

A MISSING CHAPTER FROM THE HISTORY OF YORK CASTLE: THE IMPRISONMENT OF QUAKERS

By Charles Patmore

Introduction

As a walled stronghold within the *de facto* northern capital of England, York Castle served over many centuries as a place where political offenders and dissident groups were confined. Examples include Welsh rebels in the 13th century, the Knights Templar in the 14th century, Catholic dissidents during the Tudor era, anti-royalist rebels in the 17th century, Jacobite rebels and Militia Act protesters during the 18th century, and Luddites, Peterloo protesters and Chartists during the 19th century. But, in terms of the numbers of individuals imprisoned and the total years of life consumed there, it seems very likely that it was Quakers who by a large margin bore the lion's share of imprisonment in York Castle for political or religious reasons. This paper outlines basic facts concerning the imprisonment of Quakers in York Castle, an aspect of York history which has received less attention than warranted.

Making much use of Besse's 1753 catalogue of persecution of Quakers, the focus here is limited to Quakers imprisoned specifically in York Castle, not the other prisons in York and Yorkshire which are also mentioned in that book ¹. The focus is on imprisonment for acts compelled by Quaker conscience. These involved offences as disparate as refusing military service, refusing to pay tithes, and publicly arguing with Church of England preachers during their sermons. Three episodes are covered: the mass imprisonment of Quakers during the 17th century, which receives most attention, plus two much smaller groups of prisoners: the 'Lothersdale Quakers', who resisted tithes during the late 18th century, and Quaker Conscientious Objectors during the First World War.

The background to early Quakers' conflicts with government

Standing on a rock outcrop in hill country near Sedbergh on Whit Sunday 1652, George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, addressed a huge crowd for three hours. He fired his listeners with such enthusiasm that many Quakers cite this moment as the birth date of their religious movement. It spread fast in northern England, in rural Yorkshire in particular. Then Quaker missionaries systematically spread the word to southern England, to England's American colonies, and to Europe and beyond – all within the 17th century.

The Quaker movement sought to revive the religious experience of original Christianity, freed from beliefs and practices fostered by established churches which, early Quakers believed, had long ago lost the way ². Fox taught that people should

seek to experience the voice of God within themselves. He urged people to learn from their own religious experiences and from the counsel of inspiring lay people, not from priests who claimed a monopoly on religious understanding. In due course the Quakers (or 'Society of Friends', as they call themselves) developed a unique style of Christian worship. In a 'Meeting House', which deliberately looks plain, ordinary and unlike a church, Quakers sit together in silence and reflect on whatever anyone present then feels an inner prompting to say.



George Fox's famous 1652 open air speech, as envisaged by the Quaker Tapestry¹⁸

The Quakers emerged at a time of intense social ferment. They were one of various radical new movements which in different ways were challenging the status quo. The victors in the 1642-1646 Civil War were deeply divided. Cromwell's triumphant army had been created and funded by England's growing upper middle-class of wealthy farmers, merchants, cloth manufacturers and bankers who were dominant in Parliament. These had resented the inroads made by Charles I into the influence which they could exert through Parliament and they expected their victory to enhance their influence on government. But the Civil War victory had also encouraged less privileged people towards utterly contrary goals. Many officers and soldiers in

Cromwell's army were dreaming of overthrowing their Parliamentary employers and, indeed, much of the existing social order, now that the King had been removed.

Some powerful army factions, like the egalitarian, rights-centred Levellers, called for full democracy. Another strong army faction, the Fifth Monarchy Men, hoped to remodel government on imagined biblical principles in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. The Diggers, a radical offshoot from the Levellers, challenged land ownership. Many of the new dissidents shared a dream that true understanding of Christ's teachings would guide towards a more just ordering of society.

In one sense Quaker teachings fitted well with such hopes and indeed many former Levellers became Quakers³. But in another sense many Quakers espoused a very different path. For the Quakers sought as a community to cultivate their inner light, to perfect a Christian life themselves, and generally not to impose on the worldly affairs of others through enforced redistribution of land or new systems of government.

Cromwell developed a personal military dictatorship and, in turn, crushed or side-lined the Levellers, the Parliament which had engaged him as army commander, and the Fifth Monarchy Men. Thereafter, while experimenting with novel types of parliament, he firmly retained his own grip on the levers of power. He governed predominantly in the interests of the same wealthy business and farming class from which many MPs had been drawn and he dealt with threats to their interests from the various new radical movements. While in principle Cromwell espoused freedom of worship, he enabled restriction of religious movements which appeared politically or socially disruptive. He delegated much decision making concerning the latter to local authorities, as fitted an age where new politico-religious movements like Ranters, Quakers or Fifth Monarchy Men could emerge and evolve at a rapid pace. Prosecutions would typically be led by the local establishment, by "magistrates, landowners, army commanders and parish clergy", not by edict from Cromwell.³

In Yorkshire, like elsewhere, the early Quakers became seen by local authorities as disruptive and a threat to the status quo. While, unlike the Levellers, Quakers were generally ready to 'render unto Caesar' in worldly affairs, they would not yield one inch to any worldly law which they felt compromised what they believed to be true Christian principles. In order to stand firm on certain principles, many Quakers felt morally compelled to take actions which they knew could bring them prison and considerable suffering. Within weeks of Fox's Whitsun 1652 sermon, the first Quakers were being jailed in York Castle.

POINTS OF CONFLICT BETWEEN QUAKERS AND GOVERNMENT

The following were the main points of conflict which led to the imprisonment of Quakers in York Castle.

Protests during Church of England services

During the first few years after Fox's 1652 sermon in particular, early Quakers could feel so fired by their sense of new religious insights that they would interrupt Church of England services to dispute with the preacher and share their own views with the congregation.

Quakers could view the government church as a block to ordinary people experiencing true Christianity because they believed it fooled them with a false version, which was made to look impressive by theatrical church buildings and costumed clergymen. Quakers could feel obligated to "testify to the truth" and alert churchgoers to the propagation of what they saw as falsehoods.⁴ Sometimes they would stand up during a sermon and heckle the preacher about something he had said. They might address other members of the congregation. Sometimes they might speak or write to a clergyman privately. An appendix to this paper supplies a [1655 York Castle prosecution document](#) which vividly describes a Quaker in a Yorkshire village church interrupting a sermon to dispute a point with the priest.

Unsurprisingly, such behaviour cost Quakers dear. As well as being fined and imprisoned for speaking out during services, they were repeatedly assaulted by members of the congregation – and in at least one case, in Bentham in 1657, died as a result.⁵ Writing in 1681, the Quaker Isaac Penington says Quakers did this:

"Because we are moved of the Lord so to do.... He bids us witness for him, and against deceivers...we must do it: woe unto us (from the Lord) if we do it not....What we do herein, we do for conscience' sake, in obedience to the Lord; and not out of stubbornness or rebellion, as by some we are charged, ...but singly to the Lord, that we may stand clear in his sight."⁶

One repeated Quaker objection to the Church of England was the religious expertise which it claimed for its clergymen, who seemed to lord it over their congregations, whereas Quakers preached equality and a common human potential to attain spiritual insights. Quite often a Quaker protester in church would call for a clergyman to come down from his high pulpit.

Another common Quaker objection was that the Church of England's teachings were not sustained through it engendering enthusiasm among its congregations, as did the

Quaker movement. Instead, Quakers noted, its ministry depended artificially on priests being paid – and paid with money which was forcibly extracted from the populace via the tithe system, which was backed by threats of prison. ‘Hireling’ was a term quite often voiced by Quakers when interrupting priests’ sermons.

Disruptions of church services forced the authorities to take action against Quakers at the very outset of the movement. But such protests were soon to become rare, whereas other points of conflict brought vastly larger numbers to York Castle’s gaol.

Non-payment of tithes

A major, long-running cause of imprisonment for Quakers was their refusal to pay the tithes through which the Church of England was partly financed. (Tithes were something resembling a 10% income tax on farm produce.)

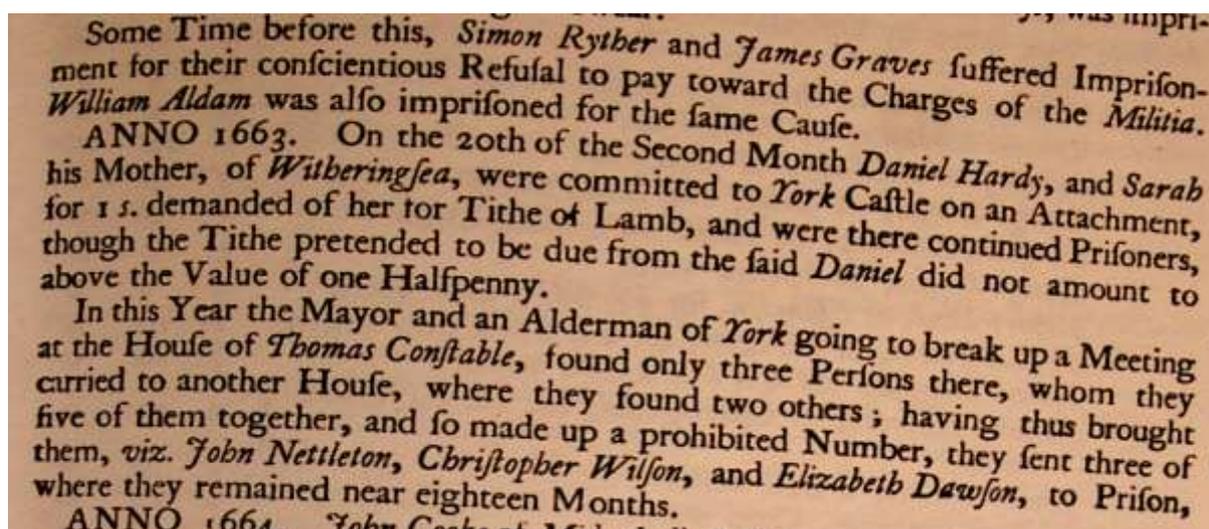
Quakers felt that it was morally wrong to contribute to the artificial funding of a church which supplied a false version of Christianity, as described above. In Isaac Penington’s view it was wrong to help to fund churches (or ‘steeple-houses’ as he and fellow Quakers called them) because “they are places which were erected for popish and idolatrous worship; and where a worship not differing in its nature and ground (but only in form) is continued in this day”.⁷ Tithes were seen as yet another feature of the corrupted Catholic Church which had continued unchanged in the supposedly reformed government church.⁸ Quakers also opposed tithes because they opposed any charges or payment for religion: ‘Freely ye have received, freely give’ should be the way in which Christian teachings were supported, they believed.⁹

Non-payment of tithes was most certainly not a matter of Quakers trying to save money for they knew they would lose far more when their property was seized in lieu of payment. They also were repeatedly sent to prison. Thomas Aldam, the first Quaker to be imprisoned in York Castle, in 1652 began a stay of two years six months for this reason.¹⁰ Imprisonment for tithes continued until 1795 when eight Quakers from Lothersdale spent two years and five months imprisoned in York Castle for non-payment of tithes.

Attendance at Quaker Meetings / following Quaker religious practices

During Cromwell’s Protectorate some Yorkshire Quakers were being fined, put in the stocks or imprisoned in York Castle for attending Quaker Meetings, since local officials deemed Quaker worship to fall outside the limits indicated by Cromwell for freedom of worship. Likewise, Quaker wedding ceremonies could be punished. In 1657, for

instance, five Yorkshire couples were imprisoned for Quaker marriages - mostly for six months in gaol but one couple for a year¹¹.



From Besse's history of persecution¹. Last entry describes a fabricated charge of attending a Quaker Meeting since five Quakers together comprised the critical number for prosecution.

After the 1660 Restoration, persecution on these counts became systematic national policy. Via the 1662 'Quaker Act', five or more Quakers found in a house together were deemed to be engaged in an illegal meeting. This was punishable by escalating fines and prison for non-payment or repeated offences. A third offence could be punished by transportation as a convict to work on colonial plantations.¹² In York in 1663, for instance, three Quakers spent 18 months in prison for illegal meeting.¹³ The 1670 Conventicles Act launched an active programme of fining preachers and attenders at any non-Anglican religious service and, where Quakers were concerned, fines could inexorably lead to prison, as described next.

Non-payment of fines

Zero co-operation with unjust or wicked laws was a Quaker principle. If a fine had been imposed because a Quaker had taken a moral stance, then the Quaker should not co-operate with injustice by paying it. This was part of affirming the rightness of the Quaker's stance. As a result, Quakers' goods were often seized and sold to cover the fine or they would be imprisoned. Prime examples would be refusing to pay a fine for attending Quaker meetings or for not attending Church of England services, because Quakers believed the government had no more right to levy the fine than to impose such restrictions on religious freedom.

Not removing one's hat in court or before a self-presumed social superior

A less common but recurrent cause for fines or imprisonment was the common Quaker resistance to removing one's hat when entering places like court rooms or when encountering government officials or people who presumed a high status for themselves. Reasons included the Quaker belief in equality and that such deference unhelpfully nurtured arrogance in the person receiving it.¹⁴ In 1657, for instance, two Quakers received three months in York Castle's gaol for not removing their hats in a court room.¹⁵

Not taking part in warfare nor assisting military activities

Quakers refused any co-operation with warfare. During 1662, for instance, there were at least three Quakers imprisoned in York Castle for refusal to pay charges for the County Militia and in 1664 property was seized from fifteen Yorkshire Quakers to cover these charges. Like tithes, this point of conflict with government continued long past the 17th century. During the First World War, five Quakers were imprisoned on the York Castle site for refusing military service on grounds of conscience.¹⁶

Non-attendance at the government church

The 1660 Restoration of the Monarchy brought new points of conflict between government and Quakers. It revived compulsory attendance at Anglican church services, which had lapsed under the more liberal policies of Cromwell's Protectorate. Punishment for non-attendance would start with fines but, because of Quakers' resistance to paying unjust fines, prison could result. Sometimes Quakers ended up with very long sentences. In 1670, for instance, a Quaker was released from York Castle after 5 years 6 months for non-attendance at church. Two fellow Quaker prisoners, imprisoned for the same reason, had died in York Castle – one after two years imprisonment and one after 6 years 6 months.¹⁷

Refusing to swear oaths

A major cause for imprisonment was Quakers' commitment not to swear oaths of any sort. Text on the Quaker Tapestry explains:

“We regard the taking of oaths as contrary to the teaching of Christ, as setting up a double standard of truthfulness, whereas sincerity and truth should be practised in all dealings in life.”¹⁸

Quakers would point to the Bible injunction “Swear not at all”.¹⁹

Quakers' problems concerning oaths surged after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and the revival of obligation to formally swear the Oath of Allegiance to the Sovereign, if this were demanded. In 1660 alone, across all Yorkshire a total of 535 Quakers were arrested, quite often at Quaker Meetings, ordered to swear the Oath of Allegiance, then imprisoned for refusing.²⁰ Quakers testified repeatedly and explicitly that they challenged only the act of swearing, not the sentiments in the Oath of Allegiance, but they were punished all the same. This Oath made a remarkably easy tool for quickly imprisoning Quakers, since no further evidence gathering was needed. As a result of their resistance to swearing oaths, it could be difficult for Quakers to defend themselves in court procedures until the option of affirmation was introduced in 1696.

PHASES IN THE 17TH CENTURY IMPRISONMENT OF QUAKERS IN YORK CASTLE

Under the Commonwealth (1649 – 1659)

During the first few years after their emergence in 1652, an approximate average of 15 Quakers per year were being admitted to prison at York Castle. Of the first 35 Quakers imprisoned there, 30 had been gaoled for some sort of public speaking out against clergymen, often in church, as described earlier. Resistance to tithes and holding Quaker Meetings were other charges during the first years of the Quaker movement.²¹

Towards the end of the Commonwealth, a notably different picture is evident. In the last four years of the Commonwealth, late 1650s, imprisonment of Quakers at York Castle now averaged 10 new incarcerations per year and public rows with clergymen accounted for only four of thirty-nine imprisonments during this period. Seventeen imprisonments concerned not paying tithes while ten were for Quaker marriage ceremonies and nine for Quaker meetings. (Subsequently, under Charles II, the change from the widespread heckling in church during the Quakers' early years became yet more marked. In 1685 only one out of 275 Quakers in York Castle had been imprisoned for arguing with clergy.)

By the late 1650s local government seemed on the offensive and there appears something of a local tide of fear and anger against Quakers. In York in 1659, Council officials organised the breaking up of Quaker meetings and beating up of participants, the locking up of the buildings where meetings occurred and destruction of their furnishings.²² Besse also reports several severe assaults on Quakers by members of the public, some of which concerned Quakers speaking out in church.

In 1659 Magistrates in Leeds, Wakefield and Bradford petitioned Richard Cromwell, who had inherited the Lord Protector post from his father, for a central government crackdown on Quakers. The latter were meeting in hundreds, they stated and they worried that “in a short time they shall be the greater Number”. Quakers were described as intrinsically subversive: “These will not know nor acknowledge any Subjection they owe to any Powers upon Earth”.²³

Systematic, large-scale persecution under Charles II (1660-1685)

From the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 a huge increase in imprisonment of Quakers occurred. According to one source, across all England some 20,000 Quakers in total were imprisoned during the period till 1689.²⁴ This persecution was the design of Charles II’s ministers and the influential post-Restoration parliaments, who sought to restore conformity to a single Anglican church, rather than of Charles II himself. In the early years of the Restoration it was also influenced by fears of plots to overthrow the new regime, like Venner’s Fifth Monarchist uprising in London in early 1661 and the 1663 Farnley Wood Plot in the north. Though not involved in such events, Quakers were ready objects of suspicion as a fast-growing, easily misunderstood network which was clearly outside the mainstream and had apparent Leveller associations.

Two additional laws now brought Quakers into trouble: the revival of compulsory attendance at Church of England Sunday services and the revived Oath of Allegiance to the Sovereign. Because Quakers may not swear any sort of oath, as described earlier, a quick way to imprison them without needing to assemble witnesses was to order them to swear the Oath of Allegiance, then charge them immediately they refused. A prime purpose of the Oath of Allegiance had been to ensure that potential Catholic subversives could not obtain influential posts because the Oath was deliberately worded so that a sincere Catholic could not swear it. Yet this Oath was used on a large scale to imprison a Christian denomination which, arguably, is further removed from Catholicism than any other.

In late 1660, at one stage 505 Quakers were concurrently imprisoned in York Castle, arrested from many parts of Yorkshire.²⁵ Many were arrested at Quaker Meetings; others in raids on their homes or workplaces or when stopped at highway checkpoints.

Prison crowding must have been extreme. Little information is accessible about what prison buildings existed within York Castle at the time; the two large prison buildings, which now house the Castle Museum, were not built until 1701 and 1780 respectively.

In 1661 there were 78 new imprisonments of Quakers in York Castle and in 1662 at least 154 more. Many of these imprisonments were for refusing the Oath of Allegiance. In subsequent years there were many arrests from raids on Quaker Meetings in many parts of Yorkshire. Sometimes a raid might bring 20 prisoners to York Castle at a time; more often smaller numbers.

Alongside imprisonment, fines and prosecutions for tithes regularly led to property seizures and its sale at knockdown prices, sometimes brokered by commercial operators. Tools of a Quaker's trade, farm and transport animals and even their beds were seized. Often these goods represented values far above the unpaid fines or tithes for which they were claimed.²⁶ Besse describes this in detail and presents it as a racket whereby prosecutions were motivated by profit. Such measures could ruin the economic prospects of a Quaker family.

In many parts of Yorkshire, it was magistrates who instigated arrests of Quakers. In some places Mayors took a leading role. In Hull some army officers played a similar leading part. After 1675, prosecutions initiated by Anglican clergymen were an increasing factor.

In York itself, immediately after the Restoration when the new regime feared plots like Venner's attempted coup, a period of intimidatory mass arrests of Quakers was stewarded by the Mayor, Christopher Topham²⁷. Subsequently however other York mayors took a different stance. The threat of fresh civil war had passed. Quaker disruption of church services in York had all but ceased. Few York Quakers had tithe obligations and many were well integrated within York's business community. York mayors and magistrates would repeatedly seek to avoid prison sentences for York Quakers whom zealous army officers had arrested in fulfilment of royal proclamations. Elsewhere in Yorkshire, Quakers were nothing like so leniently treated. Overwhelmingly it was non-York Quakers who filled York Castle's prison.²⁸

During the next 20 years the intensity of persecution of Quakers would ebb and flow. Charles II schemed to reduce restrictions on all religious minorities in order to benefit Catholics, with whom he secretly identified. But, before long, Parliament curbed his moves to ease the law. Late in the reign of Charles II, Quaker prisoners' petitions show that the number of Quakers in York Castle was again very high: 240 in 1682, 227 in 1684, 275 in 1685.²⁹ The latter petition also lists reasons for imprisonment, which has been used to construct Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons for Quakers' imprisonment, York Castle, May 1685 ³⁰

For refusing the Oath of Allegiance: 130 (47%)
For attending Quaker Meetings: 45 (16%)
For absence from Church of England church services: 40 (15%)
For ignoring summons from a Church of England court: 35 (13%)
Private prosecutions on religion-based charges 8 (3%)
Non-payment of fine for disagreement with priest: 1
Resistance to tithes: 1
Other: 15 (5%)
Total Quaker prisoners in York Castle in May 1685: 275 people (100%)

Some of the prisoners in Table 1 are said to have been there “six, eight or nine years”.³⁰ It seems likely that for periods during the reign of Charles II (1660-1685) Quakers were a large majority among all prisoners in York Castle.

How long were Quakers' stays in York Castle during the 17th century?

A broad picture can be outlined, though greater detail remains attainable were an exhaustive study conducted of Besse's detailed records.

Many Quakers spent only short spells in York Castle. For instance, 478 of the 505 Quakers imprisoned there *en masse* in 1660 were released after two months.³¹ For examples of sentences passed by courts, in 1654 for instance disruptions of church services were resulting in sentences of three, six, nine and seventeen months. Non-payment of fines was leading to spells of five, seven, twenty and twenty-eight weeks in York Castle. Some zealous early Quakers would repeat the same offence regardless and could accumulate significant prison time through multiple short sentences. Mary Fisher, for instance, who later became an international Quaker missionary, accumulated over two years imprisonment in York Castle through three sentences between 1652 and 1654.³²

There were also a substantial number of Quakers who spent many years continuously imprisoned in York Castle. Table 2 has been created from figures recorded by Besse from a survey conducted at York Castle on 9th December 1682 into Quakers there who had been “long imprisoned” for either non-attendance at an Anglican Church or for resistance to tithes.³³ The 41 individuals identified, who had been imprisoned for more than a year, represent 17% or one in six of the current York Castle Quaker contingent of 240.

Table 2: long-stay prisoners for non-attendance or non-payment, York Castle, 1682³³

<i>Duration of Imprisonment</i>	<i>For non-attendance at church</i>	<i>For non-payment of tithes</i>	<i>Totals</i>
8 years plus	5 men	1 woman	6
7 – 8 years	2 men	1 man	3
5 – 7 years	4 men	5 men	9
4- 5 years	6 men & 2 women	2 men	10
3 - 4 years	2 men	-	2
2 - 3 years	1 man	1 man	2
1 – 2 years	-	9 men	9
Totals	20 men, 2 women	18 men, 1 woman	41 individuals

The longer prison stays shown in Table 2 appear to result from indefinite commitments to prison rather than fixed term sentences: for instance imprisonment until payment of tithes. With one exception (an explicit lifetime sentence in 1662 for resisting the Oath of Allegiance), the fixed term sentences recorded by Besse generally fall below three years, usually much lower. He does however repeatedly give examples of long stays in prison, additional to those above, including deaths in prison. Indefinite imprisonment seems the explanation for prison stays like those in Table 2. Sudden, arbitrary releases could occur for Quakers who had been long imprisoned, as Besse also records.

Prison conditions for Quakers in York Castle 1652 – 1685

Crowding in York Castle could be severe and dangerous for prisoners' health. As already mentioned, we do not have detail on what buildings were used for prisoners since the surviving prison buildings, which now house the Castle Museum, were not built till the 18th century. A likely peak of crowding occurred in late 1660 when 505 Quaker prisoners were held in York Castle for two months. Besse records that during this period: "In York Castle five of the prisoners died through the Unhealthiness of the places where they were thronged together"³⁴. Another spate of deaths occurred in 1662 when eight Quaker prisoners died in York Castle – all of them people detained

for attending Quaker meetings.³⁵ In total, at the very least 27 Quaker prisoners died within York Castle 1652 – 1685. Two of these died under the Commonwealth; the rest under Charles II. Some died after short spells in York Castle; others after periods like four years and six years.³⁶



Where could they squeeze in all those Quakers? The late medieval York Castle site as envisaged by Edwin Ridsdale Tate in 1915. It was possibly not greatly different in 1660

As mentioned earlier, towards the end of the reign of Charles II there were again large numbers of Quaker prisoners. In November 1684, York Castle was so crowded that the head gaoler arranged for five new Quaker prisoners to be housed somewhere else. This occurred despite opposition from an official of the Arch-Diocese who wanted them put out on straw in the Castle yard - like hogs, as he stated.³⁷ (Six months later, Quaker prisoners recorded their own number as 275).

What consequences for morale from so many Quakers imprisoned together?

Although living conditions were sometimes severely crowded and unhealthy, might the morale of Quaker prisoners have benefited from the mutual support available? Prisons for political or religious offenders can generate a milieu which reinforces prisoners' commitment to their cause. Some evidence exists that this occurred among York Castle's Quaker prisoners.

In 1652-53, at least ten Quaker prisoners collaborated in writing religious tracts while in York Castle and got them out for publication. One such publication was 'False Prophets and Teachers Described' by 'Thomas Aldam, Elizabeth Hooton, William Pears, Benjamin Nicholson, Jane Holmes and Mary Fisher, Prisoners of the Lord at York Castle 1652'.³⁸ Two of the writers, Elizabeth Hooton and Mary Fisher, subsequently became famous as trans-Atlantic Quaker missionaries. Elizabeth Hooton wrote to George Fox that in prison she was occupied in writing as much as her weak eyesight permitted, including making copies of anything her fellow prisoners felt "moved to write".³⁹ Another prison publication was 'A brief discovery of the threefold estate of Antichrist' by T. Aldam, S. Buttivant, J. Harwood, T. Lawson, J. Nayler and B. Nicholson in 1653. Thomas Aldam, the first Quaker to be imprisoned in York Castle, was key to the publishing process. Peters states: "It was from prison in York that he sent manuscripts down to London for printing, and organised the distribution of printed tracts across the north of England".⁴⁰ Additionally, according to Scott, the indefatigable Aldam somehow managed four times to exit the prison and preach at York Minster.⁴¹ It seems likely that, for at least some of this group of Quakers, their prison discussions with each other substantially strengthened or developed the ideas which they promoted in subsequent Quaker preaching.



Elizabeth Hooton & Mary Fisher write pamphlets in York Castle gaol – from Quaker Tapestry¹⁸

However, the experience of this early group of energetic Quaker prisoners may well be different from that of post-Restoration years. There is no evidence that they faced overcrowding on the scale that later occurred. They were a smaller group. Some were bold idealists who repeatedly courted prison.

During the periods of severe overcrowding after the Restoration, there is evidence of mutual support among Quaker prisoners. On three occasions, groups of Quaker prisoners organised petitions on behalf of the whole Quaker contingent in York Castle. In 1682 this was to the Assizes judges on behalf of 240 Quaker prisoners. In 1684 it was to King Charles II on behalf of 227 prisoners. In 1685 a petition was directed to representatives in Parliament on behalf of 275 prisoners.⁴²

In 1682 five of the Quakers in York Castle sent a letter to Quakers in London declaring that:

“through the Divine Assistance of that All Sufficient Grace we have been, and still are, not only supported patiently to endure the Tribulations ... but also to go through the same with Cheerfulness and ... we receive daily Renewings of Strength ... by which we are encouraged to go on with Boldness to finish the Testimony which the Lord has committed to us.”

The letter continues in upbeat tone to say that, for many of the imprisoned Quakers, things had not been going as badly as feared in terms of efforts to seize their property. They were even feeling a sense of divine protection.⁴³

Notable Quakers imprisoned in York Castle

Several influential Quakers were imprisoned in York Castle. The three best known individuals are as follows.

George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, was imprisoned in York Castle for two days in 1665 while in transit. He was being taken under close guard from imprisonment in Lancaster Castle to further imprisonment in Scarborough Castle for refusing the Oath of Allegiance. He wrote in his journal that he was housed in a “great chamber” in York.⁴⁴ This has been thought to be Cliffords Tower, which was then a two-storey habitable building. While Fox does not name York Castle, he was being taken under tight security from the royal castle of Lancaster to the royal castle of Scarborough, so it is hard to see that he would have been lodged anywhere less secure than the royal castle of York. Consistent with this is Fox’s mention that there were many soldiers at his place of confinement, who came to see him from curiosity.

Elizabeth Hooton was the first of the great Quaker woman missionaries and a regular co-worker with George Fox. She became a Quaker late in life and was in her early fifties when in 1652 she was imprisoned in York Castle for 16 months for speaking out during a church service. This was one of at least four spells in prison in England for such protests.

In 1661, at the age of sixty, she sailed across the Atlantic to Puritan New England, a most dangerous destination for Quakers. English colonists had travelled there in search of religious freedom but they had then turned their own Puritan society into a highly repressive religious state. New England Puritans had hanged Quaker missionaries and were later to generate the notorious 1692 Salem witchcraft trials. Trying to visit imprisoned Quakers in New England, Elizabeth Hooton was arrested, imprisoned, put in the stocks, stripped and publicly whipped, and finally dumped among wolf tracks in winter wilderness for nature to take its course.

After escaping these perils, she returned to England where she somehow buttonholed King Charles II while he was playing tennis and obtained an edict to protect Quakers in New England. She visited New England yet again but suffered further brutal persecution. She died in 1672 in Jamaica at the age of 71 while on yet another missionary voyage.⁴⁵

Mary Fisher was another intrepid 17th century Quaker missionary who was imprisoned in York Castle. In 1652, at around the age of 30, she was working as a household servant in Selby when she and her employers all embraced the Quaker faith. Weeks later, she publicly rebuked her parish minister, while he was preaching on Sunday. She was charged with 'Brawling in church' and fined £200. Non-payment of this very large sum seems the reason for her subsequent 16 month prison sentence, according to Sylvia Brown.⁴⁶ Imprisoned in York Castle, she teamed up with other Quaker prisoners to jointly write a Quaker publication, as described earlier.

Released, Mary Fisher was soon back in York Castle for a six month sentence for declaring the truth, as she saw it, in a church. The following year she travelled southwards with another woman to preach wherever they could. In Cambridge the Mayor ordered them to be stripped and publicly whipped at the market cross, which they bore with fortitude. Then followed more wandering preaching and another spell in York Castle for speaking out in church.

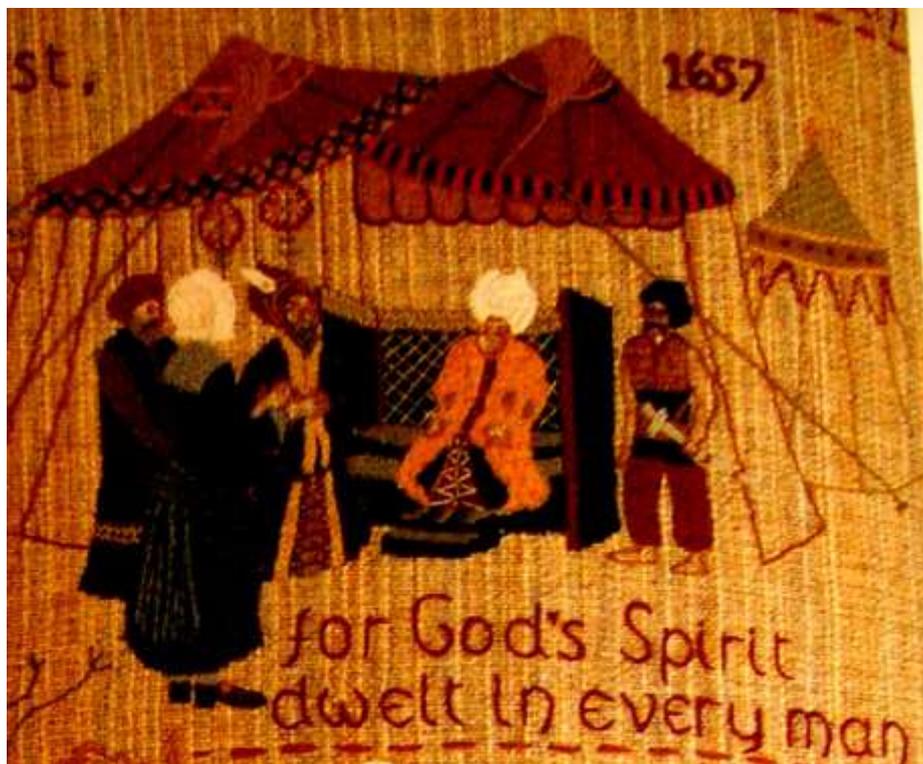
In 1655, together with yet another woman companion, she sailed across the Atlantic to spread the word in Boston, where the harsh Puritan regime was intensely hostile to

Quakers. On arrival at Boston, her books were publicly burned as heretical and she and her companion were stripped and searched for 'witch marks'.⁴⁷ Then they were locked up incommunicado and in darkness for five weeks till a ship for their deportation to Barbados was available.

In July 1657 she departed on another missionary journey with five other Quakers, aiming to bring the Quaker message to the Ottoman Turkish Sultan. They reached Smyrna (now Izmir) where the English Consul pressed them to return to Venice. Storms halted their ship at Zante (Zakynthos). Hearing that the 16 year old Sultan Mehmet IV was currently camped with his army at Adrianople (now Edirne), Mary Fisher and Beatrice Beckley left the other Quakers to try to reach the Sultan.⁴⁸

The two English women travelled by themselves across the then Turkish territories of Peleponnese and Thrace to the Turkish camp at Adrianople. There Mary Fisher obtained an audience with the Sultan, who was accompanied by ministers and three interpreters. In the words of George Bishop, the Sultan "bade her speak the Word of the Lord to them, and not to fear, for they had good hearts, and could hear it". Her message was graciously received. The Sultan told her: "That they could not but respect such an one as should take so much pains to come to them, so far as from England, with a message from the Lord".⁴⁹

Later, she married and emigrated to Charleston, Carolina, where she died in 1698.⁵⁰



Mary Fisher brings the Quaker message to the Ottoman Sultan – from the Quaker Tapestry¹⁸

QUAKER PRISONERS IN YORK CASTLE POST-17TH CENTURY

New laws remove most reasons for imprisonment of Quakers

In the reign of William III and Mary, two new laws removed the basis for many previous prosecutions of Quakers: the Toleration Act (1689) and the Affirmation Act (1696). The Toleration Act permitted freedom of worship to Protestants outside the Church of England as long as they registered their activities with the government and swore Protestant oaths. The Affirmation Act permitted Quakers to 'affirm' rather than swear those oaths. Quakers were still excluded from government roles but were now free from the laws imposing church attendance, banning Quaker meetings or requiring the Oath of Allegiance, which had brought so many of them to prison.

The new laws were intended to secure non-conformist Protestant support against militant Jacobite supporters of the deposed James II (1685-88), who eventually waged three armed uprisings. In 1687, in order to offer freedom to Catholics, the Catholic James II had conferred universal religious freedom which embraced Quakers and other non-conformist Protestants as well as Catholics. William and Mary subsequently sought to give non-conformist Protestants an equally good offer.

After these two Acts, tithes and military service obligations were the only remaining causes for imprisonment of Quakers.

The Lothersdale Eight, 1795: the last Quakers imprisoned over tithes

By this date it had become customary for Quakers' goods simply to be seized in response to non-payment of tithes; imprisonment had fallen out of usage. But a new Anglican vicar in Lothersdale, south-west of Skipton, created a *cause celebre* with an unusually vindictive campaign against local Quakers.⁵¹

He first made an exorbitant claim for tithes on eight Quakers. He could have then simply seized their goods (as he eventually did) or accepted money offered by local non-Quakers on their behalf.⁵² Instead he had them committed indefinitely to York Castle's prison until they agreed to abandon their principles and pay him.

Even by the standards of the time, the Lothersdale eight were viewed by some judges, MPs and Anglican clergymen as treated unjustly. Supportive MPs eventually negotiated an amendment in a new law in order to free them.⁵² Until the latter transpired, the eight Quakers (most of whom had large families) were imprisoned for two years and five months. One Quaker died during imprisonment. They were held in

what at the time was often called the 'New Buildings' (and now sometimes the 'Women's Prison') which today is part of the Castle Museum.⁵³



York Castle Gaol's 1780s 'New Buildings', sometimes called the 'Women's Prison', where the Lothersdale Quakers were imprisoned'

The conditions of the Lothersdale Quakers' imprisonment were relatively mild, which seems to reflect the widespread sense of injustice.⁵⁴ They praised the Governor of York Castle for his helpfulness. Local Quakers were allowed to organise many visitors – including visits by Quakers from the new United States. Prisoners' families received Quaker financial support and the prisoners were allowed to bring in a loom to make goods for sale outside. Over a long stretch of time, the Lothersdale prisoners were enabled to hold Quaker Meetings in prison twice a week. Frequently Quaker visitors attended these Meetings. Sometimes non-Quaker prisoners, especially debtors, attended the Quaker Meetings by choice.⁵⁵

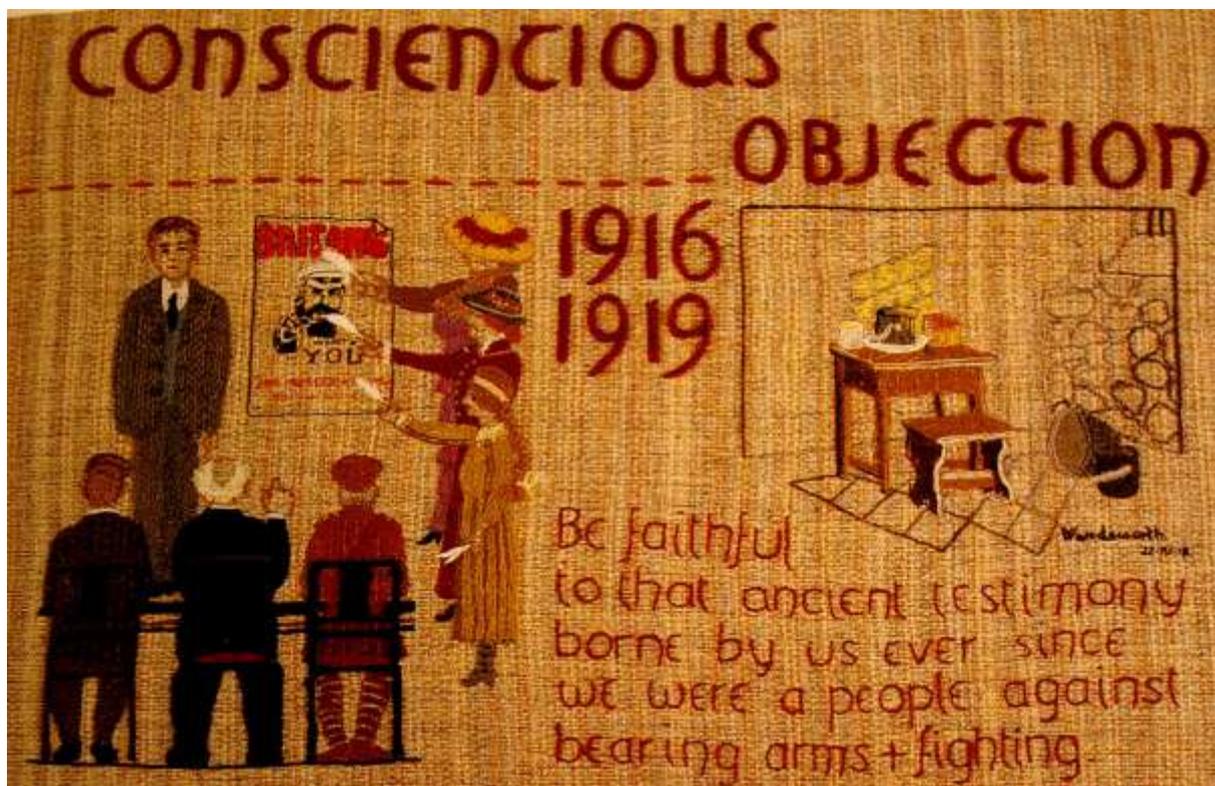
These Quaker prisoners became friendly with James Montgomery, the young Sheffield journalist and poet, imprisoned in York Castle for allegedly subversive publication. One Quaker, Henry Wormald, developed a strong rapport with Montgomery and they stayed in touch by letter after both had left prison.⁵⁶ Montgomery later wrote a poem about another Quaker prisoner, the dry-stone wall craftsman Joseph Browne, who emerged as the spiritual leader of the Lothersdale eight.⁵⁷

A very heavy burden on these Quakers was the potentially lifelong nature of their imprisonment unless they abandoned their principles. One prisoner began negotiations with the Lothersdale vicar but then changed his mind. The parliamentary campaign for a change in the law took such a chequered course that its outcome was seriously in doubt, as Montgomery acknowledged in a letter to Wormall.⁵⁸ During the final two months, Henry Wormall became so depressed about the prospect of life imprisonment that he abandoned the diary which he had been keeping throughout his imprisonment⁵⁹. After these Quakers' release, the Lothersdale vicar seized almost all their furniture in lieu of payment – including the bed of an ill, 70 year old man who died the next day.⁶⁰

The Tithes Commutation Act 1836 meant that any continuing claims by churches could be construed as resembling a freeholder's ground rent charges rather than the compulsory funding of a coercive religion. Thus Quakers could feel permitted to pay.

First World War Conscientious Objectors, York Castle's last Quaker prisoners

Military service obligations now remained a conflict point between Quakers and government.



In World War 1, Quakers go to prison (right) rather than heed pressure to fight from (left) Kitchener's recruiting poster or women proffering White Feathers – from the Quaker Tapestry¹⁸

In 1914 York Castle's Victorian era prison (now demolished) functioned as one of four military prisons which between them covered England for the imprisonment of soldiers sentenced to more than seven days.⁶¹ Since 1906 it had been relabelled 'York Detention Barracks' as part of a new regime for British military prisons which aimed to rehabilitate military prisoners as useful soldiers. Towards this purpose, serving Army NCOs in Army uniform were to work alongside prison warders and promote modern military tasks like trench digging and moving artillery pieces instead of traditional prison hard labour like treadmill, crank and picking oakum.⁶² Prison cells were relabelled 'Detention Rooms' and prisoners were relabelled 'Soldier in Arrest' in hope of making them feel different from civilian convicts.

During the First World War, nine Conscientious Objectors in total were imprisoned in York Castle and five of them were Quakers. All of the latter were moved round a series of prisons and spent no more than weeks in York Castle.⁶³ One Quaker prisoner was a maths teacher at Bootham School in York, William Cooper. He spent a fortnight in York Castle and was put in irons for refusing to drill with a rifle. He refused to sew sandbags but agreed to pick oakum, since it was a non-military task. He was freed after agreeing to work at a power plant.⁶⁴ Two of the Quaker prisoners were brothers, James and Peter Cameron. Before being moved to York, Peter Cameron had been on hunger strike and had been force fed twice. Another Quaker prisoner, Robert Jones, also went on hunger strike but this was after transfer from York Castle. James and Peter Cameron and Robert Jones spent more than two years in total in various prisons for resisting conscription. York Castle's last two Quaker prisoners of conscience, the Cameron brothers, were freed in April 1919.⁶⁵

Conclusions

Most notably, evidence has been cited that for some lengthy periods during the reign of Charles II (1660-1685) York Castle was dominated by the presence of large numbers of Quaker prisoners. This is not well recognised in popular accounts of York's history, as a quick perusal of relevant websites demonstrates.

Topics for future exploration

This account has no more than outlined a complex story and there are certainly loose ends where further detail is desirable. It would be useful to gather information from other sources than Besse concerning the 17th century mass imprisonments and their impact on York and how they affected administration of justice. In respect of the latter there are outstanding questions about what buildings in York Castle were used as prisons during the 17th century and hence about space available. Cliffords Tower is the only Castle building surviving from this period: neither of the former prison

buildings, which now house the Castle Museum, then existed. Some accounts of 17th century buildings in York Castle offer little guidance about what space was used for prisoners.⁶⁶

Public history information on York should include this story

The saga of the 17th century mass imprisonment of Quakers merits addition to public information about York Castle and York's history – to history-focused websites and tourist literature and to educational material for schools. The same could also be said about some other episodes in the history of York Castle's gaol. Its substantial role as a holding place for political prisoners is not well publicised.

A case for a memorial?

Could there be a case for some form of memorial on the York Castle site to the many Quakers who suffered for their conscience there? They and many others – like democracy and social justice campaigners of the late 18th and early 19th century – suffered in the Castle gaol for reasons which now often can seem unjust. Over the centuries the York Castle site has hosted much suffering and injustice. For one dreadful episode, the massacre of York's Jews at Cliffords Tower in 1190, there is now a memorial. Is there a case for additional memorials - or possibly memorial events - for other people who have suffered unjustly in prison, in the courthouse or on the gallows at York Castle? The many Quakers imprisoned there would certainly be a case in point.

Additions to noteworthy residents of York

Information presented here means that, once substantial stays in York Castle's prison are included, some enterprising and colourful historical figures, like Elizabeth Hooton and Mary Fisher, can be added to the list of noteworthy people who at some time have lived in York.

Appendix: [1655 York Castle charge sheet re a Quaker disrupting a church service](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Charles Patmore is a member of the Fishergate, Fulford & Heslington Local History Society. He researched this subject as a volunteer on York Castle Museum's 2017 / 2018 'Rebels' project, which studied people imprisoned on the York Castle site for political or religious reasons. He is also the author of the guidebook, 'Choice Guide to York, UK', available from Amazon: www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1521325251

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APPENDIX

DESCRIPTION OF A QUAKER INTERRUPTING A CHURCH SERVICE

Below is a charge sheet against Christopher Bramley, a Quaker interrupting a service in Little Ouseburn church in 1655. For this episode Christopher Bramley was "confined near six month" at York Castle (Besse 1753 p. 94).

Source: 'Depositions from the castle of York, relating to offenses committed in the northern counties in the seventeenth century' edited by James Raine, Durham, 1861, p. 71.

'LXIX. CHRISTOPHER BRAMLEY. FOR BRAWLING IN A CHURCH. March 28, 1655. Before Thomas Dickinson, Esq. Josiah Hunter, minister of both Ouseburnes, saith, that, upon the last Lord's day, being 25th of March instant, one Christopher Bramley, of Whixley, came, as he had done severall Sundays before, to the parish church of Little Ouseburne at the time of morning service, when he said to the informant, passing by him into the church, "Thou art going into the throne of pride;" and afterwards, being in the church he, the said Christopher Bramley, most irreverently behaved himselfe, not moving his hat all the time of the first prayer and singing of psalmes before sermon, but sat in the porch and spake to diverse as they came in, to the disturbance of them ; and, after the informant had nominated his text, which was 119 Ps., 105, "Thy word is a lampe unto my feete and a light unto my path," he the said Bramley standing up said, in the hearing of the informant and one William Peele, "Where was the word? the word was not then written or but in writing;" with much more that could not be distinctly heard by reason of the noise of the people, who, being greatly disturbed as well as the informant, rose up in their seates and turnd themselves towards him who made the disturbance. Immediately the churchwarden put him the said Bramley out of the porch and lockd the doore upon him, yet he came againe and cast in a paper through a hole in the doore conteining much slanderous and reviling matter, which appears by the writing ready to be produced by the informer upon demand. The informant saith likewise that, about sixe weekes agoe, he the said Bramley came on the Lord's day in the afternoone into the parish-church of Great Ousburne in the time of sermon, when and where he did likewise not a little disturb the informant preaching on that place of Scripture 8 Luke, 18, "Take heed how you heare," audiblye contradicting the informant with words to this purpose, "Thou hast noe such command or authoritye." After sermon alsoe he stood in a daring manner in the time of prayer and singing part of a psalme and giving the blessing, and afterwards remained most of an houre in the churchyard, labouring still to cause more disturbance, and deteining many people about him, as if it had been a place of marketting, to the great abuse of the Lord's day, &c.'