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BAPTIST MEMBERSHIP IN RURAL LEICESTERSHIRE 1881-1914

Leicestershire, from the Baptist viewpoint, is a significant county.[1] Two of the earliest chapels are at Sutton-in-the-Elms (1650) and Arnesby (1667). The birthplace of the New Connexion of General Baptist Churches was at Barton-in-the-Beans. Early in the nineteenth century there was a thriving network of chapels throughout the county. Nearer the end of the century, however, the Baptist chapels were experiencing harder times. Except on the peri-urban fringes of Leicester new chapels were no longer being founded; in some villages there were closures. The intention here is to analyse and attempt to explain the changes in Baptist membership which took place in rural Leicestershire between 1881 and 1914.

On the national scene it is generally accepted that the Nonconformist population continued to grow steadily from 1881 to 1906 and thereafter to begin to decrease. Though after 1886 the increases no longer kept pace with population increases, as they had done earlier,[2] Nonconformity nevertheless entered the twentieth century 'excited, confident, eager'. Their preachers were still listened to, money was more plentiful to meet the expenses of evangelical enterprise and there was access to university education.[3] D.W. Brogan, in *The English People*, however, stated that 'Nonconformity reached its height of political power ... round the beginning of the century', but that after the Liberal landslide of 1906 the decline of Nonconformity was 'one of the greatest changes in the English religious and social landscape'.[4] To a great extent this was the result of disappointment and disillusionment over the failure of the Liberals to pass legislation to modify the Education Act 1902.

The Baptists, who together with the various branches of Methodism and the Congregationalists formed the mass of Nonconformity, illustrated the trend. Between 1863 and 1883 their membership increased from 199,767 to 299,162, a fifty per cent addition, while membership figures in Nonconformity as a whole moved from 1,196,565 to 1,657,407, a thirty per cent increase. The population of England and Wales, meanwhile, increased by twenty-eight per cent.[5] By 1890 Baptist membership was up to 330,163. Between 1863 and 1890 the number of churches increased from 2,563 to 2,802.[6] By 1902 numbers had reached 377,747 and continued to increase rapidly up to 1906, when a membership of 434,741 was the highest number of Baptists ever recorded. Thereafter there was a steady annual decline, membership in 1911 being down to 418,608.[7]

Changes at the national level, however, tended to obscure variations at the local level. In Lancashire and Warwickshire, for instance, Baptist membership continued to increase without interruption until the beginning of the war in 1914. The high-point in Kent was reached in 1909 and remained at the same level until 1914. In Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire the peak in membership occurred in 1908-9, while in London the highest point was not

reached until 1912.

In Leicestershire there was a considerable leap in Baptist membership from 6,122 in 1881 to 7,472 the following year. Three new chapels were opened and worship accommodation was increased from 28,964 to 31,335. Thereafter membership grew very slowly to 7,836 in 1892, then stagnated until 1900, when membership was 7,781. There was a rapid increase to 10,024 in 1908, followed by another period of stagnation, the total membership in 1913 being 9,907.[8]

The framework within which both urban and rural chapels functioned was different in 1881 from what it had been earlier in the century. Though the independence of the local church continued to be stressed and there was still some resistance to the organizing of a sustentation fund because it was seen as a threat to congregational autonomy, Baptists were more accommodating than the Congregationalists, who rejected schemes to this end in 1872 and 1893.[9] In 1872 W.C. Magee, Bishop of Peterborough, was still able to dismiss (though not entirely justly) the growth of new causes with the jibe that 'Dissent very largely increased by schism',[10] but only a year later the previously ineffective Baptist Union was given a new constitution, which enabled it to gain control of accreditation and in the 1880s to become a major player in ministerial settlement and removal. A Church Extension Fund was established in 1892 and a Sustentation Fund in 1898. Moreover, the distinction between the Particular Baptists, 'the sharper edges of [whose] Calvinism were smoothed away almost to vanishing point', and the Arminian General Baptists disappeared in 1892, when their separate organizations were dissolved both at the national and local levels.[11] The Sustentation Fund had been anticipated by a system of grants established by the East Midlands Baptist Association for the support of ministers in rural churches. The EMBA succeeded the separate country organizations in 1892 and acted as a link between the Baptist Union and the affiliated churches.[12]

Throughout the whole period from 1882 to 1914 the rural areas were beset by agricultural depression and depopulation. The series of bad harvests from 1873 onward and the inflow of cheap wheat from the North American prairies caused problems to all religious causes. Anglican livings deteriorated markedly as income was derived mainly from the renting of glebelands. A study of 191 Leicestershire livings in 1877 indicates that there were twenty-seven in which income was higher than £600. By 1900 there were only ten livings worth more than £600. In 1877 the average clerical income was £370, the median income being £300; in 1900 average income had been reduced to £247, while the median stipend was only £220.[13] Few of the Baptist churches were able to gain income from rents, though the Arnesby cause owned fifteen acres. Their income was gained from the giving of worshippers, many of whom had been tenant farmers, a large proportion of whom had been ruined by the depression. Thompson notes that 'in the countryside Congregationalists and Baptists tended to be strong among the farmers and independent village craftsmen'.[14] The Baptist Union confirmed that tenant farmers had been 'the

backbone of religious Nonconformity', complaining that by 1894 they were 'looked for almost in vain among our village churches'.[15] By 1904 the general secretary of the EMBA was writing sympathetically about 'the extraordinary conditions under which the work has to be carried on at present - especially in the villages and small towns of our sparsely populated areas'.[16]

Figure 1. Changes in Baptist membership
in some Leicestershire agricultural villages

	1881	1898	1903	1911
Arnesby	96	60	60	49
Billesdon	26	?	?	14
Foxton	36	?	?	31
Husbands Bosworth	40	25	30	55
Queniborough	13	2	4	-
Sutton-in-the-Elms	67*	105*	46	93
Thurlaston	50	23	16	23
Total	328			265
* Includes Cosby members				

Villages whose mainstay was agriculture and which had poor communications with Leicester, Loughborough or Hinckley tended to lose population and Baptist membership. Arnesby and Billesdon, for instance, had both been ancient market towns, whose population had only been maintained, when that function disappeared, by the development of framework-knitting.[17] By the end of the nineteenth century the framework-knitters had disappeared almost entirely from Billesdon, which was described as having no manufacturing, while in Arnesby there was one hosiery manufacturer and five bag hosiers employing a diminishing number of framework-knitters, the majority of people being employed in farming.[18] Attached to Arnesby also were smaller chapels at the tiny villages of Bruntingthorpe, Kilby and Shearsby, all of which were entirely agricultural. Membership figures for them were included in the Arnesby total. So that Arnesby and its satellites were overwhelmingly agricultural. The population of both communities diminished. Arnesby's population of 421 in 1881 had dropped to 354 in 1911. Billesdon had 839 people in 1881; by 1911 there were only 594. In both communities it is significant that membership

deteriorated, from 96 in 1881 to 49 in 1911 at Arnesby and in Billesdon from 26 (in two chapels) in 1881 to fourteen (one chapel having closed) in 1911.

Foxton, Thurlaston and Queniborough were all agricultural villages whose population either diminished or remained stagnant. Foxton, located by the almost disused Union canal,[19] saw its population reduced from 348 in 1881 to 324 in 1911, while Baptist membership deteriorated from thirty-six to thirty-one over the same period. Thurlaston's population remained stagnant; it increased slightly from 533 in 1881 to 549 in 1901, but then declined slightly to 541 in 1911. Over the whole period Baptist membership was reduced from fifty to twenty-three. Queniborough, whose population also remained stagnant at around 550, saw Baptist membership slip from thirteen in 1881 to four in 1903, followed by the closure of the chapel.

On the other hand Husbands Bosworth and Sutton-in-the-Elms (part of the large village of Broughton Astley), both mainly agricultural, experienced significant revivals. Husbands Bosworth's population slipped from 831 to 779, but Broughton Astley's increased markedly from 708 to 1,339. Both villages were within two miles of a railway station but whereas the latter's rail connection led directly to Leicester, which could be reached within a half-hour, the nearest town to the former reached by rail was Market Harborough, still only a small market town with little industry. The relative stability of population in Husbands Bosworth and growth in Broughton Astley were important factors in Baptist membership growth from forty to fifty-five in the former and from sixty-seven to ninety-three in the latter.

Although the membership trend in agricultural villages was generally down, the exceptions indicate that changes in membership were not entirely a function of population changes. As a rule, however, the smaller the chapel the greater the membership problems. A number of reasons can be suggested. The question of ministry is perhaps the most important. A small chapel could not by itself afford the services of a full-time pastor. Yet there can be no doubt that chapels with a full-time pastor tended to fare better. For instance, at Sutton-in-the-Elms, William Bull, a capable university graduate, built up the membership both there and at Cosby over a period of forty-five years, leaving a thriving cause after his death in 1902.[20] Richard Lowe, who ministered at Husbands Bosworth, North Kilworth and Walton from 1869 until his death in 1904, in his seventy-seventh year, was described as a 'father to the people in his quiet country villages', who did 'much walking in the work of visitation and preaching'.[21] At Thurlaston, on the other hand, the deacons were never in a position after 1843 to invite a full-time pastor and had to make do with regular visits from a team of lay preachers, one of whom was barred from presiding at the Lord's Supper 'in consequence of [having] united with an Independent Church'. Eventually, in 1897 the congregation was urged by the EMBA to amalgamate with Earl Shilton Baptist Church in order that its minister could give some pastoral attention to Thurlaston.[22]

It is perhaps an exaggeration to say, as David Thompson does, that 'both the

congregational and baptist associations in Leicestershire took direct control of Churches which were financially dependent upon them',[23] but conscious of the problems which arose when there was no trained pastor, the EMBA frequently put pressure (as at Thurlaston) on smaller Baptist chapels to amalgamate with others nearby. More often than not this took the form of denying financial aid until a scheme was worked out and of approving the appointment of the minister. In 1896 the Leicester Committee of the EMBA 'recommended that a grant be made in aid of the salary of a pastor, under whose care the Churches of Wymeswold, Willoughby and Broughton might be grouped, so soon as funds permit'.[24] A few months later the Wymeswold group appointed A.H. Coombs, BA, as its pastor, at a salary of £90, of which £30 had been supplied by the EMBA and £10 by the Baptist Union from its Home Work Fund.[25] Similarly, the EMBA advised the causes at Market Harborough, Husbands Bosworth and Walton to unite and, when agreement was forthcoming, sanctioned the award of a grant of £30 to assist in the payment of C.A. Slack, the approved pastor.[26] There can be no doubt that some village chapels were enabled to survive by this means, a few even to flourish, like those at Sutton-in-the-Elms and Cosby.

Small village chapels also suffered from their inability to offer the wide range of social opportunities evident in the urban environment. At Friar Lane in Leicester 'the Working Men's Class was formed in 1891, and the provision of books, periodicals and games ... for the use of women and girls idle because of the lock-out in the boot and shoe trade in 1895'.[27] At Melbourne Hall in Leicester there were physical culture classes in a well-equipped gymnasium, a Men's Sick Benefit Society, mission activity within the town and overseas and a convalescent home.[28] Moreover, for younger people especially, the religious activities were more interesting, the preaching much more eloquent, in the town churches. There were men capable of holding people's interest, like W.Y. Fullerton at Melbourne Hall and John Greenhough at Victoria Road. By contrast, the boredom of young people in country chapels is suggested by the need at Ibstock for a deacon 'to take charge of the gallery each Sunday to keep order among the young men', for the pastor to 'see the young men to know the reason of there [*sic*] stopping away from the means of grace', and for 'the choir [to] have one hymn from Sankey's in each service'.[29] When Butlin Dickens became the pastor at Walton he found the work cheering because he had 'a good number of young people there', but had to admit that 'they were losing their young people who left for the towns'.[30]

One suspects also that there may have been irritation with the oppressiveness of chapel-life in small villages, where nothing went unobserved. There are frequent references to deacons reprimanding individuals. At Thurlaston, for instance, Richard Barton seems to have been one of the more able deacons over a number of years, but appears to have been guilty of an offence which brought him a 'conversation' with three of his fellow deacons and the hold-up of his re-election, after which his name did not appear in the minutes again.[31] It is known that he migrated to

Shepshed in 1875 at the age of fifty-five years.[32] In some chapels the oppressiveness of the deacons was all the stronger because they held office for long periods without re-election. This was the situation at Earl Shilton until eventually the pastor, J. Ney, insisted that there should be a general election of deacons, 'six years having passed since the last two were elected', and that terms of office would thereafter be three years.[33]

There was also a particular problem that arose in communities where the Baptist chapel was the only expression of Nonconformity. The tendency was for incoming migrants, who were not Baptists but who favoured Nonconformist styles of worship, to worship with the Baptists. Charles Caven, the minister of Charles Street in Leicester, in addressing a meeting at Husbands Bosworth referred to 'a large number of people who were not Baptists, and were consequently not admitted to church fellowship', commenting forthrightly that 'because a man did not have exactly the same opinion as they on the subject of baptism he did not think they should exclude him from church fellowship'. At a subsequent meeting they agreed that non-Baptists should 'be welcome into our fellowship', but insisted that they should have 'no vote in the election of future Pastors in the Church Meeting'.[34] Such a restriction would have been unthinkable in most of the Leicester churches; there the congregations of the two largest places of worship forbade even the use of the term 'Baptist' in their titles.

If membership in agricultural communities was in general showing significant losses - the totals for villages in Figure 1 were down from 328 in 1881 to 265 in 1911 - this could not be said for membership in industrialized villages, where congregations were frequently more numerous. It has been noted that in Leicestershire the 'most characteristic form of society in the nineteenth century was the semi-industrial village. Such communities were often remarkably populous and almost always prone to Dissent'.[35] Framework-knitting had produced an independent workforce whose alliance with tenant farmers had been the driving force of Nonconformity. They were rapidly being replaced by workers in hosiery and shoe factories. At Earl Shilton by 1899 the population, rapidly growing from 2,252 in 1881 to 4,190 in 1911, was 'engaged mostly in the manufacture of boots, shoes and hosiery'. At Fleckney, whose population was growing from 770 in 1881 to 1,852 in 1911, there were three hosiery manufacturers. At Rothley, whose population grew from 1,048 in 1881 to 2,006 in 1911, it was noted that 'there are boot manufactories; also a hosiery factory, built during the year 1887'. At Syston, growing from 2,470 people in 1881 to 3,087 in 1911, there were two footwear manufacturers, but there was also a 'large iron foundry'.

Some of the industrialized villages with Baptist chapels grew rapidly with the development of the Leicestershire coalfield, as Figure 2 indicates.

In general, the Baptist chapels grew also, as Figure 3 indicates, Hugglescote and Ibstock in particular. At Ibstock the population increase of 112 per cent was more than matched by a 122 per cent increase in membership. Even more impressively,

Figure 2. Growth of population in colliery villages with Baptist chapels

	1881	1901	1911
Desford	900	830	1,118
Hugglescote	4,750	4,402	5,659
Ibstock	2,335	3,922	4,946
Bagworth	604	631	1,419
Newbold Verdon	729	851	1,064
Barlestone	708	829	1,042

Hugglescote had an overall increase in population of 19 per cent while Baptist membership increased 57 per cent. Desford, Newbold Verdon and Barlestone all had chapels within the Barton-in-the-Beans group, where Barton itself and Congerstone remained as purely agricultural villages and Market Bosworth was a 'small, old-fashioned, quiet market town'.[36] The overall decline from 303 in 1881 to 236 members in 1912 represents a sharp decline in the agricultural villages and Market Bosworth masking a probable modest increase in the mining villages.

How can the increases in the most industrialized villages be explained? In part and obviously, the population increases themselves brought people into those communities who were independent-minded. Whereas in large towns Baptist congregations had become more and more middle-class,[37] this was less true of the villages, especially the mining villages, where congregations tended to be more representative of the community as a whole, and where benefit societies flourished. Because they were larger congregations than in the smaller agricultural villages they could usually afford to employ capable pastors. Despite the overall decline in membership in the Barton group, the chapels continued to be well-organized by a full-time minister. George Needham, for instance, who served in the group for eleven years, had been trained at the Midland Baptist College when it was located in Leicester. It was noted, after his death in 1901, that 'his pulpit work was carefully prepared, and his sermons were orderly, felicitous in expression, delivered with a quiet pathos, closing with eloquent appeals to heart and life'.[38]

Some villages with Baptist causes close to Leicester and with good railway facilities enabling their inhabitants to commute for work purposes were in process of developing as peri-urban dormitories for the middle-classes. Blaby, Countesthorpe

Figure 3. Changes in Baptist membership in some Leicestershire industrialized villages

	1881	1898	1903	1911
Castle Donington	154	120	113	119
Earl Shilton	69	67	73	91
Fleckney	?	71	93	107
Hathern	58	50	42	44
Hugglescote	174	189	234	274
Ibstock	68	150	147	151
Rothley	100	{ 30	30	28
Sileby		{ 15	13	23
Shepshed	110	197	306	334
Syston	53	75	40	59
Total	786	964	1,091	1,230

and Kirby Muxloe were all within seven miles of the centre of the county town and had railway stations enabling people to be into the town within a few minutes. Between 1872 and 1880 there was an average of 17,979 passenger bookings at Countesthorpe, and Kirby Muxloe had an average of 6,366 passenger bookings per annum.[39] Oadby, on the other hand, was so close to the town boundary that it became a virtual extension of the Stoneygate suburb. Population at all four villages grew rapidly, from 1,303 in 1881 to 1,959 in 1911 at Blaby, from 1,103 to 1,450 at Countesthorpe, from 742 (in 1901) to 1,063 at Kirby Muxloe and from 1,731 to 2,609 at Oadby. In response the Baptist causes at the three largest peri-urban villages began to prosper. Membership grew perceptibly in each of them, as Figure 4 indicates.

Earlier in the nineteenth century the Blaby chapel had great difficulty in sustaining its ministry. Most of its members were described in 1840 as 'very poor stockingers'; in that year the Leicestershire Baptist Association secured for them the services of a pastor and guaranteed him sixty pounds a year for five years.[40] By

Figure 4. Changes in Baptist membership in some villages on the peri-urban fringes of Leicester

	1881	1898	1903	1911
Blaby	174	209	225	217
Countesthorpe	83	96	103	141
Kirby Muxloe		53	64	112
Oadby	66	88	100	99
Total	323	446	492	569

1865, however, the hosiery industry was more prosperous. The situation had changed sufficiently for John Barnett, the pastor at the time, to be presented with a purse containing fourteen sovereigns, 'an expression of the high estimate in which the congregation held his Christian uprightness, his pulpit and pastoral efficiency, and the extensive good which he had done in the village'. With the congregation's assistance Barnett had also established a chapel in nearby Whetstone, which in 1909 was rebuilt. There were various other indications of prosperity. A new Blaby chapel was erected in 1876. In 1895 it was reported that 'the total amount (over £600) expended on additional class-rooms for the Sunday School has been raised'. When the latter scheme was projected, it was noted, 'Mr Samuel Turner, JP, - who gave the land - promised the last hundred pounds if the remainder were raised within twelve months ... The new building is now entirely free from debt'. In 1898 the congregation stated that it was 'very grateful for our prosperity'.[41] Whether the beginning of the decline, evident in the drop in membership from 225 in 1902 to 217 in 1911, was related specifically to the beginning of national decline is open to question. The upward trend earlier can be related to the successful ministry of John Barnett and his successor, George Barker, from 1879 to 1906; thereafter there was a two-year interregnum followed by the much less successful ministry of Oliver Edwards from 1908 to 1912.

It is significant that the Countesthorpe and Oadby congregations continued to increase in numbers, though they did not keep pace with the population increases. Kirby Muxloe, however, was a new venture. The village was very small until after 1877, when half the Kirby Fields estate of seventy-seven acres was sold in forty-one lots. Soon there were 'many villa residences, occupied by professional gentlemen and tradesmen of Leicester'.[42] The influence of Victoria Road Church, Leicester,

was strong, for among the new inhabitants were Edward Wood, JP, managing director of the footwear firm of Freeman, Hardy & Willis, and Herbert Pochin of the ironmongers, R. Pochin & Sons, both with Victoria Road connections. This ensured that when a new chapel was built in 1894 (the congregation having formed in 1883) its first preacher was John Greenhough, minister of Victoria Road. It is not surprising, since Victoria Road was itself intended as an ecumenical venture, that the new cause became known as 'Kirby Muxloe Free Church'.[43] There was a developing sensitivity about the appropriateness of new denominationally exclusive causes in villages. In Northamptonshire there was a meeting in 1887 between Baptist and Congregational representatives at which the decision was taken that they would not compete with each other in the development of rural churches.[44] The Revd W.E. Morris, speaking at a meeting at the Baptist chapel in Husbands Bosworth, had expressed the hope that 'all Nonconformist churches would be union churches, without distinction as to Baptists and Congregationalists'.[45]

The peri-urban chapels continued to grow, but they tended, like most of the others, to become middle-class enclaves within their communities. Money was more plenteous, enabling the congregations concerned to contribute handsomely to mission and to the raising of substantial central funds, like J.H. Shakespeare's Baptist Union Twentieth Century Fund, which aimed to provide free church witness in areas where it was not already evident,[46] and also to build, rebuild and enlarge both chapels and Sunday school facilities. By 1900, it has been noted, Nonconformity in general was 'more homogeneously middle-class than ever before'.[47] Some Baptists looked wistfully to the creation of 'a class of small-holding proprietors' to replace the tenant farmers who had disappeared. This was not to be, but if the dream had come true it would have strengthened further the middle-class hold upon Nonconformity.[48]

Middle-class domination may have provided a better financial base in some chapels, but with it went a tendency to rely less upon mission within the community and more upon the provision of Sunday schools. Shorn of the earlier need to teach the elements of literacy after elementary education became compulsory in 1880, they became devoted entirely to developing Christian knowledge and commitment. Between 1870 and 1890 Sunday schools grew rapidly, 'and in the 1890s were still very well attended and were still growing'.[49] Throughout the East Midlands attendance reached a peak of 42,396 in 1904 and then began to decline.[50]

In Leicestershire there were fluctuations from year to year, but the total number of pupils remained, after considerable increases between 1881 and 1899, almost stagnant, hovering around the 17,000 mark. There was a difference, however, between types of villages. In the agricultural villages listed in Figure 4 there was a steady decrease. Each of seven churches, representing seventeen chapels, had less pupils in 1911 than it had in 1881.

In the industrial villages there were some chapels in which the number of Sunday school pupils continued to grow steadily, especially at Shepshed, Ibstock, Fleckney and Earl Shilton. Others, however, fluctuated, like Hugglescote, Rothley and Sileby,

Figure 5. Sunday school pupils in some Leicestershire agricultural villages

	1881	1898	1903	1911
Arnesby	80	59	55	47
Billesdon	50	?	?	17
Foxton	64	42	42	31
Husbands Bosworth	80	70	55	41
Queniborough	13	30	-	-
Sutton and Cosby	181	199	185	153
Thurlaston	58	28	20	14
Total	526	428	357	303

or remained stagnant like Castle Donington. Hathern lost steadily. On the whole, it is true to say that numbers were stagnated.

In the villages on Leicester's peri-urban fringes, Kirby Muxloe increased steadily, its highest point being 251 pupils in 1911. Countesthorpe fluctuated, but its progress was generally upward. Blaby, however, reached a high point of 470 in 1899 and then declined to 273 in 1911. Oadby remained stagnated.

It is significant, however, that even where the church itself was very successful the Sunday school was not advancing at the same pace. At Kirby Muxloe membership increased during J.C. Forth's ministry from thirty-seven in 1898 to eighty in 1906, but the number of Sunday school pupils had not doubled over the same period.[51] Similarly at Hugglescote, while there continued to be a steady increase in membership in line with population increases, the Sunday school declined from a high point of 468 to 282 in 1911. At Sutton-in-the-Elms church membership increased from forty-six in 1903 to ninety-three in 1911, but Sunday school pupils diminished from 185 to 153.

Some reasons may be suggested. There was a reduction in both quantity and quality of those being recruited to teach. It was noted in 1898 that, although there was a slight increase in the number of pupils throughout the East Midlands, there was a net decrease of twenty-seven teachers.[52] Although there were fluctuations - there was a net increase of forty-one teachers in 1908 - the general trend was downward.[53] In 1913 the number of officers and teachers had fallen during the year

Figure 6. Sunday school pupils at Baptist chapels in some Leicestershire industrial villages

	1881	1898	1903	1911
Castle Donington	170	184	168	175
Earl Shilton	185	193	195	217
Fleckney	?	140	160	203
Hathern	130	80	64	56
Hugglescote	320	468	367	282
Ibstock	151	275	291	333
Rothley	100	{ 60	64	?
Sileby		{ 56	?	40
Shepshed with Belton	469	523	570	627
Syston	130	127	144	?
Total	1,655	2,106	2,023	1,933

by 226, from 2,123 to 1,897, and the general secretary of the EMBA pleaded for a response to the need for more teachers, stating that 'the position of the Church of tomorrow is bound up with the condition of the Sunday School of today'.[54]

Migration from agricultural villages often took away the people with energy and initiative who were the backbone of the village chapels and their Sunday schools. The anonymous historian of Thurlaston chapel noted that 'a large number of our members and congregation have left the village and gone to reside in Leicester [and] that has appeared to weaken our hands'.[55] It was a movement that continued over the next few decades. Alderman J.C. Bassett of Leicester acknowledged in 1896 that country chapels provided the county town 'with a constant influx of young and vigorous life from the country'.[56]

There was, moreover, a tendency for some middle-class people to move out of church activities. The Revd Charles Short noted as early as 1869 that:

> the tradesman of the middle-class is possessed with the same deadly error that he can buy himself off from personal service by a money payment as the

> equivalent. Perchance he tries to satisfy his conscience by taking a class in Sunday School; but as he has neither time nor inclination to prepare the lesson, it becomes a heartless and bungling business which he would speedily resign if he dared.[57]

By 1909 C.F.G. Masterman was insistent that the middle-classes were losing their religion and drifting 'towards a non-dogmatic affirmation of general kindliness and good fellowship, with an emphasis rather on the service of men than on the fulfilment of the will of God'.[58]

It is probable too that the Sunday schools were beginning to suffer from comparisons with day schools, which had made considerable progress in teaching organization and methods in the decades since the passing of Forster's Education Act in 1870.[59] A paper read by the Revd Carey Bonner, secretary of the Sunday School Union at the annual meetings of the EMBA in June 1903 indicated that:

> There was too much of haphazard in their methods, the 'tit-bits' principle was too much in vogue, their teaching was too disjointed and aimless ... They could learn much from the day school methods ... methods better suited to the stage of mind and growth reached by the child.

Bonner recommended that Sunday schools be graded, with a primary school for infants, a normal or intermediate section for pupils from eight to fifteen years and an institute for 'scholars of older years'.[60] This had some effect in the Sunday schools of substantial urban churches, like Melbourne Hall in Leicester, where 'the little people are provided with paper and are asked to draw their idea of the lesson',[61] but it filtered through more slowly to the rural areas, where smaller Sunday schools often had little opportunity to develop new ideas and organization.

There was, moreover, a feeling developing that the concentration on Sunday school teaching, often to the exclusion of other forms of evangelism, had been a mistake. It was beginning to be noticed in the 1890s 'that only a small proportion of children passing through Sunday school became committed Christians and church members'.[62]

It is likely that forces such as the growth of secularism and the tendency for village chapels to cling to a pre-Darwinian concept of creation that was seen to be incompatible with modern scientific thinking were influential. There can be no doubt too that many chapel members turned their backs on education, particularly higher education, which seemed to place 'an intellectual premium ... on unbelief'; this did not endear them to new generations.[63] Furthermore, C.E. Whitmore, as president of the EMBA in 1904, indicated that the quality of preaching in many chapels was like the bleating of sheep, and suggested that preachers should 'come down amongst them to preach, not go up into the pulpit'. He also suggested that 'bad air, lack of ventilation, the antique pew system, were all things which ... tended to keep people away from the Churches'.[64]

The main factor, however, was disillusionment with the Nonconformist role in

politics which was often divisive and inept, especially on the question of education. The Education Act 1870 had left elementary education in rural areas largely in the hands of the Established Church. In 1900, outside Leicester, there were no more than thirty-three school boards, the remainder of the 250 parishes being served by voluntary elementary schools, of which 198 were administered by the Church of England.[65] There had been hope that new legislation would take schools out of the management of a Church that was perceived as being in process of 'Romanizing', but when the Bill was published it caused considerable opposition because rates were to be applied 'to the maintenance of sectarian schools in which the managers will be at liberty to introduce their distinctive tenets, however abhorrent they may be to the parents of the children'.[66] When the Balfour-Morant Education Act was passed without substantial modification in this respect, except to make rate money available to all public elementary schools, there was considerable opposition from some Baptists.[67] Some refused to pay rates, and were put in prison or had their possessions distrained. This opposition became an issue in the general election of 1906, when the Liberal landslide victory was seen as the herald of changes in the Education Act. No substantial change was, however, effected and there was disappointment that all the Nonconformist efforts had failed.

Overt opposition in the countryside was less evident than in the towns. There was little opposition in agricultural villages where the Church of England was dominant and Nonconformists constituted a small minority. The tendency there was either to leave for the benefits of urban life or to accentuate the drift away from Nonconformity to the Established Church. Either way it contributed to decline.

The question of decline has to be put into perspective. The proportion of Baptist membership in Leicestershire outside the county town was slightly higher in 1912 than it had been in 1881, although it was increasing in 1881 and beginning to decrease in 1912. In 1881 there were 3,064 Baptists (fifty per cent) outside Leicester, out of 6,122 in the whole county, while in 1912 there were 5,061 (fifty-two per cent) outside the county town. It is true that Loughborough's total had increased from 625 to 802, Hinckley's from 129 to 270, and Market Harborough's from 55 to 143, but the greatest increases had been in rural communities. It is clear that Baptist membership since 1881 had kept up well in areas other than those that were predominantly agricultural, and that for a time its growth had exceeded that in Leicester. Areas outside the county town remained fairly stable in membership, especially between 1903 (5,552) and 1912 (5,061), despite losses in agricultural villages. This was attributable mainly to the development of industrialized villages and communities on the peri-urban fringes of Leicester and the response of Baptists within them.

NOTES

1 The writer acknowledges with gratitude the assistance of Mrs Susan J. Mills, Librarian, Regent's Park College, Oxford, over the use of resources at the Angus Library. All references to

population are taken from Population Censuses for England and Wales. References in tables and adjoining text taken from *Baptist Union Handbooks*. The East Midlands Baptist Association is abbreviated to EMBA.

2 J.F.C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901*, 1990, 102.

3 E.A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, 1944, 123.

4 Quoted, *ibid.*, 121.

5 *Baptist Union Handbook* 1886, 77.

6 *ibid.* 1892.

7 *ibid.* 1912, 197.

8 A net increase in 1911 was attributable to the spectacular success of Melbourne Hall in Leicester. EMBA Yearbook 1912, 32-3.

9 K.D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales 1800-1930*, Oxford 1988, 161.

10 *Leicester Journal*, 22 November 1872.

11 I. Sellers, *Nineteenth Century Nonconformity*, 1977, 11,17.

12 See Leicestershire Record Office (hereafter LRO) N/B/LBA/25 (EMBA minutes), 12 February 1895.

13 This study - G.T. Rimmington, 'Late Victorian Clergy Income: The Leicestershire Evidence' - is to be published in the *East Midlands Historian*.

14 D.M. Thompson (ed.), *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1972, 14.

15 *ibid.*, 238.

16 *EMBA Yearbook* 1904, 14.

17 A. Everitt, *The Pattern of Rural Dissent: The Nineteenth Century*, Leicester 1972, 28.

18 *Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland*, 1899, 4, 25.

19 *ibid.*, 71.

20 *EMBA Yearbook* 1903, 25.

21 LRO/N/B/154/2 (Husbands Bosworth Baptist Church, minutes of church meetings), 27 October 1904.

22 LRO/N/B/330/1 (Thurlaston Baptist Church, minutes of church meetings), 4 December 1897.

23 D.M. Thompson, 'Church Extension in Town and Countryside in Later Nineteenth Century Leicestershire', in D. Baker (ed.), *Studies in Church History*, 16, 1979, 440.

24 LRO/N/B/LBA/25, 8 June 1896.

25 *ibid.*, 10 December 1896.

26 *ibid.*, 9 December 1898.

27 D. Ashby, *Friar Lane, 1651-1951*, 1951, 84.

28 *Leicester Melbourne Hall Magazine*, 1903-1914.

29 LRO/N/B/155/1 (Ibstock Baptist Church, minutes of church meetings), 26 September 1881 and 10 July 1883.

30 LRO/N/B/154/2, 22 April 1896.

31 LRO/N/B/33/1, 26 April 1868.

32 Information supplied by H.E. Barton.

33 LRO/N/B/93/2 (Earl Shilton Baptist Church, minutes of church meetings), 27 February 1912.

34 LRO/N/B/154/2, 22 April 1896 and 20 January 1892.

35 Everitt, *Pattern of Rural Dissent*, 50.

36 *Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland*, 1899, 154.

37 E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City*, 1957, 137, notes that the Baptists in Sheffield were middle-class people, merchants, and tradespeople 'with very few if any poor people'. See also G.T. Rimmington, 'Victoria Road Church, Leicester: A Victorian Experiment in Ecumenicity', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 71, 1997, 72-85. Victoria Road Church's members were so predominantly middle-class that when the deacons were requested to consider the establishment of a benevolent society they replied that it was 'inexpedient to attempt the organisation of such a society at present'. It is also notable that the communion funds, designated for distribution to the poor, were frequently underspent.

38 *Baptist Union Handbook* 1902, 201.

39 J. Simmons, 'Public Transport in Leicestershire 1814-80', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, LXXI, 1996, 116-7.

40 D.M. Thompson, 'Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851-1881', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1969, 116-7.

41 LRO/N/B/38/3 (Blaby Baptist Church, minutes of church meetings), 7 November 1865, 23 May 1876, 2 February 1895, 22 February 1898, 26 July 1909. When Samuel Turner died, aged forty-eight years, soon after the completion of the new Sunday school rooms in 1895, it was noted that, over a period of eighteen years, he had been a deacon, Sunday school teacher and superintendent. See the minute of 1 April 1895.

42 J. Wilshere, *Scenes from Kirby Muxloe History*, Leicester 1971, 15; *Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland*, 1899, 110.

43 Victoria Road Church had been opened in 1867 with an emphasis on 'unity on the basis of common hope in Christ'. Although it was

technically a Particular Baptist institution it was not called a 'Baptist' church, since it aimed to accept newcomers into 'full and equal brotherhood without baptismal requirement, simply by being evangelical believers'. See Rimmington, 'Victoria Road Church ...', 74-6. The term 'Free Church', rather than 'Nonconformist Church' reflected a growing concern outside the Establishment for a more positive image. It was used initially at the Free Church Congress in Manchester. J. Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 1991, 169.

44 T.S.H. Elwyn, *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association*, 1964, 63.

45 LRO/N/B/154/2, 22 April 1896.

46 Payne, *Free Church Tradition*, 123.

47 Thompson, *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, 15.

48 *ibid.*, 238.

49 F.M.W. Harrison, *It all began here: The story of the East Midlands Baptist Association*, 1986, 75.

50 *ibid.*, 87-8.

51 J.A. Coldwell and P. Grange, *The First Hundred Years of Kirby Muxloe Free Church 1883-1983*, Leicester 1983, 6-7.

52 *EMBA Minutes and Reports*, 1899, 15.

53 *EMBA Yearbook*, 1909, 21.

54 *ibid.*, 1914, 26.

55 Anon., 'The Rise and Progress of the General Baptist cause in this village'. This is undoubtedly the history of the cause in Thurlaston that Richard Barton was deputed by the church meeting to 'prepare ... for printing and ascertain the price' in 1864. (See LRO/N/B/330/1, 26 December 1864). Copy supplied by H.E. Barton.

56 LRO/N/B/154/2, 22 April 1896.

57 The Revd Charles Short, *The best means of overtaking the religious destitution of our large towns*. Address at Autumnal Session of the Baptist Union in Leicester, 6-7 October 1869. Published as a pamphlet, LRO Pamphlets 33.

58 Quoted from *The Condition of England* in Wickham, *Church and People...*, 179-180. See also Sellers, *Nineteenth Century Nonconformity*, 47-8. Sellers refers to the 'increasingly home-orientated direction of the life of the suburbs ... where the high-walled villas led in the cultivation of domestic privacy'.

59 See, for instance, G.T. Rimmington, *Education, Politics and Society in Leicester 1833-1903*, Hantsport, N.S., Canada, 1978, chapters 4 and 5.

60 LRO/N/B/LBA/26, 8-10 June 1903.

61 *Leicester Melbourne Hall Magazine*, June 1907.

62 Harrison, *It all began here*, 74.

63 *ibid.*, 88.

64 LRO/N/B/LBA/26 (EMBA minutes), 13-15 June 1904.

65 G.T. Rimmington, 'Leicestershire School Boards 1871-1903', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, LII, 1976-7, 53.

66 LRO/N/B/LBA/26, *passim*.

67 See Rimmington, *Education, Politics and Society...*, chapter 7, for details of passive resistance in Leicester.

68 Wickham, *Church and People...*, 179.

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