

CHAPELS SOCIETY VISIT TO KIDDERMINSTER, BEWDLEY AND STOURBRIDGE

14 APRIL 2012

Our theme is the work, witness and heritage of Nonconformity in the industrial towns of North Worcestershire, a district which became a powerhouse for the iron, glass and carpet industries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The area was a key centre for early Dissent and there were recusant Catholic families too. Enriched by Methodism and New Dissent, there was a thriving and diverse culture of chapel-going by the nineteenth century. We have a day exploring the religious heritage of this area.

VISIT SCHEDULE

The coach will depart from Stourbridge Junction railway station at 10.30 am. Stourbridge Junction has a very frequent service of trains from Birmingham Moor Street and Snow Hill stations.

Any participants who wish to remain on the train until Kidderminster and make their own way to Baxter United Reformed Church should notify the organisers in advance and pay the appropriate rail fare.

Those arriving by car should have no difficulty in parking at Stourbridge Junction (not to be confused with Stourbridge Town) railway station, which has ample free parking at weekends.

We expect to complete our day back at the Stourbridge Junction by 6 pm, having had a chapel tea at the New Road Methodist Church, Stourbridge.

Emergency contact details on the day: 07847 264496 (Chris Wakeling mob.); 07598 671903 (Dave Watts mob.); 01384 376494 (Dave's landline, for contact before 10am on the day).

KIDDERMINSTER

The coach will take us first to Kidderminster, a town which grew rapidly from the middle years of the eighteenth century as a centre (later the principal centre) for the manufacture of carpets; even today much remains of the factories of such companies as Brintons. At the heart of the town was the canal (completed in 1772) that connected the Black Country with the Severn, serving not only the carpet companies but also important engineering firms such as the Folkes Group.

Kidderminster is forever associated with the Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, who was minister here during the civil wars and Commonwealth period. From the coach we shall catch sight of the **parish church of St Mary and All Saints** – now crudely detached from the town centre by a ring road – at which Baxter preached. The church is superficially Victorian and twentieth-century, but the nave and tower date essentially from around 1500, and the chancel was probably consecrated in 1315. In front of the church stands the marble **statue of Richard Baxter** (Thomas Brock, 1875), which was moved to this location in 1967 from its original site, near the present United Reformed Church. Its inscription (composed by Edward Parry, the local Unitarian minister) reads:

Between the years 1641 and 1660 this town was the scene of the labours of Richard Baxter, renowned equally for his Christian learning and his pastoral fidelity. In a stormy and divided age he advocated unity and comprehension, pointing the way to 'The Everlasting Rest'. Churchmen and Non-conformists united to raise this memorial A.D. 1875.

Our coach will drop us at **Baxter United Reformed Church**, in the Bull Ring. The present landmark building (F. W. Tarring, 1884-5) is the fourth incarnation on this site: first was a Presbyterian meeting house of 1693, whose congregation originated in the ministry of Richard Baxter and his friend Thomas Baldwin. The 1693 building was rebuilt in 1753 and again in 1824-5, by which time it was known as Old Meeting and had adopted Congregational polity. Perhaps to assert its role as the town's senior Nonconformist congregation, there was a further change of name when the classical Old Meeting of 1824-5 gave way to Baxter Church in 1885. Once nicknamed 'St Baxter on the Bridge', Tarring's accomplished Gothic design includes a tower and spire, 140 feet high - perhaps a reproach to the parish church, whose intended spire had never materialised. In contrast to Anglican architecture of the time, however, Baxter Church had galleries on three sides (lit by cross-gabled windows) and an arcade of cast-iron columns. The seventeenth-century oak communion table is said to have come from the parish church. Of the stained glass, that in the communion area (by Ward & Hughes) is contemporary with the building, while

the two NE windows, by James Powell & Sons, date from 1921-2, and the two NW windows (by R. Anning Bell) date from 1926. In 1967-70 the interior was reordered, as part of which the original stone pulpit was removed, a new communion dais was constructed and a new entrance vestibule was created. Behind the main building is the red-brick two-storey Sunday school, of 1864.

A very short walk takes us to the **Unitarian New Meeting**, set back from the road in Church St. It was built in 1782 for a Presbyterian congregation that broke away from the Old Meeting in a dispute over the choice of a new minister; in due course this less Calvinistic congregation became Unitarian. Among the founding members was Nicholas Pearsall, a carpet manufacturer. The main building indeed dates from 1782, but the elaborate façade of rugged stonework with ogee-headed windows and doorways (but bereft of its parapet and turret since 1955) was created when the chapel was extended towards the street in 1883 to the designs of Payne & Talbot of Birmingham. The previous façade, of 1782, was more simply Gothic, with neat brick arches and intersecting glazing bars. The original brick side walls remain, but here too the stone tracery dates from 1883, replacing smaller wooden windows. The interior has a yet more complicated history, having been altered in 1870 (when the pews were installed), and again in 1879, when a local architect, J. M. Gething, added the chancel 'in perpendicular Gothic style, so as to harmonize as perfectly as possible with the old building'. Under the chancel arch is a richly carved Jacobean pulpit, dated 1621, which was discarded as lumber from the parish church and purchased by Nicholas Pearsall c.1780/5, after which it stood in the vestry of the New Meeting. As Baxter's pulpit it has pride of place. At the time of the 1883 extension, the ceiling was repanelled, tinted cathedral glass was introduced and the sanctuary was lined with encaustic tiles by Maw & Co. The stained glass came later, by William Pearce (Sower c.1887 and another window c.1903), Hardman (four-light chancel window 1890; under the left-hand gallery 1903-13), and some perhaps by Heaton, Butler and Bayne. Among the memorials are those to Nicholas Pearsall and Lant Carpenter. Parallel with the main building, and echoing its façade, is the hall of 1907 (designed by C. A. Downton). Of the school buildings which Pearsall had erected in 1792, only a fragment survives, part of a doorway that had been added in 1883.

The coach will collect us from the New Meeting and take us on the short journey to Bewdley.

BEWDLEY

Bewdley developed from a small hamlet on the Severn to become an important port. In about 1540 Leland reported that 'at the rising of the sun ... the whole town glittereth (being all of new building) as it were of gold'. As industry developed, coal and iron goods were shipped from its hinterland via its wharves and warehouses to national markets down the river. In the late eighteenth century its role as a port was superseded, following the extension of the canal network from the Midlands to the Severn at Stourport, and the town became something of a backwater.

Soon after crossing the Severn Bridge (Thomas Telford, 1795-9) we will be dropped in sight of the eighteenth-century parish church which sadly acts as a traffic bollard at the top of Load St. Our visit will focus on Bewdley's High St, which runs south-eastwards from near the church tower. High St is not the major thoroughfare that the name suggests (it was previously known as Over or Upper St), but its attractive buildings may distract visitors from the traffic hazard. Please, therefore, take great care when walking along this narrow road.

The present **Holy Family Roman Catholic Church** is of unique form and unusual history. It was built for a Presbyterian congregation whose roots lay in the ministry of Henry Oasland, curate of Bewdley 1650-62. By 1701, during the ministry of Oasland's son, Edward, the Presbyterians' first purpose-built meeting house was erected on the present site. That first meeting house was superseded c.1778 by the elliptically-ended building which is essentially what one sees today. Its box pews and the gallery (above the entrance) followed the curving lines of the exterior, focusing attention on the high pulpit. The elegant shape left little room for ancillary accommodation, however, and within a couple of decades a vestry was built out to the right of the entrance. The congregation, which became Unitarian, included many of the town's leading citizens. In 1894 the building closed and after 1930 served as a builder's store. It was purchased in 1951 for the Catholic Archdiocese, and after emergency repairs was used for worship from 1952. The main restoration work which followed in 1953 (architect J. T. Lynch of Homer, Jennings & Lynch), involved the replacement of any remaining fittings, but was otherwise conservative: windows were

sensitively renewed and the curving external staircase was enclosed while retaining its original timber columns. At the time of writing a small extension is planned in the vestry area.

The **Methodist Chapel**, formerly Wesleyan, bears the date 1795, although it was opened for worship in 1794. Bewdley had not been among the earliest areas to be visited by John Wesley, but when he preached in the town for the last time, one snowy day in 1786, he noted that 'prejudice is here now vanished away'. The core of the chapel, including its three-bay façade, is largely of 1794-5, but the building was extended at the rear in the 1850s, and has undergone subsequent changes. The main worship space contains a central block of pews (probably of 1890-1), a balustraded rostrum that incorporates an older pulpit, and the Gothic silhouette of the organ, which came from the library at Kinlet Hall in 1892. The gallery, which once encircled the interior but now stops short of the pulpit wall, was given a light-weight ceiling in the 1970s, and Perspex-panelled screens were constructed in the foyer. In 2008 permission was given to replace the screens and to install a lift in the foyer. The gallery space is currently unused, but the lower rooms serve a variety of community purposes.

The town's Baptist congregation originated with the work of John Tombes, curate of Bewdley 1646-50. Although Bewdley's Baptists registered a building for worship in 1698, it seems likely that their first purpose-built chapel was the present one, which was erected thanks to a £100 legacy of 1764. The **Baptist Chapel** is not immediately visible from the street, being approached through an opening beside 61 High St. After this approach, what one first sees is the Sunday School building of 1925-6, behind which stands the chapel of c.1764. The chapel has been greatly altered internally (most recently in 1992-4), but a gallery on cast-iron columns survives at one end. The chapel is noted for the ministry of one of the few black ministers in Victorian Britain – the Rev George Cosens – during the years 1846-54.

Beyond its junction with Lax Lane, High St becomes Lower Park. On the corner is the birthplace of Stanley Baldwin, whose grandfather – George Browne MacDonald – came to the circuit as a supernumerary Wesleyan minister in 1867.

A few yards further is the relatively new access route to the **Quaker Meeting House**, a building of 1706, which retains the atmosphere of an understated early eighteenth-century meeting house, despite a number of subsequent changes. The single-chambered place of worship was augmented by a small extension, perhaps in the 1720s, and the entrance was successively in each of the side walls before being located in the south-east gable end, below the gallery. Extensions of 1963-4 and 1970 (the latter by H. Martin Lidbetter) provided classroom and kitchen facilities, and an extensive programme of conservative restoration was completed in 2008.

From Bewdley the coach will take us to Stourbridge.

STOURBRIDGE

Our visit starts at Lower High Street at the Unitarian Chapel and then a walk up the High St - passing Coventry St, Duke St and the Talbot Hotel - to St Johns Church on the ring road and then along New Road to the Methodist Church, visiting the Roman Catholic Church on the way. A short diversion will give us a sight of Hanbury Hill Baptist Church.

Stourbridge was an important medieval market town which grew significantly from the eighteenth century through the growing iron industries in its hinterland (nail making and a series of forges). Another industry was glassmaking, originally established by Huguenot refugees in the seventeenth century. There were significant local coalmines. As the town grew, based on heavy industry, so the challenge of reaching a burgeoning population grew. The challenge was met by a significant establishment of Nonconformist chapels, especially from 1780 onward.

From the ring road we may just glimpse (to the west) the **Quaker Meeting House** of 1688 in Scott's Rd. The Quakers established the first Nonconformist meeting in the town at about the time of the Restoration, and the site of the present building, with its burial ground, was acquired some two decades later.

The 1662 Ejection resulted in no fewer than nine Puritan ministers being ejected in the general area and living in and around the town. The local ironmasters, the Foleys, were very sympathetic to Dissent and supported the ongoing ministry of some as domestic chaplains. This also led to the establishment of a

small Dissenting chapel in the home of Thomas Foley at Prestwood (about three miles west of Stourbridge, near several of the ironmaster's forges), and another in a house he owned in the High St, now the Talbot Hotel. As this **Presbyterian** congregation grew, a permanent chapel was built in 1698 on the corner of Coventry St and High St, behind what is now Nickells and Perks shop. It was of some size with a gallery. Its first minister was George Flower, one of Foley's domestic chaplains, whose ministry lasted until his death in 1733. The building was destroyed in the 1715 Jacobite riots and after a public inquiry was rebuilt at public expense at a cost of £130. 4s. 1d.

By the 1770s, the chapel was too small and deteriorating and with the appointment of a new minister, Benjamin Flower, the congregation embarked on the building of a new chapel costing £1204, to the designs of Thomas Johnson (of Worcester) at Lower High St. This was opened on 27 July 1787, with a burial ground added in 1791. Benjamin Flower was Anti-Trinitarian and his theology brought the congregation into the developing **Unitarian** denomination. The building stands in the best street in town, and its porch is proudly inscribed 'A.D. 1788 Hoc TEMPLUM aedificatum'. Cast-iron windows, presumably a product of local industry, were introduced in 1823. Inside, the chapel retains most of its original box pews and its walls bear a good collection of memorial tablets. Above the entrance is a gallery of 1794 (built for the organ and choir, and also with seats for the schoolchildren), with benefactions recorded around its front. At the far end a chancel was created c.1860, and the pulpit was displaced to one side. The organ which now occupies the chancel is said to date from 1913, but its screen is apparently of 1896.

The new alignment at the Presbyterian chapel in 1788 resulted in ten families leaving and returning to their previous building to worship as Trinitarian Dissenters. In parallel, a group of George Whitefield's preachers had been at work in the area, supported by the Countess of Huntingdon. These had established congregations at Brierley Hill (two miles to the north) and in one of the back lanes of the High St. Both groups then decided to merge with the Coventry Street group to form a new **Independent** church. This flourished and in 1810 built a chapel on a new site in Lower High St, directly opposite the Unitarian church. The buildings were enlarged with galleries in 1840 and Sunday and Day schools in 1841, with additions in 1864. By the late twentieth century, the buildings were obsolete and in poor condition, and in 1978 the congregation – by now part of the United Reformed Church - moved to take over a redundant Anglican church on the ring road, **St John the Evangelist**, built in 1860 to the designs of the eminent Victorian architect G. E. Street. The church is a fine example of Victorian High Gothic design and has some high quality stained glass. (The chapel of 1810 was demolished in 2000 and developed for flats.)

The Congregational church established a mission church in the east side of the town, close to the railway station at Chawn Hill in 1870. This closed in 1955 but was acquired by a Brethren group and it has developed into a large and flourishing charismatic church linked to the Pioneer network.

Regular **Roman Catholic** mass was first held using premises above shops in the High St in the early nineteenth century, led by priests coming from Oscott in Sutton Coldfield. In 1821 a site was purchased in New Road by Fr John Brownlow, for whom a mission and a priest's house were built, opening in June 1824. The subsequent priest, Walter Keen, raised the money and organised the development of the present church, **Our Lady and All Saints**, which was designed by E. W. Pugin and opened in 1864. A steeple was added in 1890 designed by G. H. Cox. The well-lit interior has short columns of polished granite, from which spring tall arches. The oldest stained glass (1860s) is to be found at the east end, and other windows are by Hardman of Birmingham.

The residents of Stourbridge were described by John Wesley on his visit on 19 March 1770 as 'wild as colts untamed though the bridle was in their mouth', and it took a further twenty years before a **Wesleyan Methodist** congregation was established. This met in a building in Mill Lane on the north end of the High Street. Once it had got momentum, it moved to the local theatre. A site was acquired in 1804 and the chapel was completed in 1805, costing £1413. 18s. 10d. This faced onto New Rd, was simple in style and could accommodate nearly 1000 on two levels in horseshoe-shaped galleries. The Wesleyan chapel developed and enlarged its premises in the Victorian era with the building of a Sunday school in the 1860s, and the building of a new Sunday school (at the cost of £1653) in 1886. This latter building remains, converted into flats in 2009.

By the early twentieth century the old chapel was seen as outdated and deteriorating in condition and after World War I, the congregation raised the funds to redevelop the building under the leadership of the

superintendent, Revd H. R. Crosby. The new **Methodist Church** building, costing £13,000, was opened on 8 September 1928. The architects, Crouch, Butler and Savage of Birmingham (who had a distinguished record of work for Methodists), produced an essentially Romanesque design, with nicely conceived stone details. The sequence of stained glass windows is unusual. The most recent change to the buildings was the disposal of the Sunday school block and the subdivision and refurbishment of the main chapel in 2009. This reduced the worship area but retained its character and created an excellent multi-use community hall with kitchen.

The split in the Wesleyans in 1836 was a major reverse to its fortunes with a loss of many members who set up a **New Connexion** chapel, also in New Rd. This congregation reunited with the Wesleyan Chapel on the merger into the United Methodists in 1907, closed in 1932 and the building was demolished with the construction of the ring road in the 1960s.

In the early nineteenth century, the Black Country was a major area for the **Primitive Methodists** who started in Staffordshire. One of their leading preachers, Thomas Brownsword, preached in Stourbridge on 2 July 1820, attracting 1,000 hearers, but was promptly arrested, tried and imprisoned in Worcester gaol. A congregation was established in 1840 using the old Baptist chapel in Duke St. This moved to Wollaston in the west of the town in 1857. The building was then fitted out for a new parish of the Church of England, which built St John's in 1860. It was then used by the Catholic Apostolic Church until closure in 1928.

The **Baptists** formed a congregation in 1824, building a chapel in Duke St, but by 1833 this had closed, with the congregation going to Cradley or Brierley Hill Baptist chapels. A second group started worshipping at Hemplands, but then gained momentum to build a plain but elegant new chapel in Hanbury Hill, just off Worcester St, opening the building in June 1836. The growth of the congregation meant that it added a Sunday school building in 1841.

FURTHER READING

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