

# The Baptist Chapel: Celebrating 350 years in Dunstable.

A lecture given by Dr. Kenneth Dix during Dunstable Local History Week, 11th May 2002.  
From 1652 to 2002: the story of Dunstable Baptist Church.

The first reference to what is now Dunstable Baptist Church, also known over the years as Ebenezer, or the Old Baptist Church, is unexciting and unexpected. Unexpected because it occurs in the Records of the Abingdon Association of Particular Baptist Churches, and Abingdon seems rather a long way away. Unexciting because it simply comes in a list of place names in the account of their second General Meeting, 'At a meeting of chosen messengers of the churches at Wormsley, the 3rd day of the 9th month 1652, viz., of Abingdon, Reading, Henley, Kensworth, Eversholt etc.'. There is, of course, no reference to Dunstable, but there is to Kensworth, the village on the Downs to the south of the town. Here it was that during the earlier part of that century people used to gather in the open air to hear itinerant preachers. Here also the Rev Edward Harrison had been vicar. Harrison was very impressed by these preachers, going out to hear them for himself. When the Civil War broke out he joined the Parliamentary forces at Newport Pagnell as secretary and confidential messenger. In the late 1640's he became pastor of the Baptist church meeting at Petty France in London. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a church was formed at Kensworth.



It is worth mentioning two important factors to bear in mind as the story of the church unfolds. Firstly, we are talking about a church which by and large was made up of very poor people. It is probably true to say that this was the case through practically all its history up to the twentieth century. In the middle of the seventeenth century conditions were about the worst they have ever been for the poorest in society. Secondly, during the larger part of that century those who came to believe what the members of the Kensworth church believed and practised were subject to official opposition and actual persecution. We must not forget that John Bunyan spent twelve years in prison during the 1660's and 70's. While preachers might be imprisoned, those who attended the preaching might be fined or have their goods taken from them if they were unable to pay. It could be a costly thing to belong to a Baptist church.

The first records of the Kensworth church itself date from 1675. At that time members were scattered over a wide area around; from Mimms on the Middlesex border to St Albans, to Welwyn, Leighton Buzzard and Berkhamstead. Quite what this means is not certain. Separate churches are recorded at an earlier date in several of these places. It may be that these were considered to be congregations of the Kensworth church, or it may be that the troubled times for nonconformists following the Restoration had resulted in the break-up of churches. An out of the way village just inside the northern border of Hertfordshire was the very place where a church could survive. In any case it is probable that the church did not meet very often as one body for worship but that this took place in a number of centres, led by someone local, with preachers visiting each group on occasions.

How many members did the Kensworth church have in 1675? Most books and pamphlets speak of around 300; two previous pamphlets published by this church, one in 1909, the other in 1975, both give this figure. Unfortunately the situation is complicated. Church books record the names of members and the minutes of church meetings. The first of these still in the possession of the church runs from 1675 to 1698, with other sundry entries up to about 1771. However this book was begun in 1688, and the years between 1675 and 1688 are copied from an earlier register. The original church book – or perhaps the earliest surviving copy - is now in the Hertfordshire Archive and Local Studies Library and runs from 1675 to 1694. It is the records of this book that H. G. Tibbutt published in *Some Early Nonconformist Church Books*. But there are a number of discrepancies between the two accounts. For example the Tibbutt account lists some 14 members from Dunstable in 1675, while what we may call the Dunstable book lists 26. The Tibbutt list has names on it that don't occur in the Dunstable account, and a number of the names on the Dunstable list are recorded in Tibbutt as joining the church after 1675. There is no simple way that I can see of accounting for the differences. I have followed the Tibbutt account as one would expect this to be the most reliable.

It appears likely that the actual number of members in 1675 was about 216. We must remember that this represents baptized members, not the numbers of those who might come for worship and the preaching. They were drawn from 27 towns and villages, and only four of them actually lived in Kensworth. Twenty-one years later the Dunstable church book records: 'Sister Rigg, recorded as an inhabitant of Ringsol, did come from the general people to us and was received into full communion with us at a Church meeting held at Dunstable the 20th September, 1696'. After this there is no record of the church meeting at Kensworth again.

It is worth mentioning that this situation reminds us that in the New Testament 'church' always refers to the people. We do not know where the church met in Kensworth. Perhaps in a private house, possibly sometimes in the open air. There is no record of any church building or meeting house, as it would have been called in those days, and it is extremely unlikely that there would have been one. In earlier times it suited the church to meet at Kensworth, but later when circumstances had changed it was more convenient to meet in Dunstable. We might note in passing that in 1657 another Association was formed of churches in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire – showing incidentally the way Baptist churches were multiplying at that time. In 1659 this Association met in Dunstable.

We need now to stand back and look at the background that lies behind the emergence of the church at Kensworth. In doing so we start with a considerable disadvantage. We live in days when religion does not play an important part in the lives of many people, and has only a nominal profile in the life of the nation. We live in secular days; we do not think in terms of the will of God for our lives, our worship, and certainly not for our national life. We still have an established church, but in practice religious services of national significance are becoming more and more ecumenical and multi-faith. It is difficult for us to put ourselves back into times when separation between church and state was unheard of, when the law required attendance at the established church, and freedom of conscience to worship according to one's own understanding of the Bible was considered socially divisive and dangerous.

In addition it is difficult for most today to realise how much things spiritual and religious counted in those times for ordinary people. It is true that economic and social factors played their part in belief and behaviour, but it would be a serious mistake to think that religion then was just hypocrisy, though, of course, hypocrisy did exist. In considering this period we are thinking of a time of intense religious conviction – conviction which was not simply the possession of one faction. There was real debate and concern to find and do what the will of God was believed to be.

We start with John Wycliffe and his Lollard preachers, back in the fourteenth century. It is generally recognised now that the movement springing from the work of Wycliffe had a widespread effect and provided a sub-stratum of dissent from the Roman Catholic Church. John Davis speaks of 'a powerful native strand in the events, deriving in part from Lollardy, which provided the reformed religion with a prepared breeding ground, and strongly influenced all subsequent developments'. He goes on to say, 'Lollardy was a gathered church, and discovered in definite localities, preserving well-marked traditions of belief.' It appears that Dunstable was influenced by Lollardy, which in part accounts for its Puritan tradition. One of those who joined Sir John Oldcastle's rebellion in 1414, during the reign of Henry V, was Robert Morley of Dunstable, a rich brewer. Christopher Hill thinks that Dunstable's freedom of thought may be owed 'to the fact that it was the only market town in Bedfordshire which had no lord or squire resident in the neighbourhood'.

In the sixteenth century came William Tyndale, growing up near the Severn in southern Gloucestershire, another region of the country deeply influenced by Lollardy. With his love of the English language and great facility in its use we may suspect that he owed a considerable debt to that influence. He was, of course, also greatly indebted to Erasmus's Greek New Testament, and in Cambridge he had access to Luther's works as well as the opportunity to meet with other early English reformers. The appearance of Tyndale's New Testament in English in 1526 marked a watershed. From now on ordinary people had access to the Bible for themselves. Before long the whole Bible appeared and then version after version culminating in the King James' Version in 1611, all heavily dependant on Tyndale. Those who could read could purchase a copy, though it was not cheap to do so. Those who couldn't read could go into churches where chained Bibles would be read aloud, or meet in private houses where someone would read to a small group. In spite of several attempts at preventing the circulation of Bibles in English the demand was considerable. During Elizabeth's reign, with a population of only six million, largely illiterate, half a million Bibles were sold.

As the sixteenth century progressed and the reformation took hold of England, considerable numbers of people from the Netherlands settled in the eastern counties. Many of these were Anabaptists fleeing persecution. By 1587 those holding Baptist beliefs formed the greater part of the population of Norwich. Nor was Bedfordshire left out. John Brown tells us, 'The county, indeed, became a recognised asylum of religious liberty for many from across the sea. Refugees for conscience sake came from Alencon and Valenciennes, and settled at Cranfield in 1568, bringing with them their lace pillows, and establishing the lace trade of the district. And while many Protestants from the Netherlands,... thus found a home in the villages of Bedfordshire, introducing names still to be recognised in the parish registers, collections were also made in the churches of the county for others still in their own land and still suffering hardships on account of their faith.'

We want now to get back to Dunstable and the sixteenth century as soon as possible. Once Elizabeth 1st was established on the throne the reformation in England became a settled fact. But many were dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the Church of England under Elizabeth. The Puritan party pressed for a more thorough reformation, not only of belief, which had largely taken place, but also of church life and practice. As time went on, and dissatisfaction grew, Separatist churches arose – that is, churches separate from the Church of England - and in 1596 a 'True Confession', as it was called was issued by a sort of twin-church, having two congregations, one in Amsterdam and one in London. One of its articles goes like this: 'The present ministry retained and used in England of Archbishop, Lord Bishop, Deans, Prebendaries, Canons, Peti-cans, Archdeacons, Chancellors, commissaries, Priests, deacons, Parsons, Vicars, Curates, hireling roving preachers, Churchwardens, parish clerks, their doctors, proctors, and whole rabble of these courts with all from and under them set over these Cathedral and parished assemblies in this confusion, are a strange and anti-Christian ministry and offices and are not that ministry... instituted in Christ's Testament or allowed in or over his church.' The sentence may be rather involved but the point is clearly made!

With the enthronement of Charles 1st and the growing power of Archbishop Laud the Puritan, or nonconforming, party in the Church of England came under increasing pressure. The Mayflower pilgrims had already set sail for New England in 1620, and they were joined some years later by Zachary Symmes and his family, and two or three other families from Dunstable. Symmes had been the Puritan minister at the Priory Church; in America he was 'elected and ordained teacher' in the Baptist church at Charlestown. As the country slipped into civil war the Laudian party in the Church of England was associated with the Royalists, while Cromwell's New Model Army contained many Baptists and Independents. William Peddar, who followed Zachary Symmes at the Priory Church, joined the Royalist army, just as Edward Harrison, whom we earlier noticed at Kensworth, joined with the Parliamentarians. The religious polarisation was also a social, cultural and economic one. It must also be remembered that Baptists were on the radical wing of the Puritan movement, both ecclesiastically and politically.

It was probably in the late 1640's that the Kensworth church was established, which would make it one of the earliest Baptist churches in the country. It was doubtless very convenient for people to meet away from Dunstable. Unauthorised religious meetings, or conventicles, as they were called, were illegal, and to meet just over in Hertfordshire, out of the jurisdiction of the Bedfordshire magistrates, was a wise precaution. In the early days of the church there were two leaders of note. The first was Benjamin Coxe. He was an ordained minister of the Church of England who had adopted Baptist principles. In 1643 he had been imprisoned in Puritan Coventry for his strenuous defence of believer's baptism. After that he went to Bedford, and then to London where he possibly met with Edward Harrison at Petty France. His son, Nehemiah Coxe, belonged to the same church as John Bunyan in Bedford. At the same church meeting that called Bunyan to be pastor 'the church did solemnly approve of the gifts of, (and called to the work of the ministry)' seven men including Coxe. When Edward Harrison died in 1674, Nehemiah Coxe was called to be joint pastor of the church in Petty France.

As for Benjamin Coxe he often represented the Kensworth church at Association meetings, wrote letters on their behalf, and, as a man who had been educated at Oxford, was undoubtedly a great help in a church which consisted mainly of people who were yeomen or labourers. The other leader was Thomas Hayward. His name occurs as early as 1653. In 1675 he was the elder, or pastor of the church. It seems that he was the man largely responsible for bringing the scattered believers into the church at Kensworth during the years after the Restoration, preaching widely amongst them. In 1675 he is recorded as living at St Albans. He died in November 1688, and is described as 'that laborious servant of Christ', that is, one who laboured faithfully and diligently for Christ. It is interesting to note that the church appointed three men in his place to officiate in breaking bread and other ordinances, one of whom was appointed as a

'preaching brother'.

What would it have been like to belong to a church like the one that met at Kensworth? A Baptist church is a 'gathered church'. That is to say, it is a community of believers who are gathered together out of the world. This contrasts with a parish church system in which all in a parish are baptised as infants and confirmed when they reach a certain age, so that there is a sense in which everyone belongs both to the place and the church. It is this system which leads to the concept of a Christian nation and of Christendom as an even larger unit. The gathered church breaks the link between church and state, church and community, which is why Anabaptism on the continent was considered revolutionary and dangerous, and why Bunyan spoke of God's people being looked upon as 'a turbulent, seditious and factious people'.

Anabaptists were so called because the religious establishment looked upon them as baptizing again those who had already been baptized as infants. From the Baptist perspective, of course, infant baptism is not baptism, for baptism expresses faith and joins a person to the community of those who profess a living faith in Jesus Christ. This is believers' baptism and not simply adult baptism as it is sometimes inaccurately called. Baptized members of a gathered church are expected to live up to Christian standards of behaviour, and where members clearly fail to do so measures are taken by the church designed to lead to repentance. If these fail, in the last resort a person will be put out of the membership. Disciplinary measures are likely to be written up in the church book, and this tends to give some of the books a distinctly negative character. Such books only give a very partial picture of church life.

This is the case with the Kensworth church book. Drunkenness was a problem that troubled the church from time to time. Let me cite one example: 'Brother Osman, recorded an inhabitant at Wheathampstead, was by his month in harvest 1678, where he did shamefully with others betray his trust as a servant, and left his work, his master not being with them, and went to an ale house, where he spent most part of the day in sinning against God and spending his money, which should relieve his family, unto excess of drinking. He being a servant at a brother's house, the said brother could do no less but declare it to the church, all though to his great trouble, for which the church did withdraw from him, and he yet lieth under admonition 1678.' However, the next entry in the book goes on: 'Brother Osman of Wheathampstead aforesaid, did, in the presence of the congregation, publicly declare his fact, acknowledge his sin, and manifest his great trouble for the same, desired again to return to his place. The church gladly embraced him again, rejoicing that God had given him repentance to the acknowledging of the truth, was admitted to his membership, March 1678.'

But there were other misdemeanours. 'Brother Cranley, recorded an inhabitant of Kimpton, there happened such great difference between him and his wife, so that they would not live together but parted very unseemly not becoming Christianity for when she went away Brother Cranley did give money and set the town bell to ring by way of rejoicing at the unhappy breach: now it was that matter of fact how they did so open the mouth of our enemies to reflect upon us and also upon the gospel and truth which were professed that the whole church was greatly troubled about it.' We might note that while the church withdrew communion from brother Cranley, they did not do so from his wife. In fact he was received back into the church upon repentance, but left again some time later to join another group.

So the church was concerned to care for the spiritual growth and development of all its members and their moral conduct in the community. But along with this went a concern for the material provision of members and those beyond the church. After the death of Thomas Hayward not only were men appointed to continue his spiritual ministry but Brother Dearmer was elected a deacon to take care of the poor.

Two other features of the Particular Baptists of those days may be mentioned. Firstly, there was a desire to spread the gospel. The remarkable growth of the churches in the 1640's and 50's demonstrates this. We must not think of this as just a matter of people changing their allegiance from Anglicanism or Presbyterianism to become Baptists, though, of course, this did take place. The desire to bring men and women directly to faith in Jesus Christ is seen in one clause in the 1644 London Confession of Faith, a confession issued by the seven London Particular Baptist churches then in existence. We believe - 'That the tenders of the Gospel to the conversion of sinners is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the Law, or preceding Ministry of the Law, but only and alone the naked soul, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen again, being made a Prince and a saviour for such sinners.' Put more simply, what this means is that people were called directly and immediately to receive Jesus Christ. Regrettably this was an emphasis that Particular Baptist churches largely lost in future days.

A second feature is the desire for true spiritual experience. These people were far from understanding faith as merely a mental grasp and commitment to certain teachings believed to arise from the Bible. They expected and looked for their feelings to be stirred, and their hearts to be warmed and filled with the joy of the Lord. Here is a sentence from a letter signed by Benjamin Coxe among others, describing one of the association meetings: 'Diverse brethren had such sweet and lively and soul-ravishing manifestations of God's gracious presence, as they could not sufficiently express and such as some of them had not enjoyed in all their lives, till this day.' Similarly Thomas Hayward signed another letter which says, 'Then were we as in the mount with God. Then were our hearts broken and our souls melted, our faith strengthened, our love increased! O, what shall we render to the Lord for all his goodness? O, that you and we may bless his holy name and be encouraged to wait upon him, for he [touched] and made it good; they shall not be ashamed that wait upon him.'

On more than one occasion I've referred to Anabaptists and also Particular Baptists without explaining these terms. 'Anabaptist' was applied to a number of different groups in continental Europe that practised rebaptism. Some of these were extreme in their beliefs and behaviour. Even the more moderate groups tended to hold some errors about the person of Jesus Christ. Some of those burnt at the stake in Mary's reign in England were baptistic in belief and held to the same type of error. The first to be called Baptists in England had spent some time in the Netherlands. A small group of them returned to London in 1612 under their leader Thomas Helwys. They had been influenced in the Netherlands by Jacob Arminius who had abandoned the Calvinism which was the doctrinal outlook both of the continental reformers and of the Puritans in England. The Baptist churches which spread from the Helwys church became known as General Baptists because they believed in a 'general redemption'.

The first Particular Baptist church was formed in 1638 from a group who came out of what was known as the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, so-called after its first three pastors. This new church was pastored by John Spilsbury, who was probably a cobbler by trade. It adhered to Calvinistic orthodoxy with its belief in a particular redemption, that is, that Jesus Christ died in particular for all that were to be saved, hence the term, Particular Baptist. It is noteworthy that when the earliest churches issued their 1644 Confession they took care to distinguish themselves from the Anabaptists: 'The Confession of Faith of those churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists'. It is also significant that the second London Confession of Faith of 1689 closely followed the Westminster Confession of Faith, showing the basic agreement of the Particular Baptist churches with the Reformed faith. This confession was approved at a meeting of representatives from over one hundred churches, and Daniel Finch signed it on behalf of the Kensworth church.

One important point must be made about the Particular Baptists. It was they who came to the conclusion that baptism means immersion. Up to that time both Anabaptists and the General Baptists had baptised by sprinkling or pouring. But the early Particular Baptists saw that in the New Testament baptism symbolised the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the identification of the believer with him in dying to the old life and rising to a new one. Hence they argued that the primary meaning of the Greek word, to dip, immerse, should be followed and in this they were soon followed by the General Baptists.

In 1694 a difference of opinion which had first arisen four years earlier led to a large secession from the Kensworth church. 'December 6, 1694. The names of all the members of the church of Kensworth who rent off with brother Marsom and departed out of their places, and broke the peace of the church about the matter of desirance of Mr Titmas, as followeth.' Then comes a list of names followed by, 'The end of the names of those that departed from us, being in number 65.' Thomas Marsom lived in Luton and had been appointed to minister in the church after the death of Thomas Hayward, along with Daniel Finch, and Brother Harding. Mr Titmas - the Dunstable church book calls him Tidmarsh - had come to preach in 1690 and it is evident that those with Thomas Marsom wished him to remain as elder and preacher, while the rest of the members did not. There is a Richard Tidmarsh who signed the 1689 Confession as the minister of the church in Oxford city, but whether this is the same man is unknown, at least to me.

The group with Marsom formed a church in Luton - we must remember they probably often met there for worship anyway - and he became its pastor, serving for over thirty years while also carrying on his business as an ironmonger and merchant. Their first chapel was in Park Street, and the church amalgamated with two others in 1975 to form Central Baptist Church. In about 1720 Thomas Marsom formed a daughter church at Thorn, not far from Houghton Regis. Members of the Thorn church were drawn from a number of places including Houghton Regis and Dunstable. Members from Thorn formed the church at

Houghton Regis, the first meeting house being opened in 1790. It was also members from Thorn living in Dunstable who built a meeting house in Dunstable in 1801, the beginnings of West Street Baptist Church across the road. This coincided with a time of 'much contention and disputation' in the church here.

It is likely that at much the same time as the division which resulted in a separate church in Luton, the members living in St Albans also formed themselves into a church, the Baptist Church which still meets in Dagnall Street. Some churches at this time continued as one church even though they met in separate congregations. This was true of the Thorn-Houghton Regis-Dunstable church for a number of years, a contemporary referring to a 'sermon preached at Dunstable Houghton'. But it was to be expected that in the changed circumstances after the Glorious Revolution separate churches would emerge in towns widely separated from each other.

The first meeting house was built in Dunstable in 1708. The record reads: 'In the year 1708 built then an house at Dunstable for the public worship of God – The ground cost ten pounds. The writings cost two pounds. The charge for stuff and workmanship eighty and one pounds and two pence. The cost in all ninety three pounds and two pence. The writings belonging to the house are lodged in Brother Britten's hands.'

'The writings' in those days were formidable documents. There were originally four trustees of the land and meeting house but in 1724 this number was increased to twelve. It is interesting to note that this deed says, 'the same from time to time and at all times for ever hereafter shall remain continue and be and shall be used as and for a place of assembly or Meeting house for Religious Worship of the Protestant Dissenters called particular Baptists and others their friends usually meeting there...' What precise meaning is to be given to the phrase 'others their friends' is not clear, but it is a nice touch.

The tendency to multiply words so as to cover every eventuality is seen throughout this document rendering it almost incoherent in places: '...all That Messuage or Tenement called or known by the name of Meetinghouse lately (or sometime since) built and erected on some part of the said piece or parcell of land aforementioned to be thereby Granted Together with all ways matters watercourses lights easements profits Commodities Hereditaments and appurtenances whatsoever to the said piece or parcell of land Messuage or Tenement and Premises belonging or appertaining or therewith used reputed taken or known as part parcell or member thereof or any part thereof with their and every of their Appurtenances and the Reversion and Reversions remainder and remainders rents Issues and profits thereof and of every part thereof And also all the estate right Title interest use Trust possession equitable disposition claims and demand whatsoever of them...' and so it goes on.

The twelve trustees came from Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Luton, Sewell, Studham, Chipperfield and Albury in Hertfordshire, and Dagnall and Horton near Ivinghoe in Buckinghamshire. Six are recorded as yeomen; there is a joiner, bricklayer, carpenter, husbandman, wheelwright and tailor. There is a possibility that the meeting house was enlarged in 1807. It was rebuilt in 1849 when the present chapel was erected on the same site, apparently incorporating some part of the old building. Early on in that year a violent storm one Sunday afternoon damaged the roof which fell in, endangering the lives of the worshippers. This building now has a vestibule which was added to it a few years ago, and has been completely changed inside with the old box pews having been removed and replaced by more comfortable chairs.



It is quite clear that in the early years of the 1800's the church went through a very difficult period in which it may have almost ceased to exist, a new beginning being made in 1814. The church book speaks of 'the time of our extream affliction and great impotance'. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a good recovery under the ministry of Lawrence Chessher. It is pleasing to read the minutes of the church meeting held on December 29th 1816: 'By the grace of our God we as a Church of Jesus Christ, assembled this day. Bro. Cheshire began with prayer. The minutes of the last meeting were read. Collection made for the poor brethren. Brother William Cheshire appointed treasurer of the poor's money. Agreed, That any brother or sister of this community being sick or lame, or by any other calamitous circumstance brought to need the assistance of the Church in necessities of a temporal nature; May obtain temporary relief from any member who lives nearest to them;

which member may draw on the treasurer according to the exigency of the case, and that such a member make their report at the next church meeting. also – any member knowing a brother or sister to be in needy circumstances. May present such a case at a church meeting though they have not been applied to to that effect, and such case will be attended to and relieved according to the ability of the church or the nature of the case. Reported that Martha Scrivener, James Robinson, William Tennant and William Henley were baptized on the 8th instant according to the consent of the church the 25th day of Nov. instant. The said brethren and sister was received into the Church the same day as they were baptized.'

Lawrence Chessher first preached at the chapel in May 1814. He 'served the Church as a Visitor and Probationer, Two years, Eleven months, and one week, and we publicly ordained him on the 8th of April 1817.' Between 1815 and 1819 twenty-one people were baptized and joined the church. In June 1819 he tendered a letter of resignation but the church rejected this after consideration; he died shortly afterwards in October, aged 39. His ministry was obviously greatly appreciated by the church and there is still a plaque in his memory on the wall towards the back of the chapel.

It is not my intention to try and cover all the period between the seventeenth century and the present. In any case the materials are too sketchy to provide anything approaching a completely balanced picture. One occasion that brings an external light to bear on the church – and indeed all churches of the time – was the census of those attending church taken on March 30th, 1851. The figures for the church are as follows. Those attending on Sunday morning, 390; in the afternoon, 440; and in the evening, 310. Given that this was a rather wet March Sunday these are quite remarkable numbers, especially when it is remembered that everyone was crammed into this building. The one big difference was that in those days the gallery went round behind the pulpit. These figures included children; 40 Sunday Scholars attended both morning and afternoon services.

It is interesting to note the figures for Dunstable as a whole. The population of Dunstable at that time was 3,589. If you add together the numbers of those attending the Priory Church of St Peter, the Methodist Church, West Street Baptist Church and the Temperance Hall, together with those for this church – the only churches in Dunstable at the time - they come out like this. In the morning 2,211 people were at church, in the afternoon 1,291, and in the evening 2,340. This means that about 65% of the population of Dunstable went to church that day, and more than 10% were to be found in this chapel. Bearing in mind that some who attended may have come from villages around, we are still left with a very high proportion of churchgoers, especially when we remember that sick people, the more elderly, and mothers with small babies would remain at home. The contrast with the numbers attending a place of worship today could scarcely be more stark.

1851 coincides with the pastorate of a Mr Carpenter, who began his ministry in 1848. It was early in the next year that the chapel was severely damaged. The church book does not mention the circumstances, but at a meeting on January 30th item 5 on the agenda says, 'Agreed by the Church after some consideration the chapel should be repaired and enlarged'. This seems to have been accomplished in double quick time, for on August 26th we read, 'The church was called together for the purpose of having a re-opening' though the exact date on which this took place is not recorded.

The rebuilding of the chapel was a costly business, and was to put the church into debt for some time. It appears that the church had already adopted the system of pew rents by which people paid for their seats. In July these were fixed at one and six for downstairs and front gallery seats, with the middle seats at one shilling. At the next meeting the price of gallery seats was reduced to one and three for front seats and nine pence for second seats. It was also agreed to place two boxes at the doors for chapel funds. In case you are wondering, the price was not per Sunday but for a three month period. The practice of pew rents was very common at that time, leading to the acerbic comment of John Galsworthy in the Forsyte Saga, 'Some of them (i.e. the Forsytes) paid for pews, thus expressing in the most practical form their sympathy with the teachings of Christ'. Surprisingly the church did not abandon the pew rent system until 1949.

The Old Baptist Chapel Seat Book reveals 121 names for the first quarter of 1851, and the amounts paid suggest that seats for about 157 persons were paid for. This means that a large number of other people were often to be found at the worship, though it may be also that young children were not charged for their seats. The census reveals that there were 300 'sittings' and 70 free seats so presumably either benches were put out to accommodate the others attending or else they stood. The latter would not be unusual; West Street Baptist Church had room for 124 standing at that time. We do not have any real idea of the

number of church members. During Mr Carpenter's ministry there were frequent baptisms and additions to the church, but the number of members was probably always quite small compared to the number of those who attended the services. For comparison, Westoning Baptist Church gave the following figures for attendance on the day of the census, morning 130, afternoon 200, evening 80, but also added, members 26.

There appear to have been twenty pastors in the history of the church up to the present time. The earlier part of the twentieth century saw years of gradual decline and the church was without a pastor except for the short period between 1918 and 1922. The church was at a low ebb in 1964 when William Goode was called to be pastor, and we rejoice that he is in membership with us at this day. There was some building up of the congregation and in 1975 the membership stood at sixteen. At the end of a booklet written by Mr Reg Baker in that year we read, 'The outlook for the future is not very bright,' but fortunately the sentence continues, 'but past experiences and deliverances enable us, as a church, to say, with John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace:

He who has helped us hitherto  
will help us all our journey through  
and give us daily cause to raise  
new Ebenezers to his praise.'

Since that time growth, both numerical and, we trust, spiritual, has continued. In 1979 Kenneth Dix became pastor until his retirement in 1993. There are now about eighty in membership and the morning congregation, including children and visitors, is usually between 110 and 120. Some things change. We now have a wide variety of activities and meetings from a Mothers and Toddlers' group through to Friends and Neighbours for older people. Since 1982 the church has run the Christian Bookshop, supplying Bibles and a wide range of Christian literature. Other things should not change. As a church we continue to hold to the biblical truths believed by those who first gathered at Kensworth: the sovereign rule of God over the world and all of life; forgiveness and salvation solely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ; the church as a community gathered out of the world to show the praises of God. How a person views history depends on his philosophical, ideological or religious commitment. For ourselves we look back over three hundred and fifty years with gratitude to God, and look to the future trusting to his continuing grace.

