

## A Note on the Origins of the George Fox School, Lancaster

THE George Fox School at Lancaster, formerly Friends' School, is known to have been founded in the 1690s. "Circa 1690" is the estimate on the signpost outside the school and this is a perfectly reasonable approximation.

The first mention I have been able to pick up of the school project is in September 1692 when there was "A query of friends concerning providing schoolmasters and schooldames or mistresses for Lancaster meeting. It is desired that they will put the same into practise and give us an account at the next Monthly Meeting."<sup>1</sup> In these early days the chief problem was that of getting hold of a suitable teacher. In October, November and December 1692 "the query about a schoolmaster continues" and in January 1693 "the query about a schoolmaster continued, though a report we have by R. Lawson from one in Yorkshire who has promised to write to him shortly about his coming".<sup>2</sup> The query was continued, however, into the early Spring of 1693 when the matter was in the hands of two weighty Friends and the meeting was satisfied, by a letter from them, "that they are in the exercise of it".<sup>3</sup>

Finance may have been a problem in attracting a good teacher. The demands on the stock of the meetings were very heavy and the permanent resources—chiefly through legacies—growing only slowly. In October 1695, a substantial Friend helped solve the problem. William Gunson gave Lancaster Particular Meeting £20 "and declared for what use as follows. The same to be put forth to interest and the profit or interest of the same to be applied yearly towards the wages of a Friend who may teach Friends' children in learning, in and about Lancaster, but if no schoolmaster be

<sup>1</sup> Friends' Meeting House, Lancaster, Lancaster Monthly Meeting minute book, 1675-1731, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 127.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

procured, then the interest to be applied to the most needful use that may be seen among Friends."<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless fees would have to be paid to cover the school's expenses and if Friends "not in affluence" were without the means to pay, the Monthly Meeting would take on responsibility for schooling. On the analogy of the system whereby the Meeting underwrote the expenses of the apprenticeships of poor Friends' children, in 1695 a local Friend received £3 "in order to bring up his son a scholar according to an order of this Monthly Meeting".<sup>2</sup> The apprenticeship analogy continues in a minute of 1703 which shows the Monthly Meeting taking measures to secure a succession of Quaker schoolmasters for the future: "Lancaster meeting giving account of their charge in maintenance and care and learning of Robert Bankes, and that to perfect himself so far in learning as to fit him for a schoolmaster it will be a further charge which they desire the Monthly Meeting to assist in. So this meeting is free to pay the charge of his learning with Gilbert Tompson for half a year."<sup>3</sup>

The school, of course, was not intended to provide purely secular education but was designed also to inculcate in the young Friends' principles. Thus its running came under the close scrutiny of the Particular Meeting. In 1698 Joshua Lawson and Thomas Wilson were "appointed to take care that the schoolmaster be diligent in educating his scholars and keep them out of anything that would corrupt them".<sup>4</sup>

Clearly in Friends' thinking about the school the schoolmaster, rather than the building or the syllabus, took first place. They were accustomed to think in terms of the relationship between the master and his apprentices. It is my opinion that finding a teacher was a pre-requisite to founding a school and that the George Fox School was not founded until 1692 or, more probably, 1695.

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<sup>1</sup> Friends' Meeting House, Lancaster, Record of Trust Property to Lancaster Meeting for the Poor and Education, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Lancaster M.M. minute book, p. 150; i. iv. 1695.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219; i. xii. 1702/3. Gilbert Thompson (c. 1658-1719) of Penketh is first mentioned 2, vii. 1695 (p. 155).

<sup>4</sup> Friends' Meeting House, Lancaster, Lancaster Particular Meeting minute book, 1698-1740, p. 97; 6. ix. 1698.