

The Bickerstaffe Quakers
&
The Friends Graveyard
at
Bickerstaffe



A Monograph
by Mary Bonsall

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Preface

A list of Bickerstaffe Quakers was compiled by John H Sagar, a member of the Ormskirk Family History Society which published it. The date of publication was not stated. John Haynes, a Friend in Hardshaw and Mann Monthly Meeting provided much of its evidence, presumably from a record of names and dates of internments in the Bickerstaffe graveyard to be found in the Lancashire Quarterly Meeting Register. The FHS publication contains extremely valuable evidence for the history of the Bickerstaffe Quakers. This brief account uses it but also other research undertaken by John Haynes. Unfortunately John died before he was ready to publish, so the story has been pieced together from his rough notes, without his sources being verified. It was thought, however, that the material he collected should be put on record as valuable work in progress, in the hope that further research may come from it and that it is of interest to Hardshaw Friends.

Background



Figure 1.
The Friends Burial Ground at Bickerstaffe.

George Fox was a founder of the Religious Society of Friends known as Quakers. One of the defining moments in the Movement's origins is seen by Quakers today as his great gathering in 1652 on Firbank Fell, which lies near Sedbergh, North Yorkshire, on the border with Westmoreland. It took place in the context of great national turmoil. The Civil War was only just over, and, until 1653, the North was still under military occupation. Although the Commonwealth Government was,

by 1652, firmly in control, the '*world had been turned upside down*' by the conflict between King and Parliament, and the radical ideas engendered during those terrible times were still current. Many of the early Quaker leaders had fought in the War and they hoped that under the Commonwealth a more democratic society could be established and social ills remedied. Much of this desire was expressed in religious terms. The established church was seen as class-based, hierarchical and an obstacle to the fairer world they wished to create. Presbyterianism was the new orthodoxy established by Parliament in 1643, and it was this that Quakers aggressively challenged, taking their opposition directly into the churches, and refusing to pay the tithes which were the source of church ministers' livelihoods. In 1652, the North was regarded as the dark corner of the

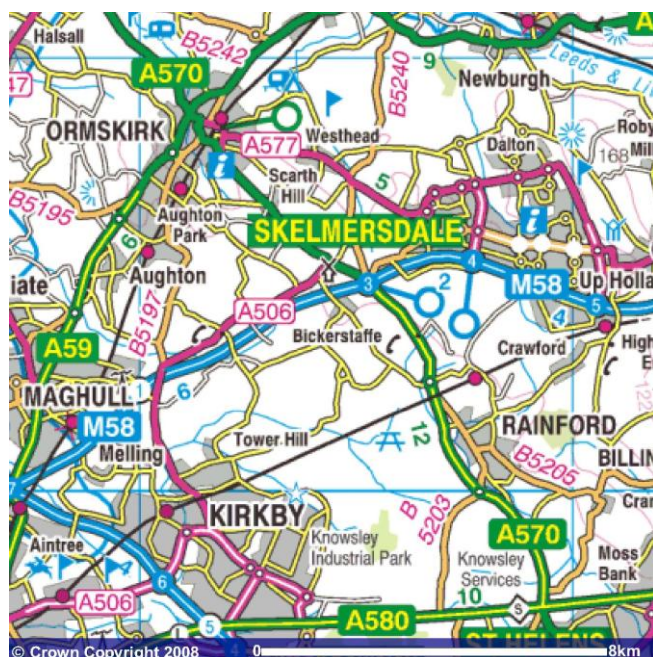
land. Fox stood on the top of Pendle Hill and from its heights looked to where he had a vision of the large numbers of people waiting to receive his message. The Firbank Fell Meeting united into the Quaker family disparate nonconformist sects, such as Seekers and Ranters. The early converts were then recruited by Fox to help spread the word throughout the land, by direct confrontational action. In Quaker history they are known as the 'Valiant Sixty', though that number is not entirely accurate. The new Quaker preachers *'were often young, aggressive itinerants, constantly on the move, alarming to the established ministers whom they refused to*

leave in peace'.¹ Those were the early, heady days when the convictions of individuals were not tested by processes established later by George Fox, as a consequence of the excesses of some of those early proselytizers.

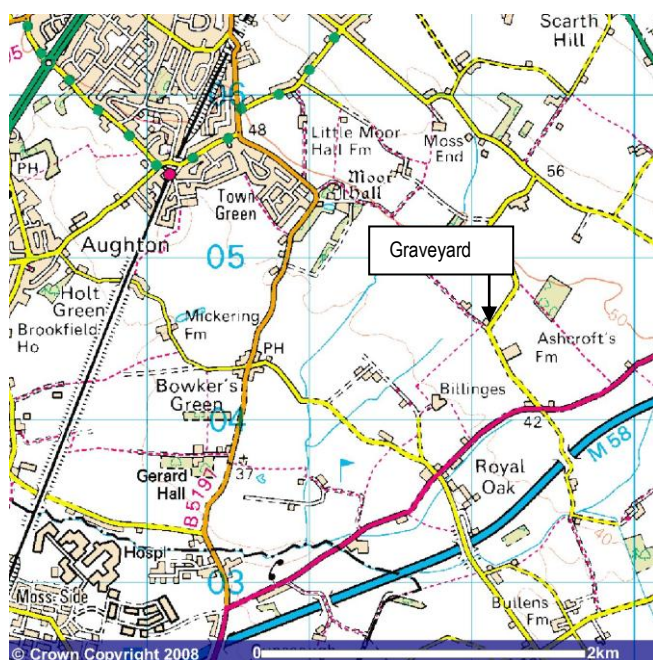
The Bickerstaffe Meeting

Bickerstaffe lies in the parish of Ormskirk, in south-west Lancashire. The village was nearer to the chapel at Rainford than to the parish church, so that it is very likely that residents found it more convenient to worship there most of the time. The Bickerstaffe Quaker Meeting was founded in 1653, only a year after the gathering on Firbank Fell, which must make it one of the earliest in south Lancashire. Three Quakers, Alexander Parker, John Lawson and William Anderson were sent to establish it. Lawson and Parker both figure in the published lists of the 'Valiant Sixty'. Lawson was a Lancaster shopkeeper and Parker a husbandman, that is, a small tenant farmer, from Ardsley. William Anderson is not recognised as one of the 'Sixty', so we have no occupation or origin for him.

In 1654 Elizabeth Leavens arrived with Thomas Holme, Elizabeth Fletcher and Jane Waugh. All four are recorded among the 'Valiant Sixty' and three came from Kendal.



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¹ Damrosch L. 'The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus' Harvard 1996 P.31

Fletcher is designated as 'gentlewoman', Leavens as 'lower ranke' and Thomas Holme, whom Leavens later married, as 'weaver'. Jane Waugh was a servant from Preston Patrick. The two Elizabeths were certainly confrontational. In the same year that they were in Bickerstaffe, they were both whipped in Oxford, for going naked in the streets. Elizabeth Fletcher was only sixteen at the time, and described as *'a very modest, grave young woman, yet contrary to her own will or inclination, in obedience to the Lord went naked through the streets of that city as a sign against that hypocritical profession they then made there, being then Presbyterians and Independents.'*² One account relates that the two young girls were viciously mobbed by the students before they were whipped by the authorities. *'Little Elizabeth Fletcher, as Edward Burrough affectionately called her, never fully recovered from her injuries.'*³ She served in Ireland for a while with Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill, but had to return home where she died 'after much suffering at the age of nineteen years and nine months'. In 1655, the year of her marriage to Thomas Holme, Elizabeth Leavens was whipped for nudity in Chester. Her new husband was 'settling' Knowsley Meeting at the time. When they married they went into Wales to preach, leaving their new baby to be cared for by Friends. Margaret Fell regarded them as an improvident pair who should have concentrated on their missionary work rather than producing a baby for other people to look after.⁴



Figure 2
The Friends Burial Ground, Bikerstaffe.
Entrance with mounting block.

It was not long before the Bickerstaffe converts were themselves sent out to preach the word. One such was Richard Johnson who travelled in the ministry in Ireland and England. In 1659 he attended the first General Meeting ever held, and in the same year George Fox came to stay with him in his house in



Figure 3
Name and date stone, 1665, set in the south wall by the entrance.

² Damrosch Op. cit. p.163.

³ Vipont E. *'George Fox and the Valiant Sixty'*. 1965. P 81

⁴ Op. cit. p 73

Ormskirk. He was buried in the Bickerstaffe graveyard in 1686, aged 56. His wife, Elizabeth died two months after him, and was also buried there.

The first two Bickerstaffe residents known to have become Quakers were Richard Cubban and Oliver Atherton. Oliver's son was described as 'yeoman', so it is likely that Oliver Atherton also had that designation before him, as there are indications that Godfrey succeeded to his father's substantial farm. Richard Cubban was described as '*a man of consequence*' living in Bickerstaffe and it is possible that he too belonged to the yeomanry class of independent or semi-independent farmers. George Fox



Figure 4.

The burial ground from the front entrance looking west, 2008.

stayed with Cubban in 1657. We know that both men were sent out travelling in the ministry soon after moving into membership. As early as 1654 Cubban was imprisoned in Furness for '*speaking to priests and people in assemblies*'. In 1660 Atherton described his countrywide itinerary in a letter to Margaret Fell. On the 10th of July 1661 Cubban and Atherton, and possibly a number of other Friends were arrested on the orders of the Countess of Derby for not paying their tithes. They were imprisoned for at least two and a half years in Lancaster Castle. Atherton died there in 1663, '*through long imprisonment in a cold damp, unwholesome place*', after an abortive plea to the Countess of Derby, taken to her by his son Godfrey, to

let him die at home.⁵ At the bottom of the copy of the letter Oliver wrote to the Countess, there is an account of the progress of his coffin back to Bickerstaffe where he was '*buried in his own yard.*' The document also records the fact that the Countess of Derby died within three weeks of Atherton's death, and her coffin made a similar progress to her burial in Ormskirk Church. Presumably this was to make the point that everyone has to face their Maker, and should live accordingly. Atherton's wife, Ann, was excommunicated in 1674 for refusing to pay towards the repair of the 'steeple -house', the parish church which was in Ormskirk. She was buried in the Bickerstaffe graveyard on Boxing Day 1678. Cubban, who was probably much younger than Atherton, was imprisoned again in 1684, as was Oliver Atherton's son Godfrey, having been indicted for '*a riot.*' While in prison they were each fined twenty shillings by Judge Jeffries for attending a prohibited Meeting. Again Cubban survived the ordeal. He died in 1709 and was buried in the Bickerstaffe graveyard. By coincidence, Godfrey Atherton died in the same year and was also buried at Bickerstaffe. It is perhaps interesting that Godfrey's brother, who died, aged 31, in 1688, was not buried in the graveyard, but in Godfrey's orchard. Perhaps he had expressed a wish to be buried with his father, who had died in prison, and had been buried '*in his own yard*' in 1664, about a year before the graveyard was acquired officially by the Quakers.



Figure 5.
The Friends Burial Ground, Bickerstaffe, from the north east showing the corner of the east wall and the north rear wall, in 2008.

⁵ Nightingale B. '*The Early Stages of the Quaker Movement in Lancashire*'. London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, inc. 1921

The Presbyterian minister at Rainford chapel, David Ellison, defending the new orthodoxy and what could have been his own precarious position in replacing an Anglican minister there, reacted violently to the Quaker challenge. There is an account of a nasty confrontation between Friends and Ellison's congregation on Christmas Eve, 1654. The Bickerstaffe and Sankey Meetings had joined together for what seems to have been an open-air meeting, when they were attacked by a group of people from the Rainford chapel. Elizabeth Leavens was manhandled and '*pulled down as she was declaring the word of truth*'. The Friends held their ground until the attackers gave up and '*went home to their dinners*'. Unfortunately as the Quaker party dispersed some of them met with the Rainford minister, David Ellison, and Elizabeth Leavens could not resist haranguing him, so that a violent argument ensued between them, which led to physical violence from Ellison's companions. The matter did not stop there. Three Quakers, Richard Weaver from Lancaster, with Cubban and Atherton, went to Rainford chapel on the same day and confronted the minister and congregation. This also turned to blows and the three were manhandled and held at an alehouse that day and the night following. The next day, Christmas Day, they were hauled before the justice of the peace. There is no record of the outcome but the account suggests that no laws had been broken and they were released.⁶ On January 5th there was a violent attack on Elizabeth Leavens and two companions. She survived but Rebecca Barnes died and her husband, John Barnes, was seriously injured. Elizabeth Holme/née Leavens lived until 1665. She was buried at Kendall. It is recorded that, in 1658, four years after the Rainford fracas, two unnamed women of Bickerstaffe were killed after attending a Quaker Meeting.⁷

Actual violence may have subsided, but the Friends seem to have courted trouble, particularly by the non-payment of tithes, the certain cause of imprisonment for Cubban and Atherton in 1661. There were a number of other friends imprisoned in Lancaster Castle's prison for their principles. The list of those indicted in 1684, at the same time and for the same offences as Cubban and Godfrey Atherton, that is for '*a riot*' and '*attending a prohibited meeting*', included two Bispshams, Daniel, said to be a collar maker, and John who was married at Daniel's house in 1677. In November 1684, Henry Foster also indicted at the same time, died in prison. He was carried back to Bickerstaffe to be buried in the Quaker graveyard. Another was Joshua Crosby, an Ormskirk grocer. He married a Lancaster girl, Margaret Middleton, while he was in prison. He was buried in the Bickerstaffe graveyard in 1716, his wife in 1736. In 1684, Mary Southworth, of Lydiate, was also a prisoner in Lancaster Castle. Her offence is not known. While incarcerated she wrote a long poem which was recorded in an account of Quaker sufferings. She married Henry Mollineux, a schoolmaster. She died in 1695 and was buried at Bickerstaffe as was her husband and their son, Nathaniel, also a schoolmaster. It is not stated where they had taught. We have a scanty record of the fact that some

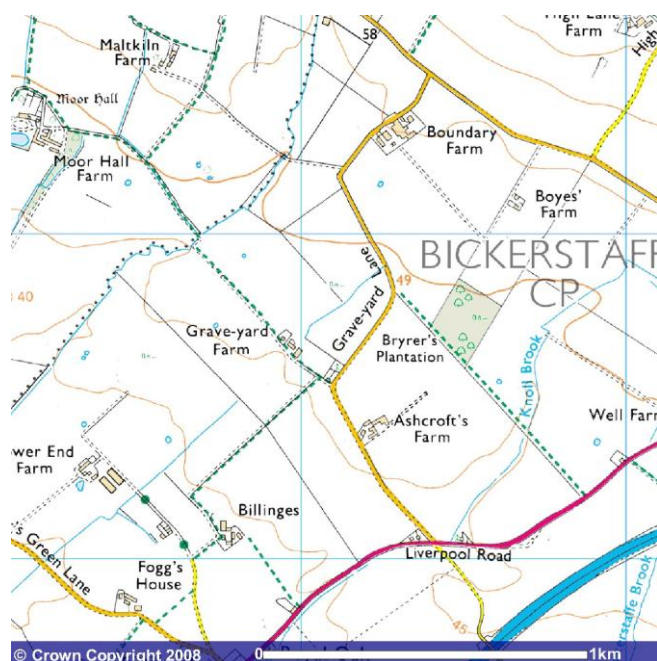
⁶ The best account of this is contained in '*A History of Rainford Church*'. 1978. It is attributed to DJ Browning and FR Pope.

⁷ Victoria County History of Lancashire. Vol. 111

Friends were not without their faults and were chastised by their Meeting for misdemeanours: Peter Leadbetter for drunkenness; Henry Foster for womanising; Henry Leatherbarrow for seducing women by promising marriage; Mary Rigby for '*brawling, tendentiousness; being a busybody and sowing discord among the brethren*'. Hugh Swift, an Ormskirk stonemason, went to do some work for a widow, Mary Atherton, and the Meeting was scandalised because '*he stayed there three nights*'! But he did marry the lady at Bickerstaffe in 1697.

The Quakers built a Meeting House in Bickerstaffe in the Stanley Gate area. The date of this is unknown but certainly before 1689. A newspaper account in 1914 suggested that it was a stone building, later used as a barn. There is a more recent account⁸ which writes of a Quaker Meeting House on the Liverpool Road, licensed for marriages in 1689, on the site of the present Stanley Cottage.⁹ It claims that after the Meeting was discontinued in 1786 the Meeting House was turned into cottages that were demolished in the nineteenth century. In its early days Bickerstaffe Meeting drew on a wide area, certainly Ormskirk, Aughton, Lydiate, Rainford and Burscough. In 1770 it was strong enough to host the Northern Counties Yearly Meeting in a specially-erected booth, which was said to hold 2,000 people, but which was inadequate for the actual number that attended.

Bickerstaffe Graveyard.



Because Quakers refused to attend their parish churches they made their own arrangements for marriages and burials. Marriages in the early days frequently took place in the houses of prominent friends. Between 1673 and 1688 eleven weddings took place in the house of Richard Cubban, but some took place in other Friends' homes. After the Meeting House was licensed, in 1689, no more marriages were recorded in private houses.

⁸ Taylor O. '*History of Holy Trinity, Bickerstaffe*'. www.bickerstaffe.com

⁹ The location has not, so far, been ascertained for certain.

Burials were a more difficult matter. The Bickerstaffe Graveyard opened in 1665 and is now in the care of the Hardshaw Trustees. It is easily distinguished from a considerable distance by its stand of trees, unique in the landscape. While researching his family history Frank Leadbetter discovered that his ancestors were lead beaters in Ormskirk who had turned to farming in Bickerstaffe. In the Lancashire Record Office there is a conveyance of land from the Derby estate to the Leadbetters, dated 1433. The family held the land until 1708 when Gerard Leadbetter died without heirs. By an indenture dated 15th May 1665 Peter Leadbetter conveyed 1120 square yards of land to the Bickerstaffe Quaker Meeting for use as a burial ground in consideration of fifty shillings to Trustees on behalf of Hardshaw Monthly Meeting. It is his date-stone that is still present on the house at Graveyard Farm, 'P L' for his name and 'E' for that of his first wife, Emily. Oliver Atherton was overseer of Peter's father's will. Peter was said to be a prominent Quaker, persecuted and imprisoned for his faith. In 1660 he was arrested and fined '*a fatted calf*'. In 1663 his first wife, Ellin, was buried in Hardshaw. No record of his death or burial has yet been found. It is recorded that in 1673 there was a churchwarden of Ormskirk parish church named Peter Leadbetter. If it is the same person, then it is possible that he left the Quakers. This could have been a consequence of his second marriage, in 1669, to Elizabeth Gerard of Gerard Hall, who was a Catholic. This is entire conjecture because there is no evidence.



It is possible that the site in Bickerstaffe was already being used informally as a graveyard before 1665, when it was turned over to the Quakers, as there is a recorded burial at Bickerstaffe dating from 1659.¹⁰ In all over two hundred burials were recorded. There may be more but the evidence is uncertain.

Unfortunately the grave plan has not been found, so it is not possible to place individual internments. Moreover, until the nineteenth century, some Quakers did not permit gravestones to be placed on graves. John Haynes found a minute dated 20.8.1691, presumably of Hardshaw Monthly Meeting, to the effect '*that stones be removed off graves and none go into the practice of laying them on*'.¹¹



¹⁰ This was definitely the case at Brigflatts, Yorkshire. The farmer allowed five Friends to be buried in his field and then handed it over to the Quakers for a nominal sum. This took place in 1665, the same year that Friends acquired Bickerstaffe

¹¹ Brigflatts retained its grave stones



Endings

In the late 18th century the Meeting declined in numbers as other Meetings were founded in the district. On the 17th day of tenth month 1786, the minutes of Hardshaw Monthly Meeting recorded that the Bickerstaffe Meeting was to be discontinued. Several friends had attended there in



rotation, and found that John Bispham and his wife were the only Friends left and that they held a '*dull and lifeless*' Meeting every first day in their own house that 'adjoined the Meeting House'. By a strange coincidence the name of the first recorded burial at Bickerstaffe, in 1659, was Edward Bispham. The last, in 1813, was that of John Bispham, aged 89, the last member of Bickerstaffe Meeting.

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