

A History of Gunnersbury Baptist Church
Trinity Martyrs' Memorial

By Doreen Heynes

In the 1851 census of church attendance in Chiswick reference is made to the following Anglican churches: St Nicholas - the parish church and St Mary Magdalene. There is one Roman Catholic church. Each of these has a fairly high attendance among adults and Sunday School children. Only two free churches are mentioned. "Strand Chappel" is described as Independent or Congregational with poor attendances of only 20 adults and 30 children in the morning and 30 adults in the evening. The master of the weekday schools states, "the inhabitants all around are fearfully destitute of the sense of religious obligation". The second chapel was Chiswick Dissenting Chapel, which is also described as Independent or Congregational where the attendance was 100 adults and 90 scholars in the morning and 114 in the evening. So in 1851 there were comparatively few dissenters in the area but between 1870 and 1900 several free churches were built. It is probable that one of the two following factors changed the situation:

1. The impact of the Evangelical Revival in 1859 which breathed a spiritual zeal into many.
2. The influence of the preaching of Charles Haddon Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle or preaching locally, for he is known to have been involved with the work of the Chiswick Dissenting Chapel which later became Chiswick Baptist Church. Up until 1873 the area of Chiswick known as Gunnersbury had no centre for public worship.

By 1873 Rev William Frith had gathered together a group of eighty dissenters who were anxious to form themselves into a church. William Frith began as a village preacher and for a while was a worker with the London City Mission. He had held three pastorates before coming to Gunnersbury which is described as 'a rising suburb of London'. After leaving Gunnersbury he had three more pastorates and initiated church building in three of the churches where he was pastor. He traced his ancestry to John Frith who was martyred at Smithfield in 1533.

John Frith was a Protestant martyr. He met Tyndale whom he assisted in translating the New Testament into English. He denied the doctrines of transubstantiation and purgatory. He was condemned by the Bishop of London to be burned as an obstinate heretic. He was publicly burned on July 4th 1533. He died with great courage reaffirming his views at the stake. All contemporary writers agree to his extraordinary abilities, his great learning, his unaffected piety and his simple life. He was the first of the English martyrs who maintained the doctrine of the sacrament which was subsequently adopted in the Book of Common Prayer.

The group who began meeting with Rev William Frith as pastor were called Trinity Martyrs' Memorial Church. Their basis was the Thirty-nine Articles of the Episcopal Church. They met in an iron church for which the total cost was £604.15.6. The foundation stones for a permanent church were laid on July 4th 1877 and the church was opened on May 22nd 1878 with the Right Hon. The Earl of Shaftesbury presiding.

The total cost for the church including fitments, law charges and architect's fees was £3536.14.7½. The cost of the manse built 1879-82 was £628.8.1. The following extract from the trust deed indicates how the cost was to be covered: "On this land is erected a Meeting House and Parsonage called Trinity Martyrs' Memorial Church and Manse, purchased by William Frith with his own monies and partly by money raised. Members promised to raise remaining £525 for completing and improving the property."

The Iron Building was removed to a site ¼ mile away in 1878 and was known as The Mission Hall. In 1881 it was replaced by the Lecture Hall - the cost of the land and hall was £1284.0.7.

During the early 1880s additions were made to the buildings. A debt of £1,300 was incurred which could not be met. A High Court writ was issued to recover the money. The Church was dissolved. In January 1886 the Trustees communicated with the London Baptist Association and offered to give it the property (subject to the mortgage debt) - the Church, the Manse and Lecture Hall. The London Baptist Association accepted the offer and the actual dissolution was finalised in September 1886. During the period of uncertainty services continued without a break. It was not until 1900 that a thanksgiving service could be held 'to celebrate the total extinction of the debt on the church buildings'.

There are no minutes of church meetings before 1887 so it is not possible to record the activities of the group. However, the schedule which was the basis of Rev Frith's teaching is stated as follows in the deeds:

'That the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only rule of faith and practice, the reality of God in three Co-equal and Co-eternal Persons - the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost. The Spiritual divinity and sinless humanity of Jesus Christ as God's own Mediator - the Godhead and personality of the Holy Ghost.

The fall of man by sin, the efficacious grace of God - redemption by Jesus Christ and justification by His blood and righteousness, regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Ghost.

The believer's security in Christ, the first and second resurrections.

The pre-millennial Advent of Christ and millennial reign and judgment of all men.

The eternal bliss of the saints and the everlasting punishment of the wicked.

Although full membership is open to all who hold the above doctrines, yet the only mode of baptism recognised will be by immersion and profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

The memorial character of the Lord's Supper and that the minister of the said meeting house hold the above sentiments.

Signed: William Frith.'

The inaugural meeting of Gunnersbury Baptist Church took place on June 11th 1887 under the chairmanship of a Dr Underhill. The debt on the buildings was stated as £1750.

It was explained that in the formation of a Church it was usual to agree upon the terms of a Covenant in which the members entered into fellowship. The following was presented to those present by Rev J Cumming Brown who was to become their pastor.

"We whose names are herewith subscribed having been brought in the providence of God to worship together in Gunnersbury Baptist Church, and being agreed upon the propriety of becoming more closely associated in the fellowship of the Gospel, do hereby so join ourselves together, with the pledge of a reciprocal esteem and confidence and in devout dependence on the blessing of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, one God. And thus by a voluntary act constituted into a church of Jesus Christ, we will from this time forth endeavour to bear one another's burdens and to rejoice in one another's welfare, we will strive together for the faith of the Gospel, we will seek to walk in the ordinances and commandments of the Lord; we will welcome to our fellowship Brethren in Christ whether dismissed to us from other churches or on giving satisfactory evidence of conversion to God: we will administer discipline if unhappily it should be required as far as possible 'in the Spirit' and according to the directions of the New Testament. And finally we will watch and pray in the common behalf that as a church we may be like a light shining in a dark place and as individuals be faithful and persevering followers of our Lord Jesus Christ unto everlasting life."

The 33 people present had signified that they wanted to join together in fellowship. Each of them had conversed personally with Rev Cumming Brown. On their part, there was a unanimous desire that Rev Cumming Brown should undertake the ministry of the Word among them and the London Baptist Association were in agreement with this. The Rev Cumming Brown stated that he believed that God had called him to the work and in spite of great difficulties in the work in dependence on Divine help he accepted the call. For his salary he was to receive the pew rents and free use of the Manse, also the supply of the pulpit during his holiday should be paid by the church. The chairman of the meeting further states his intention of supplementing the income from pew rents for the first three years up to £200 if they did not reach that sum.

The election of the diaconate was postponed for a year and a Gentlemen's and Ladies' Committee were appointed for that time. In 1887 the Church joined the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. The minutes of meetings are sparse at this time and this is explained in a footnote by the pastor that 'in consequence of the frequent absence of the secretary from church meetings regular minutes were seldom made and the omission has been supplied from the pastor's notes of meetings which are necessarily imperfect'. Rev Cumming Brown resigned in 1891.

The Rev J P Clark was appointed in 1892 and there were then 42 members. A Church Committee was formed in 1891 for a period of three years and at the end of this time seven men formed the first diaconate. There was a great concern to wipe out the debt and sales of work were organized and collection boxes issued. The number on roll in 1895 had reached 86. Besides this Sunday morning and evening service and Sunday School, Sunday afternoon series were introduced for

young people. A choir was formed and the weekday services included Bible Readings on Tuesday afternoons and a weeknight service on Thursdays. A monthly missionary prayer meeting was also held. The custom of giving the first communion offering of the year to missionaries was introduced. In 1897 there is reference to signs of spiritual growth in the church, the Sunday School and the recently formed Christian Endeavour Society but the weekday services were poorly attended. The pastor showed great concern for the work among the children and young people and frequently asked for prayer for this. The children met in the Lecture Hall.

In August 1889 Rev Clark wrote a letter to the church stating that he was counselled to resign the pastorate in consequence of weighty medical opinion as to the need of change of air for his family and especially one of his children whose health was causing concern. The church regretfully accepted his proposed move and great sadness was expressed at his farewell tea and meeting.

The Rev H Murray accepted a call to the pastorate in 1900. During his first year the debt was removed and the thanksgiving service was reported in the local newspaper.

The Sunday School Anniversaries appear to have been the highlight of the year. Occasional evangelistic missions were organized. By 1903 there were 119 members on roll - 30 new members resulting from one such mission. Continued interest in missionary work is shown - a missionary secretary is appointed in 1909 and in the same year a member left for missionary work in Spain. Mr Murray retired in 1920.

The Rev G Prideaux was appointed the next pastor in 1921. He stated right from the start that he was not interested in finance but in spiritual growth. He was anxious that the church should make its presence felt in the area. On Saturdays a sandwich board man walked the High Road. He supported movements against the Sunday opening of Cinemas and Madame Tussauds. He also made his feelings known about Sunday games in Gunnersbury Park. Mr Prideaux forwarded the church's missionary interest - he introduced the idea of a missionary Sunday and made this a regular event. The Church joined Chiswick Baptist Church for a United Missionary Exhibition.

Mr Prideaux left in 1931 and in 1932, when he was 84, the Rev H Stone was invited to act as pastor in charge for at least one year. In his reply to the church secretary, Mr Stone wrote: "Feeling the warmth that beats through your words, relying upon God for the health, grace and wisdom needed I will join with you all in earnest effort to make Gunnersbury 'a praise and glory' to Him who redeemed us by His blood."

Mr Stone stayed for four year and his zeal for preaching the Word knew no bounds. He was loved, respected and valued by all age groups.

During his pastorate the membership rose from 63 to 77. In his report for 1933 the secretary wrote as follows of Mr Stone's work"

'We cannot close without expressing our keen appreciation of our pastor's faithful work, for his unflinching adherence to the Truth and above all for the truly wonderful way in which God has led and is still leading us.'

For some time it had been felt that the Lecture Hall, which was $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away was unsatisfactory and inadequate. It was not possible to accommodate all the Sunday School scholars there. Mr Stone had the vision of building a hall on site and he launched a campaign to bring this into effect. The Lecture Hall was sold and the land behind the church was purchased on which the new hall was to be built. The new hall was opened in 1934 in the presence of many civic and denominational dignitaries. It was opened totally free of debt and in honour of Mr Stone it is called The H E Stone Memorial Hall.

The Rev D V Evening became pastor at Gunnersbury in 1937. He and his wife had been missionaries in the Belgian Congo (as it was then). On several occasions they interested the church in the work there by giving lantern lectures. The church eagerly supported this work including the children who were formed into a group of missionary supporters known as Ropeholders.

Mr Evening was anxious to reach outsiders with the Gospel and Guest Sundays were held once a quarter. The Church, including the gallery, was filled to capacity one Sunday in 1938 when Mr Evening was appointed Mayor's Chaplain. It was a real privilege for the church to receive all the officials of the borough.

By now the storm clouds of war were gathering and many of the activities of the church had to be curtailed. Mr Evening became involved in ARP work and this reduced the time he was able to give to the church. The church and manse were bombed but Sunday services continued in the Hall. In November 1940 it was announced that Mr Evening had received and accepted a call to London Road Baptist Church, Portsmouth so the church had to reluctantly let him go after such a short ministry.

It was recognized that the increasing difficulties presented by the war, especially regarding transport, made it impossible to call a pastor for some time. A moderator was appointed but the church was at a low ebb - many people including some of the deacons moved out of the area. After a few months the moderator was forced to resign because of ill health. There was such an obvious lack of leadership and man power that an approach was made to the thriving Baptist Church at Duke Street, Richmond to help Gunnersbury extend its influence and witness in the district. The minister Rev Alan Redpath, agreed to give support and he made the following proposals to Gunnersbury's remaining nucleus:

1. Richard to assume responsibility for Sunday and mid-week services at Gunnersbury.
2. Gunnersbury to be regarded as a branch of Duke Street but retain separate membership and elect its own secretary and treasurer annually.
3. All present members to sign basis of faith as at Richmond. All new members to assent to this.
4. There should be a joint committee consisting of Pastor and three deacons from Richard and the secretary and treasurer from Gunnersbury.

Immediate help to be given:

- A) to organize a Girls' Life Brigade.
 - B) to supplement Gunnersbury's Sunday School teachers.
 - C) a consecutive theme for Sunday and mid-week services.
 - D) an assistant pastor to be appointed to Richmond and such a minister to be responsible for Sunday services at Gunnersbury and act as superintendent.
 - E) each church to contribute 50% of his salary.
- The situation to be reviewed after a year.

These proposals were accepted by Gunnersbury without dissent.

The Rev J A Caiger was invited to become the Assistant Pastor at Duke Street and Minister in Charge at Gunnersbury from October 1942. The church and manse were restored and reopened at Easter 1943.

The church became governmentally independent of Duke Street from June 1948 and an acknowledgement was made of the generous help Gunnersbury had received from them during the 5½ years affiliation. Annual thank offering days were established from the beginning of Mr Caiger's ministry and from September 1949 the church was able to become financially independent of Duke Street.

Mr Caiger's preaching was deeply spiritual and conveyed his great love and intimate knowledge of the Word of God.

From the beginning his spirituality is indicated in the minutes of the Members' meetings and Deacons' meetings. In 1948 a revised church constitution was introduced i.e. the manner in which the church, as a member of the body of Christ, should conduct itself and its affairs. This included:

1. A statement of the doctrinal basis of the Church.
2. A constitution setting out details of Church administration.
3. The Covenant of Membership.

A copy of (3) is appended.

The diaconate and eldership were formally established and regulated. A Membership Recognition Committee was formed. During Mr Caiger's ministry the following organisations catered for the children and young people: Young People's Fellowship, Scripture Union Meetings, Campaigner Clan, Youth Club, Holiday Bible Club - all these in addition to the work of the Sunday School. Much of the current youth and children's work now comes under the umbrella of Covenanters.

There is a Barnabas Committee whose brief it is to coordinate the outreach of the church by organising church lunches, evangelistic suppers, sport activities and Church Weekends. It is always understood that the Sunday services and mid-week Bible Study and Prayer Meeting are pivotal to all else that takes place and members realize their own responsibility to reach out to those who do not know of God's love in Christ and bring them under the message of the Gospel.

Through its history the church has had a concern for missionary work and this was always a high priority for Mr Caiger. For many years he was on the Council of the Redcliffe Missionary Training College and for much of that time he lectured there. The church had much involvement with many of the students who worshipped with us. During Mr Caiger's ministry a Missionary Council was formed whose purpose it is to keep the church informed of missionary activity in the world and how we should support it. It is also the link between the church and our missionary members. The Council are responsible for planning our annual Missionary Weekend and providing missionary speakers for four mid-week meetings and two evening services each year. At the missionary weekend a special thank offering is taken and the money donated is shared between our missionaries and the societies they represent.

The Rev Caiger served the Lord faithfully at Gunnersbury from 1942 until his death in 1993. He was greatly loved by his people who realized how privileged they were to sit under the ministry of such a gifted Bible teacher and pastor. On the whole Mr Caiger declined any public recognition of his anniversaries but in 1963 (his 21st) the date was recognized - a special tea was held and a special preacher was invited for the Saturday evening service. Mr Caiger's Jubilee was celebrated at Redcliffe College. Ex-members from every decade of his ministry joined present members. Speeches of appreciation were given and presentations were made. A special thanksgiving service took place in the Church. Characteristically Mr Caiger's response was, "Give the glory to God".

During Mr Caiger's ministry the membership did not often exceed 100. He once described Gunnersbury as a conveyor belt - many people came onto the church roll but circumstances forced them to leave the area. Many moved on and out into specific Christian service, some in this country and now a few abroad. For years the services have been placed on cassette and these cassettes are circulated world-wide among those longing to be fed by the deeply spiritual teaching.

Mr Caiger was much in demand as a preacher and chairman at conferences and special meetings. His love for God's Word together with his gentle, gracious manner made him a valued friend and a wise counsellor to many pastors and a great number of people.

As a fellowship, we miss him greatly and we are currently waiting on God for guidance as we seek a new pastor.

'We thank God for all that is past
And trust him for all that's to come.'