

BAPTIST BURIAL GROUNDS IN BATH

INTRODUCTION

The Old Baptist Burial Ground at the bottom of Lyncombe Hill stands as a silent reminder of the important contribution made by Baptists to the life of Bath during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Baptist Chapel stood in Somerset Street, at the south end of Southgate Street, parallel with The Quay. It housed a congregation who had previously worshipped in a number of rooms and meeting houses in the city. They were formed into a separate church in 1752 by the Baptist church at Broadmead, Bristol; and Robert Parsons, carver-mason of Claverton Street, was called to be their minister. Josiah Thompson, a Baptist minister who in the 1770s surveyed the state of English nonconformist churches, and almost certainly visited Bath, recorded that

they have been gradually increasing, so much as that their place of Worship being too small in the Year 1762 they enlarged it at near the Expence of 100l. having before this at a considerable Expence purchased & wall'd in a Peice of Ground to bury their Dead But still wanting Room & being so crouded particularly at ye Seasons for drinking the Waters, they at length came to a Resolution once for all, to have a Room sufficient to accomodate all that might attend with them.¹

This room they opened in Garrard Street, later renamed Somerset Street, on Christmas Day 1768. Like many other dissenting groups the small yet expanding congregation had from early on realised the importance of a place where they could bury their own dead, without the restrictions and pressures of a burial according to the rites of the Church of England or, worse, interment in ground not intended for Christian burial at all. And so the church under the leadership of Robert Parsons purchased a small plot out on the road to London, near the turnpike gate, at the bottom of Snow Hill. This was their first burial ground.

THE WALCOT BURIAL GROUND

In March 1764 'all that triangular plot, piece or parcel of ground, lying and being in the Parish of Walcot in the County of Somerset, next the turnpike gate there, and which was enclosed with a wall,' was entrusted into the hands of fifteen trustees: Lazarus Brown, John Stock, Thomas Ludlow, William Ludlow, John Harris, Simon Nash, Peter Holland, Robert Cottel, Isaac Stephens, Joseph Mason, James Giles, John Evill, William Evill, John Latty and John Williams. These trustees represented local association interests as well as the interests of the Bath church. Thomas Ludlow, William Ludlow and Peter Holland were deacons at the Pithay church, Bristol, and Isaac Stephens was also a member there.² John Stock, John Harris, and possibly others, were members at Broadmead, Bristol.³ The last five named were members of the Somerset Street church: James Giles, John Evill, William Evill and

John Latty were baptised by Robert Parsons in 1760, and John Williams joined them a year later. The trust deeds and indentures relating to the burial ground were reported as destroyed by a flood. Details of their contents, however, were given as evidence in a case brought before the Lord Chancellor in 1829. The trustees held the ground in Walcot 'used and employed as and for a burial ground' for 'the congregation of protestants dissenting from the church of England, under the denomination of particular baptists, holding the doctrines of personal election, imputation of original sin, effectual calling, free justification, and final perseverance of the saints' worshipping at Somerset Street.⁴

The ground was small and an awkward shape. It had been larger, but a Church Meeting in July 1762 had decided 'to sell a piece of Ground next the Burying Ground for to Build two Houses upon to the best advantage'. £40 was received from Robert Parsons for the land, which helped offset the £71.8s.8d. bill for the walling, gate, and finishing of the ground. There is no contemporary description of the ground, but some of its features can be gauged from the minute and account books.⁵ In 1768 13s. was paid for 'a Pump for the Burying Ground'; in 1777 Thomas Bolwell was paid £2.9s.11d. 'for work at the Burying Ground'; and in 1781 'a Bar & Webing for ye Burying Ground' were secured for 6s.7½d. The pump needed repairing in 1795, costing 19s.6d. In 1793 £4.4s. was spent 'for Raising the Wall', and 1s. 'for Letters in the Wall': the total £4.5s. being paid 'By Cash collected for the Burying Ground'. The letters were to mark the position of individual graves, the letter reference being recorded in the register purchased in 1785 for 13s.d. Typically locations were recorded as 'In the letter D 5 feet 6 inches from the lower Wall to the middle of the Grave', 'A new Grave in the Letter A 25 feet 4 inches from the lower Wall', or 'Grave seven feet deep 16 feet from the lower Wall in the Letter A Foot of the Coffin close to first line'. The ground was in the charge of Robert Harper until 1793 when Thomas Durnell, who had previously received a £4.4s salary for looking after the Somerset Street meeting house, took over. There is evidence that quick lime, used to aid speedy decomposition of remains, was perhaps produced on site. Accounts in 1795 record £2.9s.6d. 'pd Thos Durnell for Limestone & Labor', and £1.8s.9d. 'pd Thos Durnell for Limestone at ye Burial Ground'.

The written record mostly concerns the conditions which governed who could be buried in the ground. Members of the church and their children could be buried there without payment. Yet there were charges. At first these reflected the Bath Baptists' theological views, more than the costs involved. Discipline in the church was strict, and infant baptism specifically attacked. Any member associating with paedobaptists could be cut off from fellowship, and so the Church Meeting in January 1785 agreed

that all Children not Sprinkled may be Buried in our Burial Ground free of Fine - Such who are Sprinkled and under Ten years of age to pay Five Shillings and for grown Persons who have been Sprinkled a Fine of Ten

Shillings shall be paid.

The only baptism they could accept was the total immersion of persons professing faith in Christ Jesus, according to New Testament teaching, which at Bath was usually in the Avon or at Gibbs's Mill until a baptistry was installed in the chapel. A year later more detailed conditions were laid down. The February 1786 Church Meeting agreed

1st. That no Stranger shall be interred in the Burial Ground belonging to this Society, without the consent of the Minister and Deacons of this Society nor without paying a fine of twenty Shillings if above 12 years of age and ten Shillings if under that age. NB. By Strangers we mean Persons that are not Members of this Church and who have a claim to burial elsewhere.

2. Nor shall any Stranger be permitted to erect any Monument, Tomb, Gravestone or Headstone &c other than a flat stone or slab close to the Wall or inserted in the Wall.

Burial fines were revised in 1791. The July Church Meeting set the charge as 8s. plus 2s.6d. for digging the grave of children under twelve years, and 16s. plus 5s. for digging the grave of adult persons over that age. It was further determined that

the money to be paid before the corpse is interred & no persons to be excused the above fines except it be for members of this Church or their Children. We find ourselves necessitated to adopt this measure because our burying Ground is small & it is impracticable to enlarge it.

Clearly the fines were not aimed at raising funds, for despite the number recorded burials usually only accounted for between 10s. and £3. annually, although a good year such as 1794 raised as much as £5.12s.8d. Later decisions were more practical; there was very little space.

By 1795 ten of the original trustees of the burial ground had died, and so according to the terms of the deeds the church was consulted about replacements. The Church Meeting in October resolved to put 16 names forward in addition to the existing five, which were to comprise '2 from Broadmead Church Bristol, 1 from Pithay Bristol, 2 from Devizes and 11 from this congregation.' The resolution was signed by the minister and deacons on behalf of seventy-two church members, 'male & female'! John Smith - brewer, Opie Smith - brewer, James Evill - silversmith, William Evill, James Thomas - baker, Jasper Gay, Moses Gay, Edmund Davis - shoemaker, John Millard - carpenter, William Taylor and Henry Voisey represented Somerset Street's interests; Arthur Tozer, John Nash, William Stockham, John Sloper and William Brackstone were from the Bristol and Devizes churches; and John Harris, William Ludlow, Robert Cattel, John Williams and James Giles were original surviving trustees. John Williams and James Giles were still members at Somerset Street chapel. There is no record of whether James Giles was later buried in the Walcot burial ground; but John Williams, the Walcot Street silversmith and deacon of the Baptist church, buried his wife Ann in the ground in the following

year, aged 64 years, and joined her in 1801 aged 71 years.

Throughout this period the church were looking for a second burial ground, but with little success. In the spring of 1798 they thought that they had found a suitable site, but in June the Church Meeting recorded their decision 'to let the intended Purchase of the burying ground rest where it now is having bid £120 for it & has been refused.' The following February Thomas Durnell relinquished his responsibilities for the ground, and the job was given to John Millard, the carpenter of Bradly's Buildings in the parish of St James, who had joined the church in 1784. On his death in 1809 Thomas Durnell was also buried in the Walcot ground, aged 76 years.

From the 1760s there is no record of who were buried in the Walcot burial ground. However the register purchased in 1785 to record births and burials still exists, and records 480 burials up to 1837, when the book was surrendered to the Registrar General.⁶ Of this total 134 burials are known to be male and 182 female. 120 of the remaining 164 burials were infants, with no name and no age, illustrating the high mortality rate among the very young during this period. The occupation and address information recorded against many of the entries is sparse, but demonstrates the mainly artisan composition of the Baptist congregation, and shows residences mostly in the more modest parts of the city. For most people very little information was recorded, except the brief mention of a name, age and date of burial. Only occasionally were members of the church given fuller entries.

For example, Charles Willis of the parish of St James, Deputy Surveyor of the city, was buried on November 22nd 1785, aged 30 years. On the 26th of the following month John Timbrell, a baker of the parish of Lyncombe and Widcombe was buried 'with 2 Grand Children in his arms, Same Coffin & Grave' aged 68. And on April 29th 1787, Robert Strudock, 'Weaver of Twerton but lately of the Parish of Lyncomb & Widcomb', was buried aged 78 years. This is probably the 'Robt Strudick' whose house in Twerton was licenced for worship by 'Anabaptists' at the Epiphany Quarter Sessions on January 15th 1754.⁷ On February 1st 1792, James Osborn, a 28 year old 'Servant to Opie & Wm Smith, Brewers of this City' was buried in the Walcot ground; followed on April 25th by an unnamed 29 year old servant, also of Opie and William Smith. An unnamed 18 year old servant of Moses Gay, of Stall Street, was buried on March 16th 1795. Opie Smith and Moses Gay were still trustees of the burial ground at this time.

In 1788 the church at Somerset Street agreed to appoint an assistant minister, to help the ageing Robert Parsons with his preaching and pastoral work. The natural choice would have been Thomas Parsons who had assisted his father and was called to preached on occasion. Yet Thomas Parsons differed from his father over many issues, and his preaching was not at all popular. Walter Wilson recorded that

A difference of opinion from his venerable parent, upon some high point of doctrine, entertained by the good old man, & which was magnified by suspicion & officiousness on the one part, & a refusal to come to explanation

on the other, occasioned him to be interdicted labouring in the church.⁸

Instead they called Rev William Holland of Romsey, originally from London. Unfortunately he soon became seriously ill; and in the register it is recorded that the 40 year old 'Preacher amongst us for one year' was buried on June 28th 1789. He was followed the following year by the Rev Thomas Tuppens, the Independent minister instrumental in moving the Independent congregation into their new chapel in Argyle Street, but who was never to preach there. He was buried on February 28th 1790, aged 45, a year before the Independent congregation secured their own burial ground further up Snow Hill.⁹ A curious entry in the Baptist register records the burial on January 13th 1795 of Stephen Gay, 'Clerk of the Markets in the City of Bath', aged 65 years, because 'He was inter'd in the Independent Burying ground, Walcot'!

In February 1790 Robert Parsons died, aged 71 years, and was buried at Walcot on March 7th. Within a year the church had lost both its minister and assistant. John Rippon, the London minister who trained at the Baptist Academy in Bristol in the 1770s, and who as 'enthusiastic collector of Baptist news' compiled and edited the Baptist Annual Register,¹⁰ used the fact to his advantage in promoting his publication:

The Rev. Mr. ROBERT PARSONS, pastor of the Baptist church at Bath, died Feb. the 28th, 1790; his amiable assistant, the Rev. Mr. WILLIAM HOLLAND, departed this life a few months before him, viz. on June 23, 1789. But as no biographical traits of them have been communicated either by the church or the families to which they belonged, the Register is under a necessity of passing over both these respectable characters with the bare mention of their names and the times of their exit; a circumstance this which will frequently, and indeed unavoidably, happen, unless the friends of our deceased connections interest themselves in collecting and forwarding in good time, suitable material.¹¹

In the following months the church appointed Rev John Paul Porter from Wokingham as Parsons's successor. Thomas Parsons bitterly criticised the church, believing that he was his father's natural successor. The resulting conflict lasted several years, ending with Thomas Parsons, his father's widow, and Richard Singer being excluded from fellowship with the church. Richard Singer was a friend of Robert Parsons, and one of the first to be baptised by him in the river at Gibbs's Mill. However the rift was healed in time and the church was keen to record in its minutes in April 1799 that

it was unanimously agreed, consonant with similar Resolutions made nearly 4 Years since but omitted to be then inserted that the Widow Parsons, Mr Thos Parsons, Mr Richd Singer, at their Decease, be interred in the Burial Ground free of the usual Fine and that in future no person shall be buried without the usual Fines except those who have a legal right & that no Minister shall officiate at the interment of any Person in that Ground but our own,

without his & the Church's Consent.

Their burials were recorded in the burial register in due season. Lucy Parsons was buried on the 11th of May 1812, aged 70 years; Richard Singer of St James's Parade on the 16th of May 1813, aged 90 years; and Thomas Parsons of Claverton Street on the 24th September 1813, aged 69 years. Parsons had in the meantime joined the Independent congregation at Argyle Street, and Rev William Jay preached his funeral sermon.

In 1785 there was no consistent legal means of registering births, other than the records of infant baptisms in the established church. This to the Baptist congregation in Bath was anathema, and so they recorded their own births in the register. Together the births and burials record the development of family patterns within the church during this period, or those in close contact with it. By far the largest group identified is the Evill family, with thirty burials alone. The family was united around four brothers, who from the mid-eighteenth century appear as proprietors of a number of Bath retail and manufacturing businesses.¹² The eldest was George Evill, draper, of the Market Place, who was buried on December 10th 1785, aged 65 years. His widow, Ann, lived another 11 years before she joined him on December 12th 1806.

John, the second brother, resided at Southcot House before his death in December 1791. As senior deacon, John Evill's family had opened their home to the newly arrived John Paul Porter only a year earlier; and John's death was a great loss to the whole church. After his burial on December 19th, Porter preached the sermon from Zechariah 3:2, '...is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?', in which he gave details of the deceased's character:

About thirty-six years ago, it was the pleasure of God to remove the veil of ignorance from his mind. He searched the Scriptures for himself, as the only rule of faith and practice with regard to the ordinance of baptism. In the year 1760, he, with two of his brethren, (both in the flesh and in the Lord), were baptized by Mr. Parsons....Twenty-five years our deceased friend was a deacon of this church: how he fulfilled the duties of his office, let those who were acquainted with him testify. His life was steady, circumspect, and exemplary; with manliness and fearlessness did he stand forth in defence of the gospel.... The last time I visited him, which was two days before his death, he said I know not what the Lord is about to do with me; but I know on whom I have believed. It was then the general opinion that he would recover; but sitting in his chair, he quietly and unexpectedly expired.¹³

He left £10 to the poor members of the church, £5 of which was 'put to the little fund for the poor'. The remaining £5 was divided among 13 poor members, including Thomas Durnell. John Evill's widow died the following year, and was buried on September 28th. She left £20 for the poor members, along with a further £10 'from Mr John Evill that was to be paid at Mrs Evills Death'. As a result the 'Little Fund for the Benefit of the Poor' was £10 better off; 21 poor members,

including Thomas Durnell and Robert Harper, received 15s.6d; and 10s.6d. was given to 6 others. It appears that she and her husband died childless.

The third brother, William Evill, was a deacon of the Baptist church, as had his older brothers been. He was also a trustee alongside his brother John, and later James (either his son or nephew). After a successful career, he was buried on April 25th 1793; and also left money for the poor. £5 was divided amongst 21 of the poorest members. The youngest brother was Matthew Evill. Unlike his brothers, Matthew was not a member of the Baptist church, although his children and family burials are recorded in the Baptist books. He was widowed in 1790, and buried Elizabeth, his wife, at Walcot on March 5th, aged 50 years. Five years later and only five years older, on April 23rd 1795, Matthew, 'Brother of George, John & William Evill of the City of Bath', was laid to rest amongst his family.

Comments in the register such as 'In the Letter E close to the Lower wall room in the Grave for one more', and 'In the Letter E close to the Wall Grave Full Lower Wall', betray how full the ground was becoming; and the burial fines were adjusted accordingly. In June 1813 the church determined

that the fines in the Walcot burying ground belonging to this Church shall be Twelve Shillings for persons buried under twelve years of age - and one pound one shilling for all above that age from this time.

The church's desperate need was met early in the nineteenth century, however, when a second burial ground was made available to them by their member and trustee, Opie Smith.

THE LYNCOMBE HILL BURIAL GROUND

In May 1810 the Church Meeting minutes first record the acquisition of their new burial ground in Widcombe:

This concerns the right of burial for Members of this Church and their Children in the new burying ground at Widcomb.

I Opie Smith of the Parish of Lyncomb and Widcomb, County of Somerset, A Member and Deacon of the Baptist Church of the City of Bath, County of Somerset, have by my Last Will and Testament secured in the hands of Trustees to the Members that now are or may here after be in full communion with the said Church, and their children to the age of 15 years, a right of burying in unwalled and uncovered graves, free from any expense more than 2s.6d. each and the expense of digging or opening the grave, In a piece or parcel of ground being part of an Estate called South Cot House Estate in the Parish of Lyncomb and Widcomb, and set aside by me for the purpose of a burying place. May 9 1810. Opie Smith.

The precise details are not totally clear, for although the trust deed was received by the church in November 1813 and placed in the 'Church Chest', the deeds and burial register for the site have since become lost. The questionnaire completed in 1837 to

accompany the submission of the church's registers to the Registrar General, fills in the details of an unsubmitted book. It 'contains register of burials from 1807 to 1837 and relates to a burial ground situate in the parish of Lyncombe and Widcombe in the County of Somerset called the Baptist burial ground.' But it was not submitted, 'as it contains a general scheme of the burial ground and is an index to interments.' The trustees of the Somerset Street chapel and the Walcot burial ground now had charge of the ground at Lyncombe Hill; although by October 1827, some members having in the meantime deceased, their number now consisted of Arthur Tozer, William Stockham, William Evill, Opie Smith - brewer, James Evill - silversmith, William Taylor, Jaspar Gay - gent, James Grant Smith, Thomas Horsey, William Day Horsey, John Passmore - gent, Thomas Pike, James Salter, Joseph Tapp - cordwainer, Edward Hancock, John Marshman Hill, John Buck - taylor, James Dyer, Thomas Gunning - basket maker, and Robert Leonard.

Bounded on the north by a high wall above Claverton Street, the site was very soon to be screened on the west by new houses on Lyncombe Hill and on the south by Southcot Place, a building development with which Opie Smith was involved. The burial ground, approximately 180ft long by 90ft wide, was approached from Lyncombe Hill. In January 1827 the winter climate persuaded the church to send Jasper Gay and Thomas Langdon to approach Opie Smith, and 'solicit him to build a shed in the burying ground to shelter the people attending funerals in bad weather.' A temporary 'shed' may have been built, but before long the burial ground was entered through a grand Gothic style archway built between numbers 5 and 9 Lyncombe Hill.¹⁴ It was more than a mere entrance, for the building incorporated accommodation in an upper room, which was presumably intended for the Sexton or keeper of the ground. It was about 25ft long by 12 ft wide, there was a gateway at either end, and plenty of space underneath to shelter for prayers and readings, before the committal outside. There is reference to the continual tenancy of the 'cottage' up to the 1950s. A report in 1963 described the 'two communicating rooms accessible by [an] external stone staircase off Lyncombe Hill'. However, complaints of infestation and decay, and the mounting cost of maintenance, led to a decision to demolish the structure in 1970. This led in turn to a 'row' over the fate of this grade three listed building, considered as 'particularly charming... a splendid link to grade two buildings up the hill' by The Bath Preservation Trust, and as 'a dangerous building and of no particular architectural merit' by the trustees of the ground.¹⁵

From the entrance porch, the pathway led towards the far end of the burial ground. Small rounded stones to the north side of the path, and letters and arrows carved into the upper and lower boundary walls, marked the rows A-B-C, and so on, the first row beginning close against the backs of the terrace on Lyncombe Hill. From forty nine¹⁶ surviving stones, it seems that most were buried in unmarked graves. The number of burials is unknown although probably considerable, for a correspondent in 1958 noted from the register that between 1807 and 1853 there

were 324 children interred in the ground, and 204 of these were under 2 years of age. It is equally difficult to ascertain when the final burial took place. Orders in Council [dated 31/12/1886 & 7/3/1887] closed the ground from 1887, although the last burial is thought to have been around the turn of the century.

Further details of individual burials may be found in a small number of published obituaries. Rev John Paul Porter was able to use his influence as a founding proprietor of the Baptist Magazine to publish an extended obituary of his wife Jane in the first volume.¹⁷ It describes in detail her spiritual experience and condition, and her eleven year suffering and affliction which led to her death on August 18th 1808, aged 47. She died childless for their son, Ebenezer Paul Porter, died after only thirty days and was buried at Walcot on August 18th 1800. 'Some friends used to meet every Lord's day evening in her chamber to spend an evening in social Prayer. These meetings were profitable to herself and others, as the recollection of many testifies.' It was intended that the obituary serve as an example, for although 'She well knew that her death was approaching... The fear of death was entirely removed, so that she could meet it as a friend to conduct her to Glory.' In her last days she was heard to apply to herself the lines, 'Now I am dead to all the Globe, And all the Globe is dead to me', taken from a verse of Isaac Watts's hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous Cross':

His dying crimson like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe;
And all the globe is dead to me.¹⁸

Her last words were also recorded sixteen hours before her silent but apparently painless death:

Thou dear Redeemer, dying Lamb,
I love to hear of Thee,
No music like Thy charming name,
Nor half so sweet can be.

She was buried on August 23rd in the Lyncombe burial ground, just below the house in Southcot Place where John Paul Porter was later to live with his second wife, Martha Cross, whom he married on September 25th 1809 at Bathwick Church. Mr Barnard of Bradford on Avon officiated at the committal of Jane Porter, and preached on the following Sunday from her chosen text, Job 19:25-27:

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

After over forty years as minister in Bath, and a period of illness, John Paul Porter expired exclaiming the words 'peace- peace- glory- glory', and was buried on

Thursday October 18th 1832, 'in the presence of a multitude of spectators'. He was carried to his grave by John Owen, minister at the Vineyards; Philip Cater, minister at York Street; Shem Evans, Porter's assistant at Somerset Street; and J Jackson, probably James Jackson, who had preached for Porter on previous occasions and had interests at Twerton, Thomas Street and later Bathford. The graveside address was given by William Jay of Argyle Chapel,

who after some general remarks on the subject of mortality, proceeded to bear honorable testimony to the character of the deceased: and alluded in a very affecting manner to the circumstances of his standing over the grave of one who for so many years had been his fellow labourer in the vineyard of the Lord, and with whom he had commenced his ministerial career in the City of Bath.¹⁹

The funeral sermon was preached on the following Sunday evening by Mr T Gough of Westbury Leigh.

The precise location of the above burials is unknown, as is the final resting place of William Perrott, Superintendent of the Sunday School, whose remains 'were conveyed to their last resting place' on Sunday April 8th 1860:

After lying in Schoolroom the previous night, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, they were borne to the grave by four of the Teachers, four of the Deacons attended as pall bearers. His numerous relatives were followed by the two Senior Class, Male and Female amounting to 35. These were succeeded by the Junior Scholars (omitting the Infants) to the number of 75 Girls and 52 Boys and about 16 Teachers, besides numerous friends.

Rev David Wassell preached his funeral sermon in the same evening from John 11:21-24: where on the death of her brother Lazarus, Martha tells Jesus 'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' In 'recording their testimony to his various merits' his fellow Sunday school teachers were swift to say that 'He has left them an example, that they should follow in his steps.'

Two of the remaining headstones in the burying ground, however, record nineteenth century Baptists whose memory present day Bath ought not forget. The first was the Rev David Wassell, minister at Somerset Street after Parsons and Porter, from 1839. He was buried on May 7th 1873 after a long painful illness. His obituary records that

He preached his last sermon on the third Sabbath in September. For a few months previous there had been a lack of his usual high flow of spirits, and some indications of failing strength. His painful illness, which lasted about seven months, was borne with great patience, fortitude, and cheerfulness.

'Mr Wassell was a vigorous Nonconformist', who 'started a day school for the poor children of the neighbourhood and himself taught it until the church could afford to pay a schoolmistress. He was "Mr. Valiant" when the Church Rates and Education Acts were being discussed, and proved himself a powerful champion of the Free

Churches of the city at public meetings'. In 1917 a speaker remembered the 'noble-looking' David Wassell of his youth, 'whom he recalled as a dauntless defender of every righteous cause, being conspicuous at all meetings held to attack the moral evils of the time. Mr. Wassell was, too, a Passive Resister, in that he had his Bible and furniture sold to pay Church Rates'.²⁰

These were years when Nonconformists were making a large contribution in the city to the process of political and social reform. The radical face of Baptist life is best represented in the burial ground by George Cox, whose funeral was described as 'one of the most remarkable demonstrations of popular affection and regard the city has ever known'. His father had died when he was eight, and his mother when he was eleven; so, being sent to Bath, he was brought up by his eldest sister. She found him a job in a hat factory, where he worked hard and his employer kept him until two or three o'clock on Sundays. He was often ill, and was sent to Weymouth for a short while. On returning he entered the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel at the Vineyards to hear the preacher point out 'the awful effects of drunkenness.' As Cox later recorded, 'this, to me, was very alarming, for I felt sure that it was through God's mercy I also had not perished, having been frequently in the same state.' From that time he attended the chapel, and the seven o'clock prayer meeting. He said, 'my conduct and cleanness on the Sabbath, and my attending the early prayer meeting, so annoyed the men, that they agreed to do my work if my master would allow me to be away from them on that day.'²¹

Cox worked hard for the Bath Sunday School Union, formed by 'Baptists, Methodists, Independents, and Lady Huntingdon's people', and as a Sunday School teacher was active in founding schools at Radstock, Limpley Stoke, and Bath: Vineyards, Rush Hill, Tynning Lane, Guinea Lane, Bedford Street, Avon Street, and the Baptist school in Milk Street. It wasn't until 1812 that he attended a baptismal service and felt called to follow the example himself. From this time, as a Baptist, he felt that his duty was among the poor, and was called 'to speak to poor sinners, in the city, and elsewhere, in Avon Street, Milk Street, Bath Quay, Little Corn Street, Gibb's Court, Mark's Hill, Snow Hill, Larkhall, Upper and Lower Bristol Road, Holloway, Dolemeads' and other places. In all, his Christian concern and sympathy extended to 'many whom neither dissenting nor Church agencies effectually reached', who lived in these neglected parts of Bath. Concerned with the spiritual and physical condition of those he encountered, Cox became active in the reform movement, fighting with those who were striving for the abolition of the Corn Laws and seeking religious equality, associated with Chartists, and worked hard to sustain the Peace Society.

George Cox, the Master Hatter of Stall Street, became a popular hero; he spoke with modesty, and conscientiously advocated temperance among 'so many homes where poverty, and misery, and crime, were to be traced to strong drink.' At a public meeting in 1859 those gathered heard the testimony of Dr Tunstall, a local Anglican clergyman:

Mr Cox has won the admiration of his fellow citizens because he has shown them an example of virtue and integrity; and though some of the good seed he has in his life time scattered, has fallen among thorns, much of it has descended into good ground, and must bring forth fruit. A man's deeds do not rest with the generation in which he lives, because it is impossible to rescue a man from vice without the better feeling generated in his breast, descending to his successors, and thus a grandchild is blessed by a grandfather's reforms.²²

He died on January 1st, 1861, and his funeral procession was witnessed by thousands who lined the roads between Stall Street and the Baptist burial ground on Lyncombe Hill. And such was 'Bishop' Cox's popularity that a public memorial was erected by his fellow citizens in St James's burial ground on Lower Borough Walls, 'to mark their sense of his self-denying and unwearied labours for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the poor in this city, for more than fifty years'. That memorial is now gone, but his headstone remains to remind us in these days of the debt we owe to people such as this in the past! But for how long?

BURIED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

The Baptist burial ground at Walcot has long since disappeared. It became full early in the nineteenth century, and used for a variety of purposes including as a coach yard. By the mid twentieth century the surrounding tenements had become quite derelict; and in 1949 the land 'at rear of Myrtle Place, used as garages and storage space - formerly disused burial ground' became subject to a Clearance Order on grounds of health under the 1936 Housing Act, and the ground was purchased from the Baptist trustees and cleared.²³ Since that time the Snow Hill development has changed the shape of the site; but its approximate location can be identified on and to the west of the ground now occupied by Walcot Church Hall, with its western end covered by the much realigned access to Snow Hill from the London Road.

Only the Baptist burial ground at Lyncombe Hill remains. For many years the Baptist Church in Bath, since 1872 moved from Somerset Street to Manvers Street, had tried to find other uses for it, including several attempts to persuade the City Council to take over ownership. Maintenance had become difficult, and the necessary additional cost of removing human remains prohibitive. Various suggestions were made for recreation, carparking, and building on the disused ground; and it was the City Council's view that the site could make a suitable small park.²⁴ The Council's refusal to purchase the site, and their rejection of an application to build sheltered housing, led to the Secretary of State for the Environment calling for a public inquiry. This was itself halted at the last moment, when it was concluded that 'the council will buy the overgrown land which does not appear to be of much use to anyone following past decisions.'²⁵ This did not happen and it is only recently that ownership of the ground has been transferred to The Bath Preservation Trust who aim to maintain the ground as a garden: a peaceful

haven for man and nature together!

NOTES

- 1 Josiah Thompson, *Protestant Dissenting Congregations*, Vol.IV [MS.38.10], f.17, Dr Williams's Library, London. I am grateful to the Librarian for references from manuscripts in the Library's care.
- 2 John Silas Merritt, *A Complete History of Old King Street Baptist Church, Bristol*, early twentieth-century MS, Cairns Road Baptist Church, Bristol, pp.68-70.
- 3 Sidney S. Hall and Harry Mowley, *Tradition and Challenge: The Story of Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol from 1685 to 1991*, Bristol 1991, p.27.
- 4 *The Case of the Baptist Church meeting in Somerset Street, Bath, 1829*, pp.1-5. For a fuller account of Bath Baptists, consult K. J. Birch, *The Baptists of Bath, 1752-1851*, 1986, MS in Bath Central Library.
- 5 I am grateful to Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath, for access to their eighteenth and nineteenth-century records.
- 6 Public Record Office, London, RG4/1790. For Baptist registers and records held in PRO see G. R. Breed, *My Ancestors were Baptists*, Society of Genealogists, 1986, revised 1988.
- 7 Somerset County Record Office, Taunton, Q/RRW 1.
- 8 Walter Wilson, *Account of Various Congregations*, Vol.1 [MS I.1], ff.98-101, Dr Williams's Library.
- 9 Mary Ede, *The Chapel in Argyle Street, Bath 1789-1989*, Bath 1989, p.9.
- 10 Norman Moon, *Education for Ministry: Bristol Baptist College 1679-1979*, Bristol 1979, p.15; Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 1986, p.118.
- 11 John Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register*, Vol.I, 1790-1793, p.142.
- 12 For further information on the rather complicated story of their retail and manufacturing businesses, see Trevor Fawcett, 'Eighteenth-Century Shops and the Luxury Trade', *Bath History*, Vol.III, Bath 1990, pp.68-70.
- 13 Philip Cater, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the late Rev. John Paul Porter*, Bath 1834, pp.81, 85.
- 14 *Bath and Wilts Evening Chronicle*, 26 February 1970: Letter to editor: Peter Coard, *Vanishing Bath*, Part Three, Bath 1972, pp.5, 62.
- 15 *ibid.*, 24 February 1970.
- 16 In 1963 the number was recorded as fifty.
- 17 *Baptist Magazine*, Vol.I, 1809, p.27; Philip Cater, *op.cit.*, pp.106-8, 111.
- 18 Bernard L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, Epworth 1942; reissued 1988, p.125. This verse has long since dropped from use!
- 19 *Baptist Magazine*, Vol.XXXV, 1833, p.288; Philip Cater, *op.cit.*, pp.157-8.
- 20 *Baptist Handbook*, 1874, p.296; *Bath Herald*, 25 June 1917, and 30 September 1922. It is interesting that in 1917 the writer used 'passive resistance' language, which would then have been appropriate for John Clifford and others, to describe David Wassell in an earlier generation.
- 21 David Wassell, *Doing Good: A Brief Memoir of the late Mr George Cox*, Bath 1862, pp.17-40.
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 Bath City Record Office: Records of 'Clearance under Housing Act 1936, on grounds of health, of Snow Hill No.2 Area, 1949-51'.
- 24 Bath City Council, *Saving Bath: A Programme for Conservation*, Bath 1978, p.97.
- 25 *Bath Evening Chronicle*, 18 July 1981.

KERRY J. BIRCH *Student, Bristol Baptist College*

Society News: During the 1997 Baptist Assembly, the Revd Bernard Green will give a talk following publication of his biography of J. H. Rushbrooke on 1 February 1997. The Society's Annual General Meeting will be on 28 June 1997 at St Andrew's Hall, Selly Oak, Birmingham; lecturers Revd Dr Nigel Wright, Mr J. H. Y. Briggs.

Graham Hughes, Secretary of this Society 1947-56 and a former editor of the *Baptist Quarterly*, died recently. We give thanks for a life of Christian service.