

Sutton in Ashfield.

THREE miles from Mansfield, and thirteen from Nottingham, is a flourishing town, for whose traffic the Midland and the Great Northern and the Great Central used to compete; but two of these are now merged. The 15,000 people are well catered for by religious organisations; besides the Church of England, with a parish church of the fourteenth century, there are Methodists, both Wesleyan and Primitive, with an ancient Congregational church. But what interests us is the existence of three Baptist churches. To trace their story gives a picture of varied denominational life.

In one sense, all three churches look up to Abraham Booth as their spiritual father. Two of them owe their very origin to his labours in the town; the third reveres him deeply as a leading exponent of the principles they uphold to-day. We may distinguish the three churches by the titles, General, Particular, Strict, titles which they themselves have borne.

Abraham Booth has the honour of being described in the Dictionary of National Biography. He was born four miles west of Sutton in 1734, but spent 1768-1806 as pastor of the important church in London which was the very first Particular Baptist church known, a church then meeting at Little Prescott Street, later on at Commercial Street, and now at Walthamstow. He was a leading figure in London Baptist circles, well known at the Board, in connection with the Baptist Missionary Society, the Home Missionary Society, the Baptist Education Society, now merged with "Regent's Park" college. His name is enough to interest anyone in the town that saw his early work.

His earliest religious connection was with the Barton Preachers who began their work when he was eleven years old. Converted by them and their friends, he was baptized, became one of the preaching band, and was placed at the head of a group who worked in and around Kirkby Woodhouse, where a meeting-house was given them in 1755. His own work was largely at Sutton, where he was a schoolmaster. He gathered followers deeply attached to him, and invoked the Dissenting Deputies to maintain their rights. Soon after 1763 his views changed on the question of Calvinism, which was then being keenly debated between Wesley and Whitefield. This led to an amicable severance from his colleagues, and for awhile he was silent. But when he had, like Paul in Arabia, thought out his new ideas, he began again to preach. This time he registered

Bore's Hall as a place of worship, and there delivered some masterly sermons, which he repeated also at Nottingham, and then printed under the title, *The Reign of Grace*. Of this volume very few copies are known, but its effect was great, so that it was revised and enlarged in many editions. The original led directly to his being called to London, where he was ordained in 1769. Nor is it known that he ever revisited or communicated with the two groups of people to whom he had ministered. The earlier of these is represented to-day by the church at Victoria Street, the later by the church on Mansfield Road. Their stories may now be unfolded.

I. THE GENERAL BAPTIST CHURCH.

The earlier group ranked at first as members of the church at Kirkby Woodhouse. The whole wide-spread community due to the Barton Preachers joined with some far older evangelical churches in 1770, and organised the New Connection of General Baptists. To this the Kirkby church adhered in 1773; it was rejuvenated in 1787 by T. Truman from Nottingham, and vigorous work was begun again under G. Hardstaff in Sutton, as well as in three other villages. A meeting-house was erected here in 1803, and within eight years they felt strong enough to hive off from Kirkby, with E. Allen as their own pastor in 1812. By 1819 they were recognized in the Connection as a separate church, and under Joseph Burrows they had to enlarge their meeting-house in 1824. This house faced south on to Wood street, in sight of another meeting-house, of which we shall hear presently.

A few years later the Baptist Union widened its constitution to admit all evangelical Baptist ministers and churches, and this band at Sutton was one of the first General Baptist churches to enter the wider fellowship, which it did in 1836. That same year S. Fox became its minister, an office which he held till 1844. The church seems to have flourished steadily, and needed larger premises still. These were built on the same plot, but now faced west on to Victoria Street. And despite this enlargement, the church again and again had to hire the chapel opposite. When, in 1891 the New Connection ceased to hold its annual family gatherings, this church entered the new East Midland Association. In that fellowship it seems to have no insignificant place; a members' roll of 168 speaks well for its brotherliness, and a school of 312 finds weekly work for 33 teachers.

II. THE PARTICULAR BAPTIST CHURCH.

Far more complex is the story of the Calvinists who represent the second phase of Booth's activity. For example, the

church he then gathered has had four different places of worship. He left them at Bore's Hall. They soon found a second leader, Edward Briggs, of Stanton, and bought land from John Walstone in 1770 on a lane named after him. When Booth was admitted to the Baptist Board in London, that Board of Particular Baptist Ministers recommended the building case to London generosity. By January 1773 the meeting-house seems to have been erected, and into it was transported what a later age was accustomed to call Booth's pulpit. Cambridge long gazed with admiration on Robert Hall's pulpit, but generations arose which knew not Abraham nor Robert, and suffered these relics to pass away.

Briggs was evidently a man of some enterprise and vision. The little band of Calvinists was surrounded on all hands by the churches of the New Connection, founded as such in the very year he took charge. He therefore made friends both far and near. Afar off he descried the Particular Baptist Fund, and succeeded in obtaining very practical expression of its sympathy which was extended for scores of years. Near at hand was a church on Friar Lane at Nottingham, and with this he established friendly relations. Now from 1764 there had been an Association known as the Northants. Association of Particular Baptist Churches, whose guiding spirit was Robert Hall of Arnsby. This Association had originated the plan of sending an annual letter of teaching to all its constituents, and was attracting new churches steadily; Nottingham had joined in 1768, along with St. Albans, while Leicester followed next year. The Sutton church threw in its lot with this strong group in 1771, and may have been amused to find another Sutton, this time Sutton-in-the-Elms, of Leicestershire, following suit 1772. From this Association also, help was sought to defray the cost of the meeting-house on Walstone Lane, the first for Baptists in a town where hitherto the Independents alone had a building of their own. And Briggs started a register of births which noted six of recent date, and thereafter was kept up with some regularity, till all such registers were in 1837 taken into safe custody at Somerset House. Another instance of his methodical ways is a minute-book whose earliest entry is of his own call on 2 April 1770 signed by thirty members. For seven years he guided the little flock, and then resigned, though he long supplied in the county.

Joshua Burton became pastor on 25 October 1785, dismissed from Bramley in Yorkshire. That year Hall of Arnsby preached a great sermon to the Association, on "Cast ye up the Highway." This he was asked to publish: he did better, he enlarged it at leisure, and in 1781 issued "Help to Zion's Travellers." In this he taught that every soul could and should heed the gospel. Many friends at Sutton took a keen interest, which extended even

to the Independents. Burton and their minister subscribed for copies, as did seven other men, John Whitehead taking half-a-dozen; and Booth in London supported it also. This book was one of many signs that the Northants. Association was becoming a power in the land. New men were coming to the front in its ranks, such as John Sutcliff at Olney, John Collett Ryland at Northampton, Andrew Fuller at Kettering. There were calls to prayer, consideration of duties, re-examination of the Bible. We may well expect that when the Association met at Nottingham in 1784, not only Burton but other members would trudge the thirteen miles and get inspiration from the meetings. Three years later, a young shoe-maker was ordained pastor at Moulton, and perhaps among the twenty ministers who laid hands on William Carey, Burton was to be found. He certainly was in close touch by 1789, when in the little meeting at Nottingham Carey urged that we must Expect great things from God, Attempt great things for God. Next year Burton left for Foxton, and so came near to Kettering, where in 1792 he had the joy of promising half a guinea as a founder of the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen. The interest he showed affected his former church, and when accounts were published, we note subscriptions from Sutton.

Meantime Charles Briggs, who had already supplied once or twice at Nottingham, became pastor, but was soon succeeded by Robert Holmes, who began on 22 May, 1796; sixteen were added to the church that year. Five years later, the church had a windfall. The old Sherwood Forest, so dear to Robin Hood, was being enclosed, and as the church was copyholder on Walstone Lane, it became entitled to a share of the common land. And so out on the Forest Side it acquired a plot, a mile away from its meeting-house.

With 1802, the church called its sixth pastor, one of its own members, a well-to-do man named John Whitehead, who served it for ten years. In his time the General Baptists, of whom we have heard, made their successful attempt to influence the town. It deserves attention that the meeting-house they erected was within 300 yards of the Walstone Lane meeting, and on the same street, though it bore a different name at this point. The existence of these two Baptist places in sight of one another is an important fact to be borne in mind henceforward.

Whitehead was succeeded in 1815 by Joshua Burton, son of the third pastor; but he died at the end of 1817. The church dispensed awhile with a pastor, and it devoted its spare money to support the B.M.S. steadily. This period however saw this church at best standing still, while the General Baptist church along the street forged quickly ahead.

A fresh development took place in 1826, when a young man was called, who had been trained for the ministry in a Particular Baptist College. As they were in steady touch with the Particular Baptist Fund in London, which was supporting the Stepney Academy, this was looked to for help. Clement Nott was ordained on 14 November, 1826, in the presence of Particular Baptist ministers visiting from Sheffield and Nottingham, the Independent minister from Mansfield, and the popular G.B. minister along the street. His thirty years' pastorate was full of interest.

He began with a sort of Domesday Book, taking thorough stock of the position, drawing up a covenant and rules, and overhauling the deeds. Realising that a new population was settling on the lands enclosed from the Forest, he saw his opportunity to minister to them. It was soon decided to build a second chapel on the allotment owned by the church, and by 1832 the church rejoiced in what became known as Eastfield Side. True it was on a back lane, on a cramped triangular site; but there it was in a rising population. A second school was gathered there, and the two places were worked as one community. The building was soon paid for, with help from the P.B. Building Fund, and enlargement became common talk. The British School Society could promise nothing, so they arranged an internal loan, and got a grant from the Sunday School Union, with which new rooms were added.

Nott resigned in 1856, and there was another full consideration of the position. The famous Northants. Association had in 1834 arranged for all the P.B. churches in Notts. and Derby to form a new Association, so that the area covered was less, though the churches in fellowship were more; Clement Nott had been attending regularly. In 1857 the Baptist Union, which had been founded in Whitehead's time, held a series of meetings in Nottingham, and gave the opportunity of a wider fellowship.

But no pastor was called, and energy dwindled. First the Eastfield Side chapel was let to the Independents for two years, then the school at Walstone Lane was allowed to die, then it was arranged to have afternoon service at the old place, evening at the new. Nine years elapsed before the church realized that another pastor was a necessity.

S. C. Smalley came in 1865, from Nottingham, and again there was a general re-conditioning. Within a year it was clear that Eastfield Side was now the chief place, with morning and evening services, all baptisms, and a new musical instrument. A spirit of friendliness was shown in that while the General Baptists were repairing their chapel, they were welcomed to worship at Walstone Lane, and were even allowed to baptize

there. New deeds were drawn up for both places. But this halcyon time passed all too soon, for in 1868 Smalley resigned. And years elapsed before they had another pastor of the same kind, years that saw fresh developments.

The Notts. and Derby P.B. Association developed a very fatherly care of all its churches; it saw to their deeds, it would aid churches in any trouble, would provide them with supplies. And this church came to lean very heavily on the Association with its Secretary in Nottingham. Of itself it could do little, and had not even the means to use its two sets of premises. The older chapel it really never used again, unless on special occasions. The General Baptists offered to take it over, but preference was given to a new group, of which we shall hear separately, and it was let to George Corral in 1869. Attention was concentrated on Eastfield Side, which was reconstructed and insured, while more land was bought there. This was financed by issuing shares bearing interest, an expedient that much misled people who had not known of the remarkable transaction. Then the schoolroom was let to the British School Society in the day, and the Good Templars at night. The church was now passing rich with three rents coming in, an endowment from Abraham Booth's brother, a loan from the P.B. Building Fund in London, and no minister to pay. Such a position has been the ruin of other churches too.

When one tenant died, the Association stepped in and re-let Walstone Lane to the General Baptists hard by. And it succeeded at last in inducing the church to accept a Mission Pastor, H. B. Murray, in 1884. In his time, the church began to question the wisdom of leaving its property affairs so much to others; it wanted to know what authority the General Baptists had for sub-letting to the Salvation Army; it drove a bargain for its Eastfield Side schools with the School Board and also with a Band of Hope. And when the Army offered to take over Walstone Lane altogether, it turned out that the ancient pulpit of Abraham Booth had disappeared. There were complicated negotiations between the Association, the trustees, the deacons, the church, in the course of which oil was poured abundantly by J. Gyles Williams, the second Mission Pastor, who came out constantly from Nottingham. Should Walstone Lane be sold, and the proceeds invested; should it be turned into cottages? but never, should it be re-opened for preaching.

Matthew Fox ended this period. After supplying for two years, he took the unusual step of offering to be pastor; this being accepted in 1891, a forward policy was soon developed. There was indeed at this time a great shaking. For it was agreed that such friendly relations had been established between Particular Baptists and General Baptists throughout England,

there might be much closer co-operation everywhere. The result locally was that the P.B. Association of Notts. and Derby (to which Lincs. had been added) was now dissolved, as was a Midland G.B. Conference; and a new East Midland Association was formed, in which both the Eastfield Side P.B. church and the Victoria Street G.B. church enrolled themselves. This new Association inherited excellent traditions from its two predecessors, and exercised the same watchful care over the affairs of its component churches.

The Mission-Pastor system had been allowed to lapse, and the church wavered between allowing the Association to plan supplies, and getting students from Nottingham College. One of its leading adherents dropped off, and it was clear that some striking new development was needed.

In 1903 the church joined the Baptist Union. There was a Twentieth-Century Fund, one of whose objects was to erect buildings worthy of the denomination, in good positions, where the population was increasing. Sutton was exactly the place to deal with. The supine church was emboldened to buy a fine site on the main Mansfield Road. Even then, five years elapsed before a foundation stone was laid. It was November 1908 before Principal Marshall came from Manchester college to open Zion. The blunder about Booth's pulpit was not repeated, and every relic from Eastfield Side was transferred, even to the seating, which was used to panel the new schools. That deserted chapel was soon let, and presently sold to the tenant.

The new chapel being open, the church at last plucked up heart to call another pastor, after forty years; and soon Samuel Brown was the regular minister. But with the War, and the new ideas coming with the Sustentation Fund, an attempt was made to group Zion with Victoria Street and Stanton Hill under W. J. Lait. With 1920 this was abandoned, and H. R. Jenkins came as pastor here alone, a manse being provided on Garden Road. During his time, the 150th anniversary was celebrated, and a former member came, again a Principal of Manchester College, to tell of the old days of Abraham Booth, and recall the grain of mustard-seed from which the tree had grown.

III. THE STRICT BAPTIST CHURCH.

When Smalley resigned from the Particular Baptist Church in 1868, there came to light a third group of Baptists of the hyper-Calvinist type championed at Oakham by J. C. Philpot. They had no church of their own nearer than Nottingham, and it was a great gain when George Corrall came to live in Mansfield. He soon became in practice their regular preacher, and when they found the Walstone Lane premises available, they

applied; with 1869 this venerable old place was let to Corrall and his friends. They organized a church, which never exceeded 16 in number, and gathered a congregation that may have risen to fifty. One lad baptised in 1875 has delightful recollections of those days and his initiation into Christian work.

But Corrall died in 1878, and within a few months the church broke up. The Walstone Lane premises were surrendered, and the Strict Baptists were without home or pastor. Some of them resumed attendance at Nottingham.

An evangelist named C. T. Barrett began work in the town, and in 1890 took a lease of Walstone Lane. Presently the experiences of Ephesus were repeated, when Aquila and Priscilla instructed Apollos more thoroughly. James Smith, the convert of 1875, came into contact with Barrett, and won him to the principles of the Strict Baptists. Barrett built out of his family money a new place entitled Providence Hall, and by 1906 there was again a Strict Baptist church, in a building belonging to its pastor, and singing lustily the old hymns of Gadsby.

But when in 1916 Barrett died, it was found advisable to move to the Central Schools. James Smith steered the church through a difficult time, with the help of Stonelake from Nottingham; and the church formally adopted the Articles of the *Gospel Standard*, thus winning friends of wider experience. Three years later, Walstone Lane again was vacant, and the possibility arose of obtaining a home hallowed by Baptist associations. After long negotiations the Strict church in 1929 agreed to take a lease, and it is now worshipping in the very chapel first erected by Baptists in this town.