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LOCAL BAPTIST LEADERSHIP A Lincolnshire Study*

In 1736 'An act to restrain the disposition of lands, whereby the same become inalienable' passed on to the statute book. This piece of legislation was seen as a means of checking the alienation of property to charitable uses and laid it down that no such gifts were to be valid unless made by a deed executed before two witnesses at least twelve months before the death of the donor. More significant, from the point of view of historians, was the provision that the deed was to be enrolled in Chancery within six calendar months.¹

This measure had considerable importance for the dissenting churches in a way which its framers had not envisaged, since under its terms by using Chancery enrolment they were able to obtain additional security for their title to property. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries many dissenting congregations had been relatively unsophisticated in this respect, being more concerned with the exigencies of survival in unsure times than in passing on chapels, meeting houses and any other property which belonged to them to succeeding generations of church members.² Early deeds could be so loose that property was lost when it passed into the hands of non-Baptists.³ As late as 1772 two of the men, including the occupier of the property, who were among the five applying to register a house for Baptist worship in the parish of Tewin near Hertford, did not become church members.⁴

In more settled times the importance of a secure trust, with trustees appointed from within the church, became a greater consideration. Its importance can be illustrated by two cases from Lincolnshire. The old General Baptist meeting house in the city of Lincoln was said in 1803 to have been occupied by Calvinistic Baptists. The resulting dispute over the ownership of the property meant that it was necessary to enquire into the state of the trust.⁵ Similarly, the importance of the title deeds was seen in 1827 in the case of the meeting house at Killingholme in north Lincolnshire. Here the congregation of New Connexion Baptists had to deal with 'the encroaching disposition of some professors of another denomination, who, contrary to all the rules of justice and good order, want to occupy, every Lord's day morning, a place of worship belonging to our Connection [sic]'.⁶ In the Lincoln case the congregation turned to the Chancery enrolment of the original deed to clarify the position of the acting trustees with whom they were in dispute.⁷ By 1849, when the Baptist Union was moving towards the adoption of a model trust deed which could be used by all chapels, one aspect of the provision they made was for deeds to be enrolled in Chancery.⁸

Chancery enrolment was an important legal safeguard because it gave a full copy of the title deed. From the point of view of historians, it is also important because

* This paper is based on research on the social composition of nonconformist leadership in Lincolnshire, 1770-1871, for which the support of the Economic and Social Research Council (Reference RG00232354) is gratefully acknowledged, together with that of the British Academy for work on the dissenting churches in Lincolnshire, 1770-1900.

it included the names, occupations and place of residence of trustees, together with an indication as to whether they assented to the original deed by using a sign or mark. As well as securing the property, the trust deed might include details of the doctrines and system of government of the congregations who worshipped in it - a tendency which increased in the nineteenth century. The enrolled deed of the Particular Baptist chapel at Billingham in south Lincolnshire, which was drawn up in 1846, had thirteen doctrinal articles beginning with an assertion of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and of the Divinity of Christ, and including the restriction of the Lord's Supper to people previously baptized by immersion. In addition, it laid down the criteria for membership, gave members power to appoint a minister, to arrange the level of his salary, and to appoint deacons.⁹

Trust deeds have been used as a means to study the social composition of Methodist leadership and this type of analysis can also be applied to other nonconformist churches.¹⁰ Using the enrolled deeds, it is possible to add to the range and scope of this analysis and to cover property which has passed out of the hands of local congregations, with the consequent loss of their title deeds. This study of the enrolled trust deeds for the Holbeach district in the fens of south Lincolnshire is intended to illustrate the significance of this source for the Baptist historian, as well as to provide some insights into the history of the churches of the area, particularly in the nineteenth century.

There was a strong Baptist presence in the fens of south Lincolnshire from the seventeenth century. The spread of the New Connexion of the General Baptists in the area from the late eighteenth century provided the basis for a period of development into the next century.¹¹ At the time of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship there were eleven Baptist places of worship in the Holbeach registration district - the largest number of any district in Lincolnshire.¹² They contained a total of 2160 sittings accommodating 797 worshippers at the best attended service on Census Sunday, 30 March, although there was no return of attendants for one of them.¹³

There are seven trust deeds from the Holbeach district on the Chancery Rolls at the Public Record Office, London. These are for five General Baptist and two General Baptist New Connexion chapels.¹⁴ The earliest, that for Fleet General Baptist chapel, was drawn up on 13 March 1764, but was not in fact enrolled in Chancery until 1866. The other six deeds were enrolled between 1819 and 1844, with three of them between 1840 and 1844.

Fifty-three individuals acted as chapel trustees, all of them men, of whom forty-four acted once, seven twice, one for three and one for four times. At the period when the deeds were enrolled, and when all but one of them was drawn up, all of them can be assumed to be church members. However, four who acted more than once and had been trustees for three General Baptist chapels in the period between 1819 and 1839, were members of New Connexion General Baptist trusts by the 1840s. This change reflected the growth and development of the connexion in the

area.¹⁵

Seven of the trustees who acted more than once also either changed the description they gave or actually changed their occupations. This was largely among the farmers and graziers, five of whom are variously described as farmers only, or as graziers, or as farmers and graziers. The trustee who acted three times was said on separate occasions to be a draper, a tailor and draper, and a draper. The greatest change was a yeoman who became a machineman. With as many as forty-four out of the fifty-three individuals acting as a trustee only once, there does not appear to have been a small local oligarchy controlling chapel trusts.

The significance of trusteeship, however, lay in the fact that it was a particular commitment to each chapel, made on an individual basis on each separate occasion. This means that any analysis of the trustees has to be based on each occasion a person acted as a trustee: sixty-five in all from the Holbeach district Baptist deeds. For the rest of this paper these sixty-five acts of trusteeship will therefore be treated as if they were performed by separate trustees and will be described in these terms.

The largest occupational group was the farmers and graziers. There were thirty-six of them who, together with one yeoman, comprised nearly sixty per cent of the trustees. There were six labourers, three tailors and drapers, two assistant drapers, two druggists, two grocers, two masons, two tailors, one cordwainer, one draper, one draper and grocer, one gentleman, one machineman, one minister of religion, one servant, one shoemaker and one surgeon.

This distribution of occupations, while it reflected the predominantly agricultural nature of the local community, was strongly weighted towards farmers compared with their numbers in the population as a whole. In 1851 5011 or 59% of the adult males in the Holbeach registration district were employed in agriculture, but 666 of these (13%) were farmers and graziers.¹⁶ The social structure of the Lincolnshire fens, of which the Holbeach district was a part, was distinctive in having a large number of small freeholders and farmers of whom a considerable proportion farmed land which they owned.¹⁷ Some of the farmers who acted as trustees may well have belonged to that group of small farmers, some of whom had invested their savings in land, but who were said to be 'in many cases very little raised above the hired labourer, and more hardly worked and less well fed and housed'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it was as farmers that they were chosen as trustees. The high proportion of them on the trusts of Baptist chapels can be compared with the relatively low proportion of labourers who made up 39% of the adult male workforce of the Holbeach registration district but only just over nine per cent of the trustees.¹⁹

Apart from the servant, surgeon, gentleman, machineman and minister of religion, of whom there was one of each, the other eighteen trustees were a variety of tradesmen and craftsmen. There is no way of telling whether these tradesmen and craftsmen were self-employed or whether they worked for someone else, except in the case of the one man described as an assistant draper. This means that their

exact social status cannot be determined. However, the percentage of tradesmen and craftsmen in the trust deeds was, at between 27% and 28%, much higher than in the population of the Holbeach district as a whole, where it was just under eighteen per cent.²⁰

Three of the sixty-five Baptist trustees from the Holbeach district used a mark when they signed the original deeds. They were all connected with the General Baptist chapel at Sutton St James, where a new trust was established in 1840 to replace one dating from 1813 when the chapel was built. This was divided between five farmers and four labourers, of whom one farmer and two labourers were, if the use of a mark to sign the deed is used as a measure, illiterate. A servant and a minister were the other two trustees. As well as being distinguished by the relatively low level of literacy of its trustees, it was one of the most proletarian of the Baptist trusts in the area with two-thirds of all the labourers who acted as trustees in Holbeach registration district serving on it.

If the trusts of the Baptist chapels were different in their social composition from that of the general population of the area, the question arises as to what extent this reflected the make-up of their congregations. It is difficult, in the case of Baptist congregations, to compare the social composition of the trustees of their chapels and meeting houses with that of the congregations as a whole. Lists of members can be found for some churches, but even then they do not necessarily contain details of occupations. The registers of infant baptism, which in some churches can give the occupations of fathers of children baptized, are not available to the Baptist historian and, when registers of births and deaths were kept, occupations were sometimes but not necessarily recorded. This was the case at Fleet where a register covering the period 1709-1798 in fact antedates the building for which deeds survive but gives neither the occupations of the fathers of children nor those of the people who died.²¹ It is therefore not possible to make a precise measurement of the extent to which the congregations of the Holbeach district chapels were, like their trustees, also largely gatherings of farmers and village tradesmen and craftsmen, or whether the congregations reflected to a greater extent, like the trustees at Sutton St James, the social composition of the communities in which they were established.

The particular qualities of a local congregation are, however, often reflected in its historical development and this can be related to the evidence of the title deeds of its property. The deed for the rural General Baptist meeting house at Fleet which, as has been noted was drawn up on 13 March 1764 but was not enrolled in Chancery until 12 January 1866, had eight trustees. All except one, a grocer, were graziers and came from parishes in the area. Only the grocer actually lived in Fleet.

There had been a 'licensed Anabaptist Conventicle' in this fenland community in the early eighteenth century, which probably left the register which survives from this period.²² Baptists from Fleet were in touch with the national General Assembly of the Baptist Churches up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.²³ The church had also rejoined the Lincolnshire Association of General Baptists by

1776.²⁴ Its members were involved in the formation of the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1770, but it had dropped out by the next year.²⁵ The church was said to have about fifty members at this time and to meet two or three times each Sunday. Its services were well attended with hearers and there was reported to be some appearance of a revival of religion there. It rejoined the New Connexion in 1812.²⁶

If the deed for the General Baptist meeting house at Fleet reflects the spirit of the General Baptists of the eighteenth century, that for the New Connexion General Baptist chapel at Holbeach is redolent of the new evangelistic spirit of the connexion. While the Fleet Baptists, until they finally united with the New Connexion, were only loosely affiliated to any centralized body and tended to look inwards to a community drawn, like its trust, from the fenland graziers of the locality, the Holbeach chapel deed reflected the changes which took place in the General Baptists from the later eighteenth century.

The Holbeach chapel was a product of the evangelistic activities which were part of the Fleet community's commitment to the New Connexion. In 1840 the Fleet Baptists reported that preaching had begun in Holbeach. This was a move from their rural base into a developing market town which was, at this time, undergoing its greatest period of population growth in the nineteenth century.²⁷ By 1841 they were preaching in a public room in the town and this was said to be filled and sometimes crowded.²⁸ The chapel, which was built in 1844, was situated on a newly developed street and its trust, while retaining its rural connections with three farmers included on it, also had two masons, two labourers, a shoemaker, a druggist, a draper and grocer, a tailor and a machineman. The majority of them did not, in fact, live in Holbeach, but their social composition reflected that of the town which the chapel served, with its strong community of tradesmen and craftsmen.²⁹

By the time of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship, Holbeach General Baptists were 'contemplating the enlargement of our present chapel, or the erection of a new one to furnish more accommodation for the school and congregation'. Nor was its parent congregation at Fleet a spent force, for its minister reported larger congregations than those at Holbeach.³⁰

The development of these two Baptist congregations reflected the broader canvas of Baptist church life, of which they were a part, during this period. The enrolled trust deeds provide an added dimension to our understanding of this particular piece of local Baptist history, but they can also be seen as a source which has more than local importance particularly through the analysis of the social composition of the trustees listed in them.

NOTES

1 9 Geo.III c.36.

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- 3 Seymour J. Price, 'Baptist Trust Deeds', *BQ* 5 (new series), 1930-31, pp.106,173.
- 4 Michael J. Collis, 'Ebenezer Particular Baptist Church, Hertford, and the Eastern Association of Baptist Churches', *BQ* 34, no.4, October 1991, p.191.
- 5 W. T. Whitley, ed., *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England, with Kindred Records*, III, 1731-1811, 1920, pp.257, 259.
- 6 *Minutes of an Association of the New Connexion [sic] of General Baptists, held at Derby, June 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th, 1827*, p.35.
- 7 *Minutes of the Seventy-Second Annual Association of the New Connexion of General Baptists, held at Derby, June 29th, 30th and July 1st and 2nd, 1841*, p.39.
- 8 *A Manual of the Baptist Denomination for the Year 1849*, 1849, pp.89-90.
- 9 Jones, *op.cit.*, pp.104-110; Public Record Office (hereafter PRO) C54/13428/14.
- 10 Clive D. Field, 'The Social Structure of English Methodism: eighteenth - twentieth centuries', *British Journal of Sociology*, 28, no.2, June 1977, pp.213-17.
- 11 Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists, From the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of George I*, I, 1738, pp.221-3; Adam Taylor, *A History of the English General Baptists*, 1818, I, pp.106-7, II, pp.194-201, 281-90, 294-301.
- 12 Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP) 1852-53, LXXXIX, (1690) Religious Worship (England and Wales), pp.81-5.
- 13 PP 1852-53, Religious Worship, p.82.
- 14 PRO C54/16483/4, Fleet General Baptist, 1764; C54/9868/4, Long Sutton General Baptist, 1819; C54/10522/8, Holbeach General Baptist, 1827; C54/12243/6, Gedney General Baptist, 1839; C54/12449/6 Sutton St James General Baptist, 1840; C54/12463/11, Sutton St Edmund New Connexion General Baptist, 1840; C54/13123/13, Holbeach New Connexion General Baptist, 1844.
- 15 James Taylor, *Statistics of the New Connexion of General Baptists; from its first formation in 1770, to 1843*, ed. J. Goadby, Ashby de la Zouch, 1844, pp.44-9; *Minutes of the New Connexion of General Baptists*, 1841 onwards, *passim*.
- 16 PP 1852-53, LXXXVIII - Part II (1691-II) Population Tables II, pp.576,578.
- 17 D. B. Grigg, *The Agricultural Revolution in South Lincolnshire*, Cambridge, 1966, pp.83-4; D. B. Grigg, 'The Land Tax Returns', *Agricultural History Review*, XII, 1963, p.89.
- 18 PP 1881, XVI (C.2778-II) Agricultural Interests, Digest and Appendix to part I of Evidence, p.387; PP 1867-68, XVII (4068), Agriculture (Employment of Women and Children), First Report of Commissioners with Appendix, Part I, p.74.
- 19 PP 1852-53, LXXXVIII - Part II (1691-II), Population Tables II, pp.576,578.
- 20 Calculated from PP 1852-53, LXXXVIII - Part II (1691-II), pp.576-83.
- 21 PRO, R.G.4/1636A, Non-parochial register of Fleet Baptist Church, 1709-1798. I am indebted to Mr J. Wilson of the South Humberside Area Record Office, Humberside County Council, for drawing my attention to this document and making available a microfilm copy of it.
- 22 R. E. G. Cole, ed., *Speculum Dioceseos Lincolnensis sub episcopis Gul. Wake et Edm. Gibson A.D. 1705-1723*, Lincoln Record Society, vol.4, Lincoln, 1913, p.48; for the register see note 21 above.
- 23 Whitley, ed., *General Baptist General Assembly Minutes*, I, 1654 - 1728, 1909, p.lxii.
- 24 *ibid.*, II, 1731-1811, 1910, pp.143,157 footnote.
- 25 *ibid.*, p.265 footnote.
- 26 Taylor, *Statistics of the New Connexion of General Baptists*, pp.12, 45.
- 27 George S. Minchin, 'Table of Population, 1801-1901', in William Page, ed., *The Victoria History of the County of Lincoln*, II, 1906, reprinted Folkestone, 1988, p.358.
- 28 *Minutes of the Seventy-First Annual Association of the New Connexion of General Baptists, held at Spalding, June 30th, July 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1840*, Nottingham, 1840, p.12.
- 29 William White, *History, Gazeteer and Directory of Lincolnshire . . .*, 1856, reprinted Newton Abbot, 1969, pp.830-37.
- 30 R. W. Ambler, ed., *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship 1851*, The Lincoln Record Society, vol.72, 1979, pp.34-6.