



The Quaker calendar

Research guide



In the past Quakers often dated their documents in ways that are unfamiliar to us now. This guide will help you to understand what the dates used on historical Quaker documents mean in today's language.

The English year before and after 31 December 1751

Up to and including 1751 the Julian calendar was used in England, Wales, Ireland and the British colonies overseas. In these places the year officially began on 25 March (Lady Day) and ended on the following 24 March. So 24 March 1750 was followed the next day by 25 March 1751. In Scotland the Gregorian calendar had been in use since 1600, with a year that began on 1 January.

In 1751 the British Parliament passed the Calendar (New Style) Act 1750, also known as 'Chesterfield's Act' after the 4th Earl of Chesterfield (24 Geo II c.23). It laid down that from 1752 the English year would begin on 1 January. Thus the year 1751 began on 25 March and ended on 31 December, followed immediately by 1 January 1752.

There is a further difference (related to leap years) between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, which meant that by 1752 the Julian calendar was twelve days behind the Gregorian one. Chesterfield's Act had therefore laid down that, in 1752, 2 September should be followed by 14 September (for a fuller account, see Cheney, CR (ed) (1948) *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*. London: Royal Historical Society [Ref. Shelves]).

Quaker usage

Quakers followed the national practice, with one exception. They objected to using those names of days and months which derived from heathen gods or goddesses, employing instead numbers: thus Sunday was for them First Day. They had no difficulty (until 1752 – see below) with the months September to December, which derived from numbers; but for the other months they substituted numbers, writing them out as First Month, Second Month, and so on. They sometimes used Roman numerals (I–xii) for these, and sometimes Arabic (1–12).

The problem for the modern reader is remembering that the year did not begin on 1 January until 1752, so that until 1752 February was Twelfth Month and March was First Month for Quakers. Furthermore, the months September to December were literally (in translation from the Latin) Seventh Month to Tenth Month, and therefore those names could truthfully be used. Once the year began in January, this was no longer the case, and so from 1752 all months were referred to by Quakers by their number – September became Ninth Month and so on.

It is often helpful, in making notes from Quaker manuscripts, printed works, and digest registers of births, marriages and burials, to write down the old style numbers as in the original text, but

add the new style names after in square brackets, such as:

29 ii [April] 1731 or 29 2 mo. [April] 1731

12 x [December] 1740 or 12 10 mo. [December] 1740

Double-dating before 1752

January and February present some complications. Those (including Quakers) who were aware of the difference between the two calendars often 'double-dated' documents by giving both their own and the Gregorian calendar year to avoid confusion, so that 7 11 mo. 1742 may appear as 7 11 mo. [January] 1742/3.

In making notes you may also find it useful to indicate this in square brackets, where it is not indicated in the original and you are sure of the year. So 7 11 mo. 1742 would be transcribed as 7 11 mo. 1742 [January 1742/3] or 7 xi 1742 [January 1742/3].

The first 24 days of March present even greater complications. Often these are double-dated: 15 1 mo. [March] 1708/9. Where they are single-dated the writer is usually, but not always, anticipating the year to begin on 25 March, so 7 1 mo. 1737 is probably 7 1 mo. [March] 1736/7 but may be 7 1 mo. [March] 1737/8.

Sometimes a writer will give not just the different years, but both Gregorian and Julian dates in full, so that the difference in the day (and perhaps month) is also apparent.

Inconsistencies

John Nickalls (*The Journal of George Fox*, 1952, pp. xiii–xiv) judged that before 1752 the first 24 days of March were generally reckoned to be part of the old year, but D.J. Steel (*Sources for Nonconformist Genealogy and Family History*, 1973, pp. 638–39) believes they were treated as part of the new. Samuel G. Barton, in 'The Quaker calendar' (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* vol. 93, 1949, pp. 32–39), argues the Quaker year began on 1 rather than 25 March. A note in an Ifield & Shipley register (printed in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* vol. 55, 1912, p. 81) lends substance to this: "...the year is ... to Begin the First day of the First Month commonly called March Whereas in the worlds Accompt it begins not till the 25th day of the said Month". Aside from variations in principle as to the first 24 days of March, you should allow for the ongoing human tendency to write the incorrect date in the early part of a new year.

You should remember too that the well-established American practice of putting the month before the day when giving a date in numerical form (as 3rd mo. 7 1900, III.7.1900 or 3.7.1900) was also widely used by British and Irish Friends. Finally, London Yearly Meeting's often-stated advice to keep to "plainness in language" is one indication that some Friends, at least sometimes, were using the language of "the world's people" for dates as well as in other ways.

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Society of Friends**

Friends House

173–177 Euston Road

London

NW1 2BJ

020 7663 1135

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