

Historic Documents of St. Mary's, Norwich.

ST. MARY'S BAPTIST CHURCH has a history of more than two and a half centuries and is fortunate in having a number of its earliest records preserved. The Church has now made arrangements with the Norwich Public Library Committee for the most important of these records to be placed in the custody of the City librarian, so that they will be properly cared for and easily accessible to students.

The records deposited are the two oldest "Church Books" covering a period from about 1690 to 1833, two Church Account books, a Register of Births and the "Wilkin Letters."

THE CHURCH BOOKS.

The earliest entry is a list of names headed "The number of the names of the Baptised Church in the City of Norwich and the Country joynd together walking in the Fellowship and Order of the Gospell." The second page is dated 1691 and no doubt this list was compiled after the Toleration Act of 1689. Before this time it might have provided incriminating evidence against the members. The first name is "Henry Austine" who had been a minister of the Church since its formation about 1667.

Of similar date are the ten "Articles of our Faith in which with one accord wee agree." These cover four closely written pages.

There is one minute in Henry Austine's writing recording a request to Thomas Flatman to assist in preaching. Flatman was a Norwich merchant of some consequence.

The next entries are by Edward Williams, who came from London to be Pastor about 1692. Williams died in 1713 and was buried in the Old Meeting Yard where his stone may still be seen.

Many of the minutes relate to Censures and Church Discipline. Some of the failings leading to these proceedings are—neglect of duty to the Church, "borrowing when not capable to pay," swearing, drunkenness and "taking a thing or two from a shop or two."

A long series of minutes are in the neat writing of Rev. John Stearne, who became minister in 1743. Some are very quaint :—

“ The Church chose Bro^r. Fuller and Bro^r. Francis Burril to read the Psalm and Bro^r. John Burril to dig the graves, open the window shutters etc.

“ The Church agreed that the grave-digger shall have two shillings and 6d. for digging the grave of a Grown up Person, and 2 shillings for that of a babe, And the child’s grave to be dug deep Enough to hold 2 Corpses. And when a Second Corps is buried upon the former he is to have two shillings, Even as for the former, to make amends for his Extraordinary Pains in digging the grave so deep the first time.”

In 1753 the Church declared their judgement :—

“ That it is unlawful for any so to attend upon the meetings of the Methodists as that without Partiality it may be construed to be giving countenance to them ” and “ That it is an evil in any to go to Tap-houses unless they have a lawful call.”

John Stearne died in 1755. His memorial Tablet is the oldest in St. Mary’s. After his death the church went through many years of difficulty. In 1761 “ Mr. Simson (our Minister) told the church in a very calm Spirit that he pirstev^d his Ministry had not bin blessed of Late, and that the Church was in a poor dwindling way and he gave us warning that he proposed to lave us at Lady day next.” Samuel Fisher later became minister, but the Church was constrained to excommunicate him on account of a scandal. A special order of service is given for this “ awful occasion.”

The last entries in the first Church Book record the call to the pastorate of Rev. Rees David, of the Bristol Academy.

The second book records the ordination of Rees David in 1779, when Rev. Robert Robinson, author of “ Come, thou fount of every blessing ” took part, “ Several Ministers of different denominations attended. The charge was given by Mr. Robinson of Cambridge, and the Rev^d. Mr. Trivett preached to the people. Everything was conducted with great decency.”

A minute of 1786 declares “ our entire disapprobation of such Dissenters as receive the Lord’s Supper according to the rites of the Church of England in order to qualify themselves to serve under His Majesty.”

Rees David died in 1788 and was succeeded by the great Joseph Kinghorn. There is an account of his call and ordination. No minutes appear to have been kept during his long pastorate of forty-three years, but there is a membership roll which includes the names of Cozens, Culley, Theobald, Colman, Hawkins, Boardman and Fletcher.

THE ACCOUNT BOOKS.

The account books provide information which is an interesting supplement to the Church Books. They go back to the year 1726. The income was then about £40 per annum. The minister's salary was £26 and the remaining expenses rent of the "meting hous" and "wine and bread for the Sackrement."

In this year a move was made.

"Pd. for the woorkmen's allowance and for Beare that was allowed the helpers when wee Removed the meting things, 15/10½."

"Pd. the Turner for 2 dousen pins maken for to hang hats on 2/-."

At this time it appears that regular grants were received from "the ffund at London."

Several entries relate to the expenses of visiting ministers.

In 1745 "Gave Mr. Dounkhorne for his horses journey when he came to preach for us when the new meting house was opnd 2/-."

In 1789 we find a payment of £9 9s. Od. to John Ivory—the noted stonemason—for "Rev. Rs. David's Monument"—a handsome tablet still to be seen at St. Mary's.

In the next year in connection with Joseph Kinghorn's ordination we read—

"Pd. Mr. Woods of ye Labor in Vain for ye Ordination Dinner £8 14s. Od."

Entries about this time refer to the Salary of a Singing Master "agreeable to the late William Chamberlin's Will." Apparently Mr. Chamberlin also left his son in charge of the church and the following sad story is revealed:—

1791 Clothes and Identure for Chamberlin's boy £1 12 0

1793 Feb. Paid for a Pr. Breeches for Wm.

Chamberlin 9 0

May 1. bottle wine for Chamberlin 1 9

June Paid Mr. Kersey for Physic and

attendance on Chamberlin £2 17 0

Funeral Charges for Wm. Chamberlin 16 6

In 1809 appears a subscription list for a "School for 120 girls upon Mr. Lancaster's Plan." Thomas Hawkins, Thomas Theobald, Simon Wilkin, James Cosens, and members of the Culley and Colman families are subscribers, as is John Crome, who was a regular subscriber to the funds of the Church at this time.

REGISTER OF BIRTHS.

Births of members' children are registered in the old Church book from 1745. This register, covering 1758 to 1832, is a copy

of the original. The births of Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, Jeremiah James Colman, and Benjamin Edgington Fletcher are among the entries, which also include members of the Silcock, Theobald, de Carle Smith and Bignold families.

Two daughters of John Crome and Phebe his wife—Susannah and Hannah—are registered in 1803 and 1804, showing that although Crome was never formally a member of St. Mary's, he so far fell in with Baptist sentiments at this time as to withhold these two children from christening.

THE WILKIN LETTERS.

The Wilkin letters comprise 152 letters and papers which were the property of Simon Wilkin. Simon was son of W. W. Wilkin of Costessey. After the death of both of his parents when he was only eight years old he was brought up by Rev. Joseph Kinghorn, who left him all his papers when he died. Later on Wilkin collected material for a life of Kinghorn, which was finally edited by his son Martin Hood Wilkin and published in 1855.

Simon Wilkin was a keen naturalist and a Fellow of the Linnean Society. His collection of insects was ultimately purchased by the Zoological Society. He is perhaps best known for his complete edition of Sir Thomas Browne's works. This was published in 1836 and considered by Robert Southey "The best reprint in the English language."

SURVEY OF THE LETTERS.

Some letters from W. W. Wilkin to Kinghorn contain much of interest. From Thetford, Nov. 1794—"we were surprised to find no meeting-house, and were obliged to go to Church where we heard a well-bred sermon of from 10 to 15 minutes, very neatly delivered": and next May from Bath, "Starvation is the word with me—No Suppers—no wine—tea—spirits—ving^r—medicine—infusions, etc. etc. etc.—water water! water! water! that is ye secret, that is ye source of health."

Fifteen years later Simon remembers this visit to Bath in a letter to Kinghorn, "I well remembered our old lodgings which were formerly the scene of many disagreeable sensations on account of the ill temper of the old maid, whose were the lodgings, added to my father's severity."

About 30 letters from Simon Wilkin to Kinghorn reveal how close was their friendship. These letters also contain much interesting information.

In January 1810 he writes from Woodbridge.

"The barracks are full of sick troops. The German Legion, 92nd Highlanders and 2nd Dragoon Guards seem enough to make poor skinny frog-fed Frenchmen quake."

A letter written about 1815 contains news which must have been surprising to an unpretending nonconformist minister. From London Simon writes :

"I resolved to take a peep at the beau-monde—I went to a rout at the sister of the late Marchioness of Rockingham, where I sauntered (Chapeau sous bras) for an hour among March^{ses} Duch^s Count^s and 'fashionables' of all sorts and sizes. Behaved myself very properly, was very polite, as nonsensical and garrulous as suited the occasion, twirled my cocked hat about with unstudied carelessness—and laughed very heartily at the idiotism of what I had seen. Quantum suff: tho't I—now lets see what sort of being a Bishop be—So I called on the Bishop of Winchester—found him very agreeable, his house crowded with works of art, his gardens fine, his daughters agreeable and accomplished and was very kindly received and invited to dinner. Next night I went to the concert room and here I was fain to gape because I could not admire the Italian singing—"

Much of Kinghorn's correspondence is of great importance to students of Baptist History. There are several letters from the great Andrew Fuller—the first dated 1 Sept. 1795 containing a complete copy of one of William Carey's earliest letters from India.

There is a very long letter written in 1811 by Kinghorn to William Newman on his becoming tutor at the newly formed Stepney Academy—containing his views on training young people. The students, he says, will be prone to levity, criticism and playfulness of mind, "they imagine they either do or can comprehend everything attainable by man—they are apt to imagine that what is plain is worth nothing—I know not how you can better assist your patients to escape the worst part of these evils than by your earnest prayers, your frequent exhortations and your affectionate counsel. You will prevent many evils by making the students a part of your family. This will check many follies which would take place at meals."

A long series of letters are from Rev. William Hawkins, one of Kinghorn's pupils. They tell of the great difficulties attending the settlement of a minister in days when owing to transport difficulties he was bound to stay for some time with any church he visited however unsuitable the situation seemed. Hawkins supplied at Plymouth; Olney—where "Mr. Wilson the deacon is a hairdresser—he was the friend of Cowper as well as his hairdresser and possesses some of his unpublished pieces"—Birmingham, Newcastle under Lyme, and after two years' wanderings settled at Portsea where Kinghorn went to take part in his ordination in June 1816.

Dr. Ryland writes on Mission business in a hand which would have graced a medieval manuscript. Joseph Ivimey, the historian of the Baptists, sends sheets of denominational gossip.

Many letters are of great local interest. One written by a Mr. Jameson from Royston, who asks Kinghorn to obtain Mr. Crome’s opinion on the abilities as a draughtsman of a mutual friend. Crome is described as “a self-taught man whose taste had essentially served him and made his art produce an handsome provision for his family—a serious character and one of your people.”

Other letters are from Jeremiah Colman, Thomas Bignold, Josiah Fletcher and John Culley.

SIMON WILKIN’S CORRESPONDENCE.

There are several letters from W. Jackson Hooker to Simon Wilkin, concerning natural history, written from Halesworth and later from Glasgow.

Fourteen letters dating from 1828 to 1843 are from Amelia Opie. In 1843 Simon had gone to live in Hampstead and Mrs. Opie asked his assistance in dealing with London publishers.

“Josiah Fletcher and I have just had a long consultation together and he encouraged me to take the liberty of writing to thee to ask a great favour of thee. All my egregiously sublime and delightful books, for such they undoubtedly are, are quite out of print in England—about two months or more ago I received a letter from Groves and Sons, booksellers, asking leave to reprint my works—I therefore write requesting thee to see them and negotiate for me.”

The publisher’s proposition that Mrs. Opie should be remunerated by a number of copies of the new edition called forth indignant comment.

“I can’t go about with a donkey to sell the copies—I shall get nothing by the departed children of my brains.”

These letters throw a fresh light on the intellectual society for which Norwich was famous in the early years of the 19th century, and it is to be hoped that now they have been made available they will not be neglected by students of history.

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