

Bardon Park Meeting-House: the registration of Nonconformist places of worship under the Act of Toleration (1689)

by David L. Wykes

*Leicestershire Quarter Sessions, Epiphany 13 William III [1701/2]*¹

A Building lately erected w[ith] ye yard thereto belonging situate in Bardon Parke in a certaine close there called the Great Meadow in the tenure of John Harrison to be a meeting place

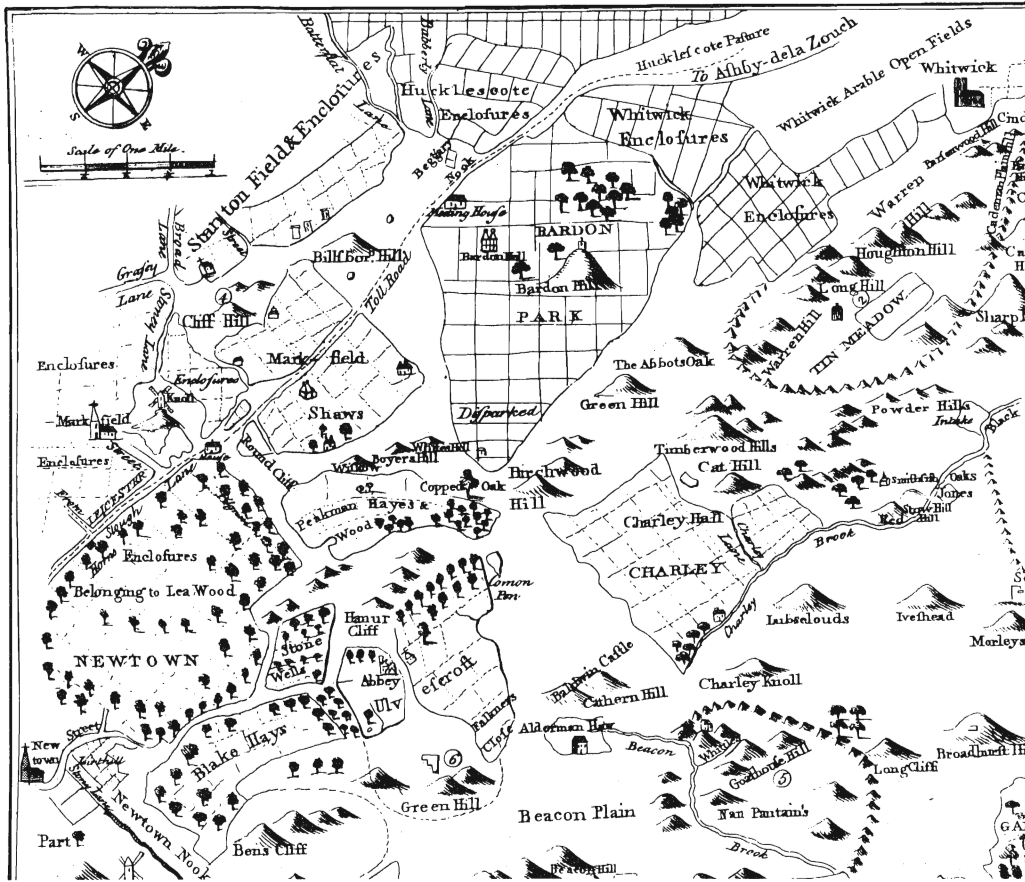
The Messuage of John Hood gent situate in Bardon Parke to be a meeting house

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Under the terms of the Toleration Act of 1689, Protestant Dissenters were given freedom to worship in public provided they registered their meeting places with the bishop, archdeacon or with the justices at the court of quarter sessions. In addition, ministers had to make certain declarations and take the prescribed oaths. The use of the surviving record of registration of Nonconformist meeting places by historians is not without problems, in particular because the Act made no provisions for the cancellation of registration, especially in cases of temporary use. Furthermore, the record itself may not be complete, for there is evidence that buildings known to have been employed for Nonconformist worship were not registered, or in some cases that the evidence for the application has not survived. In addition, the denominational descriptions of the individual congregations using the different meeting places are also very partial. Nonetheless, the surviving record of registration provides an invaluable account of the state of organised dissent in the early years after toleration, and also of its development in the subsequent generation as congregations began building meeting-houses to replace the barns and cottages they had previously used as places for worship.

In most areas there appear to have been few applications to the ecclesiastical authorities for registration before the second half of the eighteenth century. This has been explained in terms of the reluctance of dissenters to apply to the bishop or archdeacon so soon after the end of religious persecution. Subsequently, this type of application became the commonest form of registration, for reasons of convenience, since applications to the bishop or archdeacon could be made at any time, unlike quarter sessions which met only four times a year. As a result evidence for the period before the mid-eighteenth century is to be found in the quarter sessions records. Unfortunately, there are no quarter sessions court minute books for Leicestershire until 1696, and the

1. LRO Leicestershire Quarter Sessions, QS5/1/1 Court Minute Book, Epiphany 1696–Translation 1726, fol.24^v

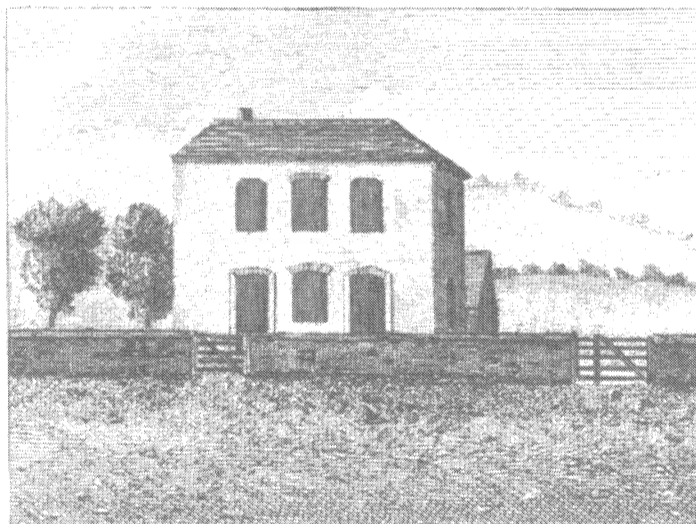


1. Part of a plan of Charnwood Forest (1754), surveyed by Samuel Wild, master of the Free School at Woodhouse. The Meeting-House is on the south-west side of Barton Park. *After* Nichols, 3.1, as n.8, p.131, Pl XXIII. The original of this map is in the LRO, DG, 9/MA/61/1 (Herrick MSS) 'Perambulation round Charnwood Forest', 1754; there are some differences between this and Nichols's print

first registration roll dates from 1714. The period covering the earliest phase of Nonconformist registration is therefore missing.²

2. LRO Leicestershire Quarter Sessions, QS5/1/1 Court Minute Book, Epiphany 1696–Translation 1726; QS44/1/1 Registration Roll of Meeting Houses, Michaelmas 1714–Epiphany 1744. Returns of places registered at quarter sessions dating from 1689 only survive for just over a fifth of all counties, see 'List of the Returns to the Registrar General of the number of certified places of religious worship of Protestant Dissenters, with an analysis and summary thereof; also showing, decennially, the number of places certified in each county of England and Wales, &c.', *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852–3 (156) LXXVIII, pp.83ff; see *ibid.* also for evidence on the pattern of ecclesiastical registration; LRO Leicester Archdeaconry Records 1 D 41/44/1–749: Meeting House Certificates, 1779–1852.

BARDON MEETING-HOUSE.



2. Bardon Park Meeting-House, drawn and engraved by J.P. Malcolm.
After Nichols, 4.2, as n.8, p. 983, Pl CXLIX

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Bardon Park Chapel near Markfield is almost certainly the oldest surviving Nonconformist meeting house in Leicestershire. Unfortunately, two recent guides to Nonconformist chapels and their records have both failed to include the congregation and its building.³ According to John Nichols, the eighteenth-century county historian, the meeting house was built by John Hood in about 1694.⁴ Although the entry at the Epiphany Session in 1702 registering the meeting house might seem to contradict Nichols, delays in registration do not appear to have been uncommon; indeed, a number of congregations appear have neglected to register their meeting places altogether. The decision to register the new meeting-house at this date, together with Hood's private house (almost certainly the original meeting place of the congregation), can probably be explained by the growing political hostility towards dissenters which had become increasingly evident by the end of William III's reign. It was doubtless thought prudent at this time to seek the protection of the Toleration Act. The first two years of Queen

3. RCHME, *An inventory of Nonconformist chapels and meeting-houses in central England*. London: HMSO, 1986; *The descent of dissent: a guide to the Nonconformist records at the Leicestershire Record Office*, ed. G. Jones. Publication 102, Leicester: Leicestershire Museums, 1989. The chapel is included in N. Pevsner & E. Williamson, *Leicestershire and Rutland*, 2nd ed. Buildings of England, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. The only records for the congregation date from the late nineteenth century, LRO N/C/18/1: Records of Bardon Park Congregational Church.
4. J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of Leicestershire*, 4.2, p.804. London: Nichols 1811. Mr Christopher Stell has since inspected the building for the Chapels Society, but he was unable to date the early structure as a result of the heavy restoration in 1877. Nonetheless, he found no evidence to contradict the date suggested by the documentary evidence. I am grateful to Mr Stell for allowing me to refer to his findings.

Anne's reign saw a peak in the number of applications made to the Leicestershire Quarter Sessions.⁵

It has been claimed that the meeting at Bardon Park dates from the time of the Five Mile Act (1665), which prohibited Nonconformist ministers from coming within five miles of any corporate town, or of any place where they had preached since the Act of Oblivion.⁶ It is clear, however, that the congregation was founded as a result of the patronage of John Hood (1647–1715) of Bardon Hall, who not only built the first meeting house, but was almost certainly responsible through his employment of a minister as a chaplain for helping to gather the original congregation. Michael Matthews in his funeral sermon for Hood spoke of him as

one of the best of Neighbours [who] took so much care of having the Ministry of the Word in this obscure place, so remote from all means of grace and salvation, . . . brought hither, and continued here by the Family and by him. . . . How many years of Sabbaths have you had!—how many Bibles and good books has he given amongst you and others!—how much compassion, pity, and concern had he for your Souls! Think of it!⁷

Matthews is said to have been the first regular minister of the congregation, but according to the survey undertaken by the Common Fund in 1690, Bardon Park was supplied by Richard Southwell, sen., an ejected minister, who also served Temple Hall, another meeting founded and maintained by gentry patronage. In his funeral sermon Matthews spoke of having had the acquaintance and friendship of Hood for 20 years. It seems probable therefore that Matthews became minister to the congregation and the Hood family in about 1694 or 1695 and that the meeting-house was built for Matthews by Hood. Matthews had been ordained at Hemphill, Nottinghamshire, in August 1690. The same year the Common Fund survey reported that he was preaching at Swithland in Leicestershire. Four years later he was appointed master of the charity school at Woodhouse founded by the Presbyterian Thomas Rawlins. He was subsequently minister of the meeting at Mountsorrel, probably following his resignation as master of the school at Woodhouse in 1704. He then conducted a substantial school of his own. By 1715 Matthews had the assistance of his son-in-law, James Watson, and between them they not only served Mountsorrel and Bardon Park, but with other neighbouring ministers took turns to supply Wanlip. The Evans List records a congregation of 340 'hearers' at Bardon Park in 1715, the largest rural meeting recorded in the survey for Leicestershire, and with 30 voters for county elections the meeting must have been supported by a number of gentry and yeomen families at this date.⁸

5. QS5/1/1/ fol.25^r *et passim*

6. N/C/18/1 'Historical account of the Church', written c.1914; 7 Car II c.2 'Persons preaching in conventicles not to come within Five Miles of any Corporation sending Members to Parliament' (1665), *Statutes of the Realm*, 5, p.575

7. Michael Matthews, *The great Privilege of a dying Believer, or living Comfort in a dying Hour; being a Funeral Sermon on the much-lamented Death of John Hood, Gent. who departed this Life, at Bardon Park in Leicestershire, Jan. 19, 1714–5, in the 58th Year of his Age*, Nottingham, 1715. There is a copy of the funeral sermon in the Local Studies Library, Angel Row, Nottingham, class no. L65.52 Collyer.

8. Nichols, 3.1, p.113 & 4.2, p.804; *Calamy revised: being a revision of Edmund Calamy's account of the ministers and others ejected and silenced, 1660–2*, ed. A. G. Matthews. Oxford, 1934, p.452; A. Gordon, *Freedom after ejection*. Manchester, 1917, p.67; LRO Rawlins School Records, Woodhouse and Quorn, DE 1502/149, 157/1–17: Michael Matthews of Swithland agreement for appointment as schoolmaster (29 Mar 1696), receipts for master's salary, 1696–1704; *Education in Leicestershire, 1540–1940*, ed. B. Simon, p.38, Leicester, 1968; Dr Williams's Library, London, MS38.4: 'John Evans List of Dissenting Congregations and Ministers in England and Wales, 1715–29', p.65