

## Nonconformity in Ullesthorpe

Ullesthorpe is a village in south Leicestershire. Non-conformity arrived early, with the first meeting house established in 1723 at the home of a dissenter. Between then and 1800, five more meeting houses were established, all in the homes of dissenters.<sup>1</sup> No indication is given as to their denomination, but evidence from the nineteenth century shows that Independents were present in the village at that time. There is also evidence of a Baptist presence.

### Independents

For evidence of an early arrival of Independents in the village, we are fortunate in having detailed near-contemporary accounts of their history. One such account can be found in an article published in the *Leicestershire Mercury* in 1856, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first Independent chapel in the village. It recorded that preaching began ‘about sixty years ago’, by a group of Independent dissenters who obtained an evangelical preacher from a nearby village to preach door-to-door. The measure was successful in bolstering the Independent community, and in 1806 a chapel large enough to seat 200 worshippers was formed out of an old barn house.<sup>2</sup> The article emphasised the importance of preaching by the early ministers, whose sermons were apparently so popular that some worshippers walked ‘from four to eight miles’ to attend them.<sup>3</sup>

There were 300 Independents recorded in the village on the 1829 census of meeting houses.<sup>4</sup> By then, expansion had led to the erection of a new chapel in 1825, at a cost of £800.<sup>5</sup> This ‘plain, square-built’ chapel was the result of significant growth in the Independent community – attributed, again, to the role of preaching.<sup>6</sup> At the time of the 1851 religious census, the new chapel was able to accommodate 350 worshippers, including 50 ‘free’ and 300 ‘other’ sittings. Attendance was recorded at 72 and 133 for the morning and afternoon services respectively. The corresponding figures for average attendance are 80 and 150. The census recorded a Sunday School, with lessons held both in the morning and afternoon and with an average attendance of 40.<sup>7</sup>

The chapel was renovated in 1883. This was motivated partly by a dislike of the original structure, which had been built, according to a contemporary account in the *Leicester Chronicle*, in a ‘highly puritanic order’ with walls that were ‘unsightly’, and high-backed pews described as an ‘ever-lasting torture’. Infrastructural problems were causing draught and over-ventilation. Finally, there was the growth of the Independent community and the concomitant need for a ‘more healthful and comfortable place of worship’. The renovations, funded partly by a Leicester alderman, who donated £50 to the cause, included a new floor, pulpit, heating apparatus, porch and pulpits. The walls were re-ornamented, and an extension was built to accommodate new rooms for a temperance society (the Band of Hope) as well as a Sunday School. The *Leicester Chronicle* contradicts the 1851 religious census in saying that the chapel did not contain a Sunday school until the 1870s, and it may have closed for a

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<sup>1</sup> Leicestershire and Rutland County Record Office, QS 44/1/2, Meeting house licences.

<sup>2</sup> *Leicestershire Mercury*, 7 June 1856.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/28, Return of Meeting Houses.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Hist. Gaz. & Dir. Leics* (Sheffield, 1846), p. 385.

<sup>6</sup> *The Leicester Chronicle*, 5 May 1883, ‘Congregationalism at Ullesthorpe Laying of Memorial Stones’.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, HO 129/408/14, 1851 Religious Census, entry for Ullesthorpe.

period.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the century, services were being held three times a week, on Sundays at 10.30am and 6.15pm, and on Wednesdays at 7.00pm. In contrast to the start of the century, at the end pastors were resident in the village.<sup>9</sup>

### **Baptists**

In contrast to the Independents, there is only minimal evidence for the presence of a Baptist congregation in the village. This comes from a trade directory in 1846, which noted that there was a 'place of worship' for Baptists.<sup>10</sup> However, this is not confirmed in any of the other trade directories, nor indeed by the religious censuses.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Leicester Chronicle*, 5 May 1883, 'Congregationalism at Ullesthorpe Laying of Memorial Stones'.

<sup>9</sup> *Wright's Directory of Leicestershire* (1887/8), p. 378

<sup>10</sup> White, *Hist. Gaz. & Dir. Leics* (Sheffield, 1846), p. 385