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Asterby and Donington-on-Bain

Lincolnshire

THE first church book of the Asterby and Donington-on-Bain General Baptist Church has recently become available for inspection¹. It is an unpaginated volume of 86 leaves, measuring 13 inches by 6 inches. Entries were made spasmodically between 1698 and 1868, and include lists of members for c.1701, 1714, 1726, 1804, 1843, 1862; financial entries for 1698 only; baptisms of believers for 1702-14 and 1783-1843; marriages for 1706 only; births for 1813-27; and burials for 1840-68.

Asterby is now a hamlet, adjacent to Goulceby and three miles from Donington-on-Bain in the Lincolnshire Wolds between Louth and Market Rasen. Two miles up the hill from Goulceby is the depopulated parish of Cawkwell, most probably the "Chalkwell" in Lincolnshire where Hanserd Knollys was born in 1598. Although Knollys' Puritan convictions did not emerge until he went up to Cambridge, his home life, with parents who "were religious and in good circumstances", inclined him in that direction. In 1631 Knollys resigned his first living as an Anglican incumbent at Humberston, near Grimsby, as his Puritan views developed. After a brief silence he preached for three or four years up to 1636 further south in Lincolnshire ". . . the doctrine of free grace . . . whereby very many sinners were converted, and many believers were established in the faith"².

In fact Hanserd Knollys did more than preach as an itinerant after leaving Humberston, for the Goulceby parish register transcript for 1633-4 is signed "Hnsrd Knollys Minister", and one entry was "John y^e Sonne of Hansard Knollys was Baptiz:d March 1th day" 1633/4.³

There was already a Separatist Baptist church in Lincoln itself by 1626⁴, in touch with the church that had returned to London under Helwys. It cannot be proved that it had a continuous history in that city up to the 1640s; but after the outbreak of the Civil War there was a rapid growth of Separatists in Lincolnshire eventually to be designated General Baptists. In 1651 they joined with similar churches in Leicestershire and adjacent counties in producing and signing "*The Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations, Gathered According to the Primitive Pattern*". The Lincolnshire list begins with John Lupton

and William Codlyn for Tattershall, Thomas Drewry and Richard Drewry for Goldsby, Ralph James and Daniel Chesman for North Willingham, and Valentine James and John Johnjohns for Lincoln⁵. Goldsby might have been Ingoldsby, a village between Grantham and Bourne where Henry Hitchcock was licensed to be a Baptist teacher at his own house in 1672⁶. But in fact it refers to Goulceby, which lies between North Willingham, 8 miles away, and Tattershall, 17 miles away, with Lincoln 18 miles to the south-west.

Richard Drewry signed *The Second Humble Address* presented to Charles II in January 1661 by the Lincolnshire Baptists. John Lupton, Ralph James, Daniel Cheeseman and Valentine James were among the other subscribers. Perhaps Thomas Drewry was Richard's father, and was now dead⁷. Thirty-seven years later the original list of "the members that belongs to the Congregations of the Baptised bleevers" in the Asterby church book includes Richard Drewry of Benniworth or West Barkwith, villages just west of Goulceby.

Towards the end of the Indulgence of 1672-3 Ralph James twice licensed himself as Baptist teacher and his house at North Willingham⁸. The fact that no licences were sought for anyone in or around Goulceby, Asterby or Donington does not mean that the persecution of Charles II's reign snuffed out Richard Drewry's church, for there is no record of licences at Tattershall or nearby Coningsby, yet the Coningsby church book begun by John Lupton in 1657 has entries dated 1660, 1670 (an epitaph for Lupton), 1671 (Charles Warwick appointed elder), and 1672⁹.

Meanwhile from 1662 to 1696 the rector of Goulceby cum Asterby was Thomas Ashall. His churchwarden at Asterby in 1670 was Nathaniel Locking¹⁰. This Nathaniel was probably the father of the Nathaniel Locking who married the rector's daughter, Marie, at Goulceby parish church, 22 May 1688¹¹. Their son, Edward, was baptized at Asterby parish church in March, 1690/1, and for that year one or other of the Nathaniel Lockings was churchwarden¹². They had several more children, but no more were baptized as infants in the Church of England. Not even Anne who was buried in December, 1693, had been baptized at a parish church¹³.

The Asterby Baptist church book shows the reason. A note added to the earliest list of members says "Nath Locking & Mary his wife Baptized march ye 15 1692/3". This is the earliest event referred to in the book, but of course it was not the earliest event in the story of the Baptist congregations thereabouts by more than forty years. A new era opened with the Toleration Act of 1689, and the young Locking couple, brought up in families involved in parish church affairs, led a rebellion against the Establishment and the parish church system that spread from their own villages to Donington-on-Bain and Stenigot, midway between Asterby and

interregnum occurred, until in 1699 Peregrine Walleth was rector: but by now the separation was complete, and the Baptist church book had been begun. Into this new beginning came Richard Drewry and his old Goulceby church, however small it may have been.

The extent of this post-Toleration rebellion against infant baptism may be gauged from the parish register transcripts. Peregrine Walleth began a separate list of "Dissenters born in ye aforesaid Parish", and of their marriages and burials until he left in 1710. During April 1699 to March 1700 four of the eight births in Goulceby cum Asterby were to Dissenters; 1702-3, four of the fourteen births were to Dissenters; one out of five in 1703-4; four out of eleven in 1704-5. Some alternative ceremony to infant baptism is implied in two entries, e.g. in 1710, "John Son of W^m & Mary Tuxworth An Anabaptist, named Febr 21th". From 1697 on the returns from Stenigot are headed "Bapt: or Born", in order to include those births that were not followed by baptism in Stenigot church: three out of five babies were not baptized in 1697-8, and none of the three born in 1698-9 were brought to the church. Likewise beginning with Benjamin Walker, the new rector of Donington-on-Bain in 1699, we have "Bapt: e Births", particularly for 1699-1700 when five of the eight born were not baptized, and 1701-2. when four of the eight born went unbaptized¹⁴. The key years seem to have been 1697-1704.

That this was a new movement away from the parish churches is confirmed by the appearance of the same couples in the list of Baptist members c.1701 and in the parish register transcripts as parents of children baptized at the parish churches up to 1690: Nathaniel and Mary Locking; John and Mary Parish of Goulceby (children baptized 1678, 1679, 1684); Theophilus and Jane Gregg of Goulceby (child baptized 1675); William and Susannah Kidd of Donington (children baptized 1686, 1687).

Asterby became the focal point of what was now a widespread church. It did not have its own resident parish incumbent; the Lockings lived here; and so did William Tuxworth who appears to have provided the regular meeting-house. This is first mentioned in the parish register transcript for 1707: "Marriages: John Tuxworth e Susanna Johnson married att the Meeting-house in Asterby Aug 1st". William Tuxworth himself was married here in 1709¹⁵. A note in the Asterby Baptist church book, based on a trust deed inspected in the 1860s, says "All that we know about the origin of Asterby Chapel or Meeting House is as follows A Mr William Tuxworth a member of the church conveyd the Chapel Stable and burying ground adjoining for the nominal sum of five pounds ten shillings The deed bears date Oct^r 1st 1722 . . .". The site and graveyard can still be seen today, though the building Donington. They openly sided with the older General Baptists after Nathaniel Locking's father-in-law vacated his living in 1696. An

was demolished earlier in our century.

The first church meeting recorded in the Asterby church book decided "we doe thinke it is Conveiant if ye whole Congregation meet once by the yeare to sit at ye lords-table together and wee have apoynted it to be at Asterbe ye first day of June", 1701. In addition four quarterly church meetings were held, arranged in February 1701/2 as "3 at Stanigod and there about and one at Tatershall and we Appoint to meet at Tatershall on the 2 munday in may . . ." In 1701¹⁶ 106 members were listed, meeting at Donington (30 members), Asterby (25 members here and at Goulceby), and Stenigot (16), with further names under Stainton (8), Benniworth and West Barkwith (6), Hameringham (4), Binbrook (6), Wragby (2), Welton (2), and one each at Martin, West Ashby, Langton, Hemingby, Haugham, and Willingham. Finally the name of Leonard Isaac of Tattershall was added, and as "Elder" he heads the signatures to church business up to 1710.

Tattershall (later Coningsby) and Asterby had their separate church books, separate services and meetings normally, and their own lists of members, yet they considered themselves united. Thus Leonard Isaac of Tattershall and Nathaniel Locking of Asterby sign most of the entries in both church books. Duly appointed representatives sent from one church were admitted to the discussions of the other church. "At a meeting held at tatershall milles upon ye 16th day of ye 11th month . . . 1706" (February 1707) "Having considered ye Letter w^h was presceted to this assembly . . . w^h was brought by ye handes of Bros Robert Aterby & Brother Joseph Watte Representitives from ye Congregation of Asterby and we have Resaued them as Bredren to be conserved in Church diseplien with us and having considered ye Righting we do think it very conuonant y^t our unyon should be continoued as formerly and funder we do agree to supply ye worke of ye ministry at hamringham and Toyinham as formely, . . ." ¹⁷ But the union must have been more often theoretical than practical, for as Tattershall wrote to Asterby in 1704, ". . . as for any other y^t y^u haue amonge y^u we haue not much acquaintance with them but we being att a distance from y^u & persons of small ability in ye world haueing not Horses to rid on . . ."

The other ancient Baptist church in the vicinity, North Willingham, was reduced to a dwindling "out meeting". It is last mentioned in a minute in the Asterby church book dated 1 January 1707/8: "The ordering the out meetings was considered and we agreed to hold a meeting at North Willingham once a month and once in 8 weeks at Hameringham and Thimelby milns". No new impetus came to North Willingham in the 1690s. The parish register transcripts mention Dissent once only: "1721 Ri[char]d James Anabapt was buried Feb: 8."¹⁸

The other out-meetings, Toynton, Thimbleby, and Hameringham, lay between Asterby and Tattershall, close to Horncastle. By the

time of the *Speculum Dioeceseos Lincolnensis*, principally compiled c.1715-18, these out-meetings and Stenigot had ceased to be meeting places. All that remained were meetings at Asterby and Donington, still associated with Tattershall, later Coningsby.

The *Speculum* gives seven Anabaptist families out of a total of 39 families at Asterby; six out of 44 families at Donington; four out of 27 at Goulceby; and one out of eleven at Stenigot. This is almost 15% of the population, and no other form of dissent is recorded. The nearby towns of Louth and Market Rasen had less than 1% of their population recorded as Anabaptist¹⁹.

Charles Warwick of Coningsby, Leonard Isaac of Tattershall, and Ralph James of North Willingham were among the founders of the Lincolnshire Association of General Baptist churches, formed in 1695²⁰. Asterby soon joined too, and the earliest dated entry in the church book is "July 30th 98 Rec^d for the Trauiling Minister and for: & toursds the charges of the representivs of the congregation and for Brother Warwick Co[nin]g[s]by to be paid at the Generall Asemble held at Lincolne August 9th: 98£3-6-6".

The "travelling minister" was the messenger appointed by the Association, Joseph Hooke of Bourne and Haconby. The Asterby church book records "The Agreements made at y^e Association at Tattershall" in May 1708, supporting Hooke and the articles of faith and union which he had brought from the General Assembly in London in 1704²¹. The Tattershall meeting was a breakaway from the Lincolnshire Association meetings always held in the county town, and now under Thomas Ullyott of Elsham as messenger in opposition to Hooke. Asterby was well represented at the reconciliation which eventually took place in 1718²². Although the controversy included the theology of the Person of Christ, it should be added that no church on either side, indeed no General Baptist church anywhere in the East Midlands dating from the 17th century, ever became Unitarian.

Nathaniel Locking was approved to become "deacon" in 1701 in place of Thomas Thorlway of Haugham, who had died: probably he was one of the members of Drewry's old church. Locking was ordained deacon by Hooke the next year, and January 1704/5 he was ordained elder (a note once calls him "pastor"). In July 1714 Hooke and two others ordained Locking "Messinger to serue y^e Churches". Now there were 117 members, still widely scattered: Goulceby and Asterby (30), Donington (25), Stenigot (4), Scamblesby (5), Belchford (11), Haugham (2), Hameringham (3), Ashby (4), Lusby (3), Forthington (3), Withcall (3), Grimblethorpe (2), Burgh-on-Bain (3), Aswardby (4), Stainton (4), Ludford (4), Tealby (2), Linwood (2), Miningsby (1), Kingerby (1), Walesby (1).

Nothing is recorded between 1714 and 1726, when Joseph Hooke ordainded Francis Ratcliffe elder for Donington and Asterby. The new list of members is reduced to 68, increasingly concentrated at Goulceby and Asterby (36), with Donington (9), Burgh (12),

Stenigot (2), Oxcombe (6), Grimblethorpe (2), and Stainton (1) the only other places represented. Never again is any village other than the two meeting places mentioned.

There would seem to have been a *coup d'etat* in the churches here and at Coningsby (replacing Tattershall since 1718). The two pages prior to Ratcliffe's accession have been cut out of the Asterby book. In 1714 there were seven Lockings in membership, in 1726 none²³. Leonard Isaac and Nathaniel Locking, both of whom must have been at least sixty years old by now, last sign the Coningsby book in 1723 and 1722 respectively; this book closes in 1728. Ratcliffe is a new name to these churches.

Nothing more is recorded until 1744, by which time Gilbert Boyce had become elder. Boyce was elder or pastor of Coningsby from 1738 to 1800, and messenger for the old Lincolnshire Association from 1753; the Association died with Boyce²⁴. After becoming messenger, Boyce was aided by Francis Walkerley and James Thornilley, "Brethren in the ministry" at Asterby in 1756. The business of these years was mostly the discipline of members, the church withdrawing its communion from individuals who "married out of y^e visible Church of Christ", the usual offence. Walkerley himself was excluded as "dead" in 1763.

It is not known where the church had been meeting at Donington, but later tradition gave it that a meeting-house was built in 1760²⁵, later modified to include a pastor's residence, and finally entirely converted into a cottage when the church ceased: this building still stands. Thornilley was buried in this meeting-house in 1782²⁵, and a member at Asterby, John Wright, was ordained at Coningsby by Boyce as the new pastor (not called elder now) in 1783. He was killed by lightning in 1802, and succeeded by John Trolley (1803-33) of Alford, "ordained Elder by Brother Burgess of fleet". Fleet was in the New Connexion of General Baptists; but Coningsby did not join until 1830, and Asterby and Donington never did affiliate to any larger body after the death of the old Association.

Membership was down to 45 in 1804. Methodist preaching places had recently been established in both Donington and Goulceby²⁶, but their leaders' names are not Baptist family names; nonetheless their presence became the more dominant evangelical and nonconformist witness. Most baptisms (averaging one a year) took place at the new church at Louth, and to the end of the story the Northgate Baptist Church, Louth, kept a close link with the two villages.

William Scott of Horncastle ended his pastorate (1834-39) embracing the "Cambelite heresy", the beginnings of the modern Churches of Christ in the Midlands having just taken place in Nottingham at the end of 1836 with a secession from the Scotch Baptist church there. The disruption was caused by Alexander Campbell's writings advocating "primitive Christianity" on New

Testament principles. In 1840 the first Churches of Christ evangelist was touring Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, including Scott's home-town²⁷: but Asterby and Donington chapels had been rescued by the members from their pastor's new interest. Early in 1840 a Louth man, Thomas Burton, began to minister; he was ordained in 1843, and continued as pastor while still living in Louth until his death, aged 55, in 1869²⁸. He did not see the old church book until 1862, so he had begun a new one in 1843, of which there is now no trace.

In 1843 there were only 40 members. Among other losses, there were four cases "Gone to America". The drift from small agricultural villages was already reducing churches like Asterby and Donington. Despite the halcyon days for Midland nonconformity in the 1840s and the evangelical revival of the early 1860s, this church was down to 34 members in 1862. The attendances returned for the 1851 census were 27 in the morning at Donington, 42 in the afternoon at Asterby, and in the evening 20 at Donington and 12 at Asterby²⁹. The parish church at Asterby averaged 30 at a morning service, plus 30 children, and 70 when the service was in the afternoon. The parish church at Donington averaged 45 plus 44 children in a morning and 90 adults in an afternoon. The Wesleyans at Goulceby had 120 on the census morning; the same afternoon they had 100 plus 50 children at Donington, and 90 in the evening. These villages were more nonconformist than Anglican, but their support was much more for Methodism³⁰.

It was still a strict communion (and closed membership) church in 1862. In the Midlands it was the old Particular Baptists who had pioneered open communion and open membership, and the General Baptists followed later. At Asterby perhaps they never did alter. Certainly it is a quite false generalisation to say, as often is said, that to have been a General Baptist church is to have had an open table and an open membership list for all sorts of Christians long ago.

Asterby and Donington chapels ceased to be used c.1912³¹. The evening services had already been dropped. The remarkable thing is not that they have died out, but that they survived so long, tenacious through 17th century persecution, 18th doctrinal controversy, 19th century economic depression and population movements. And to this day Lincolnshire has a higher proportion of its current Baptist churches claiming a 17th century origin than has any other English county.

NOTES

1. The original is at present in the care of the Rev. G. R. Hooper of Peterborough, having been given to him by Miss Marshall of Louth, whose father is said to have been a trustee of the church. The Lincolnshire Archives Committee, Lincoln, has a microfilm copy.
2. J. Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, vol. II, 347-9 (London, 1814).

3. Goulceby parish register transcript 52; with the Lincs. Archives Committee.
4. C. Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research*, 1550-1641, vol. I, 273 (Cambridge, 1912).
5. The names of subscribers are reproduced in *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. II, pp. 246-8.
6. G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence*, vol. I, 571 (London, 1911).
7. E. B. Underhill (ed.), *Confessions of Faith, and other Public Documents, illustrative of the history of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century*, 356 (London, 1854).
8. G. Lyon Turner, *op. cit.*, vol. I, 579, 584, 585.
9. Coningsby Church Book, 3, 9, 11, 17; at Baptist Church House.
10. Asterby parish register transcript 66; with the Lincs. Archives Committee.
11. Goulceby p. r. t. 80.
12. Asterby p. r. t. 81.
13. Goulceby p. r. t. 82.
14. Stenigot and Donington-on-Bain parish register transcripts are with the Lincs. Archives Committee.
15. Goulceby p. r. t. 93, 94.
16. The list is undated. It must be after Dec. 1699 as it does not include William Peters, a Dissenter whose burial that month is in Goulceby p.r.t. 86; but it does include Thorlway, whose death occurred before the church meeting in March 1700/1.
17. Coningsby Church Book, 32f.
18. North Willingham p. r. t. 102; with the Lincs. Archives Committee.
19. *Speculam Dioecesis Lincolnensis Part I*, 1705-1723, 7, 35, 42, 52, 84, 97, 116, 142, reprinted by Lincoln Record Society, vol. 4 (Lincoln, 1913).
20. A. Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists*, vol. I, 318f. (London, 1818).
21. *Ibid.*, vol. II, 99-101; cf W. T. Whitley (ed), *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptists*, vol. I, 83, 101, 107, 112, 122, 130 (London, 1910).
22. *Ibid.*, vol. II, 103f.
23. A namesake of one of these Lockings, Thomas, was connected with the early years of the Lincoln Particular Baptist Church (now Mint Street): see an application for a licence, 1770, with the Lincs. Archives Committee, Diss. I/1770/2.
24. A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 111, 325; W. T. Whitley, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 94, 95, 97.
25. *General Baptist Magazine*, January 1861, 29f.
26. Applications for licences with the Lincs. Archives Committee, Diss. 2/1795/5, 2/1804/27. Methodism reached Donington as early as 1759: see Diss. I/1759/4 (for "Independants", but signed by known Methodists).
27. A. C. Watters, *History of the British Churches of Christ*, 31, 33, 36 (Indianapolis, 1948).
28. Tablet in the Eastgate Union Church, Louth, removed from the Northgate Baptist Church when it closed c.1925-30.
29. Public Record Office, H.O. 129/429.2.38, 431.3.8.
30. P. R. O., H.O. 129/429.2.34-37, 431.3.6,7.
31. Information supplied by Mr. Arthur Moody of Louth.