Quakers, enslavement and reparation



Report summary



A report on the history and theology of Quaker involvement in enslavement, abolition and reparation

Prepared by Woodbrooke for the Reparations Working Group of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

QUAKERS

Cover images:

Extensive tree roots photo © N Chadwick and licensed for reuse under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 license (www.geograph.org.uk/photo/6606383)

Collage illustration created for Quakers in Britain by Elena Tayo, 2026.

Published in 2026 by Quakers in Britain.

Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Registered charity number 1127633
Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BJ

Follow us on social media **@BritishQuakers**

www.quaker.org.uk

Quakers, enslavement and reparation

A report on the history and theology of Quaker involvement in enslavement, abolition and reparation prepared by Woodbrooke for the Reparations Working Group of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

Report Summary

Introduction and Project Remit

Britain Yearly Meeting Reparations Working Group

Project Background

In 2022, the Minutes of Britain Yearly Meeting (of the Religious Society of Friends) recorded that:

> Love and justice require us to tell the truth, as best we can, about historical and contemporary injustices…
>
> We have heard that love and justice also require us to consider deeply how the Society of Friends in Britain might make financial and other reparation for our part in the wrongs of the transatlantic slave trade. (Minute 27)

And:

> We have heard ministry about the importance of true listening which pushes us to action. We have also heard encouragement to move forward with acknowledgment and apology for how our wealth has been linked to the enslavement of people… We do not need to begin this work afresh, but can build upon the foundations laid by others and work with partners including other churches and faith groups… We ask Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees, Meeting for Sufferings and area meetings to examine the resources which they hold on trust, and to consider how they, and we, could move forward with this work [of reparations]. (Minute 33)

Following this commitment from Britain Yearly Meeting, BYM Trustees established a Reparations Working Group (RWG). The task and finish group was established for 4 years with a remit to:

- research our past

- consult with those today experiencing the legacies of British Quaker involvement in enslaving and trafficking Africans across the Atlantic, in Quaker colonialism and economic exploitation and

- make recommendations to the BYM Trustees on reparation for the harms caused on which ultimately Friends attending a Yearly Meeting will discern the way forward.

As a faith community the members of the RWG were clear that one of the four workstreams we established needed to develop an understanding of the theological arguments used to justify enslavement. There is a growing awareness that Quakers in Britain have an incomplete understanding of their own part in the trafficking of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. Our historical view has usually focused on British Quaker involvement in the abolitionist movement, with little or no consideration given to ways in which our theology may have justified, normalised or ignored the grave injustices of widespread enslavement.

Supported by the Commissioning Group of the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, project aims and a commissioning brief were developed for a one-off project for postdoctoral research to investigate (i) the ways in which the Religious Society of Friends has theologically justified, prolonged, or obscured the injustice of enslavement and oppression; (ii) the ways in which the Religious Society of Friends has theologically addressed, resisted or repented for the injustice of enslavement and oppression.

RWG members were delighted to appoint Woodbrooke to undertake this work for us.

Project Remit

The aim of the proposed research is to help modern British Quakers understand the ways in which Quakers have theologically justified oppression and enslavement.

The research should include consideration of:

- **Theology used to justify and support systems of enslavement and oppression, including**:

- The ways in which wider Christian theologies have been used to justify the enslavement and trafficking of non-Christians, and whether and how such theologies have been used specifically within Quaker writings and ministry

- Whether and how distinctive Quaker theologies have been used to justify, prolong or obscure enslavement and trafficking

- Whether theology for opposing enslavement was there, but other theological concerns were seen to trump the need to take action

- Whether and how theology was used practically as a method of day-to-day control of enslaved people within the Quaker community

- **Theology of abolition**

  - This strand would seek to build historical evidence of the theology used to justify and support the case for abolition. Although primarily seeking to understand how Quakers developed and used this theology, this would likely involve considerable overlap with abolition theology in other Christian denominations.

- **Theology of reparation and liberation**

  - This strand would seek to understand whether there was, and continues to be, a Quaker theology of emancipation and reparation which may draw on, or be drawn on, by wider Christian theologies. Some research in this strand may be historical, as we seek to understand whether Quakers in previous centuries argued for reparations to formerly enslaved people in theological terms, however we expect that at least some research in this strand will be contemporary.

Summary of Key Findings

Key Historical Conclusions

Lily Chadwick

The history strands of this report may be summarised as follows:

Strand I [1650s to 1727]:

The history of the Religious Society of Friends in relation to colonialism and enslavement is more complex than has typically been acknowledged in traditional Quaker historiography. Quaker communities have been intertwined, invested and complicit in chattel enslavement from very early in the faith's history. Historians have largely traced the 'origins' of Quaker engagement in transatlantic chattel enslavement to Barbados, where Quaker missionaries from 1655 succeeded in converting a significant proportion of European colonisers on the island – nearly 1200 Quakers lived on Barbados by 1680, of which eighty per cent held at least one person in bondage. Of those Europeans converted or 'convinced' to Quakerism on Barbados, many already held people in bondage, while other convinced Friends enslaved and continued to enslave people after their conversion to Quakerism. Despite repeated claims that Friends were 'in the world but not of it', Quakers were shaped by and deeply embedded within a dominant sociopolitical European culture in which African people and people of African descent were kidnapped, trafficked, enslaved and forced to perform labour to further European imperial aims. From the faith's conception, Quakers had been highly mobile and present in colonial contexts, and historians have traced how Friends' close-knit familial, business and social connections facilitated the spread of chattel enslavement between Quaker communities in the Caribbean and North America. Early Quaker leaders like George Fox did not condemn enslavement but rather developed a particular theological ideology called 'Gospel family-order' which sought to characterise enslavement as a kind of 'Christianising' or 'benevolent' enterprise in order to 'justify' the practice within their communities. Historians know very little about the people enslaved by Quakers. Quaker archives have been constructed by and for Friends' purposes throughout history; the identities and lived experiences

of people held in bondage by Quakers are largely unrecorded. This strand endeavours to highlight explicit 'archival silences' to bring attention to one example of the violent legacies of enslavement that persists today. This strand ends with an acknowledgement that it is not universally agreed in the historiography why, how or when Quaker attitudes shifted en masse against enslavement. Early expressions from within Quakerism against enslavement such as the Germantown Petition of 1688 ultimately had little immediate effect on the collective Quaker community, although a series of inquiries to London Yearly Meeting from various Yearly Meetings in North American colonies suggest a growing discourse around enslavement within Quaker communities from the late seventeenth century. In 1713, London Yearly Meeting wrote an epistle to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting stating that enslavement was 'not commendable nor allowed'. While not unquestionably prohibiting enslavement from Quaker communities, this statement marks British Friends' first known expression of antislavery sentiment. This statement was reiterated to a more general Quaker audience in 1727.

Strand II [1728-1787]:

This strand begins with a central acknowledgement that, despite popular associations of Quakerism with early abolitionist movements, Quakers were not the first to express antislavery or abolitionist sentiment. Abolitionism and resistance to enslavement has always come first and foremost from the people forcibly held in bondage themselves. The earliest antislavery and abolitionist voices from among the Quakers were disowned, ignored or otherwise relegated to the margins of Friends' communities. A collective Quaker rejection of enslavement only came gradually:

- 1730s: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting establishes a committee to investigate Friends' complicity in enslavement

- 1758: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting becomes the first Yearly Meeting to explicitly forbid 'slave trading and slave holding' and to require all members to manumit people Quakers held in bondage

    - Various Yearly Meetings across North America gradually follow suit between 1758 and 1784

- 1758: London Yearly Meeting issues a statement that Quakers should 'do no less than to impress it upon Friends everywhere, that they endeavour to keep their hands clear' of trafficking enslaved people

- 1761: London Yearly Meeting makes enslavement a disownable offence

- 1784: London Yearly Meeting orders an enquiry into the status of the Society's complicity in transatlantic chattel enslavement

- 1787: London Yearly Meeting, in partnership with Anglican collaborators, establishes the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

This strand concludes by making the necessary distinction between 'antislavery' and 'abolitionist' definitions, arguing that the stance adopted by eighteenth-century Friends constituted antislavery but not an abolitionist sentiment. This argument is explored through a case study of a report commissioned by British Friends to present before Parliament to petition the abolition of transatlantic chattel enslavement.

Strand III [1788-Present]:

The third strand of the history report argues that although Quakers were highly visible and active within the antislavery movements within the British empire and United States, the foundations for true abolitionism were not established. This incomplete realisation of abolitionism is evidenced by the many publications released by Friends detailing experiences of marginalisation, inequality and racialised oppression within their Meetings and Quaker communities. This strand ends with reflections on reparative justice for Friends to consider.

Key Theological Findings

Benjamin Wood

The theology section of this report calls on Quakers in Britain to re-examine our colonial past as a means of developing a consistent practice of reparative justice in the present. Readers are invited across three sections to reflect on a personal and collective level regarding the ongoing impact of colonialism and racism on their lives, the lives of their meetings, and the character of wider society. Friends are encouraged to consider how they might nurture just conditions from the ground up by practising repeated small acts of love and compassion as a means of modelling a better future. Friends are also asked to consider how their resources (at a national and meeting level) could

be used to support greater racial justice, social equity, and reconciliation. To ground this discussion, Strand 1 identifies the ways early Quakers used their theological reflection to directly justify the institution of chattel enslavement in the Transatlantic world. It identifies the pivotal role of the writings of George Fox in prolonging Friends' engagement with the colonial slave economy. Fox's theology justified slavery in several key respects:

1) *Evangelisation*: Fox shows very little concern with the conditions of enslaved people. Fox's primary focus is on evangelisation, and incorporating enslaved people into Quaker households. Fox did not believe that enslavement should be abolished, only that enslavers should moderate their methods of control.

2) *Biblical interpretation*: Fox regarded enslavement as morally and theologically acceptable. Fox used Scripture to justify a form of indentured servitude. He emphasised the importance of enslaved people submitting to their enslaver, alongside the enslaver's role in Christianising the enslaved.

3) *Quaker Suffering*: Fox actively prioritised the spiritual and physical suffering of early Quaker communities in ways which make the lives of enslaved people invisible.

4) *Spiritual Inwardness*: The early Quaker emphasis on spiritual inwardness often caused Friends to minimise the importance of external social and economic conditions, and instead focus on an inward experience of salvation.

These theological assumptions had a significant afterlife in the pro-slavery theology of William Penn. In an effort to build on this account, Strand II seeks to show the paucity of Quaker antislavery theology from the late seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. While British and American Friends would develop a coherent theology of antislavery by the 1780s, there was a long period in which Fox's theological justifications of mass enslavement continued at local meeting and Yearly Meeting level. While we can find isolated Quaker protests both before and after the death of George Fox, none of these make any significant impact on institutional Quakerism, either in Britain or in the American colonies. In an extended response to this history of complicity and inaction, Strand III considers the theological resources British Quakers have to contest the ongoing impacts of enslavement, colonialism and racism in their meetings and within wider British society. The discussion is structured around three core questions:

1) Does the Quaker Way have a theology of liberation which can sustain and resource contemporary reparative practice?

2) How can Quaker theological tradition help us define the nature of harm?

3) Can our Quaker words about God, world and community help us reflect fruitfully on the nature of ongoing moral responsibility?

A significant focus of Strand III involves the identification of biblical symbols and narratives which can help Friends reflect upon and enact forms of reparative justice. The book of Jonah is used to examine the nature of wronged and wrongdoer, and how woundedness cannot be healed by violence or marginalisation. Covenant is used as a means of recovering a radical mode of Quaker prophetic witness in the modern world. In the course of this exploration Friends are introduced to a number of important subthemes, including:

- The meaning of reparative practices
- Quaker understandings of sin, responsibility and community
- The nature of radical hospitality

A key thread running through these subthemes is the claim that by facing the Quaker past, we can develop a renewed theology of liberation in the world. In this vein, Friends are encouraged to understand the colonial past as something which continues to impact the lives of those descended from enslaved people, the structures of our society, and the organisation of our global economy. By engaging with these often painful realities, we can discover new ways of living and worshipping. Friends are asked to nurture and resource prophetic voices in their own Meetings and beyond. This report ends with a series of queries to help us consider what love requires of us in a world scarred by the ongoing realities of colonial violence.

“Love and justice require us to tell the truth, as best we can, about historical and contemporary injustices”

Britain Yearly Meeting 2022, Minute 27

In 2022, Quakers from across Britain came together in worship and careful discernment and made a commitment to examine the historic involvement of Quakers in the slave trade, as well as consider what reparation might be made in response.

Following this commitment from Britain Yearly Meeting, a Reparations Working Group (RWG) was established for four years with a remit to:

- research our past
- consult with those today experiencing the legacies of British Quaker involvement in enslaving and trafficking Africans across the Atlantic, in Quaker colonialism and economic exploitation and
- make recommendations to the BYM Trustees on reparation for the harms caused on which ultimately Friends attending a Yearly Meeting will discern the way forward.

The aim of this report is to address the history of the Religious Society of Friends in relation to colonialism and enslavement.

The first section examines Quakers’ historical complicities in enslavement across three periods: 1650s-1727, 1728-87 and 1788-Present.

The second section explores the ways Quaker theology may have been used to justify, normalise or ignore the grave injustices of widespread enslavement.

The full report is available here: **www.quaker.org.uk/reparation-action**

If you have any queries, please send them to: **equity@quaker.org.uk**

For more information on Quakers in Britain’s work on reparations visit:

www.quaker.org.uk/reparations