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REVIEWS

Frederick G. Smith, *The Bethesda Story Re-told: A History of Bethesda Baptist Church, Ipswich, 1829-1988*, foreword by the Revd Robert J. M. Amess, 1988. 175pp. From the Church Office, Bethesda Baptist Church, 9A St Margaret's Plain, Ipswich IP4 2BB (Tel: 0473 55035). £3-00 + 50p p & p.

Frederick Smith, connected with this church for half a century and a deacon for over thirty years, has revised his earlier history, *The Bethesda Story* (1963), bringing the story up to date and using documents found since then.

In 1829 twenty members of Stoke Green Baptist Church, Ipswich, were dismissed to form the new church, with Mr James Nunn as pastor, and purchased Dairy Lane Chapel for their use. Nunn resigned in 1838. There was a division in the church and several left to form Zoar Baptist Church. The Chapel closed, but re-opened in 1841. Nunn, now living in London, preached occasionally until 1844 or 1845 but never resumed the pastorate. In 1845 the church called Thomas Poock who served until 1874. His funeral and that of his successor, William Kern, were notable events in the town. Kern's ministry was probably the last to be exercised in a period of almost unrelieved poverty and hardship.

Robert Amess judges that 'The Church of today was undoubtedly established and formed by Tydeman Chilvers'. During his pastorate (1903-20) the present imposing chapel was erected by Arthur Page as a memorial to his mother, a member for sixty years, baptised in the first pastorate. One suspects there was great surprise when Tydeman Chilvers accepted a call to Spurgeon's Tabernacle. The next pastor, Herbert J. Galley, a Strict Baptist hitherto, became increasingly disturbed by the practice of restricted communion. In 1925 he accepted a call to Chatsworth Road Baptist Church, West Norwood. Frederick Smith follows the usual Strict Baptist practice of calling Baptist Union churches 'General Baptist', although Chatsworth Road was founded as a Particular Baptist Church.

In 1929 Bethesda called a minister who had not only received formal theological training but also came from outside the denomination. The Revd Roland J. French had a strong personality, which led to clashes and a weakening of 'the bonds between pastor and people'. He retired in 1946 and the church called a Strict Baptist, the Revd George Bird, who exercised a notable ministry until 1972. After a long interregnum the church again found its pastor outside the denomination, calling a Baptist Union Accredited Minister, the Revd Robert Amess from Moortown Baptist Church, Bournemouth. The Bethesda Trust Deed describes the church as Particular Baptist. It contains no requirement for close communion, but from the early years only baptised believers of that faith and order were admitted. About 1932 'faith and order' in the Rules were replaced by 'those who believe in the infallibility of the Word of God'. For the next thirty years this was strictly enforced. Mr Amess was relieved to find this no longer enforced and sought an assurance from the officers that it would not be re-introduced. He served the church until 1986 when he went to Duke Street Baptist Church, Richmond. The present pastor, the Revd Bryan C. Brown, commenced his ministry that year.

The author used documents held by the Suffolk Records Office. Although he refers on page 32 to an article in *The Earthen Vessel*, the reviewer wonders whether he has consulted the various Strict Baptist magazines. He does not appear to have seen the obituary notices for several of its former pastors and was probably also unaware of the unpublished manuscript by Ralph F. Chambers in the Library of the Strict Baptist Historical Society entitled *The Strict Baptist Chapels of England: The Chapels of East Anglia Covering the Counties of Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire*, which gives additional information about James Nunn. Nonetheless,

REVIEWS

The Bethesda Story Re-told is a worthwhile publication, which the reviewer has read with pleasure.

MICHAEL J. COLLIS

Marjorie Reeves and Jean Morrison, eds., *The Diaries of Jeffery Whitaker, Schoolmaster of Bratton, 1739-41*, (Volume XLIV of the Wiltshire Record Society) lxiv + 108pp, Trowbridge 1989, obtainable from M. J. Lansdown, 53 Clarendon Road, Trowbridge, Wilts, £15 + p&p.

'For they had a strong sense of history': this comment on the Whitaker family also characterises their Reeves descendants, for it is to the pen of Marjorie Reeves that we owe our introduction to this family and through it to so much of the outlook and activity of rural Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see also her *Sheep Bell and Ploughshare: the Story of Two Village Families*, 1978). The Wiltshire Record Society has already served dissent well with their recent publication of the Certificates and Registration of Wiltshire Chapels and Meeting Houses (W.R.S., xl, 1984 - reviewed BQ April 1989, pp.60-61), to this they now add this edition of Jeffery Whitaker's Diaries.

As is to be expected, the diaries are exceptionally well transcribed, contexted and analysed. Thus we have comment on the rural economy around Bratton and its social pecking order, local administration and Bratton nonconformity, together with information on the Whitaker family and Jeffery and his school in particular. The text is divided with full critical apparatus, including notes on the principal families mentioned in the text, six illustrations and a glossary.

The Baptist connexion probably dates back to before 1663 when the son of Jeffery Whitaker (1624-87) is recorded in the Parish Register as 'born' not 'baptized'. Originally the Bratton Baptists worshipped in the neighbouring village of Erlestoke which registered a place of Nonconformist worship in 1662 with which the Aldridge relations of the Whitakers were connected. This was the 'Ecclestocke Baptist Church' which sent representatives to the first General Assembly of Particular Baptists held in London in 1689. By 1698 the house of Jeffery Whitaker (1664-1737) in Bratton was also licensed for nonconformist worship, and the Bratton-Erlestoke group seems to have operated as one church with two congregations until Erlestoke disappeared in the 1750s. The principal concern of this volume is Jeffery Whitaker (1703-25) who seems to have been a staid but devoted member, and sometime deacon and treasurer, of the Bratton congregation during those quiet years that preceded the impact of the Evangelical Revival.

In the Diary texts for sermons are regularly recorded. Piety and expediency live happily together. 'If God in his providence should see fit that I should have small-pox, I hope I shall rely alone on Him for support through Jesus Christ,' writes Jeffery, though this does not stop the next entry reading, 'Rode to Westbury to Dr Bayley for physic.' When at a good old age his end did come, he left £350 to the Meeting House to endow a regular ministry, for an annual sermon warning young people against the evils of the Warminster Fair, to help the poor of the village, and to provide instruction for poor children in reading and writing.

From these diaries we have evidence of a Baptist school, probably started by Jeffery the elder, not previously noticed, and developed by Jeffery the younger, significantly a layman who mixed schoolmastering with farming. The boys at his school, which numbered twenty to thirty plus scholars, were in part drawn from local Baptist families. Up to half were boarders who regularly swelled the size of the Bratton congregation, doubtless also improving its age profile. On weekdays they were grounded in a basic education of a practical rather than a classical

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orientation. In the records here presented, farm, chapel and school all hold together as the environment in which one rather lonely but devout schoolmaster, who combined a certain bookishness with practical skills and providential respect for the created order, exercised his Christian stewardship.

JHYB

Faith Bowers, *Called to the City: three ministers of Bloomsbury*, 1989, 48pp, £2-50 Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 235 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2H 8EL

Distinguished churches demand distinguished ministers who in their turn require distinguished historians. Faith Bowers in this collection has served Bloomsbury as well as the ministers whose ministries she describes. William Brock, Peto's chosen agent to found the new cause, was a Devon boy who came to London after completing his apprenticeship as a watchmaker, swiftly moving from lay preaching in a village church through training at Stepney to become, aged 26, the minister of the prestigious St Mary's Church at Norwich. After fifteen years at Norwich he was persuaded, after a Moses-like recitation of incapacities, to accept the charge at Bloomsbury with expensively endowed premises but as yet no church membership. A warm-hearted, moderate Calvinist, he was described as 'the first Baptist minister to *popularize* evangelical doctrine among men of thought and culture, especially young men.' The record is not confined to minister but embraces an analysis of the kind of church that Brock built.

With Tom Phillips, a similar warm commitment to fundamental evangelical doctrine is present though the precise nature of its specific clauses seems sometimes to be hidden beneath the force of Welsh rhetoric, a formula which seems to serve well what had now become the denomination's central church in London. A man of many initiatives - necessary to meet the changing needs of early twentieth-century London, he was described as 'an autocrat - but a very benevolent one'. Under him the church thrived, developing many contacts beyond a traditional Baptist constituency. Not afraid of controversy, either in the pulpit or in the press, on the whole Phillips turned it to the advantage of the church's witness.

Townley Lord was a scholar pastor who did not let his learning interfere with his ministerial usefulness. The youngest recipient of London University's DD at the time of its award, he nevertheless personified the compassion of the Christian gospel. He took pains over his preaching, advertising titles to engage the interest of the uncommitted, familiar as he was with ordinary people's problems, who here are allowed to speak alongside some other, less ordinary Baptists, unique to a fellowship such as Bloomsbury. Church life at Bloomsbury under Lord was busy with bustle though spiritual priorities were never forgotten. Throughout the ministries here described it is the range within the Bloomsbury constituency that comes across as making the minister's work at Bloomsbury so challenging, to which, of course, in Lord's case can be added editorship of the *Baptist Times* and the presidency of the Baptist World Alliance. Theologically too there was diversity - for Townley Lord both pressed the Christian mind to explore new dimensions of Christian thinking but at the same time rejoiced and shared in the traditional but effective evangelism undertaken by Billy Graham, a not uncharacteristic stretch of Baptist sympathies.

JHYB