

QUAKERS IN CHARD

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When George Fox sent his north-country followers to all parts of England as Quaker missionaries (or the 'First Publishers of Truth'), the messenger to south-west Somerset was Thomas Salthouse. He had been farm-bailiff to Judge Fell at Swarthmoor Hall, and had become an eloquent and persuasive preacher. As early as 1657 he was in trouble at Martock, where a Quaker meeting, stormed by a rabble led by five clergymen, was described as a 'riotous assembly'. Later in that month Salthouse was arrested when he was again preaching in Martock, and was sent to prison till the next Quarter Sessions as 'a dangerous, idle and wandering person'. He refused to promise to return to his native Lancashire, and so remained in prison for some time. When in 1661 he was before the justices again at Quarter Sessions at Chard,¹ he was ordered to remain in prison till the next Sessions, and one of his fellow prisoners was John Clement of Chard, who had been committed for refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance. It was a favourite device of magistrates if they had any difficulty in proving a case against Quakers to proffer them the Oath of Allegiance. Quakers protested their loyalty to the King, but in obedience to the advice or command of Jesus, 'Swear not at all', they refused to take any oath. Their refusal to take this particular oath made them appear disloyal subjects, and made them liable to fine or imprisonment.

Lists of Quaker Meetings in Somerset in 1670 and 1676² show that there was then no regular Friends' Meeting in Chard, but Chard Quakers worshipped with Friends at Ilminster, Crewkerne, and perhaps at Dommatt or Capland. Elias Osborne, sometime of Chillington and subsequently of Chard, a clothier, was arrested ('taken' was the Quaker word) at Crewkerne Meeting and fined in 1670. In 1671 he was in prison for refusing to pay tithe,³ which Quakers held to belong to Old Testament times, as it is never mentioned in the New Testament.

Towards the end of 1676 Alexander Parker, who had 'travelled in the ministry' with George Fox in both England and Scotland, wrote to Fox describing his journey to the West Country. Coming back from 'Cullhampton' to Wellington, he and a companion rode cross-country to Chard 'where we had some service in the evening'. They rode on the next day to 'Ilminster' and 'Crookhorn', and 'God's blessed power and presence was with us'.⁴

In May 1682 Francis Wilkins and Matthew Page of Chard were arrested with 29 other Friends at Ilminster Meeting by Henry Walrond, J.P., a captain in the Somerset Militia, and taken to Ilchester gaol. These 31 Friends were 'presented' at Quarter Sessions at Bridgwater in July, where the magistrates held that their imprisonment was illegal, as the second Conventicle Act specified fine and distraint as the punishment for unlawful assembly. The prosecution therefore changed the indictment to 'Riot', for which the 31 Quakers were fined a noble (6/8d.) each, and ordered to stay in prison until they paid. In November 1683 they were joined in prison by Sarah Osborne, also taken at Meeting in Ilminster. The next Quarter Sessions were held at Bruton in January 1683/4, and there Friends from the Meeting at Chew Magna were presented for Riot. The jury found them not guilty, but the magistrates fined them 5/- each for being at a conventicle. They then called to the bar the Friends taken at meetings at Glastonbury, Stoke (St. Gregory) and Ilminster, and discharged them.⁵

In 1684 Christopher Lodge of Chard was sent to gaol at Ilchester for 'not coming to church for 3 Sundays last past', and he died in prison in the following January.⁶

At various dates Elias Osborne had goods distrained in lieu of paying tithes. He was a Quaker of some standing. He was appointed local correspondent to keep in touch with Friends in London,⁷ and in August 1685 he carried to London Friends an important letter from Friends at Ilchester disclaiming involvement in Monmouth's rebellion.⁸ Elias had been appointed in 1681 a trustee for the Burying Ground and small Meeting House at Milverton (the famous 'Quaking House' of the signpost); and in

1693 a trustee for Taunton Meeting House.⁹ In the 1680s Elias had laid down £6 for repairs to the Meeting House at Ilminster,¹⁰ and this was subsequently repaid to him.

Chard is not named in a list of Quaker meeting houses in Somerset in William III's reign, but a house there was either 'hired or freely given up for meetings, and certified at Sessions'.¹¹ The Toleration Act became law in 1689, and Dissenters could then register their meeting houses at Quarter Sessions. At the Michaelmas Sessions that year 'the house of Francis Wilkins and others' was licensed for the worship of God by Protestants dissenting from the Church of England.¹² The addition of 'others' probably means that other Friends signed Francis Wilkins' application for the registration of his house. In 1692 the house of William Wilkins was licensed as well; and in 1703, the house of John Collins, whom Besse claims as a Quaker. (He had been taken and fined in 1670 at a conventicle 'in the corner of a field nigh Hucklebridge'. Beside his statutory fine of 5/-, John was charged, and appears to have paid, a quarter of the preacher's fine of £40, he being a second-time offender and insolvent. The preacher was Thomas Marshall of Ilminster, a well-known local dissenting minister.¹³ Collins was in Ilchester gaol in 1672, when he was released with a number of Quakers by the King's Letters Patent following his Declaration of Indulgence.)

Early Friends 'travelling in the ministry' who recorded their visits to Chard included Samuel Bownas in 1697; John Fothergill in 1709; and Bownas again in 1715, when Chard was one of 38 meetings he visited on his western journey. He came again with Thomas Story in 1717, when Story recorded, 'We went together to Chard and lodged with our ancient friend Elias Osborne, who was very glad to see us, with his whole family'. Coming back from Cornwall, 'on the 4th of 9th month (November) we had a very large meeting at Chard, being the largest that any had seen there, and very open. There was present a Baptist teacher, and some said an Episcopal priest also'. Thomas Story had a small evening meeting at Chard on Friday, the 11th of the 4th month (June) 1731; and Samuel Bownas came again in 1746, but wrote nothing about that meeting.¹⁴

In 1751 the will of Joseph Gillett, senior, granted to Joseph Gillett, his son, Thomas Freke, senior, and Thomas Freke, junior, William Hart, senior, and William Bragg, all of Chard, the Meeting House adjoining the house wherein Samuel Singleton lived, and the Burying Ground walled in, adjoining to Crow Close, to be always the Meeting House and Burying Ground for the people called Quakers.¹⁵

Joseph Gillett's title to this property does not seem to have been absolute, for the appointment of the trustees had to be entered on the court roll of the Manor of Chard in March 1759, the Lord of the Manor being Earl Poulett. A 'copyhold' was granted for so many lives, and was normally renewable, but if not renewed in time, the property reverted to the Lord of the Manor, as happened later to the Friends' Meeting House in Ilminster.

Two Friends from Pennsylvania visited Chard in the middle of the 18th century. John Churchman in 1750 mentioned 'an evening meeting at Chard' between a good meeting at Ilminster and a large meeting at Yeovil. Ten years later John Griffith wrote, 'To Chard and had a very small poor meeting on 5th day (Friday) morning, and was deeply affected with their low weak state . . . I felt much pain of mind . . . (regarding) the inordinate love of earthly things, and resting satisfied in a profession of religion only'. Three women 'ministers' came later, Ruth Follows of Leicestershire in 1773, Sarah Grubb of York and Patience Brayton of Rhode Island in 1786. Ruth found a large meeting in Chard, but very few Friends in the place. Sarah mentions 'a few innocent, concerned Friends', though 'much was lacking. In general the spirit of the world, though often disguised, so much prevails' in several of the meetings she visited. The last recorded visiting minister was Richard Jordan from New Jersey who wrote, 'on Third Day (Tuesday), fourth of fifth month (May) 1802 I got to Chard, and had a precious meeting with a few Friends there the same evening', before going on to Nether Compton and 'Sherburn' on his way to Yearly Meeting in London.¹⁶

By 1786 new trustees were needed, and Joseph Gillett, son and heir of the earlier Joseph Gillett, had an indenture drawn up, passing the two properties for the lives of himself, his wife Mary, his daughter Sarah, and John Wheadon of Chard, by virtue of two copies of the Court Roll dated 30 March 1759, to Israel Mullett, Arthur Gundry, John Mullett, Benjamin Mullett, William Ball and Thomas Were to hold according to the Custom of the Manor of Chard.¹⁷

Joseph Gillett and three of the trustees having died, the surviving trustees, adding three to their number, renewed the copyhold in 1795. The court roll records that, by grant of Earl Poulett, Arthur Gundry of Chard, grocer, John Mullett, shopkeeper, John Mullett the younger, clothier, and William Mullett, soapboiler, all of Ilminster, Benjamin Mullett, soapboiler, and John Gillett, gentleman, both of Bristol, held in trust the Quaker Meeting House (part of a tenement) and the Quaker Burying Ground in or near Spring Lane in the Tything of Old Chard, for the several lives of Mary Gillett of Topsham, Devon, aged about 30 years, Sarah Gillett of Topsham, Devon, aged about 28 years, John Wheadon of Chard, aged about 45 years, and Arthur Gundry the younger, aged about 5 years. The trustees agreed to pay a yearly rent of 6 pence, a heriot (succession duty) of 1/-, and a fine of £1 when and as often as the same should be required.¹⁸

It was significant that only one of the trustees was a man of Chard. The meeting there, having dwindled, was discontinued, and long before the four lives were exhausted, the trustees sold the Meeting House in 1815 for £32-13-6d, using that sum for improvements to the Meeting House at Ilminster.¹⁹ The Burying Ground 'in Crow Lane' remained as Friends' property. Several reports exist stressing the difficulty of keeping it in a proper condition. It was reported in 1868 that there had been no interment in it for 'about 50 years', and it is tempting to guess that Arthur Gundry died in 1815 and was the last Quaker buried there. In 1868 the Burying Ground was incorporated in a trust deed which also embraced the meeting houses and burying grounds at Bridgwater and Ilminster. In that year Chard Burying Ground was let to Robert Brown of Chard 'for growing grass only'. Friends thought it 'well secured, and let at a sufficient rent reputedly to maintain it',²⁰ but in 1885 the Monthly Meeting decided to sell the plot. Quarterly Meeting refused to sanction the sale, but in the next year agreed. In 1887 Robert Love tendered £30 as payment, and Friends accepted the offer; but before a contract was signed, Love's solicitor in 1888 questioned Friends' title to the property, and the tender was withdrawn. The following year Love paid Friends £10 for the ground. Of this £3-16-6d went in legal expenses, and only £6-3-6d reached the Monthly Meeting treasurer.²¹ Crow Lane seems to be that now known as Duck Lane.

That was not the end of Quakers in Chard. In 1961 some Friends revived the Quaker Meeting at Axminster, and a few Friends went over from Chard to worship with them. Some Friends died and some moved away, and the Meeting at Axminster lapsed in 1970; so the Friends at Chard revived the meeting there, gathering at first in the Headmaster's study at Chard School. When that was no longer available, they met in the home of Henry Taylor, Appleorchard, Avishays, Chard, and now they meet on the 1st and 3rd Sundays in the month in Chard Independent Preparatory School, which is the new name for their old quarters at Chard School.

REFERENCES

1. Joseph Besse, *Sufferings of the People called Quakers* (London, 1753), vol. 1, p. 588.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 600 for 1670; Minute Book of the Western Division of Somerset Monthly Meeting, S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) C/2412/1 p. xii for 1676.
3. Besse, *op. cit.*, p. 610.
4. *The Friends' Library*, comprising Journals and letters of Members of the Religious Society of Friends (Philadelphia, 1839), vol. 11, p. 400.
5. Besse, *op. cit.*, pp. 621, 629, 632, 634.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 645; and S.R.O., DD/SFR 10/4, epistle of 16 March, 1684.
7. S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) C/2412/1, p. xvi.
8. S.R.O., DD/SFR 10/1 fo.45, 48.
9. S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) Title Deed of Friends Meeting House, Taunton, not yet numbered.
10. S.R.O., DD/SFR 10/2 fo.61-2.

11. S.R.O., DD/SFR 10/4 fo.101; also C/2412/1 p. xvii.
12. S.R.O., Return of Certified Places of Worship, dated 14 September, 1852, not yet numbered.
13. S.R.O., Q/S1, Indictment dated 26 August 1670. John Collins signed a sheet of Quaker Advices in 1659, DD/SFR 10/2 fo.1 and 1v. Besse, *op. cit.*, p. 610. Thomas Marshall was recorded in 1669 as preaching at Ashill, Broadway, Thurlbear and Whitelackington; and was licensed in 1672 to preach at Ilminster, and in 1673 at Crewkerne. G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity* (Fisher Unwin, 1911), vol. 2, pp. 1106-7, 1110-1112. Could Hucklebridge be the present Puddlebridge, between Lower and Higher Horton?
14. *Friends' Library*, Bownas, vol. 3, pp. 8, 47-9, 64; Fothergill, vol. 13, p. 373; Story, vol. 6, pp. 290-1, 321.
15. S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) C /2412, abstracts of title deeds in vol. 4 of M.M. minutes.
16. *Friends' Library*, Churchman, vol. 6, p. 206; Griffith, vol. 5, p. 406; Follows, vol. 4, p. 42; Grubb, vol. 12, p. 309; Brayton, vol. 10, p. 468; Jordan, vol. 13, p. 330.
17. Abstracts, as in n. 15.
18. S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) 37/1.
19. Abstracts as in n. 15, and DD/SFR (W) 27 fo.239 and 161, and 242.
20. Particulars of Charitable Trusts, Meeting Houses and Burial Grounds of Bristol and Somerset Quarterly Meeting of Friends, 1870, p. 54.
21. S.R.O., DD/SFR (W) 27, pp. 253-4.