

# The Women Friends of London

## The Two-Weeks and Box Meetings

*Presidential Address to the Friends' Historical Society, 1954*

By Irene L. Edwards

The principal sources consulted were:

1. Accounts, Minutes and other MSS. of the Meeting of the Women Friends of London for transacting the business of the Two-weeks and Box Meetings.
2. Minute and Cash Books of the Friends Workhouse, Clerkenwell (now Friends' School, Saffron Walden), 1702-1745.

For sources besides these, exact references are given if not apparent in the context.

I should like to thank the present members of the Box Meeting for allowing me to use their records, and the Headmaster of Friends' School, Saffron Walden, for personally conveying between Saffron Walden and Friends House the early records of the Workhouse for my use. Finally I would like to express my gratitude to all the staff of the Library at Friends House for help freely given to me.

ONE afternoon in the winter of the year 1659<sup>1</sup> at Samuel Vosse's house, the Sign of the Helmet in Basinghall Street, a number of London women Friends were listening to George Fox. He was advising them to have

a meetinge once a week every second day, yt they might see and enquire into ye necessity of all friends whoe was sick or weake or whoe was in wants or widdowes and fatherlesse in ye City and suburbes.<sup>2</sup>

The women had been called together by Sarah Blackbury at only a few hours' notice; in the early morning of the same day she had sought George Fox's advice as to what could be done to help the great distress of the many poor Friends about the City. Persecution was severe and many heads of families were in prison.

That more than sixty women could be summoned so speedily is evidence of the large number of Friends living close together in the heart of the ancient wall-encircled City, so much of it unchanged since the Middle Ages.

Writing many years later, Mary Elson recalls the occasion we had an answer of God in our Hearts to his (G.F.'s) testimony and we joyed . . . in the Power of God in it and so we appointed a Meeting

<sup>1</sup> Exact date is not known, see Braithwaite *Second Period of Qu.*, p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of George Fox*. Camb. Edn. Vol. II, p. 343.

and after we had met for some time we considered which way we should answer the necessities and it arose in the Hearts of some Friends that we should have a conveniency that so all the Faithful might offer as unto the Lord not knowing what one another offers, that so from him they might expect their Reward.<sup>1</sup>

This "conveniency" was the Box in which they placed their money and which in time gave the Meeting its name. Thus under George Fox's direct inspiration was organised the first meeting of London women Friends.

About the same time the London men Friends at their Two Weeks Meeting, which had been set up to care for the practical affairs of the Church had themselves felt the need of "Helpmeets". Edward Burrough, Wm. Crouch and Gilbert Latey all record this sense of need. In 1705 Gilbert Latey wrote,

It was opened in our Hearts plainly that the women . . . would answer the Service which was so needful; for that we could no longer do without their Help, care and assistance, we believing it would be much on them as their concern and being satisfied they were fitted for the work and should be careful and vigilant therein, names from all parts of the City and suburbs of the antient women Friends should be taken and some from every Quarter met.<sup>2</sup>

Mary Elson's account goes on to say

after some time of our meeting together there came two of the Brethren from the Men's Meeting to us expressing their unity and they would be ready to help and assist us in anything we should desire of them for Truth's service.

This seems to indicate a Women's Meeting in direct contact with the Men's Two Weeks Meeting, receiving from them part of its income to be expended on relief and taking on the wider duties of oversight and discipline; in time this Meeting became known as the Women's Two Weeks Meeting.

None of these accounts of the first setting up of the Women's Meeting in London mention two separate meetings, yet it seems from other evidence that there were two, but as William Charles Braithwaite suggests "the distinction between the two was one rather of function than of membership."<sup>3</sup> There are no early minute books surviving for either of the meetings, though from 1669 cash entries connected with both meetings were put down in a book without very clear distinction.

<sup>1</sup> *An Epistle for True Love &c.*, by Ann Whitehead and Mary Elson, 1680.

<sup>2</sup> *Life and Death of Gilbert Latey . . .*, 1707, pp. 145-149.

<sup>3</sup> *Second Period*, p. 272 note.

I propose, therefore, to speak of the two meetings together as the Women's Meeting of London for so they were generally known.

Owing to the integrity, wisdom and good reputation of its leaders the London Women's Meeting became an example to other gatherings of women all over the country.

It corresponded with women Friends in many English and Welsh counties and in Scotland as well as Jamaica, Barbados and the American mainland, giving details of its duties:

wee meet every second day of ye week to communicate each to ye other, but chiefly our works are to help ye helpless, more especially for household of faith but we cannot be limited. . . . [it] raine on just and unjust, others we cannot send empty away. But on ye Lord we wait.<sup>1</sup>

A letter sent to Barbados in 1671 had seventeen signatures attached, but mentioned "there are 150 here but too tegous [tedious] to trouble you with all our names."<sup>2</sup> Cumberland women acknowledged the "godly care and counsell" set forth in the Epistle sent to them; they recognized the members of the London Women's Meeting "as Elders and First Fruits in this service of the Womens Meetings."<sup>3</sup>

Amongst the MSS. in which these epistles appear are several written by George Fox for the encouragement of women's meetings:

train up your young women to know their duty in this thing . . . and so make all the sober women in the Country near acquainted of this thing and when you have them together then read this amongst them.<sup>4</sup>

George Fox was concerned to give women their rightful place in meetings for discipline and to stir them up to take it and so, throughout the country he encouraged the setting up of separate Women's meetings for discipline, particularly was this so in 1671 and the years immediately following.

Monthly meetings had been settled in 1666; in the London area all the monthly meetings, except Ratcliff, were being held with men and women jointly. As there was already the strong Women's Meeting functioning centrally and concerned for all London, no attempt was made to organize separate women's monthly meetings until a very much later date.

The meeting of London Friends, known as the Six Weeks Meeting, begun in 1671, being for a time "the prime meeting

<sup>1</sup> Box Meeting MSS., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

in the City" to which all the monthly meetings could appeal, had at first a membership of 84 Friends, 35 of whom were women, most of these being prominent members of the London Women's Meeting.

There was much opposition to the setting up of separate women's meetings, it being one of the points at issue in the Wilkinson-Story controversy.

Ann Whitehead, from her long experience of the London Meeting wrote an Epistle in 1680 defending such gatherings. Three years later the Six Weeks Meeting tell "the dear and faithful friends of the Womens Meeting that their work has not been in vain."<sup>1</sup> "And this I can say," writes Mary Elson, "the more opposition we have had against our Womens Meeting, the more we have increased in the Power of the Lord and he hath blessed our endeavours and services."<sup>2</sup> In a letter written about this time by Rebecca Travers to George Fox, she tells him that "the womens meetings [in London] are accompanied with ye power and presence of the Lord as ever, our services great and our supply faileth not."<sup>3</sup>

From a comparison of the names of the women members of the Six Weeks Meeting, with those mentioned in the London Women's Meeting account books, the signatories to their epistles, the list of women visitors to the London prisons and the women's names mentioned in the London Monthly Meeting minute books which have survived from the early period (Horselydown in Southwark on the south and Peel and Westminster on the north), we note very many of the same women active in all these affairs.

A fellowship of women busy with practical matters, upheld in very difficult times by the power and love of God. This is well expressed by one of the group:

blessed be the name of the Lord who hath quickened and made alive unto himself and hath made us near and dear one unto another and hath knit and tyed and bundled up and hath united us together in one Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

As those early Friends found it too tedious to send all the 150 women's names to Barbados so it would now be too tedious to give you a long list, but some must be specially

<sup>1</sup> MS. sundry ancient Epistles, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> *An Epistle for True Love*, by Ann Whitehead and Mary Elson, 1680.

<sup>3</sup> R. Travers to G. F., 1676. Gibson MSS. Vol. II, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Elson in *Piety promoted by faithfulness . . . testimonies concerning Ann Whitehead*, 1686.

mentioned. Such a one as Sarah Blackbury, that earnest hearted woman who laid the needs of the poor before George Fox. She was one of the first women ministers in London, she started the meeting at Hammersmith and tended Richard Hubberthorne in his last hours at Newgate Prison. She died in 1665, too early to be mentioned in the surviving Women's Meeting records. There is nevertheless a note there recording that in 1671 the Meeting received from her husband, William Blackbury, the sum of £25 being a legacy left to the Meeting by Abigall Pocock, a second reference to this money says it was left by Abigall Darcy. Possibly the Lady Darcy mentioned in George Fox's Journal who became the wife of a Mr. Pocock. Among the Box Meeting's papers is a memorandum dated 1665 and signed "J. Pockocke", giving an indemnity to the Women Friends for any goods, money or plate received by them from his late wife Abigail.<sup>1</sup>

Ann Whitehead was the undoubted leader of the London women's group for many years; as Ann Downer, the daughter of the Vicar of Charlbury in Oxfordshire she came to London about 1654 and became one of the first Quaker converts, her wisdom and practical usefulness was given to the service of George Fox as he lay in Launceston prison, when she went 200 miles on foot to see him. Her first husband, Benjamin Greenwell, died in Newgate Prison, later she became the wife of George Whitehead. She died in 1686 at the home of a Friend at Southgate (near Winchmore Hill, in Middlesex) after thirty-two years of loving service on behalf of Friends. The day before her death George Fox made a special journey to see her and finding her very weak remained the night, being with her a short time before she died.

Nineteen London women Friends who had known her intimately wrote separate testimonies to her memory; these are in print followed by the general testimony signed by seventy-nine other women.<sup>2</sup> Many of the separate writers speak of their long friendship with Ann,

our dear Ann cannot be forgotten by us, we have not buried her works with her body . . . who was my ancient acquaintance both before and since she knew the Truth,—writes one Friend. Another recalls the very early days before the Women's Meeting was settled, . . . she went visiting the young, convinced both Rich and Poor, counselling and exhorting, supplying the Poor, stirring up others thereto, watching with those that were sick. . . . And since the Women's Meeting

<sup>1</sup> See *James Nayler, a fresh approach*, by Geoffrey F. Nuttall, p. 12n.

<sup>2</sup> *Piety Promoted by Faithfulness*, 1686.

(the writer continues) came to be settled, in which her services were very great, as in the Plague time and after the Fire, there was much need of wisdom (and) of her care, diligence and pains and readiness in accounts for her abilities therein exceeded most. Tho' many were willing to work with her she only in those things moved the great Wheel that caused the rest to follow.

She was very serviceable in the Churches in and about London and in other parts of the World where her hand of Love and motherly instructions did reach, yea to the Isles afar off.

This last is an extract from yet another Friend's tribute, surely indicating the authorship of many of the Meeting's epistles.

Due to Ann Whitehead's skill in figures we have some knowledge of the early money transactions undertaken by the Women's Meeting. Gifts of ten and five pounds were made to George Fox, the first during his imprisonment at London and Worcester, the second, "at his going his journey" to Lancaster the following year. William Dewsbury received two gifts of five and three pounds. Six pounds was sent to John Whitehead a prisoner at Lincoln, and other well known names are mentioned.

Ann Whitehead is careful to note that before handing over the money she had consulted two or three other Friends, including sometimes, the donor of the fund from which the money had been taken. In 1674 Mary Lawrence (later to become the first wife of William Meade) gave the sum of £50 "for use and service of truth as managed by women friends." Ann Whitehead adds "by Mary Lawrence's knowledge and Mary Elson disposed to G. F. £10."

Mary Elson, convinced of Truth by the ministry of Ann Whitehead when at Meeting at John Feilder's house at Kingston, was the wife of John Elson, carpenter, living at the sign of the Peel, Clerkenwell, which became the home of Peel Meeting. With gifts in the ministry and great compassion for the poor and all in need she was greatly beloved. She died at the age of 83 in the year 1706. "Deare Mary Elson" records a minute of her own Monthly Meeting, "in ye instructions to her Will give unto all and everyone of ye ancient people at Friends Workhouse 12d each as a token of her love," not a great sum perhaps, but expressing a thoughtfulness which one senses in many another contemporary reference to "deare Mary."

As time went on it was possible for the Women's Meeting, from its accumulated funds to lend money to individuals. In

1674 William Penn was lent £300 under his own bond, this sum being repaid by him four years later; a number of Friends took out loans on which they paid interest. Many small sums were also lent as when £2 was given to Thomas Chalkley, which he repaid within a year. Generally the smaller sums were lent for a limited period, but more than one Friend was allowed "to repay when ye Lord enables him"; and a woman Friend, "when her Husband sent her moneys from Holland." In these cases the repayment was guaranteed by several women Friends each "engaging" for sums varying from two and six to ten shillings.

From these lists of guarantors we obtain some knowledge of the membership of the Meeting.

That the Meeting's work was appreciated is very evident. From its earliest days money gifts to it were frequent, sometimes to be distributed at the same meeting at which they were received, sometimes to be used as a capital stock and sometimes given by a Friend on condition the Meeting paid him or her an annual sum for life.

In 1679 £110 had been received from Frances Van Helmont "for ye consideration thereof to pay him £11 per year during his life if he demands" but three years later the £110 was repaid to him. By his hand the Meeting had already received a legacy of £10 from Lady Conway of Ragley, who had been well acquainted with George Fox, Robert Barclay and William Penn.

Several sums of £5 and £10 were given "for a stock to sett ye poor spinning," the friend in charge was Susannah Yokely, sister-in-law of Michael Yokely, the founder of the Stoke Newington Almshouses. Cash receipts probably relating to this scheme are the 32s. received "of Mary Meade for 2 pare sheets" and the £16 received in 1684 for "linen cloth sold that Fds. made."

Many widowers made gifts to the Meeting in memory of their deceased wives, some of whom had been active in the meeting's work. By the hand of Richard Hawkins of Westminster the Meeting received an East India Bond, being £50 left by his first wife Susannah and £50 left by his second wife, Mary, both former helpers of the Meeting.

Richard Hawkins' uncle was Gilbert Latey (whose account of the origin of the Box Meeting is still read yearly by the present members). By his will Latey gave "ye womens meeting in

London . . . £10 as a token of my love." His wife, Mary, had been a member of the Meeting.

Robert Fairman of Horselydown (one of the original Trustees of the Yokely Trust) gave

£30 to Meeting of Women Friends at Aldersgate . . . having often had a sense of the great charge that attends that Meeting, my dear and loving wife Mary Fairman to send it by what hand she shall think fitt and add what more she thinks meet.<sup>1</sup>

Another £30 came from John Staploe of Peel Meeting with instructions that it be given

to honest poor Friends yt happen to marry, to buy them some little necessaries at ye discretion of ye women friends not exceeding four or five pounds to a Couple.

Up to 1941 in the yard of Peel Meeting House could be seen a leaden cistern dated 1654; this had come from Sarah Sawyer's house in Rose and Rainbow Court off Aldersgate. A meeting for worship had been held there from early times. In 1673 Friends paid her rent for the two lower rooms,<sup>2</sup> but when Sarah Sawyer married and moved to the sign of the Golden Key in the Strand, Friends took over the whole house.

At this time the Women Friends held their Meetings weekly. Once every four weeks they met at this house in Aldersgate to allocate payments "out of the Box" to those who were in receipt of regular relief. They also met at Devonshire House Meeting House in Bishopsgate and at the Bull and Mouth Meeting House, St. Martin's le Grand, where other poor Friends received help. Contributions from the Men's Meetings held on the same premises were added to their own collections, if held as a Quarterly Meeting or at the time of Yearly Meeting the money collected was greatly increased.

The women's fourth meeting place, named in the early accounts was at the house of Rebecca Travers at the Three Feathers, Watling Street. This Friend, who had been convinced by James Nayler, was a prominent minister and writer; she, like Mary Elson, actively supported Ann Whitehead in the affairs of the Women's Meeting. In 1678 she had borrowed £30 from Ann, on the security of four pieces of plate weighing 112 oz.; three years later, with Rebecca's approval, the plate had been sold, realizing £28. This transaction is noted in the Women's Meeting's account and a docu-

<sup>1</sup> Southwark M.M. Minutes, 3.viii.1716.

<sup>2</sup> Peel M.M. Minutes, 26.ix.1673.

ment signed by Rebecca Travers exonerating Ann Whitehead and her husband from any liability in the matter is amongst the Meeting's MSS. It would seem that the Meeting suffered loss, but perhaps it was made up in some other way.

In 1681, Sarah, the fourth daughter of Margaret Fell, married, as his second wife, William Meade of Fenchurch Street. At Swarthmoor Hall, in Lancashire, she had kept the household accounts and been active in the affairs of the Swarthmore Women's Monthly Meeting, so it is not surprising to find that within a few months of her marriage she is taking over the accounts of the London Meeting from Ann Whitehead whose health was failing. Most of the entries in the Ledger for the next twenty-six years are in Sarah's handwriting. Her sister Susannah had married William Ingram of Fenchurch Street; she, too, was a member of the Women's Meeting.

Arrangements were made in 1684 that the "stock of money, estate in land, writing bonds and other papers belonging to the Women's Meeting of Friends in London" should be kept in a chest with two locks upon it, each lock with three keys, one for each of the six women appointed to be in charge, and at that meeting Ann Whitehead handed over to the six women Friends her cash balance of £87.

One of the six women was Ruth Crouch who as Ruth Brown had been amongst the earliest London converts; from her childhood she had known Ann Whitehead and she had been associated with her as visitor to the prisoners in the Ludgate Compter. The chest was kept for many years at her home in Crown Court, Gracechurch Street; she and her husband, William, had moved there upon the rebuilding of the City after the Great Fire. In 1725 the chest contained £184 in cash, including 74 English Guineas, 15 half Guineas, 22 Jacobuses and 36 Caroluses, the last items being gold coins struck in the reigns of James I and Charles I. The Meeting used some of this money to purchase an East India Bond for £100 to add to its stock.

The gathering of 23 women at Ruth Crouch's house in 8th month 1697 was a memorable occasion, for with them was Margaret Fox, who, at the age of 83, was in London on what proved to be her last visit to the capital; with her at the meeting were three of her daughters, Mary Lower, Susannah Ingram, and Sarah Meade. Many present must have remembered the letter written to them by Margaret Fox a few years

before.<sup>1</sup> It had been enclosed in a packet sent to the Meade's home near Romford, but it was winter and Sarah had been unable to come to town so William Meade himself had brought it to the Meeting.<sup>2</sup> Part of the message was specially for those in whose homes George Fox had so often stayed.

I write these few lines unto you, acknowledging your tender love and care to mee and my dear Husband when he was with you in his service and Travells for the Lord. And for your tender care and love unto him you will have an everlasting Reward.

There was a close connection between the Women's Meeting and the Men's Two Weeks Meeting. An important duty of the Men's Meeting was the oversight of marriages in the London district. In addition to obtaining the consent of their Monthly Meeting the parties had to appear in person twice before the Men's Two Weeks Meeting and, although we have no record until 1753 of such appearances before the Women's Meeting, it is evident from an early date that they, too, had a similar duty. The proposal of marriage of Sarah Sawyer with Josiah Ellis was passed at Westminster Monthly Meeting in 1675, but then ordered to be taken to the Men's Two Weeks Meeting and "ye womens meeting".

The Women's Meeting expressed its opinion about many different matters. They complained in 1677 that at Gracechurch Street Meeting House, "unseasoned persons and forward lasses take up seats in the women's gallery" and under it "where many of us sit, many forward young lads and apprentices thrust up among some young maides which commonly setts on that side too, which is unseemly in our view."<sup>3</sup> This led to the Six Weeks Meeting recommending that in all London meetings, "the women sitt apart from the men as it is practised in some parts of the Nation."<sup>4</sup>

Twenty years later 35 women Friends of London addressed an Epistle especially to the young generation. This Epistle was sent into forty-two counties, the copyist being paid 22s. for the work. It gave warning against "pride and vanity in aparell and the wearing of ruffled phantasticall and high dresses" for, they said, "Adorn yourself not with broidered haire or pearls, but with good works, and if ye garments be never so plaine, you shall be comely in ye eyes

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Fox to Women Friends, 16.ix.1691. MS. Early Friends correspondence (Swarthmore Transcripts, Vol. V).

<sup>2</sup> Wm. Ingram to Margaret Fox, 9.xii.1691. Abraham MSS. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Southwark MSS. Vol. I, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Southwark MSS. Vol. V, p. 140.

of all them yt fear ye Lord.”<sup>1</sup> The Men’s Two Weeks Meeting had been complaining that some women Friends appeared before them “without aprons”<sup>2</sup> to the great exercise of Friends in general.

In 1677 the Women’s Meeting had shown practical interest in Joan Bullock’s School at Shacklewell near Dalston; in 1706 Wandsworth Friends had asked for help in enquiring for some qualified person to be assistant to Sarah Pierce of Croydon “to preserve the Boarding School for maidens”<sup>3</sup> and much later the Meeting was asked to look out for a suitable person to take over Widow Chorley’s School at Tottenham.

Help was given to the Friend’s Workhouse at Clerkenwell when their committee asked the Women’s Meeting to agree to allow any “who incline to serve us in the post of Schoolmistress” to appear first before the Women’s Meeting, and “be recommended from thence to us (when you have fixt)”; This workhouse eventually became the Friends’ School, Saffron Walden. The schoolmistress taught the girls sewing and knitting; this could only be done if the women Friends “send in plentifully of work and allow reasonable prices for doeing the same.” Again and again the Workhouse Committee entreated the Women’s Meeting members for better support, after some years “fine sewing” was abandoned in favour of “common (or plain) sewing”, later still on the advice of the women the policy was again reversed, but when the Workhouse Committee asked for help in procuring such work the women replied “it is not the business of this Meeting to put out needle-work but we have passed on the proposal to the several Friends present.”

With the setting up of the Clerkenwell Workhouse in 1702, the pattern for the relief of the poor of the London Meetings was complete. The responsibility was that of the Monthly Meetings, they received help for some of their poor women members from the Women’s Meeting, and the Workhouse provided a home for the aged poor, and for children of both sexes, orphans and others in need of care.

There were no women on the Workhouse Committee, but from time to time the Women’s Meeting was requested to appoint some of their number to visit and make report. Sometimes the management of the Workhouse came in for

<sup>1</sup> Swarthmore MSS. Vol. V, 90.

<sup>2</sup> Men’s Two Weeks Meeting, 19.vii.1692.

<sup>3</sup> Wandsworth M.M. Minutes, 1.xi.1706.

adverse criticism. Two years after its establishment the Committee received a visit from four women Friends bringing a complaint "that ye Women's Meeting are at a greater charge than they were at before ye seting up of ye workhouse and particularly for cloths". A charge of 4s. per week for an aged woman who had to have a nurse was considered excessive, but the Workhouse Committee justified this sum, saying

Therefor we tenderly request those Women friends which have set in a hard opinion of ye workhouse be very careful how they, through a misunderstanding take occasion against it, for we are not without hope that this Workhouse will in due time answer the end of ye Quarterly Meeting in settling ye same.

Payments made for the year 1707 by the Women's Meeting for the maintenance in the Workhouse of certain poor aged women amounted to £81.

Each Monthly Meeting usually had two or three women maintaining the link between them and the Women's Meeting; such a one was Mary Fairman of Horselydown in Southwark who "looked after the poor for 30 years." She was chosen by her Monthly Meeting as one of "the women to whom widows and orphans may have recourse to for counsel and advice in concerne of marriage and settlements" and was on the first list of women "to visit and incorage the Poor in the Workhouse." She wrote a letter to her Monthly Meeting in 1713<sup>1</sup> pointing out that the Women's Meeting in Aldersgate was giving a constant monthly allowance to many poor widows and other families in Southwark.

Five pounds and sometimes more every month brought away from that meeting by the women friends of Southwark for the poore (and not above 4 or 5 women Friends of Southwark that comes to said Meeting to helpe support that charge we are att). I have been ashamed to see so much moneys carryed away from our Meetings and so few women from our side to help support the charge.

From this it is evident that the women who attended the Women's Meeting were expected to bring donations with them to place "in the Box", for it was not until much later that the property and invested funds brought in sufficient income to meet all demands. Mary Fairman asked her Monthly Meeting to follow Devonshire House Monthly Meeting's example in stirring up Men Friends to encourage their wives to come to support the Meeting.

<sup>1</sup> Southwark MSS., 7.viii.1713.

If they come not themselves then to send subscription monthly (or quarterly) and to stir up widowers that have not wives to give something quarterly.

At this period occasional gatherings of the Women's Meeting were held at Mary Fairman's own Meeting House at Horselydown situated on the south side of the River (near to the present Tower Bridge) and also at the Savoy Meeting House in the Strand. Two very active early members of the Women's Meeting, Jane Woodcock and Martha Fisher, had paid for the building of this Meeting House on the site of the old Palace of the Savoy, they themselves having living accommodation adjoining. Both had now been dead for some years, but Susanna Hawkins, the wife of Richard living nearby, then became mainly responsible for the care of the poor in the Westminster area.

With the passing of the first group of keen concerned women it was not always easy to maintain the same live interest, but the need was still great and the work did continue.

Mariabella Farnborough of Peel Meeting of the same generation as Mary Fairman had a similar record of service. In her early days she had been imprisoned more than once for speaking at meetings for worship held in the street. "The Beadle called Marrabella, hussy" indignantly records a by-stander on one such occasion.<sup>1</sup> Her son-in-law wrote,

she prity constantly attended ye womens Meeting yt takes care of the poor and was one of our most servisablest and she used to goe and visit ye Sick and to meetings tho' it was with crutches.<sup>2</sup>

In 1701 Mary Lower in a letter to her mother, Margaret Fox, says, "Marabellow Farmbora desires to be remembered to thee, she is my next neighbour and hath been lamely in her foot, the fever fell into it."<sup>3</sup> We are glad to know that when Marabella was nearly 80 the lameness was cured and the crutches discarded. After her death, the work for Peel and the Women's Meeting was ably carried on by her daughter, Mariabella, the wife of Peter Briggins of Bartholomew Close. The third Mariabella mentioned in the Women's Meeting records was *their* grand-daughter; when she died, in 1769, her brother, John Eliot (III) sent thirty guineas to the Meeting as a remembrance of his sister.

<sup>1</sup> MS. Original Records of Sufferings, 1683/4, p. 779.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot Howard, *Eliot Papers*, 1894, II, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lower to Margaret Fox, 2.iii.1701. *Journal F.H.S.*, ix.185.

The Women's Meeting provided assistance in many different ways. "To mitigate present trial", was always "considered the more peculiar object of the meeting." Help was given for journeys to New Jersey and Jamaica and American women visiting England received monetary gifts. Two north country women Friends who came to visit London and lost some linen, were given £2; a bedstead was bought for 4s.; a dress was purchased for one Friend "she not having any fitt to go to Meeting in." Blue aprons, petticoats and many other articles of clothing were provided for prospective inmates of the workhouse. Sums of £2 or £3 were allowed as maternity gifts.

In 1689 "£5 was paid to Thomas Lurtin" on the occasion of his taking a poor young girl into his household. In 1756 two Friends, Claud Gay and his wife, were given 6s. per week for looking after a poor sick woman "to nurse her and do well by her". The Women's Meeting, having already granted a considerable sum of money towards the maintenance of this poor sick woman, a member of Peel Meeting, asked her Monthly Meeting to share the charge. They replied,

that they were of opinion that it is an unprecedented method, for any Monthly Meeting to add to or relieve one under the care of the Womens Meeting, tho' readily believe it is a heavy charge on them but we must request them continuing this poor Friend under their notice.

On another occasion temporary accommodation at 5s. per week was found for a feeble minded Friend while she was awaiting a bed at Guy's Hospital for Incurables. Greater efforts to help were made at special seasons and in times of national depression; "it being a hard time with the Poore in respect of want of work and scarcity of money." "The severity of the season, high prices of provisions and dearness of coals," were all good reasons for additional generosity. In the winter of 1773 special gifts were sent to each monthly meeting with the request that some Friends be appointed to distribute the same amongst the most necessitous of the poor, "which will be giving Friends an opportunity, by visiting them in their families of communicating suitable advice as they may see occasion."

From the early days a number of poor women Friends had received "a constant allowance" of 2s. per week, raised to 4s. in cases where a nurse was needed. Subsequently the allowance was varied from 3s. to 6s. per week according to

the number of applicants and the state of the Meeting's finances.

At one time these pensions were only granted if the proposed recipients had already been receiving rent and coal from their monthly meetings for at least a year. Individual members were responsible for conveying the allowances and gifts of the meeting to the recipients; Letitia Aubrey, the daughter of William Penn is mentioned between the years 1721 and 1724 as one "of ye women Friends yt takes care of our poor friends." In 1851 the Meeting minuted that requests for help should not be made in writing, but "that those friends who have the charge of the poor in our different Monthly Meetings would endeavour to attend here in person."

In 1680 "42 elles of cloth for poors shifts" had been bought from John Bellers, a linen draper, and from that time until 1901 material for clothing was kept in stock for distribution. "Bought 3 pieces of Irish cloth it being now cheap" reads an entry in 1754. The Rules of the Meeting provided for "7 ells of cloth, calico or Flannel of equivalent value to be granted once in 2 years to Friends for whom application for such benefit be approved." In the year 1853, twenty-two Friends had been given cloth or calico; a little later it was decided that "Calico being now greatly preferred to linen cloth, the latter be no longer kept in stock, but whether calico or flannel be preferred the quantity given is to be to the value of 10/-."

Various ways were devised to keep the Meeting in funds. In 1751, and continued for several years, collections were taken at the Men's Yearly Meeting by women Friends posted at strategic positions:

4 within the Meeting House, 2 at ye Meeting House door, one at the end of ye Gallery leading from the Chamber and one at ye end of ye other gallery and one at the outward door.

There was no escape for the men.

In 1768 Susanna Barclay heads a list of annual subscribers with the sum of four guineas. Smaller amounts were given by other women Friends. This was the result of a suggestion that personal visits should be made to "Women Friends in affluent circumstances" asking for their support for the Meeting.

It was in 1680 that the first Recording Clerk, Ellis Hookes, purchased on the Women's Meeting's behalf, an estate of land and houses for £350 at Southgate, Middlesex (the last portion of this estate was sold in 1923). Sometimes negotiations about

the property were conducted in the adjoining Cherry Tree Inn (a well known local landmark). For 243 years the management of this property occupied much of the Meeting's time and attention. £114 was spent in 1697 for rebuilding a burnt out house and barn. In 1720 Thomas Story was paid 31s. for "drawing the writeing belonging to the Estate at Southgate." Part of the property was let on building lease in 1775 and in 1878 the old Southgate Burial Board purchased 4 acres of the land for use as a cemetery. Fearing interference, the Women's Meeting did not wish to consult the Charity Commissioners about this transaction. Eventually their solicitor, Richard Smith, persuaded them it was necessary and right, for the proposed purchasers would not buy unless they did. Through the Charity Commissioners' action the Women's Meeting were awarded an additional £400 on the purchase price. "We are therefore quite willing to accept the increased amount," says the minute recording this unexpected result! Owing to the development of the neighbourhood the wells of the houses on the remaining part of the estate were beginning to dry up, six houses having only a few gallons of water between them. The tenants were borrowing from each other for drinking purposes and had to fetch water for washing from the pond on the other side of the road. The Women's Meeting, as landlord, considered the matter and decided it only right that every house should be duly supplied with water, and so agreed to have it laid on from the pipes of the New River Company.

The women were helped in their business affairs by several able and concerned men Friends. Thomas How acted as banker and adviser from 1743, followed by his nephew and great nephew, John Masterman and John How Masterman. In 1886 the Meeting lost a considerable sum of money when Ager and Masterman's Bank suspended payment, after which their account was transferred to Dimsdale's Bank. It was not the first time the Meeting had lost money, for they noted a deficit in 1718 caused by "gold falling", the value of the guinea, which up to then had been fluctuating, was then fixed at 21s. A few years before, they received a legacy from a former Ratcliff woman Friend who had emigrated to America. Instead of the expected £10, £6 13s. 4d. was the actual amount received. Such was the then rate of exchange between Pennsylvania and English money.

John Kitching of Stamford Hill was appointed treasurer

in 1844; his duties were to superintend the collector of the rents and manager of the estates and to meet the Women's Committee once during the year in order "to audit the accounts kept by thee and ourselves."

A slight misunderstanding arose with his successor, Joseph Sterry. He offered to resign if the Meeting "thought they had committed an error in appointing a man Friend as Treasurer", but the Meeting assured him they valued his services and asked him to continue.

The late eighteenth-century records make it clearer than the earlier ones that the Box and the Two Weeks Meetings were considered separate gatherings. In 1767, partly owing to declining attendance it was decided that the Box Meeting should still meet monthly, but on the same day as a Two Weeks Meeting. Thirty years later, the passing of marriages having been transferred to the Women's monthly meetings, the Women's Two Weeks Meeting itself decided to meet monthly, and so the amalgamation of the two meetings was complete. It was minuted that in future the Meeting was to be held on the first second day in every month, when the collections were to be made and the poor on the two lists relieved. The Meeting's title was The Meeting of Women Friends of London for transacting the business of the Two Weeks and Box Meeting, empowered to have the care of the stock of those meetings with the receipt and application of the income. (This is still the official description of the present Meeting.)

In 1881 the women decided that when the meeting occurred on the same day as a Bank Holiday it should be postponed until after the midweek Meeting for Worship at Devonshire House, because of the condition of the streets on the first Monday of August. "Women Friends finding it extremely difficult to get thro (the crowds)." These crowds were the result of Sir John Lubbock's Act establishing Bank Holidays, passed ten years before.

A useful service of the Women's Meeting was the keeping at Devonshire House of a Register of the names of women servants and nurses,

a means of both mistresses and servants being more agreeably suited and thereby prevent servants from being under the necessity of living with people of other professions.

A Yearly Meeting for women was first recognised in 1784, but for some years before women Friends from all parts of the country had held gatherings in London at the time of the

Men's Yearly Meeting. They received epistles from the Women's Yearly Meetings in America, and from the Women's Yearly Meeting for the dominion of Wales. The despatch of the answers to these epistles was recorded at the London Women's Two Weeks Meeting following Yearly Meeting. In the case of America the name of the ship and its captain is sometimes given. During the American War of Independence a second copy was also despatched "by another conveyance."

A proposal from the Men's Meeting that the women should meet with them at an earlier hour than usual for a time of religious and solemn worship before separating for their respective business meetings was answered with restrained disapproval by the Clerk of the Women's Meeting.

So far as we know (she replied) ever since the Women's Meetings in London were established a time for retirement has been constantly in use. If this has not been ye practice of our Brethren it becomes not us to enquire into ye cause thereof.

It was not always easy to find suitable Friends to act as clerks, especially when they were to follow such an outstanding one as Elizabeth Talwin of Ratcliff, who had served for many years in that capacity. She resigned in 1779 and Mary Bevan, appearing the most suitable person *willing* to undertake the clerkship, was recommended to the meeting for their "approbation on the plan of Tryal for her ability in the said service." The meeting agreed and recorded "Our Friends choice meets the approbation of this Meeting, as with Deborah of old we can say our Hearts are with the *willing* in Israel."

An interesting proposal for consideration and encouragement was laid before the Meeting in 1775 by two Friends, one being Ann Fothergill, the sister of Dr. John Fothergill. They pointed out the difficulty of young women of the Society "whose income or other prudential motives prevents keeping house, in meeting with suitable families to board with." It was suggested that a house should be provided in some of the open Courts in or near the City, and be furnished in plain and decent manner for the reception of three or four boarders. A person of stability and experience should be placed in charge. The boarders each to pay not more than £40 per year or £1 1s. per week if for a short stay. It was to be for single women only, but married couples might sometimes be accommodated. The Meeting arranged for the proposal to

be read occasionally "to see if any encouragement be met with". We do not know if the plan was ever carried out.

There has never been any direct appointment to the Women's Meeting from monthly meetings, but in practice it always endeavoured to secure representation from each of the London districts. It was not until 1892 that members from Kingston and Tottenham Monthly Meetings were added. In 1711 Joan Dant (the Friend pedlar of hosiery and haberdashery) was invited to join. Tace Raylton, a practical printer and business woman became a member of the Meeting in 1734.

In 1855, in order to secure a regular attendance, fifteen Friends were named as considered to constitute the Meeting at that time, some from each monthly meeting, but it was also to be open to any friend who may feel an interest therein and "incline to attend".

This address outlines the story of "The Box Meeting" up to the year 1890, the concluding date of the last Minute Book deposited in Friends House Library. Margaret Darton of Peckham Rye had recently resigned the Clerkship after many years service and been succeeded by Caroline Hipsley with Alice Dell as Assistant. The meeting's work has continued and today continues under a concern expressed in the Rules laid down in 1836—"that the origin of this Meeting and the feeling manifested on its institution may be kept in remembrance and that neither we of the present privileged day nor yet our successors may be unmindful of our individual responsibilities, but strive to acquit ourselves as good stewards of the manifold gifts and graces of God."

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The *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, vol. 10, no. 4 (October 1954) include three interesting articles—Lydgate Chapel: the date of the building; A minister's wife of the eighteenth century (on Mrs. Elizabeth Bury, wife of Samuel Bury, minister at Bury St. Edmunds and then later of Lewin's Mead, Bristol); and a study of the Presbyterian Classical system, 1646-1660.

*The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 1954) is largely concerned with articles on the Amish Mennonite communities, commencing with the eighteenth-century settlements in Pennsylvania and bringing the story down to modern times.