

Baptist Chapel

We begin the story of Wolston Baptist Church in about 1792, when the dominant issue in Europe at that time was the French Revolution. It wasn't a good time to be speaking out against the establishment, so when two ministers, Revs. George Burder and Jonathan Evans, and a baronet, Sir Egerton Leigh, came preaching the gospel in Wolston, they were viewed with some suspicion.



Sir Egerton Leigh was not apparently a particularly good preacher, but was useful for his status and connections. In 1795, he obtained a license to build a non-conformist place of worship in Brook Street from the Bishop of Lichfield, but met with violent opposition in the village, such that what was put up in the day was pulled down at night, forcing them to keep watch. Much of the opposition was instigated by the vicar, John Shuckburgh, who viewed the preachers as competition and even went from door to door threatening the poor that if they took part in the non-conformist meetings they would lose their jobs and not have any assistance from the parish. Of course, this was the very sort of corrupt and un-Christian behaviour that the non-conformists spoke against in the first place!

As the clashes became more violent, the magistrates called a meeting with Burder and the vicar, asking them each to state their religious views in an attempt to understand the situation. But after the meeting, some of those who had been causing trouble threw water over one of the magistrates, mistaking him for a non-conformist. On another occasion, the vicar and the parish officers conspired to have a Mr. Wootton, who had supported the preaching, falsely accused of sedition. They persuaded a woman to swear on oath that she had heard someone instruct Mr. Wootton to write "no church, no king" and similar treasonable statements. The case collapsed when other elements of the woman's testimony were proven false, and things quietened down when the vicar and parish officers discovered the extent of the expenses they had to pay.

One of the 40 or so people who signed the application for the building to be licensed as a place of worship in 1795 was George Jones. Sir Egerton Leigh had initially been part of the Independent or Congregational movement (what is now the United Reformed Church) but both he and George Jones became convinced of the need for believers' baptism and began to work with Baptists in Coventry. Jones returned to Wolston to start a Sunday School in 1806, and became minister of the first explicitly Baptist church in Wolston when it was formed by six members on 20 April 1814.

We are not sure where these Baptists first met to worship; we do know that they bought a cottage from Mr. Wootton in 1816, and subsequently built the present chapel in 1818. It is possible that the cottage acquired in 1816 was the one previously used by Sir Egerton Leigh in Brook Street, but we cannot be sure.

The small church at Wolston could not afford to pay Rev Jones a stipend, so he earned his living running a school, ministering to his flock in his own time. The church grew quickly under his leadership, from six members in 1814 to over a hundred by 1852, and the chapel had been enlarged with the addition of a balcony. This was probably not anticipated when the chapel was first built judging by the way the balcony cuts across the tall windows.

There were pews until the 1980's, when they had to be taken out because of damp rot. When the wooden floor was taken up, an uncapped well was discovered just in front of where the communion table now stands. Thank goodness the floor didn't give way! The baptistry is under the blue wooden blocks, a tiled pit about a metre deep. It has to be filled by hand and probably drains into the well. The pulpit and hymn-book stand are not original; they were acquired in the 20th century, and it is said that they were actually the bar and spirit cabinet from some country house.

A hymn-book stand of that size wouldn't have been needed at one time, as the congregation were expected to buy their own hymn-books. A few would have been provided for the use of visitors. Also, there wouldn't have been a collection, an offertory, within the service, as people paid "pew rent" instead. As in a theatre, there were cheap seats and expensive seats, and you would be allocated the amount of

space you needed for your family and charged for it. This was only ended here at the start of the 20th century.

A piece of land in Dyer's Lane was acquired for a burial ground in 1849. Seventeen memorial stones remain, though there must have been many more graves, perhaps marked only by wooden crosses which have since succumbed to decay.

The cost of the chapel and the burial ground amounted to eight hundred pounds, a huge sum at the time, and gives some impression of the commitment of those first members. Sadly, after the initial rapid expansion, the church seemed to lose its way, and a split occurred. Very little is known except that a group left in 1875 or 1876 and set up what they called the "Baptist Tabernacle" in Brook Street. We don't know why they split; the term "Tabernacle" may be significant, as this was associated with the most prominent Baptist preacher of the time, Charles Spurgeon. Perhaps the group wanted to follow the principles and practices of Spurgeon more closely; we don't know. However, knowing the cost of establishing a building, it would seem that those who broke away would have included the more affluent members. The group had ceased meeting by 1905.

The derelict Tabernacle site in Brook Street was later purchased by **Thomas Eggington Kelsey** (died 1942), a prominent Wolston businessman and Borough Councillor and, about 25 years later, sold by his descendants for development of two detached houses. A memorial stone, expensively carved and stating "Baptist Tabernacle 1876" still exists and is located in the garden of his great grand-daughter.

The Baptist Chapel entered a very tough time financially, and had to ask the bigger Baptist Church at Queens Road in Coventry to effectively take them over. The records we have show great frustration and irritation at having to ask for small sums of money to buy coal, or oil for lamps. The difficult times continued until 1965, when Sister Cynthia Allegro, a deaconess at Coventry, became the first ordained minister in Wolston for 90 years. It's believed that she was also only the second woman to be ordained among the English Baptists generally. Since then, we've had ministers almost continuously until the present day, and we have a very good relationship with the Anglicans. It's quite ironic that they have office space in our building, having tried to pull the original one down.

With thanks to the **Brandon, Bretford and Wolston History Group**.