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St. Mary's, Norwich The Origins of the Church

THE oldest document belonging to St. Mary's is a Church Book which remained in use until the time of the settlement of Rees David as pastor in 1778.

What appears to be the earliest entry is a list of 46 names headed:

"The number of the names of the Baptised Church in the City of Norwich and the Country joined together walking in the Fellowship and order of the gospel."

The list is not dated but was made before 1691. It is headed by the name of Henry Austine and includes that of William Wainford: two names which enable us to trace back the history of the Church to its origins.

Three hundred years ago, in 1669, Archbishop Sheldon called upon the diocesan Bishops to make returns of the illegal religious assemblies in their territories. Edward Reynolds, Bishop of Norwich, reported on 81 such conventicles in his diocese.¹ The first on his list is an Independent meeting of 300 people at the house of John Tofts in St. Clements, Norwich (now known as the Old Meeting): the second which met in another of Toft's houses where one Daniel Bradford lived was an Anabaptist meeting of about 30, its heads and teachers being the said Daniel Bradford and Henry Austin a dyer. This entry is the first positive record we have of the existence of the Church now called St. Mary's and it is because of this entry that we celebrate the tercentenary of 1669 though it will become plain that the Church came into being some years before that date.

The three names so far mentioned, Henry Austine, Daniel Bradford and William Wainford, had all previously been members of the "Old Meeting" Independent Church and Daniel Bradford had been one of its founders. The spiritual pilgrimage of these three elucidates the origins of St. Mary's.

Norwich from the time of Queen Elizabeth had been strongly, indeed fiercely, protestant. In 1635 Matthew Wren became Bishop of Norwich and set about implementing Laud's reforms in his diocese. He enforced the wearing of surplices. The efforts of his predecessors for 70 years had had so little success that his enemies could claim that it was:

"a thing not used before in that diocese and much offensive to the people as a scandalous innovation."²

* A paper read to the Baptist Historical Society at the Annual General Meeting, 28th April, 1969.

He interfered with the arrangements for the Lord's Supper. Since 1559 the Table had usually stood East and West in the middle of the chancel so that those partaking of Communion could gather round it in the chancel benches. Wren ordered that the table be set altar-wise against the East wall and kept in that position. He proceeded against all ministers who failed to obey his injunctions. Of these the most important to our story is the Rev. William Bridge, Rector of St. Peter Hungate, Norwich. Wren deprived him of his cures and excommunicated him for refusal to obey his injunctions. Bridge escaped to Holland. Wren informed Laud who reported to the King:

"One Mr. Bridge, rather than he would conform, hath left his Lectures and two cures and is gone into Holland."

King Charles wrote in the margin: "Let him go, we are well berid of him."³

In Norwich an important proportion of the population had never adhered to the Anglican Church. They were French and Dutch refugees from the Low Countries who had been allowed their own churches on the Reformed model from the time of their settlement in 1565 onwards. Laud tried, without much success, to limit this privilege to actual immigrants and to make their children amenable to the Anglican Church. Peter Heylin tells us that:

"Many Dutchmen with their wives and children [forsook] the kingdom, who having got wealth enough in England, chose rather to go back to their native countries than to be obliged to resort to, their parish churches as by the Archbishop's Injunctions they were bound to do."⁴

According to Heylin the re-emigration of the Dutch proved an example which was followed by English lay people. Many went from Norwich and Yarmouth—we know of over 50 who later returned. Their own account of their exodus can scarcely be bettered:

"The urging of Popish Ceremonies & divers innovated injunctions, in y^e worship and service of God by Bpp. Wren and his Instruments, y^e suspending and silencing of divers godly ministers and y^e persecuting of godly men and women caused divers of y^e godly in Norwich and Yarmouth and other places, to remove, and to passe over into Holland, to enjoy y^e liberty of their conscience in God's worship, and to free themselves from humane Inventions."⁵

The Norwich contingent settled at Rotterdam and became members of the English Church there. It is necessary now to say something about the English churches in Holland. In 1621 James I had given a commission for an assembly of the ministers of British congregations in Holland "as is used in the Walloon churches."⁶ This was not universally approved but we find George Carleton, the Bishop of Chichester, writing a few years later that he is surprised at the opposition to this Classical Assembly "it being conformable to the church government" of Holland.⁷ Naturally Laud was totally opposed to it and sought to bring these churches under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London.

But many of the British ministers in Holland were more radical than the Dutch Calvinists. The most learned and eminent of their number, William Ames, rector of the University of Franeker, wrote a book entitled *Medulla Theologica* describing the Church in terms of what we should call Independency or Congregationalism—the distinctive feature being that all its members were to be personally committed to Jesus Christ and His cause—

“a society of the faithful joined by a special bond among themselves in order constantly to practice the communion of saints.”

At Rotterdam under Hugh Peter who became their pastor in 1628 the English Church adopted Ames’s principles. Those of his people who were willing joined together in covenant and the rest were excluded from the communion of the church. In 1634 it was agreed to move the staple of the English Merchant Adventurers from Delft to Rotterdam. The merchants brought with them a chaplain licensed by the Bishop of London. The Rotterdam magistrates provided a church building and agreed that no other English church should be tolerated. This agreement they seem to have had no intention of implementing for they continued to pay Peter’s salary. We find one of the merchants writing indignantly:

“when the Prince of Orange went into the field and all the churches were sent unto by the States to pray for success Mr. Peters’ and Dampont’s English Church was sent to as the English Church and the Company’s Church was neglected as if theirs were the only church allowed by authority and ours an obscure or schismatic.”⁸

Hugh Peter left for New England in 1635 and in the following year the Rotterdam Church received the influx of Norwich and Yarmouth refugees. William Bridge was not long afterwards called to minister to the church.

In 1642 the fateful parliament known to us as the Long Parliament was returned. The exiles in Rotterdam wrote of it:

“After ye glad tydings of a hopefull Parliamt. called and convened in England was reported to ye Church aforesayd in Rotterdam, divers of ye Church whose hearts God stirred up to further ye light (they now saw) by all lawfull means in their native Country, not without hope of enjoying liberty there: After much advising wth ye Church and seeking God for direction, they returned wth ye assent, approbation & prayers of ye Church, into England, wth resolution to gather into a Church wth all convenient speed, where God should please to direct them, ye Church also promising to give their assent under handwriting for their inChurching whensoever notice should be given of ye present probability of ye same to ye sayd Church.”⁹

In November 1642 they met in Norwich when:

“Christopher Stygold freely offered himselfe to ye work of ye Lord in building a house to his name, and made a motion to John Eyre, to agree & joyne with him in yt service, who gladly

embraced it and agreed with him. . . . And they further moved ye same thing to Daniel Bradford . . ." [& 6 others] "who all agreed in ye same matter."¹⁰

It was some time before the dismissal from Rotterdam was duly received and it was not until June of 1643 that those who had offered themselves for the task met with William Bridge in Norwich and entered into covenant together incorporating themselves into a church. Daniel Bradford, however, was not present. "At this time Daniel Bradford was in ye Armie."¹⁰

The civil war was running its course and Yarmouth was adjudged a safer location for the church "in regard of ye dangerous times," the Norwich brethren acquiescing rather unwillingly.

Daniel Bradford was back from the wars in October when he was admitted to membership.

Under the arrangements then made the Norwich members had to make a twenty-mile journey to enjoy Church fellowship, a circumstance which they could not be expected to find satisfactory. In May 1644 nine of them, Daniel Bradford among them, wrote a long letter asking formal consent to the gathering of a Church in Norwich. This was promptly granted and the Norwich Church was duly incorporated in June 1644. From the beginning Daniel Bradford was a leading member of this fellowship. In 1651 he was one of eight brethren appointed "to exercise their gifts in a public way" when requested by the Church. In 1653 he and John Toft were the representatives of the Church appointed to sign the nomination of members to the Little Parliament.¹¹ In 1654 he was "made choise to be a deacon," an invitation which he accepted after more than three months' deliberation.

We may note that Henry Austine, Bradford's associate in 1669 and the first name in our Church Book, joined the Independent Church in 1650—he was a young man and had not quite completed his apprenticeship. Both Bradford and Austine were messengers of the Norwich Church to that at North Walsham at its incorporation in 1652—a circumstance which may have affected their future association.

From a very early date there were those among the Norfolk Independents who held and practised Baptist views. In 1647 we learn that the church at Pulham "denies the administration of baptism to infants."¹²

In the previous year the godly party at Wymondham had sought advice:

"Whether we may join comfortably together when as we are divided in our judgements; some looking upon the baptising of infants the way of God; and others, questioning the truth of it, therefore suspend it."

The Yarmouth Church replied:

"We think there ought to be on both sides a full knowledge and experience of one another's affections and judgements, how far they can bear in point of practice, lest after differences should be more sad than Church fellowship comfortable."¹³

The Wymondham Church was not incorporated until six years later and then on paedobaptist basis.

Baptist views assumed a new importance in 1656 when they were associated with the activities of the Fifth Monarchy party. In March the messengers of the Churches met in Norwich at the invitation of the Norwich Church (signed by Daniel Bradford and John Toft) to discuss:

“the visible reigne of Christ and the duty of the Saints towards the Govments of the world.”¹⁴

They concluded:

“That there should be in the latter dayes a Glorious and visible kingdom of Christ, wherein the Saints should rule. And to the second question, whether we should be subject to the present powers of the world, the generall vote of all the Messengers of the Churches was, that it was our dutie to give subjection, and if any should doe otherwise it should be a matter of grief and great offence unto them.”¹⁵

In June of that year William Wainford, a member of the Norwich Independent Church, whose name also appears on our first list of Baptised members, attended a Prayer Meeting in the great hall of the Bishop's palace where he prayed:

“That the Lord would be pleased to throw down all earthly power and rule and authority, and that he would consume them that they might no more be alive upon the earth and that he would set up the kingdom of his Son. . . .”¹⁶

These words were so alarming that someone reported them at the Guildhall, the centre of civic government, where a record was made of them.

Major General Haynes kept an eye on events and reported to Secretary Thurloe:

In July he wrote:

“At Norwich—our fifthe monarchy party there have many of them turned anabaptists and submitted to the ordinance.”

And later in the month:

“Our North Walsham fifth monarchy brethren who weare lately dipped, are synce growen exceeding high in their expressions, and that tending to bloud . . . and Buttephant of the lyfe guard, Ruddock & Pooly the Chieftanes of them. . . .”¹⁷

The North Walsham brethren included Richard Breviter, the Vicar and pastor of the Independent Church who resigned his living on adopting Baptist principles.

That September William Wainford and four brethren from North Walsham journeyed to Abingdon to attend the funeral of John Pen-darves who had been prominent as a Baptist and Fifth Monarchist.¹⁸

So we see that the three earliest Norwich Baptists known to us, Bradford, Austine and Wainford, had all had connections with North Walsham and the people there who had adopted Baptist practices.

The increasing numbers of Baptists in membership with the Norfolk

Independent Churches naturally caused tension. The matter was discussed at a meeting in Norwich in the Spring of 1657 where the Messengers of the churches concluded:

“that those who had not onely forsaken the Churches for want of the Ordenance of Baptizme, as they say, but alsoe judged all the Churches no Churches that were not of their minde, or came not up to their practise, that such were makers of divisions and soe to be withdrawn from.”¹⁹

Troubles were now coming upon the Churches from other quarters. Cromwell died. Charles was restored and the tide turned in favour of episcopacy. Entries in the Church books are few but one in the Norwich book for 1663 implies that Daniel Bradford had ceased to act as a deacon. Then in October 1667:

“Daniell Bradford haveing declared to two brethren who were sent to him from y^e Church, (to know ye Case of his so Long neglect of Comunion with ye Church) that he could not hould Comunion any Longer with ye Church, he was declared by ye Pastor, by ye Consent of ye Church, to be no longer a member of this Church.”²⁰

Having regard for Bradford's history before and after this minute it is quite unthinkable that he should at any time have been without any Church Communion. His 'long neglect' of the Independent fellowship can only lead us to believe that he was already in communion with his fellow Baptists before October 1667. It may well be that in an attempt to avoid the penalties of the Conventicle Act the Independent Church was wont to meet in small groups. In such a case it would be natural for those who were of the same judgement in the matter of baptism to gravitate into a cohesive group around a veteran member of the Church and such a group might easily come to regard itself as a separate church based on the Baptism of believers. Later on that Church through its acquisition of property in St. Mary's, Norwich, in 1744 came to be known as St. Mary's. As we have said the first positive record of its existence is in the year 1669 but I think I have shown that it must in fact have come into being some years earlier.

Bradford and Austine were both licensed as Baptist preachers in 1672 but in 1681 when the authorities issued a warning to the leaders of dissenting churches they sent only to Austine as leader of the Baptists—presumably Bradford had died before that date. Austine was duly licensed under the terms of the Toleration Act in 1689 and in that year and again in 1692 attended the Particular Baptist Assemblies in London. He served on the committee of seven which determined the controversy as to the propriety of singing hymns at public worship. There are several entries in his hand in the St. Mary's Church book. He lived on into the 18th century.

Looking back to 1669 we cannot but wonder what the actors in these dramatic events thought about the future of their church. In Daniel Bradford they had a very experienced Christian man in the position which today we should call 'lay pastor'—but they had been accustomed to the ministry of men trained for the purpose. All the

leaders of the Independents in Norfolk and Suffolk had been Cambridge men and I believe that in the early years our forefathers still looked hopefully to that university. Owen Stockton, an ejected minister at Ipswich when he died in 1680, left a substantial legacy to Caius College for the education of sons of nonconformists for the ministry.²¹ It was to Caius too that Henry Austine sent his son, Samuel, in 1675.²² He was educated there but could not graduate as this involved subscription to the articles of the Church of England. It is possible that he went on to a foreign university to take his degree for he was always known as Doctor Austine. He was licensed under the Toleration Act in 1689 and later became pastor of the Church.

Such is all the account we can give of how St. Mary's came into being. The men concerned were not much famed in their own times. In fact Daniel Bradford was soon entirely forgotten. His name was unknown to Joseph Kinghorn a century later and the important part he played in our origins was only traced by the researches of George Gould two hundred years on. But we may claim that their work was enduring and in 1969 there are many who look back with thanksgiving to the heritage they pioneered.

NOTES

¹ Lambeth Ms., No. 639.

² Articles of Impeachment of Dr. Matthew Wren. John Browne: *History of Congregationalism in Norfolk and Suffolk*, p. 87.

³ John Browne: *op. cit.*, p. 606.

⁴ John Browne: *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁵ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Geo. Gould. *Open Communion and the Baptists of Norwich*, CXLV.

⁶ Champlin Burrage: *The Early English Dissenters*. Vol II, 270.

⁷ State Papers Domestic, CLXIV. No. 11. 1623-25, p. 232.

⁸ State Papers Domestic, CLXLI. No. 71, 1631, p. 151.

⁹ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, CXLV.

¹⁰ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, CXLVIII.

¹¹ Milton State Papers, p. 124.

¹² Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Browne. *Op. cit.*, 285.

¹³ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Browne. *Op. cit.*, 289.

¹⁴ Old Meeting Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, XX.

¹⁵ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, XXI.

¹⁶ Norwich Court of the Mayoralty Minutes.

¹⁷ Thurloe's Collection of State Papers. Vol. V, pp.187 and 220.

¹⁸ A Complaining Testimony of some of Sion's Children, etc.

¹⁹ Gt. Yarmouth Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, p. XXII.

²⁰ Old Meeting Church Book. Gould. *Op. cit.*, XXVIII.

²¹ A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised*.

²² Venn. *Alumni Cantabrigienses*.

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