Farnsfield Quakers

There were Quakers living in Farnsfield during the second half of the 17th century and details of the religious persecution they suffered is well recorded. In 1661 Ralph and Richard Bateman of Farnsfield were taken from a meeting in Upton by the constable and put in prison. 1670 Ralph Bateman and his brother John had household goods confiscated to the value of £28 for holding a 'peaceable Meeting'. William Watson was fined 15 shillings for being at the same meeting and had goods taken to the value of about £2 10 shillings. Nathaniel Price was also at the meeting and fined £1 and the report of this action indicates the terrible harshness of the penalty presumably rendering him unable to work: "*he being a poor fatherless boy, who the Friends had put out to be apprenticed, and having no visible estate, the officers took his coat and breeches, his knife and sheath and sizzers. This was done by George Richardson Constable of Farnsfield, Tho Hawkin, Rich Copper and Hugh Hardin, Townsmen.*" In 1670 William Watson was again fined £19 for attending a meeting and in 1676 he had £60 worth of household goods, corn and cattle confiscated.

The Compton Census of 1676, commissioned by Henry Compton, Bishop of London, was undertaken to determine the religious affiliation of the population. Parishes were asked to identify the number of conformists (adherents to the Church of England), non-conformists and papists (Catholics). Non-conformists were those who absented themselves from the Communion of the Church of England, which was required by law at the time and many of these would have been Quakers. A 1674 record lists 14 Farnsfield Quakers who had suffered from oppression or persecution. There were 20 non-conformists listed on the 1676 census and perhaps it can be concluded that the majority of these were Quakers.

In 1684 William Watson made the decision to emigrate to America following the death of his wife. Perhaps he was struggling after the imposition of such severe fines and he was clearly in touch with other Quakers who had settled there and were enjoying greater religious freedom and a good living. He obtained a certificate of removal from the Monthly Meeting of Friends at Farnsfield and in addition he had a letter of attorney to carry with him to the New World. This showed he had received land in West Jersey from Thomas Grace, tailor of Mansfield who had settled there. William Watson kept a journal which recorded some of the preparation for his journey and his experiences once he settled in America. After William's death in around 1711, his son Isaac built a house which still stands today and is recorded as the oldest house in Mercer County, New Jersey.

The first meeting house for the Society of Friends 1973

The first Quaker meeting house was situated in a hut erected at the top of Cockett Hill. After the Toleration Act of 1689 the persecution of Quakers was much reduced and in 1701-2 a new meeting house was built in the village with a graveyard attached, close to Quaker Lane.

Ref: The Sufferings of the Quakers in Nottinghamshire, 1649-1689' compiled by Percy J Cropper, in 1892 from 'original records and authentic accounts'. Accessed on Googlebooks February 2024