

A brief Outline of the History of Fyfield Baptist Chapel

from an article by Revd. M Hambleton, retired Minister of
Abingdon Baptist Church

When the Revd. John Evans was minister at Abingdon Baptist Church (1798-1813) many of the members of his church lived in the villages within walking distance of the town. These were especially the villages of Drayton, Marcham, Cothill and Fyfield.

During his ministry and that of his successor, John Kershaw, (1814-1840) the membership of the Abingdon Church grew to the point that the Ock Street chapel could no longer hold them. This was resolved, in the early 1840's in two ways. In 1841 the old Abingdon chapel was replaced with the one that stands today. The Cothill chapel was built the following year and it is likely that those at Drayton and Fyfield were opened about that same year. It is said that the land for the Fyfield chapel was bought from, or donated by, St. John's College.

These village chapels were seen as part of the mission of the Abingdon Church. Before long, Abingdon had appointed two extra ministers to work in the villages and it is probable that the village members remained in membership with the Abingdon church, worshipping in their village on Sunday mornings and joining the Abingdon congregation for the evening gospel service. This pattern was still operated in the Cote circuit well into the second half of the 20th century.

At the Berks. And W. Middx. Association meetings, held at Abingdon in 1851, the Abingdon church reports:

"In the villages of Cothill and Fyfield where our brother Rev. S.V. Lewis, and at Drayton where our brother George Best continue to labour, we have reason to hope the cause of divine truth is advancing... . . ."

Towards the end of the century, the mother church installed a new organ and gave its old one to Fyfield. It is said that the old organ was a better instrument than the new!

In the 1890's we hear of a "Village Committee" consisting of the Abingdon pastor and officers, the village evangelist, one member from each village (Marcham is now included) and one member from the home church.

In July 1897 the Abingdon church minutes record that the Rev. Shipley has been invited by the Abingdon church to accept the oversight of the chapels at Cothill, Fyfield and Marcham.

By 1925 Abingdon has just two ministers, one of whom is Mr. C J.Lipscombe, who is called the Assistant Pastor or Co-Pastor. His task was to work in the four village churches. Described as "A saintly man with a good wife", and having lost his right arm in the First World War, he is remembered for his pastoral care, cycling around the villages where he would call on every household. When his visit was not welcome, he always called again to ask if they had changed their mind! He served in this way for 22 years, retiring in 1947.

During this time the Village Committee was reformed into the "Abingdon Fellowship" to forge yet closer links between the mother and daughter churches. A deacon was elected by each of the four village churches and these, with the Abingdon deacons and the two pastors formed one diaconate.

In the late 1940's, following Mr. Lipscombe's retirement, the Abingdon Fellowship minutes begin to record a weakening of the links between the villages. There is discussion regarding increased contributions towards the stipend of the next Assistant Minister. Marcham agrees to an increase of £15, but it was thought that Cothill "with only three or four members left" could not be expected to make an increase, and Fyfield would have similar difficulty with only seven members. In the Association Letter of that year it is reported that the war years have "weakened the links between "the five communities that compose the Abingdon Church".

In the early 1947 money was obtained from the Home Work Fund for an Assistant Minister at Abingdon to work in the villages. The Rev. Hubert Jenkins was appointed. He was followed by the Rev. S.J. Cowley who was very popular at

Fyfield. However, he and the Abingdon minister found it impossible to work together and, after many patient attempts to settle the matter, the Abingdon church eventually asked both to resign. All the churches had grown very weak. It was decided not to call an Assistant Minister but that the Abingdon minister must care for the villages as well. Unfortunately the next Abingdon minister suffered from ill health and was able to do very little in the villages. However, when he resigned, the village churches reported "a general feeling among the members of these churches that they did not desire in any way to sever any connections with the Mother Church in Abingdon".

For the next five years the Abingdon church is led by students from Regents Park College and other students helping the villages. By 1960 the mother church has only 32 members and the village churches are equally weak. By 1965 there are three members at Cothill and eleven at Fyfield.

But in Abingdon things were improving. During the dogged ministry of Mr. Cox the decline was halted and then, with the coming of Adrian Thatcher came rapid growth. By 1970 help was once again flowing from Abingdon to the ailing churches at Cothill and Fyfield. But the links between the churches were growing ever weaker, which is another way of saying that the daughter churches were feeling a growing need for independence. However, the separation was too much for Cothill, which finally closed in 1977. Also in 1977 the Fyfield Church declared that it wished to be completely separate and in 1984 the Abingdon trustees handed over the Fyfield trust deeds to new trustees at Fyfield. In 1989 the church was low again and indicated it would value help from Abingdon. Mr. Charles Orland, an Abingdon deacon, was a frequent leader of worship at Fyfield.

Then, during the 1990's and on into the new millennium, the Fyfield church increased in strength and firmly established itself as a church able to stand on its own.