

The Union Church at Launceston, Cornwall.

THE recent union of the Baptist and Congregational Churches at Launceston is really the outcome of their relations over a long period. Their history has been curiously intertwined, as might be expected in a small and isolated township, but this fact has not always been recognised. It seems, therefore, an opportune moment to give some account of their story. In general, three periods can be broadly described. The earliest of these, which deals with the origins, is predominantly Presbyterian in character; the second sees both Baptist and Congregational churches founded, but the latter cause alone thriving; the most recent period has seen a revival of the Baptists and a marked decline of the Congregational church, concluding with the present union.

The first, Presbyterian, period can be traced back with certainty to 1637, although at an earlier date there are hints of Puritan influences in the town. Gasper Hicks, the vicar of St. Mary Magdalene in 1630 was a Presbyterian, later to be ejected from the living at Landrake.¹ In 1637 William Crompton came to St. Mary's from Barnstaple, twenty-five miles to the North in Devonshire, where he had been "a lecturer." "He was much followed and admired by the puritanical people of that place and in the neighbourhood; but his doctrine being not esteemed by many orthodox, or as those of his persuasion say, that he was envied by the vicar thereof, because he was better beloved than him, he was forced thence, by the diocesan and ecclesiastical power, and thereupon receiving *a quick call* he removed to Launceston in Cornwall, where being a preacher in the church of St. Mary Magdalene, he continued in good estimation among the precise people about four years, and then to their grief he was untimely snatched away by death in the prime of his years."² His son followed his father's opinions, and according to Wood was afterwards an eminent Nonconformist in Devonshire, being ejected later from the church at Cullompton.

Crompton died in 1642, and for six years there was no continuing minister. A successor was appointed in 1648, when the name of Joseph Hull first appears in the parish register as clerk.

¹ A. G. Mathews; *Calamy Revised*, Oxford, p. 260.

² Wood, Anthony, *Athenae Oxonienses* ed. Bliss 1813, Vol. III, p. 23.

Hull had been born in Crewkerne, Somerset, and was rector of Northleigh, Devonshire from 1621 to 1635, when he emigrated to New England with his (second?) wife and seven children. He did not settle down, and after several moves returned to England and came to Launceston.³ The following year, on January 23rd, 1649, "was baptised Rubin son of Joseph Hull, Clarke" and a similar entry follows at almost yearly intervals until 1654, when the birth (not the baptism), of John Hull is recorded on November 25th. Soon after this Hull left Launceston, because of his growing family; John Tingecombe wrote of him: "'Tis hoped the man is godly. He has a very greate charge of children neare twenty. Some say more." A later hand has tampered with the name of his son born in 1651, and other entries directed against Puritans in the same hand suggest that Hull was a Puritan. Other proof of this comes from the fact that the Council of State in October 30th, 1655, approved an Augmentation of £50 certified by the Trustees for the maintenance of Ministers to Jos. Hull, minister of Launceston, co. Cornwall."⁴

He was succeeded by William Oliver, another Presbyterian. Oliver, whose father was a gentleman of the county, had received a liberal education. He was a "critic in the Latin and Greek tongues, for which and his other excellencies he obtained a Fellowship in Exeter College, from which he removed to take the pastoral charge (of Launceston). He was a good scholar and an excellent preacher, for which he was valued by the gentry of Cornwall and Devon."⁵ He did not escape criticism in Launceston, for in 1661 Peter Blewett gave securities for good behaviour "for having said that Mr. William Oliver, minister of this town, was a base rogue."⁶ His appointment is interesting; a manuscript at Lambeth Palace gives a memorandum that on December 10th, 1656, "there was shown to the commissioner on approbation of public preachers, a nomination by the Mayor and Commonalty of Launceston of Mr. William Oliver, to the curacy of the Parish Church of Launceston."⁷

This can but reflect the influence of the Puritans in the town at the time. One local celebrity was well known for this point of view. Thomas Gewen, of Bradbridge, in the nearby parish of Boyton, a former auditor to the Duchy of Cornwall, was elected to Parliament in 1647, although later, through his frequent opposition to the military party, he was excluded in "Pride's

³ *Calamy Revised*, 283.

⁴ Domestic State Papers, 1655, p. 402 quoted Robbins *Launceston Past and Present*. Launceston, 1888, p. 195.

⁵ *Edmund Calamy, Abridgement* 2nd ed. 1713, Vol. 2 p. 147.

⁶ R. & O. B. Peter; *The Histories of Launceston & Dunheved*, Plymouth, 1885, p. 320.

⁷ Peter, *Ibid*, 320.

Purge." He had strongly advocated a Cromwellian monarchy and a House of Lords, had sought the exclusion of the Bishops from Parliament, "a stricter observance of the Sabbath, the abolition of ceremonies unwarranted by Scripture, and the provision of able and laborious ministers of religion." He was a shrewd man, well trained in administration, and a member of various Parliamentary committees in Cornwall.^{8, 9.} But he shared the common prejudice against the Quakers, and must be held partly responsible for the imprisonment and suffering which George Fox endured in Launceston Castle.

Fox, with his two companions, Pyot and Salt, had been arrested at St. Ives for distributing religious tracts, and brought to Launceston to await the March assizes in nine weeks' time. Their trial proved to be a farce, and the conviction resulting in their imprisonment was the technical one of not removing their hats in court. Yet the six months they suffered in Doomsdale was the worst imprisonment Fox was to endure, his suffering being intensified by the indescribable filth of the prison. Fox describes the horror of it both in his Journal, and more fully in the pamphlet he afterwards published.¹⁰ Fox thought the inhabitants "dark and darkened" and in vain did he protest against the vanity and love of sport in the town, seen displayed on the bowling green adjacent to the prison.

Sewel, Fox's biographer, describing the gaoler—a former criminal, writes: "It was not at all strange then, that the prisoners suffered most grievously from such a wicked crew; but it was more to be wondered at that Colonel Bennet(t), a Baptist Teacher, having purchased the gaol and the lands belonging to the Castle, had there placed this head gaoler."¹¹ Bennett was obviously impatient of the Quakers, although he ultimately released the three men unconditionally on September 9th, 1566, without payment of the fees to their brutal gaoler, "and so as innocently they came out of prison, as innocently they were put in."¹² Fox left behind him in Launceston a "Little remnant of friends that has been raised up here while he was in prison, whom he visited when he returned to town a very short while after his liberation." The subsequent story of the group is not known, but it seems that it did not survive for long.

⁸ Robbins, *Ibid*, pps. 187, 189, 205-209.

⁹ Mary Coate, *Cornwall in the Great Civil War*, pps. 29, 225.

¹⁰ George Fox; *The West Answering to the North* . . . London 1657. A recent description is in W. C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, London 1912, pps. 232-240.

¹¹ Sewel, W. *Hist. of the Rise, Increase . . . of the . . . Quakers* . . . London 1722, p. 128 (Sewel's source is Fox's Journal, where Fox describes Bennett as a Baptist teacher, but expresses no surprise at his act.)

¹² Fox, *ibid*, 126.

Colonel Robert Bennett, to whom they referred, was a local man of considerable prominence. He was born at Hexworthy, in the adjacent parish of Lawhitton, and his father, Richard Bennett, who died when Robert was only fifteen, had been a Counsellor-at-Law. Robert Bennett was named in 1643 as commanding 1,200 foot and 300 horsemen from Cromwell at Torrington, but his effort there to surprise Colonel Digby was defeated. In 1646 Cromwell is reputed to have spent three days with Bennett at Hexworthy—which is quite possible, since Bennett was one of Cromwell's trusted advisers. 1649 sees him defending the trial of the king, justifying it before Truro Quarter Session by "an appeal to scripture, law, history and reason." In 1653 he was a member of the Council of State of thirteen, and the next year he was one of Cornwall's Members of Parliament. In local life he was an Alderman and a Justice of the Peace. While his civil and military career is fairly well known, nothing has yet been discovered to shed any light on Fox's description of him as a Baptist. Hitherto there is no trace of Baptist influence in this part of Cornwall. "Possibly there were a few Anabaptists and Brownists in Cornwall, but there is no evidence of an Anabaptist Congregation in Cornwall such as the community in Tiverton in 1626."¹³ On the other hand the Civil War had brought many new influences in its train. Dr. Whitley emphasised the part the Army played in spreading Baptist Doctrine. "Many a garrison town heard preaching by Baptist officers, to the scandal of the clergy and even of their own commanders . . . The Army was mobile, and it is instructive to study the rise of Baptist Churches where regiments were quartered."¹⁴

But in Launceston, in spite of Bennett no church seemed to have been formed, and it would seem that in this small community there was but little scope for Baptists where the Presbyterian forces were strongly entrenched. The Restoration deprived Bennett of his seat in Parliament. He retired to Hexworthy until his death on July 6th, 1683, at the age of seventy-nine. His finely carved slate tomb-stone was found in recent years in a neglected part of Lawhitton Churchyard, and is now fixed to the South Wall of the Church interior. Gewen on the other hand was in favour, and was replaced in his office under the Duchy of Cornwall, but shortly afterwards died.

With the Restoration came other changes. William Oliver, the minister of St. Mary's Parish Church, had been outstanding in Presbyterian circles, as the frequency of his name in the minutes

¹³ Mary Coates, *ibid.*, 325.

¹⁴ W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists*; London, 1932, p. 74.

of the Cornwall "Classic" suggests.¹⁵ But with the Act of Uniformity Oliver was ejected, though he remained active in the district. It seems as if he continued to gather a congregation around him, preaching in unlicensed places. In an isolated community such as Launceston the penalties for this might be defied if the local authorities were sympathetic, as indeed they might have been. The Secretary of State to Charles II was Sir William Morrice, another Presbyterian, who lived in the nearby parish of Werrington, and through his influence a pension was secured for the support of Oliver and his family.¹⁶ Yet there is a hint of their suffering given in the parish records, for William, son of William Oliver, (born on July 31, 1658), was buried on April 29, 1664 "in the little yard." Oliver is still described in the entry as "Clarke" although afterwards this was partly deleted.

A few years later, on 22nd April, 1672, John Hicks, who was a Puritan Mayor during the time of the Commonwealth, applied for a license for "William Oliver, of Dutson, near Launceston, Presbyterian" and an indulgence had already been granted to him. Oliver had in fact taken the "Oxford Oath" in 1666,¹⁷ and thus escaped the penalties of the Five Mile Act which fell on those unwilling to declare that they abhorred resistance to the King and would not seek an alteration in the government of Church or State. Soon after this a census showed that there were thirteen Nonconformists in the town, as well as some Quakers who had been in the town gaol for many years.¹⁸ Oliver kept a school in the town, bred many good scholars, and died a Lay Conformist.

Subsequently a tablet was placed in the South-East corner of the Church from which he had been ejected to commemorate him.

GULIEMUS OLIVARIUS
 ART^{UM} MAG^R
 COLLEG. EXONIENS OXON ALI —
 QUANDON SOCIUS HUIUS ECCLESIAE
 NON ITA PRIDUM PASTOR.
 DEMUM AUTEM
 REGIAE HEIC LOCI SCHOLAE LIBERAE
 RECTR CUJUS IN PULVERI DESUDANS
 PTHISI EST EXINCTUS
 NATUS 27^o 9 ris ANO DOM 1627
 DENATUS 6^o JULIJ ANO DOM 1681.

¹⁵ Printed in Chetham Society new series vol. lxxli. 1896. Part II.

¹⁶ Mathews *Calamy Revised* 373.

¹⁷ *ibid* 375.

¹⁸ Robbins, reported in the *Launceston Weekly News* 30.11.1912.

(" William Oliver, Master of Arts, Sometime fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, and not long since Pastor of this church, but recently Master of the Royal Free School in this place, sweating in the dust of which he died of consumption.")

The death of Oliver did not mean the end of Puritan influence. The Parish Register of St. Thomas the Apostle, Launceston (an adjacent parish not half a mile from St. Mary's) has some entries concerning a Robert Gill. In January 1695, he buried his wife Jane, but remarried in October of the following year, and on January 12th, 1697, "Robert Gill and Mary, his wife, has a daughter baptised, Mary by a dissenting minister"—the last four words in a later hand. A similar entry on January 22, 1699, records the baptism of their son, Robert, "by a dissenting minister." Who this minister was is not known, although recently the records of the Cockermouth Church have shown that in 1694, thirteen years after Oliver's death, there was a church in Launceston whose minister was Deliverance Larkham. Deliverance Larkham was grandson of Thomas Larkham, vicar of the neighbouring town of Tavistock (from 1648 until ejected in 1660) and first minister of the Tavistock Congregational Church. George, Thomas Larkham's son, was first minister of the Congregational Church at Cockermouth which Thomas Larkham had founded while still holding the living at Tavistock. Deliverance, George Larkham's son, was born there in 1658. Sent to London for better education in 1667, he was received into the Cockermouth church in 1681 which in 1694 called him as assistant for his now ageing father. But on July 22 "The Pastor received a letter from the people at Launceston which manifested they had chosen him called by them namely, Mr. Deliverance Larkham, for their pastor. Wherefore they desired to keep him with them." The following year Larkham promised to come to Cockermouth, but finally changed his plans, and left Launceston for Lancaster.

The Presbyterian church at Launceston was again without a minister in 1705, for a copy of a letter dated Nov. 5th of that year is recorded in the Church Book (begun in 1790). The copy appears to have been made about 1830.

"Revd. Sir,

We whose names are underwritten, knowing that you are not ignorant of our cause, And how calamitous it is like to be upon the removal of the Rev. M. Berry, unless some other suitable supply may be obtained, do hereby make it our earnest request to you that you would be pleased to favour us with your presence and Ministerial Labours. . . ."

It is not known whether the un-named recipient accepted the invitation. M. Berry who was leaving may have been related to either Harry, Benjamin, or Henry Berry—all ejected ministers

and active Nonconformists in the West. Henry Berry had in fact lived not far away at Torrington, in Devon, from 1690 to 1744, where he died and was buried, having "ministered to a numerous people, but very poor." The authenticity of the letter, which was signed by forty men, is guaranteed by a number of their names appearing in the local parish registers of the period. The list includes Robert Gill, Edward Bennett and Thomas Oliver.

Edward Bennett was the grandson of Robert Bennett. His father, William, who died in 1704, left £120 to erect "a convenient meeting-house for the ordinary and most common use of entertaining a Congregation of Dissenters from the Church of England, as were commonly called Presbyterian." The land was purchased for this in 1707, and the church built and opened in 1712.¹⁹ The present Union church stands on this site, and its main structure is substantially that erected in 1712.

Once the meeting-house was built, the church grew under the ministry of Rev. Michael Martin, who had been ordained by the Exeter Presbyterian Assembly²⁰ on June 28th, 1694 and was financially assisted while in Launceston by an annual grant of £6 from the Presbyterian Fund in London. Within a few years the Congregation included 130 "hearers" amongst whom were five county and five borough voters, while the actual membership of the church consisted of three gentlemen, fourteen tradesmen, five yeomen and ten labourers. Yet the life of the church could not have been easy, even though there were neighbouring churches at Tavistock, Okehampton, and Holsworthy. The town was strongly Tory, and Nonconformists did not flourish in such an atmosphere. There was much to harden and coarsen the inhabitants of the town; criminals were still publicly hung on Castle Green, only 100 yards from the church, while for lesser offences women as well as men were flogged through the streets behind a cart.

Martin, who later left for Lymptone, was succeeded by Rev. William Tucker. He, however, removed to St. Ives in 1728, and Martin then returned to Launceston, remaining there until his death in 1745. In his will he left £50 for the church, and a further £10 for a neighbouring church at Hatherleigh. But the cause was declining; no minister was appointed to succeed him, although a Mr. George Castle occasionally preached. Eventually the meeting-house was closed, and Richard Coffin—heir of Edward Bennett, sold the property to a local clothier.

So it was that the early Presbyterian Church, whose roots

¹⁹ Most of the legal documents are reproduced in R. & O. Peter; *Histories of Launceston and Dunheved*, p. 332.

²⁰ The Evans List; Dr. Williams Library.

are to be sought in the Puritanism active in Cornwall in the early 17th century, and which from this obscure beginning became a separate reality by the leadership of William Oliver after the events of 1662, found strength to survive the first hazards of its career, securing its own building, partly because of the help of the Bennett family with its Baptist sympathies. Yet, once the first perils had been passed, decline set in. Was Oliver, the founder, at fault, for having courage, yet not courage sufficient to go on striving for reforms as others did? Or was the church too prone after all to follow the fashions of the day? Did some wailing voice succeed in undermining their dissent? Or were the church leaders led to conform by hope of their securing public office in this ancient borough, then the capital town of Cornwall? All we know is the church suffered the fate of others at this time, and its life seemed ingloriously to have ended.

But by now a fresh wind was blowing in the religious life of the land. In 1743 Wesley was evangelising in Cornwall and George Whitefield in Devonshire. Wesley's first visit to Launceston was in 1747, and he paid a number of visits subsequently. By the time of his last visit in 1789 a chapel had been built which on that particular day was too small to accommodate the congregation which came to hear him. Yet despite the astonishing growth of Methodism in Cornwall, it did not completely take the place of the lapsed Presbyterian churches, and in Launceston itself the heritage of the earlier Dissenters was not to be lost to their more direct heirs.

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(To be continued.)