

History of Friends in Croydon

Transcribed and edited (re-phrased but not cut) by David Parlett, from

"a retrospect compiled by George Percy Harris from researches by Agnes Lindsay Waldmayer" [*sic* - Waldmeyer?]

Preface

On coming to Croydon in November 1940 my first sight of the Meeting House was a sad one. I asked two policemen at the corner of George Street and the High Street at where the Friends Meeting House was. One did not know, the other directed me to the police station to enquire again, a third policeman told me to go along the road and turn right and cross two roads and it was on the right. Yes it was there or rather what was remaining of it after a land mine had exploded near. It was a sad sight to see the shattered building and the red tiles of the adult school hail all loose, the Meeting House a mere shell. There was a notice pinned up to inform Friends that Friends Meeting for Worship was held in the hall of the Free Church in Wellesley Road where the following Sunday I found a large wooden shed where Friends were gathered and where I was very warmly welcomed. We met there for several months until the Adult School Hall was repaired enough for us to be able to use it for meeting.

In recognition for kindness of the people of the Free Church who let us use their hall, the meeting presented them with a clock. At the Preparative meeting it was left to O. Percy Harris to buy the clock and to "choose a good face"

A few weeks later, the Free Church lost their wooden hall.

Now that the Meeting House is condemned I would like to make a few records to the property, as a possible interest to Friends in the future when all signs of the Meeting House have been erased.

Agnes Waldemeyer

The premises

Origins are somewhat obscure, but the following account is based on researches conducted by Agnes Waldmayer (a late Croydon Friend) from various sources.

Gilbert Latey's biography refers to the existence of a meeting in 1657, and in 1664 Friends were holding meetings in their own houses in Croydon and Mitcham.

A minute of Wandsworth and Croydon MM, June 1697, records: "It is agreed that the weekday meeting be appointed on the 5th day of the week at the Meeting House in Croydon."

In or about that year a small building was rented at a cost of £2 per annum from Thomas Beck, but its whereabouts is not known.

In 1702 Joseph Pierce, with the help of his wife, started a small school, possibly in the small building already referred to.

In May 1707 a plot of land was bought from John Davis for £25.5s and conveyed to John Lamb, Richard Storyer, Moses Savory and John Boswell as trustees, and later on another piece of land was purchased.

In 1721 a meeting house was erected on this land at a cost of £249, together with the "West Wall" for £21. Park Lane was at that time known as Back Lane. The meeting house formed the older portion of the building which was eventually destroyed in 1944.

In 1731 the property was conveyed to John Wheeler, John Eliot, Benjamin Bell and others, and in 1753 it passed into the hands of Philip Eliot, Benjamin Bell, Richard Grafton, John Eliot and others. The property was conveyed again in 1794 to William Foster Reynolds, Edmund Fry and others "upon Trust that the said premises should at all times hereafter be used as a meeting house for the religious worship of the people called Quakers and the burial ground for the dead for ever and should for those purposes be conveyed from time to time to new trustees when and as often as the

preparative meeting of the said people called Quakers at Croydon and then subsequently monthly meeting for the time being should direct and appoint".

In 1720 there appears a minute in either monthly or preparative meeting desiring that Samuel Curtis should pay a half year's rent to Elizabeth Garland for a meeting house. A few years later this lady was paid 10s. in consideration of a way through a yard, but its location is not specified.

The rate book of 1761 records a rate of 2/6d for a meeting house at Woodside paid by Edward Skinner, and a rate of sixpence for land rented from Thomas Beck. In that year John Eliot left £100 towards a fund for keeping the meeting house and burial ground in repair. Eliot died in 1752 and his trust remains to this day [1955].

In 1764 Francis Eliot gave £50 and a little later Mary Eliot gave £100 towards the Repair Fund. John Eliot lived at The Grove, a large house situated at the corner of Coombe Road and Park Lane. It is now known as Coombe Hill House and occupied by a school.

In 1811 the burial ground was enlarged, the cost being defrayed by John and Ann Hall, who also gave £400 towards the erection of a meeting house. That this probably took the form of an addition to the older portion is suggested by the word 'repairs' in this minute of May 1816: "The subscriptions received amount to £871.15.1. The expense of building and repairs amounts to £893.5.2", leaving a balance of £21.10.1 to be provided for.

This meeting house was registered as a recognised place of worship in May 1854, so that marriages and funerals could take place there.

The cemetery in Queens Road was opened in 1861, with a portion allotted to Friends. This was evidently an unusual concession, as unconsecrated land was not generally allowed in a public cemetery. The grant may have been made because of the respect felt in the town for Friends.

In 1888 the meeting house was again altered, at a cost of £900. Four years later Kingston MM reported that John Horniman had offered to provide increased accommodation. Six Weeks Meeting appointed a committee to consider the matter in conjunction with Croydon Friends. The additions comprised the room alongside the meeting house proper, known as the Long Room, two classrooms on the first floor, caretakers' quarters on the top floor, and an improved heating apparatus. The total cost was £1600 for the building and about £100 for furniture and fittings.

In 1923 a strip of land was leased to the Corporation at a peppercorn rent for a footpath which passed under the archway in Park Lane.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the first air-raid on Croydon took place on 15 August 1940 and was followed by continual raids by day and by night. On Saturday 28 September a land mine was dropped in Park Lane, but failed to explode. The authorities immediately cleared the neighbourhood, pending the removal of the mine.

In the very early hours of the following day – about 2am – meeting house caretakers Harold and Ruth Wilkinson, who had been out when the area was cleared, appeared at the home of the Percy (the writer) and Barbara Harris at 24 Haling Park Road, seeking refuge. Sunday morning meeting was held here the same day.

On the following day a naval squad appeared in Park Lane to remove the mine. It was in the process of being hauled on to a lorry by a long cable when it unfortunately slipped. There was a terrible explosion. Several houses were destroyed or severely damaged, including the meeting house and St Anselm's School. (The school premises were those previously occupied by Friends School between its removal from Islington in 1825 and its transfer to Saffron Walden in 1879.) Fortunately, no lives were lost on this occasion, but several people were rendered homeless.

Friends met in Haling Park Road on the two Sundays following, but, almost immediately, the members of the Free Christian Church in Wellesley Road offered us the use of the building at the back of their church. This offer was gratefully accepted

and meetings were held there throughout the winter of 1940-1. In the spring of 1941 the Adult School Hall, which had suffered from the explosion, was sufficiently repaired to enable Friends to meet there. This continued till the summer of 1944 when the first flying bombs ('doodle-bugs') appeared. Thereupon the Corporation requisitioned the Hall and established various offices in it, including a canteen provided by the Salvation Army.

With the Hall no longer available, the Meeting returned to Haling Park Road and continued there for about three months, despite considerable damage to the house in August 1944 from the blast of a bomb dropped on some houses immediately opposite.

With the lessening of the raids the Hall was not so much in use. Friends thereafter migrated to the Gallery Room of the Hall.

Shortly afterwards the building was de-requisitioned and meetings resumed in the main body of the Hall, here they have been held ever since.

One of the earliest of these meetings was in memory of Hugh and Helen Crosfield, who had been killed instantly in the early morning of 14 November 1944 when their house was completely destroyed by the last bomb to fall in Croydon.

Composition of the meeting

Croydon became a Monthly Meeting upon its separation from Wandsworth in 1720. By 1755 monthly meetings were being held only four or five times a year. Only cash affairs were attended to, and representatives were entertained at The Greyhound or The White Lion. In that year Quarterly Meeting sent a committee to Croydon to investigate matters and to see what could be done to improve the life of the meeting. In 1778 Croydon joined Kingston and Wandsworth Monthly Meeting.

Meetings for worship began in Purley in 1905, but a Preparative Meeting was not formed until 1910.

A change in the Monthly Meeting boundaries took place in 1935. Hitherto Kingston and Southwark MM comprised PMs at Croydon, Esher, Kingston, Peckham, Purley, Streatham, Sutton, Sydenham, and Wandsworth. Two new Monthly Meetings were now formed.

1. Kingston MM comprised Esher, Kingston, Mitcham, Purley, Streatham, Sutton, and Wandsworth.
2. Croydon and Southwark MM comprised Croydon, Petts Wood, Peckham, Sydenham, and Woolwich.

<DSP note: In ?1982 these were rearranged as follows: 1. Kingston & Wandsworth MM = Esher, Kingston, Richmond, Wandsworth, Wimbledon; 2. Southwark, Lewisham and Bromley MM = Bexleyheath, Blackheath, Bromley, Forest Hill, Petts Wood, Woolwich; 3. Purley & Sutton MM = Caterham, Croydon, Epsom, Purley, Streatham, Sutton.>

Friends school

Friends School transferred from Islington to Croydon in 1825. The house stood in 13 acres of land, but its actual boundaries are unknown. The grounds apparently extended from Fell Road to the railway. Various Quaker names are still to be seen, including Friends Road, Barclay Road, and Penn Road House.

The site contained an old mansion said to have been designed by Wren.

In 1853 Edward Foster Brady and Elizabeth Brady were appointed to the headship. The former died in 1838 and was buried in the burial ground. His widow continued as head until 1842, with John Sharp second in command. She thereupon became superintendent of the Mount School, York, while John Sharp and his wife Hannah became heads of Friends School. The former died in 1853 and was succeeded by Charles Fryer, who died the following year. His widow, Sarah, continued until 1860,

and was followed by William Robinson. He died nine years later, and George and Lucy Linney took charge.

A number of epidemics broke out between 1839 and 1875, and, as Croydon had grown considerably, thus adding to the danger arising from typhoid, the Committee decided to remove the school to Saffron Walden in 1879, where it still remains.

<Present-day Taberner House stands on part of the site of the Croydon school. The twin iron gates originally standing at the entrance to the Croydon school were also removed and are still prominently displayed at Saffron Walden School.>

Some 19th century personalities

Looking back to the end of the 19th century, one recalls that somewhat imposing row of elderly Friends seated in the upper gallery, as it was called, of the meeting house – i.e. the top row of seats: Charles and Jane Morland, Lucy Morland, Georgina King Lewis, George Theodore Crosfield, Henry Tuke Mennell, and Edward Grubb.

Those were the days of large families: the Crowleys, Mennells, Morlands, Allens, and Warners. There are not many living today (1954) who can remember them, but to a few these names recall old memories.

Out of a large number of Friends, well-known in their day, it is only possible to mention a few.

Thomas Beck was a wealthy landowner and farmer. In 1688 he bought a house, a brewery, a barn, and a garden. He also owned the land on which the meeting house stood.

Lydia Rous, the famous head mistress of the Mount School, York, was a pupil at Croydon Friends School at the age of ten in 1829, where she remained for four years.

Liza Bell. In the diary of John Finch Marsh there appears an account of her funeral 7th mo. 24th, 1839. "I attended the interment of the remains of dear Liza Bell at Croydon. Her dear bereaved husband seemed preserved in much calmness and was strengthened to express a few words sweetly at the graveside. There were several communications in the Meeting, and some supplications. I was of the mind that more silence and fewer words would have been more profitable and edifying."

John Ashby was the founder of the firm of Ashby, Son, and Allen, millers in St James Road, still carrying on business as A H Allen and Co Ltd. He died in 1845.

Peter Bedford lived in Park Cottage, Brighton Rd. His name is still well known as the founder of the Bedford Institute. He died in 1864 and as buried in the Burial Ground.

Richard Sterry lived for many years at Oakfield Park, the grounds of which are now occupied by the Croydon General Hospital. In 1878 the estate was sold and cut up and is now occupied by the roads Oakfield, Kidderminster, Leonard, and Farquharson. Richard Sterry was a member of the Croydon Local Board from its inception in 1849 to 1855. He died in 186?, and he and his wife Anne were buried in the Friends' Burial Ground.

John and Anne Horniman lived at Coombe Cliff, now (1954) occupied by the Corporation's Convalescent Home for children. Part of the grounds are now a public park adjoining the Park Hill recreation ground. John Horniman was the proprietor of 'Horniman's Tea', familiar in hoarding many years ago. He contributed largely to the meeting house. He was buried in the Burial Ground in 1893. His wife died in 1900 at the age of 100, and was also buried there.

George Pitt, still remembered by some of us, was the last local Friend to wear the plain Quaker dress. The writer recalls his leaving the meeting if the Bible were read, because he considered that it lacked the spontaneity required in a Friends' meeting. He died in 1908, and was probably the last to be buried in the Burial Ground.

Friends have for many years taken an active part in town affairs, and at time of writing many are serving on public bodies and on various social service activities. At one time

five members of Croydon meeting were town councillors, and at another time three were magistrates. The only Quaker mayor was Charles Coleby Morland, who served in 1903-4. A former Friend, Charles Heath Clark, was mayor in 1919-20. He resigned his membership during the First World War because he could not accept the pacifist position.

Persecutions

It is well known that from the early days of Quakerism Friends suffered many kinds of persecution and imprisonment. Some local cases will prove interesting. The surprising thing is that these continued in a milder form until nearly the end of the 19th century.

Records show that in July 1659, at Mitcham, "a volley of stones was thrown at a bare-headed man engaged in prayer. The congregation was kicked, beaten, trampled upon, and sent away drenched the muddy water. A few days later the meeting at Mitcham was again broken up by violence. At this meeting another valiant servant of God, Rebecca Travers, and others were present."

Many Friends in Croydon and the neighbourhood were fined, and in some cases imprisoned, for non-payment of tithes and church rates. For example:

- On December 26, 1696, Joseph Perch was committed to the Marshalsea Prison at Southwark for failure to pay tithes. He remained here till April 27, 1697.
- In 1698 Nathaniel Owen the Elder was sued by the Rev Hugh Owen of Sevenoaks. The result of the action is not recorded.
- In 1699 John Cole of Mitcham was sued by Matthew Cookman for tithes amounting to £4.19.0. He also was sent to the Marshalsea.
- A little later, John Wilkins of Sutton was sued in the Ecclesiastical Church <*sic*: court?> "for 3s.4d for church rate, by the Wardens of the Parish".
- In 1704 John Lamb of Croydon "had taken from him (for non-repairs of the Parish Worship House) Oats 12 bushells which cost 18/-, the demand being 12/-, it being 6/- more than the demand."
- In the same year "James Jordan of Croydon by virtue of a warrant by Nicholas Carew and John Kater, Justices so-called, for 8/-."