Lancaster Quakers & the Enslaving Economy

A history in twenty cards — two audiences, one story

TWENTY CARDS · ADULT EDITION

1615 – 1641 *01 / 20*

Sugar Reaches Lancaster

John Lawson (1615–1689) was a Lancaster grocer who built a Sugar House at 15 St Leonards Street, importing sugar and molasses from the West Indies via his own river wharf. Sugar had first been exported from the Eastern Caribbean in 1641, produced overwhelmingly by enslaved Africans on Barbados plantations.

1652 – 1654 *02 / 20*

John Lawson Becomes a Quaker

In 1652 John sheltered George Fox from a stoning mob, converting to Quakerism and becoming one of the "70 First Publishers." His faith cost him dearly: he was imprisoned in Lancaster Castle twice — once for a year — for preaching and refusing oaths, yet he continued trading in goods produced by enslaved people.

1660 – 1689

03 / 20

Commerce and Conscience in Tension

John Lawson expanded his merchant empire — adding a still, warehouse, and new wharf — while facing repeated imprisonment for his faith. No evidence links him to direct trafficking of enslaved people, but his sugar and molasses business depended entirely on enslaved labour. He died in 1689, his fortune passing to sons Robert and Joshua.

1677 – 1720

04 / 20

Building the Quaker Meeting House

Lancaster Meeting House was built in 1677 amid legal persecution; Friends were regularly dragged from Sunday worship to Lancaster Castle. By 1708, Robert Lawson (Elder) and William Stout oversaw a doubling of the building to house four-county General Meetings — funded by £149 in subscriptions from regional meetings, equivalent to over £22,000 today.

1703 – 1738

05 / 20

Robert Lawson Expands the Trade

Robert Lawson the Elder sent at least five vessels to Barbados between 1729 and 1738, exporting beef, butter, felt hats, candles, cotton and more, returning with sugar, mahogany and tobacco. He also invested in the South Sea Company — which trafficked 41,000 enslaved Africans — suffering heavy losses when the Bubble burst in 1721.

1720 – 1728

06 / 20

Sunderland Point: A Port for the Goods of Enslaving

Robert Lawson of Sunderland Point (grandson of John) developed the dock as an outpost of Lancaster's port, constructing warehouses, a rope walk and an anchor smithy. It is claimed the first bale of cotton for Lancashire's industry landed here. Robert's spectacular bankruptcy in 1728 — debts of £14,000, over £2.1 million today — ended his ambitions.

1736 – 1758

07 / 20

The First Enslaving Ships Leave Lancaster

Lancaster's first known ship that carried enslaved people, the Price Fredrick, sailed in 1736. By 1752 John Heathcote and Dodshon Foster — Quakers both — owned the Barlborough, which made three voyages to the Gambia Coast, embarking 450 enslaved people, of whom 65 perished at sea and 385 were sold in Kingston, Jamaica.

1748 – 1758

08 / 20

Heathcote, Foster & the Quaker Blind Eye

The Lancaster Meeting made no formal record of challenging Heathcote or Foster for putting guns on their ships — a clear violation of the Quaker Peace Testimony. John Heathcote died aged 28 in 1758, having trafficked hundreds of people. Just a month later, Foster sold the Barlborough, coinciding with London Yearly Meeting declaring enslaving "a direct violation of the gospel rule."

1739 – 1760s

09 / 20

The Rawlinson & Satterthwaite Networks

Abraham Rawlinson and his brother Thomas Hutton Rawlinson built a colonial empire, owning or part-owning multiple ships, a sugar plantation (Goyave, Grenada), and holding interests in trafficked Africans. Thomas Satterthwaite's partnership trafficked 671 enslaved people from Gambia, of whom 80 died at sea — all while Satterthwaite was eventually readmitted to Quaker membership.

1752 – 1776

10 / 20

Secondary Economy of Enslaving & Plantation Goods

Lancaster merchants, including the Dillworth brothers and Rawlinsons, engaged in "secondary" trading of enslaved people — moving enslaved people between Caribbean islands. The 1752 voyage of the Providence from Barbados to South Carolina carried "twenty new negros." Meanwhile Quaker-linked mills in Lancashire received cotton picked by the enslaved as raw material.

1757 – 1784

11 / 20

London Yearly Meeting Speaks — Lancaster Stays Silent

In 1757 William Dillworth attended a London Yearly Meeting that minuted concern over Quakers "dealing in Negros." In 1761 YM recommended disownment of enslavers. Lancaster Meeting's response was virtually nothing: no recorded challenges to actively trafficking members, and a 1785 report claiming Friends were "clear" — naming no one.

1769 – 1792 *12 / 20*

Plantations, Profits & Political Power

Thomas Rawlinson (son of Abraham) owned multiple West Indian plantations with Anglican partner Thomas Bond, borrowed £10,000 from the British government to buy four more in 1796, and subscribed £5,000 to the Lancaster Canal. A 1792 letter to the Meeting's Clerk raised concern about his ownership of enslaved people — but no disciplinary action was ever recorded.

1779 – 1790 *13 / 20*

Privateering, Parliament & Disownment

Abraham Rawlinson (Junior) and his brother John were disowned in 1779 for profiting from privateering with armed, letter-of-marque ships. Abraham was baptised Anglican, enabling him to stand as MP for Lancaster (1780–1790), where he actively opposed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act and abolition — protecting his family's enslaving industry interests to the last.

1743 – 1807 *14 / 20*

John Satterthwaite: From Factor to Trafficker

John Satterthwaite (not a Quaker, though the son of Benjamin Satterthwaite) became a wealthy Lancaster merchant after working as a factor in Barbados and St Kitts. He owned shares in ships that trafficked 1,679 enslaved Africans from Bonny, Nigeria, of whom 141 died on the passage. He returned to Lancaster with a Black servant, Francis Elizabeth Johnson, whose only surviving record is a baptismal entry in 1778. Her hand is said to have been buried in the grounds of Lancaster Priory, later interred there by Eliza Dear, a Quaker descendant of the family.

1783 – 1807

15 / 20

Abolition Stirs — Lancaster Trades On

Even as abolitionist pressure grew through the 1780s, the Rawlinson brothers were among Lancashire's largest exporters of goods to West Indian plantations. Robert Foster, son of Dodshon, gave evidence to Parliament in 1791 at Wilberforce's request describing the conditions enslaved people endured that he had witnessed. The Slave Trade Act finally passed in 1807, ending the legal trafficking of Africans to British colonies.

1803 – 1833

16 / 20

Plantation Ownership Continues After Trafficking Ends

Banning the economy of enslaving did not free enslaved people. Thomas Rawlinson's heirs retained part-ownership of Broom Hall Plantation, Demerara, into the 1820s. James Barton Nottage — John Lawson's step-grandson, no longer a Quaker — owned five estates with 360 enslaved people. In 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act was passed.

1833 – 1836

17 / 20

Compensation for Enslavers, Nothing for the Enslaved

The British government compensated enslavers — not the enslaved — for emancipation. Henry Lindow Rawlinson received £3,300 for enslaved people on two St Vincent plantations (worth ~£331,000 today). James Barton Nottage received £5,738 for 360 people (~£551,000 today). The enslaved received nothing and were subjected to a further period of "apprenticeship."

1826 – 1896

18 / 20

The Profits of Enslaving Reshape Lancaster's Economy

Money accrued from the enslaving economy flowed into Lancaster's banks, cotton mills, properties and infrastructure. The Barrow family's colonial trade profits helped establish the Lancaster Banking Co (1826) — which eventually became part of the Royal Bank of Scotland. The Cadbury chocolate empire traces partly to the Barrow–Cadbury family connection.

1837 – 1900

19 / 20

Wealth Normalised Across Generations

Descendants of Lancaster Quaker merchants became landed proprietors, solicitors, railway investors and school benefactors — living on inherited wealth derived from the enslaving industry. Elizabeth Sarah Ford donated £1,250+ to Quaker schools in Yealand and Wyresdale. The source of that wealth — the labour of enslaved Africans — was by then invisible to those who benefited.

THEN & NOW

Complicity, Conscience & the Unfinished Reckoning

Lancaster Monthly Meeting was, in its silence, complicit: wealthy merchant-Elders could not challenge themselves. Across generations, Quaker theology opposed enslavement in words while tolerating it in practice. The history of those involved asks us today to examine how institutional wealth, social deference and economic self-interest can prevent communities from acting on their own professed values.

🌟 The Lancaster Story — For Young Readers 🌟

20 cards telling a big and important story about fairness, bravery, and doing what's right



1

ABOUT 1641 – 1652

Sugar Comes to Lancaster

A man called John Lawson had a special factory in Lancaster where he made sugar from sugar cane. The sugar cane was grown far away on islands in the sea — and sadly, the people who grew it were enslaved people who were forced to work without pay or freedom.



2

1652

John Joins the Quakers

One day John Lawson helped protect a man called George Fox from a crowd throwing stones at him. George Fox started a church called the Quakers, who believed in being kind and peaceful. After that day, John became a Quaker too.



3

1652 – 1689

Brave John Goes to Prison

Being a Quaker was dangerous! John was put in prison more than once for his beliefs — once for a whole year. He was also fined lots of money (like £4,000 in today's money) just for speaking at church. But he stayed brave and kept his faith.



4

1677 – 1708

Building a Meeting House

The Quakers built a place to meet and pray together called a Meeting House in Lancaster. At first, going there was against the law! Quaker adults, including women, were taken to prison just for praying. Their children were not imprisoned — instead they gathered on the road outside, keeping worship going while their parents were held. Eventually the Meeting House was made bigger to fit more people.



5

1703 – 1738

Ships Going Far Away

John's son Robert sent ships all the way to an island called Barbados. The ships brought back sugar, wood, and cloth. These things were made by enslaved people who were not free. Robert made a lot of money from this trade. He also put money into a company that captured Africans and sent them to Barbados and Jamaica — and lost a lot of money when that company later collapsed.



6

1720 – 1728

A Busy Port by the Sea

A man called Robert Lawson built a busy little port called Sunderland Point near Lancaster. Ships came and went bringing goods from far away. It is said the very first bale of cotton for Lancashire's factories arrived here! But sadly cotton was picked by enslaved people too.



7

1736 – 1758

The Enslaving Ships Set Sail

Some Lancaster merchants started doing something very wrong — they sent ships to Africa to capture people and sell them as enslaved people in the Caribbean. These people were taken from their families and forced to work. This was called the trade in enslaved people and it was very cruel.



8

1752 – 1758

Quakers Who Did Wrong Things

Some of the Quakers in Lancaster — who believed in peace and fairness — were involved in the trade in enslaved people. Two men called John Heathcote and Dodshon Foster owned a ship that carried enslaved people. Their church said nothing to stop them. This was very wrong.



9

1739 – 1765

More Families Join In

Other Lancaster families — like the Rawlinsons and the Satterthwaites — also got involved in trading goods made by enslaved people, and some even owned the ships that carried enslaved people across the ocean. These families became very rich.



10

1757 – 1761

The Quaker Leaders Speak Up

The national Quaker church started to say that the trade in enslaved people was wrong. In 1757 they sent a message to all Quaker groups asking them to stop. In 1761 they said anyone who owned enslaved people should be removed from the church. But Lancaster didn't really listen.



11

1779 – 1785

Rules Broken, Silence Kept

The Lancaster Quakers kept records of people who broke rules — like marrying the wrong person or getting into debt. But they wrote nothing about the members who traded enslaved people. When asked in 1785, they said they thought everyone was "clear" — which wasn't true.



12

1769 – 1799

Big Houses Built on Suffering

The money made from enslaving helped some Lancaster families build grand houses, buy lots of land, and become very important people in the city. One man built a beautiful hall called Ellel Hall. Another owned warehouses along the river. All this wealth came from the suffering of enslaved people.



13

1777 – 1783

Black People in Lancaster

We know of a few Black people who lived in Lancaster at this time. A woman called Francis Elizabeth Johnson worked as a servant. A man called John Chance lived with another family. A man called Isaac Rawlinson was baptised at a local church. Their full stories are mostly lost to history.



14

1780 – 1807

People Fight to End the Enslaving of Others

Some people were very unhappy about enslaving and wanted to stop it. A man called William Wilberforce worked in Parliament to make it illegal. In 1791 a Lancaster Quaker called Robert Foster told Parliament about the awful conditions enslaved people suffered. In 1807, carrying enslaved people on ships was made illegal in Britain.



15

1790 – 1813

Robert Foster Does Good

Robert Foster, son of Dodshon Foster, used money inherited from his family's trade to build a wool mill near Sedbergh. He did this to give local poor people jobs and help them earn a living. He also told Parliament about enslaving and signed letters asking for it to end. He tried to use wealth for good.



16

1807 – 1833

Enslaving Ends — But Not Yet for Everyone

Even after 1807, enslaved people still had to work on the plantations in the Caribbean. It wasn't until 1833 that a new law said all enslaved people in the British Empire must be freed. But even then, they had to wait more years in a so-called "apprenticeship" before being truly free.



17

1833 – 1836

Owners Got Paid — Enslaved People Got Nothing

When enslaving was made illegal, the British government paid money to the people who had owned enslaved people — not to the enslaved people themselves. One Lancaster family received what would be over £500,000 in today's money. The enslaved people and their families received nothing at all.



18

1826 – 1900

The Money Kept Growing

The wealth from the trade in enslaved people didn't disappear — it was used to build banks, set up cotton mills, and buy lots of land. The Barrow family's profits helped start a bank that eventually became part of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Some money even helped the Cadbury chocolate family!



19

1837 – TODAY

Stories Passed Down

As the years went on, the children and grandchildren of the Lancaster merchants went to school, became lawyers, bought land and invested in railways — using money that had come from enslaving, without always knowing or asking where it came from. But that history doesn't disappear just because people forgot it.



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THEN & NOW

What Can We Learn?

This story teaches us that doing nothing when something is wrong is a choice too. The Quakers believed in fairness but many stayed silent when it mattered most. Today we remember this history so we can listen to our conscience, be brave enough to speak up, and try to make the world more fair for everyone.