

## **A HISTORY OF EDENBRIDGE BAPTIST CHURCH**

### **How did it all begin ?**

Well it all really began way back in the mid 1700s at Handcross in Sussex. It was here that one of the nearest (to the village of Edenbridge) dissenters meeting houses was situated, and where, for the first time are recorded the names of non-conforming Edenbridge people. Quite some journey to join corporate worship, 18 miles on horseback or by carriage on rough unmade roads or tracks.

In June 1791 a Church meeting was held in Handcross under the chairmanship of the Pastor, one Thomas Humphrey, at which it was decided to plant a dissenters or non-conformist mission at Dormansland in Surrey. Nine members of the Handcross church were 'dismissed' to form the nucleus of the new fellowship. Their names are still on record and of the nine, three lived in Edenbridge, these being Richard Caffun, his wife Sarah and a William Nicholson.

Prior to this new planting, Pastor Humphrey had for some years travelled to Dormansland once a fortnight to conduct cottage meetings, but on the foundation of the Dormansland Mission Church these visits ceased and most services were thereafter conducted by local laymen. At one of these in 1791, it was reported that one lay preacher from Dormansland conducted a baptismal service where five believers were baptised 'in a brook at Edenbridge'.

The minute books of Dormansland Baptist Church record a number of other Edenbridge residents coming into the fellowship there in the early years, and these are listed as follows :-

1795 William Humphrey and Elizabeth Taylor, 1802 Thomas Russell, 1803 John and Rhoda Chantler, William Grafwick, Mary Russel, Ann Longhurst, Ann Baker, George Piercey, Maria Jefferey.

1895 Stephen Doomsby, 1807 Susanna Jefferey, Elizabeth Goodwin, Catherine Nicolson, Charles Longhurst, William Sherabridge, James Cooper.

1812 Elizabeth Waghorne. 1813 John Page (of Hever). 1817 Mary Wickens.

1832 Charlotte Still. 1834 Ann and William Wickens. 1837 Frederick Stanford.

In the few years up to 1837, history shows that William IV was King' that in 1833 slavery in British colonies was abolished; that in 1834 the reform of the poor laws meant that some of the worst aspects of 'pauperism' (destitute poor) were remedied for the good of the people and that in the same year a movement towards National Education or all children was begun.

Then in 1837 Victoria became Queen and an era of great men and women began: statesmen, artists, writers, reformers and preachers. Communications developed dramatically, and in 1838 the Atlantic was cross by steam for the first time.

The next year saw the beginning of the Chartist (working class reform) movement and that same year, 1839, also saw the real beginning of the Edenbridge Baptist Church.

In that year of 1839 a certain 54 year old Elizabeth Gratwick (nee Waghorne), whilst still a member of the Church in Dormansland, along with her husband Wlliam opened their house in Edenbridge for 'the preaching of the gospel'. This house is thought to be the half-timbered Tudor dwelling on the corner of Hever Road but this cannot be confirmed.

The democratic idea of the responsibilities and the value of the individual, which was already reflected in national movements and reform (and is still to this day held dear by the Baptist), was gently finding its way into Edenbridge in the area of Christian religion and we are most grateful that Elizabeth Gratwick reacted to this and that she, under the authority and hand of God, had the faith, the vision and not least, the courage to begin the work which we now take so much for granted.

Little more is known of Elizabeth Gratwick, who was so important a person in the formation of our Church. We know that she was a schoolmistress and ran a school in her home, and we know she managed to be both housewife and schoolma'am. We know from Dormansland records that she was baptised and became a member of that Church in 1812, when still Elizabeth Waghorne and 27 years old. Then as mentioned above, we know from records that she opened up her home to "a number of Christian people for the worship of God and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or she lent a schoolroom for the same reason. Probably the main room in the house and the school room were one and the same.

The work she and her husband started must have very quickly prospered for in 1841, before the formation of the Church, a Chapel to seat 150 people was erected on the present freehold site. This building, costing £250 was opened in November 1841 by a Dr. Aveling and the Rev. W. Miall.

In the summer of 1842 the members took steps to have the building registered as a place of worship, their letter to the Lord Bishop's Registrar reading :-

'To the Right Reverend Bishop of Rochester and to his Registrar.

We the under signed do hereby certify that a certain tenement or building situated in the village of Edenbridge, in the county of Kent and diocese of Rochester is intended to be used as a place of religious worship by an assembly or congregation of Protestants, dissenting from the Church of England. We do hereby require you to register and record the same according to the provisions of the Act of Parliament passed in the 52<sup>nd</sup> year of the reign of King George III entitled "An act to repeal certain acts, and to amend certain other acts relating to religious worship and assemblies and persons teaching or preaching therein". We hereby request a certificate thereof.

Witness our hands this sixth day of July, One thousand Eight hundred and Forty two'.

The six signatories included William Gratwick and Frederick Stanford, and the building was duly registered on July 21st 1842. From 1841 until 1847 Bethel was run as a mission chapel by the Dormansland Baptist Church, but in 1847 five members transferred their membership from Dormansland to form the nucleus of a separate fellowship.

### **The real foundation of the Edenbridge Baptist church in 1847**

Up till now there were worshippers and a registered sanctuary, but as yet no declared Church. Then in January 1847 five members of Dormansland Baptist Church and two members of Pains Hill Congregational Chapel at Limpsfield, Surrey, formed themselves into 'The Church of God meeting in Bethel Baptist Chapel by the Great Stone Bridge in the village of Edenbridge'. These the founders of this new part of Gods Church Universal were :-

From Dormansland: William and Elizabeth Gratwick, John and Rachel Norman.  
Frederick Stanford.

From Pains Hill: Elizabeth King, Elizabeth Driver....thus making the initial membership roll of the new 'Edenbridge Baptist Church' seven members.

This new young Church Fellowship was helped in these early days by many people from other callings and different fellowships and included the following personages :- Rev. James Smith - Dr. Fletcher – Dr Liefchild - Dr' McAuslane – Hon. and Rev. Baptist W Noel – and the Rt Hon. Henry Richard, Member of Parliament. Who these men were and where they came from is not clear without further research, but the fact that their names were picked out to be recorded and the richness of their titles gives thought that they were quite influential and certainly helpful in ensuring that the foundations of this new fellowship were made sure and firm from the very beginning.

Elizabeth Gratwick had been the one who had felt and responded to the growing needs of the Non-conformists in Edenbridge. It was Elizabeth who first took the initiative and, with her husband's blessing, started a house group church and, of all the members and other helpers at the foundation of the Church proper Elizabeth Gratwick was certainly the main leading spirit and yet, as mentioned before, after this time we hear no more of significance of her. In fact we hear no more of any of the others of the foundation members although, as far as can be determined, they all stayed in the fellowship until their deaths. There is, however, a tombstone in Edenbridge Parish Churchyard (on the right-hand side between the lych-gate and the west door) which records that William Gratwick died in 1850 and Elizabeth 1862, both aged 77 years. It also records the sudden death of a son, aged 16 years, in 1844.

It is interesting to be reminded here that, although Free Church people sometimes seem to be unsure as to what they should call their places of worship, their various buildings, no uncertainty exists when it comes to what they call themselves for without hesitation they are always 'the Church.'

The foundation and development of the Edenbridge Baptist Church also well illustrates our congregational and democratic principles, seeing that the Church was constituted and existed for five years before there was any Minister or Pastor called or accepted.

The foundation of the Edenbridge- Baptist Church is not the only good thing to happen in 1847. For instance, in the same year 'The Band of Hope' movement began ; for the first time the 'Evangelical Alliance' called the Churches of the World to a week of united prayer; Sir James Simpson discovered the anaesthetising uses of chloroform; the Ten-hour Factory Bill was passed and H. F. Lyte wrote his great hymn "Abide with me". Like all years though there was bad news as good, and following the failure of the 1846 harvest, 1847 was the 'hungriest' year of the "hungry forties.

## **The Gradual Development in Edenbridge**

- 1839 - A house was opened for the preaching of the gospel firstly to probably ten or twenty People.
- 1841 - A Chapel was erected to seat 150 people.
- 1847 - The Church is founded.
- 1853 - A new building was begun to seat 220.people.
- 1854 - The first Baptismal service is held with five passing through the waters.
- 1864 - A gallery was added which became so popular that admission to evening services was by ticket only.
- 1868 - The British Non-Conformist School was opened in Haxted Road.
- 1876 - Heating apparatus was installed in the church.
- 1876 - Lamps were provided to light the Marlpit Hill School, "leaving those who may conduct the preaching services therein to provide the necessary oil" (Here probably the beginning of the mission).
- 1884 - A minister's house (The Manse) was erected on land given in Hever Road. (Later sold but still called the Old Manse).
- 1888 Marlpit Hill mission hall o as erected and conducted as a branch issue of the Parent Church.
- 1891 - Rev. Powell elected Moderator of Kent & Sussex Baptist Association.
- 1892 The church building was extended towards the roadway.
- 1892 A lecture hall was added to the riverside.
- 1893 - A mission opened at Haxted Mill which in later years became associated with the Church of England.
- 1908 - Membership reaches 140.
- 1910 - Women's meeting started.
- 1914 Outbreak of World War 1.
- 1918 - End of World War 1.
- 1920 - Four Elms Congregational Church given ministerial oversight from Edenbridge Baptist Church.
- 1924 - Marlpit Hill Baptist Church by the transference of 23 members from Edenbridge Baptist Church.

HOW GOOD IS THE GOD WE ADORE;  
OUR FAITHFUL. UNCHANGEABLE FRIEND.  
HIS LOVE IS AS GREAT AS HIS POWER  
AND NEITHER KNOWS MEASURE NOR END.

FOR CHRIST IS THE FIRST AND THE LAST.  
HIS SPIRIT SHALL GUIDE US SAFE HOME.  
WE WILL PRAISE HIM FOR ALL THAT IS PAST,  
AND TRUST HIM FOR ALL THAT'S TO COME.

Joseph Hart 1712-1768