

THE ORIGINS OF THE ST ALBANS BAPTISTS

The bald statement on a brass plate in the Baptist Church situated in Dagnall Street, St Albans, that the church was:

Built AD 1720 - the principal Persons concerned were the Revs Philip Smith & Harding, Mr Smith and Lady Harrington. The Church was founded about AD 1600 at the village of Kensworth and was removed to ST ALBANS, AD 1700 -

may not, in most who enter the doors, excite more than a passing interest. For some, however, whose eyes have often strayed when a sermon has passed its concentration time, the words 'about AD 1600' and 'at the village of Kensworth' raise intriguing questions.

The brass plate has uncertain validity as a primary source. It was not until 1608 that the Puritan Separatists, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, whose leadership was by 1612 to give Baptists their particular identity, fled with others to Holland in order to escape possible deportation or death at the hands of a sovereign and bishops intent on maintaining the domination of the Church of England in matters spiritual and temporal. By 1626 there are known to have been General Baptist congregations in Lincoln, Sarum, Coventry and Tiverton as well as London, and from 1640, when the Long Parliament and then the English Revolution broke the monopoly of the established Church, Particular Baptist churches also emerged. So who were those dissenters who around the year 1600 were going from St Albans to meet with others in the village of Kensworth? Presumably they were moved by a desire to worship God and to study his word as their consciences led them, with others of like mind, but why maintain a presence in Kensworth for around a hundred years?

There appears to have been a pre-history of dissent in St Albans. The town had not escaped the social unrest which set tenant farmers and labourers against rapacious landlords and culminated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The townsfolk had suffered for many years from the domination of Abbot and Convent¹ to whom they had had to defer not only in matters spiritual but also as workers on monastic lands. Over the years the monastery, which was probably the most powerful in England, had become the hated tyrant of the countryside over which it held dominion, denying citizens their rights under a charter granted by Richard I. Despite the iron hand of Abbot Thomas de la Mare, who from 1349 spent forty-seven years re-establishing, defending and increasing the authority of the Abbey, the people were not cowed. When in June 1381 Wat Tyler and his rebel labourers marched on London, St Albans men were ready to join them. Tyler's death and the collapse of his rebellion spelt execution for the leaders of the St Albans rebels, but their sacrifice was not entirely in vain. During the three days they were in London they had managed to extract from the frightened boy king, Richard II, instructions to the

Abbot to restore rights to the townspeople. On 16 June 1381 the 'Charter of Freedom of the villeins of St Albans forcibly obtained from the Abbot and Convent'² was granted.

For the next century and a half until the Dissolution of the Monasteries, relations between the people and the Abbey were probably maintained in a state of uneasy tolerance, not made easier by the arrival in the town, probably during the 1370s, of Wyclif's 'poor preachers', the Lollards with their attacks on the evils of priestly rule. Thomas Walsingham, the St Albans monk and historian, tells how 'their tracts were distributed in certain towns, poisonous tracts touching almost all ecclesiastical positions, and circulated in almost every large house or inn, in the towns of St Albans, Northampton, Reading, no one knowing their author'.³ Henry IV (1399-1413) and his bishops accused the Lollards, doubtless with some justification of stirring up social unrest. The Act of 1401, *De Haeretico Compurendo*, gave statutory authority to burning heretics at the stake and burnings took place in St Albans. Nonetheless, a Lollard leader, Sir John Oldcastle, found shelter for many days in St Albans after an unsuccessful rising.⁴ Lollards continued to flourish in St Albans, for in 1427 the Abbot, concerned about them in St Peter's parish, convened a synod at the church and issued orders against pseudo-preachers and those who possessed books written in English. Wyclif had anticipated by a century much of the thinking that was to be developed by the Protestant reformers.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 removed the last vestiges of Abbey authority over St Albans. Then in 1554 Edward VI granted the town a new Charter making it 'a free Borough, corporate in deed, fact and name for ever'. Among its provisions was the opportunity given to the town to purchase the old monastic church as its parish church. The Sessions Records for the Liberty of St Albans for the years prior to 1758 have been lost, so there is no record of whether any recusant was dealt with under the repressive legislation of Elizabeth I.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, when leading Puritan Separatists like Smyth and Helwys were fleeing the country to escape persecution, others from St Albans, who also sought to worship God according to their particular understanding of Scripture, were seeking sanctuary in the village of Kensworth, some eleven miles to the north-west. The village lies in the lea of the Chiltern Hills in the angle formed by two ancient roads, the Icknield Way to the north running east to west and the Roman Watling Street to the east running north to south - making Kensworth a strategic meeting-place. For early dissenters escaping the attentions of their persecutors its woods and dells and farmers' barns would have been an attraction, yet their activities were well known to the church authorities. Archbishop Laud, giving an *Account of his Province*⁵ to Charles I in 1637, wrote:

At Kensworth in Hertfordshire, and some other places many go from their own churches by troupes after other ministers, which is a common fault in the Southern part of that diocese where the people are said to be very giddy in matters of religion.

By 1637, with the increasing tension between the king and his bishops on the one hand and Parliament, revolution bound, on the other, Laud may have had more pressing concerns: the Kensworth 'troupes' were evidently left to worship in their way. According to the *Victoria History of the Country - Hertfordshire* (1902, p.233), 'Kensworth, previous to the Toleration Act, was the headquarters of Hertfordshire Baptists, and thither resorted many who resided in upwards of thirty villages and towns of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire'.

To back-track a little, the question arises of how far the strong Lollard influence may have persisted in St Albans during the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries, to motivate those who were eventually to adopt the Baptist position. In the first volume of his work, *The Dissenters*,⁶ Michael Watts of the University of Nottingham, suggests that English Dissent sprang from two different theological sources, the one radical, the other Calvinist. The General Baptists, he suggests, were from the radical source which could be traced back to fifteenth-century Lollardy. In support he refers, *inter alia*, to Joan Boucher (Joan of Kent), a member of a group of Lollards from Steeple Bumstead, who moved to Canterbury there to make common cause with immigrant Anabaptists. She was burned as a heretic in 1550. Watts also points to strong geographic evidence to support the link between the Lollards and Anabaptists of the early sixteenth century and the General Baptists of the seventeenth century. In the 1640s and 1650s General Baptist ideas made rapid headway in former Lollard strongholds of the Weald of Kent and the Chilterns of Buckinghamshire. Coventry was a Lollard centre where one of the first General Baptist churches was built in 1626. In the Chilterns, over the hill to the west of Kensworth in the Vale of Aylesbury, in 1679 a group of General Baptists led by Thomas Monk were claiming direct descent from the Lollard martyrs and confessors to whom they referred in a credal statement as 'our worthy and famous ancients'.⁷ Following this line of thought, it seems possible to argue a positive Lollard link with the Kensworth church. The argument, however, cannot be pursued to its logical conclusion in the church becoming General Baptist. The fact that it eventually joined with the Particular Baptists may well have been due to the influence of one man, Edward Harrison, who appears later.

So the group of dissenters from St Albans journeyed to Kensworth, partly to avoid persecution but also to seek strength in the company of like-minded believers drawn there by the preaching of certain individuals. Here they are likely to have adopted the concept of the 'gathered church' and may also have come to reject infant baptism.

The size of the company gathered at Kensworth points to its importance. Information about its membership is found in the earliest extant record which the St Albans members brought with them when, in the early years of the eighteenth century, the groups gathering at Kensworth decided to go their various ways. The *Kensworth Church Book*⁸ is a small hand-written minutes and accounts book, measuring roughly 90cm x 150cm x 50cm, which, although from posterity's point

of view it has many tantalizing omissions, contains valuable insights about those first pioneers. The first entry is:

The names of the respective members of the baptised congregation of the church of Kensworth, taken the 9 day of July 1675 and registered upon the 22 day of March 1675 [Julian Calendar] by mee Hugh Smyth, Wheathamstead, Hertfordshire.

The date is significant pointing to the time when, despite the first Declaration of Indulgence of 1672, dissenters were suffering under the Clarendon Code. Brother Smyth lists the names of persons from thirty places, mainly along Watling Street or to its east. Farthest north was Brickhill in Bedfordshire, some nine miles away, and farthest south Mimms and Ridge, some fifteen miles away on the Hertfordshire border. Smyth appears to have kept his list amended up to 1694, when some sixty-five members, mainly from Luton and Dunstable, defected over the appointment of a minister. Immediately before that time the number in membership was some 136 men and 229 women.

From 1711 Smyth and his successors focused their account on the St Albans Baptists worshipping in their first meeting-house in Dagnal Lane, as it then was. The Kensworth list shows twelve men and seventeen women from St Albans led by Brother Hayward, 'elected Elder' of the church. This could imply that he was the minister of the church at Kensworth and perhaps the son of Thomas Hayward, a Kensworth farmer, whose preaching seems to have been responsible for the early growth of the church and may have influenced the young John Bunyan who had relations in Kensworth. That Thomas Hayward died, according to Smyth, in 1688 and local tradition has it that, because of his 'heresy', he was buried in an unmarked grave and his family subsequently changed their name to Howard - possibly just another version of 'Hayward'. The St Albans Heyward [or Hayward] was alive in 1715 to be the first signatory on a notification to the Archdeacon that '... the House of Thomas Heyward in the Parish of St Peters in the Burough of St Albans in the County of Hertford is designed a place for Protestant Dissenters commonly called Baptists for Religious Worship'.⁹ The name of Hayward commonly occurs in local records, as in a list of unlawful conventicles notified to the Archdeacon in 1669:

Anabaptists - In the Abbey parish, St Albans, [meetings] not constant to time or place, numbering fifty persons, and having as preachers and teachers one Heyward, a woodman, and one Heyward of Hertford, a scholar.¹⁰

Together these snippets of evidence suggest Thomas Hayward was the leader only of the St Albans Baptists, yet no other 'Brother Hayward' is named in the Kensworth membership list and consequently a question mark must remain over the exact identity of its leader. Under the Charter of 1554 all tradesmen were freemen of the city and had to belong to a Company, of which the Mercers were one. The designation 'woodman', or carpenter, probably disguises the fact that in seventeenth-century St Albans Thomas Hayward may well have been a prominent citizen, a

freeman and member of the Mercers Company - someone in fact to whom others would have turned for leadership and whose home could have been large enough for meetings of the nascent church. His standing in society may well have afforded them some protection from prosecution when, according to County Sessions Records, dissenters in other parts of the county were suffering persecution for unlawful conventicles or non-attendance at their parish churches. There seems little evidence that dissenters in St Albans suffered similarly: possibly the tradesmen governing the town protected their own against intruders!

By the 1650s the Kensworth Church had become identified with the Particular Baptists, probably through Edward Harrison who came to Kensworth as vicar in 1643. There Harrison came under the influence of local Baptist preachers and adopted their views. When he left the village sixteen years later, he became prominent among the Particular Baptists worshipping in Petty France in London.¹¹ The minutes of the meetings of the Abingdon Association show Kensworth represented from the second meeting held 'the 3rd day of the 9th month 1652 [Julian Calendar]'.¹² No clear foundation date can be specified for the St Albans church but one nearer 1650 than the brass plate's 'about 1600' seems more supportable. At the nineteenth meeting of the Association in April 1658, the churches of Kensworth, Eversholt, Pirton and 'Hempsteed' [Hemel Hempstead] were empowered to form their own Association. With the Restoration of the Monarchy and restrictions again imposed on dissenters in 1660, the Association meetings ceased. After the first Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, the Particular Baptists in London decided to resume Association meetings. These appear to have proceeded without undue impediment from the first meeting in Hemel Hempstead in 1678 until 1683. They were held each year in various locations, including St Albans in March 1680. The church has remained a staunch supporter of Association life from that time.

From the Archdeacon's record of about fifty in an unlawful conventicle in St Albans in 1669 and the Association meeting held there in 1680, a picture emerges of a sizeable Baptist community beginning to assume some standing. Yet Smyth recorded that until 1694 only twelve men and seventeen women of St Albans continued to regard themselves as members of the Kensworth Church. The St Albans community could well have included some who chose not to travel to Kensworth but to receive communion in their homes. Reading between the lines of the Kensworth record suggests that the whole membership of the Kensworth Church only gathered there for important occasions and that at other times elders [ministers] were appointed to take communion to the members where they lived:

Immediately after the deasease of that laborious servant of Christ, Thomas Hayward (1688) the whole church was assembled at Kinsworth to consider there scattered state, and there the church did elect Brother Finch, Brother Marsom and Brother Hardon jointly and equally to officiate in the room of Brother Hayward in breaking bread, and other administration of ordinances, and the church did at the same time agree to provide and mainetaine, at there

one charge, and did agree to give sufficient maintenance to a preaching brother to serve the church and to goe from meeting to meeting, and to every place the church shall appoint him within this congregation. November 1688.¹³

The record goes on to show that Brother Harding, 'aforesaid' [as 'Hardon'], agreed to accept the office of elder, and that Brother Dearmer of St Albans was appointed deacon in his place to take care of the poor. Some six years later in 1694 the record shows that Brother Harding, 'being onely left alone in the office of elder', requested the church to appoint someone to assist him 'because the largnes of the congregation and the distance of meeting caused the work to ly heavy upon him'.

Soon after this the members from Luton and Dunstable decided to secede, and the next record in the Church Book is not until 1711 and is concerned only with the affairs of the St Albans church. For 1 January 1713 the following is recorded:

at a meeting of the church at St Albans to consider the state of the church, the church did unanamusly chuse Brother Smith, junior, to be there pastore equall with Brother Harding in all things.

This Brother Harding seems likely to have been the one who originated in Wheathampstead and was appointed an elder at Kensworth. The Church Book confuses the issue by referring in the list of members to Brother Harding, senior, from Studham, and to Brother Harden, junior, of Wheathampstead who was elected deacon. In the extract quoted above, therefore, the junior Harden (or Hardon) appears to be identical with the Brother Harding who was appointed Elder. Further research may clarify the issue - and another concerning Thomas Heyward, the woodman, who apparently led the St Albans community until Brother Harding's appointment. It is frustrating to find no mention in the Church Book of his death or departure, or of his home having been used for meetings after the notification to the Archdeacon.

After the entry of 1 January 1713, the Church Book is silent until 20 February 1723, when it is recorded that a meeting of the church was held at 'Titnanger Green', today Tyttenhanger Green, a village east of St Albans. Nowhere can be found mention of plans to build the St Albans meeting house. Records of subsequent meetings of the church in Tyttenhanger occur in March 1723 and May 1724, and of a 'disiplin meeting' at Sister Smith's on 6 June 1733. The first record of a church meeting 'at the meeting house in St Albans' was on 1 July 1733, when the church 'did unanimusly agree to chuse Brother Ewer to be their pastor, equall in all things with Brother Smith'. Mr Harding, it seems, had died in office. Those engaged in today's church administration may wonder why the founding forefathers did not consider it important to record the building of their first meeting-house. There are, however, no entries in the Church Book between 1 January 1713 and 20 February 1723: Indeed, over the hundred years covered by the record there are large gaps of months and years. The next task for the researcher might be to attempt to assess the

significance in this as regards the priorities of those early Baptists. For now, a different record mentions the meeting-house: a trustees' book of financial accounts and building matters notes, some forty years after the event, that:

The meeting [house] was first built (according to the account the ancientest members of the Church give) in the year 1720. The actors and contributors were Mr Harding, Mr Hugh Smith, Mr Phillip Smith, Lady Harrington with others in a less degree.

Apart from her name, little is known of Lady Harrington. She seems to have been the only titled member or contributor that the church has had in its long history. She may have been related to the family of Harringtons at Hertingfordbury and to Sir James Harrington who was a member of the Council of State before the Restoration. She was clearly a benefactor of the church and of such standing that her name had to be recorded on the brass plate.

Evans' List¹⁴ gives two hundred 'hearers' attending the church initially. Of these, twenty-nine men were of sufficient status to be Parliamentary electors and sixteen Borough electors. The List also shows that the whole St Albans community of dissenters - Baptists, Congregationalists and Quakers - numbered some 650 'hearers' out of a total population of around three thousand adults. This represented a significant voice of Dissent in a town which for more than four centuries had been asserting its independence.

This paper has attempted to describe the long maturing of the seed that became the first Baptist church in St Albans. The town, long oppressed by the Abbey, had seen stirrings of Dissent in the fourteenth century. The Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 and the granting of the town's new Charter in 1554 must have given the civic leaders, the Mayor and Burgesses, confidence to face with equanimity whatever the State might throw at them. The alacrity with which the town welcomed the Parliamentary forces during the days of Revolution suggests that the town's own Liberty Sessions Court and its officers may not have looked too harshly on those who chose to think for themselves. When in about 1600 or a little later a group from the town decided to join others in Kensworth, it may not have been so much to escape persecution as to join those of like mind, under the inspired leadership of men like Thomas Hayward and Edward Harrison. Much remains to be explored, but the church that originated with them remains a thriving Baptist community to this day.

NOTES

This essay is based on material from a recent dissertation forming part of the submission for the Degree of Master of Arts of the University of Hertfordshire.

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| 1 | 'Convent' in the sense of the assembly of monks meeting together. | (translated from Latin, 'The Peasants' Revolt in Hertfordshire, 1381', 1981, pp.123-4). | |
| 2 | Thomas Walsingham, <i>Gesta Abbatum Sancti Albani</i> , ed. H.T. Riley, 1869, iii pp 318-20. | 3 | Thomas Walsingham, <i>Historia Anglicana</i> , ed. H.T. Riley, 1863, ii p 52 (translated from Latin, |

- Urwick, *Nonconformity*, p.20).
- 4 W. Urwick, *Nonconformity in Hertfordshire*, 1884, p.36.
 - 5 Lambeth Palace Library, MS 943 p.253.
 - 6 Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, Vol.1, 1978, pp.7ff.
 - 7 O.E. Wright, *Baptists in Berkhamsted: Berkhamsted Baptist Chapel*, 1990.
 - 8 *Kensworth Church Book*, with transcript by H.G. Tibbutt, Hertfordshire Record Office: Off Acc.1162; Item 3831 (original), 3831A (transcript).
 - 9 Hertfordshire Record Office: Archive ASA 21/1.
 - 10 Hertfordshire Record Office: *Acta of the Archdeaconsry of St Albans for the year 1669*, Archive ASA 7/33.
 - 11 W.T. Whitney, 'Edward Harrison of Petty France', *BQ* 7, 1934-5, pp.214-20.
 - 12 ed. B.R. White, *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660: Part 3: The Abingdon Association*, 1974, pp.127, 181.
 - 13 *Kensworth Church Book*, page 15, Tibbutt transcript
 - 14 John Evans, *List of Dissenting Congregations and Ministers 1715-1729*, p.49, in Dr Williams's Library.

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Yona Pusey, *European Baptist Women's Union: our story 1948-1998*, EBWU 1998, pb 80pp, black and white illustrations, £3-00.
Hilde Sayers, *The Transition from the old to the new Europe*, EBWU 1998, pb 26pp, colour illustrations, £1-75. Both available from Mrs Pusey, 50 Whitlow, Saundersfoot, SA69 9AE.

Yona Pusey, Secretary of the EBWU 1987-98 and now President, provides a useful summary history of work originating in post-war western Europe and gradually extending into central and eastern Europe and the Middle East. The record drawn from minutes is briefly amplified by personal memories, giving a flavour of cross-cultural work across the continent. Seven of the eleven past presidents contribute brief reflections. Hilde Sayers (successively EBWU treasurer, vice-president and president 1982-98) journeyed extensively in Eastern Europe. She gives a fast-moving overview of travels, often uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous, as an ambassador of the gospel, a champion of human rights, and bringer of practical aid, pausing briefly to offer pointers for reflection. This is not a history, rather a taste of history in the making. At a time when, in England at least, 'traditional' women's work is less prominent, it is no bad thing to be reminded of those who have expended less energy on banging the feminist drum than on building relationships and doing good in Christ's name.

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The Revd Anthony Cross was awarded the PhD degree from the University of Keele in July. His dissertation was on 'The theology and practice of baptism amongst British Baptists, 1900-1996'.