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Nottingham Baptist Beginnings

DERBY Road Baptist Church, Nottingham, was founded as a separate community on February 11th, 1847, but its roots lie deep down in the obscure beginnings of Baptist witness in the town. The present church is probably a direct descendant of the earliest known church which began in the days when Nottingham was regarded as one of the most desirable places of residence in the kingdom. Celia Fiennes writing in 1689, which is certainly later than our Baptist beginnings, declared it to be the neatest built town she had ever seen. And in 1784, a German traveller wrote: "This of all the towns I have ever seen, except London, seems to me one of the best and is undoubtedly the cleanest."

But these conditions quickly passed away with industrialisation and an increase of population, which, though trebled, was for various reasons, housed within the same area, until Nottingham's reputation sank to the lowest in the country, having a "proportion of density higher than that of London, or any other city." A commissioner among those appointed in 1845—two years before our present church was started—said: "I believe that nowhere else shall we find so large a mass of inhabitants crowded into courts, alleys and lanes as in Nottingham, and those too, of the worst possible description." This increase and movement of the population had a great influence upon Baptist development and the siting of churches.

It is still difficult to say precisely when Baptist witness began in Nottingham or what was its type, whether Particular or General. It may have begun as General and become Particular, as was not uncommon in the early days. What we do know is that no early references to Baptists in Nottingham mention more than one meeting place or community, that when its confession of faith becomes clear, it is that of the Particular Baptists, and that its place of meeting, with a burial ground nearby, is in Friar Lane, and that it was from this place and community that the present Derby Road Church came, by way of George Street.

In 1646 or 1647 George Fox the Quaker, then living at Mansfield, won over some of his earliest "children of the light" from a company of "shattered baptists" with whom he was associated.

“Apparently this little group of Separatists had been centred in Nottingham, but before Fox came into contact with it had dissolved and scattered. Some of the more devout, as Elizabeth Hooton, Fox’s future convert, deserted because they found the community not upright to the Lord. Others lapsed into individual separatism unlinked to any organised sect or church: the rest capitulated to the world, abstained from worship and spent the Sabbath playing shovel-board and other games.” This is not altogether a propitious first reference but it is all we have at the moment! One of the more prominent of the Baptist shovel-players, Rice Jones, was for a time a follower of Fox but later opposed him. An account of early Baptist churches gives the Nottingham foundation date as 1650, probably a new start after the previous failure, and states that in 1656, John Kirby of Stamford was engaged for the church. During the Commonwealth the Governor of Nottingham Castle was Colonel John Hutchison, who with his wife, definitely rejected infant Baptism as a result of studying the Scriptures, and was acquainted with Baptist writings. We cannot, however, trace that he had any connection with a local Baptist church. There was a prayer meeting of Baptist soldiers in the cannoniers’ room in the Castle during his time, and it is very likely that there would be some connection between these soldiers and a local Baptist church, for as Dr. Whitley says of this period, “the soldiers were active evangelists” and “many a garrison town had preaching by Baptist officers.”

There we must leave this period in uncertainty, though in agreement with the statement in a *History of Nottingham* published in 1840: “The Particular Baptists are perhaps a more ancient denomination than the Independents”—who began here about 1655—“but unfortunately the records of their early history are lost.”

Soon, however, we are on firmer ground. In 1669 the Archdeacon of Nottingham, acting on higher authority, desired his clergy to “make enquiry after conventicles or unlawful meetings under pretence of religion and the worship of God by such as separate themselves from the unity and uniformity of the Church.” He goes on to say that if the chief offenders “will come to me, I shall give them charitable advice, and hope they will follow it.” Whether the offenders went we do not know, but subsequent history suggests that the Archdeacon’s pious hope was unfounded! From these 1669 returns we find that in Nottingham there is one conventicle of “anabaptists” numbering twenty or thirty souls. It is said of all the Dissenters in Nottingham at this time that “the chief of these persons have been in actual arms against the king, and their teachers are such as are silenced for non-conformity.”

The Records of Nonconformity preserved in Dr. Williams’ Library show that two independent lists of 1715 state that there is

one Baptist meeting house in Nottingham, and again in 1717 a survey of Nonconformity in Nottinghamshire gives one "anabaptist" meeting house in Nottingham, as well as one Presbyterian, and one Independent. Both the latter can be identified. The preacher at the Anabaptist meeting is said to be George Eaton. A George Eaton, hosier, was one of seven men who in 1724 purchased the Baptist meeting house in Friar Lane, and it seems very likely that the 1717 and earlier references are to the same community. Twenty years later, George Eaton, a layman, is said to be the Baptist preacher. There is an enigmatic reference, which has hitherto been regarded as the earliest Baptist reference in Nottingham, in the list of members of the Presbyterian Church, High Pavement, "Mrs. Mary Rotherham, servant to the new Baptist preacher in town, Mr. Richardson, admitted with us June 5 (1720), from a congregation in the North." Since there is no trace of another Baptist meeting place it is probable that this Mr. Richardson was an occasional preacher at Friar Lane. In 1724 the Friar Lane property was conveyed for "the full sum of one hundred pounds of good and lawful money of Great Britain." The building is said to be "now and of late used as a meeting house for the people commonly called Baptists to assemble in for the worship of God." Another conveyance of the same years refers to "all that piece or parcel of ground heretofore used as a garden but now and for many years long past used as burying place for the people commonly called Baptists." Since Nonconformists were denied the rite of church burial many were buried in private gardens, and a fellowship would often secure a place of burial preliminary to the purchase of a chapel. In Nottingham this would appear to identify the district of early Baptist life, and the "many years long past" of the conveyance give a hint of antiquity, but at present it remains only a hint. Later references, such as that of Archbishop Herring's Visitation of 1743 and the *View of English Nonconformity in 1773*, continue to show only one Baptist meeting house in use in Nottingham, though there was a temporary division about 1750, when a schoolmaster, Mr. Morley, licensed a place in Pilchergate.

Sometime before 1729, the well-known Calvinist Baptist minister, Andrew Gifford, gave assistance at Nottingham before going to Bristol, and subsequently to the Wild Street Church, London. He later built the Eagle Street Church, now Kingsgate, at the back of the Baptist Church House. Another man who preached prior to 1770 was Abraham Booth, a framework knitter, who often walked from Sutton-in-Ashfield. He was a General Baptist who became a Calvinist, publishing his convictions in *The Reign of Grace* (1768) and becoming minister of Prescot Street Church, London, where he ministered for thirty years. He was almost the only London minister at first strongly to support the Missionary

Society, introduced Carey and Fuller to the eccentric surgeon, John Thomas, trained deacons who took a leading part in founding Stepney College (now Regent's Park).

The church in Friar Lane evidently thrived, and in 1769 the Rev. Richard Hopper came from Bishop Burton near Kingston-upon-Hull to become minister. About the same time the Church formulated a Declaration of Faith. It begins in the language of the time, "We, a small handful of the unworthy dust of Zion, assembled together for the worship of God in Friar Lane, Nottingham, holding the doctrine of election, the fall of man, regeneration, justification by the righteousness of Christ, sanctification, adoption, perseverance, and the judgment to come." Among those who signed this Declaration were ancestors of some of the present Derby Road members. The greater part of this Declaration has been retained by the Derby Road Church, and is published regularly in its original wording in the Church Manual. At Friar Lane it was for many years read at the admission of members who signed their names on the understanding that they accepted the doctrines of the Declaration.

Mr. Hopper's ministry was so successful that in 1776 the sum of £175 was subscribed for enlarging the meeting house, and it was in this building that William Carey preached on May 30th, 1792, the Association sermon which was a factor in the foundation at Kettering in the following October of the Baptist Missionary Society. At six o'clock on that Wednesday morning a prayer meeting was held, and at half past ten William Carey preached his memorable sermon from *Isaiah* xlv. 2-3. It was of the building of this time that Dr. Thoroton, the Nottinghamshire historian says in 1795, "The Baptizing Calvinists have a meeting house near Collins Hospital. This building is spacious, well lighted, and appears well attended." But in 1800 a letter from a member calls attention to the need for starting subscriptions for the erection of a new place of worship.

Mr. Hooper's fine ministry came to a close in 1803, and the Church consulted the Association through the well-known Sutcliffe of Olney and Fuller of Kettering, concerning a successor. Eventually, after a trial period, the Rev. John Jarman, who had removed from Clipstone to Oakham in 1800, was invited, and inducted on the 12th September, 1804. In 1805, John Houseman Barber brought forward a resolution concerning the expediency of raising money towards purchasing a piece of land for a new building, and in 1810 a serious effort was begun, and £1,144 was raised straight away in subscriptions from fifty-six friends. A piece of land was bought, and Mr. Barber went on tour with a collecting book and added £472 to the building fund.

The last service held by the Particular Baptists in Friar Lane Chapel was on Sunday evening, August 13th, 1815. The number

of members was then 201, and the new Chapel in George Street was opened on Wednesday, August 16th, 1815. The Friar Lane Chapel was sold to the Scotch Baptists, but the pulpit from which William Carey preached had already been replaced by a new one and the original has not since been traced. Of the Rev. John Jarman, who was minister at this time, a contemporary writer says that he is a "gentleman of very eminent talents, learning and piety." His ministry continued until 1830, the 61 years from 1769 having been thus covered by the ministries of two men. These faithful ministries, coupled with the advantage of a growing population, had served to build up a strong Baptist cause.

The Rev. James Edwards succeeded to the ministry, the church continued to thrive, and the town to develop rapidly, and the question of a second Particular Baptist Church began to loom large.

The early burial ground near Friar Lane already mentioned was taken into the construction scheme of the Mount Street 'bus station over 100 years later. The remains of those buried there were removed and re-interred in the General Cemetery.

The project of forming another Particular Baptist church in Nottingham was under consideration for some time by a section of the George Street membership. While adhering to the same scriptural and theological basis they felt the need of a more vigorous Church life in a position to meet the challenge of what was now a rapidly growing town. Mr. William Hawkins writing from Bristol in January, 1847, to Mr. Vickers, a George Street deacon, declares that the proposal to "form a separate Church and thus originate a new interest has been for many years a desideratum in Nottingham—for with such a population there ought unquestionably to be two Churches in our denomination."

On February 10th, 1847, notice of the intention to form another Church was given, and the following day, in Room No. 30, The Exchange, sixty-four people adopted and signed the Declaratory Document forming the Church. The next Minute of the George Street Church states, "we do not object to the step they have taken," but for some time there was not universal agreement that it had been a wise step. But within a few years any differences that remained were overcome and the two Churches continued their separate witness in goodwill and cordiality. For many years George Street remained a strong and influential Church until with the outward movement of population, decline set in and the premises were finally sold in 1946, having served for over 130 years.

The Declaratory Document signed by the new Church on February 11th, 1847, embodied "a brief outline of the principles upon which we propose to unite ourselves together in the formation of a separate interest." Protracted discussion eventually led to unanimity on the following statement :

Believing that the Lord Jesus Christ alone is King in Zion, and that His Will, as revealed to us in the scriptures of eternal truth, is the only rule of faith and obedience, we propose (in conformity thereto) to unite in Christian Fellowship under the designation of a Baptist Church.

We deem it on many counts convenient and more in harmony with the practice of the primitive Church that the expenses incidental to the proper maintenance of Christian worship be defrayed by weekly contributions.

With respect to the qualification of Church members we consider it indispensable to membership that they make a credible profession of repentance towards God and faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ; that they manifest their love to Christ, and their good hope, through grace, of pardon and eternal life, by submission to His authority; by a faithful observance of His ordinances, and by a life and conversation becoming the Gospel.

The Declaration then goes on to recognise as officers of a Christian Church, a Pastor and Deacons (so many as the state of the Church may require), to be appointed by the free and unbiased votes of the Church. The Pastor is to give himself up to the prayerful study and preaching of the Word of God, to the administration of Divine Ordinances, and by pastoral visitation or otherwise, watching over and praying for and with the people of his charge. The duty of deacons is to manage the affairs of the Church, to provide for the suitable administration of Divine Ordinances, to visit and relieve poor members, and to render to the Church from time to time accounts of all sums received and disbursed.

This Declaration was then signed by all the sixty-four persons present and at a subsequent meeting sixteen more signatures were added. At this meeting there were appointed a Presiding Elder, three deacons, a Secretary, and a Precentor whose duty it was to strike the note for the hymns and lead the singing. The use of Room 30 in the Exchange was sought for the next two Sundays and the offer of the use of a warehouse in Clinton Street by Mr. E. Felkin was gratefully accepted. In the Baptist Magazine for April, 1847, we find this notice :

New Baptist Chapel. A considerable number of friends having recently seceded from the Baptist Church assembling in George Street, Nottingham, and being desirous of establishing a new Baptist interest in that town, have formed themselves into a separate Church, meeting at present for worship in a commodious room in Clinton Street, where they assembled for the first time on Lord's Day, February 28th. In the afternoon of that day the Ordinance of the Lord's Supper was administered to the members of the Church (to the number of 70) by the Rev. J. Brown of Northampton. They have in the meantime taken a lease of premises in Spaniel Row hitherto occupied as the Friends' Meeting House, and upon which they hope to enter in the course of a few weeks from the present.

The time immediately following the foundation is one of advance and growing power. On the third Sunday in June the

church moved to the Friends' Meeting House in Spaniel Row, canvassed the neighbourhood and distributed tracts.

The basis of membership of the new church provides an interesting study. The question was continually considered, and on 1st March, 1847, a Minute affirms the restriction of membership to baptized believers, "believing that it is the duty of all Christians to be immersed in water"—(a later hand has added the word "cold," giving another hint of "battles long ago") on a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot recognise as members of that section of the Church of Christ to which we belong, any persons who have not complied with this, the Saviour's command. Still, we do not object to commune at the Lord's Table with members of evangelical churches who may not accord with our sentiments on the subject of baptism as herein expressed."

The question of open membership was raised for the first time in 1861 when application for membership was made by a member of the Independent Church, Surrey Chapel, of which the well-known Newman Hall was then minister. The Trust Deed was examined and it was found possible to pass the following resolution: "The conditions regulating the admission of communicants to the Lord's Table, of March 1st, 1847, be henceforth considered as sufficient qualification for membership; and that in future, all believers in Jesus Christ who may desire membership in this Church shall be cordially welcomed though differing from us on the subject of baptism." That Minute of March 1st, 1847, however, as can be seen above, referred only to "members of evangelical churches" and the present position was not really arrived at until March, 1891, when instead of inviting only those who were members of Christian Churches to the Lord's Table it was resolved that the invitation should be "all persons who desire thus to remember the Lord Jesus Christ are invited to remain and commune with us."

In May, 1848, the unanimous choice of the church fell on the Rev. Joseph Ash Baynes, B.A., of Poplar. Over a year before, Mr. W. Hawkins, writing from Bristol, had said, "With regard to Joseph Baynes, he is a young man with superior talents, and an excellent preacher"—sentiments which were amply confirmed in the subsequent ministry. Joseph Ash Baynes came from a strong Baptist family. His father was for forty years minister of the Baptist Church at Wellington, Somerset; one brother, Alfred Henry, was General Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society for many years, and another brother, Thomas Spencer, was Professor of Logic in the University of St. Andrew's, and Editor of the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Joseph Ash Baynes had been trained at Stepney College, and Poplar was his first pastorate.

Under the new ministry the church made such progress that the accommodation in Spaniel Row became insufficient, and the

Large Hall at the Mechanics Institute was used for Sunday services, and Broad Street Chapel for weeknight meetings. In October, the site of the present church in Derby Road was bought from the Duke of Newcastle. It was a well placed site advantageously positioned on a main thoroughfare to the town and in a good residential area. The foundation stone of the building, the design of which had been competed for, was laid on July 30th, 1849, by Samuel Morton Peto, M.P. for Norwich, a leading Baptist layman, who was builder of the Nelson Monument, the Houses of Parliament and Bloomsbury Baptist Chapel. The church, in early English decorated style, was opened for worship on Tuesday, July 9th, 1850, and its design and appearance attracted widespread attention. In an endeavour to combine the Free Church tradition of a central pulpit with a worshipful building the pulpit of Caen stone was placed first in the centre of the building where the Communion table now is. But in 1892 when the premises were generally cleaned the opportunity was taken of removing the pulpit to its present position at the side of the chancel. In 1894 new choir stalls in solid oak were added.

Baynes overtaxed his powers, and in 1853 fell ill. In September of the following year he resigned the pastorate and was never again able to take up the ministerial office. His short ministry had a profound effect upon the Derby Road church, however, and had he not been stricken down Joseph Ash Baynes would probably have led the church to the very forefront of local and national influence. He was succeeded in 1858 by James Martin, of Edinburgh, whose pastorate of eleven years was one of unbroken success and progress.

Today the Derby Road Church and its Radford Mission remain within the city as descendants of the earlier Baptist witness there. Outside the city the churches at Front Street, Arnold and Southwell were being sustained by George Street at the time of the foundation of Derby Road, and the latter agreed to assume responsibility for Southwell. At the beginning of this century members from Derby Road and the influence of the church, were largely instrumental in forming the cause at West Bridgford. The present Woodborough Road Church included at its formation a few who had been in membership with the old Friar Lane Church and had remained with the Scotch Baptists there, and then at Circus Street until they went to join the new church. Palm Street, Basford, which later for a short time was under the oversight of the Derby Road minister, also came from this source. The other main line of local Baptist development has been from the General Baptist cause which began in Plumpton Place, Stoney Street, in the second half of the eighteenth century.

SYDNEY F. CLARK