

Three Hundred Years of Baptist Life in Coventry.

A VERY readable little book with the above title has been written by Miss Irene Morris, so well known to members of the Home Preparation Union, and has been produced by the Kingsgate Press. It is embellished with pictures of the chapels at Jordan Well, 1724, Cow Lane, 1793, St. Michael's, 1858, Gosford Street, 1868, Queen's Road, 1884, Foleshill, 1924, with portraits of Butterworth, Franklin, Henderson, Blomfield, and an anniversary group of 1914. It is well worth the half-crown asked.

Its appearance is timed for the ter-centenary. Eleven years ago we published correspondence from Holland relating to the five churches at Lincoln, Coventry, Salisbury, Tiverton, and London, in 1626. We shall make our contribution partly by re-telling the story at this one city, with the advantage of the local records explored by the author. It is the more timely as one editor of this QUARTERLY has just settled at Coventry.

I.—THE OLD GENERAL BAPTIST CHURCH.

In 1611 Thomas "Helwys published a book setting forth the Baptist programme, dedicating it to Isobel, wife of Sir William Bowes" of Coventry, son of "Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to Russia first, and afterwards to Scotland." In her house, Helwys and Smyth had had an all-night conference with Puritan leaders five years earlier, and from such local ties there evidently arose the Baptist church revealed in the Amsterdam letters.

The correspondence turns on some peculiar views held by the Dutch Mennonites, and shows that the English declined to split hairs on the question whether our Lord derived His body from Mary; that they were ready to give evidence on oath; that they observed the Lord's Supper every week; that they declined to restrict presiding to some one ordained by laying on a bishop's hands; and that they both obeyed the magistrate as God's officer, and were prepared to act as magistrates if appointed, even to using the sword. The messengers who carried the letter replied to oral questions, whereby we learn that not all the five churches had ministers. But no Coventry name is mentioned. The inner history of this Coventry church is unknown. Any

records it may have kept, have perished; we can but weave together allusions from the outside, after this first disclosure.

In 1646 the church enjoyed for a while the help of Hugh Evans and of Jeremy Ives. The former, however, was concerned chiefly with Worcester and Wales, the latter with London. Joseph Davis, who had been apprenticed in Coventry at that time, returned about 1660 and was baptized; but his work was done chiefly round Oxford and in the Minories, London. To him, however, we owe this account of how they spent Sunday: "Upon the weekly day of public worship, I was accustomed with several others to rise early in the morning, and meet together to pray and confer about the things of God, in order to help each other forward in our Christian race. Thus we did, till church worship began. The same improvement of our time we made in the interval after dinner, till the beginning of the afternoon worship; and at the end thereof, we repeated the same exercise, and continued it until seven or eight o'clock."

At the conference of 1651 for Midland General Baptists, the representatives from this district were John Onely and Will Perkins of Easonhall, Richard Wills and Thomas Jeffes of Marston; Coventry itself is not named. This "Leicestershire Association," as it came to be called, met till 1776 at least; but its records have perished, so that we cannot gain information from them. Yet from the records of the General Baptist Assembly, of which it was a constituent, and of sister churches, we do gather a few gleanings, which are what we chiefly rely upon. Thus, in 1709, its elder was Francis Clayton, who signed a letter dismissing William Mitchell to London.

Yet it is from the enquiries of John Evans in 1715 that we learn the church then had two hundred adherents, quite large for that day, and that its leader was Samuel Essex. The Association at this period met chiefly at Leicester, the Assembly at Stony Stratford. William Essex had been reported in 1669 from Long Lawford; Ebenezer Essex was prominent in the district 1754. Local enquiries might tell more of such a family. We do know, from another source that Ebenezer Essex in 1730 married Rebecca Pratt of Netherton, who was dismissed to the church in the West Orchard at Coventry. This is the only hint as to the place where this first church met. Half a century later, the Congregationalists settled here.

In 1726 the two elders were Elde and Samuel Welton, who wrote to the sister church at White's Alley. Welton was joined five years later by Abraham Welton, and the church was prospering so that it opened in Birmingham. Of this off-shoot we know little beyond the name of Elizabeth Blackmore, who was commended from the General Baptist church at Netherton about

this time. So promising was the outlook, that Thomas Davye, a scrivener at Leicester, Messenger in the Midlands, arranged for Samuel Welton to be ordained Messenger with him, evidently to superintend extension to the west; this was done in 1733.

Some eight years later, Coventry was strong enough to spare Samuel Hands to the Park church in Southwark, as its Elder. And in 1747 it again furnished a general superintendent, in William Johnson, Messenger for the West Midlands. As late as 1763 it sent another member to become Elder at Downton in Wiltshire. But that is the last glimpse we have of it. The Association ceased to meet in 1776, and a historian who had seen its books avers that Coventry had not been represented latterly.

There is no doubt of the orthodoxy of this church; the Association had more than once taken a strong stand. But these old General Baptists had slowly lost their zeal for evangelization, and never took any serious steps to train a ministry. These defects were amply supplied in this very neighbourhood by a fervid group.

II.—THE NEW CONNEXION CHURCHES.

From Donington Park, seat of the great Countess of Huntingdon, a revival started in Ratby, Markfield, Normanton, Barton-in-the-beans, which organised a Society in 1745, and became Baptists ten years later. From Exhall an enquirer went, and brought back the flame, so that in 1760 a house at Longford was registered for preaching. Six years later a church was formed at Longford and Hinckley, with 170 members. In 1770 a meeting was held in London when the New Connexion of General Baptists was organized; Longford was represented by William Smith and George Hickling.

We can readily understand that in presence of this vigorous young community, within four miles of Coventry, the ancient General Baptist church of the Old Connexion either died out or melted into it. The two certainly overlapped, but General Baptist life in Coventry itself is not recorded between 1763 and 1820.

In that year the church of Longford, under a minister born at Exhall, opened a place of worship "at the great heath near Coventry." The Warwickshire Conference approved and supported, and the Home Missionary Society, newly reorganised, deliberately called attention to the need of occupying the large towns and cities; £10 was voted for Coventry. In 1822 it was reported that a large room had been opened in the city, and a church of fourteen members was formed and admitted to the New Connexion. By 1825 there were thirty members, with 154 scholars, housed in "a neat, comfortable chapel, measuring forty-

nine feet by thirty-four; and having three heights of school-rooms at one end and a gallery at the other." This was in White Friars Lane; the subsequent history is easy to trace, and Miss Morris gives a picture of the fine chapel erected in 1868, on Gosford Street.

So energetic were the New Connexion people when Coventry was occupied, that a second church was formed at Longford in 1826.

Technical continuity of the old 1626 church with any of these churches cannot be proved. But practically the Longford and Gosford Street churches inherit and maintain the traditions of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who visited the city in 1606.

III.—THE PARTICULAR BAPTISTS, TILL 1856.

During the Civil War, Coventry was a Parliamentary stronghold, to which gravitated all manner of refugees. Among the Baptists were Benjamin Cox from Devon and Hanserd Knollys from London, and when peace was restored, there were Calvinistic Baptists in the city, as well as the older General group. They included the Hobson family, of whom Thomas was important enough to be chosen mayor in 1660, whereby many adventures accrued. Daniel King, of Warwick, dedicated a book to them in 1650, and Manasseh King, of Whittington in 1672, did such good work here that his memory was cherished in 1712. Robert King, Robert Bryan, and Samuel Newby were in 1684 fined for absence from their parish church. But the centre of gravity of these people was not in the city, and they belonged to a widespread group reaching right over to Ramsey, numbering 124. The first building expressly for worship was at Arnesby in 1702. Eight years later the group at Coventry was constituted a separate church, and Evans heard in 1715 that their pastor was Robert Bryan.

The first building appropriated for them was erected in 1723-4, and stood till six years ago in Jordan Well. After approaches to Thomas Moore at Northampton and John Grant at Whitchurch, John Brine was induced to come from Kettering in 1726, when the church was re-organized. He stayed only three years, becoming the hyper-Calvinist champion in London. Fleeting visits from Thomas Stoker and Joseph Harrington caused only scandal, as was too often the case with Antinomians. George Simson spent four years, but went on to Cambridge, Norwich, and Warwick. For fourteen years they struggled on without a pastor; then Daniel Hill, of Walgrave, who had seen Arnesby dwindle under his care for exactly that period, came in 1750. They were strong enough to spare in return Joseph Edmonds, a man of such fine character that three of his grandsons became

pastors at Birmingham, Guilsboro, and Sutton-in-the-elms. Hill passed on within three years to Chalford, where he ended his course.

A new era opened in 1753, when John Butterworth came from Goodshaw in Lancashire, and entered on a pastorate of fifty years. He belonged to a gifted family, and his own descendants won eminence as law-publishers, M.P. for the city, etc. He himself benefited Bible students by a capital concordance, which is undeservedly superseded by Cruden's. In his time the deacon was Sutton Staughton, himself author of a little book, whose son William was one of the half-guinea subscribers to the Baptist Missionary Society at Kettering, and became a famous preacher in America. The church grew under Butterworth to 141, and as it needed a new home, the pastor grubbed up the trees from his beloved orchard, and gave the site for the new Cow Lane meeting, opened in 1793. He was now ageing, and needed helpers; the first experiments were unsuccessful, with James Aston and John Gadsby, but by 1799 a young student appeared from Bristol, Francis Franklin. Within four years Butterworth sang his *Nunc Dimittis*.

Franklin brought changes. A Sunday school was started on the chapel premises with the new century; and Richard Booth sent a guinea to the B.M.S. The church did not yet make regular collections, though Mrs. Franklin's brother was the secretary, her daughter Eliza went to Monghyr, and her son James went to Bristol to prepare. The church had the usual meagre notions of support, and Franklin was passing poor on £40 a year. So his daughters had to open a school, and to one of their pupils we owe the delightful sketch of the minister as Rufus Lyon in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*. After forty-two years' service, he in his turn needed a helper, and John Watts came till Rothesay claimed his whole time in 1849. Another Bristol student, William Rosevear, came next year, succeeded in 1852, and left to found a new church four years later.

The old times had passed. The theology of Brine was not acceptable a century later. A church which sent £20 yearly to foreign missions and gave its pastor only twice as much, evidently had discordant elements in its own bosom. And while Butterworth had brought the fine Lancashire tradition of praising the Lord with stringed instruments, so that there had been good orchestral accompaniments, the austere party succeeded in banishing the double-bass in 1852, so that a bare tuning-fork was used to pitch the note for song.

Tension in the whole denomination had grown severe in the later days of Franklin, churches were disrupting, rival societies were arising. Cow Lane felt the strain, and eased

matters in 1843 by ceasing to require members to sign articles of belief. But the old high Calvinism persisted, and reaction from it could take perilous forms. For example, even as it was presented by the daughters of Franklin, it impressed their most gifted pupil very strangely; the intellectual and moral life of "George Eliot" was at once a product and a rebound from hyper-Calvinism.

There can be no doubt as to the influence of the pastor. As a student he had accompanied Steadman on the Cornish tour which showed that the eyes of the B.M.S. were not on the ends of the earth alone. He had been trained by James Hinton to evangelize the villages round Oxford, and he brought the tradition to Coventry. Church after church in the neighbourhood was planted or watered by him; both villages and the mother-church felt the increase.

IV.—THREE SEPARATE CHURCHES.

Peace was attained by dividing into three groups. Rosevear hived off in 1856, and his adherents soon built St. Michael's on Hay Lane. For ten years it was under other care, but otherwise he was its leader till 1891. From the outset it stood for a combination of culture and earnestness, giving to the city a new conception of Baptist life.

Yet, strange to say, the old stalwarts were not satisfied with this departure from their midst of the latitudinarian Fullerites, as they probably esteemed them. In 1858 they too withdrew to a Rehoboth of their own, now housed on Lower Ford Street. Here doubtless may still be found seventeenth-century customs and doctrine; the church is in the very strictest group supporting the Gospel Standard Societies, and seems seldom to have had a pastor. Yet the thirty-two members do keep a Sunday school with five times as many scholars.

Cow Lane must have shaken itself to find two wings thus flown away. It hesitated to join the Midland Association, though invited; but it did adopt a school fostered by some of its members. This state of indecision came to an end after immigration had brought many members with other traditions; and in 1872 a young man of thirty was called to the pastorate, W. J. Henderson. Six successive pastors, all living, have seen the church utterly transformed, and grown to be the largest and the most liberal in the county. Under its wing the church at Wolston has taken shelter, another has been planted at Foleshill, and at Hearsall another is speedily expected.

The Queen's Road church will probably take the lead in the ter-centenary celebrations. Technically it dates from 1710 only, and its traditions from 1643 at most, while Rehoboth might

repudiate it as in any sense conserving those traditions. But every other church in and near the city has realized a substantial unity of doctrine and aim; all alike support the West Midland Association, the Baptist Missionary Society, and its daughter the Baptist Union. They can echo the words that went overseas from Coventry three hundred years ago: "It becomes all of us who love the same Lord Jesus Christ and His truth, to try for unity in all matters, and to walk with all and with every one, as belonging to the same society."

It is impossible in the limits of this article to give the pleasant details which abound in the book by Miss Morris. For the touches which make the churches live again, and show the piety of humble homes, we heartily commend it to our readers, wishing that more works of the kind should be available, not only for the historian, but for all who want to see the power of the gospel.

Report of the Committee of the Baptist Historical Society, May 1926.

THE Society has continued its work on the familiar lines. Letters of enquiry come from individuals and churches, and in every case it has been possible to give the information desired.

The library which enables this service to be given is still housed by the courtesy of the church at Droitwich; but it has grown to such a size that in the near future the question of accommodation must be considered. Several duplicates have been exchanged during the year with the kindred society in America, so that we have obtained a file of reports of the great Philadelphia Association from 1707. No similar file of any Association in England exists.

We are glad to know that nearly two hundred volumes of great interest, collected by the late R. Foulkes Griffiths, have recently been presented to the Northern Baptist Education Society, and augment the valuable library now treasured at Rawdon College. All owners of denominational documents are urged to follow such an example and lodge their treasures in some denominational institution.

There are ancient repositories which amply repay investigation. At Broadmead several valuable letters have lately been