

Thurlaston.

ABOUT eight miles south-west of Leicester lies an obscure village named Thurlaston. A century ago it pulsed with activity. Nearly every house contained a stocking-frame. The villagers toiled long hours, and quantities of hosiery were conveyed weekly by carriers' carts to the neighbouring town. Leicester has grown in population and in industrial importance, and has been raised to the dignity of a cathedral city. Thurlaston has lost its industry, declined considerably in population, and is now but a small, struggling agricultural village. It contains a Baptist Church which is now almost unknown in the Baptist world. Once it was a flourishing church, and like other churches in the New Connexion of General Baptists, red-hot with evangelistic zeal. The story of its rise would make a worthy addition to the Acts of the Apostles.

One Saturday in, or about, the year 1784, the Rev. B. Pollard of Quorndon, set out to go to Hinckley to conduct services on the following day. He was accompanied by Thomas Parkinson, a deacon of the Loughborough Church. Slightly deviating from their road, they visited Thurlaston, where Mr. Parkinson's brother, Edward, had come to reside. The latter lamented to his welcome visitors that in leaving Castle Donington he had passed from the light of day to the shades of night, and that he had settled at a place where the Gospel had never been proclaimed within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. Mr. Parkinson thereupon proposed that a service should be held that very evening. The neighbours were quickly informed, and a considerable number met in the house to hear, for the first time, the glorious tidings of redeeming love. Late that night, the two continued their journey, bearing with them an earnest request for further preaching.

The Hinckley Church was a product of the Barton Movement, and assistance was gladly promised. Accordingly, Mr. E. Parkinson certified his house as a meeting-house, and the Rev. William Smith visited Thurlaston as often as he could. The good seed rapidly germinated and came to fruition. In 1786 the first fruits were gathered, when a number were baptised at Hinckley. Congregations grew rapidly, but Mr. Parkinson, who was a farmer, was equal to the opportunity, and the following year he opened a spacious chapel. In reality it was a transformed

barn. He also provided a plot of ground at its rear for burial purposes.

This primitive structure was the scene of mighty works of the Holy Spirit, but the preaching of the Gospel did not proceed unchallenged. There were various attempts at persecution, sometimes of a rather violent nature, and sometimes by means of ridicule. An old church book records as an illustration, the following :

“ At one time on the week evening, while the Rev. Wm. Smith was preaching the Gospel in his usual strain of eloquence, there was one bribed to go and offer him a tankard of ale. The person went and sat for a short time within the chapel with the tankard under his coat, but he had no power to present it to the man of God while he was holding forth the word of life. He crept out again, the sport of his companions.”

Despite hindrances, the preacher continued his labours, and these words of Goldsmith were certainly applicable in his case :

Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway,
And fools who came to scoff, remained to pray.

One such was John Gilbert, “ a great opponent to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Out of curiosity he came to hear what this new doctrine was. While the preacher, the Rev. Wm. Smith, was describing the state of man by nature, he concluded within himself that some person had been telling the preacher all about him. He gave a description of his character to the letter. He felt conscience-smitten. The word was with power. At length he became converted, and in after years was very useful in the cause of Christ. He was one of the founders of the Sabbath School, and the first that established the choir here, and was an Elder in the Church for many years. He frequently preached the gospel in its simplicity.”

The Rev. W. Smith received the Home Call in 1798. His work was ably continued by his successor, Mr. Driver, who became the co-pastor of the Rev. J. Freeston, of Hinckley. The new minister was a man of remarkable spiritual power. His preaching stirred the whole village, and was the means of resuscitating the Parish Church. The same church book quoted above describes the revival thus :

“ Mr. Driver preached a number of sermons in this chapel. When it was announced that he was coming to preach, the chapel was crowded. Many from the Established Church attended. That led the clergyman to enquire into the cause of this great gathering to hear this Mr. Driver. On one occasion he went and stood outside the chapel under the window and heard Mr. Driver preach, and the Spirit applied the word with power. He found

he was a stranger to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. In this state of mind he sought advice from the Rev. Mr. Robinson, of St. Mary's, Leicester, he being an evangelical preacher. At length he became changed in his views, and a Christian, and was honoured in the village both by his own people and Dissenters as a preacher of the Gospel for a number of years. He established prayer meetings with his own people and Dissenters united, that endeared him in the affection of many."

Mr. E. Parkinson, with advancing age, suffered increasingly from asthma. At the age of seventy hemorrhage supervened and "he fell asleep in Jesus, February 2nd, 1802." The Church had, however, no lack of active workers. In addition to John Gilbert already mentioned, Bros. Dudley and Jones might be referred to. Their record is briefly chronicled as follows :

"Samuel Dudley, a person who was vile in the extreme, on his own confession, a ringleader of every vice, became the subject of Divine grace, and was a member in this Church for more than sixty years. He was an Apollos in the Church for many years. He fell asleep in Jesus December 29th, 1856, aged eighty-seven years."

"William Jones was a pillar in this Church, who occasionally preached the word, and was useful for his integrity and adherence to the truth. After a few years he went to Fleckney and was instrumental in establishing the cause of Christ in that village."

In 1803 the Rev. Thomas Yates of Birmingham became an assistant minister at Hinckley, and from that time the care of the Thurlaston Church was entrusted to him. Two years later a baptistery and vestry were constructed, and these rendered needless the seven miles' journey to the mother church. As the church increased in numbers, there was a growing desire for a friendly separation from Hinckley. This was accomplished in January 1814, when the Rev. T. Yates became the pastor of the churches at Thurlaston and Earl Shilton with a membership of sixty-six. The latter church, which dated from the middle of the seventeenth century had fallen upon evil days, and assistance had been given to it by Hinckley since 1808. The union with Thurlaston was not successful, and it resumed its independence five years later. At Thurlaston the church continued to grow, and when, in 1816, the building would no longer contain the congregation, a gallery was erected. At the same time a new vestry was built, the total cost only being £60.

That the church was full of evangelistic zeal is demonstrated by the attempts made to establish the Baptist cause in the neighbouring villages. Preaching was commenced at Enderby in 1818, but the meeting-house fell into the hands of the Indepen-

dents and the work was abandoned, not without the addition of several members, who gladly walked to Thurlaston for worship. In 1819 Huncote received attention and there were many converts. A like success also attended the introduction of preaching at Desford. The chief assistants of Mr. Yates in this work were Bros. Gilbert and Lawson.

The ministry of the Rev. T. Yates was greatly blessed of God, and he remained with the church long enough to see the erection of a new chapel in 1842 at a cost of £250.

The village was hard hit by, and has never recovered from, the cotton famine in the early sixties of the nineteenth century. The church suffered from the migration of families in search of work. To-day it is but a small community assisted by the church at Earl Shilton. Its glory has almost faded into the dimness of the past, yet not quite, for once a year it can still boast of a crowded congregation on the occasion of the School Anniversary, when large numbers from the surrounding parts journey to the Bethel, where they or their grandparents were taught the simple truths of God's love. If that is not enough to awaken visions of past splendours, a visit to Friar Lane, the mother church of Leicester should, for there, among its leaders, may be found the families of Yates, Riley, and Farmer, descendants of Thurlaston stalwarts. If Thurlaston continues to supply the large towns with Christian youths and maidens, it may yet do important service in the Kingdom of God.

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