

A Sussex Lay Preacher seeing Camp Meetings in America.

JOHAN BURGESS, of Ditchling, seven miles north of Brighton, kept a diary of which the volume 1785-1790 is preserved in the family at Lewes. A copy has been made of it for the Right Hon. Sir William Bull, who has supplemented it with letters by Burgess from New York State, 1794-1819. The diary throws a flood of light on the economic conditions of the villagers, and the letters show the bursting into bloom of sympathies repressed at home. But the following study deals with the religious life of the man. For the ecclesiastical background, the article on Lewes-Ditchling may be consulted, volume IV., page 66. For the economic, three paragraphs must suffice.

In 1785, Burgess was thirty-four years old. He had come three years earlier from the General Baptist church at Waldron to Ditchling. At that time there was no Elder, so he was able to rent the house adjoining the Meeting, built in 1730, but afterwards he moved to Hallett's Farm. He was a leather-worker. He often went to flay animals, lambs, sheep, does, horses, and on his shoulders he carried home the skins or hides; though the tanning was not his work, he had a yard where with the help of an older man he would curry and wring out the pelts. The leather was made up chiefly into breeches, for which he had a large sale at prices from 2s. 9d. to 21s. Leather waistcoats, beaver cuffs, were occasionally asked for and supplied. Then he extended to gloves, and was annoyed to find that a licence was necessary to make them, and another to sell them: for this he took a girl as apprentice, paying her sixpence a week, the parish finding half a crown. He took lessons in book-binding, and added that craft. Then he widened to collar and harness making, which required the addition of a shop costing sixpence a week.

Secondary occupations were keeping geese, and selling the wool off his sheepskins. Those who are familiar with the export duties, for he had to get a "let-pass" for his packs at Brighton, and who remember the smuggling described in *Doctor Syn*, will note appreciatively the sympathy expressed with the conviction for murder of a Revenue Officer who had simply been doing his duty. For the poor were pestered with the need of obtaining licences before they could do any work.

Burgess was a man of all trades. He dealt in dogs, pigs, and wood, besides nuts and gingerbread at fair-time; he made ladders, ropes, and whips; he did much rough building from burial vaults and hog-pounds up to his own new shop; he was capable of moving a baptistery from Heathfield to a field at Waldron; he dug graves, made paths, sank a well; he went haying and harvesting. And with this wide experience, he was called in to value and appraise. On these varied errands, he took long journeys, nearly always afoot, though once or twice he borrowed a horse. A map of his walks shows Arundel and Billingshurst to the west, Heathfield to the east, Crawley and East Grinstead to the north, and often to the village of Bright-helmston, not yet exalted by the Regent to become a fashionable Brighton. Here he got prawns at sevenpence the thousand, mackerel at 2½d. each, and a quart of "rigrels" for 2d.; once he had a wash in the sea.

And this busy man was a Lay Preacher. The first year of his diary shows him at work every Sunday. Seventeen days he was at Barcombe, six miles east; fifteen days he was at the "Purchest" meeting, a title that puzzles his editors; ten he was at Heathfield, eighteen miles to the east; six he was at home, preaching next door to his house; four he was at Waldron, sixteen miles eastward. It is a magnificent record for any man. The only acknowledgement he received was his food; and this he never mentions in detail, though on business trips we do hear of occasional banquets on boiled beef, leg of lamb and plum pudding, and on one exceptional Sunday when he heard James Drowley at Lewes, morning and afternoon, with Mr. Barnard at night, he did need sustaining with boiled beef and gooseberry pudding. These rare details suggest rather plainer fare offered to the visiting preacher.

He recorded every text, and it is somewhat curious that while on half the days there is the meagre entry, Work in ye shop, &c., or Work in the yard and shop, &c., yet the Sunday entry gives not only place and Bible reference, but copies the whole of each passage. Only on one occasion does he seem to have preached the sermon a second time. This implies constant study and reading of the Bible, though it is not mentioned directly anywhere. It seems wonderful that a busy lay preacher could prepare two sermons every week; perhaps in his long walks or at his mechanical tasks, the mind was at work all the time on these deeper things.

It is regrettable that no sermon survives in "wrighting." This exercise was always laborious to him, and he was quite independent in his spelling. So very likely he never "whroat" at all, and spoke out of the abundance of the heart. But we

may note his choice of texts. The passage he used twice was on Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God. And generally he dealt with great messages, not the bye-products. See that ye refuse not; Unto you is born this day; I have fought a good fight; He will have all men to be saved; He that shall endure to the end; Godliness has promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come; He beheld the city and wept over it; Fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; such are six weeks' consecutive themes.

Of personal dealing we read nothing; difficult pastoral work was done by the Messengers who visited frequently. There were discipline meetings, at one of which another lay preacher was censured, though he was well-to-do, and though he had already been appointed delegate to the Annual Assembly, which he did attend three days later. Occasional baptisms are recorded, and the annual communion service in January. There were frequent "conferences" at the meeting-house, which seem to include the quarterly meetings of the Kent and Sussex General Baptist Association; at these conferences the intricate plan for supplying was probably arranged.

On a few occasions Burgess was sent to the Assembly, bearing ten shillings for the Book Fund and a guinea for the Assembly Fund. For this service he was allowed a guinea towards his own expenses, and the thrifty man probably made it cover what he would otherwise have earned in the two days of Assembly and the time spent in journeying. For he would borrow a horse and start at three in Tuesday morning, baiting at Godstone and leaving the horse, arriving in London about four in the afternoon, sleeping at the Talbot with many other friends, dining after sermon next day at the coffee-house in Hoxton Square, finishing Assembly business by candle-light, walking out next day to Croydon, getting a lift in a tilted cart to shelter from a storm, sleeping at the Bell in Godstone, walking home thirteen hours on Friday.

The diary shows a wide circle of friends, so that on all his journeys he could count on one place at least for a meal and a pipe; Baptist names occur constantly. There is no trace of any evangelistic meeting; any worship except on Sunday and at funerals is most rare. Occasionally he went to a parish church, once he heard a "Methody from Briton"; when he spent a Sunday there and the Presbyterian meeting was closed, he went to Calvinists in the forenoon (probably the Countess' chapel, but possibly the Particular Baptist meeting) then to church, and after a pot of beer at the Red Cross with a pipe or two, walked home by nine of the clock. Another spare Sunday he went to Lewes and besides the luxury of an evening service at church,

he went to his own meeting twice to hear Mr. Drowley preach. It struck him greatly that there was singing in the public service, for never before had he known the General Baptists sing at worship; it had in fact been expressly discouraged, not to say forbidden, by the Assembly of 1689. The novelty did not enchant him at first, for he entered nine months later that he delivered up the key of the Ditchling meeting-house for some people to come to learn to sing psalms and hymns one Sunday. On Wednesday afternoon, 5 November, 1788, he went to preach at the Purchase in memory of Gunpowder Plot; and there was one hymn sung after sermon, the first ever sung there. It is by diaries such as this, that we get these details of the actual worship. Feetwashing is never mentioned. A Sunday School was begun at Ditchling in 1788, to which he subscribed four shillings.

Besides Assembly, there were occasional holidays. Once he went to Friar's Oak to a bull-baiting, and speculated with his dog. He sold it for a guinea in case it was hurt, but as it received no hurt, took it back at the same price; it was adjudged the best. Besides the sport, he got a good dinner, a round of beef boiled, a good piece roasted, a leg of mutton, a ham of pork, plum pudding, plenty of wine and punch all the afternoon. This of course was very exceptional, his usual drink was beer or tea. Once he mentions with shame that he was overcome, having thoughtlessly gone to the Bull without having had any dinner. Long afterwards it comes out in a letter that he was constantly troubled with a wife who was addicted to drinking; this may indeed be one of the reasons why neighbours grew cooler, and why he decided to emigrate.

A lay preacher in such constant work needed to refresh his mind. Of books there is no mention except that once he got two for ninepence; but in 1787 a Friendly Society was formed at Lindfield to meet monthly for the improvement of their minds. At the first conversation, the inquiry was on "The most easy and natural evidences of the existence and attributes of the Supreme Being." This is the only hint in the diary that the preacher was not of the Evangelical school, and that he belonged to the party which was little better than Deist; though anyone who knows the past and present history of the Ditchling church may have wondered at his choice of texts. The earnestness of the group, and their need to conserve time for ordinary work, may be seen in the decision to meet every Monday after the full moon, at four in the morning, and breakfast at eight. Many a minister's fraternal would balk at those hours on a Monday!

There is a gap between the end of the diary in 1790, when he had been ill for weeks, and the first letter from America

in 1794. We may infer that he decided to emigrate after hearing from Drowley. He borrowed £5 and took his boys, Henry and Thomas, leaving John and their mother, whom he never saw again. Several people of this Connexion did go about this time; for the outbreak of the French Revolution made the authorities more strict. While there is barely a syllable on politics in the diary, the letters show plainly the immense relief on getting into a free atmosphere. With the politics and business and finance in the new land, the straits and the joys of pioneering, we have nothing to do here, though materials are most illuminating. But the religious development claims attention.

It may be well to recall that the General Baptists in America had either adopted Calvinistic views, or had, near Rhode Island, shrunk into a little group of Six-Principle people, standing where the Ditchling people had stood in 1660. And the Unitarians, with whom he might have found some kinship, were of Independent descent, with their stronghold even further off, in Massachusetts. The result seems to be that he found no congenial home, and no one who wanted to hear him preach. The contrast with Pepys is remarkable. That official's letters show a man of much ability and integrity; it was the decipherment of his diary which showed him more human, and wrecked his character. But the diary of Burgess, for his private eyes, leaves a very good impression; which the letters modify most seriously. This shall be illustrated by extracts, in which the spelling and punctuation are modernised. He wrote from Sparta, or Mount Pleasant, in Westminster County, forty miles up the Hudson, where he worked for an old Sussex friend.

"In this country we have no Licence to pay, nor Duty of any kind; we can buy a hide, we can dress it as we please, without consulting the divil or any of his imps about it. [To his son, 1794.]

"I could entertain [old friends] with tobacco at about five-pence per pound, and good rum for about fifteenpence per bottle, good juice cider for a penny per quart, &c; and in addition to all this we could converse upon what subject we pleased, political moral or religious, without any person to suspect us, or have any power or right to control us. Oh! I would not exchange this natural right, the great service of human happiness, no, not for all the riches in Ditchling. . . . New York is a large place, several times as large as Brighton. . . . I shall look for many of you early in the spring, but don't let me persuade you, judge for yourselves; if you prefer slavery to liberty, stop where you can have it by wholesale."

[To Thomas Hallett of Ditchling, a friend to liberty, truth, justice and the rights of man, 1794.]

“ It seems as though it was designed it should be that I should meet with many of the things called natural evils; but I am so well reconciled to them as to consider them not as real evils but only as links in the great chain of causes and events. For most certainly it is an undeniable self-evident proposition that there cannot be an effect without a cause as such. It is doubtful to me whether there is so much real evil, either natural or moral, as many imagine; for we must think—that is to say, I think—that God Almighty, the great and benevolent parent of all nature must be the primary cause of all effects that take place. And to justify His moral character, we must I think conclude that all will end in the general good and happiness of His creatures.— But am afraid you will think I am wasting paper and time that might be better employed. Suppose you have heard I am very deaf? . . . I seldom go to Meeting on that account; though before I was so deaf I could seldom hear anything like Rational preaching. So that I spend my leisure time in reading, can improve my understanding, gain more pleasure by this means than any other way in this country where there is so much Orthodoxy. In England I had much pleasure in having such men as Mr. Evershed, Mr. Rowland, Mr. Dendy, Mr. Edwards my father-in-law; but more particularly Mr. Lloyd, a man of the very first abilities, had in my opinion the most Rational and most consistent scheme of any man I ever heard, as well as practical. I am [glad] that Mr. Thos. Sadler is a good preacher, that he has got a good education and preaches at Horsham; should be very happy to see and hear him in this New World, for if he is Rational he is just what we stand in need of. In the city of New York there are a great number of preachers of all denominations, many I have heard of different denominations; men of great education, men of the first-rate abilities, particularly Doctor [Samuel] Miller a Presbyterian preacher but as high in sentiment as old Doctor Gill. There is a Mr. Michel, an Irish gentleman, very good preacher; and a Mr. Palmer of the same church, an English gentleman; I always go to hear them when I am in York, and am much pleased—though I was much troubled to hear the last time there [he] is what is called, the Universalist—but not the worse for that in my opinion. They are men of the strictest moral character, the only two gentlemen that I know of that refuses to take any pay for preaching; most others have large salaries. I am very well acquainted with Mr. Palmer, he is a very benevolent good dispositioned man, pleasing in conversation. Since I came to Sparta we had an Englishman that came from Hull in Yorkshire that would sometimes preach to us at Sparta, but he declined on account of bodily infirmity and is since dead. [? James Lyon]. I think he was the nearest.

in my estimation to Mr. Lloyd of any man I ever heard for matter [but he] was a very poor speaker; he spoke sentences very correct, and a most admirable chain of reasoning, free from Orthodoxy.

“We have a meeting for the most part about once in two weeks at Sparta, supplied by itinerant preachers called Methodists, the followers of Mr. Westly. There are a great many of them in this country, have a few good preachers, but in general have no other qualification [than] to make a long face and a great noise. They have commenced a very singular method of making converts. They hold meetings about once or twice a year, in a very large wood well adapted to the purpose to accommodate so numerous a concourse of people, and they call them Camp Meetings. They generally hold their meetings for four or five days and nights, very little intermission night or day. Their camp is formed in the following manner. They make choice of wood, as near as may be to the public road, and as clear as may be from underwood or brush. What there is of this kind is cut up and cleared off the ground so as to leave a large row of single trees, which make it very pleasant and agreeable in very hot weather. The ground mostly a little sloping. Fix their stand for the preacher at the lower side, make a large circle with ropes from tree to tree to keep the principal part of the congregation from the waggons coaches and horses. Planks laid to sit on, a little raised by timber laid on the ground. The stand for the preacher is about fourteen feet long, three high, and about the same width; a board to sit on, and one raised in front, a large cloth overhead to keep off the sun and rain. Two or three constables hired to attend to keep the peace, mostly one or two justices of the peace in the daytime, so that there is no noise or disturbance of any kind suffered by those that may be so disposed. I have been at three of those great meetings, and was eyewitness to many things what occurred, that I could not have given credit to many things I saw except it had been well-attested, and suppose you be under the same difficulty. They pitch their tents, many of them are very large, all round the camp. Behind the tents are placed the tilted waggons with their horses turned out to pasture or feeding in the wood, hay, etc. The encampment consisted of fifty regular tents, some very large, fifty-six tilted waggons, upwards of one hundred other carriages, vast numbers of small tents; between twenty and thirty Preachers besides other Exhorters as they call them, and a congregation from two to five or six thousand people on the different days. I was there part of two days; it began on Monday and if I remember right ended on Friday afternoon; I was there at the end. Praying, singing, etc., was continued

night and day with short intermissions. They carried their provisions and beds, etc., made tea and coffee in the camp, suppose a hundred small fires at one time to heat water; and waggon-loads of cider brought for sale, and bread and other provisions the same as you have seen at the races. [These] things was kept at a distance so there was no disturbance [in the] camp. Public preaching at the stand was notified by the [blast] of a trumpet. There was a good speakers, men seemingly [de]dicated, but all the others I paid but little attention to. The manner of their speaking had a most surprising effect on the [pers]ons of weak minds, that numbers fell to the ground as [dead] in different parts of the camp [surrou]ded by numbers on their knees praying over them, all speaking [togeth]er. The 'slain of the Lord,' as they called them, began to recover, crying out as if they were in the agony of death, calling on Jesus Christ to send down his sanctifying power, so that there was such a confused scene as I never before witnessed. While they was 'under conviction,' as they called it, their bodies were agitated by the same passions, and they all seemed to express in the same natural gesticulations all the time in a state of ecstasy, having lost the whole art of reason, crying, lifting up their heads and hands, calling out for mercy. After they began to recover they would sing songs of praise to Jesus for his sanctifying grace. These scenes happened every day, and in several groups at the same time round the camp. Sometimes eight or ten will drop down flat on their faces as dead all at a time, while others would be crying and praying as you would think them insane. This happened more generally upon young women. These scenes of ecstasy—Enthusiasm as I call it—so inspired the people that there was such shouts of joy among them as I never before saw, all being fully persuaded it was the operations of the Spirit of God."

[To William Kensett of East Grinstead; 1807.]

"I am nearly of the same opinion [in 1815] respecting political matter as I was when in England; but in respect to my religious opinions I have seen much reason to alter my mind. I am of the same opinion respecting the Unity of God as I ever was, for I think the doctrine of the Trinity one of the greatest corruptions in the Christian Church. The doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ I have entirely given up; for I think he, Jesus of Nazareth, was the son of Joseph and Mary, a man in every respect like other men, but chosen of God as His messenger to declare to men the will of God. He was so highly favoured of God that God gave unto him the Spirit without measure, and Jesus Christ was always obedient to the will of his heavenly Father, and that for his great merit and moral

worth God was pleased to crown him with glory and honour, and give him a name above every name, etc., etc. I formerly believed in the doctrine of endless misery, but I find that has no foundation in scripture nor reason or justice; so I have given that up. The doctrine of original sin, of atonement, of personal election, and reprobation, are to me doctrines absurd in the extreme I am very glad to hear that the doctrine of the Unity of God prevails so much. I wish it could be planted here, for we hear nothing but rank Calvinism, except the Methodist. I very seldom go to meeting now I am so deaf; and when I could hear, I did not believe one half what I heard; so I enjoy myself much better in reading, and I have the use of a very large library belonging to a gentleman who came from London long since I came. He has got the greatest part of Doctor Priestley's works, Doctor Lindsey, Doctor Disney, and Doctor Hartley's, and many more of the same eminent characters. . . . I often think of you and your mother, and should be glad if it was possible we could all get to live together in love and unity the short time we have to stay in this world; it cannot be expected that I should live long either to rejoice or complain was I so disposed. [To his son John].

[Last letter, received 23 May, 1819, by William Kensett of Slaugham.]

"You tell me that your brother Henry has joined the Wesleyan connection, and that the old Baptist meeting-house is become a Methodist chapel, and Mr. Sanders preached till he had but few to hear; and you seem to think it was owing to 'getting low in principle on the merits of Christ' as you express yourself, and that it seemed to be a growing evil among the [Old General] Baptist preaching in England even before I came away. . . . I am truly sorry that you should feel so concerned about my reading such books as doth not meet your approbation. . . . I am really grieved to think you are so illiteral as to pronounce Doctor Priestly and all others 'of the same cast' as you call them, as false teachers denying the Lord that bought them; this is very harsh indeed, and I hope it was an incidental movement of your pen. . . . Will not a Locke, a Newton, a [David] Hartley, a [Joshua] Toulmin, a [John] Jebb, a [Newcomb] Cappe, a [Theophilus] Lindsey, Hopton Haynes, etc., etc., are these better teachers than Priestly, think ye? When I have done with these, perhaps may take to Watts, Hervey, Doddridge and Dan Taylor, etc., etc. But now I venture to look into the New Testament called an Improved Version [edited by Thomas Belsham, 1808] and so I often do in the older versions; I have eight different versions of the New Testament by me, all have their uses. The greatest pleasure I have in the world is in

consulting my leather coat companion, for I do not go to meeting as I did before, I was so hard to hear, and besides I do not know a Rational Christian preacher within a hundred miles. [They] in general mistake and preach up the corruption of Christianity instead of the plain doctrine of [the] gospel of Christ. You say a great number of meeting-houses are shut up and the people all dwindle away on account of the preacher being what you call 'low in sentiment'; if this was the cause how came Cuckfield shut up? for John Dancy I suppose could have supplied if called, for I suppose him high enough to cause the people to flock together like doves to the window. You say Mr. Sadler preaches at Horsham . . . tell him that I have heard that the celebrated Dan Taylor is become an advocate for the doctrine of Universal Restoration; if this be true, I hope he is become a Unitarian also; I much want to know if be a fact. . . . I am strongly inclined to hear what progress Christianity makes, what changes take place in the Christian churches. I hear Mr. Bennet is gone to Poole, but who takes his place I know not. Mr. and Mrs. Agate's respects to you; are all well. From your old friend and well wisher, John Burgess."

So we lose sight of the poor old man. Still working for his living at anything he can get to do, keeping a horse and cart and jobbing about. Only one room or two to live in, cooking his own victuals, making his own bed as he had done for years, writing heterogeneous epistles with a bad pen that cannot be mended as he had lost his knife, and begging to be excused as he never was taught to whright. But no longer called to preach, and without any thought of preaching the little he still held, unasked.