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EBENEZER PARTICULAR BAPTIST CHURCH, HERTFORD, AND THE EASTERN ASSOCIATION OF BAPTIST CHURCHES

When C. F. Stell wrote on the Eastern Association Baptist churches in this journal,¹ he was under the impression that the records of Ebenezer Particular Baptist Church, Hertford, did not exist. However, the minute books were still in the possession of the church and the late pastor, William J. Parker, kindly allowed me to consult them.²

The Hertford church can be traced back to June 1772 when the house occupied by Thomas Ribright, optician, in the parish of Tewin, three miles west of Hertford, was registered for worship. The application for registration was made by Ribright and four others, Thomas Young, William Rackstrow, Thomas Plows and Benjamin Young.³ Thomas Ribright and Thomas Young never became members of the Hertford church, but the others did. William Rackstrow became a founder member and was a deacon from 1776 to 1793 when he was 'Suspended from his Office and Communion at the Table for Unbecoming Walk and Conduct'. Thomas Plows transferred from another Baptist church to the newly formed Hertford church on 6 March 1775. Benjamin Young, of Holwell Manor, Hatfield,⁴ was to be one of the wealthiest members of the Hertford church and in due course purchased the freehold of the chapel,⁵ and conveyed it to Trustees.⁶

The first evidence for a meeting in the town of Hertford itself is in May 1773 when the house of Edward Snelling, in the parish of St John's, was registered for worship.⁷ The following month application was made for the registration of 'A Building fitted Up for a Meeting House Situated Standing and being in St Andrews Parish in the Town of Hartford in the County of Hartford'. The church was formally constituted by the signing of the church covenant on 5 September 1773 by William Rackstrow, Joseph Wood, Ann Cock, Sukea Rudd and Sarah Wood.⁸ Joseph Wood became a deacon, along with Rackstrow, but he too was suspended from office 'for an unbecoming Walk and Conduct' in 1778 but re-instated as a deacon in December 1801, and finally resigned in October 1807.

The Revd Robert Robinson assisted at the ordination of the Revd Robert Baskerville⁹ as pastor on 26 April 1775 and he recorded that the church consisted of two who had been members of the Independent Church at Hertford.¹⁰ In 1775 Thomas Green, the organist at All Saints Church, Hertford, wrote a poem which also makes clear that some left the Independent Chapel built 'Twixt Tattle Hill and the Fore Street' to join the newly formed Baptist Chapel near St Andrew's Church:

As you go on you soon will find
A Building of a different kind
A Meeting House thats large and plain
And stands within a narrow lane
Twixt Tattle Hill, and the Fore Street
Where a full congregation meet
On Sundays and on other days
To serve their God, and sing his praise.

Tho some of late, have this rejected
And a new one have erected
And placed it near St Andrews Church
And left the old one in the lurch
The Building is indeed but small
Yet large enough to hold them all.¹¹

The idea of forming the Eastern Association of Baptist Churches was first broached in public at the ordination of the Revd Robert Baskerville. Detailed

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consideration was given to the proposal at a meeting held at the home of Thomas Ribright at Tewin Mill on 8 August 1775. This suggests that Ribright, although not a member at Hertford, was a Baptist, presumably retaining his membership at one of the previously existing neighbouring churches. Details of the purpose and organization of the Association were agreed, and copies were sent to the individual churches for their approval. A further meeting on 26 September approved the articles of the Association. Annual Association meetings were held at Hemel Hempstead on 14-15 May 1776, Cambridge (1777), Harlow (1778), Colnbrook (1779), Hitchin (1780), New Mill (1781) and Hertford (1782).

The circular letter¹² issued after the 1780 meeting was written by the Revd Robert Baskerville and gives details of the business transacted. The Breviates are:

HITCHIN, Herts, May 16, 1780

WEDNESDAY evening 6 o'clock. Ministers, messengers, members of the associated and other churches, assembled at the Meeting-house. Mr Baskerville began in prayer, Mr Blaine¹³ was chosen as Moderator. Letters were read. Mr Baskerville was requested to draw up a circular letter, suited to the present condition of the churches, which in general appeared peaceable and prosperous. Assembly dismissed after prayer and singing.

THURSDAY morning, 6 o'clock. Same assembly met again, and spent time in conference and prayer. Mr Knott and Mr Cramps prayed.

HALF PAST 10. Publick worship began by the Moderator in singing 133d psalm. Mr Sleaf¹⁴ prayed. Sung 2 verses of 132d psalm. Mr Jones¹⁵ preached from Rom. xii.1. I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. Sung part of 100 psalm. Mr Walker¹⁶ preached from Matthew xix.25. Who then can be saved? And concluded in prayer.

HALF PAST 6, in the evening. Mr Robinson¹⁷ preached from Hosea iv.6. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Mr Giles¹⁸ concluded in prayer and dismissed the assembly.

RESOLUTIONS made in the course of the Association.

- I THAT in future associations, one of the brethren be appointed, to open and explain the nature and business of the association in form, in order to give the people a clear just notion of the design of our churches in associating.
- II THAT the next association be held on Tuesday and Wednesday in Whitsun week, 1781, at Tring, Herts, the services to begin at 6 o'clock on Tuesday evening, at 6 on Wednesday morning, and publick worship at half past 10. Messrs. Geard¹⁹ and Robinson to preach.

The first resolution suggests that there was some uncertainty about the role of the Association. In addition to its pastor, the Hertford church was represented at the Association Meeting by William Rackstrow who, judged by his tomb in St Andrew's Churchyard, Hertford, must have been a person of some substance.²⁰

The last known meeting of the Association took place at Hertford in 1782 and followed the pattern of earlier meetings. The Hertford church book gives the following information:

The Association was held, this Year at Hartford in the Baptist Meeting House, on May the 21, 22, 1782 in the Whitsun week.

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The Following Persons engaged

Tues, 6 o'clock, Bro Baskerville began the Worship by Singing and prayer

Mr Geard chosen Moderator,

Mr Liddon²¹, Chosen Secretary,

Mr Giles to draw up the Circular Letter,

Mr Robinson Concluded in prayer, After the Reading of the Several Letters from the Churches.

Wed. Morning 7 o Clock, Sung, Mr Walker prayed, And after some Conference Mr Geard Concluded in prayer.

Half past 10 Publick Worship began, By Singing

Mr Blaine Opened the Nature of the Association

Mr Morris²² prayed, Mr Sleaf preached from 1: Joh. 2:28

Mr Davis²³ prayed, Mr Robinson preached from Joh. 15:4

Mr Pelley²⁴ Concluded in Prayer.

Appointed the New Association at Colnbrook. Mr Baskerville and Mr Liddon to preach in case of failure Mr Geard.

No record exists of an Association meeting at Colnbrook in 1783. The Eastern Association was short-lived, but a need remained for Particular Baptist churches to consult one another. William James, second pastor of the Hertford Church, was one of those who in 1812 supported the formation of 'an annual general association of Particular Baptist Churches'. J. P. Edgecombe, pastor 1838-1843, attended the Annual Session of the Baptist Union in 1842 as a visitor.²⁵ The question whether the church should practise open communion arose in February 1822 when William James resigned, giving as one reason his favouring of open communion. The following year he resumed the pastorate but did not again raise the terms of admission to communion. He continued in office until 1827 when the church agreed that he and his wife could continue to reside in the tenement they occupied.

James Bisset (or Bissett) became pastor in 1830 but, as he favoured open communion, he offered his resignation in August 1834. The church did not immediately accept but consulted Mr Robert Young, farmer of Holwell Manor,²⁶ who, although a deacon of the church, 'was scarcely ever present and could not attend anything'. He advised the church to accept Mr Bisset's resignation and this was done! On 21 October 1835, James Bisset registered his house on the Old Cross, Hertford, for religious worship by Particular Baptists,²⁷ presumably an unsuccessful early attempt to plant an open communion church. He was excluded from the membership of Ebenezer on 28 February 1840 on the ground of non-attendance, having joined an independent congregation. Afterwards Baptist pastor at Walkern and Stevenage, he died at Hitchin on 2 April 1859.²⁸ Following Bisset's resignation, the Hertford Church called J. P. Edgecome, who 'lived and died a strict communionist and a stringent supporter of the doctrines of grace'.²⁹ The church sent a letter in support of the formation of the Strict Baptist Church Society.³⁰

Ebenezer Baptist Church has continued to practise strict communion but by the end of the century there was a group of men and women in the town with Baptist beliefs who did not feel it right to restrict access to the Lord's Supper to baptized believers. They formed Hertford Baptist Tabernacle in 1897,³¹ apparently some left Ebenezer to join the newly-formed open-communion Baptist church.³²

After Edgecombe's resignation, the pastorate was filled by Samuel Whitehead from 1846 until his death in 1857. Samuel Manley Plyer served 1858-9, when his ministry was abruptly terminated. Shortly afterwards he was 'withdrawn from' for an 'improper intimacy' which had come to light at Sheerness, where he had previously been pastor at Zion Baptist Church. Robert Bowles served as pastor 1860-

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1899 and George Mace 1902-1908. After Mace resigned, the church, not in a position financially to call another pastor, depended on supply preachers, until the local authority proposed to demolish the chapel in a road-widening scheme, and it was realized that the chapel house would only be replaced if occupied by a resident pastor. So a Strict Baptist minister, J. William Parker, a local butcher, was asked to become pastor.³³ He accepted and served for twenty-five years, until his death at the age of 76 on 10 March 1987, living with his family in the new chapel house adjoining the rebuilt chapel. Ebenezer Church has been a Gospel Standard Church for about thirty years. The last deacon of the church had come from a Gospel Standard church at Bexley and encouraged Ebenezer to join that list, a move resisted in earlier years.³⁴ The church has declined in recent years and at the beginning of 1991 had only two members, both ladies, and neither a pastor nor a deacon.

NOTES

1. C. F. Stell, 'The Eastern Association of Baptist Churches, 1775-1782', BQ 27, 1977, pp.14-26.
2. The church books for 1773-1928 have since been deposited in the Gospel Standard Baptist Library, Hove.
3. W. Urwick, *Nonconformity in Herts.*, 1884, p.556.
4. Benjamin Young was born 28 August 1758 at Holwell Manor and died 11 February 1844. He was buried at Luton Baptist Church. He became a member of the Hertford church on 1 May 1782. His father, Robert Young, leased Holwell Farm, Hatfield, from William Clarke Esq. in 1743 (Hertfordshire County Record Office 74131). I am grateful to Mr Henry W. Gray for genealogical information about the Young family.
5. Appointment and Release of Baptist Meeting House and Premises Saint Andrews Street Hertford, 6 August 1842, HCRO 74122.
6. Conveyance of Baptist Meeting House and premises upon Trust, 18 November 1842, HCRO 74122.
7. Urwick, *op.cit.*, p.539.
8. The year of foundation is incorrectly given on the present building as 1772.
9. The name is often spelt 'Baskerville' in the Hertford Church Book.
10. *English Baptist Records, 2, Church Book: St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, 1720-1832*, 1991, p.115.
11. I am grateful to Mr Edgar R. Lake for drawing my attention to the manuscript book of poems by Thomas Green held by the Hertford Museum.
12. R. Baskerville, *The Circular Letter of the Eastern Association, held at Hitchin, Herts, 16-17 May 1780*, p.13, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.
13. Henry Blaine (d.1788) was pastor of New Mill Baptist Church, near Tring.
14. James Sleep (d.1811) was pastor of Chesham Baptist Church.
15. Morgan Jones (d.1797) was pastor of Hemel Hempstead Baptist Church.
16. William Walker (d.1792) was pastor of Colnbrook Baptist Church.
17. Robert Robinson (1735-1790) was pastor of St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge.
18. Hugh Giles was pastor of Chenies Baptist Church.
19. John Geard (d.1838) was pastor of Hitchin Baptist Church.
20. William Danby Rackstrow joined the church on 5 August 1777 and died 28 February 1822.
21. John Liddon was pastor of Hemel Hempstead Baptist Church by 1790.
22. Richard Morris (d.1817) was pastor of Woodrow Baptist Church, near Amersham.
23. John Davis (d.1795) was pastor of Waltham Abbey Baptist Church.
24. Thomas Pelley (or Pilly or Pilley)(d.1801) was pastor of Luton Baptist Church.
35. *Account of the Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Session of the Baptist Union, 1842*, p.4.
36. Robert Young was born c.1755 and died 26 January 1835, being buried at Luton Baptist Church. Joined the Hertford Church on 15 May 1809, and appointed deacon 11 October 1810. Applied for registration of Holwell Manor as a place of meeting for religious worship on 19 November 1816 (Urwick, *op.cit.* p.586). This took place after his wife, Mary, became convinced of the need for believer's baptism. (William James, *A Funeral Sermon occasioned by the Decease of Mrs Mary Young, Holwells, Hatfield, Herts, 1817*, Hertford Museum). She became a member of the Hertford Church on 5 January 1812, and died 27 February 1817, aged 47, and was buried at Luton Baptist Church.
27. Urwick, *op.cit.* p.846.
28. 'Death of Rev James Bisset: Father and Founder of the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society', *Zion's Trumpet* 27, 1859, pp.80-82.
29. W. Flack, 'Death and Funeral of the late Mr Edgecombe', *Earthen Vessel* 21, 1865, pp.129-131.
30. Later known as the Baptist Evangelical Society, see G. R. Breed, *The Baptist Evangelical Society - an early Victorian Episode*, Dunstable, 1988.
31. Edgar Lake, *Hertford Baptist Church 1897 to 1987*, Hertford 1987.
32. J. W. Parker, personal communication.
33. *ibid.*
34. *ibid.*

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