

Thomas Davis served as Baptist minister at Reading, a prosperous town west of London, from 1767 to his death in 1796. During his ministry the church grew, planted other churches, and prepared young men for Christian service. Michael Haykin vividly describes the doctrinal debates and strict behaviour of the age and just as clearly depicts the fervent spirituality of the Evangelical Revival. Davis is an example of a Baptist leader who wholeheartedly believed both in the holiness of the church and in its commission to spread the gospel.

**Prof David Bebbington,
Emeritus Professor of History, University of Stirling.**

Michael Haykin has done more than anyone to bring the rich heritage of eighteenth-century English Calvinistic Baptist life to our attention. In this new work he uncovers the ministry of Thomas Davis, and the revival that took place under his ministry in Reading, Berkshire. I read it with special interest as this is the town in which I grew up! This fine study has all the usual hallmarks of Professor Haykin's writing. It is well researched, theologically astute, and wonderfully accessible. Further, there are many challenges and encouragements for Christians today. This book has the potential to do much good. I hope you will buy it and read it. More than that, I hope all of us will act on the lessons it contains.

**Revd Dr Peter Morden,
Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, Leeds.**

Michael Haykin's conviction that there are "no little people" drives this brilliant investigation of an almost entirely forgotten eighteenth-century Particular Baptist minister. As an historian, Professor Haykin does an outstanding job of reconstructing a complex religious culture from the close reading of a small number of sources. As a Christian, he understands why this effort matters, and how much we can learn from, and be encouraged by, the achievements of the manifold grace of God.

**Prof Crawford Gribben,
Professor of History, Queen's University Belfast.**

In this study, Michael Haykin brings to bear all his research skills on what might seem at first sight a mere page in provincial history—but it is significant for that alone, for Baptist historiography needs more non-London and more non-great-name-focused analysis which situates the history nearer to the everyday experience of the majority of most Baptists, even if still replete with astonishing successes [and troubles too]. This valuable study offers a valuable insight into showing how a working minister could be labelled a Fullerite and still be in some way within the circle of John Gill, warning us not to create too many exclusive categories.

**Prof John H.Y. Briggs,
Senior Research Fellow in Church History; Professor
Emeritus, University of Birmingham.**

Like the American boxer Floyd Mayweather this latest offering from the pen of Dr Haykin is small but packs a hefty punch. Names such as Carey, Fuller, Gifford, Gill and Whitefield are familiar to many. On this occasion, however, they have only walk-on parts. At the centre of the dramatic action this time round is a previously obscure circle of 18th century Particular Baptist ministers that had Thomas Davis of Reading at its centre and that included the hymn writer Richard Burnham, the former lawyer Richard Lovegrove, and others. Familiar themes such as antinomianism, credobaptism, high Calvinism, and revival are revisited but in a way that sheds fresh light on the issues rather than muddying the waters further. This is a scholarly work written with warmth and clarity that will be of interest to anyone with a heart for the work of the Lord and a willingness to learn from the past. We are again indebted to Dr Haykin for his sterling diligence and wisdom.

**Revd Gary Brady,
Pastor, Childs Hill Baptist Church, London.**

The history of the church in any age is seen largely in the experiences and beliefs of the individuals who belonged to the local congregations of the period in question. Michael Haykin has brought to life the story of Berkshire churches in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, through his account of the ministries of Thomas Davis of Reading and two men – Richard Burnham and Robert Lovegrove –

who were influenced by him. He thereby gives us a fascinating glimpse into a little-known aspect of Particular Baptist life at that time and the work of the Holy Spirit in reviving Baptist causes in Georgian Berkshire. This book will be of great interest to those who love Baptist history and an encouragement to anyone who desires to see the revitalization of gospel work in our day.

**Revd Dr Robert Strivens,
Pastor, Bradford on Avon Baptist Church.**

HOLY SPIRIT NOW DESCEND

THOMAS DAVIS AND THE EVANGELICAL
REVIVAL IN GEORGIAN BERKSHIRE

Michael A.G. Haykin

Illustrations by Tim Hawman

~ Evangelical Lives ~

Volume 1



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Foreword

It is hard to conceive of so much substantial material being packed into such a brief book. But that is what Michael Haykin does. Filled with pertinent footnotes and massive bibliographical riches, this volume on the revival that took place in the ministry of Thomas Davis leads its readers into a comprehensive study of eighteenth-century Particular Baptist life. We encounter its personalities, its controversies, its riches, its rivalries, its church-planting, its participation in the evangelical awakening, its developing hymnology, its leading theologians, and many persons of vital importance in their restricted context that contributed to the complexity of the revival phenomenon. Haykin's statement, "It is wrong to think that when the Holy Spirit revives a Christian community he does so without any regard to the truth" serves as an overarching response to the energetic display of theological interplay and shifts among these Baptists. Names that would be lost to posterity apart from the kind historiographical care given to them by the author show the richness of every Christian's dependence on the full range of gifts and convictions spread by the Spirit of God throughout the body of his redeemed. The

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appendices include a confession of faith by Thomas Davis as well as a letter narrating his conversion. This is a rich experience in history, theology, hymnology, spirituality, controversy and provides a lesson in the mysterious operations of the Holy Spirit in building the church for which Christ died.

Tom J. Nettles

Senior Professor of Church History

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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This cumberer of the ground

*Thomas Davis' early years,
conversion, and call to Reading*

Thomas Davis was born on the Isle of Wight, at Newport, to the Welshman William Davis and Mary Espinet (c.1708–1792) whose parents, David Espinet and Mary Dancé, anglicized as Dansays, had been French Huguenot refugees.¹ According to Thomas

¹ Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptists of Berkshire Through Three Centuries* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1951), 90; Norman A. Bishop, *Our Huguenot Ancestors (D'Ansays'Dansays, Espinet/Espenett and Morell) and extended families (Ballard, Caffyn, Davis, Gilham, Knott, Romanis, Stonham, Wakefield)* (Privately published, http://espinet.atwebpages.com/espbook2_chapt206.htm; accessed December 30, 2020).

For details of Davis' life, I am especially indebted to John Rippon, "The Rev. Thomas Davis, Reading, Berks." in his *The Baptist Annual Register, for 1794, 1795, 1796–1797* (London, 1797), 514–523. A portion of Rippon's account is reproduced in Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton; Holdsworth & Ball, 1830), 4:423–427. See also Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptists of Berkshire Through Three Centuries* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1951), 90–91. Thomas Davis of Reading should not be confused with Thomas Davis (died 1784) of

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Davis, his father died in 1739 when he was five years of age.² His mother, a committed Baptist at this point, later remarried a cordwainer, that is, a shoemaker, named John Hillary from Rye, Sussex, in 1745.

Mary's eldest son, John Davis (1731–1795), was taught the craft of shoe-making by his step-father and had completed this apprenticeship by the time that he was 21. During the 1750s John began to preach in Baptist churches, and on an August Wednesday in 1764 he was formally ordained as the pastor of the Baptist cause in Waltham Abbey, Essex, now on the outskirts of north-east London. The famed John Gill (1697–1771) spoke at his ordination from Ezekiel 10:20 (“This is the living creature that I saw under the God of Israel by the river of Chebar; and I knew that they were the cherubims,” KJV), which, at first glance, hardly seems appropriate as a text for an ordination sermon. Gill well knew the oddity of the choice of text, but he believed that the

Fairford, who graduated from Bristol Baptist Academy in 1744 and served at the Baptist work in Fairford, Gloucestershire, till his death.

² “Letter of the late Mr. Davies [*sic*], of Reading,” *The Baptist Magazine* 3 (1811): 240. For the entire letter, see Appendix 1.

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cherubim were “emblems of ministers of the Gospel” and as such were instructive about the nature of the pastorate.³ In one pithy remark, Gill summed up the importance that he placed on pastoral ministry: “as ministers be, churches are.”⁴ John Davis went on to serve at Waltham Abbey for over three decades.⁵

Becoming Thomas Davis

Thomas Davis’ pathway to pastoral ministry was not as smooth as that of his older brother. By the time that he was twelve years old, a year after his mother’s remarriage, Davis said that he was “a thief, a most wretched liar, and a horrid sinner.”⁶ He soon left home and found his way to Woolwich in Kent where for a period of time he indulged his proclivities to sin and became “a ringleader in all kinds of

³ John Gill, *The Doctrine of the Cherubim Opened and Explained: In a Sermon Preached at the Ordination of the Reverend Mr John Davis, At Waltham-Abbey, August 15, 1764* (London: G. Keith, 1764), 4, 15.

⁴ Gill, *Doctrine of the Cherubim*, 40. For a discussion of this sermon, see Appendix 5.

⁵ On John Davis, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “The Letter-Book of John Davis (1731–1795) of Waltham Abbey,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 24, no.2 (April 1971): 58–64.

⁶ “Letter of the late Mr. Davies [sic],” 240.

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wickedness," including smuggling.⁷ So far gone was he in iniquity that his mother, who never ceased to pray for his conversion, would, when discouraged sometimes, fear to read the newspaper lest she discover that her son had been imprisoned or even executed for criminal activities.⁸ In the early 1760s, he and some of his confederates in sin happened to attend a New Year's day service at the Baptist cause in Woolwich, where the pastor was Robert McGregor (died c.1805). They did so out of curiosity to hear what they called "Methodist preaching" and with the intent to cause some mischief during the service.⁹

⁷ John Rippon, "The Rev. Thomas Davis, Reading, Berks." in his *The Baptist Annual Register, for 1794, 1795, 1796–1797* (London, 1797), 515; "Letter of the late Mr. Davies [sic]," 241.

⁸ Rippon, "Rev. Thomas Davis," 516.

⁹ "Letter of the late Mr. Davies [sic]," 241. MacGregor was originally a member of Eagle Street Baptist Church, London, during the pastorate of Andrew Gifford (L.G. Champion, *Farthing Rushlight. The Story of Andrew Gifford 1700–1784* [London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961], 63). He began to labour in Woolwich in 1747, where a church was organized a decade or so later. His pastorate of this cause was a lengthy one, lasting until 1805. See John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register, For 1798, 1799, 1800, and Part of 1801* (London, 1798), 20, note; Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton/Holdsworth & Ball, 1830), 4:337, 516–520; W.T.

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The church was packed that evening and Davis had to stand in an aisle for the entirety of the service as McGregor preached on Luke 13:7: “Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, ‘Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?’” (KJV). The pastor had been preaching but a little while when Davis began to tremble uncontrollably. He was a tall man and would have stood out in any crowd. But that night, as he stood in the aisle and McGregor expounded the Lukan text, he felt as if every eye was upon him, for was he not “this cumberer of the ground” intended by the text? In his own words, as he began to realize the depths to which he had sunk, “he thought the floor would open beneath him, and that he should sink at once into the jaws of destruction.” But before McGregor concluded his sermon, he referred to the vineyard worker’s plea in Luke 13:8 not to cut the vine down, but to give it time to bear fruit. A hope was kindled

Whitley, *The Baptists of London 1612–1928* (London: The Kingsgate Press, [1928]), 132. Edward C. Starr (*A Baptist Bibliography* [Rochester, NY: American Baptist Historical Society, 1969], 14:264) wrongly gives MacGregor’s dates as 1747–1798.

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in Davis' mind that there was yet time for a genuine turning away from his sinful ways and truly putting his faith in God. Before the service was over, he had been well and truly converted.¹⁰ In a striking remark about his conversion, Davis said, "Justice was lifting up the axe" to deliver a death-blow to him, when "Mercy stepped in."¹¹

Davis subsequently joined the Woolwich church, where he never failed to be at worship on the Lord's day and at the church's mid-week prayer-meeting. It was soon evident that he had genuine gifts as a speaker. To ascertain the reality of his call, the church would have asked Davis to speak a number of times, probably in small-group settings. How long this period of trial preaching lasted is not known. When John Giles (1758–1827)—a member of Davis' congregation at Reading in the 1770s—transferred his membership to Carter Lane Baptist Church in London and subsequently sensed a call to preach in late September of 1788, he was asked to

¹⁰ Rippon, "Rev. Thomas Davis," 515–516; S.D., "To the Editor of the Primitive Communionist," *The Primitive Communionist* 1, no.7 (September 1839): 148.

¹¹ "Letter of the late Mr. Davies [sic]," 241.

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preach five times between then and the church's affirmation of his call in January of the following year.¹² Davis' trial preaching was probably stretched over a similar length of time. The Woolwich church affirmed Davis' call to preach and for a few weeks afterwards Davis preached at a number of locales including a Baptist chapel in Little Alie Street, London, where the resident minister was William Dowars (1720–1795).

When a good report about his preaching reached the Baptist congregation of Reading, the members of this church wrote a letter to Davis in the spring of 1767 to ask him if he would consider serving them on probation. Generally speaking, when a prospective pastor was unknown to a Particular Baptist church in the eighteenth century, a period of probation was standard practice. The prospective pastor and the congregation got to know

¹² Seymour J. Price, "'Brother Giles' becomes a Recognised Minister," *The Baptist Quarterly*, 5, no.1 (1930–1931): 37–41. The challenging nature of this trial period of preaching can be seen in the fact that Song of Songs 5:10 ("My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand" [KJV]) was the first passage on which Giles was asked to preach!

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one another during this time, and if all went well, and both pastor and church were satisfied with each other, the church would finalize a call at the close of the period of probation. The length of this probationary period usually varied from six months to two years. In Davis' case, it was to last around seventeen months.

The Reading Baptists

During the last half of the eighteenth-century, Reading was something of a boom town, increasing in population from around 4,500 in the early years of the century to 9,700 or so in 1809. Up until the middle of the previous century, the woollen industry had been a mainstay for the town.¹³ By the close of the eighteenth century, though, this industry had been replaced by brewing (by the early nineteenth century there were five breweries in the town), a pin factory, and a wide variety of other crafts, including brick making as well as silk weaving and the manufacture

¹³ See Christine Jackson, "The Age of the Clothier: entrepreneurial ambition and achievement in Reading 1500–1650," *Berkshire Old and New* 12 (1995): 27–34.