

Strict Baptists

At the end of the nineteenth century a second Baptist chapel appeared in Hook Norton, set up by the Strict (or Particular) Baptists. This breakaway movement arose from a tension that the Baptist movement had always had within it about who would be saved in the next world. The so-called Particular or Strict Baptists believed in John Calvin's doctrine of predestination, which decrees that, as God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and stands above time and place, He already knows whether a particular individual will be saved in the afterlife, and there is nothing the individual can do to change that fate. The General Baptists held that God allows an individual to choose whether to live a virtuous and holy life, repenting of sins, and so earn salvation. Thus the General Baptists held that salvation was open to all, while the Particular or Strict Baptists held that it was restricted to the "Elect".

The Hook Norton Baptist church was open (or General), but in the eighteenth century came under pressure from a revival in Calvinism within the church. According to the historian Martin Greenwood, Particular Baptists were meeting in Hook Norton as early as 1773; certainly over the next fifty years or so a number of



One of the illustrated texts that hung on the Zion Chapel's walls.

Strict Baptist chapels appeared in Chipping Norton and villages to the west. In the late nineteenth century, they enjoyed a further local revival under the ministry of Mr Gorton, a shoemaker from Oddington, and this was probably responsible for the building of a Strict Baptist chapel in Hook Norton.

The Strict Baptist Chapel was built in 1898, at a cost of £300, on the site now occupied by Windward House on Chapel Street, at the corner of Tite Lane. Named Zion Chapel, it was built at the instigation of the Lightfoot family; Mr Lightfoot was excise man at the Brewery and served for many years as the Senior Deacon of the chapel. The Strict Baptists were very puritanical in many things but had no objection to alcohol or tobacco. They insisted on plain singing without instrumental accompaniment during services, but when the chapel was demolished a harmonium was found inside.

The community seems to have ceased meeting around the Second World War. The site was sold for £1,000 in 1966 and the chapel demolished in 1968; it was replaced by a commercial garage. The stone of the chapel was used initially to face the garage, and later to extend Windward House and build the garden walls. Otherwise, all that remains of the chapel now is the apex stone and two illustrated texts, which are on display in the Village Museum. However, the Village Archive also holds some interesting mementoes of the denomination's time in Hook Norton: the Lightfoot family's copy of John Bunyan's *Holy War*, T. Busby's *Bible*, and copies of *Gadsby's Hymns* and of the chapel's magazine, *Christian Pathway*. The significance of the two latter is explained below.

We know little directly of the inner life of the Hook Norton chapel. However, as it happens, Ralph Mann – who was formerly Head of History at Chipping Norton School and later ordained as a Church of England priest – was brought up as a Strict Baptist in Leatherhead in Surrey between 1927 and 1945. He lived in the village for many years up to his death in 2014 and contributed in distinguished fashion to the history of the area. In 2002 he wrote a brief memoir of his recollections of the Strict Baptists and “their idiosyncrasies” for the benefit of the Village Museum and Archive.

Originally written as two letters, we are delighted to be able to publish that memoir – with his express permission – immediately below in a slightly edited form.

© Donald Ratcliffe

References:

Martin Greenwood: *Pilgrim's Progress Revisited: The Nonconformists of Banburyshire, 1662-2012* (Charlbury: Wychwood Press, 2013), pages 82-83.

Ralph Mann: "Memories of the Strict Baptists", typescript (2002) in Village Archive, reprinted below.

Memories of the Strict Baptists

The Strict Baptists are a totally different denomination from the Baptists, with whom they differ both in doctrine and practice, and there is little love lost between them! The Strict Baptists have their roots in the eighteenth century when they adopted an advanced Calvinist position, making predestination (or "election") their key doctrine. The insistence on Predestination was quite obsessive: they were always waiting to pounce on anyone who gave the slightest hint of believing in "Free Will"; this was ultimately the cause of my own father's excommunication, although by then I was an older teenager and had already cut my ties with them.

Locally, the Hook Norton and Chipping Norton Baptist churches were, and are, open or General Baptists. But in the 1780s, the Chipping Norton Baptists decided to become a Strict Baptist Chapel. When this decision was reversed some thirty years later, it led to breakaway Strict Baptist chapels being set up in many villages in this district, all of them in opposition to the larger General Baptist Chapels. This happened in Chipping Norton, Kingham, Milton-under-Wychwood and elsewhere. In the late nineteenth century, the Strict Baptists enjoyed a local revival

under the ministry of Mr Gorton, a shoemaker from Oddington. Hook Norton Strict Baptist Chapel probably owes its origin to that later period.

With the Strict Baptists (the most extreme called themselves “Strict and Particular Baptists”), the service always lasted an hour and a half, and consisted of a hymn, a reading from the Bible, an extempore prayer, a second hymn, an hour-long sermon, and a closing hymn. The preacher was responsible only for the sermon; the rest of the service was conducted by a Deacon. The sermon was supposed not to have been prepared beforehand – “It shall be given you in that hour what ye shall say” – although I suspect that many preachers had a good idea of how they were going to fill in that long, long hour.

The Strict Baptists allowed unaccompanied singing, which, to my recollection, was unbelievably slow and dreary. Hymns were never chosen in advance, but selected on the spur of the moment by the Senior Deacon who presided over the service. Either he, or another (male) member of the congregation, “led the singing” by pitching the opening words of the hymn, sometimes far too high (or low), and then the rest gradually joined in a grinding dirge.

Their hymn book is Gadsby's Hymns. William Gadsby published his final edition in 1838; it consists largely of his own hymns which have little poetic merit, but are doctrinally “sound”. He did condescend to include hymns written by Hart, Philpot and others, and felt obliged to include some of the better-known hymns by Charles Wesley, but could not bring himself actually to name the great heretic, and so only identifies them as having been written by “C.W. (altered)”, which used to amuse me greatly. Gadsby had quite a colourful career: he was (I think) a printer in Manchester and got involved in the disorders about the time of the Peterloo massacre [1819]. No doubt that was in his “unregenerate days”.

Strict Baptists abhorred all theatres, dancing, cinemas, cosmetics, and many of them refused to have a wireless set. But they had no objection to tobacco and alcohol. Members, who were baptized by immersion, usually late in life, were expected to marry only within the chapel fellowship. The chapel (without a capital

“C”) was the building; the worshipping community was a “Cause”; and the sect was a “Denomination”: this enabled them to avoid using the word “Church” with its opprobrious connotations. Holy Communion, from which all non-Baptized persons were excluded, was held monthly or quarterly, and was always called the “Ordinance”.

Strict Baptists were inevitably fissiparous. In my day, there was a breach between the “Gospel Standard” and the “Earthen Vessel” – named after their respective magazines which listed approved ministers and chapels. Since the Hook Norton Chapel took the “Christian Pathway” as its magazine, I suspect that they held a middle position, but were clearly “unsound” since they used a harmonium! In the chapel I grew up in, it was well understood that any sort of musical instrument in chapel was Popish and unacceptable to the Gospel Standard and to its tinpot dictator, Mr James Kidwell Popham.

Popery, along with Evolution, was the pet hate of all Strict Baptists. They abjured all saints, and so turned to the Old Testament for their chapel names. Hence the Hook Norton chapel was called Zion; other names they favoured included “Galead”, “Zoar” and “Bethel”. Committed Strict Baptists did not celebrate Christmas – it was a pagan festival. They had a service on Christmas Day as they did on every Bank Holiday, but the service did not refer to the Nativity. I can certainly remember one Christmas Day service when “Young Mr Ward” preached on the Crucifixion.

I haven't been inside a Strict Baptist Chapel since 1945, but how well I remember them. I still occasionally dream of them. Despite their obvious deficiencies they were good, kindly, loving and devout Bible-based Christian folk, and I suspect that I owe more to them than I would admit! Curiously, when I attended the Selection Conference for the Anglican Ministry, the Secretary of the Board was another refugee from the Strict Baptists: maybe that gave me an unfair advantage!

Ralph Mann