

# Elyn's Story

Elyn Mitchell is the Clerk of a Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) Meeting. When their Meeting House was damaged in an arson attack, the effects were felt across the local community. Here, she talks about using restorative justice to repair the harm, and build a more positive future.



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fire had been set in the hallway of the house. The arsonist walked into the garden through the main gate, and then broke a window and got in.

"The warden of the Meeting House lives in a separate building a few metres away, and he found the fire when he went to open the building on a Wednesday morning. By that time the fire was out, but he phoned the police. It seemed at the time like a small fire, but in fact it had untold consequences.

"I didn't see the damage immediately. We were not let in because of the contamination, but we could stand at the door and look in and it was absolutely devastating. The ceiling had come down in the lobby, the floor had come up and the plaster had come off the walls. The electrics had gone, it was all dark, and there were men in white suits and masks moving round – it looked like a science fiction scene. It was absolutely awful.

"We were out of the Meeting House for the next ten months, which was an incredibly long time. We had to meet on Sunday afternoons instead of Sunday mornings, in somebody else's church hall. The Meeting House was also used by a number of other local groups, and they all had to find other places to meet. One of the users was the Gloucester Gay and Lesbian Community, and they worried themselves sick that this was a homophobic hate crime.

"The police eventually charged a young man called Richard [not his real name]. I wasn't involved in the court proceedings. When I spoke to the police, we asked if restorative justice could be part of the process, but they said the case was not appropriate. As Quakers, we conducted a weekly Meeting for Worship in Gloucester Prison, and we had a Quaker prison chaplain. I contacted her, but if we hadn't had that contact, we probably would have given up at that point.

"I think what we hoped to achieve from a restorative justice meeting with Richard was the knowledge of why this had been done – that it wasn't an attack against Quakers. The other thing that was uppermost in our minds was that we wanted him to know that we'd forgiven him for what he did. That was the way we felt we could have healing for what had happened.

"Richard had been moved because Gloucester Prison had been closed. He was sent to Birmingham, and then to Bristol, and finally to a prison in Devon, which was where we met him. Our chaplain knew the chaplain at Bristol prison, and it was through them that the RJ process started.

"When the meeting finally came around, I went with my friend Maggi, who had also been affected by the fire. Seeing Richard in person was a complete shock. This is what comes of imagining what people look like - in no way did he look like what I'd thought he was going to look like. I had to get over that, because otherwise, he made a good impression. We'd already gathered from his letters that he was articulate, but I think we hadn't expected a sense of humour, which was a nice

thing. He's probably about 5'6", and quite slim – very neat and tidy, and quite smart in a way. I really wanted him to be a very large, neglected, downtrodden person, and he wasn't that at all. Because I'd been threatened and intimidated by what he'd done, I expected him to be threatening and intimidating in person.

"On the night of the fire Richard was very drunk and he'd also taken something which made him hallucinate, causing him to want to destroy our Meeting House. It became clear from our conversation that it hadn't been a homophobic crime, or an anti-Quaker one.

"It was very difficult for me to still feel angry with Richard. We'd forgiven him even before the meeting, but there was still a sort of, "how on earth could you have done this?" feeling. It was difficult to maintain that and not go over entirely to his side. I had to tell him that he'd caused over £100,000 of damage, and I had to tell him about all the people who'd been affected - it sounded like a very long list. Although he knew part of it already, you could almost see him visibly sinking under the weight of that. I had to stop myself from trying to minimize that or reassure him.

"We asked Richard specifically to forgive himself for what he'd done and try and start again. We asked him to try to cut himself off from the life that he'd been in, and to try and start anew. He wanted to come and see the Meeting House, so we suggested also that he come and help at an Oxfam lunch, and help raise some money for Oxfam who'd been deprived of revenue for ten months.

"The meeting wasn't closure for us. We didn't think, "Right, we've done this." It was almost the start of a process we're now on, myself in particular. We feel that we've got to contribute towards this as well as Richard contributing towards it. I've now trained as an RJ facilitator and will be volunteering for Restorative Gloucestershire. We're giving talks about RJ, and we're hoping to make the Meeting House a centre for RJ for our area.

"We were a very fragile Meeting when Richard set fire to the House. We had a lot of problems, we had a lot of issues and we had a lot of difficulties. Richard was the straw that broke the camel's back, but we did realize that we needed healing for our Meeting, and that restorative justice was the way forward to achieve that healing. But personally, I think we are all responsible for Richard and for people like him. Society has a responsibility and we're part of that society. So we need to contribute as well as expecting him to do it.

"I would say to anyone considering going through RJ, please do it for your own sake and for the sake of the offender. I'd encourage anybody to at least try and do it, and I hope in the future to be able to facilitate that."

**The RJC would like to thank Restorative Gloucestershire, and Elyn for sharing her story with us.**

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