

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tbhs_01.php

Porton Baptist Church, 1655-85.

AS I write, I have before me the time-stained records lasting from 1655 to 1685 of the Baptist Church at Porton, in the county of Wilts. The parchment cover of the little volume, eight inches by six inches, has long since become brown by the hand of time, while the once white pages of hand-made paper have become worn and yellow and stained, by the careless handling and exposure of after generations. Many of the earlier pages are now only partly legible, but fortunately I have a copy, made over half a century ago by a Baptist worthy who was anxious even in those unheeding days that such a record should not be lost.

"On ye third day of ye fourth month 1655 ye Brethren and Sisters residing about Wallop, Sarum, Amesbury, Stoverd, Chalke, Porton and ye parts adjasent mett together as a church of Jesus Christ and then with one accord declared theire resolucons for ye future through Christ weh strengtheneth them so to walke as becometh Saints according to ye Gospell of or Lord Jesus Christ in all obedience of His commands and in love toward each other as brethren and sisters ptakers of ye same grace through Jesus Christ ye Lord."

"The same day were baptized by or brother Edward Bundy nine disciples whose names follow with ye rest of ye names of or Brethren and Sisters as before mentioned according to their places of residence; first ye names of ye brethren and sisters at Salisbury are—"

Such is the opening of the earliest preserved record of a church which in 1905 attained to its 250th anniversary. There is an entry on the parchment cover, written in another hand-writing, as follows: "And for their more orderly proceeding and profit they appointed John Rede, Henry Pen and Edward Bundy, orderly and by course to administer ye ordinances as often as called for. And for ye provision of ye church and taking care of ye poor Saints they have appointed Robert Blake and Thomas Webb to overseer and take care in their places, as their duty in all things that necessarily belong to ye care of Deacons."

The list of members numbers 111, drawn from twenty villages and hamlets of South Wilts and West Hants, within a radius of twelve

miles of the central meeting place at Porton. Some at all events of these groups of brethren and sisters had previously been attached to the Church at North Bradley, now Southwick; but Porton seems to have been chosen as head-quarters for this district, partly as being the most central spot for the villages concerned, and partly because it was the home of John Rede, of Birdlymes Farm, who was a Justice of the Peace for the County of Wilts, and as such, could afford a large amount of protection to the infant church. It was to such protection, afforded by the Trenchard family (who then held Cutteridge, a mansion second only to Longleat), that the North Bradley Church owed its existence; and we can quite understand how important a factor such a consideration would be in determining the choice of a meeting-place for the newly established society.

It is difficult to account for the existence of these little groups of baptised believers existing in the scattered villages of this part of Salisbury Plain. They recall to our minds J. R. Green's description of how, when Lollardry had ceased to exist as a movement, "We see groups meeting here and there to read in a great book of heresy all one night certain chapters of the Evangelists in English." The largest group of members, twenty-five in number, came from the hamlet of Stoverd (Stoford), now a mere handful of cottages with a population of less than a hundred. Perhaps they were weavers influenced by the teachings of their fellow craftsmen in the villages further westward, but I can find no definite explanation of the apparent predominance of Baptist principles in this hamlet.

The most remote village of the group, Broadchalke, contributed eleven members, and we can almost cherish the idea that they represent somehow or other the after-results of the labours of "Honest Hugh Latimer," who more than a century before had been rector of that parish. Perhaps, too, the little group of ten from Idmiston and Porton tell of the influence of the "Judicious Hooker," once rector of the adjoining parish of Boscombe. Probably the prevalence of weaving in this wool-growing district may have been a factor in the matter, as farther westward where cloth weaving is still carried on, Baptists are and were far more numerous than in East Wilts.¹

It is easy to picture the coming together by various bridle-paths over "The long backs of the bushless downs," of these sturdy Baptists on that June morning 250 years ago. "Birdlymes" still stands, facing eastward, in its pleasant grounds sloping away down to the Bourne stream.

¹ As far back as 1590 there had been an evangelical movement in these parts, which led to many emigrating to Holland; and possibly these villages witness to a persistence of that movement, clarified by the writings of John Smith till definite Baptist principles were adopted. We know for a fact that this was the course of events in Sarum and Tiverton.—[Editor.]

Its flint-built stables and sheds would shelter many a yeoman's horse that day. Down by the river-side was a large hall (the remains perhaps of a previous Manor house), and here the meetings were held. It was only a few steps to what is still the village sheep-wash and which probably then served as the Baptistery. A plot of ground further along the willow-bordered stream was afterwards hallowed as the burial ground of the infant church, and there the remains of many of those saints and their descendants still rest in peace. There is a tradition that in his will John Rede ordered that any travelling Baptist preacher should have the right to hold services in "The Hall," but I have not been able to verify the story. The hall itself was pulled down some fifty years ago being then in a ruinous condition.

In the Parish Register of Porton-cum-Idmiston there are several entries of marriages celebrated by John Rede, under the well-known "Barebone's" Act of 1653, which provided that marriages should in future be celebrated by the Justices of the Peace for the counties. The entries are in a very similar hand-writing to those in the earlier years of the Porton Church-book, and like them are clear and legible. The burial ground is still used as the last resting place of members of the Baptist Church in the village. Perhaps the most interesting tomb in it is that of John Rede's widow and daughter which bears the following inscriptions:

"Here lyeth the body of Sarah the wife of John Rede, Gent: late of Birdlymes Farm in the Tything of Porton. She departed this life at the Devizes ye 24th of February 1708 aged 49 years."

"Here lyes also ye body of Sarah Carteret Rede, daughter of ye said John and Sarah Rede. She departed this life at the Devizes the 12th day of December 1700 aged 6 years 11 months and 4 days."

Evidently John Rede married late in life and I have not yet been able to discover where and when he died. But I am glad that he is commemorated in the Baptist Union Historic Roll as well as in the more glorious record of the succession of Christian life and service which has been the outcome of the foundation of that little Baptist Church at Porton.²

The record runs on without a break until May 19th, 1660. During those five years, between twenty and thirty members were added by

² In 1659, Lieutenant-Colonel Rede is heard of in the Clarke Papers, and in 1666 he was delated to the royal government as dangerous. See State Papers, vol. 187, page 173. If this be the same man, his importance explains the hostile attitude of the government to John Rede, of Birdlymes, in 1669 and 1672. On the other hand, if our John Rede was important enough to be a justice in 1655, it is barely credible that in 1693 he had a daughter born to him. There was a John Rede who in 1723 attended the Western Association; probably the tombs are of his wife and daughter. They show that he removed from Birdlymes to Devizes, and we may guess that he was son of the great John.—[Editor.]

baptism, the services being held at the various villages from which the converts were drawn. The monthly Church meetings were held at Amesbury, Stoverd, Chalke and Porton in rotation, the intervening "first days" being arranged for at each monthly gathering.

Then from 1660 to 1672 there is no entry, and when the record is again taken up a change seems to have come over the spirit of the Church. The blight of the Restoration has evidently affected the life of the community. There is more of discipline and excommunication than of progress and additions. But throughout the book there is not a word as to any persecution. No doubt there was plenty. Bishop Seth Ward was busy during part of the time hunting out heretics, and Crosby records that Walter Pen, one of the elders, was often in prison. But of all this nothing is recorded here.³

There are journeyings into Gloucestershire, Dorset, Hants, to help weaker churches in the ministry of the word. Money gifts also are sent to some of them "at their desire." In 1679, "did attend by desire and advice of the messengers at Bristol:

Bro. Andrew Gifford,	}	Ordained ministers by imposition of hands.
Bro. Thos. Millard,		
When by imposition of the hands of the aforesaid ministers		
Bro. Walter Pen,	}	ministers were ordained."
Bro. Thomas Long,		
Bro. Jo. Rede,		

But the greater part of the entries concern the internal discipline of the Church. Members are exhorted, warned, admonished and finally excommunicated for a variety of offences, both of commission and omission. Excessive punishment of an apprentice, disobedience to a husband, misappropriation of trust funds, "consultation with a person using unlawful arts," neglect of the Church's worship and ordinances, a "return to the World's ways and Worship"—such are the charges, besides those of a grosser nature brought against various members.

³ Bishop Ward, in 1669, discovered in this neighbourhood that Baptists met at Dinton, in the house of Thomas Dinton; that about twelve were at Fovant; that ten at Broad Chalke were ministered to by Henry Pen, a husbandman; that at Bramshaw, in the house of John Dible, William Stokes of Fordingbridge used to preach; that to Amesbury, in the house of Thomas Webb or of Long, John Read came over from Porton to hold a conventicle; and that there were many dissenters at South Newton, though he does not name them Baptists. His brother Bishop of Winchester, reported forty Baptists at Over Wallop, and others at Fordingbridge. When in 1672, Charles invited applications to be made for licenses to preach, Henry Pen took one out for Broad Chalke, Thomas Long for Little Amesbury, James Wise for Salisbury, John Alchurch for South Newton, which includes the hamlet of Stoford; and John Kent for Over Wallop. John Rede applied for a license to preach at Porton, which was granted, but was met with a very unusual repulse when he asked that his house at Idmiston might be licensed. In the end, however, this request too was granted. All these licenses were cancelled in 1673.—[Editor.]

The erring ones are patiently watched over and some return as penitents to the fold; some, alas, go out and return no more. There are dissensions too in the Church. Walter Pen, one of the elders, accusing John Rede of evil conduct with regard to property which he had inherited, and Pen being accused of uncharitableness in his conduct towards Rede in the matter. The Church after various meetings finds that both their elders have been guilty of unchristian courses and calls them both to repentance. Finally "the Church received full satisfaction in the matter relating to Bro. Rede and Bro. Pen, and they with each other to their mutual comfort."

The last entry in the book is dated The 17th of the 11th month 1685. It records the baptism of four converts at Wallop, and there is no apparent reason for the abrupt termination of the Church's history. In the end of the book there is a list of members remaining in 1685. It totals up to ninety and it is interesting to find in the list the names of thirteen of those who had helped to form the original Church-roll thirty years before.

I have come across a later item in the Church's history, rescued from the first Salisbury Church-book, which has long since disappeared. It is the record of a meeting held at Sarum on the 9th day of the 10th month, 1690, when those in and about Sarum were dismissed to form a separate Church, it being "freely and unanimously consented to" that this would be "the most effectual method in order to promote the public interest of Christ in converting souls and building up each other in the Faith and order of the Gospel." The remainder were to "sit down in the country at what place they think most for their conveniency having Bro. Rede for their Pastor formerly in the same capacity with Bro. Pen."

Among the names attached to this decision of the Church there are only two of the original 111. Jo. Rede and Jo. Andrew. They are worthy of commemoration now, two and a half centuries afterwards.⁴

What a world of history is wrapped up in the faithful thirty-five years witness of those two men! From Cromwell to William III., with the black days of the two Stuarts of ignoble memory between. One likes to trace out the records of these worthies, to follow down the streams of influence still flowing in some of those remote villages, and to find out their old homes; for some of these yeoman families have persisted

⁴ We fortunately know the ministers and messengers who attended the London Assemblies of 1689 and 1692. Before this division of the church, the messengers from Porton were Walter Pen and John Andrews; John Rede was perhaps too old to go up to town. In 1692, neither the church at Porton nor the church at Sarum was represented. There were, however, Association meetings held at Southampton, Broughton and Ringwood before the century ran out, whose minutes were recorded in the Whitchurch book, and are now lodged at Regent's Park College. At these meetings figures one Charles Rede of Christchurch, who may possibly belong to the same family.—[Editor.]

down to the present day. With a chastened feeling too one notes in how many of those villages our own particular witness has died out. Salisbury, Porton, Bodenham and Wallop, alone remain of the original names. Broughton came in afterwards, and Bowerchalke can fairly be taken as representing Broadchalke. In these places the light still shines. Neither can we fail to believe in the unknown results which have followed the meeting of 250 years ago. But we may well feel rebuked as we think of the power which the message had then, so that men and women were brave to confess Christ by baptism in village after village. Pondering over all that it meant to them, we may well pray that we may have grace to "follow in their train."

ARTHUR TUCKER, Horsebridge.

Editorial

What are you doing for the Society?

Every member can help the Society in many ways. Some can borrow old Church books or other ancient documents of interest, and obtain leave for the editorial committee to copy and publish. Others can prepare monographs of a Church or of some out-standing hero. Others can find where rare printed books are on the shelves of some village patriarch, and induce him to give, lend, sell, or bequeath them. Others can collect the circular letters of their Associations, and present to the Society. Queries are invited, and may tax the knowledge of all. Recruits may be interested and enlisted. Public libraries may be induced to subscribe. Members are invited to report by letter how they propose to help forward the common work.

Ancient Churches.

Several Churches return themselves in the Handbook as of date earlier than 1650. There are probably some cases where a Church which originated by separation from the Establishment, like Jacob's in 1616, or by an evangelistic movement, like Mitchell and Crosley about 1680, presently had its attention drawn to baptism, and took further steps by discarding infant baptism, adopting believers' baptism, insisting on immersion. And so there may be one date when a Church originated, another date when it became Baptist. It would be well if these Churches claiming antiquity would look closely at this difference. No evidence has yet