

Full Version of Monks Chapel History (Monks Chapel, Gastard, Corsham)

Monks Chapel in Monks Lane (known as Cock Street in 1570):

Following the downfall of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, King Charles II was restored to the throne and the Church of England, as previously established by law was set up again. The Parliament of the time accepted the revision of the English Prayer Book and in 1662, passed a law requiring all church ministers to use the prescribed fixed forms of worship for their services and to consent to the new Book of Common Prayer and the changes in governance of the Church. Those who did not conform were classed as 'Dissenters' and were required by law not to preach within five miles of any borough or town. With that in mind, the local Dissenters (in this case, Quakers) built Monks Chapel five miles from Chippenham as Corsham was not large enough at that time to be considered in the regulations.

In Wiltshire, some 60 church ministers were ejected from their livings because they would not accept the new ruling on belief and worship. Several of these remained hereabouts, preaching their preferred message and often becoming schoolmasters for a livelihood. Benjamin Flower, the son of the Vicar of Castle Combe, was ejected from a living in Cardiff and decided to return to Chippenham, making it the centre of his operations for preaching and teaching.

As well as opening a Presbyterian church in Chippenham itself, he also established non-conformist worship in Corsham with meeting's in houses, barns or Monks Chapel, which had been built in 1662 by the Quakers. The Quakers were strong in the area, having been established in East Tytherton for many years, and were ably supported by Adam Goldney in Chippenham, Caleb Dickinson of Monks Chapel and Thomas Beavan of Melksham. The chapel is said to be the only 'Five Mile Chapel' in which worship has remained unbroken.

In 1674 the Vicar of Chippenham wrote of Flower and "that nest of vipers at Corsham" saying that they were a "squadron of irregulars". It is stated that Lady Hungerford, a Puritan, erected the Chapel. A friend of hers was Revd. Edward Dyer, Vicar of Corsham, who seceded from the Church, resigned his living in about 1662 and, no doubt, took services at the new place of worship.

A small field adjoining the west side of the Chapel appears to be purposely walled to form an enclosure for the horses of the worshippers. This field, and access from the road, is shown on a farm map as 'Meeting House Ground', whilst the one adjoining the north side of the Chapel is 'Meeting House Mead'. A meeting house is a place of worship for Quakers. The stone for the buildings said to have come from the open quarry some 300 yards to the south.

There is a grave stone in the burial yard on which the name 'Gay' is inscribed and this is apparently the same stone on which Mr Gay took his own life 'under sad circumstances'. The stone was shaped by his quarry stonemason workmates.

The interior of the Chapel is whitewashed. On the ceiling a boy's face is depicted, still in its original state. It has been suggested that it was painted there to interest bored children. The gallery, originally built in 1690, which is reached by either of two wooden enclosed staircases, has enclosed choir seats opposite the pulpit with wooden shelving for a stand. The gallery also housed the first organ of the church. It is still possible to see the wooden pegs on which men hung their hats, on the outer edge of the wooden panelling of the gallery. There are more hat hooks on the walls.

External shutters (which were fastened on the inside) were fitted to protect the windows against attack from those seeking to disrupt services. The highest window is in the gallery and still has a pulley wheel by which the outside shutters could be pulled together from the inside. This window when seen from the outside forms the distinctive 'eyebrow' window over the main door that makes the Chapel so recognisable.

The high boundary wall may have been created as another form of defence. The unusual dry stone walling technique of using small stones closely packed together meant that finding a toehold to assist anyone in climbing

would be virtually impossible. Such was the hostility towards a preacher that an escape route would have been likely. From the structural features below the pulpit, it appears that there was an alternative disguised exit from the building.

Monks Chapel is in an area where families have lived for generations, so the legend that an escape tunnel for preachers existed, May have some truth in it. Tunnels were built (not tunnelled) simply by digging a trench, erecting support stones or walls on both sides, and then placing large flat stones on top, which were finally covered in soil. As the quarry is nearby, there would have been no shortage of materials for such a tunnel but no starting point at the chapel has ever been found.

Some decades ago now near the top of Monks Lane there was some subsidence, and two men (Mr Bert Smart & Mr Bill Painter) investigated. They found that, having removed some tilted flagstones, a hole was revealed. When asked if this might have been the cellar of an old house, they replied that it was not, as it was definitely a tunnel and they hadn't fancied going along it! The area was then cemented over. Mr Donald Reeves of Corsley, the well-known dowser, with no local knowledge whatever, stated that he was of the opinion that from outside the building at the rear of the pulpit at tunnel, deep down, ran east and then south to the top of Monks Lane.

A certain George Gay had composed a hymn tune in short metre (3-4 time) n G major which he called Chapelnap, another name for this part of the old parish of Corsham. Looking at the style of music, it's possible that this was composed in the late 18th or early 19th centuries.

Monks Lane, around Monks Chapel:

Abutting the outer wall north of Monks Chapel is what is probably a merestone which marks a boundary. In this case, it may separate the Chapel, which is officially in Neston, from the nearby cottages which are in Gastard. Similarly, a roadside stone opposite Great Lypiatt Farm is also likely to mark a boundary. (The polling wards of Neston & Gastard are separated by a path between the Chapel and the cottages. This line then takes the centre of the road up Monks Lane, turns right and then turns left down Pond Close lane to the Wansdyke.)

More information may be gleaned from the following:

John Keynes was living at Lypiatt in 1486

Richard Green was living near Monks in 1569

"Ordered that William Keynes provide and maintain mere stones between his lands and those of Richard Greene".

The two semi-detached houses down from the Chapel were sold in 1897 for £200. The annual rental received was £14. Set in the roadside wall of No. 4 is a shaped stone erected and inscribed "J.A. Porter killed March the 22 1787". His head was crushed when falling from a cart whilst the horse was bolting.

On October 5th 1594 some women of ill repute were taken to the pond at the top of Monks lane, known as the Whores' Pool, for immersion. They were taken individually on a cucking stool, which was a contraption with two very long shafts with wheels close to one end. Beyond the wheels a woman would be strapped between the parallel shafts, thus enabling the crowd to push her into the water without getting wet themselves. The ends of the shafts were allowed to shoot upwards with the direct result that the unfortunate woman became totally immersed. She was retrieved by pulling down on ropes that were attached to the now upward ends. The ceremony concluded when the dipping had taken place a sufficient number of times.

It is not known when this method of punishment began in this area but we do know that it was meted out earlier than 1594, as in 1579 Whoares at Meere Tything in mentioned. The name 'Whores Ground' is still shown on a farm map. Older residents recall the time when the pool was known as 'Green Emma's'.

A 1366 list of tenants of Corsham includes Joan the Hore, rent payed 5s, owner of 1 virgate (30 acres). Out of 29 listed tenants, she was the third highest rent payer.

The Whores' Pool has for many years been troublesome regarding overflowing and thus causing flooding of the immediate highway. In an 1882 report, it was recorded that clap stones (stepping stones) were placed along the

road when it flooded. When not in use at other times (when there was no flooding) they were staked to one side. As recently as 2011, the pool was drained to try to remove blockages that were stopping natural drainage and causing further flooding.

(With thanks to the people of Monks Chapel for providing the text for this document)