

Chipping Norton Baptist Church, 1694—1944.

“CHIPPING NORTON” appears to be a corruption of two Saxon words which, joined, mean the “Market of the Northmen.” These words, together with the nearby presence of the Rollright Stones, suggest that many hundreds of years ago there was a community living on the present site of the town. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and a Charter was early granted to the Lord of the Manor, giving him liberty to hold a fair for four days in each year. In 1606 the Borough was incorporated, and one of the Maces may be seen in the Town Hall. The Town Council was formed in the year 1835 at the time of the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act. This town, then in the north-west corner of the County of Oxford, has roots which run deep, and a long development very different from the mushroom growth of so many places reared about the time of the Industrial Revolution.

The Parish Church reflects the prosperity of the Cotswold wool trade during the latter part of the mediaeval period. A one-time Vicar, the Rev. Stephen Ford, who was a chaplain at New College, Oxford, was ejected in 1662, and, according to a history of the town published in 1852, he is to be regarded as the Founder of the “Protestant Dissenters’ Meeting” in Chipping Norton, out of which the present Baptist Church eventually sprang. Ford preached among the people until his life was threatened, and he was forced to fly to London for safety. There he preached during the time of the plague. Referring again to local history books, we find that prior to the ministry of the Rev. Stephen Ford, a certain Dr. Butler ministered to Dissenters. All that is known of him is that he was the author of a book on bees and an English Grammar. He was born in 1560 and died in 1647.

The scanty records we have begin with 1694, which is regarded as the official date of the founding of the Church, though the above makes it clear that there was Protestant Dissent in the town many years previously. In 1694 a Mr. John Worth began a short ministry, removing to Marlborough in or about 1699. He was a man of ability, and a sermon of his on the victory of Blenheim was widely known. This was preached at Marlborough.

Then there followed the Rev. John Thorley, who ministered for sixty years. There are tablets to Thorley and his wife in the

present church. He died at the age of eighty-eight. Very little is known of his work, but a book written in 1744 entitled *An Enquiry into the Nature, Order and Government of Bees*, a copy of which was bought recently by one of the present deacons, and read by the writer, reveals his ability and the religious tone of his life. The book is sermonic in style, and he never lets the reader forget that he is a Minister of Religion. The technical importance of the work is due to his revolutionary method of taking the honey without destroying the bees. He writes a lengthy preface, "from his study at Chipping Norton," and there is a long list of subscribers, among them being the Lady Abney of Newington, the Lord Bishop of Worcester, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, and William Fawkner, Governor of the Bank of England, which was constituted the same year as the Church, i.e. 1694.

After the death of John Thorley the cause appears to have become weaker, and for fourteen years there were supply preachers. The only record of that period refers to the occasional visits of the Rev. Mr. Whitmore, of Hook Norton.

It was the opening of Bliss's Tweed Mills in 1757 which made for a revival of interest and prosperity. The worshippers sought the advice of Benjamin Beddome, Baptist minister of Bourton-on-the-Water, and he advised the friends to apply to Bristol Academy. Thomas Purdy was sent as a "Probationer," and continued as such for two years, being then acknowledged as the settled minister. On the first of August, 1775, a Church was formed of fifteen persons baptised at Hook Norton, with three others transferred from neighbouring churches. Purdy was ordained on September 14th, 1775, and was, therefore, the first Pastor of a Baptist Church in Chipping Norton. The previous congregations had been of the Independent order. A broad covenant was drawn up to include the remnant of the Independents, but, according to the minute book, ten years later it was resolved to denominate the cause as "A Particular Baptist Church." The original covenant was accordingly revised. Calvinistic doctrines are easily discovered in the covenant. It was signed by seven men, none of whom has descendants in the Church to-day.

During this period there are accounts of several Fasts being observed by the members on account of the state of war. In 1776 a National Fast was appointed by the Government, and on that occasion the service of Worship and Prayer lasted for three hours.

A story of this period concerns a young man, the eldest son of a respectable family, who was warned never to enter the Meeting House, where, according to his parents, "dreadful doctrines were taught." He was, however, employed by one of the

deacons, a man of such excellent character that the youth was puzzled that so bad a religion could have produced so good a man. He would not break his promise to his parents, but he listened at the window to the voice of the preacher and was converted. He made known the facts and suffered much hardship, but was the means of converting several of his brothers and sisters. In 1779 a piece of ground was enclosed for burials. The last interment there was conducted by the present minister in December, 1940.

A long eulogy of the character and ability of Thomas Purdy, who died in 1802, is recorded in the minutes. He was succeeded by B. H. Draper. Draper was a native of Cumnor and worked at the Clarendon Press in Oxford. A fellow-worker introduced him to the fellowship at New Road Church which called him to the ministry. He was trained at Bristol College, and after a five years' pastorate at Chipping Norton, moved to Coseley in Staffordshire. He was a frequent contributor of verses to the magazines of the period.

After the short ministry of Draper, William Gray took over the charge. (Mr. Parker Gray, of Northampton, is his great-grandson.) Gray had the great advantage of being the assistant of Abraham Booth, of Prescott Street Church, London, a minister who rendered distinguished service there for thirty-seven years. After a few years in London Gray had a short pastorate in Devonport, coming to Chipping Norton in 1809. He sustained a most fruitful ministry, and also turned his house into an Academy for the training of young men. He stated that "Religion flourishes in this town and in the villages around." The Meeting House, built in 1733, was greatly enlarged in 1817. It is recorded that the afternoon service was often crowded. There was seating accommodation for about 500, and the communicants averaged about 100. During this period there were several village stations served by the parent church. In the minute book there is the record of a very lengthy letter to the Church, selections of which follow: "I believe it is well known that on a Sabbath afternoon many persons cannot obtain a place, and many others are so crowded as to render their situation uncomfortable. . . . And besides these things, what seems to me equally distressing, there is no place in the lower part of the Meeting where the poor, to whom the Gospel is to be preached, can have free access. . . . Dear Brethren, I doubt not but the cause of the Redeemer in every part of the world is our subject . . . but there are reasons why the cause of Christ should be peculiarly regarded by you: It is the place of first impressions; the place wherein which your faith has been built; the place in which you hope your children, when you are no more, will rise and call you blessed. . . . I am

fully aware of the difficulties of the present time which press almost upon every class of society . . . but the wall of Jerusalem was built in troublesome times . . . and if it be put off some of you may sleep in the silent tomb and there is no work or device in the grave whither we all hasten."

The cost of the extension was about £2,300. Mr. Gray appealed by letter and in person to churches far afield, and money was received from London, Wellington, Cambridge, Birmingham and many other places. Whilst the work was proceeding the Church met by courtesy of the Wesleyan Methodists in their sanctuary in Diston's Lane at 8.15 a.m. and 2 p.m. on the Sabbath, also on Friday nights.

Records are scanty during Mr. Gray's period, but long lists of baptisms are given, and there was jealousy with regard to the purity of the fellowship. Discipline was exercised rigorously. Mr. Gray resigned in 1825 to become the minister of College Street, Northampton.

During the ministry of the Rev. G. Stonehouse, which began in 1838, a resolution was unanimously passed in favour of the Emancipation of the Slaves. The Church also decided to refuse to receive to communion any person known to be the holder of a slave in any part of the world. Mr. Stonehouse left in 1845 to become the president of the South Australian College.

Short pastorates followed, and in 1859 there came the Rev. William Green. During his period the present handsome sanctuary was erected. Strangely enough, there is no record in the minutes of this project. From newspaper accounts it is gleaned that the Rev. William Brock, of Bloomsbury, preached the first sermon, and the evening meeting was presided over by Sir Samuel Morton Peto. The cost was over £2,300, and it was freed from debt within a few weeks of the opening date, which was January 8th, 1863. A large part of the cost was met locally, £650 being contributed by Sunday-school teachers and scholars. Three months later the Rev. J. P. Mursell preached on the occasion of the cancelling of the debt, and alluded to the time when he had resided in Chipping Norton forty years earlier, giving the congregation the benefit of some facts previously unknown. There is no account in the minutes of what he said, but from other sources we can piece together some of his remarks. Mursell, when quite a young man, came to study at Gray's Academy, and was joined by James Phillippo, who was to be one of the pioneers of the emancipation of the West Indian slaves. Phillippo was a candidate for the B.M.S., and Mr. Gray was selected by the committee of the Society as the preceptor of the young missionary-to-be. The two young men were drawn together in bonds which lasted through life. Their friendship was sealed by an exchange

of Christian names, Mr. Mursell adopting the name of Phillippo, and Mr. Phillippo that of Mursell. One called himself James Phillippo Mursell, and the other James Mursell Phillippo. The study of the young men was situated above the sitting-room of Mr. Gray, and as the heart of Mr. Phillippo succumbed to the charms of a local maiden, it was agreed that a sign be given from the window as to whether he was in or not. Most likely the Gray family were never aware of many things that went on above their heads! In this speech there is no doubt that Mr. Mursell paid warm tribute to the work of William Gray.

After Mr. Green's ministry there followed two short pastorates, and then Thomas Bentley came from Coventry and exercised a long and distinguished ministry from 1869 to 1896. Mr. Bentley, who is still remembered by the seniors, was a preacher of a very fine order, and during his time the church prospered greatly. A sermon he preached on the Future Life a few days after his fourteen-year-old daughter, Emily, died, caused deep feeling. Many alterations of value were made to the premises, and for several months the church met in the Town Hall. His ministry was terminated by recurrent ill-health. A presentation was made. He died a few years later, and there is a tablet in the present church. His family presented the umbrella stands in the pews to his memory. In 1897 the Rev. E. G. Lovell commenced an all too short ministry of two years, moving to Morning-side Church, Edinburgh, and dying there in the flower of his life.

During the forty-four years of the present century there have been four occupants of the pastorate. The Rev. R. E. Jenkins came from Cardiff College and laboured with great success for thirteen and a half years. He is now in the neighbourhood again, being the pastor at Little Compton. The Rev. Samuel Brown, from Spurgeon's College, succeeded him at Chipping Norton, removing three years later to Sandy. His was the difficult period of the first world war. Many remember his sermons, and how he was able to rise to the great occasion. He was succeeded by the Rev. H. Ellis Roberts, who after twenty-five years' service at Thrapston, came and ministered for thirteen years, retiring in 1931 but remaining in the town, and still preaching when occasion demands. During his ministry the present fine organ was erected as a memorial to the fourteen who lost their lives in the 1914-1918 war. The present holder of the pastorate is now in his thirteenth year, and the church is still vigorous, filling a place in the life of the community and the Association, which she has entertained many times. Seventy-two members have been received during the present pastorate. Since 1775, when the church became Baptist, there have been seventeen ministers, all of whom, including the present one, have been greatly indebted to a loyal band

of lay workers who have given freely of their time, money and abilities to the varied services of the Church, Sunday School and Village preaching. The Sunday School is now 158 years old. The C.E. has celebrated its jubilee and is still a strong society. The Church has served large numbers of men and women of the Forces during this war, and has offered hospitality to Dominion and American troops, including a large number of coloured ones, descendants of the slaves for whom the church had a deep concern a century earlier. The membership contains a large number who are closely identified with the work of the town and district, and on several occasions has supplied the Borough with its principal citizen. The Church has justified its existence in the past, and though its fellowship is conceived very differently to-day from the time when the Church Meeting was the hub, it can be truthfully stated she is justifying her existence in this year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and forty-four.

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