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THE HISTORIC CHAPEL AT MONKSTHORPE

In a beautiful corner of the Lincolnshire Fenlands lies the old Baptist Meeting House of Monksthorpe, dating from the early days of Baptist life in this country, when it was no easy matter to be a practising Baptist. For many years those who know Monksthorpe have wanted to see this historic building preserved as part of the Baptist heritage and put to on-going use. Within recent months the possibility of preservation has considerably increased and now seems within reach. Baptists are urged to consider supporting a project which will preserve this important piece of Baptist heritage for future generations. Old buildings are a legacy of our country's past and visiting them can be an enjoyable way of learning history. There are not many Baptist 'shrines' and few as old as Monksthorpe. This is the last opportunity to save this historic chapel for future generations. To rescue and adapt it will cost money and effort, but a substantial contribution has made the hope more tangible, and a little more effort and financial backing could ensure preservation.

The early days of Baptist life in Britain are closely associated with the East Midlands, especially Nottinghamshire and the Lincolnshire Fenlands. Baptist churches came into being in south-east Lincolnshire over three hundred years ago. From 1612, when John Smyth and Thomas Helwys led a group of English refugees in Holland to adopt Baptist beliefs, Baptists pleaded for religious liberty. By 1626 there was a General Baptist church in Lincoln, which was to play an important part in Baptist life in the county. Persecuted under the Stuart kings, dissenting congregations were driven to worship in secret.

Lucy Hutchinson, wife of Colonel John Hutchinson of Owthorpe Hall, the Parliamentary Governor of Nottingham Castle, records in *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* how she and her husband came to adopt Baptist views after reading literature confiscated from Baptist soldiers in the castle. She speaks of the Presbyterian ministers being unable to defend the baptism of infants 'for any satisfactory reason but the tradition of the church . . . which Tombes and Denne has so excellently overthrown'. To Henry Denne the Baptist cause in south-east Lincolnshire is to a large extent indebted for its establishment. He served for ten years as curate at Pyrton, Hertfordshire. In 1643 he adopted Baptist views through reading the Scriptures and was baptized by the General Baptist pastor, Thomas Lamb, and joined his church. Imprisoned for his faith, he later became a minister of the Bell Alley church in London and served in the Parliamentary army. After the war he devoted himself to evangelistic work in the eastern counties. Through him was founded the Baptist church at Fenstanton, the mother church of the district. With Thomas Lamb and Samuel Oates, father of the notorious Titus, he carried the work along the valley of the Great Ouse through Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely into Lincolnshire, contributing greatly to founding the Baptist cause in the Fenlands. In 1646 Denne preached several times in Spalding in the house of a merchant, John Makerness. It was arranged that four converts should be baptized a few days later at Little Croft, at midnight to avoid interference by the authorities, but Denne was arrested and committed to Lincoln gaol. Spalding developed into an important Baptist church of the area. For many years Denne held the office of 'Messenger' among these Fenland General Baptist churches.

At South Marsh, near Alford, an Independent church developed around 1644, drawing its members from a wide area. Around 1651 a division of opinion about baptism led to four members separating to form a Baptist fellowship. This church was to lay the foundations of Baptist work in that part of Lincolnshire and, coupled with Denne's evangelistic work, was probably behind the formation of the Burgh and Monksthorpe church.

The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 brought renewed persecution, under which the the Burgh/Monksthorpe church was formed - its foundation date is given

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as 1669. The Baptist communities of Burgh-le-Marsh and Monksthorpe formed a single church, although originally meeting both in the town of Burgh and in Monksthorpe, four miles away. The Monksthorpe meeting house, built in 1701, stands in two acres of ground in open country. It is surrounded by a grove of trees and approached by a winding, tree-lined avenue leading from a minor road. The building, invisible from the road, is difficult for a stranger to find. The Burgh/Monksthorpe worshipping community had probably used this withdrawn site for meetings for some time. Part of the burial ground at the site was already in use in the seventeenth century. The brick-lined, open-air baptistry in the grounds has three sides and shelves upwards on the fourth, and may have resembled a duck-pond.

John Dowse, a later minister whose family lived in the neighbourhood for four generations, records in his *History of the Monksthorpe and Burgh Baptist Church, Lincolnshire* (Burgh, 1910) how services used to be held under a certain tree near Monksthorpe which was still known as the 'preaching tree', and the field was still called the 'preaching croft'. During services a boy high in a tree kept watch across the flat ground for miles around. Externally the chapel resembles a great barn, and the similarity would have been greater with the original thatched roof. Dowse draws attention to the 'Narrative and Complaint', dated 26 July 1660, which Thomas Grantham and Joseph Wright presented to Charles II, setting out the sufferings of Lincolnshire Baptists. The signatories include nine from Burgh and the adjoining parish of Croft, presumably all members of the Burgh/Monksthorpe church. One of these signatories is mentioned again by Dowse, quoting from William White's *History and Directory of Lincolnshire* (1856): 'Mr Robert Shalder of Croft, a Baptist, was imprisoned for Nonconformity in the time of Charles II and died soon after his release. On the day that he was interred, so vindictive was the persecuting spirit of the Conformists that it is said they took his body from the grave and dragged it upon a sledge to his own gates.'

The Monksthorpe Chapel was probably built as soon after the Toleration Act of 1689 as funds could be raised. The earlier Acts were in abeyance but had not been repealed, so the position was delicate. A chapel could now legally be built within the five mile limit, but had to be registered with the bishop or magistrate, and the doors had to be kept unlocked during services. It was still illegal for a Nonconformist to preach there, though he would not be arrested! Recent history might suggest that the position could change again at a turn of the political wheel, so they played safe and built in an inconspicuous place and style. Official persecution apart, there was still plenty of prejudice against dissenters, so that unofficial persecution remained a popular sport: neighbours with malicious intent throwing stones or filth at them, breaking their windows, damaging or stealing their goods, holding their heads under water until they nearly drowned. Some clergy and magistrates would turn a blind eye to such practices. So Monksthorpe Chapel was built in this out-of-the-way place. A hatch still high in the rear wall could be used if ever the preacher needed to escape, with ladders set conveniently ready inside and out.

Apart from the need for concealment, the chapel was well situated to serve the local Baptist community, scattered over many villages. A list of members dated 28 April 1782, in the church book, shows that the 99 members were drawn from 24 different villages and hamlets: Great Steeping 7, Little Steeping 7, Burgh 19, Toynton 5, East Heal 3, Halton (i.e. Halton-Holgate) 5, Skendelby 3, Ousely 1, Oulsby 1, Walton 1, Gunby 1, Orby 7, Hogsthorpe 3, Winsthorpe 4, Croft 12, Thorpe 4, Firsby 5, Irby 1, Braytoft 2, Wrangle 2, Anderby 2, Bilsby 2. Fifty-eight were women. None on this list come from the handful of cottages at Monksthorpe. At other times there may have been some, but the chapel was not built primarily for local people.

Burgh-le-Marsh and Monksthorpe have been a single church throughout their

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history. In 1651 and 1660 manifestos were published by groups of General Baptist churches. That of 1651 bears the signature of a man living in Thorpe, and that of 1660 the signature of one in Burgh: both would have belonged to this church. The church must have been well known to the General Baptist leaders of the East Midlands like Henry Denne and Thomas Grantham of South Marsh, the other early Messenger in this area, who, born at Halton-Holgate, near Spilsby, joined the Alford church, but was ordained pastor at Halton in 1656. The Burgh/Monksthorpe church became comparatively large and important. The well-to-do Hursthouse family provided leadership over three generations both here and at Boston and Spalding. The first mention of this family is the baptism of John Hursthouse and his wife in 1687. In 1708 he was suspected of Hoffmannite leanings but cleared himself of the charge and was subsequently prominent in firmly but courteously opposing these tendencies in the Association as a whole. His grandson, also John, was Elder of the Burgh/Monksthorpe church and so effective that the Association repeatedly asked him to become a Messenger, but his church would not let him go. The church regularly sent representatives to Association meetings in Lincoln and, less frequently, to the General Assembly in London.

The church books begin in 1692 and reveal an active, growing church over much of the next two centuries. When the lively, evangelical New Connexion General Baptist Association was formed in 1770, most of the Lincolnshire General Baptists joined it. Of the six that continued in the old Lincolnshire Association, Burgh/Monksthorpe was the largest, with a hundred members. It did not, however, become Unitarian, but in 1825, probably under the influence of B. J. Bull, joined the Calvinist fold and in due course became a member of the Baptist Union.

The chapel at Monksthorpe is an attractive old building. Monthly services were held there until about twenty years ago, mainly to keep memory alive. The membership of the Burgh/Monksthorpe church remained quite high for a country church, reaching 134, but dwindling later in the nineteenth century. Membership rose again under John Dowse, minister in the 1880s, but the weight of the church was moving to Burgh. Factors in the decline may have been the depopulation of the rural villages, the rise of Methodism, providing chapels nearer at hand, and the widespread decline of religious observance. During the first decade of this century, when John Dowse was again minister, a determined effort was made to restore the cause. Dowse, a local man who had prospered in business in Birmingham, helped finance the restoration and provided endowments for the church: The Skegness church also took a keen interest. Since then there have been fluctuations in the life of the church, but now little help can be provided from Burgh and none from Monksthorpe.

The chapel and its outbuildings still stand on a beautiful site. Neglected in recent years, they are still capable of restoration, but will not be so for much longer. Those who know the building and the area are convinced that it could and should be restored and adapted for some on-going purpose. It cannot now be the meeting place of a local worshipping community: but it was built with a wider purpose in view. It might have a valuable existence as a youth centre, or a centre for conferences, retreats, or holidays. Various possibilities exist. Monksthorpe is peaceful and attractive, and within reach of many places of interest, including the Lincolnshire Wolds, the Fens, the coast, Gunby Hall, Sibsey Mill and the Tennyson country. Within such a scheme, space would be set aside for a display about the chapel and its place in Baptist history. Monksthorpe has been restored twice before but this is almost certainly the last chance of doing something, and something wider than was contemplated in the 1840s or 1910. If it is to be done, it is now or never!

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