

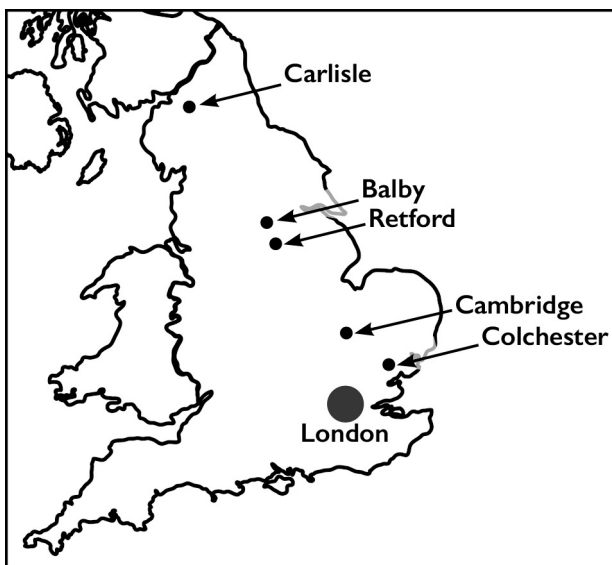
Pages for All Ages: The Quaking Boy

Some words and phrases to know before you read

- martyr
- prison
- gruesome
- Religious Society of Friends
- Elders at Balby
- civil war
- profane
- ancient
- focused on
- arrested
- preaching
- George Fox
- convinced
- hard words
- blasphemy
- unlawful assembly
- magistrate
- fine
- meekness

James Parnell was probably the first person to become famous as a Quaker martyr. He died at the age of nineteen in the prison at Colchester Castle in England. Many people in 1656 were upset by Parnell's gruesome death. He quickly became famous as "the boy martyr." He died on April 10, 1656, shortly before the Religious Society of Friends was formed. Five months later, The Elders at Balby organized the Society of Friends.

Not much is known about James Parnell's childhood. He was born in 1636 in the town of Retford, England. He was six when the English Civil War began. That means he grew up during a time when the adults in his country were killing each other because they had different ideas about governments and religions.



His parents, Thomas and Sarah Parnell, earned enough money to send James to grammar school. However, James grew up disliking the ideas that the school was teaching. When he wrote about his life later, he said, "Many of the books which are read in the schools . . . do much for . . . nourishing the wild, profane nature, which then ruled me." Those books told stories about wars and rulers from ancient Greece and Rome. Parnell thought they taught children to be mean and selfish. He did like how it felt when he joined the other children in misbehaving. But later, he would feel upset with himself for being "wicked." He felt better when he could go off by himself to think about his life and the Bible. Sometimes, he thought he could see a "shining in the darkness."

By the time he was fourteen, James Parnell was so focused on his relationship with God that he didn't care much about his other relationships. He argued endlessly with his family and neighbors about "things of the spirit." They mocked him for being odd. He finally decided to "become a stranger to them who loved not the Truth." He decided to find a new set of friends, ones who believed in the Truth the way he did. Soon, he did find "a people" a few miles from his home who would silently "sit down together and wait upon [God]."

The next year, Parnell walked thirty miles to Balby to meet the Quakers there. He found they were people who knew that God could touch them directly. They believed that most of the churches in England were



full of lies. Parnell agreed with them. He kept living with his family, but his heart was with the Quakers.

In those days, most Quakers were taking care of other Quakers in prison. Many Quakers got arrested for preaching in places where other people did not want to hear them. Once a person was in prison, they wouldn't get food, blankets, or anything until their family or friends brought them what they needed.

George Fox was in prison many times between 1650 and 1674. He was in Carlisle Prison in 1653, and James Parnell decided to visit him there. He walked 160 miles from his home to visit Fox and 160 miles back again. Fox wrote in his journal, "James Parnell, a little lad of about sixteen years of age, came to see me and was convinced." Nobody knows exactly what the two of them talked about, but after that visit, James Parnell began his life of public preaching.

Parnell was a small person, and he was young, and he seemed shy. So, when he started preaching in public, everyone called him "the quaking boy." Even so, when he preached, he was full of energy, and he spoke hard words about anyone or anything that seemed dishonest. A lot of people loved to hear him, but a lot of people hated what he said. For two years, Parnell went from town to town, preaching. He helped many people start new Quaker meetings. Sometimes he got chased out of town by angry crowds. Sometimes he nearly got arrested. Always, he stayed calm and respectful towards everyone he met.

Then, during the weekend of July 3-4, 1655, James Parnell preached to thousands of people in the city of Colchester. That Sunday afternoon, he was arrested for blasphemy and unlawful assembly. Then he was taken to the prison in Colchester Castle. When he went to court on July 12, the jury said that he was innocent and that could go free. But the magistrate said Parnell had to pay a fine for being disrespectful during the trial. Parnell refused to pay. Back to prison he went.

Parnell was forced to stay in "a hole" in Colchester Prison. This was like a little cave high up in the thick rock wall of the castle. The castle walls were twelve feet thick, and the holes were about three feet deep



and four feet wide. Even a small person like Parnell could not stretch out there. Even worse, Parnell had to climb down from the hole any time he wanted food, and he had climb back up into the hole before he could eat. His hole was twelve feet off the ground. He could use a six-foot ladder to get partway up, but then he had to climb the rest of the way with a rope.

Eventually, Parnell slipped from the rope and fell to the hard rock floor. He hit his head and hurt his leg. The guards put him into a different hole, one that was closer to the ground. Parnell recovered a little and lived another eight months. He wrote many letters during that time to encourage his Friends. But his strength was fading. He finally grew too weak to eat. After ten days with no food, he died. During those final days, he told a visitor, "Here I die innocently." Parnell's example of courage and meekness has inspired countless Friends for hundreds of years.

- Tell about a time when you thought you were right, but other people said your idea was wrong.
- What can you do when you think your friend is making a mistake?
- Why do people have religion?

The map on page 20 shows some of the places Parnell walked throughout England. The photo above shows some "oubliettes" in a castle wall. The word means "forgetting places." The little metal balcony in the picture was added long after this castle was used as a prison. This photo by Luis Vallejos is in the public domain and shows an anonymous castle.

