

Some Baptist Churches on the borders of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.

THE writer, spending some time near St. Neots, took the opportunity to enquire into the history of the Church at Hail Weston, whose date is given in the Baptist Union Handbook as 1636. This enquiry has led him to seek information regarding certain neighbouring Churches, who have kindly allowed him to examine their records. Information has also been obtained from the manuscript work in five volumes, by Joseph Rix, M.D., on the Churches of St. Neots and Hail Weston, in the possession of the Dr. Williams's Library.

It is probable that there were Nonconformist meetings at Hail Weston in 1636. The village is within two miles of St. Neots, and Nonconformists in the town would naturally find it a convenient place for meeting. But the Baptist Church there has no right to such a date.

KEYSOE.

John Donne, born at Tudhoe, County Durham, took his B.A. degree at Cambridge in 1653, and became Rector of Pertenhall, Bedfordshire, in the same year, under the Great Seal. But when Charles II returned in 1660, this was treated as null and void, and he went to live at the neighbouring village of Keysoe. A Church had been formed there in 1652, but appears at first to have met on the third Sunday of each month. Unfortunately its original Church Book cannot be found. The present book begins May 12, 1790, with extracts from the original book, including Church Covenant, and rules for admission of members. It says that the earliest entry in the original book gave the amount of a collection on December 21. 1657.

John Donne had been coming to preach to these people in 1658, and when he left Pertenhall he became the first Pastor of their Church. The date of his appointment is unknown, but he presided at a Church Meeting on December 22, 1662, when Brother Rogers was admonished for preaching without the consent of the Church. An entry in May 1664, which was not in Donne's writing, authorised Brother Rogers to exercise his gift whenever and wherever he be called thereto. Donne was probably already in prison, and James Rogers duly joined his Pastor there, and was released from Bedford Jail at the same time as John Bunyan and John Donne.

There is no doubt that Donne's children, born at Pertenhall, were christened there. The Keysoe Church Covenant gave members liberty concerning baptism, both with respect to subjects and mode. Calamy says that Donne was a Baptist some part of his life: perhaps he learned from John Bunyan while they were confined at Bedford. The Church at Brook End, Keysoe, has long been Baptist.

A return of prisoners at Bedford in March 1669, shows that John Bunyan was there, and convicted upon the statute of 35th Elizabeth for conventicles; also John Donne and Thomas Haynes, convicted upon the late statute (that is 1664) for conventicles, and ordered banishment. However, they were still there three years later, and were set free with John Bunyan. We all know the story that John Bunyan was sometimes allowed out; and it seems that John Donne was also favoured. At any rate, attention is drawn to the present tense in the Archdeacon's Return of Nonconformists, 1669:

Bolnhurst. Independent. About 80. Of mean condition. John Donne, ejected out of the Rectory at Pertenhall. He usually preaches at his home in Keysoe.

Keysoe. Independent. About 100. Meanest quality. George Fowler, woodard; Nathaniel Ancock, dairyman; Oliver Mason, labourer; William Craddock, miller; Peter Yorke of Deane, woodard; Thomas Brace of Bolnhurst, husbandman, who preach at the house of George Fowler.

When John Donne was released, John Bunyan obtained for him a licence to preach at his own house and at that of George Fowler; but his ministry was short. His health had been ruined. The date of his death is not known; but his successor had come and gone by 1677.

In 1726 they were meeting in a building that had been a barn; but in 1741 they obtained the site at Brook End, Keysoe, and built the present Chapel.

They have had many Pastors, one of whom, the Rev. Reynold Hogg, was one of the founders and the first Treasurer of the Baptist Missionary Society.

The membership has usually been 50 to 70; but in 1879 and 1880 they had a remarkable influx, and received the following new members:

1879: April, 13; July, 10; October, 6. 1880: February, 10; May, 10; July, 11; and the membership rose to 110. To-day it stands at 40.

The Church decided in 1874 that while membership be restricted to baptised believers, paedobaptists may be admitted to the Lord's Table.

On January 19, 1812, Joel Miles formed another Baptist

Church at Keysoe Row, about a mile from Bolnhurst and two miles from Brook End, and provided an endowment. This Church was united to that at Brook End in 1901; but the old thatched Chapel, which was originally a barn, is still used for one service every Sunday.

HAIL WESTON

An entry in the Church Book of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, shows that there was a congregation at Hail Weston in 1669, and mentions the name of Ralph Luke of Eynesbury. He was a member of the Church at Keysoe. In 1672 he was granted a licence to preach, and in July of that year he desired the sense of the Church at Keysoe about going out to speak the Word, and they promised their "thoughts" next month, but the Church Book makes no further reference to this.

In 1675 he was "presented" by the constables of Eynesbury for not coming to church; and in 1679 James Measures of Hail Weston was presented for suffering conventicles in his house, contrary to the statute.

On July 1, 1691, a Church was formed at Hail Weston, with Ralph Luke as Pastor. James Measures was also a member, and there were thirteen others who had been members at Keysoe. They appointed Brother Parrott "to sing the praises of God in this Church of Christ". As to baptism, there is an entry dated April 17, 1690: "Brother Hancock called forth to minister water baptism to those belonging to this Church that shall have light thereon." Somebody has struck out the words "called forth", and written above them the word "allowed". The Church Covenant dated 1691, said that if any members wished to be baptised, they should have liberty, and the Church should provide the means.

At first they met in a hired barn, but in 1702 John Brown, yeoman, conveyed to them for the nominal consideration of five shillings his great barn, "to be used for a Tabernacle meeting-house, or place for the worship of Almighty God."

In 1718 they built a chapel at St. Neots, and removed there, and that building is known as the Old Meeting. The village tradition says that it was the Congregationalists who removed there, and that the Baptists were left at Hail Weston; but there is no trace of a Baptist Church in the village for about fifty years. On the other hand, Dr. Rix says that it is probable that the Congregational Church at the Old Meeting, St. Neots, was once Baptist; and he points out that in 1855 they were still using Dr. Rippon's hymns.

In 1744, William Joyce, carpenter, became a member at Keysoe, and in 1746 was transferred to Kimbolton. In 1751 he was living at Little Staughton and began to preach there, for

which the Kimbolton Church admonished him. He therefore joined a Strict Communion Church at Cambridge, and continued his preaching. The Hail Weston Church Book begins with the words "June the 14th, 1757, the people at Little Staughton were constituted into a Church. William Joyce, Pastor." Several of them were transferred from Keysoe.

In 1759 they built a Chapel at Hail Weston, about four miles away; for three years they met on alternate Sundays at Little Staughton and Hail Weston; and in 1762 removed to Hail Weston; and the chapel was enlarged in 1780.

In 1793 Joyce's mental powers failed, and the Church unwisely invited two men to preach, and then failed to agree regarding them; and their differences resulted in the formation of three churches, or congregations, at St. Neots and Eynesbury.

They have since had fifteen Pastors, and there has been none for about twenty years.

There are some interesting entries in the Church Book regarding Baptisms.

"October 7, 1827. This day at noon according to the appointment made last Church Meeting, our friends Mrs. Page and Mrs. Law were baptised by immersion in the presence of the Church and congregation, which appeared larger than on any similar occasion. During the preceding week some anxiety had been felt on account of the very delicate state of sister Page's health, lest she should suffer inconvenience from the ordinance owing to her consumptive habit. But with gratitude be it recorded, neither particular inconvenience or injury was sustained. May the circumstance be a means of strengthening the faith of an imperfect worm for the future. And now unto Him who liveth and reigneth be the glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." It may be added that Mrs. Mary Page lived to old age.

"August 2, 1829. The father of Eliza Bozett attended and protested against his daughter being baptised, for she was only nineteen. Fearing he might conduct himself improperly and thus expose himself to punishment, and thereby wound the feelings of his child, the administration of the ordinance was deferred until more convenient opportunity. This opposition gave rise to the enquiry whether the meeting-house was properly registered; and as no person belonging to the Church could answer the question it was thought best to ascertain the fact."

Five weeks later there was another baptismal service, and the girl was one of those baptised.

The Chapel was not registered until 1904.

October 30, 1836. Four men and two women who were about to join a Church at Huntingdon were baptised, also one man and two women who were joining the Church at Hail Weston.

"The morning was cold, and the ground covered with snow some inches deep, but the countenances of the candidates and other friends seemed to present a happy contrast, their hearts being filled with joy and love. O that others may be stirred up to follow their example."

October 30 seems early for some inches of snow; but Messrs. Charles Letts & Co., the diary publishers, confirm that that date was a Sunday.

The village of Elton, in the North of Huntingdonshire, is proud of its claim that the first harvest festival in England was held in the Church, the lovely idea of Bishop Piers Claughton, who succeeded F. W. Faber as their Rector in 1845. The Hail Weston Church Book has an entry dated September 30, 1821 :

"October 5 is appointed for Harvest Meeting to return God thanks for His mercies."

But perhaps that Harvest Meeting was not quite the same as the Bishop's "Festival."

LITTLE STAUGHTON.

There were people at Little Staughton in 1668 and 1669 who were in trouble for refusing to come to Church, and for not baptising their children. They appear to have been members at Keysoe, and we have seen that when a Baptist Church was formed in 1757, several of its members were transferred from Keysoe.

When that Church decided to meet at Hail Weston and to leave Little Staughton entirely, the few who remained continued to meet for prayer and occasionally were indulged with a sermon. Then they heard that John Emery, who was born at Bolnhurst in 1739, and was a member at Carlton, was a good preacher, and Carlton allowed him to come to them once a month. Eventually a Church was formed on October 18, 1766, with eight members, and John Emery as Pastor.

At first they met in the house of William Pearson, then in a small barn. That had to be enlarged, and when it overflowed with hearers a chapel was built, but the Church Book omits to give the date. In 1793 it had to be enlarged to take 450 people, the membership then being about 200. John Emery had a farm at Ravensden Grange, about six miles away. He died in 1799, in his sixtieth year.

In the course of 178 years this Church has had only six Pastors, John Emery, October 18th, 1766, died September, 1799; John Miller, May 3rd, 1801, resigned August 1806; James Knight, October 5th, 1806, died August, 1837; Thomas Robinson, June 28th, 1836, died May, 1889; Charles B. Warren, March 3rd, 1872, resigned September 1901; Alfred Barnabas Hall, September, 1903, resigned 1928. The dates of the resignations of James Knight and Thomas Robinson are not shown in the Church Book, but there is a statement that the latter was Pastor for thirty-eight years, which does not seem to be correct.

A. B. Hall, who resigned in 1928, still lives at the manse and acts as Moderator, and preaches sometimes although ninety years old. His previous pastorate was at Carlton, from which Church John Emery and Thomas Robinson had come.

The Church Book has a Calvinistic confession. The Church has always welcomed baptised believers to the Lord's Supper, but none others.

A few extracts from the Church Book may be interesting.

On February 2, 1790, Brother Thomas Joyce was authorised to exercise his gifts in the meeting before the Church and nowhere else. On January 12, 1791, Thomas Joice (evidently the same man) was "to be silenced from exercising his gift whilst farther orders from the Church"! But Thomas Joyce did not approve of this, and persuaded the Church at Keysoe to apply for his transfer, in order that he might be able to exercise his gift. The minute on April 10, 1791 is "We readily comply." There is a corresponding entry in the Keysoe Church Book saying that their new member was to have opportunity to exercise his gift among them.

There are several other references to gifted brethren. One of these seems to be ideal, excepting perhaps in grammar:

"The Church of Christ meeting in this place finding that our brother John Peacock having in their view a gift for the work of the ministry, he was therefore requested to speak before the Church on February 2, 1803 which he did both on Church meeting day, and on Lord's Day mornings occasionally until the 27th day of December 1803, when the Church seemed to be satisfied and did hope the Lord had not only called him to, but had also given him the gifts for the great work, he having as well as the Church repeated application to supply the Church of Christ at Rushden. Therefore on January 18, a day of prayer was fixed upon in order to give to him this liberty to go and preach the Gospel whenever and wheresoever the Lord might be pleased to call him in providence so to do."

The Church Book has a copy of a long letter, undated, explaining to the Church at Ringsted why Thomas Lee separated. They also wrote on June 1, 1785 to Hail Weston, reproving them for accepting Thomas Lee. Hail Weston sent a letter on June 29, 1785, signed by William Joyce, two Deacons and nine Members, acknowledging their fault. But there is no reference to this correspondence in the Hail Weston Church Book.

In the days of its prosperity, Little Staughton was generous. Between May 1803 and November 1814, they had nine collections for other Churches, and distributed £77 6s. 4d.

In 1944 a Government Department requisitioned a number of houses at Little Staughton, and the Chapel. It was closed at the end of June, and has since been taken down. Until possession of the site can be regained, and a new building erected, the Church is worshipping in the Schoolroom.

ST. NEOTS.

When, in 1793, William Joyce became childish and had to resign the pastorate at Hail Weston, that Church invited two ministers named Mackerness and Rands to preach with a view to the pastorate. There was so much difference of opinion among the members that it was not possible to call either of them, and in 1795 William Alcock became their Pastor.

But some of the members much preferred Thomas Rands, and formed a Church in Kidman's Yard, St. Neots, of which Rands was Pastor for 25 years. Henry Kidman was a butcher at St. Neots, who had been a member at Hail Weston: and the Church met on his premises.

William Alcock lived at St. Neots. He preached at Hail Weston on Sunday mornings and afternoons, and in the evenings in a building behind the "Fox and Hounds" at St. Neots, to a congregation who had become dissatisfied with Thomas Rands.

Some sharp difference arose between William Alcock and the owner of the Fox and Hounds, so Alcock ceased to preach there, but another man provided premises for him to preach on Sunday evenings at Eynesbury.

Then the people at the Fox and Hounds invited George Pruden, a member of the Church at Little Staughton, and he was their preacher for about twelve months.

In 1799 John Stevens, a young man who had been Pastor at Oundle for two years, came to St. Neots and was invited to preach at the Fox and Hounds. On October 1st, 1800, a Church was formed there with 13 members. Stevens resigned in 1805, and eventually became a pillar of the Strict Baptists, at Meard's Court, Wardour Street, London.

In 1811 George Murrell became Pastor, served the

Church until 1868, and died in 1871. In 1817 the Chapel in New Street was opened. In 1821 the building was lengthened, and a gallery erected; and in 1897 considerable improvements were made, including a new vestibule.

John S. Wyard became Co-Pastor in February, 1865, but resigned in April, 1866 because the Church did not think that his Calvinism was strong enough. More than 20 members, however, liked his teaching so much that they formed a separate Church. This met at first at the Corn Exchange; but in March, 1873 they opened a Chapel at East Street. C. H. Spurgeon paid them a visit six months later, and the crowd, inside and outside, was so great that the meeting had to be transferred to the Wesleyan Chapel.

The Church at Kidman's Yard closed when Thomas Rands died. It is doubtful whether Eynesbury ever became a Church. The building at East Street now belongs to the Romanists. And New Street is the only Baptist Church at St. Neots.

GEORGE E. PAGE.