

Special Projects

MEETING HOUSES OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY
OF FRIENDS IN IRELAND. I.

A PRELIMINARY STUDY.

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MEETING HOUSES OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN IRELAND.

To a certain extent each denomination has developed a style or type of architecture peculiar to itself which has been influenced by the needs the manner of worship, and occasionally the tenets of a particular denomination. This is seen to be so, to a very marked degree, in the case of the Society of Friends, whose traditionally austere and sober outlook on life is reflected in the style and architectural type of their Meeting House. These simple buildings, domestic rather than ecclesiastical, with little embellishment and few pretensions towards grandeur have attained a standard of architectural voracity of well-nigh unrivalled proportions illustrating how little ornamentation or elaboration, effects the essential of true architecture.

Let us now look for a few moments at the Society to fulfill whose needs these meeting houses were erected. - the practise and structure of the Society of Friends in relation to their Meeting Houses. The meeting for worship which usually takes place on Sunday morning is the central point of Quaker life. However, it is not closely akin to the usual Sunday morning worship of other denominations, for it is completely un-programmed and related to silence. There is no minister to lead or preach, no choir, no organ, no chancel, no altar or sacrament; in unadorned silence they gather, though occasionally some friend may feel led to communicate some thought to his fellows or to lead in prayer or praise rising, as he does so. Should no member of the company feel so led, the whole meeting may pass in silence, the end, or break, being signified by a handshake.

A number of local meetings such as this, in a district, join together once a month for a business meeting, known as Monthly Meeting. Members of the Monthly Meetings send representatives to a Quarterly Meeting covering a larger geographical area. In turn, members of the Quarterly Meeting send representatives to a Yearly National Meeting. As it has always been the policy of the Society of Friends that women should share equally in the government of the Society, they too have separate (at the same time and place) Quarterly and Monthly Meetings; to deal with particularly feminine subjects and also with business relating to the society in general; thus in a number of Meeting Houses there exists a lesser meeting room known as the Women's Meeting House, specifically for the women of Monthly and Quarterly Meetings.

The furnishings, fittings and colourings within the Meeting House mirror the same sobriety and simplicity of life - a plain whitened ceiling unrelieved by ornament; plain plastered walls likewise whitened and unadorned over plain deal paneling, unpolished and without moulding or ornamentation, frequently merely horizontal boarding, the simply designed seating often mere forms no elaborate pews, as traditionally associated with churches, the plain windows, innocent of stained glass, all these lend not the expected air of drabness to the whole, but an aesthetic feeling unknown in more elaborate buildings.

Almost without exception, the Meeting Houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were provided with a rostrum known as a stand or facing seat, consisting one or more seats facing the others, and normally placed across the wall of the room which faced the entrance. It was here that the Elders, and Overseers of the Society sat. When a stand consisted of two seats, as is normal, it was usual practise for the front seat to be at floor level and the rear one raised by one or two steps from the floor; in front of this second seat was a wooden division which formed the back of the front seat, entrance being gained at either end of occasionally, as at Meath Place, Dublin, in the centre. At the rere of the stand the wall panneling would curve gracefully upwards to form the back of the rere stand seat.

There are a number of variations to the basic design; however the stand is usually very simple, occasionally as in Eustace Street, Dublin a note of Victorian granduer has crept in. But the stand, whether it be simple, or otherwise, lends character to the interior and even at its most simple, is a distinct, and possibly the sole architectural feature of which the room may boast.

Lack of this feature is very noticeable in the modern or more recently renovated Meeting Houses where the stand being deemed obsolete is frequently no longer present. The seating is in these cases arranged in the form of a hollow square, with possibly a table holding a vase of flowers, occupying the central space.

The siting of Meeting Houses is here worthy of particular mention, rarely are places of worship so well-hidden as those older ones of the Society of Friends. Owing presumably to persecutions, the earlier town and city Meeting Houses were never erected on a street face rather were they hidden behind a facade of buildings which formed this and were approached by way of a narrow passage between the buildings. This passage, in turn opened onto the Meeting House yard. Examples of this should still be seen at Eustace St., and Meath Place, Dublin; Limerick, Waterford and Carlow.

Rural Meeting Houses were erected often at quite some distance from the nearest village of habitation and are invariably approached by a laneway or substantial drive. Examples of this can still be seen at Cooladine and Ballintore, Co.Wexford.

Whereas in Britain, burial grounds normally surround Meeting Houses, particularly rural ones, this is not always the case in Ireland, where the burial grounds are frequently situated at some considerable distance from the Meeting Houses.

The extreme simplicity both within and without is the great claim, particularly of the older Friends Meeting Houses and almost despite itself the sheer utilitarianism of the whole building achieves an aesthetic success which could scarcely be attained had it been the end in view.

In the following pages, we look at those meeting Houses, albeit in a very cursory manner, both ancient and modern, which are part of our Irish heritage.

DUBLIN MONTHLY MEETINGS.

There are early references to a meeting of the Society of Friends in Dublin, taking place at the home of one George Latham, near Plegate, and was successor to one held in a room lent by Richard Foulkes, also of Plegate. In about 1657, a Meeting Place was secured at Bride's Alley, probably at the rear of a house of William Maines, at Barron's Inns, part of which property in the year 1669, became a National Meeting House paid for from subscriptions from all over Ireland. Both these Meeting Houses were used in addition to one at Wormwood Gate, until firstly Meath Place, 1684, and then Sycamore Alley, 1692, Meeting Houses were completed.

MEATH PLACE MEETING HOUSE, DUBLIN.

In 1684 the large Meeting House at Meath Place was erected to replace the earlier one at Wormwood Gate, which had become too small. This new Meeting House was erected by friends of the Leinster province by subscriptions taken from all over Ireland. It is interesting to note, however, that even at this early date, Cork friends were showing a spirit of independence which had long characterised them, by objecting to being asked to contribute to the fund.

This Meeting House, although out of Friends' hands for over twenty years, is still in good order and must be the largest Meeting House ever to be erected by the Society in Ireland. A gallery surrounds three sides and the stand remains on the fourth side. Some pillars incorporated into later walls in the yard show the original entrance to the stables. Although the furnishings are now gone and the building is used by a silversmith as a workshop, the interior retains much of its former dignity. One noteworthy feature is the presence of a timber ceiling cornice and rather more elaborate paneling than one would expect in such an early Meeting House.

EUSTACE STREET (SYCAMORE ALLEY) DUBLIN.

The Meeting House at Bride Street or Bride Alley, 1657, proving too small the Dublin Friends proceeded to build a large new Meeting House at Sycamore Alley in 1692, for the purpose of holding the afternoon meeting each first day and a morning weekday meeting. This building, throughout the years, has merged into the present premises at Eustace St.. It has unfortunately suffered much through rebuilding, particularly in the 1830's when the large Meeting Room was completely rebuilt. The interior furnishings acquired a rather Victorian flavour, particularly noticeable in the Stand, which approached at either end, is quite monumental. Eustace Street today the headquarters of the Society of Friends in Ireland, and normally the venue of the yearly national meeting.

Edenderry, Co. Offaly.

The Friends' Meeting at Edenderry owes its birth to the removal there of the Barcroft family, from Rosnallis, in the year 1672. They came to reside at Ballymoreen, about three miles from Edenderry, and established the first Quaker meeting in the area in the same year. It is then reported that 'divers Friends' came to settle at Edenderry and the meeting was moved a few years later to the house of John Edmunson at Edenderry.

In 1707 a Meeting House was erected at Edenderry and was used for over a hundred years. However, from 1806 we find re-curring minutes concerning the 'derelict state of the Edenderry Meeting House'. Eventually in 1813 it was decided to rebuild on a larger scale. This Meeting House - still in use today, even though the number of Friends in the area is a mere handful - is an interesting one, a particularly unusual feature being the semi-circular tops of windows and door.

Wicklow Meeting House.

In 1669 two Meetings appear to have been settled in Wicklow County - one at the house of the Penrose family in Ballycong, the other at the house of Thomas Trafford, at Garrymore. In 1671 John Banks travelled from Dublin to Wicklow "where no meeting of Friends before that time had been that I could hear of". The first meeting in the town was held in a carpenter's workshop, and the second, also by John Banks, in the County Gaol - where he had been confined for holding the first. On returning to the town in 1675 he found a firmly established Meeting there, which continued for over two hundred years. In 1802 it was discovered that the lease on the Meeting House was running out, and it was directed by the Dublin Monthly Meeting (with which the Wicklow Monthly Meeting had been combined in 1800) that a new one should be erected. This is now a private house, the Friends in the area having died out by the end of the last century. It is situated at Bayview Road.

Monkstown Meeting House.

As residents in the Kingstown area of Dublin were desirous of attending Meeting, without having to journey into the city to do so, representations were made to the Dublin Monthly Meeting, and the Quarterly Meeting, that a Meeting for Worship should be established in the Kingstown area; this being agreed to, in November 1830 an apartment at Seaview House was hired in which to hold First Day Meeting for Worship. This, however, was a purely temporary measure, and in 1831 a piece of ground was procured on a ninety nine year lease at Packerham Road, Monkstown. A plan was prepared for a Meeting House to seat between a hundred and fifty and two hundred people, and work was started shortly afterwards.

This Meeting has flourished and in 1968 the Meeting House was renovated and partially rebuilt so that it could be of greater service to Friends and to the community at large.

The Meeting House is a simple grouping of buildings, uneclesiastical, and rather typical of more advanced Quaker architecture of the time. During the renovation the stand was removed and the seating consists now of plastic chairs.

Churchtown Meeting House.

In December 1859 Dublin Monthly Meeting was informed that several members and their families, resident in the neighbourhood of Dundrum, had for some time past been in the practice of holding a Meeting for Worship on First Day afternoons at the home of a Friend, and that they were of the judgement that the time had come to establish a regular Meeting.

A Committee was formed to look into this matter, and they proposed that an afternoon Meeting be established in the area on Sundays. Another Committee met to arrange the carrying through of this proposal. They in turn were offered a piece of land at Lower Churchtown Road, and subsequently recommended the erection of a Meeting House on the said plot. This was done in 1861 and is now the Meeting place of the largest Meeting in Southern Ireland. It was extensively renovated and practically remodelled with more facilities including some classrooms in 1949. At this time the Stand was removed and the seating is now in the form of a hollow square. The exterior of the building is rather domestic in style and is equipped with a number of classrooms.

RATHFARNHAM MEETING HOUSE.

In 1957 Churchtown Friends decided that their Meeting was growing too large, and simultaneously Dublin Friends Badminton Club was without a home. While affairs were in this state of flux, a building plot was presented to Friends in the Rathfarnham area, by Lamb Bros.

It was decided that a number of Churchtown Friends would start a Meeting, with facilities for a Social Centre in this new and expanding district. Work commenced shortly afterwards on the present building, which is in fact a Social Centre, containing a large Hall with ancillary rooms, one of which is the Meeting Room - a complete return to the design of earliest Friends Meeting places, in Dublin, where the Meeting was held in a room of a private house in Plegate.

MOATE MONTHLY MEETING.

MOATE MEETING HOUSE, CO. WESTMEATH.

In 1655 Abraham Fuller of Lehensie, near Moate, joined the Society of Friends, and some years later, in 1659 he and some others gathered together and formed the Moate Meeting - minutes of which exist from 1690 to 1953. The Meeting was first established at the house of one John English, of Trophellin, about one mile from Moate. From here the Meeting moved into Moate, where a Meeting House was erected close to the lands of one Col. John Chilbourne, an officer of Cromwell's army, who, on discovering the presence of the gathering place, attempted to burn it down, but instead was converted to the Society of Friends. Later in 1664, he provided a burial ground and erected a new Meeting House, part of which can still be seen to-day, incorporated in some farm buildings. A new Meeting House was erected in 1748 and the Womens Meeting Room of this latter, was enlarged in 1811 - as previously it had been 'inconvenient for the accommodation of Women Friends at Quarterly Meeting'. This Meeting House is very typical of the large rural examples, and in its solid simplicity has a character, and presence denied to many a more elaborate structure; the interior furnishings are the traditional plain panelling and seating, with whitened walls and ceilings and a simply constructed stand. It ceased, however, to be used for Meeting for Worship in 1901.

CLARA MEETING HOUSE.

In 1866 the foundation stone of the new Meeting House at Clara was laid, prior to this, Friends in, and around, this area had attended Meetings at Moate or Tullamore. However, owing to the concentration of various branches of the Goodbody family, who were - and still are - involved in jute spinning and manufacturing at Clara, a Meeting House was built there by representatives of this family. It was opened for Worship on the First Day of the Twelfth Month 1867, the Tullamore Meeting House having been closed for Sunday Worship the preceeding Sunday - this has since been demolished - when the members transferred to Clara. Meetings continued to be held at Clara until 1950 when the number of Friends in the area had swindled to two.

This small Meeting house is rather domestic in design and would appear to be modelled to certain degree on the one at Churchtown, Dublin. It is interesting to note that while the building is owed by the Goodbody family, the burial

2.

ground surrounding it is in the Official hands of the Society of Friends.

BIRR MEETING HOUSE.

A Meeting was first established in Birr in 1675, and it was reported at a General Province Meeting for a Province of Leinster, some years later that there was a great openness there. A Meeting House was erected in the mid Eighteenth Century, probably succeeding an earlier one. Although Meetings for Worship were discontinued there - four years after the Meeting had been transferred to the care of Moate Monthly Meeting, from the care of Mountmellick Monthly Meeting, on the dissolution of the latter, the Meeting House remains, and is situated at Green Street. It is now used as a hardware merchants store.

CARLOW MONTHLY MEETING.

CARLOW MEETINGHOUSE.

In 1660 a Meeting was settled at Newgarden, Co. Carlow, at the home of Ephraim Heritage of Paynestown, it is not certain whether or not a Meeting House was erected here, probably not, in which case the Meetings were held in Paynestown House, which still exists; a burial ground dating from 1655 also exists, on private property.

In 1716 this Meeting was removed to Carlow where a Meeting House had been erected in 1700. In 1800 a Womens Meeting Room was added to this building. During the middle and closing years of the last century, however, the Meeting was reduced to a numerically weak state, and finally the Meeting House in Tullow Street was sold; however a very small Meeting may have continued on the premises until 1913. The building is now a Y. M. C. A. This was a rather typical small town Meeting House, approached by a long passageway from the Street, opening on to the Meeting House yard.

BALLYTORE MEETING HOUSE.

The village of Ballytore, a few miles from Carlow grew up as a Quaker settlement, the two leading families at the time of its founding being Ducats and Haughtons, the latter name being still common in Irish Quakerism. The Meeting House - the only place of Worship in or near the village, was erected in 1708 and was extensively renovated in 1840, or thereabout, after a time of neglect. Owing to the dwindling number of Friends in the area it ceased to be used for Meeting for Worship in the early part of this century. It is however, once more becoming the centre of village life - as a Community Centre - which work is being undertaken by the County Council.

MOUNTMELLICK MEETING HOUSE.

A Meeting was settled in Mountmellick in 1659, and a Meeting House of quite large proportions was erected in 1709. It is said to be very typical and comprises of a large Meeting Room and a Men's Meeting Room, also a small room referred to as the 'Patter' Room; a Womens Meeting Room is situated on the first floor.

The Meeting House was extensively altered in 1805 - accordingly a number of Quarterly Meeting due to be held there were forced to find another venue. Mountmellick Meeting was for many years both large and influential, with care of a number of smaller Meeting in the surrounding towns and villages - thus

until 1888, when numbers in the area had dwindled to such an extent that the Mountmellick Monthly Meeting was annexed to that at Dublin, from then on, the Meeting continued for a number of years in an increasingly reduced state - until it was finally dissolved in the middle years of the present century. The Meeting House is now the Mountmellick Y. M. C. A.

ROSCREA MEETING HOUSE.

In 1751 Friends living in Roscrea requested that Mountmellick Monthly Meeting should authorise them to erect a Meeting House, for their own use, in the town of Roscrea, as the distances which they were forced to travel to attend Meetings were felt to be rather long. Mountmellick Monthly Meeting did not see fit, however, to agree to this until some years later. However, upon their eventually doing so the Meeting House was erected in Roscrea. A very modest building, it served the Friends of the town for a hundred years, until the Meeting for Worship there ceased owing to lack of number in 1885. The Meeting House was not one of great character, being merely a small hall, plainly furnished within; with panelling rising in a graceful curve to form the back of the simple timber stand, which occupied one wall of the building. It is situated at Abbey Street, Roscrea.

WEXFORD MONTHLY MEETING

COLLADINE MEETING HOUSE.

In 1700 a Meeting was settled at Colladine in Co. Wexford, an area where some of the earliest Friends Meetings in Ireland were established - the first in 1655. A Meeting House was also erected about 1700, this was a unique building of great charm and character. Erected on two sides of a yard, it was a low two storeyed building with an external stairway, the upper portions of some of the whitewashed walls were slated, as was the roof, and a large buttress strengthened one of the rear walls. Practically all the windows looked out on the yard. The main Meeting Room would appear to have been on the ground floor, with various subsidiary rooms above, and one end being used as a private dwelling. Unfortunately this Meeting House is now in Ruins, however, enough can still be seen to visualise, with the help of an old photograph, the building as it was.

ENNISCORTHY MEETING HOUSE, CO. WEXFORD.

A Meeting House was erected by Friend in Enniscorthy about 1756. This was quite a substantial two storeyed building, with timber sash windows - all in one wall, it does in fact very much resemble a domestic house. Internally it is divided into a number of apartments - a large Meeting Room, a Women's Meeting Room and some ancillary rooms. In 1860 a larger Meeting Room was erected and connected with the original by a passageway; this is now used as the Meeting House, and is built in the simple style of many Noncomformist places of Worship of the time.

BALLINTORE MEETING HOUSE, CO. WEXFORD.

This small Meeting House, near Ferns, was erected in 1776. a most unusual building, it is equiped with stabling and a coach house, and the whole is surrounded by a high wall, in which originally a wrought iron gate gave admittance onto the Meeting House Yard.

The interior in true Quaker style, has whitened plastered walls and ceiling, with timber panelling and a timber stand at one end, the seating is not original. This Meeting House is situated a number of miles from the nearest village, and there are few other habitations in the area. It is very domestic in style and is not easily recognisable as a place of Worship.

NEW ROSS, CO WEXFORD.

The Friends Meeting at New Ross dates from the early eighteenth Century, the Meeting House was erected in the middle years of the same century. Owing to dwindling numbers, which in themselves were, in part, due to the fact that the New Ross Meeting was situated at some considerable distance from the other Meetings of the Wexford Monthly Meeting - the Meeting House fell into disuse in about 1870. However it is still in existence in the town. An effort to unite the Meeing with the Waterford Monthly Meeting, which was geographically nearer was refused, by the said Monthly Meeting in about 1860, after this continued in New Ross to function in a reduced state, but gradually died out some years later.

WEXFORD (TOWN) MEETING HOUSE.

This Meeting was erected in 1841, on the site of an earlier one - disused for a number of years, part of this original building is probably incorporated in the present one. The new building was occasioned by the removal of the Forrest Meeting - whose Meeting House, now in ruins, was erected in 1780 - to the town of Wexford, where a number of Friends were there in residence.

The building is not very interesting, neither has it any particulary Quaker charecteristics. It consists of a hall, and a smaller Meeting Room built at right angles to this. The building is now in the hands of the Loch Garman Silver Band and is situated at Patrick Square.

The outline of the Forrest Meeting House can still be seen and very unusual feature is the presence cf a portion of a number of pillars in the ruins - something unheard of in Quaker Architecture of the time, and which would appear to be at complete varyance with the sober outlook of the Society in the Eighteenth Century.

WATERFORD MONTHLY MEETING.

WATERFORD MEETING HOUSE

A Friends Meeting was first established in Waterford about the year 1655, and a Meeting House was erected in 1694. John Banks refers to this in his Journal of the time "We had a very Heavenly ,eeting here, in their new Meeting House, where never Meeting was before".

A new Meeting House was erected in 1701 in the town and this can still be seen to-day, although no longer used as a place of Worship. The next Meeting House was erected in 1796 - a large and commodious building which was altered little since its erection. The Meeting House is approached through a passageway from the Street, and is fronted by a courtyard, it is a long tow storeyed building with the large plain Meeting Room occupying both storeys at one end. This is furnished even though an important Meeting with the usual lack of pretention, the simple stand being the only real architectural feature. Both floors of the remainder are occupied by various smaller rooms.

Owing to the fact that the Waterford Friends are now in the process of erecting a new Meeting House outside the town, more suitable to their present needs, the older building has been sold to the Corporation.

CLONMEL MEETING HOUSE.

An early Meeting was settled in Clonmel, and this was kept at the house of George Collet for some years. In 1699 a piece of ground with £30. was donated to the Friends for the purpose of erecting a Meeting House, this was speedily accomplished. In 1793 a new Meeting House was erected and was quite a large building. It has, however, been disused for about 50 years and is now the office of the Nationalist Paper.

CAHIR MEETING HOUSE.

The Friends Meeting at Cahir, has an unusual record, in that there is a record of a Monthly Meeting being held regularly there at the end of the 17th Century, no more, however, is heard of the Friends in the town until the early 19th Century, when it was felt that there were sufficient families in the area to warrant the erection of a Meeting House, this was done in 1834 and meetings continued to be held here until about 1890. The building is not very characteristic of Friends architecture, rather does it bear the stamp of 19th Century Non-conformity. The interior have the usual panelling under plastered wall and ceiling. The stand occupied the end of the building facing the entrance.

In 1897 the building was taken over by the Presbyterians and is still in use as a Presbyterian Church.

CARRICK ON SUIR MEETING HOUSE.

This is a relatively recent Meeting House, having been erected in 1866, it is not a particularly outstanding building and was built for the convenience of those families who lived in the area. After only sixty years of use, it became redundant, owing to a number of deaths and removals, and for the last few years, the Meeting in the town was maintained by one family.

These last three Meetings were constituents of the Co. Tipperary Monthly Meeting however in 1910 owing to dwindling numbers, this was united to the Waterford Monthly Meeting.

TRAMORE MEETING HOUSE.

This meeting House was erected in 1869 up until which time the Friends living in the area had met in private houses. However, it was felt during the later year of that decade that there was sufficient numbers to warrant the erection of a Meeting House. Following the principle of Quaker building in later Meeting houses, this was designed not only to accommodate the Meeting for worship, but also other activities. A plot of land overlooking the sea was purchased in 1867/8 and the present building erected, containing the Meeting Room and various ancillary premises. It is still in use.

CORK MONTHLY MEETING.

BANDON MEETING HOUSE.

In 1728 a Meeting House for the use of the Society of Friends was erected in Bandon. Meeting prior to this time had been held at the house of Edward Cook,

and following that at the home of Daniel Massey. The Meeting House is disused.

YOUGHAL MEETING HOUSE.

In 1662 a Meeting was settled in Youghal at the house of Robert Sandham, and the same year the first Meeting House was erected in the town. The lease indicates that as well as the Meeting House, there were also connected to it two gardens and a cabin. This meeting house was followed by a later one, in the 18th Century this consists of a large house, with the Meeting House attached to it, and is now used as the Carnegie Library.

CORK MEETING HOUSE.

A very early Meeting was settled in Cork, seemingly in about 1655 and the first record of a Meeting House being built in the city is in 1678, this was followed by a building which is now a Social Centre and Dispensary run by the Cork Health Authority, and dates from 1731. the present Cork Meeting House is situated at the Friends Burial Ground - which dates from 1668 - and was erected in 1938. It is a small brick building.

LIMERICK MEETING HOUSE.

In 1655 a Friends' Meeting was established at the City of Limerick, and in 1681 a Meeting House was erected at Creagh Lane. This was rebuilt in 1736 and was in constant use until 1800, it was then used as, among other things, a bakery and a cinema and was finally demolished in the 1930's, the St. Annes Vocational School now occupies the site.

In 1800 the present, interesting Meeting House was erected, however, this is now in the hands of the Irish Red Cross Association in Cecil Street, the Friends retaining one Room for Meeting.

This Meeting House, as in many other cases, was not visible from the Street. The interior was characteristically simple, however, the stand us unusually high, and access is gained by two flights of steps.

W W W QUAIENS - IN - IRELAND.