

Retford Baptist Church.

I.

A NOTABLE event in the annals of North Nottinghamshire Baptists was recently celebrated at Retford. It was the 250th anniversary of the foundation of the Baptist Church in this ancient borough, and the seventieth of the opening of the present chapel building. All its members and workers deem it an honour to be associated with Retford's oldest Free Church, and coupled with their pride is a feeling of humble thankfulness at the fact that through all the trials and changes of two and a half centuries, the witness originally started by a handful of humble folk has been maintained.

Closely linked with Retford in the rejoicings was the village of Gamston, three miles away. Adam Taylor's *History of the English General Baptists* shows that a man named Aaron Jeffery introduced the cause to Gamston, about 1690, during the reign of William and Mary. Jeffery appears to have been connected in his early life with churches of the denomination at Collingham, near Newark, and Misterton, near Gainsborough; these were probably formed prior to the Restoration, and shared in the persecution which followed that event.

As a young man, Aaron determined to seek a situation with the fourth and last Earl of Clare (who afterwards became Duke of Newcastle), a nobleman of Liberal sentiments, whose seat was at Haughton Hall. Asked if he had brought a character, he replied, "No, but I am a General Baptist." Apparently the Earl thought this a sufficient recommendation, for he engaged him forthwith as a footman. On Sunday mornings Aaron regularly walked from Haughton Hall to Collingham (twelve miles) to worship; in the absence of a preacher, he occupied the pulpit, wearing his gold-lace livery. After many years of service he was appointed keeper of the park, and lived at Haughton Lodge. In 1691 he took a farm at Gamston, removing there with his wife and family. He began to hold meetings for prayer and exhortation at his house. In passing it is interesting to note that, in the year when he was appointed Lord High Steward of the Borough of East Retford, Earl Clare removed to Welbeck (the seat of Duke of Portland). He was created Duke of Newcastle three years later, and died in 1711 as the result of an accident in the hunting field. After his removal to Welbeck, Haughton Hall was closed and allowed to fall into disrepair. To-day, nothing but a farmhouse marks the site of a household whose splendour was a byword throughout Notts.

Aaron Jeffery and his wife died in 1729, within a few hours of each other. Their youngest son, Joseph (twenty-seven) succeeded to the farm and continued the meetings. He sought and was granted a licence for the house under the Toleration Act, 1689. When the premises became too small for services, he obtained permission from his landlord to build a meetinghouse on his own farm. This was opened in 1741. He conducted baptisms in the River Idle at Gamston.

Gamston will always be known for its association with Dan Taylor. Hailing from Northoram, Halifax, he reached the village in 1763, when on his way (with others) to Boston, in search of members of the Denomination. After a stay at the house of Mr. Jeffery, Dan Taylor was baptised by him on Wednesday, February 12th of that year, in the Idle. The meetinghouse built in 1741 was rebuilt in 1880. Dedicated as the "Dan Taylor Memorial," it was opened by Dr. Clifford. Fifty years later a restoration scheme was carried out. A cheque for £10 was received from friends at Birchcliffe, Hebden Bridge, which was Dan Taylor's Church, and became the centre from which the greater part of his work was done.

It is apparent that there was a small community of Baptists at Retford about the year 1690. Richard Brownlow, of St. Andrew, London, bequeathed in his Will 1691 (it was proved in London in 1692) "his newest message, one acre of land, two beast gates and five land ends" towards the founding of a meetinghouse. He died the same year, and was buried in West Retford Parish Church. The founding of the Church, therefore, was in 1692, three years after the Toleration Act and Bill of Rights had become law. The ancient meetinghouse was on the site now occupied by three cottages in Chapel Yard and a burial ground at the rear. The building continued in use for 125 years.

The ravages of time affected the building, but though it was patched up on various occasions, it was in a very bad state by the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, the need for larger premises had become apparent by the year 1815, and zealous exertions were made to obtain one. The principal contributor was William Hill, of Upton, Retford, who gave a handsome sum of money for two years without interest, remarking, "You may pay me the interest if you can, if not, why, I must go without!" Eventually he decided that the money should be a gift instead of a loan. A commodious place of worship was completed at a cost of between £500 and £600, and opened on May 25th, 1817, by Mr. Stevenson, Loughborough. There was accommodation for 200 people. The old meetinghouse was adapted for use as a Sunday school, which was established in 1813. It is interesting to note that the generous benefactor, William Hill (who was blind)

worshipped at Gamston with his brother, George Hill; they are interred in the chapel burial ground there.

No alterations were made to the Retford Chapel until 1836. To meet the needs of an increasing congregation it was enlarged in that year to give accommodation for 100 more people. It was re-opened on August 14th, 1836, and a manse was added in 1869. In course of time even this additional accommodation was found inadequate, and a movement was set on foot for the erection of a new place of worship. The foundation stone was laid on October 11th, 1871, by the then Mayor of Retford, and the chapel was opened on June 2nd, 1872, by Professor George Rogers, of Spurgeon's College, London. The building cost £900.

In 1790 the following were permitted to be erected by certain persons on property belonging to the West Retford Meeting House: weaving shop, calendar house, brewhouse, warehouse, starching chamber, hickling shop, spinning shade.

II.

OPEN-AIR BAPTISMS. In the 'thirties and 'forties the "ordinance of believers' baptism" was administered in the streams and in the vicinity of Sherwood Forest. At Boughton, adherents were baptised in the River Idle, close to Whitewater Bridge (forty years ago the writer was told that on one occasion the ice had to be broken before the ceremony could take place); in the pool of water on Wellow Green (not far from the famous Maypole) near Ollerton; and in the river at Warsop, near Mansfield.

Writers in old magazines state that early on a Sunday morning in those days, it was an interesting sight to witness people flocking from all directions to the place of baptism. They came from Retford, Mansfield, Gamston, Elkesley, Tuxford, Ollerton, Kirton and many villages in the area.

At Retford the rite was performed in the Canal Locks, near the Corporation Wharf, and in the River Idle, between the Carr Bridge and the Acqueduct; baptisms at Gamston were also in the Idle, the place being close by a mill which stood on the banks of the river, and which was demolished in 1854; (the last occasion the Idle was used for baptisms was in 1881); the Canal was used for baptisms at Misterton, near Gainsborough. One William Elliott, who was a member of the Broad Street Baptist Church, Nottingham, and married in 1794 the eldest daughter of John Jeffery, Gamston Mill, was in 1786 baptised with thirty-one others in the River Trent.

Henry Snowden, at the Sloswick Hospital, a faithful supporter of Retford Baptist Church, who lived to be nearly ninety years, once told the writer that he remembered the ministry of the

Rev. Silas Stenson, and he could also recollect the time when people were conveyed in waggons from Doncaster to Retford for baptism.

There is now no Baptist Church at Misterton (the cause was founded there in 1610, and a chapel built in 1761), or at Kirton, near Ollerton (cause founded in 1840), Warsop (1859), Gainsborough (1879), Sutton-on-Trent, near Newark (1811), or at Wellow, Tuxford or Worksop.

III.

WORTHY PIONEERS. A large number of those who in their youthful days were associated with the cause at Retford, became prominent in different centres and occupied notable positions in Baptist history. One became a prominent Baptist minister whose son followed in his footsteps; another was one of the principal founders of a Baptist Church at Sheffield, his son, too, became a minister. Two "sons of the manse" at Retford were elected as Mayors, and some have held office as magistrates. Others, again, played a part in industry and public life. It is impossible to give the names of all, but some of the outstanding may be mentioned.

Cornelius Atkinson (1815-1895) was baptised at Retford in 1831, on the Sunday when the mortal remains of his spiritual father (Rev. Silas Stenson) lay in the Manse awaiting burial. He removed to Sheffield in 1839, and was one of the founders of the Cemetery Road Church. For fifty-five years he was a deacon, and he held the post of Superintendent of the Sunday school for thirty-five years. A memorial tablet was presented to the church by his son, Rev. J. H. Atkinson (1843-1919), who did good work at Leicester, Liverpool and Cardiff. The sculptor of the tablet was Harry Hems, an Exeter artist, and one of Cornelius Atkinson's scholars.

James Atkinson (1814-1873), brother of Cornelius, was baptised at Retford in 1823, became a deacon and treasurer of the church and secretary of the Sunday school; for many years he was regarded as the "backbone" of the Baptist cause in that area.

Joseph Foulkes Winks (1794-1866) attended the church services in the days of his apprenticeship. He was the son of Joseph Winks, Gainsborough, whose father was a farmer at Bole. Baptised in 1823, he removed to Sheffield, thence to Killingholme, near Grimsby (known in history owing to its association with the Pilgrim Fathers) to be pastor and teacher of a day school. Later he went to Melbourne, Derbyshire, and set up a printing press. He was the first man in Great Britain to make a living by writing magazines for the young. At Leicester he became editor, printer and publisher of Baptist magazines. For twenty years he was the honorary minister of Carley Street Baptist Church, Leicester. It

was at Friar Lane Chapel, Leicester, in 1859, that he baptised his personal friend, Thomas Cooper (1805-1892), the Chartist, poet and preacher. The Baptist Chapel in St. Benedict's Square, Lincoln (erected 1885) is known as the Thomas Cooper Memorial Baptist Chapel. Incidentally, the cause in that city dates back to 1652.

Mr. Winks's good work was continued by his son, the Rev. William Edward Winks (1843-1926), who commenced preaching at seventeen. After being trained at Old Chilwell College, Nottingham, he commenced his ministry at Wisbech. From 1876 to 1914 he was minister at Bethany Baptist Church, Cardiff. A keen scientist, he was elected a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1898, and during his active ministry at Cardiff was hon. Curator at Cardiff Museum.

Another minister was the Rev. Silas Stenson (1827-31), uncle of Dr. Clifford, who was a frequent visitor to Gamston and Retford. Mr. Stenson married Miss Wightman, Elkesley, whose mother was a daughter of the Rev. John Dossey (1716-1788), one of the ministers at Gamston. The Dosseys and the Wightmans were related to the Fawcetts and Dixons. Names of members of these families are on memorial stones in the Gamston Baptist burial ground and in Elkesley Churchyard.

Two sons of the Rev. William Nicholson (1805-1875), Jonas and William, became Mayors of the city of Wakefield, and were prominent supporters of the Baptist cause there.

William Briggs (1839-1919), a native of Retford, received his early religious training in the Sunday school during the ministry of the Rev. William Fogg, and in after years regarded the hymn book (presented to him in 1847) as one of the most highly-prized treasures of his library. He was educated at a school conducted by Miss Salvin, Chancery Lane, and afterwards attended Miss Furnival's school in Grove Street, another in the Market Square (the headmaster being Mr. Brown), and at Mr. Allen's in West Retford. Mr. Briggs held every office a layman could occupy in the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and fitted up two libraries of books which had been presented for circulation to the National Sunday School Union of Scotland.

Mr. Briggs presided at the centenary gathering of the Retford Baptist Sunday School in 1913, and entertained the scholars and teachers. Four years later he gave £100 towards the clearance of the debt on the church property; under his will the trustees received £200 for investment for the benefit of the Sunday school, in memory of the time when he was a scholar. His father, William Camomile Briggs, drove the last coach between Retford and Newark until shortly after the opening of the Great Northern Railway in 1852.

The Rev. S. Skingle was instrumental in founding the Doncaster Baptist Church. He addressed meetings, and in 1885 baptised a number of people, one of whom became a deacon of the Doncaster Church.

Probably no episode in our history is more moving than that relating to Samuel Skidmore (1773-1854) a weaver who lived close to the old meetinghouse. He came from Wellow, where he was a member of Baptist Society. For upwards of twenty years he walked a distance of twenty-four miles every Sunday to conduct services at Misterton. As he had lost his sight, it was necessary for his wife to accompany him. It is no exaggeration to state that during the period mentioned, this faithful couple must have trudged a total of 52,000 miles, in all weathers.

It is recorded that William Bradford, one of the Pilgrim Fathers, was in 1610 the founder of the Baptist cause at Misterton in North Notts., and for ten years acted as the pastor. He frequently preached at Epworth and West Butterwick, Lincolnshire, until 1620, when he and his faithful band set sail from Plymouth in the *Mayflower* and landed in New England.

The village of Askham, four miles from Gamston, is known in history by its association with the Helwys family. Thomas Helwys, who lived at Broxtowe Hall, Notts., was one of the Pilgrim Fathers who fled from persecution to Holland, whence he returned, and set up in London the first Baptist Church in England. A hospital for old people was founded at Askham in 1659 by one of the Helwys family.

IV.

DATES OF MINISTERS. Aaron Jeffery officiated as pastor at Gamston for thirty-nine years (1690-1729), and his youngest son, Joseph, who succeeded him, was minister for fifty-three years (1741-1794). In 1763 John Dossey was chosen as co-pastor. He died in 1778 at the age of sixty-two. Jonathan Scott, Queenshead, Yorkshire, became the colleague of Joseph Jeffery in 1785. Both died in the same year (1794), Jeffery having attained the advanced age of ninety years. J. Scott was fifty-four.

In 1795 John Smedley removed from Melbourne, Derbyshire, to Retford, and from then until 1826, a period of thirty-one years, he had the oversight of the work at both Gamston and Retford.

Since that time the list of ministers at Retford is as follows: Silas Stenson (1827-31), William Nicholson, a native of Wakefield and founder of the well-known publishing firm of William Nicholson and Son (1832-34), William Fogg, during whose ministry the church enjoyed its greatest prosperity. There were nearly 300 members. In addition to the chapels at Retford and Gamston, there were five preaching places in the villages (1835-

53), Thomas Lee (1855-66), Thomas Mee (1868-70), John James Dalton (1871-73), who was pastor when the present church was built; James Thomas Roberts (1874-76); Robert Silby (1877-81) afterwards at Nottingham; Samuel Skingle (1881-96); John Neighbour (1897-1901), who left for Nottingham; Henry Collard, A.T.S. (1901-08), Herbert Frederick Bran (1909-12), who has just relinquished office as President of the East Midland Baptist Association; Percy George Ralph Monk (1913-15), William Francis Dart (1916-26), Wallace Vellam Pitts (1927-31), who left for Cambridge; in 1932 the Rev. Charles Frederick Darvell, C.F., was appointed pastor. He retired from the active ministry in 1937, and for several years has been responsible for carrying on the work at New Ollerton, situate in the Notts. coalfield. The Baptist Chapel at Boughton, which had been there for 100 years, was sold in 1926, and the proceeds used towards the erection of a school chapel in the new colliery village at Ollerton.

The present minister is the Rev. Edwin Exall, who came to Retford in February, 1942, from Wainsgate, Hebden Bridge, which is the "Mecca" of Yorkshire Baptists, and associated with two names famed in Baptist history—Dan Taylor, who was in 1763 the first pastor and founder of Birchcliffe Baptist Church there, and the founder, in 1797, of the Midland Baptist College; and Dr. John Fawcett, his co-worker, who in 1764 entered upon his ministry at Wainsgate (formed in 1750) and who was the writer of the hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds."

FRED. C. ATTON.