

VCH Leicestershire

Online Texts-in-progress

Wigston Magna: Religious History - Nonconformity

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VICTORIA
COUNTY
HISTORY

Leicestershire

Introduction

Wigston has a long history of religious dissent. In 1402 it was brought to the attention of the archbishop that Wigston was a centre for unorthodox teachings and readings by ‘many sons of perdition’, both lay and clerical.¹ By the late 17th century, Baptists, Independents, Presbyterians and Quakers all met for worship in Wigston. In the 1870s, nonconformity was so well established that the first school board contained two nonconformists,² with a third elected by 1881.³ This rich variety of beliefs and worship has continued to the present day, as evangelical churches have opened, mostly since the 1940s. However, anti-Catholic feeling appears to have been strong in Victorian Wigston, as 680 people signed a petition in 1851 to protest about the Pope’s establishment of Roman Catholic bishops in England.⁴

Old Dissent

General

In the 1669 Conventicle Returns, which aimed to document numbers and types of nonconformists, the entry for Wigston Magna reads ‘noe conventicle within this parish’.⁵ The 1676 Compton Census counts 18 nonconformists alongside 437 conformists.⁶ Following the Toleration Act of 1689, several Wigston people registered their houses for religious meetings, including Joseph Adcock in 1716, George Pochin and Jonathan White in 1717, John Goodrich in 1718, William Davenport (a woolcomber) in 1719 and John Daffeny and Thomas Cave in 1726, but the denominations of these meetings were not recorded. Later, James Bingley’s house was registered in 1787,⁷ as was a house owned by Joseph Newiss in 1811, where the letter of application had four co-signatories.⁸ Other registrations, where the denomination is clear, are mentioned below.

A large number of Leicestershire people stated to be recusants received a discharge in 1687 for fines for not attending church. They include ten people from Wigston. It is possible that some

¹ J. Crompton, ‘Leicestershire Lollards’, *Trans. Leics. Arch. And Hist. Soc.*, 44 (1968-9), p. 26

² Northamptonshire RO, ML594.

³ Northamptonshire RO, ML601.

⁴ *Return of Addresses to H.M. on recent Measures taken by Pope for Establishment of Roman Catholic Hierarchy in United Kingdom* (Parl. Papers 1851 (84), LIX.649), p.37.

⁵ R H Evans, ‘Nonconformists in Leicestershire in 1669’, *Trans Leics. Arch. and Hist. Soc.* 25 (1949), pp. 98-143.

⁶ A. Whiteman, *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition* (London, 1986), p. 337.

⁷ ROLLR, QS 44/1/2.

⁸ ROLLR, QS 44/1/2; QS 44/2/167.

were Catholic recusants, but many people in the county list appear in other records as Protestant nonconformists, and that could be the case for all of those from Wigston.⁹

Baptists

The first specific mention of a Baptist community in Wigston is in 1829, when a return of dissenting meeting houses recorded a meeting of Baptists with 30 followers.¹⁰ A 'small and austere' Baptist chapel was built in 1850 on Frederick Street in Wigston.¹¹ The 1851 Religious Census contains a return for one Calvinist Baptist place of worship in Wigston, described by the proprietor as having 130 free sittings. On Sunday 30 March that year, 36 people attended in the morning and 76 in the evening.¹² A Calvinist Baptist place of worship is also acknowledged in the 1872 Anglican visitation returns,¹³ and again at the 1881 visitation.¹⁴ There was still a 'Calvinistic chapel' in Wigston in 1912,¹⁵ but there is no Baptist church there today.

Quakers

It has been suggested that the first purpose-built Quaker meeting-house in Leicestershire was in Wigston, that it was in use by 1680, but may have been founded in 1677 or 1678, and that its site may have been chosen by George Fox.¹⁶ It was a small thatched building standing in a garden behind a house, and was in later years surrounded by cherry trees.¹⁷ Wigston has been named as one of the districts where Quakers experienced a greater degree of oppression,¹⁸ and there are records of Quaker persecution in Wigston from the late seventeenth century. In 1677, for example, a Quaker man had sacks of food forcibly taken from him,¹⁹ another Quaker was fined in 1680 for being at a meeting in Wigston,²⁰ and a man named John Evans, and sometimes his wife, regularly appear as victims of persecution or unfair exactions.²¹ Wigston Quakers would have come under the jurisdiction of the eighteenth-century Leicester monthly meetings, but could be found occasionally worshipping in Knighton.²² John Evans' private house was also used as one of the early Quaker meeting houses in Wigston.²³ In the 1718 visitation returns, one Quaker is mentioned by name – 'Mary Horn who lives in town'.²⁴

⁹ State Papers Online, SP 44/337, pp. 220-4.

¹⁰ ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/31.

¹¹ Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in Central England* (London, 1986), p.133.

¹² TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/9.

¹³ Northamptonshire RO, ML594.

¹⁴ Northamptonshire RO, ML601.

¹⁵ *Kelly's Dir. Leics.* (1912), p. 636.

¹⁶ R. H. Evans, 'The Quakers of Leicestershire 1660-1714', *Trans Leics. Arch. and Hist. Soc.* 28 (1952), p.68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁹ ROLLR, 12D 39/34, p. 3.

²⁰ ROLLR, 12D 39/34, p. 5.

²¹ ROLLR, 12D 39/34.

²² ROLLR 12D 39/34, pp. 4-6.

²³ Evans, 'Quakers', p. 67.

²⁴ Lincs. Arch., Gibson 4, p. 528.

Presbyterians, Independents, Congregationalists and the United Reformed Church

According to late nineteenth-century trade directories, there had been an Independent Congregation in Wigston since the reign of Charles I.²⁵ However, the present URC began life as a congregation formed in around 1666 under Matthew Clark, the ejected rector of Narborough.²⁶ In November 1672 a licence was issued for a Congregational meeting house at Henry Fox's house in Wigston.²⁷ One month later, a house in Wigston belonging to a Richard Shepard was licensed as a Presbyterian meeting place.²⁸ In the same year, the houses of Congregationalists Richard and James Farmer, the former being a teacher or preacher and the latter having been ejected from Leire in Leicestershire, were also licensed as nonconformist meeting houses.²⁹

John Brogden was recorded in the 1715 Evans List as a Presbyterian preacher in Narborough and Wigston, with 200 'hearers' in the latter.³⁰ According to a visitation return of 1718, Wigston contained around 200 dissenters 'almost of all denominations', which the incumbent partially attributed to the lack of a school in Wigston.³¹ The number and variety of worshippers was said to be similar in a 1721 visitation.³² Brogden, who lived 'three miles away', is mentioned in both of these returns as the preacher, and most of their 'contributors and supporters' were said to come from outside Wigston itself.³³ The congregation had 'appropriated' a church where they assembled 'for one half of the year once every Lord's day and the other part of the year once a fortnight'.³⁴ This was the disused medieval St Wistan's church, which they had leased for use as a meeting house from around 1682.³⁵ In 1723, 'The building called the Old Church' was registered with the county quarter sessions for nonconformist worship.³⁶ However in 1731, the lease was abruptly terminated – a turn of events which led to one individual, Samuel Davenport, leaving the Church of England and joining the Congregational Church, donating £142 16s. 9½d. towards the cost of building a separate chapel for the Independent congregation,³⁷ and in 1732 'The building lately erected for a meeting house' was duly registered.³⁸ The total cost of the building was £243 7s. 6d.³⁹

In January 1805 three individuals - Henry Davis, Barak Ward and Timothy Goodrich – registered 'A Building' (wording that suggests a purpose-built or converted property rather than a private house) as a 'Presbyterian or Independent' meeting-house.⁴⁰ In 1810, Wigston was described as having a 'large and respectable body of dissenters, of the Presbyterian persuasion, who have a

²⁵ White, *Hist. Gaz. & Dir. Leics.* (Sheffield, 1877) p. 635.

²⁶ Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in central England* (London, 1986), p.133.

²⁷ *Cal. SP Dom. 1672-3*, p. 178.

²⁸ *Cal. SP Dom. 1672-3*, p. 309.

²⁹ Lyon Turner, *Original Records of Early nonconformity under persecution and indulgence*, Vol 2: Classified Summary and Indexes (London, 1911), p.768.

³⁰ John Evans' List of Dissenting Congregations, Dr Williams's Library, MS 34.4, fol. 64.

³¹ Lincs. Arch., Gibson 4, p.528.

³² Lincs. Arch., Gibson 12, pp.423-426.

³³ Lincs. Arch., Gibson 4, p.528.

³⁴ Lincs. Arch., Gibson 12, pp.423-426.

³⁵ RCHM, *Nonconformist Chapels*, p.133.

³⁶ ROLLR, QS 44/1/1, rot. 4v.

³⁷ J. Broughton, *The Old Church: A History of St Wistan's church, Wigston Magna* (Wigston, 2000), p. 21.

³⁸ ROLLR, QS 44/1/1, rot. 2. The front of the building itself quotes 1731.

³⁹ RCHM, *Nonconformist Chapels* p. 133.

⁴⁰ ROLLR, QS 44/2/153; QS 44/1/2.

meeting house and a resident minister'.⁴¹ An Independent chapel with 520 members was recorded on a meeting house return in 1829.⁴² Following the 1837 Registration Act, on 25 October 1837, the Independent chapel in Wigston was licensed for the celebration of marriages.⁴³



Figure 1: United Reformed Church, Long Street, Wigston Magna

In 1841, an application was made by William Pochin (who is memorialised outside the current United Reformed Church on Long Street in Wigston) for a meeting-house licence for a barn belonging to him,⁴⁴ and in the same year the meeting-house was rebuilt as a 'handsome' Independent chapel at the cost of £1070. It opened for public worship on 19 April 1842.⁴⁵ The new building had brick walls and a hipped slate roof, with an original gallery around three sides and a fielded panelled front supported by cast-iron columns.⁴⁶ In the 1851 Religious Census, there is one return from an 'Independent/Congregational' place of worship, described as being erected before 1800 and with room for 734 sittings, free and otherwise.⁴⁷ The chapel had its seating renewed and the building was extended at the rear in the late 19th century.⁴⁸ An Independent place of worship is acknowledged in the 1872 visitation returns for Wigston.⁴⁹ Wigston's incumbent named Independent worship as one of two prevailing forms of dissenting worship in the parish in the

⁴¹ J. Nicholls, *The Hist. and Antiq. of the Co. of Leic. IV*, (London, 1810), p. 377.

⁴² ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/31.

⁴³ *Return of Number of Places licensed for Celebration of Marriages; Number of Marriages celebrated other than according to Rites and Ceremonies of Established Church* (Parl. Papers 1837-38 (412), XXXVIII. 153), p. 13.

⁴⁴ ROLLR, QS 44/2/193; QS 44/1/2.

⁴⁵ *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, 20 (July-Dec 1842), p. 603.

⁴⁶ RCHM, *Nonconformist Chapels* p. 133.

⁴⁷ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/10.

⁴⁸ RCHM, *Nonconformist Chapels* p. 133.

⁴⁹ Northamptonshire RO, ML 594.

visitation returns of 1881.⁵⁰ In March 1894, special services were held in the Congregational Church in celebration of the 228th anniversary of the church (making the foundation date 1666), the 52nd anniversary of that chapel, and the fifth year of the pastor's settlement.⁵¹ This date is also proudly inscribed on the front of the building, contradicting the bald statement made in 1669 that there was 'noe conventicle within this parish'.⁵² There were celebrations in 1966 to celebrate the church's tercentenary, which included members of the congregation visiting the previous sites where the church had been based throughout its lifetime.⁵³

The current church belongs to a group of Leicestershire United Reformed churches, of which the Wigston congregation is the largest.⁵⁴ Over the course of the twentieth century the church has had additional building work, erecting schoolrooms above the vestry that were later extended, and a Boys' Brigade hall.⁵⁵ The pews in the church have also been removed and replaced with chairs.⁵⁶

New Dissent

The Methodists are the most prominent among the 'new' dissenting groups that have formed since the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, but other churches are also represented in Wigston today.

Evangelical

Life Church, a group affiliated to the Assemblies of God UK, is based on Frederick Street in Wigston, in a building which was purchased in 1988 and was originally the Wesleyan Methodist chapel.⁵⁷ The Meadows Community Church was planted by Knighton Evangelical Free Church in 1993,⁵⁸ and is on Bulls Head Road. Bethel Evangelical Free Church, based on Burleigh Avenue, attribute their founding in 1940 to a missionary named Harold Lewis, and the first floor of the current building was opened in 1955.⁵⁹ This church is connected to Little Hill Church on Launceston Road, an independent evangelical church which Bethel Church formed in 1972.⁶⁰

Central Avenue Christian Church

Central Avenue Christian Church in Wigston was formed in 1980 by members of Rosemead Drive Church of Christ, in Oadby, who opposed the merger of the Association of Churches of Christ with the United Reformed Church. Initially the church met at the home of their minister, Reverend

⁵⁰ Northamptonshire RO, ML 601.

⁵¹ *Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercury*, 31 March 1894, p. 7.

⁵² Evans, 'Nonconformists', pp.98-143.

⁵³ Interview (July 2012), a member of the Wigston United Reformed Church congregation c.1922 to date of interview.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ ROLLR, DE 6056/13/4. See also Figure 2, below.

⁵⁸ Knighton Free Evangelical Church Online, <http://www.knighton.org.uk/a-brief-history.php> [accessed 24/7/12].

⁵⁹ Bethel Evangelical Free Church Online, http://bethelefc.co.uk/about_us/how-we-began/ [accessed 24/7/12].

⁶⁰ Little Hill Church Online, http://bethelefc.co.uk/about_us/how-we-began/ [accessed 24/7/12].

Alan Robinson, in Oadby, until they bought a property on Junction Road in Wigston. The congregation then outgrew that building, and purchased another on Central Avenue from Wigston Pentecostal church (now known as Life Church), which in turn moved to Frederick Street. The Central Avenue building has been heavily modified since its purchase, with the addition of a coffee bar, new worship centre and rear hall.⁶¹

Jehovah's Witnesses

There is a Jehovah's Witnesses organisation in Wigston, with a Kingdom Hall on Long Street,⁶² which was established with the help of the Blaby Kingdom Hall.⁶³

Methodists

The 1851 religious census contains returns for three different Methodist places of worship: Primitive Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist and Wesleyan Methodist Association. The Wesleyan Methodist Association inhabited the oldest building of these three, which was erected before 1800.⁶⁴ The Wesleyan Methodists' building had been erected much later, in 1839,⁶⁵ and the Primitive Methodists' building had been erected in 1845.⁶⁶

Wesleyan Methodist Association

The Wesleyan Methodist Association was established as a breakaway branch of Wesleyan Methodism in 1835.⁶⁷ However, the building where the Wigston Wesleyan Methodist Association (WMA) worshipped was erected before 1800.⁶⁸ This implies that when this split occurred within the Wigston Wesleyan Methodists, those who became members of the WMA remained in the congregation's original chapel (suggesting that the chapel's trustees were among those who formed the Wigston WMA). This is probably why the Wesleyan Methodists purchased their own land on Frederick Street in 1838⁶⁹ and erected their own place of worship a year later.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the WMA congregation appears to have been smaller than both the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist congregations in 1851, with 35 attending the WMA evening service recorded in the census, compared to 74 attendees at the Wesleyan Methodist service and 150 at the Primitive Methodist service.⁷¹ There seem to be no records of the WMA in Wigston after 1851, there is no sign of their chapel on the 1886 Ordinance Survey map, and trade directories from the 1860s mention only one Wesleyan chapel. They may have merged with the Wesleyan

⁶¹ Central Avenue Christian Church Wigston Online, <http://www.caccwigston.org.uk/ahistoryofcentralavenuec.htm> [accessed 20/07/12].

⁶² http://www.leicestershiretogether.org/jehovah_s_witnesses.pdf [accessed 22/08/12].

⁶³ N. Hagley (a Blaby resident): interview by Emma Roberts (August 2012).

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/7.

⁶⁵ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/8.

⁶⁶ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/11.

⁶⁷ M.R. Watts, *The Dissenters, Volume II: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford, 1995; 2003 edition), p. 466.

⁶⁸ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/7.

⁶⁹ William A. Ward, *Through All the Changing Scenes* (Wigston, 1985), ROLLR, N/M/179/153/1, p.5.

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/8.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO, HO 129/411/7.

Methodists, perhaps on the creation of the United Methodist Free Churches and the creation of the Wesleyan Reform Union, both in 1857.

Wesleyan Methodists

A Wesleyan Methodist chapel with 195 members was recorded on a return for dissenting meeting houses in Wigston in 1829.⁷² On 6 September 1838, a plot of land on Occupation Road (later Frederick Street) was purchased for £23 6s. 8d. from banker George Davenport and held in the name of the Wesleyan Methodist Church by 15 trustees.⁷³ A small single-storey Wesleyan Methodist chapel was built on this plot in 1839, and in 1860 it was enlarged at a cost of £140.⁷⁴ A Wesleyan place of worship is acknowledged in the 1872 visitation returns for Wigston.⁷⁵ In 1881, the incumbent of Wigston Magna specified “Wesleyan” as one of the two prevailing forms of dissent in the parish.⁷⁶ In 1885 a new chapel was built adjoining the existing building.⁷⁷ This new chapel may have given the Wigston Wesleyan Methodists an increased status in the county – the Circuit Quarterly Meeting was held there in 1886.⁷⁸



Figure 2: The Wesleyan Chapel of 1885, now occupied by Life Church

Membership of the chapel was recorded as 138 in 1905. In 1907, the church purchased land opposite the chapel, possibly to build a Sunday school. No building took place, and the plot was sold at a loss in 1911.⁷⁹

⁷² ROLLR, QS95/2/1/31.

⁷³ William A. Ward, *Through All the Changing Scenes* (Wigston, 1985); ROLLR, N/M/179/153/1, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Ward, *Through All the Changing Scenes*; ROLLR, N/M/179/153/1, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Northamptonshire RO, ML 594.

⁷⁶ Northamptonshire RO, ML 601.

⁷⁷ History, <http://www.wigstonmethodistchurch.org.uk/history/>, accessed 7 July 2012.

⁷⁸ Ward, *Through All the Changing Scenes*; ROLLR, N/M/179/153/1, p. 12.

⁷⁹ Ward, *Through All the Changing Scenes*; ROLLR, N/M/179/153/1, p. 16.

Primitive Methodists

The meeting house return of 1829 also records a Primitive Methodist chapel with 105 members.⁸⁰ This congregation appears to have built a replacement chapel on Moat Street in 1846, and in 1848 it was enlarged to accommodate membership that had reached 160.⁸¹ A Primitive Methodist place of worship is acknowledged in the 1872 Visitation returns for Wigston.⁸² The chapel was publically thanked in the *Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercury* for donating 9s. 2d. to the Leicester Infirmary in 1880.⁸³ By 1885, a new chapel was being planned. The collection taken at the harvest festival that year ‘before large congregations’ totalled £10, and was devoted to the new chapel fund.⁸⁴ In March 1886, the tenders for the building of the new chapel were discussed. Wigston resident Thomas Brown’s bid of £1,223 was accepted, and the decision was taken for work to begin as soon as possible.⁸⁵ Later that year, a new cruciform-shaped chapel and schoolrooms were completed and opened.⁸⁶ The Primitive Methodist Chapel had a choir in the late nineteenth century, which sung at the Primitive Methodist Mission Room in South Wigston in 1891.⁸⁷

Between 1948 and 1950 the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Moat Street underwent substantial and expensive refurbishment, including electrical rewiring, the addition of stage lighting, and painting and repairs both externally and internally.⁸⁸

Unification

In October 1983, the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels united to form one Methodist church. In 1987, it was decided that the Moat Street building would be refurbished and used as the sole building, and Mr and Mrs Douglas Smith were engaged for the ‘transformation, alteration and extension’ of the Moat Street chapel.⁸⁹ The Frederick Street premises were sold to the Assemblies of God, a Christian community based at Central Avenue, and the legal formalities began in March 1988.⁹⁰ The final service in the Moat Street chapel before its refurbishment was held in June 1989. For the next year Methodist Sunday services and the Sunday school transferred to the United Reformed Church on Long Street in Wigston “on a united basis”⁹¹ – an apparently harmonious arrangement with “no

⁸⁰ ROLLR, QS 95/2/1/31.

⁸¹ Wigston Methodist Church Online, <http://www.wigstonmethodistchurch.org.uk/history> [accessed 7/07/2012].

⁸² Northamptonshire Record Office, ML 594.

⁸³ *Leic. Chron.*, 24 January 1880, p. 8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1885, p. 7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 March 1886, p. 8.

⁸⁶ History, <http://www.wigstonmethodistchurch.org.uk/history/>, accessed 7 July 2012.

⁸⁷ *Leic. Chron.*, 31 January 1891, pg. 7.

⁸⁸ ROLLR, DE 4712/85

⁸⁹ ROLLR, DE 6056/13/5.

⁹⁰ ROLLR, DE 6056/13/4.

⁹¹ ROLLR, DE 6065/13/5.

disagreements at all.”⁹² This continued until the refurbished Wigston Magna Methodist Church on Moat Street was opened and rededicated in June 1990.⁹³



Figure 3: Moat Street Methodist Chapel (formerly Primitive Methodist)

Churches Together in Wigston Magna

This grouping, part of the national Churches Together movement, brings together various churches in Wigston, although the main participants are the United Reformed Church, Wigston Methodist Church and All Saints’ Parish Church. These churches participate in a variety of joint activities including Bible study and joint services on certain anniversaries.⁹⁴

⁹² Interview (July 2012), a member of the Wigston United Reform Church congregation c.1922 to date of interview.

⁹³ History, <http://www.wigstonmethodistchurch.org.uk/history/>, [accessed 7 July 2012].

⁹⁴ Interview (July 2012), a member of the Wigston United Reformed Church congregation c.1922 to date of interview.