

**EARLY  
NONCONFORMITY  
IN  
YELVERTOFT  
AND ITS VICINITY**

**E.W.TIMMINS**

## EARLY NONCONFORMITY IN YELVERTOFT AND ITS VICINITY

E.W. Timmins

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*This booklet bears witness to the considerable work undertaken by Mr Timmins in researching the history of nonconformity in the Northamptonshire village of Yelvertoft. His original typed notes are retained in the church records. Because writing style has changed somewhat since 1972 I have taken the liberty of making a very few alterations but restricted these to addressing the length of sentences and paragraphs. Barry Osborne, Minister 2008.*

The early history of nonconformity in Yelvertoft, as in most other towns and villages in Northamptonshire, has remained unwritten hitherto for the lack of surviving local records. It was due to the circumstances of the emergence and establishment in secrecy of the Dissenting Churches because they flouted the law that no incriminating documents of any kind have been left. Their activities were arranged and publicised among their congregations by word of mouth, and except where oral tradition persists, their story has been lost. The earliest account of the Church in Yelvertoft written in the Minute Book between 1814 and 1823 relies heavily on an admittedly imperfect oral tradition covering barely one hundred years. Nothing at all, until now, has come to light prior to the early 1700s and much the same applies for other villages in the district. The early presence of a Minister at the Church often resulted in some tangible records being made, but it was not until 1791 that the first settled Minister, Mr Henry Knight, began his pastorate here, and even then, little enough was written.

Fortunately there remain records from other sources which had contact or connection with these Churches during their formative years, such as the established Church of England, the Assize and the Manor Courts, Government departments both local and national, and in certain cases, individual people through their letters. Records for Northamptonshire are housed variously at the Public Record Office and at the British Museum in London, in certain specialised libraries, in the County Record Offices at Northampton, Leicester and Warwick, and in the County Hall at Northampton. In research over the past few years a very considerable store of

information has come to light which carries the history of Nonconformity in many places in the county back to the year 1662, when the Act of Uniformity obliged the Dissenters all over the country to declare their allegiance and to stand by it.

A Church is essentially a worshipping body of men and women, served by a Pastor or Minister, meeting usually in some kind of building, and it is in the history of these men and women particularly, and their activities, that these documents have so much value. Although years of work are needed yet to fill in a connected story, enough has been found to make it possible to recount for the first time the beginning of the Independent Church at Yelvertoft, as well as the Churches in nearby villages, for they were all interdependent and in close association.

Nonconformity has its roots deep in the Reformation, when those who sought to reshape and simplify the liturgy and reform the discipline and government of the Church to conform to the "Word of God", came to be called Puritans. By the time of the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, they called themselves Nonconformists, a term embracing the early Congregationalists, Baptists and often the Quakers, but frequently they were called Dissenters by the Church of England, or in a derogatory and inaccurate sense, Anabaptists.

These formed the Separatist group who were resolved to break completely with any kind of National Church and who had found themselves outside the law since the reign of Elizabeth I. The Presbyterians, on the other hand, were the larger Conforming group at the time of the Restoration, whose less extreme ideals were the replacement of the Episcopal hierarchy by Presbyterian government, and a revision of the Book of Common Prayer; nevertheless they considered themselves to be still within the Church of England.

From the earliest days Puritans were active in Northamptonshire and their influence grew during the reigns of Elizabeth and the first Stuarts, to the extent that by the Civil War the county in a large part supported the essentially Puritan Parliamentary cause. Where the sympathies of the country folk of Yelvertoft lay was shown in a very practical fashion according to a report issued on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1643.

A force of four regiments of Royalist troops, numbering four or five

thousand men: had occupied the southern part of Northamptonshire, and were quartered about Towcester, Daventry and Banbury. A company was engaged in pillaging at Crick on Wednesday 26th January. So next morning "some towns about, Crick and Kilsby and Yellowtoft, assembled themselves together, and came to Crick where a company of (Royalists) were pillaging, and fell on them, killed one, took one prisoner, and drove them all away in great disorder; and that day they all departed from Daintry and these parts towards Southam".

Financial support for the Parliamentary army was also forthcoming when an appeal in April 1643 for a "loan" (virtually an obligatory benevolence, or subsidy) was answered by some 6000 people in the county by July. The long list of names from Yelvertoft and the surrounding villages, especially in comparison with some other places, bears witness to the local loyalty; among the names are many who with their families were later to be counted among the Nonconformists

Such Puritan sympathies are reflected in the numbers of Church of England ministers who were ejected from the local Churches at the Restoration, or who, having moved to other places previously, were likewise deprived of their livings.

At Yelvertoft, Joseph Lee, a son of the Rector of Catthorpe, replaced John Harrison the resident Rector in 1645, and remained there until about 1650 when he moved to Cotesbach in Leicestershire, from whence he was ejected in 1660. He stayed in the vicinity, and is known to have preached at Lutterworth and Catthorpe at unlawful Meetings.

Joseph Lee was succeeded by Charles Simpkin who stayed until 1660, when at the Restoration he was deprived of his tithes and so took his leave to Little Waldingfield in Suffolk, a strong Puritan area. He was replaced for a year by the sequestered Rector, John Harrison, until his death in 1661. There apparently followed an interregnum until 1670, when Anthony Scattergood added Yelvertoft to his incumbency of Winwick. His sympathies lay towards nonconformity, for he was a signatory to the Solemn League and Covenant of the Presbyterians in 1648 although, like many others, he had felt obliged to compromise and pay lip-service in declared recantation in 1662 in order to comply with the Act of

## Uniformity.

Among neighbouring churches other ministers to be ejected were: from Barby, Richard Thorpe, from Cottesbrooke Thomas Burroughs, from Creaton, Richard Hooke, from Crick Stephen Fowler, from Daventry Timothy Dod, from Kilsby John Worth, and from Weedon George Martin. Also some of their one-time ministers who had moved elsewhere were deprived of their livings. A natural inclination of the people in the district towards nonconformity would not be surprising, and events serve to confirm this impression.

The Act of Uniformity had the deepest significance for the Conformists, i.e. the Presbyterian group, for they suffered a severe defeat in being placed outside the law along with the Separatists, after having been the chief negotiators for a settlement with the established Church. From thence forward they merged gradually with the Congregational and Baptist Separatists and were numbered as nonconformists.

For the Separatists, the Act had a different significance. It meant the loss of their freedom of worship, and their Ministers no longer could preach openly in the Parish Churches, besides being ousted from their sources of income. Their congregations had become accustomed to worship in the Puritan tradition during the Commonwealth, according to the practice of their Ministers, so for them the Act demanded a change of allegiance, if not of conscience, if they were to accept conformity with the Church of England's doctrines. In order to enforce at least nominal acceptance, an Act of Elizabeth I was re-invoked to penalise not only Papists, but any regular absentees from Church, with fines and an ultimate penalty of imprisonment.

This did not prevent people from congregating in places other than the church, such as in their own homes or that of an ejected minister in order to continue in their desired form of worship.

The first Conventicle Act (1664-67) was designed to put a stop to this, with crippling penalties for all those sixteen years of age and over convicted of being present in a religious meeting of five people or more, and which was not according to the liturgy of the Church of England. This was in fact, only an extension of the Quaker Act, passed two years earlier, to suppress that sect, and the

finer were the same. The ultimate sentence to be imposed for a third conviction was passed in 1665 on eight Northamptonshire Quakers, one of whom was a woman, being transportation to the plantations of the West Indies for seven years. A great public outcry followed, and no further such extreme sentences are recorded in the county.

In that year, the Corporation or Five Mile Act was passed which prevented any Minister from going within five miles of any town or village where he had previously held office, again under pain of heavy fines. The effect of this legislation on the Nonconforming congregations was to oblige them to hold clandestine meetings wherever and whenever they could in safety. Their most steadfast members persisted in refusing to attend parish church, which resulted in their being presented with monotonous regularity by the Constable of the village at the Manor Court, (the feudal system was not yet dead) and subsequently at the County Assize Court every quarter.

The first men and their families to be recorded as nonconformists in Yelvertoft were:

Thomas Facer, junior, yeoman.

Elizabeth Facer, his wife (nee Bosworth).

George Bolton, yeoman.

Elizabeth Bolton, widow, his mother.

Elizabeth Bolton, her daughter-in-law

This was in 1663 and for years they had been practising members of the congregation at the Parish Church in company with the rest of the village. Since they emerged so firmly resolved to continue in their chosen form of worship we can fairly nominate George Bolton and Thomas Facer as the Founders of the Independent Church in Yelvertoft.

Five years later they were joined by a family who had moved from Barby to live at Clay Coton: John Banister, husbandman, Elizabeth, his wife, Theophilus, their son, and subsequently their daughters Elizabeth and Abigail.

These families of Yelvertoft and Clay Coton persisted in their

defiance of the law, until the Act of Toleration in 1689 once more permitted freedom of worship. They formed the nucleus of the local illegal meetings or Conventicles, which were attended by considerable numbers of other people who, whilst they were not prepared to be so committed, did side-step the law by going to church only often enough to avoid being reported. A general air of tolerance seems to have prevailed in the village, for no records have come to light of the Conventicles held at Yelvertoft being brought to law, although Thomas Facer, Gorge Bolton and John Banister were convicted on several occasions in other villages.

We know that meetings were being held regularly at Yelvertoft, from the returns made in 1669 by John Palmer, Archdeacon of Northampton. A survey of all Communicants of the Church of England, of Dissenters and of Papists was made in that year, and John Palmer's detailed Report and letters for Northamptonshire have survived. The Report says that at Yelvertoft and Crick "A *Conventicle of Anabaptists meet at these townes by course on Sundays; at Creek they are estimated at 30; at Yelvertoft 50*". Similar figures are given for other places in the seven Western Deaneries, but in a summary the Archdeacon plays down the numbers and the quality of the people attending the meetings. In point of fact, if the numbers reported at the Assizes are being present at Conventicles are any guide, his figures are an underestimate, and moreover, the quality of the congregations ranged from the gentry to day-labourers, with a predominance of the yeoman class.

The Preachers, or Teachers as they were frequently called, were chiefly laymen, with a few deprived ministers working away from home. At Yelvertoft, George Bolton named as Preacher, and he is to be counted as the first regular Nonconformist Pastor there. At the time of the Restoration he was 36 years of age, and during the Civil War served as a soldier with the Parliamentary Army in Colonel Okey's regiment. It is very likely that he was at the Battle of Naseby, for Okey's Dragoons were in action there, described in a letter from the Colonel to a Citizen of London. George Bolton was a firm Dissenter and with Thomas Facer was excommunicated in 1670 as soon as the vacant pulpit at the Parish Church was filled by Anthony Scattergood, and since neither man recanted, they remained so, together with John Banister, from 1674, as long as the

Act of Uniformity remained in force.

The preaching at Yelvertoft and Crick was shared by George Bolton with four other men; Richard Fairbrother, a hemp dresser from Watford (he had relations in Yelvertoft); John Kitchen, an ironmonger from Lutterworth; Thomas Howlett, a weaver from Kilsby, and by the most active of all preachers in the district, Mr Benjamin Morley, gentleman from Ravensthorpe.

Benjamin was the younger son of Valentino Morley, the Rector of Harleston, and his brother Theodore succeeded their father at Harleston, so that this background stood him in good stead in his preaching career. During the Civil War he served with the Parliamentary forces, by repute as a 'cornet' or Lieutenant of the Cavalry.

He must have been a very notable preacher, for he acquired a local reputation of having once been a Bishop, possibly through confusion of his name with that of the Bishop of Winchester, Dr. George Morley. In any case he appears to have acted as a kind of superintendent over this area of the County. Besides preaching at Yelvertoft and Crick, he appeared with some regularity at Everdon, Staverton, Walton, Braunston, Barby, Long Buckby, East Haddon, Moulton and his home village of Ravensthorpe. In addition, for some weeks every year he travelled to meetings in the neighbouring counties of Leicestershire, Lincoln, Buckingham and Middlesex. He was sent to gaol with three others for seven days and fined £2 for being present at a Conventicle at the house of Nathaniel Coleman at Long Buckby on 22nd July 1666; and his wife Jane was sentenced to six weeks in Bridewell gaol in Northampton, with a £2 fine, for being at a Meeting at East Haddon in the house of John Stanley on 4th Dec, 1664.

Informers from Earls Barton and Easton Maudit reported a Conventicle at his own house in Ravensthorpe on 26th June 1670 and George Bolton, John Banister, and Alexander Smith from Long Buckby, were apprehended and fined fifteen shillings each. Benjamin Morley seems to have evaded the Constables on numerous other occasions, with the connivance of his congregation, because it was in their interest that the preachers should not be caught but remain free to carry on their ministry.

This was of particular importance after the second Conventicle Act

of 1670 which was intended to ruin the preachers and so force closure of the meetings. Unless he were caught in the act, a preacher could be treated only as one of the congregation, although the fines were heavy. According to the 1664 Act the fines imposed could be paid in cash, and the heavy penalties inflicted on the preachers were frequently shared by their congregations. To overcome this, the second Act in 1670 enforced payment of the fines only by the sale of a man's cattle and goods, but again the congregation circumvented the law by purchasing the property at the sale and then returning it to the convicted preacher.

There were a few Conventicles in the district reported and for which summonses were issued; these took place at Barby, East Haddon, Ravensthorpe, Long Buckby and Daventry, but except at the last two places, the informers came a long distance, lured by a hope of a statutory share of the fines resulting from any convictions consequent upon their nefarious activities. Local loyalty seems to have been too strong for much of the time for informers to do any harm.

The first Dissenters on record at villages nearby, with the dates were as follows:

|                     |                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Crick (1665):       | William Sharpe, Joseph Wright, John Letts, and William Boyes                                                 |
| West Haddon (1662): | Thomas Towers and Ann his wife, John Traslow (1682)                                                          |
| Kilsby ( 1665):     | Thomas Howlett (Preacher) and Ann his wife, Abraham Devonshire and Mary his wife .                           |
| Watford (1665):     | Richard Fairbrother (Preacher)                                                                               |
| East Haddon (1665): | John Stanley (Preacher), Francis Stanley (Preacher) and his wife: John Jeyes (junior), and Thomas Botterill. |
| Long Buckby (1664): | William Boulton and Sarah his wife, Nathaniel Coleman, William Dingley, and Joseph Woddam.                   |

A complete list of all recorded names would fill pages of print, but these apparent few appeared consistently over a long period of

time and so constituted the core of the separate village Churches of Non-Conformists. Their identification as Dissenters as distinct from Papists or other defaulters has in every case been confirmed, as also for others not named here but who took part in at least some of the Meetings.

For example, at Daventry, there appear to be six regular Dissenters, but a further fourteen are named in 1669 as being in the habit of frequenting Conventicles in the town, but whose names occur only sporadically over the period following the Restoration. In Yelvertoft, a few people other than those named so far are known from the excommunication records, Samuel Tarry (twice), Thomas Bryan and John Freeman. They had all served for terms as Church Wardens, and were thus expected to set the example by their conformity. They were absolved after making recantation within the statutory six months, but this did not prevent Samuel Tarry and his wife Elizabeth from further allying themselves with the Non-Conformists.

The meetings had to be held whenever it seemed safe, so we find that private houses, barns, bake houses, a malthouse, and even the Kings highway were used for the purpose. In 1672, for the space of a year licences were issued for approved places of Dissenters worship, but after their withdrawal these premises were known to the authorities and meetings held there were at very much increased risk. Only after the Act of Toleration were meeting places again officially recognised. But the issue of licences proceeded very slowly for the next decade.

In Yelvertoft no application for a licence was made in 1672, possibly because of natural caution, and well justified as events turned out. But the village was one of the earliest on the list following the 1689 Act. The first so far found was issued at Easter in 1703 for the house of Elizabeth Tarry, widow of Samuel Tarry. A year later another house was licensed, that of Robert Ward in October 1704. These premises were in use for a long period, for the succeeding licence was applied for and granted to John Norton only in 1738, the house then being occupied by Thomas Bosworth. The same property was transferred by Deed in 1747 to the already established trustees of the Nonconformist Church. It seems that this site was eventually occupied by the present Chapel, built in 1791. In the meantime, another certificate was issued in the name of the

trustees in 1779 for premises occupied by Edward Walden.

The earliest licences in some nearby villages are given here, although a complete list with the owners would take up space to the exclusion of other information.

Crick 1742; West Haddon 1770; Clay Coton 1746;  
Elkington 1779; Welford 1672 and 1700; Daventry 1672  
and 1703; Kilby 1672 and 1738; Long Buckby 1739;  
Ravensthorpe 1703; East Haddon 1744; Barby 1749;  
Watford 1775.

Apart from the 1672 licences which are to be found in the Public Record Office and have been published, other dates have been taken from manuscript sources. Nothing has been quoted from books or other publications, since the dates cannot be verified without reference to original sources, whose locations are rarely given.

Family loyalties have always been strong in Northamptonshire nonconformity, and most families had relatives in other villages who were also dissenters. It is through these ties and intermarriages that churches were able to increase their strength and maintain their continuity. In Yelvertoft, the descendants and relations particularly of Thomas Facer, Samuel Tarry, Thomas Bosworth, and John Norton in their turn have all contributed to the continuation of the Independent Church. However, it was from George Bolton and his family that the most long-lived succession originated. For over three hundred years, from the Restoration onwards, Boltons have belonged to this church. Now, through marriage into another nonconformist family, the Palmers, the tradition is continued by the senior deacon, Mr W.H. Palmer and his family, to the present day.

Only an outline of the early days of nonconformity set against the background of prevailing local conditions has been possible within the confines of a short account. But it is hoped to include more detail with the findings of further research in a fuller and more permanent publication, which will carry the story through the following two centuries. The extent of the coverage of associated villages will be governed to some degree by the interest shown in this account.

Because of the inter-relations of the neighbouring villages, as well as the nature of the documentary sources themselves, it is not practicable to treat one place in isolation.

I should like gratefully to acknowledge the assistance given me by the librarians of the municipal libraries in Coventry, Northampton and Rugby, and by the Northamptonshire Record Society. I would especially express my thanks to the Northamptonshire Record Office for access to their deposited records and the facilities for searching them, and for permission to reproduce the documents used as illustrations.

E.W. Timmins

May 1972

LONDON. June 3.—Samuel Plimsoll, known as the "Sailor's friend" and originator of the famous "Plimsoll mark," to prevent the overloading of ships, is dead.

The name of Samuel Plimsoll is revered by British merchant seamen. Actuated by pure motives of humanity, he devoted the best part of his life to the work of ameliorating the conditions of sailor life. Before his time, overloading and undermanning went hand in hand with overinsurance, and bad stowage, defective construction, and deficient engine power were more fruitful sources of disaster than they are at present. Through Mr. Plimsoll's instrumentality, numerous acts for the amendment of the shipping laws were passed by Parliament. One of the most important of these took the name of the champion of the sea toilers, and the "Plimsoll mark" showed ship owners how deeply they could load their vessels without incurring penalty. The "Plimsoll mark" is an arbitrary load line, beyond which a vessel may not load, and its establishment by the laws of England and the British Board of Trade acted as a decided check on the unscrupulous owner or charterer.

Mr. Plimsoll was the fourth son of Thomas and Priscilla Plimsoll, and was born at Bristol, England, in 1824. During his early youth he was employed as a clerk in a solicitor's office. Subsequently he became manager of a brewery, and remained in that position until 1853, when he went to London and started in business for himself. There he became interested in maritime affairs, and the abuses practiced on seamen led him to enter Parliament for the express purpose of aiding the men. He was elected a Liberal member for Derby in 1868, and was a member for twelve years.

In 1880, Mr. Plimsoll gave up his seat to Sir William Vernon Harcourt, who had been defeated at the election. Two years ago he came to this country in the hope of creating a more friendly feeling on the part of Americans toward the English. He was convinced that the reason of the ill-feeling which he believed existed on this side of the Atlantic was due chiefly to the history books used in the schools. He was compelled to return to England on account of ill-health.

Mr. Plimsoll published, in 1872, a work entitled "Our Seamen." He subsequently wrote a sequel to it, and in 1890 published a work on cattle ships. When the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland was established in 1880, he was offered the post of President of that organization. He afterward retired from it.

In Yelvertoft  
Congregational  
Church Graveyard  
lays the body of  
Thomas Plimsoll, an  
outstanding Liberal  
Parliamentarian and  
of considerable  
nautical fame. He is  
the father of the more  
famous Samuel Plimsoll

The article on the left  
was published: June 4,  
1898

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These are the graves of the  
famous for the family of the  
form of the family of the  
Elizabeth Barry — with the Plimsoll family  
my Yelvertoft in the family is set apart in London  
a place of meeting for the family of the  
Barry of the family of the Barry of the  
God in the family of the Barry of the  
my hand the Barry of the Barry of the Barry

1703 reference to a place set aside in the home of Elizabeth  
Tarry for use of dissenters for worship

Constable's Bill dated 1664 and naming three members of the Boulton family for not attending the Parish Church

Northton

15

14

An endorsement on an arrest warrant in the hand of the village constable, John Watkin, and dated 4<sup>th</sup> January 1685 explaining he was unable to trace the persons named in the warrant.

*John Watkin Constable of the parish of St. Andrew  
 4<sup>th</sup> Jan<sup>y</sup> 1685  
 I have been diligent in searching for the persons  
 named in the warrant but have been unable to find  
 any of them. I have therefore returned the  
 warrant to the court with this certificate.*