

# The Story of Pottergate and Ber Street Churches, Norwich.

## POTTERGATE.

IN the year 1762, Samuel Fisher came from Nottingham and settled in the pastorate of St. Mary's, Norwich. There he remained for twelve years which in the early years brought success to the Church, but in 1774 Fisher was accused of a grave moral offence, and on January 30th, he was excluded from the Church. Two years later, he appeared before the Church to express his repentance, but as the Church did not consider his repentance to be genuine, he still remained outside its membership. He himself, however, considered that he was sincere and others supported him.

Within a few months of being excluded from St. Mary's, Samuel Fisher had licensed premises for preaching in St. Michael's Coslany, Norwich, in a room called the "Great Parlour," belonging to John Hervey, a carpenter, but later in the year, on November 19th, he licensed "certain rooms called the Wool Room and Chamber, commonly called Norton's" in St. Mary's, Norwich. These premises were his own possession, and in them he commenced preaching to a small company of seven. Sometime later he took over premises in Pottergate which had originally belonged to the Methodists.

In the year 1775, Samuel Fisher was visited by John Johnson, the founder of the sect known as the "Johnsonian" Baptists.

John Johnson was born in March, 1706, at Lostock, Eccles, near Manchester, and was the son of a peasant. He was piously brought up and when 20 years of age became a preacher. In 1741, he became Pastor of the Byrom Street Baptist Church, Liverpool, but he left again in 1747 or 1748, because his doctrinal views were offensive to his congregation. He and his adherents then built a new chapel in Stanley Street, Liverpool, which was opened in 1750. He remained there until his death on the 20th March, 1791, at the age of 85. His wife, whom he had married in 1740, survived him.

Johnson was a man of much vigour and originality of mind, and wrote a number of books, and also established his teaching in new Churches about the kingdom. He had many adherents at Wisbech in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere. It is rather difficult to discover exactly what this man's views actually were. He was a Calvinist who held that Adam's guilt was not

inherited, but Adam's children needed as strong remedies as if they were. He also confounded the persons in the Trinity, and insisted on making this confusion a definite point in his teaching. On account of this the "Johnsonians" were regarded as "Sabellians."

Samuel Fisher, and those who had seceded from St. Mary's, accepted these views, and joined the "Johnsonians." In 1778, Johnson wrote to Fisher congratulating him that a new church had just been formed in Norwich. Apparently at that time, they were worshipping in the Pottergate premises, St. Margaret's Lane. These premises were rebuilt in 1790. Samuel Fisher had the oversight of the Church at Deadman's Lane, Wisbech, as well as the one in Norwich.

In the year 1785, there was a secession from the Methodists in Norwich that joined the General Baptist New Connexion. These people worshipped in a chapel, known as "Ebenezer," in Ber Street, which had been built by an eccentric gentleman, named John Hunt, who was a surgeon, ornithologist and gospeller. The first pastor of the Church was Richard Wright.

Richard Wright was the son of Richard and Anne Wright, of Blakeney, Norfolk, a village that was once a seaport of some importance, having trade with Germany. Richard was born in a labourer's cottage on the 7th of February, 1764. If a scheme, that had been fostered by "the ingenious Mr. Cobb" to revive the Blakeney fisheries in 1769 had been successful, Richard might have become a seafaring man, but the company failed and Blakeney's good harbour saw little trade.

Richard's parents were originally members of the Anglican Church and Anne (1732-1810) was a woman of superior class, strong mind and fair education. She was a cousin of Sir John Fenn, the first editor of the *Paston Letters*. There were six children, Richard being the eldest. Anne Wright became a Unitarian at the age of 70. Richard Wright was sent to school by a relative, a prosperous farmer, but his schooling cannot have been for long as the farmer died, when Richard was 12 years of age. At that time the family had left the Anglican Church and joined the Dissenters. Young Richard became first a farmer's boy, then a page, and then went on trial to an Anglican shopkeeper at Holt and was later apprenticed to a dissenting blacksmith, possibly at Guestwick.

At the age of 16, Richard Wright joined the Independent Church at Guestwick, where the minister was John Sykes, who had been ordained on October 29th, 1776. The preaching was Calvinistic, of the genuine unadulterated type—"not what is called moderate Calvinism," as Richard once remarked. Sykes had no moderation. "Still," added Mr. Wright, "I thank God

that I was once a Calvinist, that I have known by experience what Calvinism is. It was one important step in my progress. However erroneous, its peculiar doctrines are perverted truth, and some precious metal may be extracted from the baser material."

Wright was not without ambition. "Panting to emerge from the lowly vale, where I was placed" as he expressed it, he considered what he could do which would render him "of some value in society." There was born in his heart a desire to win souls for Christ, so without any outward suggestion, or authority from the Church, Richard Wright, when the labour at the anvil was over for the day, began week-evening preaching in the neighbouring villages. It was inevitable that in making such a general appeal to men, he must have departed from the extreme form of Calvinism that his pastor taught. The Church requested him to preach before them, and then ordered him to wait for their consent to preach, and because he would not do so, they turned him out of the Church. The Wesleyan Methodists, hearing of this, gave him many opportunities to preach though he never joined their society. His master, "judging that he would make a better preacher than a smith," kindly gave him back his indentures.

His first call to the regular ministry came from the new Church at Ber Street, and in this chapel Dan Taylor ordained him as Pastor on 29th September, 1785. Richard Wright found it a great advantage being in Norwich, as here were books that enabled him to learn Greek and Hebrew. There was apparently at that time friendly relations between the Ber Street and Priory Yard Churches, as it has been stated that Richard Wright ranked as an Elder in the Priory Yard Church.

In 1787, Richard Wright left the Ber Street General Baptists, and made friends with Samuel Fisher and collaborated with him, though he regarded John Johnson, who at that time was over 80 years of age, as being "to a high degree bigoted and dogmatic."

In that year a curious arrangement was made between Fisher and Wright, that they should preach alternately for six months at Pottergate, Norwich, and six months at Deadman's Lane, Wisbech. This arrangement lasted until 1794, when the Wisbech congregation decided that they preferred to have Richard Wright as their sole pastor. This was partly due to the fact that Wright's teaching had by this time developed a strong trend towards Unitarianism. As the agreement between the two men was broken, Samuel Fisher declined to assert his rights, resigned the Church at Pottergate, which he left in the care of George Barber, and built a new Church in Ship Lane, Wisbech, where he was ordained in 1794. He continued to exercise an oversight of the Johnsonian Churches, until his death at Newark in 1803.

A tablet to his memory in the Pottergate Church, reads: "Samuel Fisher, many years pastor of this Church, died April 27th, 1803, aged 61 years."

The further story of Richard Wright, though it does not concern Norwich, is interesting. After leaving Norwich, he definitely accepted Unitarian beliefs. When his Unitarian views became known, the Johnsonian Baptists rejected him, but the people at Deadman's Lane, Wisbech, accepted his views and became Unitarian. In 1797, he met William Vidler (1758-1816), the "Universalist" Baptist, and converted him to Unitarianism, but was at the same time converted by William Vidler to Universalism.

In 1803, the two friends joined the General Baptist Assembly, which against all precedent ignored a minority vote, so that Dan Taylor and all the evangelicals made formal protest and withdrew.

In 1806, Wright became Home Missionary for the Unitarians, and in 1810 resigned the Pastorate at Wisbech and devoted himself entirely to this work. He brought many Baptist Churches into fellowship with the Unitarians, one such being at Long Sutton. In 1822, he settled as minister at Conigre, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, and in 1827 at Kirkstead, Lincolnshire, where he remained until his death in 1836.

Very little is known of the later ministers at Pottergate. George Barber probably remained Pastor from 1794 until 1806, and during this period John Reynoldson, upon whom had fallen the oversight of the Johnsonian Churches, removed from Newark and settled in Norwich.

The next pastor was Samuel Sly. He was probably the son of a Samuel Sly, who was baptised by Edward Trivett at Worstead on the 19th of March, 1769, and was afterwards dismissed to a Norwich Church. It is believed that Samuel Sly, junr., became pastor about 1806. A tablet to his memory in the Church reads: "Samuel Sly, died April 17th, 1842, aged 68 years, 33 (or 35?) years pastor."

The chapel was possibly rebuilt again in 1840, and that same year Joseph Gray became pastor. All that we know concerning him is again taken from the tablets in the Church. There are two, one to his memory and one to that of his wife. They read: "Mary Beakley, wife of Joseph Gray and only child of George Barber, died December 25th, 1848, wife, mother, friend exemplary; she laid the first stone of this building." The other reads: "Joseph Gray, died January 21st, 1862, aged 75 years, 22 years pastor."

There is one other tablet on the walls, which was evidently to the memory of one of their strong supporters: "In memory of the

beloved wife of William Ward, wine merchant, died November 9th, 1859, aged 56 years."

The Church at Pottergate used a hymnbook especially printed for the Johnsonians. It was published by Gardiner & Co., Wisbech, in 1873, and is entitled: *A Selection of Psalms and Hymns for Divine Worship*. It was printed by Winks and Son, Leicester. There are 969 hymns in the book, and are quite up to the level of other books printed about that period.

The next pastor was Henry Trevor. He was a furnisher and upholsterer of Norwich, and was there for 50 years, but toward the end of his life he attended at St. Mary's. We cannot do better than give an account of what the Rev. J. H. Shakespeare said of him when preaching a memorial sermon. Henry Trevor died on May 26th, 1897, and on the following Sunday Mr. Shakespeare said of him: "He felt that he was called to serve God by identifying himself in early life with an obscure sect called the Johnsonian Baptists, which is, I suppose, now extinct. The little chapel in Pottergate was their home. There, morning and evening for 50 years, he was in his place, solemn and devout, at first as a worshipper, and then, according to the usage of the sect, as a preacher. He took up the work of the Sunday School. Year in and year out, never missing a Sunday, without earthly fame or reward, he preached to a few earnest souls, and superintended the Sunday School. This was a quiet unnoticed service which involved much sacrifice and labour, but which he pursued with characteristic determination. As years increased, he gave up the evening service and came to St. Mary's. Then he came for both morning and evening service, transferred the Sunday School to us, and there has been no friend more true, and no worshipper more regular and devout from that day to the Sunday before which he was struck down."

In the year 1898, Mr. F. J. Fenn had a mission conducted in a room on Elm Hill, and he removed from there and took over the Pottergate premises from the Trustees and took control both of the school and the mission. Later, about the year 1913, the Sunday School was amalgamated with the Sunday School at Unthank Road. With the decreasing population in the neighbourhood of the Church, the Pottergate premises were closed, and the whole work of the school centred at Unthank Road. The Church building was reduced to a ruin in the air-raids of 1942, and the schoolroom is now used for industrial purposes.

#### BER STREET.

As we have already recorded, the Ber Street Church was founded in 1785 by John Hunt, the eccentric surgeon of Norwich, the chapel, which seated between 600 and 800 persons, being

built at his own expense. The story of the strange spiritual pilgrimage of its first pastor, Richard Wright, from Anglicanism, by way of the Congregational, Methodist, General Baptist and Johnsonian Baptist Churches to Unitarianism and Universalism has also been recorded. Richard Wright was at Ber Street little more than one year, but the spiritual pilgrimage of his successor is scarcely less interesting.

Joseph Proud settled there in 1786. He was the son of the Rev. John Proud, of Beaconsfield, in Buckinghamshire. He was born on the 22nd of March, 1745. When he was about eleven years of age his father removed, to take charge of the General Baptist congregation at Wisbech, in Cambridgeshire. Though of limited education, yet under the fostering care of worthy parents, his mind was early imbued with religious principles. In the year 1767 he was called to exercise his gifts as a preacher, and he was invited by the Church to assist his aged father in the ministry. Soon after he removed to take charge of the Church at Kimpton, in Leicestershire, where he remained three or four years. On the 3rd of February, 1769, he married his first wife, by whom he had eleven children. While he was at Knipton he was probably ministering to the Church, but not as an ordained minister, though he attended the meetings of the Lincolnshire Association and was ranked among "the brethren in the ministry." He returned again to Wisbech, and the Fleet Church invited him to visit them as a supply, and his labours being approved, he was invited to the pastorate and settled there in 1780. He was ordained in 1782, and at that time the cause had so prospered under his care that it was found necessary to enlarge the chapel. We find Mr. Proud acting with others in the negotiations between the Lincolnshire Association and the New Connexion, meeting them at Gosberton in 1777, Kirton in 1784, and Boston in 1785.

Joseph Proud's first wife died in 1785, and soon after he married a widow, by whom he had three children, all of whom died in infancy.

Mr. Proud was a man of superior qualifications for the exercises of the pulpit, but discontent arose in the Church, owing to his introducing singing into the public worship on his own authority, being well aware that many of the members conscientiously disapproved of it. As it usually happens each party complained of the other and at length in 1786, Mr. Proud suddenly left Fleet without acquainting the Church of his design.

About this time or a little earlier, John Hunt, the builder of the Ber Street chapel, proposed to Joseph Proud that he would give him the chapel and a residence in Norwich, for the term of his life. He readily accepted this handsome offer, and

in 1786, removed to Norwich and John Hunt became his colleague in the ministry. That same year he published a little poem, entitled *Calvinism Exploded* which passed through several editions. He also held a public disputation with a Minister of the Society of Friends, which was also printed. Other small works, chiefly poems, were also published by him, among which was *The Apostate's Progress*, written after the style of Bunyan and later printed anonymously. In 1787, the Ber Street Church was admitted into the General Baptist Assembly.

About two years after his settlement in Norwich, a physician, resident in the city, recommended him to read the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and lent him the *Treatise on Heaven and Hell*. Mr. Proud read it and returned it with his opinion that it was the record of the wild and enthusiastic reveries of a fertile yet morbid imagination. Later a firm believer in Swedenborg's teaching, J. W. Salmon, was induced to take a journey from London, accompanied by a friend, expressly to meet him. Mr. Salmon was the guest of Joseph Proud during his stay, and lost no time in introducing the teaching of Swedenborg. Mr. Hunt very sympathetically listened to the teaching, but he was vehemently opposed by Mr. Proud who tried to persuade Mr. Hunt to have nothing to do with the doctrines. Mr. Proud undertook to convince his visitors that they were wrong by public disputation, but under the influence of Mr. Salmon, Mr. Proud became more sympathetic.

In his private diary, Mr. Proud recorded on "Tuesday morning, 17 June, 1788. Mr. J. W. Salmon came to our house. He lives at Nantwich, in Cheshire, is a member of the New Church, and preaches the doctrines. He preached at our chapel nine times. Never did I hear any man preach with such power, and Divine demonstration. He appears to be the most humble, affectionate, and holy man I ever knew; and I believe I shall never forget what he laid before me. I verily think that the Lord in great mercy sent him to me and the Church for great good: and I trust we have a people prepared to receive further degrees of love and wisdom. O that we may be thus prepared! I love the man most sincerely! and bless the Lord my Saviour for sending him. He staid with us till Thursday, the 26th—that is ten days, and I accompanied him to Dereham, where I took my leave of this dear, dear man." Later Mr. Salmon forwarded to Mr. Proud a copy of *The True Christian Religion, or Universal Theology of the New Church*. Mr. Proud read this book, seeking divine guidance to direct him to the truth, and became a convinced Swedenborgian.

On the evening of Tuesday, 24th of February, 1789, nine persons were received into Church fellowship, by the rite of

baptism administered by immersion. They were baptised "into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the only God of heaven and earth, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in One Divine Person." At the conclusion of the ceremony, Mr. Proud preached from Ezekiel 27, 22-23. This sermon was printed at the request of the congregation, and is regarded as one of the earliest, perhaps the earliest, published after the formation of the first New Church Society in London. It was entitled: *New Jerusalem Blessings, or the Unity, Purity, and Happiness of real Christians in the last Days, in which the New Kingdom of the Lord is established—Jesus the King thereof, who is the only God of Heaven and Earth.* Later that year he visited London and entered his name in the Society's book. He was requested to write original hymns for the public worship of the New Church, and in the brief space of three months wrote upwards of 300 which were printed in 1790. Additional hymns were printed in a second edition the following year.

Joseph Proud soon became convinced that it would be impossible to remain in Norwich as the minister of Ber Street chapel. Although by the title-deeds, the chapel, minister's house, etc., were his own for life, yet having changed his religious sentiments, he felt that he could not conscientiously hold them, although he had no prospects before him.

The remainder of Joseph Proud's life was spent in the service of the New Jerusalem Church. He became an outstanding man among them. He wrote many books and pamphlets in support of the teaching and served the Church as an ordained minister in Birmingham, London, Manchester and other places. For many years before his death he was the minister of the New Jerusalem Temple in New Hall Street, Birmingham. He died on the 3rd of August, 1826, at the age of 81, and his wife, Susannah, survived for a few months and passed away that same year on the 21st of November, at the age of 76. Edward Madeley, junr. preached a memorial sermon in the New Hall Street Temple on August 20th, from the text John 12, 26. Mr. Proud was much respected by the Swedenborgians.

After Joseph Proud had left Ber Street in 1791, he was succeeded by Matthew Dexter. Little is known of this man, but he remained there until 1795, when the Priory Yard pastorate, being vacant, Mr. Dexter and the members of Ber Street united with the other Church, and Ber Street was closed.

There are several references to Ber Street in the minutes of the General Baptist Assembly. In 1798, an effort was made to re-open the chapel, but the Priory Yard people would have nothing to do with it, and the Assembly decided that "nothing can be done particularly concerning it." In 1799, the Assembly



was asked whether its judgment coincided with that of the Trustees "that in consideration of Dr. Hunt's great expenses respecting that place, and in fitting up another for public worship that it be given him." This was agreed, but in 1801, it was discovered that the Deed had been enrolled in Chancery, and must remain for the purposes mentioned in the Deed, and as some of the Trustees would not consent for its return to Dr. Hunt, the matter fell through. We have already seen that Joseph Proud had realised that, having changed his convictions, he could not conscientiously hold the Trust Deed, so in 1801, he sent to the Assembly a copy of the Trust, and "liberally said that he was ready to convey the Chapel and Lands to such Trust as the General Assembly shall appoint." At the same time it was discovered that during his life-time, John Hunt had the sole authority of adding to the Trust, and the Assembly only had the power to do so after John Hunt's death. Obviously nothing could be done without agreement with Dr. Hunt. Matthew Dexter explained the circumstances to the 1802 Assembly, but as Dr. Hunt had not answered the Assembly's letter, nothing could be done.

The Trustees apparently re-opened the Chapel, though exactly what happened is obscure. George Beaumont was living there between 1814 and 1835. There are five books, or pamphlets which it is known that he published, but as to what denomination he belonged is unknown. The pamphlets are varied in character: *The Warrior's Looking Glass*, published in Sheffield in 1808; *Fixed Stars: or an Analyzation and Refutation of Astrology*, published in Norwich in 1814; *The Anti-Swedenborg*, published in London 1824; *The Griper—a letter to John Harvey*, published in Norwich 1830, and *The Complaint—addressed to the Mayor and Aldermen of Norwich* in 1835. This latter was a grouse against the City Officials for allowing two "Green Stalls" to stand in front of two shops which he owned on the Market Square, and which interfered with his trade. Further information concerning this man would be welcome.

It is interesting to note that John Hunt, the builder of Ber Street Chapel, toward the end of his life moved to Gissing in Norfolk and joined the Swedenborgians. He died in 1824. It is probable that soon after his death Joseph Proud conveyed the whole of the property to the Trustees selected by the General Assembly. There are references in the the records of the *New Connection* in 1824 which suggest that this was done, and in the life of Joseph Proud it is recorded that that was one of the last acts of his life, but what ultimately became of the property is unknown.

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