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The Quakers in Chichester: 1655-1967, Michael Woolley, Chichester Meeting (Society of Friends), Religious Society of Friends, Chichester Meeting, 2006, 0953482812, 9780953482818, . .

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On a Saturday in the late summer of 1655 a strange little group made its way from Arundel into Chichester. They almost certainly approached the town down the street called St Pancras which led to one of the city's still standing gates. Most of the buildings both in the street and in Eastgate Square had been flattened in the Civil War thirteen years earlier, and apart from a little row of newly built cottages adjoining the site of St Pancras church, there would have been a clear view of the city walls.

There were at least two travellers, quite possibly more. The leader was a 31 year old roaming preacher called George Fox, an eccentric and difficult man. His way of dressing may well have attracted attention as the group entered the town as it was very distinctive: for many years he was given to wearing a leather suit and an extremely large hat. His hair was unfashionably long and, though he avoided any hint of Royalist colour or finery, even the Puritans (the Royalists' greatest enemies) thought his appearance rather odd.

Fox was no figure of fun though: he had great presence, and some would suggest that despite his strange appearance he was very attractive, his strong personality giving him a dangerous magnetism. Several of the people who met him wrote of his amazing eyes. In a superstitious age there were those who associated his penetrating gaze with witchcraft, a capital crime at the time, though not one of which he was ever formally accused. It is unlikely that he had been an easy travelling companion on the road from Arundel, as he was given to impenetrable silences interspersed with passionate and sometimes lengthy outbursts. But it must also be said that he inspired tremendous loyalty - the other known traveller, for instance, as he entered Chichester that day, was Ambrose Rigge, a young man of twenty or twenty one who had left home just to follow him. Fox was an inspirational character, sometimes drawing crowds of hundreds to hear him preach. His message was outspoken and uncompromising and as a result he was familiar with the inside of various prisons. Yet the last time he had been inside one, in the spring of that same year, he had been sent to meet Cromwell himself, and had, moreover, been given his liberty by the Lord Protector. In short he was a powerful and highly complex person who, despite his humble origins, and his remarkable ability to annoy people, was a national character.

Passing through the East Gate the travellers would have found themselves in East Street, but a rather different looking street from that of today as the great building boom of the early eighteenth century had not yet given Chichester its characteristic Georgian appearance. The houses and shops were still timber framed and many had top floors which jutted out over the roadway in the Tudor fashion. At number 21, on the corner of St Andrew's Court, they would have passed the house of William Cawley, the local MP, the man who had captured the town for Parliament, assembling his forces on the Broyle fields just to the north of where the Festival Theatre stands today. Cawley is chiefly remembered as one of those who sat in the High Court which condemned Charles I. Indeed he was one of those who signed the death warrant. Later, after the monarchy had been restored, loyal Cicestrians erected a bust of the unfortunate Charles in the market cross, on the east side, looking sternly down the road at the house in which his tormentor had lived.

Fox was 'religious' and Cawley 'political' but were both products of the Reformation, an extraordinary period of ecclesiastical and cultural revolution which had been going on for the previous hundred and twenty years. Henry VIII had made the initial break with Rome, instituted some overdue reforms (of church finance for example) but had otherwise been something of a reconciler, trying to keep the country united and his 'high church' and 'low church' citizens all within a single Church of England. Edward VI, who followed him, was much more decisively Protestant, and his commissioners ruthlessly stripped churches of their and the nation's artistic heritage. Crucifixes were pulled down, statues defaced and paintings destroyed. Chichester Cathedral still bears the marks of their depredations.

After King Edward came Queen Mary and under her the country reverted to Catholicism, land previously taken from the 'high' bishops was restored to them, and Cranmer was burnt at the stake in Oxford. Even here in Chichester there were two unfortunates burnt in the cathedral precincts, Thomas Iveson and Richard Hook. Little is known of Hook but Iveson was a carpenter arrested with two others for reading the Bible in English. Urged to recant, he refused to do so and was martyred on 24th July 1555, just a hundred years before the visit of Fox.

Elizabeth, who took the throne in 1558, was like her father Henry, monarch for around forty years, and like him she wanted her church to be all things to almost all men. This was a policy she pursued with such skill that while the English church turned 'low' again, and the 'high' bishops lost their estates again, and the country filled up with returning Protestant exiles, she was not finally excommunicated by the Pope until twelve years after her accession.

These great shifts and swings in ecclesiastical policy were to continue. The Catholics made an attempt on the life of King James in 1605, the Gunpowder Plot, while his son King Charles was so ill thought of by the Puritans that when the country was riven by civil war, in 1642, one of the primary aims of Parliament was to make the country safe for Protestantism.

It was from this ferment that Quaker beliefs and Fox, their greatest early exponent, were to spring. The same thoughts were occurring to different people in different parts of the country. In 1646, Oliver Cromwell, not yet more than a soldier, had voiced an interesting idea, "To be a Seeker is the next best sect to a Finder, and such shall every faithful humble Seeker be at the end". In Nottinghamshire, and independently of Cromwell, a group of open-minded searchers for truth, the Children of Light, emerged in 1648. In Westmorland, and also independently of Cromwell, another similar movement was known as the Westmorland Seekers. For over a hundred years different groups of Christians had been proclaiming so many, sometimes irreconcilable, truths, that seeking, in humble and faithful fashion, was an appealing notion to many people. It was an idea whose time had come, and in Fox the various seekers found a voice and a leader. This was the man who came into Chichester that Saturday afternoon in 1655.

That night he and his people stayed at a woman's house, probably that of Margery Wilkinson who lived on the site of what is today 62/3 North Street. A meeting was held in the house and Fox was to write later in his Journal that "... many professors came in and some janglings there were, but the Lord's power was over all" which is to say there were a lot of believers, some disturbance, but that it was a worthwhile and reverent meeting. He goes on to recount how the woman of the house was

"convinced", but was in love with a man, also present at the meeting, whom she later married, and then discovered to be a bad lot. She was, in the Journal's words "greatly distracted", but later returned to Quaker ways, meeting Fox on at least two further occasions, both before and after she was widowed. The reason for thinking this woman might have been Margery Wilkinson is that she, Margery, was later prominent in the Chichester Meeting, indeed the Sunday meetings for worship were held in her house in 1669. She was also a widow by that time. It is not specifically recorded that Fox ever visited Chichester again, but he did travel in Sussex in 1657, visiting friends, and also in 1668, so they may have met each other again on those occasions.

The account in the Journal is supplemented by that of Ambrose Rigge who records that the next morning, Sunday, Fox went to the Baptist meeting, at that time held in a house in South Street. He was "listened to for a while but at length taken by the constable before the Mayor." This strongly suggests that he spoke without invitation, interrupting the service (something he was very prone to do) until the embarrassed Baptists had him hauled away.

The story gets more revealing, for the Mayor, one Richard Manning, fell in a rage with him for not taking off his hat, a normal courtesy in the seventeenth century. Fox refused to take off his hat to anyone, and frequently got into trouble as a result. He insisted that all men should be treated with equal respect as all "had that of God in them". He also insisted on always using the familiar second person singular, 'thee/thou', rather than the more respectful 'you', for the same egalitarian reasons. The revolution which had led to the King's execution had opened men's eyes to the possibility of a less hierarchical world. The egalitarianism of Fox reflected the ideas of the period: the Levellers, for example, were adherents of a popular democratic movement which insisted that authority should only be wielded with the consent of the people - an elected Parliament should be sovereign, its power only qualified by a respect for basic human rights. The equality of men was another idea whose time had come during the Civil War and it was an idea which greatly influenced George Fox and his followers.

His refusal to doff his cap to the Mayor of Chichester, or anyone else, was widely copied by other Quakers: there is a story told of the high-born William Penn who, many years later, on being received for an audience with Charles II, was surprised to see the King remove his own headgear. "Why dost thou take off thy hat, Friend Charles?" he is supposed to have asked. "It is the custom of this place that only one man should go hatted at a time" replied the King urbanely.

It seems the Mayor of Chichester was not quite so urbane in his dealings with Fox though he did let him go, apparently unconvinced by the accusation that the man was a Jesuit. This accusation was not uncommon at the time, there being much paranoia about disguised Catholics fomenting revolution. The situation was not helped by Quaker refusal to swear the Oath of Allegiance which had been introduced after the gunpowder plot, supposedly to ensure that all Catholics were loyal citizens. The problem for Quakers was that they refused to swear any oaths (and still do incidentally), on the basis of New Testament teaching - let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay. It must be assumed that the Oath was not tendered at Fox's appearance in the Chichester Court for he would most certainly have declined it and been imprisoned. As it was he was allowed to go, having been searched, and two days later left for the West of England.

So began the Quaker, or Friends' Meeting in the town. (The official name is The Religious Society of Friends, but the word Quaker is much used and was even incorporated into early Acts of Parliament). Records of the meeting are sparse in those early years but some do exist. In 1658 an early member, James Larbel, went into the high steeplehouse (the Cathedral) took issue with the priest for preaching false doctrine, and was arraigned before the magistrate. He was sent to prison and suffered for five months at the hands of the gaoler Edward Lean. He died a few days after his release still bearing several bruises from the beatings he had received. Joanne, his wife, died the following year and was buried with him in Whyke churchyard.

There were other burials, a sad case of a different kind being that of Jeane Smith, John Smith's daughter, in 1661, followed shortly after by her mother Grace. They were buried in St Andrews, now the Centre of Arts but then the parish church of William Cawley. John Smith was a prominent

member seven years later in 1668 - the Meeting was being held in his house in the Hornet (somewhere between the Eastgate and Bush Inns). He married his second wife, Priscilla, in the same year. Earlier, in 1663, Timothy Hale had written his will, appointing his body to be buried at the discretion of Friends in his "herb garden at Easthampnett, at the east end thereof" where his grave would catch the afternoon sun. He left bequests to named members and five pounds for "those that labour in the Word" (travelling preachers like Fox) and another five pounds for "poor Friends belonging to the Meeting". In 1664 William Clayton of Whyke (who had testified to Larbel's suffering) was imprisoned for six months for attending a Quaker meeting. The first formal record of a Meeting in Chichester was in 1668, but there clearly was one before that, albeit without all the records which later became a feature of Quaker life. Friends became very careful to record marriages, for instance, to avoid any accusation of impropriety in relationships which were not strictly legal.

During the ten years following George Fox's first visit there were dramatic changes in government which were to have a profound effects on all Quakers. Cromwell died in 1658 and after two years of uncertainty Charles II was invited to return from exile and assume the crown. Charles had smoothed the way to his return by issuing the Declaration of Breda promising a general amnesty, respect for Parliament and religious toleration. The amnesty, known as the Act of Oblivion, was duly passed, the only exceptions being people involved in the execution of his father. William Cawley was exiled to the Continent, never returned to Chichester, and never saw the bust of Charles I glaring down the street at his front door.

Charles II kept his promises to Parliament but Parliament itself, now filled with distrustful Royalists, made religious toleration impossible. The Quakers were seen as radical Puritans and quite possibly seditious. The country seethed with plots and rumours of plots. It was only twelve years since the horrors of the Civil War and the execution of the last King, so men who refused to take oaths, wouldn't pay tithes, insisted on wearing their hats, and spoke to their betters in the familiar thee/thou form were promptly singled out for retribution. No matter that one of their number, Margaret Fell, presented to King and Parliament the Peace Testimony which was to become a classic part of Friends' tradition. "We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity...(We) do deny and bear our testimony against all strife and wars and contentions". Parliament was unconvinced: the Friends had too much in common with the Levellers - men who had actively fomented mutiny.

The Quaker Act of 1662 was one of the series of measures curtailing religious liberty known collectively as the Clarendon Code. It became illegal to refuse an oath, and illegal for five or more Quakers to assemble for worship. The Meeting in Arundel was raided and the members brought to Chichester to be sentenced. They were hobbled together in chains and paraded down the main streets to the gaol above the East Gate where they were treated very brutally by the gaoler. Gaolers at the time made their living by charging the prisoners for their keep - the Arundel men were asked a groat a night - and Friends who wouldn't pay (as a form of protest) were harshly treated. Two of their number, Nicholas Rickman and Edward Hamper, were separated from the rest and "thrown in with the felons" rather than being kept in the relevant comfort of the jail keeper's house.

Another of the early victims of the legislation against holding meetings was the young William Penn (later the founder of Pennsylvania) who was sent down from Oxford for attending a Quaker meeting. The response of Chichester Friends to the oppression is not known but elsewhere in the country valiant stands were taken and Quakers continued to meet in public despite the widespread attacks and imprisonments. They refused either to conceal their meetings or to respond to taunts other than by turning the cheek. This combination of straightforwardness and non-aggression in the face of persecution won them considerable sympathy and within months the King had ordered the release of all but the ringleaders. In 1668 much of the legislation expired and was not replaced for another two years, and then with less repressive measures.

It was in that year that an organisational structure was decided upon for the emerging sect. Local Meetings were grouped together geographically and met once a month in administrative sessions called, very logically, Monthly Meetings. Chichester was part of the Chichester and Arundel Monthly Meeting which also included Steyning (just north of Worthing), Petworth, and Birdham. The latter

was a short lived assembly of some twenty or thirty people which met in the house of one Richard Green who with his wife got into trouble with the authorities for wilfully absenting himself from his parish church, a legal offence.

On the sixth of October the first Monthly Meeting was held in Arundel, and it was not a happy day for Chichester. It is minuted that arrangements were put in hand for two respected Friends from other parts of the county to visit the Cathedral City and "exhort all those who have dishonoured God in the Meeting". There is no indication as to exactly what form the dishonour had taken. The reproof would have been delivered "in the high red house of John Smith in St Pancras," the parish not the street, for John Smith lived in the Hornet. The minute, incidentally, is dated 6th Day of the 8th Month. This Quaker form of dating was an eccentricity at the time, avoiding any reference to heathen gods long before the rest of the world started using all figure dates. Before the reform of the English calendar the year began in March so the eighth month was October. Friends also numbered weekdays from one to seven, the First Day being Sunday.

First Day meetings in 1669 were being held at Margery Wilkinson's house in North Street where, on the 6th July, Chichester's third Quaker marriage took place between Joshua Kirck of Leadenhall in London and Margaret Reynolds. Nothing more is heard of this couple who presumably went to live at Joshua's house in London. Margery Wilkinson though appears in the records again three years later when, together with Richard Green, Edward Hamper and others, she leased a piece of land in the Hornet for use as a burial ground. It was a thousand year lease and the burial ground is still there, now a Quaker freehold, and let to the District Council as a small garden.

Edward Hamper was one of those who had been thrown in with the felons in the East Gate gaol. He was a man of property and after this experience he created, in 1675, an unusual legal trust to protect his estate from seizure. His Arundel houses were made over to Quaker trustees in return for a modest annual income. There were many trustees, each of whom could act alone, so that if the Meeting were raided there was a reasonable chance that someone would still be available to manage the estate. This precaution was not of immediate use, as life became a little easier for Dissenters during the 1670s. Laws were amended and a Declaration of Indulgence made by the King. There were still some problems though, as in 1678 when William Cooper of Whyke was accused by the church wardens of having Quaker meetings in his house.

Sussex Quarterly Meeting requested Ambrose Galloway, a draper from Lewes, to collect information from Friends about their sufferings. He recorded them year by year starting back in 1655 listing fines and imprisonments. Some Chichester members had suffered imprisonment in those early years, and in addition to this legal persecution there was an unusual extra-legal challenge in Bishop Peter Gunning, who was appointed to the see in 1670. This man was so ardent that he is reported to have disturbed dissenting meetings in person, but he does not seem to have been vicious. Indeed, unusually for the age, he gave a public challenge to Quakers, Presbyterians and Baptists and appointed three days for disputation in the Cathedral.

Disputation of another kind took place in the courts, in London, where William Penn was charged with attending the Gracechurch Street Meeting. The jury refused to find him guilty despite being dreadfully bullied by the judge who twice sent them away, without food or other comforts, to reconsider their verdict. After three days of this the judge imprisoned them all, for contempt of court. A considerable legal struggle ensued but finally the point was won and the rights of an English jury established.

A few years later Penn inherited considerable property in Sussex and came to make his home at Warminghurst near Pulborough. It is probable that he visited Chichester, the county town and only twenty miles away, though there is no actual record of his having done so. The Chichester Meeting would certainly have had regular contact with Warminghurst, which was to be an important Quaker centre for the thirty one years that it was home to Penn. In 1677, for example, after the London Yearly Meeting, he entertained the Quaker leaders George Fox and Robert Barclay. The authorities came to hear that illegal religious meetings were being held in the house and those present expected to be raided by the militia. In an act of open defiance a huge open air meeting was

arranged, several hundred Friends attended, probably including some from Chichester. There was great tension but in the event they were undisturbed.

William Penn was not only an effective leader but also a prolific writer. Pepys, was surprised by his book on the Trinity. "I got my wife to read it to me and I find it so well writ as I think it too good for him ever to have writ it - and it is a serious sort of book and not fit for everybody to read." One of the first guests at Warminghurst was another thinker and writer, Robert Barclay whose 'Apology' is a Quaker classic, asserting that no man could be regarded as excluded from salvation: a doctrine of inclusivity. The idea was very different from that of the Presbyterians, for example, who at the time were fiercely pre-destinationist, believing that only the elect could find grace. The Puritans had devised tests to make their churches companies of people each of whom was destined for 'salvation'. The Quakers avoided both tests and sacraments: no humble faithful seeker was excluded. Much was borrowed from Puritan Christianity, plain meeting houses and transparent honesty for example. But much was different - the unprogrammed meetings, where anyone could speak if so moved, (as is still the case today) and, most importantly, that there was no prescription for salvation, just companionship on the road thereto.

By 1679 the road must have seemed relatively comfortable in Chichester, widespread persecution had abated and Quakers were receiving de facto acceptance. When the Duke of Monmouth (a popular focus of opposition) visited the City in the February of that year, he was visited by a Quaker tobacco pipe maker who was introduced as a very honest man. He was graciously received, the Duke with his hat off and the Quaker with his hat on. "How many attend your meetings?" asked the great man. "About a hundred and we are all for thee." The Duke then asked if they were disturbed as they met but "No" said the Quaker "we are not molested.

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