**Triennial Report for Hitchin Meeting from January 2016 – August 2018**

**Introduction**

The Quaker Meeting House in Hitchin is centrally placed in an elevated position surrounded by mature trees and mainly low walls, so it is very visible from the town centre. As there is open access at all times of the day, local people often walk through the grounds, sometimes stopping to have a quiet moment on a bench. We had a Meeting policy to offer shelter to individual rough sleepers under a covered area which after forty odd years had to cease for health and safety reasons. This has provided us with an opportunity to consider using clear areas in a different way, and fundraising for development of the local homeless hostel has been very much part of our planned giving.

**Peace and Community Outreach**

The last three years has been a time of reaching out, some of it planned and some surprisingly coming our way through developing a Peace Garden. From 2016 onwards, we have had many local people keen to be involved starting with the dove shaped pond, where f/Friends helped to do back breaking work digging by hand. Friend AP, previously unknown to us, advised us about creating the different levels and depths and also provided us with many water plants that immediately looked at home in their new environment. Later he quietly appeared, after a long winter, with a beautiful vividly coloured rag rug of a Peace Dove, which is now displayed as a wall hanging in the Meeting House.

Later a large wooden ‘Conscientious Objector’s’ chair was installed near the pond with an inscription saying ‘Courage and Conscience’ along with an information board explaining the conviction and cost of standing alone. The Roman Catholic Church also provided the garden with a Peace quote on a stand which has been placed amongst the autumn cyclamen in a clearing. Members of their congregation devised an outdoor thanksgiving service to mark this welcome addition to the Peace Garden. In addition, friends installed donated benches, one with a beautiful curved roof and another with a plaque saying ‘Peace begins within ourselves’.

From the beginning, it has been our intention to invite other faiths to share in the development, and the garden was re-named Hitchin Peace Garden for all to enjoy and spend time in for rest, recuperation and reflection. Funding for this project has come from individual donations from Friends, North Herts District Council, Churches Together in Hitchin and Quaker Work Committee.

More recently, the local InterFaith group donated a multi coloured picnic table and benches. We held a thanksgiving service around the table with contributions from Sikhs, Roman Catholics, Quakers and Muslims and a brass plaque was placed in the middle of the table with logos of all faiths engraved in a circle, acknowledging Hitchin’s multi-faith community and our connectedness to each other.

This summer we were invited by Churches Together in Hitchin to devise an ecumenical service in the Peace Garden to commemorate the ‘100 days of prayer’ leading up to the end of the first world war, which was attended by representatives from many of the local churches. We included prayers, Advices and Queries 8 & 32, reference to the peace work of Mahatma Gandhi, a piece on the spiritual basis of our Peace Testimony and the hymn ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind‘, written by the Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier, all interspersed by short periods of silent reflection.

Future plans include a large sculpture named ‘Unity’ designed by two pupils from Hitchin Boys school, a sun dial offered by Churches Together in Hitchin, a nature corner planned by young Friends, a peace-themed mosaic and messages of Peace inscribed on poles in different languages. As a way of involving a wider circle of Friends, two articles have been accepted and printed in Quaker Voices and a website for the Peace Garden has been set up - [hitchinpeacegarden.hhq.org.uk](http://hitchinpeacegarden.hhq.org.uk/)

During Hitchin Festival we have hosted evenings with speakers from Britain Yearly Meeting on Conscientious Objection in 2016 and a talk on the work of North Herts Sanctuary and Stevenage Haven in 2017 (which was also the launch event for our fund-raising recipe book). In 2018 we heard from a returned volunteer with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. Also a Friend has gone on a study tour organised by Quaker Voluntary Action to see for herself the work of Friends amongst groups of women working for Peace in Palestine. Finally, members of the wider community have been invited to visit and participate in the planning of the peace garden through presentations displayed at the annual Heritage Open Days and the 2018 Triangle Community Garden Open Day in Ransom’s Recreation Ground.

**Spiritual Learning**

Meeting for Worship remains central to all that we do as a religious community and in our daily lives. We have become a slightly smaller group of 15 - 20 Friends who very much value our worshipping time together. We bring fewer chairs together around our central table, giving the feeling of closeness as a community. The amount and depth of ministry varies greatly from week to week and every now and then we have a silent hour together which can be felt as a deep stillness.

We often have visitors joining us for their first time in a Quaker meeting. All are on their own spiritual journey, some finding the lack of structure helpful and others less so. The ministers from other churches openly enjoy ‘not being on duty’ and having time to reflect and experience being prayerfully still. At the suggestion of a new attender, we decided to acquire a copy of ‘A World Religions Bible’ for the table. Reading it has inspired ministry and it has been borrowed for browsing at home, so we have purchased two more copies for our library

Our new ‘Experiment with Light’ group now meets once a month at different times during the week. Three Friends have attended an EwL training weekend, and two joined another group at Hertford Meeting in the early days to become familiar with this form of opening up to the Spirit. It has taken time to settle to this discipline but we now have eight Friends attending one of whom joins us from another Meeting

‘Food for Thought’ sessions after coffee on Sundays, about every two months have given us all a chance to further our understanding on a range of topics, including ‘Living Lives of True Godliness’, studying the document ‘Four Doors to Worship’, using postcards images to aid ’Reflections on Worship’ and ‘discussing ‘A Quaker response to the post-truth world’. To aid discussion at BYM, we had three sessions considering some chapters in Quaker Faith & Practice in view of a possible updating of our book of discipline in the future.

Once a month ‘Afterword‘ has been helpful and is well established. It consists of ten minutes of contributions following on at the end of MfW for thoughts arising from ministry, which were not voiced earlier. It can be thought provoking and allows those new to meeting to find their voice and others to share how ministry ‘opens spiritual doors’ for us as individuals.

**Caring for One Another**

Elders and Overseers have continued to meet jointly every two months. With the encouragement of Nominations Committee, the Meeting decided to create roles for Support Elders and Overseers, inviting regular attenders to explore the roles and become familiar with Quaker ways of supporting each other and looking after the spiritual welfare and right ordering of Meeting for Worship.

Courses at Woodbrooke and Friends House have been attended and those being released from service have offered continuing support and often an overlapping period of service.

A number of roles have also been shared on a rota: covering notices after MfW, grass cutting, coffee and door duty and attending Interfaith and CTiH meetings. We have held an open planning meeting to share ideas on future activities and different opportunities for spiritual growth.

We continue to raise funds for North Herts Sanctuary, the local homeless hostel, selling cakes and preserves provided by our clerk which has raised over £2,000 over three years, and also devising and selling our own recipe book ‘Eating with Friends’.

**Older Friends**

Two of our older, seasoned Friends have died, Nell Jarvis in 2016 and Margaret Moss in 2018. Both had served the Meeting faithfully over many years into their nineties and leave a large gap in our worshipping community. We still miss them both. We have been involved in organising funerals and a memorial meeting and a testimony put together with the help of Hitchin Friends both past and present and Friends from other Area Meetings. Also individual memories were collected and were printed in our newsletter QuakerView. This publication has served us well with articles written by Friends updating each other with news and views, extracts from favourite books, accounts of our activities and our experience of things spiritual

**Our Young People**

Our young people continue to inspire and add something special to our Quaker Community. Ranging from 6 – 11 years, eight children from four families have met once a month to discuss our testimonies, Cadbury’s chocolate, Kindertransport, to make a bug hotel and to release six goldfish into the Peace Pond.They join adult Meeting for Worship for the last ten minutes and display their art work and talk about their time together and adult Friends sometimes do likewise.

All Age Worship has been organised twice in this triennial period and we have all learned from and appreciated time with our spiritually minded and thoughtful young people. As 2018 has progressed, one family has moved away and other Sunday activities have clashed as the children grow older. Consequently attendance has inevitably fluctuated.

**Premises and Safety**

We have been blessed with Friends with architectural, practical, restoring and DIY skills over the last three years and much has been done to help maintain the Meeting House and grounds. Our inadequate heating system has been replaced with a new boiler and remote control heating arrangements so that the room hirings clerk can reset heating from his home. The large window frame in the undercroft has been restored which was complex but completed in-house.

A new role of a grounds maintenance team has been created to include regular checks of the burial ground for safe disposal of rubbish and evidence of drug taking and also to tackle tidying and pruning as part of the Premises and Safety committee’s yearly plan. A new policy has been written on Fire Precautions and use of a regular fire drill with a hand operated fire alarm, installed at a small cost. Recommendations have been made on future energy efficiencies and a carved wooden sign for our ‘Quaker Meeting House’ attached to an outside wall. Work parties have been held twice a year to carry out further maintenance to the building and the grounds. Funding for future essential work is a continuing concern as electrical work in the large meeting room needs upgrading as does the women’s cloakroom. We have been guided by our treasurer who has advised us well. He has helped chase funding on our behalf and all loans for our new heating system have already been repaid.

A clear Safeguarding policy for ensuring the safety of children and vulnerable adults in the Meeting has been created. Also a small group has been assessing the way in which data about individuals is stored and processed in response to the new EU Data Protection Regulation.

**Room Hirings**

Income over the 3 years of this report is:  
 2016 - £5976, 2017 - £8328, 2018 - £5872 to date 6/9.

Room hirings have benefitted from a presence on the NHDC website that advertises local venues. This enabled a period of ‘churn’ where longstanding hirers ceasing or reducing their commitment were balanced by incoming new, different organisations. The figures above show a general increase in income although we need to recognise an increase in hiring rates from 1/1/18, some disruption due to the introduction of the new heating system during February of this year, which left the Meeting House unheated for a number of weeks, and the normal ebb and flow of demand.

**Meeting Activities**

The Meeting has enjoyed a number of social occasions including monthly lunches or breakfasts, New Year parties, evening walks in the summer and a visit to Friends House to meet the staff of various departments and to be shown around the library and strong rooms and the rest of the building. Many Friends attended a concert put on by a community choir using our rooms for practices and also joined in a AM singing workshop called ‘Friends in Tune’.

Hitchin Meeting Friends and families have joined Quaker Camp each year, and two Friends represent our Area Meeting on the Grand Union Quaker Camps Committee. At least five Friends have attended each Area Meeting throughout the year, and Yearly Meetings have attracted attendance from members and attenders. Friends Reading Group meets every 6-8 weeks and is supported by f/Friends, family and neighbours. Meetings to discuss the future of Hoddesdon Meeting House have been supported, and so has the newly formed group Herts Welcomes Syrian Families.

**Conclusion**

The distinction between members and attenders is fast disappearing as we are all part of the Hitchin Quaker Community and have such an important role to play together. However those comparatively new to the Religious Society of Friends do need nurturing along which is the responsibility of us all. We recognise that everyone comes with something special to offer and most of all contributing to spiritual awareness which is the very essence of why we meet weekly. Sharing our spiritual journeys helps us to put into words why Meeting for Worship is so important to us all and we give thanks for opportunities to continue exploring spiritual truths together.