

Historical notes of Ebenezer Chapel, Burnley.*

It may not generally be known that the Ebenezer Chapel is one of the oldest Nonconformist places of worship in the town; a meeting place was formed soon after 1770, and in an old register still preserved entries as far back as 1786 may be found. It is a matter of deep regret that no document of historical value relating to the foundation of the church and the earlier efforts of these first Burnley Baptists can be found; but enough can be gathered from letters of the period and pages of contemporary journals to furnish an interesting chapter for our readers.

The Baptist cause in Burnley owes its origin to the labours of the indefatigable Dan Taylor, the “father” and guiding spirit of the General Baptist movement, founder of the G. B. Churches at Wadsworth (Birchcliffe), Shore, Halifax, and many other places, and whose name is still a household word in Baptist families. Dan Taylor is worthy to be remembered as the Wesley of the Baptist denomination, and probably no man before our day has done so much as he to popularise Baptist principles and to extend their knowledge and influence throughout the country. Formerly a Methodist, and afterwards a Baptist by persuasion he devoted himself assiduously to the preaching of the Gospel and the establishment and fostering of churches of the Baptist faith. From entries in his journal, it appears that in 1779 he preached no fewer than 350 public discourses, and his work during that year was by no means exceptional. Before his removal from the Halifax district, in 1785, at the age of 47, he frequently observed that he had travelled for the purpose of spreading the Gospel more than the entire circuit of the globe! All this, we must remember, before the era of the railways! It is not surprising that among his other efforts that he should have undertaken that starting of a preaching station at Burnley — which he describes as “a wild heathenish place on the Lancashire moors!”

For several years Mr. Taylor preached on occasion at Worsthorne, but at length for various reasons it was resolved to move the services to Burnley, which is spoken of as “a considerable town.” In October, 1779, he writes:

“A few weeks ago I ventured to hire a house in the market place of Burnley, a town of some note in Lancashire, to preach in. The town is a wretched place; no religion in or near it, that we know of. (Surely Mr. T. must have been aware of the existence of St. Peter’s?) The Methodists have made several attempts there, I am told, but have always been beaten out. The Quarter Sessions at Preston being far distant, I wrote to the Bishop of Chester’s Court for a license, and received one a month since; so that I went to open the place on the 10th inst., and intend being there again on the 31st. We intend to preach there once every Lord’s Day. The room is filled and the prospect encouraging. I am particular familiar with a physician and an attorney in the town, which I think will be of some advantage!”

*Copied August 16, 1928 from a newspaper cutting, probably *Burnley Gazette* about September 1901.

Evidently the pioneer did not expect smooth sailing at first; anyhow he apparently deemed it prudent, while hoping for the best, to prepare for the worst; from which we observe that there are times when the moral and material support of Law and Medicine are profitable even to Divinity.

An idea may be formed of the difficulties incidental to this work from an account written by a friend who resided with Mr. Taylor from 1781–2.

“I generally heard him twice and often thrice on the Sabbath, and three or four times on the week-days, in dwelling-houses at a distance of from two to five miles from his own habitation. When I have walked with him, I have been surprised at his activity and alertness. He could climb the steep hills with as much ease as I could walk on the plain, and skip like a goat in difficult passages where I was afraid of my neck. One Lord’s Day evening, after preaching twice at Birchcliffe, he walked to Burnley, about 14 miles distant. I accompanied him. We had scarcely time to take refreshment previous to starting, and it must have been half-past seven when we arrived. He preached in a dwelling-house to about 30 people, and after preaching, having smoked his pipe and taken a little bread and butter, and a small quantity of warm ale, we set out for Wadsworth. We arrived at home about two in the morning. I was tired to excess, but he complained very little, and in the morning resumed his labours at nearly the usual hour. Exertions similar to this were common with him, not only when I resided at Wadsworth but before and after that period.”

When Mr. T. first went to preach at Worsthorne a violent spirit of opposition manifested itself in some of the neighbouring places. On one of his earlier visits a number of rude people assembled before the hour appointed for the service, and openly declared their intention of pulling him down from the pulpit. This was heard by one of his friends who had come with him from Wadsworth, and filled him with alarm. He took an opportunity before the commencement of worship to ask Mr. T. if he had brought his license with him. “For what purpose?” inquired the preacher. “Because,” replied his friend, “a number of people are come determined to pull you down.” “Pooh, pooh!” Mr. Taylor exclaimed, with a smile, and without taking any further notice calmly began the service. He had scarce read his text, Hosea, 13, 9:— “O Israel thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help,” when a stout man, with a look of black resolution, pushed his way through the congregation, right towards the pulpit. His friend now began to tremble, supposing that the attack was about to commence; but the preacher, fixing his eye steadily on the man, pursued his discourse with the utmost composure. The intruder listened attentively till the sermon was finished, and then retired without any attempt at disturbance. That such faithful labours as these were not unrewarded is shown in a letter dated April 22, 1777, in which he says:— “Th[e]re is an appearance of great success in most of the places where we preach, and at one place in Lancashire which we have lately entered, though all other preachers for 20 or 30 years past have been beaten out of it. The people are ignorant, and even barbarous beyond description. Five from thence have lately offered for baptism, whom I expect to baptise on the 5th of May.”

Of the progress of events at Burnley after the tireless leader left these northern parts there is but scanty knowledge. The only source of information available to the writer is a church register which affords a threefold clue by means of a list of church members, and also of births and deaths. The “register book” contains the following introductory note:— “Register book belonging to the General Baptists meeting at the chapel in Burnley Lane; begun in a

former book in the year 1778, and transcribed into this in the month of February, 1815, by the appointment of the church, also a list of the persons interred in the burying ground of the said chapel." It is the painstaking labour of Mr. George Dean, pastor and "scribe" of the church from about 1808–1818 that we owe the preservation of these accounts, apart from which the history of the church from its commencement up to 1844 would be an absolute blank. Concerning the life and work of this worthy successor of Dan Taylor much might be told. In a summary of the history of Ebenezer Church compiled since 1870 there is a note to the effect that "about this period –(1815)– a Mr. Dean frequently supplied the pulpit." So quickly do we pass into obscurity and our works are forgotten! It is but fitting that the one to whom we are so deeply indebted for the meagre records that are left to us should himself be rescued from the oblivion into which he has thus undeservedly fallen.

Mr. Dean, like his illustrious predecessor, hailed from Halifax, which is described in his memoir as "a beautiful, wealthy and pleasant town in the West Riding of Yorkshire." Born in 1770, he did not begin to preach until he was over 30 years of age. He must have come of pedestrian stock for we are told that though his industry in the sacred work was unremitting he seldom enjoyed the privilege of riding a horse, and it was his regular practice to walk eight, ten or 12 miles to his preaching appointments on Sunday mornings. It would appear that during several years he did service as an occasional preacher at Ebenezer, but in 1811 (when he would be about 42 years of age) "the General Baptist Church at Burnley" on the recommendation of the G. B. Conference, invited him to remove to them "to preach the word of life stately;" and after due consideration he decided to comply with their request, although he did not remove his family from Halifax for some time, and for two summers and one winter he travelled from Halifax to Burnley, a distance of 20 miles each way, in order to preach on the Lord's Day. Mr. Dean was the father of a large family, for amongst many other entries in the register previously referred to are eight in his own hand recording the birth of one son and seven daughters. Under the date 1815 we find a record of the death of Mrs. Dean. A tablet raised to her memory is still preserved at Ebenezer and reads: "In memory of Letty, the wife of George Dean, minister of this place, who departed life June 23rd, 1813 Aged 49 years.

Long in affliction sore I lay,
And drank its bitter cup;
But now to realms of endless day
Jesus has raised me up.
Weep not for me, my partner dear,
Nor you, my much loved babes,
But rather shed the mourning tear
For others and yourselves.
Yet while you do sojourn below,
Do something more than weep;
Your great Creator learn to know,
And his commands to keep;
That in afflictions darkest night,
When death or age comes on,
Your joys may shine divinely bright,
And light you through the gloom.

Mr. Dean's interest in the preservation of records is observable for not only at Ebenezer but afterwards at Lineholme (Todmorden) he did valuable work in this respect, and it is due to

him that the early history of the latter church is so faithfully recorded and well preserved.

What remuneration he received for his services at Ebenezer it is impossible to ascertain; but it is doubtful whether he had as much as Goldsmith's village person, who was "passing rich on £40 a year;" for on his removal to the freshly started cause at Lineholme it is recorded:—

"At a Church Meeting January 17, 1819, held in the new chapel: 1st, Does the church approve of Brother Dean coming with his family to dwell amongst us as our settled minister? Answer unanimously, Yes, We do. 2nd, We think it best that Brother Dean have a certain sum quarterly to depend on for his labours. Agree we give him £16 yearly till we are able to do more for him."!

So far as we know never did he receive a larger allowance than this mere pittance. It is related that on one occasion it was proposed to raise his salary to £20, but he replied that he did not want any more than he had at present, which would supply his wants and those of his family. How such a generous spirit can do under such circumstances to help others is set forth in his memoir.

"He laboured to the end of his life on a very small salary, though he had considerable expenses in supporting his family, and from his own personal affection with the gravel and stone. Likewise, the husband of one of his daughters died, and left two children for his widow to support. She with her children removed to her father for assistance and protection. His aged mother about the same time lost her second husband. He took her and her daughter, who was in a very infirm state into his house. After the two last removed back to Halifax he gave them something regularly towards their support till they died."

All out of £16 per year!

The account of his tragic death will be read with interest. On December 16th, 1855, a little girl named Harriet Sheard had been to the school at Lineholme to a Christmas treat. On her return home, as the night was dark and the river near the chapel house swollen with the heavy rains, he took a lantern and walked with the child through the chapel yard over the bridge into the turnpike road leading from Todmorden to Burnley. He gave the girl and the lantern into the charge of a passer-by and returned, but in the darkness missed the end of the bridge, and as there was no fence or wall between the road and the river he stepped into the flood and was carried down by the stream. The body was not found until January 23rd, 1864, when after much searching, it was dragged from the river at Elland, over 20 miles from the fatal spot where the mishap took place. This sad event created a deep impression throughout the district, and funeral sermons were preached in many places including Halifax, Birchcliffe, and Burnley.

Soon afterwards words were added to the above-mentioned tablet at Ebenezer to this effect:—"The above George Dean departed this life Dec. 16th, 1833, in the 64th year of his age. His mortal remains were interred at Haley Hill, Halifax."

There is still living at Lineholme an old lady named Mrs. Naylor who is the person referred to in the above account as having been piloted over the bridge by the unfortunate pastor.

A few items of special interest may be gleaned from the "register book" which Mr. Dean compiled with such care at Ebenezer, and to which his successors gave due attention in later days.

In many instances the entry of a birth or death supplies us with the name of the registrar of that day, who was possibly also the minister. Thus from 1786–1794 entries are to be found

signed Edmd. Whitaker; 1795–1800, Rich. Foulds; 1802–6, Thos. Wallworth; 1808–18, Geo. Dean; 1821–36, Hy. Asten; 1839–45, Thos. Gill; 1847, John Batey.

We notice frequent references to old local place names not very familiar to the present generation, e.g. Higher and Lower Timber Hill, Pike Hill, Free School Bank, Clivicher Laithe, Bottin, Sandbeds, Little London, Oldhouse and the Tollgate, Burnley Lane, are mentioned among other places, and these together with Ightenhill Park, Brunshaye, Monkhall, Extwistle, Lomeshaye, and Cockden would sufficiently indicate the long distances which many of the friends travelled to their place of worship.

The varied occupations of the members of the congregation show that the church was representative of all sections of the working classes. Thus we find entries:— “1815, John Lord, Labourer, Habergham Eaves; 1815, Robt. Kay, Weaver, Heyhead-in-Marsden; 1817, Wm. Cowpe, farmer, Lower Timber Hill; 1821, Thos. Huttell, Waggoner Henley; 1830, Hy. Asten, minister of the Gospel, Primrose Bank; 1829, David Pickard, spindle maker, Mountain Street; 1841 George Taylor, road surveyor, Cheapside; 1843 Jonathan Balmford, Printer, Park.”

We note also certain curious causes of dismissal, withdrawal, and exclusion from church membership, e.g. “Robert Jackson, withdrew from the church Nov. 25th, 1840. Cause: His joining the ‘Later Days Saints.’” “Phebe Jackson, excluded for heresy, having united herself to a Mormonite, Dec. 1840.” “Chas. Wood, excluded for union in a secret society about year 1885–86.” “Martha Slater, dismissed to the P .B. Church at Yorkshire Street, Burnley, Dec. 29, 1842. Cause of dismissal: She married a man who was a member there.” One cannot resist a smile at the quaint wording.

That the church of these early days developed the talents and exercised the gifts of its members is abundantly manifested. We read of one John Greenwood, Baptised Aug. 4th, 1822; “He was a good and and feared God above many.” Here is a record of the progress of one Thos. Booth:— “Appointed by the church assistant to the deacons, 1842; appointed treasurer for the church 1840; called out to preach the Gospel 1845. He is also a useful superintendent in the Sabbath School. Appointed a trustee in 1844 for the minister’s house, schoolroom, etc.”

We conclude by making the following extract, a record of the events possibly within the memory of some persons now living:— “Thos. Gill, baptised by Rev. W. Butler at Heptonstall Slack, Yorkshire, Dec. 11th, 1834; accepted the call of the church at Burnley, and came to reside here Dec. 1838; ordained to the pastoral office Dec. 26, 1839; baptised in five years from the beginning of his ministry here 149 persons.”

J.W.W.