

A  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
RISE, PROGRESS & PRESENT POSITION  
OF THE  
*Forest Fold*  
BAPTIST CHAPEL,  
**CROWBOROUGH.**

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BY  
E. LITTLETON, *Pastor.*

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# CONTENTS.

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## CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
Introduction—Continued Vitality of the Cause	
—Three Pastors—Mr. Doggett—Origin of the Chapel—State of Crowborough—The Dream—	
Result of the Dream                   ...           ...           ...	I

## CHAPTER II.

Early Days of the Chapel—A Strange but Attentive Congregation—Always a Sunday School—The People Desire a Pastor—Formation of the Church—The First Baptising—The Evening Meeting—Declaration of Faith and Practice—Purchase of the Property—Trustees Appointed—Close of Mr. Mose's Pastorate—The Old Baptistry—Description of the Old Barn—The Queen's Wedding Cake                   ...           ...           ...           ...	19
--	----

## CHAPTER III.

The Interval—The Mott's Mill Chapel—Mr. Saxby's Pastorate—The Church at Horsted Keynes—Extension of Chapel—New Baptistry—Chapel House—Close of Mr. Saxby's Pastorate—Memorial Tablet                   ...           ...           ...           ...	36
--	----

## CHAPTER IV.

PAGE

My Own Pastorate—Resumption of the Sabbath School—Library—Registration of the Chapel for Marriages—Building of Schoolroom, &c.—Extension of Burial Ground—Erection of Gallery, &c.—Presentation of Chapel Gates—Deaths of Mr. Doggett and Mr. Dickerson—Memorial Tablet—Appointment of New Trustees—Admission of Trustees on Roll of Manor—Building of Chapel at Forest Row—The East Grinstead Chapel—Invitations to other Pastorates—Death of Mrs. Littleton	... ..	46
---	--------	----

## CHAPTER V.

The Rebuilding, 1897—Names of Subscribers—The Interval—The Reopening—Narrow Escape from Fire—Mr. Spurgeon's Father and the Chapel—Church Membership, Deaths, and Marriages ...	...	80
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# A HISTORY OF THE FOREST FOLD BAPTIST CHAPEL CROWBOROUGH, SUSSEX.



## CHAPTER I.

**I**T was thought that by the large number of friends and others interested in the Forest Fold Baptist Chapel, the writing of an account of its rise and progress would now be approved, because it appeared desirable that this should be done whilst those were living who were in a position to state the facts from their personal knowledge or from reliable sources. As a further reason for the publication of this account, it must be borne in mind that not only has the place a somewhat remarkable history, and not only is the oldest Nonconformist place of worship in the neighbourhood, but that it has been, and is still being, the spiritual cradle of many, both ministers

and others, who have been, or who doubtless will be, carried away in the course of events to other parts of the country, but continuing to regard it as their home, and with feelings of affection and fond remembrance; to which may be added the further sacred tie that during its lengthy history the remains of so many loved ones have been laid to rest in the quiet and peaceful burial ground of the chapel, where the last spot devoted to them at the close of their earthly pilgrimage is naturally a source of sacred memories.

The penning of this account was expedited by a very interesting conversation after tea in the Chapel' House one Sunday evening recently with Mr. Ashdown, one of the aged deacons, on the early events concerning the chapel, and on a subsequent occasion, when the discussion turned upon the many conversations the writer had held from time to time with Mr. George Doggett, the founder of the chapel, on the subject, and a recounting of all the events

in the career of the place, including the rise, progress, and successful completion of the project for rebuilding, now translated from the region of proposal into one of the most encouraging facts of the chapel's history. It seemed that the time had now come for a published record, including the rebuilding, and for a memorial of the names of the generous contributors to that undertaking. Hence the present little work.

#### **Continued Vitality of the Cause.**

Before proceeding further it may be remarked that the elements of continued vitality still visible in the cause, after so long an existence, cannot fail to be a ground of thoughtful observation. Some causes, indeed, like some books, appear almost—although they do not possess them—to have the elements of immortality about them. Not that anything under the skies is immortal; yet they retain the seeds of ever-renewing life. As to this, much depends upon their beginning and the spirit in which they are carried on.

**Three Pastors.**

It may also be mentioned that during the whole period since the formation of the church there have only been three pastors; and concerning them (as I was previously for eleven years Principal of the Islington School, Blackburn, Lancashire) it was the frequent custom of the late Mr. Dickerson to refer to a singular circumstance connected with each of us, viz. that God in His providence had caused all three to be drawn from the same — the scholastic — profession, which ensured that each should possess the educational fitness for their office. Not that natural acquirements alone are sufficient (or even in all cases essential, considering the predestinating power of God); but when coupled with Divine teaching and the three things which Luther says go to make a minister—prayer, temptation, and meditation—they are calculated in the hands of God to be made instrumental in the calling and building up of His Church. It is true neither of us has been entitled to add the degree of Master of Arts to our

name, but what has been to us of more abiding value is that we have each been favoured, by God's blessing, to be possessors of the art of feeding His Church and winning souls; for "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever" (Dan. xii. 3).

#### **Origin of the Baptists.**

The chapel was established in the year 1832, in the manner hereafter related; but in the words which I used when writing in 1864 an account of the rise and progress of the Strict Baptist Chapel at Blackburn, Lancashire, from whence I came to Sussex (and which lately reappeared in the *Friendly Companion*\*), the reader must, with regard to the origin of the Baptists, be referred to the time when Jesus Christ tabernacled here on earth and was baptised by John in Jordan, and who, when about to take His personal leave of His disciples after His resurrection, gave them

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their commission (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20) : “ Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ; teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you, and lo I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.” From that time the Apostles went forth preaching the glad tidings of the Gospel of the grace of God, which was particularly manifest on the day of Pentecost ; for when the Apostles received the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, they then stood forth testifying of Christ (Acts ii. 41) : “ Then they that gladly received the word were baptised, and the same day were added unto them about three thousand souls.” Paul gave testimony to the same thing. He says, “ I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation ; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek ; ” and from that time to the present day the Lord has had His witnesses to maintain His cause and truth. In the darkest ages of Popery and superstition this was the case ;

and many have sacrificed their lives and estates on this account. Before the Toleration Act was passed the Baptists were driven, among others, from their churches and homes into poverty and destitution; still they were enabled to stand up for His truth, and the prison has aided not a little God's cause, and furnished the Church with that which will be a blessing to the end of time.

**Mr. Doggett.**

To the writer's mind, and doubtless to that of very many others, two of the most interesting spectacles connected with the chapel have always been the appearance at the anniversaries (during their lives) of the venerable founder of the chapel and his colleague (Mr. Philip Dickerson, who formed the church), and the other of the two aged deacons (Mr. John Burfoot) giving out the hymns during the services with the weight and solemnity well known to many readers of these pages. But the central figure standing out amongst the events of this history without doubt is that of the first-named of these persons, viz. Mr. George Doggett,

the founder of the chapel. We shall now refer to him ; and in the course of our doing so will transpire events which cannot but be considered remarkable, probably amongst the most remarkable of the neighbourhood, and which mark the spot as one of peculiar interest ; which amongst some religious communities of a superstitious character would possibly have caused the chapel to be regarded in a light approaching to veneration, and by the worshippers at Forest Fold Baptist Chapel are viewed with a spirit of thankfulness and a recognition of the truth so well expressed in Cowper's well-known hymn :—

“ God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform ;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.”

During his annual visits at the Chapel House on the occasions of the anniversaries, the late Mr. Philip Dickerson used frequently to remark to the writer that the history of the chapel “should be written in gold ;” and it certainly

would appear inappropriate that it should fail to be recorded in permanent form.

**Origin of the Chapel—State of Crowborough.**

We must now go back to seventy or eighty years ago. As used often to be stated by our aged friend Mr. Doggett, at this time Crowborough was a wild, dark, and benighted region, and was the abode of men who are described as consisting largely of poachers and smugglers. As further evidence of their character may be quoted a passage in the will of Sir Henry Fermor, who, in making a bequest known as the Fermor Charity, stated that it was made for the benefit of the "very ignorant and heathenish people"; whilst Mr. B. Firmin, in his History of Crowborough, goes further into detail, and says that "It (Crowborough) was probably at an early period regarded as a wild region, and its people regarded as dangerous characters," and refers to Rotherfield as "a place of refuge" from the "rough and violent foresters (of Crowborough) who, sheltered in rude cabins on the forest land," lived by the

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exercise of various callings, into which those of poaching and smuggling seem to have entered largely. These appear, however, to have been varied by charcoal burning (from wood cut from the dense forest then existing), and occasionally by digging or collecting iron ore for smelting. Referring in verse to Crowborough of those times, Mr. Firmin, in the same volume, says:—

“ ’Twas a dense forest of yore, it is said ;  
And the purple heather there quickly grew,  
Where the smugglers their brandy could hide from view.”

Mr. Firmin devotes a great deal of space to the description of the smuggling that was carried on, which it appears was done on an extensive scale, and was, he states, continued “ even to within the memory of many who are still living.” The goods, he says, were generally landed at Newhaven and other neighbouring places along the coast. “ The people,” he continues, “ being made aware of the arrival, hurried, generally at night, to the coast, to secure the contraband articles, which they conveyed to their respective hiding-places.” He says the forest afforded innumerable

places of concealment, and specially mentions among them "The Warren," the neighbourhood of Marden's Hill, and the valley and hill at the back of "Crowborough Town;" in all of which places may now be found residing members of the congregation worshipping at this day at the Forest Fold Baptist Chapel. He says that they found the concealment of the articles easy "under the heather and thick underwood at these places; for many a spot, which is now bare and exposed, was then thickly covered with vegetation. He adds: "The least frequented and most direct routes were chosen, and night was generally selected, as the most favourable time to avoid detection;" and relates several of the recorded cases of the conflicts between these desperate smugglers and the officials of the public authorities; particularly instancing one which occurred on the common not far from the chapel, and near the part now called "Crowborough Town." Later on, describing these people in verse, he writes that they

“ were reckless and free,  
 And little cared they for authority,  
 But dared to do what the law forbade  
 When it interfered with contraband trade.

\* \* \* \* \*

In numerous gangs they went to the shore,  
 Through forest and meadow, o'er hill and moor.

\* \* \* \* \*

With brandy and silk, and sometimes with tea,  
 They stole back to Crowborough silently ;  
 And there in the heather so thick and high,  
 In secret places where none could pry,  
 The brandy lay hidden from day to day,  
 Till it could safely be taken away.”

This may not appear very much to the point in the history of a place of worship ; but it goes to show the spiritual darkness of the time, and that when, in his well-remembered short speeches after dinner or tea at the anniversaries the late Mr. Doggett frequently referred to the wild character of the inhabitants at the time of the founding of the chapel, and related, as he often did, the fact of his friend Mr. Sedgwick, of Brighton, when preaching in the old barn, being afraid to take out his watch before them to consult it, he made no exaggeration.

Going back, then, to the period of seventy or eighty years ago—*i.e.* before the history of the chapel—it will be seen that, as already stated, the neighbourhood was a very dark, wild, and benighted region; and that from a spiritual point of view it more than anything else resembled the world before its creation, and before “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Like the physical world at that period, the district, so far as concerns its spiritual condition, was truly “without form and void.” There was indeed deep darkness upon it, until at a later period, as we shall relate, God graciously caused His light to shine.

#### **The Dream.**

In these dark days there resided in the neighbourhood, at Old Buckhurst (he being tenant of this large farm under the late Earl de la Warr), a comparatively young man. He was of the Baptist persuasion, having belonged to the Baptist chapel at Diss, in Norfolk; from which place he came here. His position as a Nonconformist in a



neighbourhood like that described, with no place of truth nearer than Tunbridge Wells, seven or eight miles distant, and to which there was of course no railway or even a coach, may easily be understood. He drove the distance in all weathers with some members of his family to Hanover Baptist Chapel, of which Mr. Kewell was the pastor. But notwithstanding the long journey he thus made every Sunday, only a portion of his family could accompany him, and for his servants (whom it was his earnest desire to see at chapel with him) to do so, was entirely out of the question. This state of things dwelt very heavily and constantly upon his mind. There appeared, however, no source of relief from it—no quarter from which it could arise. The whole district was one expanse of spiritual desolation; or, to use another illustration, the sky was one pavilion of brass, with not even a cloud of “the size of a man’s hand,” from which spiritual rain could be expected. After this state of anxiety had continued for some years, however, the cloud did appear in the heavens.

His rest was one night broken by a strange dream. He saw the Crowborough Forest before him as a great and roaring sea. In certain parts amongst the waters were seen perilous rocks, and vessels were being tossed hither and thither near them ; but in the distance, in one central spot, was visible a lighthouse, which threw its bright light across the waters, and the distressed mariners were making for it, and being led by it into a haven of safety. On awaking he tried to get rid of this vivid dream, but it remained fixed upon his mind. The next day he related the circumstance to a friend, who at once said to him : “ Do you not see what it means ? You have been troubled all these years about the spiritual darkness of the neighbourhood. It is, I believe, in answer to your prayers ; and God means that you should take the Gospel up there, and vessels of mercy in distress will make for it.”

**Result of the Dream.**

This made such an impression upon his mind that he started at once for the spot where in his

dream he saw the lighthouse stand. On this spot he found an old barn, with a few cottages adjacent. He went to see the owner, and at once hired the barn (taking a twenty-one years' lease), and had it licensed as a place of public worship; he arranged for ministers to come to preach there, and fitted it up with seats, pulpit, &c., for the purpose. The services have been continued ever since. The Forest Fold Baptist Chapel (which was appropriately so named from its surroundings) now stands where the barn did; the Chapel House (the pastor's residence) where the cottages once stood. The gentleman in question was Mr. George Doggett, the founder of the chapel; and the present building is merely the continuation of the old barn, the result of successive alterations and extensions. The building may have been altered; but the circumstance remains unaltered, that the chapel originated in a remarkable dream of its founder, which he believed to have been sent to him by God, appointing him a spiritual mission, which he carried out: an inter-

pretation of the dream which appeared to receive confirmation from his finding, on the day after, a building already existing on the spot where he saw the lighthouse—a building, further, which he discovered was *available for preaching the Gospel*, and consequently for the carrying out of what he considered the mission given him, with the result that it was successful, has continued to this day, has from the first been favoured with the smile of God, and notwithstanding all the drawbacks it has had to encounter (through the multiplication of local places of worship in late years, and the constant drain of the young people to the towns), remains the principal Nonconformist chapel in the district, and never possessed more fundamental vitality than it does at the present time, as is partly evidenced by the recent heavy work of rebuilding, so promptly, and indeed wonderfully, accomplished. In view of the thus evident smile of God upon it, there can be few who will be inclined to doubt that there is some ground for believing that the founder was right

in concluding that his strange dream was given him by God. .

Owing to its well-known origin, the chapel, in the course of time, has naturally become an object of interest, not only to those associated with it, but to visitors and residents generally of what, instead of being as formerly the dwelling-place of smugglers, has now become a favourite health resort.

