AN ACCOUNT
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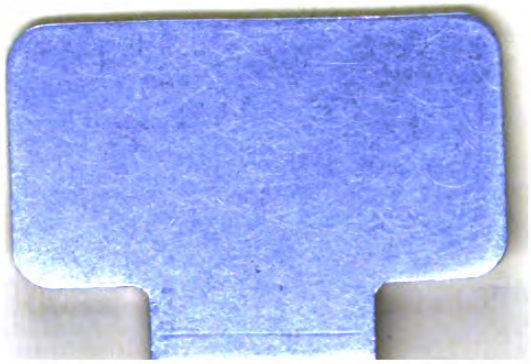

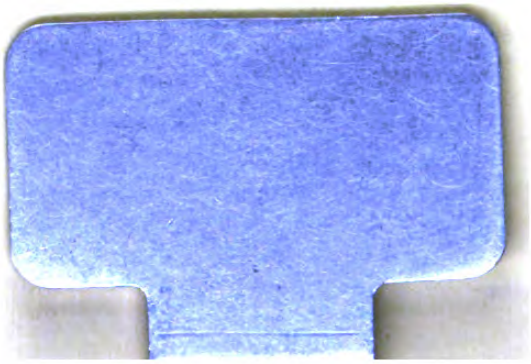

AN ACCOUNT

OF THE

OLD GRAVEL PIT MEETING HOUSE,

HACKNEY,

WITH SHORT NOTICES OF ITS VARIOUS MINISTERS,
SINCE ITS ERECTION IN THE YEAR 1716.

BY J. DAVIES,

Pastor of the Church.

LONDON:
JACKSON & WALFORD, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD;
AND JOHN COVENTRY, HACKNEY.
1853.

[About nine months ago it was suggested that increased accommodation should be provided for the Church and Congregation assembling for Divine worship in the Old Gravel Pit Chapel. After due deliberation, it was resolved to consult an architect; Mr. Edward Ellis of Fenchurch Street, being selected. This gentleman having furnished plans for the *alteration* and *enlargement* of the present Building, one of them was unanimously adopted, and the superintendence and execution of it entrusted to him. Mr. Calow of Aldersgate Street was appointed at the same time, to be the builder. The undertaking having been brought to a most satisfactory termination, and the debt liquidated, the place was reopened for Divine worship on Sabbath day, Jan. 9th, 1853, the pastor preaching both morning and evening. On that occasion the annexed paper was read by him, but without the most distant idea of its publication. This, however, having been urged by many friends—and a vote to that effect passed at a public meeting—he submits to their request; only, with the intimation that it possesses no interest whatever, beyond what is local, and is printed chiefly for private circulation.]

J. D.

CLAPTON, *April*, 1853.

STATEMENT,

(By the Architect.)

THE OLD GRAVEL PIT CHAPEL, Hackney, previously to the recent alterations, consisted of an irregular pile of buildings, of various dates; the Chapel and outbuildings behind having been erected in the early part of the last century, and subsequently at sundry periods altered and enlarged; while the spacious School Rooms in front were added about twelve years ago.

Internally, the Chapel was a parallelogram, 45ft. by 60ft., with a flat low ceiling, partly supported by two wooden columns. The sittings were almost wholly on the ground-floor, in high incommodious pews, so arranged as to cause a considerable waste of space. A deep end gallery contained free sittings and seats for the Sunday School children. The Chapel was lighted by the old-fashioned casements in wooden frames, characteristic of Chapels of this date.

The late alterations may be briefly described as follows.

The whole of the old heavy tiled roofs, in three spans, have been removed, the walls raised 3ft. all round, and a new slated roof, in one span, has been substituted.

The internal arrangement of the Chapel is entirely new. The walls have been re-plastered, and a new floor has been laid down. The old pews have been removed, and new ones substituted. Two side galleries have been erected, and the sittings in the old end gallery have been re-arranged. The new pewing is of deal, stained and varnished, and capped with wainscot, french polished.

Two hundred and fifty additional sittings have been gained by this alteration.

The old casements have been removed and new metal sashes substituted, glazed with ground glass.

The principal decorative feature of the interior is the ceiling, which consists of a pendentive dome, 24ft. in diameter, on a square plan, supported by four ornamental cast-iron columns. The remaining portion of the ceiling is horizontal, and divided into eight compartments by the main timbers of the roof,

and enriched with panels and centre flowers, from which are suspended seven gas chandeliers. The dome is lighted from above by a circular skylight; and provision is made for ventilation. The height from the floor to the top of the dome is 35ft.

In the rear of the Chapel the old buildings have been removed, the Minister's vestry enlarged, infants' school, two class rooms, and other conveniences erected.

In the front, the girls' school room has been increased in area, and the boys' school room greatly heightened.

Externally, in the front, the windows have been rearranged; a new cornice and pediment formed; the former being also carried round the entire building.

Two spacious lobbies with stone staircases leading to the side galleries, have been erected on each flank.

The entire cost of the above additions and alterations, including fittings, furniture, and every other liability, is under £1900.

SHORT NOTICES.

The Old Gravel Pit Chapel was built in the year 1716, in the reign of George the First, about two years after the death of Queen Anne. A summary view of the moral and religious state of England, at the end of her reign, is given by Bishop Burnett, who may be considered a judge at once competent and impartial.

The mass of the people are pronounced tolerably happy in their circumstances, but inconceivably ignorant of religion. The men of trade and business were the best part of the nation; for while the lowest classes were brutified with ignorance, and those who attended to agriculture cared for nothing else, and the gentry were ill taught, ill bred, haughty, insolent, and irreligious,—who, after they forgot their Catechism, acquired no new knowledge but from romances or plays,—the inhabitants of trading towns and cities, on the contrary, were not only generous and sober, but displayed considerable knowledge, zeal, charity, and devotion.

In *this* class, we conceive, must be sought, then, as now, the great mass of nonconformists. Concerning the state of spiritual religion among them we cannot pretend to speak with exactness; but the circumstances are many which oblige us to regard it as by no means flourishing. However, there were exceptions. Some few congregations enjoyed a large measure of prosperity; and among them must be numbered a neighbouring church, (St. Thomas's Square,) which had the singular felicity to rank among its first pastors, with only a brief interval between them, two such distinguished men as Dr. William Bates, and the Rev. Matthew Henry.

The former was generally reputed one of the best orators of the age. He had frequent occasion to *stand before kings*. At the return of Charles the Second, he might have been a dean, and afterwards been preferred to any bishopric in the kingdom, upon condition of deserting his principles, and conforming to human rites and ceremonies in matters of religion.

An old volume of "Farewell Sermons by some of the most eminent of the Nonconformist Ministers, delivered at the period of their Ejectment by the Act of Uniformity, in the year 1662,"

contains one by Dr. Bates, preached August 17, in which his integrity, modesty, and moderation, abundantly appear. In the close of his sermon he says, "I know you expect I should say something as to my Nonconformity. I shall only say thus much: It is neither fancy, faction, nor humour that makes me not comply; but merely the fear of offending God. And if, after the best means used for my illumination,—as prayer to God, discourse, and study,—I am not able to be satisfied concerning the lawfulness of what is required: if it be my unhappiness to be in error, surely men will have no reason to be angry with me in this world, and I hope God will pardon me in the next."

He was born in November, 1625. He died July 14, 1699, and was buried in Hackney Old Churchyard, but the spot is unknown. The Rev. John Howe, A.M., preached his funeral-sermon, founded on John xi. 16., "Let us also go and die with him."

The Rev. Matthew Henry is too well known to need any encomium. The city of Chester was the scene of his early ministry, where he laboured with diligence and success for five-and-twenty years. In 1712 he removed to

Hackney, commencing his pastoral work in the church to which reference has been made, on Lord's-day, May 18th. The appearance of the meeting-house, which then stood on the opposite side of the way to the present, was not very inviting, either without or within. It was an old irregular building, formed out of dwelling houses; but it was large, and the congregation was in a very prosperous state, at least in point of numbers and wealth; for it is said, no less than thirty gentlemen's carriages enlivened the scene on the Sabbath, while the annual collection for the Presbyterian Fund for Poor Ministers was three hundred pounds. Not a vestige of the old meeting is left.

Mr. Henry's labours in his new and enlarged sphere were abundant, but destined to be very brief. Having promised his friends at Chester, among whom he had lived so long and so happily, to visit them every year, he set out on his second journey, but which proved to be his last, on Monday, May 31st, 1714.

On Monday, June 21st, having commenced his return to Hackney, his horse fell on the road, and it soon became evident that he was greatly injured by the accident. "Pray for me," said

he to his friends at Nantwich, where he tarried, "for now I cannot pray for myself." To his friend, Mr. Illidge, he said, "You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men, this is mine:—A life spent in the service of God and in communion with him, is the most comfortable life any one can live in this world."

Other short fragments of devout speech were uttered, but apoplexy soon silenced all utterance, and Matthew Henry fell asleep in Jesus in the fifty-second year of his age.

The texts of scripture from which he preached the last Sabbath of his life on earth were almost prophetic. They were these: "There remaineth therefore a rest for the people of God;" and "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." The singularity of the circumstance induced Mr. Tong, in his life, to give the outline of both these discourses.

His chief work is his Commentary, of which editions continue to be multiplied, and probably will to the end of the world. It contains the substance of his pulpit ministrations, which were chiefly expository. It was not quite completed at the time of his death, and the last volume,

from Romans to Revelations, was written, with some assistance from his manuscripts, by a body of dissenting divines. "A good name is better than precious ointment; and [to its owner] the day of death is better than the day of birth."

On the death of Matthew Henry, the church in Mare Street chose the Rev. John Barker as his successor; though to the manifest dissatisfaction of a considerable number of the members, who consequently withdrew from its fellowship, and erected for themselves in the year 1716 the place of worship within whose walls we now are.

It must needs be that such offences come; but though schism, with its accompaniments, is a serious difficulty, and greatly to be deplored, still it is usually overruled for good. Nor can we doubt that more glory will accrue to God in the end, by the temporary permission of such evils, than if all things went smoothly on. It is his manner to "*make* the wrath of man to praise him."

The seceding congregation enjoyed for a time the conjoint services of the Rev. Daniel Mayo, and the Rev. George Smith, A.M. At the close of the year 1716, the *latter* was ordained a min-

ister of the Gospel, with the customary forms and solemnities, and before a very large assembly, in the Old Jewry, London. Soon after this the services, originally divided between the Rev. Daniel Mayo and himself, wholly devolved on him, and when about 27 years of age, he was chosen as the *sole preacher* and the *first pastor* of the church and congregation assembling in the Old Gravel Pit Meeting-house.

Mr. Smith was born of worthy and respectable parents, and his father, we are told, was a man of distinguished good sense. He was of a serious disposition from his earliest youth; one of those the bent of whose mind and heart is turned to God in reality, without their being able to fix the exact period of that happy conversion.

He received his first instructions in the higher branches of learning under Dr. Kerr and others. Afterwards he removed to Scotland, where he remained two years; and subsequently he spent a considerable time in Holland, under some of the most able professors there, and brought home with him a rich furniture of knowledge, which rendered him an instructive friend, and an able minister of the Gospel.

Through the whole of life he had a weak and

sickly constitution, and the pains he endured in his last illness were sometimes so severe as to be scarcely tolerable; yet he betrayed no token of impatience or discontent; if ever felt, they were repressed by the prayer which he frequently offered, "Lord, less pain, or grant me greater patience." Almost his last words were, "Amidst all my imperfections, I feel all is right between God and my soul."

He was considered an earnest and exceedingly instructive preacher, and had, what was then called a good congregation, particularly in the summer, Hackney being sufficiently distant from the tumultuous metropolis, to afford our forefathers, during that now migratory season, seclusion and fresh air. Of his religious sentiments we have no certain knowledge; although it may fairly be inferred, as he was the proximate candidate for Matthew Henry's pulpit, that his views of revealed truth accorded with those entertained and taught by that eminent man; and that this house of prayer was *originally* dedicated to Christ; the first assemblage of sinners ever congregated within its walls being pointed to "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world."

The first pastor was buried in Hackney Old Churchyard, and his funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Chandler, from Phil. iii. 21., "Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself." The following is a free translation of the inscription upon his tomb:—

"Beneath this stone reposes all that was mortal of the Rev. GEORGE SMITH, A.M. Born of a good family and liberally educated, when he had given much attention to philosophical studies at Glasgow, he continued to cultivate his mind at home by diligent reading, and by indefatigable industry in the pursuit of the elegant literary acquirements which he had commenced at the University. Deeply imbued with Christian piety, he employed his very rare endowments of mind and genius in fulfilling and adorning the sacred Ministry of the Gospel, to which he had wholly dedicated himself from his earliest years. As he was undeniably gifted with a clear and penetrating judgment, and with a rich and flowing eloquence (if any other man could be said to possess such qualities) so by the gracefulness and dignity of his action, the weightiness of his subjects, and the majestic force of his style, he was most eminently qualified to awaken and convert souls. Uninfluenced by party spirit, he had a sincere love for all good men, and aiming to promote peace, charity, and the common weal, he religiously and faithfully fulfilled his relative duties as husband, father, friend, pastor, and citizen; and thus gained for himself the highest esteem and affection. Although his health had been always weak and delicate, he never inter-

mitted his labours and studies, (regarding them as his best solace) until being worn out with excruciating pains, from his constitutional disease, he peacefully fell asleep in the Lord; cherishing the assured hope of a most blessed inheritance. He was born, December 11th, 1688. He died, March 8th, 1746."

The Rev. George Smith was succeeded by the Rev. Thomas Mole, a gentleman distinguished for learning and talents, accuracy and precision of thought, and a truly liberal spirit. Dr. Kippis ranks him in point of learning with Lardner, whose intimate friend, indeed, he was. As a preacher he is said to have been unpopular, and moreover, to have kept his sentiments upon the cardinal truths of revelation, very much in reserve; which is about the worst thing that could be said of him as a preacher. Christianity tolerates no reserve. It challenges universal attention. It asks the widest and most unrestrained publication. Its founder declared, "In secret have I said nothing." Its first preachers could affirm, "This thing was not done in a corner." "We believe and *therefore* speak. We *cannot* but speak the things which we have seen and heard." And a man who can preach for years together in such a manner, that his most attentive and intelligent hearers are unable to conjecture what his real

sentiments are, is chargeable with injustice to truth, and treason against the God of truth. However, we merely give the rumour; there are no means now of testing its accuracy. *If* true, we detect possibly here the divergent point from what we deem a purer faith. Concealment takes away one of the strongest incitements to fidelity. Religious convictions unexpressed are virtually disowned. If any truth be disregarded, error soon comes to supply its place.

"We are debtors of religious truth to our brethren," says one of the greatest writers of our age, "so soon as we ourselves become possessed of it; we are debtors in the strictest sense of the term, for, properly speaking, the truth is not the exclusive property of anyone. Every good, which may be communicated by its possessor without impoverishing himself, cannot remain exclusively his own. If this proposition be not true, morality falls to the ground. How much more does this hold good of a blessing which is multiplied by division, of a spring which becomes more abundant as it pours out its waters."

In consequence of ill health, Mr. Mole, after residing some years in Hackney, resigned his charge and retired to the neighbourhood of

Uxbridge, where he died about the year 1780, at a very advanced age.

The Rev. Thomas Dawson succeeded the Rev. Thomas Mole. The ancestor of the Dawson family was the Rev. Joseph Dawson, who was ejected from Thornton in Yorkshire in 1662; when some two thousand learned, pious, and orthodox Divines, were thrust out of their livings. Most of these conscientious men became Nonconformists; and the effect of *Black Bartholomew Day*, has been to perpetuate and augment a vigorous form of Christianity over the whole land. The above ejected clergyman had four sons, all of whom were brought up to the Ministry,—Abraham, Joseph, Samuel, and Eli. The *last* had seven sons, of whom six were dissenting ministers, but they all left that profession; and among them Mr. Thomas Dawson, one of the seven, who resigned the pastorate in this place, and afterwards practised, for many years, as a physician in the village.

It is said that he attained considerable eminence in his new profession. Of his theological views, and ministerial life and labours, we have no information.

Mr. Dawson was succeeded by the Rev. Timothy Laugher. He was born in the City of Worcester, on the 22nd of December, 1724, old style, of creditable and eminently pious parents, whose judicious and affectionate instructions, appear to have given him deep and very early impressions of religion.

After having, at his native place, gone through a course of grammatical learning under the care of the Rev. Mr. Stokes, assistant preacher to the Rev. Mr. Spilsbury, he went, in 1741, to Northampton, where he prosecuted his studies for five years under the direction of Dr. Philip Doddridge. And such were the improvements which he made, during the term of his collegiate education, that his entrance upon the work of the ministry was marked by an uncommon degree of acceptance and approbation. His first settlement was at Stamford in Lincolnshire, where he continued from 1746 to 1750, and then removed to Nailsworth in Gloucestershire. From Nailsworth he was called to Enfield in 1752, to assist the Rev. Mr. Bush. After this he was chosen to succeed the Rev. Mr. Prior in the pastoral charge of the congregation at Ratcliffe Cross; and in 1759, or thereabouts, he became minister of this Chapel.

He had excellent natural talents invigorated by diligent application, while the improvements of his understanding were sanctified by the graces of his heart. He died October 29th, 1769, in the forty-fifth year of his age. His funeral sermon was preached by Dr. Kippis, in this pulpit, from Proverbs x. 7.—" The memory of the just is blessed."

The late celebrated Richard Price, D.D.,LL.D. F.R.S., was the next pastor of the Church.

He was born at Llangunnor in Glamorganshire, February 22nd, 1723 His father was a dissenting minister at Bridgend, in that county, and died in 1739. At eight years old he was placed under a Mr. Simmons of Neath, and in four years removed to Pentwyn, in Carmarthenshire, under the Rev. Samuel Jones, whom he represented as a man of a very enlarged and liberal mind. Subsequently he pursued his studies at Talgarth, Breconshire, and at the Presbyterian Academy in London, of which Mr. Eames was the principal tutor.

Having completed his course of study at this Academy, he went to reside with Mr. Streatfield of Stoke Newington, in the quality of domestic

Chaplain. Soon after Mr. Streatfield's death, he was chosen minister of a congregation at Stoke Newington Green, and afterwards afternoon preacher at the Meeting-house in Jewry Street.

This last service he resigned on being elected pastor of the Gravel Pit Meeting; henceforth preaching here in the morning and at Newington Green in the afternoon,—the Rev. Nathaniel White and the Rev. — Metcalfe, being the afternoon Lecturers in this place.

Dr. Price continued to occupy both stations until February, 1791, when taking leave of the two congregations in a farewell sermon, he resigned the pastoral office. Shortly after he was attacked with a nervous fever, which was succeeded by other complaints, that brought him down to the grave in the following summer, in the 69th year of his age.

Early in life he is said to have imbibed Arian or semi-Arian principles; most probably owing to the influences exerted upon him in childhood and in youth, and from which the *man* rarely, if ever, entirely emancipates himself. If Christian parents do not teach their children their *own* religious opinions, but employ others

to teach them *theirs,* to cherish the hope of a direct transmission of faith, principle, and piety, is a delusion. " Men do not gather grapes from thorns nor figs from thistles."

It appears that Dr. Price's father was a Calvinist, but having substituted other influences over him for his own, his son was inspired at a very early age with what he calls *liberal* sentiments in religion. Of course he had no relish whatever for his father's creed, and sometimes incurred the old man's displeasure by ingeniously arguing against his favorite system. He had once it seems the misfortune to be caught reading a volume of Clarke's Sermons, which his father in great wrath snatched from him and threw into the fire. His biographer, while he justly exposes the unwise and intemperate heat of the father, with more candour than caution, adds, " It is by no means improbable that this orthodox bigotry contributed more than any other circumstance, to lay the foundation of his son's Arianism."

Every error, however, is not fatal, and many great errors may consist with much benevolence and purity. There is, indeed, more danger in pressing some truths, than in maintaining some errors ; and whatever opinion we severally enter-

tain of Dr. Price's public principles, however we deplore his religious sentiments, his virtues in private life have never been called in question.

"What crowned the whole of his character was," says Dr. Kippis, "its being an assemblage of the most amiable and excellent private virtues. His piety was sincere, humble, and fervent; his soul, pure and elevated; in his views, disinterested and noble; and in his manners, mild and gentle. The applause of his talents and virtues will be transmitted to future ages, and he will be united in the catalogue with the most eminent benefactors of mankind."

His biographer speaks, also, in the highest terms of the fervour which pervaded his public prayers, and particularly his prayers in the family, which were uncommonly earnest, and betokened much genuine devotion. He died, worn out with agony and disease, on the 19th of April, 1791, in the sixty-ninth year of his age.

He was succeeded by the late Joseph Priestly, LL.D. F.R.S., a man eminent for his abilities, and still more conspicuous for the events of his life. He was born on the 24th of March, 1733,

at Fieldhead, near Leeds. His father was a cloth manufacturer, and both his parents were respectable Nonconformists of the Calvinistic persuasion, in which he was also himself brought up. He began his religious career, indeed, by being an *ultra* Calvinist.

"He was much distressed," according to his own account, "that he could not feel a proper repentance for the sin of Adam;" from this distress he found a refuge, first in "Baxterianism," and "thinking further on these subjects," he became "an Arminian."

The Academy at Daventry, to which he was sent, with a view to the ministry, was well fitted to encourage the growth of error and presumption.

"In my time," he says, "it was in a state peculiarly favourable to the serious *pursuit of truth*,* as the students were about equally divided

* "Difficult is the task to assist, in the personal and successful search after *Sacred Truth*, young minds whose judgment is immature, their experience nothing, their reading hitherto scanty, their conceptions eager, and their self-opinion strong. If, in relation to this subject, I may presume to express my opinion and my wishes, they would be to demand in the first place, certain *pre-requisites* for the study: good intellectual powers, the habit of deliberate and patient thought, a respectable acquaintance with the language, style, and idiomatical

upon every question of much importance, such as liberty and necessity, the sleep of the soul, and all the articles of theological orthodoxy and heresy." The tutors, also, were of different opinions. Dr. Caleb Ashworth, the principal, "priding himself on the steady impartiality with which he held the balance between contending systems, seldom or never interposing his own opinion; and still less betraying the slightest emotion of antipathy to error, or predilection for truth."

"Thus a spirit of indifference to all religious principles was generated in the first instance; which naturally paved the way for the prompt reception of doctrines indulgent to the

peculiarities of the inspired writers, a memory well stored with the contents of the Bible some practice in theological reading, and ABOVE ALL, *and without which all the rest will be nugatory*, a heart governed by genuine piety, humility, the spirit of prayer, and love to God as the God of perfect holiness. In minds thus prepared, and thus with conscientious and holy diligence exercised, the seed of heavenly truth will find a congenial soil, and a happy harvest might be expected, under his blessing who alone giveth the increase. But, without this discipline, 'the truth which is according to godliness' will be unwelcome and distasteful; plausible error will be agreeable, and will meet a ready reception; and the lofty boast of free inquiry will end in deep and confirmed self-delusion."—*Dr. Pye Smith's Scripture Testimony to the Messiah*, vol. i. pp. 157-8.

corruption and flattering to the pride of a depraved and fallen nature."

It should excite no surprise to hear young Priestly say, "I was, before I went there, an Arminian, and when there saw reason to embrace what is generally called the heterodox side of almost every question, though I was not yet more than an Arian."

He subsequently became an Unitarian, and then a materialist and universalist. He then denied the inspiration of the Scriptures, and closed his life in a state of almost infidelity.

His first settlement as a pastor was at Needham Market in Suffolk; then at Nantwich in Cheshire; then at Millhill Chapel, Leeds, which he resigned and exchanged for the office of librarian to the Earl of Shelburne, afterwards Marquis of Lansdowne; but some difference arising between them, he removed to take charge of a congregation in Birmingham. Here a simple incident proved very fatal to his repose. The anniversary of the capture of the Bastile being celebrated by a party who looked favourably upon that event, a savage mob assembled, and, although Dr. Priestly was not present at the festival, they proceeded to his house, which,

with his valuable library, manuscripts, and philosophical apparatus, was riotously made a prey to the flames. The doctor fled to London; when the Unitarian congregation worshipping in this Chapel, with much magnanimity, as he now lay under a load of public odium and suspicion, chose him to succeed their former pastor. Feeling, however, that he was an object of abhorrence to many of his countrymen, and his own attachment to his native land being no doubt weakened by recent circumstances, he, on the 30th of March, 1794, preached a farewell sermon in this pulpit, previous to his leaving England, for the purpose of passing the remainder of his days upon the continent of America. He died in Philadelphia, in the year 1804.

As a man of moral character and amiable manners—as a sufferer by infamous and cruel persecution—as a most extensive general scholar, —as a perspicuous writer, and one of astonishing versatility,—he holds a place of high and merited honour.

His *religious* history, like that of many more, shews that apparently slight aberrations from the faith of the Gospel are imminently hazardous.

Great and destructive heresies have *always* had small beginnings: and the worst heretics have commonly pretended, at the first, that the innovation was very small—too small to demand either notice or censure. But error, at first inconsiderable, spreads like a gangrene, till the whole mind becomes corrupted, and "the faith once delivered to the saints" is entirely displaced.

"All error," it has been well said, "is placed upon a precipice. The second step leads more rapidly to the third, than the first to the second; and the pretended follower of reason, in his downward progress, passes from opinion to opinion with accelerated velocity, and only comes to a pause at last, because his scanty creed admits of no further curtailment."

"Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines: for it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace." "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

After Dr. Priestly, the Rev. Thomas Belsham succeeded to this pulpit.

He received his education in the Academy at Daventry, under the superintendence of Dr. Caleb Ashworth. Having finished his studies,

he became Assistant Tutor in metaphysics, mathematics, and natural history in that seminary, which he quitted in 1778, and settled as a preacher at Worcester. In about three years he returned to Daventry, to fill the offices of Minister of a Congregation there, and of *Theological* Tutor in the Academy. These offices he held for some eight years, and resigned them in consequence of changing his sentiments from Calvinism to Unitarianism. In justification of his conduct he published a discourse on "The importance of truth, and the duty of making an open profession of it," delivered April 28th, 1790, before the committee and supporters of the new College at Hackney, where he was chosen professor of Divinity; and when Dr. Priestly retired to America, he became pastor of the Unitarian congregation then assembling in this Chapel. Active exertions were made by his friends to give all possible celebrity to his conversion; though it appears to have been by no means worthy of being trumpeted as an extraordinary occurrence.

He is thought to have been a semi-Arian when he accepted the office of Theological Tutor at Daventry in 1781, and as Dr. Pye Smith re-

marks, "The transition from Arianism to the theory termed Unitarian, is not surprising or unnatural. The principal gist of the question between the two schemes is, in which rank of *creatures* the Redeemer is to be placed: and it can scarcely have failed to occur to a thinking person, that, of all possible orders of created intelligences, the difference between the utmost extremes is but as nothing, compared with the disparity between ANY creature and the Infinite God. The fact of this transition from the former to the latter has been so often exhibited, that it has seldom or never excited surprise; and it has been more usually a matter of expectation by friends and observers. Indeed, the Arianism which crept into the dissenting churches in England during the earlier part of the eighteenth century, has generally been absorbed in the modish Unitarianism of the present day."

The College at Hackney was dissolved, but Mr. Belsham remained as Minister here till 1805, when he became preacher at the Unitarian Chapel in Essex Street. He resigned the pastoral office altogether, some years before his death, which took place at Hampstead, November the 11th, 1829, in the eightieth year of

his age. Among his principal theological works, and which retains its reputation among Unitarians, is, "A Calm Inquiry into the Scripture Doctrine concerning the Person of Christ, and a Summary of the Various Opinions entertained by Christians on the Subject." It was this work which gave occasion to Dr. Pye Smith's able, temperate, candid, and conclusive treatise on "The Scripture Testimony to the Messiah." It is an occurrence of more than ordinary significance and interest, that the same pulpit should supply both the bane and the antidote. Truth, it has been said, never suffers in a contest. And we see abundant reason in the present instance, to rejoice in the result. It is the triumph of orthodoxy, without trampling upon charity. It is a body of proof, "in favour of the ancient and common faith of Christians; which can never be overthrown, and which time, so far from impairing, will but the more confirm and extend." It is Aaron's rod, swallowing up all the rest!

We conclude this notice of Mr. Belsham in the words of Dr. Smith.

"The author of the Calm Inquiry is respectable for his age, his knowledge, and his talents,

for the amenity of his manners, and for the variety, the copiousness, and agreeableness of his conversation. What he is as a professed disciple and minister of him 'who came into the world to save sinners,' is a question too awful for human decision: it will be determined in its own time by the Righteous Judge, from whom the Lord grant that he may find mercy in that day."

Mr. Belsham was succeeded by the Rev. Robert Aspland, very well known to many in this neighbourhood, who remained here till the erection of the New Gravel Pit Chapel, in Paradise Fields, in 1810, to which the Unitarian congregation then assembling in this place of worship retired, and which they continue to occupy.

Thus the sketch has been brought down to the period most interesting to us.

It is impossible now to trace with any degree of accuracy the insidious process of what we consider fundamental error in religion, within these walls.

The doctrines of the Gospel were doubtless GRADUALLY explained away, till nothing was

left but the empty husk of what was once pure religion and knowledge.

In making this averment, we cannot fairly be charged with a want of charity. We honour conscience in its most erroneous dictates; but we can neither regard, nor represent, all opinions as *equally* safe. Charity must have its *limits;* otherwise the value of truth itself is absolutely annihilated, and divine revelation is made of none effect. We are to love the truth even more than we are the persons of men; and it is no breach of charity, no want of true love, freely to maintain our own sentiments, and firmly to oppose what our convictions oblige us to regard as ruinous error. "If ye believe not that I am He,"—the truth about me,—"ye shall die in your sins." "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

The church now occupying this sanctuary was constituted March the 6th, 1804; just twelve months after the death of the Rev. John Eyre, for many years the minister of Homerton (now called Ram's) Chapel, one of the earliest of modern Evangelical Clergymen, and primary

editor of the Evangelical Magazine. He was a man of a truly catholic spirit; who, though a sincere Episcopalian, was ever ready cordially to co-operate with all who loved the common Saviour. He did not demand of his neighbour, that he *follow with* him, as well as cast out devils, as the condition of favour or fellowship. His last illness was severe, but short. On Monday evening, March 28, 1803, a prayer-meeting was appointed; but while his friends were assembled, and making intercession with God for his recovery, a messenger arrived to inform them that his spirit had just departed! On the 5th of April his remains were interred in his own Chapel. The Rev. Mr. Glasscott read the funeral service; and the Rev. Rowland Hill addressed a crowded and sorrowful audience from Matt. xxv. 21., "Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Many Nonconformists regularly attended Mr. Eyre's ministry, and to many of their pastors he freely opened his pulpit. The Rev. Messrs. Fuller, Roby, Bottomley, and Berry, with others, were accustomed to preach for him.

On the death of Mr. Eyre, the trustees of the Chapel appointed the Rev. — Williams, of High Wycomb, as his successor; a truly good man, but much more observant of ecclesiastical forms and usages than his large-hearted predecessor.

The introduction of a rigid ritualism occasioned remark and remonstrance, and led ultimately to the withdrawment of, amicably, a considerable part of the congregation. A few of these friends assembled for public worship in the hall of the College at Homerton; and finding the ministry of Dr., then Mr. Pye Smith, instructive and beneficial, they, after repeated mutual conversations, and humbly imploring divine direction, met together March 6, 1804, for the purpose of solemnly uniting as a church of the faith and order usually styled Congregational. Their names were—Joseph Aldersey, Elizabeth Aldersey, John Pye Smith, Mary Smith, George Parker, and Thomas Norton. The 132nd Ps. L. M. of Dr. Watts's paraphrase, was sung; Mr. Aldersey prayed; all testified their mutual approbation of each other as brethren and sisters in the Lord, by lifting up the right hand. The church covenant was read, all

standing up, in token of explicit acceptance; and it was then signed as it now stands in the beginning of our church-book. The brethren and sisters then gave to each other the right-hand of fellowship. Prayer and thanksgiving was offered to the God of Zion. After some pertinent remarks from Mr. Aldersey, John Pye Smith was desired to withdraw. In a little time he was called in, and presented with a call to the pastoral office in this church of Christ. To this he returned an answer of acquiescence. A short address to the church was then delivered by the chosen pastor. It was also determined to request several ministers, whose names will appear presently, to take part in the public ordination of Dr. Smith. This first solemn meeting of the church concluded with singing Ps. 132, (C.M., *v.* 4—8, in Dr. Watts's,) and prayer.

The following account of the ordination is extracted from the church-book, inserted by Dr. Smith himself.

"*Thursday, April* 11*th*, 1804.—This was the day appointed for the solemn ordination of the poor and sinful creature on whom this Church of Christ had fixed its regards, as its pastor and overseer in the Lord.

"The Church, with many valued ministers and messengers of other Churches and a numerous body of spectators, assem-

bled in the Rev. Mr. Gaffee's meeting house, in New Broad Street, London, at eleven o'clock. This meeting had been kindly offered by that respected minister and the deacons of his Church for this purpose.

"Hymn 10, Book i. in Dr. Watts, was sung.

"The Rev. Benjamin Gaffee prayed, and read Psalm cxxxii. I Thess. v. 12—24., Heb. xiii. 7—21., Ephes. iv. 1—16., Singing, Ps. cxxxii. L.M. *v.* 2—5.

"The Rev. John Humphreys delivered an introductory discourse on the nature, constitution, and rights of a scriptural Church, and on the divine institution and importance of a gospel ministry.

"He then requested the Church to give some account of the steps which it had taken, and the reason of its inviting sister Churches to witness its faith and order on this occasion.

"To this request Mr. Aldersey replied in the name of the Church, by concisely stating that the members of this small Church, were generally such as had attended on the ministry of that faithful servant of Jesus Christ, the late Rev. John Eyre; that after his death they had joined with a small number of friends and neighbours to assemble for public worship in the hall of the academy at Homerton; that they trust they had found the ministry beneficial to their souls; that after serious deliberation, and humble prayer, they had united in gospel fellowship, adopting the solemn covenant contained in this book, which Mr. Aldersey read; and that they had then invited one of their brethren to be their pastor, who had accepted of the weighty charge. Both the call and the answer were read.

"Mr. Humphreys then proposed several important questions to the chosen pastor, and received his answers and his confession of faith.

"Mr. Humphreys having finished his part of the service, by

kindly desiring all spiritual blessings for us, the ordination prayer was offered up to the throne of infinite mercy, by the Rev. George Burder, in a manner uncommonly fervent, affectionate, and impressive. This was accompanied with the Scriptural usage of laying on the hands of the presbytery.

"Singing, Hymn 82, Dr. Doddridge, *v.* 3—6.

"The Rev. Joseph Barber delivered the charge to the pastor, from Col. i. 28.—'Whom we preach warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.' This venerable and excellent minister, united faithfulness and affection to a great degree in his judicious and important address.

"Singing, Hymn 128, bk. i. *v.* 1, 2, 4.

"The Rev. John Goode offered the general and intercessory prayer, in a very solemn, devout, and edifying manner.

"Singing, Ps. cxxxiii. C.M. *v.* 1, 2, 4.

"The Sermon to the Church was preached by the Rev. John Clayton, from I Cor. xvi. 10.—'Now if Timotheus come, see that he may be with you without fear, for he worketh the work of the Lord as I also do.' Our very excellent and valuable friend on this occasion spoke with that judicious fidelity and knowledge of the dispositions, duties, and trials of men, for which he is so deservedly esteemed.

"Singing, Ps. cxxxii. C.M. *v.* 4, 5, 6.

"The Rev. James Knight offered the concluding prayer with his accustomed spirituality and seriousness."

Of all the honoured men who took part in this solemn service, not one survives: ordainers and ordained have passed from their office and work on earth, to their eternal rest and reward in heaven!

The first deacons of this church were Joseph Aldersey and Samuel Gould Underhill, who were chosen to the office, November the 30th, 1809, and on the Lord's-day ensuing, December the 3rd, solemnly set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. Up to this period, the temporal affairs of the church had been administered, at the request of the brethren, by Mr. Aldersey alone.

Thus was constituted, we think scripturally, and complete in its organization, a Congregational Church of Christ.

Such churches are *distinct*, to prevent confusion; and *equal*, to prevent usurpation; yet are not *isolated* bodies, but sustain a mutual relation to those of their own order, and to other churches, as servants of the same Lord, and branches of the same spiritual kingdom; holding nothing, as to constitution, government, or discipline, incompatible with the largest charities and the holiest aspirations. "Grace and peace be with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours."

In addition to the brethren already named as the first deacons of this church, the following

were also chosen and called to that office at the different periods indicated.

April 2, 1812—John Tiler and William Hale. February 12, 1824—George Parker. April 3, 1834—Stephen Olding. May 29, 1845—Henry Rutt and James Carter. December 4, 1851, and set apart to the office by prayer on the 31st of the same month—Searle J. Nash, T. Edgcombe Parson, and William Underhill. There are seven of these brethren fulfilling, at the present time, with entire harmony, and with great and substantial benefit to the church, the specific duties of their important and arduous office.

Long may their lives be spared and their labours continued! and may they be sustained in every scheme that may contribute to the happiness and salvation of men, and the glory of God; by the zealous voluntary co-operation of his people; and by that unostentatious, but invaluable proof of regard, "the effectual fervent prayer that availeth much."

The honoured instrument of restoring to this place, and of causing these walls to resound again with the doctrine of the proper Deity and atoning death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

was Dr. John Pye Smith; concerning whom, after fifty years of personal and professional, and nearly forty-six years of ministerial and pastoral residence amongst you, lengthened comment were, indeed, superfluous. His own works shall praise him in the gates. Many of you had opportunities manifold and long continued, of forming your own judgment of his mind, his heart, his life, labours and end; and this day "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily, and justly, and unblameably, he behaved himself among you that believe,. . . .how he exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, that ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory."

"That which formed," says Dr. John Harris, in his faithful and beautiful portrait of him, "that which formed the master key of Dr. Smith's character, was his living piety. Piety did not merely adhere to him; it pervaded and surrounded him. It was not a thing of times and places; it was the element in which he lived; and few persons could be long with him without feeling that they were breathing it.. . . . . .He moved from duty to duty in the

spirit of prayer. This was the golden chain by which he linked his various acts together; and the whole to the throne of God. And this devotional spirit it was which gave to his character unusual symmetry and completeness; reminding us of the divine model which he copied; and shedding a halo and a beauty on his earthly course."

This witness we all know is true. And it is with this feature of his character that *we* are chiefly concerned. None of us, perhaps, can hope to emulate his rich mental talents, his varied knowledge and sanctified learning; but *all* may emulate his *virtues*; his simplicity and humility; his uprightness and veracity; his courtesy and kindness; his quick sense of moral evil, and his simple respect to the will of God, in everything relating to truth and duty; his beneficence and habitual devotion; in these things he has left us an impressive example, which being associated with all the tender recollections excited by his departure, ought to have a powerful influence in inducing each individual to lead an *eminently* holy life.

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God,

whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." "Jesus Christ [is] the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

Dr. Smith resigned the pastoral oversight of this Church at the close of the year 1849, (the present pastor having held it conjointly with him for about four years) and shortly after he retired to Guildford, where he died, February 5th, 1851, and was buried February 15th, in Abney Park Cemetery.

Soft and tranquil was the evening of his days. Resignation, peace, gratitude, hope dwelt in his bosom. So, by divine grace, has he shown us how to live, and how to die. Absent from the body, he is present with the Lord. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."

When this place of worship was erected the dimensions were small, extending not quite to the front of the gallery. It was afterwards enlarged and the end gallery erected, but when, nobody can tell.

It was again repaired and beautified when the present Church took possession of it in

1811; and in 1841, the two commodious school rooms, now still more commodious, were added. The cause of its abandonment by the Rev. Robert Aspland's congregation, forty-two years ago, was some apprehension entertained by them for its stability. It has stood hitherto, however, and will we trust, stand for ages, the dwelling-place of a pure Church, which shall diffuse the knowledge and blessings of Christianity around.

Here let the Son of David reign,
  Let God's anointed shine;
Justice and truth his court maintain,
  With love and power divine.

Here let him hold a *lasting* throne,
  And as his kingdom grows,
Fresh honours shall adorn his crown,
  And shame confound his foes.

That particular places should be appropriated to the public worship of Almighty God, is a matter of necessity; and both taste and devotion teach that they should lack no decent ornament, nor becoming and reasonable accommodation. And in this, we cannot but think, you have eminently succeeded.

You have not forgotten that the building is designed for *nonconformist* worshippers; to whom

hearing and *seeing* are vastly more important than stained glass and clustered columns. You have secured simplicity without meanness; attractiveness without gaudiness; adequate adornment without aught obtrusive,—either offending the *eye* by its unsightliness, or distracting the *mind* by its incongruity and ostentatiousness,—but chaste, commodious, and of good capacity.

It demands devout and ardent thanksgiving, that the whole undertaking, in its origin, progress, and performance, has been marked by entire unanimity of purpose and action. Not by constraint but willingly, from the spontaneous promptings of one's own full and cheerful heart, *all*, without exception, have co-operated to the utmost. And thus by the good hand of God upon us, our work has been brought to a successful and happy consummation. "Now therefore arise, O Lord God, into thy resting place, thou and the ark of thy strength. Let thy priests, O Lord God, be clothed with salvation, and let thy saints rejoice in goodness."

"To Him who hath loved us and died for us," be this convenient tasteful structure, consecrated for evermore. To his honour it was *originally* destined, and is now solemnly dedicated *anew*.

May it be rendered glorious by the perpetual presence of Immanuel. May that adorable name be written above its portals. May it be the burden of every sermon and of every song. May this be the house of love and peace as well as holiness; may there be a long succession of faithful and pious pastors: and may the blessing of the Great Jehovah, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, be here, filling this goodly edifice and the hearts of all the people, now and evermore.

O Lord, we beseech thee, send now prosperity. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Amen and Amen.

J. Coventry, Printer, Hackney.