



Origins and our first Chapel

As you pursue events further back into the past, there are more questions than answers and endless branching of avenues to explore. The best you can do is seize what you can find, to accept the contradictions and to revel in new revelations when they appear. The plan is to split our history into its three centuries in the three magazine issues of this celebration year. The sources at present are a hand-written history by Dorothy Reynolds, "Nostalgia" articles by the local historian Neil Rees in the local press, and Martin Powell's collection of news reprints from The Bucks Herald.

So - 1724 is the year when the original Chesham High Street Independent Chapel was erected on this site, but the real beginning to reach that point was many years before. Dissent within the Church of England gathered momentum again after the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II's ascent to the throne in 1660. In 1662, the "Great Expulsion" followed the Act of Uniformity by which the Book of Common Prayer and the 39 articles of the Church of England became law. Two thousand clergy who did not accept this law, and who did not see the monarch to be the head of the church, but instead the Holy Spirit, were expelled. With them went their congregations and the non-conformist/separatist/independent churches began to form. In 1689, Parliament passed the Toleration Act which allowed non-conformists to meet, provided they registered their places of worship. Chesham being a hotbed of dissent, there were 4 or 5 such places of worship in Chesham by 1700, by which time the population of the town was about 1700.

In 1709, the vicar of Chesham recorded that there was a Presbyterian meeting in Chesham, led by a Mr Evans. In 1712, there were 10 Presbyterian families worshipping together, and a teacher named Isaac Robinson had become their Pastor, who registered his house as their meeting place in 1713. Though he is reported to have received £5 from the Presbyterian Fund, the church was not registered as Presbyterian but Independent. By 1715, the church had 160 members, already a flourishing congregation. "*The Society of Independents assembled for worship in some inferior building, not erected for purpose and located in some obscure part of the town...*"

Isaac Robinson died in 1723 and was buried in St Mary's graveyard. His gravestone reads "Rev Isaac Robinson, Minister of the Gospel. Died 18 August 1723 aged 52 and 1 month. A faithful and laborious schoolmaster and tutor to youth."

Our first chapel (1724-1885)



Photograph taken in 1885 prior to its demolition

After the death of Isaac Robinson, the ruling Elders of the “Church of Protestant Dissenters” called William King to be their Pastor. He, with the Elders, resolved on building a proper meeting house. The money was raised, the land bought and the building completed with all bills paid by December 1724, the whole cost being £304-15s-7d. It was registered as a place of worship in 1725 and named by Revd King the “Congregational Church of Christ in Chesham” but also known as the “Chesham Independent Chapel”. The Congregational Year Book states that “Chesham Congregational Church” was formed in the year 1724. (*NB St Paul’s Cathedral was completed about the same time!*)

To date, we have only two exterior images of the building taken from The Broadway and, so far, no certain interior pictures. There is a drawing of John Wesley preaching to a packed assembly but it is not known whether this is in our chapel. He certainly preached in our chapel five times. The above photo taken shortly before its demolition in 1885 shows the right-hand flank wall as well as the front. It was brick built with quoining with mock capitols that gave it a Georgian neo-classical style. It had double entrance doors. Its footprint was 57’ x 33’. It had four pitched rooves, their ridges parallel to the street.

During its 160 years, various improvements were made. Oil lamps replaced candles in 1760. In 1814, the vestry, presumed to be the extension at the left-hand side of the chapel, was enlarged and refloored. There was a dispute with the then owner of High House, (now the vape shop), because the extension involved the boundary wall on their side, but it was settled in our favour. In the same year, the entrance was “adorned” with the porch (costing £110-9s-8p). In 1817, there were improvements to the windows and, in 1818, a new gallery was built and the lighting improved with two hanging brass lamps with brass pulleys, and other fitments were installed.

In 1830, the vestry was further enlarged to serve as a schoolroom. In 1841, the building underwent considerable repairs and was repainted. (There appear to be three stabilising braces along the side of the building to support the wall – probably the major repair?) In 1860, a concert of sacred music, played by amateur musicians from the town, raised money for improvement to the front of the chapel. In 1861, it was proposed to replace the harmonium with an organ. In 1862, alterations and extensive extensions were undertaken to the sanctuary and schoolroom. The first Bazaar on record was held to raise the necessary funds. In 1871, comfort was afforded by “four gas pits dug in the chapel aisles” (sounds like a heating system?)

In 1880, questions were raised about repairs to the organ and the seating in the chapel. A member offered £1000 towards a new building on the condition that the friends raised a further £1000 to cover the cost. A decision was made to stop using the chapel itself for safety reasons, and the last services were held in it in April 1880. The schoolroom continued to be used. A committee was formed who undertook the “most exacting, tedious and difficult task” of planning and organising its replacement, involving over 50 meetings over the next five years. In 1885, when they were finally ready to go ahead with our current building, down came the old one and the resulting materials were auctioned for ~£100.

“Thus passed away a venerable relic, a link with Primitive Nonconformity.”

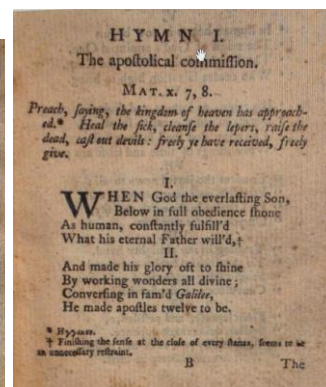
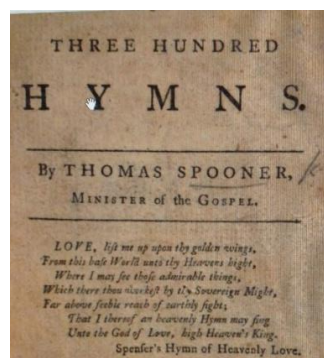
The First ~100 years Pastors

Over the first ~100 years, there was a succession of Pastors, some recently qualified for ministry.



Revd Wiliam King

Revd Joseph Surman



Revd Thomas Spooner’s Hymn Book

Revd Dr William King, Pastor from 1724 - 1740

William King had trained for the ministry, then graduated from the University of Utrecht in Holland. It shows the quality of our church community that it attracted a gifted student. He started his ministry here in 1724 and was ordained on 22 April 1725. He resolved from the outset on the building of a Meeting House, driving the purchase of land, erection of the building and seeing that all bills were paid by the following December.

Revd William Simon was inducted in 1741 but his ministry was shortened by ill health.

Revd Thomas Spooner, Pastor from 1748 - 1779

Revd Spooner was a scholar, well versed in Hebrew and the Classics. In 1762, whilst in ministry in Chesham, he had published a book of 300 hymns that he had written. He also published "A Paraphrase of the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles" in four volumes and a paraphrase of Genesis.

During Revd Spooners ministry, John Wesley was given the use of our Meeting House, because the Methodists had insufficient space, first in 1769 and then on his subsequent visits to Chesham in 1771;1772;1774 and 1775. Wesley referred to Revd Spooner as "the Dissenting Minister", and "the friendly man" in gratitude for his help.

In 1774, William Porter was taken on as Revd Spooner's Assistant Minister.

During Revd Spooner's ministry, Coulson and Ann ("Madame") Skottowe, land owners whose mansion was the long-gone Upper Parsonage that then stood at the top of what is now Lowndes Park, were worshippers in our church. In June 1774, our Communion cups were stolen. On October 22nd 1774, presumably also to celebrate the chapel's 50th anniversary, Ann Skottowe presented the church with two new silver Communion cups and a Communion plate. Ann was known for her acts of charity, particularly towards women in labour, giving them child-bed linen and money.

In 1778, Revd Spooner gave a piece of land as a burial space, which was walled round, located behind Chesham House.

Congregations had been mediocre but membership rose to 94 in 1778.

Revd William Porter took pastoral charge after Revd Spooner's death in 1779 until his own death in 1784. His main introduction was a regular Sunday Evening Service, instead of "Repetitions", in addition to the Morning and Afternoon Services.

Revd Joseph Surman, Pastor from 1786 - 1812

Revd Surman faced two contentious issues that were dividing the congregation, that depleted the membership to 44. In 1812, Mr Surman resigned due to ill health. The then congregation would not let him go so he continued to assist with some services until his death in 1819.

Between 1812 and 1816, **Revd William Miller** and students from the Hopton Academy, including **John Hall**, took the services.

Revd John Hall Pastor from 1816 - 1839

John Hall was invited to the Pastorate in 1816 and was ordained in 1817. He worked unceasingly. By his 20th Anniversary, he had preached 3164 sermons; baptized 364 persons; buried 110 people, 41 of whom were members. The congregation increased greatly and so did the membership. "Church Meetings were often devotional, characterised by warmth of feeling and gratitude, with fervent expressions of God's goodness." The church was prospering.

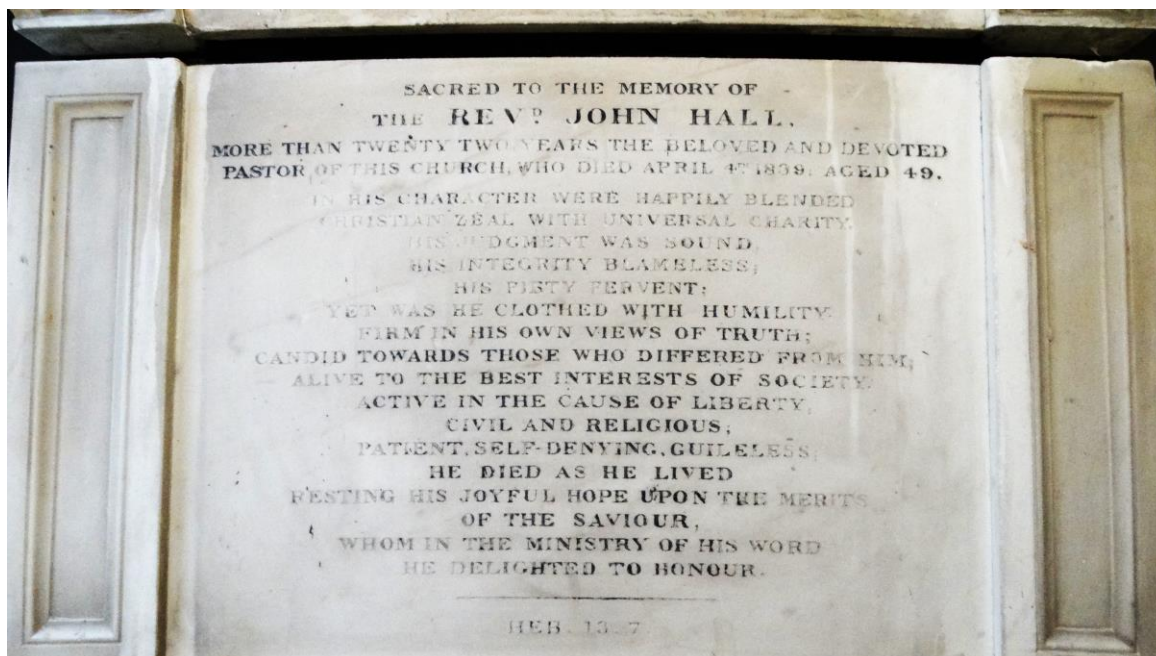
Revd Hall was very involved with church planting and ecumenical partnerships including:- at Chartridge, later shared with the Lower Baptists; services at Bellingdon after starting a Sunday school, there teaching the "3 Rs"; he preached regularly at the Union Chapel, Flaunden; he co-operated with the local clergy including Anglican to set up the first joint Sunday school.

"Halcyon days when no spectre of religious difficulty harassed the local churches."

The routine of 3 sermons on Sunday, a sermon on alternate Wednesdays, an address every Friday along with preaching at Bellingdon, Chartridge and Flaunden took its toll. A lightened schedule came too late and, physically weakened, he was taken ill and died aged 49. The memorial to him is on the corridor wall and describes him thus:- .

“Sacred to the memory of Revd John Hall, more than twenty two years the beloved and devoted Pastor of this church who died April 4th 1839 aged 49.”

“In his character were happily blended Christian zeal with universal charity. His judgement was sound, his integrity blameless, his piety fervent yet he was clothed with humility. Firm in his own views of truth. Candid towards those who differed from him. Alive to the best interests of society. Active in the cause of liberty, civil and religious. Patient, self-denying, guileless, he died as he lived, resting his joyful hope upon the merits of the Saviour, whom in the ministry of His word he delighted to honour.”



Hebrews 13:7 says “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith.”

Tit Bits

In 1817, the administration of the Communion elements of bread and wine was changed from by the Pastor to by the Deacons, “the method of all Independent Dissenters”.

“Occasional Communicants” ie. people who were away from home, or wanting to hear evangelical preaching, were admitted.

In the 1830s, charitable donations were made by the church to The Home Missionary Society, The Irish Evangelical Society, The Widows Fund, The London Missionary Society, The Congregational School at Lewisham and The Colonial Missionary Society.

In 1835, the singers (choir?) suggested that the hymns should be read a whole verse at a time.

In 1837, the Chapel was registered for marriages.

**This Stone
was laid by
Albert Spicer Esq. J.P.
of Woodford
June XXIV. MDCCCXXXV.
JESUS CHRIST himself
Being The Chief Corner Stone
Revd John Pither pastor**

Also engraved much smaller in the lower corners are the details of the architect - W G Habershon and Fawcner of 38 Bloomsbury Square, London WC and the builder - Honour & Son, Tring.

