

Quarterly Meeting agreed to discontinue preparative meetings at Burford, and in 1854 Quarterly Meeting was informed that the Particular Meeting of Burford was closed as all the members had removed from Burford. A few very elderly Friends had died in Burford in the previous five years. Minute books for the next fifty years have not been consulted, but meetings were again being held by the early 1900's but again ceased during the 1920's. Mention of Burford crops up 27 times between 1931 and 1947 in Monthly Meeting Minutes. In 1932 a committee was appointed to consider disposal of the meeting house, but the sale was not recommended. At this time the building was in use by the town band, Girl Guides, and Rover Scouts. In 1939 it was considered for use as a Government emergency food store, but not actually used. Then briefly it became a club room for evacuee mothers and babies, and was visited by Queen Mary. From 1941 Meetings for Worship were again held twice monthly by Friends and attenders then working in the district, and the building was also used as a boys' club. A youth club was set up in the building in 1947, when the ministers' gallery was removed, and this continued for a few years.

In 1955 with the arrival of more Friends in Burford, the meeting house was restored, and regular meetings were once again established.

Quakerism in an Industrial Town

Some Notes on Wolverhampton Meeting,

1704-1903

BY J. CLEMENT JONES

QUAKERISM in Wolverhampton goes back to 1704. It was in that year that Robert and Joan Hill gave to the trustees of Wolverhampton meeting, two cottages in what was once called Lower Lichfield Street. Later it became known as Canal Street and now is Broad Street. With the two cottages which Robert and Joan Hill gave to Friends was a small patch of land, the burial ground which remains today. The trust deed of 1704 states that the trustees "shall permit and suffer forever hereafter the dead bodies or carcases of all such persons who shall die in the parish of Wolverhampton aforesaid in the profession or religion of the people

called Quakers to be buried there (if desired) without fee, reward or satisfaction, otherwise than the charge of the grave."

From the rents of the cottages the trustees had to help "such poor persons of the people called Quakers as they in their discretion, wisdom and prudence shall think fit and approve." In a later recital of the deed the term "carcasses" is dropped, and there is a clause limiting the Friends who shall benefit from the rents to Wolverhampton.

Charles Osborne was the real founder of the meeting in Wolverhampton, and he was in close touch with Wednesbury,¹ Dudley and other Black Country places and with Welsh Friends. Mention of Charles Osborne is found in 1688, but how he came to join Friends does not appear. He settled in Wolverhampton and became a prosperous business man. He had at first a small workshop for making tobacco boxes, and Shaw's *History of Staffordshire* records that "he acquired a considerable amount of money from nothing; some said more than £10,000." In 1739 he bought up the then derelict estates of the Leveson Gowers in Wolverhampton, and his son in turn carried on the business and also acted as a banker.

Charles Osborne was a great friend of Abraham Darby, who was the son of a Dudley Quaker, lived at Wrens Nest, Dudley, and was apprenticed to a Birmingham Friend, Jonathan Freeth, a nailmaker. Freeth had two sons, who had a gift in the ministry and they used to meet together frequently with Abraham Darby. Darby was married at Dudley Meeting House: and when his apprenticeship was ended he went to Bristol and set up in business. There he met some of the Lloyds and another Friend, John Thomas, who was born at Welshpool and whose grandfather died in Welshpool prison. Later they moved to Coalbrookdale.²

It is to John Thomas's daughter, Hannah Rose, that we owe much information about Abraham Darby. She records that he (Darby) and her father used to meet Charles Osborne of Wolverhampton, at Newport to hold meetings once a month near the Swan Inn—"and many of the inhabitants would come and behave sober and attentive."

¹ Wednesbury Meeting House built 1680. A "hemplott" (a small area of ground used for drying hemp) purchased for £19 by Henry Fidoe for a burial ground was bought by the South Staffordshire Railway in 1849.

² See Arthur Raistrick: *Dynasty of Ironfounders*, 1953.

At this time the Darby family, Abraham I and his son, Abraham II, were very active in the Society and served as clerks of local meetings and of Wales Yearly Meeting. The interchange between Wolverhampton and the strong Quaker community at Coalbrookdale was considerable in friendship and in marriage. In 1717 there was the marriage at Wolverhampton Meeting House of Mary Osborne, daughter of Charles, to John Fowler. He was a Friend, a civil engineer and connected with the Darby's works. He designed the iron railway bridge cast and erected by the Coalbrookdale Company which crosses the River Severn a little higher up than the famous Ironbridge.

John Fowler must have come to live in Wolverhampton after that. His name crops up several times, and particularly over the misdemeanours of Charles Osborne, junior. Young Charles was not so serious a man as his father. In 1725 he married "one not of our society." The year after he sent Friends a letter "wherein he gives some expectation of being more regular in his conduct for the future." Later John Fowler "informs this meeting that it is reported he is much reformed."

Charles Osborne, the "founder" of Wolverhampton Meeting, died on the 9th of 10th month, 1729. Until 1730 Monthly Meetings were held at Wolverhampton, the last one was on the 12th of 11th month of that year and was attended by John Fowler, William Webb, Edward Mason, Dorothy Osborne, Sarah Mason, and Mary Webb.

John Fowler died in 1767 and his son Henry then moved with his wife to Leek, and this more or less saw the end of the first period in the history of Wolverhampton Meeting. Charles Osborne, John Fowler and the Darbys were dead. They were the Public or Weighty Friends of the period. The younger generation had either lost interest or moved elsewhere.

Wolverhampton as a live Meeting fades out of record. It remained, however, as a problem meeting to Friends elsewhere.

In 1840 the property in Wolverhampton was sold for £400. At one time Leek Friends considered that the income from the Wolverhampton property was the prerogative of Leek, Uttoxeter and Stafford Meetings "and that Friends who occasionally resided in Wolverhampton possessed in themselves no vested right or interest in them."

It was not until 1859 that Wolverhampton became linked with Birmingham Monthly Meeting. In that year a Committee of Birmingham Monthly Meeting considered the problems of Friends living in Wolverhampton and it was decided to ask Staffordshire Meeting for Discipline to let the Friends living in Wolverhampton be under the care of Birmingham Monthly Meeting and that the money resulting from the sale of the Meeting property 20 years earlier, should be transferred to Birmingham.

In 1860 Warwickshire Monthly Meeting accepted £200—half the amount received by Stafford Friends from the sale of the Meeting House in Wolverhampton. This money was to go to the relief of poor Friends or to help with the cost of any Meeting House thereafter needed in Wolverhampton.

There is a gap until 23rd February, 1896, when a few Friends who had come to live in Wolverhampton started an Allowed Meeting in the Y.M.C.A. They paid 2s. 6d. a week rent for the room in which they met in Darlington Street.

Friends were very socially active about 1900. The adult school movement was considered. There are several minutes re-affirming the Peace Testimony during the South African War. There was also a Bill before Parliament to stop the sale of intoxicating liquors to young people under 16 which Friends asked the three borough members to support. Of the three, only Sir Henry Fowler said he was in sympathy; the other two formally acknowledged Friends letters.

In March, 1901, Wolverhampton Friends asked Monthly Meeting to help them build a Meeting House. They had, they said, a site offered to them upon condition that a Meeting House was built forthwith.

Meetings for Worship had by then been held regularly for five years, and there was a membership of 19. Monthly Meeting was informed that because Wolverhampton Friends were "meeting in a semi-public room the state of things on our gathering together has occasionally left much to be desired in the way of ventilation and comfort, whilst we are always liable to disturbance arising from the movements in or about the building of those connected with the institution itself."

Wolverhampton, they said, "has a population of 90,000 and is extending on all sides; and there are not wanting signs of the healthy expansion and growth of the other religious

denominations, and it would be only right and fitting that our own Society should take its share in this growth."

Monthly Meeting appointed Oliver Morland, Walter Barrow and William A. Albright to confer with local Friends and the Monthly Meeting Trust Property Committee.

The three Friends reported:

"We have also attended the Meeting for Worship and conferred with the Friends there as to the probable future of the Meeting which is now attended by from 12-20, and while there does not seem to be very much life or enthusiasm, the Friends who appreciate the privilege of worshipping together once in the week, and who already attract one or two to join with them and who think they might do so more largely, if they had a room of their own . . . Friends lay a good deal of stress on the need there is in Wolverhampton for a room to be used as a meeting ground for those interested in such causes as peace and temperance."

These three visiting Friends went on to advise building a small Meeting House to seat 60-70. The lowest tender for the building was £646 15s. 8d., with extras, the total came to £717 3s. 2d. The £201 15s. 0d. site cost was given privately.

The first preparative meeting was held in Horsman Street on 2nd January, 1903—just under two years after the decision to press for a new Meeting House was made.

It is soberly recorded:

"With Reference to the third Minute of our last P.M. held at the Y.M.C.A. in Darlington Street (this was a continuation of the 'proposed New Meeting House Minute' which had been occurring regularly for these years) our new meeting house was opened on the 28th of 12th Month 1902. We regard the completion of the new premises with thankfulness and we desire to place on record the very generous initiative taken in the matter by Thomas Parker in purchasing the site."

The first Meeting House Committee was:

Thomas Brockbank, Mary M. Carr, Maria Radley, Edward Hipsley. Reginald Carr was asked to act as treasurer and S. P. Lidbetter as librarian. To this committee was left the arrangements for the formal opening, which did not take place until 4th March, 1903.