

## The Baptist Church at Lyme Regis.

**B**APTISTS appeared in this neighbourhood about 1646, when General Fairfax with his New Model Army crushed the remnant of the Royalist forces from Sherborne to Exeter. That army contained two officers, William Allen and John Vernon, who married sisters named Huish, of Dalwood, near Loughwood. They went to Ireland, and the Baptists there in 1650 wrote urging that Associations be organised throughout the kingdom. This was taken up by the London Churches, especially one that met on Broad Street, in what was then called Glaziers' Hall, better known afterwards as Pinners' Hall. This church contained members from Dorset, such as Sampson Larke, Robert Doyley, Edward Drewett. One result was the gathering of 200 members in the district between Lyme, Axminster, Colyton, Sidbury, Honiton; and another was the formation of a Western Association, which met three or four times every year.

In 1653 there was much discussion as to the organisation of churches here, with ultimately two groups, centering at Dalwood and at Lyme. Each of these churches has an abundance of documents as to Association affairs for the next six or seven years, some of which have been used by Rippon and Ivimey and Fuller. In the earliest book of Lyme, evidently compiled in 1691, scores of foolscap pages are filled with transcripts of these interesting papers. They show that Abraham Podger was the leader, and that about seventy members were in and near Lyme.

Henry Jessey, a Cambridge graduate, once an Episcopal clergyman, toured this country once, with good results. The Association appointed Thomas Collier to be General Superintendent, but it is not certain that he came in person, though his letters and Body of Divinity were very influential.

The return of Charles II. in 1660 ended this period of peace and expansion. At first it was absolute gain here, for the great London church dispersed, and Sampson Larke came to settle at Lyme, where he presently became pastor. Tradition tells that they now met chiefly in a deep, wide dell three miles out, known as White Chapel Cliffs.

In 1672 there was a respite, and Charles offered to license places for worship, and teachers therein. The clerks at the office were very careless, were prone to enter names in wonderful spelling, and were inclined to lump all as Presbyterian. But there is disclosed a large group of dissenters here, Baptist and Congregational and Presbyterian:—

Ames Short and John Short, in the house of Ames	P
John Kerridge, anywhere	P

Peter Jule of Chideockford, in the houses of Thomas Beer and Robert Scott	Baptist
John Brice in the houses of Eleanor Floyer, Whitechurch and of Henry Pitfield	P
Richard Downe in the houses of John Golding, Bridport	C
also of Elizabeth Hallett and John Coutines and of William Sampson at Bothenhampton	C P
John Pinney in his house at Bettiscombe, and that of John Brice in Marshwood	P P
Henry Backaller in the houses of Sarah Kerridge, Wotton Fitzpaine, and of James Ously	P

This liberty was withdrawn, and persecution set in again; Simon Orchard came to the front in 1681. Four years later, the Duke of Monmouth landed here to challenge his uncle James; in the duke's company was young Hewling. Many of the Church marched away with the Duke, led by Pastor Larke. So not only did many fall in battle at Sedgmoor, but others were tried at Dorchester and condemned. On the Cobb at Lyme, Hewling and Larke were executed for treason. Abundant details were printed within a few years, were reprinted by Ivimey, were used by Macaulay.

The church, of course, was terribly diminished, and crippled. When an Assembly was convoked in London for 1689, Orchard went, but there was no pastor. The church formed the habit then of being extremely slow and wary about choosing such an officer, an abstention that repeatedly hindered its progress. However, Orchard continued attendance, for the Assembly became annual, or to state it another way, the Western Association revived; and it encouraged Lyme to regain heart. So in July, 1693, there was a reorganisation, and the Church numbered four men with sixteen women. The meeting places were chiefly Wotton Abbots and Wotton Fitzpaine, till in 1699 they bought a dwelling house in Lyme, on Silver Street. Their baptisms were in the little stream, nicknamed Jordan, at a spot obviously called Jericho, where the habit obtained till 1767.

The advance in 1699 seems due to John Torre coming to the town, from Crewkerne. He was presently chosen Deacon, and the increase was such that the Association advised a new church to be formed at Bridport in 1705. The church asked Torre to become Elder, but he asked to be excused. When the Association urged it, he agreed, and was ordained in 1708 by Whinnell and Murch. Three months later, after long debate, the majority of the Church exercised their liberty to sing after the Lord's Supper, though eleven preferred only to listen. A

report was made in 1715 that the church had eighty-seven members and about 140 hearers.

Soon afterwards, vigour slackened, and no entries were made in the book; when they were resumed in 1727, accounts seem of more interest than anything else. Legacies were made, of cash and of Millgreen House. Torre died in 1734, but the Church was strong enough to entertain the twenty churches of the Association eight years later. The chief man presently was one of their own number, Samuel Burford, aided by John Pinnick from Plymouth, followed by Munn. But the cause needed closer help, and Burford was called to the pastorate in 1749, though he still supported himself. He was called to a leading London church, and was succeeded by Benjamin Messer in 1753. During his ten years, the old dwelling-house was reconditioned. His fame reached to London, and he was called to a church in Westminster. The church arranged with two Pedobaptist ministers to come and repeat their sermons, also held a third service each Sunday for prayer; evidently by this time all services in villages near had ceased.

The Association had passed through danger that affected all the West Country, a danger of weak views as to the person of our Lord; Exeter, Taunton and Trowbridge had been centres where this was acute. Baptists, however, had been preserved in the main by leaders at Bristol with decisive call to rally to Him as Lord in the fullest sense. Stennett at Exeter and Hann at Loughwood were sturdy champions, and only two churches weakened. It is true that a price was paid, of high and sterile Calvinism, which was very evident at Lyme in 1742; but at least the church never lost its way in the mists of Arianism. Taunton did, and therefore the Baptists of Wellington severed their connection and established a separate Church. In this, a prominent member was Thomas Pyne, whose son James was called to the ministry in 1760. His health failed, and he was sent to the seaside; he chose Lyme. The church leaped at the opportunity and chose him pastor, offering £35 a year. He accepted, and with a new deacon, John Love, a fresh era opened.

Yet two full years elapsed before he was ordained. After the Association meetings there came Hugh Evans and John Tommas of Bristol, Day of Wellington, Kingdon of Frome, Peter Evans of Yeovil, and the staunch old Hann of Upottery. Within seven months they handselled a new baptistery within the meeting house by three women making a good confession. In his time there was a petition to Parliament for repeal of the penal laws, and restoration of full civil rights to dissenters. Pyne joined in this, but Parliament refused.

After ten years, Pyne went to Devizes, where again he led

the church forward. Lyme, however, was left destitute, and this time it appealed to London, asking advice of Benjamin Wallin, who was prominent with the Particular Baptist Fund. He recommended Mills, who came, but was surprised at the Church's slowness; after a year or so, he said plainly, "Do you want me as pastor?" but they took three months to say yes.

Evidently there were troubles of many kinds; a new little book of minutes was opened, with full entries, while the massive old book was left blank. At one church meeting, only three members were present. Another member, Swain, was playing a fine part in the town, and was offered the freedom of the borough: to obtain this he had to take the sacrament at the parish church, and register a certificate of the same: though the church had little energy for anything else, it did censure him for this.

An unhappy situation ended with 1780, by Mills retiring, and a deacon resigning; though Wallin had to write and say that the Fund had granted money to Mills, not to the church funds generally, and they must pay it over.

The church then dallied with James Larwill, of a family well known in the denomination! After about a year he was installed; but within three years he gave scandal by his drinking habits; after arbitration he disappeared, towards the end of 1784.

Joseph Dawson came on probation, and after two years the church had him ordained. In 1792 the church entertained the Association again, with a galaxy of all the Western leaders, including the aged Tommas. Dawson had Davis to help him four years later, but there is no sign of village stations or of interest in the B.M.S. work at home or abroad. He was asked to write the Association a letter at Portsea in 1800, and gave the shortest on record. Nine years later, he resigned, but supplied for two years while the church was weighing the merits of a successor. Richard Scott had been known to the church and had preached sometimes, since 1805, but only in 1811 was he ordained pastor by Smith of Tiverton, Saffery, Horsey and Dawson.

Two years later, the Association came again, representatives of sixty-three churches attending with Saffery, Page, Ryland, Saunders, Roberts and Winterbotham taking leading parts. In 1820 Scott emigrated to America, and the church entered on a new experiment, with a student straight from Stepney Academy, Abraham Wayland, whose ministry endured from 1822 till his death forty years later.

The great Western Association had begun its course in 1653, and after 170 years embraced seventy-eight churches. It was felt wise to divide into four, centering in Plymouth, Bristol,

Southampton and Taunton. And in 1826 Wayland had the honour of presiding in Lyme over the new Western Association, with Baynes of Wellington as the preacher. Five years later a new church was formed at Chideock; this reflects a fresh policy, that the Association would devote itself to church extension. After much discussion, the Confession of 1677, which had steadied the churches sixty years later, was quietly dropped, and a brief statement as to doctrine became usual. And after more discussion, both church and Association linked with the Baptist Union in 1837 when Lyme again welcomed the sister churches and induced them to begin with the Lord's Supper. Kilmington had new premises, a new church began at Bridport, sustained for a while by the Association. This grew amazingly, and soon the secretary, Trend of Bridgwater, began collecting the history of the churches, getting a few reminiscences in each case by oral tradition.

Lyme itself shared this new energy; the young people started a prayer meeting after the evening service, the membership rose to ninety-seven, a new vestry was built at a cost of £80, and three village stations were opened for preaching, and the Association was invited afresh for 1845. Four years later, at Yeovil, Wayland filled the chief post. After that his evening years were quiet, and his forty years' course ended in 1862.

This time there was little delay, and Daniel Jennings soon came from Bridgnorth. Four years later he changed places with Joseph R. Jenkins, of Rayleigh, but ill-health soon ended this pastorate, during which a new organ was installed.

Thomas Handford came from Spurgeon's College, promised a stipend of £70, but did not stay two years. There was trouble about the deeds, and when they were recovered, all documents were carefully registered and deposited at the bank. Jenkins was asked to help in the emergency and matters straightened out when in January, 1872, George Binnie came from Sainthill. After nine years, troubles recurred, and there was danger of the chapel being closed. The Association, however, came to the rescue, and presently Edward Marks, of Boroughbridge, took charge in 1881.

The Association presented the Church with a stock of the Baptist Hymnal, for hitherto it had been faithful to Watts and Rippon. And so the century ended happily with a tried pastor and new song.

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