

THE MOOT HALL, ELSTOW.

The Old Moot Hall, known to every visitor to the birth place of Bunyan, was again opened for service on Wednesday, having undergone extensive renovation. The interesting old building, which stands on the village green, has for many years been used as a Sunday school and for preaching purposes in connexion with Bunyan Meeting, Bedford. It has a picturesque appearance, and with its clustering memories of by-gone days has played no unimportant part in the social, educational, and religious life of the people of Elstow, for it has become the existing link between the past and the present. It was probably erected about the year 1530, in connexion with the Benedictine Nunnery, originally founded by Judith, the niece of William the Conqueror, in 1078. It was no doubt first used as a place where weary travellers would be entertained by the nuns of Elstow, for we are told warm-hearted and kindly hospitality was one of the redeeming features of a system otherwise dark and soul-fettering. So this building, inside the boundary of the nunnery, and yet removed from the sacred precincts of the Abbey, remained in possession of the Abbess until the wave-tide of the Reformation, started in England by Henry VIII in 1531, swept away the monastic order from the country. Then, even to this village, far removed from the din and turmoil of city strife, the mighty upheaval extended, and on August 29, 1539, was signed the document resigning the Abbey and all the property. The villagers of that time then witnessed the expulsion of the nuns from their midst, and the confiscation of their property to the Crown. In 1553, by order of the Crown, the property passed into the hands of Sir Humphrey Raddcliffe, and in 1616, his son, Sir Edward, sold the estate to Sir Thomas Hillersdon, and so this building, with other property in Elstow, passed through a chequered career until, eventually, it was purchased by Mr. Samuel Whitbread, in 1792. After its first beneficent service as a place of rest and refreshment, it became the Court-house of the Manor. Here the Court met twice a year, in spring and autumn, to receive the fealty due to the Lord of the Manor; to levy fines, when necessary; to settle disputes which had arisen in the village; and to punish offenders against the law. Here, also, some of Bunyan's ancestors figured, not altogether in the best of lights, for at the Court held on April 30, 1548, notice was given of the sales of land by Thomas Bonyon to Robert Corteyes, and in 1549, John Lynwood came to tell that he had purchased land of Thomas Bonyon. This shows that he was indeed on the down-grade. The wife of Thomas Bonyon, too, had not only her name brought before the Court, but had to appear at 12 out of the 16 courts recorded to answer charges against her for extorting excessive prices for her beer and bread, and was fined eleven times out of the twelve. In the days of Bunyan this building was the scene of many festive gatherings, and continued to be used for all festive occasions and public gatherings in connexion with the village, until in 1817 it came into the hands of the friends of Bunyan Meeting, Bedford. The Bunyan Sunday School was started in 1811 by Mr. Thomas Green, of Bedford, and its first meetings were held in the cottage just before the Red Lion, then occupied by Mr. Thomas Harvey. As the number of scholars increased it was deemed necessary to move to a more commodious meeting place, and the Moot Hall, being at liberty, was hired for the purpose. The large room was publicly opened for regular preaching and Sunday School teaching in 1846. Since the formation of the school in 1811 it has been superintended by Mr. Thomas Green, Mr. John Hutchins, Mr. Abraham Smith, Mr. William Wells Kilpin, Mr. Thomas Carling, and Mr. W. J. Robinson, the present superintendent being Mr. R. H. Poynter, who entered upon the duties in 1890. A most successful bazaar was held last June, the proceeds being devoted towards renovating the old building and also purchasing an American organ and several other things necessary for the services. The repair of the place was a matter of real necessity, as the rafters of the roof had rotted away admitting wind and weather. The work, which was to cost altogether about £80, was taken in hand by Mr. J. Warton, of Bedford, and the interior now presents a comfortable appearance. The roof and floors have been strengthened, there are new fittings, and the walls have been decorated in keeping with the old character of the building. A fine new American organ, by Mason and Hamlin, has also been purchased.

The proceedings on Wednesday were carried out with heartiness, and although the weather was not favourable, a considerable number visited the Hall in the course of the afternoon, and took part in the meetings. There was no formal opening, but a sale of work was got up by the villagers, and may be looked upon as their contribution to the cause they have at heart. A tent was erected on the Green close by, where fruit and vegetables and other offerings were displayed for sale, with a few articles of work left over from the bazaar. Those who took an active part in the disposal of the goods were Mrs. A. Smith, Mrs. Cherry, Mrs. W. J. Rolls, Miss Nellie Smith,

and Miss Fowkes; and the vegetables were in the charge of Mr. Abraham Smith, Mr. Charles Bowler, and Mr. Peacock. The large room had been attractively decorated with flowers for the services by Mrs. Cherry, Mrs. C. Bowler, Mrs. Odd, Mrs. Carroll, Mr. Sam. Cirket, Mr. W. Cirket, Miss Cirket, the Misses Smith, Miss Lizzie Bowler, and Miss Morris. A tea was provided later in the afternoon in the Hall.

THE PUBLIC MEETING.

The Moot Hall was packed in the evening on the occasion of the public meeting, presided over by the Mayor of Bedford (Dr. J. Coombs), supported by the Rev. W. Hay Aitken, M.A., the Rev. H. H. McCullagh, B.A., the Rev. J. Thomson, Mr. W. J. Robinson, Mr. R. H. Poynter, Mr. T. Hester, Mr. J. Ashton, Mr. W. Joyce (Kempston), and many others. The proceedings opened with the singing of the hymn, "All people that on earth do dwell," to the usual tune of the "Old Hundredth," Mr. T. J. Ford, organist of Bunyan Meeting, manipulating the new American organ, assisted by the well-trained choir of the Bedford Bunyan Meeting, who had voluntarily given their services.

After the preliminary devotional exercises, the CHAIRMAN called upon the Rev. J. Thomson, the newly appointed pastor of the Howard Congregational Chapel, Mill-street, Bedford, to address the meeting. In the first part of an earnest and touching speech, Mr. THOMSON said he knew he was coming amongst them as a stranger, but when he had been once, he should not come a second time as one (hear, hear). He was there that night because he had a deep love for the villages and the villagers, and it caused him to remember the Sundays spent preaching in the villages when at college, and his experience had taught him the worth of some uneducated but Christian people in the villages. They must not suppose that the world was going to be saved by eloquence and culture, patronage of the great, or assistance from material and earthly sources, but he believed the miracle of Pentecost was going to be repeated, and the labourers and workers, and the mothers, daughters, and sisters, would by their character and work, as shown in the carrying out of the routine of daily life, prove more eloquent than spoken words, and much would depend upon their fidelity to God. Mr. Thomson dwelt at length upon the force and example of character, especially in respect of mothers.

Mr. POYNTER next gave a short report of the work done at the Hall during the past twelve months, and hoped that it would be continued. He also spoke of, and commended, the readiness shown by Nonconformist ministers to conduct the weekday services.

The CHAIRMAN offered his hearty congratulations upon the work which had been accomplished in the past, and in securing the American organ in the present. Mr. Poynter had referred to the harmonious feeling existing between the various denominations, and how they had been helped by the presence of Nonconformist ministers. It was a gratification to him and to them all to know that that harmony and united feeling was not limited to the Dissenting section of the people, because they had that night a minister who was a gentleman very eminent in another section of the Christian Church (applause). They all knew the Rev. Hay Aitken, and rejoiced that he was there that night to speak to them.

The Rev. W. HAY AITKEN, in the course of a vigorous speech, said the Gospel, wherever preached, formed a link between those who preached it; and those who were engaged in evangelistic work must feel sympathy with those who were engaged in the same work, although under other circumstances. He thought that with respect to the preaching of the Gospel the towns were better off than the villages, for in a town there was generally a place where the Gospel was preached within easier reach than he could say of some country places, and in some places there was a plethora of vitality, and in others a total absence of it. He was of opinion that the country needed to receive their charitable attention as much as the towns. Mr. Poynter did not wish to establish a new sectarian movement, but merely bring the Gospel home to those who probably, but for the efforts made at the Hall, would go nowhere, and, if they did go anywhere, might still remain strangers to the Gospel. In other words, the object and purpose of the ministrations in the building had been evangelisation; and one rejoiced to think that in these days, when so many divisions existed, and when, he was happy to say, they were beginning to deplore those divisions and wish they might cease, there was one rallying point, the Cross of Calvary—where they might gather. It was, in so far as they were true to the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, that they would be able more and more to realise how much more important was that on which they agreed, than the various points on which they necessarily differed (hear, hear). The right keynote had been struck in the address by the Rev. Mr. Thomson in calling them to a personal sense of their duties. Had John Bunyan said to himself that he was only a poor tinker, and done nothing, the world would have never had the "Pilgrim's Progress," and the marvellous work of his life-time would have been lost. Mr. Hay Aitken spoke at some length on spiritual subjects, and concluded with a telling appeal.

The Rev. H. H. McCULLAGH spoke, by request, on "The relation of music to divine worship," and in commencing, humourously observed that Mr. Poynter was better off than John Bunyan, for he had an American organ (laughter). There was a desire on the part of the worshipper to express adoration and love of God, and to do so in music was most natural and scriptural. Mr. McCullagh dealt with the remarkable power music had upon the human mind and soul for good. In conclusion he hoped they would be all the better Christians for the American organ.

Mr. W. J. ROBINSON followed with an address containing some interesting reminiscences of the old days, when he was Superintendent of the school.

Mr. J. MACK, of London, proposed, and Mr. MUSTELL, of Northampton, seconded (both old Bedfordians and teachers in the school) a vote of thanks to the Chairman, speakers, choir, organist, &c., for the parts they had played, and the meeting closed with the Doxology, a collection in aid of the renovation fund having been taken.

The choir creditably sang several anthems led by Mr. Ford, for which he and they were specially thanked.

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THE MOOT HALL SERVICES.

The Bunyan friends had a high day on Wednesday last, in celebrating the re-opening of the Moot Hall after renovation, together with the first use for its services of a new American organ by Mason and Hamlin. The circumstances of the occasion were altogether very exhilarating, and the success of the festival redounds greatly to the devotion of its ardent promoters, led by Mr R. H. Poynter, superintendent of the Sunday-school and Band of Hope, who also earnestly supports the public services on Sunday evenings. They may be heartily congratulated in having secured the generous co-operation and assistance of the widely-known Rev. W. Hay M. H. Aitken, M.A., of the Church Parochial Mission Society, who is just home from the reunion conference at Grindelwald, Switzerland; of the Rev. H. H. McCullagh, B.A., late Superintendent of Bedford St. Mary's Wesleyan Circuit; and of the Rev. John Thomson, the new and increasingly popular young minister of Howard Congregational Church, Bedford. Mr T. J. Ford, the accomplished organist of Bunyan Meeting in the county town, had charge of musical arrangements, and, besides performing some favourite selections from master composers upon the new instrument, ably accompanied and conducted the rendering of choice hymns and anthems, the latter being sung by members of his choir. The proceedings, too, were honoured with the presence of the Mayor of Bedford, Dr. Coombs, who presided over a crowded assembly in the evening.

Wednesday's celebration began at 3 p.m. with a sale of useful and fancy articles under the tent known in Bedford as a memorial of the united Sunday-school festival on the day of the unveiling of the Bunyan Statue by Lady Augusta and Dean Stanley (of Westminster) on the 10th June, 1874. Mrs Abraham Smith, Miss Nellie Smith, Mrs W. J. Rolls, and Mrs Cherry were specially interested in this small bazaar; and a sale of fruit was managed by Miss Fanny Fowkes, also beneath the tent, which was erected on The Green. Close to the Moot Hall, there was a stand filled with vegetables, which were sold by Mr Charles Bowler, Mr T. Peacock, Mr Abraham Smith, Mr William Cirket, Mr James Bowler, &c. Inside, all available space, was crowded with parties at an excellent five o'clock tea, and another serving was subsequently provided in the tent outside. The caterers were Mrs Charles Bowler, Mrs Carroll, Mrs R. H. Poynter, Miss Cirket, Miss Ottewill, Miss G. H. Robinson, Misses Ada and E. Smith, &c. The Hall was profusely decorated with flowers, corn, foliage, and flags, by Mrs Charles Bowler, Mrs Carroll, Mrs Cherry, Miss Cirket, Mrs Odd, Miss Ada Smith, Miss Esther Smith, &c. Subsequently the use of the American organ was inaugurated by Mr Ford playing the "Gloria" from Mozart's *Twelfth Mass* and Handel's *Messiah* aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

The Mayor of Bedford started the public meeting with the hymn "All people that on earth do dwell," after which prayer was offered by the Rev. J. Thomson, and the choir sang the Rev. H. H. Woodward's anthem "The sun shall be no more thy light by day."

The Rev. J. Thomson gave the first address having to return to Bedford for his own service at 7.30. He said that he came to Elstow as a stranger, but he should not do so a second time; for he loved villages and villagers. When at college the students went out into the country on Sundays, and they got to love it, as they had the happy experience of meeting with many who had the Spirit of God in them. He was pleased to be at Elstow, and should like to say that he thought there were a good many people in villages who did not understand the opportunity they had: they need not expect to be saved by eloquence, and the Pentecost miracle of salvation could still be theirs.

Seeking to carry out the principles of Our Master was more eloquent than words, and to do something charitable the best definition of Christianity. God's wish to bestow a blessing upon the churches depended upon daily and hourly fidelity to Him, and fidelity would win the crown.

Mr Poynter recorded various events in connection with the Hall during the past year—the annual tea on Sept. 30, the school anniversary services on Oct 4 conducted by the Rev. J. Russell and the Rev. J. Compton Burnett, the children's Christmas tea on Jan. 6, and their festival on July 20. The week-night services had been sustained by the kindness of Nonconformist ministers from Bedford. The Band of Hope was successful, and associated with the school was a clothing club and lending library. The regular addresses on the second part of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* had afforded interest, which it was hoped would be continued throughout the proposed series on the *Holy War*. The improvements in the Hall occasioned a reference to the purchase of some new lamps at a cost of £2 10s., soon raised; and to a bazaar on June 22 and 23, which was a great success, over £50 being realized (after paying expenses) towards renovation and repairs. About £10 is yet required for further work. The proposed new hymn-book is to be used first in October. The School anniversary is to be held next Sunday, when the afternoon service is to be taken by the Rev. J. T. Wigner, ex-President of the Baptist Union, and the evening by the Superintendent, who expressed hearty thanks to the many friends who had so cordially helped their cause.

The Rev. W. Hay Aitken spoke after the singing of "Forward! be our Watchword," which followed some congratulatory remarks from his Worship presiding. The eloquent mission-preacher thought his being much engaged in evangelization work had caused Mr Poynter to ask him to speak, and he was glad to sympathise with them in trying to bring the Gospel to cottage homes. In towns there was always some place of worship within easy distance, but in the country it was not so, and the country needed the special solicitude of those who wished to bring the Gospel home to those who might otherwise be strangers. It might be remarked that when they sleep in church they also sleep in chapel, and when the Church woke up the Dissenters woke up also. The object of that Hall meant evangelization, and all had a rallying place at the Cross of Christ. The more earnestly they made known His saving grace seemed the way more likely to bring Christians together. John Bunyan, as a preacher, had left his mark upon Elstow, and the speaker hoped that their grandsons might say that of Mr Poynter. Mr Thompson had called attention to their responsibility, and he thought John Bunyan's life was a commentary of that. Briefly alluding to Dr. Brown's history of Bunyan, Mr Aitken proceeded to draw lessons from the life of the author of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. If he had fallen back upon his position, his work would have been lost. They make a full surrender of Mansoul, and present self to God without regard to consequences, making use of opportunity. Bunyan made use of the talents God gave him, and they should learn from him how much could be done by any man who gave himself to God. It was not the extent of work they did, but the proportion according to their capacity. They wanted consecrated enthusiasm. Bunyan's persecutions of 200 years ago called attention to persecutions still existing; for one of the greatest difficulties in evangelization work was that men had not the moral courage of their religious convictions from annoyances in workshops and elsewhere. He advised them to emulate Bunyan in every circumstance, for John Bunyan in prison was John Bunyan in power. His book was not only interesting and instructive, but practical, as he wrote it that they might be disposed to set out on a pilgrimage; but on that all do not have the same experience.

A collection was then made for funds for further improvements, and the choir sang Lord Henry Somerset's chorale, "There is a green hill far away."

The Rev. H. H. McCullagh commenced an address by a kindly reference to and lamenting the loss Bedford had sustained by the death of Mr Alderman Hawkins, whom he had long known as a dear friend. Speaking of the new organ, Mr McCullagh hoped it

would be useful, and then he ably discoursed upon the relation of music to Divine service, considering, it natural, adapted, and scriptural, in support of which assertions he quoted Samuel Hooker, Shakespeare, St. Augustine, John Wesley, the Koran, and the Psalms, in which (according to a verger) were passages for those who could sing by note and also for such as could only make a noise. Music prepared the way for scripture truth, and love was at its root. He thought Coleridge's words "He prayeth best, who loveth best" might be transcribed to "He singeth best who loveth best." If they had love to God and men, they would have music; and he hoped they would be better Christians for their American organ.—Dr. Garrett's anthem "The Lord is loving" followed.

Mr W. J. Robinson (of Bedford) spoke of his continued interest in the school, of which he was many years Superintendent, and as such had had varied experiences, upon which since his retirement through affliction he had recourse to diverse reflections.