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LOUGHWOOD BAPTISTS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Driving from Exeter towards Dorchester on the A.35, you might miss seeing the little signpost about two miles west of Axminster in Devon. It points the way to 'Loughwood Baptist Chapel A.D. 1650'. Although only a hundred yards or so from the main road, this old Baptist Meeting House is not visible from the road. It is a thatched building which could easily be mistaken for a farmworker's cottage were it not for the gravestones surrounding it. Push open the rather stiff door and you step back in time. The meeting house is preserved substantially as it was in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. It is not a museum, however, and is still used twice a year for worship by the congregation of the nearby Kilmington Baptist Church.

The building was substantially restored by the National Trust in 1968, and remains in their care. As the name implies, the building was originally in a wood, and this is sometimes cited as evidence that the place was chosen for its inconspicuous nature. In 1834, George Roberts¹ wrote that Loughwood was a

romantic spot in the parish of Dalwood, close upon the borders of Devon and Dorset, which within the last seventy years was the most woody spot around these parts.

The significance of the Devon/Dorset border is interesting. Until the early 19th century, the parish of Dalwood belonged to the county of Dorset but geographically surrounded by Devon. The National Trust, in their booklet about Loughwood, show by superimposing a map dated 1765 with the county boundary marked over the present Ordnance Survey map, that the boundary ran directly through Loughwood meeting house. This lends support to the tradition that preachers there, if warned of danger from the prosecuting magistrates of either county, could make their escape to the other. There was said to be an escape door underneath the pulpit which allowed a quick escape.

The date of the beginning of the Baptist community worshipping at Loughwood is not certain, but is probably somewhere in the 1640s. The building dates from the 1650s. An entry in the church book dated the 31st. 8mo. 1654 tells us:

Seeinge there is a want of money to furnish the meetinge house we have begunne and we see some particular members have not donne their duty in givinge thereunto.

The record goes on to state how different members were appointed to collect money from other members in different areas.

The building itself is designed very much as a preaching house. The high pulpit occupies a central position at the front of the church. The main body of the church is made up of box pews, those on the left of the main centre aisle arranged in the 'normal' way - in rows facing the front. The box pews on the right of the aisle are a mixture

of square pews, and some rows facing inwards from the side wall.

There are two small rooms at the back, underneath the gallery. These rooms were used for cooking the midday meals, when the church met on Sundays for the whole day. The restoration by the National Trust added a touch of authenticity by opening up the chimneys in these rooms, putting back into place the hooks on which the cooking pots hung, and even burning a couple of logs in the fireplaces. In the front pews of the gallery are the music rests which show where the musicians sat. The National Trust provided a further touch of authenticity by reproducing the cut-out in the front pew which housed the bass viol, and the notch in the floor to rest it. The meeting house is surrounded on three sides by a graveyard, which was first used, according to the records, in 1659. In a corner of the graveyard is a small barn, which was once a stable for the horses of those who came from far afield.

The oldest church records were until recently kept at the Kilmington Baptist church, locked away in a safe. They are now kept in the Devon Record office. The first recorded transactions of the church start at 1653, and although some periods are not fully covered, the books give a record of the life of the church up till the present day.

The first book finishes at the end of the 18th century, and was itself lost for many years. It was the subject of a note at the beginning of the second book, which it is worth reproducing here:

To all whom it may concern -

About sixteen years since the Revd. Doctor Rippon, pastor of the Baptist'd church meeting in Carter Lane, Southwark London being about to publish a Baptist Register desired of us as a church to favor him with all our church books with a promise of returning them to us in the course of a few months, but to our great surprize and disappointment, after repeated solicitations, has neither returned them, nor can we get them to this day which accounts for the irregular insertion of what follows in the beginning of the book.

Dec. 27th. 1808

Rich'd Gill Pastor

James French

George Phippen Deacons

The book was to remain lost for a good many years. In 1889 Richard Bastable, then the pastor of the church, pasted in the church book a cutting from a newspaper (probably the *Freeman*), consisting of a letter he wrote, quoting the above note, and appealing for the return of the early book. By 1915 the book had been returned. Dr Whitley states,

... its appearance bears out the charge of another injured church, that the doctor (Rippon) put their books in a barrel, exposed to the damp. The volume has been cut, has been taken to pieces and put together again in wrong order; but every entry is legible, and nearly all are fully dated.²

It might be added that Dr Whitley himself left his marks in not only the first book, but also the second. He has left marks and notes beside entries of interest which he wished to bring out, and these can be traced in his article. One in particular, the counting of the number of members in the first list in the first book, was in fact inaccurate.

The spelling of the first book is not only archaic, but inconsistent. One of the early members, for instance, is referred to sometimes as 'Bro. Vicary' and sometimes as 'Bro. Vickery'. This difficulty in writing and spelling led the compiler of the National Trust booklet on Loughwood to assert wrongly that amongst the first members were some from Shebbear, which as he points out, was about 60 miles away. In fact, he had misread the name for Aylesbeare, then spelt 'Elesbeare'.³

The first record book starts in 1653, but the church must have existed for some time before that. The actual date of founding of the church is not known, but a little is known about the various elements which went to make up the church. Two Baptist officers who were part of the Parliamentary army were John Vernon and William Allen. They were amongst the army which, under General Fairfax, swept up the remains of the Royalist army between Dorchester and Exeter in 1645. These two met, and married, two daughters of a Mr Huish, of Sidbury (about 15 miles from Loughwood). They took their brides and settled in the parish of Dalwood, and the first list of members at Loughwood in 1653 shows them as members. P. H. Hardacre, however, says that Allen and Vernon were in Ireland until late 1654, when he had a disagreement with Cromwell and then settled in the South West.⁴

In the mid 17th century, Protestants in France were also undergoing some persecution. They were mainly Huguenots, and a large number of these from the northern regions of France sailed across the channel to settle in England, after the Parliamentary victory had brought religious toleration - particularly to Protestant dissenters. A large number of Huguenots from Normandy settled in Devon, and for a while there was a French speaking Protestant church in Exeter. However, at least two families settled at Dalwood and joined the Baptist church there. The first family to settle soon became known as 'French', probably because the locals could not manage a proper pronunciation of their name. French they were called and French they remained. The name remained a common one both amongst church members, and in the immediate locality.

The second family to come over were the de Phippens. Jaspas Stemberge, in his book *A Portrait of Canada*, illustrated the different strands making up the Canadian people. He was a descendant of the de Phippen family, and tells in graphic detail the story of how Jean de Phippen led his family out of France in 1657, and how they eventually settled at Dalwood, with the assistance of the French family⁵. The name soon became Phippen, and this name also became common in the church records, and in the locality.

A third name showing in the first list of members which possibly shows signs of French descent is Doyley, although nothing more is known about this family.

Other groups of Protestant dissenters in this little corner of Devon have left traces of their existence in the 17th century. The Quakers had a meeting house in Membury, just a couple of miles away, and also at Honiton. George Fox, the Quaker leader, visited both the Honiton and the Membury meeting houses in the 1650s and 1660s. While he was at Honiton, he was said to have had discussions with Baptist leaders.

The Independent church in Axminster was formed in 1660, and when the vicar of Axminster, Benjamin Ashwood, was ejected from his living in 1662, he became the first pastor. We know so much about this church by virtue of a book called the 'Axminster Ecclesiastica'. This started to be written in the 1680s, and gives a narrative account of the life of the church from 1660 until the turn of the century. This church became the Axminster Congregational church, and still exists as the Axminster United Reformed church.⁶

Another Independent church was started at Colyton with the ejected vicar of Colyton as its first pastor. It was known as 'George's Meeting', and its records are also deposited with the Devon Records Office.

Just seven miles away, but over the border in Dorset, there was another Baptist church at Lyme Regis. This church was formed in 1653, by a number of members from Loughwood breaking away to form the church at Lyme Regis. The records of Loughwood contain no reference to this, but the records of the Lyme Regis church, dating from 1653, contain a very full account of the negotiations between the church at Loughwood and the members at Lyme Regis. There was much heart searching at Loughwood before the Lyme Regis church was allowed to go with their blessing.

The Baptist church at Chard, in Somerset, also seven miles away, also owes its origin to members of Loughwood breaking away. The same is true of the Baptist church at Honiton. The church book of Loughwood does record in the early 1650s the arrangements made to conduct services at Honiton and Ottery St Mary. Evidently, the experience of Lyme Regis was fresh in their minds, and they wanted to lose as few members as possible due to distance.

In all three cases - Lyme Regis, Chard, and Honiton - there does not seem to have been any other point at issue besides the distance involved. In the church book, the theme of distances occurs several times. One of the causes for disciplining members was prolonged absence, and a frequent excuse given is the great distance involved. The first list of members gives the places of members, and they are listed from places as far scattered as Farway, Colyton, Ottery St Mary, Aylesbeare, Sidbury, Shute, Honiton, and Luppitt. This list, of course, was compiled after the Lyme Regis breakaway.

After the lists of members, the church book gives the following lists, which throws some light on the pattern of leadership:

Brethren approved of in the church to exercise their gifts according to the measure of grace, viz:

Bro. Jno. Owen	Bro. Vernon
Bro. Hitt	Bro. Allen
Bro. Tho. Payne	Bro. Doyley

Brethren nominated by the church to exercise their gifts beyaw of tryall, viz:

Bro. Jno. Payne	Bro. Guppy
Bro. Tho. Parsons	Bro. Windower
Bro. Henry Gryland	

We can get some idea of how this worked in practice from the records. Firstly, dated 14th. 12mo. 1654 -

It beinge accordinge to the rule of the gosple 1 Cor 14.29 that doctrine should be tryed in the churches of Xt and findinge that there hath been a neglect thereof among us. It is agreed upon that if anything be laid down by any Bro. in his speakinge which is directly contrary to sound doctrine: that those that observe it doe presently after he hath made an end of speakinge make their objections against it. And if there shall be only a failinge in the Application of Scripture nott accordinge to its prime sense or meaninge or anythinge equivalent thereto that, that member that observe it doe, in the presence of the church only, (in the spirit of meekness) mind such a brother of his failinge.

Then, from the same meeting -

If any member be offended at any proceedings in the church. It is thought fitt that they speedily make known such their grievance. That soe their satisfaction may be endeavoured and the peace of the church preserved.

Clearly, this was a church where all may have their say, and where all may keep each other within the bounds of what was considered sound.

The duties of these leaders in the church consisted also in administering a certain amount of disciplinary action. There are long periods when all we read of the leaders is that they admonished certain members, visited others to enquire of their reasons for absence, or collected money from members for one reason or another.

This may all seem rather daunting to our 20th century sensibilities, but their duties were not all unpleasant.

The church at Loughwood was constantly seeking a pastor in their early years. The very first recorded decision of a church meeting, dated 14th of the 12 mo. 1653, is as follows -

It lyinge as a grievance uppon the spiritts of many of the members that there is not a pastor amongst us. It is agreed uppon that Bro. Hitt draw upp an epistle to Bro. Pendarves to desire him (if he be not otherwise ingaged) to be the man,

and the members in general to bringe in what arguments they can to move him thereunto; or if in case he cannott be dismist from the place where he is, or see insufficient ground for his cominge amonge us, that he would use his utmost indeavours for the procuringe of one who is boath able and faithfull for the carryinge on of soe great worke. The arguments and the epistle to be brought in ye next first day seavennight.

Brother Pendarves did not come.

B. R. White has described the sort of views held by Pendarves, and his attitude to Fifth Monarchist beliefs in particular.⁷

In 1654 a day of prayer was appointed for the setting apart of officers in the church, and this was done when five elders and five deacons were chosen 'by the voice and full consent of us all'.

Four years later it was decided to discuss the following questions

1. What the scriptures hold forth as the essential qualifications of an elder.
2. Whether one elder only may safely and warrantably take charge of a church of Christ.
3. Whether any person soe qualified to be found in the church at Dalwood.

Their efforts went unrewarded until 1669, when an entry in the church book dated 10th. 3rd. mo. 1669 tells us -

Bro. George Allome beinge chosen by liftinge up of hands, as pastor of this congregation, was solemnly set apart for that office with fastinge, prayer and layinge on of hands of the eldership.

Bro. Hitt and Bro. Thomas Payne in like manner for rulinge elders.

Bro. Henry, Bro. John Payne Bro. Thomas Parsons in like manner for deacons.

Bro. Martin is also chosen for a deacon to be uppon tryall but not as yet solemnly ordained.

A meeting dated 31st. 2 mo. 1657 gave the following detailed timetable of services and meetings to be observed in the summer -

1. That the first day's meetings be begun (as neare as may be) aboute seaven in the morninge, and soe continue for the summer season. And the tyme employed as followeth, vizt.

1. In the tryall of gifts till 9 of the clocke. And that these two howers be improved by way of prayer and peopled by those brethren followinge; vizt. (here follows a list of preachers for five weeks)
2. From 9 in the morninge till well

towards 12 in a publique exercise. 3. From one till 3 of the clocke in publique exercise. 4. That after the dismissal of those that are nott members the church spend one hower or two in communicatunge their experiences; inquiringe after persons abent; judging the gifts of those that speake in the morninge; trying the things heard and dutys neglected.

2. That the next first day seavennight the church breake bread.

This timetable certainly gave a full day's activities. The spending of most of the daylight hours together on Sundays must have created a sense of community. The two small rooms at the back of the building contain fireplaces where the food was cooked at midday on Sundays.

What were the services like? The first part consisting of 'tryall of gifts' was meant for members of the church only, and consisted of those Brothers approved of by the church exercising their gifts on trial. The 'gifts' referred to would have been preaching gifts. The 'Publique exercise' was public worship of God, and the preachers here would have been those approved of to exercise their gifts in public.

The minute quoted above gave preaching and prayer as the two items making up the first service of the day. Certainly, reading from the Bible would have been an important part, since all authority came from that source.

A quote from a letter written by a member of the first English Baptist Church throws some light on the way the early Baptists worshipped.⁸

We begin with a prayer, after read some one or two chapters of the Bible; give the sense thereof and confer upon the same; that done, we lay aside our books and after a solemn prayer made by the first speaker he propoundeth some text out of the scripture and prophesieth out of the same by the space of one hour or three quarters of an hour. After him standeth up a second speaker and prophesieth out of the said text the like time and space, sometimes more, sometimes less. After him, the third, the fourth, the fifth, etc. as the time will give leave.

Then the first speaker concludeth with prayer, with an exhortation to contribution to the poor, which collection being made is also concluded with prayer. This morning exercise begins at eight of the clock and continueth until twelve of the clock.

The like course of exercise is observed in the afternoon from two of the clock until five or six of the clock.

Last of all the execution of the government of the church is handled.

This sounds very similar to the meetings at Loughwood, except that Loughwood's meeting limited the number of speakers to two.

The 'contributions to the poor', with or without exhortation, were certainly made at Loughwood. On several occasions they responded to requests from other churches. For example, in 1656, £2.5.0 was sent to the church at Chard 'for the relief of a brother'. In the previous year, a similar request was received from the church at Totnes, 'concerning the distress of a sister there'. Relief was also sent to Dorchester in 1659 for 'several families being presented as in very greate outward want'.

Likewise, several of the members received help from the other members. For instance, in 1655 it was decided -

That the next day of breakinge bread there be a collection made for Bro. Perryman; to the repaireing of his losse sustayned by fier.

The Lyme Regis church also records that they responded to a letter from Loughwood appealing for help for a brother's loss by fire from persecutors. Also, at Loughwood, the same day, £2.5.0 was sent to Chard, £1.11.8 was collected 'for Sister Ebdon', and a couple of years later, relief was sent to Bro. Rutley.

But not all those who asked, received. In 1659, Brother Doniam 'desired to borrow 5 pounds for present'. After consideration, the church said 'they doe nott judge it their duty to lend him anythings at present'. This was on the same day that relief was sent to Dorchester, and a further 'fifty shillings or thereabouts' was given to Bro. Browne 'beinge in want and nott able to carry on his caulinge without some present supply'. Also, in 1658, two brothers were sent to Brother Newbery of Axminster with 30 shillings, but they were also to advise him 'how best to improve it for the benefitt of his family'.

Not all help was given in cash. In 1659, because of 'the bodily weaknesse of Sister Adams and Sister Arundall of Dulliton', it was agreed to pay for 'the hyer of a horse to bringe them to the meetinge whether either of them or both shall come'.

The one thing missing from worship until almost the end of the 17th century was singing and music. The following question proposed to the West Country Baptist Association meeting at Tiverton in 1657 reflects the early Baptists' attitude to music.⁹

Q. Whether a believer being head of a family now in these daies of the gospel may keep in his or her house any instrument or instruments of musick, playing on them or admitting others to play on them?

A. It is the duty of the saints to abstain from all appearance of evill and not make provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof, Rom.13:14, to redeem the time Eph.5:15f, and to do all things to the glory of God, 1 Cor 10:31, and although we cannot conclude the use of such instruments of musick to be in all cases unlawful, yet we desire that saints would be very cautious lest they transgress the aforesaid rules in the use thereof and do that which may not be of good report and so give offence to their tender brethren.

The practice of singing in worship was introduced into Baptist churches towards the end of the 1680s, Benjamin Keach being the pioneer of this, at the Baptist church at Southwark, London. By 1691 he had established the practice enough to publish a book of 300 hymns.¹⁰ It was not until 1696 that it was approved of at Loughwood. The book records on August 23rd. 1696 -

It is agreed upon by the church... that liberty be given (to such as are satisfied therein) to sett up and continue the ordinance of singing in the publick worship of God.

It may seem odd to us, and perhaps a little sad, that by far the greatest number of entries in the early church books concern cases of discipline of church members. A further article will deal with the disciplining methods and their evolution in the church at Loughwood, but some early entries give an idea of how extensive the discipline was.

The first pages of the book give lists of the first members of the church, the first list dividing up the membership between those living in and around Honiton, and those living in and around Loughwood itself. The second list, probably the earlier to have been compiled, gives one list for all members. This consists of 105 members in good standing, plus a further 38 'members sometime belonging to ye church at Dalwood, since cast out and withdrawne from for sin and disorder'.

The other list gives 46 members listed under Honiton, of whom no less than 14 were recorded as 'cast out'. The members listed under Loughwood number 87, of whom only five were cast out. This is significant, since a good proportion of those cast out were for reasons of non-attendance over long periods. The greater distances involved may well have led to some of these dismissals.

Oral traditions have been handed down about the persecution of those early days. One says that when the worshippers arrived one Sunday morning they found the meeting house occupied - a huntsman was in the pulpit blowing his horn, while his hounds were scampering about the pews. The story does not tell how the emergency was dealt with.

Another story tells how the worshippers arrived to find an armed soldier at the door, with orders from the magistrate to thrust his sword into any who attempted to enter. After some hesitation, a brave young woman took her life in her hands, and 'with a shrill shriek' brushed past the motionless soldier. The rest of the members followed her in to start the service. These stories are not dated, but could well come from the restoration period - the 20 years or so from 1660.

One year in particular saw the polarisation of extreme Protestant and Catholic loyalties. Charles II died, and the question of his succession arose. As he had no legitimate son, his brother became James II. He was an avowed Catholic, and many Protestant forces were opposed to him. A Protestant pretender to the throne was James, Duke of Monmouth, an illegitimate son of Charles II. He had been in exile on the continent but soon came over to raise a Protestant army and claim

the throne. He landed at Lyme Regis in June 1685, and quickly gathered a makeshift army from the West country.

The attempt ended disastrously at the Battle of Sedgemoor less than a month after he landed. Following this, Judge Jeffries at his infamous 'Bloody Assize' sentenced hundreds of the 'rebels' to death, transportation, or imprisonment. Amongst those sentenced were some from the Axminster Independent church, and the Lyme Regis Baptist church. In fact, the pastor of the Lyme Regis church, Sampson Larke, was executed publicly in Lyme Regis.

Dr Whitley stated in his article that he did not find any evidence of any of the Baptists at Loughwood being implicated in the Monmouth rising. There are some clues, however.

Major Wilkins of Axminster in the 1930s¹¹ was able to cite a sworn statement before a magistrate by an informer, John Baites of Axminster. It says that he saw in the camp of Monmouth the persons listed. There follows a list of twelve names, of which two are reproduced as 'James Isitt, sen. and James Isitt Jun.'

There is a list of names, taken from a manuscript at the British museum of 'several persons who are indicted for high treason and are still at large'. There are 78 Axminster men in the list, of whom two are listed as 'James Hill, sen. and James Hill, jun.'¹² The juxtaposition of these two inclusions leads us to believe that it is possible, even likely, that the names of James Hitt, junior and senior, have been misread in both cases. Also included in the list of Axminster men was William Phippen. He was also, incidentally, amongst those sentenced to be transported to the West Indies. Certainly, given the prevailing attitude of dissenters at the time, it would have been unusual if none of the Loughwood Baptists joined Monmouth's army.

The picture which emerges of the Loughwood Baptists in the 17th century is thus one of a radical group, firmly espousing the Particular Baptist line. It may well have been this strictness in holding to Calvinist doctrine which kept the identity of the church in the following century (when many General Baptist churches degenerated into Unitarianism) and preserved it to be the thriving Baptist church which it is to this day.

NOTES

- 1 George Roberts, *History and Antiquities of the Borough of Lyme Regis*, n.p., 1843.
- 2 W. T. Whitley, 'Loughwood and Honiton', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, vol.IV, 1914-15, pp.129-144.
- 3 National Trust, *Loughwood Meeting House*, n.p., n.d.
- 4 P. H. Hardacre, 'William Allen, Cromwellian Agitator and Fanatic', *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XIX, p.301.
- 5 Jaspar Stenbridge, *A Portrait of Canada*, O.U.P., 1948, p.143.

- 6 *Axminster Ecclesiastica*, annotated by K. W. H. Howard, Gospel Tidings Publications, Sheffield, 1976.
- 7 B. R. White, 'John Pendarves, the Calvinistic Baptists and the Fifth Monarchy', *Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XXV, pp.251-271.
- 8 As quoted in *Your Heritage*, Baptist Times, n.d., p.8.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.8.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.8.
- 11 Maj. W. Wilkins, 'Echoes of the Monmouth Rebellion', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, vol.LXVIII, pp.376-378.
- 12 Additional MS. No. 30,077, British Museum.

J. B. WHITELEY

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