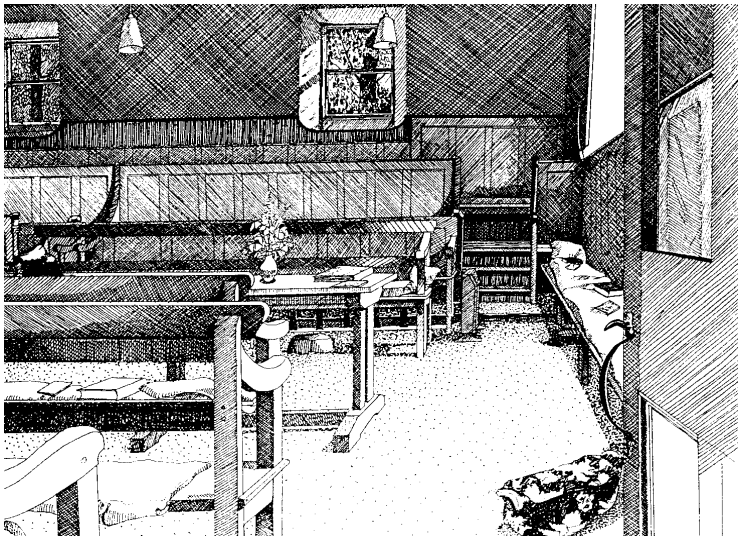




QUAKER ARCHITECTURE



Rawdon Meetinghouse, Yorkshire, England



a favorite quotation of George Fox
built into
Kingswell Meetinghouse, Scotland

The beginning of the Quaker movement was in gatherings outdoors, for example on Firbank Fell near Sedbergh, England in 1652 when George Fox spoke for three hours to about 1,000 seekers, exhorting them to let their lives speak. As the movement grew, Friends were persecuted through the Quaker Act (1662) and the Conventicle Acts (1664 and 1670), so they continued to meet outdoors (“they met without Doors, for many years, on a place called Pardshaw Crag”) or in homes or barns. It was not until the passing of the Act of Toleration (1689) that Friends were free to establish their own places of worship, though building had already begun in some rural areas.

Friends use the word “church” for the collected believers, and so they called traditional church buildings “steeple houses.” “Meeting for Worship” replaced “church services” and they named their places of worship “Meetinghouses.”

Meetinghouses are not consecrated buildings, being sanctified only by the purpose for which they are designed and used.

Equality of men and women and simplicity are Quaker testimonies (along with peace, gospel order, truth and integrity) and these values are reflected in the design of Meetinghouses, with utility being prized over elegance (“choose what is simple and beautiful”).

While any of the worshipers might speak out of the silence of the gathered worship, it was soon recognized that to some the ministry of the word was entrusted in larger measure than to others: these men and women were recognized as recorded ministers. The ministers, along with elders who had oversight of the spiritual life of the meeting, sat on raised benches at one end of the Meetinghouse. A separate room was provided for women Friends to conduct their business meetings, though men and women worshiped together. Some meetinghouses have wooden screens which lift into the roof for worship and are dropped for business meetings (Newmarket, Sparta and Coldstream in Ontario).

Meetinghouses were built in local style of local materials. In later years as Meetinghouses were built in cities they tended to become more formal and there are many Georgian and Victorian buildings which incorporate additional committee and First Day School rooms. Many Meetinghouses had their own graveyards, distinguished by simple gravestones. Some Meetinghouses were designed for annual meetings and have movable screens for such occasions.

In the mid nineteenth century, separations in the United States led to one group of Quakers employing pastors and moving to “programmed” worship. Such Meetinghouses resemble many Protestant churches with pews, pulpit, choir stalls and organ.

Today, modern Meetinghouses tend to be simple and have their furniture arranged in a circle. Light plays its part in the design, with plain glass windows casting beams of light or opening onto a quiet garden. In the centre may be a table on which is placed the Bible and the books of discipline (quotations from Friends and information on how the Society is ordered). There may be a piano in a corner of the room.

In addition to Meetinghouses, the Society of Friends created a number of other buildings of interest. Concern for education led to the building of many schools. In 1796, the Tuke family built the York Retreat, a humane mental institution, still in use. Almshouses were built for the poor. The first iron bridge, a significant advance in technology which is seen as the foundation of the Industrial Revolution was built in Coalbrookdale by Abraham Darby. Many Quaker businessmen sought trades which did not use slaves, chocolate being a favored choice: the Terry, Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry families were particularly successful in this endeavour and the Cadburys built Bournville, a “new town” with modern homes, schools, health and sports facilities for the factory workers.

Halifax Friends have been considering a Meetinghouse for many years. Concerns for accessibility, efficiency, and availability for other groups are factors which are being considered.