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Baptists at Bewdley, 1649-1949.

BEWDLEY is a small town on the River Severn, set in the midst of lovely country, rich in history, tradition and romance. Its people have a sturdy self-consciousness born of rights conferred under an ancient charter and of their liberty to appeal direct to the Sovereign through the Lord High Steward in respect of any grievance they may feel. As one of the "towns of refuge" in bygone days it stood on many occasions as a bulwark against the avenger of blood, as the part of the town boundary known as "Catchem's End" reminds us.¹

According to Dr. Whitley² the early appearance of Baptist churches in Worcestershire was due in part to the presence in the Parliamentary forces of numbers of Baptists. No less than thirteen times during ten years the contending armies in the Civil War crossed its plains, and the city of Worcester witnessed the "crowning mercy" of Cromwell's victory over the Royalists. The Bewdley church, however, owed its inception to a native of the town, one John Tombes,³ the son of poor parents, who after passing through the local grammar school, entered Magdalen College, Oxford, at the age of fifteen. At twenty-one he was chosen public catechetical lecturer. He became vicar of Leominster, but fled to Bristol at the outbreak of the Civil War. After the taking of Bristol by the Royalists he escaped to London and was appointed minister of Fenchurch. Here he refused to allow the baptism of infants in his church, and was consequently deprived of his stipend. On his promise not to introduce the baptismal controversy into the pulpit he was made preacher of the Temple, but in 1645 was dismissed for publishing his first treatise on infant baptism. In 1646 he returned to Bewdley and was chosen minister of the chapel of St. Anne, a chapel of ease to Ribbesford, where he would not be obliged to christen. Here he put forth his *Apology for the Two Treatises on Infant Baptism*, in which he writes that he "must needs say that churches which

¹ See several references in I. L. Wedley, *Bewdley and its Surroundings* (1914).

² *Baptist Association Life in Worcestershire, 1655-1926*.

³ For accounts of Tombes and his disputation with Baxter see *A History of Bewdley* (1883) by John R. Burton; *The Life of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (1934) by F. J. Powicke; *A History of the English Baptists* (1947) by A. C. Underwood.

have no other than Infant Baptism are no true churches nor their members church members." He therefore founded a separate Baptist church in the town, consisting of twenty members, while continuing to exercise the cure of St. Anne's chapel. All the churches founded by Tombes are said to have been of the open communion type. On New Year's Day, 1649 he held in St. Anne's chapel his famous disputation with Richard Baxter, of Kidderminster, the controversy lasting from nine in the morning till five in the evening before a crowded and sometimes disorderly congregation. According to Wood,⁴ "their followers became like two armies, and the civil magistrate had much ado to quiet them." Writers' opinions differ as to who had the better of the argument, but from Dr. Powicke's account it appears that at any rate for courtesy Tombes shewed himself in a more favourable light than his opponent. The excitement and strain of the day's proceedings are reflected in the town's accounts, which reveal that money was afterwards paid for the repair of seats in the chapel, as well as for a quart of sack for Mr. Tombes and another minister!

Tombes, who never severed his connection with the Church of England, left Bewdley for Leominster in 1650. Among the small community he had founded were three men whom he had trained for the ministry,⁵ Richard Adams, John Eckels and Thomas Boylston. Adams was later ejected from Humberstone in Leicestershire and went to London, where he succeeded Daniel Dyke at Devonshire Square. John Eckels became successor to Tombes as minister of the little group at Bewdley, and we shall take up his story later. Thomas Boylston⁶ was a man of standing and influence during the Commonwealth and had probably been a captain in the New Model Army. He came in for attention at the Restoration. In 1653 he and Philip Mun were the elders of the church. The baptismal controversy did not, apparently, end with the departure of Tombes, for what is thought to be the first book published in Birmingham,⁷ *The Font Guarded* etc., by Thomas Hall, B.D., of Kings Norton was "occasioned partly by a dispute at Bely (i.e. Beoley) in Worcestershire, August 13th, 1651, against Joseph Pages, Dyer; Walter Rose, John Rose, Butchers, of Bromsgrove; John Evans, a Scribe, yet anti-scripturist; Francis Loxly, Sho-Maker." "A word to one Collier and another to Mr. Tombes" is added at the end of the

⁴ Wood, *Athenae Oxon*, iii, 1063.

⁵ William Stokes, *The History of the Midland Association of Baptist Churches* (1855). He is wrong about "Royston."

⁶ W. T. Whitley, *op. cit.*; *The Corporation of Bewdley under the later Stuarts*, Philip Styles (University of Birmingham Historical Journal, vol. 1, No. 1 (1947), pp. 99ff).

⁷ A. S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptists* (1939), pp. 21 and 22.

book.^{7a} During these years of wordy warfare but physical liberty the church appears to have carried on its worship and witness under the leadership of the two elders and John Eckels, but the last is said to have removed to Bromsgrove in 1651,⁸ from which place he continued to minister to the two churches. Eckels was called to the ministry⁹ at the age of sixteen and became known as "The Boy Preacher." In an elegy written on his death in 1711 tribute is paid to his youth, popularity and success as a preacher.

With fervent zeal the gospel seed he sows,
Which Bromsgrove, Bewdley, largely from him mows;
In active youth and manhood there, his charge,
Christ's work he plies with approbation large.

The Church is said by Dr. Whitley¹⁰ to have joined the Midland Association in 1658, but Stokes¹¹ says that in that year "the church proposed to join the Association, but both it and the one at Gloucester, that had made a similar proposal, were recommended first to ascertain if there was agreement in doctrine between themselves and the Association, and then, if they were found to agree, to renew the application at some future meeting. It does not appear certain that the application was repeated during that generation, and there is no evidence of the Bewdley church having actually joined the Association until the year 1718."

The return of Charles II meant the end of organised Baptist life, except perhaps for secret meetings. Many Worcestershire Baptists were carried off to prison, among them John Eckels, who is said to have been thrown into a dungeon and to have suffered much hardship. Crosby's story that a Mr. Swift, one of the members of Parliament for the county, secured Eckels' liberation by standing surety for him in the sum of £1,000 is doubted by Ford.¹² Thomas Boylston was otherwise dealt with. The Commissioners for executing the Corporation Act in Worcestershire came to Bewdley on August 1st, 1662, and, among other actions, "'thought it meet and expedient for ye publique safety' to remove Mr. Thomas Boylston—who had taken the oaths—from the office of a capital burgess."¹³ During the Indulgence of 1672 no place in Bewdley was registered for

^{7a} Beoley is, of course, not Bewdley, but the mention of Bromsgrove disputants is interesting.

⁸ James Ford, *History of the Baptist Church, Bromsgrove* (1916), p. 4.

⁹ Stokes, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹² *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³ Styles, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

Baptist worship, but with the renewal of persecution meetings of Baptists were reported there.¹⁴ It appears from Stokes¹⁵ that John Eckels continued to give pastoral oversight during these trying times, until 1688, when he became pastor of Bromsgrove only. What happened at the dawn of toleration we can only surmise, but the work went on and at Easter, 1698 William Hawkyns¹⁶ registered a building at Bewdley for Baptist worship. About 1700 a Mr. Clark¹⁷ exercised the oversight of the Church but there is no further information about him, unless he is to be identified with the man for whose services the church at Netherton asked in a letter to Bewdley dated October 30th, 1712. It appears from the letter that at that time there were two brethren in the church at Bewdley who were qualified for the work of the ministry, and the Netherton church therefore makes the request: "We desire and entreat you for the love you have to God and the precious souls of men that you will be willing to give your consent that we may have brother Clark to serve us in the gospel of Christ." A sidelight on the size of the church at that time is indicated in the burial registers kept by William Price, rector 1706-25, who noted specially the interments of Anabaptists and Quakers. "Between 1707-13 thirteen of the former and five of the latter are thus distinguished as 'not buried by ye Publick Minister.'"¹⁸

The next pastorate was short and, so far as the church was concerned, troubled. William Thompson¹⁹ came from Tewkesbury and was ordained in 1716 in a manner which seemed to the Association unsatisfactory. They sent the church a letter referring to it. "Though we don't look on it as invalid, yet we do think the management of it irregular, and that it ought not to be a precedent." In 1718 Thompson, having declined into Socinianism, the Association advised the church to cut him off from communion with them, which they did. After his separation, says Stokes, Thompson remained in the town for two years, causing much annoyance to the church. In 1719 the Association met for the first time at Bewdley, the rendezvous probably being "The Wheatsheaf," a famous coaching inn which now forms part of the Institute buildings.

By contrast the next pastorate was a long one. In 1718, on

¹⁴ Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Stokes, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁶ Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Stokes, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Styles, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 27, gives the date of Thompson as 1670, and makes his ministry last forty-eight years! This seems unlikely, and Stokes *op. cit.*, has the support of the Circular Letters in his case.

Thompson's exclusion, James Kettilby, a young member of the church and an occasional preacher, was engaged as a supply.

"After an extended probation of near eight years' duration, he became pastor, and was ordained May 20, 1725. He was a sound, judicious, humble minister, but never popular."²⁰ He continued faithfully to discharge his duties for fifty years, dying in 1767 in his seventy-first year. The membership in 1751 was only twenty-two.

A legacy of £100 in 1764 prompted the erection of a chapel, towards the cost of which the Baptist Board made a grant of £20 in 1767. After about three years of "supplies" the church decided to call another pastor, perhaps at the suggestion of the Association, which met again at Bewdley in 1770. John Blackshaw came from Tewkesbury (Stokes says Cheshire), was ordained in 1774 and left for Leicester five years later, after exercising a useful ministry. In 1778 Mrs. Mary Marlowe, of Leominster, left the interest on £150 to the church at Bewdley, (part of a larger bequest to benefit other Baptist churches also). The estate, however, realised only one quarter of what was anticipated in the will, and Bewdley received, instead of £6, only £1 7s. 9d., to be divided as to £1 0s. 10d. for the minister and 6s. 11d. per annum for the poor! The first payment was not made until nine years after the death of the testatrix. In 1779 Mr. Deykins, of Worcester, left £100, "the interest thereof to be paid annually for the support of the gospel in the church."

Three more pastorates cover the period from 1781 to 1799. John Pyne came from Shrewsbury and stayed until 1788, when he left for Bristol, as the church was too poor to support a pastor. In 1782 the Association met again at Bewdley and Pyne wrote the Circular Letter. For three years after Pyne's departure Richard Baylis, from Bilston, supplied the pulpit, and the church involved itself in debt on his account by building the house in the meeting-yard, so that he could have a place in which to work, "he being in the hardware business." This did not solve his problem and he gave up the pastorate, but during his short stay he had baptised a young man who was to exercise an important influence on the church in the days to come. George Williams from Wolverhampton succeeded Baylis in 1793 but returned to his trade in 1799 for the same reason that hastened Pyne's departure. He had unsuccessfully tried to run a school in order to augment his scanty income. Williams was ordained in 1794 and the Association came again to Bewdley the following

²⁰ Stokes, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

year. In 1796 various items were copied from an old minute book into one still in possession of the church, including the covenant and a list of members at that date. There were less than twenty. On Williams' departure he absent-mindedly or otherwise took with him the minister's baptising gown, "which he ought not to," but the church allowed him to keep it, and he used it at Bewdley on more than one occasion afterwards.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century we come to what is probably the outstanding ministry at Bewdley, not only for its length and quality—it lasted forty-two years—but for its financial effect on the future of the church. George Brookes was born in 1767, converted in his thirteenth year, and baptised by Richard Baylis in 1790. Among the mass of papers left by Brookes is an exercise book from which it appears that he received a sound education. As an apprentice at Kidderminster he took notes on Sundays of the sermons preached by the minister of the New Meeting, a habit which probably gave him insight into the proper ordering of thought in preaching. After a period of service as a deacon Brookes began to preach in 1800. In 1802, another brother, Thomas Griffin, also exercised his gifts before the church with acceptance, and these two were invited to become joint ministers. This arrangement continued until 1808, when Thomas Griffin left to form and superintend the church at Kidderminster. In 1813 Brookes was ordained as sole pastor of Bewdley. "For twenty-nine years," says Stokes,²¹ "he continued to break the bread of life to his people, with a consistency and holy integrity that endeared him to all who knew his character." Being a man of substance Brookes was able to serve the church without payment, and this financial relief gave the people an opportunity of taking a wider interest in the work of the Kingdom, particularly in missionary enterprise. Gifts were sent to Jamaica. Brookes interested himself in Moravian Missions. In 1813 he sent petitions to Parliament from both Bewdley and Kidderminster in support of Lord Teignmouth's appeal for Christian Missions in India. During his ministry the church's register of births from 1776, and of deaths and burials from 1756, were deposited at Somerset House. Two years before his death Brookes set aside two thousand pounds for the support of the future ministry at Bewdley, and provided some seven hundred books for the use of the resident minister. In the same year he licensed a building in Wribbenhall²² for Baptist worship.

About this time a British School was started in a factory

²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²² Entry copied by the Rev. A. S. Langley from the registers in the Bishop of Worcester's Registry Office.

near to the river, and afterwards transferred to the house in which Jonathan Birtwistle lived at Wribbenhall. According to Wedley services were held there on Sunday afternoons, conducted alternately by the Baptists and Congregationalists. Brookes may have had some hand in the establishment of the school as well as of the services. Birtwistle was a Baptist, and there is in the Chapel burial-ground a stone to the memory of his little son.²³

Before passing on to the next ministeries mention should be made of a man called John Thomas,²⁴ a native of Bewdley, who was dismissed from the church in 1802 and became pastor of Broseley, in Shropshire, where he ministered for thirty-nine years and became the progenitor of a remarkable number of descendants whose services to the Baptist Missionary Society have added great lustre to it. "A missionary yew tree" in the graveyard at Bewdley is said to have been planted by John Thomas.

Three short pastorates succeeded Brookes' long one. In 1843 William E. White came from Horton Academy, Bradford, but left for Eckington in 1846. Two years earlier the church re-joined the Midland Association, apparently preferring old connections to those of the newly formed Worcestershire Association. George Cozens, formerly of Brettel Lane, and directly from Fakenham, ministered from 1847 to 1854. During his pastorate renovations to the church were carried out. On his departure to Kington the seven hundred books left by George Brookes were reduced to six hundred and sixty-five, but Cozens returned eight more afterwards, and perhaps he was not responsible for the disappearance of the rest! From 1855 to 1857 Josephus Bailey served the church, the membership when he came standing at seventeen. Formerly of the Darkhouse, Coseley, church, he went from Bewdley to Brettel Lane.

Unfortunately, for the next thirty years, covered by the ministry of George James,²⁵ who came from Llanfihangel Crucorney, and retired in 1887, there are no records. It is possible they were deliberately destroyed. We owe to Wedley a description of a second John Thomas, who succeeded James. He lived at Ticknell and "was an expert on the English concertina, and with his children frequently gave concerts in the neighbourhood. One played the 'cello, two violins, another the piano,

²³ Wedley, p. 43. His paragraph on the burial ground is interesting.

²⁴ See an article in the *Baptist Times*, January 1st, 1942, by A. S. Langley.

²⁵ George James was the father of G. Howard James, at one time of Derby, and a prominent Christian Endeavour leader. One of his daughters was head-mistress of the British School at Wribbenhall, and a painter of some note in the district.

another was a vocalist, the flute and oboe parts being filled in by himself and another daughter on their concertinas. Their concerts generally included some of the best music of the great masters." It would appear that the Bewdley church was not so deeply impressed by this musical excellence as others, since Thomas went to Budleigh Salterton in two years. The twenty years' pastorate of Francis John Aust, who followed Thomas in 1891, was marked in that year by the reception of the church into the Worcestershire Association and by his election, a little before his death in 1911, to the vice-presidency. He was buried in Wribbenhall churchyard and among the many tributes paid to his character was one from the inmates of the almshouses. Herbert Nicholls from Mansfield succeeded Aust and remained two years. In 1912 Buckridge chapel was taken over by the Bewdley church, and an Adult School for men was tried. The weekly free-will offering system was adopted, and the first mention is made in the minutes of the proposed Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation Scheme of the Baptist Union. A letter was read at one church meeting from the Baptist Spiritualist Association, but no material support was given to it! John David Hamer ministered from 1913 to 1918, a period darkened even in the country by the shadows of the first World War. During this time a new name appears on the church roll and soon after among the deacons, that of C. C. Quayle, whose children are today rendering splendid service to the cause. In 1915 the church applied to join the new Settlement and Sustentation Scheme, and some difference of opinion arose as to whether it was right for the children in the Sunday School to be asked to contribute to it, since most of their parents were not Baptists. In 1918 the first appearance of a General Superintendent is recorded, R. M. Julian being called into consultation in a difficult situation that had arisen in the church, and which he succeeded in elucidating. During this pastorate a quaint little bit of ritual between the trustee of the Brookes Fund and the minister is recalled by one who watched it. On the first Sunday evening in each month the trustee, James Teague, would place by his side in the pew seven golden sovereigns. The minister would come up and ask: "Is this for me?" Being assured that it was, he quietly pocketed the money!

The period between the first and second World Wars was covered by four pastorates. Denis John Mills, an ex-missionary from China, in four years restored tranquillity to a troubled church and greatly increased interest in overseas missions. He went into retirement at Cheltenham in 1923. In 1924 James Briggs came from Birmingham with a fine reputation, and for nine years "worked with the zeal and energy of a man in the prime of life." He was sixty-six years old when he commenced

his ministry at Bewdley. In 1926 a new schoolroom and classrooms were built at a cost of £590. At Far Forest, the successor of the old cause at Buckridge, a church was formed and a mission hall erected. From Ossett in 1934 came Samuel George Dudley, M.C., exercising a ministry especially to men, but also introducing a number of innovations such as the use of the "Wayside Pulpit", the adoption of individual Communion cups and junior church membership. The Women's Own, which still flourishes under Miss Chapman's able leadership, and the Girls' Life Brigade came into the picture during this pastorate, which ended after three years by the acceptance of an invitation to Barnstaple.²⁶ In 1938 Ronald Lewis became minister, and for four years laboured with much acceptance among the people. Conditions in these years reveal the menace of total war, the blacking-out of the chapel and the use of the kitchen and classrooms as an emergency rest and feeding centre. An unprecedented frost in 1940 called for a vote of thanks to the caretaker for the way in which he had kept the heating system from bursting. Early in this period the church was deprived by death of the services of an outstanding layman, C. C. Quayle, but two years later his name was perpetuated by the election of his son, J. C. Quayle, to the Worcestershire Association, of which he became President in 1947.

We conclude the story of three hundred years at Bewdley by mention of the quiet, but effective ministry of Frank Trout from 1943-48, who was succeeded in January 1949 by Lewis Harold Merrett of Spurgeon's College. Mr. Merrett enters upon the heritage of three centuries of Baptist witness at a time when the life of the church is more vigorous than at any period in its history. The church membership is nearly treble what it has ever been, the leadership is in the hands of comparatively young people with a good nucleus on which to work. There is a spirit of enterprise abroad among the members which has expressed itself in the determination to erect a new youth hall at a cost of more than £1,000, while the church treasurer, S. K. Quayle, has generously given the house in which the last two ministers have lived as a permanent manse. Thus the aim of George Brookes over a hundred years ago of securing the ministry at Bewdley by a trust fund for the stipend has been carried a step further. In all this we see promise for a future which shall eclipse anything the past history of the Bewdley church has known.

A. J. KLAIBER.

²⁶ The Chapman family came to Bewdley in 1902 and have been a great source of strength to the Church.