

“Basingstoke Churches and the People”

Roger Ottewill

Introduction

The title of this article is taken from the headline of two reports which appeared in the 21 March and 4 April 1903 editions of the *Hants and Berks Gazette* respectively. In the second of these, the results of two newspaper sponsored censuses of churchgoing undertaken in 1882 and 1903 were compared, with attention being drawn to the fact that in the 21 years between them the population of Basingstoke had gone up by 43.5 percent, while the increases in attendance at places of worship in the morning and evening were only 1.9 percent and 14.5 percent respectively. The observation was also made that ‘of all the denominations in the town’; it was the Established Church that ‘had made the greatest advance.’¹ Nonetheless, the censuses clearly demonstrated that, at the time they were undertaken, a wide variety of denominations were represented in the ecclesiastical landscape of Basingstoke and these contributed to the diversity and richness of the religious heritage of the town. In what follows the results of the two censuses are presented, together with those of the 1851 religious census, with a view to outlining what can be learnt from them.

1851 Religious Census

On 30th March 1851, the due date for the religious census, there were eight places of worship in the municipal borough and parish of Basingstoke and one in the adjacent parish of Eastrop, two Church of England and five dissenting. Data from the census returns are collated in the following two tables.

Table 1: Data from Sections I, III, IV and VII of the 1851 Census Returns

Secs. I and III Description	Sec. IV	Sec. VII Sitzings		
	Erection	Free	Others	Total
St Michael’s Parish Church	---	620	680	1300
St Mary’s Eastrop	---	200	---	200
London Street Chapel, Congregational Dissenters	Before 1800	200	300	500
New Road Chapel, Independent	1846	All free		n.k.
Friends Meeting House, Society of Friends	c.1828 ^a	All free		159 ^b
Primitive Methodist Connexion	1847	65	62	127 ^c
Wote Street Chapel, Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion	1802 ^d	110	215	325 ^e
Cottage House, Worting, Independent ^g	n.k. ^f	---	---	---

Notes

- a. About the year 1828 on the site of one previously existing. Enlarged 1849.
- b. Floor 93; Gallery 66. Area: Floor 619; Gallery 445 Total 1064 (presumably square feet).
- c. Standing room, 10 persons.
- d. The present chapel opened in 1802. The former bore the date of 1755.
- e. Standing room: 100 in the vestry which is also used as a Sabbath School.
- f. Not used exclusively for worship it is a dwelling house.
- g. Shown as being in the parish of Worting, although when a chapel was built it was on the Basingstoke side of the border.

Source: John A. Vickers, ed, *The Religious Census of Hampshire 1851*, Hampshire County Council, 1993

¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 April 1903.

The population of the municipal borough in 1851 was 4263 and the parish of Eastrop 62, which meant that with a total of approximately 2700 sittings it was possible to accommodate approximately 61 per cent of the population at any one time.

Turning to the number of worshippers, data from the requisite section of the census returns for the dissenting places of worship are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Data from Section VIII of the 1851 Census Returns

	Morning			Afternoon	Evening	
	Ad	Ch	Total	Total	Total	Person completing form
St Michael's	467	229	696	681	---	James Blatch, vicar
St Mary's	77	---	77	100	---	William Workman, rector
London Street	250	150	400	100	330	Alfred Johnson*
New Road	50	32	82	---	52	Luke Longman Redgrove*
Friends Meeting House	25	---	25	16	---	Richard Wallis
Primitive Methodist	40	---	40	40	100	George Lee*
Wote Street	107	68	175	71	332	William Bone*
Worting	---	---	---	---	26	Alfred Johnson*

Notes

Ad = adults.

Ch = children

* = Minister

The congregation at St Michaels on Sunday morning consisted of 467 adults and 229 children. The equivalent figures for the afternoon service were 448 and 233 respectively. There was no evening service. For Eastrop, the figures were 80 worshippers in the morning and 100 in the afternoon.

In making use of these data one important consideration concerns the issue of double counting. In other words, how many worshippers attended more than one service? For surveys undertaken in the early years of the twentieth century it was assumed that 36 percent of those attending in the morning also went to later service. Thus, for the purposes of this article the same percentage has been used in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Churchgoing Data for 1851

Denomination	Seating	Morning Total	Afternoon and Evening Total	Grand Total	Adjusted Totals ¹	% of Tot Pop ²
Nonconformist	1160	722	1067	1789	1538	35.6
Anglican	1500	776	781	1557	1278	29.5
Total	2660	1498	1848	3346	2816	65.1

Notes

1. As explained in the text, these are the totals adjusted to take account of double counting.

2. Population of Basingstoke and Eastrop combined (i.e. 4325).

As can be seen, the data from the 1851 census suggests that over 60 percent of the population of Basingstoke attended at least one service on the Sunday in question and that dissenters outnumbered Anglicans. However, these figures need to be treated with a certain amount of

caution given that, in the main, it was the clergy who submitted them. That said, it seems likely that well over 50 per cent of the population would have been at a place of worship.

One final point, it is noteworthy that at this time two mainstream Nonconformist denominations, the Wesleyan Methodists and Baptists, were not yet represented within Basingstoke's dissenting community. This was to be rectified by 1882, with the number of Nonconformist places of worship doubling from six to twelve. During this period, however, one branch of Methodism, the Bible Christians, established and then lost their foothold in the town.²

1882 Religious Census

As the report in the *Hants and Berks Gazette* makes clear this census 'was similar to that carried out in many towns of this country.'³ Unlike the 1851 census when the clergy were entrusted with completing the census forms, on this occasion 'one or more enumerators attended at each place of worship.' The count was carried out on Sunday 12th February, with the weather being 'highly favourable to a more than average congregation [and consequently] the numbers therefore may perhaps be taken as representing a rather flattering aspect of the religious life of the town.' No further comments were offered on the findings.

The results, as they were presented in the newspaper, are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Results of 1882 Census of Churchgoing

Places of Worship	Morning Attendance	Evening Attendance	Total
St Michaels ^a	514	559	1073
Eastrop Church ^a	74	95	169
Congregational Church ^a	407	336	743
Countess of Huntingdon's Church ^a	155	136	291
Wesleyan Chapel	136	121	257
Friends' Meeting House ^a	15	7	22
Baptist Chapel	90	65	155
Primitive Chapel ^a	138	147	285
New Rd Congregational Chapel ^a	24	35	59
Roman Catholic Chapel	48	64	112
Iron Room ^b	52	41	93
Longcroft Room ^b	26	35	61
Café ^b	55	130	185
Salvation Army	143	443	586
Worting Town's End Congregational Chapel ^a	8	64	72

Notes

a. Included in 1851 census

b. Plymouth Brethren preaching rooms.

No information on number of sittings was collected on this occasion.

Source: *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 February 1882.

² Roger Ottewill 'Bible Christians in Basingstoke', <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/bible-christians-basingstoke>

³ For a complete listing see Clive D. Field, 'Religion at the *fin de siècle*: a checklist of local newspaper censuses of church attendance October 1881-March 1882', *The Local Historian*, 19(1), January 2019, pp. 57-72.

To facilitate the making of comparisons, Table 5 presents the findings on a similar basis to that of Table 3.

Table 5: Summary of Churchgoing Data for 1882

Denomination	Morning Total	Evening Total	Grand Total	Adjusted Totals	% of Tot Pop ¹
Nonconformist	1249	1560	2809	2359	34.6
Anglican	588	654	1242	1030	15.1
Roman Catholic	48	64	112	95	1.4
Total	1885	2278	4163	3484	51.1

Note

1. As pointed out in the newspaper report, in 1881 the population of the parish of Basingstoke was 6681 and that of Eastrop 141, giving a total of 6822.

From the findings it is clear that between 1851 and 1882 the population of Basingstoke had increased more rapidly than the numbers attending church. Thus, in 1882, only about half of the inhabitants were at a place of worship on the census Sunday. It is notable, however, that the Established Church lost ground to the Nonconformists, with the Wesleyan Methodists, Plymouth Brethren, Strict Baptists⁴ and Salvation Army⁵ being represented in Basingstoke by 1882.

1903 Census of Attendance

The motivation for the 1903 census was clearly spelt out by the *Hants and Berks Gazette* in its report on the findings:

There has been much said recently about the declining influence of the Churches upon the people, and considerable interest has been aroused by the publication of the census of attendance at the London Churches by the “Daily News”. In important provincial towns also, notably Liverpool, similar returns have been published, and they certainly give some ground for the allegation that the churches are gradually losing their hold on the people. In view of the widespread interest awakened in this matter, we made arrangements last Sunday to take a complete census of attendance at the morning and evening services at every place of worship in the town ...⁶

The Sunday in question was 15th March 1903. The paper claimed that this was first time such a census had been undertaken in Basingstoke. Surprisingly, until pointed out by a reader, it had overlooked the one taken in 1882.

With regard to the arrangements, it went on to indicate that the ‘usual precautions were taken in order to obtain a normal attendance.’ There were no special services on the day the census was taken and only the enumerators knew in advance of the actual date.

As had been the case in 1882, ‘the weather conditions could not have been more favourable, the day being fine and bright throughout.’ In the circumstances, it was felt that the figures gave ‘a correct idea of the average Sunday attendance at places of worship in the town.’

The results as reported are shown in Table 6

⁴ Their chapel also had the titles ‘Particular’ and ‘Ebenezer’.

⁵ The arrival of the Salvation Army in the town in 1880 caused considerable controversy. See Bob Clarke, *The Basingstoke Riots: Massaganians v The Salvation Army 1880-1883* (Basingstoke, 2010).

⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 March 1903.

Table 6: Results of the 1903 Census of Churchgoing

Church of England									
		Morning				Evening			
		M ¹	W ¹	C ¹	Total	M ¹	W ¹	C ¹	Total
St Michaels ^{aa}	1500	139	226	219	584	167	289	107	563
All Saints	150	...	...	...	...	27	69	24	120
Reading Road Mission	80	...	...	...	...	10	24	17	51
May Street Mission	200	...	...	...	...	12	26	18	56
Eastrop ^{aa}	170	47	56	46	149	59	89	16	164
Total	2100	186	282	265	733	275	497	182	954
Nonconformists									
Congregational ^{aa}	600	101	130	154	385	171	224	91	486
Immanuel ^{aa}	270	26	33	31	90	29	48	16	93
Primitive Methodist ^{aa}	530	75	35	67	177	67	78	52	197
Baptist ^a	150	26	21	8	55	30	25	5	60
Wesleyan Methodist ^a	300	60	54	37	151	49	79	35	163
Salvation Army ^a	350	38	22	58	118	87	95	52	234
Railway Mission	150	...	...	...	...	42	74	37	153
Essex Hall	140	20	26	24	70	31	25	18	74
Plymouth Brethren ^a (Sarum Hill)	75	19	25	6	50	20	29	7	56
ditto (Southern Road) ^a	60	10	12	2	24	9	16	7	32
Society of Friends ^a	100	2	3	1	6	...	...	...	...
Total	2725	377	361	388	1126	535	693	320	1548
Roman Catholic									
Holy Ghost Mission ^a	75	15	24	15	54	13	19	13	45
Denominational Totals									
Church of England	2100	186	282	265	733	275	497	182	954
Nonconformists	2725	377	361	388	1126	535	693	320	1548
Roman Catholic	75	15	24	15	54	13	19	13	45
Grand Total	4900	578	667	668	1913	823	1209	515	2547

Notes

1. M = men, W = women, C = children

aa. Included in 1851 and 1882 censuses. Immanuel was previously known as the Countess of Huntingdon's Church in Wote Street. It acquired its new name in 1894.

a. Included in 1882 census

In the newspaper report, it was mentioned that there were other religious gathering not included in the table. 'In the afternoon the P[leasant] S[unday] A[fternoon] open meeting was held in the Congregational Church and there was an attendance of 342 (200 men, 115 women and 27 children); at the Railway Mission there was a congregation of 70 (13 men, 33 women, and 24 children); and at the Salvation Army a congregation of 174 (66 men, 58 women and 50 children).' In addition, 400 children attended a special service at St John's school and 20 infants a special service in the Wesleyan Schoolroom,

Source: *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 March 1903

Between 1882 and 1903 just two new Nonconformist places of worship had been opened. One was the un-denominational Railway Mission Hall, which was situated in May Street, and the other, Essex Hall in Essex Road, which was the home of the Strict Brethren. One place of worship, New Road Independent Chapel, closed.⁷ By contrast the Anglicans opened three new places of worship, All Saints Church, and the two mission halls in Reading Road and May Street respectively.

Table 7: Summary of Churchgoing Data for 1903

Denomination	Seating	Morning Total	Evening Total	Grand Total	Adjusted Totals	% of Tot Pop ¹
Nonconformist	2725	1126	1548	2674	2269	22.5
Anglican	2100	723	954	1677	1417	14.1
Roman Catholic	75	54	45	99	80	0.8
Total	4900	1913	2547	4450	3766	37.4

Note

1. In 1901 the population of Basingstoke was 9793 and of Eastrop, 283, giving an overall total of 10076.

As had been the case in 1882 and as mentioned in the Introduction, the growth in population was by no means matched by the increase in the number of worshippers. Consequently, there was again an overall decline in the percentage of the population attending a place of worship on the census Sunday. In commenting on the findings, the newspaper highlighted what it described as ‘some startling facts.’ These were:

... taking the evening figures, which are the highest, we find that there were 7,246 people (4,765 being adults) who went to no place of worship on Sunday evening. This is a startling statement, and after making the most generous allowances for those who are engaged on Sunday duty, such as railwaymen, police etc., and those invalided or having home duties to attend to, it is manifest that there is an exceedingly large non-church-going population. Another fact of striking import is the large number of people who are to be seen in the streets during the hours of divine service.

The report went on to describe the situation as a ‘problem awaiting solution’ on the part of those ‘who have the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants at heart.’⁸

By way of conclusion, the newspaper offered ‘to open ... [its] columns for the publication of suggestions from representative ministers and laymen for the solution of the problem as to how the absentees from public worship are to be reached and influenced’.⁹ In the main, however, it would seem that clergy and lay people chose not to take up the newspaper’s offer. Nonetheless, as previously indicated, a reader did draw attention to the fact that a similar census had been undertaken in 1882. Furthermore, although there was no further mention of the census in the newspaper’s correspondence columns, at least two clergymen referred to it in sermons. The minister of Immanuel Church (Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion), the Revd Eustace Long, did so when preaching on the text, ‘I have much people in this city’,

⁷ Roger Ottewill, ‘New Road Independent Chapel, Basingstoke’, <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/new-road-independent-chapel-basingstoke>

⁸ Reference could also have been made to the fact that by 1903 total sittings only constituted 49 percent of population compared with 61 percent in 1851.

⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 March 1903.

words from God to St Paul at Ephesus.¹⁰ Although he found the ‘result somewhat discouraging’, certainly by comparison with 1882, he argued that since then ‘the outward work done by the various Churches ... [had] in many ways greatly developed’.¹¹ Presumably this was a reference to their philanthropic activities and the increasing number of associated organisations. Nevertheless, he also pointed out that the true people of God had ‘always been few in comparison with the world’.¹² Another clergyman who responded to the census findings was the Revd Alfred Capes Tarbolton, the erudite and much respected minister of London Street Congregational Church from 1887 to 1907. He devoted a whole sermon entitled “Is churchgoing out of date?” to the topic. Reported at length, Tarbolton placed the Basingstoke results in the broader context of the London census and the investigations of Charles Booth into, amongst other things, ‘the religious influences at work among the people’.¹³ He also rehearsed the various reasons why the census results might have understated the percentage of churchgoers, concluding that: ‘I am fully persuaded that on any day you may choose to reckon the people in the churches and chapels you would not find more than half the people who more or less go there.’ However, he was by no means complacent and devoted attention to various ‘excuses’ for non-attendance. These included: ‘reasoned unbelief’; ‘the increase of individual liberty’; ‘the strain of modern life’; ‘class prejudices’; ‘the tremendous craze ... for amusements’; and dull sermons. Significantly, many resonate with explanations given by historians and sociologists, such as Alan Gilbert and Keith Robbins, to justify their claim that there was a ‘crisis of faith’ and thus reflected the perspicacity of ministers at the time.¹⁴ However, while keenly aware of the challenges they faced, few were defeatist and many adopted a positive stance. Tarbolton, for example, ended his sermon by proclaiming some of the reasons for church attendance:

... to thank God for the benefits from Him, and for the full personal redemption through Jesus Christ, and to stand in the presence of Almighty God and hear the words from the far-off land brought near by His voice.¹⁵

He also suggested that the churches should jointly undertake a house-to-house visitation designed to ‘make the careless care’.¹⁶

Surprisingly there do not appear to be any references to the surveys in Anglican sources. If they were discussed any conclusions were not reported. Presumably members of the Church of England would have been as concerned about the relative decline in churchgoing as Nonconformists, but chose not to make their opinions known at least in the public realm.

Principal Findings from the Three Censuses

What then can be learnt from the findings of the three censuses? First, taking the figures in Tables 3, 5 and 7 at face value, there was a steady decline in the percentage of the population who attended a place of worship from 65.1 percent in 1851; to 51.1 percent in 1882; to 37.4 percent in 1903. Second, although Nonconformists outnumbered Anglicans in each of the censuses, while their relative share of the worshipping population increased from 54.6 percent in 1851 to 67.7 percent in 1882 it fell back to 60.2 percent in 1903. Third, by 1903 all the principal Nonconformist denominations had places of worship in Basingstoke. Last, turning

¹⁰ Acts 17: 10.

¹¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 April 1903.

¹² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 April 1903.

¹³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 April 1903.

¹⁴ Alan Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London: Longman, 1976) and Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church 1900-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 April 1903.

¹⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 April 1903.

to the position of individual Nonconformist churches, between 1851 and 1903, London Street Independent/Congregational Church remained the pre-eminent Nonconformist place of worship in the town. The unadjusted figures for the total number of worshippers were 830 in 1851; 743 in 1882; and 871 in 1903. By contrast there was a substantial decline in the standing of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion Church in Wote Street with 578 worshippers in 1882; falling to 291 in 1882; and falling further to 183 in 1903. The figures for the Primitive Methodists indicate a steady increase from 127 worshippers in 1851 to 285 in 1882 and 374 in 1903 and they remained ahead of the Wesleyan Methodists in both 1882 and 1903, who had 257 and 314 worshippers respectively. The Salvation Army appears to have lost ground between 1882 and 1903 with the unadjusted totals falling from 586 to 352, likewise the Strict Baptists with 155 worshippers in 1882 and 115 in 1903.

Notwithstanding the apparent decline in churchgoing, there is evidence to suggest that in the early years of the twentieth century the churches of Basingstoke, in the language of today, 'punched above their weight.' For example, many of the leading businessmen of the town and a substantial number of councillors and aldermen were church members, with the Church of England and London Street Congregational Church being well represented in this respect. In addition, it would not be going too far to suggest that there was a considerable degree of convergence between religious values, such as service and earnestness, and those of the community at large. This can be seen in remarks concerning the characteristics of the town made by the Revd Reginald Thompson, London Street's minister, at the recognition service for the new minister of Sarum Hill Baptist Church (see below), the Revd Frederick West, in March 1910.

He believed that Basingstoke was a godly town on the whole; a town with an abundance of very kindly folk; a town where any minister might feel that he had a high calling, and that there was material for him to work upon and to work with that would call for the very best of his consecrated and humble endeavour. While he said this he believed there was a large section in Basingstoke that yet remained to be reached; that under God's providence must be and would be reached ...¹⁷

As he recognised, however, there continued to be a pressing need for evangelism within the town.

Postscript

In the years immediately following the 1903 census another un-denominational place of worship, the Working Men's Mission Hall in George Street, was opened in 1905¹⁸ and the Open Baptists established a church in the old Board School premises on Sarum Hill in 1908, thanks to an evangelistic initiative emanating from Whitchurch.¹⁹ The locations of the churches and chapels in Basingstoke town centre at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, with accompanying illustrations, are shown in Appendix A.

In 1913 the Railway Mission premises were taken over by London Street Congregational Church. The only known changes during the Interwar years were the transfer of the Working Men's Mission Hall to the Methodists in 1928 and the closure of the Strict Baptist chapel in the 1930s, with it subsequently being used by the post-War Brotherhood and later as a secular meeting place, known as Moose Hall. The Redevelopment of the town centre in the 1960s/70s resulted in many of the Nonconformist churches being demolished. Only London Street Congregational/United Reformed Church remains. Described by Arthur Attwood in 2001 as:

¹⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 March 1910.

¹⁸ Roger Ottewill, 'Working Men's Mission Hall, Basingstoke, 1905 to 1928', <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/working-mens-mission-hall-basingstoke-1905-28>.

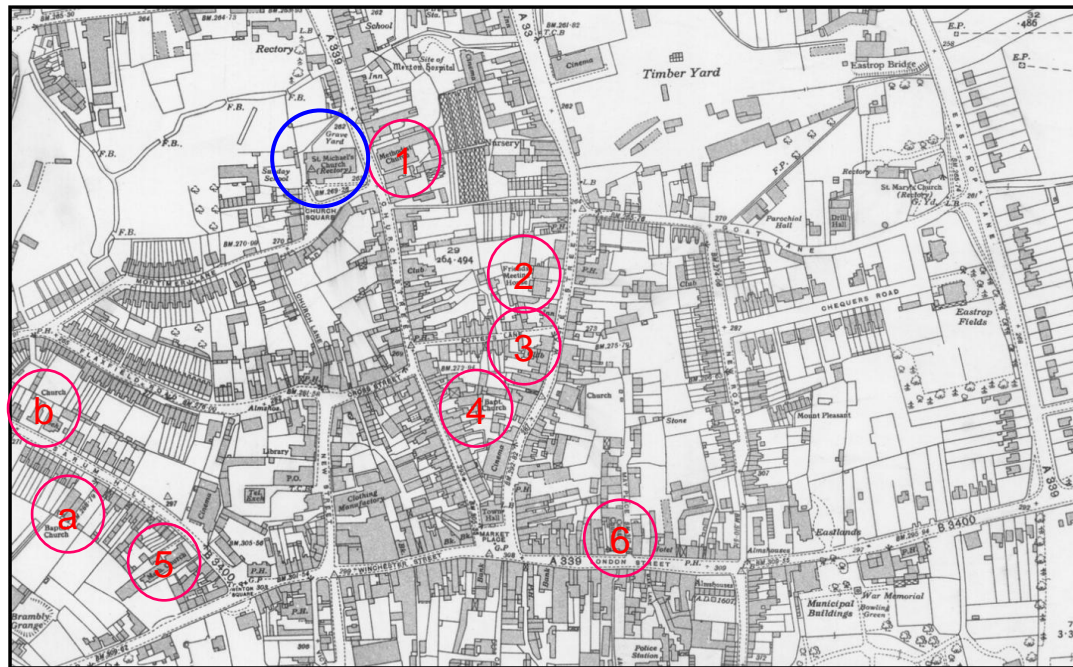
¹⁹ Roger Ottewill, 'Baptists in Basingstoke c1867-1939', <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/baptists-basingstoke-c1867-1939>.

‘One of Basingstoke’s outstanding buildings, with its attractive façade complete with pillars of Grecian style,’ it continues to make an architectural statement in the now pedestrianised London Street.²⁰

In recent decades, the focus of church planting initiatives has shifted from the centre of the town to the suburbs where the bulk of the population now lives. Thus, today, the Parish Church and London Street excepted, the built environment in the town centre is predominantly secular, with its substantial shopping mall, offices, restaurants and leisure facilities.

²⁰ Arthur Attwood, *The Illustrated History of Basingstoke* (Derby: Breedon Books, 2001), 67.

Appendix A: Map Showing the Locations of Basingstoke's Town Centre Places of Worship c1910



Key

Blue = St Michael's Parish Church



Red = Nonconformist churches and chapels



1. Wesleyan Methodist

2. Society of Friends

3. Countess of Huntingdon



4. Strict Baptist

5. Primitive Methodist

6. Congregational

Notes a = Open Baptist church; b = Plymouth Brethren meeting hall.