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Baptist Beginnings in Luton

NEAR the Whipsnade Zoological Park, and just off the busy Watling Street where it runs from Hertfordshire into South Bedfordshire, is the little village of Kensworth. It stands high, bare and isolated, on the chalk of the Dunstable Downs range, and here, about the year 1660, a large and thriving fellowship of Baptists used to meet, registering a membership of some three hundred. In this sparsely populated area few of the members lived near their place of meeting and many came from long distances to worship: indeed, some of them probably travelled from as far as thirty miles away. No trace remains today of any site or building, and little is known of the beginning of this church, but evidently it became firmly established and flourished during the Cromwellian period. After 1660, however, a very different state of affairs prevailed, and the members began to suffer persecution, like so many others in different parts of the country. One local historian says of them, "They met clandestinely, outwitted spies, eluded sheriffs, worshipped in woods and dells, quarries and sand pits." Tradition points to one wooded dell which is supposed to have been a regular meeting-place of the Kensworth Baptists during this period. It is a matter for regret that only tradition is available to give information concerning these people. All minute books and written records were destroyed by an early secretary of the church who, being expelled from membership on account of misconduct, took his revenge by this means.

By the year 1675, in spite of persecution, the fellowship at Kensworth was still flourishing and could count among its members nineteen living in the village of Luton, some six or seven miles distant. The difficulties of travel, and of trying to meet unmolested, must have influenced them in dictating a policy of dispersal, for at about this time sixty-five members separated from the Kensworth Church and formed small church groups in their own localities. The nineteen Luton members were among the number, and to them the Baptist cause in Luton owes its beginning.

These members established a church in Luton,[1] but it was a church in the New Testament sense only, for no building did they have for several years. That does not seem to have discouraged them, for by the next year, 1676, they are reputed to have had thirty-nine members. They may have worshipped in the open air at first, but it is known that they frequently met in the Dallow Farm (now demolished), which stood on the western outskirts of Luton. In this building was a space in the roof, entered by a trap-door, and here, by stealth, the worshippers would congregate. One imagines the discomfort and inconvenience which those who were no longer young would suffer in reaching such a spot. One realises too, however, how well rewarded they would feel when the preacher was—as was sometimes the case—their fellow-Baptist and countryman, John Bunyan. Evidently the Dallow farmhouse was a frequent place of resort for him, and there is a tradition that on one of his visits he was hidden for three days in the farm buildings while the officers of the law searched for him. In the Bunyan Museum at Bedford is a key of Dallow Farm which was found with the personal effects of John Bunyan, and it seems evident from this that he had access to the farm whenever he required it, for preaching or for shelter.

The nineteen members who separated from the cause at Kensworth included one Thomas Marsom, who soon emerged as the leader of the Luton church. This "grave and sedate man,"

[1] There are differing opinions about the date of formation of the church. On the one hand, Frederick Davis, in his *Luton, Past and Present* (1874) says: "It appears from a record of the Baptist Church at St. Albans, that as early as 1660 the Church at Kensworth consisted of more than three hundred members, and that in 1675 nineteen of these members were resident in Luton. In all probability about this date, when a separation of sixty-five members took place in the Kensworth Church, the Luton members formed themselves into a separate community, and held their religious meetings at Luton, for there is reliable evidence that they met for worship secretly in an apartment in the roof at the Dallow Farm, now occupied by Mr. Scarborough. (The trap-door by which it was entered is still remaining). This was their hiding place for religious worship in the persecuting days of Charles II. Tradition informs us that John Bunyan often preached the word of truth there."

On the other hand, C. E. Freeman (Curator of Luton Museum) in *A Luton Baptist Minute Book,* suggests 1690 or thereabouts as the date of formation, basing his evidence on records in the possession of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St. Albans, and the Baptist Church at Dunstable. According to these, a dispute took place about that date between the main body of Kensworth members and the Luton section, which resulted in the latter breaking away from the parent body.

When considering the available evidence, it is conclusive that there was a Baptist community in Luton by 1675 or earlier, and common sense would suggest that it would often be more convenient to meet for worship in their own locality rather than hazard the journey to Kensworth. It is likely (especially if disputes arose) that the Luton members would consider themselves an independent community long before the mother church at Kensworth was willing to "write them off" the roll, and such circumstances could easily account for any discrepancy in dates.

as a contemporary described him, was a fellow prisoner with Bunyan in Bedford Gaol,[2] and he is said to have advised Bunyan first against and later in favour of publishing the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress*. He had an ironmongery business in Luton, and it is even possible that he and the tinker may have had business dealings with each other. At all events, they seem to have been associated in various ways, and there is a supposition that the biographical note on Bunyan at the close of *Grace Abounding* was written by Marsom.[3]

Marsom's imprisonment, like that of Bunyan himself, was for conscience' sake, and his goods were seized by the sheriff on account of the fines he had incurred by preaching, in defiance of authority. But such was the respect in which Marsom was held, we are told, that no one could be found to purchase the goods so impounded. This man of sterling quality became the first pastor, and he must have been a bulwark to the church in the early days. His name appears regularly at the head of the list of deacons, and his influence helped to shape the policy of the church, to the end of his life. He died at an advanced age in January, 1726, and was interred in the burial ground in front of the meeting-house. Three of his sons also held office in the church, but do not appear to have had the force of personality of their father.

FIRST MEETING-HOUSE

The Luton congregation were without a building for the first few years of their existence, during which time they would probably meet at Dallow Farm or elsewhere. But in 1687 the Declaration of Indulgence was proclaimed, easing the restrictions on Nonconformist worship. The Luton members therefore set about providing a meeting place, and first they secured a plot of land. An old record states, "The original meeting house was situated on the right hand side of Park Street, running parallel with an alley, and in an orchard of Richard Highron, labourer, which was sold by him, with six poles of land adjoining, for the sum of £4 16s. 0d., to Thomas Marsom."

[2] In recent times doubts have been cast on the truth of the tradition that Thomas Marsom and John Bunyan were co-prisoners at Bedford and that Bunyan used to preach to the members' meeting in the loft at Dallow Farm. Such doubts rest mainly on negative arguments rather than positive ones (e.g. lack of evidence in minute books and other records, etc.), and do not suffice to explain the strength of the oral tradition which has been handed down through the generations. In support of the ancient story is one striking fact which cannot be explained away: the fact that among John Bunyan's personal effects was found the key of Dallow Farm—surely the key, also, to the tradition.

[3] This suggestion is made in Offor's *Introduction to the Pilgrim's Progress*.

Then came the question of erecting a building, and now a wonderful thing happened. Richard Sutton, a collar-maker, of Tring in Hertfordshire, erected a building on the plot of land near Park Street, and sold it to the church trustees on the 28th July, 1698. It was only a small place, 32 ft. by 26 ft., with a vestry added, but even so, the price must have been one of the lowest ever paid for a church building, for the amount he charged was five shillings. Nothing else, unfortunately, is known of this benefactor or of his relationships with the church. One wonders whether he may have had connections with the Kensworth cause, which would lie between Luton and Tring, but this is merely surmise.

So the church was built and opened. By present-day standards the size seems small for the use of an increasing congregation, but at first there were no seats to take up space, and members would stand throughout the service. The following is an extract from one of the church books, dated March 2nd, 1733: "Agreed at a meeting appointed by the church for that purpose, that leave be given to make pews in the meeting house, only round the outside, and to come out from the wall six feet and four inches." Then follow the names of the persons allowed to make pews, and the resolution concludes thus, "Agreed that none of the pews shall have any locks put upon the doors, and that if at any time the place is full, and any room to spare in the pews, the owner shall freely offer a place for standers to sit in the pews." As sermons were sometimes two hours long and some of the members had long distances to walk, the Sunday services were apt to be somewhat in the nature of endurance tests. The hour-glass which belonged to Thomas Marsom, and which he used when timing his sermons, is still in the possession of the church.

It appears that the number of members increased rapidly, for it was soon found necessary to erect a gallery the entire length of the building, four seats deep. Then in 1788, at a cost of £206 (the whole of which was raised at two collections), the building was made one-third larger and another gallery was added; this time the whole area was pewed.

As the cause at Luton flourished, that at Kensworth seems to have dwindled—perhaps because of its isolated position—and its importance seems to have been transferred to Luton. The wide distribution of members of "The Park Street Old Meeting," as it came to be called, compares with that of the original Kensworth church. In 1707 the membership was 258, of whom nearly a hundred lived in Luton, the rest coming from thirty-six other places, many of them ten miles or more away, so that they had to travel long distances to worship. It was a regulation that members must attend the Communion service, and many would therefore

stay the whole day. An entry in the church book for February, 1745 reads, "Paid for small beer for the friends who stay all Lord's day . . . 4s. 3d."

As time went on, branch churches were formed, notably at Thorn, Markyate Street, Bendish and Breachwood Green, under the care of a panel of "ruling elders," as they were called. Of these, the foremost were Samuel Chase and Thomas Bunker. The latter devoted himself mainly to the oversight of Thorn, which lies off the Watling Street between Dunstable and Hockliffe. This church separated from Luton in 1751 and became an independent cause, but for some reason it did not flourish in that spot. The church was later dissolved and the bulk of the members formed the causes at more densely populated centres at Houghton Regis and Dunstable. The chapel buildings were demolished, some of the materials being used to build the Baptist church at Houghton Regis. All that now remains at Thorn is the old burial ground, where an open air service is held once a year by the Luton Federation of Baptist Churches, to maintain the Baptist claim to the spot.

Religious persecution having ceased, small churches could now stand alone, and the Old Meeting thus gradually lost her branches, which grew up into independent churches, most of which still exist today.

The building extension which took place in 1788, referred to above, did not suffice for long. In 1814 the church had quite outgrown its accommodation and a new building was needed. This time a site was chosen slightly south-west of the original meeting-house, on a plot of land which had been acquired as an extension of the burial ground, which was now full. Here an octagonal chapel, later know as the "Old Round Meeting," was erected, to seat 800 persons.

One possible reason for the steady increase in membership which necessitated rebuilding may have been that by 1807 definite work among young people had begun. It came about in this way: in 1789 a Mrs. Neale came from Northampton to live in Luton, bringing her two daughters. One of them, Mrs. Chase, was a widow with three children and, faced with the problem of educating them, she decided to do it herself. Soon she started a boarding school, and before long her sister, Mrs. Neale, undertook to give Sunday School lessons to the boarders and any others who wished to come. So many children came that the numbers outgrew the accommodation in the home of these ladies, and so, in 1807, the Sunday School was transferred to premises belonging to the church, where it has been carried on ever since. In 1832 a schoolroom was erected on the Park Street frontage which, when later extended, would accommodate 500 children. This was replaced by a new block of buildings in 1924.

The expansion which took place in the eighteenth century continued in the nineteenth and, in fact, all the Baptist churches in the Luton district trace back their ancestry to the mother church at Park Street.

Two of the early ministers had connections with the Baptist Missionary Society in its early years. Thomas Blundell, who came to Luton as pastor in 1804, had taken part in the formation of the B.M.S. He was followed in 1812 by Ebenezer Daniel, "the apostle to Ceylon," who went there from Luton in 1830 as a missionary of the B.M.S. and remained there until his death in 1844.

By the middle of the last century, further rebuilding was necessary and during the pastorate of the Rev. Thomas Hands the present place of worship was erected—not, however, without mishap. The foundation stones were laid and work progressed, the walls of the new building rising close to the back wall of the old "Round Meeting." But on Sunday evening, 4th February, 1866, only half an hour after the church members had left the Communion service, there was a violent gale. This blew down the new wall on to the old building, and so great was the impact and the force of the storm that the "Old Round Meeting" was completely wrecked.

One might imagine that this catastrophe would confound and discourage the members, but some at least were not to be daunted by it. There was, for example, a young couple who had arranged to be married at the Old Round Meeting: but the storm intervened, and on the date of the wedding the church was a ruin. The ceremony had been planned to take place and take place it did, however, despite the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." A picture exists, showing the young couple before the minister, pledging their vows amid the rubble and planks of the ruined building. If this was typical of the people's spirit, who can wonder that before long the church members had rallied to begin the work of reconstruction? This was completed in 1870, when the present church building was opened.

In more recent times, pastors of the church have included the late Frank Thompson, the late F. J. H. Humphrey, and the late J. A. Sutherland; and Dr. T. G. Dunning and the Rev. G. H. Woodham. The late Harry Mander, a former President of the Baptist Union, was a scholar and teacher in the Sunday School and confessed Christ in baptism in the church.

At the beginning of the present century, during Mr. Thompson's ministry, a large block of Sunday School buildings was erected behind the church. These were then, and are still—under the present minister, Rev. D. H. Horwood—used extensively for the evangelisation and training of the many young people who

look upon Park Street as their spiritual home. And so we await the pages in the history of the church which it will be their privilege to unfold to another generation.

P. M. BURDITT

Yorkshire United Independent College, by K. W. Wadsworth. (Independent Press, 8s. 6d.)

In preparation for the bicentenary of its foundation, which falls in 1956, the Rev. K. W. Wadsworth, one of its former students, has written this history of the Congregational College in Bradford. The author has worked hard at his sources, and pleasantly as well as competently tells the story of the early Yorkshire Dissenting Academies, and their successors, setting them in the social, political and religious background of the times. The present College was opened in 1877, and had a flying start with A. M. Fairbairn as Principal. In 1888, by which time Fairbairn had moved to Oxford, the Rotherham Congregational College united with the Bradford College, though not without much heart-searching, as we should expect. Since then the Bradford College has had its flourishing and declining periods, and Mr. Wadsworth conveys the impression that its future has recently been the subject of debate. The decision has been taken to continue its work, and the hope of Yorkshire Baptists as of Congregationalists is that the decision will be abundantly justified in coming years. The interest of the story would have been increased if Mr. Wadsworth had told us more about the theological outlook of the institutions about which he writes, and if he had told us also of the work done by men trained at Bradford. There is a slip on page 70. The B.M.S. was founded in 1792 not 1793.

Tyndale Echoes. (J. W. Arrowsmith, Ltd., Bristol, 5s.)

This is a beautiful little book, both in content and format. It consists of extracts from the prayers and sermons of Dr. Richard Glover, Minister of Tyndale Church, Bristol, 1869-1911. The book breathes the author's serene faith in the goodness and love of God, and is particularly suitable to put into the hands of the sick or troubled. Many who have seen photographic representations of Dr. Glover will wish that there had been one in this little book.

JOHN O. BARRETT.