

## The Society of Friends in Wiltshire<sup>1</sup>

FOR the work of George Fox in Wiltshire see *Wilts Notes & Queries*, ii, 125-9, and *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. N. Penney (Cambridge Edn.). The subsequent history of the Quakers in the county can be traced from the MS. records of the various quarterly and monthly meetings, from the *Friends' Book of Meetings* published annually since 1789 and the *List of Members of the Quarterly Meeting of Bristol and Somerset*, published annually since 1874. For the MS. records see *Jnl. of Friends' Hist. Soc.*, iv, 24. The records are now at Friends House, Euston Road, London.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Quakers' story is of a decline which was gradual until 1750 and thereafter very rapid. The Methodists and Moravians largely supplanted them. An interesting example of the change over from Quakerism to Methodism is to be found in Thomas R. Jones' *The Departed Worthy* (1857). This book tells the life story of Charles Maggs, a distinguished Melksham Methodist. When Maggs first went to Melksham just after 1800 he made the acquaintance of two Methodists named Abraham Shewring and Thomas Ruddy. The family names of Shewring and Ruddy both occur in Melksham Quaker records between 1700 and 1750. Even more interesting is the fact that Abraham Shewring was known as "the Quaker Methodist" and that Charles Maggs found that "the quiet manner in which the service was conducted scarcely suited his warm and earnest heart".<sup>2</sup>

### WILTSHIRE QUARTERLY MEETING, c. 1667-1785

By 1680 the number of Quaker meetings in Wilts had reached its maximum. The Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting then contained representatives from three Monthly Meetings, those of Chippenham, Charlcote and (Market) Lavington,

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally prepared for the guidance of contributors to the *Victoria History of Wiltshire*. It is commented upon in the leading article of the present number. Sources used are the Minute books of the meetings (at Friends House), Friends Book of Meetings (annual), and other works mentioned in the text.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, 91, 94.

and from the congregations at Alderbury and Fovant in South Wilts, which later formed part of the Salisbury Monthly Meeting but which may in 1680 have been unattached to a monthly meeting. Between about 1697 and 1717 the Quarterly Meeting contained representatives from the Salisbury Monthly Meeting, but in 1717 Salisbury, then the only remaining meeting in the south, was merged in the Lavington Monthly Meeting.

The three Monthly Meetings of Chippenham, Lavington and Charlote were united in 1775 to form the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting, but for another ten years the Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting continued to meet. In 1785 Wiltshire was joined with Gloucestershire to form the Wiltshire and Gloucester Quarterly Meeting. Salisbury was omitted from this merger and became part of the Ringwood Monthly Meeting and the Hampshire Quarterly Meeting. For the later history of the Wiltshire meetings see below under the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting. For a map showing the Quaker meetings within 20 miles of Sutton Benger, Wilts, in 1740, see Arnold C. Lloyd, *Quaker Social History, 1669-1738*, opp. p. 162. This includes all the Wiltshire meetings except Salisbury.

#### CHIPPENHAM MONTHLY MEETING, c. 1669-1775

In 1669 this consisted of the Particular meetings of Chippenham, Corsham, Slaughterford, Kington (Langley) and Lea and Brinkworth. There was no change in these places until 1729, when Hullavington was substituted for Kington with the same representatives at the Monthly Meeting. The meeting at Brinkworth was failing by 1750, and after 1752 ceased to send representatives to the Monthly Meeting. It was omitted from the Monthly Meeting list in 1762 and in the same month the minutes included the notice of removal of Thomas Young of Brinkworth to Frenchay, co. Gloucester.

In 1775 this Monthly Meeting was merged with those of Charlote and Lavington to form the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting. For the last 50 years of its existence the centre of Quaker influence in the area of the Monthly Meeting was Pickwick, in Corsham, where there was a Friends' school run by Thomas Bennet (d. 1764).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Journal, F.H.S.*, x, 203.

## CHARLCOTE MONTHLY MEETING, 1667-1775

On 4th June, 1677, this consisted of the Particular meetings of Bromham and Rowde, Marlborough, Heddington, Calne, Charlcote, Purton and Devizes. The fly-leaf of the first volume of the register of this meeting is endorsed "Mens' Monthly Meeting established by George Fox in 1667 in Wilts."

On 4th June, 1683, Heddington was included in the minutes for the last time, its representatives being thenceforth entered under Bromham, which soon dropped its additional title of Rowde.

In February, 1725, there was a temporary change in the composition of the Monthly Meeting. Devizes was transferred to the Lavington Monthly Meeting in exchange for Melksham. The change ended in the following October, when Devizes again became part of the Charlcote Monthly Meeting and Melksham reverted to the Lavington Monthly Meeting.

This Monthly Meeting was in decline by 1750. On 12th March, 1759, it was noted that the friends at Marlborough had asked to be excused from contributing to the national fund because their own meeting house was in need of repair. On 11th June of the same year the minutes included a copy of the letter of removal of Edmund Waite and his wife of Purton, who went to Witney, co. Oxon. For some years Purton had rarely been represented on the Monthly Meeting and then only by Waite. The meeting began to discuss the disposal of the Purton meeting house in the month of Waite's departure, and in July Purton was officially dropped from the list. The meeting house was still in the possession of the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting in 1777. Its sale was sanctioned by the Quarterly Meeting in 1799.

Meanwhile the congregation at Charlcote, once the strongest of the meeting, was also declining. After 1760 it rarely sent a representative to the meeting and then it was always John Riley, who lived at Avon. On 13th July, 1767, Riley was transferred to the Lavington Monthly Meeting on his removal to Whitley. In 1769 and succeeding years there were discussions concerning the repair of the Charlcote meeting house, apparently with a view to its sale.

The meeting house at Marlborough was again mentioned as in need of repair in September, 1772.

In 1775 this Monthly Meeting became part of the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting.

#### SOUTHERN OR LAVINGTON MONTHLY MEETING, *c.* 1680-1775

The minutes of this meeting survive only from 1704, but it was certainly in existence for a generation before this. In 1704 the meeting consisted of representatives from the Particular meetings of Lavington, Bradford, Warminster and Melksham. Lavington had existed in 1678, and in that year there had also been meetings at Cumberwell (near Bradford), and at Shaw Hill with Melksham, and also at Westbury and Warminster. The Cumberwell meeting was known as that of Cumberwell and Bradford in 1694 and from 1698 as that of Bradford. In and after 1696 the meeting at Shaw Hill with Melksham became that of Melksham. The meetings at Westbury and Warminster seem to have united by 1689. The joint meeting was known as that of Warminster.

On 10th May, 1717, the meeting at Salisbury (see below) was added to the Lavington Monthly Meeting. It was as a result of this that the two Monthly Meetings of Lavington and Charlote were reorganized in 1725. Salisbury was a long way from the other places in the Quarterly Meeting, and the purpose of the reorganization was to reduce travelling in the Monthly Meeting which included it. When the experiment of 1725 was abandoned it was on the understanding that monthly meetings should not be held at Salisbury and that the members of the Salisbury meeting should only attend monthly meetings as they found convenient.

The Lavington Monthly Meeting remained the same until 1775 when it ceased to exist on the formation of the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting. In and after 1751 the Warminster Meeting was usually referred to as that of Westbury.

#### SALISBURY MONTHLY MEETING, *c.* 1697-1717

In 1678 there were congregations in South Wilts at Alderbury and Fovant. In the following decade they were often classed, in the minutes of the quarterly meeting, as a single meeting. On 5th April, 1686, another southern meeting appeared, that of Stapleford. Salisbury appeared

for the first time in February, 1694, in association with Alderbury. Soon Alderbury ceased to be mentioned, and Salisbury became the head of a Monthly Meeting for the South. The Salisbury Monthly Meeting existed in September, 1697, but none of its minutes survive. It presumably consisted of Salisbury, Fovant and Stapleford. Stapleford was omitted from the Quarterly Meeting list in 1716 and Fovant was dropped in July, 1717. This left Salisbury alone of the southern meetings and it became part of the Southern or Lavington Monthly Meeting in this year.

#### WILTSHIRE MONTHLY MEETING, 1775-1876

The decline of Quakerism in Wiltshire was even faster after the union of its three monthly meetings than before. In 1775 the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting included 13 meetings: Chippenham, Calne, Hullavington, Slaughterford, Bromham, Marlborough, Corsham, Devizes, Lavington, Bradford, Melksham, Westbury and Salisbury.

Slaughterford was dropped in December, 1776. In the same month the Quarterly Meeting circulated a letter of exhortation and restatement of the Quaker faith. Bradford was dropped in 1780, and in the last five years before the union with Gloucester the quarterly meetings were rarely attended by representatives of more than 8 meetings on any one occasion. Nevertheless 11 meetings still existed in 1785, 10 of which joined the Wiltshire and Gloucester Quarterly Meeting.

The Monthly Meeting register for 1788-1800 has on its back page a list of the places within the Meeting, with their times of worship. They numbered 11: Bradford was again included. In this register the members of the Monthly Meeting are listed under three Preparative meetings, those of Devizes, Hullavington, and Melksham. This new form of organization had been decided upon in April, 1788. It was a return to the pre-1775 system under a new name. The Devizes Preparative Meeting was composed of the Particular meetings of Calne, Devizes, Marlborough and Bromham: it was equivalent to the former Charlcote Monthly Meeting. The former Chippenham Monthly Meeting was resurrected as the Hullavington Preparative Meeting; it consisted of the Meetings of Hullavington, Chippenham and Pickwick (Corsham). The Melksham

Preparative Meeting, the equivalent of the former Lavington Monthly Meeting, included Melksham, Lavington, Westbury and Bradford.

In 1790 the total number of Quakers in Wiltshire (excluding Salisbury) was 146 plus, being made up of the following : Bromham 9, Calne 12, Devizes 31, Marlborough 7 plus, Chippenham 3 plus, Hullavington 17, Pickwick 10, Bradford 2, Lavington 3, Westbury 2, Melksham 50. There were also 6 non-members regularly attendant at Melksham. These numbers included children. Eight years later the total had fallen to 113 plus ; Bromham had 5 members, Devizes 30, Calne 8, Marlborough 6 plus, and Chippenham 2. The figures for Pickwick and Hullavington are not comparable with those of the previous return, because separate figures were given for places which did not have a meeting : there were 2 members at Castlecombe, 4 at Sutton Benger, 6 at Westfields, 2 at Rudloe and 8 at Grittleton, as well as 2 at Hullavington and 3 at Pickwick. The members from Castlecombe, Sutton, Westfields, Rudloe and Grittleton presumably attended meetings at Hullavington and Pickwick and their total added to those for Hullavington and Pickwick comes to 27, which is the same as the total for Hullavington and Pickwick together in 1790. In 1798 Bradford had only 1 member remaining, Melksham 31, Lavington 1, and Westbury 2. The most remarkable feature of the decline was that more than half of it occurred in the strongest meeting, Melksham.

In 1799 the Quarterly Meeting sanctioned the sale of the Lavington meeting house and a year later the Marlborough meeting, long in decline, was dissolved : its members were given the option of joining Calne or Devizes and were permitted to meet in each other's houses.

When the nineteenth century opened there were only seven effective meetings in the Monthly Meeting : Bromham, Calne, Devizes, Chippenham, Hullavington, Pickwick, and Melksham. These were all in existence in 1810, but Chippenham died in 1812, Bromham in 1814, Pickwick in 1816, and Hullavington in 1818. In 1827 Devizes was also omitted from the list, leaving only Calne and Melksham. These remained (after the extinction of Salisbury in 1828) the only Wiltshire meetings until 1854, when the meeting house at Devizes, which had remained the property of

Friends, was again taken into religious use. The Devizes Meeting again disappeared in 1880.

Meanwhile the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting had (1868) become part of the Bristol and Somerset Quarterly Meeting. A further reorganization took place in 1876, when the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting was merged in the North Somerset and Wiltshire Monthly Meeting.

#### NORTH SOMERSET AND WILTSHIRE MONTHLY MEETING, 1876-

The meetings at Calne and Melksham were still in existence in 1900, but their two meetings shared one clerk. In 1903 there were only 3 members and 5 non-members attending at Calne, and the 18 members and 10 non-members at Melksham included some who came from Frome and Devizes. In spite of these small numbers the meeting at Devizes was re-formed in 1904, with 7 members and 2 non-members. A single clerk officiated for the three local congregations. The Devizes meeting remained separate until 1908, when it was again merged in Melksham. In 1909 the meeting at Calne, which had had a separate existence since about 1670, was also merged in Melksham. It brought only 3 members and 1 non-member. In 1909 the Melksham meeting had the status of a Preparative meeting, but in 1915 it became an Allowed meeting. It then had 20 members. In 1918 the membership of Melksham was not separately stated, but was included in that of Bath. Between 1909 and 1936 the Friends in this part of Wiltshire met only at Melksham where meetings were held every Sunday.<sup>1</sup> In 1936 a new meeting was opened at Chippenham, more than a century after the extinction of the original meeting there. It met in the Railway Hall until 1938, later in the Co-operative Small Hall (1940) and subsequently (from 1941) at the home of R. and H. Tanner, Old Chapel Field, Kington Langley. This meeting is now Allowed. Another new meeting was opened in 1943, meeting in Westbury, at 4 Church Street. In 1944 this transferred to Trowbridge, where it has since met in the Deacons' Vestry of the Tabernacle Congregational Church.

<sup>1</sup> Since this article was written the Melksham Meeting has ceased.

NOTE ON PROPERTY OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN N.W.  
WILTSHIRE

In 1904 the Society held property in Wiltshire (in addition to the meeting houses still in use) at the following places: Heddington, Marlborough, Titherton, Goatacre, Hullavington, Pickwick, Bromham, Bradford, Chippenham, Devizes and Stanton (St. Quintin?). Except for closed meeting houses at Devizes and Bradford this consisted apparently of burial grounds.

## THE MEETINGS AT MERE, SWINDON AND SALISBURY

*Mere.* Founded in 1859 under Dorset influence. It became part of the Shaftesbury and Sherborne Monthly Meeting and the Bristol, Somerset and Dorset Quarterly Meeting (from 1869 Bristol and Somerset Quarterly Meeting). To-day it has 14 members.

*Swindon.* Founded in 1900 and belonged to the Gloucester and Nailsworth Monthly Meeting and the Western Quarterly Meeting. By 1910 it had 15 members and 12 attendant non-members. In 1927 it was transferred to the Witney Monthly Meeting and the Berks and Oxon Quarterly Meeting. It then had 35 members. In 1950 it had 52 members.

*Salisbury.* As mentioned above, Salisbury Meeting was separated from the Wiltshire Monthly Meeting in 1785, and joined the Ringwood Monthly Meeting and in the Hampshire Quarterly Meeting, which in 1805 was merged in the Dorset and Hants Quarterly Meeting. The Ringwood Monthly Meeting was in 1810 merged in that of Ringwood and Poole, and under a reorganization of 1819 Salisbury became part of the Poole and Southampton Monthly Meeting. The meeting at Salisbury came to an end in 1828. It was revived after more than a century in 1936, when 3 members began to meet in the Rechabite Hall, 91 Crane Street. In 1950 there were 10 members and the meeting was recognized as a Preparative meeting. It is in the Shaftesbury and Sherborne Monthly Meeting and the Bristol and Somerset Quarterly Meeting.

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