

The visiting of the families of Luddite “Sufferers” in the area of Huddersfield by the Quakers Joseph Wood and Thomas Shillitoe

In the Small Notebook No.51 written by Joseph Wood (1750-1822) of Newhouse, near High Flatts, a Quaker Minister of the Gospel, we can read a personal account of the events of the spring of 1812 and of the executions that took place the following year.

“In the spring of the year 1812 a number of people in the town and neighbourhood of Huddersfield and places adjacent manifested a riotous disposition frequently collecting in large numbers, & entering in the night season, into people's houses, workshops destroying machinery, stealing arms and other property; & in the 4th month murdering William Horsefall of Marsden in his return from Huddersfield market. They continued for a long time undiscovered, committing great depredations in these parts, very much terrifying and alarming the inhabitants; but thro' the vigilance of the magistrates, particularly Joseph Radcliffe of Milnsbridge, a discovery was made and great numbers were committed to the Castle of York, so that a special Assize was held there by commission in 1ST Mo. 1813 to try them, some were acquitted, many discharged upon bail, some ordered for transportation for administering unlawful oaths, & 17 suffered death. After their execution, a concern came upon my mind to pay a religious visit to the families and near connections of the sufferers, but I think it so unusual a thing to engage in, endeavoured to reason it away, but the more I reasoned, the more my concern increased, so that in the second month, at our monthly meeting; having previously acquainted Thomas Shillitoe therewith whom I found under a similar concern, I spread our united concern before friends which being solidly weighed, & many testimonies borne of friends unity therewith, The meeting gave us the following minute. “Our esteemed friends, Joseph Wood and Thomas Shillitoe have laid before this meeting a concern they have felt to pay a visit to the families or near connections of those persons who have lately suffered at York and who reside in Huddersfield and its neighbourhood. And this meeting after solidly considering their proposal, feels unity, with the friends in their prospect, and leaves them at liberty to proceed as way may open.”

Six weeks after the executions Joseph Wood from Newhouse, Birdsedge and High Flatts Quaker Meeting and Thomas Shillitoe from Barnsley embarked upon their visits to the homes of the “Sufferers of York”. Both men recorded the deeply troubling experiences of the seven days of visiting. Their descriptions give us an insight into the distressing circumstances in which some of these families found themselves, the range of difficulties they had to face and some understanding of the hardships they were experiencing.

On the afternoon of February 28th 1813, Joseph and Thomas accompanied by John Fisher and Abraham Mallinson, Quakers of the

Huddersfield Meeting at Paddock, visited three families in Longroydbridge. They went first to the widow of Jonathan Dean, a cloth dresser. They saw her with her five children. To them she *“appeared under great distress with her helpless fatherless children, all that was alive in us and capable of feeling was sorely experienced”* They then went to the widow of John Walker, a cloth dresser, he having left three children. Lastly they visited the home of the parents of George Mellor, a single man, found guilty of the murder of William Horsfall and found them fully acknowledging *“the melancholy circumstances of their lives”*

The following day they went to Lockwood to the home of the widow of Thomas Brook, a cloth dresser, he left three children; *“his father, mother and two young men his brothers, James and George, who had also been imprisoned in York Castle under the same offence and at our request came in and sat with us. This was an extraordinary opportunity of divine favour I hope not easily to be forgot, particularly by the young men. It was a heart rending opportunity to us, our minds clothed with compassion for the widow and deeply afflicted parents”*. James and George had been discharged on bail.

They then made their way to Dalton Fold to see the widow of James Haigh, a cloth dresser. In order to talk with her they visited the home of Edward Wilson where she was employed. *“He kindly accommodated us with the room for the purpose”*. James Haigh left no children. Of their discussion with his widow Joseph commented *“We had a comfortable time with the widow”*.

The next visit was to the home of William Thorpe, a cloth dresser, a single man. Here they sat and talked with his parents and two of his sisters. Interestingly no comments were made by either man as to the circumstances of these three families.

In the afternoon they made their way to Cowcliff to the home of John Ogden, a cloth dresser. Here they sat with his widow, his two children, his parents and two of his sisters. *“The parents were apparently confined to the house in consequence of the melancholy event that had occurred respecting their son, and from their appearance with that of their daughter they were sinking under the weight of their affliction”*. After their conversation with them a third sister, who had been married that same day, arrived for the after wedding entertainment. Joseph noted that *“we went to pay them a visit but found the men gone out but my companion had any extraordinary time with the bride and many other female guests”*.

On March 2nd. the families visited were in the areas of the Hipperholme and Halifax. Accompanied by John King and James Lees, two Friends from the Brighouse Quaker Meeting. First to be visited were the parents of Thomas Smith of Sutcliffe Wood Bottom. Here their conversations were with the parents, his sister and brother-in-law. Joseph recorded *“that a young man neighbour came in As soon as we saw him we were both of us much struck with*

his appearance; when he saw us sit he turned back & the son-in-law followed him, my companion then inquired who he was and was informed he was one of the prisoners who was discharged on Bail, he then desired he might be called in, he came and sat down. He was much broken and tendered & a remarkable time of visitation it was to him. He told me his name was Joshua Scholfield, that he was in the 22 year of his age and that he knew it not of our being there until we came to the house, nor knew not why he came there at the time. We parted in very near perfection with each other and I hope it was a time that will be lastingly remembered by him."

They then travelled to Skirtcoat Green accompanied by Thomas Dearden, a Friend from the locality. Here they visited the home of Nathan Hoyle, a weaver. His widow and their seven children had moved there to live with her father and sister. Thomas noted that the situation of the father and sister *"appeared to us to be a pitiful one – they appeared to be under great difficulty themselves to procure the necessities of life"*.

The next home visited was that of James Hey where they met his widow, his two children, his father, Joseph Hey and his mother. At the conclusion of their conversations Joseph Hey asked Joseph Wood to go with him to his house to meet with two of his other sons. Joseph wrote of this encounter *"Joseph Hey expressing a desire to speak with me accompanied me nearly thither and then returned; his company was very agreeable to me, he being I believe a truly pious man and a local preacher in the Methodist Society; & having had to express my belief in the opportunity that he had discharged his duty to his son and therefore it was clear, I was confirmed in the truth thereof, in our conversation together, and we parted under a near sympathy and tender regard for each other's welfare"*.

On the following day they went to Sowerby Bridge where they saw the widow of Joseph Crowther, a cotton spinner, of Luddenhamfoot who *"since his decease is moved hither and lives with her mother, he suffered for Robbery; & left 3 children, & she likely to have another very soon, she came from Luddenhamfoot to this place."*

The second visit in the town was to the home of the parents of William Hartley, a tailor. Here they meet with his parents, who had taken in his eight children, William's wife having died about eight months before his death. Joseph recorded that several of the neighbours having seen the visiting party enter the house had followed them in and sat down quietly with them.

The final visit of the day was to the widow of Job Hey, a waterman, who had left seven children. *"She appeared in a very tryed state, we found her in a state of mind bordering on despair, her poor mind was so overcharged with the prospect of her great poverty, her numerous children without any visible means for their support, our labour with her was that she might endeavour to get into the state of stillness in which God is known & his power felt, to stay, comfort & console the mind, and bear it up in the depths of affliction "*.

There were no visits undertaken on March 4th as there was a meeting of the Halifax Quakers in the morning and the proposed afternoon visit to Benjamin Walker did not take place. After his arrest Benjamin had taken the reward money, saving his own life by turning Kings evidence - avoiding execution by giving evidence for the crown against George Mellor, a cloth dresser from Longroydbridge. Joseph and Thomas went to *"the top of Longwood"* where Benjamin was now living with his parents *"who were newly removed from Longroydbridge"*, a move that had no doubt been necessary in the light of their son's action. It was, however, at the home of John Mallinson that they met with Benjamin the following day. Thomas concluded that *"He now felt himself an outcast believing the mark of infamy was set upon him, we could not but anticipate the deplorable situation he would find himself in - he appeared exceeding raw and ignorant, but a door of utterance was mercifully opened, whereby we were enabled to relieve our minds, & the advice communicated appear at present to have some place in his mind, & he is favoured to continue to take heed thereto, it may tend for his future peace."*

On hearing about the proposed visits to the families of convicted Luddites local Quakers had expressed their concerns that *Joseph Radcliffe of Milnsbridge* the magistrate, should be informed about the visits Joseph and Thomas were to make. Their concerns must have been very real - for in general Quakers were encouraged not to have anything to do with politics and in the highly politicised context of everything associated with the Luddites these visits could have been seen by others as a truly political statement. Joseph recorded *"the Friends thought it best to inform Joseph Ratcliffe a Justice of the Peace in the neighbourhood thereof, also the nature of it lest any unfavourable construction should be put upon it, accordingly John Fisher and Robert Firth waited upon him & gave him the necessary information, he appeared pleased with our engagement, desired the Friends give his respects to us & inform us, that he wished us good success. & to give him some account of what we had met with in the course of our visit."*

Of the visit to Milnsbridge House, which took place on March 6th, Joseph noted that *"the Justice and his wife received us very courteously, taking us by the hand and appearing much pleased to see us: We had an open free conversation with them for the space of near an hour and a half & then parting took us by the hand in a very friendly manner & bade us farewell."* Thomas provided a little more detail about these conversations. He recorded that he had informed the Magistrate that it was his opinion that *"the widows should be financially supported"* and *"the children educated until they reached the age to go into service or take an apprenticeship."* He did not, however, record the reaction of Radcliffe to these suggestions.

The afternoon was spent in Briestfield and Thornhill Edge. Here they visited the widow Joseph Fisher and her three children, who, having been first sent to the workhouse in Mirfield had now returned to Briestfield – Joseph

recorded *“the state of mind of the widow called for much sympathy – the scene of distress presented to our feelings is not to be described”*. In Thornhill Edge they first went to the home of the widow of John Batley, a clothier, and her one child, and then to the home of John Lumb, a coal miner. He had escaped execution his sentence having been reduced to transportation following a recommendation to mercy by the Jury. They found that his wife and their five children *“had no settled habitation at present”* so they met her at her mother's house. Returning to Huddersfield Joseph and Thomas went by way of Emley Moor Top where they made their final visit. This was to the widow of John Swallow, a coal miner, who had gone there, with her six children, to live with her mother. Thomas noted *“words would fall short to attempt to describe the state of distress her mind appeared to be in”*.

When reflecting later that day on the task that they had undertaken Joseph concluded *“that altho’ the exercise attending the service in which we had been engaged was great & the Sufferings we had to bear heavy in a feeling sympathy with the suffering families, yet it was eminently manifested, that he who put forth, went before, & in a remarkable manner prepared our way. It was admirable to us in every family we entered how readily & how quietly they sat down with us, & I believe their peculiar sufferings had immeasurably prepared their hearts to receive the gospel & message, - Friends were exceeding kind and lent us all the assistance in their Power, and the company of all those who went with us from place to place was very acceptable, nearly, feelingly uniting with us”*.

Both Joseph and Thomas were well aware of the realities of rural and urban poverty, especially that arising from the loss of the male earner's money. Joseph noted *“In different places where they appeared plunged into great outward difficulties, at parting with them we left a little money”*.

The Large and Small Notebooks of Joseph Wood (1750-1821) transcribed by Pamela Cooksey
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