

Notes For Visitors to Bunhill: 1

Burials ceased at Bunhill Fields in 1855 when an Act of Parliament closed all graveyards in central London for reasons of public health. By that time Friends had little need of it for those purposes. Many City Meetings closed as Friends moved out to more salubrious suburbs.

Meanwhile, the immediate neighbourhood around Bunhill, which had never had any significant Quaker population, decayed appallingly as the nineteenth century advanced. By 1900, according to the London County Council, East Finsbury (which includes Bunhill) held "some of the very worst spots in the whole of London" and had the highest death-rate in London. Young City Friends, horrified by the housing conditions which ordinary Londoners endured, sought a new purpose



Bunhill Memorial Buildings, 1881, on Coleman (later Roscoe) Street

for the Quaker land. In the 1874 Yearly Meeting furthered their concern in asking Friends to attend to "the spiritual welfare of the masses in London."

That year a Gospel Tent seating 300 was set up in the Burial Ground where meetings were held nightly for two months. A year later an "Iron Room" seating 400 was erected in its place. One methodist missionary described the local scene in 1886: "On Sunday morning Whitecross Street presents a very lively appearance, this being a crowded market in the street till eleven — about this

time the police and the carbolic acid cart do their best to clear the street. On many Sundays the chaffering has a few minutes lull as the crowd rushes off to cover the Salvation Army, as it passes, with dirty refuse and dirtier language."

Two Friends, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite, Junior, then 19, and a Canadian Businessman Joseph Allan Baker, led the crusade at Bunhill by starting an Adult School in a room rented in Banner Street under the auspices of the Bedford Institute Association. When in 1880 the Metropolitan Board of Works made compulsory purchase of a strip of the Burial Ground to widen Coleman (Roscoe) Street, Friends used the proceeds to build the Bunhill Memorial Buildings. Here were a Coffee tavern, mission rooms for the adult schools and breakfast meetings, Sunday schools, a medical mission, and a large meeting house. The success of the Adult School brought in funds for the erection of an Extension building in 1888. As reported in 1896, "some three hundred men, out of a membership of four hundred on the books" attending the Sunday morning school for men.

Inside the Meeting House a verse was painted in large letters on the wall: "God So loved the World, he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believed in him would not perish but have everlasting life". Such an uncharacteristic decoration reflects the numbers of "Associate Friends" at Bunhill, as at other BIA sites. This category of membership, which was recognised from 1872, required adherence to "Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour and the evidence of a desire to follow Him" but without commitment to all beliefs and practices of the Society. This formed a bridge between the Society and the people it served in its Institute branches. Some branches went on to become fully-fledged Meetings. Devonshire House Monthly Meeting in 1896 produced a minute forwarded to JB Braithwaite, Jr. that "the Friends of the latter Particular Meeting are encouraged to hold a Preparative Meeting in Regular course." The first PM at Bunhill was held on Sunday, September 13th, 1896.

The evangelical fervour of Victorian Friends could not, however, be sustained amidst the more circumspect sensibilities of Friends a century later. When bombing raids in 1940, '41 and '44 destroyed all but the caretakers house [*the present Meeting House*], and the post-war local council rezoned the area to allow only residential building, the mission at Bunhill — but not the Friends Meeting— ceased.

The later post-war years have seen a remarkable revival and new spirit of social mission at Bunhill, the new head office of Quaker Social Action (successor to



Bunhill Memorial Buildings, Showing the New Adult School Extension, 1888

the BIA). For example, through its HOMESTORE Project in the East End, QSA is working to ease one of the most demoralising consequences of homelessness by providing secondhand furniture and goods at nominal prices to individuals and families who, though finally housed by their local council, have no resources with which to make a home and, with it, to bring the dignity of full participation in the community.

The Meeting House garden is now a Quaker Gardens Project. The remainder of the burial ground is leased on a peppercorn rent to Islington Council for public enjoyment. Major renovations, including a childrens' playground, were completed in May 1991.

Notes For Visitors to Bunhill: 2

MEMORIAL BUILDINGS

These BUILDINGS stand on part of the
OLD BUNHILL FIELDS BURIAL GROUND
The First FREEHOLD possessed by LONDON FRIENDS
Used by them for BURIALS during nearly TWO HUNDRED YEARS
it was closed to such purposes in 1855

In 1880 The Metropolitan Board of Works purchased parts
of the PROPERTY for widening STREETS from which and also
from the Site of these Premises all remains of Interments being first
carefully removed were re-interred in the GROUND adjoining And
out of the PROCEEDS of such compulsory Sales these BUILDINGS with
their HALLS COFFEE-TAVERN CLUB and COMMITTEE ROOMS
HAVE BEEN BUILT

Near this Spot GEORGE FOX was interred in 1690, previously
EDWARD BURROUGH and some NINETY other MARTYR FRIENDS
Who died in LONDON PRISONS
HAD BEEN BURIED HERE

To the Memory of these Ancient Worthies and for the furtherance of
RELIGIOUS MORAL and PHILANTHROPIC OBJECTS
are these BUILDINGS now DEDICATED by the
SOCIETY of FRIENDS in LONDON
in the hope thereby to promote the best Welfare and Happiness
of the surrounding Population.

LONDON 10 M^o 1881.

The text on the left is engraved on a stone tablet about 4'6" by 3'6" in size. Rescued from the destruction by bombing, it was displayed against the outside wall of the present Meeting House for many years. It was moved inside because of the risk of further damage where it stood. It is planned to restore it and place it again on the outside wall.



The text above is from the stone marker placed in 1881 at the probable site of George Fox's remains. This stone was moved in 1952 to the wall of the Meeting House garden. Note that old style dates are used — 11th Month 1690 is January 1691.

The text below is from the green Westmoreland slate placed in Quaker Gardens in 1952. It marks the probable burial place of George Fox, replacing the 1881 stone.

**THIS GARDEN IS ON THE SITE OF BUNHILL
FIELDS BURIAL GROUND WHICH WAS ACQUIRED
BY THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN 1661
THE REMAINS OF MANY THOUSANDS OF FRIENDS
LIE BURIED HERE INCLUDING GEORGE FOX
THE FOUNDER OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS
WHO DIED 13TH JANUARY 1691**