

Ancient Baptist Churches

ANCIENT BAPTIST CHURCHES IN ENGLAND

Hill Cliffe, near Warrington.

WE have reliable evidence that a Separatist, and, probably, a Baptist Church, has existed for several centuries in a secluded part of Cheshire, on the borders of Lancashire, about a mile and a-half from Warrington. No spot could be better chosen for concealment than the site on which this ancient chapel stood. Removed from all public roads, enclosed by a dense wood, affording ready access into two counties, Hill Cliffe was admirably suited for the erection of a conventicula illicita, an illegal conventicle. The ancient chapel built on this spot was so constructed that the surprised worshippers had half-a-dozen secret ways of escaping from it, and long proved a meeting-place suited to the varying fortunes of a hated and hunted people.

Owing to the many changes inseparable from the eventful history of the church at Hill Cliffe, the earliest records have been lost. But two or three facts point to the very early existence of the community itself. In 1841 the then old chapel was enlarged and modernised; and, in digging for the foundation, a large baptistry of stone, well-cemented, was discovered. How long this had been covered up, and at what period it was erected, it is impossible to state; but as some of the tombstones in the graveyard adjoining the chapel were erected in the early

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part of the Sixteenth Century, there is some probability for the tradition that the chapel itself was built by the Lollards who held Baptist opinions. One of the dates on the tombstones is 1357, the time when Wycliffe was still a Fellow at Merton College, Oxford; but the dates most numerous begin at the period when Europe had just been startled by Luther's valiant onslaught upon the Papacy, and Henry the Eighth had recently published his book against the German Reformer, which earned for him the title of "Defender of the Faith." Many of these tombstones, and especially the oldest, as we can testify from a personal examination, look as fresh and clear as if they were engraved. only a century ago.

The names of some of the early ministers of Hill Cliffe chapel have been snatched from oblivion. One of them, Mr. Weyerburton, or Warburton, was related to the oldest family in the county of Chester, was a person of substance, and "a true warrior of Christ's Church." His connection with Hill Cliffe chapel, as its minister, was accidentally discovered some years ago in examining the title-deeds of the Warburton property. Mr. Weyerburton died six years after the destruction of

the Spanish Armada. A record of this good man's life, if one could obtain it, would throw much light upon the condition of the Separatists and Anabaptists in England. during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Although Mr. Weyerburton is the first minister of Hill Cliffe of whom anything is known, he is not necessarily to be regarded as the earliest minister of the congregation. Mr. Dainteth succeeded Mr. Weyerburton. The graveyard contains the tomb of his successor – Thomas Slater Leyland, "a minister of the Gospel," as the inscription tells us. He was buried in the year preceding the death of Queen Elizabeth. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Mr. Tillam was the minister of Hill Cliffe. Oliver Cromwell worshipped at the chapel when his army lay at Warrington, and one of his officers occupied the pulpit. Thomas Lowe succeeded Mr. Tillam, and attended the General Assembly

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of Baptists held in London the year after the landing of William, Prince of Orange. This (1689) was also the date of the passing of the Act of Toleration, from which period, as every Dissenter knows, really begins the legal diffusion of Nonconformity throughout Great Britain. During the pastorate of the next minister, Mr. Francis Turner, a man of great ability, of restless zeal, and of extensive usefulness, the first Baptist church was formed in Liverpool, mainly through the labours of some of Mr. Turner's converts.

Hill Cliffe is undoubtedly one of the oldest Baptist churches in England, but its claim to be the oldest is still disputed by some. The earliest deeds of the property have been irrecoverably lost, but the extant deeds, which go back considerably over two hundred years, describe the property as being "for the use of the people commonly called Anabaptists." The modern chapel stands upon the gentle slope of a sandstone hill. The wood which embosomed the ancient sanctuary has long since been cut down, and the present modest meeting-house is conspicuous from afar, – from the streets of quaint old, Warrington, and from the wide reach of level country by which that historic town is surrounded.

Eythorne, Kent.

The church at Eythorne, Kent, owes its origin to some Dutch Baptists, who settled in this country in the time of Henry the Eighth. They were, doubtless, tempted to make England their home by the brisk trade that sprang up between this country and Holland, soon after the marriage of Henry with Anne of Cleves (1640). According to a long prevalent tradition, ("uninterrupted and uncontradicted," says one authority,) Joan Boucher, or Joan of Kent, was a member of the Baptist church at Eythorne. Joan was a lady of some position, and had ready access to the court. Much of her time was spent in visiting her friends in prison, and in relieving, with a bountiful hand, their necessities. For the greater secrecy, she was accus-

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tomed to tie religious books in strings under her dress, and so the more readily pass with them into Court. Strype says that she did very much to promote the circulation of Tyndale's New Testament, then recently published. A great reader of the Scriptures herself, she sought to persuade others to follow her example. The Protestant Inquisitors, hearing that she held some unusual views on the physical body of Christ, summoned her to appear "in the chapel of the blessed Mary in St. Paul's." Long and tedious examinations followed. Joan was cast into prison. Cranmer, Latimer, and others, here sought to reason her out of her opinions. She remained unmoved, and was therefore "left to the secular arm to suffer her deserved punishment," for daring, that is, to think differently from prelates so grave, and a church so recently reformed. Nearly twelve months elapsed before her sentence was executed. Modern writers have sought to throw the blame of her martyrdom on the Council, and thus shield Cranmer from its odium. Others regard as purely mythical the story of Edward's tears when asked to sign Joan's death warrant, and Hallam thinks that the tale ought to vanish from history. However this may be, on the 2nd of May, 1550, Joan of Kent was led out to Smithfield. Even at the stake, she was still worried by the slanders and misrepresentations of her enemies, and to Bishop Scorey, who repeated them, Joan answered, with the plain speech that distinguished the age, "You lie like a rogue. Go, read the Scriptures." The Bishop might need the advice, for aught that appears to the contrary.

In the Calendar of State Papers (Domestic Series, 1547 – 1580), under the date of October 28th, 1552, we have this entry: "Northumberland, to Sir William Cecill. Wishes the King would. appoint Mr. Knox to the Bishopric of Rochester. He would be a whetstone to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a confounder of the Anabaptists lately sprung up in Kent." It would be historically inaccurate to regard this as the first intimation of the existence of Baptists, as a separate community in

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England. Apart from the probabilities about the still earlier origin of Hill Cliffe Church, it should not be forgotten that Henry the Eighth had long before 1650 proclaimed to the nation how, "like a good Catholic priest, he abhorred and detested their (the Anabaptists) wicked and abominable errors and opinions;" that in his second proclamation, he had warned all Anabaptists and Zwinglians to depart out of the country, under pain of death; and that in a third proclamation, when Cranmer was a Protestant archbishop, Cranmer and eight others were authorized to make diligent search for Anabaptist men, Anabaptist letters, and Anabaptist books, full power being put into Cranmer's hands to deal capitally with each offender. The Baptists, in King Edward's days, might have lately sprung up in Kent, but these proclamations

show that they were not then known for the first time in England.

One singular fact, perhaps without a parallel, in the history of this ancient General Baptist church at Eythorne, deserves to be mentioned: the names of the pastors, from the close of the Sixteenth Century to the last quarter of the Seventeenth Century, were John Knott. The first John Knott became the pastor of Eythorne somewhere between 1590 and 1600, and the last John Knott removed to Chatham in 1780. One of these Mr. Knotts, it is uncertain which, was a blacksmith, and attracted the notice of the informers by his zeal as a preacher. Whilst working in his shop, some friend brought him word that an officer and, a party of men 'were coming over Eythorne Down to pounce upon him. Knott hurriedly escaped by a back door, and hid himself in an old saw-pit, covered by nettles and other weeds. Presently the informers came into Mr. Knott's house, where they found his wife, with a child in her arms. On asking for Mr. Knott, the little child, suspecting no danger, cried out, "Daddy's gone out!" and would, perhaps, have further betrayed its father's whereabouts, but for a vigorous shaking from the mother, who at length succeeded in making it hold its tongue. While "the man-takers" searched about the

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house and neighbourhood for her husband, Mrs. Knott, with great presence of mind, bustled about the house, and put out the humble dinner for her family. The search proving fruitless, and the men finding the family dinner smoking on the table when they returned, asked Mrs. Knott to give them some refreshment. This she did instantly, and with the greatest cheerfulness. Mrs. Knott's kindness told favourably upon the informers. They were so well satisfied with her treatment of them, that they left the house, declaring they would make no further search after her husband, nor do anything to distress so good-natured a woman. For that time, at least, Mr. Knott escaped out of their hands. It is also said, probably concerning the same man, that on another occasion his goods were confiscated and put up to auction. So much was he respected by his neighbours, that not one of them would even offer a bid for his goods at the sale; and the strangers who were present, taking their cue from his neighbours, also declined to purchase them. Mr. Knott's goods, therefore, remained unsold.

It is worthy of record that the Church of Christ in this little village has existed for more than three hundred years without a single unfriendly division, and with a steadfast adherence to the faith and practice of the Primitive Church.

Bocking and Braintree, Essex.

In Strype's Ecclesiastical Memorials, we find these words, under date 1560: "Sectaries appeared now in Essex and Kent, sheltering themselves under the profession of the Gospel, of whom complaint was made to the Council. These were the first that made separation from the Church of England, having gathered congregations of their own." They were the first, that is, of which

Strype had heard. "The congregation in Essex was mentioned to be at Bocking; that at Kent was at Faversham, as I learnt from an old register. From whence I also collect that they held the opinions of the Anabaptists and. the Pelagians; that there were contributions among them for

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the better maintaining of their congregations; that the members of the congregation in Kent went over with the congregation into Essex, to instruct and join with them; and that they had their meetings in Kent, and in divers places besides Faversham." In other words, the Kent churches at Eythorne, Faversham, Sandwich, Canterbury, perhaps, and other places, helped to build up, if they did not actually originate, the church at Bocking.

Bocking and Braintree are two parishes divided by the main road, and the whole is now known as Braintree. The "complaints," by whomsoever made, against the Baptists at Bocking, led to their being watched, and about sixty persons were in the house when the sheriff interrupted their assembly. They confessed to the Council that they had met "to talk the Scriptures," and that they had not communed at the parish church for two years."* Some were fined and set at liberty. Others were imprisoned, and remained until Queen Mary came to the throne, when they were released, only again to be taken into custody, and by-and-by to the stake.

Among the most eminent of the ministers thus dragged, for conscience' sake, before the Protestant Inquisition, with Cranmer at its head, was Mr. Humphrey Middleton. By order of Cranmer he was kept in prison until the last year of the reign of Edward the Sixth. Middleton is reported. to have said to Cranmer, after Cranmer had pronounced his condemnation: "Well, reverend sir, pass what sentence you think fit upon us. But that you may not say you were not forewarned, I testify that your turn will be next." He was one of those who earned a martyr's crown in the reign of Mary.

Mr. Henry Hart was another of the teachers connected with

*We are told in Strype's Memorials of Cramner, that, on the particular Sunday when these sixty men were surprised, "There arose among them a great dispute 'Whether it were necessary to stand or kneel, bareheaded or covered, at prayers?' and they concluded the ceremony not to be material, but that the heart before God was required, and nothing else."

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the churches in Kent and Essex. But little is known of Hart, of George Brobridge, and of others, beyond their names. Hart was imprisoned, this much is known of him, in the dismal days of Queen Mary, and zealously combated.in jail the predestinarian views of some other victims of Mary's gloomy and cruel fanaticism. Bradford was one of his opponents.

The Bocking-Braintree church-book, still in existence, carries back the authentic records of the

church for more than two hundred years; but there is no question that the origin of the church itself dates back to the days of Edward the Sixth.

Tiverton, Devon, Shrewsbury, Stoney Stanton, and other churches, claim to be more than two centuries old, and the first is said to have existed since the last years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. But the three churches we have mentioned – Hill Cliffe, Eythorne, and Bocking deservedly rank as the most

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