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A Yorkshire Story

EBENEZER Baptist Church, Scarborough, possesses among its records an autobiographical fragment prepared by its first pastor, William Hague, in 1816, when he was 79 years of age. What follows is based upon this account (a copy of which was kindly lent to me by Mr. R. C. Peart), with some supplementary information from a number of other sources. Personal stories of this kind are the stuff out of which history is wrought, and they frequently show that some of the accepted generalisations are not quite accurate. The eighteenth century was certainly not as dead religiously as has sometimes been suggested. Nor was Baptist extension confined to the New Connexion and the Northampton Association.

William Hague was born in November, 1736 at Malton in Yorkshire, a place notable in more recent Baptist history as the birthplace of both J. H. Shakespeare and the father of Mrs. Herbert Marnham. Hagues' parents were poor and of their six children four died in infancy. At the age of thirteen, William was apprenticed to a Malton barber and, as soon as the six-year term was over, obtained work in Scarborough. His arrival there in 1756 coincided with the outbreak of what the history books call the Seven Years' War. Within a month, the young man had signed on for three years as a sailor, attracted by the large silver buckles on seamen's shoes and the watches in their pockets. Life at sea greatly improved his physique, which had formerly been weakly, but not, he says, his morals. Three times he nearly lost his life and towards the end of his time afloat this helped to make him of a more serious disposition.

When the ship returned to Scarborough in 1759 Hague was met with a message that his former master in Malton wanted him to take charge of the shop there for a time. But a few months there, with irreligious companions, left him unhappy and he returned to Scarborough, anxious to learn to read so that he might search the Scriptures. "My master with whom I then was, had a little boy, about nine years old, who could read very well," says Hague, "and he was my bedfellow, and when we went to bed, I used to give him a halfpenny to read a chapter in my good old Bible, and then he went to sleep and I to meditate on what was read." A change of occupation in 1761 took Hague into a better educated family. There he sought the help of a young man to teach him to spell, write and read better, working early in the mornings and late at night so as to become more literate; and "I can truly say that the

Word of God was so sweet to my taste that my heart has glowed within me as warmed with strong wine."

England was being stirred at the time by the Methodist Revival. John Wesley first preached in Scarborough in July, 1759. He was there again in June, 1761, and says in his Journal :

I had designed to preach abroad in the evening, but the thunder, lightening and rain prevented; however, I stood on a balcony and several hundreds of people stood below; and notwithstanding the heavy rain would not stir till I concluded.

Perhaps twenty-four-year-old William Hague was in the crowd on that occasion. At any rate in that year, 1761, he joined the Scarborough Methodists and records that one morning in the month of July, between 3 and 4 o'clock, while on his knees reading his Bible, he had "such a manifestation of the love of God in my soul as I had never felt before and which I can never forget."

Shortly afterwards Hague narrowly escaped the attentions of the press gang, who seem to have tried to get hold of a number of young fellows who were attending the meetings of the Scarborough Methodists. Fortunately, he was not taken. Faithfulness to his deepening religious convictions led him in 1763 to change his employer. Hague was determined not to work on Sundays and, with the encouragement of his Methodist friends, set up in business on his own. Within a few months he felt secure enough to marry, his bride being a Methodist named Adamson.

Wesley was in the town again in the summer of 1764 and wrote of this visit :

How is the face of things changed here within a year or two! The Society increased fourfold; most of them alive to God, and many filled with love; and all of them enjoying great quietness.

But internal discussions were about to occur. A Nonconformist minister from London came to Scarborough to see some relatives and was invited to preach in the Methodist meeting. He appears to have been a Calvinist of antinomian tendencies and what he said gave offence and provoked controversy. Wesley was written to and replied : "No person has any right to preach in any of our meetings without a recommendation from me, and such recommendation J. Mc. has not, for he is a predestinarian and ought not to preach in any of our meetings." Hague was presiding over the Methodist society when this letter was read in the presence of the Nonconformist minister. Not unnaturally considerable verbal strife ensued.

Following this disturbing incident Hague began to read some of the works of John Bunyan and the sermons of a number of Calvinist

divines. As a result he became convinced that "the doctrine of free grace was the doctrine of the Bible, of the Prophets, of Christ and the Apostles." When they learned of this, the Methodists turned from him. In 1766 he and four or five others began meeting for reading, singing and prayer in a private house. It is worth noting that it was in this same seventh decade of the eighteenth century that Abraham Booth moved from the Arminianism of the General Baptists and threw in his lot with the Calvinistic wing of the denomination. His widely circulated book, *The Reign of Grace*, appeared in 1768. At the same time in Kent, John Stanger, of Bessels Green, of one of the oldest General Baptist families and later one of the founders of the Baptist Union, was making a similar theological and ecclesiastical pilgrimage.

There had been a Baptist church in Bridlington, twenty miles from Scarborough, since 1698. While it was without a settled pastor, the Rev. William Crabtree, of Bradford, preached there occasionally. Hague walked over several times to hear him. In 1767 Joseph Gawkrödger, son of an Irish episcopal clergyman, who had been baptised at Rawdon, moved from a nine year pioneering pastorate at Shipley to Bridlington. On June 8th of that year Hague was baptised on profession of faith and became a member of the Bridlington Baptist Church. Soon afterwards five others from Scarborough were baptised and together they hired an upper room on the quayside, registered it for worship and began to hold regular Sunday services. There, after some hesitation, Hague began his career as a preacher, with a sermon on *John 5 : 39* : "Search the Scriptures." Before he felt happy in continuing, however, he followed the contemporary Baptist practice and sought the approval of the Bridlington church. After hearing him, the members bid him "go and preach the gospel."

By 1770 there were fifteen members of the Bridlington church living in Scarborough. To avoid continued "fatigue and expense" they applied for permission to form a separate church. This was duly given and in April, 1771 William Hague was ordained as pastor by Joseph Gawkrödger and tall David Kinghorn, of Bishop Burton in the East Riding, father of the more famous Joseph Kinghorn, of Norwich. On May 2nd, 1771, Hague administered the Lord's Supper for the first time. Few eighteenth-century Baptists thought it fitting for any but an ordained pastor to preside at the Lord's Table.

The new church grew quickly. By 1773 the membership had reached forty and the time had come to consider building a meeting-house. The members had long been accustomed to give twopence apiece each week towards the hire of the room in which they met. Hague at first received nothing for his services and even contributed his own twopence. Later he received help from the

Particular Baptist Fund. Among the other beneficiaries from the fund at this time was William Carey, then pastor in Moulton.

A site for a building in Scarborough, 35 yards by 20 in size, was purchased for £60. In July, 1776 the foundations were laid. The previous month Wesley had been again in the town and described the Methodist preaching-house as "the most elegant of any square room which we have in England," and his hearers as "attentive as if they had been Kingswood Colliers." The new Baptist Chapel was opened in April, 1777 with Joseph Gawkrödger, David Kinghorn and John Beatson, of Hull, as the special preachers. By a visit to London three years later Hague collected £130 and all the debt remaining on the building was cleared. In 1790 a gallery was added at a cost of £40; a burial-ground in 1793 was the same amount; an extension to the building in 1801; and a vestry in 1809. Wesley's last visit to Scarborough was in June, 1790, when he was 87 years of age. It was accompanied by a heavy thunderstorm. "I never heard the like before since my return from America," was the old man's comment.

William Hague continued in the Scarborough pastorate for forty-eight years, that is, until 1819. He was still preaching occasionally at the age of 85 and did not die until 1831, when he had reached the great age of 94. Two short pastorates succeeded his long one at "Ebenezer" and then in 1826 Benjamin Evans settled there. A new and larger chapel was soon needed and a period of considerable prosperity and influence began.

Benjamin Evans became a national figure, one of the prime movers in the launching of *The Freeman* and the founding of a new Baptist College at Bury, a noted champion of "close communion," a historian of ability and chairman of the Baptist Union in 1858. But all that is another Yorkshire story.

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