

Lancashire Women's Quarterly Meetings Minute Book

LANCASTER Meeting House is rich in original MSS. of our Society.

The *Book for the Women's Quarterly Meetings in Lancashire ; to record, and register those things in, that doth belong to their service for the Lord, and his truth, in the aforesaid Meeting for this county*, begins in 1675 and continues down to 1777.

There were then seventeen Particular Meetings in Lancashire, grouped into four Monthly Meetings. The Quarterly Meetings met only twice a year, usually in the 4th and 7th months (June and September) or early in 5th and 8th months, always at the time of the Men's Quarterly Meetings.

Every Particular Meeting was expected to send representatives, but sometimes grief is expressed for non-attendance, especially when this was repeated from the same Meeting. Once or twice old age, ill-health, or anxieties owing to persecution are mentioned as reasons for inability to attend.

“ How things are in every Meeting ”, testimonies against the payment of tithes and “ repairs of the steeplehouses ”, “ papers of condemnation ” (e.g. in cases where Friends had given in to the persecutor, but had realized their mistake, and had repented), marriages by a priest, are among the concerns brought before the Meetings, but the spiritual refreshment was the most important matter, or as one minute describes it “ that all women Friends ” in future shall “ take due care in every Meeting, when such Meetings are appointed (both married and unmarried that are come to years of understanding) that they be diligent to be at the said Meetings, that so when they are met together, in a weighty sense, and in the fear of the Lord, everyone may give in a true account, how it is with them ; and how they feel, the testimony of the Lord settled in their hearts, which is able to abide the suffering, and to resist the temptation when there is occasion.”

Finance is never mentioned—that seems to have been left to the Men's Quarterly Meeting—and there is nowhere a minute recording the appointment of the clerks. However, it is obvious that the first clerk was Sarah Fell, the able daughter whose activities ranged from the keeping of the "Swarthmoor Hall Account book" to the learning of Hebrew, to understand the Scriptures the better. From 1675 to 1680 (the first sixteen pages), her beautiful handwriting records the excellently expressed minutes, in, what is more rare, consistent spelling and perfect punctuation. In 1681 Sarah married William Meade, and moved to London and Essex. The new clerk still never signed her minutes, but in 1686, the custom began of several women signing, or at least of the clerk signing for several. The youngest Fell daughter, Rachel, who had in 1682 become the wife of Daniel Abraham of Manchester, was the last signatory in 1686, and the minutes from 1685 for several years seem to be in her hand.

Among the signatures are those of Margaret Fox, who always heads the list if she is present, and who continued to cross the treacherous sands of Morecambe Bay to attend these Meetings at Lancaster until 1698, within four years of her death at the age of eighty-seven. Another signatory is Eleanor Haydock, wife of Roger Haydock, a well-known Friend of Lancashire, who is mentioned several times in Sarah's Account Book.

Ellen Coward, who also signs, was the wife of "Henry Coward, a prominent Friend living at Lancaster, a grocer, ironmonger, etc." (*The Household Account Book of Sarah Fell*, p. 521.) William Stout in his autobiography, says that Ellen Coward was "one who took her ease, and took no notice of trade, or anything, but indulging her children". Still, she was a very regular attender at these Women's Meetings.

Two married Fell sisters frequently sign, Mary Lower who with her husband Thomas and family, divided her time between Swarthmoor, Marsh Grange (her mother's birthplace), London, and Cornwall; and Rachel Abraham.

Alice Salthouse belonged to an Ulverston family, one of whom was Thomas Salthouse who laboured much for Quakerism in South-West England. Sarah Backhouse and Margaret Withers belonged to well-known Yealand families.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Sarah (née Foster) wife of John Abraham, Margaret Fell's grandson, attended the Meetings. She lived at Swarthmoor Hall until the sad sale of 1759.

Lydia Lancaster was sometimes there. She was described in 1710, as visiting Meetings, though a young woman, but with her friend attended "with the authority of elders . . . women well-gifted and fitted for the service of Truth, especially Lydia". In 1714, Henry Gouldney calls her "a woman of extraordinary qualifications . . . she may well be accounted of the first rank". (W. C. Braithwaite: *Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 426.)

In 1754, Lydia Mellor signed as clerk. She was a Manchester Friend. In 1748 her son, Ebenezer had married Margaret Abraham, John and Sarah Abraham's daughter, and these two became the ancestors of the Irish Shackletons.

Some pages of the old Minute Book consist of the testimonies against the payment of tithes and dues for the repair of steeplehouses. The faithfulness with which this was done, and the suffering endured, continued to 1713. In the Swarthmoor Meeting, for example, there were sixty-four testimonies, sixty-eight in Yealand, forty-two in Lancaster, twenty in Manchester.

After Sarah Fell's marriage, no clerk quite came up to her power of expression, but these women's minutes are, I think, often better than the men's minutes both in language and handwriting! In 1692 the Meeting is concerned that every particular Meeting shall have a schoolmaster or schoolmistress for their children, "that so Truth's languages may be kept to, and so as much as possible youth may be preserved from the corruptions that is in the world". Later come appeal after appeal, specially to the young, to avoid superfluities, and the "formalities and fashions of the world".

Margaret Fox in her old age had written (1698) against the movement for eschewing "the colours as the hills are", and going into uniform grey, but after her death we find the Women's Meeting minuting thus (1704): "Farther we tenderly request and desire that whereas advice in the Love and Council of God hath gone forth in the Meeting against superfluity in tying and broadening of their handkerchiefs upon their breast and let a decent tying be come into, and that friends of every Monthly Meeting take care that friends

keep clear of having their hoods made with superfluity and long tabs, and so that all the youth dress their heads decent and as becomes Truth."

In 1717 mothers were asked to "keep out of superfluous fashions, cutting and powdering the hair and needless pinches in the forehead manties with short skirts or any other dress that are not consistant with Truth". In 1719, in spite of the earlier minutes, evidently "superfluities" continued, alas, and in addition some Friends must have been "wearing something in their petticoats in imitation of a hoop".

As the years roll on, the minutes become more and more formal and monotonous, sometimes the spelling and writing are very bad, and there are frequent changes of clerk. But down to 1777, when the minutes cease, Friends are still nobly refusing to pay tithes, they faithfully visit each other and other Meetings, they are exhorted to read the Holy Scriptures in their families, and to keep out of "the spirit and corrupt friendship of the world".

ISABEL ROSS

Bridget Draper, *née* Fell

BRIDGET was the second daughter of Judge and Margaret Fell, and was born at Swarthmoor Hall, Ulverston, Lancashire, probably in 1635. She was therefore about 17 years old when George Fox first came to her home in 1652. During 1660 she was left in charge of home, family, Meeting and estate, while her mother was in London pleading with Charles II for the release of George Fox, then in Lancaster prison, and she was faced with the constant difficulties due to persecution from Colonel Kirkby and others. Her letters to her mother show the strain. On 26.i.1662 (O.S.), Bridget married John Draper, of Headlam, Durham, son of a Friend, Henry Draper.

As nothing whatever except one reference to the settlement of her estate was known after her marriage, it has been thought during the last thirty years that she died