



The History of SBC

Researched by Rev Phil Burns

Skipton is an historic market town nestled in the Aire valley on the western edge of North Yorkshire. According to the 2001 Census, it has a population of just over fourteen thousand people, made up of around six thousand households. It has a long history and heritage. Known as the “Gateway to the dales”, its historic roots lie before the Norman conquest when sheep farmers settled in the area around the seventh century. The continuous trade in sheep farming and agriculture explains the town’s name, Skipton in old English literally means “Sheep town”.

Whilst it is still an agricultural centre, demonstrated by the town’s auction mart, it is now well established as a tourist town. Visitors are drawn by its position in the Yorkshire Dales National Park and by its famous, well preserved Medieval Castle alongside its extensive market. However today, the main employer in the town is by far the Skipton Building Society and its subsidiary companies. Skipton can be considered a relatively affluent town but it also has significant areas of social deprivation. It is increasingly seen as a commuter town for the nearest cities of Bradford and Leeds and even further afield to Manchester and London.

It is within this bustling, historic market town where Skipton Baptist Church is situated and has its immediate mission field. The town is well catered for regarding churches. Within the relatively small area of the town centre, there are two Anglican churches, a Methodist church, a URC, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and a few smaller house churches.

In 2011, Skipton Baptist Church celebrated 150 years of the church meeting in its present location. Although the presence of a Baptist community extends slightly further back than this.

The history of the church begins in 1848 with the arrival of pioneer itinerant Baptist evangelists, Samuel Jones and Robert Hogg. They had been travelling and working through the Aire valley spreading the Baptist message. When at Skipton they preached openly in the market place and their view of Christian baptism caused great opposition from the local Wesleyan minister. This opposition culminated in a public debate which apparently according to records, “roused no little interest,” and which lasted over two nights. The interest in the debate is demonstrated by the fact that a thousand copies of the report of the discussions about baptism were subsequently sold.

So it was in this charged atmosphere of theological debate that Skipton Baptist Church was born. In the aftermath of the debate, services began to be held in individual’s homes but soon in 1849, a room was obtained for the foundling church to meet in, ironically on Wesley Place! Around one hundred and fifty people regularly worshipped here and on Christmas Day of 1849, the first public baptisms took place in the river Aire. It was only a few months later, in March 1850, when the church was constituted with eleven members on its roll – five newly baptised and six from other churches.

The church needed to wait until 1855 to purchase an area of land in Skipton for the building of a chapel. This building, where the church is still situated was completed and opened on 28th June 1861. The price of the land and the building came to the total of £1,300!

The first minister of the church was the Rev. Francis Britcliffe who ministered in Skipton from 1864 until his death in 1878. He was followed in the same year by the Rev. William Judge who continued there until his retirement in 1911 due to ill health. During his time at the church he oversaw the building of school buildings at the church for the price of £1,000.

But it was also during his tenure that the church experienced a split in its ranks that culminated in the establishment of another Baptist church in Skipton. Forty members who withdrew from the

original Baptist formed the Belmont church in Skipton where they initially met in each other's homes for worship but for more than a year held services in the local Town Hall. A minister from Accrington, the Rev. Charles Williams formed these people into a church in 1890 in order to retain them in the denomination. They built a temporary iron chapel on Belmont Bridge in Skipton and were received into the local Association in 1891 with Rev. S. J. Griffiths becoming pastor there in 1893. A number of other pastors followed Rev. Griffiths including a number of students and lay preachers who would preach during interregnums. In spite of these developments, there was a continuing hope amongst members of both congregations that the two would one day be united again as one church in Skipton. Their wish and prayer finally came about in 1915.

The First World War had an obvious impact on the lives of many in the church. A number of men from the congregation fought and died in the war. This was commemorated with the erection of the Memorial Hall to the church. This project took eight years to come to completion with planning, fund raising, stone laying and finally opening in 1925.

The church had a series of ministers during the following years but some of the main aspects of the church life and which is clearly remembered and treasured by those who still remember are the memories of the Sunday School and drama society. Throughout the 30s, 40's and 50's, the church had a strong theatrical tradition where members of the church would regularly put on plays and shows which received good coverage in the local press. The church scrapbook, which has been assembled and cared for by Henry and Annie Ingham, is full of programmes, photographs and memories of a huge number of productions that forged a strong sense of community within the life of the church. Alongside these, the annual Whitsun marches provided an opportunity for the church to be a presence in the community.

From the 1960's onwards there was a period of modernisation, most obviously seen in the reconditioning and redecorating of the chapel interiors. However, less obvious changes came about with the call of Rev. John Lewis in 1986 who established a renewed sense of evangelism within the fellowship. People remember that prior to his call, the church could have been in decline in numbers. With the ministry of Rev Lewis, the church's membership grew and its average age fell instilling a freshness and missionary impetus within the church. With the appointment of Rev Lisa Rush (now Holmes) as associate minister in 1994, the church continued in its growth and establishment as a strong evangelical Baptist Church. The Rev Rob Harris replaced John Lewis as Senior Minister in 1997 and continued with the church's vision of "To know Christ and to make him known."

With a younger demographic in the church, young families began to attend the church and a renewed vision for working with children and young people developed. This led to the appointment of Phil Burns in 2000 as the Assistant Minister with responsibility for young people which was followed a few years later with the church calling Helen Teague to work full time with children and young families. So within a few short years the church moved from a sole pastorate to a team of four, bringing with it new challenges and opportunities. A significant attitude of the deaconate and church was to invest the church's resources into people and ministries as opposed to purely maintaining a building.

There have been significant changes in the church over the last decade. Naturally church membership has changed somewhat, however more fundamental changes have occurred too. Most clearly seen in the changing of the church's vision statement, is the broadening of the church's view of mission. Inspired by BMS and their action teams, the church has increasingly become more involved in social action alongside its natural evangelistic outlook. The new vision statement of the

church encapsulates where it has come from and God willing, where it is going. It now reads, "Meet God, Meet Friends, Make a Difference." It is in keeping with the growing trend of evangelical churches across denominations realising that their call is to more than conversion, but to transformation of people's lives and of society too.

As a result of this expansion of the church's vision, new opportunities have arisen including parent and toddler groups, 'lend a hand' initiatives, money management courses for the community and establishing a food bank for those in locality who are struggling financially. The clearest investment of the church in social action witness has been the opening of a 'Christians Against Poverty' centre and by opening a Food Bank which covers essentially the whole of the Craven area.

Skipton Baptist Church originated an initiative called #doyouknowHim? in 2018 which has led to a greater sense of evangelism and discipleship, rallying around the person of Jesus and it has also led to a new impetus in the unity of the Church in Skipton. This has been seen in shared work including several joint Alpha courses, Prayer and Praise events and the taking on the oversight of a local Well-Being weekly café.

In September 2015, the church took the exciting step of buying new premises next to our existing site. This was to fulfil the church's vision to create a place for anyone to come and experience welcome and love and a cuppa! Since 2015 we have raised more than £1,170,000 through additional giving by church members, one-off gifts, legacies and individual fundraising activities. Building work for the renovation of the 'House' is ongoing and we are hoping to be open and using it by September 2022.

The expansion of the vision and activities of Skipton Baptist Church has shown in a small way how to reach out to the surrounding community of Skipton in a way which transforms people's lives practically as well as spiritually. The church regularly sees this in stories and testimonies of those who have recently come to faith. Since expanding our vision, we have seen many more people come to know Jesus and a good number of baptism. Those first itinerant evangelists, Hogg and Jones would have been pleased. I think.