

## FARFIELD FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

### ***A brief history***

Farfield is one of three Quaker Meeting Houses of a simple single-chamber type built in the Wharfedale and Craven area of Yorkshire in the early days of the Quaker movement – they are Farfield (1689), Skipton (1693) and Askwith (1705). By historical accident it is the only one to retain most of its original features.

The meeting in this middle section of Wharfedale was settled following visits to the area by William Dewsbury, Christopher Taylor & Gervase Benson in *circa* 1652-3 – ‘and Anthony Myers was the first that received their message thereabouts, and entertained them, and kept meetings at his house at Heskett in Bolton, and a meeting came to be settled hereabouts’<sup>1</sup>. Anthony Myers is described as ‘of Catgil’: Catgil and Hesketh are neighbouring farms on the Bolton Abbey Estate that remain to this day.

Around 1666 Anthony Myers moved to Farfield, where he is thought to have occupied Farfield Hall, and gave a plot of land on the edge of the estate for a burial ground, which was extended in 1689 to provide room for a meeting house. The Act of Toleration in that year had allowed dissenters to worship openly and to register their meeting houses with the magistrates. On 16 September that year Anthony Myers leased the land and the Meeting House for a term of 5000 years to the first Trustees – his son George Myers, Stephen Smith of Farfield, Thomas Bleakey of Silsden and John Moone of Brownhill, Skipton. The Meeting House was licensed on the 8th October.

The building now standing is very much that original structure. It is built largely of uneven blocks of stone (referred to as ‘rubble’) with shaped blocks only at the corners and around the windows and door: the windows are mullioned (with vertical stone bars only) and would have originally had lattice windows if they had any glazing at all. The floor is of flags and the stone roof is open with no ceiling. The oak ministers’ stand is of an unusual design and is probably similar to the original stand at Skipton – note the turned balusters in the central section – a little touch of domestic decoration. The benches around the walls are likely to be original<sup>2</sup>. All is in a vernacular style similar to a cottage of the late-seventeenth century.

Meeting was kept here from 1698 until 1814/6 when it was removed to a rented room in Addingham and so has been without a regular use for 200 years. The meeting in Addingham itself closed in 1845 and it was not until 1863 that meetings began to be held in Ilkley, as they were during the season in many resort towns, for visiting Quakers: Ilkley Meeting House was built in 1869.

Farfield Meeting was originally part of Knaresborough Monthly Meeting and, on the closure of the monthly meeting in 1853, was transferred to Brighouse Monthly Meeting. For the next 100 years the Meeting House was owned by the Brighouse Monthly Meeting Trustees and their successors the Brighouse, Leeds and Settle Monthly Meetings Trust Funds Committee (subsequently known as the Buildings Charity).

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<sup>1</sup> *The first publishers of Truth* edited by Norman Penney. London: Headley Brothers. 1907 – extract from the account given by Knaresborough Monthly Meeting.

<sup>2</sup> the rest of the benches are probably of the mid-eighteenth century and are thought to have come from Skipton meeting house.

There was a move to demolish the meeting house in 1865 but instead it was kept in reasonable repair, often helped by the local ministrations of one of those who lived in the neighbouring cottages. In 1920 the roof was replaced for £110, a member of the Trustees who inspected the site reported that 'no attempt had been made to protect the forms from the weather while the roof was off'! It may have been at this time that the wooden casement windows and the external shutters were installed. In 1921 there was a report that hens were being kept in the graveyard and they were ordered to be removed. Subsequently both Leeds and Bradford Young Friends considered using Farfield as a centre for weekend conferences but presumably the lack of sanitation was what stood in the way.

In 1950 a Trustee raised the question whether properties which 'had little or no historic interest and which were costing money yearly to maintain' should be sold. These properties were identified as the meeting houses at Farfield and Askwith. The three Monthly Meetings (Brighouse, Leeds and Settle) were asked for their views and agreement was reached to sell Askwith, but not Farfield. In 1953, Leeds Monthly Meeting, which had been the objector in 1950, was asked to think again and this time agreed to the sale (minute 14 of the meeting held 11th of November 1953). The property was put up for sale in July 1954: in the October, the Ministry listed the building as of special architectural or historic interest, which made the sale no easier. It was not until October 1955 that an offer of £150 was made by a Miss McLaren Thompson of Ilkley on condition she was allowed to make some 'improvements'. She was allowed to install electricity to the site in advance of the sale which did not in the end go through because of the intervention of four Friends (two architects, H Godwin Arnold and David Butler, the Society's librarian, Edward H Milligan, and the well-known author, Elfrida Vipont Foulds) who wished to prevent it being turned into residential accommodation. They bought the property for £220 in November 1956 (reimbursing Miss McLaren Thompson £10 for the installation of electricity) and constituted themselves as a Management Committee to care for the building<sup>3</sup>.

During their ownership a number of meetings for worship were held in the meeting house. Eventually they leased the building to the managing director of Busby's Department Store in Bradford who used it as a studio for his son, John, who was just starting out as a professional artist<sup>4</sup>. The conversion involved the agreed removal of some of the slates to provide a north light and the installation of electric heating.

The death of EV Foulds in 1992 alerted the owners to the fact that their ownership was not a permanent solution to Farfield's future. The formation of the Historic Chapels Trust in 1993 suggested a solution and, following negotiations, the meeting house was transferred to the Trust in 1994 to become their first property.

### ***A note on the gravestones and table tombs***

It was not until 1717 that Yearly Meeting specifically forbade the use of gravestones and instructed Friends to remove existing ones – that this was not readily complied with is shown by the fact that Yearly Meeting 1766 had to ask again for it to be done. From earliest times it is clear that affluent

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<sup>3</sup> The quotations in the two preceding paragraphs come from the minutes of the Brighouse Monthly Meeting Trust Funds Committee and its successor body [Brotherton Library, Carlton Hill collection, LL25-27].

<sup>4</sup> John Busby died earlier this year, his forte was wildlife, and in particular, bird painting.

Friends did in Quaker burial grounds just as they would have done in the churchyard and erected tombs and gravestones over burials. The Myers tombs at Farfield, in which Anthony Myers (d. 1697), his wife (d. 1688), his children and grandchildren are buried, are thus a rare survival but they are not unique. There are at least four other surviving Quaker memorials in Yorkshire alone – one gravestone remounted on a wall at Rawdon Meeting House, several preserved in Huddersfield Meeting House, two or three chest tombs at Scotton in Nidderdale and a similar number of tombs of a smaller size in a small family graveyard (The Sepulchre) near Scholes in the Spen Valley.

In 1850, Yearly Meeting after a request from Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting amongst others, agreed to allow gravestones of uniform appearance in Quaker burial grounds – the original stones were set level with the turf and there are a number of these square stones surviving at Farfield, showing that the burial ground continued to be used long after the abandonment of the meeting house itself.

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