



## A Quaker Experience

I am, and believe that I always will be, an Atheist. From early in my school education I was presented with many ideas about God, stories of the Bible and was preached to by the local vicar every Friday morning. We learnt about the various cultures and religions and I was reasonably interested in their varying beliefs and practices but nothing really caught my attention, until now.

I came to Sidcot in 2006 on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September which was, coincidentally, my birthday. It was scary of course, having never boarded before, being thrust into a house with 24 other boys some of whom were a good deal bigger than me and had been there considerably longer. What mostly though, I remember were the questions from home. These generally started with; how are things with you? And ended with; so what is this Quakerism all about?

The first of these questions was easy, I was having a great time, but the second was a little trickier. "Well it's a denomination of Christianity, which was started by George Fox, you know the guy on the Quaker oats packet" was generally as far as I got before they realised I didn't really know. There is a certain amount of apathy in the young mind. Of course there are those individuals who, from an early age, strive to achieve and understand but at the age of 15, I was not one of them. I decided that I would have to wait for Quaker week which might give me some insight into this new religion.

Quaker Week at Sidcot is designed to incorporate fun activities with learning about the heritage of the early Quakers as well as educating the students about various World issues. The activities that these themes are centred around include informative talks by well read men, a concert from Ben Okafor, a singer who campaigns against the injustice of Child Soldiers on a global scale, and games which were from the sound of it boring. The talks were interesting and the debates on environmental change even more so but still, even after the week was up I couldn't put a finger on exactly what it was that Quakerism was all about.

I am now in my final year at Sidcot and therefore have been exposed to Quakerism for the last four years, but it was not until the beginning of this year that I discovered Quakerism. Sidcot offers the chance for 4 students to take part in an activity that has commonly come to be known as the Foxtrot. It is essentially a Quaker Pilgrimage, taking the students to the spiritual home of Quakerism in Cumbria and Lancashire, visiting many of the places in which George Fox's original ideas developed and became a reality in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. It would also look to inform the students about whom the Quakers really were and their role in today's society.

We were joined by members of the other Southern Quaker Schools making us a party of 25. The trip itself surpassed all my expectations. To be with a group of like minded motivated individuals was a truly liberating experience and to be together, learning about a subject that influenced all our lives made the occasion even more compelling.

Quakerism is constantly evolving. It has become more of a way of life than a religion as many modern Quakers are Atheists. At Sidcot, we are not constantly reminded of its heritage

but it is ever present in our day to day life, in the principles the school upholds and the way it expects its students to behave. Quakers move with the times, from being some of the first individuals to oppose the slave trade to combating environmental and social issues in the world today.

Quaker week 2009 gave me the opportunity to channel some of my new energy for Quakerism towards the rest of the Sidcot community. I enjoyed and appreciated everything, the informative talks, the Ben Okafor concert and undoubtedly the games. The week culminated with a Meeting which lasted half an hour. In previous Quaker Weeks it has become common for students to share thoughts about "how great it is that we can stand up and say what we like," which admittedly is needlessly pointing out the obvious, but was better than others who say, "thanks everyone for my great time at Sidcot" and promptly sit down. I listened to the predictable voices of the lower years and I began to think. This week had enthused the masses, at the end of Quaker week all these students had been moved to speak out, whether to say something irrelevant or to voice a real concern, never the less, they had. There was energy in the room, energy for change, to be involved, all influenced by Quakerism. I found myself on my feet, talking about this, my heart thumping, giving the first ministry of my life. I talked of change, the energy in the room and how it gave me hope, how the School would benefit from pupils who had had the courage to speak out and how they represented the modern Quaker.

I am, and believe that I always will be, an Atheist. I am not a Quaker, and still to this day could not give you a concise definition much to the annoyance of my parents. For me, it is about my relationship with Quakerism. It has influenced me to take pride in my work, to pursue activities which benefit others and to live my life adventurously. Its morals and guidance profits every student that attends Sidcot or any other of the Quaker schools, the periods of reflection in meetings a unique experience shared together. I know Quakerism is something that is now part of my life and I hope to keep it that way.

