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THE ORIGIN OF EVANGELICAL ANGLICANISM IN NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

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At 7:00 a.m. on Sunday, 30 May 1742, two men stood near the pump at Sandhill, to the north end of the Tyne bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne. They sang the old hundredth, and one of them preached a sermon at the end of which the crowd "stood gaping, with the most profound astonishment". The preacher broke the silence: "If you desire to know who I am, my name is John Wesley. At five in the evening, with God's help, I design to preach here again".¹ So began Methodism in the north-east of England, and Wesley's direct association with Newcastle which was to continue until his last visit to the town in June 1790. Eighteen years later, Sandhill was again the scene for the beginning of a movement. On 28 May 1808, Robert Wasney was appointed chaplain of St. Thomas' chapel, and was the first Evangelical to occupy one of the city's anglican pulpits. So began the Evangelical witness in the town, so that by 1879 J. C. Ryle noted that outside London, Newcastle was one of the twelve centres of provincial Evangelicalism.² Wasney's appointment at the beginning of the nineteenth century confirms G. R. Balleine's impression that there were no Evangelicals in Northumberland in the eighteenth century.³

By the end of the eighteenth century there were an estimated three to five hundred Evangelical ministers in the Church of England.⁴ Apart from those in isolated situations, many of them would have been members of clerical societies. One such was the Hotham society, near Beverley, founded in the 1780s by the Evangelical rector, James Stillingfleet, the membership of which would have included his curate, Robert Wasney.

Robert Wasney, born in Beverley in July 1772, the son of a butcher, was educated at Hull Grammar School, and converted to faith in Christ through the headmaster, the celebrated Evangelical, Joseph Milner. Wasney was admitted sizar at Clare College, Cambridge on 23 February 1791, and the Metcalfe Scholar on 21 January 1792. He graduated BA in 1795, but does not appear to have proceeded to MA. For three years he was associated with Charles Simeon vicar of Holy Trinity church. Wasney was ordained deacon by archbishop William Markham on 15 June 1795, to the curacy of Wawne, near Beverley, and on being ordained priest on 6 September 1796, became curate to Stillingfleet at Hotham until 1803. Wasney remained in the Beverley area until he was appointed chaplain of the chapel of St. Thomas-a-Becket, Newcastle, on 28 May 1808. Like Simeon, Wasney died unmarried.

Originally two distinct foundations, the hospital and the "chapel of the Bridge of

Tyne" were united by royal charter dated 12 June 1611. The chapel, situated at the north end of the Tyne Bridge, Sandhill, was on a restricted site. In 1732 it was decorated and re-pewed and became a chapel of ease to St. Nicholas' church. In 1770 the west end was demolished, and in 1782, it was further reduced in size and partially rebuilt to seat three hundred worshippers, which included one hundred sittings for the poor. In the 1820s it was decided to demolish the chapel, and at their expense the corporation of Newcastle would erect a new chapel at Barras Bridge, on Magdalene Meadow, which belonged to the hospital. The Act of Parliament for the erection of the new chapel was given the royal assent on 21 June 1827.⁵ In July 1827, plans by the Newcastle architect John Dobson were approved by the corporation to erect a new chapel to seat 1,200 at an estimated cost of about £4,500.0.0. On March 1830, Wasney preached the final sermon in the old chapel before it was demolished, and for the next few months the congregation assembled in the chapel of Trinity House. St. Thomas' chapel was consecrated on 19 October 1830 by Hugh Percy, bishop of Carlisle.

Until Dr. Henry Ridley, the master of the St. Mary Magdalene Hospital appointed Wasney as chaplain, various clergy in the town assisted at the chapel. But on his appointment, it being a novelty to have an Evangelical in Newcastle, Wasney attracted a large congregation.

'His manner and appearance in the pulpit were very striking. He read the liturgy with a gravity and solemnity to which we had been unaccustomed; and he preached with an authority and power which were all subduing ... His voice, slightly intoned by a provincialism, was yet clear, full and sonorous ... His theology was that of Owen, Edwards, Scott, Williams and Fuller ... Mr. Wasney found Newcastle nearly barren of religion, and he left it in possession of a religious and moral influence unknown in its previous history.'⁶

Wasney was a convinced Evangelical anglican, and, like Simeon may be described as a "moderate Calvinist",⁷ "a Bible Christian".⁸ Wasney's monument in the chancel of St. Thomas' chapel records that he was distinguished "as a Christian preacher zealously affected in the cause of Evangelical truth".

Wasney remained chaplain at St. Thomas' during the incumbency of three masters of the hospital. On the death of Ridley in 1825, he was briefly succeeded by John Smith, who died within a few months. His successor, Richard Clayton was appointed on 10 July 1826.

Clayton's appointment to the mastership of the hospital at the age of twenty-four, and still in deacon's orders, was not surprising considering his circumstances. He was the tenth of eleven children born to Nathaniel Clayton a member of the well-established Northumberland family, and town clerk of Newcastle from 1785-1822. He was succeeded by his son John, who was town clerk from 1822-1867, and it is without doubt that this family connection and influence ensured Richard Clayton's election as master of the hospital.

Clayton, who was born in March 1802, was educated at the distinguished non-conformist Percy Street Academy, Newcastle, which between 1806-1881 provided a balanced classical and modern education. Clayton entered University College,

Oxford, in 1820, graduating BA in 1823 and MA in 1826. He returned to Northumberland and was ordained deacon in 1825, and priest on 16 September 1826, by the bishop of Durham. At £60.0.0 a year he became the assistant curate of the recently created parish of Wark, near Hexham, holding this position until 1831. Sometime after his death it was stated that "whilst a student he distinguished himself in theology [and] had formed decided views, acquired fixed principles, and became serious and thoughtful beyond his years".⁹ But the evidence is otherwise, and it is clear that Clayton was converted to faith in Christ through Wasney's ministry. Speaking shortly after his death, Clayton's friend, G. T. Fox of Durham, said that:

'Clayton preached doctrines of a very different kind, and was a man in many respects of different character from that which we have known him for so many years ... but God abundantly blessed him; first taught him, and then qualified him to teach others'.¹⁰

'It was at an early period in his ministerial life that he was brought to our blessed Saviour's feet as a repentant and forgiven sinner ... in answer to the fervent prayers of some who took an interest in him and in the spiritual welfare of this town'.¹¹

Clayton referred to Wasney as "his spiritual father in Christ",¹² which, in the language of the day meant the one through whom he was converted to faith in Christ. Thereafter, Clayton expressed in his own life and preaching, "the three great cardinal truths of the gospel" – "a sound conversion to God", "the justification of the soul in the sight of God", and "sanctification of the soul".¹³

Three years before his death, Wasney was stricken with paralysis, and when he died in April 1836, Clayton succeeded him as chaplain of St. Thomas'. Although Clayton was criticized by other clergy in Newcastle for not having any parochial responsibilities, he was not idle. He built "a large congregation of intelligent well-to-do citizens",¹⁴ "and was looked upon by the Evangelical party in the town as the leader of their school of thought. He took an active part in the management of religious and philanthropic schemes in the town in which churchmen and dissenters were able to co-operate".¹⁵ Like other Evangelicals of the day, Clayton co-operated with dissenters in matters of common concern, such as Sabbath observance, opposition to the race-course and the creation of a town mission; as well as supporting the leading Evangelical societies, particularly the Church Missionary Society, the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews and the Church Pastoral Aid Society. Clayton was an opponent of Tractarianism, and criticized those in Newcastle who embraced "Puseyite innovations",¹⁶ and also opened his own school. Since the vicar of the parish in which St. Thomas' chapel and the school were situated was the leader of *Puseyism* in the city, it is hardly surprising that William Dodd described the St. Thomas' schools as repudiating "the Church of England principle of the pastoral superintendence and authority of the parochial minister, [and], I can hardly call them Church of England schools".¹⁷

The weekly attendance at St. Thomas' was considerable, with an average of 1,000 adults in the morning and 500 adults in the evening. The Religious Census of 30 March 1851 recorded an adult attendance of 958 in the morning, 305 in the afternoon and 441 in the evening; together with 314 Sunday school pupils in the morning and

318 in the afternoon. Clayton and his assistant chaplains faithfully ministered to the congregation. They

‘Visited their congregation in every parish in the town, and held meetings which enabled them to come in direct communication as clergymen, with their congregation, at least once a month, and very often once a fortnight. Not only that, but at times they had gone among the very poor, and held meetings in cottages’.¹⁸

The sudden death of Clayton in October 1856 was quite unexpected. But it raised the whole issue of continuity for Evangelical ministers. To avoid the dispersal of the congregation to dissent, as had happened in the previous century on the deaths of Samuel Walker of Truro,¹⁹ and William Cadogan of Reading,²⁰ Charles Simeon had the vision to purchase advowsons, commencing with Cheltenham in the autumn of 1816. But no such provision had been made in Newcastle, and the situation was unique. Wasney’s position was secure, and was strengthened by the Evangelical conversion of Clayton as the master of the hospital; Clayton as master and chaplain ensured that the assistant chaplains would be Evangelical. But since the appointment of the master of the hospital was in the gift of the corporation, they were responsible for the appointment of Clayton’s successor. The delicate position was expressed by G. T. Fox in an obituary sermon:

‘The day will not be far distant when within the walls of St. Thomas’ you shall no longer hear the plain message of the gospel of truth enforced by the spiritual experience of your minister ... The claims of this important and influential congregation to be heard in this matter, and to be furnished with such a successor as shall follow in the steps of him who has gone before, ought not to be disregarded ... what a sad thing it would be to see this whole congregation scattered to the winds, or feeding on the garbage of an unfruitful ministry’.²¹

Within six hours of Clayton’s death, two members of the corporation had petitioned alderman John Blackwell that Thomas Halsted, the assistant chaplain, should be appointed as the master of the hospital. Out of the 800 adult members of the chapel, 680 were in his favour.

‘We humbly suggest, that by your appointing a man like-minded with the late incumbent, the peace and integrity of one of the largest congregations in the town would be preserved, and a tribute of respect paid to the memory of him who has gone’.²²

A special meeting of the corporation was convened to make the appointment, and while Halsted was in a strong position, Clement Moody was a respected individual in the city. He was a keen advocate of education, and had made it clear that if appointed master he would agree to any necessary changes in the constitution, and would appoint a chaplain and assistant chaplain for the pastoral oversight of the congregation of St. Thomas’. Moody was also attracted towards the valuable income of the hospital to increase his £210.0.0 a year income as vicar of Newcastle. By 1856 the income of the hospital exceeded £1,500.0.0 a year. Of this Clayton had received £300.0.0 a year as chaplain, and of the remaining amount, received a third as the

master of the foundation, making a total of £700.0.0 a year, from which £120.0.0 was paid to the assistant chaplain. In spite of the strong case presented by Halsted's supporters, Moody was appointed master by twenty-seven votes to twenty-two.

Sensing the mood of the congregation of St. Thomas', Moody invited Halsted to become chaplain at an increased salary. On the face of it, it would seem that Moody's offer was a magnanimous gesture to a defeated candidate. But Halsted could not accept. Not only would he have the status of being Moody's curate, and would have to work with an assistant chaplain who might well have held different theological views, but as he made clear in his letter to Moody, "we avowedly differ on more than one vexed theological question. We hold, for example, different views on baptism". Clearly Halsted was a convinced Evangelical, and Moody, who had already spoken of them "in terms of strong disapprobation",²³ was not.

Since there were no other Evangelical churches in the city, members of the congregation of St. Thomas' decided to erect "a proprietary or trustee church with or without a district assigned, in which Evangelical truth shall be declared".²⁴ The three-fold object in establishing such a church was outlined at a public meeting held in November 1856:

1. 'To testify the veneration and affection of a bereaved congregation for their departed minister – a minister to whom they had listened for many years with profit, edification and delight.
2. To provide additional church accommodation and spiritual superintendence for a town in which such provision, in connection with the Church of England, is at present so fearfully inadequate.
3. To erect a church, which, by having the patronage in perpetuity vested in trustees nominated by the promoters, will form a central point for the maintenance and promulgation of sound scriptural and Evangelical truth in a large and populous town, in which the appointment to every existing church, with the exception of that of St. Thomas', is in the hands of a single individual – the vicar of Newcastle – the present vicar also having the control of this church by virtue of his recent appointment to the mastership of the St. Mary Magdalene Hospital".²⁵

Support for the projected church was obtained from the leading Evangelicals of the day. These included Henry Venn, secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and the important triumvirate of Francis Close, Hugh Stowell and Hugh McNeile. Although support was forthcoming from outside Newcastle, and from members of Clayton's congregation, the bitterness which existed in the town over the erection of the Clayton Memorial Church was reflected in the nickname "St. Spite",²⁶ which opponents of the project gave to the new church.

During early discussions about the new church, the bishop of Durham recommended that it should be a district church, and not simply a proprietary chapel. The township of Jesmond was selected as a parish which was an area of open farmland, consisting of a public cemetery and two small pit villages, and a population of just over 2,000. But the church was not consecrated until January 1861 since Moody was not sympathetic to the proposal. He objected that the site was too near St. Thomas',

that the church should be erected further away, and that the township of Jesmond should be attached to St. Thomas' and not to the new church. Undoubtedly Moody was responsible for the two-year delay in the erection of the church,²⁷ but on giving his permission, the foundation stone was laid on 20 October 1859, and the building consecrated on 14 January 1861, by Henry Montagu Villiers, bishop of Durham.

While Clayton was a significant Evangelical clergyman hitherto unnoticed in the documentation of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, the Evangelical cause in Newcastle was established by the appointment of the Simeonite, Robert Wasney. Two characteristics are clearly observable in his ministry which reflect the imprint of Simeon. First, in Wasney's attention to the liturgy and in his preaching. Like Simeon, he *prayed* the prayers. "He read the liturgy with gravity and solemnity to which we had been unaccustomed; and he preached with an authority and power which were all subduing".²⁸ Second, Wasney was a loyal churchman, who remained for most of his ministry in one place, and although he remained unbeneficed, exercised considerable influence over the congregation. This point was made in an obituary notice:

'A new and important change has taken place in the episcopalian character of the town. How many now embrace the doctrines of their church and exhibit the holy tendency of the religion which they profess! . . . It is true, Mr Wasney did not introduce clergymen to cures, but his ministry gave such an impulse to pure and undefiled religion, that the people must of necessity have become dissenters had they not been supplied with preachers of Evangelical doctrine'.²⁹

NOTES

¹ L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev John Wesley MA* (London 1890) vol. 1, p. 386.

² *The Times*, 6 February 1879, p. 10.

³ G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London 1908) p. 82.

⁴ J. Walsh, *Methodism at the end of the Eighteenth Century*, R. Davies and G. Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London 1965) vol. 1, p. 291.

⁵ An Act for enabling the master and brethren of the Hospital of Saint Mary Magdalene, within the town and county of Newcastle upon Tyne, to erect a chapel . . . 7 & 8 Geo. IV, session 1826-27.

⁶ The Rev. Robert Wasney AM, reprinted from the *Newcastle Courant*, 16 April 1836.

⁷ W. Carus, *Memoirs of the life of the Rev Charles Simeon MA* (London 1847) p. 418.

⁸ R. S. Dell, Simeon and the Bible, A. Pollard and M. Hennell (eds.), *Charles Simeon 1759-1836* (London 1964) p. 32.

⁹ R. Welford, *Men of Mark Twixt Tyne and Tweed* (London 1895) vol. 1, p. 587.

¹⁰ Unidentified newspaper cutting, dated 22 November 1856.

¹¹ G. T. Fox, *A Sermon on the occasion of the death of the late Rev Richard Clayton MA, master of St Mary Magdelene Hospital and chaplain of St Thomas' church, Newcastle, on Sunday 19 October 1856* (Newcastle 1856) p. 21.

¹² J. Cutter, *A Sketch of the History of Jesmond Church* (Newcastle 1883) p. 3.

¹³ Fox, *A Sermon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 8, 11, 15.

¹⁴ Welford, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

¹⁵ G. Bruce, *The Life and Times of John Collingwood Bruce* (Edinburgh 1905) p. 274.

¹⁶ Welford, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

¹⁷ Undated letter [c. 1838] from William Dodd, National Society archives, St. Andrew's school, Newcastle upon Tyne.

¹⁸ *Proceedings of the Council of the Borough of Newcastle upon Tyne for 1859-56 meeting held 29 October 1856* (Newcastle 1856) p. 302.

¹⁹ G. C. B. Davies, *The early Cornish Evangelicals 1735-1760* (London 1951) pp. 212-13.

²⁰ C. Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order, a study*

of the origins of the Evangelical Revival in Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge 1940) pp. 310, 201–47.

²¹ Fox, *A Sermon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 24.

²² *Proceedings of the Council*, *op. cit.*, 20 October 1856, p. 272.

²³ *Newcastle Journal*, 15 November 1856, p. 5.

²⁴ Minutes of the Committee Meetings of the Clayton Memorial Church, 10 November 1856.

²⁵ *Proposed 'Clayton' Memorial Church at Newcastle upon Tyne*, 9 December 1856.

²⁶ Welford, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁷ Letters from Moody, 5 December 1857, 20 August 1859, Ecclesiastical Commissioners file, Jesmond Proposed District, Newcastle upon Tyne.

²⁸ Wasney, *Newcastle Courant*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

