

Text of a lecture given by Alan Ruston at the Bury St Edmunds Unitarian Meeting House on Saturday 24 September 2011 as part of 300th anniversary celebrations of the erection of the building.

Going back to being in the shoes of a dissenter from the Church of England in 1711 would of course be a shock to those who worship in this meeting house today. The congregation is seen as continuous, except for a few gaps, but the culture and beliefs are very different. One of the most famous opening sentence to a 20th century novel is to be found in LP Hartley's, *'The Go Between'* 'The past is another country' And that is what the life and thought of a 1711 dissenter would be to us today.

To start with those who attended this meeting house were basically still puritans, who were very nastily described by the Roman Catholic author GK Chesterton as 'people who refused to contemplate God or goodness with anything lighter or milder than the most fierce concentration on the intellect. A Puritan originally meant a man whose mind had no holidays. To use his own favourite phrase, he would let no living thing come between him and his God; an attitude which involved eternal torture for him and a cruel contempt for others.' Chesterton added even more unfairly; 'it was better for the Puritan to worship in a barn than in a cathedral for the specific and specified reason that the cathedral was beautiful.' There is more than a germ of truth in this but he ignores or didn't know the fact that a barn was in their early days was the only place where dissenters could meet.

Chesterton certainly would not have understood the simple and dignified beauty of this building and the thought and understanding of the people who created it. These dissenters could not see how their relationship to God and their family of worshippers could be expressed in anything but a simple structure built in the way it is, unadorned, so unlike a cathedral or parish church.

To start with it was called by dissenters 'a meeting house' which means literally where the faithful met together. Meeting house has a very similar meaning to the word synagogue, taken from the Biblical term 'a place of gathering'. It was not a chapel and very much not a church. The meeting house was where those of the community met to pray and hear the Bible expounded. Those who gathered here were English Presbyterians, in 1711 still the largest group in numbers amongst dissenters, but their outlook was similar to the Independents (later Congregationalist) who also met in Bury. Both followed the writings and example of Richard Baxter, a key leader of the Presbyterian/Independent cause who had died not many years before. Although called Presbyterian there was no synod and certainly not in Bury.

The Independents and Presbyterians in the main still freely associated and the difference between them was more a matter of emphasis than a big difference in principle or belief. By the late 18th century the situation had evolved into something different. The last time the minister of this meeting house participated in an ordination service in the Independent chapel was on 19 June 1800. To quote a later commentator: 'Henceforth the doctrinal differences were too great to permit such friendly relations; the Presbyterian congregation at this time became distinctly Unitarian and the Independents no longer sympathised with them.'

In 1711 the dissenters were a beleaguered minority although since the settlement of 1689 were able to meet and erect their meeting houses. It looked as if all would be well but from 1709 there were the Sacheverell upheavals directed against dissenters who were termed by their attackers 'monsters and vipers'. As David Wykes has pointed out, 'Dissenters locally were subject to verbal abuse, frequent petty acts of harassment, intimidation, even violence.' In particular feeling was against those dissenters who also attended the Church of England occasionally in order to hold certain offices like teachers who supposedly spoke vile things against the Church. An Act of 1711 forbade occasional conformity which in most places proved unenforceable and was repealed in 1719. Later a Schism Bill was under discussion which many thought would return dissenters to an almost outlawed status. This fortuitously did not happen, Queen Anne died in 1714 as the Bill came into law, and it sought to create an Anglican monopoly in education. The early years of the 18th century saw persecution in particular at the time of public elections. The meeting house at Chester was nearly destroyed twice and rioters burned down that at Newcastle under Lyme in 1702. Thankfully things improved with the advent of the Hanoverians in the shape of George 1 in 1714, and arrival of the Whigs into political power. In 1711 all this agitation was almost at its height and anti-dissenter feeling was rumbling about. It was thus a brave act to open a new meeting house in that troubled year.

What were these people like who filled the new building when it was opened on 30 December 1711? There were two sermons that day based on the Bible text of Exodus 11 verse 34, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of the congregation and the Glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.' Well to start with they were not Unitarians or Socinians in belief or even Arian, nor anything like it either. They were people of Book which was at the centre of their personal and family life, and many of their beliefs could be called neo-Calvinist. In other words many believed in an elect of God. They were Trinitarian, and it was not until the ministry of William Lincolne between 1757 and 1792 that they became mainly Arian in belief which meant worship of God the father alone, seeing Jesus as subordinate but still divine. They placed great emphasis on the King's James Version of the Bible which in 1711 was then 100 years old, an anniversary which we have been noting this year - they quoted from it endlessly. The first avowed Unitarian minister to be appointed at Bury was Dr Nathaniel Phillips in 1801.

What were the services like then? There are few contemporaneous accounts available, but the pattern followed by Matthew Henry, the Presbyterian minister at Chester is seen as typical. The minister at Bury from 1690 was Samuel Bury (1663 -1730) who studied at Doolittle's Academy in London with Matthew Henry as a compatriot. Bury's exact theological views are not known except that he refused to belong to a party or theological group, which makes commentators list him as a liberal in his time. He wrote, 'I was never prostituted to any party but have endeavoured to serve God as a catholic Christian.' Of course he did not mean Roman Catholic. Whatever his beliefs were he was an energetic and highly successful preacher and minister.

Samuel Bury would have followed a similar pattern of working to Henry's which

seems to have been common. 'Henry's constant work, on the Lord's-day at Chester, was to pray six times in public, to sing six times, to expound twice. He went to the congregation exactly at nine, began the public worship with singing the 100th psalm; then prayed, a short but fervent and suitable prayer, then he read some part of the Old Testament, and expounded it, going through it in course, from beginning to the end; then he sang another psalm, then he prayed for about half an hour, then preached about an hour, then prayed and sang and gave the blessing. He did exactly the same in the afternoon, only expounding the New Testament. This was his constant Lord-day's work.'

Phew! What about that then! - two hour plus services containing 30 minutes extempore prayer and about 20 minutes explaining a text. Preaching and prayer then was undertaken without notes, it was meant to be as the spirit moved. In some places, though no evidence that it was done here, it will not surprise you that there were people appointed with long sticks to wake people up. And if you think the box pews that were here were as comfortable as what you're sitting on, you've never sat in an 18th century pew with no cushion though some will have done. The congregation sat most of the time and were silent most of time. Only psalms were sung, no hymns then except on special occasions, and standing up to sing them was not universal. There was no music, it was suspect as an activity in services, only a tuning fork might be used— small orchestras to accompany the singing came later in the century.

At the end of a Sunday the minister must have been really exhausted though perhaps his personal reward was that he was a figure of great power in his community. A critic in 1730 speaking on the decline of dissent at that time observed that 'to worship God for 20 minutes and to dictate to all for 60, is not so equal as one could wish.' No doubt the critic was right. There were never evening services and lighting the candelabra where they existed was a rare and quite costly event. Tallow candles were the cheapest but made of animal fat so they smelt; wax candles were necessary but at the top end of the cost scale.

And what happened when the families, and all of them attended, got home? To quote a contemporary account, 'After retirement for the secret exercises of devotion, in reading and meditation, and prayer, the family was called together, the children and servants catechised and questioned on the discourses which they had heard, a sermon was read, and psalms were sung and the day was concluded with fervent and solemn prayer.'

You might say that's what they did at Chester but not perhaps at Bury? We have the much edited diary of Elizabeth Bury, the wife of the minister Samuel, which shows a similar pattern. She died in 1720 when they had moved to Bristol as Samuel became the minister of Lewin's Mead Meeting House. Samuel edited her diary drastically to always present her in a devout light; it was published and considered very much an aid to devotion and she an exemplar; it sold well. The diary was republished a few years ago in America and is available on Amazon. The shame is that the original is lost, which would have shown more of her true nature. Extracts demonstrate her concern about the servants' spiritual health for she regularly quizzed them on the contents of the sermon. Similar devotions were held on most nights of week. While some families might not be as fervent as this it's likely many came near to it and most had prayers morning and night everyday.

Elizabeth Bury was a paragon of virtue, of whom the famous hymn writer Isaac Watts in a form of obituary said she was 'a pattern for the sex in ages as yet unborn'. A rich widow she married Samuel in 1697, and was 19 years older than him. She got up at 4am every day to pursue her studies in French, Hebrew, music, heraldry, mathematics, natural philosophy, anatomy, medicine and divinity. She like so many in the congregation was no light dilettante.

Not only were there long Sunday services to attend but also lectures in the week to go to, in the chapel and elsewhere, which were nearly all related to a Biblical theme. Here is Elizabeth Bury's diary account verbatim: '25 January 1699, I walked to a Lecture safely and without prejudice to my health, at 16 miles distance, and had entertainment to my Soul there.' And there were meetings for women which were not about items that might be discussed today. '6 December 1711, I was much revived at a meeting of good Women for Prayer and Repetition in which my heart was warmed.' The congregation ignored Christmas and similar festivals seeing them, like the regular repetition of the Lord's Prayer, as little more than Popish heresies. But they did listen to fairly regular fast sermons given by the minister - this is where dissenters fitted in with national events - a fast sermon was declared to be given at times of crisis like war. Samuel Bury is here commenting at the start of the diary on his late wife's attitude to them. 'She would always bless God, if authority appointed, at Public Fasts; and looked upon them as Presages of Good to the Church and Nation. She bore her part in them with great fervency and zeal.' She seems to have been a paragon of dissenting virtue, and oh so serious.

One of the key services of the year, for dissenters in particular, was to celebrate the discovery and putting down of the Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament in November 1605. Long rousing sermons against Roman Catholicism and Popery were then the norm on these occasions. To hold a service of worship to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day on 5 November we would find odd, but dissenters and to a large extent the Church of England saw it as an occasion to give praise for what was presented as a deliverance from Popery in England. They also held communion about once a month generally after morning service, sometimes the congregation sat round a table but more often and almost certainly at Bury they would serve each other as the plate and cup passed from hand to hand. The ceremony was simple but still could be a matter of much dispute.

Before 1720 there is a record at Dr Williams's Library that shows there were 700 members at Bury – an amazing number, obviously they could not all get in here, as a roughly contemporary source states this building could house 400. The former building, a converted house used from 1690 on this site was certainly smaller. Where were they from? Some met in places within Bury, but others were located in villages round about specifically Sudbury, Waldringfield, Magna Hunston, Ixworth and Wattisfield. From the 1680s onwards there are registrations as places for public worship located in barns, private houses and farms. These were outstations of the main congregation and examples of scattered small worshipping groups in villages round the hub of a town meeting can be found all over England.

The Minister's job was a tough and onerous one as he was expected to visit each sub congregation at least once a month - not long after the new chapel opened Samuel

Bury had an assistant Rev Samuel Savage, his nephew, replaced later by Rev Robert Wright. The Ancient Chapel at Toxteth in Liverpool for example had twelve of these out congregations at about this time. Samuel Bury was paid well at £80 a year; many Baptist ministers existed on less than £25. The sexton in comparison was paid £2 a year. With the help of his wife's money Bury advanced money for the building of this meeting house before all the subscriptions came in to meet the cost. He was not paid back in full until 1714.

This payment made to Samuel Bury shows the congregation was quite well off amongst dissenters which consisted of farmers, tradesmen, manufacturers and the like. Not many gentry by 1711 who had generally disappeared from dissenting congregations, nor were the poor present in any numbers. Pew rents were the main source of income for the meeting house, sometimes they had sliding scales of payment; nowhere outside London or the city congregations was it pitched at a high figure, about 10 shilling to £1.10/- per quarter was the norm. Then as now some members were richer than others and no doubt made their presence felt.

There are very few studies to show the income levels of congregations at this time, but it is clear that Bury being able to erect this meeting house in the centre of town was amongst the richer; Bury St Edmunds generally at this time attracted the well-to-do to live there. One of the few comparative studies of this period comes from an examination of the returns made of tax paid on hearths at this time – how many per household. For counties in this area these show that Independents and Quakers had 2.2 hearths, Baptists 1.9 but Presbyterians had 3.1 per household. They could afford to keep themselves relatively warm.

Of course not all members of the congregation behaved themselves as they should, and the Minister acted with great power in this respect. The Presbyterian, as the minister was called, was said to be like a Bishop in his own congregation. The Heads of Agreement amongst dissenting meetings of the 1690s stated 'In the administration of church power, it belongs to the pastors and other elders of every particular church, if such there be, to rule and govern.' Democracy was not the order of the day. How was this governance exercised? There was no church committee, that was a 19th century invention, but there were groups of influential members' one being the trustees whom the minister consulted, and the pew holders who provided the regular income.

There were church meetings of the members in some Presbyterian congregations though its universality and power lay more amongst the Independents. In such a tight group there were of course whispers and gossip and the whole dissenting community of Bury was small. Everyone who was a dissenter was concerned about the reputation of the dissenting interest especially if the Church of England could make much of dissenters' transgressions, which they did if transgressions became known. The frisson between dissent and the Church went on until almost the 20th century in small towns and rural areas, and I'll say a bit more about that shortly.

Maintaining the health of the community, and be sure that bad eggs did not spoil it, was achieved by suspending or at the most extreme expelling members. It was called 'discipline' as you might expect. It was quite a threat to be disowned by the community of which you and your family were so much a part. Some congregations kept a discipline book – what thoughts that phrase can raise in 21st century minds –

but I know of none left to us of this period. Presbyterians were among the first to drop members' discipline although books are to be found in Baptist congregations in the 1770s. Methodists toyed with them but by the start of the 19th century they had generally disappeared.

To show what they were like here is an example from a later period from the Old Meeting House, Ditchling, Sussex which was General Baptist. Something like this will have existed in Presbyterian groups early in the century;

May 10th 1757 Church meeting. The case of John Vincent was considered and whereas he has been admonished several times and has promised a reformation, but still remains in a careless way and seldom goes to any hearing of a Sunday and follows gaming and keeping of bad company and breaks his promises in regard to making good his payments, therefore we agree to withdraw from him for such disorderly walking.

Disorderly walking. What a phrase, used commonly amongst dissenters then and we know exactly what it means. The Heads of Agreement of the 1690s mentions 'scandalous or offensive walking' which required offenders to be admonished or censured generally in public to seek their recovery from sin. You might say that such suspensions didn't happen at Bury - oh yes they did and we have Elizabeth Bury's diary to demonstrate its operation here:

1st July 1716. After Sermon, a Poor Penitential, after long suspension, was re-admitted to our communion with great seriousness and solemnity by the Pastor; and I hope true repentance in the offender. Lord! Let this awaken others who stay suspended.

Now to cover what can only be termed the social and religious split between dissenters and members of the Church of England. This was not necessarily between the ministers and the vicar or rector where relations could be polite if not cordial but were savage in other places. In smallish towns like Bury with a strong dissenting interest the split spread much wider than between ministers. Up until the late 19th century shopkeepers for example who were dissenters attracted and expected the continued custom of their fellow dissenters. The same situation obtained for the Church of England. William Hale White writing as Mark Rutherford based his novels on his dissenting youth in Cowfold (in reality Bedford) and Mrs Margaret Oliphant in *Chronicles of Carlingford* both describe the social position of nonconformists in the 19th century but the tradition of relations with Anglicans came from an earlier period when it was much more acrimonious. The two groups lived in almost different worlds made more distinct by the extra dimension of class distinction. Unless essential they often did not even speak. Individual Dissenters were badgered to conform and threatened with consequences if it didn't happen. In 1713 attacks on dissenters were widespread in most parts of the country. The Church of England saw the results of the end of their religious monopoly as dire. High churchman refused to bury the children of Dissenters stating that they were not properly baptised, this was an organised activity in Derby in 1712, and led Dissenters to create their own burial grounds.

This is the reason why not meeting your payments was considered as the ultimate sin – the dissenter was not only financially letting down their fellow dissenter tradesmen but was also diminishing the whole interest in the eyes of the Church of England. The example of the General Baptist John Vincent at Ditchling in 1757 the chapel meeting

placed not meeting his payments as the last reason for his suspension but it was probably the main one. The reputation for moral rectitude, honesty and sobriety was an important one to maintain in small often rural communities.

Marriage generally took place between members of those associated with the same congregation. Marriage ceremonies up to the early 1720s took place in dissenting churches. The practice tended to disappear after this until 1753 when it was banned altogether outside the Church of England by Hardwick's Marriage Act. Marriage with a member of the Church of England was almost inconceivable within a small town. Dissenters who sometimes attended worship in the parish church were engaged in an activity called 'occasional conformity'. This action was made illegal from 1711 but it was difficult to enforce and continued to take place. It was done at certain times of the year to enable someone to hold a particular public office, and was frowned upon by most dissenters though it was not unusual amongst the richer Presbyterians. For Baptists those who occasionally conformed by going to what they called 'the mass' were ejected from the Baptist community.

Ministers who came from dissenting academies which were few at this time were almost advised in their training to find rich widows amongst their congregations to marry; this is what Samuel Bury did – his wife much older than he, and a widow left comfortable off. A leading dissenting minister from a later period Job Orton, on advising a young man not to marry a penniless girl wrote, 'you may reasonably expect, considering your education, profession and station, that you may meet with a wife with a handsome fortune, as many other dissenting ministers have done.' Rich widows and heiresses were therefore much sought after by dissenting ministers whose position then at least made them attractive to serious minded women.

How to sum up what it was like to be a dissenter in 1711? It was a serious devout life bounded by the Bible, and centred round the meeting house. There much emphasis on the family not only your own immediate one but also that which gathered in the meeting house. You mixed with your own kind, the dissenting interest, and not outside it. Your dress was sober as you yourself were with of course exceptions when it came to alcohol. Dissenting concerns were not financial, and had no need to be within the community; indeed the avid pursuit of money by an individual was frowned upon though the position in London, as ever, was rather different.

Apart from upkeep of an unpretentious building like this and providing for the minister with a moderate stipend, the group had few calls on their purses. There were generally small endowments often involving gifts of land that fulfilled many of the general expenses from year to year. The congregation had few poor members like labourers amongst it and any particular needs in this area were met from within. There were no central organisations to maintain, and where there were trust funds to support the Presbyterian denomination these were in the main given by the wealthy London dissenters. Pew rents commenced once the building was up and running and varied little from year to year; if the minister produced a real upset for one reason or another then these rents could decline and he could be forced to leave but not really for any other reason, except for conforming to the Church of England.

While exciting things happened in the wider world in a quiet country town like Bury St Edmunds the moral earnestness of the dissenter just continued in the same tenor

from year to year. Membership of some meeting houses, particularly Presbyterian, however did decline after 1715 as some richer members, not over concerned with theology, found it easier all round to join the parish church . Later generations would conclude that the dissenters' life around 1711 was in the main a boring one, not only because of their views but also that dissenters were under attack and kept in their place by the Church of England system and the social mores of the time. Among dissenters imagination was not seen as a desirable quality and the primacy of the word meant that appeals to the emotions were downplayed. Isaac Watt's hymns came along a few years later and some of these introduced an enhanced vision into dissent. I'll conclude with a verse from one of his hymns which expresses something brighter and less dour. Most dissenters of the early 18th century are likely to have judged this verse as a notable expression of their affirmations:

The voice that rolls the stars along
Speaks all the promises,
Where reason fails with all her powers,
There faith prevails, and love adores.