

A History of Nonconformist Religion in Bratton

by Kathleen White

First published by Bratton History Association in 1992 and edited for the website in 2015

Baptist

Tradition relates that William Gough, who was a Presbyterian, preached at Bratton in 1667. He was responsible for the establishment of a Baptist following at Erlestoke, and the nonconformity of the two places was always closely linked. In 1702, meetings took place in a barn belonging to John Hodges which were said to be organised by Quakers, but appear to be really the nucleus of a Baptist organisation, as no further reference is made to Quakerism in the village.

Westbury Leigh was also closely connected to the establishment of nonconformity in Bratton, through the ministrations of John Watts, a member of that church, who preached at Erlestoke in 1720 and agreed to preach at Bratton once a month. At this time meetings increased in strength, so that in 1733 a site was found for a chapel to be built in the village. The building was completely paid for by voluntary subscription, and in the beginning meetings were held fortnightly, then weekly by popular demand. While the chapel was in the process of construction, the congregation moved into a schoolroom belonging to Jeffery Whitaker. As soon as the new building was complete and ready for use, it joined the Western Association and some time between 1734 and 1747 the congregations of Erlestoke and Bratton were amalgamated. The meetings continued to grow in strength until 1928 when the congregation numbered some 100 souls. In the later 19th century the Baptist movement in Bratton became a centre for evangelism.

In the late 18th century, a public road ran through the grounds in which the red brick chapel was built, but this was diverted in the early 1800s. The figures on the stone pillars at each end of the original building show the date of 1734. In view of the rate at which the congregation continued to grow, it was found necessary to enlarge the original building in 1786 by extending it 12 feet (3.6m) back. Restoration of the building took place in 1807 and windows were placed in the east and west sides. Subsequently, the roof of the chapel was raised four feet (1.2m), a schoolroom and vestry were built, and a lecture room was added in 1856. The original schoolroom on the west side was enlarged in 1874. Much interior restoration took place about this time and new chapel windows were inserted in 1899.

There have been many bequests to the chapel. In 1775, Jeffery Whitaker gave £350 to the trustees of a house 'lately erected for pious and religious uses at Brown's Plot'. The interest on £100 of this bequest was to be given to the Baptist minister until the time came for his house (the manse) to be built, when it was to go towards the cost of this. The interest on the remaining £250 was to provide one guinea (£1.05) annually for the preaching of a special sermon, payments to the poor, and the education of poor children in the village. Other bequests include those of Joseph Goodenough Blatch who left £500

in 1840, Thomas Whitaker who left £100 in 1857, John Reeves who left £200 in 1892; and Emma Pocock who left £100 in 1932. In 1882, John Griffin left money for the benefit of the choir. For many years an American organ was in use, and the choir consisted of about 25 members, who sat in the shortest of the three galleries at the back of the building. A choir practice was regularly held and an anthem was sung at the Sunday evening services. Prior to its own baptistry being built, baptisms took place in the stream at Stradbroke.

From early on, the Sunday School was divided into two. Upstairs the very small children met in the Primary Department. The furniture consisted of small round wooden armchairs and small tables. At one end was a sand tray on legs which was very popular with the 'tinies' of about three years old. The whole room was decorated with large brightly-coloured scriptural pictures, and in the winter a cheerful fire was lit in the fireplace which was let into the west wall.

On reaching the age of ten, the children were transferred to the Bible Class which was held in the large schoolroom underneath, and Sunday School became much more formal. Sunday School anniversary services were held on the second Sunday in June, when all the new anniversary clothes came out to be aired. During the morning service, the Primary Department gave their demonstration, which usually consisted of recitations and songs. During the afternoon and evening, the senior scholars gave their demonstration, which took the form of a play illustrating such topics as the first printing of the Bible and missionaries such as William Carey.

Shiny apples were placed around the ledge of the gallery for the Harvest Festival services held on the second Sunday in October. A large loaf decorated the pulpit and the whole building was bedecked in gay flowers. On the table rested such things as eggs, jam, carrots, potatoes, beans and more apples. Marrows were placed at the foot of the table and a sheaf of corn tied to each pillar. Willing hands helped to pack up these goodies at the end of the day, ready for dispatch to London.

Ropeholders League was started in 1931. This meeting was held on Wednesday evenings following the summer break and was well attended. It was geared for the junior members of the congregation and comprised missionary stories and singing. Towards Christmas, presents and puddings were made – the presents for family and friends, the puddings for West Ham in London. Ropeholders eventually folded after 21 years of activity.

The Baptist cause was very busy in many different ways: the Women's, League, Men's Fellowship, the scripture examination every Spring, prayer meetings and of course the choir. There is still a hive of activity in the Baptist Church today, so for over 280 years, it has been a focal point in the village.

Methodist

In the early 19th century (about 1829) there were a few Methodists in Bratton but they had no meeting place of their own, except for the kindness of being able to share other peoples' homes. In 1870, this small band of nonconformists decided to build their own

church in Stradbroke, and in this they were helped very much by Nathaniel Snelgrove, who gave the land and left £400 in his will for the chapel's maintenance. In 1851 there was a congregation of about 30 Primitive Methodists who met in a cottage in East Coulston. These people had great influence over the smaller meeting in Bratton, who drew some of their ministers from them. (*See editor's endnote.*)

On completion of the building programme trustees were elected, and these included a few well-known Bratton names, such as Mr Ernest Alfred Raines, Mr Mason, Mr Lush, and Mr ER Flook, as time progressed. In 1915, Miss Ashley was the organist and Mr Mason treasurer. At the annual meeting of 13 February 1919, the Revd S Whitaker took the chair in place of Revd JE Creasy. The question of joining the Methodist Union was discussed during 1923, and it was agreed that this should happen, so the Bratton church became joined with Westbury, having previously been associated with the Bradford and Trowbridge circuit.

During the 1930s Mr J Hancock became the organist as Miss Ashley had resigned. A special meeting was held on 4 May 1936 to accept the resignation of Mr Lewis as secretary and treasurer – a double post which he had held for some years, and Mr Hancock was elected in his place. During 1937, Mr Raines, who had worked hard for the establishment of the church and been a trustee for several years, died. About a year later, Mr Lush was appointed as chapel keeper, and in 1943 Miss Barrett was appointed as deputy organist.

Over the next few years, several small legacies were left in trust for the Methodist chapel, and it prospered. Anniversary services were held in the 1920s during the month of July, and very well-attended harvest services were held each September, during which the goods were sold for funds. A new Methodist hymn book was introduced in 1944, and in 1945 Miss Axford became the part-time organist, eventually resigning in 1947. During this year, Mr Hancock also resigned as secretary and treasurer of the trustees after ten years' service.

In 1952, a complaint was received that the hedge and greenery was overgrown and needed cutting, and this was undertaken by volunteers. It was also proposed during this year that, as the state of the property had deteriorated rapidly lately, consideration should be given to closure, but this was delayed as long as possible. However, discussion took place as to the placement of some of the fittings. It was decided to send the organ to Semington, but it was later transferred to a chapel in Pound Street, Warminster, as Semington could not accommodate it. The communion set was sent to Longbridge Deverill and all moveable pews to Freshford and Westwood chapels. Members transferred to Westbury. All services therefore ceased in 1952, but the business side was not wound up until 1954. The chapel was eventually demolished in 1957.

Editor's update, 2015:

The source of the 'East Coulston' origin for the Methodist congregation is not clear. An alternative version states that it was a Wesleyan Methodist group from Tinhead who succeeded in reviving 'the cause' in Bratton. (AJM)