

Beginnings

There is evidence of a grassroots movement across the North Yorkshire Moors during the English Civil War to allow local people to worship in silence, without priests or ritual, outside the traditional churches. In 1647, two years after Cromwell's army defeated the Royalists at Naseby and two years before Charles I was beheaded, a property in Thirsk's Kirkgate was purchased by Thomas Pratt said to be capable of holding about 100 persons "together with two messuages, a stable and one other cottage" and about 21 perches of land – about 630 square yards altogether (c.527 square metres) The whole cost £25.5.0 (£25.25). It is perhaps remarkable that these local Dissenters acquired their meeting place so close to the Parish Church of St Mary and to Thirsk Hall (an eighteenth century house but almost certainly on the site of an earlier hall). They appeared to be acting in defiance of the local Justice of the Peace, who lived there, and who had been fining everyone who had refused to attend the Anglican Church until the Civil War broke out and order broke down.

The original meeting house in Thirsk had a thatched roof, as payments for "Thatcher's wages and straw" appear frequently in the accounts. The other chief expense was the hire and upkeep of "Friends' horses" for Friends (Quakers were originally known as Friends of the Truth) travelling in the ministry, an expense only partially balanced by money received "for the lend of own wheeled carriage".

Fox and early Friends in Yorkshire

George Fox, now seen as the founder of the Quaker movement, first came to Yorkshire in 1651. His journal states "and the next day I came to Burraby (Borrowby, 5 miles north of Thirsk) and there was a priest and several friendly people that met together and the people were convinced and have stood ever since and there is a great meeting in that town". In all probability, he also visited Thirsk either at this time or on one of his later tours through Yorkshire in 1653 or 1677. Thirsk was one of the 14 national hubs of Quaker worship and it is estimated that one in six of the local population were "convinced".

Thirsk Quakers purchased 9 ½ perches of land (about 240 square metres) in Barbeck (Micklegate) for £3 "to and for the intente and purpose ... that the above granted premises shall be used for, continue and be a possession of and for the use of the people of God by the world commonly called Quakers that they may bury their dead therein" in 1666. This land was sold in 1925. The site was recently excavated revealing some graves which were carefully avoided during the building of a house there.

After some intermediate dealings, the 1647 Meeting House was leased on 10th March 1701 to a group of Friends as trustees for a term of 5,000 years at a peppercorn rent. Thirsk Monthly Meeting area extended over a wide agricultural district of Yorkshire, from Northallerton to Huby, from Helmsley to Ripon, with Thirsk as the natural centre, a market town easily accessible from all parts. Early Friends were seen as “of the middling sort” and those attending Local Meetings consisted of traders and their employees in towns and of farmers in the countryside. Most or all of the Monthly Meetings during autumn, winter and spring were held at Thirsk, and those who know how impassable the Hambleton Hills are in snowy weather will not be surprised to hear that Bilsdale Friends were sometimes “prevented”.

Prominent among 17th century Quakers of Thirlby, near Thirsk, was the occupant of Weldon Grange, Isaac Lindley. Our Meeting House contains a photograph of Weldon Grange and a copy of the 1662 report of Meeting for Sufferings records the Friends who were sent to prison in Ripon for holding a meeting there. At this time Quakers, with other Dissenters, were regularly persecuted and their experiences were recorded in a “Book of Sufferings” compiled at the “Meeting for Sufferings” – still the name of the Central Executive Committee of the Society of Friends.

There is another report from 1657. “Isaac Lindley...being moved of the Lord to go to the steeplehouse at Coxwold to visit the seed of God there, after the priest had done Isaac spoke to the people; then by command of the Lady Bellasis he was hailed forth. Then he spoke further to the people, by her command he was put in the stocks and afterwards committed to Ripon Goale ... He remained a prisoner 6 weeks and 4 days” Later he appeared at the Sessions at Helmsley and was fined £5.

Another entry in the Thirsk records from Meeting for Sufferings was as follows: “the 8th day of ye 7th month 1661. Friends being met together at Thomas Towland house at Oldstead upon ye day and year aforesaid where a man of the town John Smith by name servant to Conyers Lee constable went to Newbrough to the house of Thomas Bellasis called Lord Fawconbridge who sent his brother John Bellasis and Muller his gentleman and Layers his groom and John Taigett called Marshall who came in a posture of armes with Rapiers and pistails.... And under pretence of searching for armes rifled the man’s house”.

Bellasis was the family name of the Lords of the Manor at Coxwold and Lord Fauconberg was the son of Lady Bellasis. 1660 was the year in which Charles II was crowned king in

London and Lord Fauconberg was thought to have played some part in arranging his return. As Lord Fauconberg had married Mary, a daughter of Oliver Cromwell, he appeared to have been adept at keeping a foot in both camps!

Changes in the law saved the Quakers from further persecution, for the revolution of 1688 brought Calvinist William III and Mary to the throne. A year later the Toleration Act gave freedom to Quakers and all dissenters to worship and marry at their own licensed places of worship.

The Act did not however absolve non-Anglicans from paying tithes. On 2nd October 1689 Thomas Lindley of Weldon Grange was committed to prison for non-payment of tithes, at the suit of Viscount Falconbridge.

Progress and Regression

At its height at the beginning of the 18th century, the Religious Society of Friends numbered 40-50,000 out of a population of about 5 ½ million. As a result of factors such as adherence to dress regulations, restrictions on members marrying out and business relationships with non-Quakers, and the growth of Methodism, membership fell to 14,000 by the mid nineteenth century. Thirsk's Monthly Meeting status ceased in 1826 when it was subsumed into York Monthly Meeting.

John William Hall of Allendale, who was in Thirsk from about 1868, tells how his father Isaac eloped to Gretna Green with a beautiful girl of 16. When he returned with his bride Allendale Meeting disowned him for marrying a non-Friend. Isaac did not object but said he would keep coming to Meeting anyway and bring his wife with him. Eventually, the Meeting reinstated Isaac and his wife became a Friend at the same time, but few marriages out had such a happy ending and exclusion inevitably reduced numbers.

The New Meeting House

By the end of the eighteenth century, it was clear that the original 1647 Meeting House in Thirsk had to be rebuilt. The times were not propitious, though. The war with France was dragging on, men were being pressed into the navy, Pitt had imposed an income tax, prices were high and Ireland was in rebellion, but Thirsk Friends proceeded with the present brick-built Meeting House. It was a plain, high-roofed building with large Georgian windows and a gable-end on to the road. The front of the building had a Women's business meeting room, with a partition dividing this from the rear of the building which contained the main Meeting Room with the Elders' Gallery on the back wall. It was opened for Worship in March 1799.

The land at the rear was acquired in 1833 from John Foster for £100. It was enclosed by a wall to form a burial ground, in use until 1932. By 1876 the two meeting rooms had been merged to form one, wood panelling had been introduced, gallery removed and hot water apparatus and gas chandelier installed. A single storey lean-to porch and cloak room were built against the south wall, originally with separate entrances for men and women. It is unclear when the western bay of the building was converted into a separate cottage, but improvements were made to it in 1954, including the construction of a two storey entrance range on the south side.

Local Quakers

The burial ground behind the Meeting House, now a garden, contains the graves of several of the names significant in the history of the Meeting. John Gilbert Baker (1834-1920) was a member of Thirsk Meeting whose forebears in Danbydale (where Botton village now stands) were hosts to George Fox in 1655. He was in business in Thirsk (Bakers Alley is named after him), but his home and business were lost in a disastrous fire in 1864. Being a noted amateur botanist, he joined the staff of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, Surrey, becoming Keeper of the Herbarium and acquiring Fellowship of the Linnaean Society and of the Royal Society. Fourteen of the 36 burials behind the Kirkgate premises are of the Baker family.

The Smith family had been in Thirsk since before 1580 when Bartholomew Smith, a tailor in Thirsk Market Place, had died. The Smiths became Quakers near the beginning of the 18th century, but records are tenuous until 1790 when two Smith brothers who were running a drapery business in the Market Place went off to Manchester to buy materials. There they overreached themselves and ordered far too much. Three months later ox-wagons rolled into Thirsk loaded with cloth for which the brothers could not pay. Their elder brother John, a farmer, took over the business and when he died in 1840 it was found that he had directed that the last bill owing on the 50 year old debt should be paid out of his estate.

His son, Bartholomew Smith, controlled a far more prosperous business than his father had taken on. In 1863 he needed an assistant for three months and appointed a young Quaker, John William Hall, who was working in a shop in Sunderland. The young man was very quick and he delighted everyone in the family, especially Bartholomew's daughter Polly. An engagement was arranged and the wedding followed four years later after John William went north to start his own business in Carlisle. In 1868 Bartholomew dismissed his manager for

debt and sent for his son-in-law who sold his Carlisle business. He came to Thirsk to take over the shop, said to be the longest established retail shop in England. Over the next 40 years the Hall family became increasingly influential, not only among Thirsk Quakers but also in the town itself. John William was appointed a Justice of the Peace in about 1906. He died in 1929 and was succeeded in the business by his son Jed and later by his grandson Roderick (Rod) Hall. Changing times and shopping habits resulted in the closure of the business after over 390 years. In its heyday, it had employed 80 people including 14 tailors and 30 dressmakers.

Quaker Activism

John William's son Jed Hall led local efforts to keep Britain out of the Great War. He was awarded a medal by the League of Nations for his subsequent humanitarian work. It is suggested that over 700,000 German civilians were dying of starvation, plus unnumbered Austrians. Quakers were given permission to send food and clothing to mothers and infants. Once a week for three years, Jed Hall drove the B Smiths company lorry 1,100 miles over the war-torn roads from Thirsk to Vienna as part of his mission to heal the wounds of war.

There he befriended the Schindler family. Jed brought two of Oscar's sisters back to Thirsk to recuperate and one of them attended Thirsk School. Oscar Schindler later saved the lives of 700 Jews at Auschwitz.

Decline and Revival

During the 1950s, the numbers of Quakers in Thirsk dwindled and the Meeting was closed in 1957. It was revived in 1973, when local Quakers were supported by Friends from York who cycled up to boost the numbers. Molly Hall, sister of Rod, became Clerk and set up a Children's Meeting, thus sowing the seeds of revival. At first, there were just seven adults and seven children in attendance. By 1981 there were 31 members and attenders, and local Friends felt that the time was right for Thirsk to resume its Preparative Meeting status. This was agreed by York Monthly Meeting in July of that year.

Thirsk Meeting House was refurbished once more in 1984. A suspended ceiling was constructed above the Meeting room, producing a more modern interior, with a Meeting Room on the east side of the building with lowered windows overlooking the garden, a room for children's activities and lettings on the west side and a wide foyer between them. In 2006, further improvements were made to bring facilities up to modern standards with a hearing loop, disabled toilet and new kitchen.

The Meeting currently has around 40 Members and Attenders, with an average attendance at Meeting for Worship of 16. During the pandemic in 2020/21 attendance at our Zoom Meetings remained steady and is returning to previous levels now that the Meeting House is open again. .