William Gadsby

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EP BOOKS

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To Dan and Fiona

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Preface

Most people encounter William Gadsby through singing the small number of his hymns that are still in general use, especially 'Immortal Honours Rest on Jesus' Head'. In Strict Baptist circles his name continues to be held in high esteem, for his work as a preacher, for his hymn book, and as founder of the *Gospel Standard* magazine, but more generally he has become a less well-known figure. When I was a pastor in the Manchester area I sometimes drove past the chapel where he was a minister over 150 years before. I then spent three enjoyable years researching the work of Manchester evangelicals in the nineteenth century for my PhD degree, and among those considered was Gadsby. When that was published it included a chapter on his ministry.[1] Since then Ben Ramsbottom has produced his own study of William Gadsby,[2] the fruit of a lifetime's interest. It was a pleasure to be asked by EP Books to produce a short biography of Gadsby, much used of God, who deserves to be honoured for his significant achievements.

Ian J. Shaw
July 2013

Timeline

1773	Birth of William Gadsby
1790	Conversion — dating is not completely certain
1793	Baptized as a believer
1796	Marriage to Elizabeth Marvin
1798	Preaches first sermon at Bedworth
1800	Ordination
1803	First preaching visit to Manchester
1805	Accepts call to Manchester
1814	First edition of hymn book produced
1819	The 'Peterloo Massacre'

1823–24	Gadsby's chapel rebuilt
1824	Sunday school started
1835	First edition of the *Gospel Standard*
1839	Speaks to a vast crowd in Manchester on the Corn Laws
1840	Breaks leg in a fall
1844	Death of William Gadsby

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Beginnings

There is no doubt it was a horrific sight. The young handloom weaver stood transfixed as the awful scene unfolded on the roadside outside Coventry. Anthony Farnworth, John Phillips and Matthew Archer had been sentenced to death by hanging for a robbery they had committed at the 'Shepherd and Shepherdess' public house in Keresley. A huge crowd had gathered to watch the spectacle, but the hangman had botched the job by misjudging the drop required for one of three criminals being executed who was lighter than the other two. Instead of his neck being broken instantly by the fall through the trap door, his body was left writhing convulsively for many minutes as the noose around his neck slowly strangled him. The crowd stood appalled before the executioner intervened, pulling hard on the legs of the dying criminal to end his suffering. The young weaver, William Gadsby by name, turned away, sickened by what he had seen. He thought of his own lifestyle, and one thought dominated his mind — that could so easily have been him.

William Gadsby was born in the English Midlands in the village of Attleborough, Warwickshire. His baptism as an infant was registered in Nuneaton Church on 17 January 1773. In the days before birth certificates, it seems likely that his birth date was in the early January of that year, but it is not possible to be exact. The name Gadsby was locally pronounced 'Gadgby', leading the local clergyman, or parish clerk, mistakenly to enter that as the family name in the baptismal register. William's father, John Gadsby, was a roadmender, one of the most poorly paid occupations at the time. He was a gentle, quiet man, who was to live to the age of ninety-six. His first wife had borne him seven children, and after John Gadsby was widowed he remarried. His second wife, Martha, was to bear him a further seven offspring. In all William Gadsby stood ninth out of the fourteen children. In character, Martha Gadsby was quite the opposite of her husband, and life in the crowded Gadsby household was lively to say the least.

Attleborough was then only a small village quite separate from Nuneaton itself — in 1730 its fifty households contained a population of just 225; even in 1821 there were still under 1,000 residents. With their father's low wage, and large family size, the Gadsbys were extremely poor. William remembered running about the small village with his brothers and sisters in a ragged and barefoot state. He was filled with high spirits and was an enthusiastic prankster. He loved to torment two pious ladies who attended the Independent chapel, by knocking on their door and running away before they came out. He never tired of this joke, but the ladies did. Their piety sorely tested, one day they lay in wait for him, and as he knocked and turned to run away

they appeared from beside the house and threw a bucket of water over him! On two or three days a week, William was sent to the Nuneaton Church School, where the discipline was strict. However, his inability to attend full time meant that when he left school he was unable to write. Indeed, he quickly forgot much of what he had learned, and by his late teens he could barely read.

At the age of thirteen he was apprenticed to a ribbon weaver, and after five years he became a journeyman. Ribbon weavers worked at hand-powered looms in their own homes, or in small workshops with their masters, to whom the apprentices paid a proportion, often half, of what they earned from their labours. William Gadsby was a great joker, with a strong lifelong sense of humour, but as a young man it found expression in mischief, and careless amusement. He became notorious for his swearing and profanities. He was a born entertainer, frequently standing on an upturned tub, and regaling his companions with stories and jokes for up to an hour. Yet there were times when he felt the pangs of conscience, and he was troubled with fears of God's wrath and judgement. His response was to stifle these worrying feelings by hardening his heart, refusing to think about religion, and throwing himself into further sin and the immediate pleasure it brought. During the time he attended the church school, William attended the parish church on Sunday, and when he left school he began to attend the local Independent chapel with his parents. Despite the mischief and joking, Gadsby later discerned that the hand of God was already at work in his life. Whilst his friends constantly pressed him to go out with them, and be the life and soul of their parties, he began to have perplexing thoughts, that

he could not shake off, that perhaps God wanted him to become a parson.

He witnessed that fateful spectacle on the road to Coventry on 18 August 1790, when he was seventeen years old. The awful deaths of those three men added to the unease and fear already growing in his heart about his own spiritual state before God. William was left with troubling thoughts about eternity, and his own sense of lostness. He was plunged into a period of deep spiritual distress, and he began to forsake his ungodly ways, as he later recalled:

> *I was brought to feel that my sins were against a holy, just and good God; that I had not merely to be alarmed for the consequences and punishment due for sin, but that I had to stand before the bar of infinite purity and give an account of my awful practices.*[1]

Fear of hell was now coupled with a sense that he had sinned against a holy and good God, whose mercy he had abused, and to whom he was accountable. His efforts to shake off this dreadful feeling only served to make him feel worse. Even his attempts at praying the Lord's Prayer left him feeling filled with horror — how could a holy God be the Father of an ungodly sinner such as he was? So great was the sense of the awful seriousness of his sin that he felt utterly lost and beyond hope. He found himself drawn inextricably to the services and prayer meetings at the Independent chapel at Bedworth, loving to hear the godly conversation of the old saints as they walked to church. Yet he lived in constant fear that one of them would turn and ask him about his own religious state at the time.