

The Life of Thomas Harvey

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Thomas Harvey was born in 1812, to a prominent Quaker family in Barnsley, the second of five children to parents William and Susanna. Quakerism was a radical movement which emerged in the North of England in the later 17th Century, believing religion to be an individual lived experience without the need for churches, priests, or rituals, and seeing all humans as deserving of equality¹. These beliefs would inspire Thomas Harvey throughout his life, and he later became an Elder, and then a Minister, of the Leeds Meeting.

In 1826, aged around 14, following his father's financial difficulties, Thomas left school and was apprenticed first by chemist and druggist David Doncaster, in Sheffield, and the following year by the chemist Thomas Southall, of Birmingham. Harvey spent around 8 years in this role, and later described it as "undoubtedly, a most important period of my life"² – both educationally and spiritually. It was here that he mixed with prominent Quakers including Joseph Sturge, who would come to have a great impact in the following years. He would also soon join the Temperance Society, abstaining from alcohol and encouraging others to do the same, for the good of all.

In 1836, whilst looking for employment in his early 20s, Thomas received a letter from Sturge, inviting him on a mission to the West Indies, alongside Dr William Lloyd, and John Scoble, secretary to the British and Foreign Anti-slavery Society. Three years previously, the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act made slavery illegal across most of the British Empire. However, only those under 6 years of age were granted immediate freedom. The rest were now classed as 'apprenticed Labourers', bound to their former owners for up to six more years, working 45 hours per week unpaid, for the basic provisions of food, clothing, shelter and medical care. This was seen as preparation for 'full' freedom, but in reality, very little had changed in their situation.

It was the conditions of these apprentices that the group was going to investigate, following contradictory reports from the islands, and an ambiguous, presumed biased, Parliamentary report on the situation. Although the invitation was unexpected, and he wasn't encouraged by his friends, Harvey said that he "did not feel at liberty to decline"³. As a Quaker, Harvey would have been taught a strong belief of peace, equality, and the responsibility to help those suffering injustice. And so, in October of that year, he departed from Falmouth, for Barbados. His wife later wrote that this trip was "no doubt was the means of awakening deep interest in the anti-slavery cause"⁴.

Sailing back via New York in 1837, onboard the *George Washington*, one of Harvey's fellow passengers was Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, future Emperor Napoleon III, following his exile in the United States. Harvey recalled that during the month-long voyage, "I often sat next to him at table, and had occasional conversations. He lent me De Tocqueville's book on America [*Democracy in America*, 1835]. He was reticent, though quite courteous"⁵.

¹ <https://www.quaker.org.uk/faith/our-history>

² Harvey, S.G. *Memorials of Thomas Harvey; Compiled from a short autobiography, and from his own writings and letters*. 1886.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

Upon return to England, Harvey spent several months helping Sturge to compile the findings of their trip, publishing a damning Report in 1838 entitled *The West Indies in 1837*. It concluded “that the Apprenticeship is vicious in its principle, and most cruel and oppressive in its practical operation, and that it admits no remedy short of its utter extinction”⁶. There was much support from the Society of Friends (Quakers) in encouraging public interest in the matter; over 600,000 British women signed a petition appealing to the Queen to end the apprenticeship system⁷. It was thanks to these efforts that the scheme ended and full emancipation was granted two years earlier than planned, in 1838.

Back in Leeds, Harvey picked up his career and began a chemist and druggist business at 5 Commercial Street, where he spent around 3 years before taking over the company of William West at 13 Briggate, in 1841. Notification of the move was published in local newspapers, with West speaking of his “high opinion... of Thomas Harvey’s Skill, Integrity, and Attention to Business”⁸. Around this time he was also carrying on his philanthropic work as a member of the General Council of the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade⁹, writing papers on ‘The Iniquities of the Opium Trade in China’.

During a career of almost 30 years, Harvey took on many young men as apprentices and assistants, including fellow Quaker Richard Reynolds, who would return to Leeds 10 years later in 1854 to become a partner in the firm, Harvey & Reynolds. Their 1855 catalogue of ‘Apparatus and Materials used in the Art of Photography’ describes the company as ‘Operative Chemists and Dealers in Scientific Apparatus’. They would go on to manufacture the first commercially available small clinical thermometers, designed by celebrated physician Sir Thomas Clifford Allbutt in the city¹⁰. Thomas Harvey was one of the founders of the Pharmaceutical Society and was later elected the first President of the Leeds Chemists Association (1862).

In October 1845, Harvey’s marriage to Sarah Grace Fryer, from another prominent Quaker family, was announced in the Leeds Times. Her brother, Frederick, had been apprenticed with Harvey at Briggate. They would go on to have three sons, although sadly two, Joseph and Thomas, died young, and only their middle son William would survive them. Joseph died at home in 1852 following a short illness, aged only six years old.

The tragic circumstances of 17 year old Thomas’s death in 1867 were reported in various Leeds newspapers, described as ‘The Fearful Disaster in Regent’s Park: Great Loss of Life’¹¹. Returning to London after Christmas, where he was studying at University College, Thomas joined hundreds of others skating on the frozen lake in Regent’s Park when the ice gave way, with over thirty people drowning in the incident, the bodies recovered over several days.

⁶ Sturge, J. and Harvey, T. *The West Indies in 1837: being the journal of a visit to Antigua, Monsterrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, and Jamaica: undertaken for the purpose of ascertaining the actual condition of the Negro population of those islands*. p xi. Hamilton, Adams, and Co. London, 1838.

⁷ Latimer, James. “The Apprenticeship System in the British West Indies.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 33, no. 1 (1964): 52–57.

⁸ Leeds Times (12 September 1840), Vol 8, Issue 391.

⁹ *The Friend of China* (February 1885) Vol 8, No 2, p30. Accessed via

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=U0ZBAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> 20/01/2025.

¹⁰ Grodzinsky, E., Sund Levander, M. (2020). *History of the Thermometer*. In: Grodzinsky, E., Sund Levander, M. (eds) *Understanding Fever and Body Temperature*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. P32.

¹¹ Leeds Mercury (17 January 1867) Issue 8974.

Thomas Harvey joined Joseph Sturge on another charitable mission abroad in 1856, visiting Finland (then Russian territory) following the end of the Crimean War. During the war, British and French allies had sent fleets to the Baltic, attacking Russian naval bases, destroying coastal forts and blockading vital trade routes. Whilst these actions did hasten the end of the war, they also had a huge impact on local inhabitants caught in the crossfire. Many poor fishermen whose boats and nets had been burnt, left starving and homeless, their means of subsistence destroyed. A severe winter was all it took to trigger a famine. This led to international criticism, and upon their return, the Quakers raised funds of £7500 for the relief and rebuilding effort.

In 1866 Harvey returned to Jamaica with Quaker William Brewin following the Morant Bay rebellion, a violently suppressed uprising caused by years of political and racial tensions after the abolition of slavery, where hundreds of Black Jamaicans were killed by the colonial militia. Here he inspected the conditions of former enslaved people and provisions for their education, which had been partly funded by the Quakers since emancipation. His findings were published as *Jamaica in 1866*. Harvey, along with his fellow Quakers, also raised funds for aid of freed enslaved people during the American Civil War, and for the relief of those suffering in the Franco-Prussian War a decade later.

Just a year later, in the Summer of 1867, only a few months after the deaths of his son Thomas, and his brother William, Harvey accompanied Quaker minister Isaac Robson on a trip to Russia. They spent several weeks visiting the Mennonites, a Christian group who had much in common with the Quakers, especially in their opposition to war. This led to much persecution, and many thousands emigrated to the US and Canada when faced with the prospect of being subjected to mandatory military service. The Quakers provided financial assistance to help them settle into new lands. Harvey became close with the Mennonite merchant Cornelius Janzen, who housed the visitors, and guided them through the Russian villages. They remained friends for the rest of his life, keeping in correspondence, and meeting again in New York seventeen years later.

Returning to Leeds, Harvey continued to dedicate his time to charitable work. In 1870, however, he became seriously ill with a 'heart affection' which prevented him undertaking any active work, and spending several months recuperating away from home. In November he was nominated as member of the first School Board for Leeds, and although forced to withdraw before elections, he would accept the role three years later, and remain a member for another eight years, with the aim "to bring education within reach of every child in the kingdom"¹². He served on the Committees of York, Ackworth, and Rawdon schools, and was one of the Trustees of the Flounders Institute for the training of young men and teachers, and in later life took a deep interest in the higher education and training of young women as well.

As honorary secretary, Thomas Harvey was heavily involved with the collection of subscriptions for the *United Institution for the Blind and Deaf and Dumb* in Leeds, which contributed to the commencement of the building of new premises on Albion Street in 1875. Here attendees were

¹² Harvey, S.G. *Memorials of Thomas Harvey; Compiled from a short autobiography, and from his own writings and letters*. 1886.

taught trades and assisted in finding employment; there was a school for blind children, and deaf children over four years were taught finger spelling, sign language and lip-reading.¹³

In June 1884, despite reluctance to travel so far given his age and poor health, Harvey was part of a deputation of Quakers sent to attend the Yearly Meeting in Canada. Sailing first to New York, he continued via rail to Canada, visiting Niagara Falls on the way, and often sending letters home to his family. However, there had been several incidents of illness whilst away, and upon his return in October, it was clear his health had suffered, Harvey himself acknowledging he was “too old and feeble for such a mission”.

On the 19th of December, Harvey visited W. Hanson’s photography studio in Great George Street, in ‘extremely severe’ weather, to have a photograph taken at the request of his Canadian friend Samuel Rogers, who had nursed him during his recent illness abroad. Returning home, Harvey fell ill again and requested a doctor, who the next day diagnosed pneumonia. He was nursed at home by his family over the following days, and on Christmas Day he died peacefully in his bed, aged 73.

His funeral followed on the 29th December at the Friends Burial Ground in Adel, where the remarkable attendance demonstrated the high esteem in which Harvey had been held by all those who knew him, or had been helped by his work. One gentleman was reported as saying “I never before saw such a funeral. Besides the persons who walked to the grave, there were eighty carriages. The one in which I rode was forty-seventh from the head of the procession”¹⁴.

As many could not gain admittance to the small chapel, designed for the usual unassuming Quaker funerals, an additional event was held at the Friends’ Meeting House on Woodhouse Lane that evening. Many letters of sympathy were received by the family following Harvey’s death; “there are thousands in England, the West Indies, and other parts of the world, who have lost a true friend, who lived for the benefit of the ignorant, the oppressed, the helpless, and the needy, wherever they met his view.”

¹³ Kelly’s Directory of Leeds, 1888. Pp24.

<https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/79388/rec/1>

¹⁴ *THOMAS HARVEY OF LEEDS*: The Sunday at home: a family magazine for Sabbath reading, London (4 July 1885). Issue 1627, pp 426-429. Retrieved from <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/thomas-harvey-leeds/docview/4197771/se-2>

IMAGES

1. <https://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/object-2012-0020> APPRENTICESHIP INDENTURE AS 'DRUGGIST & CHEMIST' OF THOMAS HARVEY TO DAVID DONCASTER OF SHEFFIELD FOR 'SIX YEARS, SIX MONTHS AND TWENTY SEVEN DAYS', DATED 18/8/1826, IN ORIGINAL TORN WRAPPER.
2. https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.westindiesin183700stur_0/?sp=9&r=-1.042,0.61,3.084,1.132,0 Sturge, Joseph, and Thomas Harvey. The West Indies in 1837; being the journal of a visit to Antigua, Montserrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, and Jamaica. London, Hamilton, Adams, and co, 1838. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/02013437/>. Public domain.
3. <https://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/object-2012-0075> PHOTOGRAPH OF HARVEY & REYNOLDS/ REYNOLDS AND BRANSON SHOP, 14 COMMERCIAL STREET, LEEDS, c.1900
4. <https://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/object-1782-004>: Glass Allbutt Clinical thermometer containing mercury in boxwood case. Item 1782.004
5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berndt_Abraham_Godenhjelm_-_Ruotsinsalmi_is_Burning,_Scene_from_the_Crimean_War_1855_-_A_II_983-1_-_Finnish_National_Gallery.jpg Ruotsinsalmi is Burning, Scene from the Crimean War 1855. Public Domain.
6. <https://collections.thackraymuseum.co.uk/object-2012-0021> CABINET PHOTOGRAPH OF THOMAS HARVEY BY W. HANSON OF LEEDS 'ON THE MORNING OF HIS LAST ILLNESS'