



# Stratford Upon Avon Baptist Church

Payton Street, Stratford upon Avon, CV37 6UA

Registered Charity No. 1135844

## 1. The Foundation

It was a glorious day in Stratford on 18th August 1835 when the cornerstone of the Payton Street chapel was laid. The event was marked by a sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas Swan of Canon Street Baptist Church, Birmingham. The chapel was erected within seven months and opened for services on 15th June 1836. Yet, the history of the Church, and its connection with Canon Street can be traced back further than this, to the birth of its founder, James Cox senior, the timber merchant.

James Cox (1799 – 1882), the eldest of six children, was born into a Baptist family, and baptised at Canon Street Baptist Chapel. On 19th November 1826, he met with four others at his home at 8 – 9 High Street, Stratford upon Avon, for worship and prayer and to ‘implore the blessing of God on any effort that might be made to extend His cause in the town and neighbourhood’. They continued to meet on Sunday mornings and Tuesday evenings and the congregation grew until the premises became too small. A temporary chapel erected to the rear of the house in High Street was opened on 27th July 1827. Ten members signed the covenant and articles of faith on 26th February 1832 formally founding the Church.

After the new chapel opened in 1836, they moved quickly to appoint the first Minister, Reverend James Cubitt from Ilford. He preached at Stratford on several sabbaths before accepting the appointment, beginning his ministry 8th January 1837, and serving until August 1840. He took as the text for his first sermon Psalm 90 v17 – “Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us and establish thou the work of our hands.” He performed the first adult baptisms in the chapel on 30th November 1836, of Samuel Cope Cox (James’s brother) and Richard Wootton, both aged 35. On 27th September 1838 he conducted the first non-conformist marriage to take place in Stratford. Samuel married Caroline Cooper, one of the original members that met together in High Street. Their house at 21 Payton Street, opposite the Chapel was bequeathed to the Church.

The congregation quickly grew, such that in 1842, under Cubitt’s successor Reverend John Edwards, the chapel was extended. The vestry was re-modelled, to provide a multi-functional area for use as an organ gateway, a Bible classroom, tea meetings and prayer meetings. Space for 100 additional seats were secured. An organ was purchased from the local organ builder, Thomas Hewins.

## 2. Revival Meetings

Church Revival meetings took place between 8th November and 25th December 1842, led by Reverend Thomas Pulsford, the ‘Baptist Evangelist’ of the Baptist Home Missionary Society. He attracted large congregations to the early morning and evening services held daily in Stratford, and during the month fifteen people were baptised. The Church minutes record that ‘much good seed was sown’ and the Church was well pleased and thankful for the outcome.

Two decades later, another leading Baptist preacher, Charles H Spurgeon, came to Stratford and preached on 7th June 1864 on the Red Horse Bowling Green to crowds of an estimated 2,000. The Bowling Green, located on the corner of Warwick Street and Payton Street must have been visible from the Chapel. Initially it was hoped to preach at the recently erected Shakespeare Pavilion, but permission was ultimately refused. In the event, the Bowling Green probably proved a better location, and was so successful that Spurgeon preached there again on his second visit in 1870.



Main Entrance 1990's

### 3. Village Evangelism



From 1870, influenced by its connections with Spurgeon, the Church engaged in village evangelism. Reverend Morley studied at Spurgeon's college and was furnished with a reference from Spurgeon on becoming Pastor at Stratford. He preached in the open air at Preston-on-Stour, and with the help of J C Smith established the Chapel there. Other branches followed at Temple Grafton and Tiddington. Smith, converted at Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle, commenced 'Colportage' work in the villages around Stratford after he came to the Church in 1870. 'Colporteurs' were engaged to preach the word in the villages and to sell or gift religious books and tracts. The deacon, Edward T. Kennard, who preached at Tiddington, was baptised in the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Kennard was a well-known character around the town and villages, cycling everywhere, he was even spotted cycling on the frozen River Avon. John Ready employed as colporteur in 1915 had applied for the vacancy through the Metropolitan Tabernacle Colportage Association. He led services at all three village chapels and ran a religious bookshop at 56 Ely Street.

### 4. The Fellowship

Twenty-two Ministers have served the Church since its foundation. They all put their individual stamp on the growth and development of the Church. The longest serving minister was the Reverend F C Watts from 1896 to 1929, a period of 33 years. Speaking at the centenary celebrations in 1932, he observed that the Church had appointed its first two female deacons, Mrs Fincher and Miss Toone and prophesied that in a hundred years-time "there would be a lady in the pulpit". The Reverend Joseph Sutton wrote a Church History for the centenary. Reverend Frank Wiltshire celebrated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Church by leading a service at the shop in High Street where the original members first met.

Deacons and other Church members have contributed enormously to Church, community, and local government. In the nineteenth century James Cox senior, William Stephenson and John Smallwood served as Mayors of Stratford. Smallwood brought all the councillors to the annual Civic Service at the Baptist Chapel, which was unusual as the service was normally held at Holy Trinity. Smallwood, a builder from Wooton Wawen, together with the architect, Thomas Taylor Allen, oversaw renovation work in the Chapel and the addition of new classrooms in the 1880s. Allen served as a deacon and treasurer, and was also President of the Worcestershire Baptist Association.

## 5. The Chapel



Frank Wiltshire's Retirement 1972

The Chapel, constructed in a simple Greek Revival style with a Doric portico and unfluted columns, was registered as Grade II Listed in 1972. It has undergone many alterations and improvements since it was first erected. A schoolroom was built adjacent to the main sanctuary in 1861, and later smaller classrooms were added. In 1995, the chapel and schoolroom underwent major refurbishment when the older rooms were replaced or upgraded. The schoolroom became the Fellowship Hall which is regularly used for Church and other community activities. In 1998, the adjoining former Brethren Chapel was purchased to provide additional space for church activities. Further renovations were overseen by the Church Secretary, Julian Shackleton in 2022

## 6. The Church Today

The present minister, Reverend Amanda Rhodes, took up her ministry in September 2019 and very soon faced the challenge of Ministry and pastoral care during the Covid lockdown. Under her leadership, the Church achieved the Eco Church bronze award from A-Rocha. The Church plays a full part in Stratford Churches Together, provides refreshments after the annual Easter Walk of Witness and in 2025 will host the World Day of Prayer. The current fellowship continues to grow, and we have recently welcomed new families with young children, and several asylum seekers and refugees to worship with us. James Cox's vision to 'extend His cause in the town and Neighbourhood' continues to thrive in Stratford upon Avon.



Robert Brown  
Stratford Baptist Church 2024