

At the beginning of the 19th century there was a tremendous growth in the non-conformist belief throughout the country, evidenced by small chapels and churches springing up in cities, towns, and villages. The worshippers in these communities were known as "DISSENTERS" and often experienced hardship and persecution in the early days,

This is the story of one such church, in the town of Swaffham in Norfolk, known as a Baptist Church. Briefly, Baptists adhere to the New Testament truths of "Believers Baptism" (as opposed to the baptism of infants) and congregational church government (as opposed to a hierarchy of government from above.) Each church or chapel aspires to be self-supporting financially although from the early days there has been help and friendship between fellowships through associations.

In 1821 a labourer of Swaffham, William Jackman, "had it laid upon him" to start a Baptist Church. He persuaded a group of friends that this was right, and they hired a barn and borrowed chairs and forms from nearby cottages and invited speakers from other newly-established Baptist fellowships to come and lead worship and preach. One of the first to do so was John Hewett, a member at Wymondham, who walked 23 miles there and back there regularly. Having proved his belief in the fledgling church, the following year he became the first pastor- and served it faithfully for the next 30 years.

The church prospered and was able to build a small meeting room or chapel in August 1823, with a burial ground at the corner of Whitecross Road/ London Road. It had a powerful influence in Swaffham despite suffering opposition and occasionally intolerance. All non-conformists had to apply for a licence for each service, obtained from the Bishop's registrar and costing 6p - non compliance was punished by a hefty fine on all those attending, and most were poor farm labourers who could ill afford it.

John Hewett reported that the church was a "powerful influence in Swaffham" in 1832. "The congregation is steady and larger than ever. I preach 6 or 7 times a week. There are 4 houses open for public worship every Sunday evening, about 9 prayer meetings during the week, 3 Sunday schools for 170- 180 children and about 20 teachers." (N.B. There was no universal state provision for education until the Act of 1880. Most churches were active during the 19th century in teaching the basic '3 Rs', and many built schools for that purpose, raising the money and providing teachers.)

Swaffham in 1854 had 12 inns and taverns, 3 breweries and 11 beer houses – for a population of 3,000. It was hardly likely to have been a peaceful town! The church and its many activities, choirs, concerts, outings, seasonal celebrations, afford an alternative lifestyle for all ages. But, occasionally it bore the brunt of attacks from the drinking population after pulpit messages decrying the demon drink!

Other practical demonstrations of Christian love and charity began. There had been poor funding for needy Baptists from the outset but, an early insurance scheme was set up to provide for times of sickness and death in the family (frequent in the days before the NHS and vaccination), from epidemics of smallpox, cholera, scarlet fever, TB, etc.

With no other help available and living at subsistence level with threat of the workhouse in old age or earlier, the town's people recognised that the church was reaching out to them with something special and the congregation grew quickly as they came to learn more about

their Father in Heaven. 26 were baptised in 1867, 34 in 1877. Altogether, in the Eastern Association, the average number of baptisms was 120 per year! Baptist chapels sprung up in many of the villages and the Norwich area, some of them were Bacton, Costessy, Attleborough, Old Buckenham, Carleton Rode, Great Ellingham, Foulden and Worstead. Because of their close contact and support for each other, they were able as a group to contribute to suffering mankind in other parts of the world, in particular they helped to send John Thomas and William Carey to India as missionaries, and two Norfolk men, William Bampton and James Peggs, followed. Joshua Tinson and James Philippo of Dereham were supported in the epic fight against slavery in Jamaica, Swaffham labourers empathised with their misery and were "praying earnestly for their deliverance." When the slaves were liberated in Empire dominions the congregation held services of prayer and thanksgiving.

The small chapel at Whitecross Road was no longer sufficient to hold the fellowship and in May 1860 the Station Street church was opened with 500 seats. The ministers at that time were mostly local men, one of them we know of being Henry Vince, whose father was a market gardener. He was baptised at Swaffham at the age of 18 in 1843 (Baptisms at this time usually took place in the open air in rivers or lakes). He proved himself a gifted preacher soon after and his church friends prayed for him to go away and train for teaching. He came back to Swaffham to take over his father's business after a few years teaching in Suffolk, and for the next 30 years preached in the Baptist Churches locally and taught in Sunday school at Swaffham. Eventually, returning from the business, he then became the pastor at Foulsham Baptist Church.