

## Saints and Outlaws: John Bunyan, Baptists and Hitchin connections

*This is the text of a talk given by Rev Stephen Copson during the Hitchin Festival in 2010.*



### Rev Stephen Copson

In 1856, when he set out to record memories of his family the elderly Edward Foster of Cadwell recalled stories told him by his mother about her grandfather's family, who was a Foster, one of six brothers who farmed at Preston Castle Farm, just north of the village.

*There being a large wood [Wain Wood] not far from their residence and in it a large dell which might contain a thousand people, thither they (the persecuted ones) have retreated in the dead of night to worship their God, to evade their enemies and to build each other up in their most holy faith. To that secluded spot many have resorted whilst their neighbours have been stretched on their beds taking their nightly repose after the labours of the day, thus re-invigorating their strength – there, under the canopy of heaven with the rigour of the winter's nipping frost and frowning atmosphere while the clouds discharged their flaky treasures around them, have they, our pious forefathers and others heard from the lips of the indefatigable Heywood and other Christian men, but more frequently from the lips of the highly gifted heavenly minded Bunyan who, thus released from prison, would proclaim the word of life to them – there have they stood and heard of truths in perfect unison with those he was about to pen, though prisoner of a gaol, in his unrivalled pilgrims, while pious matrons have suspended over head their aprons to ward off the driving hail and snow..*

Florid prose perhaps. The 1660s or 1670 brought to mind with cherished memories passed from one generation to the next - and maybe embellished just a little in the telling – they draw a picture of a group of people ready to put their convictions into practice. These were good solid English women and men, so why were they outlaws and what caused these otherwise law-abiding folk to risk fines and imprisonment to meet together for worship?

### The Historical Background

We must go back a hundred years or so. In 1558, the Catholic Queen Mary Tudor was succeeded by Elizabeth I. The Protestants were exultant and hopeful. But the settlement of the Church of England did not persuade everyone. There were some who thought that too many traces of old Rome remain. A further Reformation was needed to make the church more like the early Christian churches they read of in the New Testament. These people will be called Puritans or Precisions by their opponents. As an aside let me say that they were not (all) the hypocritical, narrow minded joyless bigots that the name conjures for us. As John Gere of St Albans writing in the 1640s put it, "*The Old English Puritan was such an one that honoured God above all, and under God gave every one his due*". These disaffected people were pressured into conforming to the rules of the Church of England. Some began clandestine meetings. Whilst some were content to attempt change from within, others formed groups of like-minded, separatist congregations and would eventually feed into the Baptist and Independent movements that were congregationally organised. Ecclesiastical courts

were used to keep objectors in line. Some ministers and groups decided to emigrate to the Netherlands where the religious environment was more tolerant and one such group would in 1620 become for the history books the Pilgrim Fathers with the New World offering sanctuary for those who sought a new beginning.

## **The Civil War**

Prosecuted and persecuted, the start of the Civil War in 1642 was a watershed for these Christians. The Parliamentary side, some of whose leaders had experienced religious and political oppression, was inclined to shake the foundations - ecclesiastical courts were silenced, episcopacy abolished and censorship of the press relaxed. There was a dramatic expansion of alternative congregations, now openly worshipping, and a flood of tracts. John Bunyan was a frequent pamphleteer. Encouraged by Oliver Cromwell's toleration of gathered churches during the Commonwealth and Protectorate, these churches spread across the country, often encouraged by preachers in the Army. .

## **The Restoration**

The Restoration of Charles II heralded in 1662 the Act of Uniformity as the state and the state church once more tightened their grip. As a result nearly 2.000 incumbents or University lecturers who would not conform to the Book of Common Prayer were ejected from their livings, including local ministers at Ashwell, Graveley, Harpenden, Hitchin, Kimpton, St Pauls Walden and Willian. Those who chose not to conform came to be called Dissenters. They were seen as politically suspect and ecclesiastically unacceptable at a time when political identity and religious affiliation were inextricably bound together – you were baptised in the state church and your political existence began. Legislation was enacted to limit the freedom of Dissenters, measures collectively labelled the Clarendon Code. This included Conventicle Acts in 1664 and 1670 which made illegal the gathering for worship outside the auspices of the established church of more than the household plus five other adults over 16. This reflects the importance of family prayers to both sides. In particular, the second Conventicle Act gave a financial reward to informants and penalised owners of premises, teachers and JPs who might be less rigorous in prosecution. Adults convicted of attending illegal meetings were sent to gaol for three months or pay a fine of £5; for the second offence six months and £10 and for a third offence (being convicted by a jury) banishment to some of the American Plantations. Prosecution was never uniform but nonetheless thousands of individuals were subject to fines or a time in gaol, where some died – as much a testimony to the unhealthy conditions as the rigour of the system. Quakers particularly suffered. Members of the Hitchin congregation put themselves and their families in jeopardy of the law to meet and worship.

## **Baptists in Hitchin**

The origins of Baptists in and around Hitchin are not particularly clear and probably owe something to a variety of causes. Whilst it was the practise of gathered churches to keep records of significant transactions, they were wary of committing to paper lest they be discovered and prosecuted. The Tilehouse Street book dates entire from the late 1660s (although it is possible that the church pre-existed) but there are few entries until 1700 and some may well have been written from communal memory. The book itself starts with a list of contributors to the cost of the meeting house in 1692 and then a register of members. However, we shall consider some of the influences that may have accompanied the emergence and development of the Tilehouse Street congregation. .

Henry Denne was curate at Pirton from 1631. His tract *The Doctrine and Conversation of John Baptist: delivered in a sermon, at a visitation holden at Baldock, in the county of Hertford: Decemb. 9. 1641* in which he denounced the sin of persecution, the vices of the clergy and the corruption in doctrine and worship of the established church did not endear him to his fellow clergy. Among the printed responses was *A Den of Theeves discovered.* by Thomas Rotherham of Ickleford. Denne (and indeed Rotheram) was one of a number of ministers approved to lecture at the parish church in

Hitchin in 1642 but Denne left Pirton sometime after 1642 and became a Baptist in London in 1643. During the Commonwealth several Puritan or nonconforming ministers were at Hitchin either as lecturers or ministers and Thomas Kidner vicar from 1648 to 1661 was ejected under the Act of Uniformity.

Troops of the Earl of Manchester's command in the Parliamentary Army were quartered around Hitchin in 1644 at St Ippolyts, Ickleford, Preston, Willian, Letchworth, Weston, Stevenage, Aston, Little and Great Wymondley, Kings Walden, Lilley and Offley. They included regiments commanded by Oliver Cromwell and his brother-in-law Major John Desborough, who was a patron of Henry Denne. Unlike many officers, Cromwell was content to allow those holding radical religious ideas like Baptists to serve in his regiments, judging that military capability was more important than religious conformity. It is possible that some of these mechanic preachers raised issues about baptism.

Edward Foster calculated that his great grandfather became a Baptist around 1648 because the family Bible no longer recorded baptism but birth of children. However there is no known record of a local congregation of Baptists to which he could have belonged at that time. It is possible he had misconstrued the information and instead it indicated a more general dissatisfaction with the baptism of infants.

A congregation at Kensworth near Luton began in the 1650s. One of its leaders was Edward Harrison, previously Vicar of Kensworth and an Army chaplain who had become a Baptist by 1645. He later moved to London and published tracts arguing for believers' baptism. In 1675 the church numbered 390 extending over a large geographical area and the minister was Thomas Hayward, probably the Haywood referred to by Edward Foster. The church book lists 5 members living at Preston plus 7 at St Paul's Walden and more at Codicote and Kimpton but the entries are hard to date and continue into the 1680s.

Francis Holcroft, an ejected minister from Bassingbourn near Royston was a vigorous evangelist across Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire. With others assisting, he planted congregations and supported them across the three counties. The early records of the Tilehouse Street congregation record exchanges of letters with his Cambridge church. Holcroft also had links with the Independents at Hertford, some of whom met in Hitchin and sometimes met jointly at Bragbury End. In 1687 the Tilehouse Street congregation agreed for these Independents to use Thomas Field's barn for meetings once a month.

A group of dissenters existed in Pirton from 1655. In 1663 four men were presented to the church authorities for refusing to pay taxes to repair the church building, one of whom was Thomas Vaux later pastor of the gathered Broadmead church in Bristol. Further evidence of dissent is seen in 1674 when Thomas White was presented for "*inscribing texts of Scripture in the chancel over the Communion-table, 'Ye worship ye know not what' and over the door 'In vain do ye worship me'*". Not surprisingly the churchwardens noted, "*He never comes to the church service or Sacrament*". Under the 1672 Declaration of Indulgence issued by Charles II, three men registered as Baptist teachers including Vaux and Thomas Silly, maybe a misreading of Silbey, a family that appears in the Tilehouse Street records.

Vaux was also connected with the church at Edworthy, one of the Bunyan associated congregations. In 1669 there were about 20 people there "of the meaner sort" as the episcopal return tartly noted, and Thomas Vaux was imprisoned in Hertford gaol. John Bunyan travelled widely in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, preaching wherever he could, indoors or out in the fields – the Baptist chapel at Breachwood Green has a movable pulpit that he is reputed to have used and a chimney stack at Coleman Green near St Albans is all that remains of a cottage where he is supposed to have stayed regularly overnight. .

To complete the dissenting background, mention must be made of the Quaker group in Hitchin meeting probably from 1657 and also the endeavours of Nathaniel Eeles, one of the ministers approved to preach at Hitchin in 1642, who was ejected from Harpenden where he gathered a church and also ministered to a congregation at Codicote. The shoots of organised dissent were fairly healthy then and the overlap reflects the fluidity of confessional groups, not yet fully hardened under denominational labels.

Despite the relative lack of information, we can be certain that there was a gathered congregation meeting in Hitchin in 1669 that included both those who practised the baptism of infants and the baptism of believers. Open membership churches were not common and sometime drew criticism both from Baptists and Independents. The group met in Thomas Field's barn at the rear of Bancroft – there were very few Baptist meeting houses built in England before the 1690s – and sometimes at Preston. The church had links with Holcroft's churches and Bunyan's churches. Dissenters operated a culture within a culture, defined by the way that the state treated them as outsiders. The corporate nature of the gathered congregation offered an alternative to the parish structure as the unifying bond, even though certain opportunities within the community were available only to those who attended the parish church. At times the restrictions could be overstated – for example in 1751 Dissenting parents were denied access for their children to the Free School in Hitchin unless they conformed, although the decision was reversed on appeal to the Attorney-General.

## **The Fosters and Hitchin**

The Foster family plays a key role in the story of Hitchin Baptists. They lived at Hunsdon House, thereafter site of Preston Castle whose eccentric owner Robert Hinde was one of Reginald Hine's *Hitchin Worthies*. John Foster, Edward's great-grandfather, was the eldest of six brothers and among the first recorded members of the Tilehouse Street church. He was chosen deacon, an office he fulfilled until his death in 1709. The Foster brothers were staunch supporters of John Bunyan, using their land as a clandestine meeting place – it became known as Bunyan's Dell. Edward proudly recalled that his great-grandfather John had given Bunyan hospitality around 1677 as had his brothers. Each brother had been fined £20 per month "*for not going to church until all their goods were confiscated*", as Edward put it, indicating that they were repeat offenders. An agricultural labourer could expect 12 old pence a day for his work (about £15 pa) and a skilled man 18 old pence. Goods could be distrained to settle the fines but also some fines mounted up and after the Act of Toleration, outstanding totals were written off.

## **John Bunyan**

It is probable that the link with the Bunyan congregation was the strongest influence as the congregation developed and it was to John Bunyan and his church at Bedford that the people at Hitchin appealed when they sought a pastor in 1674.

There is a whole industry devoted to Bunyan studies but let me fill in a few bare facts. John Bunyan was baptised in Elstow in November 1628. His family was poor but not destitute and John was sent to school to learn how to read and write. His later prose writing demonstrates a smattering of classical learning, although his great work *Pilgrims' Progress* shows signs of affinity with chapbooks – the cheap purveyors of popular culture. In 1645 he joined the New Model Army and served in the garrison at Newport Pagnell where Edward Harrison (of Kensworth) was Treasurer of the garrison and Bunyan may well have heard radical preachers among the soldiers. Returning home, he married and despite some spiritual turmoil he attended the local parish church in a show of outward conformity. Yet he was assailed by doubts. In 1655, he joined the Bedford church led by John Gifford, the vicar of St John's on Bedford Bridge and soon after began to preach in the villages around Bedford, although he had still not shaken off that haunting sense of unworthiness. His final assurance came in 1657 or 1658 and he described it in fittingly biblical language in his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding*, "*Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed; I was loosed from my affliction and my temptations also fell away*". In 1659, after hearing a sermon delivered at Toft in

Cambridgeshire, Thomas Smith, University librarian at Cambridge, published an open letter that challenged Bunyan's right to preach, he being a lay person. Henry Denne, a Cambridge graduate, defended Bunyan against Smith *"You seem to be angry with the tinker because he strives to mend souls as well as kettles and pans..... he pleads his mission and commission from the Church at Bedford. It behoves you to prove that either this is false, and that the Church at Bedford is not in a capacity to give such commission. The Tinker at Bedford may have from the Church at Bedford as good a commission as Mr Thomas Smith hath from his Church and Mr Thomas Smith hath as yet no better commission to preach than the tinker of Bedford"*. This sums up neatly the clash of authority that separated the established church from the gathered church - the call of God recognised by the local congregation was no less valid than a university education, ordination or presentation by a patron.

At the Restoration the congregation was no longer allowed to use St John's church for its meetings. Bunyan eventually was chosen as the pastor in 1672, whilst he was still in gaol, and maintained the network of satellite congregation meetings around Bedford. It was one church meeting in various places. It was an open membership congregational church – including both people who had been baptised as infants and those who had undergone the rite of baptism as a believer. Bunyan strongly advocated that baptism should not be a barrier to Christian fellowship within the gathered church, although he himself had been baptised by immersion and commented that his open membership stance was *"not for a despising of baptism but a bearing with our brother that cannot do it for want of light"*. In 1660 and before the Restoration, Bunyan was arrested at Harlington under a 1593 Act for preaching without license and committed to gaol in Bedford. The story tells how his wife went to London to beg for his release but a recantation was demanded and that Bunyan would not make. He refused to refrain from preaching and said *"he would remain there [in gaol] till the moss grew over his eyes rather than obey the oppressor"*. He was there for twelve years, although this did not wholly prevent him from exercising his responsibilities as a gifted member of the church. We must not think gaol as watertight incarceration, although several urban myths developed about his ability to outwit the authorities and continue to preach. Released in 1672, he continued to organise the church (*"A turbulent, seditious and factious people"* according to one contemporary) and preach wherever possible, gaining a wide reputation. The church records at Bedford show that in this period the church met at Kempston, Maulden, Cotton End, Haynes, Edworth and Gamlingay

Bunyan was released under the terms of the Declaration of Indulgence. His best known work *The Pilgrim's Progress* had taken shape in gaol and was largely written by 1669 although it was not published until 1678, as friends advised against it. The multi-layered narrative offers the theme of pilgrimage as Christian makes his way through a world of snares, oppressive authorities and worldly temptations toward his reward but also embraces the crucial theme for Dissenters of liberty of conscience and the right to make choices about discipleship and church government.

It seems likely that Bunyan knew the group at Pirton, even though it was not a satellite congregation of Bedford and certainly he preached at Preston. It has been argued that Bunyan's wife and family spent some time with relatives in Preston while he was in prison in the 1660s. And in 1701 his son John joined the Hitchin church.

## **Bunyan and Hitchin**

It is in 1673 that he crosses most directly with the Hitchin congregation as recorded in the Bedford church book. First, the Hitchin church requested Bedford to release Nehemiah Cox to be elder or pastor at Hitchin. This did not happen (Cox went on to become a leading figure among Baptists in London) but in 1677 the Bedford church was able to write *"having taken your earnest desires concerning our giving up to you our beloved brother John Wilson into serious consideration with much prayer to God for direction in so weighty a matter have at last God having bowed the heart of the church to consent to what you have both longed and as we trust, much prayed for."* The letter indicates the mutual bond between congregations, the deep commitment to prayer and a sense of shared concern for the welfare of the congregations.

Wilson was set apart for the ministry at a day of prayer in Hitchin on June 28th 1677, and the Bedford church was represented by Samuel Fenn, who had been imprisoned in Bedford too. According to the Tilehouse Street church book, also present were Antony Lamb, John James and Thomas Kelsey. It has been suggested that Lamb was actually Anthony Palmer, an ejected minister and pastor of an open membership church in London and Thomas Kelsey may be the same man who stood surety for John Bunyan in 1677, making another connection. Their presence illustrates the emerging networks of churches supportive of each other and a sign of interdependence at an early stage of development of the movement. Perhaps Wilson held baptist views more strongly because in 1678 four members left to form an Independent congregation linked to Holcroft and the Hertford Independents. Eventually a chapel was built in Back Street (Queen Street) and in the twentieth century the church joined with the Methodists to become Christchurch. Wilson was imprisoned in Hertford Castle from 1681 for a period of seven years where he was supported by the Foster brothers. *"In time of persecution his goods were once carried into the market place to be burnt but it was prevented"*. noted Samuel James, minister at Hitchin in the eighteenth century. But Wilson outlasted the Stuart regime and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 ushered in a time of peace and relative security.

The church at Tilehouse Street was gathered, voluntary and open membership, similar to the Bedford congregation. It was congregational in its organisation, Calvinist in its theology and evangelical in the sense of desiring others to join.

Baptists were orthodox in their doctrine not rejecting the ancient creeds but neither would they have them imposed as a test of authentic faith. Liberty of conscience was the essence of their expectations, to be allowed to organise and worship as they felt the Bible required. The Hitchin and Bedford churches, as indeed many of the Anglican clergy, held to a strand of theology called Calvinist, after the French Reformer John Calvin. Deep reverence for the sovereign will of God was upheld even at the expense of human responsibility. Calvinists held that God had made a new covenant with men and women and the seal was the atoning death of Christ. This did not extend automatically to everyone but to those whom God had predestined for salvation (election). It may seem hard to appreciate but this was for many a liberating theology. Answering the question Bunyan's pilgrim posed "What must I do to be saved?" the answer is for a failing humanity that the initiative lies with God and not human attempts to please God. The elect did not equate to the members of the congregational churches. Election was a mystery and there would be some of the elect in other churches – excepting Roman Catholics and unitarians - so that left no place for self-righteous pride.

However, they shared an understanding that the purposes of God could be read in the life of the world and of his elect people, so that the signs of divine activity could be interpreted and assurance gained. It was an experimental faith, that is, its authenticity truth was tested in the living. It was not an experiential faith, one dependent on an emotional response. So, when John Bunyan stated that he preached *"what he did feel, what he smartingly did feel"*, it did not mean that his feelings were troubling him but that the theological analysis of his salvation made sense and he responded. Puritans often kept spiritual journals, recording their thoughts, doubts, assurances and experiences - exploring how God could be seen at work in the nation and their own lives – "providences". Preaching was a necessary instrument to call people to respond to who they were. Here salvation was God's gift made possible in Jesus Christ and available to women and men according to the will of God, not dependent on wealth or intellect or social position. The covenanted community held the seeds of a levelling grace.

People gathered together in churches because they believed that this was the New Testament model and they were bound to each other for mutual edification and support. They are referred to as Saints, but not in the narrower sense. Theirs was a voluntary society - that is a person chose to belong. This was no small matter in the Restoration period when to join a Dissenting church was to opt for a mistrusted minority, risking social discrimination and possible fines or imprisonment. It was not a consumer choice.

Authority was vested in the members of the local congregation. The leading of God was discerned by the congregation. Ministers and deacons were chosen by consent of the membership and not by the decision of patrons. *“The 4 month 1677 the 4th day of the month, the Church being then assembled together at Brother John Foster’s did then give Brother Ralph Bigg of Salem call to the office of a Deacon which he did freely agree of before the congregation to do his duty as the Lord should help him.”* It is a relationship of mutual respect and accountability. Similarly the members issued an invitation to John Wilson to be their pastor and he responded in his acceptance. At this distance it is hard to grasp the confidence this inspired in people who often were locked into social structures that lacked any recognition of the abilities of men and women (but not always) to exercise control over their affairs. Although the vast majority were not political revolutionaries, here is an indication of how Dissenters differentiated between belonging to an ecclesiastical body and to the body politic that the establishment found so troubling, a degree of self-determination.

We see this well illustrated by the church covenant signed in 1681 (a transcription may be seen in the Bunyan room). The local covenant reflected the quality of the divine covenant, with privilege and responsibilities. *“October 25th 1681. The church being met together at Brother Thos. Field’s house and full so very few were absent did then renew their covenant to the Lord and one another with fasting and prayer non contradicting but by silence and lifting up their hands”.* The phrasing is neither canonical nor is it random; it is a solemn pledge that members assented to, it is worth reading in full as it exudes the very essence of the gathered and covenanted membership

*We who through the mercy of God and our Lord Jesus Christ, have obtained grace to give ourselves to the Lord and one to another by the will of God, to have communion with one another as saints in one gospel fellowship:- Do, before God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Angels agree and promise to walk together in this one gospel communion and fellowship as a Church of Jesus Christ, in love to the Lord and one to another, and endeavour to yield sincere and hearty obedience to the laws, ordinances and appointments of our Lord and Lawgiver in his Church*

*And also do agree and promise, the Lord assisting, to follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another, that so living and walking in love and peace, the God of love and peace may be with us. Amen*

Gathered churches were not isolationist. We have already seen something of the connections between them in dealing with disputes or presence at ordinations or sharing of resources. In 1677, the church at Keysoe in Bedfordshire agreed to the transfer of one of their members to Hitchin. In the Tilehouse church book is a list of “transient members” in the early eighteenth century – those recommended by their own church to allow them to sit at the Lord’s Table whilst in Hitchin. In 1680 it is recorded, *“The Church having come together at Preston did agree that Bro John Thorowgood a member of the Church at Pirton should preach among us sometimes when we break bread on the Lord’s Day and on the week day either once a week or once a fortnight”.* This may be a contingency in case of the imprisonment of the pastor, as did in fact happen, although the Pirton church was reluctant to agree, possible with the same anxiety. Thorowgood appears as a contributor to the Hitchin church building in 1692. The contributions toward the building costs from London and elsewhere underline the sense of a shared responsibility and a common interest in the development of Baptist witness.

Membership of this church was for those who could give an account of their experience of God. It was not common geography that defined the membership but a common understanding and experience. In Hitchin as in Bedford, this was not restricted to those who had undergone the rite of full immersion baptism as believers but equally to those who could recount their experience of God. This open membership made the church unusual both for Baptists and Independents. Membership was the lifeblood of the community. It was not so much the presence of John Bunyan the celebrity that drew the Hitchin congregation to worship (although I would not rule it out) as the desire to meet one with another in worship and fellowship. There was a concern shown for the vulnerable in the congregation and a note from 1704 lists the distribution of financial assistance to men and widows.

This was a feature of many Baptist churches and reflected not only the desire to help but also to follow the example of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles. The church book records small glimpses of compassion, noting a Mr Bale who in 1729 was “*dead by the falling in of a chalkpit*” (maybe near Chalkdell Path).

The church would have had a distinctive approach to worship that set it apart from the established church. There was no liturgy, in the sense of a set form of words or prayers. Liberty of conscience meant that the people be allowed to worship God in the way that they felt was required by scripture and not because it was in the Book of Common Prayer or demanded by an act of Parliament. This did not entail chaos. There would have been a long prayer, reading of scripture and then exposition followed by a shorter prayer. There were no musical instruments at this time and whilst some churches might sing Psalms, there were no hymns - hymn singing was a contentious issue and Bunyan’s “*Who would true valour see*” was written as a poem. It was the popularity of Isaac Watts’ hymns that increased the groundswell for change in the first half of the eighteenth century. So worship centred on scripture, its reading and exposition. This was later reflected in the architecture. The pulpit would have been on the long wall of the chapel with the communion table below. The distance between preacher and congregation would have not been great, unlike this building where the pulpit is on the short wall and the design originally intended to get as many as possible to see and hear the preacher, so the sightlines converge on the pulpit. Bunyan had many of his sermons printed although they inevitably lose the drama of the spoken event. His hearers might take notes and use them to reflect on during the week or in family prayers. Sermons could be lengthy and the expectation grew in the dissenting culture of a congregation theologically aware and able to absorb a carefully prepared and thought out scripture exposition, able to follow the argument and relate it to their lives. In the days before mass circulation newspapers, the pulpit was a place of information and education, even as the Lord’s Table was very important event as a dominical command.

Mention church discipline and the mind flies to images of stern faced patriarchs handing down harsh judgements on tearful penitents. Remember that at this time men and women were still fined for not attending the parish church or imprisoned for attending dissenters meetings. Yet discipline was far more than enforcing rules. Nor was it designed to create perfect people – as Calvinist Baptists knew well about the fallenness of humanity. Discipline was a pastoral measure. In the event of a supposed breach, there could be lengthy period between first accusation and settling the issue. Patience was of the essence and conversations could last for many months or even years. Discipline was seen as an expression of the covenant, to help the members to keep watch over one another. There was a due scriptural process where concerns were raised by one and then another before the whole church had the situation explained and the person requested to defend or explain their conduct. The result was admonition or ultimately withdrawal if there was no admission of wrongdoing or amendment in behaviour.

Perhaps inevitably this focussed on behaviour issues: there are not many entered in the book at this period but we find Thomas Sargent under admonition because of drunkenness, gaming and keeping bad company; in 1684 Ann Story is cited for lying, brawling and arguments with her husband, The best documented example is of Mary Newton who in 1681 it was noted had absented herself from the gatherings of the church, frequented bad company and associated with “*vain and frothy people and gaming with them*”; being out of her master’s house at unseasonable hours whilst telling him she had been to a meeting of the church. She then ignored those sent by the church to talk to her. She was withdrawn from until she should see the error of her ways. The sense of the seriousness with which membership was held is palpable. In 1688 the Tilehouse Street members refused to sanction the dismissal of two members to another church because their breach was still unresolved and without the agreement of the dismissing church, the receiving church would be unlikely to accept them as members.

It mattered if people were left unchallenged in a life that did not accord with their calling as the people of the covenant and it also harmed the reputation of God in the eyes of others. But such measures were also meant to be restorative and not punitive. So, in 1731 “*Mrs Horon of Gosmore*



*after long neglect of her duty was restored to her place in the church, the Lord having been pleased greatly to revive her soul". And doubtless great was the rejoicing*

Agnes Beaumont was the unmarried daughter of a yeoman farmer in the village of Edworth (just up the A1), the last child at home. Aged 22, she became a member of John Bunyan's church in Bedford, the first entry recorded in Bunyan's handwriting when he became the pastor of the congregation in 1672 after his release from prison. She had the traditional expectations of keeping house for her widowed father. She was accustomed to attend evening meetings for prayer, walking some distance, to the annoyance her father. One occasion in the winter of 1674, her father grudgingly allows her to attend. An arrangement has been made for John Wilson to go with her to Gamlingay, but he fails to arrive and instead a reluctant John Bunyan is persuaded to give her a ride with him, despite knowing that it would anger her father. At Gamlingay they saw the curate of Edworth, Anthony Lane, who recognised both of them *"he lookt of us as wee rode along the way as if he would have staid his eyes out; and afterwards did scandalise us after a base manner and did raise a very wicked report of us."* Having walked several miles home, *"ploshing through the dirt over shoes having no pattens on"* she discovers that her father has locked her out and will only admit her if she promises to stop attending meetings of the Bedford church. She spends a long cold night in the barn, in prayer and recalling scripture to console her, caught between the need for the security of the family home and being faithful to her church. After much anguish, she relents and is tearfully re-admitted. Whilst her father is satisfied, Agnes is not at ease with her choice. Then suddenly two days later her father dies. Agnes is distraught. But tongues begin to wag: she was seen on Bunyan's horse; she has poisoned her father, she is Bunyan's mistress and they have conspired to murder the older man for her inheritance. The chief accuser is one Peter Feery, a local man who may have seen his son's hopes of Agnes' hand disappointed. Rumours abound. A coroner and jury are brought in from a neighbouring village and Agnes is acquitted and vindicated. The death was natural causes. Feery is criticised by the coroner *"You have taken away her good name from her, and you would have taken away her life from her if you could"*. Yet still Feery stirs up trouble over the will. And the rumours do not die away. Agnes decides to face them down: *"I was troubled that the Lord's name did suffer. So when Wednesday morning came I made me ready to go to Biggleswade and it was very sharp and cold; it was frost and snow but I could not be contented without going, The Lord was wonderful good to my soul, that morning; that scripture ran mightily through my mind as I was going to the market "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and say all manner of evil of you falsely for my name sake; rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven."* So her account ends on a note of confidence in God. .

Agnes wrote down her experiences. There are two handwritten mss in British Library of Agnes' story suggesting that the account was copied and passed around for edification and encouragement. We do not really know why Agnes set down her account. It was not for general publication. It may have been in the Puritan tradition of self-examination or for spiritual encouragement, reflecting on her experiences of God in adversity. Samuel James, minister at Tilehouse Street published the account with several others in 1760 in *An abstract of the gracious dealings of God with several eminent Christians in their conversions and sufferings*. It became something of a Dissenting classic and went through 10 editions to 1842.

Agnes' story can be read at a variety of levels. It may be seen as a simple testimony to the consolations of God in difficult times or as an example of spirituality of the persecuted. It points up the vulnerability of the single woman in a patriarchal society (Agnes did not marry for another thirty years - and that in Cheshunt - and it may be a sign of her damaged social reputation). It illustrates the tensions that dissent could bring into traditional relationships in family and community and it illustrates the tenuous position that Dissenters held in state and the state church and it offers a woman's voice telling it as she sees it. Of course, it might also be read as self-justification of woman infatuated with charismatic preacher.....

There is some indication that women found the Dissenting churches a welcoming place. There is evidence to suggest it provided a supportive circle of women. Certainly they tended to outnumber

the men in membership. And in the gathered church women found some measure of acceptance: they made an equal commitment to the covenant, their experience was deemed equally valid when they apply for membership, they were equally taught from the pulpit, they did not have to be churched after childbirth. Some churches allowed women members to vote and some allowed the women a caucus to give their views to the men. In the Commonwealth conservative churchmen were scandalised that a few Baptist meetings had women preachers (and Quakers had women evangelists) and Bunyan was first attracted to the Bedford church by the unofficial evangelists, the women "*who gossiped the gospel*". But women pastors and teachers were not allowed. There could be an issue with "*marrying out*" as the many Dissenting churches could not offer a sufficiently large pool of potential husbands. If this was thought to be a disciplinary matter, it was dealt with compassionately, perhaps understanding of the pressure to have the security of a marriage - and women could be accepted back as long as they admitted the error of their actions and they were not expected to divorce! This may seem little to talk up to modern eyes and not particularly radical and subsequent generations were slow to build on the implications, instead allowing social convention to dictate roles and responsibilities but at the time it was something affirming and new.

Bunyan died in 1688 in London after taking a fever whilst travelling to Reading to conciliate in a family dispute. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, the Dissenters burial ground just off the City Road in a tomb that can be seen today. In 1688 William and Mary occupied the throne vacated by James II. An Act of Toleration was passed in 1689 that allowed freedom for Christians not belonging to the Church of England to organise and worship. It was recognition that the established church no longer had a monopoly on the nation's churchgoing. Toleration was not equality at law, and dissenters were disadvantaged in many ways. The last piece of legislation was repealed a late as 1880 and a culture within a culture developed that marked the life and witness off Dissenting or Nonconformist or Free Churches for two and a half centuries.

In 1692 the Hitchin congregation felt sufficiently confident to commit to a building, the first meeting house on this site in Tilehouse Street.(if you go through for refreshments there are sketches of the original building). It cost £250. Agnes Beaumont, Mrs Story by then and on her second marriage and living in Highgate contributed to the fund. During the 1690s John Wilson became increasingly frail and sat in a chair for the service – perhaps the very one now in the pulpit reportedly given by his friend John Bunyan.

One can imagine Wilson struggling or being carried up to service from his home at Bull Corner (adjacent to the garage and Eric Moore's bookshop at the junction of Bridge Street and Park Street, where the Triangle was once a group of trees and not a traffic island). In 1692 Wilson with Ebenezer Chandler, Bunyan's successor at Bedford, edited the first collection of Bunyan's writings. John Wilson died in 1716. Agnes Beaumont died in 1720 and requested that she be buried in the graveyard belonging to the Baptists in Hitchin – although she was not a member here – and her grave was in a part of the graveyard that is now underneath the sheltered housing of Robert Tebbutt Court next door. Wilson's successors Needham & James lived at Bull Corner but the next minister John Geard lived in Rectory House. Baptist Dissent was well established in Hitchin

## **Conclusion**

In this brief sketch of the early years of the congregation at Tilehouse Street I have also sought to place it in the search for political and religious identity in the second half of the seventeenth century; I have attempted to explain how Dissent was not simply a rejection of all things Anglican but offered a positive space for people to relate with a distinctive spirituality and a new sense of community, and also to show that the Hitchin church was not just an aberration but belongs to the growing tradition of .....

Thank you for listening.