

“It would be impossible to overrate the importance of Mr. Bowser’s services to the Fund for almost half a century. He was throughout distinguished by his tact, urbanity, zeal and energy, tempered by Christian courtesy. The rapid increase in the operations of the Society and its consequent usefulness, are largely owing to his untiring and self-denying activity.”

The splendour of their service abides: time has not dimmed its lustre.

SEYMOUR J. PRICE.

A Pilgrimage to Bessell’s Green.

IN the seventeenth century a Baptist Meeting was commenced at Bradbourne, by Riverhead, in Kent, and a Mr. Reeve became one of the first ministers, then called elders.

When persecution arose in Charles II. reign, the Sevenoaks magistrates sent constables one Sunday, who arrested the men of the congregation, and carried them to Sevenoaks jail. Next morning, after being admonished by the Bench, they were all dismissed, and hastening back with joy and wonder, found the meeting still going on—the women having kept continuously in ministry and prayer since the previous day’s disturbance.

The cause was soon after moved to Bessell’s Green, about half a mile away; worship was still carried on in private houses until 1716, when the present Old Meeting House was built.

The Arian trend of the eighteenth century caused unrest. Eventually a number of the orthodox members, headed by John Stanger, withdrew and built a new meeting-house, 1770, the present Baptist Chapel by the Green, and when the New Connexion of the General Baptists was inaugurated this second Bessell’s Green Church joined for a time.

One calm July day, 1926, along the pleasant roads and lanes of West Kent, through old villages—Limpsfield, Westerham, Sundridge, Brasted,—once secluded but now accessible, the motor ’bus halted at the hamlet of Bessells Green. Facing or close by the small triangular Common that gives the name, are a few private houses and cottages, two Chapels, an Inn and some recent buildings in progress.

By the corner of the lane to Ide Hill, standing back from the road in a large graveyard, is the old General Baptist Meeting House, now called "The Free Christian Church," "Unitarian," with a dwelling house, "The Old Manse," under the same roof.

The entrance is at the side into a room used as a library, a feature in many of the old General Baptist causes. Out of this is the chapel, quiet and plain, seated for about a hundred people. Sunday services are carried on, and the pulpit supplied by a rota of preachers planned for various places in West Kent.

The Register of Births, &c., 1650 to 1837 (a thick octavo volume now in Somerset House), has several historical notes.

"The Meeting House at Bessell's Green was built in ye parish of Chevening in ye County of Kent 1716. The first Meeting held there ye first Lords day in Dec. 1716 was conducted by Mr. James Richardson and Mr. Nat Foxwell. James Snow came to live at ye Meeting House ye March following.

The clock was put up in ye Meeting house March 26, 1718. The addition to ye dwelling house, two room in a floor, built 1725.

The Meeting house new rept [*sic*] and tiled 1732.

The baptistry made June 1733, and first used July 1733.

The pipes laid in Dec. 23. 1735.

The burying place at Bessell's Green let out Jan. 8. 1738-9.

Mr. Calverley's seat put up Aug. 13. 1746.

A party went off upon their own request Jan. 22. 1747/8. (Probably founders of present Baptist Chapel, Sevenoaks.)

Jan. 1747/8. Meeting at Ash laid down, as no convenient house could be had.

April 1745. Meeting at Tandridge began at Browns.

May 1745. Brother Bly began meetings at his house at Froghold.

The galery built at ye Meeting house Aug. 1749 cost £18 12s.

Thomas Harrison and Sam Bengé ordained July 15 1748.

The evening lectures began Mar. 6 1753/4, to be continued every first and third Wednesday in ye month at 6½ clock.

The new pales and gates put up June 1753.

Fir trees planted, 6 silver firs from Coom bank 1757 and 38 from Squire Polhill Nov. 1758 and 12 more April 1759.

The house new rept north and east, ye rest mended 1761."

"Rept," an old building word, means stripping off, and seems to indicate defective tiles or unsound work.

The list of ministers after John Reeve, 1640, enumerates William Jeffery, born at Penhurst, 1666, and his son John.

Joseph Brown	...	...	...	1690
James Calverley	...	...	...	1706
James Calverley (nephew)	...	...	...	1714
Thomas Harrison	...	...	...	1748
Stephen Colgate (assistant)	...	...	...	1761
Samuel Bengé	...	...	...	1766
John Stanger (assistant)	...	...	...	1766
<i>The Disruption</i>	...	...	...	1769
Edward Merrall	...	...	...	1773-1777
— Steward	...	...	...	18—
M. Harding	...	...	...	1819
John Briggs	...	...	...	1822
John Atkinson Brigg	...	...	...	1851
Edward Hammond	...	...	...	1862
Henry Green	...	...	...	1876
John Joseph Martin	...	...	...	1879
William Edward Millone	...	...	...	1885
Robert Maxwell King	...	...	...	1894

Plate 2 pewter cups—plain.

2 patens, plain.

After the disruption, some of the older beliefs and rites lingered on. Washing of feet, based on a literal view of John xiii. 14, was "performed at Bro. Palmers, Oxted; and Bro. Austin of Bessells Green preached on the occasion," as late as 1785. A later record says, "More liberal theological views further broadened at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the influence of a Protestant French tutor at Earl Stanhopes, Chevening Park, who worshipped at this old Meeting House." This was Jeremiah Joyce, afterwards Unitarian minister at Hampstead, and well known as author of *Joyce's Scientific Dialogues*.

In the graveyard are numerous tombs and headstones, some in family groups recording the generations of those who for over two hundred years worshipped here, walking or driving in many cases from distant villages.

The inscriptions on most of the gravestones, many of which are difficult to decipher, give only names and dates, but here and there an epitaph reveals the experiences, the hopes, or the sorrows of those, now forgotten, who in former days were associated with this sanctuary and helped to maintain a witness for God.

The Sale tomb records the death of Robert Sale of Limpsfield, May 1803, aged 63. He left an endowment to the Turners Hill and Horley General Baptist Church, which after the extinction of that cause was made over to Billingshurst Free Christian Church. His sister also left an endowment to this chapel.

In one corner of the cemetery are graves of the Harrisons of Ightham, six miles distant. Benjamin Harrison, the village grocer of Ightham (1837-1921) is noted for his discoveries of Eoliths and other antiquities.

One headstone is to "Thomas Harrison died 1766, aged 72. Many years a pastor of this church and likewise a Messenger of the Churches of Jesus Christ, which office he faithfully discharged with great prudence and care, and adorned the whole with a truly pious and Christian life."

"Johnson Dobell died 1798 aged 71," was possibly a son of Daniel Dobell of Cranbrook, a Messenger, and friend of the above who writes in 1772 to Gilbert Boyce, "Are you my Dear Brother in the practice of washing feet, agreeable to John 13. Our deceased Brother Harrison was one with me herein, but alas he is gone and for ought I know I am alone as a Messenger on this point."

On the reverse of a large faded headstone to the Cronk family (one died 1840, aged 84), is this inscription:

"What hath God wrought,
Bless O my soul the God of grace."

"In remembrance of the great condescending goodness of our glorious God who about 80 years ago directed and enabled John and Susana Cronk his wife, to fit up a large room for the purpose of preaching the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the town of Sevenoaks, which must be considered the greatest blessing he ever sent into any neighbourhood or among any people."

A pathetic epitaph to John Thorp reads: "After a long series of afflictions he resigned his soul in the hands of his Saviour on the evening of a Lord's Day, thus ending in heaven the Sabbath he commenced on earth."

Another is to Edward Hammond, pastor of the General Baptist Church, died 1867, aged 49. His last words were, "I die in perfect peace realised through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the one living and true God."

One lonely tomb records the death, 1841, of Jane, daughter of Rev. J. Briggs, minister of this chapel. Another is to "John Thorp, died 1835, 42 years a useful member of the New Connexion of General Baptists."

On the south-west side are graves and carved headstones of the Colgate family, generations of whom were prominent in this cause. One was a minister, and his epitaph reads:

"Here lyeth the body of Stephen Colgate, who departed this life 3 day of Jan. 1765, aged 61 years. A worthy Minister

of the Gospel, kind husband, kind and tender father. He filled every station in life well as adorns a Christian."

One is to Daniel Colgate of Orpington, who died 1806, aged 71. Another to "John Colgate, who died June 18, 18—, in his 92nd year, and in the grave adjoining Maria Colgate, sister of the above, who died May 1838, in her 89th year."

I am indebted to Dr. Whitley for calling attention to the association of some of this family with Colgate University, U.S.A. The following note is due to Mr. Jas. C. Colgate, now president of the Board of Trustees :

"The first Colgate of that family who came to this country lived at Shoreham, near Seven Oaks, in Kent. He had a farm known as Philston Farm, and I remember visiting the old place sometime about 1904. He was radical in his views, and was told by his friend, Mr. Pitt, that he headed a list of seven, and it was advisable for him to leave the country as soon as possible. He came to this country, with his family, about 1795, settling near Baltimore, Maryland. He purchased a farm there, but after some time a defect in the title was found and he lost it, and then went to Delhi, N.Y., or near there, where he died.

"His eldest son, William Colgate, who came to this country with him, went to New York City and secured employment there, and in 1806 started the business which is now carried on by Colgate & Co., manufacturers of soaps and perfumes.

"Colgate University was founded in 1819 as a school for the 'education of pious young men for the ministry.' Shortly afterward it became financially embarrassed, and William Colgate was called upon to assist in carrying it on. It was then incorporated as the Madison University. William Colgate was a member of the first Board of Trustees, and continued interested in it until the time of his death in 1857.

"His sons, James B. Colgate and Samuel Colgate, continued the interest which he had shown. In 1890 the name of the institution was changed to Colgate University, in recognition of the assistance and interest given at a time of need by William Colgate. James B. Colgate was president of the Board of Trustees until his death in 1904. His son is now president."

About one hundred yards from the old Meeting House, on land once belonging to it and close to the main road, is the open-air baptistry, dating from 1733, now in the front garden of a modern villa once called Baptistry Cottage. It is a rectangular pool, thirteen feet by six feet six inches, with about three feet of water, and approached by rustic stone steps, the whole beautifully situate in a sylvan glen surrounded by ferns and flowers.

Its position was doubtless chosen to ensure a natural supply of water. "Park Point," the house at the corner of the road adjoining the burial ground, was built in 1824, on a piece of common land granted by court leet. It was used awhile as a minister's residence.

The disruption at Bessell's Green was the local outcome of influences that had long been at work in many of the General Baptist Churches, especially those in Kent and Sussex.

For many years vague speculations on deep doctrinal points had been set forth by some of their teachers. The hearers generally were perplexed or indifferent, and even the General Assembly at London was loath to take any action. The result in some of the southern Churches led to slow decadence and extinction, but at Bessell's Green the coming of John Stanger in 1766, a young man from Northamptonshire, brought about a sudden issue.

Born in 1742, the son of parents who on both sides belonged to families who had maintained Baptist principles since the days of Caroline persecution, he, after an arduous upbringing, was led by a serious conversion and call to enter the ministry at Moulton. The next year he was invited to preach here with the view of becoming assistant minister (or "elder"). He preached five sermons and received a hearty call, moved from his distant home, married and settled in the village, and opened a school to help out his small stipend.

Before long dissatisfaction was shown. His definite teaching, his desire to introduce hymns and open communion, his ability, energy, and success, gave offence to some who were averse to any change from their local methods and rather suspicious of "foreigners." At a special Church meeting, the Messenger (as the old General Baptist Superintendent was called) who presided, asked the reason of the dislike to John Stanger. Mr. Bengé, the senior elder, replied, "He says that all men are sinners before conversion." "Who denies that?" queried the Messenger. "I deny it, for one," replied Mr. Bengé. The outcome was that there arose what the old record truly calls "unseemly strife," even to the extent of a law-suit for ejectment and personal unkindness.

The General Baptist churches in East Kent, concerned at the rupture, sent to both parties letters advising arbitration, but as the parties could not agree as to who should arbitrate, this peaceable effort failed.

Followed by the majority of the congregation, Stanger was impelled to continue in that village. Meetings were held in a private house till "an opulent gentleman in the neighbourhood, who knew their difficulties and felt interested in their success,

kindly offered them at this juncture a piece of ground as the site of a new place of worship," so in 1770 the New Meeting House, the present Baptist Chapel, was built and opened.

It stands in a small graveyard by the south-west corner of the Green, a quaint, old-world building. Through a gabled porch the chapel is entered sideways; a rostrum at the right end and a small gallery on the left. Beyond is a vestry and a large schoolroom.

Over the door, inside, is this inscription :

" This Tablet is erected by the Church and Congregation to perpetuate the memory of the Rev. John Stanger who departed this life on the 13th of April 1823. Aged 80 years.

" He was the founder of this Church, amongst whom and in many of the towns and villages adjacent his ministerial labours were arduous and eminently useful upwards of 54 years.

" He was a profound Divine, a correct Preacher, zealous and affectionate. Through grace he enjoyed the earnest of Heaven. Free grace, the grand subject of Revelation His voice proclaimed to thousands, many of whom are now his joy and crown of rejoicing. He was favoured with the smiles of his beloved Master, and while reposing on His bosom, his soul bade adieu to all that is corruptible.

" Reader! The body of this venerable pastor is confined in the grave, but it shall soon hear a voice irresistible, ' Arise and put on incorruption.' "

Another inscription reads, "buried beneath this floor," and in the graveyard are memorials of some of his descendants.

MINISTERS OF BESSELL'S GREEN BAPTIST CHAPEL.

John Stanger	- - -	from 1770 to 1823.
D. Davies, of Lincoln	- - -	September 1824 to April 1826.
William Broady, of Ashford	- - -	December 1826 to 1837.
William Payne, of Eythorne	- - -	January 1838 to October 1844.
James Stanger	- - -	September 1845 to July 1846.
William Glanville	- - -	1847 to 1856.
George Haigh	- - -	1858 to about 1866.
J. E. Dovey, of Edinburgh	- - -	1867—no entry as to his resignation, but probably about 1869.
William Fredray	- - -	January 1871 to 1876.
James Cattell	- - -	October 1876 to October 1906.
G. H. Harris	- - -	April 1912 to February 1917.

H. J. Eaton - - - April 1918 to November 1918, when he was called Home at an early age, to the great grief of the Church, for he had begun to make his ministry a power for good in the neighbourhood.

Mr. G. A. Eaton (father of the late pastor) from 1919 to 1922, "acted as Pastor and is now one of our most honoured Deacons."

Rev. M. H. Marshall - - 1923—

(List supplied by Mr. Ernest Greenway.)

One tomb in the little graveyard is that of "James Cattell who died 13 November 1907, aged 87; thirty years pastor of this Church." He was a man of ministerial gift and gracious personality. At one time a farmer, he afterwards devoted himself entirely to the ministry and was held in much esteem as an anniversary preacher among the Free Churches of West Kent, where I sometimes met him.

There are other headstones of interest, and some now difficult to decipher. One tomb is to John Epps, died April 1835, who for many years resided at the large house adjoining the Chapel, of which he was a prominent and devoted member. Some notes in the diary of his famous son, Dr. John Epps (1805-1869) refer to him thus:

"My father always retained a love for his native county, Kent; thus it is not surprising that he should fix his habitation there. He chose one of the most delightful parts of that charming district. I consider that the selection he made indicated his great natural taste. To and from Bessell's Green and London—a distance of twenty miles—he used to travel either on horseback or by gig."

"We attended on Sundays the chapel at Bessels Green. The minister there was a man much respected, and, I suppose, for a country place, he was a fair preacher. Such he was considered to be. His views were much the same as my father's, and not such as to be attractive to a child. His style was, to me, heavy and dull in the extreme. No wonder, then, if drowsiness overcame me; older people, I noticed, were not unfrequently affected in a similar manner. I do not know that my father went to sleep during the service; I suppose he did not, as his eyes were always very vigilant over me. I was sure to get a knock or a shake now and then; and often, on our return home, a lecture."

The following clause mentions a Kentish man who became a prominent religious leader :

“ My father was a strong admirer of William Huntington, who used to add to his names the initials S. S., meaning ‘ Sinner Saved.’ When by staying in town he had the opportunity of hearing him, if I also was in town (as during my after apprenticeship was the case), he used to take me with him ; and as I was then old enough to think seriously, and Mr. Huntington’s was not preaching to go to sleep over, my mind ran very much on subjects which I could not possibly understand.”

Another curious episode is mentioned :

“ Our house was at a long distance from the stables, and my father devised a plan for connecting them together without the necessity for going up the lane or round the grounds, as at night might not be pleasant. To establish such communication it was necessary to dig under the burial-ground belonging to the chapel, thus making the burial-ground part of the tunnel which was to be formed. My father set the unemployed villagers to work to make this tunnel from the scullery to the stables. It must have cost him a good sum of money. The result verified the old saying that ‘ One man may lead a horse to water, but twenty cannot make him drink.’ The superstitious fear that the ghosts of those buried above the tunnel might make their appearance to those walking through it, rendered the new pathway perfectly useless. The tunnel became a repository for rubbish. Perhaps in another century, when, by the powerful influence of knowledge superstition will have (it is hoped) disappeared, this tunnel may be made use of somewhat as intended by my father, who being himself free from superstition judged other minds by his own.”

This disused passage still exists under the front part of the graveyard and manse garden.

An elderly man, long attached to the cause, and whose ancestors rest in the little graveyard, gave many interesting particulars from his life-long knowledge of the place which still continues to maintain the holy fire and to show forth the light of truth.

Returning in the afternoon to Godstone, where Dr. Ewing was preaching the anniversary sermon, we realised that the same spirit leads earnest souls to carry the witness into present-day centres of population.

T. R. HOOPER.