

SUSSEX RELIGIOUS DISSENT c. 1830

by N. Caplan

This paper evaluates the strength of Dissent in Sussex in terms of the number and geographical distribution of places of worship and their denominational ties. It discusses the likely numerical strength of Dissent and considers the particular case of the Downland region in which Protestant Dissent failed to make a lasting impression.

I THE NUMBER AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF DISSENTING PLACES OF WORSHIP

The unique Census of Religious Worship in England and Wales taken in 1851 is indeed of first importance in an assessment of the scale and pattern of Dissent in the nineteenth century, but it is possible to gauge the strength of Sussex Dissent earlier in the century without being compelled to work back from the Census. This is largely thanks to the survival of the parish returns of Non-Anglican Places of Worship made in 1829 in accordance with the Order of the House of Commons. The writer drew attention to the great importance of this source for Sussex some years ago, but it was not possible in that short paper to do justice to such an outstandingly valuable source.¹

In fact, Parliament had given attention well before 1829 to the evident growth of Dissent. In 1810, the House of Lords had called by Order for a List of Places of Worship in parishes 'the Population of which amounts to or exceeds 1,000'². The List for Sussex was printed in 1811. Unhappily, the House of Commons Return for 1829 was not ordered to be printed and the material was then destroyed in the great fire at the Palace of Westminster in 1834.³ But the originals of the parish returns for Sussex have survived intact in Quarter Sessions records.⁴

The returns provide in so many cases details not only about the places of worship as such but also about the numbers of people involved and their denominational ties. It is an added gain that the returns were compiled by members of the Church of England and thus provide what may fairly be termed an 'Anglican' assessment of the progress of Dissent — most of the returns were prepared by Churchwardens or Overseers. The 1829 returns thus serve as an independent check on the surveys then being made by the Dissenters themselves.⁵ In 1829, the Anglican Establishment at national level was deeply exercised about the large and continuing growth of Dissent which was increasingly reflected in pressure by the political allies of Dissent for the total removal of civil discrimination against the Dissenters. This helps to explain why the Establishment had resisted strongly the idea of collecting and publishing official figures about the strength of Dissent.⁶

However, the internal evidence of the Sussex parish returns taken together with the Dissenters' own surveys makes it plain that overwhelmingly the Anglican compilers tried hard to obtain the facts about the strength of Dissent in their parishes. In a good many cases, it is unlikely that the compilers themselves would have had close personal contact with Dissenters, but they knew well the affairs of their parishes. Some of them indeed sought the help of local

Dissenting ministers before making their returns.⁷ Consequently, there are no grounds for regarding the returns as having been influenced by any bias against Dissent — as undoubtedly was the case with so many of the Sussex parish returns for the Compton Census in 1676.⁸

Sadly, it is not practicable to reproduce here more than a small sample of the actual returns, but even the few examples below should serve to demonstrate the exceptional value of the 1829 returns.

Ardingly

Ardingly Chapel, Independents — from 1 to 200 worship in it, says the Preacher, and that very few of these are residents — therefore liable to be returned for the villages they reside in. Query — are there 50 members?

Chiddingly

Dicker Chapel (being a branch of Jireh Chapel, Lewes), Calvinistic Independent — 200.

Broad Oak Chapel, Calvinistic Independent, this was a dwelling house Licensed 10 January 1813, transformed into a Chapel in 1814: 150.

Pickhill Meeting, a Farmhouse where there is preaching occasionally — 40.

Cuckfield

Ebenezer Chapel, Independents or Congregational Calvinists — 200.

Providence Chapel, Calvinists, maintainers of the articles of the Church of England or true Gospellers — 100–200, or 300.

Polestub Chapel, Unitarians — 20.

Owing to the absence of one of the Pastors, I have not been able to get the necessary information before, this delay has consequently been occasioned — George Webb, Overseer.

Hailsham

1st. Baptist Chapel, the Particular Baptist Denomination — No. of persons from Hailsham Parish 180 and no. of persons from Other Parishes 60, Total 240.

2nd. High Calvinist, two Chapels — No. of persons from Hailsham Parish 80 and No. of persons from Other Parishes 75, Total 155.

Hastings, All Saints

Ebenezer Chapel, Calvinistic Baptists — 150–200.

Zoar Chapel, Calvinists — 60–80.

Waterloo Chapel, Wesleyan Methodists — about 300 Members, congregation varies from 300–400.

Hastings, St. Clement's

Croft Chapel, Independents Congregational — 250–450, fluctuating.

Bryanites or Bible Christians, Bryanites or Ranters — 8–10 persons.

Hellingly

Zoar Chapel, Calvinists — 200.

Union Chapel, Wesleyans — 150.

Two Private Dwelling Houses, Baptists — about 30.

Sir, There are two Private Houses in Hellingly where about 30 People meet on Sunday Evenings alternately and both Houses Licensed and the Parties are Baptists. In consequence of the Houses being occupied by Families could not decide in my own mind whether they should be brought in or not but to prevent mistakes have given this information that you might decide it in a proper manner.

I remain Sir, Your Obt. Servt.

Wm. Gilmore, Overseer.

Ninfield

Bessells Green Chapel, Calvinistic Dissenters — from 80–100.

Ninfield Shop Chapel, Independents — from 50–75.

Wesleyan Chapel or House, Wesleyans — from 40–60.

Barlavington

None. A Catholick Chapel now building at the new Mansion called Burton, and in Barlavington Parish — 27 persons.

Broadwater

Independent Chapel, Independents — 200.

Wesleyan Chapel, Wesleyans — 50.

Putticks Schoolroom, Calvinistic Independents — 20.

Chichester, St. Peter the Great

Providence Chapel, Calvinists — 250.

Ebenezer Chapel, Independents — 180.

Independent Chapel, Independents — 300.

Horsham

General Baptist Chapel, General Baptists — 200.

Wesleyan Chapel, Wesleyan Methodists — 100.

Independent Chapel, Independents — 500.

Quakers Chapel, Friends, commonly called Quakers — 53.

Roman Catholic Chapel, Roman Catholics — 30.

Nuthurst

There is one Place of Worship in a Cottage in this Parish, Independents. A Minister from Horsham preaches there once a month on a weekday. There may be about 20 Dissenters in this Parish who attend this place of Worship and go to the Meeting at Horsham on Sundays. Between 40 and 50 people generally attend, but of these about one-half belong to the Established Church, and attend the Parish Church on Sundays.

Westbourne

No Building appropriated wholly for Divine Worship, but five Rooms in several houses, Licensed in the Bishop's Court for preaching, Independents — above 125.

Returns were made for 314 parishes of which 112 were recorded as having a total of 190 Dissenting places of worship. This total included both purpose-built chapels and other buildings used regularly for public worship (the latter were varied indeed and included houses, shops and schoolrooms). At this time there were many *House Churches* and the compilers evidently took pains to gather details about such groups of Dissenters. However, it could not have been easy for them to identify all such groups in the towns and the largest rural parishes. Existing Toleration Act registrations would have been some help here, as the return for Westbourne *supra* indicates, but the Act of 1812 amended the Toleration Act 1688 to permit groups of fewer than 20 persons to meet for public worship without registration of their meeting places.

Some of the compilers may well have had doubts about including in their returns very small house groups, as indeed the return for Hellingly *supra* suggests. Moreover, so many of these small groups were quite short-lived as they depended so much upon the enthusiasm of just one or two families. This means that the existence of Toleration Act registrations for say, 1827 or 1828 for a parish does not of itself indicate that the return for that parish in 1829 was in error if it made no mention of the group. There was also for compilers the problem that some of the

small house groups were not independent of the larger chapels with which they were associated and some compilers might have felt that the former ought not to be returned as distinct congregations.

Given these uncertainties, it would be misleading to offer a precise figure for the number of genuinely independent house groups meeting regularly for public worship and whose existence went unrecorded by the compilers in 1829. It seems unlikely however that the total number would have been more than about 15–20 across the county. The broad pattern of distribution of the 190 places of worship recorded was:

<i>Division</i>	<i>No. of Parishes making returns</i>	<i>No. of Parishes with places of worship</i>	<i>Total No. of such places</i>
Eastern	145	74	134
Western	169	38	56
Sussex	314	112	190

This pattern was in clear continuation of the far stronger representation of the *Old Dissent* in the Eastern than in the Western Division that had persisted from the seventeenth century. For example, the Compton Census of 1676 had acknowledged the presence of some Protestant Dissenters in 80% of Eastern Division parishes compared with only 54% of Western Division parishes. For Bishop Bowers' Visitation of 1724, these proportions were 63% and 48% respectively (though the coverage of the Visitation was narrower than that of the Compton Census).⁹ This broad pattern was also confirmed by the Protestant Dissenters' own survey of Sussex in 1717.¹⁰

The historic pattern of distribution of continuing Catholicism in Sussex was the very reverse of this. From the time of the Elizabethan religious settlement, the preponderant strength of the Sussex Catholics lay in the Western Division.¹¹ This remained true in 1829 and the parish returns then showed that six of the seven Catholic places of worship were in the Western Division.

But this brief comparison between the two Divisions takes no account of the natural regions of Sussex with their associated economic and social characteristics. Weald, Downland and Coastal Plain all march across the administrative boundaries. The writer has not, however, examined in the required depth the extent to which the pattern of distribution of Dissent c. 1830 may have reflected materially the influence of these regional characteristics — except in the case of the Downland which is discussed below. Certainly, there was a wide and strong distribution of Protestant Dissent throughout the Weald, High Weald and Coastal Plain and the only major natural region in which Protestant Dissent failed to establish itself on a continuing basis was the Downland. In the writer's view, the pattern of distribution of continuing Catholicism owed nothing to the influence of regional characteristics.¹²

II DENOMINATIONAL PATTERN

Inevitably, there are uncertainties about the denominational ties of a number of the Protestant Dissenting places of worship as stated by the parish returns of 1829. It cannot be surprising that, despite their local knowledge, some of the Anglican compilers would have been puzzled by the rather fine distinctions in this field. This applied evidently most of all when it came to the distinctions between the congregations described variously as *Independent*, *Independent Calvinist*, *Calvinist* or *Congregational*. Moreover, a number of congregations

were still using denominational titles from the past which failed to reflect important changes in their theological stance in 1829. All the remaining groups described by the compilers as *General Baptist* had become by then Unitarian or Free Christian churches.¹³ Several of the churches described as *Countess of Huntingdon* had become Congregational by 1829. Taken as a whole, however, the returns show that the compilers had made a real effort to identify the denominations involved and that they succeeded well in the attempt.

It is important in this context to note that the growth of Protestant Dissent as a whole in Sussex, and of particular denominations, as revealed by the 1829 returns far exceeded that shown by the surveys prepared around this time by national Dissenting interests themselves. The latter included notably the surveys published by the *Congregational Magazine* in 1826, 1829 and 1836.¹⁴ That for 1829 records for Sussex a total of only 87 Dissenting places of worship, and even that for 1836 gave only 98 places, compared with the total of 190 provided by the parish returns of 1829. The most striking discrepancy here in terms of the various denominations related to the Methodists. Both for 1829 and 1836, the *Congregational Magazine* surveys gave a total of only 20 Wesleyan Methodist places of worship compared with the 53 such places recorded by the parish returns of 1829; for the Particular Baptists, the figures were 13 and 12 compared with 38.

These discrepancies serve to demonstrate convincingly that the Anglican compilers of the 1829 parish returns were not influenced by any bias against Dissent in the actual preparation of their returns. It is not known to what extent the *Congregational Magazine* surveys drew upon information supplied by correspondents in Sussex itself. The internal evidence suggests that such help, if available, must have been rather slight because local correspondents could hardly have been so lacking in knowledge of the large progress actually made in Sussex. These Dissenting surveys ought not therefore to be taken as providing a reliable assessment of the scale and denominational ties of Protestant Dissent in Sussex at the time.

The table below summarises the information provided by the parish returns of 1829 about denominational ties and compares this with the figures provided by other sources including the

TABLE
Dissenting places of worship in Sussex 1810-51

Source	Total No.	Catholic	Presbyterian/ Unitarian	Independent/ Congregational	Particular Baptist	Wesleyan Methodist	Calvinistic Methodist	Other Methodist	Friends	Others
Lords Return 1810 ¹	57	3	5	19 ³	18	5 ⁵	—	—	7	— ⁹
Congregational Magazine 1829	87	6	4	31	13	20	6	—	5	2
Congregational Magazine 1836	93	7	7	41	12	20	6	—	5	—
Commons return 1829	190	7	8	58	38	53	8	5 ⁶	6	7
Census 1851	267	8	— ²	78	50 ⁴	80	5	— ⁷	— ⁸	46

Notes to Table

¹As explained above, this Return covered only the larger parishes.

²Included under 'Others'

³The Return did not mention either of these two denominations explicitly, but covered them under the general term *Calvinists*.

⁴Intended to cover *all* Baptists.

⁵The Wesleyan Methodists were not strongly represented in the larger parishes as early as 1810, but they had by then a good many societies in the smaller parishes in the eastern part of Sussex.

⁶All these were *O'Brienite* (Bible Christians) meetings.

⁷Included under 'Others'

⁸Included under 'Others'

⁹The 1810 Return included the Jewish synagogue at Brighton, but this has been excluded here from the total. The 1829 return for Brighton also included this Jewish congregation and again it has been excluded from the total.

Census of Religious Worship 1851.¹⁵ The parish returns have been corrected in a small number of cases where there is full independent evidence that an error was made by the compiler.

The close correspondence between all these sources about the number of Catholic places of worship is readily understandable because there would have been no real difficulty in identifying Catholic congregations and there were so few of them in Sussex until late on in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ The growing strength of Methodism has already been mentioned and its growth continued to be substantial after 1830. The Particular Baptists had not been strongly represented in the Old Dissent of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries when the great majority of the Baptist churches in Sussex were General Baptist. A major factor in the growth of the Particular Baptists was the transformation of all the continuing General Baptist churches into Arian or Unitarian during the first half of the eighteenth century: the period of rapid growth of the Particular Baptists dated from around 1760.

In the Old Dissent in Sussex, the Congregationalists (Independents) had been relatively weak compared with the Presbyterians but in the New Dissent they became the leading denomination. As in the case of the General Baptists, the Sussex Presbyterian churches which had survived into the eighteenth century all became Arian or Unitarian and almost all were later disbanded. It was not until well on into the nineteenth century that new English Presbyterian churches of orthodox theology were formed in Sussex — in the coastal resort towns.

III THE PROBABLE NUMERICAL STRENGTH OF DISSENT

The 1829 Return called for estimates of the numbers of persons 'belonging' to each Dissenting place of worship and almost all the compilers of the parish returns provided such estimates and evidently tried hard to make these realistic. Once again, it is clear that compilers had no inhibitions about acknowledging the great increase that had taken place in the strength of Sussex Dissent. Their estimates can be taken therefore as a good basis of comparison between the numerical strength of Sussex Dissent c.1830 and its strength as recorded in the Religious Census 1851.

Inevitably, there are statistical and other uncertainties about some aspects of the 1829 parish estimates — as there are indeed about the 1851 Census itself. Not surprisingly, most of the compilers felt the attraction of 'a good round figure' when setting down their estimates. In any case, this was reasonable because so many of the Dissenting congregations would have had fluctuating attendances at their services, and many compilers sensibly offered a range of the numbers involved. As far as the County Return to the House of Common was concerned, however, this course was frustrated by the Clerk of the Peace who proceeded to take the median of the ranges, but the ranges remain in the originals of the parish returns.¹⁷ The parish returns as a whole suggest — in the light of the independent material available — that the compilers tended to overstate the numerical strength of Dissent rather than to underestimate this. For example, the estimate for Mayfield was 600 Protestant Dissenters out of a total population of some 2,700 (1831 Census) and this does seem to be on the high side.

The indications are that very few of the compilers interpreted the term 'Persons belonging to' the place of worship as applying only to *adults*.¹⁸ Certainly, if this had been their intention, a great many of the estimates would indeed have been unrealistic in terms of the size of local populations at the time. However, the main problem is to try to assess the extent to which there was an appreciable element of 'double-counting' in the parish returns in consequence of the practice of attending more than one place of worship on Sundays. This practice held good for

Sussex for the members of several denominations (though not for the Particular Baptists) especially in the towns where there were so many chapels and such a diversity of preachers. But the practice was not confined to the Protestant Dissenters themselves. Contrary to some received opinions, there was not a total separation between Anglicans and Dissenters and there were a good many Anglicans in Sussex who were none too happy with their ultra-conservative incumbents and who, though not prepared to leave the Church of England, yet preferred sometimes to attend Dissenting services. And others among the Anglicans recognised the merits of some Dissenting ministers as preachers. A number of the parish returns show that their compilers were well aware of these factors. For example, at Ripe:

‘Calvinists of the Independent Denomination. Several Families in the Parish attend and many attend who often are at Church which makes it most difficult to draw any line between them. The number of persons who attend varies from 25 to 50.’

The similar case of Nuthurst is mentioned *supra*. Although many compilers did not make specific mention of attendance by Anglicans at Dissenting services, there is a strong likelihood that there was at this time a significant Anglican element included in the estimated numbers of persons attending the Dissenting places of worship in a fair number of cases.¹⁹

There is also the uncertainty about the extent to which the numbers of Dissenters recorded for a particular parish included persons not resident in that parish (though this factor should not of itself influence the total number of Dissenters in Sussex independently of the general factor of double-counting). With the large increase in the number of Dissenting places of worship during the previous 20 years or so, there was no longer the same compelling need for Dissenters to travel quite long distances to services of their own denomination away from their own parishes of residence. But the need remained still for those Dissenters who had no chapel of their own denomination in their parish and who attached great importance to being able to worship in such a chapel. The return for Sedlescombe is relevant here:

‘Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Congregation drawn from a wide area (few Methodists in the Parish and a few others).’

The problem of double-counting arises also for the 1851 Census of Religious Worship because the returns then made of the numbers involved were intended to cover: ‘the numbers of persons present at the most numerous attended Services’ (on Sunday 30 March 1851). This means that no allowance would have been made — or could have been made in practical terms — either for those Dissenters who attended more than one place of worship on that Sunday, or for those Anglicans who that day attended services both at their parish churches and at some Dissenting chapel.²⁰ This aspect is discussed further below, but it should be emphasized that the arithmetic of the 1851 Census ought not to be taken at its face value.

The 1829 parish returns point to a total of around 24,000 persons belonging to the Dissenting places of worship. This would have been the total number of *Hearers* — the term adopted generally to describe all persons present at worship whether church members or not and usually intended to include children as well as adults. Most of the compilers did not attempt to make any distinction between church members and hearers, but a number obtained information on this point from the local Dissenting ministers. This information supports the conclusion that the number of church members was usually a modest proportion only of the total congregations even in terms of adults.²¹ This distinction, however, does not affect the total number of Dissenters.

The figure of 24,000 needs to be discounted for the undoubted element of double-counting involved in the parish returns, including the attendance of Anglicans at the Dissenting services.

To arrive at a factor for this element is necessarily a hazardous process and it would be misleading to offer any precise figure. It is the writer's view that a total for Sussex of the order of 21,000 to 22,000 would be closer to the mark for the numerical strength of Sussex Dissent c.1830. This estimate represents about 10 or 11% of the total population at the time. In 1826, the *Congregational Magazine* referred to Sussex as follows:

'It is computed that not more than 33,000 Inhabitants of this County receive the benefit of true Evangelical Instruction.'

There is of course no means now of determining how such a computation was made. In any case, it cannot safely be assumed that its authors intended this figure of 33,000 to be taken as an estimate of the total number of Protestant Dissenters in Sussex. The term 'true Evangelical Instruction' could well have been used to allow also for the parishioners of those of the Anglican clergy who were regarded as strongly evangelical. Plainly, a total of as many as 33,000 is far too high to be credible and the parish returns of 1829 are much to be preferred as a guide here.

The writer has suggested elsewhere that the Protestant Dissenters in the 1670s probably represented no more than 10 or 11% of the Sussex population.²² It is interesting to find, therefore, that — for all the striking progress made by the new Dissent with the impetus of the evangelical revival — its strength proportionately to the total population was no greater c.1830 than it had been two centuries earlier.

Looking ahead to 1851, the Census of Religious Worship gave a total for Sussex of 38,000 Dissenters on the basis of the numbers of persons present at the most numerous attended services on 30 March 1851. This represented an average of 142 persons for the 267 Dissenting places of worship recorded by the Census (compared with an average of 125 persons for the 190 places of worship recorded in 1829). This total included the small number of Catholics. By 1851, the total population of Sussex had risen to 339,000. Taking the Census 1851 figures at their face value, and excluding the 1,200 Catholics, the Protestant Dissenters would have represented only 11% of the population. But this is to allow nothing for the factor of double-counting and there is also the uncertainty about the scale of 'absenteeism' of the Dissenters from those services on 30 March — though it is unlikely that the level of voluntary absenteeism would have been large.

The most realistic course to adopt here is probably to ignore both double-counting and absenteeism and to conclude that in 1851 the Protestant Dissenters still represented no more than 11% of the total population of Sussex. The progress of the various denominations generally between 1830 and 1851 does not at all suggest that the numerical growth of Dissent was proceeding at a significantly faster rate than the growth of the population as a whole. Even though Sussex Dissent had maintained its relative position over this period its actual strength

<i>County</i>	<i>Dissenters recorded in Census 1851</i>	<i>Total population in 1851</i>
Sussex	38,000	339,000
Suffolk	65,000	336,000
Essex	70,000	344,000
Hampshire	67,000	402,000

was modest indeed compared with the strength of Dissent in reasonably comparable English counties.²³

IV THE DOWNLAND CASE

The 1829 Return demonstrates that Protestant Dissent was indeed widely distributed across Sussex in all the major natural regions with the exception of the Downland. It is the writer's view that there are substantial grounds for attributing the weakness of organised Dissent in the Downland parishes to the strong and continuing influence of the economic and social characteristics of these parishes. The historic patterns of both Old and New Dissent confirm that the repeated efforts made to establish viable congregations in the Downland region were hardly ever successful.

When, in the closing years of the eighteenth century, the New Dissent had grown substantially, a number of the strong churches in the Coastal Plain, the Weald and the High Weald were active in trying to foster congregations in the Downland parishes. These churches sent out lay preachers to Downland parishes and set up some small house groups. This work was much extended and developed later on with the formation in 1803 of the *Society for Spreading the Light of the Gospel in the Dark Towns and Villages of Sussex*.²⁴ In this context, the use of this harsh-sounding word 'Dark' conveyed the sectarian meaning that the only places of worship in such towns and villages were parish churches not served by men of strongly evangelical sympathies. The Dissenting ministers most closely involved in the Society's work included those serving churches in Burwash, Heathfield, Newhaven, Brighton, New Shoreham, Arundel and Chichester.

In January 1809, and thanks largely to the warm support of many Congregational churches, the Sussex Mission Society was formed at Brighton. Its object was 'the more extensive spread of the Gospel in the county of Sussex.' The Society was active in Downland parishes through the appointment of home missionaries as well as lay preachers and a number of *Preaching Stations* were quickly set up. Toleration Act registrations during the period 1800–30 reflected this active home missionary enterprise with registrations for Protestant Dissenters in some 35 Downland parishes. Yet, almost all of these groups proved to be short-lived and no organised churches came into being. It was a similar experience between c.1870 and 1900 when the Sussex Congregational Union and Home Missionary Society again made a substantial effort to establish groups in Downland parishes, working particularly through the strong churches at Eastbourne, Alfriston, Brighton and New Shoreham.²⁵ A large number of *Out Stations* of these churches were set up, including those at Jevington, Litlington, Wilmington, East Chiltington, Patcham and Coombes. Once again, none of these proved capable of growing into a viable local church.

These repeated efforts were made in the Downland parishes even though the distances involved for residents in them wishing to attend services in churches of their own denominations in the Scarp Foot Zone were modest enough for those times. There had been evidence of willingness to travel these distances during the period of active persecution of Protestant Dissenters between 1662 and 1688 when a number of *Conventicles* were held in the Zone.

The weakness of Dissent in the Downland parishes was the result largely of their characteristically close-knit economic and social structure. The very smallness of their populations was itself a powerful inhibiting factor against the formation of viable Dissenting churches. In so many of the Downland parishes, a few families accounted for most of their populations and for

Dissent to have succeeded in forming effective and enduring congregations would have had the result of reducing support for the Parish Churches to almost negligible proportions.

Even at its strongest in some of the towns and in the well-populated Wealden parishes, Protestant Dissent rarely represented more than some 15 to 20% of the local populations. A similar ratio in the Downland parishes would have been quite inadequate to provide a viable basis for a continuing local church. Moreover, the absence in the great majority of the Downland parishes of any sizeable group of small traders and craftsmen was adverse to the growth of Dissent because in Sussex generally, as in so many other English counties, it was such groups who contributed greatly to the formation and support of local Dissenting congregations.

In this context, the work of Dr. Colin Brent on rural employment and population in Sussex is of great significance.²⁶ Brent has concluded of the Downland region that:

‘The characteristics of the downland region, dominated by sheep-corn husbandry, scarcity of craft employment, consolidation of a labour-saving high farming, erosion of family farmers and little scope for the enterprising cottager, underline its similarity to other increasingly folden regions elsewhere and seem frequently to have been reflected in a “want of inhabitants” and in the decay of corporate life.’

These sixteenth/seventeenth century characteristics of the Downland held good for it generally also during the period c.1780 to 1900 — above all in the vital respects of ‘want of inhabitants’ and of absence of craft employment.

The Downland case was in sharp contrast with that of the Coastal Plain with the latter’s rapid development of nucleated settlement, large growth of population and of corporate life from the late eighteenth century. And it was the Coastal Plain that provided the New Dissent with its most notable growth opportunities which it was swift to seize. Understandably, the most spectacular growth was in Brighton. The 1829 Return estimated that the number of Protestant Dissenters there was over 5,000.²⁷ It was not only the growth of the resident populations with their large groups of small traders and craftsmen which was important here because there was also the substantial financial help provided by the crowds of summer residents who wished to attend churches of their own denominations.

It is to be hoped that before long there will be a full examination of the influence of the economic and social characteristics of the other major natural regions of Sussex on the pattern of development of Sussex Dissent.

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Author: N. Caplan, The Old Cottage, Whitemans Green, Cuckfield, West Sussex RH17 5DA.

Footnotes

¹N. Caplan, ‘Religious Dissent in Sussex c.1829’ (*Journal, United Reformed Church History Society*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1974).

²British Parliamentary Papers (Lords) 1811 (48), xlvi, 17. The List for Sussex in fact included also seven parishes with populations between 931 and 997 inhabitants. There were said to be 54 Protestant

Dissenting and three Roman Catholic places of worship in the 41 parishes listed.

³There was one exception to this in that a version of the Return for the County of Lancaster was ordered to be printed: British Parliamentary Papers 1830 (644), xix, 11–34. But this version of the Return has been described as “highly inaccurate” by W. R. Ward: *Religion and Society in England 1790–1850* (1972).

⁴QCR/1/II, E.I. and W.I. These are complete for 314 parishes. The writer's reference in the paper noted in 1 *supra* to the loss of some parish returns arose through a misunderstanding when a bundle of returns was not produced with the remainder.

⁵Notably, the surveys published by the *Congregational Magazine*, 1826–36.

⁶For example, *The Black Book* (new edition, 1835).

⁷For example, at Fernhurst: 'I have been to the Pastor.' At Warminghurst, the Dissenting Minister himself made out part of the return and signed the statement about his own chapel.

⁸An exception should perhaps be made here for the incumbent of Chidham who wrote: 'Some 8 or 10 Persons attend some Dissenting Place of Worship out of the Parish, but of which Sect or Denomination the Devil only knows.'

⁹Though the information provided by the Chichester portion of the Compton Census must be treated with reserve in view of the strong evidence of underestimation of the strength of Dissent, such bias is unlikely to have influenced materially the relationship between the two Divisions of the County as such. The Visitation of 1724 appears to have been largely free from bias. See N. Caplan, 'Notes on Sources for the History of Sussex Dissent c.1660–1860,' *S.A.S. Newsletter*, No. 24 (1978).

¹⁰This was the Sussex portion of the John Evans list which was compiled by the Rev. Robert Bagster of Chichester in 1717. See N. Caplan, 'Protestant Dissent in Sussex c.1717: The Evans List,' *S.A.S. Newsletter*, No. 21 (1977).

¹¹See, N. Caplan, 'The Sussex Catholics c.1660–1800,' *S.A.C.* 116 (1979), 19–29.

¹²*op. cit.*

¹³The returns for Ditchling and Horsham referred to these substantial *Free Christian* churches as *General Baptist*, but the return for Lewes, St. Michael's Parish correctly described the former *Presbyterian* Westgate Meeting as *Unitarian*.

¹⁴The *Congregational Magazine* was published from 1818 to 1849 and it was influential in Dissenting circles.

¹⁵For a manageable account of the mass of material gathered by the Census, see H. Mann, *Abridged Report on Religious Worship in England and Wales* (1854).

¹⁶Of the seven Catholic places of worship recorded, six were in parishes with a long record of continuing Catholicism and most of these had been Mass Centres from the time of the Elizabethan religious settlement: see, N. Caplan, *op. cit.*

¹⁷For example, the return for Arlington gave 'from Fifty to Sixty Persons' and the Clerk's note on the official form reads 'Returned at 55'.

¹⁸The only return that mentioned this point explicitly was that for Harting: 'Adult Attendants Two Hundred, Sunday School 180.' An adult congregation of 200 for Harting parish may seem high, but the Congregational church there served a wide area and it drew support also from the Hampshire side of the border (another aspect of double-counting).

¹⁹The case of Bosham was extreme because of serious troubles within the Parish Church which led the Churchwarden to add a note of explanation to the return for Bosham Congregational church: 'Now crowded to Excess in consequence of the Parochial Church being so very badly served with an Insufficient Vicar which has caused the Parishioners to desert it.'

²⁰It was by no means unusual in Sussex in the 1850s for staunch Anglicans to attend Congregational churches on Sunday evenings where the ministers were respected for the quality of their preaching.

²¹For example, at Northiam: 'One Chappel of Unitarian Baptists. 26 Members or an average number of 100 Persons in their Congregation.' At Peasmarsh: 'Hurst Green Wesleyan Methodists. 30 in Society and 100 usually attend.' The precision of these figures of membership suggests strongly that the compilers had obtained them from the local Dissenting ministers.

²²N. Caplan, 'An Outline of the Origins and Development of Nonconformity in Sussex: 1603–1803' (unpub. typescript, copies in S.A.S. Library and in British Library and Dr. Williams's Library).

²³The proportion of total *sittings* provided by Dissenting places of worship in Sussex was the lowest of the English counties except for Rutland.

²⁴The *Evangelical Magazine* contains many references to the work of the Society from 1803 on.

²⁵Though Alfriston was itself a parish of the Downland, it was so much more populous than the others and it had numbers of small traders and craftsmen.

²⁶C. E. Brent, 'Rural Employment and Population in Sussex between 1550 and 1640: Part Two,' *S.A.C.* Vol. 116 (1979), 41–45.

²⁷The 1829 return for Brighton included also a Catholic church of 90 persons and a synagogue of 60 persons.