

Minutes of Central England Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) held at Bournville Meeting House and online on 28th March 2026

Clerk: Rae Ritchie Assistant Clerk: Paula Button
Elders: Donald Stubbings and John Cox-Woolven
Pastoral Friend: Anne Giles

2026.035: Worship

We have observed a period of stillness during which we heard of the deaths of Laura Nell Obaugh (COT) who died on 28th August 2025 aged 95, John Beaven (COT) who died on 20th March 2026 aged 79 and Margaret Scorey (BOU) who died on 19th March 2026, age to be confirmed.

We also heard from *Quaker Faith and Practice* 27:36:

Just as Quakers do not limit the service of God to certain times, or places, or people, so they do not have a set-apart priesthood... There is no need for any specific person to be designated prophet, priest, or church leader. Quakers would say that if people are open to the power of love and light in their lives then they will themselves become prophetic and priestly, and will not need to follow the external authority of church leaders. They will become empowered to be themselves, to find God in their hearts and to serve other people.

Harvey Gillman, 1988

2026.036: Representatives

The following Local Meetings are represented: BGR, BOU, BUL, COT, COV, HAL, HAR, KIN, SEL, STO, SUT, WAL and WAR.

The Clerks welcome the following Attenders joining us today: Allie Martland (BOU), Ellie Rushton (BOU), Becky Shirley (SUT) and Alacoque Heywood (BGR).

We also welcome Lidia Bennett, a member of Banbury and Evesham Area Meeting and Moya, Quaker Life Local Development Worker for Thames Valley.

2026.037 Laying Down of Quaker Life Representative Council

We have received a report from Lee Gun (COV) about laying down of Quaker Life Representative Council (QLRC). We have heard about the value that QLRC has brought to those who've been part of it and calls for a renewed focus on the spirit and discipline laid out in *Quaker Faith and Practice*. As QLRC ends, so does another opportunity for Friends from around the country to meet together. We hope that other opportunities to gather begin to emerge, perhaps with the move to a Continuing Yearly Meeting being a stepping stone along the way.

We thank Lee for her report.

2026.038 Meeting for Sufferings Report

We have received a report on the final Meeting for Sufferings from Esther Boyd (COT), the full papers and minutes for which are both available online via:

- <http://quaker.org.uk/documents/mfs-2026-03-agenda-papers-package>
- <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/mfs-2026-03-follow-up-package>

Esther also spoke about her family's experience of Meeting for Sufferings over the years, reminding us of how the format has changed to be more inclusive and open to more Friends. She hopes that this greater openness and inclusivity will continue in the new Continuing Yearly Meeting (CYM) format but reminded us of the need for the new representatives to CYM to take their responsibilities seriously.

We have also heard of the need to retain, or perhaps further discern and express, a distinct Quaker voice and identity amid the period of change among Quakers in Britain and a period of turbulence in the world around us.

We express our gratitude to all those who have shared their time and gifts in serving Meeting for Sufferings on our behalf over the many years. We particularly thank Esther for this final report.

2026.039 Young Friends in Britain report

Becky Shirley (SUT) has shared with us her report of the Young Friends in Britain gathering held at Friargate Meeting House in York in February 2026, during which those present took the major decision to change their organisation's name from Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) to Young Friends in Britain (YFiB).

Becky shared the similarities and differences between YFiB business meetings and her experience of Area Meetings, highlighting the greater emphasis on discernment rather than reports. She also shared how seriously young Friends, including many who have not grown up in Quakerism, take the business method and the process of discernment around concerns – while noting that they too, like us, find making decisions can be a slow process.

One of the biggest challenges YFiB face is being able to cater, literally and metaphorically, to the demand for attending their events. They are having to cap the size of gatherings, which doesn't sit well with them but is a practical necessity.

Between meetings, YFiB maintain a sense of community via Discord servers, which provide chat groups, but the group does not feel able to fully support young Friends who may be looking for non-geographic membership, should that become an option.

We thank Becky very much for her full report and look forward to hearing further updates from YFiB in future. We also look forward to Becky and other Friends from YFiB facilitating an Area Meeting workshop about their concern for trans and non-binary inclusion ahead of Area Meeting at Stourbridge in September.

2026.040 Reflections on the “Ways of Being an Area Meeting” workshop

Around thirty Friends from Central England Quakers (CEQ) and two from Banbury and Evesham Area Meeting (BEAM) attended the “Ways of Being an Area Meeting” workshop held at Priory Rooms on Saturday 7th March. The event included a presentation from Lesley Richards, a Friend from Worcestershire and Shropshire Area Meeting who has worked with Britain Yearly Meeting on the re-organisation of Area Meetings in Wales and Scotland, and a further 12 Friends joined the online session on the evening of Tuesday 24th March when Lesley shared this again.

Today we heard not only reflections on this workshop but also felt a clear sense of our next steps in the process of welcoming some Local Meetings from BEAM into CEQ. As Clerk to Trustees Sandra Berry reminded us, we have already minuted acceptance of Ettington and Stratford Local Meetings should they wish to join our Area Meeting. However, the future arrangements for Sibford, Banbury and Broad Campden Local Meetings remain in doubt.

We wish to offer a new home to these three meetings, as well as Ettington and Stratford, should they wish to join us too. We are aware that this may mean undertaking a further process of discernment about the future size, structure and organisation of our Area Meeting in the future, as has taken place in Wales, Scotland and other parts of Britain Yearly Meeting. At this stage, we cannot be sure about what may be required but the most pressing concern is that we offer the hand of friendship to these Local Meetings.

We ask the Clerk of Trustees to share this minute with BEAM, should that be helpful.

2026.041 Trustee Update

We have no other Trustee updates at this time.

2026.042 How the Truth has Prospered at Bournville Local Meeting

We have received an update from Bournville Local Meeting about how the Truth has prospered so far in 2026. The sense of renewal and vibrancy in the report has also been palpable in the building today. Friends from other Local Meetings are welcome to come along to any of the events mentioned in the report, which are advertised on the Central England Quaker newsfeed. Bournville Friends would be glad to welcome them.

We thank Bournville very much for their report.

2026.043 Minutes from Local Meetings

We have received minutes from Coventry, Barnt Green and Redditch, Selly Oak and Sutton Coldfield Local Meetings and the Peace Hub Action Group in support of a Minute from a Special Meeting for Worship for Business of Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN), a Quaker Recognised Body. This QARN minute expresses concern about the government’s current proposals regarding asylum and refugee status and asks for Britain Yearly Meeting to:

- Recognise the racism inherent in the government’s proposals
- Respond to its faith-based leadings in a gathered session

- Make resources available to support Quakers across the country working for equality and justice for people who seek sanctuary

We are in agreement with the concerns raised by QARN and the Local Meeting minutes. We are also concerned that refugee and asylum may no longer be considered a priority by Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW) and ask that the QPSW Central Committee clarify their position.

We ask the Area Meeting Clerks to:

- forward this minute and those of the Local Meetings to QPSW and the Continuing Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee
- sign the Joint Public Issues Team letter on behalf of Area Meeting
- invite QARN to speak to a future Area Meeting about ways that we can support their work

2026.044 Membership Matters

a) Deaths

Laura Nell Obaugh (COT) died 28th August 2025 aged 95

Margaret Scorey (BOU) died 19th March 2026, age to be confirmed

John Beaven (COT) died 20th March 2026 aged 79

b) Termination

Andrea Mellor (SEL)

c) Applications for membership

We have received an application for membership from JS (unattached) and TJ (unattached).

We ask Nominations committee to find the names of two Friends to visit each of them.

(d) Journey into membership

We have received a report on the journey into membership of Siobhan England (BOU) from Ralph Wallin, Kate White and Vic Grainger (also BOU). This report also explains why this application for membership has been expedited.

We warmly welcome Siobhan into membership of Central England Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and ask their visitors to welcome them and the clerk to write to them.

2026.045 Nominations

NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE SUGGESTS:

- Georgie Thomas (BGR) as a visitor to Christine Gunter (BGR) on her journey into membership (Stephen Petter, BUL, was already appointed in February)
- Ralph Wallin (BOU) and Val Jenner (SEL) to visit Eleanor Rushton on her journey into membership
- Roger Chapman (WAR) and Clare Barnett (HAR) to visit Jonathan Bowmer on his journey into membership
- Michael Eccles (COT) to serve on Children and Young People's Committee for a triennium from April 2026 to March 2029
- Cathy Khurana (SUT) to serve for another triennium as a Talking Friend Trustee from June 2026 to May 2029
- Janet Blann (COT) to serve for another triennium as CEQ representative on Ackworth School General Meeting from June 2026 to May 2029
- Alan Sanger (WAR) to serve for another four-year term as a Priory Rooms Director from July 2026 to June 2030

These names being acceptable, we appoint our Friends accordingly.

RELEASE FROM SERVICE:

- Frances Rutter (WAR) as a Pastoral Friend
- Lesley Morgan (BGR) as a visitor to Christine Gunter for her journey into membership

We thank our Friends for their service.

2026.046 Memorial Minute

Cotteridge Local Meeting have shared the following Memorial Minute for Laura Nell Obaugh (COT) from Baltimore Yearly Meeting:

Laura Nell Obaugh loved this statement by Isaac Pennington from 1678, "There is that near you, which will guide you; oh! Wait for it and be sure to keep to it." Her Spirit wove around this quote throughout her life. How fitting that the quote was from a letter to "Women Friends that Meet At Armscot Worcestershire." One of Laura Nell's spiritual formation friends wrote that "Laura Nell had the traditional qualities of Quaker women - strong, independent, focused on strengthening community life". She was a thrifty shopper, a lover of artisanal objects, and an excellent cook who could be counted on to bring a delicious dish for a gathering or to prepare a whole meal in order to bring people together. She served Quaker communities worldwide. She spoke often of doing Quaker service in Russia and in Great Britain, while all her possessions were packed away in the United States. She kept in touch with Quakers all over the world, counting herself as an ex officio member of many meetings.

Laura Nell served in numerous roles with local, regional, and international Quakers for over 45 years after joining Hopewell Friends in Winchester, Virginia, in 1979. A vita of her years of work and leadership lists many committees with various roles, service with the Washington D.C. Interfaith Conference, resident manager and staff positions at several Quaker houses, teaching experience, administrative assistant positions,

worship sharing leadership, planning and participating in Yearly Meeting gatherings and international conferences, assisting Peace Corp volunteers, speaking engagements, writing for Friends Journal, international advisory committee work for Friends House Moscow, Woodbrooke residency, traveling ministry, pen pal correspondence with many international Friends, and travel and life abroad to over a dozen countries and cities. Laura Nell's reflection on this was "I never applied for any of the positions or work. The opportunities came my way and I accepted the offers. I simply said yes, and I can't take credit for it. It was the way it happened. In retrospect, Issac Pennington's quote has meant so much to me. I have depended upon waiting and listening for the Spirit. It was all a wonder and a blessing."

Laura Nell Obaugh was born on January 26, 1930, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She died on August 28, 2025, at her condominium in Alexandria, Virginia. Her entire life was of interdenominational immersion. She spoke lovingly of her Roanoke, Virginia, childhood years where her father, Rev. William B. Obaugh, was well known for his pastoral leadership and service as statistical secretary for the Virginia United Brethren Conference. Her early memories included seeing her father in conversation with the United Brethren Bishop in the study while her mother, Lillian, would be offering meals to the homeless who traveled the railroad line that ran behind their home. Their yard became the football field for the Jewish boys from across the street. These early examples of acceptance of all were a foundation for her life contributions.

Laura Nell learned to read from the Bible while sitting on her mother's lap. She recalled the privilege of sitting with her father as he worked on church business records. She said, "Life was the usual pattern of the times, with focus on family, church and community." This extended into her years as a Mom when she married her high school sweetheart, Eugene Morris, who became a Presbyterian pastor. Laura Nell earned a musical degree from Shenandoah Conservatory, Dayton, Virginia. They had a family of four, Pete (Morris, preceding her in death), Sarah (Spire), Lou Ann (Morris), and Ellen (Morris). Laura Nell's strong community commitment was evident as she happily played piano or organ wherever her family was assigned. Her family even participated in an exchange program with the United Presbyterian Church, living in Northern Ireland for a year.

When they returned to the States in 1975, Laura Nell's advocacy stemmed into serving as the first woman elected to the Shelby, Ohio, School Board. With graduate work in sociology and psychology from Mansfield Ohio State University, she became involved with the Mansfield OSU Advisory Committee of Continuing Education for Women. Her committee work resulted in stronger programming for women's courses, topics that would be of interest to women seeking personal growth beyond the work of taking care of home and family.

Then Laura Nell's personal life took a tumble as her marriage ended in divorce. She wrote, "I wanted desperately to feel there was something I could do well - someone who needed me - some place that my presence made a difference." She turned to Seminary classes and offered her services as a hospital chaplain, which she felt was a true calling. She wrote, "Many of the patients had terminal illnesses and I listened. I heard where their words were coming from. I sensed their unexpressed fears." It was then that she visited a Quaker Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. She recalled going to a Meeting for Worship in a member's home and sensing the care of those gathered. She "knew it was movement of the Spirit".

Shortly thereafter, her father died and she felt called to move to Winchester, Virginia, to support her Mother. That move brought her to Hopewell Meeting and her Quaker outreach began. She attended a Pendle Hill conference, writing "here we are

surrounded by and lifted by our common search - by our longing to recognize that we are truly 'one in the Spirit.' " Laura Nell became friends with John Yungblut, helping his wife who was battling cancer. She stepped into broader opportunities with Baltimore Yearly Meeting, filling in as resident manager at Davis House in Washington, D.C. (1980) and working with Raymond Wilson, the first secretary for Friends Committee on National Legislation. She was pleased to create a poster "We Seek a World Free From War", using it for fund raising. She played the organ for interfaith services at Wesley and Kay Spiritual Life Center at American University and earned a Master of Arts in Education with a major in International Education there. She journaled "In an interfaith setting, each of us has our own bit to contribute. Whether or not we're in a key role, even as an attender, it's still giving diversity to the experience. She traveled among Friends internationally to England, Scotland, Brussels, Kenya and the Soviet Union Friends House, building community. She related that these experiences were "spirit stretching. The organizations beyond Baltimore Yearly Meeting broadened my sense of a global family of Friends. It is so rich, wherever you go. You are genuinely welcomed."

Laura Nell had the highly unusual experience of teaching English Grammar and Speaking in Beijing to college sophomores in 1990. She quietly spread Quaker principles, planting seeds for thought through reflective writing assignments connected to current readings. One student stayed in touch with Laura Nell writing to her later, "It has been a long time since we last met. I am eager to know how everything gets along with you. I can not help thinking about you. Because you taught me not only the English language (sic) but also the truth of life. After the past term, I found myself changed. You made me believe that there do be much love in the world. I am so grateful to you."

In 1996, Laura Nell received an invitation to be a Friend in Residence, providing pastoral care, at Woodbrooke College, the oldest of the Selly Oak Federation of Colleges in Birmingham, England. She met Felix Wedgewood-Oppenheim, marrying him in 2001 after a trans-Atlantic courtship. They shared laughter, delight in traveling, and deep loving connection. When Felix passed away in 2004, Laura Nell wrote to him regularly in her journal, honoring their spiritual ties.

Laura Nell saw her life as chapters, with many episodes. "Everything moved along, right for the time." Her last years included a spiritual formation group with Friends Meeting of Washington. She described this group as "being with family. We relate the references, books, readings to our lives. We get to know each other in a different dimension." One of the group members wrote "When I think of Laura Nell I think of music. Entering her apartment, the sound of classical music from WETA filled the air. The beautiful, handmade harpsichord filled the space, though she never played it in my presence. Perhaps it was because her real love lay with pipe organs. It was love at first sight, er... touch. She explained to me that an organ is a living thing, that breathes its notes. Pianos are lovely but they don't come close to the living sound an organ makes. From her very first lessons, she had to be pulled away from practice. Ten hours a day was not enough. In Laura Nell's final days her no-longer-seeing eyes lit up when I asked her to explain once more the difference between an organ and a piano." Laura Nell felt that "It's not a matter of listening to the music. For me, it's being back in conservatory class, thinking of form and analysis, anticipating each movement. I just sit and let it fill me."

Her dreams at this time of life were a "pleasure of memories, with a sense of gratitude" and "God speaking to us". In her own words, Laura Nell described herself as "a catalyst, the word-spreader, the sharer of ideas and friendships." She offered others opportunities for growth - spiritual, social, and cultural. In turn, the many people

she connected with were "family," whom she described as "unique treasures, to be celebrated." In turn, her life was rich outreach, exemplifying George Fox's words "Let your life speak." Laura Nell would say "put yourself out there and trust your leadings. Here I am, God. Point me in the right direction."

2026.047 Testimony to the Grace of God in the Life of our Friend Barbara Groombridge

We support the recommendation of the Elders and Pastoral Friends Support Group that the memorial minute of Barbara Groombridge should be forwarded as a testimony with no alteration and ask the Area Meeting Clerks to find the appropriate place to send this testimony now that Meeting for Sufferings has been laid down.

Memorial Minute for Barbara Mary Groombridge née Lee, 29.12.1937- 06.02.2024

Barbara was born on 29 December 1937 in London to Marjorie, née Collet-Brown, and Percy Lee, then living in Croydon, the third of four siblings. Her father intermittently gave up his work as a teacher when his mental health deteriorated, and the family moved in 1940 to Wylands, an isolated bungalow with land but no utilities such as water and electricity, situated near North Tawton in Devon, where Barbara had many fond memories of playing in the adjacent fields. She attended the local primary school, but, when the time came for her to move to a secondary school, there was no school within daily travelling distance from their very isolated home, so she followed her older sister to Sidcot, a Quaker boarding school in Somerset. However, unlike her sister who enjoyed being at Sidcot, Barbara hated it as she was very shy and homesick. Despite this, she made what became a lifelong friendship with Mary Brown, who lived in Stroud and ultimately attended Barbara's funeral.

Having achieved A-Level distinctions in English and in three foreign languages, Barbara left school and spent three months working at a children's home in Germany; this came about through a Quaker contact of her mother's, as a result of Quaker aid work in Germany in the post-war years. Following a shorthand and typing course Barbara read German at University College London. During the 1957-58 academic year she was presented with the Heimann Medal, awarded for 'The Highest Proficiency in German' at University College London. She took to life in London, enjoying the jazz clubs and learning to jive. She spent a year in Marburg, studying with German students, feeling at a disadvantage, as German was their first language, but managing to hold her own. During this time she lost the sight of her left eye and was advised to stop studying in order to rest the eye but she refused, sat her finals and was awarded a First.

Barbara then became pregnant; she decided to keep her son Nick, a courageous decision at that time, but to which both parents gave full support. She then faced the difficulty of finding work. She was fortunate to find a job running a small private school in North Tawton, despite having no teacher training or experience, which meant that she could live in with Nick. Later she took a job at a technical college in Wednesbury, teaching German to apprentices in Black Country factories, so that they could deal with Continental customers once the UK joined the Common Market. It was during this time that Barbara lost the sight of her right eye for six weeks; Nick stayed with her parents until her sight partially returned and she was able to resume teaching. She never regained full sight in her right eye.

She met Mike in Devon and in 1965 they married at Walsall Registry Office, moving later into a house in Bernard Street. Her other two sons David and Paul were born in that house, and she and Mike lived there for the remainder of her life. Barbara was always a

great advocate for Walsall, and she loved their house and their street. She came to know almost all the residents of Bernard Street in 1977 when collecting money for the street party to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee.

Barbara resumed teaching once all three boys were at school, this time lecturing at Walsall Technical College in subjects such as German and English as a Foreign Language. She worked there part-time for almost thirty years, and made many close friends at the college. Before retiring, she survived cancer on two occasions.

Barbara was a keen crossworder and did the Guardian crossword regularly. She won the Guardian crossword prize on 16 January 1999; although she continued to complete the crossword frequently she never submitted her answers again, believing that it would give other people a better chance of winning.

For some years after they retired, she and Mike helped to run an occasional stall in the town's market, collecting and selling pre-loved donated items to raise funds for charities supported by Walsall Meeting. She greatly enjoyed this. She also very much enjoyed helping with the CEQ parcel-packing each Christmas, providing food parcels for families of prisoners.

Barbara's mother was a lifelong Quaker, as was Barbara. Whilst living at Wylands their nearest Meeting was in Exeter, which was too far to attend regularly, so Marjorie started a Meeting in Okehampton, where she and Barbara worshipped. Barbara retained her Quaker faith for the remainder of her life, becoming a very well respected and much-loved member of both Walsall Meeting and Central England Area Meeting. In periods when Walsall Meeting was very small (in the 1970s and 80s) she would sometimes be the only worshipper at weekly Meeting. As well as taking on a variety of roles such as treasurer (for 40 years) at Walsall Meeting, Barbara served on several Area Meeting committees and as a CEQ Trustee, including being clerk to the trustees for some years, serving at the time of her death as clerk to the outreach and communications committee, attending via Zoom due to her limited mobility.

Barbara is probably best remembered for the love and support she gave to individual Friends. During times of difficulty, or when taking on new roles, many Friends received suitably supportive cards from her. She loved travelling by public transport as this gave her the opportunity to talk to people; her son David said of her that she could begin a conversation in an empty room. She loved her growing family, and cared about all those around her and, despite the infirmities she experienced in her later years, about which we never heard her complain, she always had time to listen.

Over the years Barbara ministered a number of times about the need to have hope. She spoke about her maternal grandmother's simple faith which appealed to her. She was the only one of the siblings who remained a Quaker. She liked the fact that Quakers can make up their own minds and don't have to subscribe to a creed and that their faith can change with them. She spoke about not believing in a personal God but in a spirit. However, she freely admitted that "when the chips were down" she prayed to a personal God and couldn't understand how others wouldn't do that, as it was such a comfort to her and kept her going. She said there are no atheists on a sinking ship. She is much missed by Walsall and Area Meeting Friends.

2026.048 Thanks and Next Meeting

We thank Bournville for their warm welcome and hospitality today.

The next Central England Quaker Area Meeting will be held, should nothing occur to prevent, on Friday 24th April between 6pm and 7pm at Selly Oak Meeting House. This will

be a Meeting for Worship preparing hearts and minds for Britain Yearly Meeting, although Friends do not have to be attending Yearly Meeting to take part. This will be an all-age meeting with some programmed content. There will also be all-age parachute games in the garden from 4.30pm, food from 5pm and, afterwards, a ceilidh from 7.30 to 9pm.

Signed on behalf of Central England Quakers

Rae Ritchie and Paula Button

Clerks this time

[We will carry agenda item 15, reflections on the morning workshop, forward to Area Meeting in May]