

## “From Devonshire House to Endsleigh Gardens”

*Based on a talk given by Stephen Wilson, at Friends House on 9 February 1976 to mark the Fiftieth Anniversary of its Occupation.*

**M**EETING for Sufferings last met at Devonshire House on the fourth day of twelfth month 1925; immediately thereafter the Central Offices moved to temporary accommodation in the Penn Club, occupying Friends House on 9 January 1926; Meeting for Sufferings first met in Friends House in May 1926, and Yearly Meeting followed in 1927. So ended the Quaker association with Devonshire House which had begun immediately after the Great Fire of 1666.

Throughout the Society there had been a strong sentimental attachment to Devonshire House, with its associations with George Fox, William Penn and other Quaker worthies. For a few, that attachment was very deep, and they could see no reason to disturb the existing arrangements. Allied to this attitude was the view that plain living contributed to high thinking, and the plainer the living at Devonshire House, the better for the Society. But a majority appears to have felt that some re-development was becoming increasingly necessary.

The majority, however, was divided. On the one hand were those who felt that the right place for any development was Devonshire House itself, in view of the associations it already had and its convenience to those who worked in the City or who normally used Liverpool Street station. Opposed to them were those who thought the time had come to follow other religious and charitable bodies in a move westwards away from the City where residential and communal life was rapidly disappearing.

Cutting across both those attitudes was the problem of finance. Devonshire House was a valuable site, and redevelopment there would require a substantial outlay of fresh money. To sell Devonshire House would produce a capital sum which should go some way to finance a new

building on a less expensive site. But if a move were agreed there were those who thought that the new site should be settled before Devonshire House was sold, whereas there were others—perhaps more cautious—who felt it unwise to think of a new site till the sale of Devonshire House had been arranged.

But little progress could be made with the financial implications without the co-operation of Six Weeks Meeting, who held the freehold of one-sixth of the site, and held a lease of another sixth from Bethlem Hospital, which, with its frontage to Bishopsgate, was the more valuable part. The site as a whole was hardly a viable unit until the Bethlem lease had been acquired and the freeholds amalgamated. It would be unfair to suggest that Six Weeks Meeting was unco-operative, but they were able to give an impression that they would be glad to assist when they were satisfied with the proposals.

But looming above and behind these cross-currents was a major question whether a large meeting house suitable and adequate for the holding of Yearly Meeting should be included in any scheme. On the one hand the view was held that any large meeting house would only be effectively used for a few days during the year, and for the greater part would be lying fallow, incurring both capital charges and the running expenses of heating and cleaning; it would therefore be sensible for the Society to hire a large hall for the holding of Yearly Meeting, and the Central Offices could accordingly be kept in improved accommodation at Devonshire House, or housed on a small and compact site elsewhere. On the other hand there was a widespread feeling that Yearly Meeting should be held on Friends' own premises, in close association with their Central Offices, and that it would be undignified for them to be dependent on others for what was their most significant corporate activity.

To this medley of argument was added in 1923 the problem of whether it was right that the Society should build on what had been regarded as an open space in perpetuity; and moreover whether the Society should build on what some regarded as too pretentious a scale.

The one point on which there seems to have been a consensus of opinion throughout was that whatever the form of development there should be a commercial or office

block to provide a regular rental income for the general work of the Society.

Few if any of these various points of view were consciously in mind when Meeting for Sufferings in February 1911 minuted that “the Devonshire House premises do not at present give satisfactory accommodation for the work of our Society”, and appointed forty Friends as a Special Premises Committee “to consider the matter in all its aspects”. Over the next few years the membership was subject to constant change as individuals resigned, retired or died, and of those originally appointed only seven were serving when the committee was laid down in 1928. In making appointments Meeting for Sufferings bore in mind the need for representation from all Quarterly Meetings, but the large size of the Committee coupled with the fact that views and attitudes were crystallising and shifting, made it a feeble instrument for any effective action. The differences of view were reflected in Meeting for Sufferings and in Yearly Meeting, and although Yearly Meeting on more than one occasion expressed a preference for a large meeting house to form part of any scheme, they placed the responsibility for decision on Meeting for Sufferings, who in turn looked for a recommendation from the Special Premises Committee. The balance of forces was thus complete, and although there was the interruption of the war, more than a decade elapsed before a solution began to emerge. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that what action was taken in making soundings about property transactions fell to a small and largely self-appointed sub-committee. As these soundings had to start on a confidential basis, there tended to be doubts on the part of the main Committee and of Meeting for Sufferings about what the sub-committee was up to. The appointment of J. Edward Hodgkin to the sub-committee in 1921 and the recruitment of Stanley Forward as secretary shortly thereafter was the stimulus to greater activity.

Such in general terms was the atmosphere prevailing in the Society during the twelve years to 1923.

The Special Premises Committee had been appointed in February 1911, and four months later took the view that “In any changes it is needful to provide for a large room suitable for Yearly Meeting and rooms for all associations and committees on the *same* premises”.

## DEVONSHIRE HOUSE SURVEY

The following twelve months were taken up with a survey of the Devonshire Houses premises and this became available in the middle of 1912.

The site comprised  
 Two large meeting houses, built in 1793  
 An Institute  
 A Library  
 5 Committee rooms  
 21 other rooms occupied by  
     Recording Clerk (3) Home Mission Committee (3) Tract  
     Association (2) Friends' Foreign Mission Association (8)  
     First Day School Association (3) Temperance Union (2)  
 4 strong rooms

In addition, the site contained a hotel, a warehouse, and ten shops let on tenancies expiring in 1918, and producing a gross rental income of £4,300.

The site was at the corner of Bishopsgate and Houndsditch, and the meeting houses were approached through a tunnel forty yards long from Bishopsgate. In the accommodation occupied by the Central Offices, heating was by coal fires; all the rooms were dull, gloomy and ill-ventilated; the ceilings were low; some of the rooms were noisy; some were up steep stairs; the office of the Recording Clerk had light only from a skylight and a reflector at one end; and the ground layout made the packing and distribution of literature awkward and difficult. At times of Meeting for Sufferings there was great pressure on the committee rooms and staff were frequently evicted from their own rooms. At times of Yearly Meeting there was greater pressure, and in particular the lavatory accommodation was quite inadequate. It was considered that at least 14 additional rooms would be required as offices.

The capital expenditure incurred by the Society on the whole site was £80,000 of which half had been raised on mortgage. A current valuation gave a figure of £137,000 but as the leases did not expire till 1918, the site could not be disposed of advantageously till the leases had nearly run out, and it therefore seemed that removal could not be contemplated for some years. In the meantime, Six Weeks Meeting had with some reluctance agreed that if the Society were to sell the site, they would be prepared to co-operate.

Following this survey, the Committee considered the possibility of taking over Westminster Meeting House in St. Martin's Lane. In October 1912 it was clear that this was unsuitable, and ideas then turned towards finding some suitable accommodation for holding Yearly Meeting apart from Devonshire House. A few members visited fourteen public halls in the London area, and reported that while several would be suitable, they felt that either the Central Hall in Westminster or the newly built Methodist Hall in Kingsway would offer all the facilities that were needed. Thereupon the Committee in January 1913 recommended that

- 1 The Society should acquire the property of Six Weeks Meeting.
- 2 The whole of the Devonshire House site should be rebuilt in stages over the following five years, to give a fair sized meeting room, and a series of committee and other rooms to suit the needs of the Society. The remainder should be utilised for building “a first class office block of modern offices fitted with electric lifts and all the latest improvements”.
- 3 A large meeting house such as would be needed for holding Yearly Meeting should *not* be included. “It is clear that some thousands of pounds can be saved annually by this course, and we believe that this money will be of far greater use in the furtherance of the work of the Society and the advancement of the Kingdom of God than if invested in buildings which would be unused during the greater part of the year.”

These recommendations had a very mixed reception from Meeting for Sufferings whose conclusion was that there was not sufficient unanimity to send forward any definite recommendation to Yearly Meeting, who should be informed that the matter was still receiving consideration.

Notwithstanding the attempt of Meeting for Sufferings to defer the problem, Yearly Meeting in May 1913 took note of a minute from Essex and Suffolk Quarterly Meeting complaining that Devonshire House might no longer be available for holding Yearly Meeting in future, and referred the whole matter back to Meeting for Sufferings with authority to settle.

The Committee adhered to their view that the Devonshire House site should be re-developed without a large meeting house, and employed William Dunn (a partner in the firm of Dunn, Watson and Curtis Green) to advise them on the scheme they had in mind. Dunn reported in December 1913

and commented adversely on the restrictions of the site, but as requested put forward a phased programme of building which initially would provide accommodation for the Central Offices and ultimately for an office block. The capital cost would be £58,000, but in view of the loss of space there would be a reduction of rental income of £1,400. As an aside, the report mentioned that it would be possible to provide a large hall to seat 1,200 people, and in conversation the architect estimated the additional cost at £6,000 with a much heavier loss of rental income.

This is the only reference traced to a professional opinion about the practicality of a large new meeting house at Devonshire House; it was clearly not fully considered, and did nothing to shake the informed lay views on the Committee that any satisfactory development of the site would preclude a large meeting house.

Early in 1914 the sub-committee by a majority (which included Isaac Sharp, the Recording Clerk, and W. F. Wells, who had been the Clerk of Six Weeks Meeting for the preceding 45 years) favoured Dunn's proposal for re-development of the site, without a large meeting house, but two members—Thomas Newman and Henry Harris—objected strongly, arguing that Dunn had made it clear that the light and air which could be provided would never be satisfactory and that "any building on the site would lack cheerfulness". The full Committee was inclined to agree with Newman and Harris, and felt that it would be right to look for other sites; but as the crucial question remained whether a large meeting house should be provided referred the whole matter to Meeting for Sufferings who in turn passed it to Yearly Meeting, who in May 1914 recorded that "after careful consideration" they felt that "a large meeting house should form a part of any scheme which may be adopted", but rather ambiguously gave Meeting for Sufferings full powers to act "as regards retaining, developing or selling the whole or any part of the Devonshire House premises, and also as to buying, leasing or mortgaging property elsewhere".

The Committee took this as meaning that a fresh site should be sought, and invited the sub-committee to "consider sites large enough in area to provide in addition to offices etc. a large meeting house, some room for garden ground, and for future development".

Thus in the summer of 1914 and after three years of cogitation and argument the Committee was back at its earlier position that there should be a unified building, but with the qualification that it should not be on the Devonshire House site.

After examining and rejecting sites in Belsize Park and Islington the sub-committee on 30 July recorded “their opinion that a Gower Street site would afford the most desirable position for the Society’s offices and for the Yearly Meeting Hall”.

The outbreak of war reduced the sense of urgency and although a site in Smith Square and several in Bloomsbury were mentioned, no action was taken till March 1915 when “It was deemed desirable that information should be obtained as to the likelihood of obtaining from various Friends the promise of financial help to the amount of about £50,000 as a capital sum towards the purchase of the site and the commencement of building”. Thomas Newman undertook to make soundings, but before the next meeting in November 1915 he had died, and it was agreed that as there was then little chance of raising £50,000 it was unnecessary to proceed further at that juncture.

#### BLOOMSBURY PROPERTIES

Around this time the Committee associated with itself P. F. Tuckett, the surveyor to Six Weeks Meeting and an estate agent, and who put before them a number of different sites in Bloomsbury where the long leases of buildings on the Bedford estate were beginning to fall in, and where London University had not yet fully established itself. A few were examined, but the only one which seemed to offer possibilities was in Keppel Street. Tentative negotiations in 1918 were broken off when it was not possible to bridge the gap between an offer of £20,000 and the asking price of £29,000. The site was on that part of Keppel Street which was subsequently closed, and is now occupied by the Senate House.

With the end of the war no progress had been made, and in May 1919 Yearly Meeting minuted that “considering the urgency of the subject we encourage Meeting for Sufferings to call a Conference of all Friends interested”. To this suggestion the Committee replied in January 1920 that they did not think it would serve a useful purpose to hold a

Conference without a definite scheme to put before it. This reply was not surprising as at the time it was given there was nothing whatever to report; Six Weeks Meeting was doing nothing about the freeholds; no steps had been taken to sell or re-develop Devonshire House; there was no prospect of a new site; the only positive factor was that the tenancies of the hotel and shops at Devonshire House were being continued on a year-to-year basis at reducing rents, and that about £10,000 had been promised by a few Friends towards the cost of a new building.

Immediately after this discouraging reply the Committee became aware that the War Office were holding for sale a long lease of the Theosophical College in Tavistock Square—premises which had been used for the storage of military equipment during the war. The initial reaction was that a leasehold property was unsuitable, but on second thoughts and after a report by Fred Rowntree it was felt that for an expenditure of £38,000 the building could be adapted for the use of the Society. The attraction was that it was in the Bloomsbury area, it had three large halls one of which could be used for Yearly Meeting, there was ample office space, and there was a garden. In March 1920 the Committee made a tentative offer of £60,000 for the lease and of £28,000 for the freehold.

Meanwhile Tuckett had made it known that Devonshire House would be for sale at a price of around £250,000, and a prospective purchaser came forward thinking in terms of £240,000 provided a substantial part would remain outstanding on mortgage.

With these negotiations in a fluid state, no positive report could be made to Meeting for Sufferings, and Yearly Meeting in May 1920 remained silent.

By the end of 1920 it was assumed that in the absence of any reply from the War Office, the negotiation for the Theosophical College had collapsed, and it was clear that the prospective purchaser of Devonshire House was no longer interested. The possibility of acquiring the Passmore Edwards Hall (now the Mary Ward Settlement) was considered but quickly rejected, mainly because the Committee was reluctant to become involved in negotiations for a new site until there was a firmer prospect of a sale of Devonshire House, and this would not be likely till the



interest of Six Weeks Meeting had been cleared up. In April 1921 the Committee reported that it seemed unlikely that an early offer for Devonshire House would be submitted, nor could any offer at present be made for a new site. On this, Yearly Meeting in May 1921 expressed uneasiness that there was no prospect of any action, and hoped that the Committee might have a fuller report to make before long. This was a stimulus for pressure on Six Weeks Meeting, and negotiations began about the time of the accidental death in November 1921 of W. F. Wells and resulted three years later in the amalgamation of the freeholds at a cost of £39,000.

But although the Committee looked without enthusiasm at a building on the Embankment (the site now occupied by Cable and Wireless) they remained apprehensive about involvement in a new site, and as Tuckett was making no progress in the sale of Devonshire House, its disposal was offered to seven estate agents dealing with City property, with an asking price in the neighbourhood of £300,000. Early in 1922 several tentative offers at much below that figure were quickly rejected, and with something approaching despair, and in the hope of getting a free hand, the Committee proposed in April 1922 that “Yearly Meeting should now be asked to alter their view that a large meeting house should necessarily form part of any scheme”. In May Yearly Meeting also had before them a minute from Warwick, Leicester and Staffordshire Quarterly Meeting that no arrangements should be made to part with any of the Devonshire House property without a further direct expression of opinion by Yearly Meeting. The agreement of Yearly Meeting was that “in leaving Meeting for Sufferings with power to deal with these premises as may seem best to them, and while not absolutely binding them, we desire that in any new premises that may be secured the question of the provision of a meeting house large enough to hold the sessions of Yearly Meeting will be carefully considered”.

This re-iterated the indication given by Yearly Meeting eight years previously that a large meeting house should be provided, and as it was generally accepted that this was impractical at Devonshire House, was a clear pointer to a new site.

Shortly after the 1922 Yearly Meeting, Joseph Cheal, a member of the Committee, was made privately aware that

the War Office might be prepared to re-open the negotiations which had lapsed two years previously with a view to selling the lease of the Theosophical College for £60,000 and that a possible price for the freehold was £32,000. After some opening gambits, the Committee authorized a bid of £60,000 for the lease and the freehold of "premises that would provide ample accommodation for offices allowing for expansion, a large hall which with some alteration would be quite suitable for holding Yearly Meeting, a good open space, and plenty of light and air, and in a position that is easily accessible". By the end of 1922 Cheal was involved in a complicated negotiation with the War Office as lessee and the Bedford Trustees as lessor, the latter making it a condition that the purchase should include six houses which lay between the College and Tavistock Square. Cheal increased his offer by stages to a final offer of £60,000 for the lease and £42,000 for the freehold (including the houses), the offer for the lease being conditional on acquisition of the freehold. In January 1923, the Bedford Trustees rejected the offer for the freehold, whereupon the Committee agreed to try a personal appeal to the Duke of Bedford and if that failed would proceed no further. T. Edmund Harvey advised that an appeal would have little success and the whole project was dropped.<sup>1</sup>

While the negotiations with the Bedford Trustees and the War Office were reaching their climax, the Committee became aware that Endsleigh Gardens would be for sale, and Stanley Forward was asked to find out the terms on which an option might be granted; on 1 February 1923 he reported that an option was out of the question, but as the

<sup>1</sup> As the Society nearly acquired the Theosophical College, the following information may have interest. Under the guidance of Annie Besant, the Theosophical Society obtained from the Bedford Trustees in 1912 a lease of a large area behind the houses on the east side of Tavistock Square, and with ready access to substantial funds in India, proposed to build an imposing headquarters and college; the building was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in the style of the Hampstead Garden Suburb; work started in 1914, but in 1917 when half built was abandoned and requisitioned by the War Office, who offered it to the Society of Friends in 1920. The negotiation lapsed when it was found that the War Office had no clear title to dispose of the lease; the legal position was not clarified until 1922 when the negotiation was resumed, but collapsed early in 1923. Shortly thereafter the property was acquired by the British Medical Association, who completed the building, and in the 1930s extended it to the front of Tavistock Square.

site seemed to have possibilities, and as the Theosophical College was now unlikely, Hubert Lidbetter was invited to provide a rough plan to show how the site might be used.

### ENDSLEIGH GARDENS

Shortly after the Napoleonic Wars the Fitzroy family had laid out some of their estates in north London as building sites, and among them were the houses on the south and west sides of Endsleigh Gardens. In 1920 when the 99 year leases were about to expire, the estates were sold by the family, and the single purchaser of the houses around Endsleigh Gardens was Sir Alfred Butt, a theatrical impresario and property developer (who was later involved with J. H. Thomas in a Budget leak). In 1921 and 1922 he re-sold the houses in small lots, with conveyances containing a reservation that “No right of access, user, light, air or otherwise over the pleasure grounds in Endsleigh Gardens are conferred by the sale”. By this means he secured the enclosure of three acres, 250 yards in length and 60 yards in depth, fronting the Euston Road, free from any restrictions. He offered it for £50,000 to the St. Pancras Borough Council, but notwithstanding pressure from most of the amenity societies in London, the Council did not feel that the expenditure of so large a sum on the provision of an open space in that neighbourhood would be justified. Butt thereupon put the site on the market early in 1923.<sup>1</sup>

On 13 March 1923 Hubert Lidbetter reported that a hall could be provided on the site to seat 1,340 persons at a cost of £117,000. On this things moved rapidly though confidentially. Stanley Forward was authorized to try to acquire half the site or the whole, and if the whole and a portion subsequently were disposed of, it should be a condition that the building would not be for the sale of alcohol, or used for a garage or contain machinery; and Knight, Frank and Rutley were commissioned to sell Devonshire House by auction at a reserve of £225,000. By early April, Butt had agreed to sell the whole site for £45,000 (although the contract had not been signed and completion was not

<sup>1</sup> A similar transaction took place around the same time in the enclosure of Mornington Crescent, on which the Black Cat Factory—now called New London House—was subsequently erected.

effected till early in 1924); tentative agreement had been reached with the London County Council that as a condition for consent to building, a strip ten yards in depth would be surrendered for the ultimate widening of Euston Road; and four Quaker architects were invited to submit plans for a new building.

At the beginning of April the Committee had made a neutral report to Meeting for Sufferings saying only that during the past year offers had been made for two sites, and in one case plans had been prepared to give an idea how the site might be used; beyond this nothing definite could be said. At the same time the Committee were apprehensive that they "were likely to be criticised in some quarters if we build on land likely to make an excellent open space". To ease their consciences, an approach was made to the Metropolitan Gardens Association with the suggestion that they should purchase half the site consisting of the two end portions for about £15,000, and develop them as gardens. An approach was also made to the London, Midland & Scottish Railway, which was seeking additional office accommodation, about the possibility of their participation in the building.

On 3 May 1923 Devonshire House was put up at auction, but the bidding was sluggish, and as it did not reach the reserve price the property was withdrawn.

During the session of Yearly Meeting at the end of May 1923 the Committee made a supplementary report that notwithstanding the failure of the auction, there was reason to expect that an offer for Devonshire House would shortly be forthcoming which the Committee would be likely to accept. The report continued that they had made an offer for Endsleigh Gardens which had been accepted, and that the contract was being negotiated by solicitors. This was the first intimation that Quakers as a body had of the precise site that had been selected, and although there was some comment about the loss of an open space, there had been no time for opposition to develop and the supplementary report was accepted by Yearly Meeting under the general assumption that the sale of Devonshire House was imminent and that Endsleigh Gardens had been finally settled.

At this point—end May 1923—the idea was that the new building would be in the centre of the Gardens, but

although the Committee had appointed Curtis Green<sup>1</sup> to advise them on the instructions to the architects, those instructions could not be finalized until the precise location of the building in the Gardens had been settled.

By the end of July 1923 the LMS Railway had made it clear that they were not interested in participation; no reply had been received from the Metropolitan Gardens Association to the suggestion that they should acquire the two end portions; but an offer to pay £30,000 for the eastern half had been received from a syndicate who proposed to build an hotel, and would give an undertaking that no application would be made for a licence to sell alcohol. The Committee agreed to accept this offer, which had the effect of reducing the cost of the site to £15,000; it meant abandoning any idea of centering the building, which would go to the western end; but it would allow a small garden in the middle. These decisions enabled the instructions to be finalized, and they were issued on 14 August 1923, the proposals to be returned within twelve weeks.

The instructions may be summarized as follows:

The building at the western end of Endsleigh Gardens should be simple and dignified, consisting of a basement, ground floor, and not more than three floors above; it should be mainly of brick, with Portland stone as necessary.

The accommodation required was:

A large meeting house to seat 1400-1600; it was important that a speaker from every part of the hall could be heard

A small meeting house to seat 200-250

An Institute and a Reference Library, each of 1,500 sq. ft.

The Central Offices with at least five separate or partitioned rooms with a total area of 1,250 sq. ft. should be conveniently placed for easy access to the meeting houses

The Association Offices, of about 10,000 sq. ft. should be divisible into suites of single or double rooms

At least 10 committee rooms were required with a total area of 3,000 sq. ft.; of these, 2 should be of 500 sq. ft. and 2 of 300 sq. ft. The rooms should be within easy access of the small meeting house, and the architects were specially asked to bear in mind that some Friends did not like too many steps

A caretaker's flat

Four strong rooms were required with a total area of 1,500 sq. ft.

<sup>1</sup> Curtis Green was a distinguished architect who had been a junior member of the firm advising on the re-development of Devonshire House in 1913. His later works included the Dorchester Hotel, the Thameside extension of New Scotland Yard, and the Cambridge University Press (Bentley House) in Euston Road.

with direct access from one to the Central Offices and from another to the Library

Lavatory and cloakroom accommodation should be on a liberal scale

Central heating must be provided but it should be recalled that the large meeting house would only be used occasionally, and the small meeting house three or four times a month, and therefore separate boilers should be considered

The meeting houses, and so far as possible the committee rooms, should not have windows on Euston Road, in view of the noise

It was essential to make provision for a Meeting House Yard where Friends could congregate after meetings. The Yard at Devonshire House gave a rough example of what was wanted (although with 3,600 sq. ft. it was not enough) and about half should be under cover

As the whole site provided more accommodation than that outlined above, the architects were instructed to provide offices which could be let to provide an income; they should have a separate entrance, staircase and lifts of their own, but so arranged that they could be absorbed by the Society for further extensions.

Such was the specification given to the architects, who in spite of complaint that time was too short, produced their outline plans under code initials. Curtis Green reported that the plan submitted by BY was in his opinion the best solution of the problem. "The design," he said, "in both plan and elevation is direct, simple and straightforward. It is modern in feeling and yet pleasantly reminiscent of the eighteenth century. The principal entrance in the Euston Road is emphasized by a colonnade of the Doric order of considerable dignity, and the use of such a portico has a precedent in the facade of the Friends' Meeting House at Manchester, a work of scholarship and charm."

On 20 November 1923 the sub-committee considered Curtis Green's report and the plans of BY and agreed to recommend the appointment of the author. A week later at the full Committee BY was identified as Hubert Lidbetter and his formal appointment made.

At the end of 1923 bright ideas proliferated; Edmund Harvey urged the provision of extensive basements for storage in the event of war; a loading bay for handling goods was suggested; there were proposals for a smoking room and for a staff common room; the Recording Clerk wanted the Central Offices on the south of the building; it

was suggested that the Institute should be on the ground floor and the Library on the first; the location of the women's lavatories gave rise to much anxious thought; there were conflicting ideas about the size and nature of the tea room; a proposal was made for a safe deposit; Meeting for Sufferings insisted that there should be provision for a bookshop, but as a shop with large windows facing Euston Road could not be provided without spoiling the elevation, it was settled that it should be located in the north east corner with a separate entrance. Another major change made at this time was to slope the sides of the large meeting house by raising the level of the outer seats by 21 inches (with a corresponding rise in the floor level of the building) and dropping the centre by a similar amount.

These and many other detailed matters were settled generally in discussion between the architect, Edward Hodgkin the clerk of the sub-committee, Robert Penney the clerk of the main Committee, and Stanley Forward. At the beginning of 1924 it seemed that all major hurdles had been surmounted; negotiations seemed well advanced for the sale of Devonshire House; the contract had been signed and £3,000 deposit paid by the hotel syndicate (now called the de la Voye group) for the eastern end; and all major points on the style and layout of the new building settled. But troubles were looming; an advertising firm had erected a hoarding around the site, and an acrimonious dispute arose with them about liquor advertisements and with the LCC who claimed that they were entitled to the rent as the hoarding was on land to be surrendered to them, and this dispute got entangled with an undertaking required from the de la Voye group about the building line they would establish. The site behind the hoarding was rapidly becoming a jungle and the Committee incurred some odium by refusing permission to the War Office to use it for tent pitching exercises, and to the Caledonian Christian Club to lay out a temporary tennis court. Trouble also developed with the auctioneers for the commission they claimed for their abortive effort to sell Devonshire House.

But very much more serious was the fact that early in March 1924 the prospective purchasers of Devonshire House withdrew, giving as the reason “the difficulties of the general business and political situation and other causes”. Opposition

to the Endsleigh Gardens scheme had been simmering within the Society, but the failure of the sale was the signal for the opposition to burst through and give opportunity for the whole matter to be re-opened. At Meeting for Sufferings on 14 March 1924 Joseph Bevan Braithwaite regarded the failure as a "providential occurrence"; several Friends thought that the Committee had not been following divine guidance, although John William Graham argued that it was a mistake to confuse divine guidance with the broken word of the purchaser. It was not clear what solution the opponents of the scheme were proposing. Meeting for Sufferings was not in unity and it was agreed that the issue would have to go to Yearly Meeting due to be held in a few weeks' time at Llandrindod Wells.

With the issue in the balance it was clear to the Committee that they could take no final decision, but on 18 March they authorized the architect to proceed with plans and quantities to the point of being able to invite tenders.

During March and April 1924 *The Friend* printed sixteen letters in opposition to the scheme; one complained of "this palatial edifice"; another said it was no time to spend money when there were difficulties about filling the Yearly Meeting quota. There were five letters in support, including two which were anonymous.

At Yearly Meeting the matter was introduced by Edward S. Reynolds (the Clerk of Meeting for Sufferings) who gave a résumé of past history and urged that the time was right to go forward at Endsleigh Gardens. According to the account of the discussion in *The Friend* there were thirty speakers, of whom twenty-one were in favour and nine were opposed or wished deferment of a decision.

The minute of Yearly Meeting in 1924 was:

After prolonged discussion this meeting concludes that in spite of many treasured associations with Devonshire House we should not be wise to attempt any scheme of re-building on that site. We endorse the proposals of the (Special Premises) Committee and re-affirm the opinion expressed in previous years that a large meeting house must ultimately be included in the scheme.

This was the final signal to go ahead, and on 5 June 1924 sixteen builders were invited to submit tenders; within three weeks tenders were received varying from £149,260 to £177,753, the lowest being that of Grace



and Marsh, a Croydon firm with Quaker connections.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting for Sufferings accepted this tender on 15 July 1924; the building contract was signed forthwith and work started immediately. The question of a foundation stone was seriously considered, but after discussion the Committee concluded “to make no such arrangements, not favouring such an idea”.

With the building work launched the attention of the Committee turned to other matters. They proposed that as the building was started in the tercentenary of the birth of George Fox, it would be appropriate to mark some association with him, and accordingly suggested Swarthmoor Hall. Thereupon a vigorous correspondence developed in *The Friend* which towards the end of 1924 printed some fifty letters with suggestions which included Friends Central House, the Headquarters of the Society of Friends, Quaker Hall, the George Fox Memorial Hall, and Endsleigh Chambers. But the weight of opinion seemed to be for “Friends House”, and this was determined by Meeting for Sufferings, to be followed where appropriate with a sub-title: “Central Premises of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)”.

Shortly after the decision of Yearly Meeting to proceed, an Appeal Sub-Committee was appointed with Barrow Cadbury as treasurer. To the £10,000 which had been promised or contributed nine years previously, personal approaches to a few Friends had brought this to £32,000, and in April 1925 an appeal was made to every Quaker family to raise this to £60,000. A year later Barrow Cadbury was able to inform Yearly Meeting that the target had been reached with a surplus of £63.

It was possible to fix this target with some precision as negotiations had been re-opened late in 1924 for the sale of Devonshire House to the same purchaser who had reneged earlier in the year; agreement had been reached on a price of £185,000, with the purchaser giving an indemnity to the Society against any claim the auctioneers might sustain (the claim was pressed but rejected by the Court). A contract for sale to London and Northern Estates Ltd. was signed in March 1925 providing for completion in October, and for

<sup>1</sup> The firm was that of Augustine Neave Grace (1875–1953) builder and contractor; at Sidcot 1887–1890; married (i) Margaret Sarah Morland, (ii) Monica Kathleen Marriage.

vacant possession at the end of the year.<sup>1</sup> After the contract the Committee was engaged in some troublesome negotiations on dilapidations with those whose tenancies were terminated, and subsequently with the sale of the old furniture at Devonshire House which realized £117.

The contract with the de la Voye group had been signed early in 1924; it provided for the sale to them of 36,000 sq. ft. at the eastern end of Endsleigh Gardens for the erection of an hotel; the price was to be £30,000, a deposit of 10 per cent was paid and in default of completion by 1 September 1924 the deposit would be forfeited. In spite of pressure from Stanley Forward and the Society's solicitors the group were unable or unwilling to complete, and in February 1926 the contract was terminated and the deposit forfeited. Thereupon the Committee invited other offers, and by the end of 1926 10,000 sq. ft. at the eastern end had been sold to Nettlefolds for 25s. a foot; 9,000 sq. ft. to the LCC for the Weights and Measures department for £1 a foot; and a similar price was paid by the GPO for 13,000 sq. ft. Thus in place of the hotel offer of £30,000 for 36,000 sq. ft. the Society had sold 32,000 sq. ft. for £34,500. Moreover a surplus of 4,000 sq. ft. had emerged, and it was agreed that this should be used to increase the size of the garden in the middle by one-third.

These ancillary and troublesome property transactions were the inevitable accompaniment of the decision to move to new quarters, and required the attention and endorsement of the Committee. Meanwhile the work on the new building proceeded relatively smoothly. Changes of plan were severely discouraged, but among the matters referred to the Committee were the lighting problems (particularly in the large meeting house) where there were rapid technological developments; the provision of internal telephones and electric clocks; the layout of the cloakrooms; the style of the gates at the main entrance and to the garden; the nature of the floor coverings; the partitions and shelving in the administrative offices; the ventilation of the strong rooms; and the transfer of some of the benches from Devonshire House to the new small meeting house.

<sup>1</sup> In the later 1920s the new owners demolished Devonshire House and erected a tall office block known as Stone House; it is still flanked by the shabby and antiquated property restricting the light and air which had deterred the Society in 1914 from re-developing the site.

The builders concentrated first on the administrative block, which with a number of loose ends, was completed by the end of 1925. Later, the General Strike was an excuse for some delay, but the small meeting house was available for use in the summer of 1926. The large meeting house was completed in the spring of 1927 and available for Yearly Meeting in May. The office block, known as Drayton House, was not completed till a year later.

#### FINAL REPORT

Throughout, the main burden of ordering equipment and furnishings, arranging accommodation, and organizing the move had fallen on Stanley Forward, who was specially congratulated by Edward Hodgkin in presenting the final report of the Special Premises Committee in May 1928. Friends House and Drayton House he said had been completed; the buildings on the eastern end of Endsleigh Gardens had the approval of the architect and were in general conformity with Friends House, although differing in height; it had been hoped to let Drayton House as a whole to a single tenant, but none had been forthcoming, and it was now proposed to let it off in suites. He continued to give the financial outcome:

<i>Expenditure</i>		£
Builders' contract		163,315
Site, fees, legal charges, interest and removal costs		21,506
Furniture and fittings		6,441
		<hr/>
		191,262 <sup>1</sup>
		<hr/> <hr/>
At that time this expenditure had been financed mainly by Sale of Devonshire House	185,000	
Less loans paid off	57,654	
	<hr/>	127,346
Appeal raised		60,848
		<hr/>
		188,194
		<hr/> <hr/>

<sup>1</sup> At 1976 prices at least £1½ million.

In addition a number of gifts had been made, including the fountain in the yard by the Peckover family and the furnishings in the Institute by Irish Friends.

The Special Premises Committee was laid down by Meeting for Sufferings in May 1928, but a few members continued as the nucleus of the Drayton House Committee to deal with the lettings, originally at an average rental of 6s. 8d. per foot. The whole building had been fully let by 1931.

Three points may be made in conclusion.

First, it is perhaps surprising that in view of the hesitations and conflicts half a century ago, Friends House ever got built at all; it owes much to the drive and energy of Edward Hodgkin and Stanley Forward, and the skill of Hubert Lidbetter. The story may contain some lessons on procedure should the Society be faced with a similar property transaction in future.

Secondly—the public outcry at what the Society had done in building on an open space led to the appointment of the Royal Commission on London Squares, which reported in 1928 that of 460 enclosures varying from mere strips in front of houses to large squares, half appeared to be in private ownership and subject only to such rights over them as might be included in the leases of the surrounding houses. To prevent what had happened at Endsleigh Gardens and at Mornington Crescent, the Commission recommended that steps be taken to ensure that all similar enclosures should be permanently preserved as open spaces, and the LCC took statutory powers accordingly. But in various quarters the action of the Society is still recalled with disfavour.

Thirdly—before 1925 Euston Road had been a seedy run-down thoroughfare. St. Pancras Church was the only building of any distinction between Regent's Park and King's Cross. Friends House, designed by Hubert Lidbetter, for which he received the medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects for the best building put up in London in 1926, did much to raise the tone of the neighbourhood; and to a far greater extent than was anticipated fifty years ago, it has made a notable contribution to the religious, cultural, social and political life of the metropolis.

*Note on Sources:*

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Information about the Theosophical College kindly supplied by the Bedford Estates Office.

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