

KEEPING THE LIGHT SHINING?
THE END OF BRITISH QUAKERISM REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

This paper follows on from two earlier articles in *Quaker Studies* on the predicted end-point for the Religious Society of Friends in Britain and presents analyses of the membership data for individual General Meetings (GMs) within Britain Yearly Meeting which suggest that the picture is not as straightforward as initially presented in the earlier articles. Based on an analysis of membership numbers since 1899, some GMs are predicted to increase over the next 30 years, although most will apparently decline. The data are also analysed on a regional basis and three models of the changing membership are presented.

KEYWORDS

Membership, Scotland, Britain, trends, increase, decline

Two articles in the last issue of *Quaker Studies* used data on the membership of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain to show that, in the not too distant future, the Society would cease to exist. Using polynomial trend analysis, the authors of both papers are in agreement on the general conclusion, although they differ in the precise detail: Chadkirk (2004) suggests the end date is 2032, while Stroud and Dandelion (2004) believe it could be somewhat later, depending on the starting point for the analysis. The latter also refer to Rowntree's 1859 essay which provided the basis for the turn-around in the fortunes of the Society in the nineteenth century (Rowntree 1859), stating that 'it will be interesting to see what reforms are proposed' on this occasion (Stroud and Dandelion 2004: 124). Both articles recognise that the technique of polynomial trend analysis is valid only if nothing happens to affect the trend and that extrapolations must be treated with some caution. Chadkirk indicates that adult membership of Britain Yearly

Meeting (BYM) began to increase from around 1960, remained on a plateau from 1975 to 1991 or 1992 and has been declining sharply ever since – a trend which contrasts with Brown's claim that the decline in church membership and the secularisation of British society was an abrupt event beginning in the 1960s (Brown 2001). (Stroud and Dandelion's data for membership show a decline in numbers starting in the 1960s, but this is due to the removal from the data at that time of numbers for children and for Australia and Canada).

As part of research into change in the Society in Scotland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the present writer has analysed the Scottish data on Members and Attenders and come to very different conclusions. In a nutshell, the numbers of Members and Attenders in Scotland General Meeting have been increasing slowly but steadily since 1866 and *show every sign of continuing to do so*. This prompted the consideration that the aggregated data on BYM, while undoubtedly showing a marked decline in numbers, may in fact mask one or more regional variations which could suggest the light will remaining shining, albeit with a reduced luminosity. Data from the summaries of tabular statements have therefore been used to identify the trends in the eighteen General Meetings (GMs, previously known as Quarterly Meetings) since 1899, using the same technique of polynomial trend analysis in which values for R^2 of 0.9 or above indicate that the trend identified is a valid one for the data. The data were also aggregated on a regional basis in an effort to further identify any regional trends. In all cases, the data refer to Members and have been extended 30 years into the future (from 2003) in order to allow some comparison with the two previous articles. (Data are missing for two years.)

Data for the numbers of Members in Scotland since 1899 are shown in Figure 1 together with the second order trend. The R^2 value of 0.96 indicates that there is a strong connection between the data and this trend, suggesting that Scottish membership numbers could increase to more than 1100 by c.2034.

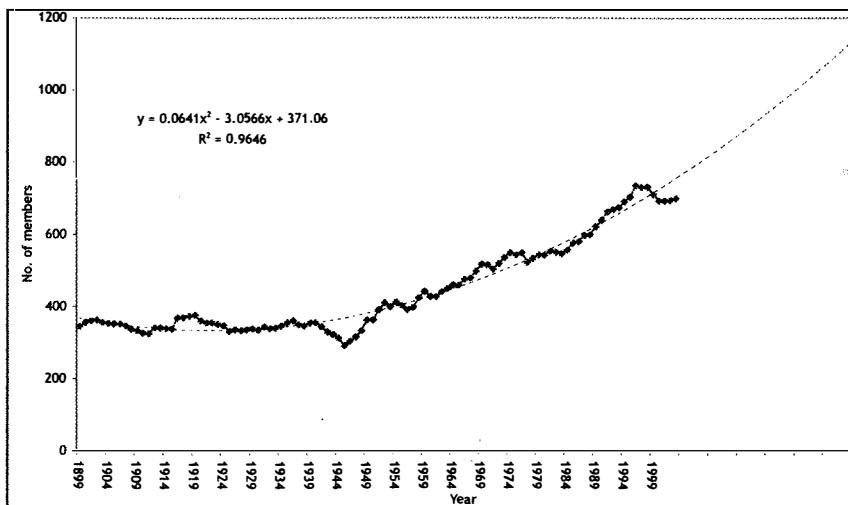


Figure 1: Scotland membership, 1899-2003: projection 30 years forward

As an aside, we can note that, as in most Christian denominations in Britain, women outnumber men in the Society in Scotland, although the ratio has changed over the years. Extrapolation of the Scottish data 30 years forward suggests that the number of men is about to reach a plateau while that of women will continue to rise, albeit more slowly than is currently the case. The continued growth predicted in Figure 1 is therefore largely due to increasing numbers of women Friends.

If we apply similar analyses to the constituent General Meetings of BYM and to the regions, is it possible to detect further differences from the broader picture which the two earlier articles identified? The data for Members in seventeen of the GMs of England and Wales were taken from the summaries of tabular statements from 1899 to 2003 inclusive and subjected to the same trend analysis as the Scottish data, including extrapolation 30 years forward. (There are currently eighteen GMs in England and Wales, but because the present GM of Hants, Isle of Wight and Channel Islands was included in Sussex, Surrey and Hants until 1966, its data have not been included here. This has also produced misleading data for Sussex, Surrey and Hants, which shows an apparently significant drop in numbers in 1966.)

One way of looking at the data is to examine the percentage change in membership numbers since 1899 which is shown for all of the GMs in Figure 2.

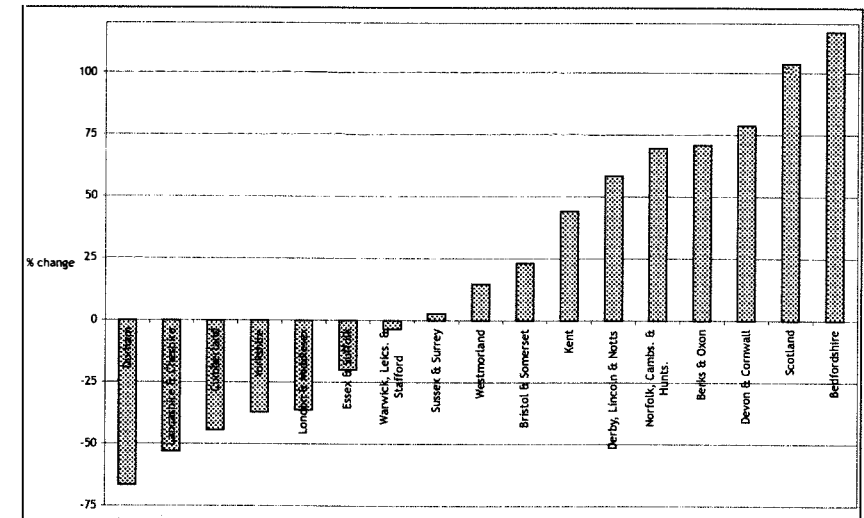


Figure 2: percentage change in GM membership numbers since 1899

Whilst it is not intended to be predictive, the figure shows an overall positive aspect, in that membership has increased in more than half of the GMs, in some cases by a considerable amount: Bedfordshire and Scotland have more than doubled in a little over a century. Using a grouping of GMs into regions (see below) produces the similarly positive pattern shown in Figure 3.

Only two regions have declined in the last 100 years, while the others show increases ranging from 10.6 per cent for the Midlands to 103.8 per cent for

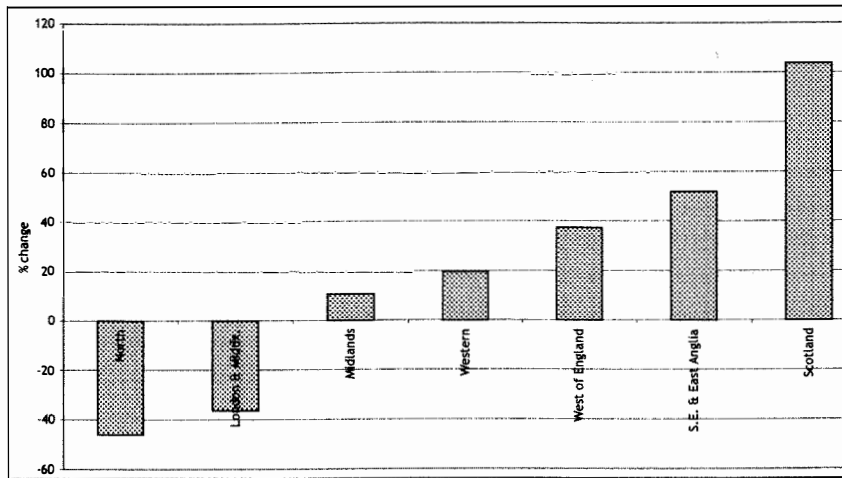


Figure 3: percentage change in membership numbers since 1899 in regions

Scotland, albeit the Scottish increase is from the small base figure of 344 Members in 1899.

General Meeting	Trend	R ²
Bristol & Somerset	Increasing	0.84
Derby, Lincoln & Notts	Stable	0.88
Essex & Suffolk	Increasing	0.04
Kent	Stable	0.69
Norfolk, Cambs & Hunts	Increasing	0.87
Sussex, Surrey & Hants	Decreasing	0.65
Western	Increasing	0.74
Westmorland	Increasing	0.14

Figure 4: GMs with R² < 0.9

Applying trend analysis to the data, eight of the GMs were found to have binomial trend lines with an R² value of less than 0.9 and are not considered here in detail, although for the sake of completeness they are listed in Figure 4 together with their R² value and an indication of the trend in their membership over the next 30 years, weaker though it is.

The nine GMs with strong correlations between the data and the binomial trend are: Bedfordshire (R² = 0.92); Berks & Oxon (0.91); Cumberland (0.94); Devon & Cornwall (0.93); Durham (0.98); Lancashire & Cheshire (0.93); London & Middlesex (0.94); Warwickshire, Leicestershire & Staffordshire (0.93), and Yorkshire (0.94). However, only three of these nine show an increase in the number of Members when the data are extrapolated 30 years forward, namely Berks & Oxon with a predicted increase to approximately 1150, Cumberland

to 250 and Devon & Cornwall, which is predicted to increase to some 1000 Members. With Scotland's predicted increase to 1100 Members over the next 30 years (see Figure 1), the fact that only four GMs (less than one-quarter of the total) will grow does suggest that, overall, the predictions of a significant decline in numbers are justified. At first glance, the only factor common to these four GMs is their more rural nature, though Scotland GM, of course, contains a number of major cities.

The remaining six GMs with an R² value >0.9 are all predicted to suffer a decline in numbers of varying severity, as summarised in Figure 5.

General Meeting	Membership 2003	Membership 2033
Bedfordshire	957	300
Durham	567	250
Lancashire & Cheshire	943	0 (by c.2023)
London & Middlesex	1705	0 (by c.2020)
Warwicks, Leics & Staffs	1066	0 (by c.2025)
Yorkshire	1669	350

Figure 5: GMs with a predicted decline in membership to 2033 (R² >0.9)

As can be seen, this includes the disappearance of three of the largest GMs in BYM before 2033. The data also suggest that the rural nature of a GM is not necessarily an indicator of increase, since Figure 5 includes at least two largely rural areas in Bedfordshire GM and Yorkshire GM.

There appear to be three models or broad patterns of change in the membership of the GMs during the last century which are in contrast to the pictures presented in the two earlier articles. Bedfordshire, for example, describes a parabola, with a generally steady increase up to 1967, after which numbers begin to decline (and are predicted to continue to do so): this is in keeping with Brown's suggestion mentioned earlier (see Figure 6).

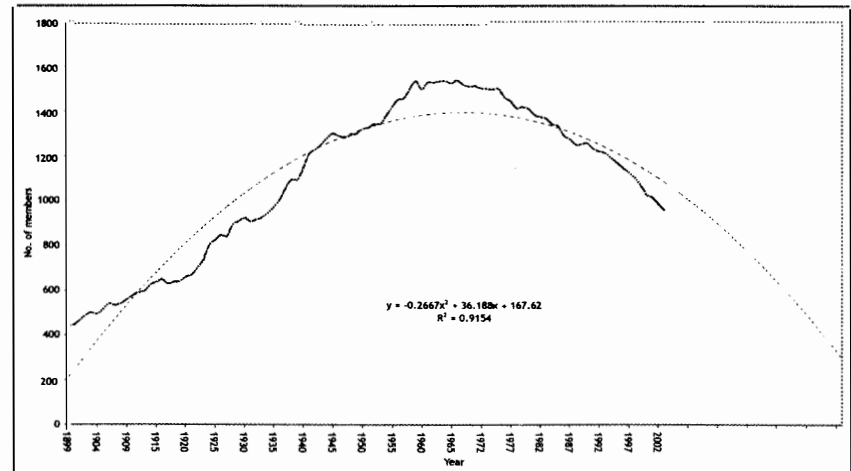


Figure 6: Parabolic pattern of Bedfordshire GM membership since 1899

Ignoring for the moment the predicted trends in membership, this parabolic pattern of increase followed by decrease is broadly true also of Essex and Suffolk (peaking at 835 in 1969), Kent (493 in 1973), London & Middlesex (3803 in 1946) and Warwicks, Leics & Staffs (2041 in 1941).

Devon & Cornwall GM, on the other hand, increases slowly throughout the twentieth century, although there was a slight decrease beginning in the 1990s (see Figure 7). This pattern of increase throughout the century but with the possible signs of a decline in the 1990s is applicable also to Berkshire & Oxfordshire (from 521 in 1899 to 890 in 2003), Bristol & Somerset (1061 to 1306), Derby, Lincoln & Notts (327 to 518), Kent (213 to 307), Norfolk, Cambs & Hunts (378 to 641) and Western GM (912 to 1091). As indicated earlier, Scotland GM also fits this pattern. Does this observation bear out the earlier suggestion that it is the predominantly rural GMs which are experiencing growth? Is there then an implicit corollary that it is the GMs in the more urban areas which are declining?

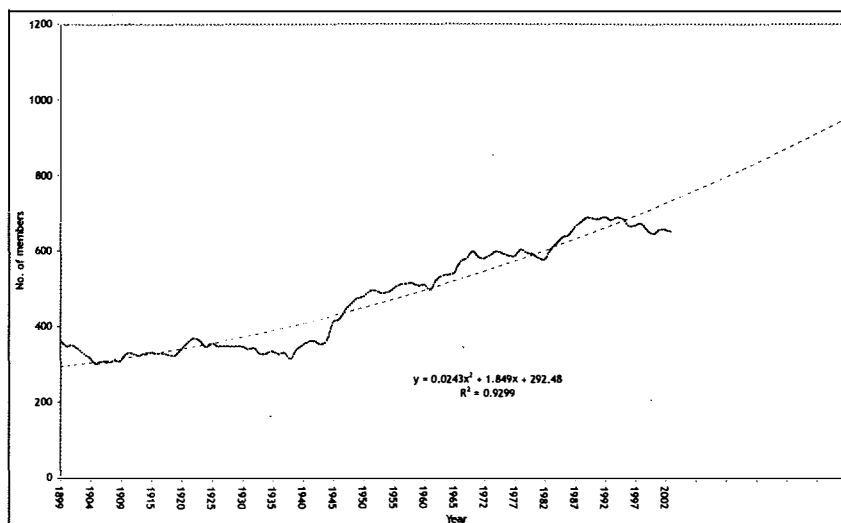


Figure 7: Slow increase in Devon & Cornwall GM membership since 1899

The third model is exemplified by Durham GM, which peaked as long ago as 1910 with 1784 members: membership has been declining since then to the present 567 (see Figure 8).

The Durham model is also found in Cumberland GM (declining from 387 members in 1899 to 215 in 2003), Lancashire & Cheshire (2006 to 943) and Yorkshire (2653 to 1669, although there was an initial increase to 3071 Members in 1919). The only GM which does not conform to one of these models is Westmorland, which appeared to be undergoing a slow decline until 1967, when its numbers jumped by almost 200 to 545: they then declined until 1998, since when they have begun to increase again. At the time of writing there is no explanation for this anomalous pattern. In addition, there does not appear to be any pattern in the geography of the three proposed models of change, except that the

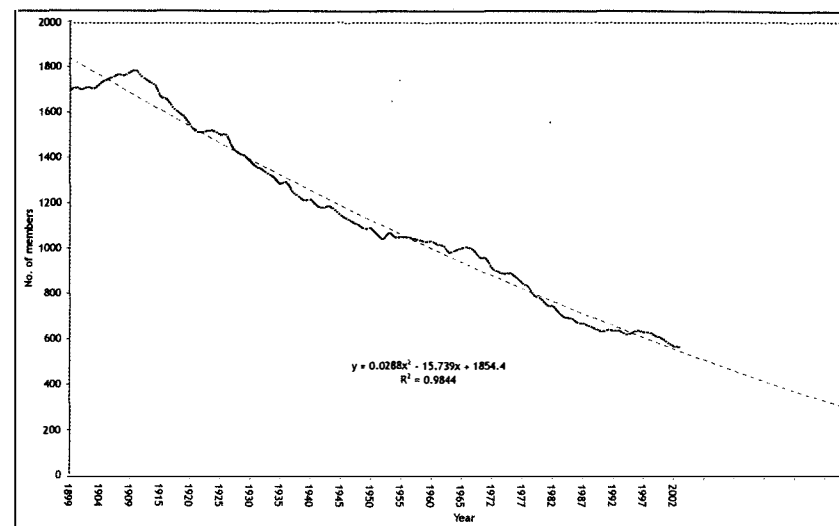


Figure 8: Durham GM membership since 1899 projected in 30 years

Durham model applies only to the northern GMs (and this may contradict the earlier suggestion that decline is a feature of the more urban areas).

The overall pattern of decline in some areas is maintained if the data are analysed on a regional basis, i.e., by grouping contiguous GMs, and then calculating the predicted membership 30 years forward. Thus, the northern GMs (Cumberland, Durham, Lancashire & Cheshire, Westmorland and Yorkshire) decline to a total of c.1000 Members ($R^2 = 0.97$) and those in the Midlands (Warwicks, Leics & Staffs and Derby, Lincoln & Notts) to c.100 ($R^2 = 0.95$). However, the two west of England GMs (Devon & Cornwall and Bristol & Somerset) are predicted to increase to c.2500 ($R^2 = 0.90$). Because of the numbers involved, London & Middlesex GM was kept separate from the other south-eastern GMs: as shown in Figure 5, it is predicted to disappear in c.2020 ($R^2 = 0.94$). The other south-eastern GMs and those in East Anglian (Bedfordshire, Berks & Oxon, Kent, Sussex & Surrey, Essex & Suffolk and Norfolk, Cambs & Hunts) are also predicted to decline from a peak of 6400 members to 4600 in 30 years time, although in this case $R^2 = 0.84$.

This short study was undertaken to investigate the hypothesis that an analysis of the data for BYM and predictions of its demise masked regional or local differences in its constituent GMs and to an extent that hypothesis has been proven. While numbers of Members in the majority of GMs are declining, some are increasing and may continue to do so, while the characteristics of the change in membership numbers during the last 100 years also differ, tending to follow one of three patterns or models. This, however, appears to create the apparently paradoxical situation, if taken with the two earlier articles, that we can predict the end of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain but also the continuation of some GMs in some parts of Britain. Some of the differences in conclusions may be the result of using a longer data set and this study has raised some ten-

tative questions about the interpretation of the analysis presented here. Precisely why the GMs exhibit different trends is perhaps a subject for more detailed investigation.

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