

The History of  
Bathford's  
Baptist Chapel

by  
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2008

## The Baptist Chapel at Bathford

Bathford's Baptist chapel in High Street was built in 1839 on land conveyed in 1827 to trustees to provide for a meeting house for use for religious worship by Protestant dissenters of the denomination of Baptists. In addition, the trust deed envisaged extension to include a vestry room, a school room and a burial ground.

In March 1839 the plot of ground was assigned by John Watson, for the trustees, to the Reverend James Jackson who built the chapel at his own expense. It has a pitched roof and large round-headed windows each side of the entrance, above which in the gable end with the date 1839. Its accommodation includes a gallery approached by a staircase immediately inside the entrance. The furnishings include a baptistry dating from 1894, that is, a pool for the baptismal rite requiring total immersion. The Trust Deed includes the names of prominent local business men including stone masons and a solicitor.

The chapel was granted a licence for dissenting religious worship by the bishop's court in Wells in August 1839. In 1841 the Reverend James Jackson assigned the land and the chapel, for the nominal sum of five shillings, to the chapel's trustees of whom he was one, for the term of one thousand years which was the term in the deed of 1827. The chapel was licensed for marriages in 1899 and the first marriage was solemnised in 1901.



Bathford Chapel in 2008

One of the few memorial tablets on the walls is to the Reverend James Jackson who died in 1853. It records that 'After the building of this chapel he preached in it till laid

aside by the affliction which ended his mortal career'. The chapel possesses a portrait of him in oils by J. Arrowsmith in 1836. He had been ordained in Wantage, Berkshire in 1817 and came to live in Bathford in 1838. There is some anecdotal evidence which suggests he lived directly opposite on the High Street. He died in 1853 and a very early photograph exists which is comparable to the painting of James Jackson in 1934 showing an obviously a sick man, probably James Jackson. The photo is in the Bathford society archives.

The original building was heated by a wood fire and contained wooden benches, one of which survived until recently. The benches were replaced by open backed pews which in turn gave way to chairs in 1989. Heating was provided by an oil fired central system and then by electric. Lighting was originally by candle – 2 candelabra being suspended from the ceiling. During major refurbishment in 1996 the roof was replaced and the original pulleys for raising and lowering the candelabra were found. They remain within the new roof. Subsequently there were gas lights on the pulpit and electric lights from the ceiling.

The Chapel was the second place in the village to receive electricity. According to Mr Jack Thresher, the village baker, the first place was the lamp post outside the bakery in Bathford Hill, and, much to the disgust of the bakery staff, the chapel received electric supply before the bakery. Mr Thresher senior was a member of the chapel.

The chapel cottage was purchased in 1923 for £123 and was for the minister's use. The cottage was occupied by Mrs Silvia Maslin from about 1960 until about 1975. Mrs Maslin was the proprietor of the shop next door and her relatives (all chapel members) owned the grocery shop by the hairdressers opposite the bus stop and the post office in church street. Her relative Ray Maslin held open air evangelistic meetings on the waste ground behind the Crown Pub.

The cottage was sold in 1996 to finance major chapel refurbishment. Brian Hilliard asked friends of the chapel to give a day's labour each and 175 days labour were provided free of charge. Mr John Mulcock of 99 High Street was clerk of works: Paul Skelton of Bradford on Avon replaced the roof; Andrew Steele (Steele Signs) of East Everleigh repaired the ceiling and painted the walls, Paul Ivory (Avonvale carpets) laid the carpet and Richard Downing of Bath repaired the windows and Derrick Coates of Stroud plastered the walls. The floor was re-laid, the Baptistry relined and electric wiring replaced. The total cost of refurbishment was £12000.

No record seems to have survived as to succeeding ministers until Mr Brian Hilliard was acknowledged by local Bath Clergy to hold the position from 1983 to 2003. During the 1960s Mr Hector Brooke was pastor assisted by Mr Leslie King from Widcombe Baptist Church in Bath. He was preceded by a Mr Coupe and succeeded by Mr Tony Whittaker of Mountain Wood Bathford until about 1978. Leslie King regularly visited every family in the village bringing the gospel, praying for the sick and helping the needy. He was especially used in children's work.

The school building, which was sold in 1970, is situated in Dovers Lane, near the corner of Chapel Row and was built in 1849 as evidenced by this date carved on the gable above the doorway. Two of the school registers have survived. One records the attendance of teachers and pupils from January 1896 until December in the following

year. The other records the attendance of pupils during 1912 and the next nine years, when there were about thirty-five children on the register. Much the same number attended the school through the 1930s. Some records survive and are now in the Bathford Society archives. When it ceased to be a schoolroom is uncertain but it was used a youth hall for the Chapel in the 1940s. The building was later sold and used to house the ferrets of Mr Coupe Jr. and then sold again as a private residence in 1984.



The Chapel School in 2008

The Baptist congregation in Bathford, though devout, was never large and, as in many churches and chapels of other denominations, congregations diminished after the First World War. The Bathford chapel's minutes record concern in the 1920s that former Sunday school pupils were not seeking membership of the church to replace losses from the congregation due to removals and deaths. By the mid 1930s membership of the church was around twenty, and in single figures in the 1960s. By 1975 the membership was down to three and the chapel closed.

In 1979 Brian and Margaret Hilliard moved to Dovers Park, Bathford, from Manchester, Brian having a job with the MOD. As an aside, the current position of the bus stop in Dovers Park is due to Brian and Margaret waking up on their first morning and finding the occupants of a double decker bus peering in their bedroom window. As the bus stop was temporary, Brian moved it to the front of the next house (No 33) as yet partially built. When the new occupants moved in, the temporary bus top moved to outside next door (No31). When the next occupants moved in the bus top quickly moved to its current position!

The Parish church had been through a difficult time around 1979 and a new vicar – Rev Michael Lowe – arrived at the same time as Brian and Margaret in August 1979. Brian and Margaret joined the Parish Church at a time of increased interest in spirituality nationwide. Church numbers increased and there was increased awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit. A remarkable event occurred one day in 1982 when the neighbour of Brian and Margaret at No. 39 Dovers Park was sitting reading her bible when (to the consternation of her husband) she jumped up and ran across the road and banged on Mrs Taylor’s door. There was no response, the neighbour opened the door and found Mrs Taylor alone with a serious haemorrhage. The ambulance was called and a life was saved. There were other remarkable events at that time

In 1983 Planning permission was sought to convert the Chapel into a dwelling. Margaret saw the notice and Brian and Margaret went to the Trustees of the Chapel and said the chapel should be reopened – not sold. The Trustees agreed and asked Brian and Margaret to reopen it. There was no congregation at that time and no money – just an old building. A meeting was advertised in July 1983 and some 30-40 people turned up. From then on there were regular Sunday Evening and mid week Services.

Rev. Melvin Banks of Chippenham came in 1984 and held special evangelistic healing services. At one such meeting some 200 people were present. The Chapel became known as the Old Chapel Bathford and people would come from all over the West Country for prayer for their sickness and circumstances.

This situation continued for years. Almost 200 people were baptised, an unknown number committed their lives to Christ. People had Pentecostal experiences as described in the Bible. Christian teachers came from all over the world to share their experiences and other notable things happened. In about 1986 there was a beef and butter mountain in the European Union and for a while the Chapel was a distribution centre for the surplus food to the elderly in the village. The Chapel was instrumental in starting some six other churches in the area.

In 1998 Brian although still at the MOD became a Director of the Christian Life (theological) College and shortly after Margaret became a part of the Genesis Project in Bath working amongst the homeless, drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics. She took them through an ‘overcomers’ course and prepared them for rehabilitation. At one time she had 47 people “on her books”.

Stress and strain took its toll and Margaret and Brian resigned from Bathford Chapel in 2003 to rest. Paul Ivory succeeded them as Pastor. The chapel continues to pray for the sick. Sunday Evening services are held together with some Sunday Mornings.

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