

The Baptists of Hatch Beauchamp.

THE Baptist Church in Hatch Beauchamp claims for itself with justifiable pride a place in history's pages as the oldest cause of its kind in West Somerset. The honour of the Presidency of the Western Baptist Association—a group of churches stretching from Dorset to Minehead—has fallen for the present period to Mr. W. J. Marks, a son of the Baptist denomination, and to him the writer is indebted for some notes of the past history of his church and village.

Wood's History states that a Baptist church was "founded" at Hatch near Taunton in 1630 and a definite reference is made to the existence of the church in the first circular letter of the Western Baptist Association of Churches in 1655; and when in the following year the question of "the imposition of hands at an orderly ordination to the ministry" was discussed, the name of "Brother Parsons of Hatch" appears as dissenting with ten others to the procedure.

During the Commonwealth great freedom was permitted to dissenting bodies—a freedom which was turned to oppression in the two reigns which followed. Sir James Macintosh states that under Charles II and James, the Baptists as prominent advocates of religious freedom, were more severely persecuted than other Nonconformists. When we remember that 70,000 persons suffered fines or imprisonment during those twenty-six years, and that twelve millions of money was extorted from them, we may judge that the quiet of Hatch Beauchamp in those days was much interrupted. In 1689, however, the wheel had revolved again. Representatives of Baptist churches met in London without hindrance, and Hatch Beauchamp was represented by Jeremiah Day, "a messenger from Hatch Church".

From 1660 to 1689 dissent had been an "underground" movement, to use our modern phrase, and without doubt the extensive woodlands in the village neighbourhood, from Neroache to Fivehead, covered a multitude of meetings of the sturdy forefathers of this tiny but influential village church. It has often seemed to the writer that the "Five Mile Act" made Hatch Beauchamp more important in those times than we are aware of, for under it dissenting ministers preached to such as would hear them in fields and private houses till they were apprehended and cast into gaol to die. Hatch is six miles out from Taunton. Between 1692, when when Jeremiah Day again represented the Church of Hatch at a London conference, to 1742 there seems a

break in the written records, but since the latter date a continuous history survives.

It became a "Particular" or "Strict" Baptist Church, without perhaps buildings such as we now know, but meeting, no doubt, in the houses of its members for worship and services, while the baptisms were conducted in the stream nearby. In my youth in another district it was quite usual to talk to older people who had been baptised by immersion—the Baptist method—in river or stream near their home and church.

The "Church Book" of Hatch for 1742 contains the following item of interest :

"August the 1st, 1742, Being our day of breaking bread, Jo: Adams appeared before the Church and made a profession of faith and described a work of grace on his heart as we hoped, and gave satisfaction, and was admitted to the ordinance of baptism, or thought qualified for it. August the 4th, The said Jo: Adams was baptised by Mr. Perry before many witnesses."

A similar record appears on October 14th about a certain Henry Trump. This entry abruptly begins the first remaining Church Book, so that earlier books if existing in those troubled times, may have been lost. Still, over three hundred years of existence in a tiny village—and still alive and hearty—speak of a past which its present members do well to hold in honoured pride.

The records show that from 1742 to 1750 this little body had no settled pastor, but was ministered to by visiting preachers and such of the members who could "exercise their gift". The item under date runs: "October the 14th, 1743, being fixed upon by the Church as a day of fasting and prayer, our brother, Samuel Burford, spoke from the text of Scripture, 14th John, 6th verse, according to the request of several of the brethren, and after some debate the Church concluded that Brother Samuel Burford might be useful in the exercise of his gift and therefore desire him to preach the Gospel among them, as often as he was called upon so to do."

In the following July, James Adams, another brother, was under the call of the church to "exercise his gift", and, "after the church had gone into consultation about it, they thought it proper to give Samuel Burford an immediate call to preach the gospel among them, and brother Jas. Adams to exercise his gift as before."

These two men for some years preached in turn, and a James Miller, having tried his talents, "a great majority of the church, believing him to have talents, authorised him to preach

in the villages around, or anywhere Providence should call him." A brother Robert Bicknell, who was not reckoned "a gifted brother", filled the responsible office of ruling elder, his business being "to propose matters in church and take up the church's conclusions."

On August 29th, 1750, Samuel Burford, "being chosen by the church in a public assembly, was ordained as the first appointed pastor of this church." No details are given of his labours, but when we remember the troubled times, and the fact that it was not always a comfortable thing to be found associating with Baptist dissenters, it is well to note that his ministry lasted eighteen years, and that James Adams who duly followed him in the pastorate, continued in office for twenty-three years.

It is to James Adams that the position and building of the present church is owed. He had other "gifts" to bring beside that of preaching. He gave the piece of land "known as Saint's Land" on which the church, the minister's house, and adjoining residence stand; in 1783 began the building of the chapel, and at his death he bequeathed two other pieces of land to the church, thus assuring the support of the ministry. His successor in the ministry is less notable, save that he owns for the first time a title: "The Rev. W. Willey." This gentleman was invited by letter "to preach among us every Lord's Day for one year, from Lady Day, 1792, to Lady Day, 1793." The time limit shows great discretion on the part of the ruling elders. It specifies clearly a brain in charge of church affairs. The call runs thus: "We have in view if the Lord sees fit and things prove agreeable to you and to us, of a longer period, but if it should not, let it be known three months before the year is up, and then you, sir, are to leave the house when the year is up." The following minute indicates the result of the trial: "The whole church was soon dissatisfied with Mr. Willey because his preaching and moral conduct were not agreeable to the Gospel of Christ, for which reason we could not renew our call to him."

There followed a Hugh Giles, whose ministry only extended to three Sundays followed by a tragic and unexpected decease, and then came the Rev. Joshua Bradler on May 28th 1794, under whom the church worshipped for 20 years. His ministry covers the period of the Napoleonic wars. He saw the French Revolution through its various stages with its effect on our own land in poverty and destitution, retiring from active ministerial work the year before the victory of Waterloo. In consideration of his long service and advanced age the church voted him on retirement "a sum of £10 yearly and every year during his natural life" which amounted to 14 years. "Passing rich", as Goldsmith said of one like this humble village worthy. *Requiescat in pace.*

The early half of the last century marked a great change in the history and fortunes of Nonconformity. Wesley's long life had closed, his work resulting in the creation of a sect whose existence had been undesigned by that great man. The commercial and business interests, great and small, were a growing power in national and local life, and among the classes comprising this section both in city and village, Nonconformity had taken strong hold. The "Salems" and "Bethels" were filled, and their leading men strove hard to live down any memory of past ignomy. The pictures contemporary novelists give us of the time are therefore prejudiced to our very great detriment if we take them, as we often do, as our authorities. Dickens failed to understand Dissent and so gave us the ridiculous Chadband and the contemptible Stiggins. Thackeray missed them altogether, save for Lady Whittlesea's chapel set. George Eliot—who could have pictured life in Dissenting circles sympathetically—stuck close to the country clergy and their parsonages. Trollope interested himself in perfect studies of deans and canons. The Brontës were hopelessly prejudiced; even our own Thomas Hardy was inclined to read his own agnosticism in places where it did not quite exist when he interpreted rustic faith. Perhaps Mark Rutherford comes nearest the truth as in his *Autobiography* and *Revolution in Tanner's Lane*.

At this period in Hatch Baptists' history, 1814-15, a new minister, Robert Fry, a student of Exeter, was asked to undertake the pastorate. Evidently doctrinal difficulties and changes were happening. A period not unlike our present age—following a long European war—had caused men's minds to waver towards established creeds. In Mr. Fry's letter of acceptance he urges the church "to pray for him because in praying for their minister they were praying for themselves, and they were to pray that he might have clear views of divine truth and be able to place same in a most conspicuous light before saints and sinners." The record adds that his ministry began on June 18th, 1815—Waterloo Day—but that before his ordination he preached a farewell sermon and actually left for some weeks. What mental or spiritual tragedy is hidden here? We could be thankful to a dissenting George Eliot could we be told.

A touching letter from the church followed him, assuring him that the church was "warmly attached" to him and "could not bear the thought of parting" from him. It also added that, "it will be our happiness, as well as our duty, to render you as comfortable as lies in our power." A list of subscribers accompanied this letter as a "proof that the congregation desired his return." And he came back. One wonders, in vain now, if the "comfort" rendered by the congregation was spiritual or

temporal! What a cameo for imagination to work upon—or old James Adams to soliloquise upon from the shades.

Be it as it may, Fry's ministry is described as "earnest and faithful", congregations being largely increased. He established a Sunday School in 1816, and saw a baptistery built in the chapel—the cost is interesting, £6 5s. 6½d. There must have been an earlier baptistery in the chapel for it is recorded of Hannah Humphreys—grandmother of Thomas Baker, a famous preacher and social worker in the district whose relatives still hold office in the church—that "she loved this house of God, and Sabbath by Sabbath walked four miles to chapel at Hatch Beauchamp, in which she was baptised on June 26th, 1784."

There must have been considerable interest during Mr. Fry's ministry, for during it two galleries had to be erected "for the accommodation of those anxious to hear the word preached". This, with other improvements, involved an outlay of £102 9s. 5½d. which was raised in two collections. The figure again is interesting. So, too, is the tangible proof that this people could pay cash for its faith.

There were occasional rifts within the lute, as became a "live" church. In 1823 five members were requested to give their reasons for absenting themselves from the services. They did so in writing claiming "that Mr. Fry did not preach the doctrines of the Gospel", which charge was repudiated in a church meeting as "trivial and factious" and the church affirmed its satisfaction with Mr. Fry's preaching as "consistent with the Word of God". The absentees were advised to be satisfied with their pastor and to return peaceably, but they refused, and were dismissed "in the hope that it would be for their comfort and for the benefit of the church to which they had gone". And the one they had left!

Mr. Fry served the church for thirteen years. He died aged forty-seven in 1828 and was interred in the vestry, which was where the present pulpit stands. His memorial tablet is in the church, a memory of stern and very living faith.

The simple annals of a village church would at first thought seem to be unworthy of a wider notice than its own personal circle. The picture given in this way of a social life which has dissolved, and which, apart from the elderly among us, is soon to be forgotten, must be my apology for reviving the pattern of that age. Our own mental and spiritual roots were formed in it, however far now outgrown, and the good or ill in it is still being derived by us, often unconsciously. Two typical names and characters stand out from the early and middle years of the last century—one lay, one clerical. The Thomas Baker referred to earlier became a Baptist convert to this church in 1829. He seems to have been a man of gifts and zeal, for in 1833, the church

having satisfied itself as to his preaching gifts, called him "to publish the word of life and salvation wheresoever in the providence of God he may be called so to do." Whatsoever the limitation of the church as to the significance of this "call" it is evident that no mistake was made. Seizing every opportunity for his evangelistic efforts in the villages around Hatch, he visited Borobridge on many occasions—there being no place of worship there—and began the work which entitled him to be called "The Apostle of Borobridge". The canal traffic, the bargees, and the type of labourer connected with that district and time, was the raw material on which his teeth were tried. The social, mental and spiritual conditions were deplorable, but all taken for granted by society and sufferers alike. Sunday was the great day for buying and selling, bull-baiting, cudgel playing, prize fighting, drunkenness and the accompanying vices abounded and were catered for. The district was a swamp, a hot-bed of fevers, rheumatism, and the like complaints, truly a God-forsaken community both local and itinerant. Some brave hearts of the place entreated Thomas Baker "to come and dwell among them and train them in the ways of God". After three and a half years among them his converts were formed into a church, and in 1836 a chapel built, Thomas Baker being released from Hatch in 1837 to become its first pastor. He wrote of his trials and work in a book, which like so many books was loaned out never to return. His family is still in active connection with the mother church and the younger branch at Curry Mallet.

Back in the old church at Hatch at this time, the musical portion of the services was being supplied by an organ—a daring innovation—played with a handle and having a repertoire of twelve tunes. This instrument stood in the gallery and is noted as having cost £30.

On November 14th, 1861, Mr. Edward Curtis entered on his ministry, and a long and notable one it became, lasting for 38 years and adding 167 members to the church. The older people speak of him still as "dear old Mr. Curtis" and in many an unlikely place and by unusual people, the writer has come across references to a very fragrant memory. He evidently earned his Master's epigram: "He went about doing good".

Piety in his case did not lack humour. A typical story of his own will suffice. Making his journeys about afoot, he talked to whoever he met, and a stone-cracker at work on his roadside heap was as good as a squire. Improving the occasion at one such meeting he told "Stonecracker John" that his work was in true line with the old Book. "How do 'ee make thic out, sir?" "Well, John, you see you're in apprenticeship for working on better materials. The streets of the heavenly land are paved with

gold." John was silent for a space, then native wit came to the rescue. "'S'pose you bain't never 'eard 'ow they d' wear, 'ave 'ee sir?" And the Rev. Edward Curtis could smile.

During his ministry the old organ in the gallery came under the condemnation of the church as "being of no use, and daily decreasing in value," the pastor being authorised "to dispose of it at the first opportunity, for cash only". Perhaps the responsible officials, knowing their pastor, realised he might give it away. A band of instrumentalists took its place—real "wood and wind"—a son of one of them having recently recalled their efforts for me. The brass tablet in the church honours the work and life of a true pastor, one of the many similar village worthies who were "the salt of the earth".

W. FISHER.

The original of the letter given on the opposite page came into the hands of the Rev. Fergus Little while he was gathering material for his recently published booklet on the history of the Northern Baptist Association. Johann Gerhard Oncken, "the Father of the German Baptists," was baptised in 1834 in Hamburg with six others. They were formed into the first German Baptist Church. For some years persecution, and even imprisonment, was their lot. In May, 1842, fire destroyed a third of the city of Hamburg. The brave and generous behaviour of Oncken and his friends gained them the thanks of the authorities and the goodwill of the populace. J. L. Angas, of Newcastle, was a well-known Baptist business man and a keen supporter of Oncken's work.