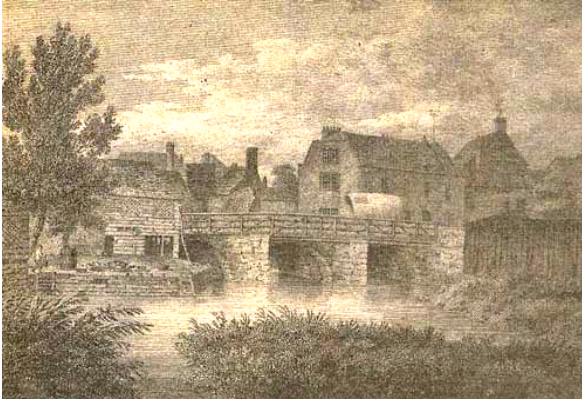


THREE JUBILEES

A Brief Outline of the Story of
Bow Baptist Church to 1935



Written in Commemoration
of the 150th Anniversary

by John E. Lynn

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The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the valuable notes kindly furnished by the Rev. Butt-Thompson, formerly pastor of the church

'E3'

London is a city of strange contrasts. The visitor from an industrial town is filled with astonishment upon seeing the clean bright streets of the West End for the first time. The stranger coming from a small town gazes in amazement at the towering offices and majestic business premises of the City. Those who come to the heart of London from an impoverished district cannot fail to notice the ostentatious display of almost incalculable wealth. The visitor whose experience of London is confined to the central areas or the more fashionable suburbs may readily return home with the impression that London is a city of stately buildings, brilliant lights, luxury motor cars, and smartly dressed crowds. Yet so strange is the contrast which London can provide that within thirty minutes a District 'East-bound' train will carry the visitor from the brilliant heart of the same city. As he leaves the station at BOW ROAD the visitor finds himself in a different London, a city displaying neither wealth nor cleanliness. There is no attractive brilliance here, for BOW stands in the midst of that monotonously dull area vaguely denned as the East End.

If he turns his steps in the direction of BOW BRIDGE, the visitor will notice that the busy main road is wide but its buildings old and in bad repair. The faded mansions are now used for business purposes and the many names inscribed upon the windows show that the majority of the larger buildings are sub-let to serve the requirements of numerous trades. Most of the shops are small, and the goods displayed for sale are of poor quality. A glance down the side-streets gives a picture of endless rows of old-fashioned flat-fronted houses. Some of these are large and seem to retain a dim reflection of their former stateliness, but contrasting curtains and little groups of children playing on the steps indicate that many families are housed within.

As the visitor approaches the bridge he passes the old parish church of 'St. Mary, Stratford-le-Bow,' its crumbling stones the silent witness of six centuries of change, and within a minute or two stands at the point where the main road crosses the River Lea. From the vantage-ground provided by the slight rise in the arch of the bridge it is possible to gain a further impression of this part of London. The sluggish waters of the river bear slow-moving barges, laden with the materials and merchandise, the supplies and the products of

the factories which line the river banks. On every hand the sky is pierced by tall chimney shafts and dimmed by their pall of acrid smoke.

A few yards from the bridge there stands a large church building. It is obviously in bad repair, and its brickwork is black with the coating of soot which is characteristic of all save the few new buildings of this district. But it is clear to the careful observer that here is a structure of fine workmanship and design, worthy of a noble purpose. A sign across the front of the building indicates that this is 'BOW BAPTIST CHURCH.'

The inside of the building no less than the exterior reveals the urgent need for repair, but there remains a quality which superficial grime cannot obscure. There is dignity and strength in the severe simplicity of this great structure. Within its closed doors the roar of lumbering traffic along the BOW ROAD becomes subdued to a low murmur. Here is one of the few places in this district where it is possible to escape from the clatter of man-made machinery and forget the noise and confusion of industry. On the wall is the faded lettering:

'HOLINESS BECOMETH THY HOUSE, O LORD, FOR EVER.'

The words seem strangely appropriate. Bow has changed since the days when this building was erected. The cleanliness of a fashionable residential suburb has been slowly replaced by the dirtiness of an industrial area. Externally this building itself has changed, its former brightness slowly effaced by a greasy deposit of soot, but in spite of all these outward changes this is still a holy place and this house is still the house of God.

The Church Records

On the walls of the vestry at the end of the building are the portraits of former pastors of the church. Most of these pictures are photographs now yellow with age, but the central place of honour is given to a fine engraving inscribed: 'Rev. William Newman D.D. former pastor of the Baptist Church at Old Ford and first President and Theological Tutor of Stepney College.' In that same room are to be found the records of the church, a dozen or so volumes, their parchment and leather bindings tattered and stained with

much handling. In the quaint script of past generations these books tell the story of men and women who have held the Baptist Faith for a hundred and fifty years. We can read of their successes and failures, of their times of rejoicing and seasons of grave difficulty. Some of their practices and opinions seem strangely removed from our own. We find it hard to understand some of their scruples or to recognise the basis of their earnest pursuit of certain objects, but in and through all these records, against a background of the changing scenes of a century and a half, is to be found the story of a sincere people, striving to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

One of those old volumes belongs to the present no less than to the past. The time-worn church register enfolds within its stout covers the names of all who have been members of this community since the formation of the church. At the head of a list of more than two thousand others stands the name of JOHN KNOTT, described as 'the pastor of the church.' The date of this first entry, and against the seven names which follow, is June 21st, 1785.

Bow in 1785

Towards the end of the eighteenth century Bow was a village outside London, in what was at that time part of the County of Middlesex. Between the ancient parish church of St. Mary and the river, the village green formed a centre about which the few buildings were grouped. Chief among them were the blacksmith's forge, the windmill, and 'Ye Olde Bowe Taverne' kept by jovial Host Adams, whose father and grandfather had kept the house before him, catering for the needs of travellers between London and Essex for many years. On every side was open country. Broad meadows sloped gently down to the limpid waters of the Lea. The road from London crossed the river at 'Bowe Olde Bridge,' dating from the eleventh century and built by order of Queen Matilda after her unpleasant experience described as being 'well-washed' while attempting to cross at the Straight Ford. Beyond the river were the flat cornfields of Essex.

A River Baptism

On a July day of 1786 everyday work was forgotten by river-men and those whose business took them across the bridge, as they paused to witness an unusual scene. Since the bridge itself provided the best viewpoint, this was soon crowded with eager spectators. Those who failed to find room on the bridge were forced to content themselves with less favourable positions along the river bank. The more active climbed into trees or scrambled to the tops of walls. A few of the spectators were so anxious to satisfy their curiosity that they secured for themselves an uninterrupted view of the proceedings by hiring the northern windows of 'Ye Olde Bowe Taverne,' from which it was possible to overlook the river. After some delay a little band of men and women came down the steps by the bridge, and heedless of the scornful cries and vulgar abuse of the crowd of observers, they performed the rite which was the distinctive feature of their dissenting faith. That day John Knott baptised four new members of the church which had been formed in the previous year, and of which he was the pastor.

For some years past the Lea had been the scene of such baptisms; but those who held that this practice was in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament were despised as 'dissenters,' and half fearful of the vigorous hostility shown towards them the Baptists of this district had performed their rite in the seclusion of the shallows above Old Ford, where they were unobserved. It was a bold move when John Knott and his few followers chose the steps by the bridge as the place for their solemn rite of believer's baptism, but that first open demonstration of their convictions was an appropriate indication of the courage with which this little group were to face the trials of succeeding years.

After the baptismal service the small company of dissenters repaired to 'Ye Olde Bowe Taverne' for a meal. Here they were greeted by Host Adams whose earlier negotiations with these people had been somewhat disappointing, but who was doubtless cheered by the arrival of sixteen guests. Host Adams, with a keen desire to turn an honest penny whenever possible, had not only let out the windows of his tavern but had attempted to hire the windows of the Baptists' own meeting house, intending to let these out as points from which the ceremony of the day might be viewed. Needless to say his request was firmly refused.

The First Members

John Knott, a sturdy man of 63 years presided at the table. He belonged to a family represented at the assembly of 'General' Baptists in London as early as 1704. He himself was associated with the 'Particular' Baptists of Sussex and Kent, and after many years at Eythorne had come to Bow, where his wife had relatives, in 1780. John Standfast kept the minutes and duly recorded the proceedings of church meetings in a large round hand. His meaning is always clear but his spelling is frequently original. He tells of certain members whose names were erased from the church roll 'after using every Prereckquiset.' In one case the reason is vaguely expressed by 'generall Tenner Bad,' but he is more definite in describing the member who turned out to be 'a very Lyeing man.' The rigid nature of the church discipline is revealed by the case of the woman ejected for 'marreing a Profane man.' The secretary's most attractive orthography occurs where he records the departure of a member who joined the 'Cade of Adulelham,' meaning the Baptists meeting in Old Street, Stepney, and calling themselves the 'Cave of Adullam' Baptists. William Welch was also present at that meal. It appears that he was a man after the heart of Barnabas, a true son of consolation and encouragement. He is referred to as 'a genial and encouraging apostle' whose influence was so helpful that he was 'continuously requested to take the Book and go round and ask the members how they do.' He was one of the first two deacons of the newly formed church, which he continued to serve with fidelity for nearly fifty years.

'Widow' Brown deserves mention as the chapel-keeper. Her services were rewarded by a payment from the church of thirty shillings a year, from which sum the amount of ten shillings was deducted as a 'subscription.' Upon the occasions of baptismal services she received additional remuneration at the agreed rate of one shilling for one person, two shillings for four persons, and three shillings for six persons. The mystery man of the party was Curteis Fleming. He was the owner of the steps which the church used for river baptisms and the 'merchant' to whom they paid seven pounds ten a year for the use of the 'chapel.' He is also called the 'minister' of Bromley and served the church as a preacher for some years. It appears that the relations between the church and Curteis Fleming were not always happy and that he was responsible for more than one unpleasant situation, but he protests that he 'would continue to be instrumentally the defender of the church.'

Nevertheless he was sufficiently scornful of the pastor's elaborate scale of baptismal charges to hope 'that no one would be shut out on account of poverty.'

The Articles of the Church

In the previous year John Knott and seven others had drawn up their articles of agreement in the following form:

'We whose names are underwritten, do now, in the most solemn manner enter in the relation and fellowship of a church of Christ. Though our number be but small, and our strength perfect in weakness, and our enemies many and mighty, do we, in the fear of the LORD, and in the strength of omnipotent grace, with deep humiliation for our innumerable transgressions, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who, we trust, hath afforded us repentance unto life, now in the presence of God, angels, men, and each other, give up ourselves to the LORD and to each other by the will of God; and from henceforth desire to renounce our own righteousness, and everything that shall attempt to rival Christ in our affections, accounting them dross and dung, for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus our Redeemer; and do most sincerely desire to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ with all the affection of our souls, and most solemnly avouch and confess Him to be our King, our Lord, our Head, and our Husband. We rely on the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ for our justification and complete salvation, and most cordially receive him in all his offices as Prophet, Priest, and King, to whose righteous laws we openly profess subjection, acknowledging it our indispensable duty and privilege to receive, believe, and maintain, all the important doctrines of divine grace - viz., that there are three divine and co-equal persons in one Jehovah, - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We, also, believe in personal election unto holiness here, and eternal life hereafter: likewise in the doctrine of original sin, particular redemption, and the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe in the efficacious grace of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and that the saints shall finally persevere unto eternal glory: likewise, the WATER-BAPTISM, BY IMMERSION, IS AN ORDINANCE OF CHRIST, TO BE ADMINISTERED TO BELIEVERS ONLY, and that prior to their receiving the LORD'S supper. We likewise believe it an indispensable duty to walk together

in brotherly love, not only to render our communion comfortable to ourselves, but pleasing to God, and lovely in the sight of all His people. And, as the opportunities of prayer are graciously commanded for the increase of every spiritual gift and grace, so also, for the promoting of Christian love. We, therefore, trust that the blessed Spirit of all grace will so effectually testify of Jesus to our souls, and that, in this solemn engagement, He doth now oblige us to confess that the love of Christ constraineth us most sincerely, most unfeignedly, and most affectionately, to love one another, believing those to be our mother, our sister, and our brother, that hear the word of God and keep it. We esteem it, therefore, our duty and privilege to watch over one another in love, and highly to esteem our minister for his work's sake; and, therefore, solemnly engage to meet together, as opportunity shall serve, to join our supplications for the success of the gospel, ---that our number may be increased, --- that we may grow in grace, and more and more be conformed to the lovely image of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath set us an example of love and humility in our conduct one to each other; and hath taught us that in bearing one another's burdens we fulfil the law of Christ; and that we do not suffer sin to rest upon one another, as the Lord may be pleased to show it unto us, but to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another, with all meekness and long-suffering, remembering that sin, Satan, and the world, are our common enemies; and that, when any individual member suffers, unfeigned sympathy becomes the whole, whether in adversity, temptation, or tribulation, as afflictions of every sort necessarily await the saints. We, therefore, as fellow travellers, engage to cleave to each other in the strength of the grace of God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, trusting to be able to bear and forbear with one another, in our frailties, weaknesses, and infirmities, with much pity, tenderness, and compassion; and in every respect to behave towards each other according to the rule of our Lord Jesus Christ in his glorious and ever-blessed gospel. And now we cast ourselves with one accord at the feet of our dear Redeemer, relying alone upon the sufficiency of His grace for the performance of these duties, which we unitedly esteem and embrace as the glorious privilege of His ever-blessed gospel. Amen. So prays the church of Christ meeting at Old Ford, in the parish of Bow, in the County of Middlesex, on the 21st day of June, 1785.'

The 'Old Meeting'

The little company whose members had 'engaged to cleave to each other in the strength of the grace of God' gathered for worship in a building by the river-side. In the first place this meeting house had been a granary, but later had become a printing works and at this time was more than a hundred years old. The tottering upper stories had been taken down and the ground floor alone remained. The structure was frail, and, since there were only three small windows, the interior was dark. One corner of the building had been partitioned off to form a vestry. The site of this meeting house, while convenient for river baptism, was deplorable during the winter months. The River Lea, so pleasing in the summer, spread its waters far and wide over the neighbouring meadows when the rains came, and the Baptist Chapel could only be approached with difficulty. When William James, a frequent visitor from Woolwich, came to preach at the river-side meeting house, his only route involved a long detour round Old Ford and even when following this course he was unable to avoid a great deal of wading through deep floods. The old building demanded continual expenditure for repairs, but the chief concern seems to have been a series of efforts to hold in check the floods of the Lea. New gravel paths were made with material provided by Farmer Mann. The gate was moved to higher ground where it would be less frequently under water. Some sort of embankment was raised to restrain the turbulent waters of the flood, and flagstones were laid down. It is recorded that these were 'brought by James' boy.' If this vessel's burden was a gift from the Woolwich preacher perhaps he had been convinced of the need for such foundations while floundering knee deep in the mud when making his way to chapel. It is not surprising that it was considered desirable to keep a fire burning in the vestry.

For four years John Knott was the preacher at the morning service and Curteis Fleming conducted the evening worship. At the end of this period a difference between the respective supporters of the two preachers made further co-operation impossible. John Knott therefore continued to lead the church for a further three and a half years, receiving £15 a year for his services. There is little recorded of his work. The church consisted of 22 members among whom John Standfast continued to keep the minutes until he left because in his opinion others were 'proffered' before him. After his retirement William Welch took his office but records little except matters of

church discipline and expenditure until the entry of January, 1793. The secretary then notes 'Our pastor by sudden stroke bereft of bodily strength — lost reasoning powers.' On the 21st of the following month it was announced that 'The Lord hath removed our pastor, — From what he expressed and from his long service and Christian course we have reason to hope his soul is happy.'

Thus in his seventieth year John Knott was called from his people. He had been a robust old man, labouring in the service of Christ until within a month of his death. During the last eight years of his life this brave old pioneer had established a church which was to survive and flourish through the changes of the next century. His successor tells how the name of Knott was 'always mentioned with warm and tender affection' and pays tribute to his life and ministry as being 'a sweet savour of Christ.'

John Knott was buried in Gould's Ground at Stratford. The service was conducted by his son, and Curteis Fleming addressed the mourners at the graveside. With his death the first chapter in the story of his church concludes.

'The Young Man of Enfield'

For six months after the death of John Knott the services of the chapel were conducted by two young men. The one, James Rodway of Bristol Academy was later to become the first Baptist missionary to Sierra Leone in 1795, the other was William Newman 'the young man of Enfield.' At the close of this period the six brothers and sixteen sisters who composed the Baptist Church of Old Ford invited the latter to become their pastor.

William Newman was at this time an assistant employed in the school of John Collet Ryland at Enfield. He was only twenty years of age and his response to the invitation of the church was a request for time in which to deliberate. He recognised the unattractive situation of the chapel building. His friends pointed out that 'the circumstance of the place of worship was not very considerable.' For some time he remained undecided but after considering every aspect in consultation with others he turned to God. The words of his

diary reveal his mind, 'I must cast myself upon providence. — Lord, I thank Thee for friends, — Direct me Thyself.'

Nearly four months after receiving the invitation of the church his decision was expressed in the following letter.

'To the Church meeting in Old Ford, Middlesex'

My dear Friends,

Your invitation to the pastoral office, dated Dec. 29, 1793, I now accept, after serious deliberation, consultation with my friends, prayer to God for his direction and blessing.

I am, very affectionately,

Your willing servant in the gospel of Jesus Christ,

W. Newman. BOW, April 6th, 1794.

It is doubtful whether he or anyone else was aware of the significance of the decision which was made with such care and expressed with such simplicity.

On May 15th William Newman was publicly ordained as the pastor of the church at Old Ford. The elaborate service was conducted by a number of dissenting ministers. The first prayer was offered by James Upton of Lambeth, who was later to become the first president of the Baptist Union. Timothy Thomas, one of the very few London ministers to support the Baptist Missionary Society in its early days, delivered an introductory discourse. The ordination prayer was offered by William Button of Dean Street, who became the first Baptist Union Secretary. John Davis, the pastor of the Enfield church of which the young man was a member, gave the charge. Abraham Booth addressed the church on 'Be ye imitators of God, in goodness, rectitude, peace, order.' The service concluded with prayer led by Curteis Fleming. The proceedings lasted three hours and were followed by an ordination dinner at 'Ye Olde Bowe Taverne.'

The Early Work of William Newman

Under the leadership of their new pastor the Baptists of Old Ford prospered and their numbers increased rapidly. In September, 1794, a Sunday School was formed, a fact which shows that William Newman was aware of the immense possibilities of what was at that time a new development, it being but 14 years since the enterprise of Robert Raikes had brought the first Sunday Schools into existence. Within two months the pastor writes of the success which had attended the work among the children, but there is clear evidence of poverty when he states that 'We are contriving to clothe some of their bodies as well as their minds.' The 'clothing of the mind' was not confined to the sphere of religious subjects but included writing and arithmetic. At the close of the first year of office at Old Ford, William Newman was received as a member of the Society of Baptist Ministers, at that time holding a weekly meeting in the 'Jamaica Coffee House' in Cornhill. Two years after his settlement the young pastor married Miss Elizabeth Robins, the daughter of Robert Robins the shipbuilder, who shared with William Welch the honour of being a member of the first diaconate. The Church rejoiced in this happy union but regretted their inability to meet his increased financial needs. The difficulty was met by the pastor who augmented his small income by providing tuition for a few boys in a small private day school.

Within a few years the community worshipping at Old Ford had increased to such an extent that the river-side chapel was overcrowded and the erection of a new meeting house became imperative. The church opened negotiations with the owners of the property, but were unpleasantly surprised to discover that the only agreement regarding the use of the building was a verbal arrangement made with their former pastor. The representative of the owners claimed to be the only person to whom the terms of this agreement were known, and the church, in order to avoid unpleasant legal proceedings, was compelled to comply with the owner's demands and use the old building for a further period. After much discussion, however, negotiations were brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and on the Sunday evening of September 21st, 1799, the building afterwards known as 'Old Meeting' was used for the last time.

The homeless church now numbered 90 members. They met for worship at the Assembly Room in Stratford and in the Methodist Meeting House in Bow. Weekday services were held in Bromley, and baptismal services as far away

as Devonshire Square and Maze Pond. During this period the pastor and deacons were actively engaged in acquiring a site and collecting the funds for the erection of a new chapel. With engaging frankness William Newman tells of his success as a collector. He records that 'Mrs —, the widow, said she would give the widow's mite. I told her the widow gave two mites. She went and fetched two guineas.

The Second Chapel

The new meeting house was erected at the juncture of 'Old Ford Lane' and 'Bow High Street,' close to the windmill owned by Richard Love and Thomas Karby, both of whom were members of the church. The first brick of the new building was laid on July 1st, 1800, by Nicholas Clark the benevolent treasurer of the building fund. Nicholas Clark was long remembered not only as an active collector of funds for the new chapel, but also as the founder of a 'lecture agency' in which the younger members of the church heard of Astronomy, Phrenology, Electro-biology, and discussions on the abolition of church rates, and denunciations of the evils of Slavery and War. During the period of rebuilding, Nicholas Clark's own house was the centre for a well-attended weekly prayer meeting.

The cost of building was higher than was at first anticipated. It was necessary to cart the materials through cabbage land, and the laying of secure foundations proved difficult and expensive, but in less than a year the new chapel was completed at a cost of £2,043.

The new meeting house was a comfortable building compared with the derelict granary which had been the first home of the church, but somewhat lacking in beauty and comfort when judged by modern standards. It was a plain square structure with rather small windows of clear glass. For some time there was no provision for heating, but the inclusion of a stone baptistry brought the necessity for river baptisms to an end. With commendable faith in their future growth in numbers, the 90 members had constructed their new home to seat 600.

Rapid Progress

On May 25th, 1801, the new chapel was opened for worship. The morning service was conducted by Dr. John Rippon by whom both William Newman and his mother had been baptised, and after 'dinner in the vestry,' a further service was conducted by George Ford, the Independent minister of Stepney. The pastor records his impressions of the occasion, 'Beautiful day, Large auditory, Handsome collection, — a day long to be remembered to the Lord with gratitude and joy.'

By the end of the year the church had increased to 100 members. Within 10 years the building was paid for, but by this time the congregation had increased to such an extent that the 600 seats were insufficient and it was decided to increase the capacity of the chapel by the erection of side galleries. Within one month the sum of £129 was raised to meet the cost of these alterations, but in spite of this additional accommodation the building would not house all who wished to attend. It is recorded that by 1823 there was a waiting list of ten members to whom no places could be allotted, and that the pulpit was 'the only spot giving leisure to move.'

Sunday Services of the 19th Century

It was certainly not the attraction of bright services that accounted for these crowded assemblies, nor was it the comfort of the chapel. The members of the congregation were seated in high walled-in pews, and until the time when the first heating stove was installed they shivered in overcoats and cloaks during the winter months. Maids who accompanied the families they served sat on forms at the back of the building, while the children were seated in the gallery, from which they could watch 'Mother' Royall. After the death of 'Widow' Brown in 1790 'Mother' Royall had succeeded to the office of caretaker and pew-opener. Her duties consisted in showing people to the pews for which they had paid rent, and in attending to the tallow candles and horn lanterns which rested upon the seats. To watch the elaborate ceremony of lighting up by means of a tinder box provided an engrossing diversion for the younger folk. The singing of hymns and psalms was a long-drawn-out process, since each two lines were read from the desk before being sung by the congregation. The company remained seated during the

singing, and no music was provided save the single note sounded by the precentor on a long wooden pitch pipe. The precentor sat in a sort of lower pulpit below that occupied by the preacher.

Famous among those who led the unaccompanied singing was 'Singing John' Carder who joined the church in 1818 and remained a member for 64 years, during 50 of which he held the office of 'clerk.' From 1825 'Singing John' was responsible for the choral class, and long after his voice had become too feeble to lead the singing he sat in his square pew surrounded by a committee of assistants. To the end he refused to recognise that he was no longer responsible for the harmony. It is recorded that 'as soon as a hymn was announced he would begin to search for his heavy iron bound spectacles, which were usually thrust high on his forehead. At times he would go on his hands and knees to search among the hassocks while his friends, quite well used to such aberrations patiently waited till the glasses discovered themselves by dropping into the rightful place.'

The congregation sang psalms and hymns from 'Watts and Rippon's Selection' and during prayer stood with their backs to the minister. Most of them had their large-print Bibles.

At the communion service the quaint old pewter vessels contained wines of rare vintage from the cellars of Henry Tippen, the humorous and successful merchant. The accounts show that the quality of Deacon Tippen's wine was so much appreciated that his fellow officers frequently took some home for their private use (paying 4/6 the bottle of course).

Church discipline was not relaxed when the number of members increased, but remained as strict as in the earliest days. An unfortunate bankrupt was ordered to 'bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.' A woman member was reprimanded for attending concerts, while many were expelled for the offences of 'Sabbath breaking' and 'walking disorderly.' The vague term 'Immorality', which is given frequently as the reason for expulsion, certainly indicates the rigid nature of the discipline rather than the gravity of the offences of the members concerned. When we read of the case of the woman who was severely censured for 'being out so late on Whitesun Monday', we recognise the striking difference between the standards of the present and the past centuries.

Extensions

In order to provide for further extensions the church acquired the adjoining lands of Elizabeth Karby, glazier, plumber and 'melting' house owner, and of West the cow-keeper and dairyman. Finally, the forge owned by 'Giant' Graham Smith was also purchased, in order to bring to an end the disturbing influence of his clanging hammer which he persisted in wielding during Sunday services.

Part of this additional land, planted with trees of lime, willow, lilac, and alder, was set aside as a burial ground. Elizabeth Tippen, wife of the wealthy and honoured deacon, was first to be laid in this shadowed garden of rest, and shortly afterwards the pastor's own mother was buried in this carefully guarded ground, but in spite of close vigilance 'body snatchers' profaned this place during the winter of 1817. The old burial-ground register contains more than thirteen hundred names, the majority recorded by Francis Kemp. 'Daddy' Kemp as he was affectionately called joined the church in 1802 and was a member for 63 years. Until within a few years of his death he could boast that he had never missed a single service, and it was said that 'Daddy' with his big whalebone umbrella was the best known sight in Bow for many years.

The Pastor's Wider Ministry

Although the needs of the growing church made heavy claims upon the time and energies of the pastor, William Newman's interests and activities were by no means confined to his immediate duties in connection with the church. During the period of rebuilding he had been forced to give up his day school, but within two years of the time when the new chapel was completed he had established a new school, this time a boarding school at Bromley. In addition to these duties in the neighbourhood of Bow, William Newman was in constant attendance at the meetings which led to the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and also took a leading part in the establishment of the first denominational paper — the 'Baptist Magazine,' to which he made numerous contributions, and which he continued to serve in an editorial capacity for many years. He was a member of the first committee of the Religious Tract Society, and also a

committee member of the Baptist Missionary Society at a time when that Society was but poorly supported.

In 1810 William Newman was invited to become the president and theological tutor of the newly formed 'Stepney Academical Institution' for the training of Baptist ministers. The Church members while sensible to the honour thus conferred upon their leader were much alarmed at the possibility of losing their beloved pastor. However, by placing his boarding school under the care of John Freeman he found it possible to retain his pastoral duties at Bow and to accept the invitation of the Academy which later became known as Regent's Park College.

The Growing Field of Service

At this time the church spread its influence far and wide. The pastor himself was responsible for the establishment of another church at Plaistow. John Freeman, his deacon and successor at the Bromley boarding school, was leader in the inauguration of a church which became Grove Road, Victoria Park. Other members held services at Clapton, Barking, Cotton Street, Empson Street, Devons Road and Hackney. Several of these meetings developed into independent churches. There were also no less than five branch Sunday Schools in addition to the 'Home' School and the 'Charity' day-school. These branch Sunday Schools were at Woodford, Ilford, Stratford Marsh, Temple Mills and Park St. Bromley. In 1815 the last named school numbered 162 scholars and 15 teachers. The school at Stratford developed under the guidance of James Burford and became Carpenter's Road Church.

Before 1823 the 'Home' school had met in a building on the south side of Bow High Street, but in that year a new schoolroom was erected alongside the chapel, furnished with the benches which had formerly been used at the house of beloved Nicholas Clark for the weekly prayer meetings. For some years this new schoolroom was let for use on weekdays as the Bow County Court, but only after much deliberation as to the propriety of adopting this course.

Among scholars whose names are remembered is John Batsford, who became the minister of Eagle Place, Mile End. Clement Nott after a course of training at Stepney Academy became the minister of Sutton Ashfield. Other scholars who became the ministers were Robert Oxland at Swansea, William Newton at Midhurst, and Charles Gordelier at 'Hepzibah' Mile End Gate. In 1833 a Sunday School teacher named James Pearson went as a missionary to the Bahama Islands where he died the following year. Thomas Gostick, a member of the church emigrated to Canada in 1834 and became the pastor of a church which he took a leading part in forming.

For many years the Sunday School continued to teach writing and arithmetic but a change of custom is indicated by the special celebrations of 1810 and 1835. In the former year, in honour of the Jubilee of George III, the pastor records that he 'distributed buns and ale to 279 Sunday School children,' but upon the latter occasion when the church was celebrating its own year of Jubilee the proceedings included 'tea and cakes' for the children.

In 1816 the remarkable developments which had attended the faithful work of William Newman attracted the attention of the Brown University of America, which conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity in recognition of his achievements. In referring to this honour he says, 'Well it is but a feather! A British officer going into the battle at Waterloo did not think much of the feather in his cap.'

The Year of Jubilee

Dr. Newman continued to serve both church and college until 1825 when he resigned his presidency of Stepney Academy, resolving to devote the remaining years of his life to the immediate needs of church. For ten years he continued to work as vigorously as his failing health permitted, until, in the spring of 1835, a slight stroke of paralysis made it impossible for him to fulfil his duties for several weeks. But in spite of great weakness he was able to attend some of the joyful meetings which marked the celebration of the church's year of Jubilee. In August of the same year Dr. Newman addressed a letter to the members of his church and congregation in which he advocated as the principal maxims for a church — 'LOCALIZE, for if you serve Christ at all it must be chiefly on the spot where you reside; CENTRALIZE, by making your

Sunday Schools, societies, and all other exertions subservient to the increase and prosperity of the church; INDIVIDUALIZE, and be careful not to be lost in the overwhelming idea of converting all the world at once. Learn from Mahomet the Arabian imposter to begin with a single family and recollect that it was his own.'

The Death of Dr. Newman

Within a few weeks increasing weakness compelled Dr. Newman to ask the church to consider the election of an assistant pastor, but before any final arrangements could be concluded his illness assumed a graver form and he died on December 22nd. On the first day of 1836, in accordance with his expressed wishes, his body was laid to rest in the burial ground of the chapel where he had laboured so long and successfully. Under his guidance and leadership the church had grown from a tiny band of 22 to a well organised and faithful company of nearly 300 members.

Shortly after his death a tablet was erected to his memory. This is still to be seen in the present building in which it was incorporated. The inscription is elaborate and verbose, but when due allowance has been made for the style of the period, its words remain a true estimate of his character and life, and an eloquent testimony to the affection and esteem in which he was held by his people.

THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED BY THE CHURCH AND OTHERS IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THEIR BELOVED PASTOR AND FRIEND WILLIAM NEWMAN D.D. WHO, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, 'TURNED MANY TO RIGHTEOUSNESS' AND WHOSE LIFE SO ADORNED THE GOSPEL, AS UNIVERSALLY TO ATTEST ITS TRUTH AND POWER. IN THIS NEIGHBOURHOOD HE FOUND HIS FLOCK AND HIS HOME MORE THAN 42 YEARS AGO; AND, FAITHFUL AND AFFECTIONATE TO THE LAST, HE VISITED THE HOUSE OF PRAYER UNDER IMPAIRED HEALTH — CONCLUDED THE SERVICE WITH HIS LAST ADDRESS — AND ENTERED INTO REST IN THE FOLLOWING MORNING, DECEMBER 22nd, 1835, IN THE SIXTY-THIRD YEAR OF HIS AGE. AS THE FIRST THEOLOGICAL TUTOR OF STEPNEY COLLEGE SOME STILL LIVE TO CALL HIM, BLESSED; AND BY HIS USEFUL WRITINGS 'HE BEING DEAD YET SPEAKETH.' HIS EXTENSIVE AND DIVERSIFIED KNOWLEDGE WAS CONSECRATED AT THE CROSS OF CHRIST; AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLD CAN TESTIFY HOW HE

SPOKE AND ACTED AS A LOVER OF ALL GOOD MEN, AND AS THE SYMPATHISING FRIEND OF THE WHOLE FAMILY OF MAN. YE WHO HAVE HEARD HIS VOICE WITHOUT EFFECT, WEEP NOT FOR HIM, BUT WEEP FOR YOURSELVES. AND YE WHO OWE TO HIM WHAT NO EARTHLY TREASURE CAN REPAY, SORROW NOT AS THOSE WITHOUT HOPE, BUT PRESS ON WITH INCREASING ARDOUR TO THE REGIONS OF THE JUST MADE PERFECT.

With the death of Dr. Newman concludes the second and most brilliant phase in the story of the church at BOW.

Immediately after Dr. Newman had requested the church to consider the appointment of an assistant pastor several students of Stepney Academy were approached. An invitation from the church was first declined by Francis Tucker, and then by Joseph Angus, who later became the president of the college. At length William Norton, a student who originally intended to become a missionary, accepted the invitation of the church, but the frail health which had caused him to abandon his first project made it difficult for him to fulfil the duties of his office. During his enforced absences the church was served by two members with ministerial experience. William Crowe, a retired missionary from India, and Thomas Hunt attempted to guide the affairs of the church at this time, but there was disagreement between those who held 'Strict and Particular' views and an increasing number who favoured 'open communion.' This division of opinion was by no means a local disagreement but arose out of a question which was then agitating the whole Baptist Denomination. The internal dissension, while not leading to serious strife, prevented progress. No marked change belongs to this period, but the children were deprived of the joy of watching 'Mother' Royall's candle-snuffing operations when Samuel Saunder the generous church treasurer arranged for 'improved lighting' by gas.

William Norton resigned in 1841 and was followed by Andrew G. Fuller, during whose period of office the church became affiliated with the Baptist Union, a course which had long been advocated by 'Daddy' Kemp whose father was a member of the committee.

George W. Fishbourne, trained at Stepney Academy, followed A. G. Fuller. At the time of his coming it was known that he did not hold 'Strict' views, but immediately afterwards the dissension between the two sections of the

church assumed such violence that his brief stay is recorded as '379 days of wormwood and gall.' At the end of this time 54 members holding the broader view, being unable to persuade their 'Strict and Particular' brethren to change the rule of the church, withdrew together with the pastor to form the church at Stratford Grove. In 1843 Sister Shephard, the only surviving member of the eight who formed the church, died at the close of 58 years' membership, having witnessed all the events thus far recorded, and having been the only representative of the original company for 19 years.

Shortly afterwards, William Poole Balfern, who kept a bookshop in Hammersmith, became the pastor of the church. During the seven years which followed many renovations were undertaken and additional classrooms were added to the church building. It was at this time that the last 13 members of 'Enon' Chapel at Stratford, having sold their own building, were received into membership at Bow.

Upon the retirement of William Balfern, the church was served for twelve months by C. J. Middleditch, the third of its ministers who had trained at Stepney Academy.

The Factories Come to Bow

The half century which followed the death of Dr. Newman was a period when far reaching changes took place in the district around the church. In the earlier period the village of BOW had become a residential suburb of London, and the great mansions which had been built near the church had been the homes of such families as those represented in the church by Robert Robins the shipbuilder, Alexander Sparkhall the ship-owner, and Thomas Parnell the clock-maker, employing hundreds of men. At a later period factories began to make their appearance and the clean air of Bow and Stratford became polluted with smoke. Those who could afford to do so sought homes elsewhere, and their great houses remained empty or became tenements. Many streets of tiny houses were constructed to provide for the factory workers and the beauty of meadow-land and corn-field gave place to the ugliness of crane and warehouse.

The membership of Bow Baptist Church decreased rapidly. During one year no less than a hundred names were removed from the church roll. Nearly half of these members went abroad, 5 went to South Africa, 8 to Australia, 2 to Jamaica, 11 to Canada, 6 to New Zealand and 15 to America. But after the first shock of the rapidly changing circumstances had been withstood the church began to make recovery, and in 1864 much-honoured 'Daddy' Kemp, himself a member of 62 years standing, was able to celebrate by a dinner served in the vestry the coming of the thousandth member when John Thorman of Stratford joined the church.

The Third Chapel

In the following year James H. Blake from Sandhurst, became the pastor at Bow. The membership of the church had increased to 300, and, since the building erected more than 60 years before was considered to be 'not worthy of the expenditure of a single farthing,' the church decided to erect the present chapel. It was rumoured that this decision was the real cause of the death of 'Daddy' Kemp who had worshipped in the old square building from the time of its opening.

On the 'second Lord's Day of August 1866' Dr. Newman's chapel was used for the last time, and on the corresponding Sunday of the following year the new chapel was opened for worship. The foundation stone of this impressive structure had been laid by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, on December 13th, 1866. In a receptacle beneath the stone was placed a copy of the 'Freeman' newspaper, a copy of the 'Baptist Messenger,' giving a short account of the chapel, a copy of the 'Sword and Trowel,' and a parchment inscribed with the following words:

'This temple, the memorial stone of which was laid on 13th December, 1866, is erected to the Glory of the Triune Jehovah. 'Til he shall come' may angels constantly joy in witnessing the operations of Divine Grace here in the conversion of souls by the influence of God, the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus, AMEN.'

The erection of this magnificent building seating nearly a thousand was a bold venture of faith on the part of a church of 300 members, but they were

moved to make this provision by the increasing population of the district, and their expectation of future expansion was not more optimistic than that of the 90 members who had built the previous chapel to seat 600. The greatest difficulty was to meet the heavy expenditure at a time when those who could afford to give much were leaving the neighbourhood. The cost of the new chapel, which is a building of majestic proportions and perfect acoustics, was more than £7,000. Charles Spurgeon generously contributed nearly £500 towards this heavy outlay, but the church was not free from debt for 27 years.

'Revival'

Under the vigorous lead of James Blake the various societies of the church were reorganised. Among these was the 'Tract Society' whose members distributed tracts throughout the district. The area around the church was divided into sections in each of which a member operated. The members met regularly to report their progress and discuss their experiences. During one year no less than 15 thousand tracts were distributed in this way, the majority by house to house visitation.

The Sunday School flourished at this time and it is evident that the pastor was very popular with the children. The Minutes Book records the occasion of the 'November Treat' of 1870, stating that 'after tea, of which about 400 freely and decorously partook, the Rev. J. H. Blake who met with the usual approbation from his young friends, exhibited by means of his oxy-hydrogen apparatus (i.e., his Magic Lantern) a series of most entertaining pictures, calling forth unbounded approbation from his juvenile audience. The proceedings terminated with the usual 'three times three' for Mr. Blake.' There are many references which show that Mr. Blake's 'Oxy-hydrogen apparatus' and his 'Dissolving views' had a large place in the life of the children of the church.

It was during the progressive days of James Blake that the first musical instrument was used to lead the singing during Sunday services. In spite of some opposition the pitch-pipe gave way to the harmonium.

The Abandonment of 'Strict' Rules

In 1870 an important change in the rules of the church was made. Hitherto the church had been a 'Strict' Baptist church and only those who were baptised believers were allowed to attend at the Lord's Table. The question of substituting 'open Communion' for this strict ruling had been raised from time to time since 1789, but the church had adhered with such rigidity to the principles upon which it was founded that no change had taken place, and as late as 1853 those who favoured 'open Communion' had withdrawn to Stratford. But the views of the majority of members were so far modified 17 years later that the whole church accepted the principle of 'open Communion' save 34 members who left to form a 'Strict' community meeting in Parnell Road.

James H. Blake resigned in June, 1876, to be followed almost immediately by G. T. Edgley, who served the church during seventeen uneventful years.

Centenary Celebrations

In 1884 G. H. Carr became pastor and in the following year the church celebrated its Centenary. The preachers upon this notable occasion were Rev. Archibald Brown of East London Tabernacle, and the Lord Mayor of London. Soon after the centenary year the building was completely renovated, the church meeting in the Bromley Vestry Hall during these operations. After Mr. Carr's retirement in 1888 the church remained without a pastor for about two years, and then Rev. J. N. Vanstone became minister. His period of office saw the inauguration of the 'Bow Baptist Total Abstinence Society,' the sign of a change of custom which is further reflected in the decision to use unfermented wine at the communion services. In 1892 preparation for a series of special 'mission' services included an all-night prayer meeting, and two years later celebrations accompanied the final extinction of the building debt. The same year was that which marked the centenary of the Sunday School. The report for the hundredth year tells of a school of 451 scholars and 32 teachers. Of these scholars 341 belonged to the main school, which met in the large school-room beneath the chapel and in classrooms attached, while the remaining 110 constituted what was known as the 'Drift' school meeting in premises nearby. The 'Drift' was

intended for the very poor children of the district and its work was entirely supported by the contributions of the main school.

The Close of the Century

In 1896 Rev. Frederick H. King became the minister of Bow. The five years that followed saw the final abolition of pew-rents and the erection of the 'Mission Hall' behind the chapel for the use of the 'Drift' School. With the retirement of Mr. King in the first year of the present century the story of the past merges imperceptibly into the experience of some of the present members of the church. Those who have served the church during the past thirty-five years have led its members through a period of exceptional strain and difficulty. Decreased congregations and the impossibility of maintaining the large building in good repair finally led to discontinuance of its use, and for some years Sunday services have been held in the 'Mission Hall' behind the main building. All honour is due to those who faithfully supported the struggling church during the feverish years of war and the ferment of the early post-war years. At one time the number of names on the roll was reduced to about 40, but these few members continued to meet in their 'church among the factories' in spite of decreasing congregations and increasing debts, for they believed that God who had wrought wonders for His people in Bow in past years would reward their labours in His own good time.

Bow Road Church Today

Their faithful service has been abundantly rewarded, for through the past few years the membership has increased steadily, until now, in the 150th year of its history, the church has more than 100 members. During recent months the possibility of making further use of the beautiful but badly neglected chapel has been realised, and willing hands have spent many hours in restoring the interior of the disused building to a usable state of cleanliness. The energies expended in this direction have been fully justified for there have been several occasions when the congregation assembled in the large building has far outnumbered the 150 for which the hall provides accommodation.

Upon every week-day the many classrooms attached to the chapel are thronged with the children and young people belonging to the organisations associated with the church. Rovers, Scouts, and Cubs, Rangers, Guides, and Brownies, the Christian Endeavour Societies, the 'Home Circle,' the Girls' Auxiliary, the Young People's Fellowship, the 'Women's Own.' has replaced the Dorcas Society, the 'Lecture Agency,' the Tract Society, the 'Drift' Mission, and the Total Abstinence Society of former generations, but, as advocated by Dr. Newman, these new organisations remain 'subservient to the increase and the prosperity of the Church.'

To know something of the Church at Bow is to become aware of the vast and far-reaching changes which have taken place during the years of its history. To know something of the district of Bow and to move among its people is to become convinced of certain things which remain unchanged in spite of the difference between the conditions of 1785 and those of 1935. The need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is as deep and real in this day of mechanisation and industry as it was when Bow was a country village or a wealthy residential suburb. The faithful preaching of the Cross is still the power of God unto Salvation, and its power to renew lives is as clearly manifest in our own day and generation as it was in the time when John Knott admonished and pleaded with the tiny company who gathered in the derelict granary. A Risen Lord, the Master of Life and the Conqueror of Death, still protects and guides His Church in Bow, for He is the same Yesterday, Today and For Ever.

The fourth building, 1956...



And the fifth, 2012...

