THE AESTHETICS OF FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSES

Roger Homan

University of Brighton, England

ABSTRACT

In an attempt to identify a Quaker aesthetic as it applies to English meeting houses, this article draws upon the physical evidence of English Meetings past and present, upon the records of discussions preceding the design and construction of meeting houses, upon interviews with Friends at some thirty meeting houses and upon the observational and interpretative literature. The main part of the discussion is structured around the moral principles of plainness, worthiness and simplicity. A distinction is made between the effect of plainness, which has in the past been regulated, and simplicity, which is here explored as a moral attribute cultivated in the person and expressed in the building. The particular aesthetic that applies to the ordering of meeting houses, however, is the pragmatic criterion of restfulness. It is submitted in conclusion that the Quaker aesthetic is a complex and disparate phenomenon, not only because of the diversity of the religious community it serves but by reason of the range of considerations it needs to satisfy.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

In characterising Quaker aesthetics the elements of plainness and simplicity have been frequently recognised and thoroughly rehearsed. Of these, plainness is the more straightforward and visible, simplicity the more complex and elusive. The achievement of plainness has in the past been pursued by means of a prescribed behaviour and monitored by delegates appointed by the Friends' Meeting. To our understanding of the process of 'plaining' in its heyday valuable contributions have been made by Peter Collins (1996, 2001), whose work is the principal reference point of this article. It is argued here that the concept of plaining lays stress upon the behavioural dimension of Quaker aesthetics and its ethic is deontological. This article, being intended as a complement to previous work, explores not the means of achieving a Quaker aesthetic but its outcome: it proposes the aesthetic of restfulness. The corollary ethic is consequentialist. While the achievement

of an aesthetic by plaining has been process-driven, that of restfulness is goal-directed. The meeting-house environments it affects are demonstrably diverse. The plain and the restful are in tension: while plaining involves the subtraction of physical properties from the meeting house or Quaker home, the pursuit of a restful space for worship frequently entails additions or refinements for the sake of agreeable acoustics and appropriate comfort. Absolute expressions of the plain are further compromised here and there in order to honour particular testimonies or associations.

The basic data from which this essay draws were collected in guided visits and simultaneous unstructured interviews in some thirty meeting houses: the sample of visits and respondents was opportunist. The author is not a Quaker but an Anglo-Catholic. The essay approaches the architecture of Quaker meeting houses, including their internal arrangements, from an interest in other religious traditions in which there is an ethic of plainness and/or restraint and taboo, however subtle, upon decoration and figurative representation. The concept of *aesthetic* deployed here and in the author's *The Art of the Sublime* (Homan 2006) is the philosophical reflection on the nature of art and beauty: that is to say, it is not in this essay concerned with technique or virtuosity but with principles that are essentially moral. The words *plain* and *simple* with which meeting houses are described as well by outsiders as by Friends themselves are regarded not as absolute conditions but as indicators of a style and taste that include a wide range of possibilities: it was by observation that this variety was registered and from which illustrations are cited in the essay.

In this article the term *aesthetics* applies to the principles governing the perception of some visual effects as good, desirable and acceptable and others as not or less so. Aesthetics is not merely a matter of what is pleasing to the eye for pleasure is dictated by moral precepts. The sense that a habit may be indulgent or superfluous diminishes the pleasure that it would otherwise provide.

Quakers have approached art and, to a lesser extent, architecture with varying degrees of apprehension. The combination of a puritan aesthetic and a sectarian rejection of the established order prompted a conscientious Friend in 1832 to decline to support the building of a new church tower at Saffron Walden but it did not diminish his generous spirit:

> How canst thou expect me, a Quaker, to contribute to the cost of rebuilding thy Steeple—but I do not mind giving thee three hundred pounds towards the cost of demolishing the tower (Lidbetter 1961: 8).

Curiously the architect of the new tower was Thomas Rickman, an erstwhile Quaker who was among the most frequently commissioned of Gothic architects in the wake of the Church Building Act of 1818.

'The adoption of taste instead of utility in this case, would be considered as a conscious conformity with the fashions of the world': so observed the non-Quaker Thomas Clarkson (1807: 290). The distance set by Quakers between themselves and the established order implied a detachment from worldly habits such as vanity, fashion and superfluity which were deemed to be vices.

Of the virtues that constitute the layers of a Quaker aesthetic, we consider first that of plainness.

'IF YOU WANT THE TRIMMINGS YOU CAN GO NEXT DOOR'[1]

Plain taste is defined not by what it is but by what it is not. Exclusion is central to the concept of plainness. It is achieved by rejection, not merely by disowning values but by removing from daily life the physical effects that do not conform to it. This removal of domestic effects is the act of 'plaining' studied by Peter Collins. Meetings appointed representatives to visit the homes of members and, in the manner of Cromwell's iconoclasts half a century earlier, throw out offensive ornaments. Collins tells of the cousins Joseph Pile of Cork and Samuel Randall who were inspectors of homes for gospel order:

> As to our own clothing we had but little to alter, having both of us been pretty plain in our garb, yet some things we did change to greater simplicity. But my dear cousin, being naturally of a very exact and nice fancy, had things in a more curious order as regards household furniture than I had. Our fine veneered and garnished cases of drawers, tables, stands, cabinets, escritoires, &c, were put away or exchanged for decent plain ones of solid wood without sumptuous garnishing or ornamental work; our wainscots and woodwork we had painted of one plain colour... Our curtains, with valences, deeply fringed that we thought too fine, we put away or cut off; our large looking-glasses with decorated frames we sold or made them into smaller ones (Braithwaite 1919: 507).

Thomas Clarkson was a frequent and perceptive visitor to Quaker homes. It is from him (Clarkson 1807: 292-94) that we have the report that a Quaker home of his day never had more than one picture displayed on its walls and he recalls only three types: a drawing of Penn's treaty with the Indians, a Slave-ship and a plan of the building of Ackworth school. Clarkson stresses decency and utility as the basic aesthetic principles governing Quaker life. The intention is 'to be adjudged by the rules of decency and usefulness, but never by the suggestion of show' (Clarkson 1807: 290).

The disapproval of gratuitous ornament, the notion that an embellishment is justifiable only if it has a practical use and an insistence on the good and worthy in materials and craft were to be fundamental or 'true' principles in the aesthetics promulgated later in the century in quite a different religious context. The Gothic revivalist Augustus Pugin, a convert to the Roman Catholic Church, took a moral view of decoration that was very close to Quaker thinking. Pugin's two 'great rules for design' were:

> 1st, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety; 2nd, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building (Pugin 1853: 1).

Portraits were of all images the most disapproved. It was not only the possession that disturbed as the vanity of sitting for the artist. In 1847, London Yearly Meeting noted portraits to be 'things utterly at variance with the known principles of

the body' (*The British Friend* 5, 1847: 128). The elimination of vanity, be it in portraiture or in the excesses of furnishing, is an act of physical rejection and diminution. Neither in Clarkson's observation nor in Pugin's formulation, however, is there a reductionist or minimalist aspect to the avoidance of excess and the achievement of decency and utility.

For Peter Collins (2001) the normative Quaker aesthetic is the plain and the act of achieving it in 'plaining' was in the early years the principle of group identity. He submits that plainness is the critical element of a Quaker aesthetic and that it has a coherent moral basis. He notes from his own ethnographic research that, wherever Quakers gather, it persists as a prominent theme of discourse, even unconsciously (Collins 2001: 123).

It is commonly supposed that the early period was marked by an austere simplicity which was an act of witness against the superfluities of the world: such, for example, is the interpretation of panels C4 and D2 of the Quaker tapestry.[2] This is said to have given way to more elaborate and decorative designs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such a reading of the rise and fall of plain taste must be subject to certain qualifications: even in its heyday, plaining had its dissidents. The arrival of decorative styles in meeting houses such as Greek porches in the early nineteenth century was not so much a pretension as a means of distancing meeting houses from the predominantly Gothic styles favoured by the Lords Commissioner dispensing the funds of the 1818 Act and, later in the century, by the Catholic revivals stimulated by Pugin; the sense that it ill becomes Quakers to allow any kind of ornament lives on.

For all that the plain is achieved by the removal of the superfluous, it neither was nor is minimalist. Austerity to the point of discomfort is not conducive to worship. It is submitted below, therefore, that other considerations than the avoidance of 'cumber' prevail the design and arrangement of the meeting house.

Some Quakers were to make a career of trimmings and to establish themselves among the more distinguished of Victorian architects. But if they were not to be plain, they were not to be Quaker. Thomas Rickman was to be 'the man whose name is most notoriously associated with the era of Commissioners' churches' (Port 1961: 64): he designed twenty-one places of worship for the established Church (Port 1961: 67). Anglicans cannot easily believe that he was not of their number. He also stands as a significant architectural theorist for it was he who classified and named the orders of Gothic ecclesiastical architecture which we know as Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular. His departure from the Society was not altogether the consequence of his art: he wanted to marry his cousin Lucy and had to remove to the Church of England whose table of kindred and affinity allowed such a union.

As a successful architect much patronised by the established Church he practised in the Gothic style and for that reason he was less of a loss to Quakers. Hubert Lidbetter, a Quaker architect of the twentieth century, observed, 'It is perhaps fortunate for the Society that he exercised his medieval proclivities in quarters more sympathetic thereto than a Friends Meeting House could be' (Lidbetter 1961: 8).

Alfred Waterhouse was born near Liverpool in 1830, brought up in a Quaker family and married a Quaker Elizabeth Hodgkin of Lewes in 1858. His inclination was to pursue a career in painting but his parents dissuaded him and he turned to architecture (Smith 1976). The civic grandeur for which Waterhouse is best known had no place in the Society: it is exemplified in such designs as the Prudential Assurance Building and University College Hospital in London, Manchester's Town Hall and Assize Court, Brighton's Metropole Hotel, the former Hove Town Hall and a number of imposing churches.

'TYPICALLY QUAKER: SIMPLE, PLAIN AND VERY COSTLY'[3]

A distinction has to be made between the complementary conditions of plainness and simplicity. The notion that plainness has to do with external effects and simplicity with inward being is widely encountered among Friends. What is in doubt is the extent to which attention to the externals of behaviour can affect the simplicity of the inner being. So some Friends advise starting without and some would start from within. In a recent manual Catherine Whitmire (2001) pursues the destination of 'inward simplicity' by the exercise of living plainly in respect of such engagements as work, speech, the use of time, money and resources. But manifest behaviour is no guarantee of attitude: in his study of early Friends in Philadelphia, Frederick Tolles noted that with affluence came a fondness for luxury and ostentation, albeit 'masked by a superficial plainness that was out of harmony with the "simplicity of Truth" as preached by the primitive Friends' (Tolles 1963: 241). Elaine Prevallet shares the perception of Thomas Kelly (1941: 114-15) that complexity emanates in large measure from an inner condition; accordingly, her advice is set out not as a course for the systematic amendment of behaviour but as 'living from the center' (Prevallet 1982: 4). Whatever the nuances of the relationship between the inner and outer being and the impact that plaining may have upon the simple spirit, the common principle here is that simplicity belongs within and plainness without.

The popular stereotypes of the Quaker meeting house, simplicity and modesty, are commonly regarded and there is recourse to faintly sentimental descriptors such as *quaint* and *charming*. The limitation of the standard vocabulary is that it attests to a visual response rather than a moral understanding. Robert Sefton recognises values in visual form when he typifies the Quaker meeting houses of New England:

> Simple wood frame, shingled exterior, covered porch at one side, residential in scale, it is unassuming, quaint, passive. It seems to express so well the simple, non-authoritarian, introspective faith of the Friends. The interior is furnished only with the barest wooden pews. There is no altar, no pulpit, no choir, no music, no cushions, nothing worldly to distract them from a *vis-à-vis* connection with God (Sefton 1972).

The American Quaker sculptress Sylvia Shaw Judson (1982: 3) characterises 'the plain integrity of Quaker meeting houses, with their good proportions, quiet

color and restful lighting, and the purity of line of their honestly fashioned furniture'. Kenneth Southall (1974: viii) writes of the old meeting houses in England as 'plain, dignified and beautiful'. Their 'beauty' is distinguished from that of churches and cathedrals which were in his view 'built to impress, to catch the eye, to create awe in the mind of the beholder'. Meeting houses on the other hand were built for shelter and silence.

The function of shelter and refuge, it has to be said, is not peculiar to meeting houses. Saxon and Norman village churches were sited and constructed with these purposes in mind. Again, the principles dictated by St Bernard in 1125 for the design of Cistercian abbeys were exclusive of any ornament that might distract the soul during devotion or incur an expense that could be put to a better use.

Nor were building costs inconsiderable. While the greater number of meeting houses have been modest in scale and price, there are some exceptions. In 1830 the Manchester Meeting House was executed at a cost of £7600 (Butler 1999: 320); the prototype church commissioned by the Bishop of Chester was costed at £6087 for 1313 sittings and the picturesque and substantial Anglican church of St George Barnsley which provided accommodation for 1250 persons had cost about £6000 (Port 1961: 71).

What emerges in Kenneth Southall's appreciation is that 'beauty' is not merely a visual effect. The early meeting houses command a kind of reverence because of the witness of those who built them with their own skills and the gift of their own materials. If there is a heartfelt appreciation of the ethic of honesty, the beholder's eye will be pleased by plain design, modest scale, vernacular style, local materials and original unpolished benches of oak ennobled by prayerful use. By the same token, one so tutored in Quakerly moral principles will be unsettled by unnecessary adornment. In short, these are found to be 'beautiful old buildings' because they are moral. The preservation of 'our Quaker heritage' has to do with the keeping alive of 'the central truths of Quakerism' derived from George Fox and with walking cheerfully over the world' (Southall 1974: ix).

It is 'their very lack of ostentation' (Barton 1990: 29) or as 'buildings of endearing simplicity (Summerson 1978: 232) that some respected commentators distinguish Quaker meeting houses from other Nonconformist chapels. Sir John Summerson has in mind such meeting houses as Wandsworth (1778) and Peckham (1826). Outsiders looking in, however, do not always appreciate the paradox that simplicity is a complex matter. Occasionally it takes the form of a stripping down to basics: there are senses of this meaning in the interiors of some meeting houses such as Bath, Brighton, Hoddesdon and St Albans. But in many others the aesthetic is less austere: in the thought given to light, proportion and ambience there is an evident exercise of taste for colour, neatness, dignity and reverence.

There is no need to throw out taste in the process of eliminating exuberance and grandeur. The arrangement of chairs or benches within the meeting house achieves a symmetry and rhythm around the central space or table. In airport, hospital and crematorium chapels colours of cushions, curtains and carpets are chosen with a soothing purpose; in the Salvation Army and old-time Methodism

the navy blue of soft furnishings conforms to a corporate image. In Quaker meeting houses, however, the colour chosen varies from one place to another. Rose is popular. Whatever, it is restrained, inconspicuous and conducive to the purpose of resting the spirit. More than one English Meeting, eschewing extravagance, makes do with bare linoleum; another, sensitive of acoustics during Meeting for worship, has invested in a Persian rug. The considerable price of austerity has been observed elsewhere. For example, Professor Hannah comments on the conjunction of simple faith and material quality in respect of Norwich Old Meeting: 'The fittings are of the plainest and their materials of the best... In its imposing austerity, the old chapel speaks of a deep but simple faith' (Briggs 1946: 26). And in their survey of Unitarian meeting houses Hague and Hague (1986: 10) note the calibre and prosperity of the founders of Unitarianism, so many of whose simple and dignified meeting houses of ante-1750 survive. But meeting houses were not cheap and the example is given of Ipswich which cost £398 in 1700.

'SIMPLE BEAUTY AND NOUGHT ELSE'[4]

The relative independence of the virtues of plainness and simplicity is demonstrable from the aesthetics of the American Shakers, a community whose anthem is called *Simple gifts* and whose economic basis has been partly the production of fancy goods (Casey 1908). There is both among Quakers and among Shakers a tension of inner light and outward form. The one is untouchable, the other subject to peer pressure and regulation. As Peter Collins (1996) has demonstrated, the rules of plaining came early in Quaker history and derived from moral precepts. Among Shakers, the Millennial Laws of 1821 reflected the practice of normative architects within the Society such as Moses Johnson and had much to do with function and organisation. The Millennial Laws related to the colour of floors and walls and the distinctiveness of the meeting house. They evolved from a set of seven principles including simplicity of language, practical peace and the virgin life (Andrews 1967: 6).

It is the moral code which provides the basis of Shaker aesthetics, operating more as a discipline for a way of being than as a set of rules for working in art, architecture and craft. Shaker architecture and furniture are but a visible effect of Shaker spirituality. It appeals to the outside world in that it speaks the virtues which others want to hear and, but for the conditions of the modern world, might want to practise: simplicity, worthy and natural materials, care, honesty, craftsmanship. The stress is not upon the explicit regulation of design but upon the indwelling presence of Christ which effects the whole Shaker way of life (Johnson 1969; Horsham 1989). Shaker design is the outward expression of the inner life:

> The Shaker crafts of the classic period were the output of those who had come to terms with themselves, who had triumphed in the greatest of all confrontations—the confrontation with self. The Shaker craftsman had no need to seek an effect. In every aspect of his daily life the idea of the attainment of effect for effect's sake was strongly rejected... We feel immediately in the best Shaker work the harmony between the craftsman and the materials of the craft. The resultant grace and

proportion eloquently bespeak the degree to which the artist attuned the sacred
oneness which was his unconscious goal (Johnson 1969: 6).

The licensing of the expressions of the simple soul was in due time to sanction a
flourishing 'fancy goods' industry (Casey 1908) that finds no place in the modern
stereotype of Shaker. If design came from within, the subsequent valuation of its
products has been commercially determined. The worthiness of the craft and the
dignity of the craftsman, the recovery of a pre-industrial sense of vocation in
manual work, the exclusive relationship of the producer to the product were
principles held in common with the Arts and Crafts Movement which burgeoned
in the east coast in the 1860s. Its ideals were already practised by the Shakers in its
midst. Yet it looked rather to John Ruskin and William Morris in Britain for
stature than to Shakers for example (Clark 1972: 9).

The virtue of simplicity is arguably more central to Quaker living than that of
worthiness and is certainly the more likely to be nominated by observers. The
question arises of whether the simplicity of the meeting house can be contrived.
For other traditions, the ideal in religious architecture may be more easily
achieved by the adoption of an agreed architectural style. The Catholic revival of
the nineteenth century operated with clear moral and aesthetic principles articu-
lated in the first instance by Pugin (1853). The mosque deploys the circle as an
abstract image of perfection and the mosaic pattern as an expression of infinite,
these being properties of Allah. In these examples, principles govern execution.

As Collins (1996: 277-88) has demonstrated, the plain is an ideal achieved by
rules and procedures. Plainness in architecture is the effect of regulation and
negotiation; typically, it involves the removal of ornament and the elimination of
all excess. The visual representation of simplicity is realised by the regard of an
available model and the disregard of its surfaces. Browning's poem *Fra Lippo Lippi*
features a dialogue between two artists representing these two positions. The first
voice pleads,

> Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
> Your business is to paint the souls of men...

So should the meeting house be planned for outward effect or should it appear as
the accidental effect of inward functions? The second verse settles for the beauty
of simplicity:

> Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue
> Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
> And then add soul and heighten them threefold?
> Or say there's beauty with no soul at all
> (I never saw it—put the case the same—)
> If you get simple beauty and nought else,
> You get about the best thing God invents.

The dilemma here is between the design that emanates from a simple soul and
that which is contrived. So it is in the evolution of the meeting house: its form
is negotiated locally, consensual subject to extensive pragmatic considerations

(Alexander 1820). Typically, the Friends' meeting house is not so much intended to be plain as to be simple, not to be conspicuous as to be modest, not to be fashionable as to be timeless, not to be civic in its demeanour as to be homely, not to provoke but to engage, not to be neglected as to be cherished.

While English Quakers hold basic aesthetic principles in common, they are locally applied according to needs and circumstances. The Quaker meeting house is not based on a national prototype. There is no corporate image, as in the case of the Salvation Army. There is no normative architect, like the Baptist John Wills of Derby. In consequence, meeting houses are distinguished not by their uniformity but by their heterogeneity and so little attention has been given to the style of Friends' meeting houses. While it was the Quaker Thomas Rickman who set out the orders of Gothic by which the styles are nowadays recognised in ecclesiastical architecture, a formal interest in style eludes many Quaker commentators. The early meeting houses are characterised for certain sentimental qualities such as 'charm' (Lidbetter 1961: 21). But the fact and issue of style has not been much explored. Even the Quaker architect Hubert Lidbetter treats in a detailed way of function, fabric and construction (Lidbetter 1961: 20) but goes on to devote a chapter of only two pages to 'Architectural character'. Lidebetter's work (1946, 1961) on meeting houses is useful as an inventory but does not adequately engage aesthetic principles.

Writing from the experience of planning the new meeting house at York in 1820, William Alexander conveys the sense that issues of design in his day were entirely pragmatic. Questions of enrichment, ornament and colour do not enter his account. The 'site', he advised, should be 'quiet and retired'; if, as at York, this was not possible it was desirable that there be no windows to the street. He recommends oblique lighting by reflecting sunlight off the north interior wall. Windows are normally for ventilation, prospect and light but in meeting houses they are not for prospect, 'for retirement, not passing scenes, is the most congenial to devotion'. The two chandeliers in the former meeting house at York, he complains, 'did little more...than render darkness visible' (Alexander 1820: 20–21). The pragmatism of meeting house design, then, is rooted in the manner of worship: the purpose is to exclude distractions including discomfort and to enable the resting of the spirit. The principle of pragmatic rather than decorative design obtains in the advice available within other protestant denominations, notably in the work of John Wills of Derby and of Crouch and Butler of Birmingham. Albeit, the restraint of decoration must not be so severe as to detract from the purpose of worship:

> Just a word with regard to the [organ] case. The stock pattern cases supplied by even the best builders are rarely things of beauty. While we do not advocate over elaboration In cases and prefer them in simple unvarnished oak, and the pipes left their natural colour, we certainly think that Committees would do well to consult the Architect in regard to the design, and it will then be his own fault if it is allowed by its ugliness or obtrusiveness to mar the utility of the other work (Crouch and Butler 1901: 55; see also Wills n.d.).

There is, however, one element of style that warrants attention as a political statement. In Lidbetter's scrupulous examination of detail, there is lost a sense of the symbolic significance of the Classical style in religious and civic buildings of the early nineteenth century: Classical and Gothic were in contention with each other and the dominance of one over the other was not merely a matter of visual preference. In 1789 revolution had come within twenty-one miles of Dover beach and there continued to loom the prospect of a similar upheaval on English soil. In a late pre-emptive response to protect the establishment through its Church, the 1818 Act empowered the Church Commissioners with a budget of one million pounds to provide for the whole population accommodation within audience of a pulpit. On the whole the Commissioners preferred designs in Gothic which thus became identified with the established Church. The Gothic taste was shared by other prolific church builders such as the Wesleyans; later in the century it was intellectualised by the Roman Catholic Pugin, for whom the evocation of ancient Greece and Rome was enough to equate Classical styles with paganism. In the Victorian debate about whether the roots of British society belonged in Greek philosophy or in Christian teaching, Classical was used for some civic and financial institutions. Charles Barry's design for the new Houses of Parliament was deemed to be insufficiently Gothic and Pugin was enlisted to enhance it with crockets and pinnacles. Some Christian groups such as Baptists, however, elected Classical as a way of distancing themselves from the mainstream.

Against this background we may recognise that it was not an indifference to style but by way of political statements that Quakers chose Classical motifs for their façades and porches added to meeting houses in the early nineteenth century. In England as in America, Classical bespoke republicanism. It was an expression as unambiguous as putting an election poster in one's window when Lewes Meeting added a Classical portico to the elevation of a domestic building in 1812. Mount Street Manchester provided one of the most spectacular exercises in the Greek style: here the 1830 meeting house by Richard Lane was modelled on the temple of Ilissus built at Athens in 484 BCE (Butler 1999: 320). Its front elevation was of five bays and two storeys with the central three bays being surmounted by a pediment and supported by four Ionic columns. Classical was used assertively at Plaistow in 1823 and, in a more restrained way, at Peckham (1826) and Exeter (1836). The later use of Classical at Ackworth in 1847 was arguably less of a statement, being chosen to harmonise with existing buildings. Elsewhere the addition of a Classical portico to a domestic or vernacular frontage was made at Darlington in 1839–40.

THE 1652 STEREOTYPE: CUMBRIA WITHOUT THE CUMBER

In the modest and opportunist sample of English meeting houses visited by this 'stranger', those that were distinguished by plainness and the studious avoidance of adornment were exceptions rather than a norm. Where the meeting room was modern, it was indistinguishable from other enclosures of space for the purpose of utility and will be unlikely in due time to warrant the special appreciation of those

who succeed Sir John Summerson. Where it was antique, it was to be found in the company of its contemporaries in the pages of Kenneth Southall's *Our Quaker Heritage*. If of the older generation of meeting houses, the likelihood is that its one-time simplicity will have been rendered conspicuously ornamental by the demise and disappearance of the buildings that were once its neighbours. This is nowhere more true than at Come-to-Good whose deep thatch and whitewashed walls contend for any postcard or chocolate box. The word *picturesque* does not belong in the vocabulary of Quaker aesthetics but such is the value now attached to its simple integrity. In the same way linguistic peculiarities such as *thee* and *thou*, once affirmed as indicators of plain speech (Isichei 1967; Collins 2001: 122), are perceived as ornamental and quaint where they survive in the liturgies of the Church of England. The problem is not confined to Quakers: Shaker furniture and household effects, fashioned for utility and economy, now realise thousands of dollars when they come up for auction. That which, being honoured by time and favoured by collectors, becomes expensive and, arguably, extravagant. A seventeenth-century bench is in worldly terms less plain than a plastic chair but it retains the simplicity and integrity of those who fashioned it as an acceptable furnishing for the meeting house. When we regard plainness as a stricture and simplicity as a moral virtue, we recognise the simplicity of the Blue Idol,[5] Come-to-Good and other historic meeting houses, but in the architectural register they are not characterised as plain.

That a Friends' meeting house is deficient of ornament, that it is honest in its appearance, that it was lovingly constructed by persons of integrity, that its garden is tended with care constitute some of the moral elements of the Quaker aesthetic. But there is also an element that is spiritual. In such meeting houses as the Blue Idol in West Sussex there is a property that is sometimes valued as much by non-Friends as by Members. Over centuries these places have been hallowed by prayer and insulated from the business of the world. This sometimes coincides with historic association: for example, at Jordens and Ifield, the visitor is pointed to original furniture. And such is the Quaker reverence for the testimonies of the past that features such as ministers' galleries (at Burford and Jordans, for example) are preserved long after their particular function has been suspended.

One of the more remarkable instances of a material interest by Quakers in places with historical associations is the looting of souvenirs from Swarthoor Hall. The very habit of pilgrimage is something of an anomaly in a religious community which has been reluctant to treat particular places or days of the year as special. But Swarthmoor has become something of a shrine. Angus Winchester, who has documented this phenomenon, points to the teaching of George Fox that God has to be found in the hearts of seekers as much as in churches. Yet for two centuries Quakers, especially American Quakers, have made their way to 1652 country, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, 'to kneel where prayer has been valid' (Winchester 1993). As long ago as 1885 the vicar of Ulverston Charles Bardsley described Swarthmoor Hall as the ' "Mecca" of the Philadelphian' and Winchester reports evidence that Quaker visitors plundered souvenirs from the wainscot and panelling inside the building (Winchester 1996: 26, 29).

One way of understanding the apparent contradiction of Quaker pilgrimage is to recognise that the pilgrim group is itself a community withdrawing from the world for the purpose of the spiritual pilgrimage of its members. Places like Swarthmoor afford the opportunity for pilgrims to adjust themselves to the early Friends and to apprehend things that are eternal (Winchester 1993). This explains pilgrimage but not pilferage.

While the Blue Idol and other Meetings retain original or early furnishings, others have discarded or relegated the plainness of the past. They prefer, for example, a circle of plastic coated chairs with metal legs and, thereby, the manufactured to the home-made. In this way, simplicity is being judged by outward effect rather than by the intention of the producer: the bench is surely the more simple and the moulded stackable chair the more sophisticated. The hazard, however, is that the antiquity of the early meeting house becomes an object of attention in itself. As the Shakers have experienced, connoisseurs and collectors are prepared to put a high price on the simplicity of their designs without wanting to practise the inner life from which they emanate: so shortly before her death the Shaker Sister Mildred remarked, 'I do not want to be remembered as a chair'.

CONCLUSION

What is at issue is the complexity of the notion of simplicity when it is expressed in a visual form.

First, the quest for the plain conflicts with other desirable effects. To the extent that simplicity is sought by plaining, it involves the removal of superfluity and ornament, of decoration, of embellishment, of pretence. This process is not itself a straightforward matter. What might be casually regarded as superfluities are on enquiry found to be inherited testimonies. The fabric hanging at Salisbury's Harcourt Terrace meeting house came from Africa and was said to symbolise the spirit of the earth, while also serving an acoustic purpose; the two-manual organ at Bournville was a silver-wedding gift of George Cadbury to his wife. When the design of the new meeting house at Exeter could have been thought to transgress the rule of plainness, the *Friend* offered a description that was generous without being altogether convincing:

> Of plain Gothic character, its form and appearance sufficiently indicate its purpose as
> a place of worship without departing from the solid simplicity which usually charac
> terises our meeting houses (*The Friend* 17, 195, 1877: 22).

Moreover, there are degrees of comfort that are conducive to the process of resting into worship and the elimination of these would have an aggravating effect.

The distinction between plainness and simplicity is a significant one in terms of the perception of meeting houses. *Plainness*, not least as a consequence of its achievement by plaining, stresses the removal of objects and manners; it draws attention to the absence of properties rather more than to the quality of what remains. *Simplicity*, by contrast, is a celebratory concept: to 'get about the best thing God provides'. It requires that the simple truth be neither embellished nor

impoverished. Stonework must be allowed to speak for itself. So one finds a relative avoidance of stucco for its superficiality, even though it is potentially plainer and more frugal than brick or stone.

It is in the nature of the Friends' meeting house that it has an external and public presence and an internal purpose. By the first it conveys a message or testimony and for the second it provides an environment conducive to worship. The first is more immediately visible than the second. In this article we have observed a general but not exclusive tendency for plainness to be associated with external effects and simplicity with the inner life. The constant factor in meeting house aesthetics—both within and without—is the criterion of restfulness. The positioning of the door and windows of the meeting house, the control of light as well as noise, the selection and approval of colour, and the enclosure and maintenance of the garden take account of the desirability of quietness and the absence of distraction. Soft furnishings are not 'cumber' if they absorb sound or moderate the kind of discomfort that would divert from worship.

NOTES

1. Field notes. Reported contribution to a planning meeting on a new meeting house; next door to the old one was a modest Methodist chapel.
2. The Quaker Tapestry is held at the Friends' meeting house in Kendal.
3. Field notes. Reported by Clerk of a Meeting as having been uttered by a Member.
4. From the poem *Fra Lippo Lippi* by Robert Browning (1812–1889).
5. This strange name possibly derives from the fact that the building was once painted blue and stood for a time idle.

REFERENCES

Alexander, W., *Observations on the Construction and Fixing up of Meeting Houses*, York, 1820.

Andrews, E.D., *The Gift to be Simple*, New York: Dover, 1967.

Barton, D.A., *Chapels and Meeting Houses*, Princes Risborough, Bucks: Shire, 1990.

Bernard [of Clairvaux], *Apologia ad Guilb Sancti Theodici*, trans. Michael Casey Kalamazoo as *St Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William*, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1970.

Braithwaite, W., *The Second Period of Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919.

Briggs, M.S., *Puritan Architecture and its Future*, London: Lutterworth, 1946.

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, I, London: Friends Historical Society, 1999.

Casey, F.C., *Catalogue of Fancy Goods*, Alfred, Maine: Shaker Village, 1908.

Clark, R.J. (ed.), *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876–11916*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Clarkson, T., *A Portraiture of Quakerism*, I, London: Longman, Hurst, Reece & Orme, 3rd edn, 1807.

Collins, P.J., ' "Plaining": The Social and Cognitive Practice of Symbolisation in the Religious Society of Friends', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11 (1996), pp. 277-88.

–, 'Quaker Plaining as Critical Aesthetic', *Quaker Studies* 5 (2001), pp. 121-39.

Crouch, J., and Butler, E., *Churches, Mission Halls and Schools for Nonconformists*, Birmingham: Butler & Webb, 1901.

Hague, G., and Hague, J., *The Unitarian Heritage: An Architectural Survey*, Sheffield: P. Godfrey, 1986.

Homan, R., *The Art of the Sublime*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

Horsham, M., *The Art of the Shakers*, London: Apple Press, 1989.

Isichei, E., 'From Sect to Denomination among English Quakers', in Bryan, R. (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements*, London: Heinemann, 1967, pp. 170-71.

Johnson, T.E., *Hands to Work and Hearts to God*, Brunswick, MN: Bowdoin College, 1969.

Judson, S.S., *The Quiet Eye: A Way of Looking at Pictures*, London: Aurum, 1982.

Kelly, T., *A Testament of Devotion*, New York: Harper, 1941.

Lidbetter, H., 'Quaker meeting houses 1670–1850', *Architectural Review* 99 (April 1946), pp. 99–116.

–, *The Friends Meeting House*, York: Sessions, 1961.

Port, M.H., *Six Hundred New Churches*, London: SPCK, 1961.

Prevallet, E.M., *Reflections on Simplicy*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 244, 1982.

Pugin, A.W.N., *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, London: Henry C. Bohm, 1853.

Sefton, R., 'The Church in North America', in Frere-Cook, G. (ed.), *The Decorative Arts of the Christian Church*, London: Cassell, 1972, pp. 206-207.

Smith, S.A., 'Alfred Waterhouse: Civic Grandeur', in Fawcett, J. (ed.), *Seven Victorian Architects*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1976, pp. 102-21.

Southall, K.H., *Our Quaker Heritage: Early Meeting Houses Built Prior to 1720 and in Use Today*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1974.

Summerson, J., *Georgian London*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978.

Tolles, F.B., *Meeting House and Counting House: the Quaker Merchant's of Colonial Philadelphia 1683–1703*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

Whitmire, C., *Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity*, Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2001.

Wills, J., *Hints to Trustees of Chapel Property and Chapel Keepers' Manual*, Derby: published by the Author, 3rd edn, n.d.

Winchester, A., 'The Significance of Pilgrimage', *The Friend*, 4 June 1993.

–, 'Swarthmoor Hall, History and Tradition: The Making of a Quaker Mecca', *Regional Bulletin*, New Series 10, Lancaster University: Centre for North West Regional Studies, 1996.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Roger Homan is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Brighton. His postgraduate and doctoral studies were in politics and sociology but his more recent work has been in ethics. He is interested in aspects of Christian art and architecture and his book, *The Art of the Sublime*, was recently published by Ashgate.

Mailing address: Roger Homan, University of Brighton, Falmer, East Sussex BN1 9PH, England. Email: r.homan@brighton.ac.uk.