

General Baptist Beginnings in Leeds 1840-50

IN the summer of 1969 an iron chest, on which were inscribed the words "The Trustees of North St. Chapel, Leeds", was discovered during renovations to the Harehills Lane Baptist Church in Leeds. Its existence was known to a few of the old members, but as far as one could ascertain it had remained unopened since the 1920's. No key being available, the lock was forced open, and inside were found documents relating to the General Baptist cause in Leeds.

Among the multitude of documents were many of minor historical value — bills, receipts, correspondence concerning legal matters (particularly with respect to the Land Clauses Consolidation Act of 1845 and the Leeds Improvement Act of 1869), copies of burial certificates and the like. On the other hand, among the more interesting items were early eighteenth century indentures concerning the purchase of land and property in connection with Call Lane Chapel (the first nonconformist building erected in Leeds after the 1689 Act of Toleration), minute books of the long-extinct Wintoun Street and North Street General Baptist Churches, and the original minute book of the earliest General Baptist cause in Leeds.¹

The first General Baptist church in Yorkshire was established by Dan Taylor at Wadsworth, near Hebden Bridge, in 1763, and it was Taylor who was one of those who founded the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1770.² Although churches were formed at Queenshead (now Queensbury) in 1773 and Halifax in 1782,³ it was not until 1840 that an effort was made to establish a General Baptist cause in Leeds. In July of that year a chapel at Albion Walk was secured at a preaching station under the supervision of Rev. Thomas H. Hudson, who for the previous eleven years had ministered at Queenshead.⁴

Albion Chapel, built in 1796, was a small, plain building of brick, and had previously been used by Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and, for a few months in 1836, by Particular Baptists.⁵ It was used for only eighteen months by the General Baptists, but during that time a church was formed. The *Leeds Mercury* of March 6th, 1841, reported that those worshipping in Albion Chapel had formed themselves into a General Baptist Church on the last day of February, and the membership roll at the back of the church's minute book records that fifteen, including the minister, T. H. Hudson, had so united.

Of the fifteen original members, eight were men: Thomas H. Hudson who soon became the first minister of a General Baptist church at Cemetery Road, Sheffield; Abraham Hodgson who became the assistant Borough Surveyor of Leeds; Edward Matthews, Joseph Nettleton and Joseph Horsley who were local tailors; Isaac Cliffe who was a cloth weaver; James Whiley who was the church's chapel-keeper; and John Andrew who was a corn miller and a prominent advocate of the temperance movement, and later an agent of the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control.⁶

The new cause was under the management of the Yorkshire Committee of the General Baptist Home Missionary Society. This Committee appears to have had little sympathy with or little understanding of the practical problems of the infant church. Albion Chapel contained no baptistry, hence the church readily approved of the Committee's view "respecting changing our place of worship, and obtaining the Stone Chapel", which was the first building erected by Particular Baptists in Leeds. However, a church resolution of approval was tempered with the facts of reality—"we fear we are not able to find persons who can give security for the money needful for the purchase of the Chapel."⁷ The Committee's reaction to this response was evidently unfavourable, for seven weeks later a church meeting decided to send a more optimistic communication to the Committee. The latter acknowledged the communication but declined to take action, for a second letter of a similar nature was sent from the church—recommending the purchase of the Stone Chapel, requesting the continuance of Mr. Hudson and pledging the financial support of the church members.⁸

Within ten days of the second letter being sent, the church was called together to consider the written notification, in the form of a resolution, of the Committee's attitude to the Wine Question. It had recommended a particular beverage to be used at Communion. Of those present at the church meeting on July 7th, six "conscientiously objected" to the resolution, seven and the minister "consented" to it and one was neutral. That the Committee's resolution had placed the church in a predicament is evident from the fact that later, in the same month, it was agreed unanimously "under existing circumstances" to postpone the Lord's Supper.⁹ A minute of the church meeting on August 15th reveals the difficulty with which the members were faced—"After considerable conversation nothing could be done to reconcile the minds of the friends who object to the Committee's Resolution on the Wine Question; and, in case they withdrew, the consenting members were not able to engage to raise the money required by the other Resolutions of the Committee relating to pecuniary affairs".

These early difficulties, probably together with the Committee's withdrawal of, or inability to provide, financial support for the Leeds church,¹⁰ resulted in the minister's resignation at the end of

August. Members present at a church meeting on August 31st passed a resolution "expressing their high respect for his piety and talents and their warm admiration of his zealous and persevering exertions amid many discouragements and trials to advance the interests of the Redeemer's Kingdom, during his residence in Leeds, and their deep regret that any circumstances should have occurred to render such resignation advisable and consequently the severance of that connexion with the church, which, though brief, has been happy and agreeable". An infant church without a minister, without financial stability but with a division of opinion, was unlikely to survive long. By the end of the year the church had ceased to function. Thus ended the first abortive attempt to found a General Baptist cause in Leeds.

It was, surprisingly, the Derbyshire Committee, as much as the Yorkshire Committee, which was responsible for the revival of the cause in Leeds. The Stone Chapel was rented for twelve months and an agent of the Derbyshire Committee, Rev. Jabez Tunncliffe, was appointed to minister at the church, provisionally for six months. A meeting of some of the former attenders at Albion Chapel was held on September 19th, 1842, when it was announced that "a second attempt [sic] was about to be made to establish a General Baptist Interest in Leeds".

The Stone Chapel was a plain stone building in St. Peter's Street. It stood back from the street a few feet and the space in front, being three feet lower than the pavement, was flagged and fenced in with a low wall having iron railings. Entry was obtained through the middle of this wall, down semi-circular stone steps.¹¹ The Particular Baptists had left the Chapel in 1826 "in consequence of the very obscure, unpleasant, and in other respects disadvantageous situation of the place",¹² but Tunncliffe in 1842 viewed it optimistically—"The chapel is a good one, in a good situation to all appearance".¹³

Lack of finance again proved a major obstacle. At the meeting called to reconstitute the cause, members were exhorted to pay pew rents, make weekly subscriptions and donate to quarterly collections—all to be devoted entirely to the general expenses of the church. A church meeting on December 2nd declared that "in consequence of the low state of our finances" it was impossible to give a salary to any leading singer. Practical economy was probably as decisive as theological conviction when a meeting of members on July 17th, 1843, affirmed "That as the question of a Salaried Singer has been frequently agitated by certain parties in the Church. We are of opinion that a salaried or paid singer is contrary to the Spirit of the Gospel and has a tendency to gender strife and uneasiness in the Church and that we resolve that we as a church will not give any Salary or Salaries to any singer or singers".

James Whiley, one of the original members and chapel keeper

of Albion Chapel, felt that his remuneration for cleaning the chapel (having his house rent free) was inadequate. A church meeting on March 24th, 1843, resolved that he, "having frequently made complaints respecting remuneration that he receives for discharging the office as door keeper and from reports that have been circulated, by him amongst the public having an injurious tendency to the G.B. cause in Leeds", should resign. It was further agreed, "That if Brother Whiley cannot settle down peaceably amongst us and exhibit a Spirit becoming the Gospel of Jesus Christ we feel it our duty (having frequently remonstrated with him on the impropriety of late conduct) to affectionately request him to peaceably withdraw himself from amongst us". Where-upon Whiley, along with his wife and daughter, immediately resigned from membership.

In May, 1843, the Derbyshire Committee ceased to be responsible for the pastor's salary, and for the next three years Tunncliffe experienced great difficulty in obtaining a salary from the Yorkshire Committee, initially because the Leeds church was not officially sanctioned by the county's General Baptist Conference.¹⁴ A church meeting on May 31st instructed the secretary "to draw up a report of the State of our little church and that Mr. Tunncliffe lay it before the Yorks Committee of Management and that we solicit some assistance in the paying of the Rent of the Chapel, etc.". In the following January Tunncliffe made "his begging Journey" into the Midlands, and came back discouraged. He intimated to the church some probability of his leaving, as a result of which the members resolved, "That we are of opinion that Mr. Tunncliffe is a likely man for raising a General Baptist Interest in Leeds. If we can only induce him to remain constantly amongst us and direct the Labours of those in connection with our Church that are ready and willing to co-operate with him. We are also of opinion that Mr. T's removal from Leeds at the present time would materially hinder our progress".¹⁵

The financial difficulties were realised by the congregation. Young men "frequently of a Sabbath morning made a subscription among themselves, raised a few shillings, and handed it to the preacher as a proof of their appreciation of his zealous and unwearying endeavours to do them good".¹⁶ In May, 1845, the church sent a letter concerning Tunncliffe's salary to each of the General Baptist churches in Yorkshire, and in the following month Tunncliffe toured Bradford and other places to solicit subscriptions towards the payment of the debt on the new baptistry. The response was not encouraging, and in the following year Tunncliffe resigned "in disgust at the whole proceedings of the Yorkshire churches towards Leeds and myself in particular".¹⁷

Although the church was so greatly hampered by its inadequate financial resources, its progress was by no means negligible. A Sunday School was established at the end of 1842; three Sunday

services were held, as well as two mid-week devotional meetings; the church was moved at the end of 1843 into Byron Street Chapel, at the top of North Street, which had been built the previous year and which was purchased jointly by the Yorkshire and Derbyshire Committees; a week of evangelistic services was held at the beginning of 1844; and there were fifty in membership when Tunncliffe resigned.¹⁸

Following the termination of Tunncliffe's labours, twenty-one members withdrew from the fellowship, followed by five others six months later including Tunncliffe.¹⁹ These, together with a few others, formed a church in a school room in Lower Templar Street on December 6th, 1846.²⁰ Tunncliffe was appointed pastor, and to his small stipend received for being registrar at the Burman-tofts Cemetery at Leeds the church pledged that it would add the proceeds of weekly subscriptions raised by the members. The fellowship was constituted as an "open" communion church—"we allow any Christian, of whatever peculiar views or denomination, whose life and profession is according to the truth, to commune with us at any time, at our monthly observance of the Saviour's death". Moreover, although the church almost wholly comprised General Baptists, an attempt was made to abolish the distinction between General and Particular Baptists. It was agreed "that we be called Baptists, as the names Particular and General cease to represent a real difference in the two bodies, and are rather a reproach than an honour to the communities who still retain them".

Pecuniary difficulties again proved an obstacle to stability. In the spring of 1847 a letter was sent on behalf of twenty-two people, "recently members of the General Baptist Church, Byron Street, but now presided over by Mr. Tunncliffe", applying for membership at South Parade Particular Baptist Church, expressing a wish to work with some present South Parade members in the East end of the town and requesting that Tunncliffe be engaged as an agent of South Parade.²¹ The deacons of South Parade regretted that they felt unable to accede to the latter request and so no amalgamation was achieved. The incident does, however, reveal that the new cause was finding it difficult to maintain financial independence. A note in the church book, written at the close of 1847, records: "We have had a year's poverty—we are nearly all poor. We have been preserved in peace; some prosperity has attended the means of grace among us. Our hope is, that still greater good is in store, and that our next year will be better than the past. Praise the Lord! Lord, help us!". The last entry of church business made in the church book was on February 13th of the following year when the financial situation was discussed. Such was the situation that the church disbanded, and Tunncliffe was able to devote himself to the Band of Hope movement, which he helped to found in Leeds that year, before commencing a ministry at Hunslet Particular Baptist Church as pulpit-supply.²²

Meanwhile, at Byron Street Chapel, Richard Horsfield had replaced Tunncliffe. Being in trade, he required no salary, although from January, 1859, until September, 1872, he was paid £7 per month and thereafter until his retirement in October, 1885, he received £10 a month.²³ He began his ministry in October, 1846, a year before the church sent a request to the Derbyshire Committee for him to be ordained as its pastor. Yet it was not until 1849 that Horsfield received public recognition as the church's minister when a church deacon presented him with an elegant communion service, remarking on "his abundant and indefatigable labours in the cause of truth".²⁴ Unfortunately, the early years of his ministry were overshadowed by indiscipline amongst church members. At a church meeting on October 4th, 1847, one of the founder-members, Joseph Horsley, was excluded "for wicked slander and other irregularities". At another meeting, a week later, another member was excluded, having been "proved guilty of lying and slander". A church meeting on September 1st of the following year dealt with no other business other than matters of discipline. Two were suspended from the privileges of the church for irregular attendance; one was admonished for "neglect of the means of grace"; one was to be visited by a deputation in consequence of his absence "from the Ordinances of Religion"; and two were no longer considered to be in fellowship, the meeting considering the mode of their removal to be "disorderly and meriting severe censure". On November 27th, Edward Hollings was excluded for immorality, and the next two years witnessed the names of several members being erased from the membership roll because of non-attendance.

These early years of Horsfield's pastorate were, however, by no means without significance for the development of the General Baptist cause in Leeds. An organ was bought for the chapel, the system of Communion tickets was introduced and 118 new members were received during the four years up to the end of 1850.²⁵ The actual membership at the end of 1850 was 76, and the congregation had become so large that it had been necessary in 1849 to erect galleries in the chapel in order to provide more accommodation.²⁶ This strong foundation ensured the church's continued existence; in fact Byron Street (or North Street) Church was to remain until 1923 when, as the last General Baptist church in Leeds, it was integrated into the Harehills Lane Baptist Church.

1850 was a turning-point for the General Baptists in Leeds. Not only was the Byron Street Church now well established but also a number seceded from Byron Street to unite with Tunncliffe at what was to prove to be another long-standing General Baptist cause in the town. Tunncliffe had not settled at Hunslet, even though requested several times to become the pastor there. He felt unable to comply with such a request "because of the distance of the chapel from my other labours at the cemetery; and secondly,

because of the difference of opinion existing between the church at Hunslet and myself, on the extent of the atonement of Jesus, and the qualification for communion at the Lord's table; they holding Calvinistic views, and strict communion order—mine are the opposite to theirs on these points. Besides this, some of the leading men are troublers in Israel, who tythe anise and cummin, and neglect weightier matters".²⁷

Early in the summer of 1850 Tunncliffe was approached by two trustees of the Call Lane Chapel which had for several years been a platform for Arian tenets,²⁸ inviting him to preach there with a view to the pastorate. They pointed out that the present minister was about to leave, that the Arians in membership were "as good as extinct" and that the Unitarians were anxious to possess the chapel although they personally would prefer it to be used by the Baptists. "I was informed that the reason why the application was made to me", wrote Tunncliffe, "was from the fact, that if a minister of our denomination—a stranger—was to accept the place, the disrepute into which the chapel had fallen for the last few years would sink him; but if a minister well known in the town for evangelical opinions took the pulpit, he might succeed in raising a cause in the place".²⁹

At the end of July, Tunncliffe was elected minister of Call Lane and shortly afterwards a constitution was adopted which made the fellowship one of "open" membership, the celebration of Communion weekly and the class system—"weekly meetings for religious exercises" modelled on the Methodist practice—the major organizational structure of the church.³⁰ "At this time", wrote Tunncliffe, "most of my old friends, the General Baptists, in this town were unsettled, owing to the conduct of my successor at Byron Street Chapel".³¹ The Byron Street minute book reveals that after ten had been recently erased from the church roll for continued absence from the Table of the Lord, a church meeting on October 1st officially terminated the membership of twenty-six others, most of whom joined Tunncliffe's congregation. Fifteen were allowed to withdraw, "the Church expressing deep sympathy towards them believing them to be the dupes of designing men, and guided and woefully led astray". Eight, including Tunncliffe's daughter, Harriet, were withdrawn from church fellowship because they had "evidenced by their carelessness and irregularity their unfitness for Church Membership". Three, including Abraham Hodgson, a deacon and founder-member of the church at Albion Chapel, were excluded in consequence of "the well known unchristian conduct of these persons who wish to withdraw from the Church". At a meeting on November 18th, at Call Lane Chapel, a General Baptist church was officially formed by thirty-one persons, and a month later fifteen others united with them.³²

An important factor in the stability of the two General Baptist causes was the settled ministries of Tunncliffe and Horsfield.

Tunncliffe's pastorate did not end until his death in 1865 and Horsfield's ministry extended until his retirement in 1885.³³ By 1850 both had already begun to play a part in local public affairs.³⁴ Tunncliffe was an ardent advocate of the Anti-State Church Association and often spoke on its behalf in Leeds and neighbouring villages. He was also one of the main local anti-war agitators and was a supporter of Cobden's peace proposals in 1849. Yet it was his work with the Band of Hope and Temperance movement that earned him wider recognition in these early years. Horsfield was more limited in his interests. Apart from being one of those who arranged a public meeting in 1849 to hear the statements of three ministers expelled from the Wesleyan Society, his main local contribution up to 1850 was enthusiastic support of the Leeds Town Mission.

The strength of the early General Baptists in Leeds seems to have been in the small shopkeeper and artisan. Just over half of the male members of Byron Street Chapel who joined the church in or before 1850 were in this class, many of them in connection with the local clothing industry. Tailor, hosier and linen draper were the professions of several; umbrella maker, shoemaker, hair-dresser, brickmaker, butcher and coffee-house owner were typical of the trades followed by these Baptists. A prosperous foreign wool merchant and an owner of a classical and commercial academy were amongst the members, but such occupations were exceptional.

NOTES

¹ Books found in the chest were: Call Lane Chapel Cash Book 1800-1854; Minutes of Meetings of Seat-holders of Call Lane Chapel and Statements of Accounts 1851-1873; Byron Street Chapel Cash Book 1853-1885; Geo. Rowand's Cash Book 1868-1883; Wintoun Street Chapel Account Book 1891-1896, North Street Chapel Account Book 1904-1921; Minute Book of the General Baptist Church, Leeds 1841-1860; Call Lane Chapel Minute Book 1869-1878; Minute Book of the Wintoun Street Baptist Chapel 1878-1896; North Street Chapel Committee Minute Book 1881-1883; Minute Book of the Baptist Church meeting at North Street Chapel, Leeds 1885-1923; North St. Deacons' Minute Book 1913-1923. For bringing the discovery to my notice and allowing me first access to the contents of the chest, I would like to thank Mrs. Varden, the secretary of Harehills Lane Baptist Church.

² A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, Kingsgate Press: London, 1947, pp. 151-153.

³ W. E. Blomfield, in an article entitled "Yorkshire Baptist Churches in the 17th and 18th Centuries" in *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, Wm. Byles and Sons: Bradford and London, 1912, pp. 103-107.

⁴ F. Beckwith, in an article entitled "A Lost Leeds Chapel, 'Albion'" in *The University of Leeds Review*, vol. X, 1966-67, pp. 255-265. Thomas Hudson began his ministry as a missionary in Jamaica before going to Queenshead. He stayed little more than a year in Leeds, and about the same period of time in Sheffield, before returning to missionary activity, this time in China.

⁵ *A Historical Guide to Leeds and its Environs*, T. Fentemen and Sons: Leeds, 1858; Minutes of Deacons' Meetings (South Parade Baptist Church), June 11th and September 28th, 1836. When the Religious Census of March

30th, 1851, was made, Albion Chapel was being used by the Swedenborgians; the *Leeds Directory* of 1843 records that the chapel was then being used by the Independents.

⁶ *Leeds Directory*, various years.

⁷ Minutes of Church Meeting, April 28th, 1841.

⁸ *Ibid*, June 16th and 27th, 1841.

⁹ *Ibid*, July 27th, 1841.

¹⁰ When Rev. Jabez Tunncliffe had to depend on the Yorkshire Committee for financial support between 1843 and 1846, he experienced delay in the receiving, and sometimes non-payment, of his salary.

¹¹ Unpublished notes of W. R. Bilbrough, 1904, kept in the safe at South Parade Baptist Church. A photograph of the exterior of the chapel is also preserved at South Parade.

¹² Minutes of Church Meeting (South Parade), April 12th, 1824.

¹³ Tunncliffe's diary (now lost), as quoted in Rev. H. Marles, *The Life and Labours of the Rev. Jabez Tunncliffe*, London, 1865, p. 192.

¹⁴ Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

¹⁵ Minutes of Church Meeting, January 31st, 1844.

¹⁶ Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁷ Minutes of Church Meetings, May 5th and June 2nd, 1845; Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, September 19th and December 2nd, 1842, September 25th and December 1st, 1843; membership roll at back of the church minute book.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, October 26th, 1846, and March 22nd and April 26th, 1847.

²⁰ "The Baptist Church Book, belonging to a portion of the denomination called Baptists, assembling for the worship of the living God and His Son Jesus Christ, in the School Room, Lower Templar Street, Leeds" (now lost), as quoted in Marles, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-209.

²¹ Minutes of Deacons' Meeting (South Parade), April 27th, 1847.

²² The idea of a children's temperance organization was first suggested by Tunncliffe—see Marles, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-219 and J. W. Ashworth, *The Jubilee of South Parade Baptist Chapel, Leeds*, Fred. R. Spark: Leeds, 1877, pp. 55-56—although the credit is often given to Mrs. Carlisle of Dublin, who was visiting and addressing a number of Day Schools in Leeds on the subject of temperance at that time—see, e.g., the *Leeds Mercury*, August 30th, 1851.

²³ Byron Street Chapel Cash Book.

²⁴ *Leeds Mercury*, September 22nd and November 24th, 1849; Minutes of Church Meetings, October 26th, 1846, and October 4th, 1847.

²⁵ Membership figures can be calculated from the membership roll at the back of the church minute book.

²⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, June 16th, 1849.

²⁷ Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²⁸ Call Lane Chapel was opened for nonconformist worship in 1691. For fifty years in the eighteenth century one man ministered to the congregation, but "his doctrine had become more and more dry and Arian". After another long ministry by "a follower of Dr. Doddridge", the next minister became a Unitarian. He was followed by Rev. Samuel Crawford who professed the Presbyterian faith but held high Arian sentiments. He was the minister whom Tunncliffe replaced in 1850. (W. R. Bilbrough, *op. cit.*,—the main source of his information was evidently Marles, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-225).

²⁹ Tunncliffe's diary, as quoted in Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

³⁰ The rules of the religious society meeting in Call Lane Chapel are quoted from the church book by Marles, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

³¹ Tunncliffe's diary, as quoted in Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

³² Minutes of Church Meetings, November 18th and December 16th, as quoted in Marles, *op. cit.*, p. 250. Call Lane Chapel was demolished in 1870 under the terms of the Leeds Improvement Act of the previous year and the church transferred to a new chapel in Wintoun Street.

³³ The *Leeds Express* of June 25th, 1865, reports that at least fifteen

thousand people were in or just outside Burmantofts Cemetery to pay their last respects at Tunncliffe's funeral. A note in the front of the "Minute Book of the Baptist Chapel meeting at North Street Chapel, Leeds" records, "The Rev. R. Horsfield having been Pastor of this Church for a period of thirty-nine years resigned his office in October 1885 in consequence of failing health. A presentation (including an illuminated address) was made to Mr. Horsfield on his retirement—the address giving emphatic expression to the warm attachment of his people and their appreciation of his faithful and efficient services extending over so long a period".

³⁴ For Tunncliffe's local activities up to 1850, see, e.g., *Leeds Mercury*, January 19th and February 5th, 1848, February 10th and December 15th, 1849, and March 9th and August 24th, 1850. For Horsfield's, see, e.g., *Leeds Mercury*, November 24th, 1849 and November 9th and December 21st, 1850. The latter's heroic quality received public notice when the *Leeds Mercury* of January 26th, 1850, reported that on the previous Sunday evening Horsfield had preached a very able sermon in pain and with a broken arm after falling on his way to chapel.

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Reviews by: A. A. Anderson, J. H. Y. Briggs, R. L. Child, S. J. Dewhurst, E. A. Payne.

Following Dr. S. Mayor's address to the Annual General Meeting there have been enquiries concerning the availability of his book *The Churches and the Labour Movement* (1967). Since the closure of the Independent Press this may be obtained direct from Dr. Mayor and enquiries should be addressed to him at Westminster College, Cambridge.