

John Ash and the Pershore Church: Additional Notes

THE realization that John Ash (1724–1779), lexicographer and minister of the Baptist church at Pershore, Worcestershire, was a direct ancestor of an old friend of mine took me recently to Pershore, where the present minister, Rev. F. W. Trout, kindly showed me the stone let into the floor of the church, with its long inscription in memory of Ash. The inscription is now barely decipherable, and this made me the more grateful for the transcript of it at the end of the recent interesting and informative article¹ on Ash by the Rev. G. H. Taylor, to which Mr. Trout directed me. What follows is notes by way of supplementing this article.

I. *John Ash's background*

After telling us that Ash was born in Dorset and that "one late source names his birth as Stockland", Mr. Taylor quotes Ivimey as authority for Ash's joining the church "at Loughwood, near Lyme, then under the pastoral care of that singular and eminent minister, Mr. Isaac Hann, to whom he was related". Mr. Taylor adds, "I can find no other reference to Hann or the church although both appear in Wilson's list for Dorset".

The original source of both these pieces of information, which are of assistance in tracing the path which led Ash to the Academy at Bristol, is the funeral sermon for Ash preached in 1779 by Caleb Evans, then Principal of the Academy. Mr. Taylor has tracked this sermon to a manuscript volume at Baptist Church House. It was in fact published under the title *The Years of Christian Friendship* (Bristol, 1779).

Loughwood is elusive, for it was never a parish name; but the early history of the church there is the subject of an article by W. T. Whitley in the *Transactions*² of the *Baptist Historical Society*. We there learn that "The Church of Christ at Dalwood usually assembling at Loughwood in Dalwood, Dorsetshire" originated in 1653-4. The meeting-house, which from a photograph appears, like so many early meeting-houses, to have been built as a dwelling-house, is "in a lonely sequestered nook at the back of Shute Hill", a mile and a half from Colyton "by a winding lane and embowered in woods".³ Dalwood, which is a civil parish, is ecclesiastically one parish with Stockland, Ash's birthplace; both places are now in East Devon, not in Dorset. For Baptist purposes Loughwood has long been united with the church at Kilmington, Devon, following which name it appears, in italics, in the current *Baptist Handbook*.

From Dr. Whitley's article we also learn that the building contains

a mural inscription to Isaac Hann (1690-1775), "for many years the worthy pastor of this church", erected by the Western Association. Hann's ministry lasted from about 1734 to about 1773. He twice composed the circular letter issued by the Western Association, from Bradford-on-Avon in 1757 and from Exeter in 1761.⁴ Earlier he had taken part in at least two West Country ordinations, in 1746 that of Robert Day (1720-91) at Wellington and in 1749 that of Philip Gibbs (d. 1801) at Plymouth.⁵ He was clearly a trusted leader in the Association.

II. *The Pershore Church*

With the aid of their Family Papers, Mr. Taylor shows how greatly the Rickards family, one of whom Ash married, contributed to the establishment and continuance of the church at Pershore. The site of the church building was secured in 1700 by Samuel Rickards, senior, and in 1742 his son, Samuel Rickards, junior, provided a manse. The family's patronage can, in fact, be traced still earlier. In 1690, in the records of the Common Fund in London, which till 1696 granted him £5 annually, the minister of the church, John Ward, is described thus: "Att Parshor, a Single man. has not aboue 5¹ p^r an- from ye peope, and one Gentlewoman gives him his dyett".⁶ That this gentlewoman was the mother of Samuel Rickards, senior, is almost certain; for eighteen years earlier, in 1672, "Widow Rickett" had her house at Eckington, close to Pershore, licensed for Congregational worship, with John Ward as teacher.⁸

Ward's successors in the pastorate, as Mr. Taylor records, were Timothy Thomas senior, who was minister from 1696/7 till his death in 1716, and his son, Timothy Thomas junior, who died prematurely in 1720. Mr. Taylor also refers to a letter written to Philip Doddridge in 1723 by the widow of Timothy Thomas, senior. About these two ministers a number of interesting facts emerge.

The father of Timothy Thomas, senior, also Timothy Thomas, who at the Restoration had been ejected from Moreton Chapel, Llanyblodwel, Shropshire, died near Oswestry in 1676, seven months before his son was born.⁹ His widow Mary, the daughter of John Evans (1628-1700), who at the Restoration had been ejected from the Mastership of Oswestry School and who since 1668 had been minister of the Dissenting church at Wrexham,¹⁰ therefore returned home to Wrexham, where she died in 7 July 1693.¹¹ In due course the young Timothy not only became a member¹² of his grandfather's church at Wrexham but on New Year's Day 1696,¹³ before removing to Pershore, married a Wrexham girl, Anne Edisbury, of a prominent Denbighshire family.¹⁴ The church at Wrexham had in 1691 suffered division. After his grandfather's death in 1700, Timothy's uncle John Evans (1680-1730) in 1702 became minister to the Presbyterians, while his grandfather's former assistant, Jenkin Thomas, who appears to have been no relation of Timothy's, ministered to the Independents and Baptists. Timothy's sympathies were with the latter congregation. When for some years, after Jenkin Thomas' death in

1710, it was without a minister, Timothy "came over . . . regularly once in three months from Pershore", doubtless for a Sacrament Sunday. That the family connexion with Wrexham was preserved appears from the fact that one of his eleven children, Elizabeth Thomas, died at Wrexham on New Year's Day 1748¹⁰ and, like her grandmother Mary Evans, was buried in the Dissenters' Burial Ground there.

Pershore and Wrexham are separated by a considerable distance, and are two churches one would not think of as *likely* to be associated. A small allowance for oats and hay for his horse was sometimes paid by Wrexham to Timothy Thomas, along with five shillings a visit for himself.¹⁷ It is of some interest that at this time both churches observed Open Communion and that a little later both became Baptist. To account for this change would take us too far afield, for it came about fairly widely in the 1730s and '40s. In the case of these two churches something may be attributed to the prevailing influence of Thomas Edwards, of Rhual, near Mold, the intemperate author of *Baxterianism Barefac'd* (1696), and his family. Timothy Thomas is said by Ivimey to have preached much at Rhual, where the family had their own meeting-house and baptistery,¹⁸ and it was at Rhual that John Williams, the Wrexham minister during whose pastorate the church became Baptist, died.¹⁹

Timothy Thomas, junior, was minister of the Pershore church for only three years and was no more than twenty when he died. His personality still speaks, however, in his diary and letters. A generation after his death these were handed by his sister to Thomas Gibbons, who in 1752 published them without their author's name as *The Hidden Life of a Christian*. By 1752 the Evangelical Revival was in progress, and the young man's eager, devout spirit evidently made an instant appeal, for a second edition was soon called for. What is striking is that he wrote as he did in the years around 1719, at a time when religion in England is often supposed to have been at a low ebb.

The information that after the death of Timothy Thomas, junior, his mother "wrote to Philip Doddridge, then at Kibworth, to persuade him to accept the pastorate at Pershore" Mr. Taylor takes from an unpublished Oxford B.Litt. thesis by the late F. W. P. Harris. Mr. Harris' source was the published *Diary and Correspondence of Philip Doddridge* (1829-31), edited by Doddridge's great-grandson, J. D. Humphreys. In the first volume of this work may be found Doddridge's reply to the official letter from Samuel Rickards, senior, on behalf of the Pershore church, inviting Doddridge to become its minister, as well as to the supporting letter from Anne Thomas.²⁰ Her original letter to him is preserved among the Doddridge MSS. at New College, London,²¹ and differs in some unimportant details from the letter as printed. Humphreys could rarely resist the temptation to "improve" the style of the letters he edited, including those of Doddridge himself. In this case it was in no way necessary, for her handwriting as well as her language shows Anne Thomas to have been a woman of education, with an ability to express herself clearly. The

letter from Samuel Rickards to Doddridge is not preserved, but a copy of Doddridge's reply is extant both among the Wilson MSS. at Dr. Williams's Library and in the Meen MS. at New College.²² It was presumably copied from the Pershore Church Book.

III. *Ash's friendship with Caleb Evans*

Mr. Taylor brings out the great importance for Ash of his life-long friendship with Caleb Evans (1737-1791), the minister of Broadmead Church, Bristol, and Principal of the Academy. Ash prayed at Evans' ordination and later preached the funeral sermon for Evans' first wife, while Ash's own funeral sermon, as we have seen, was preached by Evans. The two men also together edited a *Collection of Hymns*. Mr. Taylor further shows that each man's wife was a niece of Samuel Rickards, junior. Ash's wife Elizabeth was the daughter of Samuel's sister Hannah and Mark Goddard of Bristol; Evans' wife Sarah was the daughter of Samuel's sister Sarah and Joseph Jefferies. Mr. Taylor adds that Jefferies "was probably a Baptist minister". He was in fact minister of the Baptist church at Taunton from 1720 to 1746.²³

It is a curious fact that a sister of Caleb Evans became the first wife of another Timothy Thomas (1753-1827), later the minister of the church in Devonshire Square, London.²⁴ He was *not* of the same family as the ministers with this name who had preceded Ash at Pershore. This being so, it is a further strange coincidence that his cousin Thomas Thomas (son, brother and uncle of three more Baptist ministers all named Timothy Thomas) should in 1781 have been ordained as Ash's immediate successor at Pershore, where he spent seven years before removing to London to be Secretary of Stepney College and one of the first secretaries of the Baptist Union, the resolutions for the founding of which it is probable that he drafted.

IV. *John Ash's descendants*

It is of interest to note the descendants of a famous man, especially when they have been men of note on their own account. Mr. Taylor mentions Ash's son Joseph, who was under age at his father's death and for whose benefit the shop Ash managed in Pershore was to be kept in being. Ivimey also mentions Joseph Ash as a deacon of Broadmead, Bristol, then living in the neighbourhood of Horsley, Gloucestershire.²⁶ Through this son Ash has had many descendants, who have distinguished themselves as he did, in the world of letters as well as in the ministry.

Joseph Ash's daughter, Anne Day Ash, became the wife of Joseph Baynes, assistant minister of the church at Shortwood, Horsley, and later minister of the church at Wellington, Somerset, where a mural inscription to his memory is still to be seen.²⁷ Joseph Baynes had several sons, among them Joseph Ash Baynes, minister of Derby Road Baptist Church, Nottingham, whose son A. Hamilton Baynes conformed and became Bishop of Natal and subsequently Provost of Birmingham Cathedral;²⁸ Robert Hall Baynes, Canon of Worcester and writer of a hymn found in many hymn-books, "Jesus, to Thy

table led";²⁰ Thomas Spencer Baynes, Professor of Metaphysics at St. Andrews and editor of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; William Wilberforce Baynes, Treasurer of the Baptist Union;³¹ and Alfred Henry Baynes, for many years Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, in whose offices his portrait hangs.³² A. H. Baynes had two children: his son Norman Hepburn Baynes, author of *Israel among the Nations* and other works, became Professor of Byzantine History in the University of London;³³ his daughter Katharine married K. J. Spalding, sometime Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford. Their son, Ash's great-great-grandson, P. Anthony Spalding, author of *Self-Harvest, A Guide to Proust* and other pieces, is the friend whose descent from the Pershore lexicographer was the occasion for these researches.

NOTES

¹ *Baptist Quarterly*, n.s., xx (1963-4), 4-22.

² ii (1910-11), 129-144.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131. National Grid reference 31/253993 (O.S. map 177).

⁴ *Baptist Bibliography* (1916), ed. W. T. Whitley, i, items 15-757 and 15-761. See also *Baptist Annual Register* for 1801-2, p. 978 for an extract from a letter by Hann.

⁵ Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, iv (1830), 296 and 298. There are several references to Philip Gibbs in two recent articles by C. E. Welch, "Dissenters' Meeting Houses in Plymouth to 1852", in *Transactions of Devon Association*, xciv (1962), 579-612, and "Andrew Kinsman's Churches at Plymouth", *ibid.*, xcvi (1965), 212-236.

⁶ *Freedom after Ejection* (Manchester, 1917), ed. A. Gordon, pp. 126 and 375.

⁷ *Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence* (1911), ed. G. L. Turner, i, 525.

⁸ It seems plausible to follow Gordon (see n. 6) and *Calamy Revised* (Oxford, 1934), ed. A. G. Matthews, p. 509, in identifying Ward with the man of this name who at the Restoration was ejected from the near-by Harvington (which involves reading Eckington for Elington and Harvington for Harrington). Rickett(s) and Rickard(s) are both, of course, variants of Richard(s): see *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford 1945), ed. E. G. Withycombe, p. 112.

⁹ See *Calamy Revised*, p. 481.

¹⁰ See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (1959), ed. Sir John Lloyd and R. T. Jenkins, p. 239.

¹¹ A. N. Palmer, *The Older Nonconformity of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 1888), p. 46, n. 6.

¹² Joseph Ivimey, iv, 557. Timothy Thomas was for a brief period a member of the Congregational church at Rothwell, Northamptonshire. On 6 August 1695, with the minister, Richard Davis, he was present as a representative from Rothwell at a meeting of the church at Carlton, Beds. (now Strict Baptist), to settle a dispute between that church and the church at Stevington, Beds. (now Baptist), which is recorded in the Carlton church book (information from Mr. H. G. Tibbutt). The Rothwell church book refers to him as a lay preacher who in 1696/7 was dismissed "to minister the Word to them at Pershore". (Norman Glass, *The Early History of the Independent Church at Rothwell*, 1871, p. 110).

¹³ A. N. Palmer, p. 96, n. 1.

¹⁴ See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, p. 178. The pedigree of Edisbury of Erddig in A. N. Palmer, *History of the Thirteen Country Townships of the*

Old Parish of Wrexham (Wrexham, 1903), facing p. 225, shows her ancestors to the fifth generation.

¹⁶ A. N. Palmer, *The Older Nonconformity of Wrexham*, p. 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72, n. 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁸ Joseph Ivimey, ii. 557.

¹⁹ A. N. Palmer, p. 97.

²⁰ i. 275-281.

²¹ New College, London, Doddridge MSS., 9. 56.

²² Dr. Williams's Library, Wilson MSS., I. iv, f. 58; New College, London, Meen MS., f. 559. This also differs slightly from the letter as printed by Humphreys.

²³ Jerom Murch, *History of Presbyterian and General Baptist Churches in the West of England* (1835), pp. 201-2.

²⁴ See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, p. 957; J. A. Jones, *Bunhill Memorials* (1849), pp. 275-7.

²⁵ See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, p. 968; J. A. Jones, pp. 277-8; E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union; a short history* (1959), p. 26, where the Timothy Thomas who was his cousin is erroneously described as his brother. Mr. Taylor says Ash's successor at Pershore was John Haydon, but Whitley places Haydon at Tewkesbury, where he died in 1781.

²⁶ Joseph Ivimey, iv. 562.

²⁷ See *Baptist Hand-book* for 1876, pp. 327-332; and for portrait, see *Bicentenary Handbook* for Wellington, Somerset (1939).

²⁸ Cf. J. T. Godfrey and James Ward, *History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham* (1903), pp. 354-5.

²⁹ See *Dictionary of Hymnology* (1892), ed. J. Julian, p. 119.

³⁰ See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13th edn. (1926), iii. 557.

³¹ Cf. E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union*, p. 149.

³² See B. R. Wheeler, *Alfred Henry Baynes, F.P.* (n.d.); E. A. Payne, *The Great Succession* (1938), ch. iii, pp. 43-53.

³³ See J. M. Hussey, *Norman Hepburn Baynes 1877-1961*, repr. from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xlix (1962), pp. 365-373, with portrait. Professor Hussey is at work on a more extended memoir.

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James Ward Collection. The important collection of books in the care of the Bromley House Library, Angel Row, Nottingham, is well-known to students of the history of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. It is appropriate this year to recall that Ward, a noted bibliophile, a member of the Bibliographical Society and a life-member of the Thoroton Society, became the first treasurer of our own society when it was formed sixty years ago. He was a member of Derby-road, Nottingham, from 1871, and not surprisingly the James Ward Collection contains a number of items, MS and otherwise, of special interest to Baptists. It is hoped, at some future date, to publish a list of these. One volume, which bears the title *Baptist Historical Society*, contains letters which passed between Ward and W. T. Whitley, and various printed publicity items relating to the society in its early days.

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