

# Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

## 'A History of Pembrokeshire Quakers'

Alan York

In the early days of St Davids it was known to be "dirty and smelly with animals alongside thatched dwellings" and the times of the Commonwealth were further characterised by religious confusion and turmoil. Into this came George Fox bringing a belief in a new covenant between God and Man without the need for churches or priests, paid to share the word of God. In 1657 George Fox came to spread his ideas in Pembrokeshire – visiting Tenby, Haverfordwest and St Davids along the way. Accounts of the time refer to Quakers already established in St Davids at Maes y Mynedd (stories suggest that they set up their own settlement away from the turmoil and prejudice of townsfolk). Where there were larger numbers of Quakers Friends built their own meeting houses but otherwise met in their own homes - or the open air when weather was fine. By the 1860s the membership had led to meetings being set up around Pembrokeshire including Puncteston, Newport, St. Davids and Narbeth. In Haverfordwest people converged for the meeting in the house of merchant William Bateman, and he also welcomed George Fox a few years later, accompanied by John ap John. John, like many Quakers, spent a number of occasions in prison ... frequently for the simple act of refusing to remove his hat in church (hat-deference – not showing due respect to the clergy!)



This reflects the growing persecution of Quakers – as they could not even be buried in church-consecrated ground so they had to create their own burial grounds e.g. Sutton (near Haverfordwest). Although quite far from the town it was land gifted by William Bateman. In the 1650s enthusiasm was high but a refusal to swear an oath and no acknowledgement of titles meant that Quakers were seen as a threat to Civil Order – even by Cromwell and the Puritans – and this led to imprisonment of many. William Bateman of Haverfordwest and his relations were sent to the 'House of Correction' ... and ended up having meetings in prison before eventually being released during the Assizes. Along with others by refusing to pay fines this led to property being confiscated or even to deportation.

in 1658 Cromwell died and left confusion until the Restoration brought even more persecution of Quakers under Charles II ... for failing to fall into line. Many died in prison for non-payment of tithes and had their goods confiscated yet still people were attracted from many walks of life – including William Penn (son of an admiral in the King's navy who had loaned the king thousands of pounds). In return the Wm Penn Jnr. asked for tracts of land in the New World ... to be called 'Sylvania' (land of woods) but the king insisted it be called after Wm's father hence Penn-sylvania ... and he invited others, including Pembrokeshire Quakers, to join him (Welsh immigrants were given their own land to follow their own culture/language). In the 1680s 23 ships carried Quakers towards Pennsylvania and they named their settlements after their homeland ... Haverford, Narbeth and St Davids (suggesting the farmers from Maes y Mynedd were among their numbers).

The 1690s Act of Toleration gave legal rights to worship freely but there continued to be issues with the 'established' church as Quakers felt unable to render tithes to the church and increasingly numbers declined throughout Pembrokeshire until regular meetings ceased by the mid C18<sup>th</sup> but by the end of the century in a strange reversal Quakers were invited from Nantucket ... refusing to take part in the American Civil War 5 whaling ships brought families to Milford Haven where they set up their community and thrived – building homes and wharves from where they conducted their trades and diversified over time and thrived whilst the whaling industry remained important. Problems continued through their refusal to pay tithes – particularly when moneys went to support conflicts and wars - and goods and property continued to be taken from them. Within a century many of the Quaker families had moved away or died around Milford Haven and numbers became much reduced until C.21<sup>st</sup> when numbers observing Quakers values and beliefs have continued to rise across Britain and Pembrokeshire.

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