

RECORD AND REPRESENTATION: THE MINUTE BOOK OF THE ARNESBY PARTICULAR BAPTIST CHURCH

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This study analyses the early history of the Particular Baptist community in Arnesby from the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth century through the lens of the church's minute book. It demonstrates the importance of the book as both an ecclesiastical record and also a representation of the community as a whole. Far from being mere archive, the book was a deeply contested legitimating tool, and its contents tell us much about the mentalities and practices of Particular Baptists in this period.

Arnesby, a small village some eight miles south by south-west of the city of Leicester, was the focus of a nonconformist religious outburst in the early eighteenth century, with its epicentre the Baptist meeting house in the village. The theology of this community, the adherents who attended the meeting house and the leaders who ministered there had a profound impact upon religion throughout the region, through a network of the faithful stretching from Leicester to Lutterworth, from Coventry to Cambridgeshire and beyond.

The Baptist church in Arnesby is justifiably most often associated with the two Robert Halls. The elder Hall (1728–91) arrived in the village from Northumberland to lead the meeting in 1753. He was instrumental in formulating a new theology which shifted the church away from rigid predestination towards an acceptance of the importance of mission. Robert Hall the elder was also a close friend and inspiration for Andrew Fuller of Kettering, who went on to expound this new Baptist theology most clearly and joined with Hall in founding the Baptist Missionary Society.¹ The younger Robert Hall (1764–1831), commemorated by a statue in De Montfort Square in Leicester, was born in Arnesby in 1764 before going on to an illustrious career in the Baptist church, serving in Cambridge, Bristol and at the Harvey Lane Chapel in Leicester.²

This study, by contrast, investigates the less well-known period prior to the arrival of Hall the elder in Arnesby. Interrogating the first extant minute book

¹ B. Stanley, *The history of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792–1992*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1992); E. F. Clipsham, 'Fuller, Andrew (1754–1815)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) (hereafter ODNB). The link between the two men is shown in *The Complete works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller with a memoir of his life by Andrew Gunton Fuller*, 3 vols (Philadelphia, 1845), I, 14–15. For the theological debates, see G. F. Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and the modern question: a turning-point in eighteenth-century dissent', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new ser., 16 (1965), 101–23.

² Rosemary Chadwick, 'Hall, Robert (1764–1831)', ODNB.

from the community, which dates from the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, and examining it as both source and artefact, I will establish something of the history, actions and beliefs of the community, and at the same time approach a characterisation of the believers' self identification as manifested through their book.

Defining themselves as 'Particular' Baptists, the community at Arnesby were Calvinist Baptists, distinguished from the General Baptist movement through their insistence on a salvation only open to those who were predestined. The Particular movement developed in London in the 1630s, emerging from Henry Jacob's 'Jacobite' churches which in turn owed their heritage to the Presbyterian legacy of the sixteenth century. A full separation from the established church took place as a consequence of Richard Blunt practising immersive baptism from 1642. Spreading throughout the country and having a profound influence on government and the army during the Interregnum, Particular Baptists totalled some 130 gathered churches by 1660 in the south, the Midlands and Wales.³ By the early eighteenth century it is estimated that four Particular Baptist congregations held meetings in Leicestershire, with 460 adherents – 0.52 per cent of the county population.⁴

The church at Arnesby first gathered in the neighbouring parish of Kilby in the house of Joseph Blythe, a weaver.⁵ Pastoral duties were undertaken by Richard Farmer, a silk trader, who was connected with Independent groups elsewhere in the county, and taught at Baptist, Congregational and Independent meetings in Wigston, Blaby, Swinford and Plyte.⁶ Although the exact origins of the church are unclear, it seems likely that it dated from just after the ejection of ministers in 1662 and lasted until the death of Farmer in 1695.⁷

He was succeeded at Kilby by Henry Coleman and Benjamin Winckles, under whom the meeting seems at first to have proceeded successfully and amicably. By 1694, however, the church had divided into two opposing factions, with Coleman and his supporters retreating to set up a new church six miles away at Mowsley and Foxton, whilst Benjamin Winckles became the pastor of the meeting at Arnesby.⁸ The subject of their division was a disagreement over the necessity of

³ M. Bell, 'Freedom to form: the development of Baptist movements during the English Revolution', in C. Durston and J. D. Maltby (eds) *Religion in Revolutionary England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 187; M. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978), 51, 65–6, 160, 166; B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the seventeenth century* (London, 1983), 58.

⁴ Watts, *Dissenters*, 509.

⁵ R. H. Evans, 'Nonconformists in Leicestershire in 1669', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, henceforth *TLAHS*, 25 (1949), 132–33. The extract relating to Farmer actually refers to Arnesby. Kilby does not have an entry at all in the religious census of 1669; this is presumably because the village was only a chapelry and so the entry was subsumed under Arnesby.

⁶ W. G. Dimock Fletcher, 'Religious Census of Leicestershire in 1676', *TLAHS*, 6 (1888), 304; A. Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland iv', *Baptist Quarterly*, 26:5 (1976), 209.

⁷ J. Ivimey, *A history of the English Baptists*, 4 vols (London, 1811–30), II, 255.

⁸ J. Ryland, *Salvation finished, as to its impetration, at the death of Christ; and with respect to its application, at the death of the Christian: a funeral sermon, occasioned by the death of the Rev. Robert Hall, sen. By John Ryland, jun. M. A. To which is annexed, Mr. Fuller's oration at the grave.*

faith for justification, with Coleman believing in justification as a consequence of faith and Winckles's adherents maintaining that salvation for the predestined was assured before individual faith in Christ. Moreover, Winckles's followers contended that Coleman had refused to accept their criticisms of the church and had permitted ill-disciplined drunkards to remain in the meeting. Despite Coleman's later attempts to vindicate his theology, the schism remained and the church under Winckles thrived in Kilby.⁹

On 10 May 1702 the church moved to Arnesby, from which point it grew prodigiously throughout the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ Every couple of months saw new members joining the church, and meetings were held as far away as Coventry and Ramsey in Huntingdonshire to allow believers there to partake of communion. Although many in the church were poor labourers and craftsmen, Winckles himself was a man of independent wealth and status. Born in Hothorpe, a small hamlet in Northamptonshire, his marriage to a rich widow on the borders of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire gained him lands in Elm in Cambridgeshire and Sibbertoft in Northamptonshire. He later purchased lands and property in Arnesby and moved to live in the village.¹¹ His nonconformity probably developed whilst he was in Hothorpe, where the vicar was ejected in 1662 and the 1669 religious census recorded a meeting of around 50 Independents – an impressively large number for such a small settlement.¹² The ministers licensed to teach at these meetings included Matthew Clarke and John Shuttlewood, both ejected from Leicestershire livings and both in 'intimate friendship' with Richard Farmer according to Ryland.¹³ This provides an explanation not only for the likely origins of Winckles's faith, but also why he returned to Arnesby after his marriage in Cambridgeshire in order to continue Farmer's work there. Ultimately he bequeathed the Arnesby lands to the Baptist church to be sold, and the proceeds held by three trustees, William Hackett, Samuel Fidgeon and Thomas Wormlaughton, in a trust for paying future

With an appendix, Containing some brief Memoirs of Mr. Hall's Life, and a short History of the Baptist Church at Arnsby, over which he was Pastor seven and thirty years (London, 1791), 49–50. Whilst Ryland claims that Coleman moved to Mowsley and Foxton, the registrations of meeting houses in the Quarter Sessions records do not list him as owning a licensed meeting house in either of these places (see Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (hereafter ROLLR), QS 5/1/1 Quarter Sessions Court Minutes, 1696–1726). See also W. Bassett, *History of the Baptist Church assembling at Arnsby, in the county of Leicester: with a memoir of the Rev. Robert Hall, Sen., and biographical notices of his successors* (London, 1859), 3, which largely repeats Ryland's narrative.

⁹ Anon, *Actual justification rightly stated: containing a true narrative of a sad schism made in a church of Christ, at Kilby in Leicester-shire, proving, none of the elect are actually justified before faith* (London, 1696).

¹⁰ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 Arnesby Baptist Church Minute book 1699–1757, fol. 19r.

¹¹ Ryland, *Salvation finished*, 50–2. Hothorpe is in the parish of Theddingworth, see J. M. Lee and R. A. McKinley, 'Theddingworth', in *VCH*, V, 313.

¹² A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: being a revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the ministers and others silenced, 1660–2* (Oxford, 1943), 232–3; Evans, 'Nonconformists in Leicestershire', 102, 132.

¹³ Lee and McKinley, 'Theddingworth', 320. Ryland, *Salvation finished*, 48; D. L. Wykes, 'Shuttlewood, John (1632–1689)', *ODNB*.

pastors.¹⁴ Throughout his time at Arnesby he was obviously held in high regard, and his memory would remain with the community far beyond his death in 1732.

The church had no constant pastor until 1734 when Daniel Hill from Northamptonshire took over the office, serving the church for 16 years until 1750.¹⁵ At this point the chronology of the church's activity becomes more confused, as a succession of individuals were brought on probation as pastors, until Robert Hall was eventually installed in 1753. Ryland skirts over the issues surrounding his appointment and his subsequent difficulties in attaining office and lodgings, merely noting that whilst the church was waiting for Robert Hall to take up his post, one of the trustees 'had artfully possessed himself of the premises', and although claiming that he would pay Hall the rent for the property he later refused to do so.

This gave great alarm to the Church, and to Mr Hall. Much trouble ensued, and lasted long. The profane people in the neighbourhood seemed also instigated by Satan to insult them in their distress. Many times an assembly of mockers would gather round the windows of the house where Mr Hall was preaching for after a while they were locked out of their Meeting-house, and obliged to meet in a private house, which was very near. Lewd fellows of the baser sort flocked from other villages, 'to see the doings at Arnsby', as they termed it. And these afflictions continued for several years, before these poor people could obtain legal redress.¹⁶

The minute book from Arnesby helps us to resolve the chronological ambiguities of this period, offering a much fuller account of the proceedings, although from a decidedly different viewpoint. An entry on 19 February 1750 notes that it was decided that William Hackett could live in the house in Arnesby left in trust by Winckles, as he was one of the named trustees 'and it was agree'd to, by Joseph Horton, John Saunderson and the said William Hackett'. Another hand has remarked below this entry that 'all the rest opposed it and sent a letter discharging him from coming which although he said he would not yet come in [a] letter he got possession of the house'.¹⁷ By 30 August 1757, the lack of a minister resulted in the church issuing an advertisement for a pastor in the London, Leicester and Nottingham newspapers.¹⁸ It seems likely that this was merely a charade, for on 26 October 1757, at a meeting called by William Hackett and the other trustees, it was noted that:

¹⁴ ROLLR, Will of Benjamin Winckles, 1732. Before his purchase of lands in Arnesby, Winckles had dwelt some 30 miles away, presumably in Elm. This was used against him by Coleman in their disputes following the schism in the church, Coleman claiming the church was suffering from a lack of pastoral oversight as Winckles lived so far away. Anon, *Actual justification*, 16.

¹⁵ Ryland, *Salvation finished*, 54. ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 59v.

¹⁶ Ryland, *Salvation finished*, 63.

¹⁷ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 63r.

¹⁸ For the text of the advert, see J. Nichols, *The history and antiquities of the county of Leicester*, 4 vols (London, 1795–1815), IV, 12–13. Nichols notes that he had been advised since the publication of the first edition of his work that this advert was intended to forestall Robert Hall from taking up the post of minister.

Whereas it hath been unanimously agreed this day by all Mr Benj Winckles's Trustees present and by the Consent of the Members of the Society of the people now called the Old Particular Baptists Meeting at the Meeting House at Arnesby ... to fix upon and did then Elect and Choose William Hackett a Member of the said Society (being first duly Quallified by the Laws of this Realm) to be a Pastor or Minister to Preach Teach or Instruct the said Society or Congregation of Particular Baptists Meeting at Arnesby aforesaid pursuant to the directions of the said Benj Winckles's will, Which he then Agreed to and Accepted of.¹⁹

This lengthy entry is then concluded by a threat that if any member did not agree to Hackett being minister or went on to follow 'the New Way and New Society lately Collected together and Erected or Set up at Arnesby Aforesaid with Mr Robert Hall for their minister', then they were to be cut off from the church.²⁰

Piecing together these decidedly partial sources, the reality of the situation appears to be that Robert Hall was accepted as a minister by the congregation, except for William Hackett and his supporters. When Hall arrived to take up his post, Hackett refused him access to the meeting house or the lodgings bequeathed by Winckles, and instead staged a secession consisting of a small group of his supporters, installing himself as their leader until Robert Hall regained control in June 1759.²¹ Ryland's silence concerning the veracity of events could well have been due to relatives of the seceders still remaining in the church when he wrote his history in 1791.

Besides offering an alternative chronology of events in Arnesby to that given in the semi-official history of the 1790s, the minute book also provides numerous hints on the membership of the meeting house, the procedure of weekly meetings, and the community's theological evolution. The book functioned as a record for the community of its actions, thus providing accountability, ensuring discipline and acting as a form of collective memory.

Each entry is preceded by a date, following a potentially confusing dating system which not only changed the year at Lady Day, but also recommenced numbering the months in March. Thus 'the 26th day of the eleventh month 1723' is not 26 November 1723 (a Tuesday), but rather 26 January 1723/4 (a Sunday). Entries follow no set formula and seem to have been written in Winckles's own hand until his death in 1732, when other unidentified individuals construct the entries.

The minute book contains two long lists of names of individuals attending the church, produced by Benjamin Winckles. Whilst the continual addition of names over many years prevents accurate dating, they demonstrate the considerable distance many believers were prepared to travel in order to attend services. The first list of church members (estimated to date from 1706) shows people coming

¹⁹ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 66r.

²⁰ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 65r–66v.

²¹ Nichols notes that this was after a lengthy legal dispute, although at present no evidence can be found of this. Nichols, IV, 13.

from nearby villages including Arnesby, Kilby, Wigston, Blaby and Mowsley. However, individuals also attended from Bitteswell, Lutterworth, Foxton and Leicester, up to 10 miles away, with others travelling up to 25 miles from places as diverse as Wellingborough, Kettering, Coventry, Desford and Northampton.²²

This geographic spread of believers has repercussions for our understanding of the extent of nonconformity in Leicestershire at this time. Registrations of meeting houses recorded by the Quarter Sessions show 281 dissenters registering places of worship between 1694 and 1720. At least 13 of these are individuals listed by Winckles in the minute book, or their spouses. This suggests that there was a network of Particular Baptist dissenters in Leicestershire, with Arnesby as its hub. As regular attendance was expected of members of the Arnesby meeting, we can assume that many of these meeting houses registered to members of the community were used only infrequently for supplemental meetings to the main gathering at Arnesby. If this is true then it suggests a large discrepancy between the number of meeting house registrations, actual meetings taking place and communities of dissenters in Leicestershire in this period. A prosopographical study of meeting house registrations is urgently needed to establish whether these networks of dissenters existed for other denominations and if so to what extent. It is entirely possible that the Quarter Sessions lists are misleading historians into over-estimating the magnitude of dissent and that in reality the evident wide spread of nonconformity was focused around a smaller number of meeting houses and ministers.

More impressive is the extraordinary growth in membership during Winckles's tenure as minister. Almost 120 individuals were granted membership of the church from the first meeting at Arnesby to Winckles's death in 1732. The vast majority of these were by way of formal acceptance and baptism, after having provided an account of the 'dealings of the lord with [their] soul'. This was generally a two-stage induction with baptism conducted at a later date, once the community had considered the potential member's testimony. The entry for the first meeting in the new chapel at Arnesby records that at 'A church meeting may 10th att arnsbe Charity Booth speak of the dealing of god with her and was baptized the 23th of the mounth called may and added the church'.²³ Acceptance was not a given, however, and the church was able to reject members whom they did not consider had rendered a suitable testimony and at times instructed them to 'weatt upon the lord for furder in lightning'.²⁴ Ryland's claim that Robert Hall inherited a church greatly depleted in numbers does seem to have some foundation, for entries from the death of Winckles to 1759 show that only four members were joined to the church.²⁵

Although there was little official central organisation to the Baptist movement in this area before the association meetings in 1765, it is clear that links between

²² ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fols 99–101.

²³ *Ibid.* fol. 19r.

²⁴ *Ibid.* fol. 18r.

²⁵ Ryland, *Salvation finished*, 63.

meeting houses and personal friendships of ministers were often strong.²⁶ On 3 May 1713 the meeting received Austin Taylor and his wife who had been dismissed by the meeting at Stevington, Bedfordshire.²⁷ Throughout the volume, the community at Arnesby received frequent ‘dismissions’ of members from neighbouring churches, or sent their own to preach or formally join believers in other villages.

The socio-economic status of adherents is hard to gauge. Although the religious census of 1669 claimed the worshippers were of the ‘meanest sort of people’, Evans demonstrates that this was a shorthand used so frequently as to render it meaningless.²⁸ The trustees of Winckles’s will were a hosier, weaver and woolcomber, and although the minute book is frustratingly reticent on the occupations of church members, low numbers of testators suggest most were of a low social status.²⁹

As well as being dismissed, members also left the church through ejection. The founding principles of the meeting at Arnesby, in common with most other Particular Baptist meetings, committed the community to the principle in Matthew 18 of informing members of their fault, first privately, then publicly in front of the church, and finally proceeding to formal excommunication.³⁰ The minute book illustrates a variety of sins including drunkenness, foul language, selling bread on the Sabbath, defrauding a master or the ‘evils of card play’. Members would be informed of their sin by letter or be visited by two members. Recanting would permit the offender to rejoin the church; otherwise they would be formally ‘cut off’. Despite the biblical command to reaccept a member who repented, in the case of Benjamin Dutton the community still excommunicated him for his sins ‘although he had felt sorrow for them’.³¹ Members could be readmitted at a later date if the church were satisfied of their contrition; James Bartlemew and Jane Wells, both of Coventry, were ‘brought before the Church for their sinfull actings with another and was judged of the Church to deserve cutting off’ in April 1705, but were permitted to rejoin the church in 1707 once she had become his wife.³² In all, 35 members were ejected from the church during Benjamin Winckles’s 36-year tenure as minister.³³

²⁶ Rylands, *Salvation Finished*, 67. T. S. H. Elwyn, ‘Particular Baptists of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association as reflected in the Circular Letters 1765–1820’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 36–7 (1996–97), 368–81, 3–19, esp. 368.

²⁷ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 46r. See also the record in the Stevington minute book which records the dismissal. H. G. Tibbutt, *Some early nonconformist church books*, Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 51 (Bedford, 1972), 43.

²⁸ Evans, ‘Nonconformists in Leicestershire’, 132–3 and more generally 98–105.

²⁹ ROLLR, will of Benjamin Winckles, 1732.

³⁰ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 10. Watts, *Dissenters*, 325.

³¹ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fol. 53v.

³² *Ibid.* fol. 33r, 38r.

³³ This figure pales in comparison to the Independent church at Rothwell, where the minister Richard Davis cut off 199 members in a 25-year period from 1689; see N. Glass, *The early history of the Independent church at Rothwell, from the 3rd year of the Protectorate to the death of Queen Anne* (Oxford, 1871), 66.

The church's greatest criticisms were reserved for those members who maintained connections with the Church of England, either through attendance or marriage. Winckles was withering in his criticism of the established church, branding it the 'young strumpitt' of the Catholic Church, and members attending Anglican services as engaging in 'spiritual whoredom' or 'going to babylon'.³⁴ Marriage was a particularly difficult issue for the church. Although prior to Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 the church was permitted to, and did, undertake common law marriages of its members, it is plain that many in the church felt this was legally insufficient.³⁵ Despite many debates in 1704 and the passing of a resolution that 'for any brother or sister goe to joyn with any part of false worship with the nation in their way of marriage is sinfull', it was noted that 'some not wholly agreeing to it remain to give in their reasons', and a later hand remarked that the church was never unanimous in its views on marriage.³⁶ This scepticism over the validity of common law marriages is well demonstrated by the case of William Matcham of Wigston and Elizabeth Sleater, married in the meeting house in front of witnesses in 1706, but later noted as being cut off from the church 'for their sin going and joyning in with the anti christian way of marriag in the Carnall Church'.³⁷ No fewer than 12 couples were cut off from the church for marriage in the Church of England during Winckles's time as pastor.

Reading this narrative against the grain suggests firstly that relations between members of the established church and dissenters were not as antipathetic as we might expect, with not infrequent interdenominational relationships despite the vituperative rhetoric of church ministers which railed against other denominations. Moreover, it indicates that some members were quite comfortable with the idea of a denominational plurality and saw their attendance at the Baptist meeting as something to be undertaken in addition to their occasional conformity to the rites of the Church of England.³⁸ On a more pragmatic level, women outnumbered men at Arnesby by a ratio of 8:5. This lack of available single men from within the Baptist community probably accounts for twice as many women as men being expelled from the meeting for marrying in the Church of England.³⁹

Winckles's founding rules for the meeting at Arnesby lay down regulations on the form and frequency of worship. In particular they stress how communion was an ordinance of Christ to be practised regularly. Rule 28 sets out that all members should endeavour to come to the breaking of the bread once a month, or else give reason for their non-attendance. Members living further away were excused

³⁴ *Ibid.* fol. 10.

³⁵ R. Probert and L. Brown, 'The impact of the Clandestine Marriages Act: three case-studies in conformity', *Continuity and Change*, 23:2 (2008), 309.

³⁶ ROLLR, N/B/7/1. fols. 26v-27r.

³⁷ *Ibid.* fols. 35r-36r. For more on dissenters using the parish church as a means of escaping patriarchal obstructions to marriage, see J. R. Gillis, 'Conjugal Settlements: resort to clandestine and common law marriage in England and Wales, 1650-1850', in J. Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983), 263.

³⁸ For more on occasional conformity in Leicestershire parishes, see R. J. Hunt, 'The character of occasional conformity in early eighteenth-century Leicestershire' [University of Oxford BA thesis].

³⁹ This corroborates the assumption made by Watts, *Dissenters*, 329-30.

monthly attendance, but were expected to partake at least four times a year.⁴⁰ Although the initial rules clearly assumed that church meetings were to occur once a week, by 1750 the community was receiving preaching from their minister Joseph Edmonds once a fortnight.⁴¹ As the minute book only records meetings where there was some business of note, it is not possible to gauge their frequency with any accuracy.

Apart from communion, the minute book gives few other clues as to the format of worship. As already noted, some meetings contained testimonies from members, baptism and occasional marriages. The rules also lay down the importance of singing in 'gospell time' as 'not onely the duty of every church member but there privilidge allso'. However, ambiguity remains as to whether 'singing' in this context refers to the demure practice of communally chanting psalms or the more radical singing of hymns. Hymn singing was generally discouraged by all denominations in the late seventeenth century, although innovation in the practice of closing the meeting with a hymn was led by Particular Baptist ministers.⁴² Prophesying by 'gifted brethren' was also encouraged either upon the demand of the church or the inspiration of a member. This was despite the more general trend in the period leading away from unregulated prophesying in church services, with the exception of Quaker meetings.⁴³ Days of prayer and fasting in order to seek the Lord also seem to have been commonplace, particularly when seeking a new pastor, as laid down in Winckles's letter to the congregation.⁴⁴

More generally, the theology of the church under Winckles was deeply Calvinist, as demonstrated by a lengthy declaration of faith at the front of the minute book. This stresses that the elect were called by God from the beginning of time and were favoured by God both before and after faith, hinting that these rules were drawn up in the wake of the controversy with Coleman. The Calvinist focus continues with articles affirming that whilst good and bad things will happen mutually to the elect and damned, only the elect can possibly attain salvation. It asserts the doctrines of faith and of election before works as the essential components for salvation, although accepting the importance of good works despite their lack of bearing on redemption.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ ROLLR, N/B/7/1, fol. 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* fol. 55r.

⁴² Watts, *Dissenters*, 308–9. Also A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1947), 133.

⁴³ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fols 11–12. Watts, *Dissenters*, 307.

⁴⁴ ROLLR, N/B/7/1 fols 61r, 64v.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* fols 6–12. It seems likely that the community at Kilby-Arnesby created the confession of faith largely from scratch as it shows no similarities with those published by other Particular Baptists. The most striking difference is that the Kilby-Arnesby confession does not dwell upon lengthy statements over the godhead, divinity of Christ or the canonicity of biblical texts. Rather, it concerns itself with issues which were contemporary points of contention in the community, such as justification, marriage and disputes over the exact mechanics of baptism. For other Baptist confessions, see E. B. Underhill (ed.), *Confessions of faith and other public documents: illustrative of the history of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th century* (London, 1854); and W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist confessions of faith* (London, 1911).

Aside from merely recording events and decisions of the community, the minute book functioned as a representation of the Arnesby meeting, almost acting as its surrogate. The insistence on listing and recording the membership suggests the book was used as a means of enforcing cohesion amongst the believers, not least as these lists appear to have been used as attendance registers on occasion. At the rear of the volume, all the births and deaths of members were listed in meticulous detail, and when coupled with the particular care taken to record admissions, dismissions and expulsions, ensured the book was a complete representation of the state of the communion.⁴⁶

Upon his death, Winckles left not only a monetary legacy to the community, but also a spiritual legacy through his rules and letter to the community offering instructions on the election of a new minister. Accordingly, the book was also a force for demonstrating both continuity and legitimacy; the theme of respect for church elders and the wisdom of the ages recurs continually. Winckles, when constructing his rules for the meeting, stressed that these were merely a continuation of what had been practised during Farmer's time as minister of the church.⁴⁷ William Hackett's seizure and legitimizing of power in the meeting at Arnesby relied greatly upon acquiring and manipulating these ideas of legacy and heritage. By obtaining possession of the minute book he was able to control the body of believers and justify his annexation of the meeting house. Thus the book moved beyond being a record of events to standing as an object of authority in the community, potentially leading to conflict and competition.

Hackett's own record of his entrance into the leadership of the church at Arnesby runs to five sides of the minute book and throughout stresses his position as trustee of the will of Winckles, marking himself out as one chosen by the pastor. For added emphasis, he prefaces this account with a verbatim transcript of a letter from Winckles to the congregation on the importance of choosing a minister, once again associating Winckles's rules with his appointment. The advertisement for a minister placed in the press by Hackett in his capacity as trustee also emphasises the heritage of the meeting house as a church founded by Winckles and stresses that any new minister would have to agree to follow the founding commandments. During the period when the community was choosing a new pastor, Hackett opened up the minute book for inspection so that members could validate that everything was being conducted in accordance with Winckles's wishes.⁴⁸ Thus the minute book became a force for conservatism and continuity in the church, and the rules formulated by Winckles endured long after his death due to their encapsulation in this medium.

The book also symbolised authority, it being no coincidence that as well as seizing control of the keys of the meeting house so as to exclude Robert Hall the elder, Hackett also took the church records. Beneath the entry of 19 February 1750, which permitted Hackett to live in the minister's house, another hand has

⁴⁶ ROLLR, N/B/7/1. fols 99ff.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* fol. 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* fols 58r–66v.

added the annotation: 'all the rest opposed it and sent a letter discharging him from coming which although he said he would not yet come in a letter [,] he got possession of the house and this book & then wrote in it what he pleased'.⁴⁹ Once in possession of the minute book, Hackett was in a position where he could create the history of the meeting that he desired, affirming and reinforcing his own position. It demonstrates how the written record of the community was more than mere text; rather it was an object to be fought over, embodying the means with which to control history and to represent a community of believers.

A later hand has altered the pages relating to Hackett's election, changing the meaning of some sentences by the insertion of words, imposing new narratives on top of old ones and thus reassigning the ownership of the volume.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that once Robert Hall the elder had full control over the meeting and the minute book, he in turn added his own entries to the book, despite having already begun his own record of services in another volume.⁵¹ Having the ability to write in the minute book conveyed authority on his ministry, and also provided a sense of continuity with the community and the legacy of Winckles.

This study has elucidated some crucial details about Winckles's life and his interrelations with other dissenters of the period, but it has also exposed how little we know about the biographies of many of the leading dissenters of the period. It highlights the need for a prosopographical study of the leading ministers in the Independent, Congregationalist and Baptist communities in the East Midlands in order to better understand their interconnections. We urgently need more work on the period from the Commonwealth to the Toleration Act, which would enable us to explain the genesis of many of these meetings and how they related, if indeed they did, to the nonconformity of the Interregnum and Restoration.

The Arnesby meeting minute book allows us not only to reconstitute the history of this important religious community in Leicestershire, but to investigate the character of the body of worshippers there. By functioning as both record and representation, the book helps us to reconstruct the individual and communal mentalities, practices and power structures which aided the evolution of this group of believers on the edge of Leicestershire who exerted such an influence upon the direction of religious observance across the county.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid.* fol. 63r. For an interesting parallel to this, see Glass, *Early history of the Independent church at Rothwell*, 110.

⁵⁰ ROLLR, N/B/7/1. fol. 64r.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* fols 70–2. The new volume is ROLLR, N/B/7/2. Early entries in this volume include a new list of members of the church, as it was noted that the church was in 'bondage' to an 'opreser' who had refused to include certain individuals in the original lists (fol. 12v).

ARCHIVE MATERIAL

- Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland:
 N/B/7/1-2 Arnesby Particular Baptist Church Minute Books.
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 Will of Benjamin Winckles, 1732.

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- Memoirs of Mr. Hall's Life, and a short History of the Baptist Church at Arnsby, over which he was Pastor seven and thirty years*, London.
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Church minute books may be located in a variety of places. Unfortunately, some have been discarded or are in private ownership; however, you will find that many are still available. They may be in the possession of the church, so it will be worth consulting the secretary or treasurer of the congregation. An excellent example of a book telling the story of the beginnings and growth of a significant Baptist church is Faith Bowers, *A bold experiment: The story of Bloomsbury Chapel and Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 1848-1999*, London, 1999. Buildings. This church building reflected the confidence of the Baptist community during this period: most of these churches were spacious, seating numbers from 350 to 1000, and they were built on prominent sites, often on main roads.