

Highworth Nonconformist Chapels

Zion Chapel

The Zion Chapel was later called the Highworth Congregational Church and afterwards the United Reformed Church. This dissenting or independent denomination had its beginnings in 1777 when a Mr **Robinson** of Ilsley, Berkshire came to Highworth to superintend the enclosure of the common land and his house became a meeting place. Afterwards, the Rev **Benjamin Wase** conducted open-air services at the 'cross' at Eastrop before preaching for four to five years at the licensed home of Mr **Thomas Webb**. Services continued when in September 1786, Mr **John Hedges** was granted a 'Meeting House Certificate' for his house in Swindon Street. On the 15th July 1788 the first three services were held at the house of Mr **Thomas Collins** with the morning sermon delivered by Rev **Dyer** (Baptist Minister); the afternoon sermon by Rev **Sloper** (Independent Minister, Devizes) and the evening sermon by Rev **Wase**. The early dissenters encountered opposition whereby their services were interrupted by "talking, music and so forth" ; a donkey riding demonstrator who clothed himself with mock clerical attire and seated backwards, "rode up the street with the intention of entering the chapel".

When The Home Missionary Society was formed in 1819, Rev **Henry Larter**, an itinerant missionary, was sent to Highworth, the second station selected for a campaign in the Swindon district. On 1st February 1820 he wrote "The state of religion in this part...is truly awful...I have recently been making a calculation of the population within ten miles of Highworth, which I have found to consist of not less than 25,000 persons, residing in about 60 towns and villages; and of this great number not more than 5,000 are privileged with the preaching of the gospel." He was recognized as an evangelist at Zion Chapel, London on 20th February 1820. In August 1820, he was appointed Secretary of the North Wiltshire branch of the Home Missionary Society.

Before Mr **Larter** came to Highworth, and now, independently of his labours there, I assert that in the Parish Church of Highworth, capable of holding a great many persons, the Gospel has been, and is faithfully preached: that both in Highworth and its dependent villages, there is a considerable, if not sufficient, supply of Church room: that the Sacraments are duly administered, and Visitation of the Sick and Catechizing duly performed and that it is rather the effect of a sectarian appetite for novelty, than of an humble and teachable "hunger and thirst after righteousness" if a "Home Missionary" be needed. Yet of this place, and its neighbourhood, Mr **Larter** reports, as stated in the Home Missionary Magazine of February last: "At Highworth, I think I may say without scarcely an exception (so far as I know), the whole of the adults in our Sabbath morning congregations are either "resting alone on Christ for salvation, or with serious concern inquiring, "What must I do to be saved?"; the young persons especially but they are "persecuted." And in March: Highworth Station. "The labour of my station is so much on the increase, that I know not what can be done without the assistance of another labourer."

Rev **Henry Larter** was born in Hackney, Middlesex in 1792 and died in Langford in October 1862 aged 70 years. He married **Mary Ann Callowhill** on the 15 April 1811 at St Botolph Bishopsgate, London. Their daughter **Mary Ann Larter** died 06 October 1836 aged 25 and was buried 13 October 1836 (the first chapel burial). Their son Cornelius was buried in 1837; both died of consumption. He was ordained as an Independent Minister on 16th April 1822 in a service at Highworth. "by prayer and laying on of the hands of presbytery."

On 2nd July 1822, 3 men, **Robert Gibbs, Joseph Kirby, Thomas Lawrence** and 5 women, **Elizabeth Green, Sarah Green, Mary Ann Larter, Elizabeth Saunders** and **Margaret Teagle** were constituted into an Independent Congregational denomination:-

"We, whose names are mentioned above, do cordially unite in church fellowship and solemnly pledge ourselves to endeavour to advance the cause of religious truth, promote each others spiritual edification and encourage the Lord's people to join with us in this covenant of Christian love."

"We will strive together for the good of the cause we have espoused, by strengthening our minister's hands, seeking each other's spiritual good, using our influence to bring souls to Christ in every Scriptural way and sincerely aim at Christian union and brotherly love."

Due to the dilapidated condition of the chapel, a new chapel was erected in High Street for the cost of £623 9s 2d and opened on the 29th September 1825 with seating for 300 persons and a schoolroom for 100 children. Below is a transcription of the Certificate of Registration:-

"WHEREAS it has been duly certified to the Right Reverend Father in God, *Thomas* by Divine Permission Lord Bishop of Salisbury that *a New Chapel called Zion Chapel situate* in the parish of *Highworth* in the county of *Wilts* and in his Lordship's Diocese *belonging to a congregation of Protestant Dissenters known by the name of Independents*. I do therefore hereby certify that the same hath been registered and recorded in the Court of the said Lord Bishop, pursuant to the Directions of an Act of Parliament, passed in the fifty second year of the Reign of his late Majesty, King George the third, as Witness my Hand, this *fourth* day of *October* in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and twenty *five*. **Edwd Davies, Registrar**".

No register was kept for Births and Baptisms before the arrival of Rev **Henry Larter**. There are 101 entries dated between the 1st April 1821 and 23 Oct 1836 including 7 recorded after this date for the children of **Richard** and **Martha Clack** nee **Belcher**. It is noted in the register that this family were Baptists and were not recorded in any congregation's books; also that they were now living in Yarmouth, Norfolk.

In the register book is a handwritten letter from **George Freeth**, farmer of Chelworth, Cricklade with names and birthdates for 3 of his daughters with wife **Elizabeth Lessiter**::-

07 Aug 1828 **Susannah Lucy Freeth** twin

08 Aug 1828 **Lucy Susannah** twin

21 Aug 1831 **Sarah Lessiter Freeth** born and baptized in St Sampson Cricklade 18 Sep 1831

It also contains the following entry:-

Richard George Reynolds father **John Reynolds** mother **Rebecca Hazell** born 03 Jun 1829 in Poole, Wilts and baptized 27 Sep 1829 in St Sampson, Cricklade

A Declaration as to the authenticity of the non-parochial register is dated 07 Jan 1837 with the signatures of **Henry Larter** and **Thomas Angell** (Deacon). Henry writes to the Registration Commission "...we have recently opened a Burial ground and have interred one corpse." The register records **Thomas Angell** and **Samuel Brown** as Deacons and **Henry Larter, Samuel Brown, William Saunders** and **Joseph Kirby** as Acting Trustees.

Rev **Thomas Gilbert** (1812-1894) was the Minister for nearly 13 years between 1847 and 1860, resigning from the ministry at Highworth due to ill-health. He was held in high regard by his parishioners and upon leaving was presented with an inscribed silver inkstand.

Ministers of Zion Chapel

1777-90	Benjamin Wase
1790-91	A Stumphousen
1791-92	Garrett
1792	Bartholemew
1793-97	R Hawkins
1797-1806	W Friend
1806-1820	G Waring
1820-1847	Henry Larter
1847-60	Thomas Gilbert
1860-1864	Timothy W P Taylder
1866-69	J E Judson
1870-73	W Mottram
1874-76	John Paynter
1876-84	Thomas Toy
1886-98	James T Bennett
1899-1908	Albert Ore
1911-12	A S Welch
1913-17	Alfred Sheffield
1918-22	L J Bailey
1923-31	A J Letissier
1931-35	W R Hostler
1936-40	W H Swann
1940-43	W G Antrobus
1943-45	W H Swann
1946-47	John Renwick
1948-51	John Flectcher
1953-56	E R Micklem
1956-61	Cecil G Pearce
1962-70	J E Evans
1971-73	Frederick H Carr
1973-76	Edward N Bangay

Particular Baptist Chapel - Highworth

A small Baptist chapel was established by persons who "departed from the faith into Antinomianism". The 5th anniversary of the Sunday School was commemorated on Sunday 24th June 1866. Mr **Pound** preached on the day, exhorting the children to pay every attention to their teachers and reminding the parents of their responsibility 'to train up their children in the way they should go'. On the following Thursday, the children along with their parents and teachers went out to a field and spent an enjoyable afternoon with tea, cake and other refreshments. At the close of the picnic, the children received an edition of John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress".

Primitive Methodist Chapel - Westrop

The Rev **J Wright** of Farringdon preached 3 sermons on the 10th anniversary of the chapel which was celebrated on Sunday 30th Sep 1860. The next day a public tea was provided by the women followed by a public service presided over by Mr **C Morse** of Stratton - addresses were given by Mr **S Brown** (Wesleyan), Mr **E Hancock**, Mr **J Reynolds** (British Schoolmaster) and Mr **Wright**. Through the generosity of friends including a gift of 10£ by the Right Honourable the **Earl of Radnor**, nearly 25£ was raised and 20£ was paid off the chapel debt.

Wesleyan Chapel – Eastrop

The Chapel was established in 1842.

News Snippets

HIGHWORTH – The Education System

Another stormy meeting was held in the British School-room last week, convened by the Non-conformists. The chair was filled by Mr **Thos Angel Smith** who addressed the meeting at some length. He then called upon the Rev Mr **Mottram** of the Independent chapel to address the meeting which he did, telling them their opponents had created four great bub-bears with which to frighten the people viz:- The school-board, compulsion, Godless education and local rates on each of which points he spoke with considerable force. The Rev **Edwd Osborne**, curate was next requested to address those present and after proving to his hearers the want of argument adduced, he said – There had been a great deal of talk and a great many assertions made but not one tittle of argument, therefore, he could only meet assertions by assertions, or one man's opinion against another's. The only piece of advice he would give them before he sat down was not to allow dust to be thrown in their eyes; he sat down amid vociferous cheering. Mr **Aaron Smith**, a Primitive Methodist also addressed the meeting in a long speech, during which many persons left the room. Mr **Godwin** spoke in favour of a School-board. Mr **Edmonds** of Blunsdon, also addressed the meeting in favour of the board. A vote of thanks was proposed by Rev **Mottram**, seconded by Mr **Ed Osborne**, to Mr **J A Smith** for his kindness in taking the chair. After this, the Primitive Methodist Minister proposed that the meeting be adjourned to the following evening but as there was no seconder, it fell to the ground. The poll of the parish is fixed for Tuesday next when the contest is expected to be very close.

Reading Mercury Sat 28 Jan 1871

There will be no School Board for Highworth, the Nonconformists having withdrawn all opposition.

Reading Mercury Sat 11th Mar 1871

Sources:-

Google Books

How a Dark Corner of Wiltshire was Evangelized an extract from "Transactions of the Congregation Historical Society, Vol 4," 1909, 1910, 1969 reprint

"Highworth United Reformed Church – A Short History 1777-1979" by R A Beck

"Records of Highworth Congregational Church" by Alfreda Shackleton and Rosemary Church

"Thoughts on the Present State of Popular Opinion In Matters of Religion in England..." by Rev F Merewether M.A. 1824

Zion Chapel Baptisms 1821-1836 and Register Transcriptions from FamilySearch Microfilm No 816593 Item 11 of original records RG-4 series no. 2593 at the Public Record Office, London.