

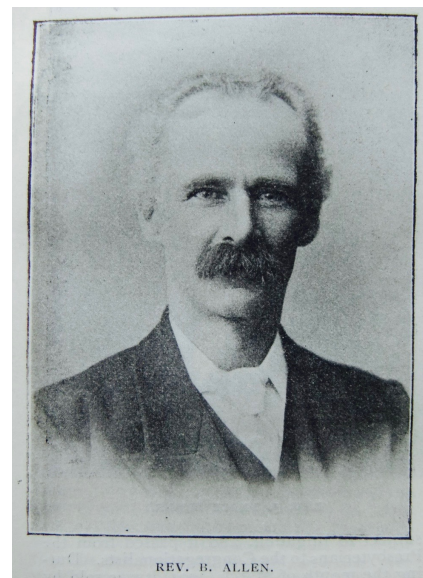
## Defoe's Chapel, Tooting, London

Transcription of Article in the Christian Messenger by Fenton Allen

During recent decades the Primitive Methodist Church has acquired some historic ecclesiastical edifices. Chapels that have belonged to other communions have been purchased and utilised for the prosecution of our many-sided work. In London we secured the far-famed Surrey Chapel, for many years the scene of the evangelical labours of the eccentric Rowland Hill, godly James Sharman, and cultured Newman Hall. Hockey Chapel, Nottingham, was acquired from the Wesleyans. It is the burial-place of Alexander Kilham, the principal founder of the New Connexion Church. Within its walls John Wesley preached the Gospel. Cheltenham Chapel is distinguished as having been favoured with the ministry of the Rev. James Smith, a preacher and writer of no common repute, whose books on religious subjects are to be found in many cottage homes. The Church of the Saviour, Birmingham, was formerly Unitarian, and was built for the congregation of the eloquent George Dawson. Our latest acquisition from other denominations has been the recent purchase of the High Street Chapel, Tooting. The original congregation was founded by Daniel Defoe, the celebrated author of that favourite classic of childhood's happy days - "Robinson Crusoe."



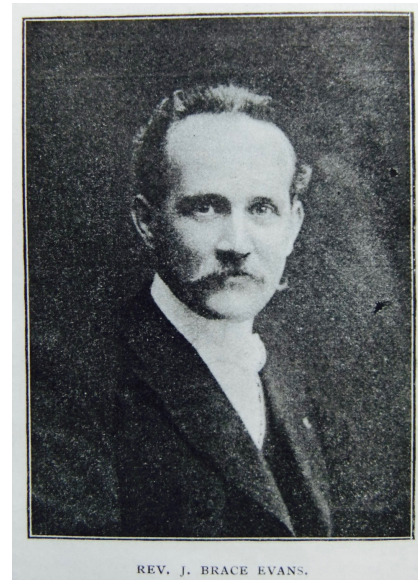
Fashionable Tooting, or to give it its full name of Tooting Graveney, is included in the wide area of greater London. It is located at a distance of some seven miles from Westminster Abbey, and it is said to be the smallest parish in the beautiful county of Surrey. The name of the place has an un-English, if not a foreign sound. Some archaeologists have supposed that the name is derived from its having been used as a "tut" or a "beacon," where fire and flame shot forth from the higher lands to warn the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhood of the approach of the invading foe. There is not a doubt that originally it was the home of some branch of the Saxon or Teutonic family of the Totingas, who have stamped their name upon their place of residence. In the Norman period the Manor was held by the powerful Gravenells. In course of time the name of the parish became corrupted into Tooting Graveney. Daniel Defoe is the most celebrated personality connected with Tooting. He is said to have lived for a short time during his early manhood at Merton, close by Tooting Junction Railway Station. Daniel Defoe, the "renowned author of "Robinson Crusoe," was born in London about the year 1661. By birth his father was a Northamptonshire man, who began business as a butcher in St. Giles', London. The "illustrious" Daniel was well educated at a Dissenting Academy, with the view of his becoming a Nonconformist minister. In the year 1685,



Defoe began his chequered and eventful career as a horse-dealer. In the days of the Rebellion he served with Monmouth, and also was a volunteer in the army of King William III. His military exploits caused him to wander in France, Spain, and other Continental Countries. Unfortunately, in 1693, he became a bankrupt, but to his honour, be it stated, that in his later years he most honourably met the financial demands of his numerous creditors. As an accountant he was employed by the glass-duty commissioners, and was also secretary to a Tilbury pantile factory.

In the closing years of the seventeenth century he devoted himself to literature. He became one of the greatest and most illustrious of English prose writers. His admirers have styled him "The Father of English novelists." His prolific pen produced over two hundred and fifty separate works, which have a style peculiarly their own, and are thoroughly distinct from all other writings in the great realm of literature. He also was an extensive contributor to the journalistic and periodical literature of his age. As a busy pamphleteer he wrote in defence of the king and his policy. Defoe's political poem, entitled, "The True-Born Englishman," was apologetic in character. It defended the Dutch nationality of the king, showing that the English people were a composite race, with a mixture of foreign blood flowing in their veins.

During the reign of Queen Anne he took a foremost part in the bitter controversy between the bigoted High Church faction and the unfortunate persecuted Nonconformists. The publishing of his satirical and ironical treatise - "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters" - stirred up national strife, and made him a martyr for conscience' sake. The House of Commons denounced his book, and determined that the copies should be publicly burned. A reward of £50 was offered for the apprehension of the author. He was tried at the Old Bailey, and was sentenced to pay the extravagant fine of two hundred marks, to stand thrice in the public pillory, and to be imprisoned during, her Majesty's pleasure.



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At the time of his incarceration in gaol he is described as "a middle-sized, spare man, about forty years old, of a brown complexion, and dark-brown coloured hair, but wears a wig. A hooked nose, a sharp chin, grey eyes, and has a large mole near his mouth." While imprisoned for the good cause of righteousness, he was ever busy with his pen. His prison writings and literary output included his "True Collection" of all his numerous publications. His "Review" was the largest, if not his most important work. One writer says: "It forms one of the greatest monuments of literary industry ever reared by a single hand, embracing as it does in more than five thousand printed pages, essays on almost every branch of human knowledge, and these written during nine years, in which he also published no fewer than eighty distinct works, themselves containing as many as 4,727 pages." After his release from prison, he lived for a short time at Bury St. Edmunds, in Suffolk. Upon his return to London, he was sent in the year 1703, by Robert Harley on a political mission of secrecy to the West of England. During the following year his patron, Harley, despatched him to Scotland, where he resided, for sixteen months, and was trying to promote the union of the two kingdoms. In 1715 Defoe published his immortal "Robinson Crusoe," based on the enforced exile of Alexander Selkirk, the marooned sailor in the lonely sea-girt isle of Juan Fernandez. This wonderfully and

graphically written story-book has become a great favourite with the young and the old, and with the learned and the illiterate.

Defoe, in his declining days; became exceedingly prosperous. At Stoke Newington he built for himself "a very handsome house," where he lived in the style of a country gentleman. He died in April, 1731, and his mortal remains were laid to rest in the famous cemetery of Bunhill Fields. It has been said "That great as Defoe was as an author, he was far greater as a man. He dared to do his own thinking in an age when independence of thought was a rare thing. For the sake of civil and religious liberty he went from his drawing-room to the prison cell, from his carriage to the pillory, and, if it had been necessary, would have gone to the stake."

Although Daniel Defoe was trained for the ministry, yet, for some unknown cause, he was never ordained to the pastorate. During his short residence at Tooting, and in the year 1688, he became the honoured founder of a Nonconformist church. Their successors worshipped in the chapel that still bears his name. It is more than probable that the congregation gathered by Defoe at first held their religious services in a house. As their numbers increased they utilised a temporary structure of wood, which was used by them as a meeting house until the erection of the Defoe Memorial Chapel. This edifice was erected in 1765 - some thirty years after Defoe's death. It fronts the main street of the town, and is built in the plain style of ecclesiastical architecture of the Georgian period. The old oak pulpit of Defoe's Memorial Chapel is sacred with historic memories. For many years It was used by the Rev. Thomas Goodwin, D.D., who was the President of Magdalen College, Oxford, a member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and one of "the two Atlases and Patriarchs of Independency."

The pastorate of Defoe's Chapel has been sustained by a succession of learned and godly divines. The first minister was the distinguished Dr. Joshua Oldfield. He was the son of one of the ejected clergymen of 1662, and held the honourable position of tutor to the family of Paul Foley, Speaker of the House of Commons during the reign of William Prince of Orange. Under his devoted ministry, the chapel was regularly attended by several respectable, educated, and even wealthy households. Dr. Oldfield was succeeded by such pulpit dignitaries as the Rev. Henry Miles, D.D., F.R.S.; Dr. Samuel Wilton; James Bowden, the recognised founder of the Surrey Mission; and William Henry, the indefatigable secretary of the Home Missionary Society. In the year 1861, the Rev. William Anderson was invited to preside over the sacred ministries of the church. In his inaugural address he reminded his auditory of the moral heroism of Defoe, "who, as a brave patriot and man of genius, in an age of persecution, had here lifted the banner of Nonconformity." Within recent years the ownership of the chapel was subject to litigation, and it passed from the Presbyterians to the Congregationalists. During the month of March, 1904, it was sold by the Rev. Bevill Allen and the Trustees to our own church for the sum of £1,900. It has been acquired by the Rev. J. Brace Evans (\*\*\*\*LINK) and the workers of the Balham Circuit. We are hopeful that this latest "corner" added to our Connexional Vineyard may become the birthplace of many precious and immortal souls.

## References

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