

## QUAKERS IN BIRCHINGTON

by Alfred Walker – pp 51-52 in The Ville of Birchington 1981  
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### THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T PAY HIS SESS

The very small Quaker community in Birchington and Acol, now known as the Society of Friends, existed here since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The Quakers were founded by **George Fox** of Leicestershire in about 1650, who proclaimed it was accepted that “the Spirit of Christ was really alive and working in all men”, and once this ‘inward light’ was allowed to show them the way, no other guidance was necessary. The seeds of these ideas almost certainly took root in the days of the Puritans in England in the early 1600s. Fox maintained that priests, ministers, churches and set forms of worship were all unnecessary.

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the small Quaker community in Birchington caused our local Parish Officials, especially the Churchwardens, much trouble, as several entries in the Churchwardens’ Account book show. They refused to conform to local customs. These people would not take an oath in its usual form or ‘pay their sess (or assessment or tax) or attend Church or have their children baptised’. As a result of the Quakers’ dissent, many of them in other parts of the country were often imprisoned or their estates were sequestrated, though this did not happen in Birchington, as the entries in the accounts show.

There was one man in Birchington who caused the parish officials more trouble than most of the others and whose name appears almost every year in the Churchwardens’ Accounts. His name was Elias Hatcher, the ardent Quaker who fought his battle with the Churchwardens for many years. He did not pay his sess, or attend church or have his children baptised. His own father, Thomas Hatcher, had already begun this course of action back in 1664, when we read that Thomas was presented at the Archdeacon’s Court in Canterbury by Birchington’s Churchwardens for refusing to pay his assessment. Year after year we read entries like these concerning his son Elias:-

“1695 Elias Hatcher, quaker paid noe sess”

“1698 Elias Hatcher, quaker will noy pay his sess”

Since he did not attend the Church nor seek the services of the Vicar, he could see no reason why he should be required to help support such a system. In 1697 he was reported for not having a child baptised, like other parents. In November 1697, an entry in the Baptism Register reads:-

“Elias Hatcher had a child born but not baptised.”

The parish officials became so concerned at the continued refusal and obstinacy of Elias Hatcher that in their account book, they wrote out in full the Toleration Act, in which it was stated that “the solemn affirmation and declaration of the Quakers shall be accepted instead of an oath”. Their refusal to swear an oath was because they said that this inferred that they did not speak the complete truth at other times, which they said was untrue. Their beliefs expected them to speak the truth at all times.

After the Churchwardens’ visits to Canterbury concerning Elias Hatcher, we read entries like –

“1699 April ye 15 – for my Journey to Canterbury to p(re)sent the quaker because he would not pay his Church sess – 00 02 06d”



At length the parishioners appointed Elias an **Overseer to the Poor**, responsible for collecting the Poor rate sess. From this date onwards there are no more entries stating he did not 'pay his sess'.

One wonders whether he finally paid up, or whether the Churchwardens agreed to waive his church sess in exchange for taking on the job of Overseer, which many found quite difficult to handle. He possibly did not submit any claims for his personal expenses, realising that the Poor Rate assessment had nothing to do with the beliefs of the church and everything to do with alleviating the chronic poverty of the agricultural labourers in the village. Whatever the outcome of Elias's decision, the Churchwardens considered the document recording his appointment so important that they preserved it and it is still part of Birchington's archives, now held for us in trust by Canterbury Cathedral. It was signed by the Mayor of Dover, Thomas Broadley, who oversaw the management of our secular affairs.

It has always been known a Quaker burial place existed in Birchington, but its situation was unknown. Tradition had it that it was probably on the site now occupied by the Methodist Church. In 1966, when workmen were digging the foundations for additions to the west side of the Chapel, an old grave was found with a much rotted coffin. Unfortunately the metal label on the coffin was not decipherable, but the discovery almost certainly confirms that this was part of the site of the original "new Quaker burial ground". The Churchwardens' Account book has the following entry:-

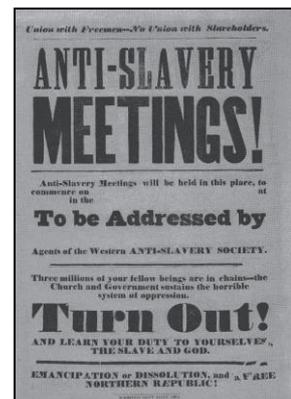
"Medm (memorandum) yt (that) Margarett, wife of John Browne was buried in a new made burying place of the Quakers in the sd p'rish and she was about yt time brought to bed of a girl as yet unbaptised."



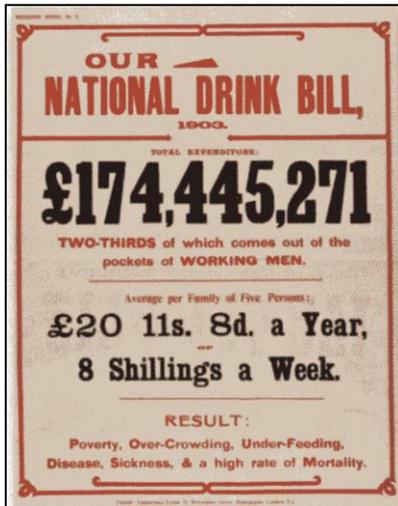
The Quakers had a meeting place in Birchington and there is every possibility that it was in or near to **Southdown House** (No: 207 Canterbury Road), which stands on the left side of the entrance leading to the Chapel. The cellars of Southdown House almost certainly date from about 1650. According to the Quaker Meeting Book of 1733 to 1743, now in the County Archives Office, it appears that our Meeting House was sold in about 1751. Whether this was because the numbers

had dwindled to such an extent that the group was no longer able to function as a separate unit, and so went to join the more numerous group in Canterbury, we have yet to establish. At the present time (2014) the Birchington Friends join with the Ramsgate Friends, as Birchington's numbers are too low to warrant a separate cell.

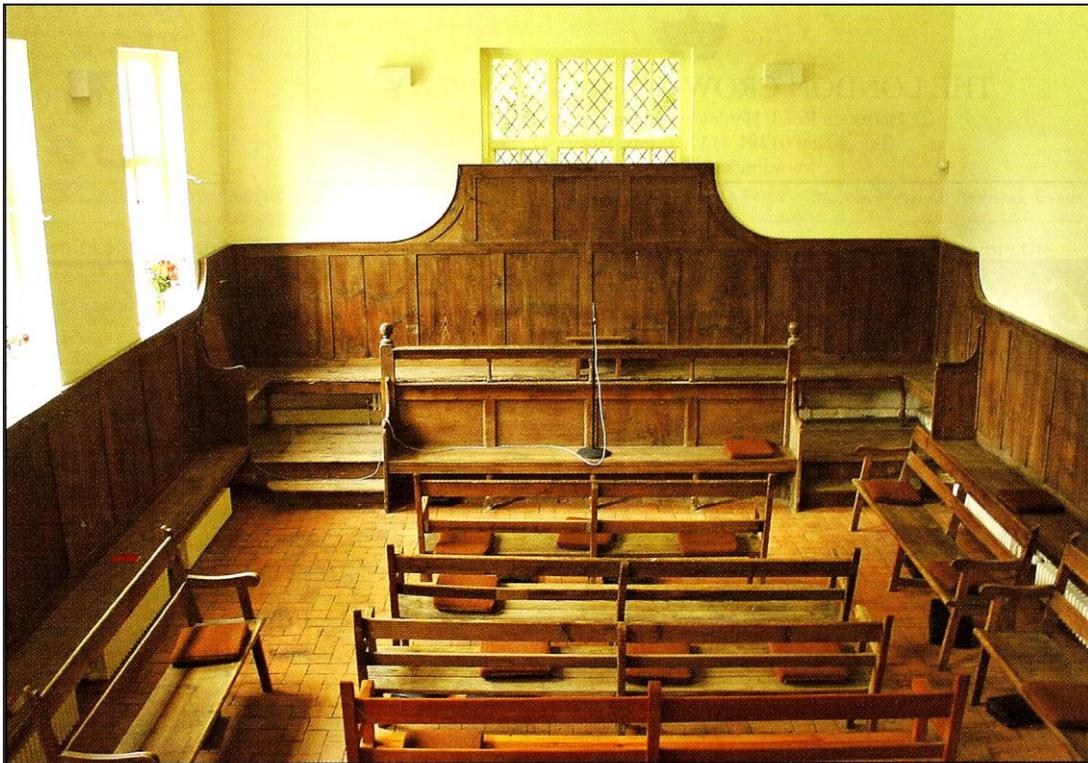
Although the Society of Friends has always been a fairly small minority group in England (never more than about 25,000) their influence has been very significant in a large number of areas of our national life. Quakers have always focused their attention on the 'underdogs' of our society, including child factory-workers, the poor in general and especially prisoners, especially debtors and women. One of its tenets has been that the sentences given should provide restorative justice, where offenders are helped to recognise their responsibility for their crimes and make restitution wherever possible.



They also focused much of their attention on helping abolish slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and in finding ways of helping the sick, the homeless and the stateless – in fact anyone who needed a voice raised on their behalf, often found warm and practical support from the Quaker movement. There are many Friends who are pacifists, which has led them to become involved in trying to keep peace without resorting to arms – the idea for the United Nations was first put forward by the Friends. The Friends were very involved with the Temperance Movement during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, recognising that it was excessive drinking that broke up families, and caused such poverty for the wives and children.



They have also played an important role in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). In more recent times their involvement with Green Peace has caused their members much hardship, but has drawn the world's attention to the need to nurture our planet and not be so profligate with its resources.



The repaired Quaker Meeting House at Jordans. Late 18th-century raised dais, panelling and benches within a 1688 shell