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Baptists in Liverpool in the Seventeenth Century (1)

THE origins of the first Baptist witness in Liverpool are tantalizingly obscure. We may presume with a fair degree of certainty that from the time it became a garrison town in 1644 and for a decade or more later a handful of the many soldiers stationed there would be of this persuasion, but so far none of those whom the Town Books show as having been admitted freemen, nor any of the sixteen godly ministers who appear on the Freemen's lists of 1644 and 1653 can be positively identified as such. Colonel John Wigan who generally managed to plant a Baptist cause wherever he journeyed was in the town in 1651, the same year as Whitley presumed he founded the cause at Hill Cliffe, and perhaps from that date onwards a tiny group of sectaries began to meet in barrack room or hovel, soldiers for the most part, but attracting one or two town dwellers, including, as we shall note, at least one civic notability. But it was not till Charles II had been on the throne for five years that a Baptist congregation existed in Liverpool for which definite proof can be adduced.¹

From that year, 1665, three valuable pieces of evidence are forthcoming. Firstly Bishop Hall, collecting information for his archbishop's great census of Nonconformity, reported that he knew of Baptists meeting at Liverpool, Warrington and Frodsham². Secondly, during his annual visitation of the Deanery of Warrington³ there were presented before him the following persons, charged with being anabaptists or leaving their children unchristened: Henry Jones and his wife (Elinor), — Nickson and his wife, (John) Tempest and his wife, Arthur Hutton and his wife, Evan Swift and his wife, Thomas Christian.⁴

Thirdly, we learn from Sir Roger Bradshaigh's letter book that a Major Jones of Liverpool, "a person notoriously disaffected," John Ditchfield of Warrington, Thomas Crompton and Michael Briscoe (of Toxteth Park) and John Tempest of Liverpool who had been arrested in September of the same year⁵ were a little later "released upon single security for behaviour and to appear."⁶

In 1669 the Liverpool Baptists were again in trouble: despatching his returns to Archbishop Sheldon's enquiry, Bishop Wilkins of Chester reported "a frequent conventicle of about thirty to forty anabaptists at Leverpoole, most of them rich people, kept at the house of Mr. Jones, and old parliamentary officer." Several of these are stated to have been "mariners."⁷ Thirty to forty seems a large

number, and an entry in the Citation Book for the same year suggests it is a misleading one. Here, the Jones, the Huttons, Mr. Williamson and Mrs. Tempest are again presented, together with several other persons, some of whom however in later records appear as Quakers. The comprehensive charge of holding private conventicles, being anabaptists or leaving their children unchristened would, of course, embrace both types of radical dissenters. Over the name of Henry Jones moreover has been scrawled the word *abiiit* (gone away) and over that of his wife *mort*. The following year the Jones do not appear, though the unfortunate Swifts, Tempests, Nicksons and Huttons were in trouble yet again. The Williamsons and the wife of John Tempest were again presented the next year on the lesser charge of "abstaining from church."

The entries in the Citation Book for 1671 fortunately specify that those accused are "reputed anabaptists" and the names of Quakers appear elsewhere. Altogether there were four classes of evil persons listed this year: anabaptists, non-appearers, tipplers and Papists. The Baptists were: Arthur Hutton gent. and his wife, Thomas Williamson and his wife, — Cleveland gent. and his wife, the wife of John Tempest and Evan Swift and his wife. (The Cleavelands, we note, had previously been charged in 1669 and 1670.)

The following year saw a short-lived phase of toleration granted to Dissenters and Thomas Christian seized the opportunity to take out a licence for worship to be conducted in his house.⁸ The licence is marked "Presbyterian," but would most probably be for a Baptist meeting (similar errors were extremely common all over the country). No doubt Christian had succeeded Jones as leader of the small Baptist community.

At this point it is necessary to pause and enquire what we know of the handful of individuals who comprised the first Baptist congregation meeting in Liverpool, whether they are mere names in a nonconformist hagiology, or living beings, about whose lives we need not remain completely uninformed. Fortunately considerable evidence has come to light concerning most of them, and we may perhaps endeavour to rescue some of them from a total and undeserved obscurity.

Henry Jones for example stands out as a most interesting figure. He should not be confused with an illustrious namesake in the Parliamentary ranks, Dr. Henry Jones, one-time bishop of Clogher, scoutmaster general in Cromwell's army, a relation of Jones the regicide, with whom he corresponded frequently.⁹ Nor should he be confused with a Captain Henry Jones who was captured at the siege of Dunkirk in 1658.¹⁰ Major Henry Jones first appears in Ireland in 1652.¹¹ One of his first duties was to sit on the committee dealing with the plague in Dublin, and two years later he was busily engaged in suppressing the Tories of Wicklow,¹² and also

serving as a member of the Court of Claims relating to Articles in Ireland. In 1655 he was on another Commission dealing with "transplanting."¹³ In 1657 Henry Cromwell wrote to the Lord Protector a letter of complaint about Major Jones, "a man neither particularly useful nor particularly loyal," who had been drawing excessive pay and had been suspended pending enquiries.¹⁴ The major seems to have recovered from this unsavoury business however, for on 22nd June 1659, as commander of a company of foot, he was ordered to remove to Dublin Castle and was shortly afterwards promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.¹⁵ Taking the side of the military party against Monk however, he was arrested in Dublin Castle by Sir Theophilus Jones in December 1659¹⁶ and thereafter nothing is heard of him till his brief appearance in Liverpool in the 1660s.

Thomas Williamson was a member of an old Liverpool family with a distinguished civic record. Thomas was admitted as a councillor on 21st June 1642 and was mayor of Liverpool in 1652 and again in 1659. He was one of the six aldermen who refused to take the declaration accompanying the Corporation Act in 1662 and were removed in consequence. He paid tax on three hearths in 1663 and lived on till 1692. His career seems to provide a valuable link between the Baptist soldiery of the Civil War period and the persecuted conventiclers of the Restoration.

Arthur Hutton (alias Hatton, Hulston) paid tax on three hearths in 1663 and died in 1673. His wife survived him by at least ten years.

Evan Swift was a member of a large family which hailed originally from the Ormskirk district, some of whom seem to have made their way to Lowhill, Everton, during the seventeenth century. An Evan Swift who was christened at Ormskirk in 1640 may be identified with the Baptist of that name who died about 1675.

John Tempest, gentleman, paid tax on three hearths in 1663 and died in 1675, his wife Frances surviving him by over a decade. There was a Parliamentary colonel of this name¹⁷ but no positive identification can be hazarded. The surname is not found in seventeenth century Liverpool records.

Concerning *Mr. Nickson* we have learnt nothing, not even his Christian name. His wife, Elizabeth, died in January 1691.

Undoubtedly the most influential of these early Liverpool Baptists were the *Clevelands* whom later records enable us to distinguish as Richard and his wife Susannah. Richard Cleveland whose nonconformity has never been noted by any Liverpool historian was, of course, the son of none other than the cavalier poet John Cleveland, known with some exaggeration as "the Royalist Milton" or, more soberly as "the last metaphysical."¹⁸ Richard and his wife had come to Liverpool in the 1670s and during the next

twenty years built up the sugar-boiling and importing business which was to raise their descendants to a position of eminence among the commercial families of eighteenth century Liverpool (Cleveland Square was named after them). What influenced the couple to embrace dissenting principles is far from clear. Their nonconformity must certainly have hindered their social and economic advancement which is all the more remarkable in the face of the bitter persecution they were compelled to endure till their deaths in 1683 and 1685.

For the years of renewed persecution, from 1673 to the end of the Stuart era, the Citation Books are our principal guide to the fortunes of the Liverpool Baptists. But from this gloomy record of spiteful intolerance, two broad and significant trends are observable. Firstly the centre of Baptist activity shifts slowly northwards from the town of Liverpool to the scattered farms of Everton and Lowhill where presumably, as the Presbyterians were discovering at Toxteth Park, Dissenting worship, though frequently interfered with, was not made totally impossible. Secondly, their mutual experience of persecution bred in the Quakers and Baptists a feeling of kinship leading on to joint worship and, by 1684, virtual assimilation. But for some reason, as we shall observe, it was Quaker principles which gradually prevailed in this partnership of suffering; and but for a series of lucky accidents distinctive Baptist witness would have disappeared by the last decade of the century.

Firstly then, the Clevelands, Frances Tempest and Mrs. Hulston, together with a small group of Quakers, bravely upheld Nonconformist principles in Liverpool, and were regularly indicted each year before the bishop for their pains, though on two occasions (1678, 1687) their obstinacy led to further proceedings before the mayor and common council, and thus presumably they struggled on, enduring nothing more terrifying than the annual episcopal visitation, when suddenly their comparative ease was rudely shattered in the year 1683. The Rye House plot inspired the Corporation of Liverpool to an excess of persecuting zeal, and there ensued a series of unhappy incidents which included a deal of popular violence and the confiscation of the town charter and which culminated in the dismissal of the mayor, Robert Seacombe, in 1684.¹⁹ On 9th October 1683, and thereafter on six separate occasions till 5th October 1685, the Liverpool portmoot, which had never previously been burdened with cases of this nature, dealt with an average of forty-five persons accused of absenting themselves from church, arriving late, or adopting irreverent postures therein. The majority of these were clearly Catholics, with a fair proportion of Quakers,²⁰ but some time-honoured Baptist names appear, including Richard Cleveland (once only, just before his death), Susanna

Cleveland, Frances Tempest and two newcomers from the north, by the name of Robert and Thomas Whitfield.

Liverpool was not in fact the only centre of Dissenting activity on Merseyside, and the number of Liverpool Baptists was extremely small and their witness all the more heroic in comparison with the presentments from the parish of Walton which not only contained a great number of Papists, and sectaries worshipping with Briscoe and Crompton at Toxteth Park, but also a growing number of persons who from later records are already identifiable as "Anabaptists" residing in the Lowhill area and in remoter districts further to the north and east. The Citation Book of 1675 indeed definitely divides the recusants of Walton parish into Papists, Quakers and Anabaptists, together with the conventiclars at Toxteth Park. Among the Baptists of the Lowhill area James Cheshire and Margaret Houghton are first noted in 1672, Thomas Whitfield of Dovecote, West Derby parish, in 1673 (on this occasion he was described as a Quaker), John Hunter in 1676, James Whitfield in 1677, Ann, wife of James Cheshire, and Elizabeth Whitfield in 1680, Robert and John Whitfield and James Heyes in 1684, Thomas Heyes and Hannah, wife of Robert Whitfield, and the wife of Jonathan Liversey in 1686.

The Whitfields are a most interesting family. Pursuing various humble trades in both Liverpool and Lowhill, they constantly appear in the municipal records as paying heavy fines, not merely on account of their dissent, but through non-performance of civic offices to which they were repeatedly, against their wishes, being elected. (One cannot help thinking that in this obstinate family the malicious authorities had found themselves a tidy source of revenue.) Little wonder that on 12th January 1685 Hannah, wife of Robert Whitfield, watchmaker, appeared before the Liverpool portmoot charged with uttering dark threats: "For reflecting on the government and saying the common council of this town had the money collected by the chapel wardens from the dissenters, and further that though it was on their side now, we hope it will be on our side ere long."²¹

Even after Toleration the Whitfields still had a certain nuisance value. The four children born to the wife of Elias Whitfield, ship's carpenter of Liverpool between 1704 and 1709, were not brought to the parish church for christening, and their names are to be found scribbled on the back page of St. Nicholas' parish register in the company of the children of gipsies and strangers. Elias and John Whitfield later appear as members of the Liverpool Baptist Church in 1730, the first year from which a list of names has survived. Like the Hunters, Houghtons, Liveseys and Cheshires this family forms one of the interesting links between the shadowy Baptist witness of the seventeenth century and the regularly constituted church of the eighteenth.

Far more significant, however, than any entries in the Citation Books concerning the Baptists of Lowhill or any such in the Town Books concerning those of Liverpool is an indictment before the Easter Quarter Sessions at Ormskirk in 1684 which reveals both groups worshipping together under the same roof: "Susanna Cleveland widow, Frances Tempest widow, Deborah Whitfield spinster, all of Liverpool, Thomas Strange stonegetter of Kirkdale, Edward Strange stonegetter, James Cheshire tailor and Ellen his wife of Kirkdale, Thomas Cheshire millwright, Maria Swift of West Derby, Thomas Whitfield husbandman of Toxteth Park, are all convicted as quakers meeting in the house of William Gandy of Liverpool, cum multis aliis ad numeris (sic) 33."²²

This William Gandy was the most resolute and determined of early Quaker leaders in Liverpool, and the meeting together in his house of so many who either before or after appear clearly as convinced Baptists indicates that at this particular juncture the radical dissenters were virtually assimilated under vigorous Quaker leadership.²³ The Baptists, disorganised and possibly since the 70s isolated and leaderless, sighed for renewed contacts with kindred fellowships elsewhere, were they to survive as a distinct community into the period of Toleration which lay ahead.

(To be concluded)

NOTES

¹ Whitley once suggested that one of the five men witnessing a Hill Cliffe deed in 1660 hailed from Liverpool, but none of these names appears in local records. Perhaps, however, he had in mind John Leigh who married Sir Edward Moore's sister in 1658. Mr. O. Nott's reference (*Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. IV) to a presentment of Liverpool Baptists before the Wigan Quarter Sessions in December 1661 cannot be discovered in the surviving Quarter Sessions records.

² From the Episcopal Returns of 1665, not included in the Tenison mss. at Lambeth Palace. The original seems to have been kept in the Diocesan Registry, was known to earlier historians, but is now lost.

³ The Citation Books of the Chester diocese housed in the Cheshire Record Office commence only in 1665. They were re-discovered in the summer of 1962.

⁴ Whitley has these eleven persons, in this order and in the same year, presented before the Lancs. Q. Sess. at Wigan, but this is certainly a mistake.

⁵ *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancs. and Cheshire*, Vol 43 (1912), 148.

⁶ Eight months later Jones and Swift were each fined 1s. for refusing to contribute towards the cost of repairing the parish church—Liverpool Town Books (Liverpool Record Office).

⁷ G. Lyon Turner: *Original Records of Early Nonconformity* (1911), Vol. I, 172.

⁸ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1672-3*, 514. Lyon Turner, *op. cit.*, II, 677.

(continued on p. 205)