

Quaker Centre Gathering 2018

- By Dr Liz Rolls -

Being a Director on the Board of the Penn Club carries many obligations but there are also some very rewarding aspects to this role, one of which was attending the annual Quaker Centre Gathering held this February at the Glenthorne Guesthouse in Grasmere. Glenthorne was an ideal setting, offering participants peaceful Quaker hospitality of simple accommodation and delicious food, set against the stunning backdrop of the snow-capped hills of the Lake District. They even provided glimpses of a red squirrel!



Looking towards Tarn Crag and High Rise

The Penn Club played an important role in organising this year's event. Fergal Crossan, our General Manager, and Margaret Burt, a fellow Director, worked hard alongside Teresa Riley from Friends Meeting House and liaised with Terry Winterton, Friend in Residence at Glenthorne, to create an enjoyable and informative Gathering arranged over three days.



QCG 2018 organisers

The purpose of these Gatherings is to support the work of Quaker Centres – that is, those Centres with a 'business' dimension, for example through letting rooms or offering accommodation – and 36 participants from 14 Centres across the UK attended this year [a welcome increase on last year's Gathering]. Participants were drawn from amongst those involved in the running of the Centres as well as Trustees and Directors holding responsibility for governance.



QCG 2018 participants

The Gathering offered support to the work of Centres in two ways, firstly, through 'input' and secondly through the 'opportunities for networking' and informal discussions about shared issues of interest.

The 'Input'

Our first day - which had meant for some quite extensive travel to the Lakes - involved a 'settling in' – to our accommodation, and then to a *Welcome* to each other through a lively warm-up exercise, and hearing details about each Centre progress since last year's Gathering. During this time, Terry was able to tell us about 'The Welcome project' - an initiative started by Glenthorne trustees to provide short respite holidays to groups of asylum seekers, refugees and those made destitute when their asylum claim fails. [If you are interested in knowing more about this initiative please see:

<https://thefriend.org/article/the-welcome-project>]

After breakfast on the second day, we had two excellent sessions addressing issues of concern to Centres. Our first speaker was Robert McCracken QC, a Barrister at Lincolns Inn and a member of the Westminster meeting, who led us - with energy and humour - through what could be a very daunting and dry subject: the implications for Quaker Centres of the EU *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) that is coming into force in May 2018. Robert outlined the GDPR for us before focussing upon its fundamental principles and how Centres can meet these. No doubt we will be hearing more about this over the next few months – although I was aware that no-one, including myself, asked about the implications that leaving the EU will have on the UK's participation in this legislation.

After refreshments, our second speaker, Dr Nicholas Burton Senior Lecturer in Strategy and Corporate Responsibility from the Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University gave an excellent lecture entitled '*The Quakers: A forgotten model of good governance*'. He took us through the extensive range of past Quaker businesses across all sectors describing why they were successful [because they were based on principles of trust, integrity and surveillance] before reflecting on the reasons why they had declined [as a result of Quaker influence diminishing as a result of floatation, incorporation, merger, take-over, nationalisation or business failure]. Finally he was able to draw out, from current good practice as exemplified by Scott Bader, new models of governance. He recommended several books including Mike King's 2014 '*Quakernomics: An Ethical Capitalism*' published by Anthem Press.

After a well-earned break and an opportunity to enjoy some of the delights of the surrounding environment, we reconvened into *Discussion Groups*. The 'Trustees/Directors' group that I joined was very helpful in identifying some of the common issues that these roles share - despite differences in the work of the Centres that were represented - including the presence and contribution of non-Quaker Board members to the work of a Quaker business.

Our first Gathering on the third day was a lively *Question and Answer* session led by Paul Parker from Friends House in which a small panel comprising himself, Teresa Riley also from Friends House, and

Sandra Berry from Woodbrooke invited discussion and gave considered responses to questions posed by the participants.



The Q & A Session

Finally, the closing session involved a review of this year's Gathering as well as disclosing the plans for next year's Gathering – to be held in Sheffield.

Opportunities for networking

Alongside this stimulating programme were plenty of opportunities for informal networking – during an after dinner informal get-together over drinks on our first evening, over refreshment breaks, and during the excellent meals provided by Glenthorne.



Chatting over breakfast

The 'Buddy' system that was initiated last year - where two Centres provide support to each other - had worked to varying degrees, but was taken up with greater enthusiasm and commitment amongst this year's participants, perhaps influenced in part by Nicholas Burton's outlining the benefits to networks/mentoring to those early Quaker businesses.

Impressions of a non-Quaker Director

As a new non-Quaker Director [elected in Autumn 2017], the Gathering provided me with a wonderful opportunity to 'immerse' myself in many aspects of Quaker faith and business practice. I valued talking to different Meeting House Centre staff and learning about how they manifested Quaker values in their setting, and it also helped me think more fully about what my role is, along with the other Board members and our General Manager and staff, in running the Penn Club *as a profit-making business* according to Quaker business values. One important lesson for me from Nicholas Burton's

history of Quaker business was that it is not 'profit' of itself that is the issue, but what you do with it! Sustaining a profit-making business ethically was central to the early Quaker businesses in order to provide value to customers/members, ensure employee welfare, and maintain good governance whilst maintaining sufficient funds to meet the operational and capital costs. I hope that I am now better informed about these issues to enable me to contribute creatively, alongside my fellow Directors, to the current work and future sustainability of the Penn Club.