

Thaxted Baptist Church: A Brief History

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The story of Thaxted Baptist Church started in 1832. In that year a small group of Baptist men and women met together for the worship of God in a barn at Water Lane (latterly named Watling Lane). Land was purchased shortly after this in Park Street for the construction of a dedicated building for worship. With the help of the minister and friends from Saffron Walden Baptist Church, a building was erected of thirty-six by twenty-eight feet with a schoolroom behind. On the first of January 1833, the church was opened for public worship. It has been the focus of Baptist life in the village and surrounding area ever since.

However, Baptist life in Thaxted started around 1813 but prior to that, worshipers had to attend Baptist churches in Saffron Walden. Between 1813 and 1831 a Baptist Chapel existed in Mill End and worship took place there. It is unclear why the chapel was abandoned for worship. No records exist of the activities at the Mill End chapel unfortunately. The current Baptist Church in Thaxted can hence be thought of as the second Thaxted Baptist Church.

The church began to expand quickly with the recent construction of the Park Street building. By the mid 1840s it became apparent that the building was no longer sufficient for the needs of the congregation and the Sunday school (which itself had grown to some 120 children). The church members decided to enlarge the building. The church was extended out fifteen feet on the front of the building across its whole width. Within the church a gallery was erected along each side of the building and along its front. The galleries were served by two staircases accessible from two doors, one to either side of the main doors.

In 1955 the schoolroom was knocked down and replaced with a church hall including a kitchen and two cloakrooms. Two doorways exist from the sanctuary through to the hall, although only one of these doors is needed for current requirements. The new addition of the hall cost the church members around £1,500 to construct. This has been a valuable addition to the church and local community serving as a schoolroom for the Sunday school, post-congregational teas and a place for activities such as Brownies and Guides.

The upkeep of the gallery staircases and the fact that they were only accessible from the exterior became difficult. In the 1980s an internal staircase was erected for the access of the galleries. The front gallery was converted into a room in its own right with windows onto the sanctuary and doors to the side galleries. This first floor room has been used for a variety of purposes but in recent times has been used primarily for youth functions. At the same time as these changes to the galleries a false ceiling was installed in the sanctuary

The church has long been associated with C. H. Spurgeon and he had considerable influence on the church during the late 19th century. In later

times the church ministry has been filled by those who have studied at Spurgeon's College London. Spurgeon's own sister came to the church as the wife of one of the ministers (the Rev. Henderson). Both Spurgeon's sister and her husband are buried in the churchyard.

The first manse associated with the Baptist Church was commissioned in by the then minister, the aforementioned Rev. Henderson. Upon his death in 1915, he left the property to the Baptist Church as part of his legacy. The manse stands next to the church and was almost the same size as the actual church. Due to this sheer size it was expensive to maintain so the manse was sold in 1982 and a smaller property purchased. This second manse is 21 Guelphs Lane and remains the manse today.

The original Baptismal pool is still in use and it remains covered over with boards when not in use. The wooden pulpit at the rear of the pool that served to raise the minister above the masses was dismantled in 1995. The pulpit was not used on a regular basis since the late Rev. Blackhurst was the minister. Over the years, the damp and woodworm moved the pulpit into a state of disrepair. For safety reasons and changes in ministerial style, the decision was made to remove the pulpit. The original pews are also still in use and lend the sanctuary its character. Although the wooden floors beneath the pews have been replaced with concrete and as a result, the wooden surround on the two sides of the church has been lost. Changes in the interior décor have been minimal over the years but have included, electric lighting & heating and the addition of handrails around the side galleries for safety reasons.

A remodelling and extension of the church hall was undertaken to put in place better facilities and access for those whom are less able and elderly. The extension has provided a larger kitchen and there are now three cloakrooms with better access. After one refusal by planning officials, permission was granted for construction in 2007. Work began on the construction in early 2008, only after important ground-works had taken place. The new extension was to encroach on the churchyard, so some of the burials had to be moved. When it became time to exhume the graves, many unmarked graves were also discovered and moved. The grave markings for those may well have been removed for the construction of the hall in the 1950s. The new extension has cost around £50,000 and was raised by church members and gifts from other Baptist churches around the country.

The church building is protected by the Grade II Listed status and has been a landmark in the village for over 150 years in its current form. In 2003 the current minister Rev. Reed worked to get the 'Baptist Church' lettering reinstated on the front of the church after an absence of many years. In the 1980s work was carried out to try and stop damp from seeping into the church, notably repairs to the roof and rendering the south wall. However, after discoveries made by church members in 2007, it is clear that parts of the church fabric have not stood the test of time as well as others, notably the brickwork.

The membership of the church in the 19th century was considerable but has steadily declined since that time, shrinking to approximately 75 in 1915. After the First World War, the church members numbered in the 40s. In 1966, at the time the Rev. MacRae was inducted, the members numbered in the 50s. By 1973 and on into the 1990s, members have numbered in the 20s. Today, membership stands in the high 20s and has increased on membership of the previous few years. With the dedication of its church members still strong and along with support from the Baptist Missionary Society and the Eastern Baptist Association, it is clear that the church can safely look forward to continued prosperity in the 21st century.