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A London Congregation during the Great Persecution

PETTY FRANCE PARTICULAR BAPTIST CHURCH,
1641 - 1688

W. T. WHITLEY found the origins of the Petty France Particular Baptist church in the baptisms of the Separatists Thomas Kilcop, Richard Blunt and Mark Lukar in 1641 and traced its course through the London church for which Kilcop and John Webb signed the Particular Baptist *London Confession* (1644).¹ By 1651 Edward Harrison appears as a member of the church,² and he apparently took up residence in Petty France in 1657, by which date Samuel Tull had also joined the church.³ Both Harrison and Tull signed *The Humble Apology of . . . Anabaptists* (1660), the joint General and Particular Baptist tract disclaiming involvement in Venner's Rising.⁴ But this was apparently insufficient to secure Petty France from attack, and on 15 June 1662 soldiers removed their preacher from the meeting-house by force. A fortnight later the violence was intensified: "Soldiers came to *Petty France* full of Rage and Violence, with their Swords drawn; they wounded some, and struck others, broke down the Gallery, and made much spoile."⁵ The 1669 episcopal returns reveal Thomas Harrison as teacher of the Petty France congregation; and it was he who obtained a licence, dated 25 July 1672, to preach in Edward Harrison's Petty France dwelling, under the terms of Charles II's Declaration of Indulgence.⁶

The first surviving church book of Petty France opens 16 May 1676, and an alphabetical list of members, dated 31 July 1676, follows. The list has clearly been added to later and it is impossible to differentiate the original from later entries, so that the exact size of the membership in 1676 is unclear.⁷ The Petty France church book is markedly unusual in containing a large number of records of accessions to membership by means of transfer on the basis of a letter of recommendation from another church. Between 16 May 1675 and 11 September 1684 ninety-eight members appear to have joined Petty France on the basis of recommendation from another Baptist congregation. In addition twenty-three transfers are recorded from Petty France to other Baptist churches, though some of these moves are by people who had joined Petty France only temporarily after transfer from another church. By comparison, 108 members (sixty-eight women and forty men) were added to Petty France by baptism during the same period, 1 August 1675 to 5 October 1684.⁸ Between 1675 and 1684 the church recorded several baptisms every year, and the records show no significant drop in numbers baptised at any stage during this period, though a fall might have been expected to follow

intensification of persecution. Following the eight baptisms recorded for 1675, there is a fairly steady increase to seventeen in 1680, but lower figures for the ensuing years.

The large number of members recommended to Petty France by non-metropolitan churches may possibly indicate the prominence of Petty France in its relationship with Particular Baptist churches across the country. It seems possible that it became common practice for members from provincial Particular Baptist churches moving to London to be provided with letters of recommendation to Petty France. Most of those joining Petty France by letter of recommendation are from closed-membership Particular Baptist churches, usually those belonging to one of the regional Particular Baptist Associations. In addition Petty France apparently accepted members from open-communion Particular Baptist churches, for instance, Broadmead (Bristol). This acceptance of members from Baptist churches of a different order is surprising in view of the intensely-fought contemporary dispute concerning the extent of fellowship extended by Baptist congregations.⁹

On 21 September 1675 William Collins and Nehemiah Coxe were ordained elders of Petty France.¹⁰ Collins had received an unusually long and thorough education by contemporary Baptist standards, and undertook a continental tour to France and Italy to broaden his experience. He graduated B.D., but despite efforts to attract him into the Anglican ministry, accepted a call to minister at Petty France in 1675.¹¹ Coxe was a qualified physician.¹² In April 1676 a Brother Bennet of Southwark took up office as deacon at Petty France.¹³ In January 1677 Paul Ludlow, a temporary member, recommended to Petty France by the Devizes Baptists for the duration of his stay in London, was asked to help lead the Monday evening church meeting.¹⁴ Petty France evidently divided up the area from which its membership was drawn into "quarters", in each of which brethren were made responsible for helping the poor, by collecting money from members and distributing aid to the needy. Brother Dixon evidently found the task in his quarter too burdensome, and in 1677 the church called on Brother Loveday to assist him.¹⁵

In 1677 the Particular Baptist churches drew up the Second London Confession.¹⁶ W. L. Lumpkin credits William Collins with preparing a draft version of this, in the form of an adaptation of the Westminster Confession, to present to the Assembly. One of the main aims of the London Confession was to emphasise the "heartly agreement with them [i.e. Presbyterians and Independents] in that wholesome protestant doctrine which, with so clear evidence of Scriptures, they have asserted". If Collins was responsible, it is significant for the understanding of Petty France that the Confession did not restrict communion to baptised believers and allowed the singing of "Hymns and Spiritual Songs". In any case this Confession, with its Appendix, was in due course read and considered by the Petty France church, who in August 1677 agreed to its publication.¹⁷

Nehemiah Coxe's first published work appeared in 1677 in the form of a rebuttal of some of the views of Thomas Collier, the West Country Particular Baptist. The immediate occasion of Coxe's attack was Collier's *An Additional Word to the Body of Divinity* (1674).¹⁸ Evidently for some years Collier's fellow Particular Baptists had been dubious about some of his doctrinal views, particularly with respect to election, universalism and the person of Christ.¹⁹ Collier's systematic statement of doctrine in this supplement to his *Body of Divinity* finally provoked some of the Particular Baptist elders to request Coxe to write a refutation of his errors. Six Particular Baptist leaders signed the preface to Coxe's response, *Vindiciae Veritatis*, explaining the occasion of its publication, and their agreement with its content.²⁰ They carefully defended Coxe, who was evidently ordained elder unusually early, from any aspersion cast on his youthful attack on a veteran Particular Baptist. In his own introduction, Coxe implies that Collier is tinged with Pelagianism and Socinianism.²¹ Collier quickly responded.²² Coxe's commission by the London Particular Baptist elders provides an example of one form of the co-operation within the group of London Particular Baptist churches.

Largely in reply to Joseph Whiston's response to Thomas Delaune's work on the covenants, Coxe published *A Discourse of the Covenants* in which he handled the subject broadly, but was particularly concerned to refute the defence of paedobaptism based on parallels drawn with the covenant of circumcision.²³

In February 1678 Coxe was appointed his church's messenger to a Particular Baptist Association meeting at Hemel Hempstead, held on 2 April 1678. In due course he reported back to Petty France, mentioning the "desire that for the future some brethren in the behalf of this and other Congregations in the city may be as occasion is offered appointed to assist them in their meetings &c."²⁴ Coxe was also Petty France's messenger to an Association meeting at Abingdon, 24 September 1678,²⁵ but when the associated London Particular Baptist churches held a meeting of messengers in the city itself the following year, both Coxe and Collins attended.²⁶ In September 1679 the Association of London Particular Baptist churches agreed that Brother Jones's Southwark congregation should be accepted into their group. The London Association was at this time regularly sending two messengers to the Hertfordshire Particular Baptist Association meetings, which were apparently currently taking place at six-monthly intervals. Daniel Dyke and Benjamin Dennis were chosen to "represent the state of the churches associated in London" at the next such meeting, at Hemel Hempstead on 6 October 1679; they were to inform the Hertfordshire churches of the accession of Jones's church to the London Association.²⁷ The following February Hercules Collins's Old Gravel Lane Particular Baptist congregation was also received into the London Association.²⁸ Coxe himself attended further Association meetings at St. Albans on 16 March 1680, and at Abingdon on 5 April 1682.²⁹ Both Coxe and Collins attended a further London

Association messengers' meeting in the city on 10 April 1683.³⁰

Meanwhile at Petty France, Brother Austen was upon trial of his gifts, and in May 1679 he was given I *Peter* 5.5 to expound to the congregation, following the "public exercise".³¹ In 1681, Coxe published the sermon he had preached at the ordination of an elder and deacons in "a London Baptist church"; possibly Austen was among those ordained on that occasion. This has been noted as the earliest recorded public ordination by dissenters after the Restoration.³²

In 1682 evidence appears of government scrutiny of Petty France.³³ W. T. Whitley interprets the "Mr. Hars" reported as leading a meeting of 600 Particular Baptists, with a total of five ministers and three meeting places, as being Edward Harrison; and suggests Coxe, Collins, John Gammon, Benjamin Dennis, and Brother Williams as the other five ministers. However, an alternative identification might be with John Harris, since from the Petty France Church Book it is clear that by 1682, the date of this informer's report, Coxe and Collins, rather than Harrison, were leaders at Petty France. In addition, Whitley suggests that the "Petit France" meeting classed as Independent in Thompson's list of London conventicles, 1683, is to be identified as the Petty France Particular Baptists, still meeting in the place licensed by Edward Harrison in 1672. In March 1683 the church was disturbed at their Lord's day meeting, and it was probably soon afterwards that they were excluded from their meeting place in Petty France, which necessitated alterations in the organisation of the congregation.³⁴ Contributions for the poor were now to be collected monthly by subscription; and the breaking of bread was to take place monthly, instead of once in three weeks. In 1686, a conventicle of members from Petty France, preached to by Nehemiah Coxe, was disrupted by the authorities. As a result Widow Elizabeth Nightingale of Bishopsgate was prosecuted for holding a conventicle in her house.³⁵

In 1687, following James II's Declaration of Indulgence, Coxe and Collins quickly accepted licences to worship and, when readmitted to the Petty France meeting house, presented an address of thanks to the King. This implicit recognition of his dispensing power met the disapproval of Baptist contemporaries; Kiffin's reaction to the Indulgence was to re-open his meeting place, but neither to acknowledge the dispensing power, nor thank the King.³⁶

In October 1684, Petty France was informed that their member, Brother Gammon, had accepted a call to be pastor of an unspecified congregation.³⁷ In November 1687, after James's Indulgence, Petty France elected four new deacons unanimously: Brothers Collet, Peck, Meers and Man were ordained in December.³⁸ In London in 1689 William Collins, as messenger from Petty France, signed the second edition of the *Second London Confession*, issued by the General Assembly of Particular Baptists.³⁹

Petty France found itself with fairly typical matters of discipline to deal with.⁴⁰ In 1675 Sister Chaplen was admonished for absence from meeting, lying, and consulting a conjuror.⁴¹ Katherine Wensly,

who asked to transfer membership to Francis Bampfield's London Seventh Day Baptist church, having become convinced of the validity of their Sabbath beliefs, was subjected, vainly, to the joint efforts of Coxe and Collins to dissuade her.⁴² Mary Williams was admonished for attempting to conceal her fornication with her master, who had evidently forced his attentions upon her.⁴³ Two brothers were sent to admonish Brother Marshall, imprisoned in the Fleet, for his drunkenness, fornication and returning to parish worship.⁴⁴ A Sister Hattam was, after due admonition, excommunicated for deserting to the Quakers.⁴⁵ Hesther (sic) Bestly differed from the church over laying on of hands, and although Petty France agreed to grant "libertye of her conscience & practise" in this matter, she resorted in disorderly fashion to a church with beliefs similar to her own. In June 1678 she was cut off from Petty France, who considered her "under censure for her disorder".⁴⁶ Sister Cyphers was accused of ill-treating her servants; she allegedly deprived them of food, beat them and pawned clothes supplied to them by relatives, leaving them nothing to wear for church on Sundays. She broke the contract of apprenticeship with one Anne Flemming, and threw her out of her house before the five-year apprenticeship had been completed. Sarah Booker, an apprentice who was the victim of her special cruelty, managed to get her covenant of apprenticeship terminated by her parents' paying compensation; but the girl was confined in Cyphers' house, and died falling from a window while attempting to escape. Sister Cyphers was excommunicated in April 1680.⁴⁷ Two years later Robert Pabworth was excommunicated for whoredom, "abominable cursing", drunkenness, wife-beating and Sabbath-breaking.⁴⁸ Thomas Price, in jail till he could raise bail, and obliged by the court to maintain his illegitimate child, was excommunicated for his fornication which had led "to the great reproach of Religion in the neighbourhood where he dwells".⁴⁹ However, it was not every case of discipline that ended in failure; Peter Grey, who had previously deserted his wife, confessed his error to the church, described his conviction of sin, and was duly received back into full communion.⁵⁰

NOTES

¹ W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London* (London 1908), p. 105. But see B. R. White, "Baptist Beginnings and the Kiffin Manuscript", *Baptist History and Heritage*, II, no. 1 (January 1967), pp. 32-3, 36-7, and W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, rev. ed.), p. 156. Webb is alleged to have later become an atheist. Kilcop also signed the 1646 edition of the *Confession*.

² Harrison graduated B.A. from St. John's College, Cambridge, 1638; M.A., 1640, Hart's Hall, Oxford. He was ordained and appointed vicar of Kensworth, Hertfordshire, but resigned his benefice on taking up Baptist views c. 1644. In 1645 he was acting as Treasurer for the Eastern Association at Newport Pagnell; in 1647 he was chaplain to Thomas Harrison's regiment of horse. He signed the 1651 *London Confession* (W. T. Whitley, "Edward Harrison of Petty France", *Baptist Quarterly*, VII (1934-5), pp. 214-20).

³ Whitley, *The Baptists of London*, p. 105.

⁴ If, as seems probable, the names of signatories are arranged according to church allegiance, three other signatories from Petty France are: John Cox (possibly a relation of Benjamin), James Knight and Christopher Blackwood. For Blackwood cf. *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, ed. B. R. White (London 1971-4), p. 123, n. 41. There is no positive proof that Kilcop was still a member of Petty France in 1660.

⁵ *Behold a Cry!* . . . (London 1662), p. 7. Whitley records that Edward Harrison provided a meeting place for the congregation by 1663 (*The Baptists of London*, p. 105).

⁶ G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Nonconformity* (London 1911), II, p. 989.

⁷ The church book, measuring 12" x 8", is now deposited in the church safe of Devonshire Square Baptist Church, Stoke Newington, London. It is labelled "Devonshire Square Minute Book C".

⁸ Figures extracted from Minute Book C. On 24 December 1676 baptisms were postponed "because by reason of the extremity of the present frost we could not now come at the water" (p. 3).

⁹ Sister Hardcastle, widow of Thomas Hardcastle, former elder at Broadmead, was received as a member in 1680; Mary Webb, from "a Church of Christ in Bristol walking with our beloved Brother Fownes" in 1683 (Minute Book C, p. 16; F. E. Lewis MS (Broadmead Baptist Church), f. 4). B. R. White, "Open and Closed Membership among English and Welsh Baptists", *Baptist Quarterly*, XXIV (1971-2), pp. 330-35.

¹⁰ Edward Harrison apparently retired from active leadership at Petty France in 1673 or 1674, though he lived on till 1689 (Whitley, "Edward Harrison", p. 218; Minute Book C, p. 1).

¹¹ Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists* (London 1738-40), IV, p. 262.

¹² Coxe was brought up in Bedford, and joined the Bedford open-membership Particular Baptist church on 3 May 1669. He was called to the pastorate of Hitchin open-membership Particular Baptist church in April 1673; but in 1674 came under censure from the Bedford church. It has been suggested that his error lay in his advocacy of closed-membership—a principle rejected by both Hitchin and Bedford (J. Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London 1811-30), II, p. 403-4). Is he to be identified with the object of William Needham's dedication of *Institutiones Medicae*?—"Amicissimo capito N. Coxe. Aetate & Juventu propro Alumno suo & Discipulo Delectissimo" (BM Sloane MS 656, f. 1).

¹³ 23 April 1676 (Minute Book C, p. 1).

¹⁴ 21 January 1677 (*ibid.*, p. 4).

¹⁵ 18 March 1677 (*ibid.*, p. 4).

¹⁶ For the text of the Confession, cf. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 236-9.

¹⁷ 26 August 1677 (Minute Book C, f. 6).

¹⁸ Its expanded title was *An Additional Word . . . being the Substance of Christianity, added on a special occasion, about the Doctrine of Election, Universal and Special Grace, Being an Essay for Peace and Union amongst all the Sons and Daughters of Peace.*

¹⁹ Kiffin, Deane, Fitten, Coxe and Moreton (?), all from London, visited Collier at Trowbridge in 1676 to try to sort out his heterodox doctrine (*The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640-1687*, ed. Roger Hayden (Bristol 1974), p. 185).

²⁰ The six signatories are all London Particular Baptists: William Kiffin and Daniel Dyke from Devonshire Square; Henry Forty and James Fitton from Henry Jessey's Swan Alley church; William Collins, Coxe's colleague at Petty France; and Joseph Maisters from Theobalds, Hertfordshire.

²¹ Coxe's work is subtitled *A Confutation of the Heresies and Gross Errors Asserted by Thomas Collier in his Additional Word to his Body of Divinity.*

Coxe lays out a numbered list of errors, before setting about systematically disproving Collier's position.

²² *A Sober and moderate Answer to Nehemiah Coxe's invective* (London 1677). In 1678 he published his own Confession of Faith, annexing to it a critical discussion of the 1677 *Second London Confession*.

²³ *A Discourse of the Covenants that God made with Men before the Law* (London 1681). In 1682 Coxe translated from Latin, and published, *A Believer's Triumph over Death, in a Relation of the last hours of Dr. Andrew Thivet* (Ivimey, II, 605; Crosby, IV, 265).

²⁴ 7 April 1678 (Minute Book C, p. 7). Probably this was a continuation of the pre-Restoration pattern, by which the associated Particular Baptists of London assisted the provincial associations. It is suggested that Coxe attended this meeting, of the Hertfordshire Association of Particular Baptists, as representative of the London Particular Baptists.

²⁵ Minute Book C, p. 9. It is probable that Coxe attended this *Abingdon* Association meeting as representative of the London Particular Baptist churches.

²⁶ 20 April 1679 (*ibid.*, p. 10).

²⁷ 28 September 1679 (*ibid.*, p. 12). Daniel Dyke was elder of Devonshire Square, Benjamin Dennis elder at West Ham.

²⁸ 29 February 1680 (*ibid.*, p. 13).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16. Again, presumably Hertfordshire and Abingdon Association meetings respectively.

³⁰ At the Hertfordshire Association meeting at Hemel Hempstead, 18 April 1683, the London Association was represented by Benjamin Dennis and Brother Williams of Petty France, who presented a report on the Petty France church (*ibid.*, pp. 17, 21).

³¹ 4 May 1679 (*ibid.*, p. 10).

³² N.C., *A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of an Elder and Deacons in a Baptized Congregation in London* (London 1681).

³³ W. T. Whitley, "Thompson's List of Conventicles in 1683" (*Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, IV, p. 49); Guildhall, City of London Records Office, Conventicle Box 1.3, November 1682; W. T. Whitley, "London Churches in 1682" (*Baptist Quarterly*, I (1922), pp. 82, 86).

³⁴ 20 March, 27 March 1683 (Minute Book C, pp. 20, 21).

³⁵ 12 August 1686 (City of London Records Office, Conventicle Box 2.5, documents 75-7).

³⁶ A. H. J. Baines, "Innocency Vindicated . . ." (*Baptist Quarterly*, XVI (1955-6), p. 167).

³⁷ 5 October (Minute Book C, p. 22).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 239.

⁴⁰ On 16 May 1675 (Minute Book C, p. 1) the church sent a letter to a John Child about an unspecified matter relating to him. He is probably the renegade Baptist who committed suicide in 1684 (*D.N.B.*; *Sad and Lamentable News from Brick Lane* (London 1684); *A Warning from God to all Apostates* (London 1684)).

⁴¹ Minute Book C, p. 1. She was later cast out.

⁴² 5 December 1675 (*ibid.*, p. 1).

⁴³ 5 March 1676 (*ibid.*, p. 1).

⁴⁴ 9, 23 July 1676 (*ibid.*, p. 2). This admonition, too, was in vain.

⁴⁵ 8 October 1676 (*ibid.*, p. 2). Sister Coxe took the same course in 1679 (*ibid.*, p. 11).

⁴⁶ 30 June 1678 (*ibid.*, p. 8).

⁴⁷ 7 March 1680 (*ibid.*, pp. 13-15).

⁴⁸ 4 June 1682 (*ibid.*, p. 18).

⁴⁹ 27 August, 10 September 1682, 21 January 1687 (*ibid.*, pp. 19, 20).

⁵⁰ 30 October, 13 November, 11 December 1687 (*ibid.*, pp. 2, 3, 26).