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## T.A. WHEELER OF NORWICH

My wife's<sup>1</sup> great-great uncle, the Revd Thomas Archibald Wheeler, of the former Unthank Road Baptist Church in Norwich, who died 31 December 1898, was characterized as 'one of the most prominent East Anglian Nonconformists of his time ... who by his pulpit abilities and his exalted character, profoundly influenced the city and county in which, for the greater part of his life, his lot was cast'.<sup>2</sup> Fading family tradition has prompted this investigation into his ministry.

A slim commemorative booklet, *From St Paul's to Unthank Road, 1788-1925*, written by Harold F. Oxbury,<sup>3</sup> provides an overall picture of Wheeler's two pastorates in Norwich. The ministry of his most famous predecessor, Mark Wilks, and his own two incumbencies together cover a total of sixty-nine years and form the bulk of Oxbury's narrative. Coming to Norwich from the Midlands, Wilks had founded a Baptist church in the poor parish of St Paul's in May 1788, then moved with his congregation to a more salubrious site in Colegate Street in the parish of St Clement's. He laid the foundation stone of the new chapel in 1812 with Andrew Fuller preaching the dedicatory sermon. This fine porticoed building was opened for worship in 1814 and its still existing shell bears the plaque:

Mark Wilks (1748-1819) Baptist preacher and radical politician who served at St Clement's chapel later known as Wheeler's Chapel which stood on this site in 1814.<sup>4</sup>

Of Wheeler's pastorates with this congregation, the first (1844-64) was at the St Clement's chapel, and most of the second (1870-87) at the Unthank Road chapel to which they moved in 1875. Between these two pastorates he was at Old King Street Church, Bristol (1865-70).

### EARLY INFLUENCES

T.A. Wheeler was born in 1821 at Moulton, Northamptonshire, where his father, Francis Wheeler, a graduate of Bristol College, pastored the Carey church and conducted a school in the manse. The son was said to have grown up in 'a singularly happy Christian home', in 'an atmosphere of evangelical godliness and missionary zeal'.<sup>5</sup> As there were eight surviving children of the family and several others who died in infancy, this suggests remarkable fortitude on the part of the pastor-teacher and his wife. Francis had a helpful sense of humour (he called the schoolroom behind the pulpit of the old College Lane chapel 'the oven').<sup>6</sup> A very durable Elizabeth Wheeler was still active in the Moulton Baptist Church sixteen years after her husband's death, at a tea meeting and sale in which she 'took the most prominent part'.<sup>7</sup> When eighty-three she gifted a family copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* to one of her nephews, inscribing it in a firm hand. She died aged ninety-one.

One of their occasional boarding students was John Turland Brown,<sup>8</sup> from the Bugbrooke church, who was sent to Francis Wheeler's school, first for basic

education and later to prepare for entry to Bristol College. He and T.A. Wheeler, from being schoolmates, remained lifelong friends. At the celebrations marking Brown's fifty years as pastor of College Street, Northampton, Wheeler gave a sparkling account of the activities and personalities of the Northamptonshire Association in the 1830s. 'Those were grand times,' he said, 'when we came up to Northampton as the tribes went up to Jerusalem, joined in the [Sunday School] anniversaries and enlivened the long walk home at night with criticisms on the preacher and his discourse, and supplemented such talk by discussions on Arminian and Calvinistic dogmas, which left us at the finish just where we were at the beginning.'<sup>9</sup> Wheeler remembered one anniversary sermon at College Lane which perhaps epitomized the spiritual tension of his life: the text was 'Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee'. His ambivalence towards high Calvinism undoubtedly had a family reference. One of Wheeler's uncles, Thomas, had a connection with the younger Robert Hall which stemmed from a sermon by the great preacher delivered at Dunstable where Thomas, then in his twenties, was employed. Deeply impressed by the discourse, which probably resolved an urgent theological difficulty, he asked Hall to find him employment in Leicester so that he could sit regularly under his ministry.<sup>10</sup> The great man humbly acknowledged this compliment and Thomas settled in Leicester, becoming a member of Harvey Lane Church and a modestly prosperous grocer in the town.<sup>11</sup> He was also four times elected a councillor for St Margaret's ward, Leicester,<sup>12</sup> thus becoming one of those who, in Temple Patterson's words, were 'the shock troops of local Radicalism'.<sup>13</sup> The eponymous uncle's admiration for Hall was undoubtedly shared by his nephew in Moulton and other members of this close-knit family.

J.T. Brown's spiritual influence on his friend was more direct. Converted through Wheeler's uncle John, pastor at Bugbrooke, and baptized by him in 1832, Brown had twice addressed the church meeting there the following year, the Church Minute Book noting that he was 'aged 14'. In 1834 he was Bugbrooke's delegate to the association meetings at Olney, where his boyish appearance in a new sailor suit raised doubts! But he had already revealed an undeniable gift in services undertaken at nearby churches.<sup>14</sup> As a boarder at Francis Wheeler's school, young Brown brought to the Moulton pastor's family the enthusiasm of his Christian discipleship and a passionate interest in botany which he evidently passed on to Wheeler, who developed a similar interest and frequently used this knowledge in sermon illustrations.<sup>15</sup> Wheeler described Brown as 'a great reader and lover of the Old Book, God's Word, and that older Book, God's Works'.<sup>16</sup>

Like Brown, Wheeler's discipleship developed into a call to the ministry. According to a self-deprecating account of his trial sermon, he 'stammered away for a few minutes and came to a dead stop', but this did not hinder his admission to Stepney College in 1839. His upbringing in a country manse gave him a genuine feeling for 'the Baptist ministers of the county, men of sterling worth, who somehow managed to live and do work for the churches and the Church's Lord',<sup>17</sup> and later

a genuine rapport with fellow-Baptist ministers and rural congregations in the Norfolk Association. He never lost his love for his home county and was preaching at Moulton and Pitsford churches in 1861 to 'crowded congregations', in support of a chapel extension at Moulton.<sup>18</sup> In 1873 he recommended the Revd William Henry Payne of Worstead, Norfolk, for the vacancy at the Bugbrooke church.<sup>19</sup>

The Northamptonshire Association's vital connection with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) moulded his own lifelong commitment to it, and he retained his membership of the General Committee throughout his career, attending the Autumn Meetings in Nottingham in 1898 only months before his death at the age of seventy-seven. At the end of his Bristol pastorate, he was offered the BMS secretariat, but declined in favour of returning to his old congregation.<sup>20</sup> His contribution to the BMS was primarily that of a trusted adviser throughout a period which demanded courageous decisions by the General Committee regarding personnel and policy. In addition Wheeler cherished corporate prayer in the spirit of the 1784 Prayer Call<sup>21</sup> and its exhortation to 'let the whole interest of the Redeemer ... and the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of ... most fervent requests'. Aged seventy-seven, the day after his Golden Wedding anniversary, he drove at dawn eighteen miles from his retirement cottage near Wroxham to Great Yarmouth to attend an early prayer meeting of the Norfolk Association.<sup>22</sup>

### MINISTERIAL TRAINING

Wheeler entered Stepney College in 1839 under the tutorship of Joseph Angus and, from 1841, F.W. Gotch.<sup>23</sup> Several considerations would have led to this choice in preference to Bristol. Francis Wheeler's eighteen-year-old protégé, Brown, had been expelled for a trivial breach of discipline shortly after admission to Bristol College. It was suggested that Brown became a scapegoat for 'the general want of discipline among the students at that time'.<sup>24</sup> The Bugbrooke church unsuccessfully sought his reinstatement.<sup>25</sup> Given the close links between Bugbrooke and Moulton, there would have been dismay at the college's refusal. On the other hand, Stepney College, where Hall's memory was honoured by staff and many students, would find approval with a family acknowledging an obligation to him.<sup>26</sup> Among Wheeler's fellow students were Alexander Maclaren and James Martin, whose translations of works of German scholarship were the product of 'a mind liberalized by German criticism and philosophy yet steadfast to Evangelical Truth'.<sup>27</sup> Wheeler's preaching appears to have fitted comfortably with this point of view.

Robert Hall's printed works probably offered Wheeler sermon models, as hinted in a later comment on his style, that it was 'touched with the dignity of the old time'.<sup>28</sup> He worked hard at his preaching while at Stepney, taking extra-curricular lessons from an old actor.<sup>29</sup> These developed his diction, language, presentation and memory, and freed him from the entanglement of sermon notes, which he rarely took into the pulpit. Good literary expression in a colloquial idiom remained one of his preaching aims, which discerning hearers agreed he generally achieved.<sup>30</sup> Later,

Wheeler's use of 'practical preaching' as a way into hearts and consciences echoes Hall's philosophy: 'The preacher has not to do with a few rigid and unbending propositions; he is to contemplate and pourtray a real state of things - a state which is continually changing its aspect while it preserves its essential character.'<sup>31</sup> For Wheeler the 'real state of things' would be the social conditions of the weaver community in St Clement's parish and how they impinged upon his church's business-oriented leadership. Again, we may look to Leicester for a connection. Hall's concern for the Leicestershire framework knitters in the depressions of the early 1800s was both philosophical, supporting their union against Cobbett, and practical in his advocacy of the relief society set up for them.<sup>32</sup> Within Wheeler's own recollection, J.P. Mursell, who followed Hall at Harvey Lane, was an unashamed political Dissenter, advocating radical reforms in the wake of the 1835 Municipal Reform Act, and the uncle Thomas Wheeler was one of the deacons through whom he was seeing them implemented.<sup>33</sup> Briggs<sup>34</sup> notes that in 1838 Mursell wrote a series of letters to the local press on 'The Rights of Labour', with a reference to Hall's earlier scheme for alleviating the distress of the unemployed. On his seventeen-year-old nephew, his uncle's involvement in these events must have made an abiding impression. Commencing at Stepney College the following year, and living for five years on the Whitechapel Road only a short distance from the Spitalfields' silk-weaving community, it is not hard to imagine the young student becoming aware of these workers' conditions. By 1840 these were such that a whole family, working twelve hours a day, could earn no more than nine or ten shillings a week.<sup>35</sup> Such impressions would have been reinforced later by his Norwich colleague, William Brock, from recollections of close contact with this community in his own Stepney days.<sup>36</sup> This may well have been Wheeler's first practical introduction to the poverty of artisan families bearing resemblance to that of the weavers of Norwich. In his fourth year at Stepney, 1844, after a six-month supply period at the Particular Baptist church in St Clement's, Norwich, he accepted their call to the pastorate without completing his degree. His tutors were disappointed, but he had already gained enough to sustain a long ministry. As one colleague bore witness: 'Mr Wheeler's temperament was profoundly intellectual, and I judge his scholarly equipment to have been far from inconsiderable'.<sup>37</sup> Wheeler was barely twenty-one when he first supplied the pulpit of this influential city church; at the age of twenty-three he had embarked on a career of almost thirty-eight years with them.

#### FIRST NORWICH MINISTRY (1844-1864)

The parish of St Clement's, on the north bank of the River Wensum, is part of 'Norwich over the Water', an area historically separate from the more prosperous commercial sector on the southern bank. The two main intersecting thoroughfares of the parish, Colegate Street and St George's Street, could boast two fourteenth-century parish churches, three fine Nonconformist chapels, and elegant homes which had been centres of business and cultural activity in the late eighteenth century.

Behind these frontages in crowded, insanitary courts and alleys lived the handloom-weaving families, who produced worsted - the staple of Norwich's wealth. Migrants to the city in earlier good times, they had virtually doubled the population of Norwich, overcrowding the cheap housing on the north bank. Wheeler found these people on the church's doorstep, stranded in a city groaning under the burden of Poor Relief through the worst years of the 'hungry forties'. Following the Crimean War, fluctuations of trade again led to severe unemployment among Norwich weavers, and the 1861 Census showed St Clement's parish lowest in the Norwich table of real property values in relation to population (£1-19s-6d per head, as against St Andrew's on the opposite bank of the Wensum with £7-16s-6d per head).<sup>38</sup>

Wheeler's work in this depressed area was a continuation of efforts by his immediate predecessor, James Puntis, but better organized and more energetic and successful.<sup>39</sup> It appears, also, that his approach to distressed working families was such as to win their confidence. Oxbury says: 'He understood perfectly the needs and desires of the working man; he had seen him in his home with his wife and children; he had seen him at his work; and, unhappily, he had seen him in times of distress when he could not find any work. Wheeler was the labourer's friend ... he knew how to talk to such when they came in crowds to his services.'<sup>40</sup>

A convinced believer in the 'open table' before his arrival in Norwich, Wheeler steadily advocated this position in his pastoral situation. A core of church members who had favoured the 'closed table' against all suggestions of their former minister, were still unwilling to share communion with unbaptized believers at Wheeler's urging. He would be involved in peripheral debate on the matter early in his ministry when, in 1845, William Brock at nearby St Mary's Baptist Church, introduced a monthly 'open' service while retaining a 'closed' service for those who desired it. Established Christians apart, Wheeler wanted to offer the fullest possible fellowship to converts from his poorer community, whose 'table fellowship' was generally limited to the church teas arranged for them. Realizing there was not only the resistance of conservative Christians to this idea but also an understandable reluctance on the part of working people to join a mainly middle-class membership in this solemn religious rite, he suggested, according to a church minute of 28 February 1848, 'that the children of the Sunday School should be allowed to stay to watch at communion', and so, perhaps, lessen their elders' misgivings. The susceptibilities of his deacons were offended even by this; no decision was taken.<sup>41</sup>

The pressure of local events, however, gradually turned the tide of church opinion. It would become known at St Clement's that the decision of the St Mary's church to hold a closed and an open celebration of communion each month had created the anomalous situation in which J.J. Colman, a leading Norwich industrialist and a deacon of St Mary's, sat at the communion table with his wife for the open celebration, but on account of her being a Congregationalist he sat alone at the closed service.<sup>42</sup>

In Wheeler's own congregation, an application for membership was received in

September 1851 from two ladies who had been forbidden by their doctor to undergo baptism by immersion. Again, the request was the subject of lengthy debate, but finally the right of the ladies to full fellowship was conceded on the understanding that this was not an open door to unbaptized membership in the future. Then in 1854 St Clement's received an invitation from Prince's Street Congregational Church and its minister, John Alexander, to join them at the Lord's table; but the invitation was declined after, as Wheeler put it, 'a long and upon the whole very temperate discussion of the matter'.<sup>43</sup> Even so, the resolution noted the church's fear of countenancing 'a dangerous heresy'. Some of his members hinted at collusion between the ministers, which Wheeler denied. Left with this unsatisfactory situation, he decided to submit a motion to the church which would require a vote by each member for or against open communion. This was carried in favour. Even so, the decision actually to invite to the Lord's table those who had not been baptized by immersion was not taken until the New Year, 1855. At this juncture inevitably a few members seceded, though not with widely divisive effect.<sup>44</sup> Wheeler had won the argument before the event, and in 1860 St Clement's showed its change of heart by contributing generously to a fund set up to defray the Revd George Gould's expenses in the Chancery case relating to 'closed' communion, brought against him by some of the members of St Mary's Baptist Church.<sup>45</sup>

It took over ten years of patient pastoral work by Wheeler to bring his church to this new position. The profound and widespread influence formerly exercised by Joseph Kinghorn in championing the closed table was a legacy which most Norfolk Baptists were slow to abandon. So it is remarkable that Wheeler, still in his early thirties, effected such a radical change with so little disruption. The reputation Norwich enjoyed for 'the spirit of harmony subsisting there among all denominations of evangelical Christians'<sup>46</sup> and Wheeler's openness to fellowship with Christian spirits congenial to his own assisted the eirenic nature of his campaign.

In spite of this change, baptism by immersion continued to be the normal route to church membership at St Clement's until 1914 when the church opened its fellowship to any professing Christian believer; then it was stipulated that ministers and deacons must have been baptized by immersion.<sup>47</sup>

Inevitably Wheeler had critics. In 1847 the Church Minutes record that a member removed himself from the church because 'he could hear Mr Brock better than any other minister'. In the same year a female member asked for dismissal because 'she heard the Gospel more finely preached by Mr Greg'.<sup>48</sup> There were as well the secessions noted above.

In addition to the work of his own congregation and church area Wheeler had, since his arrival in Norwich, carried the banner of 'association' among local Baptists. Mark Wilks had been a proponent of the idea of a Baptist Union as early as 1812.<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, St Clement's had become the regular meeting place for earlier Norfolk experiments in Baptists associating. At a meeting there in 1845 Wheeler was elected secretary of the existing county association. Difficulties arose,

however, relating to some home and overseas mission work and he resigned, though he continued as secretary of the separated East Norfolk Association. This rupture was healed in 1862, largely through Wheeler persuading East and West divisions to undertake a joint Home and Foreign Missions auxiliary.<sup>50</sup>

Wheeler's attractive preaching, careful pastoral organization, and steady advocacy of his theological position led to growing congregations at St Clement's, often including leading Norwich citizens. But his ministry among the poor shaped him spiritually and intellectually for a bigger effort on their behalf. Oxbury, writing the commemoration booklet in the 1920s, when memories of Wheeler were still warm among older church members, reflects thus:<sup>51</sup>

The whole question of open communion and membership seems to have been mixed up in the minister's mind with the need for spreading the Gospel among the people who lived near his church but were not of its fellowship. Baptism probably meant little to some of the inhabitants of St Clement's and St George's. The heart of Wheeler was wrung by the misery and vice in which these poverty-stricken dwellers of the slums reared their children and dragged out their own drink-sodden existence. Thus, to his mind, the problem of spreading the Gospel among these people, and of making easy their road into the fellowship of the church, was an urgent and impelling goad to action.

#### THE ST ANDREW'S HALL LECTURES

Wheeler became widely known for a series of lectures<sup>52</sup> which he delivered at St Andrew's Hall, the largest auditorium in Norwich, starting at the end of 1861 and continuing for upwards of two years each Sunday afternoon. A number of circumstances led to this initiative.

The 1854 report of Horace Mann, the Registrar's Chief Statistician, noted the estrangement of the working classes from organized religion, as demonstrated in the 1851 census returns. He recommended that the clergy should adopt radical measures, such as open-air preaching, in an attempt to reverse the decline in church-going. Mann also noted a minority of 'militantly secularist working men' with 'an inveterately hostile sentiment towards religion'. In Norwich these could be the rump of the old secular Chartist groups which had once flourished in the city.<sup>53</sup> The Norwich City Mission, based on Anglican and Nonconformist co-operation, was then puritanical to a degree, frowning on the most innocent Sunday recreation, suspicious of Roman Catholic activities, and likely to repel rather than attract the unchurched artisan.

The 21 May 1856 edition of the *Freeman* magazine had also called for a new approach to mass evangelism, using secular halls and theatres to attract working men within the orbit of gospel preaching,<sup>54</sup> and a number of Baptist preachers who had taken up this challenge were well-known to Wheeler. The list of BMS General Committee members for 1861<sup>55</sup> shows Charles Birrell, Hugh Stowell Brown, J.P. Chown, F.W. Gotch, J.P. Mursell and William Brock as committee colleagues and companions of Wheeler, all of whom, except Dr Gotch, had experience of



addressing large audiences outside the church context. Stowell Brown may have been a pioneer in this field. His seven-year lecture series at the Concert Hall, Liverpool, starting in May 1854, attracted growing audiences, with widely distributed weekly prints of his talks. He remarked in retrospect,<sup>56</sup> 'I have reason to think that they did some good in themselves, and ... set an example to many other ministers who ... addressed the working men of our English towns'. When William Brock moved from Norwich to the new Bloomsbury Chapel in London in 1848 he became convinced that 'if the unconquered hosts were to be won over, the banner of peace must be borne still nearer to them'. He and other Evangelical colleagues held popular religious services in a number of theatres in densely populated Hoxton and elsewhere from 1859. Lord Shaftesbury's defence of them in the House of Lords against the charge of 'irreverence' showed that they had made a real impact.<sup>57</sup> It seems likely that Wheeler was encouraged by Brown and Brock, and perhaps others, at their periodic meetings to attempt something similar in Norwich.

In his 1851 Religious Census return Wheeler recorded for St Clement's Chapel: 'United [Sunday] services held monthly in afternoons', with average attendance 400. This is the only reference in the Norwich entries to a united Sunday afternoon meeting, though there were numerous such denominational gatherings, some very well attended, e.g. St Mary's Baptist and Prince's Street Congregational both had average attendances of 400. Only a few of these were regular weekly meetings.<sup>58</sup> Wheeler's entry shows his influence across denominational boundaries. St Andrew's Hall, the vast preaching nave of a former Dominican priory which had been in the possession of the Norwich Corporation since the English Reformation, was in frequent use as a venue for large, secular gatherings, and the influence of J.J. Colman, a city councillor since 1859, would have helped gain the consent of the Corporation to a preaching project there.<sup>59</sup> A further advantage was the close proximity of the hall to his own church building, though on the opposite bank of the Wensum: he was well placed for both 'home' and 'away' support.

What about Wheeler as a preacher? Even allowing for local veneration, the accounts reveal a speaker of outstanding gifts. Samuel Vincent<sup>60</sup> described his friend as a preacher in his prime:

A healthy, vigorous, manly presence, a natural manner touched with the dignity of the old time, a fine voice, and a gift of choice extemporaneous speech diligently cultivated, gave force to the matter of his discourse ...

His speaking was always original, and often as sparkling with wit as it was full of shrewd sense and cogent argument.

From H. Broadhurst, a local MP, we have the following:

Mr Wheeler had a very fine voice, rare elocution, and splendid diction ... Although he himself never smiled, yet he had that secret and rare power of pathos and humour which on many and many occasions I have known to produce merriment, probably to be followed immediately by gravity often

accompanied by tears. He had great dramatic power.<sup>61</sup>

Regarding the physical circumstances of the lectures, Mr Broadhurst gives the following details:

Mr Wheeler used to commence punctually as the clock struck three, and as punctually stopped as the clock struck four. At that time the organ and the platform in St Andrew's Hall were at the west end ... The services were exceedingly well attended as soon as they became generally known, and though the greater part of the audience consisted of working men and women, there was a very considerable sprinkling of other classes of society.<sup>62</sup>

The usual preliminaries were a well-known hymn and a short prayer; the rest of the hour was taken up with Wheeler's address.

Bearing in mind the motivation behind these lectures and the possible themes Wheeler developed, it would not be difficult to imagine what he made of the two lectures whose subjects are on record. One was a Memorial Address on the death of the Prince Consort, which we can almost certainly date to 15 December 1861. The other was an address on the Hartley Colliery disaster, which happened on Thursday, 16 January 1862, dating the lecture almost certainly to the following Sunday, 19 January.

Woodward<sup>63</sup> remarks: 'The Prince was more popular among the people at large than among the aristocracy: this popularity was to a great extent earned by his lively interest in the problems of his time'. Brought up a pious Lutheran, Albert created and exemplified the Protestant and Victorian values of industry, reliability, duty, social concern, intelligence and Christian faith. The honours that came to him were all earned. Seen as an example of Christian manhood, his close involvement in creative techniques and production made him a man of his time. Moreover, he could be grouped with the few men of wealth who took seriously what Gladstone called 'the enormous and silent changes which have been going forward among the labouring population'.<sup>64</sup> His schemes for national improvement had succeeded against opposition from the landed and governmental aristocracies and so fell within an area of theoretical conflict into which workers were being drawn more and more.

Wheeler's address following the Hartley Colliery disaster was the only one at which he asked for a collection, in aid of the victims of the tragedy. This remote Northumbrian pit was run by its owners on lines which had been demonstrated to be dangerous as far back as 1825 by no less a public figure than George Stephenson, who concluded in that year that no mine operating with a single shaft was safe; nevertheless, some owners did not conform to the two-shaft pattern, including those of Hartley Colliery. On 16 January 1862 the beam of the pumping engine at the head of the pit shaft snapped and fell, dragging all the overhead gear into the shaft and totally blocking the only exit from the pit. As a result the 204 men and boys underground were buried alive. There was general indignation at the disaster.<sup>65</sup> The event must have suggested many themes for comment. There can be no doubt about

Wheeler's fundamental sympathy with the miners' cause: the call for a collection is unambiguous on that point. Here was his concern for the Colegate weavers displayed in a different context. His connections with the Liberation Society through his closest friends, J.T. Brown, a founder member, and J.P. Mursell, and his father-in-law, Caleb Darkins, a member of the inner circle of the Norwich group, all guarantee a message in favour of ordinary people.

Whatever the advertised titles, there can be little doubt that his lectures would have dealt pointedly with disorders in the local community: political corruption, vice and drunkenness,<sup>66</sup> dishonesty and malingering, and the exploitation of women and children, all of which were common knowledge in the industrial population of Norwich of his day.<sup>67</sup> Against this dark backdrop he was able to 'translate for them into the hard facts of the 19th century world the beauty of Christ's life on earth and his love for men and women such as they'.<sup>68</sup>

These meetings were said to be 'famous far beyond the City for many years after they ceased'. They were terminated because the effort of preaching three sermons each Sunday to large congregations put a strain on Wheeler's voice which his doctors warned could have serious consequences. A group of local ministers made a serious attempt to revive them but, missing Wheeler's personal attraction, the effort petered out.<sup>69</sup>

#### THE BRISTOL PASTORATE (1865-1870)

Wheeler's move to Old King Street Church, Bristol, was not without the pains of uprooting from 'the many dear friends who have grown up around me'; these included blood relatives - 'Norwich is full of Wheelers' went the saying. But his congregation had failed to heed his warning that the inner city population was now moving out to the new suburbs and the church should go where the people were. As a private concern, his only son, Francis, needed a modern education which Norwich could not provide. Rejecting other invitations, he accepted the call to Bristol, believing that they would rise to the challenge of spreading their tent to the new suburbs. His old tutor, Dr Gotch, was a leading deacon of Old King Street, and was soon to become President of the Bristol College. His appreciation of Wheeler's ministry was unstinted and Wheeler was received with enthusiasm by the congregation. The renewal of associations with F.W. Gotch was mutually enriching.

One of four College students, who joined the Old King Street Church a year before Wheeler moved there, was Samuel Vincent. He finished his course in July 1867 and moved to the St George's Dunes Baptist Church, Great Yarmouth, as pastor, no doubt on Wheeler's recommendation. From college days a familiar visitor at the manse, he became a lifelong friend of Wheeler, was present at his funeral, and was responsible for his official obituary.<sup>70</sup> He wrote: 'Dr Gotch, an incomparable judge of men and sermons ... prized his friendship and heartily enjoyed and praised his preaching'. 'His ministry drew more than the average number of students into the membership there'.<sup>71</sup>

Wheeler would have been present at Gotch's presidential address to the 1868 Baptist Union Assembly in Bristol when, at a time of heightened controversy, Gotch spoke on 'Christ the Centre', appealing to this principle rather than to written creeds 'for the repression of error and the establishment of the truth'.<sup>72</sup> The unanimity of both men is a sure indicator of Wheeler's own theological position. If further endorsement of his respect for his old tutor were needed, we have it in a presentation to him by 'the members of the Young Ladies Working Society' of Unthank Road church of a pulpit copy of the Revised Version of the Bible, a gift which could only have been chosen at the suggestion of its honoured recipient. It was the 1885 first edition and inscribed to Wheeler in that year. He was surely delighted to have it, not only for its greater accuracy, but also as a tribute to his old mentor who had been a member of the Old Testament revision panel.

During Wheeler's Bristol pastorate 130 new members were added to the roll. He was happy in his relations with the church, and also informally with the College.<sup>73</sup> But, though many of the church members had moved out to the Cotham suburb, where a small cause had been established, they did not, at that time, respond to his challenge to put down church roots there.<sup>74</sup> This disappointed him and left him more open to the re-call from his old church, which had gone through troubled times after his departure and could think of no solution but his return. Wheeler decided he would return to Norwich, on the promise to 'carry on the movement for the erection of a new chapel'.<sup>75</sup> That this ambition to see the church keeping up with the expanding population was no passing feeling is clear from a sermon he preached much later at the re-opening of St Mary's rebuilt chapel in 1886. 'Here is a two-hundred-years-old church,' he said, 'but where is the offspring? ... It is indeed high time for Nonconformist Christian people to bethink themselves of extending their ecclesiastical system around them.'<sup>76</sup>

#### THE SECOND NORWICH MINISTRY 1870-87

It was five years before the planned new chapel was ready for use. Anglican church extension had been going on in conjunction with suburban property development, and the churches and mission halls had found prime locations. St Clement's reluctance to act earlier meant that it failed to find a site among the new houses. The plot it eventually obtained was outside the city gates, on the site of a demolished prison, but at a road junction serving two growing residential areas on the south-western edge of the city, thus fulfilling some of Wheeler's desire.

But the unsatisfactory situation within the church and congregation had first to be dealt with. The upheavals following Wheeler's departure in 1864 were due to haste in appointing a minister without the agreement of a substantial majority of the members. R.G. Moses was a man of very different temperament from Wheeler, and his combative approach caused some of the oldest and best workers in the church to leave for other local churches. Only the healthy Sunday School work, under its energetic superintendent, W.H. Dakin, gave Wheeler any promise that the church

could be restored. His letter in reply to their invitation to resume the pastorate bears comparison with Paul's tenderest appeals in its conciliatory and encouraging tone. Wheeler accepts their invitation 'in full reliance on your cordial support of all wise and kind methods to accomplish this object' and 'in the belief that you will all strive with me for the prosperity of the Church, and the extension of the Redeemer's Kingdom in the city'. This was very different from the quarrels which, we are told, blighted the church after he left.<sup>77</sup> He was aware of an opposition group, the 'gainsayers', but hoped 'so to labour among [them], with all forbearance and tenderness, as to awaken in the minds of those who doubt the expediency of my resuming the office of your Pastor, the same conviction that it is right which I myself feel.'

The foundation stone of the new Unthank Road chapel was laid by J.J. Colman, by then a Member of Parliament, on 8 July 1874, and the opening worship services, with J.P. Chown preaching, were held exactly one year later. Such was Wheeler's influence that the man appointed to head the Appeal Committee was his former church secretary, now with St Mary's after the unhappy days of Wheeler's successor. Through his energetic efforts, the total required was raised in five years. The continuing bond between Wheeler and J.J. Colman was evident in the latter's offer of £100 for every £400 raised by the church for the building fund.<sup>78</sup>

Since the days of the Chancery case at St Mary's, J.J. Colman had been a member of Prince's Street Congregational Church. Yet another of its members, the architect Edward Boardman, designed the Unthank Road chapel. These links form a continuous strand of affectionate co-operation between Wheeler and his Congregational friends in Norwich stretching back to the 1840s and 50s when he had been a frequent guest preacher at Colman's original mill site at Stoke Holy Cross for the employees' Sunday evening services.<sup>79</sup> An item in the *Baptist Reporter* of 1856 records a testimonial presentation, on 16 January, of a silver inkstand and a purse of 100 guineas to Wheeler from 'associated baptist churches in the county of Norfolk, and the Baptist and Independent churches in the city of Norwich'.<sup>80</sup> This report confirms and illustrates the judgement that in the mid-nineteenth century 'the association between the two parts of the Congregational family remained close in mission, in polity, and in campaigning for full civil rights',<sup>81</sup> an association kept alive by campaigners like Edward Miall and J.P. Mursell.

Wheeler's 'love for the village churches', referred to as a constant undercurrent of his Norwich ministries, was attributed to his personal knowledge in early days of the 'straitness' of life in the village manse. To the same feeling is attributed his effectiveness as an association secretary.<sup>82</sup> His organizing ability was evidenced in 'a remarkable series of evangelistic meetings held throughout the county for eleven days ... conducted by seventy Baptist and Congregational ministers'. That it proved a 'splendid success' was attributed largely to his leadership.<sup>83</sup> There is an illuminating comment on his preaching in these circumstances:<sup>84</sup> 'His addresses at evangelical meetings in the village churches ..., when with others to share the time

he rarely if ever spoke for more than fifteen minutes, were perfect for their purpose; as transparent to the country people as good glass, full of strength, and tender with affectionate appeal.' Better, perhaps, even than co-operative mission, Wheeler had his long desire for united worship fulfilled on 3 December 1883, when his own church joined with Prince's Street Congregational in a united communion service.<sup>85</sup>

Wheeler retired in 1887, prompted by signs of declining strength. He passed eleven quiet years at Hoveton St John, attending committees where his advice was still valued, and spending time with his books, his roses, and his fishing rod. During holidays on the Norfolk coast he was often in the pulpit of local chapels and always petitioned for a children's talk. One of his last utterances to an old friend was, 'When you come to my condition may your feet find as firm a rock to stand on as mine are on.'<sup>86</sup> The old Fullerite faith upheld him to the end.

His death on 31 December 1898 elicited tributes from religious and civic leaders throughout the county of Norfolk. He was buried in Norwich at the Rosebury Road cemetery for Nonconformists.

## NOTES

- 1 Mary Dorothy, née Wheeler, d. of the late T.L. Wheeler, compiled an extensive family genealogy which provided the framework for this article.
- 2 *Eastern Daily Press*, hereafter *EDP*, 2 January 1899.
- 3 Oxbury was a local historian and a member of the Unthank Road Baptist Church. In addition, the three volumes of typescript entitled 'Notes for a History of Baptists in Norfolk', in the Norfolk Records Office, have been consulted.
- 4 This plaque is on the east wall of the old chapel building at the entrance to Friar's Quay.
- 5 *Baptist Handbook (BH)* 1900, p.240.
- 6 In a compilation of pamphlets relating to J.T. Brown: *The Jubilee Celebrations*; Wheeler's address, p.13, Northampton Public Records Library.
- 7 Extract from *Northampton Record*, 1869, in the archives of Carey Baptist Church, Moulton.
- 8 J.T. Brown, minister for fifty years (1843-93) at College Street, Northampton, was a member of two important deputations for the BMS (Jamaica 1859 and Norway 1884) and was elected President of the Baptist Union in 1877. He was a long-standing member of both Baptist Union Council and BMS General Committee. *BH* 1862.
- 9 *Jubilee Celebrations*: Wheeler's address, p.13.
- 10 The story is told in H. Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith of the Baptists*, p.111.
- 11 In 1830, during the pastorate of J.P. Mursell, Thomas Wheeler was co-guarantor with other deacons for repayment of a £900 loan to extend their church building. Leicester PRL, Doc.N/B/179/202(DE2849).
- 12 Register of Leicester Town Officials, Leicester PRL.
- 13 Quoted in J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, Didcot 1994, p.394.
- 14 E.A. Payne and J.R.C. Perkin, *Such is our story*, 1955, pp.30-2.
- 15 Wheeler's Jubilee Address has interesting details. He in turn passed on this enthusiasm to his son, Francis D. Wheeler MA LLD FES FRGS FZS (1852-1924), Foundation Scholar Clare College, Cambridge; Andrew's Scholar, University College London, Goldsmith Exhibitioner; founder and first headmaster, Bracondale School, Norwich.
- 16 *Jubilee Celebration*, p.11.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.13.
- 18 *Northampton Mercury*, 2 November 1861.
- 19 Payne and Perkin, *op.cit.*, p.42.
- 20 *EDP* 2 January 1899.
- 21 *BQ* XXXVI, no.8, 1996: T.S.H. Elwyn, 'Northamptonshire Association Circular Letters'.
- 22 *BH* 1990, p.242.
- 23 R.E. Cooper, *From Stepney to St Giles*, 1960, pp.44ff.
- 24 *BH* 1900, p.205.
- 25 Payne and Perkin, *op.cit.*, p.32.
- 26 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.40.
- 27 Briggs, *op.cit.*, p.194.
- 28 *BH* 1900, p.240.
- 29 *EDP* 4 January 1899.

- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 *Selections from Robert Hall*, ed. Charles Badham, 1840, p.246.
- 32 Briggs, *op.cit.*, pp.393-4.
- 33 Thomas Wheeler's son, Samuel, was also twice a Leicester town councillor, Leicester PRO.
- 34 Briggs, *op.cit.*, p.395.
- 35 L.C.B. Seaman, *Life in Victorian London*, 1973, p.12.
- 36 C.M. Birrell, *Life of William Brock DD*, p.60.
- 37 *EDP* 4 January 1899.
- 38 A.D. Baines, *A History of the City of Norwich*, 1875, p.435.
- 39 C.B. Jewson, *The Baptists in Norfolk*, 1957, p.108.
- 40 Oxbury, p.27.
- 41 Oxbury, p.24.
- 42 Helen Caroline Colman, *Jeremiah James Colman: A Memoir by his Daughter*, 1905, p.137.
- 43 Oxbury, p.24.
- 44 Oxbury, p.25.
- 45 M.F. Hewitt: Notes in preparation for a historical record of the Baptists of Norfolk, 3 vols., 1942-47, typescript, Norfolk Studies Library, Norwich. This reference comes under 'Unthank Road Church, 1860'.
- 46 *Baptist Reporter*, 1845, p.401.
- 47 Oxbury, p.47.
- 48 Hewitt, Notes, p.26.
- 49 Hewitt, Notes, p.8. 'Mark Wilks was one of the very few Norfolk ministers who favoured the scheme'.
- 50 Hewitt, Notes, 1860.
- 51 Oxbury, p.24.
- 52 *EDP* 2 January 1899: 'religious services they were, properly speaking ...'
- 53 Against this opinion, note the constructive influence of Norwich Chartists in 1848 on a leading Norwich Baptist, the shoe manufacturer, Sir George White, whom they 'fired with an ambition to take his share in the fight for progress'. Quoted by Barry Doyle in *BQ* XXXVI, no.6, 1996, p.298.
- 54 Briggs, *op.cit.*, p.301.
- 55 *BH* 1862, p.373.
- 56 H. Stowell Brown, *Autobiography and Commonplace Book*, pp.86, 89.
- 57 Birrell, *op.cit.*, p.225.
- 58 1851 Census of Religious Worship for Norfolk, Norfolk Record Society, Vol.LXII, 1998, p.122.
- 59 Colman, *op.cit.*, p.189.
- 60 *BH* 1900, p.240.
- 61 *EDP* 4 January 1899.
- 62 *ibid.*
- 63 L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform*, Oxford 1938, p.108.
- 64 Gladstone was replying to Disraeli's criticism of his Representation of the People Bill, 12 March 1866.
- 65 Details from Brian Lewis, *Coalmining in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, 1971.
- 66 His friendship with J.P. Chown and the strong abstinence tradition of the Unthank Road Church guaranteed a firm line on alcohol.
- 67 Doyle, *op.cit.*, p.297.
- 68 Oxbury, p.27.
- 69 *BH* 1900, p.240, and *EDP* 2 January 1899.
- 70 Old King Street Church Register of Members for 1864, and *BH* 1900, p.242. A student contemporary of Samuel Vincent, also a member of Old King Street, was John Brown Myers from Oakham, where John Turland Brown had his first pastorate (1839-43). He edited the volume, *Centenary of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1892*.
- 71 *BH* 1900, p.242.
- 72 *BH* 1869, pp.175ff.
- 73 Old King Street Church Book, Letter to the Revd T.A. Wheeler, 1 December 1864, and a letter from the deacons to him of May 1870.
- 74 *EDP* 2 January 1899. This situation changed later, and under Dr Gotch's leadership a fine church was built at Cotham Grove. *BH* 1891, p.141.
- 75 Oxbury, p.33.
- 76 Reopening Services at Renovated St Mary's, p.41. This reference was supplied by Mr K. Hipper, archivist of St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich.
- 77 Oxbury, pp.32-4.
- 78 Oxbury, pp.35-6.
- 79 Jewson, *op.cit.*, p.119.
- 80 *Baptist Reporter* 1856, p.88.
- 81 Briggs, *op.cit.*, p.237.
- 82 *BH* 1900, p.242.
- 83 Was it a countryman's sureness of touch that these meetings were held in July, in the 'slack' between haymaking and harvest?
- 84 *BH* 1900.
- 85 Oxbury, p.37.
- 86 *EDP* 2 January 1899.