



# Q V A News Winter/Spring 2014

**Quaker Voluntary Action**

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The theme of the 2013 Working retreats was "Pilgrimage". Quakers, of course, have pilgrimage sites in Cumbria "1652 country" & in 2013 QVA returned to Cumbria for the Swarthmoor retreats as well as visiting other Quaker centres around Europe & the Middle East.

"Pilgrimage" implies physical movement, but it also connects to the inner journey towards meaning in our everyday lives, responding to the question, "What canst thou say?", the movement away from opinions, "normal" ways of thinking, habitual attitudes & towards creating space for the "promptings of love & truth in our hearts".

## Pilgrimage



*"Pilgrimage to the place of the wise is to find escape from the flame of separateness". Rumi*

*"We always know which is the best road to follow, but we follow only the road that we have become accustomed to". Paulo Coelho*

These & other quotes were sent to participants to aid preparation for the physical & spiritual journey of the retreats.

Participants report in this newsletter on projects in Ramallah, Congenies & Svartbacken, including their experience of pilgrimage, whether to holy sites, in the mindful fellowship of their shared tasks or in the reflection & learning of the group experience.

"What is my journey?" - an open question we each face on our daily pilgrimage. Our 2014 project season will continue this theme and the dates for the retreats are given on page 4.

The QVA working retreat in October in Palestine/Israel was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. Twelve of us from various corners of Britain (and Moscow) stayed in Jerusalem, Jifna (a village north of Ramallah), Auja (a village in the Jordan Valley), and Tel Aviv. Whilst in Jifna, we visited Al-Jib (a village between Ramallah and Jerusalem), Nablus, and Efrat (an Israeli settlement south of Bethlehem), as well as Ramallah.

The project had three main elements: learning, working, and worshipping.

We learned a lot from listening to people: a Quaker who lives in a settlement outside Jerusalem; the deputy principal of Ramallah Friends School and some older students there; a former employee of the American Friends Service Committee; the administrative assistant of Friends International

## Ramallah: A Once-in-a-Lifetime Experience

Centre in Ramallah; the public relations manager of an educational & cultural centre in a refugee camp in Nablus; & the director of the Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange.



The Wall at Qalandia

In Efrat we had a lively discussion with a settler, who protested: "Calling us settlers dehumanises us. I want you to see me as a human being. I am a resident of the community of Efrat."

At an eco-centre in Auja we learned how the Israelis are extracting so much of the water from springs & deep wells that

streams which used to irrigate Palestinian land have dried up.

When we were in Tel Aviv we went to visit two Israeli peace activists, Dorothy Naor of New Profile and Amos Gvirtz. Amos told us about the plight of Bedouin villagers in the Negev, where 35 "unrecognised" villages are scheduled for demolition.

In the course of the working retreat we learned about Palestinians being held in administrative detention in Israeli jails, harassment at checkpoints, house demolitions, uprooting of olive trees, settlements growing and taking over more and more Palestinian land, and farmers being attacked by settlers.

We had one particularly memorable learning experience. As we were leaving the Qalandia checkpoint on our way back to Ramallah

## Ramallah cont-d

we saw some boys throwing stones. We feared, or at least I did, that the Israeli soldiers would start firing tear gas or rubber-coated steel bullets. Fortunately for us they only fired empty tear gas canisters.

Interspersed with the learning, there were several days or half days of work. Whilst we were based in Jifna, we spent an afternoon tidying up the garden of Ramallah Friends Meeting House, a day picking olives in Al-Jib, & another half day picking olives in a garden in Al-Bireh, the eastern part of Ramallah which is actually a separate municipality. At the Auja Eco-Centre we spent a morning making mud bricks, plastering a wall, & planting spinach & carrots in the irrigated garden.



Mixing cement for bricks at Auja Eco-Centre

Each day, usually at the end of the day, there was time for worship and reflection. It was good to have these times together & to sense the presence of God in this conflict-ridden land or at least to discover some sort of spiritual connection between us.

The pilgrimage took us to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, Jacob's Well near Nablus, & the Mount of Temptation which overlooks the Jordan Valley. A group

## Congénies: Enjoying Community

A small, but creative & happy group of Quaker Voluntary Action made their own way in the middle of March by train, by plane & by campervan to the only purpose-built Quaker Meeting



House in France, Congénies, near Nîmes. The new wardens, Judy & Dave Kashoff were happy to be involved and we drafted them in full-time. Dave played the newly arrived piano with gusto!

The week began beautifully on Sunday morning with our introduction to the theme of pilgrimage. The Meeting for Worship with members & visitors which followed went more deeply into the theme.

**Team Work.** We were well prepared on Sunday after lunch & began in earnest Monday morning, uprooting self-seeding trees & painting the shutters. Each session was preceded by a "prologue" in which I presented a phrase to remember during our "awareness pause" on the hour when the church bells strike conveniently with a two minute pause – "Where is my attention?", "Attention without Judgement", "Stop & Listen". The "uprooters" had a taste of success with at least four stubborn ash trees but the palm trees proved too strong. We moved to the long garden wall & totally transformed it, removing the weeds. For people arriving it really is a first good impression! The cookery volunteers did a superb job. For our last meal, we were away at Aigues-Mortes all afternoon & a

kindly neighbour stepped in & provided a banquet.

**Free Time.** A mis-nomer! The group enjoyed staying together, We did an amazing sculpture walk, cycled to Sommières on the "Voie Verte", had a work session,

walked up to the windmills overlooking Calvisson (from where we saw the snowy Cévennes & the bright thread of the Mediterranean Sea), our last day picnic at Ambrussum (a Roman bridge on the Vidourle) & on to the mediaeval walled town of Aigues – Mortes.

**Retreat Sessions** were memorable. On our first day, we used the worship sharing process to share "What does pilgrimage mean to me?" Each Friend contributed personally & beautifully. On Monday, we were invited to be open to the present moment with the meditation "Opening Procedure". On Tuesday, each of us offered a "Special Announcement" wow!, Wednesday we enjoyed a Sophrology session led by Mauricette, a local Attender. She concluded with a prayerful text on "Gratitude". On Thursday, a tour de force French lesson by a local teacher who had spent a memorable year in Huddersfield!

**Social Times** were varied; "Around the piano" with Quaker songbooks, a DVD "Meetings with Remarkable Men" by Peter Brook, a portrait session – each of us doing a couple & leaving the surprising results on the Meeting Room door for future generations to see, a games session & our evaluation forms.

Richard Thompson

of us also visited the site beside the River Jordan where Jesus is supposed to have been baptised. All these places were overrun with tourists, so it was difficult to pray or worship. But at the baptismal site I felt that the Spirit was at work as I watched a French Catholic priest quietly baptising members of his flock one by one.

When we were staying in Jifna we

attended Meeting for Worship at Ramallah Friends Meeting House. We doubled the size of the Meeting & were made very welcome. Ramallah Friends are few but faithful. It's the faithfulness that counts. It is possible to live peaceable lives even in the midst of violent conflict, if our lives are rooted in worship.

Gordon Matthews

## Svartbacken: An Opportunity for Pilgrimage & Action.

I was one of seven British people who travelled to Svartbacken in Sweden for the Quaker Voluntary Action week at the end of July 2013. The experience of working in Sweden with other nationalities was for me a reminder that Quakerism is global.

Svartbacken Quaker Retreat Centre was inspired by the parents of Matt Ryberg who used to live opposite the Centre. Matt & Julia live on the farm just along the road from the Centre and they along with Jo put a lot of energy into ensuring our stay was enjoyable, rewarding & comfortable.

The Svartbacken week was advertised as an opportunity to help practically with enhancing woodland pathways & spiritually as a chance to walk the labyrinth. Both these aspects were important to my own pilgrimage.

As it turned out our practical help was not directed towards woodland pathways but we did help with weatherproofing and painting parts of Retreat centre, weeding the patio area, repairing steps, rebuilding the pond decking and waxing 50 bee hive frames. I valued the opportunity to learn a new skill whilst helping with the bee hive frames.

Part of the pilgrimage journey was to work as a team, not just on these practical tasks, but also helping cook meals & clearing the dining table afterwards. One of the tasty treats was the blueberries freshly picked from the bushes that grew in the woods around the Centre.

We worked part of every day, but also had free time and a retreat session when we explored aspects of pilgrimage. The free time and retreat sessions gave us valuable opportunities for relaxing and exploring the local area, being mindful of our pilgrimage journey. Two of the sessions that hold special memories for myself were the opportunity to walk the fabric labyrinth and a personal pilgrimage walk when I was sensitive to what I was treading on e.g. the working ants and plant life.



One day we went on a group pilgrimage between Rimbo Church and Finsta, where St Bridget (the patron saint of Sweden) was probably born. I valued our shared companionship along the way.

We had all been asked to take something with us that could be shared at epilogue. These were special times for me when we were blessed with the gifts of other pilgrims. Music was one particular gift and we were treated to live recorder music from two of our group, violin music from Julia Ryberg & her friend as well as Swedish folk songs from Julia's son & partner.

To conclude, I refer to the QVA programme which mentions the benefits to be gleaned from a QVA retreat which are: Community, Friendship, Spirituality, Learning, Practical, Rewarding and Fun. By reading just a few of the comments made at our feedback session of this week, it achieved all it set out to be:

- "A unique opportunity to experience how amazing other people are and to share in what everyone gives."
- "Satisfaction in jobs done that will make a difference to running this place."
- "Some wonderful space to just be, time to calm the mind, to feel peace, love and joy within and beauty."
- "Opportunities to learn and be companions".

Thank-you QVA, Jo our facilitator for the week, fellow pilgrims and Matt and Julia Ryberg for a great week.

Jean Lyon



### Standing by our commitment to low carbon

At Canterbury two years ago Britain Yearly Meeting resolved to embark on a great adventure – perhaps its greatest adventure ever – to become a 'low carbon sustainable community.'

QVA seeks to play its part and has become involved through membership of the Canterbury Commitment Group (CCG) set up by Meeting for Sufferings to take this resolution forward.

Through a survey of 39 Local Meetings, CCG has reviewed where Friends are at, and is developing a strategy for new action with a simple method for assessing progress.

CCG will host a residential gathering of Friends at Swanwick in Derbyshire (7-9 March 2014) to discuss how we may stand by our commitment. (for details, please visit <http://www.quaker.org.uk/canterbury-commitment>)

I invite you, dear reader, to become involved in this work as you feel led e.g. by coming to the gathering in March next year or by contributing your thoughts and ideas of what QVA may do. I can be contacted at [mail@qva.org](mailto:mail@qva.org) or on 01484 687139.

Martin Smith

# Support Peace Building

Conflict in the Middle East is surely one of the big peace issues of our time. QVA is playing a part in peace building in the region through its support and fundraising for Ramallah Friends Meeting and by providing working retreats in the area. 2014 is the third year of our three-year appeal for this work. Donations are split – unless donors say otherwise – 70% to Ramallah Meeting and 30% to QVA.

So far our efforts have provided necessary funding for the work of the Meeting in reaching for peaceful solutions – where existing funding has fallen short. Also our working retreats are significant in increasing understanding of the issues – from Israeli and Palestinian perspectives – and in providing first-hand experience of life under occupation. An appeal letter being sent out with this newsletter provides information on progress.

It is important that this work continues – and indeed develops. Please support us.

With a big 'thank you' for all who have given support already.

Geoffrey Braithwaite

## Clerk's letter

Dear Friends,

We have had some changes in our committee this year. I have now been appointed clerk of QVA and Conor Jerram is once again treasurer.

We do appreciate the support we have received from individuals and meetings. We have been able to run most of the planned retreats last year and they were enjoyed by all participants. Please do spread the word and, if you would be interested in becoming a local meeting correspondent please let us know.

Jane Robinson

## Working Retreats Programme 2014

April 5-12  
**Congenies**  
South of France

April 14-21  
**Camino de  
Compostela**  
Spain

May 12-16  
**Swarthmoor**  
Cumbria

June 7-14  
**Laren**  
Netherlands

July 5-13  
**Yorkshire  
Cycling**

July 21-27  
**Bamford**  
Peak District

Sept 22-26  
**Swarthmoor**  
Cumbria

Oct 17-28  
**Ramallah**  
Palestine & Israel

Oct 20-31  
**Ramallah**  
Palestine & Israel

**Please donate to QVA – your donations  
keep us going and enable us to do more things.**

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

..... Post code .....

(Optional) e-mail ..... tel .....

**I ENCLOSE MY ONE-OFF DONATION OF £\_\_\_\_\_ by:**

Cheque/PO payable to 'Quaker Voluntary Action'

BACS transfer to account number below

(or for a standing order, please see below)

We shall allocate 30% to QVA and 70% to Ramallah Friends Meeting unless you request otherwise below.

**QVA £\_\_\_\_\_ RFM £\_\_\_\_\_ TOTAL £\_\_\_\_\_**

**GIFT AID DECLARATION – please sign if you pay  
U.K.tax** and notify us subsequently if this no longer applies.

Please treat all donations I make to QVA from the date of this declaration as Gift Aid donations.

Signed ..... Date.....

Would you like a receipt?  If so, may we use e-mail?

If by post, s.a.e. would be greatly appreciated.

## STANDING ORDER FORM

to be sent to QVA (below), not to your bank

Your bank name .....

Bank Address .....

.....Post code .....

A/c no ..... Sort code .....

Amount: £ \_\_\_\_\_

First payment: ... / ... / ... (immediately, if left blank)

and then (*please circle*) monthly / quarterly / yearly

Instruction to the bank: Please pay the above to Triodos Bank 16-58-10 for the credit of Quaker Voluntary Action a/c 03269501 (ref. QVA Appeal) until cancelled by me.

Signed ..... Date .....

NB All standing order donations under the Appeal are allocated 70% to RFM and 30% to QVA.

**PLEASE SEND THIS FORM AND YOUR DONATION TO:  
Geoffrey Braithwaite, QVA, 102 Oakwood Drive,  
St Albans, Herts. AL4 0XA**

*Thank you for your support!*

## Which fund?

We are so grateful for all the generous contributions we receive from our supporters.

Please refer to the back page of the accompanying appeal letter to ensure that you are happy with the way in which we are allocating your donation between QVA and Ramallah Friends Meeting.

**Disclaimer:** The articles published in the newsletter are not necessarily the views of the Quaker Voluntary Action Committee, management or staff. Although every effort is made to ensure information in this newsletter is accurate, QVA can accept no responsibility for errors arising from information we have been given.

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