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GENDER, CLASS AND CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORWICH

For it has often occurred to me that these Congregational Churches, with their polished, eloquent ministers, their spruce and up-to-date houses of worship, their stained glass windows, their balanced services, form an acceptable middle way between the extremes of sacerdotalism and the raw conventicles. Congregationalism, perhaps the most worldly section of the Free Churches...having a quality which seems to possess a great attraction for keen business men of the workaday world – appears to owe much of its success to its placid adoption of the convenient middle way. In its services one may have much of the grace of Church of England practice with few or none of its claims, and all the freedom of the Free Churches without the feeling that one is called upon to be strenuously religious, as some other branches of Nonconformity.¹

Congregationalism was a creed peculiarly well suited to the aims and ideals of the urban middle class of nineteenth-century England, but one which many see facing a crisis as the country entered the twentieth century. Both contemporaries and historians have suggested that this crisis of the middle class resulted in their withdrawal from the cities they had created to the introspection of the suburbs.² In the process they abandoned all attempts at inter-class relations, gave up their leadership of voluntary organisations and often left the chapel for the conformity of the parish church.³ In the wake of this rejection of urbanism came decline for the denomination and for Liberalism, the political creed it had done so much to promote.⁴ Yet, while generalisation about the crisis of middle-class Dissent is common, very few writers have looked in any real detail at the culture of urban Congregationalism in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, and

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1. "The Pagan", "Peeps at Pulpiteers. Norwich Churches Visited. No. 10 Chapel-in-the-Field." *Eastern Evening Mercury*, 13 Jan. 1920.
 2. M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties* (1902), C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, (1909), K. Chorley, *Manchester Made Them* (1950), C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity, 1780-1920* (1977), D.W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (1982), D.W. Bebbington, "Nonconformity and Electoral Sociology, 1867-1918", *Historical Journal* 27 (1984), and S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis*, (1976).
 3. J. Glaser, "English Nonconformity and the Decline of Liberalism", *American Historical Review* 63 (1958).
 4. See for example, S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (Hampden Connecticut, 1975).

our knowledge of the aims, ambitions and milieu of the membership remains limited.⁵

The aim of this paper is to address some of these problems through a study of the development of Congregationalism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Norwich. In particular, it will shed light on some of the assertions made by "The Pagan" concerning the quality of ministers, chapels, services and the denomination's appeal to the solid middle class. It will investigate the organisational structure of Norwich Congregationalism, the extent to which it was a "voluntary organisation in crisis", and assess the degree to which the social leaders of Norwich Dissent were withdrawing from the early twentieth-century city. In the course of this analysis it will reveal the part played by women in the denomination and the way in which this changed over the first three decades of the century. Overall it will attempt to give a flavour of the urban Congregational culture which Clyde Binfield has brought to life in *So Down to Prayers*, but with a more optimistic conclusion.

Church Growth 1819-1929

For nearly four hundred years Norwich played a key role in the development of English Congregationalism, whilst Congregationalism, especially between the 1850s and the 1930s, was a major force in the history of Norwich. Although a congregation settled permanently in Old Meeting in 1693,⁶ it was not until 1819, when a new Independent church was opened in Princes Street under the ministry of John Alexander, that the denomination really began to grow.⁷ By the 1851 Religious Census the three Congregational chapels accommodated almost 3,000 people on the day. The total number of sittings was 2,246, of which no fewer than 1,866 were appropriated (a larger figure than for any other free church and almost as many as the Anglicans had in their forty-one churches)⁸ indicating, even at this early stage, the denomination's superior social status. However, it also revealed part of its weakness – insufficient accommodation for the non-wealthy – and in the sixty years following the Census Norwich Congregationalism attempted to come to terms with the city's growing working-class population.

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5. The obvious exceptions are Binfield, *Down to Prayers*. Binfield, "Business Paternalism and the Congregational Ideal: A Preliminary Reconnoitre," in D.J. Jeremy (ed.), *Business and Religion in Britain* (Aldershot, 1988), Binfield, "An Excursion into Architectural Cousinhood: The East Anglian Connexion" in N. Virgoe and T. Williamson (Eds.), *Religious Dissent in East Anglia* (Norwich, 1993) and Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1914* (Oxford, 1982).
 6. C.T. Rae, "The Free Churches of Norwich" in E. Felce (Ed.), *Norwich: Civic, Industrial, Historical*. (Norwich, 1935).
 7. R.W. Hale, "Nonconformity in Nineteenth-Century Norwich" in C.J. Barringer (ed.), *Norwich in the Nineteenth Century* (Norwich, 1984) and H.C. Colman, *Princes Street Congregational Church: Norwich, 1819-1919*. (Norwich, 1919).
 8. See the Norwich Table from H. Mann, *Report on 1851 Census* reproduced in Hale, "Nonconformity" p. 177.

In 1858 an 850 seat church was opened at Chapel-in-the-Field, on the western edge of the city. The new chapel was built at a cost of £6,500 and included extensive Sunday-school accommodation completed in 1862 in commemoration of the Ejectment.⁹ In 1869, under the direction of architect and chapel deacon, Edward Boardman, Princes Street was rebuilt to seat over a thousand. Ten years later it was further enhanced, again to plans by Boardman, by a new lecture hall and school rooms capable of accommodating 1,600 children for Sunday School and providing a venue for social, political and religious activities.¹⁰

Princes Street and Chapel-in-the-Field served all classes, but churches solely for the working-class developed more slowly. Missions were formed in the slum area of Bar Street, the workers' colony of Lakenham, and the rural-industrial village of Trowse (a church opening in the latter in 1872), all three in the south of the city around Colman's Carrow works. Expansion into the northern suburbs commenced in the 1880s, initially in a joint mission with the Baptists. A temporary building, known as the "tin tabernacle", was employed from 1893 and ten years later an 800 seat church was opened on Magdalen Road with the financial assistance and managerial direction of Princes Street and Chapel-in-the-Field.¹¹ In sixty years Congregationalists spent more than £25,000 on building, all from voluntary sources, especially the wealthy members at Princes Street and Chapel-in-the-Field who contributed extensively to church building in city and county.¹²

This building activity created a distribution of chapels which differed from the typical picture of ever increasing provision for a *lifting* middle-class congregation within their own discrete suburban environment.¹³ In 1908 the Revd. J.J. Brooker of Old Meeting observed that "In many cities of the size of Norwich, down-town churches like ours have had to close their doors and transfer themselves into some suburb..."¹⁴ Yet city centre worship remained normal for the Norwich middle class – so much so that in 1903 the Secretary of the County Union had to urge church extension into the middle-class Unthank

9. *Norwich Mercury* 2 Oct. 1858, *Eastern Evening News* 30 Dec. 1966 and *Eastern Daily Press*, 25 Feb. 1972.

10. William White Ltd., *History and Directory of Norfolk 1890* Facsimile edition of the Norwich section, (Kings Lynn, 1988), p. 34-37; Kellys Ltd., *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk, 1912* (1912), p. 288 and R. Salt, *Plans For a Free City*. (Norwich, 1989).

11. Colman, *Princes Street*, p. 28-29, 59-60 and 86, *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine*, November 1960 and September 1903.

12. Chapel-in-the-Field contributed £200 towards the building of Magdalen Road, plus £35 plus per annum to help with the minister's salary. Princes Street was consistently the largest donor to the Church Aid Society, *Eastern Daily Press* 25 Feb. 1972, Norfolk Congregational Union, *Report Presented to the Annual Assembly Held in the Princes Street Congregational Church Norwich 1909* (Kings Lynn, 1909) p. 14-17.

13. See for example Binfield, *Down to Prayers*, p. 202. For a successful city centre Congregational church see C. Binfield "The Building of a Town Centre Church: St. James's Congregational Church, Newcastle upon Tyne", *Northern History* xviii (1982). I am grateful to Dr. Binfield for this reference.

14. J.J. Brooker, "After Three Years", *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. II No. 16 (April 1908).

Road district,¹⁵ home to no fewer than five of the Princes Street Deacons. In the inter-war period the Unthank Road area got its church and with the building of Jessop Road, Norwich Congregationalism finally succumbed to suburbanisation.¹⁶

The building and rebuilding of the later nineteenth century reflected a numerical, if not a "real", increase in membership and a distinct raising of the social position of the congregations. The Edwardian period saw Nonconformity's numerical peak, Norwich having an active Dissenting *membership* of around 5,000 in 1910, equivalent to approximately 6.5% of the 1901 population over fifteen years of age.¹⁷ On the basis of Gilbert's figures, Norwich had a higher than average Dissenting community, with the Congregationalists most over represented at 2.25% of the adult population,¹⁸ or in real numbers around 1,800 members in seven churches (Table 1).

Table 1
Congregational Membership, 1909

| | Date Formed | Members 1909 | Seats 1912 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Chapel-in-the-Field | 1858 | 374 | 850 |
| Magdalen Road | 1893 ¹ | 400 | 900 |
| Princes Street | 1819 ² | 776 | 1000 |
| Old Meeting | 1693 | 122 | 560 |
| Trowse (Mission) | 1828 ³ | 120 | 300 |
| Mariners Lane (Mission Church) | 1829 | 19 | 200 |
| Eaton (Village) | 1905 | 21 | 150 |

1. The original tin chapel was replaced by a permanent structure in 1903.
2. The building was almost entirely rebuilt in 1869.
3. Church Opened 1872.

Sources: Membership Congregational County Union *Annual Report*, 1909; Seating *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, 1912.

15. "The Secretary's Report", *Annual Report of the Norfolk Congregational Union*. (Norwich, 1903), p. 20.

16. Rae, *Free Churches* p. 86, *Eastern Daily Press* 25 Feb. 1972.

17. For the sources used to calculate these figures see B.M. Doyle, "Middle Class Realignment and Party Politics in Norwich, 1900-1932" (University of East Anglia Ph.D Thesis, 1990), p. 38.

18. Gilbert calculates the national Nonconformist average at 5.5% and the Congregational average as 1.2%. A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (1976) Table 2.2, p. 39.

When war broke out in August 1914, Congregationalists responded positively: Princes Street sent 252 men into the Forces, forty of whom lost their lives, including "many to whom the church had hoped to entrust a large share of its work in the future."¹⁹ The overall impact of the Great War on membership is not known, but details of inter-war church rolls are available for Princes Street and its junior churches and Old Meeting. At the end of the war the number on the roll was 561 at Princes Street and 147 in the branch churches,²⁰ both totals down on 1913. Although Princes Street had risen to 637 by 1929, the branches were further reduced²¹ whilst Old Meeting's ageing membership had fallen to less than a hundred.²²

Much of the success of Norwich Congregationalism can be traced to the calibre of its ministers, above all those at Princes Street. In its first 130 years the church had only four pastors, John Alexander (minister 1819-65), George S. Barrett (1866-1911), W. Griffiths Jenkins (1912-1924) and C.T. Rae (1926-40), and though no other chapel had a minister of Barrett's stature, they attracted some significant figures, notably J.J. Brooker of Old Meeting (1904-1926).

Barrett, son of a missionary, was born in Jamaica in 1839. He was educated at University College, London and Lancashire Independent College before Princes Street invited him to replace Alexander. In the words of the *Evangelical Magazine*, "to ask a student without experience to fill so commanding and responsible a position on his first leaving college was a bold step on the part of the church, which has, however, been amply justified by its immediate and permanent success."²³ In the course of his forty-five year Norwich career he received invitations from many other churches and an offer of the Secretaryship of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, but he chose to stay at Princes Street, to make it "one of the largest and most enterprising churches of our order in England."²⁴ In 1894 he was Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, when in the course of two presidential sermons, *The Secularisation of the Pulpit* and *The Secularisation of the Church*,²⁵ he attacked the declining piety of adherents and the increasing intrusion of secular leisure into the lives of middle-class members. Thirteen years later he criticised The New Theology, suggesting "it is not the evangelical faith, nor is it the teaching of Christ and of His apostles."²⁶ For Barrett Congregationalism was about sin,

19. Colman, *Princes Street*, p. 90. Those who lost their lives included Sydney Durrant Page, a leading activist in the YMCA and the Boys' Brigade. *Boys' Brigade Gazette* XXV 10 (June 1917), p. 119, B.M. Doyle, "Religion, Politics and Remembrance: A Free Church Community and its Great War Dead" (Forthcoming).

20. Colman, *Princes Street*, p. 72.

21. *Princes Street Yearbook* 1929, (Norwich, 1929).

22. *Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Feb. 1929.

23. T. Robinson, "Rev. George S. Barrett", *The Evangelical Magazine* Jan. 1894, p. 1.

24. Robinson, *Barrett* p. 2.

25. G.S. Barrett, *The Secularisation of the Pulpit* (1894) and *The Secularisation of the Church* (1894).

26. G.S. Barrett, *The New Theology: A Sermon Preached in Prince's Street Congregational Church, Norwich, January 27th, 1907.* (1907), p. 5.

redemption, the Cross and the truth inherent in the New Testament.

Those ideas made their way into many volumes of collected sermons and – though his lasting monument was *The Congregational Hymnal* – it was as a preacher that he shone. As Thomas Robinson explained in the *Evangelical Magazine*,

It is in the pulpit. . .that the secret of his career lies. . . When the sermon is over we have no time to ask whether we have been listening to a great intellectual performance. . .Our impulse just then is to go home, and in quiet think out the questions between God and our soul which he has raised.²⁷

Although Robinson described Barrett as “strongly Evangelical”, Helen Colman has suggested that he was rather “high” and that “his inclination was always towards a more elaborate service than the majority of the church was disposed to sanction. Indeed his friends used to tell him that had he belonged to the Church of England he would have identified with the Ritualistic section.”²⁸ Yet his preaching and tone must have appealed to his congregation, for it remained the largest and most socially exclusive Dissenting gathering in the city. Furthermore, as a Gladstonian Liberal in politics, his continuing support for the party possibly helped the rest of his congregation to remain true to that faith.

Princes Street did not suffer unduly from Barrett’s retirement. There was no real pressure to build a church in the middle-class suburbs, no loss of direction and no falling off in membership. Jenkins and Rae were successful and highly respected ministers who maintained much of the church’s prestige, and when Jessop Road opened it was Chapel-in-the-Field, not Princes Street, that suffered the loss of members.²⁹

Whilst Barrett’s experience at Prince’s Street was one of growth and prestige, J.J. Brooker was continually fighting against the tide of secularisation, slum clearance and demographic change. Appointed pastor at Old Meeting in 1904, when the membership was already beginning to be affected by the opening of Magdalen Road, he served for twenty-two years, leaving Norwich in 1926. Reviewing his pastorate after three years, he noted that the congregation of 120 were “in a peculiarly difficult position” caused by the over-supply of chapels in the Colegate Street area, “with St. Mary’s and Prince’s Street within hail.”³⁰ and it is a tribute to Brooker’s work that the church roll still numbered nearly one hundred in 1929.

His success would seem to have been based on a similar theological approach to Barrett’s:- reprimanding his members for not devoting enough time to the church and asserting that, “whilst I yield to no one in my admiration of much in

27. Robinson, *Barrett* p. 3.

28. Colman, *Princes Street*, p. 54.

29. *Eastern Daily Press* 25 Feb. 1972.

30. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. II, No. 16 (April 1908).

Episcopalianism, I am nevertheless a conscientious Nonconformist. I dabble in no 'new theology', but claim the right of perfect freedom to express my thoughts in a perfectly frank way. . ."³¹ Among the ways he expressed these thoughts was in an open and active commitment to the Liberal party. The last of Norwich Congregationalism's radical divines, he stood for the Board of Guardians in 1913 and was elected in 1919 for the Colman dominated working-class ward of Lakenham, losing to a Labour candidate three years later. Brooker kept Old Meeting afloat by playing on its heritage, effectively utilising the resources and goodwill of key laymen, and by representing the essential values of Congregationalism as they had developed in later nineteenth-century Norwich – flexible theology and a deep and public commitment to the Liberal party.

The impressive development of the Magdalen Road congregation in the Edwardian period owed something to similar qualities in its two ministers, Henry Kenward (1899-1906) and Thomas Sinclair Phillips (1906-1913). Kenward was not just a brilliant evangelist, he was also a deeply political minister, his sermons invariably carrying some radical message.³² He was one of the most active Congregationalists in the Passive Resistance campaign of 1903-14, holding a position on the Committee of the local Citizens League.³³ His big achievement was the building of the permanent church. It was Phillips who presided over the clearing of the debt that project had amassed. Although none of the other ministers was as significant as these men, most left some mark on their congregations. Many came from the Celtic fringe, all via the denominational college system and, once in Norwich, all took an active part in the secular as well as the religious life of the city. Active Liberals even after the War, many used their pulpits and their church magazines to promote the ideology, if not the party political propaganda, of Liberalism.³⁴ But it was in holding together or developing their congregations that they played the biggest part, and in achieving this they relied heavily on the many and varied organisations which involved members and non-members alike in the structures of the church.

The Social Impact of Congregationalism

Through education, philanthropy, and leisure activities, Congregationalism influenced the lives of many who were never church members. Numerically the most important of these extensions was the Sunday School. In 1910 Hawkins estimated the total number of Sunday scholars in Norwich at 16,000, or 44% of all children under fifteen,³⁵ with no fewer than 2,444 attending the seven

31. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. II, No. 24 (Dec. 1908).

32. See for example "The Christian as a Citizen", *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine*, November 1900, p. 14.

33. "Minutes of the Citizens League to Combat the 1902 Education Act, 1902-14" *Norfolk Records Office FC13/60*.

34. For biographies of other Congregational ministers see *Citizens of No Mean City* (Norwich 1910).

35. C.B. Hawkins, *Norwich: A Social Study*, (1910), p. 294.

Congregational schools (Table 2). The movement's missionary element was clearly demonstrated by the size of the Magdalen Road School, the largest in Norfolk and an important precursor to the northward development of Congregationalism in the city. In addition to a Band of Hope, with 200 members in 1909,³⁶ Magdalen Road operated a Boys' Brigade battalion, a Girls' Sewing Class and a monthly Children's Service, whilst at Chapel-in-the-Field the Sunday School met morning and afternoon, with temperance work organised through the Junior Temple of the Good Templars.³⁷

Table 2
Sunday School Membership, 1909

| | Members | Teachers |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Chapel-in-the-Field | 324 | 42 |
| Magdalen Road | 750 | 70 |
| Old Meeting | 245 | 20 |
| Princes Street | 743 | 57 |
| Trowse | 163 | 30 |
| Eaton | 80 | 3 |
| Mariners Lane | 139 | 30 |

Source: Congregational County Union *Annual Report*, 1909, p. 5.

Beyond their religious teaching, Sunday Schools were influential in three ways: as an opportunity to inculcate social and civic responsibility, as a significant conduit for the distribution of charity and as a useful focus for cross-class sociability. In addition to the thrift clubs associated with the schools, many opportunities arose to provide charity to the children, especially in the form of the Annual Tea or Outing. Special Band of Hope Services saw the children treated to buns and orange squash, Annual Teas often had over 100 sitting down to eat, whilst Sunday School summer excursions to places like Sheringham – free to scholars and teachers – usually included a strawberry tea or similar at the resort.³⁸ Not surprisingly there are suggestions that Sunday School attendance rose remarkably just before the summer outing and the Annual Tea. Although these youth organisations were not particularly effective as evangelising structures – no religious commitment was demanded of the children enrolled and most left without becoming church members – attendance kept channels open between the classes and engendered a tendency for former pupils to think “chapel”.

36. *Norfolk Congregational Union Annual Report*, 1909, p. 13.

37. *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine*, November 1900, Chapel-in-the-Field Congregational Church, *Monthly Record* (July 1904).

38. *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine* IV (September 1903), *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. II, No. 16 (April 1908), Chapel-in-the-Field Congregational Church, *Monthly Record* (July 1904).

This transition from Sunday School to full church membership was the most difficult to accomplish, and by the Edwardian period a variety of structures had been developed to ease the move, most significantly Christian Endeavour. "C.E.s" met weekly in all the churches from the early 1900s, although as early as 1908 complaints were made that "the addresses and papers [were] excellent and worthy of better audiences."³⁹ At Magdalen Road, Kenward developed a Young Men's Debating Society which held socials, instructive lectures of the "Some Wonders of the Insect World" type and debates such as "Is there a Declining Interest in Religion?"⁴⁰ But these were organisations for young men – the full acceptance of women would have to wait until after the First World War.

The emphasis on education, self improvement and separate spheres continued in the adult organisations. Combatting adult illiteracy was the main aim of the First Day School run by Chapel-in-the-Field on Sunday mornings. For the Pleasant Sunday Afternoons, begun in the 1890s, the aim was Christian citizenship, with the hope that members might also join the church. A monthly open service accompanied lectures and debates on religious and social subjects, such as "Individual Responsibility", with both ministers and laymen chairing the proceedings. Self-help and self-improvement were encouraged by the operation of thrift clubs and the awarding of prizes of "useful and instructive books" like General Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*.⁴¹

The vast majority of women members, on the other hand, fulfilled duties appropriate to their sphere – singing at services, arranging flowers for the church, and providing refreshments whenever they were required. Edwardian Congregational churches contemplated, but did not yet permit, women pastors and women deacons were rare.⁴² In most churches female members were offered little in the way of literary, civic or political education, only sewing classes and the Women's Pleasant Evening "a meeting for women, to which they can bring their needlework and spend a pleasant hour in a friendly and informal way. The end to be sought is the glory of God, the welfare of the Church, and a desire to help each other."⁴³ Middle-class women were involved more directly in the church through social and philanthropic organisations such as the Dorcas

39. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 17 (May 1908).

40. *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine* (November 1900), p. 12.

41. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 16 (April 1908), Chapel-in-the-Field Congregational Church, *Monthly Record* (July 1904), *Prince's Street P.S.A. Magazine*, 4 (Oct. 1896), *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine* (September 1903), *Magdalen Road P.S.A. Almanac* (1908). A copy of Booth, awarded to Princes Street P.S.A. member Henry Raynor, is in the possession of the author.

42. A woman pastor was inducted in Sheffield in 1918, whilst woman deacons were appointed in 1912 at the same church. Elsewhere in the country the question of both women deacons and pastors were discussed from the 1880s with women such as the Spicers playing a leading role in some congregations as early as the 1890s. I am grateful to Dr. Binfield for this information. For religion in Sheffield see C. Binfield "Religion in Sheffield" in C. Binfield *et al.* (Eds.), *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993. Volume II. Society* (Sheffield, 1993).

43. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. II, No. 16 (April 1908).

Help Society, the Home Mission Committee and the Women's Auxiliary of the London Missionary Society which encouraged them to visit the sick and needy, knit or collect clothing for foreign missionaries, and staff the stalls at innumerable bazaars, usually under the direction of the minister's wife. Although a socially powerful woman, such as Helen Colman, might slip through into the man's world, this was exceptional⁴⁴ and in general women were excluded or patronised, their participation restricted to a frivolous "Ladies Evening" as an end of year social.

On a day to day level individual churches provided important secular services such as the medical offered provided by the District Nursing Association. In 1900 the Association employed a nurse to visit the sick and in November of that year the Magdalen Road *Magazine* urged members to join the Association as:

With the winter season coming on, when there is of necessity more sickness in consequence of the climatic conditions, those of our friends who have not already joined will be wise to become members, and thus avail themselves of the great advantages of nursing and attendance which this Society places at the disposal of its members at a comparatively trifling cost.⁴⁵

In addition the churches attempted to satisfy the more commercial leisure demands of the membership, leading to organisations such as the Magdalen Road Wheelers, a cycling club which arranged many "favourable outings" including the obligatory end of season picnic.⁴⁶

These structures obviously reached the wider constituency than the Sunday service, and the three largest churches probably each influenced the lives of some 2,000 people.⁴⁷ But the avowed aim of increased church membership was not accomplished and by August 1914 changes were taking place which undermined this world as education and social services increasingly became the province of the state. The War accelerated these trends and further weakened the extended Congregational community.

From the limited evidence available it is apparent that, although church membership remained stable, the main effect of the War was on those who were

44. Miss Colman gave a paper on "The Life and Work of Mr. Sheppard of the Scottish Presbyterian Church in India" to a united meeting of the Chapel-in-the-Field and Old Meeting Guilds in November 1908. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 24 (Dec. 1908).

45. *Magdalen Road Congregational Church Magazine* (November 1900). Similar organisations were operated by working-class churches in Preston at that time. M. Savage, "Urban History and Social Class: Two Paradigms" *Urban History* 20 (April 1993), p. 74 and note 41.

46. For the commercialisation of religion and irreligion in the Edwardian period see Yeo, *Voluntary Organisations* and D.S. Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*, (Leicester 1992), chapter 6.

47. For the suggestion of 2,000 touched by a big city centre church (St. Mary's Baptist) see C.B. Jewson, *The Baptists In Norfolk* (1957), p. 140.

peripherally associated with the churches through these organisations, many of whom chose not to return in the changed circumstances of the 1920s.⁴⁸ Decline was apparent in the Sunday Schools: hence the adoption of such novel methods as the graded system. The much dated Bands of Hope were wound up and replaced by Junior Christian Endeavour meetings, whilst the Boys' and Girls' Brigades saw some expansion. But this growth was insignificant in comparison to the pre-war period and it is obvious that the churches were losing the battle for the hearts and minds of young people. The churches faced a similar problem with their adult organisations. Their character changed almost as soon as the war ended, as the P.S.A. and other societies concentrated on the religious at the expense of the political. Although most inter-war churches maintained a wide ranging menu of educational, social and devotional activities, as with the Sunday Schools, the old and new societies were failing to attract members to the same degree as before the war, and their object and scope were diminished by the more purely spiritual nature of religious activity between the wars.

The most striking change, however, was in the position of women. By 1929 Princes Street had appointed a female Visitor and elected two women to the Diaconate (Miss Ethel Colman and Mrs. Southwell). Furthermore, in addition to a Women's Guild and a Women's P.S.A. Class, the P.S.A. had six female members on its Executive Committee whilst a majority of the office bearers of the Christian Endeavour Societies were women. These organisations complemented the traditional female spheres associated with the Needlework Guild, Dorcas Society and Women's Auxiliary of the L.M.S.⁴⁹ and more accurately reflected the importance and numbers of women within the denomination.

Status, Gender and Social Leadership

It is apparent that the chapels of Norwich Congregationalism were ordered in a strict social hierarchy headed by Princes Street, with Chapel-in-the-Field some way behind, whilst Old Meeting and Magdalen Road served the needs of predominantly working-class congregations. Why, despite its location at the top of Elm Hill, one of the most notorious slums in Norwich, did the city's commercial and professional *élite* continue to make the journey from their suburban homes every Sunday to meet in Barrett's church? Crucial to the social performance of Princes Street was the transfer of J.J. Colman's family from St. Mary's Baptist Church in 1870.⁵⁰ The attendance of the city's leading bourgeois

48. This point is particularly important when considering the political implication of the effects of the War on Nonconformity. Wilson, for example, cites the decline in membership of the Stockport branch of the National Brotherhood as evidence of Nonconformist loss, not any longer term fall in church membership. T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935* (Fontana pb. 1968), p. 25-26.

49. *Princes Street Yearbook* (Norwich 1929), p. 1 and p. 52-55.

50. Jewson, *Baptists* p. 122.

family made Princes Street *the* place to go and did much to cement the tight-knit and highly middle-class community which gathered there in the Edwardian period.

Table 3
Membership of Church and Congregation
of Princes Street by District and Gender, 1913

| District | Women | Men | Total | % Women |
|-----------------------------|-------|-----|-------|---------|
| North, Central & South-East | 150 | 60 | 210 | 71 |
| East | 86 | 57 | 143 | 60 |
| West | 92 | 68 | 160 | 57.5 |
| South-West | 101 | 73 | 184 | 58 |
| Total | 429 | 258 | 697 | 61.5 |

Source: Princes Street *Yearbook*, 1913 p. 11-27.

Some observations on the geographical distribution of the members in 1913 will serve to highlight the social exclusivity of the church. The church and congregation were divided into six districts (Table 3); the two districts covering the eligible suburb of Eaton,⁵¹ West and South-West, provided 48.5% of the entire membership (and nine of the thirteen deacons) whilst the North, Central and South-East districts, covering the city centre and the main working-class suburbs, together accounted for less than a third of the congregation and included only one of the deacons.⁵² These city-centre districts were dominated by women while the middle-class areas of East (including the suburb of Thorpe), West and South-West, had a substantial number of families in membership, as well as men, single or married, who attended the church alone. These included socially prominent individuals like solicitor and Liberal councillor, Lawrence English, and accountant Herbert Gowen, a Liberal councillor, Sheriff and Lord Mayor. These members were joined by a group who were not members but went with their wives. It is arguable that these men chose Princes Street at least in part because it was socially, politically, even economically expedient to do so, and as long as most leading Congregationalists continued to think this, the social superiority of the chapel would not be challenged, either by Chapel-in-the-Field or by calls to build a church in the Eaton district.

51. For the development of Norwich housing in the nineteenth-century see S. Muthesius, "Nineteenth Century Norwich Housing" in Barringer (Ed.), *Nineteenth Century Norwich*.

52. Bracondale, a mid-nineteenth-century street of villas leading to Colman's Carrow Works, formed a small concentration of middle-class housing within this predominantly working-class area. Among Princes Street's Edwardian members resident in this area were Colman's three daughters, his son Russell, his brother-in-law Sydney Cozens-Hardy, two of his cousins, two of his senior managers and Dr. Barrett.

Thus Princes Street continued to attract the cream of Norwich Dissent. Chapel-in-the-Field, despite the advantage of a location close to Eaton, simply did not attract the same class of members. Its congregation could best be described as comfortable and, although it included Henry J. Copeman, head of a regional wholesale company, co-director of the *Eastern Daily Press* and Liberal member of the Council for forty years, the vast majority of its members were solid citizens, not social leaders.⁵³ Of the rest, the small chapel in Trowse seems to have been designed to meet the needs of the skilled and white-collar workers at Carrow, whilst the membership of Old Meeting was more typical of a city-centre chapel in an industrial part of town. About one third of the latter's congregation lived in the surrounding slums, a disproportionate number of whom were single or widowed women, the group most often in need of charity in the years before state benefits. Most of the members, however, lived in the new working-class areas around Magdalen Road or in the better-class terraced streets to the west of the city.⁵⁴ Although there are no comparable records for Magdalen Road Church, it is likely the bulk of its 400 members lived in the rapidly expanding terraced estates of north Norwich, with a small number coming from Pockthorpe, an early nineteenth-century extra-mural slum.⁵⁵

How involved were these members, especially the social leaders? Were the latter rejecting their civic and religious responsibilities and allowing leadership of the voluntary sector to pass out of their hands?⁵⁶ There were certainly some cases where this occurred. Russell Colman, son of the mustard manufacturer, withdrew from the church around 1910, at the same time severing his connection with local Liberalism and moving out of Norwich to take up permanent residence at Crown Point, the Victorian mansion overlooking Carrow, which his father had bought in the 1870s. Edward Thomas Boardman, Russell's brother-in-law, also took little part in the weekly work of the church and by the early 1920s had resigned his seat on the council and was also living on an estate outside Norwich. But this is the full extent of notable withdrawals. Not only did most of the prominent members of the church remain members, they also remained active and, for younger members in particular, involvement in church organisations was both a duty and a useful method of social and political advancement.

The layman who gave the most to Norwich Congregationalism was Sydney Cozens-Hardy, whose family connections included a sister who married J.J. Colman, a brother who was a Liberal M.P. and Master of the Rolls, and a

53. Chapel-in-the-Field Congregational Church, Norwich, *List of Members of the Church and Congregation, with their Residences* (Norwich 1900).

54. See "Names and Addresses of Members of Church and Congregation", *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 16 & 17 (April & May 1908).

55. There is an excellent description of the culture of late Victorian Pockthorpe in N. MacMaster, "The Battle for Mousehold Heath 1857-1884: 'Popular Politics' and the Victorian Public Park" *Past and Present* 127 (1989).

56. Yeo, *Voluntary Organisations*, Savage, *Urban History*, R. Trainor, "Urban Elites in Victorian Britain" *Urban History Yearbook* (1985).

nephew who edited the *Eastern Daily Press* from 1897 to 1937.⁵⁷ Born in North Norfolk in 1850, he was educated at Ebenezer West's Amersham Hall School before moving to Norwich where he trained to be a solicitor. In addition to acting as clerk to the Norwich School Board and the Consolidated Charities, he was a Liberal agent, Sheriff of Norwich in 1900 and a J.P. from 1909.⁵⁸ His son Basil attended Rugby and Trinity, Oxford, joined the family firm, served in the Great War, was a Liberal councillor for five years, a deacon of Princes Street and served as Sheriff in 1936 (although this may have been as a Conservative). Sydney was clearly a social leader and yet his record of service to Congregationalism is second to none.

He joined Princes Street in 1874, at the age of twenty-four, and was appointed to the diaconate in 1880, a position he finally retired from sixty-four years later. For forty-five of those years he was church treasurer, whilst on most Sundays he was to be found giving out the hymns and notices and frequently reading the lesson. Furthermore, in 1919 he retired after fifty years as teacher, superintendent and secretary of the non-denominational Carrow Sunday School. On a personal level he was a sabbatarian and teetotaler who adopted young the habit of voluntary tithing, devoting ten to fifteen per cent of his income to charity each year from 1875 until his death.

Sydney Cozens-Hardy may have been exceptional in his devotion to the faith, but other Congregationalists continued to give a substantial proportion of their time and money to religious and charitable causes. Among the membership of Princes Street a picture of considerable civic and social leadership emerges, with almost forty members of the church actively involved as representatives of the Liberal party between 1895 and 1939, no fewer than thirteen holding high civic office (Mayor/Lord Mayor, Sheriff and/or Alderman).⁵⁹ Among this latter group were the pre-War deacons Edward Boardman, the timber merchant J.A. Porter and the flour miller R.J. Read, whilst Ethel Colman served as the city's first woman Lord Mayor⁶⁰ and possibly the first woman deacon at Princes Street. However, they were also actively involved in the church in other ways. Porter was treasurer of Princes Street Sunday School as late as 1929 and very involved with Magdalen Road in the Edwardian period; Read was treasurer of the small church at Eaton whilst Tom Glover (Lord Mayor in 1926) was chairman of Norwich YMCA in the 1920s.

57. H.C. Colman, *Sydney Cozens-Hardy: A Memoir* (Norwich 1944). For his family see B. Cozens-Hardy, *The History of Letheringsett in the County of Norfolk* (Norwich 1957), L.E. Stuart, *In Memoriam: Caroline Colman* (Norwich 1896), Binfield, *Down to Prayers* chapter 6.

58. This and the next paragraph are based on Colman, *Cozens-Hardy*.

59. For the involvement of Congregationalists in Norwich politics see Doyle, *Thesis* chapter 5. For Norwich politics and Nonconformity generally see B.M. Doyle, "Business Liberalism and Dissent in Norwich 1900-1930" *Baptist Quarterly* xxxv No. 5 (1994).

60. For the mayors see P. Palgrave-Moore, *The Mayors and Lord Mayors of Norwich, 1836-1974* (Norwich 1978).

Joseph de Carle Smith and Laura Stuart, who both served as city councillors, should also be defined as social leaders. Mrs. Stuart, daughter of J.J. Colman and wife of a Liberal M.P., was a prominent individual in her own right; she held the distinction of being the first woman in Norwich to fill virtually every post open to women after 1918. De Carle Smith, a manufacturing chemist, belonged to an important local family and was a close connection of the Colmans. He served on the Council in the early Edwardian period when he also acted as treasurer for the new church at Magdalen Road and was still a member of both the Liberal party and Princes Street into the 1930s. The 1913 diaconate also included the Eaton ward Councillors W.B. Rutland and H.J. Pond, who both had over 100 employees in their wholesale and retail shoe manufacturing businesses. In addition to his responsibilities as a deacon, Rutland was superintendent of Princes Street Sunday School and regarded "as his recreations boys brigade work and the boy scout movement."⁶¹ Other representatives actively involved in the church came from the lower reaches of the middle class – school teachers, builders, small shopkeepers and administrators – but they had always played their part in both the denomination and the party and their influence did not grow markedly before the late 1920s.

There were also those who were active in the church but took no part in politics beyond membership of the Liberal party. This list would include at least nine members of the diaconate between 1900 and 1929, men such as James Porter senior, the retailers, Frank Garland and Napier Livock, and John and Edgar Tomkins, deacons in 1929. The Tomkinses were active in the church: Edgar was a Sunday School teacher and superintendent whilst John, editor of the Princes Street magazine, and a Magdalen Road pioneer, served as the church's first Secretary.⁶²

Many of the other Congregational churches in the city could provide this level of civic activism. Chapel-in-the-Field had – as has been seen – Henry Copeman, deacon and treasurer for over twenty-five years, who was the most politically active Congregationalist in twentieth-century Norwich, serving as a member of the council for twenty-eight years (1889-1937), Sheriff in 1902, Mayor in 1912 and one of the Liberal candidates in the 1923 general election. But he was exceptional and other active members of the church were drawn from the lower-middle class of small retailer, builders and white collar workers. At Old Meeting the congregation was kept afloat for much of the early twentieth century by the generosity of one man, Charles Watling. He had started a carrying firm during the First World War with one horse and cart, which became remarkably successful.⁶³ He was elected to the Council in 1922 and held the middle-class Town Close ward for the Liberals for the next sixteen years, becoming an Alderman in 1938 and serving as Sheriff in 1929 and Mayor in 1938. Despite his

61. See his obituary in Norwich Local Studies Library, Newscutting collection.

62. For other members of the Tomkins family see Binfield, *Down to Prayers*, chapter 10.

63. Palgrave-Moore, *Lord Mayors*.

business and political success, he did not forget his church and, on his nomination as Sheriff, the Magazine noted that he had always been a "generous supporter" of Old Meeting, paying off accumulated debts and helping to arrange subscriptions.⁶⁴

Magdalen Road, on the other hand, was dominated in the early years by members from Princes Street operating in the true spirit of the Forward Movement.⁶⁵ Joseph de Carle Smith, his brother Richard, and his brother-in-law J.S. Tomkins were respectively treasurer, magazine editor and secretary. James A. Porter was a deacon and frequent participant in church activities whilst William Mase, a director of the leading shoe manufacturers, Howlett and White, "spent much time and money. . .found[ing] a junior department in connection with the Magdalen Road Congregational Church First Day School."⁶⁶ The motives of these men were varied. As the Forward Movement made more sense if the parent church were in the city centre rather than some distant middle-class suburb, it seems to have been taken more seriously in Norwich than elsewhere.⁶⁷ Civic activism and the obligation to be useful were both taken seriously by the Norwich middle class well into the twentieth century, whilst the opportunity to foster cross-class understanding and possibly exert an element of social control may also have encouraged these social leaders to take an interest in the new church. The businesses of Smith, Porter, and Mase were located in the northern part of the old city, whilst most of their workers had migrated to terraced houses in the region of Magdalen Road, away from the direct influence of Princes Street or Old Meeting. In order to maintain some control, but also important contacts with the skilled workers and their families, these men possibly decided that it was worth promoting the new church and spending time on its organisations. In a social and political culture in which inter-class relations had not broken down entirely, such investments made sense.⁶⁸

Although this does not prove that all prominent Congregationalists were continuing to provide leadership to the voluntary sector, it is clear that a number of men and women were maintaining a high level of public and religious service well into the 1920s. Furthermore, the rejection of the political and religious culture of the father by the son did not mean the end of the family connection. Russell Colman certainly turned his back on Norwich Congregationalism and

64. *The Old Meeting Congregational Church Magazine* Vol. XXIV (Nov. 1929).

65. For some of the problems with the movement see Binfield, *Down to Prayers*, p. 203.

66. F.W. Weldon, *A Norvic Century and the Men Who Made It, 1846-1946* (Norwich 1946), p. 65.

67. The nearby Baptist church at Silver Road, which opened in 1910, attracted the support of a number of the leading members of St. Mary's, including Dr. E.E. Blyth, the city's first Lord Mayor and Richard Jewson, Lord Mayor in 1918. Anon, *1910/1960: Fifty Years of Baptist Witness. The Story of Silver Road* (Norwich 1960).

68. Referring to his involvement with the First Day School junior department, Mase recalled that "Many of the lads I had with me then are still my friends, a number of them being engaged in the Norvic Works". Wheldon, *Norvic Century* p. 65.

Liberalism, but his sisters continued to play a very active role in both and to direct substantial amounts of money and effort towards good causes in the city. In the Edwardian period, civic, religious and social leadership remained normal for men such as Sydney Cozens-Hardy, whilst a small group of younger members were willing to invest considerable amounts of time and money in developing Congregationalism among the skilled working class. Although this tactic was largely abandoned by the 1920s, city-centre worship at Princes Street, along with involvement in its outside organisations, especially by prominent female members, remained normal for many middle-class Congregationalists.

This enduring Congregational culture was held together by a wide ranging and intricate marriage network centred on the Colmans, Boardmans and de Carle Smiths. Clyde Binfield has shown the importance of both social solidarity and economic necessity in the marriage patterns of the Boardman family,⁶⁹ and these factors were replicated in the connections forged by many of the City's leading Congregational families. It is also apparent that inter-marriage was crucial to the survival of the Liberal Party in Norwich and that Congregationalists were at the heart of that marriage network.⁷⁰ From the early nineteenth century through to 1930, inter-marriage connected no fewer than thirty of Norwich Liberalism's leading families, and twenty-one of those connections were made between 1850 and 1918. Furthermore, sixteen of the families were Congregationalists at some time in the hundred-year period (four were Baptist, five Anglican, three Unitarian, one Methodist and one Plymouth Brethren) with Congregationalists predominantly marrying other Congregationalists.

The web was centred on the massive family of Robert Colman (1749-1807) which, in the first half of the nineteenth century, linked the Colmans to the Fielding, Harmer, Theobald (in turn related to Boardman), Willis and Cozens families.⁷¹ Although these families belonged to a range of denominations and lived in both city and county, by 1870 all had important branches settled in Norwich and all except the Willises were Congregationalists, mostly worshipping at Princes Street. After 1850 the focus switched to the children of Edward Boardman (1833-1910) and Henry Colman (1816-1895). Boardman had six children, four of whom married in Norwich. Edward Thomas, the eldest son, married the daughter of J.J. Colman M.P.,⁷² whilst his daughters married W.W. Rix Spelman, Joseph de Carle Smith and Percy Jewson, a member of the most important Baptist family in the city. Henry Colman's children linked his line to

69. Binfield, *Architectural Cousinhood*, p. 102-106.

70. Doyle, *Thesis*, p. 192-204 especially Figure 6.1.

71. See family tree in H.C. Colman, *Jeremiah James Colman By One of His Daughters* (London 1905).

72. Colman had six children, two sons and four daughters. Alan died at the age of thirty without marrying. Ethel and Helen also remained single, whilst Laura married James Stuart, an academic and Liberal M.P., Florence married Boardman and Russell married the daughter of a Welsh Liberal M.P. James Stuart, *Reminiscences* (1912), L.E. Stuart, *In Memoriam: Alan Cozens-Hardy Colman* (Norwich 1898), J. Mardle, *R.J. Colman 1861-1946: Some Sketches for a Family Portrait* (Norwich 1954).

the flour milling Reads and the Tomkins family, his daughter marrying Edgar. The large Tomkins family included connections to the Copemans (Elizabeth Tomkins marrying Charles Copeman, Henry's cousin), and, through John's marriage, to the de Carle Smiths. The de Carle Smiths were in turn linked to the Plymouth Brethren Southalls whose connections included a number of prominent Anglican and Unitarian families. Finally in this period, the Copemans linked up with the family of the Revd. H. Monement. Monement had three daughters, Mary who remained unmarried, Harriet who married Henry J. Copeman and Margaret who married the Princes Street deacon, Edward Livock. This last connection permits the inclusion of a small group formed in the post-war years centred on the Livocks and drawing together five politically and religiously active families including the Porters.

This network served a number of dynastic functions – religious, economic, social and political – and the extent to which it was based on what might be termed romantic love⁷³ must be questionable, particularly before 1900. Yet it is not always clear that economic motives were at the centre of the liaisons. Politics, local and national, appear to be behind the marriages of J.J. Colman's children, business was the guiding principle for Edward Boardman, social climbing for the de Carle Smiths, whilst most others seems to have been defined by membership of Princes Street – for most the only suitable field for the selection of marriage partners. However, the overall effect was to give dynastic support to the Congregational/Liberal world which came under increasing pressure in the years after 1900.⁷⁴ The paucity of political or religious defections is testament to the strength of the Dissenting world which these marriages formed, and helps to correct the image of a crumbling middle-class Liberalism and Congregationalism in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Edwardian Norwich was one of the strongholds of English Congregationalism, with a substantial active membership, massed ranks of Sunday scholars, and innumerable organisations providing everything from Bible study to bicycle rides. Furthermore, this was a Congregationalism rooted firmly in the city it had helped to create, with suburban churches serving working-class, not middle-class congregations. Admittedly, by 1930 the picture was changing: the associated organisations were not primarily for the use of members, the Sunday School child-minders for mothers who had few opportunities to be free of their offspring, the members more interested in retrenchment than reform as religion and politics went their separate ways. But these changes were not as dramatic as

73. E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (1972).

74. For the social trends which led to the breakdown of this marriage system in the post-World War I period see B.M. Doyle, "Urban Liberalism and the 'Lost Generation': Middle Class Culture and Norwich Politics, 1900-1935" *Historical Journal* (Forthcoming, 1995).

we have been led to expect and this study has highlighted a number of areas in which the image of decline may have been rather more powerful than the reality.

In particular, it has shown how issues in gender and class have clouded our understanding of religious and political changes in the early twentieth century. For example, the deleterious effects of the First World War on the membership of organisations for working-class men, such as the P.S.A., was considerable, but church membership, which was never particularly dependent upon men or the working class, had returned to around pre-war figures by the mid-twenties. Furthermore, the concentration on the activities of male members, particularly those deemed social leaders, has meant that the power and influence of women in the church and the community at large, has been greatly underestimated. This in turn may have led historians to exaggerate the voluntary sector's leadership crisis – and even the decline of middle-class Liberalism in the inter-war years – by emphasising the withdrawal of men such as Russell Colman, whilst ignoring the important work of women like his sisters, Ethel, Helen Caroline, and Laura. Finally there was Princes Street, a successful city centre chapel for the middle-class. Moving the place of worship out of the city was not inevitable for Congregationalists, and the concentration by historians on the relocation of big city congregations to distant suburbs⁷⁵ may have affected our understanding of this phenomenon.

The sensible, middle way continued to appeal to bourgeois Norwich, reinforced by a kinship network which remained Liberal and Dissenting and by the recent memory of a cross-class sociability which had been ended by war and state interference, rather than conscious withdrawal. Norwich could, of course, have been exceptional, but it seems likely that detailed study of middle-class life in other medium sized industrial towns will reveal a more enduring Congregational culture, based on kinship and civic pride, than a reading of the current literature would suggest. What is clear is that Norwich Congregationalism, centred on urban Princes Street, remained healthy into the 1920s and continued to provide the cultural support for a successful middle-class Liberalism.

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75. Binfield, *Down to Prayers* chapter 8 which deals with the Manchester suburb of Bowdon in Cheshire or Cox, *Secular Society* which has analysed the London suburb of Lambeth.