

Historical Documents at Friends' Meeting House, Lancaster

LANCASTER Meeting House attained tercentenary in 1977. The Meeting's unbroken existence over these three centuries can be charted in the extraordinarily rich collection of documents stored in two safes at the Meeting House. These documents at Meeting House Lane, Lancaster, have bearing on many important aspects of Friends' history: for example, demography and genealogy; fund-raising, philanthropy and building; Friends' involvement with commerce and industry; and Friends' organization and transatlantic connections. I would like to single out just two areas of historical and religious interest. The first is the highly developed articulacy which many of these documents show Friends to have possessed over the course of three hundred years. Quite ordinary men and women—and not just in the early days of intense revivalism—showed a mastery of Scripture and an ability vividly and spontaneously to express profound spiritual insights.

The second area is that of Sufferings. Whether Friends underwent spectacular persecution, or the more prolonged and exhausting tithe prosecutions, they showed remarkable fortitude and solidarity, and also an undimmed realization of the purpose of their sufferings.

In general terms the Lancaster documents form a sustained testimony to the acute spiritual consciousness of a religious society made up on the whole of socially and educationally unexceptional men and women. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1: 26-27).

The papers and record books at Lancaster have recently been arranged and shelved in serial order, and each envelope of papers has been given a number in accordance with this order. The Meeting House has a number of typescript copies of a full and detailed inventory which itemises, and briefly

describes the contents of, most documents. For reasons of space here I can do no more than refer very briefly to the full inventory to indicate some of the contents of the two safes.

Safe 1 (Porch Room): Record Books

Shelf A–B: Minute Books, etc. 1654–1970

Shelf C: Register Books, etc. c. 1650–1973

Shelf D: Loose plans and maps. 18th–20th centuries.

Safe 2 (Foyer): Packets of papers

[Including:] Lancashire Q.M. papers and minutes, 17th–20th centuries; answers to Queries [mid 18th cent.–mid 19th cent.] from the following monthly meetings: Fylde, Hardshaw (and Hardshaw East and West when divided), Lancaster, Marsden, Preston, Swarthmore [Shelf A xiv–xxvi]; Manley-Crossfield correspondence 1834–1837 [A xxviii];

Lancaster M.M. letters and papers, 17th–20th centuries; marriage certificates, 1671–1803 [Shelf B xii]; sufferings papers for all the monthly meetings, 17th to early 19th centuries [B xvi–xxiv];

Lancaster M.M. (chiefly) finance papers, from 1692 [Shelf C i, etc.], including papers and plans for building work at Lancaster M.H. 1789–90 [C vi], at Wyresdale schoolmaster's house 1861–2 [C vii]; and papers relative to the Friends' School, Lancaster, and to Friends' education, 17th–19th centuries [C xiv].

Copies of the typescript inventory can be obtained, on payment of £1, from me at the Department of History, Furness College, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, LA1 4YG, or from Ralph Randles, 6 Hillside, Lancaster.

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