

## London Yearly Meeting in the 1850's

THREE small MS. books have recently been presented to Friends House Library, consisting of letters written by the late Joseph Rowntree of York, containing his impressions of the Yearly Meetings of 1855, 1857 and 1858. At the first of these visits to Devonshire House, the writer was a young man of nineteen. Obviously, he was really interested in the business of the Yearly Meeting and in its conduct ; but his remarks often contain pungent criticism of the matter and length of the addresses given, and of the leisurely methods of those days : and there is evidence of the independence of mind and the sound judgement which so strongly marked his later years.

The record is chiefly concerned with Society business, but the happenings of the great world sometimes made themselves felt. On the very first page we have as background the Crimean War, then in progress :—

“ When we stopped at Grantham, a lady . . . asked Father rather earnestly for *The Times*. She glanced hastily over the columns of deaths, then sunk back into the corner of the carriage and burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. When she was a little composed she pointed to the notice of the death of her brother, killed in the trenches before Sebastopol.”

A further reminder comes in the account of a tea visit on 1st day to Joseph J. Lister's, when John Bright was among the guests. Bright's opposition to the Crimean War had made him extremely unpopular, but, says J.R., “ Amidst great opposition it seems he has some encouragement : about 30 ministers [? ministerialists] unknown to himself had written to him expressing their approval of his conduct. Among others he mentioned W. V. Harcourt, who had presented him a book with a complimentary note on the first page.” Another reminder of outside interests was the report of a letter addressed by the Meeting for Sufferings in 1858 to David Livingstone on his work for native races, and his answer thereto. In the same year an address had been

presented to the Emperor Napoleon III on an aspect of slavery. "Samuel Bowly thought we should be careful how we sent documents of this kind to such a man ; it appeared to him like ' casting pearls before swine.' "

Joseph Rowntree and his younger brother had come up two days previous to the beginning of Yearly Meeting with their parents, and the family had lodgings at 16 South St., Finsbury. The first evening they visited Madame Tussaud's, but says J. R., "the figures, although life like, were not so deceptively so as I had been led to expect. John Knox preaching before Mary Queen of Scots, Oliver Cromwell handing Chas. I a paper, the statues of Pitt, Brougham and Theobald Matthew were amongst the most interesting." The next day the two young men enjoyed the Crystal Palace, and during their stay in London they visited the Thames Tunnel and the Zoo.

In those days Yearly Meeting lasted—let us keep, as the MS. does, to the plain language—from the 4th day in the third week of 5th mo. to the following 6th day week. Meetings for Worship were held on the 6th day in the first week, and on the 4th day in the second week, in the Large Meeting-house at Devonshire House, and also at Gracechurch St., Peel, Westminster and Southwark. The general order of the business after the appointment of Clerks, was the reading of Epistles from other Yearly Meetings, the consideration of the answers to the queries (involving a good many statistics, such as the list of distraints for non-payment of tithes and church rates) which led to discussion on the state of the Society ; and, lastly, the discussion of " Propositions " sent up by one or other of the Quarterly Meetings. The names of leading Friends appear again and again : " John Allen spoke for half-an-hour " : " John Hodgkin spoke at some length " : " Benjamin Seebohm " (this was at a Meeting for Worship) " spoke at great length." Among other frequently recurring names are those of John Pease (" striking as his addresses often are for the force and beauty of that which may be said to belong to the ministry, and comparatively feeble in that which does not appertain to it "), Josiah Forster, Peter Bedford, Thomas Pumphrey, Samuel Bowly. John Bright seems generally to have been present and frequently took vigorous part in discussions. The Clerk of the Meeting in each year was Joseph Thorp.

Yearly Meeting is often criticized as being slow to move : but the pace of Friends to-day seems rapid compared with that of 80 years ago. When in 1857 it was agreed to print the Yearly Meeting documents and minutes (the first issue of " Printed Proceedings " dates from that year) Josiah Forster " seemed startled " at the suggestion that *this year's* minutes were to be printed. On a proposal to issue a " Salutation to all bearing the name of Friends " the same speaker wished to substitute the word " Address ", apparently lest the warmer word might be construed as suggesting fellowship with separated bodies in the U.S.A. J.R.'s note goes on : " When the discussion upon words had gone on at great length, Samuel Bowly hoped it would stop. He understood in the Committee on the constitution of the Meeting for Sufferings that four hours had been spent on the name."

It is only possible to refer to a few of the more important matters noted in these books. In 1855, the reading of Epistles brought the Meeting up against a difficult question. There were two Epistles claiming to come from Ohio Yearly Meeting. Which should be acknowledged? This led, says our critic, to " a long and rambling discussion ". In fact the Yearly Meeting or the Large Committee, devoted two whole days to consideration of the matter before any course could be agreed to. The decision belongs to the unhappy history of American separations : and, for once, it seems likely that, after all, the Yearly Meeting acted too precipitately.

Replies to the Queries from all Quarterly Meetings were read, and as the answers contained detailed statistics, much time was occupied. In 1855 the answers to the question whether any had joined the Society by conviction since last year reveal the fact that the largest number reported by any Quarterly Meeting was five. A long discussion took place as to the duty of a Friend with private knowledge of some exception which might prevent a clear answer being given, for instance, to the query whether Friends were " preserved in love ", if he has not had time " to speak to the delinquent or enquire into the circumstances of the case ". Should he tell the meeting, or should he not? Joseph Rowntree says : " Some idea may be formed of the animated character of the discussion by the fact that I saw one Friend try to speak 4 or 5 times and finally give up with a look of despair." " John Bright thought that much of the difficulty

resulted from the statistical way in which the queries were answered." He believed they needed revision, and that "there was much in them that would be better left out". The justice of this view is amply illustrated by the notes on the succeeding Yearly Meetings.

In 1857 Cumberland gave a clear answer to the question whether Friends avoided excess in drinking. As this was the first clear answer from that Quarterly Meeting for some years, a Friend said he would be glad to know whether it was "in consequence of disownment or of reformation"? There was some hesitation as to whether such a question should be answered: but finally "one of the representatives stated that reformation was the cause of the improvement in the answer".

The greatest difficulty, however, arose from the last part of the fourth query, which asked whether Friends endeavoured "by example and precept to train up their children, servants, and those under their care . . . in plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel". Naturally "plainness" was interpreted very differently in different Meetings. Joseph Sturge thought that this query "was doing more injury to the Society than any other single thing". He did not think that the youth of his Quarterly Meeting were unmindful of the duty of plainness, "but many of them did object to bear about a mark unsanctioned by Christianity". Time did not allow of full consideration, and the query was left unaltered "to the astonishment of not a few". Joseph Sturge brought up the subject again in the following year, and there was much discussion. The argument that a peculiar dress acted as a safeguard was brought forward, and, on the other hand, the loss to the society was deplored of young Friends who did not like being returned as "exceptions", as was also the tendency to limit office in the Society to those wearing collarless coats. "Samuel Sturge, who it is always pleasant to hear, as he is such a spirited old man, made a queer speech in favour of things as they are." Another Friend (Thomas Satterthwaite) said that "If we persisted in our present practice he thought we should have nothing but silvery hairs and infirm persons to conduct the business." William Thistlethwaite pointed out that "religion led to simplicity, not to a costume". It will be observed that these many hours mainly devoted to the question of correct dress were spent in

a meeting entirely consisting of men. The subject was finally referred to the Meeting for Sufferings, and the latter part of this query was omitted when, in 1861 a revised Book of Discipline was issued.

If "plainness" was an obstacle to young Friends, much more so were the marriage regulations, leading to disownment of Friends who married non-members, even if such were in the habit of attending Meetings. One can only wonder that the society survived its "Discipline", it was certainly brought to a very low ebb. Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting had brought in a "proposition" to alter this practice, but the subject had been left over. In 1857 it was taken up by the Large Committee, and Joseph Rowntree was specially interested because his father, Joseph Rowntree Sen. was in charge of the Yorkshire minute, "Father again brought it forward, not at great length, but sufficiently so, as I should have thought, to convince every truth-seeker." But the young man had to learn that the strongest arguments frequently fail to convince; and, he adds, "Such, however, did not appear to be the case." After debating the matter till 9 o'clock, the utmost that was attained was a minute "recommending the subject to the *favourable* consideration of next year's Y.M."

Alas! next year many friends remained unconvinced; and, in spite of a vigorous speech from John Bright, who said that "Hundreds, aye, and thousands had been disowned for acts for which a church could not rightly disown", the matter was deferred for yet another year. J.R. adds "Although this appears to be a small step in advance, I believe the question is nearly settled."

The subject of disownment in the case of the marriage of first cousins came up from Gloucestershire in 1857. It was discussed at length, and deferred, and in 1858 more debate followed before the "proposition" was rejected. John Hodgkin touched a weak spot when he said that "the exquisitely courteous terms in which we proceeded to disown persons indicated something wrong".

A more constructive treatment of the subject of marriage was that embodied in a concern of Thomas Pumphrey in 1857. He spoke, says J.R. "at great length and with much earnestness upon the importance of persons getting married. He believed that the great number of [?unmarried] adult men

and women in the Society much weakened it. If he had been of any little service to the Society, it had been owing to his being married." He thought young people should be willing to begin married life simply, not living as their parents left off. One hopes it did not destroy the sense of concern in the Meeting when "Friend Bull got up to say there had been many persons useful in the world and church unmarried"!

The subject of Education came up ordinarily on the Report of Ackworth and the other Friends' schools. In 1855, Thomas Pumphrey, Superintendent of Ackworth for the last twenty years, said it was unlikely that he would hold the office much longer. "He then", says J.R., "traced the manner in which the prospect of his being Superintendent had been opened to him, and said that if any Friend felt his mind drawn in the same way that his had been, he hoped he would be willing to attend to the call." This seems rather far removed from the present method of appointing Headmasters! Joseph Rowntree continues: "Father then called the attention of the Meeting to the deficiency of teachers. He said that although the profession of teaching did not offer equal prizes with trade yet comparing men of the age of 30 in trade and in the teacher's office the latter were generally in a better pecuniary position. The occupation of the teacher was also much more desirable. These remarks were made to counteract the common opinion that teaching was a poor means of getting a livelihood. A Friend in the bottom of the Meeting thought there could be no doubt that a clerk's employment brought in a much larger salary than that of a teacher. Why, a good clerk thought little of £300. Should not a [? Friend] be informed of this?" Obviously the days of the Burnham scale were not yet.

The discussion on Education in 1857 one seems oneself to have heard in recent years. There was "a general opinion that the terms ought to be raised". It must be borne in mind that the Ackworth report for 1856 states that 167 children paid £12, 65 paid £16, and 53 paid the highest rate, £21. Further a minute from the Ackworth General Meeting deplored the "gross ignorance" of religious subjects of children entering the School. This minute, says J.R. "was twice read, and if I was not reporting the proceedings of Yearly Meeting, I might have said it was carried by acclamation: such a general warm expression I have rarely seen." It

seems a strange subject on which to have waxed enthusiastic and I wonder if the approval may not have been given to the proposal to issue an address to parents on the Scriptural education of children. This address includes the following sentences :—

“ It is, however, with pain that we have to acknowledge that instances continue to occur of children entering our schools very imperfectly instructed in their moral and religious duties, and lamentably ignorant of the contents of the sacred Volume : the want of knowledge extending in some cases to the most simple facts and histories in the Old and New Testament.”

In 1858 Brookfield School was reported closed, and an Irish Friend explained “ that the school had been given up owing to the insubordination of the boys consequent upon inefficient teachers: and that as soon as suitable ones should be found it would be re-established ”. This led to further exhortations to young men to take up the teaching profession. Then, says J.R., “ Joseph Pearce made a speech which, if it showed nothing else, indicated that education was at a low ebb in the district where he spent his schooldays. He thought we did not want intellectual men for Superintendents : but persons of plain common sense. He knew a school where the Superintendent allowed the boys to have indigestible food because he did not know better.” In the discussion it was pointed out that the qualifications required for the Head of Brookfield School were unusual, “ a farmer of good education, or an educated man with a knowledge of farming ”. “ A nice distinction ”, comments Joseph Rowntree.

It must of course be remembered that in the years under review, and for many subsequent years, the Yearly Meeting consisted exclusively of men. Women Friends met at the same time, but had no legislative authority. Men Friends under concern not unfrequently visited the Women's Meeting, and, in the case of the Ohio separation two or three Friends were appointed to go and inform Women Friends of the course that had been adopted. In 1858 it is remarked that “ Jacob Green was liberated to pay his annual visit to the Women's Meeting.” Once Josiah Forster was moved to express the hope that a proposed visit might be “ the last visit paid ”, apparently in that year. The same year the

Clerk received "a note from the Women's Meeting, saying that a woman Friend desired to have a meeting with young Friends". Various speakers thought the name should have been given. "Josiah Forster said he knew, but for some reason it was thought better to send and enquire. A note was sent, but no answer coming for some time, Robert Forster went in to the Women's Meeting. He brought back the Friend's name, Eliza Sessions. Samuel Bowly and Joseph Sturge thought there was a great want of simplicity in these extraordinary evolutions"—surely with some justice. In the end, Eliza Sessions was liberated. There was no doubt about the subjection of women as regarded "Church affairs".

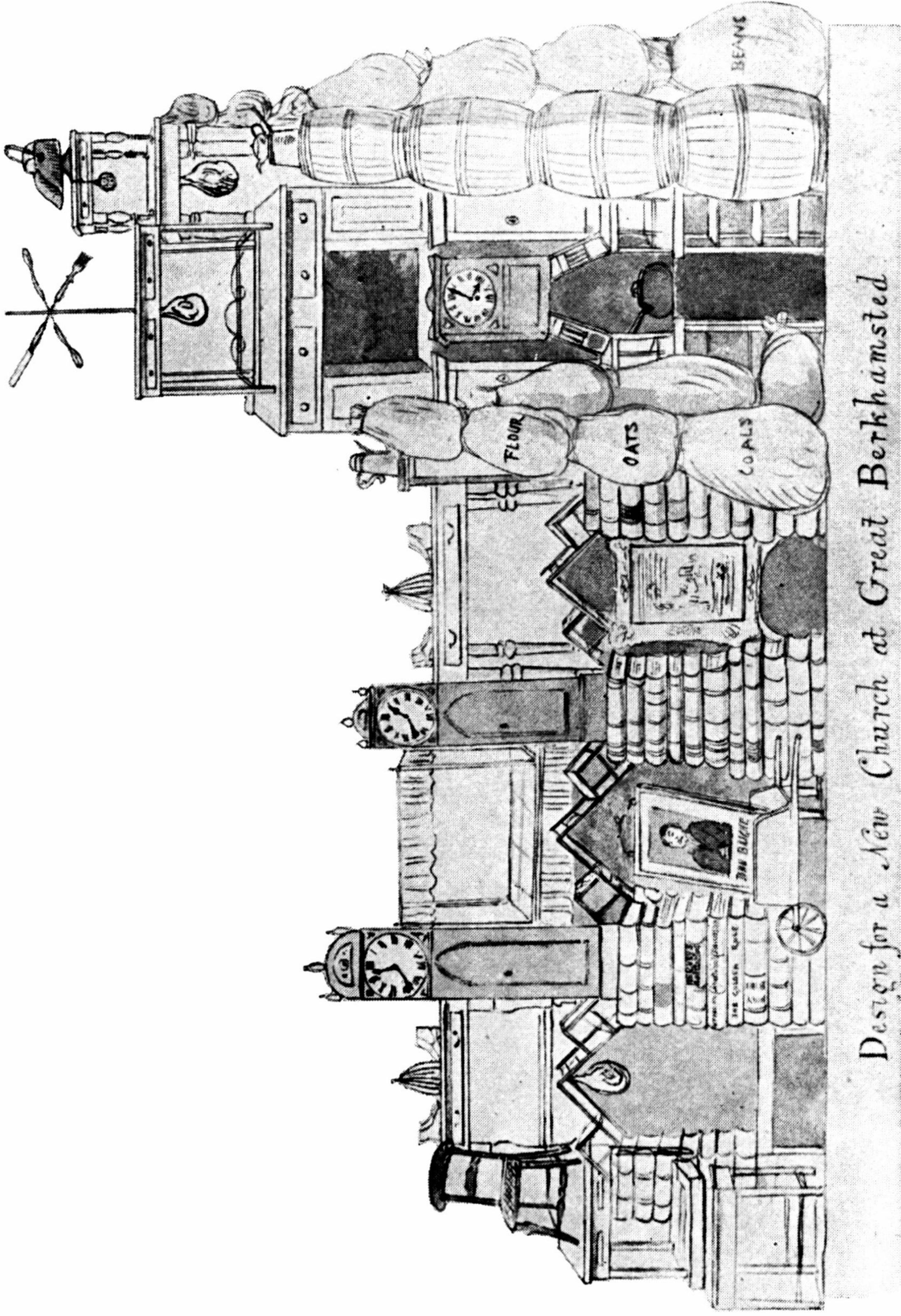
Although there is evidence of some tedium in the long discussions, and natural impatience at the extreme deliberation with which changes were made, the story of these Yearly Meetings as told by Joseph Rowntree does not make dull reading. The proposals of the Meeting for Sufferings were by no means always approved. Some advices respecting marriage drawn up by that Meeting had to be expurgated: "a rather singular paragraph about the kind of presents to give at marriages having been happily consigned to oblivion by the revising Committee."

In those days the Quaker "chant" was still heard and advice had to be given that "unnatural toning of the voice" should be avoided. Again, one speaker trenchantly "hoped that if Friends thought it necessary to make an apology for speaking, they would also consider whether they might not keep silent."

Testimonies to deceased Friends were read in full. In 1857 after the reading of a testimony to a certain Martha Thornhill, William Ball (to quote the M.S.) "objected to the pointed allusion to the frailties of the dead, and thought her ministerial defects were not greater than those of many others." Other Friends were thankful for the true record, and thought it would be of use. Here is an example of the desire for strict truthfulness which underlay the time and attention devoted to *words*; time that seems wasted to our less punctilious age. It also explains such phrases as "so far as appears" which are so common in the answers to the Queries. In 1855 when the Clerk hoped Friends would assemble punctually for the afternoon session, a Friend, in supporting his plea, said "he did not know whether it was true to say we met







*Design for a New Church at Great Berkhamsted*

A PICTORIAL PROTEST AGAINST TITHES

according to adjournment, when we had not met till a quarter of an hour afterwards ". For such regard for Truth speaking which is part of our heritage as Friends, we can be thankful even if sometimes we feel it to have been exaggerated or misplaced.

ANNA L. LITTLEBOY

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## A Pictorial Protest against Tithes

The pen and ink drawing reproduced here was made by a Friend about the middle of last century as a satirical protest against the injustice of tithes in the parish of Great Berkhamsted, Herts. The church is built up of various goods and chattels distrained for non-payment of the tithe. The portrait is that of John Bright. The plate is made from a photograph of the original drawing, given to the Library by Anna L. Littleboy. The artist is unknown.