The Ter-Centenary of Ilston, 1649-1949.

THIS year Welsh Baptists everywhere are celebrating the ter-centenary of Ilston. This Church was founded in 1649 and its influence was remarkable in the early history of the Welsh Baptist Churches. It is seldom realised that there are seven hundred and fifty churches in association with the Welsh Baptist Union with an approximate membership of 82,700. Few, if any, of this number will not know something about Ilston and its founder John Miles. As a tribute to the Church and its founder, the Welsh Baptist Union Assemblies meet this year at Swansea, the nearest town to the valley of Ilston. In the Assemblies special place will be given to the beginnings of the denomination in Wales and fitting tributes will be paid to the fathers whose sacrifice is still the inspiration of denominational work in the principality.

Ilston is to be found in one of the lovely secluded valleys of the Gower peninsula. But only those who really seek will find this delightful retreat which shelters the ruins of the pre-Reformation Chapel of Trinity Well, which is claimed by tradition and more recently confirmed by historical evidence, as the first meeting place of the Strict Baptists in Wales. Ilston is reached by taking a bus from Swansea to Parkmill, and then following the stream Illtyd inland. Following this quiet stream from the South Road, the pilgrim comes to the ruins of the chapel of Trinity Well, and here a memorial tablet informs him that his search is ended and that he is at the first Baptist Church in Wales. The memorial tablet reads as follows:

"Gorau cof, cof crefydd.
To Commemorate the Foundation
in this valley, of the
First Baptist Church in Wales
1649-60
and to honour the Memory of its Founder
John Myles.
This Ruin is the site of the Pre-Reformation
Chapel of Trinity Well,
And is claimed by tradition as a meeting place
of the above Cromwellian Church.
This Memorial
has been erected with the permission of
Admiral A. W. Heneage-Vivian, C.B., M.V.O.,
and was unveiled by the
Right Hon. D. Lloyd George, M.P., O.M.,
13th June, 1928."

The presumed founder of Ilston Baptist Church was John Miles. Mr. Rhys Phillips in the *Trafodion* 1928, *Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru* supplies sufficient evidence to prove that the correct spelling of the name is Miles and not Myles. Peculiarly enough, the original Ilston church chronicle gives a list of the church members and the first name on the list is that of the founder, but in this instance his name is given as Myles. The problems connected with the true spelling of his name are symbolic of his life story and the story of Ilston Church.

Very little is known about his early days except that he went to Brasenose, Oxford, when he was fifteen years of age, and that he matriculated there on March 11th, 1636. He was registered at Brasenose as the son of one Walter Miles of Newton, Herefordshire. Newton, so we are given to understand, was in the Parish of Clodock until 1848, but unfortunately the parish records previous to 1705 are lost. It has been suggested that Miles was ordained in the Diocese of Hereford, but again proof is impossible because the ordination records of the Diocese between 1631 and 1661 have not yet been traced. Not content with this mysterious start to a remarkable career, Miles leaves to all those who would presume to write about him the following ready-made headaches; How and why did Miles come to Gower? Where did he live whilst at Ilston and Llanelly? Who was his first wife, and why was not she a member of the Ilston church? What was the connection between the Glasshouse Church and John Miles and Thomas Proud at Gower? What was Miles' peculiar right to worship at Trinity Well? If Miles was forced to flee to America for safety's sake, why did he return to Gower after three years in America, and why did he return to the States again? And finally, where is his final resting place?

We know that Miles was twice married, but we have no record or indication of the identity of the first wife. There are three suggestions concerning her. She might have been a young lady from the Hereford district where John Miles spent his early days; she might have been a lady from one of the many places where Miles had encamped during the days of the Civil War; or finally she might have been a rich heiress living somewhere on the borders of Glamorganshire or Carmarthenshire. This last suggestion is the most probable because of the evidence of the "Land and tenements" which Miles' grandchildren inherited in 1728. The lady in question is presumed to have lived on some estate between Gower and the Gwendraeth Valley. An only son John was born about 1645. Miles' second wife was Anne, the daughter of John Humphrey, the justice of Massachusetts. Her mother was Lady Susan Clinton, the

daughter of Thomas Clinton, the Third Earl of Lincoln. A son and three daughters were born of this union.

We also know that on July 31, 1656, Miles was appointed lecturer to the Parish Church at Llanelly and received the yearly sum of Forty Pounds for his labours. The deeds refer to him as "Minister of Llanelly." In September, 1657, he was appointed minister of the Parish Church at Ilston for the same salary. In the original document relevant to the transfer we read, "For increase of the maintenance of the ministry at Ilston . . . and that the same bee from time to time paid unto Mr. John Myles the present minister there, approved according to the Ordinance of Approbacon of publiqye preachers . . . in lieu of so much to him formerly graunted as Minister of Llanelly." It is odd that Miles place of abode on Gower or at Llanelly has not been located. If he lived on his wife's estate, as suggested, near the Gwendraeth Valley, the growth of the Baptist churches at Llanelly, Llangennech, and even as far west as Carmarthen, becomes easy to explain.

Although it is impossible to accept Dr. Thomas Rees' sweeping and ambiguous statement that "Miles' history from the time of his matriculation to the year of 1649 is a blank," it is true to say that we know much more about him from that year forward. In the Spring of that year he went up to London with his friend Thomas Proud. During their visit they had occasion to visit the Glasshouse Church and returned home convinced of Baptist truth. It is suggested that this visit to the Glasshouse was not so haphazard or accidental as previously thought. The Glasshouse was owned by Vice-Admiral Sir Robert Mansell, whose roots and family were in the Oxwich-Margam estates. It is not improbable that Proud had either worked at the Glasshouse sometime, or that he had been a personal servant to Sir Robert. It was a very natural thing for him to visit the Glasshouse to meet his old workmates and share with them their zeal for the faith. What could be more natural than for John Miles to be caught up in their floodtide of enthusiasm? He was baptized by immersion and returned to Gower to found the Ilston Church.

Miles' organising genius makes itself apparent immediately. Before January 12, 1650, a Baptist Church had been gathered together at Llanharan for those baptized at Gelligaer and St. Brides. In February a church was formed at Hay, Brecon. In 1651, churches were formed at Carmarthen in the West and Abergavenny in the East. His genius, however, was not only to found churches but to exercise considerable control over them. In October, 1650, it was decided at a special church meeting that there should be "breaking of bread" at Ilston every third Sunday for all members, but that those who lived in West Gower should

meet on the other two Sundays at Llanddewi, and those who lived in the Welsh districts of Carmarthen at the house of "Jenett" Jones near Llanelly. Spiritual welfare enquiries were held in the Welsh districts on Tuesdays, at Ilston on Wednesdays, at Llanddewi on Thursdays, every week, but Church censures were only given at Ilston, the mother church, on the Wednesday morning of every third week.

By February, 1651, it was deemed advisable to baptize at Aberavon, but the right to receive members into full communion was reserved for Ilston. In April, 1651, the Lords Supper was permitted to be held once a quarter at Baglan or Aberavon, with the proviso that all members must partake of communion once a quarter at Ilston and that two or more members must attend Ilston every Communion Sunday to give account of "the condition of their church". Similar arrangements were made at Abergavenny and other churches in the area. Communion was held on the first Sunday of the month at Abergavenny; at Llanwenarth a general church meeting was held on the first Sunday after Communion; at Llangibby communion was given every three months, but a Church meeting was held every Wednesday.

The local arrangements were collated and supplemented by General Meetings which were representative of all areas. Included in their agenda was the arranging of ministerial supplies and the maintenance of the ministry. The first General Meeting was held at Ilston on November 6 and 7, 1650. The decisions are interesting. David Davies was scheduled to preach at Carmarthen on two Sundays every two months and John Miles was to preach on one Sunday every two months, and so also was Walter Prosser. David Davies was also asked to visit Llanharan as often as possible, and in his absence a brother from Hay was requested to take his place at Carmarthen. It was also decided to urge every member to support the ministry, and the sum of Ten Pounds was expected to be contributed annually by the three churches of Hay, Ilston ,and Llanharan. Other General Meetings were held at Carmarthen on March 9, 1651 and at Abergavenny on July 14 and 15, 1651. It is inevitable that Miles' early organisation was taxed to the utmost by administrative and general church difficulties. Thomas Proud was suspended from membership for fourteen weeks because he advocated mixed communion; Abergavenny was faced with a similar problem; Llantrisant was confronted with problems of discipline. In addition there were a host of problems concerning the singing of psalms, the laying on of hands, and the number of church officers and their duties.

One of the most amazing features of the times is the close

relationship which existed between the Churches. They frequently sent encouraging letters to one another, and the church at Glasshouse in particular takes great interest in her daughter churches. One letter from the Glasshouse church gives the timely and sound advice that the churches should not be multiplied unless they were manned by efficient pastors. Significantly the General meeting exercised supervision over all the churches, and discipline was centred in the General Meeting. In spite of varying influences and Miles' close contacts with London, the Strict Baptists of Wales developed their church life in a way adaptable to their own environment.

It is fitting that we should remind ourselves of the main features of their Church life. Even as late as 1710, we have this Transfer letter written on behalf of the Swansea church which reflects the prevailing traditions:

> "The Church of Jesus Christ, meeting at Swansea in Glamorganshire, owning believers Baptism, laying on of hands, the doctrine of personal election and final perseverance."

Joshua Thomas remarks on the steadfastness of the early Strict Baptists to their convictions. He also adds that when the church was in difficulty or confronted by a problem such as "Mixed Communion," it was customary to hold Prayer and Fast Days. If the problems of one church were settled it was an occasion of great rejoicing in all the churches. An excellent example of this procedure is seen at Gelli Church. When the problem of "Mixed Communion" which had greatly troubled the church was settled, Ilston, Carmarthen, and Llanafan joined in the general thanksgiving. John Miles also did not disdain to debate publicly in defence of his views. He had no hesitation in issuing a challenge to "Mr. Cradoc, Mr. Powel, and Mr. Jones" to debate on the same platform at Clifford, near Gelli. Another interesting feature was the laying on of hands. This custom has almost died out in Wales except for some of the remoter areas, such as North Pembrokeshire, where new members are still received into the membership of the church by the laying on of hands.[1] Miles himself abhorred the custom.

John Miles held his post at Ilston until the Restoration, when he, in common with many others, was forced to flee to America. It must have been very hard for him to close the Church Register on August 12, 1660, but he ventured to take the Register with him in the hope of carrying on his work there. Miles and some others settled at Rehoboth in the State of Massachusetts. Even there he did not succeed in evading persecution for his views,

[1] The Pembrokeshire Churches own Rhydwilym as their starting point. This Church was founded in 1667. William Jones is the founder.

for on July 2, 1667, "At the Court held at Plymouth before Thomas Prince, Governor, and others, Mr. Miles and Mr. Brown, for their breach of order, in setting up of a public meeting, without the knowledge and approbation of the Court, to the disturbance of the peace of the place, are fined each of them five pounds, and Mr. Tanner the sum of One pound; and we judge that their continuance at Rehoboth very prejudical to the peace of that church and that town, and may not be allowed, and do therefore order all persons concerned therein wholly to desist from the said meeting in that place or township within this month." On the 30th of November, Miles and his followers were granted a tract of land on which they built the town of Swanzey. Miles died there on the 3rd of February, 1683. His resting place is not known, but a memorial stone has been raised to his honour at Tylers Point Cemetery, Barrington, Rhode Island.

It has been suggested that when John Miles fled to America, he took a number of Baptists from Ilston with him. Isaac Backus mentions the following, "Nicholas Tanner, Obadiah Bowen, John Thomas, and others also came over to this country." A further number which are described as a colony, returned with him after his visit to Gower in 1664-65, "He returned to England, and came again in 1665, accompanied by a colony." It is only natural that they called the town where they settled Swanzey. Rhys Phillips quotes thus "The Court then transferred Wanamoiset to this territory, and incorporated the whole as a town, named Swansea, from Miles' former home. Thus did the Congregational Old Colony create a town as the seat of the first legalised Baptist Church in America outside of Rhode Island." When the colonists arrived Justices Willet and Brown were in charge of the area, and they delegated Nath Payne, John Allen, and John Butterworth to superintend the settlement of these new members of their community. They, together with Miles, ruled that the heretical, the dissolute, and the quarrelsome were to be forbidden entry into their territory. The heretical were defined as Unitarians, those who believed in transubstantiation, those who gloried in their good works, those who denied the Ascension and Second Coming of Christ, and those who rejected the Divine Inspiration of the Bible. A matter such as Infant Baptism was left open for individual interpretation and parents and ministers were allowed to use their own discretion in the matter. As a result both Baptists and Congregationalists lived peaceably together, but we are surprised that John Miles was prepared to agree to terms which would not have been tolerated at Ilston, Gower. Rhys Phillips suggests amusingly that this was the result of his

second marriage and the change in Miles' social position. Although amusing, it is not impossible that this change of mind did occur for such a reason. Matthews of Ewenny, the celebrated Welsh Divine once said that the Pope was infallible because he was not married, but that if he did marry he would soon discover his fallibility. Perhaps some similar force influenced John Miles. Miles ministered at Swanzey for some time, and when the town was destroyed in an Indian raid in 1675 Miles moved to Boston where he founded the first Baptist church in that city. He returned to Swanzey after its rebuilding and died there in 1683.

But to return to the early days of the Ilston Church, one of the most interesting features is the Church Register with its list of members. This Register is now kept at Fall River, Mass., U.S.A. It contains in addition to the membership lists, the records and letters of the Ilston Church from 1649 to 1660, followed by the records of the Church in America. The first twenty-six names are as follows:

"John Myles
Thos; Proud of Landewi
Jane Lloyd of Paviland fallen asleepe
Elizabeth Proud of Landewi
Margrett Davies of Ilston
Sarah Williams of Kevengorwydd
Mathew Davies of Kilay
Elizab Harries of Lanmadock
Elizab Hill of Rosilly
Ann Williams of Kevengorwydd
William Thomas of Llangennach
Ann Davies of Burwick
William Morgans of Byshopston fallen asleepe
Henry Griffiths of Byshopston
Mary Griffiths of Byshopston
Katharin Morgan of Byshopston
Georg Harrie of Lanmadock
Margarett Bowen of Ilston
Joan Jenkins of Lanmadock
Jenett Jones of Burwick
Margarett Georg of Burwick
Ann James of Burwick
Leyson Davies of Ilston
exco John Austin of Ilston
Sage Ffacklen of Ilston."

Other names which show the scope of Miles ministry are "John Hughes of the church att Hay"; "Evan Llewellin of ye church att Llanharan"; "Ann Grove of ye church att Barnstaple"; "Evan John, Llandilo"; "Richard Edward of Verwig in Cardiganshire"; and "Ruth Knight of Rosse." By 1660 the church numbered 261, of which 115 are men.

When John Miles left Ilston the work was carried on by

such men as Lewis Thomas, Y Mwr, Morgan Jones, Llansawel, and Morgan Jones, Llanmadoc. Theirs was the unhappy time of persecution. Charles the Second had returned to the throne and the floodgates of persecution were thrown wide open. The situation in Wales is best described by Vavasor Powell's graphic eyewitness account of events in his *Bird in the Cage*.[2]

"Be pleased now to cast your eye upon the late restriction which I might well call persecution, of the Gospel in Wales. To omit mentioning the great wrong done unto many scores, about May or June, 1660 in committing and continuing them in prison without any cause but to fulfil that saying, Quicquid volumus facimus; since that time there hath been very violent proceedings especially in some countries, where some poor and peaceable people have been dragged out of their beds and without regard to age or sex, have been driven some twenty miles to prison on their feet, and forced to run by the troopers horses, receiving many blows and beatings. Others, who were quietly met together after their manner for many years to worship God and edify one another, were cast into prisons without examination, contrary to the laws of this and other nations." In spite of the King's promise in the Declaration of Breda 1660, cruel laws were enacted against the new sects, such as the Corporation Act of 1661, the Conventicle Act of 1664, the Five Mile Act of 1665, all of which had their effect on the work and witness of our Baptist Fathers. Were it not for men of the calibre of Lewis Thomas and the two Morgan Jones's, the work of John Miles would have been in vain.

Where did the Ilston Church meet for worship? This question is difficult to answer without referring to the rather dry historical data at our disposal. The first reference to the Chapel of the Holy Trinity is found in the Will of Morgan ap Owen dated July 4, 1467. Morgan ap Owen had bought the surrounding property from Geoffrey de la Mare in 1441. This property included the lands of Court House, Ty Mawr, Ilston, and Wogan Hill, Pennard. Morgan ap Owen in his will leaves 6s. 8d. each to the altars of St. Mary's and St. Helen's at Swansea, and a similar sum to the Church at Ilston. Significantly for our purposes he left 3s. 4d. to the altar of Trinity Chapel. Trinity Chapel was near his home at Ilston and it is obvious that this is the Chapel he had in mind. But to delve still further back, in 1221 the Manor of Millwood was given to the knights of St. John who had their centre at Slebech, Pembs. This gift was by the hand of John de Braose who two years previously had married Margaret, the youngest daughter of Llewellyn, Prince

[2] Vavasor Powell (born 1617) spent nearly eighteen years in gaol for his faith and died in the Fleet Prison in 1670.

of Wales. By 1230 the possessions of the Knights had grown so extensive that Bishop Anselm of St. Davids gave them a charter of ownership. In the Middle Hill MSS we read:

"In Goher, of the gift of John de Braose, the Church of Saint Yltint Vanik and all that land which is called Mullewood and Borlakesand." In the records of the Millwood estate of 1584 only a house and garden are found at Ilston between the church and the stream, and this property was held by one Wm. Dawkin. By 1641 an addition is made to the original description namely: "Griffith Penry Esqre, held a parcell of Land called Trinitie Well contayning by Estimacon one acre and a halfe, lieing Between the lands of John Daniell on the Weste Parte and the Landes of George Dawkins on the South and East p'tes in the parish of Ilston, et redd p annu . . . 0. 9. 1d." In all probability Trinity Well was a private chantry which in course of time became less used. It was obviously still standing in 1650 when Cromwellian officials made an investigation into the affairs of the Manor of Pennard. It is then merely mentioned as a boundary between Kittle and Lunnon in these words "Trinity Come Chappell." This brings us to the period of John Miles and to a period of great spiritual awakening in Wales.

In 1636 we have ample evidence of the spiritual unrest which was to leave a nonconformist stamp on Welsh social life. Peculiarly Gower seems to be one of the first areas to show its disapproval of religious conditions by public protest. Marmaduke Mathews' celebrated objection at Penmaen Church is significant of the trend of the times. For voicing his protest Mathews was compelled to pay the price and fled to America, probably to Malden, Mass. But his protest is not forgotten in Baptist circles for his descendants perpetuate his name. Still more interesting to us as Baptists is the fact that the Lord of the Manor of Penmaen was Lewis David, the father of the Davies family which played an important part in the formation of the Ilston Church. In 1642 we hear of another protest presented by the inhabitants of the Ilston Valley to Parliament, which runs as follows:

"1642, April 30. Petition of Parishioners of Pennard, in the County of Glamorgan to High Court. Have never had more than four sermons a year in their parish church, and those by a man of a very scandalous life; pray for the nomination of Ambrose Mosten, a lecturer, a man of goodly sort, and one who can preach in the Welsh and English tongues."

The Broadmead Records describe this same Ambrose Mosten as a "Man of great abilities and highly esteemed as a minister of God's word." Phillip Henry complains that Mr. Mosten refused to baptize a child in spite of his pleading with him, and

adds "His grounds I know not." D. Rhys Phillips suggests that if Ambrose Mosten held these views in 1642, it was a preparation for Believers Baptism in Gower before Miles began his work there. An interesting thing then happens. Ambrose Mosten is moved to the North and John Miles succeeds him in the Ilston Valley. It is felt that there is something deliberate in this because the two men held the same views on baptism, both came from the Hereford district, both were former students of Brasenose, Oxford, and is it unreasonable to regard them as old friends? It would be interesting to discover their contacts at Oxford, and if we could find out the name of their tutor there, it might throw great light on the formative influences in the life story of John Miles and through him on the beginnings of Baptist witness in Wales.

Finally, there are strong reasons for believing that John Miles and his people met at Ilston Parish Church. The first business meeting of the Baptist church was held at Ilston on August 16, 1650, and in the records of that meeting we read: "They have thought fit to order that there shall be constant preaching at the publique meeting house at Ilston." From certain records it is obvious that the meeting place was the local Parish Church, and perhaps this reference proves it without further argument:

"Glam' John Gwither of the . . . of Lanridian & Ma . . .
sh widd' of ye p'ish of Ilston were published in ye meeting place
Comonly called ye church of Ilston . . .
According to an Act of P . . . publ . . . the 24th of
August 1653 & they were married the ...th of february
1655 before John Gibbs, Esqr, one of the Justices of the peace
of the sd. County. This was entered ye 3rd of March.
Jo Gibbs."

Joshua Thomas in his *Hanes y Bedyddwyr* gives the Order of Service for a normal Sunday morning at Ilston Parish Church. The Service commenced at 8 a.m. In the monthly meeting of the whole church Thomas Proud or Morgan Jones conducted the Service for the first hour, and then some "worthy" brother would conduct a service in Welsh. Following this a sermon would be delivered by John Miles or a public minister. Finally all would join in the Breaking of Bread. Prior to 1660 there does not appear to be any other meeting place apart from the Parish church. But, by June of the same year, John Miles had lost his position as Minister of Ilston Parish, the Restoration was in full swing, the church door was officially closed and locked by a representative of St. Davids' and within a month, Wm. Houghton was being welcomed as the new rector of Ilston. Yet in spite of these rapid religious and political changes we find

that Ilston Baptist Church, according to its register, was still accepting new members. It can only be deduced from circumstantial evidence that in the hour of their distress the Baptists met at the forsaken Chantry or Chapel of Trinity Well, hidden away in one of the loneliest but loveliest valleys of Gower.

The Right of Way leading to Ilston was kept open by the constance vigilance of many Baptists, ministers and laymen, and more recently by the watchfulness of the late Rev. E. Edmunds, the former secretary of the Welsh Baptist Union. Mr. Edmunds made an annual pilgrimage to the site and made a special point of calling the attention of the police to the purpose of his coming. Recently I had the pleasure of hearing a prominent Welsh layman describe how he, when a young man, had helped Mr. Edmunds on one of his visits to Ilston by removing gates and other barriers which had been erected to hinder access to the mother church of the Welsh Baptists. This Right of Way has now been established and the visitor can make his way to the site unhindered. Oddly the Baptists are very weak on Gower today and churches are small in size and membership. The moralist can draw his own conclusions. But without Ilston the Baptist churches of Swansea, Llanelly, Port Talbot and the surrounding areas and indeed the Welsh Baptist Union would not have been formed nor the Baptist witness in Wales so long-standing and effective in the life of the nation.

FRANK LEE.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

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English—*Pennard and West Gower*, Latimer Davies; *History of the Family of Maunsell*, E. P. Statham; *A History of the Puritan Movement in Wales*, Thomas Richards; *Religious Development in Wales*, 1654-1662, Thomas Richards; *History of Protestant Nonconformity in Wales*, Thomas Rees; *John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts*, H. Melville King; *A History of New England, with particular reference to the . . . Baptists*, Isaac Backus.