

# Abingdon Baptist Church



Written by Michael G Hambleton

## Introduction:

The Baptists of Abingdon have been associated with the plot of land which today is numbered 31 – 35 Ock Street for well over 300 years. Their turbulent beginnings lay in the 1640's – the decade of the English civil wars. Their distinctive views on the nature of the Church and how local churches should be organised and governed led to separation from the Church of England – a freedom for which they had to struggle – and their understanding of the doctrine of baptism soon distinguished them from fellow non-conformists and gave rise to the name by which they are now known.

Both the church as an Ock Street institution and the lives of many of its individual members have influenced the life of Abingdon during five centuries, and in that time various buildings have been erected, replaced or extended on the Ock Street site.

## The 17th Century:

When Charles 1 established his head-quarters in Oxford in 1642, there appears to have been quite an exodus of parliamentarian sympathisers from the city to Abingdon. Among them would have been some of Baptist views. Their numbers would have been swollen when parliamentary troops garrisoned the town in 1644. Among these troops, probably as a chaplain, was the young preacher John Pendarves. He began to give regular lectures in St Helen's. This parish church was without a vicar at the time. The lectures drew large crowds. In 1649, shortly after the execution of the king, we have our first mention of the fellowship which was to become the Baptist Church. Pendarves' wife Thomasine writes of a people 'that wait upon God and have fellowship one with another'.

Until his early death in 1656, Pendarves and his large and various congregation are likely to have met for worship in St Helen's church. A large gathering of radicals came from all corners of England for his funeral, causing such alarm that it was broken up by mounted troops from Wallingford. From then on the Baptists met in a number of private houses and, perhaps to ease the strain of over-crowding, late in 1656 one hundred members of the Abingdon church were sent away to form a Baptist church at Longworth.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, decades of persecutions began for Baptists and other non-conformists and Roman Catholics – involving frequent fines, excommunications and occasional imprisonments. Local leadership emerged, especially John Tomkins, a maltster. He was helped by the appointment of Henry Forty as pastor in 1675. Forty had spent twelve years in Exeter gaol for his faith. Only with the coming to the throne of William of Orange, in 1688,

did things begin to improve for non-conformists.

### The 18th Century:

In 1700 the first chapel was built on the Ock Street site. The Independent chapel in The Square was erected in the same year. These two houses on the street frontage were possibly owned by John Tomkins. The westernmost of these, now No 35, may even have been an early meeting place of the church. Certainly, in 1731, when John's son, Benjamin Tomkins, made his will, he left the two houses to the church – no. 35 to continue to be the minister's house. It could have been so used since 1700. At some time prior to 1774 a Georgian façade was put onto this gabled, timber-framed house.

The Baptists of the 18th century enjoyed two major ministries – those of William Fuller, c 1700-45, and Daniel Turner, 1748-98. Under Fuller the congregation rose to 400. Daniel Turner, remembered as a 'poet, scholar and pastor', published several nationally influential works and was able to draw upon a library of some 400 theological books, given by the Tomkins family and placed in 35 Ock Street. Today, known as 'The Abingdon Library', they form part of the research library of Regents Park College, Oxford.

### The 19th Century

One of the emphases of the church in this century was education. In 1827 the then minister, John Kershaw, called on all non-conformists in the town to launch The British School – 'for the children of labourers and mechanics'. A large purpose-built school was erected on the site. A house was purchased or built on land to the rear for the head teacher. Additional classrooms were added in the 1870's. In 1899 the school governors handed the school over to The School Board for Abingdon. The Baptist building ceased to be used when the school was moved to its Carswell site in 1902. It continues today as Carswell County Primary School. Its senior children were moved to form Larkmead School in 1954.

Kershaw was also involved with Benjamin Kent in forming a private school which occupied Radley Hall from 1819-44. The 19th century also saw the growth of large Sunday Schools.

Growing congregations during the early 19th century, coupled with increasing missionary activity at home and abroad, led to the establishing of village chapels at Drayton, Cothill, Fyfield and, eventually, Marcham. Still too small for its Abingdon congregation, the 1700 chapel was demolished and the present chapel erected in 1841. The lower courses of the old chapel's east wall remain.

### The 20th Century:

The first half of the 20th century was a time of decline for the Baptists of Abingdon, due in no small part to the two world wars. Money was very short and all the buildings suffered. Both 35 Ock Street and the old British School buildings were becoming unsafe. The 1827 school building was demolished in 1960 and, after the purchase of a manse in Thesiger Road, 35 Ock Street slipped into dereliction. In the early '70's, as the church began to prosper again, the chapel was extended and its interior 'modernised'. In the mid 1990's the church was able to restore and extend no. 35 and, as part of its contribution to the recently formed 'Church in Abingdon' (a coming together of 14 of the town's churches) open it as a community house for the people of the town – staffed by a team of 70 volunteers drawn from those 14 churches and others besides. The church forecourt was landscaped, railed and gated at the same time.

### The 21st Century:

The church continues to grow numerically. The neo-classical façade of the chapel has been restored. And 35 Ock Street has celebrated the tenth anniversary of its opening.

### Sources:

The archives of the church (e.g. complete minute books from 1721 to the present, including

lists of church members) are available for reference at The Angus Library, Regents Park College, St. Giles, Oxford. Arrangements to be made with the Librarian/Archivist.

**Bibliography (selected):**

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*John Pendarves, The Calvinistic Baptists and*

*The Fifth Monarchy*, B.R. White Angus Library

*A Sweet and Hopeful People* M.G. Hambleton 2000 Abingdon Library/Angus Library

*Aspects of Abingdon Past* vols 1 & 2 Two Lectures from St Nicholas Church, Abingdon

**Photographs of:**

Baptist Church and No 35 Ock Street