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BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF
LEADING LAYMEN

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SIR SAMUEL MORTON PETO, Bart., M.P.

*The Man who Built the
Houses of Parliament*

by
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*Presented by
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SIR SAMUEL MORTON PETO, BART.

WHEN we go to London for the Spring Assembly of the Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society we wend our way to Bloomsbury Central Church. On the right-hand side of its pulpit we can see a handsome brass plate inscribed to the memory of Sir Morton Peto, Bart., the donor and builder of the church, who passed to his reward more than fifty years ago. Fifty years is long enough for most men to be forgotten. But during these days of our Missionary Society's Ter-Jubilee Celebrations, we who have to live in the present and to plan for the solution of the problems of the morrow are busy cutting away the moss which has clung round many human pillars of the past. No man has a better right to be revealed and restored to his proper place than Sir Morton Peto, to whose life and character and princely generosity our denomination and Missionary Society owe so much.

Not that his benefactions began and ended within Baptist circles. Reedham Orphanage, Haverstock Hill Working School, Essex Hall and Earlswood Asylum, all bear witness to his wide and generous philanthropy. But life itself is larger than the facts which help to make it up and it is in that spirit that we would attempt this memoir.

Samuel Morton Peto, to give him his full name, was born at Whitmore House, Sutton, Surrey, on August 4, 1809, that memorable year which saw the Great Napoleon at the height of his power in Europe and also the births of Lincoln, Tennyson and Gladstone. Both his grandfather and father were farmers. Young Samuel was sent to a school close to the lychgate of Cobham Church. At twelve years of age he was removed and sent to a boarding school at Brixton Hill in which his uncle Henry, a builder, was much interested and which had a well-known Independent as headmaster. Famous preachers like Jay of Bath and

Leifchild of Craven Chapel, Regent Street, were accustomed to visit the school, and Samuel's uncle used to offer numerous prizes for the best essays on religious subjects.

Such an atmosphere did much to make "the boy the father to the man." Throughout Peto's life his religion was the mainstay of his character; and the foundations of his striking personality were as surely laid in that, as were the stones well and truly laid in all the buildings which he was later to erect. At fourteen he was apprenticed to his uncle and went to live with him at 31 Little Britain in the City of London. Here he not only worked the same long hours as the men, but he attended technical classes until after nine o'clock at night. Two years later we find him studying architecture at Furnival's Inn, Holborn, and one of his first drawings was the east end of Ramsgate Parish Church. He was always a good draughtsman and was ever ready with his pen. His services as letter writer were in much demand by some of his poorer neighbours who could neither read nor write. While acting as foreman at this period, Raymond's Buildings, Gray's Inn, were among those erected under his direction.

He had barely reached his majority when his uncle, Henry Peto, died, leaving the building business to his two nephews, Thomas Grissell and Samuel Morton Peto, between whom there was always perfect accord. The firm was a sound one, but its liquid capital was limited. We are so familiar with the phrase about "the hungry forties" that we sometimes forget that the "thirties" were hungrier still. Fierce riots broke out all over the country when the House of Lords rejected the Reform Bill of 1832, and it was in those days that the genius of Charles Dickens revealed the sufferings of the people in the pages of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*. The first tender of the new firm was for Hungerford Market, but the junior partner looked so youthful that they nearly

lost the contract! Samuel Peto told the Earl of Devon, who made the award, that he would take to wearing spectacles to make himself look more mature! The work, however, was so well done that, during the next ten years, the firm built, in addition to other remunerative contracts, the Reform Club, the Nelson Monument, the Lyceum Theatre, the Houses of Parliament, including the Speaker's residence and libraries, besides the Royal Gallery and St. Stephen's Hall.

During these years, Samuel Peto lived at Albany Terrace, York Road, Lambeth. This home was broken up early in 1842 by the death of his wife which left him with four young children. He had always been a close student of the Bible and it was about this time that he began to be convinced of the soundness of Believers' baptism. Twelve months after his bereavement he married the daughter of Henry Kelsall of Rochdale, one of the most influential Baptist laymen in Lancashire at that time. From then onwards he linked himself with the Baptists.

II

THE next few years were to witness the great railway boom in Britain and, on account of the experience and capacity shown by his firm, no less than one-seventh of the railway lines were laid by them. In 1846 Grissell and Peto dissolved partnership in order that the latter might devote himself more entirely to these large railway contracts, the risks of which were unwelcome to his senior colleague, but they separated in perfect harmony and goodwill.

It was while Samuel Peto was engaged in building what is now the Norwich section of the London and North-

Eastern Railway that he first met the Rev. William Brock, who was then minister of St. Mary's, Norwich. This church he was in the habit of attending when he was in that city. He had also recently purchased the estate of Somerleyton near Lowestoft which his ability transformed into one of the finest country seats, after he had first rebuilt the village itself. He then bought the barren land near to the then-little town of Lowestoft and, at great expense, laid out the harbour and esplanade which set that centre in the way of becoming the busy port it is today.

Meantime a close and cordial friendship developed between Mr. Brock and himself, and minister and layman never worked together to better purpose than did these two men in "the hungry forties" of the last century among the 30,000 workmen who were constantly employed by Peto's firm. The men were paid their wages in cash every week—a rare thing in those days—and Mr. Brock was given a free hand in all that made for their general welfare. Suitable dwellings were erected for the men to dwell in. Books and magazines were provided and religious services were held. A Bible was given to every man who could read. All the workmen were encouraged to join sick benefit clubs and Peto gave large sums to induce them to do so. Both the Bishop of Norwich and the Dean of Ely paid high tribute to his influence and testified to the good and exemplary conduct of the railway labourer in the eastern counties. One result of all this was that Peto was asked to give evidence before a House of Commons Committee in 1846 on the evils of the "Truck System"—so vividly portrayed in Disraeli's *Sybil*—and it was largely due to him that some of its worst abuses were removed. Until then many contractors withheld the men's wages for weeks, and their only means of living was by obtaining on credit shoddy goods at a high price from the stores owned by their employers. This meant that the labourers

were always in debt. Peto entered Parliament as member for Norwich in 1847 and, seven years later, he saw the Truck Act radically amended.

When in town he lived at 47 Russell Square, Bloomsbury, until he removed to 12 Kensington Palace Gardens in 1855. During this period he did much for the extension of our denomination in the Metropolis. The site on which Bloomsbury Central Church stands was owned by a State Department and the authorities were unwilling to lease the land for the erection of a Nonconformist place of worship unless shops were built underneath. Peto took the matter up, not simply for Bloomsbury, but for other possible cases. The outcome was that permission was granted, the only stipulation being that the church should be ecclesiastical in style and appearance. Its twin towers seemed to make this doubly sure! The ground rent was fixed at £200 a year and this was paid for the next fifty-seven years. Generous and public-spirited laymen connected with the London Baptist Association led the way in raising funds for the purchase of the freehold when Thomas Phillips (with whom the writer was privileged to serve a few years later) began his ministry at Bloomsbury in 1905.

Peto built Bloomsbury in 1848 at a cost of £18,000. The project was deemed a rash venture by many. He persuaded his friend, Mr. Brock of Norwich, to accept the pastorate with the result that the fainthearts were soon belied. In the next few years the newly-gathered congregation repaid him the money which he had spent on the building. This he promptly re-expended in the purchase and alteration of the Diorama at Regent's Park into the chapel bearing that name and which became the centre of honoured and outstanding ministries until the lease expired in 1920. The Tabernacle at Notting Hill was also built by Peto about this time.

Peto became Treasurer of the Baptist Missionary

Society in 1846 and held this office for twenty-one years. During that time he defrayed the cost of no fewer than five deputations to different mission fields and, at the close of one such visit to Jamaica, a debt of about £9,000 was liquidated. The heroic efforts of William Knibb had assisted greatly in the removal of slavery throughout the island in 1833, but during the seven years of so-called "apprenticeship for freedom scheme" which followed, there was abundant room for tyranny and the bitter resentment of the planters resulted in the destruction of much denominational property. When time had elapsed and feelings had lessened, an appeal was made to the home churches for assistance and Peto was among the first to send out a temporary structure for use as a chapel on the site that is named Mount Peto down to the present day. He was also a warm supporter of the plan that every missionary on the field should have at least one friend and correspondent at home. This did much to avoid any repetition of those misunderstandings which clouded the last years of Carey, Marshman and Ward.

His activities were unceasing. In the decade which followed the opening of Bloomsbury Chapel, the firm of which he was the head became the largest employer of labour in the world. He completed one section of the Great Western Railway which runs from Paddington through Oxford to Wolverhampton. He constructed the first railway in Denmark which was opened by the King, who invested him with the Order of the Danebrog. His firm undertook the contract for the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, including the bridge over the St. Lawrence—and whilst the work was well done, a heavy loss was incurred owing to the unexpected difficulties which were encountered. The firm's works appeared in the Argentine and in the depths of Russia, as well as in Queensland and on the Black Sea, while the Victoria London Docks were built immediately afterwards.

PETO was a close friend of George Stephenson and Isaac Brunel. In addition to his efforts to amend the Truck Act, he was responsible for the passing of what was known as the Peto Act in 1850. This enabled trust properties for religious purposes to be employed in a variety of ways without the drawing up of a fresh conveyance. This measure also greatly simplified the appointment of trustees and was of great assistance to Nonconformists. He also took an active part in the debate on the Church Rates Abolition Bill and stated his conviction that such a step would benefit the Established Church. He also advocated a wiser and more equitable distribution of the Church of England's financial resources with a view to establishing settlements and city missions, as well as the augmenting of the stipends of the poorer clergy. In this as in much else he was far ahead of his time. He also held office for many years as Chairman of the Protestant Dissenting Deputies.

It was during this period that the Prince Consort dreamt of a Great Exhibition for all the Arts of Peace to be held in London. Such a project was frowned on by many and the Prince was snubbed for his pains. One well-known member of Parliament who was caricatured by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*, deplored such an undertaking, and warned his fellow countrymen to take care of their wives and daughters, their property and their lives, if any such thing took place! He even bespoke the intervention of the Almighty in the matter! The King of Prussia forbade even his own brother, who was afterwards to be the German Emperor, Wilhelm I, to visit London if the Exhibition took place through fear of his being influenced by so large a gathering of "reds"! Financial support was also lacking and the whole plan might have been abandoned but for the timely assistance

of Peto who, in a letter addressed from the Reform Club in 1850 to an interested friend, offered to guarantee £50,000 towards the enterprise. Such a sum caused much comment until it was discovered after discreet enquiry that the guarantor was worth nearly £700,000. The Exhibition Committee was so encouraged by this gesture that it proceeded to work at once. Peto was thanked by the Prince Consort for his public spirit and was made a Commissioner of the Exhibition shortly afterwards. Housed in glass and opened by Queen Victoria in 1851, it was subsequently removed from Hyde Park to Sydenham, where C. H. Spurgeon used to meet by one of its fountains the lady who afterwards became his wife. Here it may be remarked that Peto was among the first to recognise the genius of Spurgeon and he not only sent him a reading-lamp of his own design for use on train journeys, but laid the foundation stone of the first Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1861 and contributed £5,000 towards its cost. He also guaranteed £500 a year for general church extension in London at this period. And this at a time when the different liabilities of his firm exceeded £11,000,000.

It was the hope of the promoters of the Great Exhibition that an enterprise of this quality which aimed to bring the peoples of this and other countries together would herald a further era of peace. But such hopes, like many similar ones in a later generation, were doomed to disappointment. Trouble began to brew between Turkey and Russia in the early fifties and the support of Turkey by Britain and France led to the Crimean War. This conflict was almost welcomed by the ignorant, both among the rich and the poor, until the historic dispatches of Sir William Russell revealed the folly and incompetence of leaders and government alike. "There is," he wrote, "nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no roads, no commissariat, no medicine, no clothes, no arrangement:

the only thing in abundance is cholera." Peto, as a member of Parliament, felt the national disgrace as keenly as anyone. Effective transport between Balaclava Harbour and the battlefields was the key to the problem and only the construction of a railway could solve it. He mentioned the matter to Lord Palmerston, who in turn spoke to the Duke of Newcastle as the Minister for War. The latter gratefully accepted the suggestion and gave Peto urgent instructions that the firm should omit nothing that they might consider necessary. Peto's only condition was that his firm should reap no pecuniary advantage whatever from the transaction, and he resigned his seat as M.P. for Norwich in order that he might the better superintend the work.

Within a fortnight twenty-three large steamers laden with men, plant, horses, commissariat and other stores for the comfort of the workmen and soldiers were sent out, together with three doctors and missionaries. The Duke of Newcastle saw them off and was greatly impressed at the care taken for the men. He was particularly interested in some tarpaulins which were to be used for their shelters until huts could be erected, and said they would also be splendid for the soldiers who were having to sleep on the bare ground. Peto at once offered to obtain an additional supply for this purpose, but the pundits in the Ordnance Department deemed such a procedure "irregular," and so the ship sailed without them, and the soldiers, presumably, continued to sleep in the open amid the arctic conditions of the Crimea.

Two months later the Duke of Newcastle asked the Premier, Lord Aberdeen, to recommend Peto's name to Queen Victoria for a baronetcy, which step was cordially approved by Her Majesty. His title appeared in the *London Gazette* of February 16, 1855, and henceforth he was known as Sir Morton Peto.

IN the press of all these things from without, the life from within had a sure place. His letters to his wife and children while he journeyed to all parts of the world in discharge of his contracts, or as he was compelled to go to company offices in times of financial stress (which were far commoner then than they are today) to obtain the large sums of money due to his firm for work done, show not only a tenderness and love of children, but a calm faith and trust in God Who gave him patience and resignation together with inexhaustible courage in days of adversity. He was a deacon of Bloomsbury Chapel and a regular attendant at church meetings when in town. "I think," he writes, "nearly all the advantages of church membership are lost in London, where parties co-operate so little together for their mutual edification and in promoting the Kingdom of their Lord."

The great Earl of Shaftesbury and Sir Morton Peto were the most sought after chairmen at the May Meetings of those days. "Night after night," a journalist records, "you see one of these two men filling the chair at Exeter Hall. How I envy the Baptists Sir Morton Peto, whose twinkling eye and fine presence bespeak a broad humanity."

The Somerleyton property was sold in 1862 because Sir Morton adjudged it right to be prudent and careful and not to bring reproach. In no circumstances would he ever give bribes, and in consequence he lost more than one large and profitable contract abroad. In all his undertakings he was ably seconded by his partners, Mr. Brassey and Mr. Betts. Every member of his staff was happy and contented in his employ and the workmen remained with him for many years.

In the year 1858, Alfred Henry Baynes entered his service as a junior clerk. Baynes was born in Wellington, Somerset, where his father exercised a great ministry in

the Baptist Church and reared an equally remarkable family. Baynes quickly gained the confidence of his employer and became his secretary. Displaying an aptitude for figures, Sir Morton loaned his assistant to the Baptist Missionary Society, then housed in Moorgate Street, at a time when the Accounts' Department needed expert help. This led to Baynes remaining with the Society and to his becoming later, one of the greatest of missionary secretaries in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sir Morton was accustomed to say that his loan of Baynes was the greatest service he ever rendered to the Society.

Even when his business responsibilities were at their highest, Sir Morton attended with regularity the most important B.M.S. Committees and he records with satisfaction their decision to assume the direction of Serampore College. When the need for missionary work among the women of India was apparent, both Sir Morton and Lady Peto were among the foremost in their support of the new venture.

During his second period in Parliament he sat as member for Finsbury and introduced a Bill with reference to the burial of Nonconformists in churchyards and asked whether Nonconformists were to be treated as though they were suicides and unbelievers. Though the Bill was influentially backed, it was lost on the second reading, and yet again on two further occasions through the political prejudice of those days. Disraeli remarked with a characteristic touch of cynicism that, while he was quite prepared to do justice to the character and motives of the honourable baronet, such matters could not be decided by personal considerations!

Between 1859 and 1861 Sir Morton made no fewer than fourteen journeys to Paris in connection with a large portion of the Paris, Lyons and Mediterranean Railway, and the Harbour, Docks and Railways at Algiers. The

foundation stone of the latter station was laid by the Emperor of the French, Napoleon III, who was accompanied by the Empress Eugenie. On being presented, the Emperor thanked Sir Morton for the great services which he had rendered in the development of the country and invited him to the palace on the following morning when they had a frank talk on the question of making the port of most service to ships of all nations. The Emperor also observed that he had received information from Sir Morton which he had been unable to obtain from his own ministers.

Sir Morton was one of the first to advocate the building of iron ships and to retrench on those now quaint-looking fortifications which still overlook parts of our coasts and which were known in those days as "Palmerston's follies." In 1865 he visited America where he was introduced to President Johnson, the successor to Abraham Lincoln. On his return he published a most interesting book on the resources of that vast country. It was shortly after this trip that business reverses came and none were ever faced more bravely.

V

MESSRS. PETO AND BETTS had accepted the contract for the metropolitan extension of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway, the early sections of which they had previously constructed. A large block of shares had to be taken in lieu of cash, which led in turn to close relations with Messrs. Overend, Gurney & Co., the well-known bankers of those days. A severe panic occurred in May, 1866, and on a day known as Black Friday many failures occurred. Overend & Gurney were among the casualties, and Peto & Betts followed suit. Even so great a crash as this, however, did

not daunt Sir Morton's spirit. After a most searching investigation, which Sir Morton welcomed, the Commissioner who made the enquiry said there was no imputation on his character and, at a meeting called for his new Parliamentary constituents at Bristol which he addressed, he was cheered to the echo. Spurgeon wrote to him saying that while he had meant to condole, there was more reason to congratulate.

Both Sir Morton and his partner were obliged to give up their spacious homes and to start life afresh. When the former resigned his seat in the House of Commons, Disraeli and Gladstone both paid high tributes to his character and service, Gladstone adding that he was a man who had attained a high position in this country by the exercise of rare talents and who had adorned that position by his great virtues.

Some time after, when the storm had passed, Sir Morton undertook the alteration of the Metropolitan Railway and, in 1872, the Cornish Mineral Railways were constructed by him. This last contract brought his business career of forty-four years to a close.

He always regarded his trials as a personal discipline, and when he was able to retire from business, he continued to interest himself in the work of the B.M.S. and in the Lady Hewley Trust. From 1877 until 1884, he lived at Eastcote, Pinner, in Middlesex, and took his share as a Justice of the Peace and as Deputy-Lieutenant in the public life of the neighbourhood. Both he and Lady Peto joined the Beechen Grove Baptist Church at Watford and remained members there until the end.

He was present at the opening of Brondesbury Baptist Church in north-west London, which was founded by the London Baptist Association in 1878 during the Presidency of the late Rev. J. P. Chown who had succeeded Dr. Brock at his beloved Bloomsbury Chapel. He finally removed to Tunbridge Wells in 1884 and the Baptist Church there

bears witness to his interest. Taken ill in the autumn of 1889, he passed away on November 13th, and was buried in Pembury Parish Churchyard. It was fitting that the service over him who had first brought in the Burials Bill should be shared by the vicar and the late Dr. Joseph Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, which largely owed its lovely home at St. John's Wood to the insight of Sir Morton, more than thirty years before.

In the course of his address, Dr. Angus said that he had known Sir Morton for nearly fifty years amid prosperity and adversity. He found it hard to say in which condition he admired him most, for he had been faithful in both; and, even as a precious stone is polished by friction, so had the one they mourned faced trial and sorrow. A lychgate at Pembury, erected by his family, stands to his memory and of none could Browning's famous words be more truly said:

Here lies "One who never turned his back:

But marched breast forward:

Never doubted clouds would break:

Never dreamed, though right were worsted,

Wrong would triumph:

Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight

better:

Sleep to wake!"