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A brief History of the Congregation of Dissenters & Unitarians at Bridport 1672-2022

Our first Minister was the Rev Richard Downe who was one of nearly two thousand clergymen who resigned or were ejected from the Church of England in 1662. Three such were in Bridport at the time. On the 1st of May a decade later in 1672 the first **legal** meeting of the dissenting meeting house commenced in a private house. The congregation grew and flourished but not without some drama. Rev. Richard Downe was licensed to preach as an “Independent Dissenting or Congregational Teacher”. This was allowed under an Indulgence from King Charles II. However the license was short lived and in 1680 Downe and “his people were imprisoned for nonconformity”.

It sounded like they continued regardless as it has been documented that in July 1683 Mr Strode of Parnham ‘let himself into’ the Independent Meeting House and broke up all the seats and pulpit and then continued with the same destruction in other places in Bridport. Just an interesting side note that may add more colour to the picture of Bridport in the 1600s - In 1668 an enraged populace (due to the hearth tax) stoned the tax collectors that came to the town.

They were not a rich congregation, yet, Bridport made rope and it is believed that Richard Downe was a ropemaker by trade and had been ordained by a Presbytery.

In 1676 there were more dissenters in Bridport than the rest of Dorset. This sounds about right and we still have this rebellious spirit today.

By 1698 the congregation were meeting in a hay loft in Barrack Street just meters from where the chapel stands now. After the hayloft they met in the spot of the Lyric Theatre (as is now). Apparently the quakers in town were a bit more confrontational than the dissenters at the meeting house - they

defiantly met for worship across the street from the Parish church and were regularly arrested for non-attendance at the parish church.

Early members of what became the Unitarians held positions of office in the town and to do so they had to report for communion at the parish church once a year. They were prepared to do this, the Quakers were not.

However, by 1720 the dissenters had the majority vote of the town governing body and they were able to remove a toll on wheat which reduced the price of bread. The dissenters in most of the rest of the country were refused positions of office and generally a lot more persecuted, it isn't clear how Bridport managed this difference but may be because of the public service they offered and were also major employers in the town. In 1711 it became illegal to attend communion just once a year to qualify for public office, but go to the dissenting meeting for the rest of the year. Again - this law seemed to have been completely ignored by Bridport. The rev Basil Short who was minister at Bridport in the fifties wrote a book on Bridport history which I have got a lot of the information from - he seems to think they got to keep their office because they kept the price of bread low. Some of the very first dissenting families were the Ways and the little village I live in Waytown, was named after them. The house I live in may have been built by dissenters who went on to build the Chapel I love!

In 1735 the Independent Congregation had grown to about 500 and the meeting split over a confrontation with the minister Rev Thomas Collins over the question of the Trinity. A Mrs Taylor questioned his beliefs and his answer caused 200 hundred members to walk out that day. The three hundred who chose to stay with Collins eventually became Unitarians. The other group became the Congregational chapel and eventually built the church opposite the chapel in the Garden, now a United Church who we are on very good terms with.

By 1774 the Dissenters are still very much in power in Bridport, a visiting orthodox teacher described Bridport as as a place where' the Dissenters

are more numerous and powerful than the Establishment. They have introduced a kind of Anti-test for no man is admitted a member of that corporation who is *not* a dissenter' (p. 32 Short)

The new chapel, now The Chapel in the Garden was built in the early 1790s and opened for worship on Sunday March 9th 1794. I love the description of the old premises in the New Chapel minute book which records the decision to build. It was unanimously agreed:

Resolved 1st: that a decent and commodious house for the public worship of God, is highly desirable and proper.

Resolved 2nd: That the present meeting house belonging to this Society is extremely mean in its appearance - unbecoming the respectability and opulence of the society - incommodious both to the speaker and the Heavens - insufficient for the accommodation of all those who wish to attend divine worship there, several families being now without seats, (and unable to get any in it) and is also in a very decayed and even ruinous condition.

[Resolved 3rdly That the resources for erecting a new meeting house or chapel can be no otherways raised but by a voluntary subscription of the members of the Society.

Resolved 4thly That as the Residence here of several persons who now attend Divine Worship in the present meeting hours, and who are known to be inclined to contribute liberally towards the building...

From -p.10 Basil Short - A Respectable Society, Bridport 1593-1835

The above meeting took place under the sign of the dove, in Dove Lane (now Globe lane) so probably at Leakers Bakery. The total cost for the building of the new chapel was £2000 and built by the same people as the Town Hall a few years before. The new building had new trustees and one of them was a woman, Ann Bolton. I want to try and find out more about her.

The very first services were held on Sunday 9th March 1794. Shortly after this they introduced a liturgy that although it wasn't set in stone, was used for the next 70 years.

If members were late to council meetings in those days, they had to forfeit a bottle of wine. It is noted that the Rev Thomas Collins Colfox was often late (like our own Philip Colfox) and had to provide a bottle. I will be reinstating this as soon as possible.

The dissenters of the town were involved in keeping the parish churches going as well, many of them were wardens, this is unusual! They also gave the land and money to the church in Allington (St Swithun's) when the old smaller church went into disrepair. This interdenominational support is quite lovely really. Their concern was for the good of the town in all its aspects.

It is now a period of prosperity for the chapel from 1820 until the first world war. Like many other Unitarian chapels of the time. I can't tell you about all the ministers of the time but I will pick one to highlight now.

Russell Lant Carpenter was minister 1864-1888 and I have loved learning a bit more about him, his painting hangs at the back of the chapel and stares you directly as you stand to give your address from the front, I had long since thought he was disapproving of what we do but the more I learn about him the more I would have liked to have known him. He studied at Manchester College Oxford to train as a Minister and Bridport was his final ministry where he remained until his death. He is one of the brothers of the famous Mary Carpenter, social reformer, educator, abolitionist, created ragged schools in Bristol. She paid for Russell Carpenter's education and when she had a mental health crisis, she came to Bridport to convalesce and take sanctuary at the chapel. They were both heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement and went to America and met prominent activists there. Thomas Colfox and Russel Carpenter had both stayed with Frederick Douglass in Washington and Carpenter invited Douglass to Bridport, and he came in 1886 to speak to a packed town hall. He was probably one of the most famous black men in the world at the time, a former slave, escapee and formidable abolitionist. Carpenter was keen for him to come to Bridport as many people there were leaving to go to America and he wanted them to be aware of the plight and stand up for them when they arrived.

Like his sister, Russell C also suffered a bout of nervous collapse, and his congregation held it together for him until he was better. He was much loved and I found a book of his sermons in a cupboard, dated 1849.

Slightly nearer history - I would love to tell you about Alice Colfox who died in 1933 who also has her picture in the chapel, she devoted her long life to the chapel Sunday School and good works in the town. Also - for children with educational special needs and disabilities, she pioneered legislation in the county to help the children and relief for tired mothers. She became a Guardian of the Poor and worked very hard about bettering conditions in the workhouse, starting occupational interests for those older inmates able to use their hands. She found and visited foster homes and got many of the workhouse children boarded out. In this she was a pioneer of what is much more commonplace today. I have always felt I would like to know her!

The 2nd world war story with photos. The panel in the pew was broken on the 1st Sunday in August, 1942 when the congregation were at prayer and an air raid came on suddenly. The chapel was damaged to one side which has all been seamlessly repaired apart from this one little hole which was left as it is “ a record of a merciful deliverance”

Then a picture of our congregation now. I think the theology of helping your neighbour whoever they are and wherever they worship has influenced how we are today. We are very much part of the community and run many projects to help the people of this town and beyond. The quote which is inscribed at the front of the chapel, below the pulpit is from John, the commandment that ““Ye love one another”. We say most weeks in our adapted covenant prayer that Love is the founding principle of this chapel and our founding Unitarian ancestors chose this one line from the bible above all others to carry forward through time to us today. I think it really inspires our mission.

Life of Rev Thomas Collins Colfox (dates)

‘...I pray Almighty God, that zeal for the cause of Unitarianism, which I most firmly believe to be the cause of Truth, and strictly Evangelical, however at times it may appear to languish, may never die at Bridport.’

Homily for 1/5/22

We can try and imagine what the 1st of May service looked like in 1672, it took place in a private house near here probably in Barrack Street, they had previously met in a hay loft in secret. But now, they have a certificate of indulgence from the King to practice their religion. I think they knew that it could be taken away at any time, and it was. Our first minister Rev Richard Downe and members of the congregation were arrested again and again. It was probably a beautiful day, the smell of wood smoke, animals and people about. A long service and an even longer sermon! I wonder what they would think of us?

I do know that we are not so very different really, they started this community with love even before having a building as beautiful as this one to pray in and now we continue with that history of dedicated, loving beings behind us. They chose to put the alter stone with this inscription from John, that we love one another. This is both simple and complex as anyone who lives amongst other people will verify! But we can feel it in the bones of this building and we can see it here in the legacy - the food given freely throughout the week, the clothes and warmth given to anyone who needs it. Welcoming refugees with warmth and dignity. It is in our weekly candles, when we hear our sibling's pains and joys and hold them as our own and give strength to each other in held silence.

There are some traditions of the past that have been lost over the years, some we might re-instate. If one is late to a trustee meeting, the offender had to forfeit a bottle of wine. In the notes of meetings over a hundred and fifty years old we can see that a member of the colfox family was frequently fined in wine!