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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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### SACRED STONES

Balancing History and Hope has from Old Testament times been a task of crucial discernment for the people of God. Whilst the Deuteronomist [ch.6] calls for a careful remembering of the heritage in all its totality, with proper contexting of human achievement within the overall providence of God, Isaiah [ch.43] calls upon a people who have only a history to bolster their nostalgic self-regard to stop looking back in order to open the eyes to a God who is to perform a new Exodus. And so it is with our material inheritance: inheritance and missionary purpose have to be carefully balanced.

To help us in this process C. F. Stell's third volume, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses in the North of England*, [HMSO 1994, 348pp, £65], which covers

Cheshire, Cumberland, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland, Westmoreland and Yorkshire, comes as a very welcome addition to his two earlier volumes. Here are to be found descriptions of the elegant legacy of Presbyterianism growing into oligarchic and urbane Unitarianism, embracing an elaborate Gothic in the process. The mostly domestic-scaled meeting houses of the Society of Friends, spreading out from their Cumberland heartland, contrast with the monumental scale of the architecture financed by the dissenting captains of industry of the North of England, whose identification would make a helpful addition. But all in all what we are offered is a rich celebration of dissenting achievement and aspiration, beautifully illustrated by drawing and by photography. In addition to the contributions of the main denominations, Moravian communities at Fulneck and Fairfield are included, as are examples of the chapels of the Swedenborgians, Churches of Christ, Catholic Apostolic, together with Edgar Wood's Arts and Crafts Christian Scientist Chapel at Victoria Park, Manchester, not to mention the great town Sunday Schools of the North West, such as the now preserved school at Roe Street, Macclesfield. The focus of the study is pre-1800 with no pre-1850 church knowingly omitted, and with rather more random recording of chapels up to 1914, so that it cannot be taken as a complete guide to chapels which are listed for preservation in the area. A depressing comparison depicts side by side three Failsworth Unitarian chapels, Queen Anne of 1698, Gothic of 1878, and flat-roof nondescript of 1975 which could as easily contain a garage or an electricity sub-station as a place of worship for Almighty God: without extended comment, Mr Stell's camera lens is eloquent beyond words.

The publication of the volume is timely, with the old exemption for ecclesiastical buildings to secure listed building consent being replaced by a new scheme. Under this the main denominations, under the scrutiny of the Department of the Environment and the amenity societies, covenant to offer a system of self-administration, as the established church has always done, wrestling seriously with the balancing of contemporary mission and respect for history and heritage, so far as chapels for whom they are trustees are concerned: those not in trust or belonging to other denominations will have to seek listed building consent through their respective local authorities. At the same time the formation of the Historic Chapels Trust to parallel the Redundant Churches Fund offers a way of securing for the future the most outstanding chapels which have become separated from an ongoing worshipping constituency. The moral dilemmas facing historic dissent if such a Trust is in the future to be funded by the National Lottery might make a nice issue for theological students of a philosophical frame of mind to debate.

Jewels of Baptist architecture recorded in Mr Stell's volume are the timber-framed Strict Baptist Chapel at Great Warford [Cheshire], with its burial ground several miles away at Mottram St Andrew, the former Johnsonian Baptist Chapel at Arthill near Lymm [Cheshire], the chapel at Hamsterley [County Durham], replete with box pews, and the restored sanctuary at Goodshaw Chapel [Lancashire], now in the custodianship of the Department of the Environment. Baptists are less conspicuous amongst the larger churches financed by wealthy mill-owners or pit-owners - perhaps their theology makes them unattractive to industrial godfathers.

Chapels like George Baines' Cannon Street, Accrington, are listed but not illustrated. In that sense the new Baptist Listed Building Advisory Committee may have a less exacting task than some of her sister denominations in that Baptists are possibly carrying forward less unsustainable plant than others. There must be a sadness that so many entries are described as 'Former' Baptist Church [for example, the Westgate, Sion Jubilee and Trinity Chapels in Bradford] - Baptists are not alone in this. Elsewhere the word 'Demolished' plus date concludes the entry. Clearly all through dissenting history congregations have had to move to those areas where congregations can be gathered and effective mission undertaken, at the expense of gracious buildings which can no longer be sustained in changed circumstances. James Cubitt's fine romanesque Osborne Road, Jesmond, well illustrated, is one such recent loss. Sutcliffe and Sutcliffe's fine 1899 suite of buildings at Birchcliffe, Hebden Bridge, is another example of a piece of denominational heritage, especially because of the association of Birchcliffe in former years with Dan Taylor, that has fallen outside denominational care. More chapel buildings have survived in the Calder Valley than present day congregations can hope to support: neighbouring Heptonstall Slack has helpfully been saved through the aegis of a specially created trust. After surveying so many losses, it is good to encounter at Salendine Nook [Huddersfield] an early Victorian chapel still in use, especially since this congregation has played such a crucial part in Yorkshire Baptist life. As produced, this extremely useful encyclopedia is not likely to get far beyond library purchases. It is very much to be hoped that less costly county sections will be produced for individual purchase, as has happened with earlier volumes.

*Halls of Zion: Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Norfolk* [Janet Ede, Norma Virgoe, and Tom Williamson, Centre for East Anglian Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, 70pp, £6-95] is a valuable study in its own right and serves as a taster, for Mr Stell's next volume is to be on Eastern England. The fruit of group research, the organization is different: a 42-page essay chronicles the development of Dissenting buildings and associated artifacts in useful contextual fashion, with helpful focus on monuments, chapel china, and tombstones. Helpful maps indicate the location of chapels in relation to village development, including full illustration of the various buildings associated with the Meeting Hill Baptist Chapel in Worstead: chapel, burial ground, school, schoolmaster's, minister's and caretaker's houses and six almshouses. The Baptist chapels here illustrated, and listed in a 22-page gazetteer, are not great town churches but substantial village chapels, the earliest of which date back to the seventeenth century, but I am glad that the authors found space to illustrate one 'Tin Tab' which, built and rebuilt as new churches were planted and developed, are truer to the theology of tabernacle than those neo-classic buildings which were anything but portable.

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## REVIVAL AND RENEWAL IN BAPTIST LIFE

*MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE: Response to the Payne Memorial Essay Competition 1996, on this theme, has so far been slow. For full details, see the inside back cover.*