

# HITCHIN QUAKERS ANCIENT & MODERN

Transcript of a Talk by  
Metford Robson  
Given to  
Hitchin Historical Society  
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EDMUND SPAYGOLD  
From a sketch by Samuel Lucas.



A QUAKERS' MEETING



BARBARA WILSON READING "THE HERALD OF PEACE"  
From a sketch by Samuel Lucas.



THOMAS BELLINGHAM IN HIS BUNGALOW CLOSET  
From a sketch by Samuel Lucas.



HITCHIN QUAKERS AT CHESS  
From a sketch by Samuel Lucas in possession of Miss Betts.



Hitchin  
Historical  
Society

## Hitchin Quakers, Ancient and Modern

First of all I would like to say a word or two about my qualifications for speaking to you tonight. I suppose, most importantly, I have been a member of Hitchin Quaker Meeting for nearly 40 years and have picked up a certain amount of information on Hitchin Quakers of the past, simply by being around for that long.

Secondly, I am one of that rare and diminishing breed of Quakers who never joined the Society of Friends, but who became one by right of birth - a privilege long gone! Both my parents were Quakers and their respective families had been Quakers for generations.

If you *really* want to know about the history and contribution of Hitchin Quakers to the town, you cannot do better than turn to Volume II of Reginald Hine's *'History of Hitchin'*, published in 1929. The excellent section on the Quakers was separately published as *'A Mirror for the Society of Friends'* in the same year, and I make no apology for using its contents extensively in tonight's talk.

Hine never became a Quaker, but developed a great love for the Religious Society of Friends - our correct, as opposed to nickname. He was also, of course, steeped in Hitchin life, but I have to stress that in my case, while my wife and I still worship here, we only actually lived in Hitchin for 8½ years between 1963 and 1972. We are consequently somewhat detached from the town and its people, as we live in South Cambridgeshire.

The first of those who were eventually called 'Quakers', or 'Friends', appeared in about 1647, but they were only properly united and organised into a church by George Fox (1624-91), starting with a great Meeting of over 1000 people on Firbank Fell near Sedburgh on Sunday 13 June 1652, which we now regard as the day of our birth. Henceforth in this talk, I will refer interchangeably to 'Quakers', originally the mocking term perhaps first used when George Fox told a magistrate to *'Quake at the name of the Lord'* and 'Friends' as we still like to call ourselves, perhaps because Jesus called his Disciples his Friends. However it is more probably because in 17<sup>th</sup> century language, they felt that they were *Friends of Truth* - their truth being that *'the inward light of Christ'* was now freely available to all, without the need for a priest, or any other intermediary.

At its beginning, the Society was therefore destined to be extremely worrying to the authorities, and thousands of Quakers were thrown into jail. At a time when attendance at the established church was expected, the Friends threw over formulated creed, the ordained ministry, set forms of worship and sacramental observances, stating that they were *'primitive Christianity revived'*. By 'primitive', they of course meant 'original'. Their worship and organisation was to be entirely based on trust in the spirit. Their Meetings for Worship were therefore not structured in any way, and were based on a silence where one could listen to the leadings of God, although those who felt moved to do so could speak words appropriate to the occasion.

The Quakers have always had a belief in the supreme worth of every individual as a child of God. George Fox originally described this as 'that of God in everyone' and it is still a very precious phrase for Quakers today. The so-called 'Quaker Peace Testimony' - a refusal to support war in any circumstances, has its roots in this, as does the concern for

social justice, which has led many Quakers to try and live a simple and spiritually grounded life.

In the past, these roots of the Quaker faith led members to reject many things that we find enriching today. Beautiful clothes, the theatre, novels, art and, later on, alcohol were all rejected as barriers to the spiritual life. The simple Quaker dress became a quaint uniform, which sadly separated Quakers from the rest of Society. At a time when one spoke to one's friends and equals using the second person singular ('thee' and 'thou') and strangers and one's betters using the second person plural ('you') Quakers settled for 'thee' and 'thou' for everyone, even the King and certainly Oliver Cromwell. This too became quaint and eventually disappeared when the second person singular disappeared from common usage in the English language. However, it was a long time going and my mother at College in the 1920s received weekly letters from her father in which he used 'thee' and 'thou', as a purely family language of affection.

Now I would like to turn more specifically to Quakers in Hitchin. Firstly, it has to be said that at our height we were never more than 200 in a population of say 5000, while today there are no more than about 40 of us in a much larger population. However, there are many more people who attend our Meetings for Worship, without actually joining the Society, so our Meeting room is well filled on most Sundays.

In the mid-seventeenth century, Hitchin was of course a Puritan stronghold and little groups of people stole away from the Parish Church, many of them to sit in silence with the Friends. Ralph Radcliffe, son of the squire of Hitchin Priory, entered in his notebook: 'The Quakers are growing numerous and troublesome', while the Vicar, Thomas Kidner, bought a book written by a John Clapham with the fearsome title '*Full discovery and Confutation of the Wicked and Damnable Practices of the Quakers*'. John Bunyan, who had of course set up as a preacher in the neighbourhood, also attacked the '*delusive pernicious doctrines of those unstable souls, the Quakers*' and the '*high, light, frothy, notions of this loose company of ranters*'.

Persecution of the Quakers in Hitchin now began in earnest. Edward Brockett was imprisoned for refusing to pay the priest's tithes, while George Huckle was tried at Westminster for his '*trespasses, contempts and offences*' and was sent to prison. John Lucas was cast into the Fleet prison, partly because in common with Quakers to this day, he refused to swear in court. After all, why should he, for Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount said, '*You are not to swear at all... Plain 'Yes' or 'No' is all you need to say*'.

Even after Charles II had promised liberty to tender consciences:

- 7 Friends were presented at court for not having their children baptised,
- 6 Friends were heavily fined for not paying church rates,
- 5 Friends were presented '*for standing excommunicate*',
- 28 Friends were presented for not coming to their parish church to hear divine service,
- 3 Friends were presented for not causing their husbands and a child to be buried in Christian burial
- 1 Friend was presented for selling Quaker books.

And so it went on.

There were constant raids by Justice Radcliffe on the Quakers' Meetings for Worship and, as these were at the time in the houses of private individuals, large amounts of goods were distrained from them.

Quakers did what they could to support one another in their Sufferings and during the worst period of persecution a national 'Meeting for Sufferings' was set up in London to offer nationwide help. In course of time, this became the national executive of the Society and it exists to this day. In Hitchin, help was of a more immediate and practical nature. For instance, apart from collections made for those in prison, a cow was purchased in 1683 to be lent round to needy families.

However, after the Act of Toleration in 1689, the extreme persecution died down and the Meeting settled quietly at 9 High Street, the home of William Lucas. This site is now under Woolworths! The barn at the back was used as a clearing-house for goods taken from members in lieu of tithes, for which they were still liable.

George Fox had set up regional gatherings of Quakers to support each other in their persecution and to make sure that those who called themselves Quakers (there being, as yet, no formal membership) were worthy of their calling. These met more or less once a month and still exist as 'Monthly Meetings'.

Now that persecution had more or less ceased, these Meetings busied themselves with more mundane matters. For instance, when Abraham Thompson and Katherine Roberts of Hitchin wanted to marry, they got permission from the Monthly Meeting, which found that they were 'free of any entanglement prejudicial to the married estate'. However, Robert and Elizabeth Berry 'Your desolate Friends' signed an admission that 'Instead of marrying after the laudable manner of truth, we did it by a priest after the superstitious form of the Church of England, a rash inconsiderate adventure, which was the result of a surprising temptation'. One wonders what on earth the temptation could have been and who presented them with it.

Eventually, in 1694, a purpose-built Meeting House was constructed in what was then called, rather insalubriously, 'Cod Piece Alley'. This then became 'Quakers Alley' and is now West Alley. This Meeting House, or what was left of it, was converted into dwellings and was eventually demolished in 1960.

There was no room for a burial ground, but the Friends paid a quit rent of ½d a year to the Lord of the Manor for a little plot at Salters Dell. His Steward said, 'The Quakers pay me a quit rent of a halfpenny only, but if they but haste to be buried there, we shall not repent the bargain. It were a blessing if this little copyhold could presently hold them all'.

The earliest Quakers relied greatly during the times of persecution on the support of prominent Friends who travelled the length and breadth of the Quaker World, in this country and elsewhere, giving succour to congregations much weakened by imprisonment. They became known as 'Travelling-Ministers' and even after the cessation of persecution, this tradition of travelling ministry continued until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While anyone in a Quaker Meeting can stand up and speak if moved to do so, those who were most gifted would be formally recorded as Ministers by the Monthly Meeting.

They would sit on a raised stand facing the rest of the congregation, in which men and women sat on separate sides, as was then common in many churches. In addition to any Travelling-Ministers who might be present, most Meetings had their own Recorded Ministers, and the congregation would expect most of the spoken ministry to come from them. Today, we all have equal responsibility for the Meeting for Worship and sit altogether in a circle, instead of facing a Ministers' bench.

**Hitchin** Meeting was visited by many Travelling-Ministers over the years; men and women who were famous throughout the Quaker World. Later on I will mention some of Hitchin's Ministers, who also made their mark in other places and countries.

I have already mentioned that Quakers were very anxious to ensure that those who bore the name were worthy of it. There were however, a few falls from grace. There were some instances of drunkenness, fornication, adultery and even highway robbery! There were also some supposed crimes which are today more difficult to understand. **Mary Kimpton**, in 1830, *'professed a satisfaction in having joined a sect called the Church of England'*. Arguments with her were unavailing and she was disowned for *'having forsaken our ministry in order to attend the hireling ministry of the Church of England'* then a cardinal sin, so far as Quakers were concerned.

The saddest **disownments** of all were for marrying a non-Quaker. This ruling sprang from the extreme difficulties experienced by the infant Society of Friends and its need to stand together in adversity. However, it became a main reason for the huge loss of members in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the requirement was annulled in 1859.

As I have already said, Quakers are perhaps best known for their objection to war as a legitimate way of solving problems. As long ago as 1660, Quakers informed Charles II, *'We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or any pretence whatsoever and this is our testimony to the whole world'*. Hitchin Friends were generally loyal to this, but there were occasions when they avoided service in the Militia by paying a substitute. John Lucas, as Clerk to the Monthly Meeting, did so in 1778 and was disowned shortly afterwards. In 1797, Joseph **Hagger** actually enlisted and took the oath usual in such cases. He too was disowned in due course.

It has to be said that in the last century, some Quakers have thought it right to join the armed forces, especially during the First and Second World Wars, but they were certainly not disowned. However, as a whole, the Society has been consistently faithful to its testimony and has endured the consequences when necessary.

In past times, and especially on so called 'Rejoicing Nights' for victories, Hitchin Friends put out their lights, closed their shutters and stayed indoors. This obviously marked them out and they naturally became the targets for malicious damage. Later on, and perhaps less concerned about their own sufferings, they became heavily involved with trying to alleviate the damage caused by war. James Hack **Tuke** of Hitchin was, for instance, one of the seven Quaker commissioners sent to France to see what could be done to alleviate the terrible suffering caused by the Franco Prussian War of 1870/71, and members of the Meeting undertook relief work in France, Germany and elsewhere during and after the First and Second World Wars. Such work still continues.

Quakers became known for their honesty in business. It is partly due to them that fixed prices for goods became the norm. Their 'yea' was their 'yea' and their 'nay' was their 'nay'. They were of course enjoined to live simply and to avoid getting involved with anything beyond what they could manage. However, these valuable pieces of advice made Quakers trustworthy in the business community and were consequently recipes for getting rich. Some Hitchin Friends succumbed to this, but it did enable the best of them to be substantial benefactors.

There were, however, some Friends who did not succeed in business. In 1805 John Brown had '*dishonourably fallen into insolvent circumstances*' while in 1838 one of the Elders of the Meeting had to be disciplined for '*unwise and unwarrantable speculation in oil, whereby he failed to meet his pecuniary engagements*'.

Those who did succeed helped Friends in poor circumstances and then extended their philanthropy to the town. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Quaker bankers, manufacturers and landowners in Hitchin founded Hospitals, Libraries, Friendly Societies and Penny Savings Banks. They gave land for roads and open spaces and projected the Corn Exchange and the old Town Hall. The list of benefactions in Hitchin is very considerable.

The background to all these good works was of course considerable personal and corporate discipline. Friends were to '*avoid all vain sports and places of diversion, gaming, all un-necessary frequenting of taverns and other public houses and other intemperance*'. One lukewarm Hitchin Quaker said, '*Everything is Nay and never Yea*'. It reminded him of Phoebe Lucas, who was said to have declined 17 eligible offers of marriage because she had lost the capacity of saying 'Yea'.

As well as these strictures and the previously mentioned strictures on speech, there was 'hat honour', (no raising or removal of hats to anyone, whatever their rank), the use of numbered days and months in order to avoid using names of pagan origin, and even strictures on their houses and gardens, which must be plain and serviceable. Costly marriages and funerals were of course frowned upon, and romances, plays and other '*vain and idle pastimes*' were prohibited. In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that identical gravestones and cremation tablets in our Burial Ground all avoid reference to the months by name, but this is now merely done for the sake of consistency with the past and because it is a rather touching link with days gone by.

It is sometimes amusing to hear how these strictures came to be abandoned, how for instance, a piano was hidden at the top of Joseph Lucas' house, where the younger generation could listen to its 'unholy' music undisturbed. Apart from such lapses from orthodoxy, one wonders how on earth Hitchin Friends actually enjoyed themselves.

Well, it is gratifying to note that they did so and with a good deal of Quakerly gusto. They read history, they could speak soberly of past and present transactions, they gardened, they carried out mathematical and scientific experiments, they cut silhouettes, they botanised, they kept up diaries and they drank tea together! Samuel Lucas of course painted watercolours, but this was right at the end of the period of their prohibition and in any case he became a member of the Church of England in 1869.

So far as dress was concerned, I have already said that the simplicity of Quaker dress became a kind of uniform. Thomas Shillitoe travelled all over Europe as a Minister. In

1821 he was in Copenhagen and was promised an interview with the King. One of the courtiers asked whether he intended to appear before the King *'in THOSE clothes'*. Thomas said he had no other ones and admitted that they did look somewhat the worse for wear due to breaking a bottle of chocolate 'over them. However, although he subsequently spent some time tidying himself up, it would have been an article of his Quaker faith to wear his simple Quaker clothes, even if he was going to a Royal Court.

As an aside to this, it is worth noting the effect of his constant travels 'in the Ministry' on his domestic arrangements. He once informed his long-suffering wife that he would be absent for at least a year and possibly two. She was silent for a while ... and then observed *'and how many shirts wilt thou require?'* Women had a particular cross to bear, but they bore it with fortitude, for as Mercy Ransom said before her death in 1811, *'When the mind thinks nothing, when the body acteth nothing contrary to the will of God, this is perfect sanctification'*. However, so far as many young Quaker women were concerned, they were not bowed down by their faith and enjoyed life to the full. It was observed that they put on the regulation bonnet in such a way as to look positively becoming and as a result, Quaker boy met Quaker girl in the usual way and there were many extremely happy and fulfilling Quaker marriages.

I would now like to talk about some other Hitchin Quaker Ministers and their ministry. One of the curious things about a Religious Society, which at its beginning testified so loudly against a separate priesthood, was that it was beginning to develop something slightly similar of its own. However, there were safeguards which were not present in the same way elsewhere and the Elders of the Meeting would soon admonish those Ministers who spoke *'not according to the spirit, or soared into notions of their own'*.

While, by and large, the Ministers were admirable people, some were dry and tedious. Samuel Spavold, who fancied himself as a prophet, spent 2 hours prophesying in 1772 and was left by the Meeting to prophesy to himself, apparently unconscious of the fact that everyone else had crept out of the room. In Salterforth, Lancashire, it was reported that he preached 'doctrine' for 3½ hours and then began to prophesy. Bearing in mind that all Quaker Ministry is spoken extempore and without notes, it seems quite clear to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that Spavold must have had severe, but perhaps unrecognised mental problems. However, some attempt was made to check him and a conference was called to discuss the meaning and scope of the word 'prophet' as used in the New Testament! Despite these happenings, Samuel Spavold nevertheless travelled to the United States and elsewhere in the Service of the Society and, when he went to Ireland, James Jenkins, who was sent with him as a travelling companion, reported that he had sweetness of disposition, but that *'Misjudgement was often superseded by the power of his imaginations'*.

Thomas Thompson (1673-1727) lived in Hitchin from 1707 until his death, but during that time was often away. In the course of his *'seasonable, serviceable and comfortable ministry'* it was said that he travelled 60,000 miles. By contrast, Mary Ransom (1682-1747) *'fed her lambs in the green pastures of home'*.

Isaac Sharples (1702-74) was a modest, unassuming man. He had *'no air of condescension about him and no exclusiveness'*, so he never had any trouble in buying back the goods and chattels seized in lieu of tithes. Nevertheless it was recorded that he spoke for 2½ hours at the funeral of Alexander Peckover, apparently *with great*

*satisfaction to the Meeting*'. In the light of this favourable contemporary comment, it is very difficult indeed for us to understand the workings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker mind, bearing in mind that most of what is said in our Meetings for Worship today lasts for only a few minutes at the most.

It was reported that [Sarah Crowley](#) (1717-99) had a *'harsh and grating voice'*, but that she nevertheless travelled acceptably and incessantly throughout the Quaker world.

[Mercy Ransom](#) (1728-1811) had *'the remarkable power of casting out evil spirits in men'*. She married Joseph Ransom in 1765 and lived in [Hitchin](#) for the rest of her life, except for her constant journeys *'in the Ministry'*, usually with an accompanying woman Friend. She did much to uphold the Woman's Business Meetings that had been set up by George Fox, who believed in the spiritual equality of the sexes, but who saw that it was not yet possible for men and women to meet together on an equal footing.

In practice, until the separate Women's and Men's Business Meetings were scrapped in the 1890s, Quaker men took what were felt to be the more important decisions, while the women relieved the poor, the sick and the weak, found jobs for orphans, distributed worthy literature and made arrangements for marriage. When the Yearly Meeting of the Society set up a separate Women's Yearly Meeting in London, Hitchin Quakers were very prominent in it.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hitchin Quaker Meeting began seriously to suffer from stagnation and decline. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there had been perhaps 200 Quakers in a population of 5,000. This had declined to 100 by 1850 and was down to 50 by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today there are about 40 members but, unlike in previous periods, we have 20-30 people who are very much part of the Meeting, but who are not in formal membership.

One of the main causes of decline was [disownment](#) for marrying a non-Quaker. This was followed by narrowness, a certain love of riches (which, as I have said before, really does not go with the Quaker ethos), respectability, doctrinal controversy and a falling away from the daring original vision, to the sin of orthodoxy. As an aside to this, when I carried out some research on Frederic [Seebohm](#), the Banker and in many respects an impeccable 19<sup>th</sup> century Hitchin Quaker, of whom more anon, I was amazed to read that the 40 room Seebohm household at *'The Hermitage'* required 6 to 7 live-in servants, 3 Gardeners for its 7½ acres of Grounds and, of course, a Groom for its horses. In addition to such worldly departures from their original insights, the utter absence of 'Form' in their observances, no longer sprang from the heart.

There was a constant attrition of resignation and I suspect that quite a few finished up at [St Mary's](#) as more congenial to their life-styles. Some people in the town were rather pleased to see this happening. In 1815, a Hitchin mob burned the effigies of those who had not celebrated the Battle of Waterloo, while Sydney Smith, the essayist, said he would like *'to roast one Quaker, only one, for the satisfaction of the thing.'*

In 1840, despite the recent loss of a substantial number of members by resignation, a new Meeting House was erected in Bedford Road. Surprisingly, this was twice as large as the previous one, but its erection 'in faith' did not arrest the decline. Ralph Lucas remarked that; *'The Meetings are cold and lifeless, the Ministers are of another age'*. It was said



of one of these Ministers, Samuel Alien, who had been very ill as a young man, that *'his life was despaired of at 27 and his death at 97'*.

However, not all was doom and gloom, and various gifted Ministers visited Hitchin to bring life to the Meetings. Particular mention should be made of Benjamin Seebohm, father of Frederic, who was born in Germany in 1798 and settled in England in 1814. He became a prosperous wool merchant in Bradford, but finally settled in Luton. He had married Esther Wheeler of Hitchin and frequently came to Hitchin, where his son Frederic had married Mary Jane Exton, and was in partnership as a Banker with James Hack Tuke. The latter lived at *'The Croft'* towards the west end of Bancroft while, as previously mentioned, the former lived at *'The Hermitage'* further down the road. Parts of both houses can still be seen, if you know where to look.

However, despite all, Hitchin Meeting was dying, a slow delicious death of introspection and too much inter marriage of body and mind. Then, all of a sudden, when the last of the aged Ministers had departed and theological change became possible, its life was miraculously released for service in the world. Hence it was not enough to be against war and other evils, but one must be up and doing to end them!

So, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hitchin Friends, despite their reduction in numbers, founded a Peace Society and worked tirelessly for the emancipation of the slaves, firstly in the British Empire and then in the United States. A series of Readings from *'Uncle Tom's Cabin'* were held in Hollow Lane and attracted packed houses. The Hertfordshire Members of Parliament were pressed on the matter of slavery and any cotton or sugar found to be 'slave grown' was boycotted. Societies were started to advocate Free Grown Cotton and Total Abstinence, despite the fact that many Quakers had once been Brewers. A 'Lying in' Charity was also founded, together with a Provident Institution, a Society for Superseding the Necessity of Climbing Boys, a Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, and a Society for the Provision of Invalid Kitchens in Back Street - presumably the equivalent of the modern soup runs for the homeless. The first Quaker Mission work, which ultimately became *'The Friends' Foreign Mission Association'*, had its roots in Hitchin, but perhaps above all there was the founding of schools. Three Hitchin Primary Schools are named after 19<sup>th</sup> century Hitchin Quakers with a special interest in education, Mary Exton, Samuel Lucas and William Ransom. Their interest in universal education arose from Quaker efforts to enable illiterate people to read and especially to read the Bible. At their height, the so called 'Adult Schools' had a membership of 350 and many Hitchin Friends until the 1920s would take a class at the Adult School first thing on Sunday Morning, before proceeding to their Meeting for Worship at the Meeting House.

Quakers had not been allowed into Parliament or to the Universities, but they had a tradition of political and social pressure, which now came to its full flowering. However, before this time, they had memories of more direct contact with those in power. George IV on his deathbed had cried in anguish, *'Oh that Quaker, that Quaker'* in remembrance of Thomas Shillitoe's plain speaking about the error of his ways. It has however to be said that although Reginald Hine and Hitchin Quakers have made much of the remarkable Shillitoe as a Hitchin resident, he only lived in the town about 10 years and spent much of that time on his religious journeys.

To return to Hitchin Friends' concern for education in its broadest sense, it is perhaps worth mentioning the attendance of Joseph Lister at Isaac Brown's Quaker School in

Hitchin, now remembered by the presence of Lister hospital. Then we must not forget the historical and religious writings of Frederic Seebohm, the Artistic works of Samuel Lucas and Birkett Foster and the Roman excavations of William Ransom. Hitchin Friends were fascinated by the world around them. One Hitchin Elder wrote *'Emily Mauser drank tea here this evening and dissected a frog afterwards with Jane'*. Clearly there was felt to be nothing incongruous about this!

As already mentioned, the Barclays Bank building in the 19<sup>th</sup> century housed the Quaker Bank of Sharpies, Tuke, Lucas and Seebohm, the partners of which became quietly wealthy. Frederic Seebohm gave land adjacent to *'The Hermitage'* to create *'Hermitage Road,'* but much more importantly, he (the banker) and William Ransom (the manufacturing chemist), set about founding the Hitchin Girls' and Boys' Grammar Schools. Part of the Seebohm estate was given outright to build the new Girls' Grammar School on Windmill Hill. The founding of the Boys' Grammar School is a bit more complicated. After the death of Joseph Sharpies in 1871, his house known as *'The Woodlands'*, opposite *'The Hermitage'* in Bancroft, was left to his daughter Eliza Peckover, who lived at what is now the National Trust owned *'Peckover House'* in Wisbech. So, for a time it was let as a Quaker School, for which it was eminently suited, as there were very substantial grounds at the rear. Alfred and William Ransom had been made trustees of the property, which eventually passed to the eldest Peckover daughter, who clearly did not need it. After some negotiation, the Quakers William Ransom, Frederic Seebohm, Joseph Gurney Barclay, Francis Ransom and members of the Peckover family, together with 50 small subscribers and, somewhat mysteriously, Trinity College Cambridge, enabled the founding of the Boys' Grammar School in the grounds of the *'The Woodlands'* in 1889 and there it remains to this day.

I think this is all I need to say about the story of Hitchin Quakers up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our story in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present day is totally different. *'The carriage does not wait for long outside the Meeting House door'* was a Quaker saying of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which meant that the carriages of the rich Banking and Manufacturing Quakers tended to move on to other places of worship which were more congenial to them. As an illustration of this move away from Quakerism, despite the presence of perhaps a dozen or so perfectly good Quaker boarding schools during the period, the lone son of Frederic and Mary Ann Seebohm was sent to Rugby as more appropriate to his class and social standing and although he remained a fairly nominal Quaker for the rest of his life, the family as a whole has now moved away from the Society of Friends.

Twentieth century Quakers became steadily less intermarried and are now usually the product of state schools. The modern Quaker is likely to be the only one in his or her family who belongs to the Society of Friends and their membership of it is likely to have been by personal application rather than by inheritance. While Quakers are likely to be involved with a wide spread of wage earning activity, Quakerism seems to be especially attractive to those who are in the teaching or the caring professions. Sadly, as in many other Churches, we do not have many manual workers and are disproportionately 'white middle class.' We are also aging and shrinking, which is worrying, as I think we have a priceless heritage. However, as I have already said, although Hitchin Meeting is technically smaller than it once was, we currently appear to be attracting a good number of young families and others, who enjoy their association with the Meeting, but who prefer not to apply for membership. On the whole this seems to be a late 20<sup>th</sup> and early

21<sup>st</sup> century trait. People are not ‘joiners’ in the way that they used to be and we should perhaps learn to accept this fact cheerfully, in the hope that all will be well in the end.

I would like to conclude by saying a word about how the present Meeting House came into being. In 1940, an incoming family reported that attendance at the Meeting for Worship in the large old Meeting House was less than a dozen. By the end of the Second World War, it was evident that the Meeting could not continue in this way and led by an enthusiastic group of younger incoming Friends, it was decided to sell the Meeting House to the then Hitchin Rural District Council and to meet temporarily in the Lucas Room at the Town Hall.

As a result of the sale of the Meeting House and an Appeal, a new Meeting House was built in the Burial Ground in Paynes Park, which had superseded the previously referred to Burial Ground at Salters Dell and another one at St Ippolyts. This Burial Ground was surrounded by a high brick wall with an imposing arched gateway, enclosing an untamed jungle prior to the commencement of building works. In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that although the Burial Ground was purchased in 1750, with the first burial in 1757, a series of initialled and named bricks appearing to date from 1726, is inexplicably built into a boundary wall on the North West side.

Many felt that the new Meeting House should not destroy the oasis of peace created by the surrounding Burial Ground wall. After a degree of acrimony on the part of the old Quaker families who did not like to see their ancestors disturbed, but who had no real input into the life of the Meeting at that time, the new Meeting House was built on stilts, with its main facilities at first floor level and only a glass enclosed lobby and staircase at ground floor level. However, the concept was to some extent destroyed when North Hertfordshire District Council decided on a traffic scheme, which necessitated removal of part of the enclosing wall, the gateway and some graves, although the public at large could at least see the building, which had won a Civic Trust Award in 1959, without having to peer through the gate. As a result of these activities, attendance at Meetings for Worship grew considerably at the time and the Meeting remains in reasonably good health to this day.

Metford Robson 28 November 2002

*Footnote: Salter's Dell (mentioned both on this page and page 3) was an area of approximately three acres, stretching from Paynes Park to Old Park Road. The 1676 Survey of the Royal Manor of Hitchin notes that the land was held by Francis Turner of London ("salter"). In 1723 a plot of one rood (¼ acre) was conveyed to the Quakers for a burial ground.*

*[Courtesy of Bridget Howlett]*