

**The Story of Coxe Feary (1759 - 1822)  
and the Founding of the Baptist Congregation at Bluntisham, Cambridgeshire**

**By Revd. Nick Hudson, Bluntisham, Feb 2011**



**Coxe Feary**

**Frontispiece to John Audley's 'Life of Coxe Feary', 1823**

### **Introduction**

In 1999 I was called to my first pastorate at the Baptist Church in Bluntisham, Cambridgeshire, a rural village on the edge of the fens, 13 miles north of Cambridge, with a population of around 1750. Since then I have been fascinated by the story, still fondly re-told by some in the congregation, of the founding of the church in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century; of its redoubtable founding pastor, local farmer Coxe Feary; and the remarkable spiritual awakening that accompanied and indeed drove these events. Of course most churches have a story to tell, but this one does seem to me to be a truly 'remarkable' one, and it could be argued its ripples can still be seen to this day. The source books for the events are now old and very rare, so in what follows I hope to make a short account of this inspiring story more widely available.



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### Sources for the story

There are two helpful source books for the story. The first is 'Memoires of Mr Coxe Feary' written by his good friend John Audley shortly after Feary's death, and published in 1823. A copy was passed to me when I came to Bluntisham, a tatty old threadbare volume running to just over 100 pages. I know of no other copies. Audley's own source is the Bluntisham Church Book, which was given to him by Feary's widow, in which Feary himself had written '*an account of himself from his birth to his conversion, and of the most important things which followed that memorable event for several subsequent years.*' Indeed much of what is quoted from Audley's book in what follows, is thought to be Feary's own words, which he had recorded in the third person.<sup>1</sup>

*Bk used* The other main source for this short account is "*A Century of Village Nonconformity at Bluntisham, Hunts, 1787 to 1887*" – by RW Dixon, published by Samuel Harris and Co, London in 1887. Again, remaining copies are few: I know of about half a dozen. Apart from drawing heavily on Audley's book, Dixon does not cite his sources, but is clearly well acquainted with the church, the village and its people, dedicating his volume "*to my friends in Bluntisham and its neighbourhood who have been and are connected with the Congregational Meeting House there.*"

### Setting the Scene

The Church Book begins by outlining the background to the founding of the church at Bluntisham, and a broad background it is, comprising in effect a short ecclesiastical history from the Resurrection of Christ, the day of Pentecost, and the subsequent spread of Christianity across Europe to Britain.<sup>2</sup> He tells with disgust how the inhabitants of Bluntisham and all their land and property were sold to the monks of Ely for thirty-seven pounds; he marks key events in the Reformation, the beginnings of Protestantism, and the principle of 'liberty of conscience' in matters of religion. He bemoans the Act of Supremacy, and notes the beginnings of dissent in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. At this point in the church book, Feary notes that '*there were in the parish of Bluntisham, a few families of Dissenters of the people called Quakers, at so early a period as about the year 1657. They had a place for public worship, but the cause declined; they sold their place and built another in the next village, Earith. In the [17<sup>th</sup>] century there were three or four families of Baptist persuasion at Bluntisham, who had occasional preaching in their houses; but without increasing the number of Dissenters. The whole village, therefore, [he concludes], except the few families mentioned above, remained strict church people till the year 1784, when the following circumstances entirely changed the religious complexion of the people.*'<sup>3</sup>

*Re edu* The central figure of this story, humanly speaking, is unquestionably Coxe Feary himself. A native of the village, he was born on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1759. John Audley records: '*His parents were not rich, but respectable. They put him to a school in the village, where he was taught reading, writing and arithmetic....He was taken from school at twelve years of age to attend to the business of the farm....but as he had a thirst for reading, his leisure hours were devoted to his books.*'

It seems that from an early age he was interested in spiritual things, and as such '*frequently retired for prayer, and walked in the fields for meditation and praise...*' The Parish Church at that time did not have an evangelical incumbent, and Feary recalls how his attempts to engage with God in his early years were by what he would later call '*the deeds of the law, being ignorant of God's method of salvation.*'



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While still in his teenage years Feary *'began to be dissatisfied with the trifling, and as he thought, the irreligious conduct of those who attended the worship at the Established Church in the parish where he lived. This induced him to turn his attention to the Dissenters, in whom he thought he saw more regard for religion than among the persons of the Establishment. The Baptists in the neighbouring village<sup>4</sup> he found high Calvinists, and some of them very narrow-minded and illiberal, pronouncing destruction on all who did not believe their creed: this prevented him going amongst them.'*

The Quakers at nearby Earith he found more sympathetic; their views on the freedom of the will in matters of religion, and their belief in the dignity of human nature led him to attend their meetings occasionally.

### **Feary's conversion to evangelical faith, and the effect on his neighbours**

It was in 1780, aged 21, that Feary came across a book by a James Hervey called 'Dialogues', in which Hervey discussed the doctrine of salvation by God's grace alone. At first Feary was greatly offended by the ideas he was reading, and was confused and somewhat distressed by Hervey's dismissal of 'free will' and the merit of good works as a means of salvation.

Two years later, however, Feary returned to the book, *'and the Lord blessed the reading of it to the conversion of his soul to the Lord Jesus Christ. He now saw, and deeply lamented, the sin, folly, and abominable pride of his own heart, in that he should have been all his life building upon a false foundation.'*<sup>5</sup>

It is noticeable that Feary's influences seem to have been quite eclectic. He was reliant on books, rather than being the spiritual child of any one preacher, congregation or movement. Instead at this early stage he was searching around for spiritual food. Dissatisfied with the preaching at Bluntisham parish church, but not wishing to be identified as a Dissenter, he was grateful to meet in Huntingdon one day a Mr. Berridge, who was the evangelical rector of nearby Stukeley and Orford. Berridge in turn recommended that Feary go to hear Henry Venn, the rector of Yelling, a village some 12 miles from Bluntisham. So Feary began to do make this journey every Sunday, to the great interest of many of his neighbours. Indeed it seems that Feary's own religious awakening made quite an impact on others in the village right from the start. He took every opportunity to talk about matters of faith with them, and to recommend to them the value of listening to evangelical preaching, as he had begun to do.

A key moment came when Feary came across another book, this time a book of sermons by George Whitefield. Audley records: *'Being at St. Ives<sup>6</sup> Market, he went into the bookseller's shop as usual, where lay three volumes of Whitefield's works'*. When he enquired whose the books were, he was told 'they are yours'. They had been sent by mistake, and the shop owner had kept them for Feary, knowing he'd be interested. On learning of the price Feary decided he couldn't afford them, but the shop owner remarked as he left *'I shall not send them back, as I expect you will alter your mind by another market day.'* This proved to be the case, and Feary returned to purchase them the following week.

*'On receiving them, he the same evening read a sermon to his shepherd, his labourers, and his intimate and bosom friend Mr Asplan, who were much delighted. The sermon was from that text, 'What think ye of Christ?'*<sup>7</sup>



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Feary himself records the following in the church book, writing as ever in the third person: *'The next evening, without his knowing or expecting any such thing, a number of poor people came with a gentleman of the village to hear him read a sermon. A circumstance so unexpected embarrassed him. The idea of reading before so many people, and the shame of being counted a methodist preacher, led him to decline reading.'*<sup>8</sup> But they insisted, and he gave in. Their insistence is evidence that the hunger to hear evangelical teaching was not confined to Feary, but that he arose as a leader to meet the spiritual thirst of other local people.

One of those present, a 'poor woman', asked him to read again at her house the next evening. Reluctantly he agreed on condition she didn't make it known to others. But the next evening the house was full *'and it was a most interesting sight to behold the profound attention, and deep seriousness, with which the poor people received the glad tidings of salvation from the reading of that sermon.'* Again, it is noteworthy that this spiritual hunger affected a cross-section of the population, from professional people such as Feary to the poorer people of the villages who were involved from the start.

These readings, given in peoples' homes, continued through the winter, and into the spring of 1785. Audley notes: *'Here for the first time he found courage to pray with the people after he had finished the sermon.'*<sup>9</sup> Feary was in fact a reluctant leader. It is clear that at this stage he would have much preferred others to have been doing the preaching, and that from his own point of view he only took on the role out of necessity.

*'The congregation still increasing, they opened a larger house in the village. All this time they had no regular time for worship; but it was sometimes two, three, or four evenings in the course of the week.'* Feary asked the advice of Henry Venn, the Rector of Yelling where he was still attending every Sunday, as to what he should do. Venn encouraged him to keep going with the reading of sermons, and promised to come and help at some point in the summer. Around this time, Feary seems to have become acquainted with Charles Simeon of Cambridge, a leader of the Clapham Sect. Simeon came to preach a sermon at Feary's house in Bluntisham at five o'clock one morning: *'The room was crowded to excess, and several persons were out of doors. This was a season long remembered with peculiar pleasure, on account of the evident tokens by which God gave testimony to the word of his grace.'*<sup>10</sup>

From this point the meetings were held in a barn, opened up by a Mr. Kent, another farmer who was part of the group. *'They thankfully embraced the offer, opened up a small subscription, and fitted it up for their use.'*

The establishment of a distinct meeting place in the village was in many ways painful to Feary, as it seemed to suggest that he was acting as a dissenting Minister, which at the time he did not wish to do. But he kept reading to the congregation, while at the same time working to procure an evangelical curate to preach at the Parish Church, and so satisfy the pastoral needs of the burgeoning congregation. Feary approached Charles Simeon for help with the plan, and Simeon made enquiries about it, but the proposal was rejected by the incumbent at the Parish Church. Simeon was also advised by a more senior clergyman not to preach at Bluntisham any more. This was, perhaps, a turning point in terms of Feary's relations with the established church. Up to this point he had resisted the idea of separation from the Establishment, but now he found he had little room for manoeuvre.

Perplexed by the situation, Feary agreed to meet with the other villagers before he left for Yelling on a Sunday morning, and again after he returned at the end of the day. *'So anxious were the people to hear the Word of God that multitudes would be waiting on the road for his coming home. They continued*



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*this practice for some time, until the congregation became very large, not fewer than between three and four hundred.* This remarkable detail suggests that already at this very early stage the 'movement' at Bluntisham was attracting people from well beyond the village, which itself was very small at the time, most likely numbering around 400<sup>11</sup>. The impact locally of such a crowd gathering in the village on a weekly basis must have been considerable.

Faced with these circumstances, Henry Venn advised Feary to stay in Bluntisham on Sundays, which he did, continuing to read from other peoples' sermons. It was only when he ran out of Whitefield's sermons that Feary, always modest about his gifts, ventured to prepare a sermon of his own. But his preaching proved very fruitful: *'The hand of the Lord was with [me], and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord,'* he later recorded.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth emphasising Feary's reluctance to depart from the established church and set up a dissenting congregation. Circumstances, however, left him and his friends with little choice but to do so.

#### **Nonconformist influence at Bluntisham**

The events at Bluntisham came to the attention of Joseph Saunders, pastor of the Independent Church in Cambridge. Saunders came and preached in the barn on July 25<sup>th</sup> 1786, and was clearly struck by what he found. *'There was a very crowded audience, and I never saw a more attentive congregation, for the whole appeared much affected. The word distilled as the silent dew upon the people, who were evidently refreshed from the presence of the Lord. I believe it to be a season which will never be forgotten.'*<sup>13</sup>

About this time Coxe Feary began to write what he called 'Short Memorials', a journal of his thoughts and experiences of the time. He records how he began to preach outside of the village, again with large numbers of people in attendance: first at Chatteris, a small town around 9 miles from Bluntisham, in a chapel of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion; and then in barns in the nearby villages of Somersham and Woodhurst. By now, it seems, he had overcome his initial reluctance to preach and be known as a preacher and, spurred on perhaps by the response of those who heard him, he began to develop the gift. Still the record suggests that he was far from a showman in this regard, and longed for God to be glorified rather than himself: *'But O! Wretched man that I am! I was soon after tempted to have high and flattering thoughts of myself. O Lord, pardon the extreme depravity of a poor worm, and teach him to give thee all the glory.'*<sup>14</sup>

#### **The establishment of a Congregational Church in Bluntisham**

As the meetings in the barn in Bluntisham continued and people came to faith, the question of whether to form themselves formally into a dissenting church became more urgent. After much prayer and some study into the principles of Dissent, Feary and his colleagues, looking for advice in how to proceed, went back to Joseph Saunders. His letter encourages them to go ahead with what appears to be their own proposal for a public meeting, for the purpose of inviting any present to *'give up yourselves to the Lord your God, and to one another, that so you may honour him, edify each other, and bear up the name of the glorious Redeemer in the midst of this sinful world...'*<sup>15</sup>

It seems that first meeting was intended to include personal testimony to the work of God in the lives of any who were coming forward to belong to the new church: *'And who can tell what may be its pleasing and glorious effects on others, who may stand by, and hear what God has done for your souls; whose*



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*hearts he has touched and animated to make a public surrender of yourselves to the Lord, and to each other, to walk together in all gospel ordinances? By all means have your day of prayer publicly, as at other times, and let all the people be present that desire it, unless you apprehend this would discourage and keep back any from speaking, who would do it at a private meeting. But in case you fear any present who might laugh, or restrain any from speaking freely of God's gracious dealings with them, then meet in a more private manner. My prayers are for you, my heart is with you.'*

The church book records there was 'mature deliberation' back in Bluntisham about these latter options, but they agreed to go ahead with a public meeting *'and openly to acknowledge Him who died upon the cross to save the chief of sinners.'*

And so, on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1786, four years after Feary's conversion, a public meeting was held in the barn. The church book contains the following account: *'After singing and prayer, and in the presence of a numerous congregation, Coxe Feary, with twenty five of his Christian friends, related severally the Lord's gracious dealings with them, joining together in hand and heart, giving themselves up to the Lord and to one another, by the will of God, to walk together in the fellowship of the gospel, and to support the interest of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world, as King upon His holy hill of Zion. Their meeting was solemn, the sight was truly affecting, and many were constrained to say that they enjoyed a season of refreshment from the presence of the Lord. It was agreed upon that meetings for prayer, and for transacting the concerns of the church, should be held in the week before their Lord's-supper days.'*<sup>16</sup>

Notably, of those first 26 members, 13 were women and 13 were men.<sup>17</sup> The list gives a brief description of their circumstances. Among the men we know that four were farmers, one a dairy man, two were labourers and two brick layers. Among the women, four are listed as either the wife or daughter of a labourer, one is a farmer's wife, one a farmer's daughter, three were widows, and one is listed simply as 'a poor woman'.

Another detail of note is that just 9 of the original 26 are listed as living in Bluntisham. At the next church meeting a month later, seven more members were added, just two of whom were from Bluntisham, so that of the first 33, two thirds were from the surrounding villages.<sup>18</sup>

As early as this second church meeting, it was expressed that the barn they had been using for their meetings was too small, and it was agreed to open a subscription towards building a Meeting House. The money was found, a piece of land was quickly bought, and on 10<sup>th</sup> April the first brick was laid by Coxe Feary.

At a further meeting on May 9<sup>th</sup>, shortly before Feary turned 28, it is recorded that *'the church met; and after prayer and singing, it was agreed upon to give C. Feary a call to the pastoral office.'* His friend William Asplan, one of those to whom he had read that first of Whitefield's sermons, spoke for the church: *'Having no pastor regularly appointed over us...we have the greatest reason to believe that our brother Feary is designed for the ministry, and that the providence of God seems to point him out to us as a suitable person for our pastor...My brethren, you have a right to speak freely upon this subject, as the choice of a minister depends upon the choice of the people. Therefore, if you think that our dear friend and brother, who is now before you, is qualified to teach you in the great truths of religion, and that you wish him to be over you in the Lord, I would have you signify your approbation by holding up your hands.'* Those present duly obliged, and Feary accepted. He lacked any formal training, but that he was the natural leader of the group must have been clear to all.



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Meanwhile the building work was underway and on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1787 the Meeting House was officially opened. The preacher was a Mr. James, of Lady Huntingdon's Connexion. By April 1788, 16 months in, the membership had grown to 56, and four men, including Asplan, were appointed Deacons. That same month a service was held in the new building to formally induct Feary as pastor. Robert Robinson of Cambridge was invited to preside, and he requested that Feary give a confession of his faith. We note the headlines of what he spoke about as listed by Audley: *'His belief of the existence of the Great Cause of all things, in whom we live and move, and have our being...; the sufficiency, authenticity, and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures; the personal distinctions of Father, Son and Holy Ghost; the doctrine of Divine Providence; the universal depravity of the whole human race; the impossibility of man extricating himself from the consequences of the fall; eternal and personal election; particular redemption; justification, pardon, and eternal life, as the gift of God through our Lord Jesus Christ; the new birth, with the final perseverance of such in holiness as have experienced that divine change; Christian fellowship; the resurrection of the body; the day of judgment; the final happiness of the saints, and the everlasting punishment of the wicked.'*

### Feary and Baptist convictions

Audley's record is helpful in allowing us to see the development of Feary's thinking on some matters of doctrine and church order which gradually took on a more baptistic flavour. Feary had as yet expressed no firm opinion concerning the correct mode of baptism. For the first two or three years of his ministry as pastor he practised infant baptism. He also baptised two adults, pouring water on them. It seems he had some doubts, though, and these led him to read and study the subject further. In his account Audley felt that Robert Robinson was an influence here: *'As he was upon friendly terms with Mr Robinson, and went to consult him previous to his ordination...some of his friends who heard him converse on the subject after he became a Baptist, are persuaded that Mr. Robinson's Work on Baptism did more than anything else to convince him, as he expresses it, that infant sprinkling was not the baptism of the New Testament.'*<sup>19</sup>

Having come to this conviction, Feary was himself baptised by immersion in the River Ouse, and once again the numbers attending suggest a momentous occasion in the life of the village. Feary's own words on the event (again, told in the third person) are worth reproducing at some length: *'Coxe Feary having been dissatisfied with infant sprinkling, as not being the baptism of the New Testament, after much prayer and inquiry into the subject, he entirely relinquished the practice of it, and openly avowed himself a believer in adult baptism; and according to the convictions of his mind, was baptised on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1791...About 9 o'clock in the morning of that day, there were assembled not fewer than five hundred people of different ranks, at Over Court beside the river Ouse.'*<sup>20</sup>

*'He addressed the people, stating his views of the nature of Christian baptism, as being from heaven and not of men - the mode, not by sprinkling nor aspersion, but by a total immersion of the subjects in water. 'Buried with him by baptism into his death'. The proper subjects of baptism, not infants, but men and women, making a public profession of their faith in Christ. 'He that believeth and is baptised, shall be saved.' 'Here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised. If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest.' 'The end, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God.' After having addressed the listening multitude on each of these particulars, Coxe Feary with twelve of his friends proceeded to the river, where Mr. Baron of Cottenham baptised them.'*<sup>21</sup>



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Interestingly though, Feary's change of mind regarding the proper mode of baptism did not preclude paedo-baptists from being welcomed warmly into membership of the church: *'Although, as has been seen, Mr. Feary became a decided Baptist, and, as might be expected, the greater part of the church gradually united with him in that sentiment; yet there was nothing rigid either in him or in them. The church was open for all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, and Paedo-Baptists were received into its communion with the greatest cordiality.'*<sup>22</sup>

This may be attributable in part to the way in which many of Feary's early evangelical influences, such as Simeon and Venn, had been part of the Establishment.

#### **Growth and Flourishing of the work at Bluntisham**

Surely one of the most encouraging aspects of this story is that the spiritual awakening at Bluntisham bore lasting fruit. This was not a case of a firework burning hot and then being quickly extinguished. The outpouring of the Spirit did not fritter away; Feary was not tempted away to bigger and better things. Instead he remained, and the new church that had started with such vigour and energy continued to grow and become a healthy congregation. As Audley records: *'Everything was prosperous: the church and congregation continued to increase; persons came from most of the surrounding villages and some from a considerable distance, as Ramsey, and other places. One lady came even from Parson Drove, a distance of twenty five miles.'*

The church book records that by 1791 four years after the church was founded, there were 120 members. Needless to say there were challenges for the young pastor. Audley notes how *'the withdrawal of four members in an unbecoming manner, and the exclusion of another for sinful conduct, wounded him deeply.'*<sup>23</sup>

#### **A ministry that bridged class divides**

Feary showed a particular concern for the poor of the villages, as well as to those of his own social standing. His first reading of Whitefield was to some of his farm labourers, and the poor women seem to have been among his most rapt listeners in the early days. As we have seen, among the 13 women who were among the founding members of the church was a Mary Gowler, listed simply as 'a poor woman.'<sup>24</sup>

In his Short Memorials, Feary records the following incident: *'Was called to preach at Woodhurst this evening. Drank tea with my poor friends at John Bass's, whose serious and pious conversation both delighted and edified my soul. I generally find my mind more seriously impressed in the company of my poor friends, who have little else to converse about but the blessings of the Gospel, and the hope they have of being with the adorable Redeemer. ...After tea, I walked into the garden, was pleased at the clean and decent state it was in - felt a secret wish that all the labouring poor of the country were, like my friend, blessed with a cow and a spot of land, to raise them from that state of distress which the poor are too frequently in.'*<sup>25</sup>

John Audley records the following tribute of his own to his good friend: *'To the poor of his flock he was especially attentive. On more than one occasion, he has been known to leave the society of his more opulent friends, to visit them. Indeed, it was his general practice, when he went into any of the adjacent villages to dine with a friend, to steal away in the afternoon for an hour or two, on purpose to*



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*call upon his poor friends to converse with them on spiritual subjects, ...If he found any of them in distress he was sure to devise and execute some plan for their relief.'*

**Andrew Fuller of Kettering**

When several members who were resident in Somersham (3 miles away) sought 'a more comfortable place than that in which they worshipped [probably a barn] for their occasional meetings', land was bought and 'a very neat meeting-house erected, which was opened in the spring of 1812. Mr. Fuller of Kettering preached an excellent sermon at Bluntisham the preceding evening; and the next morning, a very encouraging one at Somersham, from Zech. 4:10, 'Who hath despised the day of small things?'

Audley makes a further note about Andrew Fuller, whom he obviously held in the highest regard: 'Having recently mentioned the name of that great and truly pious man, Mr. Fuller, I will just relate what I had from Mr. Feary himself, and which, if it were necessary, would be corroborated by other persons. Mr. Fuller was at Bluntisham, and had a pretty long conversation with Mr. Feary on religious topics, when it was found that the sentiments of these two friends very nearly coincided. Mr. Feary...from his confession of faith at his ordination, was a Calvinist; and I believe he did not swerve in after life from the principles he then maintained.'

**The impact of Coxe Feary's ministry**

Coxe Feary remained pastor of the church at Bluntisham until his death in 1822. His ministry was all the more remarkable in that he had little formal education, no formal theological training, and he built the church at Bluntisham from scratch. Yet his impact on the locality was considerable over the long period of his ministry. The Church book contains the following record from 1815: 'August 13<sup>th</sup>. We had a public baptizing at Over Court in the afternoon when, in the presence of more than a thousand spectators who behaved with the greatest seriousness, Mr. Tall, of Swavesey, baptised sixteen persons. The ordinance was solemn and impressive, and we hope the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ was with us of a truth.'<sup>26</sup>

One man who went into Baptist ministry himself having grown up at Bluntisham, was a Rev Mr. White: In a letter to John Audley he wrote: 'I confess that with all the veneration I feel for his character, I have sometimes been at a loss to account for the extraordinary attention his ministry excited. At one period, many of his hearers came from eight or ten miles distance, and the village of Bluntisham at that time presented to the view, on Lord's days, a novel and impressive scene. The early hour at which many of the hearers began to arrive, the deep interest that appeared to be taken in the service of the sanctuary, and the powerful exercise of Christian love and tenderness, between the pastor and his people, were calculated to make a deep and salutary impression on the mind of the most indifferent spectator.'

He paints a vivid scene of a busy invasion by numerous outsiders of this small fenland village on Sunday mornings. This tribute is all the more interesting for having come from a man who grew up in the church, and so knew it very well.

'During a period of 35 years did this excellent man preside over the church and congregation, with fidelity and in love; and the greatest harmony ever subsisted between himself and them. In that time, were admitted into the church about two hundred and seventy members, the greater part of whom received their first religious impressions from his ministry. Such a number in so long a period, would



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*not be deemed extraordinary in some situations, where the church was previously organized and the congregation large; but here, it should be recollected, there was not only no church, when Mr. Feary began his labours, but no materials of which to form one, until some years afterwards.*<sup>27</sup>

It should also be noted that this work was not done in an urban or suburban situation, but in a small fenland village where the total population was around 400, along with a number of nearby villages none of which was any larger.

Audley's book concludes with the following tribute from one Newton Bosworth: *'The slightest attention to the preceding account cannot fail, I think, to have convinced the reader that Mr. Feary was, in many respects, an extraordinary man. The moral reformation which, by the blessing of God, he effected in his native village, and its neighbourhood, and which must have afforded him, in the retrospect, unspeakable delight, is an event to which, under all its circumstances, not many parallel cases can be adduced. Without education, except in the slightest elements of it; without influence, except what naturally accrued to him from the very efforts he employed and the success which attended them; without forwardness and vanity, for he rather shrank from, than courted, the publicity which awaited him, he produced a most remarkable and permanent change in a great part of the population around him. Commencing his labours without a single follower, continuing them with an ardent, yet well tempered zeal, amidst alternate hopes and fears, successes and discouragements, and ending by the formation of a flourishing church and congregation – the latter amounting to seven or eight hundred persons.*<sup>28</sup>

### **Feary's legacy lives on**

As the present Minister I am conscious, as are many of the current members, that still today we stand on Feary's shoulders. Though the numbers are of course far lower than in Feary's halcyon days, while the village is still relatively small at just under 1800 people, the church membership is over 100, with a vibrant, mission-minded congregation of all ages, and we continue to draw up to half our congregation from St. Ives and the surrounding villages outside of Bluntisham.<sup>29</sup>

If it is true that churches sometimes retain a 'character' of their own that endures with the coming and going of succeeding generations, the present day Bluntisham Baptist Church is grateful for the example that Feary and his friends and colleagues set for us all those years ago, as we continue to enjoy the character of an open Baptist Church with a broad and generous tradition; seeking to impact on the life of Bluntisham and the surrounding villages; and where there is a close bond and affection between the members, and between the congregation and their successive pastors.



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and the Founding of the Baptist Congregation at Bluntisham, Cambridgeshire**

**Sources**

**Memoirs of Mr. Coxe Feary** - *John Audley*, printed by J. Hodson, Trinity Street, Cambridge, 1823.  
Subtitled: 'first Pastor of the Baptist Church at Bluntisham, in Huntingdonshire, with an account of the rise and formation of that church.'

**A Century of Village Nonconformity at Bluntisham, Hunts, 1787 to 1887** – *RW Dixon*, published by Samuel Harris and Co, London 1887.

Subtitled: 'with introductory sketches of religious life in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.'

<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, and his own knowledge of Feary as a friend for over 30 years, Audley was also given three small books called '*Short Memorials*', containing various notes made by Feary concerning his religious experience, and various of Feary's letters. He also spoke with Feary's successor in the pastorate at Bluntisham, Rev Samuel Green, who gave an account of his last years.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed there are some fascinating details: he notes how '*it is supposed by some, that the Apostle Paul preached the Gospel to the inhabitants of this country before the destruction of Jerusalem; but in consequence of the wars that were carried on in Britain, Christianity was prevented from taking deep root, so that but very few retained the spirit of it.*' *Memoirs* p.2

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs*, p.6. Indeed such was the strength of the work begun through Coxe Feary, that in terms of the traditional 'church or chapel?' divide characteristic of many English villages, the Bluntisham population remained predominantly 'chapel' for generations to come.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly Needingworth or adjoining Holywell

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*, p.10

<sup>6</sup> St Ives, Cambs is a market town 3 miles from Bluntisham

<sup>7</sup> *Memoirs*, 19

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 20

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 21 The following is noted in the list of the founding members of the Bluntisham church: '*Elizabeth White, of Bluntisham, was called by divine grace under a sermon preached at Bluntisham by Mr. Simeon of Kings College, Cambridge.*' Dixon 152

<sup>11</sup> The 1801 Census records the total population of the larger Parish of Bluntisham-cum-Earith, comprising the two villages, as being 822.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 23

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 24

<sup>14</sup> from the *Short Memorials*, quoted by Audley 26

<sup>15</sup> From a letter to Feary from Saunders, quoted in *Memoirs* p.29

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 31

<sup>17</sup> Dixon 151

<sup>18</sup> Of those first 33, the other members were drawn from Somersham (9), Woodhurst, Over, Colne and Wyton. Those with local knowledge will be surprised that as yet none had come from the neighbouring village of Earith, though this was remedied in the following year.

<sup>19</sup> *Memoirs*, 49

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* The place where the Ouse is closest to Bluntisham, about 15 minutes walk from the village. There are many large baptism services recorded here in subsequent years. The view from this spot is dominated by the elegant Parish Church of St.Mary's, Bluntisham-cum-Earith, so the consciousness of 'dissent' from the established church at these open-air baptisms, especially in the early years, must have been palpable.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* 50

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* 52

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 53

<sup>24</sup> When the church hall was extended in 2009 to add amongst other things two new meeting rooms, it was a thrill to include a nod to our history as we named one of the rooms after Coxe Feary, and the other after Mary Gowler.

<sup>25</sup> *Memoirs* 62

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 85

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 116

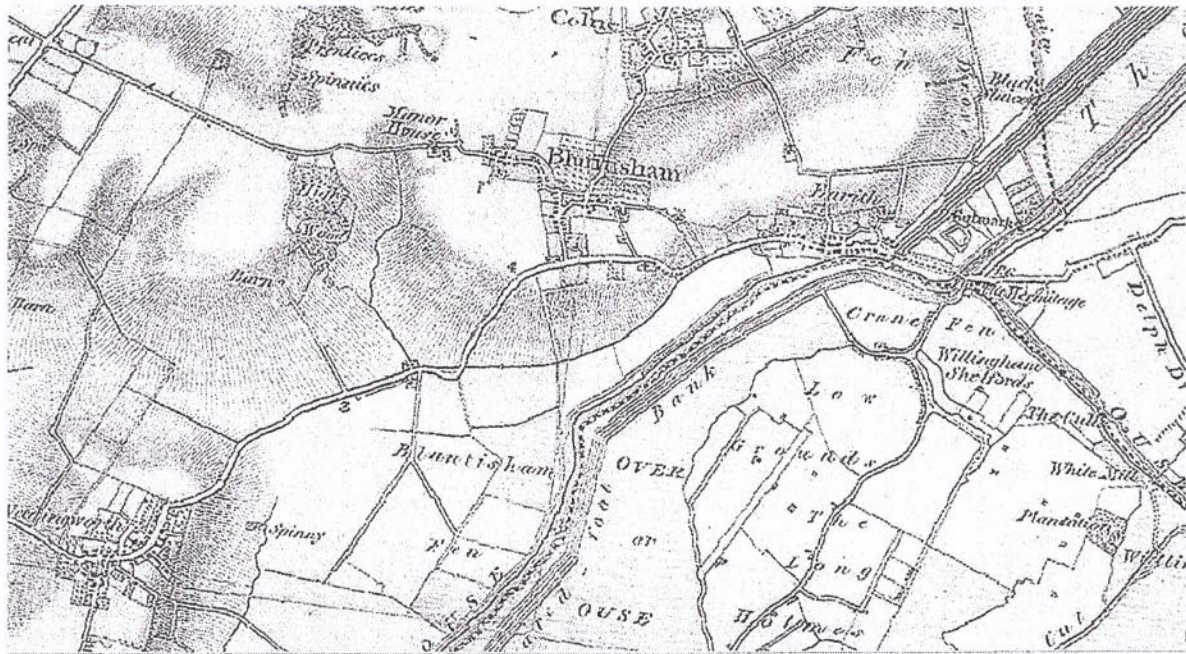
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* 104

<sup>29</sup> For an insight into the life and ministry of Bluntisham Baptist Church today, and for more detail on the church's subsequent history, visit [www.bluntishambaptist.org](http://www.bluntishambaptist.org)

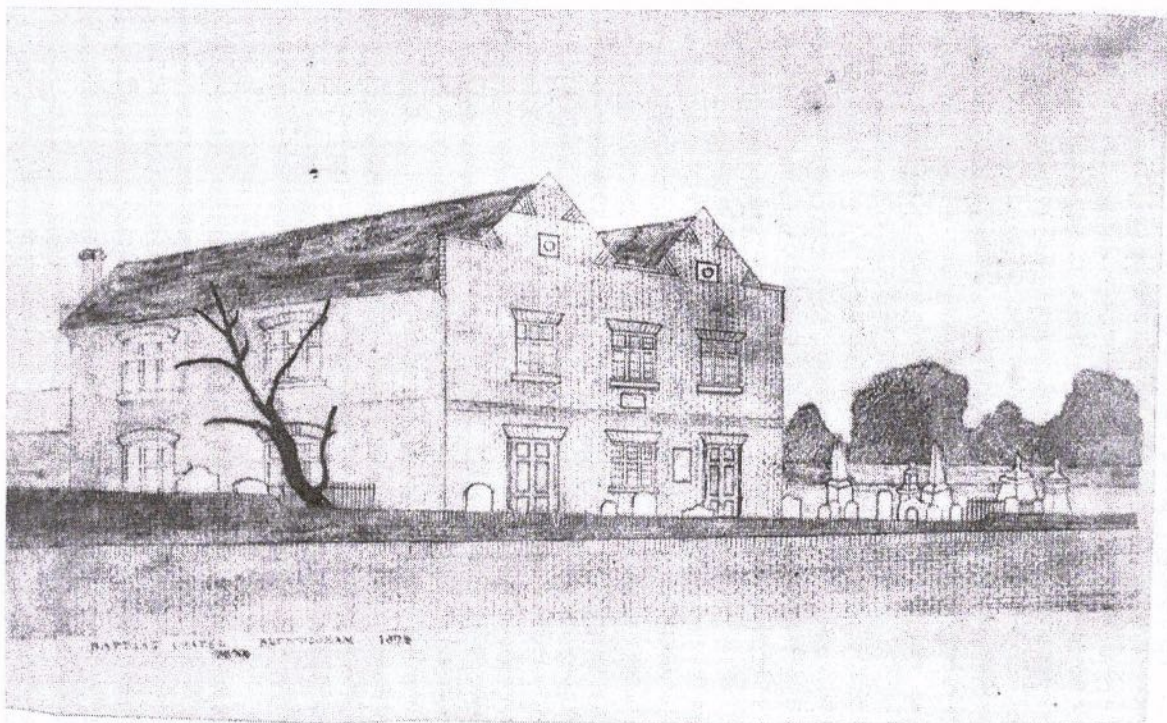


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An Ordnance Survey map from 1805 showing Bluntisham and its surrounding villages

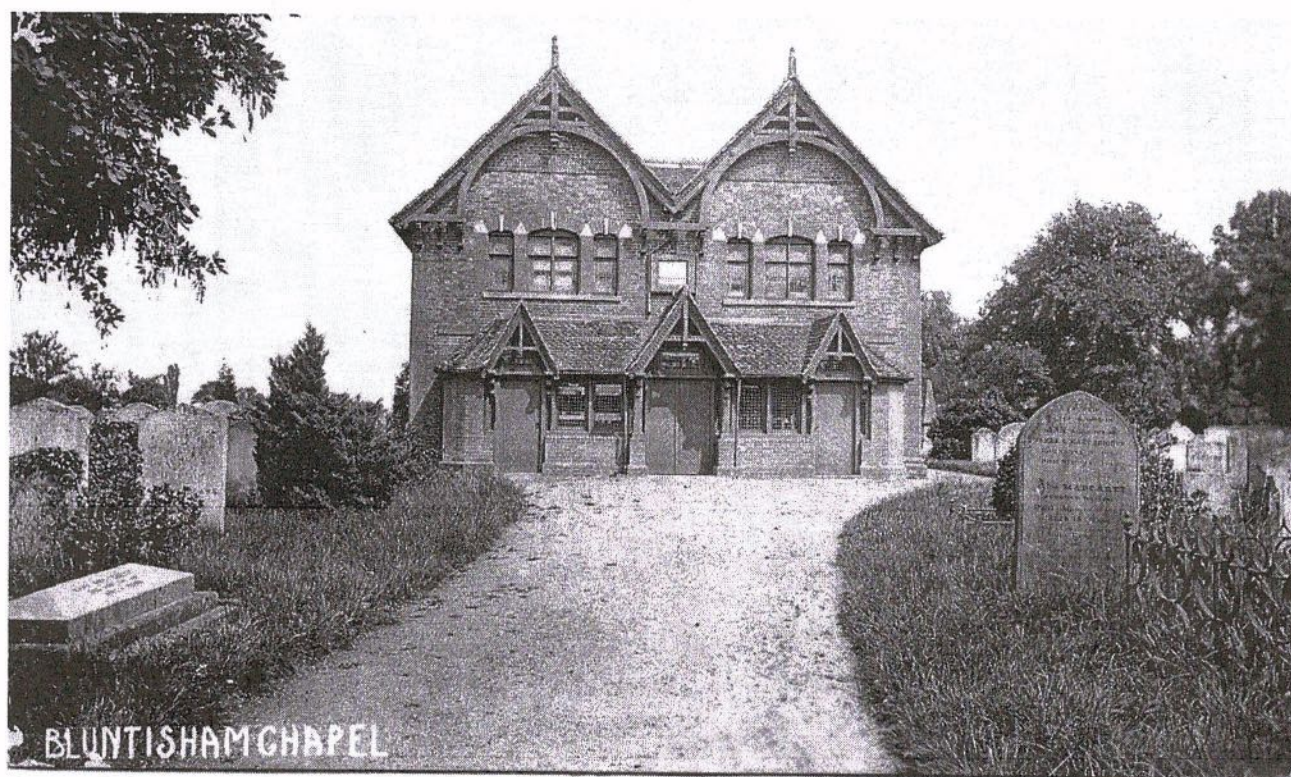


A sketch dated 1874, thought to be of the first Bluntisham Meeting House. This the year it was pulled down and rebuilt.



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A view (probably pre-war) of the present chapel



Bluntisham Baptist Church Congregation, taken on 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2010 for the Dedication of the extended church hall