
A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

SENSE AND SENSITIVITY OF DISSENT

The working out of nonconformist principles in a Victorial chapel

Mid-Victorian Protestant Nonconformity was still aware of its *reasons* for dissenting, but as dissent was becoming respectable, even influential, it was inevitably changing in character. It could be touchy, both on good old puritanical grounds and with regard to its new found position in English society. In almost every large city there were, claims E. A. Payne, nonconformist preachers who came to be regarded as in some measure the guardians of the public conscience, confirming Brogan's judgment that 'No one else has succeeded in doing what Nonconformity did, in giving a prosperous bourgeoisie a sense of duty and a sense of social obligation'.(1)

This paper illustrates the self-consciousness of dissent at work in the manifold activities of Bloomsbury Chapel, a prominent Baptist church in central London. It is a 'mixed bag' of examples, but taken together these assorted ingredients convey something of the flavour of Victorian dissent.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Bloomsbury Chapel opened in December 1848. The very building reflected the new mood. The *Baptist Magazine* described it as 'a conspicuous and elegant place of worship'.(2) London dissenters had long worshipped in inner courts, upper rooms, back streets: in a variety of inconspicuous meeting houses. Now they were ready for a new public image. The Presbyterians had built a few more distinctive chapels, including that in Regent Square in 1825. The Congregationalists had built Westminister Chapel in 1841, but it was still tucked away in a side street. Morton Peto, a wealthy Baptist, leased a prominent site, on a road newly widened as part of the New Oxford Street development, and there built an 'ecclesiastical edifice' that was meant to be seen. It was also strategically sited, to serve both the well-to-do Bloomsbury squares and the grim slums of St Giles'.

Peto invited his friend William Brock to begin a ministry at this new chapel, as yet without church or congregation - a peculiar inversion of usual Baptist practice. Brock, a Devonian settled in Norwich, was worried that he would be too outspoken for a London congregation:

> I am apprehensive of much discomfort in consequence of the follies and the fashionableness prevailing so extensively among professing Christians. I do believe that the Church, and our portion of it, has fallen into a fearful condition of lethargy, and of conformity to the 'pride of life'... I am greatly disquieted at the prospect of a congregation composed principally of those persons whose wealth, tastes and tendencies would lead them complacently to associate with ungodly men.
>
> Then I cannot hide from myself that my course on many public

> questions is deemed by many persons unjustifiable in the extreme. Not being able to bring myself to the opinion that ministers of the Gospel should let all public matters alone, I am not likely to let them alone... My religion compels me to be the citizen throughout...(3)

Peto persuaded Brock to try the London ministry. A congregation gathered, and in July 1849 a church was formed, which 'recognising no other Baptism but the immersion of professed believers, should welcome to its fellowship all followers of Christ'.(4)

Brock, though nurtured among Congregationalists, was a Particular Baptist by birth and persuasion, embracing the evangelical theology of Andrew Fuller. His colleague, Bloomsbury's 'Domestic Missionary', George M'Cree, was a General Baptist from Tyneside, with a Primitive Methodist background.

Victorian dissenters, great believers in freedom of conscience, loved the 'voluntary principle'. Even so, *open membership* was unusual. A few early Baptist churches had adopted this policy, blurring the distinction between Baptists and Independents, but generally the strict practice, of confining membership to baptised believers only, prevailed. With increasing co-operation between evangelicals, some did not care to be so exclusive. The related issue of open communion had been hotly debated between Robert Hall and Joseph Kinghorn early in the century. In 1838 the oldest Liverpool church split, the open-communionists calling Charles Birrell to lead them at Pembroke Chapel. Union Chapel, Manchester was founded in 1842 with open communion. In 1848 a split in Leeds led to the formation of Blenheim Baptist Church, with both open communion and membership.(5) The minister who led the Leeds secession, Robert Brewer, had come from St Mary's Norwich, where William Brock had succeeded the champion of closed communion, Joseph Kinghorn. Brock had made his own position clear before going to Norwich, and had eventually held additional separate communion services for those debarred by the strict members from attending the church's main celebrations. Bloomsbury was founded with open communion and open membership. The term *Baptist* was deliberately avoided in the title. The Trust Deeds spoke of 'A Christian Church knowing only the Baptism of Believers'. Brock could write in 1863, 'No term of communion has been insisted on but personal religion... Membership with Christ has been the only prerequisite for membership with our church'.(6) No infants, only new converts, were baptised, but members of other churches were received by transfer. Most were Baptists and Congregationalists. One of the latter, Henry Elliot, was invited to take a youths' Bible Class. He pointed out that he did not favour believer's baptism. Brock was unperturbed: 'You teach them what you like, Mr Elliot, I'll put them right from the pulpit'.(7)

Members were expected to take communion every week, although in 1849 the church agreed to accept two sisters whose domestic circumstances meant they could only attend 'every other Lord's Day for a while'. The celebration was reduced to fortnightly in 1882. which involved modifying the Trust.

Members of six months standing had a vote at the monthly Church Meeting, where decisions were by a majority of those present. The most onerous responsibility was the appointment of successive ministers. Brock retired in October 1872, and spoke of the Baptist method of selection at his successor's induction in December. His declaration must have been splendid at the time, though sad in retrospect. Thomas Handford, a promising preacher of ten years experience, had been the unanimous choice of the church.

> It had been remarked 'How soon they had become settled at Bloomsbury'. But he [Brock] regarded the shortness of the period as an illustration of the good working of Nonconformist methods of Church government and Church action. The way in which the Pastorate had been filled brought out into great prominence the excellence of their principles. They had not to await the good pleasure of a patron respecting the choice of a successor, trembling lest they should be saddled with Ritualism or Rationalism, lest they should have to complain in vain of unsound doctrine or immoral life. The 'living of Bloomsbury Chapel'... was in no man's gift... Nor was the appointment of the Minister dependent on the approval of any co-ordinate authority or any ecclesiastical body. In choosing a Pastor, the Congregation had acted with the same freedom as if they were selecting a Physician... If the question were to arise, 'What right had the people to choose their own Pastor?' his answer was, 'What possible right had any person else to choose him?'(8)

Brock himself had been the inspired choice of a patron; Handford, alas, was to prove an unhappy appointment.

The first five deacons were appointed for a year on Brock's recommendation, as the membership scarcely knew one another. These men were subsequently confirmed in office, and their number maintained, and gradually increased to eight, by election. In 1883 limited tenure was introduced. In that year three new deacons were needed, and the diaconate offered suggestions to the members, who showed their independence by rejecting all three.

The deacons could conduct much of the business of the church in the absence of the pastor. Indeed, it was four years before he began to attend deacons meetings. Yet the church was alert to its collective responsibility, and could be quite prickly over members' rights. In March 1853 the deacons raised Brock's stipend from £500 to £600. The church only learned of this when the annual accounts were published in December, and members protested. They heartily approved of the rise, but they should have been consulted! 'The Brethren at large should have the opportunity of concurring in measures on which, not only the comfort of the Pastor, but even his continuance with the Church might come to depend'.

In July 1858 there was a more ill-tempered attack. Some members who missed the June meeting objected to plans then brought by the deacons for alterations to the premises. They did not attack the deacons' judgment, but disliked their 'overbearing' manner. The pastor

told them it was their own fault if they failed to attend Church Meetings. He had declined to give notice of the business from the pulpit,

> upon the ground that the announcement of the holding of the Church Meeting should always be enough to bring the brethren together... Let the brethren fill up their place regularly and all things would go well... Dissent does not involve the forgetfulness of what is due to us from one another, either as gentlemen or as members of the Church of God.(9)

The objectors apologised. Such disturbances were rare: Brock could look back over two decades of Church Meetings and observe: 'We have had different judgments frequently, but we have, to a goodly extent, kept the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. And the Minutes confirm his suggestion that no more than seven meetings had an uncomfortable atmosphere.

One attack was directed at the pastor. Mr Kinnear, a member for ten years, was elected a deacon in January 1869. Six months later he resigned, on the grounds that the Pastor held too much authority compared with the deacons. He said he did not want to wound Brock personally, but 'the principles of congregationalism had been disregarded; and as he could be no party to such disregard he had no honorable alternative but to resign'. Reading the Deacons Minutes, it is hard to see what had upset him, and no one seems to have shared his feelings. Brock protested, 'He would yield to no man in affirming and maintaining the independence of the church against any assumptions, whether of diaconate or presbytery, whether of pastor or minister or priest'. Mr Kinnear took himself off to Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle.

A later minister, Benjamin Gibbon, clearly irritated his deacons when he undertook to sell 250 copies of a book of his sermons in 1901. Although it was well reviewed, the Church Treasurer was moved to write to the Church Magazine, pleading with members to buy it: 'The pastor has broken out in a fresh place. He has published a book, and that without the advice or consent of the Deacons. It is not such a very difficult matter to write, or even to publish a book, the greater difficulty lies in selling it'. Happily this one sold out within eighteen months.

The 1850 'Directions to Members' declare:

> It is expected of all the members severally that they will, at once and statedly, contribute according to their ability, not only to the maintenance of public worship at Bloomsbury, but also to the various religious institutions.

In his report on the religious clauses of the 1851 Census, Horace Mann explained that 'The necessarily self-supporting character of all the institutions founded by dissenters renders it, in their case, almost indispensable to make the erection of a chapel dependent on the prospect of an adequate pecuniary return'.(10) Because of this, Baptist and Congregationalist churches often followed their middle-class

members out to the suburbs. This tended to discourage work among the urban poor. Thomas Binney told the Congregational Union in 1848 that their mission was neither to the very rich nor the very poor, and Edward Miall declared in *The Nonconformist* that Christians had a morbid horror of poverty.(11)

Bloomsbury Chapel sat between areas of comparative wealth and dire need. Brock and M'Cree had started a Domestic Mission as soon as the Chapel opened, and respectable church members were encouraged to get involved with the very poor. They gave not only money, but their time and energy, visiting, preaching, and relieving misery in the slums. Keenly aware of the risk of pauperising by giving aid too readily, they tried hard to help the poor to help themselves. The chief safeguard was regular personal contact. Through such careful kindness, they earned the right to preach, and were constantly amazed at their attentive audiences, even on street corners.

Members contributed with greater enthusiasm to the various 'religious institutions' than to the maintenance of the Chapel ministry, and it became a constant struggle to keep the main account solvent. In theory Pew Rents should have provided enough, but in practice quarterly collections and occasional special efforts proved necessary. When they first took a collection pew-to-pew in 1853, some complained that it *destroyed all voluntaryism!* Nonsense, said Brock, 'nothing more is done than giving the opportunity'.(12)

In 1888 pew rents were abolished in favour of Free-Will Offerings. The then minister, James Baillie, declared a trifle unfairly, 'God's house had been too long in the possession of the rich and the middle classes. Now the poorest man would be made heartily welcome'. Pew rents had become less adequate because pews were less full. There had probably always been some free places. The challenge to voluntaryism worked for a time, and income rose.

This church was not averse to special fund-raising efforts, usually lectures or concerts. Later the Mission favoured Sales of Work, and in 1902, when free-will giving had failed to clear a heavy debt, the church arranged a Grand Bazaar, although the minister resented having to resort to such means.

Giving to the various institutions and agencies supported by the church was carefully recorded, and published in the Year Books. Regular subscriptions, however small, were encouraged. James Harvey, a self-made merchant of stern cast and great generosity, maintained that much of his giving should be anonymous, but some public to show Christian duty and as a stimulus for others. His attitude was probably shared by other wealthy members. Harvey reckoned to give away one-third of his income. In 1882 he urged from the chair of a BMS meeting that business men should consecrate the profits of every seventh year to the Lord's work. Even if Harvey set standards his friends found hard to match, it is clear that Bloomsbury members expected to give to evangelism and good works, at home and abroad.(13)

The Baptists who worshipped in Peto's elegant chapel had moved

a long way from the simple meeting houses of the past, and were proud of it. In 1881 James Benham, the senior deacon, personally supervised the affixing of telegraph wires to the tower (with way-leave payment to the Domestic Mission) to ensure no harm came to the 'Sacred Edifice'. They made good use of the capacious building, but maintaining it was a constant drag. For the jubilee in 1898 extensive renovations were undertaken, which provoked correspondence in *The Baptist,* revealing the denomination's ambivalence about buildings.(14)

> Sir, Last week your valued columns contained an appeal from the pastor and officers of a leading and esteemed Baptist church, begging for help towards a special fund whereby the chapel-building might be renovated, electric light installed, and the building generally modernised... It would be far more pleasing to Christ if his baptized followers gave more to the Foreign Mission cause and spent less on the beautification and modernisation of their Chapels.
>
> Yours very truly, BAPTIST PURITAN

The reply was from a young working man, who often attended Bloomsbury, although not a member: '... We have some heathen at home whose tastes and habits are in some measure refined, and if we are to attract them within hearing of the Gospel... the building must in some degree minister to their comfort and requirements'.

William Brock was described by his colleague, M'Cree, as 'the first Baptist minister, at any rate in London, to *popularise* evangelical doctrine among men of thought and culture, especially young men'. Others, e.g. Hugh Stowell Brown, support this claim.(15) Brock was already doing this at Norwich, where he moved the afternoon service to the evening and drew a wider ranging congregation.'Subjects arising out of common life, or relating to public questions and prevalent social discussions, were handled in a manner calculated to interest the most careless persons, and to win their confidence in religious teachers'.(16) Such sermons packed Bloomsbury's thousand seats. Brock's 'Counsels concerning Public Worship' directs members:

> Whenever your own seats are not filled you will cheerfully, and in a moment, invite strangers to occupy them... A crowded aisle is a gratifying spectacle, but only as an accompaniment to crowded seats. The comfort of the pulpit is often destroyed by observing the selfishness of the pew.(17)

The crowded chapel brought its own problems. In January 1850 a deacon was asked to enquire about arrangements to have police officers in chapel because of the frequent robberies. In 1854 at a meeting in Exeter Hall a missionary spoke of the moral and spiritual progress in Jamaica, contrasting it with his horror on hearing Brock advise visitors to his chapel to beware of pickpockets. 'No one would dream of such an idea in Jamaica!' Nor would most British congregations, but such problems were - and continue to be - ever present in a large city.(18)

Bloomsbury had an organ (unlike the Metropolitan Tabernacle opened in 1861), and at first paid both organist and choristers. There

was some concern that 'all involved in psalmody are religious persons'. The organist was sure he only used 'godly persons'. Brock made good use of music in worship, but he felt it could be overdone. He did not care for the 'professional singing' he met in American churches. In Chicago he addressed a Baptist Sunday School, 1200 strong, of all ages and colour. 'I spoke such words as seemed to me in season, but the time for speaking them was limited, as nearly two-thirds of the afternoon was occupied in services of song... I was assured that these abounding musical services are deemed evangelically advantageous. After a good deal of consideration, I still venture to doubt this'.(19)

Brock was prominent among evangelical leaders who began to take the Gospel to secular halls. This was often easier for nonconformists to inaugurate as they did not have to get the local incumbent's permission to preach in places where people readily gathered. In 1851 Sunday services were held in Exeter Hall in the Strand to cater for the crowds in London for the Great Exhibition. This movement for Folk Services extended into Theatre Services in 1859, when Brock preached at the first in the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton. They had wanted Drury Lane, but the actors objected as converts would stop attending the theatre. By 1862 Henry Mayhew saw these theatre services as one of the most remarkable agencies for the suppression of vice and crime.(20)

Bloomsbury was always ready to join in co-operative effort with others. At a time when denominational awareness was growing, Bloomsbury supported the Baptist Union strongly, as well as the Baptist Missionary Society, and was instrumental in forming the London Baptist Association in 1865.

When Brock retired, the church raised £2153 to provide him with an Annuity. At the retirement meeting, fully reported in *The Freeman*,(21) the Senior Deacon reminded the church that Brock could look forward to no Church Fund or Endowment, no canonry or deanery. 'What was done must be done by individual effort and through the working of that voluntary principle...'. Four years later the Baptist Union instituted an Annuity Fund, which was well supported from Bloomsbury.

Brock's potential retirement role as an elder statesman of the denomination encouraged ideas which suggest the Area Superintendents of the twentieth century. Dr John Stoughton, the Congregational minister of Kensington Chapel, declared at the Farewell Meeting: 'There were circumstances in their ministry which nobody but a Nonconformist pastor could fully understand... They wanted more ministers at large, to go up and down the country, and to stir up the churches, and to lead them with prudence on the great questions of the day. He believed that Dr Brock had still a great work before him'. For his remaining three years, Brock evidently showed the value of such a role. He was, declared Hugh Stowell Brown,

> by the common consent of his younger brethren, a travelling Bishop, preaching ... to the last with so much of the fervour and power of his best days, and giving many ministers and churches the benefit of his sound and sensible counsel. With all our objection to the Prelacy, and all our love of Independency,

> to some of us Nonconformists, both ministers and laymen, such a modified episcopacy as should secure for young churches the wise and kindly offices of a man like our departed friend would be a great boon.(22)

Bloomsbury's foundation statement says the church 'should co-operate with other churches of Christ in such works of faith and labours of love as are incumbent on all who love our Lord Jesus Christ'. The church was on excellent terms with its neighbours. Brock told how:

> With the most fraternal appreciation of the Christian labours of other churches around us, we saw that there was ample room for our labours also, and we began them.(23)
>
> When originating our Sunday School, we deemed it incumbent on us to avoid all interference with neighbouring Sunday Schools. It was our determination to receive no children who were obtaining religious instruction elsewhere... Our object was not sectarian competition but generous co-operation.(24)

A letter to this effect was sent to all local Sunday Schools. One brought a swift response from the Rector of St George's, welcoming Brock warmly. 'There was room enough and to spare for more labourers amongst the multitudes around us who are ignorant of God'.

Brock had plenty of Anglican friends, although he was firmly opposed to the established status of the Church of England and he and M'Cree were active on behalf of the Liberation Society. In the 1864 Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book Brock explained his church's nonconformist stance:

> We do not belong to the national Church... We prefer other modes of worship and religious service to those which have been instituted and enjoined by law. Our countrymen to a large extent sympathise with us...
>
> To ecclesiastical exactions we persistently demur. With evangelical requisitions we cheerfully comply.

In Norwich Brock had led a parish vote against the church rate, which caused quite a stir. The dissenting majority were quite happy to make an equal *voluntary* contribution to the parish church, but that did not suit the Anglicans, and Brock nearly went to prison over the matter. The Church Rate issue was of heightened importance because of new developments in the established church.

The Oxford Tracts greatly disturbed Brock. In 1850 he gave two sermons on behalf of the Chapel Day Schools. These were advertised in *The Times,* where we find his subject, chosen to draw large numbers, was 'Sacramental Religion Subversive of Vital Christianity ... as inculcated in the Oxford Tracts'. Two more discourses, in 1866, were entitled 'Ritualism Mischievous in its Design'. Brock also prepared the resolutions adopted by the Protestant Dissenting Ministers on 'the present state of the Church of England, and the duty of Protestant Churches in relation to it'. His biographer says this document was

received with respect by both sides.(25) Meanwhile Brock and his church continued to enjoy excellent relations with the local Anglicans and supported the parish charities.

A strict moral code is associated with dissent: in a company of regenerate individuals high standards are expected. In the early days of Bloomsbury Chapel, church discipline was still carefully practised.(26) Suspension and exclusion were both used as punishments. In a church full of businessmen at all levels, discipline was more regularly exercised on business troubles than any other class of potential wickedness.

When Brock lectured to the YMCA in 1856 on 'Mercantile Morality', he stressed that all Christians should play fair in *all* their dealings, whatever goods or services they were selling or purchasing. He complained that by ministers of religion 'the obligation to provide things honest in the sight of all men has been casually mentioned, rather than explicitly and impressively enforced'. He was not only concerned with major dishonesty or mismanagement, petty tax evasion was also wrong, and

> The men who are thus immoral are not our betting men, our licentious men... but in many instances... our visitors of the fatherless and widows... our large contributors to religious institutions, our members of Christian churches... The Queen is a good deal more practically honoured by my honest payment of the tribute-money than... by my most vociferous performance of the National Anthem.

A few years after the church censured the bankrupt Sir Morton Peto for failing to 'avoid the appearance of evil', it had to investigate a really bad case. Thomas Handford, the minister whose mode of appointment had so pleased Brock, made a promising start, but soon gave cause for concern. Eventually the shocked deacons learned from a trade-protection circular that he had committed himself to a bill of sale, having incurred substantial debts. They were anxious to help, but Handford lied to them about the extent of his financial embarrassment until bailiffs actually arrived at the manse. He left the church no choice but to exclude him. The deacons, good businessmen all, seemed more appalled at his financial irresponsibility and dishonesty than by the later discovery of his adultery, but perhaps by then they were past surprise at the deeds of that unhappy man.

The numbers of businessmen in Bloomsbury, as in other Free Churches of the period, reflect both the attractiveness and the success of the 'Protestant Work Ethic'. Bloomsbury was also concerned to help the poor earn their living respectably. Welfare work would sometimes take the form of supplying a man with the tools of his trade when illness or other troubles had deprived him of these. The church ran a Labour Registry too, to help the poor find work in members' households and businesses.

Brock was strongly opposed to smoking, presumably because tobacco was associated with slave labour. He was not teetotal, although M'Cree was a national leader in the Temperance Movement. This was partly an age difference: it had not been a burning issue in Brock's

formative years. The difference in the social spheres of their ministry may also have been a factor, but Brock saw plenty of the mission work for himself and knew the perils. His son, minister of Heath Street, Hampstead, 1861-1905, a rather more 'elevated' church socially than Bloomsbury, early espoused total abstinence. The ministers after 1875 were all total abstainers, and temperance societies abounded at chapel and mission. For communion use, the chapel went over to unfermented wine in 1888.

Like other Free Churchmen, Bloomsbury members advocated Sunday observance. Members were expected to purchase their own hymnbooks from the chapelkeeper, but, state the Year Books, 'on no account sold on the Sabbath'. M'Cree noted in 1858 that he had induced three shop keepers to close on Sundays. In 1899 Benjamin Gibbon preached against Sunday newspapers, and soon the Church Magazine could rejoice that the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* had dropped Sunday editions because of pressure from the religious public.

The overall tone of this church was not unduly stern; they were no killjoys even if Mr Harvey only desired a wife if it would help him serve God better! Brock encouraged plenty of social occasions, and midweek activities provided entertainment and instruction, as well as time for prayer and study. There were country excursions in summer, and in later years a variety of sports clubs.

Not all Baptists approved of such goings-on. As late as 1906 the church defended socials in the official Year Book:

> Dwellers in suburbia, in their comfortable homes, may be inclined to criticise, but 'Bloomsbury' is not in the suburbs, and only those who know the grim discomfort and unhomelike atmosphere of the common sitting-room of a large business house, the stiff formalities of boarding-house life, or the loneliness of a visitor in a large hotel, can fully appreciate the ... friendly atmosphere of these Socials.

People thus pleasantly occupied at the chapel were kept from public houses and music halls. Similar in intent were the various lending libraries run from the early days. These were not confined to religious works, but were selected as wholesome reading. The poor were increasingly literate, and 'porn' was all too readily available. Avid readers would seize gratefully on whatever came their way - the church's agencies appreciated the opportunities offered.

Before accepting the invitation to Bloomsbury, Brock had warned Peto that 'from politics, properly understood, I dare not abstain'. He encouraged his flock to take a responsible interest, and to use their votes properly. Parliamentary elections had been beset with bribery and corruption. Brock attacked this in Norwich, leading in 1846 a nonconformist campaign, which was unpopular with churchmembers who had seen payment for their votes as a desirable windfall. Brock made it a matter for church discipline. In 1841 he had lectured on 'The Duty of Professing Christians in relation to the Elective Franchise', and he developed the theme in 1868 in 'The Christian Citizen's Duty in the Forthcoming Election'.

> You did not cease to be a citizen when you became a Christian, nor do you cease to be a Christian when engaged in acting as a citizen. Discharge this great trust... [with] all the dignity of an evangelical enterprise, and none of the disreputableness of a political intrigue... Go to the poll as you would go to a Prayer Meeting. Record your vote... with the same sort of religiousness as you would... for a deacon or a pastor.

Brock had earlier identified himself with the campaign to abolish slavery in the British Empire. It continued in America, which worried the church when the summer brought American tourists to London. Visitors had to obtain tickets from the deacons before coming to the open-communion table. Normally the deacons only required assurance of the worshipper's 'membership with Christ'. Now they had other moral scruples, not shown in any other context. The church passed a resolution in May 1850 which it saw fit to publish in *The Times* and other newspapers:

> This church cannot admit to the fellowship of the Lord's Table any person whatever, who either sympathises with or supports the Fugitive Slave Law of the United States; or who withholds his influence from the efforts which are being made for restoring to the coloured population of the United States the rights of which they have been so wickedly deprived.

Brock and M'Cree were both members of the Peace Society. To M'Cree's disapproval, Brock wrote a best-selling biography of General Sir Henry Havelock, a hero of the Indian Mutiny and a Baptist, who married the daughter of Joshua Marshman of Serampore. The widow and her brother were delighted, but M'Cree wrote in his own biography of Brock, 'I could never, in private, induce Dr Brock to vindicate his book. The most he would say was "I did it *honestly,* my friend"'. 'Nevertheless', laments M'Cree, '*Havelock was a soldier*'.(27)

Another matter on which feelings ran high was education. Dissent disliked the legislation of 1833 and 1843 which gave government grants for education. They felt Anglican schools benefited disproportionately, but anyway they believed such aid conflicted with the voluntary principle. Many ceased to support the British Schools once they received state grants. Between 1843 and 1853 some 450 Congregational and 70 Baptist churches chose to run independent schools,(28) Bloomsbury among them. In a lecture in 1843 Brock had declared: 'National legislation should confine itself to the guardianship of our persons, and to the protection of our property, leaving every man to bring up his children... The State has no business with the education of the child'.(29)

The Bloomsbury Chapel Day Schools offered education to children of 'the respectable poor or of small tradespeople', who paid low fees, subsidised by the church. This was a service to the local poor, rather than to Baptist families. British and Foreign Schools Society books were used, but Bloomsbury would not join the Society. Brock tells how seriously they took their voluntary principle:

> There are no schools like them anywhere about. They are

> entirely undenominational, no use being made of any catechism, or creed, or church formulary whatsoever. No attendance at a particular place of worship on Sundays is insisted on. No reproach is cast, either directly or indirectly, upon the religious opinions or practices to which the children are accustomed when at home. At the same time the Holy Scriptures are in constant and careful use...

When M'Cree tried giving a short weekly address, he was quickly stopped by the Management Committee, in similar vein to their objection to an unannouced inspection by a representative of the British Society, although he had been pleased with the school.

The church closed its day schools in 1870. By 1872 the church was unhappy with the working of the new Education Act, and after a report from their delegate to the Educational Conference at Manchester, agreed to press for the 'liberation of all State education from sectarian influence and denominational control'. The church further felt that Bible reading should be omitted from State-supported schools. In 1903 Bloomsbury, opposing Balfour's Act of the previous year, sent a strong contingent on the Free-Church protest march from Embankment to Hyde Park, under a banner declaring 'Bloomsbury Chapel opposes the Bill'. Education was valued, but State control and especially State money for church schools was resisted.

A late flowering of the church's sturdy independence was seen over Christian Endeavour. The Christian Band, similar to an Endeavour society, but quite independent, was set up in 1885, as a link between Sunday School and church, and to train those aspiring to church membership to a role of active lay participation in the life of the church. In May 1898, soon after Gibbon, an enthusiastic Endeavourer, became minister, the Band voted against joining the wider movement, but in 1901 the minister prevailed and it changed to a C.E. society. By 1906, Gibbon having departed, the Bloomsbury society disaffiliated from the national organisation. They particularly objected to the *compulsory* C.E. pledge.

Bloomsbury was never a typical Baptist church, but it was one of the churches which could influence dissenting attitudes.

Early this century this independent-minded church agreed to a surprising compromise. The denomination wanted to follow Wesleyans and Congregationalists and form a Central Mission. The church believed it still had useful work to do, but had incurred restricting debts and could see the lease running out, while unable to afford to purchase the site. The Baptist Union and London Baptist Association jointly bought the freehold and cleared the debts. The church was reconstituted as Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. Since then all major decisions (financial or ministerial) must be approved by a Central Committee on which the church's representatives are joined by those of the metropolitan and national Baptist organisations. This is a unique - and peculiar - constitution among Baptists; but it has made possible a continuing strong central ministry.

NOTES

1 E. A. Payne, *Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, 1944, p.110, citing D. W. Brogan, *The English People*, 1943.
2 *Baptist Magazine*, Sept.1848, p.564.
3 Letter: Brock to Peto. Quoted in C. M. Birrell, *Life of William Brock D.D.*, 1878, pp.160-162.
4 Foundation Statement, *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book*, 1850. The published series of Year Books, reporting on the church and its associated agencies, are an important source.
5 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, p.205f. For Blenheim, Robert Gawler, *History of Blenheim Baptist Church, Leeds 1848-1948*, pp.11f.
6 *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book* 1863.
7 F. L. Blackaby, *Henry Elliot: A Memoir*, 1907.
8 Recorded in *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book* 1873.
9 Church Meeting Minutes, July 1858.
10 Horace Mann, *Religious Worship in England and Wales*, 1854, p.65fn.
11 See K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, 1963, p.19.
12 Note in Brock's hand at back of first Church Minute Book, 1849-1860.
13 For Harvey, see Faith Bowers, 'The Benhams of Bloomsbury', *Baptist Quarterly* XXIX, 1981, pp.65-66.
14 Quoted in the church magazine.
15 G. W. M'Cree, *William Brock D.D.*, 1876, p.219. W. S. Caine, *Hugh Stowell Brown*, 1887, pp.523f.
16 Birrell, op.cit., p.116.
17 *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book* 1850.
18 J. S. Fisher, *People of the Meeting House: Tales of a Church in Luton*, 1976, p.65. I am indebted to the Rev. D. C. Sparkes for this reference.
19 Birrell, op.cit., pp.245f., quoting letter from Brock.
20 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1862. The section on Theatre Services comes in the introduction written by the Rev. W. Tuckness.
21 4th October 1872.
22 Caine, op.cit., p.523f.
23 *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book* 1853.
24 Quoted in Birrell, op.cit., p.182.
25 Birrell, op.cit., p.258.
26 Brian and Faith Bowers, 'Bloomsbury Chapel and Mercantile Morality: the Case of Sir Morton Peto', *Baptist Quarterly* XXX, 1984, pp.210f., esp.213-4.
27 M'Cree, op.cit., p.70.
28 G. W. Rusling, 'Baptists and Education 1800-1850', Whitley Lectures 1974, unpublished.
29 C. B. Jewson, *Baptists of Norfolk*, 1957

FAITH BOWERS
Member of the Bloomsbury Church and Sub-Editor of the Baptist Quarterly

* * * * * * * * *

The University of Bristol Department of Extra-Mural Studies (0272-303617) is offering a residential weekend, 11th-13th September 1987, on Chapels and Meeting Houses in the South West. Speakers include Dr Clyde Binfield and Mr Christopher Stell.