

Sutton-in-the-Elms and Arnesby.

THE district between Leicester and Coventry was an early Baptist stronghold. The journal of George Fox records that in 1647 there was a great convention near Broughton.

Four years later there was another, when representatives assembled from thirty Midland churches, including Easonhall and Marston, four or five miles west of Rugby, Ravensthorp in Northants, Waltham, Earl Shilton, Whitwicke, Bitteswell, Mount Sorrel, Wimeswold, Normington, Theddingworth and Leicester. Except for this last, the county town, the churches were all in hamlets, some of which can only be found to-day by a good topographer, as postal guides and maps mostly ignore them.

Nearly all these churches were General Baptist at first, but none of them appear to-day to belong to the ancient General Assembly. Some before the seventeenth century ran out were adopting Calvinist opinions; others during the eighteenth century felt the lack of trained ministers, and were bewildered by the lax views on the Trinity; a few died out, others were rescued by the Calvinists, others were touched by the rise of the New Connexion and cast in their lot with this kindred body. And so by three distinct routes many of these ancient causes are found to-day in the Associations and the Union which link up the great mass of Baptists.

A letter of 1765 from Mr. Morley to Isaac Woodman, then pastor at Sutton-in-the-Elms, seven miles north-west of Lutterworth, sketches the early story thus:—There was a scattered people in these parts. Their being first formed into a church state I take to be near the year 1650; my grandfather Mr. Thomas Townsend being chosen pastor, and Mr. Thomas Morris of Lutterworth deacon. The major part of the church was esteemed General in principle. Their meetings were kept at several places alternately; at Sutton, Willoughby, Bitteswell, Leir, Trowlesworth. In Mr. Townsend's old age, Mr. Benjamin Moore was chosen pastor, Mr. John Halford of Lutterworth deacon. After the

meeting house was erected, the meetings were kept once a fortnight at Sutton, and at the other places by course, for some time.

With this may be compared another summary written about the same time by John Stanger, which may be thus condensed:— His great-grandfather lived at Harringworth in Northamptonshire, a carpenter, a farmer, a General Baptist preacher; under the Conventicle Act he suffered before 1688. All the General Baptists in the shire then formed one church, though resident at Moulton, Burton Latimer, Buckby, Kilsby; there often was preaching at Brawnstone, Ravensthorp, Spratton and Scaldwell, besides these places. His grandfather William Stanger was also a farmer and a General Baptist preacher, becoming first pastor of North Moulton, then Messenger of the Connexion, with a life commission to visit and aid all the churches in the district. About 1730 a reunion took place of the Midland churches with those in the south-east, but William Stanger soon doubted the wisdom of this; and convened his county churches in an Association at Buckby Mill, sending requests for a clear statement where the Assembly stood on the Trinitarian question. Failing to obtain satisfaction, he induced these churches to sever their connection with the Assembly. This William Stanger had married a daughter of John Staughton of Blisworth, another sufferer under the Conventicle Act, and ancestor of another line of Baptists distinguished in the Coventry and Leicester district. Their son Thomas Stanger, born in 1706, succeeded to the farm in 1740, was called to the ministry by 1748, and was soon concerned in erecting a meeting-house at Moulton. In 1759 he took another farm at Holcott and was soon chosen pastor; the Stangers and Staughtons were active in promoting a church at Long Buckby this year. When Thomas Stanger died in 1768, the widow kept the people together at Moulton till her death about 1781, and then the place was closed. Meanwhile Matthew Stanger shifted the centre of gravity of another group from Harringworth to Morcott, where a second William Stanger upheld the cause till his death in 1790. A third William Stanger was Elder at Slapton from about 1748 till 1767. William Stanger junior of Fleet went as far as Wisbech to find a helpmeet in the person of Rebecca Yorke. What the General Baptists owed to these two families in keeping them alive and sound, has hardly been recognised.

John Stanger, son of Thomas, was bred as a stocking-weaver, influenced by Richard Green of Earl Shilton, and joined the Leicester church in 1759. He was called out as a preacher about 1765, and was sent by the Association meeting at Long Buckby as delegate to the General Assembly at London next year. This

soon led to his being called to a co-pastorate at Bessel's Green in Kent, fraught with great consequences to the Baptist cause there and in the Assembly. He and his adherents became linked on the one hand with the New Connexion, and on the other with the Particular Baptists, so that in 1787 he revisited his father's old meeting house to join with such Calvinists as Ryland, Sutcliff and Fuller in ordaining William Carey as pastor at Moulton; a step which opened a new chapter for the church, the denomination, and the world.

Now the Stangers represent the group of General Baptists who took the great swing over to Calvinism at the end of the eighteenth century. Earl Shilton and Friar Lane in Leicester represent the group which about the same time threw in their lot with the Barton preachers and joined the New Connexion, linking up with the others in 1891. But there was a much earlier movement of those who were not content with the General Baptist doctrines, and this is well represented by two little churches, Sutton-in-the-Elms and Arnesby, each about seven miles from Lutterworth and from one another. Each of these ancient causes possesses a good file of records which yield all manner of gleanings.

Sutton was at first only one of many hamlets furnishing members to the scattered church; both Elder Townsend and Deacon Morris signed the General Baptist Confession of 1651. Townsend lived at least till 1707 when he was about eighty years old; early in that year he received four members from the Arnesby church. But since about 1699, Benjamin Moore had been co-pastor, and it is noted that he took the church into the Particular Baptist Midland Association. This change occurred in 1707, when the Association met at Worcester on June 3 and 4; and it is somewhat singular that the church at Alcester was then troubled on the doctrine of Original Sin, which was fiercely debated between the Generals and the Particulars. When the history of the Midland Association was sketched four years ago, it was regretted that the annual letters were only issued in manuscript till 1759, and that though churches were counselled to file them in their vestries or meeting houses, none appeared to have been preserved. The faithful little church at Sutton, however, seems to have a fairly complete set for fifteen years: a list shows 1708 Pershore; 1709 Tewksbury; 1710 Alcester, when the letter was signed by Thomas Holder of Leominster, John Greening and James Smith of Stow, Humphrey Potter and William Poart of Broomsgrove, John Barnes, Joseph Willis of Worcester, John Jefferis of Bridgenorth, Dan Willmot of Hooknorton, John Alcinton and John

Higgins of Alcester, and Benjamin Moore of Sutton; 1711 Stow; 1712 Leominster; 1713 Bromsgrove; 1714 Bridgenorth; 1715 Worcester; 1716 Tewkesbury—this letter being lost; 1717 Warwick; 1718 Pershore—this letter also lost; 1719 Bewdley; 1720 Broomsgrove—a third letter lost; 1721 Worroster; 1722 Warwick; 1725 Worcester is also extant here, and shows that the 1726 meeting was to be at Leominster.

The appearance of Moore's name alone in 1710 suggests that the aged Thomas Townsend had passed to his rest; and this is confirmed by the appearance of a church covenant drawn up in 1709 and signed by the members, 62 in all. Another reorganization seems to have occurred in 1723 when the covenant was renewed. After 1727 a torpor overtook the secretary who had done so well, and as Mr. Moore was now aged 68, the records become scanty, and it may be suspected that church life was low. He lingered on till 1739, and after the brief pastorate of Robert Gilbert, there was no minister in charge from 1742 till 1753, when Isaac Woodman was ordained. He seems to have belonged to a Somerset family, and had come to this county in 1749, remaining till his death in 1777. He was succeeded by William Butler of Bedworth, a member of Arnesby, 1778-86; then came Thomas Edmonds of Birmingham, who went on to Upton. This is a sign of a new era, a semi-professional ministry, as contrasted with a member called out by his fellow members, but still earning his livelihood in their midst. The next pastorate shows even more decisively how things were trending, for a student from Bristol College was invited, and with Benjamin Evans the century ended.

The Sutton church became Calvinistic not later than 1707, but its neighbour at Arnesby took the same step a few years earlier. The first local man of prominence was Richard Farmer, a freeholder of Kilby, who in 1672 licensed his house for preaching. It is evident that there was much debate as to the points dividing the General Baptists and the Particulars. Farmer was very wide in his sympathies, for he took out a second license to preach to Congregationalists, and he joined with Richard Adams, himself wavering on the General-Particular question, and two Presbyterian ministers, in maintaining worship elsewhere. Men of clearer convictions emerged in the persons of Henry Coleman and Benjamin Winckles, who both attended the Particular Baptist Assembly in 1689, the only delegates from the county. About five years later the jarring elements separated: Coleman and a minority withdrew to Mowsley, and from this section ultimately sprang the church at Foxton. Farmer died soon after, and then

28 Articles of Faith which had been previously drafted, were adopted and signed, with the express note that this was done because they believed some among them to be not sound in the doctrines of grace. Besides explicit pronouncements on Calvinism, the chief points are disciplinary and stipulate for Marriage within the community, Public singing in worship, Mutual watchfulness, Independence of other churches in the matter of ordination.

Benjamin Winckles was now firm in the saddle; he strengthened his position by marrying a rich widow in Cambridgeshire, and though he made his home there, yet was chosen pastor here and visited this district. While the church book records numerous marriages, they begin not with his own, but with that of Thomas Palmer from Syston in 1697; Winckles appears in connection with another next year, not as celebrating it, but as one of four witnesses to it. Apparently no minister was regarded as performing the ceremony, but the mutual public acknowledgment was the essential ceremony.

The inconvenience of Winckles' absence led to the choice of brethren Wright, Sharp, and Ratlin as Elders in the west, while Winckles superintended extension in the fens near Ramsey. The situation was, however, not stable, and permanence was aimed at when he bought a close at Arnesby and built himself a house. A meeting house adjoining was erected in 1702, and henceforth there was a local centre; church meetings were held at Coventry and other places, but in 1710 the Coventry friends were dismissed to form a separate church. A list of members drawn up in 1706 shows a wide-spread constituency, living at Arnsbe, Kilbe, Wigson, Blabe, Rothwell, Whetstone, Cosbe, Litletharp, Defford, Oeltharp, Leicester, Knighton, Syston, Thrupington, Summerbe, Twyford, Frisbe, Hoton, Great Glen, Newton, Smeeton, Foxon, Mowsley, Ketteraine, Kelmidge, Northampton, Wellinborrow, Lutterworth, Bitchwell, Willey, Pelton, Coventry, litle Walton, Cheese Ashbe and Monks Kerbe; 104 in all besides 20 in the Ramsey district.

When Winckles was over seventy, his hands were upheld by the appointment of Thomas Wright, Jonathan Dorrard and Thomas Wormlayton as Ruling Elders, William Hacket and Joseph Horton as Deacons. He lived eight years longer, then devised the land and building to eight weavers and knitters in trust for the church. One of these was William Hacket, who obtained possession of the church book and made no further entry till 1750 when Daniel Hill from Walgrave, who had been pastor since 1734, gave notice to resign. Hacket then joined with Horton and Sanderson in requesting himself to come and live on the premises, he obtained his transfer from Foxton, reinstated

Horton as deacon, and advertised for a minister. Failing to get one, he qualified himself at Quarter Sessions, and in exact compliance with Winckles' 28 Articles issued long legal notices to elect him pastor. After four months, he triumphantly notified in the book that all these proceedings were absolutely unchallenged.

This naturally sets the reader suspecting that there was another movement parallel to his; and a second book beginning in 1753 shows that another section of the church had invited a Durham man, one Robert Hall, who won over Joseph Horton and another deacon, with 26 members, and added a third deacon from Wigston Two Steeples. A touch of romance is in this book, when we read how Richard Snow, miller, of Arnsbe, and Elizabeth Peck of Queenborough were baptized, fell in love and were speedily married. Presently the Hacket party surrendered, and Hall got possession by 1760, borrowing to rebuild the premises, and presently obtaining the old book. As they were strong they were merciful, and did not state their case in it, except in one or two notes to Hacket's entries. It is most fortunate for history that Hacket did not make away with the records; the restored church, however, soon disused the old book and took to the new one.

In 1770 a request went to the Particular Baptist Fund for the minister to be put in the £5 class: a note by the pastor's son adds that the stipend was but £32. 10s, and the Fund would not continue to help; already there were seven children, and ultimately there were fourteen. Ministers usually are good financiers. Just about this time the pew system was varied, and a right to sittings was made to depend on attendance and subscription.

In 1780 this son, named after his father Robert Hall, was himself called out to the ministry, being a little over sixteen years of age. His career is too well known to need further allusion, except to admire the village church and village pastor that could produce such a Christian. Ten years later two other ministers were sent out, Nathan Sharman to Cheney in Bucks, and Pearce to Birmingham. Hall ended his career in 1791, and in two years was followed by Thomas Blundell, junior, from Kettering, who left for Luton in 1804. He was one of the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792.