

# The Union Church at Launceston, Cornwall.

## II. THE CHURCH TAKES ROOT.

**I**N 1777 Sir William Trelawney gave an address in Launceston and a certain William Derry was seriously impressed. Yet not in him alone was God's Spirit at work. The preface to the Congregational Church Book, dated June 6th, 1790, begins:—

“The Cause of Religion in this Town and Neighbourhood in the dissenting line had declined and ceased for a considerable number of years previous to the year 1775. About this period it pleased God to bless a Mr. John Saltren of the Town with a Religious Concern; very soon did he meet with a pious friend in the neighbouring borough of Newport, when they met together from time to time for the purpose of Social prayer and religious conversation. In a short space of time after this, a few others, being also under God wrought upon by means of the Spiritual instruction received by means of the persons mentioned, they formed themselves into a religious society, and appointed stated times for their devotions.” So it was that the little group grew; “other peaceable people who desired it were permitted to be present.” Then “Mr. Saltren began to exercise his talents more publicly and openly, by preaching the Word of God to all who chose to attend. Hearers at this time began to increase in number.” So a larger kitchen had to be used to accommodate them, and soon after, they had to move again to “the Great House, situate at the foot of St. Thomas Hill.”

John Saltren left to “serve a bigger cause elsewhere,” but his brother William succeeded him. In 1788 the old meeting-house at Castle Street was purchased and “was entirely refitted, or rather rebuilt, as it had been planned out for a dwelling house. . . . The expense of reconverting it, including the purchase money, amounted to the sum of £380. This House was opened for religious worship on Thursday 18th day of September, 1788.”

## THE BAPTIST CHURCH.

At this period we find for the first time precise information about Baptists in Launceston. There is no doubt that the cottage meeting at Newport, from which the Independent Church had grown, had contained a minority of Baptists. They now decided that the time had come for them to form their own separate church. They were never numerous, and events proved that the town was too small and Methodism was to become too strong to allow both the Baptist and Independent churches to thrive. Yet, although overshadowed by the sturdy growth of the Independent church, for twenty-one years a small Baptist Church met regularly for worship, a church which is not without its claim to fame. Its story can be partially reconstructed from its minute book, now in the custody of the Devon and Cornwall Baptist Association.

The leading figure of the church was Thomas Eyre, in whose hand the entire minute book seems to have been written. He was engaged in the wool, skin, and combing trades, and was of sufficient local prominence to be one of eleven local householders who in January 1832 were active in seeking reform in local Parliamentary representation. His brother, John Eyre, became an Anglican priest after graduating at Oxford, and then joined the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. Robbins states that John Eyre was at first associated with William Saltren;<sup>21</sup> his influence within the Baptist Church is evident from the careful formulation of their confession of faith, set out in twenty-seven numbered paragraphs which faithfully reflect contemporary Calvinism.

Eleven signatories—eight men and three women, appear beneath the "Solemn Agreement entered into by all who join this Church commonly called Baptists." On Thursday, March 24th, 1791, they had opened their meeting-house in Southgate Street. Alteration to the premises had cost nearly £49; there is no record that Thomas Eyre was ever repaid this sum. Then on the next day, Friday, at 8 p.m. six of the men were "put into a proper Church State by the Revd. Hugh Giles and gave each other the Right Hand of Fellowship. The following Sunday three more members were received on their behalf by Revd. Hugh Giles, who administered the Lord's Supper."

So the Baptist Church in Launceston was born; a small yet sturdy infant, meeting in a large room at the back of what was then "Ching's Stores," for which their accounts show they paid £5 5s. 0d. a year rent, having a twenty-one year lease of the room. Their accounts also show that another minister was present on March 25th, a Revd. J. Wilkinson, whose expenses

<sup>21</sup> Robbins, *ibid*, 272.

were 5s. 0d., compared with 7s. 6d. for Hugh Giles. Not lacking in zeal, at a church meeting on March 31st they "agreed to continue it every Thursday Month at Evening. And Stated Times of public worship by Sabbath Days—Eleven o'clock in the morning—Three o'clock afternoon—and Six o'clock in the evening—and that all meetings be ended at Nine o'clock in the evening and not later." Nor was there lacking evidence of God's blessing, for next month a member was added by baptism, the service being conducted by Rev. William Smith, when in addition a man from Tavistock was baptised. The Church Meeting which had authorised the baptism had also made Thomas Eyre their first, and only, deacon and elder.

At the close of April the Church Meeting passed a resolution concerning another of its members, Jacob Grigg; ". . . we also believe that he is possessed of spiritual and natural gifts, as we have frequently heard him with pleasure and profit dispense the Word of God among us . . . We therefore call him to preach the Gospel here amongst us, or whenever a door may be opened in Providence for that purpose. . . ."

In May 1792 Isaiah Birt of Plymouth and Robert Redding of Chacewater visited the church. Birt baptised Thomas Eyre together with William Lenn (another foundation member) and his wife "who desire to bless God for what they experienced of His presence in that holy Institution." The baptism took place in the Mill stream at the foot of Ridgegrove Hill. Later in the month Richard Lenn was baptised by Birt—but at Plymouth. (It is interesting to note that these foundation members were only subsequently baptised.)

A year later, in May, 1793, the church considered Jacob Grigg's request "to go to the Academy at Bristol for a Term of one year for Instruction, and then to return for to reside among us again in preaching the Word as usual." To this he was commended through the agency of Isaiah Birt. Already in January of this year Grigg had been registered as the teacher of the church. But at Bristol Grigg found his horizons widened, and in consequence did not return to Launceston but, being accepted by the Baptist Missionary Society, sailed in 1795 for Sierra Leone. The church never recovered from the loss of Grigg.<sup>22</sup> In 1796, in their letter to the Association, which met that year at Exeter, they describe themselves as "remaining obscure from our Brethren and Fathers in Christ." The only remaining entry of consequence in the minutes is the copy of the letter to the Association dated 1797. After a florid introduction it continues:— "And we beseech you, that . . . you would have a kind remembrance of us, two or three poor members of Christ

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Grigg is to be the subject of the next article.

at Launceston; for the cause of Christ is very low with us as to our number, and we are almost weary of waiting the Lord's Coming to make bare his Arm, as we have no addition to our little Society, and are at a distance from the Ministers of Christ visiting us: Yet we bless God that we are kept together in the Love of the Lord Jesus, and that we frequently find His presence with us, which still encourages us to keep open the doors of the Lord's House. . . ."

So the handful of members struggled on. In 1811 the church was still listed in the *Baptist Magazine*, but next year the lease at South Gate ended, and after this, the church ceased to exist as an organised body. One or two of its members ultimately became members of the Independent Church, where undoubtedly more continued to worship. Yet without a building, and without regular Baptist fellowship, a few remained loyal to their Baptist principles, so that a generation later another church was founded with greater success.

#### THE INDEPENDENT CHURCH.

In the meantime a very different story was being enacted at Castle Street, where the Independent Church was making great progress. After the Independent Church had been worshipping in the Castle Street meeting-house for a little less than two years, they felt themselves strong enough to draw up a constitution and a set of rules, which was adopted and signed by twenty-seven foundation members. Three days later, on Wednesday, June 9th, 1790, William Saltren was ordained to the Christian ministry, with representatives present from Plymouth, Bideford, Kingsbridge, Appledore, Bridport, Honiton and London. The service began at 10.30 a.m. and continued until 2.30 p.m. A service the same evening was somewhat shorter. According to a manuscript of Robert Pearce, Junior, in the Launceston Public Library, the charge to the minister was preached by Rev. Mr. Lavington, of Bideford. On the first day of the next month two deacons were chosen, and three new members admitted. The following Sunday the Lord's Supper was observed, twenty-six people being present, and the collection for the poor amounted to 8s. 8d. which was immediately distributed to four of the members. For many years the practice continued of holding a Church Meeting on alternate months, and always the Lord's Supper was celebrated the following Sunday.

During the five years of William Saltren's ministry the membership grew from twenty-seven to forty-two. One of these members, June Hurden, was received on a recommendation from "Revd. Mr. Birt, minister of a Baptist Church at Plymouth

Doek." We are left to speculate why she joined the Independent Church, and not the Baptist, and wonder if on the day before this meeting approved of her she witnessed the local baptismal service which Birt conducted. It certainly suggests that as in the previous days of the Newport Meeting, there was still tolerance of the Baptist position among the Independents.

Saltren died on Saturday, April 18th, 1795, aged forty, and a bachelor. Soon after, three more deacons were chosen, and in August it was resolved "to engage the Revd. Ionas Lewis, late from Wincanton, Som. until Ladyday, 1796, at 20/- a week." When this probationary period was ended he was called to the pastorate on a permanent basis, and although dissuaded by an anonymous letter, he accepted the call when it was unanimously repeated. The same year saw the first missionary interest, and a collection in June, 1796 raised £14 for this purpose. But Lewis' pastorate was short. The Church Book has been mutilated, so that the record is deficient, but soon after May, 1798 Lewis left the church. Robbins suggests there was a personal difficulty with the congregation.<sup>23</sup> Although the church was soon to prosper, this was but the first time such an event was to take place.

The turn of the century saw the beginning of an outstanding pastorate. On June 29th, 1800, Ronald Cope, then senior student at Hoxton Academy and afterwards a Doctor of Law, first preached at Launceston. His stay was prolonged for two months, then for a year, when he was invited to the pastorate at a stipend of £60 a year. This invitation he accepted, and was ordained on October 21st, 1801, remaining at Launceston until June 1820, when he left "to fill a more important situation in the church of God as tutor to an academy in Ireland." Cope was a most enterprising man, a keen social reformer, and active in seeking the abolition of the Slave Trade. (He published a sermon on this theme in 1807 that he had preached on May Day). Due to his initiative a Sunday School was founded in 1800, during his first probationary year. It was one of the earliest in the county, although at Falmouth such work had begun earlier still. Within a generation the Sunday School had grown to a Union embracing seven other schools in neighbouring country areas. The church grew so that it was necessary to erect another gallery within three years. But soon after the work was completed, on Christmas Day—a Sunday—while the church was at worship "a storm of wind seized the roof with such violence as to damage it very considerably" while a few weeks later another storm blew a chimney stack down, causing further damage so that "a great part of the timber work was broken . . . the rains that followed

<sup>23</sup> Robbins, *ibid*, 283.

brought down a considerable portion of the plastering and rendered the Meeting almost unfit for worship. 'Our God is in the Heavens, He doeth whatsoever He pleaseth.' However, a subscription list was opened which attracted some sixty-six donors from all local parties and creeds. Nearly £100 was raised, which almost paid for the new gallery, as well as the roof.

Continued growth required further enlargement in 1809—costing over £300—and in 1815 another gallery was erected, this time behind the pulpit. When Dr. Cope left the church his stipend had been increased from the original £60 a year to £150; he had admitted 104 new members into the church, including two members of the Lenn family, two of the Eyre family, and a Grigg, all families with Baptist connexions. He had been headmaster of a local school during part of his pastorate. Subsequently he ministered at Wakefield and Penryn, where he died in 1856 at the age of eighty.

The following year Alexander Good began a new pastorate, during which the church building was again completely repaired, its last major alteration. In 1824 Rev. J. Barfitt succeeded Good; nothing is disclosed concerning the end of his ministry. Barfitt ministered for twelve years, during which time the system of pew rents was revised, the best seats costing 8s. per annum (or £3 3s. 0d. a pew) while others could be had for 6s. or 4s.

John Horsey, of Western College, almost immediately followed Barfitt in 1836—another notable ministry which continued for thirty years. During his first year's ministry an interesting minute is recorded:—"Persons offering satisfactory evidence of conversion to God shall be considered eligible to all privileges of Church Communion, notwithstanding any difference of opinion on the subject of baptism and other points now expected." New members for that year included a Mr. and Mrs. Pattison. In August, 1930, Professor Pattison of the Northfield Bible Institute of America, on a visit to Launceston, stated that his grandfather had been a member of the early Southgate Baptist Church in Launceston, and subsequently moved to London, becoming a member and later a deacon at the Bloomsbury Baptist Church. Here again is evidence that the Independent Church continued to accept the members of the defunct Baptist Church into its fellowship and that the scanty records of the Baptist Church do not show the complete extent of its life. Pattison seems to have been a man of some status in the town, for he was a solicitor who became the first president of the Mechanics and General Institute, founded in 1847.<sup>24</sup> Probably in 1850, due to the influence of the Castle Street Church, the village chapel at Greystone Bridge was opened. This was later

<sup>24</sup> Robbins, *ibid.*, 337.

adopted by the Baptists and is still used for worship. Although Horsey's ministry was of such duration, all was not well. There is no entry in the church book for the last ten years of it. In 1865 he resigned, but then withdrew his resignation. After the subsequent discussion in a Church Meeting which was far from happy, the greater part of the congregation split, and continued to worship in the Western Subscription Rooms, (a local hall), until after the end of Horsey's ministry. He resigned the pastorate in 1866 "after passing through a severe trial in respect to himself and the Church." At the close of his ministry he was able to persuade the church to abandon the old Presbyterian custom which had prevailed until then of sitting in singing and standing in prayer.

T. E. M. Edwards began a short pastorate in 1867, which he resigned for health reasons two years later, but in which he had ministered to the reunited church, and seen the membership grow from 57 to 97, a growth which was reflected in the considerably larger, but unrecorded, number of "seat-holders," and the publication of the first Church Manual in 1868. The church was sufficiently strong to entertain the Association for their two-day meetings in April 1869. Also during this pastorate the old box pulpit was removed, and the present pulpit installed, while the project for a new vestry was accepted.

Thomas Jackson, B.A., from New College, became the pastor in 1870, and at his ordination the Baptist Minister from the church at Lifton, some six miles from Launceston, was present. This Lifton Church, opened in 1850, partly fostered the revived Baptist Church in Launceston, founded in 1876. Jackson's pastorate was unhappy; after two years he tendered his resignation stating he felt he had lost the confidence of some of the members, and his insecurity was made worse by the inadequate stipend (£140 per annum) and lack of a house, as well as by his own indifferent health. After a stormy meeting, when no less than 248 members of the congregation had petitioned him to remain, despite the deacons' opposition, all seemed well. But by July of the following year Jackson brought the deacons' continued opposition into the open. Six sermons which he had submitted to two distinguished arbitrators, Dr. Allen and Professor Charlton, were pronounced orthodox. When these findings were made public however, some of the deacons continued to remain hostile. Jackson thereupon not only resigned, but left the ministry, adopting medicine as a profession with good success. Within ten years of his settling in Croydon he was elected to the Town Council.

Jesse Bamford succeeded him in 1874, and began a pastorate of nineteen years which marked the peak of the church's life.

The membership grew swiftly; in March, 1877 no less than twenty names of prospective church members were proposed. The same year the organ was enlarged, and soon afterwards the fine block of Sunday School buildings which face the church was erected. It is of interest to note that this period was also one of general prosperity in the town, marked especially by the building of several new streets of substantially built houses.

In 1891 a Men's Bible Class was started—the origin of the still prosperous Launceston Brotherhood—while the Church Book records a discussion on means of improving both the attendance of young people at the church services and the general attendance at the weeknight meeting. But the little village church at Langore, whose origin is unrecorded, so declined that at this time of prosperity in the town the trustees were compelled to close and sell the property to pay off the accumulated debt on the church.

In 1894, Bamford was followed by William Miles. His was another happy ministry often recalled by older members. At this time the present manse was purchased, and better incandescent gas lighting was installed in the church. The long-hoped for vestry was built, and a new heating system installed. Some of this work was stimulated by the 20th Century Fund. In 1901, the village church at Polyphant was sold to Wesleyan Trustees for the sum of £10. At the turn of the century, therefore, we find the church apparently vigorous and strong, with an evening congregation which frequently filled the building which seats five hundred. The Baptists, now re-established, were as yet a small group, but this is a convenient point to turn aside to consider the story of their re-establishment, after giving some fuller account of Jacob Grigg.

KENNETH HYDE.

*(To be continued.)*