Baptists in the Weald.

KENT is a museum of Baptist antiquity. It is always in villages that the real country flavour remains, and eleven miles south-east of Maidstone is as quaint a group as anyone could want. The old fragrance is rapidly exhaling, new chapels for old meeting-houses, Alexandre harmoniums instead of flutes and bass viols, Sustentation grants instead of ten shillings a week. Shall we try and depict the past, relying for many facts and all local colour on Mr. Halford L. Mills of Smarden, long a trustee and deacon.

Three hundred years ago there were no Baptists in Kent, so far as we know. But there were sturdy descendants of Lollards, and recollections of Agnes Snoath burnt in Mary's days. The soil was capital, if only Baptist seed were dropped in. William Jeffery of Sevenoaks is one of the first to appear. Then the minister of Orpington, Francis Cornwell, preached at Cranbrook to a gathering of his brethren and startled them. Christopher Blackwood, minister of Staplehurst, took the sermon down in shorthand, and they agreed to thrash the matter out another day. In the end, both these clergy became Baptist, and of course quitted the Establishment. Important as their work was elsewhere, the local leadership fell to a family which took its name from the village of Kingsnorth, two miles south of Ashford, but whose head, Richard, was at the farm of Spilshill in Staplehurst, where his fine oak frame house is still to be seen.

An ancient book, jealously guarded at Bound's Cross chapel by a Tilden trustee, shows that the work in and round Smarden had been so effective by 1640, that in that year was drawn up a list of 84 men and women who signed a covenant. From that time onwards Baptist witness has been borne in a large group of villages on the Weald of Kent. The threads are matted together, but it has been possible to disentangle one cluster, and the unravelling may be better followed by noting the knots :—

1640. Baptists of Staplehurst, Smarden, &c., covenant together.

1677. Semi-unitarians of Biddenden, Frittenden, Headcorn, separate.

1705. Calvinists of Smarden exclude the General Baptists, who organize afresh and are recognized as the original church.

1817. Church quits the General Assembly, and next year joins the New Connexion.
1892. Church joins the Baptist Union, and the Kent and Sussex Association.
1902. Some leave and form a church, which joins the Old Baptist Union.
1905. The original church disbands, handing over the property to the Association.
1908. The Association promotes a new church to use the premises.

Practically, therefore, the story of the ancient church falls into three sections :—

Gathering and Sorting.
A Century of Testifying.
A Century of Feebleness.

But there are also offshoots to be noted; Headcorn, Smarden Tilden, Smarden Bethel, besides several Calvinists at Bethersden, Bounds Cross, Biddenden, Frittenden.

I. GATHERING AND SORTING.

In the first period there was eager evangelization in every direction for scores of years. Every village near heard of Christ, and most villages had some converts, all Baptist. Vital religion had been at a discount; the drill of Archbishop Laud had chafed clergy and laity alike, men were ready to hear the gospel and to spread it. The members were too busy to stop and write down what they were doing, and the surviving books have only fragmentary notices. From the fly-leaves of old Bibles, entries of births and other family events were gathered up later on, and show a wide circle in 1654. A careful but obscure formula of doctrine shows that men were exercising themselves in thought: another entry shows careful watch kept over morals, so that a builder suspected of supplying inferior material had to clear himself. But till 1661 the flashes of light are few. Then came persecution, for Sheldon and Clarendon were worthy successors of Laud. It soon was illegal for five visitors to meet with a family for worship; if they were caught, heavy fines could be imposed, and in default of cash, farm and house would be stripped by merciless distraint. This lasted till 1672, when Charles issued a Declaration of Indulgence, and as a result, a group of these men applied together for licenses: James Blackmore for his house at Tenterden, Francis Cornwall for his house at Marden, Richard Gunn for the house of Theophilus Beath at Cranbrook, George Hammon for the house of James Harding at Biddenden, Daniel

Kingsnorth for the house of Thomas Hills at Charing, Henry Kingsnorth for the house of Walter Gilham at Smarden, Richard Kingsnorth for his house at Staplehurst, Thomas Kingsnorth for his house at Frittenden, Daniel Kingston (?) for the house of John Heniker at Lenham, Robert Knight for the house of John Hopper at Headcorn, Nathaniel Row for the house of John Miller at Cranbrook, Henry Snoath for the house of Thomas Hooker at Boughton (Malherbe). Thus we see how strong and how wide-spread was this brotherhood.

The leader was Richard Kingsnorth. Early Baptists had a strong sense of the duty of teaching sound doctrine, and had the inspiration that the doctrine could be put into verse for people to sing and learn; it was this which caused the rise of modern hymns as distinct from psalms and of congregational singing. Soon after 1657, when he published a little book, Richard felt moved to deliver himself with care, and he entered his poem into the church book. With a little editing of punctuation and spelling it runs thus :—

THE CHARACTER OF THE MIND OF MAN,

as it is depraved in Adam's fall, as it is made worse by Satan's temptations and actual sin, and as it is renewed again by the gift of God giving it mind to loathe sin. Whereby a soul may see itself, whether it be in a state of reprobation or salvation. . . . The mind and will are one thing; and reprobation, Romans i. 28, and renewing, Ephesians iv. 23, begin both in the mind; Christ is He that hath done all for man of free grace; man's duty is only to bend and set his mind to believe in God through Christ the Lord, and all is sure.

Mind first is nought, if after worse;
Then mind and thought are both accurst.
Mind the depraved mind of man;
First to mind God, it no whit can.
Mind both the mind and will are one;
And mind and will from God is gone.
Mind that's the judgment and the strife;
Man will not mind God in this life.
Mind how the judgment first came in;
The woman's mind was won to sin.
Mind how the serpent brought this grief;
He won her heart in unbelief.
Mind reprobation doth begin
When as the mind is won to sin.
Mind renovation's come again;
When as the mind is won from sin.

Mind renovation's always true
When love to God doth mind renew.
Mind; while thy mind is won to sin
Thy mind in reprobation's in.
Mind both the new and old begin
As mind doth love, and loathe, its sin.
Mind what's the mystery, the knot;
Man must mind God, yet can he not.
Mind that the reason of it all;
Man's mind depraved in Adam's fall.
Mind God's fustis, therein thou'll feel;
The serpent's power to bruise the heel.
Mind's fallen many a willi else;
That cannot mind God of himself.
Mind yet, thought man, God cannot mind;
Yet God minds man, for God is kind.
Mind God gives means, man's mind to win
And mind the things of God again.
Mind God's grace and power has known;
By these things God to man hath shown.
Mind, as the serpent won the mind
By outward objects, made man blind.
Mind that when man thought more to see,
Then all his word was misery.
Mind, faculty, reason to do,
God gives when He requireth to,
Mind, thus God sets before man's sight
The equal way of death and life.
Mind God gives talents for man to use,
And justly damns that it abuse.
Mind godliness, godly contents,
The mind renewed made innocent.
Mind still thought weakness, be within;
Yet is the mind renewed from sin.
Mind, Christ is He that all hath done;
Mind faith only to make't thine own.

Richard Kingsnorth, Senior,
Spillshill, Staplehurst.

Richard published two more books in 1670, and held the whole community together till his death seven years later.

Hitherto the church had been kept at peace by its evangelistic fervour within and by persecution without. But now appeared disruptive tendencies on points of doctrine. The opinions of Matthew Caffin at Horsham had their followers here, and it was found the wisest course to separate into two groups. Those

who adopted Caffin's Christology henceforth held their meetings at Biddenden, Frittenden, and Headcorn. The other party, whose destinies we follow first, met at Staplehurst and Smarden.

But a second line of cleavage presently appeared, as to the opinions of Calvin and Arminius. Hardly in any other case had these counter opinions been held within the same church; but perhaps the width of the brotherhood had prevented much tension. Once, however, that toleration became the rule under the act of 1689, and evangelization ceased, unrest developed, and it was felt wise a second time to part company. On this occasion manners were not amicable; one Elder, Thomas Gilham, closed his house to the preachers of universal redemption. By the end of the century there was open quarrel, and an attempt to reconcile by visitors from the outside failed. A deputation of Thomas Deane, Messenger, William Woodham, of Deptford, Joseph Jenkins of High Hall, Abraham Mulliner, of White's Alley, James Fenn, of Deal, David Brown, of Maidstone, finished by ordaining Vincent Jennings and Daniel Kingsnorth as Elders, Daniel Austen as Deacon: fifteen other men signed the documents. Apparently a large number held with Thomas Gilham, avowing Calvinism. Their fortunes again we postpone, and follow the ancient church, attending regularly at the General Baptist Association meetings, before and after this division. It will be borne in mind that the question of continuity was not complicated by the question of title to property, for of this there was at that date next to none. No meeting-house had been erected, the barns or houses of the members sufficed. The only piece of property belonging to the church was probably the minute-book, and this was retained by Thomas Gilham; it still is in the possession of the Calvinists.

II. A CENTURY OF TESTIFYING.

With 1706 the General Baptist Church of Staplehurst and Smarden had defined its position, orthodox and Arminian. But the eighteenth century was not one of religion; the energy which a hundred years earlier was thrown into theology and evangelizing, was diverted now to empire-building, and industrialism as the century wore on.

There are interesting notes as to the care exercised over one another, in discipline meetings. These had to deal with errors both grave and gay; for one brother was brought to acknowledge his sin in wearing a wig! One rule of the denomination was that marriages should be within it, a rule hardly enforced to-day except by Roman Catholics and the Society of Friends. We can see that though again and again the rule was re-considered, and though again and again it was ratified, yet the administration was tending to laxity. In 1708-9 Mary Huggins was charged, and

signed a memorandum. "I have sinned and offended God and you my brethren, in marrying out of communion, the which error I acknowledge to God, and now to you my brethren; and do promise by God's assistance to avoid the like evils for time to come." What we should like to know is, did Mary induce her husband to join the church; if not, was it not unreal to make her say she would avoid the evil, when she did not quit him. No case has yet been found where a church had the courage to insist on this, or boldly to alter the rule. Another kind of case is much more valuable, when on 16 December, 1716, Daniel Kingsnorth acknowledged he had been wrong in threatening to go to law with his brother before making application to the church. This was witnessed by George Kenhelm, John Austen, John Cromp, Thomas Bassett and Daniel Austen. This is remarkable, for Daniel was apparently the Elder, and the church did not flinch from disciplining its officers. Next year George Kenhelm was ordained Elder, and we may assume that Vincent Jennings was now dead.

In 1726 we hear for the first time of any public premises. Daniel Hosmer had sold a patch of ground hard by a pond, half a mile south of the parish church. Here they built a little meeting-house, containing a baptistery; the place came to be called Bell meeting; it cost them £149. It may be that it was about this time a meeting-house was fitted up at Staplehurst, which they rented for £5 yearly. Certainly in 1726 the Calvinists were erecting at Gilham Quarter their little meeting, half a mile north-west of the parish church.

John Austen was associated with Kenhelm in 1732, and as the rival General Assemblies united soon afterwards, Smarden began sending representatives annually, and came into a wider current.

Thus the General Baptist Fund sent a gift of stiff theological books for the use of young ministers; this prompted a private donation; and the G.B. fund made two more grants. Some of the books are still in the church's possession. They were well used then, for the church grew. A roll of 1741 shows 188 members, and we see ministers being supplied by Smarden to Canterbury, Brede, Dover, Headcorn, Chichester and Portsmouth. A register book was opened for births, since the parish clergyman would register only christenings, and had none from his numerous Baptist parishioners. We can trace minutely the succession of officers, the enlargements of the burial-ground, the appointment of new trustees.

A really significant thing should be noted in 1772. Attendance at the General Assembly had dropped with 1758, when both Elders were ageing. In 1770 most of the evangelicals drew off,

and joined the New Connexion. The Assembly at once woke up and beat round for recruits. Daniel Austen of Portsmouth was ordained Messenger, and he set to work to revive old friendships. He had been sent to Portsmouth from Smarden, so in 1772 it is easy to trace his influence, and that of Messenger Boorman at Headcorn, in that Smarden appeared afresh. But whereas in the previous generation its adhesion signified that it was orthodox, its adhesion now meant exactly the opposite, when the Southern Association of the New Connexion was linking such orthodox churches as Deal, Eythorne, Bessels Green with Park and Whitechapel, and when it was actually meeting at Bessels Green, where John Stanger was champion. Joseph Seaton, from Leicester, was now the senior Elder of Smarden, and his attendance at Assembly was regular till 1803, when he removed to the G.B. church at Chatham. The church flourished under his care, enlarged its burial-ground again, bought the meeting-house at Staplehurst outright for £82. As this period draws toward its close, a list shows 105 on the roll, and though some indeed were non-resident, and even the names of some in America were retained, there were thirty in or near Smarden, forty in or near Staplehurst. Every Sunday the lanes were full of people going to worship, churchmen known by their prayer-books, Baptists by their dinner-baskets. Bell meeting vestry had a copper to boil for tea, but otherwise the meals were cold. Stabling was near for the horses, and the scene must have been as it is in the Australian bush to-day. With 1813 we hear of a Sunday school, and its sand table for teaching writing is still preserved.

But the Assembly was fast plunging to Unitarianism. In 1802 it admitted a universalist church with unbaptized members, whereupon the New Connexion severed its last link. A quarrel soon developed. Smarden evidently felt doubtful; no messenger went after 1807, subscription was stopped in 1809, letters were sent next year which seem to have gained no satisfaction; and in 1811 communications ceased. With 1817 there was formal withdrawal; fellowship with Unitarians had come to an end.

III. A CENTURY OF FEEBLENESS.

The New Connexion was now showing much life. In 1816 it had formally instituted a Foreign Missionary Society, had approved of the Home work done on itinerant lines, and had said it would welcome any church whose views substantially accorded. Next year Smarden and Staplehurst sent in an application, with a statement of doctrine, including "the divinity and atonement of Christ." In 1818 it was admitted, Chatham and Wrotham being its nearest neighbours, while Sevenoaks was encouraged to apply also. The report said that work at Smarden was growing, with

prayer-meetings well attended; but the branch at Staplehurst was in not so good a state; 71 members were on the roll. This new friendship caused the resignation of Elder Benjamin Austen; for awhile he conducted worship in his home for a few Unitarians, but this cause flickered out.

Staplehurst indeed slid down hill; the minister fell ill, died, and could not be replaced; Smarden had no one to spare, and Wesleyans were allowed to use the meeting-house fortnightly. With 1824 discipline meetings ceased, three years later it was reported that there was often no service for weeks together, and in 1829 it was acknowledged the cause was extinct, despite the possession of a neat and comfortable little meeting-house.

The country-side was now changing. Turnpike roads were built; one came down from Maidstone to Tenterden, through Headcorn and Biddenden, where another joined it from Charing and Smarden. It was felt that old Bell-meeting was now off the main track, besides being small; so a new site was chosen in Smarden Town, and in 1841 at the cost of £896, Zion appeared, with stucco architrave, a singers' gallery on Tuscan columns, no longer a meeting-house, but a "chapel," even now the finest erection in the Weald for free church service. More than that, the minister ought to be paid: and a salary of £20 was promised, which soon after the opening was doubled. Of course, a man could not support a wife on £40; Thomas Rofe, "pastor" now, not Elder, kept a boarding-school. Many new features appeared; a bazaar to clear off debt, for despite the sale of the Staplehurst premises and large contributions by Deacon Dawson, sufficient money was not forthcoming; then a library for the school, a benevolent society.

A venerable member still remembers the style of worship when Zion was new. The singing gallery was a great feature, with violins, bass viol, flutes. One deacon dictated two lines of a hymn from the corner pew below, the other deacon with his bass viol led the singing; everybody sat during the first two hymns, women in the gallery, men below, the boarders in the table pew with the superior labourers. At prayer the men stood. For the last hymn all stood and faced the gallery when the singing deacon led them merrily, while the servant maids slipped away home to boil the potatoes for those who lived in the village. Collections were quarterly, "the ordinance" on the afternoon of the third Sunday. The ordinance of baptism was administered by Deacon Hosmer as required, perhaps eight times a year at best: on all candidates hands were laid in the style of the apostles and the old General Baptists.

In 1859 three members obtained leave to place an Alexandre harmonium in the gallery; five years later the bass viol gave its

last solo. And so modern fashions came in, ancient customs dropped away. The old Bell meeting-house was taken down, and its site can only be traced by the line of older graves as distinct from the newer. But a manse was built, Zion was re-seated, a schoolroom arose. When the New Connexion merged into the Baptist Union, Smarden formally joined both this and the Kent and Sussex Association.

The pace was evidently too fast for some people, and when a new pastor fell out with the trustees, he quitted the premises, and with several adherents formed a new church, which cast in its lot with the Old Baptist Union, a body transplanted by Americans, founding itself on the position of 1660, the very original basis of the church. Poor Zion felt dazed at this putting back the hands of the clock, and called in the Association, which was more modern, dating only from 1779. Under its auspices a reconstruction was effected, and Smarden Zion has entered on a new phase.

It remains to take note of the other societies which have branched off from it.

IV. THE TWIN CHURCH OF HEADCORN.

Headcorn village is but four miles from Smarden, on the way to Staplehurst; yet for 250 years Baptist life in it has been organized separately. After the friendly separation of 1677, it lived a fairly quiet and obscure life.

In those early days, when no special building existed, the General Baptists of Biddenden and Frittenden esteemed themselves one with Headcorn. Representatives were sent to the Assembly soon after the first crisis on Christology, John Saunders, Nicholas Rich, James Cooper, David Chapman, supporting Caffin's views pretty steadily; they gave the name of the church as Biddenden. John Tassall and William Tempest also appeared, from Frittenden; and it is a mercy that the latter abstained from further tangling the threads by ventilating his ideas on the Seventh-day.

Meanwhile Headcorn had been quite in the background, though we know that an acre of orchard was sold to a Smarden clothier in 1704, and that a lodge was erected on it about 1736, when George Kenhelm witnessed a deed of sale to Richard Furnell. This was apparently the beginning of the "Rumpton" chapel, as it came to be known, though only in 1748 was the next building erected, and the whole clearly put in trust for Baptists.

In 1736, however, Daniel Buss attended Assembly, then Samuel Pyall, Elder by 1755, with James Cooper two years later. Thomas Clarke and James Hosmer attended the Association at Bessels Green in 1760. Eight years later Elder John Boorman

came to the front, and started a new church book. At the critical Assembly of 1770 he took two representatives up, and made such an impression that he was chosen and ordained Messenger. It was evidently due to him that the twin church of Smarden Bell-meeting returned to Assembly. His own church flourished, and as he now had wide duties, we find Robert Pyall and Benjamin Marten associated as Elders by 1797, with perhaps John Iggelden as a fourth before the century closed. Pyall devoted himself especially to the members at Biddenden till his death in 1820. There were in all the villages 101 members. Although John Coupland attended the London Conference of the New Connexion in 1810 after the third crisis, yet the church had made up its mind. It built a new chapel in 1819, and placed upon it the uncompromising inscription, UNITARIAN BAPTIST CHAPEL. There were indeed Baptists of the ordinary General type in Headcorn, but they walked or drove to worship at Smarden in Bell meeting-house.

The Unitarian cause undoubtedly flourished, for in 1834 Lawrence Holden of Tenterden was made trustee of a new chapel at Biddenden. His successor, Edward Talbot, garnered up some of the past history, which was used in 1901 for a book on *Old Tenterden*. But long ere that, the Biddenden worship had ceased; a wheelwright named Colebrook was the last preacher. The building tumbled down, and its materials were used up for a secular edifice erected 1868.

Frittenden also saw strange changes. The last note of the General Baptists here was their attending an Association meeting at Biddenden in 1771. At the close of the century a farmer named Mitchell did indeed build a little chapel on Pound Hill, but at his death this was sold.

The story of the Unitarians at Headcorn itself can be traced in detail, and it is clear that again and again there were stirrings of a richer life. When in this century a clear issue was presented, the church did at last part company with the Assembly and the Unitarians, and did cast in its lot with the Union and the Kent and Sussex Association. But the long estrangement has not made it practicable yet to re-group with its twin-sister at Zion.

V. THE CALVINISTS OF TILDEN.

In 1705/6 the old church sent off a swarm of General-redemptionists, as we have already seen; the remainder, with Elder Gilham declared themselves a Particular Baptist church. This was the only one known to Dr. John Evans of London nine years later. In 1726 James Tilden built them a meeting-house, which has impressed his name on the church. In 1741 there were 58 members, and their rolls are continuous, though there seems no

progress to record. When the Kent and Sussex Association was formed in 1779, they joined, but withdrew in 1793, when they reported 99 members. The Association had its ups and downs, but when in 1838 it was decidedly Calvinist, Tilden rejoined with 110 members. Members came from many villages, including Biddenden. There set in an era of Calvinist chapels. The building at Pound Hill, vacated by the Generals of Frittenden, was first rented, then bought by James Hickmott and put in trust for the Particular Baptists. At Lashenden, where the bounds of four parishes converge, and a turnpike crosses the old pilgrim way, Hickmott marked off a site in 1870, thus evolving Bound's Cross. Ten years later he opened " Ebenezer " there, to seat two hundred; a school was built in 1907. At Flimwell near Hawkhurst, there arose " Providence." These three places are served by a minister living at Bound's Cross, who is a trustee of many Calvinistic chapel estates. Another " Providence " stands at Staplehurst, able to accommodate four hundred worshippers. At Smarden itself the old Tilden meeting was replaced in 1893 by a new building in Gilham Quarter. This church now esteems the Kent and Sussex Association not sufficiently Calvinist for it to join, especially as Zion belongs to it. The favourite musical instrument for this group is the pitch-pipe.

VI. THE CONSERVATIVES OF BETHEL.

In 1898, R. J. La Vander was appointed at Zion, but within four years he led away those who preferred the doctrines and the methods of 1660. They built a new chapel with a new manse, and united with that shadowy body, the Old Baptist Union. He died in 1919, his widow trained A. E. Basset, of Horsham, who succeeded him.

A COMPANY of persons were on 7 July, 1654, about to baptize some women in the water on Devizes Green, in the exercise of their religion: they were assaulted by several persons who endeavoured to throw them all into the water together. They complained to Quarter Sessions, but apparently had no redress.

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THOMAS PALMORE, of Stratford-under-the-Castle, was presented at the grand inquest for Wilts. in January 1643/4 for refusing to come to church, he being a Brownist or Anabaptist.