

A Brief Sketch of the History of the Baptist Church

at Woodhouse Carr (1838-1882) and Meanwood Road
(1882-1938), branch of South Parade, Leeds.

IT was not until the original Baptist cause in Leeds had been in existence for nearly fifty years that a "forward movement" was begun in the town, and it was under the ministry of John Eustace Giles, whose political proclivities brought him more than local fame, that twenty-six members of South Parade had been dismissed in 1837 to form the first Baptist offshoot in Leeds, over the river at Hunslet, which from that day to this has maintained its vigorous witness.¹ Two evening stations which were opened at the same period in Bowman Lane and Wortley Lane did not thrive and soon came to an end, nor did anything come of a venture at Halton. But a new station begun at Woodhouse Carr at the end of 1838 took root and flourished, and it is the centenary of this mission church, which still remains part of South Parade, that is being celebrated this month.

The story goes that one day when out for a walk after service, a group of young men came up from the centre of the town, where the old South Parade Chapel then was, along paths which led through green fields (alas, no more) until they reached Woodhouse Carr, which is situated some two miles to the north. So struck were they with the poverty of the existing Christian witness in this growing district (where the Wesleyans had some years previously put up two typical meeting-houses and where the Established Church had already for ten years displayed the first-fruits of the Napoleonic Wars in the magnificent and dominating church dedicated to St. Mark) that they straightway undertook to establish a Baptist mission in the heart of things. Woodhouse was not some recent upshoot of the Industrial Revolution, tremendously busy as its woollen and other manufactories were a century ago,² for it knew a history, which, though not greatly exciting, stretched back some hundreds of years: it was old when the Great Armada was new. It possessed a small but venerable Baptist tradition also.

In the early years of the eighteenth century, before ever a

¹ See its *Centenary History*, 1937.

² E. Parsons, *History of Leeds* (1834), I, 170, "The village itself, though placed in a beautiful natural situation, is rendered unpleasant and dirty by its manufactories."

Baptist church had been formed in Leeds at all, even before there was a Baptist community nearer than Rawdon, Thomas Hardcastle had lived in "Great Woodhouse." Hardcastle ("Thomas the first" we may call him), who had been chosen "elder" of the Rawdon Church, found himself after twenty years' service "incapable of performing his office as it ought to be done" because of the difficulty of attending from so great a distance; he therefore begged to be relieved of his office, whereupon at a church meeting on October 27th, 1744, he was solemnly and "according to his own desire and for the glory of God and by the consent and agreement of the said church . . . discharged from his office of elder. . ."³ He had both a son and a grandson named Thomas also, who apparently had a close connection with the Gildersome church; but the latter at any rate continued to live in Woodhouse, where he died at the end of the century. Later, when a church had at last been formed in the town (in 1779) a prominent Baptist of Woodhouse Carr was Joseph Sharp, who signed the church covenant of 1781 and was an influential member until his death in 1803; Thomas Langdon's funeral sermon for him was printed in the same year. Again, William Robinson of Buslingthorpe (generally reckoned part of Woodhouse) was one of the trustees of the old South Parade Chapel in 1825. But no attempt was made to provide a concerted witness in the district until 1838.

1838-1860.

It was in September of that year that "a brief statement of the Woodhouse Carr station having been made to the church by the secretary, it was resolved that the rooms at Woodhouse Carr be taken for the use of those persons who have been or may be sent out to preach under the sanction of this church," and that "Bros. Binns and Town be requested to carry out the purposes of the above resolution." On September 3rd an agreement for renting rooms at £12 a year had been signed between John Wylde, "treasurer of the Baptist church and congregations of Leeds," and William Beckwith of Leeds on behalf of the trustees of Abraham Rhodes, whose large woollen spinning mills were close at hand.⁴ The two rooms thus hired

³ Rawdon Church Book (Ms.). He signed the Church's Confession of Faith (1699) in 1715 and signed as Elder in 1724. See also *B.H.S. Trans.* IV., 45. For particulars of the Hardcastles, see *B.Q.*, N.S. VI., p. 73 (1932); and of Joseph Sharp, *ibid.*, p. 170. It is not impossible that the great Yorkshire evangelist, William Mitchell, himself laboured here in the last decade of the seventeenth century, for he certainly toured the outskirts of Leeds.

⁴ Mayhall's *Annals of Leeds* (1860), p. 317, for example, gives an account of an extensive fire in 1825.

were on the upper storey of a building in "New Speedwell," later Speedwell Street (so named from a well whose waters were reputed to have medicinal properties) and were approached by a flight of stone steps at the east end of the building. In common with the other tenants, the mission had the use of the pump and the water thereat and the privies and coal-house under the steps, "coal excepted." The Baptist tenants were to keep the windows, floor and door in repair, and a cautious note adds at the end of the agreement that there were "32 cracked squares in the windows." Following a report on the taking of these premises, a church meeting of October 2nd requested the deacons to fit up the rooms as a preaching centre, as they "were now cleaned out ready for the furniture." On the 29th of the same month the deacons were further requested to "provide such requisites as they think proper for the Woodhouse Carr station." A meeting on supplies was held forthwith "at Brother Morton's shop" next day, when it was resolved to put the rooms in order without delay, by securing the steps, installing a stove and "six seats with backs, to be numbered at the end, each sitting to be numbered and then let at 1s. per quarter," providing a Bible and two Watts's hymnbooks. Other miscellaneous details (such as the cost of candles, coals, white-washing the rooms, and the reduction of the rent to £10 shortly afterwards) reveal the frugality of those early arrangements and the slenderness of the station's worldly possessions; but nothing could daunt the apostolic zeal and simplicity of the men of South Parade of those days. They not only took the arrangement of the weekly services into their hands, but made plain from the beginning the church's unceasing solicitude for the young in their midst. After a local canvas for scholars for the Sabbath School, work began immediately with an attendance of eighty scholars on the first three Sundays. Messrs. Finnie, Fox, Trickett and Ostler were appointed to take charge of the new school, and "Brethren Dean, Matthews and Fearnside" were the first superintendents. Camp meetings and cottage meetings were instituted and were held in the neighbourhood for many a long year.

1860-1882.

The work prospered and twenty years later the station decided to purchase a home of its own. It was estimated that a new building would cost at least £300 to erect, and by April 1860⁵ the sum of £212 had been promised towards that total. Actually the cost was much higher and at the opening services sixteen months later ⁶ it was reported that £70 was still needed

⁵ *Leeds Mercury*, April 12th, 1860.

⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, August 8th, 1861.

to meet the outlay of £370. On February 18th, 1861, the foundation stone was laid by Rev. F. Edwards, of South Parade, in Cross Chancellor Street,⁷ the new site being a mere stone's throw from the old: the building was a single storey in unpretentious brick and comprised a schoolroom and three classrooms. The opening services were held on Sunday, July 28th, 1861: Rev. Mr. Mather, of Lady Lane Chapel, led the devotions in the morning, and Rev. A. Bowden, of Hunslet, in the evening. On Tuesday the 6th of August, a public meeting was held at which Mr. John Barran (later Sir John) took the chair: in the list of speakers appear the following names, long and affectionately cherished among us:—a former superintendent, W. Allison, of Selby, C. Goodall, J. B. Bilbrough and Godfrey M. Bingley.

As far as attendances show, the school saw some of its most prosperous days in the sixties, and the morning services of that decade have certainly never afterwards been equalled. Familiar names among the workers are those of John Town, G. H. Robinson, H. Newton, E. Fearnside, Thomas Oates (Secretary) and T. K. Firth (Treasurer). In common with most churches of the period, the old school undertook a good deal of social work which is now performed by secular authorities. Together with a prosperous Friendly Aid Society and a good library, for example, it had many excellent and active institutions which have since passed away for ever. In the early days, also, most of the boys and girls in the Sunday school had to be taught to read and write, and their wild, mischievous habits to be borne patiently with, when they could no longer be held altogether in check.

After little more than ten years it became clear that the small premises in Cross Chancellor Street were no longer adequate to the church's growing needs, and in 1874 a plot of land for a larger structure was actually purchased near at hand, at a cost of £377; by 1875 an "extension fund" amounting to £247 had been raised or promised and at the end of the following year the money still required was only £31, which deficiency was turned into a surplus of £150 in 1877. In the meantime, having perceived that the drift of its members was tending away from the "Carr" towards Meanwood (which lies to the north-west), the church abandoned the project of rebuilding nearby and took the bold decision to follow the members and establish a home in new territory half a mile or so up the road from town. In a word, it wished to do pioneer work and did not wish to remain in a district which by now was plentifully supplied with churches; it would lead, not follow.

⁷ *Leeds Mercury*, February 21st, 1861.

1882-1938.

And so at Cliffdale (by no means as yet a "built-up" area) on April 19th, 1881, a bleak and melancholy day,⁸ the foundation stone of a new and far larger building was laid. So great was the optimism, that according to the scheme projected, only half the land available was to be built on at first, and Baptist "School," not "Church" yet, was to be the lettering on its brick frontage; the "Church" thereby explicitly and ambitiously anticipated has never materialised. It was John Town (1842-1921) who laid the stone, and to no single man does the church owe so much: many an old scholar has been found to pay respectful tribute to the memory of his loved and gracious personality and his work and influence as leader and teacher, counsellor and friend. The costs of purchasing the land, erecting the church and supplying it with furniture amounted to £2,800. Not for ten years was the church free from a lingering debt, which, from a total of £900 when the opening took place, was gradually reduced, by the sale of the abandoned site ("at no profit") in 1887 and of the old premises (in 1888) to the Quakers, and not least by the unstinted and unselfish labours of the members, until at last it was finally extinguished in 1892.

The opening services were held in March and April, 1882. On Thursday, March 23rd, Rev. George Hill, M.A., of South Parade, preached in the afternoon, and in the evening a meeting was held at which Mr. John Barran, junior (eldest son of the first Sir John) occupied the chair.⁹ On the Sunday following, the morning and evening services were conducted by Rev. T. Michael, of Halifax, President of the Yorkshire Association, and in the afternoon, Rev. G. Hill was once again the preacher, having Mr. John Town for chairman. The special services were continued not only on Sunday, April 2nd, when Rev. T. G. Rooke, of Rawdon College, preached morning and evening, but on the 9th also, when the preachers were Mr. John Town in the morning and Rev. C. A. Davies, of Bradford, at 2.30 and 6.30. The jubilee of the church lay only six short years ahead.

In the eighties and nineties the familiar names of Firth, Stead, Wigglesworth, Broadley, Holmes, Farthing, make their appearance. The memory of the last-named of these is perpetuated on the west wall of the church in a tablet which records how Rev. G. B. Farthing, his wife (formerly Miss Wright, a teacher in the school), and their three children were massacred at Tai-yuan-fu on June 9th, 1900, during the Boxer risings. Mr. Farthing, a Scarborough boy, was a student at

⁸ Disraeli died that day, and in Leeds there was a fall of snow.

⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, March 24th, 1882.

Rawdon College, and spent his vacations serving Meanwood Road. At the turn of the century Messrs. Holmes and Durrant were superintendents of the school in the morning, and Mr. G. H. Robinson in the afternoon. Mr. Robinson, happily still with us, retired from his post in 1920, having rendered faithful service for sixty years; he provides us with a remarkable link with our past and has many a golden memory of the old days. Another member with a precious record of nearly 62 years' membership was Miss Arabella Lister, who was with us from the beginning until her death in 1898.

The records show that as far as attendances go the school was at the most prosperous period of its history in the eighties; a steady weekly average of 140 scholars was no mean achievement for a school of its size, but as has been said, the morning attendances never again reached the heights attained in the sixties. In recent years the graph of attendances has shown a perturbing and precipitous descent.

The church had no resident minister until 1889. In December, 1888, Rev. G. W. Bonell was invited to hold the pastorate of Meanwood Road jointly with that of Beeston Hill, but not many years afterwards he felt obliged to resign from this dual arrangement and concentrate his energies at Beeston Hill. He was followed by Rev. E. Moore, of Bootle (1899-1909), famed for his fiddle and his politics. Then came the all too brief ministry (1914-21), interrupted by war service, of Rev. W. K. Still, honoured secretary of Rawdon College; it is not only, however, of Mr. Still himself that pleasant memories still abound, but of his wife also, and of those whom Meanwood Road find it difficult to conceive as other than "the boys." Later ministers have been P. E. Dennis (1923-24), H. Bratt (1925-28) and J. H. West, B.A., B.D. (1930-36).

Architecturally the present chapel building has been styled ¹⁰ "an admirable specimen of free classic design in brickwork, and one in every way worthy of attention as showing what can be done by the aid of good cutting brick."

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¹⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, March 24th, 1882, quoting from an address by the President of the Leeds Architectural Society; a short architectural description follows, with the names of the architect and contractors.