Rational Dissent, Unitarianism, and the Closure of the Northampton Academy in 1798*

The decision by the Coward Trustees to close their academy at Northampton in June 1798 has generally been attributed to the prevalence of Unitarianism amongst the students. The reasons are more complex. Neither John Horsey, the theological tutor, nor the students at the time of the closure were Unitarian, though the latter were probably not Calvinists either. The appointment of David Savile, a zealous Calvinist, as assistant tutor by the trustees was a poor choice and led directly to the end of the academy. Closer investigation shows that the trustees differed little in their religious opinions from either Horsey or the students. The closure of the academy at Northampton can be used to identify the growing tensions within rational dissent as a result of the emergence of a more militant Unitarianism. It also proved to have extremely serious consequences for the future training of ministers for liberal dissent.

Introduction
At noon on 15 June 1798, John Horsey, the tutor of the academy at Northampton, met as arranged with the Coward Trustees to resume the discussion about the future of the institution. Instead the secretary, Joseph Paice, read a resolution on behalf of the trustees immediately dissolving the academy.¹ The decision was unexpected. Following the meeting with Horsey three days earlier, the trustees, though they had resolved to close the academy, asked Horsey to complete the education of the senior students.² The reasons for the immediate dissolution of the academy were never made explicit, but centred on the trustees’

¹. Notebook containing “A brief account of Horsey’s coming to the Academy, its removal to Northampton and its dissolution in 1798” from letters in the possession of his daughter, by the Revd W. A. Jones, Unitarian minister at Northampton (1848), Dr Williams’s Library, London [hereafter DWL], Northampton Academy MSS, MS 69.7, fol. 73r.
². Resolutions in Paice’s hand, DWL, New College MSS, MS NCL/538/20, [14 Jun. 1798]; earlier draft by Paice (14 Jun. 1798), NCL/417/10.

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concerns about the religious heterodoxy of the students. Yet that alone is too simple an explanation. This article will therefore consider the reasons for the closure of the academy, the consequences for liberal dissent of the loss of one of the main academies for the training of its ministers, and the challenges faced by the students to complete their education and enter the ministry. Nevertheless its main purpose is to provide a clearer picture of the growing tensions within rational dissent at the end of the eighteenth century as a result of the emergence of a more open and aggressive Unitarianism. It will therefore contribute towards a better understanding of English Unitarianism at a critical period in its history when there is little direct evidence for its growth and development.

Rational Dissent, the Academy, and Horsey’s Congregation

During the second half of the eighteenth century the religious landscape of England was transformed by a series of evangelical revivals. For the first time these revivals even reached those groups previously untouched by formal religion, the agricultural labourer, the collier, and the industrial worker, as well as revitalising the religion of many regular churchgoers. Characterised by an intense religious experience and an awakening personal faith, it placed Christ at the centre of that faith, emphasising his sacrifice for the sins of the world. Although the evangelical revival began with the Church of England, the transformation which dissent underwent was even more striking. The main beneficiaries in England and Wales were the Congregationalists, who grew from about 900 congregations at the end of the eighteenth century, to around 2,000 by 1831, and to over 3,200 in 1851. The Baptists were also to experience considerable growth, though it took place later in the nineteenth century. Not all dissenters were influenced by the evangelical revival, for example the English Presbyterians. At the beginning of the eighteenth century they were the largest denomination of dissenters with more than 600 meetings, by the end of the century the figure had declined to around 200.

For many being orthodox meant having an unqualified belief in the Trinity, and for most dissenters in the late eighteenth century religious orthodoxy meant Calvinist orthodoxy. In contrast heterodoxy is harder to identify. The leading Presbyterian congregations in England had been profoundly influenced by the intellectual developments of the eighteenth century and by the doctrinal divisions which had emerged within dissent, especially over the Trinity. By applying reason to Scripture in controversial matters many individuals came to reject the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, predestination, and justification by faith alone. In matters of uncertainty they appealed to personal conscience.

As a consequence, by the end of the century a variety of rationalist opinions can be found in most wealthy English Presbyterian congregations, but their adoption was uneven, depending upon particular individuals and circumstances, and often impossible for the historian to identify or pin down for any particular period. The term rational dissent has been used to describe these opinions. What was thought to hold true for religion was applied to other areas of knowledge and enquiry. Historians have identified the contribution made by rational dissenters to the movements for religious and political reform, particularly the campaigns for the emancipation of slavery, and for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1787, 1789, and 1790.4

Orthodox dissenters became increasingly anxious about the dangers of heterodoxy during the last decades of the eighteenth century, particularly as the earlier Arian form of anti-Trinitarian speculation which had prevailed for much of the eighteenth century was being replaced by a more open and aggressive Unitarianism which went beyond Arianism in actually denying the divinity of Christ.5 Any departure from strict Calvinism was seen as an attack upon Christianity, and frequently labelled socinianism out of hand, whether or not it involved any questioning of the Trinity. As a consequence the term socinianism, originally named after the sixteenth-century theologian Faustus Socinus, was far more loosely applied by the late eighteenth century, and was generally a term of abuse. Unitarians, much more than Arians, raised real anxiety by striking at the root of so much orthodox Christian belief, and Unitarians were therefore isolated from the rest of dissent. In turn, following the French Revolution, the state came to see the challenge to doctrinal orthodoxy and the demands for reform as subversive.6 Although many of the ministers and major figures of the leading Presbyterian congregations had adopted rational religious beliefs by the end of the eighteenth century, with a very few exceptions there is little evidence that Unitarian opinions prevailed in any congregation so early. During the first decades of the nineteenth century the variety of opinions which made up late eighteenth-century anti-Trinitarianism came to be replaced by a more open declaration of Unitarianism in many Presbyterian congregations. Yet the tradition of theological diversity continued. Within those congregations which had openly adopted Unitarian sentiments the right of private conscience still prevailed and there were many who continued to hold Arian rather than Unitarian opinions adding to the problems of interpretation.7 Rational dissent has been identified as doctrinally heterodox, even as a staging post leading to

Unitarianism. This is misleading. Although rational dissent sheltered a wide variety of opinions, orthodox as well as heterodox, it was characterised by an absolute belief in an individual’s right to exercise private judgement in matters of religion, and by a rejection of all religious tests and human impositions. Dissenting academies were to respond to these developments.

Dissenting academies date from the late seventeenth century and were established to provide students for the ministry who refused to conform to the Church of England with a higher education similar to that at Oxford and Cambridge, from which they were largely excluded both by choice and by university statute. The earliest academies generally relied upon the resources of a single tutor and were therefore often small and short-lived. By the mid-eighteenth century, in response to the advances in scholarship, some academies were established on a larger scale, employing a number of tutors to teach a wider range of subjects in greater depth. They were maintained either by subscriptions and benefactions, as for example Warrington Academy, or by a charitable trust, as in the case of Carmarthen Academy which was supported by the Presbyterian Fund. Academies played a vital role in maintaining an educated ministry amongst the dissenters, and the best gave their students the knowledge and skills to examine new ideas and arguments for themselves, and indeed to hold their own in disputes with their Anglican opponents. Both tutors and students included scholars who made a major contribution to the development of ideas in literature and science during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Before the mid-eighteenth century the academies conducted by the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were generally open to all, but this was to change as a result of the evangelical revival. Fears over the spread of heterodoxy and the decay of evangelical and vital religion led to the founding of the King’s Head Society in 1730. The students they supported were required to make a declaration of their orthodoxy when they were admitted, and they were re-examined every three months. By the last decades of the eighteenth century there were only a handful academies that did not apply a religious test of orthodoxy. One of the most important was Daventry Academy, and after 1789 its successor at Northampton under Horsey.

The academy at Daventry was originally founded by Philip Doddridge at Market Harborough in 1729. The following year he was appointed minister of the congregation at Castle Hill, Northampton, and the academy moved with him. It became among the most celebrated eighteenth-century dissenting academies because of the range and innovation of Doddridge’s teaching and his increasing celebrity as one of the leading ministers amongst the dissenters, attracting students from much of England, from Scotland, and even Europe. After his death the academy was transferred to Daventry in 1752, where Caleb

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Ashworth, his chosen successor as tutor, was minister. At the same time the Coward Trustees took responsibility for its management and finances. The trust had been established by the will of William Coward, a wealthy West Indies merchant, who had died in 1738 leaving the major part of his estate to four trustees to support the education of students for the ministry. Coward and then, following his death, his trustees, had already funded many of Doddridge’s students. The trustees now appointed the tutor and assistant tutors and paid their salaries, controlled the admission of students, provided exhibitions for those intending to enter the ministry who were poor, and paid all the charges and expenses of running the academy and maintaining its buildings. Coward had intended his trust only to benefit Calvinists, but his trustees made no attempt to enforce the condition. Nevertheless in 1789 Thomas Belsham, who had been in charge of the academy since 1781, resigned after announcing he had adopted Unitarian opinions. Horsey was appointed his successor as tutor of the academy in June 1789. At the time Horsey was minister of Doddridge’s former congregation at Castle Hill in Northampton. Despite an invitation from the congregation at Daventry, Horsey decided to remain at Castle Hill, and the academy returned to Northampton. The decision was to unsettle both Horsey’s congregation and the academy.11

For Horsey the academy at Northampton had a difficult beginning as well as a turbulent end. Most of the students shared their former tutor Belsham’s Unitarian opinions. Horsey was warned by Thomas Robins that “no Calvinist wd be tolerated by the students, and no one approaching to Calvinism could have authority if any undue influence were attempted.”12 Horsey sought to remove any fears that he would attempt to enforce his own views. In his opening address as theology tutor he told the students that “It is not the design of this Institution, and it is very far from my Inclination, to usurp an Authority over Conscience, or to cherish Bigotry & Party Zeal.” He considered “Freedom of Enquiry on all Subjects is the Birthright and glory of a Rational Being,” the honest endeavour of “an unfettered mind.” It was, he believed, very much to the credit of the institution that it had been conducted for many years “on generous & liberal principles.” No subscription to any articles of faith had ever been required.13 He was clearly defending the right of private judgement upheld by rational dissent. It was only with difficulty that Horsey “combated [the] strong prejudices” of the early students. As a consequence the “first two or three sessions ... were by no means so comfortable as the succeeding five, which were followed by the [final] stormy session” which led to the closure of the academy in June 1798.14

11. For a history of both Daventry and Horsey’s Academies, see http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/
13. Copy of an inaugural address delivered at Northampton Academy 8 Jan. 1790 by John Horsey, copied from the original by W. A. Jones, 15 Aug. 1848, MS 69.7, fos. 82r, 84r–86r.

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The presence of the academy was to damage relations between Horsey and his congregation. Joseph Paice admitted that he and his fellow trustees, “by removing the Academy to Northampton, innocently introduced an infusion into his Church and Family, which injuriously affected its Peace: All concerned in that measure have ever since Lamented the consequence.”

Ann Taylor, Horsey’s sister, was less forgiving, accusing the trustees of being fully aware of the risk before inducing Horsey to take on the tutorship. For they “themselves knew so much of the complextion of the congregation here as to think that [it was] a serious objection to bringing the academy hither.” Did not Horsey himself anticipate a great deal [of trouble] in one form & another and on that account object to undertaking it? and did not the Trustees urge it upon him & promise to do all in their power to render the unavoidable burdens as light as possible and in every respect to make him & his as comfortable as such a situation would admit.

The Castle Hill congregation, like many of the larger urban congregations at this date, was doctrinally mixed, presenting a particular challenge for Horsey as the minister, but the tensions within the congregation were heightened by the transfer of the academy to Northampton because of the academy’s reputation for heterodoxy. Ann Taylor recalled that one very orthodox member of the Castle Hill Congregation detected Horsey’s “want of orthodoxy the very first Sabbath after it came hither.”

David Savile and the Academy

Horsey’s difficulties with his congregation were greatly compounded by the appointment of David Savile as the assistant tutor in 1797, and the closure of the academy was a direct consequence of this appointment. Horsey originally had two assistants who had moved with the academy from Daventry. In 1791, the tutor in mathematics and natural philosophy, William Broadbent, resigned his post on his appointment as minister at Warrington. He was not replaced and the work was undertaken by a number of senior students. One of the students, John Bickerton Dewhurst, taught mathematics for two sessions during the final part of his course. In May 1797 he completed his studies and Horsey was anxious to see him appointed assistant tutor. Horsey urged the trustees to interview him, but they declined. The following month the classics tutor, Robert Forsaith, died suddenly. Horsey again urged Dewhurst as a replacement, at least temporarily. He was told that the trustees had already made

16. MS NCL/406/20. For a draft of Paice’s reply on behalf of the trustees rejecting the charge, see NCL/429/55, dated 5 Dec. 1798.
17. MS NCL/406/20.
18. Coward Trust Minutes, volume 2, 1779–1813, DWL, MS NCL/CT2, p. 80 (14 Sep. 1791).
19. NCL/CT2, pp. 94, 97 (30 Aug. 1796, 23 May 1797); Horsey, Northampton, to Paice, 8 May 1797, NCL/430/6. Dewhurst was given 10 guineas by the trustees for his assistance with the mathematics class in 1796, and a further 30 guineas in 1797, see NCL/CT2, pp. 94, 98 (30 Aug. 1796, 3 Jul. 1797). Horsey “formed no common regard for his pupil, and was always spoken by him with a marked affection and esteem,” see “Memoirs of the Rev. J. B. Dewhurst,” Monthly Repository 8 (1813): 732.
their opinions concerning Dewhurst clear, and that they had in mind some other person “to supply the Vacancy and promote the Prosperity of the Academical Institution.” Forsaith, according to Belsham’s biographer, was very orthodox, particularly in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the appointment of Savile looks to have been prompted by the desire of the trustees to maintain the orthodoxy of at least one of the assistant tutors.

In August 1797, after receiving apparently satisfactory references, the trustees appointed David Savile as tutor in both mathematics and classics. Savile had graduated from St Andrews University in 1791, where he had assisted the professor of mathematics. He also had some experience of teaching classics. At the time of his appointment he was a private tutor in Fife. The process by which Savile was appointed is curious. Savile was recommended by the prominent Scottish evangelical Greville Ewing in a letter to the Rev. Joseph Hughes, as admirably qualified for the position of assistant tutor. Hughes, who had apparently approached Ewing about the appointment, was minister of a Baptist congregation at Battersea having previously served as classics tutor at Bristol Baptist College from 1791 until 1796. It is not clear how Ewing and Hughes became involved, but it suggests the trustees had sought advice more widely, from those who had a better knowledge than they themselves possessed, of where to recruit a tutor with orthodox beliefs.

Horsey thought it impossible for one man to teach both the mathematical and the classical parts of the course properly. In fact Savile proved incompetent, and soon earned both the contempt and the dislike of the students, particularly for what they saw as his underhand mischief making. According to the biographical account of Lant Carpenter by his son Russell, Savile “was accustomed to employ literal English translations”:

when any of the class was unable to proceed, ... he did not know how to assist them, and by his gross mistakes incurred the contempt of the young men. To have a tutor so utterly incompetent, was sufficiently disheartening; but they had reason to suspect him as a spy upon their conduct, and a maker of mischief between them and the trustees.

They became convinced that he was seeking to displace Horsey as theological tutor. Savile was also obnoxious because of his high Calvinism and its emphasis on creeds and confessions of faith. The students chose to absent themselves from public worship on one occasion when he was preaching, “to

20. Paice to Horsey, draft letter, Jul. 1797, NCL/417/3; NCL/CT2, p. 98a, copy of a letter, 5 Jul. 1797. For the manoeuvrings of the trustees, see Paice’s draft letter to the other trustees, dated 8 Jun. 1797, NCL/429/2.
22. NCL/CT2, p. 99 (8, 15 Aug. 1797).
24. Greville Ewing, Edinburgh, to Joseph Hughes, Battersea, 25 Jul. 1797, NCL/430/7. Ewing helped found the Edinburgh (later the Scottish) Missionary Society (1796), and was its first secretary, and editor of the Missionary Magazine (1796–1799).

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mark their disapproval of his bitter and declamatory harangues.” If the appointment of Savile was intended to restore the orthodoxy of the students then it was counterproductive. Lant Carpenter told his uncle, “I fear that the violent zeal of our tutor may have a tendency to make us run into the opposite extreme.” By February 1798, the students felt compelled to petition the trustees for “their want of the advantages formerly enjoyed for studying various subjects, and acquiring Literary Knowledge.” Their complaints were dismissed by the trustees as a challenge to their authority, but the trustees were to be told by Horsey that the students were “not at all disposed to be mutinous,” rather they were concerned for the reputation of the academy and their own education. To his embarrassment Horsey found it necessary to inform the trustees that Savile was not qualified for his position as tutor.27

Equally serious for Horsey, Savile disrupted his congregation. Within a month of Savile’s arrival Paice had noticed “The degrading Language of Comparison between him and Mr Horsey.”28 Horsey told the trustees in April 1797 that matters had reached such a height that he was very apprehensive about his congregation. “I cannot indeed conceive it possible, that the peace of the Society can be long preserved, if Mr Savile continues with us.”29 The Castle Hill congregation had a history of doctrinal disputes and secessions. Horsey’s predecessor, William Hextal, had been dismissed in 1775 by the members of the church for a want of orthodoxy, though he had been supported by of the many subscribers particularly some of the wealthiest. Claims about Hextal’s heterodoxy seem to have been groundless, but a number of the more affluent subscribers were thought to hold rational and possibly heterodox opinions.30 The careful balance that Horsey sought to maintain at Castle Hill between the competing doctrinal interests was destroyed by Savile’s high Calvinist preaching, and Savile made every effort to gather his own party within the congregation in opposition to Horsey. In November 1798, after the closure of the academy, Horsey was to reflect on the damage Savile had caused: “Great is the mischief which this incendiary has done, by dividing family, and thus disturbing that harmony and peace, which predominated before he came.”31 The students also proved disruptive. They naturally made friends with some of the younger members with whom they discussed their studies and even their ideas. Joseph Johnson was one member who was seriously unsettled by some these ideas, and fifty years later it was recalled that Savile and Joseph Hughes helped restore his orthodoxy.32

27. NCL/CT2, p. 102 (20 Feb. 1798); Horsey to [Paice], 7 Apr. 1798, NCL/406/1.
28. NCL/538/16.
29. NCL/406/1.
31. NCL/406/18; Horsey to Paice, 6 Aug. 1798, NCL/406/11.
The Closure of the Academy

The students broke up for the summer vacation on 5 June, leaving their books and other possessions behind, fully expecting to resume their studies. On 12 June, in response to the disagreeable reports circulated by Savile, Horsey met with the trustees in London, where they held “the most Unreserved Conversation ... on the state of the Academy,” and agreed to meet again in three days’ time.33 From the notes made by Paice after the meeting on 12 June, it is clear the trustees originally decided “to Limit their continuance of the Northampton Academy, to the Finishing the education of the Students there,” with the intention of forming a new institution elsewhere after a suitable interval. The junior students were to be placed with a minister for one or more parts of their education, or sent to a Scottish university if sufficiently prepared. Horsey was persuaded to complete the education of the senior students.34

Despite their resolution, the trustees dissolved the academy at the meeting with Horsey on 15 June. Although the reasons for the change of heart were not given, the trustees had met with Savile the day before, dining with Horsey the same evening. From a letter Horsey wrote to his wife, it appears several hard things were said on both sides, and the trustees seemed to lean in favour of Savile.35 Clearly the decision to close the academy immediately was the result of the meeting with Savile. Savile himself was to declare that he was “pleased that my efforts were successful in hastening it.”36 The trustees were certainly very aware of what Paice termed “the retrograde state of the Seriousness in our Academy, both before and from the time of its removal from Daventry.”37 Nonetheless, Savile’s account may still have shocked them by his claims about the deplorable state of the academy. There is evidence to suggest that among the trustees Thomas Urwick was particularly concerned, and that he led the trustees in the decisions they made. It was after reading the correspondence between Urwick and Dewhurst that the trustees resolved not to interview Dewhurst for the post of mathematics tutor.38 It was Urwick who informed the other trustees about Savile’s suitability.39 Perhaps most significantly, it was Urwick who drew up the resolution for the immediate dissolution of the academy, and asked Paice to call a meeting of the trustees to agree the resolution before they met with Horsey on 15 June.40

Undoubtedly the academy’s orthodox opponents rejoiced at its closure. Almost immediately an announcement appeared in the Missionary Magazine edited by Greville Ewing, Savile’s patron, which declared “we announce with satisfaction the dissolution of the Theological Academy at Northampton.”41 It

33. NCL/CT2, p. 104.
34. NCL/538/20.
35. NCL/CT2, p. 104 (14 Jun. 1798); letter from Horsey to his wife, dated 14 June 1798, mentioned by Jones in his “Brief account,” MS 69.7, fol. 72r.
37. Copy of letter from Paice to Urwick, 20 June 1798, NCL/538/7/1.
38. NCL/CT2, p. 97 (23 May 1797); NCL/429/2, draft minute dated 23 May 1797.
39. NCL/CT2, p. 99 (8 Aug. 1797); Urwick, Clapham, to Paice, 10 Sep. 1797, NCL/417/6.
40. NCL/406/2i & 2ii.
was noted that the academy founded by Doddridge, and supported by the Coward benefaction, had been intended to educate students according to Calvinist principles. Yet for many years the tutor and students had been suspected, “on the strongest grounds,” of holding socinian beliefs. It was claimed that

a young gentleman from Scotland … found the state of the seminary so bad, and the rejection of the peculiar doctrines of the gospel so universal, open and avowed, that sacrificing his salary to his conscience, he thought it necessary to propose to the trustees its total dissolution, as the only remaining expedient by which the evil, now become inveterate, could be exterminated.

While Savile was praised for his integrity, Horsey was excoriated for his deceit:

How criminal to teach in a clandestine manner, principles destructive of those which must have been professed, in order to gain access into so important a situation … and all the while conceal[ing] the state of the seminary, the prevailing principles, characters, and conduct of the students, from those whose trust required them to demand, and entitled them to receive the most ample information.42

Horsey was to reply robustly. The notice in the Missionary Magazine, he was confident, “was written by some one ignorant of the internal state of the seminary; or, who has wickedly misrepresented both the students and me.”43 He maintained that, contrary to the insinuations of the writer of the article, “the direction contained in Mr Coward’s will has been uniformly regarded, and conscientiously obeyed,” and if this was false he called upon any of his students to answer him. Horsey’s students independently were to bear public testimony to their tutor’s fidelity. They pointed out that Doddridge’s printed lectures were their text books, as prescribed by the trustees. They continued:

That those doctrines, which are most particularly distinguishing of the Calvinistic system, were so far from being withheld or opposed in a clandestine manner, that they were fully stated, and frequently introduced by Mr Horsey, (as many of us perfectly recollect) as doctrines in which Mr Coward’s will required us to be well instructed.44

Horsey also pointed out it was scarcely possible to deceive the trustees since, besides annual interviews in London, and examinations at Northampton, the institution was “at all times entirely open to their enquiries and inspection.”45 Indeed he was subsequently to write that he had been supported by the trustees during his period as tutor “without the slightest censure from them, collectively or individually, but receiving, on the contrary, in the most handsome terms,

42. Monthly Magazine 6, no. 2 (November 1798): 319.
43. Monthly Magazine 6, no. 2 (November 1798): 319.
44. “To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine,” Monthly Magazine 8, no. 1 (1799): 17–18. The claim that Calvinism was the system taught and the text books used was made about the academy both at Daventry and shortly after it had moved to Northampton, see J. Toulmin, “Character of Dr Doddridge, and of his successors,” Gentleman’s Magazine 41, no. 1 (1791): 330.
repeated testimonies of their approbation.” Savile was to reply, dismissing Horsey’s appeal to his students and ridiculing his claims to have adhered to the terms of Coward’s will. “It is expressly stated that the students shall be instructed agreeable to the doctrines of the Assembly’s Catechism.” He continued “What then do they affirm – that you taught, and they received the doctrines of Calvinism? Calvinism was their scorn; … do you yourself believe the articles in question? and if not, how could you faithfully teach them?” He went on, as others subsequently did, to make unfavourable comparisons with Theophilus Lindsey and Belsham, who unlike Horsey had “renounced their situations, when a change of opinion made it impossible consciously to retain them.” Lindsey had resigned as Vicar of Catterick in 1773, and opened the first avowedly Unitarian congregation at Essex Street, London, in April 1774.

Were Horsey and the Students Unitarians?
The charge has stuck. It is Horsey’s reputation which was blasted. The closure of the academy has been attributed to his failings, in particular his failure to preserve the orthodoxy of the academy and its students. The criticisms of Horsey have been accepted without any real examination of the evidence or the role of the Coward Trustees. It has also been assumed that Horsey was a Unitarian: a belief apparently reinforced by the fact that the Unitarian congregation in Northampton was founded as a result of a secession from Castle Hill by Horsey’s daughter and others, immediately following Horsey’s death in 1827.

None the less it is clear Horsey’s religious opinions, though liberal and generous, were still doctrinally orthodox. He continued to retain the good opinion of the neighbouring ministers, a situation which would have been impossible had he been considered a Unitarian. He officiated at local ordinations, and even the funeral of Thomas Northcote Toller, the long-serving Congregational minister at Kettering. Benjamin Edwards, minister of King Street, the second Congregational church in Northampton, preached his funeral sermon. Close investigation shows that Horsey during the early years of his ministry in Northampton had a reputation as a popular evangelical preacher. In March 1776 the minister of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, heard him preach “a solid,

46. Horsey, Lectures, xiii. See also the minute recording the approbation of the trustees, NCL/CT2, p. 101 (17 Oct. 1797).
49. See, for example, the ordination of Francis William Dury at Oakham (1802) and Joseph Gronow at Weedon Bec (1817), Evangelical Magazine 10 (1802): 247; Evangelical Magazine 26 (1818): 109–10; funeral of T. N. Toller (1821), Thomas Coleman, Memorials of the Independent Churches in Northamptonshire (London: John Snow, 1853), 112.
judicious discourse” from Psalm 25, v. 11, and concluded “He is truly evangel-
ical.”50 It is clear Horsey never lost this orthodoxy. He refused to allow himself
to be classed a Unitarian, and shortly before his death he made the following
distinctly orthodox declaration:

Whenever the summons shall arrive to call me from time to eternity, I wish to leave
the world in the character of a penitent believer, lying at the foot of the cross; implor-
ing Divine mercy through the merit and mediation of Christ, the great Redeemer and
Saviour of the Lost.51

No doubt loyalty to her Father’s ministry kept Ann Horsey and other members
at Castle Hill until his death.52

The belief that the students were socinians was also widely held by contempo-
raries. Savile and his friends were convinced that Northampton had “become a
Seminary for Triflers and for Socinians — The principles of the original Institution,
were adopted … not by a single Pupil.”53 Leading Unitarians agreed. In December
1795, after a number of prominent desertions from the ministry, Joseph Priestley,
by then in exile in America, wrote to Lindsey in optimistic terms that “Others,
however, at least a sufficient number, will rise up, better qualified to fill the places
of those whose apostacy we regret the most. Mr Hawkes says there are many
unitarians in the academy at Northampton.”54 The reputation of the academy for
heterodoxy was widespread. After serving for a year as a sub-tutor at Edward
Williams’s academy in Oswestry, William Johns entered Northampton Academy
in 1792. He came from a Calvinist family, who were horrified by his choice.55

Despite the apparent weight of evidence, to describe the academy and its stu-
dents as Unitarian is misleading. The position was altogether more complex. It
is true that by the time Belsham resigned as theology tutor at Daventry few of
the students were orthodox: indeed one of his students calculated that all but
six or so of the forty divinity students had become Unitarians.56 Horsey was
not a Unitarian and this explains the considerable problems he experienced
with the students he inherited from Daventry. Since his difficulties eased once
the senior students left the academy, it suggests that the later students were not
Unitarian. Priestley, like many enthusiasts for a cause, was often too willing to
claim adherents to Unitarianism, and in any case it is not clear that his informant

Past and Present 4 (1966): 63; Coleman, Memorials of the Independent Churches in Northamptonshire,
31–32.
51. “Historical Account of the Ancient Congregational Church, assembling at Castle Hill Meet-
ing House, Northampton,” Congregational Magazine 6 (1830), 171–72; Letters to Dissenting Min-
isters, and to Students for the Ministry, from the Rev. Mr. Job Orton, ed. S. Palmer (London:
Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), I, 95; [J. Rudsdell], The pernicious effects of religious
contentions and bigotry... relative to that church and congregation at Northampton (Northampton:
Printed and sold by C. and T. Dicey, [1775?]).
52. “Opening of the New Unitarian Chapel at Northampton,” Monthly Repository 21 (1827):
53. DWL, MS NCL/406/11.
54. Joseph Priestley to Theophilus Lindsey, 6 Dec, 1795, DWL, MS 12.13, printed in The Theo-
Smallfield, 1817–1832) 1.2: 324.
could have known the actual sentiments of the students. Furthermore, students from orthodox backgrounds still entered the academy under Horsey.

The clearest account of the religious position of the students is Carpenter’s discussion of his religious sentiments with his uncle, Benjamin Carpenter, the minister of Clapham, in May 1798, just before the closure of the academy. While Carpenter had rejected Calvinism before he entered the academy, for he had “always been led to believe that those tenets were both irrational and unscriptural,” his own religious opinions were still not settled. “I have not studied the doctrines nor the evidences of Christianity; nor have I made up my mind on any of the systems of Christianity, except the tenets of Calvinism.” Carpenter was to make clear to his uncle that this was true of the other students. “I think I can say the same with respect to this place; our conversation generally turning upon the evidences of Christianity and of the existence of the Deity, and other subjects connected with our respective lectures.” While admitting that “I have been perhaps the widest in my sentiments of any at present in the academy,” he continued: “We certainly are not Calvinists, nor likely to become such, … but I can safely say, that, among the six who reside in this house, and with whom, of course, I am most acquainted with respect to their sentiments, not one has decided or attempts to decide on the other disputable points of Christianity.”

In other words they were not Unitarians. In part the difficulty was the determination of the orthodox to label any departure from strict Calvinism as socinianism. The trustees appear to have shared this misconception. After the academy closed, Carpenter discovered that when investigating the conduct of the students, the trustees had said that “I was a determined Socinian when I entered the house. From what source they drew this information I cannot tell.” Furthermore, the trustees were far from holding the Calvinist doctrines that William Coward had held. Horsey’s sister, in her bitter letter to the trustees, accused them of hypocrisy. She pointed out the rational part of dissent was what “you Gentlemen profess yourselves to be”: “you never stiled your selves Methodists or Orthodox — other people never thought you so … what then can be the reason these young men sho[d] be so reprobated on account of their not holding doctrines you your selves don’t believe?” Even the account of Urwick, published after his death, makes clear that “his religious opinions were by no means what are called orthodox, nor could he, we apprehend, be justly said to believe a Trinity in any sense,” though he clearly disliked the growing stress by Unitarians on the humanity of Jesus. Like many rational dissenters of the

57. Mr Hawkes was most likely the Rev. William Hawkes of Birmingham, who Priestley succeeded as minister of New Meeting in 1780, and who would need no introduction to Lindsey, or may be his son, William jun., minister of Mosley Street Chapel, Manchester. It is possible that Priestley’s informant was James Hawkes, a student at the academy, but Priestley would surely have identified him properly to Lindsey to avoid any confusion.

58. For example, the parents of both John Ross and Thomas Warwick were Wesleyan Methodists, and John Lane’s parents were Independents: Monthly Magazine 12, no. 2 (1801): 72; Christian Reformer ns 8 (1852): 260; W. D. Jeremy, The Presbyterian Fund and Dr Daniel Williams’s Trust (London: Williams and Norgate, 1885), 188.


61. NCL/406/20.
old school, he did not preach on doctrinal matters, stressing instead the duties of a holy life. These were the circumstances, which gained, we are persuaded, for Mr Urwick with many Calvinists, that reputation which otherwise his excellent character, with such insufficient claims to Orthodoxy would have failed to procure.”

The religious opinions of the other trustees are not so clearly recorded, though, according to one of Belsham’s students, the trustees in the late 1780s “were, I believe, what have been called Baxterians”: that is, they shared Richard Baxter’s “middle way” between Calvinism and Arminianism with its appeal to reason and personal conscience. All the evidence suggests that Horsey differed little from the trustees in his religious beliefs, and the same was probably true of many of the students, certainly in the later years.

The Crisis in Ministerial Education

The closure of the academy at Northampton added to the crisis liberal dissent faced in educating its ministers. Warrington Academy had effectively closed in 1783, and in any case by that date few students for the ministry were educated there. When Carmarthen Academy at Rhyd-y-gors closed in 1784, both Daventry and Hoxton Academies were full and unable to admit any additional students. In 1785, following the resignation of two of the three tutors at Hoxton Academy, the Coward Trustees prompted by growing financial problems decided to close Hoxton which, like Daventry, they funded. There were difficulties in accommodating the students who transferred to Daventry. The closure of Hoxton, one of the main academies in the neighbourhood of London, was to cause particular alarm amongst liberal dissenters, and after a series of meetings a committee was formed which first attempted to meet the Coward Trustees with “the design to re-establish the Hoxton academy, on the same plan by which it was lately conducted.” When that failed they established their own academy, New College, Hackney. Although the promoters had originally attempted to re-establish Hoxton, Hackney was one of two new academies established in 1786 by liberal dissenters to replace Warrington. The other was at Manchester, also called New College. New College, Hackney, much the better funded of the two, in many ways attempted to replicate the Warrington ideal of a dissenting university, but grossly over-extended itself with a grandiose building project, and the college closed in 1796 heavily in debt, shortly before Northampton. New College, Manchester, with a tenth of the benefactions and a third of the annual subscriptions, was much more narrowly supported, in regional as well as financial terms,

63. “Recollections of Mr Belsham,” 102.
64. Both Carpenter and Neath came to the same conclusion, see Carpenter, Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Lant Carpenter, 23; Memorial of Coward’s Academies by Dr Samuel Neath, DWL, MS NCL/CT12/1, 108.
65. MS NCL/CT2, pp. 32, 33, 37, 38, 41, 44, 45, 47; Letters and memoranda of Joseph Paice concerning dissolution of Hoxton Academy, 1785–1786, MS 187/2/3–12; Hackney College Minutes, 1785–1791, DWL, MS 38.14, pp. 1–6. For a modern account of these academies, see the Dissenting Academies Online Database and Encyclopedia: http://dissacad.English.qmul.ac.uk/new_dissacad/phpfiles/sv Resources, Academy Histories.

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with almost no support outside the north of England until after the failure of Hackney. The academy at Manchester also engaged in an over ambitious building programme, and as a consequence experienced severe financial difficulties. With the closure of Northampton, the academy at Manchester was the only institution in England which was sympathetic to liberal dissent, except for a very brief period between 1799 and 1805, when Timothy Kenrick conducted an academy in Exeter, and between 1812 and 1818 when Robert Aspland conducted the Hackney Unitarian Academy. Yet the future of New College, Manchester, was far from certain. It nearly closed as a result of major financial crises in 1792 and 1797, and the resignation of Thomas Barnes, the divinity tutor, in 1798 precipitated a further crisis because of the difficulties in finding a successor. The first five ministers invited all refused, and George Walker accepted largely because he was persuaded the survival of the institution depended upon it.67 The difficulty the twelve remaining students faced in completing their education underlines the seriousness of the closure of the academy at Northampton for liberal dissent.68 The surviving correspondence with Paice confirms there were only two institutions where they could complete their education, New College, Manchester, and Glasgow University. The advantage of Glasgow was the availability of bursaries from Dr Williams’s Trust for ministerial students from England, but initially there were only sufficient funds to support three students.69

The future careers of the students who studied at Northampton provide further evidence of the challenges facing those holding liberal and rational opinions who hoped to enter the dissenting ministry. The names of thirty-nine students educated by Horsey are known, including one lay and six divinity students who transferred from Daventry. Thereafter only students for the ministry were educated at Northampton following a decision by the Coward Trustees in July 1789.70 Although a majority of the students did enter the ministry, only half continued for more than ten years, or were still ministers at the time of their death. Inevitably six students died young, two before they had entered the ministry. A surprisingly large number of the remaining students (about a third) left the ministry after only a brief period to pursue other professional careers. Of the rest, Thomas Cole conformed and there is no further information for another five, who also probably did not become ministers. Changes of heart or decisions to follow a better remunerated or more congenial career were not unusual. David Davies after serving for a short time as minister at Sutton-in-Ashfield, a very small cause near Mansfield, attended Glasgow

69. Paice, Tayler, and Urwick were also trustees of Dr Williams’s Trust, see Jeremy, *The Presbyterian Fund and Dr Daniel Williams’s Trust*, 163–64, 169–70, 173; J. Wainewright, Gray’s Inn, to J. Paice, [Oct. 1798], 14 Dec. 1798, NCL/420/8–9.
70. NCL/CT2, p. 61 (31 Jul. 1789).
University and received his MD in 1801. He became an accoucheur in London, and from 1827 until his death in 1841 was Professor of Midwifery in the University of London. William Winstanley after only eight years also left the ministry for medicine. Thomas Warwick was minister at Rotherham for two years before taking his MD at Glasgow in 1798. He then followed a scientific career.\textsuperscript{71} William Manning was minister at Bowl Alley Chapel, Hull, for five years, and then entered business. William Stevenson, father of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, while minister at Dob Lane, Failsworth, was classics tutor at New College, Manchester, between 1792 and 1796, but gave up both for a literary and administrative career. Teaching was an obvious alternative to the ministry. Obadiah Tomalin was briefly an assistant at Yeovil before turning to a career in teaching. More surprisingly, in 1812 William Youatt, after about sixteen years and a successful ministry at Baffins Lane, Chichester, where he also conducted a school, decided to pursue a new career. He has been described as the most influential veterinary surgeon in the first half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{72}

Some explanation is needed for the high proportion of students who did not enter or who left the ministry after only a short time. It was in part the result of the difficulties that ministers who had a reputation for holding heterodox opinions experienced in finding a sympathetic congregation before the early nineteenth century. The last decade of the eighteenth century was particularly discouraging because of the growing confrontation with evangelicals and orthodox dissenters who saw Unitarianism as the bane of Christianity, and because of the worsening political situation. The success of the evangelical revival in revitalising dissent had closed many churches to those who were not strictly orthodox. They included most of the congregations in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. According to Horsey’s sister, only those at Kettering and Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, and the Great Meeting congregation in Leicester, were willing to hear students from either Daventry or Northampton academy preach.\textsuperscript{73} A student of Belsham at Daventry, shortly before the academy moved to Northampton, recalled that the prospects during the 1780s and 1790s for a young minister who had embraced Unitarianism were “peculiarly disheartening.” The number of openly Unitarian congregations at the time was very small and the position was not to improve until the early nineteenth century. As a result he and many of his fellow students had been forced to serve congregations who were unsympathetic with little liking for what they termed socinianism.\textsuperscript{74} Political difficulties added to the general discouragement. The violence of the Priestley Riots in July 1791 was a profound shock and was felt far beyond Birmingham.\textsuperscript{75} The earlier confidence that many rational dissenters had felt concerning reform gave way to defeat and a great sense


\textsuperscript{72.} For the careers of the students see the Dissenting Academies Online Database and Encyclopedia: http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/new_dissacad/phpfiles/

\textsuperscript{73.} Taylor to Paice, 24 Nov. 1798, NCL/406/20.

\textsuperscript{74.} “Recollections of Mr Belsham,” 102–3.
of hopelessness because of the war with France and government repression. As a consequence, some wealthy families abandoned their earlier support for reform and radicalism, and in a few notable cases deserted dissent for the church. A number of promising younger ministers left the ministry as well. The position was to change in the early nineteenth century, as more congregations, particularly the major urban congregations, became openly Unitarian.

**Conclusion**

The loss to liberal dissent of one of the principal academies for the education of its ministers at such a crucial time was clearly a major blow. It can be argued that Unitarianism never recovered fully from the loss of so many Northampton students from the ministry in this period, and even more seriously from the long-term failure to train enough Unitarian ministers. After 1798 Manchester College was the only major institution in England sympathetic to Unitarians. Manchester College was never able to train enough students to satisfy the demand for ministers. The theological tutor, Charles Wellbeloved, told the college treasurer in 1810 that all the students leaving the college were engaged, “and to repeated applications, I am obliged to return the same answer — ‘No assistance from York’. Several places are now vacant and as far as I can see likely to continue so.”

The problem of training enough ministers was not adequately addressed until the founding of the Unitarian Home Missionary Board in 1854. By the mid-nineteenth century Manchester College was providing only about a fifth of the ministers needed by the denomination. The contrast with the other major denominations is marked. Congregationalism succeeded in training large numbers of ministers and preachers who played a key role in fuelling the extraordinary expansion of dissent during the nineteenth century.

The Coward Trustees closed their academy at Northampton because of their concerns over the heterodoxy of the students. The resolution to dissolve the academy immediately was almost certainly prompted by the report that Savile gave on the state of the academy. In his zeal Savile may indeed have exaggerated the situation. There is evidence that the trustees believed that the students were more heterodox than was actually the case. Lant Carpenter found after the closure of the academy that the trustees were claiming he was a determined...


77. Manchester College moved to York in 1803 where Wellbeloved was minister. Charles Wellbeloved, York, to George William Wood, Manchester, 11 Apr. 1810, Harris Manchester College, Oxford, MS Wood 1, fol. 107r. See also Wellbeloved’s letter to Wood that the college would be full for the next two years and unable admit any more divinity students, fol. 111r, 9 Aug. 1810; Joseph Hunter, York, to Robert Wylde Moul, Wickersley, 29 Apr. 1808, British Library, MS Add 24,878, fol. 86r, “Gorton & Morley are both lost from the want of a regular supply of ministers; & at this time there are no less than five places in the north of England which have been for some time destitute.”

78. This is explored more fully in Wykes, “Educating Students,” 94–95.

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Unitarian before he entered Northampton. Less clear is why the trustees sought to change the sentiments of the students and, when that failed, to shut the academy. Their own opinions appear to have differed little from those of the students, and the academy from when it was founded by Doddridge at Northampton until it closed never applied a doctrinal test. One explanation could be, challenged by Savile with his claims that the doctrines of the gospel were openly repudiated by the students, and reminded of the terms of Coward’s benefaction, the trustees felt impelled to close the academy. Yet this does not appear to offer an adequate explanation. The trustees were aware long before their meeting with Savile of the lack of orthodoxy amongst the students; indeed even before the academy moved from Daventry. They had not been ignorant of the likely difficulties that relocating the academy at Northampton would cause Horsey with his congregation at Castle Hill. They also refused to consider Horsey’s nomination of Dewhurst as assistant tutor because they wanted someone who was orthodox to succeed Forsaith. On the other hand the decision to appoint Savile, a Scots Presbyterian and therefore a strict Calvinist, was a serious mistake, both in terms of the man appointed and what they were trying to achieve. Savile never had the respect of the students as a teacher, but the decision to place someone so uncompromisingly orthodox in an institution which had long cherished private conscience over bigotry and party zeal was always likely to fail.

The decision of the trustees is also surprising in view of their own liberal opinions. Yet they can be excused the charge of hypocrisy made by Ann Taylor. The explanation lies in the political and religious changes facing liberal dissent during the 1790s. For much of the eighteenth century the main form of anti-Trinitarian speculation had been Arianism, which saw Jesus as subordinate to God and questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, but not the divinity of Jesus. By contrast the Unitarian insistence on the humanity of Christ involved a much more open and aggressive denial of the Trinity, which was offensive to Arians and also to many rational dissenters. R. K. Webb has argued that during the 1770s and 1780s Priestley published a series of controversial works advancing Unitarian ideas that convinced many of his readers, including a generation of younger ministers and students. Yet the increasing ascendancy of Unitarianism was detested by many rational dissenters. Rational dissent had sheltered a wide range of opinion, united not by the issue of doctrinal heterodoxy, but by the principles of non-subscription and the right of personal conscience in matters of faith. Horsey, though orthodox in doctrine, had in his opening address as theological tutor told his students that he would continue the same generous and liberal principles upon which the academy had been so long conducted. Horsey upheld these principles until the academy closed. Urwick and the other trustees belonged to the same non-subscribing tradition as Horsey, but they appear to have become increasingly uneasy at what they perceived to be the growing influence of Unitarianism. Accounts of the changes within rational dissent during

the 1790s and early 1800s have focused on the triumph of Unitarianism and to a lesser extent on the surviving support for Arianism. Little attention has been given to those who were repelled by the growth of Unitarianism and the emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Ultimately being orthodox in the fundamental principles of religion was more important for such individuals than preserving a non-subscribing tradition. When the academy was re-opened at Wymondley by the Coward Trustees in 1799 steps were taken to ensure that it was established on firmly orthodox principles, and this orthodoxy was maintained for Wymondley never had the liberal character of the earlier academy at Daventry or its successor at Northampton.