

REV. ISAAC LAWRENCE NEAR (1871-1952)

The Rev. Isaac Lawrence NEAR, the son of a Baptist Minister Isaac Near and Eliza Goodson, was born in Coggeshall (in the district of Witham), Essex 17th November 1871. He married Abigail Eliza PLUMSTEAD (born 1870 Great Coggeshall, Essex) in Braintree, Essex during the September QRT 1894. He retired in ill-health in 1931; and died in London 12th March 1952

The Rev. Isaac Lawrence NEAR received his ministerial training at Spurgeon's College (1892-1894)¹ and served successively as Minister at the Baptist Churches at March, Cambridgeshire, 1893-98; Christ Church, Six Ways, Birmingham, 1898-1903; Penge 1903-31.

That which follows was found amongst the detritus of a South African deceased estate. It is published solely as a prospective adjunct to research that someone may be doing into the life and times of Rev. Isaac Lawrence NEAR, the Surgeon's College and the English Baptist ministry .

Extracts from the Life-Story of REV. ISAAC LAWREWNCE NEAR (1871-1952)
written in 1945 and left for his family.

It was in my Father's early days at College when I was about eighteen months old, my mother took me to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and while Spurgeon² was in prayer, I was carried out squalling. (I) Must have had a good voice. It is said that he turned the interruption to advantage by asking in his petition "May the young voice we have just heard one day tell the praise of Zion's king". Some years afterwards my father had occasion to see Mr. Spurgeon and took me as a lad with him, introducing me as the boy who had interrupted him in prayer. I had very recently made my decision to be a Christian, and he asked me if his prayer was to be answered, and I told him "Yes". His eyes filled with tears: he said "That was in the early '70's, I remember it happening twice: God has answered my prayer for you, you go and find the other one". A few days after that he was speaking in Exeter Hall and told the incident as an illustration of answered prayer.

Another interview with the great preacher took place some years afterwards.

I had fallen in love with the craft of wood-carving so arrangements were made with Mr. W.B. Polley³ of Coggeshall, with whom my father had been apprenticed.

Polley of Coggeshall was an artist and a great carver, the friend of Thorneycroft⁴, Blomfield⁵,

¹ The following historical note is supplied by Judy Powles, Librarian, Spurgeon's College, South Norwood Hill, London: The information on our 19th century students is fairly minimal. We have a record card for each which gives the church from where they came, their dates in College and subsequent pastorates where known. So for Rev. Isaac L. Near the card says that he came to College from Coggeshall in Essex in 1892 and left College in 1894. It rather sounds as though he had a student pastorate in March, Cambridgeshire as his first pastorate, according to the card, started in 1893 and lasted until 1898. Then he went to Aston, Birmingham from 1898 to 1903 and from there to Penge (South East London) from 1903 to 1931 – a very long pastorate. The date of death on the card is 12th March 1952.

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), English "Boy Preacher of the Fens"

³ William Balley Polley (1833-1916), Cabinet Maker & Master Carver

⁴ The Family Thorneycroft, the sculptors: father Thomas Thorneycroft (1815-1885); mother Mary née Francis (1809-1895); son Sir William ("Hamo") Thorneycroft (1850-1925)

Bohm [sic] ⁶ and others who thought highly of his work. During my apprenticeship I worked on contracts for St. Margaret's, Westminster Abbey, Norwich Cathedral, St. George's Church at Cannes, Brasenose College, Oxford, and many other interesting places.

The last night I slept in the old home before going off to business, I had gone to bed and my father came up and knelt beside the bed commending me to God's guidance, and care, and asking if it was His will that I might one day be led into the ministry. I opened my eyes and looked at him and said to myself "Old chap, that will never be". Yet strange to say I afterwards spent nearly fifty years "on the walls of Zion".

About that time one of the first Christian Endeavour societies in this country had been formed at the chapel by Miss Plumstead, and she invited me to speak there. That young lady afterwards became my wife and has been the dear companion, sharer of my joys and sorrows, all through these years (over fifty-three at the time of writing) .

About that time I first met Wesley Boud ⁷ who afterwards played a great part in my ministerial life. It was Good Friday week and to celebrate our engagement we drove over in pony and trap to the Anniversary at Bures, where a Mr. Boud from London and our Minister was also to speak. On the morning of Good Friday I received a note from my minister saying he was ill and could not go, would I take a letter to the minister there. Mr. Boud looked at me and said "Make that chap speak, he looks as if he can". So I had to take my Minister's place and was the first speaker. Mr. Boud followed and was warm in praise of my effort. He said "I hear there is a possibility of this young man coming to London and the first London pulpit he preaches in shall be Penge Tabernacle". Mr. Boud stayed the night and over the supper table he was told that as I had received a very good offer in business I might not be going to College after all. Mr. Boud returned to London on the Saturday and though he had Easter Day before him, he wrote at once to me a very earnest letter about putting my hand to the plough and looking back. That letter finally decided me to go forward with my application to College.

While in College I often heard Dr. Parker ⁸ on Thursday mornings at the City Temple. I received a note from the Doctor and later called on him and dared to ask Him to my ordination at March. It was impossible but he asked if I had read Robert Hall's description of the Fens ⁹. "Ah, well after all Oliver Cromwell came from those Fens". There and then the old chap stood, and prayed that God would bless me and use me greatly in the service.

⁵ Sir Reginald Theodore Blomfield (1856-942), British architect, garden designer and author

⁶ Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834-1890), English a medallist and sculptor

⁷ Rev. John Wesley Boud (c. 1843-1902) and his wife Mary Ann (-1925) are buried Beckenham, London

⁸ Rev. Dr Joseph Parker (1830-1902), English Nonconformist doctor of divinity, preacher and author

⁹ Rev. Robert Hall (1764-1831), English Baptist minister

Early in 1896 I was invited to spend another Sunday at Christ Church, Six Ways, Birmingham, this time definitely with a view to the Pastorate. After much prayer and consultation I decided to accept. Soon the building was full, often standing in the gallery at night. The pulpits in Birmingham in those days were well filled with strong men. At Carr's Lane, Jowett¹⁰ was in his prime, Cambell Morgan¹¹ just finding a good ministry at Handsworth, both were neighbours within easy walk. Luke Wiseman¹² at the Central Hall, Enoch Salt¹³ at Sozells, Gregory Mantle¹⁴ at New Town Row. We had a great fraternal of ministers and some great conferences.

In the Autumn of 1902 my old friend Wesley Boud died rather suddenly - I had preached several times for him at Penge Tabernacle. Indeed in 1893 when the present building was being erected he took me in to see it and standing together on the lower platform saw the workmen raising the large beams of the roof, he turned to me and said "I reckon I am putting this building up for you". Almost prophetic for he preached nine years under that roof whilst I was there twenty-eight years. The Church secretary wrote and asked me to take a Sunday soon after his death, but I felt I could not preach from Bout's old pulpit. The following June I was asked to take a Sunday School Anniversary and was definitely approached about entertaining a call to the Pastorate and I definitely refused as I was very happy in my great work at Birmingham.

After long reflection and prayer, I could not refuse, so accepted the call to Penge. So once again I was moved to another sphere not by my own seeking or manoeuvring, by means that I knew not of at that time.

I commenced my ministry at Penge in October 1903, which in my case, as in Mr. Boud's, coincided with the Church's Thanksgiving Day. Twice the Church at Penge had been linked with Christ Church, Birmingham. Rev. George Samuel¹⁵, on leaving College, settled at Penge. When he moved to Birmingham, Mr. Boud followed him at Penge. Then Samuel died, I followed him at Birmingham. Samuel was a great friend of Spurgeon, was staying at Mentone, and when Spurgeon died, was at his bedside.

To me, Penge was a big task. Boud had been very popular, a great pastor and a tender preacher, wonderfully loved. It was no easy place to fill. There was a large congregation and membership, a large Sunday school with two Missions.

The Baptist work in Penge was founded and fathered by Spurgeon. He, one of the first and largest contributors, guaranteed personally to the builder that he would be paid. He laid the foundation stone, preached the opening sermon.

The work prospered greatly under Boud and a larger building was erected. The new Tabernacle erected by Boud seated 1,170 lettable sittings. When I came £2,000 still owed on mortgage. Gradually

¹⁰ Rev. Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), English scholar, classicist and theologian

¹¹ Rev. Dr George Campbell Morgan (1863-1945), Salvation Army evangelist, Congregational minister and Biblical scholar

¹² Rev. Frederick Luke Wiseman (1858-), Wesleyan Methodist minister

¹³ Rev. Enoch Salt (1845-), Wesleyan Methodist minister

¹⁴ Rev. John Gregory Mantle (1853-1925), Wesleyan Methodist minister

¹⁵ Rev. George Samuel (1855-), Baptist minister

it was reduced, the property renovated in 1906, new rostrum and marble baptistry [sic] erected. (This was) An entirely new system of hot water heating instead of hot air. In 1912, electric lighting was substituted for gas throughout the entire property. In 1910 the Church parlour and Primary Hall was erected. The entire property was freed from debt in 1917. The Memorial Organ at a cost of £2,300 was opened, free of debt, in 1922. In 1924, the entire property, inside and out, was renovated and redecorated so that when I retired from the Pastorate in 1931, the entire property was freehold, debt free and in good order.

For the most part a Minister's life is of necessity a very lonely one. There are confidences that can never be shared; apart from these there are one's own personal problems into which few can enter.

On coming to Penge I found real friendship. Alas, all my fellow voyagers have since passed on and the loneliness grows. (This refers to a sea-trip to the Mediterranean made possible by a good friend) .

I preached my last sermon in the Tabernacle on October 18th, 1921, on 1 John 2, 17¹⁶.

With deep regret yet with grateful relief I relinquished my last and long pastorate. There was a sense of frustration in having to give up all at 60 years, singularly the age at which my father was compelled to retire.

I heard nearly all the pulpit giants of the 19th. Century, CH. Spurgeon, Hugh Stowell Brown¹⁷, Dr. MacLaren [sic]¹⁸, Morley Punshion [sic]¹⁹, John Mc.Neil [sic]²⁰, Dr. Parker, Canon Liddon²¹, Alexander Whyte²², and many others, but as an expositor with tremendous drive and able to get the message over, Archibald Brown²³ was my hero.

Of my own ministry, what is written is written. Much has already been gathered into the heavenly garner, through the years I have often been cheered by the acknowledgments of those who have been led into the Christian life and helped on the way. After all this is a Minister's chief joy and the Master's appraisal must be the crown of all. Yet there is a measure of satisfaction in the statistics of Church life and I am not ashamed to give the appended summary of activities:

Baptisms and received in Fellowship	1,278
Marriages	224
Burials	567

¹⁶ "And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever".

¹⁷ Rev. Hugh Stowell Brown (1823-1886), at first an Anglican, later Baptist minister and preacher of renown

¹⁸ Rev. Dr. Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910), Baptist minister and eminent cleric

¹⁹ Rev. Dr. William Morley Punshon (1824-1881), Wesleyan Methodist minister

²⁰ John McNeil

²¹ Canon Henry Parry Liddon (1829-1890), Anglican cleric, Cannon Resident of St. Paul's Cathedral, eminent preacher and Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford

²² Rev. Alexander Whyte (1836-1921), Scottish Baptist minister

²³ Rev. Archibald Geikie Brown (1844-1922), Baptist minister

Epilogue

Now I come to the last chapter. What is the experience at the close of an active life? Fullerton²⁴ said not long before his passing “I have booked my quarters on the other side, taken my ticket, packed my luggage and am waiting in the hall for the cab-man to come and fetch me”. I have got just there; ever since by first big operation in 1928 life has been precarious and often painful and I know the final curtain may fall at any time.

Like Charles Kingsley, “I am looking on the act of death with earnest and reverent curiosity”²⁵.

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep²⁶.

²⁴ Rev. James Fullerton (1807-1886), Presbyterian minister of County Londonderry, Ireland & later émigré to Sydney, Australia

²⁵ Rev. Prof. Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) English clergyman, university professor, historian & novelist

²⁶ 2 Timothy 1:12 "... nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."