

The Care of Baptist Records

AT the East Midland Baptist Assembly this year, held at West Bridgford, Nottingham, we had an exhibition of old Baptist records. There were twelve cabinets of exhibits including old magazines, minute books, photographs and manuscripts (some on skin). It aroused a great deal of interest. Many delegates expressed their appreciation and quite a number either volunteered information or offered material that was in their possession. The exhibition was arranged by the County Archivist of Nottingham and myself. Our idea was to arouse the interest and whet the appetite of our delegates, so that when they returned to their churches we should already have their confidence and goodwill.

We in the East Midlands have a concern with regard to the preservation and safe custody of our old documents. Three years ago a new office was created, that of "Custodian of the Historical Documents". This officer was to be historian, having inherited from another historian, the late Mr. F. C. Atton, a number of books and a large quantity of notes and cuttings. The object is two-fold, first, that of building up a collection of Baptist records, minute books, year books, magazines, articles, photographs, and anything else of interest relating to the East Midland area; and secondly, that this should also be an Office of Information, to disseminate Baptist information as it is required.

Naturally our people need a lot of education in this respect but I have been very gratified with the response so far. We are wanting to make it easy for the ordinary church member to get information and to ask questions about our rich heritage. We are also hoping to gain the confidence of those people who have magazines, papers and photographs that have accumulated over the years, so that they will entrust them to our care, thus making the material more readily available to a larger circle of interested persons.

Now we have gone a step further in that we are using the facilities offered by the Record Offices. Our East Midland Baptist Association comprises five counties and we have agreed to deposit our material on permanent loan to a centre of four counties, The Castle, Lincoln, Archivist—Mrs. J. Varley, M.A., F.S.A.; The Public Library, Derby, Librarian—Mr. E. Bletcher, F.L.A.; The Shire Hall, Nottingham, Archivist—Mr. W. R. Serjeant, B.A.; The Museum, Leicester, Keeper of Archives—Mr. G. A. Chinnery; and the

Leicester County Record Office, Leicester, Archivist — Dr. L. A. Parker, B.A.

Let me enumerate the advantages of this step :

1. We ensure the physical preservation of the documents. The records are kept in specially equipped strong rooms, documents are treated and repaired if necessary.
2. They are made available, with full facilities (such as infra-red reading lamps for faded documents) for students, under supervision in the local Record Office.
3. The local head office publishes a list of the documents it is holding. This list is often a digest of the contents of the various items and a copy is received by the donor.
4. The local office also sends this information to the National Register of Archives in London so that information about our documents will be in the files in London for inspection by the public and students who come from all over the world.
5. The National Register of Archives each year publishes a "List of Accessions to Repositories" which is available everywhere. A copy of this will be in your local Record Office.

If other Associations will follow this example any one of us will be able to go into our nearest Record Office and by consulting the list there will be able to learn what Baptist records there are deposited all over the country. Of course, this depends very largely on whether or not our church officers will co-operate and be willing to entrust their records to their Association. In many places there will be a barrier of suspicion that will have to be overcome, but do not be discouraged. In our Association the people know me as the Custodian and when they see me at meetings they come to have a chat, seeking and offering information, handing me a brochure or perhaps telling me of something they have at home or in their church and asking me if that is the kind of thing I am wanting. Records of Sunday Schools, minute books and account books, besides histories of individual churches have already been handed to me. This exhibition has helped tremendously and I feel it has brought home to people that this is a service we can render as an Association. I am sure that when the churches really understand what we are doing and realise that their material will be far more secure with us than lying in the safe or cupboards or at the mercy of whoever may be in office, we shall have their confidence and then their records.

I have already mentioned by name the Archivists with whom I am in touch, for I must speak of their kindly co-operation even before they have received any material. I have watched the skill

of the repairers and have been able to bring away samples of the work to show to our people; I have been shown with pride around the muniment rooms and the various safeguards have been pointed out to me; I have been given digests of Baptist material that private persons have deposited; I have been able to borrow special display cabinets, so that we could have our exhibition. There is a happy relationship between us all and I cannot think that the East Midlands is unique in this respect—I understand that there is a Record Office in each county and in most towns as well. All that the Record Offices ask is that the documents be left with them indefinitely. The material is deposited on permanent loan so that we retain all our rights to the documents and, should circumstances require it, they may be withdrawn. We have stipulated that in cases of publication the permission of the Association be sought first through its custodian.

I suppose most of us in the Historical Society have been disheartened when we have been given books to examine with the spines broken, sections hanging loose and even the corners of the pages breaking off in our hands. Who has not been appalled at the ravages that damp and dust have made? With the Association behind me I feel that here is a way to stop further deterioration, to have the necessary repairs made that we can not afford, and to have our records made secure permanently. I have pleasure in commending this course to other Associations.

THOS. J. BUDGE

The Baptists of Thame by A. H. J. Baines. 51 pp.

The minister and two deacons of the church co-operated with Mr. Baines in the compilation of this booklet issued to mark the centenary of the present building. The first mention of Baptists in Thame is in 1669, as part of a mixed congregation of Dissenters. The present church dates from 1825. For some time its affiliation was with moderate Strict Baptists but in 1946 it was affiliated to the Bucks. association. Over many years the story is one of weakness, and is notable mainly for the tenacity of the few. More recently the church has gained in sturdiness and one senses in this booklet a determination to rise to the challenge of an expanding town. The chapters yet to come may well be the best. For the sake of future researchers it would be well if these local church histories could list all the known source materials and also conform to standard practice in printing the date and place of publication. The price is also of interest to would-be purchasers! No doubt the church secretary will answer all enquiries.