

NONCONFORMIST RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN CLARE

There are known to have been Protestant nonconformists in Clare in the 17th century and these can best be understood in the nation-wide context.

When the Church of England was newly established it faced many controversies among ritualists, Puritans and others. After 1640 Parliament decreed that the established church should run on presbyterian lines with a new liturgy and a form of government which was more of a committee, including elders, deacons and others as well as the clergy - and this prevailed for a time. Some groups, however, had already broken away to act on more independent lines. Among people who held the presbyterian view in Clare were Roger Cook, Giles Barnardiston, and Francis Crosse (a clothier of Nethergate House).

In 1645 a gathering of religious dissenters or independents appointed Roger Cook as 'Minster of Clare'. Meetings probably took place in his own home at first. Many churches all over the country have had their beginnings in houses or other informal premises. Even as late as the start of the 19th century there were many such: out of 405 licences granted in Suffolk between 1791 and 1810, only 48 were for formal chapels, and even this figure included Roman Catholics. In earlier years the proportion was bound to be large.

With the restoration of Charles II in 1660 the old influences regained control, and presbyterian-minded ministers in the Church of England were ejected because they would not submit to Anglican discipline. In 1662 the Rev. Francis Crow, vicar of Hundon, was dislodged from his church. He was licensed as a Presbyterian Teacher in 1672 under the terms of the Declaration of Indulgence, but continuing persecution drove him to Jamaica for a few years. He returned to England and came to Clare to become the town's Independent minister in 1687. Ten years earlier there were already three hundred local recorded nonconformists in Clare, and around this time four houses were licensed as places of worship for Protestant dissenters.

The Act of Toleration in 1689 led to permanent acceptance of nonconformity, after which proper buildings for chapels became more common. In 1690 a Philip Havers was minister of a church meeting in a barn at Clare, and baptised many people in private houses. In 1710 a large meeting house was built, replacing the Presbyterian conventicle already on the site - a site which is now occupied by the United Reformed Church and lies off Nethergate Street. Its congregation was then known as Independents.

In 1801 this Independent Church was having difficulty in finding a new minister. Thomas Hoddy, a young man of just twenty years of age, and a Baptist, was invited to take services one Sunday and then to remain as minister for a few months. He held strong beliefs in favour of believers' baptism (as contrasted to the baptism or christening of children) and expressed them forcefully. A few members of the church met on November 5th 1801 and decided to form a separate Baptist Church, although the controversial minister claimed he had not personally encouraged this. However, Mr Hoddy soon withdrew from the Independent Church and was joined by a few others to hold their own meetings in barns, and then a house.

The Baptist Church was formally founded in 1803, with twelve members. Its deacon was Lot Crowe, a shoemaker of the family of the Rev. Francis Crow who had been Clare's Independent minister in 1687. Lot served as a deacon for fifty years, *'an indefatigable preacher who, though somewhat eccentric in his ways, was beloved'*. Eventually they were able to purchase land in the Cavendish road, a site still marked by their old burial ground beside a small entrance to the Country Park. The first Baptist Chapel was built in 1805 at a cost of £242 plus £23 for the land, with Mr Hoddy as its pastor. The group was persecuted but prospered, and built a larger church in 1821, costing £365. In 1860 they moved to their present site in the High Street, given by Charles Hale, one of their deacons. They literally moved the church, taking its materials to use on the new site, leaving the old site as a cemetery.

Despite this break in the fellowship, the Independent Church continued. In the middle of the 19th century, like-minded Independent churches throughout the country gave up their old name and became the Congregational Union, later to be known as the Congregational Church. The church building at Clare was replaced in 1841, when the present church was erected with vestries and a large Sunday schoolroom attached, at a cost of £700. Its opening was celebrated by a dinner at the Half Moon Inn at 2s.6d. per head, attended by forty-one diners - the minister being allowed in free. A separate schoolroom was built alongside the church in 1926. The name of the denomination was changed again in 1971 when the Congregational Church nationally merged with the Presbyterian Church under the new title United Reformed Church.

There was also a strong Quaker element (official title, Society of Friends) in Clare by the end of the 17th century. A deed dated 1686 refers to a group of residents arranging for a cottage to be held in trust for those of the Quaker faith. This cottage stood behind other buildings at the south end of the market place, at the foot of the castle mound, and it seems a reasonable assumption that the Quakers held their meetings there at that time - indeed, a map of 1809 puts a Quaker Meeting House in this locality. A plot of land was given by Francis Waldegrave for a Quaker burial ground, but this was taken over and is now part of the private garden of 3 Cavendish Road. Captain Giles Barnardiston, owner of the Priory from 1679, was a Quaker.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT NONCONFORMIST CHURCHES

THE BAPTIST CHURCH, which is in the High Street nearly opposite the Parish Church, is a mid-19th century building with a simple classical facade and a hall and other rooms at the rear. It was opened in 1860. In the 1980s the church interior was radically changed and re-furnished, giving a large platform and comfortable seating. The adjoining Old Manse, now a private house, dates from 1892. The present manse lies in a small group of modern houses behind the church

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH is the beginning of Nethergate Street, and stands back from the road, along a path. The present church was built in 1841, and the school hall in 1926. There have been churches on the

site since about 1690. An ancient graveyard, which had over 200 burials, adjoins the buildings. This continues under part of the present church building, and a later note in the burial register comments *'there are several bodies buried under the pews'*. A small square stone in the church floor is further expounded by a memorial above: the Rev. Thomas Giles died while in the act of preaching on November 25th 1861, an event very appropriately marked by a reference to Genesis 5.24 *'And he was not, for God took him.'* In 1984 dwindling numbers led to the closing of the church building, but services continued in the adjacent hall. After some years of disuse of the church building itself, a re-opening celebration in 1991 crowned the strenuous efforts by a few people over five years to repair and restore it, making it again an excellent example of a building of its period.