

A brief guide to...

Cote Baptist Chapel

Shifford Road, Cote, Near Bampton, Oxfordshire, OX18 2EG

History & Background

As with many Nonconformist places of worship, the origins of Cote Baptist Chapel can be found in the years following the Act of Toleration in 1689. The Act allowed freedom of worship to Nonconformists who had pledged the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, and who rejected the idea of Transubstantiation (i.e., non-Catholics). Reflecting perhaps the village's proximity to Oxford, where new theological ideas were being discussed, Baptist teaching took place in neighbouring Longworth as early as 1656, despite their illegality and threat of prosecution. Land had been given for the chapel by John Williams in 1701. The earliest record of a Baptist congregation in Cote, however, comes from 1703, when Joseph Collett became the first minister of Cote and Longworth. Cote soon superseded the latter as the local focal point for Baptists, and soon became the centre of a preaching circuit. Historically Cote was adjoined to the neighbouring village of Aston within the parish of Bampton, and it is significant that neither village had an Anglican place of worship, creating a supportive environment for the Baptist movement. Collett continued as

minister until 1741, and it was his successor, Joseph Stennett, who rebuilt the chapel as it stands today, in 1756. Membership at Cote grew steadily, with 105 members in 1772, until the Church of England finally established itself in the area in the 1830s – an Anglican church was consecrated in Aston in 1839, while a school and a vicarage were built in 1856 and 1858 respectively. The Baptists had maintained a school in Aston since 1827, but the 1870 Education Act made the Anglican school the main educational establishment in the area, and the Baptist school closed in 1874. Despite this, the religious competition in many ways benefitted Cote, and the chapel prospered under Benjamin Arthur, a charismatic minister who was credited with adding 225 members to the congregation, and who was responsible for remodelling the chapel in 1859. The congregation began to decline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a result of agricultural and societal change, notably an increased religious apathy. Sir John Betjeman described Cote in his 1952 essay collection *First and Last Loves*, but by the 1980s the congregation had dwindled, and the Baptist Trust Corporation decided to transfer the chapel to



Tradition: Baptist
Built: 1756
Congregation active until: 1980s
Listing: II*
Grid reference: SP351031
Toilet facilities and disabled access available

Transport

When entering Cote from the direction of Aston, turn right at the cross roads. Cote Baptist Chapel is approximately 200 yds along from the junction, on the right hand side. It is possible to park on the verges in Shifford Road, between the chapel and the crossroads.

The nearest railway station is approximately 20 miles away in Oxford. There is a bus service from Oxford.

The burial ground is unlocked and open to the public.
Tel: 01993 851219

the care of the Historic Chapels Trust in 1994.

The Exterior

Entering the grounds through the graveyard, a stone outbuilding can be seen on the right of the gate. This used to be part of the stables in which worshippers, some of whom had to travel a considerable distance, could house their horses during the service. It was converted for secular use in

1955, and now also belongs to HCT.

The burial ground has some significant headstones, including some which predate the 1756 chapel, indicating that it was built on the same site as the first meeting house of 1703. The Williams memorial is individually listed grade II, and commemorates the family who gave the land on which the chapel stands.



The graveyard

The chapel is built from honey-coloured limestone rubble, with a stone-slatted double pitched roof. The vestry projects from the north side of the chapel. Two doors give access to the chapel, indicating that there were separate entrances for men and women.

The Interior

The pulpit was situated on the south wall of the chapel to the left of the entrance when it was built in 1756. It was moved to its present position on the west wall in 1859. There was a round headed window behind where the pulpit stands, in the same design of the two which now flank the pulpit, which was filled in to accommodate moving the pulpit.

It was in 1756 that the north gallery that faces the pulpit was

added. This was replaced in 1859 when the inside of the chapel was remodelled, and an east and south gallery were added. Below the north gallery is a Edwardian dial clock. The north gallery also houses an organ.



The pulpit from the gallery

The floor, roof and fittings were also replaced in 1859. This was when the present pews, which were rented out, were added, as well as the table pew – which was for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Beneath this larger pew is a baptismal font for baptisms by full immersion (that is by walking into waist high water and being ducked by the minister as the symbolic re-enactment of the baptism of Christ by John Baptist). This is covered by large flaps when not in use.



The table pew and covered font

The memorials on the wall are to important former ministers – the founder Collett and the ministers who oversaw the chapel rebuilding projects in 1756 and 1859, Stennett and Arthur. The framed picture and text by the door to the vestry tell the story of John Williams, a Congregationalist minister and grandson of the founder of the chapel, who was killed by the natives whilst evangelising in Samoa in 1839.

Subsequent History

One of the first chapels acquired by the HCT, around £250,000 was raised in the late 1990s for Cote's restoration and upgrading, including the provision of small-scale modern facilities and two committee rooms.

New Uses

The chapel is available for use within the community, including concerts, meetings, seminars, lectures and exhibition. Cote is also available for weddings, blessings, memorial services, funerals and burials. Contact us for more information.

Further Reading

Kate Tiller, *Cote Baptist Chapel: A History and Guide* (Historic Chapels Trust, 2007)