

1652 Country – a land steeped in our faith

Roy Stephenson explores the rich heritage of the lands where our Quaker faith first grew and finds lessons to use in the present day.

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If you are new to Quakerism, there can be no better place to begin to explore what it may mean for us than the place in which it began to be something really significant in the life of this country, and in the world. Go to the beautiful meeting houses one finds dotted throughout the area and spend time in them, soaking in the atmosphere of peace and calm, and you will feel at least refreshed. Worship with Friends - Quakers - there and you may begin to feel changed by the experience. These are places where it feels as if, to use Eliot's phrase, 'prayer has been valid'. That awareness is both humbling and comforting.

What you will find is a place where people took the demands of faith seriously, and were transformed by the experience. In letting themselves be changed, they helped make possible some of the great changes that happened to the world between the 16th and the 18th centuries of this era. Religious and then political toleration, the independence of juries, the anti-slavery movement, the industrial revolution – all these, and much more, can be said to have been brought about at least partly because of the existence of Quakerism. Understand Quakerism, and you are helped to understand why the world is as it is. If, alongside your understanding, there is the appreciation that these places may give you of the personal value of peace, quiet and inward listening, you will have become closer to that which continues to inspire Friends today.

For a Quaker however the question is more complex, and it is because of the ideas that the area itself helped inspire. There is something paradoxical about visiting the area where the Quaker movement began to be a force in the religious and political life of first of all England, but very rapidly much of the rest of the British Isles, Europe and North America. Our experience has led us to the principle that before God, all are equal; yet we respect the members of the 'Valiant Sixty', and in particular George Fox and Margaret Fell, above perhaps all other Quakers. In similar vein our testimony to equality can be applied to places too – so why honour one area in particular almost as if it were sacred?



In Fox's footsteps – coming down from Pendle Hill, October 2010. Photo: R. Powell

The answers to this conundrum certainly do not lie in the information one can acquire from visiting the area. There are several standard reference works and a growing number of biographies which can give the interested reader all the factual detail most of us are likely to want, online material seems to be growing all the time, and the true researcher can visit the Library of Friends House in London to find out more or less everything else. We do not visit north-west England for the facts we can garner there.

Nor do we visit to see the places where Quakerism began. I know this sounds strange, but there is a sense in which even if those places looked the same, which they do not, we would still not see where Quakerism started. Since the 17th Century we have gone through the Industrial Revolution with all its attendant changes, the relative status of various countries has changed as a result – and we see the world through eyes which are conditioned by the Romantic Movement. When Fox first came to Lancashire, Westmorland and Cumberland these places were seen as a wasteland, a wilderness, a place of horror from which any reasonable person would want to escape; and this would have been the view of the residents as much as the visitors. Agriculture was unremitting, backbreaking manual toil which filled the lives of 90% of the people: roads were unpaved muddy tracks and travel was difficult & slow: clothing was wool, leather and linen – heavy and water-retentive: and the average calorie intake of a labourer was about 4000 per day – enough for an athlete today, but then just what one needed to survive.

If we do not visit 1652 Country to re-experience the past – if only because we cannot – are we just sightseeing? The average holidaymaker does not expect to be changed by their time away from the workaday world: they just want a break, a respite from the daily grind. And you can visit on this basis, if you want, and do not mind missing all the rest of what can happen here, though this ‘rest’ might be much harder work. For if 1652 Country is not about the past it must be about confronting the present and the future. That means looking for the challenges the place presents to its visitors, and seeing what they tell us about our lives.

For everyone this will be different, but if we come at this with a common Quaker thread, some shared themes emerge. First, there is the challenge of the message. Fox had a vision on Pendle Hill, but it was not a private vision – it was of a *great people to be gathered*. This challenges us both to actually have our own vision, and also to share it and stand up for it with sympathiser and critic alike. Friends nowadays call this ‘outreach’ and it is not the same as evangelism. Whether or not people agree with us is up to them; what we are challenged to do is to share our visions of what the world can be.

Secondly, we are called to live that vision ourselves. It is notable that until he reached Pendle, Fox was warning people of ‘the coming of the Day of the Lord’. Afterwards, the slogan was that ‘Christ has come to teach his people himself’. He went on to explain what this implied for people's lives in the “reasonings” he had with those he encountered, wherever that may have been. When we unpack this change in his message what we see is that after climbing Pendle Hill, Fox himself tries to live a transformed life. His vision changes him. In the same way, we cannot expect others to adopt our ideas of how to live, if we do not make the effort ourselves.

The third challenge is to do with role models. For many of us, and Fox was one such, the process of living a transformed life begins with finding someone whose life exemplifies our ideals, and then trying to copy it. Out of this our own way develops. Fox made Christ Jesus his wayfinder and example. When he recognised that he must preach on top of Firbank Fell, it was because Jesus had preached on the mountain. The challenge for us is to find our own role models to emulate and grow from. We have another 350 years worth of potential examples to copy, and a much greater awareness of humankind's religious history enlarging our potential choice. However coming from the culture that most of us do, Jesus will continue to throw up a challenge about how to live – one we can either take up or turn down, but which we should not ignore.

What was remarkable, and radicalising, about Jesus' way of faith was that it was not based on acquiring knowledge or practising techniques or rituals; it was based on the acceptance of the love of God and its power to lead us into transformed existence – in response to God and to each other, initially, and by extension to the rest of the created universe. Fox experienced the power of this message and based his preaching and his life on it. Over the years we have learned to express this through and as our testimony to equality, and living up to it is still the most radicalising challenge with which we are faced. We continue to find equality frightening, so experientially, religiously and politically its challenges remain under-explored. Yet we know that equality works. In societies in which differences are discounted, a more stable, peaceful and harmonious milieu develops. Fox taught equality before God but also in commercial transactions, the jobs market, the family and in political life. Are we up to this challenge?

One of the biggest differences between early Friends and today is that they were religious revolutionaries, whereas today we tend to be social evolutionaries. We want to change society gradually, slowly, piecemeal and by mutual consent. In the 1650s the aim was not to change aspects of the world – it was to change the world altogether. The radicalism of our founders has mothered British and perhaps North American political radicalism ever since, but there have been many fathers. One difference between modern and 17th-century radicalism is that our tends to be centred round a programme of change, whereas back then it was recognised that it is people who must change first, for change to be effective. Are we also challenged to ask how radical is our vision today – or are we too comfortable with things the way they are?

We can leave 1652 Country with these questions in our heads and in our hearts. Underneath them should be the beginnings of some realisations also. First, that when we come to this place of 17th-Century horror and ugliness and now see only its beauty, we need to realise that our own, humdrum corner of the world has just as much potential to be a Divine Place as has beautiful north-west England. And secondly we can perhaps remind ourselves that just as Fox found a People of God in the religious and social cast-offs of his world, so we too can see that of God in the meanest, dirtiest and most rejected of today's outcasts. We may find ourselves led to see God at work through those we find hardest to tolerate; and even – the biggest surprise of all – in, and through, ourselves.

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