

## Baptist Churches in the Bedford Area.

**I**N the *Baptist Quarterly* of July 1944, there was an article on "Some Baptist Churches on the Borders of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire," which included Keysoe and Little Staughton. If Bedfordshire may be divided into two spheres, whose centres are Bedford and Luton, the present articles deal with the Bedford sphere, omitting the two churches already named.

Thanks are due, for their helpfulness, to the secretaries of churches, some of which are neither in the Baptist Union, nor the Beds. Union. Some are of the Strict and Particular type. Pastor R. T. Chambers helped me, while Mr. Stephen Kay Jones, formerly Librarian of Dr. Williams's Library, gave me facilities for perusing the manuscript volumes by Walter Wilson, *An Account of Various Congregations in England among the Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists*.

Information has also been obtained from Dr. John Brown's *Centenary Celebration of the Beds. Union of Christians*, 1896; C. H. Chaplin's *Biggleswade Old Meeting*, 1909; W. Abbott's *The Baptists of Blunham and Sandy*, 1890; John Duncombe's *Story of Renhold Chapel*, 1923; the *Bunyan Meeting Constitution, History and Rules*, 1931; the *Bunyan Meeting Church Book*; G. H. Orchard's *Stevington Baptist Church Book*, 1833; John Taylor's *History of College Street Church, Northampton*, 1899; and a book on the Rev. T. R. Matthews, lent to me by the Editor of the *Bedfordshire Times*.

Any survey of the churches must begin with the mother church of Bedfordshire Nonconformity:—

### BUNYAN MEETING, BEDFORD.

In 1641, a petition was presented to Parliament, supported by many people in Bedfordshire, praying for the removal of all scandalous ministers, and that there might be a "faithfull magistracie and a painful ministrie," the last adjective meaning "painstaking." Various clergy were accordingly removed and pensioned, but there were people who wanted more than this, and in 1643 there was a Congregational Meeting at Bedford whose minister, Benjamin Coxe, was in 1644 described by Richard Baxter as an ancient minister. He is said to have been son or

grandson of Dr. Richard Cox, Bishop of Ely, to have been M.A. Oxford, in 1617, and to have held a living in Devonshire.

That meeting was probably the nucleus of the Free Church, founded in Bedford in 1650. Its earliest records, 1652-1672, were apparently copied from an earlier book. John Gifford was its first pastor. In 1653 they were meeting at St. John's Church, South Bedford, and John Bunyan was baptised and became a member. John Gifford left a letter which was, until recent years, read annually to the church; it contained the following words: "Concerning separation from the Church about baptism, laying-on of hands, anointing with oil, psalms, or any external, I charge every one of you . . . that none of you be found guilty of this great evil."

The Town Council had appointed John Gifford to St. John's Church, and naturally regarded it as their duty to appoint his successor in 1655; but the church had their own views, and Cromwell upheld them in their call to John Burton to be pastor. They had to leave St. John's in 1660, and for years met on members' premises at Bedford, Cotton End, Haynes and Gamlingay; but in 1672 they bought the orchard in Mill Lane (now Mill Street), and worshipped in its barn. A chapel took its place in 1707, and the famous Bunyan Meeting was opened in 1850.

John Bunyan had become its fifth pastor before he was released from prison in 1672. He and his predecessors were Baptists in the sense that they had been baptised; but the church was never Baptist in the strict sense. As early as 1672 they refused to recognise as churches of Christ those meetings which held to strict communion; and would not grant transfers to them. Since Bunyan's death no Baptist has been called to its pastorate. Joshua Symonds, pastor 1766-88, became a Baptist in 1772. The famous John Howard thought that Symonds was trying to make the church Baptist, and he formed the Congregational Church which now bears his name; but he remained on friendly terms with Symonds and helped him in various ways. Bunyan Meeting refused to let Symonds resign; but they drew up a new Trust Deed, describing themselves as Congregationalists holding mixed communion with Baptists. In 1793, twenty-three members seceded to form the Mill Street Baptist Church.

With the exception of Joshua Symonds' pastorate from 1772 to 1788 the long line of John Bunyan's successors has consisted of Congregationalists, some of whom have held the most prominent positions among Nonconformist leaders in Bedfordshire. The influence of Bunyan Meeting may be seen in the considerable number of Union Churches, and churches with Open Membership.

Of course, this church had much to do in the formation of the Bedfordshire Union of Christians in 1797. This is now the Bedfordshire Union of Baptist and Congregational Churches, but in its early days it welcomed Christians of any denomination. An appeal that it issued in 1798 contained the noble words: "Christ hath received them, hath shed his blood for their redemption, and sent his Spirit to dwell in their hearts, and shall *we* count them unworthy, or unfit, to associate with us?" It is significant that the Rev. Samuel Hillyard was the first secretary and issued that appeal, and that Dr. John Brown wrote the story of its first hundred years; both men were pastors of Bunyan Meeting.

Until 1912 no pastor had resigned in order to take another pastorate.

John Jukes, pastor 1840-1866, was caricatured as the Rev. John Broad by Mark Rutherford (whose real name was William Hale White) in *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*. In this book, Cowford is Bedford, Tanner's Lane is Bunyan Meeting, and Isaac Allen is William White, the novelist's father.

The church is in membership with the Baptist Union as well as with the Congregational Union, and some of its deacons and members are Baptists.

#### MILL STREET BAPTIST, BEDFORD.

The Minute Books for the first eighty years of this Church have disappeared, and little of its history is known; but it is undoubtedly an offshoot of Bunyan Meeting. Wilson says that there was an amicable separation from Bunyan Meeting at the end of 1773, during which year the chapel was built, and that it became a Particular Baptist Church, Strict Communion, in 1791. But the people who left in 1773 formed the Congregational Church, known as Howard Chapel, whose building bears the date 1774.

When Joshua Symonds died in 1788, Bunyan Meeting called Samuel Hillyard, a young Congregational minister, who became the outstanding figure in Bedfordshire church life. But there were members who wanted a Baptist pastor; there are references to them in *Bunyan Meeting Church Book* in 1792: "Members who had separated." On May 30th, 1793, about twenty were declared to be "Separated Brothers and Sisters"; and on July 4th several more were transferred by "the Church of Christ at Bedford" to "the Church of Christ lately separated from them."

The present Mill Street Baptist Chapel was built in 1869. The only recorded events of interest since 1873 are a decision that candidates should not be required to face a Church Meeting; a

discussion whether seat-holders who were not members should be allowed to vote at the election of a pastor; some entries regarding a mission that became a church; and resolutions from time to time which increased the pastor's stipend. The church still has a baptised membership.

#### PROVIDENCE STRICT BAPTIST, BEDFORD.

This work began in a room in St. Cuthbert's parish; then in a barn in Castle Street. A friend offered to put up a building in that street for £10, and this was opened in June 1830, and in December a church was formed with seven men and two women, and the membership grew quickly, and the little chapel had to be enlarged.

The excellent Providence Chapel in Rothsay Street was opened in 1894. All the cost of building and repairs has been subscribed without the aid of bazaars, sales of work and such means. Mr. John W. Wren, pastor for more than fifty years, started Cottage Meetings at Keysoe, but they were discontinued.

#### RUSSELL PARK, BEDFORD.

This began as a mission under the care of Mill Street Baptist, at East Hall, York Road, the earliest reference to it being in February 1903. In 1906 the Pioneer Mission took charge, and formed a church to which Mill Street transferred twenty-four members in June 1907. The Rev. A. S. Ferguson became pastor that year, and continued until 1944. The building in Denmark Street that they now use was intended to be the School Hall, and the chapel has yet to be built. It is an Open Membership Church: but the pastor and two-thirds of the deacons must be baptised believers.

#### AMPTHILL UNION CHURCH.

In 1795, William Coles, pastor at Maulden, father-in-law of Andrew Fuller, was at the B.M.S. Meetings at Kettering, and became impressed by the need of a Gospel ministry at Ampthill, where he lived. Some of his people helped him, and on Tuesday, March 14th, 1797, a small chapel was opened on his premises, Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliff taking part. It remained for many years part of the Maulden Church, who appointed in 1803 an assistant to their aged pastor, and asked him to live at Ampthill and to help in the work there.

Mr. Cole's successor at Maulden, Samuel Hobson, 1808-39, opened the present chapel at Ampthill. The floor was brick; the pews were old-fashioned, with doors. It was lighted by tallow candles which were snuffed during the service. The singing was

led by a string band. It was used on Sunday evenings only.

Sunday school was started in 1855 with twenty-three scholars and four teachers. The pioneer was a man who in addition to his own family of thirteen, had adopted the four children of his deceased brother, and had been holding meetings at his own house for his own household and some other children.

The chapel was enlarged in 1870; renovated, new pews fitted, and gas installed, in 1877. In 1878 morning services were started, and in 1879 the Sunday school was re-formed. In 1880, a separate church was formed, and forty members were transferred from Maulden. Nearly forty years ago, during the pastorate of Charles V. Pike, there was a remarkable revival, chiefly among young people, some of whom are still in membership with the church.

#### AMPTHILL: STRICT BAPTIST.

The work began with meetings in the house of Mr. C. C. Bartram. A small chapel was built in 1895, and a church formed in 1901. A much better chapel was built in 1904 and for a time the congregations were good; but the membership remained small and has almost dwindled away. There has never been a pastor.

#### BIGGLESWADE OLD MEETING: BAPTIST.

There was a church at Biggleswade in 1715, with Samuel Cole as pastor, and a congregation of three hundred, which the minister at Bunyan Meeting described as Anabaptist. It is known that Thomas Brittain was preaching there some time between 1732 and 1765. What happened after this is not clear, but the present church was formed by four men on June 4th, 1771. They welcomed six more members that month, including David Evans. He had lived at Biggleswade and had been a preacher for twenty years; and when the church was formed he obtained his transfer from Maulden and was appointed as pastor and held that office for fifteen years.

The question of Strict or Open Membership and Communion troubled the church for some years. In April, 1794 there were two or three paedo-baptists members, and the church resolved to admit no more. From 1805 to 1813 they had a paedo-baptist as pastor, and decided in 1806 that paedo-baptists might become members.

In 1879, Thomas Middleditch, in accepting the pastorate, stipulated that while those members should be allowed to remain all future members must be baptised, but that all believers should be welcomed at the Lord's Table. In 1838, the conditions of membership were discussed, and it was decided that all who make

a credible profession of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ might be admitted. That appears to have ended the question. They agreed in 1893 to use unfermented wine at the Lord's Table.

Chapel expenses were low in the early days of this church; in 1798, Sister Franklin was appointed to look after the House of God, at two pounds two shillings per annum.

Until 1795 the church had one deacon but decided to appoint two more. One of these was the well-known John Foster, one of the founders of the Bedfordshire Union of Christians in 1797, and treasurer of the Union from its inception until 1847.

#### BIGGLESWADE: PROVIDENCE STRICT BAPTIST.

The origin of this church is uncertain, but it is probable that it began with a secession from the Old Baptist Meeting. The chapel was built about 1843, and a Strict Baptist Church formed on June 26th, 1844. It had four pastors, but none recently.

#### BLUNHAM OLD MEETING: BAPTIST.

On January 15th, 1665, John Wright, George Farr, John Docrill, William Gregory and William Myers were fined for holding an unlawful conventicle at John Wright's house. They did not pay, and were sent to Bedford gaol. On April 30th they were fined again, refused to pay, and went to prison for twenty days. On June 25th they met at George Farr's house, and were committed to Bedford gaol, two others being fined. Wright and Farr were among the men released in 1672, and John Bunyan obtained a licence for John Wright to preach at Lake House Barn, Blunham; which was fitted with some pews and some forms.

For years it was part of the work of Bunyan Meeting, but on June 19th, 1724, Blunham formed a separate church, with twenty-one members, without first obtaining Bedford's approval. The Bunyan Church decided, on July 18th, "to dismiss those members who live about Blunham to the newly-formed church there, though yet without a pastor, on their coming to the Lord's Supper before their dismissal, to show that they were in perfect accord with the brethren and did depart peacefully." Next month Bunyan Meeting dismissed ten more to Blunham, and as five others joined, the membership was thirty-six. At the end of 1725 they appointed their first pastor, and three deacons. In 1740 they raised £40, to rebuild the minister's cottage, left under the will of Mr. Thomas Aspinall. In 1751 the present meeting-house was built. "The people did it themselves and without assistance from other congregations." The vestry was added about 1800.

In 1832 the chapel walls were raised about three feet, the old gallery enlarged and two new side galleries added; the cost including new pews, windows and doors being £500. In 1855 the pulpit was lowered sixteen inches, and the old sounding board converted into a table. In 1859 they built a partition across the chapel, under the front gallery, shutting out a cold part, and placed a stove in the chapel.

At first they baptised in the river Ivel, and in February 1784, a baptism had to be postponed because of frost and snow. A stone baptistry was built in the orchard, and a baptism took place in February 1853 after the ice had been removed, and while it was snowing. In 1865 a new baptistry was built in the chapel.

In their early days they had the habit of stamping if they disapproved of the doctrine in a sermon. Thomas Cramer, their second pastor, once threatened that if a certain man persisted in this, he would come down and lead him out by the nose.

Cramer had a call from a London Church and told Joseph Clayton, pastor at Stevington, that he saw his call exceedingly clear to go to Red Cross Street, London; but Clayton replied: "Ah, brother, London is a fine place, and as it is to go there, you can hear very quick; but if God had called you to go to poor Cranfield, He might have called long enough, I fear, before you would have heard him." Cramer went to London.

Years later, in 1780, Dr. Rippon's Baptist Register said of Blunham: "The happy pastor of this people has a salary of about £26 per annum, a house to live in, rent free, and an opportunity of keeping a cow. This with a small income of his own he cheerfully devotes to the support of his wife and four sons."

In 1830 some hyper-Calvinist members seceded, and in 1843 formed a separate church at Providence Chapel. In 1858, thirty members were dismissed, to form a Baptist Church at Sandy.

A Baptist Church, Blunham has always admitted believers, as such, to its fellowship, one such member becoming deacon.

In 1750, one member was summoned to attend the church meeting to answer for the evil practice in standing for what is called godmother for a child. She did not attend, and was excluded. In 1782, the former clerk at the parish church was baptised and received into membership in his seventy-fourth year. In 1856, C. H. Spurgeon visited Blunham and preached two sermons in a meadow near the chapel to about 2,000-3,000 people.

#### BLUNHAM: PROVIDENCE STRICT BAPTIST.

About 1830 some members at the Old Meeting, who were hyper-Calvinists, ceased to attend. They met for some years in a

barn, and in 1843 formed a separate church at Providence Chapel, which has accommodation for 150.

They have had four pastors, but none recently. About thirty-five years ago a small chapel was built at Great Barford, which came into the hands of the Strict Baptists at Blunham, who hold services on Sunday mornings.

#### BROMHAM BAPTIST.

The village of Bromham is within three miles of Bedford, and is tending to become a suburb.

William Stainer, of Berry Farm, a member at Bunyan Meeting, held meetings at his house from 1818 to 1829, supported by his pastor, the Rev. John Hillyard, and by the Rev. Leigh Richmond, the evangelical vicar of Turvey. From 1836, Methodist cottage meetings were held for seventy-five years, but the owners of the estate would not allow a chapel to be built. In 1923, Mr. J. S. Rideout started a cottage meeting and secured and gave the present site, and with the generous help of Mr. Shirley A. Blott, who became its first lay pastor, the present church was formed and the school hall was opened in 1924. The ministers at Stevington have always taken a kindly interest in Bromham, several of them helping by sharing the pastorate with the lay pastors in charge. The church has the Baptist Union Model Trust Deed, with Open Membership, and is gathering funds for a chapel.

#### CARLTON: STRICT BAPTIST MEETING.

The work began in 1672, when Gideon Fisher's house was licensed for meetings. The Church was formed in 1688. Its first pastor, John Greenwood, came from Stevington, who struck him off their roll for holding meetings at Carlton, and that church told him to consider himself as though he had never belonged to Stevington. Perhaps a quotation from Wilson may be not out of place: "The Baptist Churches professing Calvinism have always been divided upon nice points of doctrine, and have often carried their bitterness towards each other much further than they would do towards persons rejecting Calvinism altogether. Independents have sometimes been equally at fault." The present chapel bears the date 1760, and can accommodate about six hundred. The floor has modern pews, but those in the gallery are ancient.

There is an interesting account of the baptism of six persons on Christmas Day, 1854. They began at ten o'clock, and after prayer by a deacon, the candidates came into the table pew and related their experience to the church and congregation. That meeting ended at about noon, and the baptismal service began at 1.30. In the evening there was a prayer-meeting, and the long



schoolroom was filled to overflowing. There was another baptismal service on July 29th, 1855. It began at 8 a.m., and eight persons were baptised in the evening. The recorded attendance of 900 to 1,000 probably means the total for the day. Such meetings must have drawn the serious attention of the neighbourhood to the ordinance of believers' baptism.

#### CLIFTON: STRICT BAPTIST.

In 1672, Isaac Bedford, Rector of Willian, Herts., dispossessed in 1660, retired to Clifton and was licensed to preach at his own house. In 1799, a place of worship formerly used by Quakers, was opened as a Baptist chapel. What happened to these two congregations is not clear, but the Strict Baptist Church was formed in 1853 by Septimus Sears. It is a good building and would hold about 700. It is of the Gospel Standard faith and order. Mr. Sears compiled the "Clifton Selection of Hymns," which they still use. He built four almshouses, and these still belong to the church. There has been no pastor for about five years. The congregation is about sixty.

#### CLIFTON: PROVIDENCE BAPTIST CHAPEL.

The work was begun by Mr. Daniel H. Hale who held a Bible class in his barn. A church was formed on August 13th, 1913, with eight members, and four more were baptised on September 25th. Mr. Hale was hon. pastor until his death in 1936. He had retired and built a new house at Clifton with a chapel alongside, which was opened a few months after he died. They have now seventeen members.

GEORGE E. PAGE.

(To be continued.)

*He That Doeth: The Life Story of Archdeacon R. B. S. Hammond, O.B.E.*, by Bernard G. Judd (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 9s. 6d.)

An outstandingly successful ministry in the slums of Sydney, N.S.W. is here vividly portrayed. Robert Hammond spent his life crusading against social evils, befriending the outcaste, rescuing numberless men from slavery to alcohol, opening hostels for the out-of-work and, by his genius for handling men and his zeal for the Gospel, bringing thousands to conversion. For evicted families he established the village of Hammondville—a unique social experiment. This biography of one whose forceful ministry combined a prophetic concern with evangelical passion is informative, interesting and challenging.