

The Baptists of North Northumberland

A Baptist travelling north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne following the A.1, might well be forgiven for thinking that Baptists do not exist in that part of the world. In fact if he were to make a point of looking out for Baptist churches on the Great North Road, he would not see one from Durham Road, Gateshead, until he reached Berwick-on-Tweed. This is not to suggest that Baptist witness is non-existent in Northumberland but it does serve to illustrate that north of Newcastle it is at its weakest. Between Newcastle and Berwick there is only one small church, Alnwick, the county town of Northumberland. This has not always been so, for at one time there was a small Baptist cause in the lovely town of Wooler, nestling at the foot of the Cheviot hills, and another some miles away in the little hamlet of Ford-forge. South of Alnwick in the picturesque village of Warkworth another small church existed, so that together with the churches at Alnwick and Berwick there have been at least five Baptist churches in North Northumberland. Unfortunately there is little evidence left to show that those now extinct ever existed.

According to D. Douglas¹ the church at Wooler stemmed from the "Scotch Baptists", and this is confirmed in an article entitled "Memoir of Mr. John Black, senior elder of the Baptist church, Ford-forge, Northumberland".² The article tells of Mr. Black's baptism at the Forge by one of the pastors of the church at Wooler, after which he was admitted into membership of the church at Wooler. This was in 1806. The article further states that John Black was acquainted with Archibald MacLean of Edinburgh, who was the originator of the Scotch Baptists.³ There is also an account of the reaction of some of the people in the area to the "intrusion" of the Scotch Baptists, especially amongst the Presbyterians. In the short history of the Western Meeting House, one of the two Presbyterian churches in the town, it is recorded that: "A Mr. George Grieve succeeded Mr. Crichton in the ministry. There is, however, no record of any baptisms having been administered by him, the reason being that he adopted Baptist views. It is believed that this is the minister against whom the more energetic spirits of the congregation were disposed to take the summary course not only of ejecting him from his pulpit, but also of projecting him over the stair-head! Owing to the constitution of the Society, the members had it in their own power to break the pastoral tie between themselves and a minister who had changed his

creed subsequent to his election. Before long, however, Mr. Grieve saw that there was no chance of his getting another congregation about him in Wooler, and accordingly he took his departure to a new sphere of usefulness."⁴ This new sphere was back to Edinburgh to practise medicine. The incident took place in 1777. Douglas writes that: "In 1801 the Church at Wooler was set in order by Mr. MacLean."⁵ Thus it is evident that the influence of MacLeanite doctrine was gaining ground in the area of the Border Country. No evidence has so far come to light as to the influence of this community in the town of Wooler, or to the length of its existence. On making enquiries the only reaction was one of surprise that there had ever been such a church in the town.

The memoir of John Black makes it clear that the church at Ford-forge came from the same source as the church at Wooler. There is no evidence of the Wooler church ever being actively involved in the life of the Northern Baptist Association, apart from its name being found in one of the lists of the churches in the year books. There is, however, clear evidence that the church at Ford-forge became a member of the Northern Association. The Ford church was "set in order" in 1807, as in the case of the Wooler church, by Archibald MacLean. It is not until 1883, however, that the Northern Association, in its minutes for April 10th, records that: "The Rev. W. J. Paker, on behalf of the Berwick church appealed for assistance for a minister to be stationed at or near Berwick, to be engaged in evangelistic work in the North of Northumberland, and Ford-forge. The Berwick church would make itself responsible for raising, with the assistance of friends at Ford-forge, £50 per annum towards the salary. The committee expressed approval of the application providing mission stations were opened in connection with which there should be a prospect of permanent denominational results." Actual application for membership of the Association was not made until 1885; whether this was because the church at Ford was still strongly MacLeanite, is a matter of debate, but their application was not accepted until 1887. The minute for 11th March, 1886, reads: "The Rev. J. M. Stephens reported on his visit to Ford-forge and Fenwick Steads, where he found a very gratifying interest in the Lord's work and much love to Baptist principles, but he did not think that any action could be taken by the committee at present." It is interesting to note that there is a claim by some members of the Churches of Christ, that the church at Ford-forge was in fact one of their meeting places; it is most probable that in the years between 1807 and 1885, in the development from their early MacLeanite views, they developed into a pattern similar to that now known as the Churches of Christ,⁶ and then later they moved towards the more regular Baptist churches.⁷ By 1887 they were accepted as members of the Northern Baptist

Association and the Rev. F. E. Harry from Rawdon College accepted the invitation to the pastorate beginning his ministry there in May of that year.

This work was carried on for several years but there were many difficulties, the greatest being the movement of population. Those who know this part of the North-East coast will understand the inevitable move of the population which could bring the life of a church to a natural close. There is evidence that some activities continued up to 1914 and an attempt to revive the congregation was made in 1920, but without success; but this was not as a Baptist church.⁸

Of the church at Warkworth one can only make suggestions based upon the little evidence available. It had a short existence, the site was purchased in 1866 and by 1888 it was sold again. Information about this cause is hard to find, but there is enough to indicate something about the people who founded the church. Anyone walking up the main street with its church (whose history goes back to the eighth century) at the bottom and the ruins of the fourteenth-century castle towering at the top, would not look twice as they passed by a doorway leading down a passage to an austere square building which now houses the local library and acts as a community centre. This out-of-the-way building was once the Baptist church. One can only hazard a guess that the beginnings of the church at Warkworth are similar to the churches at Wooler and Ford-forge, for as Underwood says, "The peculiar ideas of MacLean filtered into England . . . by the East Coast route through Newcastle".⁹ It would seem that the Presbyterians provided a fertile ground for the spread of the Scotch Baptists and in Warkworth there were only two churches, the old parish church and the Presbyterian church. It is probable that the list of those on the Trust Deeds are from families connected with the local Presbyterian church.¹⁰

The names and occupations of the founders of the Warkworth church are clearly stated on the Trust Deed dated 21st September, 1866.¹¹ Their occupations at least tell us something about these people.

Matthew Dixon of Morwick Mill — Miller.

John Crosby of Brainsbough — Farmer.

Robert Richardson of Amble — Shipowner.

George Richardson of Amble — Shipowner.

Andrew Richardson of Amble — Merchant and Shipowner.

William Hetherington of Warkworth — Gardener.

Adam Howitt of Warkworth — Cordwainer.

Robert Howitt of Warkworth — Cordwainer.

James Watson of Warkworth — Blacksmith.

Andrew Muers of Warkworth — Baker and Flour Dealer.

From this list it would seem that they were mostly all men of some means and some business ability. Their concern was for religion and education as the Trust Deeds make clear, for the premises were to be "Occupied and used as a place of religious worship for Protestant Dissenters (but not Unitarians) and for religious and secular instruction of children whether of the congregation attending worship in the said Meeting House or not as the trustees shall think fit". Whether it was because most of the leaders of the church were business men, used to employing others or being themselves self employed, is hard to say, but it might account for their attitude towards the ministry, which, to say the least, seems to be nothing other than a master-servant relationship, it was a call into their employment rather than a call to the ministry of the church ". . . every such minister or pastor shall be elected by the major part of the members of the said congregation at a meeting to be called for that purpose and that it shall be lawful for three-fourths in number of such members at any meeting called for that purpose to remove any minister or pastor at their will and pleasure and without assigning any reason for such removal . . .".

A note in the *Alnwick Mercury* for September 25th, 1870, makes a reference to the existence of the Warkworth church, and that it was known locally as "the new Church". Not until 1879, during the ministry of the Rev. R. P. Jervan was there an application for membership of the Northern Baptist Association. One cannot help but feel that it was a last effort to keep going, for the Association Minute book records on December 12th, 1882, "That the Rev. J. M. Stephen make friendly enquiries regarding the Church at Warkworth, as to the way in which the pulpit is supplied, and the work is going, and report". This indicates that they were without a minister. By 1883 the decline had really set in. It had been proposed by the Northern Association that the newly-formed church as Alnwick, about five miles away, should work together with the Warkworth church, but there was no one to work with. In 1886 the Minute book reports on 30th November, the contemplated sale of the church building. January 9th, 1888, a letter sent by Mr. J. Simpson, the secretary of the Alnwick church, together with a cutting from a local paper, was read to the Association committee, telling of an application having been made by the Trustees to the Charity Commissioners for power to sell the church. It was resolved at that meeting that Mr. Stephen (or the Association Secretary) attend the meeting at Warkworth and try to use his good offices in the interest of the Baptists in Alnwick. Perhaps it is in keeping with the kind of picture we have of the leaders from the Trust Deeds, they were determined to run their own affairs; for it was reported to the Committee on 5th April by the Secretary that "his visit to enquire into the sale of the Church was futile, the Trustees refusing to

admit him into the meeting until the conclusion of the business".¹²

The Baptist witness in North Northumberland has been difficult. Of the five churches planted in that area only two are left, Alnwick and Berwick. Neither are strong causes, the history of the Alnwick church is an account of struggle.¹³ The question still remains unanswered, why is it so difficult for Baptist witness to take a hold in this scattered district? In the case of Ford-forge the movement of population brought about a natural ending, and this must be a real factor in the decline of churches in such an area. The reason for the collapse of the Wooler church is harder to define. It could be that Presbyterianism was too entrenched in this border town to allow the Baptists to flourish and we have seen that they were not too popular when MacLeanite doctrine was introduced into the town; one has to take into consideration the conservative nature of many of the Border towns and villages. The sudden collapse of the church at Warkworth is due possibly to a combination of internal and economic instability. When Amble, the neighbouring port, ceased to be a thriving port, people drifted further inland to Alnwick, Morpeth and Newcastle. This drift away was bound to have an effect upon Warkworth. Coupled with this we cannot rule out the impression that the church itself was not the happiest of fellowships; independence seemed more important than fellowship.

Whatever the causes of collapse we must never underestimate the contribution these churches made to the total work of the Kingdom of God. It is good that we should not forget them even though they are only fragments in the gigantic jig-saw of Church history.

NOTES

¹ D. Douglas, *History of the Northern Baptist Churches: 1648-1845*, 1846, p. 249.

² *Baptist Magazine*, Vol. XIX, 1827, pp. 149-51.

³ A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1956, pp. 189ff.

⁴ Gregory, *Western Meeting House Wooler*, 1894, p. 19. Printed for private circulation. A copy is in the Central Library, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁶ Correspondence with the Secretary of the Church of Christ, Broomhill, Northumberland, produced evidence that here was a strong link between church at Ford-forge—known as the Christian Meeting House—and the Churches of Christ.

⁷ Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁸ Correspondence with the Church of Christ, Broomhill.

⁹ Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁰ A member of the Richardson family still connected with the Warkworth Presbyterian Church.

¹¹ Traced to the office of Messrs. Carse & Goodger, Solicitors, 15 Prospect Place, Amble, Northumberland.

¹² The Alnwick church did eventually receive £30 from the Charity Commissioners.

¹³ G. A. Catherall, *A Short History of the Baptist Church in Alnwick: 1883-1957*, 1961—duplicated copies.