

Acknowledgments

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T.W.W.

Foreword

This is the story of a General Baptist Church. In their Confession of 1660 the General Baptists maintained (in opposition to the Particular Baptists), "that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth, that they might be saved. For which end Christ hath commanded that the Gospel . . . should be preached to every creature."

Dr. John Clifford, the greatest of modern General Baptists, had many links with Tring and its Ministers. There was a General Baptist Fund for Assisting Ministers and Students founded in 1726, and on the Distribution List, 1860, are the names:—"Sexton, William . . . Tring. Student, for Books, Third Time — Clifford, John . . . London."

Thirty years later this student, who so wisely used his books, opened the new building at Tring, on Good Friday.

May this excellent book—a labour of love by the Church Secretary, Mr. Trevor Wright—help to answer James Martineau's prayer:—"Awaken us, O Lord, to feel how great a thing it is to live at the end of so many ages, heirs to the thoughts of the wise, the labours of the good, the prayers of the devout."

E. J. TONGUE.

March, 1950.
Stapleton, Bristol.

Our Baptist Witness for 200 years

Introduction

To delve into the early history of the Church at High Street is no easy matter. The earliest recorded minutes are dated 1843. Earlier than this the Church hides its age and its history from interested eyes. Fortunately there are other avenues of approach and something at least can be known of the early years of the life of the Church.

The Church was originally formed about 1750 by James Young, Joseph Sutton, Robert Harding, Thomas Carter and Thomas Coles, and the house of James Young was registered as a place of worship. It was not until 1751 that the first actual chapel was built at Frogmore End, now known by its more familiar title of Frogmore Street.¹

1750. It was the time of the great Revival under the Wesleys and Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon, but it was a long time before the full fruits were gathered in. England was slowly settling down to business and real progress, progress in the social and political worlds, and not least in the sphere of the religious life and thought of the nation.

These were the days which saw the birth of the General Baptist Church in Tring—days of growth and of expansion, days of the development of the Nonconformist conscience, which was to play such a vital part in the later growth of the life of the nation. The inflexible intolerance out of which our Baptist witness was born, was giving way in many places to a more reasonable outlook, as our spiritual forefathers claimed freedom of conscience for all. Toleration was in the air. This, without a doubt, was a contributing factor to the breakaway of a few from the rigid Calvinism of the parent Church at New Mill.

¹ Urwick's "Memorials of Nonconformity in Herts," pp. 464-5.

The Church at Frogmore End

The forming of the Church at Frogmore End made it the sixth Baptist Church in the County. Churches had been formed at Berkhamsted, St. Albans, Hitchin, New Mill, and Marlowes, and the Church at Frogmore End in 1750. This Church was one of the first in the County to break away from the Particular Baptists and form a General Baptist Church. This move, however, must not be confused with laxness of Church government, as the available records show a church alive to its spiritual responsibilities and quick to act in matters of discipline where such action was necessary. An entry in a contemporary diary tells us that "the General Baptist Chapel, Tring, left New Mill when liberty of conscience was allowed."

The chapel first erected in Frogmore Street was a small place holding about 200 persons. The money to defray the expense of building was collected by Pastor Young of Chesham, and his assistant, Mr. Cock, who visited the Baptist Churches in the neighbourhood to collect what they could towards the cost of erection. At the time, it was the only centre for Nonconformist worship in Tring, excepting the Quaker meeting place at the top end of Akeman Street. No mention is made of it in the annals of the denomination until 1798. An interesting sidelight, however, is a minute found in the minute book of New Mill where we read under the date November 26th, 1786: "It was enquired whether we should give liberty to the General Baptists when they bury their dead, to preach in our pulpit. Seven of the members voted for it and twenty-six against."

A short description of the chapel has been discovered which describes it as "one of the queerest, stuffiest, ugliest little chapels you can conceive of. It has a graveyard in front which the road (Frogmore Street) turns to avoid." Ventilation was so bad that it was not unusual for the tallow candles to go out, through lack of air, during a crowded service with doors and windows shut on a winter's night.

The First Hundred Years

In spite of such hardships and discomforts as those mentioned above the Church flourished until 1798, when Thomas Coughtry came to preach from Aylesbury. Preaching acceptably at first, he suddenly changed his views and began preaching the doctrines of Hyper-Calvinism which so displeased most of his hearers that they left the chapel. These folk then met in a barn in Church Lane, and in less than a year Coughtry practically emptied the chapel. His day was soon over, however, and we can imagine the sigh of relief when he went away.

At this time Berkhamsted, Chesham, Amersham, and Tring formed a small association of their own and in 1799 a Mr. Seabrook Young was ordained as co-pastor with Mr. Edward Sexton, uncle of William Sexton. Edward Sexton had for some years discharged the pastoral office "with respectability and success." His powers must have been taxed to the utmost, looking after such widely scattered churches, and it would be a great grief to him to see the work at Tring, once so prosperous, go down-hill so quickly. This was probably his reason for taking Mr. Young as co-pastor, so that more time might be given to revive the work at Tring. Things were not yet to go smoothly though, for in 1800 Mr. Young died and Mr. Sexton was left to carry on the work.

The old worshippers were back now in their old chapel, and the work began to revive under the care of Mr. Sexton, assisted by Mr. Joseph Hobbs. A doughty soul Mr. Hobbs must have been. A bookseller in Berkhamsted during the week, on Sunday he would preach at Berkhamsted in the morning, Tring in the afternoon, and Wendover in the evening. Then home to Berkhamsted, and all on his own legs! He preached 4,769 sermons from 1802 to 1836, and 639 of these were at Tring.

From 1800 to 1808 the cause prospered and the Church was reported as "comfortable" in the reports rendered to the Conference. In 1809, however, things at Tring appeared to be in a low state and it was deemed advisable to have a resident minister. A Mr. Barker was invited, and after accepting the invitation, died whilst preparing to set out for Tring. A Mr. Norris then came from Chesham and the work again revived. He, unfortunately, followed in the steps of Thomas Coughtry and changed his views with the result that again the congregation fell away. After his departure the faithful souls remaining were exhorted to keep the place open for prayer and Bible-reading. One can imagine how prayer would be made for revival of the work and the moving of the Spirit in the hearts of the townsfolk. One can also imagine how great their joy when their prayers were answered in 1811 by additions through baptism, and the coming among them of John Ewen, a schoolmaster, who served as assistant minister with great acceptance.

There followed a period of quiet growth with Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring showing 51 baptisms in six years. In 1819 the reports says "we still exist, favoured with the blessings of the gospel and enjoying unity of spirit."

Mr. Ewen removed from Tring in 1820, and his removal was discussed at the Conference which was held at Tring that year. The report says "The state of the churches was upon the whole encourag-

ing, and religion appears to be on the advance. Advice was given respecting the supply of Tring after Mr. Ewen's removal." But either the advice was not taken or was ineffective, for Tring continued in a low state until 1823 when for no apparent reason the folk suddenly started attending worship and continued to do so until 1828. Then for the third time the church was unhappily upset by a young man who, to quote the report, "departed from our views of divine truth." The ultimate outcome of this was worse than it had been before, for the church was closed and the congregation split up amongst the other churches of the town.

In 1829 fresh developments occurred. A Methodist from Aylesbury named Copcutt took over the chapel and commenced preaching there. He soon filled the place, and a small gallery was built. The General Baptists finding their own place of worship well attended again, gave Copcutt notice and took over their own place once more. For ten years they gradually increased until 1839, when enlargement of the building, long overdue, took place. A year previously in 1838 a most important report was given to the London Conference which says ". . . that we receive with satisfaction and pleasure the report of our Chesham friends which informs us of their exertions in trying to revive the cause at Tring, and shall be happy to receive further reports of their zeal and success in this cause." A further report says "Our brother William Sexton has supplied our friends at Tring since Christmas with pleasing prospects of success." How successful he was we may gauge by the fact that for 36 years he ministered amongst the folk at Tring and was greatly loved and respected by all.

The Baptist Repository gives an account of the celebration of the enlargement of the chapel, as follows:—

"On Tuesday, October 15th, 1839, the General Baptist Chapel at Tring was re-opened for Divine Worship after considerable enlargement. The weather was very unfavourable; it rained nearly all day; but, notwithstanding, the congregations were exceedingly good. In the morning and evening two highly interesting and powerful sermons were preached by the Rev. J. Stevenson, A.M., of London. In the afternoon a deeply affectionate and persuasive sermon was preached by the Rev. J. Wallis of London. On the following Lord's Day the re-opening services were continued, when the Rev. E. Stevenson of Chesham preached in the morning and afternoon, and the Rev. W. Payne of Chesham in the evening. In the forenoon the ordinance of Believer's Baptism was administered by Bro. Sexton, for the first time in this place (as prior to its enlargement it had no baptistry) to six persons, three males and three females. In the afternoon, the Lord's Supper was administered by Bro. Stevenson to this branch of

the Church. who also gave the right hand of fellowship to the newly baptized. The Chapel throughout the day was densely crowded, and the whole of the services, both on the Tuesday and on the Sabbath, were characterized by deep seriousness, and we trust were felt to be very profitable. May the Lord send continued prosperity, and raise again His holy cause in this place which has so long mourned in the dust. The collection amounted to about £32. E.S."

A further reference to Tring later in the year states that £8 2s. was received from Chesham, which was given to help Brother Sexton at Tring.

The next year finds Brother Sexton labouring with considerable acceptance and success, well filling the Chapel, with several additions to the Church. Considering the locality, the smallness of the town, and the number of dissenting places of worship, one cannot look for spectacular happenings, but for many years—in fact for the whole of William Sexton's ministry to the General Baptist Church at Tring, that appears to be the keynote of his ministry—considerable acceptance and success, with a not large, but very steady stream of additions to the Church.

Let us try to visualise this Church in Frogmore Street as the Rev. Charles Pearce describes it. "Standing partly in the road, the least noise outside drowned the voice inside. The place is so hot, water runs down the walls, and many have to leave fainting. The ceiling is so low, one can easily touch it with the hand when standing in the gallery. Candles were the early means of artificial lighting and Mr. Clark used the snuffers. Should he ever make a mistake by taking too much off, out went the light, and out went the laugh of the delighted youngsters. It was necessary to go round once or twice in every service. A bass viol and a trombone were used to start the singing, buckets for filling the baptistry. China plates, glass tumbler and black bottle were used at the Communion Table. The table was formed by placing a board on the top of the front pews."

The use of musical instruments began in 1845, for on October 1st, 1845, Brethren Clark and Burr were appointed to visit Brother S . . . to enquire the reason of his not filling up his place as usual. Be it noted, they were most particular in this respect, and any absence or apparent cooling off was at once noticed and dealt with, with all love, patience and charity, but none the less firmly. A week later the brethren appointed reported back to the Church that Brother S . . . absented himself in consequence of instrumental music being used in the service, and wished to resign his office as deacon. His resignation was accepted

Just as we in our day have installed a new organ in time for the Bi-Centenary, so in those days the Rev. William Sexton and his band of faithful workers and worshippers wished to have something special done for the Centenary. They installed gas lighting to do away with the candles, and had the chapel whitewashed and generally cleaned up. A grand tea meeting was held to defray the cost of the installation and of the whitewashing.

So we come to the end of the first hundred years. We find a Church prospering under the ministry of a faithful pastor, evangelical in its outlook and teaching. Forty new members were added to the Church between 1845 and 1850, mostly by baptism, some by transfer. It was ever watchful and careful for its good name, admonishing many for careless walking or talking, separating from those whom they termed incorrigible! The Church was working hard for the coming of the Kingdom and praying often about it too. The finances even in those days were in the hands of the Clark family—Mr. Ernest Clark's grandfather presenting his reports regularly and always satisfactorily.

William Sexton continues his Ministry

The cause at Tring continued to prosper under the faithful ministry of William Sexton. Keeping a small chemist's shop in Akeman Street he was known, loved and respected by all. His sermons frequently caused great heart-searchings amongst his hearers, and many were the conversions brought about by his able and sincere preaching.

In 1852 the Church felt able to expand its work and influence somewhat and became responsible for the superintendency of two village preaching stations at Wigginton and Aldbury. The former still continues as Wigginton Baptist Chapel. The latter has ceased to exist, leaving no known trace. This was a separate chapel from the Strict Baptist Chapel at Aldbury. The Church continued to develop in every way and in 1855 the building was insured for £300, quite a reasonable sum in those days. In that year, ten were baptised and added to the Church, this being quite an average number. At almost every Church meeting names were brought forward for consideration, so that we see continual and steady, though not spectacular, growth. Five years later there were one hundred and ten Sunday School scholars and ten teachers. At this time William Sexton began to show signs of increasing age, and the Church went quietly on until his death in 1874.

The next entry in the minute book is in the writing of Charles Pearce, and commences "on the morning of Saturday, 21st February,

1874, our beloved Pastor was suddenly summoned by his Master, whose he was, and whom he served, to receive the prize prepared for the faithful." The funeral was on Thursday, 26th February, and, Mr. Pearce continues, "nature seemed to sympathise for it was a dark, gloomy and wet day. The town mourned. Blinds drawn close down and shutters up at every shop. Notwithstanding the incessant rain an immense crowd collected around his grave. Many ministers and Church clergymen were present to pay a last tribute of respect and affection and business men left their shops and joined the long procession. His one object was the salvation of souls. Wishing to receive into fellowship all who truly believed in and loved his Lord and Master, he often expressed his wish to make the cause a Union Chapel, so that all, trusting alone in the merits of Christ for salvation might be admitted as members either with or without immersion and thus increased in numbers and strength become more useful."

A Union Church

Remembering the profound respect in which the late Pastor had been held, it seems a natural sequence of events that at the next Church Meeting held on 25th March, 1874, it was proposed "that this Church shall, from this date, be a Union Church; that henceforth all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ wishing to join the Church shall be admitted as members, either by immersion or without, according to their feeling of duty and the dictates of their own conscience, but in no case by sprinkling."

The Pastorate of the Rev. Charles Pearce

Less than two months later Mr. Pearce was asked to supply the pulpit for three months, his remuneration to be seven shillings and sixpence a week. He was called to the permanent pastorate in 1876; a pastorate which was to see many great changes in the life of the Church, a new Church building, and a world war.

In 1884 he launched the first campaign for a new building, citing as very great drawbacks the troubles with the old building, previously mentioned. In 1886 the foundation stones of the lecture hall were laid and the memorial stones in the walls of the present church in 1889. One memorial stone was laid by Dr. Clifford, who always took a great interest in the Church. In 1895 profound thanks to Almighty God were given for granting to the Church the best building in the town, and a membership grown from being the least, to the extent of bringing it little behind the largest.

only laid down his task at the call of his Heavenly Father in 1920. He was mourned deeply and sincerely, and the Church which 46 years before had invited him to the pastorate now found itself without a minister for the second time in 82 years, surely almost a record!

To the Present Day

In 1921 the Rev. Arthur Sidey was called to the pastorate. One of his pleasing duties was to propose the presentation of an illuminated address to Mr. Haizelden for his help during the war and immediately afterwards. His own ministry commenced and continued in an atmosphere of congenial relationship and unity. In December, 1929, he resigned from the pastorate, having accepted a call to Kingsgate Baptist Church, London. For nearly ten years he had served the Church faithfully and well, and the work had prospered, many being added to the Church during his ministry.

With the removal of the Rev. A. Sidey to London, the Church was left to the care of its officers. There is ample evidence to show how well they laboured, and how consecrated were their efforts to forward the work in every department of Church life during the pastorless period which followed. In 1932 a manse fund was commenced, and the present manse purchased, conveniently situated close to the Church.

In 1935 the Rev. Keith Preston accepted the Church's invitation to the pastorate and commenced his short ministry at High Street, which terminated in 1937.

During 1938 the Church was greatly exercised over the question of the pastorate and much prayer was offered for guidance in this matter. The cloud hanging over the country at this time, and the war breaking out in 1939, undoubtedly influenced the Church, and no call was made until 1941, when the Rev. Ronald Webb, B.A., accepted the invitation of the Church to the pastorate.

Coming from Bristol College to his first Church at Tring, he became generally known, respected and loved, during his nearly six years' ministry. The Rev. Ronald Webb will ever be remembered as a pastor with sufficient faith and vision to commence a 'a new organ fund.' The old organ being nearly worn out, he was the prime mover in the commencement of the fund which eventually purchased the Compton Electric Organ now installed in the Church. Because of this fact he was invited to be Chairman at the opening ceremony in March, 1950. He led the Church through the war years and on into the first uneasy years of peace. In 1946 Mr. Webb accepted a call to South Oxford, and left with the genuine regret of the Church at High Street,

In 1947 the Rev. S. C. Hearn accepted a unanimous call to the pastorate. His genial homeliness has endeared him to all who know him and the Church thrives under his leadership. The women's work, young people's and Sunday School work make steady progress. Each is alive to its responsibilities and opportunities. The scholars in the school are fewer than they were 100 years ago, but following the modern trend, so are the families of the members of the Church and congregation. The Church has always been keenly interested in its Sunday School work and in keeping alive and fresh the interest of its young people.

In 1949 a last great effort was made to raise the amount needed for the new organ and during the year the organ fund was increased by £357. This meant sustained and sacrificial giving on the part of many devoted souls. The new organ was opened on Wednesday, 15th March, 1950, with an organ recital by Dr. Eric H. Thiman, Hon.R.A.M., F.R.C.O.

This spirit of devotion and of giving without counting the cost and working without seeking for rest is typical of the Church at High Street. The Rev. Charles Pearce said that he endeavoured to make the Church 'a happily family rather than an organisation' and, as we have already noted, the family spirit prevails to-day with the consciousness of our Heavenly Father's guiding care and blessing.

We have looked back over the last two hundred years and seen days of sunshine and days of shadow, and there will be such days in the future. The great desire of the Church is that it may be privileged to witness to the great truths of the Gospel in the days to come as it has done in the past.