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Warwick Baptist Church

IT is just over 100 years ago since the last historical sketch of Castle Hill Baptist Church, Warwick, was written by an anonymous author. An attempt is here made to do something of a similar nature. The Baptist Church at Warwick is fortunate in the possession of records going back to the year 1697, though previous accounts of proceedings, if any were made, have unfortunately been lost, either by careless indifference or, as is more likely, in the great fire of Warwick in 1694. Thus the only ideas we have concerning the origin and early growth of the church are by inference from documents and circumstances of a later date than 1640—the year in which it is considered the Baptists of the town and neighbourhood formed themselves into an organised body for the purpose of worship. It has been suggested that the first Warwick Baptists were linked in some way with the church at Coventry formed in 1626, though proof of this is not available.

Described in the Church Book "as a small handful of the dust of Zion," Baptists of Warwick met first for worship in a house in Castle Street belonging to Thomas Hurd, who left it, together with some other property, a piece of ground and a quantity of silver plate, to the church, which still benefits from the bequest. Thomas Hurd was born at Barford, and early came and settled in Warwick. He was by trade a tailor and wool merchant, and by conviction a Baptist. Having gathered others of like mind about him, secret meetings for worship were held in his house at a time when all who refused to accept the doctrines of the established Church were being bitterly persecuted. When the Act of Indulgence was passed in 1672 (which allowed Nonconformists to register certain private houses as places of worship) Hurd registered his house. For the first time the church was able to meet without fear of interference, but this liberty was short lived, for three years later the Act was withdrawn. A persistent tradition in the church that the second Lord Brooke, Robert Greville, and his man-servant worshipped with the little company, seems to confirm the early date of the church's existence, for this good man was killed at the siege of Lichfield in March, 1643. The previous year he published a little book entitled *A Discourse opening the Nature of that Episcopacy which is exercised in England*, and from this it is manifest that he accepted Congregational principles, though his views on baptism are not known.

The first authentic record we now have of this church is in the

history of the Midland (now West Midland) Baptist Association formed in Warwick in 1655 during the Protectorship of Oliver Cromwell. This does not throw any light on the history of the formation of the church, but it does suggest that in that year the local Baptist community was of considerable importance and influence. Daniel King was the pastor and, it is generally assumed, the leading figure in the formation of the Association. In 1651 he attended the meeting of representatives of thirty Midland Congregations of General Baptists, and is noted as pastor of Coventry. In the same year he wrote a book which he dedicated to some churches with which he had been connected, including that at Warwick. By 1656 Daniel King was replaced as minister by Nathaniel Alsop, though the duration of his ministry is not known.

In the year 1670 Mr. James Cooke (the elder) became pastor. He was a surgeon of considerable repute, and published a book on surgery, a copy of which is one of the treasured possessions of the Warwick church. He lived in Jury Street, and was appointed physician to the Earl of Warwick and his family, from whom, he acknowledges in his book, he received much kindness. He died in 1688, and was buried at St. Mary's, Warwick. Evidence of the fact that Mr. James Cooke had charge of the church is afforded by the will of Thomas Hurd made in 1681. The year 1688 marked the beginning of a period of religious freedom under the Protestant Prince William of Orange and his wife, Mary. At this time began the ministry of the Rev. Paul Frewin (one of the 2,000 Puritan clergy evicted from their livings by the Act of Uniformity in 1662) from Kempley, in Gloucestershire, who is described in the Church Book as "an exceedingly good preacher and a popular man."

The coming of Benjamin Bowyer in 1695 marked a real step forward in the Baptist witness at Warwick. He is described as a gentleman of considerable means residing in the Stone House. During his ministry, about the year 1700, the first Baptist Meeting House was built in the town, so that, after more than fifty years, the little church had at last a home of its own where it was possible to meet freely for worship and communion. He died in 1702, and was buried in the Vineyard Garden, near to the spot where Thomas Hurd had earlier been laid to rest. Under the will of Thomas Hurd the garden subsequently became the property of the church, and is part of the ground on which the present building now stands. Castle Hill was at this time called "Back Hills," and it was by the latter name that the church was known until the last century. During the vacancy caused by the death of Mr. Bowyer, the oversight was taken by Samuel Dunckley, an architect and stonemason, who carved the handsome doorway in St. Mary's Church leading into the Beauchamp Chapel, and helped to rebuild the tower of the church after it was damaged in the fire of Warwick. A young

preacher named John Morgan came from Wales in 1703, and, according to an entry in the burial register of St. Nicholas' Church, died the day after! The Church Book, however, says that he died a week later.

A physician by the name of Philip James, M.D., was the next minister of the church. His ministry commenced in 1705 and continued for five years. During this period the singing of hymns was first introduced into the church, these hymns to be composed by the minister to suit the subject of his sermon. In deference to some who objected to singing in the house of God it was resolved that the singing should only take place after the evening lecture, an interval being allowed for those wishing to leave.

After this, and until the Rev. Edward Munford became the minister in 1723, there is considerable uncertainty as to the ministerial oversight of the church. As far as can be ascertained from the Church Book, it would appear that the Rev. John Jarvis was in charge, for his name invariably heads the lists of signatures with which the records of business transacted at Church Meetings are concluded. His name disappears after the Church Meeting held on June 8th, 1721, and that of Edward Munford first appears in connection with the meeting of June 19th, 1723. Serious differences arose between Mr. Munford and certain members of the church, and it was agreed that the pastorate should be terminated. Here it may be mentioned in passing that Church Meetings at this time, and for many years to follow, were mainly for discipline.

A NEW MEETING HOUSE

Nothing much is known of the next two men in pastoral charge—Job Burt from 1734 till his death in 1739, and Isaac Woodman, who was minister for six years from 1740. However, it was during the ministry of Isaac Woodman that the old meeting house was found to be too small, and accordingly was demolished to make room for a larger chapel, built on the same site, with a substantial minister's house adjoining. Pictures of this meeting house are in existence, from which it is seen to have been a commodious square building with a gallery round three sides, an elevated pulpit, and comfortable pews.

The next minister was a man of considerable ability bearing a name well known and much honoured in Baptist circles. This was John Collett Ryland who is said to have rebuked William Carey when the latter was pressing the case for foreign missions at a ministers' conference. Coming to Warwick in 1746 he was ordained four years later, and then continued in the pastorate till 1759 when he left for Northampton. He had been a member of the Baptist Church at Bourton-on-the-Water of which Benjamin Beddome was pastor. During his ministry in Warwick he lived in St. Mary's

vicarage, which he rented from Dr. Tate, the incumbent. Some complained to Dr. Tate for having let his house to an Anabaptist teacher. "What would you have me do?" he replied, "I have brought the man as near to the Church as I can, but I cannot force him to enter it." It was in the vicarage that he founded a boys' school which greatly prospered, and probably formed the basis for the larger and better known schools later founded by him in Northampton and finally in London. Here his son, John, was born, who later became principal of Bristol Baptist College, and a joint founder of the Baptist Missionary Society. Mr. Ryland effectively built up the work at Warwick, and wrote much of real spiritual worth in the Church Book.

For the next five years the church was without a minister until the Rev. John Knight accepted the pastorate. He was followed by the Rev. Joseph Stennett, member of a distinguished Baptist family of the 18th century. He left Warwick in 1779, and after a period of four years was succeeded by the Rev. Peter Reece who laboured in the town amongst the Baptists with considerable success for twelve years. He revived the church which had evidently been much reduced since the departure of J. C. Ryland. Mr. Reece died on June 11th, 1795. Then came Mr. John Wilson who was ordained at Warwick on June 1st, 1796, but he resigned after a ministry lasting two-and-a-half years because of dissatisfaction with his preaching among the members. For a time the church depended on supplies, the most frequent of these being the Rev. Edward Mabbutt. Just at the end of the century, on July 2nd, 1799, a Sunday School "for the instruction of poor children" was opened under the direction of Mr. John Mills.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

At the turn of the century the connection with the Association seems to have been broken, and was not restored till, almost 100 years later, the Association was asked to exercise control. The century was a sad period for the church. There were times of brightness, but these were followed by periods of strife and division, which left a legacy of bitterness and effectively prevented much brotherly cohesion. Ministers were thus discouraged, short pastorates were common, and membership declined.

There is an absence of church records during the ministry of the Rev. William Read from 1803 to 1818. Troublous times were undoubtedly experienced, and Mr. Read was involved in some legal trouble. But from 1819, when the Rev. Evan Herbert of Boddicot, near Banbury, became minister, church records were kept. He found the church in a shocking condition and, in his own words, "reduced to a very few, without discipline or records and the congregation fled, so much so, that the writer of this had not only

to lead the singing, but to preach to the walls and empty pews." He came to bring revival, and succeeded in a certain degree. But he became involved in controversy with the Unitarian minister and left in 1821.

The next minister was the Rev. John Ham, who settled in 1823. He had been minister at Wolverhampton, and was supplying at Crewkerne in Somerset. He stayed till 1825, when the difficulty of the church's finding his stipend caused him to resign. He went to Newhall Street, Birmingham. There was no minister till 1826. Often the church had no supply, and seemed near to disbanding. Several members attached themselves to the Independents (Congregationalists), and it is quite likely that the church would have closed but for the timely help of the Rev. Francis Franklin, probably the ablest minister in the Queen's Road, Coventry, succession to that date. In passing it may be mentioned that his daughters ran a school where George Eliot was a pupil. Mr. Franklin recommended the Rev. John Lincoln to the pastorate at Warwick. During the first year all went well, and seven members were added. After thirteen months Mr. Lincoln decided to count the communicants and make a membership roll. There were thirteen men and the same number of women. Presently a violent quarrel broke out between Mr. Lincoln and some of the members. In various ways the minister was slighted till he could stand it no longer. In 1834 he left Warwick for London, taking all the church books with him. They were later recovered by the good offices of a man named Horton.

It was about this time that the Leamington Church was formed by some of the members of Castle Hill who resided there. During the next ministry, that of the Rev. H. Campbell, the chapel was repaired and the front stuccoed. The date of the repair (1840) was put on the front of the chapel. Mr. Campbell resigned after some questionable conduct in 1841. The Rev. J. T. Bannister from Coventry supplied for a year and three months. Then the Rev. Thos. Nash from Netherton, Dudley, became pastor in 1843. He had the interior and exterior of the chapel coloured, and changed the date on the front to 1640. Early in Mr. Nash's ministry the chapel was enlarged to twice the size, and various other structural alterations made. In 1854 there were about forty members. Good progress was made, but gains were offset by losses through death and removal. There were about forty scholars in the Sunday School. Mr. Nash resigned in 1856.

He was followed by the Rev. T. Aston Binns of Birmingham in 1857, the membership being twenty-eight. Open membership was considered, deferred, and finally adopted on 14th November, 1859. Mrs. Binns's health necessitated the pastor's resignation in 1864. Next came the ministry of the Rev. Frank Overbury, during which

a rebuilding scheme was initiated. The present chapel is the result. It was opened in the year 1866. Then in 1872 open membership was abolished, but the pioneers were vindicated in 1930 by the adoption of this principle. Mr. Overbury had a successful ministry, but resigned on account of age in 1873. Mr. C. H. Thomas, the next minister, was a student of Pastor's (now Spurgeon's) College. He had a happy and successful ministry, but left in 1879 to become secretary of the College.

The next period of ministry lasted only three years. It was that of the Rev. Daniel Jennings who came from Long Crendon, Bucks. His resignation was brought about through ill-health. Conditions must have deteriorated for he advised dependence on supplies to avoid the expense of a pastor. The church did not heed the advice, however, and successfully invited the Rev. T. Napoleon Smith, a Spurgeon's man, in January, 1884. He resigned in the following September. By this time the membership was 48. The Rev. John Hutchinson of Westminster came in 1885, but was asked to resign in 1888 and left accordingly. The difficulty of supporting a minister seems to have been the main factor.

Then the Association took charge of the church and installed the Rev. H. W. Meadow of Wolston in 1890. This arrangement continued until 1899, when the future of the pastorate was decided by vote of the Church Meeting, and Mr. Meadow did not get a sufficiently large majority. Thus he had to resign after very faithful labour. About this time men of initiative among the members began to appear, and the Church Books were well kept and not left to the minister's care.

THE PRESENT CENTURY

The turn of the century saw a new ministry beginning at Castle Hill, that of Mr. J. Bryan Marshall, a student of Spurgeon's College. He seems to have done well, and additions to the membership were numerous. There were 57 names on the Roll at the annual meeting in September, 1901. His resignation was accepted at a members' meeting on April 20th, 1903. He was contemplating marriage to a member of the church, and there seems to have been difficulty also in regard to an increase in stipend (then at £110 p.a.) which he had requested. The ministry closed at the end of June, 1903. Later that year the Rev. C. E. Palmer came to preach, and was subsequently invited to accept the pastorate. He did so and began his ministry in April, 1904. In the same year the church adopted the use of the individual Communion Cup. During Mr. Palmer's ministry an extensive renovation scheme (first mooted in 1902) was put in hand. Its purpose was to meet the demands of a growing church, and to constitute a useful and permanent memorial of the 250th Anniversary of the founding of the West Midland Baptist

Association. It included the installation of electric light, a new heating system, a new pulpit (Bromwich Memorial), new choir stalls, new organ, and decoration of the church and school-room. The work was carried through, and the church re-opened for worship on 1st July, 1906. An appeal for financial help with this scheme of renovation was sent to all the churches of the West Midland Baptist Association, which celebrated its 250th Anniversary in 1905. This was marked by special meetings in Warwick. The new organ was formally opened on September 27th, 1906, when F. Heddon Bond, M.A., F.R.C.O., organist of Dale Street, Leamington Spa, gave a recital. Mr. Palmer tendered his resignation to Castle Hill on receiving an invitation to another church. He was pressed by means of a petition to re-consider his decision, but he did not do so, and closed his Warwick ministry at the end of September, 1910.

The next minister was a student of Spurgeon's College, Mr. J. B. Hannah, who began his ministry in Warwick in July, 1911. The organ, installed but so recently, was evidently giving trouble, and had to be renovated that same year at a cost of £71. Two years later, on resigning office as Church Secretary, having served in this capacity for eighteen years, the late Mr. W. E. Collier was elected a life-deacon. Mr. Hannah left Warwick for Burnley in 1913. He was followed in the pastorate at Castle Hill by the Rev. W. J. Fox. His stay in Warwick was brief like that of his immediate predecessor. Mr. Fox was evidently interested in the history of Castle Hill, for he typed out copies of the Church Books up to the beginning of the present century. This must have involved hours of painstaking work, for the writing in earlier books is difficult to decipher. The present writer here acknowledges a deep debt of gratitude to the late Rev. W. J. Fox.

A vacant pastorate ensued to the following April when it was filled by the Rev. H. Lanman, who had previously been minister at New Barnet. In September, 1917, it was decided to hold afternoon services instead of evening services. (This, of course, was during the first war, and the earliest raids had been made). The rising cost of living is reflected in the numerous increments given to Mr. Lanman; his stipend reached the figure of £200 by the year 1920. Also, it was the custom of the church at this time to give to the minister three-quarters of the balance in hand at the end of the financial year. The organ was again giving trouble, and plans were afoot for its disposal or complete re-building. The latter course was adopted, the work being carried out by Messrs. Hewins of Stratford-upon-Avan at a cost of £260. In the previous year a new boiler was installed. Mr. Lanman's ministry was evidently a happy one according to his letter of resignation sent at the end of 1922. He terminated his ministry at Warwick in the following March, having laboured successfully in the town for six years.

During the vacancy caused by the departure of Mr. Lanman, the Rev. A. J. Billings, M.A., minister of the Leamington Church, acted as Moderator. Mr. H. J. White was the next man to be invited to the pastorate. He had been trained for the ministry at Regent's Park College, and commenced his work in Warwick on completion of his training. The period of his ministry was one of steady growth and progress. At a Church Meeting in April, 1927, the need for enlarged school premises was spoken of, and it was agreed that a fund should be started for this purpose. An opportunity to purchase premises on the north side of the chapel later presented itself, but unfortunately the diaconate decided against committing the church in this way. The Warwick ministry of the Rev. H. J. White terminated at a farewell meeting held in January, 1928, when many paid tribute to his work, and numerous presentations were made. He had accepted the invitation of the Church at Oldfield Park, Bath.

Again during the vacancy the Rev. A. J. Billings acted as Moderator. During September, 1928, Mr. Victor A. Price, of Bristol College, preached on two Sundays with much acceptance, and so was given an invitation to the pastorate. He began his ministry on the first Sunday in November. At the annual Church Meeting in 1929 the late Mrs. E. Salmon had the honour of being elected the first lady deacon of the Church. Then the following year the church adopted the principle of open membership, though with the safeguard that the minister shall always be a baptized person. A scheme for extending the school-room was completed in 1931 at a cost of £168. Mr. Price left for South Harrow in 1933, having worked successfully in Warwick for five years.

Then came a vacancy extending over two years, when Mr. F. N. Allen, of Spurgeon's College, was invited to accept the pastorate. So began a ministry that was to last for nine years. During this period the church received a legacy from Mrs. Pryce Davies in the form of a bungalow, ground and effects. These were subsequently sold to the County Council for £600. The idea in the mind of Mrs. Davies in making the gift was that it should be used to build a mission in memory of her son, Harold, and that the mission should be known by his name. Unfortunately it has not been found possible to fulfil this wish. Rules for the church were drawn up by a sub-committee, and adopted early in 1939. Afternoon instead of evening services were held at the beginning of the war, but evening services were soon restored. Owing to the war not a great deal was made of the 300th Anniversary of the Church, but a special service was held (Thursday, November 7th) followed by tea in the Court House, when many congratulatory messages, including one from the Bishop of Coventry, were received. Having served the church well Mr. Allen removed to Bilston early in 1944.

Mr. I. H. Williams was the next to be invited to the pastorate of Castle Hill, and he began his ministry on November 5th, 1944. At this time the Church Secretary (Councillor W. V. Collier) became the Mayor of Warwick, and continued in office for three years, the minister of Castle Hill acting as Mayor's Chaplain. Again Mr. Williams acted in this capacity when Councillor T. T. Bromwich, another member of the church, was Mayor from 1949 to 1951. Not till 1948 was it decided "that a memorial to Thomas Hurd be placed in the church at an estimated cost of £30." This period of ministry saw the beginning of the Girls' Life Brigade. Much good work was done by Mr. Williams in Warwick before he left for Holyhead in July, 1951.

There followed a vacancy of several months before an invitation was given to the Rev. W. T. Goodwin, of High Wycombe, to become pastor. A house had been purchased in Cape Road for use as a manse from the legacy of the late Mrs. Elizabeth Davies. From the same legacy an electrical heating system was installed in the church. The latest and present ministry began in September, 1952. The period since has been one of difficulty occasioned through many losses, yet a happy spirit is manifest in the church. The windows have been put in good repair, a screen erected across the back of the church to make an entrance lobby, the organ thoroughly overhauled and the interior of the church has been redecorated. So to the end of the story so far. Baptist witness in Warwick continues by the grace of God. Castle Hill has never been a strong cause, but in a quiet and unassuming way it ministers help and blessing to many. May it continue and grow that this, the County town of Warwick, may have at its heart a witness to the truth and virility of the Baptist position!

W. T. GOODWIN.