James Castleden (1778-1854) Bethel Baptist Church, Hampstead*

THE beginnings of Baptist history in Hampstead must always be associated with James Castleden, for it was under his leadership that the first Baptist church in Hampstead was formed and a chapel erected for worship. He was in his 39th year when he accepted the invitation from a small group of Baptists who had settled in Hampstead to be their minister. The sources of information concerning his life and ministry are scanty and we are indebted to a fellow minister, J. Andrew Jones, a close friend of Castleden through 40 years, for the memoir he published in 1854, the year of his friend's death. Apart from the preface written by Jones himself, the memoir contains a selection from the many letters which Castleden had written to him, a few pastoral letters sent to a Mrs. Frost, and a copy of an imaginary dialogue between Truth (Castleden) and Friendly (Jones) which Castleden had written and which consists of a brief account of his life from his birth to his first years in Hampstead. It concludes with a detailed account of his death and funeral. We learn little from the memoir about his home and parents, his education or his daily tasks. Castleden was chiefly concerned to give a record of his spiritual development. But there is enough to give us a general picture of his background.

He was born in Faversham, in North Kent, in February 1778. His parents were honest, church-going people. His father worked on a farm, as indeed did Castleden himself. In later years, when visiting Faversham with a friend, he showed him the fields where he was employed as a young boy to keep the crows from the new-sown fields, and described how he used to set up some sticks and preach to them. It is evident that from his early years religion was an influence in his life, and he had already begun the habit of bringing all the affairs of daily life to God in prayer. He did not confine his worship to the parish church. A member of the Society of Friends had given him much spiritual help and he became a regular worshipper with them. He also had contact with the local Wesleyan chapel. After one of their prayer meetings he was asked to preach on the following Sunday. "This I refused, saying that I had never preached and could not

* This article is a summarised version of the life of James Castleden, the minister of the first Baptist church in Hampstead, which was written at the request of Mr. C. W. Ikin, the treasurer of Heath Street Baptist Church, Hampstead. All the facts on which this account of Castleden and his ministry is based have been collected through a number of years by Mr. Ikin with meticulous and characteristic thoroughness.

The sources which Mr. Ikin has chosen are primarily those which are at first hand. Since most of these sources are not easily accessible I have frequently quoted his material *in extenso* in order that the original writers can tell the story in their own words.

preach." But during the following week when he was reading his Bible he was much impressed by some words he found in the first chapter of Jeremiah, "Speak unto them all that I command thee", with the result that he preached his first sermon, and also preached again in the evening. "The next morning there was such a stir made among the Church people that James Castleden should be preaching at a Wesley chapel. Many of my friends, having a regard for my reputation, were grieved at my conduct." In the 18th century feeling ran high between the Established Church and Dissenters, especially in village parishes, and the situation became so difficult for Castleden that it became one of the influences which directed his steps towards London.

He moved there when he was 20 years of age and continued to worship with the Quakers, finding in their worship "blessed seasons of refreshment from the presence of the Lord." But from a cause which he does not name his relation with some of the Friends grew strained and he ceased to worship with them. But he never forgot them and the helpfulness of their worship. His closest friend, Andrew Jones, noted that he retained "a sort of Quaker dryness in his remarks through all his days. In short, he never put off his drab coat."

He then began to visit various churches, Anglican and Dissenting, eventually settling down in a Baptist church in Walworth, where he was baptised by the minister, the scholarly Dr. J. Jenkins. Later we find him worshipping under the ministry of Mr. E. S. Pierce, "who enlarged my views of the person and work of Christ." Here was laid the foundation of his own ministry. In this church he held the office of deacon for nine years. At this time he had sometimes preached to small groups of God-fearing souls in the country around and gradually he came to serve a considerable number of these, some at a considerable distance. It was at this period he met Andrew Jones and began their 30 years of close friendship.

He was then 37 years of age. He was a very different Castleden from the small boy employed to scare crows from his master's fields. Yet those adolescent years revealed qualities which were to persist throughout his life. His search for a living faith revealed an independent mind, and the persistence with which he faced the hostilities this search aroused made plain his strength of character. His experiences with the Methodists and his years with the Quakers gave him an understanding of those who held convictions differing from his own, and developed a tolerance which was all too rare in that period.

It is evident that he had a gift for preaching. Mr. John Foreman, who in 1822 walked 14 miles to hear him preach in Saffron Walden, said in his sermon at Castleden's funeral "He was not reckoned an eloquent preacher; but there was a mellowness and an impressiveness about his ministry which was frequently most striking. His words would drop with a sweet savour, and God attested it by bestowing his blessing upon it." No sermons written by him have been discovered, but the letters which Jones has included in his memoir reveal in some

measure the quality of his preaching. Many of them are in fact brief sermons addressed to an individual. In the preface to the letters Jones comments "His letters are weighty and powerful. They have a peculiar flavour of Christ in them and they are full of gospel instruction. They contain a most blessed view of the grace of God, sound experience, holy practice and a deep insight into men and things". Judging by the warmth of Castleden's letters there was a close bond between these two men, and although Jones was the older in years and in ministry it is plain that he valued the counsel of his junior. Evidently he was too impulsive and hasty in word and action, easily irritated with officers and members who did not agree with him. Castleden writes "May the Lord bless you, Andrew, and put a padlock upon your mouth", and in the same year "I hope you will pardon my freedom, but I feel much with you. I see where your weak part lies and where you are likely to be overcome. You want to have the good opinion of people, and because they don't approve of your preaching and views on different subjects you are mortified and hurt. But your salvation does not depend on your preaching, nor your comfort, but the subject and object you preach." In another letter we read "If you value your own peace you will discourage all tale-bearers. How true are the words of Solomon 'He that keepeth his lips keepeth his soul from trouble'. . . . I hope you will be a good fireman to put out fires as soon as they break out; but do, brother Andrew, give up your own wishes, will and way; preach Christ greatly, follow Him wholly, love Him dearly, and serve Him cheerfully".

In 1821 Castleden had been long enough in the ministry to have developed ideas of the purpose and conduct of the church-meeting, ideas which differ widely from today's conception of its function. He writes "The pulpit is yours. Here say all you can of the best of all friends, the Lord Jesus Christ. When you attend the prayer meeting, here you are president, you give the word of command. But there is the church meeting. Here, I think, we should be almost dumb: is it not a civil meeting, to manage secular matters? . . . never be anxious to carry a point unless there is unanimity."

In these letters to Andrew there is a complete lack of any sense of superiority. James shares what he has learned in his own experience. He speaks plainly and bluntly at times, but the close affection and understanding which exists between them remains untouched. Andrew writes of him "He is a godly man, an understanding man, a faithful shepherd of the flock, selfless".

One of the things which impress, and probably surprise, the reader of these letters is their literary quality. They are not the letters of an uneducated man. "Where did he get his education?" is a question which cannot be answered with certainty. A farm labourer's child who begins work on the farm at an early age cannot have had much normal education, yet in his teens he is reading the Bible and discussing religious truths with members of the Society of Friends and probably with the Wesleyans. In his 20s he was in growing request as a preacher.

The letters reveal that he was steeped in the Authorised Version of the Bible, which in itself is an education. This knowledge obviously influenced his use of language, for many of the brief sentences and verbal illustrations from daily life might have come from the Psalms or from one of the prophets.

His extensive vocabulary indicates a wider range of reading than the Bible alone. Probably the Friends and the Baptist ministers he knew in London would have guided and encouraged his studies, especially S. E. Pierce, his minister for some 10 years, whose part in enlarging his views of the Person and Work of Christ he acknowledges gratefully.

His ministry in Hampstead began in 1817. A group of Baptists, most of them of the Strict and Particular persuasion, invited him to conduct their worship. The impression he made was so favourable that they invited him to be their minister. Many months earlier he had told Andrew Jones of his growing desire to serve one church instead of ministering to a variety of churches, and he accepted their invitation. They were worshipping in a large room, but under Castleden's ministry this soon proved inadequate. Moreover the population of Hampstead village was now over 4,000 and increasing rapidly. He faced the situation with energy and competence. In October he purchased a plot of land on Holly Bush Hill, in the lane now known as Holly Mount. On this he built a house and a chapel. The dwelling house, in which he and his family were to live, formed the ground floor and above the house he built the chapel, to be known as Bethel Baptist Chapel. It was a solid and commodious building, with galleries. The 1851 census of places of religious public worship states that there were 350 free seats, 100 others (presumably rented by church members) and no standing room. This is an example, by no means rare in that time, of a man building a privately owned chapel for a group of Christians who had no place of worship.

This building remains, with its exterior unchanged, but is now used as a dwelling house. There is a painting in the minister's vestry of the present Heath Street chapel which is believed to portray a baptism in the Bethel chapel. It shows a central aisle leading to a baptistry, with a very tall pulpit behind it and a gallery beyond this. This painting was presented to Heath Street by a great-grandson of Mr. T. A. Evans, a former deacon at Bethel.

There is an addition to our knowledge in a lively description of the chapel written by Mortimer, the eldest son of Mr. T. A. Evans, and published by the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* in two consecutive issues in May 1904. He describes the chapel as he knew it as a small boy some 50 to 60 years earlier, so the period he covers would be from 1844 to 1854, the closing years of Castleden's ministry. Mortimer was born in 1840, and he would be recalling what he had seen when he was somewhere between four and 14 years of age. This is an impressionable period in a child's life and though some of the details may be inaccurate the general picture is convincing because it is the

fruit not of a single visit but of regular attendance over several years. He writes "It was a strange, weird old place, somewhat barn-like. Inside, the pitch of the roof came down so far in the middle that the occupants of the gallery on the south side were obscured from the vision of those on the north." He did not find the lengthy sermons and the long prayers much to his taste, but he was very interested in the building and its worshippers. He writes of the stove which at times became red hot and at other times refused to burn and filled the place with fumes, of the creaking shoes of the church wardens, of the musicians in the gallery who played on weird, old world instruments and led the hearty singing of the congregation.

In this chapel, opened on 19 February 1818, Castleden was to exercise his ministry for 36 years. Unfortunately no trace of any official records of this period have been discovered. There are no minutes of church or deacons' meetings to consult. When the chapel closed a few years after Castleden's death little effort could have been made to preserve church records. Even the copies of the local paper which covered the period of his ministry and could have yielded much useful information were not available. The copies stored at the British Museum were destroyed by fire bombs during the war and the copies preserved by the printers of the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* were also destroyed in a fire. Thus for the most part we are limited to the information which Jones included in his memoir. He informs us that the church was formed on 13 March 1818, and two months later Castleden was ordained. Membership quickly rose to 80 persons. After this there is no detailed information until seven years later, in 1825, when a crisis arose which caused a serious division among the members.

For some decades of the 18th century Baptists had been facing two divisive issues. The first was the relaxation of the rigid Calvinism which believed that since the destiny of men was pre-determined there was no point in evangelistic teaching and preaching. The fact that the group of Baptists in Hampstead invited Castleden to be their minister makes it plain that their Calvinism was moderate in character, for Castleden made no secret of his beliefs. "My task is to preach Christ and the savoury power of his death. We find that when a free-grace Gospel is preached sinners are converted and saints are blessed." His central theme was the text of his first sermon after his ordination—"Jesus Christ and him Crucified."

The congregation welcomed his ardent evangelism, and it was the second issue which proved divisive. The Strict Baptist practice was to admit to the Lord's Table only those who had been baptised as believers. But for some time there had been a movement, led by Robert Hall (1764-1831), to open the communion table to all believers in Christ. When the Bethel church was formed in 1818 the stricter view was accepted by minister and members, but seven years later Castleden announced that in future the table would be open to all believers. The result was a secession of members who opposed open communion. We do not know how many left the church, but eight of

these found a place in New End, Hampstead, where they could gather for worship and there they formed the Ebenezer Strict and Particular Baptist Church.

A detailed account of the dispute as seen by the dissentients is preserved in the church records of Ebenezer chapel, which was later compelled by a building development scheme to move to Temple Fortune. In 1958, by the courtesy of the secretary of the chapel, Mr. Ikin copied verbatim the following item from the original minute book:

"A brief account of the dealings of God with us which have led to our formation as a Particular Baptist Church now meeting for Divine Worship at New End, Hampstead.

"Wee who first formed this Church was prior to our formation members of the baptist Church under the pastoral care of Mr. Castledine of the same place and Had retained an Honerable membership some for 7 years others less time and which time wee enjoyed in good measure peace and prosperity as a Church although one Person comuned with us at the Lord's table who had not been baptized.

"But their was a general understanding among the friends by the Promise of Mr. Castledine that no other person should be admitted to comune with us at the Table of the Lord without first being baptized.

"But to our Great supprise on Lord's Day August 1st. 1825, Mr. Castledine after the ordinance was administered wished the friends to tarry when Hee informed us his intention was to continue no longer as a Particular Baptist Church as Hee was quite tired of that mode of Government and should commence a church on the Principles of open comunion and that he should therefore erase the names of the members and leave the Books open for 3 to 6 months after which time those who did not enter their names would be no longer members.

"This, being the case we with many others felt quite dissatisfied and wishd to have an interview or a church meeting to have some explination but being refused wee Quietly Withdrew some of us with an Intention to seek a Home with some Particular Church in London.

"But their being a desire among the Friends to meet together for prayer and the Lord's direction when wee was offerd a small place to worship in together the Lord thus smiling upon us we after deliberation Jointly agreed to Form ourselves into A Particular Baptist Church to keep the Ordinances of Gods House as delivered unto us.

"Wee accordingly gave ourselves to the Lord and to one another in His fear September 25th 1825 Being Eight in number. . . ."

In a letter which Castleden wrote to the church members he voiced his desire for a greater unity among believers. "I wish to see the followers of the Lamb united. I am not a rigid Baptist for I meet with many who have not been baptised with water who are blessedly baptised with the Holy Spirit; and to all such I can give my heart and hand." We do not know how he finally came to this conclusion. When this issue was raised at the time he was a deacon under Mr. E. S.

Pierce he was one of the strongest opponents to opening the Table. That he should in time modify his views was perhaps almost inevitable when we recall the catholicity of his spiritual history. He was brought up in the Anglican Church, he had links with the Wesleyans, he worshipped with the Quakers, and finally found his spiritual home among the Baptists. Through the years he had met many saintly Christians and he knew that the Baptists did not hold all truth within their fold. But their pastor's change of belief and its consequent separations must have been a sad experience for the members of the Bethel church. It speaks well for all concerned that this separation was carried through with dignity and apparently without bitterness.

His ministry continued. Four years later he could write "The Lord blesses us as a congregation with prosperity, and the church is at peace." When in 1851 the church attendance census was taken it reported that 300 persons had worshipped in the chapel on Sunday 30 March.

There are many aspects of Castleden's life of which we know little or nothing, particularly of his personal and family life. According to Andrew Jones he was a linen-draper in St. Martin's Court, off St. Martin's Lane. He was certainly in a senior position, and possibly the owner of the business. Otherwise he would have been unable to afford the money for his frequent preaching visits, sometimes to distant churches. Nor could he have taken time off for evangelistic missions which extended over many days. But his business certainly did not make him a wealthy man. It is true that he was able to raise enough money to buy the land and build a chapel upon it, but when he needed a sum of money in 1848, possibly to pay the expenses of the emigration of his daughter and son-in-law to Australia, he had to mortgage this property for £270. In one of his letters to Mrs. Frost, who had evidently asked if he could recommend a boy, presumably for work about her house, he tells her "I have kept no lad for four or five years. My business will not afford it."

The facts about Castleden which have been carefully and thoroughly gathered reveal even less about his home life. Jones mentions that in 1799 Castleden "was married to his beloved wife, who was a truly valuable Christian and to him an affectionate partner all his days." When she died in 1846, Castleden writes "Her end was peaceful; but my loss is inconceivably great." He makes brief references to Elizabeth, his only child, and always in terms of close affection. Yet it is only through the deeds of the land and chapel that we know she married and emigrated.

There is abundant evidence of his close and interesting friendship with Andrew Jones, interesting partly because of their differences of outlook. In a letter written to Andrew there is a passage which illustrates in a gentle way their difference in theological emphasis. Andrew was much more conservative than James. In his preface to the memoir he inveighs against "Fullerian duty-faith and Robert Hall's pestiferous and unscriptural nostrum of mixed communion." James refers to their

difference of outlook when he writes "Your brother and sister were very well on Monday. I hope he will be comfortable. But, Andrew, you do make such *strait* Baptists. I don't suppose he will break bread with us. But he does pray with us, and very sweetly too." Their friendship continued to the end, and the affectionate esteem in which Andrew held James is evident throughout the memoir.

One of the noteworthy features of the lengthy letters and the dialogue is that, with one exception, there is a complete absence of any comment on the social conditions of the time. The opening decades of the 19th century were a grim period for the vast majority of the people of England. The French Revolution, the long-drawn Napoleonic wars, and the foolish quarrel with America had cut off trade with Europe and the West and impoverished the nation in many ways. Business suffered and unemployment was rife. Corn was scarce and the price of bread soared. Hunger and epidemics were widespread. Castleden's only reference is in a note on the situation in Hampstead written in 1829. "We have had great afflictions in the village; eight and ten lying dead at a time. Six buried on a Sabbath, and a large number of our friends in great difficulties through the unparalleled slackness of trade, and know not what to do." Possibly a comment made after his death had truth in it—"He dwelt among his own people, and did not concern himself greatly, I judge, with outside affairs."

It was in the year 1851 that the church members were noticing a slow deterioration in the health of their minister, and this culminated in August 1853, in a stroke which partially paralysed him. His preaching days were over, but he presided at the Lord's Table and occasionally prayed or gave out a hymn. He must have been a very lonely man at this time—his wife dead and his only daughter and his grandchildren in Australia. Indeed Jones states that he had no relatives in England. He had long fits of depression and worried about the state of his soul and his standing before God. But the last week was a peaceful one and his mind was at rest, and "at the last he quietly fell asleep on Sunday morning, June 4th 1854, aged 76 years."

The many tributes paid to him at the funeral and at the memorial services on the following Sunday add little to our knowledge of him, but they underline the affection and esteem in which he was held in Hampstead and the respect felt even by ministers who held different convictions from his. This is evident in two extracts from the funeral sermon preached by John Foreman. He said "John Stevens, George Comb and James Castleden were three great public characters, known as Gospel ministers far and wide. They were engaged in most of the solemn, important and public services of their day. To these brethren my heart was knit for many years, well knowing them to be sanctified servants of the living God." "Our brother established mixed communion; why he did so we cannot say. There were 999 points on which we were agreed; and the other one only gave us surprise. It was, I think, a weakness on his part. But where is the man that is perfect?

He was a Bible-man, a Bible-preaching man and Bible-praying man."

The first extract draws attention to the important part Castleden played in the counsels of the denomination. This is stressed in a memorial article in the July 1854 edition of the *Earthen Vessel,* the journal of the less extreme Baptists. "No minister has commanded and maintained more esteem among the churches throughout this kingdom than James Castleden". Another writer asserts "that there is scarcely a county in England where his name is unknown".

Of the day to day details of his ministry we know almost nothing, nor of his personal appearance apart from G. W. Potter's description in *Random Recollections* (1907) as "a quaint but good old man, who wore a black clerical dress with small clothes and gaiters." There is also a print of him, once found in many Hampstead homes, which gives one the impression of a kindly and benevolent person. What we are given is something more valuable than external details, and that is a measure of insight into his character, glimpses of the kind of man he was.

Judging by his letters he was a humble man who, in spite of the honoured place he held among his brethren, was well aware of his own weaknesses and failures. He was a serious man, but a vein of quiet humour is evident in his letters, and this, together with the unusual turn of phrase, the apt illustration and the unexpected illustration must have lightened the sermons which young Mortimer had found so wearisome.

Tribute was paid not only to his preaching but to his pastoral care. "This old Hampstead minister was a true pastor, visiting his flock constantly, consoling those in trouble, cheering those in doubt or perplexity, and solacing the weak and feeble. He was always welcome, both in the houses of the well-to-do and in the homes of the poor." He responded to the call for help whatever the hour and whatever the weather.

The widespread tension and enmity between Anglican and Dissenter of that time had no place in Castleden's thought or behaviour. There are several references to his close friendship with the Rev. Thomas Ainger, the evangelistic vicar of the Parish church. It was he who conducted Castleden's funeral and burial. Even more surprising, in view of the deep and bitter gulf which separated Protestant and Roman Catholic, was the friendship which grew up with the Abbé J. J. Morel. This R.C. priest came to Hampstead in 1796 to minister to the 200 and more refugees from the French Revolution who had made their home in Hampstead. He was a faithful pastor to his flock and a ready helper of any who were in need. It speaks well for Castleden's courage that the prejudices of his day did not prevent him from recognising the Abbé's goodness and welcoming his friendship. He and Ainger and the Abbé were one in Christ and enjoyed that unity.

It is evident that Castleden was an unusual man. He cannot be fitted into any conventional mould. Yet somehow this did not cut him off

from those who held views more narrow and rigid. In his early preaching days he had served two churches in Reading. One was a typical Strict and Particular Baptist community. The other he described as a "Free Grace" church. They both welcomed him into their pulpits. He opened the communion table in his own church, yet his friendship with his old friend remained unbroken, and many ministers who deeply regretted his action came to his funeral. Even the chief speaker on that occasion, though he felt it necessary to make clear his disapproval of Castleden's action, extolled his virtues and praised God for such a faithful servant. "I do not say that he was a perfect man; far from it; But we take the predominant features of his life throughout and judge thereby." Perhaps the most fitting epitaph was written by his old friend Andrew, who wrote "Those who knew him best loved him most".

The Holly Bush chapel only outlived its loved pastor for a few years. In many ways Bethel had ceased to meet the needs of the rapidly growing population of Hampstead. Many of the incoming Baptists did not find themselves at home in the primitive and comfortless building which young Mortimer Evans had described, and others were accustomed to a less narrow theology. Among these was James Harvey, a London merchant, who bought a plot of land in Heath Street in 1860, and with the generous help of others who also desired a more fitting sanctuary it became possible to build the present Heath Street chapel and to open it in July 1861.

The minister of the Bethel chapel moved to Henley-in-Arden in 1860 and shortly afterwards the church was dissolved and the chapel closed. Later the building was bought by the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* for their printing work. It is now 17 Holly Mount, a private residence.

Some of the former members of Bethel were unwilling to join the new church in Heath Street, which opened its membership to all Christian believers whether baptised as believers or not. Their Holly Bush Hill church had practised open communion but not open membership. Most of those who wished to continue in this tradition formed a group to meet at the house of Mr. Richard Burdon-Sanderson, who acted as their minister. In June 1864 his wife died and he was unable to continue as their minister, with the result that 32 members of the group were received into membership at the Ebenezer chapel in New End, Hampstead.

It is worth noting that when the Heath Street worshippers formed themselves into a church in March, 1862, the first two deacons appointed were Mr. Harvey and Mr. T. A. Evans, a former deacon of long standing at the Holly Bush Hill church.

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