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Baptists in East Kent.

THE churches here were both early and numerous; their history was closely interwoven, so that each sheds light on others. This is fortunate, as no minute-books survive till the Hanoverian period, and fragments of information have to be collected from diverse sources and pieced together. A number of documents from 1689 are at Ashford, but have not been laid under contribution for the following sketch. At Dr. Williams' Library are six volumes which give (a) Minutes of Canterbury, 1711-1721, (b) Minutes of East Kent Association, 1717-1734, 1780-1787, 1798-1809, (c) Minutes of the Kent and Sussex Association, 1708-1760 (compilation for the early years), 1768-1819, 1832-1845. All these relate to General Baptists only. Particular Baptist Association minutes begin only in 1779. A sketch is attempted here in six sections, omitting Eythorne, which has received separate attention from its present pastor:—

The inchoate period till 1681;

Contact with wider General Baptist life till 1719;

The Canterbury church till its death;

The Thanet district till its death;

The Dover church;

The Particular Baptists till 1835.

I. THE INCHOATE PERIOD.

The Rev. Walter Holyoak states, presumably from early Dover records, that in 1643 Anne Stevens and Nicholas Woodman were baptized at Canterbury; that in February 1643-4 Luke Howard of Dover went to London to be baptized by Kiffin; that Daniel Coxe of Canterbury and Mark Elfreth of Dover were baptized about the same time; that Howard married Stevens; that all except Coxe became General Baptist.

Towards the end of 1645, Henry Denne came on an evangelistic tour in Kent, preaching and baptizing at Rochester, Chatham, and Canterbury.* He was in episcopal orders, but had been won to Baptist views by Thomas Lamb, a London soap-boiler, Elder of a General Baptist church. While Denne took a commission in the cavalry of the Regular Army, Lamb came on a tour in the country, and so did Kiffin the Particular Baptist in 1649.

At this time the old Episcopal system was broken down. Some parish churches were occupied by clergy of a Puritan type, placed there under authority of the Houses of Parliament.*

* Fenstanton Records, page 101.

† C.H.S., Trans., VII, 181.

In a few places Gathered Churches were arising, and Canterbury saw one organize on 12 February, 1645-6, whose very full records are now lodged at the Memorial Hall in London. They show that on 27 May, 1646, John Durant was chosen as pastor, with the approval of the Gathered Churches at Dover and Sandwich: that a second church was formed in Canterbury on 26 February, 1646-7; that they encouraged another to gather at Staplehurst in March; that they obtained the use of the cathedral chapter-house on 5 July, 1650; that a church had now gathered at Adisham; that in 1652 the pastor at Sandwich was taking public maintenance, and his church was divided in opinion about this; that in 1654 the errors of Arminius were troubling the district, and that a public declaration was made by several churches "that the Lord Jesus Christ came not into the world to dye for all in general, but only for those elect ones which he calls by the name of his sheep."

In the membership of this Gathered Church at this time were Kingsfords and Norwoods, some of whose families were presently to have wider views of God's mercy.

A Lancashire lad of eighteen, William Caton, who had adopted the opinions of George Fox, undertook most extensive tours in 1654.* He came to the Baptist meeting at Dover and gave his testimony to such effect that he won over a prominent member, Luke Howard, who placed his house at the disposal of the Quakers. Caton went on to Folkestone, Hythe and Lydd, actually persuading the Baptist Messenger, Samuel Fisher, and deeply grieving George Hammon. After going round Kent, to the great damage of the Baptist causes, he came again to Canterbury, and testified in both the Independent and the Baptist meetings, winning adherents from each church.

This is the first clear evidence that a Baptist meeting had been established at Canterbury. Now other "Publishers of Truth" had been in the fens, and had grievously troubled the Fenstanton Baptist church. So that it was very fortunate Henry Denne also was touring Kent this year.† He paid a second visit to Canterbury in October, and was at once asked by the Baptists to stay and help them; he referred them to his home church, to which they wrote on 13 November to say that they had been deserted by a mixed party which had turned out of the way, and needed such teaching and organizing as Denne could give. Four of the eleven men who signed were Richard and Thomas Beacham, Thomas and Daniel Jarman. Meanwhile he did such good work with his news of the grace of God for all, that the Gathered Churches put out their manifesto as to the limited grace in December.

* Sewell's *History*; 101 onwards.

† Fenstanton Records; 106.

The Fenstanton church agreed, and started him in January 1654/5, well provided: and a letter of thanks was written from Canterbury on 19 February. How long his stay lasted we are not sure; he was in London three years later. We may certainly attribute much of the Baptist cause in East Kent to these two visits. The work spread widely: from a later report to the archbishop, we find that a family called Holt at Ash was Baptist as early as 1654.* There were prominent men such as Richard Hobbs of Dover, besides the post-master. Samuel Fisher of Ashford, like Denne in episcopal orders, was asked by his fellow-Baptists to superintend the local work, but we have seen that he became a Quaker in 1655. John Foxwell was another "Messenger," as the superintendent-evangelists were called, and in 1654 he joined with a score of other leaders in protesting against the Fifth-Monarchy views which had so perturbed Canterbury: a generation later we find a Foxwell at this city, so John may have belonged here. In 1660 we find Joseph Wright of Maidstone with John Parsons senior and junior of Faversham at a great convention in London putting out a confession of faith; but no one from East Kent.

For the next few years there was bitter persecution. The Dover people had erected a meeting-house, which was rather exceptional in these early days; so the authorities nailed it up, and there are picturesque anecdotes as to the Baptists forcibly re-opening it. Samuel Taverner, a man of a good Essex family, governor of Deal castle, was baptized by Edward Prescott of Dover, resigned his governorship, and moved to Dover, where he supported himself as a grocer, and began to preach. A temporary conventicle act ran out with the prorogation of parliament in 1668, and there was a respite in which breath could be drawn. It was taken advantage of very fully, and we are glad to see that after eight years there was quite a vigorous work being carried on. The Dover records showed 242 members grouped loosely in one fellowship, widely scattered. Fortunately we can tell rather minutely where they belonged, and who were their leaders, for Archbishop Sheldon ordered every parish minister to send a report as to the conventicles and leaders in his parish. Three years later Charles II invited applications for licenses to hold conventicles and to teach. From these data we can put together a partial picture of Baptist life in East Kent: we will begin at Hythe, go up the coast, and up the Stour.

(To be continued.)

*Congregational Historical Society's *Transactions*, V. 124.