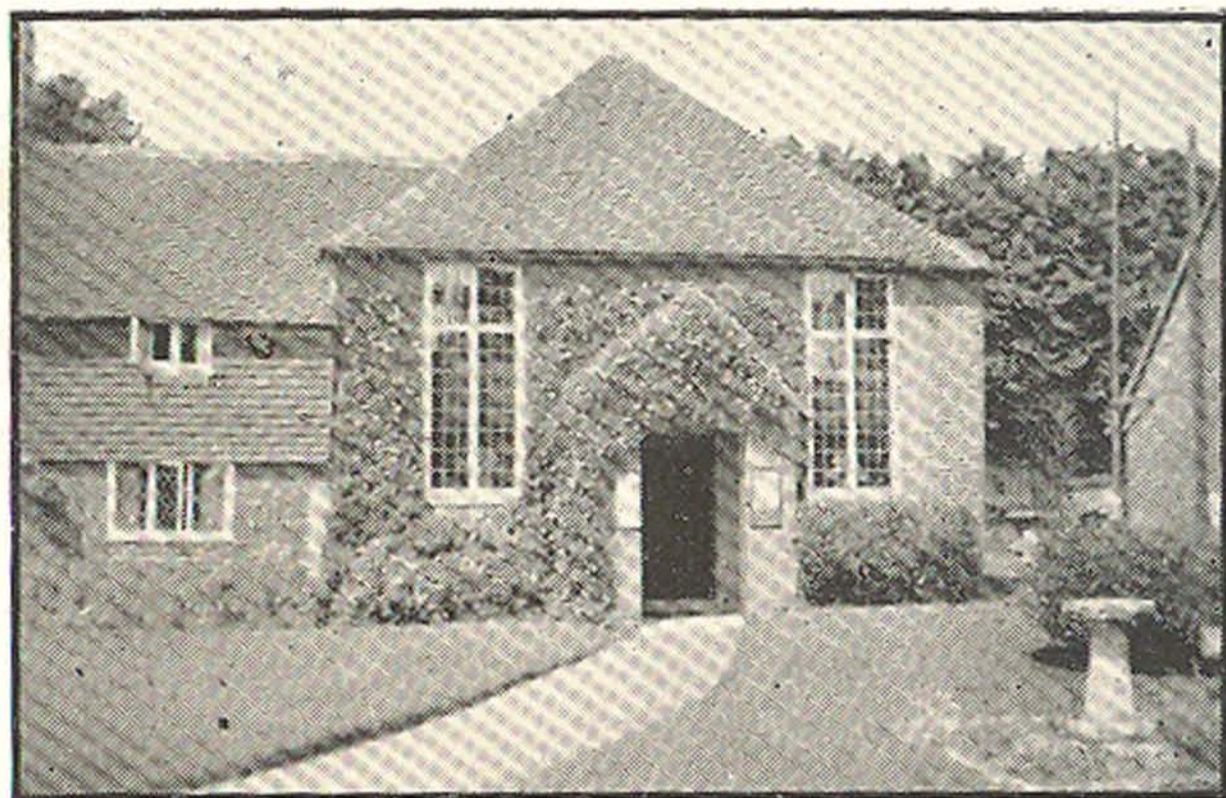


THE HISTORY OF
THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
DITCHLING

By F. A. MACRAE, M.A.



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A UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCH
OF GENERAL BAPTIST FOUNDATION

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ACCORDING to tradition the Chapel was founded in 1698 by Robert Chatfield of Streat. But for forty years before then Sussex had been worked by General Baptist evangelists, the chief of whom was Matthew Caffyn of Horsham, who is said to have colonised Sussex with conventicles. The return of conventicles to Archbishop Sheldon in 1669 show many groups of Dissenters in the district. Two groups were in Ditchling, Anabaptist and Presbyterian of the "Middle Sort." A leader or teacher is mentioned—Rev. Edward Lulham, Vicar of Ditchling 1653-1658. In 1672, under the Declaration of Indulgence, two licences were issued for meetings in the cottages of Lulham and Robert Marchant, apparently three times Church Warden under Lulham. Lulham is also mentioned in connection with a *Presbyterian* group at Lindfield. It is therefore reasonable to conjecture that the Baptist group was the one that met in the house of Robert Marchant.* The Ditchling congregation sprang from the amalgamation of all the little groups meeting in private houses in villages within a radius of several miles of Ditchling. On some date unknown, possibly the traditional date of 1698, they all assembled in Ditchling to set up a Church according to New Testament order, by democratic election of elders and deacons and their ordination by laying on of hands.

PERSECUTION

That the congregation was persecuted we can infer from an anonymous pamphlet published in Lewes in 1670. It states "that one Battlemere who informed against a Meeting at Ditchling five miles from Lewes, being since apprehended for felony, viz. (as I think), for the robbing of Fish-Ponds, declared to some asking

* Robert Marchant's house may have been the present Chapel Cottage

him of his late information that he knew not what he swear, but he put his hand on the book and swear what the justice would have him."

FORMER ORGANISATION

It is evident that the Congregation was soon well organised, for in the Minutes of the General Baptist Assembly are frequent mentions of the attendance of Ditchling representatives taking an active part in the discussions, bringing forward letters or cases. Thus—1704: Nath. Webb, Elder, and Bror: Passerold and Bror: Wood, Representatives. 1721: Robert Chatfield (Builder of Chapel), Representative. 1749: Assembly agreed as to a case from Ditchling concerning a short Catechism for children which they think is wanting—"agreed that Bro: Norris, Randall and Fry do engage to draw up a Catechism as speedily as they or either of them can well do." There is no copy of this document.

The General Baptist Assembly, to which the congregation has always been attached, is a body of Baptists who originated in 1608, and was organised before 1651. In the Minutes of the Ditchling Meeting House, earliest record 1737—the first book is lost—are references to the organisation of the constituent churches of the Assembly. These churches were highly organised. Apart from the Annual Assembly in London, to which Ditchling frequently sent representatives, there was the local Association, which appointed Messengers or district superintendents. Their office was to visit the churches frequently, to ordain their officers, to supervise their order and discipline, to heal divisions and to help in evangelism. The officers of the church—elders and deacons—were chosen by vote of the members—in the early days from their own number and for life.

Ditchling Minute Book: "on the 23rd Day of May 1737 was John Dancy, Michael Martin, and Stephen Agate ordained to serve the Church of Christ Meeting in and about Ditchling in ye capacity of Elders. And likewise John Caffin and Dann Bourn were appointed to serve the same church in the office of Deacons." The Congregation Register begins in 1737, with the name George Leopard and is continued till May 18th, 1828, when the last numbered entry, 494, is Ann Willet of Ditchling.

MINISTERS

The elders looked for Members with a gift of preaching and with the approval of the Congregation appointed them Ministers. Their position was analogous to that of the lay preacher today. This method did not always work well. Thus, in 1764, the Minutes record "this Church has sett very uneasy under the hearing of our friend John Simmons for some time past, and now we do generally agree and Conclude to Silence and not approve of him in the Ministry." Brother John Simmons "did openly and freely chuse to joyn another communion." In 1772, Brother Isaac Mott was asked to serve occasionally.

There were no regular payments and no definite training of Ministers till 1800. For some time stipends were poor, e.g.: 18 February, 1830, John Browne, Secretary to the Congregation, writing to the Rev. A. Bennett: "We have a single young man coming on approbation next Sunday. A young man whose friends are rich that he will not be wholly dependent on the Congregation." This parsimony conflicts with the generosity of the members in other ways. There are entries in the Minute Book of Regular payments of

£1-1-0 to the Messengers' Fund, of 10s. for the Assembly and of 12s. for the expenses of the delegates, e.g.: 1757, May 18th, "Twelve shillings be paid to Thoms. Pannatt and Dan. Austin to find a horse." Help was given to other churches in need and after 1800 regular contributions were paid to the Ministers' Education Fund.

PROGRESS OF CONGREGATION TO ITS PRESENT UNITARIAN POSITION

The General Baptists believed in the authority of the Scriptures, as interpreted by the individual under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This liberty of interpretation led to unorthodox beliefs among General Baptists which centred round that enthusiastic evangelist, Matthew Caffyn of Horsham. Expelled from Oxford in 1654 for unorthodox beliefs, he was later called on to defend them before the General Baptist Assembly, where he was loyally supported by the Ditchling Congregation (1693 or 1696 and 1700) who voted against his exclusion. His beliefs caused a good deal of dissension and division among the General Baptist churches, but his influence upon the churches of Sussex and Kent was all powerful, and they never wavered in their defence of liberty of interpretation of the scriptures. It is fairly safe to say that the Ditchling church was "unorthodox" in belief from its very beginning.

The Chapel Trust Deed, 1740, is an open one. There is no reference to Baptists, and it does not bind its Members to accepting a confession of faith as a condition of membership. There is no mention even of public worship. The trustees are directed "from time to time to apply the tenement and cottage . . . to such

charitable use or usages as the said trustees shall . . . think most proper." The liberty given by this open Trust doubtless helped the progress of the Congregation to its present Unitarian position.

Dr. Charles Lloyd, LL.D., Minister 1790-1793, was a Unitarian; so was the Rev. Abraham Bennett, Minister 1803-1815, and afterwards at Poole. He wrote to James Browne, Secretary to the Meeting House—"Since I came to Poole, the Unitarian case has undoubtedly much revived in the town. I told my friends at the beginning that I should come among them to revive the Cause of Unitarian Christianity." (11-9-1817. Original letter preserved in Church Records.) There is a record in the Minutes, May 2nd, 1819, "that the congregation join the Unitarian Association for the Protection of Civil Rights." In the Burial Register for 1821 the Title is still General Baptist. In 1851, an advertisement in the Inquirer states—"The Unitarian Congregation of Ditchling, Sussex, will be in want of Minister the latter end of April." A testimonial to the retiring Minister, the Rev. Thomas Gilbert, begins "the Unitarian General Baptist Congregation, Ditchling, Sussex." The title Baptist is last used in 1854 in the Minute Book.

In 1856, Hale White, "Mark Rutherford" preached at the Chapel. He did not live in Ditchling, but travelled from London.

From 1857-1889, thirty-two years, there was no regular Minister. The Minute Books Vols. II & III bear witness to courageous and successful efforts to keep the Chapel open for Worship. It was now managed by a Committee, Secretary and Treasurer chosen at the Annual Meeting. Two of the Committee were appointed

to be responsible for repairs. An extract 3rd April, 1864—"that the thanks of the members and congregation be given to Messrs. Albert Burtenshaw, Robert and Alfred Turner for their kindly assistance in conducting services during the year of non-attendance of Ministers." (1867), "Resolved that an effort be made to have services every Sunday Morning during the Months of May, June, July, August." In 1871, services were held every fortnight. In 1886, collections were made at the Anniversary Sunday in July for carrying on Sunday weekly services. From 1889-1892, the Rev. E. M. Daplyn was Minister. He was succeeded by the Rev. Henry Peach: in his Ministry the first Harvest Festival was held. The last entry in Minute Book Vol. III is dated February 25th, 1894. After that till 1941 no regular records seem to have been kept.

From 1922-1941, the Rev. Henry Maguire was Minister and under his care the Chapel was thoroughly repaired and the present beautiful panelling, pulpit and reading desk installed. From 1941-44 the Rev. Gordon Stuart was Minister. Since 1944, the Chapel has shared with New Road Church, Brighton, the services of the Rev. F. M. Ryde, who takes morning worship on alternate Sundays. Other Sundays the service is taken by visiting Ministers and lay preachers.

The Chapel, or Old Meeting House, is now called the Unitarian and Free Christian Church—a title which seems to date from 1869. It is still a Member of the General Baptists' Assembly, though it is now also a Member of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, to which it sends representatives every year. "Free Christian" emphasises the non-dogmatic character of its fellowship, suggests the fine

struggle in the past for religious liberty, and inspires us with courage for the future.

DATES IN THE HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

- 1698 (Traditional date) Founded by Robert Chatfield of Streat, who died 1726, and was buried in Churchyard.
- 1734 Cottage and Chapel mentioned in Robert's Will and bequeathed to the Congregation. "There is a house built belonging to me for the Baptist to Meeting and land to bury their Dead in Ditchling Town. My will is my son Robert Chatfield should make a good title to the same . . . to Stephen Agate, Michael Martin and others."
- 1740 Open Trust deed; land and buildings were conveyed to John Dancy and eleven other trustees.
- 1758 Baptistry built. There is no trace of it now. It is said to have been where the present pulpit now stands.
- 1800 (and subsequently.) Private pews installed according to plans approved by Committee. There were occasional disputes as to ownership, and, in 1848, Committee drew up a list of rules.
- 1845 £8-3-6 subscribed by the Members for the erection of a "Singing pew" (Choir?) In later years the Minutes note that the choir performed Sacred Music at the Anniversary Service.
- 1877 Pews and seats replaced by chairs. (Two old pews are left in the gallery.)
- 1931 Chapel repaired and panelling installed.

THE COTTAGE

It appears to be older than the Chapel. The Congregation may have met there for worship before Toleration Act, 1689, and escaped from informers by an underground passage. The entrance to it (now blocked up) is in the cellar under the Cottage. It was formerly used as the manse.

INTERESTING DATA FROM THE OLD MINUTE BOOKS

There are three books: the earliest appears to have been lost. The first entry is 1737—a list of Baptisms.

I. Wide area from which Members were drawn.

Billingshurst, Balcombe, Ringmer, Henfield, Cuckfield, Lindfield, Falmer, Clayton, Ashford, Wivelsfield, Battle, Southover, Lewes, Chailey, Streat, Westmeston, Chiddingly, and others. Ditchling appears to have been a centre for Baptists in Sussex. Its Members founded other groups, at first as branches and later independent. "Members of the Church of Christ at the Baptist Meeting House in Dichelling went to live in Lewes and put up a Meeting House for their own convenience, in Eastport Lane, Southover, Lewes, 1741."

(22-5-1803.) "Agreed that this Church at Lewes do from this period act independently of ye Church at Ditchling, and hold their annual Meetings at Lewes accordingly."

There were also branches of the Congregation at Maresfield, and Cuckfield. Minutes 21-3-1753: "a licence for the holding a Meeting at the House of Wm. Stephenson in the Parish of Maresfield." 1737 Minute: "Elders ordained to serve the Church of Christ Meeting in and about Ditchling."

II. Records of Curious and now obsolete religious Customs.

(22-5-1753.) "Pursuant to the appointment of last Church Meeting there was a Love Feast and Washing of feet at Fragbarrough by 145 persons in all."

1767: "Agreed that those Members of this society who are persuaded of the duty of Washing feet have the free consent of the Church to practise it, as it was performed June 22nd, 1767, at Mr. Thomas Pannatts by ninety persons."

III. Admission to Church Membership.

Baptism: For many years admission to membership was by baptism (immersion) and laying on of hands or a letter of introduction from a Church of the same Faith.

The earliest record begins: "A list of the Persons received into Church communion by Baptism and Laying of hands or by letters of commendation from Churches of the same faith as us."

17-5-1801: "A case left for consideration as follows—a Person applies to be admitted a Member of the Church without being baptised."

2-4-1811: "Extraordinary church Meeting to consider the following case, viz.: Mrs. Hannah Martin of Newland having made application to become a Member of the Church, who in our opinion has not been baptised, but in her own mind is convinced it is not requisite to be immersed or baptised according to our mode. Is it consistent with the gospel rule of liberty of conscience to admit the said Hannah Martin, and others in similar circumstances to Communion with us?" "After mature deliberation it was determined by a

majority we could not refuse admission to Communion with us any person who was sincere in the profession of Christianity."

6-1-1828: "Miss Mary Rowland joined the Church in Communion not having been baptised."

Last Notice of Public Baptisms June 3rd, 1832: "Anna Stevens and Frances, John, Nathaniel and Richard Herriot were baptised by Mr. Howse."

IV. Meetings for Discipline.

In the Eighteenth Century, the elders and deacons kept strict watch over the morals and behaviour of the Congregation. Erring members were admonished, acquitted or expelled, e.g., 1757: "The case of John Vincent was considered, and whereas he had been admonished several times and has promised a reformation and still remains in a careless way, and seldom goes to any hearing of a Sunday, and follows Gaming and keeping bad company and breaks his promises in regard to making good his payments, therefore we agree to withdraw him for such disorderly walking."

Many of the cases show the laxness of morals in the late Eighteenth Century, and also the patience shown by the chapel elders and their readiness to re-admit members showing genuine repentance.

There is mention of these cases in the 'Jernel' of John Burgess 1785-1794. He was a lay preacher and for a few years lived in the Chapel cottage. Entry for 25-8-87: "a disceplen Meeting in order to settle some divitions and disturbances that have happened among them." 5-9-1787: "Was at Home it was our Communion Day Mr. Evershed was hear. Three persons excommunicated." The diary is interesting reading and illustrates vividly the village life of his day.

Some typical extracts: 5-11-1788. "There was a Meeting kept there on account of the gunpoder plot I preachd a sermon upon psalms 107-31 there was one Hymn sung after the sermon the first hymn has been sung at that Meeting." (The Baptist Assembly for long disapproved of Hymn singing.) 23-4-1789: "Our Town was iluminated to celebrate King's recovery from a state of indisposition."

His trades were various—wool dealer, glover, leather breeches maker, gravedigger, gardener, and book-binder. He mentions attending cricket matches (on the Common) and bull baiting. He emigrated to America 1794.

There are no references to these "disciplenes" (mentioned in the 'Jernel') in the two later Minute Books: 1803-1894.

ANNIVERSARY SERVICES

First mentioned 26 May, 1805: "Called over the names of Members and broke bread." A Congregational Meeting was held in April for business and arrangements made for Anniversary services. In 1812, "The preachers were Mr. Vine of Lewis and Mr. Morris of Brighton, and a communion service in the afternoon."

On May 26th, 1816 (the Napoleonic War was over), tea was provided in the Chapel "100 persons sat down to that refreshment." Friends from other churches began to attend, and in 1829, 209 were present.

In 1836, there is a note—"No afternoon service on account of the expected eclipse of the sun." After 1838, there is no mention of a communion service. In 1848, the date was fixed for the first Sunday in July "in consequence of the difficulty of getting a Minister to

preach it being so near the Whitsuntide Meeting in London." The anniversary is still held on this date but tea is now provided in the village Hall. In July 1948, to celebrate the 250th Anniversary, a public Meeting and tea were held on the previous Saturday and the Services on Sunday. The numbers were 130.

NOTE: COMMUNION PLATE

1837: In an inventory of goods belonging to the Ditchling Congregation "2 Cups and 2 Plates (Pewter)" are mentioned. In 1891, October 10th, Robert Turner, Secretary to the congregation, wrote to George Eyre Evans: "There is no communion plate: some old plain cups and plates were all that belonged to the place at any time, I do not know what has become of them."

THE CHURCHYARD

The old gravestones are much worn. There are names of families long connected with the Meeting House and with Ditchling—Chatfield, Hallet, Martin, Agate, Caffyn, Holman, Mott, Billingshurst, Dancy, Nye, Rowland, Turner, Pannatt, Wood, and others.

On the altar tomb of Samuel Thompson, left-centre as you enter, is an interesting and unique inscription which states clearly his Unitarian belief.

From the Headstone of Samuel Thompson (Born 1766: died 1837). "He was a most sincere believer in one only Supreme Being, the Creator and Governor of the Universe, in the Divine Mission of Jesus, the Son of Joseph and Mary, but declared to be the Son of God with power by his Resurrection from the dead, and also in *Oneness* and *Exclusiveness* of the Church of God (which is distinct and separate from all sects, parties and churches in the Christian World.) Of that God of

whom Paul says, "For though there be that are called Gods whether in heaven or earth (as there be Gods many and Lords many), but to us there is but one God the Father of whom are all things and we in Him: and one Lord Jesus the Anointed, by whom are all things, and we by Him."

"The good loved him and *the base hated because they feared.*"

Across the Twitten is the private burial ground of the family of James Browne who died 1834; Secretary to the Congregation for many years.

OLD MEETING HOUSE. FREE SCHOOLS. 1814-1834

Summary from Minute Book:

Meeting of Gentlemen and Ladies, Friends of the Education of the Poor, held at the Bull Inn, Ditchling, September 13th, 1814. Decided it was to be a free School for children of *all* religious denominations. Subscribers of one guinea a year could nominate one child. Children must attend *a* place of worship on Sunday on pain of expulsion from School. They can be admitted gratuitously but preference will be given to those who can pay 1d. per week.

The founders of the School were John and Robert Chatfield of Ditchling and the Rev. William Campion, Rector of Westmeston.

It was said that "at one time half the people of Ditchling were educated here." Unfortunately, the schools had to be closed for lack of funds. The last entry in the Minute Book is 1834.

The building was across the Twitten from the Churchyard. It has since been pulled down.

“A CHAPEL WORTHY.” JAMES BROWNE,

1770-1834

In the Chapel records are many references to the Browne family, owners of the private burial ground across the Twitten. An outstanding member was James Browne, a Ditchling grocer, who lived at Place House, the timbered Tudor building opposite the Church now called Wings Place.

From 1790, when his name appears in a list of signatures, till his death, in 1834, he managed the Congregation. Zealous in all chapel business, he collected the subscriptions for various funds, was responsible for repairs, and was frequently representative at the General Baptist Assembly. A series of letters written by and to him are in the chapel records. They give a picture of a shrewd, generous man, quick tempered and in later years autocratic. His advice was sought by friends and relatives and the chapel committee often asked him to make enquiries for new Ministers.

He corresponded for 30 years with the Rev. A. Bennett, Minister 1803-1815, when he moved to Poole and then to Manchester. In these letters he appears as a kindly, hospitable friend, an affectionate father and husband and an upright, God-fearing man.

He kept the congregation to their duties as members. Minutes May 5th, 1799: “Whereas notice was given to hold a Church Meeting at Ditchling this day when neither Minister nor any of his congregation attending except James Browne and Jn. Broomfield in consequence of which no business was done . . . it is hoped that Church Meetings when duly appointed will be better attended in future.” The entry seems to be in

his handwriting. His vigilance did not relax, for 30 years later in a letter to Abraham Bennett he says, “Mr. Thomas Martin of Mockhouse very seldom attends. I don't know which comes oftenest Allen Browne or him. Mr. T. M. has not withdrawn his subscription, but he does not pay it, he is now some years in arrear and that not want of asking him.”

May, 1819, he proposed “building two pews at his own expense and let them till principal and interest is paid off and that then they shall belong to the Trustees of the Meeting House.” After deferring decision for six months, the Committee accepted this offer.

A LOST SUBSCRIPTION

In 1829, John Chatfield of London died. He had subscribed £5 a year to the Meeting House and rented a pew. He left £100 a year for benevolent purposes and Browne assumed some of this would come to Ditchling and advanced the pew rent to the Chapel Funds. Mr. Mercer, Chatfield's executor, refused to continue the grant in spite of a letter Browne wrote stating, “I have not the least doubt whatever that he had Ditchling particularly in view when he put that clause in his Will. I am as much satisfied of it as I am that two and two make four.” Getting no satisfaction, Browne then wrote to John Chatfield's widow, presenting an account for £13. Her son Robert Chatfield replied that “his Mother felt surprised at being called on for a subscription as for a debt due.” In conclusion he expressed her regret “at the want of unanimity which exists in so small a church,” apparently a reference to two quarrels referred to Robert for arbitration in which Browne had been involved.

TWO DISPUTES—

The first dispute was about a pew. Mrs. Duplock, the Minister's wife, had been turned out by a Mrs. Sally Rowland "although there was another pew on the other side *without an individual in it.*" The Minister resigned and preached a sermon on the text "They have spoken against me with lying tongues," which greatly offended the congregation. The matter was referred to Robert Chatfield. Browne advised Duplock to apologise, "it would be acting the part of man of sense and judgement, the part of gentleman and a Christian." His advice was taken. He was greatly concerned about the effect of this quarrel on the Chapel's reputation. "I can't go from home, East, West, North or South without hearing of it."

The second quarrel concerned Browne himself and a young Mr. Esdaile, Minister 1830-32, whose independent conduct as Minister he bitterly resented. Without consulting him, Esdaile had called a meeting of subscribers to discuss altering the time of service from afternoon to evening which "will be injurious to the congregation and unpleasant to the *Senior* members generally." Browne reported the incident to Esdaile's father admitting he, Browne, had "sometimes acted without calling a Committee in matters of small importance . . . But do I ought on that account be treated as an arbitrary tyrant and the congregation called debased slaves." He states he will resign his office "though he has been Treasurer for 40 years."

The father replied—a sensible friendly letter—pleading his son's youth and that he really cared for the interests of the congregation. "When the heart is right some allowance should be made for judgement." He

hopes Browne will not resign "for that would inflict a great injury on the good cause you have maintained for so long a period with so much zeal and with a high character."

Browne did not resign, and Mr. Esdaile held services in the evening. "With respect to candles, the Committee agree to send candles if Mr. Esdaile desires it." Minute 28-11-1830. Signed by Browne.

James Browne died on January 20th, 1834, and was buried in the family ground. It seems strange there is no mention of his death in the Minutes, only a notice February 9th "that Mr. John Wood be requested to take the office of Treasurer for the ensuing year."