

Coxe Feary, Founder of Bluntisham.

C OXE FEARY was born in the parish of Bluntisham on May 29th, 1759. At the age of twelve he was taken from the village school and began to work on the farm belonging to his parents, but as he had a thirst for reading, his leisure hours were devoted to his books.

Sherlock On Death; The Whole Duty of Man; Stackhouse's History of the Bible, were among the religious books which the boy eagerly perused. It appears that shortly after attaining his seventeenth birthday, he began to have serious questionings on religious matters. He tells us in his memoirs "that at this time he began to be dissatisfied with the trifling, and, as he thought, irreligious conduct of those who attended the parish church in his village."

This induced him to turn his attention to the Dissenters, in whom he thought he saw more regard for religion than among the people of the Establishment.

There had been since 1657 a few families of the Quakers in Bluntisham, and in 1774 they sold their meeting-house and erected another at Earith.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century there had been three or four families of the Baptist persuasion at Bluntisham, who had occasional preachings at their houses; but made no effort to increase their numbers.

Thus about the year 1776 the whole village, except the few families mentioned above, were strict Church people.

Coxe Feary first went to the Baptists at Needingworth, but "found them High Calvinists, very narrow-minded and illiberal, pronouncing destruction on all who did not believe their creed." The Quakers at Earith he found to be more according to his own views, and occasionally he attended their place of worship, but being a Churchman he could not make up his mind to join them regularly. In this undecided state he continued till 1780 when the Dialogues of James Hervey came into his hands.

Having been much delighted with his *Meditations*, he began to read *Theron and Aspasio*, but was offended with the doctrine of Divine Grace set forth therein, because he found that the merit of good works was wholly discarded. But for the next two years the remembrance of the book was a disturbing factor in his thoughts, and in 1782 he was under "strong conviction" that he must read the book again. So great was the impression

made upon him by this second reading, that he ever afterwards dated his conversion by it, and also, from the time of reading, he began to have a concern for the salvation of his neighbours, speaking with them often of their eternal well-being. Notwithstanding the total change he had undergone in his religious views, and the deplorable state of religion in the Establishment, he continued to worship at the parish church, though the preaching was entirely contrary to his liking, for he could not be reconciled to worshipping regularly with the Dissenters.

In the spring of 1784, being in a book-shop in Huntingdon, he entered into conversation with a Mr. Brock, the clergyman from Stukely, and by him was advised to go to Yelling, where the Rev. Henry Venn was Vicar.

On Easter Sunday he went to Yelling, a distance of twelve miles, and was so uplifted by Venn's preaching, that he forthwith gave up attendance at his own parish church and regularly journeyed to Yelling on Sundays, thus beginning a friendship which continued throughout life.

This "strange conduct" of his excited the curiosity of his neighbours, who "thought him righteous over-much," and often questioned him as to the reason for his actions . . . which gave him opportunity to speak to them of the advantages of Evangelical preaching and of the salvation of their souls.

In the autumn of the same year he purchased *The Life and Sermons of Whitfield*, and the same evening read one of them, entitled, "What think ye of Christ?" to two of his labourers. The next evening, unexpectedly, a number of the poor people of the village came with a Mr. Kent, a gentleman of the village, to hear him read a sermon. He was so embarrassed at the thought of reading before so many people, and also at the idea of being thought a "Methodist preacher," that he refused to comply with their request, but so determined were they, that they threatened to remain in his house until he did read to them, and eventually he read the same sermon to them. One of the poor women begged him to come to her house the next night and read again, and he promised to do so, on condition that she did not let any others know. When he arrived, however, he found the house filled with people, who "with profound attention and deep seriousness received the glad tidings of salvation from the reading of Mr. Whitfield's sermon." He continued thereafter to read to the people in the same cottage throughout that winter, but their numbers increasing, they opened a larger house in the spring of 1875, where they met as opportunity occurred, two, three, and sometimes four evenings a week. Here Coxe Feary for the first time found courage to pray with them, and "They being unaccustomed to any such thing, it produced such a feeling

of affection and surprise, that like the people of Lystra, they would have done sacrifice."

During all these months, he had been attending Venn's church at Yelling, and on acquainting Mr. Venn of what was happening at Bluntisham, was encouraged by him to remain at Bluntisham on Sundays, and to gather the people together and read to them, Venn promising to come over and visit them in the summer.

About this time the Rev. Chas. Simeon of Cambridge came on a visit to Mr. Feary's house, and preached at a service held in the garden at five o'clock in the morning, at which service Elizabeth White was "called under Divine grace." She was one of the first members of the church that was later established, and an aunt of Daniel White, who later was pastor at Cirencester.

The company still increasing, Mr. Kent offered the use of a barn as a meeting-place and the people fitted it up with a few simple furnishings. This idea of a regular meeting-place was a sore trial to Coxe Feary, "as it looked so much like a separation from the Establishment." He approached Simeon with a view to getting an Evangelical Curate for the parish church. Simeon put forward a Mr. Houseman, who agreed to come if the Rector consented; the people agreeing to subscribe for his salary. But the Rev. Jacob Oates was not at all favourably disposed to the Evangelical Revival and refused to consider the proposal.

This refusal caused the people some bewilderment, and realising the impossibility of continuing as they were; "Church-people dissatisfied with the means of Grace provided by the Establishment, and desiring to walk together in the order and fellowship of the Gospel," yet not vitally connected with the church, they applied to Mr. Saunders, minister of the Independent church at Cambridge, for advice as to the principles of Dissent. After long consideration, the advice of Mr. Saunders was followed. On December 28th, 1786, a public meeting was held in the barn, when in the presence of a numerous congregation, "Coxe Feary and twenty-five others, related severally the Lord's dealings with them, and gave themselves to the Lord and to each other, to walk together in fellowship." So was gathered out that band of twenty-six, to form a church destined to great things in the service of the Kingdom of God.

According to the Constitution of the church as drawn up by Coxe Feary, they affirmed belief in: The existence of God; the sufficiency, authenticity, and authority of the Scriptures; the personal distinctions in the Godhead; the doctrine of divine providence; the original perfection of man at creation; man's apostasy in Adam's transgression: the universal depravity of the whole race in consequence; the impossibility of man's

“entreating” himself from this condition; eternal and personal election; particular redemption through the death of Christ; justification, pardon, and eternal life, as the free gift of God; the necessity of the New Birth, together with the final perseverance of such as have experienced that Divine change; the Resurrection of the Body, the Day of Judgement, the final happiness of the Saints and the everlasting punishment of the wicked.

According to the Trust Deed of the first Meeting House built in the following year, they called themselves “A company of Protestant Dissenters from the church of England.” Up to 1791, they were in practice more in line with the present-day Congregational church as regards the ordinance of Baptism; each member on reception was “sprinkled.” But in 1791 a change took place. For some years Coxe Feary had been thinking seriously about the matter of infant baptism, and on many occasions he had spoken with Robert Robinson of Cambridge, a frequent visitor to Bluntisham, concerning his doubts as to New Testament warrant for the practice. Having eventually arrived at the conviction that the baptism of the New Testament was that of BELIEVERS and the mode IMMERSION, he definitely relinquished the sprinkling of infants, and on April 5th, 1791, he with a congregation of 500 people, went to the river Ouse at Over Court. There on the bank he addressed them on the New Testament rite of baptism, and then with twelve others was immersed by Thomas Baron of Cottenham Meeting. So the church passed into a definitely Baptist church.

Mr. Feary remained as pastor of the church until his death in 1822. During his ministry he received into the church 267 persons, the majority of whom received their first religious impressions from his ministry. He not only founded and built up the local church at Bluntisham, but planted causes in other villages, viz., Somersham and Woodhurst; and at his death left a flourishing church and congregation, the latter amounting to 800 people, drawn from the neighbourhood around to an extent of an area of twenty-five miles.

Among his intimate friends he counted Andrew Fuller of Kettering; Robert Hall, who was at Cambridge during the most active part of Mr. Feary's life and was a frequent visitor at Bluntisham; Robert Robinson of Cambridge, who probably influenced Coxe Feary more than any other; Charles Simeon, Henry Venn, and W. Jay of Bath.

He was without doubt a remarkable man. The moral reformation which he effected in his native village and its neighbourhood, is an event to which not many parallel cases can be adduced.

Commencing his work without a single follower; without education, except the slightest rudiments of it; without influence, except what naturally accrued to him as a result of his labours; he produced a most remarkable and permanent change in the greater part of the population around him. Continuing through many discouragements as well as successes, he built up and established a church which has, since his day, played a significant part in the religious life of the county.

A. EDLEY WILLINGS.

JOHN GAMMON OF BOAR'S HEAD YARD. In Bunhill Fields there were two stones, copied by Curll in 1717. "Here lyeth interred the Body of Mr. John Gammon, late Minister of the Gospel. He departed this Life the 8. Day of August, 1699. in the 47. Year of his Age." "This is the Footstone of Mr. John Gammon Minister of the Gospel. Though dead I lye; I speak to you that live: Your heart, your All To Christ be sure to give." This is the pastor of an open-communion church to which Bunyan preached his last sermon in London. Gammon wrote, "Christ a Christian's Life, &c." perhaps in 1680; it was first printed 1691, second edition 1702, 1705, 1707. From the fifth edition, 1738, it was translated into Welsh and published at Pontypool in 1740.

NEHEMIAH COX, M.D., OF PETTY FRANCE. This son of Benjamin, the clergyman, who was once a shoemaker at Cranfield, and was called to the ministry at Bedford on the same day as Bunyan, married Margaret, second daughter of Edmund and Margaret Portman. He died 5 May, 1689, and was buried in their tomb at Bunhill Fields, beneath a stone slab raised on brick. By Sloane MS 656 we learn that he was hon. F.R.C.P., and that "Institutiones Medicae" was dedicated to him by G. Needham. We do not know whether this man was related to Walter Needham, a contemporary doctor, or to the Baptist Needhams of Hitchin.