

Baptist Beginnings in Malvern.

IN his account of Baptist Association life in Worcestershire, Dr. W. T. Whitley traced the early rise of Baptists "in such a sleepy district" to the presence of the Parliamentary armies during the Civil War. No less than four of the churches, a high proportion in a comparatively small Association, date back to the middle of the 17th century. Two of them, Worcester and Upton-on-Severn, were within a few miles of Malvern, and, to come nearer still, there is evidence for the existence of a cause in the village of Colwall, just over the other side of the Hills, in 1672. Dr. H. E. Collier,¹ of Worcester, who has made research into the history of Nonconformity in the county, says that this was "probably but not certainly Baptist." "In all local records," he adds, "there is an interesting historical confusion between the Quakers and the Baptists who were intermingled almost inextricably during the period 1660-1675." This is as near to Malvern as the Baptist witness appears to have come in the 17th century and, for that matter, in the 18th. Nor did the "Home Missionaries," whose reports sometimes appear in the "Annual Letters" of the Association, apparently have time or opportunity to make a beginning though one came as near as Naunton and Upton where he "repeatedly preached in . . . such parts of the town as are most infested with the workers of iniquity." It was only in the last quarter of the 19th century, when Malvern had become famous as an inland resort, that Baptists found a secure foothold. A church was then established as the result, primarily, of a fine example of Association initiative.

There had been one independent but abortive attempt just a little earlier. At the time of writing there is still at least one person alive who attended services which were held for a few years in a house named "Holly Lodge," on the North Malvern Road. A few Baptists in the town seem to have come together there in or around 1860. No written records of their activity survive and they do not seem to have been in contact with the Association. A press report of a speech by W. J. Povey (1893) suggests that he had been able to find out but little. One purposeful figure does however emerge from this obscurity, namely

¹ Dr. Collier is distantly related to the Baptist H. H. Collier after whom the lecture room in Regent's Park College is named.

Thomas Acock, who had come from Bourton-on-the-Water about 1862 to work at one of the local hydropathic establishments. His son, W. T. Acock, now in his eighties, is the one known link with the Holly Lodge fellowship. As a little boy he used to accompany his father to the services, but can only recall four others of those who made up the congregation—his mother and aunt (a Miss Trower), Samuel Smith, and a man named Dark. The then occupier of "Holly Lodge," a Miss Colston, may have been one of them also. Though local lay preachers must have rendered a good deal of service at the beginning attempts were made to secure some measure of regular oversight. Dr. Whitley records² that a minister, J. Moore, settled with them in 1862, and the speech of Povey to which reference has been made above, supplements this with the information that Moore came from Hereford each Sunday. As to dates the meetings for worship began in 1860 or thereabouts. According to a local nonagenarian, a Freechurchman and lay-preacher, they had ceased when he came to Malvern in 1875, though he recalled hearing of the services which had been held in "Holly Lodge." The room that was used is underneath the main part of the house and was reached by precipitous steps (now overgrown, but clearly discernible), which led down from a gate on the North Malvern Road. By its Sunday residents it was jocularly dubbed "the Cave of Adullam."

Short-lived and limited in scope though this venture was Thomas Acock entertained hopes for the establishment of a church with a permanent building in Great Malvern. In 1871-2 he took steps with J. S. Hanson, of Worcester, to obtain a piece of land in the centre of the town, but these attempts were unsuccessful owing to the restrictive covenants on the greater part of the land. They lost one of the available sites by a matter of a few hours—the Congregationalists anticipated them and secured the position. With a gesture that is worth recording Acock and Hanson, and such others as may have been with them in their efforts, resolved to stand aside until the Congregationalists were fairly established, their building erected and free from debt.

Eleven years elapsed before further steps were taken and then in 1882, at the close of what has been described as "the laymen's thirty years," the matter was brought before the Worcestershire Association during its Annual Meetings, held that year at Stratford-on-Avon. The relevant minute is brief and records nothing of any discussion that may have taken place nor the name of the person who introduced it. It is easy to imagine, however, that Hanson had something to do with it in view of his evident interest in the matter. Dr. Whitley described him

² *Baptist Association Life in Worcestershire, 1655-1926*, p. 23.

as one of the driving forces of the Association. In the minute his name is first amongst those appointed as a committee "to consider the desirability of purchasing a piece of land at Malvern for the site of a Baptist Chapel." His enthusiasm for the project may be judged from the fact that when this committee met a fortnight later he had already secured a site at his own risk. The site was not a central one—Hanson had discovered the difficulties in Great Malvern when exploring with Acock in 1871—but all were agreed that it was very suitable. It was in the Link Top-North Malvern Area and the hopes and intentions of the Association gathered around it for some years to come. At the Autumnal Meetings it was resolved to go forward with the Malvern project and the sub-committee energetically got down to the task of enlisting interest and raising funds. Hanson himself gave £50, and the name of another generous supporter, J. Smallwood, now appears—not for the last time. Others such as J. P. Harvey, of Kidderminster, another great friend of the Malvern cause, also gave substantially and just over a year later, in January, 1884, it was noted that only £57 was needed to clear the cost of the site (£400), while considerable promises had been received towards a building fund. At this stage nineteen trustees were appointed. An extract from the Trust Deed, recorded in the Church Minute Book, shows that the premises were to be used "as a place of public religious worship by the Society of Protestant Dissenters called Particular or Calvinistic Baptists." The first ministerial appointment was to be in the hands of the Association. It was also laid down that any person professing repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ might be admitted to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper "although such person shall not be of the denomination aforesaid."

Fortunately, in view of subsequent developments, the matter of the building was not pressed forward with the same despatch as the purchase of the site had been. Architect's plans were approved by the end of 1885 but no start was made, perhaps with the consideration in mind that it was needful to gather a church before erecting its meeting place. At a meeting of "the Malvern Committee," July 7th, 1886, held at Stratford, William Sugden, of Malvern (a man who came to occupy a great place in the affection and respect of the church), agreed to superintend this responsible task and was authorised to accept the offer of the Assembly Rooms, Great Malvern, "for thirteen weeks at a guinea a week." There, on what is now the site of the Winter Gardens and Festival Theatre, the public worship of the new Baptist community in Malvern began on July 18th, the Rev. M. Philpin, of Alcester, conducting morning and evening service. In

September, Sugden reported that "the services have been well sustained by neighbouring brethren and an encouraging interest shown by the outside public." The purchase of "two substantial volumes for the entry of Church records and Church finances" was thereupon approved. The word "substantial" is worth noting for it would seem to indicate the firm conviction that Baptists had at last come to stay in Malvern. John Smallwood "intimated that he could find a friend willing to present a communion service. . . ."

During the Assembly Rooms period, certainly after the arrival of the Rev. W. J. Povey, baptisms were administered on occasion in the baths of the Imperial Hotel, now the Malvern Girls' College. The first baptismal service, however, was held in the Sansome Walk Church, Worcester. This took place one year after the commencement of public worship and was a moment of great rejoicing and encouragement. Those baptised on this occasion, together with others, constituted the nucleus of the church which was brought into formation on October 24th, 1887. The Chairman of the Association gave the new members the right hand of fellowship, after which all joined in the communion service. The Declaration made at the time was as follows:—

"We, whose names are hereunto subscribed, being with one consent gathered together before God our Father, do solemnly dedicate ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ our Divine Redeemer and to one another as brethren and sisters in Him; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We do now declare ourselves to be a church of Jesus Christ, banded together to walk worthily of our profession of His name, for the observance of His ordinances, and that we may labour as God shall help us for the salvation of others."

Signed

William Sugden
 Mary Sugden
 John Wooding
 Edith Mary Sugden
 Mary Annie
 Annie Maria James
 E. A. Wilson
 Emma Smith
 Ann Bawning
 Mary Hill

Martha Annie Walwyn
 Sarah Beard
 Elizabeth Watkins
 Sarah Ann Green
 Jane ——— Smith
 Emma Mary Lane
 Henry Lane
 Adolphus Smith
 Ebenezer Smith

In June, 1888, the church was received into membership with the Association and in October, about a year after its formation, was in a position to think of inviting a minister and knew the man it wanted. In accordance with the terms of the trust deed this first appointment had to have the approval of the Association. This was readily given by the Committee, subject to confirmation at the next Annual Meetings, and the church forthwith called

to the pastorate the Rev. William James Povey. This was Povey's first and only charge. His ministry began in February, 1889, and lasted for nearly thirty years. It would probably be true to say that quite early on he saw this as the major task of his life—to establish the Baptist church in Malvern in adequate premises of its own. Other invitations subsequently came to him, of course, but he seems to have had little hesitation in declining them. His name, therefore, together with that of Mrs. Povey, is inextricably bound up with the all important phase that now lay ahead. During the ministry of the Rev. J. D. Raw, while Povey was still alive, there was placed in the church a bronze tablet which paid tribute to the high significance of his pastorate. It reads, "In grateful commemoration of the ministry of the Rev. W. J. Povey, M.A., 1889-1919, who served this Church with great ability and devotion as its first Minister. The site was secured and this building erected and endowed by his patient resource and courageous leadership." Dr. Charles Brown who performed the unveiling ceremony described it as a "very simple statement . . . of a great fact and a great ministry." (The tablet was the work of Mr. Dennis Arkinstall, a brother of the Rev. Clifford Arkinstall, Raw's predecessor in the pastorate, who died in 1931.)

The church which called Povey had called a man well equipped—in some respects outstandingly so—for the tasks that confronted him. He had been for eight years a member of the Enfield Baptist Tabernacle and, though his ecclesiastical sympathies were by no means narrow, he was a thoroughly convinced Baptist who loved and served his denomination faithfully throughout his life. He was educated at the Merchant Taylors School and Pembroke College, Cambridge, proceeding thence to Regent's Park College for his theological training. His all-round ability as a student may be judged from the fact that he took the "Charles Stovel" prize for New Testament Greek and the "Davies" prize for Semitics. In due course the church had reason also to be grateful for the knowledge of law which he had gained in his earlier studies at Cambridge. In 1896 he married Annie Girling Garrard, a lady no less gifted than himself. Her father had been prominent in founding the work at Enfield—the environment in which the two met each other. She worked side by side with her husband in the many-sided responsibilities which came his way, sustained him through arduous and sometimes heartbreaking difficulties, and nursed him through one or two periods of ill-health. While this is not the place to pursue biographical details further, it is right to mention the service which both man and wife rendered on denominational councils and committees, and not least in the Worcestershire Association.

Malvern Baptists, as is already apparent, owed their establishment to the Association and of course such debts cannot be repaid, or, for that matter, assessed. It need only be said that the two Poveys rendered a return service to the Association in a manner which Worcestershire Baptists still remember with gratitude.

When Povey arrived, fresh from College and still a bachelor, the church consisted of some twenty members, with a building site paid for and a start made towards a building fund. References were made at the time to the hope of an early beginning on the erection of the church. A few months in Malvern, however, convinced Povey that the site that had been secured scarcely took account of the town's growing importance as an inland health resort, and he felt that a central position was vital if the church was to cater for and gain the interest of Baptist visitors as well as residents. The point had not eluded Acock and Hanson in 1871, but the difficulty had been in finding a position in Great Malvern. The Nonconformist tradition in architecture did not apparently impress those in authority—now much concerned with the development of the town as a beauty spot. Whether other considerations, of an ecclesiastical nature, influenced them it is impossible to say, but the situation confronting Povey is well summed up in the words of Miss C. F. Severn Burrow in her published history of the town—"No shops, public houses, chapels or factories were allowed on the residential roads."³ We may smile rather wryly at this list of companions in architectural crime, but the remarkable thing is that Povey was not daunted. In spite of the problems he carried the church with him, and the desire for a fresh, central site was communicated to the Association which still retained an authoritative voice in the Malvern project. His resource was such that by the end of the year he had found and secured a piece of property in a satisfactory position. "Upon this information" reads the minute of the Church Meeting of December 18th, 1889, "it was proposed by A. Smith, sec by Mr. Hatton and carried unan that we here record our deep heartfelt thankfulness to our pastor and Mr. Sugden who through the blessing of God have at last secured a central site whereon to build a house for Him. And this is mainly . . . the outcome of our pastor's labours. We and the Church that will in years to come meet therein will be everlastingly indebted to . . . Rev. W. J. Povey."

The site was an interesting one comprising two properties, a house then known as Fonthill College which was a girls' school, and an establishment known as the Haywell Baths. The latter was built to exploit the therapeutic value of certain springs and was laid out with conservatory and small pleasure gardens which

³ *A Little City Set on a Hill* (1948), p. 72.

overlooked a pool further down on the natural slope of the land. The water of the baths was reputed to be beneficial in the treatment of ophthalmic troubles and "Haywell" was locally and colloquially rendered "Eyewell." There is a story that a workman engaged on the building of the present church cured an infection of the eye by bathing the member daily on his arrival at work. What scope for the development of a Baptist Lourdes! The nature of the site prompted the inevitable witticism on the day of the stonelaying. "Baptists ought to have secured it long ago" said Povey, "for it was noted for its water, not only in quantity but in quality also." He was justified in looking for humour in the situation for the problems connected with it had been formidable. There was the material task of dealing with the springs; it is said that the foundations were more trouble than all the superstructure and almost as costly. But before work could be even started there were legal difficulties in the way of manorial rites and restrictions, including the familiar antipathy to a Nonconformist building. In one way and another, with no little "blood, toil, sweat, and tears" all such barriers were surmounted. In conversations with Mrs. Povey before her death, one found that the strain of that early period upon her husband stood out in her memory. If in this account the story of the struggle has been abridged, there is no doubt that the church which had called him was thankful again and again for his courage and tenacity, not to mention his legal knowledge.

The people who were afraid that Nonconformist property would be an eyesore need have had no qualms. All the Free Churches of the town are, as a matter of fact, most worthily housed and the Baptists, as Povey said at the stonelaying, July 13, 1893, knew that they too were building "a house for God" and for that reason "it should be the best, and as beautiful as funds would allow." The building which arose is evidence of that intention and of the vision and sacrifice which went into its fulfilment. Malvern, through its local paper, gracefully acknowledged that the Baptists could pardonably feel proud. It was indeed a great day for them when on June 28, 1894, with Dr. R. Glover as principal speaker, they dedicated the new church to the glory of God. They were well aware, of course, that years of work lay ahead before the building debt would finally be cleared. This, by the way, was a task in which they had a measure of outside assistance for Povey was able to enlist the interest and support of numerous well-to-do friends. Nevertheless the main burden inevitably fell on members and minister and it was shouldered with a will. Before his retirement from the pastorate in 1919 Povey had the satisfaction of seeing the task virtually complete. After his retirement, while still acting as

trustee, he sold the adjoining house and effected a small permanent endowment for the maintenance of the fabric.

The "Malvern Committee" of the Association finally laid down its task in 1895 after thirteen years of exacting, but most valuable service. The minutes of its meetings during 1894 mention the discussion that took place as to the terms of the new Trust Deed which now had to be made. The wording at this point is somewhat ambiguous but seems to indicate a majority vote for an open membership clause. Eventually the deed was drawn up in such a way as to leave the church free "to admit to its fellowship and membership such Christian Believers as may be deemed eligible to internal discipline for the time being in force. . . ." The first rules adopted by the church (in December 1896) made baptism a condition of membership; by a revision which took place in January 1912, open membership came into force and thus it has remained since. At no time, however, during the first two or three decades, the period with which the present article is concerned, did the beautiful open baptistery ever become purely ornamental. There passed through its waters a steady succession of those who were "being added to the church," and while inevitably much has been said about the minister, this story ought not to be concluded without reference to the members who so devotedly sustained the work and witness under his leadership. Rather than resort to generalisations we may perhaps refer to two or three names and through them pay tribute to the whole of that worthy first generation.

There was John Wooding, for example. His signature appears in the list of founder members; a staunch Nonconformist, and devoted to his own church and denomination with every fibre of his being. He was a local postman, but never too tired of walking to pay a daily visit to the church during the time it was being built. He knew its every stone and loved it. Everything which concerned the life and welfare of the fellowship was important to him. Perhaps he had no little share in establishing the church's local reputation for friendliness—the first people to welcome the present writer to Malvern told of the warmth with which Wooding made them feel immediately at home, when, as war-time evacuees, they came as strangers to a strange land. Such men as this belong to the backbone of our churches. He had the joy of seeing every member of his family enter fully into the work; his wife was among the first to be baptised in the new building, and two of his three daughters have in turn followed him to a place on the diaconate. During the ministry of the Rev. J. D. Raw, the church expressed its regard for Wooding by making him a life-deacon, one of the only two ever to be elected to this honour. Another family

tradition dating from the earliest days is that of the Smiths. It would be difficult if not impossible to name a year when no member of this family was in responsible office. Samuel Smith, a local tradesman, had been one of the "Holly Lodge" fellowship. One of his eleven children, Adolphus, became secretary at the first formal appointment of officers of the present church and, later, the first Sunday School superintendent. Of the third generation S. G. Smith eventually succeeded his uncle in the secretaryship; in both third and fourth generations there have been those to hear and answer the missionary call, a fact which may be allowed to speak for the strong B.M.S. interest which has always characterised the church.

One more name may go to complete this small portrait gallery. William J. Davis, a Malvern business man was one of the eight candidates figuring in the first baptismal service in the church. The five oak chairs which stand behind the Communion Table are dedicated to his memory and we are fortunate in possessing a copy of the memorial address given by the Rev. R. C. Lemin when the chairs were installed. The address as a whole was characteristically choice and—what is more important from the point of view of an historical account—characteristically devoid of exaggeration. It may indeed be as eloquent as Lemin himself as of the man he described. We make no apology for quoting it at length. After referring to Davis's constancy, wisdom, and humility, Lemin went on:—

"I have the feeling that it is just the simplicity and reality in this memorial . . . which make it so appropriate and remarkably suggestive of the tenor of his life and work amongst us here. This English oak is what it seems to be. It does not pretend to be what it is not. It is honest stuff. What it is on the surface it is right through. And that is what I have found—what all who have really known him have found his manhood and his religion to be. If he hated anything it was everything that at all savoured of the ostentatious, meretricious, insincere, canting, in speech or character. Emotion that soared above performance did not attract him. He distrusted professions that outrun practice. He had no use for creeds that have no foundation in personal experience and conviction. This gave his religious witness a weight and worth in the eyes of many who, one fears, do not always hear what we say from listening to what we are. . . . This wood yesterday was growing by the wayside—possibly of Worcestershire roads. It was a common and everyday thing. Today it is being transfigured and sanctified, by its association with the wood of the Cross, to the service of the loftiest in mortal intuition. aspiration, vision, experience. In this it is a true symbol of what he was. This is what he gave. . . . This memorial of a man who knew Whom he believed, and thereby fought the good fight and kept the faith, will stand, as long as these walls stand, a rebuke to that foolishness in the human heart which says there is no God to be the sun, the shield and the exceeding great reward of all them that put their trust in Him."

Around such personalities, then, was the church of the first generation built up. "And some there be that have no memorial." To them all, known and unknown, the present generation owns its debt and from them has received a tradition which challenges to the highest standards of churchmanship. The story told here has, perhaps, little of the dramatic in it. There has been reference to obstructions and difficulties, but none to persecution such as one may find in the history of some of the older churches in the Association. The progress made in the early days, as since, was in terms of steady advance rather than sweeping success. But although any element of a startling nature is lacking, this enterprise is worthy of a place in the annals of the denomination. It was a piece of 19th century Baptist Advance, envisaged first by a Malvern resident, set moving by an Association's initiative and the generosity of its laymen, and carried to fruition under God by able ministerial leadership and the devotion of church members.

G. W. RUSLING.

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of Dr. Vincent Thomas, Dr. Ellen Farrer and Dr. Russell Watson from overseas and Dr. Percy Lush and Sir Alfred Pearce Gould at home, while its rapid and vigorous development was mainly due to the fervour and ability of that "master enthusiast," Dr. Fletcher Moorshead. The building up of the home base and the remedial and evangelistic results on the mission fields are described, while tribute is paid to those consecrated workers at home and abroad who have devoted their energies and varied skills to the service of suffering. Miss Causton has done her work well, providing a book which holds the interest of the reader throughout, and we hope it will enjoy a wide circulation among our churches.

GRAHAM W. HUGHES.