

Transactions

of the

Baptist Historical Society.

Dissent in Worcestershire during the Seventeenth Century.

THE Established Church was re-modelled on Presbyterian lines in 1646. Between 1 September 1642 and 30 January 1648/9 the Journals of Parliament show 952 cases in which one or other house nominated ministers to parishes, over-riding the rights of patrons, and often displacing royalist clergy. But with February 1648/9 the Presbyterians ceased to control Parliament, and dissent could show itself, unchecked by the army. Thenceforward Separate Churches could easily come into existence in every part of the country, whereas before that date their existence was illegal, and most precarious.

Dissent in Worcestershire was first represented by Baptists. In Baxter's autobiography, he says that he first saw them at Gloucester, where they were opposed by Winnell the local minister. This man published his sermon, with the Baptist objections, and his reply, by 5 September 1642. A few months later Baxter took refuge at Coventry, where he was drawn into debate first with a Baptist tailor, then with Benjamin Cox, the refugee rector of Sampford Peverel in Devonshire, "an old Anabaptist minister and no contemptible scholar."

The town of Kidderminster was dissatisfied with

2 Dissent in Worcestershire during the Seventeenth Century

its vicar, and he offered £60 for a lecturer to be chosen by fourteen trustees; Richard Baxter held this post from 1646 till 1660, when it was abolished.

Soon after Baxter came to the county, John Tombes returned to his birthplace at Bewdley, and we must look at his earlier experiences. He had been at Oxford, where his career had been brilliant. As an academic lecturer he had already seen how slender were the grounds for infant baptism by 1627. After preaching at Worcester, he became vicar of Leominster, where he tried to reform the parish. As a consequence he was expelled by the royalist army in 1641. Therefore on 4 January 1642/3 the Commons sent him as Lecturer to All Saints, Bristol. Here a Baptist finally convinced him that infant baptism could not be supported by any text he knew; therefore when he took refuge in London during September, he began to discuss the question within ministerial circles. A meeting was held about the matter in January 1643/4, and resulted in his sending a Latin essay on the matter to the Assembly of Divines. Meantime he was in charge of the parish at Fenchurch which had been left by the royalist rector, Ralph Cook. As he would of course evade the baptizing of infants, the parishioners naturally were dissatisfied, and he lost this position. Fortunately the two legal societies at the Temple needed a preacher, and as they had no infants to christen, there was no difficulty about holding this post, which was offered him, and which he occupied about four years.

Meantime his Latin essay met with no direct reply, but was handed about privately; he found that he was being preached at in many London churches, while yet no one would discuss with him. Stephen Marshall preached expressly on the point, and the sermon was published. When he replied in print in

December 1645, a storm broke out, and he was at length dismissed from the Temple.

Now his native town, Bewdley, was within the parish of Ribbesford, where John Boraston seems to have been incumbent. But there was a chapel in Bewdley, where christenings were not needed, for these were the prerogative of the parish church. The people of Bewdley invited Tombes to take charge of the chapel, and this suited him well. Further, as the rector of Ross held two other posts and was a royalist, while the vicar of Ross also held two other posts and was a royalist, the Presbyterians had displaced both in September 1646. A resident vicar had been appointed, but the rent of the rectory was given to Tombes on condition he preached there sometimes.

In Bewdley he now openly preached Baptist principles at the parochial chapel, and having won several adherents, he organized them into a distinct Baptist church. This is apparently the first case of the kind, and is not exactly to be matched elsewhere, though afterwards at Hexham a lay lecturer at the Abbey did while thus officiating organize a Baptist church. It is not surprising that some comment was made, and that Tombes saw the advisability of a change. On 9 August 1649 he was appointed Master of Katherine's Hospital at Ledbury, whereupon he surrendered the rents of Ross. At the end of the year Richard Baxter challenged him to an open debate in the Bewdley chapel, and it occupied eight hours on 1 January, when each man consumed a quart of sack for which the town paid.

This advertised the Baptist cause, and Tombes was busy training young men for propaganda. Thomas Bolstone entered the army, and attained the rank of captain. Richard Adams had a Baptist career at Mount Sorrel in Leicestershire, then in London at the

famous church of Devonshire Square. The third, John Eckels was competent to take charge of the church at Bewdley when Tombes left.

This occurred when the country was settled, and when therefore he could peaceably resume his lawful post as vicar at Leominster, whence he had been forcibly ejected. It may be said, as we take leave of him, that at Ross, Ledbury, Hereford, Abergavenny, and Leominster, he publicly debated on Baptist principles, with the result of causes being established in each place. So great was his importance that when Cromwell appointed Tryers to test the qualifications of all men presented to livings, he was placed not on a county committee, but on the Central Board. It should be noted that while he held numerous posts, they were not simultaneous, and Richard Baxter writing in ignorance of the dates of his resignations, did him some injustice as to pluralities.

Baxter thought it wise to supply the gap left by the utter failure to introduce the Presbyterian system in the county, so he drew together a few score of the ministers by April 1653 by an Agreement. This was signed by Boraston of Ribbesford and Bewdley, Oastland of Bewdley who had succeeded Tombes at the chapelry, Baldwin of Chaddesley Corbet, Woolley of Salwarpe, Serjeant of Kidderminster, Francis of Dodderhill, Fincher of Worcester, Browne of White Ladies Aston, Bryan of Old Swinford, Spilsbury of Bromsgrove, Juice of Worcester, amongst others.

But Baxter made no attempt to unite the Baptist church at Bewdley, which was now in charge of Eckels. His business as clothier possibly centred at Bromsgrove, or else led him far afield, and he had imbibed the spirit of propaganda from Tombes. Soon he enlisted members at Bromsgrove, who were on the Bewdley roll by 1651.

That year the whole Regular Army came into the county, and the "crowning mercy" of a victory at Worcester ended the civil wars. Now that army abounded in Baptists, and it is not surprising that we presently hear of Baptists at Worcester.

Baptists had associated in London as early as 1644, when seven churches put out a joint confession. The precedent had been followed in Berkshire and in the west and in the midlands. It was now followed all around the shire of Worcester, by two groups.

The church at Hexham sent a letter to Tombes on 26 July 1653, which elicited a joint reply from the churches of Weston-under-Penyard, Lintile or Leint-hall, Hereford, and Wormbridge, in the county of Hereford; Forest of Dean and Netherton in Gloucestershire; Abergavenny in Monmouthshire; Bewdley in Worcestershire. This shows a group of eight associated churches all due to the labours of Tombes, who signed as pastor of Leint-hall, eight miles north-west of Leominster. The church at Bewdley had two elders, Thomas Bolstone, the erstwhile captain, and Philip Mun, while Robert Goodlad was a third who signed. The letter approves the idea, started in June by the Baptists in Ireland, that Associations should be organized everywhere.

The second group lay more to the east, and after comparing their doctrines at Warwick, organized on 26 June 1655 at Moreton-in-the-marsh, other five churches being Bourton-on-the-water, Alcester, Tewkesbury, Hooknorton and Derby. On 15 September 1657 this was joined by the church at Leominster and Hereford; and in Easter-week 1658 the churches at Gloucester and at Bewdley were proposed for reception. Another meeting on 5 and 6 October was at Gloucester.

In that year the Congregational churches also drew together in an Assembly at the Savoy in London. The leader for this part of the country was Anthony Palmer. In 1653 or 1654, when Oliver desired to find how far the Gathered Churches approved his policy, he was addressed not only by the Tombes group, but by a Gloucester group at Stow, Bourton, Oddington and Winchcomb, of which Palmer, then incumbent at Bourton was the most eminent man. Although there is no trace of a Congregational County Union then, yet the Savoy conference, with its revision of the Westminster Confession, did produce a denominational feeling.

In January 1658/9, the Baptist church at Worcester began a minute-book, in which Thomas Fecknam recorded the names of seventeen men and twenty-one women. Also he noted that on 12 and 13 April 1659 the midland churches met again at Alcester, when Worcester joined, and proposed two queries for discussion. He does not record when the church was formed, but if he be the Thomas Fecknam whose elegy was published at the end of 1695, as seems certain by the coincidence of six years in prison, then he began preaching before 1645. This would account for the size of the church at Worcester in 1659.

When the Presbyterians regained power in 1659, the lot of the Gathered Churches became hard, and Fecknam ceased keeping minutes. In 1660 however, at the Restoration, every royalist rector and vicar who had been displaced in the last twenty years, now reappeared and re-entered on his living. Thus Canon Tomkins, rector of Broadway, might at once send off a Mr. Wall, vicar there. William Woodford, rector of Upton, displaced Benjamin Baxter. Lee, vicar of Chaddesley Corbet, might resume at the expense of Baldwin senior. Richard Beeston had to

give up the rectory of Bredon to Mr. Sutton. Thomas Warmestry at once returned to his living.

A few Presbyterian clergy thus were ejected at once; and in every case where they had obtained possession, except on the nomination of the legal patron, that patron might now exercise his rights, and they would have to go. This seems to have been the case with Richard Moor at Alvchurch.

Then came the enforcing of the oaths of allegiance and of supremacy on all clergy. Tombes wrote to show that these oaths could be taken without hurt of conscience, and thereby he forfeited the little sympathy he had ever had from Baptists generally. Many Presbyterians could swear allegiance, but not that the king was supreme governor of the Church of England. Any refusal to take either entailed the loss of the living.

Meanwhile the Gathered Churches found at once that Elizabeth's Conventicle Act of 1593 was again enforced. There is hardly a minute-book anywhere which records what was done for the next few years. Our information has to be gleaned from Quarter Sessions records and casual allusions.

Thus the Baptist church at Worcester had a preacher at Claines, Robert Humphreys. For holding services in his house, he had everything of value distrained under warrant from Colonel Sandys of Ombersley. William Pardoe, who had worked in the city and at Tenbury, was excommunicated and lay in jail 1665 to 1671. In a spasm of mercy during 1663, fourteen Baptists were released at Worcester. Thomas Fecknam was in jail in 1667, and we know it was the county jail, whence we infer that he was arrested outside the city; we shall soon see where.

Yet although a new Conventicle Act was passed in 1664, the Worcester church dared reorganize on

10 February 1666/7, with John Edwards and Elisha Hathaway as leading members. The numbers after all the persecution were still eleven men and ten women.

Courage for this step would be gained by the results of the fourth Act of Uniformity in 1662, when every clergyman who would not promise to conform absolutely in worship, doctrine and discipline to the restored Church of England, had to retire in August. This led to many more secessions of Presbyterians. Oastland retired from Bewdley, Spilsbury from Bromsgrove, Westmacot from Crophorne, Serjeant from Stone, Bryan from Old Swinford, Browne from White Ladies Aston, Read from Witley, Baker, Moor, Juice and Fincher from Worcester. At Moseley, Joseph Cooper was so loved that he stayed despite the Act, without conforming; being arrested in December, he was sent to Worcester jail for six months, and the very day he was released, he preached again.

It was not usual thus to defy the law so far as to continue using the public buildings, but many of these ministers did defy the Conventicle Act, and continue preaching, in private houses. Thus at Worcester, Thomas Badland gathered a congregation in 1663, and many a little band became accustomed to meet regularly, though the Presbyterians could not on principle organize separate churches.

There are signs of the activity of William Pardoe, a General Baptist, in many parts of the county: as a result he was thrown into prison in 1664 and was not freed for seven years. The temporary Conventicle Act indeed ran out in 1668, but it was not hard to find other laws under which a man could be kept in jail. Still, the archbishop of Canterbury was dissatisfied, and sent a circular round all his bishops, to collect from all incumbents of livings particulars as to conventicles held in their parishes. These were

summarised by the bishops, and their summaries were all copied for Sheldon. The result is that we have a long list of returns as to men who were bold enough in 1669 either to entertain their neighbours for worship, or to lead them in it. To understand the comparative insignificance of the ejected ministers, we must remember that they were required to swear they would make no attempt to reverse recent laws as to Church and State, or else were required to remove five miles from any place where they had ministered and any corporate town. So that if they did continue preaching, it could only be non-political preaching, or preaching to strangers. It is not surprising that many of them gave up the ministry. They did however cluster at King's Norton, Bromsgrove, Worcester, Alcester, Stratford, Pershore and its neighbourhood, and Redmarley.

It is noteworthy that while they hung back, the pastors of the Gathered Churches were bolder, and are heard of in many places. At Worcester both the Baptist and the Congregational churches met openly. At Lapworth and Alcester the Baptists met, while at the latter place the Presbyterian attracted the chief people in the town. Most interesting is the state of affairs along Bow Brook, at Feckenham, Bradley, Inkberrow, Kington, Dormston, Grafton Flyford. Thomas Feckenham of Worcester, and John Eckels of Bromsgrove were reported again and again, as working with Henry Hanson in this group of villages. The Baptist leaven has never quite ceased to work here, though Inkberrow seems the last remnant of that activity.

On the basis of these reports, Sheldon secured a permanent Conventicle Act, and persecution was renewed for a year or two. But towards the end of 1671 the king became convinced that another

insurrection might result, and he devised a plan of suspending the law, licensing certain places for worship and men as teachers. The experiment lasted barely a year, but it enables us to see the men who were bold enough to declare themselves, yet subservient enough to take as a favour what many claimed as a right.

Far to the north, at Dudley, David Jones took out a license to conduct Congregational worship, while at Oldbury, Old Swinford, Hagley, Kidderminster and Bewdley the Presbyterians qualified. The Baptists did not apply for a license, but met without one.

At King's Norton, Wythall and Wetheroak Hill, Presbyterian worship was sanctioned. From Bromsgrove John Spilsbury put in an early application for Congregational worship, but the licences seem to have miscarried, though they were taken away, and he had to secure duplicates in September and November.

Up the Teme valley, across the Severn, Presbyterians obtained licences for houses at Eastham and Suckley, while Baptists came between at Kyre. But no one seems to have resided there capable of leading; the ejected ministers had gone to Stanbrook and Redmarley, and we cannot tell who really preached.

The state of affairs at Worcester has been obscured by two or three blunders in the licence office. Badland, Fincher and Woolice (late of Salwarp) applied together on 13 June for licences; and it shows one effect of Baxter's drawing men together that two styled themselves Presbyterian, one Congregational. It also shows how slowly the lines disappeared, to see that they preached at three different places; not for fifteen years, under the harrow of persecution, did they learn to come together into one church.

The Baptist church was slower to ask and only did so in December. Then William Randall took out a licence for his own house at Ombersley, and Elizeas Hathaway for his in the city—mis-spelt "Glocester." And further, by some blunder whose origin we cannot easily trace, they were both styled Congregational in the Entry Book; their own applications do not survive.

This leads us to scrutinize with some care the knot of people styled Congregational at Tewkesbury, Cleeve, Winchcome and Bourton-on-the-water, who all applied together in May through Owen Davies, and obtained their licences in June. Hy. Collett and Joshua Head are known as Baptists, and it would seem that the whole group were of the Tombes-Jessey type, wavering as to communion, though the preachers themselves were Baptist.

Along the Avon there were no Presbyterians, but Thomas Worden of Broadway led in April by seeking Congregational licences to preach there and at Chipping Campden; in July other places were licensed at Evesham and Birlingham, and in November others at Ashdon and Cropthorne. The other preachers were John Westmacote and John Ward, with Thomas Ingles at Honeybourne. These all appear to be Pedobaptist.

When we compare this list of men with the churches of to-day, the sad truth becomes evident that few of them show any continuity. A paper read at Birmingham to the Congregational Union in 1916 by Mr. Wimbury claims only three evangelical pedobaptist churches surviving from the seventeenth century. The work of Baxter was continued at Kidderminster by Thomas Baldwin from Chaddesley Corbet. The pedobaptist dissenters of Worcester settled down into one church under More and Badland, and the worship in Angel Street still shows traces of the

12 Dissent in Worcestershire during the Seventeenth Century

Presbyterian stateliness. At Stourbridge, Gervase O'Brien, late rector of Old Swinford, held together the Presbyterians who in 1688 built a meeting-house in Coventry Street. Outside these three towns, the other causes faded away, that at Bromsgrove lasting longest, till past the middle of the eighteenth century.

It was the Baptists who began earlier, and endured better. Bewdley dates from 1649, Worcester from 1651, Pershore 1658, Bromsgrove 1666, Upton 1693; then in the next century came Evesham, Dudley, Westmancote, Shipston-on-Stour and Cradley, while work at Broadway begun from Evesham in 1788, resulted in a Congregational church early next century. The Countess of Huntingdon fostered another church at Kidderminster in 1774, and presently new churches on the Stafford border arose at Langley Green and Dudley.