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Old Wisbech Records.

THERE is a volume containing registrations of births, burials, marriages and receptions into the church on baptism, from 1700 till 1837, concerning the Baptized Believers who owned Universal Redemption at Wisbech. It had escaped from its proper custodian, but found its way into the hands of an antiquary whose ancestors had belonged to the church. He printed a dozen copies of a transcript, and lodged the original at Somerset House. It contains 174 pages, not all full, and used in rather curious order, but the entries are mostly contemporary. A study of this, and of the Assembly Books of the old General Baptists will supplement the historical statement made in 1905 at the 250th anniversary, by the Rev. J. H. Brooksbank.

The first known ministers were Edmond Smith and Israel Cave, ordained in the presence of delegates from the Fenstanton church. In the breathing space of 1672, Thomas Taylor took out a licence to preach in the house of Joshua Johnson. But not till 1697 did the church rally from the persecution, to start records and to build a meeting house. This was erected in Place's Yard and served for more than a century.

Who was the elder at this time is not quite clear; Henry Place and Benjamin Grantham undertook to collect to relieve Marham of Lynn; Place was a woollen-draper, Grantham apparently was related to the famous Thomas Grantham who had lately died. But probably Francis Morris, messenger of the churches in this district, gave some pastoral care, for when he died at Needham Hall in 1706, he was buried in the meeting house here, and the entry in the register book is one of the earliest. A messenger was a sort of diocesan bishop, who had previously been elder of one church; he was appointed at the request of the churches in the district, with the consent of his own church; and the relation of elder might or might not continue. Evidently Morris had sustained some relation here, and his decease led in 1710 to the election of a new elder, John Sharman.

The register book records his ordination on June 12, and the renewal of the covenant by seven men and twenty-four women. His family has left many marks in Baptist history, and this book fills in a few gaps. His first wife Mary was buried in 1715, he himself in 1722-3, his widow Ann in 1732. Ten days before this last death, his son John was ordained deacon; John junior married Ann Fish in 1737, and was buried in 1742-3. In a later generation, Edward Sharman of Cottesbrook, a farmer, was dismissed from College Lane in Northampton to form a new church at Guilsborough, but about 1790 was called to be pastor at Moulton. Within the next ten years he denied the Godhead of Christ, and published two letters against Trinitarian doctrine. Nathan Sharman about the same time is heard of in the neighbourhood at Arnesby, going on to Cheney.

When Elder John Sharman died in 1723, the Wisbech church profited by Messenger Nathaniel Locking; but he only survived two years, and was then laid to rest in the meeting house, where his widow Mary followed him eleven years later. Meanwhile William Fisher was ordained Elder in 1732 on the fifth of June, and the covenant was again renewed. His pastorate lasted till his death in 1747, and then came another interregnum. We know however that in 1737 Gilbert Boyce had married Hannah Matthew here, and we may feel sure that this active Messenger would not neglect the widowed church.

John Proud came from Bucks in 1756 and remained till his death in 1784. But this pastorate was decidedly chequered, and two exceptional entries testify to the strained relations. In 1776 it was agreed to try and bury all former words and acts of misconduct in oblivion and absolutely forgive one another. The trial was evidently unsuccessful, and five years later the minister at Long Sutton came over as peace-maker, when it was unanimously agreed that Proud should continue Elder for life, provided he maintained the Christian character in his conduct of life.

When he passed away the church lost no time in calling Joseph Freeston. His pastorate raised the question whether the church should remain in fellowship with the old General Baptists, or should join the New Connexion to which he belonged. Although the church as a whole adopted the latter course, there were continual withdrawals during the next fourteen years. The threads are rather tangled, but apparently two distinct causes arose about this time.

One met in Deadman's Lane, afterwards called Church Lane. It was gathered by Richard Wright the famous Unitarian Baptist,

and in 1805 it joined the old General Assembly to which the Place's Yard church had formerly belonged. But it did not long continue in that fellowship, and it subsequently declared that it no longer regarded itself as a Baptist church. Apparently this is the section which in 1831 had Neil Walker as its pastor, and in 1837 was ministered to by John Thomas Cooper. In popular language, these would be called Unitarians.

The church meeting in Upper Hill Street, formerly Ship Lane, put out no claim to antiquity, but avowedly organised in 1794. A pastor named Fisher was reported that year to Rippon, and in 1837 Robert Reynoldson was returned as its leader.

But the main stock held on its way, though much weakened by the dissensions, and disheartened by the removal of Freeston to Hinkley in 1799. Joseph Jarrom succeeded three years later, and held the reins of office for half a lifetime. A new chapel was opened in 1803 by Dan Taylor, at Ely Place, the old building still remaining. Jarrom had antiquarian tastes, and filled scores of pages in this register book with records of births, noting on what authority he made them. They all cease in 1837, manifestly because of the new law. Under this Act, all entries down to this date were to be accepted as good evidence, but the books were to be sent to Somerset House. For about twenty years this particular book did not reach that repository, but now is in safe custody and accessible to all who will pay the fees.

Since Mr. Jarrom closed his pastorate in 1838, eight ministers have tended the flock, the ancient meeting house in Place's Yard has been sold, and a new chapel has replaced the structure opened by Dan Taylor.