

EDITORIAL: THE ARCHITECTURE OF DISSENT

Baptists have a high sense of a theology of persons but a much less well-developed theology of place. That Christian worship and Christian fellowship can be nurtured without resort to permanent architectural support does not, however, mean that yesterday's heritage should be treated with disdain. Indeed, Christians who believe in the historical engagement of the Spirit of God with men and women of every age cannot but espouse a special reverence for buildings which have witnessed the encounter of grace over a period of up to three or more centuries. Nor can we ever forget that in Christian truth, the mysterious and the intangible is for ever taking a concrete and material form - in creation, incarnation and the story of the church.

Three books indicate something of the richness of our architectural inheritance. The most significant is the handsomely produced and magisterial *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses in Central England*, 276 pp, 1986 (H.M.S.O. £45), which is primarily the work of our own member, Christopher Stell, who has previously given us earnestness of the full work now revealed: the first authoritative inventory of historic chapels, that is of practically all chapels built before 1800, with an increasingly select list of chapels built from 1800 to 1914. One is immensely grateful for what has been provided, with only a pardonable Twist-ian desire for 'more'. More, first, in terms of the publication of Mr Stell's work on other counties: those of us whose counties appear in this first volume will surely be envied by those who live less 'centrally'. More, also, in terms of the post-1800 period where the architectural heritage is arguably more at risk. More, too, perhaps on burial grounds where one suspects the material may have been drastically cut.

But we should be grateful for what Mr Stell has given us: architectural descriptions with helpful historical notes on a vast number of chapels, a miscellany of photographs, historic and contemporary; delightful sketches from Mr Stell's own pen, together with an occasional more ancient engraving; excellent measured drawings of ground plans, elevations and structural works; together with perceptive overviews of comparative patterns of development county by county. Here is deployed the story of our architectural development: from the domestic vernacular of the earliest meeting houses (though from very early on some of the wealthiest chapels were far from puritanical with their elegant internal fittings: columns, pulpits, chandeliers and the like) through the great preaching houses of the evangelical revival, on to the Victorian concern with revival of architecture rather than the soul, be it Gothic, Classical or some freer and more eclectic form. From that early period, there is a good discussion of Keach's Chapel at Winslow - a type of small chapel still being built a hundred years later as Waddesdon Hill Strict Baptist makes clear. Grandness is illustrated by two Leicester neo-classical chapels: Belvoir Street, built in 1845 by the entrepreneurial Roman Catholic, J. A. Hansom, for James Mursell's growing congregation, and William Flint's Upper Charles Street, fifteen years earlier in date and also classical in its inspiration. Both created ample space for large congregations to gather together with one another and before the Word. But even as modest a building as Stratford upon Avon could

present a classical facade to the world outside. Good examples of Baptist use of the Gothic are R. S. Hope's French Gothic Buckingham Chapel, Bristol of 1842; Salem, Cheltenham two years later with its massive Gothic doors and decorated window; George Ingall's cruciform Christ Church, Umberslade, built for his wealthy patron, G. F. Muntz in 1877 and the Church of the Redeemer (1881), James Cubitt's grandest Baptist Church, against all ecclesiological rules, a powerful 'adaptation of the Gothic style for auditory worship'. The scaled down version to meet the more modest needs of a village or indeed a hamlet is Westmancote, the location of a Society visit five years ago: here as elsewhere what appears externally to be the chancel is discovered to be in fact the schoolroom.

Mr Stell has so much more to tell us - appropriately stories of 'conversion', as with a medieval timber-framed house at Tewkesbury or a barn at Rothley, or most remarkably the parish workhouse at Southwell. Contrariwise, chapels have become theatres (Nottingham), private houses (Rollright), supermarkets (Banbury), or places of worship for denominations as broadly spread as Roman Catholic (Rocester) and Christian Brethren (Hanslope). Dig deeper and you will find the delightful Salem Chapel at Speen (Bucks) with head and footstones in the burial ground to the sculptor, Eric Gill (and his wife), carved by himself, or Cruden's scripture-inscribed painted eighteenth-century chest at Iver Strict Baptist.

Graham Hague's *The Unitarian Heritage*, 156 pp, 1986 (P. B. Godfray, 62 Hastings Road, Sheffield S72 GU, f8 + f1-50 postage) immediately prompts the question why this denomination has not produced a similar volume. We could and should do so. In part, the story, arranged chronologically, that Mr Hague and his collaborators have to tell is a *Baptist* one in so far as many of the chapels recorded are pre-New-Connexion General Baptist chapels (especially those associated with Matthew Caffyn and William Vidler in Kent and Sussex together with a number in South Wales and the West Country). The actual history of the General Baptists is not, however, well told: to say that the General Baptists were *Arminian* by the mid-eighteenth century fails to recognise that they were *Arminian* from their origins and that many, but not all, were by that date *Arian*. Nor can the New Connexion accurately be called *Strict Baptist*. Indeed, the reader anxious to discover the relationship between the Old and New Connexions is best advised to consult Dr Sellers' article in this journal (Vol. XXIV No 1, 30-41, No.2, 74-88). But until we have produced as attractive and as intelligent an introduction to our own architectural heritage, it little behoves us to carp at others.

Hallelujah! Recording Chapels and Meeting Places, 61 pp 1985 (Council for British Archaeology, 112 Kennington Road, London SE11 6R, f2-95) gives two-thirds of its pages to an historical and architectural introduction to chapel architecture which here includes recusant as well as dissenting forms - so that when one comes to Pugin's St Giles', Cheadle, one is inclined to say 'some chapel!' Skilful and judicious, it seeks to discover something of each denomination's tradition through a study of select examples, the old King's Road, Reading, serving as the Baptist exemplar. This only serves to underline the importance of the following sections which are concerned

with the making of a record of what is vulnerable. There are helpful notes about the documentary sources to consult, the principles on which a survey ought to be carried out and how properly the findings should be recorded - a 'do-it-yourself' guide, well worthy of attention by our members who, like *Hallelujah*, will put the excellence of Christopher Stell's notes, sketches, photographs and measured drawings as the goal to which all should aim. The booklet concludes with a note on the present legal situation, which may well date this publication as we all await news of any amendment to the ecclesiastical exemption currently enjoyed by places of worship in current use. The point is well made that exemption was first granted to the Church of England on the understanding that the faculty system would be resuscitated to provide a form of self-discipline. The Free Churches have never had such a system and it is difficult to see how a congregationally-based denomination could operate anything remotely analogous - again indicating how the practicalities of bricks and mortar are intimately bound up with the theology of the Church or the churches. It is a pity that the bibliography does not list the principal dissenting historical societies.

* * * * *

SOCIETY NEWS

THE ENGLISH BAPTISTS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by Dr Raymond Brown

now available from the Treasurer

£4-95, including postage

This is the second volume of the new Baptist history. The first, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* by Dr B. R. White, is also available at £4-95.

* * * * *

ANNUAL MEETING 1987

The Annual Meeting of the Society this year will be held at Bradford University on Wednesday 8th April at 4.15 p.m. Please note the day and time are different from usual.

Dr Ian Sellers will give the Annual Lecture, entitled 'Other Times, Other Ministries', in which he will be considering the work of Fawcett and McLaren.