

Kentish Missionaries to Virginia, 1714.

MINUTES of two Kentish quarterly meetings in 1657 were printed in our last volume at page 247, from the old church book of Tunbridge Wells. Doubtless others can be found in the books of the churches still existing, and there is ample material for any antiquary in the country to study early Baptist life in a county which has seen more variety than most, the one county where Baptists of the seventeenth century outnumbered all other dissenters.

There is a volume containing minutes of the Association from 1708 till 1729, with later entries 1741 diminishing in interest till 1761, when the book was placed in the keeping of Thomas Harrison of Sevenoaks. A century later it was handed over from the Cranbrook church to be kept with the archives of the General Baptist Assembly, where it remains. By the courtesy of the Rev. W. Harvey Smith, it has been studied, and a few notes from it will illustrate one remarkable enterprise of this association, the most advanced in doctrine that has ever been known among Baptists. It may be contrasted with the Bucks Association of General Baptists, whose minutes for the same period are copied complete for the Society.

The book was procured by James Richardson of Southwark, who occupies the unique position of being ordained Messenger without ever having been an Elder; it is as if an earnest and useful merchant to-day, who gives his time and money to aid country

churches, were appointed by them life-president of their association. When he died, it was disused for twelve years, and the later entries are very barren; we can hardly tell whether this was due to inaction, or to a new style of keeping minutes.

In 1708 and the next two years, there were representatives from Frittenden, Warbleton, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone, Cranbrook, Eythorn, Biddenden, Sevenoaks, Ditchling, Marden, Canterbury, Hythe and Horsham. They were busy discussing the recent rupture of the Assembly, and they came to the conclusion that they would not support the main body which was defining its doctrines as to the Person of Christ, but would adhere to the old standard of 1660, and decline to explain it further. As Matthew Caffyn had long exercised great influence in Sussex and Kent, this attitude was very intelligible; the ultimate outcome is well known, in that most of these churches are either dead or Unitarian. That fact has been dwelt upon so fully that it has obscured another set of facts of rather exceptional importance.

The Association was keenly alive to the duty of preaching, not only to churches already in being, but generally. It was very careful to maintain Messengers for this purpose, and in 1711 nominated five at once. There was some hesitation, and next year it reiterated that it would get as many as it could, and as conveniently placed for service. Six new nominations followed, and it was agreed that while their work lay chiefly among the churches choosing them, they were more largely at liberty if either called or sent. Then we find as a practical commentary in 1714 that two are despatched to Virginia. One died on the voyage, so three more were sent next year. This missionary enthusiasm was even higher in 1717, when more churches were represented—Deal, Dover, Rolvenden, Chichester, and Turners Hill. A sum of £65

was raised for the support of the staff, apparently reduced again to three. One returned in bad health next year, whereupon a substitute was found, and £200 showed the zeal in this work. So long as James Richardson lived, the interest in this work is evident.

The results of that Virginian mission have been lasting. Churches were formed which were strong enough to throw off branches further south; and when George Whitefield began his work on the Atlantic sea-board, there were these bodies ready to welcome any converts. In return, they stiffened their doctrine and became Calvinistic, so that they fell into line with the Baptist churches round Philadelphia, and laid the foundations for the great influence of Baptists in these states. And thus the great Southern Baptist Convention owes a great deal to the humble Kentish Association of 1708, which sent plentifully of money and preachers to take the gospel to the colonies. The names of Robert Norden from Warbleton, Thomas White from Sevenoaks, William Wood from Lewes and Ditchling, Thomas Bengue from Tunbridge Wells, and Thomas Harrison, may take their place on our missionary roll. They did not indeed go primarily to the aborigines, but contemplated chiefly their English kin; but they went to no settled charge over any church, they were Messengers from the home churches to minister to the scattered planters and perhaps to the "indentured servants" or white slaves. Their work was that which a generation later made the name of Wesley famous, that of Home Missionaries; only the colonies were their parish.