

## BAPTISTS AND INDEPENDENTS IN OLNEY TO THE TIME OF JOHN NEWTON

Dissent in Olney owed its origin to John Gibbs, the ejected Rector of the neighbouring Newport Pagnell, who in 1669 was reported as leading an "Anabaptist" meeting in Olney. Gibbs was a man to be reckoned with, a man of convictions, with literary ability and political sense, and also the wherewithal to give expression to them. But he did not live in Olney. He settled in Newport as the minister of the Dissenting church in that town and remained there till his death in 1699, aged 72: his tombstone, with an inscription in English, cut recently in place of the original Latin, which had decayed, may be seen outside the south wall of the parish church. Olney was only one of a number of places where Gibbs was active, and where a body of Dissenters, which sometimes persisted and sometimes died out, owed its existence to him. Newton Blossomville to the East of Olney and Astwood to the South-East, Cranfield in Bedfordshire and Roade in Northamptonshire were others. Gibbs was also in touch with the church in Bedford, and with Bunyan.

The work at Olney was carried on by an apothecary associated with Gibbs, named Thomas Bere (Bear, Beard, Bard). In 1662 he had been elected one of the four elders of the church in Cambridge ministered to by Francis Holcroft (d.1692), the ejected Vicar of Bassingbourne; but he "fell under som surcomstance that he left the church". "Oni church" then took him "into their sosieti". By 1692 he had kept "a Stated Meeting... at Olney this Eleven Years", but had now left it. So stated the minister of the church at Rothwell, Northamptonshire, Richard Davis, who had "helped" Bere "to a Rich Wife", the widowed daughter of a previous pastor at Rothwell.

Davis, like Gibbs, was a man to be reckoned with, and an active evangelist. In the early 1690s he drew into membership at Rothwell many scores of people from an astonishingly wide area: some from the world; some by dismission from other churches; some without dismission, either because the person was not yet in membership with another church or was in membership but no longer happy to be so, or else because the church concerned was in a poor way and inactive, with no regular, orderly church meeting or no stated pastoral oversight. With Bere's departure, the Olney church probably came into one or more of these last categories, providing just the sort of plums ripe for the picking, as those hostile to Davis might phrase it, or, as he will have regarded the situation himself, of sheep without a shepherd, whom it was his Master's business to seek and to gather afresh. At a series of five church meetings held between 2nd August and 16th September 1691 no fewer than twenty-four persons from Olney, nine men and fifteen women, were received into membership at Rothwell. Davis stands clear of self-aggrandizement: what Rothwell provided was no more than a refuelling station. When only a month later, on 18th October, a company of members received

dismissal from Rothwell to form a new church at Wellingborough, six of the men from Olney and all the women save one were among the seventy-two who were transferred. The first three to be named were Brother Robert Bettson (a shoemaker), Brother William Hentsman and Brother John Osborne. On 22nd October the day "was kept solemnly in fasting and prayer at Wellingborough... for our embodying and enchurching together". "Our dismissal from the Church of Christ in Rowell was... read by their messengers", and the members agreed to and subscribed a brief covenant. Henseman and Osborn were then chosen as elders and Bettson as pastor, and the two elders laid their hands on Bettson and prayed. Both Davis and Bere, who appears to have returned to Olney to care for those whose membership had not been transferred, attended this solemnity "according to the Primitive Pattern", as did the pastor of the church at Carlton, Bedfordshire, another company that had covenanted together "by the advice of Rothwell church". For some years several of the Olney Dissenters were thus under Bettson's care, and the Wellingborough church sometimes held church meetings at Olney.

But Wellingborough was twelve miles away, and Bere was growing old. The situation was not likely to remain stable. It was also a period when theological convictions were keen and often divisive. At Newport Gibbs, like Bunyan, received all who were baptized, whether as infants or as believers. No doubt he wished this "open" membership to be preserved at Olney also. This is probably the significance of the limitation of the use of the Olney premises, in the earliest extant trust deed (1694) of the church, to those "commonly called Independents... of the same persuasion and Judgement in respect of Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship with John Gibbs, of Newport Pagnell". The form was narrow, but the intention was broad. To some at Olney, however, as at Northampton, Cambridge and elsewhere, such latitude seemed perilously lax: church membership should be limited to those baptized as believers; and disruption ensued.

In 1713 a young Welshman named Matthias Maurice (d.1733) was brought in by Bere. In Wales Maurice, with others, had seceded from the Presbyterian congregation at Henllan Amgoed in Carmarthenshire to gather a Congregational church nearby at Rhyd-y-ceisiaid. At Olney, where several members of the church were now convinced Baptists, he led a Congregational secession to form a New (or Lower) Meeting. Scarcely, however, had a new meeting-house been built, and even before his own membership had been transferred from Rhyd-y-ceisiaid, Maurice left Olney again. For on 10th September 1714 the Rothwell pastor, Richard Davis, died, aged 56: his tombstone, still with the original inscription, may be seen outside the east wall of the parish church.

Maurice, on whom the Rothwell church had already cast eyes as an assistant to Davis, was now invited to succeed him; and on 6th January 1715 he was ordained at Rothwell in a service attended by Bettson from Wellingborough, together with messengers from two other churches, each linked with Rothwell and each destined to play a part in Olney's story, those at Kim-

bolton in Huntingdonshire and at College Lane, Northampton. Kimbolton had been gathered in 1693 by the dismissal of ninety-nine members from Rothwell, one of whom became its minister, at a service attended by a representative from Wellingborough; and when in 1697 his successor was ordained, messengers were again present from Wellingborough as well as from Rothwell. In Northampton, when on 27th October 1697 a "Congregational Church of Christ" was embodied in The Watering Place, only seven of its first members were from Rothwell, but the solemnity was attended by Richard Davis, by Bettson from Wellingborough, and by the Kimbolton minister; and when on 3rd December 1700 John Moore (d.1726) was ordained minister at Northampton, Davis and Bettson were again present. If about all this there is an element of "This is the house that Jack built", the presence at Rothwell for Maurice's ordination in 1715 of members from Wellingborough, Kimbolton and College Lane (to-day College Street), where the church in The Watering Place had now found a permanent home, is a reminder that in a divisive period there could still, within the lines drawn, be consistent mutual support. There had in fact, not surprisingly, been a "defference between brother Betson and brother Maurice about Mr. Maurice his leaving Olney abruptly" and part of the purpose of the messengers from Kimbolton in attending Maurice's ordination was "to assist in making up the defference". This was duly carried out "and reconciliation declared on both sides". Thereafter relations between the churches continued good. In 1723 Maurice preached at Wellingborough at the ordination of Bettson's successor, William Grant, a former member of Rothwell, and in 1726 Grant preached Moore's funeral sermon at College Lane.

In July 1716 College Lane received a letter from Olney with seven signatures, some being members of the one church, some of the other, lamenting the lack of a minister in Olney and asking for Moore to come over and preach to them. College Lane did not consent; but when in the following March another letter was received, with five signatures, calling a meeting for advice on 4th April, it was agreed that Moore and another brother should go to the meeting. However, when a week later yet another letter arrived, also with five signatures but not the same five, it was deemed wiser not to intermeddle, and the decision to send messengers was rescinded.

A year later the Independents at Olney decided the time had come for their dismissal from Wellingborough "as a distinct Church of themselves". This was a different situation. Wellingborough raised no objection. When College Lane received a request from Olney to send messengers to behold their order in their enchurching on 4th July, they agreed to send Moore and another brother, and at the following church meeting a satisfactory report was received from Moore. In October Moore and another brother (a different member was nominated to accompany the minister on each of the three occasions) again went to Olney, this time for the ordination of the church's minister, Thomas Dawson. When after six years Dawson was succeeded by Thomas Gibbons, Gibbons too was ordained in the presence of messengers from College Lane. The Olney church

"considerably decreased in numbers", however, and after Gibbons' departure in 1732 for Royston in Hertfordshire, where he remained until his death in 1757, "continued destitute of a pastor for some years". It was a jolting start.

The original Dissenting church in Olney, now distinctively Baptist, had been weakened by the Independents' secession. In 1730 it dismissed a member to be pastor of the church at Roade, another church gathered by Gibbs which was now Baptist; but like the Independent church it now had no pastor of its own. Fresh trustees were appointed in the same year, but in course of time the church disbanded.

The prospect for Dissent in Olney looked dark. Nor could help now be sought from College Lane, for that church had (also temporarily) been dissolved. But light was at hand from a fresh quarter, or rather from two.

College Lane was not the only Dissenting church in Northampton, or indeed the first. With the ordination on 10th March 1730 of Philip Doddridge, the church worshipping on Castle Hill was about to enter its most notable period. Two of those who took part on that occasion were John Drake, the minister at Yardley Hastings, and William Hunt, a successor of Gibbs at Newport Pagnell. With both these men Doddridge formed a close friendship, with Hunt till 1736 when Hunt left Newport for London, and with Drake, who remained faithful to rural Dissent, till his own premature death in 1751. Both Hunt and Drake were members of a book club instituted by Doddridge; both presented books to the library of the Academy over which he presided; both were subscribers to his *Family Expositor*.

On 23rd February 1732 Doddridge, Hunt and Drake combined in signing a letter to Isaac Watts, seeking his help, and through him the aid of the Congregational Fund Board in London, in the continuance of a "Lecture" at Olney, as "the means of fixing a regular minister here at length". "Most of the dissenters in this town", they wrote, "have for some time been extremely fond of lay preachers in the Antinomian strain...; nevertheless, ... a few... have invited us over to preach a lecture here once a month, and we have each of us taken our turns... We have found a very numerous auditory... near five hundred people. A great many of these are churchmen... it seems probable that several of them would come over to the dissenters if a regular minister were fixed here".

The request was not granted; but this did not mean that the ministers abandoned their concern, which, when Hunt left Newport Pagnell, was extended to that church also. On the day when Doddridge and Drake, with the wife of each, were at Newport to take leave of Hunt, Doddridge wrote to the St Albans minister, Samuel Clark, that he had "undertaken to supply Newport from Northampton". More than this, two years later he wrote to the Congregational minister at Hitchin, John Needham, requesting his "advice and assistance to the poor people at Newport Pagnell, whose interest would, I fear, have been ruined, if I had not purchased and settled their meeting-place". Between Newport and Castle Hill there was an old association,

for Hunt's father, who had preceded Hunt as minister at Newport, and Thomas Tingey, who had preceded Doddridge at Castle Hill, had exchanged pastorates. Probably Doddridge hoped that by caring for Newport he might also provide for Olney: the proximity of Newport and the origins of the church at Olney would seem to point to this. Doddridge's continuing interest in Olney appears in a letter of 1740 to Clark recommending an Olney watchmaker, with a good character from John Drake.

In the event it was Drake who redeemed the situation. In 1734 "several serious persons" at Olney were received into the membership of the church at Yardley Hastings to which Drake ministered; and in 1738, the year that Hunt left Newport, Drake began to preach once a Sunday at Olney. The Olney congregation increased, till it became larger than that at Yardley; and in 1759, as "the bodily infirmities of many old members... rendered them incapable of riding from Olney to Yardley every sabbath-day to hear him", Drake went to reside at Olney. In 1762 a new meeting-house was erected, with aid from Londoners who proved more responsive to personal appeals from Drake than the Fund Board had been to the letter written thirty years earlier. Drake remained in Olney till his death in 1775, and was thus the Independent minister when John Newton arrived and for the greater part of the time that Newton was Curate-in-charge (1764-80).

The Baptists remaining in Olney had transferred their membership to the church at Walgrave in Northamptonshire. The origin of this church is not known. In 1690 it was sufficiently "broad" to dismiss a member to Rothwell; but in 1707, when it was reported to the Rothwell church meeting that a sister "was in conscience for walking with Strickt Baptists, and was offended that it should be preached that the covenant made with Abraham ran from his naturall seed", the church judged that in joining "into full membership with a people at Walgrave... she was guilty of the highest schism". Walgrave for its part would not dismiss members to College Lane, on the grounds that that church "practised Singing publickly & admitted S[ain]ts as S[ain]ts (without respect to baptism)". When on 10th November 1732, led by Moore's son-in-law, Charles Rogers (d.1782), seceders from College Lane were "enchurched on a strict bottom" as a "Baptiss Church of Christ" on The Green at Northampton, the Walgrave minister, Moses Deacon, was present; and in the following August, when Rogers was ordained as minister on The Green, with a sermon from Moore's other son-in-law, John Brine, Deacon was again present, together with the pastor of another Strict Baptist church, that at Rushden. Slowly, Northampton and Walgrave nursed the Olney Baptists back to life. In September 1735 Rogers baptized three persons from Olney, one of them in her eighty-ninth year, the membership of each of them being at Walgrave; and in 1738 two of these, with eleven other members, were dismissed from Walgrave to be "settled as a distinct church" again at Olney.

By 1741 another nineteen members had been added, seven "by experience", ten from the remnant of "the church of christ in olney some time under the care of mr. Gibbins", and two from elsewhere, one of whom, Francis Walker from Princes Risborough, was "settled pastour to our joy & satisfaction. o that it may be for gods glory & for the advantage of christ interest". Members continued to be received, both "by experience" and "from the other church"; but in the following year Walker died, as the Olney parish register for October records, with the word "Preacher" against his name. In 1745 Rogers, who had left Northampton in 1738 for Coventry, and in 1741 Coventry for Romsey, came to Olney as pastor; but Rogers was an inveterate wanderer and in less than two years was gone again, for Chatham and a succession of other churches. In 1752 a member of the Olney church named Thomas Hull became pastor of the church at Carlton in Bedfordshire, a church earlier, as we saw, in communion with Rothwell and Wellingborough but since 1702 Strict Baptist; but for some years after Rogers's departure the Olney Baptists had no pastor of their own. At last, in November 1753, William Walker (d.1793), who had been baptized by Rogers in Northampton and had been pastor at Rushden till of late he became a member at Olney, was "set apart" as pastor. "It was then concluded by the brethren that the Supper of the Lord should be administered the first Lord's Day in every month and that the Wensday before should be our stated Church Meeting day". Walker remained in Olney till 1773, when he "thought it right", he wrote to the church, "to submit to providence, lay down my commission, remove and take myself away", to be pastor of another church further south in Buckinghamshire, at Colnbrook, then regarded as "certainly a very barren place for religion". Walker was thus the Baptist minister in Olney when John Newton came in 1764.

Newton lost no time in showing himself friendly. He arrived in Olney on 26th May 1764. At his first weekday "lecture" a month later many Dissenters were present - much as many churchmen had been present at the "lectures" held earlier by Doddridge and his friends. What was remarkable was Newton's readiness to go to the Dissenters' meetings for worship himself. On 14th July he wrote to his wife, who was still in London:

Last night I was at Mr. Walker's meeting, to hear Mr. Grant, from Wellingborough. A more excellent sermon I never heard, never was my heart so melted down since the golden days when I first attended Mr. Brewer and Mr. Whitefield... I am engaged to dine with Mr. Grant at Mr. Ashburner's. I shall take this opportunity to set the door of acquaintance wide open. If they choose to keep it so it is well; if not, I have but done my duty.

In the following February Newton met the College Lane minister, John Collett Ryland, by appointment, and later in 1765 wrote in his journal: "In the evening Mr. Ryland preached at Mr. Walker's meeting from I Thess.iv.3; a good and seasonable discourse".

Newton was equally willing to go to the Independent meeting. In November 1765 he wrote in his journal:

Tuesday, 26th. Omitted our prayer-meeting to-night and attended Mr. Bradbury, who preached a very good sermon at Mr. Drake's. I am glad of opportunities at times, to discountenance bigotry and party spirit, and to set our dissenting brethren an example, which I think ought to be our practice towards all who love the Lord Jesus Christ and preach His gospel without respect to forms or denominations.

Again, in the following year, on a Sunday in June,

Instead of our usual meeting in the evening attended at Mr. Drake's, to hear Mr. Ashburner of this place, who has lately finished his studies, and entered the ministry. He promises to be a useful, spiritual minister. The Lord make him such.

From the beginning Newton was deeply concerned for the children in Olney. In February 1765 he wrote to his patron, the Earl of Dartmouth:

I find great pleasure and form many hopes in my new attempts to instruct the children. The number at my first meeting was 89; it is now increased to 162 and will probably amount to near 200, for some new ones are offered to me every day. Some come from most of the parishes next adjoining, but the bulk of them are our own, and amongst them perhaps 20 or more of the Dissenters' children for I receive all that come with their parents' knowledge and consent. Many of them are very serious and hopeful; all in general behave well. About a hundred of them come constantly to Church and sit in a body before the pulpit.

It is not surprising if to the Dissenters Newton's energy and ways of going about things were not wholly welcome. They seemed, Drake wrote to a friend, "to have given a mortal wound to the Dissenting Interest in this place", so that both meetings were now greatly reduced. Newton's "strain of preaching, indefatigable visiting and many little artifices among the poor and young people seems to carry almost every thing before him. His preaching marks the sincere disciple of Jesus"; but "his carriage to the Dissenters" Drake pronounced Jesuitical.

Despite these aspersions it is clear that good relations persisted. When at Christmas 1765 Newton's old friend Samuel Brewer, an Independent minister in London, paid him a visit and preached on Christmas Day at the Independent meeting and on Boxing Day at the Baptist, Newton not only went with him but invited Drake and Walker to dine with Brewer and himself. Two years later an annual series of New Year meetings for young people was inaugurated. On 30th December Newton went to the Baptist meeting; on the following day he gave up his regular Thursday "lecture" and attended Drake's sermon; on New Year's Day he preached himself in the parish church. Three days later he wrote to Lady Huntingdon's niece, Miss Wheeler:

Thro mercy we are I hope in a thriving way at Olney. Favoured with additions now & then, & a spirit of love peace union & spirituality prevails in our society. We have no jars or divisions, no offences or apostasies amongst us, our meetings are frequent and well attended...

My heart rejoices in the good that is done by others, I leave them to judge for themselves, & I claim the same liberty, believing that the same good spirit does often call his people to different services & lead them in different ways. In whatsoever way Christ is preached & sinners converted I rejoice, yea & will rejoice.

There was no tradition in Olney of such friendliness between church and meeting. In 1636 an incumbent named William Worcester (d.1662) had emigrated to New England, where he became pastor of the Congregational church at Salisbury, Massachusetts, but there is no evidence that any of his successors at Olney were of a Puritan cast or disposed to indulge the Nonconformists. One Vicar of Olney, Samuel Freeman (a name common amongst Olney Dissenters at the time), went on to be Dean of Peterborough.

The manor of Olney was in the Nicoll family. After division for some years between her relatives, the moieties were united in Frances Katherine Nicoll, who in 1755 married the second Earl of Dartmouth, known for his Evangelical sympathies as the "good" Earl. The rectory and advowson had followed a different course since their purchase in 1633 by William Johnson, whose descendants continued to hold them, and whose great-grandson, Wolsey Johnson (d.1756), a native of Olney, in 1735 presented himself as Vicar. Wolsey Johnson was also Rector of Wilby, Northamptonshire, and a landed gentleman to boot, who in 1752 built himself a manor-house, and enclosed the park, at Witham-on-the-Hill, Lincolnshire, where he was also patron. When in 1753 he vacated the living of Olney, he appears to have shed the advowson also, alienating it to the Countess of Dartmouth's trustees; his successor, Moses Browne (d.1787), was presented by the Earl in right of his wife, and the patronage has continued in the Earl's descendants.

The new Vicar was an Evangelical, like the Earl. By Browne, in the phrase of a nineteenth-century Dissenter, "the gospel was introduced into the established church at Olney". He had been curate to James Hervey and enjoyed the patronage of Lady Huntingdon. A piece by the pietist Johann Liborius Zimmermann which was sent to Doddridge for translation into English, by Hervey it was hoped, was translated by Browne. According to Drake, his preaching at Olney "drew many from the Meetings"; it also, however, converted a young man who later succeeded Drake as the minister of Yardley Hastings. But Evangelical sentiments were not felt to necessitate residence. Under pressure from the needs of his family - he had thirteen children - after ten years Browne left Olney for London, to be chaplain of Morden College, Blackheath, and it was on this account that Newton came to Olney as his curate. The system of patronage and the practice of non-residence we may not approve, but in this case they worked together for good.

In London Browne was acquainted both with Isaac Watts, to whose "gentle shade" he composed an Elegy, and with Watts's biographer, Thomas Gibbons (son of the former Independent minister at Olney), who baptized Browne's grandson Moses after the two men had dined together. But to move in the society of respectable London Dissenters - Gibbons and Watts, like Browne himself, were known to Dr Johnson - was not the same thing as to fraternize with Drake and Walker in Olney, as Newton did. The difference lay in Newton himself.

Before he came to Olney Newton had been approached with a view to the pastorate of more than one Dissenting church, and had seriously considered acceptance. Only in the nick of time, and after "a deal of trouble", did the Earl of Dartmouth find a bishop willing to ordain Newton; and when one reads Newton's account of the difficulty he had in agreeing *ex animo* to the subscription required, one can understand the bishops' hesitation. Newton's mother was a Dissenter, a member of the church at Wapping ministered to by David Jennings. Again, Newton's first new friend after his conversion, Captain Clunie, belonged to the Congregational church in Stepney and knew Jennings. This no doubt drew the two men together. Certainly Newton turned for counsel to Jennings, with whom, as with Clunie, he continued to correspond. Through Clunie he came to know Clunie's pastor, Samuel Brewer, who in turn introduced him to Whitefield. Brewer, who visited Newton at Olney on a number of occasions, was the man whose preaching, along with Whitefield's, Newton admiringly compared the sermon he heard at Olney by William Grant. Newton says he owed more to Brewer than to anyone else. Newton's conversion, that is to say, was sealed in a Dissenting context.

Newton's own appellation for himself was "a sort of speckled bird" (Jer.12.9). Just as he could write to John Wesley "I love the people called Methodists, . . . and suffer the reproach of the world for being one myself", so he could write to his friend William Bull, the Independent minister at Newport Pagnell, "I am a mighty good churchman, but pass amongst such as a Dissenter in principle"; though he took care to add that many Dissenters "think me defective, either in understanding or in conscience, by staying where I am". His long friendship with Bull - "He sought me, he owned me as a brother in the year 1764", Bull wrote forty-three years later - and the collaboration of the two men in establishing at Newport a "dissenting methodistical academy" under Bull's supervision are well known. The more one learns of Newton, the stranger it would be if he had *not* had friendly relations with the Dissenting meetings in Olney and their ministers. Of the two ministers Drake, who was twenty-five years older than Newton and not without his suspicions of him, was a man of some cultivation; but what affinity could there be between Newton and a Strict Baptist like William Walker?

The question looks sensible; but with the years situations and attitudes change, and people with them. "What a glorious revival have we already seen", Newton wrote to Wesley before he came to Olney, "and I hope it is yet increasing". Nearer at hand, in *The Modern Question* (1737) Maurice, the minister

whom Olney had given up to Rothwell, had pointed forward to a more "moderate" Calvinism; and by the 1760s this was painfully but securely gaining ground. Walker subscribed to John Gill's *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (1769); but if the slave-ship owner had been transformed into a clergyman, Walker had altered too.

The founding of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association in 1764, a few months after Newton arrived in Olney, has been noted as the first of a new run of such Associations. They were outward-looking, adventurous, expectant. The old divisions were disappearing. In the Northamptonshire Association Strict Baptists took a lead from the beginning. William Walker of Olney (though Olney is not in Northamptonshire) and Moses Deacon of Walgrave were two of the six founders and the two appointed to preach at the first meeting; Thomas Hull of Carlton in Bedfordshire, the former member of Olney, was also an early recruit. Doctrinally, the Circular Letter issued in 1765 was explicitly Calvinist, listing the Five Points; but its signatories called for revival. In the matter of communion of churches the age of disruption had now passed. Earlier, as we saw, Walgrave did not recognize College Lane but supported the Strict Baptist seceders worshipping on The Green at Northampton, where both the Walgrave minister and his brother Samuel, a former member of Walgrave who was now minister at Roade, lent their presence at ordinations. Now, not only was the schism in Northampton made up, distrust was gone. College Lane joined the Association in 1767, Roade in the following year. Again, the Wellingborough church was not in the Association: it had never limited membership to those baptized as believers, and in 1733 Northampton Strict Baptists declined an exchange of pulpits with the Wellingborough minister, William Grant; but in 1760, when John Collett Ryland was ordained at College Lane, Grant, Hull and Deacon of Roade all took part, and in 1764 Grant was welcome at Olney, where he made so favourable an impression on Newton when Newton first visited the Baptist meeting.

Newton was in sympathy with "Religious Associations" long before the Northamptonshire Baptist Association was founded. He published a tract in support of them while in Liverpool in 1756. At that time he was a hearer and acquaintance of the Baptist minister, John Oulton, a correspondent of Whitefield and Howel Harris. "We have the truth preached in the Baptist meetings", Newton wrote to Whitefield from Liverpool. So now he was to be found in meetings of Baptist ministers almost as if he were one himself. Particularly on the not infrequent occasions when the Association met in Olney Newton was quick and generous in seizing the opportunity. In June 1775 he had four ministers to dinner. In the following May, when the Association met in Olney, several ministers stayed at the vicarage and Newton attended the meetings; in return, five or six ministers went to the parish church for a sermon from Newton, and next morning those still in town came to breakfast. "We seemed all mutually pleased", Newton wrote in his journal, where he also entered the names of the six ministers he heard pray or preach, with their texts: "I thank Thee my Lord Thou

hast, I trust, given me a heart to love Thy people of every name, and I am willing to discover Thine image without respect of parties". At a meeting of Baptist ministers held between these two occasions he again "heard in preaching and prayer the very same truths which Thou, O Lord, hast taught and deliverd unto me".

In 1775 Drake died. His successor as the Independent minister, John Whitford, after a period as one of Wesley's preachers, had left Wesley for Whitefield and had held pastorates in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Newton, who was in contact with him earlier, attended the services marking Whitford's settlement at Olney in 1776. "This is a minister of Thine own preparing", he wrote in his journal, "called by Thee, not from a University or Academy, but from hedging and ditching to preach Thy Gospel". Charles Wesley's description of Whitford as "headstrong and intractable" may be nearer the mark. In comparison with the minister who followed him, Thomas Hillyard, Whitford's six years in Olney left little impression.

Three months after Whitford's settlement Newton was at the Baptist meeting for the ordination of Walker's successor, John Sutcliff, and had three of the ministers to breakfast next morning. The arrival of Sutcliff - a name famous in Baptist story, though ignored by others - in effect marks the start of a fresh era: Sutcliff's ministry at Olney lasted till 1814, Hillyard's till 1828. In 1780 Newton departed for St Mary Woolnoth's in the City, to be followed at Olney by another notable Evangelical, the commentator Thomas Scott, whose first book, *The Force of Truth* (1779), Newton revised for the press. Friendly relations between church and meeting long continued - Sutcliff, Hillyard and the Vicar of the day were to be seen going about Olney together soliciting signatures to a petition to Parliament against the Slave Trade - but this is from another chapter in Olney's history.

During his years in the City Newton did not forget his Olney friends; sometimes he returned to preach to them. But he did not romanticize them. While still their Vicar he described them as "a poor afflicted people, who, from a confined and sedentary employment (lace-making), are mostly afflicted with low spirits and nervous disorders". After he had left them he apostrophized them as "Poor, wise, foolish, evangelical selfrighteous people of Olney!" His romantic side appears more in his nostalgia for the rural innocence he once enjoyed. "Oh, how I long sometimes", he wrote in 1784, "to spend a day or two among woods, and lawns, and brooks, and hedgerows, to hear the birds sing in the bushes, and to wander among the sheep and the lambs, or to stand under the shadow of an old oak, upon a hill-top! Thus I lived at Olney!" Three years later, in a letter to Hannah More, he was still calling to remembrance "the sound of falling waters, and the notes of thrushes and nightingales".

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL APPENDIX

To provide a reference for every statement in this paper would be cumbersome and is perhaps not called for; but I remember the frustration I sometimes felt at the lack of documentation in articles by W. T. Whitley, and therefore indicate its main sources.

The fundamental authorities are the church books.

For transcripts of the Olney Baptist church book, the original trust deed and other documents, I am indebted to the Rev. K. W. H. Howard, formerly of Olney, to whose kind assistance I desire to make full acknowledgment. I am also indebted to Mr Howard for a copy of the unpublished typescript by M. Hewitt, "Sutcliffe: the meeting and the man", in the Bristol Baptist College Library, with copious extracts from the College Street, Northampton, church book.

My second great debt is to Mr H. G. Tibbutt: for the transcripts at Dr Williams's Library of the first church books at Rothwell, Kimbolton and Bedford; and for the provision of a transcript of the first church book of the church at Croydon, Cambs., now Great Gransden, Hunts.

The letter from John Drake to a friend is transcribed in the Meen MS formerly in the Library of New College, London, and now in Dr Williams's Library. Thomas Gibbons's journal and the letter from Newton to Lady Huntingdon's niece are among the MSS in the Congregational Library, also now at D.W.L.

I have also drawn on the *London Christian Instructor of Congregational Magazine*, n.s., ii (1819) and on several works listed *sub* Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire in *Nonconformist Congregations in Great Britain* (Dr Williams's Trust, 1973) - those by Mr Tibbutt and the late Dr E. A. Payne I have found of special value.

Josiah Bull's *John Newton* and the various collections of Newton's letters are rich in material relative to Olney Dissent; for Newton's letters to the Earl of Dartmouth, see *H.M.C. 15th Report, Appendix, Part I* (1896); for his letters to David Jennings, see Bernard Martin, *John Newton* (1950). See also Thomas Wright, *The Town of Cowper* (2nd edn., 1893).

A couple of composite notes of identification may be in place.

The "Mr Bradbury" whom Newton heard preach at the Independent meeting was David Bradbury, who at the time was minister of a second Independent church at Wellingborough. A native of Reeth, Yorkshire, where he gave the land for an Independent meeting-house, he was a convert of Whitefield's and in 1769, immediately before Whitefield left England for the last time, persuaded Whitefield to preach at Ramsgate, where he was then minister; Newton's friend Brewer took part in his ordination there.

The "Mr Ashburner" whom Newton also heard preach at the Independent meeting was Edward Ashburner, a native of Olney, where he was converted by a sermon by Walker and for a time attended the Baptist meeting; but his parents were members of the Independent church, and he became the Independent minister at Poole, where he died in 1804. He took part in the service marking the settlement of Drake's successor at Olney, John Whitford.

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