

Jenny

FRIENDS ON THE MOVE - OUR FIRST FOURTEEN YEARS

(Based on extracts from South Edinburgh Preparative Meeting Minutes)

The Society of Friends' austerity in having no ministers and, at the most, simple Meeting Houses, has helped to keep it viable and vigorous despite its relatively few members.

In some churches falling numbers may force a congregation, although still larger than most Quaker Meetings, to amalgamate with another - a move, which it has been estimated, leads to the permanent loss of 40% of the original congregation.

To have no Meeting House at all has the advantages of enabling a Meeting, like a hermit crab, to change its home as it gets bigger, and to make it more aware that a church is its members and not a building. It also has its problems and there were few Preparative Meetings during the first fourteen years of South Edinburgh Meeting's existence at which premises were not discussed.

St. Ninian's

Our Meeting met first on 27th September 1970 at 10 a.m. in the committee room of a church in Fountainhall Road. The congregation of what was originally Fountainhall Church had amalgamated with that of the nearby North Mayfield Church. The vacant building had been taken over by the St. Ninian's Word and Witness Movement, founded by D.C. Thomson to "assist in the recruiting, training and organisation of the lay forces of the Scottish Churches". Friends agreed to contribute ten shillings each Sunday to the funds of St. Ninian's. Permission was later readily given to use the church hall once a month for a children's meeting.

This happy relationship did not last long because on 4th May 1971,

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a letter was received from Capt. Anderson, the organising secretary of St. Ninian's, saying that they were moving as the site was unsuitable for their work. He added that he was authorised to give us the opportunity to buy the property at a nominal price. However, Monthly Meeting Premises Committee, after an inspection by their convenor, decided regretfully that the property was too large for our requirements and would not readily subdivide. The convenor suggested that if St. Ninian's were to consider demolishing the church and rebuilding on the site, Friends might be interested in taking part in such a venture.

However, although the church was demolished, the site was used instead for a public library, now much appreciated by the local residents and St. Ninian's moved to a vacated church in Crieff, which they converted to a successful retreat and conference centre. When acknowledging the return of the key, Capt. Anderson wrote to us that 'it had been a great joy to know that the committee room had been used so effectively on Sunday mornings'.

#### Scottish Congregational College

At a meeting of a group of Friends and the President and Treasurer of the Scottish Congregational College at 29 Hope Terrace, it was agreed that we could move there from 12th September, 1971, at a cost of £32 a year. A room was also made available for children on the first Sunday of each month. It is interesting that at that time the Children's Meeting began with a hymn followed by a reading from the Bible and a short period of silence.

On 24th February, 1974, the time of Meeting was changed to 10.15 a.m. for a trial period of two months.

By 29th June, 1975 we had heard that the Scottish Congregational Church was giving up the College in the autumn and the search was on again. Our preferences were then defined as a long let of ground floor accommodation with facilities for putting up a notice, making coffee and storing books. Failing other suitable arrangements we would advertise. A Premises Committee was formed and it considered a long list of possibilities: the German Church, Cluny Church, the homes of Friends,  
/Watson's

Watson's Music School, the Royal Bank Training School, the Churchill Theatre or other corporation halls, Mayfield or Grange (Marchmont St. Giles) Church, St. Columba's Hall, the Napier College, the Jewish Community Hall and the British Council in Bruntsfield Crescent.

#### Grange Home School

On 17th August, 1975, we were told that the College had been sold as from the end of September. Most of the suggestions had been followed up, without satisfactory results. But the Principal of the Grange Home School had offered us a ground floor room for a year at £1 a week and this was gratefully accepted. The first Meeting was held there on 21st September. A piano, which had presumably been used to accompany the hymn singing, was gifted to the Green dykes Day Nursery.

On 29th October the treasurer was authorised to pay £1 extra to the school to pay for extra electricity used by the accidental leaving-on of a radiator. The culprit was not named!

We agreed to leave Grange Home School after Meeting on 25th July 1976 and, in preparation, Premises Committee again followed a number of suggestions. St. Margaret's School in Newington were happy to offer us the use of their staff dining room and the adjoining kitchen facilities. But the room was considered to be hardly big enough. Enquiries at St. Margaret's Convent and North Morningside Church were not successful. But the Rudolf Steiner School, through our Friend Eric Neil (whose name is spelt four different ways during the transactions!) were prepared to offer us the use of a room in their Colinton Road premises. Although it was felt that the site might prove difficult for some Friends, it was agreed that it should be visited after Meeting on Sunday, 6th June. As a stand-by another Friend, Catherine Hamilton Bruce, had offered us the use of her sitting room.

#### Rudolf Steiner School

However, a satisfactory arrangement was made with the Rudolf Steiner School and our effects were transferred there on 25th July. Because of the siting of the premises Friends with cars "asked that they might be allowed to give lifts to Friends needing transport". A pleasant

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quakerly was of expressing it! A contribution of £1 a week was agreed.

The accommodation was in a prefabricated building at 49 Polwarth Terrace. There were problems in heating, accommodating the required number of chairs, and providing a storage cupboard and a point for our electric urn. A bright spot was the gift of a used carpet for which Friends prudently refused to buy an underfelt - using newspaper instead. Later on, after costing lino, it was decided to enlist the help of parents and children to sand the surrounds - with what success is not recorded.

At Meeting on 5th December some Friends expressed concern that the premises were not easy to find, and ways of solving this problem - by providing notices - was discussed. It was suggested that we should expect to stay in the present place for not less than a year, although this should not deter us from "keeping an eye on the property market". Our attention had been drawn to an advertisement for a property in Salisbury road, but on investigation this was found to be quite unsuitable.

#### Pleasance Meeting House

On 16th January, 1977 it was suggested that the old Meeting House in the Pleasance be considered as a possible venue and Friends were appointed to visit it. By 11th September the Meeting House and burial ground had been bought by the University of Edinburgh, who, because of its historic associations, were seeking funds to renovate it. Nothing more was reported until 17th June 1979, when we heard that the University had set aside £10,000 to make the building wind and water proof, but were unable to do more unless they could get a grant from the Historic Buildings Council.

Support from Quaker funds would probably be welcomed. But it was expected that the renovation would be in the form of one large room, rather than in subdivided rooms.

Our Meeting felt that it should liaise with Monthly Meeting to ensure that two different groups of Friends were not approaching the University /separately

separately, and on 10th February 1980, a small joint committee was formed to consider our premises and Stafford Street, which had become rather overcrowded, and to take into account the Old Meeting House proposals. This was the last time the Pleasance site was mentioned as a possible home for us, to the deep regret of some Friends.

Previous to this, on 19th June, 1977, our Premises Committee had become resuscitated, initially to investigate the possibility of meeting at the University of Edinburgh Graduate Association's premises in Buccleugh Street. On 10th October, at a meeting to define our needs clearly again, it was agreed that premises should be sought in Bruntsfield Morningside, Churchill, Marchmont or Salisbury.

Among those considered were the Napier College Students' Union building, the new Cluny Church Centre, the Dominion Cinema and the Newington St. Leonard's Church in Clerk Street. None was found suitable, the latter because the Scottish Philharmonic Society used it for rehearsals on Sunday mornings. It later became the Queen's Hall, Newington's own concert hall, the home of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

### The Open Door

Towards the end of 1979 we had begun to take interest in the ecumenical centres planned by, respectively, the churches at Holy Corner and the Morningside churches. On 23rd March 1980, our Clerk was asked to mention our interest in, and support for, the Morningside project, and to ask if it might be used for our Sunday Meetings.

In reply, the Coordinator, Peggy Hunter, told us that premises at Morningside Station had been offered rent-free for three years. Financial support at the rate of £3 per member per year was asked for at first, but this request was later dropped, although covenant and other forms of financial support were welcomed. We were asked to appoint a Trustee and a Member of the Board and Margaret Gibbins agreed to serve and thus began her long and valuable association with the Open Door, as it was named. Friends visited the premises on Wednesday, 8th October.

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coffee at the front of the shop, an office at the back, and a games room and a quiet room for confidential conversation downstairs. By 3rd May, planning permission had been given.

The Trustees had expressed their delight that our Meeting was involved in the venture, and were looking forward to having Friends worshipping on the premises. In fact, our first Meeting for worship at the Open Door took place on 7th February 1982. We recorded our special thanks to Margaret Gibbins, and asked the Clerk to write a letter thanking Peggy Hunter and inviting her to one of our Meetings. Gratitude was also expressed to Eric Neil for help during our five years at Rudolf Steiner School and to the school staff for their forbearance.

At that time only the ground floor was available at the Open Door and there were some experiments before suitable seating arrangements were devised. A donation of £3 a week towards costs was agreed. Monthly Meeting was approached for financial help and they obliged with a substantial contribution towards the purchase of stacking chairs.

In September 1984, our pilgrimage was completed when we met for the first time downstairs.

Ronald Halliday

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