

Review: A Brief Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the South Croydon Baptist Church, AD 1869 - AD 1891 by Walter Schwind, transcribed by Michael Thomas, private publication 1994 (available from the Revd Dr Michael Thomas, 8 Culmington Road, South Croydon CR2 6DR, price £3-00 inclusive of postage)

During the course of researching my PhD thesis I must have read forty or fifty thousand pages of material, much of it interesting, stimulating, even challenging. Yet none of it affected me as did a somewhat ragged manuscript tucked away in the excellent and full archives of the Brighton Road Baptist Church in South Croydon. That manuscript was dictated in 1927 by a former London City Missionary, Walter Schwind, 'in odd and widely separated hours, snatched from precious home duties'. It tells the remarkable story of the founding and growth of the little Baptist fellowship in the South Croydon area: a story that was repeated many times over in those days of almost continuous revival from 1859 onwards. This is no academic history, rather it contains the heartfelt reflections of the man who was instrumental in helping forward a spontaneous work of God to the point where it became a distinct Baptist church.

The value of the document lies in the simplicity and beauty with which the story is told. Here, for example, is part of the opening paragraph: 'About the year 1869, at the foot of Purley Downs, William Pressey a humble minded shepherd lived in a cottage on Chandlers Farm. He was happy in his work, and happy in the fact that he had a good pious wife, like minded with himself, happy also in the growth of a little family springing up around him whose young and tender hearts he sought to win for Christ. There was one thing however, that was a hindrance to the fuller development of his happiness; his neighbours were few in numbers and scattered; and while provision had been made for the claims of thirsty throats, no provision had been made to meet the needs of thirsty souls. He longed sorely for the fellowship of Saints . . . What could he do? there was one thing, he could take it to the Lord in prayer, and this he did, long, earnestly, and continuously . . .'

How God answered that prayer you may read for yourselves - an old lady giving a cup of water to a thirsty girl, a railway ganger sitting in on a children's Sunday School class, a rich Anglican beer heiress (Rebecca Watney) paying for the support of a missionary and then building a Baptist church. Here is a simple record of the dynamics of church growth in the last century.

This manuscript has now been published as part of the centenary celebrations of the church. Thanks to the ubiquitous Apple Mac the original manuscript style has been preserved throughout. Michael Thomas has also resisted the temptation to add pagination and to modernise the punctuation. Seven carefully chosen photographs enhance the 'feel' of the manuscript. Here is a delightful half hour's read!

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