

## IT WOULD BE A SIN...NOT TO BE PANDEMONIAL

*“When I look back upon my life/It’s always with a sense of shame”* – It’s a sin.<sup>i</sup>

In this essay I want to pass comment on some current trends among British Quakers and reflect on some future possibilities. Whilst, at times, I will use what I take to be something of a prophetic voice, I am also wanting to communicate in an engaging way - hence my use of Pet Shop Boys lyrics to challenge and hopefully entertain readers. Besides these pop lyrics I have also been led to draw deeply upon the writings of Douglas V Steere (1901-1995) which also speak deeply to my condition and hopefully to readers of this essay. He reminds us of the value of Quaker silence as preparation for any action in the world: “There is no alternative to being brought back into the seat of yielding and of tendering again and again and again” (1971: 29). I write as a Quaker in membership for the last 18 years.

In writing this I am certainly *not* making any claims about how I am free from mistakes. I remain a humble pilgrim on the spiritual journey of life and, in this sense of my own previous wrong doing and ongoing need for forgiveness, I feel a profound equality with humankind, its suffering, its hope, its failures and occasional successes. I am not a Quaker because I am already good. I am a Quaker because I aspire to live better with divine help.

I ask Friends forgiveness for when my clumsy words might cause annoyance or unnecessary hurt but I also ask Friends to read these words with an open heart and to take the novelty of my use of pop lyrics as a way to cast fresh (post) modern light on the condition of Quakerism in Britain and on the ways in which we can speak to the condition of people today where the pains and mysteries of human suffering still require a spiritual response.

What is striking to me is that whilst I am in the process of writing this essay many of the issues that I raise are hot ones amongst Quakers and the wider world. It is encouraging to feel part of the zeitgeist but it raises the prospect that my words will be overtaken by events. If so can I beg you the readers’ indulgence and invite you to update this writing in the light of events.

### **Are we Quakers still relevant in post modern Britain?**

*“The years perfecting a stance/of measured cool fade into insignificance  
The moment one starts to understand/what on earth does it profit a man?”* - A red letter day.

In Britain today many Christian denominations are in decline, sometimes rapidly with aging congregations. The same is true to some extent for Quakers with something of a decline in terms of our membership numbers, indeed there is even a mathematical formula to calculate when Quakerism will die out (Chardkirk 2004, Stroud and Dandelion 2004, Burton 2005). However our current decline is not steep and I think that this reflects our continuing relevance to post modern Britain and the impact of our outreach programmes - especially Quaker Quest. So, I believe that there are grounds for guarded optimism and that Quakers in Britain do have potentially a vibrant future.

It could be helpful here at this point to reflect on the notion of 'post modern' Britain. I find this a useful way of making sense of the chaos and change that is occurring in our society. Without diving deeply into philosophy the post modern view is that the old 'grand narratives' that most, if not all, people held to be true no longer hold sway. So for example it is questionable that in Britain today we can insist that we are living in a Christian society whilst in Victorian times such a claim was possible. Perhaps our society is best seen post Christian in the sense that Christianity still holds an important, if decreasing, role in our society. However, mainstream society is increasingly seen as secular. In 1953 when Queen Elizabeth was crowned many believed her to be God's choice as monarch but today many see the monarchy as increasingly irrelevant to modern life.

However, despite the efforts of Richard Dawkins (2007) and others, atheism and science are not taking over where Christianity might have left off. Whilst we might well be enjoying the products of scientific advances I would suggest that there is little faith that science alone will solve all our problems including those of climate change.

But the changes and chaos have been even more far reaching. Many heterosexual marriages end in divorce. Increasingly people are not even getting married and children are raised in one parent families with step parents or with gay and lesbian parents. Clearly heterosexual marriage is not necessarily the best and certainly is not the only way in which to raise children.

I grow up in a small town in the West Midlands in the 1950s in which people mostly seemed to know one another. My relatives (grandmother, aunt, uncle, 3 grown up cousins and their children) lived nearby, all within walking distance, and many people who lived around me knew me by name. I attended a Church of England primary school with morning Christian assembly and weekly school attendance at church. I then went to a state grammar school with morning Christian assembly and prayers. So I knew the value of those old certainties of Christian church, extended family and community first hand. I also know their downsides. I know that such certainties remain attractive to many people but I believe they are ultimately now untenable or at least need re-creating in new forms. Much as any of us might want to put the clock back we can not. So in some way we have to accept much of modern life as it is and recognise that some of it is good. I personally believe that we are better off for living in a multi faith multi cultural society and if religiously minded people of all faiths could get over their problems in relation to gender and sexuality things would be even better.

*"Too many shadows, whispering voices  
Faces on posters, too many choices  
If? When? Why? What?  
How much have you got?" – West End girls*

This notion of a 'postmodern' Britain may be challenging and even repugnant to many Friends. However let us reflect on the following: mixed race is the most rapidly growing ethnic minority group in Britain; about 40% of children are born out of wedlock; many of us no longer live near our relatives; that belief in God persists despite the decline in attendance at religious ceremonies; that many children are now

raised in one parent, step parent, gay and lesbian families. Amidst such change it is also worth noting, however, that social mobility boundary is lower than since the 1950s and that health is still class and income based i.e. the poorer you are the more likely you are to have ill health and die younger (see Wilkinson and Pickett's book 'The Spirit Level' 2009, for much more detail on this.)

A post modern take on life whilst potentially frustrating in many ways including its refusal of authority and traditional hierarchy does represent, I believe, a useful framework within which to consider and locate spirituality in Britain today. It is striking in Grace Davie's (1994) telling phrase of 'believing but not belonging' when speaking of current attitudes to religion how important and powerful spirituality remains to us. I firmly believe that old forms of Christianity and other traditional faiths will increasingly lose their grip on people in Britain. I actually think this is irreversible because, despite how some churches are growing in size, I do not believe that people can be re-converted to traditional versions of religious beliefs. What is needed is an approach that connects to, and speaks to people's condition and crucially relates to their lived experiences. In this context it is worth reflecting on David Hay's research into religious and spiritual experiences (Hay and Hunt 2000) in which he found that 76% of people in a survey admit to some form of spiritual experience. This is where Friends can be very relevant, indeed, I believe that Quakers could be the post modern spiritual group *par excellence*.

Returning to the Pets Shop Boys quote at the start of this section 'what on earth does it profit a man' it is taken from the New Testament of the Bible, and it continues 'if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Matthew 16.26). The sense of the spiritual and its importance to our modern life remains, and for so many people our souls are a touchstone and Quaker worship can put people more in touch with their spirituality, with their soul. Our Quaker lives, at best, can model living out from this deeper truth of who we really are.

### **Parallels with 1650s**

*"They're raising an army/in the North  
From York Minster/to the Firth of Forth  
A pilgrimage of grace/you wont believe it" – Legacy<sup>ii</sup>.*

I think that there are many parallels between life in Britain today and the early days of Quakerism of the 1650s and 1660s that could give us confidence in our ability as Quakers to speak to the condition of people in post modern Britain. For in both 1652 and 2009 there is a sense of change and social upheaval, the withering away of old certainties, the sense that the end of the world might be at hand. We can of course read too much into such a comparison and I think it is important to note that in 1652 the debate about how society was to be governed and what was the good life and how to get there was often expressed within a Christian context.

In today's post modern Britain I would argue that while the spiritual remains significant to most people the debate is largely about modern life is not conducted explicitly in Christian terms. Indeed the whole question of how we talk about spirituality in inclusive language is a very real challenge that Friends have wrestled with. An important realisation that Friends have acknowledged is that we are trying to

give voice to things that are beyond words. And then put this into a post modern post Christian context and it gets very difficult and painful at times. We are called to a profound empathy to know one another beyond words, beyond the words that may divide us and to not need everyone to agree whether to a creed or any other statement.

What was clear about the growth of Quakerism in 1652 was that it 'filled a gap in the market', that there was a need to articulate a version of Christianity that in some ways was a return to early Christian ideas but also connected with the push within Cromwell's England for a more egalitarian society rooted in people's experience of their faith. Quakers were able to respond to these human needs in extra ordinary and creative ways. Early Quakers had a seemingly fearless capacity to offer witness, to speak truth unto power and Quaker women in particular acted with courage and leadership in ways that resonate today. Whilst we might feel much more cautious in our forms of outreach today than did those early Quakers their actions certainly put Quakerism onto the national and local agendas very publicly and forcefully if at times at tremendous personal cost. The very title of our Meetings for Sufferings group really points us towards this historic truth.

Within this truth I think it does bear the following reflection: when Quakers had have the courage and the push to act in public then people do often respond positively. I suspect that if we examined Quaker membership figures then we would see that they increase in times of war and other times of social challenge and when Quakers are more visible and seen as relevant.

### **Re-weaving the precious remnant?**

*"I never dreamt that I would get to me  
The creature that I always meant to be"* - Being boring.

"As the practice of replying to the queries became more formal their purpose also began to change. In the early eighteenth century Friends generally ceased to believe that the whole nation would accept the truth that they had been preaching and became more concerned in preserving the Society as 'a precious remnant' devoted to the truth." (Advice and Queries 1.04)

The idea that Quakerism is a 'precious remnant' is a phrase that haunts me and poses the question: in what way might God want us to be re-woven into the fabric of Britain in the modern world? But also are we willing to be put to use by God in ways we do not yet know about? Can we trust in the 'prompting of the spirit' can we support one another with threshing meetings, discernment meetings, facing the practical and emotional and spiritual challenges that this might make? Are we individually and corporately willing to be so re-woven?

### **Being and listening underpinning our doing**

*"At night/I am lying awake/Through the hours trying/to calculate  
Am I good enough?/Can I contrive/to keep this show on the road?  
Will I survive?"* – Vulnerable

This re-weaving begs the question that we are willing to listen, discern and thresh out God's leadings for us? So the future of Quakerism for me has to start with a profound gatheredness of our Meetings. It is common in Quaker Meetings up and down the country to bemoan the lack of Friends and Attenders willing to take up the traditional roles of Clerks, Elders, Overseers, etc but much more troubling to me is a reluctance to devote time to waiting on God's word. One hour a week on most Sundays is probably not enough time!

The spiritual discipline necessary to achieve a more gathered meeting needs to be taught and shared among Friends and Attenders. We need much more inreach and a willingness to stay together for more than one hour on a Sunday morning. I see the recent Becoming Friends project and Quaker Quest's nurturing Meetings project as making potentially a major contribution to this (Robertson 2009). We badly need to build and re-build our Quaker meetings as communities by firstly listening to one another, celebrating the differences between us, loving one another the things that are of the now as well as those that are eternal.

Douglas Steere (1955) writing about listening, in ways that have echoes of the person centred educator Carl Rogers, suggests that good listener has four qualities:

- *vulnerability*, able to be hurt, which might at first sound strange, but it implies a profound openness to the other person rather than an attitude mimicking professional detachment.
- *Acceptance*, of the other just as they are and not as we want them to be, this is akin to the form of love known as 'agape' and paradoxically when people experience it they often become more truly who they are inside.
- *Expectancy*, this can involve communicating a sense of hope, of optimism, despite the suffering that might well be being spoken of.
- *Constancy*, Steere speaks of a need for infinite patience, staying with what is being said.

Of course we are also listening to what is not being said out loud and we need to be remain interested in where 'words come from' as John Woolman found with the Native American chief Papunehang who said, 'I love to hear where words come from'.

### **Mutual Irradiation**

*"If you didn't really understand the rules  
If you didn't even know the score  
How come we went to war?" – After all (The Odessa staircase)*

As mentioned earlier I have been led to re-read some of Douglas Steere's writings. In discussion his concept of 'mutual irradiation' he offers us this following story:

"In the years immediately following the First World War, the Quakers worked in Poland distributing food and clothing. One of the workers who served in a cluster of villages there became ill with typhus and in twenty-four hours he was dead. In this village there was only a Roman Catholic cemetery, and by canonical law it was quite impossible to bury one not of that confession in its consecrated ground. So they laid their cherished friend in a grave dug just outside the fence of its Roman Catholic cemetery. The next morning they discovered that in the night the villagers had moved the fence so that it embraced the grave" (Steere, 1971: 6-7).

Steere invites us to ground our approach to ecumenical activities in the question “What is the Holy Spirit saying to me as a Christian, as a Quaker, in the witness of this other religion?” (1971: 27). However, I think we can take this further. If we treat everyone who comes to our Meetings as potentially able to speak God’s truth to us then we can approach any encounter with another person in this light and in the light of Steere’s ‘mutual irradiation’ that is both to reflect deeply on our own knowing and own faith and life and to be open to being profoundly changed by an encounter with another person willing to journey in a similar way with us. Of course many of us, most of the time, are not willing to do such a journeying but we can we not be open to the signs that the other person is ready and willing to travel in this manner?

### **Called to a profound equality?**

*“But for all of those who don’t fit in  
Who follow their instincts and are told that they sin  
This a prayer for a different way” – A red letter day.*

I believe as Friends at this point in time we are called to a profound equality. This needs to find expression in a number of ways:

- *true equality in our meetings for women.* Women’s voices are still often not heard among Quakers. If you merely look at who offers spoken ministry and who takes on which roles in our Meetings this imbalance is apparent. Women are still too silent and too involved in catering!
- *true equality for gays and Lesbians.* “*All the people I was kissing/some are here and some are missing*” (From ‘Being boring’). As I am writing this Yearly Meeting in York has just been “led to treat same sex committed relationships in the same as opposite sex marriages” (from the News Release 31 July 2009). My heart and spirit sang at this news! Our willingness to support same sex marriage as a natural expression of loving commitment between grownups and of equal validity to heterosexual marriage is a tremendous signal to the wider society of our Quaker values. I suspect that this decision is just the beginning of a process which will be painful still for some Friends and will certainly lead us into challenging situations with our faiths
- *racial equality.* Whilst we have a good record on fighting racism and supporting asylum seekers we have a very white membership, why is this so and more importantly how can we change it?
- *class equality.* I suspect early friends came from a wider class background than Friends do currently. Why are we not speaking to the condition of working class and unemployed people especially in the current times of credit crunch with unemployment rising?
- *disabled people* are also under represented among Friends – why?
- *Challenging material inequality* We know that material inequality in Britain is corrosive see for example the impressive evidence presented in ‘The Spirit Level’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) who amass an impressive range of statistics to show that more unequal societies have the worse social problems. With our banking and industrial past Quakers should be able to articulate demands for a levelling of income from employment so that huge bonuses are not paid to bankers or footballers. As part of a fairer society it seems natural to me to extend welfare and educational provisions so that no children need grow up in material or educational poverty.

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- *Extending equality world-wide.* This notion of equality can of course be extended beyond Britain to cover more committed and more focused response to world poverty.
- But also opening this out further a focus on equality is part of a *profound response to climate change.* "Time will pass/governments fall/glaciers melt/hurricanes bawl" (From Legacy). If we begin to consider equality of access to the limited resources of the planet and the need for sustainable development world wide then all our efforts for equality need to be underpinned by a profound commitment to saving the planet. I am convinced that we all need to go much further than we have yet done in response to climate change. I am delighted that Meetings are now considering joining the 10:10 campaign ([www.1010uk.org](http://www.1010uk.org)) but I want to pose a challenge to Friends as a way of really addressing climate change issues. Do we need Meeting for Sufferings to occur in the numbers involved as frequently as it does and always face-to-face? I am basically asking are our journeys that use non renewable resources and/or carbon emissions really necessary? My own meeting car park is jammed most Sunday mornings as we all travel into central Manchester from miles around. Friends do car share and use buses and a few cycle to Meeting but it does raise question of whether we would not be better served by setting up some new local meetings.

## Outreach

*"I was lost/for so long/Feels like it's taken/half my life/to find where I belong"*  
– Indefinite leave to remain.

I was without a religious home community between the ages of 18 and 40 when I 'came home' to Friends. I wish I had known about Friends earlier! So can we make Quakerism more accessible? I think this idea of equality is attractive and inviting to people and our lack of priests and relatively lack of hierarchy and openness to new experience and new voices appeals to many people today. We do have a lot of spiritual capital and a history of courage, of speaking truth to power, of being outrageous, to draw on.

Quaker Quest has led to many definite improvements in our outreach and has brought in new Members and Attenders. So we have certainly upped our game but Gerald Priestland's infamous comment that the best single way to improve our outreach would be to offer decent coffee after Meeting for Worship remains true, I believe and still needs addressing today. Quaker tea and coffee after our meetings are often not of a quality we have in our own homes, so however welcoming and inviting the tea makers themselves are this reduces our impact and outreach. I do not want to turn us into a branch of Starbucks but I would like their quality of coffee (or more) and the comfort of their seats! In a nutshell Quaker hospitality in Britain sometimes lets us down.

In contrast part of the appeal of the Alpha Christian courses is the quality of their catering. I know you can't live by bread alone but we all know good baking and good coffee when we taste it and it is an expression of love. Simplicity should not have to



mean serving tea and coffee out of aluminium teapots which are probably a health risk in any case.

The first Quakers had no buildings they did not need them and the early Quakers buildings like those at Briggflats and Bewdley I find to be absolutely delightful. I find the grand neo classical architecture of Friends' House London and the Manchester Central Meeting House really distasteful. These buildings suggest power, hierarchy and distance. Quakers today spend too much of our energies, including financial resources, on cold, dull, damp, out of date buildings, many of which are eyesores, overly expensive to heat and maintain and are often poorly sited to serve their local communities. I know at least 2 such building with busy polluting main roads too nearby. I find this is appalling rather than appealing. And do we need to maintain often expensive premises when we mostly meet for one hour a week? Even if we can make money from renting our buildings out for the rest of the week is this the best use of our collective resources? Too often, on a Sunday, there is a handful of us using a too large a room. This merely adds to a sense that our best days are now past. I think we need a very radical programme of weeding out buildings that are under used and a refurbishing of those we retain.

I notice that these issues have recently come to a head in London where Meeting houses are maintained by Six Weeks Meeting and where there is a serious financial crisis. In a recent issue of The Friend Keith Walton (2009) one of Six Weeks Meeting trustees states "Trustees are to meet to consider whether there [are] imaginative we can use this as an opportunity to reduce the burden some buildings place on us or whether we can become more active in our communities"

### **Pandemonium -Valiant Sixty to be reformed?**

*"Oh now look what/you've gone and done/ You're creating/pandemonium."*  
– Pandemonium.

Some Friends might find my use of the word 'pandemonium' disturbing as it was first coined by the poet John Milton in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to refer to the demons that inhabit hell. However, its usage has since changed to include more generalised notions of chaos, excitement and uproar. It is in this spirit that I am using the word. Indeed vocal ministry for many of us is a form of pandemonium. I shake inside when I have to minister. I hate it but I have to allow it. As with ministry, pandemonium can suggest/be an expression of a necessary shakeup. As Elizabeth Salisbury wrote in 1968, in part, after describing her vain attempts to resist vocal ministry: "I had been driven by some inner prompting which, for want of a more precise word, one might well call spirit; and yes, I had quaked, most fearfully, with something which was more than just the fear of making a fool of myself before family and friends." (Quaker Faith and Practice 2.58).

For more than 10 years now I have had the fantasy that the Valiant Sixty would be reformed. On occasions like on a 5 day Quaker Retreat residential at Glenthorne I became convinced that several people present were part of this new group. This could of course be temporary 'madness' on my part, or perhaps it is a colourful metaphor for the kind of action and renewal that Quakerism in Britain now needs. Certainly the



recent Woodbrooke Course 'Equipping for Ministry' seemed to have something of this flavour.

A new Valiant Sixty would of course use both modern and ancient means of spreading the Quaker message. These could include personal appearances, blogs, their own dedicated website, uploading videos onto Youtube, Twitter, Facebook and Myspace messages, using Skype and so on. Many of these resources are used already within Quaker Outreach but the new Valiant Sixty, I envisage, would have an extra large public profile and impact captured in the phrase 'pandemonium'. Indeed Quakerism will in my view only spread via some dramatic but God prompted actions. For example why not arrange a Quaker version of a flash mob?

See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBxbrXA4pIg> for a very recent example of a Power Shift climate change flash dance in the Jubilee Gardens in London, or in support of the Greenpeace protestors in Parliament Square - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8d6H5SSgMk> or the more commercial mobile phone sponsored example at Liverpool Street Station - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>. Just imagine hundreds of people turn up in some venue at a pre arranged time only in this case to hold silent Meeting For Worship! The recent Quaker presence at the empty 4<sup>th</sup> plinth in Trafalgar Square<sup>iii</sup> showed some of this same potential.

I think we also need to explore Quaker versions of viral videos in which people are unexpected introduced to Quakerism in novel entertaining and above all humorous ways. As an example of the power of a video clip follow this link for an extraordinary rendition of Amazing Grace: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMF\\_24cQqT0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMF_24cQqT0) which has been viewed nearly 5 million times. And the recent use of Twitter to both combat a legal gagging injunction against the Guardian newspaper and to challenge a distasteful article in the Daily Mail showed the creative power of such technology. (Twitter is a simple electronic way of keeping in touch with people via very short messages up to 140 characters long.)

I know we have the talent among Friends to do such work. If a new Valiant Sixty group was formed the actions they decide to take would emerge from their gathered silence and of course such actions would be for 'the comfort and discomfort of Friends'! So this is a call for Quakers to connect again with the wonderful creative chaos of pandemonium that was the spirit of early Quakers.

I know some Friends will find my suggested use of such modern media unpalatable but we might have felt the same way about telephones when they were first introduced. However much of this new media is decentralised, and surprisingly cheap and allows us to link up at a distance and helps build global consciousness and global actions.

### **Summary**

*"And I believe/we can change/we can make it more than a dream"* – More than a dream.

I hope I have established the case for both deeper being and imaginative and dramatic actions that attract useful media attention to re-birth Quakerism in Britain in this century. In summary:

- we need to be still and to listen to the quiet voice inside and to one another, including that which is unspoken, in a much more profound and gathered way
- we need to sell off many of our outdated buildings however much we value them
- our approach to hospitality needs to be modernised
- we need to embrace a more profound equality around race, gender, sexuality and disability as part of a larger world view that includes sustainable development and combating climate change
- we need to be ready to act in ways that are pandemonial or in the spirit of the Valiant Sixty that uses modern technology to link people up including flash mobs, viral videos etc.
- our work will thrive in so far as God wills it.

## **In Conclusion**

*“City life just leaves me weak/All this madness on the street  
Need to get away today/live my life a different way”* – Beautiful people.

If I am right about our continuing Quaker relevance to post modern British life then it would, I believe, be a sin(!) if the decline in membership of the Religious Society of Friends became terminal. However there is a simple way out of this, a simple way of testing whether we have a future and that it whether we are listening to God in our Meetings and acting on that listening. If we are doing this faithfully enough God alone knows how this ‘precious remnant’ will be put to use and re-woven in the fabric of modern Britain. If we fail to listen and act then let God put the remnant into the recycling bin!

However, I do believe Quakers in Britain have a shining future if they accept the challenges I have outlined here and which are implicit in George Fox’s oft quote words:

‘Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.’ (QFP, 1.02).

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people over the years have contributed to my understanding and experience of Quakerism and I have consulted several people in the writing of this essay. However, the people I mention here should not in any way be held responsible for the ideas expressed in this essay. I am deeply thankful to the following people: John Banks, Fevronia Christodoulidi, Jeffrey Dean, Terry Hanley, Joseph McGarraghy, Gay Morton, Emily Morton West, Andrew Nash and Richard Summers.

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<sup>i</sup> I have decided to spice up this essay with quotes from the lyrics of the Pet Shop Boys. I include their lyrics because of: how their lyrics often speak to my condition; their quality and relevance to modern life; because any group topping the pop charts with a song called 'It's a sin' has something to say about spirituality in modern Britain and because Neil Tenant their lead singer and lyricist is gay and out and this is remains a key religious issue in Britain today. I did wonder about whether to include actual extracts from their recording but there are copyright issues and also my judges might not have welcomed this. You can hear a random sample of their music by going to their website [www.petshopboys.co.uk](http://www.petshopboys.co.uk) and selecting Jukebox, alternatively their recent performance of a medley of their hits at the Brits can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OAITWrNN6o> includes most of the lyrics quoted in this essay. It is also possible to visit Youtube for video clips of all of these songs.

<sup>ii</sup> I recognise that the pilgrimage of grace actually occurred in 1536 during the reign of Henry VIII and not in 1652 but the lyrics fit!

<sup>iii</sup> Three Quakers in eleven days reach unforgettable heights – Inspired by Antony Gormley's challenge, Lucy Ivankovic, Peter Davies and Rosemary Rimmer-Clay share their experiences, *The Friend* 24<sup>th</sup> July 2009.

