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Baptist Gleanings in Stafford

THE Rev. A. G. Matthews, M.A., has written an admirable account of the Congregational churches in Staffordshire, prefaced with some account of the Puritans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers in the county during the seventeenth century. For the benefit of our readers and of future Baptist students who may undertake a similar volume for our own denomination, the chief Baptist facts are extracted.

In 1644 Captain John Garland and James Cokayne were examined by a minister, commissioned by a council of war at Stafford, for preaching at Ipstones (between Cheadle and Leek). First they claimed that the scriptures allowed every man to preach who had ability. Then they were accused of preaching that baptism without faith was of no force, that the baptising of infants was anti-christian, that soul and body both lie in the grave till the resurrection, that the calling of the clergy is anti-christian, that we may keep any day for the Sabbath, as well as the day we do keep. The result of the inquiry is unknown, and so are the future activities of these men.

In 1649 Colonel Henry Danvers was governor of Stafford, and member of a General Baptist Church there, whose Elder was Henry Hagger. These men were both active for five or six years in the neighbourhood. A group of churches in 1651 urged Cromwell to carry out a thorough reformation; another group in 1654 descended to details, and urged the regulation of alehouses.

The Quakers raided these General Baptist churches and won two prominent ministers, Thomas Hamersley and Humphrey Woolrich, who devoted themselves by public debate and otherwise to bring over all their friends; in this they had much success.

We should like to know the names of the County Tryers, both lay and minister.

In 1664 a pessimist magistrate kept reporting about plots by old soldiers, especially "they hotspurs, Anabaptists and Quakers"; next year he had arrested a company of conventiclers. One man did turn informer next year, and said that Major Gledman in London was ready to take command of four hundred men, for whom horses had been bought at Penkridge Fair. Meanwhile the constables were making presentations, and accused twenty-one people that year of being "Anabaptists"—

a good word to apply to anybody disliked—and twelve more of leaving their infants unbaptised.

The clergy reported to their bishop in 1669 that two conventicles were kept in Burton-on-Trent, both great; the place for the Baptist was either at the Shiltons, widow Honeworth, or Dixon Blount, or is not named. At Stafford John Wade sheltered three hundred or four hundred, including John Hudson, Samuel Harper, Thomas Dickinson. At Coulton (near Rugeley) thirty or forty Anabaptists met at the houses of George Wright and Richard Whiston. At Hanbury (near Tutbury) others met in the houses of Thomas Edwards, George Mallener, and Anne Cotton.

In 1672 the following licences were issued, avowedly for Baptists: On 25 July, for the parish of Audley (between Newcastle and Nantwich), Thomas Beech, for the house of John Cotrocke, and Thomas Sillito, for the house of Samuel Sillito. On 5 September, John Blundell, for the house of William Tomlinson, of Burton.

The church of Lichfield was still existing, and William Pardoe, even in prison, was able to help it. Dean Wood acknowledged in 1684 that, despite all his efforts, "three or four Anabaptists and one Quaker" declined to come to communion; and three years later he could only boast that he had stopped conventicles. In 1690 David Crosley found the Particular Baptists here, but preferring to meet outside the city. Lawrence Spooner was pastor about 1702, and was followed by Benjamin Hands, in whose day the centre was Little Saredon, on the way to Penkridge. Hands, however, was reported to Dr. John Evans in 1717 as at Darlaston, near Walsall and Wednesbury; his funeral sermon was preached in 1724 by Sing of Bridgnorth. For half a century there is no further sign of any Baptists in Staffordshire.

Baptist life began again in the county when members from Brierley Hill came to live at Coseley in 1776, whence arose the Darkhouse church. From this time Mr. Matthews devotes himself chiefly to the Congregational churches, but he gives a long and lively account of the proceedings of Benjamin Manders at Wolverhampton, involving the erection of a chapel at Temple Street in 1795.

One curious fact deserves to be followed up. Near Rushton, in a field overlooking the Dane Valley, are several gravestones, some dated from 1672, the oldest visible now is 1687. The farm was once owned by a Baptist, who bequeathed it with the condition that the house should always be available as a Baptist preaching station. This right was exercised in 1824, by the minister at Hanley. The last interment was about 1780.