

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE FELLOWSHIPS OF GOD'S PEOPLE
MEETING AT MILLINGTON**



**AND SUBSEQUENTLY AT
LYMM BAPTIST CHURCH**



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FELLOWSHIPS OF GOD'S PEOPLE MEETING AT MILLINGTON AND SUBSEQUENTLY AT LYMM BAPTIST CHURCH.

Introduction

The story of God's faithfulness in His dealings with His people at Millington and then later Lymm Baptist Church, is one which has many lessons for us today. As we read of the faithful witness through nearly 250 years which is our heritage, at times entailing persecution and personal sacrifice at many stages, may it inspire us to following His leading in our own personal walk with the same never changing God.

The story up to the 1950's is substantially based on the researches of Rev J H Sheppard, pastor at Lymm Baptist Church from 1944 to 1958, collected for the bicentenary in 1950 and published in 1958. The recent enlargement and continuing upgrading of the buildings to make them appropriate for worship, service and witness to the community into the 21st century, as well as the opening of a new chapter of ministry among us, makes this an appropriate time for updating and retelling the story. As you will discover, it is an account of steadfast witness in response to God's faithfulness and blessing to the fellowship of His people now meeting at Higher Lane, Lymm.

Baptist worship at Millington

According to the Baptist Handbook, Lymm Baptist Church was founded in 1850, but its roots are to be found 100 years earlier at Millington, some 4 miles from Lymm, just a mile or so west of Little Bollington. Millington today is a sparsely populated rural area, however 200 years ago it may have been somewhat larger, when more people were employed on the land, but even then by no means having a large population.

The ground for the Millington chapel was purchased in 1756, according to the Trust Deeds held at Baptist Church House, and the chapel erected in 1759. However, it is fairly certain that an assembly of God's people meeting together for Baptist worship came together at least 12 years earlier, perhaps in a farmhouse or barn nearby. John Wesley tells of a visit to Booths Bank, Millington in 1747, a place very near to the Baptist chapel. The spot is marked by a plaque, now under a bridge on the M56 motorway. Here, he had some controversy with a Baptist preacher named Joseph Pickup. It is probable they aired their differences on the doctrines of Calvin and Arminius with regard to predestination. (Pickup being a Calvinist emphasising the sovereignty of God and Wesley an Arminianist preaching the importance of human responsibility). Pickup was an itinerant Baptist preacher who travelled much in Lancashire and Cheshire proclaiming the gospel. From this record, it can be deduced with reasonable confidence that there was an assembly at Millington during this period, to which Pickup had been invited to conduct services.

The first burial at Millington was in 1760, according to the stones in the burial ground, containing 30 graves and 5 vaults. One vault bears the inscription: "Isaac Cheetham died July 28th 1800, aged 66 years. He was minister of the gospel in this place for 34 years.

*His soul was filled with heavenly love,
Blessed with great wisdom from above,
The faith in Christ he testified,
By faith he lived, by faith he died."*

A memorial to one of the Ridgway family, of whom we will record more later, bears the inscription: "In memory of Elizabeth the youngest daughter of Joseph and Hannah Ridgway of Ashton-in-Makerfield, who died July 24th 1832 aged 15 years."



The chapel and adjoining manse at Millington, now converted for residential use.

As to exactly how the Baptist assembly at Millington originated cannot be known with full certainty, as unfortunately the records have been lost; they were left in the possession of John Cheetham, pastor till 1819, and at the death of Mrs Cheetham in 1836 there was no trace of them. The only information of the church in the early years comes from the writings of Rev Isaac Ridgway, pastor at Millington from 1847 to 1851 and the first pastor at Higher Lane, Lymm from 1851 to 1871.

Life for Baptists in the late 18th and early 19th century

Those early years from about 1740 to 1828 were times when Dissenters had to suffer much for loyalty to their convictions. They had not yet been released from the restrictions imposed on them by the oppressive Acts of Parliament passed between 1661 and 1689. In these Acts, Dissenters were penalised in many ways and deprived of any civil offices. They also suffered from mob violence. It was not until 1689 that a Toleration Act was passed, when compulsory attendance at the services of the Anglican Church was abolished and Dissenters were allowed to worship as they desired, provided that they did so behind unlocked doors. The Conventicle Act and the Act of Uniformity, which had caused Dissenters great distress and suffering, were not repealed. However they did not in future apply to them provided that they proved their loyalty by taking oaths of allegiance and supremacy before Justices of the Peace at the General Sessions of the Peace. Dissenting ministers were still required to sign their assent to the Thirty Nine articles with certain exceptions. All meeting houses had to be registered in the Court of Bishop, Archdeacon or Magistrate at a charge of sixpence. The Test and Corporation Acts, which had inflicted such hardship upon them, were not repealed until 1828. Dissenters could then take part in local government and accept office under the Crown and in 1832 the Reform Act gave many the vote.

Thus, for nearly a century, the Baptists of Millington were men and women who made a brave stand for liberty to worship as conscience directed. It was a long and severe conflict for religious freedom that was fought by the Baptists, also by Independents, Presbyterians and Quakers. In May 1738 John Wesley had his marvellous quickening of faith, and gradually as a result of the evangelical revival led by the Wesleys, Whitefield and others, the Nonconformist stream of power and influence increased, so that in due time those civil and religious liberties which been denied them since the Restoration of Charles II, were won.

The reason for the establishment of a Baptist church at Millington, at least three to four miles from any large community of residents, may well stem from these acts of suppression which made Dissenters meet in out of the way places for worship, remote from the prying eyes of informers.

The role of John Johnson

The founding of Millington is believed to be due to the itinerant work of John Johnson, a preacher who exerted a considerable influence in the district between Knutsford and Liverpool. Johnson was for a long period a Calvinist but later it is reported that he was neither rigidly Calvinist or Arminian, but he adopted what he saw in either of these strands of thinking which was consistent with the Scriptures. He is said to have been the means of founding some thirteen churches in different parts of the North Western area, all of which have ceased to exist, with the exception of the Millington church which transferred to Higher Lane, Lymm in 1851. John Johnson was born in 1706 at Lostock Gralam, near Knutsford and at 20 years of age, took on the role of pastor at the chapel at Lostock. Shortly after, certain persons laid claim to the chapel, which was not properly vested in trustees, and sadly this resulted in the place deserted and the church disbanded or scattered, in spite of the efforts of the young minister to establish peace and unity among the worshippers. From this period, around 1730, until he accepted a call to a Baptist Church in Dale Street, Liverpool in 1740, Johnson conducted services in the Knutsford, Ollerton and High Legh district.

We cannot be absolutely certain that Johnson visited Millington during his time of itinerations but the very strong links evident with other Johnsonian churches make this highly likely. He would regularly travel by way of Millington, Latchford, Hill Cliffe and Warrington and on to Liverpool. It may be that one or more of the Ridgway family, who had friends and probably business connections in Liverpool, having contacted him or heard him preach, persuaded him to visit Ollerton where some of the Ridgways once resided. Ollerton is just south of Knutsford and not far from Millington. That such journeys were made and that there were church contacts is evidenced by the fact that, even before Johnson's time, Mary Howfoot of Lostock Gralam was taken for burial at Hill Cliffe in 1692.

The role of the Ridgway family

What is certain is that some of the Ridgway family were among the founders of the Millington church and were among the most zealous of its members. It has been declared with good authority that the mother of Isaac and Thomas Ridgway travelled on horseback from Stockport to Millington, a distance of some 10 miles, every Sunday to attend the services.

The churches at Millington and later Lymm owe much to the Ridgway family through several generations. According to a memoir of John Ridgway (b 1786), the family could trace their ancestry back to the days of Edward IV and originated in Devonshire in the neighbourhood of Tor Abbey. In Tor parish church is an imposing monument erected by Sir Thomas Ridgway in memory of his father Thomas and grandfather John. Sir Thomas Ridgway was MP for Dartmouth in 1584 and was knighted in 1600, being appointed Vice-treasurer of Ireland. One branch of the family moved to Cheshire sometime during the 16th century, first to Ollerton, later to Statham and then Wildersmoor, Lymm (off Whiteleggs Lane) in 1638.

Successive members of the family have been connected with the church at Millington and later Higher Lane for almost 200 years, giving generously both financial and spiritual support throughout this period. The family were known for their sterling integrity in business and which acts as an example for us all. At the end of the 18th century, Thomas Ridgway, who gave the land at Lymm for the building of the Baptist Church in 1848, was engaged in a considerable tea business, namely The House of Ridgway's Tea Merchants, with shops in Birmingham and Derby.

When the East India Company's monopoly on tea supply came to an end in the early 1830's, much turbulence followed in the tea trade. Ridgway's business, like so many others, suffered a severe setback and he was finally compelled to come to an arrangement with his creditors. In 1836, he decided that conditions were sufficiently settled to get back into business, and chose London as offering the greatest opportunities. The new shop was opened on the 1st October 1836 and was an immediate success, so much so that in a short time he was able to repay in full the debts he had



Isaac Ridgway
- First Pastor of Lymm Baptist Church



Thomas Ridgway
-who gave the ground at Lymm for
the building of the new church.

formerly incurred. This act so pleased his late creditors, that they joined together to present him with a silver tea service inscribed with the following:- "Presented to Thomas Ridgway Esq., by his early friends in commercial life as a token of esteem for his honourable conduct".

The Rev Isaac Ridgway who was pastor of Millington from 1847 to 1850 and of Higher Lane, Lymm from 1850 to 1871, was also a director of Ridgways Ltd, but retired from the business in 1865.

The members of the Millington assembly

Millington being chosen as the site for the founding of the new church may well have resulted from its central location, judging from the places where the early worshippers resided, for they came from as far afield as Mellor in Cheshire, Ashton-in-Makerfield, Stalybridge, Manchester, Ollerton, Poynton, Stockport, Latchford and Warrington.

Who were some of these early worshippers? In an indenture of 1801 which made over the property to seven of the church we find named:-

John and Isaac Ridgway, described as gentlemen

John Swindells, a cotton manufacturer

Joseph Forrest, a grocer

John Cheetham, a yeoman (farmer)

William Garnet, a mason

Matthew Higginbottom, a yeoman (farmer)

John Rowbottom, a weaver

Robert Walton, a yeoman (farmer)

These men were for the most part, if not all of them, men of good social position in life, and must have suffered much reproach for their Nonconformist views. Dissenters could play little part in government, national or local and could not hold commissions in the Army or Navy. They could not graduate at English Universities and therefore could not enter the learned professions. Baptists and early Methodists had thus to suffer much persecution in those days. Mobs were often instigated to upset their services and, under the influence of drink, ruffians often kicked and beat up these followers of Christ as they went to and from their places of worship. At Sawley in Derbyshire, during the closing of the 18th century, a mob tried to throw the visiting preachers in to the Trent and in so doing caused the death of one of their own gang. This treatment of Dissenters was not uncommon during

the latter part of the 17th century and 18th century. In meeting at a remote location such as Millington, the possibilities of such unnecessary violence were reduced.

When the chapel was built at Millington, the pastor was Mr Thomasson, who continued to serve until 1766. He was succeeded by Isaac Cheetham, who was pastor for 34 years. His successors were Mr John Cheetham and Mr Thomas Aked of Halifax, who come once a month, the former conducting services in the latter's absence, until 1819.

The list of those baptised and received in to communion at Millington by Mr Guyton of Comus Street Baptist Church, Liverpool gives a flavour of those who formed the membership at Millington during the later years viz:-

- 1822 *Mr Isaac Ridgway of Wildersmoor, Lymm*
- 1826 *Mrs Ridgway Snr (mother of Isaac and Thomas) from Stockport before her marriage*
- 1827 *Miss Martha Chrimes of Ollerton*
- 1830 *Mr David Whitaker of Ollerton*
- 1833 *Mr John Lord of Millington*
- 1836 *Miss Mary Pecop of Liverpool*
Mrs Davies of Bollington
- 1837 *Mr Thomas Higginbottom of Manchester*
- 1845 *Mr John Gould of Heatley*

On Feb 24th 1837, Mr Isaac Ridgway married Miss Mary Pecop at the parish church, Walton, Liverpool and when Isaac Ridgway was called to the pastorate at Millington in August 1847, this was supported by the Baptist church at Comus Street, Liverpool, which seems to have exercised some sort of oversight of the cause at Millington.

The move to Lymm

Around 1848, God's leading was felt for them to establish a chapel in a more populous district and also a more convenient situation. Mr Thomas Ridgway of Beechwood, Lymm, having recently purchased a considerable amount of land in Lymm, offered to give a piece of land on Higher Lane on which to erect a suitable building. His offer was accepted and the funds necessary to build the chapel were promptly, no doubt sacrificially, given by the members of the church. Mr Thomas Ridgway provided the stone and a large part of the money for the structure. Mr Walton of Manchester was engaged as the architect and gave his services gratis; Mr Bramhall of Manchester being the builder.

The church thus showed considerable foresight and wisdom, no doubt after much seeking of God's direction for them, in breaking the established order and making the decision to move to Lymm. Millington had only a very small population, 300 people at the most compared to around 4000 in Lymm a century ago. Had they persisted in their isolation at Millington, the fellowship would probably have gradually died out, as did all the other churches founded by John Johnson.

Thus, the foundation stones of Higher Lane were laid in the spring of 1850, and in the autumn of the same year the chapel was completed and opened for worship on September 22nd, Mr Reynoldson pastor of Wisbech Baptist Church preaching at the opening service. Close links are evident in the early years between Millington and Lymm Baptist Church with Upper Hill Street Baptist Church Wisbech (Johnsonian in their views). This link was most probably through the Dawbarn family, one time members or relatives of Dawbarns from the Comus Street Baptist Church Liverpool, which was also a Johnsonian Church.



A view of the church in more serene times

Some aspects of early life at Lymm Baptist Church

A Sunday School was opened on January 12th 1851, with fifteen children attending. By October of the same year, this had risen with some 133 names on the register. In 1852, the chapel had to be enlarged to make room for the Sunday School scholars to attend after Sunday Morning School. The Sunday School Movement at this time sought to provide an all-embracing education in reading, writing, arithmetic and singing as well as religious instruction to children, who in part had their childhood curtailed by having to work in the manufacturing industries. As such, it marked a step towards free education for all. The teaching of reading was high in the priority of Baptists who stressed personal commitment and study of the scriptures as the supreme authority. Other forms of schooling were also apparently considered appropriate, since in 1862 a weekly singing class was instigated for the fellowship, to improve the singing.

The first marriage at Lymm was on November 7th 1861 between Miss Mary Brierley and Mr Joseph Blinston and in July 1871 a new trust deed was drawn up and the following were appointed as trustees:-

*Edward Grundy, Thomas Joseph Ridgway, James Gould,
James Davies, William Davies, William Brundett and Hugh Dawson.*

The trusteeship of Higher Lane is now vested in the Baptist Union Corporation to avoid the sometimes intractable problems of trustees moving or dying.

Links with The Northern Baptist College

Throughout the years, strong links are evident between Lymm Baptist Church and the Northern Baptist College. On July 28th 1871, owing to the advanced age of pastor Isaac Ridgway, it was thought desirable to seek assistance for him in the ministry of the word. Advice was sought from friends at Towcester and Wisbech and after much prayer it was decided to seek an interview with the Principal of the Baptist College, then in Bury but now at Manchester. As a result, a request was made for Mr McClellan to preach at Lymm a few times and he was subsequently invited to become co-pastor at a stipend of £100 per annum. He was inducted to the co-pastorship in a service on December 26th 1871, with Principal Henry Dowson of Bury Baptist College, Rev J Harvey of Bury and Mr Cockett of Wisbech taking part in the service.

The Ridgway family subsequently supported the foundation of the Manchester Baptist college in 1872. Besides yearly 'College collections' by the fellowship, Mr Thomas Ridgway gave £1,100 to the Endowment Fund. In March 1873, Mr McClellan and Mr Howe of Waterbarn were asked by Principal Dowson to visit some of the American Baptist Churches to solicit further help for the building work at the Manchester Baptist College. They were given three months leave to perform the service requested and students of the college supplied their pulpits during their absence. In June of that year Mr McClellan requested a further three months leave to complete the work. He returned to Lymm on the 7th September and received into membership, from Bury Baptist Church, Miss Ellen Shaughnessy. At a later date, Miss Shaughnessy became matron at the Manchester Baptist College where she served for many years. In July 1874, Mr McClellan informed the church that he had received and accepted a call to a church in New Brunswick. Deep regret was expressed at his leaving but he left on August 23rd, preaching in the evening to a crowded congregation from the words "Finally brethren, farewell" (2 Cor 13).

In February 1875, Mr David Hughes of the Manchester Bible College accepted the call to Lymm and commenced his ministry in August 1875, Mr Cockett of Wisbech performing the act of induction, setting him apart by prayer and laying on of hands.

Miss Elizabeth Rachel Ridgway, baptised and accepted in to membership at Lymm in 1870, subsequently became the wife of Principal Edward Parker, DD, of the Manchester Baptist College. Her gracious influence was remembered with gratitude by several generations of students at the college. In 1901, after the death of Edward Parker, Mrs Elizabeth Parker together with her sister Miss Martha Ridgway and son, Mr Edward Parker, were received back in to the church at Higher Lane by letter of transfer from Brighton Grove Baptist Church, Manchester. It proved a great disappointment to the church at Lymm that Edward Parker did not accept their invitation to the pastorate on finishing his course at the Manchester Baptist College but accepted a call from Carley Street, Leicester and subsequently Burley Road, Leeds and Norbury, London.

Particularly during the period 1908 to 1913, the pulpit at Higher Lane was supplied by students from the Baptist College, many in the form of Student Pastorates, which proved of great value in their subsequent ministries. The link, however, uppermost in our minds currently is the recent move in the reverse direction by Rev Brian Howden, pastor at Lymm from 1985 to 1994, to join the staff of the College with particular responsibility for Church-based students, no doubt with much experience derived from his years as a part of the fellowship at Lymm.

Many other people and families have featured in the story of Lymm Baptist Church through the years, always offering unstinting sacrificial christian service, but it would not seem appropriate to single out others than those already mentioned. A chronological list of pastors at Millington and Lymm, from the information available, is presented at the end of this brief history.

Groaning at the seams and at the building -The Enlargement Project

During the 1970's and 80's the limitations and inconveniences of the 1850's structure became a frequent cause for concern. Outside toilets and varying floor levels in various parts of the building were a major obstacle particularly for elderly members of the fellowship. A growing fellowship frequently meant that space was at a premium and the long, relatively narrow aspect of the worship area, with fixed wooden pews, gave little flexibility with poor contact between minister and congregation towards the rear of the building. Difficulty was also experienced by the congregation in making meaningful contact with one another after services.

Thus, a firm of architects, MEBP of London, was commissioned in 1987 to undertake a Feasibility Study on the options available for enlargement. Their brief was to provide a structure to meet the church's vision to have not only a larger flexible WORSHIPPING CENTRE but also to be a welcoming OPEN CENTRE, providing a CARING CENTRE for the local community and in which the buildings could be used to demonstrate the love of God in practical ways. As far as possible the character of the building was to be retained. Discussions with the architects on the detail of the proposal to meet the requirements of the various church user groups continued for almost 4 years before the project was put out to tender in 1991.



An interior view of the church before enlargement (1992)

in Brazil of Joe and Irene Rowley (church members). The Gift Day raised the target of £4000 (a scriptural 10% of the Millington money), and was taken as an indication that the Enlargement Project was of God. At this time, a sum of £4000 represented an enormous challenge, and giving it away when so much would be needed, made it even more so. Its achievement and the principle it established of putting God first, made a lasting impression on the fellowship.

After many months of prayer, a Special Church Meeting was held in February 1992 at which it was unanimously agreed to accept a modified quote from Joseph Finney & sons Ltd of Winsford, with a total project cost including professional fees for the initial stages of close to £400,000. At that time nobody fully knew exactly where all the money was to come from, but the fellowship stepped out in faith believing it to be God's will, probably much the same as the fellowship at Millington did in moving to Lymm over a century earlier. An unsolicited gift of £1000 from the fellowship at Bracknell Baptist Church for the project, received the day after the meeting, seemed to give confirmation of God's blessing on the step of faith. When the money from Millington was used to pay the builder in 1993, its value had risen to over £75,000. Thus it was with great gratitude that the new larger hall, now used for a number of activities including worship services, was named Millington Hall, thereby perpetuating the gratitude owed by the fellowship at Lymm to the founding fellowship at Millington. At the same time, the old church, now destined to provide a smaller hall space, was named Ridgway Hall, reflecting the contribution of the Ridgway family through the years to the fellowship at Millington and Higher Lane.

Work on the enlargement commenced in April 1992 and the keys to the new building were handed over on December 18th 1992, on time and below the budgeted cost. During the intervening period and until the official opening ceremony, the fellowship met for morning worship at Lymm High School and in the evening, with a smaller congregation, in the old church, stripped of its pews and boarded off at one end. On the morning that the keys were handed over, two cheques were received in the post, one a £10,000 interest-free loan and the other a £5000 gift, reflecting the many financial miracles God had wrought during the period.

The old church and linked manse at Millington provided an input to the enlargement decision. Since the days of discontinuation of worship it had been rented out, with income to the church via the Baptist Union (BU). In 1986, the buildings at Millington were finally sold for residential use at a price of £40,000, the money held invested by the BU, to be used only for building work at Higher Lane. A Gift Day was held as a thank offering for this money and was given away to the work of the Baptist Home Mission Fund, TEAR Fund and the missionary work



The frontage of the church before enlargement (1992)

The enlargement in progress



...the rear of Millington Hall



...the apse under construction



The frontage of the enlarged building 1994

Record must be made of the sacrificial giving by the fellowship for the Enlargement Project, sometimes less painfully by means of organised events and use of individual talents. At the end of 1993, around half of the project cost had come from within the fellowship. The residue coming from the Millington sale money, gifts from outside the fellowship and a few Trust Funds, a legacy and substantial loans, mainly from bodies within the Baptist Denomination. Together they ensured that all bills could be paid.

Thus on February 6th 1992, the pastor, Rev Brian Howden, welcomed Derek Tidball, then Secretary for Mission for the Baptist Union and Keith Hobbs, the Area Superintendent, to take part in the opening ceremony of dedication. The refurbished premises feature seating for 300 in Millington Hall, easy access for disabled visitors, toilet facilities, a dedicated prayer room, a large welcoming entrance area, reception desk, office and kitchen space (fitted out during 1993) with three new small meeting rooms/classrooms above. In 1994, the refurbishment of the Ridgway Hall has been commenced and a further phase of renovation for the rooms below this hall and linking them to the main church building, awaits detail planning and finance.

The Future

It is thus with a grateful heart to God for all his faithfulness over the last almost 250 years, that we now eagerly look forward to the ministry of the Rev Chris Newton and all that God is going to accomplish in us and through us, as we seek with God's help to reach out to the community with the newly enlarged building He has provided; never forgetting that Christ's concern is not for bricks and mortar but for the hearts and minds of people.

A chronological list of pastors at Millington and Lymm Baptist Church

MILLINGTON

- 1759 - 1766 Mr Thomasson*
- 1766 - 1800 Isaac Cheetham*
- 1800 - 1819 John Cheetham, with Mr Thomas Aked, once per month*
- 1847 - 1850 Isaac Ridgway*

LYMM

- 1850 - 1871 Isaac Ridgway*
- 1871 - 1874 Mr McClellan, co-pastor with Isaac Ridgway*
- 1875 Hugh Davies*
- 1904 - 1908 A B Jack*
- 1908 - 1913 student pastors*
- 1913 - 1919 E E Lovell*
- 1919 - 1922 J Paton-Rogerson*
- 1924 - 1935 F W Dunster*
- 1935 - 1943 Hugh Jenkins*
- 1944 - 1958 J H Sheppard*
- 1958 - 1963 David Hugget*
- 1964 - 1970 George Cooper*
- 1973 - 1980 David West*
- 1981 - 1984 Martin Baldwin*
- 1985 - 1994 Brian Howden*
- 1994 Christopher Newton*

