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**'The Congregation was large & the meeting-house filled':
Dissenters and their places in the early eighteenth
century**

Anne Dunan-Page

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FRIENDS OF DR WILLIAMS'S LIBRARY
SEVENTY-FIFTH LECTURE

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& THE MEETING HOUSE FILLED’:

DISSENTERS AND THEIR PLACES
IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by ANNE DUNAN-PAGE

DR WILLIAMS'S TRUST
14 GORDON SQUARE
LONDON WC1H 0AR
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FOREWORD

The ‘Friends of Dr Williams’s Library’ was founded in November 1946, and inaugurated a series of lectures, of which this is the seventy-fifth, to promote interest in, and support for, Dr Williams’s Library, its unique collections, and research based upon them.

Anne Dunan-Page is Professor of Early-Modern British Studies at Aix-Marseille Université and a member of the Research Centre for the English-Speaking World (LERMA). Her research interest lies in the field of seventeenth and eighteenth-century religious dissent. Her books include *The Cambridge Companion to John Bunyan* (2010), *L’Expérience puritaine. Vies et récits de dissidents, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle* (2017) and *Church Life, Pastors, Congregations, and the Experience of Dissent*, co-edited with Michael Davies and Joel Halcomb (2019). She is Honorary President of the International John Bunyan Society and the Société d’Études Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles.

This lecture considers a new body of archival evidence regarding the building of post-Toleration meeting houses in London. Looking at leases, builders’ contracts, furniture inventories, Church records and surveys of congregations, it reveals the financial costs of building new premises and the advantages of renting, fitting, and sharing places of worship such as corporation halls. Particular attention is paid to the financing of new places, the building strategies and architectural models, as well as to the many uses to which meeting houses were put. It argues that the dissenters continued to blur the boundaries between domestic and public worship by building complexes with ministers’ houses but also rented accommodation, kitchens, warehouses, and gardens, drawing financial resources from their places, ranging from rents, grave reservation, baptismal fees, and the sales of books.

KEYWORDS

Meeting houses – Dissent – Nonconformity – Religious architecture –
London – Eighteenth Century – Corporation halls

‘THE CONGREGATION WAS LARGE
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DISSENTERS AND THEIR PLACES
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S’il n’y avoit en Angleterre qu’une religion, le despotisme seroit à craindre, s’il y en avoit deux, elles se couperoient la gorge; mais il y en a trente, & elles vivent en paix & heureuses (Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques*, 1734, 57).

If one religion only were allowed in *England*, the government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people wou’d cut one another’s throats; but as they are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace (*Letters concerning the English nation*. By Mr. de Voltaire, London, 1733, 45).

Voltaire’s representation of the supposedly healthy religious pluralism of eighteenth-century London was based on his observation of the way Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Church of England men, ‘Mahometans’, and Jews all met and traded together at the Royal Exchange. The English version gives an alarmist account of the number of so-called ‘religions’, referring to a ‘multitude’ whereas the French version says there are thirty, as if they were all known and safely accounted for, cohabiting peacefully on English soil.

For those who remembered the days of religious uniformity with nostalgia, the ‘Act for Exempting their Majestyes Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certaine Lawes’ (1689) had not brought forth concord and union, but rather a dangerous and confusing set of alternatives, leading to schism and disunity. It had certainly not allowed a multitude of *religions*, but its toleration of a (relative) multitude of Protestant dissenters from Presbyterians to Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers was

already dangerous enough. For those *less* nostalgic about the time of uniformity, however, the Act fell equally short of bringing happiness and peace. Dissenting worship might well be tolerated, but meeting houses had to be registered and certified by a bishop and their doors were not to be ‘locked barred or bolted’.¹ The Sacheverell riots, the Occasional Conformity Act of 1711 and the Schism Act of 1714 exposed the fragility of toleration and the financial risks of leasing plots and building new structures.² At various times between 1710 and 1715, dissenters and their places were ferociously attacked throughout the country. Dozens of meeting houses, and their internal fittings, went up in flames.³

When we approach late-Stuart and early-Hanoverian meeting houses, we may have in mind the link between architecture and

¹ ‘William and Mary, 1688: An Act for Exempting their Majestyes Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certaine Lawes’, in *Statutes of the Realm: Volume 6, 1685–1694*, ed. John Raithby (s.1, 1819), 74–6, *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol6/pp74-76>.

² For the religious history of the early eighteenth century, see in particular Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660–1722* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), 350–66; W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1996; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Donald A. Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660–1740* (2000; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ralph Stevens, *Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689–1720* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018); Grant Tapsell (ed.), *The Later Stuart Church, 1660–1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Carys Brown, *Friends, Neighbours, Sinners: Religious Difference and English Society, 1689–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism. Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke (eds.), *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); John Spurr, ‘The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689’, *The English Historical Review*, 104.413 (1989), 927–46; Lee Horsley, ‘“Vox Populi” in the Political Literature of 1710’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 38.4 (1975), 335–53. For religious literature, see Isabel Rivers, *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City: Dissenting, Methodist, and Evangelical Literary Culture in England 1720–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Christopher Wakeling, *Chapels of England: Buildings of Protestant Nonconformity* (Swindon: Historic England, 2017), 34; Horsley, ‘“Vox populi”’. For Thomas Bradbury’s meeting house in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, which was destroyed during the 1710 Sacheverell riots, see ‘Fetter Lane Congregational Chapel, Minute Book of Church meetings, [c. April] 1707–Feb 1721/2’, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter cited as LMA), N/C/31/003.

religious worship.⁴ In most modern works, the emphasis has been on buildings and monuments. We are encouraged to admire the homeliness of a rural Quaker chapel or the neoclassical idioms of the urban Presbyterians. Moreover, we have come to think of those places first, as places of worship and second, as finished products. This lecture tells a rather different story: of places in the making, of places expanding and far from being only sites of communal worship. My examples are drawn from London and I will be concentrating on Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist places which were either constructed or significantly altered after the Toleration Act.

I wish particularly to emphasize how much church records can contribute to the work of telling this story, for they have been neglected in relation to dissenting architecture. The records in question include church books, of course, but those are only the best-known type of collective document kept by the dissenting churches. Many other kinds of record survive, albeit with little narrative material. There are registers, inventories and catalogues, certificates, legal documents, account books, and contracts. The Limestreet Congregational Church, for example, kept a purpose-made box with multiple locks to store them, imitating a parochial practice: '[Let] A box with three locks and three keys be provided for the Writinge relating to the Meeting House etc. And of the Churches-Stock for the Poor & a Book for Entry of a General Account thereof'. In the margin, someone has added: 'Writing and leases about the meeting house'.⁵ At a time when legislation was reversible, keeping the legal documents relating to the meeting place was essential.

These records reveal the complexity of the transition from domestic to public worship by focusing our attention on the material significance of the buildings. Having a meeting house of one's own

⁴ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690–1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Wakeling, *Chapels of England*; Christopher Stell produced several inventories for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. See also his 'Architects of Dissent: Some Nonconformist Patrons and their Architects', Friends of Dr Williams's Library Annual Lecture (London: Dr Williams's Trust, 1976) and 'Puritan and Nonconformist Meetinghouses in England', in Paul Corby Finney (ed.), *Seeing the Word: Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 49–81.

⁵ 'Limestreet Independent Meeting House', LMA CLC/192/MS00557, fo. 26r.

was more often than not a heavy burden that no congregation shouldered with unmitigated enthusiasm. It was not a safe investment, as we know from Margaret Baxter's financial misfortunes at Oxenden Street, and the cost of building and maintaining meeting houses crippled some communities for decades.⁶ I hope to demonstrate that dissenters were sometimes builders more out of necessity than of choice, that the meeting houses were a source of concern, indeed of anxiety, and that in some instances the dissenters were perfectly happy to carry on renting and adapting premises according to their needs. This does not alter the fact that hundreds of meeting houses were indeed constructed in those years, but it does provide a reminder that dissenting visibility came literally at a price.

Restoration precedents

In London, as elsewhere, meeting houses were regularly built throughout the Restoration and their locations, like their internal specifications, were perfectly well known to the authorities. The Quakers, first of all, as David Butler has magnificently documented, were eager to establish permanent places of worship in the capital.⁷ The 1669 episcopal returns (an enquiry into the distribution and size of conventicles ordered by Archbishop Gilbert Sheldon following the passing of a new Conventicle Act in June) show that prominent dissenters were meeting not only in private houses, taverns, or corporation halls but also in at least a dozen purpose-built meeting houses. These houses were specifically identified as places for dissenting worship and some were new, as references to a 'New House' or to premises 'built on purpose', 'new built', 'built for y^c

⁶ Following a near-accident when a beam threatened to collapse while her husband was preaching in a room above St James's Market, Margaret Baxter bought the leasehold of two plots of land nearby, in Oxenden Street, in order to build a meeting house but also—apparently unwisely—two further houses fronting the street. As Baxter was eventually not allowed to use the meeting house, the couple were forced to hire another place in Swallow Street, again very close by, just off Piccadilly. See *A Breviate of the Life of Margaret* (London, 1681), 56–9.

⁷ David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 2 vols. (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999). For London and Middlesex, see I: 372–436.

purpose', or 'newly erected' show.⁸ A year later, following the new 'Act for rebuilding of the City of London', eight were requisitioned for the use of parishioners who still lacked places of worship.⁹ It is unclear to what extent the scheme was put in place, but this is how the houses were listed by the authorities, as reported in the *London Gazette* of 10 June 1670:

In *Fishers folly in Bishopgate-street*) a convenient place with two Galleries, Pews and Seats.

In *Hand Ally in Bishopgate-street*) a large room, purposely built for a Meeting-house, with three Galleries, thirty large Pews and many Benches and Forms, known by the name of *Vincent's* Congregation. In *St Michaels Lane*), a large room with two Galleries and thirty nine Forms.

In *Mugwel-street* [Monkwell], *Mr. Doolittle's Meeting house*) built of Bricks, with three Galleries, full of large Pews, and thirty eight large Pews below, with Locks and Keys to them, besides Benches and Forms.

The Cockpit in Jewin street), a Meeting house of one *Grimes*, three Galleries, many Pews, Forms and Benches.

In *Black-fryers, Mr. Woods Meeting house*) four rooms opening into one another, with Lattice Partitions, each Room conveniently filled with Benches and Forms.

In *Salisbury Court*) Four Rooms opening into one another, in the Possession of *John Fowle* a Schoolmaster.

In *Newstreet within shooe lane*) Four rooms opening into one another, with 17 Pews and divers Benches, in the Possession of Mrs. *Turner*.¹⁰

⁸ *Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence*, ed. G. Lyon Turner, 3 vols. (London and Leipzig: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911–1914). For the licenses, see also Frank Bate, *The Declaration of Indulgence. A Study in the Rise of Organised Dissent* (London: Liverpool University Press, 1908).

⁹ On those requisitions, see Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186–7; R. H. Harrison, 'Temporary Churches after the Great Fire', paper read on 3rd October 1955, *Transactions of the Ecclesiological Society*, new series, 3 (1955–1956), 251–9 (253).

¹⁰ *The London Gazette*, 478 (13–16 June 1670).

Assessing the number of seats was essential to gauge how many parishioners could fit into these meeting houses. Most of them are easily identifiable. Devonshire House, previously known as ‘Fishers’ folly’ after its Elizabethan owner, Jasper Fisher, was then shared with the Quakers.¹¹ This is where Thomas Watson, the ejected Presbyterian rector of St Stephen Walbrook preached, although this is not the place for which he sought a license. This was granted for his private house in Dowgate.¹²

Four ministers, three Presbyterians and one Congregationalist, are mentioned by name. First of all there is Thomas Vincent (ejected rector of St Mary Magdalen in Milk Street) who had moved north, just outside the wall, near Devonshire Square. The place was licensed on 2 April 1672.¹³ If it had been requisitioned, as planned, in 1670, it nevertheless served for dissenting worship two years later.

Next there is Thomas Doolittle, a friend of Vincent’s, who was within the walls, in Monkwell Street, a stone’s throw away from his former parish of St Alphege. The 1669 returns indeed indicate that he preached every Sunday ‘In Mugwell Street at a house built on purpose’ for 300 people. This corresponds to the 1670 description of the meeting house and to the ‘large and commodious place of worship’ mentioned in Doolittle’s memoirs.¹⁴ The meeting house was erected after the 1666 fire, when one Elizabeth Vaughan granted leases to Doolittle situated just off Windsor Court.¹⁵ It was shut

¹¹ Henry A. Harben, ‘Finsbury Pavement. Fisher’s Folly’, in *A Dictionary of London* (London, 1918), *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/dictionary-of-london/finsbury-pavement-fishers-folly>.

¹² Lyon Turner, *Original Records*, 320 (125), I: 239. The references correspond to the State Papers volumes (320 and 321) and Entry Books, and are followed by Turner’s volume and pages.

¹³ Lyon Turner, *Original Records*, E (2), I: 420.

¹⁴ Thomas Doolittle, ‘Memoirs of the author’ in *A Complete Body of Practical Divinity* (London, 1723), sig. [a2]r. See also, Alison Searle, ‘Writing Authority in the Interregnum: The Pastoral Letters of Richard Baxter’, in Anne Dunan-Page and Clotilde Prunier (eds), *Debating the Faith: Religion and Letter Writing in Great Britain, 1550–1800* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 49–67 (56–9).

¹⁵ ‘Deeds relating to property on Monkwell [Mungwell] Street’, LMA, CLC/522/001. See also Mark Burden, ‘Doolittle, Thomas (1630 or 1633–1707)’, *A Biographical Dictionary of Tutors at the Dissenters’ Private Academies, 1660–1729* (Dr Williams’s Centre for Dissenting Studies, 2013), <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sed/religionandliterature/online-publications/a-biographical-dictionary/>, 140–52 (142); Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches and Meeting Houses in London, Westminster and Southwark*, 4 vols. (London: 1808–1814), III: 185–217.

down by the authorities, then apparently re-opened as ‘a chapel for the Lord Mayor’, ‘without the least allowance to the right owner’, which perhaps described the 1670 situation.¹⁶ Two years later, however, the 1672 license was granted for a ‘chamber adjoining to Doelittle’s howse’, also described as ‘a certaine roome adjoining to the dwelling howse of Thomas Doelittle in Mugwell Streete’.¹⁷ Are we to understand that the meeting *house* was still requisitioned so that a separate meeting *room* or *chamber* was used instead by the dissenters? Was this room construed as being part of Doolittle’s private house or was it indeed ‘adjoining’, having, as it were, a separate identity? A later lease mentions ‘five . . . several messuages and tenements now or late in the tenure or occupac[i]on of Thomas Doolittle’.¹⁸ The meeting house was possibly at the centre of a complex in Monkwell Street that included the minister’s own house, but also a series of tenements, which could be used, if necessary, as ancillary places. As we shall see, this was not an isolated case. Here, however, Doolittle himself, not his congregation, was identified as the sole ‘right owner’, blurring a little bit more the distinction between a meeting house and a dwelling house. When both were adjacent and belonged to a private person, the term ‘houses’ might have been a shortcut to describe what were in fact different architectural entities.

The next name on the 1670 list is Grimes, the alias of Robert Chambers, who had fled Ireland. There is reason to believe that the meeting house at issue here lay in Horn Alley, just off Jewin Street, Aldersgate, as indicated in the 1669 returns. It was licensed as a Presbyterian place but without the mention of a minister.¹⁹

Finally, ‘Wood’ could be Seth Wood, the only Congregationalist among the ministers mentioned by name. He had been lecturer at St Margaret’s Westminster and was described in 1670 as residing at ‘ye back side’ of the Red Lion, Gray’s Inn Lane.²⁰

¹⁶ Doolittle, ‘Memoirs’, sig. b1r.

¹⁷ Lyon Turner, *Original Records*, 219 (b), I: 86; E (4), I: 422; E (5), I: 423.

¹⁸ LMA, CLC/522/001.

¹⁹ Lyon Turner, *Original Records*, 219 (b), I: 87; E (1); I: 419.

²⁰ *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy’s Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660–1662*, ed. A. G. Matthews (1934; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

The 1669 returns and 1672 licenses tended to privilege the terms ‘meeting place’, ‘house’ (with various compounds such as ‘a meeting place at a house’) together with a more domestic vocabulary of terms including ‘room’ or ‘chamber’.²¹ The 1670 list uses ‘room’ but also ‘meeting house’, for it identifies some of the best places of worship, the largest and most ‘convenient’ ones which were distinct from domestic premises. This was a matter, as we shall see, that remained difficult to resolve even after 1689. In what follows, I will try to keep these Restoration distinctions in mind, when dealing with later documents, in order to avoid a common confusion between a meeting *house* and a meeting *room*.

Sharing and building: Bury Street

I would like to begin my investigation of post-Toleration meeting houses with the records of Isaac Watts’s church, now in the Congregational Library. In that particular case the decision to build, in 1708, was made after a new pastor was appointed to lead the church with which Isaac Watts was sharing Pinners’ Hall, in Old Broad Street.²²

The decision to build a new meeting place was very often born of necessity when the lease could not be renewed, when the cost of repairs was too heavy to bear, when the church had completely outgrown its former place, or when a schism had forced part of it to move elsewhere. It represented a significant investment for plots had to be leased, lawyers and duties paid, the building constructed, and then maintained. The decision to do all this could not be taken lightly, especially since there is very little indication that building represented a good investment.

Of the two church manuscripts relating to the Bury Street Church the first is the church book and register transcribed by Benjamin Hanbury.²³ This church resulted from the merging of Joseph Caryl’s

²¹ On the dissenters’ sense of place, see Anne Dunan-Page, *L’Expérience puritaine. Vies et récits de dissidents, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2017), 113–39.

²² ‘Bury Street Chapel’, Congregational Library, II.a.38, fo. 115 (hereafter cited as CL). See also the abstracts given by T. G. Crippen, ‘Dr Watts’s church-book’, *Congregational Historical Society Transactions*, 1 (1901–1904), 26–38.

²³ Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page, ‘Puritans, Dissenters, and their Church Books: Recording and Representing Experience’, in Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page, and Joel Halcomb (eds.), *Dissenting Hands, Bunyan Studies: A Journal of Reformation and Nonconformist Culture*, 20 (2016): 14–32 (14).

and John Owen's respective congregations and Watts's replacement of Isaac Chauncy when the latter resigned. In June 1704, the church first moved from 'Dr Clark's house' in Mark Lane, described in a later source as 'a large room',²⁴ to Pinners' Hall that they shared with the church of Richard Wavel. He had secured the lease and, up to that point, had been sharing the premises with John Singleton before the latter moved to Lorimers' Hall.²⁵ Hall-sharing must have been common, for we find a similar arrangement in Girdlers' Hall, in Basing Hall Street, where a splinter church of Timothy Jollie's congregation, led by John Guise, met for two years with John Wright's church, before moving to Petty France.²⁶

Watts's congregation paid Wavel's an annual rent of £20, on top of half the parish charges and half the cleaning charges. The space was not huge— some 1700 square feet—but it was one of the rare examples with two galleries. It took several months, and several meetings of deputies, to agree on the 'methods of Preaching Reading & Expounding Scripture, Collections Rent & other Incident Charges', which are later described as 'y^e Articles of our compact'. Although there was no question of a formal merging of the two congregations, they described themselves as 'one Congregation as to all public & civil affairs'.²⁷ The result was a somewhat complicated arrangement of monthly duties shared by Watts and his assistant, Samuel Price, alongside Wavel.

Sharing the hall was evidently not as simple as taking it in turn, for the records show that sharing a space presented several challenges. A financial challenge, first of all. A rent had to be paid but the collection days were moved around according to the new days the pastor was preaching, and it took time for everybody to adjust and bring the money when needed. Sharing also presented an organisational challenge for it disrupted meeting habits and meeting

²⁴ 'A view of the Dissenting Intrest in London, of the Presbyterian & Independent Denominations from the year 1695 to the 25 of December 1731. With a Poscript of the present state of the Baptists', Dr Williams's Library, 38.18, fo. 59 (hereafter cited as DWL).

²⁵ CL, II.a.38, fo. 103. For Pinners' Hall congregation, see Wilson, 2: 254–6. On Wavel, see Wilson, 2: 260–2.

²⁶ 'New Broad Street Chapel (Congregational)', LMA, N/C/32/001.

²⁷ CL, II.a.38, fo. 103, 110.

hours, as well as the members' walking patterns throughout the city. Finally, sharing presented a spiritual challenge with a new pastor expounding the Scriptures and preaching. Perhaps because Watts's congregation was already the product of a merger of two churches, there might have been a sense that their identity was at stake again. The agreed system of having the men trying their gifts in common quickly came unstuck as it seemed 'disagreeable to many of y^c Brethren both of Mr Wavels Church & of Ours to exercize their gifts wth freedom before strangers or Persons y^t they were not so well acquainted wth'.²⁸

This arrangement nevertheless continued until Wavel's death in December 1705. When he was finally replaced by Jeremiah Hunt, in November 1707, it could not be revived, and this is when Watts's congregation decided to move again—not because it necessarily wanted to, but because its new partner proved intractable. So in 1708 it moved to a place of its own, built in Bury Street, Duke's Place, in the parish of St Catherine's Creed, close to the new Sephardic synagogue in Bevis Marks. We therefore witness a post-Toleration congregation not embarking immediately on the expense of building a new meeting house, but proceeding in a series of stages, from a private house, to sharing existing premises, to finally building.

There was first a collection among members, even before the legal documents were signed, which amounted to £300. Nine Trustees were chosen. They were the pastor (Isaac Watts), the three deacons (William Pickard, Humphrey Stevenson, and Daniel Scott), and five church members (Thomas Pickard, Jonathan Joyner, Nathaniel Barton, Andrew Holt, and Thomas Hort). The plot of ground, measuring 40 feet by 50, was part of the garden belonging to one Charles Great that the Trust leased for 50 years at £20 per annum.²⁹ These might have been central London prices. It is difficult to make comparisons, for few documents have survived for the beginning of the eighteenth century, but the plot of land on which Islington's first Congregational chapel was built in 1744 measured

²⁸ CL, II.a.38, fo. 107.

²⁹ CL, II.a.38, fo. 116, 117.

45 by 60 feet and was leased at £5 per annum.³⁰ From the dozen or so leases that I have examined so far, plots in the area of 2,000 to 3,000 square feet seem to have been fairly standard for building a meeting house.³¹

The next step was to approach a builder. Here the documentation reveals that dissenters preferred to employ builders and craftsmen of the same denomination, even if not of the same congregation. We read that ‘Mr Andrews A Carpenter belonging to y^e Church under y^e care of Mr Nesbitt permitted his Name to be used in y^e Lease’.³² The contract does not seem to have survived, but an entry dated 25 March 1708 shows that Andrews was to

build y^e Meeting House of such Materials & Dimensions as specifed in y^e contract & to finish all y^e Windows, Galleries above, & ware Houses underneath (excepting only y^e Pews in y^e body of y^e place) for £620 wch was suppos’d would arise to 70 or 80 <£> more.³³

The church took possession of the meeting house in early September, so from contracting the carpenter to the opening day five and half months had elapsed, again a fairly standard amount of time for such a building.

The work was first financed by subscription, a device that was used to supplement the monthly collections. The rest was to come from the purchase of seats, a system that threw social distinctions into sharp relief. Those who had donated £10 or above were first invited to meet together at Amsterdam coffee house, as was customary for conducting the business of a Trust.³⁴ Eight people

³⁰ ‘Islington Congregational Chapel’, LMA, NC/10/1–7.

³¹ See the 55x35 feet plot leased at Uxbridge; ‘Uxbridge Congregational Church’, LMA, ACC/0807/005 and the 53x54 feet plot leased at New Bothwell court; LMA, CLC 522/MS02012.

³² CL, II.a.38, fo. 117.

³³ CL, II.a.38, fo. 117.

³⁴ Alan Argent, *Dr Williams’s Trust and Library* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2022), 21–3.

attended that first meeting, including four deacons and five Trustees ‘who according to y^e Original Agreement of y^e Subscribers are capable of determining all Affairs relating thereto’. They agreed that they would not commandeer too many seats themselves, as ‘y^e great design of their subscription being for y^e conveniency & increase of y^e Church & encouragement of Hearers’.³⁵ The meeting house was to seat about 350 persons.

So what did they decide? They chose their seats first, starting with those who had donated £20 and who could have four seats and four seats only. They could have chosen more but this ‘self-denying Agreem[en]t’, it was hoped, would encourage lesser subscribers to be equally reasonable.³⁶ In cases where members had subscribed the same amount of money the older member had priority. The house servants would go to the galleries, again as was customary and where their employers could see them, while apprentices and maids were placed in the third row, at opposite ends. If subscribers or purchasers died or were absent for more than six months, their places reverted to the Trustees. People were to share the same row, if there were vacant places, unless somebody decided to buy the vacant ones in question.³⁷ Free seats were reserved for ‘several Members of y^e Church in low Circumstances’. The two examples given concern ‘aged and honourable’ members, but also members of ‘meaner Character’, that is, of lower social status.³⁸ Thus it followed that each subscriber chose their places according to what they had originally subscribed, from £20 to £10, then the rest was purchased, first by members and then by hearers as half the price of the meeting house still needed to be found. The purchase price was said to be ‘much below w^t y^e prices are in other meeting places in this City’, which did not prevent some members from complaining.³⁹ A year later, the building was not yet paid for in full, so a second subscription was raised and the prices of the seats lowered to encourage more hearers to come forward, a disposition that caused some resentment among

³⁵ CL, II.a.38, fo.118.

³⁶ CL, II.a.38, fo.118.

³⁷ CL, II.a.38, fo.120.

³⁸ CL, II.a.38, fo.120.

³⁹ CL, II.a.38, fo. 126–7.

those who had bought their seats at full price.⁴⁰

The copy of the church book ends rather abruptly in February 1710, but there is a second manuscript containing twenty-one documents that give more details about the building⁴¹. First of all, we have the list of the original subscribers. It is incomplete, but the first page shows £265 3s and the second £340 in total, probably the final sum raised in the original subscription.⁴² Then there is a copy of the registration certificate dated 8 October 1708, one month after the completion of the meeting house. Plans of the ground floor and of the gallery follow, showing the different pews, with their rent. The pulpit was positioned against the far wall, next to the vestry, with an alley encircling the pew, the ‘table pew’, being positioned at the centre and ‘table-wise’, facing the pulpit. The three rows of free seats were positioned in the middle of one wall, rather than in corners.

Bury Street is, I believe, typical of first-generation London meeting houses being an oblong timber-frame structure on a plot of 2,000 square feet leased for 50 years, with three galleries, a vestry and a warehouse, and the capacity to seat 300 to 400 people, costing in excess of £600, although this was perhaps on the lower side for this district of London. The internal plan might have been already standard nationally, as it is almost identical to that of the Abingdon meeting house as described by Christopher Wakeling.⁴³

Another example from Dr Williams’s Library pertains to the congregation known as the King’s Weigh House that built a meeting place in 1696 ‘in the parish of S: Andrew Hubbard in the Ward of Billingsgate’ under the pastorate of Thomas Reynolds. The first bill amounted this time to £693 6s 11d, the single highest sum being for the Master of the works, a Mr. Olley (£377), including £8 for the pulpit, and 7s 2d ‘for y^e Workemen to drink at severall tymes’.⁴⁴ A separate bill includes locks, cushions, and various items of ironmongery, for a grand total of £842 3s 1d.

⁴⁰ CL, II.a.38, fo. 127.

⁴¹ ‘Documents connected with Bury Street Chapel, St Mary Axe, during the pastorates of Isaac Watts, Samuel Price and Samuel Morton Savage’, CL, II.a.50.

⁴² CL, II.a.50, n. fo.

⁴³ Wakeling, *Chapels of England*, 26–7.

⁴⁴ King’s Weigh House, account book, fo. 6v, 7r.

Contracting craftsmen

The Bury Street records allude to their contract with a dissenting carpenter, although it does not seem to have survived. Another does exist, however, still in the Congregational Library, for an earlier building somewhat smaller than Bury Street.⁴⁵ It is between Henry Tabor, a carpenter from the parish of St Mary Matfelon in Whitechapel, on the one hand, and Philip Narraway, a glazier, and William Hodges, a merchant taylor, on the other, acting for a Congregational church. It is dated 8 May 1682 and gives specifications for the building of a meeting house in Nightingale Lane. It was perhaps no coincidence that this happened in the parish of St Mary Matfelon, whose pulpit had been occupied by the puritan William Crashaw until 1629, then, in the 1650s, by the Congregationalist Thomas Whalley.⁴⁶

The contract formalizes an agreement for the building of a wooden meeting house adjacent to Tabor's own dwelling, which might suggest that the carpenter, once more, had previous dealings with the church or that he may even have been one of its members. The actual structure was supposed to be finished in three and a half months, on 20 August 1682. It was a fairly straightforward and oblong timber-frame building of 40 feet by 46. The exterior was weather-boarded. The shell with no internal fittings, pews or seats, added later on, cost £170. The sum of £70 was paid on signing the contract, with a further £50 once the roof was laid, which was done on 23 June, and another £50 on completion, two days ahead of schedule, on 18 August 1682.

Narraway and Hodges had given Tabor a drawing of the meeting house that they wanted, which was that of John Ryther's congregation. They were adamant that Tabor should respect scrupulously the specifications, a point to which the contract returns

⁴⁵ See also 'Nightingale Lane Congregational Church, 1722–1751', LMA, CLC/194/MS01777/001; 'Chapel Building under the Stuarts', *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society* 3 (1907–1908), ed. T. G. Crippen, 69–72.

⁴⁶ For St Mary Matfelon, see Peter Guillery, 'Suburban Models, or Calvinism and Continuity in London Seventeenth-Century Church Architecture', *Architectural History*, 48 (2005), 69–106 (87–91).

time and again:

One new frame Edifice or building like vnto the building knowne or called by the name of M^r Rythers meeting house situated at the Lower end of Meeting house ally neare Old gravell Lane in the parish of Stepney in the county of Midlsex, according to the dimensions and other direct[i]ons and in such forme and with such materiall as is hereafter perticularly ment[i]oned . . . Item To lay the windowes and doores twice in oyle colouring. The Edifice to be plaistered over head and in every perticular thing suitable, and answerable to M^r Rythers meetinghouse . . . substantially effectuell and in as good workemanlike manner done performed and finished as the said building knowne by the name of Rythers Meetinghouse is.

The Nightingale Lane manuscript shows that in the early 1680s—a time we do not exactly associate with the heyday of dissenting worship—not only were meeting houses being built in London but there were also models to be followed. What we witness here is perhaps a burgeoning dissenting fashion. Or perhaps, if we may learn from the Quakers’ building misfortunes after the fire, it might be because surveyors could order the destruction of a building that did not conform exactly to the regulations. Insisting on the exact same dimensions and finish as a pre-existing structure was perhaps a way of avoiding yet more legal wranglings.⁴⁷

Adapting: Founders’ Hall

Dissenters were certainly builders but, in most cases, they were perfectly happy to continue renting and adapting public or semi-public buildings. I now turn to one example of such adaptation,

⁴⁷ In 1669, in White Hart Court, off Gracechurch Street, the City surveyors came to measure the foundations, hoping they did not conform to the regulations. See also the destruction of Artillery Wall and Ratclif (Middlesex) in 1670; Butler, *Quaker Meeting Houses*, I: 398, 406, 414.

which qualifies the belief that dissenters used secular buildings if they lacked funds to build themselves.⁴⁸

My example here is that of the Presbyterian Scottish congregation worshipping in Founders' Hall, in Lothbury. It is difficult to assess when exactly the Scots had started leasing the hall, but in 1700 it was substantially altered for their use and paid for by the church, then under the pastorate of Robert Fleming.⁴⁹ It was perhaps a way for the Founders to help meet the debts they had contracted for rebuilding the hall after the fire. When the rebuilding was complete, in July 1702, John Olley—the same man whom we have encountered in the building of the King's Weigh House—calculated the total cost of what he had been paid by the church. The sum was £644 14s 5d. A later source mentions that it covered 1700 square feet.⁵⁰ His bill is itemised down to the very last nail, with separate bills for bricklayers, plasterers, glazers, painters, smiths, masons, plumbers, carvers, and upholsterers. In other words, it was just as expensive, if not more expensive, to make substantial alterations as to build a brand-new meeting house; and we have confirmation that dissenters were indeed passing on to each other the names of trusted builders.⁵¹

Olley's task is described as 'Rebuilding Founders-Hall Meeting House' or 'Building and Repairing their meeting house'. So the hall itself was named a 'meeting house'. We need to pay attention to the choice of words here because, when substantial alterations were made to a place the sources construed it as 'building', not simply as a work of altering or 'fitting' a pre-existing structure. Similarly, there is a revealing lawyer's bill, from a 'Mr Humphrey' who was employed to supervise the transactions and acted as an intermediary between the church and the founders; his first item is described as the task of 'Drawing the Agree[m]ent between <you> & Mr. Olley to build the Hall'.

⁴⁸ Wakeling, *Chapels of England*, 26. I am grateful to Kathleen Lynch for discussing the use of corporation halls in the 1672 licenses. Dissenters applied for licenses at Haberdashers' Hall, Curriers' Hall, The Glass House, Lorimers' Hall, and Leathersellers' Hall. Most were not granted; see Lyon Turner, *Original Records*, I: 291b, 320 (1), 320 (34), 320 (88), 320 (93), 320 (94), 320 (97), 320 (134–5).

⁴⁹ Wilson II: 476.

⁵⁰ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 55.

⁵¹ 'Scots' Church, London Wall (Founders' Hall)', LMA, CLC/182/MS05896A.

An indenture from 1699 has survived, with the plan of the galleries, which describes precisely what could be achieved. The hall was leased for forty-one years, which probably saved the congregation from any sense of insecurity, even though the place was not their own. The lease was renewed in 1728 for a further twenty years.⁵² Most members would therefore spend their entire lives worshipping there. We need to examine more documents of this kind, and note the length of the original leases, before concluding that renting was always a temporary solution, best avoided if at all possible.

The congregation was to use the hall and a parlour every Sunday and one day of the week for a lecture, with the possibility of using it at any other times, ‘except y^e said Company of Founders shall have present use for y^e said Parlour on week dayes’. Some of the pews were fixed, but others moveable, so the space could be adapted to suit several needs. For this, the church would pay £20 per annum. The major addition was that of galleries:

along y^e east end to y^e South side of y^e said Hall three seats in depth and also to erect & build another gallery from y^e West end of y^e said Hall to y^e front of y^e musick room . . . & also to build another narrow gallery on y^e North side of y^e said Hall . . . y^e said Gallery be in a workemanshiplike manner firmly & substantially supported & secured with collumbs . . .

The roof of the hall was also raised with ‘a Cupella in y^e middle of y^e rooffe thereof to give more light to y^e said Hall’.⁵³ All the repairs to the hall, parlour, and galleries were subsequently laid to the charge of the congregation, except in case of a new fire, or ‘y^e ruine or fall of y^e Hall’. In exchange, the founders ‘shall not or will not lett y^e said hall above stairs to any dancing or fanceing Master or to any

⁵² LMA, CLC/182/MS04962, fo. 274.

⁵³ ‘Lease by the Founders’ Company to the elders of the Scottish Presbyterian Congregation of London of part of their common hall for the purpose of conducting divine services there, for 41 years; with tinted plan attached’, CLC/182/MS05896.

other person or persons for y^e exercising of religion during y^e continuance of these presents'.⁵⁴

These are just a few examples of what could be achieved in a corporation hall. In this case, the Scottish Presbyterians could certainly afford columns and cupolas. The congregation was wealthy, with five servants, a rich material culture, a system of multiple collections, subscriptions, and gentlemen's dinners, to which their records testify.

Church usages

Meeting houses could be put to many different uses. The centrality of public preaching should not divert our attention away from other spaces beyond the one specifically dedicated to worship. First of all, the lingering association between a public place of worship and domestic worship—or at least domesticity, broadly understood—should not be underestimated. When did a *house* become known as a *meeting* house? In her recent monograph, Carys Brown cites an interesting example from St Thomas parish in Southwark where, in 1725, the meeting house had been charged parish poor rates on the ground that it was not only a place of worship.⁵⁵ The congregation successfully appealed to reverse the charge by arguing that it was empty at all times, except for services. Perhaps the parochial authorities were indeed trying to belittle the dissenting 'houses' by arguing that they were just houses, not churches—except that in this case it was not just any meeting house that was targeted. I have found it described elsewhere as 'about 25 square building with 3

⁵⁴ Brown, *Friends*, 84.

⁵⁵ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', 8; see also Wilson, 4: 294–319. Despite very different situations, however, there is no real indication in church records that the congregations were necessarily unwilling to contribute to parish finances, even at times on a voluntary basis. In July 1702, for instance, the Baptists of Paul's Alley made a special collection 'for y^e poor of the parish', St Giles Cripple-gate. They renewed their donations frequently, and on 16 June 1708, 'Three pounds, 18 shillings and 6 pence [were] offered to the overseers of the poore of the parish which they received very thankfully'. Similarly White's Alley contributed to 'the Kings Taxis & Parish Duteys' and so did Watts's and Wavel's congregations that shared 'Taxes y^e Parish, Ward, & y^e Queen'; LMA, CLC 185/MS 20953/001 Paul's Alley, General Baptist, 50, 88. I am quoting from an undated transcript made by Hilda Marvell of the original minutes (1699–1739) held at The Angus Library and Archive; 'Baptist Church (White's Alley) Church Book, Minutes of Church Meeting of the General Baptist Church, 1681–1700', LMA, CLC/186/MS00592/001, fo. 176; CL, II.a.38, fo. 105.

gallerys of six seats each . . . [built in] 1703 . . . one of the largest and best in London', therefore a building large enough to arouse the interest of the parish.⁵⁶

But what if the dissenters themselves blurred the boundaries between domestic places and places of worship? In other words, were meeting houses precisely that—houses, and not simply meeting *rooms* where services were conducted? Were the parish authorities of Southwark in a sense right in asserting that the meeting house was a *house* even though in the end, the dissenters managed to prove that it was empty except during services?

First of all, there was the crucial question of where the minister was living, sometimes away from the premises, sometimes in a house attached, which might easily have been construed as being part of the meeting house. This was the case of Doolittle in Monkwell Street, who owned the lease, but also of Matthew Mead in Stepney. In July 1689, Mead sought compensation for his 'services and suffering for the Church' and for 'how much he had spent of his own estate', so the church gave him a dwelling house and part of its garden.⁵⁷ As we have seen, the proximity of a carpenter's workshop could perhaps give the impression that dissenters were trading on the premises, as Quaker workmen and women did.

Servants or tenants lived on the sites too. This was the case in New Court, Carey Street, which was built in 1705 for Daniel Burgess, and destroyed during the Sacheverell riots. It was described by its nineteenth-century historian as:

a large square building, with seating for 800 people, with an entrance at each end, the wall on the north side being pierced with a doorway and a thick iron door, leading to what had been once a large private house. Immediately opposite this doorway was the parlour, which was fitted up and used for the minister's vestry; the first floor being used for the boys' school, and the

⁵⁶ 'A booke for Church Affaires att Stepney', Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, W/SMH/A/1/1, fo. 197v.

⁵⁷ William Pierce, *Old New-Court, The Story of an Old London Nonconformist Church, 1662–1892* (London, 1892), 58. See also, Wilson III: 492–545.

second floor for the girls' school; while the top floor was occupied by the caretaker.⁵⁸

Occupancy of the house was confirmed in a letter from Abigail Harley to Edward Harley mentioning that the rioters 'did not so much as spare the poor woman's clothes that lived in the house'.⁵⁹ Similarly, Paul's Alley, a large General Baptist congregation, had built a library but also a room next to it, that it rented to (poor?) members, as we know from their records, when its occupant, a 'sister Tookey', died in August 1691.⁶⁰ We should not, therefore, think of meeting *houses* necessarily as isolated meeting *rooms*, but as semi-public settlements. Perhaps the best example is the Baptist congregation meeting at Mill Yard.⁶¹ Mill Yard had a meeting room furnished with a number of items, all duly inventoried:

A diall
A Quoishian
A Branch Candlestick wth 6 socketts
Thirteen pues, A pilpett & sounding Board & Taple
12 Hanging candlesticks: 7 saueAlls
The 10 Comandments <see p. 89> in Graven the 5th chapt[e]r of
Mathew <19> & 12 Revl: 17 <Rev. xii.12.>
Eleven formes in the Gallorey A pertickular Seat and seats Round
Twelue formes below in y^e meeting place & Roomes Adjacent
Two p[ar]titions of winscott & Sixe wainscott Doores
To wainscott cheimny peces
Four windo shutters & French Tables
A Leaden sistearne for Dipping Beleeuers
A Kay & Iron to on stopp the lock & Irons
Two Candl for the hour Glasse.⁶²

⁵⁸ Quoted by Horsley, 339. For the financial situation of the church after the riots, see 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 42–3.

⁵⁹ Paul's Alley, 4. The church sent a supply of books to Thomas Lucas at Trowbridge dissenting academy in September 1737, see Dissenting Academies Online, <https://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/sample1.php?parameter=academyretrieve&alpha=157>.

⁶⁰ 'Mill Yard Minutes being the Church Book of the Seventh Day General Baptist Congregation, 1673–1840, with Registers and Records', photographic records, DWL, 533.B.1.

⁶¹ 'Mill Yard', no. fo.

⁶² 'Mill Yard', no. fo.

So there were other ‘rooms’, for unspecified purposes. In fact, the congregation had nine adjacent ‘rooms’ or ‘houses’, most of them rented to widows, at £1 or £2 per annum. It also had a burial ground and raised revenues through grave reservations, either for members or non-members of the congregation. Finally, there was a fully functioning communal kitchen which was part and parcel of the meeting house, and attended to by one servant:

In the kichen

Larg paire of Iron Grates

A Dresser & four shelues A Cubbard ouer y^e chimney six shelues
in y^e Cellar

A sinke leaded. 2 pewett Dishes A plate & sixe pewter Cupps 2
dozen Round Trenchers

Two Taple clothes

What Moses Arkle Layes claime to Viz)

Leaden Cisterne 25/ smale Kettle & Grates 8/

Coote p[ar]tition & closetts & crane 10/

Two Closetts aboue & windoe shetars in on Roome closett in the
Garrett Thirty shillings.⁶³

To the previous list of rooms, and to the kitchen, we need to add a cellar and a garret. This was a dissenting complex, not simply a place of worship.

Finally, even meeting *rooms* themselves could be put to uses that had little to do with public worship. In May 1700 the congregation at White’s Alley decided to lend the key to one Brother Cooper:

Wheras Bro. Cooper has desired to have the Keys of
this place for his Conveniency it is Agreed that the
Kees be put into the Hands of Bro/ Danll Quarles [one
of the deacons] and that he may surfer Bro Cooper or
any other Frind to have the vse of the place for Drying
of Clothes thay doing noe Damadg.⁶⁴

⁶³ ‘White’s Alley Church Book’, LMA, CLC/186/MS00592/002, 1700–1708, fo. 11.

⁶⁴ LMA, ‘Baptist Church (White’s Alley) Church Book, Minutes of Church Meeting of the General Baptist Church, 1681–1700’; CLC/186/MS00592/001, fo. 42.

All these examples show that we should not be surprised to learn that the authorities, or indeed the London parishioners, might not have seen dissenting places as places of worship only, but also as domestic settlements around a meeting room with living-in ministers, lodgers and servants, with kitchens, garrets, cellars, and warehouses.

There were of course many other uses, the best known being for a school, as among the Baptists of White's Alley in 1689.⁶⁵ In 1695 there was a charity school within the Gravel Lane meeting house (Southwark) that 100 'poor children' attended to learn how to read and write, be catechized, and perhaps connect with a long tradition of religious suffering.⁶⁶ There is small piece of paper pasted in the Bury Street records for such a school:

Copy of the Clause in Mr John Warners Will relating to his Gift of a sett of Fox's Martyrology to the several Protestant Dissenting Charity Schools in and about London for the publick use of the said Schools and the children educated therein.⁶⁷

In addition to its library and the rented room, Paul's Alley also had an internal baptistry in 1716. This did not mean simply digging and lining a pit in the floor of the meeting room; it also entailed building three separate rooms, one for the minister, one for the men, and one for the women.⁶⁸ The congregation lent the baptistry to approved Baptist congregations and charged two shillings for each baptism. An inventory survives of 'all the Garments furniture and Uttencells' in the rooms.⁶⁹ Beside the baptismal garments, which were of cinnamon-coloured serge, these included tables, forms, 'Four new cane chaires fashionable', 'One Leaden pump & Iron handle with a Lead pipe to carry the water', 'two Closetts with wooden peggs for cloths', stone grates, looking glasses, and combs,

⁶⁵ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 1.

⁶⁶ CL, II.a.50, n. fo.

⁶⁷ LMA, CLC 185/MS 20953/004.

⁶⁸ LMA, CLC 185/MS 20953/006.

⁶⁹ 'Transcript of the records of the church', LMA, CLC 185/MS 20953/006, p. 3.

as well as chamber pots.⁷⁰ Great care was taken for the comfort of men and women so that they could change in warm and at least moderately ‘fashionable’ surroundings of which the congregation was evidently proud, and for which they levied a charge. Once again, the fact that the meeting house was not their own did not prevent the congregation from investing and enlarging the premises because they were confident enough about the length of their lease. Building the three new rooms had cost £100.

My last example concerns the sale of books in the meeting house. This happened in White’s Alley which started selling books in November 1695 with ‘Brother Cooper of Kent his Book of Advice to Parents and Children’.⁷¹ All titles had to be approved by the pastor first. The number of copies is never specified, neither are the amounts of the sales, but we know that the books were exposed on the communion table, so directly in the meeting room, not the vestry.⁷² The initiative seems to have been successful, for the church renewed the experiment with several other titles in the space of two years: Francis Stanley’s funeral sermon for William Reeve (in 1696); ‘a litle book of Baptisme; ‘A Book agst the Quakers writt by a country friend’, and finally ‘An Account of Mr Pilkinton’s Publick Recantation’ by John Pigott (in 1698). White’s Alley was a sizable and active congregation, but it had recently fallen behind with its rent and had to borrow money from its own members in 1695 to finance an extension: the lease on a further plot of ground adjoining the meeting house on which to build a new ‘little room’. As in the case of other congregations charging for baptisms and grave

⁷⁰ LMA, CLC/186/MS00592/001.

⁷¹ I am grateful to Isabel Rivers for discussing this point: some publications were listed as being sold in vestries or at ministers’ houses in the mid to late eighteenth century; see her essay on ‘Religious Publishing’, in Michael F. Suarez, S. J. & Michael L. Turner (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), V: 577–600 (598). John Wesley sold his own publications at the Foundery in Moorfields, then set up a printed press operated by John Paramore; see Isabel Rivers, ‘Wesley’s Publishing Strategy’, in *The Routledge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Clive Murray Norris and Joseph W. Cunningham (London: Routledge, 2023, forthcoming).

⁷² Alexander Gordon (ed.), *Freedom after Ejection. A Review (1690–1692) of Presbyterian and Congregational Nonconformity in England and Wales* (Manchester: Manchester University Press; London: Longmans, 1917).

reservation, book selling might have been used to contribute to the extension of the meeting house.

The dissenting interest

I end by exploring another way in which dissenting places mattered. Meeting houses came to be central to the vexed question of the 'dissenting interest' and the statistical approach that some dissenters chose to adopt. After the Toleration Act, there was no shortage of numerical accounts. Between 1690 and 1692, the Presbyterian and Congregational managers of the short-lived Common Fund ordered surveys in the different counties for administering the fund, in particular to poor ministers. The manuscript was edited by Alexander Gordon in 1917.⁷³ In 1695, a separate Congregational fund was set up, independently from the Presbyterians, followed by the Particular Baptist Fund in 1717, and the General Baptist Fund in 1726.⁷⁴

In 1715, the Committee of the Three Denominations established in 1702 decided to take a survey in order to ascertain the potential numbers of nonconformist voters.⁷⁵ The results were mostly compiled in 1718, with additions a decade later. There are two different versions: one made by Daniel Neal, which has not survived but was copied by the Baptist Josiah Thompson in 1772–1773, and another by John Evans, the successor of Daniel Williams at the Hand Alley Congregation.⁷⁶

These so-called Evans and Thompson lists are well-known, so I would like to concentrate instead on a third manuscript that Samuel Palmer deposited in Dr Williams's Library in 1800, with the proviso

⁷³ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters. From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (1978; Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), 345.

⁷⁴ W. T. Whitley, 'The Baptist Interest under George I', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, 2 (1910–1911), 95–109; C. E. Fryers, 'The Numerical Decline of Dissent in England previous to the Industrial revolution', *The American Journal*, 17.2 (1913), 232–9; Watts, *The Dissenters*, 268; Clive Field, 'Counting Religion in England and Wales: The Long Eighteenth Century, c.1680–c.1840', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 63.4 (2012), 693–720;

⁷⁵ 'Dissenting Congregations in England and Wales. The list compiled between 1715 and 1726 by John Evans. Photographic reproduction of the MS in Dr Williams's Library'. DWL, 702.E.22. Reproduction of DWL, 38.4.

⁷⁶ Watts, *The Dissenters*, 267–89.

that the ‘book may be returned in 2 or 3 months’!⁷⁷ It was compiled by one ‘A.B’, from Northampton, dated 24 February 1731, and is entitled ‘A view of the Dissenting Intrest in London, of the Presbyterian & Independent Denominations from the year 1695 to the 25 of December 1731. With a Postscript of the present state of the Baptists’.⁷⁸

The year 1695 marked the creation of a separate Congregational fund, and although it is still unclear why this particular date was chosen for the beginning of the enquiry, the author is clearly concerned with charity.⁷⁹ The closing date is perhaps more telling as I believe the pamphlet might have been part of the controversy surrounding the publication of Strickland Gough’s *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Decay of the Dissenting Interest*.⁸⁰

This is what the author of the ‘Dissenting intrest’ purported to do:

... one considerable motive which Induced an engagement in this design was to stop a prevailing <r>humour of some people which they were officially spreading (Viz) That this Intrest is in a very low and declining condition and in a much lower state then It was a few years since ...⁸¹

The author might well have been a man with a mission, but he was also a man with a method. Of course, the congregations, the pastors and assistants of the London churches would be mentioned, as well

⁷⁷ ‘A view of the Dissenting Intrest in London, of the Presbyterian & Independent Denominations from the year 1695 to the 25 of December 1731. With a Poscript of the present state of the Baptists’, DWL, 38.18. My subtitle, ‘the congregation was large & the meeting house filled’ is on fo. 4.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Mark Burden for discussing the dating.

⁷⁹ Philip Doddridge, *Free Thoughts on the Most Probable Means of Reviving the Dissenting Interest* (London, 1730); Anon., *Some Present Observations upon the Present State of the Dissenting Interest* (London, 1731), supporting Gough; Isaac Watts, *An Humble Attempt towards the Revival of Practical Religion among Christians* (1731; London, 1735).

⁸⁰ ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, n. fo. References to the manuscript are made by folio numbers, not pagination added later.

⁸¹ ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, n. fo.

as a few lines on the ‘character’ of each, but although he describes his work as ‘history’⁸², ‘A.B.’ was neither a Calamy nor a Palmer. Instead, he saw two ways of reviewing the dissenting interest. The first was to list all the known congregations in 1695 and again in 1731 to determine whether it was really true that their numbers were falling. The second was to observe the development of the buildings and the extra square feet because square feet corresponded, by a precise multiplication, to actual backsides on seats. The conclusion reached was that there were 4,000 more dissenters in London in 1731 than in 1695.⁸³ Another result of the survey is a list of seventy-five Presbyterian and Congregational meeting houses, followed by another of twelve congregations that had ‘died’ or ‘separated’ between 1695 and 1730, and finally of twenty-five Baptist churches in a postscript.⁸⁴

The first seventy-five entries begin in the same manner with the name of the pastor, the address, the number of ‘square buildings within the walls’ (a ‘square building’ corresponding to 100 square feet) then the number of galleries, with their respective number of rows. This is as close as we will ever come to an exhaustive list of meeting houses and their dimensions in the early 1730s, even if it does not mention the Quakers. The smaller meeting house, in Hoxton, shared with the Huguenots, was only 700 or 800 square feet—indeed not much—and the larger ones of about 2,500 square feet were in St Thomas (Southwark), Stepney, Houndsditch, Old Jewry, Bishopsgate Street and Westminster.

This is where we learn, for instance, that in 1730 the congregation that had been Matthew Mead’s was still the largest in London. The author was very much impressed by the fact that Mead, among his many other talents, knew how to persuade people, especially ladies, to contribute to the relief of poor ministers by ‘pawn[ing] their watches & Rings as pledges till they redeemed ‘em’.⁸⁵ This was a congregation whose ‘interest’ fluctuated according to the seasons, the congregation being large in the summer ‘but in the winter small’.

⁸² ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, fo. 81.

⁸³ ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, fo. 76–7.

⁸⁴ ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, fo. 15.

⁸⁵ ‘A View of the Dissenting Intrest’, fo. 20, 22.

We have not paid sufficient attention to this aspect in the past. The London dissenters came and went, making any fixed list of members all the more imprecise.

These seasonal movements had to be cross-referenced with London building development, to the North and to the East.⁸⁶ There, the congregations benefitted from the presence of retired businessmen and those:

. . . whose affairs would permit them to retire, for the benefit of the Air, at a small distance from the City, many good familieys of substance have heretofore resided in this place, but within 10 years past it has been less in request. And as in that space the increase of buildings at a greater distance from the City has been very considerable, Familys of substance amongst the dissenters have chosen to go farther of when they had determined to leave the City.⁸⁷

After twenty pages of analysis, including a review of the difference in church government between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, the conclusion was more mixed than we might expect. Statistically speaking, there was a loss, but a loss that was only relative:

It appears that the number of persons that call themselves protestant dissenters of the two denominations, and that stately attend publick worship, In 1731 varies but very little from what they were In 1695, But as the number of inhabitants in London are supposed to be considerably Increased, and the dissenters not to have increased in a proper proportion so far that Intrest may be said to have lost ground.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 20.

⁸⁷ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 97.

⁸⁸ 'A View of the Dissenting Intrest', fo. 97.

Spiritually speaking, the situation was ‘disagreeable and discouraging’, but the point was proven that meeting houses, in themselves, did have their own story to tell, with their square feet and their galleries. They offered a powerful vantage point from which to assess the eighteenth-century dissenting interest in a statistical (and thereby a supposedly impartial) manner.

Conclusion

In a meeting house, dissenters heard sermons and received the sacraments, conducted church meetings, and educated children, but they also lived together, ate together, borrowed or bought books, changed and dried their clothes. They paid parish taxes, hired servants and craftsmen, bought fashionable furniture, let rooms, collected house rents, pew rents and grave rents, invested their money, dealt with lawyers and landlords. I have given examples of all such activities, from archival sources that have never before been given proper consideration in the history of early eighteenth-century Nonconformist churches. And there are many more, that were all, ultimately, dependent on Nonconformist places: sources of both anxiety and comfort. The early dissenters were builders, but they were not reluctant tenants; they invested as much in other people’s places as in their own and their sense of time, as well as the length of the leases need to be assessed. I have argued that the way they chose to invest in their places, the way they chose to design them and the manner in which they chose to occupy them raise many questions that go beyond the link between worship and architecture, and that church records, such as the ones kept at Dr Williams’s Library and at the Congregational Library, are vital for a study of dissenters and their places.

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- (3) **1949** *The Book of Common Prayer and the Worship of the Non-Anglican Churches*, by William D. Maxwell, 1950. Out of print.
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