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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Bristol Baptist Itinerant Society

WE cannot write "The Bristol Itinerant Society" as that title belongs to the Congregationalists in Bristol who founded their society in 1811. Earlier still, in 1809, the Northern Baptist Itinerant Society had been founded largely through the driving force of William Steadman (1764-1837) the first principal of Rawdon. In Scotland, too, in 1797, Christopher Anderson (1782-1852) founded the Scottish Itinerant Society.

In 1797 the B.M.S. asked Steadman, then minister at Broughton, Hants, to undertake a preaching tour through Cornwall. He took as companion John Saffery of Salisbury. This effort proved so rewarding that Steadman made a second tour the year following, with Francis Franklyn, then a student at Bristol and later minister at Coventry. The Baptist Home Mission Society was inaugurated in 1797.

It was such endeavours as these that inspired a keen and devoted Bristol minister, Thomas Roberts (1780-1841) in 1824 to call together his two brother ministers, John Ryland of Broadmead (1753-1825) and Thomas Winter of Counterslip. The three men met in the new vestry at Old King Street Chapel, which had been opened in 1817. They then decided to ask their fellow Baptists in Bristol to work both in the city and surrounding villages on the Somerset side, as the Congregationalists had already decided to work on the Gloucestershire side. Thus, from the beginning, the society has laboured in Bristol, especially in new districts, and now several large and flourishing churches owe their beginnings to the work of this Society.

In the same year, 1824, work was begun in the large village of Chew Magna, nine miles from Bristol. At first the preachers held meetings in a cottage or in the open air. Within five years a small church had been gathered which grew and prospered. It was indeed a great day, 1st July, 1867, when their new chapel was opened by the Rev. J. R. Wood of City Road, and when the Mayor of Bristol, E. S. Robinson, Esq., presided at the evening meeting. In honour of his visit the church bells were rung. Dr. Gotch and the Bristol ministers took part. Later in 1888 the church added a large school-room.

Also in 1824 this society began work in Dundry, about five miles from Bristol, on a hill overlooking the city. Twelve who had been in

membership at Chew Magna formed the first church and a small chapel was built in 1829. Land near the chapel and also some small houses were obtained for extension, carried out in 1878 when a larger chapel was built, together with a schoolroom.

Work was soon begun at Winford, a well situated village about six miles from Bristol. There a chapel was built in 1829 when seven who had been members at Chew Magna formed the first church. The stronger fellowship helped this new work at Winford, where there is still no baptistry. Thus from the beginning when any at Winford were baptized this took place at Chew Magna. In 1877 improvements were made at Winford costing £150. Two miles from Winford is the hamlet of Ridgehill where work was begun in 1845. Two miles nearer Bristol on the A38 lies the small village of Barrow Gurney. Here meetings were held at first in a cottage, and then in 1893 an iron chapel was erected upon land belonging to the Bristol Water Works. While these works were being extended this chapel was well used, but later attracted only a faithful few. So a new site was purchased nearer Bristol where there are more houses and an attractive brick chapel was built.

At first preachers walked to keep their appointments, usually two going together. They would spend the first hour teaching children to read, and then conduct worship. In the afternoon they would visit from house to house. In 1825 work was begun at Cheddar and the villages around, and the college later undertook this work, which now forms the Cheddar Group with a minister.

About three miles beyond Ridgehill, mentioned earlier, stands the small village of Nempnett, where work was early begun and a chapel built in 1842. The small group of believers there bought a piece of land for two pounds, obtained materials and then built the chapel themselves. Just under two miles away is the hamlet of Breech Hill and here for several years meetings were held in a large cottage every Sunday afternoon. So the man planned for Nempnett had three services.

Work at Blagdon, twelve miles from Bristol, began in 1850, and at first meetings were held in the club room of the Old Bell Inn. The way to this upper room was by an outside stairway of twenty-six stone steps. The first chapel, built in 1864, was opened by the Rev. E. G. Gange, of Broadmead (1844-1921). A schoolroom was added in 1883. About two miles away is the beautiful hamlet of Rickford where in 1854 work was taken over from the Methodists. At first Baptists at Blagdon formed part of the church here at Rickford.

Seven miles from Bristol, on the Weston road, lies the rapidly extending village of Backwell. The society began work there in 1894 in a leasehold building, but in 1910 bought what remained of a ninety-nine years' lease. Now the freehold is ours, also. The

motor car and a much improved bus service has made a great difference to this village and its chapel.

In course of time, the society undertook the conveyance of its preachers and purchased a van, called a Coburg, seating four inside and two outside on the driver's seat. One preacher had to drive. The records tell of a new van purchased in 1882 for £43, and again of two vans in 1901 costing £85. These two vans were housed at a Bristol mews and on Sunday mornings at 8.15 the Coburg for Blagdon was ready horsed to begin the journey to Blagdon and other villages, while the second van set out at 8.30 for Barrow Gurney, Winford and Chew Magna. The man for Ridgehill walked from Winford. These vans ended their journeyings in 1919 when a motor service was begun.

Music in these village chapels, in early days, was provided by gifted members, who could play the violin, cello (called a bass viol), flute or clarionet. Once every year, in the less busy time between haymaking and harvest, a very special meeting was arranged on a Saturday at some central chapel when all these instrumentalists joined together and formed a real band ready to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. For this special event a preacher came out from Bristol.

When a village church had been formed, and was settled in its own building a lay pastor was appointed to give general oversight. He usually came to conduct services upon the first Sunday in the month when he would lead the Communion Service. The other Sundays would be supplied from the preachers' plan, which is still printed quarterly. Each preacher has a number and his engagements on the plan are in his number (not his name). The annual meeting has usually been held in one of the city churches while the annual preachers' conference is held in one of the larger villages, for this includes a well-attended tea.

For several years, on Friday evenings in a room at the Bristol Y.M.C.A., one of the Bristol ministers (either Baptist or Congregationalist) conducted a most useful training class for the lay preachers of both societies. The two hard-working plan secretaries of these societies were usually present, and before the close were allowed a few minutes to fill urgent engagements for the Sunday following, made vacant by illness or similar emergency.

From the first, there has always been complete co-operation between the society and the Bristol Baptist College. Its students have long made themselves responsible for fostering missionary interest in the village churches, and they also collect gifts for the B.M.S. For some time the college men have taken a share of dates on the plan.

There is a similar close bond of fellowship binding the society to the Bristol churches. Usually a Bristol minister acts as secretary.

One of them, the Rev. George Jarman (1843-1929) filled this post for twenty-seven years, and he was succeeded by the Rev. Thomas Davies, (1867-1936).

In the city, the church at St. George, now strong and flourishing, was for many years a station of the society, which built the first chapel. The same is true of the Victoria Park Church, also St. Marks and Patchway. In their early days both East St., and Fishponds were glad to fall back upon the lay preachers of the society.

The society has always been ready for experiment, and to face a challenge. For some years a Spurgeon's colporteur was employed to work around our villages. At another time a magazine was tried, to link the scattered villages together. But here is a recent challenge. To provide urgently needed houses for the men employed in the very extensive aeroplane works at Filton and Patchway a very large housing estate was planned and built at Little Stoke. There were good roads, shops, a large primary school, yet no chapel or Sunday School. So in 1951 this society stepped in, and first explored the ground and also saw the planning officer. Then early in 1952 we sought permission to use part of the school on Sunday afternoons and evenings. The Sunday School began with 50 children and grew apace, soon reaching 100. The evening service was soon sixty and far more at Harvest Thanksgiving or Sunday School anniversary.

The next step was to buy a good corner site near the centre of the estate in 1953. The stone-laying of the first large hall was a joyful event, early in 1954, and the hall was opened in June. Very soon a second hall had to be provided to avoid two Sunday School sessions, and to meet the need of a very large Primary Department. There is enough of the site still left for future extensions. This work has become self-supporting.

Finally, such a society plays a very valuable part in helping young men to discover and develop their preaching gifts, to test their concern over pastoral care and so prepare themselves to enter college to study for work at home or abroad.

A. GORDON HAMLIN

Fullerism. In an important article entitled "Northamptonshire and *The Modern Question: a turning point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent*", the Rev. Dr. G. F. Nuttall describes the background against which Fullerism arose in the 18th century. See *The Journal of Theological Studies*, April, 1965, Vol. xvi, Part I, p. 101.