

## Early Days at East Street, Walworth.

THE "village" of Walworth—the name sounds strangely to those who know Walworth as it is to-day, with its street markets, its busy thoroughfares, its crowded population—yet so it was only about 150 years ago. Then, as now, London's suburbs were developing, but at that time they were only two miles from the centre. Then, as now, some landowners seem to have realised the added value to their estates of a church or chapel; and so it is recorded that a Mr. Penton, whose name survives to-day in Penton Place, Walworth, when selling some of his land to a Mr. Clutton, stipulated that a place of worship should be erected on part thereof. The expectation was that the building to be erected would be used by the Church of England as what, in those days, was called a "Chapel of Ease" to the Parish Church of St. Mary, Newington, which then stood in Newington Butts, its site being marked to-day by the clock tower, which will be familiar to many. The Parish Church seems to have had but a small congregation, and the offer was not accepted. About this time, however, Mrs. Mary Hills, of King's Row, Walworth, "because the village of Walworth was destitute of any place of worship where the Protestant friends of true religion could enjoy the public means of grace," opened her house for worship. To do this she had to obtain a licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is well to note that in the application for registration it is said to be for "religious worship by a congregation of Protestants dissenting from the Church of England who scruple the Baptizing of Infants, commonly called Baptists." The first service was conducted on Thursday, April 1st, 1779, by John Macgowan, of Devonshire Square, "in the presence of many well-wishers to the cause of Christ, who purposely attended to favour the undertaking." It was decided to continue the service each Thursday evening, neighbouring dissenting ministers, including Dr. John Rippon, having promised to serve in turn as lecturers. The attendance usually numbered more than could conveniently be seated.

But the way was opening for a more suitable meeting place. On June 8th, 1779 (only a few weeks after the first meeting at Mrs. Hills' house), Mr. Penton had conveyed a piece of freehold land in East Lane (now East Street) to Mr. Clutton on the condition to which we have referred, specifying the dimensions of the building to be erected, and that it must be erected within a limited period. Repeated offers to the Anglican Church having been declined, Mr. Clutton, mindful of the success of the dissenting meeting, offered to Mrs. Hills a piece of his land having a frontage of 70 feet and a depth of 100 feet, and, in addition, a

gift of 30,000 bricks. The offer was accepted because, to quote the Minutes, it was considered "that it might be the means of introducing the knowledge of God and practice of true religion more effectively than would be done in a private house, and that thereby an opportunity would be afforded, at a proper season, for such of the disciples of Jesus as should be so disposed to form themselves into a Christian Society, by entering into Church Union one with another under a settled pastor, and by conforming in Doctrines, Discipline, Government and Preaching to the pattern given to the Saints in the living oracles of Truth."

A building fund was opened at once, a Mrs. Sarah Cox promising £100. Trustees were soon appointed, and be it known that, in 1779, these daring dissenters included in the number of trustees two women. The total number—as in many churches—was thirteen, for that number never seems to have alarmed our dissenting forbears. Careful folks, too, were these trustees. They sent a deputation to Mrs. Cox to "request her to sign a paper to secure the payments of her subscription," and a later minute of the trustees, who usually met at the "Sir William Walworth," states that the deputation produced the security which Mrs. Cox had executed. On June 1st, 1780, the meeting house was opened, and arrangements were then made for the Sunday evening and Thursday evening "lectures" by neighbouring ministers, to whom a special letter was sent requesting them to be "very punctual," as any disappointment of a supply would be exceedingly disagreeable and might have an effect on the village very different from that which the united endeavours of the lecturers and trustees were calculated to produce. One wonders why the reference to punctuality was made. Half-a-guinea was paid to the lecturer for each service—by no means a meagre sum for a new and struggling society.

Less than twelve months after the opening services it was reported that the total cost of the building had been £583 18s. 1d., towards which £392 5s. 2d. had been subscribed. In order that the treasurer might not have to bear the deficiency until funds were raised, the money was advanced in varying amounts by some of the trustees. Among the efforts to raise funds was an annual dinner at Grove House, which seems to have been a tavern with tea gardens, a popular resort at Camberwell Green. At least on one occasion the charge for the dinner was 5s. each, but the records show that the attendance at these functions was not large.

There was a cellar beneath the chapel which was for a time let to a local publican. In later years it was used as a burial place, and when, some thirty years ago, the writer became moderator of the church, it had a more dignified name and was the crypt. It is interesting to learn from an early resolution

recorded in the trustees' Minutes that it was resolved that a proper opening be left in the centre ceiling to discharge the hot air, and to read that a resolution of the trustees required that a portion of scripture selected at the discretion of the minister should be read in the course of each Lord's Day morning service—before the first prayer.

The particulars of the opening service on Thursday, June 1st, 1780, read curiously to-day. First there was a hymn, then an introductory statement, and the reading of several passages of scripture and an opening prayer by Benjamin Wallin, of Maze Pond, then another hymn, sermon by Samuel Stennett on Luke vii. 5, then prayer and a further hymn, and a sermon by a Mr. Brewer on Psalm cviii. 25, then another hymn and prayer. The service was to commence at 10.30 a.m., and continued until 2 p.m. The collection amounted to £22 6s. 8d. Then the eight lecturers (preachers) during preceding weeks dined with the trustees and their friends at "The King's Head": the number exceeded fifty.

Once more, in September 1780, when altering the hour of the Thursday evening service, the trustees seem to have thought it necessary to ask "the lecturers" to be "very punctual," giving the same reason as before. Early in 1783, at the suggestion of two friends, who undertook that the services should be no expense to the trustees, a Sunday afternoon service at 2.30 was commenced.

Meanwhile, the condition of the infant cause had grown serious owing to divisions and contentions among the trustees, and a circular was sent to those interested, in which the writers asked the reader "to reflect on your voluntary engagements to support the best interests in this neighbourhood which are in peril and must fall unless unanimity is restored. We beseech you therefore to consider that all private prejudices and all personal opposition ought to give way to the public good." So all interested were invited to dine with the trustees at 3 p.m. on August 20th, 1783, at the "Three Tuns" tavern, when, divested of all prejudices, the members were asked "to converse on those subjects on which we have formed different opinions, with that candour and disposition of mind which becomes those who are professors of godliness."

There is no record of this dinner, but at a later meeting regular prayer meetings were resolved on and two friends undertook a house-to-house collection. At this time the indebtedness on all accounts was just over £234.

Soon we find a curious step towards a settled ministry. The trustees, subscribers and friends of the cause were to meet for dinner at the "Grove" tavern, Camberwell, at 3.0 on the last Tuesday in June 1784, and the subscribers were then to be invited

to sanction a regular ministry. The dinner was held, but it is disappointing to read of no very substantial results. At length, however, in December 1784, a Mr. Moreton was invited to preach during the ensuing three months "with a view," and on March 24th, 1785, a special meeting was held to decide whether he be invited to preach statedly at Walworth. The vote, after various letters had been read, was taken by voice, but absentees who had given due authority to someone else were allowed to vote. The result was: For 24, neuter 4. His acceptance was notified by the end of the month, and it was agreed to pay him 52 guineas for a year's services, the afternoon services when held being conducted by supplies, and, although he continued thus to serve the church for some three years, he did not become minister.

The time was rapidly approaching when the necessity of forming a church was realised, and in June 1791, Joseph Swain, a member of Carter Lane, who is still remembered as a hymn-writer, began regularly to occupy the pulpit, and in the following October baptised twelve believers at Carter Lane and, next month, thirteen. These, with Swain himself, and possibly others already baptised (the records are not clear as to the number of members at the church's formation) were formed by Swain on December 13th, 1791, into a Strict Baptist Church. It is worth remembering that, during the preceding years when there was no church, the company of believers included a number of Congregationalists. There was no place for them in the newly-formed church, but there appears to have been no sort of split; some people withdrew and formed a Congregational Church nearby in York Street, now known as Browning Hall, receiving some compensation for their pecuniary interest in the chapel premises. It is good to hear that friendly relations were maintained between the two churches, the minister of the one being a not infrequent speaker at the other. We need to remember to-day, when so much is said of "union," that the spirit manifested at Walworth was not confined to Walworth—there was a similar cordiality between Hanover Chapel, Peckham, and Rye Lane Chapel when the latter chapel was erected.

Very shortly after Swain's ministry commenced a gallery was found to be necessary, but the Head of the Church had other plans and after, as men reckoned it, an all-too-brief ministry, Swain was called to higher service in April 1796. He was buried in Bunhill Fields; his funeral, attended by large crowds, was conducted by Abraham Booth, and memorial sermons were preached by Dr. Rippon and James Upton. At the time of his passing the church had 218 members.

At about this time a Sunday school, the oldest in the Lambeth

Auxiliary of the Sunday School Union, was formed, an early worker being William Brodie Gurney, one of the founders of the National Sunday School Union.

Quite frequently the church became the mother of another church (not always willingly, we think). As early as 1797 some hived off to form a church under one who had been a "supply," but evidently it had a short life only, and its location is unknown. In 1805 thirty-five members withdrew and formed what is now Walworth Road Church. When in 1818 Joseph Jenkins, the then pastor, retired, a number left and with him formed a church in Alfred Place, Old Kent Road, which has long since passed away. Other daughter churches remain to this day. In 1825 the minister, Richard Davis, issued a list of 106 members, twelve of whom remained from Joseph Swain's ministry—one of them was Henry Rogers, father of John Rogers, many years minister at Eynsford and moderator of the Kent Baptist Association. Henry Rogers' association with the church lasted forty-two years; he was a deacon eighteen years, and was buried in the graveyard in front of the chapel. When John began to preach out-of-doors, like so many other young men of the period, he was brought before the church as disorderly and "put by for preaching" for six months. In May 1798, he was again postponed and "advised to make himself more acquainted with the English language, and in the meantime to instruct children." In December of that year he was recommended as a student and as an itinerant preacher of the Kent Association. In 1801 he was again asked to preach before the church, and at last, in August of that year, by 39 to 4, he was called to the ministry. Next year he settled at Eynsford, where he ministered many years.

One incident, impossible in Walworth to-day, must not be omitted. One Sunday morning a young man, in the fields hard by the chapel, was shooting sparrows. A heavy shower came and he took shelter in the chapel, leaving his gun in the porch. Just then the minister announced his text: "Are not five sparrows sold for a farthing?" The young man had in his basket five sparrows which he had just shot. The sermon led to his conversion; he was later well known in our denomination as William Henry Watson, and his son, Samuel Watson, was equally well known. His memory is still cherished by some of us.

Other remarkable stories of the early days of Walworth might easily be told, but space does not permit. Its story of late years is of a struggling church in a changed neighbourhood with a Sunday morning market making direct approach to the chapel impossible, of heroic workers holding the fort with too little denominational backing and yet with blessing, till at length

the London County Council acquired the premises for housing, and, after attempting to carry on in a derelict Primitive Methodist Chapel, the church itself decided to disband. But if the building has gone, sacred memories remain, and still more, there is abiding fruits of its ministry, some still seed-sowing here, others gathered into the many Mansions.

HENRY N. PHILCOX.

THE CHURCH at Kensington Gravel Pits which sent the following letter is now known as Westbourne Grove Church. The request contained in the letter suggests several questions.

Rev. James Upton,  
Church Street, Blackfriars.

Dear Sir,

The Particular Baptist Church Meeting at Kensington Gravel Pitts, at a special Church Meeting May 13th to take into consideration the best means of establishing Church Order and Discipline, the want of which was considered to be owing to the want of Male Members (having only three) of judgment and experience in those matters, it was resolved that a Committee be formed consisting of seven persons and that Messrs. Ivimey, Pritchard and Upton be respectfully requested to form the Committee, selecting two from each of their respective Churches, whom they deem competent for that Office. And this Church depute Mr. Thomas Worger, as their Representative in that Committee and pledge themselves not to choose a Minister disapproved of by a majority of that Committee, but the Church particularly request that none of that Committee be Preachers.

I am, dear Sir,

Your humble servant,

THOMAS FARMER.

Signed on behalf of the Baptised Church of Christ at  
Kensington Gravel Pitts.

May 1823.