



# **The Quakers in Pickwick**

A Documentary Study  
By  
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## **Quakerism in Wiltshire<sup>1</sup>**

According to WR Powell Quakerism was at its height in Wiltshire in 1680. It declined gradually from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century until c1750 when it declined rapidly. There were 3 monthly meetings in Wiltshire. Corsham was included in the Chippenham meeting along with Slaughterford, Kington Langley, Leigh and Brinkworth. In 1775 the Chippenham monthly meeting was merged with the Charlcote and Lavington meetings to form a single Wiltshire meeting. For 50 years until closure, the monthly meetings were held in Pickwick where there was a Friends' school run by Thomas Bennet (d.1764). In 1788 the meetings reorganised into three Preparative meetings based on Devizes, Hullavington (which included Pickwick) and Melksham. In 1790 there were 10 Quakers in Pickwick. By 1798 there were only 3. At the opening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century meetings declined steeply. The Pickwick meetings ended in 1816. The only meeting by 1854 was that held in Devizes. By 1867 Wiltshire had merged with North Somerset.

In 1904 the Society of Friends still held property in Pickwick.

## **Pickwick, Corsham**

The Society of Friends, led by Benjamin Flower, son of the vicar of Castle Combe, built the first meeting house at Monk's Lane in 1662. It was purchased by the Independents in 1690 and in 1709 the Friends built a new meeting house at Pickwick<sup>2</sup>.

The Wiltshire Archive Service holds copies of the Corsham Manorial Roll containing records of the Society of Friends, the Pickwick Quaker Meeting House and the burial ground from the 12th October 1659.

At this date the Burial Ground is described as a 'Parcel of Land containing one Farthingdale more or less situated in the Tything of Pickwick'. A Farthingdale being a division of land, probably originally a fourth of a hide; this was later used to describe a quarter.

Other copies name individual tenants as they surrendered the copyhold to the next person or persons responsible for looking after the Burial Ground. By 1736 the Copy includes a Meeting House with the Plot of Land, and states 'which has sometime been erected thereon'.

On the surrender of Ezekiel Dickinson and John Bennett's copy twelve names are listed as taking over the tenancy. The surviving members of these twelve individuals were later under Charles Arnold's agreement, and they elected to build a new Meeting House on the site. Unfortunately there is no date on this document, but the names on the Roll frequently occur, but it is difficult to ascertain if it is the same individual or a relation. The 16/5/1752 will of Thomas Bennett stated he was giving 10 pounds to the monthly meeting of the people called Quakers of the 'Chippening Division, the interest to be applied yearly as my son John Bennet shall think fit...'

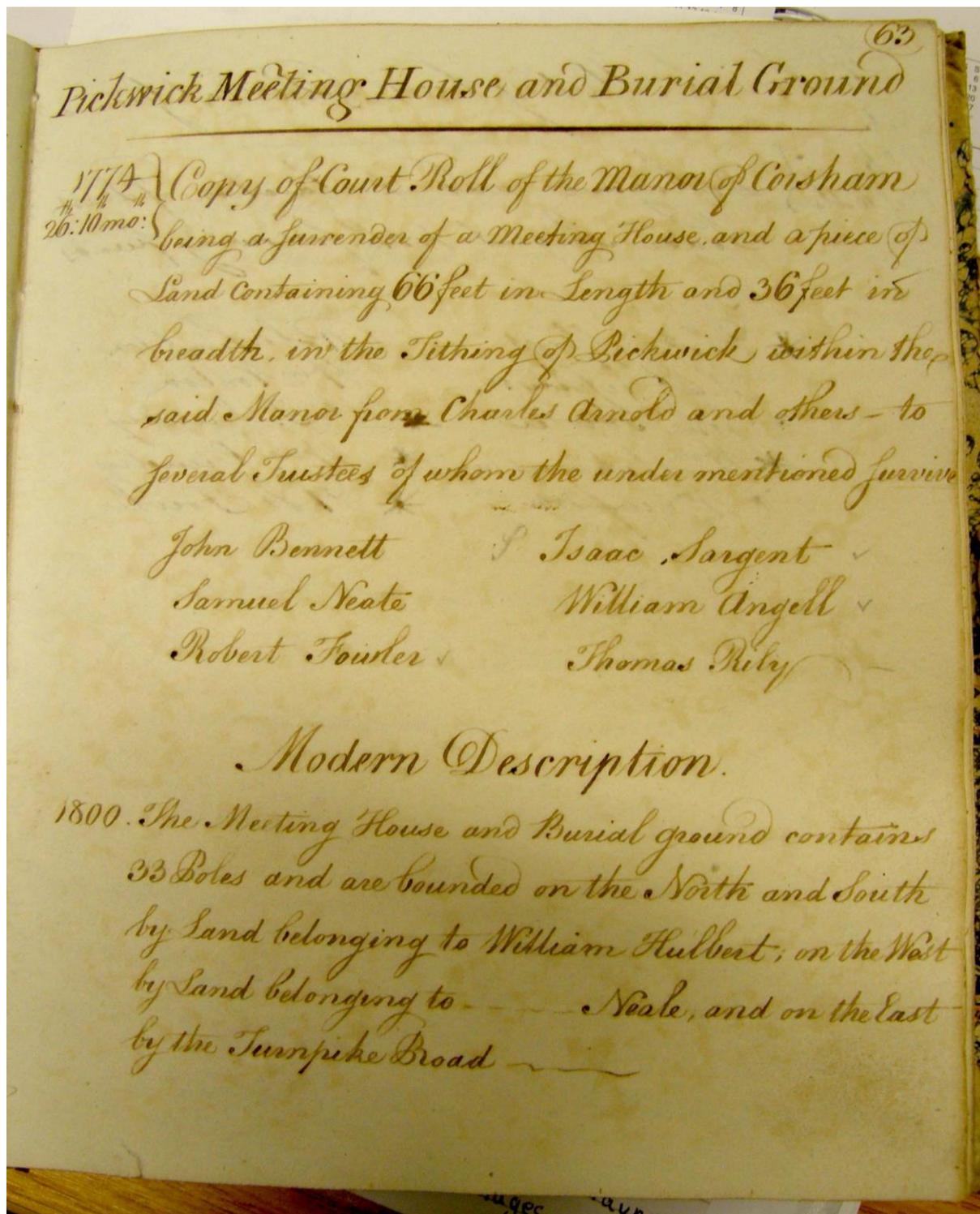
The 1774 Roll Copy<sup>3</sup> records the size of the area as measuring 66 feet in length and 36 feet in breadth, recording that Charles Arnold and others surviving in the Trust who had built the new Meeting House were surrendering their copyhold to six members.

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<sup>1</sup> Online document 'The Society of Friends in Wiltshire' by WR Powell, 2018

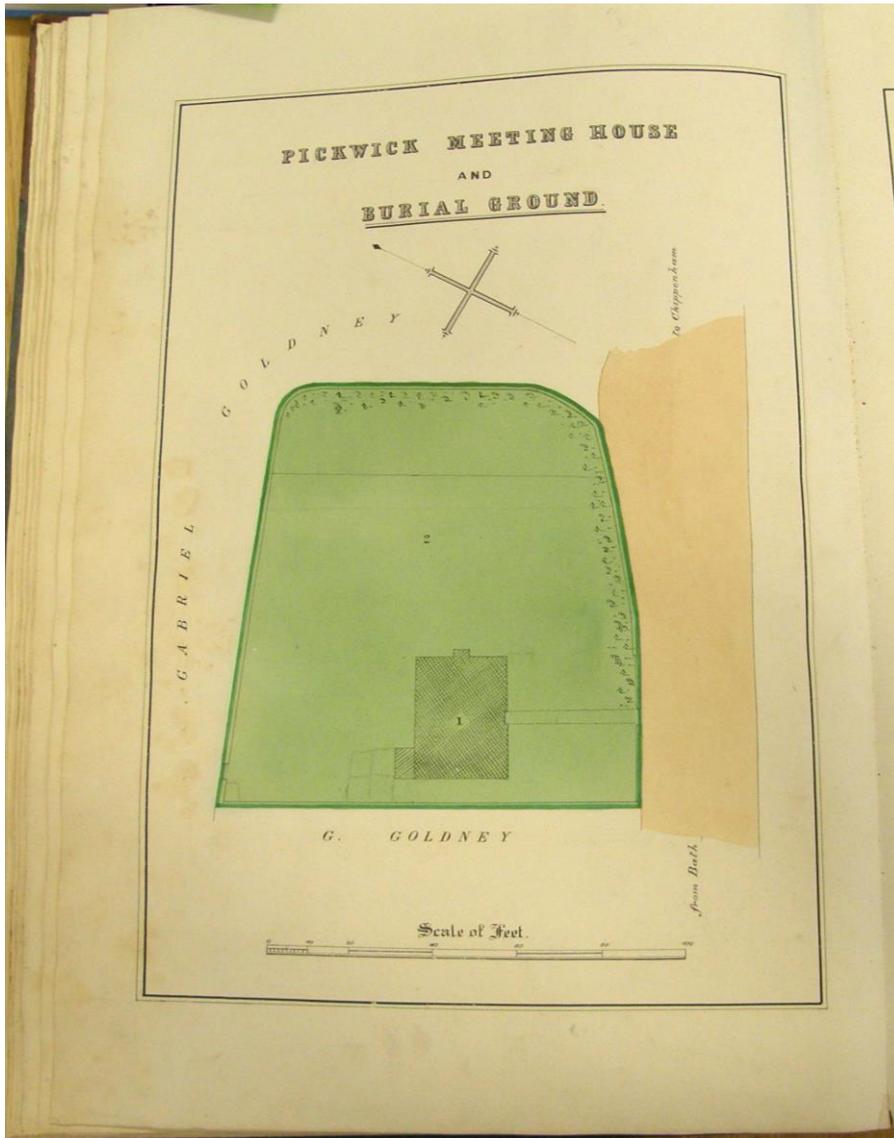
<sup>2</sup> Monk's Chapel, Corsham <http://monkschapel.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Wiltshire Archive Service ref: 854/34



**Fig. 1 Extract from Corsham Manorial roll dated 1774 ref: 854/34**

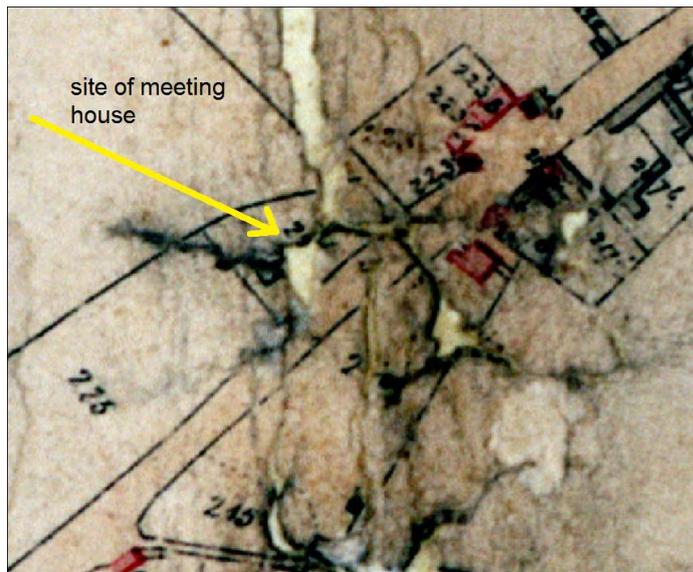
At the bottom of this document under the heading The Modern Description of the roll and dated 1800, states that the Meeting House and Burial Ground contained 33 poles was bounded on the north and south by land belonging to William Hulbert and the west by land belonging to .....Neale and on the east by the Turnpike road.



**Fig. 3 Plan of the meeting house**

The Andrews' & Dury Map of 1773 does not individually identify the Meeting House but names ownership of several nearby large houses.

A book entitled plans of Meeting Houses & Burial Grounds & Estates belonging to the Society of Friends in the County of Wiltshire was surveyed by J.Y. Sturge in 1867. The tenure as Copyhold and gives the location as Number 224 on the 1839 Corsham Tithe Award map.



**Fig. 2 Extract from Corsham tithe award, 1839**

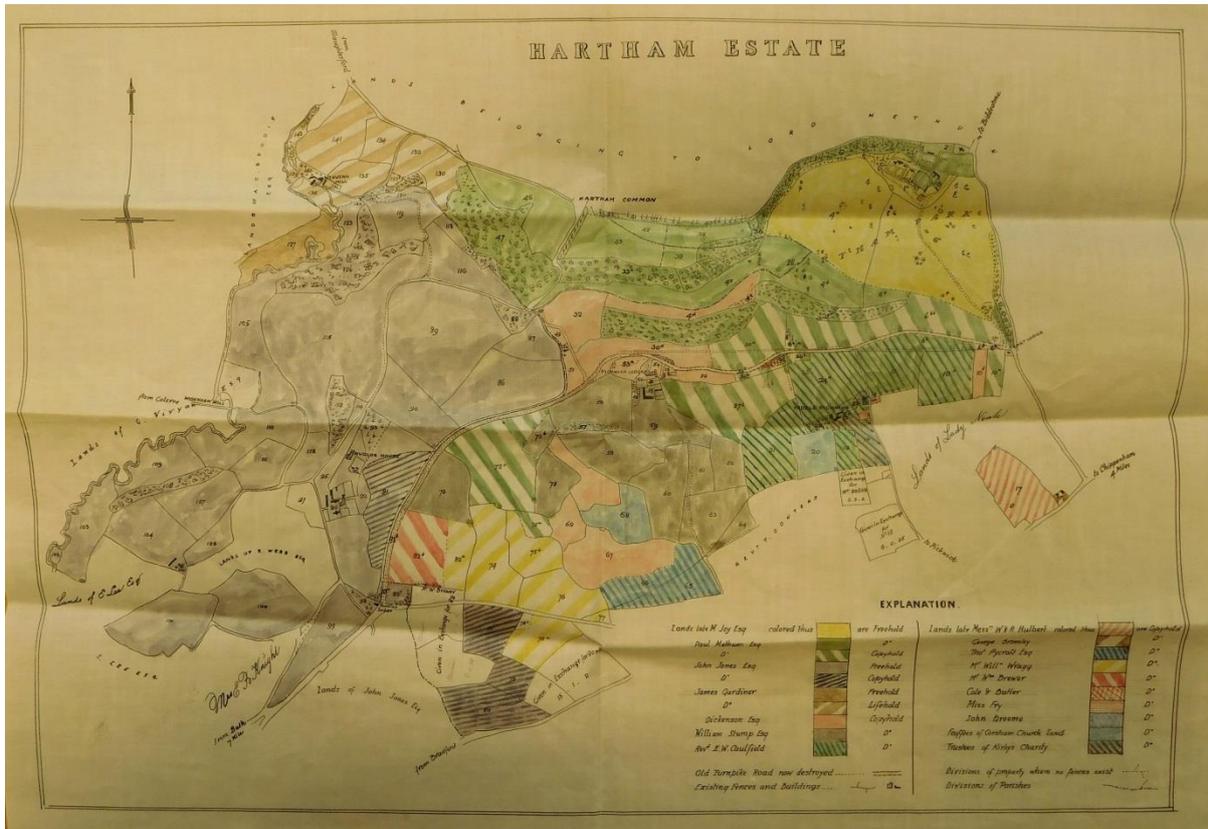
Under the heading Sundries the schedule of the map lists Number 224 as Quaker Meeting House containing 22 perches. Unfortunately there is damage on the map in the area of No.224 although No. 223 is clearly marked and it appears that the numbers follow in a line in that area.

A small note book in the W.S.R.O. records inspections of the Meeting House and its graveyard, it dates from 1879 with reports until 1888. The first report in 1879 records that the building was in substantial repair and that the roof was made of rough slabs, but goes on to record that the floor in places was in need of repair. However the Inspector wrote that the graveyard was in a state of disrepair showing evidence of many interments and whilst some stones remained many were just lying around the plot. Two of the vaults had fallen in to reveal skulls and bones. Only one inscription could be read, being Dickenson of Monks. Another gravestone recorded the date 1641. The border of the graveyard was lined with larches and bushes. The area covered 36 perches. The rent was 21 shillings or 3 pounds 3 shilling a month.

The inspector wrote that it was rented by Goldney Esq., who was the owner of the adjoining property. This gentleman was renting it out to the Working Men's Club (42 members) which was open to all and was a benefit to the village. Mr. Goldney had also at his own expense laid on gas to the club with the pipes being laid from his own house 400 yards away. At the bottom of the Report it records that the Meeting House closed in 1815 and that the last burial was in 1828.

A further report in 1885 recorded that the Meeting House and Burial Ground was situated in Lower Pickwick about 20 minutes walk from Corsham Station. It says the house appears to be substantial, built of stone. It consists of one room with a small lean-to outhouse. The Inspector records that the graveyard was still in a state of disrepair and in a similar state to that reported in 1879. The report states that although the door was locked, the door leading into the premises was opened, and that the whole place appeared very desolated and looked as if no wood had been painted in twenty years. At the end of the report it says that there is no indication that it belonged to the Society of Friends. This report suggested that the place should be disposed of or put in a creditable condition. Three years later it would appear that nothing had changed, it was still in a bad state of repair and again suggested that the building be sold or leased.

The records looked at so far do not record a school anywhere. It is conjectured that this was an informal Sunday school conducted in the back room.



**Fig. Hartham Estate Map ref: 2027/2/1/903 showing disposition of lands in 1910, including the lands of known Quakers such as Miss Fry. It also shows the old turnpike road**

Postscript: report commissioned by John Maloney