

The Union Church at Launceston, Cornwall

IV. THE BAPTIST REVIVAL

THE Baptist Church at Southgate ceased to exist as an organised body in 1812, but its few stalwarts continued to be active in the district, and the Baptist witness was maintained by their preaching. In 1849, in the village of South Petherwin, some five miles from Launceston, a Baptist church was founded. Very little is known of this church, and so far no trace of its records or minutes, if any were kept, has come to light. In the following year another church was formed, at Lifton, in Devonshire, hardly more than five miles from Launceston, on the main road to Exeter. This church had at least one immediate link with the former church at Launceston, since Dorothy Gould, who with her husband, John were prominent in its life, was a daughter of the Lenn family. William Lenn had been a foundation member of the first Launceston Church with his son, Richard. A shoemaker by trade, Richard was well known as a preacher in the district, and would walk miles every Sunday to serve the village churches. He had some fame as a local poet, and wrote verses on topical events for the local newspaper, especially about the feuds that then existed between the churches and the chapels. He did not die before 1874, and provides at least one certain link between the earlier church and the churches at South Petherwin and Lifton. Mr. Stanley Gould, secretary of Mutley Baptist Church, Plymouth, comes of this stock and, having been president of the Association in 1943-44, gives sure proof that the family still keeps to its tradition.

The church at Lifton decided to build a chapel which was completed in 1851 and seated 150. From the start the church had an open membership, but its trust emphatically stated that the minister must preach "Believers baptism, and no other." The following year saw the visit of "Mr. Wheeler to Launceston, formerly a missionary in West Africa." Was there any recollection then, we wonder of Jacob Grigg who had left Launceston for West Africa fifty years earlier? "Mr. Wheeler" was in fact J. A. Wheeler who went out to the Cameroons under the Baptist

Missionary Society in 1850, but returned in 1852. Wheeler remained at Lifton, becoming its first pastor.

The minutes of the Lifton Church show that W. D. Hanson was also active in its life. He was later the squire of Polyphant, a village hard against Bodmin Moor, and was instrumental in forming a Baptist cause in that village in 1872. This Church was again short-lived, and little information about it survives. Mr. W. R. Pattison was another leading personality, whose connection with the former Launceston Church has already been noticed. He provides another link between the two churches.

Another active Baptist was a Mr. Peters, of South Petherwin, who was frequently associated with activities at Lifton. An interesting minute records that on Good Friday, 1893, a Baptismal Service was held, and one of the speakers at the evening meeting was R. Lenn, of Launceston. At the Church Anniversary in the same year the congregation exceeded 200. In 1855, there was some discussion about raising the pastor's stipend, and a suggestion made that the Church at South Petherwin would help, but the idea fell through. In 1860, the membership had passed forty; the tenth Anniversary was celebrated, the visiting preacher being T. H. Pattison of Regent's Park College—a son of W. R. Pattison. He was later to become Professor T. Harwood Pattison, D.D., of Rochester Seminary, U.S.A., who gave the Ridley lectures in his old college in 1900, a few years before his death. The following year records, amongst other baptisms, one from Greystone Bridge—the first record of Baptists there. In 1862, the Congregational Church at Launceston, which had hitherto been responsible for this small church, made an arrangement with the Lifton Church to share responsibility for it. The Church still lives and holds a service once every Sunday; its congregation is small—rarely exceeding a dozen, often half that number, and its future can only be secured if it can find younger people to accept responsibility for it. But there is an atmosphere of sanctity in the small building so delightfully situated on the banks of the Tamar nestling under a wooded hill-side. Its older members recall still earlier years, and the baptisms in the river close by. Since 1928 it has been under Baptist Trustees.

In 1863, a preachers' plan was drawn up to embrace Lifton, Greystone, Bulford (of which we have no knowledge) and South Petherwin. The following year a church was established at Sourton; this church, standing on the borders of Dartmoor, is still thriving, but it now looks to the Baptist church at Okehampton for its main support.

In the record of baptisms we find the names of two Launceston ladies, both of whom were at the time in membership at the Independent Church at Castle Street. 1868 saw the

baptism of Henry Fitze—whose family has rendered conspicuous service to the Baptists in the district ever since.

Now there come some changes in the pastorate; the year 1869 sees Thos. Honyer inducted to the pastorate "after labouring as an evangelist in connection with the church for more than three years." He left in 1872, and was succeeded, for six months only, by John Hier. In 1874, George Parker became minister, and with his coming the church discovered a new vitality. He came from Croscombe, Somerset, and was introduced to the church by Mr. Wm. Haines, of Spurgeon's College. The next year sees the first reference to services at Portgate, and amongst others baptised is the new pastor's second son.

The Portgate church trust was dated February, 1864—ten years before this, and it was never legally enrolled. It was built by Mrs. Thomasine Smale largely for her own use, and by her will she left most of her estate for its benefit. The will was contested by her family, but the Devon Baptist Association proved the case, and then accepted a sum of £660 as capital to provide "Smale's Bequest," the income from which is for the benefit of the Baptist Minister of Lifton or Launceston. The church itself has long ago ceased to exist, and the derelict building with its small graveyard was legally disposed of, not without difficulty, in 1930.

Parker's entry in the Lifton Minute book for March 26th, 1876 reads "Comd. preaching the Gospel in the Room for many years occupied by the 'Bretheren' in Duke Street, Launceston. We had nine in the morning and twenty-six in the evening. . . . We hope to continue the service here, and to work it in connection with Lifton." The services did in fact continue, and the church at South Petherwin moved to Launceston, selling their building there for £75 in 1890. By May the cause at Launceston was sufficiently established for a permanent agreement to be drawn up with the owner of the hall in Duke's Lane; it was made over the signatures of George Parker, Richard Peter, Henry Gardiner (two men outstanding in the early days of the re-constituted church) James Palmer, R. F. Bray and C. Veysey. The rent was £5 5s. 0d. a year, payable quarterly, for the use of the room on Sundays and one weeknight. In July there were nine baptisms at Lifton, with 300 present; Parker also records "Mr. Spurgeon has sent a young man, a Mr. J. Wilson, to preach at Launceston and try to establish a Baptist Church there. He has continued his work with great encouragement several souls have been saved and baptised on a profession of their faith at South Petherwin."

John Wilson had first preached on Sunday, May 7th, and the following Tuesday his ministry was recognised when Rev. John

Aldis, of George Street, Plymouth, was the special preacher. Presiding over the evening meeting was Squire Hanson. The church was formally constituted later in the year—on October 12th, 1876, John Wilson being unanimously elected as its first pastor, and Messrs Pode and Gardiner the first deacons. The church consisted of thirty-two members. Soon afterwards, Mr. Richard Peter was also appointed as a deacon—a man to become prominent in the public life of the town. Mrs. John Fitze, a foundation member, is happily still living, and recalls these early days when she was associated with the beginning of the present church. The next twelve months saw the church established, but later in the year, after fifteen months work, John Wilson (who had already spent a short period at Chiswick) left for Woolwich, where he was to spend the remainder of his life. 1877 also saw the Lifton church purchase a Manse.

Wilson was followed at Launceston for a few months by A. E. Johnson—another of Mr. Spurgeon's early students, but after he had left, Parker, at Lifton, accepted the oversight of the church, and in December, 1878, the churches at Lifton, Sourton, and Launceston, agreed formally to unite under the one pastor. Parker's initiative was not yet spent. Having secured the formation of the new church at Launceston, he looked for other opportunities and found one at Thorn Cross, three miles from Lifton and five from Launceston, an area of scattered farmsteads and cottages that would not even comprise a hamlet, but yet together making a sizeable community. The first record of any work here comes in 1879, when Parker started a cottage meeting. Within two years land had been purchased for a Church building; in June, three months later, the first stone was laid of a building to be completed that same year—much of the work being done by voluntary labour and by farmers giving free carriage for building materials. In 1884 it was free from debt, the Association Chapel Case having contributed £100 towards it. At Sourton, too, the work was growing, and in 1882 a chapel was erected. This also was cleared from debt by 1884, so that Parker and the church at Lifton were responsible for two new buildings within two years, both of which were paid for by the end of the third.

After a ministry of eleven years, Parker left in 1885 to go to Buckinghamshire. When he left, the Sourton church turned to Okehampton for oversight, but Lifton and Launceston continued to work together with the smaller churches at Thorn Cross and Greystone Bridge.

In Robbins' *History of Launceston* it is stated in respect of the Launceston Baptist Church that "for some years up to a recent date there were no regular services"²⁵ Robbins wrote in

²⁵ Robbins, *ibid* 372.

1883. If he meant that the services were irregular between 1876 and 1883, this is incorrect, for Mrs. John Fitze asserts categorically that there was no such break. He may instead have meant that some services were held periodically between the closing of the Southgate church in 1812 and the opening of the new church in 1876, and if so (and we have no other proof of it) it means again that the Baptists were more active in Launceston than their records suggest.

The pastorate at Lifton was filled again in the following year, 1886, by the Rev. Franklyn Owen, who came from Bristol College. He resigned a year later and was succeeded by George Keen, a colporteur engaged in the district, who undertook the pastoral oversight of the group of churches. In 1891, the ministry of the Rev. H. Smart began—with the minister no longer resident at Lifton, but at Launceston. The following year the Launceston church left the rented hall they had used hitherto, and moved to the new church they had built in Western Road. This seated 130, with a basement Sunday School hall. Here the church worshipped during thirty-six years of steady growth until this building was out-grown, and they were established as a spiritual force in the life of the town. Smart left in 1897, to be followed by C. J. Leal from 1898-1906. A. E. Knight succeeded him in the same year, and in 1908, D. Dighton Bennett, B.A., began a ten-year pastorate.

While the work at Launceston was growing, the Lifton church fell on bad days. The village also had its Parish church and a strong Methodist church; the Baptist church found as well that their daughter church at Thorn Cross was drawing considerably from their strength; the congregations declined to a hand-ful, and it was at last decided to close the church. The final service was held on Whitsunday, 1916, and in 1920, the building and its furniture was sold for about £400.

Bennett had been succeeded in 1919 by William Bonser and in turn he was followed by E. P. Thorn in 1922. This pastorate proved to be a short one, and Bonser returned for a second pastorate from 1924-1927, before he finally retired. The church by now was seeking better accommodation than the small church building in Western Road offered, and at the time that they called H. W. Hughes (then a student at Spurgeon's College) to the pastorate in 1927, they also embarked on an ambitious extension programme. The old church building was sold, and subsequently converted into showrooms for the local Electricity Authority. A large old house—Madford House, standing in its own grounds in the centre of the town—was purchased, and its newer wing was converted into a church by rebuilding an outside wall to enclose a larger area. The rest of the building was used for

various church rooms, and as a Manse. The scheme cost about £4,000, but a portion of this was realised by the sale of the old church and by the subsequent sale of parts of the gardens of Madford House. The project was a splendid venture, although the church did not at the time realise how expensive maintenance of the property would become. Most of the house had been built early in the 17th century, and is alleged to be the first house built outside the old town wall, and to have accommodated Charles II when he was resident in Cornwall in 1645, being then Prince of Wales.

When H. W. Hughes was succeeded in 1935 by H. J. Harcup, most of the debt had been liquidated. He remained until 1945, being towards the end of his pastorate simultaneously pastor of the Congregational Church, with whom union was subsequently effected. To the more recent fortunes of that church we must now turn again.

In 1904, E. B. Rawcliffe began a ministry at the Congregational Church, but it lasted only for two-and-a-half years. Soon afterwards a new organ was installed, built by Wadsworth brothers at a cost of £458, and hydraulically blown. The Carnegie Trust contributed £125 towards the instrument. It still remains the best two-manual instrument in the district.

In 1907, Thomas Bowen began a ministry which continued till 1911. The first signs of the gathering clouds are now seen. The church faced a serious financial deficit in 1909, and at the annual church meeting the following year, Bowen "made reference to the evidence of the lack of spirituality in the church." Revision brought the church roll from 111 to 77, and when Bowen left he spoke of his ministry as being "exceptionally brief and quite as exceptionally barren in visible results."

1912 saw the church celebrate its bi-centenary (from the Presbyterian foundation in 1712), and in the following year, F. J. Sloper began a ministry which would have been briefer had he been physically fit enough to have joined the Army when war was declared. There were theological differences between him and part of the congregation; not a few of the champions of orthodoxy not only revolted against the "New Theology," but forsook Free Church principles, and turned to the Anglican Church (if to any) for spiritual succour. When F. J. Sloper left in 1919, he returned to the teaching profession and wrote "I have had much happiness and many disappointments. The fact that the district is not Congregational has made it difficult to replace those that have gone. On the part of some members there is a marked slackness in regard to attendance and enthusiasm; on the other hand, some have been outstanding in their faithfulness and devotion."

In 1920 began the pastorate of C. Sheppard Gibbs. The church membership now stood at about seventy and finances were proving difficult. In 1923 he stated his intention of leaving. That year sees also the end of the old "Church Book," and the minute book which follows it is the entire work of Mr. J. Treleaven, for long the secretary of the church, and an outstanding counsellor and philanthropist, whose gracious influence in the town was as beautiful and characteristic as the clear copper-plate of his writing.

In 1924 A. F. Davies began a new pastorate, and soon afterwards the legacy of Hadrian Evans was upheld in court, and the "May Evans Trust" of £300 invested in 4 per cent consols, began to benefit the church. F. Bowden followed in the pastorate in 1930, but two years later resigned, having met with considerable criticism for his methods. He returned to London broken in health, and not long afterwards died, leaving a wife and a small child. Augustus Julian, a retired minister succeeded him for a period, but in 1935, in view of the continued decline in membership—now only thirty-seven—it was resolved to seek union with the Baptist Church. A scheme for outright union was rejected by both churches in 1936, and A. L. Trudgeon came to the pastorate until 1940. It was then agreed that the church should continue to exist separately, but worship with the Baptists. The agreement was reached after full discussion, and by the decision of an overwhelming majority of both churches. On the first Sunday of June, 1940, the congregations united in worship under the ministry of the Baptist minister, H. J. Harcup.

The two churches continued to worship in both their buildings, using each on alternate Sundays. At the end of the war, in 1945, when H. J. Harcup left for Long Sutton, Lincs., it was agreed to seek a full union, and to concentrate the work in the Congregational premises. These, while in a less convenient site in the town, were more commodious than the Baptist church, which lacked any large hall. After a short, temporary pastorate under W. P. Hodge, K. E. Hyde was called to the pastorate of the uniting churches, and the decisions were implemented. The Madford Church building was leased to the Ministry of Works for office accommodation. The small Walker organ, given by Mutley Baptist Church, Plymouth, was re-erected in Emmanuel Baptist Church, Plymouth, while the pews went to Hele Baptist Church, Torquay. The income derived from the lease of the property has been entirely absorbed by the extensive programme of building repairs at Madford and the long-needed renovation at Castle Street. More recently, F. R. Jewry, another Baptist, has accepted the pastorate.

The question will doubtlessly be asked why a church with

so fine a tradition as that which formerly worshipped at Castle Street should so seriously decline; although there has been a decline of church life in the nation as a whole, here it is entirely abnormal. While there is no simple answer, several factors can be seen to have been at work. The area is strongly Methodist, and the local parish church is strong. Only equally strong denominational convictions can ensure the life of the church, and it will be fatal if in the future it looks only lightly on its two denominational affiliations. It is also evident that a vigorous evangelical witness is needed for the church to survive. The widespread initial success and subsequent failure of the earlier Presbyterian church points to this; so does the remarkable success of the Methodist Revival in Cornwall, which was no doubt helped by the "vacuum" which the lapsed Presbyterian churches had left. The Launceston Church grew under a strong evangelical ministry. A similar ministry saw the growth of the Baptist church; the Congregational church declined most seriously when the ministry was not fully evangelical. But most of all the problem seems to relate to the fellowship of the church. Out of thirteen pastorates in a hundred years, six ended unhappily, including that of Horsey, who had been minister for thirty years. Edwards, who followed, seemed glad to leave after a short while, and Jackson, the next minister, left in such disgust that he went right out of the ministry. A better period followed with Bamford and Miles, but a generation later the same story was repeated. Soon the decline had set in, short pastorates became the order of the day, the youth work of the church declined—as it always will when the spiritual life of the church is at fault—and the membership was not replenished.

The task before the United Church with its new beginning and fresh opportunity is to prove its true unity. Progress has already been made, and with a continued growth in healthy fellowship and enthusiastic service the future life of the church should be assured.

KENNETH E. HYDE.