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Bro. Etches

MANY years ago I read the strange biography of William Rolfe, *The Quest for Corvo*, and I have not yet lost the appetite that was then stimulated for unravelling human experience. When I became minister of Broadway Baptist church, Derby, an opportunity came for practising the art myself. Lying about in the archives I found a small, framed bust of a man who had lost an arm. His name, I learned, was John Etches, and the bust itself was executed in Derby china, which at one time was pure white without decoration. Further enquiry brought me a copy of some historical notes on the church as compiled by the late secretary, Samuel Taylor Hall; and from them I added to my knowledge of John that he was one of the original members of the fellowship which is now the Broadway church, but which, before 1938 was "St. Mary's Gate" and before that again, "Brook Street." Before the time of Brook Street the church was gathered by itinerant preaching, mainly by men from the neighbouring villages; but the church was actually formed in 1791 when nine persons were publicly baptized in the River Derwent on August 21st. Amongst these was John Etches, "a sailor, who lost his arm in the celebrated battle between Admiral Rodney and Count de Grasse in 1782."

It would be a long and tedious story to recount the steps by which I discovered the details of this man's life. I was amazed to find how many other people were pursuing similar lines of investigation, their motive being to find out the story of their ancestors. Amongst such there is a camaraderie and exchange of information. I was also to learn how such a quest grips one and how it leads into strange places where information may be lying. The thrill of lighting upon evidence, especially after a long check amongst useless material, belongs only to those who seek. Tempted then as I am to bore you with explanation of the machinery, I shall pass to the story as it has unfolded.

John was the seventh child of Richard and Hannah Etches, and was born in Derby on the 13th of November, 1754. All his brothers and sisters were born and Christened in Derby too, but there is no record of the marriage of the parents, so that they were presumably a young couple who came to Derby out of the country, probably from the Ashbourne district, a village which lies near Dovedale and the Peak district, and which is still famous for its annual "Shrove-tide football" which seems to be played as much in the local stream as in the streets of the town.

Nobody now knows how John Etches spent the first twenty years of his life. When, many years later, he spoke of himself to his friend and pastor, John Gregory Pike, he described himself as of a wild disposition. He certainly played the Derby brand of Shrove-tide football which became so notorious that it was finally stopped in the 1840s. This game was quite unlike football as we know it today. It was partly the traditional "letting off steam" before Lent, but it also expressed rivalries between sections of the community. In Scotland, it is "Uppies" and "Doonies." In Derby, it was between the parish of All Saints and the parish of St. Peter which were then separated by a stream that flowed into the Derwent at a spot called Morledge. To-day that stream is in a culvert under a roadway, and the Morledge is a bus-station; then, it was an annual battle ground for lively spirits. On occasion players were drowned in the swollen waters, and always there was rowdiness and often trickery in pursuit of the goal.

Young Etches was apprenticed to a "whitesmith," but nobody seems to know what a whitesmith was or did. A firm calling itself by that title existed till recently in Derby, and it offered galvanized metalwork for sale. But the famous Derby wrought-iron workers, Bakewell and his successor Yates, also called themselves "whitesmith." They produced gates which remain as honoured craftsmanship in the district. The gates of the St Mary's Gate Church, from whence came the Broadway congregation were genuine Bakewell, and one naturally wonders whether John Etches swung a hammer in their construction. He would certainly have seen them often enough, for they were made for the house of Mr. Evans the banker near where John lived and probably worked. They now stand across the road outside Derby cathedral the Baptists not having been able to afford their transport and erection in Broadway.*

Some time in March 1776 he met the recruiting sergeant who changed his life. It was a Friday, and pay day. He went to the public house to await the foreman, and there he met an Irishman, Thomas Docks who was either already in the navy and on leave or else had succumbed to the sergeant recently. Anyhow, he talked John into joining up, promising good money, a chance of bounty and an easy way in as armourer's mate. Naval records confirm the dates of enlistment. John's story is that he tricked the sergeant into classifying him armourer by allowing Docks to pass the test in his name. The test was to dismantle a musket. By the Monday he

* By an irritating inaccuracy, John's excellent pastor speaks of a "Mark's Lane" as the place of John's early employment. But there is no such place, and even on town maps of the 1790s it does not appear. Perhaps he meant "St. Michael's" Lane. Pike mistook John's age, too, but fortunately there are other records available for his later life.

was repentant of his decision, and by the 30th of March—the date he officially joined the frigate “Richmond,” he was thoroughly homesick. Docks was discharged sick in a few months: John was still on “Richmond” when she returned after a cruise in the Americas in 1779 to revictual at Chatham. There is a family story that John came home on leave and astonished everyone by covering the kitchen floor with golden guineas.

John was probably happy enough in the service. He was popular both with officers and fellow ratings, joining in the usual fo'c'sle pastimes of gambling, drinking and horseplay. But he got his promotion, and sailed in July, 1779 as a warrant officer in “Alcide.” We have to realise that the navy was a popular service then. It had been coming into its own throughout the 18th century, possibly because it was alone able to achieve independent British success against European rivals. Etches served under Rodney who, though vain, selfish and unscrupulous, could truthfully write in 1792 “within two little years I have taken two Spanish, one French, and one Dutch admiral.” The Frenchman was Count de Grasse, and the victory was off Dominica. Lieutenant Nelson was present and it was regarded at home as “celebrated” until he eclipsed it with a greater.

The story of John's adventures were told (some of them anyway) to his friend Pike later on and published in the General Baptist Repository during 1839. There are some gruesome details, for John lost his hand in the battle, and by neglect, finally his whole arm. But in June 1782 he was transhipped to “Princess Charlotte” and finally discharged at Plymouth in the September. In the November he was granted relief by the Governors of the Chest at Chatham—£4 immediately and a pension of £8; so he returned to Derby.

He was still ready for anything, and played Shrove-tide football again, but he was soon to meet Rachel Johnson whom he married on December 5th, 1783. The certificate can be seen in the records of All Saints Church with their “mark” attested by the curate and witness. They took up house somewhere near the Morledge and John tried his hand at small-holding, or it may have been trade, for at various times he was a coal merchant, kept pigs, and finally (on his death certificate) was described as a gardener. Whether he was that Etches described in the rent rolls as a seedsman and gardener, or whether he was living in the cottage of the workhouse, or whether he was actually an inmate of the workhouse is obscure, but such is the information about his secular life for the remaining forty or fifty years.

The important part was his conversion and his reliability during the early years of the General Baptist establishment in Derby. There was already a Particular Baptist cause, perhaps then, as now, given to the particularism which so frustrated William Carey at this time

in Leicester. But the great Dan Taylor had been visiting Derby, and soon preachers of his following began to come over from Melbourne and Castle Donington. They preached in a hired room and sometimes in the open. They were known irreverently as the "Dippers," and John's relatives in Nottingham had been already influenced by them. John was taking long thoughts himself, and with Rachel sought evangelical preaching in the establishment and among the Methodists. He eventually found grace amongst the Baptists and was, with Rachel, amongst the nine who went out from his house to the Derwent on 21st August, 1791 to be publicly immersed in baptism. He was dressed in his sailor's shirt, and he found himself watched by as many eyes as had seen him perform in the football game. One of his cronies, perched up a tree, cried out, "Wheer's the ball now, Jack?" But he never played again. He had dedicated his reputation to Christ and His church.

The rest of his story is the story of the General Baptist cause in Derby and can be read in the brief minutes in the early records. He is referred to as "Bro. Etches" and throughout the years his name is associated with matters of delicacy. In those days church discipline was administered, and he more often than not was one to "visit." The minutes of these years are poor enough, and they eventually peter out altogether. When they resume, Bro. Etches is no longer mentioned. The church let one of her stalwarts pass unnoticed. He had been a deacon 46 years.

He was fortunate—or should I say, "We" are fortunate?—in his association with John Gregory Pike, his minister, and with his niece and nephew by his second marriage to Sarah Wilkins, for each of these wrote something about him. Rachel had died in 1819 and in 1820 John married Sarah who must have been about his own age, for she was baptized in 1798. There were no children of either marriage; but her brother, George, married to another of the "originals" Mary Porter, had a son William whose wife entered in her diary details of the deaths of John and Sarah in 1838. They had obviously maintained a good deal of contact with the old couple. Their grandson was the late Rev. Gordon Wilkins of the B.M.S. whose wife was a grand-daughter of Rev. J. G. Pike. So John was not without issue in the Lord.

We should add to this list of his "family" the name of a John Etches who died "much and deservedly esteemed" in June, 1872. He was probably a nephew, that is a son of John's older brother Samuel, the bootmaker.

Rev. J. G. Pike, however, is the main quarry for information on John's later life. The "Memorials" show us many details of a consistent Christian life; John's hospitality for example, especially to visiting ministers who he could not bear to think of putting up in local public houses; John's anxiety lest he fall into temptation

(as in playing the game he loved on Shrove Tuesday); John's intense honesty, which made him stick to a contract even if circumstances changed and brought him loss instead of gain: John's generosity to the church.

At one time, the cause, which began in a hired room and under its first pastor built in the new housing area of Brook Street, was on the verge of extinction. John Etches as a layman and John Pike as a scholar and minister may be said to have revived it, and in his middle years, John was even on a committee, with Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Pike, to consider the resolution, "That the church attempt to build a new chapel." Nothing came of the matter and John was already dead several years before the congregation moved into the St. Mary's Gate premises.

The St. Mary's Gate building has also disappeared, and the third building in Broadway, is already 21 years old. In 1938 Rev. F. G. Hastings contributed an article about the previous hundred years, and now, once again, we look back upon our story that we may be encouraged to look forward with hope.

II

Bro. Etches was forty years a pillar of the first General Baptist Church, Derby. What, we may ask, was that church like? The Minute books answer that question, sometimes with a startling clarity.

But, first, what was Derby like? It was populous enough to make the Baptist strategians of the Midland Conference anxious both to make the little group a distinct body rather than a body dependent on other fellowships, and, in unhappy times, to maintain the cause, when it was shaken with dissension, by the call of a minister. It is strange to reflect that John was born within twenty-five years of Prince Charles Edward's armed visitation (the bridge over the Trent at Swarkstone is the same now as when the Scots crossed it). It is equally strange to observe in the records how John's elder brothers and sisters were registered in the Old Style dating. Like other ancient places, Derby was living through changing times. But it was not then to be engulfed by industry; and even now it preserves the flavour of agriculture and county importance. Yet it had much industrial enterprize. If wrought iron is akin to heavy engineering, then the tubing and boiler works of today had their ancestry. Pottery was tried out too but, in Etches day, turned over to the highly specialized craftsmanship of one firm, now known as Crown Derby. Spinning was a familiar trade, and Arkwright lived not far away at Cromford, but cotton did not become king in the town. Derby's mills turned to silk. And, as an odd echo of what had passed and of what was to come, a Derbyshire man who

learned roadmaking in Wade's army, applied his craft to his own county. Now we have railways and a jetcraft industry.

Industry attracts population and fosters unrest, and both factors appear in the history of the church, but Dan Taylor's interest in the church was justified. It was to become more influential than the village churches which supported its early growth.

The preamble to the minutes tells how this church meeting came into existence. There must already have been "interested persons" before Taylor came from London "into the country," for he "was solicited to preach." Etches' experience perhaps gives a clue. It was a time of serious religious thinking, and his relatives in Nottingham, who were barbers and small shop-keepers, had already told him about the "Dippers." These Nottingham Etches were connected with the Friar Lane church.

After Dan Taylor other preachers, from Castle Donington, Melbourne, Ilkeston, Kegworth and Kirkby Woodhouse carried on the work, the Connexion paying the rent of a meeting house. By Christmas 1790 the Conference had to note that no one had as yet "espoused the cause;" but in July, 1791 "an address was presented by a few friends at Derby," in which they desired to be "formed into a church state" and asked whether they should be associated with another church or launch out on their own.

So, on August 21st, 1791, after a morning sermon on baptism and another "on another subject" in the afternoon, the first nine were baptized in the Derwent and received the Lord's Supper in the evening.

I am restricting this paper to the first period of the history, viz. till 1800. In that year James Taylor, Dan's nephew, settled, apparently on the initiative of the Midland Conference who were anxious about the cause in Derby. The membership had risen in that period to 40 and then declined to 30. Can we trace this decline and recession?

The minutes, in various hands, record first the names of the members and the dates of the various "additions;" then a list of those out of membership by 1799 and a half page of transfers and dismissals from and to other churches. This revision was perhaps made in preparation for the settlement of Rev. James Taylor. In the record itself there is an intermediate revision done in 1794, recording "Members excluded dismissed and dead since the Association 1792." One death and four exclusions are recorded. On the same page a statistical account dated "since the Association at Hinckley 1793" gives 12 by baptism, 1 by recommendation, 1 withdrawn and 3 excluded."

It was clearly no easier then than now to make exact returns, and these figures are important only as they show us first the desire to take stock of the situation and secondly if they can be translated

into persons entering or withdrawing or being lost to the fellowship. The death can be identified—Anne Pipes was one of the originals. She died in September 1792. The one by recommendation was perhaps Elizabeth Wright who came from “a particular Baptist church,” of whom more in a moment. No further account need be taken here of Jane Porter who married and went to Ilkeston, nor of those who came from other churches into the Derby fellowship.

Elizabeth Wright precipitated an issue. On June 24th “a Church Meeting agreed to call upon Elizabeth Right to attend the next Church Meeting to give her experience to the Church.” She duly did so, but a “querey” was raised in August: “shall the candidates give their experience to the Church or to a few members selected and those give a relation of their experience to the Church.” The former was agreed, and this presumably became standard practice. At the same time, three Brothers were appointed “to have discourse with the candidates before they gave their experience to the Church.” This discourse may have come to assume almost the standing of recommendation, for a later minute refers to Bro. Dalleson as “giving his sentements on a candidate privately.” The candidate was not received into membership. In 1794 the church appointed two elders and two “deakens.” Dalleson headed the first list with 14 votes, and Whittingham (one of the above three) with 9. Etches was third with 3 and so did not qualify; but in the deacons’ election Etches was second to his brother-in-law Johnson, and Francis Thorpe (the third of the interviewers) was out of it with only one vote.

By 1800 Dalleson, Whittingham and Thorpe were all out of the fellowship. Dalleson withdrew, Whittingham was excluded for Deism and Thorpe either withdrew or was excluded, but was re-admitted in January 1800. There was probably more involved than personalities, for a minute of February 1794 records “that Brother Dalleson is to go to Brother Pickering for instruction.” Pickering was one of the preachers from Castle Donington. It looks as if Deism, whatever that falling-off implied, was gathering force. Between 1796 and 1798 several other members were excluded for the same deviation.

Besides these subtleties, other business at the church meetings may have seemed easier to consider. Some of it was charitable, some of it sordid. The very first minute, perhaps the very occasion of calling a church meeting, was to carry a “case . . . to conference praying the Churches to contribute something towards the Great Loss Brother Saml Hill has sustained through his Wind Mill being blown down.” It is regrettable to reflect that brother Hill withdrew from the fellowship in 1798. In November another two “cases” were under consideration. “The Church agree to allow him (one Charles Norton who was not, apparently, a member) 4 pence per

member and to pay it once a year as also do other Churches in the Baptist Connection." A case was also brought "to beg some assistance for Doctor Priestley who has suffered for the cause of Dissenting by the riot at Birmingham." Later in the year, Bro. Pickering was allowed "to collect for the Meeting House at Ashford the Week before Easter" and Br. Goddard to be invited to collect for his Meeting before Br. Wm. Pickering of Ashford." The minute of March 31st is odd. "A collection for Mr. Robertson of Burnley for is Law Charges concerning a young Woman in their Church. Collected 12-5 $\frac{1}{4}$." Not all of these pleas for help succeeded. It is doubtful if any help was in fact sent to Dr. Priestley, perhaps because of his "Deism;" and presumably also the plea for the "Calviness Meeting house at Kibworth" also failed. It is crossed out, anyway.

The vital question of "discipline" has ample illustration in these pages. Within a year of their baptism William and Ann Plant were up for "brauling and scaulding." William was excluded finally for "drunkenness and justifieing himself in the act," but he must have applied for reconsideration, for a minute requires "further proof of his sincerity." The final list is sobering. Apart from the group excluded for Deism, there were cases of drunkenness, defrauding, treachery, swearing, A man and woman were accused of fornication, and another woman was excluded for marrying a "carnel man." One can sympathize with Etches and his heavy heart. He considered leaving off from going to church, but his wife Rachel kept him there. One can understand too his generosity in having visiting preachers stay at his own house rather than at the local public house. It is easy to sneer at simple people tackling difficult human problems. This little church contained upright and faithful folk as well as moral failures.

Though small in numbers, the church meeting took its share in greater events. It shaped its own activities, for example. The "experience" meeting came to be of some importance, and gathered at 7 o'clock each Lord's day morning. The exhortation meeting varied between 10 and 2:30, and was directed towards special activities, such as the appointment of office bearers.

With the appointment of a minister the church began a new period in its history, not by any means without troubles, but with an acknowledged leader and with beginnings of a plan to settle in distinctive premises. House meetings and hired halls are not best for a permanent witness, and eventually the Association urged forward the church to buy land in the new part of the town and there to build a meeting house.

WILLIAM SPEIRS