

Great Warford Baptist Chapel.

By O. KNOTT.

WITHIN half a mile of the favourite Manchester suburban railway station of Alderley Edge, stands a quaint homestead widely known as Chorley Old Hall. Almost surrounded by a stone-bridged moat the half of the structure has pointed Gothic doorway and mullioned windows. At right angles to it the other half of the house is of timber and daub adorned with quatre foils. Within is an oak panelled room with grotesque carvings and the usual aroma of tradition that the great Protector once entered therein. Forty years ago a society of Manchester Antiquarians heard its legends and story of 300 years from a local historian, Mr. Wm. Norbury, who continued, "another place of importance to the antiquary, is the old Baptist Chapel in Warford about a mile and a half distant from this Hall, and its history, remotely, connected therewith. It is one of the oldest Nonconformist places of worship in England. From a document which I have in my possession written by a late minister compiled from the old church books there, we learn this congregation originated with a portion of the parliamentary army, under Sir George Booth for the time, at least, of Chorley Hall. The officers preached and gathered a small church which remained after the army had left. The first place in which they established regular worship was at Norbury Houses in Warford and here they buried their dead in the orchard."

the north-west counties gathered recruits largely from Baptists.

Sir George Booth, created Lord Delamere at the Restoration, plotted for the return of Charles II in 1659. In that year, Mr. Brooke, a parliamentary candidate for Cheshire, give as one reason for his petition against the return of Judge Bradshaw, that the Quakers had been allowed to vote for him at Congleton without having taken the oath" (see Lady Newton's "House of Lyme" pp. 199-200). Both Baptists and Friends must therefore have possessed considerable influence prior to 1659 in the district in which Warford is situated.

Thus the church looks to the farmstead of Norbury Houses, now rebuilt and occupied by the Manchester Corporation, as its primal home.

Mr. Alfred Fryer writing an account of the chapel in his very instructive "Wilmslow Graves" published at Stockport in 1885 describes the ancient timber house and the farm buildings and what remained of an extensive orchard with the old burial ground. Some of the gravestones existed within the memory of living members, and when the present building was erected coffins were found by the excavators.

Relating to the meeting at Norbury Houses is an interesting tradition. A persistent belief handed down from father to son is that one of Cromwell's generals with his soldiers knelt in prayer within that early meeting house.

Mr. Fryer gives good reason for believing that on Sunday the 17th August 1645 either General David Leslie, or an officer in command of his Scottish horse did find time to turn aside to worship while on their march from Congleton to Stockport to intercept King Charles on his flight northwards after his defeat at Naseby.

The reasons for fixing the date of the occupation

of the present site in Merriman Lane (as it is now called) as 1668 is the fact that in 1669 the Bishop of Chester's report chronicled a meeting of 60 Anabaptists in Alderley parish, which church is a mile and a half to the west of Warford, and that the oldest gravestone now existing is inscribed "H.B. 1671," while a valuable oak screen in an end gallery has carved upon it the letters I.W., with the date 1673.

Both doors of the chapel have iron plates to which knockers were once attached and each bears the curious inscription:

"NO THE 4
1712"

The local explanation is that such refers to the fact that this was the fourth Baptist meeting house in the district rather than to the month.

In the meantime Mr. Thomas Eaton of Mottram St. Andrews, a hamlet four miles from Warford on the road between Wilmslow and Macclesfield, had by deed dated 26 November 1691 conveyed a small plot in that place to John Preston of Mottram and William Hanmer of Baguley, yeoman (among others) as trustees for use as a burial ground.

In this deed the plot is conveyed as "a certain close called the Sandfield 32 yards long & 20 yards wide at one end & two & a half yards wide at the other end besides the ditch, reserving a rent of one peppercorn annually, at the feast of St. John the Baptist, if demanded *Upon trust* that the said parcel of land shall be used employed & disposed of for the burial place of the bodies of all or every or any person or persons whoever that shall depart this mortal life & in their lifetime desire to be buried there."

William Hanmer represented the Baptists of Baguley, who were soon to possess a meeting house of their own. The earliest date on any stone remain-

ing appears to be that of Dorothy Preston who was buried 8 August 1701.

In 1702 Eaton licensed his house at Mottram for services, and in the same year lost his wife, whose gravestone reads: "Here lyeth Margret wife of Thomas Eaton interred Sep^r the 30th 1702." His stone is dated 1710.

Another early member buried there was Mary . . . Wood who was interred July 6 1705, and may have been one of the family referred to later as at Warford.

Mr. Fryer expresses surprise that burials took place at Warford before any conveyance of the land had been effected. But it is quite exceptional to find at that period a trust deed of a burial ground, except where a chapel was in contemplation or already erected. Although the Chapel at Bramhall (a branch of Warford) was erected in 1856 and put in trust in 1858 the adjacent burial ground added soon after was not included in the trust until 1889 when the son of the former trustee executed a declaration of trust, and within the last few years only the action of the Charity Commission caused such a deed to be executed in respect of other land purchased.

Small Baptist burial grounds in Manchester and other places contemporary with Mottram were never put in trust and were built over generations ago.

The site of the Warford chapel was part of a field called the Intack in the possession of Thomas Roylance, a member of the Baptist church at Hill Cliff. After his death his son, John Roylance of Ashley, yeoman by lease dated 29 July 1712, assigned the plot to four members resident in the hamlet, John Henshall, yeoman, Peter Blackshaw, yeoman, Hugh Finlow, blacksmith, and Enoch Upton, yeoman, "for a term of 1000 years paying two shillings at the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin." Such

being the usual form of the Leycester estate deeds. Immediately afterwards a deed was entered into between the above four trustees and Thomas Legh of High Legh, gentleman, John Chisworth of Chorley, miller, John Johnson of Mobberly, yeoman, and Robert Cheadle junior of Edgeley, yeoman, whereby a trust was declared respecting the land and the meeting house. The eight trustees' signatures were witnessed by Rowland Hall, John Turner and James Massie, which testify of Hill Cliff. In April 1747 the surviving trustees appointed six others to act conjointly, viz., William Leigh, James Leiney, John Livesley, Samuel Hunter, Joseph Bealey, and Humphrey Lyon, whom we recognise as prominent Baptists there and in Manchester and Liverpool.

The erection of the chapel in 1712 did not necessitate the complete demolition of the original building. The chapel thus completed and as now seen from the high road, is of brick roofed with flag stones and with projecting eaves, the home for nesting swallows.

But the other side reveals the antiquity of the original barn-building. It remains a framework of oak beams, the panels of which were originally filled up with clay held on a wattling of wickerwork, a style of erection known locally as "post and pan."

When the clay has fallen out bricks have been inserted in place thereof.

The small windows on that side are of leaded lattice work placed in a most curious order. The glass is of the yellowish green used in the 17th century.

Many years ago when the congregation which formerly filled the building had considerably decreased, a partition was erected to divide the chapel, the pulpit being removed from the centre of the far side and placed against the division wall facing the little organ gallery. The gallery at the other end

was entirely removed and that portion being boarded across provides two floors now forming the chapel keeper's house.

At right angles to the chapel and overlooking the front burial ground is a small black and white timbered cottage which thirty years ago possessed an antiquity equal to that of the oldest portion of the main structure. It was then described as a gem of the magpie style of erection for which the district is noted.

The thatched roof has now disappeared and the appearance not improved by the raising of the roof at the back storey. It is now occupied by Mr. Jos. Barber the grandson of the pastor of 1839-71.

The first minister to take charge at Warford was Francis Turner said to have been a University scholar who had been educated for the ministry. He resided in the important town of Knutsford, four miles away, and conducted services there as well. Some of his sermons dated from 1673 onwards are extant. On his accepting the pastorate at Hill Cliffe, his son succeeded. In 1732 John Turner received a call to Byrom St. Chapel, Liverpool, and his place was taken by one named Heyes from the last named church.

Henceforward the register is fairly complete being preserved in an old vellum bound church book securely held by leathern thongs.

Thus we learn that on 18 July 1757 the church invited John Taylor of Hill Cliffe to the pastorate who was ordained by Joseph Piccop of Bacup, Thomas Thomason of the old cause at Millington (Rostherne), and Thomas Wainwright (Hill Cliff).

Palmy days for the village cause followed, for the chapel seating about 200 with the galleries was all occupied. The record of baptisms within only a few months of 1757 includes, William Leigh, Hannah Dane, John Walton, Peter Dane, Randle Walton,

Martha Webb, Ann Royle baptized by Mr. Piccop, and Mary Goulding, Martha Walton, Mary Walton, Joseph Hulme, Sarah Bower and Martha Booth, by the new minister. From a list of 27 active members of the church at that time we find the Wood family prominent and their graves are more numerous than any other. Close to the door of the chapel and in excellent preservation is the earliest one.

Here lieth the Body of
Joshua Wood who
Departed this life February
the 5th Anno Domini 1729
aged 54

Here also lieth
the body of Elizabeth
his wife - Departed this
life May, the 28th
Anno Domini 1736
aged 58

Adjacent are the graves of the second Joshua Wood of Marthall 1790 aged 79, of Hannah his wife 1798 aged 83, of a son Joshua 1821 aged 65 and Mary Wood 1821 aged 33, of Mary, wife of James Wood 1850 aged 37, and of three sons who all died as children in 1841. Recently, one of the family left a small sum for repairs to the chapel.

In 1789 Mr. Thomas Leigh a descendant of the family who removed from Norbury Houses to Pownall Brow Farm left a sum of money to produce an annual endowment of £14 towards the ministers salary.

The pastorate of J. Taylor proved disastrous and before his death the congregation had been much reduced.

He was followed by the eccentric Thomas Holt a man of mechanical knowledge though of "little erudition."

It is stated that he built a loom capable of weaving two webs at a time, but declined to patent or use it in fear of the consequent effect upon the labour market. He ordered his coffin well in advance and made it useful in the cottage for many years.

Holt died in 1831 aged 82 after 42 years ministry and is buried with his wife, who had predeceased him in 1829 also aged 82. The sun dial on a stone pedestal in front of the chapel was of his erecting.

A son followed him and after an interval Mr. Joseph Barber was set apart for the ministry. Soon the church membership increased to over 40.

The branch meeting at Mottram had been long discontinued, but in 1856 it was decided to erect a small chapel in Bramhall and for many years Mr. Barber conducted the services at both places (eight miles apart), there being no evening assembly at the old place.

In 1844 the church paid £20 to a descendant of a trustee before he would restore to the rightful owners the deeds of the Mottram Burial Ground.

Mr. Barber's gravestone records his death 10 March 1871 aged 78 years, after a ministry of over thirty years. There followed Enoch Shard who upheld the cause until his death in 1892, James Davenport having become co-pastor in 1879.

The church has never possessed a baptistery on the premises. About a mile away, in Fowden Lane not far from Chorley Old Hall is the interesting open stone built baptistery, in use a hundred years ago and still in excellent preservation. It is found within the precincts of Orrell's Well Farm now in the occupation of Adam Dawson, a Wesleyan class leader.

A few yards away on higher ground is the Well and on the lower side Mobberly Brook winds its way. Five lofty trees give a picturesque setting to the rural fount. No service has been held here within memory.

of the present members, but Robert Hallworth, whose tombstone is prominent in the foreground of the chapel and who died in 1914 aged 91 remembered several baptisms there.

After its disuse baptisms were administered at Sandlebridge near the original Norbury Houses on the Knutsford road, and for 60 years the few who have joined the church have gone to chapels in Macclesfield or to Bramhall.

Of the modern headstones, passers by, note that of one named Lowe on which is the verse,

In union with my Lord
From condemnation free
The saints from everlasting were
And shall for ever be.

While another records in bold letters,

“Who shall lay anything to the charge of
God’s elect?”

But the one which causes far more attention is the neat upright stone near the gate shaded by a yew tree of well over 200 years growth. It is that over the only sons of the Rt. Hon. Jacob Bright, and is lettered,



Two
Little Brothers
Paul Bright
aged 4 years and
Sydney Mellor Bright
aged 7 months
lie side by side in this grave
July 1861

Its existence so far from Rochdale is explained by the fact that John Bright's younger brother was then entering upon his political career as candidate for Manchester and for a time resident at the Queen's Hotel, Alderley Edge. There his infant son died of diphtheria. Being refused a grave at the church where he first applied, he wrote to the Baptist minister. Mr. Barber replied that there was only one space at Warford which had not been appropriated, and that should be his. The burial took place, and the little fellow Paul who stood beside the new grave followed his baby brother within a fortnight.

It is satisfactory to record that the three burial grounds of Warford, Mottram and Bramhall are kept in excellent order. At Mottram an adjoining owner has planted fruit trees around the graves and pays a nominal rent therefor to the Trustees. It is however much to be regretted that a few years ago the farmer tenant of the Mottram Hall estate was allowed to enclose some yards of the burial ground together with a valuable tree which had marked the boundary. Services have been held annually by Warford members on the ground, and in case of rain the Wesleyans have lent their excellent chapel a short distance away. A thatched cottage was once used for funeral services and is still known as Graveyard Cottage, but no burial has taken place at Mottram for 70 years. The last gravestones to be erected are those of "Joseph Burgess died July the 10th 1745" and that of the Falkener family. The latter is a large slab raised a few inches above the ground and the inscription reads:

"Here was interred the body of Thomas Falkener of Mottram who departed this life January the 16th 1757 aged 55 years. Also Samuel his son departed this life February the 9th 1757 aged 24 years Likewise the wife of his son

departed this life March the 9th 1757 aged 24 years Also Elizabeth wife of the said Thomas Falkener died October 1757."

Locally the 4 deaths within 10 months is accounted for by the fact that the family had eaten potatoes grown in the burial ground and it is said that calves put there to feed also met the same fate!

Nearly all the twenty gravestones are now neatly covered with grass and it would be well to place a notice board to commemorate the work of Thomas Eaton the Baptist stalwart of 230 years ago.