

BUNYAN MEETING - THE CHURCH

Bunyan Meeting was founded in the year 1650, and in the early years services were probably held in the houses of one or other of its members. In 1653, on the invitation of the town authorities, they occupied St John's Church, Bedford.

It was during this period that Bunyan joined the church, his name appearing at number 27 on the register of members. Bunyan had come under the influence of John Gifford, the Evangelist of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the first minister of the Church, and it was probably in the Rectory of St John's that his conversion took place. The old oak refectory table there, at which Bunyan may have sat talking with Gifford, is now in the possession of Bunyan Meeting, and part of it serves as the Communion Table.

When the Monarchy was restored in 1660, with a consequent return to religious uniformity, the Church had to leave St John's. After 12 years without a church building, it was finally established on the present site in Mill Lane, now Mill Street.

The land, originally an orchard, was purchased by Josias Ruffhead, a member of the congregation, from Robert Crompton of Elstow for £90 and subsequently part was sold by him to the Church for £50. A barn in the orchard was then licensed for preaching. This was the building Bunyan knew, and it served the Church for a number of years after his death.

The Indenture conveying the orchard and barn from Crompton to Ruffhead in 1672 is in the Museum. There is also an oak tea caddy, said to have been made from wood taken from Bunyan's pulpit.

The next building on the site, known as The Old Meeting, or more popularly, from the shape of its gabled roofs, as The Three Ridges, was built in 1707 at a cost of £400. It was built during the ministry of the Revd Ebenezer Chandler, Bunyan's immediate successor. It seated 700 people, and served the congregation until 1849, with a

major refurbishment in 1770. Looking down at the old church from the top of what is now Gadsby Street, little could be seen of it except the roof, and several steps led down to the interior from the entrance doors.

Some objects have survived from the old building: early manuscript tune books; two pitch pipes, used to give the note for singing before the advent of an organ; a mallet made from one of the oak pillars; two small glass window panes; a metal oil wick trimmer and snuffers; and a paper fan with scenes from the parable of the Good Samaritan painted on it, which was found under the floorboards when the building was demolished. The low roof and packed congregations meant that the church became unbearably hot at times, and it was usual for ladies to bring such a fan to cool their faces.

In 1849-50 the present church was built; it cost £4,300. Further buildings were later added, to house the Sunday Schools and other meetings. The porch was built to protect the bronze doors, presented to the church by the Duke of Bedford in 1876. The interior of the Church building was renovated and altered in 1974, the seating downstairs being reduced from 600 to 150 when all the old wooden pews were removed and the sanctuary modernised. The gallery remains unaltered (a children's gallery, above the present gallery on the north side, had been removed at an earlier date).

For many years the area around the Church was used as a burial ground, and in 1767 it was considerably enlarged when John Howard, the prison reformer, having bought Howard House as a weekend residence, donated a 20-foot-wide strip of his garden to the Church. Two former ministers of Bunyan Meeting are buried in the graveyard - Joshua Symonds in 1788 and Samuel Hillyard in 1839. Hillyard's tomb is the one in front of the Church building, on the left of the main gate. In 1927 the burial ground was converted into a garden of remembrance. Howard House, across the garden, became the property of the Church in 1883.

Features of the Church

Bronze doors

These are copper on bronze, and were given to the Church in 1876 by Hastings, 9th Duke of Bedford. They are modelled on the Baptistry Doors at Florence, and are the work of Frederick Thrupp. The doors have ten panels, each one depicting a scene from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, arranged from left to right, beginning at the bottom left.

1. Christian about to leave his family.
2. Christian being welcomed at the Wicket Gate by Goodwill.
3. Christian meets the Shining Ones at the Cross
4. Christian asleep in the arbour on Hill Difficulty.
5. Christian passing the lions on his way to the House Beautiful.
6. Christian talking with Simple, Sloth and Presumption.
7. Christian receiving his armour at the House Beautiful. (Notice the ancient weapons in the background.)
8. Christian being beckoned by Demas to view his Silver Mine.
9. A composite picture of Faithful's death, and of the chariot taking him to the Celestial City.
10. Christian with Hopeful crossing the River of Death.

Notice that two panels are in the wrong order. Panel 6 should be number 4, and panel 8 should be number 9. Did the artist arrange them in this order to give a better balance, or did he make a mistake?

Infant and Believers' baptism

The Church practises both infant and believers' baptism.

The Church does not have a fixed font, but when required a small portable font is brought into the Church. The baptistry, which is used for total immersion, is located beneath the dais floor. For baptism by immersion the furniture is removed from the dais and the floor taken up to reveal the open baptistry.

The Communion table

This part of the oak table was used by John Bunyan and his congregation when they first came to the site in Mill Lane, now Mill Street. At this time they used a barn for services. The table would have been placed in the centre of the barn, the congregation meeting around it to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

An open Bible

This stands on the communion table - a constant reminder to the congregation of the centrality of the Bible in their faith and worship.

Central pulpit

This signifies the centrality of preaching in the worship of the church. The situation of the communion table beneath the pulpit indicates that the ministry of word and sacrament are the focal points of Nonconformist worship.

The windows

These are all 20th century designs, and with one exception have been produced by Goddard and Gibbs, a London firm. They depict scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* or from Bunyan's life. Most of the windows have been installed to mark certain anniversaries; the first of these was in 1950 to mark the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Church. The latest came in 1988 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Bunyan's death. Two other windows with scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* were installed in 1998.