

Alma Gould Dale 1854 – 1930

Of those whose last resting place is at Walpole Chapel, none can have travelled farther than Canadian Quaker, Alma Gould Dale.

Part 1 below draws on published sources, including Canadian Quaker journals, to detail her life and ministry in Canada. Part 2 draws on local research to uncover her life and work in England.



Alma Gould, ca1880. T.A. Lord, Royal Art Studio, Uxbridge, Ontario. USMA

Part 1

Early Life in Canada

Born on 27 October 1854 in the township of Uxbridge, Ontario, Alma was the youngest child of Joseph and Mary (James) Gould. She grew up in a close-knit community, inheriting from both sides of her family commitment to the principles of the Religious Society of Friends (known as Quakers). Her ancestors had settled first in Pennsylvania in the 1680s (around the time that Walpole Chapel came into existence) escaping from the religious tribulations of England. In the early 1800s, her grandparents were part of the large-scale Quaker migration north, establishing new communities in Upper Canada. ¹

By the time Alma Gould was born, the last of nine children, her father was a prosperous businessman, land-owner and chairman of the Uxbridge School Board. That same year, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Canada. Alma seems to have gained from Joseph a versatile, can-do attitude; she was hard working, skilled at book-keeping, and interested in public affairs. From her mother, and other serious-minded Quaker women, she developed an interest in faith and service.

In frontier areas of North America, women's contribution to public life was subject to fewer restrictions than in 19th century Britain. The Society of Friends, like other independent-minded denominations, gave women opportunities to participate in decision-making, and public speaking. Women of Quaker background in the United States were active in the leadership of the anti-slavery movement – famously Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott. Quaker women were among those who led the fight for women's suffrage in Canada, and the right for recognition in the medical profession. They also campaigned for Temperance, having witnessed the harmful effects of alcohol in homes and communities, including the

¹ The English-speaking territory later to be named Ontario

tough environment of mining and logging camps. This growing confidence and social activism among women formed the backdrop to Alma's formative years.

The Religious Society of Friends

Quaker belief centres on non-violence, simplicity in living, and continuing revelation from God. Meetings attended by Alma as a child would typically have included time for silent worship, in which anyone might feel moved by the spirit and inspired to speak out loud. There might be a reading from the Bible, but there was no liturgy or creed, no pulpit, no ordination of ministers. Typically, meetings took place in someone's home or in a plain, purpose-built 'meeting house'. Quarterly Meetings drew together Friends from a wider area, and from 1867 a Canada Yearly Meeting (CYM) was established.²

The first of these took place in the recently-remodelled brick meeting house at Pickering, south of Uxbridge. At age 13, Alma attended with her mother. She vividly recalled the occasion writing from Walpole Hatch Farm, Suffolk, at the time of the 50th Anniversary.

" We were early at the meeting house and watched what seemed a never-ending stream of carriages, buggies, farm wagons and people on horseback as they turned in at the gate. I was all excitement, for I had never seen so many people gather at a place of worship. So great was the number who came that the meeting house was not large enough to hold them, and in the afternoon an overflow meeting was held at which William Wetherald spoke to the people as he stood in a wagon"³

Through her teenage years, Alma regularly attended these gatherings, growing in confidence and ability. She was fluent and witty in speech, and a good singer; she could turn her hand to carpentry, and showed great skill in handling horses. She was also good at business and accounting, enjoying the company of adults; she learned from the success of her father and brothers in banking, milling, farming and trade, in local and provincial politics.

As a young woman pushing at the boundaries, almost inevitably Alma experienced reproof from some of her more zealous, conventional acquaintance. However, she found encouragement from an older woman she came to regard as mentor. This was Hannah Jane Cody. Despite being step-mother to a large family, Hannah was deeply engaged in the committees of the Yearly Meeting, and highly respected. She counselled Alma not to feel discouraged, but to trust God's purpose for her.

Marriage

Despite such moral encouragement, Alma does seem in her late teens to have gone through a more capricious period. At all events, at some point she became acquainted with Thomas Dale, whose parents had moved to Uxbridge in 1871 – around the time the railway from

² This was the same year as the constitutional establishment of the Dominion of Canada

³ This letter appears in *Canadian Friend*, Vol.XII/no 3, September 1917, p 7

Toronto was completed. He was a young man with prospects, new in town. Alma was daughter of well-doing parents with considerable social standing.

Four years older than Alma, Tom was involved in farming, and was an agent trading in pianos and organs in Uxbridge. He was a Methodist. Alma's father did not approve of their marriage, but they went ahead. The census of 1881 records them as man and wife, living in Uxbridge. As a married woman with some independence, Alma had begun a new phase of her life.

A decade of religious and social change

The 1880s were years of considerable change in Canada. Within Christian churches, evangelism was in the ascendant. Methodist preachers were converting many to the faith with dramatic sermons and revival meetings. In 1881, disagreements as to the best way to respond to a changing culture and fast-growing population resulted in a split within the Society of Friends in Canada, known as the Great Separation. Those who believed in the value of a pastorate – individuals appointed, often from within their own meeting, to visit congregations, preach and conduct services – took a separate path from those who maintained the traditional Quaker practice of silent worship.

At the start of the decade, aged 26, Alma Dale offered herself for service. She believed it was good for women to preach if they'd been granted the gift to do so. Moreover, as a married woman, she had a more secure status within the community. In particular, she had a lively gift for engaging with young people. In 1884 she took over the Sunday School class at the Methodist Church, and by 1890 the roll had risen from 65 (average attendance 37) to 135 (average attendance 100).

As the 1880s progressed, and it became clear she would remain childless, she became prominent at Quarterly and Yearly Meeting levels. From 1886 she was treasurer of the Women Friends Missionary Society (WFMS). She became a well-known guest speaker, attracting large crowds with Home Missions, including preaching in Methodist churches in Norwich, Milldale and Pelham. In Uxbridge she organised community events – concerts given by the children of the Sabbath School, Christmas entertainments, a Mission School in the basement of the Uxbridge Mechanics Institute, built from a bequest by her father.⁴

In Canada, as in the United States, many campaigns for social reform were led by Christian women. The confidence and learning garnered from faith-based commitment – seen to be respectable - could readily grow into social and political activism. Both offered women a role outside the home on which to expend their talents and intelligence, and perhaps gain solace from an unfulfilling marriage. At the CYM in 1887, Alma Dale was one of eleven persons appointed to its Temperance Committee. CYM wrote to the Canadian government in favour of Prohibition, advocating pledge cards against the use of alcohol and tobacco. They also urged the Ontario state government to include classes in all local schools on the evils of intemperance. An article in the Canadian Quaker History Journal (CQHJ) notes wryly, "In

⁴ Joseph left \$2,500 to be invested, the interest to be given annually to families in poor circumstances because their menfolk drank in the Mansion House Hotel, which he had built and owned, for which he felt responsible

contemplating the problems that alcoholism created in society, it is not known whether it was one of the reasons for the disruption of Alma Dale's family life." ⁵

Alma Dale, minister and missionary ⁶

Certainly it appears that as Alma's commitment to her calling grew, leading to her acknowledgement in 1887 as "a minister of the Gospel among Friends", ⁷ her marriage was going downhill. In a constant push to expand, Tom Dale made various bad business decisions, mortgaging his farm, running up debt. To help, his sister Sarah took over responsibility for an increased mortgage in 1889, and in 1893 this was transferred to Alma. Her father had died in 1886, and her mother in 1891, leaving her a share of the Gould family's legacy. But Tom's financial risk-taking continued. In the mid 1890s he lost various legal suits brought against him in the High Court of Justice, Chancery Division – a public humiliation that must have been particularly irksome to Alma. It is likely that her ability, or willingness, to bale out her husband had reached a limit.

Despite reported bouts of ill-health, Alma was becoming a popular and dynamic speaker, driving at speed from place to place in her two-horse buggy; she continued her work with Sabbath and Bible schools, organised concerts, attended committees and oversaw accounts. Her niece recalled that Alma's home was a lovely old stone building south of Uxbridge. On one of the Dale farms, she had a cabin in the woods that she used as a retreat, to write letters and prepare sermons. She also hosted visiting friends there, sleeping in hammocks and dressing as they liked.

Visitors were welcomed by Canadian Yearly Meeting, and regular correspondence by letter maintained with Quakers in England, to encourage and report. Congregations across the American mid-west, both sides of the border, were in close fellowship, and in 1887 an international conference of Friends from America and Europe was held in Indiana. ⁸

It's not hard to imagine that ministry and social action were more appealing to Alma than continuing social embarrassment caused by her husband. By the mid 1890s she may well have been looking for opportunities to take her far away from Uxbridge.

The move west

In 1885 the Canadian Pacific Railway had been completed, connecting east and west coasts. This meant vast territories were opened to further development and exploitation. In the years that followed, members of Alma's wider family, particularly the James branch on her mother's side, had joined the flow of settlers moving westwards.

⁵ CQHJ no 69-70, 2004/5 page 68

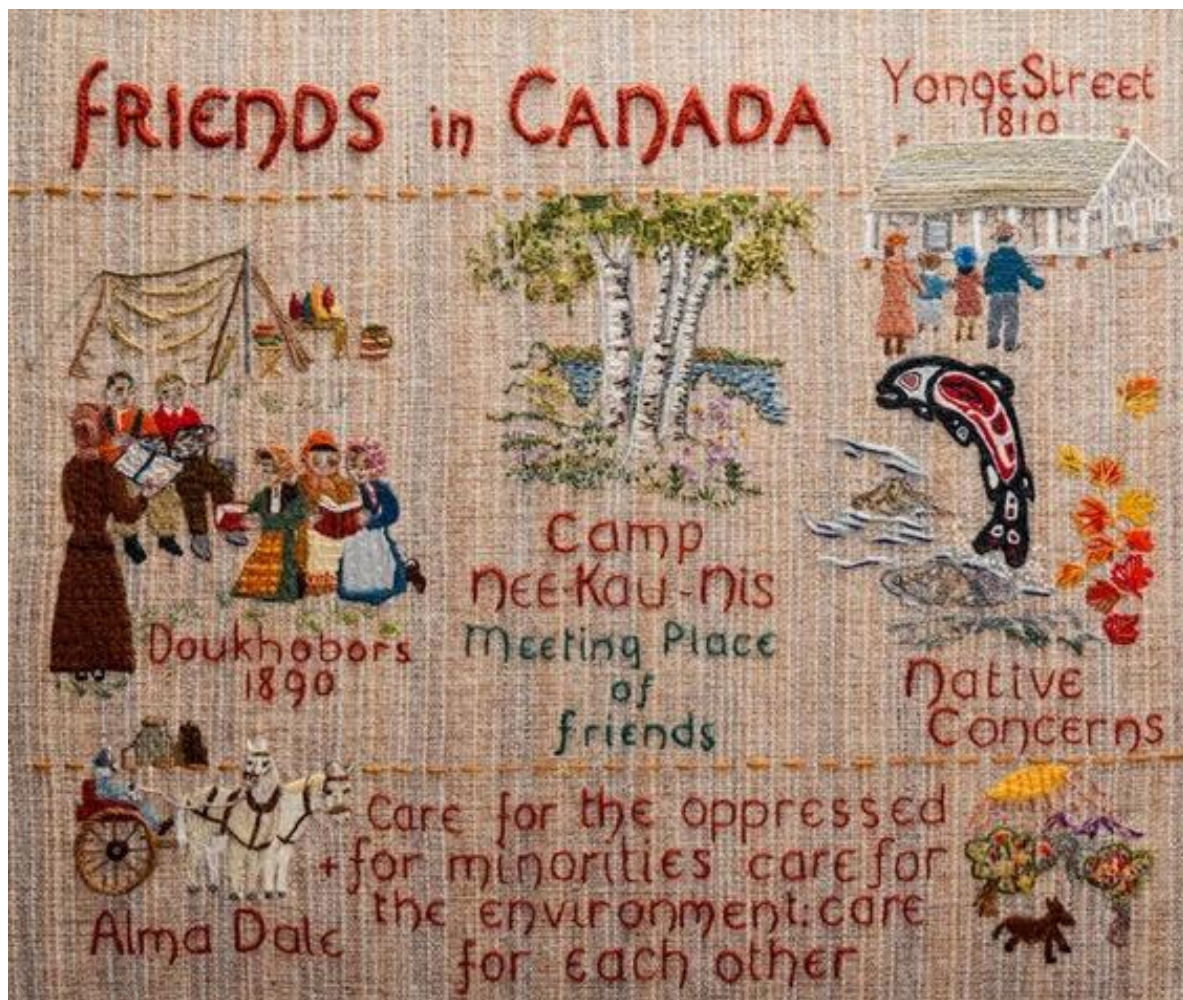
⁶ A role and title very few churches would have accorded women at this time

⁷ From 1895, thanks to a ruling by the Canadian government, as a recognised Quaker minister Alma Dale was legally sanctioned to officiate at marriages and funerals

⁸ Coincidentally, Eva Booth of the Salvation Army set out west from Toronto in April 1898, preaching in many places both sides of the US border, concluding at the Klondike

At the CYM held at Pickering College in June 1897, the Home Mission Committee (HMC) was directed to support the Society's development further west. Subsequently William A Moore spent two months in Manitoba, holding meetings between scattered groups of Friends, and on his return Alma Dale was chosen to follow up his work. After several weeks away, she returned in October to report that she wanted to devote herself to this mission, and the HMC pledged to support her to the extent of \$400 per year.

Canada's severe winter weather would have precluded an earlier departure; nevertheless, on 26 March 1898 Alma Dale gave her farewell sermon at the meeting house on Quaker Hill, and next day set out for Hartney, Manitoba. At age 43 she had escaped the ties of her marriage, and opened the way to a new life with paid employment in service of her beliefs.⁹ This is the period of Alma Dale's life depicted in the Canadian panel of the Quaker Tapestry, on permanent display in the Friends Meeting House in Kendal, Cumbria. Alma was well known for her horsemanship and willingness to travel far and wide as part of her ministry. She is shown driving a buggy pulled by two perfectly-matched cream ponies.



© Quaker Tapestry

This image shows one of the 77 Quaker Tapestry embroideries made by 4,000 people from 15 countries. Quaker Tapestry Museum, Kendal, UK <https://www.quaker-tapestry.co.uk>

⁹ Alma Dale's will, made during a bout of illness at Hartney, 30 December 1901, left her husband just \$1

Within a matter of months, on 3 January 1899, at a meeting in her new home, the Hartney Monthly Meeting of Friends was inaugurated – the first established in western Canada. The speed of progress thereafter confirmed her practical ability to get things done.

“Alma Dale, in spite of her precarious health, worked tirelessly on behalf of the congregation. She encouraged the use of music, set up a library with books from Uxbridge, and travelled widely to raise money from Quakers in Ontario and elsewhere for the construction of a meeting house... A committee was formed, land was donated (by John Hodgson), construction proceeded, and on a stormy 15 October 1899, the meeting house was opened. Soon a stable as well as a cemetery with a vault were added...”¹⁰

Some of the money donated had been sent from Great Britain.

Part 2

Journeys to England

It is not clear when exactly Alma Dale met the woman who was to prove the close friend of her mature years, Margaret Gillett, of Walpole, Suffolk. One report suggests they met in New Zealand, where Alma was invited to conduct a speaking tour. Certainly Alma made more than one visit to England in the first decade of the 20th century – a journey by passenger steamer that would have taken at least five days.

In 1904 Alma asked to be released from her ministry in Hartney, and a replacement minister was appointed. She spent part of the following three years in England, but on the resignation of her successor, she returned for a further tour of duty in Canada.

Two reports from 1907 attest to her vitality – and stamina. The first details a 24-day mission at Herstmonceux, Sussex, England. The meeting house was reportedly filled to overflowing.

“People who had not entered a place of worship for many years were there; doubters found rest; many who came to scoff, stayed to pray; drunkards have left their evil ways, and backsliders have been restored. One man remarked, “These are good times; we have not seen the like for thirty years.” As an outcome, men's and women's classes have been resumed at the meeting house, and the Christian Endeavour and other meetings have more than doubled their attendance...”¹¹

The second is a report from her return to Manitoba.

I labour both in public and in private to bring people into a closer walk with my Lord, and to enable them to see their duty and do it as unto the Lord. Half of the year of

¹⁰ *Prairie Spirit, Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West* (University of Manitoba Press, 1985) p. 314

¹¹ Quoted in ‘Canadian Quaker Biography’ by Sandra Fuller, article in *Journal of Canadian Friends Historical Association* Vol 47 Summer 1990, p.17

service in this meeting has been put in faithfully, I trust, and in fear and love of my Master. During that time, I have been able to make 109 family visits, hold 60 meetings which have been attended by about 2050 persons, and have driven 1800 miles doing the work.¹²

But in 1908 she resigned again, intending to return to England. The passenger list of the Southwark, a ship in the Dominion Line, shows her arriving into Liverpool on 19 July 1908, having departed from the ports of Montreal and Quebec. It would then have been a long journey by train and carriage from Liverpool to Suffolk. From this point on, Alma Dale seems to have made her home at Walpole Hatch Farm, owned by the Gillett family.



Its land was adjacent to Walpole Chapel, on the other side of the road to Halesworth, and to it belonged some of the cottages next to the Chapel. Margaret Gillett, unmarried, was 13 years Alma's junior. From her family she inherited her Quaker beliefs, and ultimately ownership of the farm. In the national census of 1911, Mrs Dale is recorded living there, her occupation "Minister in Society of Friends".

Service in pastures new

Alma had been living permanently in England less than three months, when we find her at work. The West Herts and Watford Observer dated 29 September 1908 records that she is to begin a nightly series of meetings at 8pm for one week, in the meeting House on Derby Road, Watford. "Mrs Dale is a bright, interesting speaker and it is anticipated that much good work will be done. She will be assisted by her friend, Margaret Gillett of Halesworth, Suffolk."

On 11 October 1908, the hand-written minute book of a business meeting of the Society of Friends in Leiston, records: "Alma Dale of Canada in conjunction with Margaret Gillett of Walpole have expressed the wish to hold a week's mission about the latter end of tenth month in connection with the Friends' Adult School in this place. Leiston Friends are willing to place the Meeting House at their service for that object."¹³

However, the following month's minutes indicate that the approval did not arrive with Margaret and Alma before they made plans for their winter's work. Consequently, they had postponed their proposal until "some future time."

On 16 October 1910, Robert E Sawyer, 'clerk at this time', writes: "A week's successful mission has been held during this month – conducted by our Friends Alma Dale and Margaret Gillett. There has been an average attendance each night of about fifty. One

¹² The Canadian Friend, Vol. III, No.3, September 1907, p. 5.

¹³ Minute books of the Leiston Society of Friends, held in the Suffolk Archives, The Hold, Ipswich

notable feature of the meetings has been the attendance of several young men quite unconnected with our Meeting or Adult School, who have been most attentive listeners. We cannot doubt that good will result therefrom. May it be that we, the members of this Meeting and habitual attenders, may have been stirred up to greater earnestness of purpose through these meetings. Then will our friends' labours not have been in vain, and our prayer is that the blessing we have received may continue and that good may result."

October (called 10th month by Quakers) appears to have been an active month for travelling ministry. Possibly this was a less busy time in the farming calendar, and before daylight hours grew too short for venturing far by pony and trap.

The early years of the century saw women demanding recognition and the right to vote. A woman preacher was certainly a rarity, and her Canadian origin added an extra point of interest, especially in rural East Anglia, where most people never travelled far from home. For example, a brief article in the Lynn Advertiser of 10 October 1913, notes that at the Harvest Festival at the Wells Meeting House (on the north Norfolk coast) the "special preacher on Sunday was Mrs Alma Dale, late of Canada."

Obviously the First World War, with its attendant horrors and destruction, proved a bitterly challenging time for all those who opposed it from a position of faith and pacifism. Nonetheless, the Diss Express of 11 October 1918 reports on a Harvest Festival at Tivetshall, Norfolk. "Alma G. Dale, a Canadian minister, gave most impressive addresses, which were listened to with rapt attention by large congregations."

Walpole Hatch Farm

Interviewed on 28 October 2022 as part of the Walpole Chapel Discovery Project, Tony Gillett, current owner of the farm and Margaret Gillett's great-nephew, supplied fascinating information and photographs relating to his family, and the woman always referred to by the Gilletts as Mrs Dale. From his valuable information we can visualise the time when Margaret – a single woman - owned Walpole Hatch Farm; and imagine how much Alma's knowledge of farming in Canada – not to mention her skills with horses and carpentry - may have fed into the innovations they undertook together.



One clearly posed and professional portrait shows the pair of them seated on the ground – which is most unusual for a formal photograph of women at this time. It has no date, but perhaps might have been taken to accompany Alma Dale’s letter to greet the 50th anniversary of the first Canada Yearly Meeting (i.e. 1917. See Part 1 above).¹⁴ As if to emphasise their usefulness and the nature of their work, Margaret has a sickle in her hand, and Alma is wearing leather gauntlets. They are dressed smartly in long skirts with high-necked white blouses, a stiff bow tie at the neck. They both have neat hair, and wear spectacles. The name of the woman standing behind them is not known. She wears a more masculine jacket, shirt and tie.¹⁵

Other photographs show the farm, the pony and buggy, the chickens and long shed. Tony Gillett ascribed several developments on the farm in this period to Alma Dale’s influence.



They brought in Pedigree Red Poll cows – a breed originally developed from both Norfolk and Suffolk, known as dual-purpose because good for milk and for beef.¹⁶ These needed high quality nutrition, especially through the winter. Alma would have been familiar with silos on farms in Canada; there was debate on both sides of the Atlantic about the comparative merits of traditional hay as opposed to the relatively new science of silage making. And so they built a silo, 35 feet (3.6m) tall, with a trap-door at the top and a chute

¹⁴ It’s worth noting that the Women’s Land Army was set up in January 1917, replacing the male workers lost to the first World War.

¹⁵ From her facial appearance one might surmise that she could be First Nations Canadian?

¹⁶ The first Red Poll Cattle Society was formed in 1888

giving out on the side just at wagon height.¹⁷ To make silage, they began to grow lucerne, (known in north America as alfalfa) which is high in protein, and white-tooth maize, which is high in carbohydrate. Boys from the village were induced to go inside and tramp the silage down.

They introduced leghorn hens – a breed of mainly all-white chickens first admitted into the American Poultry Association in 1874 (though thought to originate in Italy) and from thence to England. These were feisty, resourceful birds, known to be heavy layers of very large-size eggs.

They built a very long wooden barn. After all, Alma knew all about building wooden structures from her experience in Hartney, and was herself a good carpenter. It was wide enough that the pony and cart could enter at one end, be loaded with eggs and milk as it passed through, and then out the other end and off to supply the village.¹⁸

Is it a matter of changed emphasis that on the census form of 1921, Alma Dale is no longer listed as Minister of the Society of Friends? Margaret Gillett signs the form for Walpole Hatch Farm, and listed are Margaret Gillett / Head / farmer / employer; Gertrude May Gillett / Mother / widowed / not occupied for a living; and Alma G Dale, Boarder (the word Friend has been crossed out) / married / cash entering, errands, various farm work / her employer M Gillett farmer.

At all events, it seems that Alma went on in her faith, even if not as busily as before. Along with Margaret, she is listed as a member of Leiston Meeting in January 1923, though it is noted beside her name that she is also a member of Canada Yearly Meeting.



Another photographic portrait shows her older, seated on a wicker chair in the garden, reading. And in a letter sent to the *Canadian Friend* in 1924 she draws a picture of a woman who has recently felt like slowing down a bit.

“Most of the places have their meetings in the evening. I am now in my 70th year and tho’ I am quite well, I do not feel like putting the horse in the buggy shafts or getting him harnessed, and taking him out when we return, as I used to.”¹⁹

Alma died on 28 August 1930, aged 75. She had suffered from ill-health for a long time. Probably it had already been decided that she should be buried close to the farm, where Margaret could tend her grave, rather than at Leiston.

¹⁷ Still to be seen in front of The Harmony Centre, on land that formed part of Walpole Hatch Farm

¹⁸ This long barn was eventually blown down in strong wind, but rebuilt with two halves now placed side by side, making use of the original wood and straightening the bent nails.

¹⁹ Quoted in Canadian Quaker History Journal, No. 69-70, 2004/5, p.85

In a Burial Note presented later to Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, she is “a recorded minister of Canada Yearly Meeting”, and her place of burial on 30 August is “Burial Ground of Congregational Chapel, Walpole, Halesworth”.

Judith Condon, September 2023

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