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## CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AND SOCIAL COMPOSITION IN TEN RURAL OLD DISSENT CHURCHES IN THE SOUTH-EAST MIDLANDS, 1715-1851

It has been generally agreed amongst historians that the early part of the eighteenth century witnessed a major numerical decline in Old Dissent (General and Particular Baptists, Independents, Presbyterians and Quakers) and that revitalization of their churches and adherents sprang from the Evangelical and Methodist Revival and the 'social impact of nineteenth-century industrialization'.<sup>106</sup> This, it is believed, was accompanied by a change in their social composition as the proportion of lesser gentry and farmers fell while those of tradesmen and labourers increased.<sup>107</sup> How far does the evidence afforded from the records of ten rural churches in an area of the south-east Midlands between 1715 and 1851 support this view?

Initial research had investigated the membership of one church, Gamlingay Old Meeting, Cambridgeshire, originally Independent, later Baptist, between 1710 and 1806, and in that instance some deviation from the accepted national norm was detected. Membership recruitment there was not decreasing before 1750, decline in numbers taking place later in the century, and there was little evidence to support the view of a change in class composition as the eighteenth century progressed. It therefore seemed of value to widen the project to determine whether this church was an exception. It was decided to concentrate on dissenting village churches contained within the surrounding area, roughly bounded by Bedford, Kettering (Northamptonshire), Cambridge, and Royston (Hertfordshire), i.e. north and mid Bedfordshire, west Cambridgeshire, south Huntingdonshire and south-east Northamptonshire, encompassing between six to seven hundred square miles.

Table 1

### Dissenting churches in defined area 1715-29 (Evans & Neal)

<u>Bedfordshire</u>	<u>Cambridgeshire</u>	<u>Huntingdonshire</u>	<u>Northamptonshire</u>
Bedford	Cambridge (2)	Kimbolton	Kettering (3)
Biggleswade (2)	Croxton (2)	Perry	Ringstead
Blunham	Croydon	Spaldwick	Rushden (2)
Carlton	Eversden	St Neots	Thorp Waterville
Cranfield	Gamlingay		Wellingborough
Cotton End	Melbourn (2)		
Goldington			
Keysoe	<u>Hertfordshire</u>		
Maulden	Royston		
Ridgmont			
Sharnbrook			
Southill			
Stevington			

This particular area was selected first, because coverage of all dissenting churches of similar faith and order within a certain locality would seem to be more apposite than a random selection from different places; secondly, avoiding the limitations of a county boundary or the periphery of one town made it less likely that a major local factor would be a predominating influence overall. Town churches

were not included, though some reference will be made to them where appropriate, as their membership was geographically much more widely drawn. This could result in an over-representation of those classes with access to transport and moderate any specific local pressures which affected village causes. Towns comprised not only the larger settlements of Bedford, Cambridge and Kettering, but also the smaller market towns of Biggleswade, Kimbolton, Royston, St Neots and Wellingborough and their churches were thus excluded. Decayed, or former, market towns such as Gamlingay were included, also Rushden as during the period of the survey it was still a village.

Attention was focused on those churches which had existed continuously between 1715 and 1851 as evidenced by the Evans, Neal and Thompson lists and the 1851 National Religious Census.<sup>108</sup> According to the Evans and Neal lists, thirty-six churches were in existence in the defined area (Table 1). Of these, twelve were situated in towns. Of the remainder, Croxton, Goldington, Perry, Rushden Independent and Thorp Waterville had, according to Thompson, disappeared by 1773, while those at Cotton End and Cranfield had re-started after closure. No records could be traced for Eversden and Spaldwick before the late eighteenth century, and the Maulden Church Book does not commence until 1768, while those of Croydon (later Great Gransden), Keysoe and Ridgmont seem to have recently disappeared, though some details were recorded by Mr H. G. Tibbutt.<sup>109</sup> This left ten churches, i.e. Blunham, Carlton, Sharnbrook, Southill, Stevington, Ringstead, Rushden, Gamlingay and Melbourn Baptist Churches and Melbourn Independent Church, which had existed throughout the period under survey and whose records have largely survived.

Although principally concentrating on those churches included in the Evans and Neal lists, it was for comparative purposes judged politic to confirm, as far as possible, that no other rural dissenting groups within the chosen area fulfilled the requirements for inclusion. Few Quaker meetings in the locality were village-based and none of them seem to have functioned as independent meetings over the period.<sup>110</sup> Thus as far as can be ascertained, the ten churches not eliminated from the 1715 lists are the only ones which fulfil the criteria for the study.

With the exception of leather working in the north-west, the area was almost exclusively agricultural. All but one were open villages, ranging in size from 1200 acres (Blunham) to 6,180 acres (Southill), and their populations in 1801 from 376 (Blunham and Carlton) to 985 (Southill). Growth rates to 1851 varied from only 15% at Carlton to 136% at Melbourn which by that date had the largest population of all (1,931). Enclosure was from 1749 (Sharnbrook) to 1844 (Gamlingay).

The area had a strong association with the Puritan movement from an early date and throughout the Civil War the local nobility was predominantly Parliamentary; Cromwell himself was a Huntingdonshire man and his Ironsides were raised originally from the surrounding area. Major Roundhead garrisons were established at Northampton and Newport Pagnell on the Buckinghamshire/Bedfordshire border. The 1662 ejections were of paramount importance in the growth of dissenting churches in the region. The First Independent Church at Bedford, for example sprang from the congregation of St John's Church under John Gifford, a layman appointed by Bedford Corporation to the vacant living after its Royalist incumbent was removed; Gifford was himself ejected with his followers. John Bunyan had been an early convert and after the ejection he, together with others, was preaching

in many villages in the area. By 1680 the Bedford Church was also meeting at Cotton End, Haynes, Kempston and Maulden, Bedfordshire, and Gamlingay, Cambridgeshire. Blunham was also associated and later like Gamlingay became a separate church. Bedford had close contact too with other congregations, including Stevington.<sup>111</sup>

The Rothwell or Rowell Independent Church was founded in 1655 under the Puritan vicar of the village, John Beverley, a Fellow of Trinity, Cambridge. In 1689 Richard Davis became minister and combined a firm congregational church policy with High Calvinism, whilst retaining true evangelical fervour. During his ministry several new churches were formed by Rothwell members, including one at Bedford which moved to Southill (1693), and Ringstead (1714), the year of Davis's death. His influence was said to have spread into thirteen counties.<sup>112</sup> Denominationally, with the exception of the Melbourn churches, the congregations under survey veered erratically during the eighteenth century between Independent and Baptist principles, only Sharnbrook and Stevington setting their faces firmly against infant baptism: 'sprinkling of infants is not practis in this church'.<sup>113</sup> However, by 1810 they had all become Baptist and two, Carlton and Sharnbrook, had introduced strict communion. Melbourn Independent remained true to its original foundation, while Melbourn Baptist had metamorphosed from General to Particular Baptist around 1812.

**Table 2: Total membership  
1710-1849**

Blunham	293
Carlton	434
Gamlingay	448
Melbourn Baptist	312
Melbourn Independent	328
Ringstead	358
Rushden	465
Sharnbrook	271
Southill	471
Stevington	380
	<u>3760</u>

*Sources:* The first step in the project was to extract from the available records the number and names of those members admitted to each church between 1710 and 1849 - a total of 3760 persons (see Table 2). A chronological list of these admissions was drawn up, divided as far as practicable into decades. For each ten-year period information was collated on the number of members admitted, the proportion of men to women, the place of abode, (i.e. whether it was the central village, adjoining or further parishes), and social class as defined by occupation. The numbers unidentified and/or unclassified were also noted.

The principal primary material utilized was the Church Books, containing most importantly the Church Rolls, which list the names of those received into membership. From the early nineteenth century these Rolls were very detailed (apart from Melbourn Independent, where individual admission dates were not recorded until after 1825 and then only intermittently) and gave the person's name, date of entry and generally their parish. There were difficulties over the earlier period, where names were often entered under each pastorate as at Melbourn Independent, or in some cases haphazardly in the Church Book. However, as it can be assumed that they were listed in chronological order, it is possible to make provisional dating divisions. In the earlier period Melbourn Independent and Ringstead Baptist kept separate lists for men and women, but some deductions could be made: husband and wife were often admitted together or within a short period of each other, and the date of marriage and death narrowed the

possibilities. Birth and christening dates where available could also be of assistance as persons were not normally admitted before their middle teens.

**Table 3: Summary of Starting Points**

<u>Foundation Lists</u>		<u>Church Lists</u>		<u>Admissions from</u>	
Blunham	1724	Melbourn B	1726	Carlton	1710
Gamlingay	1710	Rushden	1735	Southill	1710
Melbourn I	1745			Stevington	1710
Ringstead	1714				
Sharnbrook	1719				

The Church Rolls should be distinguished from the Church Lists which were generally compiled at the beginning of a new ministry or at a change of constitution and consisted of all persons in membership at that time. Two of these were used as starting points because they contain the first complete information on membership: Melbourn Baptist 1726 (founded in the seventeenth century) and Rushden 1735 (founded 1722). Foundation Lists differed slightly in that they consisted of people who became members at a certain date by joining together in covenant to form the church. They have, therefore, been counted in as admissions, although most had already been associated with the group for some years while others transferred *en bloc* from other churches, including those from Bedford First Independent Church to Gamlingay (1710) and Blunham (1724), from Rothwell to Ringstead (1714), and from Carlton to Sharnbrook before 1719. Melbourn Independent had previously been a joint church with Chishill on the Essex border, but many of its founding members must have also been admitted over a period before severance. In all these cases the first decadal figures are affected by these earlier admissions and are therefore distorted. The three remaining churches were of early foundation (Stevington 1655, Carlton 1688, and Southill 1693) with detailed records, and the figures used consist of admissions alone after 1710.

**Table 4**

**Admissions before 1730: Stevington, Carlton and Southill**

<u>Church</u>	<u>1670-79</u>	<u>1680-89</u>	<u>1690-99</u>	<u>1700-09</u>	<u>1710-19</u>	<u>1720-29</u>
Stevington	71	23	69	5	75	50
Carlton	-	22	62	24	37	4
Southill	-	-	84	78	61	42

Because of these differing starting points, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion as to whether early eighteenth-century decline occurred. On the one hand, the three churches with a true initial decadal figure do show a fall in new admissions between 1720 and 1729, but the rate had fluctuated wildly from their foundations and both Stevington and Carlton had experienced schism during this early period while Southill, where the figures would seem to indicate decline, was affected numerically by the dismissal of its Hertfordshire members to become a separate church between 1710 and 1719. The founding of five churches (Blunham, Gamlingay, Ringstead, Rushden and Sharnbrook) between 1710 and 1729 and the

erection of a new chapel building at Stevington in 1721, seem to suggest that these churches had confidence in their ability to survive as independent meetings and that for them decline at this time was not an issue.

There is more evidence for a decrease in recruitment taking place from the mid-eighteenth century onwards than for the early period. Admissions were lower than average in a majority of the churches, i.e. Blunham 1750-79, Gamlingay 1760-89, Ringstead 1760-69, Rushden 1750-69, Southill 1750-69, and Stevington 1760-79. A similar fall appears to have commenced at Sharnbrook somewhat earlier, between 1730 and 1759 before the appointment of its first regular minister. It is likely that some of the decline manifested in mid-century may have been linked with ministerial problems: Thomas Thomason was dismissed from the Blunham pastorate in 1779 for adultery, Joseph Billing from Gamlingay for intemperance in 1772 and Henry Field from Southill in the mid 1760s for stealing hay. The position for the two Melbourn churches is more complicated. Presumably Melbourn Independent would not have seceded from its partnership with Chishill in 1745 if it had not believed in its future as an independent church. Unfortunately the lack of detailed dating of the Members Roll makes it difficult to draw conclusions, but it seems that the rate of admission fell considerably after 1760. Melbourn General Baptist, apart from a brief revival between 1770 and 1779, gradually faded out until replaced by Particular Baptists after 1812.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century is generally seen as the period when a majority of the Old Dissent churches began to turn from the conservatism of rigid Calvinism to evangelical expansionism. Period 3 (1770-1809) was a time of mixed fortunes as far as the selected churches were concerned, and evangelicalism in this period appears to have had three main effects: initial increase, internal disagreement and external pressure. First, those churches which appointed an evangelical minister seem to have experienced an immediate rise in the rate of membership admissions, even after allowance has been made for the inevitable low points between pastorates. For example, eleven members joined the Blunham church in the year following Martin Mayle's induction in 1780, compared with fifteen for the whole of the previous decade; at Gamlingay in 1794, William Paine's first twelve months produced twenty-five new members, while at Carlton in 1787 sixteen were received in the three months after John West's ordination. However, there were other churches where increase was taking place, e.g. Sharnbrook between 1770 and 1779 where the incoming minister does not appear to have been evangelical, and Rushden. Indeed, Sharnbrook received three refugees from 'Fullerism' at Keysoe Brook End during this time.

Unfortunately evangelicalism's initial gains were often followed by heated arguments and dissension within the church, culminating either in the acrimonious departure of the minister or of the Calvinist members, and a resultant drop in the rate of admissions. Mayle, Paine and West all left under difficult circumstances: John West noting in the Carlton Church Book in November 1792, 'Love to Jesus Christ and each other very low', only ten months after declaring 'at this time there is serious revival amongst us'.<sup>14</sup> John Patrick of Southill was actually prevented in 1811 from entering the pulpit by two deacons, who barred his way, 'telling him he had departed from the truth'.<sup>15</sup> Gamlingay lost not only its minister but also a section of its membership as a Calvinist church was established in a neighbouring village. Internal change also occurred within Calvinist churches, for example at

Table 5: Decadal Admittances 1710-1849

Church	Total	Average	1710-	1720-	1730-	1740-	1750-	1760-	1770-
			1719	1729	1739	1749	1759	1769	1779
Blunham	293	22	-	48	17	33	13	14	15
Carlton	434	31	37	4	31	16	24	31	46
Gamlingay	448	32	78	27	43	21	34	20	10
Melbourn B.	312	24	-	23	15	6	17	4	23
Melbourn I.	328	30	-	-	-	72	-	39	-
Ringstead	358	26	43	45	30	23	30	18	33
Rushden	465	39	-	-	26	24	16	21	58
Sharnbrook	271	19	27	21	11	9	9	18	47
Southill	471	34	61	42	17	46	4	12	34
Stevington	380	27	75	50	Gap	-	26	7	2
	Total	Average	1780-	1790-	1800-	1810-	1820-	1830-	1840-
			1789	1799	1809	1819	1829	1839	1849
Blunham	293	22	22	47	11	37	13	15	8
Carlton	434	31	30	46	30	36	34	51	18
Gamlingay	448	32	1	51	22	23	38	49	31
Melbourn B.	312	24	6	3	1	35	24	96	59
Melbourn I.	328	30	16	14	43	-	98	-	44
Kingstead	358	26	47	1	5	26	21	21	15
Rushden	465	39	19	30	39	77	13	51	91
Sharnbrook	271	19	12	18	7	19	13	35	25
Southill	471	34	20	18	18	39	34	69	57
Stevington	380	27	17	30	23	11	8	81	50

Sharnbrook, where a hyper-Calvinist section removed themselves in 1827, and a similar split took place at Rushden in 1801. Both these events are reflected in the membership figures.

Not only did evangelicalism stimulate internal disagreement within the churches, it also created external pressures. First, there was a massive increase in the number of dissenting churches, many in parishes which had previously contributed members, congregation and finance to the already established churches. Examination of the figures for geographical distribution of the membership of each church in the study shows that some were quite badly affected. In the Ringstead Pew List of 1762, a third of the 180 purchased seats were occupied by worshippers resident in the adjacent town of Raunds which had provided 50% (15) of the admitted membership between 1750 and 1759, but after 1789 no further intake occurred. A barn was licensed at Raunds in 1798 for Particular Baptist use. Two of the applicants were members of the Hall family, closely associated with the Ringstead church for many years.<sup>116</sup> The older churches were fully aware of the danger of church planting to their own strength and both Carlton and Sharnbrook, for instance, objected strongly to the Sutcliffe Academy increasing the number of regular Sunday services at the newly established Harrold meeting 'because they were of the opinion it would prove injurious to them'.<sup>117</sup> Harrold was not alone: at Blunham a member was suspended in 1827 for taking 'an active part in building the Meeting house at Sandy', and in 1828 another 'for engaging in the opposition Cause' there.

Evidently, while many ministers and members were actively supporting the drive for new churches, substantial portions of their congregations were not so keen. Between 1840 and 1849 the number of Harrold members at Carlton fell from the 33% (10) between 1800 and 1809 to 11% (2). Thus a feature of the geographical distribution, in most cases almost certainly as a direct result of this rise in the number of dissenting churches, was that a majority of the churches in the study showed an increase in the proportion of local members after 1810.

The second area of external pressure, perhaps as a consequence of this tremendous expansion in dissenting churches, concerned the supply of ministers. Blunham Church Book records in 1805, 'many in the neighbourhood destitute of a pastor', and some churches appear to have remained without permanent leadership for some time.<sup>118</sup> Blunham itself was vacant from 1806 to 1811, Gamlingay from 1801 to 1805, Ringstead from 1814 to 1822, Sharnbrook from 1798 to 1812, and Stevington from 1802 to 1804. Thirdly, the older churches not only experienced the difficulties of pastor-less people and increasing competition from within their own denominations, but some were also affected by the evangelical wing of the Established Church. At Turvey, for example, which for many years had provided a considerable proportion of the Carlton membership, 1805 saw the institution of the Revd Leigh Richmond, secretary of the Religious Tract Society and author of *The Annals of the Poor*, two million copies of which were distributed by the Religious Tract Society and were still being given as Sunday School prizes in the 1900s. A charismatic preacher, his congregation formed a separate Union church after he was succeeded by a non-evangelical in 1827.<sup>119</sup> The intake of Turvey parishioners at Carlton Baptist fell from 44% (20) in 1790-99 to 11% (2) in 1840-49.

Confirmation of the effect of these internal and external pressures can be found in admission figures for 1800-1809, in which period the number of new members fell from their previous high at Blunham, Carlton, Gamlingay, Melbourn Baptist (this marked the end of the General Baptists after their long decline), Sharnbrook and Stevington. Ringstead appears to have been at a low ebb, according to the few entries on the church roll, for there are no details in the Church Book for this period. The intake at Southill remained below average and only that at Melbourn Independent and Rushden showed an increase.

In 1800-09 marked a low point in the churches' fortunes; the following decade saw a dramatic surge in recruitment, slightly moderating between 1820 to 1829 and then rising substantially, except at Blunham and Ringstead. Their intake fell consistently after 1820 and it would appear they were in decline. In the last decade of the survey all the churches underwent a fall to some degree, apart from Rushden, where the shoe industry was expanding rapidly. Thus Gilbert's conclusion that nationally the Baptist and Congregational denominations had experienced their most rapid expansion before 1840 and that thereafter the absolute rate of growth slackened appears to be confirmed up to 1850 in most of the churches covered by the study.<sup>120</sup> He identifies two probable reasons for this: Anglican as distinct from Evangelical re-invigoration and population mobility as increasingly people moved away from rural areas to industrial or other towns which offered employment, or overseas. Twelve Stevington members and five from Sharnbrook emigrated during the 1840s.

While parallel movements in the admitted membership pattern can be identified in many instances, it would also be true to say that a significant feature overall was

the variability, both between church and church and between decadal periods, each church showing a series of peaks and troughs in recruitment. It has already been observed how in several instances low points in membership admissions coincided with ministerial difficulties. Comparison of these peaks and troughs at each church revealed in almost every case throughout the period a very strong correlation with pastorates, a surge in numbers occurring at the commencement of each ministry and intake gradually declining into the closing years. This seemed to be the case both at the end of a long term and when the pastorate concluded because of disagreement. Whether such a disagreement was in some cases caused by decline or resulted in it is not easy to resolve.

One of the difficulties as a minister advanced in years was his inability to retire unless he had private means or relatives able to house and support him. This problem was not unique to any denomination, but in some ways it was more acute for the nonconformist than the established church, for their minister's stipend derived wholly, with a few exceptions, from the voluntary contributions of the members and congregation. If these were reduced due to his failing charisma or increasing incapacity, the church was in financial difficulties. An example of a subscribers' revolt can be found in the Kimbolton Independent, later Baptist, Church Book in 1818, where they threatened to withdraw their contributions if their aged, deaf and mentally infirm pastor did not resign.<sup>121</sup> Kimbolton surmounted the difficulty by supplying a pension of £30 per annum to their retiring minister, which at his decease was to be added to the new minister's stipend (one hopes that he did not enquire too often as to his predecessor's health!). This kind of agreement is not found anywhere in the study churches, though John Beetham of Blunham was paid £50 to vacate the pulpit after controversy.<sup>122</sup> A fund for 'the relief of aged and infirm ministers and the widows and orphans of deceased ministers' was formed by the Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire Union of Christians in 1812 and during the next eighty years it distributed over £10,000.<sup>123</sup> However, as many pastors are recorded as dying in office it seems in most cases an elderly or ailing man had no option but to continue until his death, and his church, bound no doubt by affection and feelings of loyalty, had no option but to accept the position. There are several references in church books to the falling away that occurred within the fellowship in these circumstances: for example, at Southill in February 1842, after the death of Thomas Tay, pastor for twenty-five years, 'being partially laid aside for about a year and a half, many dissatisfied and wandered and the church brought very low'.<sup>124</sup> Thus there is evidence to suggest that the prime requisite for an increase in the rate of membership recruitment was the arrival of an enthusiastic and energetic man, and it may be that evangelicalism's success stemmed more from this factor than its actual theological content. As was said of Mrs Offrell, a Gamlingay apothecary's wife, admitted there in 1773, 'she came out of curiosity to hear a stranger'.<sup>125</sup>

*Social Class* Generally the process of dividing people into social strata is fraught with difficulties. For the purposes of this project it was decided to use the broad headings employed by Evans in 1715, i.e. Gentry, Farmers, Tradesmen and Labourers, but to amend 'gentry' to 'gentlemen', to include those individuals who, by their station and style of living, were removed from ordinary farmers or tradesmen and whose superiority was acknowledged by their contemporaries. An additional column was reserved for ministers and their families.

**Table 6: Members admitted: Gentlemen  
Numbers and Percentages, 1710-1849**

Church	Overall numbers	Overall %	Period 1 Period 2 Period 3 Period 4							
			Before 1730		1730-1769		1770-1809		1810-1849	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Blunham	7	1.4	-	-	2	2.7	2	2.1	-	-
Carlton	1	0.2	-	-	1	1.0	-	-	-	-
Gamlingay	16	3.6	5	4.8	2	2.1	1	1.1	8	5.7
Melbourn Baptist	1	0.3	-	-	-	-	1	3.0	-	-
Melbourn Independent	7	2.1	-	-	3	3.4	-	-	4	2.5
Ringstead	1	0.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1.8
Rushden	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sharnbrook	3	1.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3.3
Southill	3	0.3	1	1.0	1	1.1	-	-	1	0.5
Stevington	1	0.3	1	0.8	-	-	-	-	-	-

Other occupations were included under broader headings because of the impossibility in many cases of determining exact economic status. The category 'Farmers' includes both yeomen and husbandmen, though it can be argued that the latter were often of lower standing, sometimes supplementing their income by seasonal labour for others. Spufford believes that 'clear and well-defined differences emerge from the study of death inventories', but Godber quotes from probate valuations in Bedfordshire between 1617 and 1620 where the highest valued of the sample was for a husbandman (£577) and the lowest a yeoman (£9).<sup>126</sup> To investigate this aspect, or to look at the size of individual holdings was beyond the scope of this study, even should sufficient data exist, and 'Farmers' therefore includes all those who made an independent living from the land.

The term 'Tradesman' in the context of this research is of necessity very wide, for while ideally it would have been desirable to have distinguished between masters and men, it was not found feasible in practice. Usually it was impossible to determine whether, say, a carpenter or a tailor was employed, self-employed or an employer, and in some cases it was a changing situation. This 'blurring', as Margaret Spufford calls it, also occurred over the broad divisions: Nicholas Paine of Gamlingay was a baker at his marriage in 1746 but an important farmer by the 1770s, and his son James was described as a 'gentleman'. No real solution could be found to cover this variation and therefore it was decided to allocate to individuals the status accorded them for the majority of their time after admission.

Unless evidence was found to the contrary, it was assumed that sons followed their father's occupation and women were classed under their husband's or, if unmarried and their occupation not given, their father's. In a few cases some were in business in their own right, e.g. Elizabeth Gray (admitted Blunham 1726), shopkeeper, and Catherine Ward (admitted Sharnbrook 1840), milliner.

Two main primary sources were used: the Church Books and the Parish Registers. Church Books sources generally contained much additional material beside the Church rolls, although the detail recorded varied enormously, both from church to church and from period to period. On the whole more is available from the earlier and later periods. In some churches, particularly Gamlingay, the occupations of

members were often mentioned, as well as relationships and, in most cases, the parish if it was other than where the church was based. Information on class was also obtained from Trustee lists, which normally gave the occupations of appointees, while the material circumstances of members can be gauged from financial details, not only payments to the poor but also the quarterly subscription lists. Other documents frequently held by the churches included Property Leases and Birth Registers, the latter dating mainly from about 1780 to 1830, though there are some earlier entries.

Parish Registers generally date from the mid-sixteenth century and were kept by the incumbent as part of his legal duty. A copy was forwarded annually to the Bishop and these Bishop's Transcripts have sometimes survived where the original register has been lost or damaged. Most registers in the relevant counties, except Northamptonshire, have been printed and indexed. The Mormon Index lists christenings and marriages, but not burials where the majority of occupations are found. Apart from the Parish Registers, the usual genealogical resources, such as Census Returns, Wills, Deeds, Militia Lists, etc., were also utilized.

Throughout, the figures for social class were affected by the percentage which remained unclassified and this is directly related to the quality of the church and parish records. The lowest percentages where no class was determined were at Carlton (11%) and Gamlingay (13%). In both cases the church books for most of the period were well-kept with much additional information, particularly about place of abode. Only 2% of the Carlton membership and 4% at Gamlingay remain unidentified. The church with the highest percentage of unclassified members was Stevington (22%), here there were long gaps in the church book in the first part of the eighteenth century and a paucity of parish material. Ringstead followed closely with 21%: the difficulties over the Northamptonshire parish registers have already been noted. A further contributing factor to the percentage unclassified was the proportion of women within the fellowship, as the change of surname at marriage and a narrow range of Christian names combined with common surnames made positive identification difficult. In most of the churches the percentage of women unclassified was greater than their percentage in membership. The latter ranged from 54% to 65% overall and in most of the churches it increased in the nineteenth century, spectacularly so at Melbourn Baptist after the denominational change.

Table 7  
Members admitted: Professional,  
Numbers and Percentages, 1710-1849

Church	Overall numbers	Overall %	Period 1		Period 2		Period 3		Period 4	
			pre-1730	1730-1769	1770-1809	1810-1849	No.	%	No.	%
Carlton	4	0.8	-	1	1	0.7	2	1.4		
Gamlingay	3	0.6	-	1	1	1.1	1	0.7		
Melbourn Baptist	3	1.0	-	-	2	6.0	1	0.5		
Melbourn Independent	5	1.5	-	-	-	-	5	3.5		
Stevington	1	0.3	-	-	-	-	1	0.7		

The number of Gentlemen in membership was found to be very small. The majority of the 'gentlemen' class were farmers; there were also four 'gentlemen maltsters', four 'gentlemen merchants', two 'landed proprietors', and one

'Independent'. Of the thirty-seven in total, twenty-six (70%) were wives and daughters, a female percentage somewhat greater than the overall average, and of these fourteen do not appear to have had a husband or father who was also in membership. There is, therefore, some basis for concluding that 'gentlemen' were a degree less likely to become members than their female relatives. Where they are found, their presence appears to be grounded in familial ties or the increasing prosperity of existing members.

Table 8

## Members admitted: Labourers, Numbers and Percentages, 1710-1849

Church	Overall numbers	Overall %	Period 1 pre-1730		Period 2 1730-1769		Period 3 1770-1809		Period 4 1810-1849	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Blunham	72	24.6	3	6.3	26	33.7	25	26.3	18	26.0
Carlton	186	42.9	11	26.8	40	39.2	65	42.8	70	50.4
Gamlingay	135	30.1	29	27.6	47	31.4	26	42.8	50	35.5
Melbourn Baptist	139	44.5	1	4.4	11	26.2	1	3.0	126	58.9
Melbourn Independent	107	32.6	-	-	24	25.6	19	27.5	64	39.0
Ringstead	72	20.1	18	20.5	12	11.9	22	25.6	20	24.1
Rushden	116	25.0	3	11.5	10	16.4	41	28.1	62	26.7
Sharnbrook	90	33.2	26	54.2	13	27.7	24	28.6	37	29.3
Southill	208	44.2	40	38.8	37	46.8	34	37.7	97	48.7
Stevington	157	41.3	33	26.4	3	9.1	34	47.1	87	58.0

The percentage of professional members was even lower than that of the gentlemen. There were only sixteen in total: ten were teachers or their families, and eight of these were in the two Melbourn churches, where there was a dissenting monopoly on education.<sup>127</sup> Two of the remaining professional members were the wife and daughter of a Gamlingay apothecary, and the other four comprised a cluster of surgeon's centred at Carlton, one of whom, Ebenezer Vorley (member 1834), was the son of a minister.

Table 9

## Members admitted: Farmers: Numbers and Percentages, 1710-1849

Church	Overall numbers	Overall %	Period 1 pre-1730		Period 2 1730-1769		Period 3 1770-1809		Period 4 1810-1849	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Blunham	82	28.0	27	56.3	14	18.2	26	27.4	15	20.5
Carlton	35	8.1	8	19.5	13	12.7	7	4.6	7	5.0
Gamlingay	93	20.8	20	19.0	26	22.0	13	15.5	34	24.1
Melbourn Baptist	66	21.2	10	43.5	17	40.5	13	39.4	26	12.1
Melbourn Independent	78	23.8	-	-	26	28.3	22	31.4	30	18.3
Ringstead	96	26.8	29	33.0	28	27.7	18	20.9	21	25.3
Rushden	54	11.6	4	15.4	10	16.4	17	11.6	23	9.9
Sharnbrook	43	15.9	1	8.4	10	17.0	13	14.3	19	20.7
Southill	67	14.2	13	12.6	15	19.0	15	16.7	24	12.1
Stevington	23	6.1	10	9.0	1	3.0	5	7.0	7	4.7

The overwhelming majority of the membership of the ten churches was divided between the farmer, tradesmen and labourer classes. Some rise in the actual

numbers of farmer members between periods one and four could be expected because of the effects of population growth and increasing nonconformist recruitment, particularly after 1800, and this actually occurred in six of the churches, but in most cases the rise in the number of farmers was accompanied by a decline in their percentage of the membership. The greatest change was at Melbourn Baptist where there was a decrease from 39% (13) between 1770-1809 to 12% (26) in 1810-49, which directly coincides with the change from General to Particular Baptist. The percentage of farmers also fell at Carlton where there was little numerical change, but at Gamlingay and Sharnbrook it rose, apparently from similar circumstances, the presence in the fellowship of a large and influential family group - the Wards of Sharnbrook, whose five daughters were admitted between 1819 and 1823, and the Paines of Gamlingay, who not only joined the church themselves but seem to have attracted a socially similar circle. At least twelve of those admitted at Gamlingay between 1822 and 1832 were given the title of 'Miss' and in the main have been identified as the daughters of farmers and prosperous tradesmen in the area. One has to wonder how far they were attracted by the eligible Paine bachelors and their friends. The effect on the geographical location statistics is quite marked: between 1800 and 1819 no members were identified as originating outside Gamlingay but between 1820 and 1839 20% (10) did, coming from as far afield as St Neots and Biggleswade. At Rushden too the numbers and percentage of farmers between 1810 and 1849 would have been much reduced but for the Bates family of Dean, who contributed nine out of the twenty-three farmer members in this period.

Several possible reasons can be advanced as to why the farmers' percentage share of the membership was not maintained in a majority of the churches: decline in the number of farmers, constriction of the church's catchment area, theological change, or a combination of all three combined with their increasing social ambitions. Nationally the proportion of farmers to labourers had fallen, though perhaps not so much or so late as has been claimed.<sup>128</sup> The effect of the proliferation of new nonconformist churches on recruitment in the existing churches has already been discussed and it is likely that this resulted in a greater loss of farmers than other classes because they had access to transport and were therefore more likely to have travelled from outside the central village. How far theological tensions were a factor in the decline in the proportion of farmers is difficult to determine. There is some evidence to suggest that some of them deserted the village churches over changes in worship practice and/or the introduction of stricter admission requirements. Certainly it was the gentlemen and the farmers of Kimbolton who raised most objections over the question of a Baptist minister at their Independent church.<sup>129</sup>

The Gamlingay evidence substantiates the theory that the drift of the better-off from the village churches can be attributed at least in part to a desire to mix with what they considered their social equals and the increasing polarization of society. Additionally, it must have been almost impossible at times to reconcile the expectations of the more erudite with the increasing numbers of poorly educated people, and examples of this divide are indeed to be found within the church records.

Generally, then, it would appear that farmers were not maintaining their relative strength within the churches and conversely there was an increase in the percentage of tradesmen and labourers. In most churches the largest increase was in the

number and percentage of labourers. Although a high unclassed percentage did not always co-incide with a low labourer percentage, usually it did and therefore it would seem fair to assume that a higher proportion of the unclassed were more likely to be labourers than tradesmen or farmers: this has to be taken into account when assessing the labourer content of each membership.

Table 10

## Members admitted: Tradesmen, Numbers and Percentages, 1710-1849

Church	Overall numbers	Overall %	Period 1 pre-1730		Period 2 1730-1769		Period 3 1770-1809		Period 4 1810-1849	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Blunham	63	21.5	7	14.6	12	15.6	25	26.3	19	26.0
Carlton	143	33.0	14	34.2	32	31.4	47	36.2	40	28.8
Gamlingay	122	27.2	36	34.3	31	26.3	29	34.5	28	18.4
Melbourn Baptist	35	11.2	2	8.7	1	2.4	1	3.0	31	14.5
Melbourn Independent	72	22.0	-	-	17	17.7	11	15.7	44	26.8
Ringstead	101	28.2	25	28.4	31	30.7	24	27.9	21	25.3
Rushden	188	40.4	8	30.8	27	44.2	64	43.9	89	48.4
Sharnbrook	83	30.6	9	18.7	16	34.0	33	39.3	25	27.2
Southill	91	19.3	25	24.3	14	17.7	20	20.0	34	17.1
Stevington	99	26.0	35	28.0	13	39.4	17	23.6	34	22.7

The first characteristic of the figures for labourers is the wide variation between the churches. Their highest percentage overall was at Melbourn Baptist (45%) and this seems to be due to the denominational change after 1810 when the average percentage of the old General Baptist period (13%) rose to 59% under the Particular Baptists. Even if an allowance is made for the large percentage of unclassed in the earlier period, it comes nowhere near the later figure. The lowest percentage of labourers overall was at Ringstead with 20%, it also had the highest percentage of unclassed (21%). The second characteristic is that, except at Sharnbrook, the percentage of labourers increased between periods one and four, though the rate varied. Several possible reasons can be advanced for this: first, population increase, particularly after 1801, though this would affect all sections of the population; secondly, an increase in the number of labourers due to the decline in demand for hand craftsmen such as weavers and lacemakers, and a fall in the number of viable landholdings through multiple inheritance and enclosure. The third possibility is peer pressure in dissenter dominated villages such as Melbourn and Gamlingay, but the Gamlingay percentage increase in labourers admitted to membership is little higher than that at Stevington where there was a very low number of farmer members. Again, although the rich and powerful Independent Church at Melbourn gave relief to over one hundred families in 1828, in the following decade fifty-six labourers or their families had joined the Baptist Church: this hardly supports the theory of undue influence. The accelerated Baptist recruitment at Melbourn after 1810 rather gives weight to the theory that the prime reason for the increase was the conversionist style of worship and preaching. However, the Methodist Church at Melbourn had made little impact there, neither is there corroboration from other churches in the survey that during known evangelical ministries the percentage of labourers increased. It appears that no firm conclusion can be reached on this point.

Tradesmen representation within the membership was far from uniform. Five

churches showed a percentage increase and five a decrease. The increase had occurred in two ways: first a rise in actual tradesmen numbers, particularly at the two Melbourn churches where seventy-one tradesmen or members of their families joined one or the other between 1810 and 1849, though the independent church was more attractive to them throughout. Rushden had the highest overall percentage of tradesmen and experienced a massive rise in their numbers between 1840 and 1849, almost certainly due to the growth of the leather industry. Out of the 188 tradesmen or their families identified there, 50% were shoemakers or associated in some way with the trade.<sup>130</sup> The second reason for a percentage increase was a percentage decline in other classes, as at Blunham where the number of labourers seems to have fallen sharply.

Conversely, in the five churches which showed a decline in the percentage of tradesmen it arose either from an increase in the percentage of other classes or a decrease in actual tradesmen numbers. Gilbert has identified the middle nineteenth century as the period when skilled workers began to decline within nonconformist congregations but it appears that in some of the surveyed churches this process was already under way by 1810, e.g. Ringstead and Carlton.<sup>131</sup> In both cases this corresponded with the rise of new churches in an adjacent village. Thus developments which affected the number of farmers in membership, such as the rise of new churches in feeder villages, schism within the local church and an increase in the percentage of labourers also reduced the proportion of tradesmen.

Another possible contributing factor to the tradesmen's decline was a growing tendency for them to migrate to places with increasing population and an escalating demand for their skills; not only to expanding industrial centres like Rushden, but also to the county and market towns. Many of the tradesmen listed in the 1851 census for Bedford are recorded as originating from villages in the neighbourhood.<sup>132</sup>

Analysis of the social-class figures has resulted then in certain conclusions: the proportion of women had increased over the time span but this does not appear to be of significance; in general the number of gentlemen and professional members and their percentage was low; and although in most churches the actual number of farmers did not fall, their proportion in the membership did, due to the large rise in labourer admissions. Tradesmen numbers also increased, but not to the same extent. However, there were exceptions to all these trends over each category in individual churches.

It would appear, therefore, that the belief that changes occurred in the numerical and social composition of dissent between 1715 and 1851 is upheld by the evidence gained from the churches of this study, although in most cases these changes began to take effect somewhat later than has been propounded. Major influencing factors throughout in the prosperity of each church seems to have been the influence of the minister, theological pressures, the strength of familial links and competition from newly established churches.

## NOTES

This paper is extracted from the author's CNA A MPhil thesis, 1992, 'Rural Old Dissent in the South-East Midlands 1715-1851, with particular reference to membership and social composition'.

1 J. Kent, *Holding the Fort*, 1978, p. 15.

2 See E. D. Bebb, *Nonconformity and Social and Economic Life 1660-1800*, 1935; D. Bogue & J. Bennett, *History of Dissenters from the Revolution in 1688 to the year 1808*, 1810; C. E. Fryer, 'The Numerical Decline of Dissent in England Previous to the Industrial Revolution',

- American Journal of Theology*, 17, no.2, 1913; A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, 1976; M. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution*, Oxford, 1978.
- 3 See John Evans, 'List of Dissenting Congregations 1715-1729', *Dr Williams's Library MS Records of Nonconformity*, no.4; R. Thomas, 'The Evans List: The Hidden Neal List', *Congregational History Society*, 19, pp.72-4; Josiah Thompson's list, 'A State of the Dissenting Interest in the several Counties of England and Wales begun to be collected October 1772 and continued', 5 vols, *Dr Williams's Library MS Records of Nonconformity*, no.5; *1851 Religious Census, Report and Tables on Religious Worship England & Wales*, Shannon 1970.
  - 4 H. G. Tibbutt, *Keysoe Brook End and Keysoe Row Baptist Churches*, 1959; *Records of Huntingdonshire*, 1969; *Some early nonconformist church books*, Bedfordshire HRS, vol.51; the latest information is that the Great Gransden Church Book has now been found.
  - 5 Examples include the Stotfold, Bedfordshire, Monthly Meeting, c.1667, integrated into the Mid-Bedfordshire Monthly Meeting in 1748, and finally closed in 1798, and Bythorn, Huntingdonshire, founded in 1668, later amalgamated with Moleworth and Raunds, Northamptonshire, and discontinued in 1839. *Friends Meeting House Record Book*, Friends House Library.
  - 6 P. Bell, *Belief in Bedfordshire*, Bedford 1986, p.52.
  - 7 T. Coleman, *Memorials of the Independent Churches in Northamptonshire*, 1853, chap.2; G. Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and the Modern Question', *Journal of Theological Studies*, April 1965.
  - 8 Sharnbrook Baptist Church foundation covenant.
  - 9 Carlton Baptist first church book, p.82, Bedfordshire CRO.
  - 10 S. F. Paul, *Further History of the Gospel Standard Baptists*, 1958, vol.3, p.66.
  - 11 Northamptonshire CRO MQS 292.
  - 12 H. C. Lay, *Harrold Congregational Church*, 1959, p.9.
  - 13 Blunham Baptist church book, transcript p.38, Bedfordshire CRO.
  - 14 Bell, *op.cit.*, pp.106-7.
  - 15 Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p.39.
  - 16 Kimbolton Independent Church minute book, 1692-1828, Huntingdon CRO.
  - 17 Blunham Baptist church book transcript, p.91.
  - 18 J. Brown, *The History of the Bedfordshire Union of Christians*, 1896, reprinted with additions up to 1946, p.72.
  - 19 Southill Baptist church book transcript p.35.
  - 20 Gamlingay Baptist second church book, p.13.
  - 21 M. Spufford, 'Social status of some seventeenth-century rural dissenters', in ed. G. J. Cummings & E. Baker, *Studies in Church History*, vol.8, 1972, p.203; J. Godber, *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*, Bedford 1969, p.210.
  - 22 By the late 18th century a part-time school with 200 pupils was established by the Revd William Carver of the Independent Church. In 1821 John Trigg left £2000 to establish an undenominational school for poor children, of which all the trustees were dissenters. By 1835 there were 165 pupils. *VCH Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, vol.8.
  - 23 G. E. Mingay, 'Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution', in *Studies in Economic History*, 1968.
  - 24 Kimbolton Independent church book, *op.cit.*, 1775.
  - 25 The connection between this and other clothing trades and dissent has been commented on, e.g. Bebb, pp.25-6, Gilbert, *op.cit.*, pp.65-6, Watts *op.cit.*, pp.354-6.
  - 26 Gilbert, *op.cit.*, pp.145-8.
  - 27 Bedford Census 1851, District of St Paul's. Volumes 2 and 3.

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### CORRECTION

The editors apologize to Malcolm Bonnington, whose name inadvertently appeared as Michael, in the April issue (p.307), and also for a wrong date in the review of his *Chard Baptists* (1992), where the date of the move to the new building took appeared as 1742 rather than 1842. The suppliers, Forum Books, are no longer operating, but copies of the book can be obtained from Dr Malcolm Bonnington, 16 Elizabeth Way, Chard, Somerset, TA20 1BY, Tel: 0460 67123.