

AN OLD CIRENCESTER CHAPEL

by Dr F. James

This former Unitarian chapel which is to be a new hall for the Parish Church is probably the oldest nonconformist place of worship in Cirencester in its most original 17th century form; but to consider the history of a building without reference to the people who worshipped there and their ideas, would be incomplete.

The seventeenth century was one of turmoil and civil war over religious beliefs. The minister in charge of the Parish Church at the time of the Civil War was the Revd. Alexander Gregory M.A. of Magdalen College, Oxford who was appointed in 1632. By 1640, the gift of the living had passed into the hands of Charles I, but Mr. Gregory had puritan leanings and generally sided with parliament¹. In the battle of Cirencester 1642, Gregory with Col. Fettiplace and others were taken prisoner and removed to Oxford on foot: an account of their hardships is given by Jennings². In the aftermath of the battle, Cirencester was in a sorry state causing forty-six citizens to write to the king regretting any part the town had played in opposing the king, and asking him to take them into his protection and allow them to continue in their former trades and occupations. The king replied that he accepted their submission, was sorry that their disloyalty had resulted in so much suffering and was well pleased that all the inhabitants should return safely to their houses and live in security and free of all violence. The Royal garrison would offer no violence or injury provided that there was obedience to His Majesty's just and necessary commands as the conditions of the present time demanded³. It is evident that Gregory did not return with the other prisoners to Cirencester for he was next vicar of Camberwell, Surrey 1643⁴ and rector of Lambeth 1646⁵. Mr Gregory was personally a very well liked man and it appears the parishioners of Lambeth desired him to move to them from Camberwell.

Gregory returns to Cirencester

He was also well liked in Cirencester for the vestry book, 2 March 1647/8, has the following entry '*Thomas Osbourne, Thomas Shepherd and Caleb Self are to be payd for Two Journeys to Camberwell, to Mr Gregory, and if they can make it appeare that they went on a third Journey for the good of the Towne they are to be payd for it*'. It seems likely that

news of Mr Gregory's move to Lambeth was slow in reaching Cirencester; however, contact must have been made for Gregory did return to his friends in Cirencester and was minister during the Commonwealth period. He was a moderate puritan for he wrote on the day of the execution of Charles I, 30 January 1649, in the parish register '*O England what did'st thou do, the 30th of this month*⁶'. His puritan leaning must have been theological rather than republican since he remained in office after the restoration, and on 29 May 1660 Charles II visited Cirencester and the long silenced church bells were rung. When the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662 Gregory could not subscribe to the thirty-nine articles and book of common prayer. However, many, including 'a person of great power' indicated the king would be well pleased if Gregory could conform. This he felt he could not do, although we do not know his reasons, and was deprived of his benefice, but continued to live in the town and said he would continue to minister to those who wished him to do so.

One historian⁷ states Gregory was the first minister (1662-5) of the Presbyterian Chapel but an earlier authoritative source⁸ fails to confirm this. There is thus no proof that Gregory was the first Presbyterian minister but he might have been the focus at the time of those of puritan or presbyterian belief. Following the Five Mile Act (1665) whereby he could not live within five miles of his former curacy, he moved to Minchinhampton where he died aged 72 in 1666, but his body was returned to Cirencester for burial on 31 May 1666⁹. Doubtless Gregory's successor felt it unsatisfactory for a former minister of the church to be ministering to others in the town, and if this were happening in many parishes the Five Mile Act becomes understandable. The reasons for Alexander Gregory's nonconformity could not have affected his family for his son Jeremiah Gregory became vicar of Cirencester in 1676. His daughter married George Bull, later Bishop of St David's¹⁰.

Lyon Turner¹¹, who has made an exhaustive study of indulgences granted by Charles II, stated that a petition was prepared by James Greenwood on behalf of some of the people of Cirencester for a licence for himself to preach at the Weavers' Hall, Cirencester, and for licences to use the Episcopal churches of St

James or St Michael at Bath for preaching. How long and to what extent Greenwood was associated with Cirencester is uncertain, but it is unlikely he would have applied for a licence if there was no congregation for his preaching.

Presbyterianism and Unitarianism

Presbyterianism has a long and complicated history; it essentially concerns a method of church governance



Unitarian Chapel, Gosditch Street - external south east view

and was especially strong in Scotland and became a prominent movement in England together with independent congregations after the Civil War. Until the Act of Uniformity many of the Anglican clergy held views derived from the puritans and of the 2000 or so clergy who were evicted following the Act of Uniformity, 1500 were recorded as Presbyterians. This does not mean however they held identical theological beliefs. The history of Unitarianism, with which Presbyterianism was to an extent at one time associated, also has a long history. Jews and Muslims can be thought of as unitarians in that they

worship one God, but the term Unitarian is usually applied to Christians who do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine caused much difficulty for the early Church¹². The name Unitarian did not reach England until 1664¹³; Unitarians were excluded from the Act of Toleration 1689 and it was not until 1813 that Unitarianism was officially allowed. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association was founded in 1825 but this was an association of individuals and not congregations; it is thus difficult

to say when individual dissenters' chapels first became Unitarian. Much depended on the minister. Examination of Trust Deeds when trustees changed does not describe any special denomination or teaching. In Cirencester their property is called the Meeting House, Gosditch Street, without mentioning religious meetings.

The Act of Toleration 1689 gave Presbyterians the right to worship as a congregation but not to hold Presbyterian courts; there was thus no cohesion or overall authority and many adopted Unitarianism. By 1772 only half of the 300 Presbyterian churches in England were orthodox (Trinitarian) and by 1812 their number had been reduced to 100¹⁴.

Unitarian Ministers

One of the earliest Ministers for Cirencester was a Mr Beebee (Beeby in some records). He was a student at Oxford when Charles I was besieged there, but then returned to his home in the north of the country. After ordination he travelled to Scotland as a chaplain to the regiment of Col. Knight in the army of Gen. Monk, where he prayed and preached to the regiment to the satisfaction of both. On leaving the army Beebee practised medicine for a while near Bridgnorth and preached in the neighbourhood. He was next called to Cirencester where he later died¹⁵. He was buried in the Cirencester parish churchyard in 1697 as were his wife Hanna, 1692/3, and his son

John in 1697¹⁶. Murch¹⁷ gives a list of Ministers at Cirencester to 1820 naming Alexander Gregory as the first, but dates for the early ministers are incomplete.

Joshua Parry was the most distinguished of the ministers. Born in 1719 at Llangan, Pembrokeshire, his parents died in his infancy and he was taught first at Haverfordwest by a private tutor and later at the Fund Academy, Moorfields. In 1738 he was living with Mr Ryland, a friend of Dr Samuel Johnson and writing for periodicals under an assumed name¹⁸. By 1741 he was acting minister at Midhurst, Sussex and in 1742 became minister to the Presbyterian Church in Cirencester. Parry in 1752, married Sarah, daughter of Caleb Hillier, the Hilliers being wealthy merchants in the town and supporters of nonconformity. Joshua Parry also became friendly with Allen Bathurst (1st Earl), refused several invitations to other dissenting churches, died in September 1776 and was buried in his own churchyard, the spot being marked by an uninscribed rough stone¹⁹. In his lifetime Joshua Parry published poems, essays and satires as well as theological articles; his wife Sarah outlived him dying in 1786 and was buried in the churchyard next to her husband.

Joshua Parry's eldest son, Caleb Hillier Parry attended Cirencester Grammar School during the headship of Revd.. Dr Washbourne and was one of several boys who later became prominent in medicine²⁰. These included Edward Jenner, with whom he remained friendly throughout life, Charles Trye and John Clinch who first introduced vaccination to North America. Caleb went on to

Warrington Academy and then to Edinburgh University. He settled in Bath where he became a prominent physician and is buried in Bath Abbey²¹.

Following Joshua Parry, Mr Habakkuk Crabb was minister from 1776 - 1787 and then Unitarian leanings became evident as Mr Eliezer Cogan, Mr Crabb's successor, although only for one year, is recorded as having kept a school at Walthamstowe where the sons of many leading Unitarians were educated, these included Benjamin Disraeli²².



Revd. Joshua Parry - Photograph of portrait in possession of Miss Ann Parry.

From an examination of the old register it is evident that the Cirencester Presbyterian Chapel was not so isolated as might be imagined. There were frequent visits by ministers from other chapels, especially Barton Street, Gloucester.

Little is known about the next minister, John Kings (1790 - 1803), but his successor, Richard Fry (1803 - 1807) was minister at Billericay, Essex, for thirteen years before moving to Cirencester. There his theological opinions were reported to have led to differences with the majority of this congregation who were strictly orthodox and he was formally excluded

from the Congregational Union of Essex²³. It seems likely his heterodoxy related to Unitarianism. Richard Fry was succeeded by James Holt (1808 - 1817), then came John Read (1817 - 1818), Anthony Dixon (1819 - 1820) and Frederick Horsfield (1820 - 1860) under whom the Chapel cause seriously declined probably because of doctrinal controversies.

The Congregational Magazine of 1834 commented²⁴

'The Ancient and respectable town of Cirencester in Gloucestershire containing a population of 6,000 to 7,000 persons has until recently been largely without any place of worship for the use of congregational independents. Some, however, remember when an orthodox dissenting ministry was supported by the liberal endowment which is now perverted to cast the shadow of Socinianism, when the present miscalled Presbyterian Meeting was occupied by worshippers whose opinions were directly opposed to those of the few who now assemble within its vegetating walls.'

Socinianism refers to the teaching of two Italian theologians, Laelius Socinus (1525 - 1562) and his nephew Faustus Socinius (1539 - 1604). Both rejected the doctrines of the Trinity, considered the communion service symbolic and thought dogmas not compatible with reason should be rejected. Faustus was especially opposed to the Calvinistic teaching of predestination.

We have no details of Mr Horsfield's teaching, but he attended the Hackney Academy founded in 1813 by Robert Aspland (1782 - 1845) for the training of Unitarian ministers. Aspland had been known for "Unsound doctrines", established the Unitarian Fund in 1803, was a trustee of the Dr Williams' charities and played a prominent part on the committee of the Protestant Society for the Protection of Civil Liberties which under the Act of 1813 abolished penalties for those who did not accept the orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity²⁵. There can be little doubt Horsfield preached that which he had learned from Aspland.

The Congregationalists started with a small room which became a substantial chapel in 1839, the first minister being Revd. Joseph Stratford, author of *'Great and Good Men of Gloucestershire'*²⁶; the building continued in use until a new chapel was built in 1888 on the site of the present United Reformed Church. It seems that many dissenters in the early nineteenth century moved nearer to traditional teaching, a move reflected in Cirencester to the detriment of the Presbyterian chapel. It was the period of the Oxford Movement in Britain and the reform of the Anglican Church. There was probably a general fear of radicalism at the time, inherited from the French Revolution²⁷.

For five years after the death of Revd. Horsfield the chapel was closed and then in 1866 the Presbyterian Fund came to the rescue. In 1690, Presbyterians and Congregationalists united to form a common fund supporting ministers and students who subscribed to a doctrinal statement - the most popular being the Westminster Shorter Confessions of 1648. This union broke up a few years later due to differences of opinion on justification, the Presbyterians supported moderate orthodoxy while the Congregationalists were more Calvinistic. Doctrines of 'Justification' or 'Salvation' have always been central to Christianity. Calvinists held that although Christ died for all, only the elect benefited and these had been predetermined by God; good works counted for nothing. The Catholic Church also accepted that 'salvation' resulted from the death of Christ but allowed good works to parallel faith. The Calvinists did not disapprove of good works and behaviour but held they had no value in relation to 'salvation'. Most non-Calvinistic Protestants considered faith in the death of Christ saved them from the results of sin, and that good works went hand in hand with faith²⁸.

Names were attached to congregations according to which fund supported the minister²⁹. The Presbyterian Fund in 1866 appointed the Revd. Henry Austin. This was a very fortunate appointment as Mr Austin brought fresh life to the chapel, took an active part in local educational and political affairs and was well liked and respected by those who disagreed with his views. He continued in office until his death in 1929³⁰. An exceptional sixty-three years of ministry in one church, long enough to baptise the great-grandchildren of those he baptised when he first came to Cirencester.

The Last Years of the Chapel

Following Mr Austin's death, there were a series of appointments. A new minute book was started in March 1951 and recorded the church was taking a new lease of life with a considerable increase in numbers and a functioning Sunday school and club. The secretary said it was impossible to give a report for the past year as prior to their recent appointment there were no written records. Services were conducted by visiting ministers or students from Manchester College, Oxford. A second minute book was started in 1960 from which it appears the new life of 1951 was not sustained, the question of a joint ministry was suggested and trouble with the central

heating mentioned. The last entry in this minute book for March 1963 reads '*Owing to severe weather and trouble with heating meetings for January and February were cancelled. Services should re-start for Easter Sunday and quarterly meetings held for church matters.*'

Arrangements for ministers following Mr Austin are as follows :-

- 1930-32 S.Crook) Lady Lay Pastors
- 1932-42 B.Thomas)
- 1943-45 R.E.Goddard - Lay person in charge
- 1945-50 R.E.Goddard - Lay Pastor
- 1950-67 Visiting students from Manchester College Oxford and visiting Ministers
- 1967-69 G.S.Whitby
- 1969-76 Visiting Ministers and students from



Unitarian Chapel, Gosditch Street - north west view

Manchester College, Oxford
1976-79 Revd. E.S.Price of Aldbourn had pastoral oversight³¹.

By 1978 services were attended by only a few elderly members and no services were held after 1979. This

was a very different situation from the early 1920s when week by week the church was full³².

One ex-member writes

"My name is Vera Cleveland and I was christened by the Revd. Austin, also my younger brother, 2 years my junior. Owing to failing health his christening was held in the little private chapel at Revd. Austin's house in Cheltenham Road. My father and mother (now deceased) told us how the Chapel and Gallery were always packed for services with Good Friday Teas and parties at the house. They were married at the Church, and my grandfather was the caretaker.

During Revd. Shirwell Price's oversight the church was used for a Sunday School by the Parish Church.

The old clock which I believe was dated 1648 is now in the care of the Cirencester Museum."

The Building and Churchyard

Savory, in his '*History of Cirencester*³³ lists inscriptions on tombstones and memorials in the Presbyterian graveyard which even in 1853 were falling into decay. The same names recur, the Gurnees, Hilliers, Roberts and Smiths indicating close knit families. Samuel Worthington MD who died on the 27 April 1777 had fallen from his horse the previous Sunday evening³⁴.

Dr Worthington obtained his degree from the University of Edinburgh in 1740, having studied there for 4 years³⁵. There is a record of a letter to the Professor of Anatomy saying that in April 1739 Samuel Worthington had lost one eye and had to be given an artificial one but he had a remarkably cheerful temperament³⁶. Most lived to a

reasonable age and Ann Gurnee, who died 7 April 1751, was in the 100th year of her life, but Savory's

was small and led to a gallery covering one-third of the floor space.

Stell³⁹ wrote in the 1980s:



'The site of the meeting house behind the other property on the south-west side of the street appears to have been in use by the late 17th century and the building is of that period although much altered in 1891. The walls are of rubble with a later rendering and the roof hipped and tiled around a central valley. The south-east wall has a wide round-arched doorway with a keystone bearing the false date of 1648 and two mullioned windows of two lights all beneath a moulded cornice possibly of the early 19th

Unitarian Chapel, Gosditch Street - south east view

account omitted many who died in infancy³⁷. Some names, for example Payne, Pearce and Self, occur at an earlier date on parish church memorials, indicating that the Anglican church must have lost many members to the nonconformists in the seventeenth century.

It is of interest to note that the Presbyterian Chapel had two apprenticing charities. The first, of 1684, was given by James Clutterbuck of Exeter, a wealthy cloth merchant who had relatives in Cirencester. The second was given by Richard Mathews in 1725³⁸.

Clennell gives a brief description of the building saying it might have been at one time a large cottage or two smaller ones made into one; and that two shops between the meeting house and the street were part of the endowment. At one time, the main building had been called "Heaps" or "Sleeps" house. The door was in the long side, as now, and the lobby

century: to the left is a similar window with ... pins for external shutters and fine upper windows, one of which has been inserted. The north-west wall has four bays of windows to the lower stage, partly altered and gallery windows at each end. In the south-west wall are two former gallery windows of two lights and in the opposite wall is a small blocked doorway near one corner.

The interior (25 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet by 46 feet) has an original gallery in the north-east end now altered to form an upper room, with a front of six balet moulded panels: a corresponding south-west gallery was removed, the pulpit formerly against the north-west wall resited at the south-west end and the seating renewed in 1891.'

Savory commented it was usual in the perilous times in which the building was erected to have halberdiers (armed men) on sentry duty during services and it was probable that such kept guard by the folding doors.

By 1995, the building, when taken over by the parish church, was in a state of dilapidation but it is gratifying to see it being renovated to remind us of the past which encompasses part of the history of the English Protestant Dissent while at the same time continuing to serve the people of Cirencester.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge help given by Mr Creasey of Dr Williams' Library in finding relevant references. (Photographs of the chapel are from the *Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England* Crown Copyright.)

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