

# DRESS AND DEPARTMENT OF MONMOUTHSHIRE FRIENDS

c. 1655-1850

The Quakers, as everybody knows, differ, more than even many foreigners do, from their own countrymen. They adopt a singular mode of language. Their domestic customs are peculiar... They are distinguished from all the other islanders by their dress. The differences are great and small.<sup>1</sup>

From the early years of the Society, Welsh Friends frowned upon extravagance and high living, sternly adhering to the pronouncement of the 1689 Yearly Meeting of Welsh Friends in Breconshire to be 'plaine and desent in your habitts that you may be a good example to families and neighbours.'<sup>2</sup> Friends were also fully aware that if they veered from this regulation they risked admonition and/or public disgrace by being disowned by the Society. They were further warned to be correct in their manners of speech by being told to be 'holy and unblameable' in their conversation, 'as becomes the gospel of Jesus Christ.'<sup>3</sup> In July 1726 John James from Llanfrechfa parish, confessed his own guilt at his 'ill language.' In his contrition he is recorded as saying 'I am sorry for it in reality, and I am grieved that my tongue should utter such words. It was in passion I spoke 'em and not in malice... I wish I had not given way to them.' He further asked for forgiveness from God and his fellow Friends.<sup>4</sup> This article will briefly examine some of the aspects of the Quaker code of discipline as it related to plainness and swearing in the county of Monmouthshire.<sup>5</sup>

Friends' rejection of extravagance and other kinds of opulence, and especially their preferences for knee breeches, white bibs and traditional wide brimmed hats clearly set them apart from the rest of Monmouthshire society.<sup>6</sup> Their strict rules on dress were also stringently observed by Friends' children who attended Quaker schools. The minutes of the Monthly Meeting in 1809 specified those articles of clothing that were need for schoolchildren attending Sidcot School:

For Boys

2 Coats, 2 waistcoats (not washing ones)

2 pair of breeches

2 Hats

For Girls

One cloth Cloak, 2 bonnets, 2

gowns (not printed ones of such as will require frequent washing)

## For Boys

2 pair of shoes  
 3 Shirts (not calico)  
 3 pair of stockings  
 3 pocket Hfs.

## For Girls

1 pair of stays. 2 skirts (not  
 cotton) 2 under petticoats  
 3 shifts (not calico)  
 3 check aprons with bibs or for  
 little girls 3 Tea cloths or  
 Pinefores  
 3 Pocket hfs.  
 3 Capes  
 2 Neck Hfs. or for little girls  
 2 Tippetts  
 3 Tuckers  
 3 Night capes  
 2 Pockets  
 3 Pairs of Stockings  
 2 Pair of Shoes  
 1 Pair of Mitts.<sup>7</sup>

Monmouthshire Friends adhered closely to the Society's wishes in their answers to the Yearly Monthly Meeting queries on plainness and also in their purchase of materials which were plain and free from embellishment. A further example of this tendency can be observed in the purchase of drab poplin by Mary Lewis of Trostant in 1808 for the Society's poor and needy.<sup>8</sup> There were, however, some Friends who did not keep exactly to the letter of the Quaker regulations on dress. In 1692 the inventory accompanying the will of John Jones, a doctor from Llanfrechfa, mentioned rings and signets to the value of £2.<sup>9</sup> In 1709 Samuel Lewis, a yeoman from Llanfihangel Ystern Llywern, bequeathed to his son, Edmund Lewis, a fine array of clothes, some of which were adorned with silver buttons and silver buckles.<sup>10</sup> Again in 1770 in reply to the Yearly Meeting enquiries on plainness the answer was not at all encouraging as the Quarterly Meeting stated 'to our sorrow some take too much liberty in speech, behaviour and apparell.'<sup>11</sup> John Beadles, of the Pant, went even further. In 1683 he entered his own family pedigree at the Herald's Visitation.<sup>12</sup>

Friends' houses contained little in the way of decoration, for there were normally no pictures or portraits. By an examination of the wills of Friends doubt is cast on the extent to which some Friends fully observed the tenet of 'plainness' in their homes. In a cross-section of 100 Monmouthshire Quaker wills and administrations examined throughout the period under study, items such as clocks, watches, silver and gold plate or jewellery are noted as well as clothing ranging from a few

shillings to a several pounds. In 1674 the will of Edward Webley, a tanner of Shirenewton, indicated that he left thirty pewter dishes, £5 in clothes and four brass kettles.<sup>13</sup> His widow Grace, who died five years later, also left an abundance of superfluous materials including 6 silver spoons, a clock and £8 in clothes.<sup>14</sup> The will of the Quaker doctor, John Jones of Llanfrechfa, made a note of his silver plate and £21 in gold as well as a further £8 in clothes.<sup>15</sup> While in 1707 the inventory of John Harris, another Quaker physician from Christchurch, mentioned among his personal property a watch valued at £7 and a looking glass worth 5 shillings.<sup>16</sup>

Although there are such examples of Friends failing to observe the requirements of the Society on simplicity there was no widespread abuse of this regulation. Coupled with Friends' frugality in dress and in decoration was their use of addressing people by the terms 'thee' and 'thou' and these actions further contributed to their social peculiarity. This can be highlighted in the correspondence between Friends or business associates.<sup>17</sup> Even as late as 1854 Friends were still careful to observe this custom when dealing with Church Wardens over tithes.<sup>18</sup> Even so by the end of the late eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth century, some Welsh Friends were prepared to accept slight modifications in their customs and dress.<sup>19</sup> In one instance one Welsh Friend even allowed his natural sense of humour take precedence over his stern demeanour. The Quaker, who was unnamed, had asked his travelling companion to aid the Bible Society by denoting some money towards the fund. The traveller, known only by the letter G, enquired why the Quaker requested subscriptions to a book that Friends did not believe in. The Quaker's indignation being aroused requested the passenger to prove his assertion by quoting a 'single instance' of unbelief. The man replied 'why, there is that foolish story of a little boy's killing a giant, by hitting him with a stone on the forehead.' The Quaker retorted 'thy epithet proves thy own unbelief: but really if the Philistine's forehead was as soft as thine, I see nothing miraculous in the effort.'<sup>20</sup>

In conjunction with their adherence to 'plainness' of dress and conversation, Monmouthshire Friends also kept strictly to the Gospel commandment of Matthew 5 verses 34-37 of not swearing.<sup>21</sup> Prior to the Affirmation Act of 1697, it is questionable how Monmouthshire Friends conducted the execution of probates in Ecclesiastical Courts without swearing. In her study of Derbyshire Friends, Helen Forde has attempted to solve this problem. She suggests that Friends appointed relatives or neighbours, who were not Quakers, to act as their executors thereby preventing fellow Friends, who were named as the executors in

the wills, from contravening the Quaker code of conduct.<sup>22</sup> In the Monmouthshire wills, Friends are normally named as executors, but since there are no admonitions in the minutes of the Quarterly Meetings before 1697<sup>23</sup> for acting contrary to the rules of swearing, it could well be argued that surrogates were used. In 1669, for instance, David Jones, a yeoman of St. Brides, named Lewis Harry as his executor but the will was attested to by David Price 'surrogate.'<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in 1667 the will of John Thomas, a yeoman from Goldcliffe, has clearly nominated two non-Quakers to act as executors instead of his Quaker relatives.<sup>25</sup> In 1692 Margaret Morgan, a widow from Llangibby, called upon Margaret Walters, a fellow Quaker, to act as her executor. Yet the will was attested to by the surrogate, J. Francklyn.<sup>26</sup>

Individual Friends also made impassioned pleas to fellow Quakers to desist from swearing and also tried to encourage neighbours to follow their lead. In December 1730, for example, Evan Bevan, an elder of the Pont-y-Moel Meeting, proposed that his tract against *Profane swearing and cursing and taking ye Lords holy name in vain* be printed. It was later agreed by the Meeting that it should be inserted in the *Gloster Journal* in 1734.<sup>27</sup> Friends, furthermore, by rigorously applying the scriptural tenet of swearing to oaths spoken in court, prevented themselves from taking an active part in civil, municipal or political life. In a Quarterly Meeting minute entered for December 1750, Friends' stance against the swearing of oaths or affirmations in ecclesiastical courts was strongly re-advocated and supported by a minute from the Meeting for Sufferings of 1746 which stated 'a Friend ought to be accepted in the said courts without oath or affirmation.' The minute went on to comment, however, that Friends were allowed by Council to give an affirmation in all cases 'where an oath is or shall be hereafter required.'<sup>28</sup>

Therefore Monmouthshire Friends, as has been illustrated, attempted to keep strictly to the rules of the Society on matters that concerned plainness and swearing. Where there were breaches in this code of conduct the individual was normally admonished by the local society. Yet, there are examples in this county where the rules of the Society were not closely observed and the individuals concerned appear to have escaped censure. These examples should be treated with caution, however, as the Friends involved constitute only a small fraction of the Society during the period under study.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism* (3 vols., 2nd ed., London, 1807), vol. I., ii-iii.
- <sup>2</sup> Glamorgan Record Office (hereafter G.R.O.), D/DSF/2. Welsh Yearly Meeting held at William Aubrey's house in Breconshire, 1689, 492.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., D/DSF/352 (no pagination), Monthly Meeting minutes dated 6/5/1726.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1974 the county of Monmouthshire reverted to the ancient Welsh title of Gwent.
- <sup>6</sup> G.R.O., D/DSF/2. Welsh Yearly Meeting held at Haverfordwest, 1715; 569; *Christian Brotherly Advices*, commonly referred to as the *Book of Extracts* (London, 1738), 185-6.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., D/DSF/356 (no pagination): Monthly Meeting minutes dated 12/7/1809.
- <sup>8</sup> Gwent Record Office (hereafter Gw.R.O.), D/2200/20. Letter from John Cash of Coventry to Mary Lewis of Trostant dated Coventry 27/6/1808.
- <sup>9</sup> National Library of Wales (hereafter N.L.W.), LL/1692. The will of John Jones of Llanfrechfa, 27 May 1692.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., LL/1709. The will of Samuel Lewis of Llanfigangel-Ystern-Llywern, 11 October 1709.
- <sup>11</sup> G.R.O., D/DSF/327 (no pagination): Quarterly Meeting minutes dated 6/6/1770. 3rd query.
- <sup>12</sup> J.A. Bradney, *Registrum Antiquum de Llanfihangel Ystern Llewern 1685-1812* (London, 1920), 2.
- <sup>13</sup> N.L.W., LL/1674/103. Will of Edward Webley of Shirenewton.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., LL/1679/182. Will of Grace Webley of Shirenewton.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., LL/1692. The will of John Jones of Llanfrechfa, 27 May 1692.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., LL/20 November 1707. Will of John Harris of Christchurch.
- <sup>17</sup> Gw.R.O., D/220/17. Letter from Richard Reynolds of Ketley, co. Salop, to James Lewis of Pontypool dated 7/7/1788; N.L.W., Maybery II MSS.2800. Letter from Richard Summers Harford of Ebbw Vale Ironworks to Walter Powell of Brecon dated 15/1/1818.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Cambrian*, Saturday, 18 June, 1854, 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Neath Gazette*, 12 March 1864. According to an account of the wedding of Neath of Mary Eliza Richardson and Henry Habberley Price Junior in 1864 'the dresses of the ladies of the bridal party were chaste and elegant, but not gaudy. The bride was dressed in a white silk bonnet and lace fall, and bore in her hand a beautiful bouquet...'; see also M.F. Williams, 'The Society of Friends in Glamorgan 1654-1900' (University of Wales, M.A., 1950), 141-2.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Cambrian*, Saturday, 15 February 1812, 3.
- <sup>21</sup> G.R.O., D/DSF/351 (no pagination), Monthly Meeting minutes dated 3/1/1714. Joshua Phillips was admonished by Friends for his 'bad conversation,' but by recognising his own faults he was allowed to remain a member of the Monmouthshire Society.
- <sup>22</sup> Helen Forde, 'Derbyshire Quakers 1650-1761' (Ph.D. Thesis, Leicester, 1977), 145-51.
- <sup>23</sup> After 1697 wills are generally acknowledged by the Quaker executor in the following manner: 'I am a dissenter commonly called a Quaker.'
- <sup>24</sup> N.L.W., LL/1669/176. The will of David Jones of St. Brides.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., LL/1677/92. The will of John Thomas of Goldcliffe.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., LL/April 1692. The will of Margaret Morgan of Llangibby.
- <sup>27</sup> G.R.O., D/DSF 352, minutes dated 2/10/1730 and 4/7/1734.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., D/DSF 356, minutes dated 9/1/1749-50 and 31/10/1750.