

The Meeting House at Flamstead End Hertfordshire

DANIEL DEFOE, reporting to Robert Harley in 1704 on political feeling in various parts of England, wrote of Hertfordshire,

The Gentlemen of the Royston Club settle all the affairs of the country and carry all before them, though they behave with something more modesty . . . than in former days . . . They have built a large handsome square room . . . Here Justice — and the then club resolved the pulling down the Quakers' meeting [house] at Hertford in 1683, for which the proprietor afterwards sued him and recovered sufficient damages to rebuild the house.¹

The minutes of Hertford Quarterly and Monthly meetings² have no mention of the destruction of Hertford Meeting House at this time, though it is true that from October 1683 to May 1686 Friends assembled for Quarterly and Monthly meetings at the houses of two of their Hertford members, and the meeting house, like many others at the time, appears to have been closed.³ When Hertford Meeting House was used again, it was nearly a year before Friends decided to undertake repairs to the building, and then there was no mention of the cost.⁴ It seems hardly likely therefore that the meeting house had been extensively damaged. But there was substance in Defoe's account if one looks at the history of a neighbouring meeting house, that at Flamstead End.⁵

¹ Historical Manuscripts Commission, 15th report, appendix, pt. iv: [29] Portland MSS, vol. 4 (1897), 153-154.

Defoe acted as a sort of secret service agent to Harley. The manuscripts show that he wanted a kind of MI5 to be set up, under cover of a Ministry with an innocuous name.

For what little is known of the Royston Club, see Alfred Kingston, *History of Royston* (1906), 159.

² Hertfordshire County Record Office, Q 83.

³ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, pp. 3-30.

⁴ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 39.

⁵ A series of letters from Enfield Monthly Meeting to Hertford Quarterly or Monthly Meeting is at Hertfordshire County Record Office (Q 123). The Enfield M.M. accounts for the period are at Friends House Library, London, in "Enfield Monthly Meeting Papers, 1689-1723" (henceforth referred to as Enfield Papers). Enfield M.M. does not seem to have kept minutes at the time.

Flamstead End was a hamlet a mile or two away from the centre of the little town of Cheshunt, about six miles from Hertford and about three from Enfield. The rent of the meeting house was £11 in the 1680s. It had an orchard and arable land adjoining.¹ Before 1683 it was quite a large meeting. 73 Friends were convicted for attending unlawful conventicles there in that year, of whom about a half came from Hertfordshire, and the rest from Essex, Middlesex or London.² The boundary between Hertfordshire and Middlesex ran about two miles south of Flamstead End, and since such local services as there were at the time, including the care of the poor, were organized on a county basis, Flamstead End was fruitful soil for a demarcation dispute. Enfield Monthly Meeting had been called on to decide in 1675 whether it should be connected to the quarterly meeting at London or to that at Hertford, and if one understands aright a somewhat incoherent minute of a later date, decided to keep both options open.

It was remembered that at the first establishing this meeting it [wa]s granted that if anything fell amongst us here which this meeting be [un]willing or see it [in]convenient to determine of ourselves, but rather to have referred to a quarterly meeting; in such a caise, and on such ocation, if it falls out on that part of this meeting that belongs to Meddlesex, that then one or two Friends of that part of this Meeting belonging to Hartfordshire are to goe along with Meddlesex Friend[s] to the quarterly meeting at London and lay the matter before Friends there, and so likwis if the ocation hapen amongst any of the Hartfordshire Friends belonging to this Meeting that then on[e] or two of Midlesex accompany them to the Quarterly Meeting at Hartford, and there to lay the matter before Friends.³

In practice, however, Enfield Friends were represented at London and Middlesex Quarterly Meeting, and did not attend at Hertford until 1687.⁴

An attack on Flamstead End Meeting House is first mentioned in a letter from Enfield Monthly Meeting read at

¹ Enfield Papers, pp. 5, 8, 9.

² *Hertford County Records. 1. Notes and extracts from the Sessions rolls 1581-1698.* By W. J. Hardy (1905), vol. 1, p. 331. To judge from the money collected for the poor and other purposes, Flamstead End meeting had more members than Winchmore Hill, South Mimms and Barnet in 1675. Enfield Papers, p. 2.

³ Enfield Papers, p. 59.

⁴ London Quarterly Meeting minutes 1690-1701 (Friends House Library, London) *passim*; and Herts C.R.O. Q 83 *passim*.

the quarterly meeting at Hertford in May 1686. Hertford Meeting House had been re-opened that day, after an interval of two and a half years. Part of the money contributed by Irish Quakers for the relief of English Friends had been allocated to Hertford Quarterly Meeting. Enfield Friends had heard of this, and now reminded Hertford Meeting of

sum poore Friends towards the [out]scirts of your county, which with there neighbours from Waltham Abbey and Enfield make up the Meeting at Flamsted End in Cheshunt, where hath formerly bin great sufferings.¹

A more exact account was later sent by Enfield Friends to Meeting for Sufferings. One Sunday in 1682 Justices Maddox and Fox had arrived and, at their direction, forms, galleries, benches, windows and doors were broken in pieces, and demolition of the walls begun. On the following Sunday they came again, ordered the doors, which in the interval had been repaired, to be again broken, and burnt; this set fire to the chimney-piece of the house, "to the consternation of the neighbourhood".² Enfield Friends suggested that before the relief fund from Ireland was spent, they should be consulted, but Hertford Friends took no action on this³—it was only three months since they had decided to repair their own meeting house, and they almost certainly knew that Enfield Meeting also had received part of the money from Ireland, and in fact more than had Hertford.⁴

More than a year later Enfield Friends wrote again, and with some asperity. They pointed out that they had paid the rent of Flamstead End Meeting House for a long time, "which you should a don" (as Flamstead End was in Hertfordshire and not Middlesex). For many years too they had kept the Meeting from sinking, "as certainly else it had donn those sevear times of suffering laitly over", and now, having to repair the meeting house, "which was much damnified in the late tymes of persecution, wee find it will cost above twenty pounds".⁵ The Enfield clerk, Thomas

¹ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/1.

² Joseph Besse, *Sufferings* (1753) i, 252.

³ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 30.

⁴ Hertford received £10 (Herts C.R.O. Q 83, pp. 19, 26) while Enfield received £11 15s. (Enfield Papers, p. 6).

⁵ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/2. Their accounts (Enfield Papers, pp. 6–9) in fact record a total expenditure of £18 5s. on repairs.

Hart, and a Friend from Flamstead End, Samuel Goodacre, came to Hertford to support their cause. The matter was referred to the next quarterly meeting.¹ George Fox himself attended this latter meeting, and it was agreed that a collection should be taken at Hertford, Ware and Hitchin meetings to assist in the repair of Flamstead End Meeting House.²

A month later, at Hertford *Monthly* Meeting, there was a new development.

It was agreed to that in consideration Commissioners are to meete by order from the King in this county shortly, that may give releife to such as have sustained damage by goods taken away and Meeting places ruined, that the collection which was agreed upon formerly for Flamsted End Meeting place be deferred for som time to see what is the issue of that Commission.

The Commissioners referred to are clearly the Judges of Assize, sitting with Justices of the county as Commissioners of the Peace, whose *nisi prius* cases included a large proportion dealing with damage to property. Hertford Friends had decided that those responsible for the damage to Flamstead End Meeting House should be taken to law. There was no mention of a similar use of legal means to obtain compensation for damage to Hertford Meeting House.³

In a notably sensible and forthright letter Enfield Friends opposed resort to law. They wrote:

. . . upon your apprehension that relief would be obtained by the Commissioners or prosecuting the Justices, you had deferred it [the collection of money for repairs], the which we think you should not have done, for if any relief be gained thereby, tis Friends in your county that are in a capacity to gaine it, and not us of Middlesex, of whom your Commissioners can take noe notice.⁴ Neither doe we think they have any power to deal with

¹ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 40. The clerk minuted that the matter was referred to the next *monthly* meeting, but this must have been a slip, for it did not come up at the next monthly meeting; it was dealt with at the next quarterly meeting.

² Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 43.

³ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, pp. 44, 45. At the next quarterly meeting Friends spelt out more clearly how redress should be obtained. "Its the opinion of the Meeting that the Friend or Friends that hath the leese of the Meeting House made unto them do send unto the Justices that were active in the said business and first to know of them whether they will repaire the damages don by them in a fair way; and if not consenting soe to end it, or then that he be arested and compeled to do it."

⁴ Middlesex was grouped with London for Assize purposes. J. S. Cockburn, *History of English assizes 1558-1714* (1972), 23.

Justices or others who in a riotous manner made spoyle under noe pretence of law, but in a willful rage and malice . . . but the spoyle they then made was under £10 value . . . If you lay itt before them and shew them their unlawful dealings it may be well, but to sue them at law we can not advise you, being not so sutable to our Christian principle. However we leave it to your wisdom of God to proceed as you shall therein judge meet.¹

One can only agree with Enfield Friends that it was hardly likely that the magistrates, sitting with the Judges of Assize, would condemn and mulct for damages two of their own number. And the fees and other costs involved in bringing the case might well swallow up the greater part of the £10—legal fees, then as now, were prohibitive.²

Hertford Quarterly Meeting met three days after the Enfield letter was written, and wisely accepted, at least in part, the advice it had been given.

It is agreed that Samuel Goodacre and William Bates make application to the Justices that damnified Flamsted End Meeting House, and to know of them whether they will make satisfaction for the dammages so done, in a fair way. And if refused, then Friends of this Meeting engage to bear the charges they shall be at in the further prosecution therof.³

So runs the minute. It was also decided to organize the collection formerly agreed upon, and later deferred, and at the next quarterly meeting £4 6s. was brought in from Hertford and Ware meetings, "towards the charge of rebuilding Flamsted End Meeting House".⁴ Goodacre and Bates were members of the Flamstead End Meeting, but one or both had been attending Hertford Quarterly Meeting since the question of the repair of their own meeting house was raised there.⁵

Remarkable to relate, the Justice chiefly responsible did

¹ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/3.

² Cockburn, *op. cit.*, 135.

³ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 46.

⁴ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 47.

⁵ There were two Friends, father and son, called William Bates. This is probably the father, described once as silkweaver, but later as a labourer (*Hertfordshire County Records. Sessions books 1658-1700*, pp. 222, 363). Samuel Goodacre is also described as a labourer (*ibid.*, p. 363), but Hertford Friends collected to help him when his shop was destroyed (Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 136). He fostered poor children whom Enfield Friends supported, and rented the orchard adjoining the Flamstead End Meeting House. Both were prominent members of Enfield Monthly Meeting. (Enfield Papers, *passim.*)

pay compensation for the wrong he had done. Not the whole £10, certainly, but £7. It was not Goodacre and Bates, however, who secured the payment. A letter from Enfield Friends acknowledged the receipt of £4, "out of £7", states the Hertford minute, "recovered by some Friends means here" (i.e. Hertford). Enfield Friends understandably enquired what was to happen to the remaining £3.¹ In a letter later that month they named the Justice concerned. "You acquaint us it was the sense of your Meeting that the three pound, part of the seven pound received of Justice Maddox towards the spoyle don at Flamsted End Meeting House, should not be disposed without our concurrence first".²

Sir Benjamin Maddox was a wealthy landowner who lived only a mile or two away from Flamstead End Meeting House.³ He was responsible for several warrants in 1682 and 1683 authorizing the seizure of Friends' property for the "crime" of attending a Quaker meeting for worship.⁴ In one case at least, there must have been sympathy for his victim, for when the constables at Ware seized a gelding belonging to Thomas Burr, the maltster at whose house George Fox sometimes stayed, no one would buy the horse.⁵ It would not have been out of character for Maddox to have led the attack on the meeting house near his home.

Unfortunately for Enfield Friends, the remaining three pounds out of the seven recovered from Maddox were disposed of without reference to them, and they were indignant. The Hertford defence was a lame one—the three pounds had been paid out on behalf of "a poore Friend formerly under sufferings by the priest".⁶ Enfield Friends expostulated that "if you doe but reflect upon the great charge our Meeting has bin hitherto at to support a Meeting, and releve the necessatyes of Friends in your countie, you cannot but with us judge it most seasonable we should have

¹ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 48.

² Herts C.R.O. 123/4.

³ He acquired valuable estates in Kent and Essex by his marriage in 1664 to the daughter of Sir William Glasscock, a master in Chancery (Herts C.R.O. Deed no. 79932X).

⁴ Enfield Papers, p. 40.

⁵ *Hertford County Records. I. Notes and extracts from the Sessions rolls 1581-1698, op. cit.*, p. 343.

⁶ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 49.

the whole mony, had it been many times more".¹ Hertford Friends blamed Enfield Meeting for not writing back quickly enough about the money from Maddox, and in their minute named the person responsible for disposing of the £3. "It being left in Henry Stout's hands, to whom we refer you for further satisfaction, he not being present at this meeting."² Henry Stout was the able and wealthy maltster who played an important part in the life of Hertford Meeting,³ but Enfield Friends were very annoyed at being referred to him for satisfaction. "It is your businesse", they told Hertford in no uncertain terms, "to judge and regulate the matter, and not to refer us to any perticuler of your members . . . we have not heard nor known the like, that any perticuler person in unity with Friends presume to act of his own will soe contrary to the sense of the Meeting".⁴ One supposes that Stout, and not the two humble Flamstead End Friends, had approached Justice Maddox, that thus the compensation paid came to be in his hands, and he felt a certain freedom to dispose of it. Hertford had appealed to Enfield Friends to let the matter fall, "and that ther be no further controversy about it",⁵ which Enfield Friends generously did. But the matter was not allowed to drop altogether: five months later a Hertford Monthly Meeting minute records, very unusually, for then as now, Quaker meetings did not proceed by means of majority decisions, "It is the opinion of the major part of this Meeting, that Henry Stout having disposed of a certain three pounds formerly in controversy, did it according to Order."⁶

During this dispute about the three pounds, Hertford Friends had agreed to pay £2 a year towards the rent of Flamstead End Meeting House.⁷ Only fifteen months later they discussed whether they should continue to do this,⁸ but for some years they continued to contribute, though

¹ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/4.

² Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 51.

³ V. A. Rowe, *The first Hertford Quakers*, 1970, *passim*.

⁴ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/4.

⁵ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 51.

⁶ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 56.

⁷ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 52.

⁸ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 64.

the Enfield clerk often noted that the money arrived late.¹ Their last payment was made in April 1696,² and Enfield Friends could not persuade them to contribute again. London and Middlesex Quarterly Meeting intervened on Enfield's behalf, the dispute was finally referred to Yearly Meeting, and mediators were appointed.³ Hertfordshire Friends got their way in 1702; they paid the arrears, £10, "and soe they are free of the former engagement; and its left to there freedom to contribute as they please in a brotherly way".⁴ There was some later correspondence about some Flamstead End Quakers who were poor, and had to be supported by one or other or both of the two monthly meetings.⁵ There was still a Friends' Meeting at Flamstead End in 1708,⁶ but in the following year Enfield Friends informed Hertford Monthly Meeting that they would no longer be concerned with the rent or other charges of Flamstead End Meeting House. They thought fit to tell Hertford Friends of this "before we gave the landlord warning or otherwise dispose of the house and goods".⁷ No action was taken by Hertford, so presumably Friends ceased to meet at Flamstead End. Enfield's decision is very understandable. The monthly meeting reported in 1710 that Enfield Meeting House itself was so out of repair that it was unfit to meet there in winter. It had been decided to build a new meeting house on the old site, and this would cost £160.⁸ Obviously the monthly meeting's resources would be stretched to the limit.

Defoe was describing events which had occurred twenty

¹ Enfield Papers, pp. 11 *et al.* The Enfield treasurer was Thomas Hart. See Herts C.R.O. Q 83, p. 59, in which Samuel Goodacre brought to Hertford Monthly Meeting a letter signed by Hart and requesting the money. He was told, "This Meeting intends to pay next Quarterly Meeting." The proportions paid by Hertford, Ware and Hitchin varied, but usually Hertford paid about 16 or 18 shillings, Ware 14s. and Hitchin 8 or 10s.

² Enfield Papers, p. 25.

³ London Quarterly Meeting minutes 1690-1701 and 1701-1713. Hertford Friends explained their wish to terminate the agreement by the failure of various monthly meetings to attend quarterly meeting, so that the whole burden of the 40s. contribution fell on one or two local meetings. Herts C.R.O. Q 83, pp. 108-133.

⁴ Enfield Papers, p. 35.

⁵ Herts C.R.O. Q 83, pp. 113-138.

⁶ William Urwick, *Nonconformity in Herts* (1884), 512.

⁷ Herts C.R.O. Q 123/15.

⁸ Enfield Papers, p. 178.

years before. He was writing also from Bury St. Edmunds or Cambridge,¹ not from Hertford or Enfield, where possibly he might have obtained a more correct version of the incidents he related. His account fits much better the attack on Flamstead End Meeting House than anything known about the Hertford building. Flamstead End was a less populous and more secluded area than the centre of Hertford, where Justice Maddox and his fellow rowdies would have courted unwelcome publicity. As Hertford Friends did contemplate legal action, and as Justice Maddox in the end paid damages, one can understand how the version of the story that Defoe heard came to circulate. There are tantalizing gaps in the story—one would give much to know what happened at the interview between “some Friends here” and Maddox—but the main outlines are clear, and it is beyond reasonable doubt that it was Flamstead End, not Hertford, which was the victim of the lawless attack that Defoe had heard about.

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¹ This is clear from the manuscript of Defoe's letter, British Library, Portland MSS, Harley Papers, Deposit 29/224, f.49.