



From Widcombe Wharf



Chapel and the remains of Ebenezer Terrace

### Congregational 1820-1834

Although now known as Widcombe Baptist Church, it was built circa 1820 by the Independents as the Congregationalists were then styled. Around this period a number of houses had been built in nearby Dolemeads and the population of Widcombe had increased significantly. An embroidery survives of “Two Hymns to be sung April 18, when the foundation stone of Widcomb-Chapel will be laid” and it has the year 1820. The *New Evangelical Magazine and Theological Review* carried a letter dated 12-Jun-1822 from George Ingram, Minister of Ebenezer Chapel, Bath, in which he wrote that “Having been collecting for our New Independent Chapel in Bath” he reported that he had obtained four guineas from the Bishop of Gloucester and four other Anglican clergymen,

The whole area was flooded in 1821. From Rowland Mainwaring’s account “public attention was particularly called to the unfortunate inhabitants of those miserable abodes recently built on that low, swampy spot of ground, called the Dolemeads, and its immediate vicinity. The erection of those cottages, continuing from year to year, became a nuisance to the neighbourhood; and, at length, a perfect colony of vice and dissipation.”

Severe flooding in the area occurred yet again in 1823 and the chapel was closed for two years reopening in October 1825. In 1832 the then minister, Rev Samuel King, emigrated to America. It is unclear whether the church remained open after this.

### Methodist 1834--1838

In the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of Thu 13 Nov 1834 was an advertisement for the reopening of the church for divine service “by the Wesleyan Methodists” on Friday 28th and Sunday 30th. A subsequent advertisement on 27 Nov gave the names of the preachers. This included Rev Mr Jay, who was the independent minister at Argyle Chapel.

A series of memorials as painted metal plaques date from the 1830s. The dates are prior to and after the Methodists took over the chapel. One memorial can be found in situ attached to the wall in the crypt and numbers painted on the wall at about 3 feet intervals indicate that it was used for burials. There are some remains of painted memorials on the walls of the crypt. The history of the church written in 1975 states that “Many years ago all remains were removed and reburied and tombstones destroyed.”

From the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of Sat 22 Sep 1838: “The general attendance at Ebenezer Chapel, Widcombe has fallen very short of the expectation of those disinterested members of the Wesleyan Connexion who some time since took upon themselves the pecuniary responsibilities of having the Chapel opened as a place of divine worship. In consequence, the building has been taken, for three years from Lady Day, by the Rev. the Rector of Bath, with a view of using it as a chapel of ease for the parish of Widcombe. It is not unlikely, however, that the Chapel may be given up to the Rector at an earlier date than Lady Day.”

### Anglican 1838-1847

The building was used by the Church of England for services from 1838 to 1847 when St Matthew’s church on Widcombe Hill was opened.

### Baptist 1849-

In 1849 the building was leased by a group of fifty Baptists who had spilt from the Baptist Providence Chapel on the Lower Bristol Road. The Baptist congregation is a self-standing one and not part of the Baptist Union. In 1868 the Baptists bought the freehold from the Congregationalists for £300. This was considerably less than the cost of St Mark's church, completed in 1825, which cost over £5,000.

Seating 600, all the seats were free — publicity for the chapel made a virtue of this. This is in contrast to many other churches and chapels which derived income by charging pew rents. For example in the Post Office Bath Directory of 1895 the Providence Chapel had 400 seats of which 100 were free and nearby St Mark's church had 770 seats of which 385 were free.

The *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of Thu 21 May 1857 reported that "Mr Spurgeon, Baptist Minister, whose name has recently been so much before the public, preached two sermons, yesterday, at the Ebenezer Chapel, Widcombe." Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was known as the "Prince of Preachers" and was pastor of a Baptist chapel in London and later the Metropolitan Chapel, Southwark which could accommodate over 5,000 people.

A press report on 23 Apr 1861 on the 12th anniversary of the Sunday school stated that there were 125 children in the schools, an increase of 50 in a year. By 1871 the number of nonconformist Sunday Schools in Bath was 19 with 2,438 children and teachers and other officers 320.

For the Widcombe Baptists, baptisms occurred by total immersion in the River Avon. From the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* of Thu 11 Sep 1873 "A baptistry has been added to Ebenezer Chapel, Widcombe, and on Sunday it was used for the first time, when six persons were immersed. For many years past it has been usual to baptise the members of this church in the river."

John Huntley, who had been minister at the Ebenezer Chapel for 41 years, died on 1 Mar 1902, aged 74. He was buried in Lyncombe & Widcombe and St James Cemetery, Lower Bristol Road. The funeral oration described how he had been born at Limpley Stoke, son of a Baptist minister and had come to Bath in 1861.

In 1910 the Canal Tavern public house adjacent to the church was bought and rooms for the Sunday school built in its place. The foundation stone has an inscription that it was laid by Sir G W McAlpine in September 1910 and also an inscription "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree and it shall be to the Lord for a name." The 'thorn' being referred to is the public house which was anathema to the congregation whose views were influenced by the temperance movement. The new building opened on 27 Apr 1911.

Ebenezer Hall was formally opened on 7 Dec 1912 but had been completed before then as it had served for a meeting earlier that year.



The Sunday School building



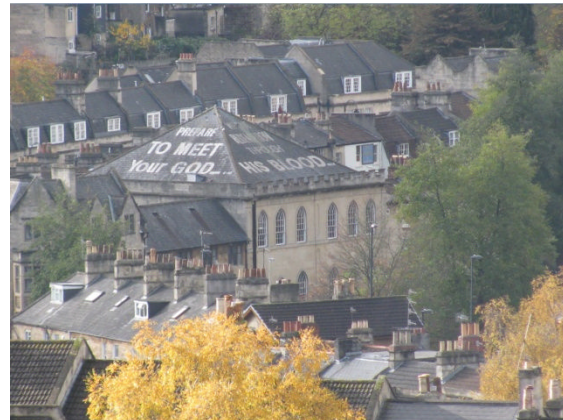
In the early 1970s there was a proposal to relieve traffic in Bath by the building of a tunnel under lower Lansdown but this was turned down and the traffic redirected via Widcombe. One of the proposals was that chapel and Claverton Buildings would be demolished to make way for a new road. Instead the new road was built to the north of the chapel (Rossiter Road).

In 1980 the orientations of the fittings inside the church were altered: the pulpit was moved from the southern to the northern side and a new entrance and hallway were built meaning that the congregation no longer had to enter from the narrow path on the canal-side. This was completed in early 1981.

In the 1990s renovation work was done on the roof, the tiles being removed by volunteers from the church. The builder recommended that the new tiles be allowed to weather before reinstating the quotations. When, after a few years, the painting was redone there was an objection from a resident living on Widcombe Hill who had bought a house overlooking the church. The Council allowed the painting to remain but on the condition that, when the tiles were next replaced, no painting would occur. Now listed as a Grade II building, removal of the inscriptions is now not permitted unless agreed to by English Heritage.



*Current internal arrangement*



*View of the roof*

#### **Further information:**

Widcombe Baptist Church – The First 150 Years, Grace M Parker, 1975

A History of Widcombe Baptist Church, 2005

[www.widcombebaptistchurch.org](http://www.widcombebaptistchurch.org)

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