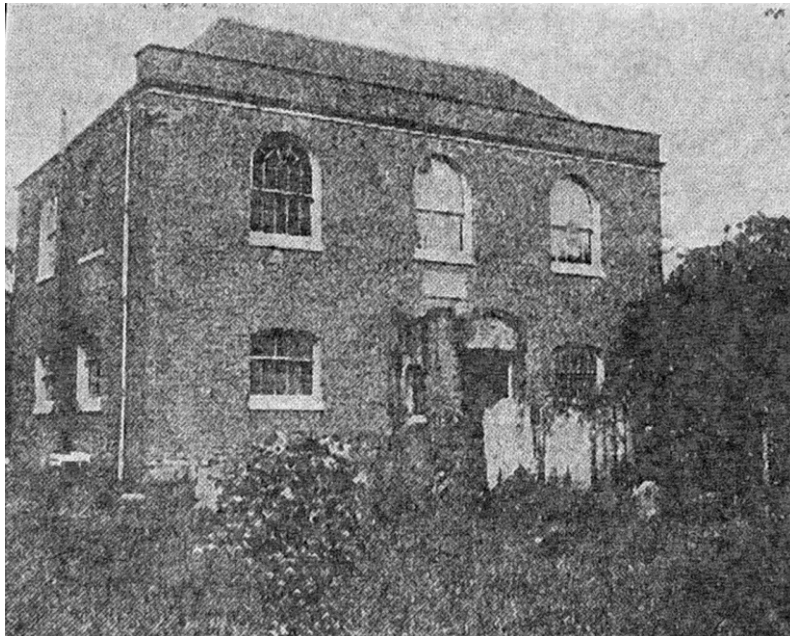


Universalists, then Unitarians of Battle 1793-1898 and the fate of their chapel



Following on from schism in the Battle Calvinistic Baptists in 1793, there was a split into Universalists and Particular Baptists. The Universalists were the bigger group and held on to the chapel that had been built, right on the corner of what is now Mountjoy and Mount Street. They also had a debt of £700 and William Vidler as their pastor. They were the first regular church in England to declare for Universalism. For details of what happened before 1793 the reader is directed to the article on Non-Conformity in Battle before that date.



The Baptist Calvinist chapel that became the Unitarian chapel - from an old journal © ESRO

William Vidler was the pastor and has an interesting story with his own article in this series! But Vidler was about to move on. He had been asked to assist Elhanan Winchester¹ at Parliament Court, Artillery Lane, London, from 9 February 1794. Winchester was American and had founded the first Universalist church in Philadelphia. During a longish visit to England he had built a congregation of Universal Baptists in London and published an influential Universalist book – ‘*Dialogues on the Universal Restoration*’. Later in 1794 Winchester returned to America. Vidler became his English successor, although he still gave half his time to Battle until November 1796.

The Universalists would gradually evolve into Unitarians. Battle Unitarian Chapel was created by a deed of 3 June 1828. It is not clear why there was this delay. Perhaps it took some time to evolve from Universalists to Unitarians, or just to do the paperwork, but it

should be noted that the Rules and Regulations of the Unitarian Church at Battle were dated 15 June 1823.

In general the moral character and public behaviour of members was considered to be under the watch of the church. Members considered to somehow be in breach of expected behaviour received visits from 'messengers'. Intoxication, profanity and non-attendance were the most numerous causes of exclusion, but one non-attending member gave the reason for his absence *'that he had been informed the pastor cut the bread instead of breaking it'*. A plaintive note was added to the minute *'The pastor always breaks the bread'*. One member *'liked going to the play-house'* and was therefore excluded.

In 1843 several repairs to the roof, floors and windows had been done and new iron gates and new doors fitted. A Mr Hall of Trowbridge was asked to come on trial as minister at a salary of £35 per annum, but he left soon afterwards as the congregation was unable to pay him. George Kenrick came as minister in 1845 and was apparently much appreciated by his congregation. He worked hard to get Holy Communion services to be well attended, trying several different formats, all to little avail as these services were seemingly not popular.

However the Sunday School was, and nearly 150 children attended and for over 100 of these this was almost the only place in Battle that the poor could obtain any education. A Mr J Crouch who was a member offered to build a school room for £100, but as there was still a debt of £69 on the building it was thought right to clear that before any further building took place.

Edward Parry who arrived in 1849 made a greater impression on Battle. At that time Battle had a house levy of £4 per house collected for the dean of St Mary's. (The only other place in the country with a similar collection was St Albans.). Parry refused to pay this and was summoned before the magistrates. They issued a warrant for him to pay with an added 10s costs. No one would collect this until the magistrates forced the local constable to do so, threatening to fine him £5 if he did not. He seized 25 books which were sold to 'a person from Hastings' on the Market Green. The buyer experienced 'much indignation and excitement'. Parry also tried to claim a vote based on the freehold of the chapel, but was unable to produce the deeds, which were found 6 or 7 years later in the possession of a Mr Munn of Tenterden.... Parry worked for a pittance and encouraged the development of a choir.

He left in 1854 and for the next three years a young member of the Freethinking Christian Movement, Mr C P Burgess, volunteered to conduct services. After this there was a succession of ministers and finally cover from London Unitarian lay-preachers. But the congregation dwindled and closure became inevitable in 1889.

In 1888 it was recorded in the Southern Unitarian Magazine that in 1854, when a Government inspector called to survey the town burial grounds, 20% of the Unitarian burial ground was still available for burials which were occurring at a rate of 8 per annum. It was incidentally noted that 2 burials per year were taking place in the smaller burial ground of the Zion Chapel. This report was to be key planning evidence very many years later, but the

two graveyards were clearly marked **GY** on the 1:2500 OS map of 1873-79 which should have raised suspicions on the local Planning Committee in the late 1970s.



Graveyards associated with both the Unitarian chapel [marked Baptist Chapel (General)] and the Zion Chapel (Par. Baptist) marked GY on this extract from sheet LVII.4 of the 1873-4 OS 1:2500 map

Due to the dwindling congregations and its closure for worship the chapel was sold under a Charity Commissioner's Scheme dated 1 October 1897, with the proceeds paid to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. It formally finally closed in 1898, but to prevent the disposal of the building and site they were purchased by an old member of the chapel, Miss Lucy Tagart, who did not live locally. She let it from 1898 to the Mountjoy Institute to be used for the recreation and education of young people. She died in 1928. In her will, dated 20 September 1925, she appointed Unitarian trustees to administer the chapel, but ownership of it passed to her heirs with the rest of her property. In 1928 the Mountjoy Institute was given notice to quit. After this it was in the hands of the Unitarian Trustees who allowed use of the building for a variety of purposes, including as a store room during WW2, until its final sale in 1946. Again it is not clear who benefited from this sale, possibly the surprised distant heirs of Miss Tagart.

Presumably it stood empty and unused until it was sold once again in 1957 to a dairyman, who demolished the chapel and covered over the burial ground without any exhumations. No burial registers seemed to have survived, so that the tombstones were believed to be the only record of burials up to 1862, when burials ceased as the graveyard was full. There was also an Order in Council that year for the cessation of burials at all the churches in the town. From that time forwards all Battle burials took place at the new cemetery on Marley Lane.

The depot was subsequently sold to Unigate Dairies in 1961 who purchased it in good faith. Unigate re-sold the site in 1979 and the new owner obtained outline planning permission for the erection of flats. Soon afterwards it was proven that the site incorporated a disused burial ground and the development did not take place. The story of this, the sale of the whole site to the Zion Baptist Church and their management of the site is covered in the article about Battle Baptist history, but Mrs M J Hadaway of Sevenoaks researched this in 1986 and her account and lists of Unitarian members and burials at the site are recorded on the Sussex On-line Parish Clerks website².

Admissions to the Universalist/Unitarian church after 1793 until 1805, derived from the above data were:

1793, Wren(n), Edward,	1797, Selmes, Samuel,
1794, Brede, William Henry,	1798, Barnes, Mr., Died (before 1800)
1794, Ford, Ann, now MARTIN	1798, Carter, Mercy, Withdrawn
1794, Packham, Henry, to Northiam	1798, Davis, Sarah, now TESTER - died
1794, W(h)eller, John,	12/12/1805
1795, Honnysett/Honnisett, John,	1798, Denego(e), William,
1795, Morpew, Thomas, excluded	1798, Dennet(t), William, Died (after 1800)
29/10/1804	1798, Grove, John,
1795, Star, John,	1798, Grove, Mrs.,
1795, Star, Mrs.,	1798, Lawrence, Mr.,
1795, Wren(n), Mary,	1798, Lawrence, Mrs.,
1796, Alderton, Jane,	1798, Luff, Mrs., excluded by 1800
1796, Austin, Mrs, From Northiam	1798, Mapplesden, Henry,
1796, Aylward, James,	1798, Offen, John,
1796, Badcock, Ruth, Now WRENN	1798, Paine, Mrs., died before 1800
1796, Dawson, Mr., From Northiam	1798, Plumbley, ,
1796, Dawson, Mrs.,	1798, Wimble, Thomas,
1796, Deeprise/Diprose, James,	1799, Elliot(t), Ann,
1796, Dennet(t), Thomas,	1799, Metcalf, William,
1796, Eaton, Stephen, excluded 27/12/1789	1799, Pepper, John,
1796, Holmes, Thomas, excluded by 1800	1799, Smith, Mary, now SLATTER....dead
1796, Leaven, Hannah, From Northiam	1800, Barnes, John,
1796, Luff, Samuel, From Northiam	1800, Easton, John, excluded
1796, Luff, Sarah, wife of Samuel died before	1800, Hanson, Thomas,
1800	1800, Harmer, William, of Brede
1796, Martin, John,	1800, Head, Thomas,
1796, Metcalf, Frances, From Northiam	1800, Hook, John,
1796, Miles, Elizabeth, wife of John from	1800, Luff, Edmon,
Northiam	1800, Metcalf, Frances,
1796, Miles, John, From Northiam	1800, Reeve, Elizabeth, now WOOD
1796, Offen, Benjamin,	1800, Reeve, John, died after 1800
1796, Ranger, Thomas, withdrawn before	1800, Shoesmith, Thomas, excluded after
1800	1800
1796, Slatter, Caroline, now OFFEN	1800, W(h)eller, Sarah,
1796, Tester, John,	1801, Ashby, Ann Jnr, To U.S.A.
1796, Tester, Mary, dead by 1800	1801, Gower, Thomas,
1796, Weeks, Mrs,	1801, Mean, Mrs. Mary,
1796, Whimby, William, From Northiam	1801, Reeve, Hannah, now SLATTER - died
1797, Butchers, Mrs Alfred, excluded (after	1809
1800)	1801, Slatter, Martha,
1797, Dungate, James,	1802, Apps, Ellenor,
1797, Elliot(t), Mr.,	1802, Eldreg, Edward,
1797, Elliot(t), Mrs.,	1802, Eldreg, Pheabe,
1797, Heathfield, Mrs.,	1802, Page, William, excluded
1797, Lemmon, Lennard, withdrawn by 1800	1802, Selmes, Mercy,
1797, Luff, Mary,	1803, Aylward, Jane, From London
1797, Offen, Henry,	1803, Metcalf, William, From Northiam
1797, Packham, John, of Northiam	1803, Offen, John, From London

1803, Slatter, Elizabeth,
1803, W(h)eller, Mary,
1804, Beny, James,

1805, Beaching, Ann, excluded (after 1800)
1805, Crunden, Thomas, excluded (after
1800)

Deaths, post 1793 , recorded from monuments books and wills, again derived from the 1986 data were:

1793, Burgess, Mercy,
1793, Easton, Jeny,
1793, Jones, Mary,
1796, Hinnall/Hounsell,
1796, Neeve, George,
1797, Cramp, Judith,
1800, Payne, Sarah,
1802, Slatter, George,
1803, Carter, Elizabeth,
1803, Selmes, Ann,
1803, Thomsett, Elizabeth,
1804, Paine, Edward,
1805, Cuthbert, Sarah,
1805, Tester, Sarah,
1806, Wren(n), Sarah,
1808, Wren(n), Jesse,
1809, Slatter, Hannah,
1811, Wren(n), William,
1814, Burgess, Jane,
1815, French, Mercy,
1816, Wren(n), Edward,
1819, Wren(n), Edward,
1823, Slatter, William,
1826, Wren(n), Mary,
1827, Sinnock, Ann,
1832, Badcock, Mrs William,
1832, Badcock, William,
1832, Beachen, John,
1832, Eldridge, Mrs,
1832, Lemmon, Mrs William,
1832, Saxby, William,
1832, Slatter, Nicholas,
1837, Hyland, Henry,
1837, Slatter, John,
1837, Slatter, Thomas,
1838, Burgess, Martha,

1839, Burgess, Robert,
1840, Hobbs, Edward,
1844, Badcock, Thomas,
1847, Burgess, John,
1850, Slatter, John,
1852, Burgess, James Edward,
1852, Metcalf, George,
1852, Weller, William,
1853, Slatter, George,
1860, Burgess, John,
1861, Burgess, Caroline Mary,
1861, Weller, Charles Frederick,
1785-1800, Beney, Mary,
1785-1800, Mephram, Mary,
179?, Slatter, Samuel,
1791-1800, Bine, Henry,
1792-1800, Eldridge, Thomas,
1792-1800, Glydd, Samuel,
1796-1800, Luff, Sarah,
1830/1831, Weller, John,
1832 Or 1852, Clark, Julia,
1836 or 1856, Dennett, John,
1841-1851, Slatter, Sarah,
after 1800, Moon, John,
after 1800, Paine, Mrs,
after 1800, Reeve, John,
after 1800, Selmes, Samuel,
after 1800, Slatter, Mary,
after 1800, Vidler, Elizabeth,
after 1831, Weller, Ann,
after 1843, Beachen, Mrs John,
after 1843, Weller, John,
before 1823, Offen, Caroline, Daughter of William
& Caroline Slatter
before 1823, Slatter, Caroline,
Dennett, James,

Ministers after Vidler³

1796- ? William Thrussell
1819-1828 James Taplin
1828-1843 ?
1843-1844 Mr. Hall (of Trowbridge)
1845-1847 George Kenrick
1847-1849 ?
1849-1854 Edward Parry
1854-1857 C P Burgess (lay)
1857-1860 ?
1861 Frederick Perkins

1861-1880 (in time order) Dr Jeffrey, Wynn Robinson, John Thomas, John Jennings, William Birks, James Bayley, Peter Dean & John Atkinson
1880-1889 Various London Unitarian lay-preachers
1889 CLOSED

Keith Foord, 2017 ©BDHS

Endnotes:

1 <http://uudb.org/articles/elhananwinchester.html>

2 <http://www.sussex-opc.org/ParishDetails/EastSussex/Battle/BattleUnitarian.htm>

3 Taken from: The Surman Index Online, Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies which can be found at <http://surman.english.qmul.ac.uk> (this lists Congregational ministers, but earlier non-conformists are also listed until Congregational congregations were established), also the Southern Unitarian Magazine 1888, p112 and the Christian Life of 21 July 1928 pp225-6.

ESRO records:

NU/3/5-9 Papers concerning the sale of the chapel and its use by the Mountjoy Institute; 1896-1928.

NU/3/14 For a history of the Unitarian Church. The founding of the Particular Baptist Chapel in 1780 (and in a later section of the book) its subsequent history to 1796; note of the appointment of J Parker as Deacon, 25 Dec 1780; minutes of church meetings, Jan 1785 - Mar 1808, Dec 1830 - Dec 1831; rules and regulations of the Unitarian Church at Battle, 15 Jun 1823; note of the adoption of Unitarian views by many of the congregation, 1817, and the resulting dissensions, 1822-1824; minutes of church meetings, Jan 1825 - Feb 1829 (including new laws relating to burials in the chapel yard, 1828), Jan 1843 - Nov 1845 (including new rules, 1844); note of repairs to the chapel, nd [1840s].

NU/3/14/1 The General Baptist Assembly Occasional Paper no 25, A History of the Unitarian Church at Battle, Sussex. By Samuel Collier Burgess and Walter Herbert Burgess, 1888, with additional material by Leonard J Maguire, Apr 1999.

NU/3/15-16 Papers concerning the burial ground; 1980-1984.

NU/3/17-18 Papers concerning the proposed sale of the chapel; 1894-1895.

NU/3/18/1 Thirteen letters to Richard Bartram, St Stephens Chambers, Telegraph Street, Moorgate Street, London, concerning the chapel trust and possible sale of the chapel to the Congregational Church or as a reading room

NU/3/18/1 *Dec 1894 - Jul 1895*. Includes letter from C D Badland, 117 Western Road, Lewes, to Rev W Copeland Bowie [British & Foreign Unitarian Association, Essex Hall, Essex Street, Strand, London].