

# Baptist Historical Society Newsletter

## Autumn 2008

Welcome to the latest edition of the BHS newsletter. We have two major items this time. We have the third part of the memories of mission in Congo in the 1950s and 1960s. We are grateful to Fred Stainthorpe for helping us know more about this experience from the inside.

The other major item is a memory of our former treasurer, Thornton Elwyn, who died suddenly while this newsletter was in preparation. Faith Bowers has written a tribute to him, and we are grateful to her. More will appear in the BQ. The editor of the newsletter simply wants to note her sadness at not being able to call him for advice any more.

There are also flyers for two BHS events, and some information about events and books that we hope you may find of interest.

If you have material for the Newsletter, please send it to me

[ruth@bloomsbury.org.uk](mailto:ruth@bloomsbury.org.uk)

### *OVERSEAS MISSION IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES:*

#### *BOLOBO; Pt3*

The Memories of Fred Stainthorpe

The mission lifestyle and our relative richness compared to the average Congolese was a cause of heart-searching. The pioneer missionaries had necessarily lived in very simple conditions. The incidence of previously unknown diseases such as malaria and yellow fever had killed many of them before they were able to do any useful work. Accordingly, BMS decided to build bigger and more lasting houses. These helped to keep them healthier and so forwarded the mission. I believe that somewhere George Grenfell and others defended this practice against accusations that they were living lives of luxury!

So we and all our colleagues inherited spacious houses with verandas, of the sort about which Roland Allen wrote rather scathingly in "The spontaneous expansion of the Church". They must have seemed indistinguishable to the Africans from those which the Belgian administrators occupied. Concrete and galvanised iron water tanks collected rainwater from the roofs and supplied us with all we needed even in the dry season. In the years before Independence, we had all furnished ourselves with refrigerators, a piece of equipment we would not have dreamed of possessing back in Britain. Likewise, we had fairly well-stocked larders which Allison's of London replenished from time to time from our orders and so life was pretty comfortable.

Yet from time to time I used to wonder how far these things kept us isolated from the Congolese. Why did we not eat more African food, such as the engele (manioc, a rubbery concoction which always tasted horrible to me) which was their staple diet? The pioneers had, according to their writings.

Sometimes the Congolese asked us these and similar questions which made me feel uneasy. If they came to England we would not expect them to import their own African food. (On the other hand we would not expect them to erect mud huts for themselves).

I cannot have been the first person to ask these questions nor the first to seek a practical solution, even if only to ease one's own conscience. People said of John Whitehead, one of the early Bolobo personnel, that his wife had some difficulty in dissuading him one day from going out dressed in a loincloth, such was his desire to identify with the Africans. Whether this would have impressed them, I cannot say. Probably, they would not have understood his actions at all.

Incidentally, we failed lamentably to record the lives of many of these pioneers. Many of them possessed an abundance of the trail-blazing spirit which enabled them to face hardships such as those of us who followed afterwards never had to face. Possibly we could not have done. Not everybody is a pioneer. This spirit gave rise to many stories about them which, sadly, have been never been recorded. The Bolobo office, for example, contained many letters which John Whitehead, the great linguist and hymn writer of the early days, sent to his contemporaries. At that time, he was working at Wayika, miles up-river from the furthest-out BMS station at Yakusu. Although he became blind, he remained there on his own for about twenty years, long after retirement age. The letters all bore evidence of his strong personality and even stronger views about everything. Historians would give their right arms to see those letters nowadays. Presumably, after Independence, newly installed Congolese pastors, who probably could not read much English anyway, saw them as useless or irrelevant documents and threw them away. In addition, many of us were so busy that we could not afford the time for the necessary research, even if we had the incentive.

Perhaps my hesitations about life-style and riches were mere scrupulosity and there was no answer to an incredibly difficult question. To which standard of life should we have approximated? Congolese were striving to raise their own, quite rightly and in comparison with other expatriates we often seemed the poorer relatives. During my early days in Belgium (1954) one of my fellow-lodgers, an American Presbyterian, invited me one day to accompany him to Antwerp. He was going there, he told me, to buy a Volkswagen van, as it was cheaper to obtain them in transit than otherwise. I enjoyed the ride there but the thought that I could or would ever own my own vehicle, as many of our American co-workers did, never entered my mind. Perhaps if British Christians had given as generously to missions as our trans-Atlantic fellow-believers did, this might have been possible. I learned that, for example, a single American Methodist lady received about sixty percent more allowance than I did, as a married man! Later, heard that where Missions co-operated in work such as the Training School and Medical Centre at Kimpese in the Lower Congo, the Africans soon became aware of the difference between the living standards of Americans and others and wondered why this was so. So missionary "affluence" had its advantages and drawbacks. They must at times have thought that Christianity was the pathway to prosperity. One could hardly blame them for succumbing to the **lure of relative wealth**.

*THORNTON ELWYN MA BSc BD*

Thornton died on 14 November 2007, of a heart attack on his way to a ministers' meeting. In 1966, when the BHS committee was despairing of finding a successor to Allan Calder as treasurer, Thornton volunteered. In 2006 he handed over to Mark Sage, while remaining an

active member of the committee. But his services to the Society ranged wider than your usual treasurer. We had to appoint a Membership Secretary and a Distribution Manager for the *Baptist Quarterly* as well, and find others willing to run the Society's stall at Assembly which had for many years been largely left to Thornton and Enid. Thornton continued to handle overseas sales and to index the *Quarterly*. Calder had rescued the Society from debt and handed over a modest balance of £250. In 2006 the Society's funds totalled £45,000. Thornton's good management saw the Society through years of inflation, and growing reserves have made more activity possible, especially in publishing. He will be keenly missed by colleagues who depended on his encyclopaedic knowledge and wise judgement, for his mind and memory remained clear to the end. We shall miss bouncing new ideas on him, confident of wise and helpful reaction.



Thornton first studied science, but was called to ministry and developed a taste for history. After training at Rawdon College, he had pastorates at Swanwick 1954-7, Walgrave 1957-63, and Dartford 1963-7. He wrote the history of the Northamptonshire Association, that cradle of evangelical Baptist life. It was a privilege to be shown round historic churches there by such a guide. From 1967 to 1992 he was an industrial chaplain with the South London Industrial Mission, working in the gas works on the site now occupied by the Dome and in nearby steelworks, and later with the Central Electricity Generating Board. He felt passionate about this work. He liked the Mission's ecumenical nature and the challenge to wrestle with issues theologically, but above all the opportunities to be there for people who would not naturally take their concerns to the church. While he was with SLIM, the Elwyns joined the Bloomsbury church, where he served as deacon. They retired to Earls Barton in 1992, where he pastored the Baptist church part-time until 1998.

Above all he will be missed by Enid, his childhood sweetheart and wife of well over fifty years, and constant partner in Christ's service since they were baptized together as youthful believers. Theirs is a close-knit family. Thornton and Enid had the joy of watching all three children come to faith and take an active role in churches, and of seeing some of their grandchildren baptized as believers too. Thornton and Enid enjoyed each other's company, in their home, out bird-watching, or travelling around Europe with their caravan. They knew that this summer had seen the last of these peregrinations - the insurance would be prohibitive when over eighty.

It has been a privilege to have a colleague so willing to work quietly and thoroughly 'behind the scenes', seeking little reward but the satisfaction of seeing jobs well done, and all ultimately for Christ and his Kingdom.

**And does any other Society member feel moved to index ...?**

**Faith Bowers**

## *Oral History Update*

With the deaths of Thornton Elwyn and Edwin Robertson, we have lost two of our memory keepers. So we wanted to remind members of the importance of our oral history project. We already have some tapes of people's memories, and we are working on digitalising them so that they will be available on our website

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But we are always interested in collecting more. If anybody would like to do some interviews, please get in touch. We have a tape recorder available, and guidelines if you need help. Please let the newsletter editor know if you would like to know more.

## *Forthcoming events*

### **BHS Assembly Seminar;**

Failing the First Commandment? Baptist Christians and Creation Care. Rev Dr Keith Jones

### **BHS AGM**

May 17<sup>th</sup>, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.

Lecture; Faith Bowers.

Visits to local churches in the afternoon.

See Flyer for further details.

### **Strict Baptist Historical Society AGM and Lecture**

Friday March 14<sup>th</sup>, Bethesda Baptist Church, Kensington Place, London

AGM 6.00pm, lecture 7.00pm.

Lecturer; Dr Ian Shaw

Baptist High Calvinists and Social Action.

*If you would like to let people know about an event, please send details to the newsletter editor for inclusion.*