



The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Brief History of Kendal Meeting House

(NB. The word "Friend" used in this text is an alternative term for "Quaker").

The earliest Quaker meetings were held at private houses in the town but in 1687 a Friend bought the plot on the present site with a building on it. He altered this for use as a meeting house and sold it in 1689 to the meeting's two trustees Bryan Lancaster and Israel Newby.

During the following century, these premises were substantially altered and enlarged but by 1814 Friends decided that a completely new meeting house was needed. A subscription list was opened and Francis Webster, a local architect, appointed. The resulting building, a Georgian town meeting house completed in 1816, is the one that is used today both by Kendal Quaker Meeting and the Quaker Tapestry Exhibition.

The new building comprised an entrance lobby with stone staircases to the gallery on the upper floor and a large room occupying the whole of the ground floor. This could be divided into two separate rooms by means of shutters, which were lowered or raised using winches in the attic. These are the shutters that can be seen in the Tapestry Exhibition area.

The upstairs gallery ran around three of the walls and, together with the ground floor, provided seating for around 750. This large room was required for special events such as visits by travelling ministers, large Quaker gatherings, weddings, funerals etc.

Women Friends held their own distinct business meetings chiefly concerned with the care of people, whilst the men met to discuss finance and property matters. As a result two separate rooms were required, as in most Quaker meeting houses.

Women met in the smaller room and the men met in the larger room, now occupied by the Tapestry Exhibition. This larger room was also used for Sunday worship: the men on one side and women on the other, as was then usual in most chapels and churches. Seating was by way of long, heavy wooden benches, some of which can be seen in the entrance lobby. Friends at the head of meeting sat on three facing benches, acknowledged ministers at the top, elders below, then overseers. The clerk's table was in the middle of the second row. These benches are the ones now used for viewing the Tapestry videos.

The smaller room was furnished in a similar way with matching ministers' benches under the gable window.

Lighting was by two chandeliers in each room suspended beneath large circular openings in the ceiling, which in turn were connected by trunking to a ventilator in the roof. This ensured a flow of fresh air.

At the insistence of the women Friends, the smaller room was heated from the start by a large central stove with an underfloor flue and a stack in the west gable wall. Heating was provided later for the larger room by means of a coke boiler which was located in the cellar. At that time the cellar was frequently flooded when the river was high.

Attendance at Sunday worship in 1816 numbered several hundred, but in 1835 the Beaconite Controversy led to the resignation of 300 Friends in Kendal, Manchester and Bristol, asserting the authority of the Bible over Quaker mysticism and the Inward Light. Kendal Meeting split and a number of Friends left to join other churches including the nearby Brethren Church. The membership of Kendal Meeting was reduced to about 100 as a result.

The building continued to be used in the same way until the early 20th century. In 1932, due to developments in State secondary education, Stramongate Friends School (founded in 1698 and across the road from the meeting house) had to close down. Since its premises were used for Kendal Meeting's flourishing Sunday School classes, alternative accommodation had to be found. Hence the smaller meeting room was substantially altered in 1934. An upper floor was put in to provide three classrooms and a stage provided in the small meeting room. The room was then used for social events and smaller gatherings.

After 1934, Sunday worship continued to be held in the large meeting room but in the nineteen-seventies this was transferred to the smaller room. Regional meetings continued to use the large meeting room until about 1980.

By 1990 Friends in Kendal had come to realise that the meeting house was too expensive for them to maintain properly and that the premises urgently needed to be modernised if they were to be fully used and attract lettings.

Local Friends were reluctant to sell their historic building but lengthy attempts to find an alternative solution failed due to restrictions imposed by the Historic Buildings Authorities. Kendal & Sedbergh Monthly Meeting finally agreed to sell the property. A committee was formed, which found a new site on Romney Road and appointed an architect. Plans for a new meeting house with warden's accommodation were drawn up and discussed at a meeting of Kendal Friends in December 1990. The Stramongate meeting house was put up for sale but without success.

In 1992 the Meeting's Clerk, Marion Winchester, suggested to the founder of the Quaker Tapestry, Anne Wynn-Wilson, that the Exhibition might find a home in Kendal. This offer was taken up, much to the delight of local Friends. The Area Quaker Meeting set up a trust together with the owners of the Tapestry (The Tapestry Scheme) and an appeal for funds was launched which, though not fully successful, raised sufficient money to refurbish the premises in 1993-4. The small meeting room was renovated by lowering the windowsill of the gable window to improve the lighting and the stage was removed to provide space for Kendal Meeting's library. Carpets were laid to cover the rough, uneven floorboards and the wooden benches replaced with chairs, creating the much-improved meeting room where Friends regularly meet for worship today.

The Quaker Tapestry Exhibition opened in the large meeting room in the spring of 1994. In 2000, the Quaker Tapestry Trustees renovated the adjoining meeting house cottage to provide accommodation for visiting stewards. The Tea Rooms were opened in 2002, completing the renovation of the whole site. Minor alterations were also made to the office rooms on the first floor to provide three working spaces and a small rest area for Tapestry stewards.

The meeting house remains the property of Kendal & Sedbergh Area Quaker Meeting which leases the building to the Tapestry Exhibition. Kendal Quakers continue to use the premises regularly for meeting for worship and social activities.

*Prepared by Monica Baynes and Peter Leeming in consultation with David Butler.
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Sources: David Butler, 'Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain'. vol. Edition 1999.