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**'AN EVALUATION OF QUAKER BURIAL PRACTICES'**

**(Bournemouth University in collaboration with Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting: Unpublished  
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This thesis considers the 'theory' and 'practice' of Friends' burials from the seventeenth century. After outlining the administration of the Quaker faith (and relating it to Anglican practice), the author explores the theory (or ideals) of what was supposed to occur through the *Book of Discipline*: the collation of rules that organise the faith. The author then considers how this manifested in practice by examining and/ or researching archaeological assessments of Quaker burial sites: several outside the Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting catchment area; eleven within. He concludes that the simplicity, the rejection of month names, and the denunciation of gravestones between the seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth century dictated in theory were not uniformly realised in practice. He also notes that Friends were buried, not on dogmatic east-west alignment, but according to practicality. Moreover, he argues, the reputation for Quaker record-keeping is well-deserved.

**Keywords:** burial practices; gravestones; headstones; memorial stones; graveyards; funerals; coffins; coffin furniture; burial grounds; *Christian and Brotherly Advices*; *Book of Discipline*; Quaker record-keeping; Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting; Brislington; Chipping Sodbury; Downend; Kingsweston, Lower Hazel; Portishead; Quakers Friars; Redcliffe Pitt; Thornbury; eighteenth century; nineteenth century; funeral practices

**Useful for:** people with an interest in Quaker burials and funeral practices; archaeologists studying post-1650 burials; those studying the impact of Nonconformists on the landscape of the West Country; genealogists and others seeking an introduction to Quaker practices (including archiving) and administration, and those searching for the possible resting place of Quaker ancestors.

## Section 1. Introduction

These three pages establish the rationale for the study, which is based on historical and archaeological evidence. The author suggests that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century burial practices have been given little academic attention. The aim of the study is to look at Quaker burial sites of the 1700s and 1800s to see if how burials 'were expected to be done (the 'theory'), and how things were done' in reality '(the 'practice')'. The author 'anticipated ... that Quaker simplicity would contrast strongly with ... Anglican practice' (p. 7). The study was also designed to suggest a methodology to optimise the recording of Quaker Burial Grounds, and to establish a database of Quaker burial grounds in England and Wales.

## Section 2. The Quakers

This section briefly introduces Quakerism, the beliefs relevant to the thesis (for example, that in recording place names, Friends removed religious connotations, e.g. Ives rather than St Ives), and Quaker administration. *The Book of Discipline* is, and was, a 'definitive statement of beliefs and procedures' (p. 11). The central tenet of Quaker life is 'simplicity'. In funereal practices, this meant there was to be no set service and no distinction between rich and poor in grave furniture. Moreover, as all ground was God's, there was no need to be buried on consecrated ground.

At its most basic, Quaker administration is as follows<sup>1</sup>: local Particular or Preparative Meetings (comparable to Parish – see **Section 4** for comparisons with Anglican practice) feed into the business of the area Monthly Meeting (roughly equivalent to Rural Deanery), the boundaries of which 'are notional' and may shift across time (p. 11); Meeting for Sufferings (the name derived from seventeenth-century persecutions) informs Yearly Meeting (similar to Province or a combination of Canterbury and York) in which local Meetings come together; however, Quarterly/ General Meetings (comparable to Diocese) also collate several Monthly Meetings. The Six Weeks Meeting of London Friends has a responsibility for Property and Financial affairs, which includes burials. There is no equivalent of priest or vicar; anyone in the congregation of largely silent reflection or worship can minister if the spirit moves them. Those responsible for the administration, therefore, include: Clerks, who act as chairs and central points of contact for each Meeting (a term meaning both congregation and place of worship), Elders are responsible for 'spiritual growth', and Overseers 'more temporal matters' (p. 12).

## Section 3. Methodology

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<sup>1</sup> Changes were made to the organisation of Britain Yearly Meeting in 2007 and some of the material contained within this section of the thesis is no longer accurate. See *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2009), chapter 4.

The author very briefly outlines how he went about searching for material pertaining to the study. He notes that Quaker records, due to attitudes about reflection and action, are impeccable, and therefore invaluable to the researcher. The material includes: the *Book of Discipline* (which also 'lists recommendations for dealing with records'), Meetings' Minute Books, registers, digests and trust property books. The archaeological sites considered focus on the Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting, but also 'include personal observation of exhumation work at Bathford (Bath and North East Somerset), Helmsley (North Yorkshire) and Kingston upon Thames (London)'. The author states that there are no detailed secondary sources which cover 'Quaker burial or funerary matters'.

#### **Section 4. Anglican Burial Practice**

This short section sets out the principal characteristics of Anglican burial practice, c.1650-1996: 'an ordained minister officiates'; 'there is a formal burial service'; 'the ground is consecrated'; 'the usual axis of graves is east-west, with head west'; 'the location of a grave within a churchyard can be related to status'; 'funerary, grave construction and gravestone forms tend to reflect status'; 'the incumbent can authorise certain gravestones'; and 'a Faculty must be obtained for gravestones which are out of the ordinary'.

#### **Section 5. The Doctrine of Quaker Burial Practice**

This section details the directions contained in the *Book of Discipline*: 'the generic name for all attempts of' Quakers 'to codify ... rules and regulations' (p. 16); a chronology of its various incarnations is contained in **Appendix 1**. Methodology is alluded to (p. 17). Whilst beforehand notices were circulated to local Meetings, the *Book* itself was first issued as *Christian and Brotherly Advices* (local manuscript transcriptions from 1738; first published 1783).

In an effort to eschew 'heathen' practices, early Quakers used numbers and not names for days and months, e.g. Sunday was First Day. From 1682, a custom emerged of centrally recording Quaker deaths. The 1738 *Christian and Brotherly Advices* advised that burial records should be collected and kept. It was advised that burial grounds should be legal property of Meetings. In 1717, reflecting their traditional practice, Friends were warned to avoid the 'vain, & empty' custom of using grave furniture (p.18). From 1850, however, Yearly Meeting permitted simple gravestones citing name, age and death date, so as to mark grave location. The wider cultural practices of wearing mourning clothes and barring women from funerals – and the later fashion of using floral tributes – were likewise rejected, though the repeated mention of this in the *Book of Discipline* suggests that practice did not always match theory.

Disowned Friends (those who had their membership revoked) were not permitted a funeral Meeting. In response to mid-nineteenth-century legislation establishing public cemeteries, burials of any Quaker therein was permitted; cremation was likewise allowed. Both practices were to conform to directives of simplicity and regular funereal procedures. Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths became law in England in 1836. Beforehand, burial notes were completed by kith and kin, and then recorded in a register at the Meeting. This continued in a different form after the 1874 Births and Deaths Registration Act, but the Monthly Meeting of the deceased member was to officially register the death; a certificate of burial 'by way of precaution' was often requested by banks, for example.

### **Section 6. Quaker Burial Practices**

In 1682, George Fox – regarded as the founder of Quakerism – railed 'How dare you say that we Bury our People like Dogs, because we cannot Bury them after the vain Poms and Glory of the World?' (p. 25). Using instances recorded in secondary sources, primary sources and archaeological reports, this section aims to compare and contrast ideals (or, using the author's word, theory) with practice. The realities varied significantly. External forces impinged. Quakers complied with the Burial in Woollen Acts (1666, 1678 and 1680), which demanded specifically funereal clothing for the body of the dead. In shared burial grounds, Quakers objected to the proximity of vaults, gravestones and tombs. Yet internal issues also arose. There were instances of brick-lined graves and gravestones (some with inscriptions and month names, not numerals). In 1694 Bristol, wine was used to mark funerals. The author also provides counterpoints to the contents of previous section with evidence of disowned Quakers and female involvement in funerals. He also incidentally alludes to wills and resurrection (pp. 29-30).

'No archaeological reports have been located for the various exhumation exercises in Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting' (p. 30). However, the author includes evidence from the reports of three other areas. In Staines, Surrey, 31 of 34 graves excavated 'were brick-lined and had been used for up to four burials, one on top of the other, separated by a flagstone floor'. These were called 'vaults'. Wood and lead coffins had brass handles and fittings of various designs; in Southwark, London, casket ornamentation was present. Graves were aligned north-south in Staines (shunning Established Church practice), but east-west in Pershore, West Midlands. Likewise, the author's own observations of exhumations at Bathford (West Country), Helmsley (Yorkshire) and Kingston upon Thames (Greater London) displayed signs of deviation in their alignment, suggestions of vaulting, lead coffins and coffin furniture.

## **Section 7. Survey of Quaker Burial Grounds in Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting**

After a short introduction and passage on methodology, this section essentially provides a one-page summary and one-page plan of each of the Quaker burial grounds in Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting. These are:

Brislington (established c.1691, sold in 1836) – author found reference to ‘gravestone still [lying] underneath’ topsoil (p. 38).

Chipping Sodbury (purchased 1692, latest noted gravestone date 1920) – author found allusion to brick-lined graves and gravestones in 1970s planning application.

Downend (originated 1657) – commemorated by a plaque (extant 1899) citing that ‘750 internments [were made] prior to the year 1800’ (p. 42).

Frenchay (title deed 1673, ground still in use) – ‘flat memorial tablets’ present; evidence that there was ‘a general south-west/ north-east burial axis with some infill at right angles’ (p. 44).

Kingsweston (established 1690, still available for burial) – simple plaque stating ‘Friends Burial Ground 1690’; over ‘eighty, flat rectangular memorial tablets’, placed ‘along the length of the grave[s]’ with north-west/ south-east axis (p. 46).

Lower Hazel (deed 1674, still in use) – ‘stone in the wall by the entrance’ dates to 1656; 57 headstones found, most with semicircular tops; site of re-interment of 100 bodies from Thornbury Quaker burial ground.

Portishead (established 1669, still used for cremations) – 73 horizontal rectangular tablets and one broken headstone from 1687 are present.

Quakers Friars (purchased 1669, secondary evidence places first use in 1701, site sold in 1956) – oval plaque present, gravestones used to resurface car park.

Redcliffe Pit (purchased 1665, used to 1923) – small plaque notes ‘Friends Burial Ground’ with date(s); gravestones were previously present; lead coffins noted.

Thornbury (purchased 1677, site cleared for development 1981) – brick, walled grave seen during exhumations.

Workhouse (deed 1698, site exhumed in 1932) – not a Poor Law workhouse, but one established to provide work for unemployed Quaker weavers; burials rare; gravestones were recorded; re-interment at Avon View Cemetery marked by memorial stone there.

## **Section 8. Results**

The author concludes that the removal of gravestones, ordered by 1717 Yearly Meeting, was lax. Of the 629 extant gravestones, 19.8% pre-date 1850 (13.1% pre-1840); 'too many to have all been added retrospectively' (p. 62). There were 48 instances of named months, mainly from the 1900s. There is evidence that some Quakers spent more than simplicity required, perhaps, the author suggests, due to pressure from non-Quaker kith and kin. Evidence demonstrates (as manuscripts and secondary sources suggest) that Quakers are not sentimental about burial grounds. The reputation for careful record-keeping is borne out. Non-Quakers, or those disowned, were buried on-site. The axes of graves do not follow an ordained pattern. There is no evidence that Quakers were buried standing up, an 'often-heard statement of fact' (p. 65). The final part of the section details the design of the database of Quaker burial grounds; heading include location (including Meeting), description and references (pp. 67-70).

## **Section 9. Conclusion, and Recommendations for Further Work**

'Gravestones dated 1717-1850 can, and do exist', some name, not number, months. Spatial and date grave arrangements vary significantly and often '[make] use of the available space'. 'Lead coffins, walled graves and other structures' have been found at Quaker burial sites, but all interments may not be Quaker. Public cemeteries – as non-Church – were acceptable to Quakers. The author recommends that the disturbance/ exhumation of burial sites should always be archaeologically and historically assessed; the presence of a priest during the reburial of unidentified bodies 'is not necessarily appropriate' (p. 71).

Whilst these conclusions were true of the sites examined, a larger sample is required, with the ideal a national database. The author also sets himself the task of compiling data in different ways, producing plans and topographies. His wish was to communicate to a wider audience his findings and the importance of post-Medieval burials.

## **Appendix 1. Chronology of the Book of Discipline**

## **Appendix 2. Risk Assessment**

**Summary prepared by Rebecca Wynter (2012)**