

BARTON HALL, HEREFORD: A HISTORY¹

David Rawson

Travelling westwards from the twelfth-century Cathedral of St Mary and St Ethelbert in the city of Hereford, on the north bank of the River Wye, one passes first along King Street and then, crossing the line of the old city wall and Victoria Street, one enters Barton Road. St Nicholas Church stands on the corner by Friar Street and then some 100 yards further along is the street wall of Barton Hall.

The name 'Barton' derives from an old English word for a farmyard or 'an enclosure for barley' and is obviously deeply rooted in the agricultural history of Hereford and the surrounding lands. In 1856 a subscription list was opened for 'building a room at the Barton',² and on the 13th of April in 1857 it was recorded by the Registrar General that 'a certain building situated at the Barton is intended to be used as a Place of Meeting for Religious Worship by a Congregation or Assembly of persons calling themselves Brethren'.³ The construction of the main hall was completed in 1858, the exact

1. This paper is an edited version of [David Rawson], 'The Story of Barton Hall in Hereford and its Part in the History of the Christian Brethren', typescript booklet, [2011]. To mark the centenary of the opening of the Barton building Dr Alfred Langford, a general practitioner in the city and a leading member of the assembly, produced *An Account of the Brethren in Hereford on the Occasion of the Centenary of Barton Hall September 1958* (n.pl. [1958]), and it is as a tribute to his invaluable research and writing that his account will be relied upon in the present paper. Langford probably drew in his turn from an undated holograph MS by Charles Brewer of Leominster, 'The Lord's Work Amongst Early Brethren In Herefordshire', presumably written late in the nineteenth century as he quotes from eyewitness reports as far back as the 1850s. The spelling of names and some details vary between accounts, but Dr Langford's version will be followed. For an account of Hereford's origins drawing upon the published and MSS sources, cf. H.H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* (London, 1967), pp.164-72.

2. Langford, *Brethren in Hereford*, p.9.

3. Registration Document, April 8th 1857, quoted in *ibid.*

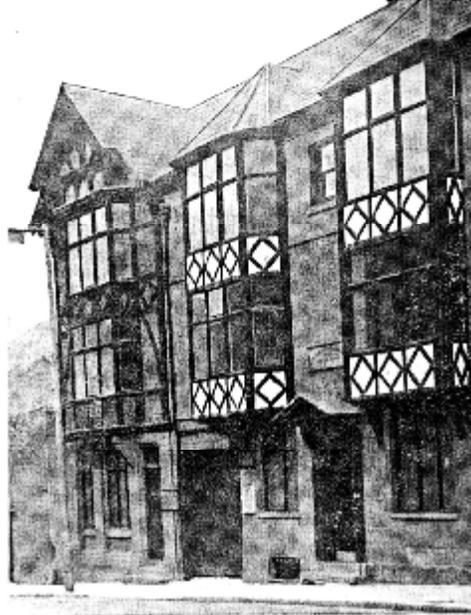
date when the building was first opened for worship is unknown. Two schoolrooms were added behind the hall early in the twentieth century and extensive renovations to the main hall were carried out in 1962-3.

Origins

In the early nineteenth century the vicar of St Peter's Church, Hereford, was a most learned and saintly man, Henry Gipps. He had had a distinguished academic career at Cambridge, having obtained a first-class honours degree in mathematics and had been placed first in order of merit among those who obtained this degree. He was a devoted gospel preacher and an expositor of New Testament teaching. It is not surprising therefore, that he gathered around him a large congregation. However in 1832 he died unexpectedly at an early age. He was greatly mourned, not only in his own parish of St Peter's, but by the whole city.⁴

After Gipps's death in 1832, John Venn was appointed as the vicar of St Peter's Church. John Venn was the son of the leader of the Clapham Sect, also John Venn, who died in 1813 when his son was 11. Venn grew up with no inclination to the Church. He learnt Hindustani and Sanskrit and was destined to join the East India Company, but in 1822 returned to England and studied for ordination. After some service in London, a friend gained him an appointment to the living of St Peter's in Hereford, part of this parish including St Owen's, the poorest part of the city. He came to Hereford in 1833. In the extreme winters of the early 1840s John Venn was to be found organising a soup kitchen to help keep the poor of Hereford alive. As he realised that this was only dealing with the symptoms of poverty, and he believed that all poverty could be overcome by work, he proposed the establishment of the 'Society for Aiding the Industrious'. His name is remembered in many places in Hereford where he worked tirelessly to help the poor.

4. Gipps's daughter was later to be married to one of the Christian Brethren leaders, William Kelly, while Mrs Gipps is on record as having given a donation to one of the Brethren funds.



BRIDGE STREET ROOM

Jean O'Donnell attributes the defection of so many of the former congregation of St Peter's Church to his Calvinism.⁵ However Charles Brewer's manuscript account of those early years refers to many in the 'inner circle of the church' being offended by John Venn's Arminianism,⁶ which in view of the Calvinism of the early Brethren and what we know of Venn, seems the more likely explanation. Whatever the causes may have been, many of his congregation did leave, and many were to gather with the first assembly of Christians in rooms in Bridge Street.⁷ On December 9th 1838 John Venn published a sermon 'against the Brethren in

5. Jean O'Donnell, *John Venn and the Friends of the Hereford Poor* (Little Logaston, Herefordshire, 2007), p.23.

6. Brewer, 'Early Brethren', p.3.

7. *Ibid.*, p.4.

Hereford',⁸ but later in 1858 at a meeting of the Hereford City Mission at St Peter's Church Schoolroom John Venn thanked God for the establishment of the Mission and, referring to the 'increase in the number of dissenting chapels', gave thanks to God for 'everywhere that the truth is preached'.⁹ He was himself accused by the vicar of Leominster of 'being tainted with Plymouth Brethrenism' because he had been at a meeting attended by dissenters.

Three notable men and their wives were to leave St Peter's to become leaders in the Brethren movement. John Griffiths was a leading Hereford surgeon, who, Charles Brewer in his manuscript history writes,

threw open his heart and purse and house. He was an energetic man, full of love for the Gospel. He would converse with his patients on their soul's greatest need, keeping Capt. Rhind's pictures of the Tabernacle on his consulting room table, explaining and enforcing the different teachings of the various parts. Some of his more wealthy visitors were offended and left but soon returned because of his professional ability, so that his faithfulness was ultimately to him no loss.

Then there was William Humphreys (or Humphries) described as 'a leading lawyer of much talent and influence in the city', and 'Mr. Yapp a leading chemist in a principle [*sic*] street, he was a man head and shoulders above anyone else in his love and self-sacrifice, ever willing to give up time, comfort, and purse for the welfare of others and their spiritual good.'¹⁰ Yapp began as a chemist's assistant but became a bookseller, and moved to London before returning to live in Leominster.¹¹

8. Cf. John Venn, *The Christian Ministry and Church-Membership; According to Scripture and the Church of England. With a more especial reference to the views of certain Christians generally known as the Plymouth Brethren* (London, 1842); a reply was published by R.M. Beverley, *The Church of England Examined by Scripture and Tradition: in an answer to lectures by the Rev. John Venn ... on the Christian Ministry* (London, 1843).

9. *Hereford Times*, 21 August 1858.

10. Brewer, 'Early Brethren', p.7.

11. M.M.D., 'William Yapp', in Hy Pickering, *Chief Men Among the Brethren (Acts 15.22): 100 records and photos of brethren beloved* (London & Glasgow, 1931), pp.138-140.

John Griffiths's wife had visited some friends in Plymouth in 1837, and had heard the preaching of Captain Percy Francis Hall. She was so impressed that she invited him to visit her house in Hereford saying 'that there were many Christians there who would be glad to hear him'.¹² Captain Hall was thirty-three years of age, and a retired naval Commander. He had resigned his commission in the Navy, because of his Christian scruples, and had therefore lost his income. He had also sold his possessions in order to share them with poorer believers.¹³ Captain Hall came to Hereford with his wife, Amelia, and their family, and they were found a house at Breinton. He came in to the meetings in Bridge Street in a horse-drawn carriage that had been provided for him.

Referring to the Brethren, a letter to the *Hereford Journal* of April 1838 states the following:

Captain Hall was the founder . . . they consist chiefly of seceders from the Church of St. Peter's; they have made a most rapid progress from the time they have been established—about six months, and scarcely a week passes without new converts being added...¹⁴

The previous month the newspaper had reported the implications of the secession for the Hereford Protestant Association, an anti-Catholic society:

A grand schism has taken place amongst the members of the Hereford Protestant Association. The treasurer, Mr. William Yapp, has tendered his resignation. W. Humfrys and J. Griffiths, esqrs., two of the most zealous and influential committee-men have likewise withdrawn their names. The above-mentioned gentlemen having been induced by Captain Hall, a dissenting minister, to give the subject an impartial consideration, have come to the conclusion that the cause of true religion is not advanced by Protestant Associations as now established. They have espoused religious tenets of a milder tone than those upheld by the stiffnecked divines of the Protestant Association, and cannot be induced to put their faith in

'Those apostolick blows and knocks

12. Brewer, 'Early Brethren', p.3.

13. Pickering, *Chief Men*, pp.19-21.

14. *Hereford Journal*, 14th April 1838.

Which prove a doctrine orthodox.’

Although several attempts have been made to reclaim the lost sheep—et componere lites—several other secessions have likewise taken place, and the Association seems to be in a general decline. No doubt now the novelty has passed away, and the people have heard the oratory of these celebrated men, it will gradually expire...It is but justice to observe that Mr. Yapp, Mr. Humfrys and Mr. Griffiths, have been always universally esteemed for piety and sincerity of purpose: their late conduct has likewise shown that they are open to conviction, and will not sacrifice conscience to party purposes, or be accessory to those deeds which become not an honest man. The censure and abuse heaped upon these worthy men by Conservatives is only equalled by their quondam fulsome panegyric.¹⁵

The earliest assembly meeting in Hereford was known as a ‘Society of Brethren’. Charles Brewer records the testimony of someone who was there at its commencement:

I shall never forget the over-powering sight, it was the first morning I went, there was a table from one end to the other down the middle of the room, covered with a white cloth with the bread and wine on it. Seated on each side were about 300 brethren, sisters and children, those were days of power and blessing.

According to Brewer, the gathering experienced some persecution:

Much personal and private opposition was manifested. A father threatened to shoot his 3 daughters if they went to the meetings. He was known to have gone out with his gun for that purpose. Some lost property, customers, good situations in consequence, but many were added to the Church... One result of the village preaching was that many came in from the country for the breaking of bread. Twelve from one hamlet walked 7 miles each way, others even greater distances every Lord’s day. One sister had to walk 10 miles to the meetings. Once a continuous heavy rain had flooded the county and covered the road, she took off her shoes and stockings and waded through the water. Dr. Griffith hearing of it, at night ordered his carriage and drove her home. Two sisters coming from some distance in the country, only able to get one horse, rode it in turns to the meetings.¹⁶

15. *Hereford Journal*, 10th March 1838; the lines quoted are from Samuel Butler’s ‘Hudibras’ (1663-78).

16. Brewer, ‘Early Brethren’, p.5.

Yapp's horses and carriages must have seen hard service on the very rough roads of that time. There were also the costs of taxes and feed to be met. In the records for 1842, is this item: 'Taxes for horses, gigs, etc., £10/12/0d.'¹⁷ Later the same year, we read: 'W. Yapp for 8 tons* of hay @ 50 shillings... £20.'¹⁸ A whole section of the accounts is devoted to 'Expenses of Horses' and there are sizable bills relating to hay, blacksmiths and the shoeing of horses. Of the numerous entries the records show how in 1842 a servant was paid '£24/12/0d for 41 weeks work', and in 1844 '1 years cost of keep of Mare & Hire of Pony & Gig from Bullar... £45/3/9d.'¹⁹ The transport costs of the Bridge Street congregation were a major expense considering the relative value of money in those days.

Preachers went out to the surrounding towns and villages in those early days and for many years to come, their assignments were carefully recorded. Leominster, Ross, Ludlow, Grosmont, Colwall, Ledbury, Malvern, Worcester, are only some of the places where missions were established. Men sent out included the names of Hall, Rhind, Griffiths, Yapp, McAdam, Bullar and others. Many of the assemblies that were formed continue to the time of writing. These outreach endeavours flourished during the pioneering days in Bridge Street but in later years the records seem to be concerned mainly with those attending the Barton Room in Hereford. Doubtless many preachers went out, but the outlying churches would have become more self-sustaining.

Alfred Langford in his Barton Hall centenary history records:

Among visitors to Hereford in those Bridge Street days was J.N. Darby, most well-known of all the early brethren leaders; an early record of a meeting of elders has this note "dear Darby present", and he is mentioned on other occasions. Captain P.F. Hall possessed a portrait of Darby, at which he was wont to gaze with rapt admiration, for Darby was a man of magnetic and endearing personality. Captain Wellesley, nephew of the Iron Duke, was a member of the Bridge Street meeting. He sacrificed everything to the Lord's work, as these cash entries indicate: February 7th, 1842,

17. Barton Hall archive [hereafter BHA], Account Book, 15th April 1842.

18. *Ibid.*, 18 June 1842.

19. *Ibid.*, 31st December 1842; 19th October 1844.

“Mr. Wellesley’s telescopes £10 Os. Od.”, June 27th, 1843, “Sold epaulettes and gold lace for £1 11s. 6d.” Later on he sold his chronometer for £5.²⁰

Mrs Gipps, the widow of Henry Gipps, is recorded as having given a donation to one of the Brethren funds and another ex-military man is noted in the records for having sold all his equipment and his ‘black mare’ for £5 to give to the Brethren.

Langford’s record notes:

In the Bridge Street meeting days, the elders met for breakfast to carry out meeting business, and they each subscribed 7/6 towards the breakfast costs. There were breakfast meetings for all members on Christmas Day and a communion service was held in the evening of Christmas Day. Days were appointed from time to time for fasting and prayer, sometimes collectively and sometimes to be observed by each at home. Tea meetings were held, and at one of these, in May, 1846, Mr. Darby was present, while Mrs. Gipps also attended a similar meeting. In the same year there is an entry: “Day of fasting and prayer proposed for second Wednesday in February in union with the saints at Barnstaple and elsewhere at 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.”

The meeting in Bridge Street was a centre for generous giving to many causes, to missions at home and abroad, to orphans including George Müller’s orphanage in Bristol, and generally to those in need:

In 1847, collection was made for “the poor Irish”, Limerick and Erin being specially mentioned; in 1854, there were collections for the widows and orphans of the soldiers who fell in the Crimean War. There were also collections for the poor “to supply coal and bread”. On January 10th, 1840, we find a note of a “Collection to be made for the poor and sent to the Mayor in the name of the Lord Jesus”. Money was sent to numerous parts of England and Wales for the furtherance of the work—to Jenkins Chapel, near Rhayader. “Mr. Sayce’s Chapel, Wrexham”, Stafford, “Wigram and Dorman’s room in London”. In 1853, there was a gift “for beloved saints persecuted in Tuscany for Christ’s sake”... Money was sent as far as Mauritius—“Cash for Mauritius to J. N. Darby £11 12s. 6d.” and Demerara.²¹

20. Langford, *Brethren in Hereford*, p.7.

21. *Ibid.* p.7.

But the division of the Brethren in Plymouth was to affect the assembly in Hereford. Charles Brewer notes:

Capt. Hall was a deep thinker and teacher, not having much fellowship with the direct Gospel testimony to the world, for he was not an evangelist of late years at least. Dr. Griffiths on the contrary was an evangelist and did not so much care for the deep thinking and wonderful expositions of Capt. Hall. The two men had nothing in common except 'Jesus is the Christ', the one was all for teaching the saints, the other was all for testimony to the world. Thence a growing coolness grew up between them which culminated in an open rupture.

And so Brewer notes 'Capt. Hall retired with his followers and met in St. Owen Street, afterwards connecting the meeting with Mr. Darby. The others retained the rooms and added many to their fellowship, which was removed to the Barton Rooms in 1859....'

A record of the situation at Plymouth speaks of much heated correspondence, of retractions and denials. It seems unfortunate that the points of doctrine debated at great length by intellectual scholarly men left many simple Christians confused. After one such meeting it is recorded:

The only one who disliked it was dear old Caleb... who, I remember found it very tedious and unprofitable. He was a simple minded, true hearted lover of Christ.... He found these papers had 'no voice in them' though he had no power to see their error.²²

In the Barton records of 1849 a certain lady who had visited Plymouth was required by the elders, before she could be received at Communion, to say '1st. that she is sorry for having slighted the judgment and feelings of the Lord's people in going to Compton Street, and that she would not go there again if returning to Plymouth. 2nd. That she should give a clear confession of Faith with reference to the false doctrine in question.'²³

Littlebury's *Directory of Hereford* for 1867 lists only a 'Plymouth Brethren' church in St Owen's Street, it does not include the Barton

22. BHA, Manuscript document and transcript, 'An account of what happened at Plymouth relating to Mr. Benjamin Wills Newton as told by Mr. Soltau at No.5 High Town, Hereford in 1866', transcript of an original manuscript made by Mrs. Vera Hadley of The Hereford Family History Society in July 2000.

23. BHA, Elders' Minute Book, (M2 1846-1857), 28th September 1849.

Rooms. Kelly's *Directory of Hereford* in 1885 lists Brethren assemblies in Barton Road, Millbrook Street and St Owen's Street. In 1914 Kelly's *Directory* lists a Brethren meeting in Bysters Hall off Commercial Street. All these groups which had split from the main body of believers gathering at Barton must have lasted for a while and then disappeared.

The Barton Graveyard

The history of Barton Hall had begun with the purchase in 1840 of land to provide a burial place for those Christian people termed Dissenters. Nonconformists were not permitted to be buried in public burial grounds by their own ministers although the Burial Act of 1852 was to change this restriction. In 1840 William Yapp purchased the land on which the Barton Hall now stands. The land was purchased for the use of the 'Society of Brethren usually assembling for religious worship and fellowship at the room in Bridge Street'.²⁴ There were two cottages on the site at the time and records suggest that some early children's meetings were held in the cottages before they were demolished to make way for the building of the hall.

In addition to the two cottages, the plot had consisted of their long gardens, and had been owned until 1768 by a Mr Lane who went bankrupt for the seemingly incredible sum of £68,000. Seventy years later it was his trustee who sold this part of his estate to Yapp, who then donated the land to the assembly. A map of 1757 'Taylor's Map of Hereford' shows the adjoining land to be cherry orchards, and the 'Barton Turnpike' stood opposite the present entrance to the Barton Hall. There is a record of a meeting on Friday 15th May 1840 with the note: 'Burial ground—Mr. J. Griffiths garden to be purchased in the name of Mr. Yapp...'25

24. 'Deed of Purchase', quoted in Langford, *Brethren in Hereford*, p.8.

25. BHA, Elders' Minute Book, (M0 1839-1842), 15th May 1840.



The Barton graveyard at present

The first burial recorded in the new ground was of a child of eight months on 30 March 1841. The last was in 1995 when Charles Booth, a well known Hereford architect and a deacon of Barton Hall who was also responsible for the design of many of the country chapels, was laid to rest in the same grave as his wife had been before him. Some of the old stones are merely grave markers, and many of the memorials have crumbled and been removed, but those that remain bear testimony to much loved family members who had died, or 'fallen asleep', as many of the inscriptions were worded.

Early in the history of the assembly there is a note in the elders' minute book regarding the burial of 'unconverted' members of a family in the graveyard:

We considered the case of the burial of the husband, wife and children of the saints if unconverted (dreadful thought!) and agreed with but slight difference that they ought to be buried but without the saints being asked to be present. Though it would be right for the gospel to be preached over the grave after a silent and sad interment on the part of the friends and relations of the dead... this decision might be left open to further consideration.²⁶

26. BHA, Elders' Minute book, (M1 1842-1846), 24th June 1842.

Each memorial bore a name that would have been well known to friends and family and the members of the Barton Assembly at the time, but words carved into Herefordshire sandstone have crumbled and have disappeared. Many of the older stones have had to be removed, the actual burial plot no longer being marked. In 1989 many stones were found to be unsafe and were then removed and stacked at the rear of the ground. However records were made of some of the decipherable tributes and the following inscription was noted:

In memory of Harriet Eccles, who died June 1848, aged 56. Also of Theresa her daughter, beloved wife of George McAdam, who fell asleep in Jesus, April..... He will s.... in victory and the Lord God will wip..... tears from all faces.

Some more information about these families has emerged in correspondence with Elizabeth Wilson of Sydney, Australia, a descendant of Harriet Eccles.²⁷ George McAdam was a dentist in the city noted in the 1830s, and was evidently an early member of the assembly, for in February 1841 he was proposed to the church as a deacon, and then in October 1841 he is mentioned meeting as an elder.²⁸ Elizabeth Wilson writes:

We really knew very little about the Eccles family except that they were very early members of the Brethren in Plymouth. Now we know that the McAdam family must have moved to Hereford soon after the foundation of the assembly there, and probably soon after their marriage. Their first daughter was born in 1839. I have a tiny letter Harriett Eccles wrote to her small granddaughter, my great grandmother, before their family emigrated to New Zealand in the early 1850's (where they helped found several Assemblies) The

27. According to the census returns for 1841, 'Harriet Eccles. Schoolmistress' was running a girls' boarding school in Princess Square, Plymouth which was attended by the daughters of Leonard Strong, who had seceded from the Church of England in 1837 to join the Brethren in British Guiana: e-mail from Dr Timothy Stunt, 17 August 2011.

28. George McAdam (1810-78) was a younger brother of Christopher McAdam, a vigorous supporter of J.N. Darby and critic of B.W. Newton. Their grandfather, John Loudon McAdam was the inventor of the road-making process, McAdamization, which has given us the word 'tarmac': e-mail from Dr Timothy Stunt, 17 August 2011.

letter had obviously been treasured and I became curious to find out more about Harriett. I've discovered that when her first baby was born in 1815, Harriett, who had promised her husband that their children would be brought up as Catholics, had a crisis of conscience and faith. This led her to become an early member of the Brethren in Plymouth and to the conversion of her husband John Henry Eccles as well.

Our Australian family is descended from Harriett's eldest daughter Catherine nee Eccles and Henry Young. Henry had been converted in India where he was a judge with the East India Co. He subsequently resigned and much to his family's dismay became an itinerant evangelist in Devon where he joined the Brethren. He and James George Deck, an early Brethren hymn writer, emigrated with their families to New Zealand in the 1850's. They are our great, great grandfathers.²⁹

One of the remaining plots in the graveyard where the stone is intact is listed with the War Graves Commission. It is the grave of a William Jay and inscribed to 'my dear husband who fell asleep on March 31st 1916 aged 44 years'. William Jay was in the Army Veterinary Corps and was gassed in the trenches in France during the First World War. He was brought back to England but died in hospital of pneumonia. He was born in Abergavenny in 1872, his parents coming from Much Dewchurch, and married Mary Ann Lewis in 1895 at Yarkhill. After coming to live in Hereford he worked as a builder and carpenter. They had five children, Percy George, William Lewis, Harold Leslie, Una Florence May (Molly), and Edna Mabel. Their second son William Lewis Jay drowned in the Wye in 1904 by the Victoria Bridge aged 5 on his way home from St James's School. In 2009 the War Graves Commission requested permission to erect an official war grave headstone on the plot, with the inscription from the original stone: 'God's finger touched him and he slept'.

The Room in Barton Road

29. Elizabeth Wilson to the writer, e-mail April 2009.

The Barton Room was built in 1858 to accommodate 400 or more members of the assembly. Langford writes:

The premises in Bridge Street soon had to be enlarged, a building being erected in the garden; this can still be seen, though now adapted for other purposes. In 1838, a subscription list was opened for the rebuilding. Among the Subscribers was Sir Edward Denny (£10), who wrote several of the hymns still in use, and there is a note of a “cheque from Plymouth” for £37 10s. In 1839, ‘Saints in London’ subscribed £10. The meetings continued in Bridge Street for twenty years...

In 1856 a subscription list was opened “for building the room at the Barton”. Among the subscribers was Lord Congleton... One single anonymous donation was for £100...

On May 12th, 1856, William Beavan sent his estimate “to the trustees of the Burial Ground at the Barton, for the erection of a new building”. The agreement was for £415, deducting an allowance of £27 for the ‘old building’. On the 13th of April, 1857, the Registrar General recorded that “a certain building situated at the Barton in the City of Hereford is intended to be used as a Place of Meeting for



**Barton Hall in the 1920s
—note the gas lamp.**

Religious Worship by a Congregation or Assembly of persons calling themselves Brethren”.³⁰

By January 7th, 1858, the builder had been paid £450, chairs and a table had been bought for £17 10s. 9d. Other expenses were stoves £12 15s. 6d., gas fittings, etc., £26 17s. 6d.³¹

For the next twenty-two years, one of the leading Brethren was Thomas Maunsell. He was a gifted teacher, trained in the law, who had come from Ireland in 1850 and had been meeting with the Brethren at Bridge Street. He was an enthusiastic and inspiring man and the numbers in the fellowship increased. The morning meeting commenced at 10.30 a.m., and would often continue until one o'clock. The Sunday school work of the assembly was begun primarily by him. In his southern Irish brogue he would often address the Sunday morning meeting for an hour or more. Young people must have loved him for the Sunday School was reported to be the best attended in the city. There is a record from November 15th, 1850 ‘...that the children of the saints be invited to meet from three to four o'clock and Mr. Maunsell will undertake for the present to instruct them in the Truth’.³² He died on 6th August 1880 aged 73.

In 1863 another of the notable men in the assembly was to die. Captain William Rhind R.N. had been a prisoner-of-war in America, following a sea-fight in which he had been one of the five survivors from his ship, and later nearly died of yellow fever in the West Indies.³³ He was a fine open-air preacher and an incident is recorded of how together with Captain Percy Hall, he was speaking in the open-air at Grove Common near Ross-on-Wye. A local farmer deputed two men to throw eggs at them. However the men listened to the message, and then returned to the farmer, emptied their pockets of the eggs with the comment, “They be good words that the

30. Langford, *Brethren in Hereford*, pp.6, 9.

31. Despite careful searches of Hereford newspaper archives no date has been discovered for the opening of the new building although there must have been special services and announcements would have been made.

32. BHA, Elders Minute book, (M2 1846-1857), 15th November, 1850.

33. Pickering, *Chief Men*, pp.23-6.

gentlemen speak.”³⁴ He was buried in the Barton graveyard. In his obituary notice he was described as ‘for forty years past a devoted servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a faithful preacher of the Gospel of the grace of God ‘.³⁵

One other noted member was John Griffiths who died in 1866. The obituary notice in the *Hereford Journal* stated:

The medical profession has lost one more of its most valued and skilled surgeons of this City. Mr. Griffiths was the senior practitioner, and kept up a lucrative practice, extending from its commencement over forty years. He succeeded his esteemed Uncle, Mr. Griffiths, who was Mayor of Hereford . . . Some twenty-five years back he seceded from the evangelical party in the Church, and joined a new sect then springing into maturity, and familiarly designated the Plymouth Brethren . . . We believe that Mr. Griffiths with his wonted energy, lent his purse and influence to the congregation which settled at the Barton. He had a peculiar habit of having long devoted himself to the distribution of religious tracts. We doubt if any single-handed gentleman, at his own cost, ever gave so many thousand books and leaflets to the people in the highways and bye-ways as the deceased.

The records show that the elders were much concerned with missionary work and with charitable giving to those in need, the local hospital, and to a home for orphans. At the turn of the century, there was a special collection for widows and orphans of those killed in the South African War, the money being sent through the Mayor’s Fund. A similar fund had been raised in Bridge Street during the Crimean War. Gifts were regularly sent to George Müller’s orphanage in Bristol in the 1860s and ’70s and to missionaries in Australia, China, Singapore, India, Norway, Italy and Spain, Venezuela and the Faeroe Islands.

The elders in earlier days also had to consider matters of assembly discipline from time to time. In 1884, ‘Mrs. Jones, Fishwoman, having been seen the worse for liquor, was asked by Brethren to stay away from the Lord’s table. Her case to be mentioned to the

34. David J. Beattie, *Brethren: the story of a great recovery* (Kilmarnock [1939]), p.45.

35. *Hereford Journal*, 21st March 1863.

Gathering next Lord's day.³⁶ Another similar case came before the elders in 1910: 'Mr. Preece having confessed to having been drunk very many times during August and September to be put away from fellowship until he shows proof of real repentance.'³⁷ There is another record of the elders being required to intervene with a violently quarrelsome married couple, and in 1912 we read of a Mr and Mrs Powell who were to be 'put away from the Fellowship for lying and deceit'.³⁸

The Twentieth Century

Records show that there were 208 people in fellowship in 1892 rising to 233 by 1895, however in 1905 numbers had fallen again to 186. Barton Hall initially had a gallery that helped to accommodate the large number of worshippers which in later years was blocked off. However by 1893 it appears that the elders were considering that the problem in the future would be to find a sufficient congregation to fill the building. They consulted their solicitor as to the power of the trustees of the Barton to effect the sale of the property. W.J. Humfrys replied that they would have to go to the Charity Commissioners whom, he thought, 'might authorise a sale and the investment of the sale monies in the purchase, either of another Meeting Room or of a site for one and the cost of erecting proper buildings'.³⁹ The idea was then dismissed, probably owing to difficulties over the burial ground.

The assembly was a centre for gospel outreach to the country villages roundabout and very many came into the regular services for Bible teaching. Large open air meetings were held on local farms and many came to meet with Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel. Langford states in his account:

Work among young people has always been a prominent feature of the Lord's work at Barton. Quite early meetings were held for them on Thursday afternoons, and on November 21st, 1893, we find a record: "On the application of C. Griffiths a meeting for young people of both sexes to be held on Thursday evenings in the small

36. BHA, Elders Minute Book, (M3 1881-1904), 5th December 1884.

37. *Ibid.*, (M4 1904-1921), 17th September, 1910.

38. *Ibid.*, (M4 1904-1921), 2nd March 1912.

39. Langford, *Brethren in Hereford*, p.11.

room for mutual exhortation and encouragement". In September, 1903, the Sunday School is described as containing "240 children exclusive of Bible Classes—the largest in the City. 22 teachers—more wanted".⁴⁰

World War I had a deep effect on British society, and Barton Hall was not excepted. Alfred Langford writes:

The First World War had a profound effect on the young life of the Meeting, and its termination with the return of the demobilised young men induced a wave of spiritual life and an expectation of the Lord's Coming in some degree not dissimilar to that referred to as following the Napoleonic Wars. From 1922 to 1924, an unusual experiment in democracy was tried, a monthly meeting at which any male member could express his views in matters of church government and policy. This apparently was not a success. It was in the 1920's that the name of Barton Room was changed to Barton Hall.⁴¹

The records of the time continue to show a great concern for the gospel outreach to the people of Herefordshire and also for the support of missionaries around the world, many of whom had been commended by Barton. These included in later years Mr and Mrs James Rowberry, Miriam Keyes, and Keith and Sheila Barber, all of whom served in India. Miriam Keyes continues to live in India and has been regularly supported by gifts from Barton. David Turner the son of Barton members, asked for commendation before going out to work on farms in Africa. He had a particular interest in cattle breeding and was to become one of the founders of 'Send a Cow'. David Turner has travelled extensively for this mission, particularly to Africa and to speak about its work in churches across the country. David and Esther Dexter were missionaries working in Japan who spent some years living in Hereford in the 1990s and David served as the Barton Treasurer for a time. They left Barton to return to Japan and continue their missionary work.

During the 1930s a boys' Bible class was led by William Weston. By the 1950s many young people were meeting at Barton for youth rallies that brought together teenagers in Christian fellowship, and a

40. *Ibid.*, p.10.

41. *Ibid.*, p.12.

Boys Covenanter Class was begun in 1955. Soon a girls' Covenanter class was also commenced. The Christians in the Barton meeting shared their faith and inspiration with young people coming in from surrounding villages and many of whom were to become strong Christians themselves. There was an involvement with a group known as the Herefordshire Young People's Christian Movement and Barton Hall was used for some of their meetings in 1956. There are records of continuing financial support for this organisation and of camps and Tent Mission work in the 1960s. A Sunday school work was begun in the Westfields area of Hereford which continued for many years. During the 1950s and 60s young people from around Herefordshire gathered at Barton for Saturday evening youth rallies. One of the many young people who met at Barton Hall for these Saturday evening meetings was Charles Price who grew up in the Herefordshire village of Hoarwithy. He became a Christian following a Billy Graham film in the Hereford Town Hall, and the Barton rallies were surely formative in his Christian experience. He was to become principal of Capernwray Bible School and then pastor in a very large church in Toronto, Canada, with a worldwide Bible ministry.

Youngsters were brought in by bus from the College and Hunderton estates during the 50s and 60s for 3 o'clock Sunday school. Further transport was provided by means of an old ambulance which had been purchased by Anthony Weston, a Hereford Solicitor, an elder of the Barton Assembly and the Sunday school superintendent. This reconditioned vehicle was used to bring in a dozen or so children from Credenhill, Stretton Sugwas and other villages. In the 1960s and '70s an outreach work amongst young people on the College Estate in the northwest of Hereford city was developed, mainly under the direction of Anthony Weston. Younger men who were reluctant to come to the Barton Hall met in a home on the estate. A redundant Baptist chapel at Bredwardine, a village to the west of Hereford, had also been purchased and refurbished and was known as 'Caleb'. It was used for many years as a youth centre and quiet retreat but it required a commitment to extensive maintenance and was finally sold in 1995. Many young people also

met for social activities and Christian teaching at Barton Hall but during 1991 serious concerns were raised about the behaviour of some elements of the youth. Problems of discipline and disruptive behaviour continued and sadly this work at Barton had to come to an end.

Further improvements had been required in the schoolrooms over the years for heating and lighting, but it was not until 1994 that a new kitchen, storeroom and entrance foyer were constructed at the rear of the large schoolroom. The work with young people had virtually ceased with the formation of the Challenge outreach in south Hereford in the 1990s (to be discussed in the next section) except for 'Koffee & Kids', a toddlers and carers group meeting once a week, and the reduction in the hall area was readily accommodated.

One of the major issues which arose during the latter part of the twentieth century was the role of the women in the church. In November 1969 Miriam Keyse who had been commended from Barton to missionary work in India had returned home on furlough. A Sunday evening 'squash' was arranged to welcome her, and two of the elders were of the opinion that she should not be asked to speak 'for scriptural reasons'. However, it is stated in the record that 'they conceded graciously to the majority decision.'⁴² The subject of women's participation at services, scriptural teaching, the definition of worship, tradition, and authority in the church, all became matters of much debate and controversy in letters and magazine articles. In 1985 Jack Heap, one of the Barton elders, wrote to the *Harvester* a long letter in which he stated:

I believe that the elders of each independent local church have a corporate responsibility for determining what is appropriate within N.T. guidelines, in their particular circumstances.... Differing local church practices (which already exist) do not of themselves undermine the unity of all who belong to Christ...⁴³

In February 1992 the Barton elders published this statement:

The elders have given prolonged, careful, and prayerful consideration to this matter, and have reviewed the writings of a

42. BHA, Elders' Minute Book (1952-1970), 13th November 1969.

43. Jack Heap to the editor, *Harvester*, vol. LXIV, no. 11, (November 1985), pp. 23-24.

number of respected Bible teachers of undoubted integrity and sincerity... There is no unanimity of conclusion among such teachers... Sisters are reminded that, short of teaching or having authority over a man in doctrinal or governmental matters, they are welcome, indeed encouraged to participate fully in other (other than the Breaking of Bread) meetings and activities arranged within the Fellowship.⁴⁴

This statement provoked many letters in response, many coming from female members who did not want a change and from those who disapproved on the grounds of 'holding to our present tradition'. Some noted that it would be good if more of the men were actually willing to speak up.

In 1994 the elders reiterated an earlier statement: 'After very careful consideration the Elders are inclined to the view that Scriptural authority permits sisters to participate in prayer, announcement of hymns and Scripture reading, as the Holy Spirit directs.' And they saw no biblical reason why this should not apply not only to prayer meetings or family services, but to the communion service as well:

We find it to be a Scriptural principle that we respect differences in opinion amongst our fellow Christians, we do not look for conformity of interpretation, but overriding all differences of custom and understanding must be our unity in the Spirit and our love for one another.⁴⁵

And so a degree of liberty was given to the sisters to be heard in all mixed-sex gatherings. Several of the wives of elders did in fact pray audibly at meetings for prayer on several occasions but the force of tradition held sway for the majority.

Challenge Community Church

During the latter decades of the twentieth century the numbers in fellowship declined as young people from assembly families who left to attend university often did not return. With the lack of younger members some families were led to move to other more lively churches. The demographic base of Hereford was changing and

44. BHA, BCF Elders letter to Fellowship members, 6th February 1992.

45. BHA, BCF Elders letter to Fellowship members, 21st February 1994.

Barton Hall was not favourably situated for attracting new membership although it became a matter of earnest prayer that the assembly should see growth both numerically and spiritually. As years passed many older members died and new members were slow to join. At present the regular attendance is approximately twenty-five.

Large estates that had sprung up to the south of the River Wye in Hereford in the later twentieth century offered great opportunities for evangelical outreach. Samuel and Grace Cheng were members of the Barton assembly who had come from Singapore in 1977; they ran a general store in an area known as The Oval in south Hereford. The shops in this area served the nearby Newton Farm estate which was one of the most deprived areas in the West Midlands. It remains an area with great poverty, and the effects of drink, drugs and debt are most evident.

In the 1980s the Chengs gave food to many of the hungry children who gathered around the Oval. They became burdened with the need for a Sunday school in the area and sought to acquire premises. Several options were explored but were not available to them. In 1988 Doris Weston died, and money became available to place two Portakabins on a vacant site at Treago Grove in the Newton Farm estate.

Youth work began here and developed into a mission which was later to become Challenge Community Church. It would seem however that even as youth activities were reaching out into a wider community, a sense of distance between the 'old guard' and the enthusiastic younger people was growing. The presence of a generation gap could be felt within the fellowship. In 1988 Harold Rowdon, then of the London Bible College, passed on the names of an ex-missionary couple to the elders of Barton knowing that the Fellowship had been praying for additional workers particularly amongst the youth of the city. Louis and Joyce Clifton had been missionaries working at Ika in Nigeria before returning to Wallasey where Louis taught Religious Education at a Merseyside Comprehensive school. The Cliftons were invited to come to Hereford and felt the Lord calling them to evangelisation work in the

Newton Farm Estate in the south of Hereford city. By the autumn of 1988 they had purchased a house on the estate and soon began meetings for young people in their own home and at the cabins which became known as the 'Challenge' project. Family services and youth activities were held in the cabins.

Louis Clifton had been invited to join the eldership of Barton an office in which he continued until 1996, and he and Joyce were whole heartedly commended to the work at Newton Farm. In 1991 a three-year lease on the site of the cabins expired and Council leaders expressed concerns about the area, suggesting the alternative of a permanent inter-denominational centre. The cabins did remain but by 1993 were reaching the end of their useful life and an application had been made to build on a permanent site. The local Belmont Community Centre was available for hire, the rent of £30 per month was met by Barton Christian Fellowship, and as it seemed to be serving the need for Sunday services very well the plans for a new building were put aside.

A young and gifted evangelist from Northern Ireland had come to Hereford in 1992 with the Counties Evangelistic Work. Martin Erwin was concerned for church-planting in the area and threw himself into the work of Challenge. He began working with the young people's activities and weeknight meetings which connected with children from local schools. Martin and his family settled in the area and he was to become a school governor and a well-known leader and preacher in a wide range of Christian activities. At a Church meeting in May 1996 seven members of Barton Christian Fellowship submitted their intention, 'unitedly following their sense of the Lord's calling', to form an 'autonomous' fellowship at Newton Farm/Belmont.⁴⁶ It was stated in June after questions on the financial viability of the new church that the group of workers 'felt assured of the Lord's leading, and so were happy to depend on His provision for all needs'.⁴⁷ At a service on 1 September 1996 the assembly commended those seven, which included Louis and Joyce Clifton, to go with the Lord's blessing to that work.

46. BHA, Jointly signed letter addressed to BCF Elders, May 1996.

47. *Ibid.*

'Challenge' had become recognised as an independent 'daughter' church of Barton and began to realise the need for a building of its own. Although the church was acknowledged to be the people and not the place it was strongly felt that the community needed to identify with a location which was clearly seen as a Christian church. Martin Erwin was so concerned on this issue that at the end of 2007 he approached the Barton deacons to consider the possibility of the return of Challenge to a base at Barton Hall. However the need for a visible church building in the South Wye Community was thought paramount and made a matter for urgent prayer. Early in 2008 the opportunity arose to purchase a redundant British Legion hall in the Belmont Road south of the River Wye, and although much renovation work was required it was indeed God's answer to the need for a Christian church in the area as the potential space for meeting rooms and supporting facilities was impressive. After great efforts the building was opened for use in June 2009, for Sunday services and children's activities, all but the main Hall being completed.

From the beginning Challenge Community Church was reaching out to meet the needs, practical as well as spiritual, of the people in the South Wye district which has been listed as an area of major deprivation in the West Midlands. They joined with other city churches in working with Christians Against Poverty, a national charity. God's redeeming love expressed in the Christian gospel can be demonstrated in the practical advice and support that can be given to people struggling with material and spiritual problems. Barton Christian Fellowship is respected as the 'mother church' of Challenge and gives regular financial support to Martin Erwin in his ministry.

Conclusion

This account has been primarily about two things, a movement and a building: the Christian Brethren and the Barton Hall. The church is the people and not the place. When a church settles in a building inevitably there comes concern for maintenance and decoration (or maybe 'plainness') and with finances, with attendance numbers and registers, and there develops an allegiance to the familiar place. 'Our church' can too easily become 'our comfort zone'. As Christian

people we must respond to the moving of the Holy Spirit. We are witnesses to a living faith not a static tradition. In recent years we have been able to share many activities with Christians of other denominations. Barton Christian Fellowship has come back to the foundation principle of welcoming all who truly love the Lord, our speakers may be invited from other evangelical churches, and our hearts are open to welcome the stranger. 'God is working His purposes out, as year succeeds to year' in many ways and in many places that we may never have imagined.