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Thomas Snow and the Western Schism

Alan Munden

Introduction

In Cheltenham, ‘Snow’s Chapel’ was associated with the preaching of the former Church of England minister, Thomas Snow. But who was he, what did he believe and why did he have his own chapel? These questions may be answered by looking at three phases in his ministerial career. First, during his early period in the Church of England; second, when he was involved in the so-called ‘Western Schism’; and third, after he returned to the Church of England.

1. Snow’s early period in the Church of England

Thomas Snow (1786-1867), the fourth son of the banker George Snow, and his wife Elizabeth, was born at Langton House, Blandford Forum, Dorset in 1786. While he was a pupil at Sherborne School his acting abilities became apparent when aged only twelve ‘the promising talents of Snow, a very young lad’ were recorded when ‘in the character of a Negro slave, delivered in French an address to his masters, displaying singular strength of memory and propriety of action’.¹ At the age of twenty-four he entered Queens’ College, Cambridge and became part of the circle associated with Charles Simeon, the vicar of Holy Trinity Church.² Simeon’s ministry in Cambridge extended over a fifty-four year period and he shaped the lives of many future Evangelical clergy.

In 1813, and in rapid succession, Snow graduated, was ordained and became an incumbent. On 3 May he graduated BA³ on 13 June he was made deacon by the Bishop of Salisbury at Quebec Chapel, Marylebone⁴ on 27 June ordained priest by the Bishop of Norwich (for the Bishop of Salisbury); and two days later became the vicar of Winterborne Stoke, north of Salisbury.⁵ His incumbency was short-lived, and in November 1814 Snow was appointed by Sir Thomas Baring to be the vicar of Micheldever and East Stratton, north of Winchester. In December 1815 he married Maynard Eliza Farquhar, a widow from East Stratton. The service took place at Micheldever and the officiant was James Harrington Evans, then curate of Milford and Hordle. Gradually Snow was drawn into the small group of Anglican discontents known collectively as the ‘Western Schism’ and in May 1816 he was baptised by full immersion, and

thereby severed his ministerial connection with the Church of England.

2. Snow and the 'Western Schism'⁶

The Western Schism was the creation of a network of mostly well-connected Evangelicals led by members of the aristocratic Baring family, whose wealth and influence came from banking and commerce. A powerful figure within the movement was Harriet Wall (1768-1838), the eldest daughter of Sir Francis Baring⁷ and wife of Charles Wall, a partner in Baring's Bank. She was a powerful and capable woman whose 'cool temperament gave her a real superiority over the heated brains and crude notions of her disciples,⁸ and her husband was 'a shrewd, bustling, practical man of business.'⁹ Initially the couple lived at Albury Park¹⁰ and following his sudden death in 1815 Harriet moved from Surrey to Hampshire to be nearer to her brother Sir Thomas Baring, of Stratton Park, Stratton, and her son Charles Baring Wall, of Norman Court, West Tytherley, west of Winchester. During the summer months various properties in the vicinity of Stratton Park were rented to accommodate the ever-expanding circle of supporters. Other individuals that became involved with Baring and his sister included Thomas Snow, the local vicar, and his curate George Bevan. Snow had doubts about infant baptism (and did not have his own children baptised) and Bevan, a man of strong opinions, had fundamental objections to the established church.

The 'Baring party', as they were known, were characterised by their strict Calvinistic principles and their rejection of infant baptism. No longer for them were the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion a sufficient standard for doctrinal orthodoxy. The acolytes that assembled at Stratton Park to discuss and debate the finer points of theology took their views with them and the movement soon spread throughout the West Country. Thomas Baring's brother George and his friends settled at Walford House, near Taunton, where he preached in a hired room in the town. The congregation soon outgrew the building and the former Wesleyan Methodist chapel in Taunton, known as the Octagon Chapel¹¹ was acquired and re-opened as the 'Trinitarian and Particular Baptist Chapel'. In May 1816 Thomas Snow, together with other sympathisers that included Baring and his family, were baptized by full immersion. Soon, however, the group broke up and those involved went their separate ways. George Baring¹² became the minister of a congregation in Bartholomew Street, Exeter, George Bevan¹³ moved to London

and Thomas Snow became the minister of a congregation in Cheltenham. ‘The rapid fragmentation of the Schism’s original leadership revealed something of its youthful effervescence and doctrinal restlessness’.¹⁴ They had gathered around them the curious, the discontented, and those attracted by unorthodox teaching. Some like Thomas Snow, remained orthodox in their views, Harriet Wall became more extreme, and some adopted heretical opinions about the Trinity.

In 1816 Snow and his family moved to Cheltenham. He already knew the wealthy layman Robert Capper, who had erected Portland Chapel in North Place, and he invited Snow to become the first minister. Although both men were Calvinists they disagreed over Snow’s strict policy of excluding from communion those who had been baptised as infants. Capper withdrew his financial support, Snow left the chapel and he and his supporters worshipped at his home, Selkirk Villa, off Prestbury Road, which was licensed for worship in March 1817. At the same time Capper re-opened Portland Chapel and in 1819 transferred it to the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion.

The wealthy Harriet Wall erected a new chapel¹⁵ for Snow in Grosvenor Street (then known as Clyde’s Terrace) where he served as the minister for four years, 1818-22. The foundation stone was laid in July 1817 by James Harrington Evans¹⁶ another dissident clergyman who had been re-baptised at the Octagon Chapel. ‘Snow’s Chapel’ (as it became known) could accommodate 1,000 people, was plain and unadorned and suited the sober and severe doctrine of the pastor. On Sundays, three sermons were preached—at 11.00am, 3.00pm and 6.00pm—and only those adults baptised on a profession of faith were admitted to communion, and it became, in effect, a Strict Baptist chapel. At that time the churches and chapels of Cheltenham were mostly evangelical in outlook; in Cheltenham Chapel, St George’s Square (which used the Anglican liturgy); in Partland Chapel, North Place; and in Ebenezer Chapel, King Street. Charles Jervis had been the incumbent of the parish church since September 1816 and during the following ten years was responsible for the establishment of Anglican Evangelicalism in Cheltenham.¹⁷ He planned to erect two new churches,¹⁸ supported the growing number of national Evangelical societies, and invited Charles Simeon and other leading Evangelicals to preach in the parish church. Like most of his fellow Anglican Evangelicals, Jervis was a moderate Calvinist, and within days of his first sermon in the parish church, comparisons were being made between his doctrines and those of Snow. Clearly Snow’s ultra-

Calvinism would have set him apart from the other clergy and ministers in the town, though shortly before he left Cheltenham he publicly supported the formation of an auxiliary branch of the London Hibernian Society, and became a member of the organising committee.

The activities of the schismatics involved with the Western Schism did not pass unnoticed. Tracts and counter tracts were published and contentious issues like limited atonement. Antinomianism and infant baptism revived old controversies. Snow came to the attention of the wider public on the publication of the address he preached following the death of the Princess of Wales. It was entitled, *A Sermon preached at Cheltenham on the day of the funeral of her royal highness, the Princess Charlotte*. This brought a counter-blast from John Simons, the Evangelical rector of St Paul's Cray entitled, *A Letter to an highly respected friend, on the subject of certain errors, of Antinomian kind, which have lately sprung up in the West of England, and are now making an alarming progress throughout the kingdom*. In it Simons referred to 'this new divinity' and to 'these errors' expressed by Snow and 'his deluded friends'.¹⁹ This in turn brought a response from Snow, *A reply to a Letter, written by the Rev. John Simons, rector of St Paul's Cray purporting to be on the subject of certain errors of the Antinomian kind which have lately sprung up in the West of England*. Snow denied that his sermon expressed false views, and refuted the suggestion that those involved in the controversy were young and inexperienced.

At the height of the controversy William Marsh, the rector of St Peter's, Colchester, and friend of Charles Simeon, challenged Thomas Baring to consider the wisdom of novelty, and of the arrogance of a narrow certainty expressed by those involved in the Schism.

I wish I could be at your elbow for a few minutes, to ascertain what it is which gives rise to certain rumours. If our brethren have found a more excellent way, they must expect us to require satisfactory proof from scripture; because it does not appear probable that the Lord Jesus should have left his church in the dark on essential points, from the Reformation to this hour, except in the case of a very few, some ten or twelve ministers in and out of the establishment, who have light which others have not. Were [Thomas] Jones, [William] Romaine, [William] Cadogan and other revivers of evangelical truth in our church, still in the dark on essential points? It may be so; but surely the most evident proof must be given.²⁰

By the autumn of 1822 Snow's enthusiasm for Baptist dissent had waned and having changed his theological views he left the Grosvenor Street chapel. His convictions apart, the transition from the security of the established church into nonconformity would have meant both a reduction in income and also a loss of status. Snow sought the advice of Charles Simeon over his own future ministry and also that of the chapel. It had been Snow's intention to present it to the Simeon's Trustees, the patron of Cheltenham parish church, but there was no endowment and the building was unconsecrated. The outcome was that the chapel remained closed until August 1827 when it was sold for £1,300 and re-opened as Highbury Congregational Chapel. In 1852, during the lengthy ministry of Dr. Morton Brown (1843-79) a larger chapel was opened in Winchcombe Street. Eighty years later the site of this chapel was acquired for the Odeon cinema, and a new Congregational church was opened in Priory Terrace. For about one hundred years the former Grosvenor Street chapel remained in use as a schoolroom, until it was sold in 1929 and then used for a variety of purposes, including currently as a youth centre.

In October 1822 Snow returned to Stratton Park, the home of Thomas Baring, and during a visit by Simeon three of Snow's children were baptised²¹ on 10 October in East Stratton church. Simeon baptised the eldest son, George (who was then aged four years and eight months) and the curate Joseph D'Arcy Sirr, baptised the two younger children, Harriet and Thomas.²² It must have been a deeply moving experience for Snow and his wife to witness the baptisms in the church where he had served as the incumbent. The occasion of the visit was recorded in Simeon's journal.

14 October. Went to town, and next day to see Sir Thomas Baring's, Stratton Park I went to meet Mr. [Snow], who had informed me of his desire to return to the Church [of England]. They wished to consult me as to the means to be adopted, and in my advice I went as opposite to my dear brother [William] Marsh, as the east is from the west. He is all love; and lets affection sit as president in his counsels. I, on the contrary, turn affection out of the council-chamber, or at best, only let him have a single vote. If I advise, it is in order to produce the best ends by the fittest means: to do this, I must consider, not what I wish, but what others will think, and say, and do. [St] Paul spoke privately to the chief persons at Jerusalem in the first instance, lest he should defeat his pious purposes: I wish to tread in his steps, endeavouring to unite the wisdom of the serpent, with the harmlessness of the dove. St Thomas

B[aring] and Mr. [Snow] were thoroughly convinced that my plans were good; and they will act upon them.²³

While it is not known what Simeon's advice might have been, it is most likely that he would have insisted that Snow should submit himself to the authority of his diocesan bishop. This would be a public acknowledgement of the error of his ways, alongside the baptism of his children that was the personal recognition that he had changed his views.

3. Snow's later period in the Church of England

During the four years 1822 to 1826 Snow returned to Langton, and during that time he was a compliant member of the Church of England. He corresponded with the Bishop of Winchester (in whose diocese he had once been an incumbent) and submitted to him his confession of error, and also with the Bishop of Bristol (in whose diocese he was then living). Strange as it might now seem, before 1836 the archdeaconry of Dorset was part of the diocese of Bristol. Initially Snow met Bishop John Kaye in Cambridge and then, at the bishop's request, part of their correspondence was published. It was the bishop's opinion that as Snow had previously published his views in his controversy with John Simons, he should now make public his change of heart and confession of his error.

The correspondence was published as *Two Letters from the Rt. Rev the Lord Bishop of Bristol, to the Rev. Thomas Snow and his reply to each*. Snow made it clear that his separation from the Church of England was solely over infant baptism. Some of those involved in the Western Schism were unorthodox in their theology, but Snow made it clear that his orthodoxy was defined by the Athanasian Creed. What he had previously published he now rejected, for there was no place for 'fresh and direct revelation of the Spirit, independent of the written word of God.'²⁴ He had enjoyed the favour of the Bishop of Winchester and was not particularly attracted towards nonconformity. He realised that it had been wrong for clergy to separate from the Church of England and then to set themselves up as teachers, and to gather around them congregations. His change of heart was wholly positive. 'And when the first glimpse of a right view on this subject was presented to my mind; the possibility of my returning with my family to the establishment, as a quiet resting place, after the endless uncertainties and confusion without it, gave rise to one of the most cheering hopes of my life.'²⁵ Some of the dissidents involved in the Western Schism had denied the efficiency

and necessity of prayer, but not so for Snow and his family. Every day, morning and evening, for the past seventeen years, Snow had gathered his family for prayer. Every day, Snow heard his eldest son read a chapter of the Bible and pray, and his wife heard their eldest daughter read and pray with the younger children. Far from being 'inefficacious or unnecessary' Snow considered it to be 'productive of the greatest blessings man can enjoy.'²⁶ It may be concluded the 'restatement allowed Snow to make amends for his previous errors in judgement, though his moving in quick succession from one good living to another suggests that, at least in the view of most churchmen, he had little to atone for.'²⁷

Having satisfied all that the Bishop of Bristol required for him to be restored into the ministry of the Church of England, Snow then served two curacies in his diocese. The first was at Chettle, north-east of Blandford Forum, 1826-27, and then at Charmouth, near Lyme Regis, 1827-33. In December 1827 Snow preached a rousing address entitled, *A Sermon preached at Charmouth Church, on the second Sunday in Advent, pointing out one particular in the character of a real Christian, wherein he differs from the mere formalist*. By this sermon he made clear his Evangelical orthodoxy.

In 1833 Snow became the rector of Sutton Waldron, north of Blandford Forum, and a year later the rector of St. Dunstan's-in-the-West, Fleet Street.²⁸ This was a prestigious living and Snow's appointment shows that he had been regarded as a suitable candidate shows that he had been fully accepted back into the established church. During this period of his ministry he was regarded as an 'excellent minister' whose 'preaching is certainly of the highest order.'²⁹ In London Snow became more closely identified with the growing number of Evangelicals, and it was during this phase of his career that he became involved with the founding of the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS).

Early in 1835 a layman, Frederick Sandoz (1802-63) a resident in Islington, and later a director of the East India Company, wrote to the *Record* newspaper expressing concern over the increasing number of the poor and the inadequacy of the parochial system to reach them for Christ. The first person who responded to the letter was from a fellow layman, Thomas Thompson (1785-1865). He was a Congregationalist, sympathetic to Christians in other denominations, and who for forty years had been the secretary of the Home Missionary Society. Thompson was so enthusiastic about Sandoz's concerns that he contributed

a donation of one hundred guineas. Later in the year a group of men met in Snow's home to formulate their plans. The aged Simeon wanted to attend the meeting, but was persuaded against making the journey from Cambridge, and so conveyed his support through his curate, William Carus. On 12 February 1836 Sandoz informed the readership of the *Record* that on the 19 February, the new Society would be instituted. The Evangelical promoters were three London clergy—Thomas Dale, the vicar of St. Bride's, Fleet Street, Josiah Pratt, the vicar of St Stephen's, Coleman Street and Thomas Snow, the rector of St Dunstan's-in-the-West; and three laymen—Nadir Baxter (the Fleet Street lawyer), Frederick Sandoz and Robert Seeley (the Fleet Street publisher). The inaugural meeting of seventy clergy and laity was chaired by Lord Shaftesbury.³⁰ Those present included Snow, who opened the meeting with prayer, and spoke in support of the new Society. A committee was appointed consisting of twenty-four laity and clergy, one of whom was Snow. He subsequently spoke at the first and second anniversary meetings, but in 1837 he resigned over the principle of awarding grants to laymen as paid parochial visitors. This was a highly contentious issue that led to a heated public debate and pressure on the committee to abandon this principle. Edward Pusey, one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement, was even prepared to give £20 a year to the CPAS committee if they abandoned the principle of lay ministry³¹ but in the end he supported the rival organisation, the Additional Curates Society that provided grants for curates but not laymen.

The CPAS provided grants to support curates or 'pious laymen' (often those who were intending to be ordained) to Evangelical parishes in England and Wales. It was essential to be vigilant over those individuals who received a grant, for confidence in the Society would be lost if grants were awarded to 'Tractarian, or idle, or ball-frequenting curates.'³² Particular support was given to 'destitute parishes or districts' where the annual income of the incumbent was only about £50. Each year the parish clergy applied to the Society for a grant and were responsible for the employment of the grantee curate or layman. In the first year of operation 110 grants supported ninety-two curates and eighteen lay assistants. Francis Close and the clergy of Cheltenham were particularly proactive in their support of CPAS, and by May 1836 over fifty Cheltenham residents had given a total of £100 to the new Society. Two months later when Charles Simeon paid his final visit to Cheltenham he found it to be almost 'a heaven upon earth. The churches so capacious, and so filled; the schools so large, so numerous, so beneficial; the people so full of love; the ministers such

laborious and energetic men.’³³ Close had already been the incumbent at the parish church for ten years and would remain there until 1856. In May 1863, as Dean of Carlisle, he preached the annual CPAS sermon in which he referred to ‘our beloved Society—a Society which I have cordially cherished and supported from its foundation unto this day.’³⁴

On leaving St Dunstan’s in 1842, Snow was succeeded by Edward Auriol ‘the nestor of the Evangelical party’³⁵ and patron and incumbent of Newton Valence, a small country parish south of Alton in Hampshire. It was Auriol who appointed Snow to be the incumbent in 1842, and then sold him the patronage, and when Snow resigned in 1860 he appointed Archibald MacLachen to be his successor. Snow then retired to Littleton House, Langton Long near Blandford Forum where he died in 1867. After his death, the patronage of Newton Valence remained with the Snow family until it was transferred to the MacLachen family.

The Rev’d Dr. ALAN MUNDEN is the Assistant Minister at Jesmond Parish Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

ENDNOTES

1. A. B. Gourlay, *History of Sherborne School* (Sherborne), 1971, p. 84. note 8.
2. A. Munden, ‘Charles Simeon.’ (1759-1836), in A. Atherstone (ed.) *The Heart of the Faith* (Cambridge) 2008, pp. 81-89.
3. The university archives make it clear that Snow did not proceed to MA.
4. Quebec Chapel was opened in 1759 as a proprietary chapel (one of nine such chapels in the parish of Marylebone). It became a parish church in 1894 and was demolished in 1909.
5. The patron of Winterborne Stoke was Alexander Baring (later Baron Ashburton) the second son of Sir Francis Baring.
6. For the background to the Western Schism I am indebted to G. Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals. Protestant Secessions from the Via Media c 1800-1850* (Oxford) 2001, pp. 105-151.
7. His son, Charles Thomas Baring (1807-79) was successively the Bishop of Gloucester 1857-61, then the Bishop of Durham, 1861-79.
8. S. Baring-Gould, *The Church Revival* (London) 1914, p. 96.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
10. Albury Park later became the venue for the Albury Conferences and associated with the Catholic Apostolic Church.

11. The chapel had been opened by John Wesley. In March 1776 he recorded, 'I went down to Taunton, and at three in the afternoon opened the new preaching house. The people showed great eagerness to hear.' J. Wesley. *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (Dent Edition, London), 1906, Vol. 4, p. 69. The Octagon Chapel closed in 1822, and four years later was reopened by the Wesleyan Methodists. and then acquired by the Plymouth Brethren.
12. George Baring (1751-1854) lived under the shadow of other members of his family. He only remained in Exeter for a year then fled to the continent where he turned his back on Christianity, became a profligate and went bankrupt.
13. George Bevan (1782-1819) became more extreme in his views and held unorthodox views of the Trinity. He died in Hampstead apparently unconnected with any particular denomination.
14. Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals, op. cit.*, p. 116.
15. Compare the Grosvenor Street Chapel with the Batholomew Street Chapel which cost George Baring and Harriet Wall £4,000 and seated 1,000 people. After Baring left the chapel further divisions took place within the congregation, the largest faction became Plymouth Brethren.
16. James Harrington Evans (1785-1849) as the curate of Milford and Hordle had been a near-neighbour of Harriet Wall. From 1818-49 he was the minister of the John Street (Baptist) Chapel, Holborn. Evans was 'the most able theologian of the [dissident] party', Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals, op. cit.*, p. 123.
17. A. Munden, "Evangelical in the Shadows: Charles Jewis of Cheltenham," *Churchman*, Vol. 96, No. 2, 1982, pp. 142-50.
18. Only Holy Trinity was opened during Jervis' incumbency; St. Paul's, was opened by his successor, Francis Close.
19. J. Simons, *A Letter to an highly respected friend, on the subject of certain errors, of Antinomian kind, which have lately sprung up in the West of England, and are now making an alarming progress throughout the kingdom* (London) 1818, pp. v, 30.
20. [C. Marsh], *The Life of the Rev. William Marsh* (London) 1867, p. 121.
21. Baring-Gould wrongly stated that *two* of Snow's children were baptised by Simeon. *Church Revival, op. cit.*, p. 97.
22. Snow insisted that his subsequent children were baptised as infants.
23. W. Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev Charles Simeon MA* (London) 1847, pp. 573-74.
24. *Two letters from the Rt. Rev the Lord Bishop of Bristol, to the Rev. Thomas Snow, and his reply to each* (Blandford Forum) 1826, p. 13.
25. *Ibid.*, p.8.

26. *Ibid.*, 16.
27. Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, *op.cit.*, p.131
28. Earlier some of the clergy associated with St Dunstan's-in-the-West were the Protestant Reformer, William Tyndale; the Puritan, Richard Baxter; and the Evangelical, William Romaine.
29. [Collection] *The Church of England preacher or sermons by eminent divines, delivered in 1837* (London), 1838. p. 77.
30. Lord Shaftesbury (1801-85) was the president of CPAS, and as such was the chairman of every annual meeting from 1836-84.
31. *Abstract of report and speeches at the Twenty-eighth Annual Meeting of the Church Pastoral Aid Society, 7 May 1863*, p.14.
32. E. J. Speck, *Church Pastoral Aid Society* (London) 1881, p. 31.
33. Carus, *Charles Simeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 783.
34. F. Close, *A Sermon preached before the Church Pastoral Aid Society...6 May 1863*, London, p. 12.
35. E. Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society* (London) 1899, Vol. 3, pp. 30, 259. The church contains a moving monument to his seventeen-year old son, Edward James Auriol, who drowned in Lake Geneva in 1847.