

THE HISTORY OF WITHAM MONTHLY MEETING 1647 – 1953¹

The story of Quakerism in this district goes back to the days of George Fox; there is an entry in his Journal to the effect that when he visited Chelmsford all the Quakers were in prison. The records of births dates from 1647 – one of the earliest in the country – and apart from about 70 years covering the end of the last century to 1922, the records cover nearly 300 years. It is a very mixed story, very human as well as revealing the life of a small community against the background of a changing England – we realise this when we remember that we are thinking of Quakers who were alive in this district in the Civil War, as well as those who saw the industrial revolution.

In 1672, when the Witham Monthly Meeting minutes commence, Charles II was on the throne, John Milton was alive and the Acts of Toleration had not been passed. In the Essex Record Office there are volumes of minutes covering the years 1672/1850, and some later ones are still in the hands of Friends. Among records of Births, Marriages and Deaths mention is made of Quakers born in 1616 thus we are in touch with those living in the days of James I, and the year that Shakespeare died.

The first recorded Monthly Meeting was at Heybridge on the 9th. of 4th.month 1672² and contains applications for marriage; the first Monthly Meeting at Witham so far as the records go, was on the 10th. of 1st. month 1673; this again shows an application for marriage, and also records two cases of discipline taken for disorderly walking³. These earliest and scrappy minutes are revealing, as they show the great care taken by Quakers to help their members who could not manage their business affairs, and also how much trouble they took to arbitrate when problems arose, and how under no circumstances would they go to law. It was in 1682 that we read of Friends definitely appointed to bring to each Monthly Meeting all births and burials, also particulars of 'sufferings' for the refusal to pay tithes, or for any other reason. The Queries which come to us from this date read, "(1) What present the prisoners?. (2) How many discharged since last year, when, how?. (3) How many died prisoners? (4) How many meeting houses built, and what new meetings settled? (5) How many publick friends died , and when? (6) What is the state of your meetings? (7) do Friends by example and precept endeavour to train up their children, servants, etc in plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel? (8) Are you faithful against tythes? (9) Do you stand clear in our testimony against defrauding the King and his customs duties, or excise, or in dealing in goods suspected to be run? (10) How are the poor provided among you, and what care is taken for educating their offspring? (11) Do you bear a faithful testimony against bearing arms, and paying trophy money, or being in any manner concerned in the militia in privateers, letters of marque⁴, armed vessels or in dealing in prize goods as such?

During this latter 17th century period there were meetings at Heybridge, Steeple, Cressing, Witham, Baddow and Fuller Street,, but by 1706 they had changed to

¹ Ed: The typed and annotated manuscript is not signed, but may be by Terrence Lane.

² Ed: Quakers did not use the name of the day of the week or month. Sunday was referred to as the 1st day, etc; similarly January was the 1st month.

³ Ed: When Friends erred in their behaviour, the Elders and Overseers tried to keep them on the straight and narrow. They often failed, and the minutes record 'disorderly walking' – a comprehensive phase covering these failings.

⁴ Ed: A Letter of Marque and Reprisal in effect converted a private merchant vessel into a naval auxiliary

Witham, Maldon, Chelmsford, Cressing, Billericay and Fuller Street. The sites of these meeting houses is now unknown, they may have been meetings held in houses, barns or special meeting places. It does seem probable that Fuller Street meeting was held in premises belonging to one Thomas Perry, a grocer of Terling, we know this family was buried at Witham where Friends had a Burial Yard from 1692, and a Meeting House from 1693.

The minutes of this early period of Quakerism are meagre, and we have to imagine a lot, but we do see glimpses of very human failings and a people trying to overcome these failings in themselves and help less strong-minded members. A minute of 1702 is typical, "Whereas a shortness has been in some Friends in dealing with disorderly walkers it is desired by this meeting that for the future the several particulars meetings [sic] take more care."

These early years of Quakerism in our district are enlightening also when we remember that the first list of 'Quaker Correspondents' all over the country was made in 1698 – more than 20 years after our minutes commenced. It was in 1700 that we read of a Preparative Meeting held on the 5th day of 6th month "to take inspection of the affairs of the Church". In the same year we learn that 10 men Friends were appointed "Guides" to take visiting Friends from one meeting to the next, a practice which lasted until well into last century; it is a reflection on the travel problems of those earlier Quakers. In 1700 also, collections were made for building a Meeting House in Chelmsford – 5 persons gave £5.5.0, and £6.5.0 was collected from meetings in Cressing, Billericay and Fuller Street, but to expedite this work, a building committee was formed by Quarterly Meeting, and the building work on the Meeting House at Moulsham was surveyed a year later.

It was six years later, in 1706, that collections were started for a Meeting House at Maldon, which presumably was finished as we read that 10 years later the deeds of the Meeting House were lost and search had to be made for them, and after another 3 years we learn that there was a debt on the premises.

It was in 1707 that mention was made of Friends buying 4 books for the library. It is interesting to remember that in Witham Monthly Meeting library, now housed at Chelmsford, there is a book entitled "Moses His Choice" by Jeremiah Burroughs, which was owned by John Goodman in 1635 and by Elizabeth Goodman in 1663.

Ten years later, in 1717, we first read of the estate left by Deborah Etney of Ulting for poor Friends; two years later the half yearly interest on this legacy was £1.15.3, which was divided among 6 poor friends. So it is nearly 250 years since the first distribution of a legacy which is still helping Friends in our Monthly Meeting. It is a sidelight on those old Quakers, that we should learn that at the same time that this gift was made, Edward Etney was causing Friends some concern. He was apparently a great talker, and not very wise in his choice of words, several times we read that he ought to be quiet; on the occasion of his request for a certificate to go abroad, Monthly Meeting gave it to him with the remark, "he ought to be wholly silent regarding preaching".

Another minute of this period is significant, "This meeting considering the usefulness of hiring a room for Friends in the gaol at so much per annum. Conclude to propose to Quarterly Meeting." This gaol was the old one near the stone bridge in Chelmsford High Street, and local Friends suffered much at the hands of the gaoler there. Friends were poor at this time, or finding hardship in meeting commitments, as we learn that it was necessary to collect 6 times as much money before the next Monthly Meeting to get out of debt. The money was not forthcoming! Yet at the end of the 17th century all meetings had reported having money in hand. (Why had the financial position changed in 20 years?)

At the beginning of the 18th century the moral standard of some Friends was low; there is a lengthy minute regarding one Thomas Turner which ends "We desire the Lord may give him repentance and that he may witness reconciliation with him, and until these manifest tokens be demonstrated and seen by him, we do deny him to be one of us". Three years later we find that he gave 6d to Monthly Meeting with the result "From this meeting was returned 6d which Thomas Turner laid down to the collection, this meeting not having freedom to receive it". What would our modern treasurers say to this action on the part of Friends? The action is more significant when we read that Billericay and Cressing were 8 months behind with their collections.

In 1730 we read that on the 1st of 4th month Monthly Meeting was held in Maldon at 6am! In February five years later report was made that no Friends from Chelmsford attended Monthly Meeting at Maldon. One wonders if it was indifference or weather conditions which kept Friends away?

The year 1752 saw several interesting events. There were the 13 directions for Overseers in carrying out their duties; these show that a very careful watch was kept over the whole conduct of Friends, not only in their personal lives but in business affairs and their relationship with the State. Overseers also had laid upon them the responsibility of preparing all those who proposed to marry. A Quaker wedding in those days meant months of preparation and examination.

It may have been a direct outcome of this that the Women's Monthly Meeting was set up that year, and the report of the Committee set up to consider this action is interesting in spite of very ponderous language, and sense of superiority on the part of men Friends. The 4th paragraph of the report read "In respect to dealing with disorderly persons of their own sex, they are to proceed as the men do in such cases, except in the issue, to wit, they must not give forth, nor even draw up papers of denial, nor receive papers of acknowledgement without the advice and assistance of the men, and whatever may come before them which they may apprehend too weighty for them they have the right at any time to ask assistance of the men".

1752 was rather late for Women's Meetings to be established, but one does speculate on the feelings of those 4 women from Witham and 2 from Chelmsford who met on the 11th of 12th month, with Ann Playle as Clerk. Ann Playle was the wife of Samuel Playle a farmer of Chipping Hill, Witham, she died in 1777 at the age of 68, and her husband who gave the legacy to Witham meeting lived to the age of 90, and died in 1804. The minutes record that Ann Playle held "money in her hand, and laid it down", and it is evident from the beginning, the women were very active in giving relief to the poor members, as well as in dealing with faulty members of their own sex and carefully considering replies to Quarterly Meeting queries which one or more of their number was deputed to carry in writing to that meeting. A separate Womens Monthly Meeting was held within living memory at Chelmsford.

The story of one poor friend comes to us from the minutes of the Women's Monthly Meeting and ranges over 30 years. In 1732, William Meade gave Stephen Lumb a copy of Margaret Fell printed in 1710 which is still in our Monthly Meeting library. Stephen's son, John married and lived in Moulsham, and had a daughter, Elizabeth, so she was a third generation Quaker. This Elizabeth, cleaned Chelmsford Meeting House for about 10 years, being paid 20s per year for doing so! In 1768 Quarterly Meeting ordered Witham Monthly Meeting to pay her 7s per week including firing, but they considered it too much and refused to pay; fifteen years later women friends gave her a bed and blanket which cost £1.5., and a year later arranged for another poor Friend to board her for 6d per week. At odd times Friends gave her clothing, and in 1791 we read that they gave her clothes belonging to another poor Friend who had just died. In 1786 it was decided to give Bibles and Friends books to poor

Friends, and Elizabeth Lumb got the 'Treacle Bible' which is in our library still. When she was evidently getting feeble in 1793 a girl was engaged to wait on her for 9d per week; she died in 1795 at the age of 70.

The Yearly Meeting Minutes sent to Quarterly Meetings have been preserved for us, they come from the latter part of the 18th century. Local Friends copied these minutes by hand, and then took them to read to Friends in their own homes, so there was no excuse for non-attending Friends to plead ignorance at the guidance of Yearly Meeting for their personal conduct. In these minutes we find that in 1754 Yearly Meeting sent the marriage declaration as we still know it to Quarterly Meetings as an official ruling; there are warnings against the observance of days appointed by the government for feasts and rejoicing nights; against joining the militia or hiring of substitutes "as contrary to the reign of the Prince of Peace". There is a caution to watch over children's reading, and against novel reading for adults. Ornate monuments over the dead are forbidden, and warnings against land enclosures for the payment of priests maintenance are significant. Warnings against the Slave Trade and 'run goods also tend to show the problems which friends at the end of the 18th century felt they had to face. We may feel that they did not matter, but there was a deep reason for them when one remembers the insistence on all aspects of Friends daily life must be lived "in the light".

Taking stock of Witham Monthly Meeting at the end of the 18th century shows that the meetings were weak; of the original group only Witham, Maldon and Chelmsford remained, and there was a time when both Witham and Maldon were closed, concern was felt because there were no convincements and membership was declining – the number of Friends were Witham 26, Maldon 30, Chelmsford 120. Chelmsford Friends were meeting twice on Sundays, at 10a.m. and 1 p.m. in winter and 10a.m. and 2 p.m. in summer. Some Friends were paying tythes, others were either serving in the militia or hiring substitutes, and small pox was in the district.

Until this time members of the Monthly Meeting had essentially been a farming community, but they now seemed to be reaching out to other occupations and often, through ignorance, failing. It was at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century that Friends appear to have had building mania. In 1790 they talked of building a new meeting house in Chelmsford on a piece of ground attached to the Grave Yard; this was completed two years later at a cost of £497.19.10. It was at this time we first read of Quarterly Meeting being held at Chelmsford. Also, much is written about a chest in the Meeting House where the various deeds were kept, this proved damp and all the records had to be dried and aired; then the safe was moved to a drier place.

A Monthly Meeting benefactor who we still remember died about this time – Stephen Levitt who had been a minister for 50 years, died in 1798 at the age of 86, his body was buried in the Baddow Lane Grave Yard.

It was in 1800 that land was purchased in Witham for a new Meeting House, but it was several years before the money could be raised to erect a building; however it was opened in 1809, and this year (1953) we sold it. We speculate about those 26 Friends who first met in that Meeting House – they must have had great faith.

In 1802, only ten years after the erection of the Chelmsford Meeting House that we find Chelmsford Friends purchasing another site for a Meeting House. Money was not forthcoming for this building project, and we read that in the following year Friends borrowed £72.4. from Stephen Levitt's legacy to pay Monthly Meeting debts. The projected Meeting House was estimated to cost £1500, and it was opened in 1807. Where did the money come from?

Friends finances at this period are a mystery. The Monthly Meeting raised about £50 in 1806 to civilise the Indian Natives! They owned a cottage at the rear of Witham Meeting House, which was let for £5.10 per year, and the repairs for the same year were £5.6.! There was no Rent Restriction Act in those days. Another side-line of the early 19th century Friends is that goods taken from them for non-payment of tithes and church-rate in 1813 mounted to £2,075.11.9, and two years later rose to £2,750.18.1. Also during this period there was great hardship amongst Friends at Witham and Monthly Meeting gave them considerable help. (In current history, the Napoleonic wars loomed large).

The building fever had not abated. Maldon Friends bought ground in 1819 and got an estimate for building at a cost of £1230. They raised all the money except for £100 and had in mind a Friend who would advance this; their old Meeting House was sold for £200. the present Meeting House was in use in 1821 (1824?)

It was in 1820 that Elizabeth Fry and her husband visited the Monthly Meeting as well as the Quarterly Meeting; it was the Baddow Lane Meeting House that they knew. It may have been as a result of their visit that gave local Friends a keen concern over the slave trade.

Once again, only 14 years after the second Baddow Lane Meeting House had been built Chelmsford Friends were considering yet another site and the land for this present Meeting House was purchased in 1821. The estimated cost of building was £2,500, but accounts dated 1826 show that the cost was £3,922.11.7 and in 1830, four years after completion there was an undischarged debt of £1,133.15.1 which twenty years later was only reduced to £520! There is no available record to show how the debt was cleared.

There are two Chelmsford Friends who have place as benefactors to the Monthly Meeting at this period – Robert Greenwood and his wife Susannah. Robert acted as Registrar to the Monthly Meeting for many years, and he wrote many of the testimonials during that time – he died in 1834, so he actually attended meetings in this building. He was also a ‘public Friend’, as he gave Chelmsford the Conduit which used to stand at the top of the High Street, but is now a relic in Admirals Park.

So for well over a century Witham Monthly Meeting has owned the properties we know, and enjoyed the use of our various trusts. The story of the last 160 years would have shocked the earliest Quakers – a declining membership, lack of convincements and above all, debts. In 1839 the answers carried to Quarterly Meeting to the various queries read “We fear there is amongst us but little growth in the Truth, one exception as to justice, and two or three exceptions as to want of punctuality. Friends appear to be just in their dealings and punctual in fulfilling their engagements. With a little exception as regards field sports, two cases of excess drinking and two of unnecessary frequenting of public houses which appear to be under care, we believe Friends avoid vain sports and places of diversion, gaming, the unnecessary frequenting of taverns and other public houses. No Friend has a claim to receive tithes”.

We have said that Robert Greenwood could claim to be a ‘public Friend’, and there were evidently others working about this time, as we know that in 1818 Friends started the Provident Society of Chelmsford and its vicinity. The bounds of this society was to extend 4 miles around the Shire Hall. (It lasted for years and had offices in Duke Street)

It was in 1822 that Robert Marriage was concerned to erect a building on our present grounds to be used as a school room. This school lasted for twenty years, and it was in 1841 that Robert Marriage reported to Monthly Meeting that the school was no longer required and they might care to purchase the building. This they did for £45,

but poor Friends refused to occupy the cottages made from the school. These premises were a nuisance to the Monthly Meeting for years, but modern housing conditions have made the cottages much sought after by non-Friends.

There is one story covering a number of years, which I always think of as 'The Importunate Widow'. Sarah Thorpe was the widow of a carpenter, during her married life and between the years 1824 – 1836 she had 9 children – the husband apparently dying about the time of the birth of the last child. It was a time of great hardship all over England the hungry forties were coming near – Witham Friends found that the money they had available for relief was low, so in the first year of Sarah's widowhood they had to reduce the grants to poor Friends from 18s, to a bushel of flour and 1s 6d. When this gift was given to her Sarah roundly abused the Overseer. In fact she was so abusive that two months later the Monthly Meeting disowned her for slandering an Overseer, and for begging as well as for threatening Friends. At the same time we read that the Monthly Meeting sent her eldest boy to Ackworth and later apprenticed him. She then wrote to Monthly Meeting saying that she was taking her case to Quarterly Meeting, and when the matter came before 12 members of the Quarterly Meeting, the Monthly Meeting decision to disown her was upheld. Witham Monthly Meeting still paid her 8s per week and gave her 3 pecks of flour. In the following year Friends apprenticed another of her sons to a tinman in Wandsworth for £40. In 1841 he family cost the Monthly Meeting £82.17.4, and even when she removed to Sheffield she remained a charge on the Monthly Meeting until her death, and then Witham Monthly Meeting paid for her burial.

The 1840s hit the Friends in the Monthly Meeting badly, we read that in 1841 there was a deficit of £101.16.4 in Monthly Meeting funds, and apart from the Thorpes, relief to the poor amounted to £139.15.11. During this decade there were many disownments for debt. Friends had tended to leave farming for trade or work that they did not understand and failed, hence the disownment and hardship. Friends were evidently very concerned, as the Apprentice Fund started at this time; also from the library report it is evident that Friends were reading and thinking. Numbers were steadily declining, in 1834 there were 325 members in the Monthly Meeting but there were only 288 six years later. Distraints for the non-payment of tithes was still high, being £1537.1.4 as late as 1850.

In 1849 we learn that Samuel Playle's legacy was used to build a cottage in the burial ground at Chipping Hill – that cottage is one of our modern problems.

Unfortunately the Monthly Meeting Minute Books after 1850 are not available [signed pencil note on manuscript dated 1986: not now true] and we can only pick up the story from definite records again from 1922. There are however facts known from other sources about the intervening 70 years. We have some very interesting bills relating to the Broomfield Road, Chelmsford burial ground all dated 1856. There is also a list of trees, with prices, that were planted.

Anne Knight of Quiet House Chelmsford, was a Friend who died in 1862 at the age of 70; she had been if not the actual pioneer, a very early advocate, of votes for all women over 21 who had freehold property valued at over 40s per year. We have a record of her passionate plea for this course taking place in the Council Room at Chelmsford in 1852. She was a public Friend, spending much time in London and in France; she was a keen advocate for wider education.

Women were certainly taking a more active part in public life; there is a minute book of the Friends Ladies temperance Society, started in 1874 with the last minutes dated 1885. These women were very active in Chelmsford, bearding doctors as well as drunkards. They were responsible for changing an old tavern in Broomfield Road into a coffee house known as 'the Red Cow', and this functioned within living memory.

When we pick up the minutes again in 1922, changes had taken place – the membership of Monthly Meeting had dropped to 137, less than half the number of the last record of 70 years earlier. Activities appear to be small, but Friends contributed towards relief of a famine in Russia. During the 1920's the Elders and Overseers sent reports to Monthly Meeting that they had not been able to meet; the burial notes far outweighed the births, and application for membership were very rare. It would seem to be a very difficult period for Quaker life in this district, yet visiting Friends did come and give stimulating addresses on current affairs. For this low ebb the Monthly Meeting has gradually risen, spiritual life is, we believe, flowing into our several meetings, and as evidence of it, when our last available minute book closes in 1940 – a year of world suffering, of war and intense bombing – we find that Billericay Meeting has opened again, and was asking to be considered an Allowed Meeting; in the Brentwood area Friends were getting together. Though Witham meeting had ceased to gather regularly since about 1875, and was now used by non-Friends, yet there were definitely signs of revival in Chelmsford and Maldon.

We believe that the revival of Quakerism, first showing in the dark war years is continuing. We recognise that many changes have taken place during the years of Quaker history in this district, we realise that different generations have felt that the vital problems they had to face were superficially different, but surely there has been an underlying urge to live 'in the light'.

One is struck with the lessening of the authority of Quarterly Meeting over the affairs of the several Monthly Meetings. Would any modern Friend appeal to Quarterly Meeting if they felt that the local meeting had treated them unjustly? It is seldom indeed that modern Friends raise any matters when the Clerk asks "Is there any other business?". Yet to raise matters which help the spiritual growth of Friends should be the concern of each member.

Another striking thought emerges, the changing value of money through the centuries – Elizabeth Limb boarded for 6d per week yet she was apparently satisfied. The various legacies made to the Monthly Meeting were generous in their day, and no doubt really gave relief to poor Friends. Times have so changed that our Overseers find it difficult to trace poor friends who need even the small interests these Trusts now represent.

Then there is the emergence of women as responsible members of the Society of Friends – one does wonder what Anne Playle and the other women Friends who sat in the first Women's Monthly Meeting at Witham would have said when told that a woman was Clerk of London Yearly Meeting – and a convinced Friend at that!

Yes, a new aspect of Quakerism is emerging. We are convinced that the world needs to listen in silence for the guidance of God, it still rests with each of us to give an example of living in the light of that guidance.