Baptist Members of Parliament: A Supplementary Note

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A series of previous articles in this journal has assembled evidence about Members of Parliament who have been Baptists. A list of those who sat in parliaments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appeared in 1980; an equivalent list for the nineteenth century, published in the following year, was followed by a fuller discussion of the role of Baptist MPs in the period 1847–1914; and in 1986 there appeared a list for the twentieth century. Over the years since that time, several correspondents have kindly supplied additional evidence about MPs mentioned and unmentioned in the articles, and in 2004 the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography came out with further information. The present note, which should be read in conjunction with the previous articles, is a summary of the extra material now available. It is arranged in three sections: the first catalogues the eight additional Baptist MPs who have come to light; the second section provides information on two MPs who had close Baptist connections but who properly belong with the previously published supplementary lists of supposed Baptist MPs; and the third supplies amendments to the earlier lists. Each section is divided by century. There must still be errors and omissions, but at least this note makes the series more accurate and complete.

Of the newly listed MPs, two were returned to parliament in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Together with the thirteen Baptist MPs catalogued in 1980, that makes a total of only fifteen for the two centuries, and their identification is often no more than probable. Both the newcomers to the list were London merchants, in one case, Sir John Eyles, an extremely prosperous trader to the West Indies and Africa, and in the other, Thomas Guy, an equally successful dealer in books whose investments turned out to yield a bonanza. These men were similar to the other two Baptists in the eighteenth-century parliaments, one of whom was Lord Mayor of London and the other its sheriff. Likewise Eyles was Lord Mayor and Guy would have been sheriff had he not preferred to pay a fine to escape office. Eyles is interesting as a prime collaborator with James II during his attempt to woo Dissenters to his side so as to weaken the Church of England. All Eyles's prominent offices came to him during James's brief reign. Guy, on the other hand, left a name to posterity through his benefaction. The hospital he founded, one of the best in the country, called itself ‘Guy’s’.

There are three new nineteenth-century MPs, making a total of twenty-two. The amendments list adds a fresh MP, Henry Havelock-Allan, who had previously been supposed to have shed his Baptist convictions before entering the Commons. It is now clear that he remained a Baptist, at least for the earlier part of his parliamentary career. There is also, however, a subtraction from the previously published list. Alfred Illingworth, who was included in the earlier catalogue of MPs, turns out not to have joined the churches where he worshipped. So these two individuals, both close to the boundary between actual Baptists and others, exchange sides of the line. Of the three newly discovered MPs, John Heathcoat is still near the boundary because further research may show that in later life, when he sat in parliament, he was no longer in Baptist membership. Sir Reuben Barrow was
definitely a Baptist, active in denominational affairs at a national level, but it is not yet clear to which church he belonged. Benjamin Shaw was even more fully involved in denominational life, serving as treasurer of the Baptist Missionary Society. He was one of the figures of the early nineteenth century who sponsored a wide range of societies for doing good, the ‘Evangelical united front’. Shaw, like Barrow after him, was a London merchant, though he represented a Wiltshire seat, and Heathcoat, a textile manufacturer of the new industrial age praised by Samuel Smiles as an example of self-help, lived in Devon while in parliament. So all three belonged to the south of the country rather than the north, helping to redress the geographical balance among the MPs of the period. When they are included, ten Baptist MPs sat for southern constituencies whereas sixteen represented the north. The most important alteration to the previous conclusions, however, is that it was mistaken to claim that there were no Baptists in parliament between 1784 and 1847. On the contrary, Shaw sat from 1812 to 1818 and Heathcoat from 1832 to 1859. The arrival of Morton Peto in the Commons in 1847 was not so momentous a development for the denomination as had previously been supposed.

For the twentieth century, there are two additions, making a total of fifty Baptist MPs for the period, and there is also a twenty-first-century newcomer. The three, significantly, represented Labour, Conservatism and Nationalism, with none of them standing for the Liberalism that had once been the virtually unanimous choice of Baptists. One, Robert Gibson, was a Scot and another, Ieuan Wyn Jones, a Welshman, each representing a constituency in his own land. The effect on the statistics is to increase the number of MPs sitting for Wales to the high proportion of seventeen out of the fifty, illustrating the strong sense of civic responsibility that marked the denomination in the principality. Both Gibson and Jones were lawyers, pushing the number who had no occupation other than the law to eight, higher than any other occupational group. Jones was to reach the position of leader of his party, the third Baptist to do so, but only after he had left the Commons to marshal the Plaid Cymru forces in the new Welsh Assembly. The third new MP, entering Westminster only in 2001, was Andrew Selous, but by the time of writing he had already become a front-bench spokesman for the Conservative opposition. He was a fresh type of Baptist MP, identifying himself with pan-Christian causes that drew as much support from Catholics as from Protestants. His predecessor as a Conservative Baptist MP, Ian Twinn, had still thought of himself as a Nonconformist, even while worshipping as an Anglican. Selous, however, declared himself on his website (itself a sign of a new age) to be an Evangelical who drew inspiration from Wilberforce and Shaftesbury.

Less needs to be said about the list of supposed Baptists. There are only two entries, for the lawyer Russell Gurney and the politician Sir Joseph Cleary. Gurney left behind the Baptist allegiance of his family by the time he graduated from Cambridge in 1826, but he retained strong Protestant convictions that led him to pilot the anti-ritualist Public Worship Regulation Act through the Commons in 1874. Gurney must have been chosen, in 1865, to travel to Jamaica to deal with the sensitive question of the overly harsh suppression of rebellion on the island by the governor because it was an issue that particularly concerned Baptists. Gurney, it was known, would be sensitive to their anxieties because his uncle, W. B. Gurney, had previously been treasurer of the Baptist Missionary Society. Cleary, too, was probably not a Baptist, although he was a prominent figure in a crisis at a Baptist church in 1930-32.
The extraordinary events at Liverpool surrounding Cleary’s involvement as a socialist in the last days of Pembroke Chapel are summarised in his entry.

Most of the amendments, apart from the inclusion of Havelock-Allan and the exclusion of Illingworth in the roll-call of Baptist MPs, are on points of detail. The church membership of two nineteenth-century MPs, Briggs Priestley and Samuel Woods, has been discovered, and there is a little extra evidence relating to others from that and the following century. Two entries help to bring the story up-to-date. After the publication of the earlier articles, in 1989, there occurred the death of Sir Raymond Gower, the long-serving MP for the Vale of Glamorgan. In the following parliament, that elected in 1992, there were still two sitting Baptist MPs. At the next general election, in 1997, Ian Twinn was defeated, and so in the ensuing House of Commons there was only a single Baptist, Ieuan Wyn Jones. At the same time that he left Westminster in 2001, however, he was replaced by Andrew Selous. Thus the tradition of Baptist representation in the parliament of the United Kingdom continues.

Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>BQ</td>
<td>Baptist Quarterly</td>
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<td>BT</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>JHYB</td>
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<td>L</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
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<td>Lab</td>
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<td>WWW</td>
<td>Who Was Who (London)</td>
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1. List of Additional Baptist MPs

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Sir JOHN EYLES

d. 1703

MP for Devizes, 1679-81

London merchant and financier. Alderman of City of London, 1687-88; temporary Lord Mayor, 8 September – 3 October 1688. Does not seem to have taken seat as MP. Contested Devizes 1681 and 1689. Knight, 1687. DL, 1687-88. JP, 1688. Acquired country estate at South Broome, Wiltshire. Member of Old Baptist Church at Devizes (John Hurley, Two Hundred Years New: A History of the New Baptist Church, Devizes (Devizes, 1996), p.4, per

THOMAS GUY
1645? – 27 December 1724
MP for Tamworth, November 1695- July 1708
Bookseller in London from 1668, specialising in Bibles and importing them from the Netherlands. One of Oxford University printers, 1679-91. Educated in Tamworth. Built its town hall, 1701, and founded almshouse. Contributed to Tamworth Grammar School and in 1686 to Lord Weymouth’s Workhouse there. Campaigned unsuccessfully for parliament at Tamworth in 1690. Freeman of City of London, 1668. Elected sheriff 1694, but paid fine to avoid office. Left management of business to partners by 1704. Governor of St Thomas’s Hospital, London, from 1704. Founded Guy’s Hospital, endowing it with £200,000 derived from selling South Sea stock at right time. Also left benefactions to Christ’s Hospital and to debtors of London, Middlesex and Surrey. Unmarried, with a reputation for miserliness. Son of a Baptist and himself a Baptist, but church membership unknown (A. C. Underwood, A History of the English Baptists (London, 1947), p. 146). ODNB (mentioning that father was ‘Anabaptist’, but omitting Guy’s religion).

Nineteenth Century

Sir REUBEN VINCENT BARROW
1838 – 13 February 1918
MP (L) for Southwark, Bermondsey, 1892-95

JOHN HEATHCOAT
7 August 1783 – 18 January 1861
MP (L) for Tiverton, 1832-59

BENJAMIN SHAW
1770? – 6 November 1843
MP for Westbury, 1812-18

Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

ROBERT GIBSON
20 April 1886 – 9 April 1965
MP (Lab) for Greenock, November 1936 – June 1941
IEUAN WYN JONES
22 May 1949 - present
MP (Plaid Cymru) for Ynys Mon (Anglesey), 1987 – 2001

ANDREW SELOUS
27 April 1962 - present
MP (C) for South-West Bedfordshire, 2001 - present
Dod’s Parliamentary Companion (London, 2006)

2. Supplementary List of Supposed Baptist MPs

Nineteenth Century
RUSSELL GURNEY

2 September 1804 – 31 May 1878

MP (C) for Southampton, 1865-78


Father, Sir John Gurney, Baron of the Exchequer, was deacon of Maze Pond Baptist Church, though he latterly attended Church of England (ODNB for Sir John). Russell was nephew of W. B. Gurney, treasurer of Baptist Missionary Society. But because Russell Gurney himself graduated from Cambridge in 1826 he was already not a Baptist. He showed ‘low-church Anglican sympathies’ (ODNB), marrying daughter of John Venn, rector of Clapham. ODNB.

Twentieth Century

Sir JOSEPH CLEARY

26 October 1902 – 9 February 1993

MP (Lab) for Liverpool, Wavertree, February – November 1935


Was ‘associated’ with Pembroke Baptist Chapel, Liverpool. (D. Ben Rees, obituary, The Independent, 18 February 1993, per Stephen Lees). In 1930 supported Joseph Golder, the lay pastor, in keeping the city-centre chapel open as centre of Christian socialism in opposition to efforts of Baptist Union as trustees to close it. After Golder was forbidden to preach by a court decision, Cleary took over as main speaker. When Baptist Union seized the property on 5 November 1931, Cleary denounced its ‘trickery and subterfuge’. His last address was long advertised on the closed building: ‘Principles stand supreme’. Although services continued elsewhere, congregation dwindled and church dissolved early in 1932. (Ian Sellers, Salute to Pembroke: The Story of the Rise, Progress, Decline and Fall of a Most Remarkable Dissenting Congregation (Alsager, Cheshire, 1960), pp. 38-9). Because chapel had become more socialist than Baptist, Cleary may not have been baptised. No evidence that was associated with a Baptist church when MP.
3. Amendments to Earlier Lists

Nineteenth Century

THOMAS CAVE
Not Unitarian, but Anglican.

HENRY MARSHMAN HAVELOCK-ALLAN
Member of committee of Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1875-76 and 1876-77. Personal member of Baptist Union, which entailed membership of a Baptist church, 1874-79. Therefore remained Baptist while MP. (JHYB)

ALFRED ILLINGWORTH
Not Baptist church member. Would have joined Westgate Baptist Church, Bradford, had he not been put off by narrow views there in his younger days (memorial sermon in Bradford Observer per David Milner). Did not join Girlington Baptist Church (church records).

BRIGGS PRIESTLEY
Although his son W. E. B. Priestley was brought up at Kipping Thornton Congregational Church (British Weekly, 8 July 1909, p. 325), Briggs himself was member of Trinity Baptist Chapel, Ripley Street, Bradford (John Mitchell, Trinity Baptist Chapel: Jubilee Souvenir, 1857-1907 (Bradford, 1907), cited by S. R. Valentine, ‘The Origins and Development of the Baptist Denomination in Bradford’, Leeds MA dissertation, 1994, p. 84).

CHARLES TOWNSEND
Long-term secretary of Tyndale Baptist Church.

SAMUEL WOODS
Member of King Street Baptist Church, Wigan (Information from the late Dr Ian Sellers).

JOHN SKIRROW WRIGHT
Not deacon but elder of People’s Chapel, Birmingham, which was led by annually elected elders only (A. S. Langley, Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present (London, 1939), p. 108), notwithstanding loose reference to him as deacon by Charles Brown (Langley, p. 11). He preached regularly until c. 1865 and was Sunday school superintendent until his death. From 1862 he organised evening classes at the chapel and sponsored the first offshoot of the Quakers’ Severn Street adult school there. (E. P. Hennock, Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government (London, 1973), p. 100). First president of Birmingham Young Men’s Missionary Society (D. L. Finnemore).
**Twentieth Century**

**Lady MEGAN ARFON LLOYD GEORGE**  
Enrolled as member of Baptist Women’s League, 1929. This suggests Baptist church membership, but since she joined by invitation of the president and she would hardly refuse, the evidence is inconclusive. (Baptist Women’s League Report for 1929, pp. 9-10, per JHYB)

**Sir (HERBERT) RAYMOND GOWER**  
15 August 1915 – 22 February 1989  
MP (C) for Vale of Glamorgan, 1983 – February 1989

**GEORGE RENNIE THORNE**  
Thorne’s father was George Thorne, lay pastor of Brierley Hill Baptist Church, 1861-73 (*Montgomeryshire Express*, 25 August 1885, *per* Dr Michael Collis), who baptised his son. The MP was subsequently a regular preacher at Brierley Hill anniversaries. (Sidney Hall *per* JHYB)

**Dr IAN DAVID TWINN**  
MP (C) for Edmonton, 1983 – 97  
Member of St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge. Described himself as an ‘away member’, worshipping at an Anglican church in his constituency (*BT*, 2 April 1992, p. 11).

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2 *BT*, 2 April 1992, p. 11.  