

The 1851 Religious Census

by Neil Spurgeon



St Peter's Proprietary Chapel built in 1789

Following more than a century of steadily decreasing interest in religion but with sharp divisions in those who did subscribe to religious practice in Britain, Parliament decided that all ministers of religion would be asked to report the number of their congregations on the last Sunday in March 1851 to the national authorities. These numbers were intended to augment the national census of population being collected at the same time.

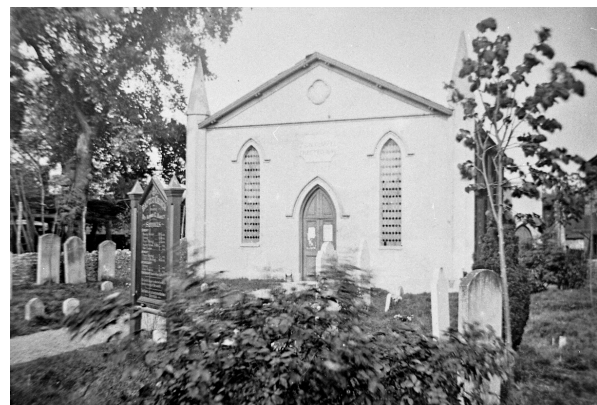
The middle of the nineteenth century was a period when the indifference of about a third of the ordinary working people of Britain towards religion was contrasted sharply by fierce arguments in intellectual and academic circles as to the form that religious practice should take. On one hand, the Tractarian Oxford Fathers, based at Oriel College at Oxford, initially led by John Keble, the Vicar of the University Church, and later by Edward Pusey, had been arguing for a decade or more to bring some of the colour, theatre and richness of the Catholic Mass into the somewhat staid Church of England. At the other extreme, evangelicals (such as Thomas Arnold, former headmaster of the influential public school at Rugby) encouraged by more than a century of independent, radical concentration upon biblical teaching, argued for a broader church offering a more personal type of worship.

There were many places in the vicinity that people could visit for a church service in the early Victorian era and just how many did, and where they went, makes fascinating study. In total roughly two thirds of the almost 1800 people who lived in Emsworth and more than half of Havant's 2200 population went to one church or another on the second Sunday after Easter, just one month before the Crystal Palace opened for the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, an even greater draw for the crowds.

And where did these people go for their services and how wide were the options available to them? There was a surprisingly wide range of types of service on offer.

In Emsworth itself there were four religious buildings immediately to hand, across three denominations, plus many more if one chose to travel a little further.

The wealthier members of the town's Church of England (or Anglican) congregation, a majority as this was the established or 'official' church, were most likely to attend St Peter's Chapel in The Square and all 200 paid for pews were reportedly filled on that census morning. For Anglicans with less disposable income, the larger and much newer St James' Church, barely a decade old, was crammed with a reported congregation of 556 including a considerable number of 'free' seats.



Baptist Church, North Street in 1895

The Independent flock in the local area was well catered for under the watchful eye of the redoubtable Reverend William Scamp, the significant evangelising minister in Havant, who had planted a new independent chapel in Nile Street in 1808. On Census Day 100 people chose to attend the service there. That building closed in 1864 when a larger chapel was erected in Bath Road. Meanwhile the even newer Baptist congregation, which just six years before had managed only 23 subscribers for the Zion Chapel building in North Street, completed in 1848, had grown considerably in the interim and at the census an attendance of 245 was reported, almost certainly doubly counting some people at two or more services.

Some parishioners and especially Anglicans of a more catholic mindset took themselves across the fields to St Thomas à Becket at Warblington where, given a local population of 479, a goodly turnout of 194 was recorded. Because of the history of the parish, whose castle had housed Blessed Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, the last of the Plantagenet dynasty, there was a considerable Roman Catholic presence in this area although they tended to keep well hidden, which, given long centuries of persecution until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, is not surprising.

After a period in the quiet backwater of Hayling Island, in 1750 the Catholics of southern Hampshire had emerged and developed a mission chapel dedicated to St Joseph, within a couple of cottages at Brockhampton Lane in Havant. Father John Kearns was the parish priest here for an area that extended beyond Chichester to the east, Fareham in the west and included Portsea, Hayling and Thorney Island, all of which had some recusant Catholic families. Unusually, the St Joseph's Chapel held three services each Sunday and a daily Mass; most churches had a single service or at most two per week. The times of these services remained hidden until well into the twentieth century and while it is known that over 200 Catholics were associated with the mission in 1814, since

many only visited once a month or so having such a long way to travel, the congregation of 50 on Census Day is probably accurate.

In Havant town, the parish church of St Faith had a reported congregation of 810 which almost certainly includes many children at the special Sunday School in the Pallant, where the Rev. Scamp preached to 204 people across the two services held that day, with doubtless many attending both meetings. Also in the town a small group of 60 followers of John Wesley but not yet formally known as Methodists, met in house groups.



Travelling preacher visits Emsworth in 1908

So what have we learned from this unique religious census? Generally, that despite, the interest in scientific discovery at this period, just eight years before Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, between a half and two thirds of the local population were regular church attendees. It was still considered a suitable, even expected place to network with one's peers and betters, although many working people felt they could with impunity not attend if they so wished. It also provoked some controversy both in Parliament and in the county with, for example, the verger at Titchfield Church refusing point blank to count the congregation, and perhaps for these reasons the exercise has never been repeated.

As Queen Elizabeth I put it, it is perhaps better not to "make windows into men's souls", nor check their church attendance too closely.