

FRIENDS' SUFFERINGS 1650 TO 1688: A COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

The two monumental folio volumes of *Sufferings* compiled by Joseph Besse and published in 1753 have been a constant source of material on early Quakerism by reference to particular people or places, or as a mine of illustrative examples. However, the large quantity of information contained there does not appear to have been examined as a means of comparing the incidence of suffering in one year or in one area with another. The wide variation in local response to the anti-Quaker legislation makes clear the need for such an analysis. The present reason for doing this is to provide a base-line of current events against which to set other activities of Friends of that time, for example the acquisition of meeting houses.

The full title of the work is:

A collection of the sufferings of the people called Quakers, for the testimony of a good conscience, from the time of their first being distinguished by that name in the year 1650, to the time of the Act, commonly called the Act of Toleration, granted to protestant dissenters in the first year of the reign of King William the third and Queen Mary, in the year 1689. Taken from original records and other authentic accounts, by Joseph Besse.

Besse had been a writing-master in Colchester and later moved to Clerkenwell in London, where he was much involved in literary work for Friends. He produced his work on sufferings at the behest of Meeting for Sufferings which in turn was carrying out a direction of Yearly Meeting 1727 to collect and digest the sufferings and imprisonment of Friends. This first appeared in print in 1733 as *Abstract of the sufferings...*, volume 1 up to 1660, volumes 2 and 3 (1660–1666) in 1737, with the intention that eight octavo volumes would complete the account up to 1689. In 1741, however, the form of presentation was changed to give a continuous account for each county rather than for each year, and to print the whole in two folio volumes.

Within London Yearly Meeting he adopted a chronological arrangement and narrative style for every county, describing each event, naming almost every person, usually indicating the place, day, and Act; and sometimes transcribing relevant documents. He concluded with a series of indexes of personal names.

The source material for this work, apart from the 200 or so contemporary and usually local books and pamphlets on the subject printed before 1689, was the written record made at the time by the meeting concerned. This was usually set down in a book kept for the purpose, and usually kept by the Monthly Meeting. A transcript would be brought to Quarterly Meeting, thence carried by the representatives to Yearly Meeting, where it was again transcribed, this time into another special book known as the Great Book of Sufferings. Six volumes of this were taken up with the period from 'the beginning of our being a People' up to 1690.

The work of transcribing was one of the duties of the Recording Clerk, who from 1689 to 1737 was Benjamin Bealing. Because of the immediate work needed by the half-dozen different meetings he served he fell far behind with the formal record of sufferings amongst other things, and it was to meet this need that Joseph Besse was first brought in, a year or two before he started on sufferings. The fact of such delay after 1689 suggests its likelihood before that date too, as one cause of deficiency in the finished work. To this may be added deficiencies in the original local record and in its transmission through the required stages. Thus some omission of small events must be expected in any part of the record, in addition to the self-evidently incomplete sections on Warwickshire from 1666 and Nottinghamshire from 1677. Overall, however, this work is the most comprehensive source generally available, and over the years those using it have found that it may generally be relied upon.

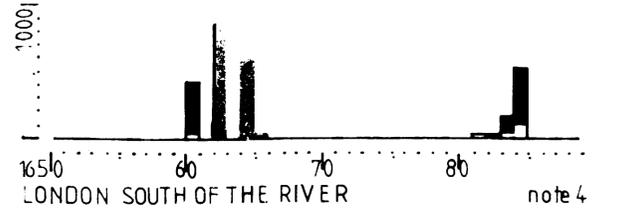
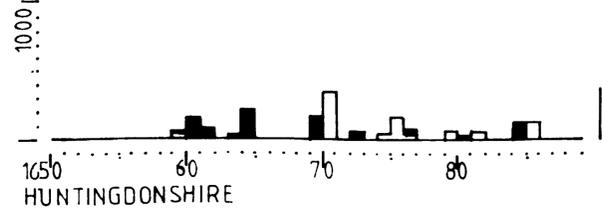
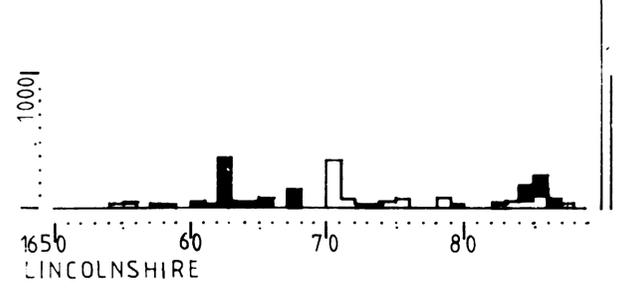
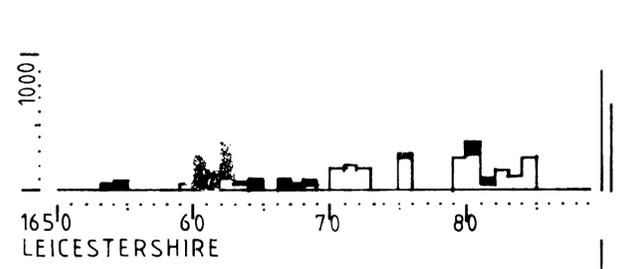
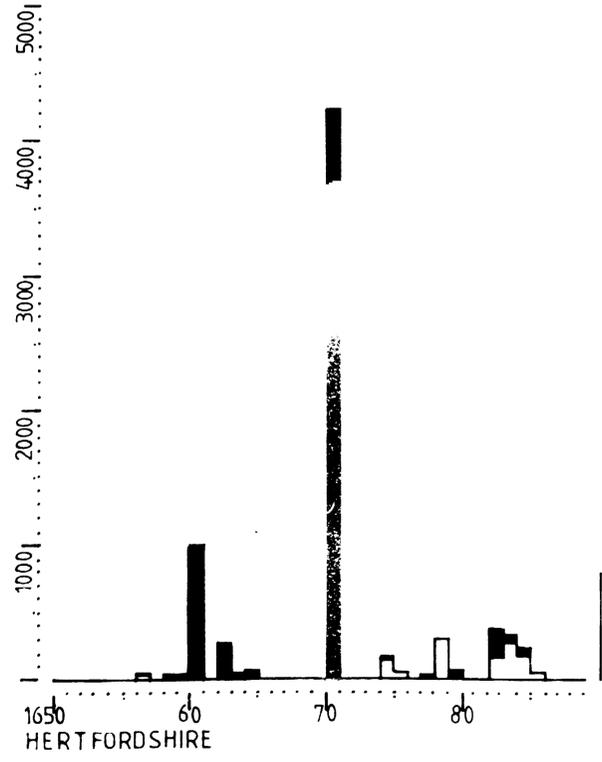
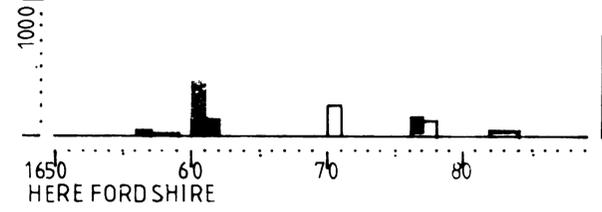
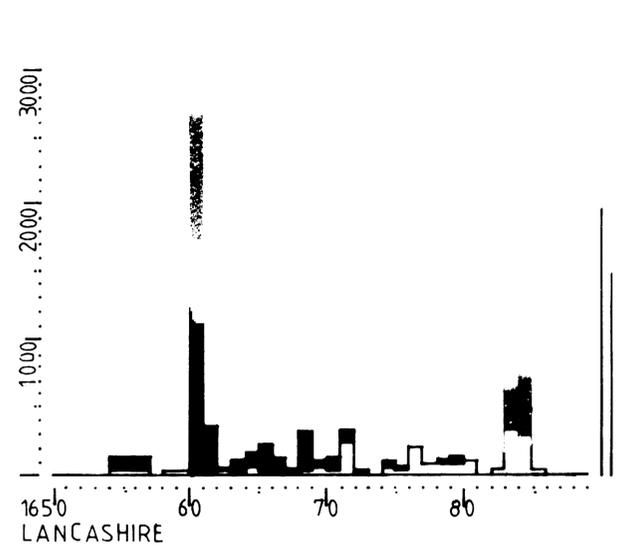
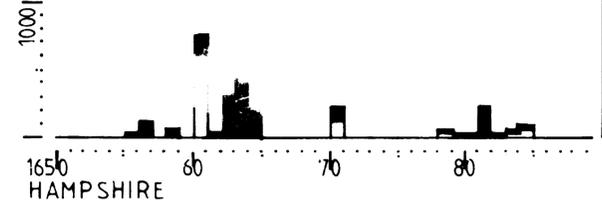
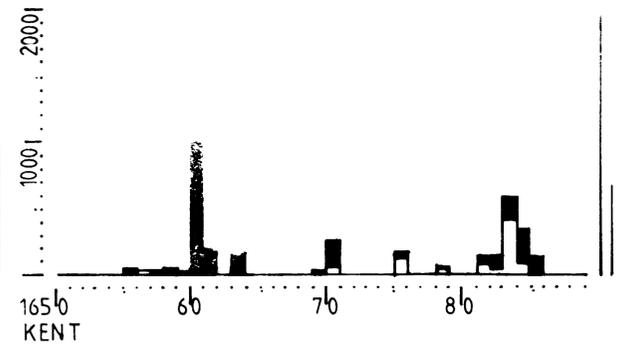
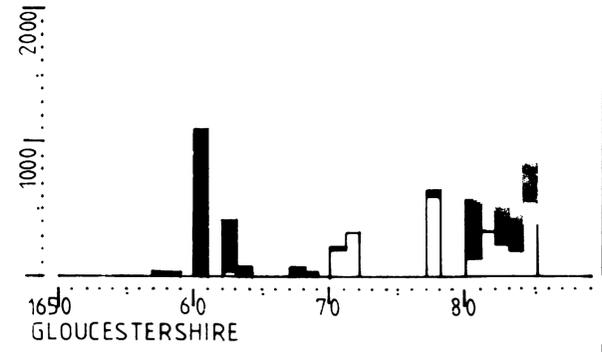
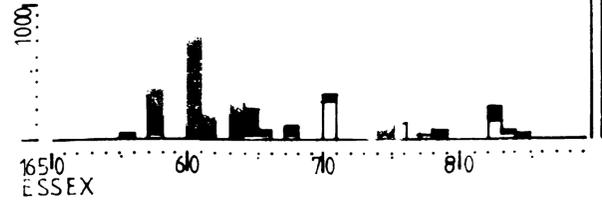
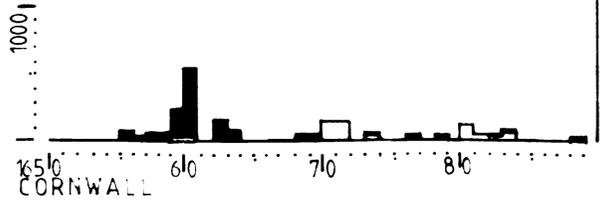
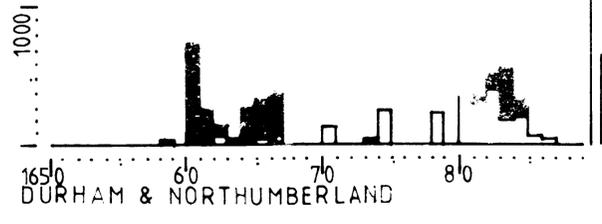
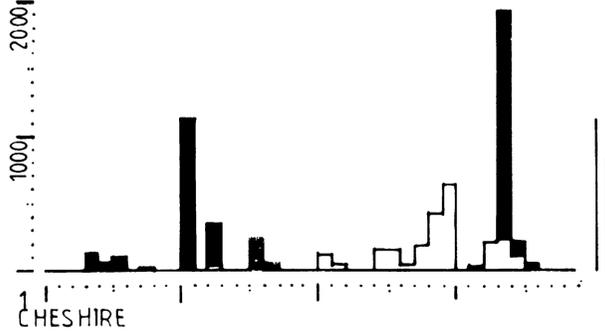
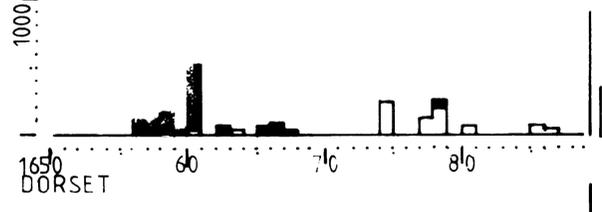
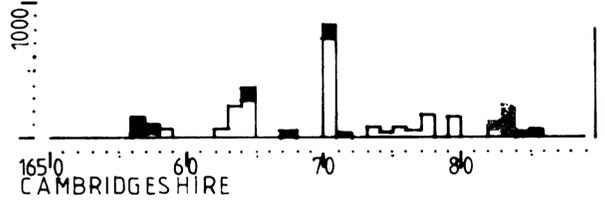
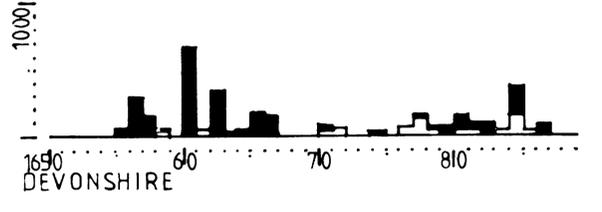
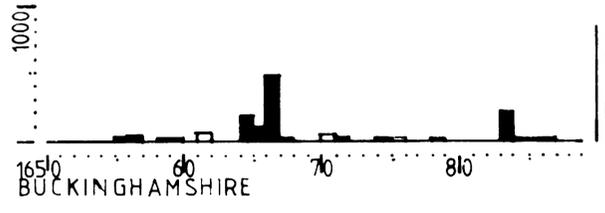
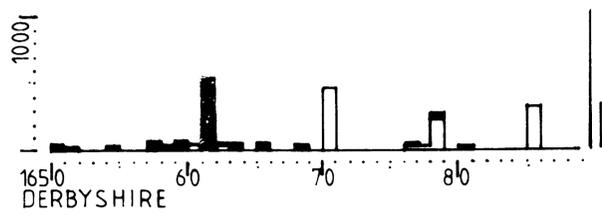
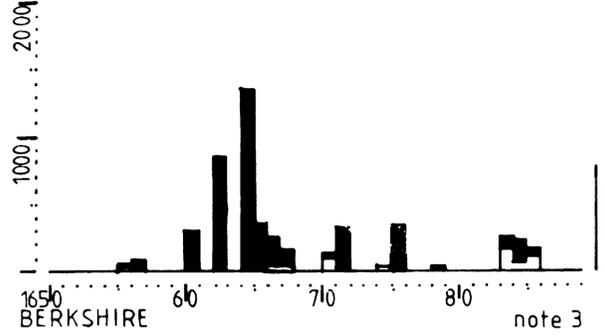
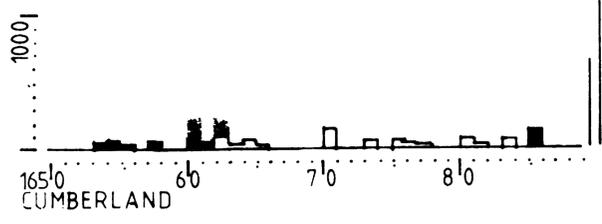
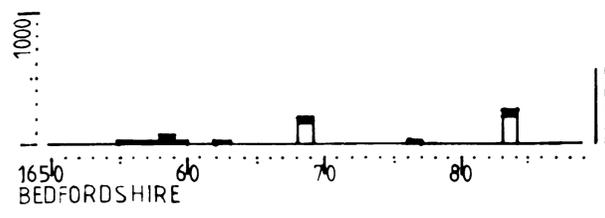
The legislation by which Friends were prosecuted varied from that passed by Parliament specifically in order to suppress the new movement, to old Acts found useful by ingenious Justices. Among those mentioned by Besse were the Quaker Act of 1662 and the First and Second Conventicle Acts of 1664 and 1670; with Acts of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I, usually those concerned with recusancy, attendance at church, travelling on Sunday, or vagrancy. The application of the legislation was, particularly in towns, very dependent upon local personalities, where an active prosecutor was in office one year, out the next. The acceptance in law of assembly for Quaker worship within certain bounds was brought about by the Act of Toleration of 1689. This did nothing however to reduce the difficulties facing Friends through their testimonies concerning tithes, the militia, and so on. The Great Book of Sufferings continued to record sufferings up to 1844, 44 volumes in all, and even that was not the end of the story.

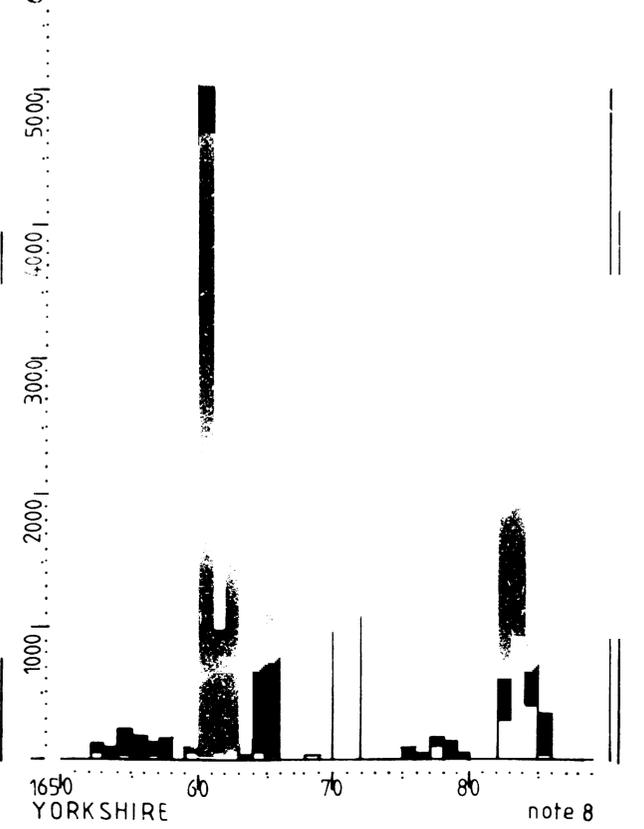
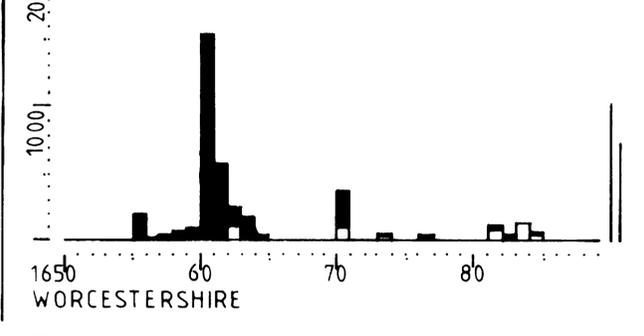
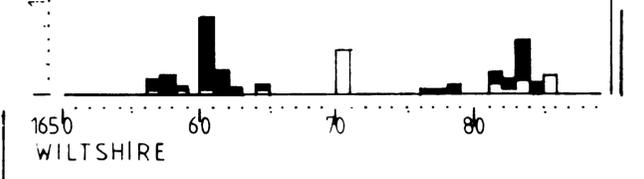
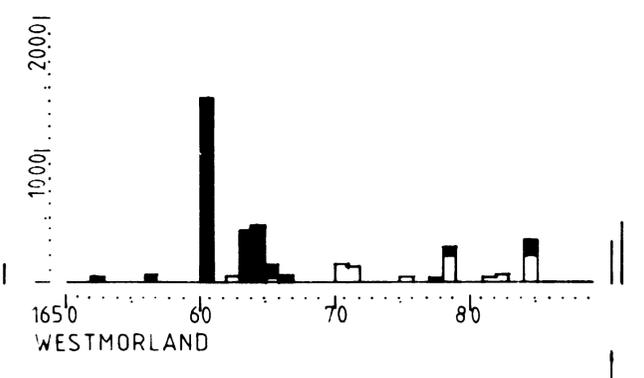
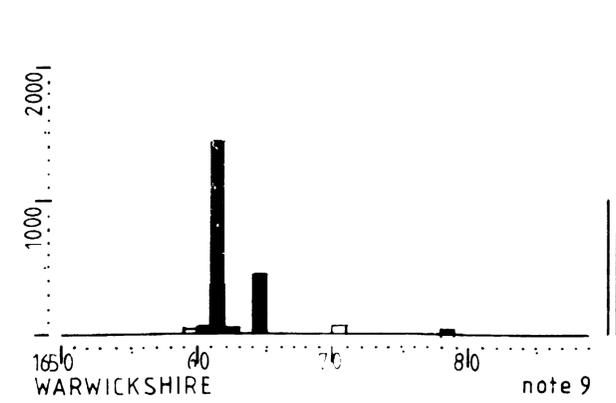
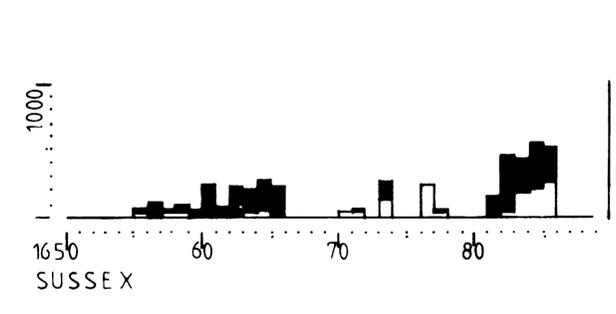
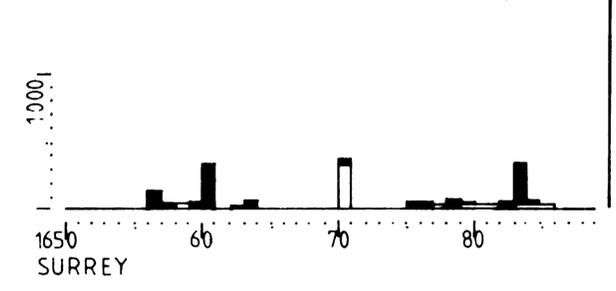
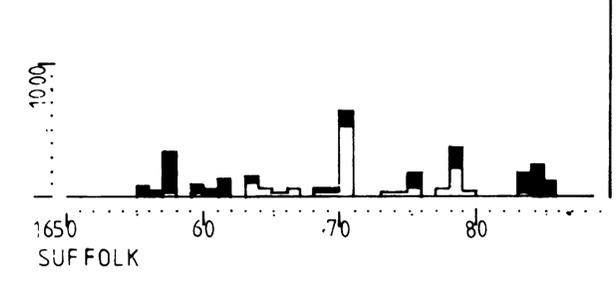
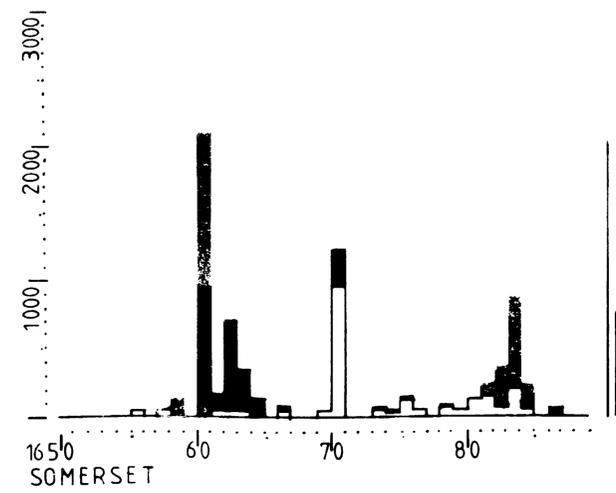
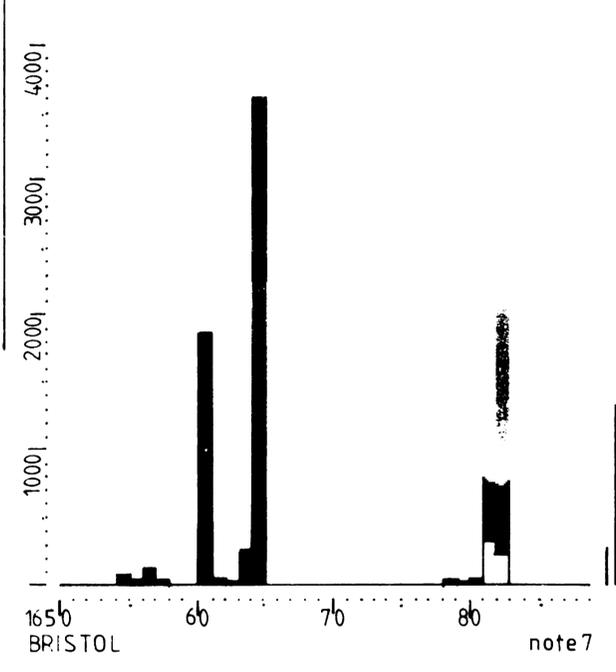
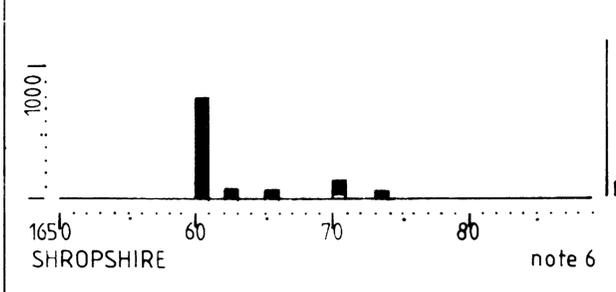
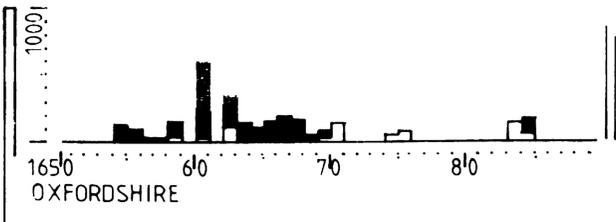
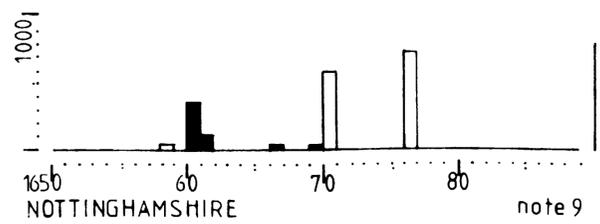
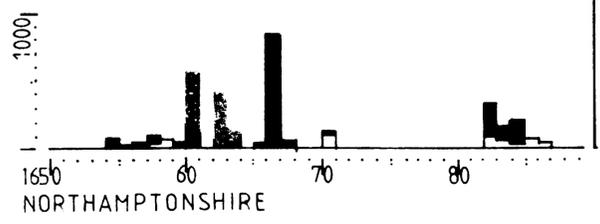
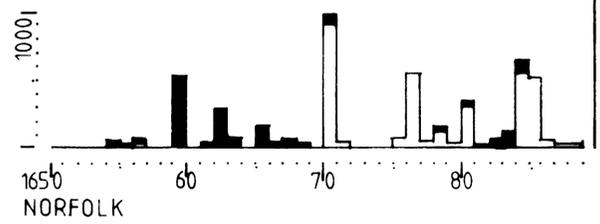
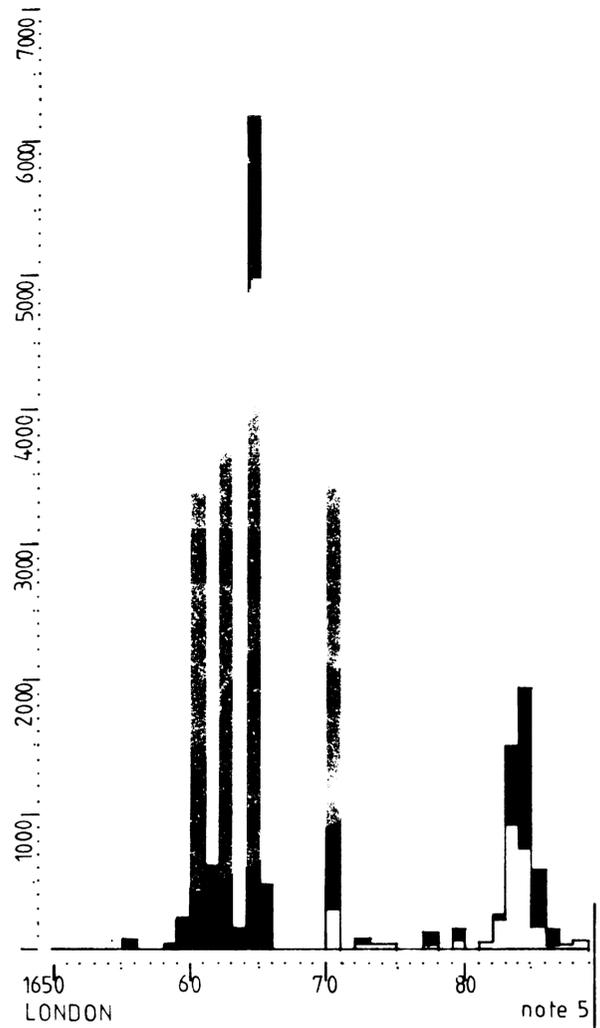
Friends' refusal to pay tithes played a large part in their sufferings. The relationship of Friends to tithe-owners was different in kind from the foregoing legislation. Here the civil authorities did not initiate proceedings, nor were there group prosecutions. The decision to prosecute each defaulter lay with his parish priest, impropriator, or tithe farmer. Its incidence was dependent on local initiative, clearly exercised in a very selective manner and sometimes developing into a long-standing feud. The overall result for Friends was a fairly steady rate of distraint year by year, not related to Acts of suppression, insignificant in towns, and continuing unabated after the Act of Toleration. Sufferings for tithes are not shown on the accompanying charts, in order that they should not mask those related to suppression.

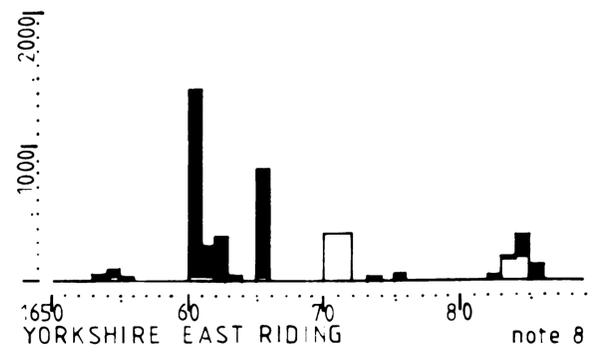
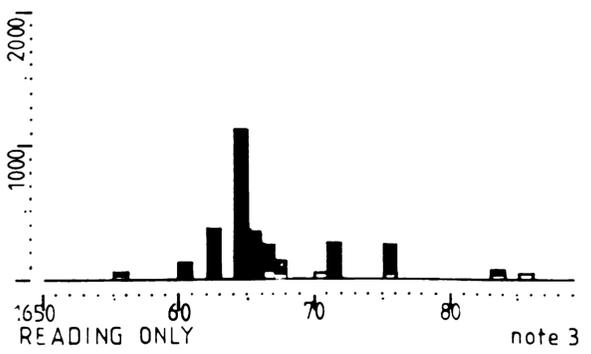
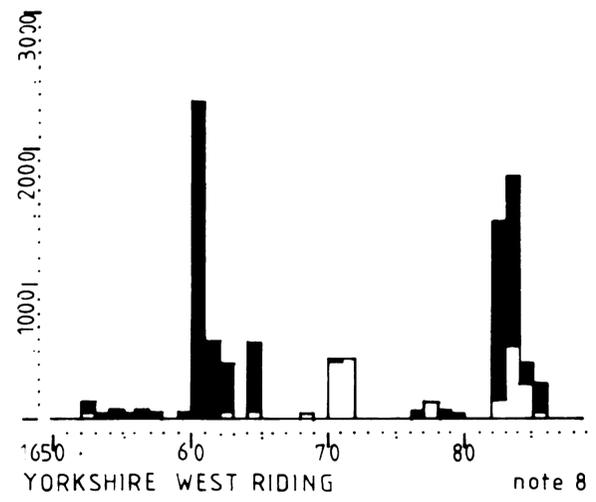
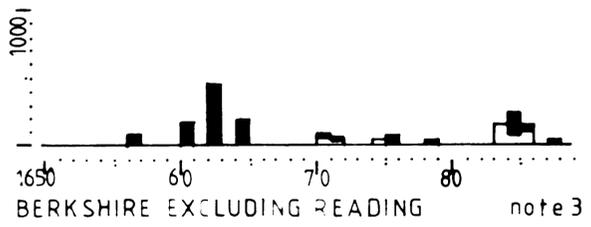
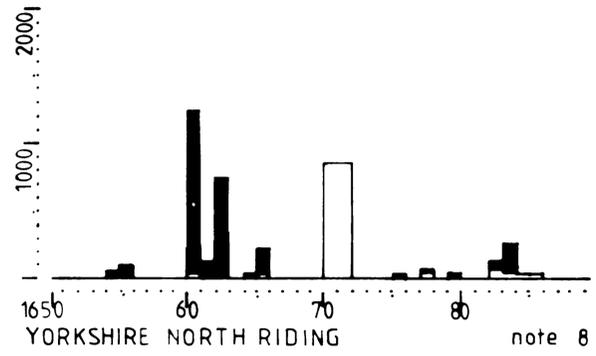
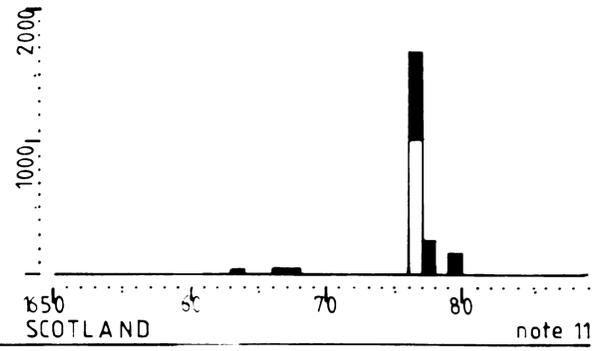
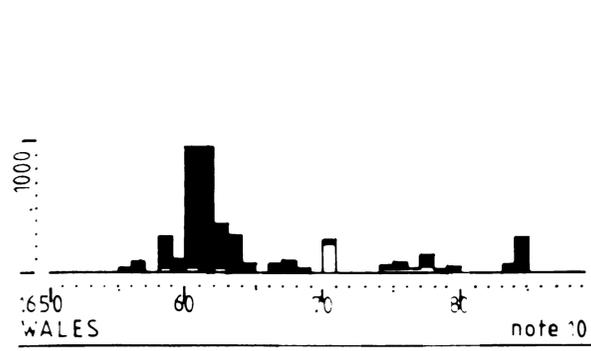
In order to express the incidence of suffering in a numerical and visual form a high degree of selection is necessary. There is no way in which the whole gamut of persecution can be brought into one simple expression, ranging as it does from arbitrary personal violence in the street and at Meeting, through fines and distraint of goods to imprisonment, banishment and excommunication, varying in effect from the trivial to the terminal. The first, personal violence, is excluded because it could not be assessed with sufficient clarity, the last two because they were relatively rare for much of the period. By far the most frequent penalties were through the loss of goods and of liberty, and only these two have been taken into account. The stated value of fines and goods distrained yields a straightforward sum in pounds. Goods taken but not given a money value by Besse have been excluded through the uncertainty of assessing a true sum. Imprisonment varied much in duration and quality, and Besse naturally drew attention to extreme examples. Nevertheless a great many terms seem to have been in the region of six to twelve months.

The method adopted here to express the incidence of suffering combines these, each occasion of imprisonment (without regard to its length) being taken as the equivalent of goods valued at £10. Since the cost of being in prison was expressed more than once as at least sixpence a day this factor seems not unreasonable. Thus on the charts each division in height represents either £100 worth of goods taken or ten people put in prison. The factor of ten, and indeed the method itself is open to refinement, but its application does yield a consistent and proportionate set of charts comparable one with another. Indeed no comparison with outside events is intended.

There is much to learn from what Besse does not say. For instance an oath was required as part of several ordinary events of life such as







proving a will, burying in wool, or entry to a trade guild on completion of apprenticeship; similarly a bishop's licence was required by a practising schoolmaster or a doctor. Difficulties over all these events are indeed mentioned, but so seldom as to raise questions as to the actual application of laws with which Friends could not comply. The text shows in fact a continuing undercurrent of good will towards Friends by the population as a whole and incidents abound to illustrate it. Perhaps the most interesting exception is of any reference to Quaker records. Given the enthusiasm of some prosecutors it seems surprising that there is no mention of minute books, account books, property deeds or other manuscript records being disturbed. Printed books were another matter altogether, and were burned with a will.

The undercurrent of good will did nothing to lessen the impact of resolute law enforcement, whose prosecutors went well beyond the law in their enthusiasm to root out the new movement. The feeling remains, however, of a widespread acceptance of these people who lived quietly and worked hard to pay their way so as to be a burden to no one. It seems clear that for the greater number of Friends and for the greater part of the time near-normal life went on, albeit uncomfortably and with an ever-present prospect of harassment and disturbance.

Much more may yet be learnt from this text of Quaker life and thought; the present notes and charts are the results of a very selective use of the material. Thus it may offer the possibility of a better understanding of the life of individual meetings, of the actual consequences of the different Acts, of the flow of money into and out of the National Stock in response to the hardships recorded, of the itineraries of early travelling Friends, of how Friends achieved such unity of thought and action in those early days.

Meanwhile these charts indicating the sufferings of Friends year by year and county by county, with all their limitations, are presented for the use of students and as an indication of what Besse's *Sufferings* has to offer.

David M. Butler

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

That part of these notes which refers to the history of Besse's *Sufferings*... is based on *The story of a great literary venture*, [? by Norman Penny], in *JFHS* vol. 23 (1926), 1-11, with the thoughtful guidance of E.H. Milligan. The rest is the result of my own reading of the Work itself.

NOTES TO THE CHARTS

1. Charts.

The horizontal scale is one year per division, from 1650 to 1688 inclusive. The vertical scale is 100 units per division, that is either £100 or 10 prisoners. Money is shown in outline, prisoners

solid black. Precise accuracy will not be found in the representation of small quantities because of the intention that none should be too small to show on the chart. In effect this means that no event reads as less than about £20 or two prisoners.

2. Population.

It is desirable that the extent of suffering should be related to the Quaker population in the area, and that this should be related to the county population, so that comparisons may be made. Available figures nearest to the period in question appear to be those given by Michael Watts in *The Dissenters*, OUP, 1985, table 12 'Estimates of dissenting numbers in early eighteenth-century England'. The two bars on the right-hand edge of the charts are intended to convey this information. That to the left represents the population at 100 times the vertical scale shown, that to the right the Quaker Hearers at the scale given. Thus when the two bars are of equal height Quaker Hearers account for 1% of the population. With the exception of Bristol (6.11%) this is about the top of the general level; nationally 0.73%.

So to look for example at Bedfordshire, the population is 54,760 and the Quaker Hearers 560, or 1.02%. Note that the figures for London are for the old county of London and Middlesex and therefore are higher than those for Besse's London; that Southwark is included with Surrey; that no breakdown is given for the Ridings of Yorkshire; and that insufficient information is available for Wales, none for Scotland.

3. Berkshire.

The numerous references in the account for Berkshire to the County town of Reading illustrate the particular circumstances there. The specific references to events in Reading have therefore been extracted and shown separately, with a complementary chart showing the remainder, including any events in Reading which are not so named in the text.

4. London south of the river.

Events in Southwark were included up to 1680 in the accounts for Surrey, after that date with London. All specific references from both accounts have been extracted to show events in an area roughly equivalent to Southwark Monthly Meeting.

5. London, 1664.

The number of prisoners taken here in 1664 far exceeds that for any other year or place. Many Friends were deliberately released after four or five days and re-taken on the next Sunday, so that they could quickly be brought to the penalty of banishment on their third appearance at court. Because of this short time in prison the number of prisoners is multiplied by a factor of 3 instead of the usual 10, in an attempt to retain some comparability with events elsewhere.

6. Shropshire.

Besse included Shropshire within his account for Wales. All specific references to the County have been extracted to give a minimum indication of events there, and the chart for Wales reduced accordingly.

7. Bristol.

Bristol is shown here for its Quaker association with Somerset, rather than where Besse has it in alphabetical order.

8. Yorkshire.

Besse treats Yorkshire as a single vast unit and the chart shows it so. However this leaves much to be desired in clarity of information. Separate charts are therefore given for each Riding, of all the events given a place-name. This leaves about 13 per cent of sufferings not accounted for, therefore the three Riding charts fall short of the County chart by that amount in total, though not proportionally in each year. Note that returns for 1670 and 1671 were largely combined.

9. Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire.

Even though the level of suffering was relatively light in these counties, the total absence of events after 1677 and 1666 respectively suggests a failure in the record.

10. Scotland.

Almost all the named events in Scotland are for Aberdeen, and on account of one particular city officer. The scarcity of other events casts some doubts on the reliability of the record as a whole.

11. Wales.

These quantities exclude specific references to Shropshire. (see note 6).