

## Meeting Houses Built and Meetings Settled

*Answers to the Yearly Meeting Queries, 1688-1791*

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THE minute books of London Yearly Meeting contain a contemporary account of meeting houses built and meetings settled from 1688 to 1791. This is found among the Answers to the Yearly Meeting Queries. The practice of receiving this information began about the time of the Act of Toleration, which gave dissenters the freedom to use and own their meeting places unmolested. Three queries had been in use since 1682 and the information was given as part of the answer to the third: "How the Truth has prospered amongst them since the last Yearly Meeting and how friends are in Peace and Unity."

When the queries were first revised in 1694 one was given to the subject "5. How many Meeting Houses Built and what Meetings New Settled". Not every meeting used this query at first; in 1694 and 1695 several continued to mention new meetings and meeting houses in their answer to the query "How Truth Prospers and Friends in Unity", which now stood as the sixth query. Query 5 remained unaltered at the revision of 1742 but was then moved to fourth place. In 1790, with the closing of volume 18 of the minute book, the answers to queries were recorded there for the last time. The answers for 1791 were preserved separately with the Yearly Meeting Papers. In that year the queries were again revised and all reference to meeting houses was omitted, although the Yearly Meeting continued to receive information on meetings "settled, discontinued or united".

Answers to the Yearly Meeting queries were prepared at the spring Quarterly Meeting and also at Bristol and at Colchester two-weeks meeting, for transmission to the Yearly Meeting which was generally held in May. Thus answers presented by each of about forty Quarterly Meetings gave information which generally referred to the previous year. The answers were at first given verbally in the meeting with consequent difficulties for the recording clerk, illus-

trated by the written report of those from Somerset and South Wales in 1691. By 1700 this and some other queries were being answered in writing. The paper prepared by the Quarterly Meeting with the written answers became known as the "Account". It appears to have given more information than was minuted by Yearly Meeting; see for example London and Middlesex, 1704. A number of these Accounts are preserved with the "Yearly Meeting Papers". They exist for occasional years from 1750 to 1778, and for each year after. The sheets for each year are numbered in alphabetical order, superscribed "Entered" and neatly bundled. A comparison of existing Accounts with the corresponding entries in Yearly Meeting minutes show no discrepancy, though there is no reason to expect the same accuracy in transcribing answers earlier in the century. The material contained in the Account was sometimes minuted also by the Quarterly Meeting, whence we have details from Warwickshire in 1704 to make good the information lacking in the Yearly Meeting minutes for that year.

The query refers explicitly to meeting houses built. They were of course acquired in a number of other ways also, for example by purchase, gift or bequest. Although there are instances where these were reported as "built" most were not mentioned, nor in general were the many rented premises. These and other distinctions became more carefully observed as the eighteenth century advanced. In the earlier years the word "meeting house" often indicated no more than a place of occasional worship, whether barn, hired room or farmhouse kitchen. It cannot always be taken to mean a place built or owned for the purpose of holding meetings.

As is to be expected, whatever is reported is right, with only a very occasional error. A large number of new meeting houses however were not reported at all. The omissions are seen when these reports are compared with lists of meeting houses derived from other sources. In the absence of accurate information it is not possible to establish exactly how many omissions there are. They include a few of the more important buildings such as Bristol Friars built 1749 and Gracechurch Street, 1774. In some years, for instance from 1730-1733, the omissions are so many that they might well have occurred in the Yearly Meeting itself; the remainder are more evenly distributed through the period.

Negative answers were given occasionally in such terms as "None built nor settled". Some seem to have been the result of an attempt to give complete answers to every question: in 1694 there were no negative answers, in the next four and in 1696 twelve. It is possible that the growing practice was then deliberately stopped, as none appeared for several years after. Others, for instance the negative replies from Devon Quarterly Meeting between 1755 and 1766, may have been the work of a rather conscientious clerk. There may be better reason for bringing before the Yearly Meeting the replies from Kent in 1746 and 1749, although the information might have appeared more suitably in the answer to query 6 on the state of the meeting and its growth in truth.<sup>1</sup>

In 1692 eighteen of the replies mentioned meeting houses registered, recorded or entered. They referred to the registration of places of dissenting worship, usually at Quarter Sessions, under a provision of the Act of Toleration. Arrangements for doing this were made by most Quarterly Meetings in 1688 or 1689 for the meeting places in their area. Not all Friends were in agreement with such formal recognition of their dissent; it seems possible that the scope of the third query was enlarged in 1692 to record the extent of compliance.

Three references were made in 1689 and 1691 to the Wilkinson-Story separation. This had been active from about 1678 and was strongest in Wiltshire, Bristol and Berkshire, where the separatists took possession of several meeting houses and minute books. The separation was in most areas resolved by 1688, but in a few places separatist meetings continued for some years more. New meeting houses were built to house re-united congregations at Preston Patrick in 1691, Newbury 1711 and Reading 1716.

Some later instances of meetings "settled" make it clear that the word had a wider meaning than we would give it now. They refer as often to additional meetings for worship

<sup>1</sup> The following negative replies have been omitted from the printed list which appears on the following pages: 1695—Cheshire, Derby, Devon, Dorset, Suffolk; 1696—Devon, Essex, Glos., Hants, Hunts., Norfolk, Northants., Notts., Salop., Wales, Westmorland, Yorks.; 1701—Bucks.; 1706—Devon; 1726—Northumberland; 1747, 1751—Devon; 1756—Devon, Scotland; 1757-59, 1762-66—Devon.

or business meetings as to the formation of new worshipping congregations. They therefore do not give a reliable guide to the date when a particular meeting was established, though they might give some indication of its growth.

It may be of interest to note the situation preceding and following the period of these reports. The first generation of travelling ministers had established meetings throughout the country well before 1688, leaving few areas still to be settled after that date. In this connection the report from Buckinghamshire in 1777 is of particular interest. On the other hand not many meeting houses had been built before 1688, and few had survived for long in the prevailing conditions of intolerance and persecution. After the query on meeting houses was discontinued in 1791 other evidence shows that the pattern indicated from about 1750 continued unchanged for a further two centuries or more: that is two or three new meeting houses each year, more often than not to replace earlier buildings.

The extracts which follow are taken from Yearly Meeting Minute Books volumes 1 to 18, and from the separate Yearly Meeting Papers for 1791. They comprise all the answers to queries on meeting houses built and meetings settled from 1688 to 1791, and appear here in the same order and spelling as in the original. Each is preceded by the name of the reporting Quarterly or Two-weeks meeting, and is followed by notes as may be required.<sup>1</sup>

An attempt has been made to complete those reports which give no name, and to name those meeting houses whose erection was not reported at all. This has been done by comparing this imperfect collection with another also imperfect, and derived from other sources. The names arrived at are therefore no more than suggestions and are shown enclosed in brackets. Only meeting houses known with some certainty to have been built for the purpose in a particular year are

<sup>1</sup> The following county names have been given in abbreviated form: Bedfordshire (Beds.), Berkshire (Berks.), Buckinghamshire (Bucks.), Cambridgeshire (Cambs.), Derbyshire (Derbys.) Gloucestershire (Glos.), Herefordshire (Herefords.), Hertfordshire (Herts.), Huntingdonshire (Hunts.), Leicestershire (Leics.), Lincolnshire (Lincs.), Middlesex (Middx.), Northamptonshire (Northants.), Northumberland (Northumb.), Nottinghamshire (Notts.), Oxfordshire (Oxon.) Rutland (Rut.), Shropshire (Salop.), Staffordshire (Staffs.), Warwickshire (Warwicks.) Worcestershire (Worcs.), Yorkshire (Yorks.)

included. They are given in the year following, where the entry would generally have appeared in normal course. The extracts and notes do not therefore comprise a complete list of meeting houses of the period.

I must acknowledge the use I have made of Richard E. Stagg's paper on "Friends Queries and General Advices" in *Journal F.H.S.*, vol. 49, No. 4, page 209.

## MEETINGS SETTLED &amp; MEETING HOUSES BUILT

1688

- CAMBS. A new Meeting.  
 DEVON A new Meeting House at Exeter.  
*Several places were hired 1688 to 1691, q.v.*
- DURHAM Increase about Newcastle.  
 HERTS. New Meetings.  
 KENT A New Meeting at Canterbury.  
*Meeting house built 1688, destroyed 1942.*
- LINCS. Large Meetings and some new Ones.  
 LONDON & MIDDX. New Meetings.  
 SUSSEX A New Meeting at Horsham.  
*see 1694.*
- WESTMORLAND Severall new Meeting Houses.  
*(including Kendal: 1688, superseded 1816.)*
- 1689
- BERKS. . . . But in two places Some are separated, keep Friends out of their Meeting House & detain their Book of Sufferings . . .  
*(Reading, and perhaps Newbury.)*
- BUCKS. *(Not reported: Jordans 1688, standing 1967.)*  
 CORNWALL . . . 5 new Meeting Houses Lately Built  
*(including Marazion, 1688, standing 1967. St. Minver, 1690, closed by 1851.)*
- CUMBERLAND . . . Five Meeting Houses Built.  
*(Kirklington: 1686, closed 1913. Broughton: 1687. Isel: 1687, closed 1828. Cockermouth: 1688, superseded 1781. Sikeside: 1688, superseded 1736.)*
- GLOS. . . . one Meeting House Lately Buildd.  
*(Nailsworth: 1689, standing 1967.)*
- LONDON & MIDDX. . . . Some Meeting Houses Inlarged.  
 OXON. . . . A Meeting House lately Built at Oxford . . .  
*1688, sold 1867.*
- SURREY One Meeting House Built.  
*(Reigate: 1688, rebuilt 1857.)*