

ONLY A STRANGER ONCE AT CHALFORD

ASSURANCE TO TABERNACLE VISITORS

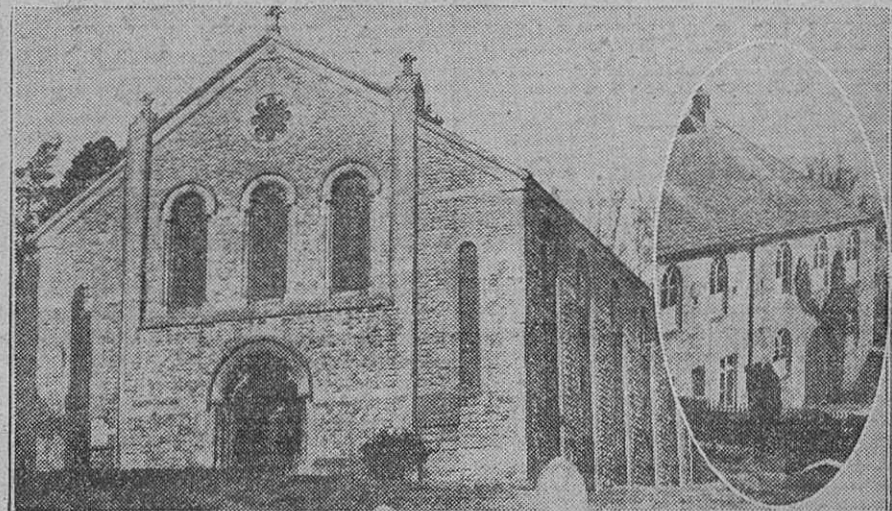
MOTTO THAT IS JUSTIFIED

STORY OF 191 YEARS' WORK

SPECIAL BY "WANDERING WORSHIPPER"

"YOU are a stranger here only once!" This is the cheering message which greets visitors as they enter the vestibule of Chalford Tabernacle, and, as a stranger there on Sunday morning, I felt I could appreciate the truth of this assertion.

The atmosphere of friendliness, and the brightness of the service, combined to make me look forward to a second visit to the Church on some future occasion.



The present Tabernacle at Chalford, with the original Chapel built nearly 200 years ago on the right.

at Whitebrook and Llandogo, afterwards doing a very successful work at King-street, Blaenavon. For the past 10 years Mr. Benjamin has been secretary for the Stroud and District Branch of the Gloucestershire and Herefordshire Association of Baptist Churches.

Three Davids

It will be seen that during the last 60 years or so there have only been three pastors at the Tabernacle, and, singularly enough, each of them has had the sponsorial appellation of David. I gathered that if history 20 years hence shows that there have only

space at my disposal, to try to mention all the good workers at the Tabernacle. Many have been connected with it for half a century or more. One of the most prominent is Alderman C. E. Clark, J.P., who has been a generous supporter. He is a deacon, and has been the Church Treasurer for many years. He suffered a heavy blow some time ago by the death of his daughter, Dr. Eva Clark, who had gone out as a Medical Missionary to India. With Mr. R. Webb, Mr. Clark was elected a life deacon as long ago as 1887. The other deacons are Messrs. E. Griffin, W. W. Rowles, J. H. Smart (who is chairman of the



Left : The Pastor, the Rev. David Thomas Benjamin. Right (top) : The Church officials and (below), the Choir.

been three ministers in 80 years, Chalford, Parish Council), C. Pearce, J. Carter, J. W.

GEOGRAPHICALLY, the Tabernacle is situated in a delightful position—at least this is what one thinks when one is there. Built at a high eminence, it has a commanding view. Without the aid of a car, however, I am afraid I should have been rather daunted in my attempts to get there.

A Beautiful Valley

Without doubt the Chalford valley is very beautiful, and I know that rail travellers are advised to look out for it when passing through, but I fancy that when climbing the narrow roadways up the hill, one's attention would have to be solely concentrated on the task undertaken.

Straggling roads with many sharp turnings have to be negotiated before one reaches the Baptist stronghold half way up the hill. Judging from its position, it can be easily imagined that the founders of the Church of nearly 200 years ago wanted to keep strangers at bay. Even if this were so—and of course, this is a flight of imagination—one can only have praise for the way in which they started the cause, and the manner in which it has since been carried on.

Early 18th Century

It was just before the year 1740 that the first church was formed. This was some 16 years after the Parish Church in the valley below was built. The names of the founders of the early Baptist cause in the parish are not known, but it is established that about this year a small congregation began to meet for regular worship in a cottage. This seems to have been the mode of starting quite a number of local Non-conformist Churches, other instances which I call to mind being Huclecote Wesleyan Church, and Shortwood Baptist Church.

The Tabernacle was originally a branch of the Baptist Church at Tetbury, which was founded in the year 1720. It was in August, 1740, that the tiny church invited Mr. Nathaniel Overbury to the pastorate. Seven years later a dwelling-house and weaving shop, the property of Mr. Edward Cordroy, of Bisley, was purchased for £70, and was vested in trustees "to be kept for the use of Protestants of the Particular Baptist persuasion in and around Chalford. This is the place in which, for between 130 and 140 years, the Baptists of the district centred their activities. Adjoining the Sunday School, this old building is no longer used as a Chapel, but it constitutes a strong link with the noble past of the church. The house was altered to its present form in the time of Mr. James Dean.

Succession of Worthy Pastors

From a historical note in the Free Churchman of February, 1898, it is learnt that the first pastor was succeeded by a Mr. Hill, who died, according to the date on the headstone, in the yard behind the chapel, in the year 1762. There was a succession of worthy pastors after him.

The passing years saw a considerable

growth in the work, and influence of the church. In 1802 a Sunday School was established in the old Coppice Chapel during the Ministry of Mr. Dean; and in 1815 it had so grown that it had six teachers and 125 scholars.

Beer at School Treat

The popular Sunday School treat was started at an early date at Chalford, but they were of a rather different type from those of to-day, for the meal supplied the children consisted of bread and meat and beer. The beer was of a quality that known as "small," and appears to have been brewed by the minister himself. The Rev. Robert White, who became pastor of the church in 1847, was an ardent temperance advocate, and one of his first acts was to abolish the custom, and to introduce tea and cake.

During the early days of Mr. White's ministry, the cause flourished so much that the Chapel was not large enough to accommodate the worshippers. Ten years later the Sunday School was rebuilt to provide for the increasing number of scholars.

A Notable Period

A notable period in the history of the Tabernacle was the pastorate of the Rev. David R. Morgan, which began in 1871. The zeal and energy of the church under his leadership was most remarkable. It was while he was Pastor that the present commodious and handsome Tabernacle was built at a cost of £2,250, and it is significant that the whole of this was paid within a year. The need for the new building had become very apparent, for the congregations were increasing to such an extent that on Sunday evenings people were unable to get in, and all the male members of the church and others of the congregation agreed to vacate their seats in the evening to provide accommodation for strangers.

The supporters of the Church were then faced with the alternatives of either enlarging the old chapel or building a new one. Some thought if £500 were spent on enlargement it would be as much as they could do. Other counsels prevailed, and it was decided to erect the new building. The memorial stone was laid in April, 1873, and the new chapel was opened on Good Friday, 1874.

Conversion of Old Chapel

Not content with this effort, when other work remained to be done, in September, 1875, tenders were received for the conversion of the old chapel into classrooms and other work connected with the School. The cost was £400. In subsequent years further large sums were expended on the church. Mr. Morgan's ministry extended over 29 years. He was a man of more than ordinary abilities, and he is still affectionately remembered at Chalford.

He was succeeded by the Rev. D. J. H. Carter, who was pastor for 17 years, carrying on the work with much success before accepting an invitation to the pastorate of the Church at Andover. On account of partial blindness, however, he felt compelled to resign the pastorate, and has since taken the oversight of the Branch Mission Church of the Tabernacle at Frampton Mansell.

The present pastor, the Rev. David Thomas Benjamin, began his ministry on the second Sunday in February, 1919. Since that time the Sunday School premises have been very much improved and the organ in the Chapel has been rebuilt and enlarged. Before going to Chalford, Mr. Benjamin was for three years each pastor of the Churches

been three ministers in 80 years. Chalford people will be far from dissatisfied.

Cordial Welcome

To turn again to the service on Sunday morning, I had not entered the Church before I received a welcome. I was standing in the graveyard viewing the Church, when Mr. Benjamin came towards me and shook hands. This gave me the opportunity to introduce myself. The welcome was endorsed by other officers, and it helped me to realise that the motto in the Church Institute was no empty expression.

I think the thing that impressed me most about the service was the delightful singing, and I particularly liked the children's hymn. I noticed that the children knew the way to sing. They put their whole hearts into it, and a little maid who was sitting behind me sang so heartily that she had helped me to learn one of the tunes before the hymn ended. The rest of the service was plain, but, notwithstanding, very interesting and enjoyable. A pleasing setting was used in the singing of the Lord's Prayer, and the choir deserved commendation for the lead they gave.

England's Glory

It was pleasing to see the attention paid to the children. There was a short address, in which Mr. Benjamin pointed out that England's glory was her good men and women, and the way the youngsters listened indicated that they appreciated the fact that they were not forgotten.

Mr. Benjamin based his discourse to the adults on the restoring of the blind man's sight by Christ at Bethsaida, and remarked on the fact that after the first touch of the Saviour the afflicted man could see, but had a distorted vision, seeing "men as trees, walking." It was after he had confessed his bleared vision that Christ touched him again to enable him to see men clearly. His confession prepared the way to a perfect cure. Had he been content with the result of the first touch of Christ, his vision would apparently have remained indistinct.

Distorted Vision

He (Mr. Benjamin) thought that story described the experience of every honest seeker after truth and light. How many people could look back on past days without being conscious of the fact that their early religious and Christian ideals were exceedingly crude? It might be that some of them still had distorted visions, and could see nothing clearly, but yearned for a truer view of things. Let them confess the dimness of their vision, for then they would be ready to receive the second touch of Christ—the touch of fuller enlightenment.

"I suggest," proceeded Mr. Benjamin, "that much of our unhappiness in life arises from distorted visions, and through not seeing other men as men. The gospel of Christ is intensely personal in its appeal. He seeks to make us see each other as individuals. The employer is sometimes apt to see his workmen merely as hands, and the candidate for municipal or Parliamentary honours to see men and women merely as voters instead of individuals. We talk about our social problems, unemployment and India as matters impersonal, but they are very personal—they have to do with men. There is hope for the nation that recognises the human rights of its people. Christ can give us the light and vision we need."

Some of the Workers

It would be impossible for me, with the

Parish Council), C. Pearce, J. Carter, J. W. Tyler, F. Souls, H. Phelps, and E. Crook, while Mr. J. W. Smith, who is 86 years old, is an elder. Mr. Crook is the Church Secretary, he having succeeded Mr. F. A. Webster, formerly the local head schoolmaster, who occupied the office for 21 years. Mr. Cook is a grandson of the late Mr. J. Franklin, who was Church Secretary for 25 years before Mr. Webster.

Nearly 400 Members and Scholars

The church has two flourishing Sunday Schools—one at Chalford, and one at Frampton Mansell. The total number of scholars is 178, this being just one less than the church membership. The morning superintendent at the Chalford school is Mr. J. H. Smart, and the one for the afternoon Mr. W. W. Rowles. Mr. George Carter is the secretary, and there is a strong staff of teachers.

Temperance and missionary movements are both strongly represented at the church. There is a Juvenile Temple, and a Lodge of the I.O.G.T., respectively in the charge of Mr. J. H. Smith and Mr. Tyler, while the fact that no less than £150 was raised by the church for the Baptist Missionary Society last year, indicates the interest taken in that work. The Missionary Secretary is Mr. Bernard Gardiner. A Christian Endeavour Society, which some years ago succeeded a Mutual Improvement Society, is another strong body. Mr. Benjamin is the president, and the secretary Mr. Harold Jefferies. The Women's Meeting is a successful organisation with 40 members. Mrs. Benjamin is in charge of it, assisted by Mrs. C. Pearce, Mrs. R. Webb, Mrs. F. Cook and Mrs. W. W. Rowles.

The choir is one of the church's most valuable bodies. It has about 35 able members. The choirmaster is Mr. Frank Crook, and the organist is Mrs. E. Webb, the latter's deputy being Miss G. Wiggall—who officiated at the organ on Sunday morning. It is my hope to hear them perform again at some future date.