

Early Days at Eythorne.

There! See our roof, its gilt moulding and groining
Under those spider-webs lying!
So we o'ershroud stars and roses,
Cherub and trophy and garland.
Yet all the while a misgiving will linger,
Truth's golden o'er us although we refuse it.

BROWNING felt that the truth was often more beautiful than the web of traditions that men weave over it, hiding its real outlines. The actual story of Eythorne Baptists is most interesting; but it is needful to brush away first a few cobwebs that conceal it. This has been made possible by the courtesy of members of the church, notably Mr. John Harvey of Sandwich. From 1725 onwards there are two books which give the doings fully, one an account-book, the other a minute-book. But for the earlier period, of which the church has no contemporary records, recourse has been had to the municipal records of Sandwich, to the parish registers of Eythorne and Barfrestone, to local tombstones, to many ecclesiastical returns from various rectors, mostly at Lambeth, to certificates, licences, and other documents at the Record Office, and to similar evidence from the period, including the General Baptist Minutes of Assembly, published two years ago. And here special thanks are due to the present Rector of Eythorne.

Eythorne is a village in the Kentish Downs, six miles inland from Dover or Sandwich, ten from Canterbury. The population now is under 450, and in Stuart times could hardly be half as great. The adjoining parish of Barfrestone does not contain a hundred people.

First for a cobweb, quite complete and beautiful in itself, but having nothing to do with Eythorne. Joan Knell of Colchester got into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities in the sixteenth century; she crossed to Calais, then an English possession, and married a butcher called Baron; she got into further trouble here for her religious views, and crossed the Straits again to Kent. Here, for a third time, she drew down the authorities, and the account of her trial, and her Hofmannite opinions as to the relation our Lord bore to the Virgin Mary, are well known, as also the story of how the Protestant bishops of Edward VI. sent her to the stake. But her description by her husband's occupation,

as Joan Boucher, has often obscured her identity. She was of Colchester, and had no connection with Eythorne.

Next, as to the Dutch immigrations and the foreign Anabaptist element in the district. From the days of the Emperor Charles V., there were constant waves of refugees to Kent and East Anglia. These were largely composed of Anabaptists, and although the Lutherans and Calvinists were welcomed, the Anabaptists were not, as there was a general fear of their rebellion in order to set up a millennial kingdom. The Dutch congregation at Sandwich was an important corporation under Jacob Buser; the Walloons, with their Flemish minister, had St. Peter's church granted them in 1558. But all the aliens were kept to themselves, and not allowed to intermix with the burgesses; the accounts of 1573 show that two-thirds of the expense to entertain the queen were collected from them. So numerous did they become that Orders in Council directed future immigrants to be sent inland. Thus French weavers were settled at Canterbury in 1567, where the crypt of the Cathedral was given them for their looms, and where their worship was permitted, persisting even to the present day. In the same year some Dutch linen workers were taken to Maidstone. In 1606 a colony of French weavers came to Smarden, Cranbrook, and Hawkhurst. Now, in all these cases, the English deliberately kept the immigrants apart and subordinate; and often not till the third generation, with adoption of English speech and intermarriage, were the descendants admitted on an equality. The influence of their religion on the English must have been rare, at least for two generations. And whereas in many parishes such names as Bachelor, Beacham, Merial, Perrin, tell of French immigration; or Busher, Frome, Brand, Norden, Rutter, Walker, reveal Dutch; yet it is to be noted that Eythorne parish registers have none but plain, homely English names. Dutch Anabaptists there were at Sandwich in 1572, but the fact of their being expelled promptly shows the popular aversion, and there is no ground for supposing that any ever settled at Eythorne.

Next, as to the supposition of John Giles, Pastor there in 1800, that there was some reason to believe there was some kind of church estate here in 1624—a very modest guess, very different from more elaborated theories. Although we have vastly more material for research than he knew of, absolutely nothing supports his supposition. The foreign elements at Sandwich and at Canterbury seem to have exerted no influence at this little hamlet, and they themselves had been rigorously purged of any Anabaptist leaven. When Laud became archbishop, he tried to withdraw

the French privileges at his city, as obsolete. From the foreign side nothing can be traced in early days.

But there was now a native English spirit of inquiry, and research in the civil records shows that at Sandwich, Ash, Egerton, Sutton Valence, there were occasional irregular conventicles from 1618 onwards. There is, however, no contact with Eythorne; not a single name of any one accused is to be found in the parish records, which are quite full for a tiny community of fewer than a hundred adults. The first sign of any Baptists here is in 1655, as an apparent consequence of the great propaganda that began seven or eight years earlier.

The village was so insignificant that the county histories have nothing to say as to events there. The rector felt justified in accepting the deanery of Canterbury, and living there in 1634, for which Laud properly rebuked him. There was, however, a mansion—Eythorne Court—acquired by a family of long standing at West Studdall, and inhabited by a younger branch. In 1570 Thomas Harvey, of the Court, brought a child to be christened, and again in 1574 and 1575. Robert Harvey succeeded him in 1580, and within two years brought a daughter to be christened. Other entries of the same kind show a large family of Birches. In 1608 William Knott brought his son John to be christened: in 1619 a daughter Elizabeth; in 1622 a daughter Katherine; in 1626 a son William. By 1642 Henry Knott came to the front, and in thirteen years he brought five children to be christened at the parish church; by 1653 William junior was married, and bringing his own children for christening. Similar entries occur for other families quite continuously.

The Nominated Parliament in 1653 ordered births to be recorded by a new civil officer, the Parish Register, and gave no orders about christenings. It must not be supposed that the registration of these always ceased, though it was no longer compulsory. On 15 July, 1655, the rector here registered in the familiar fashion that he christened Henry, son of Henry Knott. But thereafter all christenings of Harveys, Philpots, Knotts, and Birches cease for about thirty years. The obvious inference is that at this time these families became Baptist.

The process can only be guessed. In 1653 a Baptist church at Canterbury, under Richard Beacham and Thomas Jarman, had sent an address to Cromwell; and a correspondence with Fentanton next year shows nine more male members. Henry Denne was sent to the city to aid them, and when we recollect the propagandist zeal of this family, we are not surprised that within seven years there were Baptists all along the coast from Sandwich to

Hythe, and that this little village, half-way between, had been leavened.

Positive evidence begins with 1662-3, when Archbishop Sancroft began to make systematic inquiry as to the state of his diocese. In the Tanner manuscripts in the Bodleian Library may be read a report on the district, including the item that James Robins and James Henry were Baptist leaders at Eythorne. It is to be regretted that local tradition knows nothing of these men, the real mainstays in the early days, in the opinion of the new rector. We may surmise that the squire occasionally welcomed his fellow-believers to worship at the Court, but knowledge from the inside is still lacking. In February, 1664, the State Papers show James Henry reported a second time.

Five years later, in view of a permanent Act to suppress conventicles, Sheldon renewed his inquiries, and the results are in the Tenison MS. 639 at Lambeth. The following extracts are interesting. In the city of Canterbury, John Knott was a principal supporter of a Presbyterian meeting, served by three nonconforming clergy; John was a local tradesman. There was a Baptist meeting in St. Mary's parish, Northgate, whose worshippers were not numerous, and were mean in quality; Alexander Fritton was the leader. Baptists abounded at Sandwich; but at Eythorne and Barfrestone no dissenters were reported. At Dover, Laurence Knott was one of the chief Baptists, and three gentlemen at Guston upheld the same cause. Preston, near Wingham, was another centre, where James Henry was the leader, and was therefore excommunicated; he is evidently the man previously working at Eythorne. The question is, how far can we trust the report that now there was no Baptist meeting in the village. It is probably too lenient; in a little place like that, the rector would not care to quarrel with the squire; and if he was non-resident, like his predecessor, he could profess with a good grace, to be ignorant of petty details.

Yet when Baptists were invited, in 1672, to come forward and profit by the king's Declaration of Indulgence, while many local licenses were sought and obtained, Eythorne was passive. In the district the following people declared themselves. At Boughton Monchelsea, four miles west of Canterbury, Thomas Hooker's home accommodated a Baptist congregation, led by Henry Snoath. In the city, Matthew Sanders looked after the little cause still meeting in the parish of St. Mary, Northgate—disguised by a careless clerk as "Norgame." At Wingham, Thomas Atwell registered his house for worship; at Deal, Joan Coleman did the same; and at Dover, Samuel Taverner, while Richard Hobbs

declared himself the preacher. But Sandwich and Eythorn did nothing.

One reason for this inaction comes out in 1676, when the archbishop again sent for returns. This time he asked for numbers, not names, desiring to know about all the people over sixteen years of age in every parish throughout his province, whether they came to the parish church, or were papists, or were Protestant dissenters. A few figures will be instructive. In the city, St. Mary, Northgate, had 1,050 Conformists and 800 Nonconformists, being far the most recalcitrant parish. Sandwich town had 1,336 Conformists and 315 Nonconformists, again a hotbed of dissent. Preston, by Wingham, showed 144 and 25, Wingham itself 300 and 20, Guston 60 and 21, Dover 1,950 and 301. The officials noted that the extraordinary numbers in Canterbury, Sandwich, and Dover were due chiefly to Walloons; and it is with some amusement that we see the signature to this statement—Thomas Boucher. Now, from Eythorne the numbers were 77 Conformists, 12 Dissenters. The report is so minute that there cannot be any grave error; and we learn first how microscopic was the whole community, and secondly, that there was, after all the flourish of 1669, one-eighth part of the population defiant. We may safely claim this faithful dozen as Baptist, for no other form of dissent was known here. And three years later the incumbent of Guston acknowledged that things were worse than he had shown; only three families came to church, the rest were all Baptists or Quakers.

Steady pressure was applied, but the earliest result at Eythorne was not till 1683, when Thomas and Sarah Knott brought their son Thomas to be christened, and next year another son John. This shows that constant persecution will avail, as it often has done.

It must be to this period that the legend belongs, telling how one John Knott, a blacksmith, was sought by the constables, and had to take refuge in a saw-pit, where he was nearly discovered by the prattle of an innocent child. The story rings true enough, though the details of genealogy are demonstrably false.

In 1701 there was published a penny pamphlet, "A Serious Address to the Anabaptists; being a Letter from a Minister to some of his Parishioners of that Perswasion." It was replied to at once publicly by David George and Thomas Ranger, to whom the minister had to reply again. These two names distinctly suggest Eythorne, and as a new rector, ffoster, had been inducted in 1698, it seems a case of a new broom sweeping clean. There are numerous references to Kent and Sussex, with Dover, Folke-

stone, Hithe, and Ashford mentioned particularly, but of course there is nothing to throw light on the inner proceedings of the Baptist church. Foster was followed in 1709 by Henry Cason as rector.

The church belonged to the older stratum of Baptists, which had held central meetings since 1651. The Kentish churches were meeting regularly in 1657, as may be seen in the Tunbridge Wells minute-book, now at the British Museum, Additional Manuscript, 36,709. Hitherto Eythorne does not seem to have sent delegates to either gathering, but when in 1704 there was a very large gathering of the General Baptists in London, at a momentary reconciliation after a long doctrinal quarrel, Eythorne church sent two representatives, Knott as Elder, and John Birch as representative. It is unfortunate that we cannot be sure of the Elder's first name; he would seem to have been an old man, for when the Kentish Association met in 1708, only Daniel Beacham attended on behalf of Eythorne, and at the London assemblies of the next two years, John Birch and David Rutter also came. There was some wavering whether Birch were Elder or only representative; but the name Knott is altogether absent. Another man attending a little later is William Tucker. These names Beacham and Rutter are the first signs of any but pure English. They do not seem to have lived in the parish, and Beacham was a Canterbury family.

The rector, Henry Cason, wrote to Archbishop Tenison about this time—his letter, Gibson MS., xiii. 931, folio 119, at Lambeth, has no date of year—that he was gaining ground on the Anabaptists, and had recently won and “baptised” one of their number. Because of a general danger this way, two Messengers were appointed to watch over all the churches in East Kent, Samuel Ongley and Searles Jarman, of Canterbury. But disaster was about to overtake the Eythorne church.

In 1717, at the Association meeting, James Knott appeared as the Elder. Next year, on 11 October, his son Thomas was taken to the parish church of Barfrestone and christened. For eight years longer he managed to retain his position, attending the Assembly in 1721 along with John Birch. But in 1725 we learn of a crisis. A meeting was called at Wingham, when not only did twenty-eight male members attend, but three local Elders, Edward Morris of Hythe, John Hobbs of Dover, Stephen Lacy of Deal; and even more distant and renowned dignitaries, Searles Jarman, the Messenger, Thomas Bengé of Sevenoaks, Robert Mercer of Warbleton, Messenger Wood of Lewes, a missionary returned from Virginia, and Messenger Drinkwater of

Chichester. At this meeting, James Knott was rejected both as pastor and as minister, and as member, for "immorality," not specified.

This is the first entry in a book procured this year for the Eythorne congregation. It is quite possible that there were earlier books, and that James Knott kept them; at any rate, such books are no longer known. And curiously enough, the existence of this book is hardly known at Eythorne now; for the same year the church divided into three, Eythorne, Wingham, and Thanet, with a fourth added afterwards at Stelling; and by degrees the book was limited to the doings of the Thanet section, dealing more and more fully with Ramsgate, till the dissolution of that church in 1884. Another new book about the same time registers several births in the congregation, and this remains in the custody of the Eythorne section. So from this time onwards there are ample materials for telling the story from within.

Thomas Harvey, at the Court, was very old, and the scandal seems to have alienated John Harvey, who now began sending his children to be christened. James Knott professed repentance, and after the Messenger had been consulted, he was restored in 1732, at the same meeting that divided the church. As John Birch attached himself to Thanet, Knott had special charge of Eythorne. Yet within five weeks another child of his was christened at Barfrestone! Two months later, Thomas Knott, son of John and Susanna, quitted the community, and was christened as an adult at the parish church. Four days later, James, the adult son of James the Elder, copied his example, and on the same day James the Elder, with his wife, Sarah, took his infant son Henry to be christened. This defection was a terrible blow to the Baptist church, and the proceedings were so painful that several leaves were afterwards cut out from the minutes. We find that the principal members of the Birch and Harvey families conformed within the next few years, and the sister Ramsgate church bewailed the destitution at Eythorne.

There was, however, a John Knott who appeared for the first time in 1730. Two years later he was not important enough to be one of the eight auditors of Hatton's accounts; and even in 1737, when a subscription was being raised, he could afford only half-a-crown. The expenses, certainly, were not serious, consisting largely of a rent of fifteen shillings yearly to Brother Birch, for the "mitenhous." By 1745 the church had raised three brethren old enough to be put on trial for the ministry: a Knott, a Birch, and a Harvey; when the test came, in the presence of Elder Chilton from Ramsgate, only John Knott was approved;

and it gives an idea of the size of the church that on such an important occasion only six men signed, and three more made their marks, including John Knott. This was apparently the father, for a later entry of 1754 distinguishes John Knott senior of Barfrestone, and John Knott junior, the minister. Tradition tells that the father was a blacksmith, and there is nothing to forbid.



EYTHORNE.—THE OLD COTTAGE AND THE FIRST MEETING-HOUSE.

Block lent by the Church, through R. F. Watford, secretary.

Chilton had brought about a revival, and with a local preacher on the spot, the good work grew. The entries of 1754 show a subscription for a new meeting-house of their own, adjoining Birch's cottage, distinct from the outstation at Sandwich. Squire Thomas Harvey, at the Court, led off with twenty shillings, the minister put down four, as did some others; John Knott senior could afford only three. Joshua Birch leased a scrap of land, 24 by 15, in trust, and on 30 April, in the 29th year of George II., the new house was registered at Canterbury Quarter Sessions by John Knott and Stephen Philpott, the Messenger. Such an area hardly gave room for many graves, and for years after this time, many interments took place at the parish church.

John Knott junior brought the church into Association life again, attending in 1755 at Tunbridge Wells. Next year he was chosen Elder, and on 18 Septembr, 1758, was ordained by Messengers. By the end of next year his father was dead, and

he dropped the "junior" which had always figured in his signature. With 1759 he went to the Assembly, where Eythorne had so long been forgotten, and attended often for the next eleven years, while at home yet a third John Knott was growing to enter the succession.

A wave of evangelical religion had been rising for a generation, and though many of the Kentish Baptist churches were very languid, and very uncertain in their doctrinal views, a young man from the Midlands, newly settled at the old church of Bessels Green, precipitated a revival and a secession. In 1770, Stanger of Bessels Green, with Knott of Eythorne, and Fenn of Deal, quitted the ancient Assembly, and soon formed part of a Southern Association in the New Connexion of General Baptists. This Association soon collapsed, and Eythorne was left for a while the only live church in East Kent, isolated from all its former associates. It rose to the occasion, enlarged its meeting-house, called forth young John Knott to the ministry in 1771, with a Birch and a Harvey as deacons to witness, and entered on a career of enterprise. New deacons were soon chosen, services were started again at Sandwich, young John Knott was spared to become Pastor at Chatham, and three more young men were called out to the ministry. The death of Elder John Knott in 1780 did not check the flow. A collection was taken for his son to build a meeting-house at Chatham, and by 1785, there were thirty-two subscribers to a fund which enabled them to call Thomas Ranger as Pastor, and to build another meeting-house at a cost of £128 os. 9d. This date was crucial as marking the emergence from being isolated, into fellowship with the Particular Baptists. The old General Baptists were deserted in 1770, the Southern Association of the New Connexion had ceased to meet, and the church judged it wise to unite with the only evangelical Baptists within reach, neglecting the old Calvinistic differences. So Thomas Purdy of Rye, and Jonathan Purchis of Margate, came to ordain Ranger, not as "Elder," but as "Pastor." The term Pastor was not in common use among the old General Baptists, who called their chief local officer an Elder. Pastor is a term used rather among the Particular Baptists. A Minister, among both sections, was merely a local preacher.

The new ministry was not quite successful, and Ranger went to Bedford, receiving a dismissal thither in 1794, after a year's consideration. But the important step was not retraced, and he had added many converts. John Giles, a member of the Particular Baptist church at Carter Lane, Southwark, came to preach in 1792, and was ordained Pastor a year later. One place after

another was opened as a preaching station, collections were taken up to help other churches, and at headquarters it became needful to build yet again. The subscription list of 1802 shows 156 members, so splendidly had the cause prospered. And when, two years later, a new building was opened on a spacious new site, to which had been transferred the few tombstones, no less a personage than the great Dr. Rippon came to open the premises.

The little barque of history has been steered out past rocks and shoals to the open sea; all afterwards is plain sailing. Those who read the voluminous diary of good old Giles, or the printed booklet, will find a fine record of a sturdy and progressive country church. The old General Baptist churches at Deal, Dover, and Canterbury are dead or negligible; but Eythorne has planted new Baptist churches at these places. It has evangelised the district, and even now it is facing the new problems that arise with the imminent coming of a great coal-mining population to the rural district.

Of late years, a story long current in print has encouraged the carving of a tablet to the memory of the Four John Knotts, supposed to be all Pastors from 1600 to 1780, grandfather, father, son, and grandson. It is therefore necessary to say that this pedigree has not been proved, and is highly dubious; while it is certain that not more than two John Knotts were Elders, and it is possible that only one was. The first John who became prominent was apparently the one who was christened in the parish church with the consent of his father Thomas, in 1684. Before his time was not John, but James Knott, who conformed in 1717 and 1725. Before him was an Elder Knott, whose Christian name is unknown; and before him, though there had been another John, christened in 1603, yet he himself had his son christened. Now the first Baptist John, born 1684, never became Elder at all, and is not even called a minister. He did have a son John, who, in 1757 was ordained Elder, as already described. And he in turn had a third John, who did become a minister at Eythorne, but was never Elder here, becoming the Pastor at Chatham. And the succession, such as it is, ends with him.

On the other hand, the records teem with Birches and Harveys. These families had Baptist members from the first, and have a long, continuous record of loyal service, though perhaps only one of their number ever came forth to the ministry. In God's acre, around the newest of the meeting-houses, itself quaint with age, as well as in the older public burial ground, memorials of them abound.

W. T. WHITLEY.