

George Fox

George Fox was the founder of the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers.

He was born in 1624 in the strongly Puritan village of Drayton-in-the-Clay, Leicestershire (now known as Fenny Drayton), 15 miles west-south-west of Leicester. The eldest of four children of Christopher Fox, a prosperous weaver who was a churchwarden.



From childhood Fox was of a serious, religious disposition. There is no record of any formal schooling but he learned to read and write. Driven by his "inner voice", Fox left the village for London in September 1643 (age 19). He returned after almost a year and discussed his thoughts with Nathaniel Stephens, the local clergyman at 'St Michael and All Angels'.

Fox continued to travel around the country as his religious beliefs took shape. He concluded that:

- there is something of god in everyone;
- baptism and formal ceremonies of worship are not necessary;
- all could communicate directly with god;
- all are equal and slavery is wrong;
- warfare is wrong;
- plain dress is sufficient;
- to swear oaths is wrong.

In 1647 Fox began to preach publicly. Conflict with civil authority was inevitable. Fox was imprisoned many times, including in Leicester, Nottingham and Derby.

At Derby in 1650 a judge mocked Fox's exhortation to "tremble at the word of the Lord", calling him and his followers "Quakers".

The refusal by Quakers to take oaths under laws compelling subjects to pledge allegiance and their pacifism, relying on "spiritual weapons", resulted in many prosecutions.

In 1652 Fox climbed Pendle Hill, in Lancashire, and had a vision of God. After this moment, Fox's preaching activity increased and the religion grew until by 1660 there were 50,000 followers. Fox travelled to Europe, the West Indies and America to help the spread of Quakerism before his death in 1691.

The beliefs of George Fox resulted in the anti-slavery movement, prison reform, demands for social justice, equality for all (particularly women), consensus decision making and ethical capitalism (Rowntrees, Cadbury etc.).

William Penn (1644 - 1718) established Pennsylvania 1682 based on Quaker principles which included a democracy subject to a bill of rights and an amendable constitution, which later formed a model for that of the U.S.A.

Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Tom Paine were all influenced by Fox's ideas. Tom Paine's father was a Quaker and this had a lasting impact on his thinking and, eventually, the political shape of the modern world. In America Paine was instrumental in the struggle for independence. His pamphlet "Common Sense" influenced the formation of the constitution. He was subsequently also involved in the French Revolution.

In 1783 Quakers founded the first British organization to campaign for the abolition of slavery, leading to the formation of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 with 9 Quakers and 3 Anglicans. This eventually led to the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.