

Early Leicester Baptists.

LEICESTER is an interesting town from the point of view of Baptist history inasmuch as it has seen connexions with the three main types. From the beginning it had both General and Particular, the former coming to light in 1651 with Conyers Congreve and Thomas Rogers, the latter about 1654 with Richard Coleman, while the group which afterwards joined the New Connexion began to be formed about 1741.

GENERAL BAPTISTS.

By 1651 the General Baptists must have been very strong in the Midlands, for in that year no fewer than thirty congregations sent two delegates each, who together framed a confession of faith, the first on record as a joint General Baptist manifesto, though the Particular Baptists of London had led the way in 1644. Within twelve miles of Leicester itself there were other Churches at Wymeswold, Walton-on-the-Wolds, Mount Sorrel, Whitwick, Earl Shilton, Theddingworth; and a letter to Cromwell about this time from a group more to the west, signed by Congreve and Rogers as representing Leicester, shows that there was another church within reach at Bitteswell. In 1654 we hear of George Fox being strongly opposed by Baptists at Swannington, near Whitwick, and two years later of William Inge and Thomas Christian being sent to a conference at Stamford, where they engaged to stir up Earl Shilton and Mount Sorrel towards the support of two messengers who should evangelise in the Midlands.

The next light on the General Baptists is from the incumbent of St. Margaret's, Leicester, who reports to the Bishop of Lincoln in 1669 that about forty poor Anabaptists met in his parish, the leaders being William Inge, William Wells, jnr., William Mugg, William Christian, and (Richard) Farmer from Kilby. From similar reports in neighbouring parishes we find that Farmer was doing a great work in Kilby, Arnesby, and Blaby, and Richard Iliffe at Fleckney. Out of these village groups was gradually concentrated the Church known to-day as Arnesby, whose early history has already been sketched in our *Transactions* I, 181, along with another group that finally centred at Sutton-in-the-Elms.

Other hamlets with Baptists at this time were Sibley,

Rothley, Barkby, Ratby, Thornton, Leire, Lutterworth, and Wigston; and some of the leaders here, notably Laurence Farmer and William Christian, were important enough to be thrown into jail, whence they were liberated by the great "Quaker Pardon," 1672.

A Leicestershire Association was presently formed out of this abundant material, and we may reasonably think that, as with Lincolnshire, this habitually met at the county town, though no minute-book is ever alluded to.

The next notice is of Henry Green attending the Assembly at London in 1692; then thirteen years later six Anabaptists are reported from St. Martin's parish; while by 1709 we find them provided with a meeting-house where Thomas Davye, scrivener, and Zacharias Staughton were ministers. The latter attended Assembly in 1714, and five years later a new meeting-house was put in trust.

Davye himself was a very prominent man evangelizing at Tur Langton, Coventry and Netherton, so that before 1732 he was made Messenger or General Superintendent for the Association. He and the Church had adhered to the Orthodox Assembly in the split of 1709, and are found at the re-union in 1732. Three years later they made a clear affirmation of their belief in the Trinity, and declined to ban congregational singing, leaving it to each church to settle. On Davye's death about 1750 a new church book was opened—the earliest that survives. It shows nineteen men and twenty-four women, with four ministers, lay preachers we now style them. Feeling the need of a pastor they applied to the Assembly, were settled by 1756, then something went wrong, and after two more applications in 1758 and 1761, the Church settled down to bleed to death, though the cause in the county continued to flourish.

THE PARTICULAR BAPTISTS.

The earliest known leader of the Particular Baptists was Richard Coleman, the apothecary of St. Martin's parish. He had been on the Common Council from 1642 before he became a Baptist in 1654, and even after the Restoration he was chosen Alderman, but by 1667 he was committed to prison after repeated presentation for not conforming and excommunication. Apparently he was soon free, though how he secured his freedom is unknown. His connexion with John Bunyan is our next important fact.

Bunyan had been freed by the "Quaker Pardon" of 1672 to which we have already referred. He had apparently been in Leicester in a draft under Major Ellis from the garrison of Newport Pagnel, defending the town in May 1645 against Prince Rupert at the New Work (commemorated at

our Newarke Street Church). Evidently he must have formed some strong ties with the town, either then or during his imprisonment, for though he was now pastor of the Bedford Church, and might have been expected to celebrate his release there, yet the very first Sunday he was out of jail he appeared at Leicester, called on the Mayor, and exhibited his license to preach, and actually did preach at the house of one Nicholas Kestian who had been ejected from Gumley, a village with several Baptists, and who now held a license for his house in Leicester. We have no clue as to the reason which led an unimportant mechanic, who had languished for twelve years in jail, to rush fifty miles away from his church to a town he seems never to have visited again, but we may agree with Professor Lyon Turner (whose interpretation of the facts we dissent from in other respects), that his visit stirred up Richard Coleman to obtain a license for his own house, as a Baptist, in December 1672. At this time Bunyan was quite obscure, whereas Coleman was rich and influential. While Bunyan had been unable to preach, Coleman had been evangelizing as far afield as Watford, which he had supplied since 1655, and which he continued to serve till his death about the end of the century. He had laboured also amongst his own kindred, for Henry Coleman, who in 1672 had been licensed for Tur Langton, afterwards became pastor at Kilby, drawing it over to the Calvinists, and himself attending the Assembly in 1689.

However, in those days Leicester was not able to maintain two Baptist Churches, a General and a Particular, and by 1706 the Particular Baptists were on the roll of a Church whose meeting-house was at Arnesby with Benjamin Winckles as pastor. The situation was awkward, and nine years later John Evans recorded the exceptional fact that the Leicester Church was General and Particular mixed, with Davye, Henry Trail, and Zachary Staughton as ministers. It is not surprising that other Calvinists preferred to go on the roll of Sutton-in-the-Elms, which under Benjamin Moore had joined the Midland Association in 1707. Moore died in 1739 in his eightieth year, and after a long vacancy, the Leicester members of his Church plucked up courage and applied in 1750 through John Brine to the Londoners for help to build. Within six years they had a meeting-house in the town, though the Harvey Lane Church dates its separate organisation by dismissal from Sutton—in 1760.

The later history, how Christopher Hall came from Cumberland, how his brother Robert was accepted on his recommendation by the Church at Arnesby, and how the latter's son, Robert, the great preacher, came to Harvey Lane, after it had been hallowed by the ministry of William Carey—all

this is too well known to need mention. The great names are kept in memory by the Carey Hall and Robert Hall memorial churches.

THE NEW CONNEXION.

Space allows only the briefest reference to the New Connexion Baptists in the county, though the story of the rise and progress of the movement which came to centre in Barton-in-the-Beans is one of the romances of Baptist history. It began as an outcome of the Methodist revival and severe persecution, the later independent reading of the Bible leading the church to adopt the Baptist position. From the villages it gradually spread to the towns, and one of the pastors at Loughborough came over occasionally to preach at Leicester. Here he heard of the old General Baptist Church, the merest handful of people, served five or six times a year by Richard Green of Earl Shilton, who drew the rents of the property. He roused their consciences, brought Dan Taylor to evangelize, and by 1786 the town church had seventy-five members, with John Deacon as pastor. It was now a constituent of the New Connexion, and worshipped in a new building in Friar Lane. Before the century closed, some members had formed another church at Archdeacon Lane, one had gone to Baltimore in Maryland and founded a church there, while the pastor had undertaken the responsibility of compiling a hymn book for the Association. It is an example of how a decrepit church was rejuvenated by evangelistic fervour.

Meanwhile the church in the county had caused the formation of the New Connexion, of which it has always been the centre of gravity, insomuch that the Academy was long in Leicester. It continued its progressive work, establishing branches as far apart as Melbourne, Hinckley, and Longford and Wolvey. Its work on behalf of the Orissa Mission is well known, and the names of Goadby and Barrass—to mention only two—are a guarantee that its devotion and service will not easily be forgotten.

Samuel Moyer was a London Baptist, who held important posts in the customs from 1643, was on the committee of sequestration from 1650, was a councillor of state from 1653, with lodgings in Whitehall. Under Charles II. he was lodged in the Tower, then at Tynemouth, was released 10 May, 1666. The Angus Library has just acquired the only known copy of *Prison Meditation*, published 1666 by S.M., being sermons written in prison and sent to his relations and friends. It will rank in the Bibliography as 21-666. The title may have been suggested by Bunyan's *Prison Meditations* of 1664, but these were verse.