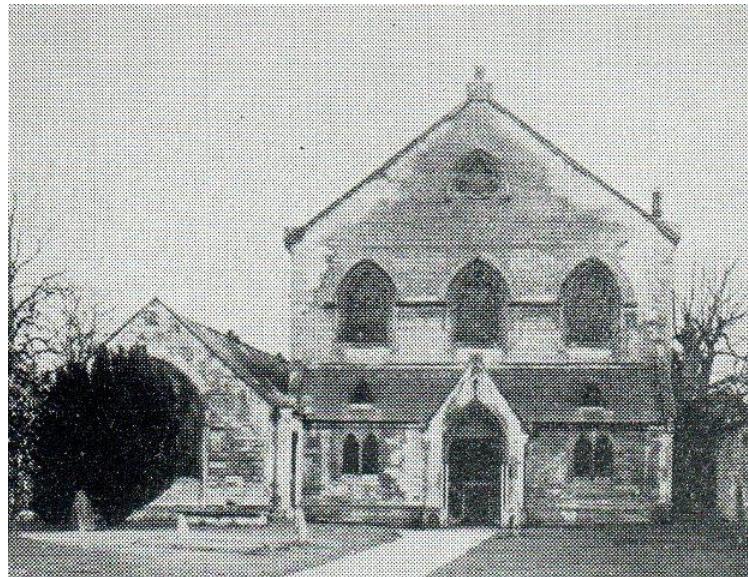


Castle Street Baptist Church, Calne

300 years of Baptist Witness



THE BEGINNING

The late Dr. William Brock of Bloomsbury, when asked to give a history of the Baptist Denomination, took a New Testament from his pocket, and commenced to read the Acts of the Apostles. The recorded history of the Baptist Church in Calne covers three centuries as it celebrated its tercentenary in 1955, but its origin goes back 2000 years when, from the lips of our Lord fell the commission - "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

To the question - when did Baptist witness at Calne commence? We are not able to give a precise answer. The date of 1655 has been chosen as representing the most probable time, but certain indications suggest that it may have been even earlier. Writing of Cromwell's soldiers in Scotland, G. M. Trevelyan states that 'the English soldiers behaved irreproachably as an army of occupation, save when they endeavoured to found Baptist Churches in an uncongenial soil.' After the defeat of Cromwell's Army at Roundway Down in 1643, it is known that many of his soldiers settled in the district. The Baptist Church now worshipping in Maryport Street, Devizes, was founded in 1649, and undoubtedly owes its origin to the Baptists of that Army who remained behind. That Calne and Devizes are nearly equidistant from Roundway Down, seems to lend support to the theory that the Baptist faith and practice came to Calne through the same channels by which it was established in Devizes.

In his "Book of Records" commenced in 1776, Pastor Isaac Taylor states - "No Church Book has been kept until this time. By traditions received by some of the present aged members, from their predecessors, it is understood the church was formed in the days of Oliver Cromwell." Now Cromwell was Lord Protector from 1653 until 1658: if "in the days of Oliver Cromwell" refers to the time of his protectorate, then 1655 is probably correct. If however, it includes his leadership of the Parliamentary forces in the Civil War, it could be earlier. It is reasonable therefore to suppose that from 1643 onwards, there were individuals of Baptist convictions in Calne, and that gradually and naturally they gathered together until by 1655 they were numerous enough to be meeting as a Church.

PERSECUTION

It was not long before the newly formed Church was subjected to severe trials. Pastor Taylor states "in the reign of Charles the Second, the people suffered much by persecution." In 1662 came the Act of Uniformity. In 1664 The Conventicle Act became law which forbade any religious meeting of more than five persons, other than that of the Church of England. In 1665 the Five Mile Act was passed. These and other cruel enactments were designed to crush all nonconformity, and during that period over eight thousand nonconformists perished in prison. As a result of these laws, the Baptists of Calne were unable to gather in their usual place of worship, and they sought some secluded place where they might meet without attracting observation.

There are two spots which for ever must remain sacred to Calne Baptists, being hallowed by the memory of their persecuted predecessors, who in those evil days, forsook not the assembling of themselves together. One is "Moss' Mill," the other is the "Gospel Bush." With Moss' Mill is associated the story of Julius Jenkins. He was a supposed half-wit and was employed by the magistrates to report those attending the mill for worship. He, however had received kindness from some of the party, and did his best to shield them. When reporting himself to his employers, he said that he saw them, but they were all dressed in long cloaks, and he didn't know one soul of them. "For," said he some years afterwards, "How could I know their Souls?" The "Gospel Bush" was a whitethorn, and stood on a rise of ground in a field at Whitley Farm. This was a favourable position for their meeting, for they could easily detect the approach of any hostile party. From time to time a fresh tree has been planted, the last occasion being in 1930, but unfortunately, it no longer survives.

These brave souls in the darkness of that night, watched for the dawn with hope and certainty. When at last it broke in 1688 with the accession of William of Orange and Mary, the little Church was found faithful and enduring. "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My Throne."

The year 1669 is the date of the first official record of a Baptist Meeting (or conventicle) in Calne. In the Ecclesiastical Archives in the possession of the Archbishop of Canterbury, appears the following entry made in a return of that year to Archbishop Sheldon. "A Conventicle is held at Jane Stretton's house (Anabaptist) number about 20 or 30. Thomas Lad of Calne, Carpenter, is the Teacher." Also in this year the Church at Calne sent messengers to the Assembly of the Western Association meeting at Clifford near Beckington.

THE MEETING HOUSE

One wonders whether Jane Stretton's house became the first Meeting House. There are strong grounds for believing that this was so. The earliest Trust Deed dated 1690 suggests that the property was a building and a garden. If Jane Stretton's house was adapted to form a meeting house, then the Baptists of Calne have worshipped on the same spot for at 286 years.

In 1703, however, the first meeting house was destroyed by the terrible storm which ravaged the whole of Southern England, and in 1704 was replaced by the meeting house which remained until 1817. Rev. Andrew Gifford of Bristol gave great assistance in the erection of this second house.

For the next fifty years the Church was served by ministers and laymen from neighbouring churches, and the cause progressed. In 1710, Thomas Cue, a carpenter of Compton Bassett. Gave to the Church two pewter communion cups and plates, the latter having been in constant use ever since. In 1724, the Church was the recipient of gifts of land, which, although modified, are held to this day on the Oxford Road.

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

In 1754 came the first Pastoral Settlement. Rev. Jonathan Watts, a wiredrawer of Bristol, served the Church for 20 years, making the journey each on horseback - and finally met his death as a result of injuries received in a fall from his horse on his homeward journey. What a record of devoted service! It was through the Rev. Jonathan Watts that the Church participates to this day in the legacy of a Mrs. Rayner who was at that time a member of Broadmead Church, Bristol.

The year 1776 saw the settlement of the first resident Pastor, a student from Bristol College - Rev. Isaac Taylor. Space forbids but the briefest mention of his monumental work for the Church. Conversions were frequent - baptisms taking place in the stream at Ratford Bridge, even (so it is recorded) on Christmas Day, when ice an inch thick had to be broken, and a "comfortable" ordinance observed!

In 1784, the Western Association met at Calne, when Rev. I. Taylor wrote the "Pastoral Letter" circulated to all associated churches. Two years later, a deacon - Mr. John Davis died, and left the church the sum of £800. This sum has remained invested and to date the church has benefited by over £6000 received in interest. A tablet erected to his memory is affixed to the south wall of the Chapel.

In 1804, Mr. Taylor commenced the first Sunday School in Calne, and continued his work with zeal and devotion until his death in 1810.

Then followed the pastorate of the Rev. Joseph Stennett, son of the famous Dr. Samuel Stennett, hymn writer and author. During his ministry the Church approved the demolition of the old meeting house and the erection of a new one. Before the work was completed however, a personal and no-doctrinal difference arose within the fellowship, resulting in the withdrawal of certain members, who met for worship in a cottage then standing on what is now the entrance to the chapel approach, and to which the name of "Zion Chapel" was given. This was the origin of the present Strict Baptist cause in Zion Lane.

In spite of these difficulties however, the building was completed in 1817, but harmony within the fellowship was not restored. In 1824 Mr. Stennett's health gave way, and he removed to Bristol.

The next few years were marked by weakness and depression. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, Calne was suffering the loss of its wool trade. Cloth mills were closing, and many of the workers were following their trade to the north of England. The Church was reduced in numbers and strength and lacked leadership. Two short pastorates followed, 1825-1827, Rev. James Deane, and 1827-1829, Rev. Joseph Dear.

In 1831, Rev. William Lush commenced on his ministry, and the Church appeared to make some progress. A vestry was built, and we find that Mr. Henry Harris was a subscriber to the building fund - the first of many generous gifts made by members of that family to the Church. On Christmas Day, 1842, the Chapel was first lighted by gas, and it is recorded that Mr. Lush preached from the text, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come!"

Mr. Lush was succeeded in 1846 by Rev. Thomas Middleditch, who came to Calne when over sixty years of age from Salem Chapel, Ipswich. His was an outstanding ministry, greatly blessed of God, and revival soon came to the Church. Many baptisms are recorded, as many as fifteen at one time. We have evidence today of his energy and initiative. Some of the cottages which stood on the site of the present entrance had been destroyed by fire in 1835. Others were in a disgraceful state of repair. As these were the property of the Marquis of Lansdowne, Mr. Middleditch boldly went to Bowood, sought an interview with his Lordship, and obtained permission for a complete demolition. This action resulted in the laying out of the entrance and path as we see it today.

He saw too, the needs of the growing Sunday School, and commenced a fund for the erection of a school-room. He secured the services of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, and on May 18th, 1857, Mr. Spurgeon twice preached in a large marquee placed on the green, to some four thousand people in all. The collections taken at these gatherings augmented the fund. The school-room was commenced, but

the faithful Pastor, now over seventy-five years of age, did not live to see it completed. He contracted a fatal chill whilst journeying yet again to Bowood to solicit the help of Lord Lansdowne, and was laid to rest in the Chapel graveyard. This school-room, standing on the south of the Chapel, is a memorial to a faithful Pastor's devotion to the work of the Kingdom of God.

Then followed two short pastorates. Rev. James Wall came in 1859, and his ministry was full of life and power, but he left in 1863 to found the Italian Mission in Rome, where he laboured with much success until his death in 1901. He was followed by the Rev. Joseph Hurlstone. Although he remained for two years only - yet he initiated and carried through a major structural alteration to the meeting house. The front elevation was raised to form the Gothic front as we see it today. The interior wooden lobby was removed, and the stone exterior one erected, and the gallery stairs removed from inside and placed in the new lobby. Mr. Hurlstone left for Corsham in 1866, but the work was completed.

Now follows one of the most fruitful periods in the long history of the Church. The great work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon was arousing the Baptist Churches, and many were turning to the "Pastor's College" for men who would repeat the success of their Principal. This was an important time in the Church life of Calne, and portentous events were shaping which profoundly affected the religious life of the town. The Vicar, The Rev. John Guthrie had recently died - a great soul of strong evangelical and calvinistic convictions. His successor was the Rev. John Duncan, a man greatly influenced by Cardinals Newman and Pewsey and the "Oxford Movement". The Church people were restless and fearful of radical changes, and many disapproved of the new Vicar's "High Church" teaching.

"To Castle Street came a student from the Pastor's College, and he was taken to from the beginning He was thin, and slightly lisped, but the matter and manner of his sermons were to the liking of the hearers. He was invited - he accepted. There is no doubt but that William H. J. Page came to Calne on the Prayers of the People of God." This was the writing of John Chappell, Church Secretary. He preached evangelical truths on old lines, but he brought a vivacity and natural talk of the Spurgeon School which attracted many to the Chapel. Many came from the established Church, and the cause grew in numbers, and very soon the front school-room was built and paid for. The Chapel at Yatesbury was erected, and a number of local preachers began preaching in the nearby villages.

After thirteen years of fruitful ministry, abundantly blessed of God, Mr. Page accepted a call to Chelsea, and left Calne amid many expressions of sorrow from his people.

Then followed three shorter pastorates. 1880-1885, Rev. F. J. Steward. 1886-1889, Rev. George Hudgell who presented to the Church the three communion chairs now in use, and 1890-1893, Rev. J. W. Kettle.

In 1893, his health having suffered in London, Rev. W. H. J. Page accepted the invitation of the Church to resume his Pastorate in Calne. The bills announcing his recognition services were headed "Welcome Home". During this period of his ministry the Christian Endeavour Society was formed, Ratford Bridge Mission Room opened, and Mr. Page resumed the office he had held in his former pastorate, that of Secretary of Wilts and East Somerset Baptist Association. In 1903, the present organ was installed, replacing a smaller pipe organ which had been erected in the gallery in 1879. For some years Mr. Page had trouble with his sight, but by 1909 he had become completely blind, which fact led to his resigning the Pastorate. He continued however, a most useful and honoured life in the Church, frequently preaching in village Churches, and encouraging and strengthening successive Pastors, until at the ripe old age of ninety-six, he received his "Home-call" in January, 1939.

It is quite impossible to measure the full fruit of his twenty-nine years' ministry at Calne; but it is fair to say that along with Isaac Taylor (who laboured thirty-four years), William Page was one of the God's greatest instruments for the working out of His Purposes in the Church at Calne.

It is only possible to give but the briefest mention of events from 1909 to the present time (1955). Mr. Page was succeeded by Rev. E. W. Mills, who laboured with much blessing until in 1913, he responded to the call of City Road Baptist Church, Bristol.

The Church rose to the challenge of war conditions, and under the leadership of Rev. Guyton Thomas, successfully ministered to the large numbers of servicemen who came to the nearby camps at Yatesbury. In 1916, Mr. Thomas resigned to enter the Chaplaincy Service, and he was succeeded in 1917 by Rev. F. E. Boorman. His three years' pastorate is remembered with affection by very many to this day.

1921 saw the settlement of Rev. J. H. Brooks, who remained in Calne for four years, and has continued an intimate and honoured friend of the Church ever since. In 1926, Rev. A. E. Johns of Brixham responded to the call of the Church, and during his ministry the last major reconstructions of the Chapel was undertaken. New choir seats were constructed, the organ alcove built, and electric light installed. It was at this time that the Church received the gift of a new oak communion table from the senior Deacon Mr. M. W. C. Dixon. Following Mr. Johns' retirement in 1934, Rev. J. J. Wilmhurst became Pastor, remaining until 1938, when he entered the ministry of the Church of England.

For some years the Church had been exercising an unofficial oversight of the Baptist Church at Bromham. In 1923, Rev. J. H. Brooks was invited by that Church to become its Honorary Pastor, and a few years later, the Church in Calne was requested to assume full responsibility.

In 1938, Rev. A. Glen Smith became the Pastor, and within a year, on the outbreak of war, under his leadership the Church commenced its great work of ministering to the material and spiritual welfare of thousands of members of the Royal Air Force. In 1939, a Manse was purchased as a memorial to the life and work of Rev. W. H. J. Page. Rev. A. G. Smith retired in 1949, and he was succeeded by Rev. J. A. Caldwell, who served the Church with diligence and zeal until his acceptance of the call to the Church at New Brighton early in 1954.

In March 1955, Rev. W. R. Miller. On relinquishing the Superintendency of the Central Area of the Baptist Union, commenced his ministry in Calne, and the Church looked forward with confidence to further signs of God's Blessing on its work and witness.

Mention has already been made of the generosity of successive generations of the House of Lansdowne. Now, as a gesture to mark its ter-centenary, the present Marquess has made a gift to the Church of the land forming the entrance, a kindly act which is greatly appreciated by all the members.

As a permanent ter-centenary commemoration, the Church had purchased a piece of land on the western boundary of the property, which, it is hoped, will provide facilities for the erection of a permanent manse.

This record would not be complete without a tribute to the men and women, who, through the years, have formed the membership of the Church. Many have served as officers, deacons, lay preachers, Sunday School superintendents and teachers. Their prayers, their loyalty, their firmness to conviction, their devotion to their Master Christ, and the proclamation of His Gospel, have ever been the secret of the strength of the Church.

Now, as the Baptists of Calne celebrate their three hundredth anniversary, they are in good heart. With much thankfulness they look back over the years that are gone; years of faithful witness to the Gospel of our Saviour Christ, and with confidence and hope they look forward to the maintenance of that witness in the years to come.