

George Fox and Worcester

We have all heard of those repeat offenders, whose lives are spent almost permanently behind bars. One spell in jail is followed inexorably by another, and no kind of rehabilitation ever seems to have any effect.

Here's a good example of one such recalcitrant ne'er-do-well. Over the space of 24 years he was in prison no less than eight times: in Derby, Carlisle, London, Launceston, Lancaster (twice), Scarborough and Worcester.

Except that this was no petty criminal with a drug habit to fund. The man concerned was George Fox, founder of the now respectable sect known as the Quakers. In George's defence, this was in the 17th Century, when professing anything other than orthodox faith was just as indictable as theft.

Fox embraced Quaker beliefs in 1648, and within a couple of years he was banged up in Derby gaol for blasphemy. Nor was Fox alone in suffering for his beliefs. During the reign of Charles II some 13,500 Quakers were imprisoned. Was it any wonder that "suffering" became one of the central tenets of Quaker belief ?

Nor was such dissidence limited to professing one's beliefs. Many Quakers also refused to pay tithes, which went towards the Church of England. This too often ended up in court, and in distraint of goods.

All of this makes 17th-century England sound like the most intolerant and oppressive of places. Legally it was, but if one was willing to keep one's religious convictions to oneself, and remove oneself from points of collision, it was perfectly possible for the nonconformist to live on unmolested. They called such withdrawal "quietism".

Take the city of Worcester, for example. It had more than its fair share of Quakers, and there is still a fine little meeting-house in the city centre today, built in 1701 and modestly tucked away in a back street, just as it was expected to be. Here is quietism perfectly expressed in brick and mortar.

Many Worcester Friends were involved in the glove-making business, the most prominent of trades in 18th-century Worcester, at least until the arrival of porcelain. And Quakers were central to the establishment of that industry too.

If the Quakers grew to prominence and acceptance in Worcester, then George Fox was partly responsible. Yet of all his spells in prison, Fox's time in Worcester gaol was probably the hardest to endure, and it was said that his health never fully recovered afterwards.

It was after a Friends' meeting in December 1673 in the village of Armscote - a couple of miles north of Shipston-on-Stour - that Fox first felt the wrath of the Worcester authorities. There were around 200 people at the meeting, well over the legal limit for nonconformist gatherings, and George Fox and his son-

in-law were arrested, having given “no satisfactory account of their settlement or place of habitation”.

Put a Quaker in court and there was invariably trouble, because he or she would refuse to swear the oath. And in most cases that refusal was treated more seriously than the original offence. Take them to a higher court and the same thing happened.

For the next two years, then, George Fox was bounced between courtrooms. He was tried at both the quarter sessions and the assizes in Worcester, and before the Kings Bench in London. And most of the time when he was not in court, Fox was in Worcester gaol instead, spending some 14 months holed up there in all.

The county gaol at Worcester was not the most comfortable of places to tarry, especially for a man approaching his sixtieth birthday. But if suffering was part of a Quaker’s badge of honour, George Fox had it here in abundance.

The then county gaol stood on the site of the former castle of Worcester, south of the cathedral green and close to the river. It was inhospitable, prone to outbreaks of gaol fever, and decidedly damp. The presence of Frog Lane just behind the prison tells you all you need to know about the conditions inside.

George Fox might well have breathed his last in Worcester gaol. Not only had he been sentenced to life imprisonment for not recognizing the supremacy of the Crown, but a rapid deterioration in his health suggested that life imprisonment would not take too long to fulfil. “I seemed to myself,” wrote Fox in his Journal, “to be amongst the graves and dead corpses.”

Fox’s rescue came, not courtesy of some clever lawyer, but through the agency of his wife, Elizabeth. Towards the end of the year, Elizabeth Fox succeeded in obtaining an interview with the King himself, and, under royal pressure, her husband’s case was re-opened.

So it was off to the King’s Bench yet again, where it was argued (and accepted) that the wording of the original indictment had been faulty. His conviction quashed, George Fox was thus immediately freed, and managed somehow to keep out of jail for the remaining fifteen years of his life.

There was, however, one positive aspect of Fox’s stay at Worcester. Confined within its walls, and thinking that his end might well be nigh, Fox wrote, though mostly dictated, his autobiography. The Journal of George Fox, published posthumously in the 1690s, has become one of the classics of devotional literature.

Many have been the great works of introspection penned in prison - from Walter Raleigh to Oscar Wilde, and from Dostoyevsky to Solzhenitsyn. George Fox’s journal was among the first, and one of the pillars of Quakerism even today.