**From the Archives … Mark Baptist Church**

In researching some archives of the Baptist Church in Burnham I recently came across some previously-undiscovered papers which I thought might interest you. They form a Record initiated in 1910 by the minister at Wedmore, Rev HF Cross, regarding Mark Baptist Church.

Wedmore had a Baptist presence from 1775, and there had probably been occasional meetings in Mark from the 17th Century. However, in 1864 the cluster of churches known as the Cheddar Baptist Association was approached by the Misses Clarke with an offer of a piece of land in Mark ‘for the purpose of erecting a Chapel for the preaching of the pure Gospel’. The Association took on the project as a branch of the work in Cheddar, under its minister at the time, Rev T Davies. The foundation stone was laid on 20th May 1866, and on 23rd October of that year the Chapel, ‘a neat Gothic building designed to seat two hundred persons’, was opened in Church Street. The cost, including railings and the purchase of the plot of 35 perches, was recorded as £500.

It seems that the Chapel flourished, the Baptist Association, in its report of 1868, mentioning that ‘the chapel was scarcely big enough for the large numbers attending.’ At the time of the opening, a group of Bible Christians met for worship in a building in the Kingsway. This group, described as ‘a West Country sort of Methodism’ by the historian Colin Short (and it in fact merged in 1907 with the Methodists), began its life through the ministry of William O’Bryan in Cornwall in 1815 as a breakaway from Wesleyan Methodism.

Rev T Davies

On the opening of the new Chapel, the Bible Christians decided to close down, and to join the Baptists. The new Wesleyan Chapel was not to be built for another three years, and as far as I can see the Baptist Chapel was the only non-conformist representation at the time in the village. I imagine also that the prospect of stepping across the road to the Baptist Chapel would have been rather more appealing than dragging long Sunday dresses and petticoats through the mud of the Causeway to the Methodists.

To begin with, the responsibility for the Chapel fell to the Minister in Cheddar, but from 1883 it was taken on by the Ministers in Wedmore, initially Rev Edginton. Rev Cross, in his Record, comments, “In the time of Mr Edginton some interior alterations were carried out. Instead of one central aisle in a line with the chapel pathway the pews have been put together and two narrow aisles have been made by the walls. This is scarcely an improvement. A portly person would ‘take up the (a)isles as a very little thing’”.

We may be able to get a little closer to some of the other players in this part of Mark’s history. Services at the Chapel were in the afternoon and evening, presumably so that ministers preaching in their own churches in the morning would have to time to ride or drive out from Cheddar or Highbridge, Bridgwater or Weston, come rain, come shine. There was a strong culture of hospitality, the preachers invariably being invited to a substantial tea at a local home. Gilbert Sheppard comments, “Mr Joseph Hardacre of Huntspill and Mr Harry Heath of Highbridge would never go anywhere to tea but our house. They were staunch abstainers and did not get on well with Miss Bagg … who upheld moderation”.

Then there was the question of the music. These were the high Victorian days when families gathered around the harmonium in the parlour of a Sunday evening to sing hymns. Gilbert, writing through the eyes of a child of the 1880s, continues, “The singing in my early days was without music three parts of the time. They had a very old harmonium with leaky bellows and damp keys. It did not do anyone much credit to play it. I shall never forget to singing without music how the old ladies used to beat out note by note with their foot and the men nod their heads and what a time getting through a hymn. At the age of 8½ my father thought I could play well enough for services and I started though I could hardly reach the pedals to blow. I began to improve and carried on till I was 12 years old and I think I was the means of making the services brighter.” I am sorry to have to say that at this point Gilbert was ‘poached’ by the Parish Church to act as their Assistant Organist.

And then there was the preaching. “A Mr Bolton used to preach there from Weare and was known as ‘the man who preached to the walls’. He was a very good preacher but he could not look the congregation in the face. When he was tired of one wall he would turn round to the opposite one.”

Rev Cross also speaks of the spiritual atmosphere of the village during this time. “All the former pastors confessed that Mark was a difficult sphere to work in, [I have] so found it, and yet it was not always so. Although the general atmosphere of Mark seems unfavourable to Free Church work, there have been good times in the past, and history may yet repeat itself.” However, an open air mission in 1910 was conducted “amidst a great deal of mockery. Had there been more workers on the spot this may have shewn a greater benefit.”

Perhaps cracks were beginning to appear in the work. The exact timing isn’t clear, but it seems that at the end of Rev Rendell’s time in office, probably around 1920, the spiritual health of the Chapel had begun to fail, and the buildings too began to show signs of neglect. It was a time of great difficulty for the churches. Many men had been away serving their country, including ministers working as Chaplains to the forces. Some did not return. Others had been unable to manage the challenges to faith and did not return to the church, and money was short.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. Around 1925 the Baptist Association was approached by Mr AG Westacott on behalf of the Brethren, another non-conformist group with many ‘Assemblies’ in West Country villages, led by a lay eldership rather than a Minister. They wished to hold their meetings in the Chapel. This arrangement, by which, for a rent of £1 per year the group would undertake to maintain the property, appears to have existed for 15 years.

In 1940, however, there was a movement to restart the Baptist ministry in earnest. This time it was the Chapels in Highbridge and Burnham to which Mark looked for support. By 1942 the Annual Report shows the Chapel was once again thriving, with a wide range of activities and considerable missionary interest. Delightfully, we hear that a mission to children held by Mr Hill of the Caravan Mission took the form of Magic Lantern Services.

But the revival of interest was not to last. Over the next 40 years the congregation shrank as did many in rural communities, and the condition of the buildings became of increasing concern. During the 1980s Burnham Baptist Church found itself administering the process of closing down the Chapel, which is how these papers fell into my hand.

Time passes and congregations come and go. However, the Baptist Church as a movement continues to be well represented in the area into the 21st Century. Amongst others in the locality, Hope Baptist Church in Highbridge recently celebrated its bi-centenary, the church at Burnham is thriving and the renewed Bagley Baptist Church offers a new approach. Meanwhile, the rather lovely building in Mark was put up for sale in 1990, and today Church Street is graced with a handsome ‘neat Gothic’ private dwelling.

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