

Autumn Newsletter

Welcome to the autumn edition of the Baptist Historical Society Newsletter.

Front Page

We're slightly later than planned, due to the newsletter's editor's relocation – apologies to anybody lying awake at night, wondering where the newsletter had got to! Would you consider receiving the newsletter by email? Details on the back page.

We have a very full newsletter this time round, with news and articles of interest. We have another in our occasional series of oral history/memoirs, focussing on mission work in the Congo in the 50s and 60s. Part two of this article will appear in the next newsletter.

There are also several shorter items of news about people and about books. If you have a short note that you would like included in the newsletter, please send it to the newsletter editor. The contact details are on the back page. Please note the changes.

The newsletter editor is always grateful to receive suggestions for contributions – and contributions themselves. So if there is something you would like to read – or write – please let me know.

Book Review

The Hills of Zion, a pictorial history by Alan Rayner, 2006, p.166 available from the author at 115 Chester Avenue, Luton. LU4 9SH price £17.50

Each stream of Baptist tradition has its Hopes and its Providences and its Ebenezers. Alan Rayner brings together a colour photograph collection of about 130 Gospel Standard Baptist chapels (2000 list) lovingly taken over four decades by himself plus as a handful from Australia and America. Each picture has a brief history of the church and list of pastors.

Although in the main dating from 1830-1870, the buildings offer a mixed bag of architectural styles that reflect the requirements of their times, from the simplicity of Zoar Reading to the more ornate Mount Zion Bournemouth to the functional timbers of modern Little Downham Fen. Mostly plain buildings without fuss or elaboration and dedicated to the gathering of God's people, they reflect the unadorned approach to worship where believers gather to hear the word, to break bread and share wine in closed communion.

The photographs are listed alphabetically by location. The final section of b/w photographs of chapels closed or no longer on the list – numbering nearly as many as those still open – is a stark reminder of the need to record the buildings lest they succumb to the trend for conversion to private houses, warehouses or workshops - the fate of so many redundant chapels. This is a well-produced and attractive book that will stand as a pictorial record of this distinctive group of Reformed Baptist believers.

OVERSEAS MISSION IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES:BOLOBO

The Memories of Fred Stainthorpe

If the three years I spent at Spurgeon's College in the early fifties were seminal ones, the next seven spent with the BMS helped to translate some of that teaching into practice. They also laid the foundation for a continuing commitment to world mission. According to Oswald Smith, in his book "The challenge of Missions", every Christian and certainly every pastor, should share this commitment. The Church's work would benefit greatly if every ordinand was able to spend some time in a "young church" country.

My initial position was that of Directeur of the boys' Primary school at Bolobo. This is a small town standing on the east bank of the river Congo, about two hundred miles upstream from Kinshasa, the capital of the then Belgian Congo. Although I had previously spent two years teaching in a secondary modern school in Gateshead, this hardly qualified me for such an exalted post. However, many theologically trained people who were not even teachers had

also found themselves doing this in previous years. The Belgian Government required every school to have a European in charge. Often a theological education and a fair knowledge of French compensated for ignorance of pedagogical matters.

Mission policy had from early years given prominence to education both of boys and of girls although it was difficult to keep the latter beyond a certain age. Families needed them to work in the family gardens and also married them off quite young. Boys were much keener to learn because they saw education as the road to employment and financial security. We were more interested in forming Christian faith and character. So, the inevitable ambiguities of "rice Christianity" arose although many pupils did become Christians. Some of them trained as moniteurs at the training Institutes at Yalamba up-river and Kimpese in the Bas-Congo, and as nurses, later rendering valuable service both in church, school and hospital.

Sometimes I wondered whether this sort of work was a "by-path meadow" but it did offer us the opportunity to do something useful right from the start of our time in the country. Whilst we were learning Bobangi, which was the local language, French enabled us to converse with a certain number of people immediately we arrived. The year spent in Belgium improving our school French also gave us some insight into Belgian thought and policy. It also meant that we had access to the local State officials and the Portuguese traders in the village. In addition, we needed time to get to know Africans and as Jack Gray, the doctor, said to me early on, "They are not likely to confide in you straight away".

All of our pastors had in some way come through the mission's educational programme although I am not sure how far the older ones had progressed. Five men supervised large parts of our area. All of them belonged to the tribe in whose area they lived. In almost all of our villages, there were "bayekoli" or disciples although the numbers varied from place to place. It was sometimes difficult to think of there being a local "church" in some villages. The overall structure of the Church was more Presbyterian than Baptist although we did not mention this much while back in Britain. Village "bateyi" or teachers were responsible for leading Sunday worship as well as teaching the youngest children. They themselves had received minimal training, although in the time of the 30's revival Andrew MacBeath had instituted a Pastors' School. From time to time, we called numbers of them in to Bolobo and held Bible Schools.

The pastors, though based in the more important of the villages in their areas, came into Bolobo fairly often for fellowship and consultation. Their best mode of transport was by bicycle although as distances were quite large, this meant journeys of two or three days. When they came, my wife and I used to invite them for meals with us (following the once expressed wish of Dr Ellen Clow, who was then Foreign Secretary of BMS, but also I hoped, our own desires). This seemed to us to be a necessary next step in fellowship. Earlier missionaries had never done this and perhaps Africans would have been a little embarrassed to eat with them. They never expressed any opinion about our invitations but I hope they appreciated them.

The majority of us on the Station did not get the chance to itinerate (or trek, as we used to say) in our region as much as we would have liked to or ought to have done. Medical and educational work tied such colleagues to their jobs although every month nurses made trips to baby clinics in some not-too-distant villages and held short services there. Educationalists were able to make good use of school holidays but we were never able to "occupy" the area as we should. This assumes, of course, that a visit from a white missionary was of more value than that of an African pastor, which is debatable. People were always glad to see us, as our arrival was a sign that we at Bolobo had not forgotten them, but there were many villages to visit. Travelling as we then did by Land Rover meant that we could annihilate distances. By the same token, we could not spend much time with people and get to know them as well as earlier colleagues had done. Occasionally we made slower trips, for example on bicycle. On one of these, we came to a stream and my companion, Ngobila Albert, asked me if I would like him to carry me over it-an interesting sidelight on the practice of earlier years!

To be continued.....

A (sort of) farewell and thanks

A note of personal appreciation as in December Sue Mills retires as the Librarian at Regent's Park College, Oxford where she has also had responsibility for the Angus Library with its rich resource of Baptist history.

I first met Sue in the mid 1980s when the Angus was a glorious help-yourself, pick-off-the-shelf, riffle-through-the-tracts sort of place. She has brought order and discipline to the foremost English archive of Baptist records. She has catalogued, shelved and sorted in the Angus (by now subterranean) during a period when the Baptist Union Library and BMS archives were removed to Oxford.

Many authors, researchers, Baptist historians and (yes) family historians will testify that Sue has been an invaluable help. Her knowledge of things and people Baptist has grown to be remarkable and she has become a sort of pool of memory for enquirers who have cause to be thankful for her patience, her wisdom and the ability to squeeze time out to help where none existed. For this she may be succeeded but never replaced.

The Baptist Historical Society has benefitted from her advice during her time as a Committee member (and she will continue so). This much and so much more has Sue achieved for the cause of Baptist history. We note with deep appreciation her contribution.

Stephen Copson

Black Baptists; George Cousens

The bugb MAGAZINE for Sept/Oct 2006 features "Black Baptist Living the Life", and offers good examples of the use of history to encourage and challenge actions and attitudes in the present.

George Cousens appears as the first known West Indian Baptist minister in the UK, starting at the Cradley Heath (West Midlands) New Connexion General Baptist Church in 1837. The BUGB leaflet's only comment is that "Several member left the church at this time on the grounds that they did not care for a "black man" as minister.

This information derives from Idris Williams *Centenary Souvenir for Four Ways Baptist Church Cradley Heath* (1993), p. 17; "There is reason to believe that several members left the church at this time on the grounds that they did not care for a "black man" as minister." But there is more to the story than that. This new church had begun with 34 members in \Dec 1833 (pp11 f), but was down to 22 when Cousens started in Nov 1837 (p 17). But in 1838 they reported 38 members with 5 baptism and 4 erasures. (p16)

Thus a very different assessment could also be given of this first known British Black Baptist ministry; "An undoubted success, who soon gained acceptance with the people. There is considerable evidence for this;

1 "He brought many to a saving knowledge of truth (p17f)

2 It is true that Cousens left in 1839 following a severe controversy between his church and the Calvinistic Baptist church at nearby Cradley from which they had seceded in 1833 (p18). Cousens was indeed a key person in preserving the chapel building for his church's use, but the whole affair hindered the church's progress. Nevertheless, his ministry was so appreciated that he returned in 1846, albeit briefly because of one of the frequent economic depressions that affected many West Midland industrial areas in the 19th c. (p23) He came yet again as pastor 1869-79; "There is no doubt that Mr Cousens was the most successful minister the church had had up to this juncture in its history." His ministry "firmly established the church in the life of the community (p 31,35) Far from being divisive, he saw the return to Four Ways of a nearby Baptist congregation that had split away in the 1860s (pp30f)

3 Cousens was acceptable elsewhere in the Midlands, as minister at Kington, Herefordshire as well as the industrial areas of Netherton (Ebenezer, in the 1860s) and Brierly Hill, (in 1839 and 1879-81), where he dies and is buried.

4 He was widely popular among other Free Churches, especially as a Sunday School anniversary preacher (p 17)

5 Cradley Heath was a radical community in many ways, and calling a West Indian as minister was part of this. It was where the Christian Chartist Arthur O'Neill was arrested in 1843 and put in Stafford goal. O'Neill became the minister at Newhall St Baptist Church, Birmingham, and prominent in the Peace Society, advocating non-violent peacemaking. He continued to be welcome at Cradley Heath until his death in 1896, long after Victorian militaristic imperialism had overwhelmed the peace movement. His other social concerns were votes for all, universal elementary education and total abstinence from alcohol. He was welcome to speak at the Cradley Heath Chapel when he could not speak outdoors. (p50ff)

Radical politics continued to be at home there. The radicalism that welcomed Cousens and that he fostered will be popularly expressed in the 21st c with the re-erection at the Black Country Living Museum of Cradley Heath Institute, linked to its original site and origins with the famous women chain-makers strike of 1910.

Cousens' story is not pre-eminently one of racism but of acceptability and significant influence. His emergence at the in 1837 was right at the time when Evangelical Nonconformity was rejoicing in the end of slavery in the British Empire (1834) and campaigning for the end to the indenture system (1838)

The Back Page

Are you interested in receiving the BHS newsletter by email. We are constantly looking for better ways to communicate with members, and know that many of us now use email as regularly, if not more, than post. We are compiling a list of those who would like to receive the newsletter this way – saving on paper, clutter and postage, while still passing on all the news. Thank you to those who have been in touch. If you mean to and haven't here is another chance. If you haven't thought about it yet – here is the opportunity. If you would like to receive the newsletter this way, please contact the newsletter editor ruth@bloomsbury.org.uk

Please note the change of address. For postal communication, the newsletter editor's address is

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