

## **The Baptists in Hook Norton**

The Baptist community in Hook Norton is one of the oldest in the country: its roots go back to the mid-17th century, a period of increasing religious and political dissent. The Baptist movement was founded by a radical Puritan group which left England for Holland in the early 1600s when King James I failed to introduce the religious reforms they had hoped for. In Amsterdam the congregation led by Thomas Helwys and John Smyth had freedom to develop their form of worship; and it was in Amsterdam that they were sheltered by an Anabaptist community.

The Anabaptists (the word means "re-baptism") believed in baptism as a conscious avowal of faith by adults. An adult who had been baptised in the Church of England could be re-baptised, but an infant who could not understand the meaning of baptism should not be baptised at all. This shocked conventional Christians who believed an unbaptised child who died was condemned to spiritual death, but Baptists and Anabaptists interpreted the scriptures differently. Anabaptists also believed that they should not take oaths (including oaths of loyalty) or bear arms; no Anabaptist was to take an active part in government, but should offer only passive obedience to the state. A wrong-doer could be excluded from the congregation but no physical punishment could be given.

Baptists who returned to England in 1612 resisted attempts to impose uniformity of worship. Their first church in England was in Newgate Street in London, but their very non-conformity led to divisions within their own movement. One group established the Particular Baptist church which adhered to the Calvinist belief in pre-destination and individual redemption, while their rivals, the General Baptists, believed that salvation was open to all.

Throughout the 17th century, Baptists continued to refuse to acknowledge successive monarchs as head of the church in England, and were persecuted. The turmoil of King Charles I's attempt to rule without parliament for eleven years roused almost nationwide opposition; his religious reforms were seen as the insinuation of Catholic forms of worship and fostered even more dissent. War broke out, first in Scotland and then in England.

In 1642 King Charles I set up court in Oxford; Parliament held the more radical city of London. [See the article on *The Great Civil War* in the "Medieval and Early Modern Eras" section on this website.] The war was on our doorstep. The Parliamentary Trained Bands marched through, possibly spreading their political and religious beliefs. When Compton Wynyates fell to the Roundheads in 1644, Major George Purefoy was quartered there. His chaplain, Abiezer Coppe, was a Baptist and by 1646 had been in Hook Norton as part of an evangelistic campaign during

which he baptised or re-baptised some seven thousand people. Led by James Wilmot, Hook Norton Baptists began to meet for Bible study and prayer. Mathew Wyton, a yeoman with a large house – and a Bible, provided the location.

It seems likely that converts were baptised in Hook Norton pond. Precisely where that pond was is not known, but it seems that later, at least, there was a baptismal pond, now filled-in, in the garden of The Old Manse on Netting Street, west of the present-day Baptist chapel. A gate used to exist in the dividing wall, rebuilt within the last 10 years, and members would go down there for baptisms.

The King was defeated; bishops were abolished and the prayer book made illegal in 1645. Under Oliver Cromwell's protectorate, there was tolerance for all except Roman Catholics and those who persisted in using the Prayer Book. Baptists could meet openly and in 1655 the growing Hook Norton congregation represented by Wilmot and Wyton joined an Association of seven Baptist churches with Bourton-on-the-Water, Moreton-in-Marsh, Warwick, Tewkesbury, Derby and Alcester.

The restoration of Charles II in 1660 put an end to the Association meetings, reinstated Bishops and the Prayer Book, the authority of Parliament - and religious persecution. Baptists and Quakers were excluded from the general amnesty and various restrictive Acts were passed, making it illegal for any group of five or more persons over the age of 16 to assemble "under the pretence of religion". Altogether, four discriminatory Acts, known as the Clarendon Code, were passed between 1661 and 1665. These are outlined on the Events chart in the History section of the Hook Norton Baptist Church website: <http://www.hook-norton-baptist-church.org.uk>

Hook Norton Baptists remained true to their faith, and the congregation continued to grow. About 60 Anabaptists met monthly at James Wilmot's house where their teachers were James and Samuel Wilmot, and John Lamley (who later became a Quaker). Some were sent to gaol. [See the Canities article *1664: Baptist Persecution* in the "Creative History" section of this website.] Sixteen Baptists from Hook Norton were excommunicated "for not coming to Church" between 1664 and 1665. This meant that the offenders no longer had the right to participate in Anglican church services, and were denied Christian sacraments including burial. Twenty years later, in 1684, 30 members of the Hook Norton Baptist Church were excommunicated. The lists include James Wilmot, his younger brother Samuel, Alexander Prescott, James Beale, Benjamin Gatfield, Henry Geyling [Galen], John Harwood, Humphrey Gillett, Elizabeth Wilmot (James's widow), Daniel Wilmot and John Wilmot senior, but the 1684 list also included Quakers. [There is an article on *Quakers* in the "Religious Life (Other Religious Faiths)" on this website.]

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (the deposition of Catholic King James II in favour of his daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange), the Toleration

Act was passed in 1689. This time the Baptists were prepared to take oaths of allegiance and obtain a licence for their meetings.

Baptists continued to meet in Daniel Wilmot's house, or barn, but soon built their own Meeting House, the first of many building projects. In 1716 James Beale, Daniel Wilmot, John Young and John Norton applied for the House of Mrs Mary Skeys to be registered "for a Meeting House for protestant desenters". This might have been only a short-term measure as William Harwood, a wealthy local man, was building a new chapel, with a house, garden and orchard for the minister. The new chapel, though permitted under licence granted in 1719, was required to be out of public view, which is why the chapel site stands well back from the road and was originally hidden by a row of cottages. The access path can still be seen, but was later paved, probably in the 19th century. The chapel was rebuilt in 1787 and is still in use. Three roadside cottages later made way for a Victorian Sunday school building, and a fourth cottage or outbuilding remained until the hall extension was constructed in 2004, when permission was obtained to disinter three known burials. In fact five burials were discovered and these were reinterred within the churchyard.

Originally burials were in the churchyard of the Baptist chapel, but in 1720 the Bury Orchard, next to St Peter's, was purchased as an additional burial ground.



The Baptist burial ground. Photograph: ©Gill Geering

Amos Sandsbury of Banbury provided £20 and George Westbury of Wigginton £40 for the purchase of two acres of land, which allowed not only for a burial ground but also allotments and gardens. On the eastern edge of the orchard, the Trustees built the Manse (on the site of the present Well House). In the 1940s some of the Bury Orchard was sold to provide housing for the elderly in what is now Osney Close.

In 1738 Anglican church records list 18 families of Baptists in Hooky; the Baptist Church record two years later also shows 18 members in Hook Norton plus 28 from 13 other villages, some from as far away as Kings Sutton. Among Daniel Wilmot's successors were Daniel Evans (1743-1747) and John Nottage (1747-1753). Benjamin Whitmore's ministry covered the following 50 years. Like other nonconformists, the Baptists continued to suffer civil and legal disadvantages until the law was changed in 1828. Marriage in Baptist chapels was allowed after 1837.

The church set up a charitable trust to maintain its property, and the trustees feature in the Enclosure Award of 1774 as land held in the Common Fields was reallocated: "To the said Thomas Walford Nathaniel Walford Richard Beale William Goffe William Tredwell John Young John Gunner Richard Salmon and John Beale as Trustees for the Baptist Congregation in Hooknorton ... a plot of land, the Bakehouse Field behind the chapel, in lieu of land at Cradle". The Cradle land had been given to them in 1720, and had provided income from rents. (In 1930 it was sold and the money invested.)

There was tension within the Baptist movement at this period. One issue was the problem of communicant membership: should it be restricted to those who had been baptised as adults or open to all believers? Was salvation open or restricted? The issues of extreme Calvinist doctrines of election and reprobation (that God had predestined some people to go to hell) and free will, often associated with John Wesley and the Methodists, remained controversial. The late 18th century might have been when the Strict Baptists formed their own community in Hook Norton, though they did not build their own chapel until 1898. [There is an article on *Strict Baptists* in "Religious Life: Other Faiths" on this website.]

Baptist church minutes throughout the 19th century cover the minutiae of financial and disciplinary affairs. Pastors came and went, some in dudgeon, some even in disgrace. There were times when there was no pastor at all in Hook Norton. The church lost members as economic difficulties persuaded many in Hook Norton to try emigration. A 19th-century entry in the Hook Norton Baptist membership list acknowledged that John and Ann Timms and Mary Phipps had "gone to America"; they were joined by William Richards, who was the preacher at Hook Norton from 1821 to 1831 and was attracted to emigration by the growing popularity of the Baptist faith in the United States. [See the article on the Richards family in "Hooky People: Emigration" on this website.] It seemed that the church here was in decline.

## The Baptist Church today

Despite the falling congregations that led to many other churches and chapels in Hook Norton failing, the Baptist church has survived. Church services ceased here in the mid-1980s, but re-started in 1987 under the oversight of Banbury Baptist Church, which appointed Ray Gill to lead the fellowship. In 1995 Hook Norton again became an independent church within the Baptist Union and Reverend John Paul Taylor was appointed Pastor in 1997 and served until 2014. It was the Hook Norton Baptist Church that sponsored his training and accreditation as a minister. A new lay pastor, Peter Brookes, has now been appointed.

The Baptist Church and St Peter's work together in supporting village activities like JAM (Jesus and me), an after-school club, and Hooky Youth: the congregation from St Peter's attended the last service held by Reverend Taylor. Other commitments include a summer Holiday Club, the Monday Lunch Club for the elderly, a weekly coffee morning, and the Parent and Toddler group.



The Reverend John Taylor's last service: he retired in March 2014

True to the original tenets of its founders, Hook Norton Baptist Church is active overseas: Dorothy Smith spent over 20 years working at a Medical Centre attached to a refugee centre in Hong Kong; Lee Woodward, supported by the Baptist Church, studied with Bethel Church, Redding, California and has returned to play a leading role in the community. HNBC is one of several local Baptist Churches that actively supports Martin and Katrina Butterworth who work with the Baptist Missionary Society in Nepal, though they have not been members at HNBC. A team from HNBC visited and ran a children's programme with a church in Malawi over the

## H o o k N o r t o n L o c a l H i s t o r y G r o u p

summer of 2011. The church and several individual members support individual children and young people through education and training in Africa and India.

The church has moved with the times: Sunday worship these days includes live music accompanying contemporary as well as traditional songs. Attendance at services has remained constant over the past 20 years; membership in the most recent annual return (2013) was 31, but services are open to all and are attended by non-members or members of other churches. It is no longer a requirement for a person to be baptised as a believing adult, but at least 90 per cent of the current membership are. There were three baptisms in 2010 and one in 2012. The most recent wedding was about 10 years ago.

The dissenters of the 17th century laid a strong foundation for the Baptist Church of today which continues to play a valuable role in both religious and community life in Hook Norton.



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with contributions by the Reverend Ralph Mann, Dorothy Smith and Nigel Whitehead

### Further Reading

*A History of Hook Norton Baptist Church.* Compiled by Rev'd John Paul Taylor, with contributions by Dr. Pauline Ashbridge, Rev'd Ralph Mann and Mrs Barbara Hicks, Hook Norton, 2010, available from the Baptist Church Office: 01608 737315.