

*High Road Baptist
Church
North Finchley*



A Short History (1791-2008)

*Extracted from the 200th Anniversary Thanksgiving Service
Order of Service.*

This service took place on Saturday 11th May 1991 at 4pm

*A Short History of High Road Baptist Church
(formerly Soho Baptist Church)*

Historians have noted the improvement in manners and morality in England during the 18th Century. The preaching of Whitfield and Wesley and others had been used of God. All over England groups of converted men and women were living the Christ-like life. Each of these became mirrors in which the age could behold its own hideousness. England can be for ever grateful to God that she was spared the horrors of the French Revolution which in 1791 had been raging for two years.

In 1791, the year in which John Wesley died, a body of such devout men and women, with their pastor, Richard Burnham, formed a strict communion Baptist Church in Edward Street, off Wardour Street, Soho. Much prosperity attended the church and in 1795, owing to its growth, it moved to larger premises in Grafton Street. Here Mr. John Stevens was baptised and became a member.

When Richard Burnham died in 1810, Mr. Stevens succeeded him as pastor, serving the church until resigning in 1822 to become pastor of Salem, Meards Court, Soho, a newly built chapel for 1,000 people.

Both Richard Burnham and John Stevens were noted hymn writers. In a *Selection of Hymns* by John Stevens, no fewer than 68 are by Richard Burnham and 33 by Stevens himself.

During Pastor Stevens' ministry the Lord continued to bless the church, the congregations increasing so quickly that in 1813 the church moved first to York Street, Piccadilly and later to Lisle Street in Soho.

Mr. George Comb became pastor in 1824, and in 1825 another move was necessary to Oxford Street. A new chapel was erected in 1835, also in Oxford Street and there the church worshipped until 1885 under the pastorates of George Wyarcl (1841-1856), John Pells (1858-1864), and Joseph Wilkins (1866-1873). It was there on 10th March 1871, that 23 churches formed the Metropolitan Association of Strict Baptist Churches.

In 1875 Mr. John Box was called to the pastorate. In 1885 the freeholder of the Soho chapel site wished to purchase the church's lease in order to build business premises. The offer of £4,600 was reluctantly accepted and invested in Soho Chapel Building

Fund. The Soho church was now without a home. Arrangements were made to hire the Albert Rooms, Whitfield Street, Tottenham Court Road, until a new chapel could be built.

After much prayer and much searching in the area a new site was purchased from the Metropolitan Water Board in June 1886. This site was in the new road from Piccadilly Circus to Bloomsbury, known as Shaftesbury Avenue, "a broad thoroughfare cut through a horrible and densely populated district". Plans were drawn up to build a new chapel to seat 500 persons, with copious school accommodation at a cost of £5,600.

In May 1887, when this building was partly erected, three memorial stones were laid. Some 600 people were present at the service. This number was swelled by many hundreds of people living in the neighbourhood who watched from windows and roofs of the high tenement buildings and who regarded the event as a gala occasion. It was said that their verbal contributions were somewhat irrelevant to the purpose of the service.

In February 1888, a service of dedication took place and the church of nearly 200 members moved to their new premises. After a faithful ministry of 26 years, Pastor Box passed into the Presence of the Lord in 1901. The church continued for some years without a pastor until in 1904 Mr. T.L. Sapey was called. It seems that, perhaps through falling numbers, there was some difficulty with the Pastor's stipend and with his removal expenses. In 1906 Pastor Sapey resigned to become co-pastor with M.C. Cornwall at Brixton Tabernacle.

Owing to families moving from the area, the membership decreased and during the First World War it was recognised that many of the congregation travelled from the Finchley area. In 1915 it was decided to sell the property to the Cower Street Church, who themselves were being forced to move. The figure of £4,000 was well below what the church had in mind but it was accepted in order to keep the building and site for the glory of the Lord in the preaching of the gospel. The closing service at Soho was held in March 1917, and in the same year the site in Finchley was purchased. In 1918, owing to the restriction of building towards the end of the war, a small building was erected for £500. This had been so badly constructed that in a few years it was in danger of collapse. It was essential that a new chapel be erected and that the original building be strengthened. The present handsome building was opened with a service on 1st June 1925.

In June 1935, Mr. C.L. Silverwood-Brown became the first pastor in Finchley and served the church until being called to the pastorate in Newquay, Cornwall, in 1938. The church then continued for many years without a pastor. The Lord maintained the work until Mr. W.A. Brown was called in April 1983, and served the Lord as pastor until retiring in October 1987. These were prosperous years, with more friends attending the services. The ministry of Pastor Brown was notable for the clarity of his Bible teaching and was a blessing to many.

It was possible to buy a beautiful manse and also to extend the premises at the chapel by adding a vestry, a schoolroom, a kitchen and modern toilet facilities. The Lord was gracious in His provision and of the £100,000 spent, only £2,000 remains to be repaid. Above all, we rejoice in the goodness of the Lord in providing the church with another pastor. Mr. and Mrs. John Kilpatrick began their ministry amongst us in April of this year.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the hearts of men are still the same as in the 18th Century. There is still godlessness, violence, cruelty to children and animals. We pray that the Lord will raise up men and women living the Christ-like life that again there may be blessings in the land.

Tablets in memory of John Stevens, George Comb and John Box, and photographs of the early pastors can be seen in the present church.

Update 2008:

In early 2007 Mr Kilpatrick announced his intention to relinquish the pastorate at the end of August. The church was saddened at this decision as he had served them well for over 16 years, enduring the many ups and downs of experienced by London churches as people no longer saw the need for a Saviour or if they did were often only being part of the church for short time before moving away.

Although weak in numbers the church pressed forward in the Lord to seek a new pastor. The Lord's hand was on the church and circumstances fell into place to recall an experienced pastor Mr and Mrs Robin Dowling from Bristol to London, where they had begun their ministry.

Mr and Mrs Dowling began their ministry amongst us at the beginning of October 2007.

With the Lord's help the church is moving forward through the 21st Century with renewed hope.