

Nonconformists in Steeple Ashton.

The **Act of Toleration** 24 May 1689, allowed freedom of worship to Nonconformists who had dissented from the Church of England such as Baptists and Congregationalists but not to Catholics. Nonconformists were allowed their own places of worship and their own teachers, if they accepted certain oaths of allegiance.

The **Religious Society of Friends** or Quakers or Friends was started George Fox (1624 –1691). He was an English Dissenter. He lived in a time of great social upheaval and war. He rebelled against the religious and political authorities by proposing a simple yet uncompromising approach to the Christian faith and travelled throughout Britain as a dissenting preacher for which he was often persecuted. He attracted a large following.

In 1704 a house, barn and back garden belonging to James Smith were licensed for Quaker meetings in Steeple Ashton.

Methodism This movement traces its roots to John Wesley's evangelistic revival which started about 1738 and quickly spread throughout England and Wales due to his open air preaching, which drew very large crowds. John Wesley preached a number of times in Trowbridge which was one of the early centres for Methodists.

In 1783 a few Methodists were meeting in a labourer's house in Steeple Ashton.

In 1797 a house was licensed for Methodist meetings at Steeple Ashton and in 1829 the Steeple Ashton Methodists were meeting in a farm house which had 8 members and about 50 people attending.

In 1817 the house of Oliver Manly was licensed for worship with the help of B. Kent, minister of the Tabernacle at Trowbridge (Calvinistic Methodist following the preaching of George Whitfield, a friend and contemporary of John Wesley and co-founder of Methodism but differing on some aspects of belief)

In 1851 one room of a dwelling-house was used exclusively for worship with a congregation of about 100 people. It is assumed this group was responsible for building the Primitive Methodist Chapel at the north end of the village three years later in 1854. The plain brick building seats 130 worshippers.

Baptists

Historians trace the earliest Baptist church back to 1609 in Amsterdam. Baptist practice soon spread to England, and instituted baptism for believing adults only.

In 1825 and 1828 Baptist meetings were licensed in Steeple Ashton. In 1864 a dwelling house facing the green was taken over as a station of the Baptist chapel at Bratton, (Three and a half miles away). In 1874 a Sunday school was started. The chapel closed in 1940 and was reconverted into a dwelling house.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Steeple Ashton became a centre of Mormonism in the mid 19th century since Missionaries started working in the area from 1844. The first person Steeple Ashton to be converted was Catherine Naish, who may have been baptised in a pond on Bullen Hill Farm.

The Berrett's Homestead, now named Old Chesils, became a Mormon Meeting House between 1846 and 1864 when John and Hannah Berrett lived there. In 1851 the church had a congregation of about 50 people. (Berrett's are recorded living in the cottage from 1730). Another convert was George Barnett, the son of James Barnett and Ann Berrett, who was a farmer, like his father and grandfather before him. He was baptized 9 March 1849 when he was 21.

George Barnett presided over the Steeple Ashton Branch from 1861 to 1864. Following a troubling time of persecution he and his family left Steeple Ashton and emigrated to Utah. They sailed on the ship the Hudson with 863 other Mormons to start a new life in America. (His mother, his wife and a daughter all died on the journey).

Several other families and individuals also emigrated.

See Emigration from Steeple Ashton to Utah.