

# **ST HELENA'S EARLY BAPTISTS:**

## *A Sesquicentennial Survey*

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by Trevor W. Hearl

Radio St Helena marked the 150th anniversary of Baptist witness on the Island by an interview with 99-year-old Henry Benjamin recalling more flourishing times at the turn of the century. An early memory was of the Rev. Thomas Aitkin (1897-1905), the later President (1917) and Secretary (1919-35) of the Baptist Union, who provided the site for the Boer Cemetery at Knollcombes; another, at six, was of members cutting stone to build the chapel at Sandy Bay under mason James John, and later that at Head o'Wain under Andrew Stevens with the help of Rose March. But his most vivid memory was of the religious revival in 1912 when the Sandy Bay congregation was "possessed by the power of the Holy Spirit". Sadly, since the last War he has seen "the church separated from its members", a deacon defect to Jehovah's Witnesses, joy in worship lost, and membership of its four churches fall to fifty. Others share these later experiences with some dismay, but few Islanders or members of the worldwide Baptist communion know how or why the Mission was first founded, and then flourished, at St Helena 150 years ago – a remarkable story of international endeavour.

On 14th July 1845 a Scottish evangelist, James M'Gregor Bertram, landed at Jamestown armed only with a letter of introduction to a local tradesman, James Morris. Bertram had been a Pastor in Britain for several years, at Bristol and elsewhere, latterly with the Ebenezer Christian Missionary Society in northern England, when in 1844, as a family man of 38, he answered a call to the Cape of Good Hope. There, after hectic months of ministering to guano-workers at Saldanha Bay, he was begged by expatriate St Helenians to relieve "the spiritual desolation" of their Island home. So, sponsored by his new friends he set out in mid-1845 to see if he would be welcomed there.

### **DISSENT DISCOURAGED**

Island history was not encouraging. Anglican supremacy had never successfully been challenged since settlement by the East India Company in 1659. The Directors, as in their other territories, discouraged Dissent at this vital staging-post for homebound Indiamen. Indeed in 1816, with Napoleon's entourage and King's regiments in residence, they warned Governor Hudson Lowe that "subversion of the Established

Church" would be viewed "as evil of incalculable magnitude". Yet nonconformity had been no bar to settlement so that St Helena had been home to men of many religious persuasions – Huguenot, Quaker, Congregationalist, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Jewish at least. In 1680 a Quaker, Scudder, was given rights as a free planter to teach "Mathematics, the art of Navigation and other sciences" and only his use of "uncivil words and actions to the Governor" got him expelled in 1682; Huguenots were recruited as wine-growers in 1689, their leader, Poirier, even becoming Governor. But in small close-knit communities nonconformists usually conform so that even those who could have exercised independence, like Lutheran G.W. Janisch or the Jewish 'Merchant-King' Saul Solomon, took their place in the pews. If lascars and Chinese labourers observed their religions, it passed without comment, as did that of Napoleon's Roman Catholic priests, Buonavita and Vignali (1819-21), the French exiles otherwise relying on the Company's chaplains – as at Cipriani's funeral in 1818.

### MORNING STARS OF ST HELENA DISSENT

Dissenting groups had, in fact, briefly existed twice at St Helena. Sergeant Thomas Payne of the St Helena Corps held Methodist meetings "for a long period" in the 1760's until dismissed "for disobeying orders contrary to his conscience", becoming in 1772 a minister in Leeds and a popular evangelist in the north of England. The second attempt was also by a soldier, "J.N." (Nicholas?) of the 66th Regiment, a Baptist convert at Calcutta, who reached Jamestown in 1816 where, as he told the popular Penzance pastor, the Rev. George "Boatswain" Smith, he found only one "professed Dissenter, 'G', . . . formerly a soldier in the St Helena Corps".

"You may suppose that we soon got acquainted and determined to do something for Christ on St Helena . . . Previous to our arrival there was no meeting in which to assemble for the worship of God, but as soon as we came, this servant of the Lord readily opened his dwelling house for regular preaching and praying. I rejoice to say, the house will now hardly contain the number who generally attend; so that we are about to . . . throw two large rooms into one . . ."

A petition to have it licensed for worship under British law was refused, but meetings were allowed "to worship God according to the dictates of our consciences" at barracks in Jamestown, Francis Plain and Deadwood Plain, which were increasingly attended by Islanders, prompting J.N. to seek his discharge and settle.

"Our chief object is to bring poor sinners to Christ, whether in or out of the regiment. We have now four candidates for the holy ordinance of baptism . . . Our congregation is chiefly of the lower class, but bless



God, the poor have the gospel preached to them . . . The people here are very desirous of obtaining my freedom that I may go in and out before them, dispensing the word of life.”

But his mission does not seem to have survived the Regiment’s departure in 1819. It was also the heyday of a “remarkable revival of religion” under the Company’s energetic evangelist chaplain Richard Boys (1811-30), “fearless in his denunciation of vice, but with a real pastoral sense”, as Edward Cannan recalled, when, inter alia, young officers met nightly to pray for Napoleon’s conversion.

### NEW RULERS : NEW RITUAL

When Bertram landed a generation later, however, he found a far different Island from that which J.N. had left in 1819, one that had suffered a demoralising blow. On 22 April 1834 the East India Company’s paternalistic rule had been swept away by Act of Parliament and St Helena had become a Crown Colony. But the Colonial Office was in no hurry to accept its unwelcome burden and the Island lingered in limbo for almost two years until Major-General Middlemore strode ashore on 24th February 1836 with a detachment of the 91st Regiment – and dismissed most of the Company’s staff. Clergy, however, were not replaced for yet another three years, so a Company chaplain, Robert P. Brooke, held on until February 1837, aided from 1836 by a Military Chaplain, the aptly-named Rev. W. Helps. Colonel chaplains had to be approved by the Bishop of London and it was 1839 before the first, young Richard Kempthorne, faced St Helena’s anxious congregations. They were in for a surprise! Transfer from Company to Crown meant not only new rulers but new ritual. The Company had favoured evangelists, the Bishop recruited Tractarians. So Kempthorne came armed with Tract for puzzled parishioners, an appealing novelty to some, but unwelcome to others. Meanwhile the social scene had become one of disorder and squalor – drunks even disrupted Sunday service – and in 1845 James Morris held meetings to pray for a missionary “to minister in the name of the Lord”. On Monday, 14 July, Bertram stepped ashore from the brig *Velox* with a letter of introduction to him from sponsors at the Cape.

The outcome was reported by a New York Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. Edwin F. Hatfield in 1852, and recently summarised in Bishop Cannan’s **Churches of the South Atlantic Islands 1502-1991**. Within a few days, Bertram was addressing packed meetings in Morris’s house which brought invitations from leading householders in other parts of the Island from Sandy Bay to Rose Bower (near Francis Plain). A nine-man Management Committee consolidated Island-wide coverage by appointing lay preachers, setting up Sunday Schools and renting a Mission House in Jamestown – all within a fortnight! Nor did Bertram’s appeal wane as the months passed; it grew despite counter-attacks by alarmed Anglicans. How does one explain this success against the odds?



## WHO BACKED BERTRAM?

Supporters from the Cape clearly gave Bertram a flying start. Led by the Rev. George Morgan, Judge Williams of the Indian Civil Service and Capt. James Adams of 'Velox' (who gave Bertram, and later his family, free passages), they included expatriate members of the Alexander, Broadway, and Solomon families, and Rev. J.H. Beck, whose death en route to St Helena in 1851 added a bizarre footnote to Island history when his body floated ashore some days later. Under the banner of 'The Christian Mission from the Cape of Good Hope to St Helena' they gave his campaign sustained financial backing and encouragement, including valuable publicity in the Cape press.

More important, the Mission was brought into the international missionary scene.

"St Helena is the halfway house on the high road from the shores of the North Atlantic to the East Indies . . . Mr. Bertram and his brethren had been accustomed, year by year, to extend the hand of fellowship and welcome to the weary, worn-out missionary, and to cheer him in his feebleness and sorrow." (Hatfield p.186).

Veteran American Burma missionary Jonathan Wade declared: "Baptist and Paedo-Baptist denominations . . . owe these St Helena disciples a large debt." He and his wife had spent three months recuperating, but not all were so fortunate. Bertram had the melancholy task of comforting the famous Dr. Adoniram Judson on his wife's death within hours of their arrival; Mrs. Judson's memorial stone, sent by "Baptist friends in Philadelphia", now stands outside Jamestown Baptist Church. From India came the Presbyterian Rev. Jamieson and W.W. Scudder; from Burma, the Rev. Haswell. Such contacts enabled Bertram to seek support in the wider world, urged on by 'signs of the times', and news that Roman Catholic priests were to serve the newly-formed St Helena Regiment!

Bertram himself believed that dissatisfaction with the Church was the major factor in bringing Islanders to his fold. The neglected coloured community also felt more at ease in 'chapel' than in 'High Church'. Obviously there were many desertions to the Mission, but evidence is clouded by an acrimonious battle of words for the souls of the 'Saints'. To zealous Dissenters, St Helena's High Church Colonial chaplains "with large salaries" seemed "mere nominal Christians" intent only on dogma and ritual, as exemplified in 1847 by the first S.P.G. recruit, the Rev. William Bousfield:

"a curious specimen, dressed to the latest Oxford fashion . . . (with) frequent use of an eye-glass . . . He had no disposition to make himself one of the people . . . (or) instruct the young in useful knowledge . . . (but) knew all the attitudes and gestures and could display a jewelled finger and a lilywhite hand to admiration."



But to Colonial chaplains, Bertram symbolized sectarian and communal dissension, an inherent Island fear which won back some early 'deserters'. As Bishop Gray admitted, however, Bertram's success excited a "deeper interest in religious matters", and hastened the creation of the Anglican Diocese of St Helena in 1859.

The most positive factor in Bertram's favour, however – apart from his recognised missionary skill – was the support of an unexpectedly wide range of St Helena society, with an essential leadership element. 'J.N.' had relied on the soldiery and the poor; Bishop Gray assumed that Bertram's appeal was likewise confined to "the poor". But on the contrary, 'The Christian Brethren of the Missionary Church in the Island of St Helena', as they styled themselves, drew from a broad social base. Even Governor Hamelin Trelawney, and artillery veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, gave Bertram a sympathetic welcome; more significant was the backing of businessmen at a time when trade was in the ascendant. Nor did the pioneers who welcomed Bertram lack social status. they included Captain Daniel O'Connor, a Congregationalist formerly of the St Helena Artillery; James Elliott, farmer; Capt. James J. Prichard, another retired Artillery officer whose family became loyal supporters; William Carroll, the influential U.S. Consul; William Lambe, Sandy Bay's largest landowner; and Capt. Henry Mapleton, Police Magistrate. But Bertram owed most to the early support of Mrs. Janisch, whose "great respectability" wrote Hatfield, "operated very favourably upon his enterprise".

### A KEY CONVERT

Mrs. Janisch, a daughter of William Seale of the Company's service, had been widowed in 1843; her husband, Georg Wilhelm Jänisch, former aide to Hudson Lowe, stemmed from Lutheran pastors of St. Katharine's, Hamburg. Her eldest son, also Hudson, a 20-year-old civil servant and secretary of the Library Committee under Kempthorne, was so embarrassed by her espousal of Dissent that he protested at their home becoming a 'meeting house'. In **Roots and Recollections**, a descendant, the Rev. Hubert Janisch (President of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association in 1943), describes the sequel:

“Hear Mr. Bertram' his mother pleaded, 'and if you are still displeased, permission . . . will be withdrawn'. Sunday morning came and at 9 am, not to interfere with the established church times, Mr Bertram preached, and Hudson Ralph stealthily stood outside, listening . . . He went to his mother saying . . . 'Those are solemn things we have heard this morning.' . . . A few weeks later (he) entered upon a profound conversion . . .(which) caused a great sensation on the Island.”

Secretary of the Management Committee, he was later ordained and learned Greek to translate the New Testament. He married Capt. Pritchard's daughter Eleanor and



amed their eldest son Bertram. Nor did Dissent blight his career; he rose through the civil service to become Governor (1873-84), "the right man in the right place", declared Benjamin Grant of the *St Helena Guardian*. Anglican claims that he favoured Baptists – still Island folklore – have never been examined, but he certainly adopted an informal style. Rather than move to palatial Plantation House, he remained at Palm Villa, Upper Jamestown, partly to be by his Observatory – he was a grandson of the astronomer Johann Encke, and F.R.A.S. After his death in 1884, the family left for the Cape, joining Wale Street Baptist Church where his son William married a descendant of the Baptist missionary, William Carey – their son being the above-quoted Hubert Anisch, serving the Baptist cause a century after Hudson's conversion.

## FUND-RAISING OVERSEAS

By February 1850 the St Helena Mission was so well established that Bertram could trust it to thrive under Island leadership while he ventured overseas fund-raising. He sailed first to the Cape, where sponsors gave him another £120; and so to Boston gaining support from Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and other "friends of Christ" in New England. Next, to Britain, where at Manchester he received an encouraging message from Saul Solomon, just arrived from the Island and living near Bristol:

"All goes well at the Mission House. Indeed you laid the foundation and no doubt all will prosper. Your exertions to promote the welfare demands public thanks. God grant you health and long life to follow up your undertaking."

In Southern Ireland he was less welcome, an angry mob stoning the windows of the Rev. Benjamin Young's chapel at Cork during his appeal. Thence to New York where meetings raised his funds to \$6000 and the Rev. Hatfield recorded his story for posterity, dedicating his "humble memoir":

"To The Friends of Missions of various evangelical churches in the United States who have so nobly responded to Mr. Bertram's Appeals and so generously contributed to the erection of churches on 'The Rock of the Ocean'."

But the Mission had gained more than funds. From being "altogether unknown beyond the narrow circle of their own sea-girt isle," exclaimed Hatfield, "now they are known, honoured and loved wherever their pastor has gone," a respect reinforced by his book which sold two editions in two years (with a reprint of the St Helena section by Dr. Percy Teale in 1975 to mark the 130th anniversary). Closer links with the wider Baptist movement also determined their allegiance and it was as the Baptist Mission

Church that their new large hall in Jamestown was opened in 1854. They now claimed 200 members and as many again in day and Sunday schools, with centres at Knollcombe, Sandy Bay, Levelwood and High Peak. The first public baptism by immersion had taken place on 2 April 1848; by 1870 there had been 352. Relations also improved with the Church under Bishop Claughton (1859-62) – Bertram stood by his side at an open-air service in 1861 – though in 1867 Bishop Welby (1862-99) gave the “numerous and influential” Baptists as a reason for not going to Lambeth.

“This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes”, exclaimed Hatfield in 1852. When Bertram retired to Dumfries in 1868, membership had reached its peak at 205. But under his successor, the Rev. W.J. Cother, it fell to 118, and with his departure and Hudson Janisch’s death in 1884, urgent appeals had to be made to the famous Charles Haddon Spurgeon – after whom Cother had named his son – who briefly funded annual incumbents from Britain. In 1899 support for St Helena’s Baptists reverted to the Cape, from where it still comes today, the Rev. Wilfred Edmunds’ account of which, *An Isolated Family*, was published in 1957 by the South African Baptist Press. The sesquicentenary seems a fitting occasion on which to honour the names and exploits of some of St Helena’s devoted nonconformist pioneers, both the famous and the forgotten, for the sake of the Island’s heritage no less than of Baptist history.

## SOURCES

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