



CLAVERHAM MEETING HOUSE IN 1903

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Care for Old Meeting Houses

WE hear a great deal nowadays of the decaying monuments of the past—country houses, and churches particularly, and the necessity and difficulty of preserving them from the inevitable disintegration of neglect due to disuse and lack of funds.

The Church of England is raising a four million pound fund for the buildings in her care: the old manor houses and their like are being handed over, one after another, to the care of The National Trust as their owners, who are often the descendants of the original owners and builders in past centuries, become unable to bear the burden of upkeep and taxation.

To a lesser degree, though no less extensively, the Society of Friends is in danger of losing some of its most cherished possessions—in fact some have already passed from its possession and others are on the verge of disintegration.

The Society of Friends has a wonderful heritage in brick, stone and timber symbolic of its way of life and history from the earliest days, now entering its fourth century. They are mostly little “buildings of endearing simplicity”, often placed inconspicuously in country towns and villages, and sometimes sited with an unerring eye for beauty and outlook.

Some, in fact many, have been tended with loving care and are in use today in the same condition as when George Fox and his contemporaries visited them—others alas have been allowed to fall into decay through migration, lack of the

necessary funds in consequence and some, it must be admitted, through lack of interest. Can the Society of Friends afford to lose these chapters of history and reminders of their earliest days and struggles?

Jordans, Brant Broughton and Brigflatts, among numerous others, are a joy to visit—one cannot but be aware of the spirit of Quakerism enshrined within their walls, though the buildings are plain and unconsecrated, except by the use to which they are put.

As a Society we rather pride ourselves on our lack of romanticism and our superiority to the attachment of any sentimental value to mere monuments or buildings, but may not this be sometimes to avoid a responsibility we really should not shirk?

William Alexander early last century, when writing his fascinating book on York Meeting House, exhorted Friends to the proper upkeep of their meeting houses by regretting

that a number of individuals, who frequent any place of worship, should live in good houses themselves, and in easy, if not affluent circumstances, and yet suffer the place in which they assemble to pay their adorations to the Supreme Being the Giver of all they possess, to lie disregarded. Would it not be well for such individuals to consider, why their place of worship is suffered to remain from year to year, perhaps not actually out of repair, but yet in a condition which they would deem a disparagement to them, in their respective dwelling? . . . “Is it a time for you, O ye! to dwell in your ceiled houses, and the House of the Lord lie waste?”¹

In the year 1700, according to the late Harry Hodgson, an advice was issued “that old property should be taken care of.” Are we as a society really concerned in this respect? It is easy to criticise, but much more difficult to know what to do for the best and how to do it. In the first place upkeep is essential, but when the ways and means are lacking rapid decay sets in and the building soon becomes beyond simple first-aid repair—what can then be done is the next and burning question and, quite frankly, I have very little to suggest, except to urge taking time by the forelock and not neglecting repairs and upkeep as and when necessary.

¹ Observations on . . . Meeting Houses . . . 1820, p. 23.

Some meeting houses have passed to other uses, secular or religious, and though this probably means dismantling the familiar minister's gallery (which some may not regret), it is better so than letting them rot.

An old building put to a new use is better than a ruin, and when this occurs a simple commemorative tablet recording the change is a historical record of value to the building and its new users and owners. How many "Quaker Lanes" and "Friends Roads" are there up and down the country, sometimes without a building to justify them, though there must have been originally?

I had occasion recently to visit a seventeenth century meeting house which had not long before been disposed of because of the lack of funds and local Friends to maintain it or undertake repairs when the fabric became dangerous. This visit was one of the most depressing I have ever paid. The old fabric was patched with corrugated iron where the holes were too big and the wooden floor had been taken up—worse than this was the Burial Ground, which had become part builder's yard and part chicken run! This is not an isolated case. It might have happened to our oldest meeting house, at Hertford (1670), but was fortunately prevented by the foresight and generosity of Friends, assisted by contributions from the Pilgrim Trust which made it possible to do the job properly.

The builder employed gave it as his opinion that in a year or two's time it would have been too late, as in the case of Claverham; where the very great expense is prohibitive, though, as will be seen by the photograph, Claverham meeting house is a building of very considerable architectural merit, as well as historic interest, first erected in 1673 and rebuilt 1729.¹

Since writing the above I have been approached by a

¹ The land on which Claverham meeting house stands was given to Friends in 1673 by the will of Robert Dawson of Yatton. Of the original building only some foundation stones remain. This was replaced in 1729 by the present structure (illustrated here from a fifty-year-old photograph).

The place was visited by early travelling Friends—among others by William Gibson, Charles Marshall, William Penn and Thomas Story, and it continued a strong meeting into the nineteenth century, but, since a new meeting house was provided at Yatton nearby, the meetings held there have been few, and the structure has fallen into decay.

A short history, *Claverham Meeting: Stronghold of Quakerism in Somerset, 1673-1874*; by Elizabeth Payne Sholl, was published in 1935 (London, Headley Brothers, pp. 16, 2 plates).

Member of the Churches Four Million Pound Fund Committee for information and particulars of any of our old Meeting Houses in need of repairs and of contributions to the where-withal to carry them out.

HUBERT LIDBETTER

In view of the position outlined above we surely need to take steps to secure the precious heritage of ancient and historic meeting houses from any further loss which can rightly be prevented. This involves both vigilance and timely action by individuals and also some provision by which as a Society we may be kept informed of what is happening and be able to have helpful advice and, in some cases, secure financial assistance to ensure the preservation of buildings for whose care no local resources are available. For this purpose it would be desirable, ultimately, to have a central committee set up by Yearly Meeting, or the Meeting for Sufferings, but in the meantime it might be a valuable service for the Friends' Historical Society to set up a committee of its own, which would seek to have the assistance of interested Friends and correspondents in different parts of the country.

But valuable as such a central committee might be, it must not take the burden of duty from the shoulders of individual members who, if they attend their Monthly and Quarterly Meetings regularly, may have a more important service to perform to prevent the alienation or destruction of historic meeting houses.

We must keep in mind the excellent advice given to us by Yearly Meeting on the need for caution regarding the sale of property and the desirability in every case of Monthly and Preparative Meetings consulting their Quarterly Meeting before deciding to sell, or let on long lease, an old meeting house. (See *Church Government*—Part III of *Christian Discipline*, pages 126-27). The vigilance and active interest even of a few Friends may thus secure a fresh examination of the circumstances in each case. There is a well-known instance in which a single Friend, by his persistent and earnest opposition to the proposal for the closing and disposing of Whitby Meeting House, was able to get the Quarterly Meeting to withhold the consent which it would otherwise have given. Some three generations have passed away and the old meeting house is still in use.

