



The Quaker Calendar

Many users of Quaker records find that the way in which Quakers dated letters, minutes and other documents, particularly before 1752, poses problems.

The English Year before and after 31 December 1751

Up to and including 1751 the Julian calendar was used in England, Wales, Ireland and the British colonies overseas. In these places the year officially began on 25 March (Lady Day) and ended on the following 24 March. So, confusingly to us, 24 March 1750 was followed the next day by 25 March 1751. With 1752 the law changed: "Chesterfield's Act" (24 Geo II c.23), passed the previous year, laid down that in future the English year would begin on 1 January. Thus the year 1751 began on 25 March 1751 and ended on 31 December 1751, which was immediately followed by 1 January 1752.

In Scotland the Gregorian calendar had been in use, with a year which did begin on 1 January. There is a further difference (related to leap years) between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, which meant that by 1752 the Julian calendar was twelve days behind the Gregorian one. Chesterfield's Act had therefore laid down that, in 1752, 2 September should be followed by 14 September. (For a fuller account, see C.R.Cheney, ed., *Handbook of dates for students of English history*, Royal Historical Society, 1948.)

Quaker Usage

Quakers followed the national practice, with one exception. They objected to using those names of days (Sunday to Saturday) and months (January to August) which derived from heathen gods or goddesses, employing instead numbers: thus Sunday was for them First Day. They had no difficulty (until 1752 - see below) with the months September to December, which derived from numbers; but for the other months, they substituted numbers, writing them out as First Month, Second Month, and so on. They sometimes used Roman numerals (i-xii) for these, and sometimes Arabic (1-12).

The problem for the modern reader is remembering that the year did not begin on 1 January until 1752, so that until 1752 February was Twelfth Month and March First Month for Quakers. Furthermore the months September to December were literally (in translation from the Latin) Seventh Month to Tenth Month, and therefore those names could truthfully be used. But once the year began in January, this was no longer the case, and so from 1752 all months were referred to by Quakers by their number. September became Ninth Month, which it now was, and so on.

It is often helpful, in making notes from Quaker manuscripts, printed works, and digest registers of births, marriages and burials, to write down the old style numbers as in the original text, but add the new style names after in square brackets, such as:

29 ii [April] 1731 or 29 2 mo. [April] 1731
12 x [December] 1740 or 12 10 mo. [December] 1740

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Double-Dating Before 1752

January and February present some complications. Those English (including Quakers), who were aware of the difference between the two calendars, often "double-dated" documents by giving both their own and the Gregorian calendar year to avoid confusion, so that

7 11 mo. 1742 may appear as 7 11 mo. [January] 1742/3.

In making notes you may also find it useful to indicate this in square brackets, where it is not indicated in the original, and you are sure of the year. So

7 11 mo. 1742 would be transcribed as 7 11 mo. 1742 [January 1742/3]
or 7 xi 1742 [January 1742/3]

The first 24 days of March present even greater complications. Often these are double-dated:

15 1 mo. [March] 1708/9.

Where they are single-dated the writer is usually but not always anticipating the year to begin on 25 March, so

7 1 mo. 1737 is probably 7 1 mo. [March] 1736/7
but may be 7 1 mo. [March] 1737/8

Sometimes a writer will give not just the different years, but both Gregorian and Julian dates in full, so that the difference in the day (and perhaps month) is also apparent.

Inconsistencies

John Nickalls (*The journal of George Fox*, 1952, pp xiii-xiv) judged that before 1752 the first 24 days of March were generally reckoned part of the old year, but D.J. Steel (*Sources for Nonconformist genealogy and family history*, 1973, pp 638-9) believes they were treated as part of the new. Samuel G. Barton, in 'The Quaker calendar' (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* vol 93, 1949, pp 32-9) argues the Quaker year began on 1 rather than 25 March, and a note in an Ifield & Shipley register (printed in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol 55, 1912, p 81) lends substance to this:

"... the year is ... to Begin the First day of the First Month commonly called March
Whereas in the worlds Accompt it begins not till the 25th day of the said Month."

Apart from variations in principle as to the first 24 days of March, you should allow for ordinary and continuing human failure to remember to write the correct date early on in the New Year.

You should remember too that the well-established American practice of putting the month before the day, when giving a date in numerical form (as 3rd mo. 7 1900, III.7.1900 or 3.7.1900) was also widely used by British and Irish Friends. Finally, Yearly Meeting's often-stated advice to keep to "plainness in language" is one indication that some Friends, at least sometimes, were using the language of "the world's people" for dates as well as in other ways