

## The Passing of St. Mary's Gate, Derby.

AT the end of September, 1937, closing services were held of the St. Mary's Gate Baptist Church, Derby. And so ends a long and historic era of one the oldest causes of the aforesaid General Baptists in Derbyshire. I say era, because those services did not mark the extinction of the Church. In recent years they had suffered keenly from the outflow of people to the suburbs, and the acceptance of a very substantial offer for their very central premises was wisely decided upon, with the specific purpose of continuing their cause in a more promising part of the outskirts of Derby. For the time being, while their old building comes under demolition and they set about the task of erecting a new one, they are being permitted to continue worship in the school premises which are part of the same block as the Church itself.

No other cause in the county town is older than St. Mary's Gate. Of the Church's inception the oldest minute book records : " 31 May 1789. Bro. D. Taylor being come from London into the country, was solicited to preach, to which he acceded. He preached in the Willow Row, near Nunn's Green, from Luke 2 chap 10 verse, 'I bring you good tidings'." Little even did Dan Taylor realise how prophetic was his open-air text. Sufficient interest was kindled to continue these meetings under the supervision of two Castle Donington ministers, N. and T. Pickering, and soon, at the expense of several churches in the Connexion, a "place was taken to preach in." Difficulties of preaching supply, however, caused an ebbing of enthusiasm, and after being considered by the Conference at Cauldwell in Christmas week, 1790, the work was continued by a rotation of supplies from the following : Francis Smith and J. Smedley (Melbourne), N. Pickering (Kegworth), Thomas Pickering (Castle Donington), and J. Goddard (Ilkeston). Sufficient progress was made for the little cause to seek the advice of the Conference at Smalley in July, 1791, as to their either joining an already established Baptist Church or being formed into a new cause. The latter course was recommended, and after instruction and baptism a Church of nine members was duly formed on August 21st, 1791. By April of the following year another thirteen members had been added. Nearly two years later came the election of their first two deacons, by name Johnson and Etches. From 1794 until the close of the century there is a gap in the Minutes, resuming in 1800 to speak of

there now being a minister, James Taylor, who had settled the previous year, "at a salary of £20 a year."

There now arises the question of a new meeting-house, and collections were made and solicited. The new sanctuary, in Brook Street, was duly opened on July 20th, 1802. Two years later Taylor was ordained, and in 1807 a Sunday School was commenced, and the same year saw the expiration of Taylor's ministry. During all the Church's history baptisms had for the most part taken place in the River Derwent. The Minutes record that in 1809 the membership stood at sixty-three. It is at this time that the great days of the Church really dawned. John Gregory Pike, a young student from London—who himself had a personal preference for the neighbouring Duffield, but the latter were not in a position to maintain a minister—commenced his ministry on July 8th, 1810. The subsequent story of the phenomenal success of the Church weaves itself around the character and influence of Pike.

Pike was educated at Wymondley, and Derby was his first and only pastorate. Something of his serious nature may be judged from the fact that it took him seven months to reach his decision, but under his leadership the Church steadily advanced. He was keenly virile in mind, and a preacher who attracted and stimulated. He was untiringly energetic in his pastoral work, and was a born leader. Moreover, he had prophetic vision. These were the days of the Carey venture, and Pike proved to be to the General Baptists what Fuller was to the Particular Baptists. Through his persistent pleading for Christ's far-flung cause, the General Baptist Missionary Society was formed at the Association at Boston in 1816. Pike himself was unable to become a missionary, but Bampton, who with Peggs became the first missionaries of the new Society, was educated by Pike at the minister's home. Pike attained considerable notability as a literary devotionalist, his *Persuasives to Early Piety* attaining a world-wide circulation. The Derby congregations rapidly increased, so that very soon after Pike's coming a gallery was erected, and in 1814 the premises were enlarged. For many years after this, concern was felt about the restricted accommodation, and in 1841, with the membership now standing at five hundred, Pike inspired his people to the purchase of a mansion near the centre of the town, belonging to William Evans, M.P., at a price of £4,000. This was converted into the St. Mary's Gate Chapel (the actual building at the present period under demolition), and the adjoining rooms were turned into vestries and classrooms. It is an indication of the esteem in which Pike was held that as soon as the seller heard that it was Pike who was seeking purchase he immediately

reduced his figure by £500. In 1845, with £1,000 of the debt still outstanding, and with the minister and officers respectfully timid to press for more sacrifice, and suggesting that they should set themselves to raise only £200 in the next twelve months, a private member, expressing their love for their minister, roused them to aim for the total liquidation of the debt, and a year later all liability was actually cleared. Such was the spirit of St. Mary's Gate in these great days. The cause at Brook Street continued for a while, but long since passed out, and that building is to-day a Methodist church. For four years, from 1847, W. R. Stevenson was assistant minister. Pike passed away on September 4th, 1854. In the course of his ministry he had baptised 1,300 souls.

Something of the breadth of outlook and missionary temper of St. Mary's Gate can be seen from the local causes in whose inception and development it had an active interest. At Alvaston preaching was commenced by Jas. Taylor in 1800. There was fluctuation of success there, preaching being discontinued in 1805 and resumed four months later, a similar thing happening again seven years afterwards. Ultimately the oversight was forgone, and the present cause at Alvaston is a quite independent venture. In these earlier days preaching was also attempted at Findern, Allestree, Burnaston, Windley, Weston, Darley and Littleover, the last three, with Alvaston, being recorded as "divisions" of the Derby Church in the membership record of 1810. The Littleover cause grew, being recommended by the mother Church to form themselves into a Chapel in 1819, but later declined, the Derby cause having to disown financial responsibility for them in 1830. The continuity, however, was preserved through the years, and the present cause there can trace its "succession" from the old Brook Street. Preachers were supplied to Duffield as early as 1807, and a meeting-house was opened there two years later. The two Churches were constituted as a single Church, a deacon being appointed on the Duffield side, and Church meetings were frequently held for the whole Church at Duffield. Differences came about, however, the Duffield folk wishing only for preachers sanctioned by the Conference, an insistence which the Derby section regarded as a violation of the dissenting principle of independency. An orderly settlement was arranged in 1810 whereby they were constituted into two distinct Churches. At Belper and Wirksworth, Baptist preaching was also introduced from Derby, but these passed into association with Duffield. In 1826 preaching was introduced at Mackworth and Langley, with little result, the latter being given up three years later. An application in 1827 from twelve members at Crich led to their being received

as a branch of the Derby Church, with the stipulation that they meet their own expenses, but two years later they were threatened with being regarded as withdrawn for baptising independently. At Ashbourne preaching was commenced in 1823, and in 1841 the Ashbourne Church was constituted as a part of the Derby Church, having a deacon elected from Derby, but being entirely independent for baptisms and finance. Association with Willington started in 1834. Five years later they were "resigned to Burton," but came under the mother wing again, and have continued so, being the one Church at present under the control of St. Mary's Gate. At Repton preaching was also started in 1834, but little is heard of it after 1839. Chellaston and Milford also received occasional preaching, the former as a village station and the latter through a disagreement with Duffield in 1845. These are the relations of St. Mary's Gate with other local Baptist causes up to the end of Pike's time. Since then, in 1877, a work was undertaken at Boyer Street, a thickly populated area in the borough. This was continued by a loyal band of workers for over fifty years, the work finally closing down in 1930. More recently the work at Junction Street arose from St. Mary's Gate, and has for many years been an independent and active cause. Nor was Osmaston Road without its contacts, for in 1827, through a misunderstanding, twelve persons detached themselves from Brook Street, and formed another Church, which later grew into Sacheverel Street, the forerunner of Osmaston Road. In a very short time happy relations were restored, and have continued so ever since. When it is remembered that the Pear Tree Road Church is a descendant of Osmaston Road, and that Trinity Church was a Particular Baptist, it is thus a romance that nearly all the General Baptist causes in the borough can trace their ancestry back to St. Mary's Gate. Truly Derby is losing the mother of its Baptist faith!

Since Pike's day there has been a splendid succession of able ministers, many of whom are happily still with us. The earlier successors of Pike were J. Stevenson, H. Crasweller, Jos. Wilshire, and J. W. Williams. The ministry of T. R. Stevenson, who came next, was in happy line with the missionary spirit of the Church, for Shanghai and Colombo were among his other pastorates. After Abraham Mills comes a succession of men who are still actively at work: J. H. Rushbrooke, fresh from Nottingham College and Halle University; F. C. Player, still in the Association and its secretary; George Evans, later in MacLaren's succession at Manchester; G. Miller Rice, whom the present writer happily remembers in France as the most beloved Army Chaplain he ever knew; and Ishmael Jones, now at Measham. The present minister, W. Graham Hilton, has in

front of him the piloting of the voyage of transition, and he has the abilities and gifts of leadership to do it worthily. Of the line of laymen, many and genuine could be the tributes. But three must suffice. John Etches, ex-sailor, first deacon of the Church, and forty-seven years in office, whose memory is upheld by a bust in the vestry; and two of the present-day leaders whose names shall represent those many long family traditions which have characterised the Church—S. T. Hall, for many years Church Secretary, and the present Association treasurer, and President of the Derbyshire Baptist Union; and G. H. Doughty, the present Church secretary.

What shall we say of the spirit of St. Mary's Gate? Foremost, it has been a homely Church, which, while having many families in its fold, has risen above domestic exclusivism. Its strong missionary temper has kept a universal breadth of vision, and its cultured ministries a catholic and tolerant outlook on Christian life. And now this fine old Church passes into a new era! Fortunately the central position of its premises made its site of great market value. When the very considerable offer came earlier this year, it is characteristic of the true outlook of the Church that they did not permit old ties, dear to many as life itself, to jeopardise the greater promise of the future. Into one of the newer and more promising districts they will now soon be going. While having a history of nearly one hundred and fifty years behind it, the Church has always had in its temper unfettered powers of vision and adaptability. Whether the old name itself will persist remains to be seen, but one thing is certain, its spirit will live on in the new venture. And may subsequent history record once again such glorious accomplishments for the Kingdom as were associated with the names of Brook Street and St. Mary's Gate.

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