

The Letter - Book of John Davis (1731 - 1795) of Waltham Abbey

THE Letter-Book of John Davis, minister from 1764 till 1795 of the Baptist church at Waltham Abbey, is among the archives of Christ Church and Upton Chapel, Kennington Road, London. There is a note at the front to the effect that John Davis preached at the ordination of 'our Brother', James Upton, on 27 June 1786; and it was presumably through Upton¹ that the volume came into the possession of Christ Church and Upton Chapel. I am grateful to the Rev. John Cribb, the present minister of the church, and to the deacons, for permitting me to examine it and to publish this brief account of it. I call it a Letter-Book because it consists predominantly of transcripts of 'Letters upon spiritual subjects'; but it also includes a number of sermons, accounts, lists of church members, etc., together with two biographical narratives, one of which is of the transcriber, John Davis. This is convenient, since, although his name occurs in W. T. Whitley's *Baptist Bibliography* in the title of the sermon preached by John Gill at his ordination, Davis does not appear to have published anything and consequently is not in Whitley's index; nor does his name occur in the recently published *Index to the Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*.

According to this autobiographical narrative, John Davis was born at Newport, in the Isle of Wight, on 17 March 1730/1. The family soon moved to London, and later, after his father's death, to his mother's birthplace, Rye. The gospel was not preached there at that time, but he read Benjamin Keach's² sermons, and with his mother, uncle and aunt went six miles to Wittersham, where the gospel was preached and the Lord's Supper administered in a number of farmhouses. There he heard George Green of Ashford, Thomas Burch of Smarden, and Thomas Wanstall of Folkestone.³ On 15 May 1749 he was baptized at Ashford by George Green, the pastor there, and was admitted a member of the church meeting at Wittersham, with laying on of hands and prayer by Green, who also administered the Lord's Supper there, the church's late pastor, John Exeter, being dead. The Presbyterians at Rye⁴ failing as to a minister and being now very small in number gave the Baptists leave to get a minister of their own persuasion; and in September 1749 Charles Rogers came over from Chatham. The Wittersham church now divided; one part joined the church at Sandhurst,⁵ while those at and about Rye, being about twelve in number,

of whom John Davis was one, formed a church at Rye, and for their minister called Charles Rogers, who settled at Rye on 8 November 1750.

On 13 October 1756 Davis married Mary Lewis of the Rye church, to whose father he had been apprenticed from 1745 to 1752, and whose mother, Tabitha Lewis, now a widow, was a member of the church at Smarden. He had four sons and three daughters, but only two of these children were alive at the time of writing (26 April 1777).

In February 1758 Davis was invited by a member of the church at Sevenoaks⁶ to work for him at his civil calling (which is not specified), and on 25 March he removed thither with his wife and child. The Sevenoaks church, which was in a flourishing condition under its pastor Michael Bligh,⁷ encouraged Davis to exercise his gift in preaching, and on 5 November 1758 he was called to the public work of a minister and preached his first sermon in this capacity. He at first went to preach at Rye, where there was now division and dissension, Rogers having removed in May; but on 4 March 1759 the church at Folkestone sent over John Stace and Thomas Finn to hear him preach, with the result that he was invited to Folkestone. He went there on 2 October 1769, but did not accept the invitation to become the pastor, partly because 'my Judgement as to Doctrine and order did not coincide' with theirs. In August 1761 he went to London to see Dr. John Gill,⁸ and on 17 February 1763 he wrote to Gill, seeking his direction. Gill replied, recommending the church at Waltham Abbey, Essex, the pastor⁹ of which had recently died. Davis accordingly set out on 28 March, on 30 March reached London, where he waited on Dr. Gill, and on 1 April arrived at Waltham Abbey.

The church invited him to become its minister, and he accepted the call. He preached his farewell sermon at Folkestone on 22 May, and his first sermon at Waltham Abbey on 29 May. On 15 August 1764 he was ordained to the pastoral charge there, Dr. Gill giving the charge to him, Samuel Burford,¹¹ of Prescot Street, London, preaching the sermon,¹² and Benjamin Wallin¹³ of Maze Pond, Benjamin Messer¹⁴ of Grafton Street, Isaac Gould¹⁵ of Harlow, and Robert Macgregor¹⁶ of Woolwich also being engaged. During his years at Waltham Abbey he had helped to settle the Baptist church at Hertford,¹⁷ he had also preached at Ponders End and Enfield Highway, and in London at Horslydown and Grafton Street, and had paid annual visits to Sevenoaks. This account was written at Waltham on 26 April 1777. Davis remained at Waltham Abbey till 1795.¹⁸ The present minister of the church, the Rev. G. B. Wise, kindly informs me that he died on 11 June 1795.

At the beginning of this Letter-Book Davis explains that he has written this autobiographical account, in order to explain

how it is that he possesses so many 'Letters upon spiritual subjects', 'between four and five hundred . . . received in answer to mine', 'the best' of which he here transcribes, in full or in abstract; and also to explain his arrangement of the letters, which are in groups relating to the several churches with which he has been associated. The first part of the volume accordingly consists of 211 letters, from correspondents at Sevenoaks-Riverhead, at Folkestone, at Waltham Abbey, at various places where he had preached, and finally relating to his call to the ministry and his invitation to churches, including the letter from Gill. These 211 letters are listed. The next section of the volume has to do with Charles Rogers, the minister of the church at Rye of which Davis had been a member from 1750 to 1758, and one to whom he had continued to be attached. There are 23 letters from Rogers, written in the years 1761-80; two from John Hussey of Exeter, at whose house Rogers died; the funeral sermon for Rogers preached by Davis at Rye on 2 June 1782 and not published; and an abstract from Rogers' diary, providing a biographical account of him. To this we will return. More sermons follow, and then 52 letters from Davis to two of his Sevenoaks correspondents. Again more sermons, and then an 'Account of the State of the Particular Baptist Church at Waltham Abbey in Essex, Distinguishing each year, from April 1, 1763, when I came here', which is continued till the year 1787. The material ends with ten further letters written by Davis himself. In reverse at the other end of the volume are two letters, accounts, including 'Subscriptions and Collections Made for Building my Dwellinghouse and Repairing the Meetinghouse at Waltham Abbey in 1769 and 1770', a few poems of a religious nature, and more letters.

Charles Rogers, Davis' minister at Rye and lifelong friend, is mentioned in published accounts of the Baptist churches in Northampton, where he was minister of a company who seceded from College Lane (now College Street) in order to hold no communion with the unbaptized. He was a correspondent of Philip Doddridge; but little or nothing else seems to be known of him, so that the biographical account from his diary, preserved in this Letter-Book, is of some interest. From this it appears that Rogers was born in Manchester on 14 February 1692, the youngest of a family of four. He was baptized on 9 February 1717 and joined the church. In 1728 he was called to the ministry, and preached first at Chester and then at Warford,¹⁹ Cheshire, till 19 September 1731, when he moved to Northampton. Here he was ordained²⁰ pastor over a company of seceders from the church lately under the care of John Moore,²¹ whose daughter²² he married, she being a widow; his son died at Rye, aged sixteen. On 2 August 1738 he removed to Coventry;²³ on 5 November 1741 to Romsey;²⁴ on 29 December 1745 to Olney;

and on 4 October 1747 to Chatham.²⁵ From Chatham he came, as we have already heard, to Rye²⁶ on 24 September 1749, being recommended by Benjamin Wallin, and settled there on 8 November 1750, the day the church was formed. Building a new meetinghouse became the ruin of all through debt and divisions, and in May 1758 Rogers left Rye and went back to Northampton,²⁷ and then briefly to Salop (Shrewsbury).²⁸ The late Rev. Samuel Merivale,²⁹ son to Mrs. Rogers by her former husband, then took Rogers and his mother to his home in the West of England, where Mrs. Rogers died in 1770. Rogers continued to live in Exeter,³⁰ with Mrs. Hussey and her son, till his death on 11 February 1782.

Most of the 'Letters on Spiritual Subjects' which Davis transcribes are what they set out to be, and are as barren of any historical material apart from the date and place of writing as are the printed letters of this nature, which are a characteristic of eighteenth-century evangelical piety. Two letters, however, may be thought reproducing: the prompt and businesslike letter from Dr. John Gill which led to Davis' becoming the pastor of the church at Waltham Abbey; and a letter from Benjamin Wallin, for its inclusion of an extract³¹ from a letter to him from the noted American Baptist minister, Isaac Backus,³² of Middleboro, New England. These are printed below.

John Gill to John Davis
London, March 10, 1763

Dear Sir,

I Received yours and should have Return'd an answer sooner But waited until I could hear something to your wishes and Expectations. There is a people at Walthamabby a place about 13. or 14. Miles from London whose pastor died almost three quarters of a year ago. I sent to their leading Man among 'em, and who hath the Care of getting ministers for 'em, and informed him of your Situation that they might have you upon trial when they pleased. He has accordingly acquainted the people with it and this day he waited upon me and desired Me to write to you to Come and give them a visit, they dont Care how soon: and if you Can be with 'em the Lordsday se'nnight they will be ready to receive you, or when it will suit you. I thought it proper to acquaint you with it, that you May take your Measures accordingly. I am with Christian respects your friend and Brother in Christ

John Gill

Benjamin Wallin to John Davis
Mazepond, April 18. 1781

Dear Sir

The following is an Extract of My Papers lately Received

from the Revd. Mr Bacchus of Middlburgh New England and dated Boston April 13. 1780.

“Very Dear Sir

For several years past our hostilities have Engrossed the peoples attention in general thro’ the whole Country, and but little appearance of Religion, a few places only Excepted, till lately, a great and glorious work has opened before us. In August 1778. I perceived a little beginning of Conviction on a few Minds in our own Society which gradually increased so that 22 very agreeable Members were added to our Church and Many More are soon expected. Brother Enhanan Winchester^{ss} who was born seven miles west of Boston 1751 is Now owned of God in an astonishing Manner. He began to Preach 14. Days after Mr Whitefields death and after Labouring a few years in those parts he went to South Carolina. A year ago he had Concluded to return to his Native Country; but a revival of Religion at Welch Neck, on Pedee River, where he was preaching, prevented it; from May 30th to august 29th inclusive he Baptized 239 persons, 100 of whom were Negro Slaves, who before were in a State of Heathenism, and averse to attend Christian Worship; but before he came away it was usual to see 4. or 500 of these poor Creatures at Meeting, and the work prevailed when he came away in September. On November 16 he called to see Me in his way to his Fathers house Expressing a strong faith of seeing glorious things in those parts where he has Preached about as many Sermons as there has been days Notwithstanding a severe Winter. Our Ministers have been greatly quickened, and the Effects have been such that about 100. persons have been Baptized at Rehoboth 70. at Swansey 40. in Taunton and Raynham adjacent to Me, and Many in Neighbouring Towns. . . . A remarkable work also is begin in Newtown and Brookline by Means of Mr Winchester among his own kindred and acquaintance. I Preached there last week, and was delighted with what I saw. Besides a glorious work begun last summer in the Western parts of our Government. Elder Peter Worden of New-Providence and Elder Nathan Mason of Lanesborough Baptized 300 betwixt May and January. In the same space Elder Cooling at Brinfeild Baptized about 80. and thro’ New-England there is Now the greatest prospect of a general thorough reformation that has appeared within 35. years and in some respects greater than I ever saw before. Notwithstanding the Torrent of Corruption seemed likely as if it would have drowned the Land. O help us to praise and pray.” So far from thence.

Dear Sir, I have scarce time to write the above: have Not been on Horseback since last at Waltham: since which also, Neither Mr Davis, nor any from thence, have called upon Me. I have No great Expectation of paying you another Visit, being in a man-

ner altogether confined, and can preach but little. I wish the confirmation of your health, and increasing comfort and usefulness and with Love to Messrs. Thompson's, Auther's, Carter, and all Christian Friends. I am Dear Sir your affectionate Brother

Benjamin Wallin

NOTES

1. This conjecture is confirmed by the fact that the note concerning Upton's ordination is printed in the *Memoir of . . . James Upton* (1835) by his son, James Upton, who thus had access to the Letter-Book: op. cit., p.17, following extracts from the Waltham Abbey Baptist church records, with references to John Davis, pp.10-12.
2. For Keach, see *D.N.B.* and *Baptist Bibliography*, ed. W. T. Whitley.
3. For the churches at Ashford, Smarden and Folkestone, cf. my 'Dissenting Churches in Kent before 1700', in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xiv.2, pp.175-189 (where in the final footnote 'A. G. Hurd' should read 'R. F. Chambers'). For Ashford and Folkestone, see further Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, iv. 514 and 511, from which it appears that Green was not ordained pastor till 1753, nor Wanstall till 1750.
4. For reference to the Presbyterian church at Rye, cf. Evans MS. (Dr. Williams' Library), fol. 116.
5. For the church at Sandhurst, cf. my 'Dissenting Churches in Kent'. Its records begin in 1731: *Bapt. Bibliog.*, item 7-731.
6. For the church at Sevenoaks, cf. my 'Dissenting Churches in Kent' and Ivimey, iv.513.
7. Bligh had been ordained on 1 October 1754: Ivimey, iv.514. His daughter Martha was a member of Waltham Abbey, where she married James Upton on 10 June 1783: James Upton, *Memoir*, p.11. For publications by Bligh, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*
8. For Gill, see *D.N.B.* and *Bapt. Bibliog.*
9. The pastor who had recently died, and for whom Benjamin Wallin preached and published a funeral sermon (*Bapt. Bibliog.*, item 19-762), was John Auther, pastor from 1731 to 1762 and the first pastor: W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London 1612-1928*, p.129. Philip Doddridge's *Correspondence*, in which his name is sometimes misspelt Arthur, shows him as previously at Market Harborough, Leics. His name appears among the subscribers to both Doddridge's *Family Expositor* and John Guyse's more conservative *Practical Expositor*. Authers, perhaps his daughters, are among Davis' correspondents.
10. For this, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*, item 12-764.
11. For Burford, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*
12. This may be the sermon recorded in *Bapt. Bibliog.* as item 14-765, but identification is uncertain, since the only copy located by Whitley, which was in the Library of the Baptist College, Bristol, has been sold, as the Librarian, the Rev. N. S. Moon, kindly informs me.
13. For Wallin, see Walter Wilson, *Dissenting Churches . . . of London*, iv.290-3, and *Bapt. Bibliog.*
14. For Messer, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*
15. For Gould, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*; Gill had preached at his ordination: item 10-763.
16. For MacGregor, see *Bapt. Bibliog.*

17. In 1775 Davis took part in the ordination of Robert Baskerville as pastor at Hertford;: St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, Church Book, f.80 verso, n.2.
18. See W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London*, p.129.
19. For the church at Warford, see William Urwick, *Historical Sketches of Nonconformity in the County Palatine of Chester*, 1864, pp.280-3.
20. For Rogers' ordination in 1733, see *History of College Street, Northampton* (Jubilee of the Rev. J. T. Brown), Northampton 1893, p.29; the preacher was John Brine (D. N. B. and P. Toon, in *Free Grace Record*, III.12 (1965), 557-71), who married another of John Moore's daughters, Anne. In 1733 Rogers preached at Great Gransden, Hunts., when the Independent church there was transformed into a Baptist church: Ivimey, iv.509.
21. For Moore, see E. A. Payne, *College Street Church, Northampton, 1697-1947*, pp. 9-11, and *Bapt. Bibliog.*
22. A letter from her to Doddridge, written at Romsey on 11 April 1743, enclosing a letter from her son, aged five, written at Romsey on 5 March 1743, is preserved in New College, London, MS. L1/8123. Her name was Hannah, his James.
23. Rogers' predecessor in the pastorate at Coventry was George Simpson (later pastor of St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge), who was present when in 1732 the seceders from College Lane, Northampton drew up a fresh, stricter covenant: *History of College Street*, p.27. Simpson's predecessor at Coventry was Brine.
24. For the church at Romsey, see Ivimey, iv.505.
25. For the church at Chatham, see my 'Dissenting Churches in Kent'.
26. For the church at Rye, see Ivimey, iv.538; the Edwards who succeeded Rogers, and whose Christian name was not known to Ivimey, was Morgan Edwards, later a founder of Rhode Island College (now Brown University): *Dict. of Welsh Biography* and *Bapt. Bibliog.*
27. The minister at Northampton between Rogers' two pastorates was Henry Davis, at whose ordination in 1748 both Gill and Brine preached: *History of College Street*, p.31.
28. Rogers spent only one year at Shrewsbury: New College, London, Meen MS., fol.543.
29. For Merivale, see *D.N.B.* s.v. his grandson, John Herman Merivale.
30. An account of the church at Exeter is preserved in the Meen MS., fols.507-9.
31. A portion of this extract was printed, with omissions and deprivations, by William Vidler, *A Testimony of Respect to the Memory of Elhanan Winchester* (1797), pp.40-1.
32. For a recent reprint of works by Isaac Backus, with critical introduction, see W. G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism; Pamphlets, 1754-1789*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.
37. For Elhanan Winchester, see J. H. Allen and R. Eddy, *History of the Unitarians and Universalists in the United States*, New York, 1894, pp.408-21; and for his effect on the Baptist churches, cf. A. H. Newman, *History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*, New York, 1894, p.258.