

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**Natton Seventh Day Baptist Chapel, Ashchurch**

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1996, Vol. 114, 105-129

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## Natton Seventh Day Baptist Chapel, Ashchurch

By JACKIE PERRY

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

And God blessed the Seventh day and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work, which God created and made.

Genesis 2:2 and 3

All the other Seventh-day Baptist churches in the provinces died out, except that at Natton, in the parish of Ashchurch. There the congregation meets on Saturday mornings when all their neighbours are about their secular occupations and generally are ministered to by a nonconformist minister of another denomination from Tewkesbury. It is long years since a seventh-day keeper was pastor of Natton Church, and the first London pastor was sent over from the United States. There is nothing in the type of service to differentiate it from that of an ordinary nonconformist service, and necessarily little or nothing is said in advancing the peculiar views whose prevalence founded the sect. There are large charities connected with the general body, and the Natton property is vested in nine trustees. The existence of the sect is known to but few people, and rarely does a stranger make an addition to the regular congregation of half a dozen or eight persons. But it is certainly an interesting fact that such a body should have existed for two centuries and a half. The curious in such matters would do well to store up a record of the sect before it passes out of existence altogether. There appears to be little attempt to propagate the faith, and without such efforts the number of adherents is not likely to increase. The tiny congregation – the only meeting of the kind out of London – is one of the oddest things in the ecclesiastical world. Not merely is the gathering inconvenient, one would think, but the place of assemblage is a remote corner – in a farmyard.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Beginning*

In January 1947 a flurry of snow was cleared from Natton Lane and, after a service conducted by the rector of the church of St. Nicholas, Ashchurch, the last burial took place in the Seventh Day Baptist burial ground in the tiny hamlet of Natton. James George Purser was the last of a family whose commitment to the Sabbatarian movement in Ashchurch had spanned almost 300 years.

Natton is in the parish of Ashchurch three miles east of Tewkesbury (Fig. 1). It is difficult to say exactly when Seventh Day Baptists began to congregate in Ashchurch. There were Sabbath Keepers in the area as early as 1620 and their church was probably formed not later than 1640. They were Particular Baptists who followed Calvinistic principles, but their specific tenet was the observance of Saturday, as the Seventh Day Sabbath of the Old Testament. In its early days, before 1680, the church appears to have been a mixed congregation of both first and seventh day observers.<sup>2</sup>

There is much evidence supporting the fact that Tewkesbury and the surrounding district were areas of very early nonconformity. In 1620 three principal burgesses and assistants in the town were observing Saturday as the Sabbath of the Old Testament and they were given warning that they would be removed from office if they did not desist.<sup>3</sup> John Gere, vicar of Tewkesbury parish church in 1628, was a low churchman and had been suspended by 1634. The vicar in 1642, John Wells, was an Independent. Richard Cooper, the vicar in 1648, signed the

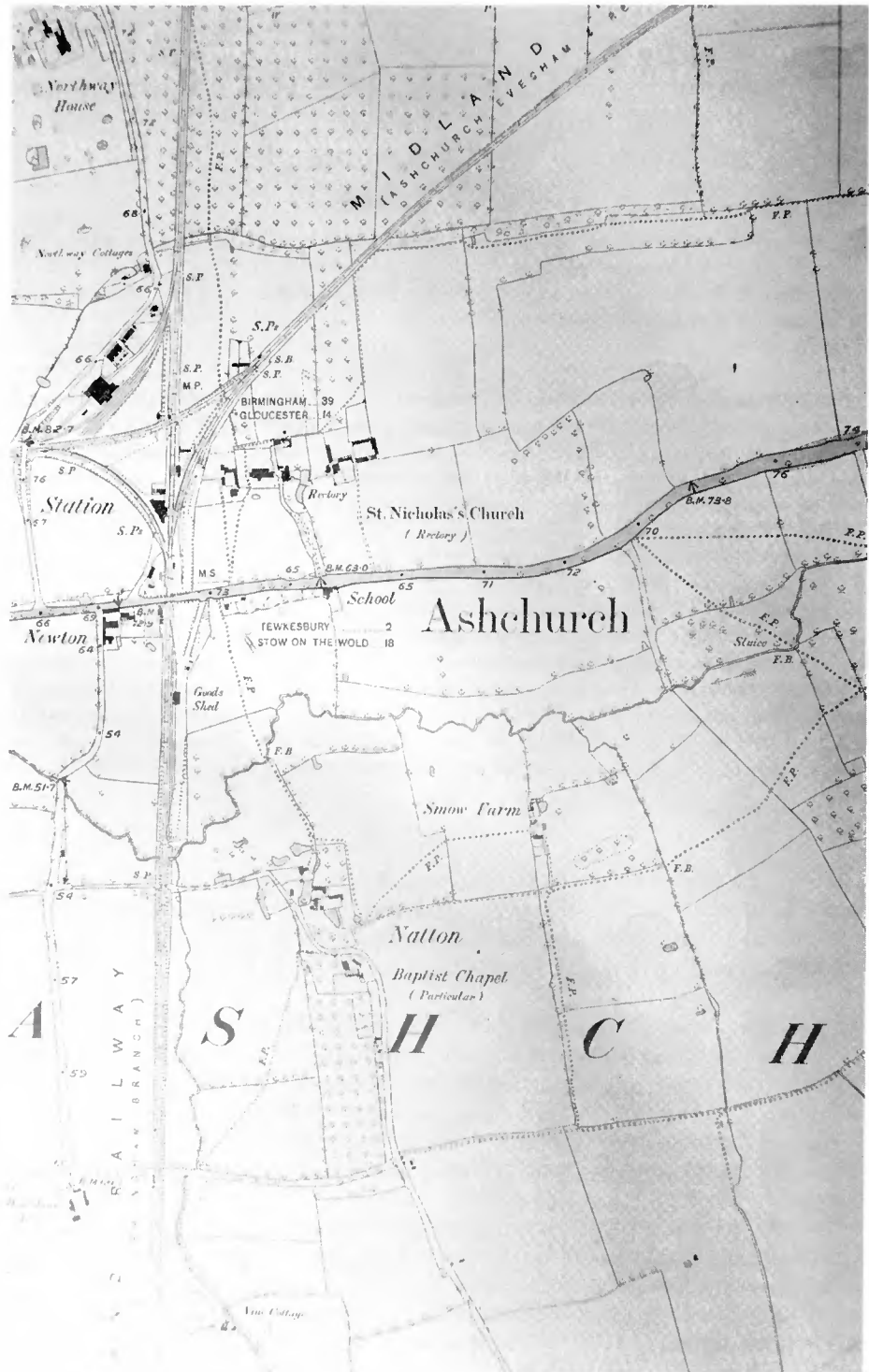


Fig. 1 A late 19th-century map showing the location of Nattton, in Ashchurch (O.S. Map 6", Glos. XII. SE. 1884 edn.).

Presbyterian *Gloucestershire Ministers' Testimony*.<sup>4</sup> Tewkesbury's return for the Compton Census of 1676 shows an extraordinarily high proportion (75%) of the population as being nonconformist, including Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Independents, Quakers, Sabbatarians and Congregationalists.<sup>5</sup> An apparent lack of friction with the established Church indicates a local toleration, if not condolence, of these various forms of nonconformity. The vicar in 1676, Francis Wells, was suspended from the Church two years later after preaching that Charles II was guilty of fornication and adultery.<sup>6</sup>

In Ashchurch a similar picture is shown of religious disquiet. An early indication was in 1597 when the curate, John Ash, was ejected from the church by two parishioners.<sup>7</sup> In 1603 four parishioners were presented for not attending church at Easter.<sup>8</sup> John Malden, minister in 1648 subscribed to the *Gloucestershire Ministers' Testimony*, but by 1650 there was no settled minister. In 1660 the minister John Langston, an Independent, was ejected from the church and by 1662 there was again no settled minister.<sup>9</sup> In 1669 Richard Gaynson and William Baylis, both of Pamington in Ashchurch, were presented for not attending church for one month.<sup>10</sup> The Compton Census recorded thirty nonconformists in a population of approximately 300 for Ashchurch, although by this time the church had an orthodox minister. However, as a result of evidence appearing from current local research, the validity of these figures can be questioned. As early as the 1620s names such as Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Samuel, Abednego, Benjamin and even Melshisadeck (*sic*) were beginning to replace traditional names such as Richard, Edward and John in the baptisms recorded in the parish register.<sup>11</sup> These Old Testament names initially occurred frequently within the same families, primarily those of Purser, Deaves, Hawling, Geenes, Haynes and Strafford. The curate from 1673 to 1692, William Prayerer, recorded in the register the burials of four unbaptised children between 1679 and 1692. These may have been stillbirths, except that two of them were children of Thomas Hawling.

By 1661 there were two Seventh Day Baptist ministers preaching in Ashchurch, John Cowell, referred to as John Cowell of Natton, and John Purser.<sup>12</sup> It would appear that there was some friction between the two and, whilst Cowell was the principal preacher at Natton, Purser preached in Aston on Carrant, where he lived, and the surrounding area. Cowell was a cordwainer who lived and ran a substantial business in Tewkesbury. He was joint elder with John Brian of the town's First Day Baptist church, originally three cottages in an alley on the north side of Church Street, but by 1661 he had adopted the doctrine of the Seventh Day Sabbath. Cowell was very much a literary man and it is clear that many of his ideas were influenced by the writing of contemporary clergymen. He was also an avid writer himself. His courage and dedication to his beliefs are substantiated in the publication in 1664 of his book entitled *A Beam of Sabbath Light*, which defined and defended his position in the same year as the passing of the Conventicle Act, and his *Divine Oracles* published shortly after. An indication of the danger of legal persecution in these times is reflected in the Tewkesbury Baptist church book, where the entries for 1663 were made in cipher to protect the members,<sup>13</sup> and the consequent flight to the New World by another Seventh Day Baptist, Stephen Mumford.

Mumford's name and that of Sister Mumford appear in the cipher entry of the Tewkesbury Baptist church book but he was certainly a Seventh Day Keeper and member of the Natton church, possibly under the guidance of John Cowell.<sup>14</sup> Mumford arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1664 in the company of Robert Ayres of Gotherington, who allegedly married Mumford's daughter Katharine. Whilst still maintaining his observance of the Seventh Day Sabbath, Mumford became a member of the First Day Baptist church in Newport. Described as a 'Sabbatarian Baptist Evangelist' he built up a small following and thereafter First and Seventh Day Baptists worshipped together, following the example of the earlier churches in Natton and Tewkesbury. By 1669, however, elders of the Newport church complained about the 'divided'

church and spoke out against Mumford and his followers. The situation worsened, until the Sabbath-keeping group refused to take communion, were called before the church for neglect and consequently excluded from the church in December 1671. As a result on 3 January 1672 Stephen Mumford and six followers formed the Newport Seventh Day Baptist church. It would seem conclusive that through the evangelism of Stephen Mumford the early Natton Sabbatarian meeting became the mother church of the first Seventh Day Baptist church of America. This church grew from strength to strength and still flourished in 1995.

John Cowell, however, was to take a different course of action. He was not alone in following the Sabbath of the Seventh Day and associated doctrines. Throughout the period the subject of adherence to the First or Seventh Day Sabbath was argued locally and nationally, largely through the channels of theological publications. This culminated for Cowell in the publication 'at the Crane in St. Paul's Churchyard' in 1677 of his book entitled *The Snare Broken* and subtitled *Being a true and faithful account of the author's grounds for leaving off the Sabbath of the First or Old Covenant: Wherein his 'Beam of Legal-Covenant-Light' is darkened by the more clear shining forth of Gospel Light and Truth.*<sup>15</sup> Cowell justified writing the book by expressing his desire to revoke several things he had written in *A Beam of Sabbath Light* (this was withdrawn and all copies seem to have disappeared) and to defend himself against the charge of 'self-seeking' of which he had been accused since ceasing to observe the Seventh Day Sabbath. He began the book by saying that since joining the Faith in 1661 he had been increasingly troubled by the writings of several Sabbatarians, particularly *The Propositions & Queries* of Christopher Pooey and Edward Skipp published in 1664, in which the observations of the whole of the Old Testament laws were advocated, including circumcision, offerings and sacrifices. Cowell maintained that he had warned against such practices in *Divine Oracles*, but that he had still upheld his own principles of Sabbath keeping of which 'I heartily repent me of'. He wrote of confusion amongst Seventh Day Sabbath keepers by 1668 as to exactly what constituted the Sabbath, some keeping part of the sixth and part of the seventh day and others keeping part of the seventh and part of the first day. This confusion grew steadily in the Tewkesbury area until a Mr. Gretrix, 'who lived not far from town', asserted that as Christ rose on a Tuesday the true Sabbath was therefore on a Monday, Resurrection being on the morning after the Sabbath. Cowell maintained that arguments of this kind were made a corner-stone of Sabbatarian church fellowship. He was, however, further disturbed in 1671 when a Tewkesbury woman denied the existence of Jesus Christ and the New Testament and only accepted the Bible from Exodus to Malachi. These trends toward the strict observance of Old Testament doctrines and the Laws given to Moses were followed by notable Sabbatarians, one being Edward Stennett, who in his book *The Seventh-Day is the Sabbath*, published in 1664, advocated the death penalty for the breaking of any of the Ten Commandments, including the non-observance of the Sabbath.

In response Cowell answered that the Laws of the Old Covenant were given exclusively to the Jews and were superseded by the Laws of Jesus Christ and, after much exploration of the New Testament, he stated he could find no justification in upholding his previous beliefs. He appears to have considered Sabbatarians eccentric and dangerous, advocating laws of bondage and punishment as opposed to Christian liberty and forgiving. Throughout the *The Snare Broken*, Cowell's arguments are continually backed by biblical reference and there is a strong element of desire for public credibility. His changing beliefs did not appear to affect his position within the Tewkesbury Baptist church where he continued as elder. In 1672 the Baptist property in Tewkesbury was apparently conveyed to John Cowell.<sup>16</sup> By his will dated 20 July 1680<sup>17</sup> he bequeathed to his son John 'all my house with the Appurtenances that I bought of Joseph Bradford'.

John Cowell died on 31 July 1680 and was buried in the Baptist burial ground behind the Baptist chapel in Tewkesbury. His gravestone carried the following epitaph:



His glas being run to rest hees gone  
 Who was a labourer in ye ministry  
 Sinners unto Christ for to bring home  
 In opening of the gospel mistery

### *Growth*

Although the matter of the keeping of the First Day Sabbath appears to have been resolved in Tewkesbury, John Purser of Aston on Carrant remained faithful to the keeping of the Seventh Day. At Cowell's death Purser took sole charge of the congregation at Natton. He originally came from a wealthy and influential family but was disinherited by his father because of his Sabbatarian beliefs.<sup>18</sup> He did, however, become a prosperous farmer in his own right and served the church faithfully until his death in 1720. According to an enquiry of 1719<sup>19</sup> there were 20 Seventh Day Baptists in Ashchurch and a congregation of 40 Baptists, possibly Seventh Day, in nearby Oxenton, under John Purser. He had a large family, all of whom followed him with regard to their religious observance.

Joseph Hatch, curate of Ashchurch from 1692 until 1731, clearly kept an eye on nonconformity within his parish. A page at the back of the parish register was headed 'Dissenters' and recorded the births, not baptisms, of ten children between 1696 and 1709, five of whom were members of the Purser family. The first, rather pointed entry on 3 March 1696 was 'Mary daughter of Samuel Purser and Mary his reputed wife was borne', possibly a reference to a marriage that had not taken place in the church.<sup>20</sup>

In 1718, after the limited freedom extended to nonconformists by way of the 1689 Toleration Act, Purser's youngest son Benjamin bought a farmhouse and land at Natton and fitted up an L-shaped wing adjoining the house to be used as a chapel. Whether the house was used for worship before this date is not known for certain. It is possible, however, that it was the house purchased by Samuel Hawling, mercer of Tewkesbury in 1691, and referred to as 'all that one capital message or mansion house'.<sup>21</sup> The house passed by way of Thomas Hawling to Samuel's grandson, also Samuel, who by 1710 was building a two storey addition.<sup>22</sup> Evidence from many other sources confirms that the Hawlings were one of the early Tewkesbury/Ashchurch Baptist families. On 16 September 1746 a request was made to Martin Benson, bishop of Gloucester, to register the house at Natton as a place of worship. The certificate was signed by Samuel Wells, Benjamin Purser, Thomas Pope and Benjamin Hudson and the chapel was registered the following day (Fig. 2).

Benjamin Purser, a yeoman, wrote his will on 23 September 1756.<sup>23</sup> At the time he was living with his niece Hannah Purser at Bredon's Hardwick and was 62 years old. His wife Mary had died in June 1756 aged 69. The marriage appears to have been childless, an unusual occurrence in the normally prolific Purser family. The prime concern in Benjamin's will was the continuation of the Sabbatarian movement that his father had established at Natton. His first bequest was for the payment of a £5 annual rent charge from his freehold message, tenements, lands and premises at Natton to the minister preaching at Natton on the Seventh Day. It was to be paid in two equal instalments on 25 March and 29 September, with power to the minister to enter the premises and to distrain in the event of non-payment. Benjamin stipulated that the ministers should always be chosen by the members of the Natton Sabbatarian meeting, and he ordered that the largest lower room 'which is set apart' and the gallery over it in the house at Natton were to be used solely as a room for the minister to preach in. He willed that a piece of ground nearby, which he had enclosed, was to be used only as a 'Burying Place' with the way or passage leading to it.

To His Most Excellent Bishop of the Diocese  
of Gloucester

These are to certify your Lordship that some of his  
Majesties protestant Dissenting Subjects intend  
to hold a Meeting for the Worship of Almighty  
God at a House fitted for that purpose at Natton  
in the Parish of Red-Church in the County of  
Gloucester and desire the same may be registered  
according to the Act of Toleration in the Reign of  
King William and Queen Mary in that Case made  
and provided as contents our Warrants this 16. Day  
of Sept. 1746.

Sam. Wells  
B<sup>ty</sup> Purser  
Thos Raps  
Benj. Hudson

17<sup>th</sup> September 1746

The above Certificate was duly registered in the Registry of the  
said Bishop of Gloucester by me

The Branch Stary Publick

Fig. 2 Certificate registering the Natton chapel, 1746 (Glos. R.O., D 4944/10/1/1).

Benjamin also made various bequests to members of the Purser family, including his sister Rachael, Samuel Purser of Pamington, Sam Purser of Cowfield Farm in Northway, John Purser of Homedowns and Isaac Purser of Walton Cardiff. Also in receipt of bequests were members of the Green family of Elmstone Hardwicke, John Clarke of London (his sister Elizabeth's son), Phillip Jones (then pastor of the Upton upon Severn church) and members of the Finch, Alsop, West, Witts and Agg families. He stipulated that all beneficiaries should be observers of the Seventh Day Sabbath, and that should they cease to be so they would forfeit their legacy. The names of the beneficiaries of Benjamin's will are important in that they probably constituted a large part of the Natton congregation before and after 1756; families named Finch, Witts and Alsop remained members of the congregation after 1865.

Benjamin left all his freehold 'messuages, lands, tenements, hereditaments and premises at Natton or elsewhere in the County of Gloucester' to his nephew Isaac Purser of Walton Cardiff, son of his late brother Isaac. After Isaac's death the estate was to pass to his lawfully begotten male heirs and, it was stressed, only to male heirs 'who are in the Belief and Observation of the Seventh Day Sabbath'. In the event of no such male heirs the estate was to pass to other branches of the Purser family, each with the same hereditary stipulations and obligations. Benjamin Purser died on 4 February 1757 and was buried alongside his wife Mary in the graveyard at Natton, 100 yards behind the farmhouse.

In the late summer of 1991 the writer of this article visited the burial ground at Natton. Many years' growth of brambles and nettles covered the western half, completely obscuring all of the oldest headstones which were in that area. The burial ground was carefully cleared to reveal all the headstones, which were cleaned and their transcriptions transcribed with the invaluable help of Julian Rawes and George Cryer. The memorial survey, completed in the spring of 1992, is given below in the appendix.

In 1910, when it was probably the only original Seventh Day Baptist chapel standing in England, the Natton meeting house was described as being 'to all intents and purposes a part of the farmhouse which it adjoins. It is built of brick and wood, once with a thatched roof. The room is a small one not capable of seating over 35 people at most, it contains a small high pulpit, a communion table, a fireplace, a sedilium (seat) below the pulpit for the clerk. The entrance is thru the dooryard of the farmhouse'.<sup>24</sup> In 1991 Mrs. Key, a resident of Natton, remembered and also described a small half-galleried chapel with a stairway, pulpit and pews. The total area of the chapel measured 260 square feet and there was a separate entrance from the house at the side of the building (Fig. 3). A unique feature was that the only passage for a funeral was through the house, kitchen garden and orchard.

The headstones in the first row at Natton are set chronologically from south to north (Fig. 4). The second headstone is dated 1746 and so it seems reasonable to assume that the first headstone predates it. There is no record of the burial in 1720 of John Purser of Natton in the parish churchyard of Ashchurch and no evidence of his burial at Tewkesbury. One would have thought that when his father died Benjamin would have wanted him to be buried at Natton. It would seem plausible that the first headstone marks John Purser's grave, and that the epitaph is a message to his descendants who were to follow his unusual faith for a further two hundred years.

Long have I wish'd to see my Saviour . . .  
 And you may hope my soul is gone to Joy;  
 May you my children and your Offspring know  
 The grace of Christ & see his glory too;  
 May you live here as tho' you liv'd above  
 Where every word & every thought is Joye.





Fig. 3 View of the Natton farmhouse and chapel before 1930. James George Purser is on the left.

Study of the wills of known nonconformists during this period has revealed a formula whereby the soul of the testator was initially commended to Almighty God rather than to Jesus Christ and the body left to the ground or to the earth, instead of the conventional request to be buried in the parish churchyard.<sup>25</sup> Several other Ashchurch wills of the time followed the same pattern. There are no entries in the parish register for the burials of John Purse (1682)<sup>26</sup> and Nicholas Ockley (1686)<sup>27</sup> of Pamington, Thomas Hawling (1697)<sup>28</sup> of Natton, Ezra Green (1714)<sup>29</sup> and Joseph Green (1717)<sup>30</sup> of Pamington, John Morris (1735)<sup>31</sup> of Natton and Sarah Morris (1746).<sup>32</sup> No bequests to the parish or its church were made in their wills, although Thomas Hawling bequeathed 10s. to the Baptist community 'in and around Tewkesbury' and Sarah Morris gave 10s. a year for life to John Phillip Jones, an elder of the Upton upon Severn Baptist church and pastor of Natton from 1727. The wills are witnessed by known or suspected nonconformists, the Greens' wills by John Purser and other wills by members of the Hawling, Strafford and Haynes families. Such evidence suggests that there was a group of nonconformist, and almost certainly Baptist, families in late 17th-century and early 18th-century Ashchurch. A diocesan survey of 1735<sup>33</sup> records a total population in Ashchurch of 400 including 24 Sabbatarians and Congregationalists. According to a similar survey in 1750<sup>34</sup> the population included 26 Sabbatarians meeting on Saturdays. One question arising from the evidence is whether the burial ground at Natton predates 1720 and is in fact of a similar age to the Baptist cemetery at Tewkesbury. A fuller study of Ashchurch wills of the period, combined with other relevant information, will provide further evidence on this point.

After John Purser's death in 1720 Edmund Townsend succeeded as minister of Natton. He arrived from London where he had previously worshipped at the Seventh Day Baptist church at Pinner's Hall, Old Broad Street. His success as a minister is illustrated by the fact that he was recalled to London in 1727, at the death of Joseph Stennett, and was chosen to lead the church at its new premises in Currier's Hall, Cripplegate.<sup>35</sup> Phillip Jones of Cheltenham was asked to officiate at Natton after the departure of Townsend. Jones is recorded as a man of 'untiring energy and commitment', having several and regular widespread preaching stations, and is credited with increasing the Natton congregation to between thirty and forty during his term as pastor. He served a Baptist congregation at Upton upon Severn (possibly Seventh Day) from 1731 and the congregation at Natton from 1727 until his death in 1770.<sup>36</sup>

By that time a link had been formed, by way of the Joseph Davis charity, between the church at Natton and the Seventh Day General Baptist church at Mill Yard, Goodman's Fields, London.<sup>37</sup> Joseph Davis, born at Chipping Norton (Oxon.) in August 1627, was the son of a magistrate. He was allegedly founder of the Sabbatarian sect in England in the mid 17th century and was imprisoned at Oxford in 1670 for his religious beliefs. He was released by the pardon of Charles II in 1672, along with John Bunyan and hundreds of other Protestant dissenters. In 1705, while he was a member of the Mill Yard Seventh Day Baptist church, he bought the manor of Little Maplestead in Essex. By his will dated 5<sup>th</sup> May 1706 he bequeathed the manor and fourteen houses in Shadwell (Mdx.), subject to certain life interests of his son Joseph, to seven members of the Mill Yard church in trust. After the elder Joseph Davis's death, the property at Mill Yard was conveyed in 1717 to the trustees, to permit the large meeting house there to be used forever by dissenting Protestants meeting for religious worship every seventh day. The trustees were directed to pay the minister £6 a year and to distribute the surplus income from the property to the poor of the congregation. The deed also appointed nine other trustees, one of whom was the minister, with power to revoke or alter the trusts. Joseph Davis the son died in 1731 leaving no heirs and the whole estate was vested in the trustees. Another deed was drawn up in 1755 to distribute the rents from the properties at Maplestead, Shadwell and Mill Yard. Along with other allowances, £5 a year was to be paid to each of the ministers of the eight Seventh Day Baptist congregations in England, one of which was at Natton.

Natton was also attracting charitable bequests locally, from members of the congregation. By will proved 27 February 1758 Samuel Purser, yeoman of Cowfield Farm, left the residue of his estate in trust to be 'placed out at Interest on Government or some good real Security'.<sup>38</sup> Half of this bequest was to be paid to the minister of the 'Society of Sabbatarians usually meeting for divine worship at Natton' and his successors, and the other half to poor members of the congregation at the discretion of the trustees. Samuel also directed that at the death of any of the trustees a successor should be chosen by the survivors from within the Society. The original trustees were Isaac Purser, Isaac Haynes, Thomas Townsend and John Purser of Homedowns. Five acres of meadowland in Apperley, near Tewkesbury, were bought with the revenue from the bequest, the rents from that land thereafter being paid to the chapel at Natton. Both Samuel Purser and his wife Elizabeth were buried in the graveyard at Natton.

Mary Haynes, widow of Stoke Orchard in Bishop's Cleeve, left £100 in trust by will dated 3 January 1774<sup>39</sup> to be similarly invested. The interest was to be paid to the 'Minister for the Time being of the Society commonly called the Sabbatarians or the Seventh Day people that usually meet for divine service at Natton in the parish of Ashchurch to which Society I belong and to his Successor for Ever'. Again the trustees were directed to replace from within the Society any trustee who died. The original trustees were John Ryland of Pershore, Samuel Alsop of Stoke Orchard, Joseph Purser of The Smow in Ashchurch and Joseph Alsop the

younger of Bristol but previously of Walton Cardiff, near Tewkesbury. The bequest was used to acquire more land, just over five acres at Twynning, near Tewkesbury, known variously as Mog Ditches and Dog Ditches and, in 1917, Natton Doles.<sup>40</sup> The burial at Natton of a Mrs. Haines was recorded on 29 January 1774.

In September 1783 John Purser of Natton left his estate, after his wife's decease or second marriage, in trust for his children to John Ryland, a schoolmaster, and Thomas Hiller.<sup>41</sup> Hiller was the nephew of Phillip Jones and from May 1769 minister of the Tewkesbury Baptist church. He professed to be a Seventh Day Keeper and accepted the invitation to the pastorate of Natton, thereby reviving the previous union between the two congregations under John Cowell. An additional benefit for a Tewkesbury minister officiating at Natton was that he would also receive annuities from the Joseph Davis and other charities. After his death in 1790 Hiller was credited in the Tewkesbury Baptist minute book as being 'universally respected and regretted'.<sup>42</sup> He was reputedly buried at Natton but no memorial was found in the survey of 1992.

Thomas Hiller kept a detailed record of his activities at Natton in the back of one of the Tewkesbury church's registers.<sup>43</sup> Between 1771 and 1785 he recorded 14 funerals and burials at Natton. For nine of those no memorials were found and they are therefore not recorded in the survey. They took place on 11 March 1771, 6 March 1779 (Mr. Haynes), 15 April 1779, 29 January 1774 (Mrs. Haines), 5 July 1777 (Mrs. Turner), 13 March 1779 (Mrs. Purser), 26 February 1780 (Mrs. Ryland), 17 February 1781 (Mrs. Lan) and 5 February 1785 (Samuel Purser). On 15 March 1777 Hiller recorded a wedding service, but unfortunately gave no names or details, probably because it would have been illegal under Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754.

A detailed record of the dates of all the weekly services held at Natton from 1769 until a month before Hiller's death in June 1790 was also kept. The number of services each year ranged from 34 to 49, with 45 being the average. Most services were held on a Saturday, with only 35 out of the total of 787 being held on a Sunday. These figures would seem to indicate a thriving Baptist community with a firm commitment to the keeping of the Seventh Day.

No record of baptisms at Natton appears in Joseph Hiller's Tewkesbury register. Hiller did, however, record that Isaac Purser of Natton (an elder of the Natton church) and his wife Hannah were parents to Benjamin (born 7 May 1765), John (2 November 1766), Isaac (1 May 1768), Elizabeth (29 May 1771), Hannah (19 November 1776) and Sarah (31 January 1779), indicating a firm succession of Natton Pursers and a continuing link with the Natton church.

By 1811 all the trustees of the Joseph Davis charity except one were dead. Disputes between the surviving trustee and the beneficiaries of the charity resulted in a lawsuit in which it was decided that only three of the original eight Sabbatarian congregations survived, Mill Yard, Cripplegate and Natton. In 1823 a Scheme redefining the terms of the charity was approved in Chancery; under it £60 a year was awarded to the minister of Natton and £30 a year was assigned for distribution among the poor of his congregation.<sup>44</sup>

A period of approximately 45 years elapsed from Hiller's death until Natton again had a regular Seventh Day Baptist minister. It is probable that services were conducted either by the First Day Baptist minister from Tewkesbury or by deacons of the Natton church, the latter invariably being members of the Purser family. In the same period, until *c.* 1835, a close link continued with the Tewkesbury church. Baptisms took place at Tewkesbury of persons who were to leave the town meeting and join the Natton congregation in the years 1835-40. Whether these transfers of allegiance were due to a strengthening of the Natton church once it again had its own regular minister, to the incentive of charitable payments in the region of £6 a year, or to the fact that Natton accepted as members those who had been dismissed from elsewhere is impossible to say.

The Tewkesbury Baptist church's register contains an entry made for John Fincher of Tewkesbury, who was baptised and received into the church on 17 July 1796 at the age of 10. He

was suspended from communion in April 1804 'on account of an arrest for Debt'. He was restored to full membership in June 1806, but was excluded again on 5 February 1820 accused of Socinianism. John Fincher died 26 years later on 8 February 1846 aged 60 and was buried in the Natton graveyard with the following epitaph:

Mark Reader well the upright man of God  
Tread the same path that upright Fincher trod.

John Fincher's wife was in receipt of regular payments from the Joseph Davis charity from 1836. James Eaton of Tewkesbury was received into the Tewkesbury Baptist congregation on 25 November 1802 but was suspended for non-attendance in November 1836. He died in September 1851 and was buried at Natton as were his first and second wives and eight of his children. James Eaton was in regular receipt of payments from the Joseph Davis charity as a poor member of the Natton congregation from 1846 until his death. Henry Matty of Tewkesbury was baptised and received into the Tewkesbury congregation on 17 July 1796. He was made a deacon on 5 September 1817. He was excluded from the church on 30 November 1835 for non-attendance, but was restored to membership in December 1839. By 1836 Matty had pastoral oversight of the Natton congregation and was receiving £20 a year from the Joseph Davis charity.<sup>45</sup>

The Pursers were a wealthy family and by the 1830s they had acquired and occupied more property and land in Ashchurch mainly at Homedowns Farm and Smow Farm.<sup>46</sup> Successive members of the family continued to occupy the farmhouse at Natton as well as other property in the hamlet. In April 1835 Joseph Purser of Natton bequeathed the cottage and garden 'wherein I now live' at Natton to his nephew Isaac Purser of Newton, in Ashchurch.<sup>47</sup> Isaac Purser had been baptised into the Tewkesbury church in August 1818 but was excluded for non-attendance in November 1835,<sup>48</sup> the date coinciding with his inheritance of the Natton property and almost certain admittance to the Natton church.

### *Decline*

In April 1840 Benjamin Purser, farmer of Natton made a will which was to break the succession within the family of male inheritance and adherence to the Seventh Day observance begun in 1756.<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Purser had been baptised into the Tewkesbury congregation in September 1838 but had been excluded from it in October 1840 for not being lawfully married to the woman with whom he lived.<sup>50</sup> According to his will, however, Elizabeth was his second wife and to her he bequeathed the homestead and estate at Natton, which was to pass on her death to his eldest son Benjamin. For the protection of the chapel and congregation the older Benjamin required 'the maintenance at all times of a good road or way across the Court Yard to the Meeting House there' with the positive restriction 'that no part of the said premises shall ever be used as a Public House or Beer Shop or otherwise to the annoyance of the persons assembling in the said meeting house'. Elizabeth was named as executrix in the will and William Potter, shopkeeper, of Tewkesbury and Isaac Purser of Ashchurch were appointed as trustees. By January 1842 Elizabeth, who was not a Sabbath Keeper, had died and in November 1843 Benjamin wrote a codicil naming the two trustees as executors in her place and charging them with responsibility for dividing the estate between his eldest son and Elizabeth's seven children by a previous marriage. Benjamin died in 1845. The effect of his will must have certainly been a breakdown in the previous close management by the Purser family of the Seventh Day society at Natton.



An account book for this period, however, shows that day to day activity in maintaining the chapel and burial ground and in helping the poor of the congregation continued unaffected.<sup>51</sup> In December 1849 £2 10s. 0d. was paid for an iron gate for the graveyard. By June 1841 it had been decided to rebuild the wall around the graveyard at a total cost of £77 8s. 2d. For that work 2,000 bricks were bought and several men were paid for their labour. In October 1844 bills totalling £20 were paid for repairs to the chapel. Among church members in receipt of charitable payments between 1836 and 1847 were Mrs. Fincher, James Eaton, W. Purser, Mary Harvey, William Pratten and Martha Davies. The account book also shows that Henry Matty was paid regularly, every quarter, for discharging his duties as pastor until his death, at the age of 75, on 14 December 1845. The Natton church book contains only one entry for Matty's term as pastor.<sup>52</sup> It records a decision made by members at a meeting on 25 January 1845 to procure a new book as the old church book had been lost and could not be found 'after diligent search being made'. The old church book has never been found and the reason for, and the manner of, its disappearance remain a mystery.

From June 1846 the quarterly salary for the oversight of Natton was paid to the Revd. John Francis. He had been minister of the Particular Baptist church at nearby Westmancote (Worcs.) since 1842 and he continued to live in Worcestershire with his wife and children. Francis kept the Natton church book carefully, recording the names of new members and the dates of their admittance to the congregation.<sup>53</sup> On 7 March 1846 his wife was admitted along with William Pratten after giving satisfactory accounts of their religious views and their belief in the Seventh Day being the Sabbath. In the same month Martha Davies, having repented and professed her faith in Christ, was baptised into the congregation. This was the first of only two admittances by baptism performed by Francis at Natton, although other people previously baptised elsewhere were admitted. In March 1846 Isaac Purser of Natton, executor and trustee of Benjamin Purser's will and a former member of the Tewkesbury church, was unanimously elected to the office of deacon. Mary Harvey, previously baptised at Westmancote, was admitted in May 1847 and the death of Susannah Eaton was recorded in January 1848.

On 4 April 1849 an indenture was made<sup>54</sup> whereby Thomas Williams Chandler, a Tewkesbury coal merchant, and Lawrence Chandler, a hosier, sold part of an orchard in the nearby village of Kinsham (Worcs.) to trustees for £30. The trustees, twelve in number, were to hold the land for the erection of a chapel or meeting house to be used by 'a congregation of Protestant Dissenters of the sect or denomination commonly called Particular or Calvinistic Baptists' living in Kinsham and surrounding settlements. The land was next to the house called Kinsham Villa in which John Francis took up residence before October 1867. Francis was surely aware of the purchase, but there appears to have been no funds readily available for building a chapel at Kinsham and providing a salary for a minister there. As minister of the Natton church Francis received a salary of £60 a year and annuities from the Purser and Haynes charities.

It is clear that Isaac Purser acted as treasurer to the Natton church. He was responsible for the payment of the minister's salary and workmen's bills and various other expenses concerning the chapel. The church accounts also show that in March 1848 he was paid for cleansing and planting the bank at the burial ground. From 1848 to 1855 the sum of £4 6s. 8d. was paid annually to him for distribution to the poor, that amount being the rent received for the land at Apperley.<sup>55</sup>

By the time of the death of James Eaton in September 1851 and the admittance of Sarah Jaynes the following month,<sup>56</sup> the congregation at Natton had dwindled in number to only 12.<sup>57</sup> The small congregation, however, apparently decided no longer to endure cold winter meetings and in January 1852 it bought and installed a stove at a cost of £3 19s. 5d. John Purser of Tewkesbury, baptised by Francis at Westmancote in May 1852, was admitted to the Natton church the following month on the recommendation of Isaac Purser. Martha Sheldon was



baptised at Natton and received into the church in May 1853. In December 1853 John Francis the younger was admitted at his own request and before 25 January 1854 he was chosen as co-deacon with Isaac Purser.<sup>58</sup> By 1857 the congregation had fallen to ten, its members being Mary Francis, John Francis the younger, Isaac Purser, John Purser, Mary Harvey, Sarah Jaynes, Martha Sheldon, Martha Davies, Sarah Witts and William Pratten. Mary Franklin of Westmancote became a member of the church in October 1858 and Bentley and Susannah Mansell were admitted in May 1859. Bentley Mansell was elected a deacon of the church two weeks after his admittance. Between 1858 and 1865 four members died; Sarah Witts and William Pratten in June and September 1858 respectively, Isaac Purser in May 1864 and Mary Franklin in May 1865. On 5 August 1866 a letter was received by the pastor John Francis from J.R. Parker of the Particular Baptist church at Upton upon Severn, honourably dismissing Francis's two daughters from the Upton church to the fellowship of the Natton church. Emmie and Sarah Francis were received into the Natton church on the same day and the admittance of Diana Franklin in July 1867 brought the congregation back to 12 in number, being Mary Francis, John Francis the younger, Emmie Francis, Sarah Francis, John Purser, Bentley Mansell, Susannah Mansell, Mary Harvey, Sarah Jaynes, Martha Sheldon, Martha Davies and Diana Franklin. Four of the congregation were members of the pastor's family and the other eight had been admitted by Francis, two having been baptised at Natton and six having been 'received' almost certainly from the Westmancote church. All the old members, including Isaac Purser, had died and the two remaining deacons were Francis's son and Bentley Mansell, a close follower of Francis. Francis had gained control of the Natton church by means of the congregation, the only remaining link with Tewkesbury being John Purser.

There are no more entries in the Natton church book by John Francis after 18 July 1867. The next entry, dated 21 December 1867, was made by Thomas Wilkinson, minister of the Tewkesbury Baptist church, who had accepted the pastorate of Natton on 5 November. Between July and October a split had occurred within the Natton church as a result of quarrels regarding the admission of new members. Wilkinson recorded that Francis had been expelled and implied that Francis or his wife were responsible for the disappearance of the communion service, of the keys of the library and of the church book.<sup>59</sup> John Francis continued to act as a minister of the Seventh Day Baptist church and held services in his home in Kinsham. He had notices printed informing the congregation and any other interested parties of the new place and time of worship. Bentley and Susannah Mansell, Diana Franklin and Francis's family constituted the new congregation at Kinsham. Francis made his ideas quite clear regarding the rules for admittance to his new congregation in the Kinsham church book in which he wrote that 'Baptism by Imersion be not considered a condition of membership', with the proviso that anyone insisting on the right to baptism should receive it, and that 'the Communion at the Table of the Lord be considered the test or badge of Church membership'.<sup>60</sup>

The remnant of the congregation at Natton in December 1867 consisted of the minister Thomas Wilkinson, the deacon John Purser, Mary Upstone, Eliza Witts and Martha Sheldon. Various meetings were held during 1868 and members who had joined the Kinsham congregation were dismissed for non-attendance, after being given reasonable notice of dates and times of services continuing at Natton. Once again the Joseph Davis charity, which had increased considerably in value, was in dispute, as both Francis and Wilkinson claimed the minister's salary as well as the allowance for the poor of their respective congregations. At the end of the usual church service on 9 January 1869 a meeting was held in the Natton chapel at which Wilkinson read to the members a letter from Francis requesting that the matter be settled amicably. The congregation gave Wilkinson full power to come to an arrangement with Francis which would preserve all their rights and privileges as members, would give Francis a

salary for his lifetime or otherwise as Wilkinson thought fit, would confirm Francis's severance from the Natton church both as minister and member and would confirm Wilkinson as minister of Natton. No satisfactory agreement was reached. The charity's trustees applied to the Charity Commission for guidance and were advised that the matter should go to court for direction. The trustees proposed a scheme for the court's consideration and on 6 March a meeting was held at Natton to consider a letter received by Wilkinson from the trustees setting out their proposals. The congregation's response was unanimous. It would not consent to any division of the allowance for the poor from the Davis charity and would prefer to await judgement as to who should receive it. The congregation also rejected any future proposal to build and endow a chapel at Kinsham out of the funds of the Davis charity and it was content to await a judge's decision as to who was legally their minister, Wilkinson or Francis.<sup>61</sup>

Another meeting was held at Natton on 17 July at which Wilkinson read the proposals he had been asked to make regarding the distribution of the Davis charity. Wilkinson's proposals were that

- 1 – the gross annual income of the Joseph Davis charity was in the region of £700 and a considerable surplus fund was in existence,
- 2 – a sum should be set aside annually for the repair and management of the Natton estate,
- 3 – no churches other than Mill Yard and Natton should receive anything from the charity,
- 4 – the division of the income between Mill Yard and Natton should be equitable,
- 5 – the Mill Yard income should be apportioned according to the wishes of Mill Yard,
- 6 – the income for Natton should include an adequate salary for the minister, relief for the poor and provision for incidental expenses,
- 7 – the payment of poor relief should be made by the church itself and not by the trustees or the 'caprice' of the minister,
- 8 – the minister's salary should be shared by Francis and Wilkinson and in event of Francis's death Wilkinson was to receive the whole,
- 9 – the legal expenses of all parties should be paid from the surplus fund, and
- 10 – that eight new trustees be appointed, and that of these two should be the ministers of Natton and Mill Yard and three should be nominated from each congregation.

The congregation was in full agreement with these proposals and it gave Wilkinson the authority to expand or modify them on its behalf. It agreed to abide by the terms that he and the other parties to the suit should finally agree.<sup>62</sup>

On Wednesday 15 June 1870 the case concerning Joseph Davis's charity came up in Chancery. The Vice-Chancellor heard the evidence put before him and referred back to the principles established in the lawsuit leading to the Scheme of 1823. He decided that the proposals put forward by the charity's trustees were in accordance with the earlier judgement.<sup>63</sup> Under those proposals both the congregations of Natton and Kinsham, as well as that of Mill Yard, were to benefit from the charity. Francis's salary was to be raised to £140, Wilkinson's salary was to remain at £60, and £30 a year was to be allowed to the poor of each congregation. Francis was content with the proposals, but Wilkinson's counsel insisted on his client's right to a larger stipend. The salary of the Mill Yard minister was to be raised to £220, although it was noted that out of a congregation of nineteen only seven were resident in England, the other twelve being in America or China.<sup>64</sup> Mr. Wickens, appearing for the Attorney General, commented in court on the results of leaving large endowments for the propagation of the beliefs of particular sects and opined that such congregations had merely been kept in existence 'by these doles'. He considered that in dividing the funds too much had been given to the ministers, but the Vice-

Chancellor answered that he did not consider the salaries suggested by the trustees extravagant and confirmed his approval of their proposals.

The different reactions of the two congregations to the Vice-Chancellor's rulings were reflected in the church books of the two congregations. In the Natton book a short entry, dated 2 July 1870, records the meeting at which Wilkinson reported the conclusions of the Chancery proceedings to the members.<sup>65</sup> Their only complaint, on what must have been a crushing result, was that arrears for the charitable payments were to be paid at a rate of less than £30 a year. A letter to the trustees was signed by the minister and the church pressing for the full amount of the arrears to be paid from September 1867 to June 1870, and it was agreed that all the money for the poor should be paid to the minister and distributed by him.

A report of the Chancery case, along with a brief history of the Sabbatarian sect in England, was given as an introduction to the Kinsham church book.<sup>66</sup> The only reference to the schism of 1867 was that it was 'in consequence of some unpleasantness that arose'. There was obvious jubilation with the decision regarding the recognition of the Kinsham church and the clearance of all the charges against Francis. It was stated that his position and character were now unquestioned: 'His enemies will I cloth with shame but upon himself shall his Crown flourish'. A short report of the case was published in the *Tewkesbury Register* on 25 June 1870 and in the same issue Francis placed an advertisement acknowledging the kindness of neighbours and friends without whose generous assistance he would not have been able to maintain his family for the past three years. A list of the names of members, their addresses and dates of admission to the church was recorded in the Kinsham church book. By 1875 the congregation had grown to 15 consisting of members from Kinsham, Kemerton, Westmancote, Bredon and Cheltenham. Between 1869 and 1871 a small chapel with a burial ground was built next to Francis's home but it had closed by 1881,<sup>67</sup> the closure coinciding with the date of Francis's death. He died on 13 February 1881 in his 81st year and in the 61st year of his ministry. He was buried in the Methodist burial ground in Kemerton.

The congregation at Natton did not grow, and the account book from 1882 to 1908<sup>68</sup> merely recorded the regular payment of half yearly rents from the lands at Apperley and Twyning. The rents and poor allowance from the Davis charity provided an annual income of £56, which was distributed to four poor members at the rate of £3 10s. 0d. a quarter each, and to three poor members from 1889. Payments of between £5 and £7 to Wilkinson were recorded twice yearly in 1882, 1889, 1892, and 1902 and once in March 1903.

Thomas Wilkinson resigned from the Tewkesbury Baptist church on 19 June 1885 on the grounds of ill health: 'I retire from office not because of difficulties nor because of lessened interest in your welfare, but because the hand of God has incapacitated me from efficient and useful Service'.<sup>69</sup> He was apparently suffering from spinal trouble and his duties at Natton were often performed by a deputy. 'Sometimes when this assistant arrived at Natton he found no audience and then, of course, there was no service for that Sabbath; but when three persons appeared at High noon of a Sabbath-day, he would preach with as much earnestness as though there was an audience of thousands'.<sup>70</sup> In 1901 a complaint that 'Mr. Wilkinson has not been to Natton for years', was recorded in the minute book of the Joseph Davis charity trustees.<sup>71</sup> Wilkinson died in 1903 at the age of nearly 90 years, leaving the Natton church once again without a minister. Thereafter meetings were sustained by John Purser of Tewkesbury, a deacon of the Natton church from 1867, who had been baptised by Francis in 1852. Purser, who was quoted in 1902 as saying that Francis was not a Sabbath Keeper, blamed the decline of the Natton church on the split of 1867 and the Chancery's decision in favour of Kinsham, 'very nearly knocking Natton out altogether'.<sup>72</sup> He considered that Natton would not do well until they had a true Sabbath pastor and only then

would they prosper. He enquired if it would be possible to obtain such a pastor from the United States.

John Purser died on 19 October 1909 aged 88 years. He was buried in the Tewkesbury Baptist graveyard and the service was conducted by T.W. Richardson, pastor of the Mill Yard Seventh Day Baptist church, London, and acting pastor of the Natton church before its demise. At the time of his death John Purser was reported as being the oldest Seventh Day Baptist in England and the longest attendee of the Natton church, having been a member for 57 years.<sup>73</sup>

On 17 January 1908 the Charity Commissioners decreed that the chapel at Natton was no longer registered or used as a place of meeting for religious worship.<sup>74</sup> Due notice was given to the remaining trustees who were William Harris of Church Street, postman, Henry Wilkins of Barton Street, baker, George Yarnell of Barton Street, cabinet maker, all of Tewkesbury, and Herbert Green of Oldbury, carrier, John Osborne of Barton Street, Gloucester, grocer and Alfred Spurrier of Sheffield, silversmith. The trustees administering the charities of the Natton chapel and burial ground were George Clifford of Tewkesbury, grocer, and John Rogers of Barton Street, Tewkesbury. Advertisements were placed in the local newspapers and under a Scheme of the Charity Commissioners the Natton charities were transferred to the trustees of the Tewkesbury Baptist chapel non-educational charities.<sup>75</sup> On 1 February 1908 the communion plate, cup and cloth were handed over to George Clifford. The early 18th-century communion table was transferred to the Tewkesbury Baptist church.<sup>76</sup> The trustees were given permission by the Charity Commissioners to sell the chapel. Half of the income from the investment of the proceeds of the sale, plus part of the income of the remaining charities, was to be used by the trustees for the maintenance of the burial ground. The other half of the investment income was to be paid to John Purser and Eliza Witts, the last two beneficiaries of the charity, and on the death of the survivor to needy members of the Tewkesbury church.<sup>77</sup>

James Purser, son of Benjamin (d. 1845), and his wife Dorothy had lived with their children in the farmhouse adjoining the Natton chapel until their deaths in 1887 and 1897 respectively. In 1908 the house was occupied by James's eldest daughter Mary Ann and her son James George, neither of whom had ever married. On 24 March 1908, a firm of Tewkesbury builders wrote to H. Herring, secretary of the Tewkesbury Baptist church, valuing the old chapel at Natton at £20. Mary Ann Purser wrote to Herring on 30 March offering to pay £10 for the chapel on the grounds that 'it is very old and very much out of Repair and you know that there is really only three walls belonging to the Chappell as the other Wall is belonging to my House'. After further negotiation an agreement was reached on 11 April that Mary Ann Purser would pay £15 for the chapel, providing all expenses were paid out of that sum. The balance of the purchase money was paid to Official Trustees of Charitable Funds. The schedule to the sale simply described a 'piece of land containing 260 sq. ft. or thereabouts, with the building formerly used as a Chapel adjoining the farmhouse at Natton in the occupation of Mrs. Purser'.<sup>78</sup>

Mary Ann Purser died on 3 April 1930 and was buried in the Natton graveyard in the family plot with her parents James and Dorothy. James George Purser, distraught at the death of his mother, never entered the farmhouse again. He moved to another house in Natton and went into partnership with Emily Key, amalgamating their two farms into one, called Natton Farm.<sup>79</sup> James George Purser was an active member of Ashchurch parish council and was always to be seen with a collie dog at his side. He lived at Natton until his death at the age of 73 in January 1947. It was Emily Key's grandson Ron Key, the present owner of Natton Farm, who cleared the lane of snow for the passage of the funeral to the burial ground at Natton.



*Epilogue*

The old Baptist chapel in Chapel Alley, Tewkesbury went out of regular use in 1805. It was restored in the 1970s and was maintained in the early 1900s by the town council and by gratuities from visitors. A strong Seventh Day Baptist movement surviving at Newport, Rhode Island, in the United States, in the early 1990s was undoubtedly descended from followers of Stephen Mumford and other members of the Natton Seventh Day and Tewkesbury First Day Baptist churches, who fled during the time of nonconformist persecution. The chapel at Kinsham reopened in 1904 as a First Day Baptist church and had a small but dedicated congregation in the early 1990s. At that time the Mill Yard church, having changed premises several times, met in Tottenham, London, with a Seventh Day congregation and minister, and the Joseph Davis charity continued its work.

The chapel and farmhouse at Natton, in disrepair and unoccupied from 1930, had finally collapsed by the mid 1950s; a scattering of bricks and a broken stone sink were all that remained in the early 1990s. The burial ground beyond, dominated by a huge and elderly oak tree, was sold by the Tewkesbury Baptist church *c.* 1990 and became the property of the owner of Natton Farm, Ron Key. In 1995 the walls surrounding the ground had collapsed or were crumbling, and sheep and cattle were grazing amongst the graves. Many of the headstones were broken or defaced and the graveyard was in imminent danger of disappearing.

The writer was contacted in the summer of 1993 by John Purser of Cornwall, a direct descendant of John Purser of Natton (d. 1720). She was able to show John the graves and tell him, before his own death, the story of his forefathers. She would like to dedicate this article to him and his family.

## APPENDIX

Inscriptions in the Seventh Day Baptist burial ground at Natton recorded in 1992 by Jackie Perry, Julian Rawes and George Cryer.

Natton is a small hamlet of eight dwellings, farms and cottages, two miles from Tewkesbury, one mile from Ashchurch. It is one mile from everywhere, and leads to nowhere, but here is a chapel entered through Miss Purser's farmyard, a cemetery, where interments are still made, and in which there are some good tombstones. To reach it you must go through the farmhouse, kitchen garden, and orchard; or a wall must be taken down to admit the funeral and rebuilt after the burial. So long as it exists as it now is the old saying will be true – 'Truth is stranger than fiction'.<sup>80</sup>

The historic and remote little burial ground at Natton is all that remains of the one-time flourishing Sabbatarian movement in Ashchurch parish, which once attracted members from as far afield as Upton upon Severn, Bishop's Cleeve and Cheltenham. In the middle of the burial ground is a large and elderly oak, whose branches spread protectively over the graves. The whole is encompassed by a brick wall, which was rebuilt in 1841, although the southern end has collapsed to let in cattle and sheep from the adjacent field. There is an iron gate on the north, clearly the entrance from Miss Purser's kitchen garden and orchard mentioned above. The last burial here, in the winter of 1947, was perhaps fittingly that of James George, the last surviving member of the Purser family in Natton. In the late summer of 1991 the western end was cleared of heavy bramble to reveal the oldest stones, and the inscriptions on the 25 carved memorials remaining in the graveyard (Fig. 4) were recorded.



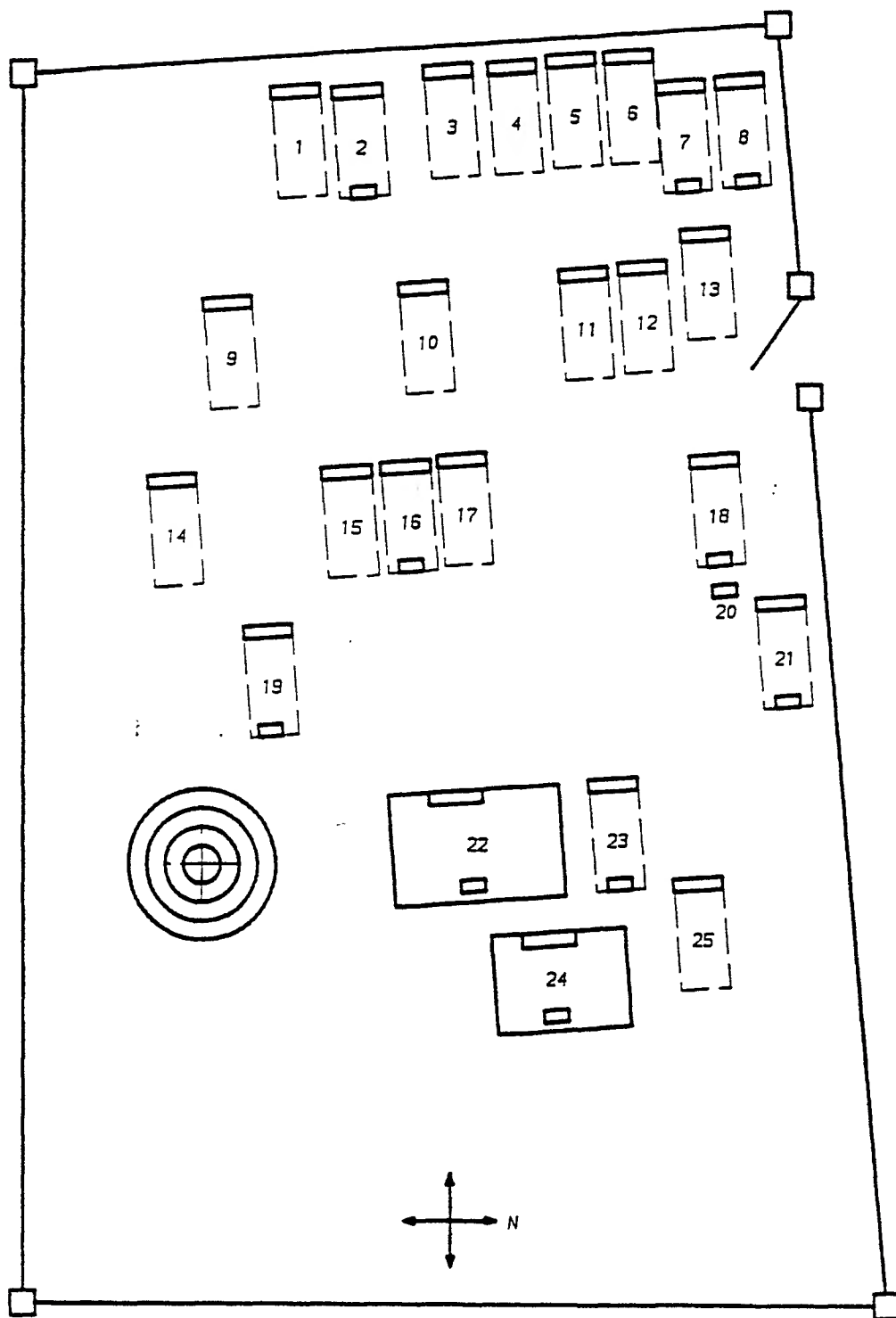


Fig. 4 Plan (not to scale) of the Baptist burial ground at Natton. The graves are numbered according to the survey of 1991-2.

1. Base of headstone with various pieces of top scattered around graveyard.      5. Headstone.

.....  
 .....  
 Long have I wish'd to see my Saviour –  
 And you may hope my soul is gone to Joy:  
 May you my children & your Offspring know.  
 The grace of Christ & see his glory too:  
 May you live here as tho' you liv'd above.  
 Where every word & every thought is Joye.

In Memory  
 of Samuel Purser late of Cowfield  
 Who Departed this Life the 4th day  
 of January 1758 Aged 43 Years.

If meekness Charity and Friendship have:  
 No other Receptacle but a Grave:  
 This Grave has got its share but if they Rise  
 Heav'n has his Soul whilst here his Body lies.

2. Decorated sunken headstone and footstone.

Headstone –  
 In Memory of John  
 Finch he died the 1st March  
 1746 Aged 48 Years.

Short was my time but hope to see  
 A joyfull place prepar'd for me  
 Where Christ and all his Angels sing  
 Sweet Halalujah to their King.

Footstone –  
 J. –  
 1746

6. Headstone – totally illegible.

7. Headstone decorated with urn and footstone.

Headstone –  
 Sacred  
 to the Me[mory of]  
 William Pur[ser son] of  
 Benjamin & Elizabeth Purser  
 Late of Natton  
 who departed this life Nov. 25th 1815  
 In the 22nd year of his age.

Boa.....  
 .....

3. Decorated headstone.

In Memory of Sarah  
 Purser who died June the 27th  
 1751. Aged 60 Years.

Her soul is gone who lov'd the word  
 We hope unto the loving Lord.

also of [George] Purser  
 son of the above  
 Benjamin and Elizabeth Purser  
 Who died March 28[th] –  
 Aged 29 Years.

4. Headstone decorated with faint arch and pillars with winged cherub.

In  
 Memory of  
 Elizabeth Purser  
 the Wife of  
 Samuel Purser  
 of Cowfield in the Parish  
 of Ashchurch she died  
 the 12th of December in  
 1756 Aged 60 Years.

Footstone –  
 W.P. 1815  
 G.P. 1851

For many Years Affliction have attended me  
 Which made me Long my Blessed Jesus for to see.

8. Decorated headstone with footstone.

Headstone –

In Memory of  
Sarah wife of Benjamin Purser  
(of Natton) who departed this life  
July 8th 1810 aged 53 years  
Elizabeth  
Wife of Benjamin.....  
Departed this life.....  
Aged 62.....  
Also the above Benjamin.....  
Depart this life Jan.... ..  
Aged .... Years.

The right[eous] .....

Footstone –

S.P. 1810  
E.P. 1841  
B.P. 1845

+

III

Mason's mark on back of footstone.

9. Decorated headstone.

In Memory of  
George Buckman  
(late of Tewkesbury)  
who died December 6th 1832,  
Aged 69 Years.  
Blessed are the dead which die  
in the Lord.  
Also Sarah Wife of the above  
who died Feb. 7th 1834  
Aged 83 Years.

10. Defaced shaley headstone reading only 'In'.

11. Decorated headstone – defacing.

– Memory of

Mary the Wife of Benjamin Purser  
of Breedon's Hardwick, who departed this  
[life] the 16th day of June 1756  
Aged 69 Years.

.. .. . fore ready also for the Son of Man  
[com]eth at an hour when ye think not.  
Luke 12:40.

Also of the said Benjamin Purser  
– departed this Life the 4th day of Feb.  
1757 Aged 62 Years.

..... taketh away their breath  
..... and are turned again to their dust  
Psalm 104:29.

12. Decorated sunken headstone.

In Memory of Isaac Purser who  
departed this Life Nov. the 9th  
1784 Aged 67 Years.

Lord, I have loved the Habitation of thy  
House and the Place where thine Honour  
Dwelleth. Psalm 26:[8].

13. Decorated headstone – totally illegible.

14. Decorated headstone.

In Memory of  
 Joseph Alsop, who died  
 August 1st 1795 Aged 76 Years  
 also of Elizabeth Alsop  
 Wife of the above who died  
 1782 Aged 60 Years  
 likewise Ann Jones their  
 Daughter, who died April 11th  
 1808 Aged 46 Years.

Blessed are the peace makers: for  
 they shall be called the children of God,  
 Matthew 5:9.

15. Decorated headstone

In Memory of  
 Elizabeth Ryland who departed  
 this Life June the 16th 1782  
 In the 92[nd] Year of her Age.

I have fought a good fight I have finished  
 my Course I have kept the Faith Henceforth  
 there is laid up for me a Crown of  
 righteousness. [2] Timothy 4:7 and 8.

Likewise in Memory of John Ryland  
 Son of the above who (after a Life  
 of many Years Exemplary piety)  
 finish'd his course the 1st July  
 1797 in the 77th Year of his age.  
 The righteous shall be in everlasting  
 Remembrance.  
 Psalm 112:6.

16. Stump of headstone - pieces found by north  
 wall near gate. Possibly a Ryland memorial.

.. Mem .....  
 Samuel ..... and  
 who died Feb 15th 1761  
 Aged 40 -ears.  
 What is y[our] Life: it is even

a Vapour that appeareth a little  
 Time. James 4:14.

Footstone to the above broken.

17. Decorated headstone.

In  
 Memory of  
 Joseph Ryland  
 who died April 7th 1761  
 Aged 44 Years.

By ye therefore ready also. For the  
 Son of Man cometh at an Hour when  
 ye think not. Luke 12:40.

Also of Jane Wife of the above  
 Joseph Ryland, who died May 18th  
 1777 Aged 60 Years.

18. Headstone decorated with urn and footstone.

Headstone -

Sacred  
 To the memory of  
 Elizabeth, wife of  
 John Fincher who departed  
 this life April 29th 1842.  
 Aged 70 Years

But God will redeem my soul from the pow  
 er of the Grave for he shall receive me.  
 Psalm 49:15.

Also of the above  
 John Fincher, who departed  
 this Life Feb. 8th 1846  
 Aged 60 Years.

Mark Reader well the upright man of God  
 Tread the same path that upright Fincher trod.

Footstone -

E.F.  
 1842  
 J.F.  
 1846

19. Headstone decorated with urn (same as previous) and footstone.

Headstone –

Sacred  
To the Memory of  
James Eaton,  
Who Died September 21st 1851.  
Aged 70 Years.  
Also of Sarah Wife of the above  
James Eaton,  
Who died September 9th 1822.  
Aged 63 Years.  
Likewise of Susan second wife of  
The Above James Eaton,  
Who died January 8th 1847  
Aged 57 Years.  
And of William, son of the above,  
James and Sarah Eaton,  
Who died January 24th 1848  
Aged 29 Years.

The righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance.  
Psalm 112.6.

Also, seven children of the above  
James and Sarah Eaton,  
Who died in their infancy.

Footstone –

J.E.  
1851  
S.E.  
1822  
S.E.  
1847  
W.E.  
1848

20. Markerstone, this plot possibly relating to neighbouring grave.

E.O.  
1901

21. Headstone, defacing, with footstone.

Headstone –

In  
Loving .....ance of  
Mary .....[Osborn],  
Who dep[arted this life Ap]ril 15th 1876,  
.....[Osborn,]  
.....d  
.....s  
.....n

Footstone –

M.A.O.  
1876  
Also W.O.  
1894  
E.O.  
1901

22. Large family plot, headstone and footstone surrounded by kerbs.

Headstone –

Sacred To the Memory of  
James Purser  
of Natton  
Who Departed this Life Jan. 11th  
1887, Aged 73 Years.

As Thy Days So Shall Thy  
Strength Be.  
Deuteronomy 33:25.

Also of  
Dorothy, wife of the above  
James Purser,  
Who Died November 2nd 1897.  
Aged 85 Years.



There is Life for a look at the Crucified One,  
 There is life at this moment for thee;  
 Then Look Sinner Look unto him and be saved,  
 Unto him who was nailed to the tree.

Also of  
 Mary Ann Purser  
 Daughter of the above  
 James and Dorothy Purser  
 Who died April 3rd 1930  
 Aged 86 Years.

Footstone –

J.P.  
 1887  
 D.E.  
 1897  
 M.A.P.  
 1930

23. Collapsed headstone with footstone.

Headstone –

In  
 Memory of  
 George, son of  
 James and Dorothy Purser  
 Who died June 14th 1871,  
 Aged 30 Years.  
  
 He cometh forth like a flower  
 And is cut down, he fleeth also  
 As a shadow, and continueth not.  
 Job 14.2.

Footstone –

G.P.  
 1871

24. Large family plot, headstone and footstone  
 surrounded by kerbs.

Headstone –

In  
 Loving Memory of  
 Elizabeth Mellor,  
 daughter of  
 James and Dorothy Purser,  
 Who died June 3rd 1931  
 Aged 82 Years.

Also in loving memory of  
 James George Purser,  
 called to rest Jan. 21st 1947  
 Aged 73 Years.

Father in thy gracious keeping,  
 Leave we now our loved one sleeping.

Footstone –

E.M.  
 1931  
 J.G.P.  
 1947

25. Headstone decorated with clasped hands.

In loving memory of  
 Edwin Purser  
 Who died April 30th 1875.  
 Aged 58 Years.

The Master is come & calleth for thee. John 11:28.  
 Be ye also ready.

Also Eliza  
 Wife of the above Edwin Purser  
 who died April 20th 1900 Aged 84 Years.

Yea though I walk through the Vale of sha  
 dow of death I will fear no evil for thou art  
 With me, thy rod, thy staff they comfort me.  
 Psalm 23:4.

Also of Edwin Edgar Purser  
 Youngest son of the above  
 who died May 21st 1901 Aged 47 years.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their  
 Eyes and there shall be no more death neither  
 Sorrow nor crying neither shall there be any  
 More pain for the former things are passed away.  
 Psalm 21:4.

Also of  
 William Purser eldest son of the above  
 who died August 10th 1901  
 Aged 58 Years.

I am the resurrection and the life saith the Lord he  
 that believeth in me though he were dead yet shall  
 he  
 Live. St. John 11:25.  
 [I] Know that my Redeemer Liveth.  
 Job 19:25.

*Notes*

1. *Birmingham Weekly Post*, 13 April 1901.
2. *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America* (Plainfield, New Jersey, 1910), 1, 44. The observance of the First or Seventh Day Sabbath was apparently under discussion in the Tewkesbury area before 1680.
3. *V.C.H. Glos.* 8, 149.
4. *Ibid.* 155.
5. Compton Census: photocopy in Glos. R.O.
6. *V.C.H. Glos.* 8, 155.
7. *Ibid.* 185.
8. G.D.R. (Gloucester diocesan records in Glos. R.O.) vol. 91.
9. *V.C.H. Glos.* 8, 185.
10. Glos. R.O., Q/S1b 1, f. 168.
11. *Ibid.* P 19/IN 1/4.
12. 'Early Baptist Churches', *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* 2, 241.
13. Glos. R.O., D 4944/2/1.
14. This paragraph is based on information (1994) from David Ayers of Barlett, Illinois, U.S.A.
15. Copy in Bodleian Library, Oxford.
16. Glos. R.O., D 4944/11/4.
17. G.D.R. wills 1680/73.
18. *Seventh Day Baptists* 1, 45.
19. 'The Baptist Interests under George I', *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* 2, 99.
20. Glos. R.O., P 19/IN 1/5.
21. *Ibid.* D 2318/III/2.
22. G.D.R. wills 1710/79.
23. Glos. R.O., D 3775.
24. *Seventh Day Baptists* 1, 47.
25. G.D.R. wills 1680/73 (John Cowell of Tewkesbury); 1697/62 (Thomas Hawling of Natton); 1714/201 (Ezra Green of Pamington).
26. *Ibid.* 1682/105.
27. *Ibid.* 1686/250.
28. *Ibid.* 1697/62.
29. *Ibid.* 1714/201.
30. *Ibid.* 1717/145.
31. *Ibid.* 1741/182.
32. *Ibid.* 1746/157.
33. *Ibid.* vol. 285B(1).
34. *Ibid.* vol. 381A.
35. 'The Baptist Board. Minutes from 1724', *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.* 5, 109.
36. 'Baptists in the State Papers', *ibid.* 148.
37. Dr. Williams's Library, Gordon Square, London: ref. 2376.
38. G.D.R. wills 1758/23.
39. Glos. R.O., D 4944/6/2.
40. *Ibid.* D 2472/E 1-4.
41. G.D.R. wills 1785/57.
42. Glos. R.O., D 4944/1/2.
43. *Ibid.* 5/1.
44. *The Times*, 16 June 1870.
45. Glos. R.O., D 4944/1/2; 10/1/1.
46. G.D.R. wills 1785/57.
47. *Ibid.* 1835/53.
48. Glos. R.O., D 4944/1/2.

49. G.D.R. wills 1845/53.
50. Glos. R.O., D 4944/1/2.
51. Ibid. 10/1/1.
52. Ibid. 10/1/2.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid. 10/3/1.
55. Ibid. 10/1/1.
56. Ibid. 10/1/2.
57. *V.C.H. Glos.* 8, 187.
58. Glos. R.O., D 4944/10/1/1-2.
59. Ibid. 10/1/3.
60. Ibid. 10/1/4.
61. Ibid. 10/1/3.
62. Ibid.
63. Public Record Office, C 33/1162 (1698).
64. *The Times*, 16 June 1870.
65. Glos. R.O., D4944/10/1/3.
66. Ibid. 10/1/4.
67. *Glos. Notes & Queries* 2, 354.
68. Glos. R.O., D 4944/10/1/7.
69. Ibid. 2/2.
70. *Seventh Day Baptists* 1, 46.
71. Minute book, p. 159: information (1993) from the general secretary of the General Baptist Assembly.
72. *Seventh Day Baptists* 1, 47.
73. Copy of newspaper report in Davis charity trustees' minute book: information from gen. sec. of General Baptist Assembly.
74. Glos. R.O., D 4944/6/8.
75. Ibid. 10/1/7.
76. *V.C.H. Glos.* 8 163.
77. Glos. R.O., D 4944/6/8.
78. Ibid.
79. Local information.
80. J.A. Brinkworth, in *Saffron Walden Weekly News*, June 1907.