

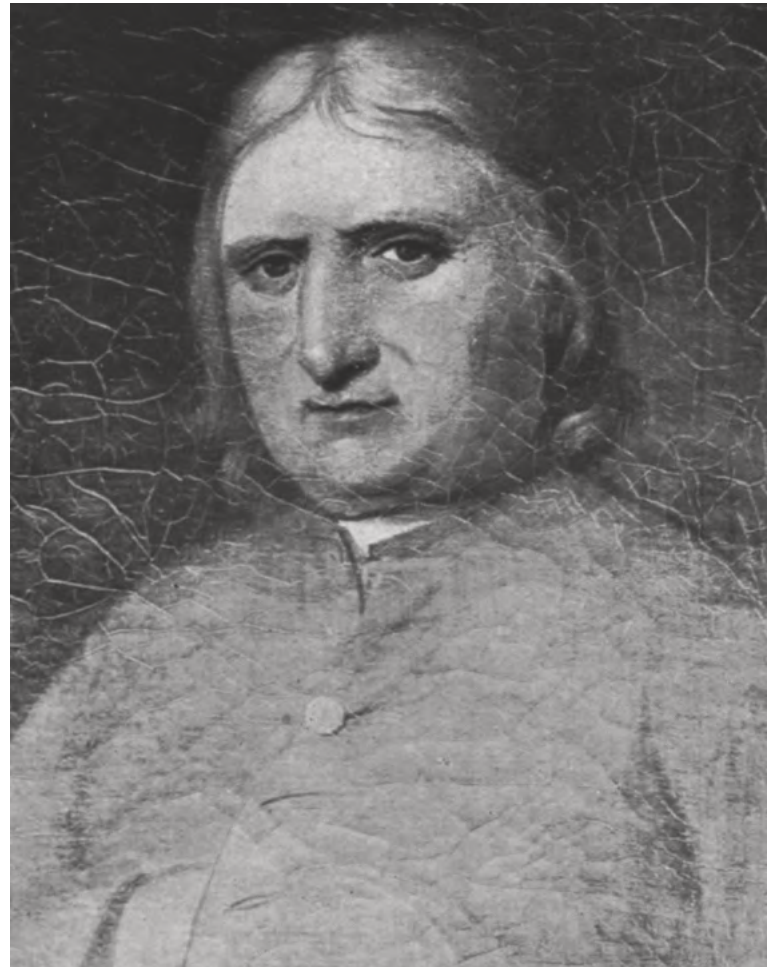
QUAKERS: *Keeping on their Hats, in Tewkesbury*

by Derek Benson

During 1650 George Fox, a preacher, was imprisoned in Derby for blasphemy after he interrupted a church service. The judge, Justice Gervase Bennet, mocked Fox's exhortation to "*tremble at the word of the Lord,*" calling him and his followers '*Quakers*'.² This intended slight soon became the commonly used name for the movement. The members of the religious sect that Fox led preferred to call themselves: '*The Saints*', '*Children of the Light*' and '*Friends of Truth*' - or simply '*Friends*'.

The Quakers were one of many non-conformist religious groups that sprang up during the Civil War period. Fox wrote that he experienced a number of visions and heard voices that gave him a mission to "*turn people from the darkness to the Light*". He believed that an individual's personal relationship to God via '*inner light*' was more important than Scripture, churches (or '*steeple houses*' as Fox called them), rituals and priests. He wanted a return to simple and fundamental everyday Christianity. These types of ideas were not unique to the Quakers but some of their other

*“When the Lord
sent me forth into
the world, He
forbade me to put
off my hat to any,
high or low¹”*



George Fox (1624-1691) attributed to Peter Lely
([Wikipedia](#))

activities, such as disrupting church services, being highly critical of the established church, allowing women to preach, refusing to remove their hats in court or doff them to supposed social superiors, refusing to take oaths and addressing everyone with the familiar '*thou*' rather than '*you*', did not endear them to the powers that be who considered them as fanatics. A pamphlet published by Fox in 1659 is full of vitriol against the clergy, the following excerpt gives the flavour:

“And are not you them priests, curates, vicars, and parsons, which serve God with your lips, and call upon him with your mouths, and your hearts afar off, being full of ravenousness, murder, and madness, and persecution, and will drink the blood of the saints, who be contrary to you minded, and deface and mar the creatures, which are the workmanship of God, and yet make people believe Christ has sent you, a company of disorderly men to mar the workmanship of God?”³

Other characteristics of the Quakers that alienated them from the rest of society were their refusal to use the names of the days of the week as they were associated with pagan gods; instead, they used ‘1st day’ (Sunday) to ‘7th day’. Similarly, they did not use the names of months, again using numbers.

A consequence of their attitudes and conduct was that the Quakers suffered a good deal of persecution, Fox being imprisoned several times, as were many others - some 2,100 during the Commonwealth. In 1658 Gloucester Gaol held twelve Quakers.⁴ The highly radical Quaker leader, James Nayler, was found guilty of ‘horrid blasphemy’ by Parliament after re-enacting Palm Sunday in entering Bristol on a donkey in October 1656. He declared to his accusers, “I am King of Israel spiritually”. His punishment was to be whipped through London, be branded with the letter ‘B’, and have his tongue bored, followed by two years’ imprisonment.⁵

However, the Quaker movement did have a powerful sympathiser in Oliver Cromwell, who intervened on their behalf a number of times. Fox did actually meet Cromwell in person at least three times and they appear to have had a good relationship with each other. The Quakers were very much on the side of Parliament during the Civil War, some had served as soldiers in the New Model Army, James Nayler had served for eight or nine years, and Fox often preached to the troops. They were also active in the radical ‘*Levellers*’ movement, their leader, John Lilburne, became a Quaker in 1655.⁶ The even more radical, Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the ‘*Diggers*’, became a Quaker in later life.⁷ The *Levellers* argued for universal suffrage, equality before the law, free trade, freedom of speech and the absolute right of people to practice whatever religion (or none) that they chose. The *Diggers* agreed with most of the *Levellers*’ ideas, but their main policy was that all land was to be held in common. In pursuit of this they created a number of agricultural communes on common land. Cromwell initially tolerated these factions but eventually suppressed them. A Quaker of the early 1650s had far more in common with a *Leveller* or *Digger* than with a modern member of the *Society of Friends*.

During 1655, Elizabeth Corte, one of the first Quakers in Tewkesbury, went with Margaret Newby to Evesham to visit Quakers imprisoned



St. Mary's Lane Meeting House
(Author, 2023)

there. Corte described in a letter to the important Quaker leader, Margaret Fell, how “*The Mayor caused us to be putt in the stocks and he charged us we should not singe, and if we did, he would putt both our hands in also; nevertheless, we did forbear, being moved internally by ye Lorde to singe in ye stocks, each of us both leggs in*”. It is recorded in Quaker records that the women were in the stocks in very cold weather for at least fifteen hours. (Corte added in a postscript in her letter that, “*We ar at psent [sic] short of money, and would have some sent to us as some as conveniently may be*”).⁸

As part of his many national tours, George Fox visited Tewkesbury in 1655. He wrote that he “*held a great meeting there*” despite being challenged by an ‘Independent’ minister of the town, John Wells, described by Fox as “*the priest of the town with a great rabble of rude people*.” Some debate with Wells appears to have taken place with Fox getting the best of it (according to Fox!)⁹

Fox was again in Tewkesbury in 1660, “*visiting Friends in their meetings ... And in all my time I never saw such drunkenness as in the towns, for they had been choosing Parliament men*”.¹⁰ This parliament was known as the ‘*Convention Parliament*’. It was the first election after the death of Cromwell in 1658 and followed the ‘*Long Parliament*’, which had sat for twenty years, finally voting for its own dissolution. The 1660 parliament was regarded as a ‘*free parliament*’ as it swore no oaths of allegiance to the Commonwealth or to the Monarchy, although it was predominantly Royalist in its membership. Tewkesbury returned two MPs in the election, **Henry Capell** and **Richard Dowdeswell**, both Royalists who had fought for the king during the Civil War.¹¹

Following the death of Cromwell in 1658, without his protection, legal and public hostility (including physical attacks) against the Quakers increased. Their situation did improve, however, for a year or two following the Restoration in 1660 and the accession of Charles II. He promised religious toleration where it did not disturb the peace of the kingdom and 700 Quakers, imprisoned throughout the country, were released. In response, the movement made a formal **Declaration of Loyalty** to the King and made their first explicit commitment to pacifism. However, in 1662, Parliament passed the **Quaker Act**, which denied the right to refuse to swear an oath before a magistrate and banned all meetings of five or more Quakers on pain of fines, imprisonment or transportation for the third offence. The Quakers generally disregarded this law and the enforcement of it appears to have been very spasmodic.

In Tewkesbury, in 1663, the established church authorities focused on the legality of religious meetings held in private houses. Samuel Mosse, Nathaniel Jeynes, Charles Tovy and Joseph Underhill were investigated for holding the Stoke Orchard monthly meetings in their Tewkesbury homes. Stoke Orchard was the leading Quaker assembly in the district. They were uncompromising in their view of the established church, calling their ministers “*the priests of Baal*” and “*the fist of wickedness and bloody hands, who have had their hands in the blood of the brethren*.”¹²

The monthly meetings of the Quakers sought to direct many aspects of the lives of the local membership. Couples wishing to marry had to receive permission to be married in a Quaker ceremony. If the match was deemed undesirable, but they went ahead and married in the established church, they would often be disowned. Marrying someone outside of the faith was very much frowned upon. The behaviour of the congregation was closely monitored with reprimands for drunkenness, gaming and dressing immoderately. Stoke Orchard monthly meeting minutes include criticism of couples for ‘*disorderly walking!*’¹³

In 1668 fuel was provided for the critics of the Quakers local to Tewkesbury by the murder of two women by a Quaker farmer called Restal, of Stoke Orchard, and his son. Restal owed Robert Hammond £30 [perhaps £5,779 in today’s values]. Arrangements were made for the money to be handed over in Cheltenham to Hammond’s wife. Mrs. Hammond was waylaid en route and killed with a bill hook. Another woman was passing nearby, saw what happened, tried to run but was overtaken and also killed. A boy witnessed these events and ran for help. Restal and his son were arrested, tried at Gloucester and sentenced to death. The son was hanged on 7 July 1668, but his father was apparently reprieved. A seven-page pamphlet was published entitled ‘*The Bloody Quaker*’ that described the events in detail, making much of the hypocrisy of the religious farmer, “*a seeming Saint but real Devil*”.¹⁴

Tewkesbury had a long history of religious non-conformity, with 75% of the population estimated to be dissenters in one form or another in 1676. However, the number of Quakers in Gloucestershire appeared to have declined during the 18th century and is estimated at around 50 in Tewkesbury in 1750.¹⁵ They became more accepted and involved in their communities and were respected for their industry and sobriety. Nevertheless, they still came into conflict with the authorities, particularly in refusing to pay ‘*church tithes*’ (a tax levied to support Church of England priests and churches). Some refusers were

imprisoned but more often goods were seized in lieu of the tithes. The Quakers kept meticulous records of what they termed as *'sufferings'*. On 27 December 1743 goods were seized from some Tewkesbury Quakers (March was their 1st month until they changed it to January in 1752 when England adopted the Gregorian calendar).

"Joseph Peacey & Wm Hathaway Wardens took from Thomas Pumfrey Cooper of Tewkesbury (?) by Distress ye 27th of ye 10th Mo 1743 for a Levey (for ye church soe called) for Eleven shillings & Twelve pence for ye constable & Warrant for Destraining is all Twelve shillings.

Foure Dishes of Pewter worth about £0.14s.0d. & they sent back £0.0s.7d. - £0.13s.5d."

On the same day, Ann Sansom, widow of Tewkesbury, had two copper coffee pots and two brass candlesticks worth nine shillings taken for a debt of five shillings. Thomas Taylor, maltster of Tewkesbury, had four pairs of brass scales worth seven shillings taken for a debt of five shillings.¹⁶ An indication of the general public being in some sympathy with the Quakers is that the Wardens found it difficult to find buyers for the seized goods if it was known that they had been seized.¹⁷

On a national scale, the Quakers had questioned slavery from the early days of the movement and openly denounced it and campaigned against it from 1688. In 1727 the British Yearly Meeting of the Quakers formerly forbade any member from owning or trading in slaves on pain of expulsion from the Society of Friends. In 1787 the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* was formed and nine of the twelve founders were Quakers. The Society was essentially the same organisation that eventually achieved abolition under Wilberforce. The Society of Friends in Tewkesbury actively supported anti-slavery candidates in elections. In the 1792 General Election, the Quaker John Milliard, a clockmaker, promoted such a candidate, Naval Captain Thomas Lloyd.¹⁸

It is likely that the use of houses in St. Mary's Lane (numbers 16 and 18) as a meeting house and the site of a barn there as a burial-ground dates from around or before the time of Fox's first visit to Tewkesbury in 1655. The Quaker attitude to burial grounds was in line with their accent on plainness and simplicity. Fox proposed in 1659 that Friends should provide any convenient piece of land for burials that, *"may stand against the Superstitious Idolising of those places Caled holy ground"*. They also thought that erecting gravestones, inscriptions etc was *"a vain & empty custom"*.¹⁹ This is a little ironic in that George Fox



St. Mary's Lane burial ground (Author, 2023)

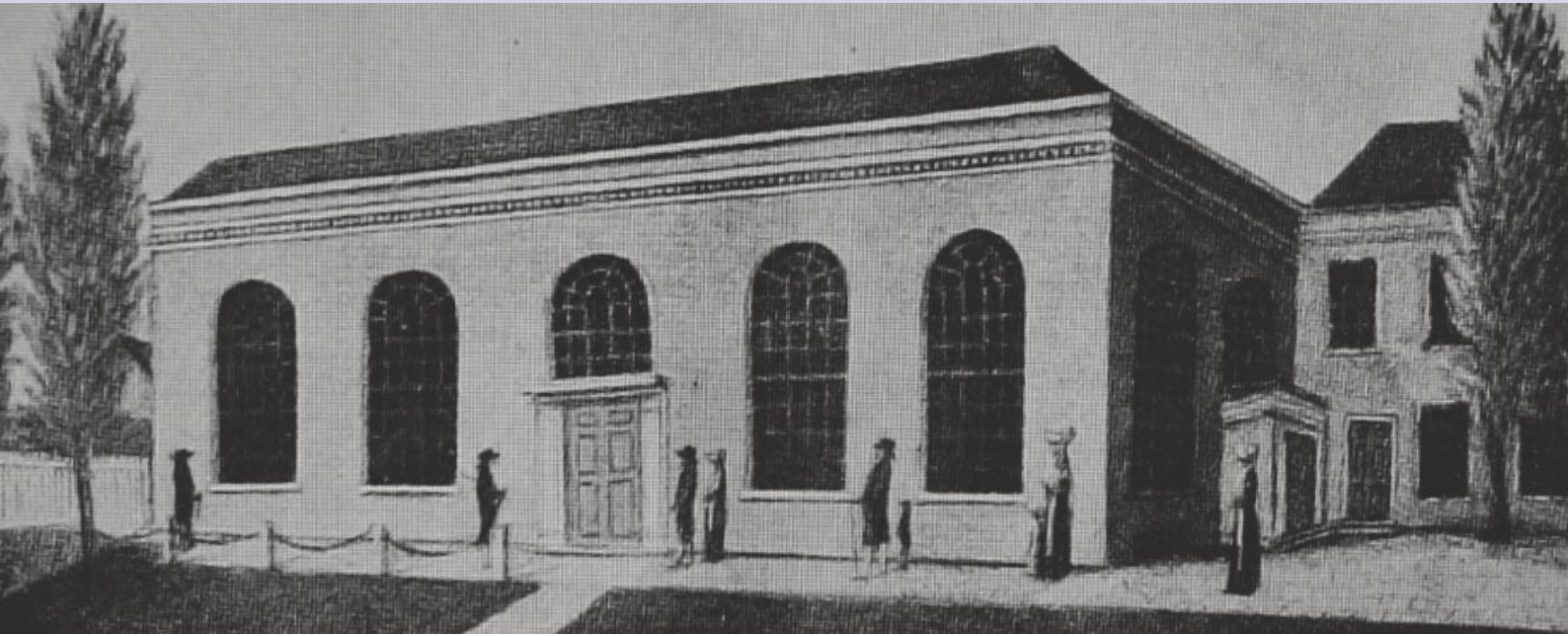


Saffron Road burial ground entrance (Author, 2023)

has an inscribed gravestone in the Bunhill Fields Friends Burial Ground where he was interred in 1690.²⁰ In the earlier period of Quaker activity in Tewkesbury district they also had a burial ground at Fiddington and at Corse.²¹

Public meetings were also held at the Town Hall and at the *'House of Industry'* (Workhouse) in Gloucester Road. Visiting Friends were recorded, sometimes from far afield: Ann Jessop of Gifford County, America in 1785 and Mary Watson from Waterford in Ireland during 1800.²²

In 1804 a new Meeting House was built in Barton Street, on the site that is now the Watson Hall.



Barton Street Meeting House (The Quakers in Great Britain and America by Charles F. Holder (openlibrary.org))

James Bennett described it as “a very neat and substantial structure, capable of holding several hundred persons.” This new centre for the *Friends* included a small burial ground with an entrance in Saffron Road although the St. Mary’s Lane ground appears to have remained in primary use.²³ The old Meeting House in St. Mary’s Lane later became a public house, *The Tanner’s Arms*.²⁴

Despite the good standing of many of the Quaker families in Tewkesbury and their integration into society, they were still periodically punished for their refusal to pay church rates. In 1825 goods were seized from Jacob Allis, John Allis, Samuel Barker, Joseph Browett, Moses Goodere, Nathaniel Hartland and James Petley, some of whom were wealthy citizens.²⁵

Moses Goodere was a prominent man in Tewkesbury. He was born in St. Johns, Worcester on 6 May 1753. He came to live in Tewkesbury and married Mary Millard there on 3 April 1785 at a Quaker Meeting.²⁶ He ran a confectionary business and involved himself in town affairs as well as those of his Friends’ community. In 1792 he was chosen to give evidence to a House of Commons committee in support of the building of a House of Industry (Workhouse) in Tewkesbury. The idea of a workhouse did not sit well with sections of the people in the town. Goodere had the windows of his house broken a number of times due to his involvement - on one occasion the *Riot Act* needed to be read. Upon Goodere’s death in 1838, James Bennett described him politically as “first a Whig, then half Whig and half Tory, and at last the anomaly of a Conservative Quaker. He was a zealous and useful member of his religious community ... he never wore a garment of forbidden cut or colour,

never bent his body in salutation, and never uttered the heathen name of a day or a month.”²⁷

A prominent Quaker family in Tewkesbury was the Hartland family. John Allis Hartland ran a Tannery business and was a partner in the Lechmere and Hartland Bank at 99 Church Street, now a fast-food outlet (next to the Heritage & Visitor Centre aka ‘Old Hat Shop’). When he died in 1838, James Bennett described him as “an opulent Tanner” and “a highly respectable member of the Society of Friends”.²⁸ In 1836 a meeting was held to set the church rate. George Freeman, seconded by John Hartland, proposed that the rate be changed from compulsory to a voluntary contribution. A formal poll was taken over two days, and the proposal was easily defeated. A newspaper report commented that “Tewkesbury is becoming distinguished for the good sense of its inhabitants.”²⁹ John Rogers described the Hartland family as having “some of the leading men of the town” and stated that they made every effort to support the education of poor children with Nathaniel Hartland, Banker, giving land in Barton Road for the British School to be built on. The school was run in the ‘Lancastrian’ system of education where mutual instruction was attempted between teachers and pupils.³⁰

Another well-established Quaker family were the Dobells. They owned and ran the Britannia public house for several generations from 1871 until the 1960s, Cyrus & Clarence Dobell, Ralph then Patrick Dobell being landlords. The pub was always known as ‘Dobells’ rather than its official name. As Quakers, the Dobells did not open on a Sunday!³¹

Other Quaker families in Tewkesbury included: Allis (Jacob Allis ran the *Victoria Temperance Hotel* in Church Street, which was probably, the building that is now the *Rosado Lounge* at

The Cross), Samuel Barker (a hairdresser), Browett, Hawley, Hughes, Millard, Petley, Tyler, Wright.³²

In 1856 Dinah Craik published her novel *John Halifax, Gentleman*. The action is centred on Tewkesbury, disguised by the fictional name Norton Bury. A major character of the book is a wealthy Quaker, Abel Fletcher, a tanner and owner of the local mill. Following the success of the book, Abbey Mill in Tewkesbury became known as *'Fletchers Mill'*.

During the mid-nineteenth century the Quaker presence had diminished considerably and in 1853 the Barton Street Meeting House was let as a school. In 1861 it was sold to become a music hall and was at times used as a Sunday school for the Baptist Chapel. In 1880 it was sold to Messrs. William Gray and George Watson and was known as the *'Philharmonic Concert Hall'*. In 1909, following the death of George Watson, it became the *'George Watson Memorial Hall'* as it is known today. Tewkesbury Borough Council became trustees of the building in 1956 and £10,000 was spent on renovating it in 1961.³³

The burial ground in St. Mary's Lane became derelict and overgrown but was restored in 1977 by the Girl Guides as part of the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations. Quakers were still holding meetings in Tewkesbury during the 20th century. They met at 51 High Street (the red-brick part of the Tudor House Hotel) from at least the 1944 up until 1967.³⁴

During the First World War many Quakers were opposed to being combatants. In Evesham in 1915, Charles Gregory was fined for refusing to sign the *National Register*. This was a register of men aged 15-65 used to assist in the deployment of labour and was later used when conscription was introduced in 1916.³⁵ Once conscription was implemented, Military Tribunals were appointed to consider the cases of *Conscientious Objectors*, who refused to be conscripted. In a report of a tribunal sitting in Gloucester it was noted that "*The public present included a large number of members of the Society of Friends, to which society most of the applicants belonged*". Although refusing to fight, many agreed to serve in medical support, the Quakers had their own *Friends' Ambulance Unit*.³⁶

The Quakers maintained their pacifist stance during the prelude to the Second World War. A letter from Arthur Eddington, who signed himself as *'Clerk for the Meeting for Sufferings (Executive of the Society of Friends)'* was published in the *Tewkesbury Register* of 20 May 1939 opposing the government's *Military Training Bill*. The legislation proposed six months of



Goodere Moses (1753-1838)
(James Bennet, *Tewkesbury Yearly Register and Magazine Vol I*)

compulsory military training for men aged 20-21. Eddington stated that "*the compulsion of men to learn how to destroy their fellow men is an assumption by the State of an authority over human personality that is an outrage upon God and men*". However, many British Quakers were conscripted into the *Non-Combatant Corps* during both world wars.³⁷

The Quakers now are an accepted, largely respected, Christian denomination. Their numbers are relatively small, over 12,000 in Britain and around 400,000 worldwide. In addition, there are a number of Quaker sub-sects with slightly differing theological beliefs and their own separate organisations. Throughout their existence, the Quakers believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which led them to advocate for various social reforms throughout history, such as the abolition of slavery and the promotion of women's rights. They still place a strong emphasis on pacifism, social justice, and equality, maintaining their consistent nonconformist stance.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

- ¹ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, 1924 edition <https://bit.ly/3P0EATC>.
- ² Fox, *Journal*, as above.
- ³ George Fox, *The Lambs Officer*, The Works of George Fox, Vol. 4 <https://bit.ly/43MEWBk>.
- ⁴ Richard Lacock, *Quakers in Gloucester: the first fifty years, 1655-1705*, BGAS Vol. 125, 2007.
- ⁵ Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World*, 2023.
- ⁶ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 1972 - gives a comprehensive account of the various religious and radical groups active at the time.
- ⁷ Ann Hughes, editor, *Seventeenth-century England: A Changing Culture – Primary Sources*, 1984.
- ⁸ *The First Publishers of Truth*, p281-283, Edited by Norman Penney, 1907. <https://bit.ly/3OsvhLn>.
- ⁹ Daniel C. Beaver, *Parish Communities and Religious Conflict in the Vale of Gloucester 1590-1690*, 1998. **Independents** [also known as *Congregationalists*] advocated local congregational control of religious and church matters, without any wider geographical hierarchy, either ecclesiastical or political. In Tewkesbury, this church was situated in Barton Street from 1820-1977. Today it is the [vacant] church of the *Jehovah's Witnesses*.
- ¹⁰ Fox, *Journal*, as above. (Editor)
- ¹¹ Henry Capell (1638-1696) Tewkesbury MP 1660-1692, became Baron Capell of Tewkesbury in 1692, founded the Botanic Gardens at Kew. Richard Dowdeswell (1601-1673) of Pull Court, Bushley, Tewkesbury MP 1660-1673.
- ¹² Beaver, as above.
- ¹³ *Society of Friends: Stoke Orchard Minutes (1671-1854)*, Glos. Archives, D1340 B2/M1.
- ¹⁴ *The Bloody Quaker or the Gloucestershire Murder Discovered*. University of Oxford, 2011, Oxford Text Archive, <https://bit.ly/3NSrTJv> (download available).
- ¹⁵ Kathleen Ross, *The Book of Tewkesbury*, 1989.
- ¹⁶ *Society of Friends: Accounts of Sufferings*, Glos. Archives, D1340 A1/A1.
- ¹⁷ Lacock, as above. (10 shillings (50p) in 1743 was perhaps around £90 in today's values.)
- ¹⁸ *Changing Times I: Abolition Of Slave Trade Event Year: 1792*, via THS *Woodard Database*. The incumbent family, the Codringtons, won the election for their candidate, Christopher Bethell Codrington. (Editor)
- ¹⁹ Bridget Jepson & Anthony Skelsey, *A History of the Friends Meeting House and Burial Ground, St. Mary's Lane*, Tewkesbury, 2003.
- ²⁰ Dr. Andrew Crowther, our proofreader has added: "My late senior partner, Philip Holding, was a Quaker and, after he died, he had an interesting Quaker funeral service in Devon, where he had retired. His family later added a plaque on the wall in the burial ground in St Mary's Lane."
- ²¹ *Tewkesbury Register*, 17 Apr 1959 and St Margaret's, Corse, <https://bit.ly/3rgEdKP>.
- ²² Jepson/Skelsey, as above. The former Workhouse (1793) has now been restored into the *Webber House* residences.
- ²³ James Bennett, *The History of Tewkesbury*, 1830.
- ²⁴ Bryan Linnell, *Tewkesbury Pubs*, 1996.
- ²⁵ *Moore's Auctioneers Notebooks*, (from THS *Woodard Database* transcripts).
- ²⁶ *Society of Friends (Quaker) Births & Marriages 1578-1841*, Find My Past.
- ²⁷ James Bennett, *The Tewkesbury Yearly Register and Magazine*, Vol I, 1840.
- ²⁸ Bennett, *Register*, as above.
- ²⁹ *Gloucester Chronicle*, 9 Jul 1836 & *Bath Chronicle & Weekly Gazette* 21 Jul 1836.
- ³⁰ John Rogers, *A Short History of the Old Alleys Courts and Lanes of the Borough of Tewkesbury*, 1905. The school building still stands but as the *Elizabeth Wyatt House*, an Old People's Welfare Centre.
- ³¹ Linnell, as above.
- ³² Bennett, *Register*, as above, (from THS *Woodard Database* transcripts).
- ³³ *Tewkesbury Register*, 19 May 1967. (£10,000 in 1961 was perhaps around £237,000 in today's values.)
- ³⁴ *Tewkesbury Register*, notices of Society of Friends meetings 1944-1967. The owner was Frank Bigland a Quaker who ran it as a Temperance Hotel and was chairman of the Civic Society until 1971. (J. Dixon, Analysis of Papers deposited in the Museum by *Tewkesbury Civic Society*, 1965-1977.)
- ³⁵ *Gloucester Chronicle*, 11 Dec 1915.
- ³⁶ *Gloucester Journal*, 25 Mar 1916.
- ³⁷ Ironically, perhaps, the Bigland family was fined at least four times for blackout offences during the war. (J.Dixon transcribing *Register* 1 Nov 1941 p. 1.)



DEREK BENSON was born and brought up in Croydon, moving to Gloucestershire in the 1980s and to the Tewkesbury area in the 1990s (retaining his support of Crystal Palace FC!). He is an active committee member of Tewkesbury Historical Society and has a particular interest in the history of *suffrage* and political and social movements. Eight of his previous articles have been shortlisted for the county *Bryan Jerrard Award* and three of them have won the THS *Woodard Award*.