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

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

THE BAPTIST CHURCHES AND SOCIETY IN LEICESTER 1881-1914

In the second volume of his excellent *Leicester Past and Present* Jack Simmons describes Nonconformity in Leicester.¹ He accepts the greatness of Robert Hall's ministry at Harvey Lane early in the nineteenth century and pays tribute to 'the tenacity and moderating force of the Nonconformist tradition', but refers also to 'the failure of the Nonconformists to fill their meeting-houses ... the frequency with which those meeting-houses came and went [and] a predilection for wrangling that springs from the very origin of Dissent itself and is apt to expand into a general quarrelsomeness, congregation against minister, sect against sect'.² It is not, however, a complete picture. He fails, for instance, to note the deputation of thirty Nonconformist ministers who appeared at the Leicester Church Congress in 1880 and graciously informed Bishop Magee that 'we earnestly hope ... your labours here will have for their result an increase of spiritual power, such as shall be felt throughout the whole of your communion, and throughout the country at large'.³ Or the Bishop's reply, welcoming rapprochement between Church and Nonconformity, and praising the latter for 'removing one of the most fruitful causes of ... differences - I mean social estrangement'.⁴ Or to give more than scant mention to the opening in 1881 of Melbourne Hall, an institution that, though it came within the definition of a 'Baptist Church', did not call itself either 'Baptist' or 'church' or even 'chapel', and which was destined within a few years to house the largest Baptist congregation that ever existed in Leicester. The latter was a powerful symbol of F.B. Meyer's concern for the poor and a visible expression of Baptist adaptability to circumstances that enabled the denomination to continue to expand - albeit more slowly and rather uncertainly - in and beyond Edwardian times. This essay, therefore, aims to trace the extent of the growth and development of the Baptist churches in a rapidly growing town from the time of Mearns' census to the beginning of the First World War.

In 1881 the Baptists were the undoubted leaders of Nonconformity in Leicester. They had grown rapidly in numbers since 1851, when they had ten places of worship. Two more had appeared by 1872. By 1882 they had twenty places of worship,⁵ with seating accommodation for 12,475 people. Andrew Mearns' unofficial census indicated that there were 7,346 evening worshippers, more than twice that of any other Nonconformist denomination and only a little more than 2,000 behind that of the Anglican total of 9,783.⁶

In the decade before Mearns' census, the denomination had founded eight more congregations and provided seating accommodation for 3,682 additional worshippers. However, after 1882 there is a problem, for changes cannot any longer be measured by attendance figures. There was no further census of any kind. Nor were 'sittings' much of an indication, for they were always more numerous than

those who occupied them. Recourse has to be made, therefore, to membership lists published in successive copies of the *Baptist Handbook*, published annually by the Baptist Union. These lists are subject to error, as the tendency was for each church to delay revision of the membership roll for several years and then engage in a severe 'pruning' operation. In 1876, for instance, it was reported at a Charles Street church meeting that 'our church roll has undergone a thorough revision ... we have erased a large number of names. Indeed, from all causes no less than 120 names have been removed'.⁷ In 1914 the general secretary of the East Midlands Baptist Association grumbled about 'four churches erasing 274 names [because] we do not get full credit for the additions to membership'.⁸ In an earlier year he had complained that 'two [churches] have not returned their schedules at all', so that their entries indicated, probably inaccurately, that there had been no change in membership.⁹

Membership was not, of course, coincident with attendance. Some members attended spasmodically, while many regular attenders did not commit themselves to membership. In every church there was a penumbra of non-members among the worshippers, some of long-standing, others in process of being evangelized, yet others who may have attended for the entertainment. Nevertheless, the membership figures are reasonably accurate as an indicator of the success of a church over a period of several years.

Baptist Handbooks indicate that there were fifteen churches with 3,059 members in Leicester in 1881. By 1891 there were only twelve churches. St Peter's Lane, Alfred Street and Newarke Street were no longer listed, though the loss was soon offset by the opening of Clarendon Hall and Carey Hall, further away from the town centre. Nevertheless, between 1881 and 1899 there had been an increase in membership of 37 per cent, the total being 4,186 in the latter year. In 1904 there were fifteen churches again, though this was because of a temporary split in the membership of Clarendon Hall, and membership had increased to 4,599. By 1911 there were 4,691 members accommodated in seventeen churches. Harvey Lane, which had supplied the bulk of the membership at the new Robert Hall Memorial Church when it opened in 1902 and which became a dependency of the latter, had become independent again, even though there was no long-term future. A new work had also begun at West Humberstone.

To some extent the growth in Baptist membership can be related to the growth in the population of the town. Throughout the country urbanization proceeded rapidly in the late Victorian times. In 1871 37 per cent of the total population of England and Wales lived in towns of 50,000 or more; by 1901 the percentage had risen to 45. In 1851 just over half the population had been living in urban areas, but in 1901 three-quarters of all the people were classified as urban dwellers. The fastest rates of growth were exhibited in Leicester, Nottingham, Hull and Bradford.¹⁰ Leicester, riding on the crest of a wave of new developments in hosiery and footwear manufacturing, increased its population from 122,376 in 1881 to 174,681

in 1891, a phenomenal rise of 43 per cent. By 1911 there were 227,242 people living in 50,940 houses.¹¹

FIG 1: Baptist Membership, Number of Churches and Population in Leicester and other urban centres

	1881	1891	%	1901	%	1911	%
Leicester	3,059	3,783	+24	4,503	+19	4,691	+4
	15	12		16		17	
	122,376	174,681	+43	211,574	+17	227,242	+7
Nottingham	3,016	3,799	+26	3,770	-1	3,880	+3
	15	18		18		19	
	160,000	211,984	+33	239,573	+13	259,942	+9
Hull	418	545	+30	483	-11	696	+44
	2	3		3		3	
	123,408	19,991	+77	240,133	+20	278,024	+16
Bradford	3,034	3,0	-1	3,117	+4	2,965	-5
	11	312		14		14	
	145,850	12	+49	279,809	+29	288,505	+3
		216,361					
Birmingham	3,483	4,033	+16	5,614	+39	6,214	+11
	22	22		30		32	
	343,787	429,171	+25	522,182	+22	525,960	+1

The increases in Baptist membership did not quite keep pace with the population increases, but they did not lag far behind. In 1881 Baptists comprised 2.5 per cent of the population; in 1911 they accounted for 2.1 per cent.

Population changes alone, however, do not entirely account for the increase. Some rapidly growing large towns and cities in other areas had smaller increases or did not increase at all. In Nottingham, for instance, situated in a county where there were 6,122 Baptists in 1881, rising to 9,883 in 1911, the population rose from 160,000 to 259,942, yet the number of Baptist members in the town never reached 4,000. There were 3,016 in 1881 and 3,880 in 1911. Between 1886 and 1906 numbers remained relatively static at between 3,700 and 3,900. In Bradford, where the population increased from 145,850 in 1881 to 288,505 in 1911, the Baptists, despite an increase in the number of churches from eleven to fourteen, remained almost static in membership. They never exceeded 3,300, nor had less than 2,800. The total of 2,965 in 1911 was slightly less than the 3,034 recorded for 1881. In Hull, surrounded by a sparsely populated rural area where there were few Nonconformists, the population increased from 123,408 in 1881 to 278,024 in 1911, yet the Baptists, who never had more than three places of worship, increased only from 418 to 696 over the same period.

The experience at Hull indicates that towns without a substantial Baptist hinterland had little hope of developing a significant Baptist membership. The Baptist Union noted, with a hint of desperation, that there were several large towns in the country where the denomination was weak and where, between 1896 and 1908, there had been considerable suburban growth without any increase in membership or the development of new congregations.¹²

Conversely, there was a tendency for towns with a strong Baptist hinterland to experience greater development. A good example is Birmingham, where the population between 1881 and 1911 increased by 53 per cent; Baptist membership at the same time increased by 78 per cent, from 3,483 to 6,214. It is significant that there was a long-standing Baptist presence. Birmingham was already an important centre of Baptist activity in 1846, when the Baptist Union met there.¹³ In Warwickshire as a whole membership was already up to 5,052 in 1881, with 1,569 of those outside Birmingham. By 1911 the rest of Warwickshire had 3,781 members, a very substantial hinterland.

Leicester itself was surrounded by a long-standing and well-developed hinterland. As early as 1651 there had been eight Baptist churches in Leicestershire.¹⁴ In 1800 this number had risen to eighteen.¹⁵ By 1851 there were forty-seven General Baptist churches with accommodation for 12,467 people and twenty Particular Baptist churches with accommodation for 4,365.¹⁶ Initially the town churches were sponsored or encouraged by these country churches. Sutton-in-the-elms church, founded in 1650, sponsored the Harvey Lane church in 1760, while John Deacon of the Baptist clock-making family at Barton-in-the-beans revived the ailing Friar Lane congregation in 1783.¹⁷ Without this rural 'infrastructure' it is doubtful that the Baptists would have become the leaders of Nonconformity in the county town.

There were other factors too in the continued growth of a denomination which had had a reputation for haphazard development. Ian Sellers notes, with truth, that 'strategic planning was foreign to them: the emergence of new causes through clash of personalities or theological disagreement was endemic'.¹⁸ Early in his episcopate, W.C. Magee, the Bishop of Peterborough from 1868 to 1891, dismissed the growth of Nonconformist causes with the comment that 'Dissent very largely increased by schism'.¹⁹

There had indeed been schisms among the Baptists in Leicester. It has been noted that 'there was a church at Millstone Lane ... in 1858 of 75 members ... a secession from Dover Street which later joined Friar Lane'.²⁰ Similarly at Friar Lane there was dissatisfaction with the ministry of George Eales in 1883; this led to the formation of a new church worshipping in New Walk. With the resignation of Eales, the dissidents were re-absorbed into Friar Lane in 1891, only for another forty-five to resign and follow Eales in the establishment of a short-lived 'Unity Church' at the Temperance Hall.²¹ The most spectacular schism was the breaking away of F.B. Meyer and forty-six members from Victoria Road to initiate the forerunner of Melbourne Hall in 1878.²²

In the main, however, new developments occurred without rancour and, toward the end of the period, increasingly through planning within the denomination. A letter from the Charles Street church to the Leicestershire Baptist Association in 1867 stated that 'about 40 persons ... have amicably parted from us with a view to the formation of the new cause at Victoria Road'. Similarly it was noted two years later that 'baptisms of those joining Thorpe Street took place at Charles Street until February 1869 when fourteen were dismissed from Charles Street to form the new church'.²³

Although the independence of the individual local church was a cherished principle that had served the Baptists well in the past, it had become obvious that with the rapid growth of industrial towns there was a need for closer association to provide planned development of new churches. There had already been situations where several chapels comprised one church, particularly in rural areas. The New Connexion of General Baptist Churches, which developed initially in eighteenth-century Leicestershire, inherited the Methodist principle of a close association of a group of chapels 'formed on the Methodistical Plan', with 'the word preached by several persons alternately'; members were expected to attend communion in the principal chapel at Barton each Sunday morning, but to attend their own chapel in the evening.²⁴ The Particular Baptists, though adhering more strongly to independency, also developed some associations. The old cause at Arnesby, for instance, founded in 1667, had developed dependent smaller chapels in the tiny villages of Bruntingthorpe, Kilby and Shearsby.²⁵

Gradually, through the nineteenth century, the associations between Baptist churches became stronger and more formalized. The Baptist Union was founded in 1813, but initially 'it had no practical aim, no permanent officers, no inspiring leader'.²⁶ Moreover, the Particular and General Baptists both had their separate organizations. Some churches remained organizationally separate from both. The Zion Baptist Church, for instance, which was Strict and Particular, was for some years listed in the *Baptist Handbooks*, but never became a member of the Baptist Union or any of its constituent associations. However, the Baptist Union was useful because it provided a forum for matters of common concern. It provided the vehicle that convinced the two parties there was little doctrinal difference between the Arminianism of the General Baptists and the form of Calvinism adopted by most Particular Baptists (which Andrew Fuller of Kettering had propagated in the late eighteenth century) and brought about the dissolving of their separate organizations in 1892 and the disappearance of the terminology associated with them. Even before this, in 1873, there had been a new constitution, which enabled the Baptist Union to gain control of accreditation, ministerial settlement and removal. A Church Extension Fund came into existence in 1892 and a Sustentation Fund to support the ministry in 1898.²⁷

Before 1892 the Particular Baptists in Leicestershire had had a formal association which, although it respected the independence of the local church, devoted some of

its attention to evangelism in country areas. Its only concern in Leicester had been to arrange for 'several visits of a fraternal character to be paid by the town's ministers to the country churches in the hope that all the Churches might be brought into closer fellowship and sympathy' and to respond positively to a letter from the General Baptists inviting the Particulars 'to unite with them in the endeavour to establish a Baptist cause in some needy part of the town'.²⁸ When the East Midlands Baptist Association (EMBA) was inaugurated in 1892, however, there were more attempts to co-ordinate the denomination's work throughout the area. Churches that were given assistance with grants for the sustaining of the ministry had to seek approval before appointments were made. They were often advised to amalgamate with others or at least to share in the services of a pastor.²⁹

There were complaints, however, that the EMBA was mainly concerned with supporting lost causes in the countryside rather than assisting with development in the town, perhaps because until very late in Victorian times there were people, mainly Nonconformists, who believed that migration to urban areas would be reversed.³⁰ It took a long while for Baptists and others to realize that the agricultural depression that began in the 1870s was not a temporary phenomenon capable of reversal. Consequently they took little notice of J.J. Goadby, minister at Dover Street, when he made adverse criticisms of attempts to establish home mission stations in sparsely populated rural areas.³¹

It is true that the EMBA gave some assistance to the new Robert Hall Memorial Church, opened in 1902, and intended to replace the Harvey Lane Church by locating the new place of worship in a newly populated area on the Narborough Road. It donated £130 from the funds of the defunct Leicestershire Baptist Association. As far as the local Baptists were concerned, however, the EMBA was neither knowledgeable enough nor determined enough about the situation in Leicester.³² A new Leicester Baptist Association (LBA) was, therefore, formed in 1895 to take charge of Baptist work in the town. As well as offering a forum for debate about Baptist witness in Leicester, such as the one which elicited 'the opinion that long sermons were a drawback to nonconformity',³³ the LBA aimed to unify church extension. In 1899, at the instigation of James Thew, described as 'the quiet and cultured preacher who drew such large congregations in the Belvoir Street Chapel', it invited his protégé, John Shakespeare, the future General Secretary of the Baptist Union, to speak about 'the objects and methods of the Baptist Union Church Extension Committee'.³⁴ It aroused much interest among people who were becoming concerned about stagnation in membership.³⁵

Whereas there had been a spectacular growth in membership during the early 1880s, from 3,059 in 1881 to 3,831 in 1886, the growth rate thereafter was much slower. It remained almost static during the early years of the twentieth century, 4,503 in 1901 becoming 4,691 in 1911.

The main growth in the 1880s had been attributable to the Baptist response to the development of housing on the south-eastern outskirts of Leicester, in Highfields,

New Walk and Stonegate. Victoria Road, situated prominently with a front on London Road, had continued to grow, despite the schism of 1878, under the guidance of J.G. Greenhough (1878-1903), an able preacher, and his successor, Peter Thomson (1905-1914), whose ministry, despite punctuation by his committal to prison no less than eight times over refusal to pay the education rate and periods of ill-health, had been marked by growth in youth work. Membership grew steadily from 179 in 1881 to 355 in 1911.³⁶

Even more successful had been Melbourne Hall, situated in the heart of developing Highfields, only a few hundred yards from the parish church of St Peter, where Francis Robinson, the energetic young vicar, had already developed a substantial congregation. F.B. Meyer had resigned from the pastorate at Victoria Road because he was genuinely concerned that Baptist places of worship were not attracting working-class people. He and his friends had aimed to work with the 'un-churched' masses, through missions in poorer parts of the town, with a base in Melbourne Hall, a building which intentionally did not look like a church. It has been described as a 'citadel of evangelicalism: its plain red brick building standing solidly among the dreary tenements of Highfields',³⁷ and seeming 'as though some giant, striding across the country, had ... set down his huge lantern at the junction of the four roads'.³⁸ Under Meyer himself and, from 1894 to 1912, W.Y. Fullerton, membership had grown rapidly from 213 in 1881 to 1,287 in 1911.³⁹

The success of these two churches, both in the right place at the right time, stood out as exceptions to the general stagnation, the last efforts of Particular Baptist independency. To deal with the problems of the time, the Leicester Baptist Association decided that all new development would take place within its own aegis. By 1899 it had been restyled as the 'Leicester Baptist Union' (LBU), its membership consisting of the ministers and officers of the affiliated Baptist churches in the town. It sought to allocate resources in an efficient and authoritative manner.⁴⁰

What then were the problems faced by the Baptists? One problem was the gradual retreat of the middle-classes, the mainstay of the chapels, to the suburbs or to the peri-urban villages beyond the town boundary. In their new environment some of them contributed handsomely to the strengthening of old chapels, like those in Blaby and Countesthorpe, or in the developing of new chapels like the one in Kirby Muxloe,⁴¹ while others, now moving in wider circles as social discrimination disappeared, adopted the social habits of the people around them and attended the parish church.⁴² Yet others were drawn into 'the increasingly home-orientated direction of the life of the suburbs ... where the high-walled villas led in the cultivation of domestic privacy'.⁴³ C.F.G. Masterman, writing in 1909, observed that 'it is the middle-class which is losing its religion'.⁴⁴ The Congregational Union noted in 1895 that 'the out-of-town drift of the middle-classes strains the resources of those who yet remain in the city churches; and meantime the rapid growth of suburban districts has created a dominant need for church extension'.⁴⁵ It was as true for the Baptists as it was for their Congregational colleagues.

It was not only the middle-classes who were moving away from the inner city areas. Working-class people also were moving to the inner suburbs. This had already caused the closure of three chapels, as has been observed already, while Harvey Lane was in process of decay, and Charles Street, Dover Street and Friar Lane, all in the town centre, had falling membership rolls. Made conscious of their failure to appeal to working-class people by Meyer's efforts at Melbourne Hall, the Leicester Baptists decided to put a great deal of their energy and resources into the erection of Carey Hall, after a generous donor had provided most of the land needed. John Ward, who became a member there and served as the Sunday school superintendent, stated that, in his capacity as the chairman of the local Baptist Church Extension Committee, he and his colleagues had agonized over the question 'as to whether we were justified in spending such a large amount of money in the erection of such commodious buildings in the midst of back streets, instead of occupying a more public position in one of the main thoroughfares'. They had felt, however, that it was their duty to proceed as the chapel was 'situated in a densely populated neighbourhood which continues to increase with marvellous rapidity. And until the erection of this Hall this great district ... was practically left without any religious accommodation whatever'. By 1903 the cost of Carey Hall had been £6,483, with a remaining debt of £3,105, but, it was reported, 'the congregations have been large', the membership rapidly increasing from 96 in 1899 to 195 in 1904.⁴⁶

The LBU continued the work of giving support to Carey Hall, requesting that all the churches 'be asked to contribute a day's collection in support of the work for a further three years'.⁴⁷ It also dealt firmly with schisms. When Clarendon Hall was a new church smarting over a split that had resulted in the setting up of a rival congregation in the nearby Knighton Public Hall, there was no hesitation in taking up the request for 'advice and arbitration'. Clarendon Hall was dissolved as an independent church and became, temporarily, a dependent chapel of Victoria Road, until the fissure was healed. The Union committee had agreed without hesitation that 'the existence of only one church on the [Clarendon] Park, in the place of the two Baptist churches now existing there, is the only goal worthy of the efforts of the Association'. Effective witness was considered more important than the proliferation of weak causes.⁴⁸

Also faced was the problem of Belgrave Road Tabernacle, a church in a genuinely poor working-class area of the town. It lacked effective lay leadership, had difficulty in retaining a minister and was always short of money. A plan was formulated to link the church with three other churches in adjacent working-class areas, Archdeacon Lane, Carley Street and Carey Hall. It was envisaged that a student pastor at Belgrave Road would then work with the ministers of the others churches in a team approach. The LBU stated that it 'would enable a system of pulpit exchange to be introduced, which would give the ministers more freedom for visiting and general organization ... It was felt that a young minister working under

such conditions at Belgrave Road would not feel the sense of isolation necessarily involved in a separate pastorate.⁴⁹ After much discussion, however, the plan was put aside, pending a decision on a much wider scheme of amalgamation, and A.G. Foster, a member at Victoria Road, was appointed as lay pastor.⁵⁰ Another idea, that of linking the Tabernacle with Melbourne Hall, failed when the latter refused to countenance it while the chapel was in serious debt and the schoolroom inadequate.⁵¹

The linking of the four churches would not in fact have solved the financial problems endemic in working-class areas. So a different scheme was tried at West Humberstone, on the eastern side of Leicester, where a member from Charles Street, John Pole, started a Sunday afternoon class for youths in Overton Road in 1876. By 1880 there were 140 children with sixteen adults, while an evening congregation, consisting of forty adults and eighty young people, had also been established.⁵² To effect further development a sub-committee of the LBU directed 'that the congregation worshipping at Overton Road ... appoint their own Deacons, Treasurer and Secretary' and have 'a distinct and separate membership roll', but was insistent that finance would be in the hands of a 'Governing Body', consisting of three members each from Charles Street, West Humberstone and the LBU, with the president of the LBU as chairman. This new body was to decide when a new minister was to be called, when large expenditure was to be made, if and when structural alterations were needed and anything else on which 'they may deem right to act'. This seemed to work well; the Uppingham Road Baptist Church was the eventual result.⁵³

There was, however, a feeling that, if the Baptists were to cope adequately with twentieth-century demands, a closer association of all the denomination's churches in the town was necessary; only then, it was believed, would momentum in development be restored. Baptists had become very much aware of the 'non-attendance of large masses of people at our places of worship' and of the growing indifference amongst large sections of the community, even of 'an estrangement between the churches and the working class, to the detriment of both'. John Ward even went so far as to say that 'the idea is abroad today that there is not, on the part of the Free Churches, that sympathy with and consideration for the growing aspirations of many of our workers'.⁵⁴

To some extent working-class estrangement can be attributed to the growth of secularism, both formal and informal. The tenure of F.J. Gould as organizer and secretary of the Leicester Secular Society from 1899 to 1908 enabled the secularists to grow in strength, with a Sunday school teaching Christian ethics alongside the Sunday lectures and concerts at the Secular Hall in Humberstone Gate in the town centre.⁵⁵ The activities of the secularists, however, should not be over-emphasized, for even they found difficulty in gathering audiences. It became necessary to provide 'a skittle alley, whist matches and a ... bicycle club [which] enhanced the opportunities for enjoyment provided by the Society'.⁵⁶

In 1905 there were also four 'Labour churches', described as primarily a ruse to allow for indoor socialist lectures on a Sunday without offending sabbatarian sentiments'.⁵⁷ There must have been many immigrant workers too, like the one who told the Unitarian social worker, Joseph Dare, that 'although my predilections in favour of religion are as strong as ever, yet the habit of non-attendance seems confirmed'.⁵⁸

Even more serious in blunting the edges of Baptist momentum was the competition from other denominations. Although in general there was agreement that Baptists and Congregationalists would not compete with each other in new suburbs,⁵⁹ and there were many who would have agreed with the Revd W.E. Morris in the hope that 'all Nonconformist churches would be union churches, without distinction as to Baptists and Congregationalists',⁶⁰ there was no such agreement with other denominations, some of whom made themselves more attractive to working-class people. Among them were the Churches of Christ, founded in the USA by Alexander Campbell, a former millenarian Baptist who tried naively to promote church unity by providing churches with the 'best' features of all denominations. Their first church in Leicester was founded in 1859. Lancaster notes that 'by the 1890s members of the sect were active in establishing a footwear producers' co-operative, were planning their own garden city, and two prominent members ... became important activists in the Labour movement'.⁶¹

A greater threat than the Churches of Christ was an upsurge of Wesleyan Methodist development, expressed on the national stage as well as locally. E.R. Wickham states that in Sheffield most of the Nonconformists suddenly terminated their expansion in the early years of the century; the only significant increases were effected by the Wesleyans.⁶² In 1884 there were nine Wesleyan churches in Leicester, with 1,171 members. By 1900 there were fourteen churches with 2,462 members.⁶³ Their contacts with working-class people were evident. In January 1904, in order to advertise a 'Saturday Midnight Meeting', the workers met at Wesley Hall 'and after prayer marched in procession through the streets headed by a brass band and torchlights. Several public houses were visited, and invitations given to the meeting - the emphasis being placed upon the offer of free buns and coffee'. At the Temperance Hall, where they held a regular Sunday evening service, it was noted that 'the spacious hall is crowded to its utmost capacity, it is no unusual thing to have fifteen hundred people present'. Moreover, there was an open-air meeting in Welford Place which 'attracts hundreds of people who perhaps would not attend a service indoors', led by 'our splendid brass band'.⁶⁴ In the obituary of the Wesleyan minister, Joseph Posnett, who died in 1906, it was stated that 'during his ministry the Temperance Hall Mission had its commencement, and Wesley Hall and Clarendon Park Church and several smaller chapels were built ... in his nine years ministry, he saw the Methodism of Leicester double in numbers, influence and saving effectiveness'.⁶⁵ John Ward, like many other Baptists, wavered between admiration and alarm. While applauding 'the enterprise and enthusiasm which ... the

Wesleyans have shown in recent years', he was afraid that 'unless we are prepared to continue to take our part ... in this Extension work, many of our own people will be lost to the denomination and will be absorbed in other new causes which may become established in other parts of the town'.⁶⁶

There was a serious threat from the Anglicans also. Bishop Magee had not only encouraged an efficient building programme. He was proud of the fact that the Church of England had successfully provided endowed and settled ministers in the poverty-stricken areas of towns much more successfully than the Nonconformists had been able to do.⁶⁷ This was certainly true of Leicester. Moreover, whereas the main threat to Nonconformity had been the Evangelicalism of most of the clergy in mid-Victorian times, later it was Catholicism of the Ritualistic type that was perceived as the greatest danger. At St Mark's, for instance, after the death of Canon H.J. Burfield, an Evangelical, in 1883, John Woodroffe, a Ritualist, was appointed. He prepared the way for Lewis Donaldson (1896-1918), a keen Christian socialist as well as an Anglo-Catholic. Donaldson stated that in his parish was represented 'all the tragedy and pathos, shame and horror of modern social conditions ... together with an almost complete absence of beauty and a dire lack of the graciousness and glory of life'.⁶⁸ His identification with working-class people (especially the unemployed) and his ability to provide a more colourful worship environment brought him and his church a considerable following, which the Baptists, who tended to place themselves outside the agitation for a new social order, were not able to match.⁶⁹ Ritualism was also evident at St Paul's, St Andrew's and St Mary de Castro, bringing colour - through vestments and hangings, music and elaborate ceremony - into the lives of poor people and persuading them that the Church of England was concerned about them. For some of them, at least, it seemed preferable to the 'evangelical moralism' of the Nonconformists, who stressed Sunday observance and temperance.⁷⁰

That the Baptists were concerned about the Anglican threat is evident from an EMBA statement, which recognized that church leaders were 'passing through a period of stress and strain', because of, *inter alia*, 'their stand against the Romanizing tendencies in the Established Church'.⁷¹ John Ward, who was the managing director of the footwear manufacturing firm of Stead and Simpson, referred to the High Church Party capturing the working man 'with their so-called religious socialism'. As a rejoinder he advocated that 'on suitable occasions, such questions as affect the social conditions under which great bodies of our working classes have to exist should be considered *in connection* with our places of worship'.⁷²

The situation faced by the denomination was indeed regarded so seriously that many Baptists regarded it as essential that their organization in Leicester should be radically overhauled. They were encouraged to take action by the 1903 EMBA presidential address of the Revd G. Howard James, who spoke 'first of the relation of the Baptist Churches to the working classes', went on to deplore the 'present

method of ministerial settlements and the frightful waste of consecrated ability involved in our present haphazard system', and to conclude that 'we needed a closer federation of our Churches'.⁷³ The LBU took up the issue, after a proposal by H.W. Wilshere for a 'scheme for amalgamating the Baptist Forces of the Town in a more effective manner than at present obtained'.⁷⁴ The churches were then asked to discuss the proposal. After much heart-searching debate the replies indicated that, out of fourteen affiliated churches, ten were in favour, Dover Street and Belvoir Street were opposed to the idea of a single Baptist church with various branches in the town, and Melbourne Hall and Emmanuel Union Church needed further time to consider it. It was noted also that the Belgrave Union Church members were in favour, but that 'the Trust Deeds ... provided for either a Baptist or an Independent Minister, and that this circumstance prevented their going into it'.⁷⁵

It was soon obvious that the original plan for amalgamation of the churches was not destined to succeed. W.Y. Fullerton at Melbourne Hall, conscious that F.B. Meyer, the founding pastor, had preferred to avoid the appellation 'church', warned that the time was not yet ripe for discussing the matter further at one of his church meetings. Moreover, unless the association was 'looser' than originally intended, it barred the Union churches from membership.⁷⁶

The amended scheme provided for the payment of a minimum stipend of £150 to accredited ministers, moderators during vacancies, church extension and an annual communion service. The title of 'Leicester Association of Baptist and Union Churches' was decided upon. It was obvious, however, that the result fell far short of the original intention, and there was much regret in most of the churches that the 'closer' union had not been put into effect.⁷⁷ It is significant that Peter Thomson, the initial president, found it necessary to plead for 'loyalty on the part of our churches in acting up to it'.⁷⁸ It was too weak an association to be really effective in recovering the denomination's fortunes.

Nationally Baptist membership began to decline after 1906. The total membership in England and Wales of 434,741 in that year was the highest ever recorded. By 1911 the total was down to 418,608 but it was still higher than it had been before 1904. This decline may be explained, at least in part, by political failure. Up until 1906 there had been hope that the Liberals would not only win the general election, but would also reverse some of the provisions of the Education Act 1902. This Balfour-Morant legislation had provided rate assistance to voluntary schools, most of which were Anglican and many of which were the only schools available in small villages. This meant also that pupil teacher apprenticeships went mostly to Anglicans. Furthermore, Nonconformists were effectively excluded from thirty-five out of forty-five teacher training colleges. These issues were fought by Nonconformists in public meetings, in law courts and in the press.⁷⁹

Yet all this was to no avail as, despite the return of a Liberal government, 'teeming with Nonconformist connexions', and 185 Nonconformist MPs, the realities of the situation - the perceived need for stability in education, divisions within

Nonconformity, preoccupation with the Boer War, Home Rule for Ireland, and Liberal splits - determined that no effective legislation on education was enacted.⁸⁰

In Leicester the Baptists, like other Nonconformists, were divided between passive resistance (refusal to pay the education rate) and campaigning by legal means to rescind the 1902 legislation. Despite the protests of ninety-three Nonconformists who appeared before the magistrates and suffered imprisonment and distraint of property, there were others who were prepared to give the education system the opportunity to work. They hoped for some improvements after 1906, but were prepared to live with disappointment. That some people were so disillusioned with the impotence of Nonconformist politics that they disappeared from the pews is hardly surprising.⁸¹

Yet the loss was not great. Between 1906 and 1911 there was a Baptist membership loss of 322, but the total of 4,691 was still higher than in 1901. The question that needs to be asked is not so much about losses in membership, but why the numbers kept up so well, despite the growth of secularism and competition from other denominations. After all, between 1891 and 1911 there was a net increase of five places of worship, taking the total number of Baptist churches from twelve to seventeen.

One continuing asset was the Sunday school, already in decline in rural areas of Leicestershire, but continuing to grow in importance in the town.⁸² Some Nonconformists had begun to doubt its value, because so few children eventually became church members,⁸³ but on the whole Baptists felt that it was an important means of evangelism. The *EMBA Yearbook* for 1914 declared that 'the position of the Church of tomorrow is bound up with the condition of the Sunday school of today'. Moreover, the quality of Sunday schools had improved considerably. At Charles Street there was enthusiasm over 'an innovation in the form of a "Missionary Engine", which is put together by forty children. Each child when adjusting its own part describes it, and much real interest is created'.⁸⁴ At Melbourne Hall it was noted that 'the little people are provided with paper and are asked to draw their idea of the lesson ... and sometimes the children are provided with modelling clay or sandboards to illustrate the topic'.⁸⁵ From 7,118 pupils in 1881 numbers rose to more than 8,000 by the end of the century and maintained that level up to and beyond 1914. The most remarkable developments took place at Melbourne Hall and its various mission stations, where from 1899 onward there were never less than 2,200 pupils, a thousand of them at Melbourne Hall itself. Numbers were kept up by active recruiting in the neighbourhood. There were also meetings between parents and teachers, who were regarded as 'partners in the great enterprise of training the young for Christ'.⁸⁶

FIG 2: Baptist Sunday school pupils in Leicester

1881	8,257	2,307 at Melbourne Hall and mission stations in Paradise Place, York St, Britannia St and Christow St.
1891	8,257	2,030 at Melbourne Hall etc.
1901	8,113	2,013 at Melbourne Hall etc.
1911	8,572	2,372 at Melbourne Hall etc.

Sellers remarks that as the Nonconformist churches became more institutionalized they became more concerned about 'securing cultural domination over the neighbourhood ... with a church building to which all age groups, all classes and all interests could gravitate, and where all could indulge in something attractive enough to occupy their leisure hours'.⁸⁷ Leicester Baptists achieved this to a greater or lesser degree, Melbourne Hall being the most successful in this respect, with its Men's Sick Benefit Society and its open-air missions, its prayer circles and men's meetings, its physical culture classes and its convalescent home in Derbyshire.⁸⁸ Victoria Road, where Peter Thomson had considerable expertise in youth work, extended its premises in 1910 to include a concert hall and institute building, with a gymnasium under the church itself.⁸⁹

The Baptists also became more concerned about employing ministers who were well-qualified and 'successful'. Deacons busied themselves in finding out how successful a man had been in his previous pastorates.⁹⁰ Of the thirteen full-time ministers in Leicester in 1912, only one, J.R. Hayes of Harvey Lane, was not on the Baptist Union list of accredited ministers. All the others were either university graduates or had been trained in a Baptist theological college. John Freeman at Belvoir Street was an MA graduate of Acadia University in Nova Scotia and had been trained for the ministry at Toronto Baptist College. Victoria Road had the luxury of two pastors: Peter Thomson, a Glasgow graduate, because he was chairman of the Baptist Union's Sunday school department, young people's union and ministerial recognition committee, had a young and talented assistant in M.E. Aubrey, who had recently graduated after study at Mansfield College, Oxford. W.Y. Fullerton of Melbourne Hall was trained at Spurgeon's College, where he had developed a gift for preaching and organization that enabled him to increase the membership and clear the church of debts.⁹¹ Edward Elliott, who had been trained at the Midland Baptist College, was a faithful pastor at Archdeacon Lane, where he was able to slow down an inevitable decline, despite being a neighbour of Donaldson's St Mark's.

Baptist decline in Leicester did not really occur until after the Second World War. It had much to do with the loss of potential leaders in Flanders and with 'the cultural shift to the cinema, the radio and more serious elementary schooling'.⁹² The seeds of decline were, however, contained in the period before 1914. There was

Spurgeon's split from the Baptist Union, after he had questioned 'how far those who abide by the faith ... should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another gospel?',⁹³ an indication that the denomination would be rent from then on by the conflict between fundamentalism and theological liberalism. It certainly led to tensions within the LBU, which was eventually to lead to Melbourne Hall's increasing emphasis on its 'Free Evangelical'⁹⁴ status (as distinct from the majority of Baptists who were more inclined to follow the lead of John Clifford's liberalism) which was to lead it to eventual resignation from the Baptist Union.

There were other tensions too, such as those arising from Victoria Road's insistence on leaving out the 'Baptist' designation from its title and following a decidedly ecumenical course. It earned from other Baptists the jibe that it was 'neither church nor chapel', which did little to help the public image of the denomination.

At the same time the development of the Free Church movement confirmed that Baptists would no longer compete with other Nonconformist denominations in the establishing of new causes. The first 'Free Church Congress' had met in 1892 in Manchester. A second congress in 1894 in Leeds began to outline the construction of a national organization consisting of county federations and councils in towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants.⁹⁵ There was soon a Free Church Council in Leicester; it joined in a countrywide ten-day mission in February 1902.⁹⁶ It also ushered in a period of uncertainty, with J.H. Shakespeare, General Secretary of the Baptist Union, advocating a re-unified Church of England embracing all the churches.⁹⁷ For the Baptists in Leicester, whose new organization was in any case too 'loose' to be really effective in determining future action, it meant less confidence in moving forward with extension work. Furthermore, it ensured that the spontaneity of an F.B. Meyer would not again be able to find expression.

NOTES

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|---|---|----|---|---|--|
| 1 | This paper was originally presented as a lecture to the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society on 5 November 1998. The author is grateful for permission to use facilities at the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, and to the Librarian, Mrs Susan J. Mills, for her assistance. Population statistics throughout have been taken from the published Censuses of Population for England and Wales as appropriate. Baptist membership figures have been taken from the <i>Baptist Handbooks</i> and/or the <i>East Midlands Baptist Association Yearbooks</i> (hereafter <i>EMBA Yearbooks</i>). | 4 | <i>ibid.</i> , 646. | 5 | Only fifteen of these were independent churches, the rest being dependent mission halls and chapels. |
| 2 | J. Simmons, <i>Leicester Past and Present</i> , 1974, II (Modern City), 148-9. | 6 | D.M. Thompson, 'The Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851-1881', Cambridge PhD thesis, 1979, 157-8. | 7 | Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (hereafter LLRRO)/1D66/III/4 (Charles Street Baptist Church meeting minutes), 24 May 1876. |
| 3 | D.J. Vaughan, ed., <i>The Official Report of the Church Congress held at Leicester 1880</i> , Leicester 1881, 645. | 8 | <i>EMBA Yearbook</i> 1903, 24. | 9 | <i>ibid.</i> , 1903, 24. |
| | | 10 | J.F.C. Harrison, <i>Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901</i> , 1990, 14-15, 240. | | |

- 11 Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present*, II, 151.
- 12 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/21 (Baptist Union ... Church Extension in Large Towns, 1896-1908).
- 13 A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, 212.
- 14 C.E. Welch, 'Early Nonconformity in Leicestershire', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, XXXVII, 1961-2, 41.
- 15 Thompson, *op.cit.*, 29.
- 16 *ibid.*, 48.
- 17 Anon, *A Brief History of the Baptist Churches in connection with the Leicestershire Association*, Leicester 1865.
- 18 I. Sellers, *Nineteenth Century Nonconformity*, 1977, 1.
- 19 *Leicester Journal*, 22 November 1872.
- 20 Thompson, *op.cit.*, 164.
- 21 J.W. Smith, *History of the General Baptist Church meeting at Friar Lane, Leicester, 1656-1896*, Leicester 1896, 114, 195; D. Ashby, *Friar Lane 1651-1951*, 1951, 78-83.
- 22 G.T. Rimmington, 'Victoria Road Church, Leicester: A Victorian Experiment in Ecumenicity', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 71, 1997, 80-3.
- 23 Sheila Mitchell, *Not Disobedient: A History of United Baptist Church, Leicester*, Leicester 1983, 118.
- 24 E. Welch, 'The origins of the New Connexion of General Baptists in Leicestershire', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, LXIX, 1995, 65, 69.
- 25 G.T. Rimmington, 'Baptist membership in rural Leicestershire 1881-1914', *BQ*, XXXVII, 1998, 386-401.
- 26 Underwood, *op.cit.*, 212.
- 27 Sellers, *op.cit.*, 11, 17.
- 28 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/3 (Leicestershire Baptist Association minutes), annual meetings 18-19 June 1889 and 17 June 1890.
- 29 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/25 (East Midlands Baptist Association minutes) 11 June 1895.
- 30 Dr J.B. Paton, principal of Nottingham Congregational Institute, spoke about the 'desirability of increasing the number of small farmers with a view ... to reviving rural churches', and the Baptist minister, John Clifford, brought up in rural Sawley, Derbyshire, believed that 'the landscape of the farm is full of divine feeling'. See D.W. Bebbington, 'The City, the Countryside and the Social Gospel in Late Victorian Nonconformity', *Studies in Church History*, ed. D. Baker, 16, 1979, 418, 423. At the inaugural meetings of the EMBA the Revd Dr S.H. Booth complained that 'the growth of their cities had drained the agricultural districts of their young men and women'. He advocated changes in the laws relating to land tenure and looked forward to a new age 'whena small holdings were possible, and factories and electricity ... might bring back work to rural homes ... Then the villages would revive, and in some measure their smaller churches would recover their waning social rank', *Leicester Daily Post*, 22 June 1892.
- 31 This was true of the Congregationalists also. The Revd S.T. Williams of London Road Congregational Church complained that the Leicester Congregational Union cared 'with eagerness for the evangelization of scattered hundreds [but was] completely heedless of the spiritual welfare of dense thousands'. D.M. Thompson, 'Church Extension in Town and Countryside in Later Nineteenth-Century Leicestershire', *Studies in Church History*, 16, 1979, 436-8.
- 32 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/25, 12 December 1902.
- 33 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/10 Leicester Baptist Association minutes, 3 October 1895.
- 34 Underwood, *op.cit.*, 248.
- 35 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/10, 30 January 1896.
- 36 Rimmington, 'Victoria Road ...', 84; G.T. Rimmington, 'L.H. Marshall's Ministry in Leicester 1930-1936', *BQ* XXXVI, 8, 1996, 405-6.
- 37 M. Elliott, *Victorian Leicester*, London and Chichester, 1979, 32.
- 38 E.E. Kendall, *Doing and Daring: The story of Melbourne Hall Evangelical Free Church, Leicester*, Rushden, 1955, 33.
- 39 *ibid.*, 62.
- 40 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/10, 23 February 1899.
- 41 See for instance LLRRO/N/B/38/3 (Blaby Baptist Church minutes of church meetings) 1 April 1895, 26 July 1909. Also J. Wilshere, *Scenes from Kirby Muxloe History*, Leicester 1971, 15.
- 42 *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. D.M. Thompson, 1978, 14.
- 43 Sellers, *op.cit.*, 47-8.
- 44 Quoted in E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City*, 1957, 179.

- 45 *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, *op.cit.*, 227.
- 46 J.L. Ward, *Leicester Baptist Union: An Address*, 1903.
- 47 LLRRO/W/B/LBA/10, 21 and 28 February 1910, 6 May 1910.
- 48 *ibid.*, 11 November 1897.
- 49 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/11 (Leicester Baptist Union minutes), 3 May 1907.
- 50 *ibid.*, 8 October 1907.
- 51 *ibid.*, 7 December 1909.
- 52 K.G. Bates, *Uppingham Road Baptist Church, Leicester: A Century of Blessings 1876-1976* (Leicester, 1976), 1-2.
- 53 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/11, 6 May 1907.
- 54 Ward, 'Leicester Past and Present', II, 34-5.
- 55 Simmons, *op.cit.*, II, 34-5.
- 56 D. Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, Leicester 1992, 55.
- 57 Bill Lancaster, *Radicalism, Co-operation and Socialism: Leicester Working-class Politics 1860-1906*, Leicester 1987, 174.
- 58 *ibid.*, 66.
- 59 At a meeting between Baptist and Congregational representatives in Northamptonshire in 1887 the decision was made that they would not compete with each other in the development of new causes. T.S.H. Elwyn, *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association*, 1964, 63.
- 60 LLRRO/N/B/154/2 (Husbands Bosworth Baptist Church minutes), 27 October 1904.
- 61 Lancaster, *op.cit.*, 71.
- 62 Wickham, *op.cit.*, 168.
- 63 *Quarterly Messenger* (Leicester Bishop Street Circuit), October 1884, October 1900.
- 64 *ibid.*, April 1904, October 1905.
- 65 *ibid.*, October 1906.
- 66 Ward, *op.cit.*
- 67 *Leicester Journal*, 24 April 1874. See also G.T. Rimmington, 'Bishop W.C. Magee and the Town of Leicester 1868-1891', *Midland History*, XXIII, 1998, 121-35.
- 68 B. Buchanan and G. Hulme, *St Mark's Church, Leicester*, Leicester 1996, 5, 14.
- 69 Even F.B. Meyer, who evangelized among some of the poorest people in Leicester, had no particular interest in politics. He accepted the social order as he found it. His aim, like that of many Baptist preachers, was to redeem the individual. This comes out clearly in his publications. See, for instance, *Elijah and the secret of his power*, 1954, which originated as a series of Melbourne Hall sermons.
- 70 Wickham, *op.cit.*, 194.
- 71 *EMBA Yearbook* 1904, 14.
- 72 Ward, *op.cit.*
- 73 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/10, 14 May 1903.
- 74 *ibid.*, 10 May 1906.
- 75 LLRRO/N/B/LBA/11, 9 May 1907.
- 76 *ibid.*, 2 July 1907.
- 77 *ibid.*, 29 October 1907, 26 March 1908.
- 78 *ibid.*, 8 October 1908.
- 79 C. Binfield, *Pastors and People*, Coventry 1984, 123. See also LLRRO/N/B/LBA/26 (EMBA minutes), annual meetings, 8-10 June 1903.
- 80 C. Binfield, *So down to prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity 1780-1920*, 1977, 207-10.
- 81 G.T. Rimmington, *Education, Politics and Society in Leicester 1833-1903*, Hantsport, N.S., Canada, 1978, 212-5.
- 82 For the contrast between the declining Sunday schools in rural churches and the continuing growth in town Sunday schools, see Rimmington, 'Baptist membership ...', 395-8.
- 83 The Wesleyan Methodist *Quarterly Messenger* (Bishop Street circuit), April 1895, noted that 'at present we have only 12 per cent of our scholars in church fellowship with us, a very small percentage compared with the amount of agency at work. Indeed the conviction is forced upon us that there is not as much harvest reaped ... as we have reason to look for when we take into account the amount of seed that is sown'. See also F.M.W. Harrison, *It all began here: The story of the East Midlands Baptist Association*, 1986, 74.
- 84 *EMBA Yearbook* 1910, 33.
- 85 *Leicester Melbourne Hall Magazine*, June 1907.
- 86 *ibid.*, November 1903.
- 87 Sellers, *op.cit.*, 47-8.
- 88 *Leicester Melbourne Hall Magazines* 1900-1907. It was stated in December 1900 that the 'Young Men's Christian Union has begun work which may have far-reaching results. A section of our neighbourhood has been selected, each house of which is to be visited and a courteous enquiry made whether anything further may be done by the Church for its inmates ... We want our neighbours to feel that the Churches care for them'.
- a Rimmington, 'L.H. Marshall ...', 405-6.
- 89 Sellers, *op.cit.*, 49.

- 91 Kendall, *op.cit.*, 65, 74-5.
- 92 A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990*, 3rd edn., 1991, 268.
- 93 A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, 1976, 177.
- 94 The term 'evangelical' was used in the nineteenth century to describe churches and people who were theologically trinitarian; it was used later to denote adherence to conservative or fundamentalist principles. J.Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 1991, 171.
- 95 John Clifford believed that theology was a 'progressive science'. He saw no real conflict between religion and science, nor had he any worries about biblical criticism or 'modern thought'. See P. Sangster, *A History of the Free Churches*, 1983, 154.
- 96 Munson, *op.cit.*, 171.
- 97 *Leicester Melbourne Hall Magazine*, February 1902.
- 97 Underwood, *op.cit.*, 252-3.

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W.M.S. WEST: BAPTISTS TOGETHER

The Baptist Historical Society has published this collection of papers in memory of the late President who died last November. Edited by J.H.Y. Briggs and Faith Bowers, it contains the three completed chapters for his intended book on Baptists in the twentieth century, and reprints his paper on 'The Child and the Church': a study of how Baptists welcome infants in the church. Dr West's autobiographical notes are reinforced by tributes from Robert Ellis and Harry Mowvley, and an appraisal of his ecumenical activity from Keith Clements. Anthony Cross provided a full bibliography of Dr West's publications.

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