



The Quakers of Hartshill

20 09 2012 | by Rae Ritchie and Clare Barnett

Rae Ritchie and Clare Barnett describe a journey of renewal and revival at historic Hartshill Meeting



The tapestry panel that we are creating represents... not just the village's Quaker past, but our hopes for the future

Hartshill Friends working on their tapestry panel | Photo courtesy of Hartshill Meeting

In 1624, George Fox was born in the small Leicestershire village of Drayton-in-the-Clay (now known as Fenny Drayton). As a young man, he tended sheep in the nearby village of Hartshill. Later in life, he returned to Hartshill and met with Nathaniel Newton, one of the first generation of Quakers.

Almost three hundred and fifty years later, the current generation of Quakers in Hartshill is commemorating the friendship between these two men in an embroidery panel in the style of the Quaker Tapestry. The panel celebrates Newton's life and his continued legacy in this area. His family established a Quaker school in Hartshill that went on, at one stage, to be the largest in the country. After the school's closure in the nineteenth century, the legacy became an educational trust fund that has served the needs of local youngsters in various ways; at present, it gives small grants to those entering university. The village primary school is named after Newton, while the contemporary Meeting house (built in the early 1970s) stands on the site of the former Quaker school.

Heritage

Hartshill's Quaker story has moved in different directions over the years, from early eighteenth century Friends gathering in Newton's barn for Meeting for Worship to the Quaker mission tradition throughout the twentieth century. At the heart of the village is a green where, in 1720, Newton gifted the first purpose-built Meeting house. When this burnt down, it was replaced with a brick building. This served the Meeting until numbers dwindled following the closure of the boarding school and the Meeting house lay unused for many years.

Fast forward to 1868 and picture the scene rather romantically described by the late local historian and Quaker Joan Allen in her book *The Quakers of Hartshill*: ‘a Friend from Leicester, named Edward Brewin, in conjunction with a number of Birmingham Friends, felt desirous of holding a Meeting for Worship in the Meeting house. These Friends made efforts to clear away weeds and overgrown briars... to make an entry into the Meeting house, which was found to be in need of repair and cleaning. When this was completed, a comfortable and profitable Meeting was held, with many inhabitants of the village in attendance’. This led to a revival of the Meeting.

In 1906 full time mission workers were sent to Hartshill with the job of helping the Religious Society of Friends to relate to the local community. This mission was hugely successful, establishing popular Sunday schools for children and adults, weekly fellowship meetings and even a football team. The influence of the mission is still present in the form of the programmed Sunday evening Meeting and the Sunday school, both of which continue to involve members of the local community who may not consider themselves as Quakers but who have had, in many cases, a lifelong involvement in the Meeting.

Outreach

The most recent revival of Hartshill’s Meeting has taken place over the last couple of years. The tapestry panel that we are creating represents this resurgence; it is not just about the village’s Quaker past, but our hopes for the future. The Meeting had dwindled to two members, who kept the silent Meeting going, and the longstanding attenders maintaining the programmed Meeting.

Nevertheless, a Quaker presence in the village remained and, gradually, this has strengthened. Another Quaker moved to the area; a previous attender returned to the village and took up membership; two other lifelong attenders felt moved to journey into membership as well. New people began to come through the door. Many have come again, and again, and again. With the support of others within Central England Area Meeting, we felt able to host Quaker Quest last July. Nineteen Questers came along, five of whom have been coming back ever since. Whereas we once could only dream of double figures at Meeting for Worship, we now regularly have twelve present and twenty no longer seems unfeasible.

With our strengthened numbers, we are better placed to build for the future. A sense of community has flourished amongst us, helped by collectively working on various projects, such as our tapestry and a couple of lovely days out, including a trip to the site of the planned Quaker Service Memorial. Attempts to reach out into the community have also increased, with heritage open days and some extremely popular fundraising efforts; our jumble sale attracts a queue over an hour before the start time. Such events introduce the Quaker way to a whole new audience, who are often keen to know more about a group they associate with porridge and Cadbury’s chocolate – at least one ‘punter’ will usually leave with a few leaflets about Quakers today.

We are working hard towards the Canterbury commitment on sustainability too. Bring-and-share lunches have provided a chance to discuss our individual concerns and things that we can all do to make a difference. We have a ‘sustainability tree’ (a large branch kindly donated from a friend’s garden), where paper leaves are being hung to record all our endeavours, however large or small. Collective activities include moving towards becoming a Fairtrade place of worship, the first step towards which was taken to coincide with the launch of our Meeting house appeal back in March.

Building work

We are making major improvements within the building and developing our heritage centre. The former is absolutely fundamental to becoming a more sustainable Meeting. The generosity of

Friends from around the country, along with the support of grants and loans, has enabled us to begin a programme of much-needed repairs and upgrades that mirror the renewal of the Meeting as a whole. Our Meeting room had large single glaze windows that were leaking; we have now replaced these with double-glazed argon-filled units – a major energy-saving step. We have also been able to re-cover our large flat roof in a long-lasting rubber surface with added insulation. Along with the recent addition of cavity wall insulation, the Meeting house is notably warmer and our energy usage is dropping dramatically.

We now hope to begin the addition of disabled toilets and a new lobby to ensure easy disabled access throughout all of the building. These alterations will also make a difference to the community groups who let the building and will allow us to welcome a wider range of groups to use the space.

The George Fox Garden

Central England Quakers have upheld and encouraged us in so many ways: as an Area Meeting, as Local Meetings and as individual Friends. Many of these Friends joined us for a devotional Area Meeting last August, when we also officially opened our new George Fox Garden. Filled with plants widely used in ‘our George’s’ day and flowers symbolising peace, the garden occupies an area at the front of our site that was somewhat neglected. Like so much in Hartshill’s Quaker history, it has been transformed through hard work, vision, community and, above all, love.