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The Journal of W. J. Acomb

WILLIAM JAMES ACOMB led an unremarkable life. For three years he was a colporteur evangelist before enjoying four terms at the Pastor's College—Spurgeon's College as it is now known. Thereafter he served in a number of pastorates, not all of them Baptist. The recent discovery of his journal, however, is of some interest for his observations on men and matters of his time. On its first page Acomb had written:

Journal by W. Acomb.
Forget not to record thy mercies.
W.A.

He obeyed his own injunction for a few years, but, to our loss, the major part of the journal consists of a list of dates, places where he preached and texts for his sermons. Even so, there is a reward for the patient researcher.

I

Acomb was born at Saltwood, near Hythe in Kent, on 4th December, 1836.¹ His father, William Albert Acomb, is described as a gardener² and as a florist.³ When schooldays were done, Acomb worked in a florist's business.⁴ On 20th September, 1858, he married Elizabeth Child who was two years older than himself. The bride's father, Peter Child, was a shopkeeper.⁵ The ceremony took place in Saltwood parish church, the Rev. James Croft officiating.

The young couple soon set up home in Canterbury some fifteen miles to the north. How was it that they first left the Anglican tradition in which they were reared and began to attach themselves to a nonconformist church?

Watling Street Congregational church, which was also in membership with the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion, was founded in 1792, T. Young being its first pastor. Valentine Ward became pastor in 1860. He had been born in Edinburgh on 9th June, 1818, and was trained at New College. He served at Horbury, Yorks., from 1854 until he moved to Canterbury. After ten years at Watling Street he went to Hythe, moving from there to Matlock Bank, Derbys., in 1883. He was still serving there when he died in 1894.⁶

Acomb began attending Watling Street during Ward's ministry. It is probable that Ward inherited, rather than initiated, the home missions plan at Canterbury. For some years the church supported a number of itinerant colporteur evangelists who worked in the villages around Canterbury. Acomb must have shown some promise, for he became one of these evangelists, commencing his work towards the close of September 1866. It is not now possible to learn any details concerning his appointment. He records nothing in his diary and the Watling Street church lost its premises together with all its papers

during the 1939-45 war. A new suite of buildings has been built, still in Watling Street, but there is no longer any link with the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion, the Congregationalists having united with the Presbyterians to form the United Church of St. Andrew.

II

The first entry in the journal is dated 1st October, 1866. Acomb makes his industry as an evangelist plain by reference to the places he visited. In the first month of his work for Watling Street he went to thirty-two different villages and hamlets, ten of them he visited twice and one, Broad Oak, three times. He names places to the east of Canterbury—Littlebourne, Fordwich and Bekesbourne, to the south—Thannington and Lower Hardes, and to the west—Harbledown, Chartham and Chartham Hatch. The major part of Acomb's work, however, was concentrated in an area to the north of the city within a triangle formed by Canterbury, Herne Bay and Reculver. Here are mentioned Sturry, Broad Oak, Blean, Bullockstone, Swalecliffe, Hillborough, Bishopstone. Isted, Beltinge, Marshside, Broomfield, Herne, Herne Common, Rough Common, Tyler Hill, Upstreet, Chestfield, Chislet and others.

In the early weeks of visitation naturally Acomb had little to say about individuals. Some days he visited as many as fifty homes, which means that often he got no farther than the doorstep. He walked considerable distances every month. Herne Bay is nine miles from Canterbury and Reculver more than ten. Only very occasionally does the journal say the weather was too bad for him to get out on the roads and any reference to the use of transport is even more rare. It was not long before Acomb began to record comments on people and these reveal his care and compassion. Sometimes the entries are brief.

1867. Dec. 13. Chestfield. Mrs. Tritton has found Jesus.

1868. Jan. 14. Broad Oak. Read and prayed with Mrs. Epps, senr. She "has a burden on her heart" and cannot get rid of it try as she will.

Faithfully he recorded his disappointments.

1868. August 18. Conversed with James Nicholls who says "They won't turn me now" . . . (Tyler Hill).

1869. January 18. Chartham Hatch. Visited old Mr. Hawkins—very dark.

Of all the places he mentions, Tyler Hill brought Acomb most discouragement.

1867. Dec. 14. Tyler Hill. Have secured a house in which to hold a meeting here.

1869. Feb. 24. Tyler Hill. This village seems to be one of those that reject the gospel of Christ. The influence of clergy and squires is very great, and this combined with carnal enmity in the minds of people renders it rather a hopeless enterprise.

1869. July 14. Tyler Hill. Old, old story. Only 10 at meeting owing to haying, &c.

1869. July 21. Tyler Hill. No meeting.

Yet on 9th July, 1870, whilst on vacation from College, Acomb visited Tyler Hill again and "spent some time with Brother Gammon who is full of the Holy Ghost", and in 1885 the Baptists of St. George's Place, Canterbury, moved by the concern of Stephen Gammon, were able to open the chapel at Tyler Hill where work still continues.

In other villages there was more immediate success, notably at Broad Oak. As early as 16th November, 1866, Acomb made the following entry, drawing a frame round it for emphasis:

Broad Oak. I am always well received in this place, and many of the people gladly receive me into their houses that I may read and explain the Scriptures.

Four days later he wrote:

. . . Held first cottage meeting at Broad Oak in Soutan's cottage, 28 present.

The work progressed.

1867. January 18. Broad Oak. The visitation and our meetings are beginning to have a good effect on the people. One person has offered the ground on which to build a chapel, if the funds can be raised.⁷

1867. February 27. Went to Dover to make enquiries respecting the land offered for chapel. . . .

1867. March 5. Broad Oak. Collected for Chapel £10. . . .

Acomb recorded attendances at meetings in this village, about two miles north of Canterbury, of up to sixty during those days. On 10th July, 1867, he wrote:

Good tidings. Today has commenced the building of the chapel in Broad Oak.

The only entry for the following month reads:

14th. New chapel at Broad Oak opened by Rev. V. Ward of Canterbury. Crowded to excess. Very hot. Tea in booth and mtg. also in evening. 160 to tea.

Clearly this was a great day for Acomb. Perhaps he hoped that some account of the proceedings would have appeared in the next issue of *The Kentish Gazette*, but there is nothing. However, if he searched its pages he may have noticed a report of a sermon entitled "The Liturgy and Ritualism" delivered at the consecration of the Church of St. Mary Bredin on 20th June, 1867, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Thomas Longley. Those were days when the established church was troubled by some who were experimenting with more elaborate ritual. Most of the ecclesiastical leaders—and Queen Victoria herself—had made clear their consternation. Longley, whilst Bishop of Ripon (1836-56) had opposed the "Romanising" tendencies of E. B. Pusey's new church of St. Saviour, Leeds. On 16th December, 1865, three years after Longley had commenced his

primacy, Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford had written in a letter to him, "There is, I believe, in the English mind a great move towards a higher ritual."⁸ Longley would have none of this. Now he declared:

" . . . Ritualism is now rampant in the Church of England—it is threatening the very existence of many congregations. . . . It is no secret that the Popish emissaries who swarm in this country, and who are labouring heart and soul in the mission of un-Christianising the Church of England, rejoice in this movement of the ritualists and look upon it as one of the most cunningly devised schemes which of late years have tried to spread Popery in England. . . ."⁹

The debate on these matters was to produce in 1874 the Public Worship Regulation Act. Further evidence of the intensity of feeling is given by a report in the same issue of *The Kentish Gazette* which states that a meeting of the Protestant Reformation Society had been held on 15th August in St. George's Hall, Canterbury, when a "tolerably numerous and highly influential audience" listened to an address by the Presbyterian, Dr. John Cumming, on the subject "No Peace with Rome".¹⁰ To none of this does Acomb make direct reference in his journal, although he cannot have been unaware of the controversy. His own attitude to certain clergy is made clear, however, in some passages. One will suffice.

1867. May 3. Broad Oak. . . . Last Sunday the curate of the parish rated the people soundly from the pulpit on the impropriety of "his flock" attending these meetings as no one was fit to preach unless appointed by the bishop &c.

Although Acomb maintained his regular visits to the many villages on his itinerary, it was of Broad Oak that he wrote with most warmth. The increase of the work demanded enlargement to the chapel.

1869. June 3. . . . Today Mr. Austen offered ground upon which to enlarge the chapel which has proved far too small for our evening congregations and Sabbath school. May the Lord help us in it. Mr. Barber senr. offers £1.

1869. June 7. Messrs. Ward and Chambers fell in with the idea of enlarging Broad Oak chapel. . . .

The extension was built¹¹ although no reference to its completion is made in the journal. There is, however, reference on 23rd July, 1869, to a sum of £5 being paid by Ward of Watling Street to Acomb. This came from the trustees of the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion and was probably towards the cost of the extension. This chapel, owing so much to and so well loved by Acomb, is still in use.

Towards the end of the three years he spent as an evangelist in the Canterbury district, Acomb recorded more frequently that he had occupied himself in study. He recognised the need for an educated ministry.

1869. July 7. Attended the Annual Meeting of the Kent Associa-

tion at Alma Road Chapel, Sheerness. Was struck with the little real ability of the speakers. Struck me there was a good (deal) of trades union feeling manifested amongst them. One expressed himself as being very jealous of Nottingham Institute. It occurred to me that a year or two there would do him good.

The Nottingham Institute, founded some six years earlier, was to continue to enjoy the leadership of its first principal, J. B. Paton, until 1897.¹² From 24th to 31st May, 1869, Acomb had been on holiday at Saltwood, the place of his birth. On 27th May he had written in his journal:

. . . While at home the question of going to Nottingham was again mooted. Decided to remain at Canterbury at present, and if at some future time it is practicable, go. . . .

But it was not to Nottingham that he went. He began to have scruples concerning infant baptism. On 9th June he recorded the baptism at Watling Street of the child of a Mrs. Holness of Broad Oak, rejoicing only that this woman, "one of the stoutest 'church people'" was now a regular worshipper at the chapel. Yet three weeks later he wrote:

1869. June 30. Tyler Hill. At home in the evening. Mrs. Newne's child *sprinkled*. What a farce it seemed!

Later—

1869. Sept. 10. . . . Today sent in my resignation of office as an evangelist of church in Watling Street. Present engagement to close at Christmas. May the Lord give me a field in which I can labour more abundantly & usefully than in this. If it is His will I shall get a little more training. A short time in Spurgeon's college would be very desirable. . . .

1869. Sept. 26. Preached twice at Brabourne. . . . These were my trial sermons before brother Wright who most kindly offers to render me all the assistance in his power towards getting into Spurgeon's college.

Brabourne, about fifteen miles south of Canterbury, had had Baptist witness since 1818 when Ashford had sponsored Sunday School work there in a disused bakehouse. The cause had been independent of Ashford since 1824¹³ and had 92 members at this time.¹⁴

A month went by and Acomb showed a little impatience in his journal.

1869. November 6. Was going to see Mr. Spurgeon today, but received notice from Mr. Blackshaw that the form must be filled up first, as Mr. S. would not consider any case before that was done. Applied for form at once.

C. Blackshaw was secretary to the College. Acomb received the form from him on 17th November, returned it completed next day but received from Blackshaw on the 20th a request for "testimonials as to preaching abilities".

1869. Nov. 25. Broad Oak. Had a good meeting tonight there

being about 55 present most of whom afterwards signed the paper bearing testimony to my ability to preach. This paper to be sent to Mr. Spurgeon with other testimonials tomorrow.

1869. Dec. 10. Today received intelligence from Mr. Spurgeon that he was willing to receive me as a student at the next term beginning Jan. 4th. Bless the "first great cause". Unto *Him* be all the praise and glory. There are 400 applicants & I applied very late & had no denominational interest & yet here is the door open before me so quickly. . . .

Not only had Acomb no denominational interest. As will become clear, he had not yet been baptised. On the 17th December he journeyed to London for the day to arrange lodgings for himself and his wife. The College was then still housed in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, which Acomb saw for the first time. Not until another three years had passed was the College to have its independent accommodation. As for Acomb and his wife, they secured rooms for themselves with a Tabernacle member, W. J. Smith of 68, New Kent Road, who was also a student at the College, later to be pastor at Westmacote from 1870 to 1888.

III

Spurgeon's College was founded in 1856, first being known as The Pastor's College but from 1867 as The Pastors' College. Until the Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened in 1861, the earliest students were taught in the home of the first Principal, George Rogers. From 1861 until the College's first independent home was opened in 1874, lectures were given in "the dark subterranean rooms" beneath the Tabernacle.

On 4th January, 1870, Acomb moved to London, his wife following two days later. The College then numbered 80-100 students¹⁵ and had an annual expenditure of about £5,500.¹⁶

Acomb's first term began a week after his removal to London and soon we read:

1870. Jan. 30. College. Today was baptised in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Ghost by Mr. J. Spurgeon. Bless the Lord, O my soul.

It was not until seven months later that his wife followed him.

1870. Aug. 25. . . . My dear wife baptised into Christ at the Tabernacle by Mr. J. Spurgeon. The Lord be praised for His goodness in thus giving us one mind. . . .

Acomb was in his thirty-fourth year when his College course began and he confided to his journal that he often found the work demanding. Amongst subjects covered in lectures and mentioned in the journal were hydrostatics and hydraulics, Euclid, geology, geography, history, analysis of Milton, metaphysics, ethics, theology, philosophy and homiletics. Some lectures in botany reminded Acomb of his horticultural interests. He seems to have struggled with Greek but made fair progress with Latin.

1870. Aug. 12. College. Today read my Friday paper. Subject—Miracle of feeding 5,000. Mr. C. H. Spurgeon present. He gave me great credit for it. . . .

Acomb did not waste his opportunities for study, but what happened at his only recorded sermon class stung him to complaint.

1870. Sept. 15. Preached before College from John 3:3. Had criticism from McKenny who in a spirit of buffoonery caricatured it throughout. . . . Mr. Rogers, though taking a more favourable view of it than McKenny, did not do me justice. . . .

T. McKinney was to serve at three pastorates in the U.S.A. before his death in 1910. Of some students Acomb was himself critical.

1870. June 3. . . . Hall turned out of College. My opinion has long been that he ought not to be in.

1870. Oct. 14. College. . . . also had two papers today . . . the other simply a collection of good things cribbed from various writers & tied together with a string of his own by scheming Coombes.

J. Coombes was to serve at Streatham 1871-73, Kings Langley 1873-80 and at Princes Risborough 1880-97. He died in the following year.

Acomb dismissed some exercises as fruitless.

1871. March 9. College. Discussion on Foreknowledge & Free agency. The wisecracs left it as they found it. . . .

His observations on preachers are interesting, occasionally illuminating—of himself if not of his subject, for he betrays all the qualities of student confidence. Of C. H. Spurgeon, whom he did not hear preach until he had begun College life, Acomb uses such phrases as “very good”, “most powerful sermon”, “pungent, practical & instructive” and “spoke with usual power”. Once, however—

1870. Nov. 20. Lord’s day. In the morning heard Mr. Spurgeon, who for once seemed to be under disadvantage of having nothing to tell the people that was fresh. This no doubt he felt. . . .

Charles’ brother, James Archer Spurgeon, had entered Regent’s Park College in 1856. In 1868 after other pastorates, most recently as Charles’ successor at New Park St., he became co-pastor at the Tabernacle and Vice-President of the College.

1870. March 24. Heard Mr. J. Spurgeon preach in Tabernacle. Very nice, but does not possess the strength of mind & power of C.H.S.

1871. April 6. . . . In evening heard James Spurgeon at Tab. . . . Very moderate indeed.

The Rev. John Spurgeon was father to Charles and James. Presumably it was of him that Acomb wrote—

1871. Jan. 22. Lord’s day. . . . In evening heard Spurgeon senr. at Fetter Lane Chapel. Poor old man, he is evidently better adapted for farming than for preaching. Never was I so surprised by a total want of method, unction, or freshness of thought,

coming from a man of his appearance and years. He has evidently missed his calling.

Archibald Fergusson was tutor at the College 1862-92. Acomb had a warm spot for him.

1870. April 1. . . . Glorious address from Mr. Fergusson. Melted all our hearts & made us feel very humble & unworthy before God. Mr. Spurgeon deeply moved by it.

But a year later—

1871. March 31. . . . Addresses by Messrs. Rogers & Fergusson. The latter needed to be condensed very much, for it sadly tried our patience. . . .

Joseph Parker moved from Cavendish, Manchester, in 1869, to become the minister at the Poultry Street Chapel where he remained until the City Temple was opened in 1874.

1870. April 14. . . . Went to hear Dr. Parker preach again. Had a good sermon with a little *too much* manner, and *too little* Gospel.

1870. Sept. 29. Heard Dr. Parker preach a grand sermon today on the temptation of Christ.

1871. March 19. . . . In the evening heard Dr. Parker on "Joseph cast into prison". Very good and forcible though *but little* *unction* attending it.

William Brock of Bloomsbury and William Landels of Regent's Park Chapel with C. H. Spurgeon founded the present London Baptist Association in 1865.

1870. March 6. Lord's day. Went to hear Mr. Brock in the morning. Good sermon from Luke 12: 32. . . .

1870. Nov. 7. Lord's day. In the morning went to hear Dr. Landels at Regent's Park Chapel. Very thoughtful, but very dull.

James Wells was a noted critic of Spurgeon, perhaps because he was jealous for his own popularity.

1870. Jan. 5. . . . In the evening heard James Wells in his Surrey Tabernacle, blundering in the Revelation. Poor stuff.

C. B. Sawday was minister at Vernon, King's Cross, from 1864.

1870. May 29. Lds day. . . . In the evening I went to hear Sawday but to my disappointment Jonathon Grubb & a poor simple old man frittered away the evening in uttering commonplace platitudes. London folks seem to have a great deal of patience & put up with some very poor stuff.

Later he heard Sawday address the class at the Tabernacle led by Mrs. Lavinia Bartlett and commented, "Very earnest, but there was sad want of thought". The same day he wrote:

1870. Nov. 7. Lord's Day. . . . In the evening we went to hear Arthur Mursell at South Lambeth Chapel. We were treated to a dish of intellectual porridge, that was not at all fitted to awaken spiritual life. Half the time was wasted in attempting to demonstrate that God possessed a capacity for suffering. The discourse was not improved by being a written one. Fancy a man appealing

(at the close) to sinners to flee to the cross, from paper. Reposturous. We came home & read one of Mr. Spurgeon's sermons which brought us round by degrees.

Arthur, son of James Phillippo Mursell the Midland Baptist leader, had moved from Birmingham to London. Meanwhile, Thomas Binney of the King's Weigh House was in the van of those nonconformists who were showing new interest in liturgical forms of worship.

1870. June 5. Lord's day. Went to hear Mr. Binney, Weigh House, in the morning. He did not attempt a sermon but simply treated us to a paternal chit-chat from Titus 2: 14.

Another Congregationalist, Newman Hall, made his London home a centre where nonconformist leaders of the day met to reflect and deliberate.

1870. May 29. Ld's day. In the morning we went to hear Newman Hall at Surrey Chapel. Very good but not much depth in it. . . .

Thomas Guthrie (1803-1873) was a Presbyterian, noted for social work, especially from 1847 onwards in the founding of ragged schools.

1870. Nov. 1. College work. Had the pleasure of hearing Dr. Guthrie preach in the Presbyterian Church, Camberwell. It did my heart good to hear the grand old man in sonorous tones preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Text John 1:12. . . . Place crowded to excess. His discourse was marked by simplicity & directness.

His strictures on two other preachers were severe :

1870. Sept. 11. Lord's day. In the morning heard Mr. Hearson at Wandsworth Rd. Chapel. Poor dead stuff. Wondered at the few people until I heard the sermon and then no longer. . . .

1870. Nov. 13. Lord's day. . . . In the evening went to St. James' Hall. Mr. Varley preached & produced conviction in my mind that he is a superlative ass. Instead of preaching the Gospel, he went into politics &c. Came home disgusted. . . .

Such harsh entries are balanced by self-criticism which Acomb confided to his journal. Having reported his address to fellow students on the strict membership and open communion question he added, "Never spoke worse. Made an awful job of it". Other observations were, "Felt very dead & cold today", "My thoughts seem to be frozen & my soul as it were in the midst of spiritual winter", "Spoke very badly", "Felt very wretched after preaching & was tempted to believe I was mistaken in my call to the ministry", "Spoke most wretchedly myself", "Very little communion this week. I pray God restore the joy of his salvation". In other places Acomb showed some elation, but throughout his life any moment of hope and confidence seemed to be followed quickly by hours of depression.

He was probably more adventurous than most students of his day in the places he visited. Besides going to the House of Commons ("Found the speaking there, as elsewhere, some of it very so-so sort of stuff"), the British and Kensington Museums, Wandsworth prison, St. Paul's, Madame Tussauds and the Art Union exhibition, Acomb visited the

Lambeth Roman Catholic Cathedral on Good Friday 1870 and later a Jewish synagogue in Gt. Portland Street. Afterwards he was as hostile to the Roman Church as he had been before but whereas some, doubtless, fulminated without having any first hand experience, at least Acomb attended a service, if only on one occasion. As for the Jews, he seems to have left the synagogue more in sorrow than in anger.

Most of Acomb's preaching engagements in College days were in the London area. Farther afield he preached at Spaldwick, Waterbeach, Winchester and Newhaven.

1870. Oct. 28. . . . Today received a letter for supply for Winchester, their pastor, a doctor, having resigned through ill-health. If the Lord were not with me, I should quake considerably at the idea of filling the place of such an individual but I feel quite confident that He will help me through. Help Lord.

The pastor who had resigned was a Dr. Willis.¹⁷ The next day—

. . . In the evening went to Winchester. Had a long dreary ride with a number of Scotch folks who kept singing Scotch songs all the way. May I be kept from such company in future. . . .

And the next—

. . . The friends here have a nice little chapel, but with an awkward debt of £440 which acts as a millstone. I believe there is a good field for labour notwithstanding the influence of the establishment, which is so great.

Acomb preached at Newhaven on 27th November, 1870.

. . . Spent some time with the pastor, Mr. Sargeant who is ill of consumption & not likely to recover. Found him to be a very earnest, intelligent man, with his heart thoroughly in the work. There is evidently a good work doing there.

The following day Acomb travelled to Brighton to visit his mother-in-law. From there he went to Burgess Hill, where, apparently, his brother James and his wife lived. On the 25th November Acomb had written—

. . . On my way home intend to call at Burgess Hill in order to see if there is room for a Baptist cause there. . . .

But—

1870. Nov. 28. . . . At present do not see room for starting a new Baptist interest there. . . .

Five years later, however, the work in this Sussex village was commenced.

Apart from occasional preaching engagements in London between January 1870 and June 1871, Acomb considered the possibility of student pastorates at Hounslow, Chiswick, Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell, Brixton and Walthamstow. In none of them did he find a congenial sphere of service. Did any of the staff or students, observing this fact, draw conclusions concerning Acomb's future? Certainly none of his subsequent pastorates were held for any length of time.

The Hounslow people were being served early in 1870 by the

W. J. Smith with whom the Acombs found accommodation in New Kent Road. After Acomb had preached twice at Hounslow, Smith asked him to consider becoming student pastor there. Accordingly, Acomb preached on three consecutive Sundays in March 1870, but although he did not record his decision in the journal, obviously he decided to decline the invitation.

On Saturday, 16th April, 1870, he went to Chiswick to see the district before preaching in the Church the next day.

. . . Walked round the outside of the poor old "Horticultural" and as I did so my mind wandered back into the past & something like gloom and sadness filled my mind for a time. The love for the old profession is not quite dead yet, it was too deeply rooted for that. . . .

He stayed the night with a Mr. and Mrs. Neighbour at Turnham Green who "live in a most delightful spot with 6 acres of orchard ground attached". Concerning the church—

1870. April 17. Lord's day. Chiswick. . . . Spent a happy day, though had but thin congregations, there being but 20 adults in the morning & 36 in the evening. . . . There is a good chapel & plenty of people round about, but the cause evidently nearly dead. . . .

Although on the 22nd April Acomb wrote—

. . . Also study for Chiswick. Feel very hopeful about that place.

He preached there on five more Sundays only.

1870. May 1. Lord's day. Chiswick. . . . Showery weather affected our numbers. There were 30 in the morning & about 50 in the evening. The Lord disappointed me today in not filling the place. . . .

and—

1870. May 22. Chiswick. Lord's day . . . only 35 persons present. Cannot see my way clear to keep on here. Gave Mr. Neighbour notice to that effect. Do not feel equal to the burden of a struggling church while at college.

The next month he first visited Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell—on a Wednesday evening. Later he wrote: "Brother Davidson offered me his church at Clerkenwell". His first Sunday evening engagement there was on the 19th June. He preached there again a week later, but the College was on vacation throughout July, and Acomb went for the month back to Saltwood. On 14th August he was again at the church—

. . . The deacons trust I shall settle among them. I tell them that will depend on the feeling of the church in the matter. There is a great need of a revival there. . . .

He continued to preach at the church on Sundays and Wednesdays.

1870. Sept. 4. Lord's day. Had good time at Clerkenwell. . . . Had a look into a chapel now held by Unitarians in St. John's Square, Clerkenwell. It's a capital place. O that the Lord would give it to us, in exchange for the Noah's Ark we now have. The

deacons entertain the idea of applying for it. Nothing is impossible with God.

On the 18th September there were 70 in the evening congregation.

“We are beginning to hope to see a revival.” But—

1870. Oct. 2. Lord’s day. Preached at Clerkenwell. . . . Had the presence of the master, but of very few of His people. . . . Not many signs of a revival yet. People won’t go to the wretched place, charm the preacher never so wisely.

And a week later—

. . . Gave the deacons to understand that I could not see my way clear to accept the pastorate of the church, under present circumstances.

However, Acomb continued to lead the services at the church for a few more Sundays. Then on Wednesday, 19th October, he wrote—

. . . In the evening gave a short address to the friends at Clerkenwell & afterwards conducted their church meeting at which they agreed to hear Dr. Thompson of Kilburn preach, with a view to the pastorate. This gentleman offers to take the school and chapel on his own responsibility if the friends of both interests can close with his offers. I very cordially recommended them to give him a hearing & do trust it is of the Lord. . . .

J. Thompson preached at Red Lion Street the following Sunday and Acomb wrote—

. . . He gave us a very nice Gospel address. With exception of his age, he is just the man for this place. May the Lord make all things plain.

Acomb’s discouragement at the church seems to have been complete the Wednesday of that week.

1870. Oct. 26. College work, prayer meeting, &c. Went to Clerkenwell in evening & gave an address to 7 persons who favoured me with their presence. Good bye, Clerkenwell.

His association with the church was not quite at an end, however.

1870. Nov. 2. . . . Afterwards went to Clerkenwell & was present at a meeting formed of members of school committee, & deacons of church, Mr. Donkin, proprietor of premises, & me Dr. Thompson the proposed pastor. He seems a bird that won’t take the bait very readily so proposes to preach for a month, *that they may know each other better*.

Acomb returned to the church only once more, and that for a sad occasion.

1871. March 5. Lord’s day. Spent the morning in study for the evening. In evening preached a funeral sermon at Clerkenwell Chapel. Endeavoured to gather a few lessons from sudden death of Dr. Thompson. Place full & great attention paid to sermon which was founded upon Gen. 5:24, “He was not, for God took him”. . . .

At this time a suggestion was put to Acomb for which he seems never to have entertained much enthusiasm.

1870. Dec. 9. . . . Today Mr. Keyes who has been preaching at Whitstable for some time, but with little success, proposed at the suggestion of Mr. J. Spurgeon that I should take up the place & endeavour to do a work there. Mr. C. Spurgeon thinks I ought to have my two years, or three if I like, at the College. My feeling is, I should like to get 6 months more at Greek, & then be off, if the Lord opens the way. I agreed to go down for 2 Sundays, in order to test the feeling of the people, & to form a judgment relative to the matter. . . .

The last day of term was December 15th and the next day Acomb travelled to Canterbury where he stayed with friends for a day or two.

1870. Dec. 18. Preached at Whitstable Baptist Chapel from I Kings 19:9 & Heb. 12:16-17. Very thin congregations. Stayed at Coleraine's, a dreary fellow.

The second promised Sunday fell on Christmas Day.

1870. Dec. 25. Christmas Day. Whitstable. Preached from Heb. 12:1, Luke 11:21-22. Fearfully cold & dreary. In evening only about 30 persons in a chapel that will hold 350. A more dreary Christmas day, I have seldom spent.

1870. Dec. 26. Went by first train to Saltwood, glad to leave Whitstable behind.

Acomb first preached at Brixton soon after the recommencement of term. A new cause had been started in the North Brixton Hall, but Acomb feared from the first that the work was too close to the Tabernacle for it to become very strong. However, on the Tuesday following his first Sunday with the Brixton people he wrote—

1871. Jan. 31. College. In the evening went to prayer meeting at North Brixton Hall & had a most delightful season. Mr. Cooper & about 20 other Tabernacle people came down to encourage us. It seemed really my recognition service, for they all spoke as though I were stationed there, & Mr. Cooper, who led the meeting, after giving an address to those present, turned to me & gave me some very good advice about *preaching a full Christ & sticking to the good old Gospel*. . . . I know not what may come out of it all, but I have promised to go a month that we may see what things will lead to. . . .

He preached for the four Sundays of February, but by the third was discouraged and wrote—

. . . Oh that we could get into some sphere in which the Lord would bless souls & prosper the work by us.

The last Sunday came—

1871. Feb. 26. Lord's day. Spent the day at Brixton. . . . Today Mr. Greenwood, the principal supporter of the place, gave me great encouragement by hinting that he should like me to take the place altogether at the close of my college course, &c., &c.

At present they must give another student an opportunity of preaching there, owing to an engagement made with him previous to their having seen me. . . .

There is no reference to Brixton during March, but—

1871. April 1. . . . The friends at Brixton Hall have invited me to give their place a 3 months' trial, Mr. Cooper's protige (sic) having proved unequal to the task. Not easy work to preach to those who have been accustomed to Mr. Spurgeon's ministry. May the Lord direct me aright in the matter. . . .

By the 19th of the month his mind was made up.

. . . Today declined the invitation to take up the work at North Brixton Hall. Cannot see my way clear to go on with it. The Lord has given me plenty of negatives concerning it, in various shapes.

Perhaps one of those shapes was Walthamstow, for Acomb paid his first visit to the Wood Street chapel there on the 12th March. His first entry is enthusiastic. In a fortnight he returned and wrote—

1871. March 26. Walthamstow. Lord's day. Had good times both morning and evening. . . . I seem to have struck the right vein of people here. They are just of the class that I should delight to preach to, & I trust the Lord will lead me to a similar sphere in his good time.

Twice during April Acomb preached at Walthamstow, but entered in his journal later in the month—

1871. April 22. Study & preparing for Chippenham. A Baptist church there requires "a thorough Christian & efficient preacher" as for such "there would be a prospect of much usefulness, under God's blessing". . . .

The next day he preached at the New Chapel cause in the town. There were two other Baptist churches in Chippenham in those days—the Old Chapel and the Bath Road causes. New Chapel had been founded in 1857 and had 56 members in 1871.¹⁸ Acomb was not as enthusiastic over his first visit to Chippenham as he had been on his first acquaintance with Walthamstow, but he was back in the town a week later. Then he wrote—

1871. May 1. Today received a call to the pastorate from the Baptist Church at Chippenham. May my mind be rightly exercised by such an important question, & may the Lord guide me aright. How difficult to have *no will or prejudice* in such a matter. I have been dwelling upon *London* as a sphere of labour, & here comes an invitation from a church *100 miles* from London. . . .

George Rogers and James Spurgeon both advised Acomb to accept the invitation. The next Sunday he preached again at Chippenham and after recording the events of the day added—

. . . At the close of the day gave my answer in the affirmative to Messrs. Allen & Mills, the deacons of the church, who expressed great pleasure at the result. May prosperity attend our labours here. Propose to leave the college at Midsummer vacation. . . .

Next day, with the help of one of the members, Mr. J. Brinkworth, he "Engaged a house" for his wife and himself. Elizabeth Acomb saw neither town nor house until the couple moved to Chippenham on the last day of June. Acomb was able to write, however, "Her first impressions favourable". Meanwhile he had returned to preach in the church every Sunday during that month.

So his College course ended.

1871. June 29. Last day at College. Gave short address together with Brother Dyke who is also leaving for Toronto. Thank God for the opportunity of gaining so much valuable knowledge & for giving us health & necessaries while in College. May all be used for His glory. We can bear testimony of His faithfulness & goodness since we have known Him. We also are greatly indebted to our beloved Presidents & Tutors, to each of which I gave thanks. . . .

He said "Goodbye", too, to the Smiths of New Kent Road, he packed their goods and in his thirty-fifth year, Acomb took his wife off to Wiltshire to try to put into practice some of the lessons he had learned in a College course all too short.

IV

For the New Chapel Baptists of the country town of Chippenham 1871 had been a discouraging year. The Rev. John Davis of Bath had served the church for two or three Sundays early in the year, but when the members met to discuss extending to him an invitation to the pastorate there was some hesitancy. Instead they asked him to preach in their church once more, and on the 5th February sent him the invitation. Fourteen days later the members of the church were told that he had declined. On the 9th April the church invited a Mr. Lowe, a student of Regent's Park College, to the pastorate, but on the last day of the month the members learned that he, too, had declined. That same day an invitation was issued to Acomb to serve them as pastor at a stipend of £100 per annum.¹⁹

No special services marked the commencement of Acomb's ministry. He began work on the 1st July and by the 14th of the month could write—

. . . Have about visited all my flock now, and are altogether very well pleased with the appearance of things.

He and his wife moved into their permanent home, Hampton Villa, on the 28th July although workmen still had not completed the necessary alterations.

Acomb called a team of men to share with him in tract distribution and that of Spurgeon's sermons. He began this work with enthusiasm and hopefulness, but—

1871. August 15. . . . Under very great depression owing to the apparent lethargy of the people. . . .

In the autumn his spirits rose with better congregations. The first baptismal service, with five candidates, was held on Wednesday, 1st

November. The next month he recorded more encouragements and later there were more conversions and baptisms, but there was also the now familiar pattern of elation and despondency in the entries.

He had a few particular pastoral heartaches.

1871. Sept. 17. . . . Had great difficulty in evening owing to Hodgson's case being on my mind. After every service the case came before Church. It turned out that the offence of which he was charged (drunkenness) occurred before my settlement as pastor & so I declined to go on with the case, as the man professes to have turned over a new leaf since I have been here. God help him. This is my first trouble as a pastor & it has cost me no end of grief & sorrow.

The church minute book makes no reference to this difficulty.

In another matter Acomb wrote—

1872. March 14. Church Meeting. Tucker expelled for fraudulent dealing.

Here the minute book is more explicit. William Tucker's membership was suspended on the 28th February when the charge of fraud was preferred and expulsion took place on the 14th March when the case was proved in court.

Another, and evidently more contentious matter, is recorded in the journal but not in the minute book.

1872. Sept. 26. At Teachers' meeting Chandler resigned having proved unfaithful to us. Elliotts & Brinkworths in a fury, it having broken up a little clique. . . . Church is rallying around us.

The Brinkworth family had shown considerable kindness to the Acombs on their removal to the district, and Acomb had recorded his appreciation of this fact. This incident, whatever its origin, must have been painful, especially as later appears in the journal—

1872. Oct. 13. . . . We are looking up to God for help alone & feel very calm although the Brinks. have deserted us. . . .

Acomb became interested in the cause at Hullavington, six miles to the north.

1872. Nov. 7. Went to Hullavington. Came away with very unfavourable impression.

1872. Nov. 14. Preached at Hullavington. . . . Position of people such, that something must be done. May we (be) guided aright. Had about 60 persons at the meeting.

During the month he undertook to supply Hullavington and recorded one visit for each of the following three months and again in May 1873. There are, however, no other references to this cause.

Two other entries in the journal at this time of Acomb's life appear to be related.

1871. July 16. . . . Today had Mr. Wesley from Halifax in Nova Scotia with good news of Mrs. Joplin, the widow of a former pastor of our church here, & who removed to Halifax and died there. Spent very pleasant time with him conversing about America, &c. . . .

Did this conversation arouse within Acomb thoughts of living in that land? Nearly two years later he attended the annual conference of former students of Spurgeon's College and wrote—

1873. March 31. Conference at Tabernacle, London. Went & returned on Friday. Had splendid week, thank God. Spoke to C.H.S. about America.

But he did not go. Ten years later, however, the thought was still with him. He wrote then—

1883. Aug. 26. . . . Resolved to go to America.

Interestingly enough, although Acomb recorded the fact of his resignation of the Chippenham pastorate, the entry in the journal is interlinear and bears the marks of having been written after the entry that follows it. On the resignation the church minute book is more detailed and reads—

1874. March 22. The Pastor, W. J. Acomb, seeing no prospect of a revival of the work of God in the town, at the close of the evening service, resigned the pastorate of the Church, intending to seek a more extended sphere of usefulness.

Later that year in the journal Acomb wrote—

July 16. Lord's day. . . . In the evening preached farewell sermon. Had good time. Chapel full.

And

Aug. 26. Had farewell meeting at Chippenham when friends presented me with a purse of 11 guineas. Thank God for the kindly spirit shewn by all.

V

F. H. Newton was trained at Bury College. He held his first pastorate at Bethel, West Bromwich, from April 1870 until November 1873, when he moved to West Hartlepool. When the members of West Bromwich met on the 20th May, 1874, "The general opinion of the meeting was we have been without a Pastor quite long enough, it was ultimately suggested that an offer made by Bren L. Bailey & G. Garratt be accepted viz, that they go to London & have a personal interview with Mr. Spurgeon (having offered to pay their own expenses) & lay our case before him & ascertain if he has a suitable man amongst his students for us."²⁰

The visit took place as planned and at the next church meeting Bailey and Garratt reported that Spurgeon "recommended Mr. Acomb of Chippenham as a very suitable man to take the pastorate of our church therefore they left it in Mr. Spurgeon's hands to send him for two Sundays."²¹

From the journal—

1874. July 18. Went to West Bromwich, Staffordshire.

July 19. Lord's Day. Deut. 32. 10-12. Matt. 1. 21.

July 22. Week Service. Nehemiah 8. 10.

July 26. Lord's Day. I Kings 19. 13. Heb. 9. 14.

While at Bromwich felt very little power but received great

kindness *from all the people*. Mr. Bailey on 23rd took me down the coal pit at Swan Village & the Lord brought me up again in safety. *Most interesting*.

There follow other entries concerning Chippenham and then—

1874. August 20. Accepted the invitation to pastorate at West Bromwich.

The invitation had been a unanimous one, the stipend was to be £130 per annum,²² payable in monthly instalments,²³ and so Acomb's ministry there commenced on the 30th August. On Monday, 28th September, a tea and recognition service were held. Acomb wrote—

. . . Happy time. 370 to tea. Many ministers present.

The church minutes in fact state that addresses on this occasion were delivered by six ministers.

The journal has a week by week list of texts used by Acomb on Sundays and on weekday services, but there are very few additional entries. Acomb noted his attendance at Spurgeon's College Conferences and meetings of the Baptist Union and of the West Midland Association. In successive years he recorded holidays in North Wales, Brittany and Scotland. The holiday in Brittany was taken in company with his church secretary, George Garratt, who had a cousin in those parts in the potato trade.²⁴ Presumably that holiday prompted Acomb to commence the study of French, a fact which he confided to his journal.

Seven months after he had moved to West Bromwich, Acomb wrote—

1875. March 3. Deacons' meeting to consider question of a new chapel, Unanimous.

Behind that laconic entry lies the story of Baptists in the area. Baptists began work in the town about 1796. A place of worship, Providence Chapel, was opened in 1812 in Harget Lane, later to be known as Sandwell Road. At this time the population was about 7,500. In 1816 the church became affiliated to the Midland Association, having then 43 members. The first pastor, John Parker, came from Bond Street, Birmingham, in 1831. His ministry failed to arrest a movement in the church towards hyper-calvinism and antinomianism, so in 1834, Parker and 24 members seceded to form a Particular Baptist Church in Dartmouth Street, Lamberts End, West Bromwich.²⁵ The seceders met at first in a house, but they built Bethel in the same road and opened it for worship in September 1835, by which time the population of the town had risen to 20,000. Parker left for Coseley in 1837 and the following year was succeeded by William Stokes, the first historian of the Midland Association, who had come from Burton-on-Trent. His five year ministry saw the membership increase from 25 to 76. Stokes left for Newhall Street, Birmingham, in 1843, but four pastorates and eleven years later he returned to serve the church for a further twelve months.²⁶

West Bromwich continued to develop so that by 1874, the year of Acomb's settlement, the population numbered some 50,000. Bethel

Baptists began to feel their disadvantages. Their church was not well placed in the community, and it compared unfavourably with the newer buildings being erected.²⁷ Many proposals were discussed, but the above quoted entry in Acomb's journal marked the first determined advance towards making dreams come true. The decision was perhaps made easier by the committee responsible for the day school which met on the Bethel premises. They had offered £10 to the church as a first contribution to a new chapel building fund.²⁸ The fund was opened and Acomb's journal states that the site for the new buildings was acquired on the 13th March, 1875. The church minutes for the 31st March record "the church pledges itself heartily into the scheme for the acquisition of the proposed site on the Lodge Estate, High St., & afterwards to the erection of a new chapel as soon as practicable." Acomb reported in his journal that a very successful tea-meeting was held on the 12th April, when £351 was raised, but the new site cost £770 and "as soon as practicable" was a date greatly delayed.

Whilst they dreamed of their new buildings, therefore, Bethel Baptists had to renovate the existing ones. In October 1875 the work was put in hand. During those days it was still possible to hold morning worship in the schoolroom, but the church had to use, at a cost of £9. 17s. 6d., the Town Hall, completed that very year, for evening services for the twelve weeks commencing the 7th November.²⁹

It cannot have been long after the renovation was completed—if indeed, it was not earlier—before other signs made a replacement for Bethel not only desirable but essential. The mining of coal had caused subsidence in the area. Cracks in the fabric widened as time ran out for Bethel and worshippers were to find that their services were sometimes punctuated by the sound of falling plaster and mortar chippings. However, the building had to serve for a time yet.

Charles N. Newdegate was Conservative M.P. for Warwickshire North. He was well known for his hostility to Roman Catholicism and in 1876 endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to have his Convent Inspection Bill adopted by the House of Commons. The measure was discussed at West Bromwich where Bethel authorised Acomb to sign a petition in its favour on behalf of the church.³⁰ Acomb would have been happy, too, about another decision of the church. On the 31st January, 1877, it was decided that in future members of other denominations would be welcome at communion services held at Bethel.

Acomb's pastorate was not to last much longer. His letter of resignation was dated the 19th December, 1877. He wrote—

Dear Sir,

I beg to tender my resignation as Pastor of the Baptist Church, Dartmouth St. Several considerations have led to the step—among others my health demands a change; the improbability of any increase of usefulness, the persuasion that to support me

some of you are being taxed beyond your ability, and lastly the offer of a pastorate in a more salubrious situation & where there is a greater scope for ministerial labour. Kindly convey to the Church the expression of my highest regard for the character and services of those by whom I have been surrounded during my brief stay at West Bromwich. I hope to leave without an enemy, and I know I shall reap the benefit of a lifelong friendship with many.

With Christian regards,
I remain,
Yours faithfully,
W. J. ACOMB.³¹

Amongst the enduring friendships was that which he enjoyed with the Garratt family. He frequently returned to West Bromwich to preach and, when George Garratt retired, moved away to Hagley and became a founder member of the Hagley Free Church, Acomb often preached in that church also. As for Bethel, its membership had been 68 in 1874. Four years later, upon Acomb's removal, there were 75 members.³²

VI

Whilst still at West Bromwich Acomb had written in his journal—
1877. Oct. 28. Lord's Day. Had visitors from Redditch to inspect us.

Later—

1877. Nov. 11. Lord's Day. Astwood Bank. Staid at Mr. Perkins.
Preached . . . spoke in Sunday School. . . Impressions very favourable.

He was there again on the 2nd December and a week later as well as for a weeknight service. He wrote again "Things look promising."

Astwood Bank is three miles south of Redditch. The Baptist church was founded by the cause at Alcester. Witness in Astwood Bank began when Benjamin Spencer was minister at Alcester³³ and in 1787 the Sunday School was commenced. The church dates its foundation as 1813. Its first minister, J. Smith, served the church for half a century. Philipps, the minister immediately prior to Acomb, had retired because of poor health. The church had 125 members in 1877 and enjoyed a good reputation in the village.

The church Minute Book confirms the comments in the journal. A deputation had visited West Bromwich and they recommended that Acomb should be invited to preach for a Sunday. The church meeting then asked him to preach for two Sundays on probation.

Mr. Acomb having supplied for two Sundays to the satisfaction of the church it was resolved unanimously to invite him to become their Pastor, but before sending the invitation a meeting of the seat holders be called for the purpose of expressing their opinion on the matter. This meeting was held at the church. Election unanimous and confirmed.³⁴

The stipend was to be £150 per annum with house free of rates and taxes. So the Acombs left West Bromwich. At their farewell on the 11th March, 1878, Acomb received a watch and a £10 testimonial. Their removal to Astwood Bank took place the following day and the recognition service was held on the 4th April.

The pastorate was to last for six years. Unfortunately again the journal is very little more than a list of dates and texts. Names of those baptised are recorded in the journal, but comparison with the church minutes shows that some have been omitted. Occasionally Acomb delivered a lecture at the weeknight service. Some of the titles are Ladies and Gentlemen; Coal; Lower Creatures; Oliver Cromwell; Shakespeare and the Bible; Josephus; Catacombs; Uncle Tom's Cabin; The Women of Shakespeare; Proverbs of all Nations; Fables new and old; Wilberforce; Greyson's Letters; Traditions of all Nations; Jesuits; Cowper; Night; Contrasts of Life; Astronomy; History of Religion; John Calvin. On the 29th October, 1882, he started a Mutual Improvement Society and five months later received as a present from the Society a copy of Tennyson's poems.

1880. March 26. Have undertaken Cookhill for a year.

Cook Hill is about 4 miles south of Astwood Bank. The *Baptist Handbook* gives the date of the founding of the work there as 1841. The minutes of the Astwood Bank church show that negotiations between the two churches took place and resulted in the establishment of a joint pastorate. For the minister this usually meant travelling to Cook Hill for the afternoon service on the first Sunday in each month. The joint pastorate lasted until 1964 when Frank Wiltshire moved from Astwood Bank to Stratford on Avon, taking the Cook Hill link with him, as it seemed unlikely at that time that Astwood Bank would have another full-time pastor.

Acomb attended the meetings of the Worcestershire Association regularly and when it met at Evesham on the 3rd June, 1879, he gave a paper on "The Christian in commercial life". Two years later he wrote the circular letter sent by the Association from its meetings at Atch Lench. He chose as its theme "Baptist Institutions". The meetings of the Baptist Union were held at Southampton in 1881 and the following year in Liverpool. Both these Acomb attended.

In one entry he revealed a little of his own political views.

1880. April 12. East Worcestershire Election. We won.

In those days, the Worcestershire East division was returning two members to Parliament. In the previous election, in February 1874, the constituency had returned two Conservative members—Henry Allsopp and T. E. Walker. Their party, with a majority of 52 seats, had formed the government. In 1880 the tables were turned again. Henry Allsopp was again a candidate, but the other Conservative candidate was Richard Temple. They lost to the Liberal candidates, W. H. Gladstone and G. W. Hastings. Gladstone had earlier represented Chester (1865) and Whitby (1868, 1869 and 1874). Hastings had unsuccessfully contested the Beverley seat in 1854, but that time

as a Conservative. He had changed his allegiance to support the Liberals by the time he fought, again unsuccessfully for a seat as member for Worcestershire West in 1874. This time he and Gladstone enjoyed a victory which was small enough, there being only 621 votes between the lowest and highest cast for the four candidates. If Acomb was pleased at the success of local Liberal candidates, he must have been pleased, too, that the new House of Commons had 414 Liberal members as against 238 Conservative. W. E. Gladstone commenced his second term as Prime Minister in 1880 with a larger majority than any Liberal administration had enjoyed since 1832 or would, indeed, enjoy again.³⁵

Acomb, who had persuaded the West Bromwich Baptists to welcome Christians of other denominations to their Communion Services, achieved the same result at Astwood Bank.

The Pastor, Mr. Acomb, asked the question whether they (the members present) were willing to allow him to admit to the Lord's Table any person whom he believed was a Christian though unbaptised.

That minute dated the 7th September, 1882, was followed by another dated the 16th November the same year—

Resolved that the question of admitting to the Lord's Table Christian persons (although unbaptised) be left to the discretion of the Pastor, but not to be considered a rule of the church.

Towards the close of the following year Acomb wrote in his journal—

1883. Nov. 15. Half yearly church meeting. Resigned pastorate. Evidently the church members were taken by surprise.

Mr. Sol Shrimpton expressed at considerable length what appeared to be the general feeling of the meeting that Mr. Acomb's ministry had proved a great moral and spiritual blessing not only to the church and congregation but also to the community at large, this being the case, that Mr. Acomb should not be allowed to relinquish the pastorate if it were possible to restrain him from doing so.³⁶

A deputation waited on Acomb with this resolution. He relented to the extent of saying that he would reconsider his decision on the sixth anniversary of the commencement of his ministry amongst them, except that "should any opening to work elsewhere offer itself I should be at liberty to look at it." Evidently the latter did not materialise. The journal records—

1884. March 22. Resigned pastorate at Astwood.

The letter he wrote is included in the church minutes for the 27th March.

Parsonage,

Astwood Bank.

March 22/84.

To the Baptist Church and Congregation,
Christian Friends,

Having duly considered the question, I have more fully than

before come to the conclusion that it is expedient on many grounds for me to relinquish the pastorate at Astwood Bank.

With your permission our connexion as minister and people will cease in the middle of June next.

Assuring you of my lively appreciation of the kind way you suggested a longer stay with you,

I remain, Yours faithfully,

W. J. ACOMB.

No reason for his desire to resign had been given by Acomb either earlier or now. The church meeting, after some brief discussion, passed the following resolution.

That this meeting learns with deep and heartfelt regret that the beloved Pastor of the church has after three months further consideration announced his final determination to relinquish the Pastorate in the middle of June next, this being the case, it is hereby resolved that the resignation be accepted. This meeting further desires to express its admiration for and appreciation of the high character, the sterling moral and intensely spiritual tone which have ever characterised the ministry of Mr. Acomb during his pastorate of six years, and ventures to hope that in new spheres of labour, under the blessing of God he may still be spared many years to proclaim the eternal truths of the Gospel, be instrumental in winning many souls for the Divine Master, and in promoting the general interests of His Kingdom.

Acomb's longest pastorate concluded with a farewell service on the 15th June, 1884.

VII

After Acomb had left West Bromwich, the Bethel members had sought a new pastor and in due time C. J. Clarke, having recently completed his studies at Spurgeon's College, settled amongst them. The pastorate was held until 1883. No successor had been found in the following year, when Acomb concluded his work at Astwood Bank. Even before he had left Astwood Bank, Acomb had shown his continuing interest in his former pastorate by appealing, though without success, to C. H. Spurgeon because of Bethel's financial needs.³⁷

Any promise of help would have been welcome to West Bromwich Baptists at that time. Nine years earlier they had exhausted their resources in the purchase of the site in High Street which was still undeveloped. Whilst the funds for the new premises slowly grew, the damage to the structure of the existing building, caused by the subsidence, became worse. The church minutes have records of numerous meetings of the trustees, of the church, of interviews with representatives of the Association and of correspondence with the legal representatives of the mine owners. The protracted negotiations were frustrating to the church. In May 1884 the trustees decided to close the chapel. For a while the church met in the schoolroom, but in July 1884 at the Sunday School treat the cover over a surface water cistern

collapsed and some thirty or forty children and teachers fell into the cistern. Happily no serious injuries resulted, but further use of the premises was abandoned. Site and buildings were sold to the mine owners for £350.³⁸ For over two years worship was held in the Prince's Assembly Rooms in the High Street, baptisms taking place in the Sandwell Road chapel, this indicating that relationships between the two fellowships were not strained in those days.³⁹ The stone laying ceremony for the new premises on the Lodge Estate site was held on Monday, 6th September, 1886, and the schoolrooms of the new church were first used for worship on Sunday, 24th October that year.

Back in 1884, however, Acomb had returned to West Bromwich. The church was glad to have the services of its former pastor during difficult days, but although the journal records Acomb's promise that he would serve the church from the 17th August until the close of the year, he was not there as pastor. The church minutes of the 10th September clearly state that he was to receive the same sum as that paid for supply preachers, and he was not chairing business meetings. In the journal there is reference to a three day bazaar, held in the Town Hall on November 26-28th which swelled the funds of the church by £326 17s. Whether Acomb entertained hopes that he might be invited as pastor for a second term is not revealed. In the event, he and his wife left West Bromwich for Folkestone on the 17th February, 1885.

In March, April and June Acomb preached at Upstreet and at Rendezvous Street, Folkestone. On the 12th July he preached at Maidstone, returned a fortnight later, once again in August and twice in September. By this time, however, the failing health of his wife must have become evident. She was known to be suffering from diabetes, but acute pulmonary tuberculosis was also present, although undetected until a month before her death. Elizabeth Acomb died on the 5th November, 1885, in her fifty-second year.⁴⁰ It is curious that her husband made no reference to her death in the journal.

An entry early the following year reads—

1886. Feb. 3. Went to Maidstone for three months.

At the close of the three months the people, evidently satisfied with his ministry, recognised Acomb as pastor.

Services were held in the Masonic Hall in Brewer Street, which was also used as a girls' school during the week.⁴¹ This group had left King Street Congregational church⁴² as a result of a dispute at the commencement there of the ministry of the Rev. J. Q. Parks in February 1886.⁴³ The secessionists were numerous enough to support their new pastor, and he seems to have been willing enough to serve a faction which could be persuaded neither to return to King Street, nor to unite with a second Congregational church in the town, Week Street. The journal shows that Acomb served the Brewer Street people loyally for three years.

During the time he was absent occasionally. He attended the stone-laying ceremony for the new premises being built at West Bromwich,

on the 6th September, 1886, and returned to conduct worship there one Sunday the following year after the opening of the new church, which took place on Wednesday the 27th April, 1887. But there were other reasons for his sustained interest in that part of the country. On the 16th August, 1887, Acomb married again. His second wife was Emma Rebecca Brown, a schoolmistress of Feckenham in Worcestershire. The marriage service was conducted at Astwood Bank, by Acomb's successor to the pastorate there, W. Wright Robinson.⁴⁴ Emma was thirteen years younger than her husband who had now celebrated his fiftieth birthday. Whilst still at Astwood Bank, Acomb had written in his journal.

1884. May 29. Baptism. Mrs. Tarleton & Miss Brown.

It seems likely that the candidate for baptism and the future second wife were one and the same person. The church minutes for the 15th May record that Mrs. Tarleton had applied for membership at Astwood Bank and the decision of the church that (the first) Mrs. Acomb should visit her together with a Mrs. Richards. Eleven days later the church met again and resolved to receive Mrs. Tarleton as a member, but there is no mention of Miss Brown in the minutes or on the church membership roll. It might have been possible to conclude that Miss Brown was baptised but not received as a church member, except for the fact that her name appears in the church minutes for November 1886 as a visitor to a candidate for church membership. It would appear that her name was omitted in error.

After a honeymoon in Scotland, the Acombs returned to Maidstone where the work continued until January 1889. The membership of the Brewer Street fellowship had not increased and Acomb tendered his resignation. At this the people concluded that they had no independent future and agreed to a dissolution. A farewell meeting was held in premises loaned for the occasion by Primitive Methodists. In a report a local newspaper recorded—

. . . There was a good congregation to hear the rev. gentleman deliver an able sermon, his subject being principally "Short Ministries" which he advocates. Mr. Acomb is a clever preacher, and his kind, courteous and affable demeanour throughout his ministry had won the admiration and esteem of all. . . .⁴⁵

Presentations were made and W. Morling spoke in appreciation—

. . . He had conducted himself in a calm and dignified manner, and had proved himself to be a man above the average of men. . . .⁴⁶

After the closure of the cause, the Acombs continued to live in Maidstone for a while. He preached and lectured in local churches. Although he does not record the date of their removal, it would seem that the couple moved to Birmingham in the middle of the year. The *Baptist Union Handbook*, which carried no record of him for the years 1887-1889, gave a Handsworth address for Acomb in 1890.⁴⁷

One further item of interest from this time is that Acomb resigned from Spurgeon's College Conference in 1889.⁴⁸ From 1865 onwards,

men trained at the College met annually in conference. The Downgrade Controversy issued in the resignation of Spurgeon from the Baptist Union in October 1887. In the following year, the Pastors' College Evangelical Association was formed. This was the old Conference with the theological basis more explicitly drawn. "It was a great grief to the President (Spurgeon) that some brethren, who were firmly attached to Evangelical doctrine, remained outside the new fraternal band. . . ." ⁴⁹ Clearly, for his own unstated reasons, Acomb was one of these.

VIII

The journal shows that during the years in Birmingham, Acomb was busy preaching in many churches, mainly West Midland Baptist churches but occasionally in those of other denominations. Between 1889 and 1915 he preached in sixty-four different places. However, there is no record of any other means of livelihood, nor, indeed, is there anything to show where his church membership was entered. The *Baptist Union Handbooks* for these years show that the Acombs lived at half a dozen different places in the Handsworth and Edgbaston districts.

The Acombs were living at 8, Weston Road, Handsworth, when their only child was born. They named him Henry Waldo, his birthday being the 28th July, 1891.⁵⁰ Mr. C. Bailey recalls that Waldo took him to the Roman Catholic church in Bristol Street, Birmingham, in or about the year 1914 when Waldo may have been on vacation from Cambridge. At least by 1930 Waldo was living in London. He died in the St. Charles Hospital, Kensington, in March 1962, in his seventy-first year, his last recorded place of occupation being the National Liberal Club in Whitehall Place, Westminster.⁵¹

An anonymous note folded into the journal says—

Though out of so called active work for many years, he (W. J. Acomb) was constantly preaching; supplying nearly all the Baptist pulpits in Birmingham area repeatedly. . . . A serious accident stopped his activity in 1911, though he frequently took duty after recovery.

For the year 1916 there are only five brief entries in the journal. The last of these reads—

Dec. 23. Removed from Blockley to Cambridge.

After temporary accommodation, the Acombs soon moved to 75, Panton Street. The local directory lists the householder as Mrs. E. R. Acomb.⁵² In those days M. E. Aubrey was at St. Andrew's Street and Edward Milnes had just commenced at Zion. However, for the year 1917 Acomb recorded no preaching engagement at any church in the town, with one exception—Eden Street, which he served on the 18th November. His preaching took him to Landbeach, Wisbech, Gamlingay, Little Shelford, Harston, Cherry Hinton and Fulbourne. In addition he read a paper on "Reincarnation" at Westminster College.

The Zion church in the town had been encountering troubled

times. W. Bampton Taylor had moved from Chesham to Zion in October 1897,⁵³ exercising a notable ministry until he moved to Worthing in 1910.⁵⁴ The next year his successor, R. Foster Jeffrey, began his work, quickly to discover that a dissident element in the church could not then be reconciled. This group separated, founding Prospect Chapel, Eden Street, in 1913. From 1918 to 1920 Acomb ministered to this cause on 52 recorded occasions. The last entry of this period reads—

1920. June 27. Prospect farewell. . . .

The anonymous author of the biographical note folded inside the journal states what is repeated in the memoir in the *Baptist Union Handbook*, that Acomb became pastor in an honorary capacity to the Prospect fellowship. There seems to be no independent confirmation of such a statement. Indeed, such indications as now exist suggest that his commitment did not go beyond frequent preaching engagements.

Prospect Chapel was never affiliated to the Cambridgeshire Association nor to the Baptist Union. Its growth did not fulfil the hopes of its founders. Jeffrey had left Zion in 1915 and Edward Milnes, who succeeded him in 1916 was a minister whose "brotherliness had in itself become an open door". On the 4th July, 1920, 30 erstwhile members of Prospect were received back into membership at Zion.⁵⁵

Acomb still gave occasional service in the district, most often at Emmanuel Congregational church. The last entry in the journal reads—

1923. Sept. 19. Emmanuel. Paul's Shipwreck.

Acomb died at his home on the 25th April, 1924. He was eighty-seven years of age. The primary cause of his death was pleurisy, but he had also a complicating heart condition.⁵⁶

H. C. Carter, who for thirty-four years ministered at Emmanuel Congregational church, but whose influence was much wider than that felt only in Cambridge, wrote the memoir for the *Baptist Union Handbook*. In it he commented—

. . . He was a most acceptable preacher. In later years he was constantly preaching and, to the end, was ceaselessly working, studying his Bible, Shakespeare and classical mythology, preparing addresses and articles. . . .⁵⁷

The Astwood Bank vestry has a small photograph of Acomb, taken, presumably, during his pastorate there. It shows that he had a striking face, a drooping, bushy moustache and a mop of hair brushed on the wrong side.

Emma Acomb survived her husband by nearly six years. Present day members at Astwood Bank can still recall that after her husband's death she returned to the district, and they, then teenagers, used to push her out in an invalid chair. She lived in the High Street, but some time before her death she went to the Ipsley Mount Nursing Home near Redditch. She had celebrated her eightieth birthday before senility ushered in her last day on the 30th January, 1930.⁵⁸

SOURCES

¹ Brief biographical note by anonymous author, folded inside the journal. The writer evidently lived in Cambridge and the note is very similar to the memoir by H. C. Carter in the *Baptist Union Handbook of 1925*.

² *Marriage certificate MX 309360*, 20th September, 1858, Elham, Kent.

³ *Marriage certificate MA 978119*, 16th August, 1887, Alcester, Warw.

⁴ Biographical note.

⁵ *Marriage certificate MX 309360*.

⁶ *Surmon's catalogue*, Dr. Williams's Library, London.

⁷ A letter from Mrs. Agnes Pout, Secretary of the Broad Oak Chapel, dated 20th September, 1971, states "My family have been connected with Broad Oak Chapel from its beginning as my Grandfather, William Austen, gave the first piece of ground on which it was built."

⁸ Cited by Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, part II, 1966, p. 311.

⁹ *The Kentish Gazette*, Tuesday, 20th August, 1867, Canterbury, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ The letter from Mrs. Pout already cited adds in parenthesis "It was enlarged at a later date."

¹² R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662-1962*, 1962, p. 306.

¹³ F. Buffard, *Kent and Sussex Baptist Association*, 1963, p. 78.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Sword and Trowel*, 1st April, 1870, p. 149.

¹⁶ *Sword and Trowel*, 1st September, 1870, p. 439.

¹⁷ Cyril J. Cooper, *Centenary Celebrations of . . . City Road Baptist Church*, Winchester, 1961, p. 27.

¹⁸ *Baptist Union Handbook for 1871*, p. 159.

¹⁹ *Chippenham Church Minute Book*.

²⁰ *West Bromwich Church Minute Book*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, dated the 10th June, 1874.

²² *Ibid.*, on a page headed "Church history", undated but in correct sequence.

²³ *West Bromwich Deacons' Minute Book*, dated 1st September, 1874.

²⁴ As reported by Mrs. C. Bodey, granddaughter of George Garratt.

²⁵ A. S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptists, Past and Present*, 1939, p. 210.

²⁶ J. Richards, *West Bromwich & its Baptists 1796-1968*, 1968. A full list of ministers appears on pp. 18f.

²⁷ T. N. H(oneybund) and ATWAS, *West Bromwich Baptist Church, Centenary 1835-1935*, pp. 12f.

²⁸ *West Bromwich Church Minute Book* dated the 2nd December, 1874.

²⁹ *West Bromwich Deacons' Minute Book* dated the 18th October, 1875.

³⁰ *West Bromwich Church Minute Book*, dated the 21st March, 1876.

³¹ In the *Minute Book*.

³² *Baptist Union Handbooks for 1874*, p. 187 and for 1878, p. 224.

³³ *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. VI, p. 176.

³⁴ *Astwood Bank Church Minute Book*, dated the 10th December, 1877.

³⁵ Details in J. Vincent & M. Stenton, *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*, 1971.

³⁶ *Astwood Bank Church Minute Book*.

³⁷ *West Bromwich Church Minute Book*, dated the 14th May, 1884.

³⁸ T. N. H. and ATWAS, *op. cit.*, pp. 14f.

³⁹ J. Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Death certificate DX 172054*, 9th November, 1885, Elham, Kent.

⁴¹ *The South Eastern Gazette*, 16th August, 1886, Maidstone, p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2nd February, 1889, p. 2.

⁴³ *Maidstone & Kentish Journal*, 8th February, 1886, Maidstone, p. 5.

⁴⁴ *Marriage certificate MA 978119*, 16th August, Alcester.

⁴⁵ *The South Eastern Gazette*, 2nd February, 1889, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *The Baptist Union Handbook for 1890*, p. 268.

- ⁴⁶ *Register of Students*, Spurgeon's College, London.
⁴⁷ *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1890, vol. IV, p. 332.
⁵⁰ *Birth certificate*, BX 874437, 28th July, 1891, West Bromwich..
⁵¹ *Death certificate*, DX 172119, 30th March, 1962, Kensington, London.
⁵² W. P. Spalding, *Street & General Directory of Cambridge, 1919-20*.
⁵³ *Zion—One Hundred Years of Baptist Witness 1837-1937*, p. 15.
⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
⁵⁶ *Death certificate* DX 172093, 25th April, 1924, Cambridge.
⁵⁷ *The Baptist Union Handbook for 1925*, p. 303.
⁵⁸ *Death certificate* DA 594185, 31st January, 1930, Alcester.

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GEORGE DYER AND RYLAND'S ACADEMY

JAMES CULROSS in his attractive little book *The Three Rylands*, published in 1897, tells of John Collett Ryland (1723-92), his famous son, Dr. John Ryland (1753-1825) and the only son of the latter, Jonathan Edwards Ryland (1798-1866). During more than a century this family succession made varied and notable contributions to Baptist life.

While minister of College Lane, Northampton, J. C. Ryland started a school, which gained a considerable reputation and for which he prepared a number of textbooks, now of interest to students of education. He moved the school to Enfield in 1785.

Among the ushers at Ryland's school was George Dyer (1755-1841), minor poet, bookworm and author of a life of Robert Robinson, of Cambridge. Dyer appears in the pages of Lamb and Hazlitt. In the *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. X, pp. 260-267, I argued that E. V. Lucas in his well-known life of Lamb must be mistaken in suggesting that Dyer joined Ryland in Enfield and presented a case for thinking that he went to Northampton in 1782 or 1783 and ceased to teach at the school when it moved to Enfield and he had been beaten for the hand of Ryland's step-daughter, Miss Stott, by his fellow usher, John Clarke.

On pp. 39-43 Culross quotes from what he describes as "the unpublished autobiographical reminiscences of the late Samuel Bagster of Paternoster Row and Old Windsor, a pupil of Mr. Ryland's". Now, seventy-five years later, this autobiography has been published under the title *Samuel Bagster of London 1772-1851: An Autobiography* (Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., £2.00), with an introduction by Sybil Thorndyke. The book has much in it of interest and is of importance to Baptist historians for the references to Ryland's school, which are more extensive than Culross's quotations suggest.

Bagster was sent to Northampton as a boarder in 1779 at the age of seven and left, to his regret, in 1783. He records that Dyer was "classical master" at the time of his entry so that the date I suggested