

ART. VIII. – *The Quakers, The Brethren and the Religious Census in Cumbria.*
By JOHN BURGESS, M.A., M.Litt.

Cumbria has never been a county famous for the strength of its religious denominations or the influence of organized religion, the population being too scattered, sparse and fiercely independent to accept alien ideas fully and retaining more than a hint of paganism into modern times. Illustrative of this attitude was the limited impact of the medieval church and the way it impinged on native Cumbrians' life, mainly via the monastic economic "empires".¹ Likewise at the Reformation the Cumbrian switched allegiance with scarcely a murmur, not because of the influence of the secular or religious authorities, but simply because one faith was very much akin to another in sixteenth-century Cumbrian eyes. Nor was the nineteenth-century success of Methodism primarily amongst the native Cumbrians, but rather amongst the flocks of immigrant Methodists to West Cumberland, Barrow, Millom and Carlisle, who brought their faith with them from Cornwall, the Midlands, the North East and industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire.² Indeed it is arguable that one denomination alone found the Cumbrians eager to embrace it: the Society of Friends.

When George Fox first came to Westmorland he can scarcely have guessed at the success which his new cause was to have in Cumbria during the 1650s and 1660s. Hundreds of families, numbering thousands of individuals, were swept into Quakerism, and presented in the minds of ecclesiastical and secular authorities an alarming threat not only to law and order but to the very fabric of government and society.³ This is not the place to describe the detailed assault of the Quakers of the 1650s and 1660s in Cumbria, their many successes equalled only by the determination of magistrates to curb their activities, and the full story has been told elsewhere.⁴ There can be no doubt that the success of Quakerism was in part due to the inadequacies of the Established Church in a county split between a small isolated diocese of Carlisle and the huge unwieldy diocese of Chester and its 3 Deaneries of Kendal, Copeland and Furness (under the Archdeaconry of Richmond). To a population largely composed of people battling in a harsh environment, the Church was a costly, inefficient and remote burden: Quakerism offered an alternative faith without the need to pay for Tithes, Church Rates and the whole machinery of the diocese, and expense was ever dearest to the heart of a poor people. Anglicanism could not function satisfactorily in such an atmosphere, and it was no accident that Quakers were most numerous where parishes were largest, clergy neglectful and landowners relatively impotent.⁵ Cumbria's large parishes, and those with large populations in towns, were the areas of strength for the Dissenters.

By the early eighteenth century however Quaker numbers had substantially declined in Cumbria. The days when Conventicle Returns for the 1660s⁶ reported several hundred Quaker families in West Cumberland and scores of Quaker members in the Lake District were past. Nevertheless the enduring nature of Cumbrian Friends was still evident into the 1780s. When Archdeacon Waugh surveyed the number of Dissenters in the diocese of Carlisle in 1747 he was dismayed by the considerable Quaker population and only

comforted by a number of clergymen reporting declining numbers.⁷ Faced with over 350 Quaker families, concentrated along the Solway coastal parishes, in the major towns and on the edges of the diocese, Waugh was surprised at times that Dissenting numbers were not stronger, bearing in mind the conditions of some parishes and their clergy. In a population estimated by Waugh to be between 65,000 and 70,000 this meant nearly 3% were Quakers, though their numbers were concentrated in a dozen parishes. Bearing in mind it was over 90 years since Fox's work, Quakerism had lasted well.

In the Chester Deaneries Quaker numbers remained large and the Bishop's Visitation Returns for various years indicate their strength. In 1789 Whitehaven, Kendal and Ulverston contained many Friends, probably as high as 50 or more adults a town, whilst the countryside around Kendal, in Furness and along the Solway also mustered large numbers. Cockermouth and Brigham were estimated to possess 60 Quaker families, so the three Deaneries contained not far short of the numbers in the Diocese of Carlisle.⁸ However a drastic decline in Quaker numbers, nationally as well as in Cumbria, took place over the next 60 years, entirely altering the importance of Quakerism in the county.

The decline in the number of Friends was masked for a time by their substantial economic influence in places like Whitehaven and Kendal, centres of trade, industry and Nonconformity with a number of prominent Quaker businessmen. Nonetheless the incomplete 1829 Return of Sectaries listed the weakness of all Dissent in Lancashire North of the Sands; no returns are extant for the old Quaker centres around Kendal and Whitehaven.⁹ The Return's accuracy might be questionable, but it points the way to the "great Cumbrian" decline of the Society of Friends, a decline not evident in the mid and later eighteenth century.

The 1851 Religious Census provided the first county-wide figures for the attendances of all denominations at their places of worship.¹⁰ It was alleged that its figures were inaccurate and that all manner of errors were made, but its results stand as the only available survey of attendances and their places of worship. With 31 places of worship the Quakers were not poorly represented, having more than the Baptists and Presbyterians and not many fewer than the Independents and Primitive Methodists; on the other hand their number of hearers were by far the smallest of the main denominations, and less than 1,000. This was two-thirds of the Baptists' meagre total and less than a quarter of the Presbyterians. Compared to the massive 31,628 for the Methodists and 70,763 for the Anglicans, the Quakers represented only 0.3% of the Cumbrian population. Kendal Ward and Carlisle, Cockermouth and Wigton registration districts provided the overwhelming majority of Quaker attendances. The Friends mustered 30 hearers per chapel, the lowest for any denomination; and between 1851 and the next report on religious attendances Quaker numbers dropped still further.

During 1902 the *West Cumberland Times* held a survey of the number of hearers at all places of worship on one Sunday across the registration districts of Whitehaven, Wigton and Cockermouth.¹¹ There is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the survey and nobody complained about injustice. What it showed was a sharp drop in the numbers attending all places of worship, the only exceptions being the Primitives and Wesleyan Methodists, and the Roman Catholics, who were enjoying great success amongst the new immigrants to the industrial and mining areas. From the twelve Quaker meeting houses of 1851 only three survived, at Broughton, Cockermouth and Wigton, or at least only those three held services on Census Sunday. At their five services there were 107 hearers, a drop

from the 376 for the same area in 1851. The Whitehaven Friends, listed as holding two services with 27 hearers in an unofficial census in the town in 1881 alone, no longer functioned as "Friends".

The reasons for the changes in the fortunes of the Quakers are complex and intertwined, in Cumbria at least, with the fortunes of other denominations. A main factor was the so-called "Beaconite" controversy of 1835. This was the culmination of a campaign against the work and teaching of American Quakers, who held that the Friends should concentrate on "inner truth" rather than the outward aspects of religious behaviour like evangelism and active philanthropy. During the early nineteenth century this movement to concentrate the Friends on their own religious concerns created a division in the USA and led to Isaac Crewdson, a Manchester businessman from a Westmorland family, writing "A Beacon to the Society of Friends", advocating active Quaker evangelism and an outward-directed religion. The controversy damaged the Quaker movement nationally, and in Cumbria led to a number of prominent Friends joining other denominations, including the Church of England in Kendal, and the Primitive and Wesleyan Methodists, and in the direct formation of the first Cumbrian "Brethren".

The "Brethren" originated in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century pietistic movements and from the outset exhibited features in common with the Quakers. From their German origins the various groups of Brethren moved to England and North America, determinedly believing in the "simple life" of work and thrift as opposed to "idleness and luxury", obedience to the teachings of Christ, the doctrine of Peace and fellowship with all mankind regardless of caste, class or colour, and (later) the need for temperance, philanthropy, and proper education. The appeal of such ideas to disillusioned Quakers is obvious, and groups of Friends (and a smattering of other denominations) were responsible for establishing small societies of Brethren in Cumbria, often based on the old Quaker buildings and meetings. Under the impetus of J. N. Darby's "Plymouth" movement, and of the Dissenting tradition implicit in the so-called "Church of Christ" in the USA, the Quakers easily assimilated new ideas which frequently coincided with the progression of their own, and the Cumbrian Brethren were composed of the same mixture of Dissenting traditions as characterized the Nonconformist congregations of the 1650s: Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregational (from the several Brethren communities), but with a predominantly Quaker ethos. When Crewdson involved the Quakers in the so-called "Beaconite" controversy he helped wreck the Kendal society, one of the strongest in the county, and the dispute harmed Quakerism further afield.¹² By the 1851 Census the Kendal Brethren congregation had 106 hearers and the Whitehaven Brethren 230, together with a small Brethren society in Ulverston of just 32 hearers in 1851. The Kendal and the Whitehaven Brethren were established by former Quakers unhappy with the Society of Friends in the 1830s. The losses to the Quakers did not stop there, for a number of prominent families abandoned the Friends for other denominations and even (in Kendal) for the Church of England, so great was the division in their ranks.

It would seem logical to explain the drop in Quaker numbers between 1851 and 1902 as in part a reflection of the establishing of Brethren congregations in the old Quaker haunts. For instance the Whitehaven Friends, shown as still meeting on a reduced scale in the small 1881 Census, had 21 years later become headquarters for a new Brethren society, and one of three in that town.¹³ The several Brethren groups had in 1902 seven societies and had all but supplanted the Quaker influence in West Cumberland. Naturally many of the Brethren

may not have been former Friends, but the founding of several Brethren societies by disillusioned Quakers suggests that many of the new Brethren were former Quakers. How much difference exactly existed between Quakers and Brethren is a matter for conjecture, but the change was significant.

The rejection of the Society of Friends during the nineteenth century by former members can be accounted for partly by the Beacon controversy, partly because of the way some Quakers actively participated in the mid-1830s campaign against the Established Church.¹⁴ Those dissatisfied with the existing attitude of the Friends towards the political and religious turmoil of the time had choices: some remained Friends, many left to establish the Brethren and others joined the Methodists, Anglicans and others. With the Quakers of the two Cumbrian centres of Nonconformity, Whitehaven and Kendal, committed to involvement in political and religious agitation, the county's first two Brethren societies came into being there. By the turn of the century there was a proliferation of Brethren congregations in the former Quaker areas.

The Quakers not only largely created the Brethren in Cumbria but they also aided the Methodists in a number of places and retained a peculiar attachment to both denominations, though with the passing of time they tended to become wholehearted Methodists. At a time when Wesleyan Methodism was starting to affect the county widely between 1790 and 1830 links with the Quaker societies were close. At Ulverston the prosperous cotton-spinning family, the Dixons, gave early Methodist preachers hospitality, lent money for the first chapel and acted as trustees and officials for the Wesleyan society in the 1800s.¹⁵ The stories of Quakers helping Methodist and Inghamite preachers in and around Sedbergh and Dentdale in the late 18th century came down by word of mouth, and relations between the denominations were unfailingly good.¹⁶ Co-operation too lasted well into the 19th century; the influential Quakers of Hawkshead willingly lent their chapel to the Wesleyans and combined for services in the 1860s at the "Union Chapel".¹⁷ At Gosforth in West Cumberland Friends were early Methodist stalwarts, acting in most official capacities into the 20th century.¹⁸ Co-operation characterized the far poorer but fervently evangelical Primitive Methodists of the 1820s and 1830s in their first missions to Cumbria, and as whole families of Friends attended Primitive services in Maryport and Whitehaven, still in their characteristic and distinctive dress, they surprized ministers unaccustomed to the sight.¹⁹ Primitives indeed readily combined with Quakers in a way that Wesleyans never did with the Primitives, which speaks volumes for the attitudes of the time.

The considerable number of Friends in Cumbria was initially recruited amidst fierce persecution and equally fierce evangelism by Fox and a score of Cumbrian helpers famous in the annals of Quaker history. Persecution if anything enhanced their success and in this neglected outpost of Anglicanism the Friends prospered. During the limited "evangelical revival" in the county the Friends were not willing to participate on a wide scale and other Nonconformist groups, notably the Methodists, to some extent supplanted them. More seriously, the Quakers had none of the appeal of the Methodists, and perhaps did not wish to possess it. They lacked the means, including that most potent Methodist weapon with which to reach the many who attended no church, Sunday schools. Internal divisions and an unwillingness or ability to recruit members led to absorption of Friends into the Methodist and Brethren movements in Cumbria, and the reduction of Quakerism to a size very different to their hey-days in the 17th and 18th centuries.

TABLE I: *Quakers in the Diocese of Carlisle.*

<i>Living/Parish</i>	<i>Families</i>	<i>Living/Parish</i>	<i>Families</i>
Arthuret	3	Flimby	1
Greystoke	15	Dearham	1
Dacre	4	Crosscanonby	4
Barton	3	Plumbland	1
Skelton	1	Torpenhow	1
Newton Reigny	2	Ireby	2
Penrith	12	Bolton	13
Shap	3	Caldbeck	29
Lowther	1	Crosthwaite	4
Clifton	5	Aspatria	4
Kirkby Stephen	4	All Hallows	2
Morland	6	St Marys (Carlisle)	14
Orton	1	St Cuthberts (Carlisle)	10
Houghton	1	Stanwix (Carlisle)	8
Westward	5	Crosby-on-Eden	6
Sebergham	4	Kirklington	32
Great Orton	8	Cumwhitton	1
Grinsdale	1	Wetheral	8
Burgh by Sands	28	Warwick	4
Dalston	1	Irthington	8
Kirkbampton	3	Walton	1
Bowness	2	Stapleton	16
Kirkbride	4	Lanercost	2
Aikton	4	Bewcastle	1
Scaleby	12	Brampton	1
Beaumont	1	Wigton	12
Holme Cultram	30	Bromfield	21
Uldale	2	Isel	2
Camerton	3		

Source: Miscellaneous Accounts of Bishop Nicolson 1703 with additions by Archdeacon Waugh, 1747.

TABLE II: *Quakers in the Chester Deaneries 1789.*

<i>Place</i>	<i>Families</i>
Witherslack	1
Burton	6
Preston Patrick	26 + meeting house
Heversham	6
Kendal	"many"
Burneside	4
Crook	8 + meeting house
Grayrigg	"several" + meeting house
Hugill	1, "much declined"
Helsington	1
New Hutton	1
Staveley	1
Underbarrow	1

TABLE II -contd.		
	Silverdale	"a good many"
	Aldingham	2
	Hawkshead	15 + meeting house
	Satterthwaite	10
	Brigham	33 + 2 meeting houses, "much lessened"
	Cockermouth	25 + meeting houses, "static"
	Embleton	6
	Lorton	1
	Setmurthy	3
	Mosser	10
	Whitehaven	"many"
	Dean	8 + meeting house, "increasing"
	Distington	2
	Lamplugh	2
	Clifton	1
	Workington	4
	Ulverston	"many"

Source: Chester Record Office EDV 7/2/116 to 313. Visitation Returns 1789.

TABLE III: 1829 Return of Sectaries for "Lancashire North of the Sands".

Township/Parish	Denomination	Adult Membership	Chapel/Meeting House
Torver	Baptist	7	Yes
Staveley	Quaker	1	
Lowick	Roman Catholic	1	
	Baptist	14	
Kirkby Ireleth	Baptist	?	
Egton and Newland	Methodist	9	
	Baptist	12	Yes
Holker	Roman Catholic	1	
Burblethwaite	Quaker	0	Yes
Hawkshead	Quaker	6	Yes
	Baptist	6	Yes
Dalton	Wesleyan	24	Yes
Colton	Baptist	1	
Allithwaite	Quaker	22	Yes

Note: The strength of Dissent in Lancaster, an old port and trading centre similar in many ways to Whitehaven where there was too a strong Dissenting presence.

Lancaster	Roman Catholic	800	Yes
	Quaker	250	Yes
	Wesleyan	600	Yes
	Congregationalists	500	Yes
	Baptists	60	Yes
	Presbyterians	70	Yes
	Primitives	60	Yes
	Independent Methodists	160	Yes

Source: Lancashire Record Office QDV 9/1 to 245.

Note: Omission of Ulverston. A Majority of townships had no Dissenters.

TABLE IV: 1851 Religious Census—Quakers.

Places of Worship	Total Seats	Attendances			
		Morning	Afternoon	Evening	
<i>Westmorland</i>					
Kendal	1	850	103	46	—
East Ward	1	46	11	—	—
West Ward	2	260	7	—	—
					167 for Westmorland
<i>Cumberland</i>					
Alston	1	200	6	—	—
Penrith	2	620	16	5	—
Longtown	2	370	24	—	—
Carlisle	3	710	106	72	—
Whitehaven	1	700	25	12	—
Wigton	6	910	72	12	—
Cockermouth	5	1,290	97	158	—
					605 for Cumberland
Ulverston	3	422	24	—	—
Sedbergh	4	540	59	—	—
	31	6,918			83 Lancs. N. of the Sands
					<hr/> Total 855

Note: No Defective Returns.

TABLE V: 1851 Religious Census—Brethren.

Places of Worship	Total Seats	Morning	Attendances		Evening
			Afternoon		
<i>Westmorland</i>					
Kendal	1	100	46	—	60
<i>Cumberland</i>					
Whitehaven	2	400	50	—	180
Ulverston	1	—	—	32	—

TABLE VI: 1902 West Cumberland Times Religious Census.

Quakers:

Place	Services	Hearers
Broughton	1	3
Cockermouth	2	19
Wigton	2	85
	5	107

(1881 Whitehaven Census recorded 27 at two services).

Brethren:

<i>Place</i>	<i>Services</i>	<i>Hearers</i>		<i>Type</i>
Whitehaven	2	93	(former Quaker Building)	Unspecified
Frizington	2	34		"Plymouth"
Harrington	2	49		Unspecified
Workington	2	132		"Christian"
Parton	2	83		"Church of Christ"
Whitehaven	2	44		"Church of Christ"
	<u>2</u>	<u>29</u>		"Christian"
	14	464		

<i>Other Denominations</i>	<i>Total Attendances</i>
Church of England	9,475
Independent	1,670
Presbyterian	922
Baptist	396
Roman Catholic	5,577
Wesleyan Methodist	4,844
Primitive Methodist	2,311
United Methodist	509

Notes and References

- ¹ C. M. L. Bouch and G. P. Jones, *A Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties*, 1961, pp. 28-32, 174-6, 183-92.
- ² J. Burgess, *The Growth and Development of Methodism in Cumbria*, Durham University M. Litt. thesis, 1979, ch. 3. See note 14 below.
- ³ Bouch and Jones, pp. 179-83.
- ⁴ *Rise and Progress of the Truth: Quakerism in Cumberland*, written in early 18th century by county Friends, in the Carlisle Record Office; B. Nightingale, *The Ejected of 1662 in Cumberland and Westmorland* 1911, gives details of the relations between clergy and Friends for the period of the Commonwealth into the 18th century.
- ⁵ J. Burgess, *Dissent in the Diocese of Carlisle*, typescript volume in Carlisle Record Office; J. Burgess, *Growth and Development of Methodism in Cumbria*, ch. 2, which charts the progress of Dissent before the coming of the Methodists.
- ⁶ B. Nightingale, vol. 2, Appendix 5, p. 1329, Appendix 6, p. 1330-64 for Conventicle Returns and Presentments for Conformity.
- ⁷ See Table 1, Miscellany Accounts of Bishop Nicolson 1703, with additions by Archdeacon Waugh 1747, MS in Carlisle Record Office.
- ⁸ Bishop of Chester Visitation Returns 1789, Chester Record Office, EDV 7/2/166 to 313; see Table II.
- ⁹ See Table III; Return of Sectaries for Lancashire North of the Sands, Lancashire Record Office, QDV 9/1 to 245.
- ¹⁰ J. Burgess, *Growth and Development of Methodism in Cumbria*, Appendix 2 for the full returns for all denominations in all Religious Censuses; Census of Religious Worship in England and Wales, Tables and Report 1853; see Table IV.
- ¹¹ *West Cumberland Times*, December 1902; Table V.
- ¹² DKK, *Reminiscences of People and Places in Kendal 60 Years Ago*, 1890, provides the scene for the Kendal dispute; C. Nicholson, *Annals of Kendal*, 1861, pp. 163-7 on the formation of the Brethren and Quaker losses; *Westmorland Gazette*, 18th December 1836 and 10th June 1837 for instance on the "Beaconite" issue.
- ¹³ D. Hay, *History of Nonconformity in Whitehaven* in the *Whitehaven News* during 1940; Table V.

- ¹⁴ *Westmorland Gazette*, 14th March 1835 and throughout the succeeding months violently condemned the actions of leading Quakers and Unitarians in attacking the Anglican Establishment; S. Brown, *Middle Class Leadership in Kendal*, University of Lancaster, M.A. 1971.
- ¹⁵ Neville Street (Ulverston) Wesleyan Chapel Jubilee Brochure 1951; *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 1860, p. 396.
- ¹⁶ P. Gaskins, *Methodism in Hutton Roof*, 1975 and other centenary brochures of the locality; co-operation between Methodist and Quaker remains common in North Lancashire too.
- ¹⁷ Hawkshead Centenary Brochure, 1962.
- ¹⁸ Gosforth Chapel Centenary, 1974, and the society records in Lowther Street, Whitehaven Methodist Church.
- ¹⁹ *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, 1865, p. 695.

