

WE, THE PEOPLE OF GOD...

Some notes on the Chenies Baptists and their Chapel

By Christopher Stell 1978

THE PEOPLE OF GOD MEETING TOGETHER AT GREEN STREET CHENIES IN BUCKS HAVING BEEN ENABLED THROUGH DIVINE GRACE TO GIVE OURSELVES TO THE LORD AND LIKEWISE TO ONE ANOTHER BY THE

Behind the history of every institution lies a pre-history in which a diversity of events combines to prepare the ground in which the seed is later to be sown and the flowers blossom. Four hundred years before the Baptist Church was formed in Chenies John Wycliffe became master of Balliol and in 1368 rector of Ludgershall, Bucks. His itinerant preachers who went forth at that time to spread the gospel commenced a religious awakening amongst the peoples of the Chiltern Hills, 'Lollardy' took a firm hold, and in the subsequent persecution many suffered for their faith including some whose surnames appear frequently in Chenies Baptist records. Even members of the Cheyne family, lords of the manor, were not beyond suspicion, and in the 14th and early 15th century the fires of Amersham again and again crackled with the bones of Lollard martyrs.

Persecution did not serve its intended ends and Lollard traditions survived to be revitalised by the Puritan movements of the 16th century. In 1553 John Knox paid a notable visit to the county preaching a most outspoken sermon at Amersham on the eve of the succession of Queen Mary. In the following century nonconformity began to take its present form. Baptist vicars appeared at Hemel Hempstead and Kensworth but were condemned by the Presbyterians and Independents who held most of the Commonwealth benefices. In 1662 the Presbyterian rector of Chenies, Benjamin Agas, was among the 2,000 ministers ejected under the Act of Uniformity; he and his fellow sufferers Dr. Edmund Staunton, president of Corpus Christi, and the venerable Richard Baxter all contributed to maintaining occasional preaching in the district in those difficult years.

Two houses in Chenies were licensed for dissenting worship in the early 18th century, that of James Newton in 1705-6 and that of James Cannon 'called Cheynes Lodge' in 1708, both families and the Lodge being later associated with the Baptist Church. A further link in this pre-history is through another James Newton born at Chenies in 1733 of 'pious parents' who later entered a small ministerial academy in London, was there a contemporary of Dr. Morgan Jones, passing on to ministerial and scholarly honours in Bristol. Such was the promised land into which in 1757 came

Mr. Bennet, minister at St. Albans, who resigning that office on 3 February 1757, 'removed to Chenies, in Buckinghamshire, where he raised a congregation and continued till his death in 1761'.

It is likely that Bennet was encouraged to come to Chenies by members of those families which later gave the Church some of its earliest Deacons and Trustees, not least by William Davis, the steward of the Duke of Bedford, who occupied the Manor House and seems to have been accustomed to an independency of action which must have made him a powerful leader in the affairs of the Church. The Church was formed about 1760 by 23 persons; the first entry in the Church Book is undated, comprising a carefully written Confession of Faith of 24 articles, and a Church Covenant in five parts. The first dated entry, 20 December 1760, is an agreement concluded on the advice of the Rev. Dr. John Gill, of Carter Lane, Southwark, whose nephew had succeeded Bennet at St. Albans. From this it appears that some Independents and Presbyterians had assisted in fitting up the meeting place but their inclusion in the Church was causing difficulties for others in the transfer of Church membership. The conclusion reached was to restrict membership so far as possible to Baptists although in 1764 these conditions were modified to admit Independents 'upon an impartial confession that they are not ignorant of Believer's Baptism for want of searching'.

Bennet's successor was a Mr. Stone whose regular quarterly salary of £6 appears in the accounts from 1761 to 1764; he was transferred to Dr. Gill's Church in 1765. The next pastor was Thomas Cromwell from Limehouse whose brief records of Church discipline and membership give a misleading picture of tranquility. By 1774 a serious disagreement had developed leading to the secession of two deacons and other members. The origins of the quarrel are not clear but deficiency in pastoral visitation is suggested with the possibility of more serious doctrinal differences. Cromwell resigned in 1775 and is later found preaching in Blunham, Beds., but without acceptance. With the arrival of Hugh Giles in 1775 the first period of Church history comes to a close and a brief look must be taken at the first meeting-house which till then had sheltered the Church.

The original Confession of Faith commences 'We the People of God, Meeting together at Green Street, Chenies, in Bucks'. Green Street was at that time a small hamlet on the main road from Rickmansworth to Amersham, now comprising only Great and Little Green Street Farms, but formerly including the almshouses built in 1605 by the Countess of Warwick and no doubt a few cottages and outbuildings one of which was converted for use as

a meeting-house. No trace of any such building now remains nor has any licence been found for it, but it is quite clear from a reference in the 1760 agreement to persons 'who contributed to the Expence of fitting up the said Meeting House' that it was the conversion of an existing building. It was not merely a small room since the accounts, which survive from 1761 to 1774 refer to the existence of a gallery as well as a pulpit with its bible and cushion, a clock, candlesticks, and various charges for minor repairs and regular cleaning. No records appear of any rent paid for the building which most likely would have been lent to the Church by one of its members without further formality.

The first indication that a more permanent chapel was needed is in a lease of 1 February 1773 of part of the present site in which John Davis grants the Church part of an orchard then occupied by George Cooper subject to six months notice 'whenever they shall have occasion or think proper to build a Meeting House thereon'. The dramatic resignation of the pastor may have delayed the start of the new venture, but by September 1775 Hugh Giles was already active on behalf of the Church representing it at a formative meeting of the Eastern Association. In a letter to the Association of 28 April 1776 the Church reports 'The Lord is inclining more and more people to attend upon the word than can be conveniently accommodated with seats in the meeting-house'. The 1777 letter notes a steady increase in membership. By the time the letter of June 1778 was compiled the new meeting-house had been started, the Church reporting 'the place we at present occupy for Religious worship far too small to contain the people in a comfortable way and manner which has constrained us to begin building a more commodious and larger house for the worship of God! and noting that letters asking for assistance had been sent to members of the Association. On 8 October 1778 the new building was certified to the court of Quarter Sessions 'as a Place for Religious Worship for Protestant Dissenters and so may be presumed to have been ready for use.

The formal vesting of the property was delayed until May 1779 when it was transferred by John Davis to 20 trustees including his son William, sons-in-law Rev. Morgan Jones and John Munn, and the minister Hugh Giles. 'Kingscote' then occupied by Giles was included in the deed, but the adjacent cottage, the present manse, remained the property of Davis whose tenant George Cooper was still living there. The impressive document of five large parchment sheets bound by tape and covered with many seals, placing the chapel in trust for Particular Baptists includes a plan shewing a central entrance as now but further back, and small square vestry.

The chapel of 1778 is still clearly recognisable although the front wall was then in line with the panelled front of the rear gallery and the windows each side of the pulpit were longer and came above the low Vestry roof. The Vestry was rebuilt or enlarged in 1833 and again in 1841-51 when the schoolroom was built above it. In 1799 the chapel was enlarged to the front and the galleries extended, and in 1838 the porch was added. The first major internal addition was in 1794 when the baptistery was dug, avoiding a long journey to Chesham for those who may have regarded John Davis' pond immediately in front of the Chapel as insufficiently salubrious. A major structural problem in 1829 caused the insertion of iron columns to assist in supporting the roof. Various internal repairs in 1840 caused three successive Sunday services to be held 'at the back of the Chapel under a large rick cloth' and at the same period cast-iron gutters were provided and the present front railings set up. The cost of further repairs in 1862 supervised by Mr. Smith, architect, of London, were partly paid for by the sale of engraved portraits of the pastor by 'Mr Boarder, the artist'. Of the changes which took place in the generation or so following the centenary of the building it can here only be said that much worse might have happened. Though the box pews and the benches and the pulpit were all renewed it is still possible to appreciate scenes once familiar to the fathers of the Church two centuries ago and to recall that they built not for their bodily comfort but for the comfort of their immortal souls. John Wesley could never have said of Chenies as he did of the sumptuous fittings of the Octagon Chapel in Norwich 'how can it be thought that the old coarse gospel should find admission here?'

Of the life of the Church following the erection of the new meeting-house much could yet be written, of the sad end of Hugh Giles' ministry in a hasty and ill-considered resignation in 1788, and of his successor Nathan Sharman whose notable pastorate of 18 years saw the opening of preaching stations in Mill End, Bovington, Chipperfield and Flaunden. Little is known of his successor William Lewis but the pastorate of Ebenezer West is recalled by the tablet behind the pulpit. His small school which removed to Amersham and later to Caversham took him partly away from the Church in 1829 just when the incumbency of Lord Wriothesley Russell at the Parish church began to have a serious effect on Baptist support, but the assistant pastor, Thomas Davis proved himself a blessing to the Church in time of need. And of his successors? Are their names not written in the book of life?