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The Eastern Association of Baptist Churches, 1775-1782

THE THREE denominations of protestant dissenters, Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists, emerged in the seventeenth century as often fiercely independent congregations setting a high value on individual liberty and variously suspicious of any exercise of external authority. Nevertheless, from an early stage they found the need to confer with similarly minded societies for the discussion of mutual problems and, where necessary, the determination of more difficult points of theology or church discipline. Several associations of Baptist churches were formed in the seventeenth century and the records of some of these have recently been published.¹ The associations continued in varied form throughout the eighteenth century, further increasing in the following century into the largely county structure of today.

The records of one of the least known and shortest lived of the eighteenth-century associations, the Eastern Association, are to be found in the library of Regent's Park College, Oxford.² They comprise the minute book of the Association (15½ in. by 10 in.) bound in rough calf with a leather label on the front inscribed "EASTERN ASSOCIATION BOOK" containing 106 pages of manuscript notes, together with several inserted items believed to be in the hand of Robert Robinson, pastor of St. Andrew's Street Church, Cambridge. The idea of forming an association, although it may earlier have been in the minds of some, of whom Robinson is the most likely, was first broached in public on 26th April 1775. The occasion was the ordination of Robert Baskerville as pastor of the Baptist church at Hertford, when the ministers and members of many of the surrounding congregations were conveniently gathered together. The proposed association was to cover churches in the counties of Bedford, Buckingham, Cambridge, Essex and Hertford "after the manner of the primitive Synods, for the purposes of mutual advice and assistance, and free from all dominion, jurisdiction and coercive power".

The first move in the formation of an association was the detailed consideration of the proposal, and for that purpose the ministers interested agreed to meet on 8th August 1775 at the house of Thomas Ribright at Tewin Mill, three miles west of Hertford. It is probable that Thomas Ribright was a leading member of the Hertford church and as such better able to provide the necessary hospitality than the newly appointed pastor, but unfortunately the Hertford church records for this date do not appear to exist. Seven ministers met together at Tewin Mill in August, but not Robert Robinson who was unable to be

present although he asked to be informed of the results of the meeting. Those that came were the pastors of churches at Luton, Beds. (Thomas Pilley), Colnbrook, Bucks. (William Walker), Waltham Abbey, Essex (Mr. Davis), Hemel Hempstead, Herts. (Morgan Jones), Hertford (Robert Baskerville), Hitchin, Herts. (John Geard) and New Mill, near Tring, Herts. (Henry Blaine). Details of the purpose and organisation of the Association were agreed upon, and copies of these were directed to be sent to the individual churches for their approval. A further meeting was arranged for 26th September.

One church not represented at the formative meeting but to which the information was sent was that at Chenies, Bucks. The letter and the reply to it were dutifully copied into the church book (*see* Appendix I), a circumstance of some importance since the records of most of the member churches, where these survive, make scanty reference to the Association particularly in its earliest stage, nor does it occur in the Chenies books apart from this exchange of epistles. The proposals envisaged an annual meeting of ministers accompanied by "messengers" or lay delegates who would report in writing on the state of the member churches. The meetings were to commence with prayer at between 4 and 5 p.m. and proceed to business, which included the appointment of a "moderator" whose responsibility was to draft an Association Letter to be approved by the meeting and to be printed and circulated amongst the church members. The ministers were to meet again at 6 a.m. the following day for prayer and exhortation and at 10 a.m. a public meeting was to begin which was to include two sermons in the morning and, after an interval, a concluding service with a third sermon was to commence about 5 p.m. The authors of these proposals were at pains to emphasize that the independence of the churches was not to be questioned. At the same time a clear statement that each church was responsible for its own expenses served as a reminder that the privileges of independence were accompanied by corresponding obligations.

A final meeting to approve the articles of association was held by prior arrangement on Tuesday 26th September 1775 at the house of Morgan Jones, pastor at Hemel Hempstead, "to be there by 12 o'clock". To this meeting again came the ministers of Colnbrook, Hemel Hempstead, Hertford, Hitchin and New Mill; the churches at Luton and Waltham Abbey did not continue their interest, but their places were filled by the ministers from Chenies, Bucks. (Hugh Giles—named as "pastor" in the Association Book, although not ordained until the following year), Chesham, Bucks. (James Heap) and Harlow, Essex (Isaac Gould). Robert Robinson again failed to put in an appearance but sent a letter saying that he would "lay our plan before his church in the ensuing winter". Besides agreeing to the proposed articles, members made the important decision that the annual meetings should be held "at nearly the opposite quarter to the place where it was held the year preceeding".

The first annual Association meeting took place on 14th-15th May, 1776, in the Baptist meeting-house at Hemel Hempstead. The same

persons were present as before together with the ministers and messengers of two new member churches, Woodrow, near Amersham, Bucks. (Richard Morris), and, at last, Cambridge (Robert Robinson). The orderly hand of Robinson was soon set to work, for he was at once elected moderator and put forward twelve resolutions for the better conduct of the Association's affairs. These included the purchase of the existing minute book: "That a folio writing-book, bound in rough calf be purchased at the joint expence, the joint property, and for the joint use of these associated Churches—That it be called the Association Book—That all the Transactions of this association be regularly entered in it so as to constitute it an authentic record—That the moderator purchase it and make the proper entries this year . . .". This was directed to be held by each moderator in turn. An "octavo memorandum book", now lost, was also ordered to be purchased, to be used to record the letters and papers belonging to the Association, for which the moderator had to sign a receipt, the book to be held by "the deacons of the church at Hempstead for the time being or any other three trustees to be annually chosen". Of more general interest, in view of the widespread disuse of the style "Reverend" amongst Strict Baptist pastors, is the explanation in the final resolution, concerning the alphabetical listing of the churches, that ministers are to be styled Reverend "in order to express our notion of the lawfulness of the ordination of nonconformist ministers against the preposterous claims of a clergy who ordain one another after the manner of the papal hierarchy". When the members met again the following morning they were given some account of the state of dissent in England and Wales from accounts collected by Rev. Josiah Thompson Jnr. of London, showing that, of 1,243 congregations of Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists, 444 were of this last denomination. The draft of the circular letter was approved, and 1,000 copies were ordered to be printed, of which Cambridge took 200 at 3d each, 150 went to Hitchin, 100 each to Colnbrook, Harlow, Hertford, Hempstead and New Mill, and 50 to Chenies and Woodrow.

The second meeting of the Association was held at Cambridge, despite a counter invitation from the Hitchin church, on 13th-14th May, 1777. The ministers from Cambridge, Chenies, Chesham, Harlow, Hempstead, Hitchin, New Mill and Woodrow were present; William Walker was prevented by illness and Robert Baskerville also failed to arrive having suffered a severe fall at Royston when on his way from Hertford. The slowness with which the Cambridge church was drawn into the Association, in spite of the evident interest of their minister, is accounted for in their letter to this meeting; they admitted to initial feelings of great caution over associations, alleging that early associations in the church "were in the end productive of the great antichristian apostacy—an apostacy so fatal to the civil and religious liberties of mankind—and particularly to those of the brave old puritans and nonconformists—that the very words Synod and Session—council and canon—yet make both the ears of a sound protestant dissenter to tingle".³ Further regulations were made at this

meeting for the safe custody of the Association's property: the original papers, letters and minute book were directed to be kept in Cambridge, and a receipt for the memorandum book was to be signed each year in the church book of the congregation where the Association was currently meeting—a resolution which, on surviving evidence, does not appear to have been fully implemented. The possibility of wider links with other associations was also suggested at this meeting when a letter from the Western Association was read requesting a correspondence.

For their third Association meeting on 16th-17th June, 1778, the ministers of all the ten member churches travelled to Harlow, and there they were joined by Richard Emery, minister of the church at Over, Cambs., which was admitted into membership. Amongst the business transacted at this, the best attended of all the gatherings, was the declaration of Monday, 12th October 1778, as a general fast throughout the churches of the Association. The purpose of the fast is not recorded, but religious exercises of this kind were not uncommon amongst most denominations at that period. The question of approving charitable collections or "church cases" was discussed, and a request from the church at "Cardington End", Beds., was favourably recommended: this was the church at Cotton End, three miles south-east of Bedford, whose first meeting-house had been built in 1777 and was perhaps still to be paid for.

The last meeting recorded in the Association's minute book took place at Colnbrook, at the extreme southern tip of Buckinghamshire, on 25th-26th May, 1779. Of the eleven member churches only eight ministers came. The church at Over was not represented, Hertford sent only a messenger, Will Rackstraw, and Harlow sent a brief note saying "... We shall not any longer continue our connection in this association", but gave no reason for its defection. The care of the Association records was again discussed and responsibility for their safekeeping was laid upon Robert Robinson; the second Monday in October was again named as a day of fasting and prayer; and, finally, an appointment was made for the next meeting "at Hitchin, Herts., on Wednesday, and Thursday, in Whitsun week, 1780".

Although the minute book closed with the 1779 meeting, leaving only two blank pages and no indication of the purchase of a second book, a brief account of the fifth Association meeting held on 17th-18th May, 1780, at Hitchin was entered in the Tilehouse Street church book. From this it appears that, although Henry Blaine of New Mill was chosen as moderator, the duty of drafting the annual letter fell to Robert Baskerville of Hertford. The pastors of all ten member churches with the exception of Over are named as taking part, together with two unnamed ministers "not in the association". It was noted that Morgan Jones of Hemel Hempstead, although he took part in the proceedings, had resigned for reasons of ill-health from the pastorate of that church since the last meeting. These minutes and a few brief notes of the same meeting pasted into the fly-leaf of the minute book

are the latest surviving manuscript records. Circular letters were issued after the meeting in Whitsun week, 1781, at New Mill and after the last known meeting, in 1782 at Hertford, but at neither place do the church books shed any light on the composition of the assembly or on the business transacted.

The reasons for the demise of the Association are not immediately apparent from the existing minutes and, in spite of the considerable distances involved, most of the ministers were able to be present. The only indication of difficulty, apart from Robert Baskerville's unfortunate accident on his way to the 1777 meeting, is in the letter from Colnbrook excusing their pastor's absence from the same meeting. In this they say, "You will excuse our Pastor's non attendance at this time, he would be glad to be with you, to hear and to learn, and if required to assist according to the ability God hath given him: but as he is not much used to travel, the Journey is too great for him to undertake, the fatigue of travelling so far would tend to render him incapable of being of any service, and unfit him for his work the next Lord's day". The cost of travel undoubtedly had its effect on the attendance of the messengers who were to have accompanied the ministers to ensure a full degree of lay representation. Only four churches sent messengers to any of the first three meetings and five to that of 1779, Hemel Hempstead alone being represented by two messengers on each occasion. An example of the expense involved, even though the accommodation may have been freely provided, survives on a loose paper inserted in the minute book and records the cost of Richard Emery's visit to the 1778 meeting in Harlow (*see* Appendix II). From this it appears that of the two guineas allowed to him by the church at Over he was able to return half-a-crown in change. His means of locomotion are not specifically stated but the distance of about 45 miles was not inconsiderable and the cost of transport is the principal item in his account. Whether the change of pastor at Hemel Hempstead, where the church had fully supported the Association, had any effect can only be surmised, but this, coupled with Robert Robinson's other pre-occupations and the gradual change in his theological opinions which might have served to estrange him from his fellow ministers must have had its effect and left a gap in the organization of the Association which the other smaller and weaker churches were unable to fill.

One valuable contribution of the Association minutes lies in the light they shed on some aspects of the history of the member churches, particularly in cases where the records of the churches themselves are missing or deficient. The church at Cambridge, for example, included in their letter of 1776 a brief account of the origins and present state of their society. In the letter which the church at Chenies sent to the Association in the same year, after reporting a membership of between 30 and 40, they say "The Lord is inclining more people to attend upon the word than can be conveniently accommodated with seats in the meeting-house; and, we have reason to believe the Lord has some precious souls to call by his effectual grace in this retired

neighbourhood . . .". In their letter of the following year an event is noticed which the church books, sparsely kept by the pastor, entirely omit—that of the erection of the new meeting-house: "Glory be to Immanuel he is still mindfull of us—our congregation is still kept up and has increased so as to render the place we at present occupy for Religious worship far too small to contain the people in a comfortable way and manner which has constrained us to begin building a more commodious and larger house for the worship of God, but as we have sent letters to the Churches who belong to the association begging their assistance therein shall therefore desist saying any more on that head . . .".

The letters from Chesham (Lower Meeting, latterly "Hinton", now "Trinity") add little to our knowledge, whilst Colnbrook, in their 1776 letter, are full of the problems of a weak and elderly church: "We are sorry to say it is at a very low ebb—the church is small and the auditory but thin; we have but few members, and most of them advanced in years . . .", sentiments repeated the following year with the added comment that "Colnbrook is certainly a very barren place for religion". Harlow is concerned more with the darkened international situation, praying in their 1776 letter that the ministers may "be enabled to plead, with holy importunity, with the Lord, that he would be pleased, in his good providence, to bring about a happy reconciliation between us and our Colonies; that the destructive sword of war may be sheath'd, and peace restored upon equitable and lasting foundations . . .". The same topic is reverted to in 1778 by Hitchin; "We deplore with great concern the calamitous circumstances, into which as a body politick, we are brought, by the awfull contest betwixt Great Britain and America".

The Hemel Hempstead letter of 1776 is long but historically uninformative; the reason for its lack of information is apparent from their next letter in which they say, "We also would give you a full account of our Church, but the desolation, which discord among brethren necessarily occasions has depriv'd us of our Church records for many years after its commencement". Hertford have little to offer in their first letter of 1776, but a petition from the church for leave to make a collection is also recorded in the minutes of this year, from which it appears that the church at Hertford "has expended on the necessary fitting up of a meeting house for divine worship more money than they can afford to pay . . . that they have not expended their money in unnecessary and lavish building or adorning . . ." and that the case is recommended to the churches. In the same year New Mill refers to a large increase in members within the past two years and records their indebtedness to "the church and Pastor of Hempstead, for their generous and liberal contribution towards our late expences", without, however, any further explanation. The church at Over, which did not come into the Association until 1778, was another weak cause whose divisions are poignantly set out in their letter of the following year: "But dear and honoured brethren with sorrow of heart I write these lines—The art of singing is wanting among us—the youth

are desirous to learn the art of singing I with the majority of the church and united voice of the congregation, encouraged it, the effects of which disgusted some of our elder Members and they have absconded hearing and the Lords table upon that account—Our end in so doing is to keep the youth under the Gospel and to promote the interest of Jesus Christ. I, in the name of part of the Church and the whole of the congregation, should be glad of your assistance in a way of advice. Signed by Richard Emery in behalf of the Church May 13th 1779". The happy conclusion of the affair is fortunately recorded in the brief notes of the 1780 meeting, "Received a pleasing account of a Reconciliation between the contending Parties in the Church at Over about Singing". The fullest accounts of church history appear in the letters from the church at Woodrow of 1776 and 1777, here given in full (*see* Appendix III), in which the origin of the congregation is traced to what became the Upper Meeting, Amersham, a church of some antiquity whose early minute books were published by the Baptist Historical Society in 1912. In these letters the transition from a Particular Baptist to a General Baptist church at the Upper Meeting is explained and fresh light is shed on the early history of the Lower Meeting at Amersham, the successor of Woodrow Meeting.

The churches which formed the Eastern Association all survive to the present day, although in allegiance they vary widely, ranging from membership of the Baptist Union to strict communion churches in which the principles of a Calvinistic creed are more apparent. Their meeting-houses are equally varied, the oldest being that at Chenies, Bucks., licensed in 1778, and referred to in the Association minutes. The Lower Meeting at Amersham was built about 1783 for the Woodrow congregation and later enlarged. At New Mill the numbers increased so rapidly that a stable and coachhouse were built to take twenty horses and sixteen carts and chaises, followed in 1818 by the rebuilding of the meeting-house. The little church at Over, which during the life of the Association was meeting in a barn, built its present chapel in 1810, a much altered and unprepossessing building externally but with an interesting galleried interior. The old meeting-house in Tilehouse Street, Hitchin, lasted until 1844 when it was replaced by the present grandiose classically-pedimented building. Hemel Hempstead, Chesham, and Colnbrook all replaced their meeting-houses in the late nineteenth century and the present Baptist chapel, rebuilt 1903-4, in St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, is the third on the site, the previous buildings having been erected in 1764 and 1836. The little Strict Baptist chapel at Hertford where the idea of an Association was first mooted no longer stands in its old position but was rebuilt close by in 1967 during road improvements; as a reminder of Robert Baskerville's meeting-house nothing now remains except the date 1772 inscribed on the present building. Of the Eastern Association itself even less appears to survive in the memory of the member churches—other associations have arisen to distract their attention and the writer is left to wonder, not at the short period of the Association's existence, but that such a small company of churches as

far removed as Tring and Cambridge, Over and Colnbrook, remained in fellowship as long as they did.

APPENDIX I

Copies of two letters relating to the Eastern Association entered in the Church Book of the Baptist Church meeting in Chenies, Buckinghamshire.

Copy of the proposals for an Annual Association of Ministers & their Churches sent to this Church from the Ministers meeting at Tewin Mill in the County of Hertford August 8. 1775.

Pursuant to an Appointment made in the Month of May last of a Meeting of the Baptist Ministers of the Counties of Bedford, Bucks, Cambridge, Essex & Herts to consult together concerning the *Propriety & utility* of an Annual Association and if approved of; the most proper & effectual means of conducting it, the following Ministers did meet at Tewin Mill in the County of Hertford on Tuesday August 8. 75 Viz. Mr. Jones of Hempstead Mr. Walker of Colnbrook Mr. Davis of Waltham Abbey Mr. Pilly of Luton Mr. Baskerville of Hertford Mr. Geard of Hitchin & Mr. Blaine of New Mill near Tring, a Letter was also received from Mr. Robinson of Cambridge wherein he expressed his Cheerfull concurrence with whatever should be proposed by the Ministers who should associate & also his concern that he could not attend on that occasion.

After two of the Ministers had engaged in Prayer wherein the[y] spread the Case before God, and implored his Direction and Influence, the following things were agreed upon as proposals to be submitted to the consideration and final Decision of a future meeting of Ministers after the several Churches have duly considered these proposals and given their Ministers Instructions accordingly to act in their Names Resolved,

1. That an Annual Association of Ministers and also their Churches by their Letters & Messengers is a likely means with a Divine blessing of giving the Gospel a wider spread in the World—of reviving Vital Godliness in the Hearts & Lives of Believers—of promoting brotherly Love among Christians in general—of checking the growth of Error in the principles, & desoluteness in the manners of professors & in forming a more intimate Friendship & cordial union between Ministers themselves—We propose therefore to have such an Annual Association of the Ministers before mentioned & shall be glad of others who approve the Plan, and likewise a messenger from those Churches who chuse to send one with their Minister, a Minister however or messenger with a Letter informing the Body of the present State of each Church will be expected from those Churches that shall be members of the proposed Association and continue so—

2. That no Church or Churches, Minister or Ministers assume or pretend to any Authority or superiority over their Brethren in the Ministry or their sister Churches but that they mutually submit to each other & strive together for the edification of the whole—

3. That one whole Day & a part of another be allotted for the continuance of this Association that it begin between the Hour of 4 & 5 in the afternoon of the first Day in solemn prayer to the Lord for his presence & blessing—then that the Letters from the several Churches be read—after that a Moderator be Chose, who shall draw up the Association Letter to the Churches, which Letter shall consist of such matter as the Associated Ministers shall judge to be most usefull and pertinent to the state of Religion in the Churches in general, according to the Judgement they shall then have form'd of it from their several Letters to the Association—that the Ministers meet together again at 6 in the Morning for prayer & Christian conference, that every Minister be left at Liberty either to relate his experience or not, according as he shall find freedom of mind or otherwise—also that the Moderator be exempted from the Conference as he is to pen the Association Letter & to present it to his Brethren for their inspection amendment or approbation, at the Close of their aforesaid morning service—That the publick service begin on the second Day precisely at ten that Two Sermons be preached in the former part of the Day & that not too many Ministers be engaged in prayer lest the service be protracted to an undue length, that the publick service begin again at or before 5 that a sermon be then preached & that the Association close the same Evening

4. That every Church bear the expence of its minister & messenger to the Association—

5. That we meet for the final settlement of this affair at Hempstead on Tuesday September 26.1775 where we shall be glad of the concurrence of those Churches who approve of this plan for an Association & hope to meet their Minister or messenger with their Letter signifying their consent or dissent also what alterations they may think necessary in our plan that by taking the sence of the Churches in general we may form as unacceptationable plan as possible—

Genuine Copy W D—

Copy of an Answer to the foregoing Letter

To the Reverend Gentlemen The baptist Ministers meeting at Hempstead September 26.1775

The Church of Jesus Christ meeting at Chenies in the County of Bucks send Greeting

In answer to the proposals sent to us for our consideration of an Annual Association of Ministers & their Churches, we think it will be a means with a Divine blessing of promoting the Glory of God, the increasing & strengthening the Reedeemers Interest & the Comfort & edification both of Ministers & private Christians, therefore approve of, and give our hearty consent to those proposals you have laid down as a plan for carrying on the same.

As our present Pastor The Reverend Mr. Cromwell is to leave us next Lords Day after which time we have got a supply for a Sabbath or two only therefore earnestly beg a share in your prayers at the Throne of Grace that the Lord will be pleased to continue a supply for us & in his own time provide such a minister for us as he sees

will be most for his own glory, our comfort and the good of precious Souls that attend here—

That the God of all grace may bless you in this laudable undertaking & make each of you a peculiar blessing to that Branch of the Church of Christ to which you respectively belong & them to you is the sincere desire & unfeigned prayer of Reverend & Honoured Gentlemen your unworthy Brethren in the Fellowship of the Gospel

Signed in behalf of the Whole September 24.1775

F. Morton
Jno. Reeve } Deacons
Wm. Davis }

John Davis
John Temple
Edward King
Thomas Jordan
James Cannon
Isaac Wallington

Genuine Copy W D

APPENDIX II

Mr. Emery's expenses to the Eastern Association meeting, 16th-18th June 1778

| June | | £ | s. | d. |
|------|-------------------------------------|---|----|----------|
| 16 | for Tuesdays Breakfast | | 1 | - 1 |
| | for Comeing to harlow | | 8 | - 0 |
| | on the Road | | 0 | - 4½ |
| | Tuesday Dinner &c | | 2 | - 3 |
| | Ditto Supper | | 4 | - 0 |
| | On the Road | | | 6 |
| 17 | Wednesday Breakfast | | 1 | - 4 |
| | Ditto Dinner | | 5 | - 0 |
| | Tobacco & Beer | | 0 | - 2 |
| | Supper | | 4 | - 0 |
| 18 | Breakfast | | 1 | - 4 |
| | Waiter | | 1 | - 0 |
| | for Roll Butter & Beer | | | 5½ |
| | for Comeing home | | 8 | - 0 |
| | Dinner | | 2 | - 0 |
| | | | 1 | - 19 - 6 |
| | Received back from Mr. Emery | | 2 | - 6 |
| | | | 2 | - 2 - 0 |

APPENDIX III

Two letters from Woodrow church to the Eastern Association

To the worthy Gentlemen and Ministers belonging to the Baptist Association, held at Hemel Hempstead.

We, your poor unworthy brethren the Church of Christ at Woodrow near Amersham in the County of Bucks (now under the ministerial care of Richard Morris) who last year made a refusal against entering into such an engagement by reason that our elder was very aged and at that time dangerously ill with a violent disorder which the Lord had ordained for his end; and we being but a very poor people and but few in number and knew not whether or no the Lord would be pleased to make any farther provision for us, by reason that we cannot maintain a minister without labour, which things when duly considered by us we readily concluded together to omit joining with the proposals which we received from your said society; but now, dearly beloved Brethren, seeing that the goodness of God hath been pleased to take our aged elder out of time into eternity, according to his own purpose and grace hath been pleased to make ample provision for us in providing for us an agreeable Pastor suitable for us in every respect, and we have now taken it into our mature consideration to join with you as our associated brethren in the Lord, if it be consistent with your pure minds and will. And may God of his infinite mercy grant his presence and blessing to attend your endeavours, and add unto your faith virtue, knowledge, patience and godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness and to brotherly kindness charity: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and may the God of all peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his blessed will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be all praise, glory and adoration for ever and ever. Amen

Done by the mutual
consent of our Church,
May 12, 1776

Rd. Morris, Minister
Nathaniel Palmer Deacon
The mark of

X

Thomas Parker
William Cox George Long
James Carter Jno. Hailey

[1777]

To the Ministers and Messengers belonging to the Eastern Association held at Cambridge.

Dearly Beloved Brethren. We your poor unworthy Brethren of the Church of Christ at Woodrow near Amersham in the County of Bucks now under the pastoral care of the Reverend Richard Morris, humbly desire to represent the earliest Account of the Foundation of our Church, which at first met at Amersham under the pastoral care of George North, who was settled as a stated Minister over them; during the Term of years that this man ministered the word to this Church, there were certain of the General Baptists, that went as Hearers; and perceiving the Church but small and weak, they asked the favour to set up one of their Ministers at certain seasons, as they could get a supply; which favour the Church granted, by reason they

Contributed, to the support of their Minister; but in a little time after that favour was granted, to the General party, they gained Advanage over the Particulars, and turned them out of the Meeting house; whereby they being but few in Number, and most of them poor, they were forced to Desist; But one of their Members having a small Cottage of his own at Woodrow, Immediately had his house Licensed and their they assembled as a Church for some time; till the good hand of our God was pleased to raise them up a friend, one Mr. Burch in London, who was pleased to take upon him to collect a certain Sum of Money to purchase a spot of Ground to build a Meeting house for them; which thing was soon Accomplished: and the Church enjoyed great Tranquility with their Elder for some years, after the house was built; but after the Decease of their Elder, one John Whitmell ministered the word unto them for a time, but after from them, the Lord was pleased to direct the heart of the late John Harris, to become our Minister; and Blessed be God the Church was then put into good Gospel order, and we enjoyed great Tranquility whilst he was spared amongst us; and several were added to the Church in his time; but more were taken out of the Church by death than were added: and after Twenty Years labour amongst us, the Lord was pleased after a long and painful Illness to call him out of time into eternity: but at the first of his Illness so soon as he was prevented coming amongst us, to execute the office of his Function, we being weak; our fears began to rise, and distress of mind did then multiply; but may the Lord grant that we may not be so dismayed, but that we may be more strengthened with all might and power in our inner man; For Blessed be the name of the Lord, who readily granted us a release from our fears, by sending our Brother Morris amongst us, whom we cheerfully embraced as an Assistant, in the room of our then afflicted Brother; but after his decease, we desired him to be settled over us as our Minister, which he readily accepted, and was ordained as an Elder over us; and Blessed be God for every distinguishing favour that we now enjoy under him: For we are all Unanimous, and a sweet harmonizing spirit is diffused through the whole Church and though but few in number, in all but Twenty one Members yet every heart seems to be deeply affected with Love, one towards another, and to our Minister whom God preserve among us; and it hath been the pleasure of the Lord, not to give us any Increase of Members as yet; but it hath been his pleasure to give a great Increase of hearers, and such as seem to give great attention to the word; may the Lord grant that some among them may be saved with an everlasting Salvation; and now dearly Beloved, may the Lord put it into every of your hearts, to bear us upon your minds at the Throne of God; and may God grant that Sions cords may be lengthened, and her stakes strengthened; and may God of his Infinite Love command a Blessing upon all your endeavours, and protect and preserve all, in their Journeys, which is the humble and earnest Prayer, of your poor unworthy Brethren in the Lord Jesus Christ; Given under our hands the eleventh day of May, one Thousand, seven hundred, and seventy seven.

NB. We have sent our beloved
Minister & Messenger but on
Account of the great distance,
have not sent any other

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| Richd. Morris | } Minister Deacons |
| Nathaniel Palmer | |
| William Cox | |
| Jno. Hailey | |
| William Smith | |
| James Carter | |

NOTES

¹ B. R. White (ed.), *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, Baptist Hist.Soc., (3 parts, 1971-4).

² I am indebted to the Principal, the Rev. Dr. B. R. White, for allowing me to inspect these records. I am also much obliged to those members of the former constituent churches who kindly inspected their church records and supplied me with relevant information.

³ This letter is printed in full in George Dyer, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Robert Robinson* (1796), 464-7, as is the Circular Letter of the Association for 1778, *op. cit.*, 433-50.

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