

## The Use and Custody of Local Records

AS BRITONS, as Free Churchmen and as historians we ought to be unceasingly grateful that our nation has for so long been spared the miseries of foreign conquest and domestic convulsions. Each of us lives in a town or village with a history which ought to be known, and our freedom from invasion and revolution has greatly assisted the preservation of the local records which enable that history to be written. In almost all our towns and most of our villages the Protestant Dissenters have made a significant and distinctive contribution to the life of the community for the past three centuries; but until the third of these centuries was well advanced, the local historian was unlikely to record that contribution. He was usually an Anglican, often a cleric; his education, his social class and his attachment to a Church which had always been closely associated with the civil power, and which could claim a continuous history for thirteen centuries, did not encourage him to seek out and study the records of rival bodies which included 'not many mighty, not many noble.' Compared with the parish church, the village Bethel seemed a thing of yesterday, which called for no mention today since it might be gone by tomorrow. The natural and civil unit, the township, was usually identified from an early date with the ecclesiastical unit, the parish; and in the English countryside the great majority of our villages still cluster round parish churches which were built or rebuilt between the twelfth century and the sixteenth (however much altered in the nineteenth). This was itself almost enough to concentrate the local historian's attention on the stable agricultural society of the high Middle Ages, whose ideals those churches so wonderfully embody in stone, rather than on the six formative centuries which went before, or the four centuries of steadily accelerating change which have followed. The abundance and accessibility of our medieval and Tudor records, both ecclesiastical and civil, have encouraged the same nostalgic leaning.

In contrast, the records of the Nonconformist churches were "fewer, more difficult of access and harder to trace," to quote J. L. Hobbs' *Local History and the Library* (Deutsch, 1962), a standard textbook on its subject, which devotes three pages out of 338 to them. Free Church records were not in public custody; they were not calendared and until quite recently there were no guides to sources or bibliographical aids. Moreover, even had our local historian sought them out, most Dissenters would have agreed with Robert Hall that the archives

of a particular local church were not the concern of anyone outside that church.

May I illustrate the point from my own county of Buckinghamshire? There was a Baptist revival which began in the 1780's at a cottage meeting (the cottage was, as it happened, a squire's 'folly,' from which he soon ejected the congregation). It led during the next two generations to the formation of the Bucks. Baptist Association and to the foundation or renewal of most of the Baptist churches of mid-Bucks. which exist today. There was persecution in one village, friendship and co-operation with the incumbent in another. Chapels were built by the dozen, some beautiful, some distinctly otherwise; one by the devoted labour of its own desperately poor congregation, another by a single rich man. The movement affected the pattern of our politics, our schools, even our shops and factories. Yet when a truly great county history by Dr. George Lipscomb appeared in four weighty volumes in 1847, it said not a word of all this.

Baptists themselves have sometimes been strangely unmindful of their own history, but there has been some change of heart in the sixty years since the foundation of our Society, at least as regards strictly local studies. Hundreds of churches have marked their centenaries or other anniversaries by commissioning a booklet, compiled with loving care, duly printed, and read with deep interest by those families who had made the history, though often by hardly anyone else. Many of these booklets are not in public or even denominational libraries. Too often the writers were not greatly concerned either with the broader sweep of church history or with the history of their local community as a whole, and therefore failed to fit the history of their local church into the wider framework. In particular, they have not always realised that in addition to the records produced by Nonconformists themselves, there are many local records relating to them which were produced by others, especially in the difficult years between the Restoration and the Hanoverian settlement, when the Three Denominations took shape.

For the twenty years between the outbreak of the Civil War and 'Black Bartholomew' in 1662, we cannot strictly describe the Presbyterians or even the Independents as Nonconformists. They sought with varying success to exercise civil power, and their aim was to reshape the Establishment. Most of the Baptists were then, and are still, dissenters from any form of State establishment of the Christian Church, but, since they were not being actively persecuted, their growth, though relatively more rapid than during any comparable period, is not well documented at the local level, though much can be learned from the State Papers. But once the old ecclesiastical system was restored, official records about them began to accumulate. In each archdeaconry the newly-appointed vicar-general with his apparitors resumed his visitations and recorded his *detectiones*, which provide much material for church and social history during a period for which few county records survive. Then there are the episcopal

returns of conventicles in 1669, which record the denomination of the 'teachers' and the number and 'quality' (social standing) of their 'hearers.' Licences under the 1672 Declaration of Indulgence give a full and accurate picture of the distribution of those Dissenters who were prepared to rely on the King's dispensing power; but most General and some Particular Baptists were not so prepared. In Buckinghamshire only one Baptist, Thomas Taylor of Wycombe, lace buyer, sought and obtained a licence to preach. The hesitation of Baptist elders and pastors was fully warranted; under Parliamentary pressure the licences were soon recalled, and could even be used as evidence against those who had accepted them.

In the years which followed, the incidence and the intensity of persecution can be assessed by presentments at Quarter Sessions and proceedings in the ecclesiastical courts (one could be punished by both for the same act or omission). To use these lists as a directory of active Dissenters would be hazardous; some who are known to have been leaders enjoyed immunity for various reasons. There is a well-known instance in my own district, where nine Baptists who were less likely to be fined themselves agreed to pay the fines imposed on their fellow-members (This depends on Adam Taylor's authority; the church book which he consulted is lost). Cases are known of Baptists serving as parish constables or even as high constables of hundreds during the penal times. In any event, constables would be much less ready to bring in presentments against gentlemen of good estate than against day-labourers and small tradesmen.

Proceedings against Nonconformists ceased somewhat abruptly after 1686, and the next class of official records which the Baptist local historian will need to consult consists of the registrations of meeting-houses (in the broad sense of premises used for worship, whether regularly or occasionally) following the Toleration Act of 1689. In the first few years these were very numerous; no less than twenty houses were registered for worship in my own parish, though doubtless most of these were only in occasional use. It was apparently not an uncommon arrangement for a meeting to "go round" the houses of several brethren.

Our Baptist forefathers were in no great haste to erect meeting-houses of their own. A few date from penal times, since the fines for accommodating a conventicle to which people of other families resorted for preaching and prayer were much heavier than those for frequenting one, and it was argued that a purpose-built meeting-house could attract only the lesser penalty. After the Revolution, many congregations met in converted barns or outhouses, but for another generation many preferred the traditional hospitality of the farmhouse or cottage.

The age of William of Orange and Queen Anne was notable for its reliance on oaths and subscriptions of all kinds. Failure to take the statutory oaths of allegiance and supremacy, to join the Association in defence of the King, or to abjure the Pretender, entailed legal or

at least social disabilities, and each of these obligations gave rise in turn to something approaching a county directory. Under the Toleration Act, Baptist preachers had to subscribe to all but four of the Thirty-nine Articles. To Particular Baptists this presented no problem, but the General Baptists were in a real difficulty, because of the Calvinistic tone of the Anglican formularies. Many subscribed, and some were disciplined by their churches for so doing. A few evaded the issue by making the much simpler declaration required of the Friends, and these may be wrongly calendared in the sessions records. Strictly speaking, the Quaker declaration was available only to those who scrupled the taking of any oath whatever, and by 1689 few General Baptists were of that mind.

From the 1720's onwards Baptists tended to drop out of the notice of public authority. Toleration was becoming indifference, and it was no longer felt necessary to register every cottage where a prayer-meeting was held, though meeting-houses were registered either with the Archdeacon or the Clerk of the Peace.

Towards the end of the century, Baptists began to petition for the redress of grievances or for political or social reforms. They took a prominent part in the campaigns against the slave trade and slavery, and for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, since very few Baptists were prepared to countenance the occasional conformity which would have sufficed to qualify them for civil office. The names on petitions are a useful source of information; so are lists of subscribers to publications, and printed subscription lists such as those in the *B.M.S. Periodical Accounts* and the *Irish Chronicle*.

There is one remarkable instance of purely private records ultimately becoming public. Nonconformist registers of births and deaths were collected by the Registrar-General and were given statutory recognition by the Non-Parochial Registers Act, 1840. Some churches kept transcripts, but the originals have now been transferred from Somerset House to the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane under the Public Records Act, 1958.

The General Register Office was also responsible for registering meeting-places for worship under the Protestant Dissenters Act, 1852, and the Places of Worship Registration Act, 1855, and for the very thorough religious census of 1851, which is unique in our history except for an attempt in 1676.

These and other public records have been effectively used in the later, though not in the earlier, volumes of the *Victoria County History*. When I was asked to write the story of the Baptists of Thame I was greatly assisted by the text of the *Oxfordshire V.C.H.*, and still more by the references in the footnotes, which local collaborators were able to follow up.

But at best official records and printed lists can only provide the skeleton of the history of our churches. Their inner life can only be recalled from the records which they themselves have created. The

most important of these are the breviates of associations and the minute books of church meetings and of other organs of the local fellowship—deacons, trustees, finance committees and so on. Most of these are still to be found in the personal custody of the minister, church secretary or other officer, or in a cupboard, safe or box on the church premises, often covered with dust and almost forgotten. Some have remained in the possession of former officers or their descendants. The risk of destruction or disappearance is then very great. Even trust deeds are not immune. Only recently a renewal of the trust of an old Baptist meeting-house (since sold and demolished) came into my hands, having been for half a century in the keeping of private individuals who had no direct connection with the place.

Nevertheless, in spite of all losses, the volume of church records still remaining in the hands of existing Baptist churches and their present officers is immense. What, if anything, can we do, as individuals and as a Society, to make them available for study and to secure their future? Modern records may be needed for reference, and can reasonably be regarded as confidential if they concern persons still living. A fair working rule might be that records prior to the baptism of the senior church member could be made public; this would impose a delay of from 50 to 75 years, and even then a member might not wish the world to know that his great-aunt had been excluded for fornication. But even the Vatican finds 100 years sufficient. After this interval, the records ought to be deposited with county or city record offices. This has been the advice of the Congregational Historical Society for many years, and it is much to be wished that our own denomination would adopt a similar policy. In the more centralized Presbyterian Church of England, closed records are deposited at Tavistock Place, but the Society of Friends, whose meticulously kept and well-indexed records have secured more attention than the strength of the denomination would otherwise warrant, now advise Monthly Meetings to place their records in the appropriate local office, though the library of the Society of Friends maintains an inventory of all known records.

The advantages of local deposit are obvious. Many county archivists can now offer facilities for repair, safe custody and access under good conditions which no denominational repository can equal. Further, the accessibility of related records such as sessions rolls and family papers may induce the Baptist local historian not merely to study the records of his church or association in isolation, but to relate them to the life of the time.

Since few churches are likely to take this step of their own volition, one could wish that official archivists would take the initiative by approaching the Free Churches in their counties or county boroughs to obtain lists of their records and to offer facilities for the deposit, repair and indexing of books and papers no longer needed for current reference. The first step might be an approach by the denominational historical societies to the British Records Association, which co-

ordinates the work of the authorities and societies interested in the conservation and use of archives. (This Association arranged a symposium on Protestant Nonconformist records in 1960, reported in *Archives*, vol. V, no. 25 (Lady Day 1961), pp. 1-12, to which I am much indebted). For some churches, the work has already been done, either by individual local historians or in reports for the National Register of Archives, such as that being prepared by the Northamptonshire Record Society, which includes the rich and extensive College Street records. Our Society could well publish lists of church muniments which are in public custody or which have been adequately calendared. The lists would not be long.

It is probably asking too much of repositories such as Dr. Williams's Library or the Angus Library of Regent's Park College that they should transfer archives already in their care to the appropriate local record office. The answer may lie in photo-copying. For all but the most subtle purposes, a photographic copy is as useful as the original, and most public archivists will accept copies of documents relating to their areas which for any reason cannot be placed on deposit. Transcripts are the next best thing. When a very important early General Baptist minute book seemed recently to have been mislaid (it has since come to light again), I was greatly relieved to recall that I had previously copied it—though not *literatim*, since the temptation to abbreviate is common to the modern transcriber and the medieval scribe.

Our Society might pay special attention to the records of closed churches. These at least can hardly be required for further reference. Some have been deposited with associations; I have seen one which might serve as a case-study on the causes of failure, even in the period of our greatest outward success. But here again the local record office is the better place of deposit.

So far I have spoken mainly of manuscript (or, for recent decades, typescript) records; but some printed sources of Baptist history may be almost as scarce, and more elusive. The Presbyterians have an excellent rule by which congregations are expected to keep files of their monthly magazines, and their Historical Society has bound volumes of many of these, together with centenary and jubilee brochures. In the Victorian high summer of Nonconformity some churches printed detailed annual reports, including membership lists, accounts, baptisms, deaths and notes of other important events.

For the eighteenth century, funeral sermons are an important source of biographical information. A hint of their importance to Baptist ministers is a decision of the Buckinghamshire General Baptist Quarterly Association to reserve such sermons to the elders; following this, a gifted brother, authorized to edify the church, was forbidden in 1699 to preach at funerals without "ye Authority of ye Higher Powers." For some generations, a Baptist of standing would hardly have been considered well buried without a printed panegyric. Some of these are listed in Dr. W. T. Whitley's *Baptist*

*Bibliography*, but no doubt others await discovery.

The lists of academic theses related to Baptist studies, now being published in the *Baptist Quarterly*, are of considerable interest. They suggest that there are particular aspects of church life which await attention by research students, among them the following:

- (a) The evolution of the church covenant. So few have been printed that the first step would be to locate and transcribe an adequate sample of texts. Some are of course derivative (and we need evidence of 'common form') but many are original documents drafted by the founder of the cause, or adopted on a reconstitution of the 'church state'; these are of the highest value as indicating which aspects of faith and church order seemed of real importance at the time. A closely related topic is the evolution of doctrinal clauses in trust deeds.
- (b) The survival and revival among Baptists of the historic structure of the Christian year.
- (c) The choice of hymns and of hymn book, as an effect and even as a cause of changes in theological emphasis.
- (d) The development of vocal and instrumental music in Baptist churches. (Ralph Vaughan Williams once described the choice of church music as a moral rather than a musical issue).
- (e) The time and character of morning, afternoon and evening services. Regional differences and secular changes in the relative attendance at different times of the day may reflect trends in domestic habits, including the size and timing of the Sunday dinner.
- (f) The impact of the temperance movement on Baptist church life during the nineteenth century.
- (g) The relationship between Baptist churches and day schools, especially the "British Schools."
- (h) The gradual separation of the Strict and Particular Baptists from the mainstream of Baptist life, and the effects of the further schism between the Earthen Vessel and Gospel Standard sections of the denomination.

Of course, all such studies would be very much easier if more church records were available in print. It is easy to suggest that our Society should print more original source material, but one realizes that the Editor can print no more than he receives. The publication of many classes of local records *in extenso* has in recent decades been undertaken by county record societies, some of which receive annual or occasional grants from their county councils. It should be possible, in collaboration with such societies, for Baptist scholars to print our surviving seventeenth-century church and association records without undue delay (in some cases association minutes were kept by the church where the meeting took place). These would naturally lead on to selected material down to (say) 1837, when the end of an age was marked by a new reign, by civil registration and civil marriage, and by a realignment of the Three

Denominations along new theological boundaries.

Such an arrangement would leave the Baptist Historical Society to deal with records of national (or, as with the Baptist Missionary Society's archives, of international) rather than local significance. In its early days the society published the minutes of the Old General Baptist Assembly down to the time when its Arianism darkened into Socinianism and its more orthodox members moved over to the New Connexion. A similar edition of the New Connexion minutes from 1770 to 1891, together with other related documents now in the keeping of the Baptist Union, would be of great value. We are grateful to the Rev. T. F. Valentine for his account of the first 250 years of the Particular Baptist Fund, but the records in his care clearly deserve a much fuller treatment; so may those relating to the earlier years of the General Baptist Fund. I do not know what progress Dr. Whitley had made with the third volume of his *Baptist Bibliography*, but we greatly need such an aid for the mid-Victorian period, when Baptists, like other Dissenters, were rapidly increasing in numbers, in standing and in political influence, yet not without losing much which their great-grandchildren are seeking to regain. Another aid to local research which would meet a real need would be a general index to persons, places and significant topics mentioned in the 19th-century denominational journals, especially the *Baptist Magazine* and the *General Baptist Repository*. Above all, we need a general catalogue of manuscript material, showing its nature and present custody. Admittedly, so long as this custody remains private rather than public, losses will continue; but at least our research workers, including scholars from overseas whose time here is limited, could then undertake their work with those aids which they can reasonably expect from the mother country of the Baptist churches of the world.

*Postscript:* It would be most discourteous not to mention Baptist records in countries of the British Isles other than England, but no less presumptuous for an Englishman to say much about them. Our diamond jubilee celebrations should not pass without our recalling that the Welsh Baptists gave a lead both to other Welsh Dissenters and to all British Baptists by establishing a Historical Society as early as 1901. Since most of the Welsh counties are hardly large enough to support record offices with the full range of services, one would expect the National Library of Wales to be the recognized place of deposit for Welsh church records. The disestablished Church in Wales adopted this policy in 1944, and it is to be hoped that the Welsh Baptists and Independents will eventually be persuaded to take equally effective steps to ensure the adequate custody and preservation of their muniments. One gathers that the National Library has made arrangements with some printing firms to receive the annual reports of churches, whose officers might not otherwise place copies on deposit. Over the years the National Library and the Bangor University College Library have collected Nonconformist



ministers' papers, which are most relevant sources for the history of their churches and districts, and also the working papers of local historians who may have lacked opportunity to publish their findings.

It would be helpful for members of our Society in Scotland, Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man to submit papers on Baptist archives in their respective countries. I was interested to learn in discussion of early Irish minute books which await publication; and the records of the educational work of the Baptist Irish Society have waited until this Summer School for extended treatment, perhaps because English historians have found Irish history more painful than they could bear. One would also welcome a paper on the Gaelic-speaking churches of the Hebrides; a cursory examination of the Gaelic books in the library of Iona Abbey, where members of a Baptist Union citizenship conference were storm-bound for longer than they intended, suggested to me that the Baptists had some influence on Gaelic culture in the last century.

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#### THE INDIAN PRESS AND MISSIONARIES

(Concluded from p. 76)

<sup>12</sup> "Memoirs of Mr. John Chamberlain," *Quarterly Oriental Magazine* (March 1825), iii, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Bengal Hurkaru*, 20 August 1824.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 September 1824.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 September 1827.

<sup>17</sup> *India Gazette* (Calcutta), 13 March 1823.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, "Burning of Hindoo Widows," *Oriental Herald and Quarterly Review* (June 1824), ii, 173-86.

<sup>19</sup> *The Englishman* (Calcutta), 11 June 1834. These contributions are also discussed in some detail and critically assessed in my book, cited above.

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**The Particular Baptist Confession of 1644.** The ecclesiology of this exceptionally important early Particular Baptist document is discussed by Dr. B. R. White in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. xix, 2, 1968, pp. 570-590. After reviewing the circumstances of its publication, Dr. White examines its relationships with the Separatist Confession of 1596 and suggests that its doctrine of the Church is to the left even of the Separatists. In the latter part of his article, when Dr. White examines the theology of inter-congregational co-operation, he criticises and seeks to replace a traditional theory of the origin of associations.