

Dover Street General Baptist Chapel, established 1824

The Little Theatre since 1930.

“The building which was to be transformed into the Little Theatre had been erected in the nineteenth century and was originally a Baptist Chapel. Like other nonconformist chapels of the period it had had a high, flat ceiling and a gallery round three sides. But in 1919 it was purchased by the Independent Order of Rechabites, who removed the galleries and inserted a raked floor at gallery level. This newly created first floor was to become the auditorium of the new theatre, entered by two staircases which had served the old gallery.” (1)



Left: The Chapel circa 1900 (Leicestershire Records Office) and

Right The Little Theatre in the early 1960s, before the existing theatre foyer was added. The first floor auditorium is behind the bricked up windows. The extension on the right was built after a fire in 1954 destroyed the stage and backstage areas.

Behind the Chapel was a small graveyard and in what is now a paved courtyard there remain a number of headstones. I have managed to transcribe six of them and do a little research into the families. The results of this research appear later in this article, but first a little about the Chapel itself and the community in which it existed.

Dover Street and the Chapel

These advertisements for the auction of tenement properties in Dover Street in 1826 and 1831 give some idea of the type of housing and the likely density of population. (2, 3)

VALUABLE
FREEHOLD PROPERTY,
IN LEICESTER.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By B. PAYNE,
Some time in the month of March, 1826,
FOURTEEN newly erected **FREEHOLD MESSUAGES** or **TENEMENTS**, situate in Dover-street, London-road, Leicester.

Also, two very excellent **DWELLING HOUSES**, situated in Dover-street aforesaid, with Wood Yard, Carpenters' Shops, Sheds, &c. &c. in the occupation of Thos. White and his undertenants.

Also, at the same time,
WILL BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By B. PAYNE,
A large quantity of Deal Boards, Scantlings, Ironmongery Goods, Doors, Windows, and other articles necessary for building.
Further particulars in next week's paper.

VALUABLE FREEHOLD PROPERTY.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By B. PAYNE.

On Tuesday the 2d day of August, 1831, at the Antelope Inn, Silver-street, Leicester, at six o'clock in the evening, subject to conditions then to be produced:—

Lot 1.
TWO Newly-erected Messuages or Tenements, with hard and soft water pumps, yards, gardens, and other appurtenances, situate at the upper end of Dover-street, Leicester, in the occupation of — Newcombe and — Carter.

ALSO,
Three Messuages or Tenements, situate at the back of the above, in the occupations of — Hughes, — Hopwell, and — Orme.

Lot 2.
All those **Two** newly-erected Dwelling-houses, together with Grocer's Shop, with excellent hard and soft water pumps, yards, Gardens, and other appurtenances, situate in Craven-street, Sanvygate, Leicester, and in the several occupations of — Twigg, — Whitmore, and — Matthews.

For further particulars, apply to Mr. Crick, Builder, Town-hall-lane, or to the Auctioneer.

At the 1841 Census Dover Street was home to Framework Knitters, Bricklayers, Carpenters, Wheelwrights, Painters, Bakers, Labourers and a Blacksmith. Ten years later there are some 75 dwellings in the street and a further 24 in Dover Square, Glover's Yard, Thorpe's Yard and Herbert's Yard. The range of occupations of the inhabitants has widened a little to include a Solicitors' Clerk, Police Officer and Schoolmistress. There are two licensed premises, at No.34 and at No.54. No.34 is directly opposite the Chapel; later it was called The Dover Castle and now The Dover. In 1861 the Yards (or Courts) seem to have increased to eight, each with three or four dwellings.

The Chapel opened in 1824 and in September 1827 the *Leicester Chronicle* announced:

"Tomorrow, Sunday Sept 30th, the Anniversary Sermons of the Opening of the Baptist Chapel, Dover Street, Leicester will be preached by The Rev. J. Goadby Junr. Services to commence at half-past-two and half-past-six. NB: a collection will be made at the close of each service, to assist in the liquidation of the debt remaining on the Chapel." ⁽⁴⁾

By 1839 the Chapel had established a successful Sabbath School ⁽⁵⁾ and in 1843 returns the following statistics to the General Baptist Association: Name of Minister: J. Goadby, Number of Members 282, Baptized 23, Received 4, Restored 1, Dismissed 2, Excluded 4, Withdrawn 6, Dead 4; Chapels 2; Sabbath Scholars 360, Teachers 45. Their written report states:

"During the past year we have enjoyed internal harmony combined with a good measure of brotherly affection. We have felt in various ways, in common with others, the unfriendly influence of commercial depression. Our congregations at Leicester on the Lord's-day are encouraging, but our prayer meetings, week night lectures and Church meetings, have not been so well attended as could be desired. Were we more solicitous to attend the means of grace, and earnest in our supplications for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we doubt not that God would favour us with more manifest tokens of his presence and grace. We fear that our remissness has grieved his Holy Spirit, and retarded in some degree, the progress of his cause. At Whetstone, the good work has considerably improved. The Lord has evidently blessed our labours there. The prayer meetings, and public services, have been well attended; and a large proportion of those added to us have been from Whetstone. We have purchased an eligible piece of ground in this village, and are about commencing the erection of a chapel capable of accommodating two hundred and fifty hearers. We have been at considerable expense this year in cleaning and improving our chapel in Leicester." ⁽⁶⁾

The Chapel at Whetstone opened on 19th September 1843.

At the 1841 Census the Chapel's Minister, Rev. Joseph Goadby (Snr) lived in New Walk with his wife, Elizabeth, and family (2 boys and 3 girls). Their eldest son, Joseph Jackson Goadby, was at the age of 13 an apprentice with William Thirlby, Grocer, at his shop in the High Street, but by 1851 he was a Student at The General Baptist College on Humberstone Road. Later he too was to become the Minister at Dover Street. Joseph Goadby (Snr.) left Dover Street in 1848 to become Minister at the Baxter Gate Chapel in Loughborough; he died in Loughborough in February 1859.

At the end of the 1860s the Ladies' Committee of the Church organised a Bazaar "For the Sale of Useful and Fancy Articles" to raise money for the new Chapel Fund. ⁽⁷⁾ The fund is presumably for improvements to the Chapel because the *Leicester Chronicle* reports that the Chapel will re-open on 26th March 1873 'after extensive alterations and improvements'. ⁽⁸⁾ The Preacher on this occasion is the Rev. J. Jackson Goadby who had been Pastor of the Church until a couple of years earlier.

By 1880 the Chapel has ambitious plans to demolish two tenements next door to the Chapel in order to extend their premises to provide better accommodation for the Sabbath Schools for up to 400 children. The cost of this work is about £2,200 and once again the Ladies' Committee organises a Bazaar.⁽⁹⁾

The headstones

Gabriel King:

“Sacred
to the memory of
Gabriel King
Through whose untiring energy and perseverance
(in connection with a few others)
a Christian Church was formed
and the house of God erected here.
Up to the time of his death
he used the office of a Deacon well,
and was called to his reward
the 26th of January 1846
aged 77 years.

“Also of Sarah his wife
who entered into rest
the 22nd of November 1829
Aged 50 years.
Yeah though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.

“Also of Samuel their second son
who died October 3rd 1830
Aged 31 years.
His end was peace.”

Gabriel King married Sarah Butler on 17th June 1792 at All Saints Anglican Church, Loughborough. In the 1841 Census he is living in Union Street, Leicester, age given as 70, occupation, Tailor, with his daughter, Martha, age given as 20. *The Leicestershire Mercury* (31 Jan 1846) announces his death: ‘On the 26th inst., after a long and painful affliction, Gabriel King, of Union-street, High-street, in his 77th year, deeply lamented by his family and numerous friends.’

“Mr. Gabriel King, of Leicester, departed this life, January 26, 1846 in the seventy-eighth year of his age. Mr. King had been connected with the General Baptists in Leicester upwards of fifty years. He was baptized by the late Rev. J. Deacon, in 1796. For many years he sustained the office of deacon, first in Friar-lane, and afterwards in Dover-street church. His end was peace. His departure was improved on Lord’s-day Feb. 1, from Acts xxi. 16, ‘An old disciple’.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Catharine Kitchinman

“Beneath
are deposited the remains of
Catharine, wife of
RICHARD KITCHINMAN
who died December 22nd 1833
Aged 35 years

Also **Jane**, daughter of the above
who died March 12th 1833
Aged 9 months”

“When my Father and my Mother forsake me then the Lord will take me”
[*the remainder of this is illegible*]

Their daughter, Catherine, was baptised at the Dover Street Chapel on 22nd March 1834.

William Scott

“In memory of
William Scott
who departed this life
May 19th 1855,
Aged 78 years.

“I know that my redeemer liveth.”

“Also of Ann, wife of
William Scott,
who departed this life
the 1st of September, 1839,
Aged 63 years.

“Her name is engraved on this tablet,
her character and her virtues,
on the hearts of those who knew her.

“Also Alice Matilda, daughter of the above
who died February 25th, 1831,
Aged 11 years.”

The 1851 Census records a William Scott (age 73), Silk Dyer, at 23 Belvoir Street, Leicester, with his unmarried daughter, Mary Ann (born 1815), who assists him. William and Mary are also living in Belvoir Street in 1841.

Ann Garner

“In
Affectionate remembrance of
Ann, wife of
JAMES GARNER,
who died
the 20th of January 1844
in the 30th year of her age.

“Matured for Heaven, to tarry longer here
An habitant in such a world as this,

Her maker will'd not, but a purer sphere
Bade her enjoy in realms of spotless bliss."

"William, son of the above,
Died April 26th 1838 aged 3 months."

James Garner and Ann Stableford were married at St. Margaret's, Leicester, on 4th February 1836. She was the daughter of John Stableford, Joiner of Canning Place. At the time of her death James Garner is a Dyer and lives in the Newarke. ⁽¹¹⁾ In 1846 he is appointed Overseer of the Poor for the Newarke. In the same year he remarries:

'Marriages: On Tuesday, at Dover-street Chapel by the Rev. Joseph Goadby, **Mr. James Garner**, dyer of the Newarke, to **Sarah**, fourth daughter of Mr. J. **Tyers**, druggist, Highcross-street.' ⁽¹²⁾

William Thirlby

"William Thirlby
died 18 December 1846
aged 33 yrs
by sickness long oppressed.

"Sarah-Ann
daughter of William & Jane Thirlby
died 24 January 1840 aged 9 weeks."

William Thirlby married Jane Brown in June 1837 at St. Margaret's, Leicester. At the time, Baptist Chapels were not permitted to celebrate marriage, although the Marriage Act of 1836 enabled Chapels to register. Jane is the daughter of Joseph and Phillis Brown who were also members of the Dover Street Chapel and who were buried in its graveyard.

In August 1837, the *Leicestershire Mercury* reports on a meeting of the Trustees of Sir Thos. White's trust for the purpose of selecting, "young men of good name and fame", to receive loans of trust money. The trustees had £3,400 at their disposal to be shared between a maximum of 68 applicants. The 66 finally selected to receive these loans of £50 each are mainly city centre tradesmen - butcher, publican, cabinet maker, boot maker, hosier, baker, framework knitter, carpenter, chair maker, builder and a cow-keeper (in Chatham Street). Among these fortunate workers is William Thirlby, High street, grocer.

In 1840 *The Leicestershire Mercury* reports:

"Report of The Church-Rate Seizures: on Wednesday warrants of distress were executed on twelve parishioners of St. Martin's for refusing to pay the annual exaction, termed church-rate, which is levied on all denominations for the benefit of the episcopal sect. William Thirlby, Grocer, of High Street, was fined 7s. 6d. plus 5s. costs and had seized 3lbs Hyson Tea, 7lbs Black Lead, one scrubbing brush and one grate brush." ⁽¹³⁾

William Thirlby died at his Grocer's shop in the Market Place from Phthisis (chronic wasting away or Tuberculosis). His will leaves his assets in trust for his dear wife, Jane. The trustees are his brother Thomas Thirlby, Normanton-le-Heath, Farmer, his friend Robert Case, Coal merchant, John Harvey, Grocer, and Rev Joseph Goadby, Dissenting Minister. Robert Case is married to William's sister, Ann.

Jane Thirlby remarried in 1851 to a Miller and Baker from Radford, Nottinghamshire.

John Tyers

“In
affectionate remembrance of
John Tyers
who died 11th September 1848
Aged 59 years
also of
Sarah, his wife,
who died 27th October 1840
Aged 32 years.

[verse beneath this line which is illegible]

In 1835, John Tyers, Lace manufacturer and Druggist of Loughborough is declared insolvent and his lace-making factory in Leicester Road is sold. ⁽¹⁴⁾ At the 1841 Census John Tyers (bn.circa. 1789) is a Chemist in South Gate Street, Leicester, with daughters Mary (bn.c.1818) and Sarah (bn.c. 1820), Selina (bn.c. 1824) and Emma (bn.c. 1826), Ann Buckley, Lodger and William Chapman (age 4). Four of his daughters are married at Dover Street Baptist Chapel. The youngest, Emma, is married to John Foster Taylor, Grocer, of Bakewell, Derbyshire in November 1845. In 1846 two more daughters are married:

“Marriages: On Tuesday, at Dover-street Chapel by the Rev. Joseph Goadby, Mr. James Garner, dyer of the Newarke, to Sarah, fourth daughter of Mr. J. Tyers, druggist, Highcross-street. At the same time and place, Mr. Joseph Harvey, grocer, Market-place, to Selina, fifth daughter of Mr. Tyers. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Finally, in 1847, Mary marries James Gratton, Printer and Bookseller also from Bakewell.

John Tyers was clearly well thought of by the community at the Dover Street Chapel; *The Leicestershire Mercury* reported his death:

“On the 11th inst., aged 60, after a long and severe illness, borne with Christian fortitude and resignation, Mr. John Tyers, druggist, Highcross-street. The deceased was for many years a much respected deacon of the church in Dover-street, and held in the highest esteem for his zeal, consistency, and integrity, by all who knew him.” ⁽¹⁶⁾

By the 1851 Census, Joseph Harvey (age 40) Master Grocer, and Selina with a daughter Lilla (age 2) and a son Joseph Jarrom (age 8 mths) have a shop in Biggin Street, Loughborough, with Robert Gregory, nephew, (age 16) grocer’s assistant, two apprentices and two house servants. In 1861, they are back in Leicester with a Grocer’s shop at 30 Market Place. They had six more children, two boys and four girls. By 1871 Joseph is a widower, running a larger shop at 70 & 72 High Street. All eight of their children are at home.

James Garner (age 39) and Sarah, on the other hand, with a daughter, Selina (age 4), are living with Sarah’s older sister, Eliza Tyers (age 39) who is head of the household and Druggist having taken over her late father’s business at 2 Highcross Street. James Garner died in 1857, but his widow and daughter continued to live with Eliza at the Druggists’ shop until in 1876, Sarah marries Joseph Harvey.

Joseph Harvey and Sarah Garner Harvey lived in Victoria Place, New Walk and by the 1881 census only Eliza Mary Harvey, one of Joseph’s daughters, is living with them. Joseph died in October 1881 and in his will made provision firstly for his widow and then for all his daughters, ignoring his sons, who, he said had no need of his assistance. The grocer’s shop in the High Street is being run by Joseph’s second son, John Tyers Harvey.

In 1873, Selina Garner married another William Thirlby, chemist and druggist. He was born in Castle Donington, the son of Richard Thirlby (variously builder, ironmonger, upholsterer, carpenter and joiner) and in 1871 is a Chemist’s Assistant in Leicester and is boarding in Clyde Street. One might assume he

worked for Eliza Tyers. William and Selina were also members of Dover Street Baptist Chapel. In 1881 they are living with her aunt, Eliza Tyers, chemist and druggist of 2 Highcross Street, Leicester. The firm became Tyers and Thirlby. The partnership was dissolved in 1883⁽¹⁷⁾ and William Thirlby ran the business until his death in 1912.

Eliza Tyers died in 1884 at the age of 71. Probate was granted on 23 September 1884 to her executrixes, Selina Mary Thirlby (wife of William Thirlby) of 4 Southgate-street, her niece and Sarah Harvey of 27 New-walk, Widow her sister. Her personal estate amounted to £606 9s 9d and she left all her household goods to Selina and the remainder of her estate jointly to Selina and her sister, Sarah.⁽¹⁸⁾

All these Chapel gentlemen, James Garner, John Tyers, William Thirlby, Joseph Harvey and the Rev. Joseph Goadby were active politically, petitioning the Mayor to petition the Government for the repeal of the Corn Laws and the abolition of the Bread Tax. This is clearly a close-knit community, and one suspects that all those daughters had little choice but to marry within the Chapel circle.

It's a small world!

My husband, Robert Thirlby, joined Leicester Drama Society (LDS) (the owner of The Little Theatre) in the early 1960s. We met there and have remained members of LDS ever since. When the headstones in the graveyard had to be moved, we discovered the stone in memory of William Thirlby, the Grocer. We made a note of the inscription and left it at that. Many years later, I began to research Rob's Leicestershire family. Recently I have transcribed another five of the headstones still standing in the graveyard, and find that the family connection is a bit more complex than we thought.

References:

1. Graham, John, *Before My Time, the Story of the Leicester Drama Society*, 1982.
2. *Leicester Chronicle*, 11 March 1826.
3. *Leicester Journal*, 29 July 1831.
4. *Leicester Chronicle*, 29 Sep 1827.
5. *Leicestershire Mercury*, 31 Aug 1839.
6. *The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer*, Report to the 1843 Annual Association.
7. *Leicester Journal*, 30 April 1869.
8. *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 March 1873.
9. *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 May 1880.
10. Parish Records and *Leicester Chronicle*, 27 January 1844.
11. *Leicester Chronicle*, 30 May 1846.
12. Obituary in *The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer*.
13. *Leicestershire Mercury*, 25 April 1840.
14. *Leicester Journal*, 3 April 1835 and 1 May 1835.
15. *Leicester Chronicle*, 30 May 1846.
16. *The Leicestershire Mercury*, 16 September 1848.
17. *Lloyd's List*, 19 December 1883.
18. England & Wales, National Probate Calendar, Index of Wills & Administrations.

Lisa Thirlby

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