

The Circulating Yearly Meeting for the Northern Counties, 1699 to 1798

REFERENCES to the provincial Yearly Meetings appear in the journals of a number of travelling Ministers as well as in the minutes of eighteenth-century quarterly meetings and of Meeting for Sufferings. Their period neatly spanned that century and in one form or another, although they differed in purpose and in practice, they covered a good deal of the country. In no sense were they alternatives to the London, or National, Yearly Meeting, but were gathered to meet another need entirely.

A list of the places of meeting of the Circulating Yearly Meeting for the Northern Counties has been prepared from the minute books of Westmorland Quarterly Meeting, which each year recorded a report from its representatives or a formal epistle from the Meeting. The following notes are based on quotations from these minutes and from a variety of other contemporary sources, which serve to illustrate the purpose and course of the Meeting and to give some indication of its organization.

The Meeting comprised the Quarterly Meetings of Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumberland and Westmorland. The usual reference to counties became less exact as time went on. Thus meetings at Penrith were nominated by Westmorland Quarterly Meeting, and the junction of Cheshire and Staffordshire in 1784 allowed a meeting in the latter county in 1791. On the other hand the boundary of Northumberland was never crossed despite the union, "attended with many great Inconveniences", with Cumberland Quarterly Meeting in 1785.

The meeting was clearly initiated in Lancashire Quarterly Meeting:

"And whereas it was by our last meeting for Sufferings (in Kendal) signified to Friends of Lancashire our sense of compliance in settling a Yearly Meeting for some of the Northern Counties we do now understand that it was

there agreed that the first Yearly Meeting be kept at Lancaster the 1st 4th day of the 2nd month next."

Westmorland Quarterly Meeting 6.vii.1698.

"The Yearly Meeting agreed upon by Friends for some Northern Counties . . . was according to appointment held at Lancaster the day appointed to the great comfort and satisfaction of Friends there present and is further agreed that as the Lord shall make way to be continued to be kept on the 4th day before the Quarterly Meeting this time twelve month to begin at the 8th hour in the morning."

Westmorland Q.M. 7.ii.1699.

The form of meeting soon fell into a regular pattern and was described each year in a minute or epistle sent to each of the four Quarterly Meetings and, later, to Meeting for Sufferings.

"Kendal the 12th of 2 mo., 1733

The Yearly Meeting for these Northern Counties hath been held here Agreeable to Last Years Conclusion which hath been Large and Satisfactory, and According to course falling in Lancashire next Year, Its Agreed to be at Lancaster as follows viz^t The Meeting for Ministers and Elders the 2nd Third day of the 2nd Month at 2 in the Afternoon, the General Meeting for Worship on 4th Day to begin at 8 in the Morning and 2 in the Afternoon, the Meeting for Conference on 5th day morning after which its desired the Quarterly Meeting for Lancashire may be held and if possible break up in such time as may give opportunity for a parting Meeting in the Afternoon."

Westmorland Q.M., 1733.

Here are set out various aspects of the Meeting's function: the meeting for discipline which received sufferings and answers to its queries; the local Quarterly Meeting; the public meetings which gave opportunity for the established local and travelling ministers to reach a large public; the final parting meeting which was an occasion of power and virtue, speaking to a public well prepared by the earlier meetings to receive the messages.

For a more lively description of the Meeting we must look to private journals or to the rare optimism of this document from the Meeting itself:

“From our Northern Yearly Meeting held at Kendal
8th, 9th and 11th days 2 mo. 1729.

To the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings in Cumberland,
Westmorland, Lancashire, Cheshire and
Elsewhere

Dear Friends! This Meeting having been under a fervent Travail of Spirit for the Exaltation of Truth and Promulgation of the Gospel of Peace that Righteousness may be established and cover the Earth as the Waters do the Sea, Which We have reason to believe was the moving cause of instituting these our Annual and Solemn Assemblies and Through the Blessing of God have in Degree Arrived near the End Intended. . . ”

Kendal Meeting House strongroom, packet 102.

The queries which were adopted some years after 1699 appear to have remained little changed until 1790 when a lengthy new set was adopted, compounded of all the Quarterly Meeting Queries of the four Counties “with some necessary additions”. The former set, taken from a document of c.1750, were as follows:

- “1. Are Friends in the several Counties careful to keep up and attend all Meetings for Religious Worship and discipline of the Church?
2. Do Friends take care Regularly to deal with all Offenders, and Place Judgement duly on such as may be obstinate?
3. Is Love and Unity maintained amongst Friends and Particularly in the Management of Affairs relating to Discipline?
4. What care is taken to prevent any Friend from Launching into Trades and Business beyond their Stocks and Capacities, lest they should fall Short of Paying their just Debts etc.?
5. & when anything of that kind happens, are Friends careful speedily to censure the offenders?

6. What Openness in the Several Counties to hear the Testimony of Truth and where?"

Kendal Meeting House strongroom, packet 102.

"On Fifth day Morning at 8 oClock began the Meeting of Conference . . . The Northern yearly Meeting Queries were read & answered verbally by Representatives, from each county constituting this Meeting, during which time very pertinent & weighty Remarks were made by Jno: Storer and other Friends, the Meeting Closed about one Clock."

Joseph King of Newcastle, in a letter of 29.iv.1777.¹

During the later years of the Meeting it became the practice of Meeting for Sufferings to supply a parcel of books for distribution. These were selected by a committee appointed by Meeting for Sufferings, and in 1793 consisted of these titles:

- 4 William Penn's No Cross No Crown
- 12 William Penn's Primitive Christianity
- 12 William Penn's Rise and Progress
- 2 Robert Barclay's Apology
- 12 Elizabeth Bathurst's Truth Vindicated
- 12 Robert Barclay's Catechism
- 30 Samuel Crisp's Letters
- 12 Stephen Crisp's Plain Path-way
- 6 Benjamin Holme's Serious Call
- 50 Summaries [of the History, Doctrines and Discipline of Friends]
- 12 Susanna Boone on Grace.

Copy of minute of Meeting for Sufferings, 22.iii.1793.

The Quarterly Meeting appointed a few representatives to attend, although most of the meetings were open to Friends of all sorts. Indeed the paper of 1729 quoted above goes on to complain at length that

"Some of both Sex come to these Meetings whose Deportment Dress and Imprudence in conduct in their Inns and Elsewhere have given just Occasion of Offence and Therby much Lessened the Service."

¹ *Journal F.H.S.*, Vol. 21 (1924), p. 62.

A similar thought is behind the unenviable task set by the host meeting:

“In order that care may be taken for the accommodation and well ordering at the ensuing Yearly Meeting four Friends are desired to direct Friends to accommodation and advise Friends to keep in good order and behave well at inns and all company.”

Penrith Monthly Meeting, 26.iv.1757.

Another side to the problem is shown by Thomas Story in his description of the meeting of 1733:

“I went to Kendal on the 9th of the Second Month, in order for the Yearly Meeting there; which was very large, consisting, for the most Part, of young People; as do our Society throughout the World at this Day . . . yet the Spirit himself is not fallen upon many of them, as a sensible and experimental Dispensation of Life and Power.”¹

Detailed arrangements for the management of the general public do not appear in the records of Northern Yearly Meeting so that in order to get an indication of their scope it is useful to quote from an account of the Yearly Meeting for Wales in 1731 at Ludlow:

“And notwithstanding the great Throng of People there was not any Disturbance or Disorder among them, for the Magistrates, to their just Commendation, had taken great Precautions by making Proclamation through the Town beforehand, and pasting the same up in Writing in the Market, or some public Place, that if any should molest the Meeting or give any Disturbance, such should be severely punished: And, beside this Encouragement, they appointed at least a Dozen Constables to attend the Gates, keep out Children and Rabble, and the Meetings peacable; some of whom were very servicable in the Meeting, in direct the People to convenient Seats, and placing them to the best Advantage for general Accommodation.”²

It is possible, however, to illustrate the care that was taken of some others' tender conscience at the Northern Yearly Meeting held in the “Great Tennis Court” at Chester:

“It was very large and open, that great spacious Place being crowded, with two Galleries also erected for that Purpose, as likewise a large upper Room, with Windows opening into the Court, where were Military Officers and some others who, though

¹ *Journal of the Life* (1747), p. 689.

² *Ibid.*, p. 670.

willing to hear and see, did not think it safe or proper to be in the Meeting, with regard to some Laws then in Force, which might have affected some of them. The Lord appeared with us, to the Glory of His own Name, and Comfort of His People, and to the general Satisfaction of most People there, for there were present of most sorts and Sects in the Nation . . . Things were well and Truth over all, to the general Satisfaction and the Glory of our great Lord, whose Honour, and the good of His People, and of Mankind in general, is what we aim at in all these Things."¹

It was not usual for the Meeting to find such suitable accommodation available for its use. Where there was an adequate Meeting house it was used at least for the select and business meetings, sometimes (as at Kendal) for the whole occasion, but the provision of a temporary building figures largely in the annual preparations. Friends were appointed "to survey the Town and fix on the most likely piece of ground for erecting a shade . . . and to contract for the liberty thereof and erecting the same", afterwards to have a care for its removal; later to make collections and to receive contributions towards the cost from the other Quarterly Meetings.

The consequences of the Meeting on local meeting houses was often not only drastic but urgent, as at Lancaster.

"In the spring of 1708 our meeting house not being capable to entertain the general meeting for the fower northern counties, it was resolved to pull it quite down, and build it nigh double to what it was."²

A few years later at Kendal:

"By the account of the Representatives for each Monthly Meeting we understand that Friends are unanimous in their judgement that if we be favoured with the privelege of the Northern Yearly Meeting here again there will be a Necessity of Enlarging this Meeting House for the more suitable accommodation of the said Meeting therefore this Meeting appoints to Consult what way to enlarge it and not only so but to Accomplish the same as speedily as Possible."

Westmorland Q.M. 4.xi.1716.

¹ *Journal of the Life of Thomas Story* (1747), p. 569.

² *Autobiography of William Stout*, ed. J. D. Marshall, 1967, p. 155.

“As the Yearly Meeting Hath been proposed to be at Penrith the Ensuing year; But the Principal objection was the want of proper convenience in A House—I have therefore given you a Rough Sketch of an Addition to this Present Meeting House Which I think may Hold as Great a Number as is Necessary to provide for . . . I propose . . . to take away the side Wall and set the Beams on pillars (which may be Done safely) then build an Addition of 7 yards Width the whole Length . . . then Divide the new House from the Old by Shutters . . . I compute it Will Hold 940 people without being thronged.”

Report and plans submitted to Westmorland Quarterly Meeting, 1756, in Kendal Meeting House strongroom, packet 102.

Unlike the work at Lancaster and Kendal this project was not carried out, and a temporary shade was erected instead.

Six meeting houses stood on the regular circuit of the Meeting and building work known to have been done largely or entirely in anticipation of a visit of the Yearly Meeting may conveniently be summarized:

| Town | Number of Y.M.s held | Work done | Date of Work | For the Y.M. next following |
|--------------|----------------------|--|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Carlisle . . | 7 | Enlarged — — | 1711 | 1711 |
| Chester . . | 11 | Nothing ^a — — | — | — |
| Cockermouth | 5 | Enlarged . . | 1740 | 1740 |
| Kendal . . | 19 | Enlarged . . | 1708 | 1708 |
| | | Enlarged . . | 1717 | 1718 |
| Lancaster . | 19 | Rebuilt to seat 200 | 1708 | 1709 |
| | | Large Meeting house built to seat 480 . . . c. | 1744 | — |
| Whitehaven . | 8 | Galleries built adding 150 seats | 1784 | 1784 |

^a Presumably because good alternative accommodation was available in the Great Tennis Court.

Twenty-two other towns were visited once or twice only. At most of these there was no meeting house, so that the entire occasion took place in the Booth or Shade.

“Our Northern Yearly Meeting at Kirkby Lonsdale is now over and I hope to pretty general satisfaction. The Shed made for

that purpose was not the largest, but the most comfortable of the kind I have seen, it was well filled at all the three Public Meetings but not many more than it would contain. The people behaved well and so far as one could perceive were well satisfied.¹

“We arrived at Long Town on Second day the 17th where we found very good accommodation & every way Suitable for so Large a Company . . . Parting Meeting began at 3 °Clock which was very large, so much so that the Booth altho’ computed to hold 2000 People would not contain them all. The Throng was so great so that Friends were obliged to divide & hold another Meeting at same time in the yard adjacent.”

Joseph King of Newcastle in a letter of 29.iv.1780.²

The place of next year’s meeting was always agreed before the Yearly Meeting dispersed, and after 1722 the choice between the four Quarterly Meeting areas followed an exact rotation. By the middle of the century it became the practice frequently to appoint the ensuing year’s meeting for one of the towns regularly visited, then during the intervening months, to seek a more adventurous opportunity within the county. The process involved every business meeting in the county:

“By a minute at Quarterly Meeting it is recommended to the several Monthly Meetings to Consider of the most Suitable Place to propose for holding the Northern Yearly Meeting in the County—this Meeting recommends the said Proposition to the Weighty Consideration of the several particular Meetings and to Report thereon to our next or succeeding Monthly Meeting.”

Pardshaw M.M. 21.i.1783.

“This Meeting agrees to mention Whitehaven”

ibid. 10.iii.1783.

The practical consideration: the administration and organization of large numbers of people, the accommodation not only in a booth but at inns as well, the books for distribution, building and clearing away the shade, transmission of collections from one meeting to another: all in the end had

¹ Letter from Isaac Wilson 23.iv.1769, from *Isaac and Rachel Wilson* by John Somervell, 1924, p. 94.

² *Journal F.H.S.*, Vol. 23 (1926), p. 35.

their effect. After 1780 the lesser towns are less frequently visited, until:

“The Quarterly Meeting having had under Consideration a Proposal for discontinuing Northern Yearly Meeting which was recommended to the several Monthly Meetings—This Meeting desires the same may remain weightily on the Minds of Friends until our next Meeting.”

Pardshaw M.M. 20.i.1784.

The conclusion at this time was to continue with the meetings. The problem was again “solidly considered” in 1787 when

“it appears safest to continue at least one year longer with the restriction of building no Booth for its accommodation and that the queries be continued as heretofore”.

Epistle from Northern Yearly Meeting of 1787.

The break was finally made at the meeting in Liverpool in 1798 after exactly one hundred meetings, and was reported thus in the epistle:

The Yearly Meeting for the Northern Counties hath been held at this place, which hath been large. The discontinuance or continuance thereof in future, having again been weightily under consideration of this Meeting, notwithstanding it has been held as heretofore to satisfaction, after solid consideration thereof, it is with much harmony concluded to discontinue the holding thereof.

The following list gives the dates and places of holding of the Northern Yearly Meeting. *Italic* place-names in brackets following the name of the meeting place indicate the venue originally proposed at the previous year's meeting.

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------|
| 5 April 1699 | Lancaster ¹ | ?7 April 1703 | Lancaster |
| ?3 April 1700 | Lancaster | 5 April 1704 | Lancaster |
| ?2 April 1701 | Lancaster | ?4 April 1705 | Lancaster |
| 1 April 1702 | Lancaster | ————— 1706 | Carlisle |

¹ The Yearly Meeting was at first held on the 4th day (Wednesday) before Lancaster Q.M., and later on the day before Quarterly Meetings elsewhere. The day given here, and stated in the contemporary documents until 1752, is the day of the public General Meeting. The Meeting for Ministers and Elders was held on the previous afternoon.

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 28 April 1707 | Middlewich | 6 April 1743 | Chester |
| 31 March 1708 | Kendal | 11 April 1744 | Whitehaven |
| 5 April 1709 | Lancaster | 10 April 1745 | Kendal |
| 11 April 1710 | Liverpool | 9 April 1746 | Lancaster |
| 10 April 1711 | Carlisle | | (<i>Lancashire</i>) |
| 31 March 1712 | Kendal | 15 April 1747 | Knutsford |
| 6 April 1713 | Middlewich | | (<i>Nantwich</i>) |
| 31 March 1714 | Lancaster | 13 April 1748 | Whitehaven |
| 6 April 1715 | Kendal | 12 April 1749 | Kendal |
| 17 April 1716 | Carlisle | 11 April 1750 | Wigan |
| 8 April 1717 | Chester | | (<i>Lancaster</i>) |
| | (<i>Liverpool</i>) | 10 April 1751 | Chester |
| 31 March 1718 | Kendal | 14 April 1752 | Carlisle |
| 15 April 1719 | Liverpool ¹ | | (<i>Whitehaven</i>) ³ |
| 13 April 1720 | Cockermouth | 17 April 1753 | Kendal |
| 12 April 1721 | Lancaster | 16 April 1754 | Lancaster ⁴ |
| 10 April 1722 | Kendal | 15 April 1755 | Nantwich |
| 9 April 1723 | Chester | | (<i>Chester</i>) |
| 14 April 1724 | Carlisle | 20 April 1756 | Cockermouth |
| 13 April 1725 | Kendal | | (<i>Carlisle</i>) |
| 5 April 1726 | Lancaster | 26 April 1757 | Penrith |
| 11 April 1727 | Chester | 25 April 1758 | Lancaster |
| 9 April 1728 | Cockermouth | 24 April 1759 | Stockport |
| 8 April 1729 | Kendal | 15 April 1760 | Whitehaven |
| 8 April 1730 | Lancaster ² | 11 April 1761 | Appleby |
| 14 April 1731 | Chester | | (<i>Kendal</i>) ⁵ |
| 12 April 1732 | Whitehaven | 20 April 1762 | Bolton |
| 11 April 1733 | Kendal | | (<i>Lancaster</i>) |
| 10 April 1734 | Lancaster | 19 April 1763 | Congleton |
| 16 April 1735 | Chester | | (<i>Chester</i>) |
| 14 April 1736 | Whitehaven | 17 April 1764 | Brampton |
| 13 April 1737 | Kendal | 16 April 1765 | Kendal |
| 19 April 1738 | Preston | 15 April 1766 | Preston |
| | (<i>Lancaster</i>) | | (<i>Lancaster</i>) |
| 18 April 1739 | Chester | 21 April 1767 | Macclesfield |
| 16 April 1740 | Cockermouth | 19 April 1768 | Carlisle |
| 15 April 1741 | Kendal | 18 April 1769 | Kirkby Lons- |
| 14 April 1742 | Lancaster | | dale (<i>Kendal</i>) |

¹ From 1719 a system generally prevailed in the appointment of date of commencement, and the Quarterly Meeting was moved to suit. At first the meeting commenced on 3rd 3rd day (Tuesday) in 2nd month (April).

² The date of commencement was altered to 2nd 4th day (Wednesday) in 2nd month (April).

³ The date of commencement was altered to 2nd 3rd day in 4th month (April). This did not alter the programme at all, but announced the date of the Meeting for Ministers and Elders instead of the public Meeting as previously.

⁴ The date of commencement was altered to 3rd 3rd day in 4th month.

⁵ This was the only occasion on which the Yearly Meeting met at a weekend and not mid-week.

202 CIRCULATING Y.M., NORTHERN COUNTIES, 1699-1798

| | | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 17 April 1770 | Ormskirk (<i>Lancaster</i>) | 15 April 1783 | Northwich (<i>Chester</i>) |
| 16 April 1771 | Chester | 20 April 1784 | Whitehaven |
| 21 April 1772 | Whitehaven | 19 April 1785 | Kendal |
| 20 April 1773 | Kendal | 18 April 1786 | Blackburn (<i>Lancaster</i>) |
| 19 April 1774 | Bolton (<i>Lancaster</i>) | 17 April 1787 | Chester |
| 18 April 1775 | Nantwich (<i>Chester</i>) | 15 April 1788 | Cockermouth (<i>Carlisle</i>) |
| 16 April 1776 | Keswick (<i>Carlisle</i>) | 21 April 1789 | Kendal |
| 15 April 1777 | Kirkby Stephen (<i>Kendal</i>) | 20 April 1790 | Lancaster |
| 21 April 1778 | Ulverston (<i>Lancaster</i>) | 19 April 1791 | Newcastle- under-Lyme |
| 20 April 1779 | Chester | 17 April 1792 | Whitehaven |
| 18 April 1780 | Longtown (<i>Carlisle</i>) | 16 April 1793 | Kendal |
| 17 April 1781 | Penrith (<i>Kendal</i>) | 15 April 1794 | Lancaster |
| 16 April 1782 | Rochdale (<i>Lancaster</i>) | 21 April 1795 | Stockport |
| | | 19 April 1796 | Carlisle |
| | | 18 April 1797 | Kendal |
| | | 17 April 1798 | Liverpool |

DAVID M. BUTLER