

BAPTIST ARCHIVES IN GREAT BRITAIN

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It seems rather presumptuous of me to be talking about Baptist Archives, since I am neither a Baptist nor an archivist, so those of you who are one or the other or both will have to forgive any glaring errors or omissions in the following, which represents only what a mere Methodist librarian has been able to pick up in the course of dealing with enquiries.

At this Conference last year Dr Clyde Binfield, when discussing research into Dissent, or any aspect of the life of a Dissenter, stated that "the best way ... is to go to the records of the relevant Dissenting Congregation" which "can be a very hit and miss affair". I can certainly vouch for that as far as Baptist records are concerned and propose to give you some idea of the variety and scope of the different types of Baptist archives and the wide range of organizations and institutions which can be expected to have some of them. We return to the theology of religious archives: it is because the Baptist denomination is not centrally organized, in the way that, for example, the Methodist Church or the Church of England are, where each local church is accountable to a denominational headquarters, that there has never been a systematised approach to the keeping of records. "Each local Baptist church is a separate, autonomous body, self-governed by the 'church meeting', which is the decision-making body. Although there are area Associations and a Union of Baptist churches, individual churches can decide whether to join them or remain independent." (I quote from a pamphlet entitled *My ancestors were Baptists: how can I find out more about them?* by Geoffrey R. Breed and published by the Society of Genealogists.) In other words, although advice can and has been given to local churches by the Baptist Union and the Baptist Historical Society as to what to do with their records, there is no element of authority to encourage or discourage the deposit of certain types of records with, for example, a local County Record Office, a Baptist College Library, the Church safe, the Church Secretary's attic or even somebody's bonfire!

The following summary of Baptist history, taken from the current *Baptist Union Directory*, will demonstrate the diversity of Baptist organization, reflected today in the archives with which we are concerned.

"Organized Baptist life in England had two distinct beginnings. In 1611 Thomas Helwys led back from Amsterdam a small group who a few years earlier had sought religious freedom in Holland and who had there formed themselves into a Separatist church - under the leadership of John Smyth - practising believers' baptism. Helwys was the author of *The Mystery of Iniquity*, the first English printed book to plead for full religious freedom. The successors of Helwys and his friends became known as General Baptists. They were Arminian in theology but their church order was previously independent but modified by the appointment of inter-congregational officials known as "Messengers".

In 1633 a group connected with a Calvinist Separatist church in London broke away on adopting believers' baptism. This was the origin of the Particular Baptists. They remained Calvinistic in theology but their church order was of the more 'independent' type. The first Baptist church in Wales was founded in 1649 at Ilston, near Swansea. Baptists had founded work in Ireland by the mid-seventeenth century and in Scotland by the mid-eighteenth century. A "New Connexion" of the more evangelical General Baptists was formed in 1770 under the influence of the Methodist revival by Dan Taylor; certain General Baptist churches remained aloof, however, and of these the majority became Unitarian. The late eighteenth century also witnessed a resurgence of evangelistic zeal amongst the Particular Baptists, as a result of the influence of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and others whose Calvinism was actively evangelical in spirit. The formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, whose first missionary William Carey went to India in 1793, was the most notable fruit of this renewal of Particular Baptist life. The influence of the BMS led in its turn to the formation in 1812-13 of the first Baptist Union amongst Particular Baptist churches. The Union had an uncertain early history, but after its re-formation in 1831-32, Particular Baptists and General Baptists of the New Connexion began to draw more closely together. This process culminated in 1981, when the General Baptists of the New

Connexion, under the leadership of John Clifford (1836-1923) amalgamated with the Baptist Union.

Certain churches have remained more strictly Calvinistic, and in general have refused to receive any at the Lord's Table who have not been immersed as believers. They are known as Strict Baptists, usually, and have three regional Associations of Strict Baptist Churches. The Strict Baptist Assembly continued until 1976 when they joined the Assembly of baptised churches holding the Calvinistic doctrine of Sovereign Grace to form the Grace Baptist Assembly.

The Baptist denomination has, over the years, spread to many lands and is today one of the largest Protestant communions in the world, linked in the fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance, formed in 1905."

We turn now to the archives themselves, whose diversity reflects the independence or even anarchy of spirit prevalent among Baptists.

i) **Church records.** The "Church Book" is the primary source for historical research about an individual church or the people connected with it - minister, elders, deacons, members. It usually contains the minutes of the Church meetings, when all church members gathered to make any decisions concerning the church, including applications for baptism and membership. It also often contains lists of members at certain dates and even records of births, marriages and deaths in some instances, and so is a valuable fund of information about people. This was sometimes the reason for the non-surrender of pre-1837 registers not found among the "Non-Parochial Registers" in the Public Record Office. Unfortunately, many of these Church Books have been lost, along with other useful church records, such as the minutes of Deacons' meetings (small groups of church officers handling the day to day administration of the church), Sunday School minutes, accounts, and such registers as were not surrendered. Those which do survive are kept in a wide variety of locations: many have been retained by the church itself, often under conditions which do not bode well for their chances of survival; some have been passed to the local area Baptist Association for safe keeping; some have been deposited

with the local County Record Office; some, deposited originally with the Baptist Historical Society or the Baptist Union, are now in the Angus Library at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and others have been deposited directly with Baptist theological college libraries. (Those from the North-West of England deposited with the Northern Baptist College or its predecessors, Manchester, Rawdon and Midland Baptist Colleges, now form part of the Northern Baptist College Collection in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.) A few early General Baptist Church records are in Dr Williams's Library. Finally, there are some Strict Baptist Churches' records in the Strict Baptist Historical Society's Library at Dunstable and the Gospel Standard Baptist Library in Hove. Locating any individual church's records is not always easy. In 1984 the Baptist Union attempted a survey of all Baptist churches listed in the *Baptist Union Directory*, in order to determine what records were still extant and where they were located, but unfortunately only a fairly small proportion of churches responded. An earlier survey in 1961 had a slightly higher response rate, but had asked for, and therefore received, much less detailed information concerning holdings. The files containing the results of these surveys, arranged according to the relevant area Associations, have now been deposited by the Baptist Historical Society with the Angus Library. They also contain any lists concerning Baptist Church holdings which have been sent in by County Record Offices. (At this point, could I make a plea to any of you from County Record Offices containing any Baptist Church records who have not sent us a note of them to do so: even a brief list of the names of the churches whose records you hold would be a great help.) These files, kept in one drawer of a filing cabinet in my office, are the only attempt which exists at any form of central register of Baptist Church archives, and are always my first resort for enquiries. It is planned to publish this information from time to time, I believe, in the *Baptist Quarterly* - the journal of the Baptist Historical Society.

Perhaps at this stage I should give a brief history of the Angus Library. The original heart of the Library was a large collection of printed and manuscript works by English Baptists and other Nonconformists dating from the early 17th Century left to Regent's Park College by Dr Joseph Angus, Principal of the College from 1849 to 1893 (and incidentally also Secretary of the Baptist Missionary

Society) and later catalogued and enlarged by Dr George Pearce Gould, Principal 1896-1920. Other significant collections have meanwhile been deposited with or donated to the library and in 1985 the Baptist Union Library, which had earlier incorporated the Baptist Historical Society's library of manuscript and early printed Baptist materials, became part of the Angus Library. Finally, in the summer of 1989, when the Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society moved their offices out of London to new joint premises in Didcot, the archives of the Baptist Missionary Society were deposited with the Angus Library and the various collections were brought together and relocated in three large rooms of mobile shelving and one manuscript room in the basement of the College, with the newly built addition of a Librarian/Archivist's office and a research room both for College research students and visitors to the Angus Library.

ii) **Associations.** From an early stage in Baptist church history, at least the 1650's, individual Baptist churches made contact with others of a similar persuasion in their vicinity and these informal contacts were soon formalised into area Associations. The earliest records of the meetings between the "messengers" (representatives of these churches) were often kept in one or more of the individual Church Books, some of which have been published by the Baptist Historical Society*, but by the 18th Century letters between the churches, accounts of the Association meetings and details and statistics of the churches in an Association in the form of an Annual Report, were being kept for most Associations and many survive in manuscript form, most often under the charge of local Area Association secretaries, details of whom can be found in the *Baptist Union Directory*. A few of these early "Circular Letters" are in the Angus Library and a number of other Association records - minutes, correspondence, details of churches, etc. - have been deposited with us, but unfortunately there is no central file showing the whereabouts of early Association records: present Association secretaries ought to be able to locate their early records, but the

* WHITE, B.R., ed. *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*. London, Baptist Historical Society, 1971-74. (3 parts + Index).

changes in Association names and areas covered over the last three centuries will sometimes make this difficult. Association records are very often a particularly good source of information about individual churches and their ministers, notably in the 18th Century, when other records are scarce (although there are some useful printed sources of such information, such as Rippon's *Baptist Annual Register* of 1790-1802 and the *Baptist Magazine*, which, while starting in 1809, frequently reaches back into the previous century). Some of the larger Associations even have their own archivist who keeps information about the archives of churches in the Association as well as the Association's own archives.

iii) **Other, wider groups.** Alongside the local Associations various assemblies, societies, boards and organizations soon grew up, whether from a group of like-minded ministers meeting in an 18th Century London Coffee House or from a felt need for wider cooperation and discussion of issues of mutual concern. All these organizations produced records and correspondence, some of which have survived. Of singular importance in the study of Baptist history are the minute books of the Particular Baptist Fund, now on deposit in the Angus Library. This Fund was established in 1717 as a result of the response to a "Proposal for raising a Fund" contained in a letter sent out to Particular Baptist churches in and about London, which stated:

"Whereas several Ministers and other persons who have the Interest and welfare of the Baptiz'd churches in England very at heart, have observed for some time, with great grief and trouble, the little correspondence and union that there is between those of that denomination, the great decay of that Interest in some parts of England, and the difficulty they have to keep up the public worship of God, with any tolerable reputation in other parts; the great want of able and well qualified persons to defend the truth, and to supply those Churches that are in want of Ministers; the poverty and distress which some employed in that sacred office are exposed to for want of a competent maintenance for themselves and families; and the frequent applications that are made to some private persons on those occasions who neither have ability to help all, nor opportunity to enquire into the truth and circumstances of every particular case. It was therefore proposed and earnestly

desired by the said persons, that a Public Fund, or Stock, be raised to redress these grievances; and, more especially, for the support and maintenance of honourable Ministers, and providing for a succession of such. That this Fund shall be for the use and advantage of those Churches only that go under the denomination of Particular Baptists. That it be begun by taking subscriptions and making a public collection for it in the several congregations of that persuasion in London and the parts adjacent, and by the free gift of any particular persons whom God hath blest with an ability and disposition for such an extensive and pious charity ...**

The lists of Ministers, churches and Colleges helped by the Fund during the course of its 270 year history, as well as the discussions of the principles involved in making allocations, all contained in the Minutes, are a rich source of denominational history.

A similar Fund, of smaller financial resources, was formed in Bristol, also in 1717. Called the Bristol Baptist Fund, it still functions in Bristol.

Time does not allow for such detail concerning the minutes of other Baptist organizations, such as the Society of Baptist Ministers in London (General Baptist), the General Baptist Building Fund, the Conferences of New Connexion General Baptists, the Baptist Board, the Baptist Monthly Meeting, or the London Association of Strict Baptist Ministers and Churches, to name but a few of those whose minute books we hold.

iv) The Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society. The archives of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (and Ireland until 1988), in the form of the minutes of the meetings of Baptist Union Council and its various committees, have been retained by the Baptist Union at the new joint headquarters of the B.U. and the Baptist Missionary Society at Didcot, and have been bound in volumes, some of which have been indexed. It is hoped during the course of the next year that these will be sorted and many of them

** Particular Baptist Fund. *Fund Book I*, 1717-1729. (ms.) (spelling modernised).

put on microfiche. They are not available at present for public access. The Baptist Union Corporation Ltd. holds the Deeds and Title of several thousand church properties and correspondence files concerning churches going back many years. A considerable amount of historical archive material was discovered in the course of the move to Didcot and has been forwarded to the Angus Library. Duplicate marriage registers received from the Registrar General for many years were distributed by the British Records Association to the appropriate County Record Office.

The complete archives of the Baptist Missionary Society up to 30 years ago, on the other hand, were deposited with the Angus Library at the time of the great exodus from London to Didcot last year. They contain not only Committee minutes of the Society from the earliest days, but also correspondence, diaries and reports from the missionaries overseas and from the officers of the Society at home. (The Society will be celebrating its bi-centenary in 1992, for which an official history is being written). Many of the archives are of wider interest than for students of Baptist history, such as George Grenfell's original survey books of the Congo, William Carey's accounts of the first missionary endeavours in India, Roxburgh's Indian botanical works first printed and annotated by Carey in Serampore, which the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew recently enquired about, accounts of the Boxer Rebellion and later martyrdoms in China, the slave trade in the West Indies, or, more recently, the linguistic and botanical researches of John Carrington in Zaire. Much of the pre-1914 material has been microfilmed, and there is a summary catalogue of this; there are also detailed catalogues by country of the correspondence of missionaries whose association with the Society ceased before 1914. For material after this date there are as yet no catalogues, apart from a handwritten shelf-list, originally compiled in London as an assessment for future microfilming, rather than as a catalogue to be used to locate documents, but there is an alphabetical register of missionaries up to 1942, which we only found in July. This situation is being rectified, but, as you can imagine, will take some time! Missionary correspondence is arranged by country, and then within broad dates alphabetically by surname (or husband's surname, in the case of women missionaries injudicious enough to marry a male missionary during the course of their employment with the Society!),

so it is not too difficult to locate an individual missionary's file. It is the occasional report or survey of a general area such as the West Indies which is at present rather harder to find.

In addition to the archives of the Society itself, there are a considerable number of useful historical documents given to the Society at one time or another, such as the single minute book of the Baptist Itinerant Society for 1797 to 1812, or of the General Baptist Missionary Society for 1816 to 1861 (the two societies in Britain did not merge until 1891), or letters predating the formation of the Society, such as those dated 1736-1779 addressed to John Sutcliff, an influential 18th Century Baptist minister. There are also some letters from prominent Baptists who were neither officers nor missionaries of the Society, such as C.H. Spurgeon in the 19th Century. It is appropriate that this rich store of research materials is now located in the same library as other related collections of documents. An obvious example concerns the voluminous writings of William Carey: there were collections of his letters and other writings in the original Angus Library, along with various artefacts connected with his life; another major collection of his letters came with the Baptist Union Library; and all his official correspondence and journals were in the B.M.S. Archives. Added to which, letters of his keep turning up in private hands and are passed to us, more hitherto uncatalogued papers of his turned up in a safe in London during the move to Didcot, and in May I came across some more in an old wooden trunk in the College containing, totally unsorted and uncatalogued, the papers of one of Carey's descendants and major biographers. The B.M.S. Archives also contain photographs, lantern slides, and scrap books of press cuttings.

v) **College Archives.** Brief mention has been made of the libraries of the Baptist theological colleges, but it is also worth remembering that the archives of the Colleges themselves are a useful source of historical information. Some are more easily accessible than others, however. Spurgeon's College in South London has a useful card index to all former students referring back to a numerical entry in a large register, which gives full details of each student's home background on entering the college and subsequent career in the ministry. Similarly, Bristol Baptist College, founded in 1679 and the first of the Baptist Colleges, has an alphabetical card index of all

Bristol College students, giving comprehensive biographical and bibliographical details. Unfortunately, at Regent's Park College, founded in 1810 as Stepney College in London, we cannot boast such an easy way into the careers of our former students, particularly in the 19th Century, and many of the College's early minute books have been lost. The 19th Century records which survive have never been properly sorted and catalogued either, so I usually prefer to use the College's printed annual reports for any enquiries concerning former students. Bristol Baptist College also possesses the papers of many of its former students who became prominent Baptist leaders in the 18th and 19th Centuries, making a rich Baptist archive complementing that of the Angus Library. (A pipe dream of mine would be to amalgamate the catalogues of these two collections and put them into machine-readable form, but I cannot imagine funds becoming available for such a project in the foreseeable future).

Mention has already been made of the Northern Baptist College Collection in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, but I have not been able to verify if the actual archives of Horton, Rawdon, Manchester and Midland Colleges are in that Collection. Wales has had various colleges, now amalgamated into two: the South Wales Baptist College at Cardiff, from Abergavenny, Pontypool and Haverfordwest originally; and the North Wales College at Bangor, originally at Llangollen. In Scotland the Scottish Baptist College has been in existence since 1894 and in Ireland there is an Irish Baptist College in Belfast. I know nothing about the state of the archives of these smaller colleges.

Until now I have concentrated on British Baptist archives, in particular those in England - time does not permit further elaboration concerning those in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, but a brief mention should also be made of Baptist materials from further afield. There is a European Baptist Federation, whose Danish Secretary at the moment is also the Baptist World Alliance's Associate Secretary for Europe, and who therefore presumably has access to considerable European Baptist records. The European Baptist Women's Union has recently approached Regent's Park College with a view to the possibility of the deposit of historical papers still in its possession with the Angus Library, because, like the European Baptist Federation, it has no permanent

home and frequent changes in personnel result in records being mislaid. I can well imagine this being a future growth area in our archive holdings. We already have many of the records of the Baptist World Alliance, from the time when it had offices in London, including correspondence dated 1938-1953. We also have some papers connected with the World Council of Churches, owing to the involvement of Dr. Ernest Payne, student and tutor of the College, who was Secretary of the Baptist Union from 1951 to 1967 and a President of the World Council of Churches in 1968: he died in 1980 and we have countless boxes of his papers, as yet not accessible to the public. The headquarters of the Baptist World Alliance are now in the U.S.A., but if I were to begin to talk about Baptist archives in the United States we would be here all day. Suffice it to say that the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention has placed many useful Baptist materials worldwide on microfilm and these are available for purchase.

I hope this has given some impression of the sources for Baptist archives and will end by quoting Dr. Binfield again in his search for information on a certain Victorian Baptist architect: "You need to know the inwardness of Baptist life. You need to know (if only you can anchor your subject into such a sense of locality) how to read the records of the congregation for which he practised his professional skills, and which formed him as a person." Perhaps this is becoming increasingly possible as archivists and librarians of various persuasions come together on an occasion such as this and pool their knowledge of the materials under their charge.

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