

# 'The truth sprang up first in Leicestershire': George Fox, 1624-1691 and the origins of Quakerism<sup>1</sup>

by R.H.Evans

The tercentenary of Fox's death prompts a review of his part, both nationally and locally, in the beginnings of Quakerism. After a brief introduction the first section illustrates some of the qualities that made Fox a powerful missionary and a dedicated leader. The second section examines some current tendencies in Quaker historiography, with particular reference to the importance of missionary activity, the part of Fox in the Quaker leadership, and the value of his early work in the Midlands. The last section turns to the beginnings of Quakerism in Leicestershire and employs hitherto-unexplored evidence to show that the movement was more developed there in the 1650s than is currently recognized and, further, that there is reason to believe Fox's early missionary activity in the county bore lasting fruit. The older view that Quakerism began in Leicestershire is not without foundation.

In commemorating the tercentenary of the death of George Fox in January 1691 we celebrate the life of a Leicestershire man who became one of this country's outstanding religious leaders, only paralleled among Englishmen by John Wesley, a century later. Fox did not enjoy the social and intellectual advantages of Wesley. Although his parents had a respected status in their village of Fenny Drayton his origins were lowly by the standards of the time. Though literate he grew up without any formal education and was apprenticed in his teens to a shoemaker and cattle-dealer. At the age of 19, as his *Journal* relates, 'At the command of God, on the 9th day of the 7th month 1643 I left my relatives.'<sup>2</sup> This matter-of-fact statement marks the beginning of a spiritual pilgrimage and religious mission that was to take him over a great part of England and Wales, to Ireland and Scotland, to the Low Countries and Germany, and across the Atlantic to the West Indies and North America. It also inspired others to undertake missions to the Knights of Malta, the Pope in Rome, the Sultan in Constantinople, and to the Holy Land. It ended with Fox established as effective leader of a new and unique religious movement. At his death in 1691, 'the people in scorn called Quakers',

1. Part of this paper was originally delivered as a commemorative lecture to the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society in January 1991. I am very much indebted to the Editor, Dr. D. L. Wykes, for his considerable assistance in preparing it for publication.
2. *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by J. L. Nickalls, p.8. Cambridge University Press, 1952 [subsequently referred to as *Journal*]. Fox here expresses the date in Quaker style which denoted months by their numbers not by names. Because the year was then considered to begin in March this was the first month in the Quaker calendar: the 7th month, the date of Fox's departure, was therefore September.

after years of tribulation and endurance, were spread throughout the English-speaking world and relatively secure.<sup>3</sup>

Forty years later Voltaire, explaining England to his fellow-Frenchmen, singled out the Quakers for special comment. He attributed their remarkable success to two great leaders, Fox whose inspiration founded the movement, Penn whose practical commonsense made it respectable. He described Fox as 'saintement fou', a holy madman.<sup>4</sup> This judgement ignores the complexity of Fox's character and of his contribution to the Quaker cause. Fox was not only a great missionary but also an energetic organizer who did more than anyone to establish the network of meetings and committees that made the Quakers the best ordered of the Dissenting bodies.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, with Fox as missionary that our concern lies here; and in this respect Voltaire's description has considerable truth. Fox offers a good example of what the seventeenth century termed a 'phanatick'. His religious feelings were highly charged and ecstatic. The magistrates of Derby in 1650 complained that he was 'taken up in raptures';<sup>6</sup> and this state of exaltation prompted his impulsive visit to Lichfield the following year to cry 'Woe on the bloody city'.<sup>7</sup> He believed he had received a divine commission to preach the gospel: he told a group of clergy that he came 'with a message and a word from the Lord as the prophets and Apostles had.'<sup>8</sup> Like the prophets of old he claimed exceptional powers which enabled him not only to foresee future events but heal the sick and raise the apparently dead.<sup>9</sup>

Fox had the physical presence to sustain his prophetic role. His powerful voice enabled him to command large open-air meetings and confront hostile clergy in their churches.<sup>10</sup> It served him equally well in his many battles in the courts and provoked one judge to complain, 'Thou speakest so loud thy voice drowns mine and the Court's'.<sup>11</sup> Observers noted his compelling and piercing gaze which enabled him to dominate people and break through their defences: one of them reported the belief that Fox could 'outlook any man' and that he did it 'to know what is in them'.<sup>12</sup> The same writer also observed that when people came to talk to him he would take them by the hand, quickly obtaining such an ascendancy over their minds that even passionate opponents would be won over and 'would now much more violently affect his wicked religion than ever before they did distaste it'.<sup>13</sup> Such was the compulsion of Fox's personality that he was suspected of sorcery.<sup>14</sup>

Fox also possessed to a high degree the qualities of fortitude and courage that were indispensable to the Quaker missionary. His high moral sense, rigid integrity and almost niggling dedication to the literal truth made compromise with the ways of the

3. W. C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, ch.13. 2nd. edn. revised by Henry J. Cadbury. Cambridge University Press, 1955
4. Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques ou Lettres Anglaises*, pp.11, 16. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1956
5. W. C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, chs.9, 10. 2nd. edn. revised by Henry J. Cadbury. Cambridge University Press, 1961
6. *Journal*, as n.2, p.51
7. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.71-72
8. *Journal*, as n.2, p.123
9. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.147, 350, 361, 147, 631, 155-6. See also *George Fox's Book of Miracles*, edited by Henry J. Cadbury. Cambridge University Press, 1948
10. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.108-9, 121, 158
11. *Journal*, as n.2, p.467
12. Francis Higginson, *A Brief Relation of the Irreligion of the Northern Quakers*. London, 1653, in *Early Quaker Writings*, edited by H. Barbour and A. Roberts, p.74. Grand Rapids: Eardmans, 1973
13. Higginson, *Brief Relation*, as n.12, p.74
14. Higginson, *Brief Relation*, as n.12, p.74

'world' unthinkable.<sup>15</sup> In an age when a Leicestershire Quaker could be cudgelled to death for refusing to doff his hat to a local notable, even apparently trivial rejections of social convention could provoke violence,<sup>16</sup> and as Quakerism was generally perceived by both public authorities and populace to be subversive of Church, State and social order, the missionary like Fox, who felt bound to publicize his message as openly as possible, risked at all turns a dangerous reaction, both spontaneous and organized. The 'rude people' appear as a malignant chorus in Fox's *Journal*, greeting his appearances with riot and physical assault. Their onslaught at Market Bosworth in his native county in 1649, when, as he records, 'the people of the town and market fell upon us and stoned us very sore and abused us, hundreds of them with stones a great way out of the town' was only an early example of what was to become a common experience.<sup>17</sup>

The cudgels, pitchforks and brickbats of the 'rude people' threatened the missionary's life; yet in practice they proved less dangerous than the prisons of the public authorities which threatened both his liberty and his life. Imprisonment became more difficult to avoid as the web of penal laws was gradually drawn tighter and the authorities became more confident. Between 1649 and 1675 Fox was imprisoned eight times and spent about six years all told in captivity, sometimes in disgusting conditions.<sup>18</sup> By the time of his last release the years of confinement and maltreatment, in addition to the rigours of his travels in all weathers, had left him seriously weakened. In the last 15 years of his life he could only endure to ride horseback for the shortest of stages. Yet such was his dedication to his mission that the affairs of the Society of Friends continued to occupy his attention, almost excluding any other ties, to the day of his death.<sup>19</sup>

### Fox and the rise of the Quakers

George Fox was a great and formidable figure in the formative years of the Quaker movement. Traditionally he has been considered its founder and leader.<sup>20</sup> This was his own view. Among the papers left at his death there is one that begins '... and the Truth first sprang up in Leicestershire in 1644 and in Warwickshire in 1645 and in Nottinghamshire in 1646 ...' and traces its progress in Fox's footsteps to the northern counties until in 1654 it reached 'most parts of the nation'.<sup>21</sup> His great *Journal*, essential source though it is, has to be read with this bias in mind, for it treats every meeting with 'friendly people' as a conversion to his personal message and all their leaders as his personal disciples. Today this view of Fox as founder of the movement is seriously questioned, even completely repudiated. W. C. Braithwaite, the first modern historian of Quakerism, writing 80 years ago, made some telling points. He showed that the northern separatists, with whom Fox made contact in 1651 and 1652, had already, independently of him, reached a position much like his and adopted similar

15. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.36-39: for an episode in which Fox was accused of cowardice in trying to avoid arrest see Braithwaite, *Second Period*, as n.5, pp.219-220

16. Library of the Religious Society of Friends, Great Book of Sufferings, Leicestershire [hereafter GBS, Leics.] p.582, s.v. John Boyer

17. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.48-49

18. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.769-770, 262-253

19. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.713-752

20. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3., ch.13

21. *Journal*, as n.2, p.709

practices, and that their leaders, such as Richard Farnsworth, William Dewsbury and James Nayler 'had reached the Quaker experience before Fox came among them'. He also made it clear that, whatever Fox had achieved earlier in the Midlands, it was the northerners who provided the vitality, together with most of the missionaries and much of the money, required to turn a struggling group into a national force. In particular he singled out 'the crowded fortnight' in which Fox met the religious communities round Sedbergh and Preston Patrick as 'the creative moment in the history of Quakerism'.<sup>22</sup>

In the last 30 years a number of historians specializing in Quaker history have developed Braithwaite's intimations into an explicit rejection of the Fox-centred account of Quaker origins.<sup>23</sup> This attack has two prongs. Firstly the role of other leaders has been magnified at Fox's expense. Secondly greater stress has been placed on the element of spontaneous growth in Quakerism, so that the role of even the great travelling missionaries has been reduced almost to that of discovering existing groups of separatists who might be potential Quakers, linking them together and enabling them to recognize their fellowship with others of like mind. These views have been expressed concisely by Barry Reay. He translates Braithwaite's 'creative moment' into the explicit statement that 'Quakerism began in the north'. The birth of the movement 'was less a gathering of eager proselytes at the feet of a charismatic prophet, than a linking of advanced Protestant separatists into a loose kind of church fellowship.' Fox's early activity had no part in it; and in any case the nature of his achievement in the Midlands is too unclear to be taken into account. During the 1650s Fox was no more 'important or influential' than any of the other major leaders. His distinctive contribution was made after the Restoration, in defending the movement and building its organization: it was then that he became the unrivalled leader, but this was only because the premature deaths of others had left no competition.<sup>24</sup>

New insights are always welcome but there is a danger that their unqualified expression may suggest that they have become the whole truth. Having warned against focusing attention entirely on Fox, Richard Vann, for example, goes on to remark that in 'one sense, there was no real effort at evangelism'.<sup>25</sup> There is more than a grain of truth in this comment but as a generalization about the Quaker missionary effort as a whole it can mislead. The discovery of kindred spirits was not a simple or painless exercise, as Fox's *Journal* demonstrates so clearly. It was necessary to venture into the hostile territory of the parish church or the market place and brave the cudgels of 'the rude people'. Even when discovered, a prospective recruit might not be easy to gather in: there were many competitors for his or her soul. Margaret Fell, later to become Fox's wife, might well have been recognized as an obvious recruit, known to have strong religious feelings and radical tendencies. Yet in 1651 she still remained faithful to her parish church in Ulverston and under the spell of the charismatic preaching of its minister. Account also had to be taken of her husband, a judge and local puritan notable. When Fox arrived at her home at Swarthmore he had to fight a preliminary and prolonged verbal duel with her minister in the relative privacy of the hall; but that

22. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.86

23. E.g. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3., p.546 (Henry J. Cadbury's additional note to p.28); Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964; Richard T. Vann, *The Social Development of English Quakerism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969; Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution*. New York: St Martins' Press, 1985

24. Reay, *Quakers*, as n.23, pp.7-10

25. Vann, *Social Development*, as n.23, p.10

did not fully convince Margaret. To win her he had to fight a second battle in a public confrontation in the church in the presence of the whole parish. Even so the victory was not complete until Judge Fell returned home and Fox was able to persuade him to tolerate his wife's spiritual infidelity.<sup>26</sup> Although the rapid spread of the movement cannot be attributed solely to the efforts of Fox and his fellow-militants it is difficult to see how it could have been achieved without them.

The work of the Quaker missionaries cannot be lightly dismissed. This applies to Fox as much as to the rest of the 'valiant sixty'. Fox was only one of many, yet one with some special attributes. When he moved north in 1651 and, according to Reay, the Quaker movement really began, he was already a battle-hardened missionary, a veteran of two imprisonments and numerous confrontations with 'the rude people'. The message he preached was already distinctively Quaker and those who followed him were already 'in scorn called Quakers'.<sup>27</sup> This message might not have been new to the northerners but it was presented with the confident militancy that characterized Fox. The explosion of activity which followed his arrival needs explanation. Even if the people Fox reached were already Quakers *avant la lettre* he evidently had something new to offer: for example he persuaded Howgill to give up his preacher's stipend, won the support of Burrough after a lengthy disputation and surprised at least part of the congregation of Firbank chapel with the novel idea of an open-air service.<sup>28</sup> It may be, too, that his prophetic confidence helped to transform their negative rejection of formalized religion into a positive faith in the validity of the position they had reached. At the least his presence seems to have served as the catalyst which transformed the lives of so many local leaders and drove them along the rough and sometimes deadly road of missionary work. Without the firm base offered by the community life, organization and numbers of the northern separatists the Quaker movement could not have developed, but it needed the charismatic presence of Fox to realize its potential and galvanize it into action.

From this point until the early years of the Restoration Fox's position in the Quaker movement is difficult to determine, especially if we take into account - as we must - the personal bias of his *Journal*. The egalitarian nature of Quakerism allowed no place for human authority. This did not prevent in practice the emergence of a small band of leaders, perhaps some six in the first rank, including Fox;<sup>29</sup> but since authority depended on their spiritual and moral power their status lacked definition. The authorship of the many epistles and letters of advice issued to Friends does not reveal a clear structure of command or division of responsibilities.<sup>30</sup> Like Rousseau's Legislator a Quaker leader exercised 'an authority that is no authority' and therefore difficult to recognize.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps it was more readily perceived by outsiders. Certainly some observers recognized a preeminence in Fox. Among them was Francis Higginson, vicar of Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland, who, in 1653, provided in a hostile pamphlet on the northern Quakers one of the earliest accounts of their activities. He drew on personal experience of them in his own and neighbouring counties and on the reports of informants in the Midlands (where he had connexions, as his father had at one time held the Leicestershire living of Claybrooke) who kept him posted about Fox's record

26. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.114-15

27. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.29-39

28. *Journal*, as n.2, p.109

29. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.89

30. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, ch.13

31. 'une autorité qui n'est rien', J-J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, p.262. Paris: Garnier Frères, n.d.

there. Even though Nayler had been active in the north-west in partnership with Fox it was Fox whom Higginson identified as the leader. He called Fox 'the father of the Quakers of these parts'. Higginson was well aware of the wider ramifications of the movement and did not confine Fox's leadership to the north-west: he also described him in wider terms as 'Grand Master of the faction' and 'the ringleader of this sect'.<sup>32</sup>

In later years other outsiders, either explicitly or implicitly, shared Higginson's assessment of Fox. The Quaker general meeting which was held in January 1655 at Swannington in Leicestershire was said by the alarmed justices in their report to the Protector to have been summoned by 'one Fox'; and his consequent arrest and dispatch to London to be interviewed by Cromwell suggests that their view of his authority in the movement was shared by the government.<sup>33</sup> The newsletters of the time also singled out Fox. *Mercurius Politicus* reported that 'divers Quakers have been apprehended as they were roving about the country in Leicestershire, and among them one Fox, a principal leader of that frantic party...'; and after the interview with Cromwell *Perfect Proceedings* informed its readers that 'this afternoon Fox, the great Quaker, who is said to be one of the chief old ringleaders of them, was at Whitehall'.<sup>34</sup> Further evidence of this kind is provided by the comment of the judge when Dewsbury was tried at Northampton in 1655. Although Fox had no part in Dewsbury's activities and was neither present nor on trial, the judge singled him out to associate his name with Dewsbury's: 'If thou and Fox', he told Dewsbury, 'had it in your power, you would soon have your hands imbrued in blood'. By the time of the Restoration Fox's name and reputation were well known to the authorities throughout the country. When he was arrested at Lancaster in 1660 it was as 'chief upholder of the Quaker sect'.<sup>35</sup> In 1662 when he was arrested in Leicestershire and admitted who he was, Lord Beaumont replied, 'Aye you are known all the world over'.<sup>36</sup> In the North, Daniel Fleming, one of the most zealous justices in his hostility to the Quakers, singled out 'George Fox and his cubs' as one of the chief dangers, offered a reward of £5 for his capture and secured his arrest early in 1664, at much the same time as Francis Howgill, regarded by some historians as a leader of equal status with Fox, was taken at Appleby. After Fox's conviction at Lancaster Assizes the fear that the local prison could not contain him securely led to his transfer to the more formidable Scarborough Castle, while the authorities were content to allow Howgill on his conviction to remain in the local prison at Appleby.<sup>37</sup> The cumulative impression is that by this time Fox was recognized by the outside world if not within the movement as at least the first among equals in the Quaker leadership.

### **Fox and the beginnings of Quakerism in Leicestershire**

A final question remains: the value of Fox's personal contribution to the propagation of Quakerism in Leicestershire and the part it should have in the history of the movement as a whole. The present trend among historians seems to be to discount the whole of Fox's work before 1651.<sup>38</sup> One reason for this is the difficulty of establishing

32. Higginson, *Brief Relation*, as n.12, pp.66, 74

33. *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, edited by T. Birch, 7 vols. 3, p.166. London: 1742.

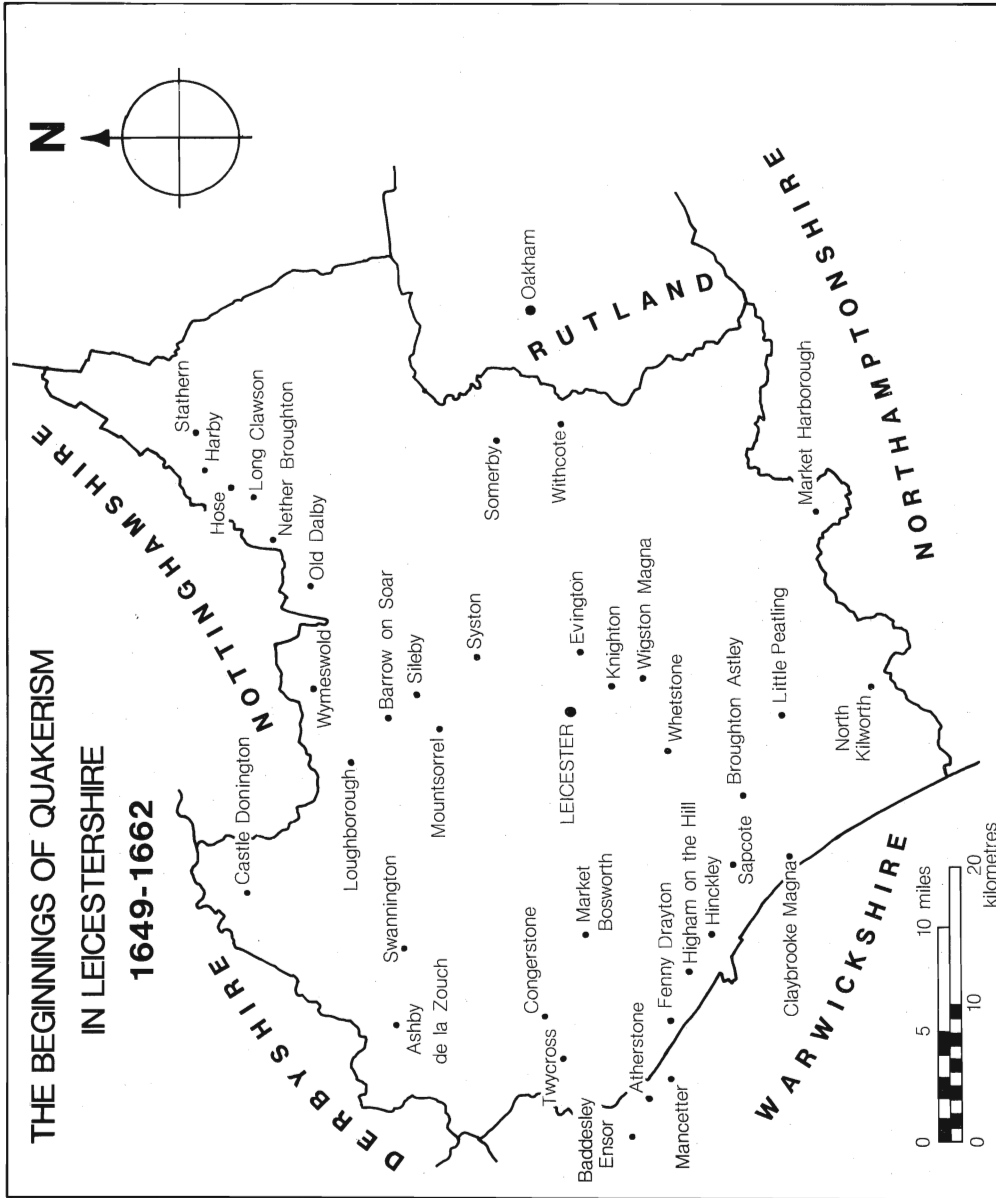
34. S.R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate 1649-1656*, 4 vols. 3, p.263 n.1. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903

35. Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers*, 2 vols. 1, p.522. London: 1753

36. *Journal*, as n.2, p.379

37. *Journal*, as n.2, p.430; Braithwaite, *Second Period*, as n.5, pp.31-39; Reay, *Quakers*, as n.23, pp.7-10

38. Reay, *Quakers*, as n.23, p.8



how much of his achievement in the Midlands survived his departure for the north and therefore how far a fresh start was required in 1654 when the great mission to the south began. For Leicestershire Quakers the evidence for the period before 1660 is indeed sparse. Their own records do not begin before 1671, there are only a few references to them in local or national records, and they appear to have contributed nothing to the national collections begun in 1657; supplied no names to the list of persons fit to be members of Parliament, and taken no part in the petitions of 1659 against tithes.

In default of a solid body of direct evidence for the Quakers in this county during the Interregnum, the history of the Baptists, who are better documented, offers, as a starting point, a suggestive parallel. From articles of faith and petitions to which the Baptist congregations of Leicestershire and Rutland subscribed in 1651, 1652 and 1659 Alan Betteridge has convincingly demonstrated that out of eleven Baptist centres of worship which are known to have existed after the Restoration all but one were already active in the early 1650s and probably before, and that there was also a remarkable continuity of leadership between the two periods.<sup>39</sup> It is not implausible to suggest that the Quakers' experience was similar. This suggestion is supported by a comparison between the first firmly established evidence for the existence of named Quaker meetings and less explicit evidence for the first year of the Restoration. The explicit evidence is provided by the Quakers' own record, the Leicestershire Quarterly Meeting book: this, started in the year 1671, gives a list of particular meetings or congregations, together with the names of 'persons in charge of public affairs'. This names thirteen meetings, grouped in three monthly meetings: Leicester, Hinckley, Kilworth, Peatling; Oakham, The Vale, Wymeswold, Sileby, Syston; Swannington, Twycross, Castle Donington, Loughborough.<sup>40</sup> The evidence with which this has to be compared is provided by lists of Quaker prisoners held in Leicester in the first years of the Restoration.<sup>41</sup> The lists only offer names, but from other evidence their homes can be established as follows: Leicester (this includes Quakers from the nearby villages of Evington and Knighton), Hinckley, North Kilworth, Little Peatling (and from the nearby village of Broughton Astley), from Somerby and Withcote (near Oakham), four villages in The Vale (Long Clawson, Old Dalby, Stathern and Hose), Sileby, Syston; Swannington, Twycross, Congerstone (near Twycross and subsequently a separate meeting) and Castle Donington.<sup>42</sup> A comparison between these two lists demonstrates clearly that almost all the places listed as having Quaker congregations in 1671 had

39. Alan Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland: (2) Original Documents, Commonwealth and Restoration 1650-1661; (3) General Baptists', *Baptist Quarterly*, 25, pp.272-85, 354-57
40. LRO Quaker Records, 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs
41. Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, 1, ch.23, List of prisoners in Leicester 1661 and 1662: a total of 89 persons of whom 3 appear three times and 8 twice.
42. The following list details the places and the surname of one Quaker sufferer from each place: Leicester, *Wilson* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Evington, *Poole* (Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, 1, ch.23, 1674); Knighton, *Ward* (LRO 12 D 39/34, 1680); Hinckley, *Bramston* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); North Kilworth, *Elliot* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Little Peatling, *Swann* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Broughton Astley, *Bayley* (Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, 1, ch.23, 1679); Withcote, *Cant* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1676); Somerby, *Tompson* (LRO 12 D 39/1, 1681); Long Clawson, *Day* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Old Dalby, *Church* (LRO 12 D 39/6, 1676); Stathern, *Gregory* (LRO 12 D 39/2, marriages 1688); Hose, *Edinburrow* (12 D 39/2, marriages 1683); Sileby *Marshall* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Syston, *Brown* (Patrick Livingstone, *Truth Owned and Deceit Denied*, pp.6-7. London: 1667); Swannington, *Muggleston* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Twycross, *Farmer* (LRO 12 D 39/2, 1671); Congerstone, *Hincks* (LRO 12 D 39/2, meeting houses: Congerstone 1698); Castle Donington, *Evatt* (LRO 12 D 39/1, 1671)

Quakers living in them in the earliest years of the Restoration. Comparison also shows that 19 of those Quakers in prison at the time were listed as persons in charge of public affairs in 1671.<sup>43</sup> This suggests the Quaker leadership enjoyed a continuity similar to that of the Baptists. It seems reasonably safe to conclude that the pattern of Quaker meetings and leadership that undoubtedly existed in 1671 was already in existence at the time of the Restoration. And if it was in existence at the Restoration it was almost certainly in existence before it, at the end of the 1650s.

To trace Quaker activity further back, to the mid-1650s, to the time of the great mission to the south is more difficult, but evidence is available. Some relates to Leicester, where three Quakers were arrested in October 1654, at the same time as the Quaker missionaries Dewsbury and Whitehead. One of them was also charged with causing disturbances in church, two with distributing religious books. When the men were arrested the mayor seized 'a parcel of books to the number of 500 books'.<sup>44</sup> There was clearly a Quaker presence in or near the town at this date, since they were Leicester men, sufficient organization to arrange the supply and distribution of Quaker literature and a considerable public to purchase them, probably outside as well as in the town. The episode also furnishes evidence of continuity with the Restoration period, as one of the men named in 1654 was in trouble again in 1661 and another of them in 1670 when he was arrested at a business session of the Quarterly Meeting.<sup>45</sup> Apart from the large number of books involved there is nothing to indicate the size of the Quaker presence at this date and other evidence is conflicting. Dewsbury wrote to Fox asking him to 'send some to visit them little remnant scattered about Leicester'; but Farnsworth had a little earlier written, 'There is many at Leicester and thataways ...'<sup>46</sup>

Hinckley was reported in 1656 to 'have some stirrings of life' with an 'apothecary and his wife pretty loving'. The apothecary was clearly Nicholas Juxon who, in 1671, appears as one of those in charge of Hinckley meeting.<sup>47</sup> Also in 1656 his wife Anne was committed to prison in Leicester for reading a paper in one of the churches.<sup>48</sup> At North Kilworth John Elliot, in charge there in 1671, was evidently already a reliable Friend in 1655, as Thomas Stubbs wrote that he proposed to stay at 'Captain Ellits' on his way from Harborough.<sup>49</sup> Even Little Peatling had its activist in 1656 in the person of Grace Swann, who took part with Anne Juxon in the demonstration in the Leicester church. That these two women living some distance from one another were able to undertake a concerted demonstration well outside their home territory, indicates that they did not belong to isolated groups. The episode also affords further evidence of continuity since her husband John, listed as in charge at Peatling in 1671, was almost certainly a Quaker in 1656.<sup>50</sup> A reference in 1656 to 'those few about

43. William Bramston, William Cant, Richard Church, John Doubleday, John Elliot, John Evatt, Richard Farmer, William Horton, Nicholas Juxon, Richard Leak, William Marshall, Edward Muggleston, Thomas Orton, William Perkins, George Power, Richard Read, William Smith, John Swann, Samuel Willson: LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs

44. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.579

45. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.581, s.v. Richard Farmer; Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, ch.23, s.v. John Carr, 25 Jan. 1670

46. I. Sharp and N. Penney, 'William Dewsbury and John Whitehead to George Fox, 1654', *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, 1 (1903-4), pp.41-42; Quoted in Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.176

47. Letter of Thomas Taylor quoted in Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.394; LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1664-5*, p.142

48. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.580

49. 'Letters to William Dewsbury and others', edited by Henry J. Cadbury, *Friends Historical Society Supplement*, 22 (1948), p.38

50. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.580; LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs

Sapcote' may also be linked to the nearby village of Broughton Astley, one of whose Quakers suffered in 1661.<sup>51</sup> Whetstone, between Peatling and Leicester, which also provided a sufferer in 1661, seems already to have been regarded as a firm base at this time: Thomas Stubbs proposed to move on there after going to Kilworth and Fox held meetings there twice in 1655, first when he was arrested by Hacker and later when he converted Hacker's wife Isobel.<sup>52</sup> Fox moved on from there to Sibleby where he stayed with William Smith, (an elder in 1671 and prisoner in 1661): this suggests another long-established centre of Quaker activity.<sup>53</sup> At Mountsorrell, close by, a Quaker was charged with refusing an oath in 1659; and at Barrow-on-Soar, also close, a woman Baptist was converted, probably in 1654.<sup>54</sup> Nothing is known of The Vale at this time, but on the Rutland border Withcote now became a Quaker centre, with the conviction of Isobel Hacker, and in 1659 a disputation was held there which she attended. It is likely, also, that meetings began to be held in nearby Somerby from 1654.<sup>55</sup> By the end of that year, at the latest, Swannington was clearly regarded as a firm base, as otherwise Fox would hardly have chosen it as the site of the general meeting that was held there in January 1655. According to Cromwell's informants 'the only place of their entertainment was the house of Edward Muggleston'. From this time the Muggleston family showed a constant loyalty. Edward was sent to Leicester prison in 1656 for non-payment of tithes and died there in 1661 after five years of imprisonment. His son Edward accompanied Fox to Leicester prison in 1662 after they had both been arrested at Swannington and in 1688 no fewer than five Mugglestons signed a removal certificate for a Quaker emigrating to Pennsylvania.<sup>56</sup> After the Swannington meeting Fox stayed at Twycross, no doubt also sure of a welcome there: two Quakers from Twycross were soon to be in trouble, one for non-payment of church dues, the other for disturbance in church; and both men were elders of the meeting in 1671.<sup>57</sup>

From this review it appears there survives evidence of a Quaker presence of some kind in the middle 1650s in all the places mentioned in 1671 except Syston, The Vale, Wymeswold, Oakham, Castle Donington and Loughborough, and with the addition of Sapcote, Whetstone, Withcote, and Somerby. It can be concluded that by 1656 at the latest, Quakers had already established themselves in most of the areas listed in 1671; there is also a strong presumption that once established this presence continued unbroken into the period of the Restoration.

It may well be that this Quaker presence apparent in the 1660s originated in the great 'Mission to the South' that began in 1654. This is supported by the account of the conviction of Sarah Browne of Barrow-on-Soar which records that 'in the

51. Letter of Thomas Taylor quoted in Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.394

52. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.581; *Letters to William Dewsbury*, as n.49, p.35; *Journal*, as n.2, pp.191, 222

53. *Journal*, as n.2, p.222; LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs; Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, 1, ch.23, (1661)

54. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.580; Samuel Browne, *An Account and Testimony of Samuel Browne, concerning his dear Mother Sarah Browne, Widow*, [?1694]

55. Humfrey Wolrich, *A Discovery of the Baptists Foundation and Bottom*, 1658 [1659]; Mary Radley and Henrietta Ellis, 'The Somerby Estate, Leicestershire', *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, 6 (1909), p.17

56. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.182, 432; *State Papers of John Thurloe* as n.33, 3, p.116; GBS, Leics., as n.16, pp.579, 582; Swarthmore College Archives, Film MD-Ph Chesterfield Monthly Meeting (Burlington County, New Jersey) Removals 1677-c.1773, p.15 John Warring's Certificate from England (1688). I owe this last reference to John Warring's descendant Mr W. Thomas Warren of Webster, New York, U.S.A.

57. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.580; LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs.

fulness of time God having fitted and prepared a People in the Northern Parts of this Nation whom the World in scorn called Quakers ... When they came she received them.<sup>58</sup> Although no date is offered for this event it can reasonably be connected with the visit of William Dewsbury to the county in the autumn of 1654. On his way to Leicester (where he was arrested in October), he might well have passed through Barrow. He was therefore possibly active in the lower Soar valley, certainly held meetings in Leicester itself and continued to the south of the county. He preached at Harborough fair and there convinced a Northamptonshire man whom he then accompanied into that county. He did not return to Leicestershire until the following year, when he seems to have gone to Withcote and on to Oakham. From this it is clear that although Dewsbury conducted an important missionary tour in the county it was, in geographical terms, a limited one.<sup>59</sup> Another missionary, John Whitehead, was briefly imprisoned in Leicester over Christmas 1654, but he was on his way from Lincoln to Wellingborough and his impact on this county must have been slight.<sup>60</sup> Margaret Killam, sister of one important Yorkshire Quaker and wife of another, and herself a courageous travelling preacher, was present, possibly with Dewsbury, at a meeting at Barrow in the house of Browne, but she too, did not stay in the county but returned to Nottinghamshire.<sup>61</sup> In all it seems that the impact of these was limited to a small though central part of the county; yet this is a difficult matter to judge. The influence of a missionary was by no means limited to the immediate vicinity. Harborough fair for instance spread Dewsbury's influence at least as far as Wellingborough in Northamptonshire; and at Whetstone later in 1655 Fox claimed to have convinced two justices who had come from Wales to hear him.<sup>62</sup>

Even taking this point into account, Fox's own missionary activity in Leicestershire in 1655 seems to have been more extensive and intensive. It began with the great general meeting at Swannington, attended by several of the most influential leaders and by a printer from London. After it Fox made a tour of the county accompanied by Alexander Parker starting with Twycross where he had a lively confrontation with Ranters, then moving by way of Atherstone to Fenny Drayton for some even more lively sessions with the vicar, Nathaniel Stephens ('priest Stephens' of Fox's youth) and other clergy, followed by several unspecified meetings which took him north and so back to Swannington, then to Leicester and the short distance to Whetstone. There all was set for a meeting, to which 'were several friends come out of several parts', but it was prevented by the arrival of Col. Hacker and Fox's work was temporarily interrupted by a visit to London and an interview with Cromwell. Later in the year he returned to Whetstone and enjoyed the two-fold pleasure of holding a meeting in defiance of Hacker's prohibition, and also of 'convincing' his wife. From there he went to Sibleby to William Smith's; then to Baddesley near Atherstone by way of Fenny Drayton. His missionary tour of that year ended with another visit to Whetstone after some violent handling in Warwick and Coventry, with a return to Baddesley and finally visits to Swannington and Higham-on-the-Hill on the way to Northamptonshire and London.<sup>63</sup>

58. Browne, *Account and Testimony*, as n.54

59. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, pp.174-5

60. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.579

61. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.128; Barbour, *Quakers*, as n.23, p.51

62. "The first publishers of truth", being early records (now first printed) of the introduction of Quakerism into the counties of England and Wales', edited by N. Penney, *Supplement of the Friends Historical Society*, 1-5 (1907), p.194; *Journal*, as n.2, p.222

63. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.182-191, 222-3, 226-228

One could conclude that it was the missions of 1654 and 1655 which founded the Quaker movement in Leicestershire. If that is so, then Dewsbury made an important contribution to it, concentrating his efforts along the main north-south axis from Loughborough through Leicester to Market Harborough and in the south-east of the county towards Rutland. Fox concentrated his efforts on the western half of the county, with, in addition, Sileby and Whetstone. As for Leicester itself, Dewsbury held meetings there during his short stay, Fox only mentions passing through the town. On the other hand Whetstone may have been chosen by Fox as a meeting-site as it was easily accessible not only from villages to its south as Sapcote, Broughton Astley and the Peatlings, but also Leicester and its vicinity. Responsibility therefore for the Quaker presence in Leicester may have to be shared between the two men. However that may be, on this view Quakerism was effectively planted in the county by the joint, though unequal efforts of Dewsbury and Fox who came down as emissaries of 'a People in the Northern Parts of this Nation'.<sup>64</sup>

Another view, however, is possible, a conclusion that takes the first effective settlement of Quakerism in the county back to Fox's early missionary work before he went north in 1651. Some features of his mission of 1655 suggest that the object of his tour was mainly to revive old contacts and recharge the faith of adherents he had gained in earlier days. He did not choose to break new ground in 1655. He crisscrossed territory that he had frequently traversed in the past. Even within this territory he avoided challenging the larger centres of population, such as Ashby de la Zouch, Market Bosworth, Hinckley, or even Leicester, though he had been making such challenges in other counties. Instead he concentrated his attention on relatively insignificant places like Higham-on-the-Hill, Twycross, Swannington, Whetstone and Sileby. They were places where he seems to have been confident of somewhere to stay and a good reception. This makes it plausible to suggest that he had old and reliable acquaintances there.<sup>65</sup>

Although Fox's *Journal* does not provide an explicit itinerary for the years before 1651 some evidence can be gained through it directly and also indirectly from the circumstances of later visits. In 1649 he visited Twycross, where he rebuked the excisemen, won the friendship of 'a great man' who was an invalid, and also claimed some 'convincements', this being a time when he had already defined his beliefs and accepted his mission. It could have been as early as this that he won the adherence of the Farmer family who were to be leaders of the Quaker community there in the Restoration period.<sup>66</sup> Although Fox does not mention visiting Swannington at that date, he must already have been well acquainted with Edward Muggleston's house there to have made it the venue for the general meeting in January 1655. The place lay on the direct route north from Fenny Drayton to the counties beyond the Trent, so

64. Browne, *Account and Testimony*, as n.54

65. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.182-183, 191, 222, 228; Hugh Barbour comments that at this time Fox was holding 'large but seemingly fruitless meetings in and around Leicestershire', Barbour, *Quakers*, as n.23, p.58; of the five places mentioned Higham-on-the-Hill had the shortest-lived Quaker presence, since, although three were reported in the village in 1656, there was said even then to be 'some going back' and from the time of the Restoration there seem to have been no Quakers left there, Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.394; R. H. Evans, 'The Quakers of Leicestershire, 1660-1714', *TLAS*, 28 (1952), pp.63-68; the 'great man' at Twycross, whose friendship was to be again demonstrated in 1662, has been identified as a member of the Noel family, and this friendliness towards Quakers may have continued since as late as 1698 Lady Noel was the landlady of the house in nearby Congerstone which the Quakers proposed to convert into a meeting house, *George Fox's Book of Miracles* as n.9, pp.118-119 (No.31b and note), LRO 12 D 39/2, 24.7.1697, 30.7.1698

66. *Journal*, as n.2, p.49; LRO 12 D 39/1, Persons in charge of public affairs

that he is likely to have known it well and probably passed through it going north from Twycross in 1649. Muggleston himself was in trouble for non-payment of tithes in 1652 and though this does not necessarily prove that he was already a Quaker by this date the general context makes it plausible.<sup>67</sup> As for Whetstone, Fox's confidence about the place is demonstrated by the three visits he made there in 1655, which suggests that it was already an established centre of Quakerism. This presence was probably connected with the Pawley family, who also had property in Wigston. Their commitment to the cause is attested by Nicholas Pawley's imprisonment in 1661 and Samuel Pawley's in 1666: and it must surely have been firm before 1655. It is just conceivable that it had its origins in the meeting Fox held at Broughton Astley, only two miles distant, in 1647 when 'the Lord's power began to spring' in him and 'several were convinced in those parts'.<sup>68</sup> Whetstone was close enough to Leicester for Quaker activity in the village to be related to Quaker activity also in the town. Farnsworth's reference to the presence of many Quakers there in 1654 predated Dewsbury's mission and might be taken to support this view. Fox had been in Leicester in 1648 when he intervened in a disputation and claimed that 'there were several convinced'. It is difficult to test the status of such statements, but there is just a hint of support for this claim in the account of a riot in one of the town's churches in 1649 where the names of two of the persons involved, Cley and Gilbert, were held by Quaker families of the town in the Restoration period.<sup>69</sup>

North of Leicester Fox's visit to Sileby in 1655 and explicit reference to William Smith's house as the place of meeting suggest more positively the presence of assured support and a recognized leader. This could have been the product of Dewsbury's mission the year before but it might also be connected with the occasion in 1649 when Fox, already a hardened campaigner, came with some followers to Barrow-on-Soar, only two miles away, to dispute with Baptists there and their leader Samuel Oates.<sup>70</sup> Further north lies the area that in the later seventeenth century formed the Quaker Monthly Meeting known by the name of 'The Vale' or subsequently as 'Old Dalby'. It comprised a line of villages strung out along the line of the Wolds and the Vale of Belvoir, from Wymeswold in the west through Old Dalby, Nether Broughton, and Long Clawson to Hose, Harby and Stathern in the east. Although the Quaker presence was clearly established at the time of the Restoration, nothing is recorded about them in the 1650s except for Christopher Levis of Harby whose goods were distrained for tithe in 1652. The missions of 1654 and 1655 appear to have passed them by, yet these villages may have been centres of Quaker activity from as early as 1648. Fox was there twice in 1648. The first time he stayed some weeks and reported disputations with atheists and that there were 'many convinced'. He went again in 1648 after he was 'come up in spirit through the flaming sword of the paradise of God', and stayed at Long Clawson. He records that 'the mighty power of God was there also in several towns and villages where Friends were gathered'.<sup>71</sup>

67. GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.579

68. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.18-19, 191, 222, 228; Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, ch.23, (1662, 1666); for the Pawleys, see also W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village*, ch. 8. London: Macmillan, 1957

69. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.176; *Journal*, as n.2, p.24; *Records of the Borough of Leicester 1603-1688*, edited by Helen Stocks, p.384. Cambridge: University Press, 1923; LRO 12 D 39/2, marriages (1677); Besse, *Sufferings*, as n.35, ch.23 (1680)

70. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.45-46, 222

71. See n.42 above; GBS, Leics., as n.16, p.579; *Journal*, as n.2, pp.25, 28-29; John Whiting, *Persecution Expos'd in Some Memoirs Relating to the Sufferings of John Whiting*, p.268. London: 1715

Another place that requires mention is not in Leicestershire but in Warwickshire, just across the county boundary. It is Atherstone, which was important both to Fox and to the people of west Leicestershire. It was the local market-town, only three miles from Fenny Drayton; and Mancetter where he passed his apprenticeship was even nearer. The business he claims to have undertaken for his master was probably conducted at Atherstone and he would have been well known there from his early youth. Atherstone's business was extensive. When Edward Muggleston of Swannington had his sheep distrained for tithes they were sold at Atherstone market 12 miles distant.<sup>72</sup> To speak there on a market day, particularly when it was also a special sermon day, as Fox did in 1649, was to reach a large audience on both sides of the county boundary.<sup>73</sup> It is hardly surprising therefore that a small place just outside Atherstone, Baddesley Ensor, became the centre of the largest Quaker meeting in Warwickshire, and possibly in the Midlands.<sup>74</sup> When Farnsworth was there in 1654 as one of the northern missionaries he found 'near a hundred that keep constant at one meeting'.<sup>75</sup> This suggests a meeting already firmly settled in 1654 and perhaps having its origins in the earlier activity of Fox.

The purpose of the last few paragraphs has been to consider the possibility that the Quaker movement in Leicestershire did not owe its birth entirely to the mission from the North in 1654-5, but owed something at least to Fox's activities before 1650. If we set aside Fox's own account as self-centred, partial and over-optimistic or vague about the results achieved, the other evidence is slight and not easily interpreted. Yet if we combine the two the coincidence between those areas where Fox felt he experienced a 'friendly' response and those in which a Quaker presence was later recognisably established suggests the probability of continuity. Swannington, Twycross, Baddesley Clinton, Broughton Astley, Whetstone, Sileby, and the villages of The Vale appear to be the most likely centres of this 'primitive' Quakerism. In support of this the analogy with the Baptists which has already been invoked may be used again. It is possible to be quite positive about the location of Baptist congregations in the county at this time because their leaders put their names to certain petitions and a public confession of faith. Apart from that the presence of these Baptist congregations would be to a great extent a matter of informed conjecture. The imprisonment of Samuel Oates at Leicester and a reference in Fox's *Journal* would suggest a Baptist presence in Leicester, a pamphlet by the parson of Fenny Drayton with another reference in Fox's *Journal* would indicate a presence in south Leicestershire, and Fox's meeting with Oates in Barrow-on-Soar together with the Testimony about Sarah Browne would establish Baptists there in 1649.<sup>76</sup> All this is evidence no stronger or more precise than has been used to suggest a Quaker presence in the county.

Whatever Fox's success in propagating Quakerism in Leicestershire he failed to call forth any followers of note or persons of standing. In Nottinghamshire he at least enlisted Elizabeth Hooton and James Parnell, both notable leaders, and John Reckless, the Sheriff of Nottingham. Here his influence must have been restricted mainly to the relatively humble husbandmen and rural craftsmen of the sort who provided the bulk of

72. GBS, Leics., as n.16, pp.579-80

73. *Journal*, as n.2, pp.47-48

74. J. Hurwich, 'Nonconformists in Warwickshire, 1660-1720', p.196. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1970

75. Quoted in Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, as n.3, p.176

76. *Records of the Borough of Leicester*, as n.69, pp.385-6; Nathaniel Stephens, *A Precept of the Baptisme of Infants out of the New Testament*. London, 1651; *Journal*, as n.2, pp.18, 24, 45; Browne, *Account and Testimony*, as n.54

the Leicestershire membership in the Restoration period.<sup>77</sup> Their core would probably have been formed by family groups, so important an element in the piety of the period. In some ways Quaker worship was only family piety raised to a high level of awareness and intensity. The Quaker household could be quite self-sufficient, able to survive without formal organization or ministerial leadership. Nor would it necessarily be isolated and cut from the larger fellowship: even a brief study of Quaker activity in this period cannot fail to alert the reader to the high degree of personal mobility and rapid transmission of information that could be achieved. It does not seem implausible to suggest that when Fox returned here in 1654 after five years' absence his mission was as much to greet old Friends as to make new ones. If this is so his confident statement that 'the truth sprang up first in Leicestershire' should not be lightly discarded.

### **Personal details**

Mr R. H. Evans, M.A., F.S.A., J.P., (Chairman of the Society's Committee),  
Department of History, University of Leicester

77. Evans, 'Quakers of Leicestershire', as n.65, pp.71-72