



Wantage Baptists in the 17th Century

by Lis Garnish

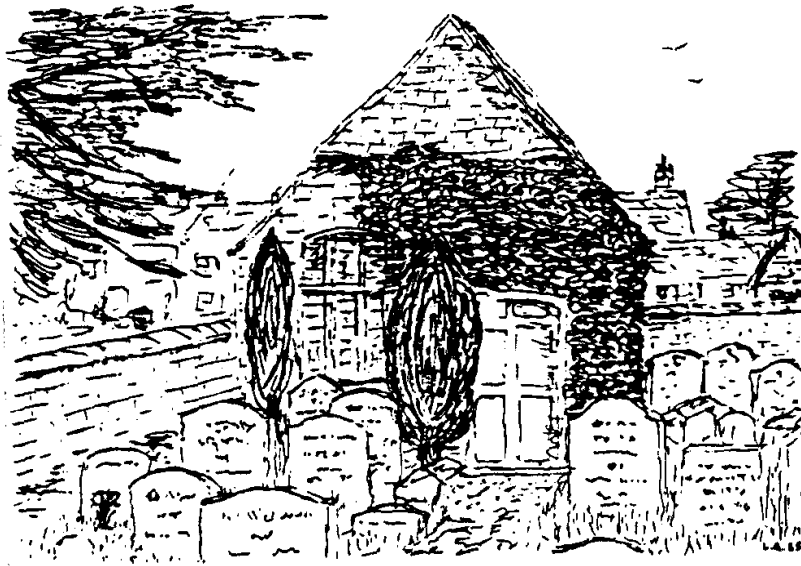
The Baptist Church in Mill Street is but the last in a succession of buildings in which the Baptists of Wantage have worshipped. The first one of which we know was the timber framed Market House or Town Hall, which once stood in the middle of the Market Place. Before that they may have worshipped secretly in one another's houses and barns. A barn was certainly their next permanent home, a building which stood on the north side of Garston Lane within the old Baptist Burial Ground, and it is here that we see the first firm evidence of who those Baptists were. The earliest grave stone dates from 1692, but by then the Baptists had been active in Wantage for forty four years. So who were the people who made up that forty year old congregation? Who were the first brave souls who stood up to be counted? At a Working Evening in the Museum a small group of Friends tried to answer that question.

The first clues appeared several years ago. The magazine of the Oxfordshire Family History Society carried a short article on Marriage Licence Bonds for Wantage between 1669 and 1693, with extracts of the names of the brides and grooms, their bondsmen and the witnesses.¹ Marriage Licences were applied for when the couple did not wish to wait for the banns to be called in church. Some people felt that it was beneath them, some wished to marry in secrecy or in a hurry and some were Dissenters. When a Marriage Licence was applied for the groom could be required "to enter into a bond to forfeit a sum of money if the marriage was found to be contrary to Canon Law".² Two friends or family members would stand as bondsmen and other friends or relatives might act as witnesses. As a result, the bonds are a useful source of familial and friendship groupings. The next discovery arose from the query of a Friend regarding "Burials in Woollen". Whilst checking the micro-film of the second Parish Register (1653 1704) I happened to move the film right through to the end to make sure there were no further frames. I found that the last page carried some notes which had been written right in the back of the register, on the fly-leaf. They were various entries, made between 1652 and 1696, of children who had been born but had not been baptized.

Puzzled I checked the Burials Register to see if these were children who had died at birth, before they could be christened. Drawing a blank there I tried the Baptisms to see if they were notes to be entered later. Still there were no records of these children but there were some other entries in the Baptisms Register of children recorded as "born" but without a subsequent baptism. One surname struck a chord - Beall - where had I seen that before? Then I remembered the first Marriage Licence Bond, which was for a Zacheus Beall, and here was Zacheus' birth recorded in this odd fashion in 1648. Another name was Haskins and that I recognized instantly. Alice Haskins was the sister of Robert Stiles, the donor of the Newbury Street Almshouses. There is evidence that Robert Stiles may have been a Baptist and here were his sister's children recorded as born but not baptised. Baptists rejected infant baptism so could we find any other significant connections?

At the Working Evening we assembled the material which we had; the Marriage Licence Bonds; the strange birth records; the earliest burial inscriptions from the Baptist Burial Ground; Robert Stiles' will and the wills of other people whose names appeared in the Marriage Licence Bonds and a history of the Baptist Church in Wantage. Now all that

was needed was an hour's work making index slips for all the names we could find. Over coffee we sorted the slips into alphabetical order and looked for significant groupings. Two or three names sprang into view immediately, names which were already known in connection with the Baptists. There was William Kiffin, pastor of the Baptist Church, Devonshire Square, London, who was acquainted with John Pendarvis, the pastor of Abingdon Baptist Church; Elias Clark, who is buried in the Wantage Baptist Burial Ground and had been a Deacon of the Wantage Baptists; and Robert Keate who was the first Baptist minister in Wantage, beginning his ministry in 1648. But here we found them in connection with Wantage people. William Kiffin was concerned with the probate of Robert Stiles' will; Elias Clark was a witness to the will of Samuel Tull, the miller at Grove; Robert Keate was named as an overseer in the same will of Samuel Tull and also helped to compile the inventory of Samuel's goods; strangest of all perhaps was Isabella Jones of Whitechapel in London, who in 1680 had appeared before the Probate Court in London and produced the will of Robert Stiles, made 35 years earlier before he went to Amsterdam. She now lies peacefully beneath the grass of the Wantage Baptist Burial Ground where a grave stone records that she died in 1701.



But what of the ordinary people, who made up the majority of the congregation? The Beall family seem to have been some of the first to make their Dissent public. They lived in Grove Street, where they ran a shop and issued tokens bearing a picture of a roll of tobacco, the mark of John the father, or two crossed pipes, the mark of Zacheus his son. Four of the children, Zacheus, Mary, Isaac and Hannah, were not baptized at birth and when Zacheus came to marry Mary Cooke in 1669 they applied for a Marriage Licence rather than attend the Parish Church three Sundays in succession for the banns to be read. Another brave family were the Haskins, who also refused to have their children 'sprinkled' at an early age. Eventually their son Joseph was to inherit Robert Stiles' huge fortune and to carry out his uncle's wishes regarding a donation to the Baptist Church and the founding of the Almshouses. John Haskins, the father, was also a witness to Samuel Tull's will. And the Tulls? They ran the middle mill at Grove, the remains of which can be traced in the stream bed at 'Kingfishers'. Samuel himself was an only child, his father having died young, but when he came of age he inherited the mill and prospered. Samuel and his wife Margery raised five sons, Samuel, Joseph, Benjamin, David and Jonathan, and a relation of Samuel's, John Tull, became co-pastor in 1696. John lived in Grove Street and he and his wife are buried in the Baptist Burial Ground.

Another Grove family who were part of this close-knit group of Baptists were Richard and Mary Shepherd, whose grand-daughter Jane married Samuel Tull the younger by Licence in 1686. The Shepherds were farmers at the north end of Grove village and one of their

meadows was still called Shepherd's Close in 1754. Richard helped to make the inventories of the goods of both Samuel Tull the elder and his cousin William Tull, a yeoman, and the Shepherds probably raised their seven children on good Baptist principles.

Other families were the Boyces, the Bakers and the Browns, the last two also concerned with milling at Grove, which makes a clear point about the status of these families. It is often suggested that Baptist beliefs were popular and flourishing amongst the humble, working-class people, particularly weavers. They probably were, but these Wantage and Grove families show us that many prosperous, middle-class people became Baptists as well. We have yeoman farmers, millers, woollen drapers and mercers choosing the hard road of Dissent at a time when penalties could be harsh. Their good local connections may have afforded them a measure of protection, but until the Toleration Act of 1689 it still took considerable personal courage to decide to stand out from the crowd of one's fellow townsmen and proclaim one's beliefs. Perhaps the fact that some of these early Baptist families do not appear again in later records suggests that they decided that discretion was the better part of valour and they moved away to the anonymity of a larger town. The ones who remained however, formed the nucleus of the congregation which purchased the Garston Lane Chapel in 1682 and moved towards 1700 as a recognized Church, and with renewed confidence in the future.

REFERENCES

1. The Oxfordshire Family Historian, 3/2, (Summer 1983).
2. The Dictionary of Genealogy, Terrick V H FitzHugh, Alphabooks, 1985, p.192.

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