

LIFE IN A S

KEEPING THE FLAG FLYING

FAITHFUL BAPTIST WORKERS AT WOODCHESTER

CENTURY-OLD HERITAGE OF ENTHUSIASM

SPECIAL BY "WANDERING WORSHIPPER"

IN a private room in the village of Woodchester 108 years ago, there gathered a small band of Non-Conformist people, who laid the foundation of what is now the Woodchester Baptist Church, which I visited on Sunday morning.

This Church, like so many other of the smaller country places of worship, has had to struggle against many difficulties, but it has connected with it a group of faithful workers and supporters who are making valiant efforts to keep the flag flying.



Left to right, Mr. F. Fletcher, Mr. P. Cole and Mr. J. W. Browning.

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Woodchester has often been brought much before the public eye. It is famed as the possessor of the remains of a Roman villa, comprising a piece of tessellated pavement, considered to be one of the finest specimens of its kind in Europe. Ten years ago the village was visited by Princess Marie Louise, who opened the Victory Hall. As long ago as 1788 wide attention was centred on the village, for in that year Woodchester Mills were visited by King George III., Queen Charlotte, the Princess Royal, and Princesses Augusta and Elizabeth. It was estimated that a concourse of nearly 30,000 people was attracted by the visit.

The little Baptist Church has escaped any such glow of publicity. Hidden away in the southern part of the parish, it would probably escape attention unless specially sought. I had some difficulty in finding it on Sunday morning, and was at first misdirected. I must attribute this to misunderstanding on the part of the youth appealed to, and not to ignorance of the locality of the building. From the size of the congregation, however, I might have thought that there are a great many in Woodchester who do not know their way to the Baptist Church.

Contagious Enthusiasm

The deficiency in numbers was more than made up in the enthusiasm of those who were present. The preacher was full of energy, and his hearers evidently found it contagious, for they sang heartily, and followed the service with rare intentness. There was also some very nice music, but there was one thing which rather marred the service—from my point of view at all events—and that was the coldness of the building. The heating of the church depends on one stove, situated in a corner of the building, and it apparently failed to radiate to the spot where I was sitting. Of course, one realises that the installation of a central heating apparatus would make a big demand on the resources of a small church, but at the same time it cannot be forgotten that a cold building might provide a justifiable excuse for people to absent themselves from its services. I remember, too, one witty parson who declared, with a good deal of common sense, that it is no good preaching to people with cold feet. I mention this because it seemed a pity that the congregation of an interesting little place should be depleted for such an easily remediable cause.

A Humble Beginning

As I have indicated, the service was of an enthusiastic character, and from what I learned of the history of the church, this has been a feature of it which has helped it through many vicissitudes during its 107 odd years of existence. Its origin dates from December 31st, 1822, when a private room was opened for preaching services on weekday evenings. These services were arranged in connection with the Baptist Church at King Stanley, and were under the pastoral care of the Rev. James Cousens.

The venture proved very successful, and the gatherings were so well attended that after several months the people expressed a wish "to have preaching on Sabbath days, which was attended to as often as supplies could be obtained." Thus the cause went on for three years, when the cottage was found to be too small to accommodate the people anxious to attend. A plan was proposed to build a small chapel, "provided a piece of land could be obtained and some confidential person found to superintend the affair."

The present site of the church was obtained, and Mr. Peter King undertook the management. Mr. King seems to have dis-

played the enthusiasm which has been a heritage of the church, for it is said of him in regard to the building of the place: "Many hundreds of miles did he compass, and many thousands of persons did he visit while accomplishing the work, till at length every tradesman was paid and every liability removed." The formation of a Baptist interest at Woodchester must be mainly ascribed to his unwearied and self-denying exertions.

Opened 105 Years Ago

The church was opened for divine service in the fall of the year 1825, and its first resident pastor was the Rev. Joseph Preece, of Kenchester, Herefordshire, who was paid a salary of £50 per annum, "with a promise of more as the cause increased." Since that time pastors have come and gone, and at times the church has been pastorless, but it has always had faithful workers, who have toiled in season and out of season. This is illustrated by the fact that in recent years at least two legacies have come from supporters. One was for £200, left to the church "for general purposes" by Mr. Joseph Earl in 1913, and another was for £100, left more recently by Miss Kate Perkins, who, in her time, rendered the most valuable help to the church. She worked particularly hard in the temperance cause, acting as leader of a large Band of Hope for over 30 years.

Messages for Children and Adults

To return to Sunday morning's service, the character of the proceedings were very much as I had expected. The service was conducted by Mr. P. Cole, a genial young man, who spends his spare time supervising the church. He hails from Ruardean Hill, but is now resident in Woodchester. He had a message for the children present, for, speaking about milk and honey, he reminded them that even while they were young there was work for them to do; help that they could render to others. Each one of them, he urged, was capable of being a blessing to someone else, probably in a way that nobody else could be.

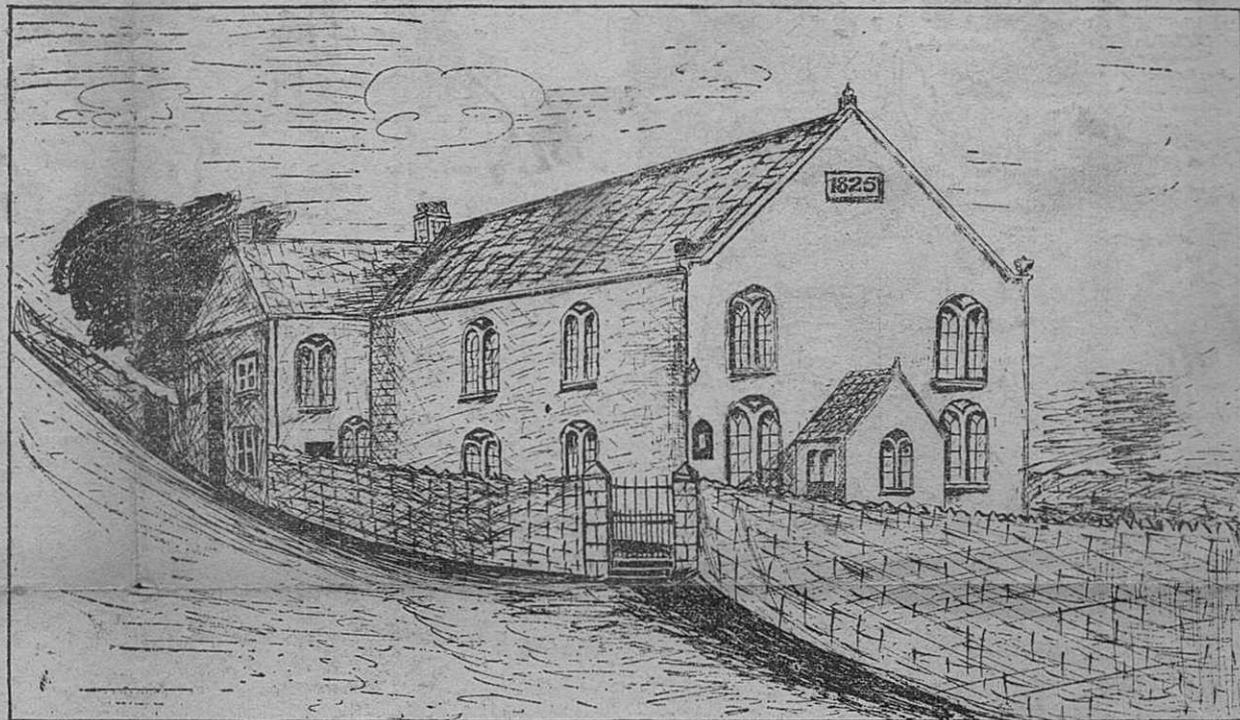
For the adults, Mr. Cole had an address which seemed to be particularly typical of him. He took for his text "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ," and he characterised the Gospel of Christ as a great gift and treasure. There was a need to-day, he said, to remember the redemptive power of Christ and the spiritual strength which could be gained through His word. As in the days of Paul, the human life could not do without Christ. Paul knew that pomp, power, majesty, and earthly glory did not bring lasting satisfaction to human life, but that deep down in the heart there was a feeling only Christ could satisfy. It was the same to-day.

There was a time when Britain, like ancient Rome, hungered for knowledge of Christ. In those wild, far-off days, when men sought not to love one another, but to be at enmity, when crime and avarice were rampant in our land, the Gospel of Christ came, and it was only because of that that we are able to-day to enjoy liberty and love. It was because others remembered us, our need and our sin, and realised that we wanted Christ, that we are in the position we are to-day. At the present time people needed to get the spirit of Paul, and in the face of difficulties and sacrifices to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others—to hand on what had been given to them. He asked them not to be ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.

Life Long Association

After the service I was introduced to Mr. J. W. Prouning, who is without doubt the pivot of the church life. He is one of the deacons, and holds the important offices of

SMALL BAPTIST CHURCH



The Baptist Church, Woodchester.

church secretary and treasurer and Sunday School superintendent. He is a native of Woodchester, and has been connected with the church all his life. There can be no doubt about Mr. Browning's love for the old place, and to him the church owes very much. His long association with it made him eminently suitable to write the history of the church on the occasion of its centenary in 1925. The pen drawing of the church which we reproduce is the work of Mr. Browning's son.

I learned from Mr. Browning that the Sunday School is a very flourishing part of the church. For the size of the church—which has about 30 members—the school is a very good one, having seven teachers and 40 or 50 children attending it.

Same Supporters

The other deacon of the church is Mr. E. Underwood, who has had a quarter of a century's connection with the church. He is also the envelope collection registrar, and, being a very practical man, he renders valuable help in overseeing the preservation of

the fabric of the building. Another good supporter of the church is Mr. F. Fletcher, who for ten years or so has taken the keenest interest in its welfare.

The organist and choirmaster is Mr. R. Beighton. For three years or so he has given his services to the church, and he certainly earned a word of commendation, for he played in delightful manner a little melody which fell pleasingly on the ear.

Week Night Meetings

When the announcements for the week were given out I was somewhat surprised to hear that on every night in the week except one there was a meeting to be held. On Monday evening a meeting of the Christian Endeavour was to take place; on Tuesday, a devotional service; on Wednesday, choir practice; on Thursday, a young ladies' social club meetings, and on Friday a young men's social club meeting. The Endeavour is a live body, and this is proved by the fact that last year it won a shield for getting the largest percentage of increased membership

in the Stroud district. The meetings are taken by Mr. Cole, who also has charge of the Tuesday devotional service and the Women's Club, the last body having a membership of about 20. The leader of the Young Men's Club, which has some 40 members, is Mr. F. Mills.

The church is vested in trustees, and the trust deeds are deposited in Lloyds Bank, Nailsworth. In 1917, when the number of trustees had been reduced to two, namely, Messrs. Henry Soles and George Mayo, the names of the following were added: Messrs. E. J. Hallett, D. J. H. Carter, A. Redman, A. W. Johnston, J. W. Browning, E. H. Underwood, F. A. Burford, W. G. Roberts, Charles Herbert and —, Smith.

Next Sunday "Wandering Worshipper" will attend the morning service at Hempsted Parish Church. He will give his impressions in next week's "Gloucester Journal."