

Socio-Economic Status and the History of the Quakers.

On the 31st of December 1660 a letter was written from York ‘concerning the Lord Fairfax raising the county in arms ... [reporting] that Lambert was marching south from Newcastle to join the Quakers in Yorkshire.’¹ This indicates that Quakers were still participating in military activity until the very end of the civil war, potentially supporting General John Lambert in the New Model Army. Reay has provided detailed evidence for Quaker involvement in the army,² before they turned to pacifism in the early 1660s.

Many Quakers had been influential radicals in the civil war: the ‘future Quaker leader James Tyler, yeoman, [was a] quartermaster in Lambert’s forces in Scotland,’³ and ‘Winstanley and the Leveller leader John Lilburne became Quakers.’⁴ The army was strongly influenced by the Leveller movement, and according to one account, it was the ‘New Model army in which the Levellers had their primary base,’⁵ while ‘several regiments had raised the sea-green colours at Ware’, as they prepared to go to war.⁶

Quaker letters and journals mention progress in army garrisons in York, Bristol, Holy Island, Berwick-on-Tweed, Lancaster, Carlisle, Chester, Kent, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, London [and] Shrewsbury.⁷ Additionally, ‘Quakers were particularly successful in the garrison towns of Ireland and Scotland.’⁸

This geographical distribution of Quakers is reflected in data from a demographic study.⁹

Table 1: Quaker Infants at Risk, 1650-1849.

<i>Region</i>	<i>1650-99</i>	<i>1700-49</i>	<i>1750-99</i>	<i>1800--49</i>
London	330	519	300	72
Bristol & Norwich	691	990	1062	505
Provincial England	2781	3768	4332	3381
Dublin	591	625	623	270
Cork, Wexford. Waterford, Limerick	966	1402	1300	676
Rural Ireland	1953	2964	2487	513
Total	7312	10268	10104	5417

Infants at risk were essentially children born to Quaker families, and Table 1 indicates that most Quakers were from rural and provincial areas both in England and Ireland. This was the pattern until the nineteenth century, when the overall number of Quakers was significantly reduced, and in Ireland became relatively concentrated in towns and urban areas,

¹ R.C. Latham and W, Mathews, *The Diary of Samuel Peps*, Volume 1, 1971, pp. 6, 7.

² Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution*, 1985. See also Christopher Hill, ‘Quakers and the English Revolution’ *The Journal of the Friends’ Historical Society*, Volume 56, 1992 and Kenneth L. Carroll, ‘Quakerism and the Cromwellian Army in Ireland’ *SAS Open Journals*.

³ Reay, *The Quakers*, p. 18.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁵ Graham Milner, ‘The Levellers and the 1640s English revolution’, *Online*.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ Reay, *The Quakers*, p. 50.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ I have re-analysed Vann and Eversley’s reconstitution schedules lodged in Friend’s House, London. For their study see R.T. Vann and D.E. Eversley, *Friends in Life and Death*, 1992.

According to Reay, Quakerism in the early period ‘mainly drew its membership from what were known as the middling sort of people: wholesale and retail traders, artisans, yeomen, husbandmen.’¹⁰ George Fox himself, the leader of the Quakers, was a shoemaker’s apprentice. Reay’s description of the socio-economic origin of Quakers is confirmed by evidence in marriage registers which list the occupations of grooms.¹¹

As a result of the threat of invasion from Scotland in 1651, ‘Cromwell announced to the army that, if he should fall, England would witness a universal crisis and change the numerous colonels, in all their splendour, who were once tailors, goldsmiths and carpenters, would have to make way for the nobility and courtiers.’¹² This description of the socio-economic status of the New Model Army was confirmed by Samuel Pepys in his diary. He wrote:

of all the old army now, you cannot see a man begging about the street. But what? You shall have the Captain turned shoemaker, the lieutenant, a baker; this, a brewer; that, a haberdasher; this common soldier, a porter; and every man in his apron and frock, etc, as if they had never done anything else – whereas the other [cavaliers] go with their belts and swords, swearing and cursing and stealing – running into people’s houses, by force oftentimes, to carry away something. And this is the difference between the temper of one and the other.¹³

Although the Quakers had relatively humble origins – many of them had come from a Baptist background – they were very literate and established their own libraries with printed books and tracts.¹⁴ They turned out to be the most radical of the sects, including a refusal to pay tithes or to doth hats to superiors and recognize titles, which appeared extremely threatening to established authority. They also refused to recognize people in authority by use of special titles and addressed everyone by the terms ‘thee’ or ‘thou’. In the early period they also interrupted Anglican services, shouting at and accusing the ministers of being “dumb hirelings”. They refused to swear oaths in the belief that all testimony should be truthful without artifice. All this activity reflected a belief in equality, a belief which greatly shocked the authorities, Quakers claiming that the aristocracy and gentry owed their position to the ‘Norman Yoke’, who had seized land and property by forceful dispossession.¹⁵

They adopted fixed price trading where merchants set a single, fair price for goods instead of engaging in bartering or haggling. This policy, popularized by early Quakers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was based on religious principles of honesty, equality, and integrity. Because of their reputation for reliability and quality Quaker businesses flourished in manufacturing, commerce and banking.¹⁶

Their religious culture was also heavily influenced by the radicalism of the New Model Army. According to Baxter

¹⁰ Reay, *The Quakers*..

¹¹ Vann & Eversley, *Friends in Life*, pp, 70, 71; Alan Cole, ‘The social origins of early Quakers’, *Past and Present*, number 48, 1970; Judith Jones Hurwich, ‘The social origins of the early Quakers’, *Past & Present*, Volume 48, 1970, pp. 156-162.

¹² Relazione of England by Giovanni Sagredo, 1656, in Edward and Peter Razzell, *The English Revolution: A Contemporary Study of the English Civil War*, 1999, p. 19.

¹³ Latham and Mathews, *The Diary*, Volume 4, 1995, pp. 173,174.

¹⁴ S. B. Jennings, *The Gathering of the Elect: The Development, Nature and Socio-Economic Structure of Protestant Religious Dissent in Seventeenth Century Nottinghamshire*, D.Phil. Thesis, Nottingham Trent University, pp. 260, 261.

¹⁵ Reay, *The Quakers*, p. 39; Jennings, *The Gathering*, pp. 17, 18

¹⁶ Quaker Fixed Price Trading, *Online*.

‘many honest men [in the New Model Army] ... made it ... their religion to talk for this Opinion and for that; sometimes for State Democracy, and sometimes for Church Democracy; sometimes against Forms of Prayer, and sometimes against Infant baptism, (which yet some of them did maintain); sometimes against Set-times of Prayer, and against the tying of ourselves to any Duty before the Spirit move us ... and sometimes about Free-grace and free-will, and all the Points of Antinomianism and Arminianism ... But their most frequent and vehement Disputes were for Liberty of Conscience as they called it ...’¹⁷

The emphasis ‘against Set-times of Prayer, and against the tying of ourselves to any Duty before the Spirit moves us... about Free-grace and free will’ as well as ‘Liberty of Conscience’ was central to Quaker belief, as ‘God’s message came to individuals directly through the inner light of their personal inspiration.’¹⁸

A comparison of Quaker occupations taken from 250 marriage registers in London revealed the following:

Table 2: Select Occupations Among London Quakers, 1680 and 1780.¹⁹

	1680	1780
Banker	0	7
Merchant	14	20
Surgeon, Doctor	0	6
Stockbroker, Scrivenor, Land Surveyor	0	4
Craftsmen. Artisans	147	30

There was a strong polarisation in the socio-economic profile of Quaker occupations in London between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All the elite occupations – bankers, merchants, surgeons, doctors, stockbrokers, scriveners, land surveyors – increased significantly in number during this hundred-year period, whereas there was a massive decline in the number of draftsmen and artisans.

Arthur Raistrick has documented in detail major Quaker achievements in science and industry during the eighteenth century. Among the most famous are Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale, Joseph Fry chocolate manufacturer, John Lettsom and Baron Thomas Dimsdale medical practitioners, and David Barclay of Barclay’s Bank and Charles Lloyd of Lloyds Bank.²⁰

By the late nineteenth centuries, the Quakers were much wealthier than the general population. 45 Quakers who left Wills in 1868 left an average of £11,496, compared to the next 45 non-Quakers in the probate register, who left an average of £2,267. The 46 Quakers with Wills represented 30 per cent of 151 Quakers dying over the age of 21. This can be compared to 11 per cent of 110,510 men in the general population dying in 1858 who left Wills, suggesting overall that Quaker men were fifteen times wealthier than the general population.²¹

¹⁷ R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part 3, 1696, p. 53.

¹⁸ BCW Project, *The Quakers*.

¹⁹ Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry*, 1950, pp. 30, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid*,

²¹ Alison Taylor, *Quakers and Industrialism in England & Wales*, Undergraduate Thesis Bedford College, 1973.

I have carried out an analysis of Quaker Wills for the period 1881-89, selecting the first 100 cases from the Quaker memorials website. The mean wealth of this sample was £20,105, compared to the next 100 cases in the probate register with a mean wealth value of £4,795. The Quakers were over four times as wealthy as the control sample, confirming the earlier analysis of Quaker wealth. In the Quaker sample, there were 8 esquires with mean wealth of £106,345, 28 gentlemen with a mean of £9,493, and 8 farmers with a mean of £265.

The success of the Quakers was based on their lifestyle. Not only were they a very cohesive group supporting each other in both adversity and financial activity but living a puritanical lifestyle – distrusting ‘worldly’ amusements – the arts, music and the theatre – and adopting a highly disciplined way of life.²² They developed a very supportive community and were also highly educated, with an emphasis on practicality and science.²³

In the nineteenth century, ‘some Quakers went “gay” and lived according to the normal standards their wealth would secure for them in contemporary Society ... with the inevitable result that many of the children brought up in such conditions married into county families and drifted into the Church of England and ceased to be Quakers.’²⁴

Nevertheless, Quakers were a central part of the ‘protestant ethic’ leading to the development of capitalism.²⁵ They were also leading members of humanitarian movements, such as the anti-slavery campaign. For such a minority within the English population, they made a highly significant and major contribution to the development of English society.

²² Raistrick, Quakers, p.43.

²³ Ibid, pp. 32-34.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 342,343.

²⁵ See P. E Razzell, ‘The protestant ethic and the development of capitalism: a natural scientific critique’, *British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 28, 1977.