

## A CHILIASM OF DESPAIR? The community worshipping at St George's Road Baptist Chapel, Manchester<sup>1</sup>

The urban chapel of the early nineteenth century was famously characterized by E.P. Thompson as generating a 'chiliasm of despair': a black box for the soul of the working class.<sup>2</sup> Yet Thompson's devastating critique of nonconformity in general, and Methodism in particular, does not sit easily with the prolific growth and colourful community life of many chapels during this period. The example of St George's Road Baptist Chapel situated in Manchester - the shock city of the Industrial Revolution - provides an interesting case study that helps to undermine Thompson's theory. Its interest stems not only from the socio-economic profile of this congregation which was slanted dramatically towards the working class, but also from its dramatic growth during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Part of the appeal of this chapel was that it provided both a community centre and some education for workers. However (a point often overlooked when analysing nonconformity without using local studies), the crucial role was that played by William Gadsby, its maverick pastor from 1805 to 1844. In a nonconformist world that might appear to provide drab entertainment in the eyes of the modern historian, 'eloquence was the supreme delight . . . preachers were the main stars'.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his eloquent preaching, Gadsby's working-class background, charismatic personality and, intriguingly, High Calvinist theology all contributed to the forging of a flourishing working-class community at his chapel.

Like so many tales of nonconformist expansion, the growth of the St George's Road church was uncomfortably twinned with division. Gadsby's son proudly recalls that his father's first sermon at Manchester caused 'an uproar among the Fullerites in Manchester they had not heard before',<sup>4</sup> and his arrival as pastor in October 1805 created a split at the chapel. From this emerged the Baptist chapel in York Street, which joined the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association of Particular Baptist Churches at approximately the same time as Gadsby's chapel left. This freed St George's Road chapel from any church organizations - and the church vigorously asserted its independence, showing great caution to 'Arminian' Methodists, the Established Church and 'mongrel' Calvinists who diluted the message of High Calvinism. This attitude is seen in the chapel's strict communion, that is its policy of refusing communion to members of other Manchester nonconformist chapels, including those that practised believer's baptism. Yet this did not inhibit expansion: the chaotic records of births are unreliable, but a huge rise from seven recorded births in 1790 to twenty-three in 1815 suggests exponential increases in the chapel population.<sup>5</sup> Precise numbers within the congregation are difficult to gauge, as church records reveal only the number of baptized church members and, given the emphasis on a depth of 'experience' prior to baptism, these figures are just the tip of an iceberg. It seems safe to assume a ratio as high as four 'hearers' (i.e.

members of the congregation) to every one baptized church member. The number of these church members rose from 107 at the start of 1807 to 287 during 1840-43.<sup>6</sup> However, both the need for a larger chapel (seen in an extension of 1807 and a new building of the early 1820s), and a report of the Christmas service in the *Anti-Corn Law Circular*, suggest a congregation of well over a thousand.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, these figures of apparently unstoppable growth mask much division - ironically, the first major 'split' of 1823-4 centred on the need for a new chapel: the storm was heralded when voting church members divided 108 for a new chapel, 63 in opposition, and on 3 October 1823 two deacons, Mr Greenhough and Mr Gracraft, resigned along with thirty-five members.<sup>8</sup> The second schism in 1843 was a little more complex. It centred on a group within the chapel who had become increasingly dissatisfied with a pastor who was growing old and was frequently absent. Gadsby's annual preaching visit to London and the provocative influence of the visiting minister, James Wells, provided the occasion for division. Yet despite these schisms the general picture is one of growth. 'Recruitment' to the chapel was not only from the ranks of the irreligious but also, given the fluid congregations of nonconformist culture, from other chapels. And it is interesting to note that conversion imagery is used not only to describe the transformation from non-belief to Christianity but also to describe changes of chapel within one denomination. 'W.T.' provides a classic example of this process:

I was a free-willer till quickened by grace,  
By God's Holy Spirit set in my right place,  
To bend to his sceptre, acknowledge his might.<sup>9</sup>

In itself this is an eloquent tribute to the differences Gadsby's followers perceived between themselves and most other nonconformists.

This leads to a discussion of who these figures were who made up the numbers in Gadsby's congregation. Analysis of this now largely forgotten community 'gathered' around Gadsby's beliefs is necessarily limited. Two generalizations can be drawn from church records, the memoir of Gadsby and obituaries in religious magazines: first, Gadsby attracted a congregation from a large catchment area; second, as has already been seen, the congregation tended to be drawn from the poorer, although not entirely destitute, members of society - a statement particularly applicable to the first half of Gadsby's thirty-eight years at Manchester. Often long journeys to the Sunday services were entirely on foot - William Cowshill 'frequently walked a round trip of 28 miles to hear William Gadsby', Mrs Lawton walked from Oldham, James Whitaker from Stockport, Richard Lord from Bury, Hannah Dyson from Glossop, and a number travelled from Hollinwood, five miles from the chapel.<sup>10</sup> In May 1816 Maria Morton and Mary Hobson were excused from attendance at midweek church meetings 'on account of them living at a distance of nine miles from here'.<sup>11</sup>

A socio-economic profile of the congregation shows a relatively high proportion of working-class members, even for a nonconformist chapel,<sup>12</sup> and in particular a

large number of handloom weavers. Those living in Manchester usually came from the poorer districts of town - such as John Jones and family of No.10 Booth Street, or Thomas and Maria Hepworth of No.6 Jersey Street, Ancoats Lane.<sup>13</sup> That many of these were handloom weavers can be seen from a wry comment Gadsby made on reading Psalm 127.4-5 ('Lo, children are an heritage from the Lord . . .'), looking up from the pulpit Bible he stated that there were 'no handloom weavers in those days'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Gadsby's two most influential protégés within the Gospel Standard denomination, John Warburton, the first person Gadsby baptized at Manchester and later the eccentric pastor at Trowbridge, and John Kershaw, baptized by Gadsby in 1809 and pastor at Rochdale for over fifty years, were both handloom weavers,<sup>15</sup> as were inconspicuous figures like William and Elisabeth Brown 'of Fallowfield' and Humphrey Chapman, 'a weaver of Clifton in the parish of Eccles'.<sup>16</sup> At the church Gadsby founded in Rochdale, no fewer than twenty-six of the first thirty-six fathers to be recorded in the register of births were described as 'weavers', and two of the remaining ten worked as spinners.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1830s, however, there must have been fewer exponents of this dying employment associated with Gadsby: in 1836 a mere 3,192 out of 170,000 inhabitants of Manchester were engaged in this activity.<sup>18</sup> And, even during the early period of the pastorate there had been a variety of 'working class' trades represented, such as the deacon, George Greenhough, who was apprenticed to a currier and leather dresser at the age of thirteen, 'suffering much from hard labour and severe deprivations',<sup>19</sup> and the 'pattern drawer', Charles Kenworth.<sup>20</sup> The impoverished nature of the congregation is also seen in the number of emigrations recorded, such as James and Phebe Hamer, who left Liverpool for the USA in July 1829,<sup>21</sup> Mr and Mrs William Lee who resigned their membership in January 1824 to emigrate, and, of a higher class, William Rondeau (1779-1852), a struggling lawyer, who left for the USA in 1819, and later became one of America's most famous 'backwood preachers'.<sup>22</sup> Emigration levels illustrate the point that, although this was a working-class community, the members were not so much the 'defeated and hopeless', but rather those wishing to carve a niche of respectability for themselves; thus the presence of handloom weavers reminiscing on a past 'golden age', and those struggling but with enough initiative and capital to attempt a new life on the alluring shores of America. The example of Rondeau also illustrates the point that the congregation at St George's Road was not entirely drawn from the 'labouring poor' - but included a man living in the relative affluence of No.6 Tasole Street and with the means to have a surgeon present at the birth of his child.<sup>23</sup> From the start of the pastorate there had been characters such as the business man, William Mouncey ('a man of business . . . greatly esteemed in the sphere he moved in, the mercantile world'<sup>24</sup>), who helped to support the church financially, and the congregation perhaps became increasingly affluent. This is seen in the 1830s by men such as the pastor's son, John Gadsby, a rapidly expanding printer, and in the 1840s by the surgeon, William Smith. A type of small-scale

welfare state can be seen to have emerged in many nonconformist chapels as a result of these affluent members of the congregation. At St George's Road, attempts were made to ease suffering during the periodical trade depressions: for example, on 3 November 1826 it was 'agreed by the members present that three pews on each side of the chapel and those on either side of the pulpit be appropriated for the use of the Poor as free sittings'.<sup>25</sup> A special church meeting held on behalf of the poor on 1 November 1839 'agreed that the widows and poor female friends connected with the chapel have dresses provided', whilst on 'the first Lord's Day in 1840' a collection was arranged for the distressed which subsequently raised £30.

The socio-economic profile of this congregation was complex, but slanted heavily towards the working class. One of the more straightforward generalizations about the congregation that can safely be made throughout the period is with regard to gender. Women appear to have outnumbered men. They were amongst Gadsby's most devoted followers, as seen in examples such as Hannah Dyson, who earned a living on her parents' smallholding and travelled by coach from Glossop prior to Gadsby's opening of a chapel in Charlesworth, and Margaret Bates, a 'follower and hearer of Mr Gadsby'.<sup>26</sup> It would probably be unhelpful to read too much into this fact. Gadsby made no attempt to 'court' a female congregation, females played no role in church leadership, and a relatively high female church attendance is a perennial pattern that appears to tease historians across most periods of history.

Any explanation of why St George's Road proved to be so appealing must be based on its colourful pastor, William Gadsby. His remarkable popularity can probably be gauged by the number of sons in the congregation named 'William' (admittedly a popular name), including the Probock family who took it a stage further, calling a son 'William Gadsby Probock' and a daughter 'Elizabeth Gadsby Probock'.<sup>27</sup> Amongst the now largely obscured communities of industrial Lancashire, William Gadsby's name was once a 'household word',<sup>28</sup> and to the historian, Clyde Binfield, he was theologically 'no less important in his own way than Butterworth or Bunyan, Franklin or Andrew Fuller'.<sup>29</sup> Born into a nonconformist family in Attleborough, Warwickshire, during January 1773, he received very little education and was apprenticed to a ribbon weaver at the age of thirteen. It was not until after his retirement from ribbon weaving due to ill health in 1795, his move to Hinckley, and especially the start of a prosperous drapery business in 1802 that Gadsby began to gain social 'respectability'. Yet, despite being born outside Lancashire and his relative affluence (seen in both his large pastoral wage, £125 per annum in 1805, and the large sums left in his will<sup>30</sup>), he maintained a close affinity with the workers, consciously adopting the role of the ex-ribbon weaver. He was in the mould of minister that Beatrice Webb described as the 'old fashioned type' - 'called of God from among the people, no more educated than his fellows but rising to leadership by force of character'.<sup>31</sup> In a sympathetic letter during the depression of 1842 he wrote, 'I know what poverty is, for I have been so poor as to feel grateful for twopence'.<sup>32</sup> His 'praiseworthy exertions for

the poor of the town' and involvement in Manchester's radical politics, partially motivated by the socio-economic profile of his congregation, also probably contributed to his appeal.<sup>33</sup>

This appeal is made more intriguing by the fact that he preached a traditional High Calvinism - emphasizing God's sovereignty and the predestination of the elect, with strong denunciations against those who tried to water down a doctrine that some found unpalatable. Robert Halley, Gadsby's contemporary in Manchester, as both a fellow Dissenter and Corn Law opponent, argued that, whilst 'he seemed to be a preacher made on purpose for the working classes', this was not due to his Calvinistic theology.<sup>34</sup> Ward, in contrast, claims that Gadsby provided 'a last-ditch defence of the poorest of the denomination, a proclamation of their acceptance before God irrespective of all worldly considerations'.<sup>35</sup> Whilst this is a little oversimplified, his High Calvinism did have an attraction to the poorest section of Lancastrian society. First, it was a simple creed, lacking the subtleties and complexities of a more 'moderate' Calvinist theology. In the confusing nonconformist world of Sandemanians and Swedenborgians, Moravians and Muggletonians, a man who spoke in straightforward, even stark, language had an attraction. One member of his congregation used an analogy from the business world to contrast the preaching of Gadsby and the local 'parson': 'Sometimes our parson wholesales it and we poor folk cannot go to a wholesale shop; it suits me to have it retailed out, for these are the shops we poor people can go to.'<sup>36</sup> Secondly, Gadsby's belief in election left little place for social stratification: among God's chosen there were neither 'Barbarian or Scythian, bond or free'; Gadsby continually emphasized equality, even to the extent of providing seats for those who could not afford pew rents. Thirdly, it was a theology that provided consolation for social suffering, arguing that all circumstances worked together for the good of God's children and teaching the care of a Providential God for his elect. Across almost every page of Gadsby's *Memoir* and in autobiographies of his congregation, such as John Warburton's *Mercies of a Covenant God*,<sup>37</sup> the Almighty directly intervenes in the concerns of his children: providing for them in financial difficulty, and offering protection from enemies. Gadsby developed the theme in a letter to a 'dear friend in the House of the Lord', writing 'remember the dear Lord was poor before you, and in the riches of his grace has made you, in the best sense, rich through his poverty and you will find him One that will be a very present help in trouble'.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in its emphasis on a despised, 'peculiar' people, Gadsby's theology not only consoled but almost glorified the marginalized in society:

Lord, pity outcasts, vile and base,  
The poor dependants on thy grace  
Whom men disturbers call.<sup>39</sup>

Fourthly, as in most nonconformist congregations, the Bible had a degree of appeal, especially when vividly interpreted by Gadsby and couched in rural metaphors that perhaps had an added weight amongst the squalor of Manchester, as did the

character of Jesus, 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief', who provided salvation in this unpleasant world and immortal life beyond this 'vale of tears'.

Nevertheless, it was the actual presentation of this message that was perhaps the most important factor in attracting massed congregations. Even his somewhat turgid theological pamphlets often attempted a degree of popular appeal through recourse to Bunyanesque figures discussing the issue in question. In particular, this popular approach is seen in his oratory: an uncommon mix, as Chadwick observed, of quaint humour and stern language.<sup>40</sup> The local press commented on this preaching style: 'although marked by some eccentricities' it combined 'the fervour of deep devotion' with 'an original intellect', 'clearness of illustration' and an 'earnest tone'. One of the obituaries appearing on Gadsby's death in 1844 wryly commented that the gospel of peace had produced 'sons of thunder' as preachers, as well as 'sons of consolation'.<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly, his followers commented on this oratory. 'Ah,' stated an old man from Clayton West, 'if you had but heard that voice of his rolling like peals of thunder, and seen those eyes of his like balls of fire piercing through the congregation, you would never have forgotten it as long as you lived'.<sup>42</sup> There did seem to be a curious power behind his eccentric wit, his terse sentences and pointed questions. When preaching at Langton, such was his effect upon one member of the congregation that he 'had to put my hands up to my mouth to stop me shouting I was so full',<sup>43</sup> and according to one report of an open-air baptism at Blackburn in 1819 amongst a noisy crowd, 'Mr Gadsby got on one of the knolls in the field and with his powerful voice called out, "In the Name of the Lord God of Israel, I command silence!" It went like an electric shock through the whole multitude, and all was still while the ordinance was being administered'.<sup>44</sup> His political speeches must have been in a similar vein, with near demagogic effect - short sentences, a type of 'folk' wisdom coupled with biting wit, sharp rhetorical questions and all the moral indignation of an Old Testament prophet. It was after one such address, directed against the Corn Laws and delivered to an unruly, packed Town Hall in December 1839, that Cobden admiringly commented, 'after such an address from Mr Gadsby I can hardly venture to bring your thoughts down . . .'<sup>45</sup>

However, in addition to the charisma of the pastor, the site of the chapel aided the growth of a large working-class community. The chapel was placed in St George's Road (later to become Rochdale Road, one of the main arterial routes out of central Manchester) amongst the peripheral ring of labouring dwellings, outside the centre of the town with its bastions of the establishment in the modern Corn Exchange and ancient Collegiate Church. With its massed congregational singing, short prayers, powerful oratory and, after 1824, flourishing Sunday school, the chapel provided a direct, entertaining alternative to the pub culture in a 'poor quarter of town' where one was 'jostled by a crowd of loiterers'.<sup>46</sup> The services were in the Puritan mould, simple and unadorned, conducted in a building which possessed 'nothing peculiarly worthy of notice either internally or externally', and yet they drew the working class.<sup>47</sup> Beyond Gadsby's preaching, unaccompanied

congregational singing - a musical epitome of community life - would have a certain attraction. Despite having nothing but a pitch-pipe to start the hymns, St George's Road was one of the numerous Lancastrian chapels that gained fame for their musical accomplishments: throughout the nineteenth century Lancashire chapels were seen as recruiting grounds for operatic impresarios. Services were not just limited to Sundays: there were prayer gatherings every week, and during the anti-Corn Law campaign political meetings were held on weekday nights. Nor was community life simply confined to the service: books and pamphlets were sold in the vestry, a library was provided and New Year's Day was spent, at least partially, at the chapel. Church meetings to discuss chapel affairs were regularly organized: a taste of democracy as the members voted on issues such as expenditure, inviting visiting ministers and, most importantly of all, whether a person was suitable to be baptized and hence to become a church member. The nonconformist chapel educated workers in self-government: 'a self governing community regulating not only chapel matters but overlooking the private life of its members'.<sup>48</sup> Thus the chapel provided a community focus in urban districts where there were few alternatives to the disreputable practice of drinking. 'It took, by itself, the place now hardly filled by theatre, concert-hall, cinema, ballroom and circulating library put together. Here were all things required for social intercourse: recitals, songs, lectures with or without the lantern, authorised games, and talk. It was a liberal education'.<sup>49</sup> Gadsby was fully aware of this, continually juxtaposing his own viewpoint against popular culture; thus at the end of one Sunday evening, he proclaimed that 'next Sunday being race Sunday I shall preach a racy sermon', and subsequently preached on the horses of Revelation 6.<sup>50</sup> Yet, whilst this contrast of 'chapel' and 'popular' culture is crucial to understanding its appeal, the impact of the chapel's situation can be exaggerated: not only because this was increasingly an Irish Catholic community (the chapel windows were smashed and Gadsby was threatened when he strongly opposed Catholic Emancipation) but also because Gadsby attracted 'hearers' from a large catchment area.

This process of constructing this largely working-class chapel community was hardly an unintentional process, despite the oft-made claim that there was a 'hyper-Calvinist' aversion to the spreading of their message. One point that is often overlooked is the distinction between 'hearers' and 'members'. The core of membership was relatively small and it was to a floating constituency of 'hearers', sometimes drawn by little else other than curiosity, that sermons were often addressed.<sup>51</sup> When 'converted', the path from being a 'hearer' to becoming a member who received communion at the 'Lord's Supper' was through the 'watery path' of adult baptism. Nevertheless, Gadsby was also active in the local community publishing tracts such as *What is it that saves a soul?* and *A Christmas box for children*, which stated his views in direct language. Some, such as *A New Year's Gift for the Seed Royal*, were deliberately aimed at the working audience. However, the attempt to propagate his message is best seen in his support for

Sunday Schools - 'one of the best institutions in the kingdom'.<sup>52</sup> Whilst the tracts were of a theological substance, the Sunday School also allowed him to promote the political gospel of self-improvement. Thus, the St George's Road Sunday School Teacher's Friendly Society, created in 1836, aimed 'to do all in their power to encourage poor, destitute children to partake of the advantages enjoyed in the Sunday school', providing 'clogs, shoes, stocking and other articles'.<sup>53</sup> Attendance by the poorer members of society was important because Gadsby, in *A Few Thoughts upon the Utility of Sunday Schools*, based his support for these institutions on the 'respectability' that they offered the working class, anticipating Laqueur's arguments that they imbued 'honesty, orderliness, punctuality, hard work and refinement of manners' and divided the idle from the non-idle classes.<sup>54</sup> This was very far removed from Thompson's fierce denunciation of 'psychological atrocities committed on children'.<sup>55</sup> Sunday Schools not only provided a means of disseminating his theological viewpoint through Bible reading, 'it is incumbent upon us to teach children the truths of God . . . and leave the event in the hands of the Lord, who alone can make his truth manifest in the conscience', but also offered social salvation, 'a means of saving the rising generation from that degradation into which they otherwise would have sunk'.<sup>56</sup> The Sunday School at St George's Road was founded in June 1824, and started with ninety-four 'scholars'. The success of the scheme can be gauged by the Sunday School Committee's decision in January 1825 to buy a plot of land, and a subsequent enlargement to the building in 1842. Like many Sunday Schools, it became an added attraction to chapel life - a social centre for adults as well as children through events such as the 'Whitsun Treat', Sunday meetings and the provision of a well-stocked library.<sup>57</sup>

The disciplining of church members might seem to be a rather unpleasant aspect of this community's life, yet even in this the members of the chapel were self-regulating. There was no aspect of the life of a member that was not implicated in his commitment to membership.<sup>58</sup> Regulation of behaviour was probably not too difficult in the crowded living conditions of Manchester, especially when the sin was a very public one such as drinking. Discipline was strictly enforced and, of the 224 members between mid-1817 and 1820, sixteen were excluded for various offences. Occasionally the issue at stake was theological. Hart gives an example of a man who was 'admitted' to church membership but 'he imbibed what Mr Gadsby calls Sandemanian sentiments, and they cut him off'.<sup>59</sup> However, the most common cause tended to be an issue that Gadsby was increasingly concerned about - alcohol abuse. It was often said that 'drink is the quickest way out of Manchester'. It also provided the quickest route out of Gadsby's church. Virtually every month in the 1830s men (for this was predominantly, though not entirely, a male offence) such as John Hopkinson (27 February 1835) and Peter Chapman (2 August 1839) were 'separated for intoxication', or in John Roberts's case for 'selling beer on a Lord's Day' (4 March 1831).<sup>60</sup> A strong opposition to the Church of England is seen in an example such as Sarah Halliday's suspension (February 1827) for 'christening her



child at the established church'.<sup>61</sup> Marital problems were likely to result in a similar penalty, and husbands beating their wives could expect expulsion, which was also the punishment meted out to Catherine Birch in July 1822 for 'frequently striking her husband in a very improper manner'.<sup>62</sup>

Discipline for political extremism rarely features in the church minutes. In September 1815, however, William Derbyshire was asked to leave 'the society called Odd Fellows',<sup>63</sup> whilst a sermon by MacKenzie in a rather vague fashion describes how Gadsby had openly criticized a 'sin' commonplace within the congregation and, whilst most repented, 'another went out of the place and he became an Owenite'.<sup>64</sup> For those wishing to remain more orthodox in their politics the chapel was an ideal forum. For example, after Sir Oswald Mosley's grant of lands for the Manchester Public Infirmary during the summer of 1808, a collection in April 1809 raised £8-12s-3¾d for this cause.<sup>65</sup> The tone of political involvement became increasingly radical. In July 1811, money was paid for two parchments to petition parliament - probably, although the accounts give no specific details, as part of the campaign against the Sidmouth Bill.<sup>66</sup> Other causes that the chapel supported included the Protestant Dissenters' Society, giving donations of £6 in 1811 and £3 in 1812.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, by the late 1830s and 1840s the primary political issue for the chapel was Corn Law repeal. After one weeknight sermon by Gadsby on 13 April 1841, condemning the corn laws, 'a congregational petition was laid on the table, and numerous signed'.<sup>68</sup> Later in the same year, after the 'day of prayer' on 6 September, Gadsby both preached an anti-Corn Law sermon and founded 'The St George's Road Anti-Corn Law Association', which denounced an 'unjust and unscriptural, demoralizing and inhumane' law; Gadsby heads the list of subscribers with a £1 donation.<sup>69</sup> The crusade against the Corn Law even filtered down into the Sunday School. At the annual recitation in 1839 one boy said a poem named 'Cotton and Corn - a Dialogue', which ended with an overtly political verse:

And possibly, friends, you'll agree,  
That corn has been up long enough;  
And to say that trade shall not be free  
Is all a vile parcel of stuff.<sup>70</sup>

It was Sunday Schools like that at St George's Road which caused an irate *Manchester Chronicle* to claim that League petitions gained numbers by having 'signatures hawked for in the Sunday Schools and mere children directed by their teachers to sign in crowds'.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps above all, the chapel provided a meeting place for those involved in the nether world of radical politics, especially in the period directly after the Napoleonic Wars. William Gadsby preached at the Hampden Club in Middleton, approximately five miles north of Manchester,<sup>72</sup> and the Middleton members of Gadsby's congregation were heavily involved with Samuel Bamford's activity. Bamford was a leading Lancashire Radical living in Middleton; he played an active role at Peterloo (1817) and in the formation of local Hampden Clubs, but is best known for

his classic autobiography, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*. Ralph Ashton gives the example of 'Mr and Mrs T.S.' who, living in a lonely house in Coal Pit Lane, Alkington, placed their house at the disposal of Samuel Bamford as it provided a good route of escape from the authorities.<sup>73</sup> Mr T.S. is presumably Thomas Spencer who was one of the eight members who resigned their membership at St George's Road to form a new church in Bamford's Middleton in 1819.

The chapel, rather than enticing the working class away from political involvement, provided a natural setting in which political issues could more successfully be adopted. The primary aim of the chapel was to give religious instruction, and this was attractive enough to draw large numbers to the services every week. However, the chapel also became the focal point for a whole range of activities such as political involvement and the opportunity for education through the Sunday School. It was one of the few institutions in which workers could take an active, democratic part in decision-making, with provisions being made for the poorer members of the congregation.

Thus conclusions to be drawn from the life of the working-class community based around St George's Road Baptist Chapel contradict the arguments that Thompson puts forward in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Rather than trapping the working class, the chapel provided a forum for community life and education. It is little wonder that a charismatic personality with the speaking abilities of William Gadsby managed to attract large numbers of hearers to fill his chapel. It is this colour and life emerging from the local study which helps to undermine the negative image of the nineteenth-century chapel.

## NOTES

- 1 The author thanks Professor Brian Harrison and Mr B. A. Ramsbottom for their helpful advice on the subject of this article.
- 2 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1982 edn, p.411.
- 3 W.J. Dawson, *Autobiography of a Mind*, 1925, p.48; J. Obelkevish, *Religion and Rural Society*, 1976, p.212.
- 4 J. Gadsby, *Memoir of William Gadsby*, 2nd edn 1870, p.32. 'Fullerism' refers to the 'moderate' Calvinism taught by Andrew Fuller (1754-1815). Gadsby was a strong believer in traditional High Calvinism. See W.R. Ward, 'The Baptists and the transformation of the Church, 1780-1830', *BQ* 25, October 1973.
- 5 The Baptist Register, St George's Road, Manchester. Public Record Office RG 4/2692.
- 6 St George's Road Church Books: 1807-17, 1817-37, 1837-61.
- 7 *The Anti-Corn Law Circular*, 31 December 1839.
- 8 St George's Road Church Book, 1817-37.
- 9 *Gospel Standard*, January 1837, p.37. I have not been able to trace 'W.T.' but he was clearly a follower of Gadsby.
- 10 *Gospel Standard*, June 1888, p.279; April 1881, p.193; February 1870, p.101; November 1870, pp.433-4; September 1872, p.392; June 1887, p.271.
- 11 St George's Road Church Book, 1807-17.
- 12 The socio-economic profile is not dissimilar to that painstakingly put together by C.J. Radcliffe for Prospect Place New Connexion Chapel, Bradford. See J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 1994, p.271.
- 13 Baptist Register, St George's Road, Manchester. Public Record Office RG 4/2692.
- 14 Ralph Ashton, *Manchester and the Early Baptists*, 1916, p.37.
- 15 J. Warburton, *Mercies of a Covenant God*, 1837, and J. Kershaw, *Memorials of the mercies of a Covenant God*, 2nd edn, 1870.
- 16 Baptist Register, St George's Road, *op. cit.*

- 17 Register of Births and Baptisms, Hope Chapel, Rochdale. Public Record Office RG 4/1331.
- 18 D. Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers: A Study in the English Cotton Industry*, 1969, p.57.
- 19 *Gospel Magazine*, 1842, p.182.
- 20 Baptist Register, St George's Road, *op.cit.*
- 21 *Gospel Standard*, October 1858, pp.309-17.
- 22 St George's Road Church Book, 1817-37.
- 23 Baptist Register, St George's Road, *op.cit.*
- 24 J. Gadsby, *The Works of the Late William Gadsby*, 1851, p.99.
- 25 St George's Road Church Book, 1817-37.
- 26 *Gospel Standard*, September 1872, pp.390-2; June 1872, p.261.
- 27 Baptist Register, St George's Road, *op.cit.* Examples of parents naming their son 'William' include the Wilde, Hepworth, Darbyshire, Fletcher, Matsey and Goodfellow families.
- 28 Claim made in *Manchester City News*, 13 April 1907.
- 29 *BQ* 26, July 1975, p.124.
- 30 *William Gadsby's Last Will and Testament*, Lancashire Record Office.
- 31 B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, 1950 edn, p.146, writing about another Lancashire town, Bacup.
- 32 *Gospel Standard*, July 1843, p.218.
- 33 *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 December 1826. The local secular press is a rich source of information on Gadsby, but is more useful in revealing information about his radical politics than the community at St George's Road Chapel.
- 34 Robert Halley, *Lancashire: Its Puritanism and Nonconformity*, Vol.II, 1872, p.484.
- 35 W.R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England 1790-1850*, 1972, p.73.
- 36 J. Gadsby, *Memoir of William Gadsby*, 1870, p.107.
- 37 J. Warburton, *Mercies of a Covenant God*, 1837.
- 38 *Gospel Standard*, July 1843, p.218.
- 39 *Gadsby's Selection of Hymns*, 1965 edn, no.233, p.184.
- 40 O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part I, 1966, p.415.
- 41 *Manchester Times and Lancashire and Cheshire Examiner*, 26 September 1840; 3 February 1844.
- 42 *Christian's Monthly Record*, June 1891, p.145.
- 43 *Gospel Standard*, July 1876, p.305.
- 44 *ibid.*, June 1886, p.270.
- 45 *Anti-Corn Law Circular*, 24 December 1839.
- 46 Leon Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: Its Present Condition and Future Prospects*, 1844, footnote on p.28.
- 47 *New Manchester Guide Book*, 1815, p.133. This chapel, inherited by Gadsby in 1805, was removed in 1823 to make room for a bigger building.
- 48 *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, Vol.I, 1978, p.19.
- 49 E.E. Kellett, *As I Remember*, 1936, p.121. I am indebted to Professor Brian Harrison for this quotation.
- 50 H. Watmuff, *Some Elegiac Thoughts on the Departure of William Gadsby*, 1844, p.13.
- 51 For a discussion in the South Wales context see E.T. Davies, *Religion in the Industrial Revolution in South Wales*, 1965, p.151.
- 52 J. Gadsby, *The Works of the Late William Gadsby*, Vol.II, 1851, p.305.
- 53 *Gospel Standard*, February 1836, wrapper.
- 54 T.W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture*, 1976, p.239.
- 55 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1982 edn, p.414.
- 56 J. Gadsby, *The Works of the Late William Gadsby*, Vol.II, 1851, pp.308, 305-6.
- 57 R. Ashton, *Manchester and the Early Baptists*, 1916, pp.94-5. This library seems to have been destroyed during World War II: a disaster for historians of this church.
- 58 A point discussed in A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, 1976, p.87.
- 59 H. Hart, *Antinomianism Dissected*, 1823, p.49.
- 60 St George's Road Church Books, 1817-37, 1837-61.
- 61 St George's Road Church Books, 1817-37.
- 62 *ibid.*
- 63 *ibid.*, 1807-1817.
- 64 *Gospel Standard*, July 1837, p.264.
- 65 St George's Road Account Book.
- 66 *ibid.*
- 67 *ibid.*
- 68 *The Anti-Bread Tax Circular*, 21 April 1841.
- 69 *ibid.*, 9 September 1841.
- 70 *ibid.*, 31 December 1839.
- 71 *Manchester Chronicle and Salford Standard*, 11 April 1840.
- 72 S. Bamford, 'An Account of the Arrest and Imprisonment of Samuel Bamford, Middleton, on suspicion of High Treason', in S. Bamford, *Early Days*, 1967, p.318. Bamford was returning from hearing Gadsby preach at the chapel which housed the Hampton Club when he was first arrested in 1817.
- 73 Ralph Ashton, *Manchester and the Early Baptists*, 1916, p.38.