

CRAWSHAWBOOTH FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE

(Transcript of an unsigned and undated document. Picture in Rawtenstall Museum).



Crawshawbooth Meeting House stands hard by an old Pack-horse bridge over the little River Limy to which descent, right and left, two ancient moorland roads, the one from Haslingden and the other from Accrington. At the time the meeting house was built Crawshawbooth was a mere hamlet, a handful of houses occupied by people who were spinners and weavers in wool and farmers as well. For the most part their stock consisted of sheep, the wool from which they spun and carded and wove into cloth, the finished pieces being taken to the markets as Haslingden and Blackburn over the roads which climb up from the bridge to the heights above.

Before there came to be a meeting house Friends in Rossendale held their meetings in their own houses. The Rossendale meeting was held in the house of Richard Ratcliffe, who was cited for having a conventicle in his house. At Haslingden Abraham Heyworth's house was visited by 'two bold informers' while a meeting was being held, and James Ratcliffe, though he was not present at the meeting, was fined £20 for preaching there. Apparently there were quite a number of those meetings held in houses from one end of the Valley of Rossendale to the other. Quakerism is said to have been introduced to the district by William Dewsbury and Thomas Stubbs. Dewsbury was the first convert in Yorkshire made by George Fox and to the moment his life left him in 1688 he was amongst the most active of the early Friends. No sufferings were inflicted on them in Rossendale, we are told, but many gladly received them: "yea, ye then priest of Rossendale, Thomas Summerton, received them and William Dewsbury had a large time of ministering in ye steeple house and afterwards ye priest confirmed by words ye testimony received".

Soon after the year 1660 Richard Ratcliffe who has already been mentioned, provided a piece of ground near his home at Chapel Hill as a burial ground for Friends. Ten years later we find him cited again, his offence this time being "hedging a parcel of land to bury dead corpses in and diverse have been interr'd there". This parcel of land at Chapel Hill is now enclosed by a dry stone wall erected at the expense of Marsden Monthly Meeting in 1847. In 1865 it was declared to be held upon trust as a burial place for Friends dwelling in the

Hundred of Lancashire. The first burial recorded in the register is that of Mary Heyworth, the internment taking place on the 23rd of the first month, 1663. The ground was used until 1844 when it was finally closed, though it remains still, a peaceful little retreat among the hills shaded by some of the finest trees to be found in the district. Some of Richard Ratcliffe's descendants went to Pennsylvania and Ratcliffes are there still, men and women of distinction, whose progenitor's dust lies in what was actually a corner of one of his own fields at Chapel Hill in peace and quiet.

The time came, however, in 1715 when it was considered necessary to have a meeting house in which the members of these house-meetings might assemble for worship. As has been said already there were several of these meetings and a convenient centre had to be found to which they could all come. This explains why the building was not erected at Chapel Hill, chapel Hill being in those days, and still, an inaccessible place approached only by a narrow lane which came to an end there. So in the bottom of the valley two miles away a piece of land was acquired and on it a meeting house was built. It stood really in the hamlet of Crawshawbooth at the junction of three roads, the two already spoken of, and the road from Newchurch, the place of the first clearing and settlement in the Forest of Rossendale, which joined them on the other side of the bridge.

It was a very small meeting house, only half the size of the present building, with which it was incorporated twenty years later. Underneath it is a stable in which the Friends who came to meetings stabled their horses and their asses. In 1722 John Birtwistle by a declaration appropriated the interest of £20 towards the supply of hay for the Friend's horses, and for the poor or for the repair of the meeting house. Later we find two gifts, by James Haworth in 1735 and John Barnes in 1743, given upon trust the interest to be paid to the families who entertained Friends on religious service. This interest is still drawn though it is the members of Monthly Meeting who are entertained nowadays. But the amount is very small.

Such bequests as these throw a flood of light on the conditions obtaining in the district when this building was erected. Towards the cost subscriptions came from the adjourning Monthly Meeting known as Hardshaw, from its five constituent meetings:- Penketh £2.13s., Bickersteth £1.2s.10d., Coppull £1.4s., Liverpool 11s., and Mancheser 14s.8d/ Its cost was about £60. The steps now leading up to the cottage are the steps to this meeting house and part of it forms the gallery of the present meeting house, the steps to this gallery being cut through what was the outer wall of this first building.

In 1736 the newer portion of the Meeting House was built. Before this time, however, the land round the first building was being used as a burial ground, the first burial taking place there in 1728. Even after the new building was finished the Friends were advised by the Monthly Meeting not to use the 'new hall' until it had been registered as a place of worship. The Monthly Meeting held there at this time was held in the Meeting House and not in the now hall. William Taylor, to whom the present writer indebted for some of this information, described the present arrangement of the Meeting House as follows:-

“A meeting room about 21 feet by 25 feet with an ante-room (sic) at the back which can be thrown open. This is under the gallery at the back, which is about half of the original Meeting House, the remaining portion being detached and forming a room about 11 feet by 25 feet approached by steps outside”.

To this it may be added that the hanging shutters which divide the large room from the ante-room are of pine wood, painted and grained to look like oak, and that they probably represent an expedient adopted about a century ago to make the ante-room a part of the Meeting House when it was necessary to do so. Friends had large meetings in those days, and we find that occasionally it was necessary to hold meetings in the “Methodist Chapel” on several occasions. Elizabeth Fry and a crowded public meeting in 1828, and Joseph John Gurney spoke in the Methodist meeting in 1832. Then in 1845 James Backhouse had to speak in the Methodist chapel, which was apparently the last occasion on which it was found necessary to migrate to a larger building. The pine shutters were probably put in about this time.

John Griffiths, who visited the meeting in 1748, described it as being a pretty large one. Interesting light is thrown on a dark subject by a minute which fixes the monthly meeting to be held at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and in winter, “on the fifth day on or before which the moon is full”. It is still a dangerous proceeding to travel over the old roads in darkness, as the present writer knows to his chagrin. They are in the same condition now as they were then: overlain with loose stones and pieces of slippery rock stumbling over which it would not be at all difficult to sustain a sprained ankle or a broken leg, and spread here and there with deep ruts, very unpleasant things to get into on a winter's night. In imagination we can see these men of the hills coming to meeting over those rough tracks, the women and children being carried on horseback, breasting many a storm born on the wild wastes over which they travelled. Once at the meeting house there they stayed all day, and in the cupboard in the gallery is a huge earthenware jug, out of which it may be, the beer or the water was poured for their drinking. The first-day meetings were over by two o'clock to allow of the daylight serving those who had long distances to go. Curiously enough the road from Haslingden is still being used by Friends who come from that town to the Meeting House as their Quaker fathers did long ago.

The plot of land upon which the Meeting House was built was known as the Old Garden. In a surrender dated the 9th of May 1753, it is described as the “Old Garden and four measured or English Bays of building”. The four bays of building have reference to the Meeting House itself. An English Bay of building was about eight feet, and as the term was originally used it referred to the distance between the frame timbers of a building. That it was used in a legal document so late as 1753 is a point of some interest. The existing building is about 24 feet in length, which makes it answer the description. The property was surrendered by John Hoyle (of Haslingden probably) in trust for the Friends of Crawshawbooth Meeting and the trustees were admitted tenants on the roll on the 11th of May in the same year, the transaction being confirmed by the Halmote Court. By a further surrender in 1823 two adjoining plots of copyhold land were added to

the burial ground, and in 1875 an additional plot containing 199 square yards was in consideration of the payment of the sum of @29.17s surrendered to the use of the trustees.

The building itself is of local stone probably obtained from the quarries a short distance away. It retains its original form and fittings which are all of black oak. The dias for the ministers and elders has in front of it a railing of hewn oak and at one end is a small book cupboard built into the wall which still has the original oak doors. The forms and seatings are all of hewn oak black with age. There is no window at the end of the building, light being obtained through mullioned windows, a single window on one side and two windows on the other. It may be that some extension of the building was anticipated at the time it was built and that the end wall was left blank for this reason. As it is the place is inconveniently dark on dull days.

An unusual and interesting thing is a seventeenth century refectory table, a century older than the Meeting House itself, now as black as ebony and worn and polished by the usage of three hundred years. Where the table came from no one can say, but in all likelihood it was given by some Friend for the use of those who took their meals in the Meeting House. There is an oak chair, too, not quite as old as the table, which is said to have been used by John Bright when he came to the meeting. The seat of the chair is composed of rope netting with a cushion on it. If it be true that John Bright would never sit upon a cushion then it is obvious that he did not use this chair. The present writer has discovered an old tradition which says that the chair originally belonged to George Fox and was used by him. It is certainly old enough to have been used by George Fox and there seems to be a strong probability that it came to the Meeting House because of its associations with the founder of Quakerism.

At one time the rooms subsequently converted into a cottage appear to have been used for a day school, the upper storey being added for this purpose. The master of this school was transferred to the famous school at Ackworth and served as headmaster there for a long number of years. The first Sunday school is said to have been started here in 1793 and William Taylor suggests that the Friends of the Meeting had in mind the need of the religious instruction of the children of those who had been disowned for marrying out of the Society.

The street in front of the building has been raised until the old bridge is a "saddle back" no longer. Now almost hemmed in by buildings this little Quaker Meeting House and burial ground is a green and peaceful oasis in the heart of an industrial district, open always for the purposes of rest and meditation. The graves, for the most part unmarked, are overshadowed by trees, one of them the largest tree to be found in the whole of Rossendale. For over two hundred years Friends have held their meetings in this place and the very stones have acquired an air of peace which contrasts strangely with the dust and the noise by which they are surrounded.

TWO

In the Bury Sessions Rolls, under date October 11th, 1716, the license is recorded of "A certaine Eddiffice or building newly Erected in the forest of Rossendale for an Assembly of persons called Quarters etc".

The applicant for the licence, which was granted under what is popularly known as the 'Conventicles Act", an Act which exempted Protestant subjects who dissented from the Church of England from the penalties of certain laws, was granted to Henry Birtwistle, who must have been the Clerk, the first clerk of Crawshawbooth meeting. It is reported that the first persons in this district to become Friends were Susan Hoyworth, widow, and Mary Birtwistle, widow. Henry was the son of Mary Birtwistle and right faithfully he served the soeitey until his death in 1733. In 1681, he and George Heyworth were sent to prison at the suit of John Duckworth the "priest" of Haslingden, the reason being their refusal to pay tithes. It is probably that Heyworth was the son of Susan Heyworth, one of these first Rossendale Quakers, and that these two men were the first in the district to bear testimony against tithes. We have no means of knowing how long they were kept in prison, but George Heyworth (or Haworth) says the record, died a prisoner at Lancaster for his testimony against tithes and was brought to Chapel Hill for burial, the 26th of the seventh month, 1692.. In the same year James Rishton of Rossendale also died a prisoner at Lancaster for tythe and was buried at Chapel Hill on the 19th of the eight month.

Of the death of Susan Heyworth we have no record, but she may have died before her son and before the burial ground at Chapel Hill was opened. Mary Birtwistle lived until 1704 and was buried at Chapel Hill on the 12th of the fifth month in that year. Her son Henry underwent many trials and tribulations in his lifetime. In 1670 he was informed upon for having a meeting at his house. The account of what happened illustrates admirably the kind of treatment that was meted out to Friends in the name of justice. Certain informers, say Besse in his "Sufferings of the Early Friends", meeting some Friends going homewards from Rossendale, took their names and gave information upon oath that those persons were met at a meeting at Henry Birtwistle's house, of which the informers could not be legal evidence. Nevertheless, upon that information their goods to the value of above £35 were taken away. They appealed to the Quarter Sessions but were for some time denied a copy of the information so that two Sessions passed before they could obtain a hearing. At the third Sessions, though it was fully proved that he witnesses had sworn against three persons being at the meeting when they had only seen them, one at two miles, one at half a mile, and the third at a quarter of a mile from the house, yet they found no redress, one of the justices declaring that seeing the Quakers had meetings at certain hours if witnesses saw them coming from any of these houses it should be sufficient to convict them. This instance, says the writer who may have been Birtwistle himself, may serve to show the prejudice and partiality of some magistrates and what presumption would pass for proof with those whose minds were inclined to severity and rigour against the prosecuted on these occasions.

At Preston Quarter Sessions in 1700 the house of Henry Birtwistle in Rossendale was certified as a meeting place for Protestant Dissenters.

In the register of burials at Chapel Hill appear the names of Lydia Birtwistle, daughter of Henry, 1682; Elizabeth, wife of Henry Birtwistle, 1691; Henry Birtwistle junior of Rossendale, 1714; and Alice and Mary, both daughters of Henry Birtwistle, buried within eight days of one another in 1716. It is probable that Henry Birtwistle when he died was a very old man for in 1660 we find him being taken off to prison along with a number of others, among them his first wife, for being present at a meeting which was being held at the house of Abraham Heyworth. He was buried in the Crawshawbooth burial ground on the 17th day of eighth month, 1733, being described as Henry Birtwistle of Crawshawbooth. His second wife, Mary Birtwistle, died at the age of 82 years in 1753 and on the 5th of first month in that year her body was interred at Crawshawbooth. She was a minister of the Society for fifty years.

Perhaps the most distinguished of the early Friends whose dust is mingled with the earth at Chapel Hill was Thomas Lorimer. Lorimer's name is amongst the names of those who went about the country proclaiming the Quaker message. In his youth he came as apprentice to Abraham Heyworth, another son probably of the Susan Heyworth who has been mentioned as being one of the first two Friends in Rossendale. Abraham Heyworth was a stalwart of the new faith. He was persecuted and imprisoned, and his name is first on the list of those who were taken off to prison out of the meeting being held at his house at Haslingden on the 17th of second month, 1660. There was a Nathan Heyworth at Bentgate, probably his son, who in 1700 applied for his house to be licensed as a place of worship for Protestant Dissenters.

Thomas Lorimer, we learn, served his employer faithfully and well and afterwards removed to John Fielden's at Hartley Royd, "where he abode a faithful servant and a good example, having a good example in meetings". Of these meetings we get one glimpse in the papers printed by Besse in his book "On the 5th of the month called April, 1668, Thomas Lorimer along with five more were taken prisoners for meeting for worship at the house of John Ashton. (This house is described as being near Tottington). One of them, Hugh Taylor, died in prison (Lancaster castle) and the rest continued there fifteen weeks. On the 31st of the month called July the Friends assembled at John Ashton's house where taken without warrant and put into a court house (probably the one at Holcombe) and next day carried before Laurence Rawsthorne of Newhall, a justice of the peace, who sent Thomas Lorimer along with eight more to the House of correction at Manchester". From this it is evident that Lorimer was not out of prison very long between the two meetings.

In 1669 Lorimer travelled in various counties, in Cheshire, in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and so along to Huntingdonshire where he was imprisoned once again. He then went to Ireland proclaiming the message of Friends and visiting the meeting there, afterwards going into the eastern counties of England where he suffered imprisonment again. He then returned to Rossendale Meeting "not being in health" as pathetically says the record, "and abode with Alice Radcliffe about eleven weeks". He had come home only to die, and on the 8th of the third month 1678 he died, his body being buried at Chapel Hill two days later.

Abraham Heyworth had his house in Deardengate at Haslingden and we find his name constantly recurring in the Sessional Rolls. In 1669 ten shillings was demanded of him and on his refusing to pay, goods to the value of fifty shillings were taken from him. Again a little later seventy shillings worth of goods were taken on his refusal to pay fifteen shillings. In 1684 we find him indicted at Manchester along with nine others, all of them being sent to prison. In those days life was rather a strenuous business for the Quakers. They could be hauled off to court, evidence sworn against them, and because their consciences forbade them to take an oath, could make no answer the justice would accept, to the charges brought against them, It was a customary thing to require of a Friend who might be brought before a magistrate for the offence of being at a meeting for worship to take the oath of allegiance to the King. When the Friend refused to be sworn he was committed to prison and kept there for an interminable period for refusing to take the oath although that was not the offence for which he had been taken into custody.

Friends were kept in prison for months and even for years for technical offences of this kind. It was for the relief of these prisoners and those dependent upon them that the Meeting for Sufferings was called into existence. The Meeting still exists and is now virtually the executive committee of the Society of Friends. Abraham Heyworth died in 1687 and his body was taken to Chapel Hill, where it was buried the 21st of the second month. His wife Isabel died in 1671.

Many members of the Binns family are interred in the meeting house burial ground at Crawshawbooth. The family was in business at Crawshawbooth as clog and patten makers. The earliest recorded entry is that of Joseph son of Benjamin and Martha Binns. Eighteen members of the family were buried at Crawshawbooth up to 1847. The family eventually removed to Liverpool and carried on the business of leather merchants. In course of time a considerable fortune was amassed and today in the Binns collection at the Liverpool Art Gallery is a memorial of this Crawshawbooth Quaker family whose members met and worshipped in the old meeting house by the bridge. Among the Binns manuscripts is a sketch of the meeting hose as it appeared in 1792.

A prominent Friend was William Dockray who in partnership with Nathaniel booth, built Hareholme Mill in 1798 on land leased to them by Thomas Edmundson of Mytholmroyd. It was not only the first mill of its size in Rossendale, but it was one of the most important mills for miles around. It was the first building in Rossendale to be lighted by gas and visitors from all parts came to look upon the unusual sight it presented at night when all its windows were illuminated. From the time of its erection down to 1851 the mill continued to be used for the manufacture of worsted and during that period passed through several hands. The building has now disappeared altogether.

The chimney was a curiosity in its way. It was set on a broad base which was nearly one-third of the height of the whole structure. From this base it tapered to the top, which by accident or design exactly resembled the broad brimmed hat of a Quaker. Altogether the chimney presented very much the appearance of a

champagne bottle and was obviously the work of builders who were experimenting in a new style of building. This mill must have been one of the first in the district to be driven by steam power. William Dockray died in 1807 and was buried in the burial ground at Crawshawbooth. Abel Bridge will remember a member of the Dockray family attending the meeting house, mounted on a donkey, which he stabled in the stable underneath the cottage walls while the meeting was going on.

Something more ought to be said about the Richard Ratcliffe who provided the burial ground at Chapel Hill and hedged it in. He was twice cited for this offence and again for holding a meeting for worship in his house. He was evidently a man of no small courage and determination. It is sometimes said that meetings were held in the burial ground itself and that formerly a stone bench ran round the walls which provided seating accommodation for Friends at their meeting. This bench, it is said, was broken down by one who was not in membership. The present enclosing wall, as we have seen was erected by Marsden Monthly Meeting, a hundred years after the building of the meeting house. It must be fairly evident therefore that, if it existed at all this seat was not intended to be used at meetings for worship. If the seat were made originally by Richard Ratcliffe it was probably intended for the use of those who attended the burials taking place there. In the register of burials Richard Ratcliffe is described as of Chapel Hill, and there he was buried on the 26th of second month, 1675. There was a James Ratcliffe who in a citation of 1684 is described as a husbandman of Musbury. James may have been a son of Richard, at any rate not all the King's men could prevent him from worshipping God according to his conscience. In the citation reference to he¹, and a number of others, are indicted "for that they upon the Lords Day Comonly Called Sunday at Musbury with intent the peace of our Sovraigne Lord the King to disturbe themselves by force and Armes Riotously and Routously and unlawfully did assemble and come to gather under Colour and ptence of exercise of Religion in other manor than according to the liturgie and practice of the Church of England". Our clerk of arraigns evidently had a pretty mouthful of work at his pen end. A John Ratcliffe "of Grane", who is described as senior, died in 1735, he having lived at the farmstead which to this day is known as Quakers Farm. This John Ratcliffe may have been the brother of James Ratcliffe of Musbury. The descendants of the family are now in Maryland.

Altogether the bodies of 135 Friends were buried at Chapel Hill. They offered their testimony and although the law and the officers of the law were against them there is abundance of evidence to show that they lived not entirely unto themselves; that they were a light made manifest in an obscure place. R.H.

¹ sic