

CHAPTER 5

Recovery under Rev. James Dobson (1795 - 1832)

This odd arrangement between the two brothers over so many years took its toll of the congregation, which suffered a great decline in size. Many members died and their numbers were not replenished, for few came to the point of church membership.

It so happened that over a period of several years from 1793, dissatisfaction became widespread in the Parish Churches over the placement of clergy in the area, and several farmers defected to the Independent Chapel 'to hear the Word of God preached with power'.

When a Mr. James Dobson, who had conducted Services at Newport but did not wish to settle there, came to Chishill for that very purpose, he was urged by these men to come as probationer for three months, this later being extended to twelve months. He accepted, and came among them on 24th April 1795.

Mr. Dobson was born in 1771, a native of Lancashire, but he had moved to London with his parents, who both died soon afterwards. Orphaned, he came to know privation and sorrow, but he showed great ability and came to enjoy much success in business life. During this time he married, his wife's name being Martha.

He attended New Road Chapel in London, and preached his first sermon there. He felt a strong call to Christian service, and often visited the poor out of his working hours, taking Holy Communion with them. His minister persuaded him to undertake a course of reading and seek entry to the ministry. Thus it was that in due time he came to Chishill.

An invitation for final acceptance was accepted by Mr. Dobson, but the decline had been so severe that

only three members actually remained. In effect, a new fellowship was formed in April 1796, and Mr. Dobson was ordained on 19th May 1796. Those attending the Service included Rev. Samuel Bull of the congregation at Bassingbourn, newly separated from the Melbourn church, and Rev. Joseph Smith from Foulmire (the current spelling).

Mr. Dobson wrote a report of the Ordination Service in the Church Book, and concluded with a prayer

'Thus has God for more than a century maintained His own cause. May He long continue to shine upon His people here, and as long as life shall last, continue His candlestick and a light among them.'

As if an unpromising beginning was not enough, calamity soon struck the church and its surrounding neighbours. Whether because repairs were now urgently needed upon a decaying building, or the life of the church began to expand rapidly, it was decided to start repair work upon the structure. On 22nd February 1798, however, a fire became out of control.

It was necessary as a result of the fire damage to build a new meeting-house, part of which remained as the 'old schoolroom' until demolished in 1991. This was achieved by the fund-raising abilities of Mr. Dobson, the liberality of his congregation even though the fire had destroyed much of their property and livelihood, and the aid of the religious public.

Under the leadership of Rev. James Dobson, the congregation began to flourish until later it numbered 800 worshippers.

This prodigious growth in the size, life and activity of the congregation at Chishill stood out as the only factor which impressed the writer of an article in the 'Congregational Magazine' of August 1832.

He begins his history with the dismaying effect which the countryside itself had upon him :

'Seated on the bleak confines of a wild and open country, its inhabitants are few, scattered and generally poor, without groves or gardens, modern mansions or ancient castles. It is only in connection with its moral plantations, the husbandry and the building of God, that it will supply anything that can interest the Christian stranger'.

Links were established with other Independent Chapels in the neighbourhood, as seen in a brief report of the half-yearly meeting of the Associated Ministers in the County of Essex held in 'Chisshill at the meeting house of Rev.J.Dobson' in June 1818.

The Dobson family at large was well represented in the ministry, for an Ordination Service was held in the Old Meeting House at St. Neot's on 30th October 1828 for a Rev.S.H.Dobson (believed to be the son of the pastor), at which Rev. James Dobson gave the charge and a Rev.J.P.Dobson gave the Blessing.

Another S.Dobson, however, lived only from 1814 until 1836, as a tombstone in the graveyard testifies.

Bodily ailments began to weaken Mr. Dobson in his later years, but his heart remained strongly in his ministry. It was said of him that 'his sermons were his experience, and the pulpit one of his places of self-examination'.

He was obviously rather a 'workaholic', for he wrote on one occasion 'The greatest part of my affliction is my absence from my work'. His illness had a calming effect, for it was noted that although naturally irritable and 'keenly susceptible of feeling' whilst he was healthy, he became more peaceable when ill, whilst resisting illness strongly in mind.

Ill and pale of face, he insisted on presiding at his last celebration of Holy Communion, even though it meant carrying him to his seat.

Pastor and congregation were well in harmony with each other, for in his last hours, this devoted man bore testimony to his flock "I was never during a period of nearly 40 years a single hour made uneasy by my church".

Rev. James Dobson died on 6th May 1832, aged 61 years, whilst peacefully sitting in his chair. Inside the church a marble plaque was erected 'by an affectionate people as a testimony to the public labours, private sympathy and extended usefulness of the Rev. James Dobson who in this place during 38 years proved himself a faithful pastor. A sincere friend, a devout and exemplary Christian whose end was peace'.

Such was his ability in the ministry that although the meeting-house was practically deserted at the beginning and the membership had become almost extinct, the church came to enjoy a greater success than it had known before.