AN EAST MIDLAND CALL:
ITS CONTEXT AND SOME
CONSEQUENCES.

THE GENESIS OF CLARENDON PARK
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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I

Thursday, 9 September 1886: Set off with Bennett for a three days walk en route to Leicester where I was due to preach on the Sunday: Mansfield, Newstead, Papplewick, Langley Mill ... Ashby de la Zouche where we slept. Then Calke Abbey and St. Bernhard’s Abbey, a live monastery near Whitwick to Loughborough where we slept and walked next day with Mr. Alexander Baines by Garendon Park, Langcliff, over the Beacon Hill and Bradgate Park to Leicester. Found in Mr. Baines the husband of Lucy Thompson of Bowdon. Stayed with him and preached at the new Clarendon Park Chapel. Took tea with Mr. Stafford who knew many of my friends.

Who is this diarist, preacher certainly although more muscular Christian than travelling preacher? He is Elkanah Armitage, minister of Doncaster Road Congregational Church, Rotherham. He is the greatly loved pastor of an incorrigibly awkward people, a physically and intellectually energetic man in his early forties. He also teaches philosophy at Rotherham College, which trained men for the Congregational ministry. This explains the companionable presence of Bennett, William Henry Bennett, ten years younger, who teaches Hebrew and Old Testament there. Bennett and Armitage belong to a new strain of the old breed of scholar minister: both are Cambridge firsts, Armitage in Moral Philosophy and Bennett in Theology. Armitage is a Trinity man, Bennett is St. John’s. In four years’ time Armitage will leave the pastoral ministry for full time college work in Bradford where the Rotherham College had united with Airedale College to form the idiosyncratically if accurately named Yorkshire United Independent College. Bennett, however, is already firmly embarked on his collegiate career and in five years’ time he will move to Hackney College, North London. In another twenty-five years he will return as principal to Lancashire Independent College, Manchester, where he and Armitage had trained for the ministry. In London he will find himself on the University Senate and Dean of the Faculty of Theology. In

1 Ms diary in possession of the family of the late Revd H. A. Wilson
Manchester he will be a founder and first President of the Society for Old Testament Study. He will gather doctorates from Aberdeen and Cambridge and he is in demand as a Hebrew examiner. One wonders if ‘the new Clarendon Park Chapel’ quite appreciated what was about to hit it in pulpit and pew.\footnote{For Elkanah Armitage (1844–1929) see \textit{Congregational Year Book}, 1931, pp. 222–3; for William Henry Bennett (1855–1920) see \textit{Congregational Year Book}, 1921, p. 203.}

I suspect that it did. Alexander Baines’s wife came from the church where the extensive core of Elkanah Armitage’s family worshipped. Mr. Stafford too had his Manchester connexions. All sorts of nets will be found to work out from the Staffords, Thompsons, Baines, Bennetts, and Armitages, covering much more than Manchester, Cambridge, Rotherham, or Leicester. Our immediate concern, however, is Leicester.

Leicester was an ecclesiastically radical town. Its Unitarians were discreetly grand in an appropriately old-fashioned Great Meeting. Its Trinitarian Presbyterians, shortly to be displaced by railway development, had witnessed in spired Gothic since 1869. It had become a centre for Churches of Christ, whose growth was easily encompassed by the lifespan of citizens who in 1886 were in their prime. The real success story, however, lay with the Baptists, whether New Connexion General or Particular: fifteen churches (and another five mission halls) in 1881, upwards of 3,000 members and still growing, fine buildings, nationally known ministers, from Robert Hall and James Mursell to James Thew and F. B. Meyer. Leicester’s Congregationalists paled beside them: nine churches (and as many mission stations) in 1886. In their way, however, they ceded little in radicalism or possibility to the Baptists.\footnote{Baptist development can be followed in two chapel histories: E. E. Kendall, \textit{Doing and Daring: The Story of Melbourne Hall Evangelical Free Church Leicester}, Rushden nd. (1955); and Sheila Mitchell, \textit{Not Disobedient ... A History of United Baptist Church, Leicester}, Leicester 1984; for general background D. M. Thompson, \textit{The Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851–1881}, Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1969.}

Between 1881 and 1891 Leicester’s population rose by forty-three per cent, from 122,000 to 175,000. Those figures suggest contrasting challenges: suburbia is one, the inner city is another. They predicate insistent changes in class, culture, politics, and social expectation, each change heralding a swifter transition than the last, together providing a whole clutch of challenges. Leicester was hardly a new town but it escaped none of the challenges faced by new towns and it could be argued that its Congregationalists were well placed to meet them.

None of the Leicester churches listed in the 1886 \textit{Congregational Year Book} (to take the denominational resource most accessible to Armitage and Bennett as they set off on their walking tour) predated 1800. That was the year when Bond Street was formed. Gallowtree Gate followed in 1824, then London Road, Oxford Street, and Wycliffe, in 1857, 1862, and 1867 respectively, followed by Belgrave and Emanuel in 1874, Humberstone Road in 1876 and, so recently that it first appeared only in the 1887 \textit{Year Book}, Clarendon Park, formed in 1886: seven churches in thirty years.\footnote{These are the dates of formation as listed in the Year Book. In fact they can hide complicated pre-histories. Thus Bond Street descended from the now Unitarian Great Meeting, and Oxford Street from Bridge Street Wesleyan Chapel. \textit{Congregational Year Book}, 1886, p. 305, and 1887, p. 342.}
If the pattern of Leicester’s Congregational Church growth could seem encouraging in 1886, its pattern of ministry was decidedly interesting. For contemporary Congregationalists Leicester meant two things: Political Dissent and theological liberalism. In the early 1840s the combination of Edward Miall’s ministry at Bond Street and William Baines’ refusal to pay Church Rate led to what became the Liberation Society and that vehement periodical, *The Nonconformist*, two core ingredients of a new politics and a new journalism. The Political Dissenter was abroad. In 1877 the Congregational Union’s Autumnal Assembly at Leicester furnished the occasion for a conference of ministerial Young Turks whose doings rocked the Union. To be a Congregational Young Turk in those heady days was to be Unitarian in all but name; or at least so it was in the eyes of the Old Guard.

Nine years after that notorious Leicester Conference two of Leicester's nine Congregational churches were vacant; none had a minister of wide denominational note but the seven who served were on the young and liberal side. Four of them had settled in the past three or four years, four were in their first pastorates in Congregational churches, five came from ministerial families – they were sons, sons-in-law, or brothers of the manse. The most suggestive of them all was F. H. Stead, who had settled at Gallowtree Gate in 1884.

Francis Herbert Stead was a son, and about to be a son-in-law, of the manse. He was thirty, with a lifetime of education already behind him: Silcoates, (the school near Wakefield for Congregational ministers’ sons), Owens’ College Manchester, Airedale College Bradford, the universities of Glasgow, Halle, Göttingen, Giessen, and Berlin. There had also been a significant teenage introduction to journalism. It was significant because Herbert Stead was the younger brother of a man who was already a nationally notorious journalist and who was arguably the most significant, certainly the best known, journalist of his age, W.T. Stead. Herbert’s own future career fulfilled all that had made Leicester exciting for Congregationalists. In 1890, copying Edward Miall fifty years earlier, he too would leave his Leicester pastorate for journalism in London, as editor of *The Independent and Nonconformist*, the official denominational paper into which Miall’s proud dissidence had now dwindled. From 1894 there would follow the wardenship of Browning Hall, Walworth (named after Victorian Congregationalism’s prime literary hero, Robert Browning), where for twenty-seven years he promoted the causes of social Christianity: first, Old Age Pensions, perfecting a pressure politics of what he called ‘Prayer and Postcards’ to draw his campaign to the attention of MPs; then a series of Labour Weeks, all the while

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7 For Francis Herbert Stead (1857–1928) see Congregational Year Book, 1929, pp. 231–3.

assisting his brother in the *Review of Reviews* and writing ceaselessly on his own account, determinedly preaching a Christ who stood ‘for the sway of the proletariat’, capturing him at last in his book, *The Proletarian Gospel of Galilee*.

Herbert Stead had in fact left provincial journalism to train for the Congregational ministry in 1876, the year before the Leicester Conference. He was, therefore, too young to have played any part in that affair. Even so his ministry testified to the ongoing spirit of ‘Leicester’ socially applied within clear if liberally interpreted denominational bounds. While he was actually in Leicester, moreover, he played an important part in promoting the new cause at Clarendon Park.

Even the strongest imagination would find it hard to picture Clarendon Park as a centre of proletarian Christianity but even the unimaginative would be impressed by its assured air of civic culture. In September 1886 it was seeking a minister. Two years later it had called one who measured up to some stringent criteria: a Scotsman, midway between Armitage and Bennett in age, a product of Aberdeen, Göttingen and New College London. Like Armitage and Bennett he knew Manchester and he would go on to know Cambridge. Like Armitage he knew Bradford and, like Bennett, he would have a prolonged exposure to Hackney College. Like Stead he had some journalistic experience and what he had written so far coloured the imputation of theological and political radicalism. Stead might have heard of him, perhaps encountered him, very likely been warned off him, while he was still at Airedale. These are suppositions but they are encouraged by the pre-history of the church at Clarendon Park and in turn they encourage a closer examination of that church’s building, its people, and their search for ministry.

II

First, its building. The Victorian Society approves of it. Their Leicester Group sums it up as ‘a confident, thoughtful building – not a bad architectural tribute to the most forthrightly intellectual of all the English Nonconformist denominations’. So those two forthright intellectuals striding down from Rotherham had a treat in store, which the official description furnished the following year by the *Congregational Year Book* tended to confirm.

Leicester’s newest Congregational chapel, opened in Spring 1886, was ‘a handsome and commodious church’. It cost upwards of £7,000, inclusive of site, organ, and fittings, and it seated downwards of 600 allowing for eighty in the back gallery. It was at once complete and flexibly planned for further growth or at least for the occasional large gathering. In addition to vestries for minister, deacons, and ladies, and what was described as ‘a room for the curator’, it had a parlour or library, while behind the main body of the church, separated only by

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stone piers and arches, was a roomy chancel, big enough for another 200 adults. It was gothic and dignified: an interior of stuccoed walls and Ancaster and white Mansfield stone masonry, with open framed and boarded roof. Its nave and aisles were divided by stone columns and arches, and a ‘transepted projection’ allowed for an organ chamber. There were fixed benches in the body of the church but the chancel was ‘left free for moveable seats so as to make it conveniently available for week-night services and other meetings less numerous than the Sunday service’. It was a broad church, a good space for listeners and therefore for speakers, better for godly aldermen than worldly archdeacons, and its civic air was enhanced by those auxiliary rooms, that decoratively useful chancel, and the general sense of welcoming efficiency, down to ‘roomy internal lobbies and double doors for preventing draughts’.

The exterior was fully worthy of the interior. Set slightly back from an important road and marking the entry to an opulent suburb was what in shape and assurance was a fine parish church, suburban in the best sense, its colour and texture and some of its mannerisms reminding us that it was built in the decade which produced the Arts and Crafts Movement and in a town which encouraged some of that movement’s formative figures. Its style was fifteenth-century Gothic. Its materials were local random granite, sandstone dressings, tiles for the roof. Its commanding feature was a broad and massive tower, anything but spindly, its
verticality expressing civic and ecclesiastical affirmation rather than social aspiration. This was the Church’s main entrance and the Year Book went to town with its description: ‘a bold arched and moulded doorway, over which is a triplet of two-light traceried windows set in gablets divided by pinnacles’. Over them in turn was ‘an interval of plain walling, containing only a stone-carved clock-dial’, and above that was the belfry (although, as far as I know, no bells were contemplated) with its range of windows ‘set in tabernacle work, surmounted by an embattled parapet and a high-pitched tiled roof with an ornamental leaded ridge’.

Who contemplated, executed, and then worked this interesting building? The Year Book was brisk and to the point: ‘For some years past it has been widely and deeply felt that a Nonconformist place of worship was greatly needed in the Clarendon Park District’. The area already had a population of 4,000 and any
Dissenters among them were restricted to a chapel which held sixty. In 1884–5 the Anglican need was met by St. John the Baptist, Clarendon Park Road, a church greatly liked by the Victorian Society, ‘extremely tall’, its interior ‘spacious and softly coloured’, indeed ‘exceedingly fine’, standing comparison ‘with almost anything erected in the late nineteenth century’. They would be followed in Clarendon Park Road by the Baptists in 1893 (‘a very large building ... in an undecided style: could it be called Elizabethan, Jacobean or Queen Anne?’) and the Wesleyan Methodists in 1900 (‘a large building in what can only be called a later Perpendicular style’, with a ‘Strange octagonal tower’ and a ‘lofty’ if ‘somewhat oppressive’ interior). More Baptists followed on London Road itself in 1912 (a ‘very solid, prosperous-looking church’, in ‘heavy, confident Baroque style’, its interior ‘spacious and quite un mys terious’).11

The Anglicans, therefore, were first on the scene, beating the Congregationalists by a whisker, but all of them – Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists alike – were in large, confident buildings of considerable character and some quality. Two of them, Clarendon Park Baptist and Clarendon Park Congregationalist, were by James Tait.12

Tait was a local architect, in his prime and with twenty years’ independent practice behind him when the first Clarendon Park commission came his way. It seems that he was a Nonconformist, I suspect a Congregationalist, and certainly his name figures frequently in the Year Book’s architectural descriptions. It has been said that he descended from the Brothers Adam, but all that tells us is that architecture was in his bones. For our purposes he was an adaptable, prolific, provincial Goth, and for three years he had been in Wolverhampton as George Bidlake’s managing assistant. Bidlake was a thumping Goth, a successful man whose work may now inspire a rueful affection but never admiration. He was, however, a Congregationalist, one of the men behind Tettenhall College, the West Midland proprietary school for Dissenters, and whether by chance or in reactive desperation his office nurtured considerable talent. Philip Webb was briefly, and unhappily, in it; so was his own son, William Henry Bidlake, who became a leading Midland Arts and Crafts Architect (though he died in the Sussex Weald) with a fine line in Anglican churches (his retirement home was appropriately called ‘Vespers’). This detail is not wholly irrelevant because in January 1882 the younger Bidlake, then nineteen years old, was in James Tait’s Leicester office before heading off to a sequence of important London offices and the RIBA’s Pugin Studentship, and two of the three men who proposed young Bidlake’s associateship of the RIBA in January 1888 were Leicester architects: Goddard, the architect of the atmospheric St. John’s Clarendon Park Road, and Tait, the architect of Clarendon Park’s Congregational church.13

An architect, however, is nowhere without clients. Who were Tait’s clients, the movers and moulders of Clarendon Park?

13 For George Bidlake (1829–92), and William Henry Bidlake (1862–1938) see ibid., p. 80
III

The new cause’s formative moment came at the 1884 spring meeting of the Leicester and Rutland Congregational Union: a committee was set up, a site secured, and funds came in with gratifying ease. Seldom can a chapel building scheme have proceeded so smoothly. The building committee started work in December 1884, the chancel was opened on 10 January 1886 and the main church followed on 2 March. The committee’s composition offers a multitude of clues. Herbert Stead was on it but really we should look to the laymen and particularly to the founder members of the church itself.

The chairman was Alderman Chambers, supported by Alderman Anderson, Alderman Almond, and Alderman Stafford. Chambers had been Mayor in 1881–2 and Stafford had been twice mayor – the first time was in 1870 which, he liked to recall, was 500 years to the year after an earlier John Stafford had also been mayor. Of the non-aldermanic committee members, Francis Hewitt had been mayor in 1882–3, Alexander Baines was the son of an alderman who had been mayor back in 1863, and the nephew of a councillor, and Richard Toller was Leicester’s Clerk of the Peace for sixty years. Nor was this municipal clout their sole merit. They gave generously: £500 from Stafford, £250 each from Chambers and Hewitt, £100 each from Baines and Almond; and there was another £100 from Mr. Gee of Knighton Frith.

With Harry Simpson Gee, chairman of Stead and Simpson, we come into a broad and genial provincial culture. He had moved to Leicester from Leeds and his interests ranged from shoes to banks, collieries, and trams. He typified Leicester’s Chamber of Commerce. He was not, I think, a Congregationalist but he was well disposed and, as it happens, his house, Knighton Frith, would be comprehensively refitted in 1893 by Elkanah Armitage’s designer-and-architect younger brother, Faulkner Armitage of Altrincham. Knighton Frith, indeed, was Faulkner Armitage at his most ponderously exuberant, a carved and fretted world of leaded lights, richly figured wood, fluted pilasters, butterscotch twisted legs, studded leather, linenfold doors, strap hinges, of leather-backed chairs, settles, sideboards, and dumb-waiters, of Mexican-onyx-topped washstands, and canopied bedsteads mottoed with ‘Sleep in Peace, Wake in Joy’. As Oxford’s Union and Mansfield College, the Fine Art Society in London’s Bond Street and the Devonshire Club in London’s St. James’s Street, Sheffield’s Ruskin Museum and Cheshire’s Bramall Hall would all bear witness, Faulkner Armitage was lavishly Old England, just the man for new houses in Clarendon Park.

So what of Gee’s business acquaintances, so many of them Clarendon Park...
Congregationalists? We might note that Alderman Anderson was Chairman of the Leicestershire Congregational Union in 1886 and Alexander Baines was the treasurer but the survey should begin with the building committee’s chairman, Leicester’s 436th mayor, Alderman Chambers.\(^{18}\)

Henry Thomas Chambers of Ingleneuk, Stoneygate Road, was a second generation builder in his lateish sixties but with thirty years still ahead of him. He was a Liberal with a Radical past and a benevolent present who had chaired Leicester’s Watch and Highways and Floods Committees. He liked to claim that the Leicester Permanent Building Society, which he also chaired, began in his house. He grew to maturity in Edward Miall’s Bond Street Church and moved on, like William Baines, to Gallowtree Gate before coming to rest in Clarendon Park. His second wife was a sister of Alexander Mackennal, minister of Bowdon Downs, Altrincham, and a power in Victorian Congregationalism under whom sat the families of Elkanah and Faulkner Armitage and of Lucy Baines.\(^{19}\) Is that why Mackennal preached at Clarendon Park’s opening services? Chambers was portrayed by his obituaryists as one of the men who engineered the transition to modern Leicester and at his funeral in May 1916 his minister touchingly described him in words which could now no longer be used: ‘He was a white man through and through ... the very follower of Him who was the first true gentleman that ever breathed.... He carried himself with dignity because he respected himself’; and at the last ‘the partition of the two worlds was so thin that he simply slipped through’.\(^ {20}\)

Chambers of Ingleneuk had friends and nephews but no children. Alexander Baines, subsequently of Inglewood but as yet of Rostherne, had the lot.\(^ {21}\) Baines was late thirties, younger than Armitage, older than Bennett, and going places: he became a school governor and Chairman of Leicester’s School Board, he was a director of Parr’s Bank and, more adventurously, of the Louisiana and Southern States Real Estate and Mortgage Co. and, more boringly if probably none too profitably, of the Leicester Coffee and Cocoa House Co. Baines’s domestic tastes were more refined than those of Harry Gee. A year before Faulkner Armitage stamped his mark on Knighton Frith, Baines moved to Inglewood, newly built for his own occupation by Ernest Gimson, who in fact never lived in it.\(^ {22}\) Inglewood is one of Knighton’s finest Arts and Crafts houses, a markedly restrained essay in local brick and Swithland slate. The Gimsons were a notable family in the Leicester timber and engineering trades. Ernest’s branch was politically radical, Secularists turning into Unitarians, and Ernest had been converted – no other word will do – by William Morris himself and now was off to the Cotswolds,


\(^{19}\) For Mackennal (1835–1904) see ODNB.

\(^{20}\) *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 29 May 1916.

\(^{21}\) For Baines (1848–1907) see Scarff and Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

never to look back. There was, however, a Baptist (and Tory) branch, active at F. B. Meyer’s marvellously monstrous Melbourne Hall and eventually to marry into several Clarendon Park families. They too developed Arts and Crafts connections.  

Baines’s own connexions were labyrinthine. His older brother George married and moved into West Hartlepool shipbuilding. He was a director of his father-in-law’s business and a founder of the family’s Central Marine Engine Works. Education, Congregationalism, and the Voluntary Sector marked George’s life as strongly as they marked Alexander’s. George chaired West Hartlepool’s School Board and the county’s Technical Instruction Committee; he also chaired its Charity Organisation Society. Like Alexander, George was a JP; like Alexander he was active in chapel-building and he was to take a thoroughly useful interest in Silcoates School. If Alexander had five daughters, George had four, one of whom, Winifred, went to Girton in 1896 to read Classics. And George became an Alderman, of Durham County Council.  

These successful brothers had a father and an uncle. Their father, also George, also a JP, also an alderman, indeed Mayor of Leicester in 1863, had died in 1880. He had moved from drapery in the Market Place to wool-spinning in Fairfax Mills. He had been a Gallowtree Gate Congregationalist and his brother, strictly speaking his half-brother, William, was the best known Leicester Baines for he was William Baines, the Church Rate martyr of 1840, hatter, hosier, and shirt maker of Market Place and still alive in 1886.  

If William Baines’s court case and imprisonment had precipitated Miall’s Nonconformist and the Liberation Society, their local publicity owed much to the Leicester Mercury, then owned by the appropriately named Albert Cockshaw. This brings us to another of Clarendon Park’s founders, Francis Hewitt.  

Like the Baineses, the Hewitts were Gallowtree Gate Congregationalists. Francis Hewitt’s background was farming on the Northamptonshire border but he moved to Leicester in his early teens, the mid 1840s, worked on the Mercury, set himself up as stationer, bookseller and newsagent and prospered sufficiently to buy the Mercury in 1877. His was a classic success story. He personified the intelligently entrepreneurial mental-art man. In his time there Leicester’s population grew fivefold, from 40,000 to 200,000. He was a master of publicity, battling with the local Infirmary and Poor Law authorities to defeat their bureaucracy and fitting his shop windows with such ‘graphic reproductions of war

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23 For Melbourne Hall see E.E. Kendall, Doing and Daring, op. cit. Mary Martha Gimson (b. 1886), of the Baptist branch, and first cousin once removed of Ernest Gimson, married a Sheffield Congregational architect, John Mansell Jenkinson (1883–1965), an admirer of Gimson’s Cotswold and Charnwood work, and a busy proponent of Peak District vernacular.

24 For George Henry Baines (1843–1913) see J. Jamieson and W. T. Pike, Durham at the Opening of the Twentieth Century, Brighton 1906, p. 264.

25 For George Baines (d. 1880) see Leicester Chronicle 10 April 1880, Supplement p. 2

26 For William Baines (1806–91) see Leicester Chronicle 10 January 1891; D. Fraser, Urban Politics in Victorian England, Leicester University Press 1976, pp. 52–3

27 For Francis Hewitt (1832–97) see Scarff and Pike, op. cit., p. 159; Hartopp, op. cit., pp. 217–18.
scenes’ that ‘the police had to be called out to control the crowds surging round the shop to look at the pictures’.  

Hewitt’s proprietorship of the *Mercury* marked its real expansion, placing him with the Baineses of Leeds (no connexion with the Leicester Baineses), the Byleses of Bradford, the Leaders of Sheffield, the Copemans of Norwich, Paterson of Barnsley, the Woodheads of Huddersfield, the Tillotsons of Bolton, in the distinguished line of Congregational provincial newspapermen. Hewitt inherited a staff of twenty-five and a circulation of 5,000. By 1886 circulation was over 10,000 and a move to much larger premises was imminent; Hewitt’s son, another Francis, was in line for a partnership and the Hewitts were firmly set in Leicester town and county life and quite as conscious as Baines, Chambers, Gee, or the Gimsons, of their surroundings. Through his first wife Hewitt was connected to the Unitarian Gimsons and the family’s excursions into aesthetic seaside property development were significantly enhanced by Kate Hewitt’s marriage to a sensitive second generation Arts and Crafts architect (and Baptist) and by Jessie Hewitt’s marriage into the timber Jewsons (who were also Baptists, although she became a Christian Scientist).  

There remains Alderman Stafford, who somehow knew many of Elkanah Armitage’s friends.  

John Stafford of Elmsleigh Hall, Knighton, his wife, two sons, three daughters, and a daughter-in-law, were founder members of Clarendon Park. If the Baines, Chambers, and Hewitts were from Herbert Stead’s Gallowtree Gate, the Staffords were from H. H. Snell’s Wycliffe. John and his younger son Percy were a model father and son, John in his sixties, Percy in his late twenties. That bell-founding John Stafford may well have been Leicester’s mayor in 1370 but the John Stafford who was Leicester’s mayor in 1870 came from Lutterworth, so his Leicester church had to be Wycliffe. He had started in business as a cheese factor but he became a provision merchant and cigar manufacturer, the tobacco steadily overtaking the provisions as Stafford, Sons and Oswin prospered.  

Stafford, like Hewitt, who was ten years his junior, had served on the Board of Guardians as well as the Town Council and like Chambers and Baines he was a JP. Since his particular public service lay in his chairmanship of the Borough Lunatic Asylum Committee, he has his place among the ancestral shades of the present University of Leicester. His son Percy, who in the late 1880s was being groomed

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like the younger Frank Hewitt for a partnership in the family firm, majored in temperance, lawn tennis, and golf; he would become Clarendon Park’s Sunday School superintendent, conducting a Sunday morning young men’s class, a Thursday evening Band of Hope, and commanding the 2nd Leicester Boys’ Brigade. This young cigar manufacturer was a truly muscular Christian.31

With such promoters Clarendon Park’s Congregational Church could hardly fail. A church was formed on 14 January 1886 with twenty-seven members: two Baineses, two Chamberses, and the Misses Mackennal, who were Mrs Chambers’s sisters, two Hewitts, and eight Staffords among them. Of the four deacons – Chambers, Stafford, Hewitt, and Baines – three were former mayors and the fourth was the son of a former mayor.32

It cannot be said that membership grew exponentially. Clarendon Park was no Melbourne Hall. There were ninety-six members in 1896, 173 in 1905, 291 in 1926: a more than tenfold increase in forty years.33 It began, however, as it intended to go on; and here we turn from membership to ministry.

IV

The building was opened with truly representative weight by Dr. Allon of Union Chapel Islington who had been Chairman of the national Congregational Union in 1881, Dr Hannay who was the Union’s secretary, and Alexander Mackennal who was its chairman-elect.34 Mackennal was certainly a felicitous choice. He was a past minister of Gallowtree Gate; that church’s present minister had served on Clarendon Park’s building committee and eight of its members now transferred their membership to the new church; three of the eight were Mackennal’s sisters, a fourth was his brother-in-law, a fifth had been reared in his present church and a sixth was her husband. These were not the only links with Gallowtree Gate. One of John Stafford’s daughters was married to the brother of another of its past ministers. That minister was currently MP for Leicester and we will return to him. It suffices here to note that this connexion has both Liverpool and Manchester connotations and probably explains how Stafford knew so many of Elkanah Armitage’s friends.

Links like this also explain the choice of supplies for the new pulpit. The aim was to fill it with well-known names and the promising young in the hope that one, whether well-known or young, would become the church’s first minister. An educated assurance was clearly desirable. So, it quickly appeared, was theological liberalism.

Men of weight were certainly happy to come: Edward White, who was currently Chairman of the Union, R. W. Dale of Birmingham in December and

31 For Percy Evans Stafford (b. 1860) see ibid., p. 185.
32 Minute Book 1886–1907.
34 Minute Book 1886–1907. For Henry Allon (1818–1892) see ODNB; for Alexander Hannay (1822–1890) see Peel, op. cit., pp. 259 ff.
J. B. Paton of Nottingham in January, John Brown of Bedford in February. Education was also to the fore: to Rotherham’s Elkanah Armitage we should add Airedale’s erratic Dr Duff. Then there were the students, no doubt for practice but, one suspects, harbouring hopes of a view if not a call and all of them the best their colleges had to offer. E. P. Powell, the novelist George MacDonald’s nephew, came from New College; he was to become one of Congregationalism’s first provincial moderators. There were two young men from Mansfield College, Oxford, W. B. Selbie and Charles Silvester Horne; their future was assured. Selbie came in December 1867 and Horne in early October, and again in late October, and again in February 1888, and in May. What was going on? And why them, their promise apart?

In Selbie’s case the link was Manchester: Selbie’s father, now retired, had ministered in Salford and was well known to the cottontots of Cottonopolis, among them the Thompsons. Selbie would marry a Thompson; it has been noted that Lucy Baines was a Thompson. What about Horne?

Selbie’s biography of Horne notes briefly that, ‘Already his fame had begun to spread in the churches, and he received many invitations to preach in some of the most notable Congregational pulpits. He first preached for Dr Dale at Carr’s Lane Birmingham, in 1887.’ It is likely, however, that the agent in Horne’s invitations to Clarendon Park was Thomas Simon, minister at London Road Leicester and on the Committee of the national Union. Simon was one of a famous quartet of ministerial brothers; the other three were Mark in Liverpool, Henry in London, Edwin in Bath. John Simon, advocate, politician, and appeaser, was Edwin’s son. A man like Thomas Simon knew everybody – Congregationally speaking – from London to Manchester and, one might add, in Shropshire too, where Horne’s parents now lived and where Mark Simon had ministered. Selbie provides the clue. In October 1886 the first candidates for Oxford’s new Mansfield College were interviewed. Horne and Selbie were among them. Inevitably the selection panel was dominated by Dale of Birmingham, Fairbairn, the new college’s principal, and Mackennal, with two of whom Horne took tea. ‘Fancy a tea-meeting consisting of Dr Fairbairn, the President of the Congregational Union [in fact the Chairman-elect], and little me. It was very jolly’, wrote Horne to his parents. In fact the jollity had begun earlier at the very late lunch which followed the interviews. Horne described that too to his parents:

The lunch was at 2.15, at the swell Hotel here – the Randolph. We were there in good time, and as I breakfasted at 7.30, I was hungry – properly ravenous. A gentleman called me by name to sit down by him, and said he expected I knew his

35 For Edward White (1819–98) see F. A. Freer, Edward White, London 1902; for Dale (1829–95) and Paton (1830–11) see ODNB. For John Brown, (1830–1922), who was Maynard Keynes’s grandfather, see N. Brown Dissenting Forbears, Chichester 1988, pp. 72–106.
37 For Edward Pearce Powell (1860–1933) see Congregational Year Book, 1934; for MacDonald (1824–1905) see ODNB. 272–4
38 For William Boothby Selbie (1862–1944) and Horne (1865–1914) see ODNB
40 For Simon (1848–1925) see Congregational Year Book, 1926, pp. 181–2.
41 For John Simon, 1st Viscount, (1873–1954) see ODNB
brother Mark. It was Mr. Simon of Leicester. He and I chatted most of luncheon-time about Wollerton and Newport. It was Mr. Simon of Leicester. He and I chatted most of luncheon-time about Wollerton and Newport. 42

Newport is where Mark Simon had ministered and the older Horne's lived. That must be how, a year later, Horne got to Leicester not once but four times. And then stopped. 43

Before we look more closely at those who came openly with a view, we should note some of the others for with them a pattern emerges. Northampton's Thomas Gasquoine was from a neighbouring county town but he had also been a key figure at the 1877 Leicester Conference and later wrote an invaluable account of it. 44 John Hunter, from Trinity Congregational Church, Glasgow, was another 'Leicester' man; he was the best known of his generation, already firmly embarked on a gleamingly liberal ministry. 45 Garrett Horder came from Wood Green in April 1886. He too was a liberal. Today he has a respected place in the history of hymnology; his hymnbook, *Worship Song*, became popular with thoughtful, often suburban, congregations and its adoption was a sure sign of their liberalism. 46

There were also two cousins, John and Alfred Byles. Alfred Byles, now of Leamington, had been minister at Headingley Hill which was already in Leeds what Clarendon Park aimed to be in Leicester; he was a well-connected communicator since he was one of the Bradford Observer Byles. 47 Had Francis Hewitt and Herbert Stead put in a word for him? John Byles was minister at Ealing, where his successor would be Garrett Horder and where his congregation included John Stoughton, one of his denomination's pulpit statesmen, now in retirement. 48 John Byles was intellectually more suspect than Alfred; he became a Unitarian. 49

That such men were not invited at random is suggested by an early deacons' minute, 10 February 1886: 'Mr Baines stated that in the Church Minute Book there was a printed 'Declaration of Faith and Church Order' embodying 20 Principles of Religion and 13 Principles of Church Order and Discipline. It was unanimously resolved that the page containing these printed forms should be cut out of the book'. 50 Clarendon Park's minute book was a sensible, sturdy volume as used by many Congregational churches. The 'Declaration of Faith and Church Order' which prefaced it had been adopted by the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1833. It reflected a watered-down Calvinism, unmistakably Evangelical but open to critical objection by liberals and conservatives alike.

42 Selbie, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–3. For Andrew Martin Fairbairn (1838–1912) see ODNB
43 Was Clarendon Park seriously hopeful of landing Horne? By November 1887 the immensely influential Allen Street Congregational Church, Kensington, was interested in him, and in January 1888 issued a call, which he accepted (Selbie, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–51)
44 For Gasquoine (1833–1913) see *Congregational Year Book*, 1914, p. 173; Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 71.
46 For William Garrett Horder (1841–1922) see *Congregational Year Book*, 1924, p. 98
48 For John Stoughton (1807–97) see ODNB. His son's firm Hodder and Stoughton published the *Congregational Year Book*.
50 10 February 1886. Deacons Minutes 1886–1890.
Generally accepted, seldom read, consequently followed more in the breach than the observance, it had been appealed to in the wash of the Leicester Conference; its deletion by Clarendon Park was a mark of liberal lay independence.51

What, then, of the men whom this determinedly untrammelled church hoped to stand before them with a view to ministry? There were five who merit examination: Park of Wandsworth, Matthews of Barnet, Stannard of Huddersfield, Halsey of Anerley, and Ross of Reading. They had in common relative youth, good education, liberal theology, pulpit allure, and uncertain health. Though none was called to Leicester, they illustrate the Clarendon Park mind.

John Park was a Scotsman, Glasgow University, into his third pastorate, thirty-nine years old. His profile was strong; three very varied urban pastorates – Dumfries, Stroud, a centre of solid small-town Congregationalism, and East Hill Wandsworth, steadily turning into a suburban success story.52 Park’s obituary suggests why suburban Leicester sought him in his prime: health never robust, preaching ‘never popular in the ordinary sense’ but ‘thoughtful, lucid, and uplifting’, appealing ‘to a large circle of cultured people’; a man reserved, retiring, yet ‘the great secret’ of his ministry ‘lay in his intimate knowledge of the private life of his people, their cares, their joys and their sorrows’.53 Park is the first to come across in the church’s minutes as a man under serious consideration; ‘Park of Clarendon Park’ would have had a certain ring to it. Should he be asked a second time? Any hopes, however, came to nothing and he remained in Wandsworth for another twenty years. It is, nonetheless, suggestive that the man who did come, several viewings down the line, showed some of Park’s salient characteristics.

John Matthews was forty, a Devonian reared a Bible Christian who had become a Baptist. His training had been in London at Regent’s Park College under Joseph Angus. He too was into his third pastorate: Baptist churches in Wokingham and New Barnet and then, when his views changed and he joined the local Congregational church, he swiftly became minister at High Barnet, where he was to stay for fifteen years. Thanks to the railway revolution High Barnet was already in outer suburbia and Matthews’s attraction was that serious rebuilding was in view. Matthews was clearly an effective minister. His obituary refers to his ‘intellectual and spiritual power’, and his ecclesiological journey through evangelical Nonconformity was reflected in his year as the Metropolitan Free Church Council’s full time secretary. Ill health would cut short his last pastorate, Princes Street Gravesend; he died in his mid-fifties.54 In March 1887 Clarendon Park’s deacons resolved to hear him a second time, but it came to nothing.

In July the deacons focused their attention on a very interesting man. Henry Chambers and Francis Hewitt had gone to Huddersfield to spy out the land at Milton Church. Milton was new, large, and handsome. Its chief supporters, the Woodheads, would have been known to Hewitt since they owned and ran the

51 Peel, op. cit., pp. 69–78; 267–8.
52 For Park (1847–1925), see Congregational Year Book, 1926, pp. 174–5
53 Ibid., p. 175.
54 For Matthews (1846–1902), see Congregational Year Book, 1904, p. 182.
Huddersfield Examiner. Its minister was widely admired as a coming man with a becoming past. He was a role-model for liberals everywhere.

John Turner Stannard was forty-two. He began in Chelmsford as an Anglican with the law in mind but he became a Congregationalist and turned to the ministry. That meant Nottingham Institute under J. B. Paton and Spring Hill, Birmingham, under D. W. Simon. Paton was directly adventurous, Simon (who was not related to the four Simon brothers) attracted bright liberal students. Stannard had been in Huddersfield since 1874. The intention had been that he should assist and then succeed Richard Skinner of Ramsden Street as minister of one of Yorkshire’s leading Congregational churches; he would be a power in an important industrial town. It did not work out like that because Stannard’s theology delighted and alarmed in equal measure. Powerful families were split and the rival parties went to law. Stannard and his followers left Ramsden Street to build Milton, which flourished. Stannard’s public image was advanced and attractive. He was a beacon for younger men. His closest ministerial friend was John Hunter. He too had been a ‘Leicester’ man. He should have been a catch for Clarendon Park.

Yet Clarendon Park failed to catch him. He preached twice for them, on 17 and 24 July 1887. On 25 July the deacons minuted: ‘After careful discussion Mr. Simon was asked to write to the Rev. J. T. Stannard to say that there did not appear to be sufficient consensus of opinion to warrant the Deacons taking any action respecting his recent visit to Leicester’.

That was probably as well. Two years later Stannard’s health collapsed and he went to recover at a hydro in Blackpool. One morning his body was found on the beach, wounded, and apparently washed up by the tide. It was generally agreed, thanks not least to John Hunter’s advocacy, that there had been a tragic accident, perhaps a fatal heart attack as he walked by the sea’s edge. But the evidence presented at the inquest could equally suggest suicide in the wake of mental breakdown. Stannard’s ministry, outwardly so successful, had become increasingly erratic. The doctrinal openness which thrilled his admirers had turned into a doctrinal vacuum. Perhaps he ‘was staring atheism in the face... The Fatherhood of God gave him some solace but it was not an answer’.

In Autumn 1887 the deacons’ attention turned back once more to suburban London. Joseph Halsey of Anerley, on the borders of London Surrey and London Kent, was forty-four. This made him the oldest of the men considered by Clarendon Park. Halsey was an East Ender, born in Stepney, who had worked in a shipping office and then trained at Hackney College. He had been at Anerley since 1867. Surely it was time for a move? Anerley was a large church; Halsey had an impregnably liberal reputation; he played hard to get. He first preached at

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56 For Stannard (1844–89) see Congregational Year Book, 1890, p. 187
57 25 July, 1886, Deacons Minutes 1886–90
58 Mark Johnson to author, 22 March 1979. I am much indebted to Professor Johnson for information about Stannard.
Clarendon Park in March 1887. Approached in September to come in October he replied that ‘he was not prepared this year to supply any pulpit with a view to the pastorate’. They tried again in November to get him the following January. Again he declined, this time for health reasons: he needed a rest. The deacons decided not to press the matter.59

Halsey was in fact a one pastorate man. He remained in Anerley for another seventeen years and then, in semi-retirement, he briefly ministered in Oxted which was already becoming the most precious of Congregationalism’s leafer Surrey retreats. Halsey’s Year Book obituary was brief. Perhaps Anerley was too hot a liberal potato; the clues are there nonetheless: the ‘brilliant’ ministry, the ‘delicate health’, the last preaching engagement of all, up in John Hunter’s old church, Trinity Glasgow; and the memorials presented by two London laymen, a window in Anerley and a lectern in neighbouring Penge where a much younger Hackney man, Ernest Barson, had taken over Halsey’s mantle as theological liberalism’s South London Congregational standard bearer.60

So to Thomas Simon Ross, surely a forlorn hope for all his charm. Ross was the youngest of the men considered (thirty-three in 1888), his health was the poorest, although he lived the longest (eighty-three when he died). Like Halsey he was a Londoner, New College rather than Hackney, and he was at the end of his first and, as it turned out, his longest and most successful ministry, at Broad Street Reading. Early in 1888 Ross preached twice at Clarendon Park but his health was delicate, his mother had just died, the matter dropped. He went to Rhyl instead. His obituary confirms the impression: four more short pastorates (Rhyl, Carlisle, Newquay, College Chapel Bradford), each terminated by ill health (but then, while at college he had lived at home with mother, which contributes to the delicate picture), and nearly forty years of retirement in what is described as ‘often enforced leisure’ on the Hampshire coast at Southbourne. The obituary stresses how at Reading he developed preaching gifts and made lasting friendships and how at Rhyl ‘many visitors of older days will remember the brilliance and the evangelical fervour of his preaching’ but it was surely a liberally tinted evangelical fervour since the obituary also describes how Ross ‘read widely in the literature of the continent as well as in that of his own land, and was a witty and searching conversationalist. Those who remember him will recall long evenings of friendly converse and argument. It is needless to say he followed with a critical affection the story of the Free Churches’. The Year Book even found room, in 1939 of all years, for a verse filled with the larger hope:

And doubtless unto him is given
A life that bears immortal fruit
In such high offices as suit
The full-grown energies of heaven.61

59 15 September, 27 November 1887, Deacons Minutes 1886–90.
60 For Halsey (1842–1919) see Congregational Year Book, 1920, pp. 99–100.
61 11 January, 4 February, 1888, Deacons Minutes 1886–90. For Ross (1855–1938) see Congregational Year Book, 1939, p. 711
It must by now be clear that Clarendon Park’s minister should be in his prime – in his forties or perhaps his late thirties, with pastoral and preaching skills and some administrative acumen too, well-educated, and at ease in suburbs. So far such men tended also to be dogged by ill health, reserved (or, as we would now say, ‘private’), and not wholly easy in temperament.

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On 4 March 1888 and again on 1 April a sixth candidate preached with a view. He fitted the mould of the previous five. He was forty. He had been twelve years in the pastoral ministry. His track record was advanced but sustained: Shipley (on the edge of Bradford), Hackney (St. Thomas’s Square), and Manchester (Cheetham Hill), where he had been since 1885. His name was Forsyth, Peter Taylor Forsyth, and he was a marked man. His political and theological liberalism marked him out but his unusual cast of mind and language made him impossible to categorise. One thing was certain, he was a man to watch for important work. Excluded from the Yorkshire Congregational Union on ecclesiological (for which read theological) grounds, he had been admitted to the London Congregational Union at the close of his Hackney pastorate and in Manchester (as indeed in London and Bradford) he had immersed himself in the musical, cultural, educational, and political life of the wider community. He had a well-developed civic sense. His academic record was impeccable – Aberdeen and Göttingen – though his career at New College London was such as would now cause problems over leaving certificates. His health was poor to fair. His pastoral record was good. He was not an easy touch but he was meticulous, efficient, with a keen pastoral eye for those key components in any contemporary congregation, the young, the professionals, and the women. He had John Park’s gift for plumbing the private life of his people and Thomas Ross’s liking for argumentative evenings with friends. And he was now denominationally credible. The 1887 Year Book shows that. Forsyth had ministered to Congregational churches since 1876 but the Year Book gives 1884 as the date when his Congregational ministry began: that was into his sixth year at St. Thomas’s Square, Hackney, when he was at last admitted to the London Congregational Union.62

But why leave Manchester so soon for Leicester? Clarendon Park was eligible, perhaps it was desperate. There were other pulls. Forsyth was a Leicester Conference man. He had given a paper there. He was also a close friend of John Hunter (who was at his ordination) and John Stannard (at whose ordination he spoke) and he had been a protégé of the late James Baldwin Brown,63 the one denominational heavyweight who had spoken for Leicester’s men in the wash of the controversy. And then there was the brother of Alderman Stafford’s son-in-law, the man whom the knowledgeable general public most associated with the


63 For James Baldwin Brown (1820–84) see ODNB.
Leicester affair, James Allanson Picton. Was he the chief, if unofficial, agent in Forsyth’s call to Clarendon Park?

James Allanson Picton had been MP for Leicester since June 1884. He was a Radical and a Home Ruler, a short man and a prolific writer. He brought to Westminster an unmistakable pulpit manner. That marred his effectiveness. It too easily pigeon-holed him as ‘a sincere advocate of extreme views’. That pulpit manner is the clue.64

Picton was a high achiever, a serious communicator: Owens’ College Manchester, a first in Classics, MA London, and twenty-three years in the Congregational ministry. Like Forsyth he had served three pastorates: Cheetham Hill Manchester (the church from which Forsyth was now to be prised), 1856–1863; Gallowtree Gate Leicester (the church which furnished the core of Clarendon Park’s founding members), 1863–1869; St. Thomas’s Square Hackney (the church in which Forsyth succeeded him), 1869–1879. Notwithstanding his doctrinal adventurousness, Picton’s had been a successful ministry and although he was cut off now from organised Congregationalism and advancing fearlessly into pantheism he had plenty of continuing Congregational contacts, especially in Leicester.

His father, Sir James Picton, was a maker and moulder of Victorian Liverpool, a masterful architect who had moved from Methodism into Congregationalism and was on his way to an unruffled Anglicanism.65 Sir James moved in the circles of Dr Raffles, Liverpool’s grandest Congregational minister, and cotton brokers like the Bulleys; Elkanah Armitage’s wife was a Bulley, Dr Raffles was her grandfather. James Allanson Picton’s first wife was a Beaumont. The Beaumonts were Manchester Congregationalists, active at Cheetham Hill. They produced a dynasty of successful Manchester architects with Congregational churches in their portfolio.66 The brother-in-law of a Beaumont sister-in-law of Allanson Picton appeared for Stannard during the Ramsden Street Chapel Case, and there was also a Beaumont connection with Mrs Faulkner Armitage, Elkanah’s sister-in-law.67 And this was before the Stafford connexion: Allanson Picton’s brother William married Alderman Stafford’s daughter Mary.

Forsyth had a sharp tongue and high standards but he kept his friendships in good repair, Picton’s among them. At Leicester he was to write a poem for the second Mrs. Picton and in Hackney he had appeared on political platforms with Picton and shared his interests in School Board education, so when we note that on 23 November 1886 J.A. Picton MP lectured at Clarendon Park on ‘The Character of Cromwell’ (his books, Oliver Cromwell: the Man and His Mission,

64 For Picton (1832–1910) see DNB, ODNB
66 For Thomas Raffles (1788–1863) see ODNB; for J. W. Beaumont (1848–1931) see W. B. Tracey and W. T. Pike, Manchester and Salford and the Close of the Nineteenth Century, Brighton 1899, p. 204.
67 Mrs George Faulkner Armitage was a cousin of J. W. Beaumont FRIBA (1848–1931), who had been articled to Sir James Picton; J. T. Stannard had been represented by Herbert Cozens-Hardy, future Master of the Rolls (and father-in-law of C. S. Horne), whose younger solicitor brother Sydney Cozens-Hardy married Jessie Beaumont. These are coincidences, no doubt, but coincidences natural among people who know of each other.
1882, *Lessons from the English Commonwealth*, 1884, might explain why some MPs kept their distance, it seems clear that he retained his denominational contacts, even – at a usefully unofficial level – his influence.68

Thus Forsyth preached on 4 March 1888 and again on 1 April, staying on that occasion with the Staffords. On 12 April the deacons agreed, unanimously, to issue a call and to offer a stipend of £400 a year. On 18 April this was put before Church Meeting and agreed, again unanimously, and on 12 May Forsyth wrote to Alexander Baines setting out his terms. That letter was read to Church Meeting eleven days later and incorporated in its minutes. All this was normal practice but although Forsyth’s letter was wholly characteristic no other church can have received one quite like it and few other ministers could have written it.69

For a start Forsyth rather brushed off the chapel debt: he would be ‘responsible for nothing more in that connexion than the utmost sympathy and stimulus in your efforts to wipe the thing off’. His real concern was with more fundamental matters;

I have the honour of your Christian call; ... I am your servant in Jesus Christ, if, when you hear the whole of this letter, you still will have it so. And let us trust that our interpretation of the Lord’s will is right, and that we unite because He will have it so.

First, I come, not, in the main, to make a certain congregation a prosperous concern, but, as a minister of Christ and of the Church Universal, to declare and apply the Gospel of the Cross. I believe in the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God in the sinless person of Jesus Christ; in the Redemption of Mankind through His death; and in His risen life as the unseen personal power which guides both the world and the Church to fulfil the Kingdom of God – especially through personal union with the Saviour....

I view these great truths not as a mere seal of orthodoxy, not as confining the action of the human mind, nor as hedging it up, so to speak, against mistakes. But I view them as a Gospel, as the charter and impulse of the soul’s liberty, and the guide to heights and ranges of freedom, both in heart and head, which without Christ’s gospel we should never have won... [Therefore he requested] ... the completest freedom in this respect ... both to the specific ways of applying these truths to modern conditions and to my own personal style of phrase and speech. I always feel that my freedom is a responsibility [,] that the feelings of others are entitled to respect, and that it is cowardly to use the privileges of the pulpit to the disadvantage of those who have both to listen and perhaps to differ...I have some time got past the mere love of novelty but I always shall see and say some things individually and strongly. And if I cannot preach freely I cannot preach the truth – not, that is, with any of the power which is the essence of preaching as distinct from writing. And I am more the wishful the whole Church should understand this point because of the agitation going on and the conflicts which may be impending in our religious world....70

I may further add that I have neither time nor energy to waste in such contentions as sometimes arise in Churches on doctrinal points; [so, should the Church wish to be rid of him]....an ordinary vote of the Church with a decided majority to that effect will be quite sufficient.

68 Deacons Minutes 1886–90.
69 23 May 1899, Minute Book 1886–1907; the letter is reproduced in full in Waddington, *op. cit.*, pp. 55–6.
70 Is this a reference to the Downgrade Controversy which rocked the Baptist Union in 1888?
And he ended: ‘I am yours for Jesus Christ’. So now they knew; or could they only guess?

Forsyth began his ministry at Clarendon Park on the second Sunday in July 1888. On 1 August he presided at the Church Meeting. On 28 October the Mayor, Alderman Wright of The Hollies, a solicitor, an Anglican, and a fairly recent arrival from Northampton, attended evening worship with fourteen councillors. Forsyth’s sermon was on ‘Civic Christianity’.

The rest is another story. For Clarendon Park there began a memorable and successful time, productive of long friendships between Forsyth, the Baineses, the Hewitts, and the Staffords (the last of whom to have been a founder member died still in membership in 1956). For Forsyth personally it was perhaps the most testing time of a continually tested life. His health collapsed, his wife and mainstay suddenly fell terminally ill; she died within days of their settlement in Cambridge, where Forsyth had accepted a call to ministry in February 1894. That was to be his last pastorate before he settled down to the principalship of a London theological college. It was in London that he wrote the books for which he is still remembered. His five-and-a-half years in Leicester, however, were a watershed, crucible time in the development of the Victorian minister who became one of Britain’s most distinctive twentieth-century theologians.

Personal details

Since completing his PhD at Cambridge on Nonconformity in Victorian Eastern England Clyde Binfield has pursued his interest in Nonconformity especially in the history of Congregationalism. He is Emeritus Professor of History in the University of Sheffield.

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71 For Sir Thomas Wright (b. 1838) see Scarff and Pike, op. cit., p. 146; 29 October 1888, Deacons Minutes 1886–90.
72 The last founder Stafford was Percy’s sister, Edith Marion Stafford, member 1886–1956.