

Cirencester Baptist Church

Church History

Cirencester Baptist Church is one of the oldest Baptist Churches in England, tracing its origins back to the English Civil War. 2001 marked the official 350th Anniversary. Prior to the move to the current premises in Chesterton Lane in January 2017, the Church always met in Coxwell Street and the surviving chapel there dates from 1856.

How did the Baptist denomination begin?

Baptist Christians first started to worship in groups in the early 17th Century in Holland and England. In 1609 the first English Baptist Church in Holland was founded by John Smyth, an Anglican priest, and Thomas Helwys, a lawyer from Lincolnshire. They were influenced by the Reformation in Europe, and in particular by the teachings of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin

Baptist thinking undermined the role of the Church of England. It was therefore unpopular with the authorities, who made it illegal.

How did Cirencester Baptist Church begin?

The beginnings of the Church are hazy. The first definite information is in two documents listing names of baptised people; and births of children, both from 1651.

List of names of those baptised in the Church of Christ in Cirencester and those that were received into communion from other congregations since the year 1651

This is the record of the names of those children that were not sprinkled according to the custom of the nation and the day when they were born - whose parents are in fellowship in the baptised church of Christ in Cyrensister from the year 1651

It is probable that the church as a group of people began in the period of the Civil War. A document of 1659 agreed that they should meet 'as formerly' in Joan Peltraces's house, and pay her 26/8 [£1.33] per year. The assumption is that this house was on the same site as our current church. The road was called Abbot Street then, later being renamed Coxwell Street.

Church Buildings

In 1659 we know the Cirencester Baptists met in the home of Joan Peltrace, a widow. This is believed to be the site of the current church.

Coxwell Street is first mentioned in the will of William Freeman, dated 25 April 1737. William was a grocer, and he left his son, Joseph Freeman, all the property he owned in a street called Coxwell Street. The property consisted of a piece of land, with a room called the Meeting House and wherein a congregation of people called from time to time for many years past, had met to celebrate divine service and exercise their religious worship. William asked his son and heirs to allow the Baptists to continue worshipping on the site. There was also a piece of land on the West side of the meeting house, extending from the brew house down to the brook. William Freeman intended this to be the Baptist Burial ground.

Little more appears until in August 1817 the decision was taken to remove the vestry, which was in a ruinous state and in its place build 2 school rooms, to accommodate a boys children's ministry. The church was obviously growing as in 1824 the minutes record that congregations were in general large and attentive, and the applications for sittings more than could be conveniently accommodated so it was decided to alter the form of seating.

By the 1850s it was clear that the buildings were in no fit state to use, being in such a state of dilapidation it became very dangerous to worship therein. The church decided after repeated

meetings to build a new chapel. An architect, Mr Dangerfield of Cheltenham, was commissioned to design the building, and adverts were put in the local newspapers inviting tenders for the work.

Prices given were much higher than anticipated so the work was postponed. The job was given to Thomas Bridges, but again there were delays, as it took a long time for the money to be raised. In March 1856 the deacons resolved that in consequence of the repeated non-attendance of various persons, whose cooperation in the carrying out of the contemplated project had been confidently relied upon that the project should be abandoned.

By the following month things were getting even more difficult. A church meeting was held in April 1856 to discuss the propriety of adopting steps to prevent accident by the falling in of some part of the roof of the chapel. Finally it was agreed to change the whole scheme and turn the old Chapel into schoolrooms and put up a new building over the back burying ground, from the north side of the present Chapel to the street. This is our current building. The foundation stone was laid in July 1856.

Charles H Savory wrote in 1858 that *'this Chapel was built in 1854, for the use of, and purchased by a Church of the Particular Baptist persuasion, who had for some years previously met for worship in a Room in Dyer-street. This Chapel was opened on the 31st May, 1854.*

The interior of the Chapel is comfortably and neatly fitted up, and there are seats calculated to hold 150 persons down stairs there is also a Gallery, a Baptistry in the Chapel, and a vestry behind.

The average attendance is about 100. The Sabbath Services in the Chapel are at 7am for Prayer, 10½ Preaching, 2½ Prayer, and 6 Preaching.

There are also two week evening Services, on Tuesday and Thursday. The Church is under the pastoral care of Mr. Tanner.'

The doctrines advocated are those generally known as Calvinistic. Various other alterations have been made over the year: new halls in the 1890s, a major refurbishment in the 1920s, the installation of gas, and later electricity, and most recently in 1997 a further rebuilding of the halls and entrance. The 1856 Chapel is now classified as a Grade II listed building.

Deaths

In the early days, Baptists would have been buried in the same graveyard as other Cirencester people. The Cirencester Parish Records vol 2 refer to Anabaptists, a common term for Baptists in the 17th Century

Records such as these exist:

June 5th 1654 Burial of a child of Robert Wilkins, Anabaptist

July 20 1654 John, son of Joan Pellteace, widow, buried

August 17th 1654 Burial of a child of Alexander Neale, Anabaptist

Sept 1st 1655 Burial of a son of Richard Burge, Anabaptist

They show the high death rate of babies and children in the 17th Century.

The Baptist church records hardly refer to death, unless in a members list, until 21 December 1737, when William Freeman, a minister died. He had been in the ministry at Cirencester for 30 years, and was aged 74. His wife died on 25 December 1736, and both were buried in the meeting yard of the chapel. William Freeman left this land to his son, providing that the Baptists might make use of the said piece ... Of ground with a convenient passage to and from the same, for the burial of their dead in a decent manner. A new burial ground was begun in October 1752. This was located to the west of the Meeting House, where the current office/flowerbed is. Elizabeth Blackwell was the first recorded burial in the new yard - she died on 10 April 1754.

Some burials have taken place in the chapel itself, for example the remains of Mary, the wife of Solomon Ivin were interred in stone grave in the Baptist meeting house, March 11 1808. There also appear to be several vaults used in the 1820s, variously described as brick or stone lined. Mary Pauline Morier, and Ann Viner were buried in vaults in 1826, and Harriet Morrier in 1832. Altogether 60 names are recorded as buried in the floor.

There is also a non-conformist burial ground down Watermoor Road, almost opposite The Avenue. This was used in the 19th Century and can still be walked around today.

The town cemetery at Chesterton opened in 1872 and since then Baptists have opted to be buried there or in Stratton cemetery. Funeral practices have changed and there is a choice of cremation or burial now.

Cirencester Baptist Church and the Second World War

The church, along with Cirencester and the nations, was initially in shock. On 6 Sept 1939 the women's meeting annual committee records that they met in exceptional circumstances, England having declared war on Germany because of her treatment of Poland.

Evacuees from Barking commandeered the schoolroom and halls for use. Gloucestershire Education Committee looked after the renting arrangements for Russell School. The Women's meeting and other groups that met midweek had to use the church sanctuary.

Blackouts were needed throughout the church, first the skylights, and windows in the halls were provided with plywood frames and curtain rails, and then fabric was purchased. French & Sons, of West Market place supplied this for £5.

The church had to provide fire wardens in case of air raids, also equipment to put out fires. An entry in the deacon's minutes of 27 January 1941 states that a stirrup pump at £1 be obtained from Urban District Council. Sand bags and buckets were also purchased.

Practical aid was needed, as the church joined in with the rest of the country in the war effort. 10% of the regular weekly offering was devoted to the fund to assist distressed churches in the denomination. The Red Cross and St John's Ambulance asked for help to relieve air raid distress and the loose cash in the offerings was several times devoted to this appeal. In 1941 the County Council asked for hospitality for the raid shocked people of Bristol, asking for food and lodging for mother and child for one or two weeks. In pauper cases the cost can be met from the Lord Mayor's fund.

Some church members were called up. Men were sent to the war front and women to work in the support services, such as the Women's Land Army, or in factories. The church supported them in prayer, and by writing letters and sending Christmas cards. Those that returned were welcomed back. Some were conscientious objectors, men who could not equate killing with the Bible's teaching. These joined the Non-Combat Corps, known as the N Cs. Wherever they were sent the church tried to link its members with churches in the area.

Towards the end of the war, there was a large American Hospital in Cirencester Park, to look after casualties of war. Cirencester Baptist Church worked with a team from the Free Churches to bring practical and spiritual help to the soldiers and staff.