



The Quaker Meeting House: 100 years on the Suburb

In 1913 the Friends Meeting House was completed. It formed part of the first stage of development of Hampstead Garden Suburb and prior approval had to be obtained from Dame Henrietta Barnett. The building was designed by Frederick J. Rowntree, a well-known Quaker architect. Rowntree's plan was at first rejected because Dame Henrietta wished for a building with either a spire or a dome to match the churches in Central Square, even when it was explained that Friends did not have ornamentation on their Meeting Houses. Finally, it was built with neither a spire nor a dome, being modelled on Jordans Meeting House in Buckinghamshire and in due course became one of the buildings on the Suburb listed as being of special architectural and historical interest.

Whereas St Jude-on-the-Hill and the Free Church, with the Institute, formed the centrepiece

of the Suburb and are both visible for miles around, the Meeting House is tucked away in a corner of North Square, in part of the ancient woodland of Middlesex. The naturally wooded garden at the front of the Meeting House, with spring-flowering white anemones and English bluebells, shrubs and a small grassy space, has always been a place of peace and calm.

The entrance hall has as its focal point a large brick chimney piece with an 'angle-nook' housing a small library, as well as information for visitors about Quakers and a Visitors' Book maintained since 1918! Large Sunday children's sessions were held regularly through the 1950s and 60s, and an extension was added in the 1950s at the rear of the building with two further rooms. Today young people continue to use these rooms overlooking Big Wood. The Meeting Room itself is used by a wide variety of

groups during the week, and is well-lit by large windows. It too has a fireplace, and a piano used for concerts and at the annual Christmas Gathering. Upstairs two smaller rooms also look over Big Wood. The larger, once the library, is used for smaller meetings through the week.

Over the years, the Meeting House has needed maintenance because of damage caused by subsidence from the clay sub-soil on which the Suburb is built. A sloping entrance path added in the late 70s makes the Meeting House reasonably accessible to wheel-chairs, despite shallow entrance steps; recent measures such as handrails and path repairs have again improved things.

Friends are glad that over the last century the Meeting House has continued to meet a wide variety of community needs and interests, as well as being used for its primary purpose as a place for Meeting for Worship.

A History of The Golders Green Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Before the Quaker Meeting House was built, Friends had been meeting in the Suburb since 1909, first at inter-church services and then in the Club House. The list of members in 1913 shows an adult membership of thirty-eight. An early member of the Quaker Meeting was Hubert Lidbetter, an architect who designed Friends House on Euston Road and three houses in the Suburb. One of the first occasions of note in the Minutes of the Meeting is a wedding in 1914, the first of many to take place in the Meeting House, with the celebration in due course of at least two golden weddings. A further early event was a Christmas Party in 1917 for the wives and children of interned aliens.

Not long after the Meeting House was built, it began to be used by bodies other than Friends, including by Men's and Women's Adult Schools, and a Prisoners' Visitation Committee. For many years, the Meeting House was used by a nursery school, for classes run by the Suburb Institute, by the Suburb Residents Association and many other bodies. It was always the case that Friends participated in Suburb affairs. The Meeting was a founder member of the HGS Fellowship whose first Secretary was a member of the Meeting, Ruth Fawell. One Friend, Bryan Richards, was closely concerned with the provision of up-to-date sheltered housing for the elderly in Hampstead Way. Kitty Slack gave the Henrietta Barnett Memorial Lecture in 1975 and assisted for many years in the care of Suburb Archives. From its early days, the Meeting ran study groups on a wide range of topics, as well as weekend

conferences in the 1970s and 1980s. From 1948, a committee arranged for publication of material and gatherings to spread knowledge of Friends' work and thought and to offer speakers to other bodies. One feature of the life of the Meeting is its activities with other local churches.

The number of members of the Meeting peaked in 1933 with 156 adults; currently the figure of regular members, including children, is thirty. Children were part of the Meeting from 1913, and their numbers continued to grow so that, in 1945, it was described as fortunate to have so many children. One factor accounting for the fall in numbers is that a Quaker Meeting was developed in Finchley in the 1960s to which a large number of families transferred. Another factor may have been the secluded position of the Meeting House, especially as the Suburb developed. This seclusion may also have affected the nature of the Meeting's members and worship, with less vocal ministry and more deep silence which appealed to those who looked for depth in the quietness of a gathered meeting.

A particular interest of the Meeting is related to Friends' Peace Testimony. During WW1, at least two members served prison sentences as conscientious

objectors. A letter was sent to the Prime Minister in 1931 asking him to follow a policy of total disarmament and to invite other countries to do so too. A Refugee Committee was set up during WW2 to organise activities and support Jewish refugees in the Suburb. When large numbers of Ugandan Asians were forced to emigrate, Friends sent a letter to the Hendon and Finchley Times protesting at Barnet Council's refusal to provide accommodation for them. In the 1980s, Brenda and Sydney Bailey visited Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to assist in the setting up of 'Quaker House' in Belfast.

The 1990s and the beginning of this century were difficult times for the Meeting. Key members died or moved away. The HGS Institute terminated its use of our premises after 50 years and we found ourselves in a poor state. Supported however by our Suburb neighbours and local Quakers we remained faithful and hopeful. Now there is a steady growth in those who value the Quaker meeting for worship held each Sunday and those who value the building as a background to a variety of therapeutic activities and retreats. Golders Green Quakers are in good spirit and look forward to the year ahead of celebration and thanksgiving.



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Quaker Meeting Centenary Events

Golders Green Quaker Meeting is celebrating its Centenary in 2013 and warmly invites you to the following events:

Peace, Justice, Solidarity: Europe – A Work in Progress?

3pm Sunday 3 March. A talk by Liz Scurfield and Martina Weitsch, Members of Golders Green Meeting, about their ten years work with the Quaker Council for European Affairs. Followed by light refreshments.

Meet Golders Green Quakers, Past and Present.

Followed by tea. 2.30-4pm Sunday 7 April, (tbc)

Gerard Hoffnung's Cartoons: a presentation by Annetta Hoffnang.

2.30pm Sunday 9 June.

Open House

Sunday 22 September

All the events are at Golders Green Quaker Meeting House, 17 North Square, Hampstead Garden Suburb, NW11 7AG

For further details please contact Diktyanna Warren at diktyanna@hotmail.com or Jean Jenn, 7267 0685.

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