

Early Days on the Cotswolds.

CIRENCESTER lies on a watershed, separating the Thames from the Frome; the Romans therefore occupied it with a fort, whence radiated the Fosse Way, Ermine Street, and Icknield Street. Thus it can be approached from every side with equal ease, or perhaps with equal difficulty; and can affiliate in many directions, or be left out in the cold by all. The Baptist church there has grouped itself at various times with others in Gloucester and Hereford, with others in the south-west, with others in Oxford and Berks; but on the whole has been somewhat isolated from all but Maizey Hampton. A sketch of its early years can be drawn from its own ancient book, consulted by the courtesy of Mr. Legg, round which are added other facts from contemporary sources.

The first allusion to Baptists in the neighbourhood is by Wynell, vicar of Cranham in 1642. He told how Walter Coles of Painswick joined the congregation at Whaddon where Wells was pastor, brought down Thomas Lamb a chandler and Clement Wri[gh]ter a factor of Blackwell Hall; Lamb wore a grey suit, and wished to preach in the church at Cranham! The visit resulted in winning Hodson at Gloucester, and in others being baptized in the Severn. Three years later we learn from Whitelocke that Richard Barrow was governor of Berkley Castle; and he was a good propagandist. In 1646 John Knowls, a lifeguard, was busy in the neighbourhood, to the great annoyance of Giles Workman of Gloucester, who published a pamphlet

against private men being pulpit men. John Tombes also was busy west of the Severn, at Ledbury, Ross and Bewdley.

Thus there were many ways in which Baptist principles could reach the Cotswold town; the first attention they attracted was in 1649, when Thomas Thache, vicar of Kemble, issued a pamphlet against the Cirencester Anabaptists or Saints. Mr. Rudge had preached there, and correspondence had ensued; the Baptists had sent the reply of Thache to Harrison, a London stationer, trooper to the Earl of Essex, preacher, now placed by the Vigilant Committee of the county in the living of Charlton Kings near Cheltenham. They challenged the calling of the ministry in the Church of England, terming a miscellaneous congregation a "church," the right of parliament or magistrate to interfere with conscience, the compulsory exaction of tithes, and other customs which the Puritan clergy desired to maintain. From various passages in Thache's pamphlet, defending these things, we find that the leading Baptists were Thomas Clutterbuck, a clothier, William Burge, an ironmonger, Giles Hancox, a mercer, who was now a justice of the peace to the chagrin of his opponent, Thomas Sheapheard, Caleb Self, Roger, a shoe-maker, Samuel, a boddice-maker, and John.

We can probably identify the Rudge who provoked the outburst as Thomas Rudge, member of the church at Weston under Penyard; the Harrison who was the champion afterwards as Richard Harrison (not Thomas as Calamy states) who was soon pastor of the church at Netherton near Fairford and Maizey Hampton; these two men are in a group worth studying, acting together in September 1653, see Fentanton Records, pages 344, 345.

The revolutions of 1653 made Cromwell very anxious to gain popular support, and addresses of

confidence were obtained from several Gathered Churches, which were printed next century by Nicholls. A group of letters came from Gloucester and Hereford, including the churches of Leominster, Hereford, Dymock, Cirencester, Weston and Wormbridge. The signatures for Cirencester are William Daves, Giles Watkins, Giles Griffiths; Tombes and Richard Harrison also sign, as they did the circular letter of September. We thus infer that the origin of the cause at Cirencester was due, at least indirectly, to Tombes; we observe a Welsh element in the church, which soon disappeared.

Henry Jessey, of the same open-communion type as Tombes, visited all over this district in 1656, and came here, as we learn from *Sighs for Sion*. Perhaps it was on a hint from him that the church bought a fine folio and began to keep records. They should rather be called jottings at this stage, put down on any early page where the book happened to open, and needing much sorting. The earliest dated entries are on page eight, recording baptisms from 3 January 1655-6 onwards; many of these relate to Maizey Hampton, and the importance of this centre is evident from the resolution of 11 November 1658 that the church did then order her preacher to go into the country once a fortnight, and once a month; he refused however, with the reason that what made him incapable in one thing, did in all things. It is not surprising therefore that on 9 September 1659, the friends in the country sent notice by William Moulder and Richard Veysy of their intention to sit down as a church of themselves, but said that they would be glad to have the same care and assistance from the ministering brethren as before. The church agreed, and the minute was formally signed by Habel Selfe, Giles Watkins, Robert Wilkins, Hendry Pittney, John Aston and Richard Herge.

This minute is interesting on many accounts. First, the date has been read as 1639, and this is somewhat plausible for those unacquainted with the script of the period, for the entry is on page three, earlier than the previous minutes. But comparison with the figures 5 and 3 on pages eight and nine show what this is intended for; moreover on page eight are recorded the baptisms of Moulder, Veysy and Pittney in 1656, so that they could not have taken part in church business during 1639. It follows that the date 1639 (which is almost incredible intrinsically) has no documentary support as the date of the church's origin, and that cannot be stated more accurately than between 1642 and 1649.

Next, we observe that there was no one pastor, but there were several ministering brethren; other facts show, however, that while Habel Selfe might be the senior, Giles Watkins was the most active; the minutes and entries for many years are in his handwriting. Then we observe further that this occasion was regarded as determining the constitution of the church rather formally, in that the minute is entered at the beginning of the book. This is further apparent from a second resolution the same day, that whereas sister Pelltrave had hitherto accommodated the church for worship in her house, the arrangement be continued during her life; only she be paid 26/8 by the year. This was signed not only by the resident members, but by Vaysie and Moulder, evidence that the Maizey Hampton members did not wish to sever all connection or responsibility.

The church had other good uses for its money, for in October 1656 it lent twenty shillings to Joseph Earby, and as much to John Willaby, both members; they promised to repay at the next Michaelmas, but while Earby's debt is receipted, Willaby's character for repayment is not established. Meanwhile Thomas

Abell secured another pound, which he did return at the due date. The tearing out of half a leaf raises the question whether the church decided to discontinue this form of help. Another early expense was 3/7 laid out on bowls for the use of the church, presumably at the Lord's Supper.

This was a halcyon time for Baptist churches, and many records are extant; we find casual notices of members transferred from other churches, such as Petty France. But while they were grouping in Associations, Cirencester lay so on the crest of the hills that it did not join with Bourton and Stow in the Midland, or with Sodbury and Bristol in the Western, or with Longworth and Coate in the Berks. And so when entries cease, we cannot trace any details from such sources. The Restoration of course checked all progress; the brothers of Giles Watkins were Governor and Judge of Antigua, but are not likely to have retained these posts under Charles. There was one baptism in 1660, another in 1662, then none till 1666, a great contrast with the increase previously. There was a timid recovery in 1668, but the enquiries of next year by the bishops definitely close the first period.

In 1672 Charles issued a Declaration of Indulgence, and on 9 December the Cirencester Baptists took out three licences; for the house of "Joane Palteeres" to worship in, for Giles Watkins and John Oates to teach there. It is interesting to contrast with a fulsome and gushing petition of the Presbyterians there:—By this "unparelled Act of grace, y^e have made o^r hearts to leape & o^r soules to singe for Joy of heart. & have layd such a sense of y^r royall condescention and indulgence upon us if we canot but now, always & in all places acknowledge & celebrate the most worthy deeds done to us y^r poore subjects, and as men rayseed out of the grave from ev^ry corner of y^e land, stand up and Call y^r Majesty

blessed." This adulation was so far successful that they obtained the use of the Weavers' Hall, even after they had been refused a licence for the Recess.

For a few months the Baptists resumed recording their proceedings; it seems that Thomas Malacke had set up a separate meeting, having been disciplined for heresy as to the atonement; he and a few others were dealt with—which seems to imply, excluded. Others were dealt with for drunkenness, and a few were baptised. But with the revoking of the Indulgence in 1673, darkness falls again.

In 1686 the notes begin again, with the exceptional entry of a birth, while a pamphlet of next year telling the life death and sufferings of Amariah Drewett throws light on the period of persecution just ending. In 1689 and again in 1691, Watkins attended the Assembly, still only a minister or lay preacher, not pastor; he signed a minute as late as 1695, when the church was in the Berkshire association. Another man who had been baptized in 1659 lived on to 1697, but he left a message to the churchwardens and overseers, while the absence of his name from the minutes confirms the idea that he found it easier to conform. In 1698 the vicar published an appeal to the dissenters, who had just lost their minister; we should like to think that Giles Watkins was the man thus acknowledged, but probably it was the death of Stephen Worth which caused these overtures to the Presbyterians.

With 1708 there was a new beginning, and a fresh roll shows 34 members, two dating from 1659. William Freeman had joined after 1673 by a letter from Moreton behind the Marsh, and he now took the lead; he had married Mary the sister of Giles Watkins. There were complicated negotiations with the Maizey Hampton people, resulting in a practical severance so that the church there went its own way under

Thomas Lovel. There was also a secession in Cirencester of several who followed Richard Dowell, and the church dropped out of Association life again. Freeman died in 1737, and his successor Robert Major, bailiff at Coln St. Aldwyn, died in 1745. A scion of Bourton followed, Thomas Flower, who had been a pastor in London, so that this was a step toward a professional pastorate; his return to town in 1761 closed a period in the church's history.

At this time some prominent members were Joseph and William Freeman, sons of the pastor, and their cousin William Wilkins, an edge-tool maker. Joseph tried in 1771 to bequeath the meeting-house, which had been used, it appears, for just a century; but as it was copyhold, the desire could only be carried into effect by his daughter. Others were prompted to like generosity, and from the Bristol Academy a young student was obtained, William Dore, with whom the church settled down on the lines familiar to-day to us all. The steps as to property, endowment, educated pastor, are characteristic of the measures which preserved many churches through the critical years of the eighteenth century, while those which attempted to struggle on by the mutual services of their members, and refused to make financial provision for premises and minister, flickered out.