

Protestant Nonconformity in Castle Donington

Castle Donington is a large village in north-west Leicestershire, closer to Derby than to Leicester. It is the home of East Midlands Airport and Donington Park race circuit. Research is currently underway for a full VCH parish history.

No return was made to the religious census of 1676,¹ but early nonconformity was strong. Most of these early congregations faded away, but were replaced by New Connexion General Baptists and Wesleyans, the latter retaining a strong presence into the 21st century.

Baptists

A conventicle of about 80 Baptists, 'most of them women and children', met at the house and barn of husbandman John Pim in 1669, during divine service or 'in the night', guided by King of Coventry and yeoman Elias Boyar of 'Raunston' (Rempstone, Notts).² James Harris's house had been licensed for Baptist services by 1706,³ but meetings ceased to be held by 1715 and the family attended the parish church.⁴ A 'Presbyterian-Independent-Baptist' congregation is mentioned in 1718,⁵ but no other clear records of a Baptist meeting until a new congregation was established in 1752.⁶

Presbyterians and Congregationalists

Donington's former vicar Thomas Smith was licensed in 1672 to preach at Presbyterian meetings in the house of Frank Thomasman in Castle Donington and Congregational meetings in Thomasman's house at Wanliff Grange (possibly Wartoft Grange, then in Castle Donington but now in the parish of Isley Walton).⁷ Samuel Wright was also licensed to preach at both Presbyterian and Congregational meetings in his own house at Castle Donington.⁸ William Smith, the former vicar of Packington, was licensed in 1672 to preach at both Presbyterian and Congregational meetings at his house, Diseworth Grange.⁹ That property cannot be identified, and it may be an alternative name for Wartoft Grange, which is close to the village of Diseworth. The property appears to have been within Castle Donington in 1672, as the manorial and parish officers were fined in 1681 for failing to act when an unlawful conventicle was held there.¹⁰ Smith was buried at Diseworth in 1686, but the register entry records that he was 'of the parish of Castle-Donington'.¹¹

Presbyterian meetings in Donington were attracting 120 hearers in 1705, including 16 men who qualified for the vote, and preacher William Walton was receiving £5 from the Common Fund for his work.¹² They had a meeting house where they assembled on Sunday afternoons, generally after

¹ A. Whiteman, *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition* (London, 1986), 306

² R.H. Evans, 'Nonconformists in Leicestershire in 1669', *Trans. LAHS*, 25 (1949), 122; A Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland III: General Baptists', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 25 (1973), 366

³ Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake's summary*, 736; Lincolnshire Archives, DIOC/GIBSON/4, p. 18

⁴ Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake's summary*, 736.

⁵ W.G.D. Fletcher, 'Documents relating to Leicestershire preserved in the Episcopal registers at Lincoln', part III', *Assoc. Archit. Soc. Rep. and Papers*, 22 (1893-4), 265

⁶ See below.

⁷ *C.S.P.D.* May-September 1672, 62; 1672-3, 93.

⁸ *C.S.P.D.* May-September 1672, 62, 574

⁹ *C.S.P.D.* 1671-2, 551; May-September 1672, 62

¹⁰ Town book 1680

¹¹ Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 450; ROLLR, DE 726/2

¹² Dr Williams's Library, MS 34.4, fol. 64

attending the parish church in the morning. Regular preachers included Mr Walton of Castle Donington and Mr Crompton and Edmund Coalton, both of Derby.¹³ In 1718 vicar George Gell recorded 30 families of dissenters 'of Presbyterian and Independent persuasion',¹⁴ but their meetings seem to have attracted hearers with a range of religious views. Two of the three meetings held in Castle Donington in 1718 were described as 'Presbyterian-Independent-Baptist' and 'Presbyterian-Independent-Quaker'.¹⁵ William Walton left a building 'called a meeting house' to his sons in his will of 1749, for use by Presbyterians.¹⁶

Quakers

John Evatt of Castle Donington was one of 25 Quakers imprisoned in Leicester gaol in 1660 for refusing to swear oaths.¹⁷ Evatt, John Hood, Richard Newcomb and Thomas Glover all had crops seized for refusing to pay tithes in 1678 and 1679,¹⁸ as did others in the later 17th and 18th centuries.¹⁹ Evatt was fined £10 for holding a meeting in 1679, Thomas Glover and William Howett were each fined 5s. for being present and Howett was fined an additional £10 for 'the pretended property' of Evatt. An inventory was taken of Evatt's possessions, and they were all sold for 7s., although said to be worth 30 times that sum.²⁰ He would have been left with nothing, but after paying the money, the sympathetic purchasers left the goods with Evatt.²¹ Another meeting in 1684 in the house of Dorothy Evatt resulted in the seizure of goods worth 18s. from her, £5 from Thomas Glover, £30 from Richard Newcomb and £6 from Isaac Gisburne of Kegworth. Newcomb was left without even a bed, dish or spoon, and he, his wife and children were obliged to lodge with a neighbour. Gisburne was also fined a further £15 for preaching, but with insufficient goods to satisfy that, the parish officers paid the informers from their own pockets.²²

Collections were taken at Quaker meetings across the county in 1697 and 1698 to cover the costs of raising the walls of Richard Newcomb's barn in Castle Donington and fitting it out as a meeting house for Quakers across a wide area.²³ Between 1706 and 1721 (and probably far longer) meetings were held every Sunday and Thursday.²⁴ There were ten Quaker families in Donington in 1709,²⁵ although this number had reduced to five by 1721, some of whom 'always' went to church.²⁶ In the

¹³ Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake's summary*, 735-6.

¹⁴ Lincolnshire Archives, DIOC/GIBSON/4, p. 18

¹⁵ Fletcher, 'Documents relating to Leicestershire', 265

¹⁶ ROLLR, DG8/30

¹⁷ J. Besse, *A collection of the sufferings of the people called Quakers: for the testimony of a good conscience, from the time of their being first distinguished by that name in the year 1650, to the time of the Act of Toleration, granted in the year 1689. Taken from original records and other authentick accounts* (1753), 331-2

¹⁸ ROLLR, 12D 39/34, fol. 1.

¹⁹ ROLLR, 12D 39/34, fols 1, 54v and 103

²⁰ ROLLR, 12D 39/34, fols. 2-3.

²¹ Town book, 1679

²² Besse, *A collection*, 345

²³ ROLLR, 12D 39/1, fols. 60-66.

²⁴ Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake's summary*, 735-6; Lincolnshire Archives, DIOC/GIBSON/4, p. 18; DIOC/GIBSON/12, p. 30

²⁵ Broad (ed.), *Bishop Wake's summary*, 735-6.

²⁶ Lincolnshire Archives, DIOC/GIBSON/12, p. 30

1740s, Donington's Quakers included Ruth Follows, who later travelled extensively through Britain as a minister for her faith. She died at home in Castle Donington in 1808.²⁷

A new meeting house with a burial ground in Barholme Street (now The Baroon) was registered in 1829.²⁸ It stood on land given by basket-maker Joseph Evatt,²⁹ the building cost £450,³⁰ and could accommodate 200 people.³¹ Attendance on 30 March 1851 was just 19 in the morning and 12 in the afternoon, although 10 people who would normally attend were said to have been indisposed.³² The meeting was discontinued in 1915.³³ The building was let to the War Office during World War II,³⁴ and to the Anglican Church for 5 years from 1952 for use as a church hall.³⁵ The 'derelict' building was sold in 1959,³⁶ and converted to a private house.

New Connexion General Baptists

The New Connexion of General Baptists in north-west Leicestershire owes its origins to David Taylor, servant to the Countess of Huntingdon at Donington Park.³⁷ A congregation at Castle Donington met in the house of shopkeeper Samuel Follows from 1752,³⁸ and was a daughter congregation to the meeting encouraged by Taylor at Barton-in-the-Beans.³⁹ A chapel was built in Bondgate in 1774 on land given by John Bakewell senior of Church Farm.⁴⁰ It was enlarged in 1827,⁴¹ and had 175 members in 1829.⁴² A schoolroom and minister's house were built alongside, and there was a burial ground.⁴³ Services were well attended, with 160 worshippers at the morning service and 302 present in the evening of 30 March 1851, in a building which could accommodate 500 worshippers.⁴⁴ Membership declined from 154 in 1881 to 113 in 1903.⁴⁵ Planning permission and listed building consent for conversion of the chapel to a dwelling house were granted in 2010,⁴⁶ and services were transferred to Orchard School.⁴⁷

Independents

²⁷ G. Skidmore, 'Follows, Ruth (1718–1808)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9797, accessed 15 July 2013]

²⁸ ROLLR, QS 44/1/2

²⁹ Nottinghamshire Archives, NC/Q 208/2

³⁰ W. White, *History, Gazetteer & Directory of Leicestershire & Rutland* (Sheffield, 1846), 339

³¹ TNA, HO 129/444/1/14

³² TNA, HO 129/444/1/14

³³ D.M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting-Houses of Britain: an account of the some 1,300 meeting houses and 900 burial grounds in England, Wales and Scotland, from the start of the movement in 1652 to the present time; and research guide to sources* (1999), 354

³⁴ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/qmh/2052436288/> accessed 11 May 2014

³⁵ Nottinghamshire Archives, NC/Q 208/5

³⁶ ROLLR, DE 3115/74

³⁷ P. Austin, 'Barton in the Beans', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 11 (1945), 420

³⁸ ROLLR, QS 44/2/8

³⁹ A. Betteridge, 'Barton-in-the-Beans Leicestershire: a source of church plants', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 36 (1995), 74

⁴⁰ Ex. inf. the late Mr. Alfred Seneschall; ROLLR, QS 44/2/86.

⁴¹ Tablet on building.

⁴² ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/68

⁴³ W. White, *History, Gazetteer & Directory of Leicestershire & Rutland* (Sheffield, 1846), 339

⁴⁴ TNA, HO 129/444/1/15

⁴⁵ G.T. Rimmington, 'Baptist membership in rural Leicestershire, 1881-1914', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 37 (1998), 393.

⁴⁶ North West Leicestershire District Council, 10/00689/FUL; 10/00688/FUL

⁴⁷ <http://castledoningtonbaptistchurch.snappages.com/home.htm> (accessed 12 May 2014)

There was no Independent congregation in Castle Donington in 1829.⁴⁸ Through the efforts of the Leicestershire Association of Independent Churches and Ministers, a large room in a former factory was fitted up for worship, with the first service held in January 1838. Ministers from across the county led services, in rotation.⁴⁹ In 1840 a chapel was built, for 'Independents or Congregationalists' on land in Clapgun Street purchased by Richard Hemsley and George Dixon. A vestry and school room were added, with a burial ground and there were plans for a minister's house alongside.⁵⁰ The could accommodate 285 worshippers. On census Sunday in 1851, 67 people attended the morning service and 142 were present in the evening.⁵¹ There was a resident minister by 1855,⁵² but this chapel appears for the last time in the Congregational Year Book of 1858-9.⁵³ The building was purchased by a local company in 1860 for use as a lecture hall, chiefly in connection with the Temperance Movement.⁵⁴

Wesleyan Methodists

John Wesley visited Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, at Donington Park on four occasions in 1742 and 1743,⁵⁵ and he preached in Castle Donington in 1764, 1772 and 1774.⁵⁶ The first Wesleyan Chapel was built in Apes Gate in 1777.⁵⁷ It was pulled down in 1823 and a new chapel built on the same site,⁵⁸ at a cost of £1,000.⁵⁹ The congregation had 180 members in 1829.⁶⁰ The chapel was enlarged in 1839,⁶¹ to give 292 free and 292 other sittings. On 30 March 1851, 211 people attended morning worship, and 402 attended in the evening.⁶² The building was enlarged again in 1873.⁶³ Vicar Arthur Mammatt recorded in 1882 that of all the dissenting groups in Donington the Wesleyans were the most numerous, and 'have the most money'.⁶⁴ Land on Market Place was purchased for £1,030 in 1904,⁶⁵ and an impressive new church with a steeple opened in 1906.⁶⁶ The community has produced three well-known preachers: Dr. Joseph Beaumont (1795-1855), Dr James Dixon (1788-1871) and B. Archibald Harrison (1883-45); Dixon and Harrison were also presidents of the Methodist Conference.⁶⁷

Primitive Methodists

⁴⁸ ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/68

⁴⁹ *The Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 January 1838, 3; 13 November 1838, 2.

⁵⁰ ROLLR, DE 1363 N/C/64/1

⁵¹ TNA, HO 129/444/I/12

⁵² *P.O. Dir. of Leics* (1855), 25

⁵³ ROLLR, DE 1363 N/C/64/2

⁵⁴ *Derby Telegraph*, 17 Nov. 1860

⁵⁵ T. Jackson (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (1903), I, 349, 358, 377, 384.

⁵⁶ Jackson (ed.), *The Journal*, III, 155, 431; IV, 9.

⁵⁷ QS 44/2/88

⁵⁸ ROLLR, N/M/64/52 fol. 2v

⁵⁹ White, *Hist., Gaz. & Dir. of Leics. & Rut.* (Sheffield, 1846), 339

⁶⁰ ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/68.

⁶¹ W. White, *Hist., Gaz. & Dir. of Leics. & Rut.* (Sheffield, 1863), 485

⁶² TNA HO 129/444/1/13

⁶³ W. White, *Hist., Gaz. & Dir. of Leics. & Rut.* (Sheffield, 1877), 183

⁶⁴ Northamptonshire RO, ML 601.

⁶⁵ Property deeds, in hands of the trustees and examined by their kind permission.

⁶⁶ Plaque inside chapel.

⁶⁷ ROLLR, N/M/64/66, p. 4

A Primitive Methodist Chapel is said to have been built on Little Hill Steps by Robert Cotton during the 1830s.⁶⁸ No records of this congregation have been found. It is possible that this was the 'room and premises in Burrow Street' registered for worship by Joseph Green in 1834.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ex inf. the late Mrs. Lawrence White, a grand-daughter of Robert Cotton.

⁶⁹ QS 44/2/185