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Capel-y-ffin.

I HAVE recently had the privilege to examine a ragged small quarto, bound in vellum, and inscribed *A Register Book for the use of the Baptized Church of Christ meeting at Chapel y Ffin*. It is dated 1794, but it also contains "writings and agreements copyd out of the old decayd Register Book" from 1737. Capel-y-ffin (which takes its name, "the chapel at the boundary," not from the meeting-house hereafter referred to, but from an ancient chapel-of-ease of the parish-church of Llanigon) is a scattered hamlet in the south-eastern corner of Breconshire, where the counties of Brecon, Monmouth and Hereford meet, lying along the northern part of the next to the most easterly of the four valleys which run up into the Black Mountains, the vale of Ewyas. It is still a secluded place, where the road ceases to become really practicable for twentieth-century vehicles and the nearest convenient railway station is ten miles off, at Llanvihangel Crucorney where, in 1678, another "dissenter," the Ven. David Lewis (*alias* Charles Baker), a Jesuit, was brought before the magistrate. But in the years covered by the register-book the place was even more retired and suitable for the gatherings of a sect still hardly immune from persecution. Even in the earlier years of the nineteenth century the normal ways in and out of the valley were by the mountain bridle-paths to Hay at the north and to Longtown on the east; the southern end was not opened up as it is to-day, and Archdeacon Coxe in his *Tour Through Monmouthshire* (1801) gives a most alarming account of his adventures in a chaise when penetrating the vale of Ewyas from Abergavenny. In the register it is noted (15th Sept. 1805) that "Abergavenny is far from here and none from here goes there but seldom," and that letters should be directed "to the care of Mr. Swetman Shopkeeper Hay Breconshire."

The easternmost valley of the Black Mountains, adjoining Ewyas, is that of Olchon, and at its southern end, in more or less open country, is Oldcastle, the home of Sir John Oldcastle, sometimes called Lord Cobham, the leader of the Lollards during the reign of Henry V. After his escape from the Tower and the abortive rising of 1414 he fled to the west and was in hiding in the vale of Olchon for three years, from whence he organized the

disturbances which eventually lead up to his re-capture and hanging in 1417. The diocese of Hereford, to which Olchon and Oldcastle were adjacent, was one of the centres of Lollardy, and without doubt Sir John's enormous influence (he was a man of personality and ability as well as of position and wealth) extended the short distance over the mountain ridge to the then Welsh-speaking inhabitants of Ewyas. Indeed, in spite of the language objection, it is possible that *Bwlch Efengyl* (Gospel Pass) which opens the northern end of Ewyas, gets its name from Lollard preachers. Popular tradition associates it with the presence of St. Paul, while some writers have brought Archbishop Baldwin through here when on his crusading mission; the second conjecture is as certainly wrong as the first, for Giraldus, who was with the archbishop, definitely says that they went from "Landeu" to Abergavenny *via* Coed Grono i.e., Grwyne-fawr, the next valley west.

Joshua Thomas, that indefatigable collector of traditions, was told about 1750 that in 1633 there was formed in the vale of Olchon a Church of Particular Baptists under the pastorate of one Howell Vaughan. Though politically in Herefordshire, it was accounted the second nonconformist church to be founded in Wales and the first of that persuasion.¹

From very early days the Olchon Baptists had a "branch" at Capel-y-ffin, and the two places were closely associated. There was never a distinct meeting-house at Olchon, worship being

¹ There is no need to question the tradition that the influence of Sir John Oldcastle had persisted, and that dissent was rife in the vale. There is, however, abundant contemporary evidence that there was no dissenting church in Wales before 1639, when Wroth, Craddock and Jessey organized at Llanvaches. Had there existed any organized church in Olchon then, of any shade, silence about it would have been most unjust. The leaders of the Llanvaches church were in Bristol 1642/3, when local Baptists were influential enough to win John Tombes thoroughly to Baptist principles. Therefore it is quite possible that from 1643 onwards, Baptist views may have become known, both at Llanvaches and at Olchon. Yet repeated search for evidence has found nothing earlier than the entries in the church book of Swansea, now at Swansea, Massachusetts. They were summarised in 1795 by Joshua Thomas, and published fully in Welsh page 13 of the *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1910-1911. Mr. Thomas Richards concludes that early in February 1649/50 "a Baptist cause was started at the Hay in Breconshire as a convenient meeting-place for the converted Independents of Llanigon and the Baptists who had some years foregathered on the other side of the mountains at Olchon in Herefordshire"; and he notes that the researches of Baptist historians have hitherto failed to give a satisfactory account of the origin of this church. It should be observed that Myles and Proud went to London (not to Olchon) to learn more fully, and to be baptized. The letters of 1650 published by Ivimey would agree with the theory that the dissenters of Olchon were converted to Baptist principles and were organized into a church early in that year.—EDITOR.

conducted in private houses; and so when, in 1762, an acre of ground was given in Capel-y-ffin and a meeting-house built thereon, the Olchon "church" became merged in and lost its name to Capel-y-ffin.

It is thus seen that this tiny Welsh hamlet has a tradition of religious "dissent" going back to the days of Henry V. Whether that tradition is unbroken is not clear, but the Baptists of the neighbourhood are conscious and proud of the antiquity of their association, and always date it to the fifteenth century.² It is possible that there is here a tenuous link between pre-reformation dissenters and post-reformation Protestants—but no sufficient continuity to make Wiclif or Oldcastle, much less Langland or Fr. John Ball, "morning-stars of the Reformation."

The register-book of this ancient community was kept in no ways methodically or completely. It includes lists of members, baptisms (by immersion in the Afon Honddhu and other streams) amounts and details of collections, disciplinary records, and notices of pastors, who until recently merely added the duties of the ministry to their work as farmers. No marriages are recorded (this was the business of the parish-church) nor deaths, except incidentally. Throughout its pages, from 1737, the same family names continually appear, many of which, Watkins, Lewis and Price, for example, are with us still.

From the entry of a Church Meeting on June 2nd, 1784, it seems likely that the complete fusion of Olchon with Capel-y-ffin did not take place until that date. The agreement is a good example of the decency and simplicity which characterized their religion. It begins as follows:

We agree to make our covenant as a church with each other, in the name, and in the fear of the Lord and in His strength, that is to say as followeth. First if a Brother or Sister shall be found guilty of giving a private offence to a fellow-member, that such offended member is to behave to the offender according to the rule given in St. Matt. in Chap. xviii. 15, 16, 17. Secondly, not to forget or forsake the Assembling of ourselves together, on our publick, and more private prayer meetings, but in love, and after, instruct, sympathize, comfort, bear each other's burden, And pray with and for one another, Heb. 10. 25. *Et cetera, et cetera.*

Baptism being denied to infants, christening was replaced by a naming ceremony, e.g.—

William and Daniel and Mary and Sarah. The two sons and two daughters of Wm. Jones by Sarah his wife were

²They even claim that Sir John Oldcastle was "re-baptized" in Olchon brook, but there is no evidence beyond vague tradition.

named (as above) before many witnesses 6th of January 1812.

John the son of John Nichols by Blanche Williams his intended wife was Named before witnesses. Feb. 19, 1813.

With reference to this last entry, it should be borne in mind that the country people of Great Britain have never regarded the parenthood of *betrothed* persons with excessive disfavour. So that when, in the thirteenth century, the clergy, as against the baronage, urged that English law should recognize the legitimation of children by the subsequent marriage of their parents, they voiced public opinion as well as canon law.

There are two moving obituary notices, expressed in familiar terms:—

Joan Ellis Died August 24th, 1843. . . . She had the high privilege of Living consistent with her profession. . . . She was a very eminent Christian, faithful and zealous with the cause, and in her last affliction she exemplified all Christian graces in great perfection—often she said . . . “pray for me that I may be kept from murmuring.”

Thomas Prosser of Cwmbwch died Febry. 2nd. 1848 He (under)went two great afflictions, he bore them with great patience, and resignation to the will of God.

A good proportion of the register is taken up with particulars of the exercise of the discipline of “exclusion,” i.e., excommunication, which in any given case was resolved on in private and executed in public meeting.

For what offences or crimes People ought to be excluded from communion (i.e., with the church).

1. Such who are disturbers of the Church's peace. 1 Cor. xi. 16, Gal. v. 12.

2. Such as do not keep their places in the Church. Jude vi., verse 19.

3. Such who walk disorderly and irregular in their lives. 2 Thess. iii. 6, xi. 14.

4. All such as commit atrocious crimes unrepented of and continued in with such we are bid not to eat at the Lord's Table. 1 Cor. v. 11.

5. All yt are erroneus who hold and propagate doctrine. Rom. xvi. 17 & John ix. 10, 11.

The end of excluding persons from a Church ought to be the glory of God in the 1st place.

2. To purge the church and preserve it from infection a little leaven leavens the whole lump. 1 Cor. v. 7, 13.

3. The good of persons excommunicated. Jude, verses 23, 2 Thess iii. 14, 2 Cor. ii 7.

Sound doctrine here! The following are examples of its application.

Chapel y ffin May 4th. 1793. Then agreed that James Williams to be excluded for drunkenness and other crimes laid to his Charge. Anne his wife to be suspended for false speaking with other things unbecoming the Gospel. And Mary Burton for injuring her fellow member and other crimes. To be done at the Lord's Table. Which was performed the Sabbath following. (Four signatures.)

23rd. May 1801. Then agreed for Wm. Edwards, Margaret Price, Jas. Lewis and his wife, and James Price to come to the prayer meeting (at our meeting house) at & upon the Day which the Ministers and Messengers at the next Annual Meeting shall appoint for prayer & C³ in the Churches and our Bro. Geo. Watkins to send a Letter to acquaint ye sd. Price of the necessity of his coming as he lives not near to be otherwise informed. And if they or any of them shall willingly neglect to comply to exclude such from communion upon the ordinance day next following for breaking the covenant with God and their brethren with other errors if they shall not be restored sooner.

James Lewis & his wife attended & gave satisfaction to the Brethren.

Witness our hands 27th. May 1801. (Five signatures.)

That faith was regarded as well as morals the following entry emphasizes :

Feb. 27. 1808. Then agreed to exclude James Price from communion with the Church for holding and propagating erroneous Doctrines, such as the winchesterian and C and profligate life to be done at our next ordinance day, which was performed after the Lord's Supper was administered at the Table on ye 27th. of March 1803. As witness our hands. John Griffiths. John Lewis. William Price. James Lewis.

"Winchesterian" doctrine was named after Elhanan Winchester, a Baptist minister from Philadelphia, who between 1787 and 1794 preached in London with great acceptance that all men would ultimately be saved. This doctrine had previously been called Rellyan, from James Relly of Pembroke, from whom it had passed to Winchester through James Murray. It is generally known to-day as Universalism. Its adherents in America had held a convention in 1803 at the town of Winchester in New Hampshire, and had published a Profession of Faith known as the Winchester Profession.

³ From elsewhere in the register I find that " & C " included fasting.

“Back-sliding” was duly noted. Thus :

Sarah Perrot was Baptized Decr. 5th. 1802. She was excluded March 25th. 1804 for illegal pregnancy after previous warning.

Evan Evans of the Cwm was baptized September the 1st. 1822. He was excluded he being guilty of fornication June the 20, 1824.

Under date August 17th, 1800, the names of fifty-two members are recorded, of whom four, three women and a man, were subsequently excluded. A note is added that,

There is seventeen of the above named . . . either too far off and can't attend, or neglygent and do not, all of them poor except Jane Gilbert who is prevented as she says by her husband.

The extracts which follow are from a letter dated September 15th, 1805, and superscribed.

The Church of Christ meeting at Olchon in Herefordshire and Chapel y ffin in Breconshire to the Church of Christ meeting at Broadmead Bristol sendeth salutation. Honored Brethren

Whereas our dear sister Ann Williams is (in providence) come of late to reside in Bristol and apply to Dr. Ryland for being received a member with and among you, and as the Revd. Dr. sent a letter to our Minister G. W. signifying his desire to be informed of her good character. . . . She in her youth submitted to the ordinance of Baptism & gave herself a member with us much against and contrary to ye consent & will of her parents with other relations according to the flesh. . . . (She) was as useful as could be wished according to her power, and beyond her power we judge that she was willing as she delighted to entertain strangers; which she continued to do for a number of years. Untill the wheel of providence turned unexpectedly against her and her late husband (we hope he arrived safe above) which obligd them both to quit the place and we as a church so low that we could not extricate them out of any part of their distresses. So she Naomi-like went from the poor neighbourhood . . . partly as we are given to think, by poverty, weakness, old age, & perhaps by stubbornness and abatement in her first love. But be that as it may we feel for her. . . . So our desire is that you would please to receive her in the Lord watching over her & performing all Christian duties towards her as becometh Christians to their fellow members so we commit you and her to the Lord and to the word of His grace which is able to build you & her and us, in the most holy faith. That

the God of peace may sanctify you and us wholly and that your and our spirits souls and bodies may be preserved blameless unto the coming of Lord Jesus Christ is & shall be the prayer of

Your unworthy poor brethren, & C.

The minister G.W. referred to is George Watkins, who speaks thus of himself.

And unworthy me was favoured to begin to engage in the pleasing tho' arduous work (of the ministry) in the year 1765. . . . And having obtained help of God I continue to this day. . . . I have no desire to live any longer than my Master would make me of some use to my fellow-men & fellow Xtians that Jesus X may be more and more glorified in the salvation of the objects of his eternal love. So be it. Geo. Watkins. June 6. 1806.

On the inside of the back cover is an anxious note on Lord Sidmouth's bill (1811) to restrain laymen ("Blacksmiths, Chimneysweepers, Pig-drovers, Pedlars, Coblers") from preaching. "The bill is thrown out."

Throughout the book the handwritings are notably literate, the spelling not often "eroneous," and the facts well expressed. There are no entries in Welsh, except the transcription of a hymn. Occasionally I came across examples of the more fervid style of evangelical diction, for example:

Our brethren enjoyed great liberty in speaking and the Doctrine was dropping like rain. (1838.)

When the net was drawn up, we found that some had been caught, and drawn (we hope) from their old element to breath in the air of Calvary. (1842.)

In reading these records of a despised sect of one hundred and two hundred years ago, there was brought vividly to my mind the early days of the Church. The simplicity, the faithfulness, the stern discipline, the unwordliness, the trust in God and His grace, whatever the world might do or say, are reflected clearly in the records of these folk whose salvation lay, not in adult baptism and in ordinances, but in their transparent good faith. And their descendants of to-day are not unworthy of them. Their religion is a reality; they hold it simply, firmly and almost without a thought of any other; and the newspaper has not yet supplanted the Sunday sermon, which is appraised and appreciated as an art-connoisseur his treasures. The comparison is deliberate, for preaching is here still a popular art of which all know the rules and the criteria.

DONALD ATTWATER.