

Bromsgrove Baptist Church

1666-2016

*A brief look through the 350 year history of
Bromsgrove Baptist Church, Worcestershire
from its establishment in 1666 to the present day*

Introduction

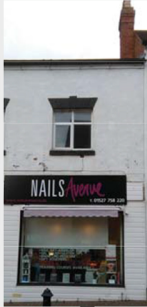
The most important aspect of Bromsgrove Baptist Church's 350 year history is its continuous existence as a body of people trying to follow Jesus, serve the community and live in fellowship with each other. Since the church was founded three and a half centuries ago, the world has changed dramatically and the people of the church have constantly sought to do their best to adapt to practical and cultural changes. After managing for its first half century with no building, the church has worshipped in six different buildings and had more than thirty pastors. At times, the fellowship has appeared to thrive in its work serving God and at other times it has struggled.

The following pages provide a brief history of the church from its early days in 1666 to the current time of 2016. Whilst the majority of the church's history has been presented as a chronological narrative, certain aspects of church life have been given separate attention. These include the changing experiences of women, children and young people in the church; the place of the church in the community and the significance of church meetings in the running of the church.

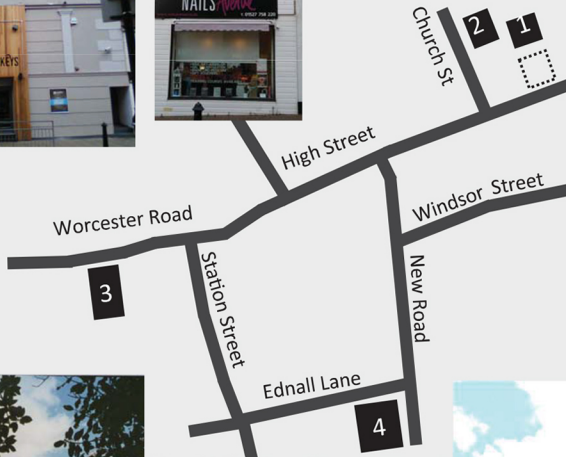
3. In 1822, the church moved to this bigger building. Today it is the nightclub, 57 Monkeys.



2. In 1770, the church moved to a building which backed on to the previous one. It is now Nails Avenue.



1. In 1700, the church registered its first building behind Lesley Ashworth on the High Street. Before this building the church met in people's houses.



4. In 1867, the church built a new building on the newly opened "New Road". This building was replaced in 1977 and again in 1990 with the present building.

The six buildings of the Baptist Church

Early history of the Baptist Church in England

The 17th Century was a turbulent time for England, with religion being one of the driving forces that led the country into civil war in the middle of the century. Following the restoration of the monarchy, King Charles II was keen to keep a tight rein on the church. The King's Chancellor at the time, the Earl of Clarendon, introduced four important pieces of legislation known collectively as The Clarendon Code. This legislation made it compulsory to use the Book of Common Prayer, which laid out in detail what should be said and done during church services. The 2000 clergy who refused to do this were immediately expelled from the Church of England. This meant that there was suddenly a large number of "non-conformist" ministers in the country, which posed a threat to the King's authority, so the remaining legislation in the Clarendon Code ensured that any threat was kept to a minimum. The legislation meant that "non-conformists" were not able to take up positions of public office, teach in schools or meet for worship in groups of more than five people from different households.

Non-conformist ministers were banned from coming within five miles of towns that had a mayor and were also banned from places where they had formerly lived and ministered, which ensured they would not be able to lure practising Anglicans away from the Book of Common Prayer. This legislation was strictly enforced and there were harsh punishments for offenders.

The 1660s was arguably the most risky decade in Protestant history for someone to found a non-conformist church. Bromsgrove Baptist Church's founder, John Eckells, would have been well aware of the dangers, with various people across the region already having been imprisoned for not complying with the Clarendon Code. It was not until the Act of Toleration in 1689, after the arrival of William and Mary of Orange as King and Queen,

that non-conformists were permitted to worship in their own buildings and with their own preachers. There were limitations to this freedom and non-conformists were not permitted to establish their own schools or hold public office for many years.

Founding of Bromsgrove Baptist Church: 1666 - 1700

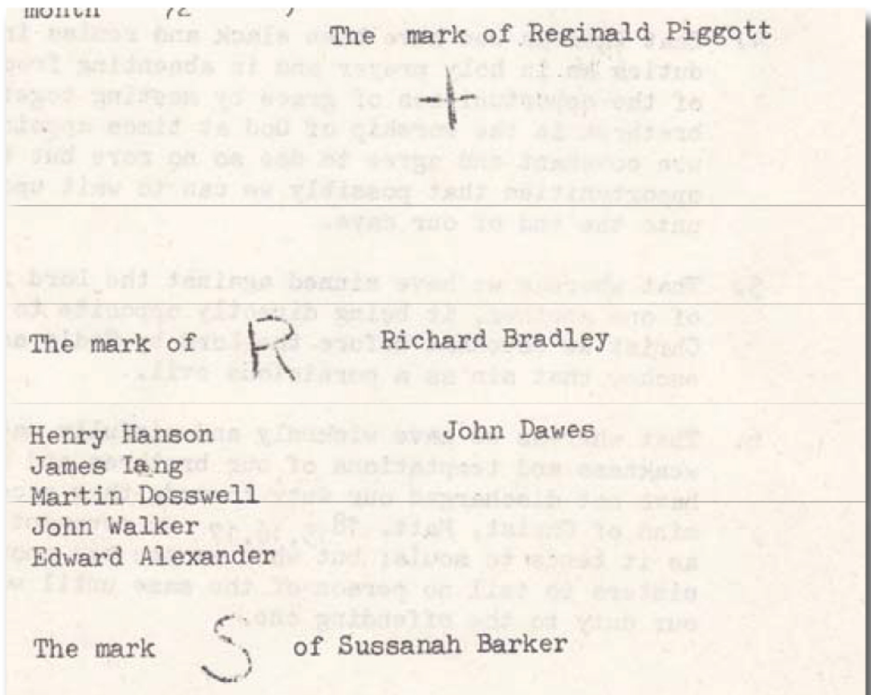
There may have been Baptist churches in the Midlands from as early as the 1620s, when a Baptist church is known to have existed in Tewkesbury, and there were certainly enough Baptists in the Midlands to initiate the development of the Midland Baptist Association in 1655. However, the origins of Bromsgrove Baptist Church could be said to lie in Bristol, where John Tombes, the vicar of Leominster, first rejected the practice of infant baptism. In 1647, he declared his Baptist convictions in his native town of Bewdley and founded a Baptist church in the town. A young man named John Eckells heard Tombes preach and developed his own Baptist beliefs. Eckells had been learning to be a clothier and this trade brought him to Bromsgrove, which at the time was well-known for its cloth and linen industry and had a population of 2000 people living in around 400 houses.

Despite the strict legislation, the people of Bromsgrove had probably been hearing religious viewpoints that challenged Anglican practices for some time. Bromsgrove's parish vicar until 1660 was a well-known Puritan, John Spilsbury, who went on to found an independent church after a spell in prison. His parishioners seemed to have considerable sympathy with their previous vicar and perhaps some of these people had heard enough from him to be prepared to take some religious risks when Eckells arrived in Bromsgrove with his nonconformist beliefs and convincing preaching.

Eckells is thought to have begun preaching to the group of people that became the first Bromsgrove Baptist Church in 1666.

It was in 1672, however, that the first group of members signed the original covenant, three of whom signed with a “mark” as they were unable to write their own names. The thirteen members signing the covenant agreed to:

- do everything they could for the sake of the Gospel
- repent of sin
- meet together for worship
- avoid speaking ill of each other
- serve the poor and the sick
- study things that would promote peace and holiness
- not embrace other doctrines or leave the church without first appealing to the church for its agreement.



The marks of founding members recorded in a transcript from 1974.

These members were taking a step of faith and putting themselves and their families at considerable risk. There is evidence that Eckells himself spent time in Worcester Gaol at some point during his preaching career and other members of the church may also have been punished for their nonconformist practices. Nevertheless, the fellowship grew over the following decades, with 98 members on roll by 1694.

The church membership reflected the industries of the town at the time, with a number being involved in the cloth industry as weavers, cloth whiteners and cloth tradesmen, but there was also a baker, a surgeon and a grazier (who reared cattle for market) within the congregation. Despite the growing membership, there is no suggestion of a dedicated building for worship and it is likely that the members met in their homes.

Towards the end of the century the first of several painful and difficult periods within the church began, as disharmony developed within the fellowship. It is difficult to establish the exact nature of the disagreements, as the pages in the original documents have been inked over and some were apparently burned. However, the records imply that there had been accusations directed at John Eckells relating both to his own actions and to the behaviour of his family members. Eckells and some other members of the church separated from the fellowship and set up another church in Bromsgrove, which led to disputes about which was the "original" Baptist church. The situation could not be resolved by the church members, so they appealed to the Midland Baptist Association for guidance, which was also unable to resolve the matter. Eventually, in 1700, both sides of the dispute acknowledged their part in the difficulties and apologised, agreeing to continue with the two separate churches but also agreeing to destroy all papers relating to the dispute. It appears that, with time, the two churches reunited but, by this point, John Eckells had retired from preaching in Bromsgrove.

Soon after the dispute was resolved, Bromsgrove Baptist Church registered its first meeting house, which was at the back of the home of Humphrey Potter, a cloth merchant, behind the High Street. The building held up to 70 people. When Humphrey Potter died in around 1719, he bequeathed the meeting house to the trustees of the church and his home to the same men for the benefit of the minister of the church.

Place in the Baptist Community

The first Baptist church in England met in Spitalfields, London, in 1612 and by the middle of the century, Baptists were present all over the country. The Midland Association of Particular Baptist Churches had been in existence for about ten years when Bromsgrove Baptist Church was founded. The church in Bromsgrove became a part of the association, which had a number of its meetings in the Bromsgrove chapel. At a time when Baptist churches were not permitted by law, a supportive network of churches who shared common beliefs would have been very important. Over the years, Bromsgrove Baptist Church was involved in the formation of other churches; providing financial support to Baptist churches in times of need; and sharing preaching.

Bromsgrove Baptist Church was involved in mission from its earliest days, when people from Birmingham were known to walk to Bromsgrove to hear preaching at the church. This led to seventeen people forming their own church at Cannon Street in Birmingham in 1737. Later, a church member called Moses Nokes began to preach in Catshill and Lickey, which led to a number of people being baptised and the eventual building of a chapel in Catshill in 1828. Preaching in Dodford resulted in the building of a chapel in 1865, beginning a relationship that continued until the chapel closed at the end of the 20th century.

It is also thought that Bromsgrove Baptists were involved in the founding of churches in Droitwich and Webheath. The church maintained close links with Droitwich Baptist Church for many years and, until the latter part of the 20th century, had regular joint services, often using a coach to transport people from Bromsgrove to Droitwich. Catshill Baptist Church's close relationship with the church continued throughout the 20th century, with numerous joint activities and support from Bromsgrove Baptist Church when Roger Wheelhouse began his pastorship there. The church continues to maintain its Baptist links and is a member of the Heart of England Baptist Association and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

1750 - 1800

There is little recorded history of the years that followed although it would appear that the church members were continuing to do their best to live in a biblical way that did not always sit comfortably with the world around them. As long ago as 1768, the Midland Baptist Association was offering guidance on how to respond to changing times, for example advising members to “*avoid the ridiculous fashions and customs of the world, both in manner and dress, well knowing that the image of the beast is stamped upon them.*” At the time, people wanting to become church members were expected to prove their devotion. The standard was extremely high and there was little room for people to make errors of judgement in their daily lives. Early church records are dominated by names not only of people who were accepted into membership, but also those who were refused membership. For example, one entry documents a couple’s “*earnest desire*” to be baptised and admitted into membership of the church but their application was rejected as the couple acknowledged that “*occasionally they took the name of the Lord in vain*”. It is not clear from the records whether they managed to change their behaviour sufficiently to be accepted into membership at a later date.



An artist's impression of how the chapel may have looked in 1800.

In 1770 the church building moved to Howe Lane (now Church Street) following a financial bequest that made this possible. The move to larger premises was necessary because of the increasing size of the congregation. This growth had occurred during the 39 years James Butterworth spent pastoring the church. Although non-conformism was

no longer illegal at this time, it was still viewed with suspicion by the government and the established Anglican church. This was apparent when, in 1778, a visitor to the town commented that Butterworth was “*too successful in gaining converts from the lower and illiterate class of people to his diabolical and wicked principles*”. Following James Butterworth's retirement in 1794, the church numbers declined and there followed another disagreement and split within the church.

1800 - 1850

It appears that John Scroxton began his ministry in Bromsgrove Baptist Church in around 1798 but it was not until 1800 that he formally took the position of pastor. The difficulties of the previous few years meant that the church at this point had only 27 members, probably the smallest membership since the church began. However, those members would have been very committed to the faith as the fellowship continued to have very high standards for the behaviour of the members of the church. During this period, there were frequent suspensions from communion and expulsions of members. If anyone became aware of a concern relating to a member, this was usually first discussed at a church meeting, followed by two church members meeting with the person to discuss the concern. The outcome of this meeting was then brought back to the church members and a decision made. During the first half of the 19th Century, members were suspended from communion for reasons including “*disorderly conduct*” at the church meeting, having an infant daughter baptised and “*gross intoxication*”.

Scroxton pastored the church for 28 years and, although there continued to be divisions within the fellowship, he seemed eventually to bring some unity. The first split under Scroxton was in around 1814, when some members appointed another minister and began meeting in the Independent Chapel in Worcester Street (since then, the buildings on the site have housed a picture house, a snooker club and a nightclub).

However, this separate church was relatively short-lived and the group reunited with Bromsgrove Baptist Church in 1822. As it happened, the church building on Howe Lane had become too small for the congregation so the decision was taken to move to the Worcester Street building. The church purchased this building for £580 and the Howe Lane building was subsequently sold for £150.

In 1827 John Scropton requested the support of a co-pastor, as he was experiencing health difficulties. John Hooper, a student of Stepney College, was invited to become co-pastor but his correspondence with the church indicates some financial reservations on his part about the position. He wrote to the membership that the annual £60 they were offering was “*small for the role*” and in his acceptance letter requested that any church offerings be paid to him after deducting “*necessary incidental expenses*”. It is unclear if this was usual practice in Baptist churches at the time but the church membership unanimously agreed to this model of payment. Unfortunately, the appointment was not a success and seemed to trigger a further split in the church. A group of members encouraged Mr Hooper to resign but he “*took umbrage*” at the suggestion and refused to even speak to these members. Mr Hooper took a unilateral decision to expel these members from the church, without consulting Mr Scropton or the other church members. This prompted several more church members to resign and form another church, which met in a nearby schoolroom until the church was eventually reunited in 1831, shortly after Mr Hooper left Bromsgrove.

Despite the turbulence of these times, John Scropton seemed committed to keeping the church united and his “*generous spirit*” in welcoming members back to the church after the disagreements were resolved was noted. The church valued John Scropton's long pastorship and he remained a member of the church, for most of which he served as a deacon, until he died.

Children in the church

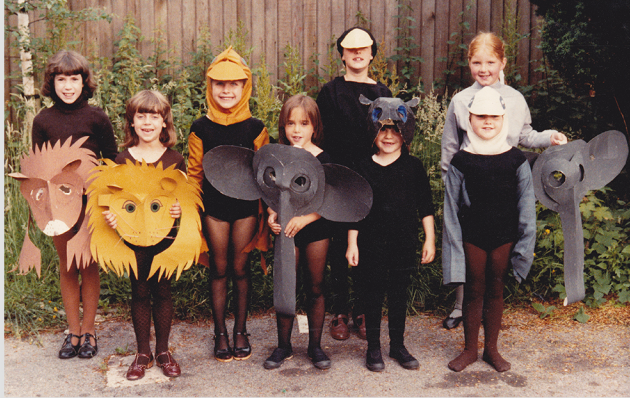
Bromsgrove Baptist Church's Sunday school was founded by John Scropton in around 1798 and it is believed to have been the first Sunday school in Bromsgrove. This was almost a century before compulsory school attendance for primary aged children was introduced, so the Sunday school offered not only religious instruction but also the "three Rs" at a time when many children would otherwise have remained illiterate. John Scropton was still a member of the church, although not its pastor, when the Sunday school celebrated its 50th anniversary, so he was invited to address nearly 200 people at a Social Tea and celebration meeting.



It was not long after the Sunday school's 50th anniversary that the church moved to the New Road site but the new chapel did not have a dedicated space for the Sunday school. Although it was originally intended that a classroom would be built, the difficulties of the church during the years following the move meant that there was no finance available to

do so for some years. For a time, the old Sunday school building in Worcester Road continued to be used for Sunday school but later the children began having their Sunday school activities in the gallery of the New Road church. By 1888 financial improvements meant that a separate Sunday school building could finally be built. This must have been of great benefit to both the children and the congregation at services, as the numbers of children at this time were high. The Sunday school building still exists today as the church hall and the date 1888 can be seen on its outside wall.

Sunday school tended to involve both Sunday morning and afternoon sessions. In 1932, when Herbert Hunt began his ministry at New Road, the Sunday school had 60 children attending in the morning and 100 in the afternoon. Although these figures seem high compared to the current figure, over the last fifty years there has been a significant reduction in church attendance generally and the numbers have remained fairly steady: in 1968 it was around 40, in 1997 it was around 40 and in 2016 the number continues to be roughly 40.



There have been times when there have been fewer children in the church, but there never seems to have been a time when there were enough Sunday school teachers to meet the needs of the children. Church meetings have frequently involved a plea from the Sunday school leader of the time for more help and on many occasions the teachers have shared with the wider fellowship their frustration that the importance of children's work is not sufficiently recognised.

In response to the difficulties of finding Sunday school teachers, various solutions have been attempted to provide the church's children with the teaching they need. For example, during the 1960s, the fellowship looked towards the older children to provide teaching to the younger children and appealed to them to "volunteer" to help with the younger classes. The meeting minutes reported that "all but one agreed willingly" although there is no further comment about how they got on in their roles or what happened to the one "unwilling" child! At around this time it was noted that, whilst the attendance at morning Sunday school had been growing, attendance in the afternoon had declined which led to a suggestion that the afternoon group close. At the time it was agreed to continue the afternoon session but it does not seem to have continued for much longer.

During the 1990s, the church invited a trainee children's worker to the church but unfortunately the church did not manage to sustain the placement and, whilst the idea has been revisited from time to time, there have been no further children's workers invited to work at Bromsgrove Baptist Church. As well as being encouraged to support children younger than themselves, the children of the the church have taken active roles in various aspects of church life. In the 1960s, members of the Sunday school were frequently responsible for the Bible reading at the church service and "it was remarked how very well they read."

The church has not only provided activities to children attending the Sunday school, but also to children who are not attenders of church. The church formed a unit of the Girls' Brigade, a Christian uniformed organisation, in the 1970s. The company thrived until the mid-1990s, when the leaders took the decision to close, feeling discouraged by the church's lack of interest in the organisation and aware that girls no longer wanted to be part of a uniformed organisation. Boys were also catered for, although not as part of a uniformed organisation, with groups such as "Hot Shots" and the less imaginatively named "Boys' Club".

Changing times have had another impact on children's work within the church. As the national media began to uncover stories of historical abuse of children by people in positions of authority in church settings, the church in general has been made increasingly aware of the great care that should be taken to ensure children are safe when involved in church activities.

By 1996, the Baptist Union was providing information and guidance on what legislation such as The Children's Act meant for the church. The legislation led to the appointment of Children's Advocates and recommended that all children's workers should be provided with some form of training. In 1998 the Safe to Grow policy was shared with the church and training for children's workers began. The children's workers in the church continue to be trained and kept up to date with legislation.



At the time of Scropton's retirement, Bromsgrove Baptist Church did not seem to be at all strong. The Baptist Reporter wrote in 1834 that the church "*had been for a considerable time in a very languishing position*", with numbers dwindling and the chapel barely half full for services. It appears that no-one was keen to commit themselves as pastor of the church. In fact there was a total of eight pastors appointed over the next three decades.

Although the church had reunited after the various splits of previous years, the members continued to struggle with making decisions together and the church records show a number of disagreements around the appointment of pastors during this period. Some of these disagreements related to the members' strongly held beliefs about "strict communion", as there had been a growing acceptance in Baptist churches generally that communion could be taken by anyone professing themselves a Christian rather than being restricted to those who had taken the route of "believer's baptism" and been accepted into Baptist membership. Whilst some members of the church and diaconate were in agreement with this, others strongly objected.

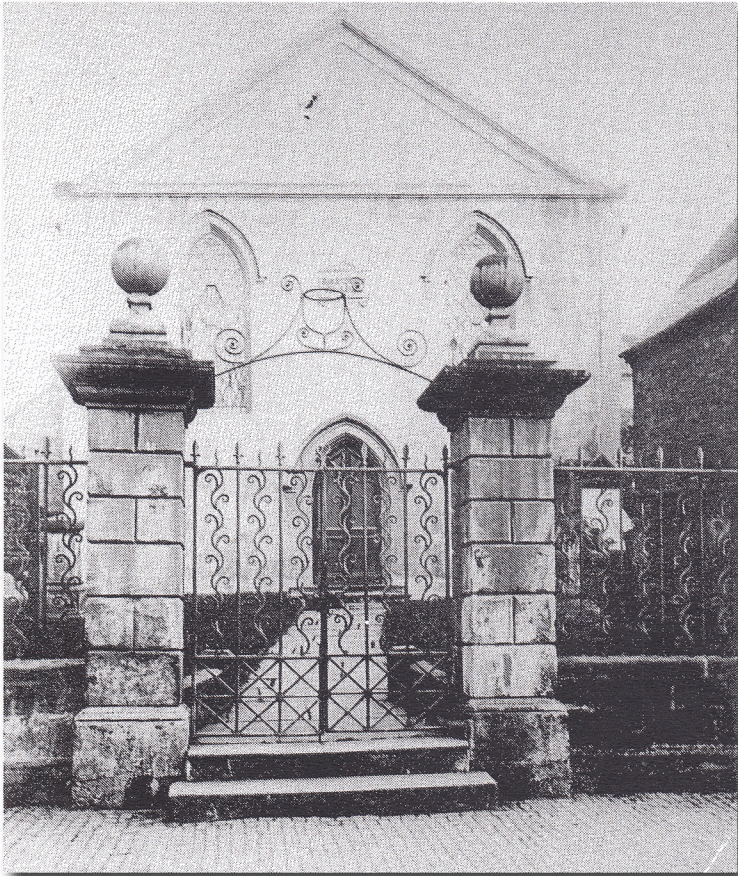
This meant that the convictions of any prospective pastor around this issue were extremely important and made the search for a pastor very divisive. For example, in 1841, a Reverend Hobson was invited to be pastor of the church but one of the deacons challenged this, saying that he would "*throw the affairs of the church into confusion*". The deacons did not reach an agreement about Hobson but another man, Mr Stokes of West Bromwich, was then invited to become pastor by one of the deacons. This deacon was accused of making "*hurried decisions*" but he defended his behaviour by saying that talking with one of the other deacons was "*so awkward*" that he could hardly discuss anything at all with him. Perhaps picking up on the tensions within the church, Mr Stokes declined the invitation to be pastor.

When the church was able to agree on the suitability of pastors and the invitations were accepted, there were a variety of reasons for the short duration of these appointments. At the time, there was a high level of migration to America and two of the pastors resigned to take up positions there. Another pastor resigned for financial reasons, as it appears the pressure on the church to pay loans from the purchase of the Worcester Street property was affecting the church's ability to pay his stipend.

Two of the pastors, Abraham Jones and James Ewence, were linked with unhappy times for the church, with the records stating that during Jones' pastorship "*difficulties soon arose for which the minister appears to have been to blame*". During both Jones' and Ewence's time at Bromsgrove Baptist Church, several deacons resigned and members withdrew from the church. Although there was a range of reasons given for the eight pastors moving on so swiftly from Bromsgrove Baptist Church, it is reasonable to assume that the obvious lack of harmony amongst the members and deacons also contributed to the church's difficulty in finding a pastor who would stay with the church for any length of time. However, some of the pastors during this period had a positive influence on the church, despite their short-lived positions.

The arrival of Thomas Davis in 1842 seems to have energised the life of the church, with the congregation more than doubling in size and side galleries being built to accommodate the increasing numbers attending services. Newspapers of the time published several of Davis' letters, articulating his strong opinions about current affairs. For example, in 1847, his letter challenged the law that prevented widowers marrying their former wives' sisters. It is unknown what prompted him to write to the Morning Post about this, but perhaps it was his willingness to argue about such issues that encouraged people to come and hear him preach. The

increasing numbers in the church improved the church's financial position, which meant it was able to purchase cottages at the back of the chapel to make into a school room and to re-floor and re-pew the chapel itself.



The chapel on Worcester Road as it appeared in 1890.

Place in the National and International Community

The church has looked outwards throughout its history, trying to support people in other places in times of need and to help people share the gospel around the world. As early as 1813 the church recorded international aid amongst its "numerous acts of benevolence", including a financial gift to people affected by a fire in India. During the Second World War, the church donated financial gifts to the refugees of China and Europe. Just prior to the church's 300th anniversary celebration, the tragic landslide at Aberfan occurred, resulting in the loss of 144 lives including those of 116 children. A special church collection took place, which was sent to the Baptist Church at Aberfan to support people in need.



Bromsgrove was the "training church" for a BMS action team mission to Mizoram in 2014-15.

Whilst many international aid charities, past and present, are based on Christian principles, in the past, the church generally favoured Baptist charities. For example, in September 1967, a box was placed in the vestibule for used stamps, which could be used to raise funds for the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) and this practice has continued for nearly fifty years. In contrast, the following year, some church members proposed selling harvest produce to support a "worthy cause such as Oxfam", but the deacons agreed that the money raised should instead be donated to a charity that was "part of the Baptist Missionary Society". The church now supports a broad range of causes, for example children living in poverty via the Hope and Kindness and Compassion charities; women and girls who have been sexually exploited in Brazil and Nepal, via the Meninadanca and Love in Action organisations; young people who have been affected by war, via the Novimost organisation; and of course the work of the Baptist Missionary Society, now called BMS World Mission.

1850 - 1900

During the second half of the 19th Century, the Baptist churches across the country were becoming more evangelistic in their approach – it was during this time that thousands of people nationally were hearing Charles Spurgeon preach and reading transcripts of his sermons. After a decade of very short-lived appointments, Alexander MacDonald arrived at Bromsgrove Baptist Church as pastor in 1863 and brought with him an energy for evangelism. MacDonald also encouraged the church to look inward and, realising that attendance at services and communion in particular had declined, the members recognised the need for more commitment amongst themselves. They decided that a strict rule would be put in place that anyone missing three consecutive communions would be visited to discuss the situation and a decision made about their membership. The combination of stronger commitment from its members and an increased focus on evangelism had a positive effect on the church's numbers and, just a year after MacDonald's arrival at the church, it had increased by 50 members. The members were keen to acknowledge that this growth had not been the result of “*extravagant*” or “*sensational*” preaching, but rather the “*natural result of practical gospel teachings made effective by divine agency*”.

The growth of the church inevitably brought questions about how the current chapel could accommodate the increasing numbers and a committee was appointed to consider the question and explore options. In 1866 the foundation stone for a new chapel on the church's current site in New Road was laid and building work commenced on the site of the current church (in later years this foundation stone was discovered by builders and the damaged stone is now displayed in the porch of the current building). In 1867 the new church opened for worship and the deeds outlined that the church be used by Baptists for worshipping God, taking communion and teaching children.

Unfortunately, the building project provided another opportunity for disagreement and division amongst the fellowship.



A wedding at the Victorian church .

On 19th November 1866 (exactly 150 years prior to the church's 350th anniversary weekend celebrations this year), a special church meeting was held about the deeds of the new church. A clause was added that would open membership to believers who professed their belief in Christ but had not submitted to believer's baptism. This clearly challenged the practice of "strict baptism" which had been subject to so much debate over the previous decades. As a result, 19 members did not feel able to remain in the church. These members withdrew their membership and, when the Worcester Street chapel was vacated following the move to New Road, they purchased it for £330 to maintain it as a "Strict Baptist" chapel, stating that they did not want to be worshipping in union with "*wandering sheep*" and they did not want to be part of the "*liberalism of the age*".

Unlike some of the previous divisions, the church records suggest that both groups were keen to remain friends and there was an element of mutual respect. The New Road members voted

to leave the table in the vestry of the Worcester Street chapel “*as a gift to the friends who are about to commence in that place*”.

There was, however, a financial impact of the church's division, as the loan taken to build the New Road chapel had been based on the church having a larger number of members. Following MacDonald's departure from the church in 1874, the fellowship seemed to lose its zeal and the records suggest that the debt was constantly looming in the minds of the members. In fact, the whole country was experiencing a trade depression which was having an impact on people's ability to give financially and the result was that the £1000 debt proved very difficult to pay. Unsurprisingly, the church found it a challenge once again to find a pastor who would stay at the church for long, particularly as they had very little money available to financially support him. Edward Scammell, who became pastor after MacDonald left, stayed in Bromsgrove for just two years, explaining to the members that although financial reasons had contributed to his decision to resign, the general feeling of discouragement within the church “*in other and the higher aspects of our work*” had also led to his decision.

It was not until James Comfort arrived as pastor in 1882, that a real strategy for debt reduction was developed. The church sold some of its properties around the town and used some specific funds and investments to reduce its debt from £1000 to £100 by 1888. This financial turnaround meant that the fellowship had additionally raised sufficient funds to build a separate school building. This news must have been well-received by both the Sunday school children and the adult members of the church, as the Sunday school activities had been taking place in the church gallery since the move to New Road twenty years previously. Once again, the church experienced a period of growth and, when James Comfort left the church in 1893, membership had grown to 177.



The heavily worn hall foundation stone bearing Comfort's name

Church meetings

When Bromsgrove Baptist Church was founded in 1666, the members had made a courageous decision to step away from the Anglican church and the Book of Common Prayer, which was highly prescriptive about how people should worship. In contrast, from its earliest days, Bromsgrove Baptist Church sought to ensure that all members had a voice in the running of the church rather than having a "leader" deciding how things should be done. Early church records indicate that separate "church meetings" did not initially exist, but church services blended teaching and worship with prayer and discussion about "business matters" such as buildings, finance and membership issues along with updates about the well-being and needs of the people within the fellowship.

As the church grew and it obtained buildings, the number of decisions needing to be made by the fellowship also increased and, over the years, church meetings became more formal and took place outside of the usual Sunday church services. It is possible that "Robert's Rules of Order", a book published in 1876 which outlined how to effectively run meetings and make group decisions, influenced the pattern of church meetings. The meticulously kept records of meetings during the early part of the 20th

century demonstrate how careful the fellowship was to ensure that members' views were sought for all kinds of decisions. However, this sometimes meant that there were lengthy discussions as members struggled to reach a compromise when they had differing viewpoints. For example, in the 1960s, there was such disagreement about the use of the Sunday school building for a fundraising sale, that the discussion could not be resolved in one meeting and had to be carried over to a further meeting.

At another meeting, when members were asked to consider how to increase attendance at evening services, the *"discussion in fact went on so long that only part of the meeting's agenda could be dealt with"* and even after such lengthy discussion, *"nothing concrete was established."* The frustration of the church secretary after one meeting was evident as he minuted *"this meeting was attended by only 14 members"*, although further reading of the minutes might indicate why members had lacked the motivation to attend: *"it was called to discuss the cleaning of the organ!"*

Although in the past even minor decisions were usually made by membership vote, over the years there has been a shift towards more decisions being made by individuals or groups, entrusted by the fellowship to prayerfully seek God's will. On occasion, this has sparked heated discussion. For example, in 1934 a special church meeting was called to agree how free the pastor should be to make decisions about the order of worship in a service. The new minister argued that it was fairly common for ministers to make their own decisions within reason, but the church members argued that such decisions had always been brought to a church meeting. Eventually a proposal was made that *"the minister shall be free to use his own discretion in the conduct of worship confident that he will continue to act in harmony with the deacons and the church"* and, although a counter proposal was made, the proposal was carried.

Similarly, in 1998 kitchen equipment was purchased using the *"maintenance and improvements"* budget, without first consulting the membership, which led to *"heated discussion"*. Nevertheless, church meetings have remained an essential part of church life, where the members *"join together as God's people to lovingly share, discuss and pray about the life of the church and what God is doing"*.

1900 - 1950

Entering the 20th century, the fellowship had a settled period under the pastorship of James Ford and the church focused its attentions on the local community and giving to the needy. The town's Cottage Hospital, which had been founded in 1878, was located opposite the church on Ednall Lane and the church records show that many donations were made to the hospital for example a proportion of the annual thanksgiving offering. At the time, the church was also giving to "*poor persons, widows and orphans*".



The Victorian church with the cottage hospital visible in the background.

This settled period of church life was to be challenged by the developing conflicts in Europe which led to the outbreak of the First World War. There is little recorded in the church documents about the war but in 1916 it is noted that the pastor was to "*send a message of good wishes to those at the front or in training*". There is no mention by name of all the church members who left Bromsgrove on active service but we do know that twelve men from the church were killed in action. These men were Russell Cound, Walter Ford, William Gower, Arthur Kelly, Wilfred Leadbetter, Arthur Liddell, William Manning, William Martin, Alfred Turner,

George Wallace, William Westwood and Raymond Wincott.

It seems that the church tried to function as usual throughout the war although there were a number of practical issues that the conflict brought, such as finding suitable buildings insurance in case of damage caused by enemy aircraft and establishing a committee to darken the windows in line with lighting restrictions.

The 250th anniversary of the church fell in the middle of the war, in 1916, and there were some differences of opinion about how to mark this. The pastor, James Ford, whose own younger son had died in action in 1915, advised that *“the present troubled time is not suited to any effort to raise any special fund to signalise this”*. However, the fellowship did not want to let the anniversary pass by unmarked so at a later church meeting it was agreed that it would be acknowledged by a history of the church written by the pastor, a commemorative tablet and a fund set up for redecoration of the building. At the anniversary services, a visiting preacher spoke about *“one soweth and another reapeth; other men laboured and ye have entered into their labours”* and *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever”*. Both these messages were particularly relevant given the personal challenges the members were experiencing as a result of the war. There were also musical celebrations in the church but, despite the polite tone of the records, there is a hint of ambiguity about their quality, with the performance of Gaul's Sacred Cantata being described as *“rather ambitious”* although it *“seemed to turn out well.”*



The war memorial engraved by Reverend Ford whose son is listed amongst the dead.

During the war years, Reverend Ford became very unwell after a period of 23 years pastoring the church. His illness came on very suddenly following a church service in December 1916 and it is described in the records as a *“breakdown”*. Reverend Ford immediately went to York for rest and recuperation and he resigned as pastor in March 1917, with the church records acknowledging the *“sad circumstances”* of his resignation,

perhaps alluding to the personal loss he had endured during the war. He had been very highly regarded by the church and had been active in the local community, particularly around education, sitting on a number of local education boards and committees. The war memorial tablet in the church, which includes the name of his son, was carved and gilded by him after the war and dedicated in 1919.

Following James Ford's departure, a new pastor, John Brooks began his ministry in Bromsgrove in 1917 and some records indicate that he had been at the Battle of the Somme prior to this ministry. The challenge for Brooks as pastor of the church as the war came to an end was to show *"the gospel ... to be relevant to that generation"*. The war had brought significant changes to society, with an acceleration of a national decline in church attendance that had begun prior to the war. In response, the church became increasingly active in evangelistic activities in the local community. As a result, *"the witness of the church was known widely in the town"*. Sadly, Brooks had to retire due to ill health in 1921 and the church had three more pastors over the next two decades. It experienced some growth during the 1930s, particularly as a result of some very focused efforts of the membership following Christmas 1934 when the pastor at the time, Herbert Hunt, set the church the bold challenge of increasing the size of the membership by 25% by Easter. Although the specific numbers were not recorded, this challenge met with some success. In the years leading up to the Second World War, the church was busy with a wide variety of activities and groups for men, women and children and the fellowship as a whole enjoyed sharing social times together.

Unfortunately, it was not long before the country was at war again and the nature of the Second World War had a more direct effect on the day to day life of the church members than the previous war. The deacons met on 9th September 1939 to discuss *"the extraordinary difficult time we are all passing through"*.

As with the First World War, there is little direct reference to the war in the church meeting minutes, although again there were practical considerations to be addressed. The church purchased blinds for the blackout and changed the evening service times to make the most of daylight. There were also changes made to the membership process, as people were evacuating to Bromsgrove from other parts of the country. A temporary membership scheme was set up so that members from Baptist churches elsewhere could easily move to membership in Bromsgrove until they were able to return to their own homes and local churches. One of the evacuees to the area, Miss Thomas, married the pastor and the church saw this as a rare happy outcome of "*the evil of war*".

Food rationing was introduced to the country in 1940 and this had an impact on the social aspects of church life, for example in 1943 the ladies of the church queried whether the annual church tea should go ahead, as it was becoming "*so difficult to get supplies*". It was agreed that the tea would go ahead and the church members stated that they had "*every confidence that the church ladies would be able to create something*". It appears that they were successful in this task!

There were a number of National Days of Prayer during the conflict and the church members were urged to bring along their friends and neighbours to these events. In 1940, the schoolroom was requisitioned by the County Council for use as an emergency shelter for needy people, being used as a base for issuing ration books at one point and as a canteen for members of the forces at another. Herbert Hunt, the pastor at the time, kept in touch by letter with the sixteen young men on active service in the forces. The following men from Bromsgrove Baptist Church were killed in action: Oliver Aston, Alan Eades, Peter Garrod, Howard Speed, George Oldbury, Leslie Juggins. It is important to point out that conflict continued in many areas of the world following the Second World War and a further young man from the church, Bertie Stanton, died whilst in service in Malaya in 1951.

Women in the Church

The very first covenant of Bromsgrove Baptist Church was signed by thirteen members, including two women named Sussannah Barker and Mary Pike. In the years that followed, numerous women were recorded being baptised, excluded and suspended for their behaviour, including adultery and Sunday trading. Although there have been many women members throughout the church's history, they were not permitted to be in leadership positions within the church until the second half of the 20th century, which was a reflection of women's position in society at the time. It is probable that the women of the church had informally met and supported each other from the very beginnings of the church in Bromsgrove, particularly when Baptists were viewed with suspicion by the wider community, but it was not until 1876 that a "Ladies Chapel Committee" was formed by the pastor's and deacons' wives. At the same time a "tea committee" for church wives was established.



The position of women in the church has changed over recent years as society has changed and there has been considerable thought, discussion and prayer over the years as the church has sought to make wise decisions. The first suggestion of appointing women deacons was made in 1957 and there were two serving women deacons by the end of Reverend Easthope's ministry in 1958. However, women's presence on the diaconate continued to be dependent on the convictions of the pastor at the time and, following Reverend Easthope's departure there were no further women deacons appointed until 1967, when it was again "*felt desirable that two ladies should join the diaconate*". This was a progressive move but expectations of the women in the church remained broadly traditional; in the same year, the church agreed to have an anniversary meal and it was minuted that "*the ladies of course would be responsible for the supper.*"

After these two appointments of women deacons in the 1960s, women were not seen in these roles again until the retirement of Keith Blades in 1996. Immediately after the announcement of his retirement, the question was raised about electing women to the new diaconate. The subject of the role of women in church was particularly in people's minds at the time, as the introduction of the ordination of women in the Anglican church in 1994 had been an area of national controversy. Members of Bromsgrove Baptist Church were encouraged to think and pray individually about the right people to become deacons and since the turn of the century women have represented roughly half of the diaconate. The church has never invited

a woman to be pastor, although during the interregnum preceding Paul Lewis's appointment as pastor, the church specified for the first time in its search that they would consider men or women.

Aside from decisions about leadership, over the years there have been various ways in which women from the church have met together in fellowship. Women have been primary carers of their children throughout the history of the church. Whilst in the earlier years many of the families would have worked in cottage industries, with workshops in a family's living accommodation, over the years society moved towards a model of men going out to work and women staying home to look after the home and children. As a result there have been various groups trying to balance the needs of women for fellowship with the practicalities of having children and these have resulted in very strong support networks within the church. For

example, Petticoat Line began in the 1970s for women who had small children and were unable to attend evening meetings. It soon attracted up to 30 people each month. As the members' circumstances changed, they moved to meeting in the evening and balanced the programme between speakers and social events, including the annual "Petticoat Dine".



As the members became older, however, it became more difficult for them to meet in the evenings and the final Petticoat Line meeting was in 2014. Whilst this is an example of a group that was able to provide fellowship to a generation of women as they moved through various life stages, this has proved harder for the church more recently. Several daytime groups have existed, including the "Ladies' Fellowship" in the 1990s and "Oasis", which began in 2007, but a large proportion of women continue to work whilst raising children, so daytime groups have been harder to maintain.



In 2015, a new group, "Links" for women was set up, particularly aiming to provide women who were working with an opportunity to meet socially in the evenings to develop deeper relationships. Initially "Links" met for a range of activities but this has now developed to a more informal pattern of meeting to eat, drink and chat.

Along with the rest of the country, every November, the men who were killed in action are remembered by the current fellowship. Until very recently, the names of these servicemen were read by Vic Halfpenny, a member of the church who had been attending Bromsgrove Baptist Church since before the war and was a member throughout his life. After reading the names of the men listed on the memorial tablet, he always ended by stating that some of the names were of men he had known personally, a reminder that in a close fellowship of people the impact of the war was far greater than the official church records convey.

1950 - 2000

The second half of the 20th century was peaceful compared with the tumultuous times of the first half, but the country and local area was experiencing significant changes that the church needed to adapt to. In 1966, just prior to England winning the World Cup, Bromsgrove Baptist Church was preparing for its own celebrations marking the church's 300th anniversary. Lewis Cooper was the pastor at the time and he told the Bromsgrove Messenger that the church was *"proud of its heritage and confident of its ability to survive in an increasingly materialistic age"*. The church had been newly decorated and was full as its history was presented in a pageant.



The 300th anniversary "procession of witness" from Birmingham reaches the church - July 1966

There was a relay of Boys Brigade members running from Birmingham to Bromsgrove, via Beacon Hill, remembering the route people from Birmingham had walked many years before to hear preaching at the church in Bromsgrove. The women of the church provided tea for about 250 visitors and a collection was made of £32 which was put towards the cost of the pageant and other activities. Of course, during the anniversary year, the everyday business of church life continued. On the same week of the anniversary celebrations, the Bromsgrove Messenger reported the marriage of David Foster and Wendy Huskins at the church, with the headline that the "*Groom Gave Premium Bonds to Bridal Party!*"



By the 1970s, the Victorian building was in a poor state of repair.

The people of the church continued to serve the local community in a variety of ways, wanting to attract more people to the fellowship. In 1970, for example, in acknowledgement of just how tiring it could be for people to walk up the hill from the High Street to the church, the fellowship made the offer to Bromsgrove Council of donating a seat for "*elderly folk to rest on coming up the hill from the town*". There remains a bench in the same position today.

It was not only the local community that had practical needs, however; after more than a century, the church building itself was presenting the fellowship with many practical challenges. In 1973, a survey of the building was undertaken which identified the extent of the church's poor state of repair and the financial burden of maintaining it. At the same time, membership was growing and there was an increasing variety of church activities

taking place, which meant that a more flexible building would better meet the needs of both the church members and the local community. Bill West, the pastor at the time, addressed the church about the options available to them. He was clear that the only realistic option was to spend a large sum, either on a total demolition and rebuild, or on a thorough renovation. He warned against the false economy of spending a modest sum to make small adjustments that would “*merely delay the work that was so evidently needed*”.

West had previously worked in insurance and industry which no doubt helped him objectively consider the situation and share his thoughts frankly with the membership. West also commented that, whilst the schoolroom would be retained during the building work for worship and to continue the normal activities of the church, it was “*conceivable that in the long term the schoolroom may be replaced*”. However, forty-two years later, the schoolroom (or “church hall” as it is now known) is still standing!

In March 1974 the church agreed, with a 75% majority, to demolish the fourth church building and the final service in this building was 1st September 1974. At the next family service, the congregation of about 120 walked onto the levelled site to pray and dedicate the site to a new church, followed by a renewal of the church's covenant with God.



The new building was created to seat 200, with a reception area that could be used independently for meetings and with a kitchen, vestry and side room. A moveable platform increased the flexibility of the main worship room. Although it is now quite common so see churches without fixed seating or a fixed pulpit, the tone of the Bromsgrove Messenger's report on the new church suggests that this was unusual at the time. The opening of the new church was used as an opportunity to witness to the community about the gospel, for example the Messenger article explains the baptistry's role in speaking of "*Christ's grave, empty because of Christ's victory over death*".

In 1978, not long after the new church had opened, Keith Blades came to the church as pastor. He was known to be a "*great pastor, preacher and evangelist*" and the church began to grow in number.

Young people in the church

In the past, childhood disappeared very swiftly once a child left school and began working for a living. Children in the church would have remained in the Sunday school until they were old enough to attend the adult services. In the middle of the twentieth century, however, Bill Haley and the Comets introduced the word "teenager", presenting a new challenge for the church. The church records show that there had been very little thought given to "teenagers" and young adults until the 1950s, but things began to change at this time. Regular youth services began to be held with students from the local teaching college, Shenstone College. These were regarded positively by most of the church and, following one event, the church members and the students commented on how they had felt an "atmosphere of devotion".



Exploring forms of worship that would appeal to the youth was only one aspect of service to the young people of the church and the local area. Providing suitable activities was also important, especially as the invention of the "teenager" seemed to bring with it concerns that modern young people were "uncouth and rebellious". In 1968 the church began to discuss the possibility of a youth club and this was eventually set up. The club was a success but the church meeting minutes suggest a sense of bemusement at how the young people spent their time, reporting that they "seemed to enjoy themselves in their own way"!

Nevertheless, the church's work with young people thrived and, during the 1970s, the "open youth club" was attended by dozens of young people from the town on a Friday evening, many of whom also enjoyed an annual week in Devon. A large proportion of the young people attending the club were not churchgoers, so an evangelistic message was given each week - initially this was presented as an "epilogue" at the end of the evening, but when the leaders realised that a number of young people were leaving before hearing it, the "epilogue" was re-named the "interlogue" and shifted to the middle of the session! On Sunday evenings, the young people had the opportunity to explore their faith in more depth at the "Youth Squash", which took place at various leaders' homes. It was given its name because of the number of people trying to squeeze into the sitting room and the refreshments on offer.

Youth work in the church continued to grow and, with that, came the same difficulties in finding leaders that the church had always had with its younger children. However, there was also a time when there did not appear to be sufficient young people to accommodate the number of willing helpers! By 2004, there were only two people in the church who were of "youth" age, which led to the setting up of an outreach group, which would come to be known as Sprout, to encourage young people back into the church. For the first few sessions, the three leaders enjoyed the company of just one young person who attended but this young person's efforts to bring along friends began a process of growth until the group numbered around 40. The group is continuing to thrive today and, as well as its weekly meetings, has enjoyed a number of weekends away.



A Sunday evening group, Sparks, was set up to encourage the young people to explore their faith further, as the "Youth Squash" had in the past. The current group of young people in the church includes a number of gifted musicians.

As well as playing with the worship group, a monthly session known as the "Youth Worship Project" gives them time to practise and worship together and the group has led worship at church services and at the sunrise Easter service on the Lickey Hills.

Around this time, a member of the church, Sue Halstead, shared with Keith Blades and his wife the vision God had given her that she was to go to Nepal. She began her mission work with the organisation Operation Mobilisation but in 1987 the church supported her to take herself to Nepal, where she met Shanta, a Nepali Christian. Together they set up a charity called Love in Action to help women and girls forced into prostitution.

Although Sue's health now prevents her from going to Nepal, she continues to lead the work from Bromsgrove, with supporters in this country and around the world. Bromsgrove Baptist Church continues to support this work with fundraising, practical gifts and prayer.



Keith Blades with his wife, Pat.

The church continued to grow in number throughout the 1980s and, towards the end of the decade, it was agreed that a larger building was needed. The building of a new church so soon after the previous rebuild would bring considerable expense to the church, so various sources were asked to support the project. The Edward Cadbury Charitable Trust was one of the organisations that made financial contributions towards the project, although the majority of requests for help were met with encouragement but no financial contribution.

Nevertheless, the building project went ahead and the new building formally opened on June 2nd 1990. The service was conducted by Keith Blades and included a piano and violin sonata as well as a greeting by Sir Hal Miller, the MP for Bromsgrove at the time.

Place in the local church community

Whilst Bromsgrove Baptist Church was initially a rather closed group, over the years it became more open to relationship with other Christian denominations. This was not an easy process, with a number of the divisions in the history of the church being related to the disagreements about whether the church should accept Christian believers who had not taken the route of Believer's baptism. Given the risks that the earliest members of the church had taken so they could worship in the way they believed to be right, it is understandable that some members should be protective of the factors that distinguished them as "Baptists".

During the second half of the 20th century, particularly under the pastorship of Lewis Cooper, Bromsgrove Baptist Church began to develop stronger relationships with the churches of Bromsgrove, despite their denominational differences. Cooper served as president of the Bromsgrove and District Free Church Council and was chairman of the Bromsgrove Council of Churches. He was clearly keen to support other churches that shared the Christian faith and, in 1962, he exchanged pulpits for the first time with the vicar of St John's Church for a service, which would have been inconceivable even fifty years before. Some years later, when the new vicar of St John's noticed the low rate of attendance at St Andrew's Church in Charford, he appealed to both the Baptist and Methodist Churches for some support. Joint services with the Methodist Church on New Road, just a few hundred metres away, also began to take place, particularly at Christmas.

Bromsgrove Council of Churches agreed in 1995 to move forward as "Churches Together in Bromsgrove" (CTiB), with the aim of the churches facilitating each other to witness effectively to the people of the town. This provided a way for churches to advertise events more widely in Bromsgrove and develop opportunities to do things together, for example in 1995 the churches put together their first shared advert for Christmas services in Bromsgrove. In 1998, a series of mid-week meetings was arranged to help the different denominations develop their understanding of each other's beliefs. At this time, most members of Bromsgrove Baptist Church agreed that all Christians who believe in the Bible have common ground which should bring them closer. However, not all members of the church felt the same, expressing uneasiness about getting too closely involved with denominations that might not "*put Jesus in his rightful place*". These members suggested that more effort should be put into strengthening links with other Baptist churches in the region. Despite these reservations, CTiB has strengthened over the years and it has helped the success of projects such as the Young Homeless Project, Street Pastors and the memorable performance of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat".



CTiB has continued to develop ways to more effectively communicate the activities of the churches in Bromsgrove, for example, a website was created in 2013 and a Facebook group was set up in 2015.

The presence of an MP showed just how much things had changed since the church first began in 1666, when no MP would have taken the risk of being seen present at a Baptist Church!

The fellowship's excitement about the new building was shared with the local community. A brochure was printed explaining the gospel, telling the history of the church and sharing the testimonies of some of the members at the time. The brochure also contained a number of local business adverts and the revenue they generated was donated to the Primrose Hospice. The church clearly wanted to demonstrate that it was relevant to people in all stages of life, challenging the country's shift to secularism and the steady decline in church attendance that was evident nationally.



The brochure for the opening of the current church building.

Following the church opening and throughout the 1990s, there was regular “open air witness” in Bromsgrove, aiming to make passers-by in the High Street aware of the church and invite them to services. A monthly coffee morning was set up which was particularly popular with people from Nailers' Court, the retirement apartments opposite the church, on the former Cottage Hospital site. In 1998, a number of people who regularly attended the coffee morning founded the Thursday Fellowship, a group who *“shared in singing, prayers and thoughts from God’s word, followed by a cup of tea.”*



Thursday Fellowship group photo in 2002.

Around this time, Bromsgrove Baptist Church was involved in various national evangelistic initiatives. Churches of all denominations declared the 1990s to be a “decade of evangelism”.

In 1994 the fellowship supported the “Minus to Plus” programme, which intended that a booklet explaining the gospel would be delivered to every home in the United Kingdom. Whilst only 50% of homes across the country eventually received the booklet, in the Midlands region, approximately 7000 enquiries were made to churches in response to booklets that were received. Bromsgrove Baptist Church members attended further events to explore ways to reach “unchurched” members of the community, who had little knowledge of the gospel and no Sunday school background, such as the West Midlands Baptist Association Conference Day in 1995, which was entitled “Reaching the 95%”.

For the majority of the 20th century the fellowship appears to have been unified with a strong focus on evangelism but, as the century drew to a close, there were disagreements in the church that led to a period of decline and uncertainty.

This came towards the end of Keith Blades' ministry, during which the fellowship had flourished, when in recognition of his increasing age, he prompted the membership to explore their ideas about the future leadership of the church. Differences of opinion emerged within the fellowship and, eventually, the church agreed that Reverend Blades would take a period of sabbatical leave to allow some time to reach a decision. During that time he experienced serious health problems and made the decision to retire in 1997. The church leaders agreed that the church needed a fresh start. Consequently, those responsible for leading the church vacated their roles to initiate this process.

Keith Blades was given the title Pastor Emeritus, as he planned to remain in church membership, and in recognition of all he had done during his ministry at Bromsgrove Baptist Church. He remained a church member until he died in 2000. Shortly before he retired, Keith Blades urged the fellowship to *“continue to have a burden for the lost and the lonely in Bromsgrove and to keep hold of the vision for revival, especially within our own fellowship.”*



A packed event inside the current church.

This period of disharmony within the fellowship occurred just a few years after the opening of the new church building, which created considerable pressure as the loans for the building needed to be repaid. Additionally, in 1996, the fellowship had been informed that the hall required extensive repairs to the roof which would cost around £9000.

Although the church continued to receive new members into the fellowship during this period, this did not match the number of members who had withdrawn membership to worship elsewhere.

As a result, members were informed that their weekly offering was £400 short of what was required to run the church. In addition to the financial impact, the decline in numbers also affected the church's music ministry and children's work.

Recognising the severity of the situation, both financial and spiritual, the fellowship met together and identified that their vision was *"to enable the church to begin to function as a united body of God's people again."* Social events, such as a New Year party and a barn dance were organised to help repair relationships and quality teaching was provided, by both outside pastors and those within the fellowship. The church identified that they needed a pastor who could support them to develop in two areas that felt they were particularly struggling with: pastoral care and mission.

After more than a year without a pastor, the church invited Howard Heyburn to Bromsgrove and he began his ministry at the church in September 1998. His induction service began with the song, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord" which was a strong message for the church as it tried to move forward from the events of the preceding few years.

With a focus on mission, Howard Heyburn had made it clear that one of his first tasks in Bromsgrove would be to run an Alpha course.



Reverend Howard Heyburn

Alpha was developed by the Anglican Holy Trinity Brompton Church as an evangelistic course aiming to introduce people to the basics of Christianity over a period of ten weeks. As the new millennium approached, the course was quite well known across the country and by 1998, when Bromsgrove Baptist Church ran its first Alpha course, over 10,000 courses had already taken place, not just within church settings but in universities, prisons and workplaces.

The course appears to have been a positive step forward for Bromsgrove Baptist Church and signs emerged that the fellowship was strengthening, with increasing numbers. Consequently, the financial situation for the church improved, the building loan was cleared and legacies enabled essential work in the church hall to be carried out.

There remained some tensions within the fellowship and, over the next few years, the members continued to have disagreements, particularly about the suitability of one church member who, it emerged, had an affiliation with an organisation that many church members believed was incompatible with living as a committed Christian. The fellowship was urged to seek peace but a number of people left the church, resulting in barely any children or young people attending services. In acknowledgment of the difficulties, the fellowship continued to explore and develop its pastoral care and to offer spiritual support to each other.

2000 - 2016

Howard Heyburn was called to pastor at another church in 2003 and the church found itself without a pastor for a further two years, until Terry Broadhurst came to the church with his family in 2005.



Reverend Terry Broadhurst and his wife, Nicola.

During the years that followed, the church gradually began to see more families attending and a number of activities aimed at supporting families in the local community began, including Little Wonders, a very highly regarded parent and toddler group which continues to thrive.

The church was amongst 1500 churches across the country that took part in “Hope 08”, with the goal of churches *“serving their communities, sharing faith in word and action”*. The focus was local mission and the year began with litter-picking in the local area. This was followed by the churches of Bromsgrove coming together to stage an exciting production of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat”, with Mike Stringer from the church taking the role of Joseph. The management of the project was co-ordinated by Bromsgrove Baptist Church and NewSong Church in Sidemoor. Following this, the church facilitated a group called “Parentalk”, group sessions to help parents explore and



The Hope 08 production of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat

share their experiences of parenting, based on the resources from Care for the Family. By the time Terry Broadhurst left Bromsgrove Baptist Church in 2009, its links with the local community had strengthened significantly, particularly with the older people living in the immediate vicinity of the church and with local families.

The church's community focus continued when Paul Lewis arrived as pastor in 2011 and it continued to strengthen its relationships with other churches through Churches Together in Bromsgrove. The same year, the church membership agreed to support Street Pastors in Bromsgrove, jointly with a number of other local churches. The project was developed to work with police to reduce the level of crime and antisocial behaviour at night, with teams going out on the town's streets, near the pubs and nightclubs, to help people in practical ways. The presence of Street Pastors was well received by the local community, with antisocial behaviour reducing by 35%, and the benefit of the project to the community was acknowledged when it won a Community Safety Award in 2013.



The "Mega Makers" holiday club in 2014.

After many years' absence, Paul Lewis reintroduced "Holiday Bible Clubs" to Bromsgrove Baptist Church and they have proved a very positive way to link with the community. A large proportion of the fellowship help with the annual event, not only directly with the children but also in preparing materials and decorating the hall.

The current J-Team (Sunday school) children and leaders will probably never forget spending a hot July morning sorting through hundreds of plastic milk bottles, surrounded by the stench of sour milk, to build a plastic igloo which collapsed almost immediately on completion! The church has become familiar to many children in Bromsgrove as Paul Lewis visits several schools to speak at assemblies; a number of children visit each year to explore the church as part of their Religious Studies; and several schools are invited to bring their pupils to watch the pantomime, performed by the Saltmine Theatre Company, at Christmas.



Saltmine Theatre Company performing Snow Queen in the church in 2014.

Whilst groups for children and parents have in the past been aimed at women and took place on weekdays, the last decade has seen the introduction of occasional Little Wonders toddler sessions on Saturday mornings, aimed at dads bringing their children along. For men with older children, "Dads and Kids"

sessions have been introduced as part of the men's outreach ministry, offering dads the opportunity to enjoy activities with their children, get to know other dads and think about their role as parents.

The fellowship has continued to attract young families and consequently groups for the church's children and young people are currently thriving. The Sunday school, now known as J-Team, has continued to struggle to find enough teachers to cope with the numbers of children, just as it has throughout its history, but the children have continued to provide the church with energy, excitement and fun. The annual nativity is a highlight for the congregation and, recently, the children were particularly proud to film a "movie" of the nativity in locations across Bromsgrove.

The young families who began to attend the church just over a decade ago have grown into families with teenagers and, as the children have grown, their needs have changed. The young people from the church enjoy Friday evenings at their youth club, "Sprout", and Sunday evenings at "Sparks", a group that was set up to provide a space for the young people to explore the Bible, encourage each other in their faith and develop their spiritual maturity.



Reverends Keith Judson and Paul Lewis.

Paul Lewis was joined by Keith Judson, in 2014, who accepted a joint position as Associate Minister to Bromsgrove Baptist Church and Chaplain to Primrose Hospice. The fellowship welcomed this opportunity to form further links with the local community. In his church role, Keith has introduced the monthly "Sanctuary" service, a more reflective evening service, that has provided a different way for people to worship in church.

A recent significant change to the church has been the move away from the terminology of “membership”. During the course of the church’s history, people wanting to become church members were expected to prove their devotion and at times this led to people not feeling welcomed by the church. The move from “membership” to what is now called “Covenant Partnership” was agreed by the church as a way to embrace a better understanding of belonging together as God’s people. In this way, people who have made Bromsgrove Baptist Church their spiritual “home”, can be affirmed by the church meeting as being part of all that the church is seeking to be and do for the Lord.

This brings the church's history to the current time and the fellowship is excited to be celebrating 350 years of the Baptist Church in Bromsgrove. The celebrations have included a look at the past as well as an acknowledgement of the present. In September, a number of members of the fellowship followed in the footsteps of John Eckells and walked together from Bewdley to Bromsgrove, remembering the significance of this journey to the church today.



Anniversary walk from Bewdley to Bromsgrove, September 2016

The children of the church have been putting together a time capsule so that, in the future, they will be able to look back at themselves in 2016. Various members of the fellowship have been filmed answering questions about their memories of church life over the years. On the anniversary weekend itself, the church has invited families from the local community to attend a “Messy Church” event and previous members of the church have been invited to celebrate with the current fellowship at a barn dance and a celebration lunch.

From John Eckells' early preaching and the commitment of the first thirteen members, the church's long history has seen times of growth, times of challenge and times of pain. When the focus has shifted from Jesus, the fellowship has faltered. The church currently has a vision for serving the community both locally and further afield, but history shows that the fellowship needs to keep its eyes firmly on the Lord.

Despite the flaws of the people of Bromsgrove Baptist Church, past and present, the words of the visiting preacher exactly 100 years ago still stand and can give the fellowship confidence for the times ahead:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever

Pastors

1. John Eckells 1666 - 1696
2. John Moore 1698 - 1699
3. William Peart 1700 - 1719
4. George Yarnold 1719 - 1746
5. James Butterworth 1755 - 1794
6. John Scroxtton 1798 - 1833
(co-pastor John Hooper 1827 - 1830)
7. Benaiah Hoe 1834 - 1837
8. John Blakeman 1838 - 1841
9. Thomas Davis 1842 - 1848
10. James Sneath 1848 - 1851
11. Abraham Jones 1851 - 1852
12. Robert Aikenhead 1853 - 1855
13. William Green 1856 - 1859
14. James Ewence 1861 - 1862
15. Alexander MacDonald 1863 - 1874
(co-pastor W. J. Stevens 1868 - 1869)
16. Edward Scammell 1875 - 1877
17. Ernest Coleman 1878 - 1881
18. James Comfort 1882 - 1893
19. James Ford 1893 - 1917
20. John Brooks 1917 - 1921
21. Thomas Dineen 1921 - 1926
22. W.H. Browning 1927 - 1932
23. Herbert W. Hunt 1932 - 1945
24. Maurice Buckler 1945 - 1956
25. J.H.G. Easthope 1956 - 1958
26. Lewis J. Cooper 1959 - 1971
27. Bill West 1971 - 1976
28. Keith Blades 1978 - 1997
(Roger Harber as Assistant Pastor 1986 - 1997)
29. Howard Heyburn 1998 - 2003
30. Terry Broadhurst 2005 - 2009
31. Paul Lewis 2011 - present
(Keith Judson Associate Pastor 2014 - present)

Buildings

1. Humphrey Potter's house 1700
2. Howe Lane (Church Street)1770
3. Worcester Street 1822
4. New Road 1867
5. New Road second building 1976
6. New Road third building 1990

The 350th anniversary church history was written by Cathie Swainland in 2016.

Sources: The majority of the information in the church history has been gathered directly from the church records from 1666 to the present day. However, local newspaper reports, the recollections of current members and information from previous written church histories have also been used. For specific information about references, please ask Cathie Swainland.

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