

Hannah Chapman Gurney was the daughter of Joseph Gurney, (1757-1830), a banker of Norwich, and Jane Chapman (d.1841), daughter of Abel Chapman (c1756-1852), a prosperous Whitby ship owner and banker. Both families were Quakers and in 1811, aged 24, Hannah married the Quaker banker Jonathan Backhouse (1779-1842) of Darlington. Both by birth and marriage Hannah Backhouse was connected to a financially powerful Quaker network including the Barclay, Fox, Fry and Pease families.¹

However, her early life does not appear to have been a rigorously religious one. The various branches of the Gurneys of Norwich were a gregarious family who enjoyed social events. Nevertheless, by her early twenties, Hannah Gurney was experiencing a strong religious calling. She recorded in her journal:

*2nd Month, 9th, 1809. Twenty-two years old. Through the mercy of everlasting kindness, great is the change that this year has wrought in me; the power of Love has enticed me to begin that spiritual journey which leads to the promised land: I have left, by His guidance and strength, the bondage of Egypt, and have seen His wonders in the deep. May the endeavour of my life be, to keep close to that Angel who can deliver us through the trials and dangers of the wilderness of this world.*²

Immediately following her marriage and a move to Darlington, Hannah Backhouse did not actively pursue this calling, but in 1820 she began to speak at Quaker meetings.

*Opened my mouth in Darlington meeting, on First-day afternoon. A mountain in prospect! The meetings now became very interesting to me, as the reward of what I was induced to believe was faithfulness, often greatly refreshing.*³

After some difficult times personally, in particular the death of her eldest son, by the late 1820s Hannah Backhouse began travelling to Quaker meetings further afield. In 1827 she went to Devon and Cornwall and in 1829 to Ireland, both with her husband. In 1830, they decided to travel to North America and the following extract from a letter to her cousin, Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer, shows Hannah Backhouse's state of mind in anticipating this journey and leaving her young family.

My dearest Betsy,

*I believe some of thy tenderest sympathies will be aroused, on hearing of the momentous prospect now before us of visiting North America. I dare say many, many years ago, thy imagination sent me there, --call it by that name, or the more orthodox one of faith, --so has mine, but I saw it without baptism; now, I pass into it under baptism, which in depth far exceeds any thing I have known before; the severing work it is to the ties of nature, to my dear Father, Mother and Children, breaks me all to pieces, but I have much, if not entirely, been spared from doubts; all I seem to have had to do was to submit; this is a great comfort, for which I desire to be thankful, and for that peace which in the midst of deep suffering has so far rested upon it.*⁴

Hannah Backhouse stayed in America until autumn 1835, while her husband returned home, both in 1833 and earlier in 1835. He wrote:

Durham biographies volume 6

*I do think my wife's labours in these parts, have been of essential service;-- helped some sunken ones out of a pit, strengthened some weak hands, and confirmed some wavering ones, as well as comforted the mourners. She has no cause to be discourages about her labours, they have been blessed.*⁵

However Hannah did meet a little resistance to her ministry, as she recorded in 1833 in Ithaca, New York State:

*In a few places they refuse women's preaching; yet it is but rarely they do so; the ministers are too dependent upon the people. And the people receive it [women's preaching] willingly.*⁶

Apart from religious teaching, the two issues which the Backhouses appear to have concentrated on were schooling and slavery. For example, in Indiana, Hannah's visit had a lasting influence and she is "remembered her for her advocacy of First Day Schools, many of which were established with her encouragement".⁷ In 1833, she wrote to one of her sons from Norwich, Ontario:

*We are again going from log-cabin to log-cabin, and seeing multitudes of unlettered children...You have indeed great advantages; most of these poor children can barely read intelligibly, and are very ignorant of the Scriptures.*⁸

During 1834 and 1835, Hannah Backhouse went to the southern states with a companion, Eliza Kirkbride, who recorded the enthusiastic reception they received – being told by a slave "what great joy [the] meetings were to colour people".⁹ On entering North Carolina in October 1834, Hannah Backhouse wrote of the iniquities of slavery:

*We have now been travelling some hundreds of miles through slave States. The distress of seeing these poor creatures on the road, just bought up by the slave-dealers, separated from the nearest relations of life, never more, in all probability, to be heard of again by them, is unspeakably great, although I believe there are many, especially the domestic slaves, well treated, and that even pious care is often extended over them; yet the system is horrible. They are kept in as much ignorance and degradation as possible. Could you see what I see, and hear what I hear, you would not wonder that we are called to suffer as we do. No one who has not seen it can tell me what slavery is.*¹⁰

After the Backhouses' return in 1835, they continued their ministry in Britain through most of that decade. However, Jonathan Backhouse's health deteriorated and he ceased travelling a few years before his death in 1842. Hannah Backhouse continued her ministry round Britain until the mid 1840s when ill-health forced her to stop. She died at Polam Hall in Darlington on 6 May 1850. She had, as her obituary in the *Annual Quaker Monitor* said, "a character in which the woman, a Christian, and the Quaker were....fused into one".¹¹

John Banham, Tudhoe

End notes:

¹ For details of H.C. Backhouse's family connections see: Durham University Library Archives and Special Collections, [Backhouse Papers](#), GB-0033-BAC and Durham County

Durham biographies volume 6

Record Office, Hodgkin papers, D/Ho/. For the Gurneys in particular, see Daniel Gurney, The record of the house of Gournay: compiled from original documents, London, 1848.

- ² Extracts from the Journal and Letters of Hannah Chapman Backhouse, privately printed but not published, 1858, p.32.
- ³ The Annual Monitor for 1851 or, Obituary of the members of the Society of Friends of Great Britain and Ireland, for the year 1850: Hannah Chapman Backhouse.
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁶ Extracts, p. 158.
- ⁷ <http://www.earlham.edu/~libr/content/friends/parker/g;ossarya-b.html>
- ⁸ Extracts, p. 161.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 186
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 180
- ¹¹ The Annual Monitor for 1851.