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The Benhams of Bloomsbury

THIS paper is about the contribution made to a Victorian church and to the denomination by a lay family and particularly by one member of that family, James Benham, the first treasurer of Bloomsbury. The family is by no means unique: many churches have known the equal even of James Benham. Bloomsbury itself has had many other loyal and enthusiastic laymen. But in looking at the service of this man who stands out in the archives of Bloomsbury Chapel I hope to illustrate the wide-ranging contribution made by the laity in our churches.

Bloomsbury Chapel was built in 1848 by a wealthy layman, the railway contractor Morton Peto. The Chapel sat between the smart squares of Bloomsbury to the north and the grim slums of St Giles to the south. Peto persuaded his friend William Brock to come from Norwich to minister to the new cause. With him came George Wilson M'Cree as missionary to direct the Domestic Mission in the adjacent slums, for which Bloomsbury Chapel would provide the resources. The Chapel opened in December 1848 and by July 1849 fifty-two people worshipping there were ready to form a church. Of these initial members seven were Benhams. In subsequent years thirteen more Benhams were to join Bloomsbury, and a further three subscribed to its activities.

Who were these Benhams, the largest single family participating in the founding of Bloomsbury? They were young, the eldest, James, being only twenty-nine. The seven founder members were already members of the Christian Church, transferring from Paddington Chapel (Congregational), except for Eliza, James' wife, who came from Prescot Street. Their home was in Wigmore Street, Cavendish Square, the base of the business founded by their father in 1817, *John Lee Benham & Sons, Ironmongers, bath makers, stove, grate and kitchen range manufacturers, and hot water engineers*. The firm prospered under John Lee and James. It still exists today, but the family connection ceased in 1961, and it is now part of Thorn Electrical Industries.

We do not know how the Benham brothers and sisters came to desert Paddington Chapel for Bloomsbury, but another of the family, Edward, had worshipped at St Mary's, Norwich while Brock was minister there. William Brock's ministry always had a particularly strong appeal to young men: he was unconventional, unaffected and warm-hearted, and he was always concerned to relate religion to everyday life. After a few months at Bloomsbury the young Benhams were eager to throw themselves into

the various activities of the newly constituted church.¹ These included the B.M.S. Auxiliary, Missionary Working Party, the support of a teacher in the native female Boarding School in Calcutta, the Domestic Mission, Sick Poor Relief Society, Cheap Clothing Society, Ladies' Charity for assisting poor married women, Sunday Schools, Day Schools, Ragged and Industrial Schools of St Giles and St George Bloomsbury, Ladies' Bible Class, Young Men's Discussion Class, and Contributions to the Children's Treat. The family spread their interests across these, subscribing generously, and in many cases acting as officers of the various bodies. In 1857 John Lee Benham subscribed to the Mission Hall, and the firm to the Ragged Schools.

The seven founder members were James and his wife Eliza, his brothers Frederic, Augustus and John, and sisters Emily and Jane. In December 1849 Harriot, another sister, joined "by profession on conversion". Subsequently the wives of Frederic, Augustus and John all joined, and also Charlotte, the wife of a fifth brother, Daniel. Daniel himself was not a member, although he subscribed to the Sunday School and Sick Poor Relief Fund. Miss Anne Benham also subscribed. By 1853 the next generation began to subscribe, when little Henry Benham, James' son, contributed to the Children's Treat. His brother Walter was only six when he first subscribed to the B.M.S. They both joined the church on baptism in February 1863.

Emily, the eldest sister, was a collector for the B.M.S. and secretary of the Ladies' Bible Class, until she moved away, on marriage, in 1857. Frederic became the first superintendent of the Sunday School, in which all the brothers taught. He was also concerned with the Domestic Mission, joining its committee in 1863. In 1869 he was one of the twelve elders appointed to assist the ageing Brock with pastoral work. From this date too he was church auditor. In February 1870 he was elected deacon, but declined to accept this office. In November 1872, soon after Brock retired, Frederic with his wife and daughter transferred to Regent's Park Chapel. Augustus, who became a partner in Benham & Froud, copper-smiths, also taught in the Sunday School. He served on the committees of the Day School and Sick Poor Relief Society and was first secretary of the Discussion Class for young men, from which grew the Bloomsbury Chapel Young Men's Association with 250 members by 1865. In October 1862 he was elected a deacon, accepting by letter from Dublin, but in January 1864 he resigned with great regret as he was out of London too much to serve properly. In November 1865 he and his wife transferred to Redhill.

Jane, a younger sister, married James Harvey² in November 1853. He had been baptized at Bloomsbury in 1850 and elected a deacon in October 1851. He had come to London in 1832 as an energetic junior assistant to a wool merchant, where he prospered to become a City merchant himself. In 1852 he confided to his diary, "I desire a wife, if it will help me to serve God better, to discharge my private and official duties more efficiently, and by these means to honour my Lord and Saviour; and not else. Do I believe that a Christian woman likeminded with myself would thus help me, and I help her? I do." He found a suitable woman of Christian character and piety in Jane Benham. On the eve of their marriage, aged 36, Harvey

was worth £11,000. He wrote out a resolution never to spend more than one third of his income on self and family expenses, never to save more than one third, not to give less than one third to religious and charitable purposes, and never to be worth more than £20,000. (He failed in the latter, but in his will the surplus was left "to promote the cause of Christ and the good of our fellow men".) Jane evidently proved all that Mr Harvey hoped for in a wife and they were very happy, but in August 1855 she died, a few days after their son was born. James Harvey subsequently moved to Hampstead where he took a leading role in the foundation of Heath Street.

John Benham, the youngest brother, also played a prominent role at Bloomsbury. He served the Sunday School throughout his life, as teacher 1849-62, superintendent 1862-70, and treasurer 1879 to January 1899, just handing over tidily before his sudden death. He was a deacon from 1870 to 1883, and often represented the church at wider meetings. He was an L.B.A. member 1872-99, and on the committee most of that time. From 1874 he was church treasurer and according to the Bloomsbury magazine obituary "he yielded no jot to his successor in exactness, though he was not gifted with the art of breezy fascinating Budget speeches". He was also a "musical enthusiast", and "referee of the church in all musical matters". He often dealt with the organist on the deacons' behalf, even after he had resigned from their number. His wife transferred from Paddington Chapel in 1863. Eventually they moved to Lymington House, Clapham, but continued to travel to Bloomsbury. Three of their children were baptized and joined the church, Mary in 1880, Leonard in 1881, and Ethel in 1882, but in 1884 they and their mother transferred to Grafton Chapel in Clapham, returning, like Augustus, to the Congregational fold. John retained his membership at Bloomsbury until his death in 1899.

James Benham, meanwhile, was one of the original deacons. In forming the new church, it was resolved "to choose certain brethren as Deacons for one year, on the nomination of the Pastor, in the expectation that at the end of that time the Church will have gained sufficient knowledge of its several members to enable it to form an independent judgment as to the brethren the best adapted to use the office of a Deacon well".³ Five were chosen: Samuel Morton Peto, the founder, George Harris, Robert Whall Cooke, James Benham and George Kemp. (It is not clear whether Kemp, who was absent from the meeting, accepted office — he is nowhere mentioned by name in the Deacons' Minutes, although the Year Books show him active elsewhere about the church. Certainly in 1851 James Harvey joined the other four as the fifth deacon.) Benham remained in office and active until his sudden death in June 1885. It is his unbroken length of service which makes him stand out among other faithful laymen. At Bloomsbury he was known for his "watchful devotedness to all matters of the Church and Sanctuary, material and spiritual".⁴

The diaconate really settled to business in October 1849 when "it was agreed that all matters of Finance connected with the Chapel should be under the control and management of the Deacons, both as regards receipts and disbursements — James Benham to be the Treasurer". A book-keeper, Mr Hadrill, was employed to handle the monthly pew rents. In the first

months of the Chapel Peto had made himself personally responsible for the finances, but now James Benham took over both the Chapel General Fund and the Lord's Supper Fund, the latter only until 1853, after which it had a separate treasurer. He was evidently under some pressure in 1853 as he asked to be relieved of the Church treasurership, if Mr Harvey would take over, offering instead to undertake pew lettings (but not the receipt of payments). The deacons decided against this. However, at that time James gave up the secretaryship of the Schools Committee. He was a careful treasurer, regularly presenting detailed statements of accounts. Once, however, he slipped up. The Church Minutes for 3 April 1857 read: "The Church was informed that Mr Benham's accounts of last year had, through some oversight or inadvertence, left him indebted to the Church ten pounds, which sum he had most honourably advanced. The Church was furthermore informed that another sum belonging to its funds of £10 had been stolen from Mr Benham's premises, which sum also he had most honourably advanced: whereupon, it was unanimously resolved to repay to Mr Benham the both sums, with the renewed expression of their obligation to him as Treasurer of the Church."

At the next Church Meeting, however, James Benham declined their offer, with dignity.

In 1861 there was a reshuffle of deacons' duties, when Mr Harvey resigned: Mr Mart became treasurer and James Benham secretary. In 1864 a further change made James steward of the building — to undertake the charge of the Chapel building, of the necessary repairs and of the chapel keepers. These matters remained James' special concern for the rest of his life.

Problems with chapel keepers (or caretakers) constantly exercised the deacons. Their first action as recorded in their Minute Book in July 1849 was to sack the chapel keeper. In May 1885, a fortnight before his death, James chaired a special Deacons' Meeting to interview candidates for this post. In the intervening years he had frequently had to sort out problems with the chapel keepers and their various assistant pew openers, door keepers etc., all employees of the church. In 1882, for example, there were complaints about Dolby the chapel keeper "not being sufficiently cleanly in person or in keeping the pews free from dust".⁵ Mr Benham promised to speak to him.

From the first James Benham was involved in maintenance problems, some of which came within the scope of the family firm.⁶ Doubtless too he knew other tradesmen in the area personally, and so he handled negotiations with Mr Bellingham of Messrs Bellingham & Amey⁷ about building a new vestry in 1854. Maintenance problems occur continually and range from the almost trivial (draughts at doors) to the massive (exterior stonework perishing, requiring complete replacement).⁸ The splendid new building had plenty of teething problems, especially with warming and ventilation, and the need for redecoration came round pretty often in nineteenth-century London. To all this, from the crack in the roof⁹ to the schoolroom water closets,¹⁰ James gave his personal attention over many years.

As chapel steward Benham had various dealings with the neighbours. Twice he received requests for wires to be fixed to the towers. Messrs Pullman of Greek Street¹¹ sought permission to attach a wire for a telephone between their two premises "and for this privilege offered to subscribe one Guinea per annum to the Domestic Mission". Then the Electric News Telegraph Company of Ludgate Circus wanted to "attach fixings for two wires to the north tower" and offered the same amount for "way leave".¹² Benham negotiated with the company managers and had an interview with the secretary on the tower before granting permission. He reported receiving the first guinea in advance and a written agreement. "Since then the wires have been affixed without any damage to the Sacred Edifice."

From 1870 to 1872 Benham had protracted and difficult dealings with the solicitors for Sir John Hanmer who owned property behind the chapel, about iron railings and gates at the sides of the chapel. Holborn Board of Works and Bedford Chapel were also involved. When these negotiations were satisfactorily completed, the deacons formally recorded their thanks "for his trouble and perseverance in relation to this matter".¹³ In 1878 Sir John demanded the removal of the railings, because of his redevelopment. As the other parties were no longer interested, Bloomsbury could not usefully resist, but at least Benham persuaded the Parish to pay for their removal. He himself paid for necessary alterations to the chapel side gate.

Without the railings' protection, practical problems ensued. In September 1882 Mr Benham reported to the Deacons

"That great annoyance was given to Sunday School teachers and others using the Lecture Hall [under the Chapel] by the improper conduct of Boys outside, and to prevent a recurrence of it [he] was employing Roberts the doorkeeper as Watchman for the present. Also the pits below the gratings at the side of the Chapel were used during the week as a receptacle for filth and rubbish, and to prevent a continuance of it he proposed to have glass fitted to them and at his own expense would also have the top sash of windows in Lecture Room altered so that they may screen more effectually when opened for ventilation."

James' care for the Chapel building conflicted with his concern for the church finances. He accepted that the ideal was often impossible, but he grieved to see renovations over long delayed, and often paid for improvements himself. In June 1884 he wanted to redecorate the chapel, but was told it would have to wait. This was eventually, and appropriately, done with the legacy of £200 he left to the Church.

James was always generous to Bloomsbury, both in direct giving and material contributions, which are sometimes carefully acknowledged in the Deacons' Minutes. The first gift recorded was a Communion cup in 1866. He gave the pastor's vestry a new carpet to greet T. W. Handford, and repapered it and recushioned the pastor's pew to welcome J. P. Chown. He commissioned and presented to the vestry a portrait of Dr Brock in 1877. In 1884 he put new lighting in the deacons' vestry and presented a roll of red cloth to be used at weddings. This was to be the property of the vestry, who could make a charge for its use. He liked members to be comfortable: in 1877 he fitted a steam pipe to the baptistry "by which

the water could be warmed in cold weather". In 1883 he had the front seats in the gallery altered because "they were previously most uncomfortable". Although his legacy of £200 to Bloomsbury looks relatively small (his estate was £60,000), the total value of his gifts must have been considerable. His other charitable bequests were £100 each to the B.M.S., London City Mission, Baptist Building Fund, Regent's Park College, University College Hospital and Great Ormond Street Hospital.

James Benham was the first secretary of the Sabbath and Day Schools Committee at Bloomsbury, although he gave up this office in 1853. In the Sunday School he conducted the infant class. His interest in the schools remained, and in the latter years of the Day School he served as treasurer, and often presided at committee meetings. In 1872 he attended a conference on national education at Manchester, and won the church's support to petition Parliament for the liberation of all state education from sectarian influence and denominational control. Bloomsbury's own school had been non-sectarian. In 1856 James offered to superintend the choir when the deacons wanted to have more direct control over it. John, the youngest brother, was the Benham most involved in Bloomsbury's musical affairs, but in 1883, after a Gospel Temperance Meeting in Bloomsbury, it was James who suggested in a Deacons' Meeting that the Moody and Sankey hymn book had been popular and might be liked for the regular Monday evening prayer meeting. He was not himself heavily involved with the Domestic Mission, although as a deacon he sat on its committee. He must have believed in and cared about the work in St Giles, and in March 1878 he told the deacons that a serious deficit in the Mission funds was "not creditable to us as a church". He presided at a public meeting in Bloomsbury Chapel in May 1878 to urge the claims of the Domestic Mission upon the church and congregation. He and his wife always cared deeply for B.M.S. work. James was one of the founders in August 1848 of the Young Men's Missionary Association,¹⁴ which first organized children and young people to support the B.M.S. James evidently retained this interest all his life, for he addressed the Young People's Missionary Meeting at Exeter Hall on 1 May 1885, and was expected at a committee in the Mission House on the day of his death. He also became interested in the Baptist Church in Paris, with which his elder son was connected. In 1873 he visited the Paris church on at least three occasions, reporting back to Bloomsbury.¹⁵ He laid the foundation stone for the new chapel in Paris and attended with his son and two other Bloomsbury representatives at the opening ceremonies, presiding at one of the services.

The Benham family generally was interested in the wider Church, not just Bloomsbury. Various members appear from time to time as Baptist Union and London Baptist Association delegates and as Protestant Dissenting Deputies. James was actively associated with Brock in the formation of the London Baptist Association. He attended B.U. meetings all round the country, first as a Bloomsbury delegate, later as a personal member. From 1856 to 1884 he was on the Council of Regent's Park College, on which his father had also served. From 1851 he was connected with the Baptist Building Fund, serving as joint secretary with Alfred Bowser 1861-64, and as treasurer 1864-85, while Bowser continued as secretary.

Seymour Price's article on the fund quotes extensively from a paper by James Benham, who had had access to the original Minute Books, since lost.¹⁶ Benham and Bowser "initiated a policy of advance", appreciating the value of publicity, and travelling the country to advocate the Fund. Benham, active in this sphere too to the end, presided at the Diamond Jubilee Meeting on 23 April 1885 and at committee meetings on 12 May and 9 June. Seymour Price laments that he had failed to find a portrait of Benham for his *Popular History of the Baptist Building Fund*.¹⁷ The family had presented to Bloomsbury a portrait after James' death,¹⁸ but it appears not to have survived.

James Benham was a good-humoured, vigorous, decisive man. He and Brock would have understood each other well, for neither liked to beat about the bush. James did not like decisions to be put off without good reason. Even in his later years he was open to new ideas and a trifle impatient with his colleagues' reluctance to change procedures. In the early years his manner sometimes upset some fellow members, but later there was only respect for him and his "no nonsense" manner. In 1858 there was quite a stir in a Church Meeting¹⁹ when he said he was unhappy about "a recent meeting in the schoolroom" which had criticized some of the deacons' suggestions about building work. He felt they had been "severely and unjustly blamed", and would resign if the Church agreed with the complaints. Mr Francis and Mr Stuart, who were prominent among those referred to, disclaimed discreditable intentions, saying they did not attack the deacons' judgment but had not liked Mr Benham's "somewhat overbearing" tone. Brock defended his deacons, and Benham and Francis publicly shook hands on it. Subsequently Mr Stuart, as auditor, defrayed the £16.4.0 deficit from these repairs.

Some years later Benham was responsible for the Terseptenary Celebrations and informed the Church Meeting²⁰ he had booked the Hanover Square Rooms, but he had learned some discretion:

"He accounted for having gone so far as to arrange anything definitive without consultation with the Church, on the ground that the use of certain rooms for the occasion would have been hazarded by any delay. He also undertook to give up the use of them even now, whatever the pecuniary acknowledgement that he might have to make, if the Church should prefer to meet elsewhere."

The Church happily agreed to his choice!

At this Terseptenary Social Benham suggested that Brock should use the title "Dr". Harvard had given him a Doctorate of Divinity a few years earlier, but Brock felt he had no pretensions to such a title. Benham, when writing records (in handwriting which is a joy to the historian), always used "Dr Brock" or the "Rev Wm Brock DD". He was doubtless also proud of his graduate sons — Walter's name regularly carries his BA in the church records.

Benham was always mindful of the pastor's welfare. In 1865 he repeatedly urged on the church the need for Brock to have a "lengthy tour abroad". The church kept deferring the matter, even after "Mr Benham spoke of the desirableness being very great of a most unanimous and affectionate wish on the part of the Church that that visit should be paid".²¹ In February 1866 Benham was still advocating such a "sabbatical",

and eventually Brock visited the United States from May to August 1866. In his absence Peto and Benham chaired meetings, and the deacons decided to carry out repairs to the buildings while he was away.

About this time Peto ran into serious financial trouble, eventually going bankrupt. Bankruptcy of a church member was always carefully investigated. Sometimes a business was found to have failed in a way which did not reflect discreditably on the unfortunate Christian involved. But one of the original deacons, Cooke, had already been censured by the church in 1856 for "walking disorderly" and had left.²² Many of the members were businessmen and commercial morality was important to them. Peto's trouble was singularly difficult for Bloomsbury. He had founded the church, had made Brock its minister, had been continually generous — but the church did not shirk its duty. Mr Benham and Mr Kinnear were duly asked to investigate Peto's affairs. They produced an eighteen page report, with four memoranda attached. Peto had accepted the rightness of the inquiry and had co-operated fully. Nevertheless, it must have been a difficult and unpleasant duty. The report is in the second Church Minute Book. It is perhaps salutary reading for those who write Peto off too glibly as a bit of a bouncer! Benham and Kinnear explain in detail the ways of financing railway undertakings, which always entailed a lot of legal fictions.

"We cannot attribute to them the character of real falsehood which they do not bear. . . . We regard such legal fictions much in the same light as the harmless insincerity with which we call every barrister 'Learned' and all the children of noblemen 'Honourable' without any reference to the intellectual character of the one or the moral character of the other."

They make the point that one cannot accept the system as morally justifiable when it succeeds but condemn it when it fails! They conclude:

"We are strongly of the opinion that Sir Morton Peto has not been guilty of any fraudulent or deceitful conduct . . . in fact we do not think he has himself done anything inconsistent with the strictest honesty and integrity, and we consider his character as a man of honour is unimpeachable. If we could state this in any stronger language we would so do. . . . Having acknowledged this, we are quite aware that some of our brethren think we ought to stop and pass no censure whatever on Sir Morton Peto, and looking at it as a question of *conventional morality* alone they are probably right. But we cannot forget that something more than conventional morality is demanded from the followers of Christ . . . Sir Morton Peto did not exercise the Christian prudence and moderation which we should have expected from him . . . we must therefore say . . . with much grief . . . that our respected brother has justly exposed himself to the censure of the Church. . . . Yet . . . we commend Sir Morton Peto to the unabated respect and love of the whole Church as a man of whom we have great reason to be proud and none have any need to be ashamed. 25 Sept 1868."

Sir Morton left Bloomsbury — and London — after this, but in later years he was often a welcome and honoured guest on special occasions.

To censure Peto must have been a bitter task for James Benham, but soon an even worse one came his way. In 1872 William Brock resigned the pastorate, and at his retirement Benham took the pastor and deacons out to dinner at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, where they spent a pleasant afternoon together, attending to business before dinner.²³ (This outing was obviously enjoyed and twice in later years Benham repeated it, taking the pastor and deacons in June 1878, and in 1882 the pastor, deacons and their ladies — a party of eighteen in all.) As senior deacon, Benham naturally took a leading role during the interregnum, and the report of the committee which recommended the Rev. T. W. Handford is in his hand.

Handford's ministry began well enough, but early in 1874 the deacons began to feel all was not well. Eventually they were forced to investigate the pastor's affairs. Handford had got himself badly into debt, ultimately committing himself to a bill of sale, presumably for a personal loan. The deacons learned of this through a trade protection circular. They would gladly have helped Handford out of the mess, but he was neither honest with them nor prepared to co-operate. It was the fact that he lied to them which upset the deacons most, but their account reads as though the debts shocked them even more than the subsequent discovery of adultery. The treasurer, Mr Woodall, who had served the church well as a deacon for twelve years, had unwisely allowed Handford three months salary in advance before he realized the extent of his mismanagement. Sadly, Woodall felt bound to resign and left Bloomsbury. Shaken as they were, the deacons tried for some months to help sort things out, but by September the church was suffering badly and their sympathy was thinning. At last Handford resigned his office and was excluded from membership. James Benham was left to lead the church through these dark days.

The next pastor was chosen with great care. On 8 March 1875 Benham presided at a church meeting at which the pastorate committee recommended J. P. Chown. The church approved, and Benham told them "that he and the secretary were prepared to start for Bradford by the 11.55 train tonight" to take the invitation to Chown. This they did, arriving at 8 a.m.

At the last church meeting of the interregnum,²⁴ Benham thanked the church "for the kind manner in which they had sustained him throughout this long interval of solicitude and trial". In October the church presented to him an illuminated address, a handsome French clock and a pair of bronze vases for "constant devotion to the interests of the Church since its formation in 1848, and more especially for services rendered during the vacancy in the pastorate". Mrs Benham received an elegant davenport writing table for her assiduous attention to the various church institutions.

Chown's ministry was a much happier time, although the church finances continued to be difficult. Benham constantly felt that it should be possible to avoid annual deficiencies on the General Account.²⁵ He resisted, however, a suggestion that the church should economize by not serving tea on social evenings: Benham always liked the social occasions and often took responsibility for arranging them.²⁶ He was also continually troubled by the unused surplus on the Lord's Supper Fund,²⁷ and clearly doubted whether the elders were doing their pastoral distribution to the needy as thoroughly as they might.

Chown appears to have been glad to let Benham take the initiative on many administrative matters. In business details Chown was less decisive. In 1876 Benham suggested Chown should arrange to be "At Home" to the church and congregation regularly as Brock had been.²⁸ In 1880 "on a suggestion of Mr Benham, the Pastor agreeing" it was resolved that notice of the services should be inserted every week in *The Times*, *Daily News* and *Echo* newspapers.²⁹ In 1881 Benham wondered if they should make some sittings cheaper. He became increasingly unhappy with the pew rent arrangements.³⁰ The deacons considered changing from pew rents to voluntary offerings, but decided against it at that time. Benham favoured the change, and certainly thought strangers should be encouraged to give -- so he had some new offering boxes put up more prominently around the premises!

Late in 1884 Chown began to think of retiring and discussed this only with Benham, who persuaded him first to try to get some help. Together they negotiated with Dr Alexander McLaren, who was thinking of going to Regent's Park College, from whence he would happily have come to preach once a Sunday at Bloomsbury. In May 1885, when this looked likely to be possible, they took the idea to the deacons, who welcomed it. However, after Benham's death this scheme fell through, McLaren deciding to stay in Manchester, and Chown retired.

In his last years James Benham became concerned about the organization of the diaconate, which had hitherto been left vague. Deacons had simply been elected for life. When they died or resigned, or more often after two or three did, some more were chosen. Virtually all the deacons had had specific duties allotted to them. Originally they had mostly lived in the squares of Bloomsbury or similarly near, but gradually families were moving out to the suburbs. Deacons' meetings rotated around their homes, but this was now meaning St John's Wood, Tufnell Park, or Clapham. Benham suggested in 1878³¹ that it was time to increase the size of the diaconate. He had been ill and realized he could not do so much, and his brother had "gone to live out of town" (Clapham) and found it difficult to attend more than once a day. Other deacons "had found it necessary to live out of town for a while during the summer months". The church was asked to give more assistance, and appointed two more deacons. Again in 1880, with more deacons living further out and only coming once on Sunday, Benham suggested an increase in the diaconate. In 1881 he made a more radical suggestion: "Mr Benham said he had felt for a long time the life election for the Diaconate was wrong and that it would be better for the future interests of the Church were it made terminable by the resignation of two members every year subject to re-election by the Church."³² A decision was deferred. Two years later³³ Benham proposed details for a limited tenure, with eight deacons serving four years each. His suggestions were now accepted. In that year, 1883, three deacons resigned, including John Benham. The deacons agreed to suggest three brethren to the church, including Walter Benham, but in the event none of these was chosen. At the Deacons' Meeting James again showed concern for those less prosperous than himself:³⁴

"Mr Benham said he thought it would be well if the Pastor will inform any friend elected to the office of Deacon that the quarterly meeting at each other's houses, although very pleasant, was not necessary. The meeting could be held in the Vestry. [He] hoped that not having suitable accommodation for this will not prevent suitable men from accepting office."

James himself was duly re-elected — and the next three meetings took place at his home! In January 1884 "a tabular statement of the *Duties of the Deacons' Office* both specific and general prepared by Mr Benham" was read at the Deacons' Meeting. They then allotted the specific duties, James Benham remaining chapel steward.

On Monday 15 June 1885 James Benham passed quietly away. "Life had ceased on earth some time before it was known to those nearest him and his departure was a 'translation' rather than what we think of as death."³⁵ That evening, after the Monday Prayer Meeting, the deacons met, stunned, for the senior deacon had been as "bright and active as ever" the evening before. They decided to have a special memorial service in the Chapel on a Sunday. There are several accounts of the funeral and the memorial service, both very numerous attended and bright in character — they could not be funereal about him. The Chapel Year Book and the *Freeman* carried long obituaries, and Mr Chown wrote a brief life for the *Missionary Herald*, copies of which were distributed to all at a Church Meeting. The Church Minutes, Volume 5, have a memorial account written on three full pages, all with a black edging, which is unique in the church's records.

On James' death his seat on the diaconate and his job as chapel steward passed to his son Walter. His two sons, Henry and Walter, had both joined the church by profession on conversion in February 1863. Walter, the younger, was then thirteen. Henry did not join the family business but became a doctor. He spent some time in Paris, going there for the 1867 Exhibition and becoming involved with the Baptist Church there, on which he reported to Bloomsbury in 1868 and 1869. He eventually became a director of the McAll Mission in Paris. His wife came to Bloomsbury from Woodford Congregational Church in July 1873, but in February 1874 they were dismissed to Ipswich. Dr Benham continued to subscribe to Bloomsbury, at least until 1908. Charles Henry Benham, whom I take to be Henry's son, was also in membership at Bloomsbury for a time, transferring from Paris in February 1892 and giving Walter's Wigmore Street address. No details are given of his departure, except that he had "removed".

Walter followed much closer in his father's footsteps. He remained a bachelor, living at home, and eventually becoming chairman of Benham & Sons, after John's death. His special Bloomsbury interest was in the work of the Domestic Mission, and he first made his mark at a Church Meeting in December 1873 in a debate on the Mission Church. He appears as a lay student in the records of Regent's Park College. His short term as chapel steward was notable for his concern that the chapel keeper should get proper summer holidays, but when his father's period of tenure ran out, Walter declined to stand again for the diaconate, although he was a

trustee of the Chapel from 1886. The Sunday School magazine for January 1897 contains a description of Walter speaking at the Meard Street Hall of the Domestic Mission:

"The address was given by Mr W. J. Benham, and was excellent, pointed and brief. We wish he would sometimes speak a little less rapidly. . . . His voice is powerful and far-reaching: it would excite the envy of a Trafalgar Square orator, but is now and then apt to become a little too loud for an indoor meeting."

In 1898 the Domestic Mission report mentions that Walter is off active work because of "heart weakness", but is still attending to finance and correspondence. By 1900 he was active again, and returned to the diaconate.

He "threw himself heart and soul into the developments which have converted Bloomsbury into a great institutional Church"³⁶ and was one of the twelve deacons of the new Central Church, and became financial secretary of the Church and Central Mission Committee in December 1905. However, his health failed again in April 1907 and he was only able to continue with the help of Mr Yates, a deacon who lived near him and whom he asked to have formally associated with him. Yates often represented him at meetings. In March 1908, when he had nearly but not quite completed the year's accounts, Walter was ordered to bed by his doctor, Sir Thomas Barlow, and asked to be temporarily relieved of the treasurer-ship. In June 1908 he was still unable to undertake any responsibility for Bloomsbury's finances,³⁷ and he died later that year.

Mr Colin Benham, grandson of John Benham, tells me that his father, Walter's cousin, a Congregationalist, used to say of Walter that he had "an intense love of meetings . . . as many as five in one day . . . he should have been a Baptist minister!" These men were, however, of most value to the Church as laymen, bringing their business abilities with their Christian dedication, caring for the finances and premises and generally enabling their ministers to get on with the spiritual work.

The *Freeman* published an obituary of James Benham on 19 June 1885 under "Denominational News". The fulsome tones were perhaps justifiable here, and it serves as an epitaph not just for James but for the family, and as a challenge to laymen still. The range of his interests is listed, then the obituary continues:

"All [were] objects of his keen intelligence and business faculty. He saw everything, knew all the bearings of events, came to real, practical decisions, drew up large, simple, wise, financial plans, administered with fidelity, left no weak places or unsettled accounts, did well whatever was trusted to him, such a business man was invaluable to . . . the whole church.

"But Mr Benham was not a mere financial deacon; he was regularly present at the Monday evening prayer meeting and ready to take his part in its most essential proceedings. His interest in the B.M.S. was profound. . . . His attachment to Bloomsbury Chapel was very great. Every stone of it was precious in his sight and its holy services were as life to his soul. Such men are the light, salt, flower and pillars of our Churches."

NOTES

Most of this material is drawn from the Minutes of Church Meetings (CM) and from Deacons' Minutes (DM) of Bloomsbury.

- 1 Details in Bloomsbury Chapel Year Books.
- 2 Biography of James Harvey, *From Suffolk Lad to London Merchant*, by his son Alfred J. Harvey, Vicar of Shirehampton (Bristol 1900).
- 3 Year Book 1850, 'Origin and Constitution of the Church'.
- 4 Year Book 1886, Obituary.
- 5 DM 15.3.1882.
- 6 e.g. DM 17.1.1852. Mr Benham Senior reported on and was authorized to attend to the warming apparatus.
- 7 DM 12.6.1854.
- 8 DM 20.6.1877.
- 9 DM 21.6.1876.
- 10 DM 12.2.1862.
- 11 DM 21.12.1881.
- 12 DM 19.12.1883.
- 13 DM 16.7.1872.
- 14 *Baptist Quarterly*, XIII, pp. 62f.
- 15 CM 28.2.1873, 4.4.1873, 3.10.1873.
- 16 *Baptist Quarterly*, III, pp. 118ff., 172, 223f.
- 17 *Baptist Quarterly*, IV, p. 95.
- 18 DM 16.9.1885.
- 19 CM 2.7.1858.
- 20 CM 5.11.1869.
- 21 CM 30.6.1865.
- 22 CM 5.12.1856.
- 23 These are all duly recorded in the Deacons' Minutes.
- 24 CM 7.5.1875.
- 25 e.g. DM 18.6.1884.
- 26 DM 7.11.1884.
- 27 DM 22.2.1884, 12.12.1884, 27.3.1885.
- 28 DM 21.6.1876.
- 29 DM 5.12.1880.
- 30 DM 16.3.1881, 19.3.1884, 12.12.1884, 27.3.1885.
- 31 DM 20.3.1878.
- 32 DM 21.12.1881.
- 33 DM 24.1.1883.
- 34 DM 19.12.1883.
- 35 Year Book 1886.
- 36 *Baptist Times*, Obituary, 13.11.1908.
- 37 Details in this paragraph drawn from the Minute Book of the Bloomsbury Central Mission Committee 1906-9.

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