

HISTORY of WITHAM MONTHLY MEETING

Short Talk by Terence Lane¹, 21.11.1971

It is rather the fashion nowadays to consider history as old fashioned and to feel that the only thing which matters is the present, and of course, the future. But we are here today on account of the history of the past. This meeting house [Brentwood] is directly related to the past for it was built on part of the proceeds of the sale of the Duke Street, Chelmsford Meeting House; which we sold in 1955 for £34,000 and this enabled us to build, not only this building, but the new premises at Chelmsford and to purchase premises at Billericay. What made this fortunate state of affairs possible? Because Friends [Quakers], in 1824, built Duke Street Meeting House at the cost of approx. £4,000 and, to do this, They had to borrow a great deal of money, about half of it; and it took them many years to repay this sum.

Not only do we owe this building² to history, but the whole Quaker Movement is based on history, a little of which we shall glance at today.

Essex was a stronghold of Puritanism before the days of Friends and there are many records of instances of individual revolt in the Essex Sessions Records. For instance, in 1642, Bridget, wife of Walter Mildmay of Great Baddow, refused the Holy Sacrement and also refused to go to hear Divine Service; she was convicted. In 1644 many more were convicted for not attending Church, at Moulsham, Great Baddow and Springfield. Again in 1644, but on the question of peace, Humphrey Sargent, of Pleshey, yeoman, was accused of being one of those who mutinously and riotously assembled at Guildhall (in London) about a petition for peace, and to have spoken words against the Parliament and Common Councilmen of London. So the seeds of religious and secular unrest were sown for Quakers, and others, to harvest.

Coming down to Quaker days, James Parnell, a youth of 18, heard George Fox preach and was convinced. In June 1655 he came to Witham to the house of John Freeborn, a baymaker³, and was arrested at Coggeshall for speaking against the Priest, whilst addressing a crowd of a thousand people. Imagine such a crowd in a small place like Coggeshall. In September he was tried at Chelmsford Assizes and imprisoned in Colchester Castle, where he died, after ill treatment, about a year later. One of the earliest Quaker Martyrs. But James Parnell really belongs to Colchester and is not part of the history of Witham Monthly Meeting.

However, Quakers were making themselves felt in the area because, at Quarter Sessions held at Chelmsford on July 15th. 1656, this diatribe against Quakers was issued:

“Quarter Sessions Order Book 1651 – 1661

QUAKERS. Whereas this Court doth take notice from divers partes of this Country That many idle, seditious and evil disposed persons doe travaile and walk from County to County and from place to place propagating and spreading certain obdurate and damnable opinions and delusions derogatory to the House of God and destructive to men's soules, subverting the principles of Christianity and seducing and withdrawing many persons from their due obedience to the good Government of the Nation, and that many such persons doe in sundry partes of this

¹ Ed: Member of Chelmsford Local Meeting.

² Ed: Brentwood Meeting House, where the talk was given.

³ Ed: a maker of bays (now usually spelt baize), a type of woollen cloth.

Country frequently assemble and gather themselves together drawing unto them many other persons suiting their evil disposition soe that multitudes of such persons doe often appear in the Country to the terror of good and peacable people and disturbance of the publique peace And also divers persons minding and desiring to hinder and obstruct the due worship and service of Almighty God doe often enter into publique assemblies of the good people of the Country as well as upon the Lords Dayes as other days ----- and doe there greatly disturb such Assemblies and reproach, traduce and highly abuse with many invective railings and other approbious speeches the Ministers and dispensers of God's word and other of God's people ---- This Court doth think fitt and doth order and command that the Chief Constables of the severall hundreds in this County doe forthwith make out their precepts to the petty Constables of the severall parrishes and places within their respective hundreds Straitly charging and commanding them that they use all possible diligence to apprehend all such evill disposed persons that shall or may bee found within this County -----“

For Witham Monthly Meeting itself, the history commences in 1667. On 13.9.67 George Fox held a General Meeting at a private house at Felsted, when Quaker organisation was discussed for Essex. Monthly Meetings were set up at Colchester, Felsted, Witham and Ham, this being West and East Ham, now part of the Metropolis. For the moment we are interested in Witham Monthly Meeting. Although our Monthly Meeting has not staged any epoch making events in Quaker history – like Colchester or Bristol – there have been faithful Quaker families whose names run right through our history; such names as Marriages, Christys and Smiths.

Quakers from the first, realised the value of records so we have minute books and registers dating, in Witham Monthly Meeting from 1672, and about twenty years ago the records up to 1850 were deposited on permanent loan with the Essex Record Office and a formidable lot of books and papers they are. They are thus open to students and the public, because they throw much light on the social history of the times. There are many mentions of the Sufferings which early Friends had to meet; imprisonments for refusing military service and for taking part in meetings, before such meetings were allowed. Imprisonments for refusing to swear, to take the oath of allegiance or even for refusing to remove one's hat in court. Hat Honour was important in days gone by and Quakers just refused to take off their hats in honour of another, and when they appeared before a magistrate or judge, the first point was refusing to remove their hats and the second was refusal to take the oath and this was a cast iron method of convicting a Quaker, whatever the original charge had been. Nowadays, we fail to realise the importance of such things but they were largely important in those days. I can speak from some experience of 'hat honour'. When in 1916, we were arrested and forcibly dressed in uniform and given a military order, we refused to take off our military cap, which had been jammed on to our head. After a staring conflict of some few seconds – our hats were forcibly removed and in fact, a sergeant had to follow us around to remove our hats and put them on again when discipline demanded it, since we would not do this ourselves. This procedure was similar to the early Quaker refusal of 'hat honour'.

Another way of imprisoning Quakers was their constant refusal to pay church tithes. If they were not imprisoned, then their goods were distrained upon, and there are long lists of goods and chattels taken for tithes. Farm animals, corn and other crops, tools, drapery, ironmongery, furniture etc. etc. and since the value of the goods taken and the amount of the tithe is fully set out, these lists are valuable social items of history and help to give a picture of the times.

You all know the Quaker chestnut about the Quaker shoemaker, who refused to pay the tithe demand of the local parson. The shoemaker made out a bill for a pair of shoes which the parson had not had or even ordered. The irate cleric went to the cobbler and demanded to know why he had had the bill, since he had not had the shoes, "Well" said the shoemaker, "You send me a bill for services I have not had or wanted, so I thought I would do the same."

Distrain for tithes is almost recent, since the Tithe Act, which deals with tithes in a manner which Friends can accept, is not very old⁴.

Another aspect of the distraint for tithes which comes out in the records, is that since the bailiffs always took more than the value demanded, there was usually a balance when the goods were sold. This surplus was brought back and given to the person concerned. But Quakers refused to take it, on the grounds that the goods were stolen, and they could not handle the proceeds of stealing. This caused many headaches to the authorities – such an authority as Judge Tindal, whose statue is outside the Shire Hall in Chelmsford, especially when Quakers coupled his name with stolen goods.

When George Fox visited Chelmsford, nearly all the Friends were in prison. This was not the present gaol, but the old prison adjacent to the Stone Bridge in the High Street. It is recorded that Friends got leave and thus were able to attend the meeting with Fox.

In 1701 there were six Meetings mentioned in our Monthly Meeting, Witham, Maldon, Chelmsford, Billericay, Cressing and Fuller Street. Some years ago, Grace and I were intrigued by the Meeting at Fuller Street; so we went to see the place. Now Fuller Street is a hamlet, between Terling and Great Leighs. That there were even sufficient Quakers to form a Meeting in such a small place shows how strong Quakerism was in Essex in those days. We will again mention some of these separate Meetings later. But in addition there are mentions of Meetings at Heybridge, Steeple, Mundon, Southminster and all these before, or around 1700. Of course, not all had Meeting Houses, they probably met in a private house, farm or barn; and some years later, when non-conformists achieved some sort of recognition, there are records of houses registered as Quakers Meetings at Pleshey, Little Baddow, Moulsham, Boreham, Rainsford and Billericay. So, adding all this up, it really seems that Quakerism had made a religious impact on Essex; and you can understand the chagrin of the established church and the authorities. We must bear in mind that this was also true of Baptists and Independents, now called Congregationalists, and other sets as well.

From the first, Friends tried to live a life in accordance with the tenets as expressed by Jesus and they succeeded to a great extent; every thought and action was tested against this high ideal and we can understand how many failed. Some failed miserably and this is where Quaker Discipline came in. The Elders and Overseers, who also date from early days, tried to keep the erring Friends on the straight and narrow path, but they often failed and we read in the minutes of 'disorderly walking', a comprehensive phrase which covered these failings. Often the culprits were reasoned with and endeavours were made to reform them, but alas, human nature could not reach these heights, so disownments were necessary and were becoming common.

Unfortunately, there is an aspect of disownment of which we are not very proud today. Friends were encouraged to marry within the Society. Normally this

⁴ Ed: The Tithes Act 1836 allowed the monetary payment of tithes in place of payment in kind. It was not until the Tithes Act of 1936 that the practice was reformed.

happened and Friends married Friends. But again, Friends of both sexes fell in love outside the Society and married. This was frowned upon, and disownments for marrying out were frequent. This happened to a date almost within living memory, but then fell into disuse.

This leads us to look at Quaker marriages. From the first, Friends decided to carry out their own marriages, and as the legal marriage was only by a priest of the established church, Friends weddings were not legal, and the children consequently illegitimate. Hence Friends has to be careful and precise in making their wills, so the Advice⁵ on the making of wills was important and was regularly given out in Meeting. As Friends persisted in their own marriages, they were at last officially recognised. This is a privilege which we enjoy and which we should endeavour to keep.

Burials also caused concern to early Friends. All burials took place in the local churchyard and were carried out by the priest with the Church Burial Service. Friends could not accept this, so they had to acquire their own burial ground and often the burial ground was acquired before the building of the meeting house. And we have our burial grounds today and carry out our own burial in our own way.

Witham Monthly Meeting had a burial ground at Steeple and the first burial took place in 1695. The Steeple ground was disused for many years and has been abandoned by Friends. We still have a separate burial ground at Witham, near the church, and this is leased at a peppercorn rent to a neighbour, who has turned it into a pleasant garden. There is room there, should we wish to build a meeting house in the future. We still own a small burial ground off Baddow Road, Chelmsford, which has not been used for 150 years. It is only about 40ft by 40ft and we have dubious right of access. The graves are still there and it is used as a car park by a motor firm who own the adjacent premises. Negotiations are proceeding as to the future of this small piece of land. The Burial Ground at Duke Street, Chelmsford contained over 140 graves and when we sold the premises to the County Council we moved the remains to the Broomfield Road Burial Ground. This was done by Home Office permission. We still use the burial ground at Maldon and also Broomfield Road. Broomfield Road is a large sited and a pleasant place. There is a cottage at the entrance and this dates from about 1860. When Grace Alderman was the tenant there, Sir Alfred Nunnings, President of the R.A., saw the place and described it as a perfect piece of Victoriana. It is now let to some Friends at a reasonable rent.

In the early days there appears to be no distinction between men and women in Quaker circles and women spoke in meeting and were recorded ministers and officers. There were many prominent women, like Margaret Fell, who became the wife of George Fox, and Elizabeth Hooton, a famous Quaker preacher and many others. But about 1750, it was decided that women should have separate meetings and separate meeting places with their own elders and officers. So we have Minutes of the Women's' Meetings dating from 1752 and the women continued to meet separately until about 1900 [this referred to Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, in 1896 Yearly Meeting decided that 'in future women Friends are to be recognised as forming a constituent part of all our meetings for church affairs (business meetings) equally with their brethren'], when it fell into disuse and they met together again. But the women were restricted, they were not allowed to disown, this was done by the men, and they were told that they had to have the advice of the men in difficult decisions. There were women's' meeting houses at Duke Street and Maldon [areas within the Meeting Houses which could be screened off when separate business meetings were held] and here we might mention some Chelmsford women.

⁵ Ed: See for example the Quaker Advices & Queries No 29.

Anne Knight (1792 to 1862), was the daughter of a Chelmsford grocer and became a teacher, she wrote poetry and some books. She was an active Friend and thought that women should take their part in political life. So she wrote the earliest pamphlet on women's suffrage and had the temerity or effrontery to address the Chelmsford Council on the subject of votes for women, and also to speak on the subject on the steps of the Shire Hall in Chelmsford. She was also active in the anti-slavery campaign, which was largely sponsored by Quakers, both in this country and in America. She and Joseph Marriage were delegates from Chelmsford to the large Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in 1840. There is a large picture, about 10ft square in the National Portrait Gallery of this Convention showing most of the delegates, but Anne Knight, Amelin Opie and Lucretia Mott are at the back and not prominent in the picture. Lucretia Mott, a famous American Quaker, was also a delegate, and she was also an advocate of women's suffrage. It is thought that Anne Knight had influenced Lucretia Mott in this direction. The suffragettes featured Anne Knight recently when they celebrated some anniversary of the granting of the vote to women. Grace Alderman was also a suffragette and spent one sentence in Holloway Prison during the campaign before the first war. She attended Chelmsford Meeting for many years, but never became a member.

The records tell us about other Quaker women and Elizabeth Lumm is one of them. She was a poor Friend and cleaned the Meeting House for twenty shillings a year in 1765, she gave this up in 1782 and Widow Bridgeman carried on. Friends allowed Elizabeth Lumm a small sum per week, about 2/-, and when she became too feeble, they paid a girl 9d per week to look after her. We notice her in our story because we have a 'Treacle' Bible in the library at Chelmsford. This dates from 1565 and is the oldest Bible in the town; the Cathedral have no Bible of so early a date. The 'Treacle' Bible has the name of Elizabeth Lumm, her book, in it, but the name of the original owner is deleted. One of our minutes asks well-to-do Friends to turn out their old books and Bibles to give to poorer Friends, and this is how Elizabeth obtained a copy of the Great Bible, similar to that used by George Fox. We have rather a good collection of Quaker books, as you know, at Chelmsford.

Friends always looked after the poor and needy among them and this became especially necessary in the 'hungry forties' when many Friends became bankrupt. The minutes record many instances. Widow Thorpe had nine children and Friends allowed her a weekly sum, but this was small. When money became tight and the Monthly Meeting was in the red, the overseers found they had to reduce even this small amount. Widow Thorpe was a woman of spirit and was extremely rude to the overseer who gave her the news. She continued to abuse Friends and was eventually disowned. Being a woman of spirit, she appealed to the Quarterly Meeting against the Monthly Meeting overseers, but Quarterly Meeting upheld the decision of the Monthly Meeting. In spite of all this, Monthly Meeting sent one of the Thorpe boys to Ackworth School and paid £40 for apprenticeship for another and continued to allow the mother some money, even after she had moved out of the district.

The Chelmsford Women held a Temperance Meeting in 1874 at Coval Hall, one of the residences of the Marriage family. A Women's Temperance Society was formed which had 54 members in 1875, with a Band of Hope with 29 members. Sixty public meetings were held and a tract was sent to every doctor within five miles. They also called on 27 clergy in the district and distributed 2,100 tracts. They were very active and established a coffee house at the corner of Broomfield Road and Rainsford Road known as the Red Cow; but known by the Chelmsford locals as the 'Charlotte Arms' after Charlotte Marriage who lived at Coval Hall. The Red Cow was on her land.

Leaving the women and returning to the men and women.

Friends formed in 1818, the Chelmsford Provident Society, to encourage thrift among the working classes. Friends also took part in the running of the town and Robert Greenwood gave the stone conduit to the town and this stood in the High Street near the Shire Hall. The conduit was removed to Admirals Park and is a handsome piece of masonry. It served a useful purpose until the town had piped water. Robert Greenwood died in 1834 and left the Robert Greenwood Trust to Friends of £200. Most of us will remember Francis John Marriage who for many years was a prominent member of the Rural District Council and Chairman of the Chelmer – Blackwater Canal.

There are various references to Witham Monthly Meeting in Quaker Journals and mostly they are not flattering, they describe the meetings as 'being low' – which means spiritually low in quality. After the early enthusiasm, numbers dropped and continued small until recent times when we have increased slightly.

Now for a few words about the individual Meetings.

WITHAM

Apart from the Burial Ground which we still own, the meeting house was in Maldon Road. Plans were drawn up in 1801, but the actual building not completed until 1809. It measured 45ft by 25ft and the members were only about 26 persons, at no time does there seem to have been more than 33. By 1875 meetings were irregular and eventually abandoned altogether, although one Monthly Meeting was held there each year until 1952. Various other bodies used the building, the Salvation Army, the Peculiar People etc. for a time. The meeting house was neither of artistic or sentimental value, so Monthly Meeting decided to sell it to the Masons for £655. It was riddled with dry rot and decay and became a liability.

MALDON

The first meeting house was a small two storey building just off the High Street and was used from 1709 until 1820, when it was sold for £200 and it was burnt down a few years ago. In 1821 the present meeting house was built at a cost of £1230 and is 64ft long, 32ft wide and 18ft high. The Meeting had ups and downs and was closed for a period. It was never strong and flourishing, but it now seems to be again on the increase.

BILLERICAY

As we have already mentioned this was one of the early Meetings and the first meeting house was in the High Street dating from about 1715. It was only a small place and the members gradually declined in numbers and meetings ceased. The building was sold in 1831 and various other people had the site. It is now part of Churchill Johnson's premises. But a Meeting was restarted in hired premises until we purchased the Red House on Bell Hill in 1957 and converted it into the place we now know.

CHELMSFORD

Has had five meeting houses. The first one was at the Moulsham end of the town and was 37ft long and 22ft wide and cost £150. Of the second we know little, but the third was in Baddow Lane, now Baddow Road, and was sold within living memory, except the small burial ground, which we have already looked at. The fourth was the large Duke Street premises and Friends met there from 1824 until 1957, the building was sold to the County Council for extension of the Technical College. It was too big for us and the repairs were a liability. The sale gave us money to acquire and fit out our meeting houses at Brentwood, Billericay and Chelmsford. Before deciding on a new meeting house at Chelmsford we had a committee which toured to look at meeting houses at Watford, Ealing, New Barnet, Hammersmith and further afield at

Coventry, Leicester, Peterborough and Bedford. These visits cleared our minds, especially of what we did not want and led us to make a decision as to what we felt a meeting house should be like and this information was given in detail to Paul Mauger, our architect, with the result we can see for ourselves. The cost of the land and buildings was approximately £15,000.

BRENTWOOD

Something like thirty years ago a group of Friends commenced meeting at Brentwood and after some discussion, they decided to join up with Witham Monthly Meeting and not Ratcliff and Barking Monthly Meeting in the London area. They met in hired premises until 1950 when they looked out for a site of their own. In 1955 this land was bought for £1000 and Hubert Lidbetter, the architect of Friends House, London, was asked to design the building, which was opened in 1957. The class rooms have since been extended and the total cost is now something like £12,000.

This completes our summary of our existing meeting houses except we are now responsible for the new town of Basildon.

As you know, there was a group there which had meetings for a year or two in hired premises. Since the group preferred to belong to Witham Monthly Meeting and not a London Monthly Meeting, we asked for a change of boundary and this was agreed by Meeting for Sufferings and the whole of the new town is in our compass. We still have some money left from the sale of Duke Street and this should help towards premises in Basildon, as no doubt there will eventually be Friends in such a large town, the largest town in Essex.

This rambling account has been rather gloomy, but we hope the future will be more rosy for Friends in Witham Monthly Meeting.