



Genealogy

Subject guide



Organisation of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

It will help with your research if you have some knowledge of how the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is organised. The term 'meeting' is used to denote both the church and, as a shortening of 'meeting for worship', gatherings of Quakers. Before 1967 Quakers in Britain were organised into the following groupings:

Particular meeting

A local worshipping group of Quakers. Also known as preparative meetings, recognised meetings, allowed meetings, or notified meetings. Since 2007, known as a local meeting.

Monthly meeting

Comprising a number of particular meetings, the monthly meeting is the principal administrative unit of Quaker church government. It handles membership, property, records, and the local meetings under its care. Since 2007 known as an area meeting.

Quarterly meeting

Initially for a county, and later for a group of counties in most cases, the quarterly meeting comprised a number of monthly meetings. Later known as a general meeting, they mostly no-longer exist.

London Yearly Meeting

Now called Britain Yearly Meeting, this was the official name for the central organisation of Quakers in Britain until 1994. The records of London Yearly Meeting are held in the Library.

Wales Yearly Meeting

This became part of London Yearly Meeting in 1797. Almost all of its records for before and after this date are held locally.

Scotland General Meeting

This became part of London Yearly Meeting in 1786. Almost all of its records for before and after this date are held locally.

The Religious Society of Friends in Ireland

This is a separate organisation, which includes Quakers in Northern Ireland. Its records are held in Ireland. Visit www.quakers-in-ireland.ie/historical-library.

For more information about how Quakers in Britain are currently organised, visit www.quaker.org.uk. For more about meeting terminology and how it has changed, see the Library's 'Meetings glossary' subject guide.



Meeting records

Location of meeting records

The majority of Quaker meeting records are not held in the Library of the Society of Friends. Local meeting records are kept in the area, deposited in the appropriate local archive or library.

The Library of the Society of Friends acts as the local repository for archives of meetings in the London and Middlesex area (Greater London, Middlesex and parts of Essex, Kent and Surrey that border London).

To find the location of the records you need, visit discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk and search 'society of friends XX monthly meeting'. If you are still unsure of where the records are, ask us for help.

What to expect from meeting records

Membership lists

Lists of members were in general use from 1837. Some monthly meetings kept lists from the late 18th century.

Printed lists were being produced annually by many meetings from the 1870s. Some list only members, whilst others list attenders as well. They will usually list the meeting's elders and overseers for that year, and include meeting members that are serving overseas. The Library holds a collection of printed membership lists from around Britain. They are organised by quarterly meeting, then year.

Minute books

The monthly meeting was the principal administrative unit of the Religious Society of Friends, so its minute books will probably be the most helpful. These can contain:

- Removals and Settlements – from the 1670s it was customary for Friends moving from one monthly meeting to another to carry a certificate (see below). Removals and Settlements were sometimes recorded in the minutes.
- Disownments – the formal recognition that a member's behaviour was contrary to the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends and/or brought it into disrepute. These were usually recorded in the minutes or a separate register. Reinstatement was possible and was usually recorded in the minutes.
- Marriages – declarations of intention to marry were usually recorded in the minutes, sometimes with more information about the families involved than is recorded in the registers.
- Ministers – British Quakers have never supported a paid ministry, but in the 18th and 19th centuries Friends who were more moved than others to give vocal ministry were acknowledged or recorded and known as 'publick' Friends.

Certificates

Some monthly meeting records will have copies of certificates of removal (see above), or file copies of marriage certificates.

Births, marriages and deaths

Registers of births, marriages and burials

From the mid-17th century, nearly all monthly meetings, some particular meetings and some quarterly meetings kept register books of births, marriages and burials (Quakers do not practice baptism).

Between 1840 and 1842, under the Non-Parochial Registers Act, the Society surrendered these original registers to the Registrar General. The registers are all now kept at The National Archives in Kew.

Online access

The Quaker registers are available on most of the big genealogy subscription sites.

Visit www.bmdregisters.co.uk for a free basic search tool (the Quaker recordset is RG6). The site charges to view a whole record, but it is useful for establishing if a record exists, and what meeting a person was part of.

Digest registers

Before surrendering its registers, the Religious Society of Friends compiled Digests from them, rearranging information from the registers by surname. The Society also made a sequence of Digest registers covering the period from 1837 to the mid-20th century.

The Library has the original Digests, and both sequences have been microfilmed. For preservation reasons the original registers are not usually produced to

users, but you can consult the microfilms. The Quaker Family History Society has created spreadsheet versions of the Durham, Essex, London, Norfolk and Suffolk digests which are freely available on their website. Visit <https://newtrial.qfhs.co.uk/resources/quaker-digest-registers>

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Why does there appear to be more than one copy of this record?** Entries may be recorded in more than one register, it is usually worth looking at both.
- **Can I use these records to find information from before 1650?** Not usually. Early Quakers who converted sometimes created a backdated birth record for themselves, but this was not standard practice.
- **I can't find a Quaker record for my ancestor. Does this mean they weren't a Quaker?** Probably, but not definitively. Although Quaker records are generally substantial, Friends sometimes failed to make entries in the registers, and some of the earlier registers were lost prior to the handover to the Registrar General. Check the appropriate monthly meeting minutes to confirm.

Genealogical sources in the Library

Getting started

Milligan, EH and Thomas, MJ (1999) *My Ancestors were Quakers*. London: Society of Genealogists. [002.1 MIL]

Introduction to Quaker history and beliefs

Punshon, J (2006) *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers*. London: Quaker Books. [097 PUN]

Dandelion, B P (2008) *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP [Box 594/26]

Ralph, G (2018) *Living our beliefs: An exploration of the faith and practice of Quakers*. London: Quaker Books [039 RAL]. Available online here: shorturl.at/djU46

On the catalogue

Particularly in the case of early Quakers, it is worth searching any names in both our online catalogue and our card catalogues as we may have documents relating to or by them. The card catalogues are organised alphabetically by surname; the online catalogue should be searched using both [first name] [surname] and then [surname], [first name] for best results (e.g. John Smith and then Smith, John). Search our online catalogue at <http://quaker.adlibhosting.com/search/simple>.

The Dictionary of Quaker Biography (DQB)

This major source of information has entries for over 15,000 Quakers and comprises unpublished research done by former staff and volunteers of this and other libraries. It can be a shortcut to birth, marriage and death records and to published sources of information about individuals. There are copies in the Quaker & Special Collections at Haverford College, Philadelphia, the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, Philadelphia, and in the Library of the Society of Friends.

Annual Monitor (1813–1920)

An annual that lists Quakers who died that year, often with an obituary. The Library holds the full publication, along with an index, which covers about 20,000 Quaker deaths. Many volumes have been made available online, visit

https://raindrop.io/Library_of_the_Society_of_Friends/annual-monitor-21577062 for links.

Besse's Sufferings

During the 17th century members of the Religious Society of Friends were persecuted for their beliefs. Cases of persecution were recorded by the Quakers, and were later compiled into a published work by Joseph Besse, searchable by name. The first volume is available online at

<https://archive.org/details/collecionofsuff01bess/page/n3>, the second is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175034931157> and we hold both volumes and the index in the Library.

School indexes

Name indexes relating to people involved with the following Quaker schools are available at the Library:

- Ackworth School (pupils and staff 1779-1979)
- Bootham School (pupils 1823-2011)
- Isaac Brown's School (pupils 1829–1845)
- Flounders Institute (pupils 1848–1874)
- Gildersome (pupils 1807)
- Lexden (pupils 1869–1903)
- The Mount (pupils 1831–1931)
- Newtown (pupils 1798–1891)
- Penketh (pupils 1834–1934)
- Rawdon (pupils 1832–1882)
- Saffron Walden (obits of pupils 1900–1976)
- Sibford (pupils 1842–1867)
- Stramongate (pupils 1860–1926)
- Tottenham (pupils 1828–1877)
- Wigton (pupils and staff 1815–1953)
- The Woodlands School (pupils 1873)

Conscientious objectors and relief workers during the World Wars

World War I

The Library holds records on conscientious objectors (COs), including the archives of the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) and the Friends Emergency and War Victims' Relief Committee (FEWVRC).

Many of the Library records have been incorporated into the Pearce Register of British WWI Conscientious Objectors, which we can search on your behalf.

This database, compiled by academic Cyril Pearce, includes over 16,500 records of men who refused to go to war on moral grounds, compiled from sources in archives all over the country. Pearce lists all the resources he was able to find on each individual.

To help in locating records we also have a register of those who served in the FEWVRC, with some information on where they served.

The personnel cards of those who served with the FAU are available online at

<http://fau.quaker.org.uk>.

World War II

The Library holds the archives of the Friends Ambulance Unit and the Friends Relief Service (FRS). Indexes of workers are available in our Reading Room, and the FAU service cards are available on microfilm.

To investigate the experiences of Quaker COs and relief workers during the wars more generally, please see the Library subject guides on Peace, World War I and the FAU, or email us at library@quaker.org.uk.

You might also be interested in this list of online interviews and videos:

https://raindrop.io/Library_of_the_Society_of_Friends/fau-and-frs-oral-histories-and-videos-21700516

Quaker missionaries

We hold a name index of workers involved with:

- The Friends Foreign Mission Association (1866–1927)
- The Council for International Service (1919–1927)
- Friends Service Council (1927–1978)
- Friends Service Unit (1946–1950)

The Friend

The Friend is an independent Quaker magazine, based in London. It is published weekly and has been in circulation since 1846. It can be a very useful source of information. The full run is available on open access in the Library, and we also hold the following name indexes:

- Obituaries 1894–1964
- Obituaries 1963–1983
- Marriage announcements 1950–1989

- Death notices 1950–1989
- Speakers at London Yearly Meeting as reported in The Friend 1870–1911
- Movements of Ministering Friends 1843–1914.

Online resources and other organisations

The Journal of the Friends Historical Society

The Friends Historical Society is dedicated to the study of the history of the Religious Society of Friends and associated individuals. Its journal is a rich source of information and is available for free online. Go to

<http://journals.sas.ac.uk/fhs/index>.

The Quaker Family History Society

A non-Quaker organisation for all those with Quaker ancestry or interested in researching Quaker family history. The website offers a detailed guide to the Quaker registers, a database of Quaker wills and spreadsheet versions of some of the register digests and some of Besse's Sufferings. Members are also able to access their journal, *Quaker Connections*, and regular online meetings. Go to

<https://newtrial.qfhs.co.uk/>

The Society of Genealogists

The Society of Genealogists offers a specialist bookshop, courses, events and a substantial library to its members. Go to www.sog.org.uk.

The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives

The Library is unable to undertake extensive family history research on behalf of enquirers. If you can't visit the Library in person, there are professional researchers who can do the work on your behalf. The Association has a list of researchers on its website: www.agra.org.uk.

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