

Southern
East Anglia
Meeting



Waterhead Hotel, Watercolour

John Kay

Newsletter

SOUTHERN EAST ANGLIA QUAKER MEETING

January - March 2026

Editorial	2
Meetings for Worship	2
Area Meeting Notes and Quotes	3
Area Meeting dates for 2026	4
Quaker Earthcare Gathering 2025	4
John Kay and the Newsletter	6
Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) High Leigh Conference Centre 3-5th October 2025	7
Tales from Layer Breton burial ground	8
Our Newsletter	9
SEAQ Book Group	10

SEAQM c/o Colchester Quaker Meeting House
6 Church Street, Colchester CO1 1NF

Email address: AMClerk@essexsuffolkquakers.org

Website: www.essexsuffolkquakers.org

Meetings for Worship

CLACTON

Meeting for Worship: Sunday 10:30 am
liz.prockter@gmail.com

COLCHESTER

Meeting for Worship Sunday 10:30 am
Meeting for reflection:
Wednesday 12 noon
Clerks: Paul Campion:
pwp.campion@gmail.com
John Greenwood:
jg.greenwood@btinternet.com
Chris Samuel:
christophersamuel1955@hotmail.com
Informal Bring-and-Share Lunch after
Meeting for Worship on the last Sunday of
every month.
All age worship (provision for children)
First Sunday of month.
Ian Brown fourbrowns4@btinternet.com

EARLS COLNE

Meeting for Worship:
Sunday 10:30 am
Clerk: Jenny Kay
earlscolne@essexsuffolkquakers.org

HARWICH/MISTLEY

Worshipping Group Meetings for
Worship on first and third Sundays are
held at the home of a local Friend during
winter. Please contact Rebecca for further
details:
rebeccajoanneleek@gmail.com

SUDBURY

Meeting for Worship:
Sunday 10.30 am
Thursday 12:30 pm
Catherine Moffat
cathmoffat@yahoo.co.uk

WIVENHOE

Worshipping group Meetings for Worship,
first Thursday of the month, 7.00pm
1 Woodcutters, Littlefield. Wivenhoe,
CO7 9LW
Anne Watkinson
anne.watkinson@icloud.com

SEAQM Online Meeting for Worship:

Sylvia Jeffcock
07952 286538

FUNERAL CONTACT

Kate Powis 07939 223830

Editorial

Becky Hallewell

Hello Friends

It's been a while and we've lost the warm and wonderful John Kay. I had known John for many years. But as we worked together to produce this newsletter, I had the pleasure of feeling his wonderful warmth and kindness remotely but regularly.

I have also lost my lovely Dad and write this only days after his funeral. Of course these are sad, sad times but there is also beauty and wondrous light.

My Dad was 96 years old when he died, and living fully right to the end. An end that saw him finish his all-important Christmas cards, look forward to celebrating the festive period with us, and to our trip with him to see the Northern lights in Scotland.

So much was positive. All his grandchildren got to say goodbye before he died and sang carols to him round his bed. And I managed to stay night and day at the hospital as he lay dying, right to the end. I stroked him, talked to him, prayed for him and mostly played him glorious, glorious music. I never left, and in doing so, came to feel how the leaving of this life is not a whit less important than all the hoo-ha around a person's arrival into it.

I had the profound joy of knowing I had done all I could to make his time on earth meaningful and happy. And as I stayed with him, I had the rare but precious experience of knowing that there was nothing else I should be doing and nowhere else I was meant to be, other than being with him on the final part of his earthly journey.

Someone read me this poem and I'd love to share it:

My Symphony by William Henry Channing

To live content with small means.
To seek elegance rather than luxury,
and refinement rather than fashion.
To be worthy not respectable,
and wealthy not rich.
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently,
act frankly, to listen to stars, birds, babes,
and sages with open heart, to bear all cheerfully,
do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
In a word, to let the spiritual,
unbidden and unconscious,
grow up through the common.
This is to be my symphony.

Area Meeting Notes and Quotes

Combined from the minutes of the Area Meetings held at Clacton on 14.09.2025 and at Colchester 15.11.2025

Jenny Kay

Representatives were present from Clacton, Colchester, Earls Colne and Sudbury at Clacton, from Colchester, Earls Colne and Sudbury at Colchester.

News of Friends

Death of John Kay John Kay, long-time member of Colchester and Earls Colne Meetings, died in the St Helena Hospice on 11 September at 6 pm, aged 90. Angela Kenny, Quaker chaplain, was with him in his last peaceful moments. The funeral took place at Colchester Crematorium on Wednesday 15 October, and his ashes were interred in the Quaker burial ground in Roman Road on 5 November following a short Meeting for Worship.

Marriages: Two meetings for worship for the solemnisation of marriage were recorded. In Sudbury, Sara Alison Merrit and Michael Stuart Thompson in May, and in Colchester, between Kate Mary Powis and John Henry Grey in August.

Chaplain at Essex University, Susan Rhodes, has been appointed to this role.

Appointments

For as long as she is able, Sylvia will continue to serve as clerk until December 2026. I will continue to act as a clerk's support. Mike Thompson of Sudbury is now a Pastoral Friend.

Financial Matters

Trustees Annual Report and Accounts for 2024.

In September, Martin Rayner presented a summary. The full accounts, circulated before the meeting, were accepted, Martin and the Trustees were thanked, and Streets(Whittles) were appointed as Independent Examiners for the next year.

Record of Support for ASRDC

(Action de Solidarité pour la Reconstruction et le Développement Communautaire). AM authorised the Treasurer to pay the £10,000 that Sudbury had offered from the Tony Wheeler Fund, endorsed by the Trustees. An update was received in

November, Pastor Innocent confirmed that they have held their first workshop. He has provided photographs of the event included in this Newsletter. Sudbury Friends have adopted this concern, and they are asked to be the main contact with ASRDC.

Sound Immersion experience. The treasurer was authorised to cover the cost this one day event which took place in August.

Future of Southern East Anglia Area Meeting

This item was introduced with a recommendation from Clerk to Trustees and the AM clerking team, that SEAQM be laid down. Clause 6 of our Governing Document states that if the area meeting deems it necessary or advisable, it can seek to dissolve the Area Meeting or amalgamate with another area meeting with agreement by Meeting for Sufferings. Although financially secure the AM does not have enough Friends in place to function properly as an Area Meeting and little prospect of finding enough Friends willing and able to fulfil the necessary posts.

The Clerking team and Clerk to Trustees have held discussions with Oliver Waterhouse from Quaker Life and Jenny Gant, our Local Development Worker to see what options are open to us.

The meeting authorised the group to continue these discussions and to approach our neighbouring area meetings to investigate the possibilities of merging or transferring local meetings to different area meetings. This is regarded as an opportunity for reorganisation and a way of developing more appropriate structures to support our local meetings.

In October, fourteen Friends from all six Area Meetings in East Anglia met at Colchester Meeting House, facilitated by Jenny Gent, Lesley Richards and Ollie Waterhouse. The day was to explore governance changes in other parts of Britain and consider possibilities of working together across East Anglia. The gathering recorded a minute asking willing AMs to appoint two Friends each to come together as a group in March or April 2026. This would be without commitment to any proposal arising from the group's considerations. The group would work over a two-year period with possibly six meetings. SEAQM agreed at the November meeting.

The suggested purpose of the working group was set out as follows:

1. *To explore the opportunities for rationalising the governance arrangements for Quakers across East Anglia.*
2. *To develop proposals for informal and formal ways that the Quaker charity and community structure in East Anglia can be modified.*
3. *To engage with the current area meetings in a variety of ways to bring proposals and seek discernment / agreement to proceed.*

Nominations Committee

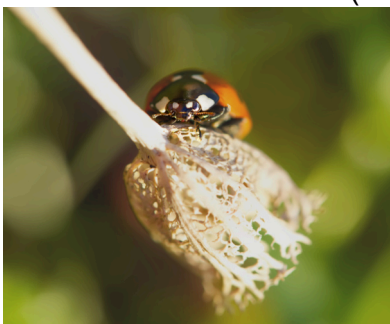
We recognised the need for a Nominations Committee. It is Quaker practice that Friends are nominated for a role through a process of discernment rather than simply volunteering. See QFP 3.22 We considered how to proceed. Colchester and Sudbury had known in advance that this was on the agenda and brought three names willing to serve. These Friends were appointed. An expression of interest from a friend in Earls Colne would be considered by that LM. The offers of support to the committee made by two Friends with past experience were accepted.

Keeping our faith in difficult times

Our attention was drawn to the poster in the noticeboard outside Colchester Meeting House, “In turbulent times and we had heard the reading “How can we walk with a smile into the dark? We must learn to put our trust in God, and the leadings of the Spirit” QFP 29.01 Reference was made to the peacemaking issues raised in the ecumenical appeal made by Churches in Scotland and how to address them. (QF&P 24.09) The clerking team was asked to arrange a meeting to explore our responses.

Area Meeting dates for 2026

Saturday 7th February Colchester (blended)
Sunday 12th April Earls Colne
Saturday 6th June Sudbury
Sunday 13th September Clacton
Saturday 14th November Colchester(blended)



Quaker Earthcare Gathering 2025

24th to 27th October at The Hayes, Derbyshire

Epistle agreed as a minute at the concluding session on 27th October.

We are 114 Friends of all ages from Britain and continental Europe, gathered to explore how our Quaker faith and communities can help us to meet the Earth crisis with hope, strength, and compassion. Our time together has been deeply rooted in worship, and has included a children’s programme, a Quaker Quest session, workshops, discussions, practical activities, music, art and much more.

As we meet, Hurricane Melissa approaches Jamaica. Climate catastrophe is forecast to cause billions of human deaths this century amid ecological collapse and ongoing mass extinction.

Our residential is part of a year-long extended gathering process, braiding streams in our Quaker Earthcare engagement, especially the Living Witness worshipping community and the Quaker Support for Climate Action community. We have been blessed by the contributions of Quakers in Britain staff and committee members as organisers and participants. We have upheld Friends going through the courts for their Earthcare witness.

The extended gathering will continue to the end of 2025 and beyond, with online sessions and networks open to all Friends everywhere.

We are nourished by our deep-rooted corporate testimony on the Earth, by Yearly Meeting commitments over many years and the work of successive committees and groups.

This is our epistle in written form. But we are all epistles from the gathering, through the ministry of our lives, actions and relationships as well as words.

A thread through our gathering has been learning from the work of Vanessa Andreotti and the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, on practices for “hospicing modernity.” The words of poet Deena Metzger resonate with us:

There are those who want to set fire to our world,
We are in danger,
There is only time to move slowly,
There is no time not to love.

(These were the words shared in ministry in our meeting and agreed upon in the minutes. Deena Metzger's poem on her website reads "There are those who are trying to set fire to the world")

In our Quaker Quest session we considered the question:

What has been your journey of relationship and entanglement, of seeking to answer that of God in the other, of being shown our darkness and led to new life? How has it changed you? How does it still challenge you?

The gathering heard ministry from Friends experiencing "intensive struggle" with the brokenness and cruelty of modernity and its culture of uncaring. We are filled with admiration for those Friends' capacity to sustain themselves and those they love, and still to bring their witness to the world.

We carry fragilities and we are at different stages of grappling with our grief. We need to listen, support and uphold each other.

We feel a strong sense of gratitude to our children, present and absent, and everything they give us. We have heard that for young people, climate change is not 'change'. They have grown up with heatwaves and floods; "for us it feels normal, but it should not be normal." This is not how it is supposed to be, and it is frightening.

We joyfully celebrate the diversity of nature and are grateful for the time we have been able to spend in nature over the course of the gathering.

We have heard about the diversity of our experience and how our lives are entangled with the systems of modernity.

We all take different roles at different times. We can be mystics, activists, builders, upholders, artists, prophets and reconcilers. We are all of us a rainbow, and the colours move around. The spirit shows us where we are led.

We must ask ourselves what is mine to do, and what is my capacity? We can recognise all forms of courage – physical, emotional and spiritual. We uphold all Friends' contributions. We need all of it: those who are called to take nonviolent direct climate action; those who hold space for a shift in consciousness; those who lend practical support and spiritual presence to those undertaking climate action; those who show a path forwards through living out their witness through sustainable lifestyles; those who are working to strengthen community resilience; and those who work towards changing the policies and politics that maintain our broken system. We are more than the sum of our parts.

We have heard about the Palestinian concept of *sumud* or steadfastness: living every day in nonviolent resistance in the face of violence. We are asked to consider how we are called to bring travelling minutes back to our local meetings and beyond, to witness to the power of love and truth in the face of the climate crisis.

How does Quakerism need to change in these turbulent and uncertain times? We must live with the bravery of not knowing, of not having answers, of not having safety. We are like a caravan moving across the desert, with the vanguard leading the way, and the stragglers at the back who are grieving for what we are leaving behind. We need each other.

There are outliers here of all kinds who may feel lonely. Polarisation happens in our community. Quaker unity is not about consensus. It is about recognising the diversity as we are called to accompany each other on our spiritual leadings and journeys.

In small groups, we have considered how we can walk the talk: in our homes, in our meeting houses, in our property portfolio. How can we reinvigorate and fully resource our 2011 Canterbury Commitment to becoming a low-carbon, sustainable community? And other Yearly Meeting commitments since? We have heard strong calls for our Yearly Meeting to drive its commitments forward with adequate funding and programmes.

How can we support each other to progress towards sustainable lifestyles? We know that many elements of modern life such as taking flights and eating meat are not compatible with the future we want to see. We need to challenge ourselves and our society with gentle compassion to go further.

We need to ask questions about our corporate structures to understand how our money is being used. Work has been done on this and there is more work to do. We have been challenged to consider our own attitudes to money. If we knew we would lose all our assets in six weeks' time, what would we do? What stops us from doing it now?

We trust that further action, meditation and reflections will flow out of this gathering. We have heard how we can make a difference. Not every hurricane has to make landfall if we can nudge the direction of travel.

Caro Humphries and Pennie Quinton, clerks.

John Kay and the Newsletter

John offered to help produce the newsletter in 1990, when Valerie Graves was appointed editor. At that time, it was printed monthly on a Gestetner in Colchester Meeting House by Friends led by Marjorie Pollard after the Midweek Meeting.

Graphic design, along with drawing and painting, had always been part of John's life, from letterpress to computer design technology. He used these abilities in his service to the Quaker Meeting. It sustained him throughout his life. Initially, the sole graphic was on the front of the Newsletter, but as technology advanced, John was able to add more of his drawings and paintings, clip art, photographs submitted by contributors, and graphics captured from the internet. When the Gestetner finally went out of use, John bought a laser copier on a service contract and set up The Millrind Press, his not-for-profit printing and publishing business, claiming costs to produce the Newsletter. When the copier came to the end of its life, Inprint in Colchester took over the printing. All this time, the copies were produced in black and white and were available for distribution and collection from Colchester Meeting House. For years, John and I delivered the Sudbury copies to Olwen Titchmarsh in Bures, an opportunity for talking about Quaker matters with a seasoned Friend who became very dear to us.

It was the contact with others through the Newsletter which meant so much to John. Over the 30 years of working closely with Valerie Graves, a strong, supportive bond developed. Another seasoned Friend who became very dear to us. In 2020, John designed, printed, and bound a book, 'Timely Texts', containing many of the articles Valerie had contributed.

In 2020, when COVID-19 limited how we could meet, major changes occurred in the distribution of the Newsletter, setting the current pattern: circulation by email. John printed and posted copies to those who could not receive them any other way. The benefit was that the Newsletter was seen and printed in colour, and the circulation was extended to include many with past connections to the Meeting. The Newsletter became highly acclaimed.

From July 2018, cancer was back again in John's mouth. His life became a round of hospital appointments, scans and surgeries. His love for and commitment to the Newsletter enabled him to continue producing the 11 editions a year without fail. John enjoyed the regular email communication with Becky and the pleasure of putting together each edition. He valued the contact with the Friends who sent in contributions and photos, as well as the contact he had with those who received the email copies. It was an important part of his Quaker life; one he sustained through his difficulties. He had started on a September 2025 edition in the weeks before he went into the St Helena Hospice, where he died.

Jenny Kay

John and Jenny Kay



Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) High Leigh Conference Centre 3-5th October 2025

'Quakers aren't very good at change. We want to change the world, and we're happy to change our individual selves, but change our systems? Oh boy. Please bear with us. We're a work in progress.'

For a detailed account of this meeting, please see the coverage in *The Friend*, which is still available online. <https://thefriend.org/article/meeting-for-sufferings-octobers-residential-part-one-friday-saturday> and <https://thefriend.org/article/meeting-for-sufferings-octobers-residential-part-two-saturday-sunday> If you'd like a deeper dive into the papers and minutes, it's all on the Quaker.org website <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/mfs-2025-10-follow-up-package>

In the meantime, here is my personal take on what turned out to be full, inspiring weekend:

As we gathered on the Friday evening, I sensed Friends were in a somewhat sombre mood. Many had had long journeys. It was raining and it had started to feel like autumn. In the calling papers we had read of yet more Friends around the country being arrested for acting under concern, for their faith. It was meant to be a blended meeting but we were frustrated by an early IT glitch. Over the evening meal, conversations turned, sadly, to an all too familiar topic: Friends feeling isolated, unappreciated even, and overburdened by the multi-task of running their Meetings. One Friend, moved to vent their frustration, opined that, despite the clear exhortation in *Advices and Queries* (15&34), "*Friends don't have the slightest interest in our governance, our administration or our action, political or otherwise*". A bit harsh perhaps, but Quaker plain-speak nonetheless. Another, oft-repeated, refrain was "*Where have all the children gone?*"

And yet, and yet, and yet, from the slough of despond something miraculous happened. Something I have experienced many times before. Whenever a "critical mass" of Quakers gathers in community, it does not take long for it to become transformational. Some might call it the Holy Spirit moving amongst us. Others might say it is the spirit of Ubuntu, enabling us to go beyond our individual selves and embrace the 'I am because we are.' We might ponder what the number in that critical mass is. Is it two? Twenty? Two hundred? Whatever. When Quakers gather, something happens. After all, isn't this why we are a "gathered people." And why meeting houses are called meeting houses!

This occasion was no exception. Soon we were feeling refreshed, energised and bubbling with ideas for the weekend ahead, seeking out the Simple, the Radical, the Spiritual.

Early business was the "signing off," of the merging of the Scottish AMs into a new body, Quakers in Scotland. In the margins, we heard about preparatory moves by Quakers in the Northwest and in Yorkshire to start a similar journey.

We then spent some time thinking about the theological & community aspects of online & blended worship. Blended meetings had had their beginnings before COVID lockdown, but the enforced "atomisation" of our Meetings had accelerated the process. We were asked to consider the questions:

- How might being in different places affect our discernment of the Spirit among us?
- In blended meetings, are we one worshipping community, or two?
- How do we best facilitate becoming a gathered meeting?

It led to an interesting, exploratory discussion. On the one hand, it can feel that the online experience is qualitatively different from that mediated by physical proximity. On the other hand, blended meetings open the opportunity of connecting with isolated Friends, and Friends worldwide. Just as some of us in SEAQM have done over the last few months with Friends in the DRC. And my experience earlier this year of blended meetings in British Columbia, where Friends are scattered over a huge area, showed me how well it can work. A Friend pointed out that early Quakers had to adapt to change, and move to permanent, fixed, meeting houses. Another Friend reminded us that Quakers were once renowned for being in the vanguard of technical and societal change. Where are we now? Are we taking a lead or playing catch-up? Another Friend, reflecting on the demographics in the room, suggested this might after all be a generational thing...

My takeaways were three-fold. One, that we cannot put the genie back in the bottle. We must be prepared to embrace new technologies. Two, the role of Elders and Pastoral Friends is central, in the sense that they need to be mindful of not only those Friends who are in the room but also beyond the four walls of the Meeting House. And three, we cannot skimp on the technology. It is hoped that guidance on good practice might be further developed; and blended/online meetings are likely to be covered in the next edition of QFP.

Quakers in Britain is creating a new strategy to support Quaker communities over the next five years. The strategy, which builds on Our Faith in the Future, will be called Approaches for the Future: Faith, Inclusion and Growth. Quaker Life (QL) leads it. We had the early opportunity to take part in the consultation process (Anyone can similarly contribute to the consultation by going to <https://www.quaker.org.uk/communities/development-work/future-approaches>)

The QL team invited us to look ten years into the future, to think about what Quaker communities might look like in a world in which Friends were thriving. Not necessarily the broad strokes – not ‘We will all love each other,’ but concrete ideas. The team offered all sorts of creative activities to help get us thinking: building a Quaker future out of Lego; or painting a picture; or drafting a newsletter from the future. Some tantalising visions of our future emerged. For example, meeting houses replaced by a touring double-decker bus: ‘We are holding the Meeting in the bus, where it’s needed, and when it’s needed.’ Or our Meeting Houses and burial grounds, and other Quaker land, have been mapped and connected by signposted pathways and pilgrim routes. Or, and here is a radical one, our meeting houses will look like a child has visited and enjoyed themselves sometime in the last 300 years. And finally, that all Friends are familiar with the Quaker business method. This might seem obvious, but the fact is that, currently, it is not the case, and that is seen as one of the risks to the cohesion and indeed future of Quakers in Britain.

This exercise inevitably led to further interesting discussion over coffee, over lunch and on walks. What exactly are Quaker Meeting Houses for? Are they meant solely to be places for personal sanctuary and spiritual wellbeing. Or are they wellsprings for action in our communities. Or are they meant to be both?

Robert Parkes, November 2025



Tales from Layer Breton burial ground

Ellen Louisa Barritt - A Life Less Ordinary

Ellen Barritt’s headstone states that she was the eldest daughter of Walter and Annie Barritt. This unusual addition to a Quaker headstone caught my attention, and I wanted to know more.

In the 1871 census, Ellen is reported as being four years old and living with her parents at Aldham Hall, where her father farmed 254 acres. She had four siblings, and the family employed four servants. It sounds like a comfortable, secure childhood, of which nothing further has so far been discovered.

A marriage record for Ellen states that she married on the second of August 1885 in a Church of England ceremony at St. Marylebone church, Marylebone, London, when she was twenty-three years old. Her husband was Herbert William Hart, a widowed civil engineer seventeen years her senior (although according to her death record and the 1881 census, she had added a few years to her age on her marriage declaration!)

By the time of the 1891 census, the couple were living in Brighton and had two children, Sybil aged 3 and Howard aged 1. They employed one servant, a sign of middle-class prosperity.

It is interesting that although Ellen had apparently ‘married out’, both her children received a Quaker education. Her daughter, Sybil, who later became a suffragette, was educated at the Quaker school in Saffron Walden and was married in a Quaker ceremony to Andrew White. Ellen and Herbert’s son, Howard, was also educated at the Friend’s school and died in 1919 in Russia whilst serving with the Yorkshire regiment.

It seems that all did not go well with the marriage and it appears the couple separated, as Ellen remarried bigamously in December of 1902, at All Saints church in Walworth, Surrey. Her new husband was Walter Cook Moorfoot, a widower, whose occupation was that of a butcher. It appears that she may have been under the impression that her first husband was deceased at the time of her second marriage, indicating the likely separation. This

was indicated in a newspaper report of 1912, where Ellen summoned Walter for the theft of a piano in November 1912. which he had given her as a wedding gift. Ellen stated to the court that she had been married to Walter since March 1905, 'her former marriage to him having been found to be invalid owing to her first husband being alive'. Obviously, her second marriage also had issues in October of the same year, as, when she returned from a break in Brighton, Walter had had the locks changed.

Ellen appears to have earned her own living both during her second marriage and the subsequent period as a travelling drapery saleswoman.

She is next on record as being admitted to the London Workhouse in August 1915. Her father Walter, then of Moat Farm, Copford, is given as her next of kin. She was transferred to the London County Asylum in Norwood, where she died on 10th September 1915. Her cause of death was given as Graves' disease, the result of an overactive thyroid gland, and her death was registered by the asylum medical officer. It should be borne in mind that women at this time were admitted to asylums for social transgressions as well as 'insanity'. So passed an independent-minded woman, unafraid to seek justice and to live on her own terms. memorialised in a quaker burial ground as a daughter and under her maiden name, she returned home after a life less ordinary.

By Helen Greenaway

Our Newsletter

Friends, thank you for reading this far. This is our newsletter, and we need as much content from Friends in the area as possible. Have you read a good book? Do you have any practical ideas that would help other Friends? Have you taken a photo that would bless others? These are just a few ideas. We all have gifts we can share with others in our Area. It is our hope that you will take the time to send anything to:

beckyhallewell@hotmail.com

Please let us know what you would like to see in the newsletter, what was of interest to you in this edition? We want to honour John and keep the newsletter he built to help bind the Area together. How can we make it stronger? Do you have memories of John or how the newsletter has helped you? Please let us know.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve.



Sudbury Meeting House Fox 400



SEAQ BOOK GROUP

A small group of Friends met on Zoom on 22.01.2026 for the first meeting of the East Anglian Quaker Book Group. The meeting began and ended in silence, and discussion took place in a reflective setting. The book under discussion was *Mary Magdalene: The Woman Whom Jesus Loved* by Robin Griffith-Jones, an Anglican priest and Rector of the Temple Church in London. The book explores the figure of Mary Magdalene through the New Testament, later Christian traditions and their reception in theology, art and popular culture. Griffith-Jones examines how Mary has been understood and reimagined across history, engaging both biblical scholarship and later interpretative traditions, and reflects on what these portrayals reveal about changing attitudes to authority, gender and discipleship.

Discussion raised questions about the book's approach. Friends noted some uncertainty about how it should be read, as Griffith-Jones moves between biblical studies, theology and reception history without always making clear which methodology he is using. While some recognised this as typical of writing for a general readership, others found the book dense, which affected engagement with its arguments.

Friends reflected on the many ways Mary Magdalene has been interpreted over time. Several New Testament Marys were noted as having been conflated, often in service of later social concerns. Mary Magdalene was seen as readily shaped to meet the needs of subsequent generations, becoming a symbolic figure rather than a historically grounded one.

Although the book seeks to reclaim Mary from damaging stereotypes, Friends noted the risk of replacing these with new and equally problematic narratives. Some questioned whether such reclamation can still involve a sense of ownership, in which Mary continues to be used rather than heard as a first-century Jewish woman. This raised questions about whether she is asked to bear too much symbolic weight, particularly when the New Testament and early church already contain clear examples of women exercising authority and agency. Others were keen that Mary, as a highly symbolic figure in the Western world, be redeemed from the harmful stereotypes ascribed to her.

Friends also spoke about early Christian diversity and the development of the church. As structures became more established, patterns of leadership emerged that narrowed who was recognised as inspired, with some voices, including those of women close to Jesus, becoming increasingly marginalised. This prompted reflection on Quaker understandings of authority and inspiration.

Griffith-Jones makes reference to Gnostic texts, and these, especially the Gospel of Thomas, featured in discussion. Friends found the language of its closing saying, in which Mary is to be "made male" in order that she may become a living spirit, challenging. This raised questions about identity and gender in both the early church and contemporary society, particularly the tension between valuing difference and sustaining a sense of shared humanity. Friends noted the importance of celebrating diversity of identity, as well as recognising the shared humanity of all.

The group further explored the context of Gnostic texts, and how they reflect disputes about authority within early Christianity. This potentially makes them difficult to treat as straightforward historical portraits of Mary Magdalene, even where they present her more positively. Some Friends nonetheless expressed sympathy with Gnostic communities as marginal voices in tension with an increasingly centralised church, drawing comparisons with seventeenth-century radical religious movements, including Quakers, while remaining cautious about the theological claims involved.

Finally, discussion opened onto wider questions of gender and feminism today, including the recovery of marginalised voices across many fields. In this context, *Mary Magdalene: The Woman Whom Jesus Loved* was seen as part of a broader re-examination of whose voices have been heard, and whose have been overlooked or silenced.

The group plans to meet again, and details of the next meeting and book will be shared in due course.

By Thomas Bridges

If you would like to join the reading group, please ask for details.

