

BENJAMIN PARSONS A GLOUCESTERSHIRE REBEL

by Leslie Wollen

Benjamin Parsons was a Dissenter of Dissenters, a radical of radicals, who opposed the Establishment on almost every issue, but who was warm-hearted and devoted to his work. His ministry was outstandingly successful and few men in the county can have had larger congregations or built up a more impressive institutional church. He was a Gloucestershire boy, born in 1797 at Sheephouse Farm, Uley, the youngest of five children of Anglican parents who had found deeper satisfaction at Dursley Tabernacle under George Whitfield and his associates, Thomas, his father, died when Benjamin was six years old and the child remembered his mother quoting a verse from the Psalms 'He will be a father to the fatherless and a husband to the widow'. He was so deeply impressed that he began to read the Bible for himself. He was sent to Lowland Hill's Black School at Wotton and at fifteen, when his mother died, he set to work on the farm—which time, he later said, 'was better occupied than it would have been at Oxford or Cambridge.'

In his later 'teens he was apprenticed to Mr Reynolds, a tailor of Frampton-on-Severn, who was a deacon of the Independent Chapel there. He was a reserved young man, spending his leisure time in reading under the guidance of his employer, with additional help from Mr

Melville, the evangelical parson of the parish, and Mr William Richardson, the Congregational minister. He then became a journeyman clothier in the surrounding countryside until settling down as shop assistant in Stroud. Here the formative influence was John Burder of the Stroud Old Meeting and William Winterbotham the radical Baptist at Shortwood, near Nailsworth.

Parsons was never able to identify the exact date of his conversion but was spiritually reassured by overhearing two devout old men in Frampton express the opinion that it was possible for many to be Christians without knowing the exact hour of their regeneration. "I went home", he said, "leaping for joy." In 1821 he joined Rodborough Rabernacle under Revd. John Rees and became a Sunday School teacher and later the same year was sent to Cheshunt College to be trained for the Ministry. Five years later, after a brief spell at Nibley, he was called to the struggling Congregational Church at Ebley, built 28 years previously, where he was to spend the remaining 28 years of life, 1826 to 1854.

Ebley was an industrial hamlet in the parishes of Stonehouse and Randwick. The people were poor. The Congregational Church, after initial growth, had fallen away and the chapel was in bad repair with rain dripping through the roof into a tub. The vestry was

used as a stable and the burial ground overgrown. The Manse, too, was miserable with rain pouring into every bedroom. The young minister set to work with a will and put the premises into good order.

He saw the congregation rapidly increase though he was not simply concerned to build up a congregation but to create a Christian community. Parsons had been deeply influenced by the life of the French Pastor Oberlin who had transformed the whole quality of life in a depressed area of South-East France and he longed to see a similar transformation in the life of Ebley. There was no school in the neighbourhood save a dame school where he found the instruction valueless, and a boarding school which was well out of reach of the poor. At this time many employees were suspicious of popular education fearing the growth of sedition and an unwelcome ground swell of political awareness. He resolved to build first of all an infant school (1828) and then began a campaign of popular education at a night school, lecturing himself on historical, scientific and political subjects. A day school followed in 1840 to accommodate 600 pupils. Classes were held as early as 5 a.m., before the factory bell called the older children to work. Often they returned to school late at night. An adjoining field was bought as a playground and to provide allotments for the teaching of gardening.

The Chapel-Manse-School campus was well laid out with 'serpentine gravel walls, turf edges, flower borders and evergreens and we at once allowed free access to the whole work.' 'It has been said,' he commented, 'that English children are little better than barbarians and that you cannot admit them to a gentleman's garden without their being guilty of all sorts of deprivations. We determined to wipe out this blot . . . and it is worthy of remark that though you have a hundred or two boys and girls running round these walks there is a scarcely a footprint to be seen on the flower borders.'

A Provident Fund was founded for Sunday School children and a Savings Bank with the needs of young married people specially in mind. A library followed with discussion classes and a literary society. Keen young men and women were learning to read the Greek New Testament.

On Sundays the chapel was crowded with congregations of a thousand, and half as many again at the wildly enthusiastic anniversaries. He preached on such subjects as 'The divine nobility of every human being' and 'The mental and moral dignity of women'. A typical sermon was entitled 'The universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.' His political stance was evident in another headed 'The democratic spirit of the Gospel'. Though topical his preaching was biblical and his theology trinitarian. He simply believed that the Gospel should influence the whole of life.

Parsons published a number of popular booklets called 'Tracts for Fustian Jackets and Smock Frocks', in which he popularised his radical social views.

Some of them are heady stuff even for today. He attacked militarism; 'Wellington and Napoleon will have to meet their troops again and to reckon before an impartial tribunal for the carnage of Waterloo'. The common people, he alleged, never had a quarrel and wars were fought by them in the interests of their rulers. He would rather have Wilberforce on the column in Trafalgar Square than Nelson for he achieved his victory, the emancipation of the slaves, 'without drawing a sword or touching a lighted match'. The freedom of the common man in Britain, he urged, will only be realised by fearless, resolute and non-violent political pressures. This did not prevent him from supporting the Chartists whose demands he considered reasonable and just.

Like Henry Ford, he considered history damned humiliating and scathingly exposed the morals of Kings. 'Can savage life present a viler monster than Henry the

Eighth, who notwithstanding was created Head of the Church and Defender of the Faith? Mental and moral greatness has been the exception to the general rule in the history of aristocracies'. He argued from history that the nobility have lived off sinecures, drawn large pensions and often wasted their money in gambling and high living. Books on the faults of the labouring population are not wanting but nobody accuses the rich and powerful. 'We are robbed more by our 'state paupers' than our felons!' Interestingly enough, he does not blame Queen Victoria for the abuses of his time. Instead of 'down with the Queen' we should cry 'down with the corruption and despotism of the aristocracy'. His quarrel is with the Court and its excessive cost and influence rather than with the Crown.

In his tract on the Dignity of Woman he argued that their mental powers are equal and their moral feelings superior to those of men. He was a little singular in attacking State education. He believed that education was the responsibility of the local church and he could have pointed to the success of his Ebley schools to support the contention.

From his writings he comes out as a 19th century Leveller, inheriting the mantle of his Independent spiritual ancestors of Commonwealth times. 'The law of Primogeniture', he asserts, 'is an outrage on humanity—the oldest takes all and reduces the rest to beggary'. He indicts a church which pays its bishops £10,000 or even £20,000 a year and starves its curates. 'If the Minister of the Gospel determines never to run into collision with public sentiment he must preach a very tame and spiritless gospel, live a very tame and spiritless life and be frequently impeached by his own conscience for moral cowardice.'

Benjamin Parsons practised what he preached. He opposed the enclosure of nearby Selsey Hill, writing to the *Stroud Free Press* about the theft of Raboth's Vineyard, and quoting a verse which may well have been his own and which Cobden borrowed for the Anti-Corn Law campaign, a cause which Parsons of course supported.

It is a crime for a man or woman
To steal a goose from off the common.
But who shall plead that man's excuse
Who steal the common from the goose?

He opposed the levying of a church rate, speaking for two hours in Randwick Church, as the Press put it, "with characteristic wit and force". He campaigned against Sunday work in the mills and was an early and lonely advocate of abstinence from alcohol.

We take leave of him in the bosom of his family. He married Amelia Fry of Devonport when he was 33. Two of their children died in infancy and another at the age of 11, but five survived. Life in the Manse was spartan. Father was his own gardener, groom and ostler, assisted by the children. Family prayers were held regularly after breakfast and tea, the children following the Bible reading in their Greek Testament and being frequently called upon to illuminate the meaning from the original text.

He and his wife, who outlived him by 25 years, lie buried in the forlorn graveyard behind all that remains of the impressive chapel and school which once hummed with the restless, urgent and impatient life that he fostered. Such radical impatience, independent thought and utopian optimism are among the glories of the human spirit. Gloucestershire is not without an exemplar in Benjamin Parsons.

SOURCES:—
Edwin Paxton Hood *Life of Samuel Parsons* 1853
Tracts for Fustian Jackets, Gloucestershire Collection