

THE BAPTIST CHURCHES AND THEIR MINISTERS
IN THE 1790s
RIPPON'S BAPTIST ANNUAL REGISTER

No other denomination has such a fine contemporary record of its churches and their ministers as exists for the 1790s in Rippon's *Baptist Annual Register*. The endeavour to provide exhaustive and detailed information was a remarkable enterprise, part of the fresh, confident life which had burgeoned during the previous thirty years and was now showing itself in the formation and speedy growth of churches throughout the country, as well as in vigorous mission and interest across the oceans. A closely similar stirring of new life is visible, more at large, in the *Evangelical Magazine*, which also, like the *Register*, embraces missionary work overseas; but the particulars gathered by the *Magazine's* sponsors for a survey of 'The State of Religion in England' (or the fragments of this which are all that are preserved) remain in manuscript.¹ For the Baptists, Rippon published the details as they came in, expanding them and correcting errors of identification, location and spelling as he went along. If his lists and annotations of them are thus somewhat unsystematic and demand care in interpretation, the untidiness also conveys a sense of something growing under one's hand. The important thing is that Rippon published them.

He put out two lists, one in his first volume (1790-3) and another, more extensive, in volume three (1798-1801) of the *Register*. The second list does not supersede the first, not only because owing to the interval names of ministers are often different but because in the second list several additional churches are given, while a few no longer appear. Conflation of the two lists, which Rippon arranged alphabetically, within counties also in alphabetical order, produces the following breakdown:

Bedfordshire	18	Lincolnshire	5
Berkshire	9	Middlesex	8
Buckinghamshire	10	London & Southwark	27
Cambridgeshire	9	Norfolk	14
Cheshire	3	Northamptonshire	20
Cornwall	3	Northumberland	2
Cumberland	3	Nottinghamshire	3
Derbyshire	2	Oxfordshire	5
Devon	14	Rutland	1
Dorset	3	Shropshire	4
Durham	3	Somerset	15
Essex	13	Staffordshire	6
Gloucestershire	16	Suffolk	6
Hampshire	9	Surrey	7
Herefordshire	2	Sussex	9
Hertfordshire	9	Warwickshire	8
Huntingdonshire	7	Westmorland	0
Kent	19	Wiltshire	16
Lancashire	19	Worcestershire	12
Leicestershire	9	Yorkshire	31

This made a total of 379 churches.

In Rippon's second list the churches are provided with serial numbers, reaching a total of 361. The reason for this lower figure is that four churches (Falmouth, a second church in Folkestone, Ryton in Warwickshire, and a second church in Leeds) are said to be extinct and two (a second church in Kettering and one in Sheffield) to be dissolved, while twelve churches in the first list (half of them in London) are now silently omitted.

In the 1790s Baptist churches were thus to be found in every county in England save Westmorland, but were few in Cumberland, Northumberland and Co. Durham. Apart from London & Southwark and Yorkshire, they were most numerous in Lancashire, Kent (an ancient stronghold), Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire, and Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Devon. Bedford, Wantage, Lymington, Portsmouth, Ashford, Folkestone, Woolwich, Manchester, Norwich, Kettering, Bristol, Birmingham, Pershore, Hull and Leeds each at one time or another had two churches, but the second church was sometimes very small and did not always survive. During the 1790s these churches that came to an end were being rapidly replaced by new foundations elsewhere, in the year 1796 as many as nine.

The number of churches in Rippon's lists which do not appear in the current *Baptist Handbook* is about 90 (though some do not appear not because they no longer exist but because they are Strict Baptist). A study of extinct churches and of the variety of reasons for their dissolution would be illuminating. Whatever the conditions to which dissolution was a response, these could change, so that dissolution was not always permanent: after a few years of non-existence, a church could be re-formed in the same locality.

The churches of the General Baptist New Connexion (32) and their pastors (22) Rippon lists separately. Situated in London and no more than ten counties, these churches were rarely in the same towns or villages as the Particular Baptist churches. Three Seventh-Day Baptist churches, two in London with their own ministers and one without a pastor in Gloucestershire, to which the Tewkesbury minister (and earlier his uncle, the minister at Upton-on-Severn) preached on a Saturday as well as to his own people on a Sunday, find a place in the main lists; also the church at Hag Gate, Colne, in Lancashire, the members of which 'somewhat differ from the other Baptist churches in England', but in what way is not stated.

In the main lists the number of pastors is 379. The figure is identical with the number of churches, but this is coincidental. A few churches had a second minister, or assistant, who might be the minister's son, as at Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire. Several churches had no pastor, or none recorded. Some were under the care of a minister not (or not yet) ordained, or of a candidate for the ministry, or of a gifted brother who exercised oversight: these are named but are placed within brackets, and are not included in the total above, which is of pastors. It is said that in the eighteenth century a man

would often remain in the same pastorate for a considerable period, even for life. Rippon's lists show that this was sometimes the case, but also that a brief pastorate was not uncommon. By comparing the later list with the earlier the removal of a minister from one church to another can sometimes be traced, usually within the same neighbourhood but occasionally to a different part of the country, as with John Sharp, who left Manchester for Bristol (Pithay), or Thomas Edmonds, who went from Sutton-in-the-Elms in Leicestershire to Upton-on-Severn in Worcestershire. The main impression the lists make is of names that appear and then disappear again: a large number of those in the earlier list are not in the later. It is possible that the 1790s saw more deaths of ministers than did the average decade, as well as more ordinations. It was certainly a time of rapid change. Twenty-one of the ministers were later deemed worthy of inclusion in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: six of these were in London, three in Northamptonshire, two in Gloucestershire and two in Norfolk.

Ordination, it is evident, was conceived of as important. Ordinations are recorded in both volumes, in lists arranged in chronological order as well as in annotations to the list of churches. The order followed in the service, which was virtually invariable, continued to be traditional into the present century. In many cases the laying on of hands is mentioned, but in about as many it is not; in some of the latter cases reference is made to 'the right hand of fellowship'. One ordination is stated (not by Rippon) to have been *without* imposition of hands, that of William Hoddy in 1795 at Bildeston in Suffolk. This was one of a number of churches that observed 'mixed communion', and, although Hoddy was a Baptist drawn from another Baptist church in the same county, only one Baptist minister, and he not from Suffolk, took part, the other five ministers being all of them Independents. So preponderant a number of Independents was altogether exceptional, but for an Independent minister to take part in the ordination of a Baptist minister was not uncommon. Occasionally a gifted brother is mentioned as taking part. The ministers present were almost always from other churches in the same county, but some ministers of standing nationally, such as Ryland, Fuller, Sutcliff, Caleb Evans, Robert Hall, and Richard Hopper of Nottingham are to be found beyond their own area, sometimes together: when Samuel Pearce was ordained at Cannon Street, Birmingham, in 1790, with imposition of hands on five deacons as well as himself, the pastor of the second church in Birmingham was the only Warwickshire minister who took part, the others being Evans, Fuller, Hall and the minister of the church at Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire; at the ordination of John Saffery at Salisbury in 1791 Evans again took part, with the ministers of Bristol (Pithay), Frome, Portsmouth and Lynton, not one of them being from Wiltshire; and at Carey's ordination in the same year at Leicester the ministers were none of them from Leicestershire, for they were Ryland, Sutcliff, Fuller, Pearce and Hopper of Nottingham.

While the ministers of a county thus met not infrequently for ordinations, a meeting over a wider area was provided annually, in May or June, by the local Association. These meetings, their breviate (or minutes) and the letters they issued are regularly recorded by Rippon. Churches in the North being scarce, only a handful of ministers attended the Northern Association, which because of the difficult terrain was divided into two districts, Eastern and Western; nor did either the York & Lancashire Association or the Norfolk & Suffolk fare much better: churches were numerous, in Yorkshire particularly, but associating ministers very few. The Kent & Sussex Association seems, conversely, to have been better supported by the ministers than by the churches from which they came. Three Associations were strong: the Northamptonshire (covering the East Midlands), the Midland (covering the West Midlands), and the Western (Gloucestershire and the South-West). At each meeting a Moderator was elected *ad hoc* - Ryland, Sutcliff and Caleb Evans appear again in this capacity -, also a Scribe; sometimes the same man held both offices. Visitors from other Associations were welcome, nor only such leaders as have been before us already: ministers from Truro and Plymouth attend a meeting of the Midland Association at Ross-on-Wye, the pastor of Diss in Norfolk a meeting of the Kent & Essex held at Tenterden, the Portsmouth minister a meeting of the Western Association at Wotton-under-Edge, which on another occasion, meeting in Bath, invited the local Independent minister, William Jay, to 'begin in prayer'.

Two of these Associations, the Northamptonshire and the Kent & Sussex, have been studied in some detail. What Rippon's *Register* does, for the Associations as for the churches in general, is to provide the means for a wider survey. He has perhaps not received the credit that he deserves. Nor are his volumes mere scaffolding. At first his lists of churches look lifeless, and the other material - memoirs of deceased ministers, lists of publications, pages relative to India and America - appears a jumble and far from easy to follow; but as the personality of the compiler makes itself felt, the bones stir unexpectedly into life. The fact that the *Register* is, in some ways, the work of an amateur, not a professional, yields the sense that these churches, with their ministers, are neither statistics nor waxworks but human beings, alive and open to error but also stirred by new vision and new hope. Who but Rippon would compose such entries for an Index as 'Hague, rev. W. of Scarborough, loving and beloved', 'Crabtree, rev. W. feeble, but fruitful', 'Dracup, rev. John, finished well'?

NOTES

- 1 For 'The State of Religion in Northamptonshire' (1793), sent in by Andrew Fuller, see *Baptist Quarterly*, XXIX, 4 (Oct. 1981), pp.177-9
- 2 *Evangelical Magazine*, 1795, p.426; cited by John Browne, *History of Congregationalism and Memorial of the Churches in Norfolk & Suffolk*, 1877, p.574, note †, a work the pages of which (547-90) on the Baptist churches in these two counties form a useful supplement to the *Register*.

- 3 T. S. H. Elwyn, *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association, 1964*; F. Buffard, *Kent & Sussex Baptist Associations, [1964]*. For discussion of wider issues, cf. my 'Assembly and Association in Dissent, 1689-1831', in *Studies in Church History*, vii (1971), 289-309.
- 4 Rippon's diary for 1759-60 (I h 26), a letter of 1793 to Sutcliff (II a 18.148) and other Rippon papers (II c 6) are among MSS. in the Congregational Library (now at Dr Williams's Library and in process of being recatalogued).

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REVIEW

SOME RECENT LOCAL HISTORIES

The Beechen Grove Story. A History of Beechen Grove Baptist Church, Watford by Walter Bennewith. 1983. Available at £1.45 from Mr A. F. Rogers, 40 The Avenue, Watford, Herts., WD1 3NS.

Slightly 'dated' in that it is a reprint of articles originally written for the Beechen Grove magazine 25 years ago, this is nevertheless a highly useful summary of the church's history, beginning with Baptist origins in Watford in the 17th century. Bennewith is as entertaining as he is informative, and always manages to relate the local scene to the wider context of religious and social developments. He is also able to tell the story as an education in Baptist belief and practice - highly necessary these days. The continuity that can be discerned in the character of the church for over three centuries is quite striking as told here - firm conviction on essentials, openness to the future and an often prophetic address to the community at large.

The Baptist Story. South Street Baptist Church, Wellington by Pam Marshall. 1983.

The booklet was written to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the present church building at South Street, but the story of this Somerset church reaches back nearly two and a half centuries. Anglican-dissenting feuds feature well in the story, not least in the 19th century. As so often with local histories, the author has had to cope with the unevenness in quantity and quality of first-hand records at different periods in the history. But she refers to 'very detailed records' by the son of Rev. G. W. Humphreys (minister 1862-1900) and W. D. Haddon, a deacon. We ought to know more about such material, and it would add greatly to the value of local histories if full bibliographical details were included.

From Friars Lane to Castle Street. A Fragment of Inverness History by J. S. Fisher. Inverness Baptist Church, 1983. Available at £1 (including postage) from the author at 16 Overton Avenue, Inverness IV3 6RR.