

# Quakers and the peace testimony



# Introduction

From early in our history, Quakers have taken a clear stand for peace and against military action. The words we have written, and action we have taken in opposition to war and in support of peace, have come to be known as the Quaker “peace testimony”.

This booklet has been made to celebrate the first written declaration of a Quaker commitment to peace, a declaration by early Quakers in 1660 to Charles II. However, the peace testimony has always been more than that. It is an active expression of our understanding of how we should live in this world: an understanding that comes from our experiences of meeting together in worship – periods of collective quiet prayer and reflection. It is an evolving expression of an insight at the heart of our approach to faith, challenging us in every generation.

We call it a “testimony” because it is how we witness to the world about our beliefs. Our experience is that everyone can respond to and express the living spirit of God within us.

We try to live out our commitment to peace in our daily lives and in our work, individually and together. Sometimes, we set up and support long-term individual and collective Quaker action as an expression of our peace testimony. At other times, simply “bearing witness” to a different way – a way that affirms the value of all life rather than denies it through warfare – is all we can do as individuals. But this too is an important part of our testimony.

Our peace testimony is not simple, and not all Quakers will have the same understanding of what it will lead them to do in any given situation. Above all, based on our understanding of God’s love, our peace testimony is about paying attention to all relationships, from those with family and neighbours to those between nations. It is an opportunity to undo some of the hurt in this world and to build a better future.

# Timeline

**1660** The declaration to Charles II distances Quakers from the violent Fifth Monarchists and declares that Quakers “utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons”.

**1693** William Penn writes his influential *An essay towards the present and future peace of Europe*.

**1807** The Slave Trade Act makes slavery illegal in Britain: Quakers had campaigned for the ban for many years. Contemporary research has shown that some Quakers also profited directly from the slave trade or even owned slaves.

**1813** Elizabeth Fry’s first visit to Newgate Prison. Her concern for the welfare of prisoners causes a revolution in thinking about prison conditions.

**1830s to 1860s** Quakers take a lead in setting up the secret Underground Railroad in America to help slaves escape from the southern states.

**1846 to 1847** Quakers help in the relief of the Irish Famine.

**1852** John Bright, MP for Manchester, delivers a moving speech to the House of Commons in opposition to the Crimean War.

**1854** Quakers send a peace delegation to Czar Nicholas to mediate over the Crimean War.

**1870** Quakers set up the Friends War Victims Relief Committee.



**1914** The Friends Ambulance Unit is founded, in which many serve as an alternative to military service.

**1916 to 1918** Conscription starts in Britain and, as well as opposing this, many Friends are conscientious objectors to military service and are imprisoned or sent to do “work of national importance” such as farming or mining.



**1918** Three members of Friends Service Committee are imprisoned for publishing anti-war material without submitting it to the censor.

**1947** The Friends Service Council and American Friends Service Committee accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Quakers around the world.

**1950 onwards** Quaker opposition to nuclear weapons begins to build. Friends take part in marches to Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment throughout the 1950s and 60s.

**1972** The Quaker-sponsored School of Peace Studies is opened at the University of Bradford.

**1979** Friends take part in marches at Greenham Common against cruise missiles.

**1982** Twenty-five members of Quaker staff ask their employer, Meeting for Sufferings, to withhold that proportion of their tax that would fund war preparations, until assured that it would be used for non-military purposes. Meeting for Sufferings accepts the request and challenges the law in court, unsuccessfully.

**2000** The United Nations adopts OPAC – the ‘child soldier treaty’ – prohibiting the conscription of children under 18 and the military recruitment of under 16s. Quakers play a leading role in bringing about the treaty, and continue to campaign against all exploitation of children for military purposes. As of May 2024, the treaty has been ratified by 173 states.

**2013** The *Teach Peace Primary* pack is released for use in primary schools – inspired by a Quaker peace activist’s concern about military involvement in her granddaughter’s school.

**2019** The Quaker Roots Epistle ([www.quaker-roots.org.uk/epistle](http://www.quaker-roots.org.uk/epistle)) is published, railing against ‘a great evil—a machine of war and militarism’. Subsequently, 48 Friends are arrested during a meeting for worship in the road which blocks the set-up of Defence Security and Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair.

**2019** The UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) becomes international law. The treaty is the culmination of over 60 years of work by the global movement for nuclear disarmament, in which Quakers have played an active part.

**2022** The *Peace at the Heart* report is launched, making the case for peace education.

**2022** At Yearly Meeting, Quakers commit to making practical reparations for the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and economic exploitation.

**2024** The *Teach Peace Secondary* pack is launched for use in secondary schools.



**Find out more: Library of the Society of Friends**

[www.quaker.org.uk/library](http://www.quaker.org.uk/library) or 020 7663 1135

# The declaration of peace to King Charles II

## Why did twelve Quakers make the declaration to Charles II in the first place?

After the restoration of the monarchy on 29 May 1660, Thomas Venner led a Fifth Monarchy uprising in London early in January 1661. The Fifth Monarchists fought street battles with soldiers and about forty people were killed. Venner and his followers were pursued and captured, tried at the Old Bailey and executed on 19 January 1661. The failure of Venner's rising was associated with repressive legislation aimed at the suppression of all nonconformist sects.

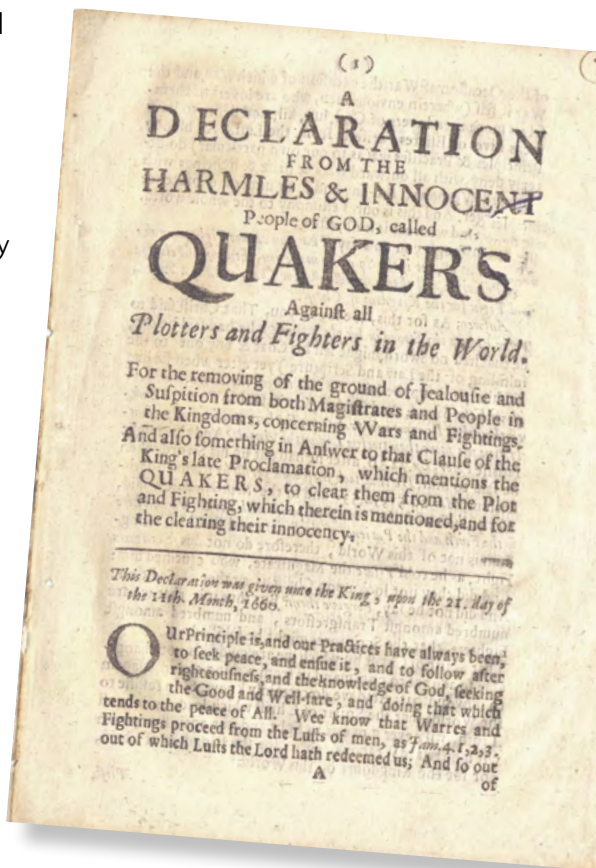
elves more then lovers of God, lust, kil, and desire to have mens Lives or Estates, ariseth from the Lust. All bloody Principles & Practises we(as to our own particular) do utterly deny,with all outward wars & strife,& fightings with outward Weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our Testimony to the whole world.

On 10 January the king outlawed meetings of Fifth Monarchy Men, Baptists and Quakers, and all members were required to take an oath of allegiance. It was now dangerous to pass through the streets and letters were intercepted. George Fox speaks in his journal of "soe much breaking uppe of meetings after ye monarchy men had risen". Over 4,000 Friends went to prison.

Once it was seen that the rising had not spread nationwide the measures were relaxed, but an intensified fear of all religious radicalism remained. Several times Margaret Fell went to the King to gain the release of imprisoned Friends, finally gaining an assurance that Friends would be set at liberty without paying fees.

In response to this dramatic situation George Fox and Richard Hubberthorn drew up a declaration “against plots and fightings”. Just a few days after Venner’s execution, Fox and eleven other Quakers signed the declaration and passed it to the newly restored monarch Charles II. However, the city authorities took steps to prevent its publication “by a violent and unjust taking away the whole first impression”. George Fox recorded the seizure in his journal, noting that it was “taken in the press”.

The declaration’s full title speaks of “plotters and fighters” as it was written to distance the Quakers from Fifth Monarchists. Its publication marked a shift from individual pacifism to a more explicit, corporate witness among Friends. It can be seen as a political and strategic document, intended to convince others that Quakers, despite their revolutionary religious beliefs, posed no threat because they rejected the use of violence. The statement seems to have been easily accepted by other Quakers and has remained an enduring and distinguishing characteristic of Friends for over 360 years.



Compiled by staff at the  
Library of the Society of Friends.

Find out more: **Library of the Society of Friends**

[www.quaker.org.uk/library](http://www.quaker.org.uk/library) or 020 7663 1135

# Individual Quakers' witness to peace

“As a Quaker I feel that war is wrong and contrary to the example that Jesus (and other amazing spiritual leaders) have shown us. I was a conscientious objector in 1942 – I served in the Friends Ambulance Unit for four years. I have ever since demonstrated and given talks and interviews on this subject.”

**Peter Rutter** (1923-2019)  
lifelong Quaker and pacifist



**“Peace means... being still and silent and paying attention to what’s around you.”** Walter Shaw, aged nine

“Quakerism is about the focused, considered, practice of peace. In my activism, this translates as seeking to creatively and nonviolently intervene in processes that result in suffering.

Countless Quakers, past and present, have engaged in such action, and in so doing, shown that there can be a difference between justice and lawfulness.”

**Tim Gee**

Tim Gee (standing) superglued to other climate change activists.  
Photo: Amelia Gregory





“After 44 years of teaching English to non-native speakers, I now not only teach them English but try to show that the values I hold dearly, that of Peace, Love and Truth, inherent in all of us and strengthened and nourished by prayer and worship, are important ingredients in life.”

**Shanthini Cawson**



Shanthini with her mother and sisters



“On a personal level, I think of peace as being a constant orientation towards love. Without this focus I can become disorientated as I witness injustice and violence in the world and in my life. By joining with others to share and respect our common humanity, I believe the seeds of peace are planted and change towards a more just world is possible.”

**Debby**, former EAPPI accompanier

“The peace testimony is really difficult to describe... It is not just the absence of fighting, because that is not necessarily peaceful. That could be oppressive, with lots of pain and suffering... I’m not sure if world peace is achievable, but it is an aim worth working towards, for the safety of everyone... Conflict is sometimes inevitable – we need to attempt to find ways to resolve it in peaceful ways.”

**Fergus, Hannah and Isabel** – teenage Friends

# The spiritual basis of our peace testimony

Our Quaker peace testimony arises out of the conviction that, as George Fox said, there is a “life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.”

Dwelling in the life and power involves opening ourselves to the Inward Light, allowing the Light to shine into all the dark corners where we might find occasion for attacking those who have hurt us.

As we dwell in the life and power, we grow in reverence for life. We recognise that there is “that of God in everyone” and this leads us to renounce violence. We may even adopt the Gandhian principle of ahimsa or “non-harm” in relation to all living beings.

Reverence for life leads us not only to avoid doing harm to living beings, but also to nurture life. We not only refuse to kill people, we nurture ourselves and others. This conscientious affirmation of the worth of every human being is the other side of the coin of our conscientious objection to killing people.

We open our eyes to the many forms of violence around us, including the “structural violence” of economic injustice, institutional racism, discrimination against women, and cultural oppression. We open our eyes too to the seeds of war in our own hearts and in our own lives. We nurture the seeds of peace by responding to hatred, violence and bitterness with acts of love, kindness and forgiveness.

Our faith enables us to work for peace and justice through active nonviolence, using the kind of imaginative actions that Jesus proposed in his Sermon on the Mount.

Whenever we are able to respond to conflict creatively and live in peace with each other in spite of our differences, there is cause for celebration. We can sing, dance, play games, tell stories and embrace each other. This is all part of our Quaker spirituality nowadays. But it is the promptings of love and truth in our hearts during a gathered meeting for worship which are the primary spiritual basis of our peace testimony.

Peace grows, as we dwell in that life and power and are obedient to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. We can be confident that we will be led to live our lives in such a way that we ourselves become a testimony to peace. We can expect to be led as individuals to engage in particular forms of peacemaking. And we can expect to be led corporately to witness to peace as a peace church.

**Gordon Matthews**

Life-long Quaker and former Joint Representative of  
the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

# Quaker peace organisations in Britain

Within Quakers in Britain, Quaker Peace & Social Witness Central Committee guides our peace work – whether it’s advocating for peace around the world, promoting peace education in schools, helping Friends in Britain live out their peace witness, or supporting peacebuilders in the UK and in other parts of the world.

Quakers in Britain staff often cooperate with other Quaker bodies such as the Quaker United Nations Office and Quaker Council for European Affairs, as well as other civil society organisations, and local meetings.

Northern Friends Peace Board (NFPB) was set up in 1913 by Friends in the north of Britain, just before the outbreak of war. Its aim since then has been “to advise and encourage Friends, and through them their fellow citizens, in the active promotion of peace in all its height and breadth.” NFPB’s work ranges from giving Friends space to think through their response to conflicts locally and globally, to playing a vital role in networks such as the Global Campaign on Military Spending and Rethinking Security.

There is also a broad range of local Quaker work for peace going on around the country. For instance, there’s the West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project, which operates under the umbrella of Central England Area Meeting. For over twenty years, it has been delivering conflict resolution workshops and training in primary schools through its Peacemaker Project ([www.peacemakers.org.uk](http://www.peacemakers.org.uk)). This is well-informed, grounded and long-term work, supporting teachers and bringing practical mediation techniques into school communities.

Another example is the work of Northumbria Area Meeting. They seek



Northern Friends Peace Board members protesting in 2022 outside the Faslane naval base, home to the UK’s nuclear missile submarine fleet.  
Image: Philip Austin, NFPB

to prevent damaging conflict and promote wellbeing by establishing or supporting a range of local projects through the Northumbria Conflict Resolution Network (NCRN). NCRN is currently developing training in the awareness of trauma in community contexts and working with the Friends School Ramallah (in the West Bank) to promote exchanges between young British Quakers and their peers who have grown up in a situation of conflict.



Quakers protesting at the DSEI Arms Fair in 2023. Image: Michael Preston for Quakers in Britain

The projects in the West Midlands and Newcastle are just two instances of local Quaker peace work, and there are many more. But Quakers don't necessarily need our own organisations to promote peace, and there are many peace organisations that are not specifically 'Quaker' but have Quaker roots, Quaker staff, or Quakers on the board. Quakers played a role in establishing many movements and organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Campaign Against Arms Trade.

Find out more:

**Quaker Peace & Social Witness**

[www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw](http://www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw) or 020 7663 1071

**Northern Friends Peace Board**

[www.nfpb.org.uk](http://www.nfpb.org.uk) or 01204 382 330

**West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project**

[www.peacemakers.org.uk](http://www.peacemakers.org.uk) or 0121 236 4796

# What you can do

Our belief that there is “that of God in everyone”, coupled with a love for all creation, motivates us to act on our peace testimony. Quakers are led by the spirit to a great spectrum of action for peace. That could mean writing a letter to an MP, taking part in a vigil, teaching children to respond to violence with peace, cutting into a nuclear base, or 101 other things.

However, we know that living out our peace testimony can be hard. This is especially the case during times of war. Here’s some advice produced by Quakers in Britain staff with experience of supporting British Friends through war situations.

## **Talk to your local meeting**

The first place at which to raise your concerns is your local Quaker meeting. You may wish to request a meeting for worship from which may emerge some leadings as to what the meeting may wish to say and do. It may be that Friends need help with thinking about the root causes of the particular issue, and you all may need to do some personal research and return with your findings. You may wish to refer to religious text for guidance.

Be aware that some Friends will wish to sit with grief and sadness about war in worship and uphold all those affected but may not wish to do more than be part of the meeting. We all have times in our lives when we are called to public outward action and times when we are not. There is room for everyone, with all their sorrows and joys, in a Quaker meeting.

If you speak out against war in a context where your community is accepting of war as necessary, you may face some hostility. Remember your local meeting can support you in facing this challenge.

## Resources in your Quaker meeting

The primary resources in your Quaker meeting are Friends themselves. Through gentle listening and discernment you might discover remarkable strengths. You might find new methods of challenging what is going on in the world and creative ways of supporting each other's actions. Collective plans can be made.

### Consider the experience, skills and resources in your meeting:

Do you have members with experience of running silent vigils or protests in response to war?

Are members of your meeting related to armed forces personnel who are affected by the hostilities? How can the meeting uphold them?

Do members of your meeting have connections to the region affected by military action (e.g. do they have friends or relatives living there, or have they lived there themselves)? How can the meeting support them? Can they talk about their experiences?

Do you have members who have taken a public stance or action against previous wars (e.g. former COs)? Would they be willing to share their stories within or outside the meeting?

Are there members of your meeting who would be willing to serve as a support group for those individuals called to take more public action?

Does your Meeting House have a library stocked with relevant peace-related resources, e.g. leaflets or posters for use in vigils and protests; Quakers in Britain toolkits giving advice on how to organise actions; or peace education materials for use in local schools? Write to [peace@quaker.org.uk](mailto:peace@quaker.org.uk) if not.



## Opportunities for action

Are there other churches and faiths in your community who may also be addressing issues of war and peace? You could approach them with a view to working together.

You could set up a public meeting on the subject of war and invite members of local churches and faiths to it. You could have a multifaith vigil against war in a public place. Or you could book coaches to provide opportunities for the community to attend a national anti-war demonstration. You could link up with other Quakers for a pre-demonstration meeting for worship and then walk together as a Quaker group.

You could think about whether there are local non-faith-based peace groups that you could work with? Could Friends offer them a space to plan their work in relation to war? Could Friends offer assistance with facilitation and planning to those groups?



## Some organisations working for peace

- War Resisters International ([www.wri-irg.org](http://www.wri-irg.org))
- Religions for Peace ([www.rfp.org](http://www.rfp.org))
- Network of Christian Peace Organisations ([www.ncpo.org.uk](http://www.ncpo.org.uk))
- Conscience: Taxes for Peace not war ([www.conscienceonline.org.uk](http://www.conscienceonline.org.uk))
- Pax Christi ([www.paxchristi.org.uk](http://www.paxchristi.org.uk))
- Campaign Against Arms Trade ([www.caat.org.uk](http://www.caat.org.uk))
- Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament ([www.cnduk.org](http://www.cnduk.org))
- Forces Watch ([www.forceswatch.net](http://www.forceswatch.net))
- Peace Pledge Union ([www.ppu.org.uk](http://www.ppu.org.uk))
- Fellowship of Reconciliation ([www.FoR.org.uk](http://www.FoR.org.uk))
- Rethinking Security ([www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk](http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk))
- Demilitarise Education (<https://ded1.co>)



## Points to remember

The experience of Quaker peace work through the centuries is that there are allies everywhere. In the most unexpected places there is room for positive dialogue and progress towards the peace we long for.

Grounded Quaker practice reminds us that we can find strengths in ourselves when we are faced with a big challenge – war is such a challenge.

Collective Quaker action outwardly from a local meeting on a peace or justice subject can strengthen the meeting internally.

It is important to have an honest discussion about war with children and young people in the meeting. Carefully consider how you will do this, and explore resources such as the Quakers in Britain [peace education resources](#) and *Journeys in the Spirit* newsletter.



You may not see the results you want within a short time frame. Don't lose heart. As Friends we are tasked with engaging with the world as it is, with all its failings. Quakers are in this for the long haul.

**“Peace is a process to engage in, not a goal to be reached”**

*Quaker faith & practice 24.57*

# Further resources

- Join the free Faith in Action newsletter mailing list to keep informed about upcoming events and opportunities at [www.quaker.org.uk/quaker-faith-in-action](http://www.quaker.org.uk/quaker-faith-in-action).
- Visit [www.quaker.org.uk/peace](http://www.quaker.org.uk/peace) for information, resources and ideas for action.
- Contact Quakers in Britain for advice at [faithinaction@quaker.org.uk](mailto:faithinaction@quaker.org.uk) or 020 7663 1153.
- For free peace-related resources, visit [www.quaker.org.uk/free-resources](http://www.quaker.org.uk/free-resources).
- Find out if someone is already doing something and give them a call. If no one is doing what you believe needs to be done, start it!



# The peace testimony today

Quaker Roots is a grassroots network of Quakers in the UK. Since 2019 we have been witnessing together in London at the DSEI arms fair, in response to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. Some Friends have taken direct action, blocking the set-up of the arms fair, while several hundred have participated in Meetings for Worship for witness outside the fair. As we consider where we are led next, we seek to rediscover the spiritual roots of our peace testimony.

As Quakers, we are proud of our history of courageous and loving peacebuilding, our record of standing with the oppressed and of refusing to go along with systems based not on love and justice, but on fear and greed. Grounding ourselves with the words of Margaret Fell, we are reminded that:

We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity; it is our desire that others' feet may walk in the same.

We hear this reminder as a query. Are we clear enough in our knowledge of those things that make for peace, love and unity? Are we courageous enough in our following?

Recognising the extremism of the arms trade in its ruthless and relentless drive for profit, we also reflect on the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or the extension of justice?

We know that we have been called to be a community of creative extremists for peace, love and unity. In the face of so much violence and bloodshed globally, we feel deeply that we must continue in our peace testimony and work faithfully to find new and creative ways to do this in the years ahead, at DSEI and elsewhere.

Quaker Roots core group, 2024



A Quaker holds a peace flag outside RAF Lakenheath; photo by Philip Wood for Quakers in Britain.

Front cover image: Quakers nonviolently blockade an arms fair in London; photo by Michael Preston for Quakers in Britain.

A large print version is available: please email the publications team at [publications@quaker.org.uk](mailto:publications@quaker.org.uk) or call 020 7663 1162.

First published in 2025 by Quakers in Britain

### Quakers in Britain

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Registered charity number 1127633

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