

A Brief History
of the
Baptist Church
New Mill
Tring, Hertfordshire.

Foreword

This is by no means the first attempt at a brief history of the Baptist cause at New Mill. To my knowledge there have been at least three others produced in 1882, 1924 and 1955. Anybody familiar with the earlier booklets will soon realise that this document is simply an update which draws heavily, and rightly so, on its precursors.

The story of New Mill has not always been one of peaceful transition. At times the body of Christ here has been in conflict with government authority, other churches and itself. This is stated not as a cause of celebration but simply to recognise that any church, the church at New Mill being no exception, is made up of God's people, far from perfect, not always agreed, but none the less seeking to follow Christ and build His Kingdom to the best of our abilities.

*Martin Hardwidge
September 1994.*

*With additions from David Norkett
October 2010.*

The Baptist Church at New Mill, is one of the oldest in Hertfordshire, established in the period of religious liberty that prevailed between the Civil War and the Restoration of the Monarchy. The present Church and Sunday School buildings were built in 1818 and 1897 respectively, but the history of Baptists at New Mill goes back to the time of Oliver Cromwell.

In, or about, the year 1655, six persons formed themselves into a Baptist Church. Their first place of worship was a mud-walled cottage which stood close to the site of the present building. Some records suggest that a Mr Aldridge was the pastor, more reliable records name Richard Sutton as the first official pastor from 1660.

Despite promises to maintain religious freedom, shortly after his restoration, Charles II issued a proclamation - "prohibiting all Anabaptists and other sectaries from worshipping God in public except at their parish churches."

This prepared the way for the May 1662 Act of Uniformity followed in 1664 by the Conventicles Act which stated that: "every person above sixteen years of age, present at any meeting under pretence of any exercise of religion in other manner than is the practice of the Church of England where there are five persons more than the household, shall for the first offence, be sent to gaol for three months till he pay £5; for the second offence, six months till he pay £10; and the third time, being convicted by a jury, shall be banished to some of the American plantations." By comparison the annual rent for a house and land could be counted in pence.

In 1666 the Five-Mile Act came into force, forbidding any non conformist minister from being within five miles of any place where they had been ministers. Records state that "the little church at New Mill had to leave their retired meeting-house, and go into the woods to worship God, for fear of their persecutors." Their night-time meeting place was discovered and Richard Sutton

was arrested sent to prison where he remained until the death of Charles II. A local official is reputed to have said "Sutton, you have preached a good sermon and now you must suffer for it. "

With the accession of James II, legal changes to allow Roman Catholic worship also granted religious liberty to non-conformist churches. Richard Sutton was freed and New Mill chapel was re opened, around this time John Bunyan is reputed to have visited and preached on several occasions.



New Mill Chapel from the graveyard (1953)

How long Richard Sutton remained minister is unclear, he was a signatory to the Confession of Faith signed by thirty-seven Baptist ministers in 1689. It seems likely that Richard Sutton was succeeded by Joseph, his son or grandson, who was minister until his death in 1727. About this time the mill pond close to the church was used for public baptism. Despite being granted freedom to worship Baptists were a despised set of people and the New Mill meeting was small with a membership of less than twenty. No new minister was appointed and for a number of years

the church appears to have been closed, its remaining members worshipping at Dunstable.

In 1761, Joseph Sutton, a great-grandson of Richard, was called to the ministry and sixteen members were reformed into a church under his pastoral care. The ministry was obviously a struggle at this time. In May 1770 Joseph Sutton wrote: "The time of my affliction has been long. I have thought it my duty to desire a dismissal from the office I was in as minister and elder, being incapable to officiate therein."

In 1772 the church was reorganised by Samuel Medley of Watford who baptised a Mr King who was minister of the church until 1775 when, we are told, "his conduct not being consistent, he was sent away." He was succeeded by Henry Blaine. As his tablet in the present chapel records, "he was a faithful and laborious pastor, by whose instrumentality, under Divine providence, the late house was erected." Henry Blaine died in 1788, aged forty-five, he was drawn in a cart, on some straw, to preach what had been announced as his last sermon, as far as we know he died the same day.



New Mill Chapel from New Road (1924)

John Clement, the watch-maker, who had been baptised by Mr King and assistant to Henry Blaine was called as his successor. It is recorded of him that "he was humble, solid, faithful, and consistent, greatly esteemed, and worthy of being imitated." It was during his ministry that a baptistry was installed. In the first volume of the Baptist magazine for 1809 we are told that during his ministry, "the meeting has been several times enlarged; and they have erected a new stable and cart-house, sufficiently roomy to receive twenty horses and ten to twelve carts and chaises, so many being employed to convey the worshippers to the place. They dine in the vestry room, and have from one to two hundred at the prayer-meeting after dinner."

Towards the end of 1811 he fell ill and had to give up much of the work he was involved in. In January the following year he preached his last sermon. It was the time of the annual collection

for the poor and it is recorded that: - "Mr Clement, though brought very low, from his love and care for the poor of his flock particularly requested that he might once more plead their cause in the pulpit. This request, though with great anxiety on the part of his friends, was granted; but strength equal to the day was afforded. His text was Job Ch. 30 v. 20: 'Was not my soul grieved for the poor'?" John Clement died, in February 1812 aged sixty three, the church membership numbered more than 140.

The Rev. John Rees, "a warm-hearted, zealous Welshman", succeeded him, but his ministry ended sadly when, in 1815, he died of consumption, aged twenty-four. The 'Sabbath School', which met in 'The Tabernacle', originally an enlarged thatched barn in Akeman Street, was established during the time of his short ministry.

In January 1817 Daniel Clarabut, the schoolmaster, was ordained pastor. It was during the early part of his ministry that the present Chapel was erected and regularly filled with "attentive hearers". The villages around were constantly visited, not only by the Pastor but by various lay helpers. The church grew and by 1827 church membership stood at 212. Daniel Clarabut died in 1833 aged forty-one.

In 1834, Mr Jeffery was briefly ordained to the pastorate, following which the church was without a minister for some years and membership declined. In 1838 Charles Smith became minister, and under his leadership, in 1845, it was decided to build a schoolroom. Charles Smith's ministry concluded in 1846 and he was succeeded in 1849 by John Austen who resigned in 1851. Little is recorded concerning John Austen's ministry, but amongst the documents preserved by the Church is a copy of a small printed poster which reads as follows:-

Public Services
New Mill and Marsworth

The Annual meeting
of the New Mill
Sabbath Schools
will be held on Whit-Tuesday
June 10th 1851

SERMONS
will be preached in the Afternoon
and Evening (D.V.) by
Mr. Austen

The Teachers and Friends will take
Tea as usual. Tickets
nine-pence each. Children
six-pence.

Service to commence at Two o'clock
in the Afternoon and Six in
the Evening.

On Wednesday, June 11th
The Anniversary at Marsworth
On which occasion Mr. Austen has
engaged to Preach.
Service to commence at Two o'clock
in the Afternoon and Six in
the Evening

E. C. Bird
Printer & Stationer,
Tring.

In 1854, after a year serving as a supply minister, Mr J S Warren was officially recognised as pastor of the Church which then included the New Mill 'Meeting-House', the 'Tabernacle' Tring, and the 'Baptist Chapel' at Marsworth. Mr Warren resigned before the end of the year. His appointment to the ministry was not without its problems. In December 1853, the police had to be summoned to help control a crowded church meeting and at a further meeting were asked to prevent some of the deacons from entering the church. In the event, the deacons concerned (Pastor Clement's sons) did not appear and they and forty-eight other members joined the Akeman Street church.

In 1856, John Statham became the pastor and during the next four year "by his wise, conciliatory, and loving disposition, was the means of bringing back a good degree of harmony and peace to the church." Following John Statham's transfer to Chenies, three years elapsed before the pastorate was filled, in 1862, by William Cheetham, from Rawdon College, who was pastor for two years, "leaving the Church and Congregation much divided". He was succeeded by Robert Schindler, "who ministered the Word with considerable acceptance and success."

In 1868, Henry Bradford, from the Pastors' College was called to be Pastor. His ministry attracted large congregations and during the years up to 1874 the church membership nearly doubled. At a meeting in the Tabernacle in 1874 it was resolved that there should be one Chapel instead of two, and that the better way would be to improve the Chapel and School accommodation at New Mill. In October 1874, the Rev W V Young became the pastor. Ill health caused him to retire from this post in March 1882. During his ministry, half an acre of land was donated to the church by Sir Nathaniel de Rothschild (afterwards Lord Rothschild) in order to enlarge the burial ground. The whole of the land was then walled in, planted, laid out and new iron gates erected.

In 1883, on the recommendation of the renowned Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who preached on several occasions at New Mill, then H F Gower was inducted as Pastor, and during his ministry restrictions as to closed Communion were removed. The successor to Mr Gower, the Rev Foskett, was pastor until his death 1894.



New Mill Sunday School (1924)

For many years morning and afternoon Services had been held at New Mill, and evening Services at the Tabernacle, but the increasing population of New Mill and the gift of the Manse (in Grove Road), led to the evening Services transferring to New Mill. In 1890 the Sunday School at New Mill numbered 350 Scholars and 40 Teachers. In 1895 soon after Rev H J Martin became pastor, a new road from Wingrave Road to the Schoolroom was built. Plans were laid for the building of the present schoolroom

and the building was completed and opened in 1897 at a cost of £1,015.05. The cost of the new schoolroom was more than met by various means, including the sale of the Tabernacle.

The next pastor in succession was the Rev J Bayliss who served from 1903 to 1909.

In 1912, during the pastorate of the Rev. T Percy George, a decision was made to install new gallery seats, at the same time a new baptistry and Rostrum and improved heating and lighting were also provided.

Throughout the difficult World War periods and the intervening years, good work was carried on by the Church under the successive leadership of Pastor W W Heading, Rev F G Kemp, Rev E J Willis, Rev A C Miller and Pastor H W Dando.

During Mr Miller's pastorate an additional large piece of land was purchased, from the Trustees of Tring Park, to facilitate the further extension of the burial ground. Pastor Dando having served the church and "village" for three years, left the district in 1943, but was later recalled for a further period, and served again from 1945 to 1952. During his ministry the chapel buildings were thoroughly re-decorated both internally and externally and he did much to build up the Church in the difficult post-war years.

In 1952, a formal notice was received from the Ministry of Local Government and Planning that the new Mill Baptist Church has been scheduled as a Building of Historic Interest.



The Manse

Charles Atkinson was appointed to the pastorate in 1953, after he left in 1960 there was a two year gap until Raymond Neave was called to be pastor in 1962. During his pastorate the practice of collecting seat rents for pews was formally ended, to be fair it had already ceased to all intents and purposes years before, the numbers and card holders remain on many of the pews. Between 1964 and 1967 the schoolroom was used as a day school for infants by the County Council while new school buildings were prepared. Pastor Neave retired in July 1977, both he and his ministry are fondly remembered by church members.

Ian Walker was Pastor at New Mill from December 1977 to February 1982. In the intervening months between Raymond Neave retiring and Ian Walker accepting the Pastorate the Church Rules were amended to allow open church membership. In effect this meant that it was now possible to be a full church member

without having been baptised by immersion. Ian Walker left New Mill and was Pastor of what is now the Foursquare Church in Tring.

George Richardson accepted the pastorate in 1983, leaving in 1993, both he and his wife Janet had great experience and by their Christian teaching and example much was gained by the fellowship. In October 1993 Sue Hardwidge became student pastor - spending half her time as pastor and half as student at Regent's Park College Oxford.

Sue's student ministry was much appreciated and in 1996 she accepted a call from the church to become our full-time pastor. For the following 5 years she introduced the church to innovative ways of working and worship but left in February 2001, feeling it was time to move on, to a pastorate in Yardley, Birmingham.

The first decade of the millennium has been a period of interregnums and short pastorates. Rev. Peter Lewis, a much-loved Welshman in his 60's became our pastor in the spring of 2003 but passed away in October 2004 after a brief battle with cancer. His caring pastoral visiting, his fairly traditional services and evangelical preaching endeared him especially to the older members of the congregation.

Before and after Peter's pastorate we were well served as moderator by Rev. David Nash, an NHS chaplain from Aylesbury. By September 2006, as we had still not found a pastor, Rev. David Norkett, the church treasurer, put his name forward as interim, part-time minister and this was accepted by the church. In July 2008 the church meeting unanimously called Lynn Davidson to be our minister-in-training. During her 3 month ministry Lynn's teaching and leading were enthusiastically welcomed by many in the church. But she experienced considerable difficulties with some members and in January 2009 she was withdrawn from her

placement with us by Spurgeons College.

Since the spring of 2009 we have been ably led by our moderator, Alan Cookson, a lay pastor from Aston Clinton Baptist Church. He has encouraged us in a number of initiatives including a “Back to Church” month in October 2010, while we look to God for a minister to lead us into the future.

Mention should be made of people who have worked ably in the church over recent years, including Val Carr (church secretary for over 15 years), Gill Brownell and Andrew Webber (treasurers), Lesley Baker (in charge of Renovation), Ron Jeffery (organist) and Rosemary Duck, Mary and David Norkett, Brenda Tourle, Janet Holland, Jeremy Jones, Jo Webber and others for their work with children and young people.

For the last 20 years or so our membership has stayed at around 25, congregations have fluctuated between about 15 to 50 and several slightly younger couples have left us, usually to join other churches. But our mainly elderly church family is in good heart and we have received 7 people into membership in the last 2 years. We look forward to growing in numbers and in depth of prayer and worship, in discerning and following God’s will and in reaching out into the community with the Good News of Jesus over the coming years.

PASTORS OF NEW MILL BAPTIST CHURCH

Mr Aldridge	1665 - ????
Richard Sutton	1660 - ????
Joseph Sutton	???? - 1727
Joseph Sutton	1761 - 1770
Rev. King	1772 - 1775
Henry Blaine	1775 - 1788
John Clement	1788 - 1812
John Rees	1813 - 1815
Daniel Clarabut	1817 - 1833
John Jeffery	1834 - 1836
Charles Smith	1838 - 1846
John Austen	1849 - 1851
J Warren	1853 - 1854
John Statham	1856 - 1859
William Cheetham	1862 - 1864
Robert Shindler	1864 - 1868
Henry Bradford	1868 - 1874
W V Young	1875 - 1882
Harry Gower	1883 - 1887
Louis Foskett	1887 - 1894
H Martin	1895 - 1903
J Bayliss	1903 - 1909
T Percy George	1909 - 1914
W Heading	1914 - 1917
F G Kemp	1920 - 1927
Ernest Willis	1929 - 1932
A C Miller	1935 - 1938
H W Dando	1940 - 1943
H W Dando	1945 - 1953
Charles Atkinson	1953 - 1960
Raymond Neave	1962 - 1977
Ian Walker	1977 - 1982
George Richardson	1983 - 1993
Sue Hardwidge	1993 – 2001
Peter Lewis	2003 – 2004
David Norkett	2006 - 2008
Lynn Davidson	2008 – 2009



Interior of New Mill Chapel