

A short history of Dissent in Exeter (and further afield), c.1531-1854

Between 1748 and 1854, at least 1300 Dissenters were buried in the small graveyard on Magdalen Street, Exeter. To all intents and purposes, the name “Dissenters” and the strange, extramural (i.e. “beyond the city walls”) place of burial tells us everything we need to know about this community’s *distinct* identity. The history of Dissent in Exeter and further afield is, however, rarely one of harmony. The people buried in Exeter Dissenters’ Graveyard were, broadly speaking, followers of the Presbyterian tradition, but those interred came from at least four separate congregations, divided by their views on Christian doctrine. Furthermore, Presbyterians were but one group of Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England, along with – to name a few – Independents (or Congregationalists), Baptists, “Quakers” and Methodists. The purpose of this short history is to illustrate how the common origins of these confessional groups and the tendency of subsequent governments to treat them as one community conceals tensions caused by and sometimes responsible for the tempestuous course of English history.

After 1662, as we shall see, Protestant Dissent was defined by one’s rejection of the doctrines and practices of the Church of England. However, Dissent can be defined more broadly in relation to the belief that the English Reformation had not gone far enough in dispelling the “superstitious” practices of Roman Catholicism from the Church of England. Defined this way, a history of Dissent must start with the original “dissent” of the Protestant Reformation. England had been Roman Catholic since the spread of Christianity to England in the third and fourth centuries. In 1517, Martin Luther published *The Ninety-Five Theses*, beginning a Europe-wide revolt against the Roman Catholic Church. This Reformation drove a wedge through Europe, leading to “Counter-Reformation” and the butchery of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Fourteen years after Luther published his *Theses*, however, he found a supporter in the Exonian, Thomas Benet. In 1531, Benet was imprisoned for openly opposing the authority of the Pope. Convicted, Benet was executed at Livery Dole, Heavitree, by the excruciating method of being burnt at the stake. According to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, Benet withstood the flames and ‘did never stir nor strive, but most patiently abode the cruelty of the fire, until his life was ended.’¹ To this day, Benet is commemorated by an obelisk standing not far from the Dissenters’ Graveyard, on the junction of Denmark and Barnfield Roads.

During the reign of Henry VIII, England broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and Thomas Benet became one of many Protestant “martyrs”. However, settlement was not straightforward. English Catholics opposed the Reformation, leading to the bloodiest chapter in Exeter’s history. In 1549, a group of Roman Catholics from Cornwall and Devon marched towards London in opposition to the new, Protestant prayer book. The rebels besieged Exeter, which remained loyal to King Edward VI and the new, reformed religion. In August, thousands of the rebels were cruelly massacred by loyalist troops at Clyst Heath, just outside Exeter, and the siege was summarily relieved, spelling the end of the rebellion.² Although the accession of Catholic Mary Tudor led to the return of Roman Catholicism to England, her sister Elizabeth ensured a lasting, Protestant settlement. It was in the

¹ Rev. Stephen Reed Cattley (ed.), *The acts and monuments of John Foxe*, 8 volumes (London, 1838), v, pp. 25-26.

² See John Sturt, *Revolt in the West: The Western Rebellion of 1549* (Exeter, 1987).

sixteenth-century's apocalyptic struggle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism that Dissent originated. The desperate fears of Counter-Reformation, typified by Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, encouraged a group of people within the Church of England to make sure Roman Catholicism could not seep back into the English Church. These people were the "Puritans"; a name of derision, but one with incredibly enduring usage. In the words of social historian Keith Wrightson, Puritans sought the reform of the ungodly multitude through 'a blend of punishment and preaching... The more ungodly features of popular culture were to be eradicated rather than contained, while at the same time every effort must be bent to the creation of a powerful preaching ministry.'³ For this reason, Puritans have come to be associated with austerity and rigid submission to the Bible.

Puritanism was an important aspect of Exeter's social and political history during the later-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. At the beginning of the seventeenth-century, a group of separatists left England to build their "City Upon a Hill" in North America. We know a handful of Exonians who joined these "Pilgrims", including John Warham, who arrived in 1630 and John Maverick, who arrived between 1635 and 1636. There is also a record of 'one Mansfield' who was 'a poor, godly man of Exeter, aided to come to [New England] by a rich merchant of [England] named Marshall' although, he 'grew rich', thereby losing both 'godliness and wealth.'⁴ Back in Exeter, Puritanism began to dominate local government. In 1617, Ignatius Jurdain 'the "arch-puritan" of the West" in the words of a contemporary biographer, became Mayor of Exeter.⁵ Jurdain's aim was to use local courts to crack down on ungodliness – such as engaging in pastimes on the Sabbath Day – and achieve godly reformation in Exeter.⁶ During the 1630s, however, the unstoppable force of Reformation came up against the immovable object of the ceremonial and hierarchical policies of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. In 1642, accelerated by the irreconcilable positions of those conforming to and dissenting from Laudianism, one hundred years of religious division raced to the surface in a bloody confrontation between King and Parliament. Although historians still debate what caused the English Civil Wars (sometimes the "English Revolution" or the "Wars of the Three Kingdoms"), religion was a prominent factor.⁷ Broadly speaking, the Puritans who had chased further reformation and actively opposed Laud's measures came out in support of Parliament. In the words of one Puritan, Richard Baxter, being 'perswaded fully both of the Parliaments good endeavours for Reformation' endeared him to Parliament's cause.⁸ Following three bloody wars (responsible for the deaths of a larger proportion of the English population than the First World War) and the execution of Charles I, an era of Puritan government was ushered in. With Bishops dismissed and the Church of England disbanded, the victors of the English Civil Wars were able to pursue the "thorough reformation" dreamt of by Baxter and his fellow Puritans. With the empowerment of the godly, however, emerged the inherent schism of those who supported Parliament.

³ Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (London, 1982), p. 208.

⁴ Charles Henry Pope, *The Pioneers of Massachusetts : a descriptive list, drawn from records of the colonies, towns and churches and other contemporaneous documents* (Boston, MA, 1900), p. 478, 306, 299.

⁵ Mark Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction: Rebellion and Civil War in an English City* (Exeter, 1996), pp. 19-20.

⁶ Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, pp. 22-23.

⁷ See John Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow, 1993), pp.31-175.

⁸ Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), p. 39.

The English Revolution brought into focus the different “Reformations” occurring among England’s godly. Historians tend to depict four key groups of Reformed Protestants in the mid-seventeenth century. Firstly, there were the “Presbyterians” – Puritans who wanted to reform the established Church along the lines of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Scottish Kirk. Secondly, there were the “Independents” or “Congregationalists”, who believed, by biblical example, that each congregation should be independent. Thirdly, there were “Baptists” (or in contemporary, derogatory parlance “Anabaptists”) who, although broadly agreeing with the ecclesiology of the Independents, were characterised by their opposition to infant baptism. Finally, representing other, smaller sects which appeared during the English Revolution were the Religious Society of Friends. Derided by all other religious groups, these “Quakers” were defined by, amongst other things, their emphasis on the possibility of a direct experience of Jesus Christ and the spiritual equality of women. Following Parliamentary victory and the establishment of a Republic (or “Commonwealth” and, later, “Protectorate”), differing interpretations over how best to achieve Reformation took centre stage. The Presbyterians, many of whom opposed the execution of Charles I, were pushed into the background, while the Independents – like Oliver Cromwell himself – took up the reins of government. Elsewhere, the Quakers experienced persecution which would come to underpin their confessional identity.

Despite the fact that all of these groups pursued Reformation, they differed over the its extent and the means to achieve it. In Exeter, these differences were all too clear. Possessing a strongly Puritan corporation, Exeter came out in support of Parliament in 1642, leading to Royalist siege and subsequent occupation, before being recaptured by Parliament in 1646. After Parliament’s victory, Presbyterian and Independent groups failed to reconcile, leading to the physical division of Exeter Cathedral into two separate congregations; one Presbyterian, one Independent.⁹ Baptist principles came to Exeter with Parliament’s army in the 1640s, but it wasn’t until 1649 that they had a fully fledged congregation at Deanery Hall, before moving to St. Paul’s Church.¹⁰ Although Quaker missionaries visited Exeter during the 1650s, the Religious Society of Friends would have to wait until the 1680s before it established itself in the city.¹¹

In September 1658, Oliver Cromwell died and, in the subsequent political vacuum, England descended into chaos once more. By May 1660, with the support of many of his subjects (including the Presbyterians who opposed his father), Charles II was brought back to reign over his kingdoms. With what appears to have been a remarkable clemency, but was probably more likely a strategic move, only those responsible for his father’s death were to be punished, while others were urged to forgive and forget. Encouragingly, for those who had been granted religious freedoms under the Commonwealth, the King had promised ‘liberty to tender consciences’ (i.e. to Dissenters).¹² In 1661, a conference was held at Savoy Hospital, London, between representatives of the Church of England and Dissenting groups in an attempt to heal the nation’s wounds. Unfortunately for England’s Dissenters, the Savoy Conference achieved little for them and it became quickly apparent

⁹ Allan Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter, 1650-1875* (Manchester, 1962), p. 12.

¹⁰ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 15.

¹¹ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, pp. 15-16.

¹² For the full text of Charles II’s 1660 “Declaration of Breda”, see Samuel Rawlson Gardiner, *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution, 1625-1660* (Oxford, 1906), pp. 465-467.

that the Restoration would not bring about the fulfilment of godly reformation. The “Cavalier Parliament” which met at Westminster in the same year, named for its strongly formerly Royalist membership, passed legislation in an attempt to quell the Puritan spirit and ensure the “Great Rebellion” could never happen again.¹³ In 1662, the *Act of Uniformity* mandated that every parish minister must conform to the “39 Articles” of the Church of England or be ejected from their livings. As it happened, thousands of ministers refused to conform, leading to “Black Bartholomew’s Day” in August 1662 and the ejection of over two-thousand ministers, many of whom had taken up office during the Revolution. According to Allan Brockett, eleven ministers were ejected from Exeter and its extra-mural parishes, including one who later conformed.¹⁴ Ministers were not the only Dissenters to suffer. The *Corporation Act* (1661) made it a criminal offence to hold public office without taking Anglican Communion and the *Conventicle Act* (1664) prohibited open-air congregations following the ejection of ministers from their churches. In fact, in 1665, the *Five Mile Act* was passed, making sure that no Dissenting minister was allowed to come within five miles of their former living. These penal laws, usually misattributed to the Earl of Clarendon and referred to as the “Clarendon Code”, became the legislative face of institutionalised prejudice against those who would not conform to the rites and practices of the Church of England. This “experience of defeat” was summed up in the May 1661 diary entry of Thomas Larkham, then minister of an Independent congregation at Tavistock, Devon, which had allied itself with a similar congregation under Lewis Stucley in Exeter during the 1650s.¹⁵ On witnessing a new, Church of England minister enter town, Larkham complained how ‘the people of God [were] something saddened’ by the accompanying ‘riding, running, ringing among superstitious, ignorant, prophane people.’¹⁶ In Exeter itself, Presbyterians no longer worshipped together, but the Independents continued to hold conventicles.¹⁷

If the legislation passed by the Cavalier Parliament in the 1660s and 1670s was aimed at quelling Dissent, its most recognisable effect seems to have been the hardening of Dissenting identity. In the words of historian John Spurr, ‘Puritanism was adapting to new circumstances and re-forming in the guise of Dissent: Puritanism was evolving, not dying... after 1662.’¹⁸ In 1672, the King’s *Declaration of Indulgence* finally offered the ‘liberty to tender consciences’ promised at the Restoration. Thousands of Dissenters came forward asking for licenses to hold meetings at various buildings around England. In Exeter, there were a total of nineteen Dissenting congregations; most of which were Presbyterian.¹⁹ Dissenting hopes, however, were to be dashed once more. The *Declaration* was repealed in 1673 by a Parliament consumed with fears about Roman Catholicism, which had been “indulged” by the same declaration. In the same year, Parliament passed the *Test Act*, which

¹³ See Paul Seaward, *The Cavalier Parliament and the Reconstruction of the Old Regime, 1661-1667* (Cambridge, 1988).

¹⁴ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 21.

¹⁵ For the “experience of defeat”, see Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat : Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London, 1984); Susan Hardman Moore, ‘Larkham, Thomas (1602–1669)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols. (Oxford, 2004), xxxii, pp. 565-567.

¹⁶ Susan Hardman Moore (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Larkham, 1647-1669* (Woodbridge, 2011), p. 244.

¹⁷ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 26.

¹⁸ John Spurr, ‘Later Stuart Puritanism’, John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 90.

¹⁹ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 37.

enjoined all Dissenters and Roman Catholics to receive the sacrament of Anglican Holy Communion within three months of holding office. For the remainder of Charles II's reign, Dissenters faced renewed persecution. This was particularly the case during the 1680s, when many Dissenters supported efforts to exclude Charles' brother, James, Duke of York, from the throne as a Roman Catholic. In February 1685, Charles died and James acceded to the throne. In the following June, James, Duke of Monmouth, a possible alternative to the succession, landed at Lyme Regis, Dorset, and thousands of West Country people – some of whom were from Exeter and many more from East Devon – joined his army. Among these were Dissenters, taking the opportunity to regain violently the freedoms lost by the restoration of the Stuarts in 1660. The Rebellion, however, was a failure and, following defeat at the Battle of Sedgemoor, hundreds of supporters were brutally hanged, drawn and quartered having been prosecuted by Judge George Jeffreys at the so-called "Bloody Assizes".²⁰

James continued to rule for three years. In 1687, he issued his own *Declaration of Indulgence*, which offered freedoms to Dissenters and, alarmingly for the majority of the population, Roman Catholics. It was at this time that a Presbyterian Meeting House was built at the bottom of South Street and named in James' honour.²¹ In 1688, fearing for the future of English Protestantism, William of Orange was invited over from Holland to govern in James II's place. This "Glorious Revolution" was seen by many Dissenters as a source of hope, particularly as William might be encouraged to comprehend Dissenters within the Church of England or align it with the Dutch Reformed Church. In reality, Dissenters were not to be comprehended; they were instead given "toleration", thereby relegating them to 'second class status.'²² The end of the seventeenth century marks a turning-point for Dissenting identity. After a century in which much blood had been shed in an attempt to reform the Church of England and to ensure the nation remained Protestant, Dissenters began to accept and embrace their position in English society. Rather than fight for the "Old Cause", Dissenters began holding public office by doing the bare minimum to conform; what was referred to at the time as "occasional conformity". In Exeter, the turn of the eighteenth century saw the Dissenting interest manifested in local and electoral politics. The "Whigs" – a party which originated in campaigns to exclude James, Duke of York, from the throne in the late 1670s and 1680s – took on the "Tories" in political debates informed by confessional identity. In Exeter, William Glyde, a brewer, was elected in 1679 amid cries of 'down with the church!'²³ Following Glyde's period in office, the dominance of the Cathedral in local politics brought about the long ascendancy of Edward Seymour, a strongly Anglican figure, until his death in 1708.²⁴

According to John Spurr, the treatment of Dissenters as a coherent group by their detractors 'helped [them] develop a stronger sense of their shared interests and common tradition.'²⁵ Consequently, towards the end of the seventeenth century, Dissenters tried to

²⁰ See Robin Clifton, *The Last Popular Rebellion: The Western Rising of 1685* (London, 1984).

²¹ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 54.

²² Spurr, 'Later Stuart Puritanism', p. 93.

²³ Basil Duke Henning, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1660-1690* (London, 1983), I, p. 199.

²⁴ Henning, *Hist. of Parl.*, i, p. 198; Eveline Cruickshanks, Stuart Handley and D. W. Hayton (eds.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1690-1715* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 141-144.

²⁵ Spurr, 'Later Stuart Puritanism', p. 90.

heal their differences. In 1691, Presbyterians and Independents attempted what has been referred to as the “Happy Union” to encourage inter-confessional cooperation. In Devon the “United Brethren” was founded to organise the education, training and regulation of Dissenting ministers and from the mid-1690s onwards, the General Assembly of this cooperative met at Exeter.²⁶ However, as argued by John Spurr, attempts at union were a ‘false dawn’ because of deep-running doctrinal divisions and tensions about congregational independence.²⁷ Indeed, it was division over doctrinal issues – the sort of division which had physically separated Independents and Presbyterians worshipping in Exeter Cathedral during the 1640s and 1650s – which dominated the history of Dissent over the subsequent two-hundred years.

During the 1710s, a controversy emerged among Dissenting Protestants over how God should be defined. The “orthodox” or “Trinitarian” view held that God was three distinct persons (i.e. the father, son and Holy Spirit) and yet of one substance. On the other hand, “Arians” (later “Unitarians”) believed there was no scriptural basis for this interpretation. Consequently, in Exeter and elsewhere, ministers began to define themselves in relation to the Trinitarian-Arian split. At this time, Exeter saw an increase in the new theology, with the ministers of James’ Meeting, James Peirce and Joseph Hallett II, ejected for their Arianism. In 1720, both men were appointed ministers at a new chapel at the Mint.²⁸ By 1715, the General Assembly of the United Brethren had expelled anyone who believed in Arianism, thereby erecting a barrier to future divisions within their constituent congregations.²⁹ By 1750, under the ministry of Micaiah Towgood, James’ Meeting adopted similarly Unitarian views.³⁰ In 1760, James’ Meeting took up residence in a brand new meeting house in South Street, called George’s after the current incumbent of the throne. Bow Meeting, another Presbyterian congregation, remained orthodox, while Little Meeting had closed altogether.³¹ Following the lead of the Quakers, who had their own graveyard nearby, the Arians of James’ Meeting House began burying their dead outside the City walls at a cemetery on Magdalen Street in 1748. Concomitant with the Reformation’s emphasis on the authority of the Bible, Dissenters rejected the use of the Book of Common Prayer necessary for burial services in parish churches and, anyway, saw no need to bury the dead within consecrated ground. Indeed, to bury people close to altars and shrines was considered a superstitious remainder of Roman Catholicism.³² In cities like London, this opinion led to the burial of Dissenters at Bunhill Fields; now famous as the final resting place of, amongst others, John Bunyan (author of *A Pilgrim’s Progress*) and William Blake. Despite the Trinitarian-Arian split, the burial ground was also used by members of the Little and Bow Meetings before they closed for good in 1750 and 1794 respectively.³³

Traditionally supportive of the Whigs and later the Liberal Party, Dissenters came to be identified with radical politics towards the end of the eighteenth century. In English dissenting congregations, one might have heard support for both the American and the

²⁶ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 64.

²⁷ Spurr, ‘Later Stuart Puritanism’, p. 101.

²⁸ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, pp. 81, 93.

²⁹ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 96.

³⁰ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 106.

³¹ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 109.

³² Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, religion, and the family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford, 1998), p. 333-337.

³³ With thanks to Beryl Coe of the *Exeter Dissenters’ Graveyard Trust* for this information.

French Revolutions of the 1770s and 1780s.³⁴ Indeed, Exeter Unitarian minister Timothy Kenrick got into trouble in July 1791 for speaking out against the Birmingham Riots, which had been sparked by opposition to support among Dissenting congregations for the French Revolution.³⁵ Such was the disdain for Kenrick's politics among the "respectable" middle classes that a splinter group, made up of former members of his congregation, founded a meeting at the site of the old city gaol.³⁶

The Dissenters' Graveyard closed its gates in 1854, when, according to Allan Brockett, Exeter's Dissenting community made up just under two-fifths of the city's church-going population.³⁷ At this time Dissenters from Exeter and further afield were strongly linked with the government of England and its empire. Dissenters, like the Exonian Baring and Bowring families, were prominent figures in the city's booming, transnational wool trade. Sir John Bowring would later become the Governor of Hong Kong.³⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, then, many of the obstacles in the way of English Dissenters had been removed. In 1826, University College London, the first university to accept Dissenting students, was founded and two years later, the *Corporation Act* and *Test Act* of Charles II's reign were finally repealed. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, laws which refused the burial of Dissenters in parish cemeteries were repealed. When writing a history of Dissent during the three-hundred years following the Protestant Reformation, one witnesses how the (sometimes treacherous) path of English history is indebted to the religious and political impulses of the sometimes united, sometimes divided communities to which those buried in the Exeter Dissenters' Graveyard belonged.

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³⁴ See James E. Bradley, *Religion, revolution, and English radicalism : nonconformity in eighteenth-century politics and society* (Cambridge, 1990).

³⁵ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 142.

³⁶ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, p. 168.

³⁷ Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter*, pp. 232-233.

³⁸ Gerald Stone, 'Bowring, Sir John (1792–1872)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols. (Oxford, 2004), vi, pp. 987-990.