

THE QUAKER TAPESTRY AS A RESOURCE FOR HISTORY AND SPIRITUALITY

The Quaker Tapestry was a community embroidery project which began in 1981 and took 15 years to complete. It was the result of the inspiration of 11 year old Jonathan Stocks and his Quaker Sunday school teacher, Anne Wynn Wilson. Anne wanted the tapestry to become the means of forging community and at the same time increasing people's knowledge of Quaker history.¹ In forging a community her attention was drawn to two peripheral groups in the Society of Friends who she wanted to direct the Tapestry towards: Quakers on lonely spiritual journeys and children and young people who were growing up away from a spiritual community. Anne Wynn-Wilson's own words illustrated the motivation of what she had taken on, and the sentiment continues whilst the Tapestry is on show.

*"By considering our history we will be drawing strength and inspiration from the past and by creating something worthwhile we affirm our faith in the future. So our work will be in the right tradition."*²

It consists of seventy-seven different panels showing the history and stories of Quakers and Quakerism from its beginning in the seventeenth century until the second half of the twentieth Century. The panels are on permanent exhibition in Kendal Meeting House, which, built in 1816, is an example of a typical nineteenth century Quaker building. The exhibition is open each year from the beginning of April until the middle of December. Every year for the whole of February about half the panels and some stewards visit a different venue where an exhibition is held in a Cathedral or similar church. This year it was at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh where it was visited by over 11,600 people and next year it is planned to take it to Exeter Cathedral.

The Quaker Tapestry does not claim to be a complete history of Quakerism but a Celebration of the spiritual insights in over 350 years of experience of the Religious Society of Friends. It is a product of what a small group of Friends of the late twentieth Century saw as important and presents a general overview of the life, times and

thoughts of Quakers up to that time. In the early days of the project a request for suggestions in the Friend brought in 404 responses and initially over 60 subjects were chosen. After that, research was carried out to develop the ideas and from that a small amount was actually chosen for inclusion on each tapestry panel. Thus the tapestry can only provide a fraction of Quaker history but it is a valuable starting point. When our Meeting's 'Meetings for Learning' Planning Group were thinking how to introduce Quaker history a visit to the Tapestry Exhibition was an obvious choice. Anyone who visits the exhibition and wants to find out more can move on to the Quaker Tapestry publications. *The Pictorial Guide to the Quaker Tapestry* contains a brief background to the stories on the panels, biographical notes of some of the lesser known persons mentioned on the tapestry and sources of the quotations. Its sister book *Living Threads – Making the Quaker Tapestry* tells the history of the Quaker Tapestry itself. A third book is soon to be published telling the story of the Quaker botanists which is so beautifully presented in the Botanists panel (D8). This book is a result of extending the research which was initially undertaken to find material for the panel.

The panels are arranged and categorised and numbered according to the *Christian Faith and Practice* which with *Church Government* formed the Book of Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of Friends in Britain, current at the time the tapestries were made. For the title Panel, *The Prism*, Anne Wynn Wilson was inspired by the words at the beginning of Chapter one of *Christian Faith and Practice* entitled Spiritual Experiences of Friends.

“For the Society of Friends might be thought of as a prism through which the Divine Light passes, to become visible in a spectrum of many colours; many more, in their richest, than words alone can express.”

There are six sections A to F relating to a chapter or chapters in that book. The headings are GOD AND MAN, PUBLISHING TRUTH, THE MEETING, THE ART OF LIVING, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES and NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, is the subject of the first panel in all but one of the sections. They cover different times in his search for a spiritual home. From growing up in Fenny Drayton Leicestershire (A1), in and around 1643 and becoming dissatisfied by the behaviour of those about him, who professed to be religious. Then leaving home and after travelling through the East Midlands he reached Derby in 1650 (F1) where he preached to the people of the

Truth and the light within' and was gaoled for six months under the Blasphemy Act. After his release from Derby Gaol he passed up the Trent valley to Lichfield (D1) where he '*espied three steeplehouse spires*' as recorded in his journal and walked through the city saying '*Woe to the Bloody City of Lichfield*' and

'saw an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness.'

In 1652 coming to Sedbergh, Firbank Fell, Preston Patrick and Brigflatts (B1), he preached to many groups of seekers and had the vision on Pendle Hill of '*a great people to be gathered*'. Then he came to Swarthmore Hall in June 1652 (C1). Here he was invited to use the house to meet for worship by Judge Thomas Fell. The Hall became the centre of comfort, administration and inspiration for early Quakers and continued until the death of Margaret Fell (C2) in 1702 having married George Fox in Bristol in 1669.

James Nayler is another early Quaker who is commemorated by a panel (A2). He visited Swarthmore in 1652 and was in the forefront of the new movement. He was a powerful charismatic preacher. After years of imprisonment he was on his way home but was robbed and bound and died shortly afterwards in a Friend's house. His dying words from the text which is the main part of this panel.

There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil nor to revenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end... If it be betrayed, it bears it, for its ground and spring is the mercies and forgiveness of God.

Its crown is meekness, its life is everlasting love unfeigned it takes its kingdom with entreaty and not with contention and keeps it by lowliness of mind... I found it alone being forsaken.³

Other well known Friends featured in the tapestry include Margaret Fell (C2), William Penn (F11 and F2), John Woolman (A6) and Elizabeth Fry (E5 and E6). The panels also feature Friends who may be less known but have made their own contribution.

In and around 1654 Fox and other Friends began to travel to America. The Woodhouse (A5) ship was built by Robert Fowler for his own local use in 1657, but '*contrary to my will*' he found himself heading for London. Here he picked up eleven Friends hoping to travel to New England. He gathered together a crew in Portsmouth and after a two month hazardous journey they arrived at Long

Island near New Amsterdam where there was a tolerant Dutch colony.

The John Woolman (A6) panel shows him travelling from America to England. He gave up a lucrative business and took up tailoring to free himself of cumber. Because he felt dyes were invented to '*please the eye*' he gave up wearing clothes made of dyed material. In 1772 he felt called to service in England. He walked from London to York rather than travel by stage coach because he thought the horses cruelly treated. '*Tender compassion fills my heart towards my fellow creatures*'. In York he became ill with small pox and died.

There are panels showing insights of Friends who spread the Quaker message, such as the Mary Fisher panel (B2) which tells of the many women "publishers of the truth". In 1657 a group of six Friends set out for the Middle East and reached Leghorn where they preached and distributed books in English, French and Latin. A more recent example is the Leaveners panel (C11) which tells about the Quaker Youth Theatre which began as a street theatre at Yearly Meeting at Lancaster in 1978.

Some of the panels such as the Marriage panel (C8) show aspects of Quaker life. George Fox wrote

'For the right joining in marriage is the work of the Lord only, and not the priests or magistrates; for it is God's ordinance and not man's'.

This panel (C8) shows a couple in a Meeting for Worship in the early nineteenth century, taken from a painting 'The Quaker Wedding' by Percy Bigland.

The Quaker Tapestry started as a children's project and there is a panel depicting the activities of Children and young people (C10). Until well into the twentieth century children sat throughout meeting for worship with their elders. This panel shows the children's Sunday school and quotes from Advices and Queries⁴:

'Watch with Christian tenderness over the opening minds of your Children. Through example and training help them to recognise the voice of God in their hearts.'

Panels such as Coalbrookdale (D4), Innocent Trades (D5), Quaker Merchants (D6), Industrial Welfare (D11) and Bankering (E3) give information about Quakers at work remembering a time when Quakers were forbidden entry to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and barred from entry to professions and activities

where entry depended on the taking of an oath. On the Quaker Merchants' panel it says

'Diligent is their management of their trades and affairs Keeping their word and promise they gained credit in the country'

There are panels which reflect events happening in the country as a whole. After the repeat of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828-9 enabled Friends and other dissenters to stand in national and local elections, Joseph Pease was the first Quaker to enter parliament and John Bright (B3) was the second. He was a founder member and leading orator of the Anti-Corn Law League until the repeal of the laws in 1846. He courageously opposed the Crimean war and studied Irish issues from the time of the famine (panel E8) looking for land reform as a way forward. John Bellers (E2) wrote prolifically and succinctly about social and international issues, twenty titles of which were addressed to Queen Anne.

Although Quakers have no set creed or dogma, there are commonly held views which unite them. One accepted view is that there is *'that of God in everyone'* (final panel). This view leads Quakers to value people and not to harm or threaten them. This is reflected in some of the panels, Criminal Justice (E4) and the Slave trade (F3). This sentiment is also reflected in the Quaker Testimonies which are about how Quakers try to lead their lives. Many of the panels illustrate Friends response to their testimonies. Truth and integrity are illustrated by Oaths (A9), it was believed that the taking of oaths was setting a double standard so Quakers refused to swear, quoting scripture in support of their position. The Banking panel (E3) illustrates that Quakers gained a reputation for being honest so people felt they could be trusted with keeping their money. The testimony of equality and community stems from the conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth. Illustrations of this can be found in many of the panels Unemployment (E10) and Mary Hughes (E9) who said:

'Once we have said the 'Our Father' in the morning we can treat no one as a stranger for the rest of the day.'

The testimony to simplicity is integral to Quaker faith. From early times Quakers saw extra trimmings such as unnecessary buttons and lace ribbons adorning their clothes as expressions of pride. The contrast is shown in the Simplicity panel (D2) between the Barclay

family in their plain Quaker dress and the Queen and other members of the court. The best known of the Quaker testimonies is the peace testimony and there are a number of panels, Conscientious Objection (A7) Quaker Peace Action Caravan (B8), Friends Ambulance Unit (F8) Peace Embassies (F16) and Vigils for Peace (F17) which bear out their witness to peace and pacifism. As the spiritual basis of action becomes apparent new testimonies emerge which reflect the society in which we live. One such area is our stewardship of the environment and the Ecology panel (D12) reflects this.

The first panel The World Family of Friends is just one of the panels which tell us about Friends Worldwide. Others include Service Overseas (B7), Relief Work Overseas (F7) and Meeting Houses Overseas (C5) and a number deal with a particular country such as Aoteara/New Zealand and Friends in Canada (F21).

The exhibition and other materials attract different groups of people for various reasons including students and school children studying different relevant areas of history, other religions and textiles, women's groups interested in needlework, craft and embroidery, historical groups and those wanting to gain an insight into other religions and Quaker groups of all ages interested in their heritage. Some of the photographs and cartoons also form teaching aids in Quaker Sunday schools. It is not uncommon for a woman to come into the exhibition whilst her husband waits outside thinking it is not his type of thing, but if he were to come into the exhibition he would find all sorts to interest him. Metalwork as in the Ironbridge at Coalbrookdale (D4). Science on the Scientists panel (D10) architecture and engineering on a number of panels, railways on the Early Railways panel (D7) and flowers on the Botanist panel (D8).

*'Excellent display – even my husband was interested' – visitors' book
21/05/03*

Amanda Dael Browell-Hook, studied the Tapestry for a dissertation towards her degree in Social Anthropology in 2001, 'Artistic Narrative in a diverse Religious Community: A study of the Quaker Tapestry'. She noted that, as well as being a historical resource to inform Quakers about their own history it also informs non Quakers about Quakerism. To members of the public the Meeting House acts as a signpost for the Society of Friends. A large number of visitors admit that they knew very little about Quakers. Some believed that Quakers belong to a past era and were not part of modern society.

Visitors often ask about the tapestry and the building. The stitching of the panels finished in 1996 but the ongoing interest in the tapestry continues. There has been a Quaker Tapestry Calendar every year since since 1986 and and these all contain information on the back of each page as well as a picture of the Tapestry on the front. This picture can now be detached and used as a postcard. Regular embroidery workshops are held and many talks and slideshows are given around the country. The Teashop at the exhibition centre opened three years ago and visitors often question the Tapestry staff and stewards who are eating there, about Quakerism. These are all opportunities to inform people about Quakerism. As are the occasions when the Tapestry has been featured by the media, including three appearances on the BBC television programme *Songs of Praise* and many articles in a variety of publications.

The historical and spiritual aspects of many Quaker stories are, by the nature of Quakerism inseparable, so when writing about the tapestry as a historical resource we are also demonstrating it to be a spiritual resource. Two quotations on the Railway panel emphasise this.

'True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it' declared William Penn and 'In their handiwork was their prayer' Ecclesiasticus.

Following interviews with visitors to the Tapestry, Amanda Dael Browell-Hook found the aims of Anne Wynn-Wilson, to create a visible expression of identify which would help connect isolated people within the Society of Friends was, for some, achieved:

One middle aged Quaker couple, visiting from a relatively rural part of Australia came to Kendal to see the Tapestry and to place their identity as Australian Quakers into a "wider context". They felt it added to their sense of community and that: "It is good to have a connection, however small, with something as far reaching as the Quaker Tapestry". Another Quaker visitor, who had only very recently become a member, spent several hours taking extensive notes. When pressed as to why she was doing this she explained that she was not that well informed and "to help me on my spiritual journey I want to know as much about the Quakers their beginnings and beliefs". A third visitor having visited the Tapestry after the death of his wife had found the visit deeply moving as it illustrated.

"The beliefs I have had and the philosophies I agree with, but have never really associated them with Quakers"

He describes the Tapestry as that 'something' he was looking for. He later began attending and then joined a Meeting and for him his "membership was a direct consequence of seeing the tapestry".

It is obvious when reading the visitors' book at the exhibition that many people who see the tapestry, Quaker or non Quaker, respond to their spiritual message as well as to a beautiful work of art.

"Thank you for what you are to a world so in need of all that you are."
– 31/03/2003 South Africa

"An inspiration for the spirit as well as crafty fingers" - 5/05/03

"Deeply thought – promoting a historical and spiritual journey thro' life concerning humankind and its relationship with others and the world itself." – 12/08/03

"A wonderful example of fellowship and co-operation in making a statement of love and the meaning of life" – 15/10/03

If you haven't seen the tapestry you have a treat in store and will probably not be satisfied with the one visit.

Faith Rodger and Margaret Lawson

NOTES

- 1 Jennie Levin (1999:10) *Living Threads: Making the Quaker Tapestry*
- 2 Levin (1999:12).
- 3 Fuller version of this text can be found in *Christian Faith and Practice* 25, and *Quaker Faith and Practice* 19.12.
- 4 From *Church Government* 1968.

I found a recent return visit to the Tapestry both inspiring and moving. (Editor)