

The Role of Quaker Women in the Seventeenth Century, and the Experiences of the Wiltshire Friends

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There are no references to Margaret Shurmer in the literature as a leading Quaker figure in her native Wiltshire, nor is she famed as a preacher or pamphlet writer. She was just one of the many women who chose to embrace the life-style of the Society of Friends. She had some standing in her own community as the second wife, and then the widow, of Giles Shurmer, a prosperous farmer of Purton Stoke. Both Margaret and Giles were active members of the Purton Friends' meeting,¹ opening their home to local Friends as a meeting place. When he died in 1676 Giles left the adult children from his first marriage and his widow, Margaret, with two small children and pregnant with their third. Despite her family responsibilities Margaret continued to host meetings for the Purton Friends, and occasionally for the Wiltshire East district's monthly meeting, and her home was registered as a meeting-house for religious worship under the Toleration Act of 1689.

Christine Trevett, writing in 1995, deplored the fact that little research seems to have been undertaken into the role of the ordinary women who were attracted to Quakerism, how they managed their daily lives, marriages and families, their inspiration to write and preach, and their notions of spiritual equality.² The discovery of surviving court records relating to a series of illegal meetings, hosted by Margaret Shurmer in 1683,³ has provided the means to address some of Trevett's justified concerns. It has been possible, through the personal information contained in these records, to study of a group of ordinary working women and men and the impact of Quakerism on their lives. The court records have been used in conjunction with the Friends own records, such as meeting minute books, the accounts of sufferings for their faith at the hands of the authorities, and their registers of births, marriages and burials, to gain a fuller picture of this Quaker group. Additional

external, and generally hostile, evidence of the Quakers located in the Ecclesiastical Returns of 1669 and the 1676 Compton Census,⁴ and other church records, such as the churchwardens' presentments to the bishop on the state of the parishes, have also been used.⁵ For most women, their family circumstances and daily routine would have prevented their involvement in the Society at a level that would bring them to the attention of historians as pamphlet writers or preachers. Only a minority of women exercised the freedom offered for public ministry but this was not the only role open to women within the nascent Society. As Richard Allen observed, it was women's organising qualities that helped the Quaker movement to survive the harshest years of persecution.⁶ As a relatively wealthy, educated widow, used to helping to run the family businesses, Margaret Shurmer was well placed to take an active role in her local Friends' meeting. It is generally accepted that men were the leaders of meetings at all levels (except for the separate women's meetings) even though women, usually widows, often provided the premises.⁷ However, it will be demonstrated that Shurmer possessed organisational and leadership qualities that enabled her not only to get involved with the newly instituted women's meeting but also to remain at the helm of her joint local meeting for worship for nearly thirty years.

The role of Quakers in challenging the accepted notions of the place of women in seventeenth century society has been a topic of debate for historians for many years. In 1958 Keith Thomas looked at the impact of the Civil War sects on women and their own perceptions of their place in society.⁸ The place of a woman, at that time, was determined by a universal belief in her inferiority, and by Biblical references in Genesis and the epistles of St Paul that reinforced the need for her subjection to man. Throughout the seventeenth century St Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, admonishing them to 'let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted for them to speak,' had been at the root of social condemnation of women's preaching. In 1631 Richard Braithwaite's book of advice on female conduct decreed that neither theological nor state matters were becoming subjects for discussion by modest females, either in public or private.⁹ To question the place of a woman within the social order was to flaunt the will of God and could only result in chaos and anarchy. Thomas was one of the first to voice the argument that the Civil War sects in general, and the Quakers in particular, provided unusually active public roles for women. From the beginning the Quakers laid great emphasis on the spiritual equality of the sexes which included, in theory at least, an equal share in church government. Numerically women were extremely prominent among the dissenting sects, which led to gibes from their opponents that

their audiences consisted chiefly of the weaker sex. Women played an important role in the life of the sects and the opportunities open to them were greater than in the outside world. Nevertheless, despite this illusion of religious equality most sectaries maintained the web of female obedience intact, apart from the liberty of conscience and worship and, as Thomas observed, the early Quakers were notoriously patriarchal. It would be anachronistic to expect Quakerism to have offered women secular equality and the equality they knew was essentially of a spiritual nature. Thomas regarded the long-term effects on the progress of feminism of this sectarian insistence on women's spiritual equality as small, and of no great importance in the later history of female emancipation. No call for female suffrage was made during this period, and the arguments used by the future feminist movements were based upon natural right and the denial of any intellectual differences between the sexes rather than on spiritual equality.¹⁰

Over three decades after Thomas gave his assessment on the role of women in the dissenting sects the debate on whether or not Quaker women were early feminists has been re-examined. Patricia Crawford stressed that seventeenth-century assumptions about the legal and social positions of the two sexes remained virtually unchallenged, even during the Civil War and Interregnum when many traditional ideas were being questioned.¹¹ Women at this time were accustomed to a limited degree of freedom within marriage, for example assisting their husbands in business deals and acting as executors to wills, although in religion they were still considered subordinate to men.¹² Judith Kegan Gardiner noted that Margaret Fell's 1666 essay *Women's Speaking Justified* has been heralded as an early feminist landmark,¹³ and Christine Trevett referred to seventeenth-century Quaker women as 'incipient feminists' suggesting that they sought social as well as religious equality.¹⁴ But, for Margaret Fell, gender distinctions were irrelevant in the face of faith, and the world was divided into two groups: Friends with the inner light, and all others. Elaine Hobby observed that the Biblical role models chosen by Quaker women were those that epitomised women's caring role 'as a mother in Israel.' She argued that, while the pamphlets issued by Fell and others were important in providing tools for their readers to justify women's speaking, they were not radical feminist works and there was no single coherent Quaker tradition of defence for women's preaching.¹⁵

Phyllis Mack investigated the freedom gained by women of all sects to become involved in public ministry and itinerant preaching in the more tolerant religious climate of the Civil War and Interregnum.¹⁶ Hilda Smith identified the events of the Civil War as the probable catalyst that led some women to think about, and speak out against, the

miserable education of women and their unjust position within the home.¹⁷ However, like Thomas and Crawford, she did not see radical religious groups, such as the Quakers, as providing the framework for expressing the legitimacy of women's intellectual equality. She noted that, whilst writing in support of women's speaking, Margaret Fell accepted that women should never speak in a way that would usurp the authority of men.¹⁸ Social norms, as defined by the likes of Richard Braithwaite, led some men – and women – to feel that women being visibly active in the public arena could bring the whole Society into disrepute. As Antonia Fraser observed

the trouble was that the kind of woman who possessed the audacity to challenge the ruling of St Paul was not likely to combine it with that feminine modesty which would win society's respect for the cause of the woman preacher.¹⁹

The actions of Quaker women in publicly challenging ministers within their churches, petitioning against the payment of tithes, or standing in the market place exhorting passers-by to repent, led to implications that they were scolds or even witches and thus social outcasts.²⁰ Dorothy Ludlow noted that Quaker women missionaries were a common occurrence in both town and countryside, and that obstreperous behaviour by women parishioners was a regular feature of the religious controversies that agitated the entire nation. Incessant interruptions of congregations by these women in the 1650s led local magistrates to interpret strictly the Elizabethan vagrancy laws and when the offenders were not natives they were forced out of town.²¹ Trevett has examined the motives of these ordinary women moved to speak at public meetings or to flout social conventions by ranting at clergy or going naked. Both she and Mack also recorded some of the contemporary male reactions to these women, in the shape of support or condemnation from within and outside the Quaker movement. Trevett noted that, in their own eyes, these women were no longer female, weaker vessels trespassing on male preserves, but had transcended carnal humanity and so were innocent of socially offensive unfeminine behaviour.²² However, not all men and women agreed with such reasoning, and many viewed women's meetings and women ministers as dangerous innovations. As the Society developed and matured the leadership saw the need to curb the apparent excesses of its early enthusiasts, especially the women, in order to gain public respectability.

The social disruption of such unruly public behaviour was a cause for concern for the civil authorities. The case of James Nayler and the women that supported him has been well documented, with the behavi-

our of Martha Simmonds and her companions being cited as a significant factor in his fall from grace.²³ The Books of Sufferings,²⁴ which were compiled locally by the Friends in each county to record the treatment of all their members for acts of civil disobedience, or refusing to pay tithes and church rates, reflect the results of the authorities' concerns. The sufferings of thirty-five men and ten women are recorded in Wiltshire during the 1650s for such offences. The men, who were deemed to be responsible for their own actions and finances, were usually given a term of imprisonment or a fine, or both. However women, who were usually the responsibility of a male protector – unless widowed – were often whipped and sent to the local Bridewell prison for days or weeks and, as Trevett observed, it was women who were frequently moved to make public expressions of their faith. Contemporary Wiltshire records gave the occasional assessment of the type of woman moved to such public action. In 1657 Barbara Blagdown, who spoke to the congregation in Marlborough after the minister had ended his sermon, was described by a sympathiser as 'a woman of good parts and education.'²⁵ She was physically chastised and committed to the Bridewell for her crime. In 1656 Mary Loe was imprisoned for speaking in the market place. Undeterred she was soon incarcerated again, this time with Jane Betteris, for speaking to the people after the minister had ended his sermon. This did not subdue the pair and they had to be removed to the prison dungeon to prevent them speaking to passers-by through the grating. Other examples have survived of Wiltshire women being physically punished for public speaking. For exhorting repentance in the Marlborough market place in 1658 Mary Goodman was put in the blind house overnight, then tied to a pillar in the market place and whipped. Anne Clayton, who committed the same offence, was sent to the Bridewell, then whipped and sent out of town 'privately by a back way.'

The implementation of a structured organisation for the Quaker movement during the 1660s, saw a change in the role of women within the Society, with moves to channel their publicly extravagant behaviour into more socially acceptable and conventional spheres.²⁶ George Fox, the acknowledged founder of Quakerism, visited Wiltshire in 1673 to promote the establishment of separate women's meetings in the county.²⁷ Margaret Fell, who had married Fox in 1669, had been active herself in the early organisation of the Society, with her home at Swarthmoor being used as a central meeting place and post office for the movement's missionaries. Her own pivotal role within the organisation may well have led her to appreciate the contribution that women could make to the Society, and she has been credited with being among

the chief creators of women's meetings.²⁸ Margaret Shurmer embraced the opportunity for separate meetings with other women, but on the death of her husband in 1676 she also assumed the role of host and organiser of the joint local meeting for worship.

Despite Shurmer's standing in her local meeting it was the men who represented this, and all other local meetings, at each district's monthly meeting where the Society's business matters were discussed. One of the reasons George Fox gave, in 1671, for the need for separate women's meetings was that there were many things that it was 'proper for women to look into, both in their families and concerning women', that modest women did not feel free to speak about among men. Fox was, thus, publicly declaring the modesty of Quaker women and providing them with a forum in which to discuss specifically female concerns, which had the added bonus of reinforcing the traditional view of the women's sphere, and keeping it separate from that of the men.²⁹ He also acknowledged that men did not wish to pry into purely female concerns.³⁰ However, such reasoning did not appease all his opponents. In Wiltshire there was a vocal group of male Friends who were opposed to women being involved in any public activities away from their traditional role in the home, even though this was within the Society and away from the public gaze of the market place. This situation was further aggravated as the scope of the women's meetings, while outwardly subordinate to the men's, was not confined exclusively to women's concerns but included wider issues such as the administration of funds for poor relief, and the investigation of the suitability of those wishing to marry.

The problem of proving the legitimacy of Quaker marriages was a major concern for the early leadership as it had implications for the general respectability of the Society, the legitimacy of Friends' children, and the status of women in their communities. Critics often accused Quakers of being like Ranters or members of the Family of Love, having no morality and 'coming together like beasts'.³¹ It was important for the survival of the movement to have a public form of marriage which adhered to Christian morality, whilst not compromising their distaste of the Anglican ceremonies. Early Quaker marriages, including that of Fox and Fell in Bristol in 1669,³² were simply contracted before those assembled at a monthly meeting. In order to confound their critics the Friends needed to introduce a more stringent system, with all those present at a marriage declaration signing the meeting minute book as witnesses.³³ Although this satisfied some detractors there are examples of churchwardens still challenging the status of Quaker marriages and the legitimacy of their children, as late as 1683. William Burger and his 'reputed wife' were presented for not attending Divine Service for many

years, and at the same time Elizabeth Burger was presented for having a base-born child.³⁴ To ensure that marriages were seen to be morally contracted the leadership required the couple to have their freedom from other attachments investigated by both the women's and men's meetings. Thus, the investigation of Friends' marriages reflected the egalitarian message of the Society and underlined the importance of women to the local meeting.³⁵ In practise the women undertook the initial investigation and passed their recommendation to the men's meeting for final approval. It was this aspect of the system, implying that women had some degree of control over men's lives, that made women's meetings a contentious issue within the movement for many years.

Although no minutes have survived for any such Wiltshire meetings in the seventeenth century, there are sufficient references in the minutes of the men's monthly meetings to be confident that separate women's meetings had been set up across the county.³⁶ The men's minutes confirm that the new system for investigating marriage proposals was operating well as it was the women's marriage recommendations that form the main body of references to women's meetings in the men's minutes. There are examples in the Wiltshire East monthly meeting minutes of men and women working together to confirm the clearness of a couple to marry, such as those dated 26 May 1678 and 4 August 1679. Women were also expected to look after the moral conduct of their members, as demonstrated by the case of Richard Goulding and his wife Jeane who were accused of 'fornication & uncleanness in lust after Marridge'. The men's monthly meeting in Calne in 1681 agreed 'they both be desired to come to next monthly meeting of women friends to whom they belong'. In an example of co-operation, perhaps because of the nature of these allegations, four men were appointed to 'joyne with women friends in this service'.³⁷ Jeane subsequently appeared at the women's monthly meeting where she was suitably admonished for her behaviour but refused to modify her actions, and William Smith and his wife were authorised to speak further with the offending couple.

Aside from investigating marriages it has been argued that many of the other functions of women's meetings were stereotypical female roles, firmly rooted within their traditional sphere, and that their independence was limited.³⁸ They dealt with the settling of servants and apprentices; the education of young women; and the disciplining of disorderly members, although this sometimes needed the support of the men, as in the case outlined above. Dispensing charity was an important aspect of women's work, so the women's meetings organised visits to help the poor, the sick, the elderly and the infirm.³⁹ They held their own collections to raise funds for poor relief which they administered

themselves. For many ordinary Quaker women having their own meetings provided new opportunities, not only to get involved with activities such as administration and accounting, but also to express themselves freely without feeling restricted by the dominating presence of the men. The meetings were a gathering of like-minded women, which gave them a sense of community.⁴⁰ Fox supported their independence for charitable purposes, but warned that when confronted with problems 'beyond their range' they were to submit their difficulties to the men's meeting.⁴¹ Despite such restrictions Quaker women continued to enjoy more authority and respect than other Christian women received in their churches.⁴²

On the whole the men in Wiltshire seemed to work in harmony with women Friends. As already noted, an exception to this unity arose over the male perceptions of the role given to women to determine marriage proposals. Some male Friends were angered by the power they saw being given to women to decide a man's destiny regarding his marriage. The issue became a focal point for the Wiltshire supporters of the Quaker separatists, John Wilkinson and John Story, who were in dispute with George Fox over a number of leadership and organisational issues. Wilkinson and Story drew much of their support from Wiltshire where they had worked almost exclusively as missionaries in the 1650s and 1660s. Under the leadership of Arthur Eastmead of Calne and Nathaniel Coleman of Sutton Benger these separatists continued to oppose women's meetings throughout the 1670s and 1680s. Coleman was particularly vociferous in his objections to women having their own meetings or acting as teachers or elders, as he favoured their total subordination to men. However, the views of Coleman and his separatist colleagues did not prevail as the century wore on, and many Wiltshire women were enjoying the rights of their own meetings by 1678. The matter had been so well settled that, by 1696, the quarterly meeting minutes were able to record that,

With ye approbation of ye Womens Halfe Yearly Meeting our next Halfe Yearly Meeting is appointed to begin on ye 2nd day of ye weeke at ye 9th Hour in the Morning.⁴³

It is against this climate of development and change, both within the Society of Friends and in seventeenth century England, that the life of the Wiltshire women Friends should be viewed. Politically the country had experienced repeated upheavals, through the period of Civil Wars, and the Restoration of the monarchy. These events had produced a number of radical groups but also left an insecure population, scared of potential revolutionary threats, and keen to suppress anyone, or any group, that might pose a threat to the status quo. The Civil War period

had spawned a plethora of religious and political sects to challenge the authority of both church and state. A generation later the Popish Plot, the attempts to exclude James Duke of York from the succession, and Rye House Plot of 1683 all engendered a further climate of religious and political suspicion.⁴⁴ The adverse reactions to the Quakers, who kept themselves separate from mainstream society, possessing their own exclusive meetings and communications networks, extended to the organisational and disciplinary roles accorded to women through their meetings.⁴⁵

Unlike other dissenting groups the Quakers refused to hide in secluded places, holding their meetings in the open, in defiance of the Conventicle Acts. Their refusal to pay tithes or church rates was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of the Anglican Church and to the preservation of social order. The authorities made no distinction between men and women in their attempts to enforce social and religious conformity, as the example of widow Warman shows.⁴⁶ In 1666 she refused to pay her tithe demand of £5 and was committed to the county gaol for three years, along with John Gardner and Giles Shurmer who also refused to pay their tithes. Warman and Shurmer were subsequently removed to prison in London where they remained for many years, during which time the widow had ten cows taken, valued at £40, to discharge her debt.⁴⁷ However, she remained true to her Quaker principles, being presented to the bishop by the churchwardens in 1674 for refusing to attend Divine Service.⁴⁸

The Quaker particular meeting at Purton, to which these Friends belonged, does not appear to fit the expected geographical and demographic norms for Quaker meetings of the period. Purton is situated in the agricultural north-east of the county, away from the areas of cloth production with which religious dissent is traditionally associated. In her work on Protestant Nonconformity in Wiltshire, Marjorie Reeves asserted that the north-east corner of the county remained relatively untouched until the great evangelising movements of the later eighteenth century.⁴⁹ Donald Spaeth concurred with Reeves, noting that the region lacked the conditions favourable to the spread of dissent, in the form of the cloth industry, rivers, and road links to other cloth towns. In his view this accounted for the absence of the dissent that flourished in the west of the region.⁵⁰ Although outside the cloth region, Spaeth was mistaken in assuming that the area was cut off from the national road network. Although in a rural district, Purton was not a backwater in the seventeenth century being situated on the main route from Oxford to Bristol and Exeter, and only six miles west of the junction of this east-west route with the north-south route from Worcester via

Marlborough and Salisbury to Poole.⁵¹ Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon, who before his fall from grace in 1667 had been the architect of the Code named after him, the series of laws aimed at controlling religious dissent, had property in the parish. His daughter Anne, the mother of the future queens Mary and Anne, spent much of her childhood there.⁵² Purton Manor was owned by the first Earl of Shaftesbury, the former Lord Chancellor, who led the agitation for the exclusion of the Catholic Duke of York from the succession, and supported the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion in 1685.⁵³ Despite the assertions of Reeves and Spaeth, both Quakers and Baptists were active in the region in the seventeenth century and the 1669 Ecclesiastical Returns described the Purton meeting as consisting of about one hundred 'Quakers and such like fanatickes'.⁵⁴

Hostile clergy frequently sought to devalue the importance of dissenters' meetings, and those attending meetings in Wiltshire were variously denigrated as 'meane people,' 'ignorant,' 'chiefly wives, servants and children,' 'meane mechanicks,' 'tradesmen and shopkeepers,' and 'mostly women'.⁵⁵ Analysis of the occupations of the thirty-two women and forty men identified as regular members of the Purton meeting during the 1680s, has revealed that over half the men were engaged in rural activities. Their livelihoods derived from being yeomen, husbandmen and labourers, as well as tradesmen and artisans including bakers, maltsters, cordwainers, a blacksmith, and a gunsmith. Of the remainder four were tailors, one was a hatter and one a glover, which could indicate links with the neighbouring cloth producing region. The women are mainly described as either the wife or daughter of a man Friend or as a widow, and the younger, and the unmarried, women are often described as spinsters, which also suggests strong links with the cloth producing region. Unusually Margaret Gardner is described as both the wife of John and a spinster, indicating her occupation as well as her marital status.

Three families in the area, the Gardners of Purton, the Sanders of Cricklade, and Shurmurs of Purton Stoke, have been identified as the leaders of the Purton Quaker community, and the group's ties were strengthened by the intermarrying of their members, and the settling of each others' children as apprentices. Thus the instigators of the Purton meeting named in the 1669 Returns were the rich farmers, John Gardner and John Shurmer, while it was Giles Shurmer, another rich farmer, who had donated his orchard for use as a burial ground in 1668.⁵⁶ Margaret Sanders of Cricklade married Giles Shurmer in 1671, and Ann Gardner married Thomas Sanders, a baker, of Cricklade in 1675.⁵⁷ As well as being members of the joint meeting for worship Margaret

Shurmer, Margaret Gardner and Ann Sanders were also all active members of the separate women's meeting.

Ten women are listed in the Wiltshire East men's meeting minute book as members of the women's meeting in 1680,⁵⁸ but the bulk of information about the group is located in the aforementioned court case against Margaret Shurmer.⁵⁹ She hosted a series of five meetings over the summer of 1683 and, as a result of information given to local magistrates, all those who attended were prosecuted with her at the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions. Shurmer and her companions were courageous to persist in meeting openly throughout that summer as the Rye House Plot, an alleged Whig-Radical conspiracy to assassinate the king and his brother, the Duke of York, had been uncovered earlier in the year.⁶⁰ Discovery of the plot had resulted in an unquestioning wave of loyalism sweeping the country, and an order that all public meetings should cease. The Duke of Monmouth, who had become a rallying-point for dissent following his triumphal progress through the West Country in 1680, was subsequently implicated in the Rye House Plot.⁶¹ Monmouth's main support was drawn from the clothing areas of the south-west, including many Wiltshire towns, and his defeat resulted a backlash against nonconformists. There was a revival in the implementation of the laws against nonconformity, as tolerance towards dissenters was blamed for allowing such plots to be hatched.

The church and civil authorities both took the opportunity to round up the dissenters that they considered were causing a problem in their parishes. In their presentments to the bishop for the Cricklade Deanery, in September 1683, the Purton churchwardens presented eleven women and seven men 'for not coming to Divine Service and not receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper at Easter last past.'⁶² All of those named were members of the Purton particular meeting, and eleven of the eighteen had attended at least one of the series of meetings at Shurmer's home between 17 June and 17 September. For the civil authority the Clerk of the Peace in Wiltshire reiterated the national injunction

to proceed against all such dissenters (under what name soe ever they do call themselves), to the end that they be brought to obedience to the Kinge and his Lawes both in Church and State, for we finde by more than Twenty yeares experience that noething but the severity of the law will reclaime such men, and that all Indulgences, Tollera-tions and connivances makes them more redy to rebell.⁶³

This order led to a clamp down on dissenting groups throughout the county, with local constables acting as informers, usually for a financial reward.⁶⁴ The wording of the charges against Shurmer and her compan-

ions made it clear that they were all being prosecuted under the Conventicle Acts as it described them as

being of severall Ages of sixteen years and upwards and subjects of the Realm but not of the family of the said Margaret Shurmer . . . were present at a certaine unlawfull Assembly Conventicle or Meeting . . . for the pretence of the Exercise of Religion . . . Against the Act of Parliament made . . . for Suppressing of Seditious Conventicles.⁶⁵

Despite the assertion made in the charges, three of those attending and fined for doing so, were members of Margaret's family, namely her stepson John, her step-daughter Mary, and her sister-in-law Ann Sanders.

Each person who attended was fined five shillings for their first offence and ten shillings for each subsequent offence, with no distinction made between men and women. There was no means testing for ability to pay, with labourers being fined at the same rate as the yeomen. As married women had no property of their own the charges for their offences were levied on their husbands. Thus, John Sly and Arthur Henty had to pay the fines both for themselves and their wives, while labourer William Woodard, who did not even attend any of the meetings, had to pay his wife's penalty. John Gardner's daughters Sarah and Mary, who were both present, were identified as spinsters and appeared in the list of fines to be levied in their own right and not as John's responsibility. As widows, Margaret Shurmer, Susanna Reade, Elizabeth Cleeve, and Joan Wimblett were all responsible for their own fines, the three older women being in much poorer financial circumstances than their hostess. However, Margaret Shurmer was fined an additional £20 for each offence of hosting an illegal meeting, her total fine for the five meetings amounting to £102-5s.

To put these fines into context, the maximum wages for a bailiff of husbandry in 1685 was set by the Wiltshire magistracy at £6 per year, a chief shepherd at £5 per year, and a chief woman servant at £2-10s. per year. Male labourers doing seasonal agricultural work earned between twelve and eighteen pence per day, depending on the task and whether or not meat and drink was included, while for a woman labourer the daily rates were from six to twelve pence.⁶⁶ Thus the total fine of £2-5s. imposed on farm labourer William Woodard for his wife's activities would have been a crippling punishment, and the married couples that both attended had to pay double this amount, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Although the court case arising from these meetings is not recorded in either their monthly or quarterly meetings minutes it is probable that at least part of the fines would have been met from the Wiltshire Friends'

funds, which were raised by collections at meetings, to help members in need.⁶⁷ Surprisingly the extreme hardships these fines must have caused were not recorded in the book of Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings either, although the sufferings of those charged with attending various meetings in Devizes in 1683 were recorded.⁶⁸ There is a reference in the Book of Sufferings for 1684 to John Gardner having been fined £10 for attending illegal meetings, and for which he had goods taken to the value of £11.10s. This probably relates to the meetings hosted by Margaret Shurmer, and could imply that Gardner was the only one to report the extent of his losses to the quarterly meeting.

Despite their financial hardships those attending the meetings in Purton were at least fined according to the scale laid down in the Conventicle Acts. In this respect they fared better than their colleagues had thirteen years earlier, when a group of eight Friends were charged with being at one meeting at the Bromham home of the recently-widowed Dorothy Rawlings in 1670.⁶⁹ The fines levied on that occasion do not seem to have been those stipulated by the law, but rather opportunist seizures by the magistrate and clergy. Dorothy Rawlings was fined £40 for hosting the meeting and a further fifteen shillings for attending it, while her son Stephen was fined fifteen shillings for attendance and £10 for harbouring the minister, although none was present. They were so poor that the sale of Dorothy's goods only raised forty shillings and Stephen's raised a further £2-5s-6d.⁷⁰ The goods of the others present were seized in lieu; Benjamin Shell (six cows and one bullock worth £20), Thomas Gerrish (two pieces of broadcloth valued at £13), Richard Stump clothing worth £1, and Henry Chivers and his wife one kettle and one pot valued at £1. Mary Eyre, who was described as an ancient feeble woman, had three cows and one bullock taken, worth £12, which were all the cattle she had.

Rawlings was one of five widows and three men recorded in the Wiltshire Book of Sufferings to have goods taken in lieu for hosting meetings in 1670. Across the county these represented only a tiny proportion of the meetings held⁷¹ and it can not be assumed from this that widows hosted more meetings than men. However, it does show that women were active as meeting hosts and suffered alongside their male counterparts. Most of these widows were poor and endured real hardship through the distraint of their possessions. One of them, Joan Hale of Bremhill, had been targeted for many years but continued to host meetings despite the repeated seizure of her goods. Finally in 1670, while she was 'sick of the ague' and caring for young children, all her household goods were taken. They 'did not leave a bed for the children nor clothes to put on.'⁷²

Superficially the meetings cited here were similar, being hosted by widows in rural areas and attended by local Friends, but those attending Shurmer's meetings included prosperous yeomen, tradesmen and artisans with a few labourers, while those at Rawlings' were predominantly labourers and smallholders. In contrast to Shurmer, Rawlings and Hale were from humble backgrounds and there is no evidence to show that they did more than provide the premises for meetings. There is supporting evidence, which will be discussed below, to identify Shurmer as a leading member of both the women's meeting and the joint meeting for worship. Thus, it could be inferred that women in a position of some authority within the wider community were also able to assume a leading role within their local Friends' meeting, or conversely that it was only the actions of such women that were recorded. Another example is that of Jane Selfe, the wife of wealthy Market Lavington clothier Isaac Selfe. When Isaac was imprisoned for a few years, for breaches of the Conventicle Acts, Jane was able to assume the leadership of her joint local meeting. On his release the pair worked together for the local meeting although Isaac resumed the lead with Jane as his helpmeet.⁷³

The situation eased for Quakers following the accession of James II in 1685, as he was anxious to improve conditions for Catholics, and the Friends benefited in the wake of this new climate of toleration. The Act of Toleration finally came into force in 1689, after the Glorious Revolution had put William and Mary on the throne. The Act allowed for premises to be registered as meeting houses for religious worship, thus negating the harshness of the Conventicle Acts. Margaret Shurmer's Purton Stoke home was included in the first batch of twenty-four Wiltshire Quaker premises to be registered on 15 January 1689/90.⁷⁴ She continued to host meetings there for the next fifteen years, despite a proposal being made to the quarterly meeting in 1701 to build a new meeting house in Purton itself, which would be more convenient for members travelling in from the surrounding area.⁷⁵ The new meeting-house was finally acquired and registered for use in 1705, by which time the ageing Shurmer was ready to relinquish control to a new generation.⁷⁶

During the last decade of the seventeenth century Shurmer had continued to preside over the Purton meeting. It is clear from the men's monthly meetings minutes that she was regarded as the leader of the community there. On those occasions when the Purton meeting failed to send representatives to the monthly meeting it was Shurmer who was asked to give an explanation. She also occasionally hosted the monthly meeting on its regular rotation around the district, although there is no direct indication in the minutes that she took an active part. However,

there are records of Shurmer's earlier involvement in discussions relating to a 'troublesome servant' Elizabeth Wilkins, and the course of action to be taken was finally decided at a monthly meeting under her roof.⁷⁷

Shurmer also seems to have played an important role in trying to resolve internal disputes between the male members. Most of the disputes concerned William Grimes, a gunsmith from Cricklade, and his son, also William. Grimes senior had been a staunch Quaker since the early 1670s but seemed to expect impossibly high standards of behaviour from his fellow Friends, which led him to accuse others of slothfulness and disorderly conduct. Nathaniel Bayly, Roger Cook, and Hopeful Vokins, who were on the receiving end of Grimes' complaints, hotly contested his accusations. After rumbling on for many months the affair was passed to the quarterly meeting for judgement. Once the quarterly meeting had assessed the case they recorded on 6 July 1696 that

As to Wm Grimes case etc the Friends report yt they gave their judgement upon it and sent a copy of it to Margret Shermore & wee understand shee wholly conceded it, this Meeting appoints John Hodges to write to her about it, and hath appoynted John Sparrow & Zephaniah Fry to speake to her on the same acct.⁷⁸

This wording provides confirmation of Margaret Shurmer's acknowledged status as a leader within her local meeting, and the action to which she conceded was for the disowning of William Grimes and his son by the Society of Friends.

It has often been stated that women were publicly active in the early days of the Society of Friends, but that their importance diminished and their activities were curtailed as the movement became institutionalised.⁷⁹ The introduction of separate women's meetings gave women a specific role although, as Allen noted, they had to rely on the sanction of their male counterparts in conducting their permitted administrative and charitable tasks.⁸⁰ Despite these apparent restraints, this brief trawl through the records of the Wiltshire Quakers has revealed that women could wield significant local influence. For nearly thirty years Margaret Shurmer was prominent within her joint local meeting, and through dialogue with the men's monthly and quarterly meetings, as well as in the separate women's meetings. Whether her degree of authority, which originated in her assumption of her late husband's mantle, was unusual has yet to be fully investigated, but it might be more common than hitherto realised. The records are full of instances of women, usually widows, hosting meetings, and thus providing a stable network of premises in which the movement could grow and mature. Whilst women's actions were constrained by the times in which they

lived the Society of Friends provided the means for women with the right social standing and intellect to take a leading role within their own communities. Margaret Shurmer and Jane Selfe were relatively wealthy, educated women, used to some degree of command, and so were able to lead their local meetings, although Shurmer's widowed status gave her the independence that Selfe lacked. Dorothy Rawlings' more humble background did not prevent her from hosting meetings but she deferred to her son to lead them. Women of all ranks were able to take part in their own separate meetings and conduct their own business, such as administering charitable funds and investigating proposals for marriage. All these women, working quietly together at the grass roots of the Society, were as essential to its survival as the more flamboyant and charismatic leaders. They were not the forerunners of modern feminists, making no calls for universal suffrage or for women's rights outside the home, but they did help to lay the foundations for change by stepping outside the social norms of their time to assert their rights in the spiritual arena.

Notes

1. Friends, or particular, meetings were the local level of the Friends' organisation, where men and women met together, mainly for worship, and minutes of such meetings were not usually kept.
2. Christine Trevett, *Women and Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century* (York, 1995), pp. viii-ix. An early examination of Quaker women was undertaken by Mabel Richmond Brailsford, *Quaker Women 1650-1690* (1915), in which she looked mainly at the lives of women well-known for their preaching or writing.
3. Records of the civil action taken against those attending illegal meetings in Purton are located at W[iltshire and] S[windon] R[ecord] O[ffice], Quarter Session Great Roll, A1/110, 1683M; and the informants' papers 212B/5535-5538, 5556-7.
4. G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity Under Persecution and Indulgence* (1911), vol. 3. Anne Whiteman (ed.), *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition, Records of Social and Economic History*, series X, (Oxford, 1986).
5. Presentment was a means of notification of the presence of dissenters and not the legal process of conviction.
6. Richard C. Allen, 'The Society of Friends in Wales: the Case of Monmouthshire c1654-1836', (Unpublished. Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales Aberystwyth, 1999), p. 406.
7. Anne Laurence, *Women in England 1500-1760: a Social History* (1995), p. 207. Laurence noted that women were significant suppliers of premises but it was only in the registration of Quaker meeting houses that their names appear as signatories on behalf of the congregation.

8. Keith Thomas, 'Women and the Civil War Sects,' *Past and Present* (1958), reprinted in Trevor Ashton (ed.), *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660* (1965), and the edition cited here.
9. Cited in Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth Century England* (1984), p. 274.
10. Thomas, *op.cit.*, pp. 338-9.
11. Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720* (1993), p. 9.
12. Allen, thesis, p. 408.
13. Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Margaret Fell and Feminist literary history: a "Mother in Israel" calls to the Jews', *Prose Studies*, XVII, (3) (1994), p. 43.
14. Trevett, *op.cit.*, p. 10. Allen, thesis, p. 411.
15. Elaine Hobby, 'Handmaids of the Lord and Mothers in Israel: early vindications of Quaker Women's prophecy', *Prose Studies*, XVII (3), (1994), p. 90.
16. Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England* (California University Press, 1992).
17. Hilda Smith, *Reason's Disciples, Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), pp. 53-9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
19. Fraser, *op.cit.*, p. 276.
20. Christine Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales 1650-1700* (Lampeter, 2000), p. 220.
21. Dorothy P. Ludlow, 'Shaking patriarchy's foundations: sectarian women in England, 1641-1700,' in Richard L. Greaves (ed.), *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History* (1985), p. 93. Richard C. Allen, 'Taking up her daily cross: women and the early Quaker movement in Wales, 1653-1689,' in Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (eds.), *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales*, (Cardiff, 2000).
22. Trevett, *Women and Quakerism . . .*, p. 50. *Idem.*, *Quaker Women Prophets . . .*, p. 29.
23. Nayler was convicted of blasphemy in 1656 after his entry into Bristol in apparent imitation of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The involvement of women Friends in Nayler's downfall is discussed in C. Trevett, 'The women around James Nayler, Quaker: a matter of emphasis,' *Religion*, XX (1990), pp. 249-273, reprinted in Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets . . .*, pp. 151-178.
24. WSRO. 1699/17, 18, Books of Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1653-1702.
25. WSRO. 1699/17. Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers . . . 1650-1689*, 2 vols. (1753).
26. Trevett, *Women and Quakerism . . .*, p. 12.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 83. WSRO. 1699/79, Chippenham Monthly Meetings Minutes 1669-1709.
28. Bonnelyn Young Kunze, *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism* (1994), p. 144. Kunze's theory of Margaret Fell's role has been contested by H Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends, George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (Oxford 1994), p. 349.
29. See Allen, thesis, p. 432, for the suggestion that, while the purpose behind the establishment of women's meetings was to give women a share in

- church government, it conveniently restricted their influence by not allowing them an equal share with men.
30. Ingle, *op.cit.*, p. 252. Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History* (1950), p. 110.
31. Allen, thesis, p. 338. Fraser, *op.cit.*, p. 419.
32. Russell Mortimer (ed.), 'Minute Book of the Men's Meeting of the Society of Friends in Bristol 1667-1686', *Bristol Record Society* (1971), minute, 21 October 1669, pp. 24-5.
33. W. C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (1912, reprinted Cambridge, 1961), p. 146. A detailed account of Quaker marriage procedures is given in Allen, thesis, pp. 317-320.
34. W.S.R.O. D1/52/10/2, Cricklade St Mary, Churchwardens' Presentments to the bishop, 1683.
35. Allen, thesis, p. 411.
36. For examples, see WSRO. 1699/75, Wiltshire East, Monthly Meeting minute book, 29 September 1679, 29 April 1680, and 29 November 1686, refer to the Women's Meeting at Bromham; that of 5 September 1681, to Calne, 18 June 1680 and 2 August 1686, to Purton.
37. *Ibid.*, minute, 5th 7mo 1681.
38. Allen, thesis, pp. 432-434.
39. E. D. Bebb, *Nonconformity and Social and Economic Life 1660-1800* (Philadelphia, 1935, reprinted 1980), pp. 137-8. Laurence, *op.cit.*, p. 207, noted that women's meetings were more a vehicle for organising charitable work than a means of participating in the government of the movement.
40. Jean E. Mortimer, 'Quaker Women in the eighteenth century: opportunities and constraints,' *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, LVII, (3), (1996), p. 230.
41. Lloyd, *op.cit.*, pp. 110-2.
42. Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets*, p. 210.
43. WSRO. 1699/38, Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting minute book, 22 September 1696.
44. For a comprehensive discussion of social attitudes towards Quakers, and a good overview of the period, see Barry Reay, 'Popular hostility towards Quakers in mid-seventeenth-century England,' *Social History*, V (1980), pp. 387-407. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). John Kenyon, *The Popish Plot* (1972).
45. Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets* . . . , p. 235.
46. See Allen, 'Taking up her Daily Cross . . .', p. 107. The evidence from Wales, and that from Wiltshire, supports the general impression that Quaker women, like their male counterparts, were prepared to suffer the rigours of imprisonment, or the seizure of household goods and farm stock, for the sake of their consciences.
47. WSRO. 1699/17, Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1666.
48. WSRO. D1/54/6/2, Deanery of Cricklade, Churchwardens' presentments, 1674.
49. M. Reeves, 'Protestant Nonconformity in Wiltshire,' in R. Pugh and E. Crittall (eds.), *Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire*, vol. 3 (1956), p. 115.
50. Donald A. Spaeth, 'Parsons and Parishioners: Lay-Clerical Conflict and

- Popular Piety in Wiltshire Villages 1660-1740', (Unpublished. PhD. thesis, Brown University, 1985), p. 279.
51. *Ogilby's Road Maps of England and Wales 1675* (1971), plate 79.
 52. Alec Robbins, *Purton's Past* (Purton Historical Society, 1991), p. 16.
 53. E. Kempster, *An Illustrated Guide to Purton and its Neighbourhood* (Purton, 1889), pp. 18-9.
 54. Turner, *loc.cit.*, pp. 27-8.
 55. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-22.
 56. Spaeth, thesis, p. 196. WSRO. Arch-Wilts., Wills, 1676. The will of Giles Shurmer described him as a yeoman owning property and land, with disposable goods valued at £196-6s.
 57. Gaps in the relevant baptismal records for the first half of the seventeenth century have prevented confirmation of the exact family relationships, but these family names frequently occur in the Friends' records of this close-knit community.
 58. WSRO. 1699/75, Wiltshire East minute book.
 59. WSRO. Quarter Session Great Rolls, A1/110 1683M.
 60. Kenyon, *op.cit.*, p. 280.
 61. Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (1992), pp. 142-3.
 62. WSRO. D1/52/10/2, Deanery of Cricklade, Churchwardens' presentments, 1683.
 63. WSRO. Quarter Sessions Great Rolls, A1/110, 1683H, plea to the Lord Lieutenant from the Grand Jury. B Howard Cunnington (ed.), *Records of the County of Wiltshire: being extracts from the Quarter Sessions Great Rolls of the Seventeenth Century*, (Devizes, 1932), pp. 268-9.
 64. WSRO. 212B/5535-8, 56-7; the 1683 Cricklade and Highworth Constables' lists of the Purton conventiclers, and the rewards they received for acting as informers. One, Edward Sanders, a yeoman of Cricklade, may well have been related to Margaret Shurmer, née Sanders of Cricklade.
 65. WSRO. Quarter Sessions Great Rolls, A1/110, 1683M.
 66. Cunnington, *op.cit.*, pp. 294-5.
 67. As the women's meeting collected its own funds to help members in need, it is possible that the fines were paid from such a source, although not substantiated by surviving minutes.
 68. WSRO. 1699/18, Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1653-1702. During 1683 Friends were taken from a number of Devizes meetings and three men and one woman were committed to the Bridewell for eight weeks, until the next Quarter Sessions; kept as close prisoners under harsh conditions, the mayor eventually ordered their release. Two more women were also committed for eight weeks, and another man had forty-three sheep seized in lieu of a £20 fine.
 69. Dorothy was the second wife of Daniel Rawlings who died 22 March 1669/70. In 1679, two years before her death, she appealed to Wiltshire Friends for help in settling son Aaron.
 70. WSRO. 1699/17, Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1670. James Waylen, *The Quakers of Wiltshire* (Devizes, 1856).
 71. There were at least thirty local Friends' meetings in Wiltshire at this time, affiliated to four district monthly meetings. As each local meeting met

weekly for worship, the eight cases recorded in the Book of Sufferings represent only a tiny fraction.

72. WSRO. 1699/17, Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1670.
73. *Ibid.*, Wiltshire Friends' Sufferings, 1663.
74. WSRO. 854/14, Meeting-house certificates.
75. WSRO. 1699/75, Wiltshire East minute book, 1 September 1701; 1699/38, Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting, minute book, 15 September 1701.
76. Margaret Shurmer was more than 60 years old when she died in 1710.
77. WSRO. 1699/75, Wiltshire East Monthly Meeting, minute book, 11th 2 mo 1698.
78. WSRO. 1699/38, Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting minute book, 6 July 1696.
79. Laurence, *op.cit.*, p. 207.
80. Allen, thesis, p. 445.