

The Baptist churches in London

Aims and approach

This document is designed for those who wish to explore an aspect of the religious heritage of the Baptist churches in London, in particular the history of an individual church.

It will:

- provide a background history to the Baptist movement in London
- explain ways of finding out more about important aspects of Baptist history in London in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Overview: London Baptists

We are grateful to Ian Randall (Spurgeon's College, London) for his contribution to this guide, and to this section in particular.

Pre-nineteenth century

London has played an important part in the history of the Baptist movement. The first 'General' Baptist churches (known as such because of their Arminian view of the atonement) began to appear in England early in the seventeenth century, firstly in Spitalfields under the leadership of Thomas Helwys in 1612. Parallel to this, from around the 1630s the 'Particular' Baptist churches ('particular' because they held a Calvinistic 'limited' view of the atonement') began to emerge, with a congregation gathering in Wapping in 1638. By 1660 there were well over two hundred Baptist churches in England. Congregations often met in homes and warehouses and new converts were often baptised in the River Lea by Bow. In 1770 a New Connexion of General Baptists, with a strong Evangelical emphasis, was formed; this experienced growth while the older groups of General Baptists declined.

The nineteenth century

The nineteenth century saw a gradual coming together of Connexion and Particular Baptists. In 1812-13 a Baptist Union was formed, and while largely influenced by Particular Baptists, over time it began to draw in churches from the Connexion. By the end of the century this was the main body representing Baptist churches. Yet there was also division – some felt that Calvinistic doctrinal standards were slipping. In the early nineteenth century, a group of churches, influenced in part by London Baptist minister John Stevens, emerged as the Strict Baptists. The first Strict Baptist periodical, the *Gospel Standard*, was published in 1835. A Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches was formed in 1871.

As London experienced rapid expansion there was a flourishing of Baptist church building. This was fuelled in part by the formation in 1865 of the London Baptist Association, which ten years later had 131 members. One of the main aims of the organisation was the provision of funds for church extension (now commonly known as 'planting'). In the first years of the Association, funds were found to build Baptist churches in Upper Holloway, Victoria Park, The Downs (Clapton), Battersea Park, Surbiton, Balham, Leyton and Highgate Rd. These years of church building reflected the growing confidence of the Baptist community: many of these churches were spacious, seating numbers from 350 to 1000, and they were built on prominent sites, often on main roads.

The *Daily News* census of religious worship in 1902-3 indicated that Baptists, with 163,052 worshippers, were the largest of the Free Church denominations. Attendance at the best-attended Baptist churches showed that certain preachers could still draw crowds. The largest attendance at one Baptist service was 2,210, at the huge Metropolitan Tabernacle, founded at the Elephant and Castle by the Victorian 'prince of preachers', C.H. Spurgeon. The next largest Baptist causes - with

more than 1,000 people at one service - were the East London Tabernacle, founded and built up by Archibald Brown, a friend of Spurgeon's, followed by Tabernacles or Chapels at Woolwich, Westbourne Park, Poplar, Shoreditch, Upper Holloway, Ferme Park, West Norwood, West Croydon and Peckham. Many had been planted by students from Spurgeon's College, an institution for training Baptist ministers in London.

An important gauge of Baptist social involvement is the activity of Baptist churches in deprived areas. Here the work of Baptist deaconesses was crucial. In 1890 a Baptist Deaconesses' Home and Mission had been founded under the direction of F.B. Meyer and the London Baptist Association, and medical, social and evangelistic work was undertaken. With the support of the Deaconesses, many Baptist churches were active in social engagement. Local Baptist churches were actively involved in evangelism. In the early twentieth century some churches were holding evangelistic meetings in cinemas, sometimes with considerable success.

The twentieth century

Church planting was again evident in the mid-20th-century, as it had been previously. There were pioneer causes at New Addington in Croydon; Bonneville in Balham; Temple Hill in Dartford, Kent; Northolt Park in Harrow, Middlesex; Monks Gate in Ilford, Essex; Morden Park, Surrey; and Enfield, Middlesex. Two of these new congregations were led by deaconesses. Efforts were made to rebuild churches damaged by WW2 bombing in suburban areas, following the considerable number of Baptists who were moving out of London. Towards the end of the twentieth century the most marked examples of Baptist growth were among Black-majority Baptist congregations. For example, a predominantly Ghanaian congregation, Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church, which began in 1994, had almost 400 members two years later. At the end of the century Black ministers were leading congregations in London that were the fastest-growing in the Union: Trinity, West Norwood, and Calvary Charismatic, Stratford, both with over 800 members in 1999, were the largest shown in the Union's 1999-2000 *Directory*.

Researching the history of a Baptist church and congregation

Finding out about a Baptist church and congregation can be rewarding; however, it can also present a range of challenges. Sometimes it can be difficult to know where to start your investigations and which resources to use. It can be that libraries and archives appear confusing, or even intimidating. This guide will explain how you might begin your research and introduce you to the range of sources that are available to you.

You can find out quite a lot about the history of a church and parish without doing any research in a library or archives, and even without doing much reading. We suggest the following sequence of activity:

Look-Listen-Read-Research

Look

Look at the building itself – which may already be very familiar – with new and inquisitive eyes.

- When was it built? A foundation stone and/or dedication tablet may well quickly give an exact date, but architectural style and other evidence will give useful clues.
- Has it been significantly extended, altered or rearranged during its history? If so are there clues as to when and why?
- What ancillary buildings are there? (Hall? Sunday school?) What was their original purpose and how might this have changed?

- How does the church relate to its physical surroundings? Is/was it on a main road or a back street? Do/did a lot of people live nearby? Does it look like a focal point for a community, or a building that is easily ignored?

Listen

The memories and testimony of others can form a significant component of a research project. Talk to older and more longstanding members of the congregation. What can they tell you about the past history they have lived through, and perhaps about earlier periods they had themselves heard about? Do not accept what they tell you uncritically: they may well have particular viewpoints or prejudices, or simply have been misinformed. On the other hand their perspective on the past is to be valued and affirmed as part of the collective memory of the church community, and is likely to give you valuable insights into why people behave and think as they do. Follow this link for more information on [oral history](#). Note that both the [Baptist Historical Society](#) and the [Strict Baptist Historical Society](#) have oral history projects to which you can contribute.

Read

A great deal has already been written about the history of London's Baptist congregations and this material may inform you about the wider context and give you good ideas for your own research.

General resources

Within the wider Baptist community (remember there are various groups within the movement – see 'overview' above) there is a thriving interest in the history of the movement. The Baptist Historical Society [www.baptisthistory.org.uk] and the Strict Baptist Historical Society [<http://www.strictbaptisthistory.org.uk>] both offer an invaluable range of resources on denominational history and beliefs and on writing histories of individual churches. The BHS site includes advice on oral and family history, and links to the *Baptist Quarterly*, which itself includes many articles on individual churches and ministers. The SBHS site includes a history of the denomination, information on family history, a searchable database of ministers and churches and advice on writing an individual church history [http://www.strictbaptisthistory.org.uk/_private/writing.htm].

There are also two published books available which are informative guides on writing a church history:

- Susan J. Mills, *Probing the Past: A Toolbox for Baptist Historical Research*, 2009. ISBN 978-0-903166-39-3. Available from the Revd Dr Roger Hayden, 15 Fenhurst Gardens, Long Ashton, Bristol. BS41 9AU. UK
- Breed, Geoffrey, *My Ancestors were Baptists: How can I find out more about them?*, 2007

Published books

Published material can provide an excellent 'way in' to a project, perhaps orientating you to different themes and issues or describing a wider historical context. Furthermore, you will find that many individual London Baptist churches already have an older written history. Before you begin a project, it will be worth searching the online databases of the libraries above to find these. Additionally, you could search the [British library integrated catalogue](#) or the London's Past Online [<http://www.history.ac.uk/projects/londons-past-online>] database. A particularly useful overview of London's Baptist churches going back to the seventeenth century and up to the early twentieth

century, which includes accounts of individual congregations, is W. T. Whitley's *The Baptists of London, 1612-1928* (1928). A list of individual histories can be found in *Nonconformist Congregations in Great Britain* (1973), which can be found at the Dr Williams' Library.

The following are recommended general histories of the Baptist movement:

- R. Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, Didcot, 2005.
- B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*, Baptist Historical Society, London, 1983
- R. Brown, *The English Baptists of the 18th Century*, Baptist Historical Society, London, 1986
- J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the 19th Century*, Baptist Historical Society, Didcot, 1994
- I.M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century*, Baptist Historical Society, Didcot, 2005
- K. Dix, *Strict and Particular*, Baptist Historical Society, Didcot, 2001
- G. R. Breed, *Particular Baptists in Victorian England*, Baptist Historical Society, Didcot, 2003
- R. F. Chambers, *The Strict Baptist Chapels of England*, Fauconberg Press, 1952
- W. C. Johnson, *Encounter in London: the Story of the London Baptist Association, 1865-1965*, London, 1965.

For finding out about the local context (for example, population growth, industry and employment and other churches) a useful resource is the Victoria County Histories. These are available on line at www.british-history.ac.uk (from the home page click on 'London').

Research

Archive material

There is a wealth of archive material for finding out about Baptist congregations in London, and much of this is available in London itself.

Church-related material

Individual churches made records of their life and work, and these are important sources for research. For Baptist churches, the most useful of these is the church minute book. These books contain a list of church members and their dates of admission to membership; however, they also include a record of the organisation and workings of the church; for example, wide-ranging discussions by members about the life of the church, matters of finance, the discipline of members, the arrival/leaving of a minister and the appointment of elders and deacons.

Church minute books may be located in a variety of places. Unfortunately, some have been discarded or are in private ownership; however, you will find that many are still available. They may be in the possession of the church, so it will be worth consulting the secretary or treasurer of the congregation. However, they may well have been deposited. Some are held at local reference libraries (see list below) or the London Metropolitan Archives, while others may be in the possession of a regional Baptist Association, the Baptist Union archive (at the Angus Library, Oxford – see appendix), or, where appropriate, either the Strict Baptist Historical Library or the Gospel Standard Baptist Library. A useful resource for locating church records is the National Register of Archives database [<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp>].

If you are able to locate the church minute book you may also find other important written records, including those relating to a committee of management, deacons meeting, church meeting, Sunday school, youth club, choir, accounts or denominational organisations such as the Baptist Women's League.

Many churches published monthly magazines, and even annuals, for their members. These are often a gold mine of insight into the life and activities of a congregation.

Newspapers

Local newspapers will often contain reports about the opening of churches and significant events and anniversaries. Many of these are held at London's local archives:

- [Barnett Archives and Local Studies Centre](#)
- [Brent Archive](#)
- [Camden Local Studies and Archives](#)
- [Chiswick Local Studies and archives](#)
- [Ealing Local History Centre](#)
- [Enfield](#)
- [Hackney Archives](#)
- [Hammersmith and Fulham Archives and Local History Centre](#)
- [Haringey Archives and Local History](#)
- [Harrow Civic Centre Reference Library](#)
- [Hillingdon Local Studies, Archives and Museums Service](#)
- [Hounslow Archive](#)
- Islington Local Library
- [Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies and Archive](#)
- [Tower Hamlets Local History & Archives Library](#)
- [City of Westminster Archives Centre](#)

Additionally, denominational newspapers included reports on individual churches (openings, anniversaries and outreach etc.) and ministers (articles, obituaries). There are a range of Baptist newspapers belonging to different constituencies within the wider movement, including the *Baptist Magazine*, *The Freeman* (1855-1899) *Baptist Times* (1899-), *The Sword and the Trowel*, *Gospel Herald* (1833-1969), *Earthen Vessel* (1845-1886), *Christian's Pathway* (1896-1969) and the *Gospel Standard* (1835-). You might also find information in the *British Weekly* (1886-1961) and *Christian World* (1857-1961) nonconformist papers. The specialist libraries listed above will hold collections of individual newspapers, but the British Newspaper Library [<http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrrooms/blnewspapers/newsrr.html>] at Colindale, north London, is also an excellent resource for religious and other newspapers.

Non-deposited sources

You may well find that there are invaluable sources still in the possession of the church or members of the congregation. As already mentioned, church records may still be in the possession of the church secretary or treasurer. Is there an old run of church magazines gathering dust in a side room? Or has some-one kept a parent's or grandparent's diary or photograph album recalling church life in the earlier twentieth century? Such material can be very useful and revealing.

Finding out about aspects of a church and congregation's history

The most useful histories of Baptist churches do not simply related to bricks and mortar – rather they will give insights into the people and life of the congregation, perhaps themes in the history of the church, and also its interaction with the local community. The following are aspects of church life that you might wish to explore:

Beginnings of a fellowship

There will always be specific reasons for the setting up of an individual congregation. It may have been a deliberate church 'plant' (perhaps funded by the London Baptist Association or through funding associated with Charles Haddon's Spurgeon's work at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Elephant and Castle, London), or it may have been a split from another fellowship. Many congregations had

their origins in a fellowship based in a private house before the construction of the new building. If you have a church minute book (see above on how to locate these) for these pioneering days it will provide valuable context, including perhaps a statement of belief and a list of the original members of the congregation. If the church was formed as part of a split from a nearby congregation, it may also be worth checking their minute book also for a different perspective! The Trust Deeds of the church may have been deposited in the county register office the national archive [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk]. Local and denominational newspapers will often provide another angle for investigation.

An excellent example of a book telling the story of the beginnings and growth of a significant Baptist church is Faith Bowers, *A bold experiment: The story of Bloomsbury Chapel and Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 1848-1999*, London, 1999.

Buildings

This church building reflected the confidence of the Baptist community during this period: most of these churches were spacious, seating numbers from 350 to 1000, and they were built on prominent sites, often on main roads. The largest was Spurgeon's Tabernacle, opened in 1861, which seated over 5,000 people. Many chapels were built or acquired by the London Baptist Association, and a list of these between 1866 and 1965 is included as an appendix to W. C. Johnson, *Encounter in London: the Story of the London Baptist Association, 1865-1965*, London, 1965.

Ministers

A minister, of course, will have played a central role in the life of the church and congregation. There are various ways of finding out about individual ministers. Church minute books will often contain important details, relating, for example, to the circumstances of their arrival and the way in which they directed the activities of the congregation. From 1861, the *Baptist Handbook* included a list of all churches and all ministers. Local and denominational newspapers would often report the arrival of a new minister. Obituaries can give useful retrospective insights into the life and character of an individual minister, and these can be found in the *Baptist Union Handbook* and the *Baptist Magazine*, as well as in the other denominational newspapers listed above. The Baptist Historical Society has an index of Baptist minister's obituaries

[http://www.baptisthistory.org.uk/basicpage.php?contents=memoirs&page_title=Obituary%20Index]

The Strict Baptist Historical Society has an online interactive database of ministers and chapels [<http://www.strictbaptisthistory.org.uk/dbsearch/search.htm>] which may include details on the birth date, place of birth, date of death, place of death, writings, obituaries and memoirs.

For earlier years, you can consult the lists of Particular Baptist churches and ministers in England and Wales in the *Baptist Annual Register* for 1790, 1794 and 1798 – these also contain biographical information and obituaries. Walter Wilson's *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches and Meeting Houses in London, Westminster and Southwark, including the lives of ministers'*, 2 Vols. (1808) also contains useful biographies of London Baptist ministers. Lists of Baptist ministers can also be found in the *Baptist Magazine* for 1811 (pp. 458-63); 1823 (pp. 23-29; 159-162; 331-332; 432-434); 1831 (pp. 160-64; 203-7).

There are a few Baptist ministers who have had huge influence on London Baptists. The most influential is C.H. Spurgeon. On him see:

P. J. Morden, *C.H. Spurgeon: The People's Preacher*, Farnham, CWR, 2010

I. M. Randall, *A School of the Prophets: 150 Years of Spurgeon's College*, London, 2005

Also prominent was F. B. Meyer, a Baptist minister who pioneered extensive social ministries in south London in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

I.M. Randall, *Spirituality and Social Change: The Contribution of F.B. Meyer (1847-1929)*, Paternoster, Carlisle, 2003

And John Clifford at what is now Westbourne Park Baptist Church, who was strongly engaged politically.

Congregation

There are a number of aspects of the life and activities of the congregation that you might wish to examine.

- **Attendances**

Many Baptist churches in London experienced significant growth during the late nineteenth century, but often experienced decline in the early twentieth century. However, you will find a great deal of variation where attendances are concerned. Don't assume that a church was necessarily full in the past, or indeed that it had low attendances if that has been part of its recent story. One way of examining attendances is to consult the religious censuses of London religion of 1851, 1886 and 1903-4. A compilation of the 1851 statistics for London (mostly north of the river) contained in the [original printed report of the Religious Census](#) is available here as a pdf (with permission from ProQuest's *Parliamentary Papers* online). In order to consult the original returns you will probably need to go to the National Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) at Kew, although it would be worth checking whether your local borough archive or local history library holds a copy of returns relevant to your area. It is, however, straightforward to view the returns at Kew. They are available on microfilm in the open access reading room, for which it is not necessary to obtain a readers ticket or make an appointment. The results of the census conducted by the *British Weekly* in 1886 were published as *The Religious Census of London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888), available online at www.openlibrary.org/b/OL14037667M. The census conducted in 1902-3 by the Daily News was particularly thorough and informative and was published as Richard Mudie-Smith, *The Religious Life of London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), with extensive commentaries and analysis. It is available online at www.archive.org/details/religiouslifeofl00mudi.

- **Outreach**

In the Victorian period many Baptist churches were very active in their engagement with the local community, either in the form of evangelism or social action (particularly until the early twentieth century), for example providing welfare through community programmes, clubs for children and adults or temperance societies. In London the Deaconess movement was of great importance. You will find insights into the activity of churches in their individual church records, particularly members meeting minutes and deacons meeting minutes. You may also find local and denominational newspaper articles that give a picture on the engagement of an individual church with their local community. However, perhaps the most valuable source, if available, for this aspect of a church history is the church magazine or year book. These will include church diaries, adverts for individual events and reports on schemes and activities.

Some Baptist churches also planted subsidiary mission stations in order to further their outreach. For example, Upper Holloway church, one of the largest Baptist congregations in London in the late nineteenth century, planted Rupert Road and Hercules Road Mission Hall. You will often find that the records for these missions remain in the collection for the 'mother' church. Many of the early students from Spurgeon's College planted new Baptist congregations in London when they left College and these enterprises were always recorded in *The Sword and the Trowel*. (the volumes are held in Spurgeon's College)

- **Church life**

There is a strong emphasis in Baptist worship and spirituality on preaching, and it may be possible to find sermons by local pastors. Certainly the more famous Baptist preachers' sermons can be found. C.H. Spurgeon's sermons were published and collected in a multi-volume set. But alongside the role of the preacher in worship has been the role of the congregation. Joseph Angus, who was the Principal of the Baptist Regent's Park College in

London (now in Oxford), spoke of church life as 'based on the consecrated activity of all its members'. By contrast with the Established Church, Baptists (especially in the nineteenth century) saw their churches as 'voluntary societies of Christians', agreed in faith and worship, and committed to the Lord and one another. A church 'covenant' among the members often elaborated on this commitment. Among other things, members typically agreed 'mutually to love and pray for each other; to walk in faithfulness, forbearance, and tenderness to each other; to discharge to the best of our powers all those duties which we owe to one another, according to the light of nature, or the directions of scripture'. Wording of this sort presented a Baptist vision of corporate spirituality, in which the emphasis was on inter-personal relationships as a key element in spiritual growth. It is worth looking for these covenants, although many of them have not survived. The two other key elements in Baptist worship are the baptism of believers, which is always by immersion, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which follows typical nonconformist practice.

For Baptist worship and spirituality see:

C. J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition*, SCM, London, 2004.

- **Sunday school/youth clubs**
Sunday schools have often been an important part of the life of a congregation. Many grew rapidly from the mid nineteenth century, with the London Baptist Association estimating over 50,000 'scholars' in London by the 1870s, and there became an urgent need for more accommodation which resulted often in the building of halls and rooms. You will often find a Sunday school minute and attendance book in the church records, if you are able to locate them. Furthermore, church magazine and annuals will be a useful source of information.
- **Family history**
There are excellent sources relating to family history and the Baptist churches. If you are trying to find details on an ancestor who was a Baptist minister see this article [<http://www.strictbaptisthistory.org.uk/private/art001.htm> - 'Great Granddad was a Baptist Minister, I think']. If you are trying to track down members of Baptist congregations you should read Geoffrey Reed's *My Ancestors were Baptists: How can I find out more about them?*, 2007. This includes lists of Non-parochial registers held at the Public Record Office and the library of the Society of Genealogists.

Appendix:

Specialist libraries for Baptist history

- **Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford** [<http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=19>]
This library holds a large collection of material relating to the life and history of Baptists. The archives of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Baptist Missionary Society are held here, together with material relating to the Baptist Historical Society and the Baptist World Alliance. There are collections relating to individual leaders, such as William Carey, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Ernest Payne and J.H. Rushbrooke. This is also an excellent collection of pamphlets, periodicals, journals, church and association records and church histories.
- **Dr Williams's Library, London.** [www.dwlib.co.uk]
This is a major research library for Protestant nonconformity. It includes over 300,000 printed books and includes a significant collection of manuscripts relating to English nonconformist leaders, particularly those of the 17th and 18th centuries.
- **Strict Baptist Historical Library, Dunstable.** [[Strict Baptist Historical Society Library](http://www.strictbaptisthistoricalsociety.org.uk).]
This holds a specialist collection of books and magazines relating to the Baptist movement and the Strict Baptists in particular. There are also Strict Baptist church minute books held here.
- **Gospel Standard Library, Hove.** [<http://www.gospelstandard.org.uk/GS-Library>]

This library includes over 10,000 volumes of Calvinistic, Puritan and Reformed works, with a special emphasis on material relating to the Gospel Standard stream of Strict Baptist life. There is a collection of pamphlets, leaflets, booklets and typescript sermons.

- **C. H. Spurgeon Archive** [<http://www.spurgeons.ac.uk>]
This archive, at Spurgeon's College, South Norwood Hill, London, contains material written by and relating to the great London Baptist preacher and College and Orphanage founder, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), who is often referred to as the 'prince' of Victorian preachers. There is also an index and register of past students of the College from 1856, including in some cases photographs. The information often includes details on the sending church, their years in College and subsequent pastorates. Many of them held pastorates in London.