

BARTON-IN-THE-BEANS LEICESTERSHIRE A Source of Church Plants

CELEBRATIONS

1995 is the 250th anniversary of the formation of the church at Barton-in-the-Beans, Leicestershire, in the past often called the Mother Church of the New Connexion of General Baptists. 1745 has been celebrated over the years. After the fiftieth anniversary the stories surrounding its origins appeared in serial form in the first volume of the *General Baptist Magazine*, in the seven issues from April to October 1798. The centenary was celebrated with services on Thursday, 15 May 1845, in the recently rebuilt chapel of 1841. People came from Leicester, Hinckley, Loughborough, Nottingham, etc. 'The emotions excited on this day were of no ordinary kind; the place of assembly appeared like holy ground; every object associated with the early history of the cause was regarded with a feeling almost approaching veneration. The house in which the gospel was first preached at Barton is not standing, but in the ceiling of that which is reared on the same spot, is the very beam which supported the first congregation . . . In the grave-yard repose the smouldering dust of the first seven. . .'.¹ One of those who took part, J. H. Wood, went on to write *A Condensed History of the General Baptists of the New Connexion*, published in 1847. Leading up to the 150th anniversary came J. F. Godfrey's *Historic Memorials of Barton and Melbourne Churches* (1891). 1945 contented itself with celebrations at Barton and an article in the *Baptist Quarterly*. Barton and its daughter churches were now blended into the larger Baptist Union and its Associations, and so were less remembered as having formed a separate entity.

SOURCES

It was John Deacon (died 1821) who wrote the 1798 articles. He was a son of Samuel, one of the founders in 1745, and from 1783 to his death John was pastor of the Friar Lane Baptist Church, Leicester, leading it to revival.² Deacon said that his account had been first begun 'several years ago', and his notes were in writing long before 1798. The wealth of detail for the 1740s and 1750s supports his claim to have spoken to people directly involved in the events. This is particularly the impression given by the very detailed account of the violence in 1743-44 that led to the complete separation of the Barton people into a self-governing church. John Deacon's account deserves reproduction, but it is not my intention to repeat it here. Adam Taylor printed it almost verbatim in his *A History of the English General Baptists* (1818), continuing the story up to 1817. Occasionally Taylor glided over Deacon's detail, e.g. Deacon included 'Tipton-green and Wolverhampton' among the places visited by preachers from Barton soon after 1745, for which Taylor just put 'Staffordshire'.³ J. H. Wood and J. R. Godfrey used Taylor's account but

more briefly. Later single church histories used the same material, though increasingly vague through abbreviation.

Finally global Baptist histories must still give the rise of the New Connexion a place. Thus Robert Torbet in *A History of the Baptists* (1966) condenses to two paragraphs Taylor's many pages on the Barton origins up to 1760. 'It is possible to trace a direct influence of Wesley's preachers upon General Baptists. In November, 1755, out of a group of Methodists in Leicestershire, who were witnessing at Barton-in-the-Beans in spite of constant persecution by the populace, nearly seventy persons adopted believer's baptism. . .'.⁴ By this stage abbreviation can be misleading, because there was no separate Methodist society anywhere in Leicestershire until 1757, and it did not produce any Baptists.

Because of the thoroughness of John Deacon's original accounts, little extra has been added except by John Nichols in *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*.⁵ Nichols transcribed two relevant slate gravestones. He also reprinted an account provided in 1790 by John's brother, Samuel junior (1746-1816), telling of his progress from farming to clockmaking, setting up business in Barton in 1771, and a summary of the persecution there in 1743-44. Indeed, it is remarkable that an antiquarian and historian of Nichols' time should bother with dissenters, let alone dissenters whose story was so recent. He even included a small print of the meeting-house at Barton amidst prints of medieval churches and stately homes.

BARTON'S ROOTS

After their evangelical conversion in May 1738, John and Charles Wesley moved between London, Oxford, Bristol and Bath. It was at Bath that Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was converted to the new experience in 1739. Her country home was Donington Park, Leicestershire (the same place as the modern racing car circuit). The family estates and influence lay in the west and northwest of the same county. Thus Markfield was one good base for the Countess to use. The Earls of Huntingdon were patrons of the parish, and from 1738 to 1749 it had a 'Methodist' rector, Edward Ellis (1712-95).⁶

In 1741 the Countess was able to use her resources and position to send out one of her servants, David Taylor, as an evangelistic preacher to Leicestershire villages, especially Glenfield and Ratby, northwest of Leicester and near Markfield. George Whitefield began open-air preaching early in 1739 and John Wesley followed suit a few weeks later. Now the Countess's man introduced it to Leicestershire in 1741.

Samuel Deacon of Ratby was at work scything when he heard that Taylor was to preach in the street, first at Glenfield and then at Ratby. Deacon was an early convert. Struck by the contrast between the new preaching and the careless lifestyle and teaching of the local clergyman, it was not surprising that a separate 'society' began in the village, probably as early as 1742, though its members would still go to the parish church on Sundays. Little is recorded of this group, though a small congregation here survived under Barton-in-the Beans, dying out in the 1810s.

There were other converts, joined by a blacksmith and clockmaker from Normanton-le-Heath, Joseph Donisthorpe (1702-74), whose testimony is given by John Deacon. It shows someone arriving at an understanding of the gospel through remembering I Timothy 1.15 ('This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief') over against a clergyman's advice to 'make yourself easy; continue to attend your church' and nothing else. Donisthorpe talked of his spiritual discovery to his customers, losing some of them as a result, and to all sorts in his home in the evenings. So by 1743 he was known to the group at Ratby.

READY TO SEPARATE FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

In 1742 David Taylor moved to Yorkshire for a while, and others took over the preaching in Leicestershire, especially a schoolmaster of Markfield, John Taylor. In 1743 John Taylor followed up an invitation to a labourer's home at Osbaston, west of Markfield and near Barton. This attracted many, including John Whyatt, a Barton carpenter, and John Aldridge, the son of a farmer there (and later at Hugglescote). They in turn invited Taylor to Whyatt's house. Barton was a village without a place of worship; much of it lay in Nailstone parish whose church was a mile away. The new converts wanted to meet for spiritual encouragement and so they met at Barton on Saturday evenings. One item used was the account by the young Moravian, John Cennick (1718-55), of the way in which his preaching had led to his being violently attacked. This gave local people from Nailstone the idea to do the same at Barton one Saturday.

Knowing this was likely, the meeting was moved to Thomas Aldridge's home, as he was 'a considerable farmer, possessing somewhat more influence'. This did not stop the attack - Deacon took three pages to describe what happened. It was this violence, perpetrated by people who were at Nailstone parish church next day, just as some of the Barton group were, that made the latter eventually dissociate themselves from such a church. It was not until the summer of 1744 that the law courts were able to quell the repeated violence by issuing indictments. During those months their Barton meetings ceased. They still went to parish churches, some to the more sympathetic Markfield rector, but now with less enthusiasm.

The Barton group was intensely committed to a gospel that offered forgiveness to sinners on the grounds of Christ's death on the cross. They felt that this was not at all the message being preached and taught at most of their parish churches, as Samuel Deacon had realized at Ratby and Joseph Donisthorpe had at Normanton-le-Heath. Again and again this was to be the turning point in other places in the area, gradually taking individual parishioners from their parish churches and into evangelical dissent. All of Barton's local early members came from the Church of England, not from Methodist societies which did not yet exist in Leicestershire. Nor did the Barton people come from the older Baptist or other older dissenting churches that had been in west Leicestershire since the 1650s and 1660s.

It was this separation at Barton that provoked the earliest written record we have of this movement. John Wesley made his first journey into the Midlands in June 1741, heading for the Countess of Huntingdon's home at Donington Park. He stopped at Markfield on the way, where he preached in the parish church with Edward Ellis's approval. The malaise of the Established Church was evident: 'Many, I trust, found they were Heathens in heart, and Christians in name only'. Wesley revisited several times in the following years. On 2 May 1745 he was in a crowded Markfield parish church again. 'But I was sorry to hear, some of the neighbouring churches are likely to be empty enough: for the still brethren, I found, had spread themselves into several of the adjacent parishes and the very first sins their hearers leave off, are reading the Bible, and running to the church and sacrament'. This had happened since his last visit in November 1743.⁷ It must refer to the people who met at Barton. No other new churches were being formed in Leicestershire at this time to catch Wesley's attention. The violence and the ensuing legal manoeuvres that made separation inevitable occupied between the autumn of 1743 and the summer of 1744 (the first available Quarter Sessions to hear the case was in January 1744, so the assault must have happened in the previous three months).

LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW CHURCH

A church planting era was being created by making the evangelical gospel central and by violent persecution from other 'Christians' as one response to the message. A third factor leading to separation and release into vigorous evangelism was the availability of roving would-be church leaders. Perhaps these men were easy-come, easy-go sometimes. They were certainly difficult to get on with if they could not have their own way. As soon as the threat of violent persecution had been curbed legally, David Taylor (the original preacher of 1741) came to Barton as the regular preacher for a while. He was helped by Stephen Dixon, who at the same time joined the new Fulneck Moravian settlement at Pudsey, Yorkshire, formed in 1744. Presumably Dixon was one of their members who lived at a distance. He only lasted one year as a Fulneck member; he was expelled for unknown reasons and with him left another Fulneck Moravian, William Kendrick (Fulneck's early records do not have much about these years, and have nothing about Dixon and Kendrick). Kendrick was a rolling stone, first with George Whitefield, then with John Wesley who expelled him, then with Fulneck, and now with Dixon at Barton - all by 1745. No wonder Wesley was critical in his comments in May 1745. 'The still brethren' was Wesley's way of describing the Moravians, with whom he was now in disagreement on a wider front. His extra comment about abandoning the Bible is not fair to Kendrick, Dixon and the Barton folk who welcomed them.

So by early 1745 Donisthorpe, the Aldridges, Deacon, etc. were joined by two keen preachers, ready for action and with no local parish church loyalties to think about. Kendrick was a pleasant, fluent speaker, witty, and so highly popular and

genially persuasive. Nevertheless, the leaders who had breezed in would sooner or later leave under a cloud.

A CHURCH SET TO EVANGELIZE

A separate church was formed at Barton in 1745 with seven members, of whom Kendrick and Dixon were chosen to be 'elders', with Kendrick's wife as 'eldress'. The others were John Aldridge, John Whyatt, Joseph Donisthorpe, and Samuel Deacon - all to be preachers too. Of course, the numbers attending, and indeed the number of Christians, were much larger, and more and more joined as members. A meeting-house was quickly built and opened the same year. Nichols's print of it shows it was plain with domestic-style rectangular windows. It was only 36 feet by 22. Windows in the gable ends lit the rooms under the roof, which were meant for single men and single women along the lines of a Moravian community, though this never developed. The pulpit was in fact a rostrum where all the preachers could sit.

They had the ingredients for expansion. They were separate from any existing structures that could curb them; they were free from violent persecution, though a couple of court cases were attempted against them in the 1750s; and they had six men convinced of the need to preach the gospel and with ability to do so. This is the most exciting feature of Barton and its daughter churches. Lasting congregations elsewhere resulted thick and fast, including in the first ten years Hinckley (1746), Hugglescote (1746), Packington (1746), Melbourne (1747), Castle Donington (1752), Diseworth (1752), Loughborough (1753 or 1754), and Kegworth (1755). Each of these became a springboard for yet more congregations. This growth did not die away but had its greatest impact between 1800 and 1840, especially in the East Midlands.

They had a straightforward appeal to people to recognize their sin and to recognize the death of Jesus as the means of forgiveness. This is expressed at Barton in their earliest testimony, on a slate headstone to John Aldridge's parents, Thomas (1678-1748) and Sarah (1676-1748), who owned the farmhouse where the violent attack of 1743 took place:

Here lie two Babes not three Years old,
 yet many Years in sin,
 We wandred in the sinners path,
 and took delight therein:
 A Preacher came in Jesus name,
 and shew'd us in God's word
 Christ bore our sins: we this believ'd,
 then we was Born of God.

It was a gospel worth spreading. Two anecdotes illustrate the spirit of the Barton movement over the years. When one of the Diseworth converts, a bricklayer, came for a while to Exhall, just north of Coventry, in order to carry on his work, he soon began witnessing there. One convert led to another, including William Smith whose

enthusiastic witness led to the start of the Salem Longford congregation in 1759. The local vicar ordered Smith to stop his religious activities. The vicar's servant was sent back with this message from Smith: 'Tell your Master, I regard neither him nor his persecution; for I mean to go to heaven myself, and to take all I can with me.'

The conviction continued into the next century, that preaching the gospel was the greatest activity to take up, and that the greatest step was to repent and believe, and to receive forgiveness and new life. In 1823 William Jones, the General Baptist minister of Fleckney, Leicestershire, one of Barton's many grand-daughter churches, went to preach in the open-air at Gumley, a small parish controlled by squire and parson. The rector and a justice of the peace rushed through the crowd to Jones. 'Who authorized you to stand there and make that noise?' Jones held up his Bible and said, 'My Lord and Master, Sir. He told his disciples to Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' The parson retorted, 'You may go into all the world if you don't come to Gumley.' Nevertheless, the open-air preaching continued every fortnight for some time.⁸ Of course, in those days villages had no access to popular media entertainment or easy travel, so Jones could still get his audience. He still need not have bothered, but this basic conviction urged him on, that people needed to hear the gospel.

It was an appeal by people most of whom were working-class or independent craftsmen to similar people. The appeal to belong to such communities bound together by a shared faith was carried forward even more rapidly as working-class men and women felt the need for education and had an increasing expectation of a fairer place in society at large. Barton's offspring churches, like many other evangelical Nonconformist churches, offered a sphere for developing skills and increasing self-worth, all on a basis of Christian belief and standards. They were communities that were ready to stand against long-established privilege and dominance, especially on the part of clergy and gentry.

It was an 'awakening' where people who were a bit religious but ignorant of New Testament Christianity came alive to God. It was not strictly speaking a 'revival'. Nor did the visible and more spectacular features of twentieth-century revivals and renewals take place, as far as I can make out, in the Barton churches: no speaking in tongues, no miraculous physical healings, no exorcisms, no dancing or falling down, no incidents of special 'discernment'. There was just one prophet, the Little Prophet of the Vale of Belvoir, who came to Loughborough in the late 1750s and persuaded some of the General Baptists there to get ready to march against the ungodly in order to bring in the millenium; but all along he was opposed by the Baptist leadership. In fact, there were no signs and wonders except the one they always had in view, that sinners find peace with God and forgiveness through faith in Christ.

It is worth noting that the Barton preachers were always ready to begin their work in a new place in a local house made available and duly registered. However,

they did not make a virtue of using domestic property, for often within months of their making an impact on a village or town they set about acquiring land on which to build a place of worship, often still referred to as a 'meeting-house' well into the nineteenth century. The Baptist congregation at Diseworth began in a large timbered house which still stands today as 'Lilly's House'. All the same they set about getting a purpose-built meeting-house nearby within a few months. This 1752 building has been enlarged and altered over the years, but it is still the core of today's Diseworth Baptist Church, and the oldest building surviving among Barton's offspring.

TO BELIEVER'S BAPTISM AND IMMERSION

The leadership that migrated to Barton in 1744-45 soon grew. Dixon brought a schoolteacher friend, William Allt (Ault) (1719-79), back to his native Leicestershire from London. The three could not survive together. Kendrick held on, and Dixon and Allt soon left. Wandering leadership settles best where it has undisputed sway, which Kendrick now achieved at Barton. Allt had begun the congregation at Hinckley in 1746 and wanted to be in charge there, bringing him into conflict with Kendrick's desire to control all of Barton's daughter congregations. Allt then went his own way, though he stayed on in Hinckley with his own group for a while. Dixon was judged to be theologically suspect and was soon expelled from Barton. He moved to northeast Leicestershire where he appeared with his own congregation in 1749. Allt and Dixon were written out of the story from now on by the Barton historians, but both went on to be Baptists, and in fact practised believer's baptism before the people at Barton did. This had been discussed at Barton before Allt parted company. His speedy move to believer's baptism by immersion made people at Barton go slower because they did not want to appear to be copying him.

At Barton the move was in two stages. First they accepted that 'baptism' is a word meaning immersion, so they dipped their babies in a tub. They were reviving the old parish church method of infant baptism that had been superseded by sprinkling 150 years earlier (the Prayer Book of 1549 required the child to be dipped three times, that of 1552 required a single dipping. Both allowed 'if the child be weak, it shall suffice to pour water upon it', an exemption that remained printed in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, even though dipping had ceased in practice).

Stage two came in November 1755 when their reading of the New Testament showed them that believers were the correct candidates for baptism. A dip on the west side of the field behind the Barton chapel shows where the tiny stream was dammed to make an open-air baptistry. From then on Barton has been a Baptist story, and their zeal for offering the gospel to all made them the General Baptist type. After 1760 they were closed communion, requiring believer's baptism and church membership before anyone could share in the Lord's Supper. As for babies, they straightaway followed Mark 10.16 where Jesus took children in his arms and blessed them. Babies were prayed for and blessed in a public service at Barton,

using the words of Numbers 6.24-26.

Allt's group in Hinckley were Baptists by 1752 when they used this word in registering a house in adjacent Burbage.⁹ Allt was a determined Baptist. He did not last long in Hinckley, but moved to pastor Baptist churches of his founding in Sileby and Syston, north of Leicester. They were 'General Baptist' but never in the New Connexion or other association. Their last trace was at Syston in the 1850s. Neither had anything to do with the later Baptist churches in those places that survive to this day. Allt was buried in his parish churchyard at Long Whatton, near Loughborough. His slate headstone beneath a chestnut tree faces the path from the old rectory to the church for every incumbent to see. The epitaph he wrote for himself recognized the controversial role he had played:

Here lies the body of William Allt,
Some say he was without a fault,
And others say there's none had more,
But he says 'Jesus paid my score':
So be they many, or be they few,
They're all forgiv'n and this is true!

The New Connexion General Baptists talked about 'the system of Mr Ault' and called it 'Antinomian', a General Baptist who preached the gospel as available to all, with grace that took away any reliance on our good works for salvation or on ourselves for the ability to do good works. His vigour against the need for infant baptism appears on the adjacent headstone for his three babies who died in 1770-72:

The Saviour call'd, ye tender Lambs adieu,
His Life and Death, sufficient is for you:
No guilt by you contracted,
No Enmity can be;
No Faith then need be acted
To make your Conscience free.

Stephen Dixon is recorded as minister at Long Clawson and Ab-Kettleby, Leicestershire, villages north of Melton Mowbray, registered there as an 'Independent', 1749-50. These congregations last appear in 1759. But in 1751 Dixon was a 'Baptist' at Sileby where Allt took over. Dixon moved on to Lincolnshire, where Timberland (1755) and hamlets near Heckington (1769, 1772) were his later ports of call. By now he was a Particular Baptist, establishing a Calvinistic Strict Baptist church at Heckington that lasted until 1978.¹⁰

Meanwhile the autocratic Kendrick came unstuck at Barton in 1760. At last the homegrown leaders took over. Their single widespread church was divided into five, only one of which had a solitary minister in charge. At Barton itself one of three ministers was Samuel Deacon senior, of the most famous family line the church has ever had. His son, Samuel junior, joined him as a minister in 1779. Clockmaking gave the younger Deacon financial and social independence, as it did

for Joseph Donisthorpe to whom he had been apprenticed, now one of the ministers at Loughborough. The Deacon workshop continued at Barton until 1945 and it is now housed at the Newarke Houses Museum in Leicester. Deacon clocks survive, e.g. in Hinckley's old parish church and in the 1807 Newton Burgoland Congregational chapel.

GROWTH BY REPLANTING

Once the Barton churches had been organized into a national New Connexion of General Baptists by Dan Taylor in 1770, old General Baptist churches in the Midlands surviving from the seventeenth century joined them. Unlike southern England, no Midland General Baptist church became Unitarian. Those that lasted after the 1740s did so either by having shifted to Calvinism and become Particular Baptists (especially in Shropshire and Northamptonshire) or by being drawn into the New Connexion (especially in Leicestershire and Lincolnshire). Some took their time to join the New Connexion, like Knipton (1816). Others came early on, like Friar Lane, Leicester (1780), which accepted Samuel Deacon senior's son, John, the writer of the articles in 1798, as minister. This led to the church's revival and growth, with a bigger and more conspicuous place of worship built in 1785. Others, like Mountsorrel in 1788, were restarted as old disused meeting-houses were discovered and reclaimed for General Baptist preaching. In one way or another spiritual vigour took the place of decline or death as the New Connexion enthusiasts were allowed to get to work.

There is no evidence that these old General Baptist churches made any contribution to Barton's origins, yet this is strange, for in the very area in which the Barton church arose there had been General Baptists since the 1650s meeting at Markfield, Thornton, Ratby and Barlestone - but not after 1710. Their probable successor, Desford, ceased when its minister moved to Leicester (1721) where he died (1733). Although this was all so near to Samuel Deacon senior's home at Ratby and other places in the Barton story, there is no indication that any of these older Baptists were drawn into the Barton movement in its formative years.¹¹

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

When the gospel is preached, God's Spirit brings it home to people's hearts and there is a response. Forgiveness and new life in Christ become apparent, and worship and witness to Christ become key features of normal Christian living. Barton and its daughter churches grew well over a long period on this basis. They drew people who belonged to the area and who were around long enough to see stability as well as exciting beginnings. It was a wide area, giving them openings in many localities as the years went by, including the chance to influence relations and friends in new places. Their main areas covered places with new rural industries (like framework-knitting) and a growing independent artisan class (like the clockmakers). They kept to their trades, and this again gave them openings. They

broke out of the mould of church life that required one minister alone as leader, and so they avoided their successes being devastated by the lapsing of any one leader. They filled a space in Christian history in west Leicestershire that in many other areas would be filled later by Wesleyan Methodism (Wesley's early visits to Leicestershire were entirely within the Church of England's structures, and did not lead at the time to any separate Methodist societies).

The reorganization in 1760 into five churches, each of several congregations, gave new foci for growth. The advent of Dan Taylor from Yorkshire, Methodist turned General Baptist in 1763, brought an ability to organize on a yet wider scale within the framework of New Connexion after 1770. This structure enabled strengths and resources to be shared, sparse as they often were. Eventually from Dan Taylor's initiative there came in 1797 an Academy to prepare a more educated ministry and a monthly magazine to share news and insights. The new strain of evangelical General Baptists had reached the size that could support enabling agencies, ready for the greater openness to evangelical nonconformity in towns and villages in the early nineteenth century.

Yet something else needs to be said, for Allt and Dixon lived in the same era and for some years endeavoured in similar communities but their churches hardly survived, let alone became examples of church growth and church planting. Perhaps the key is that they had lost the simplicity of a gospel message that could touch the hearts of their contemporaries, Allt with his Antinomian tendencies and Dixon moving to a less evangelistic Calvinism.

The popular New Connexion slogan was 'A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation' (Isaiah 60.22). This was used on many occasions, especially at the opening of new chapels, over the century following Barton's foundation. They believed that they were seeing this promise being worked out in the Midlands of England.

NOTES

- 1 J. H. Wood, *A Condensed History of the General Baptists of the New Connexion*, 1847, pp.238-41.
- 2 D. Ashby, *Friar Lane 1651-1951*, 1951, pp.34-49.
- 3 *General Baptist Magazine*, June 1798, p.229; A. Taylor, *A History of the English General Baptists*, 1818, vol.2, p.19.
- 4 R. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 1966, pp.73f.
- 5 J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, vol.3, pt.1, 1800, p.425;
- 6 vol.4, pt.2, 1811, pp.519f, 808.
- 7 *ibid.*, vol.3 pt.2, 1804, pp.921f.
- 8 *General Baptist Magazine*, December 1863, p.454.
- 9 Leicestershire Record Office, QS 44/2/9.
- 10 *ibid.*, QS 44/2/1,2,3,5,16,40; Lincolnshire Record Office Disa 1/1755/1, 1/1769/4, 1/1772/3.
- 11 *BQ* January 1976, p.218.

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