The road to respectability:

Hitchin Baptists and their Early Ministers, 1716-1831

The Revd Brian Tucker: 1934–2015

This article started life as a lecture, offered by Tilehouse Street Baptist Church (TSBC) as a contribution to the Hitchin Festival in July, 2011. As such, it followed in the pioneering footsteps of Stephen Copson, who delivered the first such lecture the previous year. His was called 'Saints and Outlaws: John Bunyan, Baptists and Hitchin'. [1] This one was conceived as a sequel to his; hence the title.

Hence also the theme. By contrast with the subject matter of the original lecture, this is a mundane theme. It doesn't deal in the high drama of oppression and resistance, or in the extreme roles played out under such conditions. It doesn't even offer surprise. Its narrative arc is already familiar: this community survived across a dozen generations precisely because it moved from exclusion to inclusion, from outlawry to respectability. That was its destiny, the only tale to tell.

The force which drives the story is the contrast between its beginning and its end. My subtitle pins these termini down to specific dates, which mark respectively the start of the second minister's sole pastorate, and the end of that of the fourth minister. After this, there is a sea change in more ways than one. Some of those changes will be noted towards the end; here, I highlight the arithmetical one. The first four ministers, if the overlap between first and second be counted in, averaged pastorates of forty years each. The remaining sixteen completed pastorates averaged ten years. Whatever factors are in play here, the data suggest that this date marks, for Hitchin Baptists, a fundamental change in the relationship between church and minister. This article stays on the far side of that change.

Stephen's lecture detailed the extremity of our outlaw origins. It wasn't just Bunyan who went to jail, but also his lieutenant, John Wilson, who had by then been selected and commended to Hitchin Baptists by the Bedford meeting, and accepted as their first minister, 1677-1716. [2] Whereas Bunyan managed to engineer sympathetic treatment in Bedford prison, Wilson suffered unremittingly harsh conditions during seven years in Hertford jail. There is some dispute about which of the two uttered the famous response to the quarterly or half-yearly opportunity to conform as the price of reiease or to choose the only alternative, continuing and indefinite imprisonment. The choice always went the hard way: 'Yea, and until the moss grow upon my eyebrows.' [3]

This story is not just about ministers. Hitchin Baptists are first noticed in the historical record in 1669, 4 eight years before they cailed John Wilson. Among their lay leaders were the six Foster brothers, who farmed in three pairs of families in the nearby village of Preston, close to Wain's Wood, where Bunyan illicitly preached. Their persistence in meeting, and their unflagging support for Wilson throughout his imprisonment, cost them repeated fines in money and goods 'till all that they had in the world was confiscated'; [5] a penury which they could not have sustained without the occasional blind eye turned by the more sympathetic magistrates.

All this took place under the vengeful conditions imposed by the Restoration regime. Retrospectively, and safely, we may fulminate against them, but they may also be understood as inevitable. It seemed so at the time; from the perspective of a people steeped in scripture, the state, and especially the ruler, are easily seen as grotesquely armed beasts bent on evil and destruction. [6] If such a creature has crucified your Lord, how much more readily will he snatch your own goods, liberty, life? And more objectively, from a historical perspective, it is acknowledged that Dissent is necessarily on the wrong side of the law. As Smyth puts it: 'In the age of the confessional state, refusing to conform to the state Church amounted to an act of civil disobedience, inviting the imposition of civil disabilities and penalties.' [7]

It is ciear that the narrative arc begins in exclusion from social and even legal recognition. As early as 1670 it is put on record of Hitchin Baptists that 'noe persons of any considerable quality or estate appiar (sic) among them'. [8] This contemptuous attitude is reflected in their chosen minister being hauled off to jail and detained at his majesty's pleasure. Yet by the end of this story we have a minister who happily leads the church in joint prayer meetings with their Congregationalist counterparts for the health of the reigning monarch, and notes with modest satisfaction twenty years later that the king is still alive. [9] Again, it is not the ministers only who embody the story. Edward Foster is able to point to Ebenezer, another descendent of the family once so impoverished by the state, who established himself in business in Cambridge and became in turn an alderman, a magistrate, and - after this article's watershed year - mayor of the city (1836) and High Sheriff of the County (1849). [10] Moreover, he was allowed to achieve all this while stubbornly remaining a Dissenter, a member of St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church. A newspaper obituary tribute to him emphasises the accompanying transformation in social attitudes and legislation. 'Happily he lived in the days of political progress, and saw many laws which were a disgrace to our country, and intended to operate against such men as himself, swept away, and a brighter and more tolerant system introduced. [11]

When the Heroic Age of Dissent ended, or began to end, with the Glorious - and unambiguousiy Protestant - Revolution, Hitchin Baptists found themselves with two outcomes. One was, if not unambiguous liberty, then at least the collapse of some restrictions. They at once set about securing the land still incorporated into their present site, and building on it their beloved Salem, the only Hitchin Baptist chapel which the main protagonists in this story ever knew; it was opened in 1692.

The other outcome was that they got their minister back, his faith intact, his spirit strong, but his physique badly damaged by all he had endured. Edward Foster, a grandson of the founding generation of Foster brothers, has left an invaluable Brief Outline of the story culled both from his own direct experience and from listening to his family's earnest conversations. This is his description of the ageing minister. 'He laboured under many infirmities, and for the last twenty years of his life he was often incapacitated for labour. For several years through a paralytic stroke, he was conveyed to the chapel on a chair. [12] Church and minister alike came to recognise the need for an assistant, and thus the door was opened for the appointment of John Needham in 1705.

Needham, like Wilson himself, was not the church's first choice. Then, they had initially asked the Bedford Meeting for the young rising star, Nehemiah Coxe. But the Meeting had withheld Coxe as a person who, although undeniably gifted, tended to provoke division. [13] Now, they initially turned to John Wilson's own son, Ebenezer. But the younger Wilson tersely informed them that he was happily settled in Bristol, and did not propose to be uprooted. [14] This may well have been a wise stance in a tyro son with a forceful father who had survived a unique time of trial. The church then turned to one of their trusted advisors, Thomas Hollis of London, a member of a substantial Dissenting family of drapers. It was he who recommended that they call Needham from Sheffield, where he was studying under Timothy Jollie, son of a minister previously ejected from the Church of England. [15]

John Wilson shows his own awareness that his commanding presence might intimidate a young beginner. The church's call to Needham was accompanied by a covering letter from Wilson to Hollis,

expressing anxiety that he 'may come to us under some Disadvantages having one go before him that most of his time preached without the use of any notes in the pulpit and of a loud voice.' [16] But all went well. In 1706 the church sent a letter of thanks to Hollis for his recommendation. [17] By 1709 he had so proved his worth that he was recognised as co-pastor. [18] When Wilson died in 1716 he became sole minister, and so continued until his own death 27 years later.

His was a different England from VViison's. it was united with Scotland, but had exchanged its Scottish Stuarts for its new Hanoverian dynasty of Saxe-Cobergs (now Windsors). The Act of Succession which had secured this odd change had been driven by anti-Catholic sentiment, witness to a state which was integrating Protestantism into its national identity. The cartoon figure of john Bull had just been born, and was to flourish for well over two centuries. Spain and France could now be derided for having provided tr1e pope's battalions, the scorn ritually fed by bonfires and songs.

Compared with his two successors, Needham left little record of the life's labour for which he had so long prepared. According to the funeral sermon preached for him by John Wilson's grandson; Samuel, he left instruction that little be said about him; this answers to Reginald Hine's subsequent lament that there was, in fact, little to be said. [19] It would be easy to take this silence as witness to nothing more than dogged routine; that is, after all, the nature of a good deal of working life, then and now, including ministerial work. But there are three characteristics which do break up this otherwise featureless landscape.

One is Needham's undoubted claim to scholarship. He had not wasted his time in Sheffield, and he evidently kept his academic interests fully engaged. Some of his time he invested in tutoring others, including Benjamin Wallin, who was to become a significant Dissenting minister in his own right, and Thomas Hollis's sons Samuel and Timothy. An exhortatory letter of his to Timothy survives, in which he writes, 'I hope you follow my advice in preserving your knowledge of the Latin tongue, by making use of Castalio in reading the New Testament, and in going over again Cornelius Nepos, & Orbis Pictus ... '. [20] Samuel Wilson had not exaggerated when he claimed that Needham had 'made great proficiency in All Parts of learning, necessary to his province as a Divine.' [21] A second feature is the breadth of his interests. He was noted as 'proficient in astronomy, and no mean poet. [22]

A third feature of his working life, as others remembered it, was that children loved him and enjoyed his company.[23] This sits uneasily his daughter's recollection that he had been known to laugh but twice in his life. [24] He did not live to see his son dismissed from his Bristol pastorate. [25]

Needham left a will which found him with a significant estate including two farms. He had himself been a beneficiary of Hollis's will, [26] and it may well be that additional earnings as a tutor had helped to swell his coffers. This recourse seems to have been widely accepted among Dissenting ministers and their congregations, perhaps combining a legitimate use of their talents before there was institutional provision and a convenient way of enlarging a very modest income. His wife had died in 1733. Apart from some specific bequests his estate was simply divided: half went to John Junior, and a quarter to each daughter. Mary received her share straightforwardly and, as she married Samuel James, it remained, so to speak, in the Hitchin Baptist family. But Elizabeth's bequest was strictly 'upon this sure and certain condition Viz that she shall never be married to George Moor Exciseman of this town but if contrary to my express will she shall be married to that rnan above named then shall her share above mentioned which I allotted to her be entirely forfeited and she shall have no right to any of my Goods and Chattells only out of ffatherly compassion I give her an annuity of ten pounds during her natural life. [27] What part either love or lucre may have played in her choice who can now say, but the person Elizabeth did eventually marry was not 'that man' but one John Williams, woolstapler of Hitchin. [28]

It is worth pausing for a moment to pay attention to John Needham's scholarship. The popular imagination is captured in a pair of cartoons by Cruickshank which contrast two extremes. [29] In one, a surpliced Anglican clergyman leans languidly on a pulpit, displaying his learning for the

entertainment of a discerning congregation. In the other, a dishevelled preacher lambasts a ramshackle crowd in the open air, seeming to cow them into submission by the sheer force of his uninformed but enthusiastic conviction. But most ministers, and most congregations, were closer to the centre than to either extreme of this particular bell curve. Dissenting congregations welcomed and valued the ministry of learned men, often provided, as it had been in Hitchin, by ejected Anglican clergy of Protestant conviction. Their enquiry to John Owen, former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, whose reply provides the first entry in their Church Book, concerned the suitability of two such men, Thomas Beard and Joseph VVaite, who had been evicted from the Cambridgeshire church of a third, Francis Holcroft. [30] John Wilson himself, though proud to be deputy to a tinker, had evidently once been a man of some social and perhaps intellectual standing. When the Bedford Meeting dismissed him to Hitchin they accompanied their commission with a warning, recorded in their minutes, which included the phrase, 'thy lot is cast in a place of high transgression'. [31] Exactly what that meant we are now left to guess, but it sounds as though he moved in a world where most of his fellow Dissenters would have felt out of piace. His oniy known publication was his foreword to The Pilgrim's Progress.'[32] Needham's studiousness was not so out of p!ace in Hitchin as might be supposed.

If Needham's years alongside Wilson be counted to him, then his successor's pastorate of thirty years was the shortest of these first four. But Samuel James's years, 1743-73, were undoubtediy also the liveliest. He was a vigorous man, whether at home or at work. He married Mary Needham in 17 44 when he was twenty-eight, and with her fathered eleven children; nevertheless, she outlived him. By his dynamic preaching he attracted increasing congregations, such that Saiem, already once enlarged in Needham's time, had to be further expanded twice. The story is told of Dame Abbey, who came every Sunday from the village of Lilley whatever the weather and, being deaf, insisted on sitting on the pulpit steps so as not to miss a word. [33] Faster accounted him 'an excellent preacher', [34] and this reputation, with its quantifiable results, was to become a cause of deep chagrin to his own eventual successor who longed to emulate him, while being ail too keenly aware that, try as he might, he never would. A striking example of James's enthusiastic activism was his readiness to embrace the cause of evangelistic mission overseas. In 1767 he seized on the visit of Samuel Occom, a native American convert to Christianity, along with his sponsor, a Mr. Whittaker, to offer Hitchin its first opportunity for face-to-face experience of such a novelty. The response was a collection of £84 for the enterprise, and this pre-dated the foundation of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society by a quarter-century [35] Life with Samuel James as minister was never dull.

But James brought to the task more than just enthusiasm. Like his two predecessors, he had some claim to learning. Urwick's Memorials tells us that he was 'educated under Mr. Parsons of Clerkenwell and Dr. Taylor; admitted as a student (1732) of the King's Head Society at Clerkenwell, afterwards at Homerton. '[36] lt also gives him an M.A. The usual source for such awards fm Dissenters, with the English universities barred to them, was either Aberdeen or the Low Countries, [37] but his was awarded in 1770 by Rhode Island College, a Baptist foundation of 1764 which subsequently became Brown University. This we know from the extensive material which James's son Isaac added to later editions of his father's Abstract, first published in 1760.[38]

Three significant stories remain to be told which involve Mr. James. In his Abstract, which may have attracted Rhode Island College's award, he chose to include A Life of Mrs. Churchman. By recounting her remembrance of the heroic age he doubtless meant to fan that ardent flame. She started as an Anglican. 'Agreeable to what my parents educated me in, I was zealous for the established church, and thought all fanaticks, who dissented from it.' But this family solidarity was seriously threatened when Mary found herself irresistibly drawn to Dissent. 'As soon as my father and mother knew that I went to meeting, satan (sic) was in a great rage. My father was then a high constable, and had an order from the justices to return al! the names of them who frequented the meetings. This made it a hard thing for his own daughter to be a fanatick, which was what he could not bear... If my father at any time understood where I was gone, he spent the day in nothing but oaths and curses, and resolves to murder me... I often hid myself in a wood-stack, where I have

seen him pass by, with a naked knife in his hand, declaring he would kill me before he slept.'[39] The second story has the opposite significance. James became party to a running feud with the Vicar of Stotfold. [40] It was a theological argument and, at first, safely textual - although, as consequences of cyber-bullying often show today, words can be vicious and sometimes lethal weapons. This eighteenth century version began with the vicar's pamphleteering against Dissent; with characteristic enthusiasm James took up the same weaponry to defend his side and attack the other. Perhaps Mr. Rowe, the vicar, recognised the futility of the exercise; at any rate, he turned up on James's doorstep. James asked him in and gave him dinner, they spent the afternoon together, and parted as great friends. It was a triumph of ecumenicity, and a tribute to the two people who had so unexpectedly discovered their common ground and abandoned the stereotypical attitudes expected as proper to their respective offices.

It may have invited controversy. Certainly James's behaviour in the third story did, for he proposed to introduce singing into the services. This was scarcely an original idea, since Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley had already published their hymn books, in 1707 and 1739 respectively. But it was still a deeply suspect idea for Dissenting congregations, untouched by the Lutheran musical tradition but deeply marked by Calvinist aversion to anything not manifestly scriptural. [41] Their minister's move provoked deep division in the Hitchin Baptists' church meeting. A compromise was eventually reached whereby hymns could be sung provided there were not too much musical variety, and this restraint was achieved by imposing a limit of just one tune. Each and every hymn, whatever its metre or sentiment, must be forced to fit that musical Procrustean bed. It was a compromise so impracticabie as to be doomed to failure, and the congregation eventually !earned to accommodate a wider musical range. Some also learned a lasting mistrust for so innovative a minister and James, who had hitherto been warmed by general approval, for the first time felt the cold wind of disapprobation.

The continuing controversy wounded James, seriously and, as it turned out, fatally. This is how Hine interpreted the evidence: 'The contention may be said to have killed the Pastor. '[42] The data he used was presumably that provided by the remarkable sermon which Benjamin Wallin preached at James's funeral. [43] in doing this, he was following a familiar path. Doctor. Williams's Library contains an abundance of such publications, for occasions like this offered the opportunity to demonstrate one's homiletical abilities before a gathering of one's peers. These are bravura performances, replete with references to biblical Greek and Hebrew. They also developed a standard pattern: a lengthy disquisition on life after death, a shorter encomium on the earthly life and admirable character of the deceased, and a closing exhortation to his bereft family and congregation.

But on this occasion the preacher veered off course. He divided his material as usual; respectively, 27, 11 and 4 pages. But in the middle section he conflated his eulogy for the deceased with his exhortation to the church, and the exortation was entirely negative, making for a dramatic contrast between the estimable minister and the blameworthy and divisive congregation. They were evidence of 'our growing declension from those things which should be added to our faith'; they were by implication responsible for James's decline, 'a threatening disorder, which lay chiefly on his spirits', and thus for his eventual death. [44] Even for so lively a pastorate, it was an unexpectedly dramatic end.

His premature death opened the way for John Geard, who has been by far the longest serving of all Hitchin Baptists' ministers, 1774-1831. He arrived as a young man in his twenties, and did not resign until well past eighty. When he came, it was as a leaving student from the Bristol Academy, and with the unqualified endorsement of the Baptist Church in Yeovil of which he was a member, and where he had already been recognised as exceptionally gifted for a ministerial vocation. [45] When he resigned, it was to universal recognition in Hitchin and the neighbouring villages as someone who had abundantly fulfilled that early promise. Edward Foster, who had the honesty to remark that 'as a pieacher, his talents were not superior', nevertheless affirmed that 'He was one of the most affectionate Pastors, living in the affections of both the old and the young, and heid in high

estimation by all the neighbourhood, whether Churchmen of Dissenters, and by an extensive circle of friends, ministers and churches. '[46] He added that Geard 'manifested that humble, childlike simplicity that gives lustre to the Christian character.' The church awarded him a pension of £70 a year (to which his family contributed £25), and when he died in 1838, aged 88, his funeral attracted 'an immense crowd of hearers, who came to witness their last respect (sic) for so venerable a character. '[47] Hitchin's united response to its Baptist minister is witness to England's awareness of a lasting change: that we had become a religiously plural society. Geard himself had long since recognised this when he took the oath of allegiance before the Hertford magistrates in 1786, a procedure made possible by the 1779 Act regarding Protestant Dissenting Ministers. [48] There could be no greater symbolic contrast than that between this low-key transaction and the drama of John Wilson's persistent defiance.

There are features of John Geard's long ministry in Hitchin which are wholly in tune with this summary description of its beginning and its end. For one thing, he cemented the alliance between the Pastor and the Foster family which had characterised the church from the beginning: he married into it, in his second year here, taking as his wife one of their descendants, Elizabeth Bradley. He also wrote a brief account of the family. [49] For another thing, he was and remained a man formed by his experience of study at Bristol and inclined, so far as he could, to maintain the practice. Like his predecessor, he was eventually rewarded by an M.A. degree from Rhode island College. This was presumably for his publication in three volumes, 1797-1803, of a work entitled The Beauties of Henry. As his contemporaries would have recognised more quickly than most of us, this title referred to Matthew Henry and his set of bible commentaries published 1708-10. Geard had simply excerpted what he deemed to be the best bits of this Henry, introduced them, and presented them as a digest for readers who lacked the time, or the stamina, to plough through the original nine volumes. This was a worthwhile service, as the OOCC still reckons Henry to be 'notable esp. for its good sense, pregnant thought and felicitous expression'. [50] A third distinguishing mark of his career was his active, sometimes pro-active, involvement in wider Dissenting life. He concerned himself with organising a regional association of Baptist churches, [51] and he shared in attempts to set up a society for aiding the widows and orphans of Dissenting ministers. [52] On these fronts he proved to have advanced too far; success came later, when resources were less constrained. We also find him meeting with the Committee for the Civil Rights of Dissenters. [53] Fourthly and finally, he was an energetic leader of this local church. With Geard at the helm, the church created a thriving Sunday School which quickly reached 300 children, it contributed to the BMS as soon as it was formed and faithfully continued doing so; [54] and it responded to the national mood both by prayer and fasting when times were anxious and by celebrating when they were triumphant. [55] John Geard did not achieve oratory, but he did place himself at the heart of his people's deepest concerns and he did help them both to insight and to action in the light of the Gospel.

This sounds like a sunlit journey from eager youth, through long endeavour, to serene old age, with treasures found along the way. Unsurprisingly, that is not the whole story. It is Geard himself who has made sure we can discover that, by following a common pattern of his time in keeping a personal record. Not all he wrote has survived. TSBC has one of his two diaries, unaccountably mauled, and Hitchin Museum one of his two journals. One missing volume was last heard of with a branch of his descendants in New Zealand, [56] and the other has left no trace. But the extant material is quite enough to reveal a more complex traveller on a darker journey, and no stranger to trouble. Wilson had fought the state; James had found himself embattled with his own congregation; Geard's struggle was internal.

A useful example of the contrast between outward presentation and inward reality is provided in the year 1816. That year, Geard decided to mark the anniversary of his ordination with special emphasis. As part of the proceedings he wrote the church a letter, in which he noted that in ail the intervening 41 years he had not missed a single Sabbath when he was due to be in Salem's pulpit. [57] This was due to the robust health he had always enjoyed (and, we may infer, bespoke a minister at ease with himself, his calling, and his congregation). But there must have been readers or hearers of his letter who remembered othenwise. Thirty years earlier his father had died, and he

had returned to Yeovil and nearby Montacute not just for the funeral but also, with his brother, to attend to the estate. They found their father's affairs in a mess, and beset by debt. The stress and anxiety of the consequent labour reduced Geard to a nervous breakdown, such that he did not, and evidently could not, return to Hitchin. In the end, when his absence had stretched into months, some of his deacons had themselves to travel to Yeovil and physically fetch him back to where he belonged. [58] The presenting persona of a cheerful and popular minister could not altogether hide from view another person, less confident and more stricken than he appeared. It must have been this person he had in mind, and perhaps the Yeovil experience in particular, when he recorded in 1811, 'Above all I have reason to be thankful for the peace and comfort which I have now enjoyed in my own mind for a period of about nine years. with comparatively little interruption. [59]

This other person, whom the reader is allowed to glimpse in Geard's own records, appears through experiences which range from the trivial to the tragic. The controversy over singing recurs. He was known to have a fine bass voice himself, and was undoubtedly on the side of those who longed to give full rein to song in their worship. [60] But there was still a rearguard who viewed all such desires as deeply suspect, and they made it clear that for them this was a resigning matter. [61] So he could only move cautiously and gradually, much against his own instinct. He was also keenly aware of his own limitations as a preacher. Time and again he comments on his own performance, and his commonest verdict is the tepid 'tolerable opportunity'. Once it was 'Nothing very extraordinary upon the whole', and once he managed to rise to 'No very great cause to complain in generai.' In this as in other matters he was plagued by the disadvantageous contrast which he felt with the reputation of his predecessor. It is an obsession which shows in his numerical precision. Foster offers us a summary of the church's numbers under its successive pastors but, perhaps intentionally, in a form which does not lend itself to ready comparisons. [62] But Geard knew exactly where he stood: 'The comparison between Mr. James and myself, is the same as before namely 78. 0 that I may come much nearer to him, indeed get even with him if that were the divine wiii, but this I am afraid I never shall.' Frustrated by this shortfall in outward signs of success, he could also find himself in a state of near despair over his own inward and spiritual condition. On the 36th anniversary of his ordination he wrote, 'I have reason to lament over my own deadness, lukewarmness, prayerful unfruitedness, and comparative uselessness.' He can only find satisfaction by lowering his sights. 'I have been able to keep together a considerable congregation,' and, '! am at this time as wel! respected by my people, as far as I know, as my predecessors.[63]

The moment was to come when all this, so vexing at the time, wouid lapse into utter triviality by comparison. He was already a widower when, in 1812, his son John died, aged 30. The surviving diary shows this blow at a glance. Until this moment he has kept it in shorthand (using a style prior to Pitman's, but sufficiently well known for Hitchin Museum to have provided a transcript). its use had saved him time; perhaps it also betrays his ambivalence about disclosing his private self. Now, mid-page, he abandons shorthand for good, inviting the reader straight in. [64] He wants people to know what his happened, and what unbearable desolation now visits him. He transcribes some of John's letters into the record, not for any intrinsic interest, but simply because they are John's. He doses himself with the only medicine he knows, two books appropriate to his case and, over and over again, the reading of the Psalms - on one occasion, a hundred of them in a single day. But it is circumstances that bring him a more effective remedy. He hears that a family of his congregation has suffered the same loss through a farming accident; their son had been 26. For the first time since John died he writes about something else, describing how he hurries to their home, searches his heart for ways to bring them comfort, and quite artlessly acknowledges his distress on their behalf. [65] The pastor in him has been roused and, quite evidently, though without conscious intent, the physician has begun to heal himself. You come to see why Hitchin in general, and its Baptists in particular, came to love John Geard.

His three predecessors all lived and died in the same house, long since vanished, a little below Tilehouse Street. John Geard lived and died at a different address, but shared with the first three a common habitation: they all lived in what Peter Lasiett called The World we Have Lost. [66] But he

died on the threshold of the new world which replaced it, like Moses on Hebron, overlooking a land which was to prove both sweetly abundant and relentlessly hostile.

He retired in 1831, a year before the (First) Reform Act which signalled Britain's definitive step towards democracy, and died in 1838, a year after Queen Victoria came to the throne, signalling the end of the Georgian Age's strange combination of brutality and elegance and the start of a new period when energy would be channelled into exploration, enterprise and moral seriousness. His England had already hosted an evangelical revival whose definitive product was to be the Methodist Church, but he did not live to see the second Great Awakening. He witnessed the completion of Catholic emancipation but not the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy here. The first teetotal society in Britain came just in time for him, but among the developments he missed were Livingstone's arrival in Africa, the introduction of harvest festivals, the invention of the Daguerrotype, the first Grand National, the penny post and, by a slightly greater margin, the Communist Manifesto.

There were also three local events which John Geard did not live to see. One, a sign of Hitchin Baptists' determination to keep up with the changing times, was the replacement of Salem by the present nee-Georgian building in 1844. It was differently aligned, to front onto Tiiehouse Street (now Upper Tilehouse Street, since a ring road sliced the original in two). It was also differently conceived, costing ten times as much as the former chapel, and named as a church. On the published list of donors there appears a Mrs. Geard of Montacute \ii.tho gave £25; [67] that family connexion lived on. The second local event was the coming of the railway to Hitchin in 1850, a sign of the changing times themselves. !t locked Hitchin into the process of industrial revolution, and its own inevitable transformation from market town to commuter territory, with a present population about eleven times more than the 3, 161 revealed by the first national census of 1801. We may see the steam train as the angel with the the sword of steel and flame which prevents our return to the world which is iost to us, tr1e only world that John Geard, his church and their predecessors ever knew.

The third local event which he did not live to see (but which had earlier roots) is added here as an illustrative conclusion. What it shows is the continuing strongly felt division between establishment and Dissent. This no longer had legal warrant, and the ideological divide was probably less keenly felt. But for some it had become entrenched as a social reality. What it also shows is that others refused to accept such assumptions and, provoked by extreme circumstances, made their opposition very plain.

A local newspaper, The Independent of 28 November 1855, published a full page account of the trial before Hitchin magistrates of Mr. George Brereton Sharpe of Baldock and his accomplice. [68] It begins by reporting that 'The attendance of the public was so numerous as to oblige the court to adjourn before the proceedings commenced from the ordinary room to the much larger one above.' It ends by reporting that, after a ten-minute adjournment, the Chairman of the bench, F. P. Del me Radcliffe Esq., had announced that 'the case for the sessions had most signally failed, and that it was their bounden duty to dismiss the summons.' In between, we get the details which had attracted such a crowd. Mr. Sharpe was a surgeon, and a pillar of his iocal church. But his parents had been Baptists, worshipping in the new building on Tilehouse Street, and his late mother had been buried in its churchyard. Since then, he had prevailed upon his father Abel - 'a somewhat sour and stiff Dissenter [69] - to come with him to the Church of England. The father, now a widower for a second time, died in his turn, and was buried in the Baldock parish churchyard. Soon after, the son had turned up at TSBC with a cart and a helper and had talked the wife of the caretaker (who was away) into letting him open his mother's grave. His helper (an undertaker) dug down, removed progressively the coffined bodies of two women and two infants, returned the upper woman to the grave, and loaded the remaining coffins onto the cart. They drove back to Baldock, where the father's grave had already been opened, and re-buried his first wife, Sharpe's mother, with him, aiong with the children, who were two of their grandchildren. [70]

The facts were not in dispute, but there was keen controversy over their legality and propriety. Newspaper editors were in no doubt, either of the rights of the case or of the weight of public opinion, and rode their moral high horses with the kind of pompous indignation which still seems to be a defining mark of their profession. A loose cutting reprints from the Daily News of the time (n.d.) an article headed 'Body-Snatching Legalised'; it is highly critical of the favouritism of the magistrates, themselves all gentry and Anglicans. [71] The County Press of 5th December gave Mr. Sharpe two-thirds of a page for a letter of self-defence, but filled the remaining third with witr1ering comment.

On his own showing, he has been guilty of an act of desecration which no one, we apprehend, would have more vehemently condemned, if it had been perpetrated in the grave-yard of a parish church; instead of in the grave-yard of a Dissenting chapel. His whole letter reads like a studied insult to Dissenters, who we must beg to remind him are not only servants of the great Master whom he would monopolize for himself, but under the aegis of the same fair and reasonable English law. A gross outrage has been perpetrated on Dissenters ... [72]

On this judgment, Hitchin Baptists as representative Dissenters had reached full religious recognition, equality before the law, and general social acceptance. They had, at last, become respectable.

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