

BAPTISTS IN THE TYNE VALLEY



Paul Revill

Original edition produced in 2002 to mark the 350th
anniversary of Stocksfield Baptist Church
Second revised edition 2009

BAPTISTS IN THE TYNE VALLEY

Contents

Introduction	4
Beginnings	5
<i>Recollections: Jill Willett</i>	9
Thomas Tillam	10
Discord and Reconciliation	12
The Angus Family	13
<i>Recollections: Peter and Margaret Goodall</i>	17
Decline	18
A House Church	20
Church Planting	22
New Life	24
Two Notable Ministers	26
New Places for Worship	28
<i>Recollections: George and Betty McKelvie</i>	31
Into the Twentieth Century	32
Post-War Years	37
The 1970s	40
The 1980s and 1990s	42
Into the Present	45
<i>Recollections: Sheena Anderson</i>	46
Onwards...	48
Bibliography & Thanks	51

Introduction

2002 marked the 350th anniversary of Stocksfield Baptist Church. There has been a congregation of Christians of a Baptist persuasion meeting in the Tyne Valley since 1652, making it the second oldest such church in the north east of England and one of the oldest surviving Baptist churches in the country. However, statistics such as this do not really give the full picture, for a church is not primarily an institution or an organisation, but a community of people who have chosen to serve and worship God together. The real story of Stocksfield Baptist Church is told in the lives of the men and women who for three and a half centuries have encountered God, experienced his love and become followers of Jesus Christ, expressing this new-found faith through believers' baptism. They have given their lives to serving their Lord through sharing their faith and helping people in need, meeting together for worship and teaching. Most of these people are now long forgotten, except by the God who called them to follow him and with whom they now rest – ordinary rural Northumbrian folk. But the church which still continues to witness to the love of God and his life-changing salvation through Jesus Christ owes its existence to the faith of these people, and without them our lives today might be very different.

So, this church anniversary has been a time for giving thanks to God for what he has done in the past. It is also a time for looking back and learning from the church's history, the story which explains why things are the way we find them today. Through the past, God can speak to us today. After all, Christians believe that God speaks through the Bible, which is the record of his dealings in history with his people. The story of Stocksfield Baptist Church's past also has an important role to play as we look forward to the future, living as we do in a new century with its many challenges and changes. Learning from the past enables a church to face the future, by knowing better what it is and why it exists. The past can point the way forward to the future and help us to understand better how to face the challenge of the world in which we now live.

We hope that this booklet will not only be an historical record, but also one which helps you to think about God and what he can do with ordinary people's lives. With this in mind, we have included some personal stories of people

whose lives have been changed through the ministry of Stocksfield Baptist Church, and there is also a brief reflection at the end of each section, where you can pause to consider your own response to what you have read.



Hexham Abbey

Beginnings

The church now known as Stocksfield Baptist Church came into being during a changing and stormy period in British history, in some ways not unlike today's fast-changing world. The seventeenth century was turbulent politically, socially and spiritually. The early years of the century saw the emergence of several radical new Christian sects, formed by people who felt that the established church had no place for them and their ideals, derived from the Protestant Reformation. One of these movements was those who came to be known as Baptists.

The first Baptist church emerged in Amsterdam in 1609 and the first such church founded on English soil was begun in London under Thomas Helwys the following year. The Baptist movement soon grew, in spite of persecution, as the

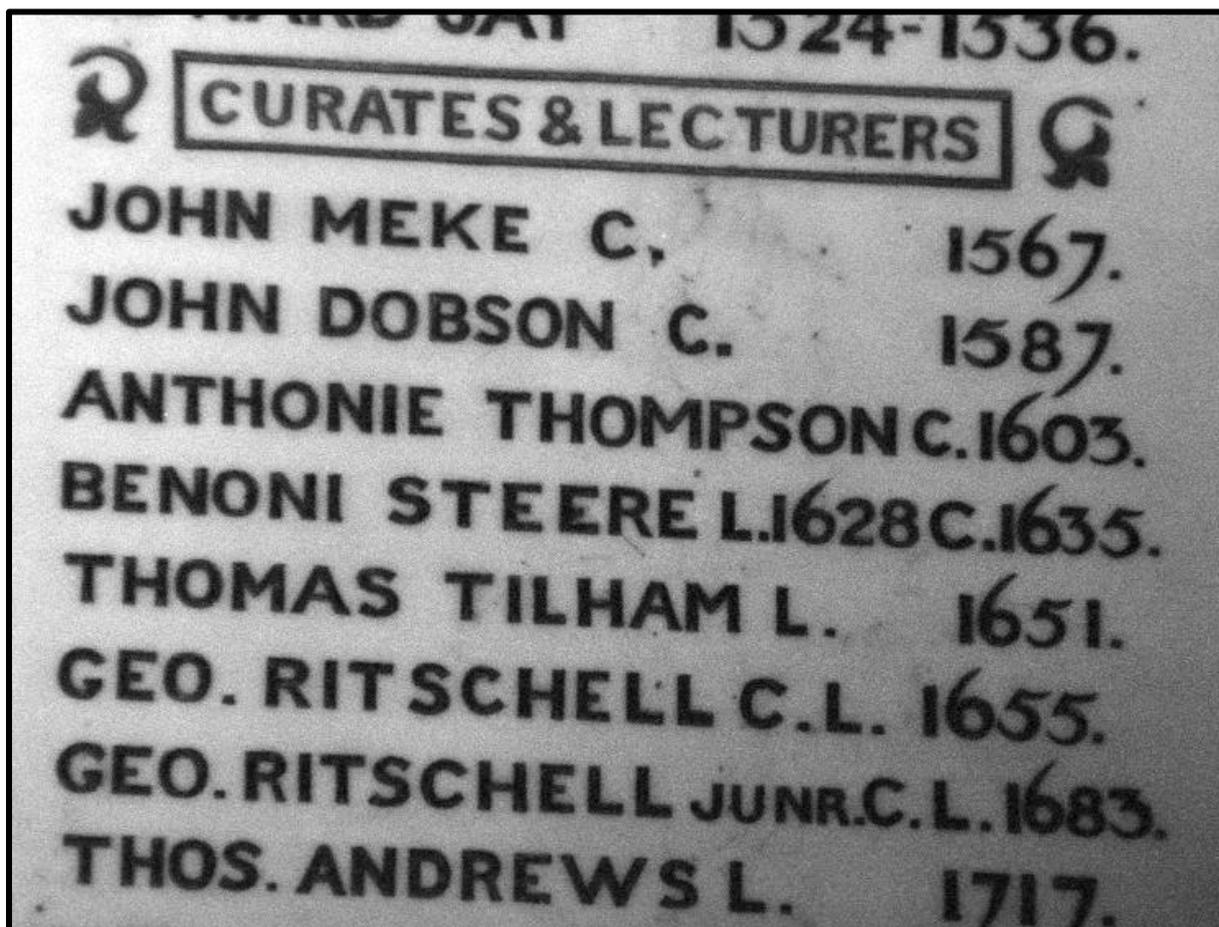
troubled years leading up to the English Civil War saw a fertile ground for their new ideas. Many of the soldiers in Cromwell's New Model army held Baptist convictions, and so new Baptist churches sprang up in the places where the troops were stationed. One such example was the Baptist church in Newcastle upon Tyne which was founded in 1650.

After the disruptions of the Civil War, the Anglican churches in the North of England were in decline and need, with many lacking clergy. In response to this situation, Cromwell's commonwealth set up in 1650 a *commission for the Propagation of the Gospel in the Four Northern Counties*. One could hardly imagine anything of the like being initiated today! It would appear that the Commission was in part a response to a petition sent by the people of Muggleswick in the Derwent Valley, County Durham, complaining about the lack of spiritual leadership in the local churches. They complained that their minister was "*one of the most debauched among the sons of men,*"¹ who locked the door of the church to prevent them from worshipping on the Sabbath.

Thomas Tillam (or Tilham), a member of the Coleman Street Baptist Church in London, applied to the Commission to take advantage of the benefits offered by it. He was appointed to the position of lecturer at Hexham Abbey, and the Coleman Street church appointed him as their 'messenger' (what some churches today might call an 'apostle'). He arrived in Hexham to take up his new post in December 1651. A plaque on the wall of the Abbey records his ministry in Hexham.

From the beginning of his ministry in Hexham, Tillam not only preached the Christian gospel message, that people's sins could be forgiven through Jesus Christ's death on the cross, but he also challenged people to follow Christ and to publicly confess their faith through believers' baptism. This Baptist practice

¹ Neil, D., *Northern Baptists in the Seventeenth Century*



The Plaque in Hexham Abbey recording Thomas Tilham as lecturer from 1651

was a radical departure from the accepted norm of baptising infants, which had been the universal practice of the Christian church from the third century. But Tillam, like Baptists from that time and since, had come to believe that the New Testament model for the administration baptism was by full immersion and only to those who could profess repentance and faith for themselves.

By the summer of 1652, Thomas Tillam had baptised by immersion eleven men and five women, who covenanted together on 21st July to form a Baptist church in Hexham. Using Biblical imagery, this covenant expressed the desire of the members of this new church to bind themselves to God and to one another. Such solemn declarations of commitment were characteristic of the early Baptists. Today, Stocksfield Baptist Church continues this tradition by inviting church members to commit themselves to a 'Family covenant'.

At the time, Tillam explained the purpose and intention of the new church's covenant in these words: *"Those solemnly giving up themselves to the Lord and to one another, to walk in communion together, with submission to all the ordinances of the gospel, I Thos. Tillam, espoused to one husband, hoping I shall present them as a chaste virgin to Christ, with all, that in sincerity of heart, have, through the mighty power of God, or shall be, joined to them."*² Tillam and his new converts believed that they had God-given authority to discern his will for the church themselves, without needing the oversight of bishops or the mediation of priests. This congregational model of church government was another radical practice of the day.

According to the church records, on 25th July 1652 the new church *"joyfully celebrated the Lord's Supper."*³ Thus the two Christian ordinances of baptism and communion were at the heart of the new church's life. Over the remainder of the year, a further eighteen people were added to the new church, so that the congregation numbered thirty-six by the end of the year. During the following year a further thirty-eight people were added to the church, including a group who were baptised in the River Derwent near Muggleswick. During these later baptisms, Tillam entered into a dispute with some local clergy who advocated infant baptism. The result was that a further six people chose believer's baptism! The church attracted some people of considerable influence and importance in the region, and although records are sparse, it probably met in the chapter house of Hexham Abbey, presumably while Tillam also served the Anglican congregation who met in the main Abbey building.

Reflection

Here we have a picture of a vibrant new church, growing rapidly, formed by people who had chosen a radical alternative to what they saw as the corrupt religion of the established church of the day. They were people who sought a

² Douglas, D., *The History of the Baptist Churches in the North of England*, p11

³ Douglas, *History*, p11

form of church which expressed more purely the doctrines of the New Testament, as they understood them. They were Christians for whom following Christ meant wholehearted commitment.

Take a moment to think about your own faith. What are your beliefs regarding God and Jesus Christ? What does the idea of commitment to following Christ mean for you?

Recollections of Stocksfield Baptist Church – Jill Willett

I was dedicated as a baby at Stocksfield on 28th October 1962 by Rev. Goodall, who was the minister at the time. I went to the Sunday School throughout my childhood. In 1975 there was an event called ‘Come Alive in ’75’, when an American evangelism team came to the church and stayed with our family. Sharon, a member of the team staying with us, was ill in bed, and when my sister Helen and I went up to see her, she talked to us about Jesus and asked us if we’d ever asked him into our lives. We both knelt by the bed and gave our hearts to the Lord. In 1977 I was baptised – on my 15th birthday. Between then and 1999, when I left to train to be a Baptist minister, Stocksfield was a consistent part of my life and my walk with God.

There were times when we really experienced God’s presence in a powerful way. We had all night prayer meetings and early morning prayer meetings – prayer was very much a feature of our lives together in those days. There were times when we experienced the Holy Spirit’s anointing in such a way that you really didn’t want to miss any meeting, in case you missed out on what God was doing. We had fellowship suppers, on a Saturday evening, when we used to invite other churches to join us. We ate and we also had times of worship and ministry that were powerful.

There were also low times as well. Some church meetings have been abominable! There have been splits, people leaving or being asked to leave, which left a huge hole in the congregation. I lived through times when we

seemed to change the whole congregation except for just a few of us. However, there were also many entertaining times. As a child, I used to get bored during the services, so I used to sing every other word in the hymns, to make it more interesting. I once sang in a very loud voice, 'While shepherds washed their socks by night' – I'd been singing it at home and forgot myself. It caused much amusement to all except me – I was mortified. I have many, many happy memories of Stocksfield, and many amongst you who I count a privilege to call my friends. Through it all, God has been faithful.

Jill is now serving as a Baptist minister in Coalville, Leicestershire.

Thomas Tillam

Tillam was a strong-willed character, both charismatic and volatile. Between 1653 and 1655 he engaged in a furious dispute with the other local Baptist congregation in Newcastle upon Tyne. Amongst other things, the two churches fell out over the issue of whether ministers should be independent from the state church, and over Tillam's decision to baptise some people in Stokesley, whom the Newcastle church had refused to baptise. The Newcastle church accused Tillam's church of "*having come out of Babylon by halves only*,"⁴ reflecting the view of many early Baptists that the Church of England was an instrument of the devil. They took exception to the fact that Tillam was still a clergyman in the established church and that he enjoyed fellowship with others who remained within the Church of England.

Another cause of discord was Tillam's independent church-planting initiatives, which offended the Newcastle church as they were already establishing groups of believers outside the city and no doubt wished the Hexham church and its satellite groups to come under their own umbrella.

Tillam was a man of very strong convictions, who refused to compromise over those views he held dear. However, at the same time, he desired to establish

⁴ Douglas, *History*, p60

unity and co-operation amongst the new independent churches which practised believers' baptism. It is unfortunate that perhaps because of his temperament he was not successful in that aim. Doctrinally, he was a 'Particular Baptist' by persuasion, which meant that he belonged to the branch of Baptists who emphasised Calvinistic doctrines. He advocated closed communion (reserved for church members only) and actively sought to grow other churches with similar views across the North of England. He practised love feasts (celebrating communion with a fellowship meal), foot-washing, the holy kiss, the singing of hymns and the laying on of hands – all of them new ideas of the day.

He was a passionate preacher and undertook tours far and wide to bring the Christian gospel where he felt the need and God's call. In 1652-3 he preached around the North east and also in Cheshire. He was away from his local congregation as much as he was with it, and in this respect was not an ideal pastor. But he saw these preaching tours as fulfilling his mandate to evangelise the Northern Counties, for which he had been appointed.

Reflection

Tillam, like all of us, had his strengths and weaknesses. He possessed some admirable qualities such as his energy and passionate commitment to his Christian faith, and others which we might question. Maybe at times he was too inflexible and brought unnecessary conflict upon himself and his church.

How about you? What in your personality and character would you regard as strengths and what are your weaknesses? If you're brave enough, ask someone who knows you well to answer this question! How can you make the most of your strengths and overcome your weaknesses?

Discord and Reconciliation

The conflicts in which the church found itself embroiled from the very beginning could hardly have helped in its life and growth, and no doubt the church would have been stronger were it not for these disputes. Tillam's sponsoring church, Coleman Street Church in London, withdrew its support for him, after being petitioned by the Newcastle Baptist church. The disagreements over issues such as how far the church should become separate from the State, the laying on of hands and what criteria should be applied in receiving people into church membership eventually caused Tillam sufficient difficulty to persuade him to leave this troublesome situation behind, and so he left the North East in 1655. He moved to Colchester, then shortly afterwards headed to Germany, where he later died.

On Tillam's departure, the Hexham church numbered eighty members. However, it was left divided with factions supporting and opposing Tillam. The church split into a 'pro-Tillam' group which continued to meet in Hexham under the leadership of elder Richard Orde, and an 'anti-Tillam' group which settled in Derwentdale, at Eadsbridge near Muggleswick (located just off today's A68 road near the Derwent Reservoir) under the leadership of John Ward. Some Baptists left the churches to join the new Quaker movement which had spread to the North East by 1654. The Hexham church then moved out of the town to meet at Juniper Dye House, four miles south of Hexham, while the Derwentside church developed congregations in Weardale at Bitchburn near Witton le Wear and a further congregation at Hindley Farm (just outside modern-day Stocksfield). Reconciliation between the divided congregations was attempted on different occasions, at first unsuccessfully and later with more positive results. These various Baptist congregations came in due course to exercise a great measure of mutual support and care. They shared pastors for many years and engaged in further mission activity together. Such co-operation and non-coercive mutual support is characteristic of the Baptist practice of churches 'associating' together, rejecting a strong central hierarchy in favour of a more informal network based upon strong relationships between local congregations.

Reflection

Discord and broken relationships are to some extent a sad reality for all of us. Maybe you are familiar with conflict in your family, friendships or workplace. Fortunately, conflict does not need to be the last word. The early Baptists in the North East clearly recognised the importance of seeking reconciliation with their fellows and made strenuous efforts to heal hurts that had been caused. It is to their credit that relationships amongst these sister churches were mended. Symbolically this was underlined during the church's 350th anniversary year when the minister of Westgate Baptist Church, Newcastle, successor to the seventeenth century Newcastle church, visited Stocksfield Baptist Church to preach. Although reconciliation is often a lengthy journey, Christians believe that it is made possible through the power of God's love. The New Testament tells us that one of the benefits of Jesus' death upon the cross is the breaking down of barriers between people. When people recognise their faults and confess these to God, they receive his forgiveness through Jesus Christ and reconciliation with others is made possible.

Think about your own experience of conflict or broken relationships, in your own life or of those close to you. What might you be able to do to enable reconciliation to take place in your own situation or that of others?

The Angus Family

On 14th May 1653, a couple named Henry and Mary Angus were baptised by Thomas Tillam, amongst a group of nine converts to the Baptist cause. They lived at Roe House, south east of Hexham, between Broomhaugh and Broomley. Henry Angus was descended from a Scottish family which had fled south of the border in 1584 during the reign of James VI, at a time when radical Protestant ideas were being opposed in Scotland. Angus Watson, who chronicled the history of this family, even suggests that many members of the Angus clan had professed Baptist beliefs as early as 1620 and had founded a church fellowship in the home of Alexander Angus at Juniper Dye House. If this were true, it would

indicate that the church's origins stretch back further than Thomas Tillam's ministry. However, there is no other concrete evidence to support this claim.

Successive generations of the Angus family were to play a significant part in the life of the Baptist churches in the North East and beyond. They became mainstays of the Baptist cause in the Tyne Valley over the next two and a half centuries until the turn of the twentieth century. The church's continuing existence owes much to the faith and witness of this family in particular. Indeed it could be said that without the Anguses there might be no Stocksfield Baptist Church today. Many served as church leaders and they hosted worship services in their farm-houses for a great number of years before a purpose-built chapel existed. In the nineteenth century they were chiefly responsible for erecting the Baptist chapels in Broomley and Broomhaugh – of which more shall be said later. Members of the family also played a role in sustaining the life of the Baptist church Newcastle upon Tyne. In memory of them there are dedicated windows at Westgate Baptist Church, Newcastle and an 'Angus Room' at the Stocksfield church



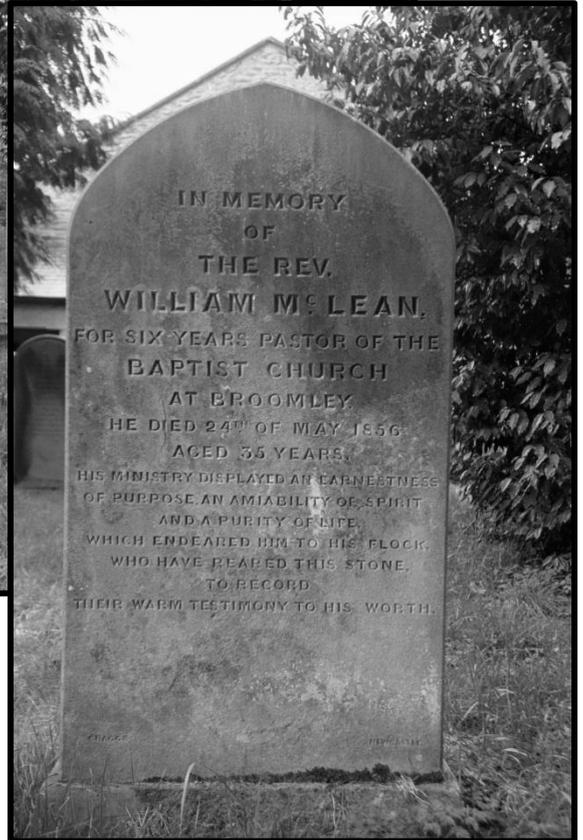
Roe House as it is today – it was rebuilt in the nineteenth century

Descendents of Henry Angus and his brother George played an influential role in the civic life of Newcastle upon Tyne, especially in the nineteenth century. Rev. Joseph Angus, a member of the Newcastle Baptist Church, served for many years in the latter half of the century as President of Regent's Park College, London, a training college for Baptist ministers. Henry Angus, of Hindley Farm, became the first Baptist mayor of Newcastle in 1867. Jonathan Angus, born at Roe House, also served as mayor twice and as an alderman and magistrate. From another branch of the family came George Fife Angus, whose father Caleb established a very successful coachworks in Newcastle. He was a prominent businessman who was the prime mover in establishing the British colony of South Australia in 1834. He established the National Provincial Bank in England and two banks in South Australia. He established the first Sunday school Union in the North of England and also successfully fought for the emancipation of slaves in Honduras and the Mosquito Coast. His brother William was a notable missionary who served with the Baptist Missionary Society amongst seamen of Western Europe.

The Angus family established a private burial ground at Broomhaugh, when permission was refused by the parish church to bury a child who died in infancy. They buried the child in what was at the time an orchard. Subsequent members of the Angus family and others connected with the Baptist cause in the Tyne Valley came to be buried here, including two of the church's ministers. The burial ground is still in existence, located at the rear of the Broomhaugh Baptist chapel, now used by Riding Mill Methodist Church. It serves as a testimony to the legacy of faith passed down the generations of this notable family.



Broomhaugh burial ground, where several members of the Angus family are buried



Reflection

The burial ground at Broomhaugh can be visited today, by arrangement with Riding Mill Methodist Church, and it is a quiet place to pause and reflect upon the lives of these Christian saints of former years, as well as our own mortality and the legacy that our own lives will leave behind.

Take a moment to consider what your own epitaph might be. How would you like to be remembered by future generations? What wisdom, faith or traits would you like to be passed on to future generations of your own family?

Recollections – Peter and Margaret Goodall

We began ministry at Stocksfield from 1958 following the conclusion of five years at Bristol Baptist College. Margaret and I had met at Bristol and we were married in Bradford, Yorkshire, at Heaton Baptist Church. The ordination and Induction was July 19th 1958. We began as newly-marrieds and as students from college. What a responsibility for the church! Soon we were made to feel accepted so that we could begin the work to which God had called us. We quickly discovered that this indeed was where we were meant to be.

Stocksfield became our home as it was where we had our first two children, Marcus and Deborah. They became part of a group of children that made up the Sunday School. Each Friday night the church was host to a thriving Teen and Twenty Club which was a very successful meeting place for youngsters in the village. The Sunday services were generally well attended. The Easter I remember especially was when reading the meeting of Jesus with Mary I was so personally touched by Jesus' greeting of Mary, I had to stop completely as I gained control. We could hear the very voice of Christ speaking his resurrection greeting to each of us.

There were other moments too when immediately after the morning Communion Service I was berated by two wonderful Scottish sisters for the choice of colour for the halls. Mind you it was rather bright! In '62/63 the snows came, and we had sixteen inches of snow on the garden. In the hills around, cars were covered over by snow drifts so that we could walk over them, the snow was so deep.

We made many friends in our time in Stocksfield. The fellowship was rich with people of character and spiritual maturity for which we praise God some forty odd years later. To all who remember us, and to the present membership we send greetings in Christ's name.

After leaving Stocksfield, Peter and Margaret Goodall served churches in Birmingham and Rickmansworth, then as missionaries with the Baptist Missionary Society in Sri Lanka. They are now retired and living in Devon.

Decline

As already mentioned, the Derwentside church, as it had come to be known by the end of the seventeenth century, consisted of three congregations. The other branch of the original Hexham church was a small congregation that met at Juniper Dye House in Hexhamshire. However, during the latter years of the seventeenth century this latter congregation fell into decline. They began to neglect meeting together, and as the church minute book later recorded, *“The church here sadly began to decline their duties, break off their meetings and forget their Rock, whereupon miserable effects ensued to be their portion, so that most of them returned to their folly. In this state they continued for many years.”*⁵

The sister church, Derwentside, endeavoured to encourage the Hexhamshire congregation, which by 1675 numbered just thirteen members. The Hexhamshire church members were reported to have *“confessed their feebleness.”*⁶ However, this decline persisted and indeed there are no records of an autonomous Hexhamshire church between 1681 and 1750. It would appear that the church ceased to function as a separate body, though a group of faithful Baptist believers continued in the region and became linked to other groups, mainly the Derwentside church.

The main reason for this spiritual decline was changes taking place at a national level. The Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, which re-established the pre-eminent place of the Church of England through the 1662 Act of Uniformity, marginalised the new independent churches. Further legislation such as the various laws passed between 1661-1665 known as the Clarendon Code made life increasingly difficult for non-conformists, banning any gatherings of worship according to non-Anglican rites which involved more than five people over the age of sixteen and also banning ministers from preaching within five miles of any town. For the Hexhamshire and Derwentside Baptist churches, this meant a ban not only from meeting in the Abbey where they had started life but also drove them to a more ‘underground’ existence in rural locations.

⁵ Copson, S., *Association Life of Particular Baptists of Northern England, 1699-1732*, p17

⁶ Douglas, *History*, p98

Non-conformists, who chose not to belong to or recognise the authority of the newly re-established Church of England, suffered thirty years of persecution for their beliefs and practices. Rumours and accusations of plots against the monarchy by such groups as Baptists began to circulate at this time, not aided by the anti-monarchist views held by some of the more extreme Baptist leaders at the time. One such rumour, completely unfounded, was that the Baptists from the Derwentside church in Muggleswick were plotting to rise in rebellion against the government, to destroy parliament and to murder all bishops and clergy. This resulted in a trial, at which the leaders of the 'Muggleswick Plot' were acquitted, but led the Bishop of Durham, John Cosin, to instigate a search for other local Baptist leaders in order to bring them to trial. For the Derwentside and Hexhamshire churches, this period was a testing time where their witness was considerably restricted.

Reflection

We all experience periods of growth and progress and other times of decline and feeling 'stuck in a rut'. There are also times when we face unjust opposition from others. Indeed, persecution is still an all too personal reality for many Christians today. Jesus himself warned his followers that this is what they could expect for following him. The radical demands of the Christian life and the claims about truth which Christians make can often raise the opposition of powerful people who feel under threat.

Think back over your own life. What have been the good times of growth and what have been those of decline? What kind of period are you experiencing at the moment? Give thanks to God for the times of growth and progress and to confess your failings which may have contributed to times of decline. Ask God to help you to grow in your knowledge of him as you journey into the future.

Think about the principles, beliefs or practices which you feel strongly enough about not to want to compromise, even if it means to suffer. Think about those today who suffer for their beliefs. Maybe there is something practical you can do to help, such as letter-writing to those in prison for their beliefs or raising a particular issue regarding persecution with your M.P.

A House Church

For two hundred years, from the founding of the church in the mid-seventeenth century, Baptists worshipped in different farm houses around the Tyne Valley. We do not know much of what went on in their meetings, for there are no written records. As David Sheppard, a twentieth century minister of Stocksfield Baptist Church put it, *“All we know for certain is their meeting place – a farm kitchen. During the week, the family was fed and the butter was churned and the washing was done and beer brewed in that kitchen – but when Sunday came it was a place set apart for the worship of God, officially registered as such.”*⁷

The farm he was referring to was located at Hindley, and worship was maintained here under the auspices of a branch of the Angus family for over a century and a half. Alas the original farm-house no longer exists as it was destroyed by fire in 1863. This meeting was one of the three congregations that formed the Derwentside Baptist Church.

As already mentioned, a further congregation met in the Hexhamshire community of Juniper Dye House. By the middle of the eighteenth century this Hexhamshire group had become more formally linked to the Derwentside church and constituted a preaching station – one of the locations where Derwentside preachers would also lead worship.

⁷ Address by David Sheppard, *N.B.A. Handbook, 1949*



The old Hindley farmhouse, where a Baptist congregation met until 1835

Other homes around the region became bases for Baptist worship. Isaac Garner, a Derwentside Baptist Church pastor in the middle of the eighteenth century, is known to have preached in homes in Prudhoe, Horsley and Stamfordham as well as further afield. These bases gathered their congregations from a widely spread rural population.

Churches usually become identified with the buildings they use for public worship, and we use the same term for both congregation and building. However, the New Testament always speaks of church in terms of people and not the premises they use, largely because the first Christian churches also met in homes, only erecting elaborate buildings after the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Even after the Act of Toleration in 1689 which gave greater freedom for Protestant non-conformists to meet for worship and for ministers to exercise their duties, the Baptists of the

Tyne Valley continued to meet in farm houses. The fact that the Baptists of the Tyne Valley were content to worship God in their own homes reflects this desire to return to New Testament practices and principles which undergirded their faith. Their relatively small financial resources would also have restricted their ability to open specially dedicated premises for worship. This home-based faith was passed on down the generations, through families. The worship of God and teaching of the Christian faith was closely integrated with the other activities of daily life.

Reflection

It might seem a little strange to think of a church meeting in farm houses. In fact such house churches have always been part of the Christian tradition, from the earliest days after Jesus' resurrection until today. Stocksfield Baptist Church today continues the practice of meeting in small groups in people's homes. These smaller gatherings enable deep relationships to be nurtured, and for the whole of daily life to be brought under the guidance and blessing of God.

Think about your own home and what happens there. Is it a home life that honours God in what is said and done? Is God recognised and acknowledged in your home? In what ways do you experience the presence of God in your home? What can you do to make this possible?

Church Planting

Over the years, several other Baptist churches were established through the missionary work of the Baptist church founded by Thomas Tillam. One such church was the Baptist church which was begun at Coniston in Cumbria in 1678. John Ward, the pastor of the Derwentside church, together with another elder of the church, were mining engineers by profession and regularly made trips to the Torver area near Coniston to work in the lead mines there. These men engaged in evangelistic activities while undertaking their business in the Lake District and the Baptist church resulted from their efforts. The church later

moved to Hawkshead Hill, and despite a couple of periods where the church ceased meeting, its ministry was revived and it still continues to this day. In March 2002 the current Hawkshead Hill congregation was visited by members of the 'mother church' in Stocksfield for a joint service to celebrate their common roots.

In 1748, after a period of revival in the church, one Thomas Angus visited Marton, near Stockton on Tees. He then requested that David Fernie, the pastor of the Hexhamshire Baptist congregation, should come to speak to a group in Marton, and as a result a new church was founded. Fernie and his family also helped to establish Baptist churches in North Yorkshire and Stockton on Tees, the latter of which became known as Stockton Baptist Tabernacle and which is now the largest Baptist church in the Northern Baptist Association, meeting in an impressive new building on the river-front in the town centre.

The Derwentside church was one of the founder members of the Northern Association of Baptist Churches. This was convened for the first time in 1690, following the Act of Toleration which removed many of the oppressive restrictions on non-conformist churches. The Association comprised six Baptist churches, the others being in Pontefract, Ulverston, Egremont, Broughton and Newcastle. Since many of these churches had more than one branch, the Association represented about a dozen different congregations.

The Association was a structure which enabled the individual churches to support and care for one another. This desire to support and co-operate with other churches reflected the Baptists' conviction that while authority for church government was given to the members of each local church, nevertheless such churches needed the fellowship and oversight of fellow-Christians from other similar churches. The Association would formally meet on an annual basis and its role was to discuss matters of doctrine and other common concerns and to enable the Baptist churches to offer mutual support, for example through offering mediation over disputes.

Reflection

Like a family tree, all the fifty or so Baptist churches currently belonging to the Northern Association can trace their roots back to either Tillam's church in Hexham or the Newcastle Baptist Church. Throughout their history, Baptist churches have been missionary in spirit, wanting to share the Good News of their Christian life and message with other people.

The Christian word 'Gospel' means 'Good News'. Do you think of the Christian faith as being Good News? What is good about it? How do you share this good news with others?

New Life

By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Derwentside church had flourished to the extent that by 1717 two of its three congregations had erected chapels, the Derwentdale congregation building theirs in Rowley and the Weardale branch in Hamsterley. These two chapels, though subsequently rebuilt, are still the oldest surviving Baptist buildings in the region. These congregations had been less seriously affected by the persecutions of the previous years because of their relative remoteness.

The relaxation of restrictions upon the Baptist churches of Britain from the end of the previous century, however, did not bring fresh growth. The first half of the eighteenth century was largely a fallow period for Baptists in the North East of England, as elsewhere in Britain. The 1740 meeting of the Northern Baptist Association records the wider situation at the time: *"Times of decay are much more frequent than times of Revival, and generally speaking, much longer in continuance."*⁸ It took the great 'evangelical revival' under men such as the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield, together with a changed spiritual climate from the 1740s onwards, to change this state of affairs.

⁸ Douglas, *History*, p154

The North East, like the rest of the British Isles, was profoundly affected by the spiritual fervour of evangelical revival, which swept across the country during the second half of the century. Many thousands of people were added to the churches and the dull formality and moral laxity of church life was replaced by vigour and energy, with a renewed emphasis on evangelism. John and Charles Wesley frequently visited the region during their preaching travels, and many of the Methodist churches which were established in the area stem from this period. Although separate from the Methodist movement and holding to some different doctrines, the Baptists were caught up in this new spiritual climate and became more outward-looking themselves and committed to sharing the Christian gospel with others. And so the Derwentside church in particular experienced new life and numerical growth in the second half of the eighteenth century and numbered 103 members by 1774.

Reflection

Throughout the history of the Christian faith there have been periods of great revival when churches have been renewed with fresh life and large numbers of people have been converted and deepened in their faith. Such revivals often have social and political consequences as well. It is said, for example, that the eighteenth century Methodist revival prevented Britain from experiencing a parallel social and political upheaval to what was happening across the channel through the French Revolution.

The Baptists in the Tyne Valley have experienced such times of revival, albeit on a relatively small scale. Many Christians today in Britain hope and pray for a fresh revival of the Christian faith in our nation, which might reverse the decline in church membership and attendance, and draw people into faith in large numbers.

*Think about what a revival of the Christian faith might mean for Great Britain?
How does your faith need reviving or renewing?*

Two Notable Ministers

From their beginnings, the Baptists of Hexhamshire and Derwentside appointed ministers to lead them, supported by elders or deacons. The ministers of the Derwentside church would be based either in Weardale or Derwentdale and supported the Hindley congregation through preaching in the farm-house there. They were often helped by assistants, because of the growing workload in the eighteenth century revival. It should be remembered that until the end of the eighteenth century none of the ministers who served the churches received a formal academic college training as Baptist ministers do today. They would be men of prominence and usually of learning who served in existing churches and whose leadership gift was recognised. They would then be called into the role of pastoral charge. Two of these Derwentside and Hexhamshire ministers are worthy of mention.

The first is David Fernie, mentioned earlier in connection with the church planting initiative in Stockton. He was called in 1748 to work as an assistant minister alongside the existing pastor Isaac Garner. He had formerly been a Presbyterian and held strong Calvinistic views. He was an able and powerful man, the *“stormy petrel of the Northern Baptist Association.”*⁹ Unfortunately he fell out with Garner, who took charge of the Derwentside church while Fernie moved to the Hexhamshire congregation at Juniper Dye House.

Fernie also helped to revive the Newcastle Baptist church, through making regular visits to preach and to encourage the congregation there. Eventually he moved there to become its pastor, while continuing his ministry in Hexhamshire. Amongst his other achievements, he led one Robert Hall to faith in Jesus Christ. A year later Hall moved to Arnesby, Leicestershire, where he served as minister of the Baptist church there for forty years. His son, also called Robert, became one of the most celebrated Baptist preachers of his age.

The second notable minister of the Derwentside church from this period was Charles Whitfield, who served the church in this role for almost fifty years from 1772 onwards. Whitfield had been strongly influenced through his meetings

⁹ McKelvie, G., *The History of Stocksfield Baptist Church*

with John Wesley and was being groomed by Wesley as a potential leader of great promise when he became convinced of the truth of believers' baptism. He moved to the Newcastle Baptist church, from where he was called to pastor the Derwentside church. Under his ministry many more people were added to the three congregations, and he also had great success in reconciling divisions that existed between different congregations. In particular he re-established good relations with the Hexhamshire congregation at Juniper Dye House. He also helped to revive the Northern Baptist Association, which had been suffering a period of decline, and he was notable for establishing the first Sunday school in County Durham and a substantial library at Hamsterley where he lived.

Whitfield felt that the demands of travelling to the scattered congregations under his charge were too great, and so in 1785 the Derwentsdale branch, meeting in Rowley and its sister congregation in Hindley formally separated from the Hamsterley congregation. Whitfield took charge of the Hamsterley church and his assistant, Mr Ross, took care of Rowley and Hindley. The Hamsterley church now became for a while the most influential Baptist church in the Northern Association.

Reflection

As in other organisations, the quality of leadership in churches has a vital influence on the life of the congregation. The Tyne Valley Baptists have been blessed with a number of godly ministers, elders and deacons during their long history, who have not only had great faith but also brought others to faith and inspired them to a lifelong commitment to follow Christ.

Think of leaders who have inspired you, either ones you know personally or people of renown whom you have admired. What is it about them that inspire you? How might you emulate their example?

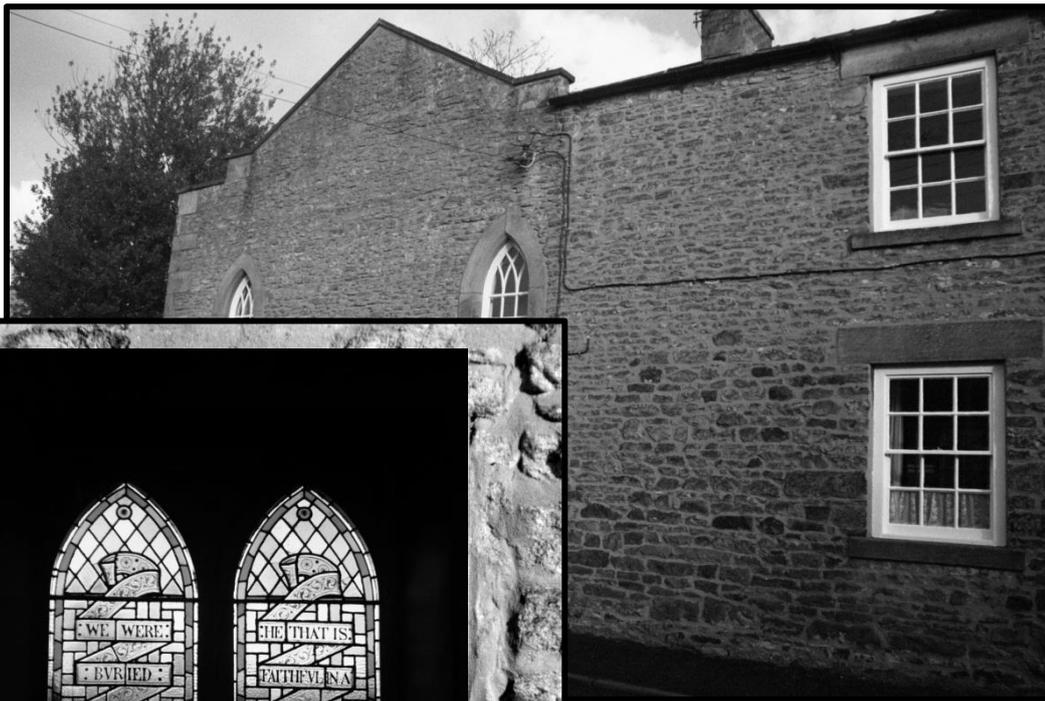
New Places for Worship

Into the nineteenth century the congregation which met in Hindley Farm eventually grew to the point where the building was too constraining and where it too could raise sufficient funds to erect its own building. Thus it was on 8th June 1835 that a Mr sample from Newcastle preached the final sermon in the Hindley farm-house, using as his text Exodus 33:14-15 – *“The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.’”* This marked the closure of the farm-house for public worship.

A new chapel in Broomley village was dedicated for worship and the congregation gained its first purpose-built place of worship. A year later, because of continuing numerical growth, Rowley Baptist Church erected another chapel in Shotley Field. The church was branching out still further. Throughout this time the church continued its practice of preaching in other villages – there were twelve such preaching stations in all.

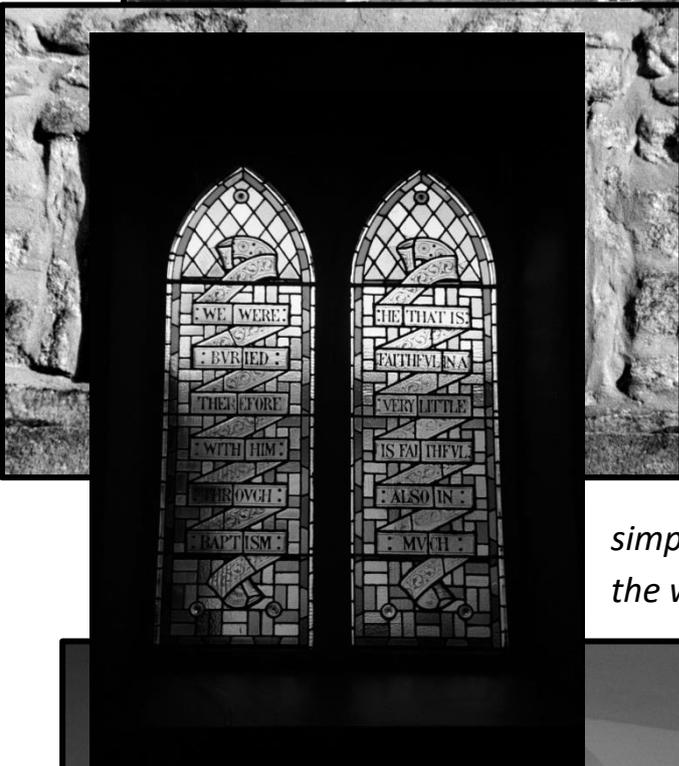
In 1839 an evangelist called Thomas Pulford was engaged by the North-Eastern Baptist churches to preach in their region. All the churches benefitted with numerical growth, and many were added to the three congregations of the Rowley church. A fourth congregation was established in Broomhaugh and a new chapel building erected there, on land owned by the Angus family and adjoining their burial ground.

At a collection taken on the Sunday following the dedication of the building, the entire cost of the chapel, estimated at £146, was cleared. At this point the Broomley and Broomhaugh church, as it was now called, formally separated from Rowley and Shotley Field Baptist Churches and became fully independent, calling its own ministers.



Above: The Baptist 'Jubilee Chapel' at

Broomhaugh, with the plaque recording its date. Below: interior of the building, with its simple gothic details. The Bible verses recorded in the windows are Romans 6:4 and Matthew 25:23



Reflection

The buildings used by Christians for worship speak powerfully about the faith and priorities of the people who erected them. Great cathedrals can inspire awe by their sheer size and beauty, speaking of the majesty and might of the God who is worshipped there. In a similar way, the much more humble buildings used by Baptists in Broomhaugh and Broomley speak of the faith of those who created them.

Only the Broomhaugh building remains today. It is an unpretentious building, hidden away down a side street off the A695 road in Riding Mill village, built with a minimum of 'gothic' detailing which reflects the architectural fashion of the day. This reflects the Baptists' belief that the church was not about building great empires or of ostentatious show, but that its heart was a community of Christian people, seeking to live a radical counter-cultural lifestyle set apart from the worldly concerns of others. This small building also reflects the relative poverty of the congregation as compared to some of the big churches of nearby towns or cities.

Inside, the building is dominated by the pulpit, reflecting the Baptists' belief in the centrality of the preaching of God's word in forming the church. Two stained glass windows feature Bible texts rather than images of Christ or saints. There would have been a baptistery, which no longer remains, where converts would be fully immersed in water as they confessed their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

What does your own home say about your beliefs and priorities in life?

Spend some time visiting a church building and being quiet there. What does the building have to say about God? Allow opportunity for God to make you aware of his presence as you spend time in the building.

Recollections – George and Betty McKelvie

We send our warmest congratulations on the 350th anniversary of Stocksfield Baptist Church. We both feel privileged to have played some small part in the work and witness of the church during our time there, from 1977 to 1982.

We have many happy memories of lasting friendships and wonderful fellowship we enjoyed at Stocksfield. We were very moved to receive the greetings of so many on George's 90th birthday recently.

We have many fond recollections of growing links with Christians of all denominations across the community. Thursday mornings saw the men of the village from the churches joining together in fellowship. On Tuesday mornings the Mums' club reached out to the younger women of the village. Our hearts warmed as we looked around at a full church on Sunday mornings as old and young gathered together for worship. It was a very special time in our ministry and for us personally.

We join with you in spirit as you celebrate this historic occasion. May God bless the ongoing work and witness of Stocksfield Baptist Church and its leaders. We pray regularly for you all.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding: in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.”
(Proverbs 3v5-6)

George and Betty McKelvie retired to Devon to move closer to family members. Subsequent to this recollection in 2002 both have died, aged into their 90s.



The site of the Baptist Chapel in Broomley. Only a plaque remains in the stone wall to indicate that this was the site of a place of worship.

Into the Twentieth Century

From the church records, the congregations of Broomley and Broomhaugh maintained a combined membership of between thirty and fifty people throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, with a similar number of young people involved. As well as the Sunday services held in the two buildings, the minister would also preach from time to time in other farm-houses in the neighbourhood, continuing the church's long-held practice of meeting for worship in homes across the Valley.

For the Baptist denomination as a whole, the national 'high water mark' in terms of church membership came in the first decade of the twentieth century, after sustained numerical growth and evangelistic activity during the previous century. From the middle of the decade numbers then began to decline, a trend

which accelerated as a result of the First World War. For Broomley and Broomhaugh Baptist churches, however, the period from 1904 onwards saw not decline but considerable growth, as the churches increased in membership from thirty people to three times this number over the following fifteen years.

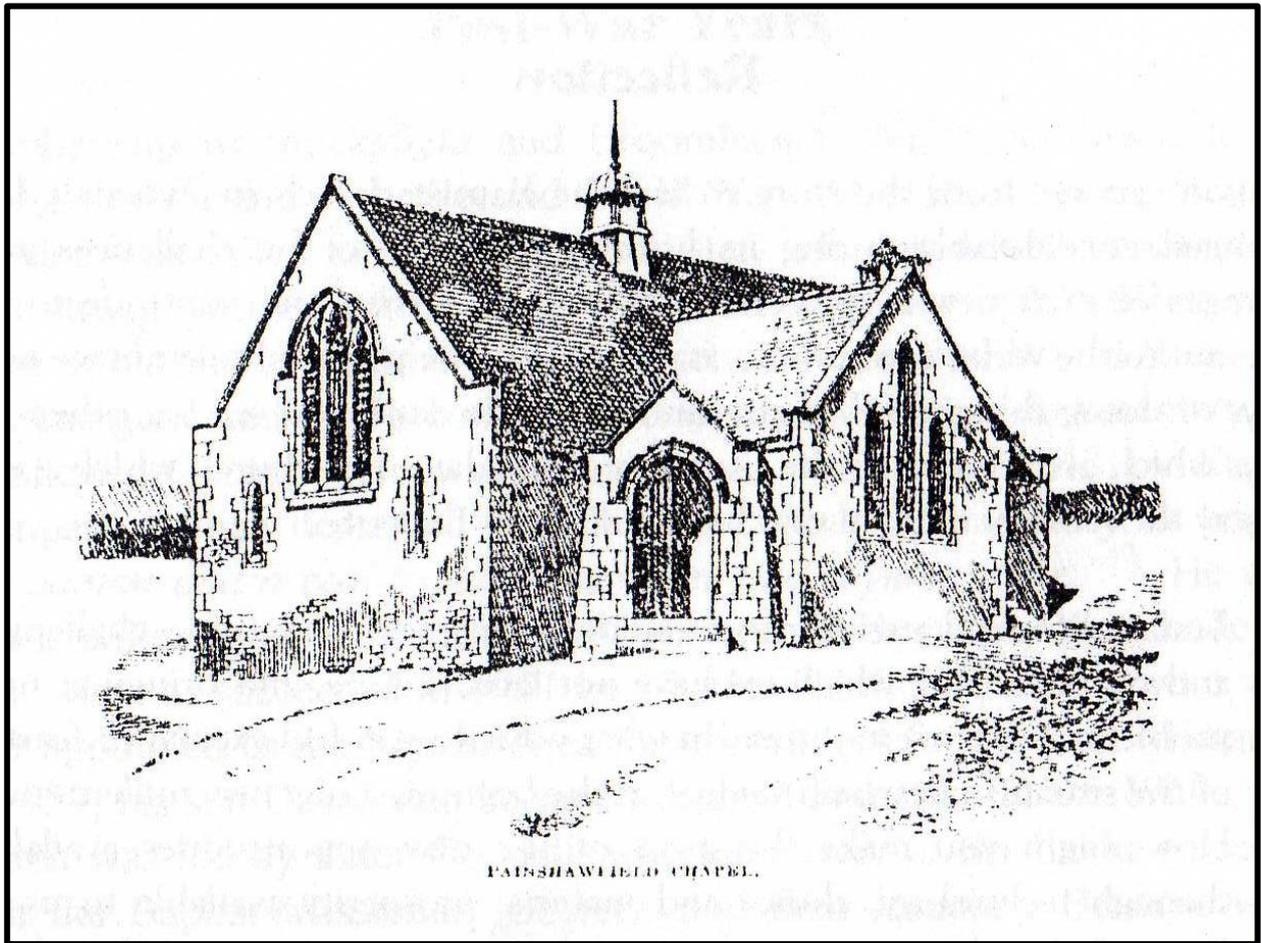
Another major change occurred with the move in 1905 of the Broomley congregation to a new building erected on the main road in Stocksfield. This was described in the 'Baptist Handbook' for that year as 'Painshawfield Chapel': *"The building stands in a prominent and commanding position in the centre of a district which is being rapidly populated from Newcastle."*¹⁰ The church had taken the strategic decision to move from a small village which had suffered from depopulation to a new growing community which would provide a more fruitful mission field.

The old chapel building in Broomley was demolished, and the stones were taken to Stocksfield to be incorporated into the new building. A plaque in Broomley records the site of the old Baptist Chapel. The new Stocksfield church building included a keystone that recorded the dates of its erection in 1905 and the foundation of the church in 1652. And so at last the church came to be known by a more familiar name, as Stocksfield and Broomhaugh Baptist church.

These significant developments owe much to the ministry of another outstanding man, Peter Slater, who pastored the church for forty years from before the turn of the century until his retirement in 1937 at the age of eighty. A later minister described him as *"A man of rare spiritual insight and abounding sympathy. He became the confidant of many and had the joy of leading many to Christ. Cultured in mind and humble in spirit, he enriched the lives of his members by expository preaching and intercessory prayer of unusual power."*¹¹

¹⁰ *Baptist Handbook, 1905, p477*

¹¹ N.B.A. Annual Report, 1905



An architect's drawing of the new building in Stocksfield, as reproduced in the Baptist Handbook for the year 1905.

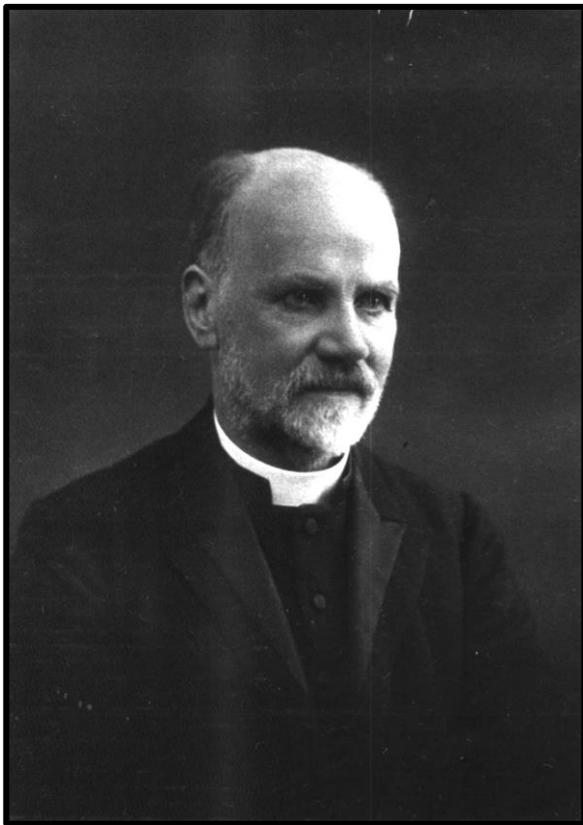
During the first year in its new location, special mission services were held, which resulted in fourteen professions of faith. The report for that year describes *"Quickened life and increased prayerfulness of a church full of promise for the future."*¹² Further growth, particularly in attendances at the Sunday school, reaching numbers in excess of two hundred in the years after the War, meant that the church had to expand its premises, building the halls at the back of the main sanctuary in 1920.

A visitors' book from this period gives a picture of the activities in which the church was engaged at this time. These include a thanksgiving service for the end of war in 1918, a dedication and farewell service for miss Jessie Slater, the minister's daughter, who was sent to serve as a missionary in India, annual

¹² McKelvie, *History*

missionary meetings and ministers' fellowship meetings, a dedication service for the Boys' Brigade, and a Gospel Mission in 1922 involving two evangelists from the faith Mission in Edinburgh.

In 1927 the church appointed an assistant minister, Reginald Lillington, who took special oversight of the Broomhaugh congregation. He undertook a good work among the young people of Stocksfield and the church made 'good progress'. Peter Slater died in 1949 and was buried with other members of his family in the burial ground at Broomhaugh. Plaques were erected in both Broomhaugh and Stocksfield chapels in his memory.



Left: Peter Slater. Right: Reginald Lillington

Reflection

The Baptist churches in the Tyne Valley have changed considerably during their history, adapting to the challenges and changes of each new age. For the church to survive and continue to be effective in its ministry and mission it must always be prepared to embrace new ways of doing things and of communicating the faith and serving others in ways which are appropriate to the situation of the day. The church which seeks to remain the same as it always has been will surely die out.

Today, life seems to be changing at a more and more rapid pace, presenting great opportunities but also challenges, problems and uncertainties. In what ways do you feel excited or fearful as you consider the state of today's world and the near future? How might you be able to make the most of the opportunities available to us through technology and material prosperity in the UK today? In what ways can you use these opportunities to help others who are in need?



Stocksfield Baptist Church 'Women's Own' group, 1947

Post-War Years

Membership of the Stocksfield and Broomhaugh churches continued to be strong until the end of the Second World War. Following Peter Slater, Herbert Fursdon was appointed as the new minister. He was notable because of his strong pacifist convictions, which brought him into conflict with some of his church members at the outset of the war. He was a considerable scholar, writing a commentary on Matthew's Gospel. He was succeeded in 1943 by David Sheppard, a man described as being "*A pleasant personality, a bright companion and a real friend to minister and layman alike.*"¹³ He was also a skilled joiner and made most of the furniture in his home himself. He was followed in 1951 by Charles Hardiman, a Scot, who went on in 1959 to be appointed as the Baptist Area Superintendent (the role which is now known as 'regional minister') for the East Midlands region. His son David also became a Baptist minister.

Ministers of the church in the 1940s:



Herbert Fursdon (left) and David Sheppard (right)

¹³ McKelvie, *History*



Ministers of the church in the 1950s and 1960s: Charles Hardiman (top left), Peter Goodall (top right), Jonathan Benson & family (left).

In the 1960s, the church was led firstly by Peter Goodall, who came to the church straight from training college in Bristol with his new wife Margaret (see his personal recollections above).

After serving two more churches they later went on to serve with the Baptist Missionary Society in Sri Lanka. The next minister to serve the church was Jonathan Benson, who made a particular effort to welcome the new people moving into Stocksfield as the new Birkdene estate was built.

The post-war years saw numerical decline for both the Stocksfield and Broomhaugh congregations. This church decline was typical of the national scene. The 'swinging sixties' presented great challenges to the churches in the UK, and in general they failed to actively address these and speak with relevance to the changing culture. Like many others, Stocksfield and Broomhaugh churches remained somewhat 'traditional' in culture and practice, failing to significantly attract new and younger people into the Christian faith. It was a period when there were very few baptisms recorded, even amongst those who came to faith. Reports of the church's life at that time describe a "*Steady work*" or "*A year of ordinary plodding work.*"¹⁴ There was a lack of vibrancy and vision at this time and the church was more focused on itself than upon mission. Church worship was dominated by a hand-pumped organ. People from the time remember how the organist occasionally fell asleep at the keyboard during sermons and the children would pump air into the bellows to create an unholy sound, much to the organist's embarrassment!

The congregation at Broomhaugh dwindled to the point where the church had to be formally closed, in spite of the faithful witness of members of the Slater family. The few remaining church members joined the congregation in Stocksfield and the building was sold to the Methodists of Riding Mill in 1966, so that it could be preserved as a place of Christian worship. The proceeds of this sale helped towards purchasing a new manse for the minister in Stocksfield.

¹⁴ N.B.A. Handbook, 1947, 1948

Reflection

Throughout the history of the Tyne Valley Baptist churches there have been periods of growth followed by others of decline or stagnation. In spite of fallow times, the church has continued in its existence, maintained by the faithfulness of its committed members. Their prayers and hopes for growth and progress have always been answered, if not always in their own generation, and not always in the ways they might have expected or appreciated.

Who have been the faithful people in your life who have stood by you and supported you through difficult times? Spend a moment remembering them with thankfulness.

In what ways might your life have become stagnant and be in need of fresh challenge or change?

The 1970s

During the 1970s the church was not able to afford the services of a full-time pastor. Between 1971 and 1977 it was served by Gerald Miller, who moved to the Stocksfield area to serve as a non-stipendiary minister, which meant giving his spare time to leading the church while also working as the Religious Education advisor for Newcastle Schools. Under his leadership the church began to experience new life and impetus. In 1975 the church participated in a project known as 'Come Alive in '75', a mission which involved the churches of the Northern Baptist Association. Five American evangelists visited the church and held mission events and engaged in door to door visiting. Their ministry had a significant impact and a number of people came to faith in Christ as a result (see Jill Willett's recollections above). This mission brought fresh confidence to the congregation and the following year's report describes a 'year of sustained growth.' American mission teams have since visited the



Top: The interior of the church in the 1970s, showing the pews and pulpit removed during later modernisation. Gerald Miller is the preacher.

Below: George McKelvie with the church Deacons in 1980

church on a number of more recent occasions, including the 350th anniversary year in 2002.

In 1977 George McKelvie and his wife Betty moved to Stocksfield. George was already 65 and in his own words 'semi-retired' when he came to pastor the church. He was a committed ecumenist, who in many ways served the village in the manner of the parish priest, being the clergyman with the highest profile. As one church member at the time put it, "*If there were ever people who needed help or who were in trouble in the village, George and his wife were always there.*"¹⁵ In 1980 the church marked its 75th anniversary of the move to Stocksfield by renovating the premises with a new kitchen, vestry and toilets, and renaming the smaller hall the 'Angus Room', in honour of the family who had been so instrumental in the church's witness.

The 1980s and 1990s

After George McKelvie's retirement in 1982, Andrew Fitz-Gibbon was called to be the new minister. He served the church with his wife Jane for ten years from 1984, a period which saw some of the most dramatic changes in the church's history. Andy Fitz-Gibbon led the church through charismatic renewal, the world-wide movement which focussed upon seeking the life and work of God's Holy Spirit.

Charismatic renewal was marked in Stocksfield as elsewhere in increasing informality and spontaneity in worship, the use of modern songs alongside traditional hymns, the use of spiritual gifts such as prophecy, healing and speaking in tongues. Andy Fitz-Gibbon himself would lead worship on the guitar in the style of his hero Eric Clapton. His informal dress caused consternation to a few!

This period of transformation brought many new people to faith and into the church, and there were regular experiences of dramatic life-changing

¹⁵ Bill Bailey, in interview, 2002

encounters with God (see Sheena Anderson's recollections below). The church experienced significant numerical growth for the first time since World War Two and increasing numbers of people were drawn from further afield than Stocksfield itself to become part of the thriving congregation. It should also be acknowledged that this period of the church's life was also at times turbulent with conflict, and a number of people who were uncomfortable with the changing nature of the church left to join other local congregations.

Andy Fitz-Gibbon was a gifted teacher and a deep thinker. He took a radical and innovative approach to ministry and in many ways was at the leading edge of exploring new ideas and ways of doing things. The church at one point explored the possibility of moving from its premises in Stocksfield to Hindley Hall, next door to the farm where the church had worshipped for so many years earlier in its story. In the end this plan never materialised. But the period saw the modernisation of the church sanctuary, removing the pews and replacing them with more flexible seating, developing small groups and growing a thriving youth work.

In 1993 Andy Fitz-Gibbon left the church with the intention to move to the USA and to develop a household-based church. After a brief experiment with this in Hexham for a year, he moved in 1994 and has subsequently founded a new



monastic community in New York State, drawing upon ancient Celtic Christian traditions. He also teaches the philosophy of religion at a local university.

Andy Fitz-Gibbon

In 1995 the church called Mark Sharman to be its new minister. Previous to his appointment to Stocksfield, he had led an independent evangelical church in Newcastle. Unfortunately, despite his gifts for evangelism and leading people into spiritual renewal, Mark's ministry in Stocksfield was a short one. In spite of a positive beginning, financial and relational difficulties began to dominate. Positively, the church began running the hugely successful Alpha Course programme during this time, one which has had an important role in bringing a number of people to faith in the Tyne Valley.

Reflection

The later years of the twentieth century have seen major changes for Stocksfield Baptist Church. However, unlike many other local churches over recent years, the church has seen significant spiritual and numerical growth. Charismatic renewal has brought great benefits to the life of the church, especially its emphasis in experience of God alongside intellectual belief. Through this renewal movement the church has been reminded that the God is still able to work powerfully and miraculously in people's lives today. On the other hand, as with many other churches, charismatic renewal has at times led to conflict and division. The joys and blessings have been tinged with pain.

Have you experienced God working in a powerful or dramatic manner in your own life, or in the lives of others whom you know? Does the idea of modern-day miracles make you feel excited or sceptical? Maybe you have a need for a work of God's power in your own life, be it healing for yourself or a loved one, or some dramatic change to a seemingly unchangeable problem. Ask God to work more powerfully in your own life, to fill your life with his Holy Spirit. You could ask a Christian friend to pray for you... and see what God might do...!

Up to the Present

Mark Sharman left the Stocksfield Baptist Church in 1998. The church had lost a number of members at the conclusion of both Andy Fitz-Gibbon's and Mark Sharman's ministries and was at this time unable to afford a full-time pastor. For three years the church was overseen by David Lennox, who with his wife Miriam had joined the congregation at the end of Andy Fitz-Gibbon's time as minister. David and Miriam both brought much wisdom and leadership experience to the church, as well as strengthening the church's links with the wider Baptist family through David's work as Northern Baptist Association Secretary and regional tutor for the Northern Baptist College.

In 2001 the church called Paul Revill to be its new pastor, supported by his wife Barbara. This new ministry was enabled by generous giving from the Baptist Home Mission Fund. The church entered the new millennium in a more positive spirit and marked the 350th anniversary of its foundation with a series of events in 2002. After three years under the new ministry, the church had grown again to become financially self sufficient. The church engaged in fresh community-based mission projects through launching a luncheon club for senior citizens and a youth club. It has developed youth and children's work further by appointing a part-time specialist worker. It has added to its premises by opening a new 'Upper Room' in 2004. And while church life still has its ups and downs, the congregation is full of hope and expectation for what God will continue to do

amongst the folk of the Tyne Valley over the coming years.



The Stocksfield Baptist Church logo, adopted under Andy Fitz-Gibbon in the 1980s, which represents the cross of Christ, the water symbolising the River Tyne and Christian baptism, and three figures representing prayer, worship and service.

Recollections – Sheena Anderson

I was brought up with absolutely no religion in my life. In fact I can count on one hand the number of times I had even been within a church building as a young person. Then I unexpectedly had a third child and my life began to take a different route. After attending a church service for his christening, I was drawn to return, for reasons hazy to me. I even started going almost every week. It got to the stage where I knew when to sit, when to kneel and could recite prayers without reading completely from the book. I actually began to like the ceremony, the liturgy and the rituals, but still wondered if it was real. I still was not perceiving a living God and no-one showed me how I might find him. So I asked him direct – I was calling the shots, “If you exist then you will have to make yourself real to me.” He appeared not to hear my voice, so I stopped asking and my life returned to a non-church existence.

Meanwhile my eldest son made friends with the Baptist minister’s son and I made friends with his wife. She dutifully invited me to join her to see how the Baptists ‘do it’. I went and was quite shocked to see how the Baptists did it. The minister was wearing trainers. Where was the reverence, the esteem and the awe? The congregation was clapping! I made a hasty retreat. She again dutifully invited me to drink coffee while hearing a ‘remarkable story’ about how a man called Jim Wilson turned his life around. I remember him saying that even the dog knew he had become a Christian. Time passed and again I was invited to a baptism. I could not refuse – it was, after all, my son’s best friend and his brother.

There was almost a party atmosphere. The videos and cameras were everywhere. Everyone was happy – they were chatting, smiling and laughing. I recognised they were doing something which was intangible to me. The church was crammed full – I had to sit near the front. The service began. There were five baptisms taking place – three more than I thought. Each person chose their own song. I never heard such words: *There is a Redeemer; Shine, Jesus, Shine*. Each person told their own story – the great puzzle was beginning to unfold.

My emotions were rising, soaring beyond anything I had ever experienced. Still more testimonies were told, and by the end of the service I thought my heart would break through my body and the handkerchief could hold no more. My whole body shook. I felt faint. The service ended and I was unable to move. I was approached by the minister, Andy Fitz-Gibbon, his wife Jane and a lady I knew through the children. They asked me how I was, what I thought of the service. I was unable to speak. They seemed to be delighted. I continued to shake – they told me that God had touched my life. He wanted me to know that he loved me. I almost fell off the chair, but someone caught me and kept telling me how much God loved me. My body was full of embarrassment. They acted as if this was the most natural thing in the world to happen.

Eventually I went home. I was so shaken, I could hardly draw on the cigarette. The whiskey shook in my hand. “You have overdosed on emotion – you’ll be OK in a few hours,” my husband kindly informed me. But I wasn’t. I felt ill. It lasted for days.

September 9th 1990 was a beautiful day – soft summer sunshine. I took a walk round the garden. I was still not feeling 100%. I lay down on the lawn and ran my fingers through the grass. It was soft and fresh, feeling like only English grass can feel. The garden was alive with colour and beauty. I thought for some reason of an old proverb: *Man feels closer to God in the garden than anywhere else on earth*. I realised again that God was grabbing my attention. I knew at that point that I could resist him no longer. I just knew that he was real and that I wanted him in my life. As I felt that grass under my hands I spoke out loud to him. I told him what I thought, what I hoped and what I felt. Strangely I felt better. I couldn’t wait to tell Jane, the minister’s wife.

So began the process of discipleship classes. I was unsure what discipleship meant, but I knew I wanted to be part of it. Some of it made sense, some of it didn’t. Towards the end of the class I professed the ‘sinner’s prayer’ in the minister’s office. Again I felt so charged with this awareness of what I can only describe as electricity and pins and needles. I felt faint. I said to Andy, “Can you feel it?” but he said that it was for me. He was just there doing what the Lord wanted him to do. But I knew he was elated too.

So it has continued. God continued to shout, he spoke audibly, he awakened all sorts of desires to know him more. Whenever times seemed hard and he appeared distant, I only had to ask, to make the first move and once again he would reveal himself in some wonderful way. From the first scripture passage he shouted at me in Isaiah 43 and told me that I was called by name and was his. He steadfastly taught me Matthew 7 – seek and you will find. Life is not perfect. My walk with the Lord has been extremely difficult at times. But the prickly rose bears the sweetest fragrance.

Sheena was the Church Secretary for a number of years at the beginning of the millennium.

Onwards...

The future is an undiscovered country, but Christians march into it with confidence, knowing that their Lord Jesus Christ goes before them and with them always. For Stocksfield Baptist Church there is much potential as well as great challenges. Our nation is more secularised than at any time in its history, and Christianity has been progressively marginalised in politics, education, culture and the media. Communities have become fragmented, families experience greater stress and breakdown, crime continues to trouble us. We fear environmental catastrophe and weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands. Society is less homogeneous and has lost its rootedness in one agreed overarching 'big picture' or story. Institutional religion is viewed either with suspicion or as irrelevant by many. While alternative spiritualities and therapies proliferate, the churches fail to reap the benefits of this interest. We enjoy a standard of living beyond what our predecessors could have dreamed of and yet we feel empty, alone and fearful.

Yet in other parts of the world the Christian church is growing at an unprecedented pace, especially those which are evangelical (emphasising the authority of the Bible) and charismatic (emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit). Even in the UK new kinds of 'emerging churches' are springing up which seek to

find new ways of being church that relate to contemporary culture. While religious extremism is feared and deplored, our national politicians also increasingly recognise the importance that faith groups play in shaping and sustaining communities. The Christian church still has a vital role to play locally and nationally.

What does all this mean for the Baptists of the Tyne Valley? If they can remain true to their values and historic roots while at the same time finding ever new ways to express their faith in the language and culture of the world in which they live, they still have a telling contribution to offer. If they remain faithful to God and missionary in purpose, if they continue to seek God in prayer above all other competing demands and give their lives wholeheartedly to living for him, then the best chapters of this story are yet to be written.

The history of the Tyne Valley Baptists is a testimony not only of the faithfulness of men and women to God, but even more of the faithfulness of God to them. God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and will never leave or forsake his people. This story is more than the journey through time of a particular group of people. It is even more the story of a God who is alive and at work in the lives of people throughout time. Therefore it would be fitting to end this account by using the words of the Psalmist in the Bible, *“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.”*¹⁶

¹⁶ Psalm 115:1 (N.I.V.)

Reflection

The story of the Tyne Valley Baptists reminds us that God is not simply an historical phenomenon, but that he can be experienced today. His power is still at work in this world. Have you experienced the life-changing work of God for yourself?

If you are a Christian, give thanks to God for your own history and heritage, for those who introduced you to Jesus Christ and nurtured your faith. Commit yourself afresh to following Christ wholeheartedly and without reservation.

If you are not a Christian but have been moved to consider the Christian faith more seriously, why not find a Christian church or friend – perhaps Stocksfield Baptist Church – and find out more about the Christian faith. It could be the best decision you ever made.



An early photo of the current church building in Stocksfield

Bibliography

Baptist Historical Society	<i>Baptist Quarterly (Vol 27)</i>
Baptist Union	<i>The Baptist Manual (Published annually in the nineteenth century)</i>
Baptist union	<i>The Baptist Handbook (Published annually from the mid-nineteenth century onwards)</i>
Copson, Stephen	<i>Association Life of Particular Baptists of Northern England, 1699-1732</i> (Baptist Historical society)
Douglas, David	<i>The History of the Baptist Churches of Northern England</i> (London: Houlston & Stoneman, 1846)
McKelvie, George	<i>History of Stocksfield Baptist Church (album collated during 1980)</i>
Neil, David	Lecture notes from 'Understanding our Tradition – The History of Northern Baptists'
Northern Baptist Association	<i>Handbook (Published annually)</i>

Thanks

The author would like to express appreciation to the following people for their help with this publication: Bill Bailey, Ian and Margaret Douglas, David Lennox, Sue Mills, Vincent and Eileen Tait, and those whose contributions are included in the text.