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Those Handbook Dates

THE Baptist Handbook and Association Year Books show no consistency in the selection of entries for the "Date" column following the name of each church. What promises to be a terse historical comment turns out to be a medley of dates referring to a variety of events in local church history, and sometimes to no particular events at all.

That there is something wrong is made immediately clear by comparing the Baptist Handbook with an Association Year Book. I take as my example the geographical counties of Leicestershire and Rutland, which contain 76 churches and branch-churches. In eleven cases the Handbook for 1969 (hereafter referred to as BU) and the East Midland Baptist Association Year Book for 1968-69 (hereafter referred to as EMBA) disagree, by as much as 149 years in one case, in dates for the same churches. Three discrepancies are time-honoured printers' transpositions of figures, perpetuated with the zeal of an ancient copyist.¹

The dates most usually employed are for one of three events: the first regular preaching and worship from which the present church arose; or the erection of the first place of worship; or the formal constitution of a distinct church.

We might expect that the date of that third event is the one to be recorded. However, many Leicestershire churches were begun through the New Connexion. Independence was not often an early step in the history of individual churches, and groups of congregations under one pastor or more were frequent. Barton-in-the-Beans, the New Connexion "mother-church" in Leicestershire (1745), began regular preaching within eight years at Hugglescote, Hinckley, Melbourne (Derbys.), Diseworth, Kegworth, Loughborough, etc., but despite their distances apart they were all one church until 1760.² Some churches have never ceased to belong to a group: Bagworth, Barlestone, and Newbold Verdon still form one church with Barton, and do not get separate dates; Kegworth and Diseworth have always gone together, yet they are given their own dates—and different ones at that.³

Other churches balk at ignoring decades of history like this. Thus Castle Donington gives a conjectured start of the work (1750, EMBA)⁴, and the date of the first building (1774, BU)⁵ but not the date of its formation as a separate church from Keg-

worth, 1785.⁶ Whetstone was a branch of Dover Street General Baptist church, Leicester, from 1827 to 1855, and then of Blaby Particular Baptist church from 1855 to 1909. But it is neither the origin of the work nor its independence that the handbooks record, but the change of oversight, itself of no theological significance by the 1850s.⁷

More confusion concerns city churches that have moved to modern suburbs. Are they really continuations of ancient downtown churches? The Archdeacon Lane church, Leicester, began in 1793 (1790, BU),⁸ but moved to become the Archdeacon Lane Memorial church in Buckminster Road in 1939 (EMBA).⁹ Compare the Friar Lane and Braunstone church: Friar Lane came from a church in existence by 1651,¹⁰ but it merged in 1961 with a daughter church at Braunstone constituted in 1942.¹¹ Here the handbook date is 1651. Surely the old dates are the proper ones if the transfer of premises or the union of churches were genuine events.

Again, was there a real union between the Charles Street and Belvoir Street churches in Leicester in the Charles Street premises?¹² They were parent and daughter churches uniting in the offspring's building; yet the united church retains the junior date, 1831, instead of that of Belvoir Street (previously Harvey Lane), 1756.¹³

What happens when two completely dissociated churches unite? At Belgrave a General Baptist branch-church begun in 1834¹⁴ joined in 1875¹⁵ with a Congregational church in better premises than either could have had on its own, suitable for the newly developing suburb. In fact the modern Union church here has a continuous history back to 1807, for the Congregational church had been a Wesleyan Methodist society that left its Connexion during the 1850-1852 Reform movement and held on to the old Methodist chapel.¹⁶ If we are not to take notice of the non-Baptist era, what shall we do with Barton-in-the-Beans, constituted in 1745, but not embracing believers' baptism until 1755?¹⁷

The date of the formal constitution of a distinct church is often not the obvious historical moment to underline. It was usually the point at which a congregation of Christians was capable of calling and sustaining a pastor among them, and as this was frequently a late stage in corporate Christian life, many churches have chosen the earliest reference to their Christian work for their "date". In the less formally organised New Testament sense of "church" the date of foundation is the point at which regular worship begins among a congregation that includes at least a nucleus of Christian believers. This, the seed from which the later organisation and buildings grow, is surely the momentous event. The shortage of preachers might mean that such a preaching-station could only function once a fortnight. Records do not always explain such details, only that preaching and worship were regular, and that the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and believers'

baptism were available, even if it meant journeying to another village to join another congregation. Of course there must be more than just an audience of indifferent villagers lounging in the street and seized upon by an open-air evangelist week by week. The core of local believers had usually appeared by the stage at which indoor premises were in use for regular preaching. Examples of this date of origin in the handbooks are Charnborough Road, Coalville (1835: not a separate church until 1854);¹⁸ Emanuel, Leicester (1853: a branch of Charles Street until 1869);¹⁹ Uppingham Road, Leicester (1876: a mission of Charles Street for years afterwards);²⁰ and King Street, Loughborough (1899: a separate church in 1914).²¹

To find the date of the earliest regular Christian worship and witness is not always easy. Therefore recourse is made to the date of the first chapel, despite the note in the Handbook before the List of Churches, "The year[s] in which churches were formed (not the erection of buildings) are given after the names of the churches". This disclaimer about buildings just is not true. For example Foxton ("1716") began as a split in the Kilby (Arnesby) church in 1696 which moved its meeting place to Mowsley and then to a new meeting-house at Foxton in 1716.²² Thurlaston ("1787") had preaching from 1778 but was not formed into a separate church until 1814—the chapel was first built in 1787.²³ Other unambiguous cases of building dates are Earl Shilton (EMBA, "1758");²⁴ Quorn (EMBA, "1770");²⁵ Measham ("1811");²⁶ Billesdon ("1813");²⁷ Whitwick ("1823");²⁸ Long Clawson ("1845");²⁹ Langham (BU "1854").³⁰

Furthermore, the attempt to find the earliest date for a church's work is often inaccurate. Arnesby should be 1663, not 1667.³¹ Sileby has 1800, though no preaching occurred until 1816, and it was still a branch of Rothley decades later³²—but Rothley's independence was 1801 (given as 1800),³³ and this has been appropriated by the daughter church as well. At Mountsorrel a church functioning by 1649³⁴ was restarted by the New Connexion in 1788, a branch of Quorn for decades, despite the BU "1820" and the EMBA "1770".³⁵ Barrowden, the continuation of Morcott, goes back through Harringworth to Tixover, 1651;³⁶ "1710" is simply the oldest date in a church book extant in the early 19th century. These are not the only cases.

Conclusion. If we want the date of constitutional independence in our handbooks, at least 33 out of one area's 76 entries need changing in BU and 32 in EMBA. If we want the date of earliest regular worship and preaching among a local nucleus of believers, at least 52 BU and 51 EMBA entries are wrong. Twenty-five entries in BU and 24 in EMBA refer to neither event. For 76 churches these are high proportions.

Amid such disorder it would be best to omit altogether from our handbooks so ambiguous a column as "Date".

NOTES

- ¹ Ashby-de-la-Zouch 1804 (BU), 1840 (EMBA); Countesthorpe 1836, 1863; Desford 1940, 1904.
- ² A. Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists*, London 1818, volume II, p. 45.
- ³ Cf. A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, pp. 45, 157; *The Baptist Handbook*, 1865. Recently Barlestone has received a date—that of its present chapel building.
- ⁴ Cf. A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 24, where it is dated 1751. A house was licensed in 1752 (original application in Leics. Record Office).
- ⁵ Chapel inscription.
- ⁶ A Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 157. "1785" is given in *The Baptist Handbook*, 1865.
- ⁷ Blaby Church Books, 6 Nov. 1855, 23 July 1893, Oct. 1909.
- ⁸ D. Ashby, *Friar Lane: The Story of Three Hundred Years*, London 1951, p. 35. A house was licensed in 1793 (original application in Leicester Museum).
- ⁹ *Leicester Mercury*, 13 May, 1939.
- ¹⁰ *Baptist Quarterly*, volume II, pp. 246ff.
- ¹¹ Braunstone Baptist Church Book; *Leicester Mercury*, 21 April, 1962.
- ¹² D. Ashby, *op. cit.* p. 120.
- ¹³ *The Baptist Handbook*, 1865; D. Ashby, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁴ J. H. Wood, *A Condensed History of the General Baptists of the New Connexion, preceded by Historical Sketches of the Early Baptists*, London 1847, p. 206; *Minutes of Association of New Connexion*, 1834, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Union, *The Story of Our Churches 1662-1962*, Leicester 1962, pp. 19f.
- ¹⁶ Original applications for licences dated 1807 (in Leics. Record Office), 1811 and 1834 (in Leicester Museum); L. W. White, *Directory of the Counties of Leicester and Rutland*, 1863, p. 467.
- ¹⁷ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 31.
- ¹⁸ *London Road Centenary Handbook*, Coalville 1935, p. 3 (copy in Leicester Reference Library).
- ¹⁹ *History of the First Fifty Years of Emanuel Nonconformist Union Church*, Leicester 1903, pp. 9, 11f.
- ²⁰ E.g. *The Baptist Handbook*, 1883.
- ²¹ *King Street Souvenir Programme*, Loughborough 1949, p. 3.
- ²² *The Story of a Sad Schism in a Church of Christ at Kilby*, 1696, (copy in Leicester Reference Library); J. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, London 1810, volume IV, p. 13 footnote.
- ²³ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, pp. 167, 356; chapel inscription.
- ²⁴ Chapel inscription; cf. *Baptist Quarterly*, volume II, pp. 246ff; J. H. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- ²⁵ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, pp. 54, 348.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, volume II, p. 337; J. R. Godfrey, *Historic Memorials of Barton and Melbourne General Baptist Churches*, Leicester 1891, p. 152; cf. original application for licence, 1797, at Derbyshire Record Office.
- ²⁷ Licences for a house, 1811, and a chapel, 1812 (original applications in Leicester Museum); D. Ashby, *op. cit.*, pp. 43f; J. H. Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 184, 211.
- ²⁸ Chapel inscription; A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 335; *London Road Centenary Handbook*, p. 4.
- ²⁹ House licensed in 1840 (original application in Leicester Museum); chapel inscription; J. H. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- ³⁰ Cf. Religious Census, 1851 (Public Record Office, H.O.129/419.1.32); White, *op. cit.* p. 826.
- ³¹ R. H. Evans, "Nonconformists in Leicestershire in 1669", *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, volume

XXV (1949), pp. 98ff, gives the full returns for Archbishop Sheldon's Survey of 1669, including for Arnesby: "A Conventicle of Anabaptists usually held on Sunday since these six years last past . . ." G. Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence*, London 1911, volume I, p. 73, only gives the briefer final return.

³² A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 347; licences for 1816—1821 (original applications in Leicester Museum); J. H. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

³³ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 346.

³⁴ J. Nickalls (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge 1952, p. 45.

³⁵ A. Taylor, *op. cit.*, volume II, pp. 233f; J. H. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

³⁶ *Baptist Quarterly*, volume II, pp. 246ff; XVIII pp. 132ff; preface to the earliest Morcott & Barrowden Church Book (now in the Leics. Record Office).

ALAN BETTERIDGE.

DANIEL ROBERTS OF READING AND THE QUAKERS

THE following section from George Fox's book, *The great mystery of the great whore unfolded*, London 1659, 323f. has been transcribed completely:

"*Daniel Roberts* Teacher to the Baptists at *Reading* in *Barkshire* did affirm.

Pr. *That Baptisme of water (that is to say) Elementary water doth wash away sin.*

Ans. Here thou puts water in the roome of Christ's blood which cleanseth from all sin, and what need of that, if water doth it, outward water can but wash the outward.

Pr. *That God had committed all judgement to the scriptures.*

Ans. That is contrary to the Apostle, who saith, God will judge the world by the man Christ Jesus, according to the Gospell, and that is the power, and all judgement is committed to the Son (marke) to the Son, and the saints shall judge the world, and he is in them.

Pr. *That the new Covenant is the words of Christ and the Apostles, and every one that hath the Bible in their house, have the new covenant.*

Ans. The New Covenant is Christ the scriptures speaks of, and the Jewes had the Scriptures that stood against the Covenant, and many may have the *Bible*, and not in the thing it speaks of.

Pr. An other *Baptist* said at the same time, *If they had not had scriptures, they had not known how to walk nor order their conversation.*