

## Newport, Isle of Wight.

CAPTAIN BUTT-THOMPSON is doing fine historical service. His essays on William Vidler and the Battle church were in early numbers of our *Transactions*. He has written two books about the early church at Sierra Leone, founded by negroes from the Carolinas and Nova Scotia—a most romantic story. Now that he is in the Isle of Wight, he has compiled the story of early Baptist effort there. While he is gathering fresh material in South Africa, he places at our disposal his results, with leave to edit them.

Thomas Collier, the evangelist of the West Country from 1644 onwards, won converts on the Hampshire and Dorset coasts. From Hurst Castle a family of these, the Angels, crossed and settled in the Isle of Wight, when the plague threatened from Southampton in 1665.

At Newport, Robert Tutchin had been ejected three years earlier from the parish church. He had many friends, and some of these subscribed so that he continued to preach, though the Five Mile Act obliged him to transfer to a house on the outer verge of the Caris Brook hamlet. Among his supporters were Cookes, Clarkes and Hopkins.

Another rivulet of Dissent was Quaker. In 1670 widow Martha Jefferey came to lodge in Newport, and five years later she bought a cottage on Pyle street where she set apart a room for the reverent worship of Jehovah God. When she left the island in 1681, she sold the cottage to Alice Hopkins, and laid hands on Mary Hall as her successor, being moved by God to consider other fields white to harvest. Mary was daughter of Alice, and had married a mason who belonged to the Carisbrooke group. The cottage had cost only £17, and by 1694 was not worth repairing. After many journeys she gathered enough money to pull it down and erect on its site the first meeting-house in the island, opened 1695. Many names on the stones and in the records are of those who belonged to Baptist families, for the relations between early Friends and General Baptists were close, if quarrelsome.

But the Baptists were the first to put themselves on record. John Sims, of Southampton, had created a sensation in 1646 by occupying the parish pulpit. With Peter Rowe he did much evangelising, getting into trouble 1663. In 1669 they were reported as holding regular conventicles at Ryde and Cowes. As a result, when the Declaration of Indulgence came out in

1672, licences were taken by Michael Aldridge and Edward Knight and James Wise, all of West Cowes, to preach in their own homes, and in the house of Mark Wright at Carisbrooke. They all declared themselves "Baptist." Wise had links with Salisbury, and he brought over evangelists thence, including James Horlock. They toured the island and won many converts, culminating with a baptism in the mill-stream at Alverstone one Sunday in August.

The Declaration was cancelled, the licences were revoked, and progress was checked. The Angel family was content to cast in its lot with the Friends for public worship, though Joseph junior and his bride, Mary Thomas, were baptised in the Solent at Ryde by Thomas Collier. Two events precipitated a permanent organization, a public debate, and the return of a Baptist woman.

Baptists at Portsmouth had been known for a long time, and in 1693 when toleration was assured, they built a meeting-house on St. Thomas street. This public advertisement stirred the Presbyterians, and after some skirmishing a public debate was arranged. It was formally sanctioned by the king, who enjoined the authorities to see that peace was preserved. The result was that the governor, the deputy governor, the mayor and other magistrates attended, while a short-hand report was taken by the town-clerk of Southampton and Richard King, a prominent Baptist of the same place. It would seem a pity that this good old style is so little used to-day, for whenever an able debater stands forth, there are always many people persuaded. William Russell, the king's physician, was one of the Baptist champions. One immediate result was that John Angel and his wife Frances and his brother, Joseph senior, were baptised at Portsea.

About the same time there returned an Anne, already a member of a London church. At first she was maid to old Mrs. Cooke, but she soon married John Angel. He was a hatter, living in an Elizabethan house near the Dragon inn on Pyle street. The Cookes were so important that Newport had been described as "near Mr. Cooke's brew-house"; while this Mrs. Jane Cooke had throughout a long widowhood managed also the family businesses of malting and currying. She had won great respect in the town, not only for her ability but for her graciousness. And she, with all her wide family connection, was noted for sturdy nonconformity.

Anne Angel repeated the exploit of Martha Jefferey and Mary Hall. Within four years there was a separation from the group in the Pyle street meeting. The founders of the new society, so said a tradition recorded in 1836, agreed to differ on much that they considered minor points of doctrine, but most,

though not all, were favourable to and practised Believers' Baptism. The Angels, Clarkes and Cookes, who formed three great clans, were all Baptists, and so was Philip Orchard of Brading, as the parish clerk there recorded when refusing Christian burial to his child in 1704.

The date of organisation is named as 1702 on a communion cup given in 1802 to commemorate the centenary. But no minutes are available till 1730. It would seem that like many churches of that period, the Newport members considered themselves members of one widely-spread church; and not only were all members in the Isle in that fellowship, but all belonged to the church whose only meeting-house was in Portsmouth, with members also at Southampton. They did, however, have local officers, John Angel as Elder, Joseph Angel senior and William Cooke, deacons.

About 1712 John Angel was succeeded by Richard Clarke, a baker, who two years later reported an island membership of fifty-five to a General Baptist Conference which the church entertained at Newport. That number was therefore recorded by John Evans next year.

In 1721 the General Baptist Assembly (of the non-subscribing churches) met at Chichester, and John Cooke attended from the island. Five years later, Clarke preached a funeral sermon for Mrs. Sarah Chick, and his MS. is the earliest document preserved by the church. But permanence was assured by following the example of good old Mary Hall, and building.

The garden of the late John Angel on Pyle street afforded a site, and in 1728 the church acquired a definite home of its own. Yet so deeply was graven the memory of the precarious times, that the trust-deed specially provided for the case of toleration being revoked. There was no baptistery, "the open meandering brook flowing into the Medina river" being adequate. John Clarke, the brewer, was soon appointed as secretary and treasurer, and the minutes begin with 1730, as also a roll of members. They included farmers, gardener, wheelwright, button-maker, mealman; they came in from Alverstone, Brading, the Cowes, Wellow and Wootting. They made monthly subscriptions totalling about £130 a year. With such liberality, they felt able at last to make some acknowledgement of the preachers' services, and in 1749 they paid £30 for two years' help by "Isaac Mott, minister." Isaac Mott ten years later was Elder of Chichester, and we cannot be sure whether he came from there to help in some interregnum; for it was most unusual to pay a "minister" or assistant preacher anything beyond expenses.

There certainly was a new departure directly afterwards.

A revival of religion had taken place, and had been marked by a Methodist society arising in Newport, and by Dr. Benson, bishop of Gloucester, confirming seven hundred people in the town. Now at Crediton there was a vigorous Baptist called John Sturch, of an evangelical family long flourishing round Aylesbury, and represented in Southwark. This man in 1737 promoted a meeting-house at Honiton, and was seven years later at Portsmouth. The church now decided that more vigorous measures were needed in the island, and a meeting commissioned Sturch to go and take charge at Newport. For practical purposes it may be said that the great nebulous church now condensed into separate stars, and that the Isle was independent of Portsmouth from 1750 onwards.

John brought his wife Mary, and his daughter Elizabeth, a girl of twelve. The ancestral house of the Angels, in whose garden the meeting-house stood, was repaired and given them for a residence. There was henceforth a regular salary, beginning at £30, and once touching £42 10s. The church drove a hard bargain, only lending the money for his removal expenses, and taking back a guinea a year; though once it had a credit balance of over £100, so successful was his work. It must be remembered that all the traditions of the General Baptists were for gratuitous service, and that previous Elders had been well-to-do tradesmen or brewers.

One of the Angel family was now spared to help Chichester, and Sturch became concerned at the spread of pernicious principles in religion, so that he wrote to Assembly in 1754 apprehending fatal consequences; but it is not clear that any decisive step was taken. We can trace his activity again in practical response to an appeal from South Carolina, for a friend of his was sent out as evangelist from a meeting which he attended in 1757. But he did not attend regularly in London, having his hands full with affairs in the Isle.

Thus he edited the *Isle of Wight General Magazine of Arts and Sciences* from about 1754 to 1760. He visited many places lecturing and preaching. He was a diligent pastor, seeing not only to re-tiling the meeting-house in 1759, but to monthly gifts for aged men and women, and occasional benefactions to old soldiers, etc.

Into the wider life he stepped again in 1769, being at the Assembly which heard of a rupture at Bessels Green; he acquiesced in the advice that the evangelical minister should withdraw. It must have been a shock next year to find that the advice was followed very amply, and that a large number of evangelical churches withdrew from the Assembly. In the emergency, another man was told off to persuade them back,

with the assurance that Sturch would be the preacher in 1771. On that occasion the Assembly was stirred to acknowledge decay and declension of religion, and to ask all the churches to observe a day of fasting and prayer. He allowed something to detain him in 1772, so that in his absence there was a new departure, the admission of a merely personal member; and this man was more learned than evangelical. Sturch did indeed forward a catechism, but when it was reported on, this new man got the Assembly to refuse issuing it, and all that could be secured was a request that Sturch would publish it. So easy for a man with £30 a year! Nor was he put on the committee to enquire into the causes of the decay of Christian piety, and its remedies; its proceedings were very dilatory. So when he did appear again, in 1775, though he was put in the chair, he found very few evangelicals, but Joshua Toulmin preaching the sermon, so much to the taste of the Assembly that it ordered it to be printed—an unpleasant contrast to its treatment of his catechism. Eight years elapsed before he attended again.

Those years were given to hard work in the Isle. A new chapel, in a grove of vines at the end of the High street, was registered on 1 November, 1775. Within, it was comfortably pewed, without it had a façade after the Greek style, and the local newspaper considered it an adornment to the town. The old meeting-house on Pyle street was sold to a Cooke for £35, and the whole cost was paid within thirteen years. Evening services seem to have been started, for candles cost four shillings and sixpence a year from 1778 onwards. There is a mention of heavy snows next year, which swallowed up the roads and stopped the services.

With 1783 he re-visited the Assembly, and found much to sadden him. The London churches were huddled together in one little meeting-house. The only business tried was to arrange a plan of apprenticeship among Baptists. He seems to have grafted on this a general communication urging a closer union. For next year the New Connexion replied to such an overture with a long and explicit letter, both refusing to adopt old-fashioned customs, and refusing emphatically to unite with any who denied the proper atonement of Christ for the sins of men, or justification by faith. Unhappily Sturch did not attend regularly, and the Assembly shuffled in its answer and in its subsequent proceedings. One more attempt he made, in 1787, when the New Connexion was represented by Robert French of Coggeshall and Dan Taylor of London, the latter preaching. But they were too late; a new family had taken the lead, a church was admitted which had no General Baptist affinities, but was Socinian; and the only printing ordered was by a

Socinian. Sturch seems to have given up hope, and though the sister church of Portsmouth did send some friendly advice, he never attended again. He was even courageous enough to abstain from subscribing to funds which were so misused.

The rest of his life he gave to local affairs, and he was so evangelistic that he joined with Bogue, the Calvinist of Gosport, in a tour, preaching round the island at Ryde, Cowes, Newchurch, Wellow, Shanklin and Brading. In April 1793, the *Earl of Oxford* anchored at the Motherbank in the Solent, waiting for a convoy to the East Indies. There landed from it an earnest Particular Baptist from Leicester, one of whose members had come to the Newport church. On 5 May Sturch got William Carey to preach for him both at Newport and in the country, and next day there was a fine spiritual re-union at Mrs. Clarke's house. Carey stayed nearly six weeks in the Isle, and the heart of the aged Elder must have been greatly cheered. A few months later he died, full of years and honour.

Gabriel Watts was the next Elder. Like many men in later days he sought an island ministry because the doctors told him that here he would have a chance to live. He soon won the hearts of the people with his quiet speech, eloquent in the pulpit. But though they raised the stipend to £75 after the fourth year, and though in the last months he was almost wholly freed from duty, his flame flickered out in 1800. In his time Thomas Cooke, of Newport, became much interested in the plan for binding apprentices with the Connection, and received the thanks of the Assembly. Cooke also eagerly supported a committee to train young men for the ministry, appointed in 1794, and obtained other subscribers in Newport. Through this, he made the acquaintance of Job David, under whose influence the Frome church had been verging toward Socinianism. And David came several times to supply in 1800. When, therefore, Watts passed away, David was ready with a novel suggestion which would appeal to Cooke.

There was a lad of eighteen, named Robert Aspland, of splendid abilities. He had been baptised three years before at Devonshire Square, had passed through Bristol College, had won a Ward scholarship and gone to Aberdeen. From the Marischal College he had unhappily been expelled, for unsound views. These views, however, would highly commend him to Job David, and the church was probably unaware that they would fulfil the worst fears of John Sturch. The new departure was taken, of appointing a brilliant young scholar. He settled in 1800.

The ministry began with a blaze of prosperity. The M.P. and his wife joined the congregation, which overflowed at every service. A school was started, meeting twice a week, and funds

poured in for every new project. The great Dr. Joshua Toulmin, of the Taunton church, came to preach at the ordination, and the church found a ten-guinea fee. William Hughes, the late Presbyterian minister of Leather-lane in Holborn, came to the Isle, and cast in his lot here, with his wife.

And thus the danger that John Sturch had viewed afar off, and had intermittently combated at the Assembly, attacked his own church in full force. Toulmin was little better than an Arian. Hughes had preached his church empty with the same views, and now in 1801 Newport was the place where the Southern Unitarian Association was formed, with the adhesion even of the vicar of Carisbrooke. Two other ambiguous Baptists had won literary fame, William Vidler for his *Universalist's Miscellany*, and his new *Universal Theological Magazine*, Thomas Twining, of Trowbridge, for his pamphlets on baptism. The church bought these freely, and there was a whirl of discussion.

All sorts of points were involved, and Thomas Cooke, who in 1802 succeeded John Clarke as secretary-treasurer, made many minutes on them. It was he who wrote down the family tradition that the church was of mixed membership at the first, not wholly Baptist. If that were acted on, it would clearly be swamped. Two years later there was a counter note that it belonged to the General Baptists. But in the intervening year, the Assembly had transformed itself: it had admitted a church by a majority vote, whereas previously unanimity had been required. This church was under Vidler, a Universalist and a Unitarian; therefore all the evangelicals remaining quitted at once. And it was at this moment Newport re-asserted itself General Baptist.

Again, David, Toulmin, Vidler, Twining, were all pastors of churches which had been Particular Baptist. Aspland had been brought up in the hyper-Calvinist church of Soham, and had been in a Calvinist atmosphere all his life. Evidently the term "General Baptist" had greatly changed its content. It had come to mean in practice, Unitarians of Baptist origin, unless it was qualified as "General Baptists of the New Connexion."

These few years that saw the Assembly transformed, and Unitarians boldly avowing themselves nationally, saw the Baptist situation in the Isle equally transformed. The church roll shows members resigning every month, or names being struck off for non-attendance. The storm-centre shifted in 1805, when Aspland went to the "Old Gravel Pit" meeting in Hackney, once Presbyterian, now Unitarian. But the swell of the storm remained, with the old Baptist church tossing as a helpless hulk. The next minister, Tingcombe, was a nonentity, and in 1815 a formal remonstrance and a great reduction of stipend brought his career

to an end. Aspland then recommended James Lyon "one of our most popular preachers, and a Baptist into the bargain"—a phrase that shows both Aspland and Tingecombe considered themselves Unitarian. Lyon had nearly wrecked the old Baptist church at Hull, then seems to have been at Matthew Henry's church in Chester. He came at once, and next year the remnant in the old place unanimously decided to call the church "General Baptist Unitarian." In 1819 they seem to have abandoned all Baptist fellowship, joining the Unitarian Association of London. With the future of this section, which despite its small numbers preserved the historic continuity, we need not concern ourselves. It closed its baptistery in 1875. Meantime four other sections had taken definite shape, all of them evangelical.

As early as 1747 there were Particular Baptists in the Isle, meeting at one another's houses. Ryland of Warwick heard about 1750 that their pastor was John Mercer of Newport. To this fellowship many of the Generals adhered, and at length the old church recognised the situation, granting them a formal dismissal in 1812, when they styled this church "Node's Hill."

As soon as Aspland began making trouble, some of the Cookes started work at Wellow, and by 1804 they engaged William Read from the mainland. This remains to-day as the senior evangelical church, strengthened in 1834 by uniting with a group at Yarmouth. At what stage it declared itself Particular Baptist, is unknown.

A third group in Newport was headed by a Clarke. They soon incorporated as the "General Baptist Church of Newport; meeting at the Freemasons' Hall," on Town lane, with the countenance of the Rev. M. Brown of Warminster. This was the chance of the New Connexion, which in the disturbance due to the Assembly's proceedings served as a rallying point for all evangelical General Baptists, and had just admitted the church at Downton in Wilts. Nearer at hand, in 1801 John Kingsford, assistant at the old Portsmouth General Baptist church, led out a large party and formed a new church on Clarence street. Thrice in eight years they had to enlarge their building, and they joined the New Connexion in 1805. We might have expected that the same course would have been taken by this island group. But a very different turn was taken.

As far back as 1770, a "minister" or assistant at the Portsea Particular Baptist church named Lester, had lived in Newport. He brought over his pastor, Joseph Horsey, for occasional preaching, though while Sturch flourished there was no attempt to establish a second church. But they had won converts. William Dore, of Newport, had been called to the ministry by the Lyminster Particular Baptist church, and after



going to Bristol had settled at Cirencester. His brother, James, had also settled at Maze Pond in London. Now in 1807 a third member of the family, Thomas, was dismissed from the old General Baptist church, and next year he set up the standard of the Particular Baptist, to which there was a quick rally from all sides.

Great interest was taken in this move by all the neighbouring churches on the coast. Daniel Miall came from Portsea, John Penny and John Shoveller from Portsmouth, Richard Owers from Southampton, William Giles from Lymington, William Mursell from the second church at Lymington, speedily to unite with the first, and Samuel Bulgin of Poole. Such a gathering betokened a most important new departure. On Wednesday, 18 October, 1809, there were services morning and evening in the Town Lane meeting-house, and in the afternoon at the Methodist chapel.

The new church was soon welcomed into the Western Baptist Association, due to Thomas Collier 160 years before. Property was bought on the Carisbrooke road, and the Castlehold chapel built. In 1812 John Shoveller accepted the pastorate, after frequently supplying. Another series of meetings was held, to which came not only Giles, Miall and Owers again, but Russell of Broughton, Saffery of Salisbury, Roberts of Bristol, and Isaiah Birt of Plymouth. Some baptisms had already taken place in the old General Baptist meeting, but with the opening of the new place on 1 September, they began in Castlehold, and it was noteworthy that one of the earliest was an Independent minister, James Payne, destined to do good work at Ipswich and Ashford.

In 1813 Shoveller took part in the formation of the Baptist Union, and the church entertained the Hants and Wilts District Association. The church was thus in the full stream of denominational life, and its story need not be carried further, nor need we trace the expansion to other parts of the Isle.