

The Chapels Society

Visit to HENLEY and the SOUTHERN CHILTERN
Saturday 1 October 2011

Travel Guidance

WE MEET at St Mary's Church, Castle Street, Reading [square B4 of the map on the reverse] where coffee will be available from 10.00. A talk on this interesting cause and its striking classical building will start at about 10.30.

Those arriving at Reading station can walk via Station Road, Queen Victoria Street, Broad Street then either Chain Street or St Mary's Butts to Castle Street [duration 10-15 min]. Bus 26 leaves stop EK in Blagrave Street outside the station every 12 minutes and can drop you at the corner of St Mary's Butts and Castle Street: taxis are also available.

Those coming by car can use the Park and Ride services accessible from the M4 on the south of the town [details at <http://www.parkandride.net/>] which will drop you in St Mary's Butts: note that the last return buses from the station are at 18.36 and 18.45 respectively. The nearest car parks are at Broad Street Mall (access from Castle Street), Chatham Place and the Oracle (access from Bridge Street): other more distant car parks are marked on the map [further information, including tariffs, at <http://www.reading-travelinfo.co.uk/TravelInformation/>].

Our coach journey will start from Castle Street at 10.45. If you are unavoidably delayed please phone or text 07548387101. If necessary we can make a late pick-up at Reading station a little after 10.45 – wait at the Horseman's bus stop in Station Hill [opposite Reading station, outside Gregory's Café].

The coach trip is planned to finish at Reading station at 18.15.

Chapel Notes

READING lies on the river Kennet near where it flows into the Thames. The town dates from at least Saxon times but its growth in wealth and importance dates from the founding of the Abbey by Henry I in 1121. It was a centre for the wool and cloth trade in mediaeval times as well as a market town and entrepot for the local region, exporting goods downriver to London. The town survived and even thrived following the dissolution but was brought low by the Civil War, during which it changed hands several times, due to its position on the fault-line between Parliament in London and the King in Oxford. The 18th century saw a return to moderate prosperity based on malting, brewing and the river trade followed by an expansion in the 19th based on the triumvirate of beer (Simonds), bulbs (Suttons) and biscuits (Huntley & Palmer). Reading has long been self-governing (it sent 2 members to Parliament from 1295) and was for many centuries one of the county towns of Berkshire: it is now one of the six unitary authorities which took over local government on the demise of the administrative county in 1998.

The area has had a long reputation for Dissent dating back to the Lollards of the 15th and 16th centuries: there has been a Baptist congregation since the early 17th century and both Baptists and Quakers have records dating back to the 1650s. In an assize sermon in 1653, Simon Ford

said of the townsfolk, 'they love Anabaptism, Familism, Socianism, Pelagianism, Ranting and what not', and opined that, 'the Devil was served in heterodox assemblies as frequently as God in their's'. A hostile commentator in the early 19th century, echoed this with, 'among those of the present day, may be numbered the Methodists, Calvinists, Baptists, Universalists, Quakers, Sandemonians (sic), and verity of scions, under various denominations, springing out of that seminary of fanaticism – Methodism.'

Independency in Reading can be dated back to the ejection in 1662 of the vicar of St Mary's, Christopher Fowler, whose adherents became the cause which survived as the **Broad Street Independent Chapel** [Stell, Berkshire 47] until 1983. Members will be able to view this Grade II listed building on their walk from the station: it now houses one of the Reading branches of Waterstone's bookshop. The Broad Street front with its shop premises dates from 1892. Inside one can gain an impression of the interior of the chapel, rebuilt in 1800: the galleries and the domed plaster ceiling survive as part of the bookshop; the organ, pulpit and sanctuary would have been in the place of what is now an imposing staircase linking the two floors.



A later secession from the established church led to the founding of **St Mary's Chapel, Castle Street** [Stell, Berkshire 49: Grade II*] which is now St Mary's Episcopal Chapel (Church of England Continuing) and our gathering place for this visit. The congregation gathered around the evangelical ministry of the Revd William Talbot and his successor William Bromley Cadogan at St Giles' parish church in the late 18th century and became separated in 1797 on the appointment of an unsympathetic vicar. They worshipped for a short time in a disused Countess of Huntingdon's chapel in the Butts but this was not large enough to satisfy the demand for Gospel preaching and Prayer Book worship in Reading and the new chapel was erected on the site of the former County Gaol in Castle Street in 1798 to designs by Richard Billing and opened for worship on 16 December that year. The enthusiasm of the new church did not meet with uniform approval in the town – the jaded commentator above described them as 'under pretence of a superior sanctity' and observed that they had 'erected in this place what they call a chapel, where... service is performed, on certain days, almost incessantly.'

The interior of the chapel is largely original, with its gallery round three sides supported by Doric columns at the lower level, with Ionic columns above supporting the barrel-vaulted ceiling, and a small projecting chancel. It was planned for a capacity of 1000 in its box pews. The exterior was originally modest but in 1838-40 the current portico of six Corinthian

columns supporting a pediment was added to designs by Henry and Nathaniel Brient, the architects of the Royal Berkshire Hospital, and topped off with a narrow but lofty bell tower, likened at the time to a pepper-pot. It is visible in the 1890 photograph on the right: only the plinth now remains after the tower was found to



be unsafe and removed in the 1950s.

The heyday of the Castle Street Chapel, as it was then known, came during the ministry of James Sherman (1796-1862) from 1821 to 1836. Sherman had trained at Cheshunt College and was ordained into the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion in 1818. He was a powerful preacher, planning his sermons minutely but committing them to memory and preaching without notes and made his impact in the town by preaching a sermon on the occasion of the annual Cheese Fair. It was Sherman's particular concern to bring the gospel to the neighbouring villages and he was responsible for adding a further five village 'stations' to the two then in existence – and to have erected neat chapels along vaguely gothic lines, two of which we shall visit today.

Sherman eventually moved, as successor to Rowland Hill, to the Surrey Chapel, upon which the chapel trustees entered into negotiation with the bishop and the building was licensed for Church of England worship as a proprietary chapel and 'chapel of ease' to the parish church, St Mary the Virgin. However a considerable number of congregation strongly disapproved and 'the building went one way and the congregation another', forming another independent church which eventually built the **Congregational Chapel, Castle Street** [Stell, Berkshire 50: Grade II by J.J. Cooper, 1837], immediately opposite and now in use as a nightclub. The first minister of this new cause was to be the Revd Spedding Curwen, the father of John Curwen, the inventor of the Tonic Sol-fa, about whom Clyde Binfield wrote in our recent *Miscellany*.



Our tour takes us across the Thames to Caversham, passing the New Testament Church of God (formerly the Caversham Electric Theatre) and Caversham Baptist Church (c1860 by Alfred Waterhouse), towards Emmer Green.



Caversham Hill Chapel, now Grace Church [Stell, Berkshire 51] is the first of the 'Sherman' chapels on our itinerary: it is set on what was the very edge of the village where there was little development until the 1930s. The cause started with a group who met regularly in a farm kitchen and the church was funded by a Mrs Burchett, a friend of Rowland Hill, who owned several farms in the area and gave the land provided James Sherman would build the chapel. The product was, as he said, 'a neat structure of Bath stone, with a tower and a bell' and was erected in 1827. The building is of five bays, slate roofed, with buttresses and triangular-headed windows: the battlemented tower is in three stages. At the base of the tower is the grave of James Dadswell, pastor of the chapel from 1854 to 1865, who reorganised the basis of the church.

The chapel itself now acts as the hall and lacks any original internal features. The present church, a modern square brick structure with a tiled roof supported by laminated wood beams, is at the rear, linked to the original structure by a vestibule with attached kitchen and associated rooms. There has been a manse on the site since the beginning, although the present structure is not original.

The church was at various points affiliated to the Congregational Union – and was from 1892 until 1937 a joint pastorate with Binfield Heath. It is currently an independent evangelical congregation with a membership of around 110, linked to the New Frontiers family of churches.

We now proceed north through the rural suburbia of Emmer Green and Sonning Common, passing the simple structure of Sonning Common Free Church and the modern St Michael's Catholic Church, travelling through the Chiltern beech woods we reach Stoke Row.

STOKE ROW remains a relatively small village despite modern developments with its main claim to fame being the ornately decorated well head over the well dug in 1863, through the generosity of the Maharajah of Benares. Dissent was strong here even in the 17th century, when the dwelling of Richard Blackhall was registered as a meeting house of 'Congregational Protestant Dissenters': there was still a licensed cottage in the 1808. The present chapel is thought to be successor of a congregation which met in a barn in the village in the early 19th century. Purchase of the land for the chapel is recorded by a conveyance dated 20 July 1815, the signatories of which include the dissenting ministers of Wallingford and Henley as well as local farmers, millers and gentlemen, presumably from among the original members.

Stoke Row Independent Chapel [Stell, Oxfordshire 98: Grade II] was built that same year (a brick inscribed WG 1815 high on the east wall indicates the date and the builder, William Giles) and was opened on 6 August 1816: the cost of £350 was supported by the Congregational Board. It is a simple brick rectangular structure with hipped slate roof and a later porch in similar style: there are rounded windows – two in each of the east and west sides, and two high up in the north side above the sanctuary, one in the south side above the porch. To the rear a school room and kitchen, more recent additions – the schoolroom is described as 'new' in a poster of 1885, the kitchen extension dates to 1956. A burial ground surrounds the chapel on three sides and is still in use.



The interior contains 19th century pews, not always in the original orientation, but the panelling, cross and other furnishings in the sanctuary date from the late 1960s. There was no organ in the chapel until 1978: the current organ is a Walker dated 1965 and installed in 2003. There are a number of interesting memorials including a parish war memorial of 1918, which is replicated in the parish church, indicating the importance of the chapel in village life: there was no parish church before 1846 [the 1851 census showed attendance at morning service was 77 in the chapel, 35 in the church]. Curiously there is also a copy of the Royal Arms over the entrance door, obtained by a minister who was a retired chaplain to the nearby RAF Benson.

Through its first hundred or so years the chapel was supplied by itinerants and neighbouring ministers. Regular ministry in the chapel commenced in 1959 when a minister's house was built on land opposite bequeathed by William Brazil (1858-1955), a local farmer: the development of the rest of this land yielded a trust fund which maintains

the chapel and manse. It was at Brazil's insistence that any closer association with the Congregational Union was prevented.

The tour now continues through the village, past the Maharajah's well and through the villages of Nuffield, Nettlebed, Cookley Green and Pishill to Stonor, at the head of the Assendon valley.

STONOR PARK has been the home of the Stonor family since at least the 12th century, although there was a house here before the Conquest, 'clyminge on an hille' as Leland commented in the mid-16th century. The present house is basically a mediaeval structure 'embedded in a jigsaw of later additions' (Pevsner). To the east of the front of the house is the **Chapel of the Holy Trinity** [Grade I], a simple hall structure of flint with stone dressings and a brick north tower. The chapel was first recorded in 1331 but is thought to have been built late in the previous century although lengthened in the 14th century: the tower was added in the 15th century, possibly in 1416/7, when bricks were ordered from nearby Crocker End.



The interior was remodelled in the Gothick style by James Thorpe between 1796 and 1800 and restored in 1960. The roof is a plaster rib vault on angel corbels: the doorways have ogee hoods and finials. The stained glass is by Francis Eginton (1737-1805) of Birmingham. The chapel has been in continuous use for Catholic worship since its consecration – one of only three in England.

We now drive down the Assendon valley towards the Thames, entering Henley along the Fair Mile, which preserves the line of the Roman road from Dorchester.

At 45 Northfield End is the **Friends Meeting House** [Stell, Oxfordshire 56: Butler, p499-500: unlisted, 1894]. Quakers first met in a hired house on this site outside the town boundary in 1668, subsequently purchased in 1672, and two neighbouring cottages were added by gift in 1727. This building may have been rebuilt, or at least its frontage remodelled, in the 18th century, in which form it survived until 1894.



The meeting had closed in 1873 and now Friends wished to reinvigorate it as a mission meeting and so the meeting house and one of the cottages were demolished and the new meeting house erected with a front in decorative brickwork with terracotta panels. The more modest interior was divided by folding shutters to give a meeting room and classrooms which could be combined if necessary. From 1934 to 1985 much of the building was used as a Youth Hostel. In the subsequent opening up of the space, the platform, initially at one end, has been removed and extra windows added looking out

onto the ancient burial ground.

We take our packed lunches here – hot drinks will be available.

The tour continues with a trip up the Thames valley to Hambleden, just into Buckinghamshire.

Pheasant's Hill Congregational Church, now United Reformed Church, [Stell, Buckinghamshire 43; unlisted] lies a little way up the valley from the main village at the top of a sloping site on which is a small burial ground. This 'Salem Chapel' was opened in September 1807: the church book for 1810 records that 14 persons made a form of covenant and four others were added shortly afterwards. It was described in 1818 as having been founded by Calvinistic Methodists. The congregation called its own Minister for much of its life: it is now linked in a joint pastorate with Christ Church URC, Henley.



The building itself is unassuming and of brick and flint construction with a slated roof; it is not separate from the neighbouring house. The windows are not original. The interior retains its pews and the 19th century pulpit (accessed directly from the vestry) as well as a pedal organ with exposed pipes.

The coach will now return us to Henley where we will be dropped in the Market Square, adjacent to the Town Hall [circled in red]. We have some time to explore the town before making our way to Christ Church URC in the Reading Road by 16.30 at the latest.



HENLEY-ON-THAMES is a mediaeval 'new town' gaining its first charter in 1142 and from the beginning competing with Reading, further upstream, as a market centre and inland port supplying London with agricultural produce. Malting and brewing became important industries in the 17th and 18th century and it also became an important coaching centre. However it was initially bypassed by the growing railway network, with only the development of the Regatta returning it to national importance. Its modest size has allowed it to retain more of its character than more successful towns.

Henley Baptist Church, now known as d:two, [not in Stell: Grade II, 1878], to the west at the bottom of Gravel Hill, grew out of a local gathered church group which originally hired the Assembly Rooms in Bell Street (now a warehouse) and which formed a church of 21 members in 1876. In 1877 they called their first minister and by 1879 had purchased the present site and built what was originally known as the Henley Tabernacle.

The exterior is in grey brick with red brick dressings, a Gothic door and a three-light window with stone tracery. The interior has recently undergone considerable rearrangement.

Further up Gravel Hill on the north side is **Hope Chapel** [unlisted, 1878] a small brick chapel with a slate roof, now converted to a dwelling house.

In New Street on the north side is the Kenton Theatre, opened in 1805 but with little initial success: it reopened as a theatre in 1930. According to Stell, the present building contains a chapel of 1809 [Stell, Oxfordshire 55] in which a breakaway section of the Congregational church worshipped for a time, ceasing to meet some time after 1836.

Other buildings which are worthy of note are the Town Hall (H.T.Hare, 1901) in the Market Place; the former Brakspear's brewery buildings in New Street; the Chantry House of 1450 behind St Mary's church and, on the other side of Hart Street from the church, the Speaker's House, birthplace of William Lenthall, Speaker of the Long Parliament.

From the intersection of Hart Street with Market Place and Bell Street, take Duke Street south. A Wesleyan Methodist Chapel was built here in 1874: there is no sign of it now. Carry on over the intersection with Greys Road and Friday Street, into Reading Road and the tower and spire of **Christ Church URC** [not in Stell: Grade II, 1908] will soon come into view on the west side of the street. Next to the church is the early 19th century manse: this together with the church itself, and opposite, Gladstone Terrace, the Masonic lodge of 1892 and Higg's printing works constitute a fine townscape.



An independent/presbyterian church was successful in the town from the 1660s – several ejected ministers were resident in or near the town and at least one took out licences in 1672. A John Gyles seems to have been the first regular pastor of the group and he is said to have preached regularly in Harpsden Wood a mile or so to the south of the town. A meeting house was first erected on the present site, just outside the Henley parish boundary, in 1718 when the congregation was reckoned at 4-500, including several gentlemen.

The most famous minister was Humphrey Gainsborough, pastor 1748-1776 and brother of the painter. He was a man of great mechanical ability and a considerable inventor, inventing a drill plough and the tide mill: he was responsible for constructing a number of

the locks on the Thames and superintended the regrading of the road to London, which runs up a steep hill from the bridge. He died 'universally loved and respected'.



The dominance of the Congregationalists continued into the 19th century, the chapel being extended in 1829. A British School was established in 1856 and Joseph Goadsby, the minister from 1874, founded the Henley Free Press, now the Henley Standard. By 1900, the chapel was becoming too small and plans were made to rebuild further back from the road.

The current church by Hampden W Pratt, 1908, is an impressive brick structure with yellow stone dressings, gothic-style tracery, and Art Nouveau glass - a clear statement of the Congregationalists' importance in the town. The flamboyant tower was given by a local businessman and resident in memory of a nonconformist grandfather. The preacher at the opening service was the Revd Silvester Horne. The interior is much as it would have been in 1908 with raised choir seats behind the

pulpit and a gallery at the rear. There are a number of memorials and the church plate is displayed in glass cases at the rear of the sanctuary. Alongside the church sits the Christ Church Centre of 2000 which brings the church and halls together with a covered concourse in which is a café area, where we shall take our chapel tea.

After this we shall return to the coach for our final visit of the day to Binfield Heath.

Binfield Heath Chapel [Stell, Oxfordshire 46: unlisted] is the second of the 'Sherman chapels' on our tour. It is of very similar design to that at Caversham Hill, in the Gothic style with a narrow battlemented tower over the entrance but this time executed in ashlar with a slated roof. The original schoolroom and external toilets are still in position at the rear but a flat-roofed extension of c1960 provides a kitchen and more modern facilities. The chimney for the school room fire exits at the rear of the church.

The congregation derives again from a farmhouse church which may have met as early as 1827. Sherman says that 'a piece of freehold land... where two or three roads met, was offered for sale, and I purchased it. A committee of active intelligent men undertook to superintend the erection of a house of prayer, if I would obtain the money.' A tablet in the chapel records the major donor as Mrs Sarah Adams of Reading, one of the Castle Street congregation. The chapel was opened in August 1835, like Stoke Row, the only church in the neighbourhood. The interior was 'modernised' in the 1960s with a beaded dado, metal windows and a wooden pulpit at floor level, but more is retained than at Caversham Hill, including the original window shapes.



The congregation has gone through many vicissitudes over the years, having a joint pastorate with Caversham Hill for some time and returning to the care of preachers from the Castle Street chapel in the recent past. However the church is once again independent with its own part-time pastor but under some oversight by one of the Reading Baptist congregations.

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