

# PORTON BAPTIST CHURCH

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Finally, although he only served us for six short years, no history of Porton would be complete without a mention of Stan Robinson. When the church was at probably its lowest ebb following the death of Mercia Light/Blake, in 2002, Stan came as a breath of fresh air, and a considerable relief to me, after twenty one years in the saddle. His enthusiasm, coupled with his complete dedication to his Lord, soon put a new spirit into the fellowship.

Whether it was preaching or painting the ceiling, Stan exemplified the saying, “ whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might”. Very few people achieve what he did in so short a time. We treasure his memory and seek to carry on the work.

### Postscript

This is obviously a very brief record of many centuries of history. If you wish to know more, please ask, and I will attempt to answer your queries.

Douglas Parish, March 2011



1651 – 2011

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## ORIGINS

Baptists have their roots in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when the translation of the Bible into English revealed discrepancies between the teachings of the church and the Bible. What to do? For some this meant trying to reform the Roman church; for others, a break with Rome, but retaining the same essential theology ( Anglicans and Lutherans ); for others a Reformed theology, but still with a hierarchical structure - (Presbyterians ).

Some, however, felt that the only right way was to start again from a New Testament model. These people were known as ‘ Separatists’. They believed that each congregation, or ‘Gathered Communion’, was an independent body, governed only by God’s Laws, and not responsible to any state authority in matters of religion. This, naturally led to persecution, since the concept of Church and State being one prevailed in England, and anyone who did not ‘conform’ was considered a potential traitor. In consequence, many were forced to flee overseas, particularly to the Netherlands. Among them was a group led by John Smyth, an Anglican priest who had formed a Separatist group in Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, who fled to Amsterdam in 1606. He was later joined by Thomas Helwys. In 1610, after contact with a Mennonite group, Smyth became convinced of the truth of Believers’ Baptism, and so the first English Baptist Church was formed. In 1612, Helwys returned to England, and the first Baptist Church on English soil was founded. Sadly, Helwys soon aroused the wrath of the authorities, and died in Newgate Prison in 1616.

By 1620 there were Baptist Churches in Lincoln, Coventry, Salisbury Plymouth and Tiverton, as well as others in London. Indeed, the Plymouth church entertained the Pilgrim Fathers when they were forced to turn back to Plymouth on their journey to America. These churches were all ‘General Baptists’, believing that Christ died for all. A second strand, ‘Particular Baptists’ emerged from the Independents in London around 1640, and it is to this group that we owe our origins

Baptists grew rapidly during the Civil War (1641 – 51), as many of Cromwell’s New Model Army were Baptists. Among them was John Rede, a Colonel in Ludlow’s Army. He was the owner of Birdlymes Farm, Porton, and a Justice of the Peace. We know he was a Baptist,

tea have to be brewed at the back of the church, and the Elsan behind the church became redundant !

In 1986, after 100 years as a Baptist church we, at last acquired a baptistery, thanks to the efforts of Bernard Smith and Bill Baker, and Bill’s daughter Nikki became the first person to be baptised at Porton, but not the last.

In 2001 we celebrated the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, with a combined effort with Broughton. The President of the Baptist Union, Professor Ashworth, was the speaker. There was a meeting at Broughton on the Saturday, followed by a service at Porton on the Sunday. Sadly, shortly after this, Broughton were forced to close as a result of declining numbers, leaving Porton and Brown Street as the sole survivors of the original church.

Finally, in 2006 the further extension to the front of the building was carried out, this time at a cost of £15,000. So much for inflation ! This was followed by the first ‘proper’ wedding in the church. Although the student Pastor, Eric Blakeborough, and his bride had a wedding ceremony in the chapel in 1954, as the building was not registered for marriages, they had to have a civil ceremony as well. So as to have everything in order for Gemma and Steven’s wedding, the building was registered in 2006, and there has been one wedding since, that of Stan Robinson’s son Peter.

## People

However important buildings and events are, it is the people who make a church, not the ministers or the organisation. We have been fortunate at Porton to have a core of faithful people who have maintained the work through good times and bad. Apart from a very few occasions the membership has not exceeded twelve, but they have been very faithful. This is borne out by the long service of the officers of the church. Since 1909 there have only been six Church Secretaries and ten Treasurers. Charles Blake Senior became Secretary in 1909 and served until 1916, when he was succeeded by Harry Moxham who served until 1934. Charles Blake Junior then took over and served until his death in 1966, when he was succeeded by his wife Mercia, who served until her death in 2002, a truly remarkable record. The longest serving Treasurer was Fred Blake who served from 1922 to 1948. There must be few churches which owe so much to one family.

## The Written Record

Fortunately, we have a complete set of minute books since 1886, enabling us to get a picture of the changing fortunes of the church over the past 125 years. The early records are very sparse, merely recording the Annual General Meeting, at which officers were appointed, accounts received and new members recorded. There is very little about the actual life of the church, which is a pity. What is interesting is the appearance of well known names very soon. John and Emma Callaway, whose son was Sunday School Superintendent in the 1960's joined in 1894, and Charles Blake, Grandfather of 'our' Mercia' in 1898, thereby founding a dynasty which has been the foundation of the church ever since.. What is interesting about the first list of members is the 'turn-over'. We think of our ancestors living a settled life in one place, but, of the 70 names recorded up to 1901, only 5 remain when the book was closed in 1914. Some of the loss is due to death, as the expectation of life was much less 100 years ago, but most by removal from the village, or 'falling-away'. What is also very strange is that, although the record covers two World Wars, there is no mention of them in the Minute Books. The only passing reference is in 1940, when, discussing the proposed Church Anniversary, it was stated, (presumably by Mercia), that unless the Food Control Officer would allow the supply of 4lb of Sugar and 2lb of butter, there could be no tea !!

## Significant Events

In a short history it is not possible to record all the events of the past 125 years, but here are a few of the most important. In 1922 the building was enlarged by the addition of the platform area, and what is now 'Zak's Room', at the cost of £400, a considerable sum for those days, bearing in mind that the average annual receipts were in the region of £50. A loan was received from the Baptist Union which was quickly repaid. On the 26<sup>th</sup> June 1935, the 280<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was celebrated with a Rally of the Village Churches in Mr Targett's field. Three hundred people attended, and the local paper records that they took tea in three sittings. As there was no kitchen at this time, the logistics must have been formidable. No doubt Mercia was in her element! In 1972, to the great relief of the members, the kitchen and toilet extension at the front of the church was built at a cost of £1,180. No longer would

because, while Governor of Poole, 1647-51, the townspeople complained that he favoured the "Dippers", as Baptists were nicknamed. He returned to Porton in 1651, and it is for this reason that we count this as our foundation date.

## The United Church

Many other groups of Baptists had sprung up in the area in the aftermath of the Civil War, and, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1655, they came together at Porton and formed a united church. There were 110 people at the gathering, from villages as far away as Stoford and Broadchalke, as well as those from Salisbury, Amesbury and the Bourne Valley. The church appointed John Rede, Henry Pen and Edward Bundy as Elders. They agreed to meet as a group once a month in one of the main centres and in their separate villages in the intervening weeks. The Church Book, now held in Regents Park College, Oxford, but of which we hold a transcript made in the 1850's, gives a fascinating glimpse into early Baptist life. They were very conscious of the need to maintain high moral standards, and did not hesitate to discipline erring members, if necessary expelling them from the fellowship, but always with the hope of repentance and restitution.

Over the first five years the church grew steadily, with frequent baptisms, presumably in a river or pond. However, the church book is silent during the years 1660 – 1675, following the Restoration of King Charles II. We can only guess at the persecution they must have suffered. John Rede himself spent some time in the Tower of London, accused of complicity in a plot against the king.

When the book resumes in 1675 the make up of the church seems to have changed. There is no more mention of the groups to the west of Salisbury, but increasing numbers from Broughton and Wallop. There also seems to have been some tension between John Rede and Walter Pen, the leader of the Salisbury group, leading to a decision in 1690 for the latter to form a separate church, the country group continuing under Rede.

By 1710, when John Rede died, Broughton/Wallop were now by far the largest number, and, as far as we can ascertain, Porton became a "cottage" meeting for the next 150 years. The only evidence being the issue of two "Meeting House Certificates" for cottages in Porton. Meeting House Certificates were required for any group of worshippers exceeding four, excluding the family, application being made to the Bishop. This requirement only ceased in 1857.

## **Eviction!**

During the late 1700's the Salisbury Baptist Village Preachers Association came into being, not only to preach in the existing village chapels, but also, in many cases, to plant new causes and build new chapels, since many of the members were prominent businessmen in Salisbury and district.

In 1865 a crisis arose in Porton. As a small pamphlet found in Brown St's archives, written by John Toone, tells :- "The doctrines now taught in the village are those countenanced by the High Church party; the Church and the sacraments are all the villagers are to know or believe. Dissent in every form is heresy and schism, against which they have to watch and pray; and should a villager show sympathy with Nonconformist principles and worship, he still has to partake of that cup which the good in the days of yore drank so deeply. Several persons interested in the village are very desirous to erect a neat chapel in memory of the noble men who have there worshipped, and to provide for the spiritual necessities of the villagers; the place in which worship for some years past has been conducted having been closed by the owner of the property. For this purpose a friend has given a piece of land in a very suitable position, and nearly half the required funds has been cheerfully subscribed by persons familiar with the circumstances."

And so our chapel was built in 1865. I'm not sure I would agree with John Toone that the position is very suitable, but, then, he couldn't foresee the problem of car parking! Happily, our relations with our Anglican neighbours are very different today.

## **Revival**

Although the chapel was built in 1865, nothing much seems to have changed in the next 21 years, as the forward to the first of our 'new generation' minute books suggests. The author writes as follows:-

"This chapel was built about twenty years since by the efforts of the church worshipping at Brown St, Salisbury, and has since been largely sustained by the efforts of village preachers who have regularly supported the preaching services, from the church at Salisbury.

In the latter part of the year 1885 a spirit of awakening was manifest among the people who attended for divine service; the visit of an

evangelist was much blessed; special services were held by the village preachers; a spirit of prayer was manifest, and the combined efforts of many friends, among whom may especially be mentioned the family of Mr White, Mr and Mrs Edwards, Mr E Brown and Mr and Mrs Fulford resulted, under the divine blessing, of many converts being gathered into the Saviour's Kingdom .

It was then felt that it would be desirable to gather into Christian fellowship, for the observance of Christian ordinances, those who had manifested tokens of their conversion, and, by the advice and sanction of the church at Salisbury, the rules drawn up on the following page were agreed to mutually between the church at Salisbury, and representatives of the friends at Porton."

Thus was set up the pattern of government for Porton which lasted until we became members of the Baptist Union in our own right in 1988. The minister of Brown St was ex officio minister of Porton and a representative of the Village Preachers Association was appointed as chairman (always a man!) of the management committee or Diaconate. The most notable of these was Fred Martin, who held the office from 1948 to 1976, and in addition was Treasurer for that time. On his death in 1982 he left legacies to each of the village churches, and our Communion Table was purchased with ours, in his memory. Fred was a tireless worker for the village churches, and a fine preacher. In earlier days he travelled by motor bike.

For a time in the late 1930's a retired minister, Revd. Arthur Moore, was appointed as Superintendent of the Village Churches, ( Porton, Winterslow, Coombe Bissett and Bodenham), and the practice was repeated from 1976 to 1981, when Revd. Stan Bacon was appointed Associate Minister of Brown St. with care of the village churches. For three years from 1951, Eric Blakebrough, a student at Bristol Baptist College served as Student Pastor.

In the back of the first minute book is a list of the foundation members in December 1886, 25 in number. What is surprising is the variety of occupations, as revealed by the 1891 Census. William Sparks, the first on the list, was a baker, and among the rest are an engine driver, a platelayer, a dairyman, and, as would be expected, several agricultural labourers. In Paul's words, 'not many mighty'. What is also surprising is their ages. There is no one over 60, and the majority are in their 20's and 30's. Would that we had that age spectrum today!