

CHAPTER 1

Stirrings of Nonconformity

There was obviously much dissatisfaction with the state of religion in Great Chishill in the 1660's, for there is a vivid account of an unruly incident in the house of a Mr. Thomas Hagger on 16th November 1663.

An assemblage of approximately 80 persons had gathered 'to exercise the worship of God' and was addressed by a Mr. Corbett. From the style adopted, it is obvious that worship was neither conducted by a clergyman of the Established Church, nor based upon the Book of Common Prayer.

Whether such a large assemblage, like a city on a hill, could not be hid, or aroused the attention of an informer, is not known, but constables arrived on the scene to arrest the orator, and were only prevented from doing so by the exertions of the crowd. Nevertheless the incident gave rise to a case heard before magistrates two days later.

It is hard to judge whether such gatherings for worship (for there were doubtless others unrecorded) could be regarded as Quaker or Congregational, both of which were supported in the village later. There would, however, be a touch of irony in accusing Quakers of holding a riotous assembly.

Often it was considered too risky to hold a meeting for worship indoors, or during daylight hours. Francis Holcroft and Joseph Oddy, (who instigated many Dissenting groups in this area), are recorded as having met friends for worship at midnight in a secluded lane. This lane lay a little below the windmill, on the boundary between Essex and Hertfordshire.

This was later used by John Nicholls and his flock for their clandestine meetings, for they took advantage of the geography by slipping into Hertfordshire if the Essex constables arrived, or vice versa if the Hertfordshire officers arrived. Neither police force was allowed to enter the other county, and it obviously proved beyond the wit of man to mount a joint attack.

In 1660, the Rector of Barley, Rev. Nathaniel Ball, was ejected from his living for refusing to conform to the harsh laws upon church government which were enacted after the enthronement of Charles II.

He was a pious man of great learning, and a truly evangelical preacher. When asked to comment upon his predicament (for he had a large family), Mr. Ball said "He was then supported by God's promises and ever since by His providence".

Part of the Lord's providence was embodied in a local, conforming relative living in Little Chishill who sheltered the family, and Mr. Ball was still able to preach in the surrounding neighbourhood. At his death, he is reported to have said "I bless God I have never conformed. I have the comfort of it now".

Another doughty clergyman living in the area was a Rev. Robert Billio, who had similarly been ejected from the living at Bedworth, Warwickshire. He settled at Chishill Parva, where he taught in the local school, and even preached occasionally in Cambridge. Such a staunch teacher of religion could confidently be expected to have gathered a congregation around him.

It was written of such groups 'Though they were not gathered together in Church Order, they were dissatisfied with the superstitions and persecuting practices of the prelates of that day, and were earnestly concerned to edify themselves and propogate the truth, gladly entertaining those zealous friends of the Gospel

of Christ who were then stigmatised by many under the name of Puritans'.

The later growth of a more tolerant attitude by the authorities is shown firstly in the practice of submitting official returns of the numbers of Dissenters, which began in 1669. This could indicate in round-about fashion that being a Dissenter was a distinct option.

A further degree of freedom was given to Dissenters by the Act of Toleration (1689) which allowed them to hold religious Services, provided that the preachers and the meeting-houses were licensed by the local Bishop of the Established Church. This led to a rash of buildings of all types (e.g. private houses, barns) being registered for worship.

In this way, these scattered congregations became sister churches, with greater or less contact with each other.