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Baptist Churches in the Bedford Area.

(Continued)

COTTON END BAPTIST CHURCH

THE Bunyan Meeting records show that during the persecution, 1660-1672, and in 1677-80 and later, they were holding some of their meetings at Cotton End. In 1670, Thomas Thorowgood, a weaver at Cotton End, at whose house services had been held, was fined nineteen pounds and d restraint made upon him. All he had, including his trade implements, were taken from him. The present work was begun by Francis Holcroft, but the church was not formed until 1776, some years after his death. Wilson refers to it as the Cardington Dissenting Meeting House at Cotton End, and the Maulden Church Book shows the reception of a member in 1802 from Cardington, Cotton End. The church was too poor to support a minister, so help was given from the "Baptist Fund in London" until 1797. The chapel was twenty-eight feet square, and was enlarged in 1796, 1805, and 1810, and rebuilt in 1837. Samuel Whitbread gave 120 guineas for restoration at Bunyan Meeting, and some of this money was spent in providing the spreading, many-lighted brass chandelier, which is now in the vestry at Cotton End. The Church Book shows that it was in 1776 Strict Communion, with nine foundation members; but they altered the rules so as to admit Mr. Thomas Taylor, paedobaptist, as a member. In 1832 the church declared for Open Communion. Among the Pastors was John Holloway, 1822-1831, who gave at his induction a remarkable confession of Faith. John Frost, Pastor 1832-1878, was a Congregationalist who started in 1840 an "Institution for the education and training of young men for the service of the Home Missionary Society," and continued it until midsummer 1874. He had 127 students in all. Among the men who applied was William Booth, but for some reason he went instead to a Methodist College, and eventually became the founder of the Salvation Army.

CRANFIELD BAPTIST

The Church Book begins in 1792, but 1660 is claimed as the date of the formation of the church. It is said that S. Gibbs, a decided Baptist, was turned out of the Rectory at Newport Pagnell at the end of 1659 or early 1660, and set up a Dissenting Meeting

there, and began to preach at Cranfield also. William Wheeler is said to have been Pastor at Cranfield 1662-69. Calamy says that he was Rector at Cranfield in August, 1661, but that his successor was instituted on October 15th of that year. He petitioned about 1670 for release from prison to which he had been committed on a charge of keeping a conventicle in his house. He died at Cranfield in February, 1672. His book, "A Spiritual Portion of Heavenly Treasure bequeathed by Mr. William Wheeler, late minister of the Gospel, and Pastor of a Church of Christ at Cranfield, in Bedfordshire, as his Last Legacy to his Wife and Children" (London: 1670), is treasured by the church. His successor, Nehemiah Coxe, was Pastor in 1674 and 1675. We shall meet him in connection with Maulden. The church has had eighteen Pastors in all. It was re-formed with eight members in 1776, after being thirty-two years without a Pastor. The present chapel was built in 1770, and enlarged in 1820. There is a Calvinistic confession of faith. It was decided to admit unbaptised believers in 1795. Many leaves have disappeared from its Church Book, some of them cut out. The church has had some times of dissension, and some members seceded in 1848 to form a separate church.

EVERSHOLT: PARTICULAR BAPTIST

According to Wilson there was a church here at the end of the 17th century which was represented at the General Assembly in London in 1689 and 1692. Edmund White was Pastor in both those years. Matthew Dutton resigned the pastorate in 1730. The dates of formation and dissolution are uncertain. There was a General Baptist congregation in the village early in the 18th century, but nothing is known about it except that Joseph Garnett was Pastor in 1701.

FLITWICK BAPTIST

The Maulden Church Book shows that on February 13th, 1804, it was resolved to remove the Flitwick Sabbath evening service from Mr. Ellis' to Mr. Beales'. Mr. Ellis had claimed £1 per annum: Mr. Beale had offered the use of his house free, except candles. We do not know when these meetings began, or when they ceased; but the Flitwick Church Book tells us without any dates that some residents at Flitwick were members at Maulden, and used to walk the two or three miles there. Then some young men from Ceylon Baptist Church, Luton, used to drive out in a wagonette and hold open air meetings on the Green at Flitwick, and Mrs. Cousins provided tea for them. Later, they rented a cottage at Gravel Pit Lane at 1/- per week; and afterwards held meetings for about three years at Mrs. Cousins'

cottage; two services on Sundays and a mid-week meeting. Twenty or thirty used to attend, and Mr. Cousins helped the singing with a concertina until Ampthill lent a harmonium. Mr. R. Goodman, School Superintendent at Maulden, gave the site in King's Road. F. B. Meyer came one day to see Mr. Goodman, who took him to see the ground and Dr. Meyer prayed there for God's blessing on the work. The chapel was opened in April, 1907, and Maulden transferred eight members to the new church in 1909, including Mrs. Cousins and Mr. and Mrs. R. Goodman.

HAYNES: STRICT BAPTIST

Between 1660 and 1672 Bunyan Meeting Church used to hold some of their services at Haynes; but whether the present work can be traced back to that date is unknown. The only information obtainable is the name of a Pastor of fifty years ago, and a statement that the present chapel, which will hold 150 people, was opened in 1934 in place of a building that had been about 100 years in use.

MAULDEN BAPTIST

The church was formed in 1672, in which year John Bunyan obtained a licence for Nehemiah Coxe to preach at a cottage belonging to Sarah Tomkins, widow. Nehemiah Coxe was son of Benjamin, who was Minister at Bedford in 1643. A member of the Bedford church, Nehemiah was a cordwainer or shoemaker, and there is a variation of the word in the following story. Coxe was once before the magistrates for preaching the Gospel. The charge was in Latin, so Coxe addressed the court in Greek and Hebrew. The lawyers complained that they did not understand these languages, and Coxe replied that as they had charged him in Latin he had the right to reply in other learned languages. The Chairman of the Bench told the lawyers, "Gentlemen, this cordwinder hath wound you all up," and dismissed the case. Coxe was not long at Maulden; he then had a short pastorate at Cranfield, and thence went to a London church, and became also a fashionable physician.

In 1726 a chapel was built on the site of Sarah Tomkins' cottage. The original Church Book has disappeared and the present book begins on October 26th, 1768, with "A Brief Chronology of the principal Events relating to the Church of Jesus Christ assembling at Maulden in the County of Bedford." In that year the present chapel was built, and William Coles began a pastorate of thirty-seven years. Coles' daughter Anne was the second wife of Andrew Fuller, of Kettering. The chapel was enlarged in 1802, and practically reconstructed in 1862. During Coles' pastorate, meetings were started at Houghton Conquest, at

Greenfield, and at Ampthill. It is not known what became of two of these, but the Church Book has many references to Ampthill and afterwards to Flitwick. When the latter church was formed, and Mr. and Mrs. Goodman were transferred to it, the church at Maulden invited them to continue to attend all meetings of the church, and Mr. Goodman presided at some church meetings at Maulden. In 1808, when S. Hobson became Pastor, the evening meeting took place at Ampthill. 1845 has a note that it is believed that the church was originally Open Communion, but became Strict during Mr. Coles' pastorate, and again became Open Communion in 1808. At the end of the Book are seventeen Articles of Faith (Calvinistic) and the following:—

“We Believe that the singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs vocally is an Ordinance of the Gospel, to be performed by Believers, and that everyone should be left to their Liberty in using it.

“We believe that Baptism is an Ordinance of Christ, that Believers are the only proper subjects of it, and that the only Scriptural mode of administering it is by Immersion in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

Several entries in the Church Book show that the financial position was difficult. For a time they shared a Pastor with Flitwick; but each of these churches now has its own Pastor. The original Church Book has gone. It was of such interest that it was borrowed in 1923 for exhibition at the Baptist World Congress at Stockholm, was duly returned, and then disappeared.

POTTON OLD MEETING: STRICT BAPTIST

John Wesley wrote in 1762 that he could not find a living Christian at Potton, but wild beasts in abundance. He was evidently not much impressed by what he saw at the ancient Parish Church. But there was a very different ministry at Everton, less than two miles away, where John Berridge had begun his great work in 1756. Berridge died in 1793 and it is probable that some of his people began the work at Potton. The date is unknown, but the chapel was registered in May, 1802, and the first entry in the Church Book is dated 1800. The best known Pastors have been Edward Blackstock, 1826-35, and William Site, 1846-61. In recent years it has depended upon supplies.

RAVENS DEN: PRIMITIVE BAPTIST

The Rev. Timothy Richard Matthews, B.A., was Curate-in-Charge at Colmworth from 1818-1830, and from 1825-1830 was assistant chaplain at what was then called the House of Industry at Bedford. He became chaplain in 1830 and removed to Bedford, and made his Sunday services open to the public, who came in

large numbers until, in 1832, the authorities restricted the meetings to inmates. Within nineteen weeks his congregation built the large chapel in Bromham Road, which he called Christ Church. The Bishop refused a licence, but, of course, that made no difference. Matthews lived in the rooms under the chapel, and died there in 1845. His people buried him behind the chapel, but his body and the stone tomb were afterwards removed to Colmworth Churchyard. The chapel is now the Bromham Road Methodist.

Matthews was a great open air preacher, and was in the habit of gathering a crowd by blowing a trumpet, and he became well known in all the district around Bedford. He cannot be claimed as a Baptist, for he would not abandon the baptism of the infants of believers; he used to baptise them—not sprinkle them. It was his custom to baptise converts, usually in the river at Bedford. His register shows 430 such baptisms there between 1837 and 1842. One of these was a paralytic woman who was assisted into the water; but after baptism called out "I can walk," and proved it by walking ashore.

Among his converts were Thomas Symons, a gardener at Ravensden, and his wife, Hannah. They used to walk three-and-a-half miles on Sunday mornings to the meetings at Bedford; and he accepted their offer of the kitchen of their cottage as an afternoon preaching station. When this became too small they hired a barn and turned that into a chapel; and Hannah Symons began to collect money for a better building; but Matthews' work had ended some years before she had enough money. Meanwhile preachers from Bunyan Meeting and Howard Chapel, Bedford, supplied the pulpit at Ravensden. Zion Chapel was opened in 1853, and enlarged in 1863, but the date of the formation of the church is not known.

The old Minute Book has disappeared, and the earliest note in the present book records the death of Hannah Symons in March, 1885, "who had for many years had the management of the business of this Church." It is known that John Green, Superintendent of the School gave the land. The church rules say that all persons admitted to membership may be immersed on profession of their faith in Christ. The community is described as the Primitive Baptist Church Meeting at Zion Chapel, Ravensden. Over the pulpit hangs one of the trumpets that Timothy Matthews used. His Communion Service is still there.

RENHOLD BAPTIST

The work was started by Wilden, three miles away, some of whose members lived at Renhold, and cottage meetings were so well attended that in 1872 they asked Captain Polhill-Turner for a site for a chapel. The opposition of the vicar delayed matters

until the next year. The congregation dug the foundations in the summer evenings. The chapel was opened in September 1873, and in December, the church was formed with twenty-three members. The articles of faith are not Calvinistic, but some of the foundation members were strongly so. They used Spurgeon's "Our Own Hymn Book." For some years they had no organ and the hymns were given out verse by verse, and the singing led by a precentor. About forty years ago the church had a revival, which began at prayer meetings.

RIDGMONT BAPTIST

It is generally believed that John Bunyan preached several times at Ridgmont and at least once in the Parish Church. The church was formed in 1701 and the Church Book starts on September 22nd of that year, when thirteen persons entered into covenant relations, mixed Communion, and declared, "We judge union with Christ, soundness in judgment in fundamentals of the Gospel and an holy conversation to be the only and sufficient grounds of the communion of saints." In May, 1770, the church became Strict Communion, but it has long had baptised membership with Open Communion.

RISELEY: STRICT BAPTIST

In 1838 some people "who desired to introduce the Gospel in its purity into the benighted village of Riseley, with 1,000 inhabitants" began meetings, and built a chapel; a church was formed in February, 1839. In 1844 they were unable to give a transfer of a member to Bunyan Meeting because that church practised mixed communion, but they sent a letter giving that member an honorable character. An entry in the Church Book in 1897 says that they had been without a Pastor for thirty years, and that no records had been kept, but that the services had been held regularly.

In 1900 there was a baptism, the first for many years. In 1937 a Communion Service is noted as the first for about eight years. In 1945 the membership consisted of two women, and services were infrequent. The chapel has since been sold.

G. E. PAGE.

(To be continued)