

A History of Battle Non-Conformity 1696-1793

Presbyterians 1696-1773, Independent Calvinists and Baptist Calvinists 1776-1780-1793



In England Presbyterianism was established in secret in 1572. Thomas Cartwright is thought to have been the first English Presbyterian and his controversial lectures at Cambridge University condemning the hierarchy of the Elizabethan Church of England led to his dismissal by Archbishop John Whitgift and his prudent emigration abroad.

During the Commonwealth England and Wales followed Scotland in turning to Presbyterianism. In 1643 Parliament abolished diocesan administration and in 1646 the offices of archbishop and bishop were formally abolished.

In 1647, by an act of the Long Parliament under the control of Puritans, the Church of England permitted Presbyterianism. The situation concerning dioceses was reversed at the Restoration in 1660, so the break in diocesan records was comparatively short, but the re-establishment of the monarchy in 1660 brought the return of episcopal church government in England. If any clergy did not conform to the authorised church by St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1662, they did not get paid and were unceremoniously thrown out of their vicarages, often into poverty.

The Presbyterian Church in England continued in non-conformity outside of the established church. The ministers displaced under the Act of Uniformity (1662), amounting in total to about 20% of the clergy, often 'went underground' to avoid fines or even deportation to the American colonies. Many lived from hand to mouth until ten years later in 1672 they could once more be licensed to hold services. Henry Fisher, the dean of St. Marys in Battle circa.1645 – 1664, was a Presbyterian but he must have signed the Act of Uniformity as he served after 1662. Henry Fisher has been recorded elsewhere as 'Oliver Cromwell's chaplain'. Many others are so designated, it was probably a synonym for being a Presbyterian.

Thirty two years after 1662, in 1696, the Rev. Burnard¹ a Presbyterian disciple settled at Lewes. Soon afterwards he started undertaking regular visits to Battle, nearly 40 km (24 miles) away. He probably did a circuit of villages and towns but Burnard's zeal must have been very great because travelling around Sussex in those days was not easy. The result of his endeavours was the establishment in Battle in 1716 of a resident Presbyterian minister, a Mr William Potter, a "gentleman of character and ability." Following this the Presbyterians led the way for the return of non-conformity in Battle, forming a congregation of some size (120 persons in 1717, out of a possible population of approx.600)^{2 3}and owning a building on Mount Street for their meetings. The second Battle Presbyterian minister was the Rev. Samuel Ashmore, followed by the Rev John Smith. He in turn was succeeded in 1740 by the Rev John Whittel, who moved to Brighton in about 1747, when the Rev David Jenkins took over.

At the beginning of the Rev. Jenkins' twenty-five years the Presbyterians were flourishing and he was said to have been "evangelical and able". As years went on he apparently found it increasingly difficult to cope with the Universalist doctrine that was spreading and Presbyterianism petered out in Battle by 1773. For some years the chapel was closed and the residual congregation must have worshipped in members' houses. It should also be noted that the benefactors of Battle, David and Elizabeth Langton, were clearly strong Presbyterians, with David giving a legacy on his death to the Rev David Jenkins, and his widow Elizabeth later leaving money in her will of 1792 to found a local school for poor children. The Langton name persists in the name of the present local primary school – Battle and Langton

Just after the death of David Jenkins, George Gilbert, an Independent Calvinist from Heathfield, known as the "Apostle of Sussex," came to Battle to hold services. *"The occasion of Mr. Gilbert's coming to the town,"* says William Vidler (who would himself be a critical person in 1793) *"was thus: There was a poor man, one William Sweetenham, that came from Brighton to Battle to make bricks. This person loved the Gospel, but he could go nowhere to hear it nearer than Heathfield, which is ten miles from Battle; he therefore gave Mr. Gilbert an invitation to come to his house to preach. He accepted the invitation and in January, 1776, he came and preached to about 40 people in the evening, and the Word seemed to be well received."* George Gilbert paid further visits in February and March, after which Mr. Sweetenham's landlord forbade the preaching (presumably it was loud) and a "conversation" took place instead. *"Several persons seemed to be in earnest about their salvation, the appearance of which set the whole town in confusion."* The Battle group also had visits from preachers supported by the Countess of Huntingdon⁴ who gave money to support the Calvinist Methodist cause including support for the building of 64 chapels.

George Gilbert was obviously a man of charisma. He was born at Rotherfield in 1741 and was said to have been "A wild, reckless and immoral soldier." In 1759 he had joined a regiment of light horse under General Elliott, who was engaged in defending Hanoverian interests against the French. He went through three campaigns of the "Seven Years' War" and distinguished himself by capturing a French standard; so he was a brave man as well. He returned to England in 1763. Soon after, while at Nottingham in 1766, Gilbert was converted to 'Methodism'. After this he became an overseer on the estate of his former commanding officer, by now Lord Heathfield, at Heathfield Park. Presumably by then he was no longer 'wild, reckless and immoral' and Lord Heathfield had recognised that. He went around Sussex villages conducting religious meetings. He first concentrated on Rotherfield, then Crowborough. His spare time was filled with village preaching *"till he had introduced the message of His mercy into more than forty different parishes."* He eventually became pastor of an Independent chapel at Heathfield being paid £28 per year, later £40. He built his own house and filled it mainly with furniture that he made himself. He stepped down and became an Assistant Minister in 1809 and died on 23rd March 1827, aged 86 years, after a ministry of 60 years.

Following Gilbert's visits when he preached in the open air under the Watch or Great Oak at the north entrance to the town, in 1776 a small group of people formed an Independent Calvinist Church in Battle. They gathered regularly for worship, initially worshipping in a room of a house in The Mount⁴. A youth called William Vidler joined this church and the

next year he started lay-preaching. Under Vidler's Independent ministry, while he still worked with his father as a stonemason, the number of members rose rapidly from 15 to 150.

It seems that from 1777-1780 there was no formal minister, but in 1780 Vidler and some others, persuaded of the correctness of believer's baptism (as opposed to infant baptism), were baptised by Thomas Purdy, a Baptist minister in Rye. A majority of the Independent Calvinist Church then re-organised as a Baptist Calvinist Church on 28 March 1780. Nicholas and William Slatter, Joseph Fuller, Daniel Wood, Thomas Mephram, Edward French, William Ashby, Thomas and Ann Hasleden, Stephen Spilstead, Charity Sweetenham, and Elizabeth Ashdown were its first signed up members, with William Ashby elected Deacon, they then called William Vidler as minister. In addition there is a record of the appointment of J Parker as Deacon, 25 Dec 1780.

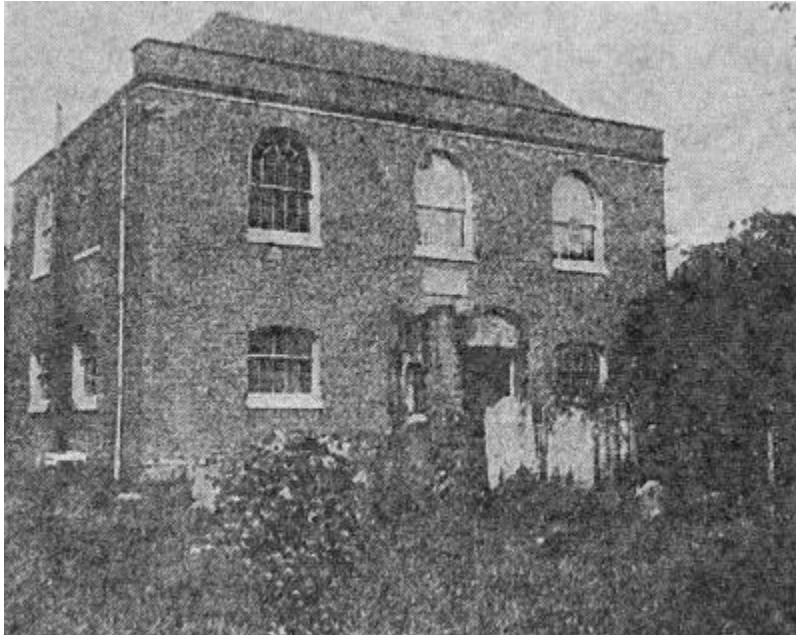
It is therefore from 28 March 1780 that the 'Baptist Calvinist Church of God' at Battle existed. At first they met in a house on 'The Mount' possibly the same house as mentioned above, but in 1782 this church bought a house described as 'the old Presbyterian building'. This may be the piece of land of 400 sq m (1/10th acre) with an 'edifice or building called a meeting place' described in a 99 year lease from Sir Godfrey Webster to Lester Harvey Esq., dated 5 April 1791 with a ground rent of one old penny per year⁵. Just who Lester Harvey was is not clear, but he may have acted as an intermediary and then re-assigned the lease to the Church. The Church members pulled this old Meeting House down in 1789 and bought just over 890 sq m (1/5th acre) of part of an adjacent orchard for £60.



Extract from old tithe map with overlays. The sites bought by the Baptist Calvinists in 1780. The old Presbyterian house is marked in yellow and the orchard land in red

This left them £160 in debt for the land, most of which was found from members and friends. They then created a new church 13.4 m (44 feet) long and 9.75 m (32 feet) wide with two balconies and a vestry plus a burial ground. The new building opened on 11 April 1790, but left them with another debt of £700. Consulting the tithe map of 1840 and the Ordnance Survey map of 1873, this chapel stood on the same side but further up Mount Street towards Caldbec Hill than today's Zion Chapel and was set back some distance from

the road in its own churchyard. Mountjoy did not exist as a road at that time, but there was a footpath corresponding to it and this was the northern boundary of the site.



From an old newspaper cutting. The church built by the Baptist Calvinists which opened in 1790

In the next two or three years chapel affairs became turbulent and Vidler was essentially at the core of this. A separate paper covers the life of William Vidler, but as noted above he became a Baptist under the influence of Thomas Purdy of Rye in 1780. He married Charity Sweetenham, William's daughter, on 7 September 1780. They had six children William b. 13 Oct 1782 Ebenezer b. 24 Sep 1784 Charity b. 1 Jan 1787 Rebekah b. 3 Nov 1789 Sarah b. 15 Jan 1792 and Elhanan b. 16 Nov 1793.

Vidler was a powerful preacher, often travelling to villages around Battle and preaching in the open air. During the mid-1780s he read Elhanan Winchester's *'Dialogues on The Universal Restoration'*, published in 1788. Elhanan Winchester was an American who, through John Murray, had adopted the doctrine of Universal Restoration. Winchester had come to England to spread this doctrine. Vidler travelled and met doubters of orthodox Baptist doctrine including Andrew Fuller and met followers of Winchester in Lincolnshire. He returned to Battle a strong believer in the universal restoration of all humankind. In 1791 he undertook further travel among Baptist churches to collect funds for the Battle chapel. He had little success with whittling down the £700 still owed, but the travels allowed him to think a lot, perhaps a bit too much..... by the end of 1792 he had professed Universalism.

"It is long since I wrote anything of the state of my soul" he wrote in his diary on 22 August 1792. *"I have lately been much stirred up again by reading Mr. Winchester on the final restoration of all things, which doctrine . . . I am constrained to say I believe."*

Locally this led to turmoil in the Baptist Calvinist Church and a huge debate took place on Christmas Day and New Year's Eve 1792 followed by a schism. A large majority loyally remained with Vidler as Universalists and some later became Unitarians, but 15 people left

the church and continued as Particular Baptists. The Universalist majority kept the chapel. They also kept the £700 debt....which would not be paid off for a very long time. The chapel was renamed after 1793, but the chapel had the legend over the entrance "UNITARIAN CHAPEL – A. D. 1789", which it would not have had from the time of its opening as a Baptist Calvinist Church in early 1790. Walter Burgess of the Unitarian Historical Society, writing in 1928 confirmed that this was a retrospective plaque put in position at a later date during a restoration. Vidler and his Universalist/Unitarian congregation were duly expelled and excommunicated by the local Baptist association in the summer of 1793. The Minute Book of the Baptist Church at Rye, states:

"July 1st 1793. At a quarterly Church meeting agreed to disown the Church at Battle as a sister church on account of Mr. William Vidler and many of his people imbibing the erroneous doctrine of Universal Restoration. Also agreed to request Brother Spilstead, Senr., and Sister Ann Howard not to commune with them any longer." The 1794 records of the Baptist Association state: "Mr. Vidler's society at Battle having avowed the error of Universal Restoration was separated from the Association in 1793."

So there was a situation from 1793 where there were two radical Non-conformist churches in Battle. Vidler's Universal Baptists who via Universalism would become Unitarians and the small rump of Particular Baptists. The latter might claim that they were the continuity of the Particular Baptist church formed in 1780, but they had lost their chapel and now had to build again. They survived eventually becoming the Battle Baptists who are still very active today. The names of those who joined and left the church from 1780 (when it became Calvinistic Baptist) until 1792 (and leavers after early 1793 when it became Universalist) are available. These are kept at ESRO as Unitarian files and they record the 15 people who continued as Particular Baptists and many others are recorded as either withdrawn or been excluded by 1800 or soon after.

There are many still recognisable local names and the full list is given below in recognition of this – maybe a forebear will be spotted. The author for example recognises his own paternal ancestors Cornelius Ford (*sic*) who married Esther Hyland plus his Hounsell maternal great (x n) uncles. The list is in alphabetical order.

1780 Ashby William To U.S.A.	1788 Barton Joseph to Codnor Derbyshire Aug 1789
1783 Ashby Ann To U.S.A.	1783 Bavers Richard Excluded
1780 Ashdown Elizabeth now JONES excluded	1792 Beechen John
1792 Austin Sarah Withdrawn	1780 Bennet Richard
1781 Backshell Mary now BURGESS	1785 Beny Mary Died (before 1800)
1789 Backshell Jane To Diss Norfolk 1790	1791 Bine Henry Dead before 1800
1780 Badcock William	1790 Bishop William to Lewes
1789 Badcock Dinah now PEPPER	1787 Blundell Elizabeth
1790 Badcock Mary	1787 Blundell Stephen Jnr
1792 Badcock Thomas	1780 Bodle Abraham
1785 Barham Arthur Excluded	1785 Bray Lucy
1785 Barham Mary Excluded	1781 Bretton William
1788 Barron Hugh Excluded 23/10/1797	1788 Bryant Sarah Excluded 25/6/1792
1786 Bartholomew Rich. Excluded	1787 Burgess Mercy Died May 1793
1786 Bartholomew Jeny From Rye	1787 Burgess William
1786 Bartholomew John	

1786 Butcher Elizabeth Excluded November
1790
1781 Carter Mrs Elizabeth Died 21/2/1803
1781 Carter Ann
1783 Carter Mary
1788 Carter Hannah now BLUNDELL - by 1800
1780 Chapman Hannah to Brighton
1781 Chase? Ann now CUTBERT withdrawn
5/5/1793
1792 Coleman William Excluded (after 1800)
1786 Cooper Jane now HOUNSELL excluded
1780 Cramp Judith Died 28/3/1797
1780 Cramp Samuel
1785 Cramp Mary
1792 Cramp Robert
1792 Cramp Sarah Dead - before 1800
1788 Creace John
1788 Creace Mrs.
1787 Crunden Thomas Excluded 23/10/1797
1781 Cutbert John Withdrawn 5/5/1793
1785 Cutbert Sarah Senr. Died 10/9/1805
1781 Dadswell Robert to Brighton 1792
1785 Deeprose Elizabeth
1786 Deeprose John
1782 Dennet(t) Jane now SLATTER - before
1800
1788 Dennet(t) Mary now HOLMES - before
1800
1784 Douch Grace Excluded (after 1800)
1788 Douch John
1787 Dunk Henry Withdrawn by 1800
1787 Dunk Mary Withdrawn by 1800
1790 Dunk Henry Died 1792
1785 Easton Jenny Died February 1793
1787 Easton Stephen
1792 Easton Edward
1784 Eaton Charles
1790 Eaton Thomas Withdrawn after 1800
1790 Eaton Hannah Withdrawn after 1800
1792 Eldridge Thomas Died before 1800
1785 Elliot(t) Deborah
1785 Elliot(t) Wm.
1792 Elliot(t) Deborah Jnr. now HOBBS by
1800
1790 Ellis Mrs. Withdrawn by 1800
1791 Ford Cornelius
1784 Foster Ann
1786 Foster Edward
1791 Freeman ?
1780 French Edward
1783 French Mercy

1780 Fuller Ann to Brighton
1780 Fuller Elizabeth now HAZELDEN
withdrawn 1792
1780 Fuller Joseph Died before 1800
1787 Fuller Stephen
1788 Gates William Withdrawn by 1800
1792 Glide/Glydd Samuel Died before 1800
1792 Glide/Glydd Ann
1780 Gutsell Samuel Excluded (after 1800)
1783 Guy Lydia
1780 Haynes Mary
1780 Hazelden Ann Died before 1800
1780 Hazelden Thom Sr. Withdrawn by 1800
1792 Hazelden Thom Jr. Withdrawn May
1793
1790 Herod Ann to Lewes
1787 Hoad Charles Excluded after 1800
1782 Hobbs Elizabeth now GUTSELL before
1800
1790 Hobbs Edward
1790 Hobbs Jasper Died 19/5/1807 or 1809
1792 Hobbs Martha now TAYLOR before 1800
1787 Hobden Richard Withdrawn before 1800
1790 Hobden John
1791 Hobden Elizabeth Withdrawn before
1800
1792 Holman Mariah
1791 Honnysett Hannah
1792 Hounsell Richard Withdrawn by 1800
1792 Hounsell William
1792 Hounsell John Excluded after 1800
1787 Housley Thomas Excluded 1/4/1787
1789 Howard William Excluded 1795 dead by
1800
1792 Howle Susan Withdrawn by 1800
1781 Hurst Joseph
1780 Hyland John
1791 Hyland Esther now FORD by 1800
1784 Jarvis Mary now QUAlFE by 1800
1792 Jones William Withdrawn by 1800
1792 Jones Mary Died 2/2/1793
1785 Kenward John
1788 Kenward Thomas
1789 Kenward Elizabeth
1786 King William
1790 King William of Crowhurst
1790 King Mrs. Died before 1800
1784 Lacey Thomas Died September 1788
1792 Langridge Elizabeth
1792 Langridge James
1780 Laurence Thomas

1780 Laurence Ann	1790 Saxby William
1781 Lusted Abram	1792 Saxby George
1787 Martin Elizabeth	1790 Selmes Ann died 13/2/1803
1780 Mephram Thomas	1782 Sinden James Excluded before 1800
1784 Mephram Mary Died before 1800	1792 Sinnock Ann Excluded 17/12/1792
1787 Mephram Hannah Excluded 27/12/1789	1780 Slatter William Senr.
1785 Moon Elizabeth	1780 Slatter Nicholas
1792 Moon John Died after 1800	1780 Slatter George
1786 Neeve(s) Susannah Withdrawn 7/5/1793	1781 Slatter Ann now WELLER
1788 Neeve(s) Sarah Withdrawn 5/5/1793	1787 Slatter Elizabeth Died 1789
1788 Ne(e)ve(s) Honner now CRAMP before 1800	1787 Slatter Samuel Died 1791
1789 Neeve(s) Richard Excluded before 1800	1792 Slatter William Jnr.
1792 Ne(e)ve(s) Hannah	1792 Slatter Jane
1792 Ne(e)ve(s) George Died 15/5/1796	1780 Smith Ann to Brighton 1793
1792 Ne(e)ve(s) William	1781 Smith Richard to Brighton 1793
1789 Page Elizabeth	1788 Smith Hannah Withdrawn after 1800
1791 Page Thomas	1788 Smith Thomas Excluded 1796
1792 Page William	1780 Spilsted Stephen
1792 Paine Edward Died March 1804	1780 Sweetenham Charity married William Vidler
1780 Parker John	1792 Taylor Arthur
1788 Parker Jane	1792 Taylor Frances now SAXBY after 1800
1785 Pattenden John	1787 Thomsett John Excluded November 1790
1788 Pattenden Mary now HOUNDSELL - died bf. 1800	1791 Thomsett Elizabeth Died 8/4/1803
1790 Peckham Mary of Northiam	1791 Thomsett John
1792 Pepper Thomas	1780 Tollhurst Ann
1792 Pepper John to Rye	1785 Venes John Excluded November 1791
1792 Pepper Mary Withdrawn by 1800	1790 Vidler Elizabeth Died after 1800
1780 Philcox Mary	1790 Vidler William from Rye
1780 Philcox Thomas	1781 W(h)eller Mary
1791 Philcox Luke	1781 W(h)eller William from Rye
1790 Pocock Mrs.	1788 Wait Richard
1788 Pollard Sarah now EATON by 1800	1790 Wait Elizabeth Died March 1792
1782 Pugh Ann to Goodman's Field London	1792 Wait John Withdrawn before 1800
1789	1792 Weeks John
1785 Quaife William Excluded after 1800	1791 White Ruth
1780 Russell William Snr. Excluded March 1792	1782 Whiteman Edward
1785 Russell William Jnr.	1786 Wilson Thomas
1792 Russell Thomas Withdrawn before 1800	1780 Wood Elizabeth Withdrawn before 1800
1789 Sands Hannah Excluded	1780 Wood Samuel
1792 Sargent Thomas	1788 Wren(n) John
1782 Saxby Philadelphia	1789 Wren(n) Thomas to Brighton after 1800
	1791 Wren(n) Sarah now BADCOCK after 1800

Some further Baptism records are available from Sussex On-line Parish Clerks. After 1754 Baptists had to marry in Anglican churches and they should be recorded in their parish registers. Baptist marriages became legal again in 1837 if a civil registrar was in attendance.

Endnotes

1This must refer to Thomas Barnard b.1643 (in Lewes) who became joint pastor with the Rev Edward Newton at a private house in Lewes in August 1695. He was the son of a prosperous Lewes draper who also had a farm at Northease. He ministered from 1673, but was not ordained until 1687 at Glyndebourne. His wider ministry does appear to have been active from before 1696 as there is a record that he baptised someone in the sea near Hastings in 1691.

2The population had been static for a while but grew quite rapidly after this to 2040 by 1801 and 3039 by 1841

3This was an unusually large proportion of the local population, the only place in Sussex with a larger Nonconformist population was Rye where 50% of the families were Non-conformists.

4 Mount Street

5 ESRO BAT/1446

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