

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2005

Hymn Writers connected with Berkshire

The Wargrave Local History Society met in St Mary's Church for their September meeting, when John Dearing spoke about *Hymn Writers Connected with Berkshire* - 'illustrated' by the members singing selected examples of some of the hymns!

John considered that a 'good' hymn was one that was founded in scripture, and not the 'ideas' of the author. Some 'modern' hymns, he suggested, focussed more on 'Man's problems' than the worship of God. A good hymn should also have a reasonable metre, so as to enable the words to fit to a tune.

There has been debate over many years as to what should be sung in Church - in the 18th century some felt that only the psalms were appropriate - the evangelical William Romaine exclaiming 'I want a name for that man who should pretend that he could make better hymns than the Holy Ghost. His collection is large enough. It wants no addition'. It was in the Free Churches, in the 17th and (particularly) 18th centuries hymn writing and singing became established - with writers such as Isaac Watts (writer of *O God Our Help in Ages Past*) and John and Charles Wesley. Within the Anglican tradition, the Olney Hymns, compiled by John Newton and William Cowper in 1779 was pioneering.

John then introduced us to a number of people who had lived in Berkshire, and written hymns. In the case of John Bunyan (writer of *He Who Would Valiant Be*), it was written as part of Pilgrims Progress, rather than as a hymn. Bunyan visited Reading a number of times, and was imprisoned in the town (most likely in the county gaol that stood where St Mary's Castle Street now stands).

The Baptist denomination was to the forefront in the introduction of hymns encouraged by Benjamin Keach a pastor in Southwark. The first of the Berkshire hymn writers was Daniel Turner - the Pastor at the Abingdon Baptist church from 1748 - 98 and previously pastor to the Reading Baptists. He published a collection of *Divine Songs Hymns and Other Poems* in 1847 - none of which seemingly are still in use today.

James Merrick was a poet and hymn writer born in Reading in 1720, and on his death in 1769 was buried in Caversham. He is not thought of as a good poet, and his versions of the psalms were described as 'tedious'. None of the hymns he wrote is still in common use.

The hymns of John Cennick, however, are a little more familiar - *Children of the Heavenly King* probably being the most familiar. Born in Reading in 1718, his grandparents had been Quakers (for which they were held in the county gaol), but his parents were C of E, John attending St Laurence's as a boy. For a while, he was friends with John Wesley, but quarrelled with the latter over doctrinal matters. Later, Cennick became a Moravian minister. His book *Sacred Hymns for the Children of God* was published (in 3 parts) in 1741-2, and more books of hymns followed up to 1754.

Henry Hart Milman was the other 'main' hymn writer with a Reading connection, being Vicar of St Mary the Virgin from 1817 - 35. His best known hymn is *Ride On, Ride On in Majesty*, still frequently sung for Palm Sunday. Most of his other hymns were also written whilst in Reading - subsequently he turned to writing books on the *History of the Jews*.

John mentioned a number of other 'Reading connected' hymn writers, and then moved on to tell us of one with a Wargrave connection. Henry Kirke White (with no local connections) had written *Much in Sorrow* in 1812. A Revd Collier had added a further 6 lines to it, but in 1827 a hymn book compiled by Mrs Fuller-Maitland, of Park Place, included the hymn - now as *Oft in Danger Oft In Woe*, without Collier's lines, but with 14 lines added by her daughter, Frances Sarah. She also wrote 2 other hymns - *Launched Upon the Stormy Nation*, and *There is a Veil on Israel's Road*. Neither is familiar now-a-days. The usual tune for 'Oft In Danger' also has a 'local' connection, as it was written by Henry Gauntlett, who lived in Reading as a child.

Maybe the 'best known' of the Berkshire connected hymns is *The Church's One Foundation*, written in 1866 by Samuel Stone, who had in 1862 become curate of Windsor. It was a 'rallying call to unity', based on the Creeds used in worship.

Richard Lloyd then added to the history by recounting the *Community of Celebration*, based in Wargrave in the 1970s. Many of the hymns written by members of the community - notably Betty Pulkingham - were published in the books *Sounds of Living Waters*, *Fresh Sounds* and *Cry Hosanna*.
