

## Bunyan Relics.

Described by the Minister of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford.

**B**UNYAN MEETING HOUSE, the Church of John Bunyan at Bedford, is the third structure associated with the Dreamer's name. On August 20th, 1672, for the sum of £50, Bunyan and a small company of believers secured from Josias Ruffhead, a barn, surrounded by an orchard, in Mill Lane, and the Indenture is still in our possession. The first meeting house, or barn, was succeeded in 1707 by the Old Meeting (with its table pew and gallery), erected during the ministry of the Rev. Ebenezer Chandler to seat 800 people, and in 1849 the present building took its place, the doors on the old-fashioned pews giving the touch of ancient things to our mellow sanctuary.

We enter through the bronze doors, illustrative of the Pilgrim's Progress, the gift of the Duke of Bedford, and unique in Great Britain. The prison door, with heavy iron cross-pieces, meets the eye. It seems a strange place for such a relic! Yet it abides in the wall of the vestibule, this door from the County Gaol (where Bunyan suffered his long imprisonment), at the corner of High and Silver Streets, just across the way from the end of Mill Street, a mute testimony in honour of an early Nonconformist martyr for religious liberty. It is only a few steps from the gaol door of the tinker to the bronze tribute of the Duke, but between them there is a great gulf fixed: fame has bridged the gulf, for the name of Bunyan, Brazier, is second to none in Bedford.

The door of a cell from that same goal has been promised to me for the Church, either on the death of the owner or the establishment of a proper museum. At the end of the vestibule, near the Garden of Remembrance, where Bunyan's sundial—"Days pass like pilgrims"—rests in the centre of the old graveyard, is the memorial tablet of Hannah Bunyan, the great-granddaughter of the justly celebrated Preacher.

Visitors leave the church and vestry for the parlour, where there is a small but fascinating museum of Bunyan relics. In the corner is the vestry chair used by Bunyan, devoid of two ornamental portions at the back, owing to the "souvenir" craze of some vandal: it is a small, plain and squarely-made chair, with a wooden seat, smaller still now, as it had to accommodate a shorter-legged successor. The Ruffhead Indenture adorns the wall above the chair, where a Japanese visitor once knelt by its

side in fervent prayer. One may also read the text of Commissions for a Lord Lieutenant of the County. Documents bearing the signatures of Francis Wingate and Sir John Kelynge—Justices who introduced the preacher to prison—keep fresh the memory of names that otherwise would perish. The old oak, Bunyan's pulpit, a tree which has grown as a natural open-air pulpit, still stands in the field at no great distance from the old bridle-path, and the spot where he was arrested at Lower Samsell, and thence taken to Harlington Manor. The present occupant's son visited our Meeting House recently and I acted as his guide, returning the compliment paid me by his mother at the Manor House, where Bunyan appeared before Wingate. The interior of this House is substantially the same as it appeared in Bunyan's day, and as I took two steps downward into the lovely old room, with its panelled walls and "oaken cross-beams centred by a carved rose boss," the spirits of the prisoner and his judge seemed part of a cloud of witnesses. Times change, and the irony of fate decreed that some of Wingate's descendants should join Bunyan's Church, and mingle their dust with the brave who slept their last sleep in Bunyan's graveyard.

In the opposite corner of the museum to the chair stands the belfry door, bearing its weight of years manfully. This is the very door that guarded the entrance to the belfry of the Elstow Parish Church in Bunyan's day, when he passed to and fro as a bellringer. There is the handle, old and rusty, on which the hands of the Dreamer once lingered! Bunyan's bell in the Elstow belfry tower is still pointed out to pilgrims, and the smaller door in our museum, half-hidden by the larger one for lack of space, once kept the entrance to the spiral stone stairway that leads to the belfry and the top of the tower, where one gains a splendid view of the Moot Hall and the broken Cross on the village green, where the tinker played tip-cat and heard a voice from heaven. So in this parlour room these relics are windows that enable us to look before and after, to see visions and dream dreams.

Recently the Sunday School Union presented to the trustees the old pulpit, with its winding stairway, that Bunyan used, when as a special preacher, he visited the Zoar Street Meeting House, Southwark, the site of which I was able to identify in a rather strange way some months ago. On the museum walls are excellent engravings of that Church—exterior view, and interior views after it had been converted to secular purposes. Would that we knew what appearance Bunyan's barn possessed!

The Zoar Street Meeting House stood not far away from the Church where Spurgeon first set the Thames on fire, not very far away from the site of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Across

the Thames, up the Fleet river, is Snow Hill, Holborn, where Bunyan died on August 31st, 1688, at the Sign of the Star, the house of John Strudwick, the Grocer. The immortal Dreamer's tomb is in Bunhill Fields, London, so that through his death in the Metropolis he belongs to the whole British Empire, for all roads lead to London, and many pilgrimages are made to that sacred soil opposite Wesley's Chapel.

From the little cottage at Elstow, where its old stairway leads abruptly to the upper rooms, we have a well-worn portion of the former threshold, for this solid piece of wood was removed when the cottage was renovated years ago. At the Abbey Church, Elstow, one may see the font where John Bunyan was christened on November 30th, 1628, and the altar rails, communion table, pulpit and sounding board in use when the tinker attended this ancient and lovely house of prayer, where once a great nunnery, dating from the Domesday Book, stood in all its glory.

An old oil painting portrays John Howard, the Prison reformer and philanthropist, then a trustee of Bunyan Meeting, superintending the demolition of Bunyan's pulpit, which he bought for £30, afterwards presenting a new one at the cost of £40 to our church, still in use at our village church at Goldington. The only portion of Bunyan's pulpit I can trace now rests in the pulpit of the Newport Pagnell Congregational Church, suitably inscribed: there is a tradition that an enterprising cabinet maker made portions of it into chairs for admirers of the Preacher!

We also possess a heavy old key, attached to a ring, from the upper room door at the Dallow Farm, Luton, where secret meetings, attended by Bunyan, were held. Park Street Baptist Church, Luton, treasures a chair Bunyan is said to have used. Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Hitchin, has an inlaid chair in its vestry, said to have been presented by Bunyan to the Foster family, who protected him while preaching in the Wainwood, the natural amphitheatre still known as Bunyan's Dell.

We are also glad to have the key of Oliver Cromwell's cash-box, because the Protector's personal decision was in favour of our second minister in a dispute over the tenure of a local church building—now St. John's Parish Church. It is an interesting fact that every one of our Ministers, from John Gifford to John Brown, Bunyan's Biographer, 1650-1903, spent his life in the service of the Church after becoming Minister—an unbroken succession of 253 years!

The relics of greatest interest to our visitors are personal ones, such as his private inlaid cabinet, his nest of drawers, and his handsome staff, a Manilla cane, a walking-stick with an ivory handle, inlaid with malachite, both coming to the Church from Mrs. Bithrey, of Carlton, his great-grand-daughter, and the widow

and family of the Rev. C. Vorley. What thoughts arise as we behold the jug, with its brilliant blue, used by his daughter (so the local story is told) to take comfort to her father in prison! There, too, is his "Will," or rather Deed of Gift, in his own handwriting, dated December 23rd, 1685, leaving everything to his wife: it was only discovered when the house in which he lived in St. Cuthbert's Street, near to his Church, was demolished—a sad loss, for it would have made a splendid museum, and yet the catastrophe led to the discovery of the Will. The sum of inventory at his death was £42 19s. 0d. "equal to about £150 in present value"—and the First Edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* lately discovered, realised at the public auction the bid of £6,800.

In our Church Book we have the account of Bunyan's relations with the Church, and pages of minutes of Church Meetings in his own handwriting. His name appears on an early page of the record, and early on the list of members: we rejoice in a complete list of our Church Members from 1650 to the present hour.

The only other Bunyan handwriting appears in his application for licences to preach in May, 1672, which reposes in the Record Office, Fetter Lane, London, and Foxe's Book of Martyrs—the book he used in prison—with his Autograph, which was purchased from the Town Library during a period of financial difficulty, by Mr. Pierpont Morgan. The warrant for his arrest in 1675, was secured by W. G. Thorpe, Esq., F.G.S. of the Middle Temple.

We hope, as one result of the Tercentenary Celebrations in 1928, to secure a proper Bunyan Museum, where our present valuable relics, books and illustrations of his works may be adequately displayed; and this will induce people to present to the Museum other treasures of which we have been informed. Our library has a Third edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, first edition of the Holy War, and other works, for Bunyan was the author of sixty books, and we have copies that extend from the beginning unto this last, as well as early foreign translations, and excellent sets of illustrations for *Pilgrim's Progress*, that should be framed, for they constitute a study in the art of engraving and illustration from 1679 to 1900.

We are preparing the Church for the Tercentenary, for the Barn has become a Tabernacle, and within easy distance of the present church are the sites of Bunyan's Bedford Home, the County Gaol, where he lingered during twelve long years, and the old stone bridge, which replaced a former bridge on which stood the prison house, where "as I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept, I

dreamed a dream"—a dream that has circled the world, and brought earth nearer to heaven for every pilgrim.

When I first entered this pulpit I thrilled as I thought that near this very spot the tinker, deacon, lay preacher, apostle of religious liberty, had proclaimed the glorious gospel of Christ during the sixteen years of his ministry from 1672-1688. In that barn—"Bunyan's Meeting House," though the founder of the cause was John Gifford, "Evangelist" for Bunyan and for "Christian"—many had seen the vision of the Redeemer, the Babe born in a manger. There was no room in Bethlehem's Inn for Jesus Christ: there was no room in England's State Church at Bedford for John Bunyan, but time tests all things, and now the Preacher's statue adorns the ancient town of Bedford by the river, and it was in a prison on the river bridge that the immortal Dreamer saw his Pilgrim set out on a journey that ended when all the bells of the Celestial City rang for joy.

C. BERNARD COCKETT.

## Postscript by the Editor.

A brazier's anvil is owned by John Beagarie of Hitchin; on three of the six sides of its stem are rudely cut:—J. BVNYAN, HELSTOW, 1647.

Bunyan's name is on three muster-rolls of the parliamentary militia which garrisoned Newport Pagnell: on 30 November, 1644 under Colonel Cockayne; on 22 March, 1645 under Major Boulton; on 17 June, 1647 under Lieutenant-Colonel Charles O'Hara.

The actual pardon under which Bunyan was released in 1672 is to be seen in the Friends' Library on the Euston Road opposite the L.M.S. Station. It is dated 13th of September, 1672.

About the end of April, 1672, an application for 57 licences was put in at Whitehall. They were all for Bunyan's friends, and it is often thought that the application was penned by him. But a very careful student, Professor Lyon Turner, induced Dr. Brown and two experts at the Record Office to agree that though there was a strong general resemblance between the handwriting of the Deed of Gift and that of the application, there was a shade of uncertainty as to their being from the same hand. Professor Turner gives reasons of writing, and of the spelling Bunyon, to conclude that it is not a shade of uncertainty, but a grave question.

Many churches have claimed that Bunyan preached there. Unhappily, as at Bedford itself, the actual buildings do not seem

to survive. In London, Charles Doe heard him "at Mr. More's meeting in a private house"; the church never owned a building, and disbanded in 1709. He also heard him "at a town's end meeting house," to which about 3,000 went, and only half could get in. Conceivably this was at Boar's Head Yard off Petticoat Lane in Whitechapel, where Bunyan actually preached his last sermon. He may possibly have preached at Chester's meeting-house, Zoar, near Gravel Lane in Winchester Park; but this was built only a few months before he died. Its position was made clearly known by Walter Wilson in 1814, and pictures of it were published by Offor in 1863, with pictures of many other relics. We are sure that in 1683 he preached at Pinner's Hall, the sermon entitled, "The Greatness of the Soul." That building in Commonwealth times, had been still known as Glass House, and had sheltered a Baptist church. But it was in 1678 taken by Thomas Hollis on a long lease, and converted to a variety of uses, secular and religious. On Sunday it was used by a church of which he was a member, a church just like Bunyan's consisting of both Baptists and Pedobaptists. The lease expired in 1778, and the building was taken down soon afterwards. Winchester House on Old Broad Street very nearly occupies its site.

The warrant for the arrest in 1675 was offered for sale a few years ago, and the owner allowed photographs to be circulated. If we remember aright, America set the highest value on this relic.

London possesses three modern memorials. Outside the Baptist Church House, facing north-west, is a statue. In Westminster Abbey a window was placed by public subscription, and a Bunyan window can also be seen at Southwark Cathedral.

CHITCOMBE is in the Blackmore Vale, north of Dorset Heights, in Woolland Parish. A Baptist meeting-house was built there in the seventeenth century by Joshua George. In 1771 it received a small endowment, and graves of Applins, Edwards, Jacksons, date from that period. The cause seems to have been very secluded, and it escaped the notice of every Baptist antiquary and of every county official. Worship ceased, and the building is now ripe for pulling down. But the piety of a descendant of the founder has secured the endowment, which will benefit the churches at Buckland Newton and Iwerne Minster, also the pastor at Semley. Information as to the earlier history will be welcome.