes of preserving the premises from the authorities, as we have seen, and of providing accommodation for those whom the meeting wished to help. The latter use started well before Gilbert Latey and continued long after toleration. When Gilbert Latey 'ordered a poor Friend to be put into Wheeler Street meeting house', that is exactly what happened: not into some other room under the same roof but into the meeting room itself. While this could be difficult for the tenant, it was not always easy for the meeting. So at Winchmore Hill (London) in 1692 'widow French is to be acquainted that Friends are troubled to see that she does not put things out of sight during the meeting time as her pots and things upon the shelves and cheeses on the beams which are for all to see'.³⁵ They went on to complain how the children ran up and down stairs during meeting, suggesting that she had the use of the attic. The meeting house at Kingston was perhaps rather better off as it had a cellar which which was partitioned a year after it was built,³⁶ when Sarah Lyne was to dwell there. Then soon after 'it was agreed by the meeting that Eleanor White with her child do inhabit in the meeting house in the lower rooms with Sarah Lyne as they two can best contrive'.³⁷ Not surprisingly there is mention two years later of the spot in the meeting room itself where 'Ellin White's bed did used to stand'. Friends continued to allow their needy brethren to live in their meeting houses for the service it offered. The Society had deliberately put itself outside any poor relief available to the rest of the population, and so in this as in other matters it had to be self-sufficient.

In this context mention might be made of meeting houses as almshouses, the distinction being between living in the meeting room, or beside it under the same roof, in fact very few mentions occur. The clearest is at Claverham (Somerset), where the deed of the first meeting house in 1673 states the intention 'that... may be built a house for the said people called Quakers to meet together... and for some of their poor Friends to inhabit therein'.³⁸ The form of its very stylish successor of 1729 clearly indicates the continuance of this combined use. When the first London Devonshire House meeting house was built in 1678 the contract plans show that the attics were to be fitted out for poor widows to live in.

Others too lived in the meeting house, who served as resident caretakers. Friends in Norwich had one at their first narrow premises

in St Lawrence parish, who in 1676 was 'allowed 4 pence per week for washing the courtyard belonging to the meeting house'. John Fieldman took on the job later that year 'upon the consideration that he is to keep the yard and rooms clean, and doing other service pertaining to Truth in the place, and pay the chimney-money, he is to pay no other rent, and to give, or take a quarter's warning'. He was the last to live there, and in 1677 a woman living nearby was employed at 10/- a quarter 'for making clean the meeting rooms & yards, & placing the forms on meeting days',³⁹ suggesting that the room was used for other things between meetings.

Education was then largely in the hands of the Church, so again Friends had to supply it themselves. The meeting house served well as a school, and Friends were content, although they were cautious about meeting-time. At Bristol they appointed a schoolmaster in 1663, and 'it is concluded that for the present he shall be allowed to teach in this room, provided that he be careful to have it made clean and ready for meetings every week'. When the meeting moved to Friars in 1670 the school was given the use of a separate room: 'It being proposed to this meeting, to spare the void room over the meeting house to Lawrence Steel, for a schoolroom, this meeting doth, with one accord, give consent that he shall have it'.⁴⁰ Countless small schools were set up very early throughout the country, a few developing into quite large affairs, like Stramongate School at Kendal.

We may never know just how many pre-toleration meeting houses there were, nor their distribution. Where careful local studies have been made the quantity known is generally far greater than elsewhere, so it is necessary to be cautious in drawing conclusions on geographical distribution. Throughout the country many meetings never achieved, or even aspired to, permanent premises, and a full tally of the meetings of this time is a quite separate study.

The main objective of the First Publishers of Truth was London rather than Westmorland or anywhere in between, thus almost at once they were in the capital, where they were soon using several large buildings. Growth was next to the west, to Bristol and Somerset via the Cotswolds; and towards Essex, encouraged by Friends on their way to Holland and the continent. Only after this was much progress made in the remainder of England, and indeed in some parts meeting houses did not develop appreciably until after toleration.

We can say something of the distribution of these buildings, of the way they were acquired, and of their location. During the first 17

years to 1669, acquisition averaged (disregarding the very earliest years) some three meeting houses per annum. The second period of ten years from 1670 contains the main growth at about twelve per annum, while during the last six years, a time of severe persecution, acquisitions dropped to half that.

There are sound indications of how most of the 220 pre-toleration meeting houses were acquired. Over the whole period more than three-quarters were owned, the rest were leased or rented; of those acquired during the more stable middle period almost all were owned. The next stage, how many were built as meeting houses, cannot be so well defined; however it appears that nearly half were purpose-built, though few in the earlier years. This conveys the intention of permanence which Friends worked for.

The location of two-thirds of these meeting houses is sufficiently known, for instance whether on major roads or back lanes, suggesting three observations. Firstly that there was a small but important group of meeting houses which were intended by Friends to make a strong public statement of their belief in their right to worship when and where they thought proper. Secondly, the figures indicate early strength in town centres, followed later by a corresponding increase in villages. Lastly they make clear, as indeed do the writings of early Friends, that there was never any wish for concealment. The emphasis was clearly in the opposite direction. Thus the location and acquisition of a meeting house was a reflection of the intentions and preferences of Friends, rather than a response to persecution or concealment from it. Their meeting house was a permanent structure sited, to the best of their ability, where they wanted it.

Later, well after persecution ceased, the limitations of available urban sites often led to the use of 'back land' reached through an alley off the main street, where Friends could be central yet 'retired', a deliberate and perhaps 'Quietist' choice. In farming country, places which may appear remote to us now were not always so, for the development of paved roads has led to the neglect of a far closer network of bridleways and lanes; and farming then supported a far larger population. A meeting house as remote to us as any is Thornyland in northern Cumberland, yet its site was chosen deliberately for its convenience: 'And the ground of Thomas Forster, of Hurst, and Anne his wife, called the Thornyland, being most suitable and near the middle of Friends, was requested, which they readily granted'.⁴¹

The attitude of early Friends towards their meeting houses seldom

took account of anything much beyond convenience and utility, and, as we saw at Norwich, the good service they offered. This phrase, 'the service of Truth' recurs often in this connection. The building was to be useful in relation to the spread of the message, and convenient for worship, without regard for the consequences.

This attitude led to permanence in respect of ownership and, where they could afford it, of quality, it led also perhaps to a cautious approach to size. It reflected, as time went on, Friends' strengthening testimony on material simplicity and showed then, as still, the local rather than national responsibility for premises. This in turn led to an absence of trend or pattern in their physical appearance. There were few family likenesses, which developed later, and began to show in the years immediately following the close of this period. Release from persecution in 1689 encouraged more meetings to build, although even then the rate of building scarcely exceeded the seventeen per year in 1676 to 1678, ten years before the Act of Toleration.

So during this period when Friends were meeting under such great difficulties they laid down the broad outline of their meeting houses for the next two centuries. The only significant change since this time has been the mid nineteenth century closing of women's business meetings; real new initiatives had to wait another half century, which is perhaps a reflection of how the Society had changed in the intervening years.

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Presidential Address given during Britain Yearly Meeting
in London, 3 May 1999

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For details of the individual meeting houses mentioned, see David M. Butler *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999.