

2·2 George Fox and Quakerism

This book celebrates Fox's journey that led to the foundation of the Quaker movement. His looks were striking – tall and broad, he had long hair and was seldom seen without his hat, which he would wear in church to signal his dissidence.

During May and June 1652 he preached while travelling through Lancashire and Westmorland, gathering support from a wide range of people. His success made him the leader of a movement that eventually united a range of dissident religious groups, including the Westmorland Seekers, into the Society of Friends.

Although George had preached in Leicestershire earlier, his seminal journey in 1652 began on Pendle Hill and continued north through Downham and Malham to the Yorkshire Dales and Sedbergh. Over the next few weeks he continued into Lancashire and arrived at Swarthmoor Hall, near Ulverston. There his preaching made a deep impression on the Fell household and their friends. Among those who were converted was Margaret Fell, then the wife of Thomas Fell and mistress of Swarthmoor Hall.

Thomas Fell became a Justice of the Peace in 1641 and a member of the Long Parliament four years later. Fox's ministry had impressed him too, although he never publicly declared himself a Quaker. He was at least a closet supporter, and until his death in 1658 he often protected Fox and other Quakers from persecution.

Early life

Born in July 1624 in Fenny Drayton, George was the son of a Leicestershire weaver. The family was fairly prosperous and George was apprenticed to a local tradesman by the age of 12. His parents were Puritan and George had studied the Bible closely, and in his autobiography he claims that he already 'knew pureness and righteousness' as a child.

However, he was restless and troubled, and aged 19 he left home 'to seek the truth'. His own ideas were radical, and he challenged not only priesthood but also the system of tithes that supported the church and even the churches themselves – buildings that he dismissed as 'steeplehouses'. He proclaimed his beliefs at every opportunity, and was soon in trouble with the authorities. His first spell in prison was in Nottingham in 1649 for blasphemy.

In 1651 he refused a captaincy in the New Model Army, preferring to remain in gaol, because he believed in 'the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion for all wars'. When he set off for Pendle Hill the following year, he was only 27 years old but already a supremely confident preacher and experienced evangelist. He was utterly convinced of his unique relationship with God and his personal ability to transmit his Truth. Although his leadership was contested later in life, his charisma and conviction lent a powerful momentum to the early day of Quakerism.





Pendle Hill

Journey in 1652

He started from Pendle Hill and was 'moved by the Lord to go atop of it' where he had his vision of 'a great people to be gathered'. Gazing at the distant hills to the north he saw fertile ground for his message to take root, and to the west he saw the inspiring gleam of light on the 'Lancashire Sea' – Morecambe Bay, near his journey's end at Ulverston. 'The Lord let me see atop of the hill in what places he had a great people'. Later he had a further vision that evoked the Book of Revelation: 'the Lord ... let me see a great people in white raiment by a river's side coming to the Lord'. At his alehouse lodgings that night, he told all this to his landlady who urged him to write it down. She then had it copied and spread it through the countryside, helping to build Fox's gathering momentum.

Soon afterwards in Sedbergh, having climbed high near a yew tree in order to make himself heard, Fox preached for hours to a large crowd outside St Andrew's Church. His audience was apparently spellbound, and included several Seeker leaders who invited him to join them at their rally to be held on nearby Firbank Fell on 13 June. By this time, word had spread about the charismatic preacher and families arrived from all directions, making a crowd of over 1000.



Fox's Pulpit

In the morning of 13 June, Seekers Francis Howgill and John Audland preached, both hoping that George Fox would reinforce and focus their message. After everyone else had lunched, George (who drank only some water) climbed up to a dramatic crag now known as Fox's Pulpit. With all eyes now turned on him, he preached fluently and passionately for three hours, demanding the end of the false church with its hireling priests, steeplehouses and tithes. Fox was convinced that the time had come to restore the true Christian Church, to open hearts and minds to the inner light and to recognise the divine truth.

Persecution and imprisonment

Despite continuing controversies and sporadic local persecution, Quakerism grew rapidly throughout England in the 1650s. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 marked the beginning of a period of persecution for nonconformist groups, and Quakers were viewed with particular suspicion. This was enshrined in law by the Quaker Act of 1662 and the Conventicle Acts of 1664 and 1670 that banned all religious services except those of the Church of England.

Conditions in prison were harsh, with unpalatable food in pitiful quantities, extreme cold and damp and polluted air. Quakers were typically stoical and they often impressed their fellow prisoners and sometimes their gaolers as sincere prisoners of conscience.

Imprisoned in a foul smoky tower in Lancaster prison in 1664, Fox did not complain, instead embarking on what became his *Short Journal*. Severely crippled by arthritis, he was dragged from his tower room and forced to ride to Scarborough Castle where he was imprisoned in appalling conditions.



Scarborough Castle (12th century keep)

'A threepenny loaf served me three weeks and sometimes longer' he reported. Its location on sea cliffs ensured that his quarters were cold and damp, exacerbating the pain in his joints. Cruellest of all, he was not allowed any visitors, although many Friends came to the castle gate.

Fox set a shining example of conducting himself bravely and with dignity. Quaker behaviour outside prison was also admired, especially in London where the bubonic plague (Black Death) killed about 20% of the population and caused many wealthier citizens to flee, including Anglican priests who abandoned their parishioners. Quakers from all over England sent funds, and brave Friends defied the law to visit Newgate Gaol and the guarded homes of sick Quakers. Quaker money was used to smuggle food through the windows of houses sealed by the plague.

Finally released from Scarborough in August 1666, Fox had been a prisoner of conscience for nearly three years, much of it spent in solitary confinement. Unbroken and uncowed, he worked to establish a structure of local, regional and national organisation for the Quaker movement, in which women took part in decision-making and exercised authority alongside men. In early 1669 he travelled to Ireland and was energised by the Irish Quakers' support.

Marriage to Margaret Fell

During his time in Ireland, George somehow 'sensed a divine command' that he should marry Margaret Fell who had been his good friend and strongest supporter for 17 years. Margaret had been widowed some 11 years ago, and had been an active and effective Quaker since 1652. She was becoming the movement's chief organiser and published many epistles. After consulting their families and friends, they were married in Bristol on 27 October 1669.

It was – to say the least – an unusual marriage. Not only was she ten years older than him, but also his superior in social class and wealth. George was scrupulous about making no claim on Margaret's estate, again contrary to the custom of the times. Almost throughout the marriage, their Quaker work took precedence over spending time together. Just ten days after the wedding, they set off northward from Bristol and parted company after just a couple of hours: 'I passed on ... in the work of the Lord into Wiltshire' reported George, while his bride travelled on alone to Swarthmoor, her lifelong home.

Working separately for the Quaker cause became the norm throughout their marriage – George mainly in London and Margaret at Swarthmoor. Her estate had passed to the children of her first marriage, and her seven daughters supported George warmly and welcomed him as stepfather. However, of the 22 years that their marriage lasted, George spent less than five years at Swarthmoor, most of that time recovering from ill health and imprisonment. Once restored to health, he would set off again to spread the word.

Despite the rigours of long journeys in those days and her greater age, Margaret had to do nearly all the travelling to see George. She was 76 when she made her ninth trip to London to see him in 1690.

Travels and later years

In August 1671 George set sail for Barbados to spread the Quaker message, enduring a voyage during which he became very unwell. Upon arrival he spent nearly three weeks bedridden and fasting. In 1672 he moved on to Jamaica and sailed through stormy weather to Maryland, Virginia and Carolina. He set up new Meetings, attracted attention from 'men and women of account' and preached successfully to native Americans. He also worked hard to try to reconcile factions within the movement. It would have been a gruelling trip for a young person in good health.

He returned to find he was too late to see his mother before she died in Fenny Drayton, and he was soon imprisoned at Worcester – his eighth incarceration. Finally released after 14 months in 1675, he suffered terrible ill health, but his work and travels were far from finished. He took his mission to Holland and Germany in 1677 with William Penn, and displayed immense physical courage in managing horses at a swollen river crossing near Lüneburg. The more challenging the journey, the more he seemed energised.

Finally he returned to Swarthmoor in 1678 for a period of recuperation. His last decade was spent mainly in London, writing his *Journal* and epistles to Friends. His last contact with Margaret was in 1690 when she visited him from spring until June. After further travels, George returned to London in January 1691 and fell ill with a mysterious 'cold strike to the heart'. After three days in bed, he died a serene death. His coffin was carried through the London streets to the dissenters' burial ground at Bunhill Fields, followed by 4000 Quakers.



Fox's gravestone, Bunhill Fields

Fox's legacy

George Fox endured enormous hardships throughout his life and was persecuted for his beliefs. Near the end of his life, he saw William of Orange and Mary Stuart invited to rule England as joint monarchs in 1689. This led directly to the Act of Toleration that granted freedom of worship to all Protestant Nonconformists. It marked the end of persecution and a major step towards freedom of conscience – a fitting tribute to George Fox and the movement he had founded.

For all that his marriage was largely maintained at a distance, it was extremely important to the foundation of his movement. His leadership would never have been as effective without the lifelong efforts of his wife Margaret Fell Fox. If he was the father of Quakerism, she was its mother. She was an indefatigable organiser, letter-writer and advocate for George's ideas and she too spent time in prison. She also lived and worked much longer than he, and had established her home, Swarthmoor Hall, as the headquarters of Quakerism in the north. To do her justice, we dedicate our successor guidebook to her: see page 78.

Finally, in addition to its role in the creating freedom of conscience, Quakerism has also created an architectural legacy. Quakers believe that worship does not require a special building, and indeed Fox was happy to preach outdoors in order to avoid 'steeplehouses' - his dismissive term for traditional churches. However practical considerations soon meant that meetinghouses were needed – some adapted from existing buildings, other purpose built.

The hallmarks of a meetinghouse are simplicity, community and equality, with a total absence of traditional liturgical objects and symbols. Brigflatts is a superb example, built during Fox's lifetime in 1675, and the oldest meetinghouse in the north of England. Many of its original oak furnishings survive intact, and its simple benches and gallery make a tranquil space for Quakers to meet and share their faith. Our route visits it on page 72 and it is pleasing to know that it is still in regular use by local Friends for their meetings. It is a perfect place to sit and contemplate the lives and legacy of George and Margaret Fox.

Brigflatts Meetinghouse, near Sedbergh

