

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DAMERHAM BAPTIST CHURCH



The Civil War in the mid 17th century caused a tremendous upheaval in English society, the consequences of which are still with us today. One of the most notable features of the turmoil was the rise of numerous religious sects. Some of these were relatively short lived, but the Baptists gained strength and assisted by the increased mobility of the population due to the war they spread throughout the country.

During the Civil War period Baptist churches were founded by soldiers of the Parliamentary armies at Salisbury and in a number of surrounding villages, principally at Porton, Downton and the Wallops. It was however over a century later that the Baptists came from the Salisbury congregation to Rockbourne and Damerham. They held services and preached in the open air with the result that a number of village people joined them and eventually founded their own church in 1801. A meeting house was built at a cost of £200, although unfortunately its exact location in the village is unknown.

It appears that the early congregation lacked proper leadership and in time the members drifted away, preferring to walk to Downton, Bowerchalke and sometimes Salisbury to



worship. To all intents and purposes the Baptist Church in Damerham was dead.

Then came William Rhodes. Rhodes was born in 1792, the son of a village carpenter. His father was a violent and dissolute man who sent the young Rhodes out to work picking stones and scaring crows at the age of seven. When he was twelve years old he began work in his father's business.

William appears not to have been a particularly religious young man, but in 1811, influenced by a friend who was possibly a member of the nearby Baptist congregation, he underwent a spiritual experience similar to that of Wesley in the previous century, who had "felt his heart strangely warmed". Rhodes describing the experience said "All things appeared to me in a new light: I felt most vividly concerned, distressed, alarmed about my soul and God". Moving on from the experience he became a noted preacher and evangelist who after a hard week's work would sometimes walk over

twenty miles to preach in the surrounding villages.

By 1817 Rhodes had commenced studies in Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. How a poor and untutored village lad from Damerham found himself in Scotland in the company of the greatest philosophers and theologians of the day is not explained, but he completed his studies in 1819 with every expectation of a brilliant career in the church. However, his health was not good and after a very serious illness in 1823 he reluctantly returned home to Damerham.

There he gathered a few cottagers and farm servants and preached to them. A biographical note on Rhodes says that the material was most unpromising: the people boorish, ignorant and depraved. However, Rhodes had what today we might call charisma. He encouraged his embryonic congregation to build a place of worship. The location was in the centre of the village at Crossways on land which is now a copse at the rear of the bus shelter. The

members of the church provided the labour and materials, Rhodes himself making the pews. The chapel was completed in 1828 at a cost of £50.

Rhodes ministered to the local Baptists at this chapel for twenty four years. He died in 1856, as the church records say "much beloved and respected of all classes". Besides preaching he had founded a school, established a temperance society and dispensed medicines to the poor. His ministry partly coincided with that of another memorable man, the Rev Richard Allnutt, Vicar of the Parish, who among his other achievements was responsible for the establishment of the present village school. It must have been very rare for a remote parish like Damerham to have enjoyed the parallel ministries of men of their intellectual and spiritual calibre.

In 1852 Henry Earney became pastor to the Baptist congregation, having been the assistant to Rhodes for number of years previously. In May 1863 disaster struck. Rhodes's chapel was burnt to the ground together with twenty-nine cottages and three farms. However the congregation proved very resilient and a replacement chapel was quickly erected on the present site at Greenbanks at a cost of £200. Some of the work was clearly funded by loans. The records show that in 1865 £18 17s 7d was paid into the Building Fund, a not inconsiderable sum bearing in mind that the members were very poor and the highest weekly collection during the 1860s was 1s 4d.

Henry Earney was succeeded as pastor in 1895 by his son Levi. The first anniversary of the new pastorate was marked by tragedy. The Rev T J Collier, former minister of the

Downton Baptist Church, collapsed in the pulpit while preaching and died. He was seventy-four years of age and had walked six miles to attend the service. Some may remember James Collins who ran an estate agency in Fordingbridge and was a descendant of the Rev Collier.

In 1904 three members were summoned for refusing the Education Rate. Today this may appear a trivial issue, but at the time it was a matter of supreme importance the nonconformists who objected to paying the rate to maintain the Church of England Schools. The three members had warrants of distress levied against them and their goods seized and sold. Among the objectors was Herbert "Bertie" Vincent whose daughter Mrs Hilda Jerrard now lives at Sandheath.

In 1906 at the age of forty Lewis Earney died, followed shortly after by his wife Linda. William E Barnes of Fordingbridge was offered the pastorate and accepted. Membership was at the time around forty, but over the next twenty years a decline set in so that by 1930 there were fewer than ten.

In 1911 William Widgery came to Damerham from Winchester to be inducted as the new pastor. He did not last very long in the post. The Church record cryptically notes that he was dismissed from the pastorate in 1914 and that his wife also left - the cause "sympathy with husband". It is not explained for what offence Mr Widgery was dismissed.

Following Mr Widgery's departure, during the Great War there was a move to group together the Rockbourne, Martin and Damerham Baptist Churches under the leadership of Walter Goodenough, a young man who died at

the age of twenty-five of consumption. Mr Goodenough lived with his mother in a cottage where now stands the former village post office (opposite the Methodist Church). The garden contained a hut in which Walter lived to relieve his illness. The chapel contains his memorial plaque.

In the early 1920s John Butcher, who lived at Frogham, assumed the leadership. The 1920s appear to have been a time when attempts were made to bring the Damerham Baptists into the mainstream of the life of the denomination. The ministers of the church at Salisbury and Downton encouraged the local members to accept pastoral oversight from Downton, but this was rejected. They replied that they were quite happy with John Butcher. Another controversy at the time concerned relations with the Baptist Union. They had obtained the title deeds to the chapel and manse (Rhodes Cottage in the High Street). How this had come about is not clear, maybe Mr Widgery's dismissal had something to do with it. Whatever the case, the local members resented the Baptist Union's involvement and there is a record of intermittent dispute over many years. The Church is now in full membership of the Baptist Union and the controversy has died.

In 1930 a local young man, Hugh Butt, took the post of co-pastor, but he resigned to go into full time ministry in 1931, eventually taking a church at Dudley in the West Midlands.

When war broke out in 1939 the Church was thinning, being run by a number of local younger people such as Leslie Phillimore and his wife Hetty, and Peggy Nicklen. But a number of leading members were called up for

active service and by the end of 1942 only six remained.

At this time the Church Treasurer was one Arthur White. Mr White was by all accounts a distant relative of the local family of that name. He had visited Damerham for a number of years. He was a well-known artist and cartoonist who had created the "Chick", the main character in a popular children's comic "Chicks Own". He also painted a mural of Robinson Crusoe for the Great Ormond Street Hospital. Some of Arthur White's work still exists, principally the "Good Samaritan" and crayon drawings from scenes in Pilgrim's Progress. In each of these he used local people as models.

In 1946 when the Church Roll was revived it was found that very little recovery had been made from the wartime position. Only seven members were recorded. In the early 1950s numbers increased. Ralph Colbourne became Treasurer, a post he was to hold for nearly 50 years. Mary Miller (now Mrs Charlie Colbourne) and Mrs Joan Phillimore joined the church with Mr and Mrs John Leakey. All had come to settle in Damerham from London.

The 1950s was a time of progress. Pastoral oversight on a part-time basis was provided by the Downton minister, the Rev Keith Missen, for a number of years and united services were held in the Village Hall under the auspices of Youth of Christ, a venture in which the local Baptists took a prominent part. The Youth of Christ rallies were an important feature of the religious life of the village for many years and a number of well known evangelists, preachers and teachers came to Damerham Village Hall during this period.

For almost twenty years the Baptist Church was largely run by the very experienced triumvirate of Percy Nicklen, John Leakey and George Colbourne. Unfortunately, all of these leaders passed away within seven years around the late 1960s and early 1970s and it was difficult to see how they could be replaced.

However, Derek Jerrard who had been in membership with the Fordingbridge Congregational Church agreed to take over the pastorate. With his appointment the wheel turned full circle, since he was directly descended from Henry Earney, Rhodes's assistant and successor.

Derek Jerrard relinquished the pastorate in 1987. John Avery, a well respected Methodist local preacher who had served both the Damerham Baptist and Methodist Churches for many years was called to the pastorate. He accepted and is pastor at present, although he has announced his retirement which will take effect from April 2000.

Discussions commenced during the mid 1990s between the local Baptists and Methodists to explore the possibility of uniting in a single congregation. Representatives of the wider denominations took part but it was decided to maintain the status quo. Each Church has for two hundred years maintained a separate and distinct witness to the village but both have much in common as their co-operation over the years shows. Most of the old controversies between the nonconformists and Anglicans have also now died down and it is hard to imagine a situation like the dispute over the 1904 Education Act arising today.

None of us knows what the next century will bring for the Damerham churches of whatever

denomination. Perhaps we should be listening out. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" (Rev 2 v 9).

THE DAMERHAM CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL



The Congregational Chapel was built in 1807 and up until the 1930's had regular services on a Sunday evenings. In the late 30's until well after the Second World War it was closed and for a time was "home" to British soldiers who were billeted there. Mrs Annie Nation, who lived next door, looked after the Chapel for a time before it's close.

It was re-opened for a few years in the 50's and

early 60's when services were held on Sunday afternoons and the organ was occasionally played by Graham Colbourne. Mr & Mrs Dyer, Mrs Spranklin and Mrs R. Sims were regular attenders at that time.



It is thought the Chapel closed finally in about 1965 when the large monkey puzzle tree in the front of Goesmere Cottage was cut down. The Chapel was later converted into a house as it still is today and known as "Chapel Cottage", Southend.

The large Bible from the Chapel is still in the village and the organ was moved to a shed at



Crossways Farm where, sadly, it gradually disintegrated over the ensuing years.

CRENDELL METHODIST CHURCH



Crendell Methodist Church is part of the Wimborne Circuit of Methodist Churches, and first appeared on the Wimborne Ministers' plan in 1856, even though it is in the Damerham Parish. To what circuit it previously belonged is not clear, but headstones still remain dating back to 1844. It has long been normal for Crendell and Cripplestyle Congregational Church (which is less than half a mile away) to unite for special services and functions, such as Harvest Supper. Nowadays, Damerham and Whitsbury Churches often join Crendell on these occasions, and vice versa.

The present chapel was erected in 1870, and refurbished most recently in the 1980s. It has a school room, which hosted a Wesleyan Day School for many years. More recently there has been a Sunday School and the church still has a

modern day youth group who attend regularly and perform at church functions.

In the second half of the twentieth century Crendell Chapel has become well-known within the circuit for its enthusiastic singing, and has hosted hymn "sing-ins" with DJ Hugh Ashley.

The chapel will mark the Millennium with a commemorative garden and a capsule filled with details of current Church and Junior Church members, and present day artefacts.

THE DAMERHAM METHODIST CHAPEL



This First Primitive Methodist Chapel was founded in Mill End. It was a wooden, single storey building which, in approximately 1876, was converted into a dwelling after

Mr Colbourne had arranged to have the building (later called "Rest Haven", now "The Haven") in return for a piece of land in the High Street, where the new Chapel was built and opened in 1877. It was built by local craftsmen with locally raised money.

Although not a great deal is recorded about the Chapel in the first half of this Century, it is commonly accepted that a gentleman, well known in the Village as Artist White, who lived in the now demolished house opposite "Southend Cottage", painted the text: "Hold Fast That Which Is Good", on the end wall above the pulpit. He also did the illustrations for "Chicks' Own".

During the War, the ammunition dump at Knoll, on the Martin Road, exploded with sadly some fatalities and the blast caused the Chapel gallery to move away from its position by about an inch. It has recently been strengthened with iron straps.

During the fifties and sixties, the Chapel was thriving, with a well attended Sunday School at 10 am, under the watchful eye of Josh Tiller from the Post Office and later

Godfrey Beale. The Chapel Anniversary was a very special occasion and the children had to learn "Dialogues" for delivery on this special day. It was quite nerve racking! Each week, every child had to learn a text from the New Testament to recite during Sunday School. "Hold fast that which is good" or "Jesus wept" were not accepted by Mr Tiller.

Many 'choruses' were learned such as "How did Moses cross the Red Sea?", "I am H.A.P.P.Y.", "I will make you fishers of men" and "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam".

From time to time, Mr Tiller would hand out small books entitled "Sunny Smiles" which contained about twenty pictures of orphans around the world and these would be sold for 6d or one shilling and the purchaser given the picture. Prizes for good attendance were given Good Soul Stories with a moral.

From time to time, Cliff College, at Sheffield, would organise "Crusades" and preachers would come to Damerham and many other Chapels to preach. Two who spring to mind were Alec Passmore and David Cole. They taught the children a chorus, still remembered today:

*"Sunshine corner Oh! it's very fine,
It's for children under 99.*

All are welcome,

Seats are given free.

*Damerham sunshine corner is the place for
me."*

The Harvest Festival was another big occasion with the Chapel full to bursting with food and people. Some of the regulars were the Beale Family from Bouldsbury, Mr and Mrs Thorne, John Hooper, the Youngs from Rockbourne and the Harts from North End, to name but a few.

The Chapel was, for some time, within the 'circuit' of the Reverend George Barnes and then Richard Heafield.

Presently there are twelve members of the Chapel including the Herringtons, Woodvines from Martin, Miss Hart, Mrs Aslett, John Hooper and Mrs Butcher from Martin. Currently, the Chapel is one of several in the area under the supervision of the Reverend Andy Lowe from Fordingbridge.

In September and October 1999, the Chapel underwent a major renovation and refurbishment. All the pews were removed and sold and replaced with chairs. New windows were also fitted. The cost was covered by Vision 2000, the Joseph Rank Benevolent Trust and by local support.

