

Somerby

Somerby is a small village in East Leicestershire, located five-and-a-half miles south of Melton Mowbray. The Society of Friends arrived in the village in the mid-seventeenth century, remaining until at least the early nineteenth century. By then, Methodism was expanding, with both Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists present in the village by the end of the century.

Society of Friends

The main source for the Society of Friends in Somerby comes from two volumes in the *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, published in 1909.¹ This source points to an early presence of Quakerism in the village, being first introduced in 1654 by an itinerant preacher.² At that time, Somerby contained a potential opening for non-conformity, mainly due to a weak presence of the established church: two years later, a parliamentary commission identified it as one of eight parishes in Leicestershire with no appointed clergyman. The Quakers in Somerby became grouped with those of 15 other villages, with monthly and quarterly meetings rotating between villages. Those held at Somerby were 'better attended...than elsewhere' chiefly because of the village's central location, close to villages containing high numbers of Quakers.³

How many Quakers there were in Somerby itself is difficult to establish. The Journal lists nine people who were 'among...the early adherents' but gives no information about the growth of the movement or attendance at meetings.⁴ Somerby did have its own meeting house, which had been passed down to the Society, along with 21 acres of common-field land that came with it, by one of the nine early adherents. The Society took formal possession of it in 1687.⁵ By then, the Society had expanded sufficiently to have attracted the attention of informers, who imposed fines on attendance at meetings.⁶ There is also evidence of imprisonment, with one of the early adherents, for example, being among 24 'non-swearers' at Leicester Jail in 1660.⁷ The extent of persecution in Somerby is difficult to assess because the Journal focuses on a small number of specific cases. However, generally, persecution is described as a 'suffising test of membership' of the Quaker community in Somerby.⁸

During the eighteenth century, the presence of this community began to decline. Somerby gradually lost its role as a host village for monthly and quarterly meetings, as nearby places such as Oakham and Warwickshire took over; it ceased this function altogether in 1789.⁹ As early as in 1719, only one of the nine names associated with the early adherents remained in the village, and the Society was also beginning to struggle financially. Its land, consolidated into a 24-acre parcel of land in the Marrfield by the enclosure award of 1761, had been let

¹ *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* v.6 (1909).

² *Ibid.* 18

³ *Ibid.* 129

⁴ *Ibid.* 129

⁵ *Ibid.* 72

⁶ *Ibid.* 20

⁷ *Ibid.* 20

⁸ *Ibid.* 129

⁹ *Ibid.* 131

out, theoretically only to Quakers – but the failure of these to meet their rents resulted in the land being necessarily let out to non-Quakers.¹⁰ The meeting house, being too costly to maintain, was sold in 1829, having lost its function as a meeting place over 70 years earlier.¹¹ The Somerby Local Historical Society has identified a building that could possibly have been this Quaker meeting house, which still stands today.

The last reference to a meeting of Quakers in Somerby was on 12 September 1802, and only then for expenses.¹² Quakers disappear from the records after this date: there is no mention of them in either the 1829 return of religious houses or in the 1851 religious census. They may still have been present in small numbers, but there is no more evidence of religious meetings being held.

Wesleyan Methodism

Wesleyan Methodism was likely to have been established in the village in the eighteenth century. Evidence for this comes mainly from sources of nearby Melton Mowbray, especially from Josiah Gill's account of the history of Methodists in Melton Mowbray, written in 1909.¹³ This recorded that a chapel that was established in Melton Mowbray in 1797 had two residents of Somerby as trustees. One of these was noted to have possessed a farmhouse in Somerby that was an authorised place of worship.¹⁴ There is also evidence of a meeting house, belonging to someone else, that was built around the same time and on a tiny parcel of land measuring only ten yards by six yards, which was said to have formed part of a cottage garden.¹⁵ Another meeting house was established in the village in 1820, although there is no description of the denomination that met there.¹⁶

Somerby was initially part of the Leicester circuit, appearing on a circuit map of Leicester in 1816; sermons were held fortnightly, at 2pm. It became part of the Melton Mowbray circuit around the year 1822, and erected its own Methodist chapel in 1842. This building still stands, but no longer serves as a chapel.¹⁷ A new chapel was erected at some point during the twentieth century, and a New Hall was added in 1956.¹⁸

The religious census of 1851 noted space for 155 sittings (including 100 'free' and fifty-five 'other'). Sermons were held in the afternoon and in evenings, with attendance on census day

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 76

¹¹ *Ibid.* 77

¹² *Ibid.* 132

¹³ Josiah Gill *History of Wesleyan Methodism in Melton Mowbray and Vicinity* (Melton, 1909).

¹⁴ Gill, *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, described on the website for the Stamford and Rutland Methodist Circuit <http://stamfordrutlandmethodists.org.uk/History%20of%20Somerby.htm> [retrieved 18 Nov 2014].

¹⁵ *Letter of Attorney to admit Tenants of Lands in Rothley Court* (1803), p. 954

¹⁶ Leicestershire and Rutland County Record Office (ROLLR), list of meeting houses in Leicestershire, entry for Somerby, QS 44/1/2.

¹⁷ Gill, *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, described on Stamford and Rutland Methodist Circuit (website).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

recorded at 100 and 120 respectively. No average figures are given. The chapel contained a Sunday school, with attendance on census day recorded at fifteen and sixteen, although these are entered in the columns of 'morning' and 'afternoon'.¹⁹

Primitive Methodism

A chapel was erected in 1863, with services being held every Sunday at 2.30pm and 6.00pm.²⁰ Primitive Methodism may have expanded after this date, as the replacement of this chapel in 1898 was made on the basis that it had become too small.²¹ The new chapel was established at Oddfellow's Hall, which the Methodists purchased; the old chapel was sold.²² The 1863 chapel still stands, but is no longer used as such. A temperance society and a Band of Hope were also present in the village during the nineteenth century.²³

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December 2014

¹⁹ 1851 religious census, entry for Somerby, HO 129/418/21.

²⁰ *Wright's Hist. Gaz. & Dir. Leics. and Rutland* (1899), p 217.

²¹ *Stamford Mercury* 13th May 1898, 'Somerby', p. 6

²² *Grantham Journal* 12th February 1898, p. 2; *Stamford Mercury*, 'Somerby', p. 6.

²³ *Wright's Hist. Gaz. & Dir. Leics. and Rutland* (1899), p 217.

