

## 2.2 Margaret Fell and Quakerism

Margaret Fell's key role cannot be understood without reference to her second husband – George Fox (1624-91). Readers

unfamiliar with Fox's story can refer to our five-page biography from Friends Way 1: see [bit.ly/RR-Fox](http://bit.ly/RR-Fox). Like Fox, Fell was imprisoned for her Quaker beliefs, and she used her time in prison to write and publish closely argued religious tracts and persuasive

letters. She wasn't imprisoned as often as Fox, nor for nearly as long; whenever at liberty, she used her influence to promote Quakerism. She campaigned tirelessly for the release of many persecuted Quakers.

Margaret was, by the standards of the time, highly educated with a lively intellect, and she wrote extensively and persuasively. She was skilful at identifying abuses by the authorities when persecuting Quakers, including their use of warrants, searches, seizures, arrests and imprisonment. She clearly learned legal concepts, principles and practice during her 26-year marriage to Judge Fell.

In 17th century England, women's influence waxed and waned with their marital status. Fell was married twice – to Thomas Fell from 1632 until his death in 1658, and to George Fox from 1669 to 1691. Marriage to Fell made her the mistress of Swarthmoor Hall and enhanced her access to powerful people and increased her status. Much later, her position as George Fox's wife gave her influence among Quakers because of his standing. But during two long periods, she endured the marginalised status of widowhood.

Margaret's influence also was amplified through her seven adult daughters whom she energised and harnessed to the Quaker movement, which later also recruited their husbands. Her correspondence with her family was extensive and, with the exception of her son George, it seems that the whole family became a powerhouse of Quakerism. George Fell was generally hostile to George Fox, in contrast to his seven sisters who were convinced by Fox's message and affectionate towards their stepfather.

### Mistress of Swarthmoor Hall, and 1652

Born as Margaret Askew in 1614 at Marsh Grange near Dalton, she was one of two daughters of John Askew – a well-respected member of the landed gentry, and grandson of the Protestant martyr and poet Anne Askew (c. 1521-46). Upon John Askew's death she inherited half of his considerable estate. At the age of 18, she married Thomas Fell (1598-1658) who was at different times a barrister, Judge of the Assize in the north-west, Justice of the Peace, member of the Long Parliament and, in his final four years, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. This arranged marriage was advantageous to both: together they enjoyed both increased monetary wealth and also social capital.

Thomas Fell was 18 years her senior, and his work often took him away for many weeks at a time. Meanwhile Margaret ran the household confidently and cared for the eight children they had that survived infancy. Thomas both allowed and encouraged her to exercise an unusual level of independence,





*Margaret Fell's birthplace, Marsh Grange near Dalton*

and Margaret received visitors even when he was not at home. When Fox arrived at Swarthmoor Hall in 1652, Thomas was away on the Welsh circuit.

Fired up by the success of his Whitsun Sermon on Firbank Fell, Fox had then preached in the chapel of Preston Patrick, in Kendal town hall and in Staveley – with mixed results. In Staveley the church warden John Knipe had incited his fellows to eject him and throw him over a wall into the graveyard: see page 59. After reaching Ulverston in late June, Fox heard of the hospitable household at Swarthmoor Hall and called there, speaking at first to Margaret's children (aged two to nineteen) and 'Priest' Lampitt (rector of Ulverston) – who clearly felt threatened by Fox and his message. In the evening Fox spoke with Margaret herself, and she reported being persuaded.

Fox stayed at Swarthmoor for some nights, and on 1 July attended Ulverston Parish Church at Margaret's invitation and (with Lampitt's reluctant permission) addressed the congregation. Margaret was deeply affected by his words, and defended George against Lampitt's increasing anger. After George was ejected, he addressed the crowd in the churchyard before returning to Swarthmoor and convincing most of the household. Margaret was by now facing a dilemma: 'I was struck into such a sadness, I knew not what to do, my husband being from home. I saw it was the truth, and I could not deny it'.

In early July, Fox made a series of journeys on horseback to preach and gather support in various villages within easy reach of Swarthmoor. He also returned to Kendal and Sedbergh to fortify his recent converts. Meanwhile Margaret and her household had their Quaker beliefs reinforced by leading Quakers James Nayler and Richard Farnsworth, who had followed Fox to Swarthmoor and been invited to stay on. Three weeks after first meeting Fox, Margaret sent word that Judge Fell was expected to return and beseeched Fox to return from Sedbergh.

Even as Fell was crossing the sands of Morecambe Bay on his return, a group of angry gentlemen led by Lampitt intercepted him to speak of the 'disaster' they had observed at Swarthmoor, claiming that his wife, children and household had been bewitched by a travelling preacher.

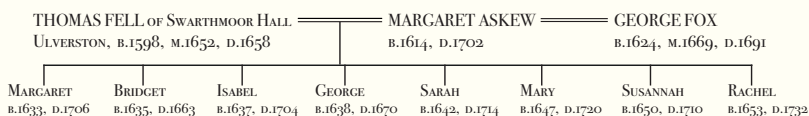


The accusation of witchcraft was very serious at the time. Happily for Margaret, Fell suspended judgement until he had heard both sides. After supper, Fell agreed to Margaret's request that Fox should speak directly. According to Margaret 'And so my husband came to see clearly the truth of what he spoke, and was very quiet that night, said no more, and went to bed'.

The next day Lampitt visited and in long earnest talks tried to change Fell's mind, but without success. When later some Friends were discussing the problem of where they could meet to worship as they preferred, Fell overheard them and offered 'You may meet here, if you will'. Two days later the first Meeting was held in Swarthmoor's large hall, and they continued on every Sunday until 1690, when Fox created a Meetinghouse nearby: see page 69.

Although Fell was clearly sympathetic to Quakerism and never hindered his wife's activities, his public position prevented him from being publicly identified as a Quaker. He continued to attend Lampitt's church without his wife and family for a year or two, maintaining outward religious appearances. In his later years, however, he would sit in his study with its doors open to the large hall while the Meeting was in progress – a discreet form of attendance. He was also a valuable defender of Quaker liberty and source of legal advice.

In the years following her 'convincement', Margaret took to writing letters, tracts, and a total of 16 books, four of which were translated into Dutch, Hebrew or Latin. Her subjects ranged widely – from freedom of conscience in worship, to the equality of women, a mission to the Jews and pacifism.



*All of Margaret's children married and about 24 of her grandchildren survived infancy.*

## Widowhood and imprisonment

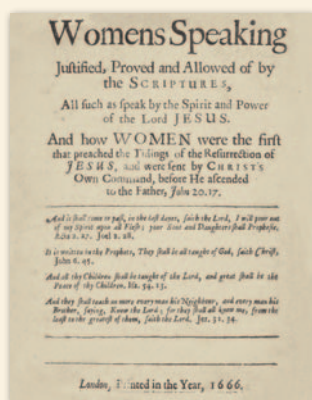
In 1658 Thomas died and Margaret continued her work for the Quaker cause. Freed of any restraining influence, she acquired more autonomy in word and deed, as well as inheriting his considerable estate including sole ownership of Swarthmoor Hall. However she also became more vulnerable – no longer protected as a judge's wife. Nevertheless she was quick to turn her influence and eloquent writings to the defence of other vulnerable Quakers.

Another important death in 1658 was that of Oliver Cromwell who had established the Protectorate after the beheading of Charles I in 1649. Within two years of Cromwell's death, the succession struggle ended the Protectorate, and England's monarchy was restored. Charles II went on to reign from 1660 to 1685. Margaret began what became a long correspondence and series of visits with King Charles, spending 18 months in London on Quaker business from 1660. Her first goal was to plead with him for George Fox's release from prison.

During the summer months of 1663 Fell and most of her daughters made a 1000-mile journey all over England to visit and encourage Friends. The following year she was arrested for failing to take an oath and for allowing Meetings to be held in her home. Defending herself, she said 'as long as the Lord blessed her with a home, she would worship him in it'. After six months in Lancaster Gaol, she was sentenced to life imprisonment and forfeiture of all her property – Draconian punishment for religious belief and practice.

In fact she was released in June 1668, having used over four years in gaol to write religious tracts including *Women's Speaking Justified* – a scripture-based argument for women's ministry. This developed Fox's assertion that the spirit of Christ lives in both men and women equally and therefore each gender is entitled to speak and be heard. By 1667 it had run to a second edition which included replies to questions and criticism, and is considered a major text on women's religious leadership in the 17th century.

After her release from Lancaster Gaol and the restoration of her estate in 1668, Fell began to establish Women's Meetings in parallel to the existing Men's meetings. At first these tended to focus on issues around marriage, orphans and the elderly, and also about the employment and apprenticeship of young women Friends. From 1671 she held monthly Women's Meetings at Swarthmoor, where she and her daughters were prominent leaders



## Marriage to George Fox

Margaret's marriage to George Fox took place in Bristol, in October 1669. This may have been more of a strategic and theological alliance than a love match or a physical union. Margaret was 55 and had been widowed for 11 years, whereas George was a bachelor of 45. Since their first meeting in 1652, they had enjoyed many years of close friendship and deep mutual respect.



They married only after extensive discussion with fellow Quakers, whose concern to avoid any appearance of impropriety or scandal may have been a factor. Margaret's children were also consulted and all her daughters were supportive of the marriage. Once married, their separate Quaker work seemed to take precedence over spending time together. Just 10 days after the wedding, they left Bristol together, but George 'passed on ... in the work of the Lord into Wiltshire' while his bride travelled on alone to Swarthmoor.

Only six months later, Margaret was imprisoned in Lancaster for about a year for breaking the Conventicle Act by allowing Meetings at Swarthmoor. Shortly after her release, George Fox left for America on another Quaker mission, and he was imprisoned again on his return in 1673. Margaret went to London to plead for his release, and George was eventually freed in 1675. After this, they spent about a year together at Swarthmoor, collaborating on Quaker work. The companionable interlude did not last long, and in a rare moment of emotional appeal, Margaret's letter of 18 July 1678 shows how much they all miss him: 'Thy company would be more and better to us than all the world or than all the earth can afford; but only for the Lord's truth and service [are we willing to resign it]'. Two months later, Fox returned to Swarthmoor for 18 months.

By 1680, Quaker membership had grown to a peak and the establishment responded to their rising power by increasing the persecution. Fines were widespread and Quakers were often imprisoned. Margaret was fined heavily and had her cattle confiscated. In 1684 Margaret, now 70, made another journey to London to petition the new King, James II, but he dismissed her with a curt 'go home'. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 put William and Mary of Orange jointly on the throne, and the Act of Toleration was finally passed in 1689. At long last, the persecution of Quakers became illegal; both Margaret and George must have rejoiced at this achievement.

Over the 22 years of their marriage, George had been with Margaret at Swarthmoor Hall for a total of less than five, usually only for convalescence from his spells of brutal imprisonment. Margaret calmly accepted George's prolonged absences both in prison and on preaching missions. She often made the arduous journey to London, where George spent most of his last decade, staying in the homes of Margaret's married daughters near London. She was 77 when she went there in 1690 for several months, perhaps aware that he had not long to live. In January 1691, George Fox died in London and Margaret spent her remaining 11 years at Swarthmoor.

In April 1702 Margaret Fell Fox died serenely at the remarkable age of 88 years. Just before she died, she said to her youngest daughter Rachel 'Take me in thy arms ... I am in peace'. Her body lies at Sunbrick Burial Ground on Birkkrigg Common. Swarthmoor Hall had been her home for 70 years, and it continues to inspire the Quaker movement to this day. And so does Margaret Fell, who lives on through her publications, which in 1712 were edited and published by her daughters and sons-in-law.



*Wall plaque at Sunbrick Burial Ground*