

NONCONFORMISM IN SOUTHERN GLOUCESTERSHIRE 1690-1900

Tony Youles

Introduction

For over three hundred years, Nonconformism has been an important force in southern Gloucestershire. Stimulated by, and in turn stimulating, the industrial and social conditions of the area, its chapels and meeting houses are a prominent feature of the built environment, more numerous than Anglican churches. Painswick for example has one church and six chapels. Some have been demolished, others converted to commercial or community use, or to private dwellings, but many remain in use for religious worship.

Origins

In 1603, when James I succeeded Elizabeth on the throne, all English men and women were deemed to be members of the state Church, dissent being a punishable offence. Heretics were still burnt at the stake. Everyone had to attend Church services, pay tithes, and all were subject to the discipline of the Church courts. Books were censored by bishops, parsons were appointed by the landed ruling class.(1)

During the Civil War and the Cromwellian Commonwealth, the House of Commons ejected numbers of "scandalous ministers", and abolished the Anglican hierarchy, selling off the Bishops' lands in 1646.

However the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 brought a series of Acts known collectively as the Clarendon Code (1661-1665), and the later Test Act (1673). These Acts excluded Dissenters from any share in local or national government, and from the universities, and forbade meetings for worship other than those of the established Church. Bishops returned to their thrones in 1660, and to their seats in the House of Lords. 1,760 ministers were ejected from the Church as Dissenters.(2)

Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the accession of William and Mary, Dissenting meetings became legal, provided they were licensed by a bishop. In 1690, meetings were licensed at "Berklie", Cam and Wotton: in 1702 Cam Independent Meeting appointed a permanent minister and built a chapel. In 1703-4, two homes in Dursley were licensed for "Presbyterian" and "Protestant Dissenting" meetings respectively. There were Quakers at Stinchcombe and Stancombe.(3)

Early Years

These licensed meetings, which marked the official end of the established Church's monopoly and the beginnings of Nonconformism, were the successors to earlier gatherings which originated in the religious turmoil of the Civil War and the Cromwellian Commonwealth, or followed ministers ejected at the Restoration, being forced to become clandestine under the Clarendon Code.

E. Calamy, writing in 1727, recalled an Independent minister, ejected from the state Church in 1662, who preached at Horsley, "and there was a great Resort, and a very large Place was provided, which was afterwards called Nailsworth Meeting". The Quaker Meeting at

Nailsworth was even earlier, established before 1655. In 1660 George Fox attended "a very large meeting of many hundreds" there. After 1689, the Nailsworth Independent Meeting was replaced by the Independent (later Congregational) chapel at Forest Green, from which in *circa* 1705 a number left to form a Baptist Meeting at Shortwood,(4) building a Meeting House in 1714. In the late 17th century, Stroud Presbyterians were meeting in a barn in Silver Street, building a meeting house *circa* 1705 in Chapel Street. The Victoria County History quotes a contemporary report of 400 Baptists at "Stroudwater" *circa* 1715.(5)

The Theological Period

The earliest purpose-built meeting houses are plain, often delicate buildings with tall windows and a prominent pulpit reached by steps. Galleries on three sides were often included, or added later. John Betjeman has dubbed this the "theological" style, after the contemporary pattern of Dissenting thought and practice.(6) After the revolutionary tumults of the 17th century, religious life in the first decades of the next century was more restrained; there was the "undemonstrative piety of 18th century Anglicanism and the gently declining ethos of the Old Dissenting tradition",⁽⁷⁾ which had abandoned politics and become sectarian and respectable. This was the era of the Dissenting "gathered church", seen as "the constitutional body of the saints [ie. the members] in covenant both with God and with one another",⁽⁸⁾ but keeping apart, as far as possible, from "the World". The movement had, however, inherited the Puritan work ethic, summed up by Thomas Taylor "We teach that only doers shall be saved..... The profession of religion is no such gentlemanlike life or trade, whose rents come in by their stewards, whether they sleep or wake, work or play".⁽⁹⁾ Men served God here on earth by productive labour.

Dissenters remained excluded from most endowed and grammar schools, and from Oxford and Cambridge, but after 1689 they were able to set up their own Dissenting Academies, which multiplied rapidly, training men for business and the professions. The normal academy curriculum was wider and more up-to-date than those of the grammar schools and the universities, typically including science and mathematics.⁽¹⁰⁾

Southern Gloucestershire in the early 18th century was socially and economically favourable to the growth of Nonconformism. There were few great landowners, but many independent or semi-independent farmers, and clothiers and cloth workers, and some minor gentry living on their small estates.⁽¹¹⁾ "Closed" villages, controlled by squire and parson, the only employment being on the land, were uncommon, most being of the "open" pattern. 17th century Puritanism, according to Hill, "was always strongest . . . in the clothing areas" and "appealed especially to the small employers".⁽¹²⁾ This tendency continued into the next century. Cam Independent Chapel for example was built in 1702 on land donated by the clothier William Hicks. Trustees of the Chapel included John Phillimore of Cam fulling mill, John and Thomas Pope, clothiers, and Nathaniel Hicks, owner of Upper Cam corn and fulling mill.⁽¹³⁾

The Evangelicals

The restrained religious practices of the 18th century were, from the mid 1730s, increasingly influenced by the developing Evangelical movement. John Wesley and George Whitefield began preaching in the open air in 1739, Whitefield to coal miners at Kingswood, Bristol, "with astonishing emotional effect".⁽¹⁴⁾ Wesley preached at Stroud in 1742 and 1744,

Whitefield in 1739-42, and he maintained links with the area despite his extensive travelling in Britain and America. Rodborough Tabernacle was founded by followers of his in 1749, and was for some years the centre of a local association of like-minded societies known as the Rodborough Connexion.

Wesley, Whitefield and others took their message all over the kingdom, eliciting a widespread, though sometimes short-lived, manifestation of religious fervour. Whitefield's sermons were intensely dramatic; "Scripture stories would be literally acted out in the pulpit, with the clergyman setting the scene and assuming the voices of the different characters, such as Abraham and God, Zacheus and Jesus. Congregations were frequently brought to the heights of hysteria, with believers crying out and breaking down".(15) People believed that they were participating in a great stirring of the Holy Spirit.

The 18th century Evangelical Revival produced new Nonconformist groupings, principally the Methodists and Calvinistic Methodists, which became known as New Dissent, in contrast to Old Dissent comprising Independents (later Congregationalists), Baptists, Presbyterians and Quakers which had their origins in the religious controversies of the mid 17th century. The New Dissent of John Wesley (Methodist) and Whitefield (Calvinistic Methodist) initially remained firmly within the Church of England. Calvinistic Methodist "societies" met outside Anglican service times. Their preachers were "exhorters" not ministers. One of the Trust conditions of Dursley Tabernacle was that it be used by "people who profess themselves to be of Calvinistic Principles in connection with the said George Whitefield according to the doctrines of the Church of England and who are commonly called Methodists".(16)

Nevertheless, in 1795, four years after John Wesley's death, Methodism separated from the Church of England and became a new denomination, proving strong enough to survive a number of splits and schisms from 1811 to 1849. Calvinistic Methodism on the other hand was largely held together by groups of local societies such as the Rodborough Connexion, and (after 1751) the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.(17) These broke up in the early nineteenth century, the majority of chapels either becoming Independent/Congregational or joining mainstream Methodism (in Wales, however, an indigenous Calvinistic Methodism remained significant).

Old Dissent was initially cautious towards the new movement, but the impact of Evangelicalism on the Baptists and Independents/Congregationalists was eventually substantial. Shortwood Baptist Meeting House, for example, was enlarged three times between 1760 and 1787.(18) In 1832 The Baptist Union subscribed to "principles generally known as Evangelical". Meanwhile New Dissent continued to develop rapidly; Methodist membership, 37,000 in 1781, rose to 92,000 in 1801 and reached 288,000 in 1831.(19)

The movement was strong in the areas of early industrialism; the cloth industry from about 1790 was in process of change from a proto-industrial or outworking stage to a factory-based industry. "The forty years from 1790 to 1830 were years of intense and competitive evangelism in the area, the Bishop of Gloucester granting 133 licenses of places for Dissenting worship during this period, with 22 chapels built or rebuilt; at least one in almost every parish".(20)

Ebley, for example, was only a cluster of houses in 1803, but the building of a large new mill led to expansion of the village. The Independent Chapel, founded in 1798, was substantially enlarged. In 1856 it was reported that "Ebley Chapel will hold a thousand people....always full.... We have frequently seen twelve hundred people.... its British School [day school] is as certainly flourishing as any.... its Sabbath Schools are attended by three or four hundred children..... it has its own benefit society, literary society, library, discussion classes, elocution classes".(21) There is probably a degree of hyperbole here (Anglicans complained that Dissenters exaggerated the numbers of their congregations), for the national Religious Census of 1851 recorded attendances on census day of 450 for the morning, and 520 for the evening services. Nevertheless there was clearly an impressively high level of religious, educational and social activity associated with the Chapel.

Nonconformism versus Anglicanism

The 1851 Religious Census confirmed the existence of a vigorous Nonconformist movement in the area. For every place of worship, a return was made of the number of attendances on Sunday 30 March. The results showed that nationally, Protestant Dissent was roughly equal with the Church of England in the provision of accommodation and in numbers of worshippers. In Gloucestershire as a whole the Established Church had 53.2 per cent of total attendances and Protestant Dissent 45.7 per cent. In our area, however, the picture was significantly different. For the Registration District of Stroud (not the parish or the town but the Stroud Poor Law Union of parishes) Protestant Dissent accounted for 54 per cent of the total whilst the Church of England had only 44.8 per cent; moreover there were 53 Nonconformist places of worship compared to only 28 for the C. of E. For Dursley Registration District the results were even more striking; the Established Church had only 39.2 per cent of attendances, against 60.7 per cent for Protestant Nonconformism. Numbers of places of worship were 14 and 19 respectively.(22)

The reasons for the rise of Nonconformism to a position which challenged the Established Church are still debated. The traditional approach concentrates on the role of individuals - Wesley, Whitefield and others were seen by contemporaries as inspired by the Holy Spirit, converting people to Christ through the strength of their convictions and the force of their preaching. An alternative approach stresses the impact of profound social and economic changes consequent upon rapid industrialisation. The Church of England was seriously under-resourced in the industrial areas. "The system was unchanged for 500 years.... abuses and inequalities.... The Convocations of Canterbury and York had not met since 1717". (23) Moreover, the Church, in its presentation of the Christian religion, emphasised the old social order, in which the place of each man and woman was ordained by God. An approach epitomised by the hymn, still being sung in my C. of E. Junior School in the 1940s:

The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate
God made them high or lowly, And ordered their estate.

By contrast, New and reinvigorated Old Dissent integrated religion with self-help and self-improvement, seen as leading to the amelioration of poverty.

"Religious conversion of the individual from sin to righteousness was to be paralleled by conversion of the individual to industry, temperance and thrift; self-improvement and eternal salvation alike were responsibilities of the individual conscience".(24)

Social and Industrial Aspects

The Nonconformist emphasis on sin has been seen by some as leading to repression and guilt, and the stress on maintenance of a state of grace through discipline and work as an instrument of social and industrial control. Certainly, networks of local industrialists and employers were very influential. For example, Abraham Marsh Flint (born 1808), owned Frogmarsh Mill at Woodchester in partnership with his maternal uncle Samuel Francis. In 1845 he acquired Nailsworth Mill from a partnership comprising his aunt Sophie's husband John Heskins and Messrs Barnard and Bliss. All these men were long-serving deacons of Shortwood Baptist Church. Both Abraham's father Thomas Flint (b. 1777) and his maternal grandfather Benjamin Francis were pastors of Shortwood.(25) Other deacons included Hillier, founder of the bacon-curing factory, and H.J.H. King of his eponymous engineering company. Such employers could bring pressure to bear. The Howard family, influential members of Dursley Tabernacle and owners of three cloth mills, required their men to attend religious services and send their children to Sunday School.(26) Nevertheless, Evangelical Nonconformism, whilst stressing the moral deficiency of all men and women, also emphasised their natural equality before God, and was a radicalising force, giving ordinary people opportunities for participation and leadership (unlike the established church with its hierarchical structure) leading on to action in radical politics and the emerging labour movement.

Local Politics and the Chapels

Dissenting political activity was stimulated when Stroud became a parliamentary borough in 1832, following the passing of the Reform Bill. Not only lay people were involved. "In the 1830s and 40s, most Stroud Dissenting ministers clearly considered it their duty to take public stances on those issues in which they found moral or religious principle to defend and these covered much of the ground of current political debate".

"The Almighty intends" said Benjamin Parsons, pastor of Ebley Independent Chapel, "that all his *real* disciples shall be *political* as well as *religious* agitators". Parsons preached and lectured on political, social, and religious questions with a radical message. His annual sermons for the Ebley Sunday and Day Schools included the following topics:-

- "The universal brotherhood of man"
- "The aristocratical character of false religion" [i.e the C. of E.]
- "The democratical character of the gospel of Jesus Christ"

He published a pamphlet which argued "that the mental powers of women are equal and her moral feelings far superior to those of men". Indeed in many congregations women outnumbered men by two to one, and played a part in political activity, for instance by gathering signatures to petitions addressed to Parliament. In 1843 an anti-Corn Law petition was sent to the House of Lords by "the female inhabitants of Stroud".

The campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws began in Stroud in 1838, Dissenters playing a prominent part. Numerous lectures were given in the town and surrounding areas, and no less

than 58 petitions presented to Parliament between 1839 and 1846. The ministers presented the question in moral and religious terms; Parsons of Ebley "looked upon it as a question of justice, and therefore of religion". T.F. Newman of Shortwood Baptists quoted scripture "He that withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him" (Prov.ll.26). This campaign against the "tax on bread" appealed to both the local working class and their employers.

On the 28th of March 1848, a great meeting was held in Stroud, of local Chartists and Dissenters. Benjamin Parsons, although condemning violence, spoke in favour of the Charter, as did Joseph Partridge, the leading local dyer and member of Rodborough Tabernacle.

Advocacy of radical political and social questions did not, at least in the first half of the 19th century, preclude support for industry. Indeed it was seen as a progressive force, in contrast to the old order of landowning aristocracy and established church. "A crafty aristocracy and a hireling priesthood have . . . laboured to frighten religious men from engaging in the political renovation of the world". In 1851 for example, Parsons preached on "the Great Exhibition and the Gospel", his sermon subtitled "the Crystal Palace a mirror affording a glorious prospect of the past success of Christianity, and a brilliant prospect of its future triumphs".

Nonconformist political activity was not confined to local and national issues. The movement participated in the long campaign against slavery. Missionary societies were supported. "In 1846 the Reverend J.J. Jesson from Tahiti addressed a meeting at Rodborough Tabernacle on the plight of Queen Pomare and her people. This was followed by the drawing up of a memorial to the Foreign Secretary, and congregations were requested to sign it the following Sunday.(27)

After the 1850s, local Dissenting political activity gradually decreased. The anti-slavery, anti-Corn Law battles had been won; discrimination against Dissenters in law, though not yet finally removed, was much reduced. Nationally, Nonconformism began to change from an emphasis on individualistic social morality based on self-help, as espoused by the famous preacher Spurgeon amongst others, to an emphasis on what came to be called the "Civic Gospel". Morality, health, the relief of poverty, cultural improvement, were to be advanced by municipal action.(28) This is paralleled by a gradual change in attitudes towards the moral conduct of members. In the early 19th century, the minute books of the deacons (elders) of the Shortwood Baptists are full of references to the disciplining of members for "fornication", "intoxication", swearing, Sabbath-breaking, untruthfulness etc. One member was disciplined for stealing a bunch of grapes from his employer! By the 1870s, the deacons had ceased to concern themselves with individual members' conduct.(29)

The Development of Organisations

From about the middle of the 19th century, centralised denominational structures began to develop, together with societies for overseas missions, chapel building, tract distribution, education etc. After about 1880, political leadership moved away from the Liberation Society, formed in 1844 with the aim of removing the privileges of the established church and the disabilities of the Nonconformists, towards the Free Church movement. The National Council of Free Churches was formed in 1896. The change of name was significant.

Patterns of Nonconformist worship developed and changed during the 19th century. By its end, services were more musical and more participatory. They were also shorter, as were sermons. Increasing wealth and prominence in civic life joined with an appreciation of liturgy and moderate ceremony.

Architecture developed from the simple meeting houses of the "theological" era; to the preaching-houses, usually built in a fairly simple but pleasing style, Betjeman's "architecture of enthusiasm"; to Gothic style buildings, reflecting a changing social status and a changing approach to worship. By the 1830s, the Dissenting tradition, based on self-governing congregations, was becoming a group of Nonconformist denominations; by the end of the century, the notion of Free Churches was current, "Free" as opposed to "Established" but Churches nonetheless.

Late Victorian and Later

In late Victorian times, Nonconformist political and social status reached its apogee. Associated with the institutional churches was a wide range of societies and clubs for cricket, football, cycling, YMCA, YWCA, Band of Hope, Boys' Brigade, Temperance Societies etc. It was the hey-day of Nonconformist mayors and Members of Parliament. The late Victorian Free Church movement had perhaps become more conformist than nonconformist. Yet in the 20th century the movement declined steadily and significantly. This is attributed by some to the general decline of most religions in Britain in this century. Others, however, consider that the very reasons for the movement's earlier success were the cause of its later steep decline. In 1897 the Congregational theologian Fairbairn noted that "It is.... harder to be a Nonconformist today.... than ever.... The very decay of disabilities.... has made it harder for us." A recent history writes that "Free of the need to dissent, but characterised by a chapel culture of commitment and participation, Nonconformism in process of becoming Free Churchmanship was not well adapted to the increasingly optional, lukewarm religious ethos of 20th century Britain.(30)

Chapels and Meeting Houses

The earliest Dissenting meetings were held in the open air, in members' houses or in converted domestic premises. In our area, the only remaining examples of the latter are meeting-houses of the Society of Friends (Quakers). This is no accident, since the Friends' unstructured meetings, without ritual, preaching or music, have hardly changed since the 17th Century. Notable examples are Nailsworth (Spring Hill), a mid-17th Century domestic building,(Fig. 1), and Painswick (Vicarage Street), built 1705-6 for an existing meeting. However in Tewkesbury (Church Street) is the Old Baptist Chapel, a three-bay hall-house of about 1500, converted to a meeting-house in the late 17th Century and restored 1976-9.(31) All three buildings, with their plain white-washed walls and simple wooden benches, have the quality of well-scrubbed domestic interiors, meeting the needs of their theologically literate members, who came to hear the Word from ministers with similar views to their own, or (in the case of Friends), from their fellow-members as the Spirit moved them.

Most of the existing chapels in our region are preaching-houses, in Betjeman's "architecture of enthusiasm", "serviceable structures obeying the traditional rules of proportion and solid craftsmanship", (32) with generously proportioned, often round-headed, doors and windows, and good detailing in quoins and key-stones, perhaps a pillared porch, or a pediment in low

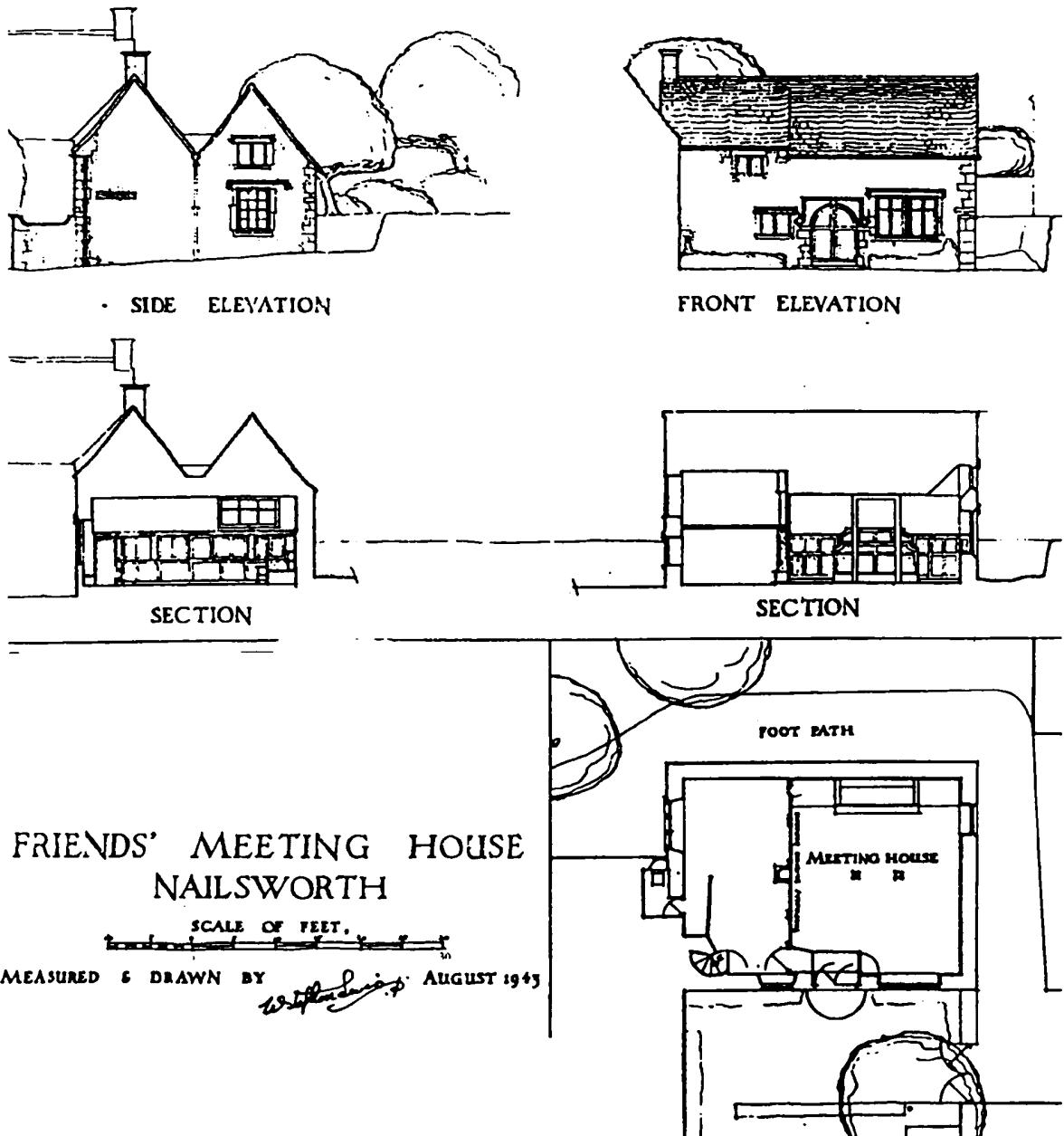


Figure 1 Friends' Meeting House Nailsworth Plan and elevations

relief supported by pilasters. They make a fascinating subject of study, to be found in almost all our villages and towns, including some oddities such as the octagonal Methodist chapel of 1765, enlarged in 1796 with later additions, now used by the Salvation Army, located in Acre Street, Stroud. Occasionally one sees a more grandiose, obviously architect-designed building of a quality appropriate to a city such as Bristol say, or Cheltenham. A good example is the Bedford Street Congregational Chapel, again in Stroud, with its central Venetian window flanked by four fine Ionic Columns supporting a grand pediment, and its circular stair tower with pilasters surmounted by a dome and a lantern.

There are fewer examples in our region of the Gothic-style chapels which became popular in the later nineteenth century. Wotton-under-Edge has two. One is the 13th century Gothic-style building erected in 1852 to replace the original Tabernacle (a much plainer building) of the late 18th century founded by the Evangelical preacher Rowland Hill (*not* the originator of the penny-post). In scale, and quality of design and stone-work, it suggests a wealthy congregation, although only one of the intended two small towers was completed. By contrast, the Methodist Chapel in Bradley Street, built 1898, is of brick, plainer, featuring Gothic-style windows with stonework detailing.

A starting point for the study of the region's rich heritage of Nonconformist buildings is the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England's *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses. Gloucestershire* (HMSO 1986). But beware! Entries include some buildings which were in fact demolished in the seventies. Moreover, it is not as comprehensive as might be expected, as some interesting buildings are missing, for example the breakaway Baptist Chapel in Nailsworth, now the Town Hall, and the Methodist Chapel in Bradley Street, Wotton-under-Edge mentioned above.

The research for this article was originally undertaken for the Stroud District Museum Volunteer Research Project.

References

1. Hill, Christopher, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* Van Nostrand Reinhold 2nd ed. 1980 pp 2 and 63.
2. Hill, pp 167 and 208.
3. Evans, David E. *As Mad as a Hatter: Puritans and Whitefieldites in the History of Cam and Dursley* 1982 Alan Sutton 1982 p 32.
4. Nuttal, G.F. "Dissent in Nailsworth", *Journal of the United Reformed Church Historical Society* vol.4 1992 p 617
5. *Victoria County History of Gloucestershire* vol. xi p 140.
6. Betjeman, John *First and Last Loves* John Murray 1952 p 93
7. Parsons G, ed. *Religion in Victorian Britain: vol. 7* Manchester University Press 1988 p 5.
8. Briggs, J.H.Y. *The English Baptists of the 19th Century* Baptist Historical Society 1994 p 14.
9. Hill p 69.
10. Hill p 251.
11. Evans p 9.

12. Hill p 71.
13. Evans p 34.
14. Kenyon, J.P. ed. *Dictionary of British History*. Wordsworth Editions 1994 p 360.
15. Bremer, Francis and Rydell, Ellen "Performance Art? Puritans in the Pulpit" *History Today* vol.45 no.9 Sep 1995 p 50.
16. Evans pp 57 and 70.
17. Evans p 58.
18. Nuttal p 618.
19. Wolffe, John *The Evangelical Background to Victorian Religion* Open University Press 1990 p 3.
20. Walmsley P.M. "The Public Face of Dissent: Stroud 1830-1852" *Journal of the United Reformed Church Historical Society* (URCHS) vol.4 1992 p 619.
21. Hood, E Paxton *The Earnest Minister: A Record of the Life, and Selections from the Posthumous and other Writings of the Revd. Benjamin Parsons of Ebley, Gloucestershire*. 1856. Quoted in Walmsley, *URCHS Journal* p 621 .
22. Parliamentary Papers 1852-3 LXXXIX: Census 1851: Religious Worship (England and Wales) p 65.
23. Parsons, pp 18 and 19.
24. Parsons p 89.
25. *Manuscript of Benjamin Francis Flint* (1835) Gloucestershire Record Office
26. Evans p 130
27. Walmsley, pp 619-627 is the source for this section on Dissenting political activity in Stroud.
28. Parsons, p 93
29. I am indebted to Mrs Betty Mills of Newmarket, Nailsworth, for allowing me to study the Shortwood Deacons' minute books.
30. Parsons, pp 109-114.
31. Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses: Gloucestershire* HMSO 1986 pp 90, 92, 98.
32. Betjeman, p 102.