

An Original Letter of Thomas Newcomen

A LETTER of great interest to Baptists has recently been acquired by the Corporation of Dartmouth. The letter itself is a rarity, for only one other letter of the great engineer is known to exist and that is on a business matter written in 1725, and is now in the Prussian State Library in Berlin.

The letter now brought before the public was written by Newcomen from London to his wife in Dartmouth on 30th December, 1727. Apart from the light thrown upon his religious life, the important passage is: "Mrs. Wallin being present gives her service to you." It was at the house of Edward Wallin that Newcomen died, after a brief illness, on 5th August, 1729, and the inference from the letter surely is that he was accustomed to lodge—or at least frequently stay—with the Wallin family, when in London.

Now "Edward Wallin, gent." appears in a list of the committee exploiting the Savery Patent in 1726, that is the group with whom it is well known that Newcomen had some working arrangement for the right to construct his own engine.

Moreover, Edward Wallin, who had been trained for business, was himself a Baptist, being minister of the chapel at Maze Pond, Southwark, from 1702 until his death in 1733.

It seems highly probable, therefore, that Wallin acted as Newcomen's "London agent," and that their business friendship arose through the faith they held in common. This conclusion is strengthened by consideration of other business connections of Newcomen. His Dartmouth partner, John Calley, was one of the small group of Baptists residing in the town. Furthermore, their first contract for an engine was negotiated through Humphrey Potter, a leading member of the Baptist Church at Bromsgrove, and from that same congregation came Joseph Hornblower, who went with Newcomen into Cornwall to help him with his trade in the year 1725. It seems clear that Newcomen drew his staunchest friends from those in whose fellowship he found the deeper satisfactions of his life.

The letter has been acquired from Mr. C. P. R. Prance, of Chudleigh, Devon, who is descended from Hannah Gibbs (née Newcomen) grand-daughter of the engineer. Other papers in the possession of Mr. Prance confirm what has always been said by the Baptists of Dartmouth, viz. that Newcomen was their leader

for many years, and that he leased part of his premises in Lower Street for their services. The contents of the letter make it very clear indeed that he was a man of deep piety and earnest conviction; and that in any attempt to portray his character these qualities must be given very considerable weight. His grandfather had died in 1652, but his grandmother, Bathsheba, is listed as one of the nonconformists (absentees from church) in 1663, the year of his birth. His family were Baptists, his wife, Hannah Waymouth, was a Baptist, and now it is made more than ever clear that his religious beliefs were indeed the mainspring of his conduct.

PERCY RUSSELL.

COPY OF ORIGINAL LETTER

(Now purchased by the Corporation of Dartmouth, March, 1952.)

London, December 30th, 1727.

My dear Wife,

I rejoice to hear by yrs. of 26th inst., that the family is in good health, which Mercy I am also favoured with—I suppose Elias may be returned before this comes to hand, if not remember me kindly to him, and to our other two children, and tell them I should greatly rejoice to hear they were seriously enquiring the way to Sion with their faces thitherward: This ought to be their chiefest concern, as ever they propose to themselves the enjoyment of true Happiness—Tell them that I sometimes reflect upon the Melancholy Circumstance of the late Prince Menzikoff, who, a few months since was Prime Minister to the Great Empeur of Russia, had arrived to an extraordinary height of power, had accumulated to himself an immense quantity of Riches, and was almost adored by all, as the most happy of all men, but was suddenly deprived of all, and reduced to his former degree of Meanness, having incurred also the highest displeasure of the Great Monarch; yet, in my apprehension (notwithstanding the many sorrowful reflections he may be supposed to make upon it), his Case is very desirable, when set in compare with that ffooll mentioned by our Saviour, Luke 12, who, when his Soul comes to be required of him, shall be found only to have been laying up Treasure to himself, and is not rich towards God, for the former hath time and opportunity to provide himself of a much better and greater Treasure than what he hath lost while the other is past all hope in that respect: The former hath nothing more to fear from the rage of the great master, than the Killing of his body. But oh, what hath not the latter to fear from the anger of an Incensed God, who had so often offered himself unto him as his portion in order to his everlasting Happiness, but was neglected and sighted, and for what was the Gracious offer despised? Even for the Gratification of sinful lusts, or for the enjoyment of Lying Vanities, which he very well knew he must soon leave, and how soon, who can tell? The Lord grant these considerations may make suitable Impressions upon all our Minds. To his case I heartily commend you and with dear love to you, Duty and dear respects to all at Dartmouth, and wishing you all a happy New Year and many of them I am

Yr Affect. Husband
Thos Newcomen

Mr. Lidston was to sail the middle of last week, so shall send the screws and Pulleys by next Vessel.

Mrs. Wallin being present, gives her service to you.