The origins of the New Connexion of General Baptists in Leicestershire

by Edwin Welch

The New Connexion of General Baptists originated with an attempt by Lady Huntingdon to introduce Methodism into the parishes near Donington Park where she lived. The Methodists soon separated from the Established Church, adopted Baptist opinions, and formed a denomination which spread throughout the Midlands in the nineteenth century.

In 1772 Josiah Thompson compiled an account of the older dissenting congregations in England and Wales. At the end of the section on Leicestershire, he added, 'it may be proper here to bring to view and give an account of some protestant Dissenters who are but little known but who are likely to make a considerable figure among our Churches.' He then named the places where they met: Barton in the Beans, Hugglescote, Markfield, Packington, Castle Donington, Diseworth, Kegworth, Loughborough, Quorn and Hinckley in north-west Leicestershire; Melbourne and Little Hallam in south Derbyshire; Longford in Warwickshire; and Great (or East) Leake and Kirkby Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire. Thompson described these churches as Methodist. In this he was not strictly accurate, for although Methodist in origin they were Baptist by 1772. More specifically, they formed part of the New Connexion of General Baptists. He was, however, correct in predicting that they would become important. For this small group of dissenters in the East Midlands was to play an interesting part in the great evangelical revival of the eighteenth century and a still more significant part in the re-awakening of the old General Baptist movement.

Since their origins in the seventeenth century, Baptists in England had been divided in doctrine on the question of salvation between the Particular Baptists, who were Calvinist and believed that only some would be saved, and the General Baptists, who were Arminian and believed that all could be saved. The General Baptists had originally been strongest in south-east England, and the Particular Baptists in the Midlands, particularly Bedfordshire, and South Wales. Two of the three principal Baptist congregations in

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1 I am indebted to three former Leicestershire Archivists, the late Allen Chinnery, Leslie Parker and Kate Thompson, for their assistance over many years, and to Susan Mills of Regent's Park College for help with printed sources. I have discussed the origins of the New Connexion with Dr G. F. Nuttall on numerous occasions, and he and Dr D. L. Wykes have read and made helpful comments on the first draft of the article. I should also like to thank all the custodians and owners of manuscripts for permission to use and cite from their collections.

2 Dr Williams's Library, London, MS 38.6, Josiah Thompson, 'A State of the Dissenting Interest in the several Counties of England & Wales begun to be collected October 1772 and continued', fo.44r. Kirkby Woodhouse is in the parish of Kirkby in Ashfield near Mansfield.

3 This simplifies a more complex situation. The early General Baptists were divided on the question whether the Sabbath was to be celebrated on Saturday or Sunday, and the Particular Baptists on that of open or closed communion.


Leicestershire at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Arnesby and Sutton in Elms, were Particular Baptists. As both General and Particular Baptists had adopted the principle of adult baptism, the division between them was not absolute. There were some congregations composed of both General and Particular Baptists, at Earl Shilton and Friar Lane, Leicester, for example. Nor did the doctrinal position of individual congregations remained fixed. A number of congregations during the eighteenth century changed from General Baptists to Particular, as at Shepshed and Wymeswold, while the joint congregation at Friar Lane in Leicester became entirely General Baptist by the middle of the century and a new Particular Baptist Church was established at Harvey Lane. The Particular Baptists experienced renewed growth during the eighteenth century, but the General Baptists began to suffer a decline in vitality and numbers. Many General Baptist Churches, especially in Kent and Sussex, gradually adopted Unitarian opinions or died out. According to Alan Betteridge in his study of Baptists in Leicestershire, there is no evidence for the survival of the congregations at Markfield, Thornton, Ratby and Barlestone beyond 1710; and during the next 50 years, those in Desford, Mountsorrel, Wymeswold, Somersby, Twyford and Oakham ceased to meet. Others were reduced to meeting only a few times a year. In 1776, undermined by these weaknesses at the congregational level, the Leicestershire Baptist Association itself collapsed.5

The General Baptists in Leicestershire were, however, saved from probable extinction by the New Connexion. The origins of the New Connexion are to be found in the evangelical revival which swept through the British Isles and America from the early eighteenth century. Often described in this country as the Methodist Revival, the role of John and Charles Wesley in the revival should not be exaggerated, all denominations in varying degrees were affected by it. By the end of the eighteenth century not only had all the English Congregational Churches been influenced by the Revival, but their numbers had been greatly increased by the addition of the Calvinistic Methodists. The Particular Baptists also increased their numbers by an active policy of evangelisation.6 New denominations were not formed until the end of the eighteenth century: Lady Huntingdon's Connexion in 1782, the Wesleyan Methodists in 1795, and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists in 1811. The first new denomination to be formed was the New Connexion of General Baptists because the congregations could not find an existing denomination to join.

Despite the importance of the New Connexion very little has been written on the subject. Thompson's contemporary account has never been published. The Connexion is only given a few pages in the histories of the Baptist movement, and even less in local accounts; yet the evidence concerning its early development is extensive.7 At the end of

the eighteenth century John Deacon, one of its pastors, collected all the information he could find and printed it in the first two volumes of the General Baptist Magazine. It preserves information not to be found elsewhere, but is unreliable for dates and details. The Leicestershire Record Office has a large collection of papers from the first chapel at Barton in the Beans, but these only begin about the end of the eighteenth century. Finally the records of a number of court cases, also in the Record Office amongst the Quarter Sessions and Archdeaconry records, provide extra information to supplement and correct the account given by Deacon.8

The origins of the New Connexion can be traced back to the conversion of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, in July 1739. At the time she was an Arminian and a supporter of Charles and John Wesley. With all the enthusiasm of a recent convert she looked for opportunities to proselytise in the area around the family home of Donington Park. Her first effort was a mission to the local colliers. George Whitefield and the Wesleys had already started in the coalfield at Kingswood near Bristol, and John Wesley was later to claim that he began to preach to the miners of Durham and Northumberland at Lady Huntingdon’s suggestion.9 Both the Staffordshire and Leicestershire coalfields were close to Donington and seemed to offer excellent opportunities. Her own family, the Shirleys, owned mines in Staffordshire, and the Hastings’ lands at Oakthorpe near Ashby-de-la-Zouch were also being developed. It was about this time that Charles Wesley preached to ‘the Colliers of Coaloverton’ (Coleorton), composing a hymn for the occasion.10 For a few months her correspondents rejoiced ‘to hear your Ladyships Account of the Colliers’, but Mr Sparrow, the colliery manager at Oakthorpe, was less enthusiastic. In 1742 he described ‘our truly Ignorant Colliers’ as ‘a strong Sett of Obstinate People and under no kind of Government’.11 While claiming to be sympathetic he refused to be involved and warned her that they might form a mob to attack the Methodists. As the colliers receive no further mention in the Countess’s correspondence it would appear that she heeded his warning.12

The next attempt made use of the many informal religious societies which existed and proved far more successful; too successful as it eventually led to secession from the Established Church. Religious societies were one of the most characteristic features of the eighteenth-century Revival. They arose spontaneously when men and women met together to read religious works, sing psalms or hymns and to offer each other religious comfort. They flourished with or without the support and encouragement of the local incumbent, and they provided centres for early Methodist preachers when they arrived in a new district. Unfortunately few records of these societies have survived. Knowledge of a society at Breaston and Draycott in Derbyshire only survives because they wrote to thank their ‘Benefactors Unknown’ (in fact Lord and Lady Huntingdon).13 These societies were evidently sufficiently numerous for the Countess to encourage one of her servants, David Taylor, to speak at their meetings. Taylor was an effective preacher and soon became a full-time evangelist. His success, however, caused some embarrassment to the Lady Huntingdon as his enthusiasm for open-air

8 General Baptist Magazine, 1 (1798), and 2 (1799); LRO, 1 D 51, Barton Chapel records.
10 The manor of Coleorton belonged to the Beaumont family. Cheshunt College archives at Westminster College, Cambridge B5/6, p. 9, Charles Wesley’s hymns collected for Lady Huntingdon.
12 Sparrow’s fears were probably confirmed by the Wednesbury riots in the following year, see J. L. Waddy, The Bitter Sacred Cup: the Wednesbury riots, 1743-44 London: Pinhorns, 1976.
meetings outraged at least one local clergyman and forced her to write a letter of apology. Her letter describes what she thought to be the purpose of these meetings: to read from such works of piety as those of Bishop Ken, to sing a psalm and read a prayer. David Taylor left her employ to become an itinerant preacher, but his erratic behaviour caused problems for both Methodists and Moravians. She had better success with the Rev. Edward Ellis who had been presented to Markfield by her husband in 1738. She sent both John and Charles Wesley to preach in his church and provided his parishioners with religious books and medicines. For a few years Donington Park remained a centre for evangelism. There were visits not only from John and Charles Wesley, but also from Benjamin Ingham and Jacob Rogers. Ingham however made a runaway marriage with the Earl’s sister, Lady Margaret Hastings, which alienated him from the family. Jacob Rogers, who had lost his curacy at Bedford for preaching Methodism, joined the Particular Baptists and then the Moravians. The death of the Earl in 1746 left the Countess with the responsibility for their young children and the care of the family estates. In 1748, under the influence of George Whitfield, she became a Calvinist to the great disgust of John Wesley. Whitfield
continued to visit her, but he confined his activities to Ashby-de-la-Zouch.\textsuperscript{17} Thereafter Lady Huntingdon made no reference to the evangelism which she had previously encouraged.

John Taylor now became the leading figure in Leicestershire in succession to David Taylor. He had accompanied John Wesley to the North of England in the spring of 1742.\textsuperscript{18} Although not ordained he had been an itinerant preacher in Gloucestershire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. In October 1742 he visited London and heard the Welsh Methodist Howell Harris preach in Whitefield’s Tabernacle. The letter which he wrote to Harris on 12 October provides the few clues which are known about his early life.\textsuperscript{19} In it he expressed a desire to live in Leicestershire ‘although I should Live on Bread and water’. On Lady Huntingdon’s advice he opened a small school and a shop for religious works in Ratby.\textsuperscript{20} From there he was able to travel and preach to the religious societies in the district. Two years later he had probably moved to Barton in the Beans which was becoming the centre of the movement.

While Taylor was at Barton there occurred the riot which is perhaps the best-known incident in the early history of the New Connexion. John Deacon described how Taylor while preaching outdoors read aloud from an evangelical magazine an account of the persecution of another Methodist, John Cennick, in Wiltshire.\textsuperscript{21} This encouraged the inhabitants of Nailstone to imitate the persecutors, and they ‘used various means to disturb the congregation’. When Taylor continued to preach a local farmer notified the surrounding parishes that

\begin{quote}
Whosoever will attend, and assist in taking the Methodist Parson, the next time he comes, wheresoever he shall be found, shall be rewarded with a Barrel of Ale: and shall be indemnified, though the house be pulled down where he is.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Another local farmer who had joined the society, John Aldridge, consulted with the nearest magistrate, Sir Wolstan Dixie of Bosworth Park, about this threat. Dixie advised him ‘that they would be justified in resisting, and even firing upon such lawless banditti, who offered violence to their dwellings; but at the same time recommended more lenient means.’\textsuperscript{23} Taylor had taken refuge in the house of a carpenter, John Wyatt, during previous attacks, but Aldridge decided to offer him protection in his own home. At the next preaching the mob stormed through the hamlet after failing to find the preacher in Wyatt’s house, and ‘ransacked every house in the village till they came to Mr Aldridge’s’.

\begin{quote}
Here the preacher was, and a number of people assembled for the purpose of worship, though service was not begun: and on seeing some hundreds of people rush into the yard, some of the family locked the outer door, which was soon broken open by the mob. In the passage betwixt the outer and inner door, Mr Robert Aldridge ... stood with his gun, threatening to shoot such of them as dared to proceed farther; but being
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} E. Welch, ‘Lady Huntingdon’s Chapel at Ashby’, \textit{TLAHS}, \textbf{66}, (1992), pp.136-142.
\textsuperscript{19} National Library of Wales, Trevecka letter 684, John Taylor to Howell Harris, 12 Oct. 1742. I am indebted to Dr Nuttall for pointing out that the entry of ‘one Bale’ in Harris’s diary is probably a misreading of Harris’s very difficult handwriting, and refers to Taylor, see T. Beynon, \textit{Howell Harris, Reformer & Soldier (1714-1773)}, p.29. Caemarvon: Calvinistic Methodist Bookroom, 1958.
\textsuperscript{20} Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library, Manchester, Lady Huntingdon’s correspondence with Charles Wesley 105, 29 Apr. 1742.
\textsuperscript{21} The magazine was \textit{The Weekly History} (London), no. 24, 19 Sep. 1741, a Calvinistic Methodist publication.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Gen. Bap. Mag.}, as n. 8, 1, p.184.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., as n. 8, p.184.
unwilling to put his threats in execution, and the insurgents rushing violently in, they disarmed Mr Aldridge, dragged him into the yard, and let the gun off in the air. The inner door being also either locked or bolted, they tried to force it open by several of them thrusting their fingers and hands betwixt the door and the door-post. One of Mr A's daughters, and sister to Robert and John Aldridge, seeing so many fingers so neatly arranged, took down the cleaver, and, beginning at the top, drew it down with pretty good accuracy and velocity, over the whole range.24

Despite these injuries the mob eventually broke down the door, attacked the congregation, and carried off Taylor, Aldridge and others to Osbaston to find a magistrate. This occurred on Sunday 25 February 1744, and on Monday the ringleaders carried Taylor before Sir Wolston Dixie and charged him with assaulting William Knowles of Odston, Richard Potter, Benjamin Storer and William Starkey, all of Nailstone, presumably because of the cleaver incident. On the following day Taylor was bound over to appear at the next county Quarter Sessions.25 His sureties were John Aldridge and John Wyatt. The outcome of the court proceedings is not clear as the only judicial record is the bond taken from Taylor, and the accounts given by Samuel Deacon jun. over 40 years later is not entirely consistent. In one place Deacon states that the rioters were betrayed by the plasters on their hands from the wounds inflicted by the blow from the cleaver, so that they were ‘apprehended, tried and cast’. On the other hand he also states that several of the Methodists were tried at Quarter Sessions. Unfortunately, nowhere does he mention what happened to either the rioters or the Methodists. The only court record appears to be the bond already mentioned.26 Possibly there was a compromise and neither case proceeded.27

John Taylor returned to London within about a year of the riots.28 His place at Barton was taken by two new preachers. In the summer of 1745 William Allt (or Ault) left his teaching post in London to preach in Leicestershire. He had been the assistant master at a school established by Whitefield's Tabernacle, the centre of Calvinistic Methodism in southern England.29 Allt was a Calvinist, so much so that he was later accused of antinomianism by his opponents. The other preacher, William Kendrick, was a supporter of the Moravians. He came from Yorkshire, and was probably a member of a Moravian society in the Leeds area.30 In this way the three differing forms of early Methodism were brought to Barton: Arminianism represented by Aldridge and his friends; Calvinism by Allt; and Moravianism by Kendrick. Inevitably there were disputes about doctrine, together with arguments about seceding from the Church of England, and eventually about the need for adult baptism. By 1750 these disputes had come to a head.

24 Ibid., as n. 8, p.185.
26 Gen. Bap. Mag., as n. 8, i, p.188. Deacon gives the date as Christmas 1744.
27 Ibid., as n. 8, p. 189. No eighteenth century assize records have survived for Leicestershire. Public Record Office, Assizes 11 begins in 1818. See Dr Williams's Library, MS. 12.64 (62), p.5, for the following early confirmation of the events: 'before the time came the utmost submission were made and the most Earnest Entreaties were used to prevail on the Plaintiffs to stop the Proceedings and not to suffer it to come to a Hearing'. I am indebted to Dr Wykes for this reference. This account is supported by The Barton Centenary; a report of the public religious services held at Barton-in-the-Beans, in the County of Leicester, on Thursday, May, 15, 1845; including a copy of the Memorial of the Church, read on the occasion, and the sermons and addresses, compiled by T. Cook, p.87 Leicester: T. Cook; London: W. Britain, [1845].
30 He had left Yorkshire by Feb. 1744/5 when he met Jacob Rogers at Nottingham, The Bedford Moravian Church in the eighteenth century: a selection of documents, ed., E. Welch, Bedfordshire Record Society, 68 (1989), p. 56.
Although the Society at Barton was still nominally part of the Church of England, it was slowly moving towards dissent. It was originally formed 'on the Methodistical Plan', but now had 'the Word preached by several Persons alternately' instead of having a printed sermon read to them. The members also ceased to receive communion in their parish churches.

The Members of the Church (received from their several societies) used to assemble in one Place once a month to have Communion at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper was administered by a senior minister tho' there was no settled pastor till the Congregation from its increasing Numbers was divided into several distinct Churches which was near 20 years after they first met. 31

Barton was only a hamlet in the parish of Nailstone and therefore had no parish church and this probably explains why the first meeting-house was erected there. It was soon after the Barton riot that the decision was taken to register the building at the county Quarter Sessions as a place of worship for Protestant Dissenters under the 1689 Toleration Act. 32 They were among the first Methodists to register their meeting-place, and their intention was probably to seek the protection of the Toleration Act, as so many Methodists were to do later. The chapel was registered by John Aldridge, John Wyatt, Samuel Deacon and others, and the Society formed itself into an Independent congregation with Kendrick and Stephen Dixon as its elders and overseers. Dixon, who had been a follower of the Moravians for a time, had joined David Taylor. Kendrick provided a church covenant for them to sign, which they later discovered to be that of a Huguenot Church in Spitalfields, London. 33 It demonstrates the uncertain nature of the congregation that they should adopt a Calvinist document as their own. Aldridge moved to Hugglescote where he took charge of the society members there. Allt, however, quarrelled with the Barton elders and settled at Hinckley. There he persuaded the Barton society members to establish a separate congregation practising adult baptism. 34 Dixon adopted universal salvation, another doctrine which attracted early Methodists, and as a consequence was expelled from the Barton church. 35 This left Kendrick in sole charge at Barton and he planned to establish a Moravian-style settlement there, which would provide a centre for Moravian societies in the adjoining areas of Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire where men from Barton had previously preached. 36

It was in November 1755, after debating the subject for several years that the congregation finally adopted the principle of adult baptism. 37 This decision was to complete their isolation from the other denominations. By seceding from the Church of England they had separated themselves from John Wesley; by remaining Arminians they were unacceptable to most other dissenters who were Calvinists; and by

31 Dr Williams's Library, MS 38.6, fo.44v. It should be noted that not all members of the societies were admitted to communion.
32 No certificates or registrations for this period have survived amongst the quarter sessions records.
33 Printed in Gen. Bap. Mag., as n. 8, 1, pp.275-8. If this attribution is correct then Kendrick was using a Calvinist rather than a Moravian church covenant. There were two Huguenot churches in Spitalfields, La Patente and St Jean, both nonconformist and later incorporated with the church in Soho Square, see I. Scouloudi, 'Some Huguenot Records', Archives, 11 (1974), p.153.
34 Gen. Bap. Mag., as n.8, 1, pp.238, 358.
35 Ibid., as n.8, p.28.
36 Ibid., as n.8, p.227. Soon after this the Moravians established a settlement at Ockbrook (between Derby and Nottingham) where its buildings can still be seen, but its records contain no references to Barton. A list of places with Barton society members appears ibid., p.229.
37 Guildhall Library, London, MS 3083/1, pp.359, 360; Dr Williams's Library, MS 12.64 (62), p.12, written in 1772 dates the change 1754. They had already agreed on immersion for infants some years earlier.
becoming Baptists they ceased to have links with the Moravians. The older General Baptist congregations had mostly adopted Socinian opinions and so were unacceptable to the New Connexion. Thus they found themselves in the same position as John Smyth the seventeenth century Se-Baptist.\(^{38}\) They chose to solve the problem in a similar manner. Kendrick baptised Joseph Donisthorpe, another pastor, and in turn Donisthorpe baptised Kendrick.\(^{39}\)

It is probably evidence of the tensions which developed in the new congregation that in addition to the doctrinal disputes there were several lawsuits affecting members. The first, which John Deacon describes as persecution, was probably more of a family quarrel, though religion entered into it. When Samuel Aldridge of Hugglescote Grange died in 1747 he left almost all his property to his eldest son William, a minor.\(^{40}\) One of his brothers-in-law, Joseph Stocks of Leicester, was the executor who proved the will, but Benjamin Tatlow of Hugglescote became the boy’s guardian. There was a dispute and Tatlow sued Stocks in the archdeaconry court for an account of his executorship, a cause which languished in court for most of the year.\(^{41}\) Tatlow was also warden of the

\(^{38}\) John Smyth (1570-1612) was a dissenting Arminian minister. When his congregation adopted adult baptism they were unable to find anyone to baptise them. Smyth therefore baptised himself and then the rest of the congregation, see B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, pp.23-26. London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983.

\(^{39}\) *Gen. Bap. Mag.*, as n. 8, 1, p.360.

\(^{40}\) LRO, Archdeaconry wills, 1747, Will of Samuel Aldridge, Hugglescote Grange.

\(^{41}\) LRO, 1 D 41/11/81, Leicester Archdeaconry Court Records, Act Book Instance business, 26 Sep. 1745 - 21 Sep. 1754.
chapelry of Hugglescote, and he presented John Aldridge and his wife Elizabeth to the
same court for living in adultery and having an illegitimate daughter. The basis of
the charge was that they had not been married in the parish church. Like many other
dissenters, they had probably declared their intention of marrying in the presence of
two witnesses. According to common law at the time they were married this was a
legal though irregular marriage. At first the Aldridges did not appear in court and were
excommunicated. Eventually they hired a proctor, were absolved, and when Tatlow
failed to prosecute the cause it was dismissed. There was a sequel to this case in
1777, when Francis Smith of Melbourne wrote to the Protestant Dissenting Deputies
in London enquiring about the validity of a marriage celebrated at Barton on 6
October 1752. The secretary of the committee replied that although he would lay the
matter before the Deputies at their next meeting he doubted they would take any
action. He believed that the question did not involve the civil rights of dissenters and
stated that as dissenters had no right to perform their own marriage, the marriage was
invalid. The Deputies were to agree with this opinion, but they were in fact wrong. It
was not until 1753 that the Hardwicke Marriage Act made marriage outside the parish
court unlawful for all Protestant dissenters except Quakers. A third cause in the
Archdeaconry court, not recorded by Deacon, was brought against Elizabeth the wife
of William Allt of Hinckley for defamation by William Kendrick, who was described as
‘an Independent preacher at Barton in the Beans’. She was alleged to have said of
Kendrick

He was a Rogue and gott out of Bed from another Man’s Wife to preach the Gospel
(whose Name was Hannah Perry) wishing her Arm might drop off or that her shoulder
might split asunder if it was not true.

The depositions given in this cause by Jane Allen of Hinckley and Elizabeth Ball of
Stoke Golding have not survived, so it is not clear why the judge decided in favour of
Elizabeth Allt and ordered Kendrick to pay her costs of five guineas. Soon after this
there was a further lawsuit between Aldridge and Tatlow at Leicester Assizes in which
Aldridge was successful. Once again it is unclear whether this was an attempt to
persecute members of the new denomination or merely a private quarrel.

Although the General Baptists appear to have encountered few difficulties with
either civil or ecclesiastical authorities in Leicestershire after 1745, they did experience
problems when they spread to Derbyshire. In October 1766 a complaint was made to
the Dissenting Deputies that the magistrates for Derbyshire had refused to license
meeting-places at Melbourne, Measham, Packington, Sawley and Little Hallam in the
parish of Ilkeston. Although the minute book does not describe these congregations
as General Baptist, at the same meeting a similar complaint was made that the
magistrates would not give a certificate to Mr Perkins, a Baptist preacher. The
Deputies adopted their usual practice of applying to the Court of King's Bench for a
mandamus to compel the justices to issue certificates in response to both complaints,
but also instructed their secretary to write to the clerk of the peace in an attempt to
avoid legal action. The magistrates must have refused, a mandamus was issued and the
licences granted in February 1767.49

In 1760 William Kendrick was expelled from the Connexion for unnamed
misdemeanours, leaving John Aldridge, John Wyatt and Joseph Donisthorpe as the
senior pastors.50 They were now joined by Samuel Deacon senior of Ratby. Deacon
had originally been a farm labourer, but eventually opened a small grocer’s shop and
become a woolcomber. Although he was said to have been converted in 1741, it is not
until 1751 that his name appears in the records, when he signed the application for the
registration of the Barton meeting-house.51 After a doctrinal dispute with his fellow
ministers in 1767, Aldridge had resigned his position as a pastor, though he remained
a member of the Barton congregation; Wyatt was expelled for habitual drunkenness;
and Donisthorpe died in 1774, leaving Deacon as the senior pastor at Barton.52 This
was to make Deacon and his descendants leading figures in the denomination for
many years. His son Samuel junior was apprenticed to Joseph Donisthorpe, and
established a clockmaking business in Barton, which continued until 1951. He
followed in his father by preaching at Barton from 1777, and was ordained at
Hugglescote two years later.53 All these changes and problems did little to hinder the
progress of their evangelism. Elders or ministers itinerated throughout the area, often
preaching in new villages by invitation. A small society would be formed if there was a
good response, and a resident minister (who presumably remained in secular
employment) was appointed, but the new society was still considered part of a larger
congregation, and the members took communion at a central chapel. The Nottingham
congregation’s church book illustrates the process:

It was in the year 1775 in the month of May that a few persons formed themselves into
a Church of Christ (they were of the General Baptist persuasion and belonging to the
New connection).54

Four persons already baptised were transferred from other societies, and one of them,
William Fox, baptised six new converts. In the following year

William Fox was ordained over these few persons as their Pastor, in his Garrett of his
own hired house in Boot Lane which was their regular preaching place.

49 Guildhall Library, London, MS 3083/1, as n.45, pp.504, 510. For a description of the work of the
50 *Gen. Bap. Mag.*, as n.8, 1, p. 408.
Churches*, p.18. Leicester: Buck, Winks and Son, 1891; T. Cook, *Preacher, pastor, mechanic: Memoir of
the late Mr Samuel Deacon, nearly forty years pastor and fifty years a member of the General Baptist Church,
Barton, Leicestershire*. Leicester: W. Buck, 1888. It seems to have been a tradition in the Connexion to
date all the early conversions to 1741.
53 LRO, 9 D 51/III/1 as n.8; P. A. Hewitt, *The Deacon Family of Leicestershire Clockmakers*. Wadhurst:
54 Department of Manuscripts, Nottingham University, Mr R 1, Records of Nottingham, Mansfield Road
Baptist Church. Many of the congregations were poor. At Longford near Coventry the women are said
to have given up their wedding rings to establish a General Baptist meeting-house, see
Dr Williams’s Library, MS 12.64(62), Letters to Walter Wilson from correspondents with information for
his four volume *History ... of Dissenting Churches*, Account of the General Baptists of Leicestershire, p.9.
From this small beginning 11 congregations were eventually established in the city. Until 1760 Barton in the Beans was the congregation to which all members belonged even though they had their own societies and meeting places. As the numbers of members and hearers increased this became increasingly inconvenient and so five churches, each supporting a number of societies were formed:

Barton, including Hugglescote, Stanton, Markfield, Ratby, Hinckley, Longford and the adjacent villages.

Melbourne, including Packington, Measham, Swannington, Ticknall, and the neighbouring villages.

Kegworth, including Castle Donington, Sawley, Long Whatton, Diseworth, etc.

Loughborough, including Quorndon, Leake, Wymeswold, Widmerpool, Wysall, Gotham, etc.

Kirby Woodhouse, near Mansfield, Nottinghamshire with the adjacent places.  

The societies met once a week in the evening for a service. After attending the meetings for six months hearers were eligible for membership of the church. If accepted they received a ticket which was renewed every six months. On Sundays they were expected to attend the principal church, where they also had communion. By 1770 a sixth church, based on Longford (near Coventry) and Hinckley was needed.

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Statistics for the New Connexion Churches in 1770

It was at this time that Dan Taylor (no relation of either David or John) came to Leicestershire. He was born at Northowram near Halifax in 1738 and became a coalminer. He had been converted to Arminian (Wesleyan) Methodism in his youth, and in 1762 left to become minister of a group of seceders from Methodism meeting near Hebden Bridge. While there he studied infant baptism and decided, as other Methodists had done before him, to preach adult baptism. The Particular Baptist

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55 *Gen. Bap. Mag.*, as n.8, 2, pp.54 & 55.
56 *Ibid.*, 1, as n.8, pp.363, 364. Issuing tickets for membership was an established practice in all types of methodist congregations, and is still continued in the modern Methodist Church.
ministers of the West Riding refused to baptise Arminians, and he went south to find a General Baptist congregation in the Lincolnshire Association of General Baptists (not New Connexion). In 1763 he was baptised at Gamston in Northern Nottinghamshire, and returned to his congregation. However he soon became disillusioned with the doctrines of the Lincolnshire Assembly and turned to the evangelical churches of Leicestershire for fellowship. It was as a result of his efforts that their representatives met in June 1770 at Whitechapel with those of two Lincolnshire, two London and a few General Baptist churches from the south-east to form the New Connexion. The newly-formed denomination expanded rapidly throughout the Midlands. Wood’s *History* describes the establishment of a dozen new congregations by the end of the century, and there were doubtless many societies too. Another success was the accession of Friar Lane chapel, Leicester, in 1781. Friar Lane had been built by the General Baptists who had seceded from the Particular Baptist congregation early in the eighteenth century. By 1781 the cause had almost disappeared, but the few remaining members obtained preachers from Barton, and then invited Samuel senior’s son, John Deacon, who had opened a clockmaking shop in Leicester, to become their pastor. During the course of the nineteenth century the antagonism between Calvinists and Arminians declined, doctrinal differences became less divisive, and cooperation became possible. As early as 1840 the General Baptists were considering the possibility of a union. The Calvinists, who had joined together in the Baptist Union, held their meeting at Nottingham in 1857 to establish links with the ‘General Baptist Association.’ The General and Particular Baptists finally amalgamated at the Baptist Union of 1891.

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