

Baptist Historical Society.

I. THIRTY-FIRST ANNUAL MEETING.

IT has now become an established custom for our Society, during the Annual Assembly, to hold an excursion to a place of Baptist antiquity in the locality. During the Birmingham meetings a company occupying four coaches left the city, in beautiful sunshine, for Bewdley and Bromsgrove. Going out along the Hagley Road we passed the Oratory, where Cardinal John Henry Newman spent many years, and not many yards beyond it our own imposing building, the Church of the Redeemer. After leaving Halesowen we came near to the Clent Hills, and in the distance on our right caught a view of Dudley Castle. Soon we were in the old-world village of Hagley, and caught sight of Hagley Hall, the seat of Lord Cobham, lying back in the trees.

As we approached Kidderminster, the Rev. W. D. Morris, who once ministered there, gave us an interesting account of Richard Baxter, whose statue, with hand uplifted, we saw as we passed through the town. Our own churches, Church Street and Milton Hall, were pointed out to us. For some time now the profusion of blossom upon the trees had spoken of the fruit country of Worcestershire. We had our first view of the River Severn upon our left, and soon we were passing over the old bridge at Bewdley, once famous for its strategic position on the high road to Wales. The narrow streets and quaint old houses took us back to the tranquillity of centuries ago, and when someone mentioned the name of Stanley Baldwin we realised that it was not his pipe alone that was the secret of his quiet contentment. But the object of our quest was the Bewdley Baptist Church, an old building lying hidden from the road, which we approached by walking up a narrow entry. Here the minister, the Rev. R. A. Lewis, spoke kindly words of welcome, telling us that, historic though the church was, it was still the centre of an active work, last year alone seeing five baptisms and fourteen new members.

Dr. W. T. Whitley, who gave the impression of being very much at home in this district (he himself once ministered at the adjacent Droitwich) referred to the Bewdley Church as the "grandmother" of Baptist work in Birmingham, and the centre of its early life in the Midlands. He caused some amusement by reminding us that the bridge over the river used to be fortified to keep out the Welsh! This Bewdley cause, so Dr. Whitley

told us, owed its origin to one John Tombes, who, after training at Magdalen College, Oxford, subsequently became vicar of Leominster. The coming of the Civil War drove him for refuge to Bristol, where he came into intimate association with Baptist refugees, with the result that Tombes himself emerged from the ordeal as a Baptist. He did not, however, break with his own church, but saw clearly that his new principles would not permit him to go back to Leominster. Hearing of the vacancy of St. Anne's, Bewdley, he secured the appointment. This was very suitable to him because it was only a Chapel of Ease, which meant that folk could neither be buried nor christened there, the latter fact plainly obviating any practical difficulty about baptism. To this church we afterwards paid a visit, where Dr. Whitley told us of a debate before a crowded congregation, lasting from six to eight hours, between John Tombes and Richard Baxter, in which the former occupied the pulpit and the latter spoke from a place in the back gallery! Tombes himself later moved on to spheres in Gloucestershire and Leicestershire, afterwards becoming Master of the Temple, and finally ending his days in Wiltshire. His presence in Bewdley meant a powerful witness to Baptist principles. His converting and baptizing work was wisely followed by teaching, and he left behind him a number of men trained to carry on as Baptists, foremost among whom was John Eckels, of whom we shall hear more later. It was out of this movement initiated by John Tombes that the Bewdley chapel arose.

After a stroll down to the riverside we embarked again, and this time made our way to Bromsgrove, where we arrived about four o'clock. Dr. Whitley had previously described this cause as the "mother" of Birmingham Baptists. The Bromsgrove cause dates back to 1666, thus being born in those memorable days of the struggle for religious liberty in our land. Its formation centres around the aforesaid disciple of John Tombes, John Eckels. With his first venturing were probably associated a small number of Baptists from the few other Midland churches, who had migrated to Bromsgrove because of the cloth-weaving and other industries. In 1672 the thirteen members signed a covenant to meet together for "ye worship of God at times appointed by ye church," and in it avowed their loyalty to the cause "to keepe in ye way of sepparation from all inventions of men, and never to leave the church to embrace any other doctrine that tends to schism and division until we have appealed to ye church for satisfaction." That they were sharers of the persecution of the time is evident from the early words of the covenant—"though we have met with sore and great temptations [trials] we have hitherto been helped by the God of Israel,"

and Crosby records that Eckels was taken while preaching and put into Worcester Gaol, although there is little existing evidence for this.

John Eckels' ministry continued for over thirty years, and it is noteworthy that during all this time the church had no settled abode, its gatherings being held in private houses. To meet the requirements of the Toleration Act the house of deacon Humphrey Potter was, in 1700, registered as a meeting-house. Behind this house Potter later built the church's first actual meeting-house. The relation with Birmingham began on August 24th, 1737, when seventeen Bromsgrove members, living in Birmingham, were formed into a separate church, the Bromsgrove pastor, George Yarnold, assisting in the service. This church later became Cannon Street. For thirty-nine years during the closing half of this century, James Butterworth, a disciple of David Crosley, was minister, and during his time (in 1770) a new meeting-house was erected in Howe Lane (now Church Street). John Scroxton's ministry, which commenced at the close of the century, was noteworthy for the formation of the first Sunday School in Bromsgrove, and for the settlement of the church in the Worcester Street chapel, which became their third meeting-house. The most noteworthy of subsequent ministers were Alexander Macdonald (1863-75), whose flourishing ministry led to the erection of the present New Road chapel, and James Ford, who wrote the history of the church as a memorial of its 250th anniversary.

After a splendid tea, delightfully served by the Bromsgrove friends, we proceeded into the church itself. The Bromsgrove chapel is a light, spacious, and tastefully appointed building, readily creative of a sense of worship. Dr. Whitley, in taking the chair for the Society's annual meeting, reminded us that it was in the Bromsgrove chapel that David Crosley was baptized. Mr. Seymour Price's secretarial report rejoiced in the manifest progress of the Society, over one hundred new members having been added in three years. Mr. A. H. Calder, the treasurer, reported a balance in hand. Officers and committee were re-elected for the ensuing year, and Mr. G. E. Page happily voiced our thanks to the Bromsgrove folk for their kindly hospitality. The pastor, the Rev. H. W. Hunt, who is exercising so happy and progressive a ministry, emphasised the delight of his own folk at entertaining us, and gave an interesting résumé of the church's history. The Rev. Percy Austin, B.A., gave well-merited praise to the Rev. A. S. Langley, F.R.Hist.S., for his efficient organizing of the party, and through him to the laymen who had provided the transport. Mr. Langley himself was set apart for the ministry in that church, and in telling us something

of its glowing history, he told us that in the fifties of last century the Bromsgrove church had more mission stations than any other two churches in the Birmingham area.

The return journey took us to the foot of the Lickey Hills, past the works of the Austin Motor Co., and we saw also the colleges of the Woodbrooke Settlement, and the Birmingham University. And so ended yet another outing of the Historical Society; interesting, very informative, and a time of happy fellowship.

F. G. HASTINGS.

II. REPORT FOR THE YEAR 1938.

Twelve months ago, by generous permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury, our annual meeting was preceded by a visit to Lambeth Palace, a building which enshrines many centuries of history. Literary treasures of particular interest to Baptists were shown, and we also found much to claim our attention in other rooms of the Palace and in the spacious grounds. "Upton," Lambeth, a London church which dates from 1785, and has been the scene of two outstanding ministries, that of James Upton, the first President of the Baptist Union, and that of William Williams, Spurgeon's intimate friend, welcomed us for the annual meeting and tea. The churches which entertain us on our annual excursions do so royally, and "Upton" worthily maintained the tradition.

To-day we are indebted to our member, the Rev. A. S. Langley, for arranging this interesting excursion to Bromsgrove, and to three Midland laymen, Councillor A. Smith, Mr. F. S. Thompson, J.P., and Mr. R. H. Woodward, who have generously provided the charabancs. Here at Bromsgrove we are on historic ground, for this church was the mother church of the Birmingham area. We pay our tribute to the pioneers, worthy men and women, who followed God's truth as revealed to them, prepared to suffer rather than be disloyal to that truth. We rejoice in the present welfare and prosperity of this ancient church, and we pray that on minister and people God's richest blessing may rest.

During the past twelve months we have elected twenty-seven new members, making over one hundred additions in the course of three years. We need a constant influx of new members, as inevitably we lose a few each year, who retire owing to age or financial stringency. Then, in recent years, our losses by the death of those who joined in the early days have been heavy. We recall with affection such men as F. J. Blight, W. E. Blomfield, Carey Bonner, S. W. Bowser, Alfred Ellis, C. M. Hardy,

Herbert Marnham, Edward Robinson—all faithful members, keenly interested in Baptist principles, indeed, men who helped to make Baptist history.

The new members have been secured mainly by the efforts of two or three officers. Is it not within the power of each member to introduce one new member during 1939? With a larger membership roll we could do much more and publish "extras." A specimen copy of the *Baptist Quarterly* will be sent to any prospective member.

The officers have received several enquiries on historical matters from research students and churches, both in this country and abroad, and usually the required information has been available.

Four issues of the *Baptist Quarterly*, now enlarged to 64 pages, have been published, and the editor and his co-workers are deeply indebted to the ministers and laymen who, without remuneration, contributed to its columns. Particularly gratifying has been the research undertaken by some of our younger ministers and laymen. That the *Quarterly* is valued, and has a place of its own, is evidenced by the many appreciative letters and messages which are received.

All students of history will rejoice that the material for the third volume of Dr. Whitley's invaluable *Baptist Bibliography* is now ready. The publication of this will be an expensive matter, but it must be faced. The new volume, which may run from 1837 to 1887, will cover an important period of Baptist life in this country, and we hope it will not be needful to defer publication unduly.

SEYMOUR J. PRICE, *Secretary.*

III. FINANCIAL STATEMENT.

(For the year ended 31st December, 1938.)

				INCOME.					
				£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Balance from 1937	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	18	6
Subscriptions—									
Annual for 1938	134	1	6			
Annual for 1939	7	2	0			
				<hr/>			141	3	6
Sale of Publications	8	5	9
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							£153	7	9
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EXPENDITURE.

	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
<i>Baptist Quarterly</i> , four issues	101	2	3
Stationery, postages, insurance, etc.	12	18	0
Issue to Hon. Members, <i>Roade Baptist Church</i> ... ..	...	...	...	4	0	0
Transfer to Reserve ... ..	...	...	...	25	0	0
Balance in hand	3	5	6			
Subscriptions paid in advance	7	2	0			
	<hr/>			10	7	6
				<hr/>		
				£153	7	9
				<hr/>		

RESERVE FUND.

	£	s.	d.
For Life Subscriptions	50	0	0
General Reserve	35	0	0
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	£85	0	0
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A. H. CALDER, *Treasurer*.

Bunyan and the Cokayns.

Mr. Bernard Cockett has published in the *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society* (vol. xii., 225) an account of George Cokayn, minister at Pancras in Soper Lane. It contains references to Bunyan, as follow. He was mustered as a lad of sixteen, when his father had married again, into the company of lieutenant-colonel Richard Cokayn, and was sent to garrison Newport Pagnell, under Sir Samuel Luke. The officers belonged to Cople and Cardington, three miles east of Elstow. George Cokayn was ejected in 1660, about the time when Bunyan was imprisoned. In 1663 and 1664 he was preaching in his father's house at Cardington, and he may have visited Bunyan in the County Jail. In 1672 application was made (perhaps in Bunyan's writing) for a group of licences to be delivered to Nathaniel Ponder, including the house of Frances Whiteman at Cardington, John Bunyan at the house of Josias Roughead in Bedford, John Gibbs for his own house at Newport Pagnell.

Other licences were also granted for George Cockaine at his houses in Redcross Street and St. Giles, Cripplegate, outside London.

Four years later, Ponder published the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Mr. Cockett thinks that he may have prompted John Owen to stir in the release of Bunyan from the Town Jail. And soon, evidently through the same circle, Bunyan was preaching at Pinner's Hall, one of the chief places for Dissenting worship, occupied on Sunday by an Open-Membership church of exactly the same type as his own at Bedford. In 1679 and the next few years, his church met often at Cotton End, and on the death of Elder Samuel Fenn, at a meeting there on 12th December, 1681, it was agreed to arrange for the better supply of the Meetings at Bedford, Kemston, Malden, Cotton End, Edworth and Gamblingay; also to transfer William Breeden to the care of the "beloved Brother Cockain in London." Another of Cokayn's members was John Strudwick, about twenty-seven years old, a grocer at the sign of the Star on Snow Hill, who rose to be senior deacon. In August, 1688, he welcomed Bunyan, wet through on a ride from Reading; and though Bunyan preached on the 19th at John Gammon's Open-Membership church in Boar's Head Yard, off Petticoat Lane, he was too ill to go home. His last days were cheered by his "lifelong friend" Cokayn, and on 31st August he was laid to rest in a grave bought for the purpose by Strudwick in Tindall's burial ground, Bunhill Fields. Three years later, Cokayn also was buried there, on 27th November, after service at Stocking Weavers' Hall in Red Cross Street.

A year later, the church moved to a new meeting house built for it, still to be seen at 5 Hare Court, a quarter of a mile west from Red Cross Street. Cokayn's will was not proved for four years. It spoke of land and mansion at Herring's Green, Cardington; of his bachelor son, John, at Cotton End; of his son William, a grocer in London. Twenty months later, Strudwick died, and was buried in the grave he bought for Bunyan.

W. T. WHITLEY.