The Quaker Meeting House in York 1673 – 2009

The Society of Friends, their adherents usually known as Quakers, was born in the religious confusion and turmoil of the English Civil War. Late in 1651 George Fox, the founder of the faith, visited York where he was roughly handled and forcibly thrown out of York Minster when he delivered his own religious message after the conclusion of the sermon by the appointed priest. The third quarter of the seventeenth century was a difficult period for the new faith and many Quakers were imprisoned in York Castle or otherwise savagely persecuted. Some died and others were heavily fined or incarcerated for lengthy periods in brutal conditions.

Well before 1700, however, Quakers had come through their initial trial by ordeal, the only denomination born in the crucible of civil war which has survived to our own day. They were now ready to build their own religious establishments or meeting houses as they were and still are called. (The usage was then common among Protestant dissenters but Quakers continued to use the term after other sects adopted 'chapel'. It suited Friends, among whom plain speech, plain dress, plain buildings, a simple but deeply held faith were distinguishing characteristics.) It has been suggested that as Quakers moved from the era of persecution into a quieter period, though one by no means devoid of legal challenges, they may have lost some of their original fire, enthusiasm and indeed membership. It should also be pointed out that the religion of the Society of Friends which we know today is in certain important respects different from that of our founding parents, though silent worship is still the rule and the pre-eminence of the individual conscience remains paramount.

The earliest surviving meeting house, in Hertford, dates from 1670, well before the Act of Toleration in 1689 made the construction of religious buildings for dissenters other than hazardous. In the north of England a number of meeting houses were constructed in the 1670s; the oldest survivor is Brigflatts, near Sedbergh, which dates from 1675. Both Hertford and Brigflatts remain in proud and active use for their original purpose.

York cannot boast any building of the same age, but it was in 1673 that its first meeting house was planned. It was completed the following year. Edward Nightingale lived in Far Water Lane, now Friargate, and it was he, as Stephen Allott tells us, who took a 99-year lease on existing property adjoining his own home. The property was converted into a Quaker meeting house, divided into separate sections for business meetings of men and women, at a cost of about £225, a sum raised by subscription. By 1681 a porch, a gallery and a stable were added for a further £129. Thus organised Friends' worship began in this quarter of York and has continued in the same area ever since. Upon the death of Edward Nightingale in 1696 Friends purchased the property for £195, of which £100 was paid by York (later Yorkshire) Quarterly Meeting. This body, which bore Quaker administrative responsibility for the whole county, held its sessions in the York meeting house which was in the words of its historian Pearson Thistlethwaite, 'in every sense [its] home and headquarters'. Indeed, the building was the property of the quarterly meeting until 1912, when it was transferred to the ownership of York Preparative (local) Meeting, which had long shared the financial burden of building and maintenance.

Problems arose because the voices of Friends holding business meetings in one room could be heard in another, 'a difficulty familiar to Friends elsewhere', David Butler points out. (Similar problems have been experienced in later times, though with the eventual introduction of mixed-sex business meetings extraneous noise came from without rather than within meeting

houses themselves.). The number of Friends grew, and expansion in a different part of the city was proposed in the early eighteenth century. It was finally decided, however, to build additional accommodation adjacent to the original site. The cost was £650, to which sum monthly meetings (sub-divisions of the quarterly meeting) in Yorkshire contributed generously. The new building, which seated an estimated 800 to 1,000 people, was registered as a place of worship in July 1718.

It survived with little change for a relatively lengthy period. In 1743 a private passage was provided for Friends between Castlegate and the meeting house. A new gallery was provided in 1768 and a room constructed for the archives in the same year. The latter room was rebuilt in 1797. In 1785 the women's business meeting room was enlarged and the following year the walls and ceiling were replastered. Heating was also improved but in essentials the meeting house reconstructed in the early eighteenth century lasted for a hundred years.

It was agreed in 1816 that the large meeting room (or house) should be rebuilt, additional land being purchased by the quarterly meeting for the purpose. The new property, completed in 1817, faced Far Water Lane (Friargate) but was reached only by the private passage from Castlegate. The main meeting room now accommodated 1,200 people at a cost of £3,274. According to William Alexander, a printer and bookseller who was a close neighbour of the meeting house, the previous accommodation had been 49 feet long and 20 feet high The new building was fifteen feet longer than its predecessor and seven feet higher. A portico was a feature, apparently an early example in a Quaker meeting house. The new height Alexander judged 'very sufficient in every respect'. Other rooms were also built, including a library, committee room , toilets and strong room. Alexander termed the old meeting house gloomy; in some parts candles did little more than 'render darkness visible'. The new one, on the other hand, was 'agreeably lightsome' and indeed he felt that 'the room might have done with less light'. One hundred and fifty years later standards had changed, and what had been considered light and attractive in his day was in its turn found gloomy.

Later changes retained the seating capacity of the main meeting room. Its large size was useful as the pupils and staff of the two York Quaker schools, Bootham and The Mount, though relatively small until recently, attended Sunday worship. Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting continued to meet in York and during the second world war the large amount of accommodation available was part of the reason why London Yearly Meeting, the largely attended annual meeting which made legislative decisions for the whole body of British Friends, could twice be held in the relative safety of York. It should also be remembered that the number of worshippers was greater than today. Although the total number of British Quakers did not decline sharply in the twentieth century their distribution has clearly changed. On each Sunday morning in October 1904 about 400 worshippers, the large majority of them adults, attended Sunday morning meeting, and well over 200, again predominantly adults, were present on Sunday evenings. This was an increase of over 40 per cent since the national religious census in March 1851, in which the capacity of the meeting house was stated to be one thousand. By October 1914, with increased numbers of children, attendance rose again, by over fifty per cent. At the time of writing there is no Sunday evening meeting and the average attendance at the main Sunday morning meeting does not exceed 100 except on special occasions.

In 1884 additions were made by the City of York to the street pattern of the city. Clifford Street was constructed and Friends were offered, and agreed to buy, a piece of land behind the new road to extend their site. The cost was £475. They also bought more land and the

property was rebuilt. The entrance was now on Clifford Street, and the meeting took the name of the street. The interior of the large meeting house largely remained as it had been in 1817 but the smaller one was demolished and rebuilt. Further rooms were provided, among them a library, committee rooms and a school room. The new building was opened in 1885 at a cost of over £5,000. It was planned that traffic noise from the busy new Clifford Street would cause as little disturbance to worshippers as possible given its site.

The meeting was not, however, to live in its reconstructed premises happily ever after. David Butler writes that there was heavy expense on heating and ventilating the meeting house. Pearson Thistlethwaite commented at the end of the 1970s that York (and Leeds) Friends were 'groaning under the burden of over-large, or inconvenient, decaying premises which cost a great deal to heat and run'. By this time most of the pupils of the two York Quaker schools were no longer regularly attending meeting on Sunday mornings and reconstruction was on the way. In 1975 a builder's report was reassuring but the respite was temporary. Reconstruction was regarded by influential members as a better option than repair. The expensive, decaying building did not have the appeal to its members that a medieval building would have possessed and there was no sustained campaign to save it as there might have been in later, more conservation-conscious years.

As early as 1974 Clifford Street meeting's property and finance committee had begun to explore whether a new meeting house should be built and the following year the local press carried stories about the possible closure of the old building. Plans gradually evolved. It was decided to remain on the Clifford Street site and to plan a new meeting house to accommodate nearly 200 people. In 1977 a report by structural engineers concluded that the building was unsafe and cracks appeared or became obvious to visitors. Rebuilding suddenly became urgent and the consent of the local authority to the demolition of this listed property was granted in August 1977.

A number of Clifford Street Friends were appointed as a Development Group and nearly £150,000 was raised by an appeal and the sale of such of the building and furnishings of the old meeting house as had now become expendable. The cost of demolition was borne by the sale of property on Castlegate which had been purchased in the early twentieth century, and the surplus raised enabled grants to be made to deserving groups in ensuing decades. The new, more compact meeting house, a modernised version of the existing small meeting house, was finally opened in May 1981 in the presence of the Lord Mayor of York and over 200 other people who strained the capacity of the new premises.. The architect was Denis Mason Jones of Leeds. A new foyer, described in the appeal leaflet as 'a light, modern welcoming Hall' was provided. Members generally felt that the new meeting house was 'much lighter' and 'more friendly' as one commented. The headmaster of Bootham School expressed publicly his pleasure that 'dreary old Clifford Street Meeting House has gone'. A kitchen was instituted and there was a smaller library as well as new committee rooms and toilets. The provision of tea and coffee on a regular basis after meeting for worship was an important and welcome innovation.

The building was glass fronted and care was taken to incorporate elements of the old meeting house. Some of the cast iron columns of 1817 supporting the gallery of the large meeting house were placed outside where they make a significant impact on the visitor. The new entrance was on Friargate and the former Clifford Street meeting was now known as Friargate meeting. The street which a local newspaper said had previously been a 'dark and neglected alley' had now become 'a worthy addition to our City'. A room for archives and storage was

provided, and older records of preparative, monthly and quarterly meetings (now local and area meetings and 'Quakers in Yorkshire') were placed in the sympathetic custody of Special Collections at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. The frontage facing Clifford Street which had been sold can still be seen. One imagines that few passers-by know that they are looking at the former entrance of a Quaker meeting house. The basement was sufficiently extensive to provide accommodation for a peace centre, later replaced by the York branch of the University of the Third Age. Accommodation for the wardens and their family, previously uncomfortably perched at the top of the Clifford Street building, was provided in the form of a modern house.

There have been no major changes to the structure in the nearly thirty years since it was rebuilt. Worshippers quickly became accustomed to the new premises and almost without exception approved them. Today York Friends are proud of their record of continuous worship on the same site for well over three hundred years. The meeting house may still seem large to some who must rely on modern technology to hear those who speak in meeting, but Friargate meeting has to accommodate the largest membership of any British local Quaker meeting plus many 'attenders' who are regularly present but not in membership. 'Britain's largest Quaker meeting' is not a title to be surrendered lightly. It is difficult to cater for both large numbers and intimacy, a matter of concern to York Friends who are anxious that everyone should feel welcome among them. The foyer and new rooms are useful for meetings, exhibitions and socialising, the site remains central and the building is constantly rented for use by non-Quaker groups. The future will bring more changes. It is to be hoped and expected that York Friends will meet new challenges with the same cheerful determination to resolve them as in the past.

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<u>Further reading</u>

Alexander, William, *Observations on the Constructions and Fitting Up of Meeting Houses including one lately Erected ib the City of York …* (York, 1820)

Allott, Stephen, *Friends in York: the Quaker story in the life of a meeting* (York, 1978)

Butler, David, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain,* vol. 2 (London, 1999)

Rubinstein, David, *Faithful to Ourselves and the Outside World: York Quakers during the twentieth century* (York, 2001)

Thistlethwaite, Pearson, *Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting of the Society of Friends 1665-1966* (Harrogate, 1979)