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NOTES ON COTE BAPTIST CHURCH.

BAMPTON GR. SCHOOL.

A History of Cote Baptist Church.

Until the end of the Middle Ages, the Christian Church did not consist of a number of branches as it does today. It was just one body and its head was the Pope of Rome. It was a powerful body, and very few people ever dared to criticise it or speak against it. From time to time a few brave men did have the courage to criticise the Church and they usually ended up by being executed for daring to criticise God's Church.

In the 14th Century, an Englishman called John Wycliffe began to be very outspoken about the Church. He was a professor at the University of Oxford, and his words were listened to with respect by many people, some being quite important. He organised a number of priests to journey through England to spread his ideas. Soon he had many followers who became known as Lollards.

The Lollards used to meet together secretly to discuss the teachings of their leader. They were compelled to meet secretly because the authorities were very down on them, and a number of Lollards were executed.

One of the things they disagreed with the Church with was Baptism. For instance, they did not believe in infant baptism and said that people should wait until they were older so that they could thoroughly understand what it was all about. Because of this the Lollards gradually became known as Anabaptists.

One group of Anabaptists seems to have been founded at Longworth, just across the river from Cote and used to meet in a small building situated in a hop garden which is now part of Messrs Tucker's rose gardens.

Very little is known about the Longworth Anabaptists except that in spite of a great deal of persecution they remained true to their beliefs. In 1481 we hear of their first connection with Cote which was then in the parish of Bampton.

In 1481, two brothers, named Williams, came to live at Cote. They were extremely religious men and told their new neighbours that they had given up their old home in Wales and had come to live at Cote bringing all their farm-stock with them as the result of a message from God himself. One of the brothers married the daughter of the Longworth farmer in whose hop garden the Anabaptist meeting house stood, and this is how the connection between Longworth and Cote began.

In 1604, James I became King of England, and the Anabaptists felt that the days of their persecution were over. So they built themselves a new meeting house in the hop garden. It was a simple and plain looking square building with a thatched roof and it was to remain on the site for many, nearly 300 years, although for the last 200 years of its life it was not used for religious purposes.

All through the 17th Century there was a good deal of coming and going between Longworth and Cote where Williams family was still living. Because of the influence of this family Cote Anabaptists became more and more important members of the Longworth group.

During the 17th Century, the Longworth church had several well-known ministers. The first ever to be appointed was John Pendarvis who came from London. He came to Longworth in 1652.

In 1660, his successor, John Coombes, was imprisoned in Reading Castle with a number of other Longworth Anabaptists, but in 1672, John Man received a Royal Licence to preach at Longworth and the days of persecution were over.

Towards the end of the 17th Century, the Cote members became more influential and in 1704 it was decided to give up the Longworth meeting house and build a new one at Cote. This decision was mainly due to one man, John Collett who was born at Aston, Bampton, in the year 1684.

He was born at Pond House, and belonged to a very religious family, and at the age of 16 he used to preach to meetings in his father's house. The local Baptists, as they were now called, thought the world of Collett and although he was so young, in 1703 he was invited to become minister of Longworth and Cote.

Collett very naturally was determined to make his home village the Baptist headquarters in the area, and he persuaded his followers to agree to the building of a new Baptist church at Cote in 1704.

The new church continued to thrive and gradually Longworth faded from the scene. Although the old meeting house remained until about 1890, it was no longer used by the Baptists and it was put to all sorts of uses.

John Collett and his successor, Joseph Stennett M.A., were so successful in their work, that it was necessary to build a second and larger chapel at Cote in 1756.

The congregation continued to grow and included some of the most influential people around for miles. People came even from Abingdon and Oxford. Such people would either travel by horse or in a coach and it was necessary to build stables beside the church.

John Collett was minister at Cote for 39 years, during which time he built up a strong Baptist feeling in the district. He was succeeded by the Rev. Joseph Stennett, who was minister for 31 years. It was Mr. Stennett who was responsible for the enlarging of the church in 1756.

Throughout the 18th Century, Cote Church continued to prosper and the Rev. Thomas Dunscombe M.A., who succeeded Stennett in 1773, busied himself with undertaking the building of two more churches, one at Bampton, in 1778, and another at Buckland in 1782. There is no doubt that at the end of the 18th Century the Baptists were in a very influential position in this part of the country.

It is very interesting to read in Bishop Secker's Visitation of 1738 what the Vicars of Bampton have to say about the Cote Baptists. There were only two vicars instead of the usual three at that time, their names were the Rev. John Edmunds and the Rev. Thomas Snell. In their report to the Bishop they write:-

"Dissenters are of the sect only who go under the name of Anabaptists; they have one meeting house in the village of Coate, two miles from Bampton town, their teacher, Collett by name, a man taken from the sheepfold, his followers at best but yeomen, one with the other, mean and illiterate. Their number stands as of years past, neither lessened nor increased, consisting of about ten or twelve families".

It is sad to think that the Church of England two parsons should be willing to send such a false report to their Bishop. To describe Mr. John Collett as a man "Taken from the sheepfold" is very misleading, as his family were most highly thought of people. And it was just not true to pretend that the number of Baptists was not growing. Indeed, many of the local gentry attended Cote Church, including Mr. Abraham Atkins, Lord of the Manor of Kingston Lyle and formerly High Sheriff of Surrey.

Their report is very typical of the laziness of the 18th Century Church of England clergy and the way they looked down on Nonconformists. The result was that in places like Aston and Cote more and more people joined the Baptists and less and less attended the Parish Church.

The history of Cote Church in the 19th Century is quiet and uneventful. One interesting fact is that all through the 19th Century the minister's salary was only £50 a year.

The congregation continued to grow and the church had to be enlarged again in 1859. This was done by adding two large galleries to the Organ gallery over the door. In those days, it was the custom for a family to separate when they reached the church door. The fathers and sons sat on one side of the church, and the mothers and daughters on the other side. So the two new galleries were known as the 'Men's Gallery' and the 'Women's Gallery'. Courting couples who did not wish to be separated sat in the Organ Gallery.

The seats or pews on the floor were rented and were occupied by the richer members of the church.

In the 19th Century Cote Church never held evening services except on very special occasions and then people used to lend candles and lamps to provide lighting.

It is very interesting to discover that the Church of England had a much greater respect for the Baptists in the 19th Century. In his 'History of Bampton' 1848, the Rev. J.A.Giles, curate of Bampton, describes Cote Church as 'one of the most respectable establishments founded for the use of Dissenters in the whole kingdom', and then speaks highly of the minister, the Rev. Benjamin Wheeler. So it seems the times had changed.

In 1845, a schoolroom was built at Aston of which Cote is a hamlet. This school was known as the 'British School' and was a rival of the Church of England school in the village. The building was used as a school during the week and for services on Sundays. In 1870, the new Education Act compelled the chapel school to join with the Church School and the building became Aston Chapel, and is still used as such.

In 1832 a daughter church of Cote was opened at Standlake and in 1868 another was founded at Ducklington. All the chapels belonged to the Cote 'Circuit' as it was called. On Sundays, as many people as could manage it went to Cote in the mornings and to their own little chapels in the evenings.

The Cote Circuit.

Cote Church 1604

Bampton Chapel 1778

Buckland Chapel 1783

Standlake Chapel 1832

Ducklington Chap:1868

In the 20th Century, the circuit has continued to prosper. People continue to come great distances to attend Cote Church on Sunday mornings, but nowadays, there is a row of motor cars outside the church in the places of the old horses and carriages.

Notes.

A famous missionary: One of the oldest families in Bampton is the Dutton family. For nearly 200 years they were grocers in the little town and only sold out after the first world war. The family have always been strong Baptists, and the last of the Duttons, Miss Florence Dutton, (who died in 1960) played the organ at Bampton Chapel.

The most famous member of the family, Henry Dutton, went to Stepney College in 1837 to train to be a Baptist minister. When his training was completed he decided to go to the West Indies to work among the newly-freed slaves.

He landed in Jamaica in 1839 and his preaching soon caught the fancy of the Jamaicans. He spent four years there and during that time baptised thousands of coloured people and built up a huge Sunday School of over 2000 members.

He returned to England in 1843 for a mission through England and Wales. He attracted huge congregations wherever he went. In a year or so, he returned to Jamaica, but his hard work proved too much for him and he died, mourned by thousands of natives, just before his 30th birthday.

The Rev: John Williams: Henry Dutton must have known John Williams well and it was probably the latter's example which encouraged Dutton to become a missionary.

John Williams was a member of the Williams family who did so much for Cote Church over a period of three centuries. He was born in and in his youth he went to London to be apprenticed as a but he was a very religious young man and decided to become a minister in the Baptist Church.

He was very attracted by the idea of becoming a missionary and eventually he sailed for the Society Islands in the Pacific Ocean. In those days, the inhabitants of these islands were cannibals and Williams set about teaching them the evils of this barbarous custom. To begin with he seemed to have a good deal of success, but in the end he fell a victim himself. He was killed and eaten in 1839 by some of the very natives he was trying to help.

The Buckland Baptistry: One of the rules of the Baptist Church is that a member should not be baptised until he is old enough to understand its meaning. Unlike the Church of England ceremony where only a little water is used to splash the child's head, in the Baptist Church the person actually stands in water.

In a small field close to the village of Buckland, are the remains of one of the earliest baptistries in the country, probably built in the 17th Century.

The building was originally built and measured about 27ft. long and 12ft. wide. A doorway and a few steps lead down into the bath itself which is 16ft. long, 8ft. wide and $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the building was in excellent condition, but sometime in the last sixty years, nobody seems to know when or why, it fell into private ownership and it has been allowed to fall into ruins. At present the roof has fallen in and the walls are broken and the bath is filled with rubbish.

Everybody connected with the Cote Circuit is agreed that it is a great pity that such a historic building should be so neglected, but a lot of money would be needed to restore it and nobody seems to want to undertake the task of raising funds for this purpose.

Some of the older people in Buckland call it the Dipping House, which reminds us that in past times Baptists were often nicknamed 'Dippers'.

Tercentenary: In 1957, the Circuit celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of Cote Church.

References:

1. The Church in the Hop Garden - J. Stanley
2. History of Bampton - Giles
3. National Biography - O.U.P.