

Kingsbridge Nonconformists

LHG Meeting 20 February 2013

By Celia Strong with acknowledgements:

1. Sarah Prideaux Fox 1864, Kingsbridge Estuary with Rambles in the Neighbourhood
2. James Fairweather 1912, Salcombe and Neighbourhood
3. Anne Born 2002, The History of Kingsbridge and Salcombe
4. Resource Centre, Cookworthy Museum

In Medieval times the Church in England was under the rule of the Pope and services were in Latin. There were attempts to translate the Bible into English (and European languages) from the 7th century.

In the 14th century John Wycliffe, a religious reformer at Oxford, objected to the Papacy and the wealth and power of the Roman Catholic (RC) Church. He believed the Bible should be the sole guide to doctrine and so he made English translations of the Bible and sent itinerant preachers out to spread the word. But the death penalty was imposed on anyone found in possession of an unauthorised scripture.

In the 16th century William Tyndale also decided to make English translations. He was tutor to a family in Gloucestershire and told a visiting clergyman of his plan, "so that ploughboys should be more educated than the clergyman himself"! At this period of Henry VIII's reign, England was RC and Tyndale, rebuffed, moved to Germany. Even here he had to evade capture because he would be regarded as a heretic and severely punished. In Germany Tyndale translated the New Testament from Hebrew and Greek texts into English. Printing was now available and so copies were printed and sent to England in 1526. Many were distributed despite attempts by the authorities to seize and burn them. Tyndale, his life in danger, then had to escape to Antwerp where he worked on the Old Testament. In 1530 sent printed copies to England but his work was not finished.

Henry VIII became aware of these translations and fearing the popularity of his texts, invited Tyndale to return to England. Tyndale agreed only if the King would allow an English Bible to be printed but this was forbidden by the RC Church.

In 1536 Tyndale was captured in Antwerp and burnt at the stake. Ironically Henry VIII separated from the Church in Rome (to resolve his matrimonial problems) and became Supreme Head of the Church of England and in 1538 published The Great Bible in English, based on Tyndale's translation.

This was an important landmark in the rise of Protestantism in England.

The rise of Protestantism

Religious reformers in Europe such as Luther and Calvin also disapproved of the RC Church and were gaining followers.

In 1547 Edward VI succeeded Henry VIII (but he was only a child). During his short reign Archbishop Thomas Cranmer devised a new pattern of worship especially for the Established Church of England. This was set out in the Book of Common Prayer and imposed by law under the Act of Uniformity of 1549.

Mary Tudor (1553-58) tried to return the country to Roman Catholicism and many were executed for refusal to recant their Protestant faith, hence her nickname "Bloody Mary".

Elizabeth I (1558-1603) wanted to unite all Protestants into one C of E but with more travel, trade, printing and opportunities to circulate new ideas in Europe and in England, other religious groups were forming. The largest Protestant group in England were Puritans. They wanted to remove all trappings remaining from RC times including the Episcopacy (Bishops) and replace governance of the church with Presbyters (Elders).

Puritans were oppressed under James I and many emigrated to the Netherlands and America.

During the reign of Charles I failure to deal with political and religious factions culminated in the Civil War. The King was executed and in 1653 Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector. He abolished the Episcopacy in favour of Presbyters. However there was no longer a legal requirement to attend C of E services. A number of Separatist groups were now able to worship openly to the concern of the Puritans. Those Puritans who were not Separatists called themselves Presbyterians. They wanted to suppress the Separatists and decided the only solution would be to restore the Monarchy.

Thus in 1660 Charles II was crowned. However to the dismay of the Puritans, he restored the Episcopacy. Then he revised the Book of Common Prayer. This was to be the official liturgy of the C of E enshrined in the Act of Uniformity of 1662. All clergy must conform by St Bartholomew's Day, 1662 or be ejected from their church and their living. This became known as the Great Ejection as 2000 clergy became Nonconformists.

Ejected clergy continued to hold services outside the church, known as Conventicles until the Conventicles Act of 1664. This was to prevent religious assemblies of more than 5 people outside the church. In 1665 the 5 Mile Act prevented ejected clergy from living within 5 miles of their parish. The Corporation Act prevented Nonconformists from holding civil or military office or receiving a degree from Oxford or Cambridge. Thus this Act excluded a substantial section of English Society from public affairs, a situation which persisted until the 19th century.

Perhaps this explains why on St Bartholomew's Day, 7 February 2012 a Service of Reconciliation was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury in Westminster Abbey to mark the 350th Anniversary of the Great Ejection.

Thus under Charles II:

The C of E held the middle ground

The RCs were too strong to suppress but had no power

Dissenters, despite efforts to suppress them, were growing in numbers.

Religious persecution in 17th century England was severe. Nonconformists were punished and imprisoned, many lived in abject poverty and died, others emigrated.

George Hughes was ejected from St Andrew's Church in Plymouth in 1662 and was imprisoned on an island in Plymouth Sound. After his release he moved to Kingsbridge and "could be seen walking up Fore Street in his old cloak green with age and on beside the ancient shambles' pillars before a quiet death." He died 9th July 1667. Thomas Crispin, founder of the Grammar School, erected a marble tablet in memory of George Hughes which can be seen in St Edmund's Church.

Kingsbridge probably became a centre of Nonconformism because of its remoteness but also it was said, for the welcome it afforded persecuted preachers. However, magistrates were appointed to enforce the law of the Conventicles Act. George Reynell of Malston and John Beare of Bearscombe were particularly keen. Matthew Hele of Halwell and George Bastard of Gerston were more lenient. In fact they were prosecuted for not suppressing religious assemblies! In Kingsbridge the constable, John Lucas, was also said to be very brutal.

At this time small groups would hold house meetings. Open air sites were carefully chosen for larger gatherings. These included high ground where look-outs were employed eg Sorley Green and Lincombe Hill. Ticket /Tacket Wood was secluded and the name derived from the showing of a ticket to gain entry for worship. The Saltstone was a rock in the estuary which was extra-parochial and so not illegal.

Some Notable Events

John Hicks was ejected from his church in Saltash in 1662, he moved with his wife and family to Kingsbridge, “a peaceful place where he could preach to a house-church”. A forthright and fiery preacher, he was often in trouble with the magistrates and constable. He wrote a notebook: “A narrative of persecution against Dissenters in Kingsbridge and other places in Devonshire under the reign of Charles II” which was published in 1671 detailing the sufferings of himself and others and their families.

On Lincombe Hill near Salcombe, Hicks had a notable experience.

John Hicks at Lincombe Hill ²

“It was here that Hicks came close to capture and death. The worshippers were awaiting him, saddles from the gentlewomen’s palfreys placed in a half circle on the ground as seats. Hicks preached the text: “the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”. As he came near the end of his deeply felt address the bearers caught the sound of galloping horses approaching. At once they dispersed, Hicks himself seeking shelter at Blake’s farm nearby. The farmer urged him to the barn where he buried himself under a thick pile of straw. Soon the pursuers arrived and started to ransack the place, the furious magistrate and his men asking for “those seditious brawlers”. Seeing the old decayed buildings, overrun with ivy, he declared he would have them closely searched and if any of those scoundrels were found it would be better for the farmer if all his ricks and barns were in a blaze. The party searched the house and the outbuildings and clattered up the ladder to where Hicks was hidden. One man seized a pitchfork and probing into the straw nearly sent its prongs into his body, but he was not discovered and so after a while having grown weary of the search they rode away. The farmer and son went to find Hicks and all embraced and wept for joy at the good man’s preservation. After dark he returned home.”

The Saltstone Rock was used by various preachers too.

Saltstone Rock ²

The Saltstone became a useful place for illegal worship as a rock in the estuary was extraparochial.

“The top of this rock, at ebb o’ the tide presents a level platform near five score feet in length and half as much in breadth, so that a goodly number of worshippers can stand thereon and have blessed breathing of prayer and be refreshed with spiritual exhortation.”



43. Nonconformist service on Saltstone rock, a painting from 1672.

On one occasion the Rev. John Hicks and Rev. Brand walked from Kingsbridge to Charleton Creek and then started for the rock in a boat. A large company had already assembled, among them Rev. James Burdwood who was ejected from St. Petrox in Dartmouth and farmed at Batson. They were chanting "God is our refuge and strength". Brand preached first, then Hicks – a discourse, suggested by their position, upon the 'Rock of Ages' and finally Burdwood.

Then all prayed that they might be strengthened to suffer and that better times might be granted in the nation. Night and tide came on but on that praying ground they lingered until the water washed their feet, telling them to arise and leave."

John Flavel (ejected from Diptford and living at Slapton) also preached on the Saltstone.³

Rev. James Burdwood - was finally driven out from Batson by Beare's men who were "sent to wreak havoc at his house, seize and drive away his cattle, rip the locks off his barn doors and, the final brutality, to hang his daughter's pet dog before her eyes".³

Hicks appealed to Geo. Bastard as a kindly magistrate to stem the persecution and procured alleviation but only temporarily.

Two bishop's emissaries were sent to find Hicks. Hicks happened to meet them on the road and dined with them at an inn. In conversation they told him they were to look for the infamous preacher John Hicks. Hicks kept up a good pretence but, when they were finished eating, went to the stables and, mounting his horse, he revealed his identity to the amazed informers, beating them about the head with his staff before galloping off.

Constable John Lucas died in 1671 and Hicks was accused of his murder and imprisoned at Exeter for a time. Hicks left Devon and later joined the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion and was executed in 1685.

Nonconformist Churches in Kingsbridge

Baptists

Protestant groups were forming in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In 1609 in Amsterdam, the English Dissenter John Smyth founded the Baptist movement.

1613 the first Baptist church was formed in London. (In Cromwell's time this was allowed).

1640 Baptist Society in Kingsbridge, possibly the earliest outside London.

1662 Three ejected clergy became leaders of the Baptist Society and they met in meeting houses and on the Saltstone.

1689 The Act of Toleration under William of Orange granted freedom of worship to all Dissenters ie Nonconformists. This was another significant event for all Nonconformists including the Baptists.

1700 First Baptist Minister, Martyn Dunsford (son of an ejected clergyman).

1702 small chapel or meeting house built off Fore Street (passageway now called Baptist Lane).

There was a Baptistry outside.

1799 a larger church built on site of present church and the former building became a cellar, tenement and schoolroom. (For sale in 2012).

Church enlarged and refurbished several times, most recently in 2011/12.

(on a LHG visit, workmen showed us a substantial ship's timber which they had revealed. It had been used to support the gallery above the front entrance. We were told that ship's timbers were also used in the construction of the first church.)

1990 Service to commemorate 350th anniversary of the founding of the Kingsbridge Baptist Society with hymns and songs from the 17th – 20th century.

After 1662, not only were religious meetings disrupted and broken up, but funerals too so burial grounds were often in remote places. In 1673 the Baptists were given a plot of land at Venn which is still tended today. Venn is near Churchstow.

Society of Friends or Quakers

Another 17th century group of Nonconformists was founded by George Fox. He protested against the Presbyterian system with its superfluity of priests and ministers. He rejected the idea of any individual or group setting up as the keeper of another's conscience introducing a new view of Christianity and form of worship. He preached with great power and emphasis and his followers founded the Society of Friends.

In 1655 George Fox visited Kingsbridge and stayed at the White Hart Inn. He preached with fervour and at length such that the innkeeper feared it would affect his trade. Fox was urging the gathering to take the "light of Christ Jesus into their hearts" whereupon the innkeeper appeared at his side with a lighted candle and escorted Fox to his bedroom!

In 1659 Kingsbridge Society of Friends was formed and held monthly meetings in local houses. In 1663 Fox was invited to return but this time the meeting was secretly held in the house of George Pollexfen at West Alvington. The Society of Friends (or Quakers), like other groups were repeatedly tracked down, attacked and fined. Fox was eventually imprisoned elsewhere.

In 1693 William Hingeston gave a plot of land for burials at the corner of Fore Street and Syger Lane (now Duncombe Street). In 1697 land was purchased on Fore Street to build a Meeting House which opened in 1703 (the site of the RC Church today). There was seating for 200. Behind is a burial ground and in 1880 remains were removed from the original ground and re-buried here. The earlier ground was sold to house a fire engine and provide meeting rooms for the town. Today the corner has trees and seating. In the 1880s the number of Quakers declined and the Meeting House was sold.

It was used by the Salvation Army for some years. They certainly made an impact:

Extract from a letter to the Gazette, 12 Sept 1887, on 'Street Nuisances'

"Perhaps you will also grant me space to refer to another matter, respecting which complaints are by no means infrequent. The members of the Salvation Army appear to arrange their processions on Sundays at times which cause them to disturb all the other religious congregations in the town. It is a regular occurrence in our chapels, as soon as the service has fairly commenced, to hear the beating of a drum and the shrill strains of a cornet accompanied by the voices of a lot of persons. I am not among the number of those who indulge in wholesale condemnation of the Salvation Army, for I know of cases in which I believe they have proved a means of doing good, but I do think a little good feeling and consideration for others on the part of the managers would prevent a repetition of the cause for complaint to which I have given expression.

Trusting these remarks will be received in the spirit in which they are written, and that they may lead to a cessation of the causes of annoyance to which I have referred

I am, yours truly,
T.F."

Finally the property was acquired by the Roman Catholic Church and although considerably altered, still retains some features of the Friends Meeting House. The burial ground remains too and although the gravestones are propped up against the wall some notable names can be seen.

A number of prominent Quakers were active in trade and commerce. They ran the Town Mill on Mill Street and produced woollen cloth for export. They set up the first bank in Kingsbridge. A Quaker

School was opened in the 18th century in Melbourne Place off Fore Street as a “dissenting alternative to Crispin’s Grammar School”.

Cookworthy and Prideaux were well-known Quaker families but like other Dissenters they were excluded from the professions.

1970s Society of Friends re-formed and met in a room at the Cookworthy Museum.

1991 they purchased a property on Leigham Terrace which is their Meeting House today.

Congregationalists

These were the successors of a body of Presbyterians.

1662 John Hicks was a Presbyterian.

1667 Presbyterians were said to have built a chapel on the west side of Fore Street at the upper end. (Perhaps it was built as a house to avoid detection?).

1780 New Presbyterian Chapel built on east side off Fore Street.

1791 Presbyterian Chapel adopted a new name in line with a new form of worship, Congregational.

As the numbers grew, the church was enlarged and then rebuilt.

1858 New Church “handsome and commodious Gothic church. Very plain and unpretending in character”. It was faced with cut stone from Bowcombe Quarry and windows were glazed with a new kind of patent quarry glass. There was seating for 270 On the ground floor and 190 in the galleries. In the west gallery was a fine two-manual organ. Also in the church was a table and a chair, significant remainders of turbulent times.

The Table

8 Feb 1749 the evangelist preacher George Whitefield came to Kingsbridge to preach on the Quay. Nathaniel Cranch from a Nonconformist family lived on Mill Street. He brought his kitchen table for the preacher to stand on.

At 8.00pm in the evening Whitefield preached to 1,000 people on the Quay. Among them was a boy, Philip Gibbs who climbed into a tree for a better view. He must have been inspired as he later became a Baptist minister in Plymouth. In referring to this service later, the preacher afterward wrote, “in the solemn, still moonlight I hope some began to think of working out their salvation with fear and trembling.”

The table was much later presented to the church and was used as a communion table. It has a commemorative brass plaque.



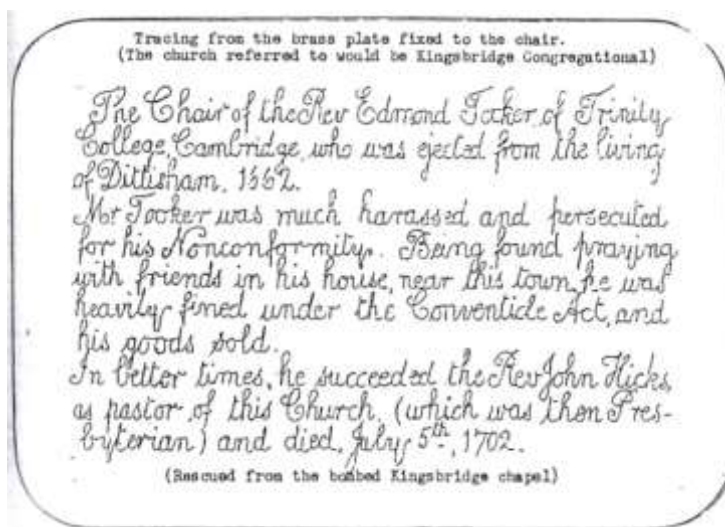
The Chair

This was also in the church and had the following inscription:

The date indicates that Rev. Tooker must have been pastor of the earlier church on the west side of Fore Street during troubled times.

More recent turbulent times affected the church too.

On 2 January 1943 at 12.30pm a German bomb hit the church and other properties causing irreparable damage. The organ and the table were rescued and are now in the Congregational Church at Loddiswell. The plaque from the chair was found in the rubble.



The site is in Riverview Place and houses built there are called Chapel Mews. Some remains of the church walls can still be seen in the passageway.

Methodists

This Protestant group was founded in the 18th century by Charles and John Wesley at first within the C of E. But John Wesley felt obliged to preach his message of salvation by faith outside the established church. John Wesley rode on horseback preaching to large gatherings in towns and villages but he did not visit this area. So how did Methodism come to Kingsbridge?

In the 1800s barracks were built in Dodbrooke for the Napoleonic war. Some of the militiamen were Welsh Methodists. They wanted to worship on Sundays and hired a house in Dodbrooke for the purpose. The services were in Welsh but when local people showed an interest they were conducted in English. Then the Methodists employed the Kingsbridge town crier to announce the service e.g. "this evening in Mr Parker's schoolroom off Fore Street at 7 o'clock, The Reverend John Jordan, Methodist Preacher from Ashburton, will hold a religious service; public invited". These were known as Wesleyan-Methodists and as their numbers grew they were able to purchase a site at the upper end of Fore Street and build a fine church where it stands today. Kingsbridge Methodist Church opened in 1814. It was enlarged and improved in 1870 and seated 400. It underwent major refurbishment in 1999.

1867 Behind the Regal Club on Church Street was the Bible Christian or United Methodist Church seating 250 people. The money to build this church was from Mr Peek of Hazelwood.

Plymouth Brethren

Founded in 1830. A group of Irish Anglicans brought to Plymouth by John Nelson Darby.

1853 Built the Gospel Hall on Fore Street. A church with colonnaded front and set back from the street. It is now the Evangelical Church.

Jehovah's Witnesses

1974 There were 25 members who met in a room at the Cookworthy Museum.

1985 They acquired the old British Legion HQ off Fore Street which is now the Kingdom Hall.

Refuge Chapel

This was a small chapel on Mill Street mentioned by Sarah Prideaux Fox writing in 1864. It was used by High Calvinists.