

## St. Albans Meeting—Notes on the Past

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*Written by the late Edward Marsh of Luton (died 1911),  
and read at a gathering of Friends of St. Albans Meeting  
held some years ago.*

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**T**HERE is a tradition that a certain citizen of St. Albans, born in the palmy days of the great monastery, lived right through the period of the Reformation into that of the early Puritans, remembered all the strange vicissitudes both of place and people in his active lifetime, related all that he could remember to any presentable person who would listen to his tale when he was old, and finally passed away at the ripe age of 103, almost exactly 300 years ago.

For the purposes of our present gathering, we seem to need the assistance of a Quaker equivalent to this Mr. Robert Shrimpton, some venerable patriarch miraculously preserved alive from George Fox's day to ours, and able by word of mouth to impart a glow of life and colour to those faint outlines which are all that we possess of the history of our Society in St. Albans, so bridging the great gulf between past and present. Our fore-elders in these parts lacked even a rudimentary foresight of our wholesome curiosity in regard to the details of their daily lives. They left nothing behind them in the nature of a Triennial Report. Of the origin and development of the local Meeting, no record appears to have existed at any time. The Minutes of the Monthly Meeting contain, at long intervals, references to St. Albans, chiefly on those occasions when the conduct of particular members had to be considered in a critical spirit. These references do not bulk largely in our archives. What little we know, or can reasonably surmise about the history of the local Meeting, may be set down in few words.

Standing upon a main road, in the full tide of Quaker travel, St. Albans must have had opportunities for hearing the message of our pioneers almost from the outset. The formation of a settled Meeting was quite another matter. As in so many other borough towns, the right to keep open shop in the seventeenth century would be restricted to freemen only, and these, if not free by birth or inheritance, would have to purchase their freedom on terms controlled by the general body of freemen, who usually possessed, or could easily contrive, some effectual method of exclusion for unwelcome candidates. It is likely that here, as elsewhere, the early Friends had to pass through a probationary period, while the average English trader was "sizing them up" and ascertaining whether they could safely be trusted to take a hand in the general business of the country. The result at St. Albans appears to have been favourable to Friends. They gradually became firmly established in the town, and had little to complain of in the way of persecution, over and above the thorny question of tithes and "those called church rates."

One feature in the history of the Meeting remained almost constant during many years, the removal from London to the country of Friends retiring from business. These new-comers naturally proposed to take an active part in meetings for discipline, and the advent of their new ideas led to important changes.

For some reason or other Hertfordshire, organised as a territorial Quarterly Meeting in 1668, did not succeed in working the Society's machinery throughout the whole extent of the county. The area of what is now Hertford and Hitchin M.M. was all that could be dealt with at first from Hertford as a centre. St. Albans and its district came under the care of Beds Q.M. while West Herts was looked after by Friends of Buckinghamshire. Thus when well concerned Friends from London settled in St. Albans towards the end of William III.'s reign, they were not best pleased to find that their Monthly Meeting was held in one of the high places of the earth, namely at Kensworth, a distant village overlooking the principal pass through the Chiltern Hills. Agitation for a change of place led to the removal of the M.M. from Kensworth to Markyate. There is no finality about compromises, and

the agitation soon began again. Prolonged negotiations between Monthly and Quarterly Meetings led to nothing in particular. Eventually the Yearly Meeting was consulted, and this step led up to something definite, the formation in 1703 of Albans M.M. under Hertfordshire Q.M. It would be a mistake to suppose that St. Albans Friends got exactly what they wanted. They apparently asked for leave to be a Monthly Meeting co-terminous with the bounds of their own Particular Meeting. The Yearly Meeting, in its wisdom, insisted upon their taking responsibility for Hemel Hempstead, including Wood End, Watford, and Chorley Wood, in addition to St. Albans, and that was how the matter was settled. The result was that, excepting the Tring and Berkhamstead district in the West, Hertfordshire Q.M. had at last covered the whole area of that county.

We have not been too lavish of dates hitherto, and may be permitted to say here, that the first holding of Trust property by Friends in St. Albans began in 1676. This was what is now the Victoria Street burial ground. The Dagnall Lane Trust dates from 1721, when the felt need for a new and more central Meeting House no doubt indicated a high-water-mark in the fortunes of St. Albans Meeting. All that now remains of this second property—a singularly unprepossessing burial ground—is accessible from Spencer Street.

The merging of Luton M.M. in that of Albans took place in 1786. As Luton Friends immediately took upon themselves to do more than half of the business of the enlarged M.M. it seems likely that St. Albans Meeting had already begun to decline. But it was still going strong at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Of its decay from 1829 to 1833 the details in the Minute Books of the M.M. are comparatively full. They do not make cheerful reading, and we need not dwell upon them.

The Albans Meeting of olden time (Friends seem to have dropped the prefix "Saint" as something unscriptural and not properly authenticated) had done good work in its day, and went without dishonour into a state of temporary eclipse, from which we have rejoiced to see a new and lively Meeting emerge.

Old Mr. Robert Shrimpton—four times Mayor of St.

Albans—used to tell his juniors how in grand processions through the streets of his town, where the image of St. Alban was carried, it was usually borne by two monks, and after it had been set down awhile at the market cross and the monks had essayed to take it up again, they pretended they could not stir it. Then the Lord Abbot would approach, and, laying his crosier upon the image, pronounce these words, “ Arise, arise, St. Alban, and get home to thy sanctuary ” ; it then forthwith yielded to be borne by the monks. It is to be hoped that this transparent piece of solemn fooling did not seriously impose upon the credulity of any bystander. For ourselves it seems to supply a hint as to a definite and practicable duty. This is not our rest. The work ahead of us is greater than anything now in sight, greater than anything we have left in our rear. It is surely time for us to get home to the sanctuary, to receive the power and preparation for all right work from the only possible source of such equipment. “ Alban, arise, arise ! ”

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**William Frederick Miller**  
**1834-1918**

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Our valued contributor and helpful friend, WILLIAM FREDERICK MILLER, died at his home at Sidcot on the 28th of April last, aged eighty-four years. For some time he had been in poor health, but till near the end he retained a keen interest in the F.H.S. and its work, and was always ready to place at our disposal his wide knowledge of Scottish Quaker History. During his lifetime the Reference Library has been enriched with literature presented by him and he has bequeathed MSS. of great value. Thus the loss, constantly felt, of his personal help has been somewhat lessened by the possession of results of his untiring research. W. F. Miller's interests embraced various subjects. He was an artist and engraver, and a botanist of repute, and he had spent many years in the publishing world of London.

Information respecting our friend's ancestors, the Miller family of Edinburgh, appeared in *THE JOURNAL*, vol. ii.