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Particular Baptist Itinerant Preachers during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries

ENTHUSIASM is an evil much less to be dreaded than superstition . . . Superstition is the disease of nations, enthusiasm that of individuals . . ." ¹ These words from Robert Hall's apology for village preaching illustrate very well the attitudes and motivation of both itinerant preachers and their opponents at the close of the eighteenth century, for to the preachers and their supporters much of the prevailing religious observance connected with the Established Church was little better than superstition, while, equally, many Churchmen regarded their irregular and uninvited activity as an unseemly and dangerous form of religious enthusiasm which in the light of contemporary events in France threatened the Establishment and the whole existing structure of authority.

Dissenting itinerancy holds considerable importance for the secular historian as a part of the popular evangelicalism that was such a prominent and universal social phenomenon during the 1790s and the early decades of the nineteenth century, but for the denominational historian it has additional significance, for whereas the more exciting developments concerned with overseas missions tend to steal the limelight, this work on the domestic front by hundreds of largely unremarkable men effected the transformation in English Dissent that made extended overseas activity possible and laid the foundation of a significant proportion of the social and political influence of Victorian Nonconformity.

By the time Robert Hall was writing itinerant evangelism had become an established practice among Particular Baptist congregations, but this prominence had been achieved almost entirely since 1770, for during the lean years of the mid-eighteenth century few pastors or church members had exhibited much practical concern for those outside the immediate circle of believers, and the only real growth had been in Calvinist sectarianism. As the mood of introspection and withdrawal had spread so the itinerant preacher of earlier times had become a rarity. But few though they may have been, some pastors did attempt to combine evangelistic work among the surrounding communities with their own stated duties. In the years following 1759 when he became the minister of the church at Cambridge, Robert Robinson preached with varying degrees of regularity in some fifteen neighbouring villages at a distance of anything up to fourteen miles from the town. According to Josiah Thompson, "The usual times were half-past six in the evening, when the poor [could] best spare the time; and sometimes at five in the morning, before they

[went] to work, and now and then in summer at two in the afternoon, for the sake of far-comers: the meetings generally consist[ed] of scores, often of hundreds of people".²

From the 1770s, however, the situation began to change under the influence of factors both theoretical and practical. The growing acceptance of the idea that it was the duty of the unconverted to believe the gospel, coupled with a rejection of certain logical deductions made by contemporary Calvinists such as the notion of pre-destined reprobation, lay behind the evangelistic activity that began to be visible in the Northamptonshire Association which gave official support to village preaching in its circular letter for 1779.³ In the West of England there is some evidence of an older stream of evangelical thought and practice associated with the academy at Bristol, for apart from the regular monthly preaching excursions undertaken by Benjamin Francis the pastor of Horsley Baptist church in Gloucestershire from 1759 until 1799,⁴ the Western Association started a fund as early as 1775 with the support of village preaching as one of its declared objectives.⁵ Besides the theoretical impulse given by the more evangelical interpretation of Calvinism many of the new generation of village preachers were influenced by the practical example of Calvinistic Methodism with its central emphasis upon itinerant evangelism, and among these must be included Robert Robinson for he gained part of his early experience of the ministry at the Tabernacle in Norwich.⁶

Contemporary criticism inevitably made much of the untrained lay element in Dissenting itinerancy, not only belittling the lack of education exhibited by the preachers but also their low social status. Many Churchmen expressed sentiments similar to those of Robert Woodward, the Vicar of Harrold who, describing the men who preached at the gathering held in his own parish under the auspices of the Bedfordshire Union of Christians, said "a tailor, a mason, a watchmaker, a sievemaking, a woodman, and a schoolmaster [speak] by turns, or as they pretend or imagine they have the power or gift of utterance."⁷ But in spite of the large number of ordinary church members increasingly participating in evangelism and the novelty of this development, the itinerant ministry was a composite structure which depended upon a range of personnel extending from those with full-time pastoral responsibilities to tradesmen in wholly secular employment.

From the first appearance of this new emphasis upon itinerant preaching the leadership and impetus came from those who were ordained ministers. Among those raised in the older Dissenting tradition of the settled pastorate and its associated responsibilities the concern for itinerancy was slow to develop, but in this as in many other aspects of evangelism the 1790s proved to be the crucial decade and by 1800 many Baptist ministers were endeavouring to combine effectively both pastoral and evangelistic roles. This dual concern emerges clearly in the ordination charge given to Richard Pengilly at

Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1807 when William Steadman urged the young minister to attend not only to his own people but also to the spiritual needs of the heavily populated area in which the church was situated.⁸ Most examples of ministerial itinerancy were for obvious reasons concerned with the intensive penetration of neighbouring towns and villages, but in certain cases settled ministers engaged in extended preaching tours through some of the more remote parts of the country assisted financially by societies operating at the national level. During the summers of 1796 and 1797 William Steadman accompanied first by John Saffery the minister at Salisbury and then by a Bristol student named Franklin spent several weeks preaching throughout the county of Cornwall, the expenses being met by the Baptist Missionary Society.⁹ Although the responsibility for supporting such ventures passed to the London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society¹⁰ in the following year, geographically extensive itinerancy did continue both in the West Country and in other parts of England. Indeed, for a decade commencing in 1797 John Palmer the energetic minister at Shrewsbury combined his pastoral duties with the organization of a network of village preaching within Shropshire, and, during occasional protracted absences from his church, with preaching tours through the towns and villages of the border counties and central Wales that took him as far afield as Aberystwyth and Machynlleth.¹¹ Although Palmer's reports to the London Society suggest little in the way of tangible results from these lengthy journeys, apart from the fact "that his going there had induced the Welsh Ministers to attempt to preach in English", he was able in 1805 to write saying "We have upwards of 70 Members that do not reside within Ten Miles of us mostly the Fruits of Village Preaching."¹²

While the national itinerant societies and county associations were able to undertake the evangelization of more remote areas, most of the expansion that occurred in the period up to 1830 was the result of local itinerant preaching around existing churches. Between 1806 and 1808 the minister at Dartmouth preached regularly every week to crowded gatherings at houses in the neighbouring villages of Strete and Dittisham,¹³ and it would appear that limited itinerancy of this kind had by that time become a normal adjunct of pastoral duties, but the scale of operations mounted by some individuals ensured far greater penetration of the surrounding area. During the same period the Immingham minister reported preaching in at least a dozen places, some as much as twelve miles from his home, but it would seem likely that his visits took place on a more occasional basis than those at Dartmouth.¹⁴ Nor was the effectiveness of such preaching limited to the places visited, for the minister of Cottenham in Cambridgeshire reported that at one of his preaching stations, at Dry Drayton, people from seven different villages attended.¹⁵ But whatever the scale of this local itinerancy, most took pains to emphasize its value, perhaps at times in order to counter reluctance on the part of their own church members and to stimulate assistance. Frequent reports were made

regarding baptisms and the establishment of regular village prayer meetings and a repeated theme of the letters to the London Society concerned the number of members and adherents their churches had gained through these evangelistic efforts. After only one year at Lockwood near Huddersfield, Aston, the minister formerly at Chester, observed that through his own itinerant preaching in the district and the prayer meetings run by many of his male church members forty-four people had been added to the church.¹⁶ Although he did not mention the size of the church nor any losses that may have taken place, such an increase of forty-four members in one year was remarkable and quite sufficient to stem any possible criticism of his pastoral performance. Yet others were even more unequivocal regarding the value of their external activities, and in 1809 Robert Imeary of North Shields noted that of the fifty members of his church, thirty had come from his evangelism in the surrounding communities.¹⁷

If ministerial itinerant preaching became increasingly common from the 1790s many of the seeds of that practice were sown during the period of theological training, and indeed students in preparation for the ministry themselves formed an important group among those identifiable as itinerant preachers. Writing in 1840 the Independent minister at Preston, Richard Slate, pointed to the distribution of the Dissenting academies as constituting an important factor in the uneven strength of the various denominations in different parts of the country.¹⁸ While his observation could be taken as demonstrating no more than the potential for endogenous growth where existing churches were assured of a plentiful supply of adequately trained ministers, there is no doubt that in the area cited as being particularly prosperous for Independents and Baptists, namely the West Riding of Yorkshire, the three Dissenting academies at Rotherham, Idle and Bradford contributed also to denominational prosperity by the large number of congregations raised or revived through student evangelism. The Baptist academy in Bradford which opened its doors in 1805 had as its president William Steadman, a lifelong advocate of itinerancy, who helped to steer the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association in that direction, especially in the establishment of a Baptist itinerant society for those two densely populated counties.¹⁹ His students engaged in preaching in the Bradford area probably in conjunction with that society although the extant records pass over the details of their labours in silence. From the annual reports of the nearby Independent academy at Idle, however, it is clear that when William Vint received more requests than he could satisfy he "borrowed" Baptist students for his own itinerant network with Steadman's ready approval.²⁰

Students from the older academy at Bristol also took part in evangelism despite the many demands for supplies from existing churches. Even before John Ryland's presidency Caleb Evans had encouraged such work and a popular anecdote concerning the period of his final illness in 1791 told of a conversation with one of his students in which

“he most earnestly recommended Village preaching, giving a detail of the rise and progress of a favourite congregation at Downend, near Bristol, where he then was”.²¹ The reports of the Bristol Education Society do not concentrate on this aspect of the students’ courses, but mention is made by various sources of a variety of itinerant activity. During his studies at Bristol Samuel Pearce was sent to preach on two Sundays at Coleford in the Forest of Dean, a place which had no Baptist church at that time, and later he described his nightly preaching in that mining community. “I felt particular sweetness in devoting the evenings of the week to going from house to house among the colliers who dwell in the Forest of Dean, adjoining the town, conversing and praying with them, and preaching to them. In these exercises I found the most solid satisfaction that I have ever known in discharging the duties of my calling. In a poor hut, with a stone to stand up on, and a three-legged stool for my desk, surrounded with thirty or forty of the smutty neighbours, I have felt such an unction from above that my whole auditory have been melted into tears, whilst directed ‘to the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world’.”²² Thirty years later, on many Sundays students would ride on horseback some thirteen miles to Rowberrow on the western edge of the Mendips to preach to the calamine miners who were described as “exceedingly poor”.²³ Nor was the work of the Bristol students confined to rural communities, for regular preaching took place within the poorer parts of the city at first in the open air and later at Brick Street with a more permanent preaching station.²⁴ When these local examples are considered in conjunction with Franklin’s Cornish tour in 1797 and the similarly extensive journey made by Robert Humphrey through the northern part of Devon and Somerset in the following year,²⁵ a convincing picture can be constructed of a considerable level of involvement in itinerant preaching at Bristol.

The effectiveness of student itinerancy may not be apparent in an urban context such as that offered by Bristol, but against a rural setting its impact becomes more obvious. Between 1800 and 1814 the men in training for both home and overseas service at John Sutcliff’s small academy at Olney visited the surrounding villages,²⁶ and although the details are not readily available they were probably broadly similar to the neighbouring Newport Pagnell Evangelical Institution which in 1824 was taking a major part in the maintenance of regular Sunday evening services at five places with an estimated attendance of 900.²⁷ The latter academy, although principally an Independent foundation, displayed a particularly non-denominational spirit and among those prepared during the period up to 1830 were seven who subsequently became pastors of Baptist churches.²⁸

Behind the practice of encouraging students to itinerate as distinct from merely supplying vacant pulpits in existing congregations lay several basic objectives. There was an obvious desire for evangelism and expansion either by means of visits made to hitherto untouched areas or through the more intensive penetration of communities

adjacent to existing churches, and although the evangelistic potential of student preaching was not advanced as a reason for the foundation of any of the Baptist academies, it was widely recognized as one of the benefits to be derived from any such institution.²⁹ For an evangelical academy the practice offered by itinerancy in developing the art of simple evangelistic preaching also constituted a significant attraction although that advantage was to some extent offset by an unfortunate tendency towards encroachment upon the period available for study. A third purpose, and, for those who thought like William Steadman, the one that was probably the most important, lay in the desire to implant in the rising generation of ministers a firm commitment to the principle involved. The success of this intention is obvious from the rising level of activity among the churches, but John Rippon's description of the situation at Bromsgrove is particularly interesting in that it recognizes the causal relationship involved: "Mr. John Scroxton received his education under the Rev. Mr. Bull, of Newport Pagnel, and was 'resident minister at Woburn' before his removal to Bromsgrove. Habituated to village preaching, he has, in his new situation, begun to labour in two neighbouring villages."³⁰

Apart from settled ministers and those preparing for that office the spectrum of itinerancy comprised two further categories: those who were engaged as full-time salaried evangelists and a large heterogeneous group of lay preachers. The significance of the appearance and development of these categories in this period consists in the state of flux thereby revealed within Old Dissent: the breaking down of traditional structures of ministry and church order for the sake of accommodation to a changing environment and for evangelism and growth. This widening of the concept of ministry to include both mobility and variety of personnel affected the Baptists less than their fellow Dissenters, for, despite the possible novelty of salaried itinerants, the use of lay preachers had vigorous historical roots and traditionally the preaching ministry in Baptist circles had involved men from fairly humble social groups and had not been treated as something noticeably "apart" from the role of the ordinary church member.

The appearance after 1795 of full-time paid itinerant evangelists working under associational direction in specific localities in many ways closed whatever ministerial gap may have existed, for the new category drew on both lay and trained sources and supplemented the traditional role of "gifted brethren", many of whom subsequently became pastors in their own right. Among Particular Baptists "itinerants", as they were technically known, were not widely used before 1820, in contrast to the Independent county associations many of which employed one or two in a solely evangelistic capacity from their formation at the turn of the century. The reason for this discrepancy undoubtedly derives from the difference in character and function between the older Baptist associational structures and the Independent bodies. The former gradually adapted to include evan-

gelism among a range of existing objectives, whereas the latter came into being largely because of the concern for home mission following the formation of The Missionary Society in 1795. Those associations involving Baptists which did employ full-time itinerants prior to 1820 were without exception either new and specifically evangelistic bodies such as those in Essex and Shropshire³¹ or inter-denominational ventures uniting Baptists and Independents with Calvinistic Methodists. As an example of the latter group the extant minutes of the Northern Evangelical Association suggest a rather inconclusive performance by two separate persons employed at different times between 1799 and 1804,³² but other societies of a similar nature such as the County Missions in Surrey and Sussex appear to have enjoyed rather more success with their choice of preachers. In Surrey for example the work grew steadily from the commissioning of the first two itinerants in January 1798 to the situation in 1821 where the society had five agents preaching with varying frequency in some fifty villages.³³ Of the specifically Baptist societies the Essex Association managed in most years to support one paid evangelist, while in Shropshire under the inspiration of John Palmer of Shrewsbury the total had risen to three by 1820.³⁴ Only the London Society which operated at a national level failed to use this type of evangelistic ministry although at one time such an appointment was actively considered.³⁵

The particular advantage of the full-time itinerant lay in his potential for deployment in areas or localities judged to be of special need or opportunity and lying in many cases beyond the convenient reach of existing congregations. One obvious example was provided by the Welsh border counties, and Herefordshire was acknowledged to be a particularly irreligious region by contemporary observers as disparate in their allegiance and outlook as William Steadman³⁶ and the Bishop of Hereford.³⁷ According to the London Society it was in the light of his lordship's approval of local Dissenting efforts to give popular religious instruction that in 1802 they voted £5 to Micah Thomas, a former Bristol student, to enable him to itinerate in that county.³⁸ Where preaching centres were chosen carefully results could be both immediate and enduring as in Essex where the first two itinerants with the county association raised churches at Rayleigh and Thorpele-Soken within two years of commencing their work.³⁹ Sometimes, however, the outcome was less certain, and it was not uncommon for work to be inconclusive, or for the initiative taken in a particular locality to wither following the departure of a particular individual. Between 1799 and 1805 the Northern Evangelical Association sponsored evangelism in south-west Cumberland, in the villages surrounding Carlisle, and in the vicinity of Milnthorpe in Westmorland, but in none of these places does any permanent congregation appear to have taken root.⁴⁰

Despite the reduced appeal of paid itinerancy by comparison with the pastoral oversight of an established church, and considering the

physical difficulties and variable financial rewards involved,⁴¹ there was a surprising readiness to undertake the work. This acceptance of full-time itinerancy may in part reflect the comparatively short-lived nature of the role, for having raised a congregation the individual concerned would usually settle as pastor rather than continue as an evangelist in a different locality. After 1815 the small number of county-based itinerants was augmented by men directed and paid at a national level by the Baptist Home Missionary Society,⁴² but during the four years up to 1819 progress was unspectacular, for the society, which also supported other forms of village preaching, employed only one full-time home missionary, John Jeffery, who worked among the remote communities in the Scilly Isles. In 1820, however, three more were engaged and thereafter the number increased steadily reaching thirty-six by the end of the decade.⁴³

Although the use of professional itinerant preachers on any significant scale was a comparatively late development, the same was not true concerning lay activity. Particularly in evidence from the later 1790s, lay participation in itinerant preaching would appear to have been on a scale which dwarfed all the other categories put together. Unfortunately the precise extent of the lay contribution is difficult to determine, for, quite apart from the question of ordination and the distinction between those wholly in secular employment and those set apart for the work of the ministry but still in the position of supporting themselves, the records of associations and itinerant societies are notably reluctant to discuss the lay element, having been written in the cold climate of Establishment polemic against ignorant and untrained lay preachers whose activity stopped little short of subversion. While significant problems of assessment are raised by such contemporary silence, the evidence that does exist⁴⁴ suggests a considerable level of Baptist lay itinerancy involving men from a variety of social backgrounds, but depending principally upon the various species of skilled craftsmen and including a number who were described as schoolmasters. This developing image of lay evangelism does require a number of qualifications. In the first place the degree of lay activity would appear to have varied from area to area, for the records of the Essex Baptist Association mention only a handful of people recognizably falling within that category, whereas the village preaching maintained by the Bedfordshire Union of Christians⁴⁵ and the intensive itinerant activity based on places such as Salisbury⁴⁶ and Nailsworth⁴⁷ inevitably required the services of personnel far too numerous for the regular ministry to supply, even taking Independent and Baptist resources together. Secondly, the lay involvement itself requires careful definition, for a range of semi-ministerial functions including exhortation, the reading of published sermons, the leadership of prayer meetings and gatherings for edifying conversation together with preaching in the full sense of the word were in many cases subsumed under the single heading of "lay itinerancy", and it is often impossible to determine the precise character of the individual's contribution. Yet

another point and one moreover which appears to contradict what has been said already concerning the extent of lay preaching arises from a careful study of contemporary church records. The minute books invariably record the trial and approval of individual lay preachers by their respective churches, and it is interesting to note that in every church examined the number of individuals involved was surprisingly small, and this is hard to correlate, for example, with the fifty or sixty preachers allegedly issuing every Sunday from the city of Salisbury.⁴⁸

In terms of practical organization the deployment of lay resources varied from the individual efforts of church members within their own immediate vicinity to simple team itinerancy involving ministers and laymen. One fairly prominent and sustained example of the latter was initiated during the 1790s by the church at Salisbury where for more than a decade several members in conjunction with their pastor preached every week in the villages of Shrewton, Rockbourne, Bishopstone, Bodenham and Winterbourne Stoke, places situated within a ten mile radius of the city, and occasionally at other unspecified localities.⁴⁹ Similar networks of organized lay preaching can be identified with other centres such as Shrewsbury and Bedford, and, as might be expected, their occurrence was in most cases linked with the leading advocates of itinerancy; men like John Saffery, John Palmer and William Steadman. The central conviction of these leaders both spoken and assumed was that evangelism formed the *raison d'être* of the Church and therefore every available resource including the preaching talents of its members should be directed towards that end.

While it may be convenient to divide itinerant preachers into various categories, any tendency to regard this classification as rigid and permanent is unsatisfactory, for a considerable degree of flexibility and movement existed between the different forms of commitment to itinerancy. Earlier the natural progression from full-time evangelism to that associated with pastoral responsibilities was noted and examples can similarly be found of men like William Terry, a clock and watch-maker of Bedale in Yorkshire, whose successful lay preaching led in the course of time to a settled pastorate⁵⁰ or in some cases to an appointment as a county itinerant. Much less common was the decision taken by Charles Holmes to resign his pastorate at Wantage and devote himself entirely to the work of evangelism and the apparent courage of this step seems to have been recognized by the London Society in its award of an additional £5 for his support.⁵¹

From the collections of sermons designed for reading at village meetings and the numerous reports found in associational literature it is clear that the theological and moral issues dealt with by the preachers varied little, although the apparently narrow perspective was broadened in many instances by some accompanying aspect of social concern such as the establishment of a weekday or Sunday school to teach reading, and in some cases writing also, or a local charity fund for the provision of clothes and other forms of relief for the sick or indigent. But if the substance of the preaching tended to be uniform,

the work differed considerably in terms of its external circumstances and the responses it evoked.

During the initial period of expansion prior to 1810 access to many localities both urban and rural was gained most readily using open air meetings held in convenient public places: on village greens, common land or even in the case of an urban environment in the streets themselves. The life of an itinerant preacher particularly in the early pioneering stage was by no means attractive and was seldom free from physical discomfort. The second eight week evangelistic tour of Cornwall undertaken by Steadman and Franklin during July and August 1797 had a strenuous itinerary which included almost every place of significant population in the county and involved both men in preaching every day, at times standing in the open among crowds of miners estimated at more than a thousand strong. Steadman remarked afterwards that quite apart from the fatigue involved their sense of pleasure in the work had been diminished by the almost continuous rain which rendered travelling and open air preaching both disagreeable and difficult to sustain.⁵² Similar factors militated against more local and regular itinerancy. For several years from 1797 a schoolmaster named Wastfield set out on horseback every Sunday morning at six o'clock from the now deserted village of Imber on the Salisbury Plain to ride across the downs in order to preach in the villages of the upper Avon valley and the Vale of Pewsey. In his still extant journal for 1797-8 some glimpses of the difficulties of this work are given, for apart from frequent opposition from farmers, clergymen and local officials the lengthy journeys of the summer months became a danger to health on the cold, dark evenings of autumn and winter. In the entry for 8th October 1797 Wastfield wrote: "In the eveng. I preached at Rushall and Wedhampton and got home a little before eleven. It was a cold eveng. and took cold in my head which affects my hearing. Going out from a hot room into the cold over the down was I suppose the cause being by preachg. worked into a perspiration, but I hope all will be well again Soon. I found the Ld. good today."⁵³

Because of the difficulties and impermanence of work in the open air, regular preaching in practice required the use of a suitable room or some other form of semi-permanent accommodation which would then be licensed in accordance with the requirements of the Toleration Act. During the opening decade of the nineteenth century with increasing tension over the legal position of itinerancy most ventures in new localities began indoors and from the outset depended upon the availability of rented or borrowed premises. With a single powerful landlord who resented this kind of Dissenting intrusion, considerable adverse pressure could be brought to bear if a tenant was involved, and at times individuals were evicted or preachers forced to hold their meetings elsewhere. But in many cases, as at Aldeburgh, if accommodation was not readily offered the prospect of a regular income from a letting arrangement served to overcome initial hostility.⁵⁴ In Manchester a somewhat novel if rather less permanent solution was

applied to the problem, for in 1822 it was reported that three tents each capable of holding seven or eight hundred people were constantly in use in a programme of evangelism designed to reach the thousands of irreligious inhabitants of that city.⁵⁵ The final stage in the provision of accommodation marked the metamorphosis of itinerant evangelism: the confining of essentially unstructured activity within recognizable ecclesiastical forms as rented accommodation gave way to barns fitted up as permanent places of worship for regular congregations and even to simple purpose-built chapels.

In the 1798 edition of the *Baptist Annual Register* John Rippon surveyed the prospects for the success of domestic evangelism with enthusiasm and in so doing undoubtedly reflected the overwhelmingly positive response encountered by village preachers throughout the country. Having summarized the evangelistic impetus already evident among Baptists he continued: "To these efforts there has been scarcely any opposition, nor is opposition much to be feared in any part of his Majesty's dominions. Almost the whole country is open for village preaching, and if there be a hamlet in a thousand where ministers cannot, without comfort, preach out of doors, rooms and houses may be registered at a small expense; and if this is done, which we earnestly recommend, the gospel will be heard not only while the summer weather lasts, but it is probable all the year round."⁵⁶ In his assessment of the situation Rippon may have been unduly sanguine, but his remarks accurately reflected the general mood. In many parts of the country open air preaching attracted large numbers of hearers and rooms taken for the purpose were frequently crowded to capacity; nor was this popular response to itinerancy short-lived, for a high level of interest is revealed by increasing attendance figures throughout the period up to 1830. In the village of Twerton members of the church at Bath commenced regular preaching in 1804 using a house that had been rented and fitted up by an unnamed resident. As the numbers attending increased the original premises became too small and in September 1808 a new meeting-house was opened with accommodation for some three hundred persons.⁵⁷

Much of the unfriendly reaction encountered took the form of localized, spontaneous disturbance of preaching proceeding either in the open air or in properly registered premises. Where the latter were involved and the offenders could be identified, preachers had some hope of legal redress through pressure exerted by the Dissenting Deputies, or after 1811, by the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty, but in many cases, as at Stoke Gabriel in Devon in 1805, the mere threat of legal action was sufficient to bring a public apology, the payment of compensation (usually to a specified charity) and the cessation of hostilities.⁵⁸ At the parish of Barling in Essex following repeated noisy interruptions of services conducted by the Essex Baptist Association itinerant in a house duly registered for preaching, the opposition came to an unusually abrupt end one night in February 1807. The uproar created by the mob, who were equipped

with "Drum, Fife, Trumpet, Horns, Boilers" and other implements, startled the horses of the parish constable and churchwarden almost causing them to be thrown, whereupon the ringleader was summoned to appear before the local magistrates at Rochford.⁵⁹

Rather more serious was an outburst of violence which took place in Oxfordshire in 1794 when a party of unruly recruits for an Irish regiment attacked a house in Woodstock where James Hinton the Oxford Baptist minister was preaching. Although the premises had been registered at the Oxford Quarter Sessions, a constable who was present refused to act without specific instructions and as a result the offenders escaped unpunished. Moreover, applications made to the Home Secretary through the medium of the Dissenting Deputies failed to achieve any form of redress, for during the investigations the matter passed from the hands of Henry Dundas to the significantly less sympathetic Duke of Portland.⁶⁰ Fortunately for those taking part in itinerant evangelism such serious incidents were rare, and popular opposition seldom advanced beyond the level where it constituted a temporary nuisance.

Rumours circulating in 1800, however, and again later in that decade anticipated restrictions upon preachers that would have been far more limiting than sporadic physical opposition and anything but temporary in their effect. Until the first decade of the nineteenth century some resistance to itinerant preaching had been experienced from individual legal functionaries, as with the threat of action against the Wiltshire schoolmaster Wastfield made by Hayward the constable of the Swanborough Hundred if he continued to preach in the open within his area of jurisdiction.⁶¹ From time to time the magistrates in certain counties also showed reluctance to register places of worship and to allow certain individuals to qualify as Dissenting preachers, but in such cases gentle pressure applied by the Deputies mentioning the possibility of application for a "Mandamus" normally produced the desired compliance.⁶² During the first decade of the nineteenth century in the climate of Establishment alarm at the spread of itinerant preaching this occasional reluctance blossomed into a new and strict interpretation of what was meant by the term "Dissenting preacher". From 1809 with the advent of Lord Sidmouth's efforts to curb itinerancy the refusal by magistrates to administer the oaths to those unable to demonstrate a settled pastoral relationship with one particular congregation became widespread. In the spring of 1812 when matters came to a head it was alleged that this strict approach to the provisions of the Toleration Act had led, in spite of the defeat of Sidmouth's bill, to such refusals in some thirty English counties.⁶³ Various test cases were brought before the Court of King's Bench by the newly formed Protestant Society including that of Leonard Ellington, a Baptist preacher described in the court records as "the Teacher of a Separate Congregation of Protestant Dissenters at Mildenhall".⁶⁴ In May 1812 the King's Bench issued an absolute Writ of Mandamus compelling the Suffolk Quarter Sessions

to administer the oaths to Ellington,⁶⁵ but this and other similar decisions announced by Lord Ellenborough did little to relieve the pressure against itinerant preachers, and it was not until the passage of Liverpool's "New Toleration Act"⁶⁶ in July 1812 that effective legal restrictions upon itinerancy were removed.

It has been suggested that the pressure for this significant piece of legislation stemmed in part from an alarming rise in the number of prosecutions being brought under the Conventicle Act,⁶⁷ but careful examination of the minutes of the Dissenting Deputies yields little evidence suggesting the active use of that statute to impede itinerancy during the years prior to 1812. The one notable exception occurred at Bildeston in Suffolk in 1805 where the Baptist minister had been convicted of preaching in a house which remained unregistered at the time because of a technicality. The minister, named Hoddy, was fined the £20 stipulated by the act as applying to a first offence, and in consequence his property and that of the woman who occupied the house was distrained in order to meet the penalty.⁶⁸

After 1812 and the removal of the Five Mile and Conventicle Acts from the Statute Book the only significant hindrance to the work of the itinerant preachers came from isolated cases of popular hostility, from the adverse influence in specific localities exerted by certain prominent individuals, and from the increasing tendency towards formalism, complacency and lethargy within the churches themselves.

NOTES

¹ R. Hall, *Works*, ed. O. Gregory, III (London, 1832 edn.), p. 360.

² J. Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, IV (London, 1830), pp. 453-4.

³ Northamptonshire Association Circular Letter for 1779, p. 14.

⁴ G. F. Nuttall, "Questions and Answers: an Eighteenth-century Correspondence," *Baptist Quarterly*, XXVII (1977), p. 89.

⁵ Records of the Baptist Western Association In the Years 1733-1809: Minutes of annual meetings and accounts, printed insert.

⁶ Ivimey, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

⁷ J. Brown, *The History of the Bedfordshire Union of Christians*, ed. D. Prothero (London, 1946), p. 45.

⁸ W. Steadman, *The Christian Minister's Duty and Reward. A sermon, addressed as a charge to Mr. Richard Pengilly, when ordained pastor of the Baptist church at Newcastle upon Tyne, 12th August, 1807*, (Gateshead, 1807), pp. 38-9.

⁹ Baptist Missionary Society *Periodical Accounts*, vol. I, no. III, p. 263, and no. IV, p. 358.

¹⁰ Formed in 1797 its full title was "The Baptist Society in London, for the Encouragement and Support of Itinerant and Village Preaching." Hereafter it is referred to in the text as the London Society.

¹¹ J. Rippon (ed.), *Baptist Annual Register*, III (1798-1801) p. 30; London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society Minutes for 25th July and 24th October 1799.

¹² *Ibid.*, Minutes for 23rd January 1800 and 25th April 1805.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Minutes for 24th July 1806 and 21st July 1808.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Minutes for 25th July 1805.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Minutes for 19th October 1809.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Minutes for 22nd October, 1807.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Minutes for 19th October 1809.

¹⁸ R. Slate, *A Brief History of the Rise and Progress of the Lancashire Congregational Union; and of the Blackburn Independent Academy*, (London, 1840), pp. 128-130.

¹⁹ *Baptist Magazine*, VII (1815), p. 219.

²⁰ Idle Academy Annual Reports for the years 1817, 1818, 1825 and 1829.

²¹ Rippon, *Register*, II (1794-97), p. 447.

²² S. A. Swaine, *Faithful Men; or, Memorials of Bristol Baptist College, and some of its most distinguished alumni*, (London, 1884), p. 159.

²³ *Baptist Magazine*, XI (1819), p. 352.

²⁴ Swaine, *op. cit.*, pp. 208, 236-7.

²⁵ Rippon, *Register*, III (1798-1801), p. 8.

²⁶ "Sutcliff: the Meeting and the Man," anonymous dissertation in Bristol Baptist College archives, p. 117.

²⁷ North Bucks. Independent Association, Annual Report for 1824, pp. 14-15.

²⁸ F. W. Bull, "The Newport Pagnell Academy," *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, IV (1909-10), pp. 316-19.

²⁹ See for example Rotherham Independent Academy, Annual Report for 44-5.

1814, p. 15; also Northern Education Society, Annual Report for 1806, pp.

³⁰ Rippon, *Register*, III (1798-1801), p. 37.

³¹ Formed in 1796 and 1806 respectively.

³² Minutes of "The Evangelical Association for propagating the Gospel in the Villages of Cumberland, Durham, Northumberland, and Westmoreland," 1798-1805, *passim*.

³³ T. G. Crippen, "The Surrey Mission," *Trans. Cong. Hist. Soc.*, VI (1915), pp. 300, 303.

³⁴ *Baptist Magazine*, XII (1820), p. 469.

³⁵ London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society Minutes for 19th October 1797 and 19th April 1798.

³⁶ Rippon, *Register*, III (1798-1801), p. 59.

³⁷ London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society Minutes for 21st October 1802.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Essex Baptist Association Minute Book 1805-1864, see introductory notes on its history since its founding in 1796.

⁴⁰ Northern Evangelical Association, Minutes of Annual Meetings 1798-1805, *passim*.

⁴¹ The income of Baptist itinerants in the period up to 1830 varied from £30-£80 p.a. It has been suggested that the average figure was in the region of £40 p.a., see C. Brown, *The Story of Baptist Home Missions*, (London, 1897), p. 30.

⁴² This was the later name for the Baptist-Society in London, for the Encouragement and Support of Itinerant and Village Preaching. From 1817 it became known as the Baptist Itinerant and British Missionary Society, and in 1821 this title was shortened to the Baptist Home Missionary Society.

⁴³ *Baptist Magazine*, VII (1815), p. 436 and XII (1820), p. 162; C. Brown, *Baptist Home Missions*, pp. 30, 32.

⁴⁴ This evidence has to be gleaned from various sources including church minute books, association minutes, denominational periodicals and polemical comments such as that made by Robert Woodward (see footnote 7).

⁴⁵ Bedfordshire Union of Christians, Annual Report for 1799, pp. 5-9.

⁴⁶ D. J. Jeremy, "A local crisis between Establishment and Nonconformity: the Salisbury Village Preaching Controversy, 1798-1799," *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, LXI (1966), pp. 63-84, *passim*.

⁴⁷ *Baptist Magazine*, I (1809), p. 427.

⁴⁸ W. M. Bowen, *An Appeal to the People on the Alleged Causes of the Dissenters' Separation from the Established Church*, (Salisbury, 1798), pp.

17-18 footnote. This estimate was made by an opponent, however, and it may have taken into account preachers from unrelated groups in addition to those from the two main Dissenting congregations led by John Adams the Independent minister and by John Saffery his Baptist counterpart.

⁴⁹ London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society Minutes for 24th January 1805 and 19th April 1810. The number of church members involved was small however; in 1810 it amounted to only three.

⁵⁰ Rippon, *Register*, II (1794-97), pp. 15-16.

⁵¹ London Particular Baptist Itinerant Society Minutes for 12th July 1808.

⁵² Rippon, *Register*, III (1798-1801), pp. 56-9.

⁵³ Journal of T. Wastfield, 1797-98, Entry for 8th October 1797.

⁵⁴ Anon., *Simple Facts, illustrative of the beneficial results of Village Preaching* (London, 1814), pp. 7-8.

⁵⁵ *Baptist Magazine*, XIV (1822), pp. 315-6.

⁵⁶ Rippon, *Register*, III (1798-1801), p. 40.

⁵⁷ *Baptist Magazine*, I (1809), p. 38.

⁵⁸ Dissenting Deputies, Minutes, III, 1791-1805, 29th November to 27th December 1805, *passim*.

⁵⁹ Essex Baptist Association Minute Book 1805-1864, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁰ Dissenting Deputies, Minutes, III, 1791-1805, 30th May 1794 to 27th March 1795, *passim*; *Protestant Dissenter's Magazine*, II (1795), pp. 252-3; J. H. Hinton, *A Biographical Portraiture of the late Rev. James Hinton, MA* (Oxford, 1824), pp. 255-65.

⁶¹ Journal of T. Wastfield, Entry for 30th July 1797.

⁶² *A Sketch of the History and Proceedings of the Deputies Appointed to Protect the Civil Rights of the Protestant Dissenters* (London, 1814), p. 165.

⁶³ *Evangelical Magazine*, XX (1812), p. 116.

⁶⁴ Court of King's Bench, Rule Book, 1807 Mich.-1812 Mich., p. 745, Public Record Office KB 21.49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 848.

⁶⁶ Properly entitled "An Act to repeal certain Acts, and amend other Acts relating to Religious Worship and Assemblies, and Persons teaching or preaching therein", 52 Geo. III. c. 155.

⁶⁷ T. W. Davis, "Conflict and Concord among Protestant Dissenters in London, 1787 to 1813" (University of North Carolina PhD thesis, 1972), p. 325.

⁶⁸ Dissenting Deputies, Minutes, III, 1791-1805, 31st May and 29th November 1805.

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