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« The Presbyterians and their records : a case-study of the Scots' Church at Founders' Hall »  
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## “Churches”

The project ‘Mapping Multi-faith London’ started for me in Rome.

When I travelled here some fifteen years ago, I stayed at the British School at Rome and met with David Spero, a British photographer who was then in residence for a few months.

Spero had just published a book with the very simple title *Churches*. And what did David Spero photograph?

With a title like this, you would expect perhaps places like these:

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But this is what Spero actually captured:

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= Evangelical churches throughout Britain that met in the most unpromising surroundings, in the most deprived areas, in garages, warehouses, and back rooms.

Calling these building *churches*, as Spero did, seeing them through the photographer's eye, reminded me I knew very little about the places of worship of seventeenth and eighteenth-century dissenters and about their relations with their buildings, including those that they rented.

For a long time, I remained happy to rehearse the familiar story that for dissenters a Church was not made of wood, brick or stone, but of people, of flesh and blood.

This, sometimes, confused some of the younger members of the congregations:

**‘and i being yong did not understand what he preached but thought he was a strang man to talk so much about stoons’<sup>1</sup>.**

This was the experience of the young Richard Conder, future minister of Great Gransden in Cambridgeshire, when his father took him, across fields, with servants, to hear the sermons of Francis Holcroft.

When the Baptist John Canne made a visit to Bristol, he once debated for two hours on the green, with a local vicar, ‘Mr Fowler’. With practical good sense, Fowler remarked that no church of flesh and blood could be accepted in the town, because its members would be ‘cast out of all publique places’.

**‘Mr. Cann answered, that mattered not; though they could not get a publick place or such conyeniencies, they should *Hire a Barne* to meet in’.**

Edward Terrill, the writer who reported the exchange, commented:

**‘But y<sup>e</sup> businesse of preaching in a Barne could hardly be received.**

Because people still had the notion of, **I quote ‘*Relative Holinesse, and tincture of Consecrated places*’<sup>2</sup>**

But did a sense of ‘relative holiness’ ever disappeared? I doubt it.

The metaphorical stones of God’s church and the actual stones of places of worship were in fact hardly incompatible for dissenters, whether we talk of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or even Baptists.

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<sup>1</sup> Great Gransden CB, s. fol. Sur l’épisode, voir Margaret Spufford, . The Dissenting Churches in Cambridgeshire from 1660 to 1700, Proceedings of the Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Society lxi (1968) : 67-95 (p. 71).

<sup>2</sup> Bristol, Hayden, p. 93.

We need to nuance and complexify the many ways dissenters of all shades experienced the places in which they met and/or worship.

In their vast majority, when they were given the opportunity to meet in better circumstances, they did, from the parish churches of the 1650s to the private houses of the 1670s and of course to the purpose-built chapels and meeting houses after 1689.

### **1. The Scottish Presbyterians and their archives**

I would like to focus on one particular congregation, the Scottish Presbyterians who, from 1700 and until 1764, worshipped in the hall of the worshipful company of Founders, which was situated at the heart of the city of London, in Lothbury.

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I am going to concentrate on the Church's records which are held at London Metropolitan Archives.

I wish to particularly emphasize how these records can contribute to the work of telling the architectural history of dissent. For the Scots' Church, there are about half a dozen boxes containing loose papers, account books, the meeting house lease, registers, and a church book with correspondences.

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### **2. 'Building the hall'**

The pre-Toleration history of the Church is still unclear, but it seems that it appeared during the Restoration, probably in or around 1665.

But let me begin in the year 1698, the earliest date for which we have records, when a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Robert Fleming, became pastor. He died in 1716 to be replaced by one John Cumming until 1729. Fleming had been ordained in London in 1688 then went to Holland to minister to the Scottish church in Leyden for a decade, before coming back to London.

Founders' Hall was special, if not unique because the church was offered the first floor as a place of worship, not the ground floor, as was customary. It opened on 29 September 1700.

The first documents that help us understand how this came about is a series of bills from the master of the works, a certain John Olley.

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Olley was paid:

**'In part of my Contract with Mr. Walter Steward & y<sup>e</sup> said James Blaickley [members of the Church] for Inlarging repairing & Fitting up of Founders Hall for a meeting house for y<sup>e</sup> Reverend Mr. Rob<sup>r</sup> Fleming Congregation'.**

Elsewhere, Olley used a slightly different turn of phrase:

**being In Fule for Building their meeting house.**

From his point of view, therefore, the extent of the works justified to consider this was akin to 'building' a meeting house.

And indeed, the sum of money that he was paid was in the area of what was spent to build a brand-new meeting house in central London.

The total sum amounted to 644£ 14s 5d.

So it's difficult to ascertain what made the Scots rent instead of build, as it was certainly just as expensive.

Did they have trouble securing a plot of land in central London in 1700?

When they did finally build their own meeting house, nearby, in Coleman Street, in 1764, this was not because they could not secure another lease but because Founders' hall had become too small.

Another important document is the original lease, that includes a plan of the galleries. It was signed on 15 February 1699 for 41 years, double the amount of time that we may found elsewhere.

SLIDE

This was between the master, wardens and assistants of the company and six representatives of the church.

For drawing it, and agreeing on the terms, the Presbyterians employed their own lawyer which returned a bill of another £15:

HUMPHREY'S SLIDE

The congregation leased:

**'That part of the Common Hall now & formerly used for y<sup>e</sup> exercise of religion & Parlour or some other convenient room instead of y<sup>e</sup> Parlour ... together with all passages comodities privelidges & appurtenances...'**

Another source mentions a 'little' room used as a vestry.

The rent was £20 a year, to be paid quarterly.

For this amount of money the Scots would use the hall:

**'the whole Sabbath day entire & one part of a weeke day for a weekly Lecture... and also at any other time when y<sup>e</sup> said parties shall have occasion to exercise their religion...'**

I would like to give you an idea of the extent of the work John Olley carried out for the presbyterians. These are just a few examples:

**'erect & build a gallery along y<sup>e</sup> east end to y<sup>e</sup> South side of y<sup>e</sup> said Hall three seats in depth and also to erect & build another gallery from y<sup>e</sup> West end of y<sup>e</sup> said Hall to y<sup>e</sup> front of y<sup>e</sup> museick room  
there now being with a paire of stairs to it  
& also to build another narrow gallery on y<sup>e</sup> North side'**

Those galleries were supported by:

**‘handsome collumbs from ye Parlour below & where else it may be thought needfull for y<sup>e</sup> support & strenghtening of y<sup>e</sup> said gallerys as shall be agreed upon by surveyors on both sides and likewise to build seats or pews fixed within that broad end of y<sup>e</sup> Hall within y<sup>e</sup> Arch & all betwixt y<sup>e</sup> Arch & y<sup>e</sup> door to be with moveable seats such as formerly were used’**

And then: **SLIDE**

**‘to raise the roof of y<sup>e</sup> said Hall eight or ten feet higher then it now is & also shall & will make a Cupella in y<sup>e</sup> middle of ye roofe thereof to give more light to y<sup>e</sup> said Hall & shall and will make one convenient room or gallery in y<sup>e</sup> roofe’**

In return, the Founders:

**‘shall not or will not lett y<sup>e</sup> said hall above stairs to any danceing or fanceing Master or to any other person or persons for y<sup>e</sup> exercising of religion during y<sup>e</sup> continuance of these presents’.**

Fixed as well as moveable seats, 3 galleries, 1 roof gallery, columns, a raised roof with glazed cupella: nothing suggests that the Scots felt insecure in the hall and reluctant to invest.

### **3. Financing and maintaining the meeting house**

Early eighteenth-century meeting houses were in large part financed by subscription but the details have not survived for Founders’ Hall.

The Scottish presbyterians were an affluent congregation by dissenting standards. Their elaborate 'treasury books' details healthy finances, and lists of plate and linen:

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But even for them raising the money might have been difficult. The Church records allow us to assess how they organized themselves financially, throughout the eighteenth century to raise the money that was necessary to maintain the hall and its glass dome.

First of all, they made not one but two monthly collections, and in the 1720s, at the peak of the membership, they were raising about 85£ a year this way.

The money was distributed to the poor members but also served to pay the 3, then 4, then 5 church servants, wine and drinks, pipes and tobacco, preachers' fees and coach hire, including for the famous minister Edmund Calamy, as well as cleaning expenses.

But they had other sources of revenue such as: special collections, donations by members at regular intervals, or on special occasions, for acquiring a dial for instance, or when a new cushion was necessary for the pulpit:

**'of purple vilvett with Gould and purple Thosells att the 4 Corners'**

and of course members remembered the church in their will.

But this is not all. In 1717, the church instituted popular 'gentlemen dinners' for which they charged their guests three shillings. These were held either in Weavers' Hall or in taverns, such as the George in Ironmonger Street. They rapidly reached a 100 people. A ticket for the 1718 dinner has survived:

**'Sr yow aroe desired to Dine att weavers hall with the Rev:d Mr John Cimning and the Rest of the Gentlmen of the Church Exactly att Two aclave in the Afternoon on Wednesday y<sup>e</sup> 5th November pay the Berrer Three shillings and bring this Tickett with yow'.**



## **Conclusion**

The Scottish Presbyterian Church in London was a tolerably wealthy church, with multiple donors, a rich material culture, and the magnificence of their hall, albeit rented, was an integral part of their quest for respectability.

I have argued that identifying and analysing the records of the dissenting churches in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is necessary to reveal how these places were built and maintained, whether they were purpose-built or rented. They are also vital sources to understand the varied ways in which the dissenters interacted with their immediate environment, with their landlords, with their servants, with their builders, with their lawyers, and the sense of security or insecurity they might have felt, while legislation was still reversible.

These are questions that Mapping Multifaith London will be addressing in the next few years.