

A testimony to the grace of God in the life of
Kathleen Wigham
30 Dec 1919 to 23 Sept 2010

Kathleen Derbyshire was born in Blackburn into a large family. The father was a herbalist, and this proved crucial. Their doctor had bad news: this child was unlikely ever to walk. Her parents, however, using their healing skills, literally took matters into their own hands and in spite of the demands of the other children and the business, night and day they massaged baby Kathleen until her leg was straight and strong. In after years she felt she had been, as they say, 'saved to serve', and one form of service was using the natural healing arts she had first learnt at home and in her work in a health shop. In later life she would offer simple massage or suggest natural remedies, and became a member of the Friends Fellowship of Healing.

She also learned her ethical principles at home, growing up a pacifist and a vegetarian. In World War Two Kathleen was drafted into work at a munitions factory. She refused to accept this, and then refused to pay the fine incurred. Accordingly in 1942 she was committed to Strangeways prison in Manchester, where like many other conscientious objectors she was treated with contempt, degradation and cruelty. Being a vegetarian made matters worse, for she repeatedly sent back the meat meals. Kathleen was threatened that she could be kept in a mental institution for life and never see her mother again. She was in fact released, but that terrible fortnight coloured her life. The story can be read in some Quaker peace documents and is recorded in the Imperial War Museum. A full page feature in the local paper, the *Blackpool Gazette*, appeared in 1995 explaining why Kathleen was not exactly celebrating the 50th anniversary of VE Day as a military glory. It told of her experience in Strangeways and her Quaker beliefs. The interviewer wrote "She speaks softly, radiating a calm and peace."

So was nurtured the peace campaigner and Aldermaston marcher. On one amazing occasion in 1965 Kathleen found herself standing beside the 89 year old Bertrand Russell on the plinth of Nelson's column, at a gathering about the Vietnam war, reciting one of her own poems, a heartrending plea for the mothers of Vietnam.

Kathleen became a home tutor to children with learning and other difficulties. This was work she loved. She would patiently spend weeks and months lovingly earning the trust of these difficult children, and received much love in return. Together with others working in this field, she helped to create the system of sign language still used with such children, Maketon. The name combined the initials of the founding group, she being the K.

Our Friend had joined the Society of Friends when she was 24. In 1962, in her 40s she married Wilfrid Wigham, a Quaker and a member of the Independent Labour Party. He died fifteen years later.

What was she like? A simply spoken, down to earth Lancashire lass who enjoyed company, jokes, children, outings, writing and painting.

To the end of her life, Kathleen insisted that her local Meeting make an annual collection for Quaker Peace and Service, later QPSW. As for her own personal generosity, it was famously spread across many good causes, including other Quaker work such as Woodbrooke and the Quaker Tapestry. On one occasion the treasurer reported a donation to the local Meeting. 'Is this anonymous?' someone asked. 'She usually is' was the twinkling reply.

In 2004, celebrating her 60 years as a Quaker, Kathleen wrote:

"If I have sat in Quaker Meeting for Worship all these sixty years and have not gathered in grace, I have not only been wasting my time, but also our dear Lord's time as well. How the hours of waiting and listening strengthen one! As I grow older and my eyesight begins to fade, I would not be anything but for the discipline of Meeting for Worship. What I have gained holds me together now and always - the grace and love of God".

Kathleen came to Blackpool Meeting in 1984, having previously attended Bunhill Fields among other Meetings. It was often remarked that Meeting for Worship was never the same without Kathleen: her very presence brought spiritual depth. In her last years she was housebound, but always 'kept the meeting' at home, where every Sunday morning she would imagine herself in the meeting room and focus upon one of the Advices and Queries for her worship. We treasured her and are proud that she was one of us.

Blackpool Quaker Meeting
Lancashire Central and North Area Meeting
2010