

Two Centuries of Baptists in South Yorkshire

The Rotherham Baptist Church 1789-1989

BEGINNINGS

The Baptist story began nearly four centuries ago within 30 miles of Rotherham. In 1602, the Vicar of Gainsboro, Rev. John Smyth, decided that he could no longer be true to his conscience, and continue to hold office within the Anglican Church. With others of like mind, he became leader of a separatist group in Gainsbro. Four years later, a second group was formed at Scrooby Manor, with Rev. Richard Clyfton, ex-Vicar of Babcock, as pastor. Non-conformity was, however, anathema to both Church and state. On acceding to the throne of England, James I determined to stamp out all dissenting sects. *“I will make them conform”, he said, “or I will harry them from the land.”*

In 1606 Smyth took his congregation to Amsterdam. Having become convinced that baptism was for believers only, Smyth baptised himself, and then baptised the rest of the congregation, and in 1608, they formed themselves into the first Baptist Church of English speaking people. Later, Smyth and some of his congregation joined the Mennonites. The remainder, now led by Thomas Helwys, returned to England, where they founded the first Arminian, or General Baptist Church in 1612, in Spitalfields, London.

‘The Church of Christ is a company of the faithful, baptised after confession of faith and sins. Baptism is the external sign of the remission of sins, of dying and of being made alive, and accordingly does not belong to infants’ (John Smyth, Baptist Confession, 1610)

Another Baptist tradition arose in a different way. From 1616 onwards, there was a Congregational Church in London that often discussed baptism. Around 1633, some of the congregation broke away to establish a church that practised believers’ baptism. These Baptists held a Calvinistic theology and became known as Particular Baptists. There is considerable argument as to how much the English Baptists were influenced by European Anabaptists. It is clear that in the early days there were links with the Mennonites. However, it is also clear that the Baptist movement in this country came out of a search to rediscover the pattern of the apostolic churches – a pattern which, they believed, could only be found in the Scriptures.

Non-conformists continued to face opposition under James I and Charles I, who attempted to impose uniformity on the Church. Opposition to these policies finally hardened - leading to the English Civil war. At that time, Parliament was predominantly Presbyterian, while the army, under Cromwell was largely controlled by Independents (including Baptists). After the war, different religious groups were allowed to continue their separate existence. By 1660 - when with the restoration of the monarch, opposition began again, - there were an estimated 300 General and Particular Baptist churches.

The records of Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol give some idea of the price of dissent after 1660: *“then Satan stirred up adversaries against us and our Trouble or Persecution began.”*

In 1662, 2000 clergymen, 30 of them Baptists, were evicted from their livings. Thousands of other Christians were thrown into prison or in other ways were made to pay dearly for their desire to be true to New Testament teaching about the Church. Their example challenges the complacency of Christians today, who take for granted - and even treat with disdain - the

freedoms which were not enjoyed by fellow believers in years past, and for which they were willing to sacrifice their liberty and even their lives!

Persecution of dissenters continued until the Glorious Revolution, and the accession of William and Mary brought a limited toleration. With toleration, came the spread of a wide range of theological views. The General Baptists drifted into Unitarianism – which denied the deity of Christ, while the Particular Baptists, reacting against liberal ideas, retreated into hyper-Calvinism! Consequently, Baptists did not at first benefit from the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit blowing through the churches in the 1700's dispelling the dust and decay of rationalism and dead formalism which had stifled the Church, and replacing it with new life.

The 'Great Awakening' began in 1734 in America, under Jonathan Edwards, and spread to England through men like George Whitfield and John and Charles Wesley, where it became known as the Evangelical or Methodist Revival.

But Baptists did awaken, slowly. A group of workers in Leicestershire were converted, and came to Baptist convictions. Similarly, Dan Taylor, a Yorkshire miner, converted among the Methodists, became convinced of the importance of believers' baptism, and went to the General Baptists in Lincolnshire to be baptised. Eventually, the group from Leicestershire, Dan Taylor's Church, and a few General Baptist churches that had remained orthodox formed 'The New Connexion of General Baptists' in 1770.

New life came to the Particular Baptists when, in 1785, Andrew Fuller published 'The Gospel worthy of all Acceptation' which condemned the hyper-Calvinism that had stifled evangelism by saying that since only the elect could accept the gospel, and since they would do it anyway, there was no point in preaching to the unconverted. Fuller asserted that true Calvinism was a missionary theology.

Fuller's re-statement of Calvin's theology directed Particular Baptists towards evangelism, and thus paved the way for what was called at first 'The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel' and later the 'Baptist Missionary Society' in 1792 - the first missionary society to grow out of the evangelical revival. A key figure in this was William Carey. He argued that the commission to take the gospel to every creature still stood. In a famous sermon in Nottingham he urged his hearers: 'Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God'. This led to a meeting in October 1792 at which the Baptist Missionary Society was founded by fourteen men who pledged £13 2s 6d as their first offering to missionary work. Next year Carey began work in Serampore, India. In 1812 it was agreed that a more general union of Particular Baptists was needed to support the work of the Missionary Society. 20 years later the Baptist Union was founded. Meanwhile, Particular Baptists who did not accept Fuller's teaching became Strict Baptists.

BAPTISTS IN ROTHERHAM

Rotherham's earliest known connection with Baptists can be traced back to the 17th century, to a Baptist from the town, Thomas Hollis. As a young man, Hollis left Rotherham for London, where he was baptised by Hanserd Knollys - a leading Baptist. Hollis provided the money for the first dissenting chapel in Rotherham – which by 1715 housed about 100 worshippers, principally Presbyterians. For more than 100 years, the chapel (in Down's Row) was a centre for Rotherham dissent. However, it, like so many other dissenting churches, was caught up in the drift towards Unitarianism – whose rational approach appealed to the more educated, but which had little appeal to the poor. As South Yorkshire was transformed by industrial developments, the old

dissenting sects failed as badly as the established Church to meet the spiritual needs of the masses. Methodism helped fill this spiritual vacuum, and Wesley himself visited the town in 1755.

John Thorpe, who was converted through the ministry of Wesley and sent out by him as a preacher, found himself more and more inclined to the Calvinistic theology being advocated by that other great preacher of the day, George Whitefield. In the 1750's there was a growing rift between Methodists and followers of Whitefield, known first as 'Calvinistic Methodists, and later as 'Independents'. Finding that many Methodists in Rotherham were accepting the Calvinism to which he was so opposed, and blaming Thorpe, Wesley removed him from the town. This seems to have precipitated the breaking away of a group of Methodists, who became Independents, and invited Thorpe to be their pastor. In 1760 the Independent (later, Congregational) Chapel in Masbrough was built. During the second half of the 18th century, there was fierce debate between different theological factions. Presbyterians and General Baptists embraced Unitarian ideas and both became largely Unitarian denominations. The growing number of Methodist and Independent churches, on the other hand, advocated infant baptism. Against this background, those who continued to embrace Calvinism and who insisted, too, on the importance of believers' baptism, were drawn together to found the first Baptist church in Rotherham (under the Particular or Calvinistic Baptist banner).

THE MASBROUGH BAPTIST CHAPEL

The precise details of the origin and early history of the Rotherham Baptists are not clear. A small Baptist church had been started in Milk Street, in Sheffield in 1786, and it is possible that this group gave inspiration to a similar group in Rotherham. What we do know is that the Rotherham group was well enough established by 1789 for there to be a chapel building in Masbrough Common (which became Clough Road). The date on which the church was founded is uncertain, although an old church register gives 2nd September, 1789 as the date of the first recorded birth – and it seems likely that the church was founded earlier that year. The same register mentions the first minister of the church, Rev. Benjamin Dickinson, who with his wife, was received into membership of the church on 25th February, 1790. On that same day, five people were baptised at what may well have been the first baptismal service of its kind ever held in Rotherham. The five who were baptised and admitted to full membership of the church were: Samuel Brown, John Creswick, Joseph Higgins, Matthew Roebuck and John Roebuck. A total of twelve baptisms took place in 1790, and the membership of the church in that year stood at 21. The chapel at Masbrough, which has now been demolished, was little more than a working man's cottage with no elaborate ornamentation. It had no baptistry – and there is a report of the baptism of a man called Harvey, which took place not long before the church moved from Masbrough, which was carried out in the river from the 'Gaol bridge'. On that occasion, the ice on the river had to be broken, before the baptism could go ahead! Those first baptisms in February, 1790 are unlikely to have been much warmer!

In September 1793, the Baptist church in Sheffield closed, and 12 members were transferred to Rotherham. For 11 years they walked from Sheffield to Masbrough in order to worship with fellow Baptists. In 1804 it was felt that the time was right to establish again a Baptist witness in Sheffield, and 12 members of the Rotherham church were dismissed to found the church in Townhead Street. In more than a century before its close in 1912, this church had a significant influence on Baptist life in Sheffield – and from it sprang the Portmahon and Glossop Road

churches. Richard Atkinson, one of the founding members of the Rotherham church, became a deacon in the newly established work in Sheffield.

James Hudson was baptised in 1792, and appears to have become lay pastor after the departure of the church's second minister, John Turtle. In 1833, during the ministry of William Welch there was some trouble, which resulted in 12 members, including deacons being 'excluded'. It seems that this was resolved, and some at least of the excluded members restored to fellowship, since two of the excluded deacons later appear as witnesses of a church resolution, also signed by the then lay pastor, W. Matthews, that no new graves should be opened in the Masbrough Burial Ground.

By 1835, the Baptist community in Masbrough had become established. It had made some progress, though not much. Nevertheless it was felt that for further growth, the fellowship needed a building more suitable to its needs, and a trained, full-time minister. It was at this point that the Rotherham Church received help from Rev. Charles Larom, minister at Townhead Street. Together with James Hudson and Joseph Brown, he secured a site for a new church building in Westgate. The foundation stone of the Westgate Baptist Church was laid on 27th April, 1836, and the new building was opened a year later. The Rev. James Buck who had recently completed his studies at Horton College was appointed as Pastor.

WESTGATE BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Larom was the third pastor of the Townhead Street church, which by this time had become influential among Baptists in the area. The church owed its beginnings to the Baptists in Rotherham, who had nurtured its founders during a difficult time. Now, the Sheffield church was able to offer help in return – giving nearly £100 towards the cost of the Westgate site. The new chapel was erected at a cost of £1276 3s 7d. By the time of the opening £592 0s 7d had been collected, leaving a debt of £684 6s. This proved to be a heavy financial burden for the new church to carry and by 1848 the debt still stood at £450. 'The Particular Baptist Church meeting in Westgate Chapel' (the title which appears on an old minute book) was constituted with 26 members on 22nd June 1837 by the Rev. S. Marston of Grimsby. Among the 26 were Samuel Brown and Alice Wolfendale who had both been baptised in 1790, and James Hudson. The first minister, Rev. James Buck was inducted on June 28th 1837, the day of Queen Victoria's coronation. March 1838 saw the election of James Hudson, Joseph Brown and Thomas Coe as the church's first deacons – set apart for office by the laying on of hands. In 1839 Westgate joined the West Riding Association of Baptist Churches.

During his 4 years at Westgate, James Buck carried out more than 40 baptisms, and the membership increased to nearly 70. He left in 1842, and was succeeded by Rev. D. Peacock. He stayed only 18 months, but in that brief time he baptised 22 members. The burden of debt seems to have weighed particularly heavily on the church in its first decade, and so Rev. Amos Dyson, who succeeded to the pastorate in 1848, set about raising the £450 still owing. Eventually, by the spring of 1852 the debt was cleared, and a Thanksgiving Service was held on 14th March.

During Rev. Dyson's ministry a vestry was built, and an organ introduced into the church; in each case the proposal was accepted on condition that it could be done '*without involving the Church in debt*'. Those who had suffered under the burden for so long had no wish for it to be re-imposed! Towards the close of 1855 the church became divided, and Rev. Dyson's ministry challenged. A vote was taken, with a small majority in favour of the minister remaining. He resigned in 1856, and accepted a call to a church in Buckinghamshire.

When Rev. Joseph Ashmead took over the pastorate, the membership of the church stood at 102, but it was a congregation in which deep divisions had begun to appear. Nonetheless, he was able to pull the church together to prepare it for a new advance. The building was further extended, with the addition of a new schoolroom, an organ loft and two further classrooms. A new heating system was also installed. The opening services of the new building were marked by a visit from Rev. Charles Spurgeon.

1862-3 was marked by a series of resignations and withdrawals in what was clearly a difficult time for the church and in 1863 Rev. Ashmead accepted a call to Northumberland. In 1871 he returned to Rotherham and opened a private school. He renewed fellowship with Westgate, becoming a deacon and, from 1876 to 1881, Church Secretary. In 1887 he wrote a Jubilee History of the Church. There he notes with evident regret that though during his ministry the membership reached 140, by the time he left – due largely to withdrawals to the Strict Baptists in Masbrough – the number had dropped to 114. In 1865, it was decided to have an open communion table. In that same year Spurgeon paid a second visit to the Church. By 1872, the church membership had increased to 137. The link with the old Masbrough church was severed in 1873, with the death of Joseph Brown, at the age of 84. Baptised in 1817, he was the last surviving member of the congregation that had moved to Westgate.

Looking Forward – and Outward

During the 1870's, the Westgate church became linked with the establishment of new Baptist churches in South Yorkshire. In 1872 William Shaw, who was a deacon at Westgate, and his wife moved to Brightside, Sheffield. He found other Baptists in the neighbourhood, and together they decided to form a Baptist Mission in Attercliffe. The first meeting was held on 24th November, 1872, and included in that congregation were several Westgate members. In 1875, a small group of Baptists began meeting in Swallownest – under a tree in the village! Baptists from Westgate took an interest; the new church became linked with Westgate as a mission and was put under the care of its minister. A site was bought, and in 1877 the foundation stone of the chapel was laid. The building was completed in the same year.

A further work was started in 1879 with the opening of a Mission Room at the Ickles. A Sunday school and mission meetings were carried on until 1889, when the opening of St. Peter's Church, Ickles close by meant that the Mission was no longer needed.

With the appointment of Mr Benjamin Lee, a keen evangelical, as lay pastor, in 1883, Westgate began to enjoy one of the most fruitful periods in its history. Outdoor services, a Gospel Temperance Mission, and special Sunday evening and Wednesday evening lectures were among the things introduced to arouse interest. In addition, the Church building was re-decorated, the downstairs was re-pewed, and new lighting was installed. Writing in his centenary history of the Westgate Church, Rev. Skinner remarks that *'altogether the old Church took on a new lease of life and activity'*.

In 1887 Westgate, along with Queen Victoria, celebrated its Jubilee, and could look back with gratitude to God for the last 50 years. The membership had increased five-fold; buildings had been extended; Sunday School work had grown; and the church had played no small part, too, in the founding of other works – particularly, as we have seen, at Attercliffe and Swallownest. The 50th Anniversary celebrations were held on Sunday and Monday, 9-10 October, 1887. The Church had no pastor during its Jubilee year, but extended a call to Rev. James Collinson, who began his ministry in January, 1888. A serious task facing the new minister was the renovation of

the Church, and it appears that it was not only the buildings which were renewed – with twenty new members being added to the Church during his first year.

The amalgamation of the Particular Baptist Union and New Connexion of General Baptists took place in 1891 with Westgate delegates voting in favour of the union of the two bodies.

Division ... and re-union

By 1900, there was growing dissatisfaction with the Church and its minister. This led to considerable tension, and culminated in 1901 with the resignation of 16 members who formed the Baptist New Church. It is difficult to be clear about what led to this split. The constitution drawn up for the new fellowship, however, stresses the need both for an open communion table and for vigorous evangelism in the town, and it would thus appear that these issues had a significant part to play. The new Church began meeting in the Temperance Hall on Wellgate, and became known as the 'Wellgate Baptist Church'. Later, it secured a site on Gerard Road (which became a Methodist Church) but since the Association was unwilling to encourage the building of another church so close to Westgate, plans were abandoned.

In 1903, after several difficult years both for him and for the Westgate Church, Rev. Collinson resigned. The following year an invitation given by Westgate for the two fellowships churches to unite was accepted by Wellgate Church. The last service at the Temperance Hall was held on June 26th, and on the same day the two churches were re-united at a special communion service. Reporting to the district, the then Church Secretary commented: *'the service at which they were received into fellowship will long be remembered as one of the most beautiful and impressive ever held in the old home. We were conscious of the presence of the Great and Good Shepherd, and that the future was full of hope because of His unerring love and care for His people ...'*

Meanwhile, Mr. Percy Evans, who had been Church Secretary up to the close of Rev. Collinson's ministry, left Rotherham to prepare for the Ministry. After several ministries, he became a tutor at Spurgeon's College in 1922, and Principal in 1925.

The Church did not feel itself financially strong enough to appoint a new minister for some time. Nonetheless, baptisms continued, and in 1907 newly extended premises were opened. With renewed zeal the Church looked forward, in that same year, to the ministry of Rev. J.T. Hesleton.

The war years brought new problems and challenges to the life of the Church. Lighting restrictions meant that the evening service had to be held in the afternoon. For some time, too, Rev. Smith who was overseeing the Church was absent with the YMCA – 'somewhere in France'. A generation of young men were called up for service – and many never returned. Yet, under God's hand, the work continued. Following the war the Church continued to move forward and to look outward, with renewed vision. Rev. Weeks became minister in 1919, and remained until 1923.

EAST DENE BAPTIST CHURCH

Following the departure of Rev. Weeks the Church was encouraged by the Yorkshire Association and the District to consider its future development. A Special Church Meeting was held at the beginning of 1925, at which representatives from the Association and District were present, to discuss *'a new forward movement' in the Church's life*. The meeting accepted the need for closer cooperation with the Association; and agreed, too, that while looking for the right man as Pastor, the Church would also consider a scheme of removal from Westgate and to seek *'to secure a site in the most suitable locality where the Cause is most likely to prosper'*. The man

called to lead the Church in this forward movement was Rev. Skinner, who came to the Church in 1926.

Over the next few years, under the auspices of the Association, several sites were considered – though the emphasis on removal from Westgate appears soon to have given way to the idea of extending the Church's ministry into new areas of the town. The location that seemed most promising for extension work was Badsley Moor Lane, on the East Dene estate - which was being built at that time. Recognising the clear need for a Christian witness on the estate, on May 29th, 1929, the Westgate Church agreed to look into the possibility of hiring the East Dene Welfare Hall for an afternoon Sunday School, and an evening service (at 8.15pm). The hall was duly hired – at a cost of 10/- per week – and an opening service conducted by the Mayor, Alderman Hall was held the same year on Oct. 6th.

At first the new Church received oversight from Rev. Skinner – through whose initiative the work had started. When he left Rotherham in 1947, the two churches agreed to a shared ministry. A joint meeting of Deacons agreed that a future minister would divide his time equally between the two fellowships, and that each would contribute equally to his stipend and expenses. In 1947 the stipend was £270 plus a manse (valued at £30). East Dene was to give £150, and Westgate £120 plus the manse – with the money paid into a joint fund. Workers in this pioneering venture included Methodists as well as members of the Westgate congregation, and there was soon a large and lively group of children coming to the Sunday School. Every Sunday morning the floor of the Welfare Hall had to be swept, and up to 200 chairs set out for the growing number of scholars. An older group of young people also began meeting in a local home. With open-air witness, processions, etc, the new work took every opportunity to make an impact on the estate.

As the work grew, the need for more suitable, permanent premises became increasingly apparent. Under the guidance of Rev. Skinner, and with help from the Yorkshire Association, a dual-purpose building was put up on the present site on Badsley Moor Lane – at a cost of £3250. The stone-laying ceremony for the new building took place on 26th May, 1932, and the following year the East Dene Baptist Church was opened. Among the founder members at East Dene were some who transferred membership from Westgate to support the new cause. The Sunday School work continued to expand; up to 400 children, with 22 leaders, filled every corner of the new building.

As time passed, however, work at East Dene was found to be far from easy. In 1951, after a revision of the Church roll, the number of members stood at just 17, after a further revision in 1957, the number had fallen to 13. Looking back, we are grateful to God for those who persevered despite the many problems and obstacles that were encountered, to preserve the Church's witness in East Dene. Towards the end of 1957 the Church meeting agreed to the formation of a Boys' Brigade Company. Among those involved at its start was Mr Bob Wilford, who remained with the BB until 1987. By 1966, there had been some movement in the membership of the Church; a list showing the total membership of East Dene and Westgate indicates that by this time there were 36 on the East Dene roll.

THE UNITED BAPTIST CHURCH

On 25th April, 1937, Westgate celebrated its centenary, with services led by the Rev. Henry Bonser, the General Superintendent of the North Eastern Area. A centenary service for the Sunday School was held on the same day, at 2.30pm. Some time earlier, another 100th birthday had been a cause for celebration - that of Mrs Pitts, a member of the Church at Westgate, described in an article in the Rotherham Advertiser as "Rotherham's oldest citizen".

In his centenary account of the Church's life, Rev Skinner also notes the contribution made to the life and witness of the Church by the Sunday School, Boy Scouts and Girl's Auxiliary. Time, however, took its toll - on both buildings and church attendance! The joint list of 1966 which has already been mentioned names 56 members of the Westgate church. In the same year, however, the Deacons expressed concern over the non-attendance of many church members, and also over the deterioration of the Church building - which was nearly 130 years old, and showing its age!

A possible solution that had been raised several times before was the closure of Westgate and the transfer of Westgate members to East Dene, where there were newer and more suitable premises. After considering possible alternatives in 1968 it was decided finally to amalgamate the two fellowships and transfer to East Dene. Closing services for the Westgate Church were held on April 20th, 1969. At a Service of Union, held on Wednesday, 17th June, 1970, the following Covenant was signed by the 41 members present:

'We being the members of Westgate and East Dene Baptist Churches and formerly worshipping and serving as separate fellowships do hereby solemnly covenant together to serve God and Christ and one another as members of the United Baptist Church, Rotherham ...'

Later that same year, work began on the new extension at the rear of the Church - intended to give better facilities for youth work. It was opened in June of the following year. In memory of the Westgate Church, it was agreed to name the new building: 'Westgate Hall'. Other 'improvements' to the buildings were also undertaken, including the installation of a suspended ceiling. In 1971, Rev. J. Shaw, who had vacated the pastorate in 1969, was invited to provide oversight for the Church.

The uniting of the two church fellowships did not, however, have the hoped for effect on church membership and attendance. In 1970, 41 members (including 12 from Westgate) had signed the Covenant that brought East Dene and Westgate together. After a revision of the roll in 1973, the number of active members had reduced to 37. Both spiritually and numerically, the Church had reached a low ebb!

New leadership, in the persons of Malcolm and Ivy Clough, however, brought to the Church a new direction and sense of purpose. Malcolm became Church Secretary in May, 1973, and continued in that role until 1983. Their commitment to the work of the Church, together with practical and administrative skills, brought new hope to the fellowship at a very crucial time in its life.

In 1975, the Church sold some of its land to the Baptist Men's Movement Housing Association (now, the Baptist Housing Association) to provide eight flats for senior citizens. 'Eastgate Court' (a name combining the names Westgate and East Dene) was opened in 1976. An indication of the Church's growing confidence is seen in the decision, in 1976, to apply for a Home Mission Fund Grant, in order to appoint a full-time minister. The grant application was approved, and in January 1977 the Church agreed to invite Rev. Alan Foster to the pastorate. He took up the charge in July 1977, and continued until September 1979. After discussions with the Area Superintendent, the Deacons recommended, and the Church agreed to the appointment of another full-time minister as soon as possible. Thus it was that the present minister was called to the Church - and inducted on 20th September, 1980.

Looking back over the past life of the Church, there is much evidence of human weakness and failure. There is evidence, too, of witness faithfully preserved; of a light which has often flickered and burnt low but which has remained alight. The history of the Baptists in Rotherham is a true testimony to the faithfulness of God - not because it is a story of success, but because it is story

of God's gracious care in preserving, through the obstacles and opposition, through the waywardness and the weakness, a people for His own glory! It is with our eyes fixed on the same God who inspired and enabled those who have gone before, that we also look towards the future.