

CHAPTER 4

The brothers Watson and interregnum (1735 - 1795)

Despite this successful ministry over 40 years, the congregation remained without a pastor from 1735 to 1741, having to rely on help from visiting preachers.

Growing rather anxious for a settled ministry, the congregation applied to a Rev. Sutherland, who was the dissenting minister at Saffron Walden, and he in turn contacted a theological college in Edinburgh.

This led to an introduction to Mr. John Watson, the son of a farmer, who was born in Aberdeen in 1713 and graduated with a Master of Arts degree at the university there. He became a tutor in classical and general literature, one of his students being the 'pious though eccentric' Alexander Cruden, who later compiled the renowned Biblical Concordance.

Mr. Watson arrived from Scotland on 3rd June 1741, and accepted the offer to become pastor of the joint church, being ordained soon afterwards. He married Anne Hanchett of Chrishall Grange, and thus became possessed of an estate and the manorial rights attaching to the manor of Great Chishill. To these parents were born nine children.

In 1745, however, the congregation at Melbourn expressed themselves dissatisfied with the ministry of Mr. Watson and wished his removal, not only from Melbourn but from Chishill as well.

Mr. Watson firmly opposed this action, and adjudication was sought from the Board of Dissenters in London. As a result, the two congregations went their separate ways and Mr. Watson continued his ministry in Chishill until 1760, when he moved south to a destitute church in the Borough, South London. He still made special visits to Chishill to conduct Holy Communion.

Although Mr. Watson no doubt had a strong Scottish accent (his form of speech being described as 'not popular'), he was held in high esteem and affection in Chishill. During his residence there, he was honoured with the award of a Doctor of Divinity degree by Aberdeen University. He died in July 1783, aged 69 years.

A period of 35 years ensued from 1760, during which the church had no settled pastor, although Services were conducted by various laymen of ability. One of these was in fact William Watson, the brother of Rev. John Watson. Born in 1722, he had had no academic training for the ministry, but being a man of piety and intelligence, his brother encouraged him to preach. He introduced him to the congregation at Chishill, where he became a member although living in Melbourn.

William Watson had a prodigious knowledge of the Bible, and could instantly give chapter and verse for any text quoted. He was never ordained and would not undertake any pastoral duties, but he had an arrangement whereby his brother, coming regularly from London to administer his estate in Chishill, would officiate at Holy Communion and Baptism.

He was considered 'a judicious and evangelical preacher, but possessed of a voice naturally unmusical, which was made even more inharmonious by a broad Scottish accent, so that his labours were far from popular with the multitude'. Tradition has it that one Sunday morning, Mr. Watson rode on horseback from Melbourn to find the church door locked against him, and another person conducting the Service.

He led a life that was holy and blameless, and he was greatly respected by those around him, but it had to be admitted that 'he could not be classed with the eminently useful preachers of the Gospel'. He died of apoplexy on 6th January 1793, aged 71 years.