

## A Short History of Monks Chapel in Gastard, Corsham.



This chapel, just outside Corsham, is one of the oldest independent chapels in England and dates from 1662 in the reign of Charles II. It is 31' x 18' and has a small gallery on three sides of the interior. It also has a double pulpit. The chapel is two miles from the centre of Corsham by the side of a winding lane called Monkspark Lane.

In 1662 the Parliament of King Charles II revised the English Prayer Book and required church ministers to use fixed forms of service and consent to the new Book of Common Prayer (which is still in use in some churches today). About 2000 ministers felt obliged to leave the established Church and many more were ejected from their livings because they would not accept this new ruling on belief and worship. (The Act of Uniformity)

In the same year the Five Mile Act was also passed by Parliament and this required all ministers to take an oath that they would not at any time seek to alter the government of the church. Those who refused to do so were not allowed to come within five miles of any town or borough.

The Quakers built Monks Chapel in 1662 outside the five mile radius of the borough of Chippenham to conform with the Act. At the same time, Benjamin Flower, son of the Vicar of Castle Combe, was ejected from his living in Cardiff, and made Chippenham his centre for preaching. He established independent worship in Corsham as a Presbyterian.

In 1689 the Act of Toleration was passed and in 1690 the Independents came to won Monks Chapel. Regular Sunday worship has continued uninterrupted since then and the chapel is now used by the United Reformed Church (formerly Congregationalists, previously Independents & Presbyterians).

In the Tythe Deeds of 'Monkton Cappel' it is referred to as being Presbyterian but after 1720, it became an Independent Chapel. In 1818 a Sunday School was started and in 1824 the Revd. Rowland Hill opened the new gallery which can be seen today.

In the early days, people gathering for worship spent the day at Monks, bringing their midday meal and heating it at the fireplace, which also served to warm the chapel. The fireplace has now been closed in but the chimney can still be seen.

From the high pulpit the preacher had a good view of the surrounding countryside and he could make his way to safety if the chapel was raided by troublemakers or anyone who was trying to arrest him. There are signs that there might have been a secret doorway out of the chapel via the pulpit. This would have been for the Preacher to escape the King's forces when they looked for him. The law limited groups of people to five (five people together at the chapel often had a meal to give the appearance of being a family to allay suspicion) but larger groups were considered to be a meeting with a speaker, who could legally be arrested.

The first preacher (Benjamin Flower) was buried in front of the pulpit under the floor in 1720. Two other people who were related to each other, were also buried under the floor next to Benjamin Flower in 1753.

For the 160 years before 1822, the Independents were the only non-conformists in Corsham, until the Baptists opened their chapel that year. The chapel nearly closed its doors to worship in 1989 but was then taken on by Mr Ivor Tilley, so that in 2012 Monks Chapel celebrated its 350<sup>th</sup> year of continued regular Sunday worship.

(With thanks to the people of Monks Chapel for providing the text for this document)