

Stony Stratford

THIS church has always been allied rather more closely with others to the north, in Northamptonshire and Warwick, than with those to the south, in the same county of Bucks.

In 1651 a meeting of General Baptists in the Midlands was attended by representatives of thirty churches. The nearest to Stony Stratford were *Easenhall*, four miles north-west of Rugby, *Marston* in Warwick (perhaps Prior's Marston, four miles from Byfield in Northants), *Ravensthorpe* in Northants, near Long Buckby, *Horley*, three miles north-west of Banbury in Oxon, *Sundon* in Beds., eight miles east of Leighton Buzzard. As these encircle Stony Stratford, we are tempted to infer that no Baptist church existed there at that date. The meeting decided to send out messengers to plant new churches, and quite possibly this was founded as a result.

In 1654 the Fifth-Monarchy men were exciting fears; and a meeting of General Baptists was held in London, which disclaimed them. Morley signed from Ravensthorpe, Monk from Berkhamstead, John Hartnoll from Winslow, Stephen Dagnall from Aylesbury; but no one can be identified from Stony Stratford. Two years later another meeting was held in London, attended by much the same men, and again Stony Stratford is not to be recognised.

The earliest local evidence is that in 1657, John Emerson of Cosgrove (yeoman) and W. Fortnell of Paulerspury took a lease of a plot of ground, 48 by 20, south-west of the Cofferridge, from William Hartley; and it is implied that in May a building was erected, able to accommodate a hundred people. The registers of these parishes might throw more light on the men involved. Hartley does seem to have been a Baptist, the Registrar of births, etc., appointed under the Act of 1653. "Emerson" is probably a slip for "Emerton": William Emerton of Awbury Monke (Aldbury in Herts?) was reported in 1669 as preaching at Drayton Beauchamp, on the main road from Berkhamstead and Tring to Aylesbury; Randal Emerton was a Baptist rich enough to be nominated as sheriff for Herts. in 1670.

In 1659 the General Baptists of sixteen counties met at Aylesbury, as we learn from the church book of Dalwood in Devon; but the minutes are not extant and we do not know if

Stony Stratford was represented. A Confession of Faith was adopted next year by a meeting in London, and to the men above named can be added the following of the neighbourhood: Francis Stanley of Ravensthorpe, William Smart of Wingrave, Joseph Keach of Soulbury; there are seventeen others whose locality is not known.

James Slye, of Potterspury, is the authority for the statement in 1831 that George Martyn was the first pastor here. That can hardly be the precise state of the case, for this church was General Baptist, whereas he was a Presbyterian minister, a royalist staunch enough to appear in arms for Charles in 1659. Calamy said of him that after he was ejected from Weedon Beck, in Northants, he "exercised his ministry pretty much among an handful of honest people at Stony Stratford"; and this is confirmed by the fact that application was made on his behalf by Nathaniel Ponder in May, 1672, for licences that he might preach in his own house at Haversham, and at Edmund Carter's houses at Stony Stratford and Wolverton. As all these were called Presbyterian, we can hardly say more than that he may have preached in the Baptist meeting-house occasionally; but that he was ever the ordained Elder is incredible.

Another licence was, however, desired for the house of John Britten, in Lavendon, half-way between Bedford and Northampton, near Olney. This family was destined to be closely linked with Stony Stratford, and the first sign was that in 1675 new trustees were appointed on the death of Emerton. John Fulford of Stony Stratford, brazier, was associated with John Brittain junior of Yardley Gobion, carpenter. Of another John Britten, born in 1660, we shall hear much.

When we ask how services were maintained in this long period of persecution, 1660-1687, we must remember that the General Baptists had three kinds of preachers—Messengers, who superintended a wide area, both preaching and administering; Elders, ordained to one particular congregation, which might be drawn from and might meet in, many villages; Ministers, answering closely to our lay preachers. As yet, we are unable to identify any Elder of Stony Stratford at this time, though it is probable there were two or three joint-elders. We do know the Messengers who worked in the district; Hartnoll of Winslow was reported in 1669 to the bishop by many clergy, so were Monk of Berkhamstead and Morley of Ravensthorpe, with his colleague Francis Stanley.

There are traditions of five ministers here, "Jenkins, Cook, B.K., Sturch, Fouks." There was a Jenkins family at Winslow, which sent out more than one preacher for half a century. There was a Cook family at Chesham and Berkhamstead, equally

helpful. B.K. was the well-known Benjamin Keach, born at Stoke Hammond in 1640, baptized 1655, married a Winslow girl 1660, brought into prominence by a trial for his children's primer in 1664, much in demand by the General Baptist churches of Bucks for the next four years, till he went to London. John Sturch and Richard Fulks were members at Aylesbury. Therefore it would almost appear that the church at Stony Stratford relied on preachers from the outside, and may have had none of its own.

We have reports from the two incumbents in 1676, that there were in the east side of the street thirty-one dissenters over sixteen years of age, and on the west side ten more. Persecution raged all over the district, troops being sent into the county on purpose. One of the treasures of the present church is an old window-frame through which the preacher could slip into the wood, and in ten minutes be across the river out of the jurisdiction.

Yet, when liberty was secured, and there was time to take stock and re-organize, a Pedobaptist minister who settled at Pury reported that the Baptist Church numbered sixty-seven members, twenty-five in Stony Stratford itself, fourteen in Yardley (Gobion), eight in Paulerspury, six in Potterspury, seven in Hanslope and Thrupp (*i.e.*, Castle Thorpe), three in Blisworth, two in Denshanger, two in Wicken. All these places lie on the Pury side, and this shows that if the meeting-house was in Bucks, yet the church was largely Northants. It would be well to search the Quarter Sessions rolls at Aylesbury, and see who registered the meeting-house, and when.

From 1690 we are well-informed both as to the Bucks General Baptist Association, and the General Assembly. The former consisted of seven churches at first, and there is no mention of Stony Stratford. Quite possibly the church looked northward, and was in touch with the General Baptist churches at Welton, Northampton, Coventry, Ravensthorpe. In the troubles raised by Matthew Caffin, the Northamptonshire Association took a strong stand for a thorough investigation; but this was evaded till 1705, when all who would not express themselves clearly on the divinity of our Lord were expelled from the Assembly. From all these troubles this church stood aloof, and there is no trace of its being represented at Assembly or Association.

In 1689 the church at Slapton began a new book, and the accounts show at once frequent payments to John Shenstone, a family to be noted; this particular man seems to have been aided as in poverty; the church had its own Elder, but often enjoyed the preaching of Edward Fowkes from Northampton. In 1702

it brought over John Britten some distance, paying for horse-hire twice the sum from Northampton. From this time he and Shenstone were frequent preachers, aided presently by Philip Cherry.

On 12th November, 1709, John Brittain's name appears as auditing the accounts of Slapton, and thenceforward annually. On 21st April, 1712, he was at the Association in Aylesbury, and was asked to mediate in a trouble at the Ford church. The church of Slapton came to depend almost entirely on him and Nathaniel Kinch; but there is no reference to his place of residence. An entry of 1719/20 shows him presiding at a meeting of the Slapton church held in Bradwin. These entries prove that he was a man of great weight in this district.

Now the Assembly which in 1705-8 purged itself of its vague members, met in 1712 and 1713 at London; in 1714, 1715, 1716 at Stony Stratford, 1718 at Coventry, 1720 Stratford, 1721 Northampton, 1722-1725 Stratford, 1726 London, 1727-30 Stratford, 1731 London: it came to be known as the Stony Stratford Assembly. Evidently there must have been in this town a strong church or a strong man—perhaps both.

About 1715 John Eyans of London was taking a careful census of all dissenting churches. From Mr. Jennings, of Kibworth, in Leicestershire, he had a letter with a great deal of information as to Northamptonshire. It shows General Baptists abounding, but those in many villages linked into one church. What concerns us is two entries, which are slightly ambiguous: (1) John Brittain of Cosgrave, minister of 240 people at Yardley, Stony Stratford and Thorp in Bucks; (2) Nathaniel Kinch of Horley, ministers at Bifield and Chipping Warden; John Britain and Philip Cherry minister at Woodend Weston and Bradwin; all these people, with Banbury and Horley, make one church.

We infer then, that Britten, who was fifty-five years old in 1715, resided at Cosgrave, that he was Elder of Stony Stratford, that he gave help to the northern church at Slapton, also to the six-village church to the south.

It is no surprise to learn from the minute-book of the Aylesbury Association that in 1721 he was ordained Messenger, Joseph Hooke coming from Lincolnshire for the purpose. Henceforward he was both technically and really the leader of the General Baptists in the Midlands. In 1723 a house in Towcester was fitted up for worship, and in 1725/6 it was duly conveyed to him: this was one of the centres of the Slapton church, and Weston-by-Weedon became another. All neighbouring churches now take note of him, ordaining, presiding at business, administering baptism, and breaking bread.

In 1731 he arranged for the Assembly to meet at White's Alley in London. The ambiguous General Baptists had kept up a rival Assembly, which met intermittently, and overtures for union were accepted. A clear pronouncement was made on Christology, and on 10th June, 1731, reunion was effected, John Brittain's signature heading the list. It is much to be regretted that the Stony Stratford Assembly book, which was deposited with James Richardson of Southwark, has been lost; for it would have been the spine to which might easily have been articulated the many local records.

In 1733 the Assembly minuted that it very much condoled with the church at Stony Stratford in the great loss it had maintained by the removal of its late worthy minister and pastor, Brother John Brittain, Messenger of the churches; but it was glad to hear that the Lord had provided for them so that they were capable of continuing the worship of God among them, in which the Assembly would always be willing to afford its best assistance; it would be glad to enjoy the church's company and assistance next year; and it desired brother William Gyles, of Winslow, to carry this message. To succeed Brittain as Messenger, Samuel Welton, of Coventry, and William Allen, of Ford, were nominated, but William Johnson seems after some delay to have been ordained.

The Northamptonshire Association and the Bucks Association were not satisfied with the turn of events. They sent a strong and reiterated protest against singing in worship, which the Assembly declined to endorse. Also they objected to one article in the terms of reunion, which had been inserted with the hope of pleasing them, but was presently deleted to please them. Yet the two Associations felt very luke-warm towards the Assembly.

Stony Stratford in particular never held any further communication with the Assembly. It would appear that Brittain had overshadowed everybody, and on his death a rapid decay set in, both among the Associated churches and even in his own church. Association meetings become rarer, and churches drop off; in 1747 Woodrow was declared disorderly, in 1750 Wycombe collapsed, and the remaining members joined Amersham, in 1759 only Winslow was represented at the Association, next year only Berkhamstead, "the other sister churches being entirely decayed and broke off from us because they were too stiff in their mode of faith." By 1775 Winslow church had "turned Calvine"; twenty years later the Amersham people were so feeble they left their building unused, and met in a vestry of the Calvinistic Baptist meeting-house.

Now Stony Stratford was one of the earliest churches to

undergo this metamorphosis. In Brittain's later days he had been helped by Samuel Shenston, who succeeded him as sole Elder, and died in 1736. He was followed by Richard Irons, "resident preacher," even at Christmas, 1734, "a downright Baxterian," of whom we gladly would know more. One critic in 1738 spoke of "the reign of Richard the fourth"; he showed his Calvinism by inviting John Heywood, the Pedobaptist of Pury, to conduct an evening lecture in the Baptist meeting-house at Stony Stratford; he was doing the same thing at Towcester alternately with Stanger of Weston. Irons was followed by Tift, of whom nothing is recorded. During his pastorate the meeting-house was enlarged at the expense of the son of Samuel Shenstone. All this while the Brittaines were doing good work in the neighbourhood and in London, but they seem to have done nothing here, except that between 1747 and 1756 Thomas Brittain, son of John, came over repeatedly from Chalton for funerals and the Lord's Supper.

About 1786 Samuel Hatch became pastor, a thorough Calvinist; he drank in something of the old spirit, and named his son Samuel Shenstone Hatch. The next pastor was John Goodrich, from Accrington and Preston. He drew up a church roll on 1st January, 1790, showing twenty-five "real members," besides seven "transient members," of Winslow church; two Shenstons were actually resident. He drew up a new church covenant, in the Lancashire fashion, and caused every member to sign it. The contrast of thirty-two with 240 in the days of Brittain is painful; and the accessions under Goodrich were not many. For the rest of the century only fifteen entries were made in the minutes, and from 1802 to 1815 there is nothing. An aged member remembers that a man baptised in 1802, fell into sin, and was excluded by the others, who were all women; he was restored in 1815. One other man joined, and he too was excluded for attacking the minister's character; with that entry the minutes of this pastorate cease. Meantime the pastor's son, John William Goodrich, born here in 1789, baptised at Leicester by Robert Hall, had been received as a member, called forth to the ministry, trained at Bristol, welcomed back 1814, sent again to Bristol. He helped his father latterly, but about 1822 the father resigned, leaving the church in low water and bad odour.

In 1823 John E. Simmons from the university of Glasgow was invited to the pastorate. He drew up a new covenant and thoroughly re-organised the church. A new "chapel" now replaced the old meeting-house, and the church was fairly launched on a new career.

From the earlier period it would be interesting to follow

the careers of the Shenstons and the Britains, who, of course, intermarried with the Stangers and the Staughtons; John Brittain Shenston recapitulated in his personal doctrinal evolution much what we see here, and in so many of the old orthodox General Baptist churches, a passage over to Calvinism, which was sweetened and redeemed from Antinomianism.

JOHN GIBBS, clergyman at Newport Pagnel, became Baptist, and started Baptist or mixed churches there and at Olney. Bennett ministered at the former, but in 1707 it dissolved and asked advice from Northampton as to a new start, so that Robert Hansel was ordained in 1709. Later ministers were Palmer and John Hewson. At Olney, the Pedobaptists were led off by Morris to a new place, leaving Gibbons to minister to the Baptists at the old place. When Gibbons went to Royston, Olney declined. But in 1738 Drake of Yardley fostered both Royston and Olney, continuing his work for over twenty years. With 1776 Olney at last got on its feet, when John Sutcliff was ordained. Josiah Thompson is the authority for the earlier statements.

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CAMBRIDGE had a chequered early story. From Hussey's church there was a secession in 1721, which divided again two years later. Preparations were made to form a Baptist church, meeting at a house hired in Stone Yard; but the Baptists withdrew and hired Miller's Barn on St. Andrew's Street in April 1726. Two years later they returned to the Yard, where Andrew Harper became minister over a mixed church; he died in 1741. Two years later, the church called from Floore an Aberdeen M.A., George Simpson; he left for Norwich about 1756, and the doors were closed. Salvation came from Anne Dutton of Great Gransden, who told of a young man aged 23, Robert Robinson, recently baptized by Dunkham of Ellingham. He came in 1759, the church soon bought Alderman Adshead's place, and built a new house in 1764, at a cost of 500 guineas. Such was the account gathered by Josiah Thompson.