



A short history of Battle Baptists from 1793

The early formative history of this church from 1780 to 1793 has been discussed in another article on Battle Non-Conformity until 1793.

There was an acrimonious split in 1793 by Baptists from William Vidler's Calvinistic Baptists who became Universalists, who kept the original chapel (see the above article and also the article on Battle Universalists and Unitarians). The 15 continuing Baptists, now calling themselves Particular Baptists therefore faced the daunting task of re-building their church spiritually and physically. To follow this journey we are fortunate have access to a book written by the Rev F W Butt-Thompson in 1909 for much, but not all, of our information after 1793.

The Particular Baptists at first met in houses, but they had soon increased in number from the 15 and became big enough to have a minister of their own. A Mr J Brown came to them from Norfolk and served between 1793 and 1794. There was no replacement minister immediately after this, but in 1795, Sergeant Burton, of the Warwickshire Militia (who must have been based at the Battle Barracks on Whatlington Road) and a Mr Bondergham (sent out by the Baptist church at Folkestone) covered the absence. The Rev J Davies then took over as minister in 1796.

From 1798 to 1803 they rented a piece of land, set back from Mount Street, but with a right of way to the road. The land was described as triangular in shape, 38m (125 ft) long, and from 10m (33ft) to 2m (6ft) in width, in area about 177m² (7 rods). This would have been a most awkward piece of land to build on, but in 1800 whilst the land was still rented, a wooden meeting house was constructed, "a neat and comfortable place," holding some 200 people. This was erected by carpenter James Inskipp and John Longley. The tithe map of 1840 shows that this was an L-shaped building, which was how it fitted onto this odd-shaped piece of land. For the sum of £107 8s 9d, they had a building of their own for the first time since 1793. In January 1801 the accounts were paid by Messrs Ffoord, Sargent and others on behalf of the church. In 1803 the leasehold of the land on which the wooden meeting house stood was bought on behalf of the church by Mr Spilstead Snr. and Mr. Ffoord¹.

The Rev Davies left the church in 1802. Sinnock's memoir reports that he fell into 'disgrace' and that the church dismissed him. So after a short time without a pastor, Mr J Bagnall² became the pastor sometime in 1803. He had been a former member of the church and also a local preacher whilst in the militia and barracked at Battle. Returning to former friends, he remained for only a few months. In 1804 a Wesleyan society was founded in Battle and

Bagnall moved to it, taking some followers. This appears to have been secondary to yet another schism³ and no new pastor arrived for the Baptists until November 1806 when the Rev J Kingsmill arrived. He was popular and stayed for 13 years, until he died on 6th January 1819.

In 1810 the freehold of the meeting house land was finally formally conveyed from Messrs Spilstead and Ffoord to the church at a cost of £21. It is described in the deed as "*part of messuage formerly known as the 'Rose and Crown'*". The church bought the land via a co-operative with nearly every member paying a portion of the price. Butt-Thompson writes: The trust deed declared the place to be for "*the Pious and Religious Exercise and purposes of the members of the said Society or Congregation, who should hold believe and maintain The Tenets and Doctrines of three equal and distinct persons in the Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit. Election before time to holiness here and glory hereafter. Justification alone by the imputed Righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Salvation of the Elect only. The Resurrection of the Dead. The Last Judgement. Eternal Life for the Righteous and endless death to the wicked.*"

The members who became trustees were:

William Spilstead, Senr., Ewhurst, Yeoman.
John Ffoord (written "fford"), Battle, Baker.
George Sargent, Battle, Draper
John Bartholomew, Westfield, Yeoman.
William Mainwaring, Burwash, Clocksmith.
Luke Philcox, Battle, Cordwainer.
Thomas Dawes, Rye, Turner.
Edward French, Crowhurst, Yeoman.
James Kingsmill, Battle, Gentleman.
Elizabeth Ffoord (wife of John Ffoord).
Ann Sargent (wife of George Sargent).
Richard Hounsell, Battle, Labourer.
William Knight, Battle, Tallow Chandler.
Mary Sinnock (wife of Richard Sinnock, Gent.).
Elizabeth Newington (wife of John Newington, Gent.).
Elizabeth Page, Battle, Spinster.
Mary Philcox, Battle, Widow.
Elizabeth Wood, Battle, Widow.
Samuel Willis, Burwash, Labourer.
Thomas Pavey, Burwash, Labourer.
Richard Hobden, Penhurst, Labourer.
James Sinden, Warbleton, Labourer.
Thomas Housley, Robertsbridge, Cordwainer.

The wooden meeting house was used for worship for 23 years, after which it was used for Sunday schools until 1869. The chapel members asked Jonathan Jenner who was auditing their accounts to be responsible for its sale by public auction. The building does not appear on the OS 1:2,500 map of 1873-79 so it must have been demolished by then and its site was

sold in 1886. Florence Cottages, now on Rue de Bayeux and attached to the Roman Catholic church, were built on the land some years later in 1897.

In 1799 a Mr Richard Sinnock (b.1740) built a house on Mount Street, next to the Baptist Church which he attended. He must have leased or purchased the whole of or much of *'the messuage formerly known as the 'Rose and Crown'* before 1798 as the deeds of his house's land also refer to this. He was one of the 15 representatives of the original Baptist Church (although his relative, Ann Sinnock, was one of those excluded just before the acrimonious split of 1793, on 17 December 1792).

Sinnock had run a cordwaining (shoemaking) business in Hastings in 1762, but moved to London in 1785 in order to join a dissenting sect (no church in Hastings provided what he wanted), he then moved on to Guildford, but then moved back to Sussex. He did not wish to live in Hastings again as at that time there was no dissenters' meeting place, so he built his house in Battle in 1799. He was clearly of some substance, via his previous businesses, and had obviously retained local real estate interests. In about 1800 he leased one of his old shops in Hastings to be a meeting house and later in 1805 he bought some land in Hastings for the sum of £400 on which the Croft chapel was built. He has left a fascinating memoir (lodged at ESRO).

In June 1820 Mr J Puntis arrived from Stepney Academy to be minister and he was so successful that in September of that year a larger building was begun. Richard Sinnock had clearly approved of Mr Puntis and prompted by Mrs Sargent, the wife of George Sargent (a nephew of Sinnock's wife) had generously given the land to the north side of his new house on which to build this new permanent chapel.

This land is described

"All that piece of land situate in the Borough of Mount Joy in the Parish of Battle, abutting north on a Chapel and Burying Ground in the possession of a Society called Unitarians: south on a house and premises belonging to Richard Sinnock east on the Public Road leading to London⁴; and west on a garden belonging to Sir Godfrey Webster."

This is the present Zion chapel, *"plain, neat, modernised and commodious,"* opened in February 1821 with an indenture dated 3 April 1821 consisting of the chapel and site managed by a body of trustees. A small burying ground was behind the new chapel, which itself had a close frontage onto Mount Street. A copy of the indenture in 6 parts is still held by Battle Baptists.

The trustees, appointed on 3 April 1821, were:

George Sargent.

John Bartholomew.

Richard Sinnock, Battle, Gentleman.

John Ffoord.
William Knight.
Richard Winch, Crowhurst, Farmer.
David Stonham, Rye, Draper.
Edward Hilder, Rye, Ironmonger.
Richard Weedon Butler, Rye, Surgeon.
William Harvey Staco, Folkestone, Miller.
Thomas Edwards, Folkestone, Draper.
Samuel Green, Sevenoaks, Builder.
Thomas Southern, Sevenoaks, Distiller.
William Atwood Jr., Farningham, Shopkeeper.
James Stanger, Maidstone, Ironmonger.
Chapman Barber



Old photograph of Zion Chapel looking north up Mount Street showing the old porch (now removed). From the frontispiece of Butt-Thompson's book.

William Sinnock survived his wife Mary (Williams) whom he had married in St Clement's church, Hastings, on 27 April 1763. She died on 24 August 1817. In his will of 1823 he requested that George Sargent, his executor, arrange that he be buried at the front of the Zion chapel, clearly not at the rear in the small burying ground. He died on 2 November 1827 at the age of 87. No burial slab has survived; it may be that this was lost at the time of the later demolition of the porch of the Zion chapel.

Richard Sinnock seems to have had no direct heirs and his estate passed mainly to his nephew Richard Sinnock Middlemas. Sinnock's house was sold after his death and on the tithe map of 1840 it is shown to belong to William Weston of Mount Street, also a farmer born at Sedlescombe in about 1814; he was there in 1861 but died at Battle in 1869, unmarried.

It still stands and after being bought by the 5th earl of Ashburnham in 1882 is now the fine timber-clad Presbytery of the Catholic Church called 'The Hollies'. For more details of this see the article on Catholics in Battle. Would Richard Sinnock have approved?... It would seem very doubtful. It is also interesting to note that an Ann Sinnock (who may have been Richard Sinnock's nephew's wife) was buried in the adjacent Battle Unitarian burial ground in 1827.

The new building was registered at the Diocese of Chichester for worship as a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters in the possession of George Sargent⁵ on 20 February 1821. Seven days later on Tuesday, 27 February 1821, the new meeting house called Zion chapel, belonging to the Baptist denomination, was opened for public worship.

"Rules of Interment in Zion Burying Ground" were drawn up. The burial fee was to be four shillings and this would be used to keep the ground in order and mend the fences. Every burial was to be paid for "save the minister, or any member of his family." Also it was to be open to "persons unbaptised, who therefore are not entitled to what is called 'Christian Burial'".

The new trust deed declared that the meeting house and small burying ground were; *"for the use and benefit of the Society or Congregation of Protestant Dissenters called Particular Baptists, now and hereafter assembling at the said Meeting House and premises, maintaining the doctrines of the One living and True Lord, Three equal Persons in the Godhead, Eternal and personal Election, Original sin and Particular Redemption, Free Justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ, Regeneration, Conversion, and Sanctification by the Spirit and grace of God, the moral law a rule of life and conduct to all believers, the final perseverance of the Saints, the resurrection of the body to eternal life, the future judgement, the eternal happiness of the righteous and everlasting misery to such as die impenitent, and the practice of Baptism by immersion to such only as are of years of understanding upon their own confession of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."* They loved their words in those days - note the barb to the Unitarians.

Mr William Garner followed Mr Puntis as minister in February 1827, following which the membership increased considerably, some members walking to services from many of the adjacent villages. The Rev S Stennett was the next pastor 1835. The year after that an event occurred which those of us who lived in Battle in October 1987 and who experienced the 'Great Storm' can empathise with. The Great Hurricane of 29 November 1836 ripped over England. It was truly widespread and houses were torn apart, barns shattered, and public buildings destroyed. The Zion chapel was so badly damaged that the cost of repairs could not be afforded by the congregation. An appeal was made for financial help, but when an answer came from their neighbours at Rye it stated in turn that they had hoped for

assistance from Battle, for their own place had been partially un-roofed in the storm. Somehow the church managed this crisis.

Two years later they opened a branch at Netherfield, with a Sabbath school and place of worship. The diocese records state that this was registered for worship on 2 October 1822 as a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters in a building known as Netherfield Sunday School Room, Netherfield, Battle, in occupation of George Sargent⁶. However this was later to be sold under a Charity Commissioner's scheme on 23 June 1885, with the proceeds being added to the receipts from the sale of the old wooden meeting place and its site to help fund new school rooms at the rear of the Zion chapel.

From 1837 Baptist marriages became legal again if a civil registrar was in attendance. Between 1754 and 1837 Baptists had had to marry in Anglican churches and these marriages should be recorded in their registers (Richard Sinnock's marriage was an example).

Membership had risen to 64 by 1841 when Stennett left to be replaced by the Rev Robert Grace. The full list of pastors will be found at the end of the paper; so from this point forwards rather than list the events of each pastor-ship the major events are described.

From 1854 the Government had been trying to close the town's various burial grounds which were nearly full (see the Cresy report article). Several closure Orders in Council were received by the three town churches which had burial grounds (St Mary's, the Unitarian church and the Particular Baptists) and by 1862 the burial grounds around all of the town's churches, including the small Zion chapel ground, were closed by order of the Privy Council and a new public cemetery was opened off Marley Lane.

The decade 1870-80 seems to have been one of the most prosperous ones for the Zion chapel since the days of William Vidler. Most of the farmers around the town were members, and some of the wealthiest inhabitants were found worshipping in "Zion".

In 1873 the practice of admitting unbaptised believers to the membership was made lawful by a new rule of the church. It may have been this move that led to the foundation of a Strict Baptist group which would meet at Langton House. On the other hand this decision also appears to have led to membership from May 1873 of the Jenner and Mannington families who had been active attenders since 1869. Jonathan Jenner in particular was very active and became chapel treasurer and later a deacon in 1873.

The question of adult baptism arose again in 1880 and the Church re-instituted the requirement that adult baptism was a pre-requisite of membership. Clearly some members, including Jonathan Jenner and his family who had been accepted after 1873 and had had

prior infant baptism were uncomfortable with this. The Jenners were amongst the 22 members who left and formed a Congregational Church.

Battle Baptists also had some branch mission stations, notably at Whatlington, which closed due to competition from a new Methodist chapel (the latter is the old white chapel that now sells heating stoves on the A21) and the one at Netherfield. In 1886 its Netherfield station, the last of the branches of the Battle Baptist church, was sold to Robertson Street Congregational church of Hastings, for £65. The money was reserved for the building of a new Sunday school which was built to the rear of the Zion chapel. In the same year the old wooden chapel and its land was sold and the money used to renovate Zion chapel. But in 1899 there was some considerable expense to buttress the chapel, the results of which can be seen today.

In 1906 there was a local move to unite the local Baptist and Congregational churches, mainly it seems as both churches were struggling to fund their pastors, but it was found to be impossible after 'full and frank' discussions. The Baptist congregation continued to wane and just before the Rev F W Butt-Thompson was appointed in 1908 it had dropped to 27. Things struggled on, often with support from neighbouring Baptist churches.

When WW2 broke out the schoolroom was taken over by the Army for the billeting of troops. The church was paid five shillings per week. During the war special permits had to be obtained from the local food office for the church anniversary and Good Friday teas and these supplies were supplemented with food saved by members from their own rations. In 1942, the church railings were requisitioned for the war effort. During this time the membership was 38 and between 1942 and 1945 alternate weekly services were held between the Baptist and Congregational Church.

The dean of Battle, the Rev J Darby, preached in the Baptist church in 1975, the very first time the dean of St Mary's did so. Although inter-church relations were improving in the 1970s things were still not generally very good for Battle Baptists. On top of this significant major repair was required to the Zion chapel towards the end of the decade. Some thought the best action would be to disband. They were lean years for the chapel and membership was rarely higher than 35. But things were about to improve.

In the article about Battle Unitarian chapel the story is told of its waning in membership and closure. The old Unitarian building was eventually demolished to make way for a dairy depot. This depot was built in 1953 over the old Unitarian burial ground, surprisingly without any exhumation of remains. Eyewitnesses reported bull-dozing of the surviving gravestones to the side of the Zion Chapel. Unigate Dairies bought the dairy distribution unit in 1961, in good faith, but closed and re-sold the site in 1979, but then nothing happened. In 1979 the wife of the Baptist pastor went on to the site and claimed it for the Lord's work.

Tragically her hopes appeared to be dashed when, just a few weeks later, her young husband pastor John Halliday was killed. He had only been in post five months.

In 1980 E J T Tyler of the Battle and District Historical Society recorded details from all the old tombstones from the dairy site that he could find and read (they had been shunted to one side) and a typed transcript of the inscriptions is held at ESRO⁸.

In September 1980 Dennis Nolan was asked to be lay pastor to the church (he was to be ordained in 1983). He was convinced that if the Baptist church were to survive then the site of the former dairy would be needed for expansion. In January 1982 a "For Sale" board was erected on the site. At a church meeting the few members present agreed to offer £6,000 towards the project, but this was not enough to buy it. There then followed three years of frustration. Plans to redevelop the dairy site as a block of six flats were approved in 1982. Protests were made because of local knowledge of the presence of the now unmarked graves, but at that stage no supporting documentary evidence could be found in proof. Between 1980 and 1984 church membership grew. £20,000 was offered for the site. This offer was rejected. In 1984 the church was informed by its solicitors that the site had been "irrevocably sold" for redevelopment which would start within weeks, but the development did not start. In January 1985, after extensive research, the burial ground closure Order in Council dated 1862 was found. Review of the old 1:2500 OS map of 1873-1878 also shows graveyards clearly belonging to the old Unitarian chapel as well as a small graveyard north of the Zion chapel itself. There was also the report from the 'Southern Unitarian' of 1888 previously mentioned, which included a photograph of the old Unitarian chapel, with many gravestones clearly visible. There was really no doubt at all that there was a burial ground, but the developers still seemed undeterred and in March 1985 gave public notice of intention to exhume human remains.



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

By April 1985 the Home Office ruled that the entire site must be cleared of graves before development could take place. Dennis Nolan, now the full time minister, managed to make an offer of £30,000 for the site. This was rejected, but an anonymous benefactor enabled a

higher bid of £45,000 to be made, only to discover that in the meantime yet another developer had purchased the site and new planning permission had also been granted to develop the area as apartments. In December 1985 another generous gift was made to finally enable the site to be purchased from the developers for £57,000, considerably more than the £160 paid for the same land in 1789.

Between 1985 and 1989 various sets of plans were drawn up and discussed by the church. In 1989 church members spent two months working on site to exhume 108 sets of human remains by hand, before building work could take place. Re-interment of the remains took place in the Marley Lane cemetery where a commemorative stone marks the site.

Since 1987 the church has often used Claverham Community College as the venue for some Sunday meetings as the total size of its congregation became too big on occasion for the Zion chapel. A second pastor was called in 1989 and a manse near the church purchased. In December 1989 the foundations for phase 1 of a new development on the north side of the chapel fronting on to Mount Street were laid and 'The Manna House', a meeting place for a variety of activities, was opened in December 1990. 2002 saw phase 2 of the development project. The 1880 Victorian school hall to the rear of the chapel was demolished and the 'Bayeux Centre' a large facility for children and young persons plus a prayer room, office, resource room and a second kitchen was opened in November 2002. In 2006 they bought another small neighbouring plot of land for further development and in 2011 built an extension to the 'Manna House'.

Pastors of Battle Baptist Church:

1793-1794 J. Brown

1796-1802 J. Davies

1803-1805 J. Bagnall

1806-1819 J. Kinghill (Sinnock's memoir says Kingsmill, which was the name of one of the first trustees)

1820-1827 J. Puntis

1827-1835 W. Garner

1835-1841 B. Stennet

1842-1849 R. Grace

1849-1853 P. Perkins

1853-1856 J. Maurice

1857-1859 J. Pulman

1860-1863 C.G. Brown

1863-1872 G. Veals

1873-1875 G. Wright

1875-1895 J. Howes

1895-1897 G.B.. Richardson

1899-1902 O.W. Screech

1903-1906 J.R. Hewison

1907-1910 F.W. Butt-Thompson

1911-1921 P. Stanley

1921-1923 J. Gotham
1925-1928 H.J. Dale
1932-1933 T.O. Weller
1942-1946 H. Anderton
1946-1957 S. Kerr
1959-1963 H. Emmott
1963-1968 S.W. Gowley
1969-1976 J. Hunt
1979 J Halliday
1980-1983 D Nolan acted as lay Pastor
1983-2016 D Nolan
2016- E Jones

Keith Foord, 2017 ©BDHS

Endnotes:

- 1 The author can find no family connection between himself and Mr John Ffoord, who was a baker.
- 2 Richard Sinnock's memoir states that Bagnall had been in the Militia and stationed at Battle and whilst there had been baptised
- 3 Sinnock's wife commented that she did not think Bagnall a sound preacher and Sinnock describes Bagnall as having imbibed Antinomian doctrine (that by faith and the dispensation of grace a Christian is released from the obligation of adhering to any moral law).
- 4 This was 'The Mount' now known as Mount Street. The road to London ran through Whatlington to join the road from Rye (which itself ran along the ridge through Brede and Udimore)

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