

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## A Pilgrimage to Drake's Island.

IT is the custom of the Baptist Historical Society at the time of the Annual Assembly of the Union to organise a trip to some memorable scene of our denominational history. Particularly is this so when the Assembly is held in the provinces. With Plymouth as our venue this year we had what was generally recognised to be one of our most interesting and inspiring trips for many years.

A party of nearly a hundred set out from the Guildhall under the leadership of the Rev. G. C. Matthews, the minister of our Church at Saltash, who from time to time stopped the party at places of historical interest to recount to us their particular associations. Our first halt was at the Old Pig Market, the first known site of Baptist worship in Plymouth. We were then shown the remains of Blackfriars monastery, which dates back to 1383. The surviving building is part of the Refectory, and was erected in the first half of the sixteenth century. After the ejection of the Dominicans, the building came into the hands of the Corporation and was used as a debtors' prison. It was of particular interest to us that in 1672 the Independents met there under Nicholas Sherwell, and that later it was occupied by the Huguenots as a place of congregational assembly. We saw also the Prystin House, close by the Parish Church, where Catherine of Aragon stayed when she first landed in England.

Upon reaching the Barbican, Mr. Matthews handed over his leadership to Dr. Whitley. Standing upon the famous *Mayflower* stone, Dr. Whitley recalled to us the story of the Pilgrim Fathers' venture to New England, and traced the influence of Thomas Helwys upon certain of their number.

From thence we embarked upon what was the main part of our trip. This part of our journey we might justly call a pilgrimage. Motor-boats were waiting to take us to Drake's Island. We were early made acquainted of the uniqueness of this privilege. One keen Plymouth citizen, a member of the George Street Church, told me that he had never previously known of permission being granted for such an organised trip to the island. Although through the years he had been familiar with the sight of this upstanding rock in the centre of Plymouth Sound, never before had he been able to get the opportunity

of setting foot upon it. Thanks be, then, to those through whose influence the authorities had been persuaded to grant us this unusual favour. Moreover, our anticipation was keen because Dr. Whitley had already told us something of the wonderful story of Abraham Cheare—and we, in this long after-time, were to be the first party of his fellow-Baptists to visit the scene of his long incarceration and death. Fittingly, it was agreed that Dr. Wilkinson Riddle, the present minister of George Street, with Dr. Whitley and Mr. Seymour J. Price, the Secretary and Vice-President respectively of the Baptist Historical Society, should be the first to set foot on the island.

Upon landing we were told that apart from entrance into any building we had entire freedom to go where we would. We made our way to a green sward upon the summit, where Dr. Whitley told us in greater detail the heroic story of Abraham Cheare (1626-67/8). In the year 1660 Abraham Cheare was sent to gaol for encouraging religious assembly, and after a few months was set free. Two years later Cheare was again imprisoned, this time in Exeter gaol, for the explicit crime of refusing to conform to the Established Church. Later in the same year, after removal to the Plymouth Guildhall, he was banished for life upon the island, then called St. Nicholas' Island. Here he met the vicar and the lecturer at St. Andrew's, ejected in 1662; also another Baptist, once commander-in-chief in Scotland, General Robert Lilburne. Like Bunyan, Cheare passed many of the lonely hours of prison life in writing. Dr. Whitley read to us some of his poems for children. My memory retains one striking line—"The presence of a gracious Lord doth this a palace make." Moreover, he gave himself to the composition of sacred verse, which made him one of the fathers of congregational song.

The climax of our strange gathering came when Dr. Riddle conducted a brief and simple service in commemoration of his heroic predecessor. With the knowledge that this was probably the first occasion after nearly three hundred years that Cheare's fellow-Baptists had been granted opportunity to pay such sacred tribute, these were deeply impressive moments for us all. After reading one or two very fitting extracts from his letters and poetry and the George Street Records, Dr. Riddle called us to a prayer of proud and thankful remembrance. Those of us whose joy it was to be present will not for a long time forget that simple service.

It was perhaps a little disappointing that no relic of Cheare's incarceration appears to be left upon the island. The dungeons, we were informed, had for fifty years or more been without trace of existence, having probably been filled in. Only a few

government erections could claim the casual visitor's particular interest. None the less, we walked about that tiny island (it could be encircled in ten minutes) feeling that it was ground particularly sacred to us, for there had one of our very own died to win the priceless liberty that we now share. Strangely enough, our party on leaving the island left Dr. Riddle behind. But not as a prisoner! While we went on to Saltash, he was returning to Plymouth by another boat.

The boat trip to Saltash brought interests of another kind. The day was beautifully fine, and we were able to view the panorama of Plymouth and Devonport in beautiful sunshine. As we made our way up the river, Brunel's famous bridge came into view, and we disembarked at the foot of it. And so, in reaching Saltash, the seafaring part of our journey came to an end. But there was still more of interest and pleasure awaiting us. The Rev. G. C. Matthews took charge once again, for we were now on the ground of his own pastoral work. The cause at Saltash dates back to the late eighteenth century, being at first linked with the Church at Plymouth Dock. Mr. Matthews showed us the beach where, on the occasion of the first Baptist preaching in Saltash, Isaiah Birt was stoned and narrowly escaped with his life. It was in 1797 that Isaiah Birt, then minister of Plymouth Dock, entreated William Steadman (afterwards the first Principal of Rawdon College) to become his co-pastor, and enforced his plea by stating: "The meeting-house at Saltash was shut up last Lord's Day, and I have no prospect of supply till you come." We were shown the site of that first meeting-house. A little later we passed the tiny cottage of Mary Newman, the first wife of Francis Drake. Slowly we made our way up the old-world street, narrow and very steep, and on finally reaching the present church we congratulated ourselves that Baptist historians can be mountaineers as well as seafarers.

We had heard of the new life that had come to this historic cause through their present ministry, and were happy to be welcomed with so great a warmth of hospitality. Beside each guest's plate was a posy of primroses, a unique token of kindness. Very soon we were made to feel at home. Around the tea-tables, and under the chairmanship of Mr. Seymour J. Price, we held the Historical Society's Annual Meeting. The outstanding item in the Secretary's Report was the announcement of the publication of a volume containing a photographic reproduction of "The Mystery of Iniquity," a plea for religious liberty written by Thomas Helwys in 1612. The volume contains also a facsimile reproduction of Helwys' personal appeal to King James, as a result of which he was committed to Newgate

Gaol, from whence he never came out. It was a matter of general regret that this should be the last report from Dr. Whitley as our Secretary. Professor A. J. D. Farrer, in making a presentation as a very small token of our esteem, recalled that Dr. Whitley had, over a period of twenty-eight years, been the Society's first and only Secretary. Far outspanning any other in his wide and accurate knowledge of our Baptist community, he had unsparingly placed all his resources at the service of the Society. Not only has he guided the Society in its manifold publications of material valuable to Baptist historical research, but he has himself been its greatest contributor. Professor Farrer recalled particularly his series of lectures delivered under the Angus Trustees, and thereafter published as *A History of British Baptists*. Other works, very many, may have been mentioned had it been courteous or opportune to do so. But we all knew that our foremost Baptist historian, great not only in the wide range of his work, but what is equally important, in the keenness and accuracy of his research, was laying down his office. And yet the Society is not losing Dr. Whitley. The meeting confirmed the Committee's recommendation of an arrangement which virtually means that the Secretary and the Vice-President exchange offices. So that Dr. Whitley remains in prominent association with the Society as its Vice-President.

Mr. Seymour J. Price, the new Secretary, warned us of the limitations of a very busy man. It would be superfluous to say more than that the Society is aware that in Mr. Price they have a conscientious servant whose worth they know both from his deep interest in, and contributions to, Baptist historical research, and also from the esteem in which he is held through his wider service of the Churches. It was a deeply satisfactory appointment. Mr. Alan Calder, in presenting his first Report as Treasurer, showed the Society to be in a sound financial position, and appealed for an enlarged membership.

We were privileged to have as our guest the Rev. Walter H. Burgess, B.A., President of the Unitarian Historical Society, who spoke of work done in co-operation with Dr. Whitley, and brought to us the greetings of his Society. Our thanks were accorded to the Church at Saltash for their kindly and ample hospitality, and to their minister for his valuable help in arranging and part leadership of the outing, to which Mr. Matthews himself responded.

And so ended what we all felt to be one of the most memorable Historical Society trips for many years.

F. G. HASTINGS.