

The Independent Congregationalist Chapel, Backway, Great Haseley

The Independent Congregationalist Chapel was financed by protestant non conformists who were determined to establish their own special place of worship in Great Haseley.

The origins of Congregationalism are located in the Lutheran theological tradition that each congregation of believers should independently and autonomously run its own affairs, and so not be governed by a hierarchical system of priests mediating between the people and God.

At the end of the eighteenth century there were few protestant non- conformists resident in the Haseleys but their number grew rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Much of this growth can be located in an increasing dissatisfaction with the response of the Anglican Church to the plight of agricultural labourers and their families. A succession of poor harvests, the cessation of trade with Europe caused by the Napoleonic wars, the destructive impact of the 1815 Corn Laws which kept the price of grain artificially high and the introduction of mechanisation in farming meant that most Haseley people lived a hand to mouth existence and were often only one step away from hunger and destitution.

The plight of villagers was further exacerbated with the passing of 'The Great Haseley Inclosure Act' in 1820. This was a private Act of Parliament promoted by the dean and canons of the Diocese of Windsor, of which St. Peter's, Great Haseley, was a part. The Rector of St. Peter's benefitted directly from this inclosure, being awarded 87 additional acres of land, making 'glebe land' the second largest area of agricultural land in Great Haseley. Ordinary villagers, however, lost their rights to common land. They protested in vain that their newly allocated 'allotments' were a boggy field that was in poor condition and infertile and that timber was no longer provided, which meant that they were unable to maintain and heat their homes. The long established imposition of church tithes had also helped to make the clergy by far the most unpopular sector of rural landowners.

In their desperation many villagers turned to the Anglican Church for both practical help and spiritual guidance but little of either was forthcoming.

The Rectors of St. Peter's at this time were Charles Manners Sutton, Rector between 1794 and 1805, who later became Archbishop of Canterbury, The Hon. Edward Legge, Rector 1805-15 and Henry Hobart, the son of the 3rd Earl of Buckingham and Rector 1815-1846. They were commonly seen as absentee rectors, churchmen who made a lucrative living from sinecures and from benefices they rarely visited.

Between 1800 and 1832 pastoral care in the parish of St. Peter's was left to the curate, Charles Ballard. He resented both his lack of status as a stipendiary curate and his lack of security in matters of tenure and finance. At a time when many agricultural workers and their families were living in poverty Ballard's main concern was persistent absenteeism from church services by his flock which he variously ascribed to idleness, indifference and vice, the depredation of neighbours, and a pursuit of worldly concerns. His singular response was to limit the celebration of Holy Communion to just four times a year.

As dissatisfaction with the Anglican church grew villagers turned increasingly to Congregationalism for mutual help, support and a sense of community. A residential house had been licensed for Congregational worship in 1814 and meetings continued to be held in villager's homes until the chapel was completed in 1839. In 1846 the Anglican Bishop of Oxford considered protestant dissent to be 'rife' in Great Haseley, and in 1851 up to 55 people were attending the chapel on a regular basis.

Many agricultural labourers in Oxfordshire also demonstrated against their poverty and insecurity in more rebellious ways. 'Jackson's Oxford Journal' of 8th January 1831 describes the trial at

Oxford City Sessions of six 'machine breakers' who led a 'mob' of forty local men to Warren Farm, Little Milton, the property of James Wells, where they destroyed his 'thrashing [threshing] machine'. The six leaders were all found guilty of felonious assembly and four were sentenced to transportation to Australia for seven years.

It may well have been the timely intervention of J.L. Lockhart, who lived at Haseley House and had been M.P. for Oxford from 1807-18, which spared Great Haseley from a similar rebellion. Jackson's Oxford Journal reported in the same edition (8th January) that "At Hasely [sic] the poor people on Thursday last were cheered by a large distribution of blankets, stockings and meat, the bounty of J.I. Lockhart, who has a seat there."

By 1889 chapel congregations in Great Haseley averaged about seventy. However, by 1893, an eight day mission from Wheatley was said to have been sent to bolster Haseley's "fluctuating cause"

In 1846 William Birkett had been appointed to St. Peter's Great Haseley, followed by Henry John Ellison in 1876. Both Birkett and Ellison saw it as their calling to improve both the spiritual wellbeing and the temporal lives of their parishioners.

Henry John Ellison was particularly successful in realising this calling. His "Haseley Improvement Society" of 1876 provided a framework for the establishment of clubs, societies and self help groups in the Haseleys, and in 1891 The Institute, a parish centre for religious, social, educational and recreational activity was opened by Ellison. His energetic and timely stewardship of St. Peter's between 1876 and 1894 enabled the church to reconnect with its parishioners, and as a consequence church attendance and membership in Great Haseley parish increased dramatically.

Regular worship at the chapel, although declining, continued into the first half of the twentieth century. A Sunday school for children was started. With its focus on the teaching of the Gospel in a way that appealed to the young and an emphasis on games and outdoor activities of all kinds the chapel Sunday school became an integral part of the Sabbath for many Haseley children.

Hilary Glen and Dorothy Pickett are two Haseley residents who attended chapel Sunday school during and just after the Second World War. They remember their chapel Sunday school days as ones of warmth and affection and with an underlying sense of fun.

The two Sunday school leaders at the time were Miss Beedy and Miss Bowles. They lived at first in a Romany caravan near the allotments in Backway but then moved to the tiny chapel annexe which they converted into a bedsit.

Children who attended the Sunday school were known as "campaigners". They wore a simple green uniform when they joined and then one of navy blue. Hilary and Dorothy both went on Sunday school day trips by coach to the seaside. In 1948 Dorothy spent a week away with other campaigners at a girl's school on the Isle of Wight, and became a member of "The Pocket Testament League", an American based organisation which encouraged children to read a text from the Bible each day.

In the early 1950's the intake of children at Great Haseley School increased rapidly, a consequence of the post war baby boom, and the chapel was used as an overflow classroom. However, attendance at Sunday school and chapel services were in decline and in 1953 Miss Beedy and Miss Bowles decided to close the chapel as a place of worship. They then retired to a small cottage in Little Haseley.

The chapel was then used for storage and later as a place to keep chickens. In 1970 it was bought by Great Haseley and District Horticultural Society for three hundred pounds. The society completely renovated the chapel, with a new concrete screed floor laid over the original brick floor, the roof retiled and the interior redecorated. For the next twenty five years it served the society as an outlet for the storage and sale of horticultural supplies.

The chapel is still in the ownership of the horticultural society, but is now rented for use as an artist's studio.

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