

IDENTIFYING NONCONFORMITY IN LATE-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ST ALBANS

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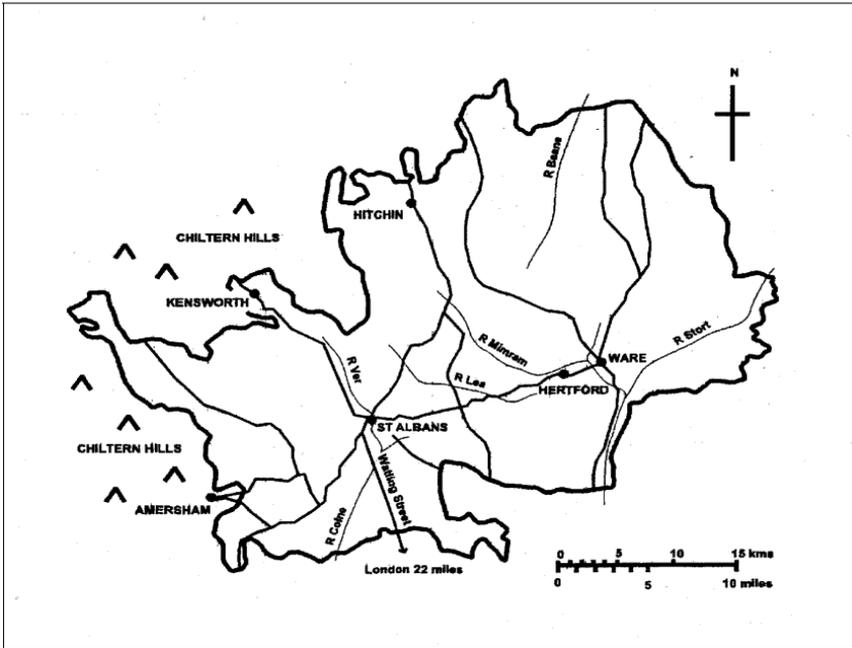
Introduction

After the Reformation the people of St Albans demonstrated a leaning towards independence in religious and political thought. They purchased the Abbey Church in 1553 and supported Parliament in the Civil War, and the town was also close enough to London for its inhabitants to be influenced by a strong puritan community in the city. These factors provide sufficient circumstantial evidence to suggest that this town may well have comprised elements which were conducive to the spread of radical Protestantism.

The monastery at St Albans had been an important religious centre and place of pilgrimage during the Middle Ages. The market, established in the tenth century, undoubtedly prospered as a result of the comings and goings of pilgrims, scholars and religious dignitaries. By the seventeenth century the town's situation of one day's ride from London on the main highway from London to the north west provided the basis for a thriving economy based on the inn trade and associated occupations of brewing, food retailing, tanning and smithing. Agriculture remained an important occupation, the produce from which was not only for local consumption but also for the rapidly expanding population of London. The town and close environs also attracted the new London gentry to build their 'second' homes. The location of St. Albans is shown in Figure 1.

London's population of a minimum of 310,000 and possibly 475,000 in the later seventeenth century set it apart from all other English towns, and its enormous size greatly influenced urban centres in the provinces by way of trading opportunities and the spread of ideas.¹ The population of St Albans in the late-seventeenth century was probably in the region of 3,000 to 3,500 (see below), rendering it the largest town in Hertfordshire; Hitchin came next with 2,175; whereas Hertford, the county town, supported only 1,500 inhabitants.² Defoe refers to what may have been seen as, and perhaps still is, an anomaly, describing St Albans as 'the capital town, though not the county town of

Figure 1. Location of St. Albans in Hertfordshire



Hertfordshire'.³ Seventeen markets operated in Hertfordshire in 1673, producing the highest density of market towns per square mile of any English county.⁴ In England and Wales at this time Langton has identified 1,005 towns, 51 with a population of between 2,500 and 4,999, 277 with 1,000–2,499, and as many as 650 very small 'towns' with populations below 1,000.⁵ St Albans thus stood in the lower reaches of a stratum that can be regarded as towns proper, above the category of the simple market town. Towns of a similar size and status to St Albans in other counties included communities such as Winchester, Cirencester and Maidstone.⁶

The strong nonconformist element in St Albans detected from the current research largely consisted of regular churchgoers to the parish church who wanted to reform the church from within, rejecting the overwhelming control of bishops and archbishops. Following the Restoration, the incumbents of the three parishes making up the Borough of St Albans were ejected and replaced by men deemed to be more in sympathy with the monarchy and who would operate an Anglican church rather than adopt the 'puritan' principles of the Interregnum. During the reigns of Charles II and James II dissenters suffered persecution punctuated by brief periods of toleration, depending on how much the king needed the cooperation of the nonconformist element in parliament and how threatened he felt by the activities of the more radical dissenting sects. It was common for dissenters to attend church occasionally,

perhaps only once a year, thereby enabling them to participate in local government and avoid persecution. Lacey says that there is convincing evidence that those who were occasional conformists actually considered themselves to be dissenters.⁷ As the century proceeded and persecution of dissent increased, these people formed distinct groups and began to meet in private homes, calling themselves Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Quakers and Baptists were also present in St Albans from around the 1640s. In this paper the terms 'dissenter' and 'nonconformist' are used interchangeably.

Methodology

Some 12 years ago a group from the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society interested in the seventeenth century decided to form a sub-group of that society with the intention of producing a book on St Albans 1650–1700. As an aid to this objective, it was decided to create a computer database, providing a directory of people whose names occur in records of that period. The major sources have been the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials for the three parishes, Abbey, St Michael's and St Peter's. The research team has also searched for and assembled information from marriage licences, wills, probate inventories, corporation records, title deeds, Hearth Tax assessments, the Protestation Oath returns of 1642 and 1696, a list of voters in the election of 1690, archdeacons' records, Quaker records, manorial records and church memorials. In order to organise this enormous bank of information, families have been reconstructed. Individuals have been allotted 'memo' fields in each of which has been collated surviving information relating to that person. Linking the information in this way and studying the records within a community has provided detailed insight into the lives of the inhabitants of seventeenth-century St Albans and how they related to each other in trade, religion, friendship and marriage. Take, for example, William Hickman, ironmonger. His memo reads:

Parliamentarian in the Civil War – Treasurer/High Collector for a number of wartime and post war committees.⁸

1646 signed a petition requesting a permanent minister at St Peter's Church.⁹

1649 a commissioner for the six-month assessment.¹⁰

1651–2 was paid for wood and candles for soldiers.¹¹

1654–55 was paid for coals for soldiers.¹²

1654 a commissioner for ejecting ministers and schoolmasters.¹³

1663 assessed on eight hearths for Hearth Tax.¹⁴

Here we can begin to build up a picture of this man. He was a prominent member of St Peter's church and was frustrated by there not having been a permanent minister for some years. He held official appointments in the

Commonwealth period and the assessment of eight hearths suggests substantial wealth.¹⁵ After his first wife died in 1644, he married Katherine Whitchcot. Her will, drafted in 1680 after she had been widowed, mentions her brothers, Sir Jeremy and Benjamin Whitchcot.¹⁶ Benjamin was a notable Cambridge divine.¹⁷ Katherine's will goes on to give further clues. She describes a property which was divided into three houses, one occupied by William's son, another by Jonathon Grew and the third by Dorothy Pemberton, widow. Dr Jonathon Grew became the first minister of the Congregational Chapel built in St Albans in 1698.¹⁸ Dorothy Pemberton is a member of a puritan family whose kinsman, Robert, is described by Katherine as 'my good friend'. Robert Pemberton applied for a licence to hold religious meetings in his house under the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672.¹⁹ The will is witnessed by Jonathan Grew, William Pembroke, Thomas Clarke and Robert Pemberton. William Pembroke was a signatory to the trust deed of the above-mentioned chapel and was also presented for not attending communion in 1683; Thomas Clarke is a member of a family who appear in Quaker records.²⁰ The detailed research into the Hickman family is thus a good example of how the study of a community can produce evidence which would not be apparent when examining individuals in isolation. Christopher Marsh has stressed the importance of studying wills in this way.²¹ Nigel Goose has also recommended that the use of a wide range of evidence in support of parish registers can be the 'best strategy... in any attempt to elucidate the structures and processes of early modern urban populations'.²² In the drawing up of the family trees in the present study, the wills in particular have been invaluable in achieving a greater degree of insight.

This paper describes a technique based upon the compilation of such detailed biographical information that enables the population of St Albans, and the proportion of that population who were nonconformists, to be calculated. During the process of reconstructing the families an assessment has been made as to whether an individual was alive and living in the town on 31 December 1675, and a total of 3,529 has been calculated. In making this judgement, the biography of each person was considered. For example, where there is a baptism, a marriage, baptism of children, assessment in the Hearth Tax and poor rate, church or civic office, will and burial, spanning the year 1675, the decision for inclusion in the population total was clear. Where no baptism record was available, evidence of residence was usually based on baptisms and burials of children, and often then linked with miscellaneous information, burial and will. Where there is no baptism record, age is assessed as 23 for women at marriage and 26 for men and likewise 25/27 at baptism of first child. Where no burial is recorded, men and women are regarded as deceased by the age of 40.²³

Where no evidence has survived after baptism certain criteria were employed:

- i A woman over 23 was considered to be married or to have left home and has not been included in the total population. The age of 23 was used because this has been calculated as the average age of marriage in St Albans in this period. Some of these women may have remained in

Table 1 Analysis of married couples deemed not to be living in St Albans in 1675

	Number of couples
Over 40 by 1675	6
Deceased by 1675	18
Surname suggests stranger to the town or evidence exists of residence in another parish	107
No subsequent events recorded*	70
Total	201

Note: * These couples were members of local families and some may have remained in the town.

the town and not married but it is difficult to make any sort of calculated guess.

- ii It has been assumed that a man of 24 had left the town. The age was chosen arbitrarily. It is recognised, however, that a young person of 16 years of age could have migrated to take up an apprenticeship or to seek work elsewhere. The number of men between 16 and 24 on 31 December 1675 total 245, and of these 94 are known to have remained in the town. The total population figure might therefore be reduced by 151.

Couples who married in St Albans up to 1669 but for whom no subsequent events are recorded have been discounted. An analysis of the 371 marriages which took place in the three parishes between 1660 and 1669 (the age of couples marrying before 1660 would preclude them from being counted in 1675) shows that 201 couples were not included in the 1675 survey. Table 1 shows the reasons for their omission.

In summary, the total of 3,529 might be increased by spinsters who may have remained in the town and a percentage of couples who may have stayed but produced no offspring. The total could be reduced by young men aged between 16 and 24 who might have migrated. The numbers involved are likely to be small in relation to the total. Estimates of the population have previously been calculated by two different methods. From the Hearth Tax returns in 1663 and 1673 a population of 3,066 has been suggested and from counts of baptisms 2,916.²⁴ Langton believes that the Hearth Tax provides the best basis for calculating the population.²⁵ The estimate based on biographical information comes within 15 per cent of that based on the Hearth Tax. Arkell recommends that population estimates should be presented within a range rather than what he describes as with 'spurious accuracy', and a range of between 3,000 and 3,500 might be considered appropriate.²⁶ The calculation from the reconstruction of individual biographies, therefore, stands close enough to previous estimates of the town's population once reasonable margins of error are allowed for.

The computer database and the reconstruction of individual biographies facilitated the process of counting nonconformists. The principal sources used for this purpose were individual wills, deeds of the Quaker meeting house and the Dagnall Street Congregational Chapel in 1676 and 1698 respectively, a register of members of a Baptist congregation dated 1675, a list of voters in the parliamentary election of 1690, a report to the archbishop on the extent of dissent in 1669 and other miscellaneous snippets of information culled from a variety of sources which have been collated in the 'memo' fields of the database. The Compton Census of 1676 has not survived for St Albans and nor have the quarter sessions records for the latter half of the seventeenth century. In the absence of these two important sources, the present research uses alternative means, and what follows is an explanation of how individuals have been identified as nonconformists. Once established it was a simple task to insert a code on the computer, providing a total of 263.

Report naming 'dissidents in response to the Act of Restraining Nonconformists from Inhabiting Corporations' 1665

This report was found among the Gorchambury papers.²⁷ It lists 18 men who had held office in the corporation during the Commonwealth and accuses them of belonging to the 'Phanatique Party', alleging they had 'performed acts against the king'. Such acts were graphically described. It was said that Thomas Cowley, the elder, Mayor of St Albans

.... when forces were raisinge for the Parlimt putt on his sword saying I have nott wore a sword these 20ty yeares butt now I doe itt to encouradge the people to fight against the Kinge. Hee hath allways joyned wth and shewed wt: countenance hee coulde to the Phanatique partie And hath upheld on Partridge to preach wch: was never called to the Ministrie & hath denied others.

The 18 have been included in the total number of dissenters.

Baptist congregation

Twenty-seven people stated to be from St Albans and described as members of the Baptist congregation which met in Kensworth are listed in a book compiled in 1675 by Hugh Smyth of Wheathamstead.²⁸ Kensworth is a village eight miles north of St Albans. Inhabitants from 19 other villages are listed. Not all 27 have been identified because first names are not given. For example, members are described as 'Brother Gould' or 'Sister Sleep', but where they can be recognised they have been included in the final total.

Parliamentary election 1690

The extant list of voters in the parliamentary election of 1690 is a valuable contribution to the current research and has provided an insight not only into the politics of the inhabitants of St Albans but also into people's standpoint in

religion.²⁹ In the borough of St Albans three candidates stood for the election: George Churchill, brother of John, first Duke of Marlborough, who had already served as Tory member of parliament for St Albans from 1685–87; Samuel Grimston, Whig and local lord of the manor; and Joshua Lomax. Lomax was a wealthy lawyer, owning large estates in Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire and Buckinghamshire, and a renowned dissenter. According to an indictment in the archdeacon's records, he was accused in 1683 of not attending holy communion at Easter and having 'for these twelve, ten, eight, six, four, or two months last past, ... made [himself] an utter stranger to [his] parish church of St Albans'³⁰

Lomax signed the trust deed of the Congregational chapel mentioned above.³¹ According to the charters, the St Albans electorate should have been freemen and entitled to two votes each. Fifty-one voted for Joshua Lomax, not using their second vote. It has been assumed that these men were committed dissenters and they have been counted in the final total of 263. In 20 cases there is other supporting evidence. For example, John Clarke was a well-known Quaker, Richard Mote signed the trust deed for the Quaker meeting house in 1672, and Thomas Tanner, who engaged Thomas Flindell to witness his will, was a cousin of John Clarke and executor and legatee for Thomas Broomer, maltster.³² Broomer's wife was the sister of John Clarke; he was an appraiser for Elizabeth Gould, member of the Baptist congregation and he voted for Lomax in the parliamentary election. Thomas Tanner is named as executor and legatee in Broomer's will. A further 158 voted for Lomax, using their second vote for either Grimston (74) or Churchill (84). The records of each of these electors have been examined and if another piece of supporting evidence has been found, these have been included in the total of identified nonconformists.

Quakers

Further names have been found in the deeds for the Quaker meeting house built in 1676.³³ Other Quaker records have provided further names, but these are scarce for this period and it has not been possible to put names to the 60 persons 'called Quakers' reported to the archbishop in 1669 as meeting 'at a hyred house for ye purpose, every Sunday and Wednesday'.³⁴ Just as members of the Baptist congregation came from a wide surrounding area, it is possible that some of these Quakers may not have been inhabitants of the town.

Wills and probate inventories

Wills have been used extensively by historians studying the Reformation in attempts to assess the degree of support for either radical Protestantism or the prohibited Roman Catholicism. They have concentrated on preambles and these will be considered later in this paper. In the present study, the aim has been to identify individuals who formed the nonconformist element in the town. Two hundred and fifty nine wills have been examined, dating from 1638 to 1715: of these, 69 testators were female, 15 of whom were described as spinsters and 54 as widows.

The majority of the St Albans wills were witnessed by three people, one of whom was usually the scribe or a lawyer. Normally inventories were taken by two appraisers and, in the present quest to identify nonconformists, where two well-known dissenters were witnesses or appraisers it has been assumed that the testator was also a dissenter. Bill Stevenson, in his examination of the wills of Fenstanton between 1661 and 1724, suggests that testators' choices of scribe and witness may totally ignore the differences in religious propensity, giving preference to ability and integrity.³⁵ However, in St Albans there has frequently been a suggestion from another source, or from links by marriage, which has provided supporting evidence. It was noted that Thomas Flindell, cooper, and Thomas Heyward, shopkeeper, appeared together as witnesses to wills or appraisers of inventories on a number of occasions. These two local men were named in the aforementioned report to the archbishop as being leaders of a 'great number' of 'sufficient' people who met secretly at 'ye house of William Ayleward, yeoman, called New House'.³⁶ Between 1658 and 1684 Flindell was witness to six wills. On one occasion Heywood was a fellow witness. Between 1662 and 1685 Flindell was an appraiser in 29 inventories and in seven instances Heyward was also an appraiser. In three instances another known dissenter, Abraham Cowley, was Flindell's co-appraiser. Where both Flindell and Heyward or Flindell and Cowley acted together, the testators or deceased have been counted among the estimated dissenting population. That Katherine Hickman, a well-known nonconformist, was one who used both Flindell and Heyward gives support to this method of detection.

In many cases legatees have provided evidence of nonconformity, as in the will of Katherine Hickman already mentioned. In his will written in 1679, Robert Pemberton names well-known dissenters, Abraham Cowley, William Pembroke and Jonathon Grew, as legatees.³⁷ The widow, Ellen Passmore, in her will written in 1672, creates a dilemma.³⁸ Joshua Lomax acts as her witness, although he might have been engaged in his capacity as a lawyer, notwithstanding his religious beliefs. Ellen's first three legatees are the ministers of the three parish churches in St Albans, who it could be assumed would be conforming at that time. She then lists 12 female friends, three of whom have surnames associated with dissent, and it is suspected that her 'friends' are members of a congregation. Her choice of preamble is unique in the St Albans wills:

... considering that the days I have to live in this earthly tabernacle cannot be many do therefore in order that when I come to die I may have nothing to do but to resign myself into the hands of that good God who gave me life and being and to my dear Saviour Jesus Christ by whose precious death and blood shedding I shall have a most glorious life and being to all eternity.

Finally, she names dissenters Thomas Heywood and William Pembroke as legatees. On balance this appears to be the will of a dissenter. That she makes bequests to the incumbents of the three parishes could be a clue that local churches were operating in much the same vein as before the Restoration.

While all three ministers who were in post during the Interregnum had been ejected in 1662, it is interesting to note that John Rochford replaced his father, William, as vicar of St Peter's.

Tracing nonconformity from the preambles in the St Albans wills is difficult. Margaret Spufford has argued from her research on the wills in Willingham that the extent to which the religious opinions of testators can be determined is limited. She discusses the spectrum of formulae used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and suggests that the single phrase 'I bequeath my soul to Almighty God' is neutral and does not necessarily convey any strength of religious feeling, whereas any will which stresses salvation through Christ's death and passion, or makes reference to the company of the elect, indicates a stronger position and indicates that the testator may well be a puritan or Calvinist.³⁹ Christopher Marsh expresses caution in reading too much into the length of dedicatory clauses.⁴⁰ This view, however, is not supported by the will of Joshua Lomax whose dedicatory clause, requests for sermons, and bequests to the poor extends to some 1,200 words before he begins on the material bequests to his family and friends.⁴¹

In the St Albans wills, 126 preambles are variants of the following wording:

I commit my soul to Almighty God my creator hoping and steadfastly believing through the merits, death and passion of my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to have my sins pardoned and to be made partaker of everlasting happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Out of these, 20 testators reinforced the basic formula by adding the following statement or similar wording:

and to appear at the last day not clothed with my own righteousness but in the rich robes and righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to me and to inherit eternal life to which holy trinity and one eternal deity be all honour and glory and praise both now and for ever.

Twelve of these were written by John Leigh; one by Thomas Downes, schoolmaster, whose vote for Joshua Lomax in 1690 implies dissent; two by Thomas Richards, town clerk, listed in 1665 as a member of the 'Phanatique Party' and whose wife was from a prominent dissenting family; and two were written by John Charnocke, also an alleged member of the 'Phanatique Party'. Joshua Lomax's will was written by a fellow lawyer, John Tombs, whose son was Lomax's godson, suggesting they were close friends and co-religionists. William Foxwist, another lawyer and dissenter, wrote his own will.⁴² Seventeen of the 20 had been identified as dissenters before considering the preamble of their wills. Of the remaining three, two were widows, about whom we have very little information; their husbands are unknown to us. The third, William Beastney, was a local butcher.⁴³ One of his witnesses is possibly a dissenter; the other is John Retchford, the vicar of St Peter's. The will was written in 1667, which precludes the use of the 1690 voting list. William Foxwist's will is also witnessed by John Retchford.

Did Beastney employ John Leigh for his legal qualifications regardless of his religious position? The testators of nine of the 12 wills written by John Leigh were almost certainly dissenters: does this suggest that all who asked him to write their wills were so? This will be discussed further below.

No such ambiguity is expressed in Robert Pemberton's will. His preamble reads:

.... I give up my soul into the hands of Almighty God my creator in the blessed name and mediation of Jesus Christ my saviour and redeemer by whose death and passion which I verily believing he suffered for me and all the rest of the elect of God. I do steadfastly believe and assuredly hope to obtain remission of all my sins and life everlasting through his glorious resurrection and merits in whom I believe in my heart into righteousness and whom I confess with my mouth into salvation. My body I commit to the earth from whence it was taken in hope of a happy resurrection at the coming again of my saviour Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

That Robert Pemberton makes this lengthy, pious commendation correlates with other evidence pertaining to him and bears out Margaret Spufford's view that the stronger the preamble, the stronger the testator's beliefs. However, it is not always as simple as that. Three well-known dissenters: Katharine Hickman (1675), William Gould (1683 – a member of the Baptist congregation), and Thomas Flindell (1687) give nothing away.⁴⁵ They have completely omitted a preamble and only 'praise the holy name of God'. Five other known dissenters omit any reference to religion whatsoever. Alban Coxe in 1666 simply praises 'the holie name of God'.⁴⁶ Yet his database memo quoted below implies that he was a dedicated Commonwealth man:

1646/47 signed a petition requesting a permanent minister at St Peters.⁴⁷

Commissioner for raising assessment for maintenance of the forces by the Act of 7 December 1649.⁴⁸

1650 Colonel Coxe occupied part of the gateway with a messuage or tenement and land and ruins round the Abbey Court.⁴⁹

1653 appointed judge for the county of Hertfordshire.⁵⁰

1654 Commissioner for ejecting scandalous, ignorant and insufficient ministers and schoolmasters.⁵¹

Only 18 of the 126 using the basic preamble quoted above had already been identified as dissenters. The records of the remaining 108 testators have been re-examined, taking cognisance of Spufford's comments. Those who have strengthened the basic preamble fall neatly into the category of dissent. With so much contradiction in evidence, caution has been exercised in labelling testators who felt 'assured of salvation through the death and passion of the Lord Jesus Christ' without considering their biography as a whole. Therefore, the same principle has been followed as before: that is to say, if a second piece of evidence survives the testator has been classified as a dissenter.

One hundred and forty-four wills were witnessed by an attorney or scrivener. Five attorneys were prominent during the period of this study. There is little evidence from the preambles that they exerted any influence on the testators. The formula used in the majority of these wills was the standard one quoted above. Four scribes were prolific in witnessing wills: two generations of John Barnard, father and son, John Charnocke and John Leigh. The John Barnards wrote 52 wills, using the following neutral wording in the majority of cases:

I commend my soul into the hands of my good God in the hope of a joyful resurrection through my blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Of the 52, only nine testators are thought to be dissenters. John Charnocke drafted 15 wills between 1648 and 1668. He generally uses the standard preamble, but in Richard Ruth's will a stronger wording surely reflects the testator's religious faith.⁵² The wills witnessed by Joshua Lomax follow a similar pattern: mostly standard formulae, except two stronger messages from Ellen Passmore and William Preston.⁵³ In view of the frequent use of the standard clause by Charnocke and Lomax, it is more than likely that the stronger message is by the request of the testator rather than suggested by the attorney, which supports Rosemary O'Day's findings that 'some wills are marked in their preambles by strongly individual phraseology and it seems safe to say that deviant wills of this kind do reflect the individual testator's beliefs'.⁵⁴

As we have seen, it is quite a different story when the wills written by John Leigh are examined. He was operating in the last quarter of the century, following on from John Charnock who died in 1671. Of 29 wills, seven have a particularly elaborate dedicatory clause:

I commend my soul into the hands of Almighty God my creator steadfastly believing through his holy spirit by the bitter death and bloody passion of his son and my ever dear and blessed saviour Jesus Christ to receive full pardon and free remission of all my sins and to appear at the last day not clothed with my own righteousness but in the rich robes and righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to me and to inherit eternal life to which holy trinity and one eternal deity be all honour and glory and praise both now and for ever. Amen.

In 1690 Leigh voted for Joshua Lomax, not using his second vote, and in 1698 he was a signatory to the deeds of the newly erected Congregational chapel. It is suggested, therefore, that nonconformist testators deliberately invited this scribe to write their wills. Christopher Marsh finds 'no reason to suggest that scribes deemed it fitting to impose long and idiosyncratic clauses upon those who had not asked for them. It may well have seemed a waste of time to do so'.⁵⁵ This view is confirmed by the St Albans wills.

From this analysis, 375 males have been identified as nonconformists over the whole period of study. The next section will attempt to quantify the

Table 2 Number of times various sources have been used in the identification of nonconformists living in St Albans in 1675

Voting list	96
Witnessing of wills	57
Family links*	54
Appraising for inventories	46
Legatees	32
Quaker records	31
Preambles in wills	28
Archdeacon's records	21
Marriage links	18
Nonconformist records	12
Others	10

Note: * Family links have not been considered sufficient evidence on their own (that is without additional information) but they have been used to give weight to the deduction.

proportion in relation to the town as a whole, particularly focussing on the year 1675 when 263 nonconformist males are judged to have been living in St Albans. Table 2 indicates the number of occasions on which the various sources have been used to make this judgement. These do not divide equally between those identified because in some instances a variety of sources provide the evidence.

Estimating the extent of nonconformity in St Albans

Having identified the nonconformists by the method described, an estimate has been made as to the proportion they formed of the population. The total of 3,529 calculated from the process of family reconstruction includes 1,192 males. Two hundred and sixty-three men have been identified as nonconformists living in St Albans in 1675. This suggests that dissent was as high as 22 per cent. This compares with a national average of between 4 and 5 per cent, but in Amersham, an area where radical religion was rife, the nonconformist community amounted to some 25 per cent.⁵⁶ Maidstone, a town with a comparable population to St Albans and similarly active in providing necessary supplies to the expanding capital, was reported to have had 316 dissenters, about 10 per cent of its total population.⁵⁷

A check on the number of nonconformists in St Albans can be made from other sources. According to Urwick the Congregationalists and Presbyterians of St Albans united in the building of the Dagnall Street Chapel in 1698, which was designed to seat 400.⁵⁸ The number of St Albans members of the Baptist

Table 3 The occupational distribution of identified nonconformists in relation to the known occupations of the whole town

Occupational sector	Dissenters		Whole town	
	No.	%	No.	%
Agriculture	44	19.2	160	15.1
Food and drink	67	29.3	344	32.5
Transport	6	2.6	55	5.2
Building	23	10.0	100	9.5
Leather	25	10.9	104	9.8
Textiles	27	11.8	97	9.2
Household goods	14	6.1	52	5.0
Professions	14	6.1	73	7.0
Labourers	7	3.1	61	5.8
Others	2	0.9	11	1.0
Total	229	100.0	1057	100.1

church at Kensworth was 27 in 1675.⁵⁹ The 60 Quakers reported to the Archbishop in 1669 might also be included, making a total of 487 which is remarkably close to the 263, doubled to include female members.⁶⁰

Who were the dissenters?

Of 375 nonconformist men who have been identified over the whole period of the present study, it has been possible to determine the occupation of 229, and these have been analysed in Table 3. The occupations of dissenters roughly follow the pattern for the town as a whole. That the proportion of those working in agriculture is slightly higher might be explained by the fact that two large nonconformist families, the Aylewards and the Kentishes, farmed vast tracts of land in St Peter's and St Michael's parishes, extending beyond the town boundaries. These men described themselves as yeoman in their wills. As Nesta Evans has observed, 'yeoman' was often used as a status rather than an occupational description and it was not uncommon in the seventeenth century to find yeoman living in towns. Some also had a trade.⁶¹ It is possible that more labourers than have been identified were nonconformist but documentary evidence is sparse for this social group. However, in the 1690 election 58 per cent of labourers who voted chose Joshua Lomax. Only two labourers in our period have left wills. Of the 125 dissenters of whose occupations we have no knowledge, 21 are described as gentlemen.

Table 4 presents a comparison between the assessment for the Hearth Tax on dissenters in comparison to the whole town.⁶² The low figure for one- and two-hearth households can be explained in that exemptions are more likely to

Table 4 Comparison of Hearth Tax payers in 1663 between the whole town and identified dissenters

No. of hearths	Dissenters		Whole town	
	No.	%	No.	%
1	6	5.9	49	11.0
2	22	21.8	109	24.4
3 – 5	44	43.6	198	44.4
6 – 9	22	21.8	64	14.3
10+	7	6.9	26	5.8
Total	101	100.0	446	99.9

be on this size of property. The owners of the larger properties included Sir Harbottle Grimston, Master of the Rolls, whose country estate, Gorhambury, was assessed on 40 hearths and Sir Richard Jennings, member of parliament and father of the Duchess of Marlborough, assessed on 24 hearths. Other large establishments were inns. If we regard those assessed on one or two hearths as of generally low social standing, then they are somewhat under-represented among dissenters compared with the whole town. However, this *may* partly reflect the difficulty in identifying the relatively poor from the sources. There is no evidence that the middling inhabitants, defined as those assessed on three to five hearths, show any particular bias towards dissent. If we regard those assessed on six hearths or more as relatively wealthy, then it is clear that dissent was indeed slightly more common among this group. However, these differences are ones of degree only, and on the basis of the Hearth Tax evidence we can only argue that dissent was widespread across the social spectrum in late-seventeenth century St Albans. Traditionally, it has been the view of historians that 'protestant sectarianism was primarily the prerogative of the rich and moderately well-to-do'.⁶³ However, Spufford and Stevenson have shown this not to be the case in their biographical studies of the inhabitants of Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, their work is focused on village communities and Spufford goes on to suggest that 'protestantism, being a religion of the book, was the preserve of the literate ... and flourished amongst townsmen'.⁶⁵

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that it is feasible to construct a biographical database for a substantial urban community in the late-seventeenth century, to use this to establish the extent of nonconformity among the male population, and to identify the main economic and social characteristics of those nonconformists. The strength of dissent in St Albans can largely be

attributed to it being a thoroughfare town with good communication, in close proximity to London. It has been noted that the migration pattern into the town comes predominantly from the north west. This route crossed the Chilterns where, as we have seen, nonconformity was also prevalent.⁶⁶ Indeed the current research has shown that St Albans Quakers and Baptists travelled to Kensworth, a village at the foot of the Chiltern hills, for their meetings.

Numerous references to London have been found in the St Albans records, implying there was a close relationship with the city. In Thomas de Laune's account of *The present state of London*, published in 1681, no less than seven coachmen and waggoners are listed as plying the route between Aldersgate Street and St Albans. Other market centres in Hertfordshire have only one or two carriers listed.⁶⁷ News, views and publications would have been exchanged in the inns where the provincial highways terminated. It is on record, for instance, that the Bull and Mouth Inn in Aldersgate was a meeting place for Quakers.⁶⁸ Tradesmen with connections in the city and merchants travelling through St Albans to other parts of the country were likely to have spread the message of dissent. Communication was a prime element in the dissemination of independent ideas and beliefs and this busy route from the north west to London, passing through St Albans, could be the key to the strong nonconformist element in the town.

NOTES

1. J. Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge urban history of Britain. Vol. II 1540–1840*, (Cambridge, 2000), Table 14.4, 473; E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the continent in the early modern period', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 15 (1985), Table 1, 686.
2. A. Whiteman, *The Compton Census of 1676: a critical edition*, (Oxford, 1986), cxvii.
3. D. Defoe, *A tour through the whole island of Great Britain*, (Harmondsworth, 1971, 1st publ. 1724–6), 344.
4. A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540–1700', in Clark, *Cambridge urban history*, Table 13.1, 430.
5. Langton, 'Urban growth', 463, 466.
6. Whiteman, *Compton Census*, cxv–cxvi; P. Clark and L. Murfin, *The history of Maidstone: the making of a modern county town*, (Stroud, 1995), 42.
7. D. R. Lacey, *Dissent and parliamentary politics in England 1661–1689*, (New Jersey, 1969), 26.
8. Public Record Office (hereafter, PRO), SP28 6 Part III f. 439; 11 Part f.26; 127 Part I; 130 Part II f.59; 154; 155 Item 15; 197 Part I ff.187–198 and Part II ff.49–57; 230; 231; 232; 233 (I am grateful to Alan Thomson for these references).
9. W. Urwick, *Nonconformity in Hertfordshire*, (London, 1884), 149.
10. C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, *Acts and ordinances of the Interregnum 1642–1660, Vol. II*, (London, 1911), 300.
11. Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (hereafter, HALS), Off. Acc.1162 Mayor's Account, 175.
12. HALS, Off. Acc.1162 Mayor's Account, 178.
13. Firth and Rait, *Acts and ordinances*, 971.
14. PRO, E179/248/23–24.
15. See, however, the reservations expressed regarding the relationship between hearths and wealth in late-seventeenth century towns in N. Goose, 'How accurately do the Hearth Tax returns reflect wealth? A discussion of some urban evidence', *Local Population Studies*, 67 (2001), 44–63.
16. PRO, PROB 11 370/434.
17. Dictionary of National Biography, Benjamin Whichcote.

18. Dictionary of National Biography, Jonathon Grew.
19. PRO, SP44 38A.
20. Bedfordshire County Record Office (hereafter, BRO), FR24/18/3.
21. C. Marsh, 'In the name of God? Will-making and faith in early modern England', in G. H. Martin and P. Spufford, eds, *The records of the nation*, (Woodbridge, 1990), 240.
22. N. Goose, 'Fertility and mortality in pre-industrial English towns from probate and parish register evidence', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose, eds, *When death do us part: understanding and interpreting the probate records of early modern England*, (Oxford, 2000), 212.
23. E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England 1541–1871: a reconstruction*, (London, 1981), 228. Wrigley and Schofield have calculated the expectation of life in 1676 to be 36.4 years: *The population history*, Table A3.1, 528. We have rounded this up to 40, because in a sample of 305 burials in the St Albans registers, the average age at death of adults 16+, where ages are known, is 39.7 years.
24. N. Alvey, 'Growth in the population of St Albans from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries', *The Local Historian*, 30 (2000), 150–9.
25. Langton, 'Urban growth', 460.
26. T. Arkell, 'Multiplying factors for estimating population totals from the hearth tax', *Local Population Studies*, 28 (1982), 56.
27. HALS, VIII B67.
28. HALS, Off. Acc.1162.
29. HALS, 9243.
30. Urwick, *Nonconformity*, 187.
31. HALS, D/EDY T11.
32. BRO, FR24/18/3.
33. BRO, FR24/18/3.
34. G. Lyon-Turner, ed., *Original records of early nonconformity under persecution and indulgence*, (London, 1911), Vol. I, 92.
35. B. Stevenson, 'The social integration of post-Restoration dissenters', in M. Spufford, ed., *The world of rural dissenters, 1520–1725*, (Cambridge, 1995), 379–85.
36. Lyon-Turner, *Original records*, 92.
37. PRO, PROB 11 364/326.
38. HALS, 123 AW 22.
39. M. Spufford, *Contrasting communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, (Stroud, 2000), 320.
40. Marsh, 'In the name of God?', 222.
41. PRO, PROB 10 1158.
42. PRO, PROB 10 1055.
43. HALS, 113 AW 2.
44. PRO, PROB 11 364 f.152.
45. PRO, PROB 11 370 f.110 (Hickman); HALS, 120 AW 12 (Gould); HALS, 123 AW 10 (Flindell).
46. HALS, 147 AW 4.
47. Urwick, *Nonconformity*, 149.
48. Firth and Rait, *Acts and ordinances*, 300.
49. HALS, Gorhambury Manorial Records, Quit Rent Rolls, XB 7 D.
50. Firth and Rait, *Acts and ordinances*, 758.
51. Firth and Rait, *Acts and ordinances*, 971.
52. HALS, 90 AW 9.
53. HALS, 108 AW 19 (Passmore); PRO, PROB 11 332/398 (Preston).
54. R. O'Day, *The debate on the English Reformation*, (London, 1986), 155.
55. Marsh, 'In the name of God?', 239.
56. M. Spufford, 'The importance of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in Spufford, *Rural dissenters*, 21–2.
57. Whiteman, *Compton Census*, xxxvix.
58. Urwick, *Nonconformity*, 229.
59. HALS, Off. Acc. 1162.

60. Lyon–Turner, *Original records*, 92.
61. N. Evans, 'The occupations and status of male testators in Cambridgeshire, 1551–1800', in Arkell, Evans and Goose, *When death do us part*, 180.
62. PRO, E179/248/23–24.
63. B. Stevenson, 'The social and economic status of post-Restoration dissenters', in Spufford, *Rural dissenters*, 333.
64. A comprehensive discussion of the social status of dissenters is presented in M. Spufford, 'Introduction', in Spufford, *Rural dissenters*, 1–102; Stevenson, 'The social and economic status'.
65. Spufford, 'Introduction', in Spufford, *Rural dissenters*, 1.
66. M. Frearson, 'The mobility and descent of dissenters in the Chiltern Hundreds', in Spufford, *Rural dissenters*, 273–308; S. Hindle, 'Persuasion and protest in the Caddington Common enclosure dispute, 1635–1639', *Past and Present*, 158 (1998), 61–3.
67. T. de Laune, *The present state of London*, (London, 1681), 386.
68. Frearson, 'Mobility and descent', 286.