

Cemetery Road, Sheffield, 1839-1939.

THE Church at Cemetery Road, Sheffield, has completed a century of Christian fellowship and service, and November provided the occasion of its celebration. Opportunity was taken to raise a fund of about £2,000, by which the entire substantial premises have been re-decorated and placed in complete repair. Thus the new century is entered upon free from any burden qualified to hamper future usefulness, and its workers succeed to a goodly heritage.

Cemetery Road, which returns the largest membership of the Yorkshire Baptist Association, had, like many of our churches, a humble nativity. In 1837 a young man, Cornelius Atkinson, came to a business appointment in Sheffield, hailing from the General Baptist Church at Retford, some 23 miles away. He did not bring his transfer with him, for Retford hesitated to dismiss him to the Sheffield Church meeting at Townhead, and Townhead was equally uncertain about his reception, for, said they: "Those of our body are High Calvinists, and they are Low Arminians."

Left without a spiritual home, this young man of but seventeen years gathered a few others of like faith and order, who met together for prayer and mutual edification, commencing in Rockingham Street at the house of Mr. and Mrs. John Carter.

From here, they were next found meeting in premises at 17, Matilda Street, since rebuilt, and in which a well-attended Sunday School also gathered. Presently the school was for convenience removed to a two-storied workshop in Porter Street. The difficulties of the struggling cause may be found in the fact that the superintendent of the school had to take his stand half-way up the communicating stairway, from which position his head and shoulders were visible in the upper school, and the lower portion of his anatomy from the ground floor room. A somewhat unusual vantage point for supervising the proceedings, and not without its humorous aspect.

Presently a venture of faith was made in a migration to the Assembly Rooms, Norfolk Street, now taken down for street widening, at a rental of £2 per month. When numbering eleven souls they entered into a Christian covenant, the Minute Book recording in ornate caligraphy as follows:

"May this little band increase in piety, in holy zeal, in brotherly love, and in numbers; and may the great Head of the Church be honoured in them, and by them, for His Name's sake." H.H.

The initials are of the Rev. Hugh Hunter, of Nottingham, who constituted the little flock into a church.

During the first half-century, seven ministers laboured in the seeking and saving work to which the church was called. Under the first of these—Rev. T. H. Hudson, 1841-1844—they appear to have made good progress, for they resolved to “build a house unto the name of the Lord”; which aspiration was attained in 1842 at the opening of the chapel in Eyre Street. In the meantime, use was made of the nearby running stream of the Sheaf as it passes through Leadmill Dam for the observance of the baptismal rite. This Dam, situate at the junction of Matilda Street and St. Mary’s Road, has for some years been arched over, the covered surface forming a children’s playground.

Mr. Hudson has been described as “an able preacher, a wise counsellor, and of great largeness of heart.” By-and-by he heard the call to undertake missionary work in China, where he continued to the end of his life.

Helpful ministries succeeded and the cause prospered. The Rev. Thomas Horsfield, 1845-1849, was a devoted and active personality, greatly beloved for his sweetness of disposition. During his ministry steps were taken to enlarge the accommodation, and to consolidate the work. Some surnames now familiar in the present membership are found during this pastorate.

Rev. J. Batey came to the church in 1850. He was present, too, at the Jubilee celebrations in 1889. Tall and spare of figure, of keen intellectual gifts, and outstanding virility, he was later widely known in the London Baptist area. In 1881, Mr. Batey, then seventy years old and retired, conducted a class of Lay Preachers at Broadway Hall, Crouch End. In the same year he became honorary pastor of a small congregation, meeting at this Hall. Recognising the need for more permanent buildings, and arising out of his great pertinacity, the present site of Ferme Park was acquired in 1884 and the building opened in 1889.

During the ministry of Rev. Henry Ashberry, the Eyre Street Chapel became inadequate, and it was decided to remove to a more promising and developing neighbourhood, choosing the present site, which was secured sufficiently large to permit later extensions.

It is worthy of record that in the negotiations for sale of Eyre Street Chapel to the Vicar and Wardens of St. Simon’s Parish, a vital meeting of the contracting parties took place to arrange the final details and to fix the amount of purchase. After seeking Divine guidance in prayer, the would-be purchasers were

invited to state the highest price they could see their way to give, naming the figure in writing. The vendors were similarly asked to name the lowest amount they were prepared to accept; and when these two statements were exhibited to the general company there was not so much as a single coin of difference between them; so amicably was this important transfer made.

The sum of £2,200 thus realised was exceedingly helpful in the erection of the present chapel building, with the schoolroom beneath, costing £3,000, which was opened for public worship on May 12th, 1859, the Rev. Hugh Stowell Brown, of Liverpool, conducting the opening services. And now, with a more commodious chapel, situated in a prominent thoroughfare, led by an able minister, and supported by a loyal and whole-hearted people, Cemetery Road began to take an acknowledged place in the religious life of the city.

Among their ministers, the Rev. Giles Hester, 1864-1875, previously at Loughborough, is remembered as a man of exceptional gifts, and one who exerted a powerful influence. His memory is still held in honour by all who knew him. During his ministry several notable additions to the premises were made. The street frontage was improved by the construction of better approaches, the organ enlarged, and classrooms provided.

Rev. James Maden, a past President of the General Baptist Association, laboured from 1880, leaving grateful memories of a lovable and genial disposition upon his acceptance of a call to another sphere at Nottingham in 1883.

He was followed by Rev. E. Carrington, who maintained a most helpful ministry for twenty-two years, 1883-1905. Coming from his first charge at Swadlincote, he gathered about him a company of warmly attached and devoted people, whose elders dreamed dreams and whose young men saw visions. A local newspaper of the period said of him :

“Judging by the services, he is an eloquent practical preacher; an energetic worker; and a man of broad and generous sympathies; to whom young and old alike will unhesitatingly resort for counsel or advice.”

With painstaking zeal he ever upheld the highest ideals, and again larger premises were needed for the work. There were, too, some remaining debts, but the folk rallied their ability and talents for a new advance. The premises as they are to-day were then completed. The new Lecture Hall, Church Parlour, Men's Room, Primary Department, Tea Kitchen, Caretaker's House, and a more commodious Minister's Vestry, at a cost of £4,150, were added. The value of this new equipment has long been proved.

A quite distinctive feature in the church's life has been the persistence of several generations of families, sons and daughters following on in the work and service of the church of their forbears; whilst a by no means insignificant number lay claim to more than a half-century of membership.

One early instance only may be cited. In the fifties of the last century one of the elders, who was also choirmaster, exclaimed to his growing son: "John, I am going to have you taught music, and when you are proficient you will play the organ at the chapel; and, mind, you will play without fee or reward." It is good to relate that John — did play the organ for no less than forty-one years, and delighted in doing so gratuitously. This is but a type of the devotion that has characterised this active fellowship throughout the years.

Neither have calls to National Service fallen upon deaf ears. During the period of the Great War, 1914-1918, quite a number of members volunteered for active service, and the names of those who made the supreme sacrifice are held in highest honour; being publicly remembered in a beautiful Memorial Pulpit, and upon outstanding occasions such as Armistice celebrations, and in other ways.

In the year 1923 the church was recipient of a valuable benefaction through the kindness of Mrs. Elizabeth Clark Eberlin, who bequeathed as a memorial to her late husband, Mr. Louis Eberlin, the present Manse in Thornsett Road. Mr. Eberlin's life had been identified with church and school in many capacities, including Bible Class leader, Deacon and Church Secretary. Never was there a more faithful servant, and this bequest stands out as a distinct acquisition to the church's property, and a cherished memorial to two of her most devoted members.

Other succeeding ministers have been Rev. Ernest Price, B.A., B.D., Rev. C. E. Shipley, Rev. W. H. Stradling, and the present pastor, Rev. T. J. Whitman, who has supported a happy pastorate of twelve years.

The story of Cemetery Road is an uneventful and peaceful record of several generations of devoted hearts, brethren and sisters, who have given themselves to the service of the sanctuary unstintingly; and have found there the comfort of its worship, the inspiration of its fellowship, and the joy of its evangel.

F. E. BRADLEY.