

Western Circular Yearly Meeting, 1720-1786

OUTLINE statements of the organization of the Society of Friends usually show clearly the relation between, and respective functions of, the yearly meetings, central committees, quarterly meetings, monthly meetings and particular meetings, but rarely is more than passing notice given to the general meetings. When mentioned, they appear often only as forerunners of the national meetings. It is easy to account for this. The local general meetings, and the yearly meetings after them, were unevenly spread over the country; they were never a typical manifestation of Quaker activity and do not fit into a hierarchical pattern beloved of archivist-historians. The meetings left no records to form archive *fonds* in the national collections¹ and had largely died out long before the late nineteenth century when the new school of Quaker history was taking shape.

Material for the history of these meetings is scattered in local minute books, spread through a century and a half of the records at Friends House, and is to be found in the journals of ministering Friends from William Edmundson to Catharine Phillips. Working from these sources, this essay attempts to present a brief account of the yearly meeting which circulated among various towns of seven western counties between 1720 and 1786.

The late Alfred Neave Brayshaw introduced an account of the general meetings of the Midlands² by pointing out that "the eighteenth century was not so destitute of attempts to spread a knowledge of Quakerism as is often supposed." The desire to evangelize was doubtless a moving force in the establishment of the local yearly meetings at the close of the seventeenth century, but they also had an aim and a service, perhaps more lasting in effect, to knit more closely

¹ An exception is Bristol Yearly Meeting. At one period this meeting exercised some disciplinary functions and the records are preserved at Bristol.

² *The First Century of Quakerism in the Midlands*, in "Handbook of the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, 1908, Birmingham," p. 55.

together Friends widely scattered in country areas. Bristol Friends had this service among Friends in mind when they proposed in 1694 to establish a yearly meeting in that city "to be holden for ye Worshiping of God, both in a generall way and alsoe yet more perticularly for freinds amongst & by themselves, as alsoe yet more perticularly for all those of our freinds & Brethren that have a publick Testimony, who many of them being so Remote from London can hardly Reach it, and so Consequently are deprived of those good Oppertunityes & Comfortable Seasons that others Nearer do frequently Enjoye."¹

Out of this yearly meeting after an interval of twenty-five years, grew the Western Counties' Circular Yearly Meeting. In considering the work of the meeting these three aspects of activity—evangelism, promotion of solidarity and provision of ministerial opportunity—must be borne in mind.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the spread of Friends' principles through the service of the meetings. Without active after-care any initial progress toward conversion would fade, and it probably rested wholly with local Friends to follow up contacts. Thus, however lively the impression made at the meetings themselves, the practice of holding meetings in places where few Friends could follow up the work yielded little result. Evidence on this matter is largely still to seek. Wiltshire Friends were concerned on the point, and in 1726 the quarterly meeting was "of Opinion that the proposition of appointing Friends at the Quarterly Meeting preceeding where the said Yearly Meeting is to be held, to make prudent Enquiry what Reception the Testimony of Friends had among the People may be very Convenient and of good Service."² Opportunity came to the county in the following year when the meeting was held at Marlborough. The summer quarterly meeting instructed the committee in charge of arrangements also to enquire how Friends' testimonies were received.³ It was not until eighteen months had elapsed

¹ Draft of letter from Bristol Men's Meeting to the counties, August 20, 1694, in "Proceedings of the Bristol Yearly Meeting" (preserved at the Friars M.H., Bristol, vol. E2), p. 1; quoted by Brayshaw, *loc. cit.*, p. 56.

² Lavington, July 4, 1726; Wilts Q.M. minutes, Vol. 3, p. 523.

³ Bradford, July 3, 1727; *op. cit.*, p. 535.

that the quarterly meeting received report from Marlborough Friends "that the Testimonys of Friends were generally well accepted by the people."¹

Some such phrase usually occurs in the reports the county representatives gave to their home quarterly meetings on return from each yearly meeting. In 1725 Somerset Friends reported the Wotton-under-Edge meeting "very larg and much people frequented it, Yett notwithstanding 'twas held in much Unity, and great Sobriety appear'd among the people."² The next year John Fry told Wiltshire Friends that Hereford had been attended by several eminent ministers, "and that there were many considerable persons not of our profession, who gave very great attention to the testimonies there delivered and behaved very civilly."³

Evidence of permanent progress is difficult to assess. Wiltshire's withdrawal from the circuit in 1734 may be in part due to Friends' sense that little extension work was being achieved, but it can hardly be an accident that in 1738 Somerset Quarterly Meeting was proposing to establish a monthly or weekly meeting at Bruton, little more than a year after the circular meeting had been held there.⁴

Among Friends themselves the meetings had a unifying influence which enabled a scattered membership to maintain a corporate life during a period when visitation by travelling ministers was steadily diminishing, and when the isolation of distance had not receded before the revolution in transport of the nineteenth century. The journals of leading ministers of the period bear witness to the regularity of their attendance,⁵ and, as we learn from the late Arthur Eddington's presidential address to this society (1946), socially, the meetings were occasions for Friends over wide areas to renew acquaintances and make new ones. The attendance at the meetings doubtless varied, but large gatherings of over a thousand were

¹ Calne, April 7, 1729; *op. cit.*, p. 557.

² Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. C, p. 112.

³ Wilts Q.M. minutes, Vol. 3, p. 527.

⁴ Glastonbury, January 4, 1738; Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. C, p. 265.

⁵ For instance, Catharine Phillips notes in her *Memoirs* (1797) nineteen of the meetings between 1749 and 1785.

common, and provision was frequently made for halls for overflow meetings. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reported of the Stratford meeting in 1763 that there were 6,000 assembled, and "near 50 couples were publicly married."¹

A basic attendance was secured when at the summer or early autumn quarterly meeting in each county representatives were appointed to attend the ensuing circular meeting. Friends not on the appointment were likewise encouraged to be present. Having regard to the hundreds of miles sometimes involved, attendance by one or more of those appointed was very regular. Rarely did more than one county fail to be represented at any meeting. Bristol Yearly Meeting, with its fixed place and time of holding, was not always attended from every constituent county,² and the calibre of the appointed representatives was not always satisfactory, as the following minute of that meeting plainly shows: "it is the advice of this meeting that for time to come friends in their severall countys do not put the office of attending yearly meetings on persons whose business calls them there, but that the meetings would make a choice of Such as are fit for it."³ Much less therefore was the peripatetic circular meeting able to count on adequate representation from counties at a distance. In 1724 Somerset appointed eight Friends to attend the meeting at Bodmin, but "neither of them attended; which neglect this meeting resents, And desires that for the future they will be more carefull to attend when appointed."⁴ Twenty years later, again Cornwall—Redruth in 1745—Somerset noted without comment: "The Circular Yearly Meeting being not attended according to appointment we can have no account thereof."⁵ Perhaps Friends in Somerset had come to accept what Wiltshire had anticipated from the first. When the Circular Yearly Meeting was mooted in 1719 and 1720,

¹ Quoted in *Journal F.H.S.*, Vol. 13, p. 69. The meeting would appear to have been exceptionally large, or the estimated attendance generous.

² As early as 1698 Cornwall sent an epistle but no representative; Bristol Y.M. Minutes and Epistles (preserved at the Friars M.H., Bristol, Vol. E1), p. 37.

³ May 4, 1697; *loc. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴ Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. C, pp. 96 and 98.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p. 363.

Lavington M.M. stated they did "Like ye Proposition so farr as it may advance ye Intrest of Truth, but aprehending ye great distance we are from Cornwall, we Suppose it would be of more Service to us to have a Yearly Meeting in Somersetshire and ys County Successively."¹ On mature consideration the Quarterly Meeting at Calne in April 1720 agreed to the proposals for a circular meeting "provided it be held in Somerset, Wilts, Devon or Gloucester."² In the event the meeting was established on no such restricted basis. None of the Wiltshire representatives attended at Bodmin in 1724, and when Cornwall's turn came round again in 1731, the quarterly meeting merely desired "any Friends that are free" to attend.³ This difficulty of distance may have been a contributory cause of Wiltshire's dissatisfaction and withdrawal from the meeting in 1734, for it is noteworthy that the county remained a member of Bristol Yearly Meeting, held nearer home.

As for detailed arrangements, the constituent counties took their turns in providing hospitality for the yearly meeting. In 1720 Bristol Yearly Meeting approved the proposal for a circular meeting, to commence at Bradford-on-Avon that year if London Yearly Meeting allowed it. The place and time of holding subsequent meetings was to be agreed upon at the close of the Bradford meeting. This procedure was followed in the early years. At Worcester in 1723 the place was fixed for Bodmin in the following year, the time to be agreed upon at Bristol Yearly Meeting. Somerset representatives were directed to bespeak the 1725 meeting in Somerset if no other county asked, and were sent likewise to each following meeting, until in 1727 they went to Marlborough with directions to solicit for Somerset the 1728 meeting "as in course it fall." Later (and the meeting of 1728 is a case in point) the appointment of the meeting was left until the spring and arrangements were announced at Bristol Yearly Meeting and notified to the quarterly meetings in a postscript to the Bristol yearly epistle. When Bristol Yearly Meeting was laid down for

¹ Corsham, January 4, 1720; Wilts Q.M. minutes, Vol. 3, p. 333.

² Calne, April 4, 1720; *loc. cit.*, p. 341. Compare the Dorset and Hampshire (Ringwood) yearly meeting, which met from 1708 until 1796.

³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 586.

discipline and the epistle discontinued, appointment was made by the hosts to inform the other counties of the time and place of holding, by letter or through representatives at Bristol Yearly Meeting.

With a meeting within the county in prospect, the quarterly meeting concerned took timely steps to appoint a committee or to ask monthly meetings to suggest possible places within their compass. Having been successful in securing the yearly meeting for the county for 1728, Somerset Friends at their winter quarterly meeting appointed a committee to select a place suitable for holding the meeting and to report. The meeting chose Wells and asked certain Friends to seek accommodation there. At the spring meeting the committee reported that their search had been ineffectual, and so Taunton was chosen for a second time. The difficulty at Wells was almost certainly the unwillingness of the town authorities to allow the use of any hall, for when next the circular meeting met in Somerset, the arrangements committee in search of a suitable place was asked to "enquire (if they think proper) whether such a Meeting would be allowed of, by persons presiding in such places."¹ Changed attitudes in the authorities are indicated as the century wore on. Wells presented no difficulty in 1743, for a hall was readily obtained and the meetings were "Large and the People very Sober."² In 1764 the meetings were held in Crewkerne market house and Friends made a special appointment "to acknowledge to the Earl Paulett the kindness we have received for the Use of the Markett house and otherwise."³

When town and market halls were available for use the costs of housing the meetings were likely to be small. Somerset Friends had a bill of £7 os. 1d. before them for the fitting up of the Crewkerne hall, and the seating and accommodation of Ilchester town hall cost £11 in 1750. At Bruton in 1736 the place chosen needed more seating and fittings, but this was accomplished at a charge of less than £30. In many places however no suitable halls were

¹ October 8, 1735; Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. C, p. 232.

² December 14, 1743; *loc. cit.*, p. 345.

³ Chard, September 19, 1764; Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. D, p. 107. Some of the registration certificates taken out when these halls were used for meetings, survive (e.g. for Minchinhampton and Wotton-under-Edge, see *Journal F.H.S.*, Vol. 36, p. 59).

available, and when Friends had to build a booth the cost ranged above £50. Wincanton bills in 1770 amounted to £57 11s.; Bridgwater in 1776, £56 and Frome in 1783, £64 2s. This aspect of meeting arrangements is fully dealt with by Alfred Brown in his *Evesham Friends of the Olden Time* (1885), who quotes accounts for some of the midland counties. Among the charges there revealed was a sum for defraying the inn charges of ministers. This practice would appear from a Wiltshire minute¹ to have been the customary thing on behalf of those who came from without the compass of the constituent counties. The accommodation of attenders at the meetings was regularly overseen by local Friends specially appointed. An early notice of this comes from Frenchay (West Gloucester) Monthly Meeting in the motion for the appointment of "some proper persons" to attend at Tetbury "in order to observe that Friends in their several Inns and Quarters keep a proper Decorum in their Conduct and behaviour, that so no just offence be given to any that are not of our Society."² At each meeting the committee in charge of arrangements had a general care for the smooth running, and reported back to the quarterly meeting giving account of the proceedings and expenses incurred. The bills were paid from the quarterly meeting stock, by a proportionate subscription from each monthly meeting stock, or by a special collection as seemed most convenient.

The spirit in which these meetings were held can best be illustrated perhaps not by quotation from the quarterly meeting minutes, concerned as they were with arrangements, financial questions and general decorum, but by dipping into the journals of the attending ministering Friends. One such, Benjamin Holme, a seasoned minister, records of 1728, "having some Drawings to be at the Yearly-meeting for the Western Counties, which was at Taunton in Somersetshire, I went there; the Meeting began on the 1st of the Seventh Month, and ended on the 3d of the same, in which Time Friends had five publick Meetings, and the Lord was graciously pleased to appear in his Love to the comforting of his People, and many that came there, that

¹ Chippenham, April 4, 1727; Wiltshire Q.M. minutes, Vol. 3, p. 531.

² July 3, 1732; Frenchay M.M. minute book, Vol. 2, p. 121; preserved at the Friars M.H., Bristol.

were not of our Society, shew'd forth a great deal of Sobriety and good Behaviour in our Meetings."¹

The year that Benjamin Holme found at Swansea his last bodily resting place, John Griffith and Joshua Toft were among the ranks of travelling Friends. The former recites in his Journal: "The yearly-meetings for the westerly counties being to be held at Coventry, we went thither, in order to attend the same, which began on first-day, the sixth of the sixth month, 1749. The meetings were held in a large town-hall; conveniency being made therein by friends for the purpose; so that one room, which was called the hall, would contain, by computation, not less than a thousand people; and another under the same, roofed, it was supposed would contain above five hundred. We had a pretty large meeting-house besides. There, I think, one or more were all filled at one time. There was indeed a great collection of friends from many parts, and very great flockings in of others, amongst whom there was considerable openness, and their behaviour in general was becoming. The gospel was preached with power, clearness, and good demonstration. I found myself much excused from public service, which I accounted a favour; having greatly to rejoice in the exaltation of truth's testimony, through well qualified instruments, of whom there were a considerable number present, whom I greatly preferred . . . The meeting ended on third-day, to the comfort of friends, and, as far as appeared, to the general satisfaction of others; whose attention to what was delivered, and behaviour to friends in general, was to their honour, and the reputation of the city of Coventry."²

The course of the meetings did not run smoothly throughout the period of the existence of the yearly meeting. In 1733 Friends were considering whether, with the completion of the second circuit in Herefordshire that year, the meeting should drop. Wiltshire and Somerset at their summer quarterly meetings appear to have favoured discontinuance. The course of consultations at the Kington meeting was reported in writing to Wiltshire Friends as Henry Sanger was unable to attend the quarterly meeting at Calne on

¹ A collection of the epistles and works of Benjamin Holme (1754), pp. 66-67.

² Griffith's *Journal* (1779), pp. 177-78.

September 17. "The counties that were present except two were of the opinion that it (*i.e.* the yearly meeting) had had its Service for the present, but if all did agree to have it another round they were content, but John Galton gave Account that their County of Somerset was not Free, and said Samuel Hopwood did say at their Quarterly Meeting that Cornwall was of the same mind, so that nothing was concluded on whilst I was with them, but I was told they met again and some that was not belonging to the Seven Counties did perswade and some did agree to write to the Seven Counties to prevail with them to continue it."¹ Somerset minutes show that consideration at Kington had been postponed until the ensuing Bristol Yearly Meeting, and in the meantime a committee wrote to all the counties on the subject. Somerset Friends, from being advocates of discontinuance, turned at their spring meeting, and gave answer to this overture: "Our agreement is, to leave the determination of the Affair to you, not desiring its dissolution; and if it should be continued, this Meeting thinks it may be advisable (if possible) to appoint it in places where such Meetings have not been before."² Wiltshire is silent on the subject, but notes the receipt of an epistle from the Exeter meeting in 1734,³ and for that county the chapter closes with a minute at Calne, April 7, 1735: "This Meeting thinks proper to discontinue the Minute at present respecting the joyning in with the other Counties relating to the circular Yearly Meeting."⁴ The way was thus cleared for the accession of Warwickshire to the meeting, and the gathering was held at Rugby in that year.

From the list of places⁵ it will be noted that the declension of Wiltshire should have placed Somerset in the position of host for 1734, but that spring Somerset made no offer to entertain the meeting. Devon stepped into the breach, and Warwickshire, the newcomers, followed

¹ Letter dated Warminster, September 14, 1733; copy in Wilts Q.M. minutes, Vol. 3, p. 624.

² Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. C, p. 214; see also *ibid.*, pp. 209, 211.

³ Presumably inviting the county to continue in the yearly meeting.

⁴ Wilts Q.M. minutes, Vol. 4, p. 8; see also p. 4, Chippenham, September 16, 1734.

⁵ p. 43.

in 1735; both these counties preceded Somerset in the new rota.

Further doubts of the fruitfulness of the meetings were voiced at various times before the final closure in 1786. For instance, after the meeting at Exeter in 1762, the matter was referred to the counties. Somerset Friends "generally approve of the continuance of such Meetings,"¹ and their view was echoed by all the other counties except Devonshire, which missed the next two turns. In 1786, for the third time in fourteen years the meeting was held at Gloucester and some falling off in the attendance of non-Friends was admitted. No arrangements were made for another yearly meeting. The great silence which descends, unbroken by voice of protest from the constituent counties, and the fact that before the close of the century all these peripatetic yearly meetings had ceased, indicates clearly that their service was over.

The reasons for this may be sought in various quarters. Developing as a suitable outlet for gospel ministry to the people of the county, the meetings ceased to have some of their effectiveness as the Society slipped back into a position of worthy quiescence. The upthrust of Methodism in the middle of the century had robbed Friends of any shreds of radical appeal which might have remained, if only in reflection from their early past. Few signs appear of revival fervour, and the ranks of travelling Friends were thinning too fast as the century wore on for adequate follow-up work to be done by an educated ministry. Without such activity few of the sober audiences at the annual meetings could really be won. Accordingly the groundwork of evangelism was largely wasted.

Secondarily the meetings had been established for the comfort and refreshment of the local ministers, and to provide opportunities for travelling Friends to express their message. This object does not appear to have been happily achieved towards the end of the century, and the journals of concerned ministers express sorrow at the low state of the ministry even in the great gatherings.

In its third aspect the Circular Yearly Meeting probably continued throughout its existence to provide a well-used social opportunity for Friends from scattered country

¹ Somerset Q.M. minutes, Vol. D, p. 88; Glastonbury, March 16, 1763.

districts, and this may have been the guiding consideration which encouraged Friends to continue to hold the meetings nearly to the end of the century. In this sphere the discontinuance of the meetings did leave a gap, only to be filled fifty years later, when the advent of railways made London an easily accessible centre.

The following list of dates of commencement and places of holding the meetings corrects and completes the details given in Brown's *Evesham Friends*, pp. 155-168 :

1720	Sept. 11	Bradford-on-Avon, Wilts.	1744	Sept. 2	Worcester.
1721	Sept. 10	Taunton, Som.	1745	Sept. 1	Redruth, Cornwall.
1722	Sept. 9	Exeter, Devon.	1746	Aug. 31	Minchinhampton, Glos.
1723	Sept. 1	Worcester.	1747	Aug. 30	Leominster, Herefs.
1724	Sept. 6	Bodmin, Cornwall.	1748	Aug. 28	Plymouth, Devon.
1725	Sept. 5	Wotton-under-Edge, Glos.	1749	Aug. 27	Coventry, Warws.
1726	Sept. 11	Hereford.	1750	Aug. 26	Ilchester, Som.
1727	Sept. 10	Marlborough, Wilts.	1751	Sept. 1	Bromsgrove, Worcs.
1728	Sept. 1	Taunton, Som.	- 1752	Aug. 2	Truro, Cornwall.
1729	Aug. 31	Barnstaple, Devon.	1753	Aug. 26	Coleford, Glos.
1730	Aug. 30	Kidderminster, Worcs.	1754	Sept. 8	Hereford.
1731	Sept. 5	Bodmin, Cornwall.	- 1755	Sept. 7	Tiverton, Devon.
1732	Sept. 3	Tetbury, Glos.	1756	Sept. 5	Warwick.
1733	Aug. 26	Kington, Herefs.	1757	Sept. 4	Dulverton, Som.
1734	Sept. 1	Exeter, Devon.	1758	Sept. 10	Kidderminster, Worcs.
1735	Aug. 31	Rugby, Warws.	- 1759	Sept. 2	St. Ives, Cornwall.
1736	Aug. 29	Bruton, Som.	1760	Sept. 14	Wotton-under-Edge, Glos.
1737	Aug. 28	Tenbury, Worcs.	1761	Sept. 6	Bromyard, Herefs.
1738	Sept. 3	Launceston, Cornwall.	- 1762	Sept. 5	Exeter, Devon.
1739	Aug. 26	Gloucester.	1763	Sept. 4	Stratford-upon-Avon, Warws.
1740	Aug. 17	Ledbury, Herefs.	1764	Sept. 16	Crewkerne, Som.
1741	Sept. 6	Exeter, Devon.			
1742	Aug. 29	Atherstone, Warws.			
1743	Aug. 28	Wells, Som.			

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1765	Sept. 1	Stourbridge, Worcs.	-	1776	Sept. 15	Bridgwater, Som.
1766	Aug. 31	Bodmin, Cornwall.		1777	Sept. 14	Bewdley, Worcs.
1767	Sept. 6	Tetbury, Glos.	-	1778	Sept. 13	Launceston, Cornwall.
1768		Ross, Herefs.				
1769	Sept. 10	Rugby, Warws.		1779	Sept. 19	Gloucester.
1770	Sept. 16	Wincanton, Som.		1780	Sept. 24	Hereford.
				1781	Sept. 16	South Molton, Devon.
1771	Sept. 15	Evesham, Worcs.		1782	Sept. 15	Tamworth, Warws.
1772	Aug. 16	Helston, Cornwall.		1783	Sept. 7	Frome, Som.
1773	Sept. 19	Gloucester.		1784	Sept. 12	Shipston-on- Stour, Worcs.
1774	Sept. 11	Kington, Herefs.	-	1785	Aug. 7	Truro, Cornwall.
1775	Sept. 10	Coleshill, Warws.		1786	Sept. 10	Gloucester.

RUSSELL S. MORTIMER