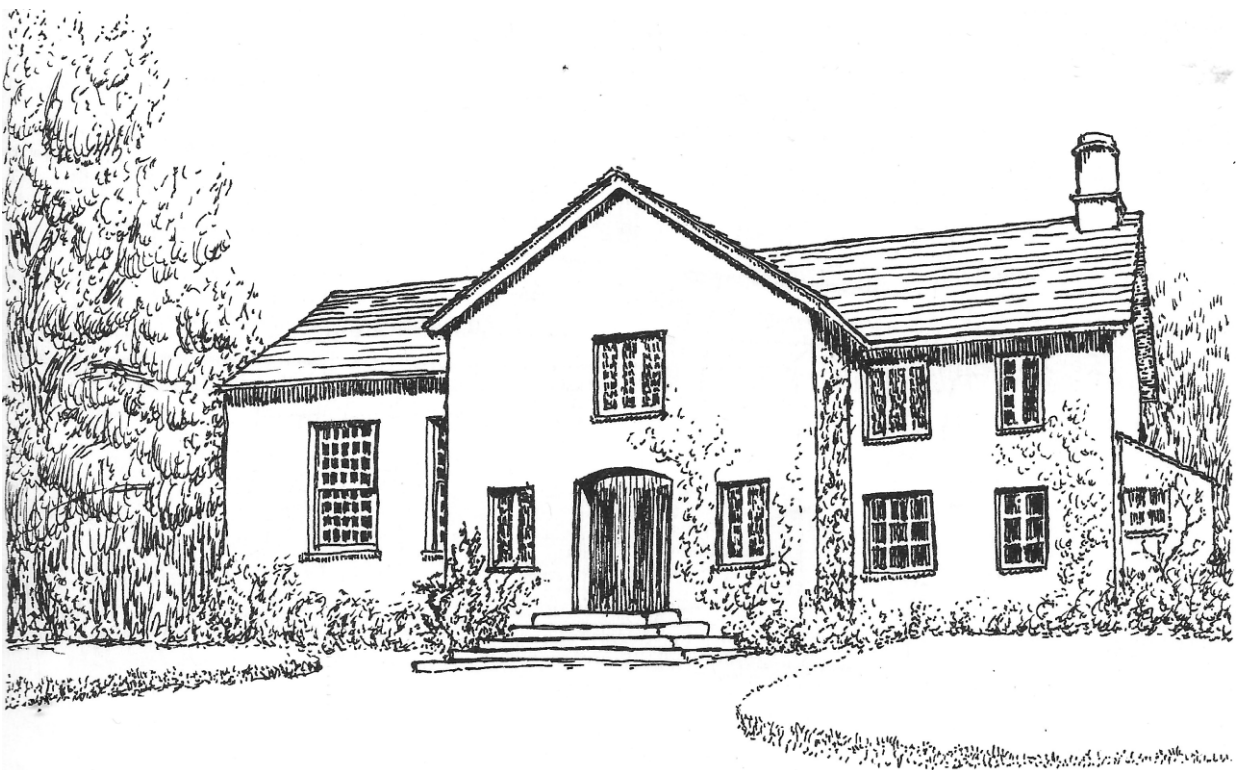


Rookhow Quaker Meeting House



Rookhow is a strange empty building in the middle of nowhere. That at least is how it seemed to me, a city boy, when I first came across it. It is an elegant old building, certainly, but with no obvious use, surrounded by trees in a sparsely populated valley in the middle of the Lake District. This is true. When it was built, however, it had a very obvious use and there were many more people then living in the Rusland valley. It was built for the Quakers in 1725 to provide a large enough space for them to meet when they came together from the surrounding country. They had their own small 'meeting houses' in Ulverston, Hawkshead and elsewhere, but the Quakers wanted to come together to support one another and prepare their work in the world. Rookhow was built, they said, 'for the scattered people of God' in Westmorland and Lancashire 'north of the sands'.



They were indeed a religious community, but they were not religious in any obvious way. When they met together, for example, it was not in a 'church,' with an altar, a pulpit and priest to preside over them. It was a simple meeting house, with no furniture but the benches on which they sat, and sitting, often for hours on end, in silence.



That stark simplicity is evident as soon as you enter the meeting house today. It was a reaction to traditional forms of worship, which did not 'speak to their condition', as they said. They wanted to find the truth about their life, even the ultimate truth which they called 'God', but they couldn't find it in the formal rituals and preaching of the church, which seemed to them to have been fashioned by human beings according to their own ideas of what worship should be. They did find it, however, when they gave up all their human activities and became still and silent. Then something stirred deep within them and showed them what they needed to know. They called this 'the light of God', and their worship took the form of simply 'waiting together in the light'. If you sit quietly in the meeting house today you can get a sense of what that kind of worship might have been like.



In 1725 the Quaker movement was still in its infancy. It had begun in this part of the world in fact, which was still a vibrant centre for its spread around the world. George Fox, its recognized leader, had come through this valley in 1652, speaking to any groups who were interested to hear his radical new message. He had spoken to over a thousand people on top of Firbank Fell near Sedbergh just a few weeks before, and then set off for Swarthmoor Hall in Furness where, he had heard, Thomas and Margaret Fell might give him a warm welcome. They were important people in the area and were able to give Fox and his Friends the kind of support and protection they needed, which they did. Friends needed support because, as you can imagine, their message was not well received by most of the authorities of church and state, who perceived them as a threat to the established order. Swarthmoor Hall became a haven of rest and a base for their mission. It is still a centre of Quaker activity, and open to the public as a site of historical interest.

In 1689, however, the state relented, partly under pressure from the Quakers, and passed an Act of Toleration. The Quakers were now free even to build their own meeting houses, which they did in Colthouse, for example, near Hawkshead, just a few miles north of here, and at Brigflatts near Sedbergh, which are the oldest Quaker meetings houses we have – Quakers come from all over the world now just to see them.

See Fox's Journal for his many journeys through this area, for example, in the summer of 1652: "In the afternoon I went about two or three miles to another steeplehouse or chapel called Lindale, and when the priest had done I spoke to him and the people what the Lord commanded me.... And from thence I came to Ulverston and so to Swarthmoor to Judge Fell's'. *The Journal*, ed. J. Nickalls, 1952, p. 113. Larry Ingle's biography, *First among Friends*, is good on the journeys he took, and why, e.g. p. 86.

See www.swarthmoorhall.co.uk . For more information about the Quakers themselves visit www.quaker.org.uk

But numbers grew, so by the 1720s none of their meeting houses were big enough to hold all the Quakers in the county. The territory was also a bit rough – much more so than now, especially for a horse and cart – so getting from one to another was hazardous and tiring. They came up with the unusual idea, as they pondered their plight in the silence, of building a large house just for this purpose of meeting together, once a month, and just in the place that would be easiest for them to get to, equidistant from their individual meetings.

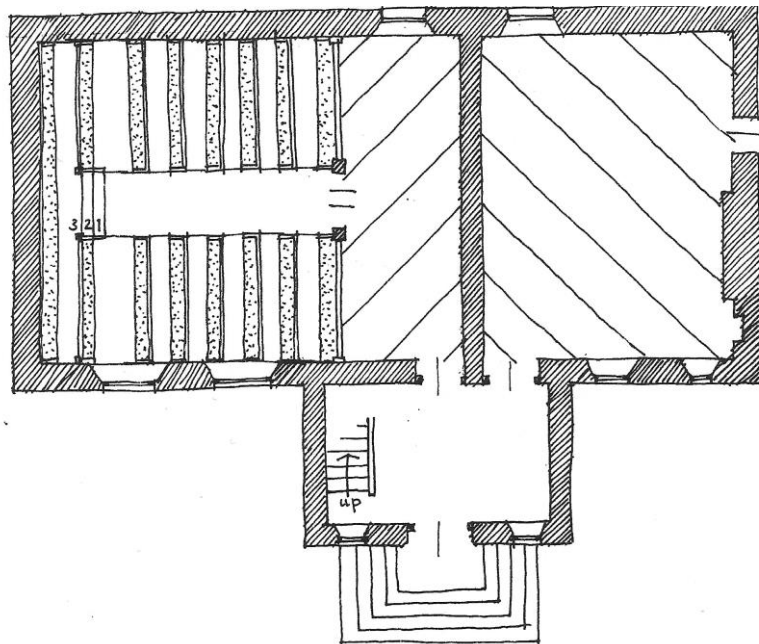
So in 1724 they purchased a piece of land in a wooded area of Rusland for a house to be built there. As they wrote in their Minute at the time, 'Conclusion is made that the same to be builded at Rookhow near Abbot Oak Green in a close of ground purchased of John Taylor of Whaitemoss for £65. The meeting house is to be 7 yards wide and 10 yards a half long, both within, and a dwelling house the same breadth and 6 yards long, and a stable at the end thereof of the same breadth and 4 yards long

Coitage amacheo

*Loft with open
balustrade,
no shuttles.*

*Formerly shutter
below, now removed;
Pillars remain*

*Stone floor;
seats fixed &
raised on wood
platform.*



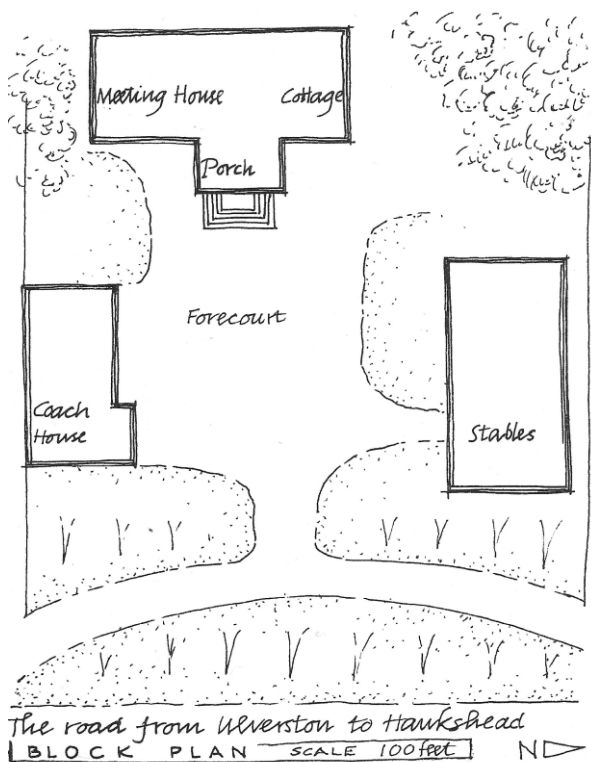
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The 'dwelling house' was for the caretaker, or warden, and a special room, 'the Friends' kitchen', to enable the women to hold their business meetings apart from the men. The date 1725 still appears on the spice cupboard in the kitchen, and again on the latch of the meeting room door, a beautiful piece of cut ironwork.

Stables had to be built, of course, to shelter the horses that brought them there, and later, across the yard, a coach house, or gig barn, for the carriages they had sat in.

The woodland behind the house, some 12 acres altogether, provided enough trees for the caretaker to make a living from. According to the census of the time those living at Rookhow were 'woodcutters'. Coppicing and charcoal burning were indeed common occupations in this wooded valley. Charcoal, for example, was needed to smelt iron in the great furnaces known as 'bloomeries'. Evidence of charcoal pits can still be seen in the woods today.



The meeting house and warden's rooms, together with the stables and gig barn, were built in under 11 months. The first meeting was held on the 3rd June 1725, and there was enough room for 150 people.

The Quakers have continued to meet here ever since, and little has changed in that long period of time. The meeting room is recognizably the same, with some of the original benches still in place and some old chairs and furniture from other meetings.

David Butler gives the detail in his *Quaker Meeting Houses in Britain*, already cited, p.... [in volume 2?] '**Loose furnishings** The meeting house contains a large collection of interesting furniture, including four benches from Bold Street meeting house in Birmingham, [is this Bull Street Meeting?] one bench from Swarthmoor Hall (originally from Friends House, London), a pine bench previously in Ambleside meeting house (now closed), one from Cartmel and one that may be original to Rookhow. There is an Arts and Crafts bench made by Stanley Davis and inscribed 1922, along with four chairs and a set of rush-seated chairs, an oak table with one drawer and a bookcase and drawers inscribed JB 1880 (from Swarthmoor). The words inscribed on the Stanley Davis bench are 'Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.'



The original stone flags have been lifted and relaid, now with insulation and underfloor heating pipes, powered by an air source heat pump to supplement the old wood-burning stove. The stables have become an independent hostel, with simple bunkbarn accommodation, and the gig barn shelters volunteers and visitors now instead of carriages. The woods behind are still coppiced, but only for firewood for Rookhow's own use. More importantly, they have become, like the meeting house itself, a place for spiritual renewal and refreshment.

Former wardens have described the change as follows: 'Rookhow woods were once cropped to charge iron furnaces. Now they are perhaps even more valuable to those seeking a personal charge from peaceful surroundings in this beautiful and historic place'.

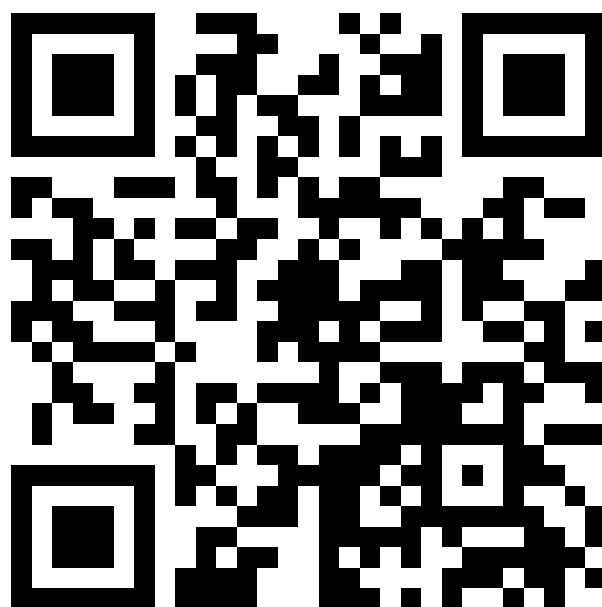
Today, as well as still providing a gathering place for the 'scattered communities of the Society of Friends', Rookhow opens its doors to families, youth groups, mental health organizations, therapists, forest schools and local people living in the Rusland Valley. But this is not really a departure from its original purpose. It was intended to be a place where people could truly meet one another, discover their deep connection with nature and with life, and find themselves strangely refreshed by the peace and the silence.

Rex Ambler 2022

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go to the Quakers in Britain
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