

## **Chapter 1 Early Beginnings: fasting and praying**

In 1700 Baptists in Cullompton met for worship in a dwelling house as a branch of the church at Upottery, and continued to assemble in houses around the town for the next 40 years. This was not unusual as there are many instances of non-conformists meeting in this way. For example, at the same time the Baptists at Prescott met for their services in a farm house known as Old Hall, for at least 8 years. Our links with Upottery are explained by the climate of religious persecution that prevailed in the seventeenth century. Of particular importance to our story was the introduction of the Five Mile Act in 1665. This prohibited clergy who would not take the oath of allegiance ( these would normally be non-conformists) from holding services within five miles of a corporate town. The penalty for failing to comply was a fine of £40, a vast sum at this time. Upottery was significant because of its relative isolation, being well over five miles away from any major towns and close to the county boundary. The records of Tiverton Baptist Church give full account of the lengths to which Baptists were prepared to go in order to worship. As their history explains:

‘Baptists from Tiverton were accustomed to start from their homes with provisions on the Saturday in order to cover the twenty-one miles [ to Upottery ] in good time for the Sunday morning worship’ (1).

Unfortunately, we have no surviving records for our church at this time but it is easy to imagine that similar events were to be found in Cullompton . In 1688 the Act of Toleration was passed which reflected a more relaxed attitude by the authorities to non-conformists and this enabled them to apply for a meeting house to be licensed by the authorities. We know from local records that the first such licence in Cullompton was granted in 1690, but unfortunately we do not know what denomination applied for it. At this time such licences were usually for a meeting room in a

private house, as our church had begun in 1700. The records at Tiverton also give small glimpses of early Baptist life in Cullompton, where in March 1703 the church at Tiverton was called upon to hear a complaint against one of their members that had attended the service at Cullompton, who it was stated 'did set up singing as soon as preaching was finished to the great dissatisfaction of both preacher and congregation' (2).

Cullompton in the early years of the eighteenth century was a stronghold of dissenters and in 1736 the vicar reported to his bishop in Exeter that the population of his parish was 3,558 souls, of which 728 were dissenters; made up of 508 Presbyterians, 133 Anabaptists, and 87 Quakers. He also claimed, somewhat falsely in the case of the Baptists, that numbers were decreasing since the Presbyterians had no settled preacher and the one they had came from Dartmouth, and 'that they must inevitably sink when he dies'.

By 1743 a meeting house was erected where our present church now stands and for some years the services were conducted mainly by members of the church from Prescott. If we examine the licences issued under the Act of Toleration we find a record of one being granted for our church in September 28th 1744. The application, which still survives, reads as follows:

' I Robert Jorden of Culmstock in the County of Devon do hereby certify that the house lately erected and built in the town of Cullompton in the said county, belonging to John Elworthy and others, is set apart for a Place of Religious Worship, there to be performed by me the said Robert Jorden and others'.

This gives a number of interesting glimpses into our first chapel. First it was being serviced by the people of Prescott, Jorden(Jordan) as discussed below was a member at that Baptist church . Second , that the building belonged to John Elworthy and others, in other words it was held jointly most probably by a

number of local church members. We know from other records that there were at least 133 Baptists in Cullompton parish in 1736. Later rather vague evidence from the mid-nineteenth century town directory suggests that the chapel was built through voluntary subscriptions.

We have little further information on the first chapel building but we do know that it had a small burial ground attached which was first used in 1743. The Public Health Book for 1854 gives a few limited details on the layout stating that there are houses adjoining the burial ground on one side, whilst the chapel abuts the other and there are gardens on another side.

Records at Prescott show that our early ministry was by their pastor the Rev Channon with the assistance of three teaching elders, each of them 'preaching in every branch of the church'(3). These were Justinian Manning, Robert Jordan, and Charles Baker, of these Robert Jordan was reported to have 'lost his respectability in the world and his usefulness in the church' and communion was withdrawn from him at Prescott in 1752, but as we have seen he played a key role in our early church life. These people appear to have preached at Prescott, Upottery, and Cullompton during the first part of the eighteenth century.

Our limited surviving accounts for this period state that in 1751 'a day was set aside by the brethren for fasting and prayer, when it was unanimously agreed by them to invite Mr Nicholas Gillard'. He had already been preaching to the Cullompton Baptists, but was now asked 'to take oversight of them in the Lord' which he accepted and continued his official connection with our church for almost fifty years(4). Whilst our records are silent as to the details of his long ministry we do learn that 'he was highly respected by all parties' and in the records of Prescott church he is described as a worthy minister and pastor. Furthermore, the celebrated Mr Toplady, author of the hymn 'Rock of Ages' and vicar of nearby

Broadhembury , recommended his flock to visit Gillard's services in case Toplady's successor ' Should not prove to be a man of God'. Quite clearly Gillard was popular and effective with a considerable local reputation.

Although our early development owed much to the Baptists at Prescott relations between the two churches were not always easy. For example, in 1752 the church at Prescott reported that George Tucker 'had desired to join with us and that the Cullompton church did not think that they should give him a letter'. After much discussion members from Prescott let the people at Cullompton know that they would accept him without a letter of recommendation.

As Gillard became older and his work more difficult the church agreed to provide him with a an assistant minister, Samuel Rumson from Exeter, who eventually took over the entire ministry in 1803. His time at the church was rather short and in a little over two years after his ordination he was most suddenly removed from his labour. His bereavement was 'deeply felt by his sorrowing people', but although short Rumson's ministry also proved to be productive as in the time of his pastorate, Mr James Viney, a church member, was sent into the ministry first at Bridgwater, an old and established church of some importance, and then to Beckington. The Cullompton church was not only growing physically but also spiritually in its witness. Rumson's ministry is recorded on a memorial tablet placed on the wall of our church entrance, evidence of his strong links with the church members.

In 1807 The Rev Robert Humphrey of Stogumber was invited to the pulpit at Cullompton , and after preaching to the people for 15 months 'with many pleasing evidences', he was asked to take pastoral charge. We learn that 'the early part of his ministry was particularly blessed by God and that he had great satisfaction of seeing the cause very considerably increased and strengthened'.

This time of revival and growth also involved church planting, with a group from Cullompton helping to establish a church at Sainthill in 1816.

For most of our early ministers and members we know very little of their lives and character. However, we are fortunate in Robert's case in knowing a good deal about him and it is useful to examine his life in some detail as it illustrates the vision and purpose of these early Baptists (5).

Robert Humphrey was born in the village of Wilton, Northants, in 1771. His father was a farmer and grazier who regularly attended the local parish church. This had an impact on Robert who confessed in his diary that he grew up 'very zealous and had mean ideas of Methodists and Dissenters'. However, at the age of 17 he faced the question 'what am I doing and where am I going?'. He was converted and his life revolutionised. He used all his free time studying the Gospel and eventually entered the Bristol Academy under the instruction of Dr John Ryland, minister of Broadmead Baptist church. He became student-pastor of Stogumber Baptist church where he began his full time ministry in 1798. During this time he preached three times every Sunday, organised a regular course of village lectures nightly, established a Sunday School and trained the teachers. He also travelled widely for the Baptist Itinerant Society across the whole of North Devon and Somerset and was involved in planting several churches.

It was this energy and experience that was brought to Cullompton in 1807, where he came with 'implicit faith in God'. The church grew under his leadership so much so that two side galleries had to be built. He continued his practice of itinerant preaching in the villages around Cullompton. These included Sainthill, Bradninch, Thorverton, Kerswell and Honiton all of which had churches planted because of his efforts. None of this hampered his ministry at Cullompton as measured by the steady growth of the church and

the enlargement of the chapel. Sadly, in spite of its growth, the church could not afford to pay him an adequate stipend and economic circumstances forced him and his wife to open a drapery shop to supplement the family income. He finally left Cullompton to preach in North Curry in Somerset . When Robert resigned in 1831 his successor, the Rev Elliot of Minehead, worked for just two short years in Cullompton., and in 1833 the Rev Amery , a student of Bristol College, was called to our church. We know little detail of his work except that all agreed that his ministry was successful and ‘accompanied with tokens of divine approval and rendered the means of promoting the general prosperity of the cause’. He continued his ministry until 1840 when he moved to the church at Torrington.

In this first phase of our church’s life much had been achieved. A chapel had been constructed on the main street of the town, ministers had been called and the membership increased. The faith was strong and resolute, strong enough to call members into the ministry and to take part in many schemes of church planting.

## **Chapter 2 Growing in Faith: building a new school room**

The period from around 1840 to the end of the nineteenth century saw the church grow both in its membership and in terms of the building. Unfortunately, we have no records of the original building but we do know it was expanded at least twice during the nineteenth century. The first stage of growth occurred under the ministry of the Rev Uriah Foot who became the pastor in 1842. The memorial tablet in the church tells a little of his ministry and of the sadness of him losing a young son at the age of 16. We know little more about the man or of his life in Cullompton, although we do know he rented a house in Church Street as at this time we had no manse. Uriah had succeeded the Rev Chapman who like so many of our early ministers had come from Bristol College in 1840. During the long ministry of Uriah Foot the congregation was well sustained and ‘on different occasions the chapel and school rooms were largely improved at a cost of several hundred pounds, nearly the whole of which the people contributed themselves’ (1). Sadly, failing health led him to resign in 1869 and the ‘termination of his pastorate was greatly regretted’. Having accepted his resignation the church found itself without any ready replacement and applied to C. H. Spurgeon, president of the Pastors’ Collage in London, for advice in the selection of a new minister.

The church called the Rev Forth from Pontypool in October 1869 who ministered in Cullompton for just three years. When he resigned Uriah Foot returned but sadly died shortly after. He was followed by the Rev Benjamin Miller who became minister in 1872. This was to mark the start of another major phase of church expansion led by Benjamin whose ministry lasted 19 years. He was born in 1839 and brought up in Dorset within the established church. As a boy he gathered information from all sources to educate himself. In this he was very much helped by his grandfather who was a man of God. Although brought up in the

Church of England, at the age of 19 he moved to Yeovil and it was here that a considerable change came into his religious views and he became a Baptist . In 1864 he was appointed an agent of the Western Association of Baptist Churches and did the work of an evangelist in the Crewkerne district. During his time at Cullompton the membership of the church greatly increased. He stated in his letter of acceptance that he intended to ‘offer the plain, but I hope earnest and affectionate, preaching of the old truths of the gospel’.

His ministry was not always easy as some individuals within the town showed open opposition to the church. For example in 1873 Mary Gillard offered herself for membership but our minute book for that period records with sorrow ‘ her withdrawment because her husband began to persecute her and oppose her’. But there were many successes, as in 1875 when five people were baptised. In the same year Miller decided, along with other members of the church , to distribute a monthly tract around the town. He invited those ‘ that had leisure to engage in this work ‘ to give out copies of ‘ The Monthly Visitor ‘of the Scottish Tract Society . This outreach continued and in 1879 the church held special services between March 16-21 . These were held each day and the entire town was visited the week before with tracts and invitations to the meetings. The whole effort was repeated again in October of that year at the request of the Association . By 1880 money was running out and the church had to consider dropping the ‘ Monthly Visitor’ .Yet against these difficulties ‘there was so much harmony, unity and hopefulness, that the meetings were thoroughly cheering to all present’. During 1880 more members came into the church, although financial problems still persisted. There were also other more personal difficulties as in 1884 when the church had to face up to the painful matter of disciplining a member Henry Hellier, who was baptised into the church in 1883. He had fallen into ‘grave inconsistencies of conduct, drunkenness being one thing, it was felt absolutely necessary to deal with the case’. The pastor went to see him and found him sorry, weeping aloud at what he

had done, but he was soon to relapse into his old ways and finally excluded from the fellowship.

During the late 1870s the church, despite its financial problems, decided to expand its building to cope with the growing Sunday School (see chapter 6 ). This was an act of great faith since no money was immediately available for such an expansion. The building of the new school rooms in the early 1880s is a strong testament to the faith and determination of these nineteenth century Baptists.

In May 1882 a successful bazaar was held in Cullompton's Assembly Rooms to assist the funds for the proposed new school room. Indeed, for some five years previous the teachers and scholars of the Sunday School had been contributing weekly, raising some £95, they also had raised another £60 by making of goods for sale. The total cost of the building was around £516 of which £232 had been raised and the rest borrowed from the Memorial Fund of the Baptist Association.

By August 1882 the memorial stone in the new school room was laid in a ceremony performed by J.H. Hepburn of Hele and the Rev A. Pidgeon of Sainthill. This was a measure of the success of the ministry of Benjamin Miller and all the hard work of the entire membership. Behind the stone were placed a bottle with copies of the 'Freeman' and 'Baptist', along with local newspapers and a document containing a record of the work undertaken. 'The day was to be remembered as a most encouraging one in our works', claimed the minute book at that time.

At Christmas in 1882 the school room remained unfinished but so eager was the minister to use the room that on Christmas day a meeting of a few friends was held in the new room for prayer. As it was the very first meeting the small group 'dedicated the room and the entire building to God'. The meeting was held at 2.30pm

with tea at 5pm for those who had no other engagements and we learn that ‘ a fairly good company’ spent time singing and in prayer. The minute book ‘claims that this service was one of the most hallowed, with a great fervour and power in prayer’.

The building was finally fully completed in March 1883 when a special service was held . The whole enterprise had preoccupied the church for some considerable time and even by May 1883, when the annual social tea was held, it was found that the fund for incidental expenses was in arrears, ‘ but friends took a cheerful and generous view of the matter, and a considerable portion of the balance was received at once’.

The church was also growing spiritually as new members were being brought to the Lord. In November 1882 two sisters, Anna and Elizabeth Samson, together with William Hartnell wished to be baptised. By December many were being ‘ newly brought to Christ and others were anxious to be saved’. In the following February three other names were submitted to the church for baptism and membership. The church was also responding to wider social concerns, especially the great problems of drunkenness that preoccupied Victorian society. In 1886 our church unanimously agreed that a total abstinence association be formed. Also that year special services were held that brought another 20 people into the church, with three from one family. As numbers continued to increase the success of Miller’s work was also recognised beyond Cullompton when he was elected president of the Devon and Cornwall Baptist Association.

The church received further good news in 1887 when the gift of two adjoining gardens were conveyed to our church by the local solicitor and philanthropist Fredrick Burrows. These were used to establish the Burrows Trust which is still providing funds for our church to-day. His generous gift enabled the church to use the rent from this ground to make further improvements to the fabric of the

building. For once we see in the minute books that there was no clear agreement as to the course of action. To resolve the issue a special meeting was held at which the following ideas were discussed:

1. To repair the roof on the west or street side of the chapel.
2. Remove the present pulpit and provide a platform for preachers.
3. Remove the organ gallery and place the organ on a platform on a level with the preachers platform.
4. Take down the south side wall and lengthen the chapel in that direction to compensate for the removal of the gallery.
5. To take steps to provide a classroom for infants on the ground floor.
6. To provide some means of warming the chapel in winter.

The meeting did not agree to motions 5 and 6 but the rest were approved and yet once again the chapel was modified. It seems likely that the gallery that was removed was one of the two added in the time of Robert Humphrey.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the usual number of deacons in the church was three, but in 1891 there were only two serving deacons. Again at this time it was common for the minister to take the church minutes as there was no church secretary. The motion to have a church secretary was turned down at this time as Benjamin Miller was happy to carry on taking the minutes. This was to be Miller's last contribution to the church, after a long and extremely significant ministry. He was in the heart of his work when he was called to the Lord. Typical of the man is the fact that his last act was to write his sermon. The minute book records that 'his sermon, based on 1 Peter v.10, was prepared ready for the morrow, but on the morrow he was in the grip of a stern harbinger of death'. He was a tower of strength to our church. His energy knew no bounds in that he not only was minister but he was also president of The Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society, The

Total Abstinence Society , The Band of Hope and The Local Preachers Association. Beside all of this he had a family of 6 children to provide for all of whom were baptised into the church. When he died at the age of 52 there were an estimated 500 people who attended his funeral at Cullompton. His ministry is commemorated by a tablet inside our church, which also shows the long links his family have with another church family, the Labdons.

At this time in March 1891 the town suffered a late and very severe snow storm that raged for some 36 hours preventing the holding of the church's social tea. In 1892 a new minister arrived, the Rev John Horne from Bristol, and in the same year the church formed a Christian Endeavour Society. In the following year the risk from a local outbreak of scarletina forced the closure of the Sunday school for the whole of November. We also find a record in our minute books of an early church magazine called the 'Monthly Visitor' chiefly supported by local advertisements. Unfortunately, we know very little about this publication but we can draw the logical conclusion that the church was continuing the outreach started by Benjamin Miller.

### **Chapter 3. A New Century: the process of modernisation**

At the start of a the new century the church had a new minister the Rev Joseph Butler who took over the pastorate of the church in 1901, after what appear to have been rather unhappy times in the last years of John Horne's ministry. All we know of Joseph was that he was a happy and friendly man who brought a good deal of optimism to the church. This was a time when the church was starting to develop a new found confidence to organise more social events and treats for the Sunday school (see chapter 6). The ministry of Joseph Butler was relatively short, as was that of his successor the Rev Joseph Beaupre, both only stayed in Cullompton for three years. Joseph Beaupre arrived in 1904 and we learn that he had a genial character and was a good visitor to the sick and infirm. His time was marked by the significant event of the building of the first Manse next to the church, on part of the land given by Burrows in 1887. Prior to this ministers had lived in rented property in different parts of the town. This was not unusual at a time when most people rented from private landlords and the church had little money to buy a manse. The church agreed to build the manse in 1905 under the direction of Mr E Labdon ( local builder and church member ), they were also hopeful of gaining money from the Baptist Union Twentieth Century Fund . Unfortunately, this was not forthcoming and as no grant was made the church once again had to rely on its own resources. This was not the only difficulty for in addition to having to raise a considerable sum of money there was also some internal dissent within the church. The minute books are largely silent on the details of the problem. But it seems some members objected to the Manse being built so close to the chapel and initiated a court case ,claiming the loss of light. This was unsuccessful but obviously opened up divisions within the membership and created unnecessary difficulties. When building began the foundation stone was laid by Mr Smith of Reed and Smith the papermaking company and John Pidgeon from the church. The building made

good progress and was completed in 1906 at a cost of £453. The minister and his family moved into their new home in March 1906., after the Manse was officially opened by Mrs Reed of Thornlee near Exeter. The occasion was marked by a public meeting in the evening addressed by the Mayor of Tiverton to which people were asked to pay 6 pence for admission. Just at the same time that he was preparing to move into the manse the pastor asked the church whether they would like him to continue his ministry as his time of office was at an end in October of that year. The church agreed that he should be invited to stay for a further two years, although they warned of the difficulties in guaranteeing his salary unless weekly offerings improved.

At this time the church also took stock of its lay preachers and these included Mr E Labdon ( listed in the town directory as a builder and undertaker in Fore St.), Mr C. Raven (bootmaker), Mr M. Labdon, Mr J. Samson ( bootmaker and cycle agent in Fore St), Mr W. Gunn, and Mr W.G. Paul (baker and confectioner in Fore St.). Clearly our church was well served spiritually and that many of these people were important traders within the town.

The financial difficulties continued into 1908 when the pastor was again warned of the problem in meeting his stipend and that funds were only sufficient to meet his pay for the next three months. Not surprisingly it was shortly after this that he had decided to leave. At this time there were some 59 church members and a strong confidence in the need to carry on undertaking further improvements to the building. Over the next few years renovations were carried out on the organ and improvements made to the choir stalls.

In 1909 the church was also confident enough to call a new minister and the Rev Bonsor was offered a stipend of £84 and the use of the manse at a rent of £2 per year. By 1912 the membership was still growing as a further 7 people were baptised. Interestingly,

attendance at church meetings was fairly low, usually averaging about 15 members. Improvements continued as the members voted to install a new organ in 1912 at a cost of £200., and by May 1913 some £150 had been collected.. Much of these monies were raised by sales of work which became a common feature of the church at this period.

1914 saw the resignation of the Rev Bonsor on health grounds, a resignation that was accepted with deep regret by the church . At the start of the war the church became involved in the conflict, first directly through a number of its members joining the armed forces, and second through collecting for relief efforts. During the period 1915-16 the church collected for the British Red Cross, the Soldiers Institute at Aldershot, the French and Belgium Relief Funds, and Christmas parcels for soldiers at the Front. In 1916 the minute books also record that the church secretary was empowered to secure the chapel against aircraft, we are not told how he should achieve this! By the end of the war in 1919 the church had lost a number of young men in the fighting and these were remembered in a commemorative window at a cost of £85, this was officially unveiled in May 1920 by Mayor Selwood.

It is also interesting at this time to pause and reflect on the number of different offices in the Church, some of which carried with them a salary. For in addition to the secretary and treasurer, there were sidesmen, a caretaker , organist and organ blower. The organist commanded a salary of £10 per annum, whilst the blower was paid £3 . The organ and its use also became the centre of some disagreements between the organist and the church. The organist claimed the right to use the organ for teaching his pupils whenever he wanted to. One of the pupils in question was Eric Batten who was being trained but was soon appointed deputy organist in 1924. He was appointed organist in 1927.

The 1920s were a period of church growth as membership grew

and giving increased. There was no doubt a level of optimism after the war years. In part this was reflected in the continual modernisation of the building, as for example in 1923 when electric lighting was installed at a cost of £32. In the same year a baptismal service had been held for 8 people. We also learn that in 1925 it was suggested 'that in view of the increased large attendance on Sundays it would be wise for all seatholders, especially those requiring their own seats, to occupy their seats early'. The organist was asked to give a little extra music before the service. There were also increased weekly offerings and a further six baptisms in 1926. These were exciting times for our church as in 1926 we hosted the Devon and Cornwall Baptist Association meeting, although heavy rain kept many people away and only about 88 people sat down to tea. The minister at this time was the Rev Noel Ives who after 5 years of successful work at Cullompton told the church that he planned to move to Exmouth at the end of 1931.

The process of modernisation and change continued into the 1930s, under the ministry of the Rev Wilden who was invited to the church in 1932, but only came the following year. For reasons unknown to us his ministry was extremely short and he left after just 12 months. A new pastor, the Rev Hugh Ferguson from Lowestoft was appointed almost immediately through the suggestion of the Rev Butt who was much active in our church during this period. In that same year Mr F.L. Labdon offered to give £50 toward the building of a new primary room and kitchen as a memorial to his late father. This was agreed and the project went ahead at a cost of £183.

The period of the late 1930s was a somewhat troubled time in the church, the minute books record serious dissension between one member and the church leaders that led to his membership being suspended after one fiery meeting in 1937, thankfully reason prevailed and the exclusion was rescinded in 1938. To make

matters worse the church was once again without a minister, although this was rectified in 1939 when the Rev Burton accepted the pastorate. In that same year the minute book records that Eric Batten resigned as organist , 'having been called to serve his country'.

During World War Two the schoolroom was used in the war effort and functioned as a YMCA canteen and centre for the armed services based around Cullompton. Members of the church were as ever active in the centre and worked tirelessly to look after the various troops who used the facilities. This was much appreciated by the men and many of their letters of thanks survive, typical of these is that by a Mr B, Hollow of the RAOC stationed in Malta in 1943 who wrote:

‘ I have travelled half way around the world, and I can honestly say, I have not met anyone, as hospitable as the people of Cullompton. I also wish to thank the personnel of the YMCA for their kindness to myself and brother soldiers’(1).

Many people were involved in this work but from the church Mr and Mrs Whitton seemed to have taken a major role, Mr Whitton was also our long serving church secretary. Towards the end of the war the Rev George Sterry was invited to be the pastor for a period of 5 years. He came to Cullompton from Bridlington where he had served for six years before going on to minister to the East St Church in Bristol. Many years later he was to come out of retirement to serve our church again.

As usual in the church, plans were already being made to bring back the schoolroom into church use and with the compensation from the military authorities for their use, the church was able to proceed with a renovation of the schoolroom. Not being ones to waste anything, they found that the blackout fittings left by the military could be sold for 30 shillings.

The church in 1946 also had to deal with an outbreak of bad behaviour, as the minute book states that they would have to seek ' police help in stopping rowdyism of youths outside the church during the services'. By 1948 the church started a mission around the town especially on the St. Andrews estate but this was short lived as the following year the minister stated his intention to resign and move to Bristol. Once again the Rev Griffen stepped in as a stand in pastor, before the Rev Clifford Henson came in 1950. This year also saw large development plans being made for the inside of the church , these involved changing the seating and moving the baptistry to the front of the chapel in its present location. These changes to the building were part of the 250th Anniversary celebrations.

The 1950s were a somewhat mixed time for the church. There was great optimism after the war as represented by the church redevelopment and a spate of baptisms , with 7 young people coming forward in 1951 alone. Sadly, there was also a time of much internal strife. It centred around the sudden resignation of the Rev Henson who moved to Southmead Baptist Church in Bristol. His sudden departure 'caused deep concern amongst some church members' as the minister had felt he had lost the confidence of the deacons. In turn many members stated that they had lost confidence in the officers of the church. This unpleasant period fortunately was soon put in the past as the church welcomed a new minister in 1956, the Rev Boocock.

During the years from 1909 the church had also taken on the responsibility of the chapel at Ashill as a branch of their work. This involved controlling the premises and covering various costs of repair . It is to Cullompton's great credit that in 1954 the Rev Clifford Henson could report that Ashill had been well maintained and that it had 12 members , a Sunday school and a women's meeting.

## **Chapter 4. When Two Became One**

The 1960s saw the church facing great financial difficulties partly because of rising costs and in part because of the major work undertaken in the 1950s. Such problems preoccupied the church meetings during the early years of the 1960s as the church found itself overdrawn at the bank. As usual the membership responded with many money raising schemes, particularly popular being barbecues, many of which were held at Rydon House, Willand the home of Eric and Beata Batten. More significantly the church also spent considerable effort in drafting a new constitution under the leadership of the Rev Boocock . This was adopted in 1962 and formalised many of the existing workings of the membership and the church officers. Shortly after this the minister resigned and the Rev Thompson was invited to the pastorate in 1963. The church was still having financial problems although it was still receiving new members as for example in 1964 when Miriam Gloyn applied for membership, and the year before Ken and Lynn Edwards were received into the church.

At this time the church had been asked by the Devon and Cornwall Association to consider relinquishing its control of Ashill, as it could be now linked with Uffculme and Sainthill. This was readily accepted.

The 1960s was also a time when there were a good number of young people in the church and youth activities were developing in a strong way (see Chapter 6). In 1965 seven people, including Ruth Edwards and Stuart Lindsell, had asked to attend baptismal classes. It was also a time of recognition for the long service by some members with Reg Whitton being made a life deacon after serving in various church offices for 29 years and Gladys Drewe was given a gift as she retired after long service as a deacon.

In response to the changing social times, this was the so called ‘

swinging sixties' as the Beatles and pop music exploded on the scene, the church provided a youth club under the control of Ken Edwards ( see chapter 6). In 1967 he asked if the school room could be used as a ' club room and coffee bar', this was agreed . Indeed the young people became far more active within the church and started to take special services that were much appreciated.

In 1967 at the height of the Biafran Civil War , Bill Roberts, a Cullompton man working in Nigeria with the Scripture Union came to give a talk to the church about the plight of the Biafran people. How could the church help? This was at the time before the building of the M5 when every Friday night during the holiday season the traffic would crawl down the A38 often blocking the centre of Cullompton. How could these people be helped? Ken Edwards solved both problems by opening an all night café in the schoolroom . Posters were placed at each end of the town and motorists had plenty of time to read them. Volunteers from other churches joined our members to cook and serve light meals from 8pm to 8am. Coffee and bacon butties was a favourite. It was a service much appreciated and all the money went to Biafra.

One of the biggest changes during this time was the joining with the Baptist Church at Bradninch, mainly due to the increasing problems of meeting the cost of the ministers stipend. The church had been obtaining help from the Home Work Fund for some years and it was suggested in 1972 that we join with Bradninch. This had been precipitated by the end of the Rev Thompsons ministry. At a special church meeting under the chairmanship of the area superintendent, it was recommended that ' under the present circumstances, we should have one minister for the two churches. Each church to pay half of the minister's stipend and expenses and that a new manse be built on the outskirts of Cullompton nearest to Bradninch . Each church to decide what to do with their manse'. There were no objections to this although some were unhappy with the idea of selling the manse. By contrast Bradninch

wanted to defer any decision on a joint ministry for a further year. To overcome the problems of having no minister the Rev George Sterry kindly agreed to take services on three Sundays per month. In the same year Reg Whitton resigned as church secretary after 33 years. He was replaced by Beta Batten , with Norman Lindsell as treasurer.

The mid 1970s was also a time when Cullompton was growing as the first of what became many new housing schemes was started. The church gave recognition of this and was making efforts to interest more local people in its activities, with a 'bring a friend' service being organised.. By 1973 Bradninch had agreed to the merger and plans were laid for calling a joint minister. The details occupied the two churches for some considerable time and many joint meetings were held. Problems arose over who should be called to the ministry as the two churches failed to agree. Cullompton had further problems with the death of its part time minister George Sterry in 1973 after his second term as pastor at our church.

Agreement was eventually reached with the acceptance of the Rev Edmund Palmer as minister to both churches. Eventually in 1977 a new manse was built on the new housing area around Manitoba Gardens in Cullompton and the old manse sold much to the regret of some members. Despite all of the early problems this was to mark the start of a successful partnership between Cullompton and Bradninch. A joint newsletter was established, along with a joint 'young wives' group. House groups were also established and proved popular as did fellowship evenings between the two churches.

Despite the fact new houses were being built in Cullompton the church was unfortunately not attracting many young families as was pointed out in 1979. This was to mark the start of a long term trend characterised by an increasing population in the town but

fewer younger people attending our church. It was decided to visit the new local estates and literature was prepared for this along with copies of St John's Gospel. In addition the minister started an after church meeting for young people.

In 1980, the fifth anniversary of the joining with Bradninch , special services were held at the two churches and the partnership was duly celebrated.

The 1980s also saw two other significant developments - one was the encouragement for more people to join in the church services, and more significantly the proposal to move away from a closed membership . The latter was only agreed after much thought and prayer. The church was also well served at this time by a wide range of members who often took the strain of church office in their stride despite problems of illness. This was especially so in the case of the then church secretary Beryl Lambert. Also at this time the church embarked on a programme of evangelism under the title of 'talk about' . Edmund Palmer was able to report in 1983 that such meetings had been well attended and he proposed to carry on these meetings later in the year. There was also a large-scale crusade held in a tent on the Community Fields and Ken Edwards reported that some 300 people had attended. He also stated that the Crusade choir formed for the occasion would continue, and they are still singing today. The late 1980s saw further efforts by the church to reach out to the new housing estates as visits were made to the new houses at Oak Park in 1986 and 1987.

1987 also saw the resignation of Edmund Palmer who moved to Burnley and this was to mark the beginning of the end of the joint ministry between Cullompton and Bradninch. The old problems arose as the two churches could not agree on which minister to call, this led to Cullompton exploring the possibilities of calling their own pastor in 1988. During these difficult times we were

fortunate in being sustained by the work of the Rev Matthew Francis who had retired to Cullompton. A letter was sent to the congregation explaining financial support needed to call a new minister, this brought 19 replies representing an increase of £61 in weekly offerings. All agreed that we should go ahead thus cutting the links with Bradninch.. There were many practical problems to overcome especially the dividing up of the money from the jointly held manse.

In 1989 the Rev John Alvis was invited to take up the ministry at Cullompton, he came with a young family and did much to add to the Sunday school. Under his ministry the church opened a play group that was led by the minister's wife, this is now the 'Noah's Ark' playgroup which has proved extremely popular and still meets on our church premises. It was also at this time that the idea was put forward to have coffee after our morning service, which has now become a regular event. Unfortunately, troubles arose in the church, largely over a new style of ministry, and by 1993 his work was terminated in much sadness. The church at this time was in a somewhat confused state but was fortunate in 1994 to have the services of an experienced and caring pastor in the shape of the Rev David Luce. He agreed to act as our minister and was 'on loan' from Upton Vale church at Torquay. Under his leadership the church came together again and experienced a happy time that saw membership increase. It was also a time of great loss as a number of key members were called to the Lord. The church lost the following servants; Ivor Rees, Beata Batten, Gladys Drewe, Matthew Francis, and Joy Lindsell. Quite naturally this left the membership short of their considerable skills and they have been very difficult to replace.

The second part of the twentieth century had seen considerable changes in the church, financial problems had led to a joint ministry, but then Cullompton had the confidence and support to go it alone again. The town itself was changing during this period.

It was growing rapidly but many of the new, younger families had jobs in Exeter or outside the area and as such had few ties with the town. The church found it increasingly difficult to reach these new families a problem that continues to-day.

## **Chapter 5 Into the Twenty First Century: Building in Faith**

When David Luce resigned his ministry in 1998 the church was already embarked on a major programme of rebuilding of the scale reminiscent of that which occurred in the late nineteenth century. The work involved the construction of a new modern kitchen, a new vestry and for the first time some new toilets within the main body of the building, as the previous ones were outside in the back courtyard. The project was largely the idea of David Luce although the late Rev Matthew Francis had earlier thoughts on changing the entrance between the church and schoolroom and some of these designs were incorporated into the rebuilding. The idea was to provide more modern facilities both for the members of the church as well as the various groups that use the schoolroom, especially the play group. This has been a major undertaking and involved a range of money raising schemes including a sale of promises, coffee mornings, second hand book sales, antiques evenings and even Burns Night Suppers courtesy of our exiled Scots! These and many other events together with generous help from the Chapel Case Appeal which the church gained in 1999, has enabled some £40,000 to be raised toward the cost of the redevelopment. This period was also marked by the loss of a number of members from our fellowship, including Mrs Lyn Edwards, a long time Sunday School teacher and pianist, along with our long serving organist Mr Eric Batten; both are greatly missed.

Other activities arose or were rekindled in David Luce's ministry, especially the formation of a choir ( see chapter 8 ), the formation of a church bookstall thanks to the efforts of Joan and Gilmour Jenkins. There has also been considerable work done on the fabric of the schoolroom and the new buildings by Joan and Gil along with Norman Wellard. We have also been fortunate in having an experienced and dedicated church treasurer, Norman Lindsell, who has guided the finances for the new building. All of this effort resulted in the completion and dedication of the new building at a

special service in May 2000.

The church has also had the confidence in its future to call a new minister, the Rev David Evans and his wife who came to us from Bath in 1998. As I write this church history David and other church members are busy organising a major programme of outreach to the new housing areas of Cullompton. Yet again we can see echoes of Miller's work in the nineteenth century and the efforts of the 1970s. These new attempts are taking an approach of visiting some 600 houses in the town and giving out copies of the Jesus video. Only history will record whether we meet with success, but whatever happens our past history strongly suggests that with the Lord's help the Baptist church will be witnessing in Cullompton for many years to come. We also hope to provide many more activities in the new premises that will add to our outreach within the community.

## **Chapter 6 The Sunday School and Youth Activities.**

The first record of our Sunday school is from a minute book of 1856, when the ‘ teachers of the Sabbath School ‘ agreed to observe a set of rules . At the meeting were some 15 teachers, including the superintendent John Pidgeon. From this we can draw a number of important facts. First the church must have had a well established Sunday school by this time given that there were so many teachers and although we can not date our beginnings we do know that Tiverton Baptist church had a formal Sunday school by 1809 (1) Second we can also deduce from having 15 teachers that there must have been a large number of pupils in 1856. Of course at this time education for most people was limited as there was no state provision. As a consequence attendance at Sunday school was considered important by many families.

Victorian society was heavily regulated and controlled and rules were important not only in society but also within our church. The Sunday school imposed rules on the teachers and the pupils. In 1856 there were 19 rules for the pupils to observe. These included; ‘ Any child being absent five times during the quarter without giving a satisfactory statement for doing so cannot be permitted to remain in the School’. Also that all children ‘ should return to their homes when dismissed and not remain in the streets profaning the Sabbath’ (2). As well as punishments there were rewards for those children who regularly attended. They were given a ticket, and when twenty had been collected in a quarter they were entitled to a book. The scholars were instructed in bible study and by 1879 consideration was given to whether any of them should compete in the Exeter Sunday School Union ‘ Industrial Exhibition’.

During this time of the Sunday school there was a considerable expansion in the number of people attending and this was in no small part to the great work of John Pidgeon the superintendent of whom we know very little. He was obviously an educated man and was a miller living and working at the lower mill in the town.

The children were also treated to parties ( so called winter and summer treats), the first recorded being in August 1879, when the pupils met in the schoolroom at 4pm. This was to become an annual event that was eagerly awaited by children who probably never had any real holidays. The early outings were local and continued to be so until the early twentieth century as for example, in July 1915 when ‘ the teachers and scholars met in the schoolroom at 3pm to form up and march to the field kindly lent by Mr Lawrence , tea was provided and various games were played until 9pm when they marched back to the Bull Ring , having sung a hymn’ (3). The minute book tell us that after ‘ prayer we all went home feeling that we had a happy and enjoyable time’. The ‘ Great War’ not only limited the summer excursions but also brought personal tragedy to the Sunday school . In September 1917 Percy Labdon , ‘ was killed in action’. Before the war he ‘ was an earnest and consistent teacher’.

After the war the summer outings started to go to the seaside and for many children this was their one visit to the coast even though it was relatively close by . A popular destination was Teignmouth which the Sunday school visited in 1919 and ‘ a most enjoyable time was spent ‘ with tea being provided ‘ on the pier at 5.30 and all did justice to it’. These outings were usually joint with the Wesleyans and always by train. The last act was at Cullompton station where the ‘ scholars formed up before parting and thanked the station master for the excellent arrangement of the railway service’. These treats or outings continue to-day and in recent years the summer ones have often gone to Forest Glade at the kind invitation of Freda and Norman Wellard.

The other important annual event in the life of the Sunday school was the anniversary service . We are told by the minute book for 1915-1937 that , ‘ one of the most successful anniversary services was held in May 1922 when the Rev Scroggie was the preacher,

and his address and sermon was much appreciated'. The 'attendance at each was good , the chapel being full morning and afternoon, and in the evening it was packed, every available bit of room was taken up'. At this time and right up until the 1960s a Sunday school was held in the afternoon and classes were divided by age and by sex for the older pupils. The numbers attending were impressive averaging 100 for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

With this vast number of people many things were possible . The Sunday school for example raised considerable amounts of money for the church and charitable organisations. By the 1920s sales of work became regular events as in 1924 when the following stalls were arranged:

Jumble stall -Mrs Nichols

Household Stall - Mrs B. Labdon and Miss H. Discombe

Sweets and cakes- Miss Soul and Miss Paul

Fancy goods- Mrs F.Labdon and Miss A. Labdon

Mens goods- Mr E. A. Batten

Bran pie Miss D. Fare

Tea -men teachers

The entry charge was 3 old pence and the sale was deemed a great success as it raised over £30 to buy bibles and hymn books for the Sunday school.

Progress for the pupils in bible study was a serious and an important part of their training with scholars being examined to gain certificates from the Sunday School Union. Part of this organisation visited Cullompton in 1927 and made various suggestions to improve the Sunday school. These included ' that classrooms be made more attractive in the way of colouring and table cloths on the tables'. This was also a period of changing educational ideas since in 1928 a conference was held by the

Exeter and District Sunday School Union on the 'teaching of temperance and the League of Nations principles'. Charles Raven the school superintendent addressed the Cullompton teachers and urged the need for change. This in part was a plan brought in by Mrs Ives, the minister's wife. It seems to have mainly consisted of a reorganisation of the classes by age. By 1930 further improvements were being urged by the Exeter Union, who argued that 'primary classes should have more ventilation, a carpet for the floor and also something for the legs of the chairs'. Clearly interest had now turned to improving the environment for the small children.

One of the biggest blows to the Sunday school was the death of its superintendent of 27 years, Charles Raven, in 1932. He was a local boot maker who lived in Lower Street and had dedicated his life to service in the church. At his memorial service the scholars were encouraged to give their hearts to Jesus and to serve him whilst they were young, 'for it was at a young age that Charles Raven had accepted Christ as his Saviour'. A memorial tablet is to be found to Charles Raven, appropriately placed in the schoolroom. The attempt to find a worthy successor was a time of much reflection for over a month, after which the post was offered to Mr F. Gunn, who accepted for a 12 month period but in fact held the position until 1937.

The Second World War brought great hardships to both scholars and teachers. But their sufferings were minor compared with those enduring the bombing in London. In answer to an appeal from the London Baptist Sunday School Union a gift of £1 15s and 6d was sent in March 1941. The dark days of the war restricted activities and the Christmas treats had to be held in the day school as the schoolrooms were being used for other purposes ( see Chapter 3 ). At this time Mr E. A. Batten was playing an increasingly important role and by 1944 he had accepted the job of superintendent 'until such time that a new minister was appointed.

At the end of the war the Sunday school had nine teachers with classes meeting in the morning and afternoon. This was also a time when thoughts were being given to how to provide more activities for the older children, especially the girls, during the week days. The Rev Sterry expressed ' his deep concern over losing them from the Sunday school and from our Fellowship'. Gladys Drewe kindly offered to arrange activities for the older girls although what happened is not recorded in the minute book , we can have no doubt that Miss Drewe would have made a positive contribution. Her commitment to the church and Sunday school was strong and she was still teaching children over 40 years later, and in total she worked for 62 years as a Sunday school teacher.

During the late 1950s the minister raised the issue of adopting new methods of teaching to reflect what was happening in the day schools, concern was also raised over the shortage of teachers. and it was proposed that Norman Lindsell and Paul Lambert be asked to help out.

Unfortunately, problems persisted and numbers dwindled further, it was also reported in 1959 that ' unruly children were becoming a difficulty'. To combat this children were put on a months trial in a curious throwback to the Victorian period. By 1962 other drastic measures were taken as the Sunday school was moved to the morning service. The minute book reports that , ' there were mixed feelings about this, but it was felt that the time has come when changes are necessary , as numbers are considerably down'. The afternoon classes were kept but most children came in the morning.

The 1960s were clearly a period of change both in the scale and nature of the Sunday school's activities. For those young people within the church they were exciting times as youth activities were being developed, mirroring the wider changes in society. In 1965 our church entered two teams in the Exeter Scripture Union

competition, and both won. Until recent times the cup they won was kept in a glass case at the front of the church. At a church meeting in October 1967 Mr Edwards asked if the Schoolroom could be used for a youth club and the primary room as a coffee bar. This was agreed and the church had its own coffee bar for young people, often meeting on a Friday. It was the idea of the church's teenagers themselves to start this as a process of outreach. The club was called the 'Pink Piranha' and a sponsored walk paid for the furniture and coffee bar. It caught on quickly attracting a curious mixture of school friends and the local leather bikers. The church was very tolerant of this invasion by sometimes up to a hundred teenagers, who just wanted to meet drink coke or coffee and chat against a background of loud music This seems to have lasted about two years before those who started it went away to University and it ended as quickly as it had begun. This period was also the start of an increasing participation of young people in the main morning services. Ken Edwards encouraged this and was over the years the author of numerous Sunday school plays , all of which were received with great interest by the congregation and acted with considerable enthusiasm by the children.

Of equal importance was the start of a wider youth outreach with the establishment of the summer holiday club. This was originally run by visiting students to Cullompton . Their first visit was of 20 students in August 1967, this became a joint venture between all the churches in Cullompton and continued into the mid 1990s providing welcome entertainment and fellowship for hundreds of the town's children over the years. It became a regular event each August and I know of at least two children within our church who refused to go away on holiday when the holiday club was meeting.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s various youth clubs and groups have been formed, including 'Club 64' and the 'Pink Flamingo'. All have been good fun and attracted interest but most have been short lived and served the needs of one specific group

of teenagers within the church. In contrast the Sunday school has provided a more consistent contribution to church life and we have been fortunate in always having willing teachers. Some have served for many years such as Gladys Davis who has worked as a Sunday School teacher for 55Years.

## **Chapter 7 The Sunshine Hour and Other Women's Organisations.**

One of the most popular and oldest organisations is the Women's Sunshine Hour, which for many local people is synonymous with the Baptist Church. It was formed in 1926 by the wife of the Rev. Noel Ives. The story behind its formation is that the newly married Mrs Ives, whilst honeymooning in Bournemouth, came across a church notice that announced that 'the women's Sunshine Hour will meet'. This was the inspiration and she informed her husband that this would be the name of the women's meeting she intended to start in Cullompton. The idea was soon put into practice and weekly meetings were held of a devotional nature, with speakers talking about the gospel. In addition, the early meetings featured a book read as a serial, with one of the readers being Mrs Batten. It seems that the organisation was fairly informal initially since the first available register of members was only started in 1937.

The weekly meetings proved a lively and attractive format for many local ladies, providing a welcome relief from household chores. Music always figured strongly in the meetings, usually provided by the Sunshine Choir. We learn, for example, from newspaper articles of 1939 that, 'the members of the Sunshine Hour celebrated their harvest festival in a very happy way'. In addition to the choir, a solo 'was rendered by Mrs Down of London' and that a well attended meeting received a talk on 'The seed is the word of God' by the Rev. Ives. Another regular event were summer tea parties, usually held at Rydon House, Willand, the home of Mr and Mrs Batten.

The meetings continued during the dark years of World War Two although in a slightly changed format. The schoolroom was used by various members of the armed forces (see page ) so the Sunshine Hour met in the church, led by Mrs Tidborough. Tea, always an important part of the meetings, was made over a gas-

ring in the vestry. It was towards the end of the war that the first minute books were kept. In January 1945, the first minute begins '23 members were present and it was decided to form a committee' comprising of a President (Mrs Sterry), Vice-Presidents (Mrs Batten and Mrs Goddard), Secretary (Mrs Kerslake), Treasurer (Mrs King) and Pianist (Mrs Tidborough).

The immediate post-war years saw a growth and transformation of the Sunshine Hour as social events and outings began to play an important role. Such activities were clearly a reaction to the restrictions and austerity of the war years. The first major social was held in 1947 and in the same year the ladies had their first summer outing. In April 1948 the Sunshine Hour held their first Women's service in the church. At the 25th anniversary of the Sunshine Hour in April 1951, the local newspaper tells us of 'a large attendance' and that the original founder Mrs Ives 'felt certain that Cullompton was a better town because of the influence of the Sunshine Hour'. On this occasion numbers were increased by some visitors from the local Methodist 'Happy Circle' group.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the organisation continued to expand, attracting between 30-50 people to its meetings and various events. Prayers, devotion, music, parties, visits and outings were all part of a varied programme. The president was usually the minister's wife although during times when the church was without a minister others took on the office. One of the most enthusiastic and tireless workers was Mrs Batten, who in 1966 also became President of the Baptist Women's League Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. This provided opportunities for wider links with other churches, as happened in 1967 when ladies visited from Finland. Indeed for the officers of the Sunshine Hour it was an important part of their work that they participate in the activities of women's organisations at other levels in the District.

The Sunshine Hour members also contributed greatly to the life of the church through their music and of course in the provision of

refreshments. In terms of the former the Sunshine Hour choir became a regular contributor to the Sunday evening worship. To aid the latter in 1966 they were given permission by the church to rebuild the kitchen provided, as the church meeting records, that 'they will be responsible for the cost'. The money was duly raised by members of the Sunshine Hour amounting to £672 11s 11d, of which Mrs Humphries contributed £68 5s 10d by making cakes. The work on the kitchen was completed in April 1967.

The celebration of their diamond jubilee in 1986 was an occasion of much activity for the Sunshine Hour, when over 100 ladies attended a special service. The lesson was read by Mrs Irish, one of the founding members, and the choir sang a specially written hymn by the Rev. Henson – a former minister at Cullompton. At this time the organisation was run by Mrs Palmer (president), Mrs Edwards, Mrs Lambert and Mrs Lindsell, with Mrs Batten presiding over the tea at which some 15 churches were represented.

Throughout the 1990s the Sunshine Hour has continued to be a significant part of the church and its outreach in Cullompton. Its 70th anniversary in 1996 was once again a time of much celebration when two past presidents, Mrs Connie Thompson and Mrs Ann Palmer, were invited as guests. In recent years the organisation was run by Mrs Edwards and Mrs Rachel Francis who worked tirelessly to maintain its original standards and ideals. Rachel Francis continues to organise this group today.

### Young Wives Group

When the Cullompton church was united with that of Bradninch it became important for new organisations to be established that would help this unity - in part the young wives group was formed to fulfil such a role. It was also formed to help outreach to the new housing estates that were being developed in the town during the

mid 1970s. The Cullompton and Bradninch young wives group was established in 1975 , and its constitution stated that its aims were to 'provide Christian fellowship for younger women and the opportunity for outreach. Our church minutes show that it was the idea of Mrs Palmer who had called together a small group of members ;Mrs Lindsell, Mrs Lambert, Mrs Edward, Mrs Norton and Mrs Walker. The deacons generously recommended they 'be offered £5 to start their finances', and meetings were held monthly on Friday evenings. As part of the outreach programme invitations were issued to the first meeting to all the mothers of the children attending Sunday school. Its first year was one of rather mixed fortunes as attendance fluctuated, resulting in the meeting being changed to Wednesday. At the committee meeting in 1976 we learn that the group was growing spiritually as 'there did seem a feeling of fellowship developing'.

The group did expand and took on a wider role within the local Baptist fellowship as it became active in taking church services. This idea was proposed in 1979, with the suggestion that the group should take a service at both churches once a year. The first one being in March 1980, and took the form of bible readings, verses, and music provided by the young wives. By the early 1980s they had formed a choir which was asked to perform at the induction of Mrs Palmer as President of the Exeter and District Baptist Association in 1981.

A significant feature of the group was that it became a true joint venture between the two churches. In this context it proved extremely successful in bringing together Cullompton and Bradninch, or at least parts of the fellowship. The group not only dealt with spiritual matters but also sought to offer help and advice on a range of other topics. Craft activities remained an important mainstay, along with outings and slide shows. However, members were keen to expand the range of topics covered at meetings and later these were to include discussions on social work, adoption, genealogy and environmental health. After Mrs Palmer left, and even when the two churches split again, the group continued

largely through the efforts of Freda Wellard who was vice president. The group unfortunately did decline in membership and in our church transformed during the mid 1990s into a more general women's social, which meets once every month.

## **Chapter 8. Music in the Church**

Music of all kinds has played a role in our church for many years but of course the nature and type of this has varied. In the early years if singing did occur it would be unaccompanied and certainly our early church, even when the chapel was built, did not have an organ. During the nineteenth century music and singing became major parts of the service, and the church organist was an important position. We know little of when the choir was formed but it was certainly prominent from the 1880s onwards. Equally the church appeared to have a progressive policy toward introducing new types of hymns into the service, as in 1882 when a supplement to our hymn book 'Psalms and Hymns' that contained 271 additional hymns was purchased. It was resolved at a church meeting to 'introduce these to our worship as early as possible'. In 1909 plans were made to modify the organ gallery and to rebuild the choir stalls, whilst in 1912 the idea was mooted of purchasing a new organ at a cost £200. At this time only £58 had been promised but sales of work were planned for the following year and the money was duly raised

It seems that the years just before the Great War were a special time for music and worship in our church. Under the pastorate of William Bonser the church started a series of so called 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoons' Under the ministers leadership an orchestra was formed with the help of William Bragg who also bought a double bass to play and give balance to the orchestra. In addition there were violins, a flute played by Harry Galpin,, there was also a cello, a clarinet played by Fred Parsons, whilst the ministers daughter played the piano. They were conducted by James Sansom and provided a range of music for these special afternoons. There were also readings, an address by the minister and a book club with members paying so much per week and then selecting their chosen reading from a catalogue. Clearly this was an attempt of self improvement with members being exposed to music and

literature of different types.

The church continued to have a choir throughout its history, although by the 1960s it had become much smaller and its regular contributions to services was becoming more problematic as numbers fell away. By 1983 Numbers had declined further and the church discussed the continuation of the choir, deciding to ask the Sunshine Hour Choir to sing at special services and for Paul Lambert to arrange musical items on other Sundays. This did not mark the end of music in the church but rather the start of other musical contributions, these have involved youth bands, music groups and special choirs.

During the 1960s when there were several teenagers within the church, four of them started a Gospel Group with two guitars, one drum and a cymbal which they called the 'Rainbow Revellers', and took part in church services. This seems to have been an evolving group for as the number of singers and instruments changed so did their name to 'Synnergogs', then 'The Effect' and finally to 'One Way Street'. They were much in demand at chapels and youth clubs over quite a wide area but their top billing was at Rolle College Exmouth and The Pavilion, Paignton, with Betty Lou Mills an international star of those days. To raise money to buy a keyboard they went on a sponsored walk to the Wellington Monument and back.

In the 1990s Rachel Francis, one of our organists, also established a music group that would meet regularly once a week and play at morning worship. This never seem to have a name but was made up of Marie and Martin Davey ( in charge of the Sunday School at that time) , Andrea Wellard, Chris MacAulay and John and Sarah Shaw. This never achieved the dizzy heights of the 1960s group but did provide a lively and modern aspect to Sunday morning services. We are still entertained by at least one member of this group.

During the time of David Luce's ministry a number of musicians and singers also got together to form a singing group, which has expanded and contracted over recent years. This group, who go under the name of 'Harmony', now provide occasional performances at our services and carry on the long tradition of church music that has characterised our worship for much of our history.

## **Chapter 9 The Newsletter: Our Voice**

Most churches have their newsletters but we have our 'Network', courtesy of Mr Ken Edwards. This monthly publication is not only eagerly awaited by our membership but by many other within Cullompton, its combination of family news, national and international features, crosswords and jokes providing a refreshing antidote to our depressing daily newspapers. We owe all of this to the editor, and a number of regular contributors.

Before the 'Network' magazine our church used to purchase copies of the 'Challenge' publication and would then insert a one-sided duplicated sheet from the minister, during the time of the Rev Thompson. When he left Ken Edwards used to write the message and on one occasion this led to dramatic results as Ken himself explains:

' In February 1974 the message I had written for the magazine was based on the Phillips' translation of 2 Corinthians 4:9 " We may be knocked down but we're never knocked out". On the evening the newsletter was published I was driving along the Honiton Road at Post Cross when a car from a side-turning ignored the stop sign . I ended my journey in a ditch in a completely wrecked car . While I was waiting for the ambulance I remembered clearly , "We may be knocked down but we're never knocked out"; the message I had written in the newsletter'.

Our 'Network' magazine started life in January 1982 and was originally called 'Counterpoint'. At this time Cullompton and Bradninch were joined under one ministry, and as the first edition explained, 'Counterpoint' was designed to reflect not only the unity but the diversity of the two fellowships, with the editorial duties divided also between the two churches – Mr Edwards at Cullompton and Mrs Salmon at Bradninch. The format was more or less the same as we have now except our much-loved crossword

was missing. The second issue recorded that there 'were many appreciative comments that greeted the first issue of "Counterpoint"'. In the church minute book for 1982 we learn that the 'new form of our monthly newsletter had been received with much appreciation and general approval from all quarters'. The monthly costs of £10 were shared equally between the two churches, with Cullompton's share paid for by the Burrows Trust Fund. The background to the development of 'Counterpoint' was the increasing costs and difficulties associated with the church newsletter in 1981. The church minutes for that year tell us that 'the rise in cost of "Challenge" focused attention on whether a better form of outreach could be sought with the possibility of producing a new form of newsletter'. At subsequent meetings in that year various ideas were discussed including the possibility of a joint town newsletter and some suggestion of having an insert with St. Andrews monthly magazine. Thankfully, the Deacons decided after much prayer to establish a joint newsletter between Cullompton and Bradninch. Furthermore, Mr Edward's interest in printing and his purchase of new printing equipment made the publishing of 'Counterpoint' a feasible proposition. This was the Rotaprint Offset Press, which was heavy and cumbersome. For sometime it remained idle in Ken's garage because it couldn't be moved. It was only through the combined efforts of all the male deacons that it was lifted to an upstairs room in his house, which was designated a 'Printing Chapel'. This was certainly fellowship in action.

'Counterpoint' the joint magazine ran from 1982 to 1989 when the two churches went their different ways. Fortunately for Cullompton Mr Edwards continued to edit and publish our church magazine which took the new title of 'Network' in 1989. As the editor explained in the new magazine's editorial it was a difficult task of finding a new title. He 'thought of Grape Vine, Amplifier, Grace Notes, Sounding Board, Seed-Drill, Channel X, Point of View, The Good Word, Outlook, Sound-track,

Agapanthus, Transmitter, but settled on Network'. The process of selection is best summed-up by the editor himself when he suggested that 'Network' was a term associated with 'broadcasting, communications, fishing, even scoring goals. A schoolboy defined a net as "a lot of holes surrounded by string". If as a church we become "a lot of nobodies, bound together with love and used for fishing" we may not be too wide of the mark'. All those who read 'Network' will agree that the editor has achieved his mark.

## **Chapter 10 A Widening Vision**

Communities in south-west England have traditionally been close-knit & without much contact with anyone outside their own parish. As recently as 1982 a man from Cullompton went to Rockwell Green in Somerset, but only 11 miles away, with publicity about an important event and was met with an amazed greeting “You’ve come all the way from Devon!” The Baptist Church had always taken its mission to Cullompton very seriously and had been loyal to the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) by supporting the annual missionary weekend, the Christmas missionary sale and by praying “Please, bless the missionaries”. There was nothing much more personal or far-reaching than that.

But with the coming of the motorway, Cullompton itself became much less parochial and new families with new missionary interests joined the Church. Occasional home-meetings to do with the Overseas Missionary Fund, the Worldwide Evangelisation for Christ (WEC), and the Red Sea Mission Team began. Edmund and Anne Palmer encouraged members to become more involved in District and Association affairs and to use the BMS Prayer Diary. There was a Cullompton group at the European Baptist Assembly in Budapest and Mrs Batten went to the World Congress in Tokyo. The Reverend Matthew Francis, who had retired to Cullompton, was perhaps chiefly responsible for a change in outlook. He discovered that no-one could remember anyone from Cullompton going overseas to be a missionary except Bill Roberts from the Parish Church. He asked people to pray for missionary recruits and organised two ambitious missionary conventions in the local comprehensive school, involving some 16 missionary societies. After the first, Andy Broom, who had been a member of the Baptist Youth Fellowship, joined Youth With A Mission (Y.W.A.M). It was Matthew who started the “Round & About” slot in the church magazine, now taken over as “Outside our Patch”, giving monthly world-wide news. Another of his

suggestions was to turn one Sunday evening a month into a “Mission Spot” to be held informally in the schoolroom. “People won’t come if it’s not a proper service” it was said, but they but they did and still do. The largest evening congregations meet to hear about and pray for a wide range of mission activity from the ICE project in Exeter schools to Support Ministries to China.

Reg Whitton, a former Church Secretary, bequeathed a house in Cullompton but they did and still do. The largest evening congregations meet to hear about and pray for a wide range of mission activity from the ICE project in Exeter schools to Support Ministries to China.

Reg Whitton, a former church secretary, bequeathed a house in Cullompton to the BMS for the use of retired missionaries. This meant that Phyl Gilbert, who had served in Angola and the Congo, became a member and more recently Shiela Samuels from India. In addition another former missionary Margaret Pearce and her family joined us. She makes frequent visits to Didcot and keeps the Church all up to date and alert to BMS needs.

During this time the BMS itself has become much more enterprising and this has affected the local church. The first missionary to be linked personally with the church left the BMS before she had made any contact with Cullompton; but since then Ryder and Heather Rogers in Albania have corresponded regularly and visited during their breaks at the time of the Civil war and the Kosovan refugee crisis. There have also been a number of lively visits from young “Action Teams”.

It has been good to see the barriers coming down and interests widened. At the local level the buzz-word is “clustering”- the ad-hoc getting together of a small number of churches, Baptist or other, to meet particular needs and opportunities, and this has started to be put into practice. At an overseas level, Matthew’s prayers have been answered: apart from Andy Broom, also in Albania, a former deacon and his wife, Graham and Valerie Norton now work with Release International paying annual visits to

Eastern Europe and West Africa; Joy Borgan, brought up and baptised in this church, is now serving with her husband in Caceres, Spain with the Southern Baptist Mission Board; and we started this year with commissioning one of our members, Becky Pearce, to work with the BMS in Nepal. So people no longer just pray for “the missionaries” but for particular people with specific needs. And who knows, we may even see a cluster of churches from Devon and Somerset.

## Appendix A. List of Minister

1700-1751 Rev Channon, Justinian Manning, Robert Jordan and Charles Baker

1751-1803 Rev Nicholas Gillard

1803-1805 Rev Rumson

1807-1831 Rev Robert Humphrey

1831-1833 Rev Elliott

1833-1840 Rev Amery

1840-1842 Rev Chapman

1842-1869 Rev Uriah Foot

1869-1872 Rev Forth

1872-1891 Rev Benjamin Miller

1892-1900 Rev John Horne

1901-1904 Rev Joseph Butler

1904-1907 Rev Joseph Beaupre

1909-1914 Rev William Bonsor

1914-1923 Rev Nichols

1926-1932 Rev Noel Ives

1933 Rev R. Wilden

1933-1939 Rev Ferguson

1963-1971 Rev G E Thompson

1972-1973 Rev G W Sterry

1974-1987 Rev Edmund Palmer

1989-1993 Rev John Alvis

1994-1998 Rev David Luce

1998 to present Rev David Evans

# Serving God and the Community; a history of Cullompton Baptist Church 1700-2000

Gareth Shaw

Proceeds from the sale of this book will be given to the Church  
Building Fund

