

## The Quakers

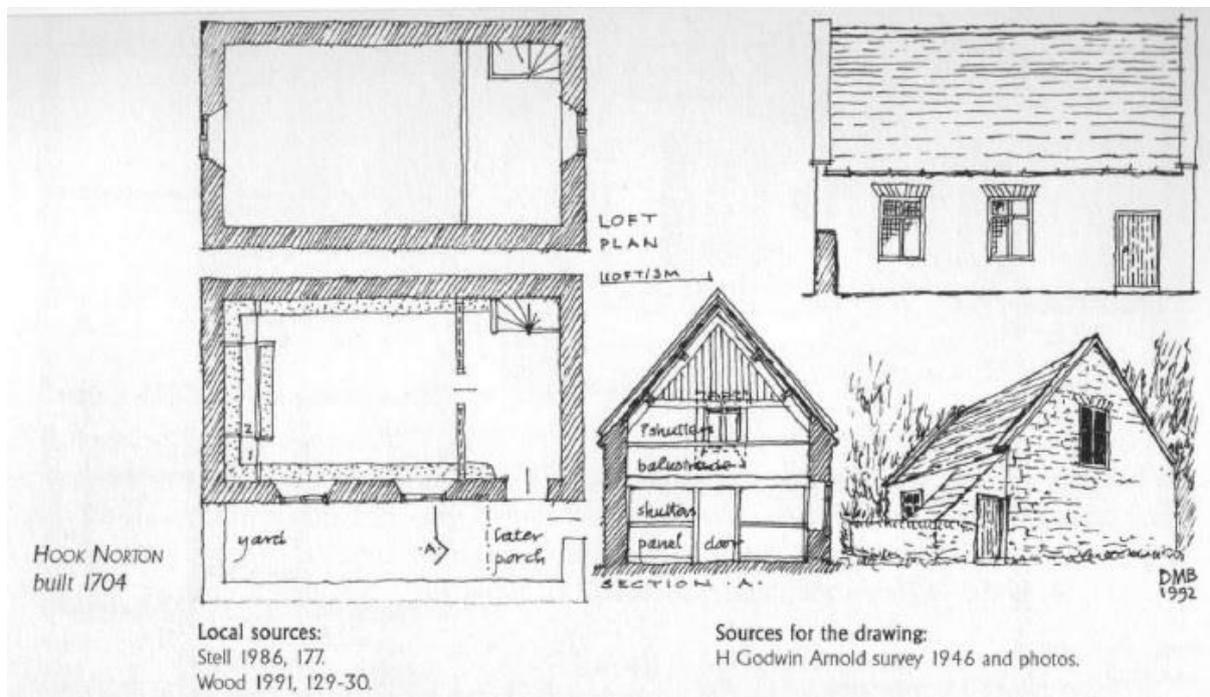
The Religious Society of Friends had its origin in the preaching and missionary work of George Fox (1624-1691) in the late 1640s, following the Great Civil War.

Believing that every individual is capable of a direct relationship with God, Fox taught that Christ had come to teach His people Himself. Though they preached vigorously when evangelising, Fox's followers increasingly met in silence, seeking guidance through the Spirit in their own hearts (the "inward light") or through the words uttered by fellow worshippers who were moved to speak. There was no formal creed, no baptism, no sacraments, no prayers, no hymns. Like most dissenters, Fox believed that he was re-establishing the true Christian church after centuries of apostasy.

Brought before magistrates in 1650 on a charge of blasphemy, Fox told them to tremble before the Word of the Lord, whereupon one of the magistrates became the first person to call them "Quakers". Originally used as a term of abuse, most Friends embraced it as a badge of distinction, though they were more properly called the Friends of the Truth. The sect was deeply mistrusted because it challenged all authority, secular as well as religious, and refused to take oaths or acknowledge social rank. It suffered persecution under the Protectorate (though Fox got on well personally with Cromwell), and again after the Restoration under the Quaker Act of 1662 and the Conventicle Act of 1664. Though recognised under the Toleration Act of 1689, the Quakers continued to face prosecution and punishment because of their refusal to pay tithes to the Church of England.

This ardent missionary movement appealed particularly to Baptists who had become disillusioned with the obsession with baptism and other ceremonies. By 1680 it had 60,000 adherents nationwide. It proved very successful in the Banbury region, following visits by George Fox and other missionaries, and a number of Quaker meeting houses were established, notably in Banbury itself (in North Bar), in Adderbury and Sibford Gower. In 1668, while at North Newington, Fox established a Monthly Meeting for the County, as an administrative grouping of local meetings.

That same year, 1668, the Friends met for the first time in Hook Norton. Prominent members were numbered among the more active in the region and suffered for non-payment of tithes. An ecclesiastical survey counted eighteen Quakers here in 1683. In 1704 they built a Meeting House in Southrop, the first nonconformist building in Hook Norton. It stood next to Southrop House (O.S. grid reference SP 358328). The property was sold to the Quaker trustees by Richard Parkes, an ironmonger from Wednesbury in Staffordshire, who owned Southrop House. There was no burial ground, but in 1752 Samuel Parkes, Richard's grandson, added a strip of land, a narrow walled yard in front of the building, that was used as a passage to "the House of Worship".



These plans and drawings are taken from David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. 2, page 500.

During the eighteenth century the Quakers lost their drive to convert the world and became increasingly a closed community of those born to the faith. They were well-known for their plain dress and pacifism, as well as their honest, plain dealing and artisanal skills. By the nineteenth century a local industry had developed making poke bonnets, which were then fashionable, some "for the many local

Quaker ladies” in the region.<sup>1</sup> Still they were subject to legal harassment for refusing to pay tithes to the established church. In 1835, for example, the Hook Norton church rate wardens seized a silver cream jug, valued at 10 shillings, from a prominent local Quaker, and in 1849 took three silver spoons worth 10s 3d from the same man.<sup>2</sup>

After 1700 the North Oxfordshire Quakers produced some excellent clockmakers, notably in Sibford and Adderbury, who became widely appreciated for the distinctive style of their iron posted hoop and spike clocks, with distinctive ring and zig-zag engraved dials. One Banbury Quaker watch and clockmaker, John Paine (born 1801) produced less distinctive, rather more standard clocks, some with delicate painted faces. Sometime between 1824 and 1826 he moved to Hook Norton and became prominent in the local Meeting, representing it at the regional Monthly Meeting. Then in 1851 the Quakers disowned him not only for failing to meet his just business debts of about £200, but also for appropriating Quaker funds entrusted to him and using them for his own purposes!<sup>3</sup>

By the nineteenth century numbers were in decline and many Quakers turned to other sects. The Census of 1851 showed only eleven people attending the Quaker service in Hook Norton on census Sunday. Towards the end of the century the denomination, like others, became more involved in mission work. In Hooky, for a few years after 1883, they started holding Meetings for Worship in a nearby barn (presumably larger than the Meeting House) for the men constructing the Cheltenham to Banbury Railway; “they were well attended by villagers, but not many railway workers”. About the turn of the century there was also some adult education work conducted in both private homes and the Meeting House, but on a small scale and probably short-lived.

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent contemporary quotations from Quaker records are taken from Jack V. Wood, *Some Rural Quakers: A History of Quakers and Quakerism at the Corners of the Four Shires of Oxford, Warwick, Worcester and Gloucester* (York: William Sessions, 1991), pages 103, 129-130.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, *Quaker Clockmakers*, page 174.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 174. Paine continued to be identified as a clock and watchmaker in Hook Norton until 1869. *Post Office Directory for Oxfordshire* (1869), page 879.

In 1888 the Meeting was discontinued and the Primitive Methodists rented and maintained the Meeting House, though the Friends reserved the right to use it. In 1893 the Meeting re-opened until 1897, and re-opened again in 1905 for five more years. Between 1914 and 1932 there was a Meeting about once in every five weeks with about 20-25 people present. In 1932 the Meeting was finally discontinued, though the Meeting House survived until 1950 when it was demolished as unsafe and the site later sold.

There are several Quakers now living in Hook Norton, as part of the Banbury and Evesham Area Quaker Meeting. In the past some attended Meeting in Banbury (where the Meeting House is the oldest extant place of worship in the town) and now most worship in Sibford Gower where a new, larger Meeting House was built in 1864 because the original was too small to accommodate both local Friends and scholars of Sibford School. The school had been started in 1842 as a co-educational boarding school for the children of Friends who had “married out” (i.e., married other than a Quaker), though nowadays it is open to both day pupils and boarders, of all faiths and none.

There are fine examples of surviving Meeting Houses in the locality that are worth visiting: many are normally locked, though Sibford Gower is open during the day. The old Meeting House at South Newington is now the village hall and is well preserved. The finest examples of unspoiled seventeenth-century Meeting Houses are Adderbury and Ettington; they would be best visited by attending Meeting for Worship on a Sunday.

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(with generous help from Tim Yeomans and especially Frank Cookson)

**References:**

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