

General Baptists in Surrey and Sussex.

I. Lewes-Ditchling.

THE General Baptists in Surrey and Sussex were dotted in numerous hamlets during the seventeenth century. Some gathered into churches with buildings of their own, as at Billingshurst, Chichester, Horsham. Others continued widely scattered, as at Turner's Hill, Horley, Nutfield; a study of this church appeared in the *Quarterly*, volume II, page 324. It is possible to present a sketch of another church of this type, owing very much to Sir William Bull, M.P., who has placed at our disposal a large volume of his family records, which includes a transcript of the church-book, 1737-1803. It has been freely annotated by various students, and in return for further annotations, we have extracted the general story.

The first news of this church, however, is in the returns of the incumbents in 1669 to the bishop of Chichester. At Twineham, in the house of James Wood, Michael Martyn and others unknown ministered to about forty mean people. There was a meeting at Barcombe, served by Thomas Chroucher. Another at Ditchling, besides the Presbyterians under Mr. Lulham. At Balcombe, seven or eight families, tradesmen and labourers. At Westmeston, two hundred used to meet, many of good estate, served by Richard Turner, Thomas Hallett (ex-clergyman), Edward Lullham and John Earle, in a house called Blackbrooke. Another large meeting at Brighthelmstone in the houses of William Beard and Henry Smythe. Lewes seems omitted from the summary.

It is not said by the vicars that all these were Baptists; and it is probable that some were not, originally. But most of them contributed to the wide-spread Baptist church. Of this we have other tokens in a pamphlet printed in 1670, and reprinted by Crosby in his *History*. A meeting estimated by its enemies at 500—for the larger it was, the more money they could get in fines—was held at the house where usually they met, within a mile of Lewes, on Sunday 29th May. The pathetic account of the information, the conviction, and the distrains, gives us a list of the local people:—Walter Bret, grocer in Lewes, Thomas Barnard and Richard Barnard, draper, Richard White, brazier, John Tabret, carrier, Thomas Ridge of the Cliff, draper, John Prior of the Cliff, cheesemonger, Richard Thomas, butcher, Edward Henly, shoemaker, Samuel Cruttenden, haberdasher,

Thomas Elphick, shoemaker, Richard Bennett, tailor, Edward Whisket, victualler, Nicholas Grisbrook, blacksmith, William Humphrey, barber, Benjamin Wood, mason, John Knappe, barber, Henry Owden, carpenter, Thomas Thowl, butcher, Richard Mantle, William Ridge of Ford. The same day there was a meeting at Brighthelmstone, in the house of William Beard, maltster. Another also at Chiltington, in the house of Nicholas Martin, farmer.

Two years later, the king offered to issue licences to approved persons and places. Among those taken locally, we find William Mills, Congregational, for the house of Ninian Tasker at Balcomb; Edward Newton, ex-clergyman, Presbyterian, for the house of widow Swan, in Lewes; Joseph Osbourne, Independent, for the house of John Fryland in Brighthelmstone; the houses of Edward Lulham and Robert Marchant at Ditchling; of Robert Kenwood at Isfield; of Stephen Ridge and John Browne at Westmeston. None of these were described as Baptist.

No one seems to have explored the Quarter Sessions rolls, to see what persons and places were registered in and after 1689.

When James imitated his brother and issued a Declaration of indulgence, Edward Newton immediately fitted up a place for worship in Lewes. By November 1695, some deeds connected with this disclose Walter Brett the grocer, Thomas and Richard Barnard, and others, as adherents. Thomas Barnard was now helping Newton. Apparently he bought property on the south side of the High street, near the West Gate, and converted it into a meeting-house. There was some re-arrangement about 1707, when Barnard and Newton parted company; and more in 1711, when a congregation under John Ollive joined Barnard. Into the story of this Presbyterian group we need not go fully. In 1715, Dr. Evans of London heard not only of that church, but of a Baptist church also in Lewes, with no pastor reported. In fact, the headquarters—in so far as there was any—was not at Lewes but at Ditchling, ten miles west.

In 1704, when after eight years' split, the General Baptists re-united, Nathaniel Webb attended as Elder, with Pannett and [William] Wood as representatives. The Assembly split again in 1709; next year the church sent again, this time to the party which declined making any evangelical declaration. Webb did not come; Thomas Ansell and William Wood did not seem to appreciate the proceedings, and no representatives came again till 1715. Then Webb tried afresh, and was so little profited that six years elapsed before another attendance. In 1721, the Assembly met at Chichester; Henry Wood and Robert Chatfield went. The Assembly commissioned William Wood to accompany

the Messenger, James Richardson, to Ireland, to settle some difficulties, apparently in the church at Dublin.

Their neighbour, Robert Nordon of Warbleton, had been sent even further afield, to Virginia, and was expected back to report; but though there was much interest in the colonial mission, this particular church never referred to it.

By his will of 30th September 1725, William Wood left £5 to the poor of "the Baptist Meeting in and about Ditchling and Lewes." The attorney was Michael Marten.

In 1731 there was a second re-union of Assemblies, when Daniel Brown and Thomas Buckman attended as Elders. Next year Buckman brought a second Nathaniel Webb and William Denman as representatives; the question of building meeting-houses was then raised. In 1733 he brought John Ansell, and they agreed to a careful declaration assuring the Northants Association that very few churches approved singing hymns, and all objected to sign doctrinal articles, preferring the plain words of Scripture. In 1734 Matthew Hunter was the sole representative, and agreed to an exhortation to build meeting-houses; so next year did Buckman and James Broomfield. But shortly afterwards, Buckman died, and the church had to choose new officers.

Meanwhile, the repeated adjurations to build had impressed Robert Chatfield of Street. From the lord of the manor of Camos-court he obtained a copyhold plot at the Twitten, on East End lane in Ditchling, perhaps in 1700; he built a meeting-house upon it and offered the plot as a burial ground. When making his will on 24th February 1734/5, he enjoined his son to make a good title to this for Thomas Buckman, Thomas Wood, Stephen Agate and Michael Marten at Fragbarrow. This was duly done on 30th April 1740, when the rood of ground was enfranchised, conveyed to twelve trustees with absolute discretion as to what charitable uses they and their successors would devote it to: and on 14th June it was enrolled in Chancery. The example fired the members in Lewes, and next year they bought a plot on the south of Eastport Lane; a building was soon erected, and on 30th April 1743, it was conveyed on the same wide trust to apparently the same trustees, namely, Joseph Mercer of Isfield yeoman, Michael Marten of Ditchling yeoman, Stephen Agate of Ditchling turner, John Caffin of Clayton yeoman, Thomas Hunter of Southover weaver, Matthew Hunter of Lewes grocer, Stephen Inden of Southover maltster, John Harman of Lewes pipemaker, John Ansell of Westfrie fellmonger, Benjamin Webb of Patcham yeoman, Michael Marten of Plumpton yeoman, and James Browne of Chailey mercer. The church thus

now possessed two meeting-houses. It also certified the house of Mr. Stephenson in the parish of Marsfield as another place of worship.

On 23rd May 1737, three Elders were ordained, Buckman being evidently dead: John Dancy, Michael Marten, and Stephen Agate. John Caffin and Daniel Bourn were also appointed Deacons, in addition to Thomas Hunter. It is rather singular that the church seldom sent any Elder to the Assembly; this may be connected with the fact that the Assembly would not allow any church to cast more than two votes; the church usually sent two representatives, with 12s. to pay their expenses, 21s. for the Messengers' Fund, and 10s. for the General Baptist Fund. In 1749 the church asked for a short catechism for children, and the Assembly commissioned three men to draw one up and print it.

There was a general stock-taking in May 1753, when two Messengers came for a visitation. Three more deacons were ordained, by prayer and the laying on of hands of the Messengers; these were Matthias Copper of Tunbridge Wells, nearly at the end of a long career, with Thomas Harrison of Bessels Green, newly promoted. Next day, at Fragborough farm, 145 members assembled, held a love-feast, and observed the rite of feet-washing.

A new Memorandum Book was begun; unfortunately the book previously in use is mislaid; it is said that this began with 1689, which is quite possible. The new book had entered into it the list of members, 167 in all at the time. Not all the residences are given, but the following are named:—Ditchling, Cuckfield, Lewes, Bolney, Balcombe, Brighthelmstone, Falmer, Newick, Cowfold, Henfield, Uckfield, Chailey, Chilmington, Chittingley, Clayton, Crawley, Isfield, Keymer, Rotherfield, Westmeston. It should be remembered that there were other G.B. churches near, Waldron to the east, Turner's Hill and Horsham to the north, Chichester to the west; the group we are studying was mostly within ten miles of Ditchling. Within a fortnight four men from Lewes joined, including a grazier named Aron Lempière. The accessions were constant, some being baptized every year; when the register closed in 1802, after exactly fifty years, 278 had been added. So that the church was distinctly alert in this period. A baptistery was built in 1758.

The minutes rarely show more than one meeting in the year, usually in May, preparatory to the Assembly. It is evident that a close watch was kept over the morals of the members, for there are constant notes of admonition, enquiry, acquittal or suspension, exclusion. As one or two cases were of prominent

members, advice was sought from the Assembly, which replied that public sin must be met with public excommunication.

The church took an annual collection for its ministers, and was liberal to other causes; at Braintree, Earl Shilton; even when a London church had to rebuild in 1754, a house-to-house collection was taken, realizing £9 13s. The representatives that year were bidden ask how much cash there was in the Messengers' Fund; this might either be a hint that accounts ought to be presented, or an offer to contribute, as was done regularly for years. Four guineas were sent in 1757, and the account shows that the third centre now served Homebush, Sidnye, and East-ridge, i.e. Cuckfield and Cowfold. Soon we hear of Chailey also as a regular centre.

Michael Marten senior hardly appears again; it is possible that his work lay in the Lewes district; but there was another in 1743, at Plumpton, also a yeoman; and a third was baptised in 1758, and at once proposed as deacon with three others. Affairs were so flourishing that it was proposed to elect two more Elders that year; but as in a previous case, no action is recorded.

Trouble however was brewing. In 1759 some people wished to join without being baptised, and presently people styled under the Denomination of Methodist were requested to refrain from coming to our communion. Then John Simmonds was disliked as a preacher, and Henry Booker declared it was no true Christian church. The church invoked two Messengers, Samuel Fry of Horsleydown and William Evershed of Horsham; thirty-four people met on 20th October, 1762, and it was agreed that the Elders should plan Simmonds where he was acceptable, that Booker be expelled, and that members who had been adhering to a Methodist ministry were requested to attend the Baptist meetings. On June 1st, 1763, Booker founded a new church, at Wivelsfield, to which many members were peaceably dismissed in the next few years: a surprising thing is that it became extremely Strict and Particular. There arose also in 1778 another of this type at Handcross, which invoked the help of Booker and of Michael Bligh of Sevenoaks; out of this arose Dorman's Land. The links with Battle and Brighthelmstone Particular Baptist churches cannot be detailed here.

Stephen Agate died about 1762, therefore Michael Marten and John Godard were chosen Elders to be colleagues with John Dancy; but there is again no record that they were ever ordained. Meantime John Simmonds gave more trouble, and had to be silenced. He simplified matters by leaving, and joining Booker at the end of 1764. Despite these losses, the

register shows constant accessions by baptism. In the difficult situation, the church invited the Kent and Sussex G.B. Association to meet here in June 1765, hoping to get new Elders; but nothing happened.

Further discontent with old methods is evident in 1767, when the rite of feet-washing was observed by only ninety members, others not being persuaded of the duty. John Dancy performed his last duty this year, and urgent application was made to Michael Marten and John Godard to accept office; the latter was encouraged by a request for the G.B. Fund to send him books, while Philip Dobel (living in the church house) who took the request, was trusted with 10s. to pay over. This became an annual gift. By 1771 it was clear that no Elders were forthcoming, and even Ministers were scarce. Isaac Mott was "desired to officiate occasionally as Elder," but apparently he would not; nor did three others accept a proffered election; at last in 1773 Thomas Agate agreed to officiate in the ministry at Ditchling, though he was not even asked to be Elder.

The situation is the more remarkable as Philip Dobel responded to frequent appeals from South Carolina and went out to Charles Town with the commendation of the Assembly; this church never offered him any post, though it allowed him to live in the church house. All baptisms, laying on of hands, communions, church meetings, were carried on by a Messenger coming. Yet membership was easily maintained, and in 1776 we hear of a meeting-house at Cuckfield. Further efforts for Elders proved useless, even though backed by the Assembly; and for five years no meeting was recorded. Ten people however were baptised in 1778, including Thomas Sadler; three in 1779; ten in 1780; ten in 1782, in which year they did at last have two deacons ordained by prayer and laying on of hands—John Bourne and Thomas Pannett, who with Aaron Lemprière, Thomas Walder and Simeon Buckman made a good staff to attend to all the property and expenses. This indeed needed attention, and new trustees were appointed in 1778 for the Lewes Meeting House; yet more deacons were called for in 1783, and two Elders. The only real acceptance seems to have been John Burgess, as Minister. The Martens lost two or three members, and James Drowley of Lewes came to preach funeral sermons in 1786, 1789; but he left for America in 1793. Another severe loss was the resignation of a deacon from membership, Simeon Buckman, in 1788.

Another new factor appeared in these years. A new Connexion of General Baptists had been formed in 1770, but on ambiguous terms had joined with the Assembly in 1783. Dan

Taylor came on a preaching and begging tour through Chichester, Lewes, Waldron, and on into Kent. But no note of this appears in the Ditchling book.

Charles Lloyd was admitted by baptism and laying on of hands on 31st January 1791. He had been introduced by Toulmin of Taunton, and kept a school. He represented a new type, a cultured minister of Presbyterian training, now practically Unitarian: he published in 1813 anonymously *Particulars of the life of a Dissenting Minister*. He was sent as representative to Assembly, but in 1793 removed to Exeter, so his influence on the church was not long.

The building at Ditchling had to be repaired next year; there never seems to have been difficulty in raising funds, whether for local or general purposes; and a letter to the Assembly in 1794 said the church was ready to pay for ministerial help. Next year it seems that some one had settled, but at Lewes. This was a new departure in two respects, a salaried ministry, and semi-dissolution of the church. In 1797 the first statistical report showed one Elder, four assistant Ministers, two Deacons, and 149 members. At Ditchling henceforth an annual collection was taken for the new Fund to educate young ministers. And in 1799, Thomas Sadler junior, baptised in 1798, was sent to be educated by John Evans of Islington; he settled however at Horsham, so the new policy did not help this particular church. In later days a third Thomas Sadler won wider fame in Unitarian circles: see the D.N.B.

Another crisis arose in 1801, both local and general. Some one applied for membership without baptism; no decision was reported. Then William Vidler, who had wrecked a Particular Baptist church at Battle-Northiam-Brighthelmstone, and had become pastor of a Universalist church in London, asked admission of that church to the Assembly, although it had unbaptised members. The Assembly referred the question to each church, and Ditchling approved. When the vote was taken, a rule was laid down as to voting, with the result that though representatives of about 3,700 members voted against, and 1,200 for, yet as thirteen churches voted for, and five against, it was admitted. The New Connexion at once ended its uneasy fellowship. The Assembly was soon greatly transformed; it shrank to one third of its size, and vainly sought to balance by admitting Unitarians.

The effect on Ditchling was quite as marked. For from Vidler's church there now came Abraham Bennett, and there was at last an Elder. Apparently this gave trouble, for Lewes definitely separated on 22nd May 1803. Its subsequent history

was remarkable; at first Richard Snelgrove was Elder, then Bennett was called in for a year, then John William Morris the biographer and publisher of Fuller, who went on in 1817 to a hyper-Calvinist church. About 1826 the church merged with the old Westgate cause from which it had parted in 1709, both being now quite Unitarian.

Bennett pulled together the western section, which took the title "Ditchling, Cuckfield and Barcomb." Baptisms were frequent, and in 1805 he reported three assistants and 104 members. Ten years later he inaugurated a day-school for boys, and another for girls, next year: these Nonconformist "voluntary schools" have been too often forgotten. Bennett ended in 1818, and five years passed before there was another stable pastorate. Then Gideon Duplock came 1823-30, and the changed order was shown when he accepted a call away to another church: the growth of a professional order of ministers is evident. George Withall was here 1832-37, and in his day the registers were given up to Somerset House; births from 1798, deaths and burials from 1821. After two experiments another pastor was found in Thomas Gilbert, 1841-52.

By this time there was plentiful provision made for worship in the district. To say nothing of the old Independents and the Methodists, or of the Establishment, several Particular Baptist churches had arisen, of which Wivelsfield had been the pioneer. Rotherfield 1774, Lewes 1781, Uckfield Rockhall 1785, Brighton 1786 and 1824 and 1856, Dane Hill 1827, Cuckfield Zion 1845, Balcombe 1858, these had to be reckoned with. Occasional help from cultured men like Hale White, and students from Manchester New College, did not reinvigorate the church. The Cuckfield meeting-house was closed, and for a long time some £153 was held in connection with it. Thomas Carter 1864-67, Edgar Daplyn 1889-92, seem to have been the only pastors.

The trust had always been extremely flexible: it might almost appear that the trustees could turn the property into a Cottage Hospital or Almshouses. What really did happen was, complete estrangement from the Assembly, one of whose Messengers in 1869 hinted at mere rationalism: and as there had long been unbaptised communicants, with a total of only twelve when the last return was made, a frank assumption of the title, Free Christian Church.

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