

## THE BAPTISTS AND THE CUMBRIAN RELIGIOUS CENSUSES

The following paper deals with the Baptists in the modern county of Cumbria, that is since 1974 the former counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, the district known as Lancashire North-of-the-Sands which is cut off from the rest of the parent county by Morecambe Bay, and a small part of the West Riding of Yorkshire (principally Sedbergh and Dent) which comprised a salient into Westmorland on a level with Kendal. Until 1856 the northern half of Cumbria was under the Diocese of Carlisle, last bastion against the Presbyterian Scots, the southern half under the vast rambling Diocese of Chester, with that most reluctantly Cumbrian area known as Alston Moor in the far east under Durham and later Newcastle. The 1856 formation of the new Diocese of Carlisle brought a religious unity (Alston apart) which was not reflected in administrative circles for one hundred and eighteen years, Cumbria being the most north-westerly English county containing within it the Lake District in the centre (roughly half a million acres) but the outer ring of coast, dale and moorland amounting to well over twice this amount.

In a county not famed for the numbers of religious adherents and where the Established Church failed to make a significant impression, it was not surprising that the Baptists remained one of the smallest of the Dissenting denominations in Cumbria. The great success of the Quakers in parts of Cumbria during the later 17th century was a response on the part of the isolated and stubbornly independent countrymen to a sect fostering their indifference to Church authority (itself a response to Anglican neglect) and determination to ignore secular government.<sup>1</sup> The large number of Presbyterian societies was due to the proximity to Scotland, the many Scottish traders and merchants in main towns and ports, and the work of "ejected" ministers together with Scottish reinforcements (who incidentally kept all but Kendal society "free" from Unitarianism).<sup>2</sup> The unparalleled success of the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists during the 19th century had its foundations in the industrial and mining development of Barrow, Carlisle and West Cumberland and large scale immigration of converted Methodists to augment existing societies.<sup>3</sup> It might truly be stated that the native Cumbrians were impervious to organised Christianity, and particularly impervious to the Baptists.

Nonetheless there were a number of Baptist congregations in the county, and sufficient information exists to suggest their scope of work and their achievements here from the 17th century to the 19th century. The first Baptist influences were at Carlisle, Cockermouth and nearby Great Broughton in the 1650s, based on men amongst the Parliamentary forces stationed there.<sup>4</sup> The Carlisle cause soon disappeared, but the puritan incumbent of Cockermouth, John Wilkinson, helped manage the other two congregations of mixed Nonconformists. During 1653 Wilkinson was converted to the Friends by early missionary workers and

temporarily ruined the Broughton Baptist sector of the congregation.<sup>5</sup> Co-operation between the several forms of Dissenters continued for some years and led to partly Baptist congregations at Oulton and Egremont, both shortlived.<sup>6</sup> The Sawrey family of Broughton-in-Furness were responsible for founding the Tottlebank, Torver and Sunny Bank causes during the same period and these proved more enduring. The "Presentments for Nonconformity" and the "Indulgence Licences" show that there were a number of Baptist families scattered across a vast area and likely to be united with other Nonconformists, particularly Presbyterian.<sup>7</sup> Likewise the "Record Book of Dissenting Meetings" for the Chester Deaneries of Kendal, Furness and Copeland illustrate the dispersed and weak nature of all Dissent.<sup>8</sup> By the 1680s there cannot have been more than 100 Baptist families in Cumbria.

18th Century Cumbria provided little scope for any denomination, even the dynamic Wesleyans being thwarted until the 1790s brought their first major success outside of Whitehaven.<sup>9</sup> The Baptists maintained small presences, though Archdeacon Waugh in characteristically thorough manner could only unearth a dozen families in 6 parishes, compared to 400 Quakers, 600 Presbyterians and over 40 Roman Catholic families in the diocese of Carlisle.<sup>10</sup> The Returns for the Bishop of Chester's Visitations may not have been as accurate in total as Waugh's investigations, but demonstrate the strength and distribution of Dissent. For instance at the 1789 Visitation there were 29 Baptist families, including 10 at Hawkshead, 6 at Lowick and others around Coniston.<sup>11</sup> Set against this must be the 250 Quakers, over 150 Presbyterian and other Dissenting families. Otherwise the Baptists surfaced little in public life or in the public eye; this could be advantageous with the Quakers being favourite targets of the authorities and seen as far more of a threat. Whitehaven congregation was founded in the 1750s and a meeting house licensed in that town due to Great Broughton efforts, and the curate of Plumpton (in the parish of Greystoke) and the Salkeld Grammar School master, caused a shock to the Anglican authorities by turning Baptist in 1778.<sup>12</sup> This curate, Isaac Slee, spent some time in the Penrith area after resigning his cure but was unable to raise a congregation and became pastor to a Yorkshire congregation.

The revitalising of Baptist fortunes nationally under the Particular and New Connexion General Baptists, which brought such great strength to that denomination in Yorkshire, Lancashire, East Midlands and the West Country, affected Cumbria only after some years. One peculiar episode in Cumbrian Baptist history took place at Kendal where James Kay, minister to the Congregational chapel after its secession from the only Unitarian society in Cumbria, changed his views and in 1809 set up a new congregation of "Baptist-Unitarians". Kay emigrated in 1820 and his followers reunited with the Unitarians. Merchant William Jennings led a second secession in the early 1830s after renewed disputes within the membership, and reformed the Baptist congregation under the name of the "Highgate Conventicle". Within a few years Jennings and his main protagonists in the Unitarian body had died and the Conventicle reunited with the Unitarians.<sup>13</sup>

The Harbottle family missioned the Duddon Valley in the south-west of the county and encouraged Tottlebank to found the Ravenglass congregation in 1833. The influx of workers in quarrying and mining helped Baptist (and other Nonconformist) missions, though Ulpha soon died out. The Home Mission based on Coniston founded 5 congregations but none were enduring.<sup>14</sup>

Scotch Baptists played an important part in keeping the denomination alive in West Cumberland; 20 Scottish families in Maryport petitioned for a minister in 1809 and received a minister (Kitchin) who received no stipend.<sup>15</sup> The continued expansion of Carlisle as a service and communications centre encouraged a new Baptist congregation to be founded in the 1830s when they used the old Wesleyan chapel and fraternised with the Wesleyan Association "Rebels" so numerous in the city. By the 1848 Census no Baptist services were being held.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately the "1829 Return of Sectaries" has survived intact only for Lancashire North-of-the-Sands, though this is better than nothing.<sup>17</sup> It shows the relative weakness of all Dissent even at so late a date when the Methodists and others were expanding greatly across parts of Cumbria. The Baptists had small congregations at Colton, Kirkby Ireleth, rather larger ones at Hawkshead, Torver, Lowick and Egton and Newland, which would seem to point to a continued struggle to survive for the little causes. The 1851 Religious Census offers rather more detail.

The 1851 Census listed 18 Baptist places of worship with a total attendance of 1,508 on the Sunday at all services.<sup>18</sup> The 4 Westmorland congregations, all in the East Ward, registered 361 attendances, the 5 Ulverston District ones 509, and the 9 Cumberland ones 685. Attendances and places of worship were fairly evenly balanced between the 3 former parts of modern Cumbria, and between the Particular Baptists and the New Connexion General Baptists (largely recorded as "Undefined"). The Particulars possessed fewer but larger congregations and were only matched by several good New Connexion showings in the Ulverston district, where Home Mission work was raising reasonable support. Compared with the performances of other denominations the Baptist achievements pale into insignificance. The Wesleyans recorded 16,637 attendances at 134 places of worship, the Primitive Methodists 6,050 at 41, the Independents 7,302 at 37, the Roman Catholics 4,784 at just 10 places of worship, and the Church of England 70,763 at 282. Half of one per cent of all Cumbrians attended a Baptist place of worship on Census Sunday, and bearing in mind that some people attended 2 or 3 times, the proportion would really be less. The Baptists too registered only 83 hearers per chapel, as against a county average for all denominations of 200 hearers per place of worship. Only the Quakers recorded a worse figure amongst the major denominations.

Between the Census and the end of the century the Baptists experienced some advances in Cumbria. The Carlisle cause was at length permanently established at the fourth attempt in the 1870s and its chapel opened in 1889.<sup>19</sup> Attempts by the Scotch

congregation in Maryport to mission the new population met no success until fortuitous attempts at Grasslot in 1876 and Netherton in 1882 led to two new congregations amongst a largely mining population.<sup>20</sup> As Workington developed into a town and industrial centre the Maryport Baptists founded a branch mission in 1874 and maintained it until 1888. The missions to Barrow and Millom by Tottlebank Home Mission were productive, though nowhere were hearers as numerous as at most other Dissenting chapels.<sup>21</sup> In West Cumberland and perhaps elsewhere, the Baptists merged with Brethren groups and the Pentecostal movement which practised total immersion and adult baptism, bringing in a number of Quakers to their meetings. When a local religious census was taken during December 1902 by the *West Cumberland Times* newspaper, surprising facts were revealed.<sup>22</sup>

The old Broughton congregation had 53 hearers at its 2 services, the Scottish Baptists of Maryport 170; the Aspatria congregation was listed as "Baptist Church of Christ" with 84 hearers, and further congregations of "Church of Christ" had hearers numbering 44 in Whitehaven and 45 in Workington. The Baptist congregations there had been renamed. From a position where the 1851 Census noted 6 Baptist causes in West Cumberland with 425 hearers, by 1902 Oulton had been lost and hearers diminished elsewhere. Although other denominations found their congregations depleted between 1851 and 1902, the Baptists were only ahead of the Quakers (mainly replaced by the several Brethren sects) and well behind all others. The Baptists represented a tiny minority of the 130,000 Cumbrians estimated to be living in the Census area.

The influence of a particular denomination need not be measured in terms of membership numbers, hearers, wealth, chapels and Sunday schools, just as an outward display of church attendance does not denote necessarily a religious person. Yet in Cumbria where the influence of the Nonconformists was so variable, the Baptists proved unable to exert influence over more than a handful of people at any stage in their history. During the 17th century when there were strong pockets of Nonconformity in a number of towns and localities in the county, the Baptists formed a tiny proportion of this number, often being merged with far more numerous Presbyterian or Independent congregations and not leading a separate existence. Diocesan and other returns over the course of the 18th century revealed the localised concentrations of Quakers and Presbyterians and scarcely found time for the few Baptists, often just one family forming a congregation many miles from the nearest group of others of a similar persuasion. When in the period 1790 to 1830 the Cumbrian population significantly expanded along with the county's towns and industries and Methodism took root in the wake of the Evangelical Revival, other Dissenters lagged behind and found the factors favouring Nonconformity not as relevant to their own circumstances.<sup>23</sup> At root, Cumbrians determined to exhibit their characteristic independence of action and thought became Quakers, or during the early 19th century Independents under the impact of several active ministers, whilst the Presbyterians were sustained

through difficult times by proximity to the Scottish power house. Even a decrepit Anglican diocesan machinery could rely on the latent desire of most people to be considered "respectable" Anglicans, however inactive, and their resources out-matched anything to be found amongst the Nonconformists. The Methodists too were supported by a strong Connexional machinery and ministerial regime which could not afford to allow Cumbria to lose or to weaken its Methodist circuits, and the sheer scale of Methodist operations ensured scores of societies eager to recruit amongst immigrants.<sup>24</sup> The Baptists, denied support from stronger Baptist areas or from an effective central organisation, starved of funds, unable and at times unwilling to recruit widely, remained possessing the allegiance of a fraction of one per cent of Cumbrians during any epoch. Immigrant Baptists attracted by prospects of employment rarely found a welcoming Baptist congregation; with an extensive range of officials the Methodists were immeasurably less prone to such loss of members by seepage, and their society and circuit network embraced even the smallest population centres.<sup>25</sup> In this way many immigrant Baptists must have abandoned their denomination for a more convenient one.

The few existing Baptist congregations contained few men or women of the social standing likely to encourage others into their fold, and with an inability to attract either quality or quantity of membership were doomed to form less than one half of one per cent of Cumbrians at their numerical peaks. Into the twentieth century the Baptist congregations of Cumbria continued as small dispersed causes, outposts of the Old Non-conformity with a long and famous heritage despite their restricted futures.

## NOTES

- 1 See for instance A. B. Anderson, "Lancashire Quakers and Persecution 1652/1690", University of Lancaster M.A. thesis 1971.
- 2 J. Burgess, "The Growth and Development of Methodism in Cumbria", University of Durham M.Litt. thesis 1979, chapter 2 on the Dissenters of the 17th and 18th centuries; B. Nightingale, *The Ejected of 1662 in Cumberland and Westmorland*, 1911, 2 vols, which deals in detail with the experiences of each parish and its ministers from the Commonwealth period into the 18th century.
- 3 J. Burgess, *op.cit.*, chapters 6 and 7.
- 4 B. Nightingale, *op.cit.*, pp.746, 1257.
- 5 "Rise and Progress of Quakerism in Cumberland, (Rise and Progress of the Truth)" in Carlisle Record Office, a manuscript written by early 18th century Friends about their origins and includes details of the Wilkinson affair at Great Broughton.
- 6 W. Whitley, *The Baptists of North West England*, 1913, pp.334,357.
- 7 B. Nightingale, *op.cit.*, pp.1330, 1365, Appendices 6 and 7.
- 8 *Record Book of Dissenting Meetings 1697/1848*, Lancashire Record Office QDV 4, lists scores of meetings licensed in homes, but usually does not list the denomination.

- 9 J. Burgess, "Methodism in Whitehaven 1748/1815", 1979.
- 10 J. Burgess, "Dissenters in the Diocese of Carlisle", see the tables, MS in Carlisle Record Office; "Miscellany Accounts of Bishop Nicolson 1703, with additions by Archdeacon Waugh 1747", MS in Carlisle Record Office.
- 11 "Returns of the Bishop of Chester's Visitation 1789", Chester Record Office EDV 7/2/166 to 313.
- 12 "Licences Issued to Dissenting Places of Worship", 1752/1779 and later, Chester Record Office EDA 12/2/1 to 250; J. Kinghorn, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Isaac Slee*, 1827.
- 13 F. Nicholson, "Kendal Unitarian Chapel and Its Registers", *Transactions Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, New Series 1905, vol.5 pp.172/181; "Dkk", "Reminiscences of Persons and Places in Kendal 60 years ago", 1890, pp.91/95; C. Nicholson, *Annals of Kendal*, 1861 ed., p.16.
- 14 Whitley, op.cit., pp.333, 336, 338.
- 15 H. and M. Jackson, *History of Maryport*, 1971, chapter 17.
- 16 Aglionby Street (Carlisle) Baptist church newsletter, gave the history of the early congregation including the building of the present chapel in its pages during 1976/77; see for the 1848 Census, J. Burgess, "Origin and Development of Methodism", Appendix 2; and the Carlisle Journal of May 17th 1848.
- 17 "1829 Return of Sectaries", Lancashire Record Office, QDV 9/1 to 245; it contains glaring omissions though.
- 18 Census of Religious Worship, England and Wales, tables and report 1853; J. Burgess, "Growth and Development of Methodism", Appendix 2.
- 19 Whitley, op.cit., pp.162, 331; Aglionby Street (Carlisle) newsletters 1976/77.
- 20 H. and M. Jackson, op.cit., chapter 17.
- 21 J. Burgess, "Growth and Development of Methodism in Cumbria", Appendix 2; all denominations except for the Wesleyans and Primitives had attendances cut by half to judge by the 1881 Whitehaven Religious Census, carried out by the *West Cumberland Times* and compared to the 1902 one the decline in attendances suffered primarily in the period 1881 to 1902.
- 22 *West Cumberland Times*, December 20, 1902. The weather was poor but the editor believed the results to be "healthy".
- 23 A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in England*, 1976, explores the growth of all the denominations through statistical methods; A. Everitt, *The Pattern of Rural Dissent*, 1972, examines the factors favouring Dissent in three counties.
- 24 For all Methodist Circuits there were 480 preaching places and chapels by 1870 in the region (Carlisle District).
- 25 J. Burgess, *A History of Cumbrian Methodism*, Titus Wilson of Kendal, 1980, chapters 1 and 7.

<u>TABLE 1</u>		<u>TABLE 2</u>	
<u>Baptists in the Diocese of Carlisle 1747</u>		<u>Baptists in the Chester Deaneries of Cumbria 1789</u>	
<u>Parish/Living</u>	<u>Families of Baptists</u>	<u>Parish/Living</u>	<u>Families of Baptists</u>
Holme Cultram	4	Flookburgh	1
Bromfield	1	Satterthwaite	1
Isel	1	Torver	2 (meeting house)
Dearham	1	Ulpha	3
Walton	3	Distington	4 ("diminished considerably")
Lanercost	2	Lowick	6
No other parish reported Baptists.		Rusland	1
Total: Baptists: 12 families		Hawkshead	10 ("Mr Dawson as preacher")
Quakers: 400		Whitehaven	"a number"
Roman Catholic: 45		Total: Baptist: 28+	
Presbyterian: 600		Presbyterian: 150	
Source: "Miscellany Accounts of Bishop Nicolson 1703, with additions by Archdeacon Waugh", 1703 and 1747 respectively; MS in Carlisle Record Office.		Independent: 8+	
		Quaker: 250	
		Roman Catholic: 50	
		Source: Bishop's Visitation Returns 1789, Chester Record Office EDV/7/2/166 to 313.	

TABLE 3 1829 Return of Sectaries for "Lancashire North of the Sands"

<u>Township/Parish</u>	<u>Denomination</u>	<u>Adult Membership</u>	<u>Chapel/Meeting House</u>
Torver	Baptist	7	Yes
Stavely	Quaker	1	
Lowick	Roman Catholic	1	
	Baptist	14	
Kirkby Ireleth	Baptist	?	
Egton and Newland	Methodist	9	
	Baptist	12	Yes
Holker	Roman Catholic	1	
Burblethwaite	Quaker	0	Yes
Hawkshead	Quaker	6	Yes
	Baptist	6	Yes
Dalton	Wesleyan	24	Yes
Colton	Baptist	1	
Allithwaite	Quaker	22	Yes

Note: The strength of Dissent in Lancaster, an old port and trading centre similar in many ways to Whitehaven where there was too a strong Dissenting presence.

Lancaster	Roman Catholic	800	Yes
	Quaker	250	Yes
	Wesleyan	600	Yes
	Congs.	500	Yes
	Baptists	60	Yes
	Presbyterians	70	Yes
	Primitives	60	Yes
	Indep. Meths.	160	Yes

Source: Lancashire Record Office QDV 9/1 to 245.

Note: Omission of Ulverston. A majority of townships reported no Dissenters.

TABLE 4 1851 Religious Census - Baptists

Places of Worship	Total Seats	Attendances			
		Morning	Afternoon	Evening	
<u>Westmorland</u>					
East Ward	4	199	169	62	130 (Westmorland: 361)
<u>Cumberland Baptists</u>					
Wigton	1	60	8	0	0
Cockermouth	4	565	156	22	110
Whitehaven	1	300	70	0	59
Carlisle	1	1,000	30	0	-60
Bootle	2	100	70	35	18 (Cumberland: 685)
Ulverston	5	822	300	124	85 (Ulverston: 509)
	<u>18</u>	<u>3,046</u>	<u>803</u>	<u>243</u>	<u>462 = Total 1508</u>

Note: Defective Returns: Westmorland - 1 Particular Baptist, 1 Undefined Baptist.  
Cumberland - 1 Undefined Baptist.

Places of Worship	Baptist Seats	Baptist Attendances			Churches Open			
		Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	
<u>Westmorland</u>								
Particular Baptists	2	199	169	0	100(269)	1	0	1
Undefined Baptists	2	0	0	62	30(92)	0	1	1
<u>Cumberland</u>								
Particular Baptists	4	1,720	235	0	229(464)	4	1	3
Scotch Baptists	1	45	10	10	0(20)	1	1	0
Undefined Baptists	4	260	89	47	18(154)	3	2	1

TABLE 5 1902 Religious Census: West Cumberland

Chapel	Attendances	
	Churches	Services
Broughton	53	2
Maryport	170	2
Aspatria	84	2
Whitehaven	44	2
Workington	45	2
Total	396	
Other Denominations	Churches	Attendances
Church of England	49	9475
Independent	12	1670
Presbyterian	8	922
Brethren	7	464
Quaker	4	107
Roman Catholic	10	5577
Wesleyan Methodist	34	4844
Primitive Methodist	26	2311
United Methodist F.C.	5	509

Source: *West Cumberland Times*, December 1902.