

Commemorating Rev. William Benn's formation of the Congregational Church in Dorchester, Dorset.



In 1662, a separate Congregational Church was first formed in Dorchester. The event is commemorated in the stained glass window in our church in memory of the Rev. William Benn, the first minister and one who was the principal reason the Church came into being.

It was not something that he wanted to do. He was content with his position as rector of All Saints' Church in High East Street, and he would have continued there but for the passing by Parliament of the Act of Uniformity, 1662. William Benn failed to comply with the obligation to indicate his agreement to the requirements of the Act by St Barnabas' Day (24 August), and for this he was ejected from his living. He continued to preach, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally, and gathered around him a congregation of people who supported his stance and endorsed his beliefs.

The seventeenth century was a turbulent time and William Benn lived through the period of confrontation between Parliament and King Charles I which ended in the Civil War and the king's execution, the Commonwealth and the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, and the Restoration of 1660 when Charles II returned to England as king. He was born in November 1600 at Egremont in Cumbria, and educated at St Bee's School and Queen's College, Oxford. He was a Puritan, believing in the importance of preaching from the Scriptures in worship and against the inclusion of too much "popish" ceremony, but prepared to reform the Church of England from inside rather than joining one of the breakaway sects that sprang up at this time. His background probably commended him to the worthies of Dorchester, who had already enjoyed some years under the inspiring leadership of the Rev. John White at St Peter's and Holy Trinity, and it may even have been John White who was instrumental in William Benn's invitation to the town and selection by the town corporation as rector of All Saints' in 1629.

William Benn seems to have been more uncompromisingly puritan even than John White (who was noted for the number of people he encouraged to join the new idealistic colony in Massachusetts Bay near that founded by the Pilgrim Fathers). He frequently omitted sections of the Book of Common Prayer set for worship, substituting his own prayers. He had his critics in the town, who complained of his

long-winded sermons and accused him of being haughty and distant in his manner, but he was also commended for his work preaching at the county gaol, where he is said to have built a chapel at his own expense.

During the Civil War William Benn preached vigorously against the king, and he fled from Dorchester to London in August 1643 while a royalist army threatened the town. After John White's death in 1648 he assisted in the other two churches in the town as well as his own. By the time of the Commonwealth his puritan views were developing still further, and he turned his back on the idea of a mainstream Presbyterian Church for the whole nation, after the pattern adopted in Scotland, to join the ranks of the Independents. He formed a "gathered church" within his parish, and it was only these committed members who were admitted to communion.

After Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658, it proved impossible for those at the heart of government to agree on a way forward. There were attempts to introduce a written constitution which would have given overriding power to Parliament, but the details had still not been settled between the various competing factions when there was a real fear of another descent into civil war. In May 1660 Charles II wrote to Parliament from his exile on the continent, in what is known as the Declaration of Breda, offering to unite the nation under a rule of benign toleration that would bring an end to all the enmities of recent years. This included the words, "We do declare a liberty to tender consciences, and that no man shall be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matters of religion, which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom."

If that had remained the position, William Benn might have got away with it. Admittedly he was soon brought before Dorset's assizes for not using the Book of Common Prayer and imprisoned, but only for a short time, and he was allowed to resume his living at All Saints'. But a new Parliament elected in 1661 contained a number of new, younger, Members, who were not only royalist in their sympathies but also keen to get their own back for the treatment of their families by the previous governments, when they had been heavily fined, or even deprived of property, for their allegiance to the old king (as a way of paying for the cost of the war). Toleration was not uppermost in their minds and they were able to persuade the king (who did not need much persuasion) that he was not bound by any promises he had made in order to engineer his return to England. The Act of Uniformity was designed to hurt those who would not endorse what essentially was the royalist view of how things should be.

The Act of Uniformity required all clergy to declare their unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything in a new edition of the Prayer Book. Secondly, each had to declare that there was no obligation on himself or anyone else, arising from the oath commonly called the Solemn League and Covenant (which was the pact between the parliamentarian side in the Civil War and the Scots), to endeavour any change or alteration either in Church or State. Thirdly, it had to be accepted that no one could minister in the Church of England as priest or deacon unless he had been ordained by a bishop.

The third issue was not a practical difficulty for William Benn, because he would have been ordained by a bishop, but he would have resented the implications for those ministers appointed to office during the Commonwealth period, when the power of bishops was removed. The other two matters were serious matters of principle for him, because they challenged his fundamental conviction as to the supremacy of the Scriptures. The supreme authority in any matters of doctrine and ordering of the visible Church did not rest with the State, but in the will of God revealed in Scripture; this was something that had been built into the Solemn League and Covenant. He would also have questioned on scriptural grounds some of the requirements of the Prayer Book, and clearly believed that some variations from prescribed forms should be allowed, including the use of extempore prayer.

So William Benn came to form his own congregation outside the Church of England. Initially he managed to stay within Dorchester, but then a further restriction was imposed by the Five Mile Act so that in 1665 he had to leave the town to pursue his ministry elsewhere. He was preaching at Maiden Newton in 1665, but was preaching at Fordington, well within the five mile limit of the borough of Dorchester, by 1669. Finally, the futility of persecution was becoming apparent, and by a Declaration of Indulgence issued by the king the worst restrictions were relaxed. On 1 May 1672 William Benn was licensed to preach as a Congregationalist at the house of Philip Stansby, a former mayor of the borough. He died early in 1681 and was buried at All Saints' Church. He appears to have active to the end, being said to have been able to read without spectacles even at the age of eighty, and to have prayed in his study seven times a day.

Quite a man, and well worthy of his commemoration in a stained glass window in our church!

