

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN DARTMOUTH

Founded under the leadership
of JOHN FLAVELL, 1662

This account is written on the occasion of the re-building of the Sunday School premises and Flavel Hall, carried out under the Government War Damage scheme, after the destruction of the old premises by enemy action on February 13th, 1943.

Before the act of Uniformity of 1062 there is very little—if any—reason to believe that the Dartmouth families who favoured the practice of the Independents dissociated themselves from attendance at the parish church (or rather chapel-of-ease) of St. Saviour's. They might believe firmly that each congregation was entitled to choose its own¹ pastor and to conduct its affairs independently of control by the Crown or by Bishops, but this was already much the position at St. Saviour's. The town's men, through their borough council had acquired the rectorial rights in the parish, and had been, responsible—ever since the fourteenth century—for the stipend of the incumbent and for the maintenance of the fabric of Saint Saviour's, and since 1586 of the little used mother-church of St. Clement's.

Both Walter Welchman (appointed vicar in 1606) and Anthony Harford, vicar from 1634 to 1656, followed many of the Puritan observances. When the Borough Council rebuilt St. Saviour's in 1634/5 the refurbishing was consistent with the general practice of the Calvinist churches throughout Western Europe. Harford continued to minister during the confused and terrible times of the Civil War (when the vast majority of the town'smen were Parliamentarians) and it is said that Harford himself was at the time of his death in 1656, a warm admirer of young John Flavell and his opinions.

After considerable discussion General Desborough (Major-General for Devon and Cornwall) was called in to suggest a successor to Harford and it was agreed that Mr. Alien Gears (born

at Stoke Fleming in 1622) and Mr. John Flavell should share the duties at St. Clement's and St. Saviour's.

Amongst the signatories to the agreement were members of families long after known as prominent amongst the Dissenters, such as Barnes and Plumleigh.

As is well known about two thousand of the ministers of parish churches gave up their livings in August, 1662, because they were unwilling to conform to the rules of subordination to the Crown and Bishops, laid down by the Royalist Parliament in¹ the Act of Uniformity.

Amon'gst these men were Geare and Flavell. Geare was of delicate health and died before Christmas. At that time John Flavell was a man of 32 years of age. Born at Bromsgrove in Worcester (where the family name is still common) he was the son of a clergyman, who took his degree as a student of University College, Oxford, in 1650. The Standing Committee for Devon appointed him to assist the aged rector of Diptford (near Totnes), and on the death of Mr. Walpate Flavell became rector, and—by reason of his learning and devotion—a leading man in religious circles in South Devon. From 1662 to 1665 Flavel continued to reside at Dartmouth and the records show that he worked with the former vicar of St. Petrox (Mr. Burdwood) in the conduct of a school in the town.

There can be no doubt that in these years Flavell continued to act as pastor to a considerable group of supporters in the town (known since as Non-Conformists), for several of these were repeatedly fined for n'on-attendance at the Parish Church. The names include the families of Bowden, Jeffery, Plumleigh, Steed and Stoor, as well as those of Charles and Bathsheba Newcomen.

Incidentally the question arises whether the famous engineer, Thomas Newcomen (1663-1729), was one of Flavell's pupils. He may well have been' such in 1672 when Flavel was again in the town, and it is certain that later in life Newcomen was in close touch with families in Bromsgrove—Flavell's- home town, On the other hand Robert Steed (mentioned above) took out a licence as a Baptist preacher in' 1672 and it is possible that ten years earlier he was the leader of a separate group of Baptists, of which Newcomen was a member from his youth up.

In 1665 the groups of Independents and Baptists throughout the country were dealt a severe blow, as the new Five Mile Act prohibited the ejected ministers from residing in or near any corporate borough. The little group at Dartmouth, prevented by the law from meeting in any number greater than' four, was left

to its own resources, whilst Flavel took up residence at Slapton, from which some of his published sermons are inscribed. Between 1665 and 1672 the Magistrates strove hard to suppress any services or meetings of the Non-Conformists, but Flavel and his colleagues occasionally held services on such no-man's lands as the Saltstone in Salcombe Harbour, or secretly at midnight in the houses of such sympathisers as John Rolle, of Hudscott Hall. Three miles from Exeter such a service in a wood was broken up and many present were arrested and fined. On other occasions Flavel rode disguised in woman's clothing, and once he escaped pursuit by swimming his horse round a headland.

After seven years King Charles, wishing to secure toleration for the Catholics, issued a Declaration of Indulgence, and Flavel received a licence as a preacher in Dartmouth. The supporters of the Established Church, however, would have none of this, and Parliament compelled Charles to withdraw his Declaration. Flavel now felt that hide-and-seek in Devon was fruitless and made a voyage (on which his ship was nearly cast away) to the great city of London. Here he was able to live in seclusion and to arrange for the publication of many powerful sermons—which had a wide circulation for well over a hundred and fifty years.

The Catholic King James again announced a policy of religious toleration in 1687, though the permanence of such an immense boon was not permanently secured until the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the passing of the Act of Toleration under William and Mary.

It was in his fifty-seventh year, therefore, that Flavel was able to return and live peaceably as pastor to his faithful friends in Dartmouth. Their 'Meeting House' stood just to the east of Foss Street on part of the site of the enlarged chapel of 1841, now rebuilt as Sunday Schools in 1956. Judging by the date of the lease renewals, 1729 and 1779, this meeting house was first erected during the brief truce of 1672, services from 1662 being in private houses.

The learning, character and hard experience of Flavel made him the natural leader of the Independents, and it was on a journey to Topsham as Moderator of the Devon Assembly that he fell ill and died (June 26, 1691). He was widely mourned and a great company on horses and on foot followed his coffin to Dartmouth—where it was laid in' the chancel of. Saint Saviour's, for the Independents had no burying ground of their own.

The victory for religious toleration in England—so hardly won— was a noble landmark in English history, but in Queen Anne's time a section of the established Church were still very

bitter and narrow in their views. A small group of these abused their powers as Magistrates and in 1709 ordered the removal of the Flavel memorial tablet from the walls of Saint Saviour's. It was rescued by the friends of the deceased and set in their own meeting-house (it is now transferred to the chapel building of 1895). It is pleasant to record that a replica of the memorial was set up on the walls of St. Saviour's (c. 1885) with the consent of the vicar and wardens.

The Latin inscription on the tablet records the virtues of John Flavel in the style then customary, but ends with the happy verse set out below:—

*Could Grace of Learning from the Grave set free
Flavell, thou hadst not known Mortality.
Tho' here thy Dusty Part Death's Victim lies,
Thou by thy works dost Eternise,
Which Death nor Rust of Time shall overthrow,
Whilst thou dost reign above, these live below.*

The Independents have continued to worship in Dartmouth in their 'meeting-house' ever since the time of Flavel. They were long barred from taking any part in official life, but as hard-working God-fearing people they played a prominent part in Dartmouth—as in many another English town.

The fervour of John Wesley and his followers, together with the establishment of Sunday Schools by Robert Raikes, led to a great revival of religion in England at the close of the eighteenth century, and many churches and chapels were newly built to accommodate the crowds of worshippers.

At Dartmouth the chapel had a very able minister in the person of Rev. Thomas Stenn'er, who served from 1810 until his death in 1849. He was largely responsible for the foundation of Independent (or Congregational as they now came to be called) chapels at Dittisham (1836) and at Stoke Fleming (1842). Under his leadership a lease of additional land was obtained from the Dartmouth Corporation in 1841, the whole site to be devoted to a 'meeting-house' for religious worship and no other. The new building was a galleried chapel to accommodate a large congregation' and played a very valuable part in the religious life of Dartmouth for over fifty years.' The Church Membership rolls have not survived, but many Dartmouth families, well known for their integrity and public spirit, appear even on the brief lists of trustees attached to the leases. They include (1841) Hunt, Follett, Cranford, Wilson, Windeatt. Denning, Neck and Pepperell and (.1893) Adams. Couch, Bales, Jago, Lovell, Lidstone. Plater, Punchard, Sanders, Tolman and

Short.

The minister for over thirty years from 1876 to 1909 was Rev. John T. H. Paynter, and it was under his vigorous leadership that the next development occurred. The Foss Street site was very cramped, but the reclamation of land from the old harbour encouraged building to the eastward. At first a Sunday School block was contemplated, but it was decided to use the existing buildings for such purposes and to erect a new chapel building—to be known as the Flavel Memorial Congregational Chapel. This was done in 1895 in the revived open roof Gothic style, which has been considered by people of all denominations as that best suited for Christian worship. This fine building was to the designs of Mr. E. H. Back (responsible for most of the building's on the new South Embankment); the builder was Mr. R. T. Pillar. In this new chapel and in the older buildings in the rear thousands of Dartmouth children and young people attended in the decades when attendance at Sunday School was all but universal.

It is pleasant to record that on the opening day of the new chapel both the vicars of Dartmouth and Stoke Fleming were present, both expressing the view that Christendom was much more united than many people thought. This certainly showed that the battle for religious toleration had been well and truly won—the pity is that the victory has been so complete that millions now utterly fail to appreciate their privileges, and use the liberty so hardly won to drift idly along in complete indifference to spiritual matters.

In some ways the nineties were the hey-days of the Protestant Churches and Chapels in England; for, just as the great issue of religious freedom had been settled, so other great battles were won and largely forgotten. The organised Churches had stood strongly for freedom from Sunday labour, for the education of the poor, for the care of the sick and of the aged, for the cultivation of temperance and thrift. In the memory of people living these great causes have been taken up by a Welfare State, while many "undenominational" bodies, such as Scouts, Women's Institutes, Rotary Clubs and so forth have enlisted the enthusiasm of many whose parents have found their sphere of service within the walls of the organised Churches.

These developments have affected the Flavel Memorial Church as they have done others, but many realise that the work of the Sunday Schools is vital to the morale of the country. It is for this reason that, in spite of all the hardships suffered by the

Congregation in being without any auxiliary buildings since 1939, it is not only the Church Members who will rejoice in the re-construction on modern lines of the old chapel block of 1841, destroyed by enemy action in 1943. Out of evil cometh good, and the new and convenient buildings should be of immense value to the Flavel Church and to wide circles of people in the town.

The architect is Mr. W. G. Couldrey, of Paignton, and the builders are Messrs. Bell and Clements, of Dartmouth. The bulk of the funds are found by the Government, under the statesmanlike resolve of Mr. Winston Churchill that religious buildings destroyed by the enemy should be replaced in appropriate manner at the expense of the State. Valuable additions to the fund have been made by the Congregational Churches Central Fund (raised by sacrificial gifts from the churches of the denomination). The Flavel members themselves have worked long and hard to cover a balance of several hundred pounds and have still much to do—a task in which help will be warmly appreciated. Delays in commencing the work have been numerous and lengthy, and the Church owes a great debt to its hard working minister, Rev. Ernest Smith, who has pushed the work forward with immense determination since he came to Dartmouth in January, 1952. **P.R.**

Note. The account of the life of John Flavel is based upon a lengthy essay by Mr. Edward Windeatt, of Totnes, printed in the Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art, 1911.

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