THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN HAVERING

Introduction:

I was privileged to wander over the old Neave Estate before the Greater London Council bought the land to build the Harold Hill Estate. The Neaves had merged the old Manors of Dagenhams and Goosehays, a very pleasant area of rolling countryside rising up to Noak Hill, on to Pyrgo Park, then to Havering Village and Bedfords Park. In earlier times much of this had been the preserve of royally.

It was not difficult to see why in the seventeenth century the area was sought after by people wishing to escape the sounds and smells of London. In 1665 Samuel Pepys came to 'Dagenhams' to escape from the plague. He declared that it was 'the most noble and pretty house', for its size, that he had ever seen!

In 1684, a Linen Draper, William Mead, bought the manor of Goosehays. His wife was born Sarah Fell, the daughter of Margaret Fell and Judge Thomas Fell of Swarthmoor Hall in Cumbria. When the good Judge died, Margaret had married George Fox.

So in one 'fell' swoop Havering acquired its first recorded Quakers. George Fox was the founder of the movement,Margaret Fell one of his first converts. George Fox was pleased to come and stay at Goosehays in his last few years. By then he was a man broken by eight imprisonments and many beatings.

His presence at Goosehays must have attracted many well known names among the Society - not least the man who grew up at Wanstead, and went to Chigwell School, William Penn.

He was a close associate of William Mead, and a good friend of George Fox. In his youth William was a good athlete, who enjoyed running great distances. He may well have run across Hainault Forest and into Havering, so he could have known the area well.

<u>The Society of Friends - the origins</u> :

Who were these people who became called Quakers? The ferment of religion in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, both in Europe and the British Isles, saw many sects rise, most of them to fall. In

Britain there were many strands of Puritanism, but Quakers were not Puritans. They were to be persecuted by Puritans, the Establish Church, and the State.

The Quakers arose because of the religious differences of the time. There were two main strains of Puritanism: those who would 'purify' the Church of England from within, and those who would overthrow it and start again. The larger number was operating within the Established Church. They wished to 'purify' it of all 'popish tendencies' and that included ridding the Church of the hierarchy of Bishops and Archbishops.

In the Parish of Fenny Drayton in Leicestershire we find an example of what was happening. Anthony Nutter became rector there in 1582. In 1590, he was imprisoned as one of the leaders of the Elizabethan Presbyterian Movement, and in 1605 deprived of his living for failure to conform to the Book of Common Prayer. A number of his Parishioners were punished and even excommunicated for Puritan leanings. George Fox's father was a Churchwarden at this Parish Church, and knew many of those affected.

George Fox was born in Fenny Drayton in 1624. The village was in no backwater - it is situated close to Watling Street (now the A5) which had become the main road to Ireland. Naseby is about twenty miles away.

It is little wonder then, that George Fox grew up disturbed by the apparent contradictions and disagreements amongst those who professed to follow Jesus Christ.

He became apprenticed to a Shoemaker who dealt in skins and hides. This meant that he had to travel to become adept in the ways of business. Throughout his life he was able to keep himself, and he made sure he was not a burden on those he visited.

In 1643, at the age of nineteen, he set out to question all manner of Priests, Ministers and 'professors' about their faith. He travelled for four years. He became more and more depressed by what he heard. He was very well versed in the Bible, as were many in those times, so he found he could counter others' assertions.

In the depths of despair he heard a voice which said 'there is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'.

In other words one did not need Priests or other intermediaries of any sort, but could draw inspiration and direction straight from God.

He had other 'openings of the spirit'. At one point his Journal refers directly to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. He saw the light, and would from then on ask people to walk in the light of God.

Once he had received these messages he started to tell others - to preach wherever he could find an audience. At this time he had no intention of establishing another sect : his findings could be used by all Christians.

What he found was a very large audience for his messages. There were, all around the country, groups of Separatists and Seekers unhappy with conventional religious observance. George Fox called his findings the 'Truth'. And this Truth resonated with many seeking the 'Truth'.

As John Punshon says, his message 'was to appeal to ex-Baptists, ex-Levellers, ex-Seekers, ex-Independents, ex-Ranters and ex-Monarchy Men! 'Rather than being able to trace one line of development from Puritanism, or Anabaptism or Continental Spiritual religion, we can see elements of all these things in Quakerism. '

<u>The Practice and Consequences of Quaker worship</u>:

It was not necessary to have a special building set aside for worship. Fox called Churches 'Steeple-Houses'. One could meet anywhere, even in a field, but the British climate was not conducive to open air practice. In the early days someone's House or Barn was set aside for the purpose.

Friends would gather in silence and wait upon the Lord. If some member of the congregation was 'moved' to speak, or sing, or minister in any way, they could do so. Friends were helped to travel to other groups preaching and spreading the word.

The 'Truth' that George Fox and his earliest followers expounded led to some rather earth-shattering consequences:

One had to 'speak to that of God in all men' (and this meant men and <u>women</u> from the start).

All had to be honest - to speak truth. If you were truthful, then there was no need to swear upon oath - oaths meant you had double standards of

honesty. Yet oaths of allegiance in many transactions of the law were required. This was to lead to considerable persecution.

Of course, getting a reputation for honesty did not always work against you - but this aspect will be discussed later.

In those days it was obligatory to acknowledge the aristocracy, or 'one's betters' by doffing one's hat, by bowing and scraping. Friends spoke against this. If there is God in every man, then all men are equal in the sight of God. The Magistrates and Judges they had to face were greatly offended. Friends would have their hats knocked off in Court.

This period was the time of the Civil War, and a large number of able-bodied men were engaged by one side or the other. But, according to George Fox, it was wrong to fight - one would be fighting against God in the other person. As men became convinced by the Quaker message, they sought release from bearing arms. William Mead, along with a considerable number who became eminent Friends, was cashiered from the Parliamentary Army, ostensibly for insubordination.

So Fox and his early converts were seen as a troublesome addition to the problems already abroad in Britain - both by the Church and State.

This was not helped by the fact that they were often confused, maybe vindictively, with less benign groups of separatists. Such were the 'Ranters' and the 'Fifth Monarchy Men'.

Shortly after the Restoration in 1660, the Fifth Monarchy Men rose in revolt in London and controlled the City for three days. As they were 'put down', the Authorities arrested anyone who might have been thought to have been implicated in their plot. Astonishingly, the largest group so considered were the Friends - some 4,230 Quakers were rounded up and imprisoned.

This led directly to the Declaration of the Peace Testimony which was addressed to the King to dissociate the Quaker movement from the Fifth Monarchists.

The powerful and beautifully worded testimony, which is quoted in part, has inspired Friends to this day:

'the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of this world'.

With the Restoration came Lord Clarendon's Acts : the Quaker Act (1662) to the Conventicle Act (1664) - which was the Quaker Act stiffened and applied to all Dissenters (a Conventicle was an illegal place of worship). The Five Mile Act prevented the establishment of Meetings within five miles of Corporate Towns.

These Acts provided stiff penalties for even preaching that the taking of Oaths was wrong! 'Praemunire' - the confiscation of one's estate, or imprisonment for life (or for the duration of the King's pleasure) were the punishments prescribed.

Shortly after the second Conventicle Act (1670) was passed, those two worthy Essex Men referred to previously, caused a fundamental freedom to be entrenched in English Law.

William Penn and William Mead tried to preach at Gracechurch Meeting in the City of London. The Meeting House had been locked up by the Authorities to prevent this, so they proceeded to address a large crowd outside the premises. In due course they were arrested.

The Meeting was obviously not in secret, neither preacher was ordained, so the Five Miles Act did not apply. How would the Authorities charge them? They decided to make the charge one of riot. Unfortunately, for them, this carried the right of trial by jury. Penn and Mead were indicted on the charge of riot at the Old Bailey.

They conducted their own defence robustly, but when the Judge summed up, he directed the jury to bring in a guilty verdict. This the jury would not do! So the jury were taken to Newgate Prison - till they should change their minds!

This they would not do, and after due course of law, the case was reviewed by a higher court. This finally established the right of juries to bring in their own verdict, independent of judicial direction.

The establishment of Meetings for Worship :

Despite the occasional successes achieved by the Peace Testimony and cases like the Penn and Mead trial, the persecution of Quakers went on unabated. Every possible accusation was mounted at them, and in consequence many found themselves imprisoned.

It was found necessary to keep a record of those who were imprisoned, or fined, or in other ways caused distress, so that help could be organised for the prisoners and their families. To this day the main executive meeting of the Society of Friends is called the Meeting for Suffering. There is also a charitable committee called the 'Box'. This name deriving from the actual Box where Friends were encouraged to deposit cash, clothes or items of food for those in need when they attended 'Sufferings'.

George Fox started the process of rationalizing the movement. First were the local meetings, or 'Preparative Meetings'. These were strengthened by grouping them into Monthly Meetings so that support could be given to other meetings in the immediate neighbourhood. Representatives would also be sent to Quarterly Meetings of a wider range of meetings - say within a county. Finally, Representatives would be sent to an annual meeting for the whole country.

This sharing of responsibility for those in distress helped in other ways :

For example, from time immemorial, madmen had killed and claimed 'God told me to do it!' They still do, unfortunately. But, the structure of the Society introduced by Fox allowed for checks and balances to be introduced. If a particular Friend was given a revelation, or a message, he or she could first share it with members of his or her local meeting. If the local meeting thought the 'finding' was the 'Truth', they would pass it to Monthly Meeting and so on until it was considered at the Annual Meeting. The term 'concern' became common parlance, and to this day individual Friends are supported in their concerns till the whole Society can consider and act in an appropriate way.

There was to be no dogma, no creeds, no clergy, no sacraments. The nearest to a written statement covering Quaker beliefs comes in the 'Advices and Queries' . These started as 'Queries' which were asked of each preparative meeting to check that they were in 'the light'. In no way were they to be regarded as an instruction in how Friends should think, and this was made evident from the beginning.

Quakers in Trade and Industry ;

Quakers were precluded from attending Universities, they could not become lawyers or take Government posts because they would not take oaths. They would not serve in the army or navy, of course. In the early years they were not allowed to be directors of public companies. So how could they make a living? Yeoman farmers and others with their own small businesses carried on, and many prospered because they could be trusted.

It is said, people coming to a town they did not know would ask "Where is the Quaker shoemaker" (or tailor, etc)?

However, there were also a large number who were encouraged to 'travel in the Ministry' - to spread the 'Truth'.

What better way to travel than to take goods at the same time! As did George Fox, to trade. In those more lawless days it was common for traders to travel together from town to town for protection. So Friends travelled as Traders, or with them. They would then stay in other Friends' houses. In modern parlance they 'networked'. One result of this system was a degree of liberation for women. There are records of women travelling great distances in the ministry of the 'Truth'. Margaret Fell was one of them.

Women also were involved in business, perhaps they had to be, to continue their husband's business whilst he was in prison; perhaps the changed attitude to them within the Society of Friends allowed for them to do work previously thought of as mans.

The account book of Sarah Fell for the years 1673 -1678 throws light on her involvement in various trading activities. Not only did she sell the farm produce (of the Swarthmoor farms) throughout Lancashire, but she was involved in shipping goods to Bristol and Cornwall. She traded in iron goods, and had ore transported to make the ironware. She acted as a Banker in a modest way.

Her numerous activities never seemed to interfere with her work for Friends, in fact, they were seamlessly bound with visits to meetings, relief of prisoners and the constant coming and going of Friends to Swarthmoor

Hall. Sarah Fell's trustworthiness with money was echoed around the country. Many were trusted to look after other people's money and goods, so a plethora of Banks grew, eventually to coalesce into larger and larger organisations.

Samuel Gurney, the brother of Elizabeth Fry, for a short period at the beginning of the nineteenth century became the "Banker's Banker" when the Bank of England was in difficulties. His philanthropy is celebrated with a statue of him in the middle of Stratford Broadway.

Another leap forward came from the acknowledgement of Quaker honesty : the setting of fixed prices for goods. For example, a Quaker shoemaker would say my costs for materials etc are so much, I've worked for two days making them, so these shoes are worth so much. That is my price.

Haggling seemed a dishonest approach to business. Many customers came to respect this approach, and the business would prosper.

God was kind to many Quakers at this time - or some would say the Devil moved in to corrupt them with money!

The end of the seventeenth century is generally reckoned to be the start of the Industrial Revolution. Friends were there, available, innovative and supportive of one anothers endeavours.

Abraham Darby I of Coalbrookdale (1677 - 1717) pioneered the use of coal (in the form of coke) for the smelting of iron; his grandson Abraham Darby III built the first iron bridge across the Severn in 1779.

Another Friend, Hunstman, developed a steel making process.

There are many other developments that can be traced to Quaker activity : in the mining of lead and silver; developments in brass and tinplate manufacture; the involvement with canal and railway building, agricultural machinery and clocks were improved.

Quakers who were brewers were happy to change to the less intoxicating drinks such as tea and chocolate.

The list could be much more exhaustive!

Quaker Meetings in Havering

It is likely that the first Quaker Meetings, on a regular basis, were held at Goosehays after 1684 when William Mead acquired the property. Harold Wood was the nearest village. Goosehays (meaning Goose enclosure) is, rather delightfully, referred to as Gooseyes, Gooseys or Gooses, by various correspondents.

Barking Women's Monthly Meeting Account Book shows collections taken at 'Harald' Woods (various spellings) in 1694 - 1696. The sums seem generous (all over £1) compared with those taken at Barking, a numerically stronger Meeting. This must be a reflection on the relative wealth of those Friends meeting at Harold Wood. The possibility that the sums had accumulated over several meetings and had only been transferred intermittently are ruled out by the accounts reading 'collected ye 3rd day of ye 8th month, 1695', for example.

In 1695 the Monthly Meeting decided that Harold Wood should be reduced to the status of 'retired' meeting, attended only by those too infirm to travel to public meetings further away. The Monthly Meeting itself continued to meet at Harold Wood until 1701. In 1709 Friends applied to quarter sessions for meetings at the house of William Smith at Romford. Nothing permanent resulted from this.

Sarah Mead, who died in 1714, left £100 for building a meeting house at Romford or Harold Wood. This legacy was an embarrassment to the Monthly Meeting, which, in 1718, declared that the few Friends in those areas attended the Barking meeting, which itself was small and poor. They asked that the legacy be made available for the general charitable purposes of the monthly meeting. Sir Nathaniel Mead, Sarah's executor, eventually agreed to this, and the money was handed over in 1732.

Thereon and for over two hundred years any Friends living in the area attended other meetings elsewhere.

One of the most notable of those once connected with Friends was Joseph Fry, the son of Elizabeth Fry, who, with his wife bought and lived at Fairkyles, Hornchurch, from 1870 to 1896. As he had left the Society, and his mother died in 1845 Friends cannot claim that 'E.Fry stayed here' sort of label. Joseph Fry's daughter, Augusta, followed in her

Grandmother's footsteps, working for prison reform and other social concerns.

It isn't until 17.10.'33., that a minute of a meeting held at Friends House, Euston Road, indicates an interest by Friends in Hornchurch to hold a meeting in their area. A month later on 17.11.'33 a meeting of those interested in forming what is called a 'particular meeting' was held at the home of Mr and Mrs Stevens, St. Leonards in Butts Green Road.

On 23.11.33 a meeting was held at Hydesville Hall, 161 Brentwood Road, and this led to a public meeting being advertised. The printed notice of this refers to a Meeting of Worship being held each Sunday at 11.00a.m. at Hydesville Hall.

From the minutes dated 14.10.'34. it appears that the Meetings have been transferred to Reede Hall, Junction Road, presumably on the grounds of cost. The minutes show that collections (over eight weeks) averaged 4/10d (24p) per week (pace 1695 £1.7.0d).

No exhaustive research has been undertaken into the Meetings venue for the next ten years, but Friends confirmed that their Meeting Place was bombed out during the war. Hydesville Hall suffered this fate on 19.4.41, when Romford suffered fifty-five fatalities in one night - the worst of the war.

Meetings continued in one anothers homes until 1944 when Friends found enough money to purchase their first proper Meeting House - 171 Victoria Road, Romford. Property prices were at an all time low, so the timing was right.

By the late 1950's Friends were dissatisfied with 171, Victoria Road. It was inadequate for their needs and little alteration could be made. A building fund was set up. About this time the Monthly Meeting - now the Ratcliff and Barking Monthly Meeting, learnt that leases on property in Bow were due to 'fall in'. The properly included the old Bow Magistrates Court (Friends wondered how many of their number had faced 'the Beak' there!) which was scheduled for demolition.

There were, also, several large houses both on Bow Road and an adjoining side road. The property was very dilapidated and needed considerable expenditure before the buildings (converted to flats) could be let. Eventually, they started to yield a good rental income.

Friends of the Monthly Meeting were naturally delighted with this news. New meeting houses were needed not only in Romford but also at Harlow New Town. The Monthly Meeting readily agreed to the two new meeting houses being built.

Land was sought and an Architect, Norman Frith, who was a member of Wanstead Meeting, was appointed to draw up the plans.

In Romford planning permission was sought for a Meeting House to be built on a plot of land off Haynes Road. Local residents complained that Quakers would be too noisy (!) and their objection was upheld.

The present site, off Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park, was found and bought for about £900. It had been used for allotments during the war and was laden with broken glass from greenhouses and cloches.

Norman Frith met with local Friends to listen to their ideas on an ideal meeting house. Some wanted a main Meeting Room with views of the garden, some found that distracting - there was an easy solution to this problem, but not to all the conflicting ideas put forward. Norman eventually opined that the meeting house was like a camel, designed by a Committee. Like a camel the meeting house has worked very well.

The initial costing included a striking butterfly winged roof for the classroom/toilets front of the building. This was deemed too expensive and rather foolishly a flat roof was accepted. Thirty years later it cost more than three times the cost of the complete building to replace the roof with the current pitched roof.

The estimate for the building came in at £12,000 approximately. At the time the substantial semi-detached houses on the Main Road by the cricket ground were being built and sold for approximately £3,600.

With the inevitable modifications, the cost of landscaping and planting the garden, furniture and equipment the final cost was in the region of £16,000.

In the meantime, the Monthly Meeting learnt that by the terms of the various wills and covenants governing the Bow Estate, 5/7ths of the income was to be used for the relief of the poor and needy, and only 2/7ths for general purposes.

Furthermore, it was necessary to contribute the 2/7ths to the executive committee of Friends that runs the business of the Monthly Meeting in the London Area - the Six Weeks Meeting.

Six Week Meeting did grant £4000 towards the building fund in anticipation of the income to come. The only other resources of the building fund were the £1132 we had accumulated (up till 1959) and approximately £2000 from the sale of 171 Victoria Road.

There was nothing for it but to start fund-raising on a grand scale. The usual efforts such as jumble sales, garden parties, marmalade making etc. slowly began to whittle the debt away. Various Quaker Trusts sent donations and money from a legacy was received. It took about seven years but finally Romford and Harlow Meeting Houses were paid for. Before this happened, Monthly Meeting had decided to rebuild Wanslead Meeting House and Norman Frith's skills were called upon again.

After selling 171 Victoria Road, the Meetings were held above Coles Ironmongers shop in Balgores Lane, Gidea Park, until the new Meeting House was handed over to Friends in September 1961.

It has helped many in their search for God.

It is not appropriate to refer individually to the current membership, but reference can be made to two Friends who have died only recently : Frank and Reta Coffin. They were known to many in the Havering area, served on the local Council for many years and were active in many different fields. They were both made Mayor of Havering in the 1970's.

Friends should be seen to be living their beliefs : certainly this is what Frank and Reta Coffin did, throughout their long lives.

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