

THE HISTORY
OF
TILEHOUSE STREET
BAPTIST CHURCH,
HITCHIN.

BY
REV. THOMAS WILLIAMS, B.A.

LONDON:
ALEXANDER & SHEPHEARD, PRINTERS,
CHANCERY LANE, W.C.

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E propose in the following pages to write a brief account of the Baptist church at Tilehouse Street, Hitchin. The first trace we find of the existence of Baptists in Hertfordshire is at Hemel Hempstead in 1642. Mr. George Kendall, M.A., an orthodox divine in orders, preached against the baptizing of infants. In 1670, Capt. Richard Deane, in a letter to the Bishop of Lincoln, writes that "thirty-eight years since, Episcopacy being laid aside in Hertfordshire, Mr. Edward Harrison and some others did openly profess, some of them write and publish their opinions concerning the proper subjects and manner of baptism." Edward Harrison was not

only a Baptist pastor at Kensworth, but he was also vicar of the parish and preached in the parish church. There he advocated his Baptist views and had a large following. He had a son, Thomas Harrison, who became an eminent Baptist minister. Henry Denne, who was educated at Cambridge University, was ordained in 1630. He held the living of Pirton, near Hitchin, about ten years, and being a more frequent, eccentric, and lively preacher than most of the clergy of those times, he was greatly beloved and respected by his parishioners. In 1643 he professed himself a Baptist, and was baptized by immersion in London. He published a work in defence of John Bunyan. During the Commonwealth several Puritan and Nonconformist ministers were at Hitchin, either as lecturers or as ministers of the parish church.

One of the ejected ministers who came to reside at Hitchin was John Hutchinson, B.A., Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He was licensed to practise as a physician "per totam Anglem." He settled in Hitchin, and practised nearly thirty years.

He belonged to the church in Tyler Street, Hitchin. He preached at Bendish, and occasionally at Hertford, Ware, and Bedford; but always *gratis*, and would not take charge of a congregation, although much urged to do it.

The Rev. F. Holcroft, M.A., Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, was ejected from his fellowship in 1660, and became pastor of a Congregational church, whose centre was at Bassingbourne, in Cambridgeshire, but whose branches extended to different towns. Associated with him as ministers, were J. Oddy, J. Beare, and Mr. Waite. His congregations extended as far as Hitchin, where Mr. Waite and Mr. Beare preached to the Independents before 1669; some of whom afterwards formed the Independent church in the town, and Mr. Holcroft sometimes came to preach to them. There is a particular memorandum of his being at Hitchin, May 24, 1678, from Dr. John Owen and George Griffith, addressed to the church at Tyler Street, Hitchin, and dated from London, March 8th, 1679, in which these two elders, Mr. Beare and

Mr. Waite, are named; and the members are exhorted to honour Mr. Waite for his work's sake, and to encourage him in his labour. The writers add, "We rejoice in the success the Lord has crowned his ministry among you withal, and we pray he may yet more and more be of use to you for your building up." We are further told that the congregation at Hitchin, of which Mr. Holcroft had been pastor, being dismissed to the charge of Mr. Haworth, of Hertford, he used to preach to them about once a month in a barn belonging to the Society in that town. The Independents at Hitchin suffered much persecution previous to the passing of the Toleration Act, and near to the Independent chapel was a large building said to have been the receptacle for the goods of Dissenters, where they were kept till a sufficient quantity was obtained to make a sale.

In those days of persecution John Bunyan used to preach in Wain Wood, where, in a small natural amphitheatre called Bunyan's Dell, meetings were held.



JOHN BUNYAN.

“Up to this time,” says Mr. Urwick in his “History of Nonconformity in Hertfordshire,” “there is no mention of a Baptist chapel in Hitchin.” But on March 29th, 1677, John Wilson, of Bedford, was transferred to Hitchin with an affectionate letter from the church at Bedford, signed by John Bunyan and others. The letter is as follows:—

“The Church of Christ in and about Bedford, to the Church of Christ in and about Hitchin, sendeth greeting.

“Holy and Beloved,—We, the fellow-heirs with you of the grace of life, having taken your earnest desires concerning our giving up to you our beloved brother John Wilson into serious consideration, with

much prayer to God for direction in so weighty a matter, have at last (God having bowed the heart of the church to consent to what you have both longed, and as we trust much prayed for) granted, and hereby do grant and give up, our beloved brother to fellowship with you for your mutual edification and joy of faith.

“ We need not as some others to commend him to you, God having before prevented that, by commending him to you Himself. Now, God and our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, make this both our and your well-beloved brother a double blessing to you, both in his ministry and membership with you, and also a watchman over you, if God and the church with you call him thereto. Amen.

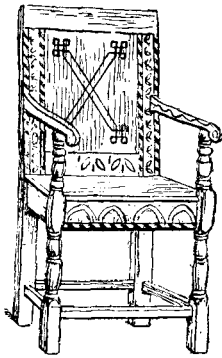
“ Written for you by the consent of the church and subscribers in their names by your brethren,

“ JOHN BUNYAN,

“ SAM. FENN,

“ JOHN FENN, AND OTHERS.

“ 1 Month, 1677.”



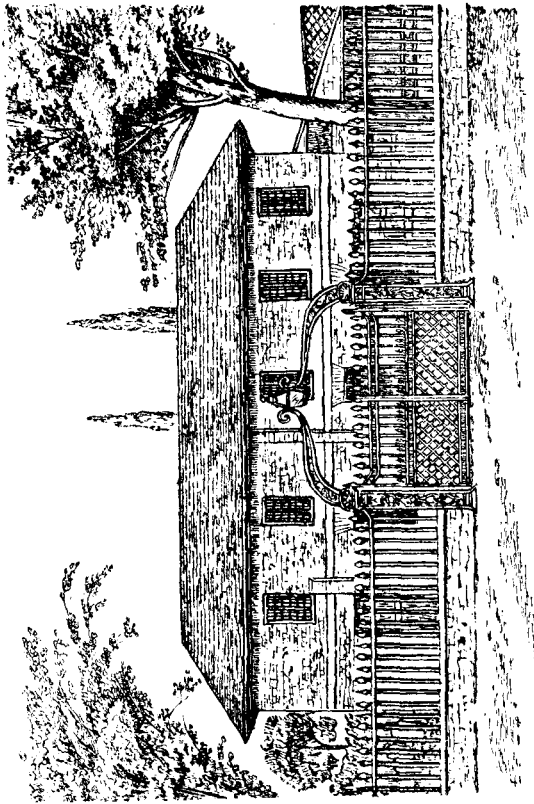
BUNYAN'S CHAIR.*

On October 1st, 1677, the church being assembled at Brother Foster's, Brother John Wilson accepted the call to be their pastor; and on April 20th, 1678, he was ordained by Anthony Palmer, Thomas Kelsey, John James, of London, and Samuel Fenn, of Bedford.

Tilehouse Street Chapel was begun in May, 1692, costing £250, an amount raised partly in London and partly in the country. In 1697, Ebenezer Wilson was invited to assist his father. In 1698, James Gregory

* This chair is now in the vestry of the Chapel.

and Edward Hurst were made ruling elders. Hurst was remarkable for the strictness of his life, and was called Holy Hurst of Hitchin. E. Wilson having declined the co-pastorate, John Needham was invited to assist Mr. Wilson, which he consented to do, being dismissed from a church at Sheffield. He became co-pastor with Mr. Wilson, January 29th, 1709. Mr. Needham was born at Ware, August 14th, 1685. He was a man of extraordinary gravity. His daughter said she only saw him laugh twice in his life. Yet he was affable, proficient in astronomy, and no mean poet. He lies buried in the meeting-house, under a marble stone with the following inscription: "Here lie the remains of the reverend and learned Mr. John Needham, who departed this life February 10th, 1743, in the fifty-eighth year of his age." Then follows the epitaph on his wife: "Near this place are likewise interred the remains of Mrs. Mary Needham, his beloved wife, who, in the hope of a blessed immortality, resigned her spirit to Him who gave it June 19th, 1733, in the forty-eighth year of her age."



OLD MEETING HOUSE, TYLER STREET, HUTCHIN.

Mr. Needham left behind him three children :
Mary, who was married to the Rev. S. James ; John,
who was a minister at Bristol (author of the well-
known harvest hymn,

“To praise the ever-bounteous Lord,
My soul wake all thy powers” ;

also of the hymn commencing,

“Holy and reverend is His Name”) ;

and Elizabeth, who became the wife of Mr. Jno.
Williams, woolstapler, Hitchin.

Mr. Needham was succeeded by Samuel James,
M.A., who came from his father's church at Hemel
Hempstead, and was ordained July 13th, 1743, when
the number of communicants was 108. He was
educated at King's Head Society, Clerkenwell ; after-
wards at Homerton. He married Mary, daughter of
Rev. Jno. Needham, by whom he had eleven chil-
dren. His last words were, “Victory! victory!”
The church and congregation erected a handsome
tomb to his memory. The inscription, which was as
follows, was prepared by Dr. Stennett :—

“This monument, sacred to the memory of the Rev. S. James, M.A., is erected to transmit to posterity what cannot be erased from the memory of those who knew him—that he was an affectionate husband, tender father, faithful friend, exemplary Christian, and able minister of the Gospel. For thirty years he humbly, cheerfully, disinterestedly, and successfully served this church as their pastor, and, amidst the tears of a sorrowful family and afflicted people, he sweetly fell asleep in Jesus, Aug. 22nd, 1773, aged 57 years. Also here lies interred Mary, his wife, daughter of the Rev. John Needham, formerly pastor of this church. In every relation she shone with peculiar lustre, and after a long illness, borne with exemplary patience, died in London, Nov. 12th, 1779, aged 65 years.”

The next pastor was Rev. John Geard, M.A. He was born at Montacute, near Yeovil, March 5th, 1750. He was educated at Bristol Academy, and was ordained April 13th, 1775. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Mr. S. Bradly, of Maidencroft,

July 13th, 1758, and had several children. When he came the communicants numbered 156.



REV. JOHN GEARD.

John Geard was an active pastor, and held many village services, as the lists of certified places will show. He was a most devoted minister, living in the affections of old and young, and held in high estimation by all the neighbourhood. He manifested that humble and childlike simplicity which imparts lustre and attractiveness to Christian character. He was a man of peace, and his end was peace. He died in 1838, aged eighty-eight years, having been pastor fifty-six years.

Mr. Geard, in a letter written in 1832, gives the

following account of the Foster family, so long and honourably connected with this church :—

“The first John Foster, of Bennington, died in 1621. He had two brothers, Michael and Edward. His son, John Foster, was born in 1613. Matthew, son of John, was born November 30th, 1653. He was one of six brothers—John, Edward, Matthew, Michael, Joseph, and Richard. John was the eldest and Richard the youngest of the family. At the time of their father’s death they all lived at Preston, near Hitchin. They were all industrious, and all gave evidence of being pious, conscientious, godly men. They risked the spoiling of their goods and the loss of their liberty for the sake of their loyalty to their consciences. They were several of them members of the church, and all of them members of the congregation of Protestant Dissenters meeting at Tilehouse Street, near Hitchin. Mr. Wilson, first pastor of this church, suffered imprisonment for the sake of a good conscience in Hertford Gaol, and these worthy brothers nourished him there. They had all been

fined £20 a month each for not going to church, till all they had was confiscated. However, their fines had not been literally extracted till the glorious Revolution, when William III. gave them, as it were, a receipt in full of all demands."

The letter narrates further that three of these brothers married and separated. John and Edward lived at Ickleford; Matthew and Michael at Little Wymondley; Joseph and Richard at Hitchin. Richard the youngest died last in 1742 or 1743.

"While these worthy six brothers lived at Preston, their house was an asylum for persecuted ministers. Among these no one was more frequent when not in Bedford Gaol than good John Bunyan, and he used to preach in a dell in Wain Wood, near Preston, which is a little above the only house in the wood, and which was not only convenient for privacy, but was capable of containing a great number of people. I have understood that a thousand people have met in that dell at midnight to hear Mr. Bunyan preach. There is a chimney-corner in the

house in the wood which I have had pointed out to me as the place where this distinguished preacher used to sit, and I have sat in the same chimney-corner many times in that house. As there was a danger of being interrupted when Mr. Bunyan preached in the dell before mentioned by enemies, there were friends stationed in the sides of the wood to give the preacher and congregation time to separate before their enemies could apprehend them; and I do not remember ever hearing that any were apprehended any time when they assembled. I have heard an anecdote respecting Bunyan when he was at the house of the six brothers at Preston, to the following purport:—He was asked by some one what he thought was the meaning of the difficult passages, Romans viii. 19, &c.—“For the earnest expectation of the creature,” &c.—to which he made the following shrewd reply:—“All I can say in answer to that question is that the Scripture is wiser than I.”

“I have collected the substance of the foregoing anecdotes of the Foster family at different times, by

different means, and from different sources. I am now in the eighty-third year of my age, having been born March 5th, O.S., 1750. I was married July 13th, 1778, to Elizabeth Bradly, a descendant of Matthew Foster, one of the six brothers.

“JOHN GEARD.”

Amongst the descendants of the Foster family may be now found merchants, bankers, and members of the legal and medical profession, notably Dr. Michael Foster, M.A., one of the Secretaries of the Royal Society.

Mr. Geard was succeeded by Mr. Thomas Griffin, who settled as pastor, and remained about ten years. After him came the Rev. John Broad, who had resigned his office as pastor of the Baptist church at Kensington. He entered upon his office in 1841, and was instrumental in drawing a large and influential congregation; but in consequence of failing health he resigned his charge in 1857, and died at Hastings, October, 1858. He was a man of

great moral worth, and his preaching was always deeply thoughtful and evangelical. The old meeting-house in which he began his ministry quickly became too small for the congregation, and steps were taken to procure the ground, and the present commodious chapel was built. A neat tablet in the chapel



REV. JOHN BROAD.

expresses the affection of an attached flock. The inscription is as follows :—

“In affectionate remembrance of the Rev. John Broad, seventeen years the faithful and devoted pastor of this Christian church, who was suddenly called to his rest at Hastings, October 9th, 1858, in the fifty-first year of his age.

“This sanctuary stands a memorial of his zeal for the glory of God, in which his unwearied labours were abundantly blessed to the conversion of souls, his joy here and crown of rejoicing now in the presence of his Lord.

“Rev. xiv. 13.”

The cost of the new chapel was £2,432 5s. 9d. It was opened June 28, 1844, when the Rev. William Brock, of Norwich, afterwards of Bloomsbury; Mortlock Daniel, of Margate, and Dr. Leifchild officiated.

Mr. Broad was succeeded by the Rev. George Short, B.A., late of Regent's Park College, who continued the pastorate till 1868, when he removed to Salisbury. He was an able and zealous preacher, and was much esteemed. During his ministry the schoolroom was enlarged at a cost of £735, a manse was erected at a cost of £960, and the organ, which was built by a member of the congregation, was reconstructed at an outlay of £255.

He was succeeded by the Rev. John Aldis, jun., formerly of Bristol College, son of the Rev. John

Aldis, late of Plymouth, one of the most original thinkers and eloquent preachers amongst the Nonconformists, and whose third son became senior wrangler and Smith's prizeman at Cambridge in 1861; his fourth son sixth wrangler with classical honours, 1863; and his fifth son second wrangler and Smith's prizeman with classical honours in 1866.

Mr. Aldis exercised an earnest and faithful ministry till the year 1877, when he removed to Canterbury. During his ministry the Bunyan Memorial Chapel at Preston was built. In the same year (1877) the Rev. F. G. Marchant, then of Wandsworth, and now of the Metropolitan Tabernacle College, undertook the pastorate. He quickly obtained recognition as a preacher of unusual power. His pulpit discourses were marked by great depth and earnestness, and his ministrations were much appreciated by the church and congregation. In 1884, his services were suitably acknowledged by the church. His life was clouded in 1887 by the sudden death of his wife who was beloved by all who came under her

bright influence, and one who was most active and energetic in Christian work. The illness of his daughter led to his resignation of the pastorate and removal to the South Coast, while continuing his work as tutor at the Pastors' College, where he had been engaged for some years.

In 1890, the present pastor, Rev. T. Williams, B.A., of Coleford, Gloucestershire, was recommended to the church by Dr. Angus, the highly esteemed President of Regent's Park College. He entered upon his ministerial work in May, 1890.

There are three village chapels connected with the parent church—viz., Preston, Stondon, and Wymondley; and it should be added that the Home and Foreign Missions and various benevolent societies are well supported by the church and congregation.

The desirability of renovating the interior of the chapel had been felt for some time. Steps were accordingly taken at the commencement of this year (1891) to carry into effect what had been long desired and thought of. A committee was appointed to consider the whole question and to

adopt such measures as they deemed necessary. It was resolved to engage Messrs. Kerridge and Sons, architects, of Wisbech, to prepare plans and specifications of the alterations proposed. The scheme included the repewing of the whole chapel, a new platform and pulpit, an ornamental front to the gallery, heating apparatus for warming the chapel, schoolroom, and vestries, and a ventilating appliance for the chapel. Tenders for the carrying out of the work were adopted, involving an expenditure of £636, and it was decided to enlarge and remodel the organ. The work of renovation had not proceeded far before it was discovered that the joists which supported the floor had all decayed and must be replaced. It was a fortunate discovery, although at the same time it delayed the completion of the undertaking and considerably increased the outlay.

Reopening services were held on Wednesday, July 22nd. Rev. W. Brock, of Hampstead, preached in the afternoon, from the words "The general assembly and church of the first-born written in heaven"

(Heb. xii.). A public tea was held in the school-room, at which about 300 sat down. At the meeting held in the evening, Mr. J. Marnham, J.P., of Boxmoor, presided, and addresses were given by Mr. M. H. Foster, treasurer; Revs. C. M. Hardy, B.A., G. Short, B.A., W. Higgins, T. Williams, H. Andrews, T. H. Smith, and W. Brewins. The services were continued during the two following Sundays, when the Rev. G. Short, B.A., of Salisbury, preached on Sunday, July 26th, and the Rev. F. G. Marchant on August 2nd, to large congregations.

A SUMMARY OF THE FOREGOING PASTORATES.

J. Wilson	1677 to 1717
J. Needham	1709 „ 1743
S. James, M.A.	1743 „ 1773
J. Geard, M.A.....	1775 „ 1831
T. Griffin	1831 „ 1840
J. Broad	1841 „ 1857
G. Short, B.A.	1858 „ 1868
J. Aldis	1868 „ 1877
F. G. Marchant	1877 „ 1889
T. Williams, B.A.	1890 —

AGNES BEAUMONT.

In the beautiful graveyard adjoining the chapel is a small mural tablet erected to the memory of Agnes Beaumont. She was the friend of John Bunyan, and suffered much on account of her earnest determination to attend his ministry. Her father appears to have been among Bunyan's faithful adherents at one time, but he afterwards turned against him, and strictly forbade Agnes to hear him preach. She had arranged to attend a great Communion service at Gamlingay, in which Bunyan was to take part. Mr. Wilson, of Hitchin, was to call for Agnes at the house of her sister and brother-in-law, who resided near Edworth. For some reason Mr. Wilson failed to fulfil his promise. Bunyan happened to pass, and he was requested to allow Agnes to ride on a pillion behind him. At first he demurred; but when he was assured her father allowed her to go, he consented. She rode home at night behind a young woman, a friend from Edworth. Riding pillion-fashion was

common then. When she reached her father's house the door was locked against her. She pleaded for admission, and the reply she received was that she might go to spend the night where she had been all day. That night she spent in her father's barn in wet clothes, having had to travel through the rain. The next morning she went to the house of her sister and brother-in-law, who received her very kindly. At length her father relented, and came to invite her to return home. She went, and promised very reluctantly to attend no meetings without previously obtaining the consent of her father. That night her father retired early, apparently in his usual health. In the night he was taken seriously ill and expired within a few hours. A lawyer in the neighbourhood named Farry had applied for Agnes's hand and was refused. Smarting from a sense of wounded pride and disappointment on account of being rejected, he resolved to do all that lay in his power to ruin her who saw through his baseness. He demanded an inquest upon the father, because he had reason to suppose his daughter Agnes had poisoned her father.

The court was held. Farry was called upon to state the grounds of his suspicion. He had nothing more to say than that Agnes was seen riding to Gamlingay with Bunyan. Therefore she and Bunyan had conspired together to poison her father in order to obtain possession of his property. Upon hearing the evidence the jury at once acquitted the accused, against whom there was no tittle of evidence. "Sweet-heart," said the Coroner, "be not daunted; God will provide thee a husband, notwithstanding the malice of this man."

She appears to have been twice married. Her second husband's name was Story. The last years of her life were spent at High-gate, where she was held in high estimation for her virtue and intelligence. She died, November 28th, 1720, in her sixty-eighth year.

The following inscription is carved on the stone:—
"Agnes Beaumont, of Edworth, Bedfordshire (afterwards Mrs. Story), became a member of the church at Bedford, under the pastoral care of the

Rev. John Bunyan. Died at High-gate, Nov. 28th, 1720. Aged 68 years. And being brought to Hitchin, by her own desire, was interred in the adjoining burial-ground.

“This stone was erected by subscription in 1812, in respectful remembrance of a person so justly celebrated for her eminent piety and remarkable suffering.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE ORGAN.

The organ has been entirely reconstructed, and considerably enlarged, by the eminent firm of organ-builders, Messrs. Hill & Son, London, at a cost of about £550. It was begun early this year (1891), and has just been completed in the best style. It presents a noble appearance, and will rank among the finest instruments in the district.

The compass of the manuals are from CC to G, 56 notes, and Pedal CCC to F, 30 notes. The specification is as follows:—

GREAT ORGAN.

1. Open Diapason (No. 1)	Metal.....	8 feet.
2. Open Diapason (No. 2)	„	8 „
3. Hohl Flute	Wood.....	8 „
4. Harmonic Flute	Metal.....	4 „
5. Principal	„	4 „
6. Twelfth (prepared for).		
7. Fifteenth	„	2 „
8. Mixture, 3 ranks	„	Various.
9. Trumpet	„	8 feet.

CHOIR ORGAN.

10. Gamba.....	Metal.....	8 feet.
11. Dulciana	”	8 ”
12. Lieblich Gedact	Wood & metal	8 ”
13. Gemshorn (prepared for).		
14. Lieblich Flute	Metal.....	4 ”
15. Clarionet	”	8 ”

PEDAL ORGAN.

16. Open Diapason	Wood.....	16 ”
17. Bourdon	”	16 ”
18. Violoncello (prepared for).		

SWELL ORGAN.

19. Bourdon	Wood	16 ”
20. Open Diapason	Metal.....	8 ”
21. Salicional	”	8 ”
22. Stopped Diapason	Wood.....	8 ”
23. Voix Celestes	Metal.....	8 ”
24. Principal	”	4 ”
25. Piccolo (prepared for).		
26. Mixture, 3 ranks	”	Various.
27. Horn	”	8 feet.
28. Oboe.....	”	8 ”
29. Vox Humana	”	8 ”

COUPLERS, &C.

30. Swell to Great.	33. Choir to Pedal.
31. Swell to Pedal.	34. Great to Pedal.
32. Swell to Choir.	

3 Composition Pedals to Great.

3 Composition Pedals to Swell.

Tremulant to Swell by Pedal.

The bellows are worked by one of Messrs. Hill's hydraulic engines, and is provided with an hydraulic starter placed at the keys.

PRESENT SUMMARY.

Great Organ	8 stops	560 pipes.
Swell ”	10 ”	650 ”
Choir ”	5 ”	256 ”
Pedal ”	2 ”	60 ”
Couplers	5 ”	—
	30	1,526

