

THE APPROACH OF THE NEW CONNEXION
GENERAL BAPTISTS
TO A MIDLAND INDUSTRIAL TOWN

The New Connexion of General Baptists began as a village movement and, as far as the East Midlands are concerned, remained very much a movement in villages and small towns for the first half century of its life. There is little indication that the early General Baptists in this area had a vision of a new age of rapidly growing industrial towns where the battle of the next century for the allegiance of the working classes would be waged and that they went out of their way to concentrate their efforts on these towns. What actually happened was that, in due course, General Baptist preachers went to these towns with their message, as they had gone to the villages, and, as the towns themselves increased in size, so the churches increased in size and number.

In the cases of both Nottingham and Derby a General Baptist church appeared toward the end of the eighteenth century, owing its foundation to people from a village church. In both cases this church became the active central church of that town and opened preaching stations in what were then villages on the perimeter as opportunity offered or where it was seen that a growing population presented a challenge. These peripheral villages in due course became first outer, then inner, suburbs.

In Nottingham the founding of the General Baptist church took place almost by chance. William Fox, a journeyman framework knitter (a self-employed workman making hosiery on a stocking frame) and a member of the General Baptist church in the village of Kirkby Woodhouse, moved to Nottingham in 1773 and licensed his dwelling house for public worship. In due course, a small church came into existence, its members meeting in a garret of Fox's house in Boot Lane. The next year Fox was ordained preacher. The society survived vicissitudes, including the exclusion of Fox himself for drunkenness, and in due course a small meeting room was rented in Jack Knutter's Lane (now Halifax Place).

The event which brought it to the notice of the town, however, was the execution of Cooper Hall for robbing the mail. Two General Baptist ministers, Pollard of Loughborough and Tarratt of Kegworth, and several church members visited Hall in jail and he showed signs of a spiritual conversion. They accompanied him to the place of public execution and both ministers preached to the assembled crowd. Of the two sermons, Hall heard only that of Pollard. After this unique Baptist service - with an execution in the middle - the church grew rapidly. A small chapel was purchased and in 1784 a settled minister, Robert Smith, was appointed.

In 1799 a new and larger chapel was built in Plumtre Place, Stoney Street, which remained the home of the church for eighty prosperous years. This church eventually attained a membership of over 1200, scattered over several congregations. It became the largest church in the denomination and was described by Dan Taylor as 'the glory of the New Connexion'.(1) It engaged in widespread evangelism and church planting and became the mother or grandmother church of

numerous others founded in and around Nottingham during the nineteenth century, during which period the population of the town increased from about 40,000 to 300,000.

The way these churches came into existence varied. Sometimes the first approach was by open-air preaching during the summer months, followed, when winter came, by the renting of a room. Sometimes the rented room was a barn, as at *Beeston* where Thomas Rogers, assistant minister at Stoney Street, joined with a couple from the Ilkeston church in 1802 to conduct services in a barn belonging to the Methodists. A house was licensed for meetings two years later and in 1806 a chapel was built. Sometimes meetings were held in a shop, as at *Radford*; sometimes in a private house, as at *Bulwell* and *Hyson Green*. Often the house in which a branch church began was the home of a church member who had removed to a new district. In the case of *Mansfield*, a neighbouring town to Nottingham, V. Taylor, a framework knitter who moved there to escape the Luddite riots in Nottingham, held meetings among the stocking frames in his workshop.(2)

The church in the suburb of *Old Basford* was founded as a result of Stoney Street preachers visiting the village in 1796 and preaching, first in the streets of what was then a country village, then as winter approached, in a hired room. There followed the building of a small chapel in 1802 and a much larger one in 1827. Sometimes the first approach was the opening of a Sunday School, as at *Prospect Place*, *Radford*, and *Carrington*. More often the Sunday School was established a little later as at *Old Basford*, though still at an early stage. These Sunday Schools rapidly attracted as many scholars as the room would hold. By 1812 the Old Basford school had 32 teachers and 148 scholars, indicating a very active church community.

Arnold, with a population of 3000, was the largest of the growing villages on the periphery of Nottingham. Adam Taylor refers to the building of a meeting house there in 1809, though nothing more has been discovered about this.(3) The Arnold church was re-formed in 1817 when a room for a meeting was offered.

In 1805 John Garton, the owner of a large bleach works, opened his house for preaching in *Bulwell*, then a village of 1500 inhabitants but destined to increase its population tenfold during the century and to become part of the borough of Nottingham. The Baptist church obtained its first chapel in 1810, largely at the expense of Garton, a chapel which was replaced by a larger one on two occasions during the century.

Most of these churches were first established as preaching places by groups of laymen belonging to an organisation called the *Stoney Street Preachers' Plan*, the forerunner of the present *Nottingham and District Baptist Preachers' Association*. Its members were mainly working men seeking to extend the Kingdom of God among their own kind and they did so very successfully. In the early days only occasionally was a more wealthy person involved, as at *Bulwell*, though these occasions increased in number during the century as some of the craftsmen became factory owners. In this they were unlike the Particular Baptists whose principal Nottingham church, *Friar Lane* (later *George Street*), where Carey preached his 'deathless sermon', had many wealthy industrialists among its membership throughout the years and provided Nottingham with its mayors for a third of the century and with a large proportion of the councillors for most of the century.

Doubtless for the same reason, there is no evidence that the

General Baptists engaged in organised social work to any great degree during the first half of the century. They belonged to the class on whose behalf social work might be undertaken and, except on a personal level, were in no position to do much in this direction. The exception to this was educational work. This was the period in which Sunday Schools came into existence, followed by the church-organised *British* and *National* Schools. Stoney Street was a pioneer in supporting a British School; other churches followed suit and all had Sunday Schools whose subjects were reading, writing and religious instruction, and sometimes arithmetic, and provided the only schooling most of the members would receive. Stoney Street, however, had a Benevolent Society for the relief of individuals in distress in the first half of the century. After the middle of the century, General Baptist churches, led by *Mansfield Road*, which was founded in 1849, took a share in seeking to relieve poverty through such agencies as Benevolent Societies, Soup Kitchens, Dorcas Societies, Blanket Loan Societies, etc. and took up special collections for the relief of poverty on special occasions, e.g. periods of trade depression. Mansfield Road had a society with the intriguing and self-explanatory name of *Little Coats* and the records of its Benevolent Society sometimes indicate a care for the sick and dying comparable with that shown by some of the mediaeval Roman Catholic orders. (4)

The General Baptists gradually began to take part in social and political issues, local and national, though by no means as early or on as wide a scale as the Particular Baptists during the first half of the century. William Felkin, first a General though later a Particular Baptist, factory owner and four times mayor of Nottingham, was very active in improving the conditions of factory workers, prefacing his work with careful research at a period when this was most unusual. (5) On a lower social scale, a number of individuals were Chartists; their churches did not officially give them much support but neither did they show serious disapproval. Some churches, especially in mining areas, provided trade union members and sometimes officials, probably in greater numbers than can easily be discovered. Occasionally also a mine manager was provided by a General Baptist Church - examples are Newthorpe and Ilkeston.

The work of the central church, Stoney Street, in founding these suburban churches, did not end with the building of a chapel. The branch congregations needed help and support for a long time and they were considered part of the Stoney Street Church for up to two generations. Local administration work was undertaken by the local group but such matters as the admission and exclusion of members and the calling of ministers were dealt with by the full church meeting which took place at Stoney Street. However, recommendations from the local congregations relating to their own affairs were invariably accepted. The minister of Stoney Street was considered the minister of the branch churches and he officiated at important functions such as the opening of chapels and the administration of the sacraments, especially communion. Eventually these branch churches became independent of Stoney Street and appointed their own minister, some, e.g. Beeston, almost immediately, but most of them only after one or two generations.

To summarise the situation in Nottingham, although the founding of the original church differed in no way from the founding of any village or small town church, the expansion of General Baptist life into

what were to become the different areas of a large city, was the result of a vigorous and sustained policy of outreach in which the laity played a very active part and in which opportunities were not only taken as they presented themselves but were actively created. A preliminary examination of the situation in Derby gives the impression that what happened there was very similar.

NOTES

References to individual churches are from the minute books of those churches, either in the possession of the church concerned or with the Nottingham County Archivist. Reference has also been made to the author's Nottingham University M.Phil. thesis, 1972, *The Nottinghamshire Baptists*.

- 1 *Baptist Repository*, 1804, p.50.
- 2 Stoney Street Register and Mansfield Road Church Records, in Nottingham University Archives; *Baptist Repository*, 1844, p.93.
- 3 Adam Taylor, *History of the General Baptists*, 1818, Vol.2, p.249, and *Baptist Repository*, 1823, p.382.
- 4 Examples of entries in the *Case and Minute Book*, 1850, of the Benevolent Society of Mansfield Road General Baptist Church:
 'Mr Birch, Bear Court, Mansfield Road, was given 2/- a week. He was extremely deaf and it was doubtful if he heard an entire sentence of the conversation: ignorant, unable to read: nothing satisfactory to report'.
 'Mr Warsop, Nelson Street, given 2/- a week. Very grateful, not likely to live long: since dead.'
 'William Sparks, 45 Millstone Lane: first found in a wretched state of mind: died in possession of peace with God'.
 'William Boulding, 7 Water Lane: dead: very ignorant: wife neglected him: traced: taken to house of relative who gave up her own bed to him and soothed his dying pillow'.
 Both men and women took part in visiting, going in pairs to those of their own sex.
- 5 Reports: *Employment of Children in Factories*, 1833, and *Children's Employment Commission*, 1844; in both Felkin was an important witness. See also author's thesis, *The Nottinghamshire Baptists*.

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ALL CHANGE

An East End of London Baptist Church in the Nineteenth Century

The East End of London can be defined as an area bounded by the City in the west, the River Lea in the east, the River Thames in the south, and Hackney in the north. In the mid-eighteenth century, when Abraham Booth became pastor of the Particular Baptist church founded in 1633 and now meeting in Little Prescott Street, most of this area was still covered with green fields.(1) Although the Prescott Street Meeting House was only a few hundred yards from the Tower, it was also less than half a mile from open fields. Stepney, Bethnal Green and Hackney were still villages; continuous building along the north bank of the