

Little Wild Street.

THE closing and sale of the chapel on Wild Street suggests that the story of Baptists there be recalled; it will form a background to the article by Mr. Dann.

In 1691 there were high hopes as to progress possible with toleration assured. Six General Baptist churches existed in London: the original church of 1612 worshipped in White's Alley between Coleman and Moorgate Streets; its daughter of 1624 was at Dockhead on the Surrey side; an offshoot from this was in Winchester Park, which has long since been built over, so that Southwark Bridge Road nearly crosses the site of the Baptist premises and grave-yard; John Griffith headed a fourth church in Dunnings Alley, west of Bishopsgate; a fifth took advantage of Goodman's Fields being cut up for building, to acquire a home on Looking-glass Alley; the sixth had been gathered by Francis Smith the bookseller, and met in Glasshouse Alley just west of Goswell Street and south of the Charterhouse.

There were men of vision and of property in this group. They induced the churches to combine for a forward movement, and noting that the West End was devoid of Baptist witness, they searched for premises. These they found on the upper part of Bow Street near Hart Street; and they took a lease of the "Two Golden Balls" from Lewis du Moulin, at £15 yearly; here they planned to hold services on Sunday, and one afternoon a month probably for a business meeting. It is an interesting question how they dealt with the premises on the whole; if there had been three golden balls, we could imagine a flourishing business in fashionable raiment and jewellery. Work began in November 1691, and succeeded so well that on 12 April, 1692, a seventh General Baptist church was constituted, on terms agreed with the five which had been responsible—Dunning's Alley was engrossed with extension in Bucks. Two Elders were appointed; the senior, John Piggott, was to baptize and to visit, to take service in the afternoon and on fast days, for which he was to receive £20; Mark Key was only to take the morning service, and receive £15.

There were two questions agitated in all Baptist churches then:—Was it necessary to lay hands on all people at their baptism, in prayer that they might receive the Holy Spirit, as in apostolic days? Was it wise to sing at worship, and if so, should psalms be sung as in the Church of England, or hymns as by Christ and the apostles? Such trouble developed here, that the new church broke off relations with its five founders, and Mark Key resigned, going to Reading. The church naturally vacated the premises provided by the Association, and built itself a new

home on St. John's Court. It secured a second Elder in Nathanael Foxwell, a butcher. But in the next few years, the doctrinal opinions of Matthew Caffin at Horsham gravely disquieted all the General Baptists. Piggott considered deeply, and at last adopted Calvinistic views; with a large number of the members he quitted the church in 1699. This held on its way for another thirty-nine years, and then disbanded, most of the members joining the mother-church in White's Alley.

Piggott and his followers decided to found a new church, and they were fortunate in finding excellent premises. A Dorset Catholic family, Weld of Lulworth, had a town-house in Holborn, which had been leased to the Spanish embassy. The ambassador had built in 1665 within its grounds a fine chapel for Roman Catholic worship. At the explosion of popular feeling at the end of James' reign, the mob sacked and burned the chapel. William of Orange was anxious to keep on good terms, so ample apology was made to the ambassador, with a guard of honour; and a new chapel was built at the public expense. But he at once vacated the premises. And the chapel was hired by a Huguenot church, "La Piramide," till it went to Newport Market. Piggott, who had in May, 1699, baptized a Benedictine monk, saw his opportunity. In January 1699-1700 he took a lease of this new chapel, which was henceforth approached by a cross-street named Little Weld Street, afterwards corrupted into Little Wild Street.

Piggott had been a schoolmaster, and was in the front rank of Baptist ministers. He threw himself into hard work, and was instrumental in reviving the Particular Baptist Association. The church grew rapidly, and the chapel was equipped with three galleries and a vestry. The pastor was very popular, and his chapel drew many who were not Baptists; Defoe was often to be seen here. When Piggott died in 1713, a volume of his sermons was issued, with a portrait by a fashionable engraver. He had brought Baptists into notice in the West End.

Under his successor, Thomas Harrison, another educated man, the church continued in the front rank, and took part in founding the Particular Baptist Fund. One of the deacons, who had given largely from his stock to ministers in Pennsylvania, was so impressed by his deliverance in the storm of 1703 that he left £40 for an annual sermon to commemorate it. The church did not subscribe towards either of the co-operative baptisteries erected at this time; it seems a fair inference that it had one of its own.

When the pastor conformed to the Church of England, the church looked to Bristol, where one of its former members, Bernard Foskett, was tutor of the Academy. Andrew Gifford,

who had been trained at the fine academy in Tewkesbury also, came in 1730, and carried the church to greater heights, being in touch with Court and Parliament. In political affairs, there was need to maintain the civil rights of Dissenters, and regain those which had been taken away under Charles II; at the formation of the Dissenting Deputies, the church was to the fore, and it proved that one of its deacons provided a test case which he won triumphantly when on his deathbed in 1767. The church flourished financially, buying the freehold in 1735; also spiritually, providing a pastor to Maze Pond.

But a slip of Gifford when a student, years before, became known, and the church was divided on the question whether it could be condoned. He left, with many members, and founded a new church on Eagle Street, north of Holborn. The remainder began a new church-book, and by October 1736 secured another educated man, Joseph Stennett, with experience at Exeter; that he personally observed Saturday as the sabbath was no obstacle. Two of his sons were called to the ministry, besides Caleb Evans; and he himself was awarded a D.D. from St. Andrew's on the recommendation of the Duke of Cumberland, for the church had been actively loyal at the Jacobite rebellion.

His son Samuel Stennett succeeded in 1758, and soon received an Aberdeen degree. From the membership in his days, which was "rather select than numerous," being only about sixty, went Clarke to be pastor at Unicorn Yard, Jenkins to Shrewsbury and Walworth, Hughes to Battersea and the Bible Society, John Thomas the first missionary in India, James Smith to be treasurer of the Particular Baptist Fund for forty-three years; while John Howard the great philanthropist attended so regularly that though strictly a Congregationalist he wrote to Stennett from Smyrna as "my minister." So flourishing was the cause that the building of 1689 was taken down, together with an adjoining house, and a larger chapel was erected in 1788, the finest in London for the denomination, with spacious vaults for interments.

Later pastorates were of less length, but the fine tradition was maintained for a time. Under Coxhead a Sunday-school was started in 1806; Anderson was called to the ministry, and afterwards became tutor at Bristol. Waters, from the daughter church of Battersea, saw the last link with the past snap, when a member, Thomas Laughner, died at the age of 112, old enough to have seen Piggott enter on the former chapel. Edwards of Accrington and Hargreaves of Ogden brought an entirely new style of ministry which lasted for twelve years. In their day the leading man was William Paxon, who filled many offices, becoming the first Honorary Solicitor to the Baptist Union. But

conditions in the neighbourhood had changed, and there was no London Baptist Association at work. When Hargreaves resigned in 1829, the chapel was closed, the church lost heart, and Paxon drew up its epitaph.

Some Londoners were stung with shame, and re-opened the premises after some time. It was hard to find any minister willing to face the problems, but at last Christopher Woollacott came from Westminster. On the stern lines of the conservatives, he kept the flag flying till 1863, and others continued eleven years longer, with a roll under thirty. Woollacott compiled a short account of the church, but did not bring out the existence of three different churches; and even some of his statements of facts are questionable.

Meanwhile the Bloomsbury church had developed work of a new kind, employing a missionary, George Hatton. He found ample scope in the district, but the work was cramped by being scattered in little halls. It was an obvious solution that the fine premises of Samuel Stennett should become the centre of this group of missions; and by 1874 there was again a strong church of 267 members, which steadily increased, and allied itself with the L.B.A.

What was once the West End, was now an area of slums, and radical measures were adopted towards the end of the century. Clearances and rebuilding left the mission-church with fine new premises, now facing on to Wild Street itself, with huge blocks of flats opposite, housing hundreds of respectable families. Once again a new church faced new conditions. It continued, however, to specialize in the work of the St. Giles Christian Mission even at the expense of loosening its ties with the L.B.A. And this latest chapter has now closed.

It will be seen that on this spot there have been four successive chapels; the embassy Catholic chapel; the chapel built at national expense, used successively by Huguenots and Baptists; the chapel built by Stennett's congregation; the chapel built by the London County Council. Besides the General Baptist church in St. John's Court, three Particular Baptist churches have worshipped here; one fashionable, one Strict, one mission.

Starting from Wild Street, a man can "touch the doors" within ten minutes of a crowded day-school, the Methodist Kingsway Hall, the parish church of Holy Trinity, the Roman church of St. Anselm, the Kingsgate Baptist church, a second crowded day-school, the parish church of St. John, an Ethical Society that started as a Baptist church, and the fine building where Harington Evans and Baptist Noel ministered. Honour the men who face their problems, and may they have the wit to deal with the thousands dwelling around them.