The Bakewell Family and the Local Unitarian Chapels

by

Janet Spavold, M.A., M.Sc. (UMIST), M.Sc. (Loughborough)

Introduction

It has been known for a long time that the Bakewells of Dishley Grange, near Loughborough, were members of the Unitarian congregation, but little else was known about their involvement. However, a short history of the Loughborough Unitarian congregation is held in the Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (ROLLR), and this led the New Dishley Society members to investigate further and to make contact with the current Unitarian group. We hoped by exchanging information to understand more about Bakewell’s beliefs, and perhaps how they interacted with his farming principles.

Unitarian History and Beliefs

The Unitarians are a nonconformist group dating from the mid-seventeenth century in England. The chapel in Wigan was the earliest, founded in 1697, although its first burial took place in 1794. A lot of early chapels go back to 1662, and they called themselves Presbyterian groups then. The first Unitarian church in London was established in 1774. Unitarians believe in God as a single entity, and do not accept the Trinity or the divinity of Christ. They would not accept the Book of Common Prayer or the way the C of E practised its theology. Nonconformists were legally persecuted and suffered civil disabilities until the Act of Toleration was passed in 1689, though this excluded Unitarians as they denied the Trinity. Dissenting groups were allowed to build their own chapels after the Act, and Unitarians gradually gained acceptability, as Presbyterian groups, during the 18th century. Technically it was illegal to be a Unitarian until the 20th century. Now, Unitarians are welcome to some church groups, but not to others.

It is difficult to say what exactly Bakewell would have believed in his lifetime. For Unitarians, the difficulty was not the position of Jesus, but that of the Holy Spirit. To practically-minded Industrial Revolution men, the idea of the Trinity seemed inherently improbable. They had a preference for freedom of conscience rather than a fixed doctrine, and they claimed the freedom to interpret the Scriptures for themselves. They saw (and still see) Jesus as a teacher. They believed in divinity, but not the Nicene Creed; they were not Trinitarians. They objected to prescribed dress such as surplices, and prescribed forms of worship. Like other Nonconformists, they could not attend the universities because they could not subscribe to the Church of England’s 39 Articles, which they saw as too prescriptive. They could not be Justices of the Peace or hold any civic or state office.

They tended to be rational freethinkers in Bakewell’s period, men with a wider variety of social and intellectual interests than other nonconformist sects. Much of their thinking then was strongly influenced by Dr Joseph Priestley, and they ran enlightened schools. They were in general wealthier than other nonconformist groups, and of a better (and rising) social class. In Leicester and Leicestershire they were often very successful merchants and manufacturers. Unitarians, and Nonconformists generally, were generally independent and free thinkers. This affected all areas of their lives, including their entrepreneurial and business ventures. Examples
are men like Jedidiah Strutt, Erasmus Darwin or Priestley, and other members of the influential
Lunar Society in Birmingham. The Unitarian groupings were influential out of all proportion to
their numbers, and socially they were a self-reinforcing group through marriages, business ties
and intellectual pursuits. Some of this may be because they were excluded from any civic duties.

Politically they were Whigs in the eighteenth century, then Liberal reformers in the nineteenth
century. After Municipal Reform in 1836, Leicester, which had been ruled by the Conservative
establishment for generations, had a string of Unitarian mayors; this led to the Unitarian Great
Meeting chapel they attended being nicknamed the “Mayors’ Nest” 1. It illustrates the influence
of a small but intellectually powerful group. However, with political and financial success, some
Unitarians later moved to the Church of England and to Conservative politics, to fit in socially.

In the later 18th century, nonconformist groups set up their own schools, usually called dissenting
academies, where they taught a modern curriculum. It was based less on Latin and theology, and
more on science and mathematics. The academies were managed by trustees, who were not
theological men as in Church of England schools. It may be that they were appointed because of
their experience of managing money and property in their business lives. It was the same for the
Unitarian chapels, which were also managed by trustees.

Bakewell would fit into the 18th century Unitarian mould; he thought for himself. His methods
of cattle breeding for instance would have been frowned on by the Church of England and the
Establishment as incest, and prohibited by both secular and canon law. Pat Stanley has described
how Bakewell established a blueprint for cattle breeding 2, and there were similar methods with
racehorse breeding. It underlined the freethinking element in Bakewell’s work, and the appeal
that would have had for him. In spite of this, Bakewell had a good working relationship with
Arthur Young, the agricultural writer and a Church of England minister.

The Loughborough Unitarians

In his 1908 history of the Loughborough Unitarians, the Revd. Walter H. Burgess noted that the
Victoria Street Unitarian Chapel was the oldest Nonconformist cause in Loughborough, and that
its first minister was Samuel Statham, from 1729 until his retirement in 1760. Statham’s father
was a Loughborough apothecary. Statham himself gave the land for this first chapel, but he
retained a right of way from Warner’s Lane through the chapel property to his other land. 3

On ground at the back of Statham’s house a modest little Chapel or Meeting House
was built about the year 1743. It is described in the deed of 1744 “as lately erected
on the land of Samuel Statham with the moneys freely contributed by divers persons
thereunto disposed”. The building is still standing, but when the Congregation left it
in 1864 for their present church it was sold and devoted to other uses. There was a
provision in the deed that stable room had to be kept close by for the standing of the
horses of those who came to Divine service on horseback. These were yeoman
farmers from the out-lying districts who rode in on Sundays. The Bakewells of
Dishley were loyal supporters. Mr Bakewell was famous as a breeder of
Leicestershire sheep. 4

The chapel is now no longer standing, but its position is recorded by a Blue Plaque on the wall of
the nearest building in Warner’s Lane.

© Janet Spavold 2010
The dates here indicate that two generations of Bakewells were members of the congregation: the famous Robert (1725-1795), who bred the New Dishley sheep and improved the Longhorn cattle, and his father, also called Robert, who died in 1769. In fact three generations of the family were members, as Robert the younger’s nephew Robert Honeybourne who took over the farm on his death was also involved with the chapel. They took their religion seriously, and their responsibilities to it; Robert senior was one of the original trustees for the chapel.

The first deed of the old Chapel is dated the 29th of March, 1744, and conveyed the premises from Samuel Statham, clerk, of Loughborough, to John Richards, of Normanton-upon-Soar, esquire, and “Robert Bakewell, of Dishley, gentleman, and their heirs”. This is Robert senior. It is interesting that the Unitarian members had enough faith in the honesty of these families to make them hereditary trustees. Bakewell, a tenant farmer, is described as a gentleman, which indicates that he was comfortably well off and with considerable social standing (though John Richards, esquire, had higher social status). Nine other trustees were named.

When four trustees had died the survivors were to elect four more within six weeks. There were eleven trustees. The Trust was renewed in 1774, when all except three of the original trustees were dead. The new deed was dated 11th October 1774. The new trustees included “Robert Bakewell of Dishley, gentleman, a son of Robert Bakewell mentioned in the deed of 1744”. This Robert is our famous breeder, and though a trustee, he was not listed as a warden of the chapel. Joseph Paget of Loughborough was also appointed a trustee; he was a hosier. The hosiery industry was very important in Leicestershire then, and was Loughborough’s most significant industry. By the next renewal in 1816 only Joseph Paget and one other trustee survived. Paget withdrew because of his age, and his son, Joseph junior, was appointed along with William Paget esquire, and John Paget esquire, both of Loughborough, and Charles Paget, the eldest son of Joseph junior. Charles Paget was also a hosier. These families, the Pagets and the Bakewells, provided considerable loyalty and continuity in running the Loughborough Unitarian congregation for two generations of one family and three of the other. By 1863 only one of these trustees survived, Mr Charles Paget, who was by then a Member of Parliament.

From the chapel’s account books, Revd. Burgess notes that ‘Robert Bakewell, senior, seems to have been treasurer of our Church at one time, judging from this note at the close of the accounts for 1766:-

“A deficiency due to Mr. Bakewell £2. 4s. 0d.”

Bakewell senior seems to have given or left money to be invested on behalf of the chapel. The account books show that for over 40 years a sum was received annually, described as “interest of £15, being dividends made on Mr. Bakewell’s effects”. The interest was paid by Mr. Stone, of Quorn, Leicestershire. On July 15th, 1827, the principal was paid into the Church account by Stone’s son:-

“Of Mr. Stone money recd [sic] by his Father being two dividends from the property of the late Mr. Bakewell £15 0 0”.

It was probably a small bequest to the Church.

Robert Honeybourne, the nephew of Bakewell junior, succeeded to the farm at Dishley and continued to be a generous subscriber to the Loughborough Unitarian chapel until 1814. The Warden’s book has an entry:-
This is the last mention of him in the Unitarian records; the floor of his pew had new rush matting put down. The close association of the Bakewell family with the Loughborough Unitarian chapel had lasted from 1729 to 1813.

The remnant congregation of the Loughborough chapel still exists, and they are looked after by the Leicester Great Meeting. They meet in each other’s homes.

The Mountsorrel Unitarians

Mountsorrel, a village close to Loughborough, had a granite quarrying industry as well as its agriculture. It had its own Unitarian congregation, founded from a charity ‘arising from a plot of land left by Hugh Phipps and vested in 1753 in the names of Samuel Statham, John Stone, Joshua Grundy and Robert Bakewell’14. This was Bakewell senior, and Statham of course was the Loughborough chapel’s minister. But the Mountsorrel Unitarians were fewer and they struggled to survive, eventually having to be rescued by the Loughborough congregation. In 1761, after his retirement, Samuel Statham was instrumental in getting fresh trustees appointed for the Mountsorrel Unitarian Chapel. They included Joseph Paget senior, the Loughborough hosier, and ‘Robert Bakewell the younger of Dishley, graizer’15. The Mountsorrel chapel, like Loughborough’s, was described as ‘Presbyterian’, which at that date meant they were liberal nonconformists.

The next Mountsorrel trust deed was 1795. The trustees then included Joseph Paget junior and William Paget, both of Loughborough, and ‘Robert Honeyborn (sic) of Dishley, graizer, a generous subscriber to the Loughborough Presbyterian Meeting’16. Robert Bakewell junior had died on October 1st 1795, so Honeybourne had only just taken over the tenancy at Dishley Grange. Mountsorrel clearly still relied heavily on Loughborough, as the Pagets were also trustees for Loughborough.

Bakewell, by his contemporaries

The contemporary edition of the Dictionary of National Biography is quoted by Burgess for an interesting description of the family and of the work done to improve cattle, sheep and horses.

A Fine Old English Gentleman.

A native of Dishley he [Robert senior] rented a farm of some 440 acres there and gave great care to its development. He sent his son Robert, the third of the name, into the West of England to study different modes of farming and then gradually surrendered the management of his own farm into his son’s hands as age and infirmity increased. This last Robert Bakewell (1725-1795) was of an inventive turn of mind. He sought to develop a finer breed of sheep than any known in the district before. He held that by selection and careful breeding “you can get beasts to weigh where you want them to weigh, in roasting pieces and not in boiling pieces.” To show the superiority of his sheep with a short neck, small bone, and compact fleshy form, he had select carcases preserved in brine for comparison with ordinary breeds, and had skeletons set up for careful study. He produced the special breed of
“Leicesters” which spread into “every part of the United Kingdom and to Europe and America in little more than fifty years”. He also developed a strain of cattle known as “Dishley cattle” or “Leicester Long-Horns” described as “a small clean-boned, round, short-carcased, kindly looking cattle inclined to be fat”, excellent for the grazier, not so good for the dairy. With horses of a type suited for farm and military work he was equally successful, and by royal command exhibited one of his fine Black Stallions in the courtyard of St James’s Palace to King George III. People interested in agriculture and stock raising visited his farm from far and near, and all were hospitably entertained at his house. He had the ingenuity to cut a series of water channels to irrigate his fields and made use of the current to convey his turnips to the farm: “We throw them in, he said, and bid them meet us at the Barn End”. For his animals he always had a kindly thought. His rams were clean as race horses, and in severe weather had “body clothes”. Throsby, who visited Dishley about 1790, gives an account of a famous cow, which incidentally reveals the humane feeling of Bakewell. It is amusing to see how an antiquarian describes an cow:—

“the long-famed old cow”, he says, “stood like a venerable ruin on props of magnificent architecture, bulging fine limbs enfeebled with old age … she is now 25 years old and has been esteemed by judges one of the finest animals of that species ever bred. She now lives in an asylum; a meadow full of keep set apart to soothe her passage to earth, for in the slaughter house she is not to make her exit.”

“Excursions in Leicestershire”, page 412.

The initial expenses of Bakewell’s experiments brought him into financial straits in 1766, but he soon recovered his position and, as the fame of his stock grew, he secured an increasing income from the hire of his rams. In 1790, according to the “Leicester Journal”, the fees from one ram alone amounted to 1,800gns “a fact almost incredible”. This Robert Bakewell died a bachelor on October 1st, 1795, aged 70, and was buried with his fathers at Dishley. From that time the name of Bakewell drops out of our Church Books. His sister Lucy married the Rev. Thomas White.

The old church at Dishley stands within the curtilage of Dishley Grange, though without its roof and the west wall. It is a small Early English building, now in the care of English Heritage. The Bakewell family tombstones lie in the chancel floor. Although they were Unitarians, burials took place in the Church of England as there was then no legal provision for burial for nonconformist groups.

The Pagets

The Revd. Burgess recorded a little about the Paget family too.

‘The Bakewells were not the only family connected with our group of Churches in this district who distinguished themselves for their improvements in husbandry. In Marshall’s Rural Economy of the Midland Counties we have a pleasant account of Mr. Paget of Ibstock, whose industry and inventiveness were inherited by his descendants who settled in Loughborough.

Marshall says:-
“Mr. Paget a superior manager of the higher class of yeomanry made himself a master of the art of Sod-draining, taught it to his labourers, practised it on an extensive scale upon his own estate and has sent young men of his instructing into various districts as sod-drainers.”

Page 192.

For an account of John Paget, of Thorpe Satchville, another connection of this family, who carried the arts of English husbandry into Hungary and helped the Unitarians of Transylvania at a critical period in their history, I must refer the reader to the article in the Dictionary of National Biography by the Rev. Alexander Gordon. ¹⁸

The Bakewells and Pagets intermarried, reinforcing their business and religious ties. Bakewell too was interested in the art of land draining.

References.

¹ Temple Patterson, A., Radical Leicester A History of Leicester 1780-1850 (1954) p. 214
⁴ ibid., p. 8
⁵ ibid., p. 11
⁶ ibid., p.12
⁷ ibid., p. 15
⁸ ibid., p.13
⁹ ibid., p. 8
¹⁰ ibid., p. 33
¹¹ ibid., p. 34
¹² ibid., p. 34
¹³ ibid., p. 34
¹⁴ ibid., p. 25
¹⁵ ibid., p. 24
¹⁶ ibid., p. 24
¹⁷ ibid., p. 33
¹⁸ ibid., p. 34

We are grateful to the members of the Charnwood Unitarian Fellowship for their discussions on this subject.

The New Dishley Society would be pleased to hear from any reader who can add information about the Bakewells, the Pagets or their Unitarian connections in the later 1700s. Our email address is ndssecretary@rya-online.net.