

From an Old Cornish Church Chest.

RECENTLY there was shown to me a book that had lain for years in an old wooden chest in the Parish Church of St. Feock in Cornwall. On the front cover was printed in bold letters, "CHURCH BOOK belonging to TOWNS-END MEETING in the Village of FEOCK. 23rd July 1821," and on the back cover there was an index of contents stating that "This book contains 1 The License of the Church, 2 The Doctrines, 3 The Rules, 4 The Members' Names, 5 The Records, 6 Children's Register, 7 Church Accompts." On the fly-leaf was a note added by a former Vicar of the Parish. "This book was obtained by us from John Crowle. . . . Its chief importance consists in that it contains the only records of some of the Children born in this parish between 1820 and 1839. C. F. Messenger, Vicar. Jan. 18th, 1894."

The book made most interesting reading, and furnished proof of what the writer had often heard but never been able to verify in any official Baptist records, that there was once a Baptist Church in the small village of Feock situated on the River Fal between Falmouth and Truro.

The license for worship was issued at the General Quarter Sessions at Truro, May 1st, 1821, before "John Vivian, Edward William Wynne Pendarves, Henry Prynne Andrew, Esquires," and worded: "It having been certified in writing to the Court by William Cocker the Younger of the Borough of Truro aforesaid Sadler that a certain House situate at Town End in the parish of Feock in the said County hath been appropriated and set apart for the religious worship of Protestant Dissenters called Independents and upon application to this Court for that purpose, it is ordered by this Court that the same be licensed for that purpose pursuant to the Statutes in that case made. By the Court, Goodredy Clerk of the Peace."

A Mr. Wm. Cocker was a member of the Truro Baptist Church. He was baptised at Truro, September 25th, 1814, but his name is not given as a member of the Church in a list of signatures to a call given in 1816, nor on subsequent Church Rolls, so possibly he is the first pastor of the Towns-end Meeting who died September 25th, 1821, ". . . after preaching in the New Meeting twelve weeks and three days only." The name of John Rouse appears in both Church records. Rouse is a common name in Cornwall and this may be but coincidence, but since the Truro John Rouse was baptised at Penpol, May 8th, 1802, there may be a link here between the two Churches. Penpol is situated near Feock and was once an important

smelting centre with quite a large population. There was a Baptist Church at Penpol, according to a letter sent by the Truro Baptist Church to the newly formed South Devon and Cornwall Baptist Association in May 1825. This Church was supplied by Baptist friends from the Chacewater, Redruth and Truro Churches, and later adopted by Truro as a Village Station, and so it may be that the explanation of the rise of a Baptist Church at Feock is that it was commenced by John Rouse and friends from Penpol. This is the only possible explanation of the Towns-end Meeting, and the only link between the Church and the Baptist Churches of the County, that the writer has been able to trace, for there are no records in Association or Church Minute Books of any Baptist cause at Feock.

The Church Records begin with a statement of doctrine, "The following System of Doctrine and Discipline is received and submitted to by the Church of Jesus Christ at Towns-end Meeting in the Parish of Feock," and to this is added a paragraph to the effect that those whose names are "hereunto affixed . . . joined themselves together to be a Church of Jesus Christ, which for distinction sake we call An Independent Baptist Church, Twenty third July 1821." The signatures to this covenant were: "James Rouse Snr., Sampson Laworne, Nichols Trethowan, Samuel Cornew, Mary Trethowan, Ambrose Treganowan, Jas Crowle jnr." The Doctrine of the Church consisted of forty-two articles of faith, which cover ten pages of closely written matter, every paragraph punctuated with several Scripture indices.

The "Rules for the regular Order and Discipline of this Church" were thirty-one in number, of which the writer noted several of special interest governing membership. One of these stated "That any Individual desirous to become a member shall certify the same to the Deacons at least three months before admission." After the name had been brought before the Church the candidate for Church membership was interviewed by the Minister, and then according to rule had to "declare before the Church assembled, the particulars of his faith and experience." The Rules and questions were read to the candidate "distinctly and positively," and he was required to answer them "distinctly and positively." Then it was enjoined "That the said Individual with all his relations present be requested to withdraw, then the Church who remain shall faithfully express their thoughts of what they have heard, either for or against."

They were an open membership Church, yet while they did not insist upon Baptism as the condition of membership, they were jealous of the ordinance as a privilege, for Rule 29 expressly stated "That no Member who does not receive nor submit to Adult Baptism, shall speak contemptuously of the

same, nor lay any impediment in the way of those who are disposed to it, either directly or indirectly." A wise rule for some "Union" and "Free" Churches where our witness of Believer's Baptism is only occasionally observed and often slighted to-day.

The Public catechism must have been an ordeal, for there were twenty-two questions! The last two emphasised the personal accountability of the believer. Question 21: "Are you disposed to this of your own mind without being influenced and persuaded thereto by another?" Question 22: "Are you satisfied with the Doctrines, Ordinances and Rules of this Church so far as you understand them?" Many must have felt very grateful for that last saving clause!

Following the Statement of Doctrine, the Rules and the Catechism, is a list of the first Church members, and then for a reason not given is added in a different handwriting "A Reform Church Meeting held Dec 26th, 1836," and continuing ". . . We whose names are hereunto affixed do by this Covenant before God, Rejoin ourselves together in a regular and orderly manner to be a Church of Jesus Christ, holding and maintaining the Doctrines, Ordinances, and Laws, inserted in the former part of this Book." The Church Covenant, Rules and Questions are written in a neat clerical hand and evidently by a person of some education, presumably John Hicks, who succeeded William Cocker as Pastor of the Church. The note of the Reform Church Meeting and all entries subsequent to 1836 are by an uneducated person in a different handwriting. Later in the Church Rules, over Rule 29 already quoted, there was pasted a roughly cut piece of paper bearing these words written in another handwriting, "That no member is to Absent themselves From the Church, wen the Doar is open For Divine Worship: but on Justifiable Grounds."

The Records were not well kept. Blank pages occur and several pages have been torn out of the book. The records of Births to the members and Adult baptisms from July 1821 until August 1836 are over the signature of John Hicks. After John Hicks' last entry of a baptism there is one recorded by Samuel Cornew in July 1838 and a Susana Lawarne reported by Cornew as having been admitted into the Church, Oct. 1838. That is the last entry given in the records of admissions into the Church. The Children's Register, which, in the opinion of the Vicar who obtained the Church book from John Crowle, is "the chief importance of the book," was kept by John Hicks until 1836, and subsequently by Samuel Cornew and John Clearke, the last entry being June, 1839. The names of John Hicks and John Clearke are not given among the members' names.

The Church "Accompts" found at the end of the book make very curious reading. They only took collections at Midsummer, Michaelmas, Christmas and Lady Day, and the largest collection, which was always at Midsummer, never totalled more than 18/-. "Sittings" were also paid quarterly, but the contributions of the members grew less and less until in 1836 the Church was in debt 14/7. No Church accounts are given after 1836 (the date of the Reform Church Meeting), perhaps both Minister and Treasurer had given up in despair!

On the debit side the chief expenditure after £20/8/11 on "Reparation the Meeting" in 1823 was on "Candles, oil, etc." They spent 8/6 on Watts' Hymn Book, and such curious recurring items as "Whites, pullys, etc." Other items of expenditure which will make the modern Church member lift his eyebrows were quantities of rum and brandy bought by the Church and bought for the Minister! These occur almost every quarter, and from the price paid it seems very questionable whether the spirits were obtained lawfully! They may have been good Baptists, but, if not smugglers themselves, they numbered smugglers among their friends. What was left over from the collections after paying expenses was handed to Mr. John Hicks, the Minister. For what purpose is not stated, but if for salary 14/- per quarter was not high remuneration, and since the Church was in debt in 1836 to the sum of 14/7, the incompleteness of the financial statement leaves us wondering if the poor man ever received any payment afterwards.

The names of the first Church members were: "James Rouse, Ambrose Treganowan, James Crowle, Nichols Trethowan, Sampson Lawarne, Jane Talick, Samuel Cornew, Elisabeth Gray, Mary Clemow, John Rouse, James Rouse, James Hicks, Elisabeth Hicks, Grace Cornew, Honnor Mitchell, Mary Laworne, Sophia Laskey, Francis Hicks." Ambrose Treganowan and James Crowle were the first deacons. The names of the members after the Reform Church Meeting were: "John Rouse, James Rouse, James Crowle, Sampson Lawarne, Nich Trethowan, Mary Trethowan, Saml Cornew, Grace Cornew, Elisath Gray, Mary Climo, Mary Richards, Agnes Crowle, Mary Green, James Hicks, Susana Lawarne, James Lilly, Honr Ford." James Crowle and John Rouse were elected deacons at the Reform Church Meeting.

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