

# A brief historical and contemporary account of Quakers in the Wallingford area



The early eighteenth century Meeting House as seen when approached through the passageway from the street.

## **Quaker Meetings, Sundays, 10.30 am start.**

13 Castle Street, WALLINGFORD, Oxfordshire. OX10 8DL

Telephone: (01491) 837835

Email: [wallingfordinfo@midthamesquakers.org.uk](mailto:wallingfordinfo@midthamesquakers.org.uk)

Websites: [www.midthamesquakers.org.uk](http://www.midthamesquakers.org.uk) and [www.quaker.org.uk](http://www.quaker.org.uk)

Many a visitor and resident of Wallingford has seen the “Quaker Meeting House” sign on Castle Street, walked up the drive-way, and peered through the window of number 13, realising that this is a home and not a place of worship. The word “Quaker”, a former term of derision, is increasingly replacing the word “Friend” as it is more identifiable to non-Quakers. The 18<sup>th</sup> c. Meeting House is in fact through two sets of double doors and across a court-yard, behind the Victorian house which is the Warden’s Cottage. The land, tenement and out-buildings of no. 13 was purchased from Chadderton Seymore in 1722 with £13 6c 8d apiece from John Perry (physician), Thomas Thorpe (salesman), and William Gunn (clockmaker). It appears that these three local Quakers had also paid John Taylor of Didcot £120 that was owed on the property on mortgage, and later the superior Quarterly Meeting appointed three of its members to hold the lease. Although this was the first “settled” Meeting in the Town, Quakers had lived here and worshipped at Warborough, where there was a Meeting House until the early 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Early members of this radical apocalyptic sect, began by George Fox in the 1650’s, often found themselves at odds with society. The threat of hostility is why the Meeting House was built away from the street frontage, and the keyless exit-only backdoor served as an emergency escape. In 1667, Wallingford Friend William Dobson had £40 worth of cattle taken from him and sold as a consequence of refusing to pay the Tithe to the Established Church. He also earned himself a penalty for not doing “hat honour”, i.e. doffing his hat as a sign of respect to the magistrate, which contradicted Quaker teaching on equality among God’s people. £11 of clothing was taken from him and sold at the George Inn in 1668, along with more cattle, for repeat offences. Three Quakers, including the mystic Isaac Pennington, were brought before the Quarter Sessions here in 1671 for refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance “severall times”; this unwillingness to take oaths remains to this day (Matt. 5:34). Quakers locally joined with others from the region in speaking with their MP’s about religious persecution in 1711, and in 1722 some attended the Wallingford Assizes to witness and report on the mistreatment of Friends.

It was in 1724 that the Meeting House was built in characteristic simple style and a Licence granted for public worship. Our places of worship have never been regarded as holy-ground, as the focus has always been the inward experience, a spirituality and covenant written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33). The original Minister’s gallery remains, i.e. a platform and sounding board for use by those who have a recognised gift of delivering prophecy, comfort and counsel within the Meetings for Worship; this is no longer needed due to assistance from a hearing-loop. It continues to this day that all are free to minister regardless of gender, social status,

level of education, etc. Individuals are supported in their ministry by the Elders who continue to sit on the bench in front of the Minister's gallery. They also ensure the "right ordering" of Meeting for Worship, and of our Business Meetings which are conducted in the spirit of Worship.

The benches are from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. and originally faced the Ministers gallery, but now all face inward, with a table in the centre. Tables with Bibles and our book of Faith and Practice, and sometime flowers, appeared in Meeting Houses in the 1930's. Visitors have asked if this is the "Lord's table" where Holy Communion is celebrated, which has never been the case. Early Quakers believed that the Last Supper was to be commemorated until "the Lord comes" again (1Cor. 11:26), and as the Lord was now among them this was unnecessary. There is no font to be found in Quaker Meeting Houses, though in the USA some did introduce "water Baptism", as early Quakers strived for the "Spiritual" Baptism of Christ and not the outward ritual carried out by John (Mat. 3:11).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> c., the large part of the Meeting's finances were spent on the relief of poor Friends. Another frequent expenditure was contributions towards the cost of Friend's horses, which may reflect the itinerant nature of Quaker Ministry. Some were "released" from the Meetings to spend long periods traveling in the Ministry, such as Anne Crowley of Shillingford who covered 4000miles with her female companion over two-years. Wallingford and Warborough received some well-known traveling ministers, e.g. Thomas Shillitoe (1754-1836), who found Quaker religion here "at a very low ebb", i.e. poor conduct out-side of Meeting and "roving" minds within. In 1832, the American Friend John Wilbur visited and carried with him a concern over Evangelical Christian influences within the Society.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> c. religious tolerance increased, Quakers stepped out from their protective "hedge", and went from what could be described as a "sect" to a more mainstream Christian denomination. Meeting for Worship discontinued in Wallingford 1852 and proposals to demolish the Meeting House were resisted at Quarterly Meeting by a member of the Gillett family, the Banbury bankers. In 1883 the building was used as a place of worship by the Plymouth Brethren, and it remains common for other faith communities to use our Meeting Houses. In 1916 the building was used as a Temperance Hall, which is in sympathy with the Quaker way of life, alcohol still not being permitted in most Meeting Houses.

John Phelps, a tenant of the cottage in the 1920's, grew vegetables in the garden and stored and sold them in the Meeting House which was essentially a green-grocers shop. Wallingford Girl Guides were hiring the building in 1924 and

around this time two Quakers, Reuben and Alma Strevens who had moved to St John's Green, restarted the worshipping community. By 1959 Wallingford had an "Allowed Meeting", i.e. one that did not conduct its own business, which met on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of the month, and consisted of eighteen Friends. This included Dorothy Glaister whose husband founded the social experimental community at Brazier's Park. She regarded herself as an atheist and was part of emerging generation of Quakers open to diverse beliefs, yet maintained a common worship practice and commitment to social action. In 1964 £1000 of renovations were carried out on the Meeting House, £10,000 spent in 1983, and in 1999 a window lintel was replaced along with plasterwork and lime-wash. During the last work Friends held Meeting for Worship in part of the Methodist Church in Wallingford, and in 2016 the court-yard was redesigned.

Matthew Callow

### **A little about contemporary Quakers:**

A Quaker Meeting is based upon silence, in which any or none may be inspired to speak, often Meetings are largely silent. There is no programme or leader, they last about an hour. On Sundays, about twenty people meet in Wallingford for such a Quaker Meeting, alongside facilities for children. Refreshments are available following the Meeting and we have other learning and social events.

Quakers hope to live lives that testify to that which is sacred in all people and the whole of creation, as well as to peace, equality, simplicity and integrity. We do this by listening to the promptings of love and truth in our own hearts, tenderly helping one another and through our corporate discernment processes.

A Quaker Meeting is both an experience of intense, expectant listening and a space for gentle, waiting stillness. The silence is not so much for individually reflective thinking or reading or about achieving a certain state of mind, such as might take place in a meditation group. It is more the active silence of a community gathered and connected together in a shared hope of inspiration and gradual transformation. Each person present affects the depth of the Meeting.

Anyone can come to a Quaker Meeting; you simply turn up, find a seat, settle yourself and let the experiment begin!

Daniel Hughes

*'True silence is the rest of the mind; and is to the spirit, what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.'* William Penn (1644-1718). *'Be patterns, be examples... walk cheerfully over the world...'* George Fox (1624-1691).