Memories of Newbold Verdon Baptist Church
from Brian Hill

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Before my time!

I have notes made by Mary Fisher, who wrote a series of articles for the Newbold Verdon St. James' Church Parish Magazine, entitled 'A History of Newbold Verdon'.

These say the following:

'Newbold Verdon Baptist Chapel.

This building, which was erected in 1833, stands back from the road near the centre of the village and Middle End.

It was opened on Tuesday 22nd October, the service being continued on Sunday 27th October. The building committee consisted of Messrs. Poyser, Kirkman, Deacon, Massey and Statham. The opening services on 27th October were conducted by the Rev. T. Orton of Hugglescote in the morning, and in the evening by the Rev. Joseph Goadby of Leicester.

The chapel stands on the site of some old houses. The cost of the building was about £220. Since 1870, a new schoolroom and outbuildings have been added, and the chapel renovated. The schoolroom was again enlarged in 1903, at a cost of £200.'

I possess a detailed article of the events, and the people involved, at the opening of the schoolrooms in the 1870s, and a copy of these is enclosed.

My family, through both my father and mother's line, has I believe, been connected with the Newbold Verdon Baptist Church since its beginning. A member of the original Building Committee was named Statham, linking with the information about my mother's family below. Further probability lies in that my paternal great grandfather, James Hill, was born in Newbold Verdon in 1859, this just 26 years after the chapel

was built. From James Hill, to my son Clive Hill, there were five successive generations from our family who served the church as deacons.

My paternal great grandfather, John James Statham, commemorated by the plaque in the chapel, was born at Carlton in 1867.

The evidence that the Hill family was prominent in the life of the church is supported by the concert programme, a copy of which I enclose, dated 3rd March 1888, and describing the venue as 'Mr. Hill's Schoolroom'. He was the choirmaster at the church, and was presented with a silver-mounted conductor's baton in 1907, and that is now in my possession. I remember it being brought out once a year, for the Sunday School Anniversary, when I was a child, the then choirmaster being Perce Wright.

The family of both my father, James Leslie William Hill, and my mother, born Lily May Statham, were Baptists at Newbold Verdon. When John James Statham died at the age of 43, Roland Statham married his widow, Rose Bevins Statham, and later became the church secretary.

Hubert Statham, my grandfather, was the choirmaster in the 1930's, notably on 2nd December 1933, when the Messiah was performed, three years after the opening of the extended chapel.

My father, who was organist for some years, was the organist on that occasion at the age of only 21, and in 1929 had been the organist at the opening service following the extension work. The first hymn book I remember in use was the Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised) which was published in 1933. I have copies of this, including a tune book. However, with earlier hymn books, only words were published, and the organist had to find tunes from elsewhere. The main resource for this was The Bristol Tune Book, and I still have my father's well-used copy.

Before the chapel was extended in 1928, the organ was placed centrally at the front of the chapel, and pulpit was in the front corner, on the playing-field side. The extended chapel had a new central pulpit, and the present small extension was constructed to house the organ.

My father told me, many years ago, that two harmoniums were in use on the premises in the latter part of the 1800's, and the early 1900's, the large one known as 'Goliath' and the smaller one 'David'. When the new organ was installed, in 1891 at a cost of £60, 'David' was dispensed with. Maurice Farmer, who later became the church organist, learned to play on 'Goliath'.

The pipe organ was built by George M. Holdich of London, a noted organ builder, and installed by the local firm of Porritt of Leicester. Larger organs by the same builder can be found in the United Reformed Church, Hinckley, and in Lichfield Cathedral. The organ underwent a major overhaul in 1981, the work being carried out by F.W. Burns and Son Ltd. of Nuneaton.

The extension of 1928 caused problems. It was financed by some private giving, of which I have some of the notes of donors (church members) made by my father, but largely by money supplied by the Hinckley and Country Building Society, for which Roland Statham was an agent. I have some correspondence from the Society to Rev. E. J. Garnham, who was minister at the time.

It took some years to pay off this loan, and several of the younger men in the church clubbed together and bought a silent film projector, to show films in the lower schoolroom. A small brick building, housing the projector and the projectionist, was constructed at the rear of the schoolroom, on the land belonging to the Vera Cottages, which then belonged to the Barton Group

of Churches. I think the admission was 6d, and the room was packed each week. There was, of course, no television then, and such entertainment was only available in Newbold Verdon at the Baptist Church, and at the Miners Welfare Institute. Films were usually hired from Frank Jessop, of Leicester, whose name lives on in the modern firm of Jessop's, which I believe grew from a later development of what had been a private business. Frank Jessop travelled himself from Leicester to show the films at the Miners Institute.

My own early memories

My own early memories are largely of Sunday School. This met both in the morning and the afternoon. Andrew Statham was then superintendent, Perce Wright played the piano and shared the teaching, and Phyllis Poole (later Cave) also taught, and was responsible for distributing Scripture Union Bible reading notes.

The hymn book in use was The Sunday School Hymnary, of which I still have a music copy. There was also, at one time, a wall-mounted selection of hymns, and the sheets of this could be rolled over to reveal the required hymn.

Andrew Statham stood at a wooden desk, with a sloping lid, and on the desk was a small brass bell, which was rung to require attention – and silence!

At this time, the chapel and schoolrooms were heated by a coke-fired boiler, and a gravity fed radiator system. This system had a header tank in the very small shelved cubicle, off the upper schoolroom. There being no mains water then, the tank had to be topped up by taking buckets of water up the stairs to the tank, and often, before Sunday School, this had to be done.

The Occasions

The Sunday School Anniversary, on the first Sunday in June, was the event of the year. Some six weeks of practice, usually twice weekly, preceded the day. The two platforms erected in the chapel, either side of the pulpit, one for the children and one for the choir, were simple but strong affairs. Each had three sloping supports, pegged into the floor at the bottom, and resting against the wall at the top. Boards fitted on to pegs on these supports, and one of the boards had a curved piece cut out of the rear edge, presumably from the days when it had to fit around the old corner pulpit.

I graduated from singing to pumping the organ. Before the present electric blower was installed, the long wooden handle had to be pumped, with an eye on the small gauge.

The earliest Anniversaries I remember had Perce Wright as choirmaster, and my father as organist. When the Wright's moved to Mablethorpe, my wife Chris' father, Walter Causon, took over, and organists included Maurice Farmer and then Gillian Poole, Chris' cousin.

For some years, the Caravan Mission to Village Children (CMVC), which was a branch of the Scripture Union organisation, visited the church for, usually, a week's mission.

The first missioner I remember, was Haddon Careless, a lovely man. He would come with his caravan and it would stand in the yard of Harry and Lucy Poole (parents of Sheila Bembridge). Later, the missioner was Ronald Jones, who once came with his tent, erected on the playing field at the rear of the chapel.

The meetings were a mixture of hymns, choruses, quizzes, and illustrated talks.

Two other annual occasions were Harvest Festival and Christmas. In those days, the 1940s,the village was much smaller, with a population of around 1200. The three village Harvest Festivals (Baptist, Methodist and Church of England) were on fixed days, to avoid a clash. A great effort was made to fill the chapel with fruit, flowers and vegetables. And in those days, everybody had a productive garden.

On the Saturday morning prior to a Harvest Festival, the produce would be collected from the houses all round the village, and in many cases, it was put out ready by the back door. People expected the churches to come for it, and were glad to supply it. My own joy was, as a boy, going round for this collecting, with Harry Smith, who lived in one of the cottages in front of the chapel, for Harry usually managed to borrow a pony and trap for the job. And I loved that. One year, it had to be a builder's handcart,

The produce was sold for church funds on Monday evening, after the Harvest Sunday. This again was a village event, and was in the form of an auction. In those days of wartime, and immediate post-war, rationing, treasure like a 2 oz. bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate fetched ridiculous prices.

The feature of Christmas, for me, was carol-singing round the village. Both the Baptist and the Methodists, separately, formed a carol singing party to sing round the village on Christmas Eve, It was wonderful! We began at 10 p.m., and sang our way up Main Street and Dragon Lane, to The Heath. There, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Barsby (senior) expected us at their bungalow, with tea, cakes and mince pies waiting. We then sang our way down to the village, and came down Mill Lane to the chapel, where some of the ladies of the church were waiting with more refreshments. Then, we covered the lower part of Main Street and Desford Road, before returning to the chapel before going to our homes.- at about 3 a.m. And there was no collecting of money for the singing either! We did it for the joy of it.

We sang the old carols, and two which had been sung year on year, but of which no music or word copies existed. One of them, which I was told was my grandfather's (James Roland Hill) favourite, was this. (I still remember words and tune.)

Morning Star in splendour shining,
Glad we hail thee on thy way,
While we chant with happy voices,
Christ the Lord is born today.

(Refrain)
Ring merry bells, ring merry bells,,
Sweetly chime this Christmas morn,
Ring merry bells, ring merry bells,
Christ the Lord is born.

Son of David, King eternal,
Born to set thy people free.
Reign for ever, King of glory,
All the world is blest by thee.

Ring merry bells etc.

The other was this.

How beautiful upon the mountain,
How beautiful upon the mountains,
How beautiful upon the mountains,
Are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings,

That bringeth good tidings,
Good tidings of joy.
That publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion:
'Thy God reigneth, Thy God reigneth.'

Break forth into joy,
Sing together, sing together
Ye waste places of Jerusalem.
For the Lord, he hath comforted His people,
He hath redeemed Jerusalem.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Praise ye the Lord!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Praise ye the Lord!

Sunday School Outings were another well-anticipated feature of the year. When I was a boy, such an outing was, for many, the only such trip of the year. Certainly in the war years, and immediately following, a day's trip out was a rarity.

The church usually booked Deacon and Hardy (Lilac Coaches) of Barlestone for the transport

Sometimes sandwiches prepared, and cakes baked, by church members and friends were taken with us. On other occasions, tea was booked at the venue, if the facility was available. Places visited included Wicksteed Park at Kettering, Billing Aquadrome, Drayton Manor Park, Trentham Gardens, Dudley Zoo, Chester Zoo, and Mablethorpe.

At one time, the church held a series of 'Youth for Christ' evangelical rallies, and I have a photograph of the chapel with the banner used for those events, and I enclose a copy.

Later Years

As I grew up, having been baptised at Cross Hills with Christine Causon (now my wife), Gillian Poole (now Jones), and Nancy Kind (now Smith), in a small church, it fell to some of us to take on responsibilities ourselves. I was a deacon for almost 25 years, and church secretary for most of that time.

My wife and I have many memories of those years, much of which was quite a struggle to keep the church going.

We were always looking for ways to involve and reach children and young people. For some time, I ran an evening event which we called 'The Five Star Club', which consisted of games, singing, and telling stories (often Jungle Doctor stories). It was not unusual to have forty or so children literally sitting at my feet, listening.

Teenagers, as they were then known, were also catered for. 'The Hideaway' was a kind of coffee bar, held in the upper schoolroom. We begged old comfortable chairs and so on, and it was simply somewhere for youngsters to come and sit and chat, listen to music, and have a soft drink. We were told by a local policeman that it was one of the best things to happen for youngsters in the village for a long time. Otherwise, many of them just walked around the streets, bored. No computer games to hold them at home in those days!

One consequence of 'The Hideaway' was the discovery of a structural problem. At times we had up to sixty youngsters upstairs, and I found on one occasion that when they were there, it was not possible to replace the wooden dividing panels which were then in the lower schoolroom.

Inspection found that the main joist in the upper floor was bending to a dangerous degree with the weight. We solved the problem by having two steel joists fitted, either side of the older wooden one, to support the floor timbers. The RSJs were

provided by the father of one of the youngsters at cost price, and they were paid for, at least partly, by a sponsored walk by the youngsters themselves.

For a time, there was an inter-church Sunday School football competition. Tom Brown, of the Methodist Church, and I had the idea, and there were teams from the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, St. James Church, and, I believe, Barwell Methodist Church, who played each other. David and Tony Crowfoot, and Terry Satchwell, were among the players. We had a set of yellow football shirts, which Chris, my wife, washed and ironed! It was an excellent additional activity, involving boys and their parents, who came to watch.

Improvements to ancillary rooms

The facilities at the church had always been poor, with a tiny 'kitchenette' under the stairs, and inadequate toilets outside at the rear.

We agreed with the Barton group that some of the land which had been part of the gardens for the Vera Cottages, but which had lately been uncultivated, could be taken into the church property. A plan was then drawn up to demolish the old outbuildings, and enlarge the lower schoolrooms to provide a proper kitchen, an extra small meeting room, and proper internal ladies' and gentlemen's toilets.

One side issue here was that the old boiler house was finally defunct, although this boiler had for some time not been used, as infra-red electrical heaters were installed in the chapel, and other electric heaters in the schoolrooms This change was to save an enormous amount of money and labour. I had spent many hours, often late at night or early morning, stoking the coke boiler!

The improvements to the rooms were carried out by W. Oakley and Son of Carlton, but money had to be borrowed. Several of us stood surety for this money, but it was repaid in a comparatively short time.

John Poole and I also laid a new concrete path at the rear of the chapel, and in process discovered that the old men's urinal had been fed into the 'Baccy Pit' – no wonder it stank! We said nothing at the time!

Alarm came when it was noticed that the rear corner of the chapel on the playing field side was bowing. Again, Mr. Bill Oakley was consulted, and he recommended that the rear wall of the chapel needed to be stabilised. The work done consisted of all the bricks below damp course level at the rear of the building being replaced with engineering bricks. This Mr. Oakley did, and as far as I am aware, the building was stabilised.

Revd. E. J. Garnham

It would be impossible for me to record my memories of the Newbold Verdon Baptist Church without paying my own tribute to Ernest James Garnham.

He came to Christian faith in a Bible-class held by one of the sisters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He became minister at King Street, Loughborough in 1907, and then at Basingstoke from 1913. It was at King Street that he was once admonished by the Deacons for not preaching a sermon which was long enough! This was somewhat daunting for a young man who was then quite shy, but who nonetheless cured this by the practice of forcing himself to speak to everyone in the congregation before they left the chapel after worship.

He became minister in the Barton Fabis Baptist Churches in 1919, and remained so until retirement – a pastorate of some

thirty-five years. Before the war, he was one of two ministers, as had been the case in these churches for many years, until financial considerations in the 1930s meant that only one stipend could be afforded.

He was not college-trained, but read widely. One of his bits of advice to me was to read a good Western occasionally, as well as theology!

He raised his family, having married when living at Barlestone, on what was never a large stipend. When he retired he was being paid £208 a year, plus the manse. On such money, a car was never a possibility, and he rode between the churches of Barton, Cross Hills, Newbold Verdon and Barlestone on his bicycle.

His preaching was in the old style of taking a text, and working a framework for the sermon strictly from the text, which was probably only one verse of a passage. The style of service he led was simple, and in the old style of 'the long prayer', and the sermon toward the end of the service.

But one gained the sense of awareness of God in such worship. I can still hear the deeply respectful way in which he often pronounced the word 'God', and also the way in which he would at times spontaneously break into a hymn at Communion. One such was after the sharing of bread and wine, he came and stood with us in the pews, and broke into song:

'And above the rest this note shall swell,
My Jesus hath done all things well.'

When I expressed a sense of call to ministry, at the very young age of seventeen or eighteen, he immediately helped me. I would travel to the manse at Barlestone on Friday evenings, where he would give me three texts to prepare sermon outlines for. The ones I had prepared from the previous Friday were discussed, and gently dissected, altered or often scrapped! And always we knelt in prayer before it was time to go home, and say goodbye to Mrs. Garnham and their handicapped daughter Margaret. He found me preaching opportunities within the Barton Churches, and although circumstances meant that I did not actually train for ministry until some years later, it was to Mrs. Garnham, then his widow, that I wrote on being ordained, to say that that day was largely due to him.

He was a man often misunderstood, at times badly treated even within the churches, and at times he thought his life had too many failures. But from him I learned the simplicity of reverence and Christian faith, and shall for ever be in his debt. His photograph, of which I enclose a copy, still has a place of honour in my study.

Revd. R .D Browne

I only met Robert David Browne in his later years, but he was the second minister in the Barton Churches for a period in the pre-war years. He became, and remained, a friend of my father for the rest of his life. He has a hymn in the ' The Baptist Hymn Book', beginning 'Thou, Lord, hast given thyself for our healing'. The hymn, with slightly altered words, is also in the latest hymn book, 'Baptist Praise and Worship'.

The hymn is set to an old tune, Springfield, which Browne never intended, and in his later years, my father wrote a tune for the hymn, which he called 'Bartonia'. I have copies of this if anyone might be interested.

I mention Mr. Browne particularly, because in a letter to my father in the later years of his life, he said that he had never come across a Baptist Church with the quality and love of music which he found at Newbold Verdon in the time of his

pastorate. This was a remarkable tribute to a small village church. Brown, I believe, sang tenor in the singing of Handel's Messiah' in 1933.

He wrote many other hymns for use in his churches, and I have copies of many of them which he was kind enough to send to me before he died.

Chris and I left the membership of the church at Newbold Verdon in 1981, when we moved to my first pastorate at Long Buckby. After training at the Bristol Baptist College, I was ordained in this chapel, the preacher on that occasion being Revd. Dr. Morris West, President of the College.

The family connection did not end there. Our son, Clive, and our daughter Rachel, with her husband Tim, remained for some time, being active in the leadership of he church.