

# The Evangelical Tradition in Olney in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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## **Nonconformist beginnings**

East Anglia and the East Midlands took to the Reformation and the new ideas of religion very easily; perhaps their proximity to the printing presses of The Hague and the rest of Northern Europe was a contributing factor. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the Puritan faction was well established in the area. Unease with the established church of Charles I and his Archbishop Laud expressed itself quite early in the king's reign.

In 1635 some Olney families emigrated to New England in search of religious freedom; they left in April on board the Hopewell of London, arriving in Boston in June. From Olney itself went John Cooper, Edmund ffarrington, William Parryer and their families and from the neighbouring villages of Lavendon and Sherington, George Griggs and his family and two brothers, Philip Kyrkland aged 21 and Nathaniel Kyrkland 19. The oldest emigrant was 49 and the youngest 18 months. Another early migrant to America was the Vicar of Olney, William Worcester, who left in 1639. He was a Puritan and was disenchanted with Archbishop Laud and the way the Church of England was becoming increasingly High Church. He became the first minister of Salisbury, Massachusetts, remaining in that post until his death in 1662.

Many families in the neighbourhood are of Huguenot descent and one of the reasons that they settled there was because of its Puritan sympathies. They migrated in three main waves between 1572 and 1685. Since they came from the Continental lacemaking centres of Mechlin, Brussels, Lille, Arras, Chantilly and Alencon to a flax-growing area, they reinforced and expanded the existing lacemaking skills of the countryside. Huguenot names such as Minnard, Raban, Mole are still to be found locally today. A 1637 letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, possibly from the Bishop of Lincoln, states that 'this corner of the diocese being most distant is much suspected of Puritanism'.

## **The Civil War and Restoration**

Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, like the rest of the eastern counties, were predominately Puritan in outlook and therefore mainly supported Parliament. The road from Oxford to Cambridge passed through Olney, and a skirmish took place at Olney Bridge on 4 November 1643. Colonel Harvey and his Parliamentary troops, who were stationed at Olney, came upon Prince Rupert and his cavalry. The result could be said to be a draw, with Colonel Harvey standing off and Prince Rupert withdrawing towards Oxford, which was held by the King.

The curate of Olney from 1616 to 1683 was one Ralph Josselin and he was 'a staunch Parliamentarian and worshipper of Cromwell'. John Bunyan, who was born at Elstow just outside Bedford, was stationed with

the Newport Pagnell garrison during the Civil War, five miles south of Olney. Following the Restoration, conflict grew between the Dissenters and the government, which compelled preachers to be licensed. Bunyan refused to give an undertaking to the magistrates that he would not preach without a licence. He was committed to Bedford Gaol until he was prepared to give such an undertaking but remained there for 18 years, during which time he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The 1672 Declaration of Indulgence granted 27 licences to preach and hold meetings in the area, but such toleration did not last. John Kent's barn was raided in 1684 and 40 people were arraigned and fined. Henry Elliot, Vicar of Olney from 1700 to 1720, declared that 40 per cent of the parish were Dissenters, that is Congregationalists, Baptists or Quakers. George Whitefield came to Olney in 1739 and preached in a field to two thousand people. John Wesley followed him some years later. When John Newton arrived in 1764 the figure for non-Anglicans had dropped to 25 per cent. His fellow preachers in the town were John Drake, the Independent Minister, and the Baptist ministers William Walker and from 1775 John Sutcliffe.

### **John Newton's arrival in Olney**

The observation that 'In the eighteenth century the parish was ruled by Squire and Parson' does not apply to Olney. There was a lack of control by the diocese, Lincoln being too far away. The local resident aristocracy, the Throckmortons and Digbys, were Catholic and had little influence in this hotbed of Nonconformity. The principal landowner and Lord of the Manor of Olney was the Earl of Dartmouth. He had attended Westminster School with William Cowper. Lord Dartmouth was a politician and spent most of his time in London. He was Secretary of State for the Colonies before the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin judged him 'A truly good man and wishes sincerely a good understanding with the colonies but does not seem to have strength equal to his wishes'. Dartmouth was, through a meeting with Lady Huntingdon, of evangelical persuasion and had been greatly impressed by Newton's *Authentic Narrative*. It was thanks to his patronage that Newton was finally ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln. Dartmouth then offered the curacy of Olney to Newton, who began his ministry at Olney in 1764 aged 39.

Within a year a gallery had to be built in the parish church for the growing congregation of about two thousand. Newton believed in short sermons: 'It is better to feed our people like chickens, a little & often, than cram them like turkeys.' Many people travelled from a considerable distance to hear Newton preach. John Thornton, a rich Nottingham merchant, became Newton's patron and gave him £200 a year to cover entertainment and distribution to the deserving poor. Newton kept open house on Sunday for anyone who had travelled a distance greater than six miles; sometimes there were 70 people for dinner. What Mrs Newton thought of this is not recorded!

### **The background to Newton's ministry**

Olney had since the Middle Ages been a market town full of poor but independent artisans and tradespeople. In the eighteenth century 337 men represented 50 occupations in the town. There was only one other house in the town apart from Newton's and Cowper's not linked with

trade. In the eighteenth century the population was about two thousand. According to Newton, 'The people here are mostly poor - the country low and dirty.' Cowper remarked that 'Olney is a populous place inhabited chiefly by the half starved and the ragged of the earth' and that there were 'near 1200 lace makers in this beggarly town'. Newton was full of plans to help 'the poor ignorant lace makers'. It was mostly women who were employed in the lace trade, which gave them a degree of economic independence. Because the women worked at the lace for 12 hours a day gangs of children roamed around the countryside getting into all kinds of mischief. Fifteen years before Robert Raikes instituted Sunday Schools, Newton had begun weekly meetings for children in The Great House. Upwards of 200 children came at first but the number settled down to around 70. A Bible and five shillings were given to the best boy and the best girl annually at Easter.

Another meeting was held mainly for lacemakers on Sundays at 6 o'clock in the morning. This group often held meetings in each other's homes. Sometimes they were without Newton, other times he would drop in to pray with them. Between 1765 and 1767 Newton held Ecumenical Meetings in the Great House for up to 130 people. Visiting Nonconformist Ministers would give sermons and lead prayers. Foremost among them were the Rev. William Bull, Independent Minister of Newport Pagnell, and Sam Brewer, an Independent Minister from London. Brewer preached for Newton at the Parish Church on Tuesday, on Wednesday for Drake and on Thursday for Walker at the Baptist Chapel. The four ministers dined at the Vicarage on Thursday evening before Brewer returned to London.

These monthly meetings of six or seven clergymen eventually evolved into the Bedfordshire Union of Christians, a forerunner of evangelical ecumenism. The Anglican clergy would exchange Church services. Newton, however, had his critics, for although Newton was an Anglican, the other Church of England clergy were, at first, at odds with him. He was regarded as a Methodist, his 'enthusiasm' was preached against. It would be 150 years before his ecumenical attitude became acceptable in the Church of England as a whole. Nevertheless his influence in an area between Northampton and Bedford was considerable, Dissenters being the most sympathetic to him. Most of his teaching was, therefore, 'parlour preaching'. However, despite himself, Newton could not resist gloating when a long standing Baptist joined the Church of England: she 'chose to walk with us entirely'.

When Newton first arrived in Olney and moved into the Vicarage, newly refurbished by Lord Dartmouth, he had painted onto the bare plaster of his study the following words:

Since thou wast precious in my sight thou has been honourable

Isa. 43 v 4

But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondsman in the land of Egypt  
And the Lord thy God redeemed thee

Deut. 15 v 15

Both quotations were a personal reminder of his previous life as an unbeliever and his involvement in the 'triangular trade', that is, the slave trade.

### **Friendship and ministry of John Newton and William Cowper**

Newton's correspondence greatly increased after the publication of his autobiography, the Authentic Narrative. He started to go on preaching tours and continued to do so for the remainder of his life. He was usually accompanied by his wife Mary, or 'Polly', as he called her.

In 1767 some mutual friends suggested that Newton call upon the Rev. Morley Unwin whose lodger was a cousin of Martin Madan, an evangelical who had co-written 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'. This lodger was none other than William Cowper. Newton arrived in Huntingdon a few days after Rev. Unwin died as a result of a riding accident. It was at Newton's suggestion that his widow, her daughter Susanna, her household and William Cowper moved to Olney to be under Newton's pastorate. This they did in 1768.

Cowper was impressed with the spirit of co-operation between those of different denominations in Olney. In a letter to his aunt, Judith Madan, dated 18 June 1768, he wrote of his visit to the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, which William Walker helped to host. Newton had been invited to preach to the Baptists on the evening of 16 June. Cowper wrote in 1769, 'The Dissenters here, most of them at least who are serious forget that our Meeting House has a steeple to it and we that theirs has none.'

The Newtons, Cowper and Mrs Unwin became great friends, meeting every day. They were of equal social standing in a town composed of artisans and the lower classes. Both ladies were deeply religious and the four had a keen sense of humour, although Cowper's wit was dry and ironical. Polly Newton and Cowper shared a common interest in gardening. Cowper helped Newton distribute Thornton's largesse to the poor of Olney. Cowper had a great interest in the evangelical movement prior to meeting Newton, and started parlour meetings on Monday evenings at Orchard Side. Their great collaborative work, however, was the Olney Hymns. Published in 1779, this volume consisted of some 300 hymns, 80 being written by Cowper, and the remainder by Newton.

Cowper's mental health was poor. He suffered what is known today as bi-polar disorder, but his condition at the time was diagnosed as 'religious melancholia'. He was, like so many creative people, a manic-depressive. He had his first major attack at 22 but was 32 when he made the first suicide attempt he admitted to. He was placed in Dr Nathaniel Cotton's care in St Albans. Thanks to Dr Cotton's humane treatment and the support of his brother John and his Methodist cousin Martin Madan he recovered. It was here that Cowper wrote his first hymns. He dated his religious conversion to this period with Dr Cotton, when in 1764, he opened his Bible by chance at Romans 3:25, which speaks of Christ,

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

His third major attack occurred when he was 42. It was triggered by the Easter Cattle Fair in Olney. Cowper couldn't face the noise and bustle associated with the fair so he removed himself to the Vicarage as Newton's guest. Six months later he was still there when Newton and his wife were absent on a preaching tour. During this time Cowper again attempted suicide. Newton returned and used the electro-static

machine in an attempt to alleviate Cowper's condition. The results were inconclusive: 'Prevailed on him to let me make experiment of it today. But could not observe any sensible effect.'

Cowper's depression was not helped by gossips who put pressure on him to marry Mrs Unwin. Her daughter had left Olney - she had married the Rev. Matthew Powley - and therefore the couple had been living unchaperoned at Orchard Side. Tongues wagged furiously in the town. Cowper remained at the Vicarage from 12 April 1773 to 28 May 1774. Polly Newton is the unsung heroine in all of this, equally with Mary Unwin who remained to nurse him day and night although he was under the delusion that she had poisoned his food. It is said that when Cowper recovered he wrote his great hymn 'God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform'.

### **The end of John Newton's ministry in Olney**

In 1775 John Sutcliff became Baptist Minister at Olney. John Newton actually went to hear his inaugural address in the Baptist Chapel, much to his wife's distress. Polly had a lively mind and a deep faith and she had no qualms about hearing John Wesley preach but she drew the line at Baptists. By 1779 Newton was leader of the evangelical clergy. Apart from Cowper his great friend was the Independent Minister of Newport Pagnell, the Rev. William Bull. John Thornton gave financial support to Bull and the Newport Pagnell Academy. This was a Dissenting Academy for the professional education of Dissenting ministers. When Newton left Olney in the winter of 1779/1780 Bull became the spiritual support of Cowper.

The American Revolutionary War had some impact in Olney. As a result of war taxation the mob attacked a flour cart. Newton was sympathetic but lectured his congregation from the pulpit against taking direct action. He also sympathised with the colonists but thought they should not have taken up arms. He had some connections with America, although rather tenuous. His father had been Governor of Fort York, Hudson's Bay and his stepbrother, Harry, was in the Royal Navy stationed at Boston. Lord Dartmouth had interests in Georgia, and in 1765 proposed that 'Mr Whitefield's orphan-house is to be converted into a seminary, college or university; and Mr. N. is to be desired to be the president thereof, with the annexed living of Savannah, the chief town.' Newton declined the offer because of his affection for Olney and his wife's hatred of travelling by water.

For many people the war was a civil war. Newton wrote to Thornton: 'Our disunion from America is an event of such importance that it seems to me like a dream and I can hardly persuade myself it is true.'

By 1779 Newton's congregation was falling off and his influence in the town was waning. He had fostered a popular religious culture to the detriment of ecclesiastical and parochial order. This had bolstered the local tradition of Calvinist nonconformity in an independent artisan population. They no longer needed him.

There had always been a lawless element in Olney. In 1773 he had preached a series of sermons against the sins of the town - whoredom, adultery, profanity and drunkenness. With over one hundred alehouses in the town that was not a difficult condition to be in! Poverty and alcoholism were widespread, nor were suicide and attempted suicide

uncommon. The crunch came when Newton had preached against the bonfires and excesses of Guy Fawkes Night, partly because of the danger from fires in the town. A mob of about fifty went around smashing windows. Newton lost his nerve and sent the mob leader a shilling to avoid his house, an act of which he was afterwards ashamed.

Bull commented, 'Mr. Newton trod a path, which no man but himself could have used so long as he did, and he wore it out long before he went from Olney. Too much familiarity and condescension cost him the estimation of his people. He thought he should ensure their love, to which he had the best possible title, and by those very means he lost it.' Ultimately John Thornton offered him the Rectorship of St Mary Woolnoth Church in the City of London. Newton accepted and preached his last sermon in Olney Parish Church in January 1780.

This was not the end of the Evangelical tradition in Olney in the eighteenth century. The Rev. Thomas Scott (1746-1821) was the curate at Olney from 1781 to 1784. When he had been curate of Stoke Goldington and Weston Underwood he had encouraged and lent books to a young William Carey. Later famous for his Commentary, Scott while Vicar of Buckden had tutored students preparing to work for the Church Missionary Society.

William Carey (1761-1834) became a Baptist when he was eighteen and straightway started to preach. From 1785 Carey became involved with the Baptist Church at Olney. He was one of the students trained by Sutcliffe at his home, 20 The High Street, Olney. Both men were involved in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society. Carey later took his preaching further afield. In 1793 he went to India, studied Bengali and translated the Gospels. He remained for the rest of his life in India. The Evangelical tradition continued to flourish in the nineteenth century, but that is another story.

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