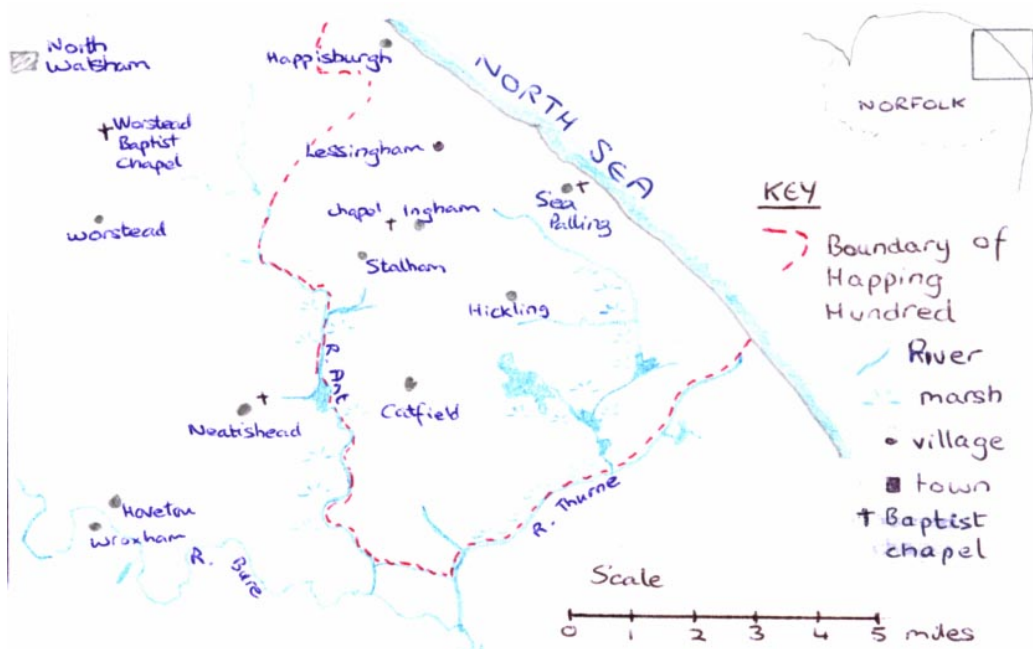


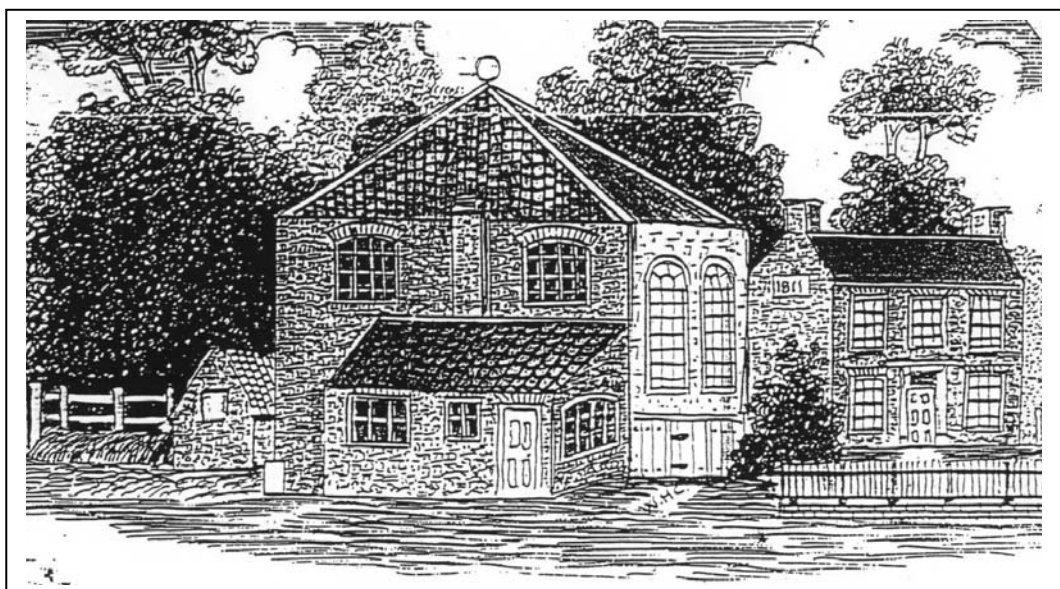
A History of
Stalham Baptist Church

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Map of North East Norfolk

Stalham and Ingham lay in the Happing Hundred, an ancient administrative area covering 15 parishes. It is an area of villages within an entirely rural location



Drawing of Ingham Baptist Chapel built in 1813 and in use until 1884. In the background is the minister's house. The latter building survives to this day.

The Early Years

Stalham Baptist church is the direct descendant of a fellowship which first formed at Ingham in 1653 (possibly earlier). Many baptist fellowships formed around this time but few were to survive the political and religious upheaval of the late 17th century. Ingham lay on relatively high ground (for Norfolk) in an area bounded by sea, river and marshland, so that access beyond a few miles was limited and the area was relatively isolated. Maybe this is why Ingham fellowship survived, though there are stories of subterfuge for it to do so. Freedom to worship finally came with the Toleration Act of 1689. A license for worship was granted in 1693.

Records claim that between two and three hundred people met each week during the late 17th century, coming from Ingham and the surrounding area. It is hard to establish the size of the fellowship in the 18th century, particularly with the difference between the number of members and the number actually attending meetings (higher). However, it appears that numbers had declined by the end of the 18th century. This may have been due to several factors: the fellowship followed sabbatarian principles and met on Saturdays for a period of fifty years during the century; a thriving baptist community (non-Sabbatarian) had developed in 1713 in Worstead, some 5 miles to the north west; general waning of religious enthusiasm and the subsequent rise of methodism.

Regardless, a proper meeting house with adjoining minister's house was built for the Ingham baptist fellowship in 1745. Prior to this it had met in a private house (or barn, presumably!) A baptistry was built in 1782 and the meeting house rebuilt in 1813 at a cost of £590 when the minister's house was also repaired.

The history of the Ingham fellowship comes to life in the early nineteenth century through the memoirs of Sophia Cooke. Born Sophia Cubitt in 1778, she was baptised in a stream near Worstead and became part of the fellowship there. In 1805 she married Samuel Cooke, the miller in Stalham and moved there, though kept her membership in Worstead and attempted to fellowship both at Worstead and Ingham, despite family commitments!

She was a pious woman who only partook of any activity that worshipped God. She was troubled by the milling or sale of flour on a Sunday and was happier when both ceased around 1810, but this was to bring another dilemma for Sophia - what were the young men now to do on Sunday morning (rather than getting drunk). Partly at her insistence, a morning service was initiated after Mr Pickers became the pastor at Ingham in 1811.

Samuel Cooke was heavily involved in the building of the new meeting house at Ingham in 1813. He may not have been as zealous in his Christian life as Sophia. Certainly Sophia expressed happiness and relief when Samuel started to lead family devotions. Having never been a church member, Samuel was baptised in January 1815 and Sophia finally transferred her membership from Worstead.

Peace and Growth

Most members of the church were engaged in the agricultural economy of Norfolk. The nineteenth century had brought great change to these rural areas. Enclosure of common land led to the reduction of smallholding and increase of large-scale farming, not least with agricultural mechanisation. This in turn led to a decrease in wages for labourers. The end of the war with France in 1815 brought hard times. During wartime, there had been no trade with France, but with the resumption of trade, the price of wheat fell. Coupled with a disastrous harvest, this area was badly affected, relying as it did on the crops of wheat and barley. This was a testing time for Samuel the miller and many others.

Samuel became a deacon in 1820. Women could not be deacons, or even vote in the baptist fellowship. This did not stop Sophia influencing with her pen though. She was a prolific writer of letters and other forms as she thought befitting. In 1820 a group of travelling players were visiting the area and posting bills of their entertainment. It has to be said that Sophia was probably one of the strictest moralists in her view of plays. In 1813 she had written to her 5 year old daughter "Be sure never to frequent plays, balls and card parties; they belong to the prince of darkness, not to the Lord of light"

In response to the travelling players, she posted the following notice.

"On Sunday August 11th

AT INGHAM MEETING HOUSE

FOR THE BENEFIT OF IMMORTAL SOULS

Beginning at 10 in the forenoon and at 2 in the afternoon,

Divine worship will be performed by the Rev Mr Pickers who will expound the Word of God in the Forenoon and preach in the afternoon.

Prayer will also be offered up to Almighty God, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of poor sinners, who have broken his holy law, and exposed themselves to his wrath forever; but through the atonement and righteousness of the divine Mediator pardon is communicated to every penitent, seeking soul.

Praises will be sung to Jehovah at the usual periods.

To conclude with thanksgivings to that God who seeks the happiness of his creatures by commanding them to keep holy the Sabbath day.

Free admittance for all who are disposed to attend, and the accommodation of seats till the house is full.

The notice gives several insights into church worship at the time. First, that the second service was in the afternoon - given that evenings were dark. This did not leave much time between services. Also that attendance was free. The members paid a regular subscription (quarterly) rather than passing round an offering plate.

The fellowship was unashamedly evangelical, with Calvinistic theology. Pages 6 and 7 are a copy of the covenant entered into by members of the fellowship, thought to date from around this time. There was a strong emphasis on commitment to each other in furthering their Christian faith. However, discipline was not ignored - records have been found of those excluded from fellowship because of adultery, drunkenness or 'disorderly conduct' for example. This would have been the final recourse as members were admonished if accusations against them were found to be true and given the chance to repent. Even those who had been excluded had the chance to return to fellowship if they subsequently repented.

Unfortunately, Rev. Pickers became ill in January 1826 and was unable to fulfil his duties as a minister. Pulpit supply was found until the summer when a twenty year old was invited from Stepney College. In September, the church meeting unanimously agreed to request the resignation of Rev. Pickers, who was unable to reply due to mental affliction, though he voluntarily left the church in October. The incident seems very sad, yet the church was to embark on a time of great blessing.

The Venimore Years

The twenty year old from Stepney Academy, James Venimore, was invited to become the new church minister. He became a church member on 6th May 1827, and was ordained as the pastor on 15th May. On 20th May, his first Sunday as pastor, he baptised two people, administered communion and admitted three people into church membership. In September he baptised Mary Cooke, daughter of Samuel and Sophia Cooke. In 1831 James Venimore married Mary and it is suggested this is one reason why his ministry lasted 40 years, the longest in the history of the church.

In 1829 a schoolroom was built, though a Sunday school had been operating since 1814. The first superintendent was Richard Boardman Silcock and he held this position for 56 years. The school was largely run by Mr and Mrs Silcock and Mr and Mrs Cooke. Even though they were not allowed to be deacons or even to vote in church meetings, the women in the church held a valuable role.

Diseases like cholera may not have been rampant in Norfolk, but poverty was still an issue. Many poor people lived in cramped accommodation. The riots over agricultural mechanisation in 1830 passed Ingham by, maybe because of prayer. Whatever the local issues were, the church members were keen to be involved in national issues and the work of the church around the world. There was a day of prayer in 1834 specifically to pray about the Poor Reform Act. The church supported overseas missions, the local agent for the British and Foreign Bible Society being Sophia Cooke. Financial aid was given to other fellowships that were building new chapels. This was not necessarily local. In 1818 £11 had been sent for a new chapel in Newport Isle of Wight.

A
COPY
OF THE
Covenant
ENTERED INTO BY THE
MEMBERS
OF THE
PARTICULAR BAPTIST CHURCH,
MEETING IN
Ingham, in the County of Norfolk.

In order to bear in Mind the Engagement we, as a Church of CHRIST, stand in to each it hath been unanimously agreed that the same be committed to Writing, and particularly read at the Acception of Members, and oftener if it shall be thought proper.

We, therefore, who have set our Hands to the following COVENANT, being fully satisfied in the Way of Church Communion, and the Truth of Grace in some good Measure on each other's Souls, desire to walk together in the Fear of the Lord; and, through the Assistance of the HOLY GHOST, (professing our deep and serious Humiliation for all our Transgressions,) do solemnly, in the Presence of GOD and each other, give up our souls to the LORD, that he may be our GOD, and we his People, through the everlasting Covenant of his Free Grace; which Covenant alone we trust to be accepted by him, through the Merits of our Lord and Redeemer, JESUS CHRIST, whom we take to be our Priest, Prophet, and King.

First, We promise to watch over each other's Conversation, and not to suffer Sin upon one another, so far as GOD shall discover it to us; to stir up each other to Love and good Works; to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another with Meekness, according to the Rules left by CHRIST in that behalf.

Secondly, We promise to walk in all Holiness, Humility, and Brotherly Love, as much as in us lieth, to render our Communion delightful to GOD, comfortable to ourselves, and lovely to the rest of GOD'S People; and in a special Manner to pray for one another, and to the Increase of this Church, for the Presence of GOD in it, the pouring forth of his Spirit on it, and his protecting it to his own Glory.

Thirdly, We promise to bear each other's Burdens, to cleave to each other, and to have a Sympathy for each other in all Conditions, both outward and inward, as GOD in his Providence may exercise any of us with.

Fourthly, We promise to bear with each other's Weaknesses, Failings and Infirmities, with much Tenderness; not discovering to any without the Church, nor any within, unless according to CHRIST'S Rule and order of the Gospel provided in that Case.

Fifthly, We promise to strive together for the Truths of the Gospel and Purity of GOD'S Word and Ordinances, to avoid Causes and Causes of Division, endeavouring to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bonds of Peace.

Sixthly, We promise to meet together on the LORD'S Days, and all other Times as the Lord shall give us Opportunity, and think it becoming to give Account, when GOD, by his Providence should hinder us in so doing, to one another; and to study the Good of the Church in general, and every Member in particular.

Seventhly, We promise, with regard to the Minister our LORD shall provide for and set over us from time to time, that we will, to the utmost of our Ability, make his Life comfortable, both with Spirituall and Temporals; knowing it to be the Will of GOD, that *they who labour in the Vineyard should be Partakers of the Fruit thereof*.

Eighthly, We also promise never to discover to any out of the Church the Transactions that may be done at the Church Meetings, but only to the Members; except when Persons are totally excluded from Church Communion, and then we think they ought to be published.

These, and other Gospel Duties, as left upon Record, we humbly submit unto; promising and purposing, in the Strength of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, to perform with all Readiness and Cheerfulness of Mind.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the issue of closed or open communion vexed many baptists. Most baptist fellowships practised closed communion, i.e. only offering communion to those who had received believer's baptism, as an adult. Rev. Venimore sought to administer communion to believers who may not have been baptised as adults. There was opposition to this but a compromise was reached whereby communion was administered separately for many years. At the end of Venimore's ministry in 1867, open communion was adopted.

The ministry of James Venimore brought growth in the church, aided by a strong team of deacons. Between 1827 and 1851, the membership of the church grew from 71 to 128, 126 of these having been baptised by Rev. Venimore. While people could become members by transfer from other baptist churches, most became members by baptism.

The religious census of 1851 records the estimated attendance in the morning to be 172 and 289 in the afternoon. There were also 69 Sunday school attenders, in each of the morning and afternoon (most likely the same pupils). The population of Ingham by now was 488, though this is largely irrelevant as people were attending from neighbouring villages and parishes.

Without dwelling on the prominence of the Cookes, it must be recorded that Sophia Cooke died in December 1855. Her funeral was on Christmas Day, so that as many people as possible could attend. Her husband had predeceased her by 21 years. She was buried in the graveyard alongside the meeting house.

Changing times

After Venimore's ministry, there was a succession of pastors who stayed a few years, then moved on. Rev. William Root was in post from 1867 to 1872 but then moved to the English Presbyterian church before becoming an Anglican. Rev. Scriven came from Birmingham in 1872 but moved to Brondesbury in 1879. There is an interesting entry in the membership records from late 1872 made by Rev. Scriven, 'In September 1872 I baptised Miss Barcham, an elderly lady of Norwich, a member of the Church of England and in which communion she still remains. She had been christened in infancy but feeling that was not baptism, she confessed her faith in the Lord Jesus and was baptised by me at Ingham'.

Economically, the years 1850 - 1870 brought better conditions to Norfolk as the price of grain improved and pay for agricultural labourers increased. There was a certain amount of streamlining as people moved from agricultural employment to new trades in the towns and cities. In some cases this meant a move from Ingham to nearby Stalham, while others may have moved to London and it is recorded that some members 'went North' or abroad.

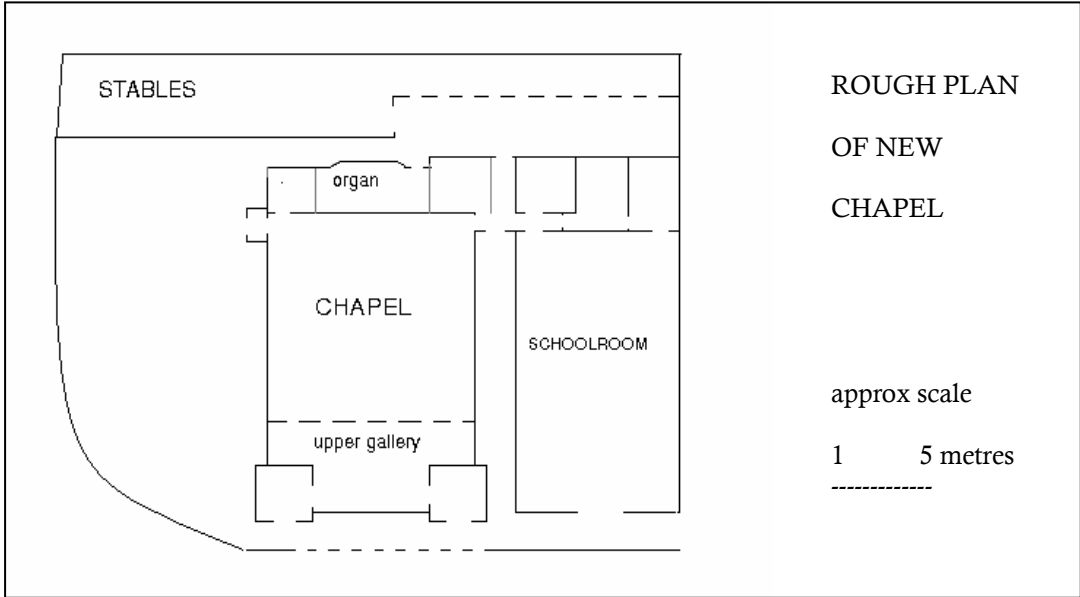
Rev. Bell came from Regent's Park College in 1880, but in 1883 went to Bombay. Abraham Hertzberg, of Polish descent, began his ministry in 1883 having finished at college. During his ministry, the church relocated to Stalham.

Relocation

By 1878, the condition of the meeting house was deteriorating and it was decided to build a new chapel. Stalham was now much bigger than Ingham and was developing as a trade centre with many businesses supporting agriculture or general service providers such as grocers and clothing shops. Several of the members of the fellowship lived or traded in Stalham, which had acquired a river staithe for trading boats and a railway to both Great Yarmouth and North Walsham. The 1881 census records population figures of 852 for Stalham and 429 in Ingham. For these reasons, it was decided to relocate to Stalham.

A trust fund had been set up and land was acquired by the fellowship at the end of Stalham High Street. There were seven trustees, including members Boardman Charles Silcock, farmer of Stalham (son of Richard Boardman Silcock), and Samuel Cooke, miller of Hoveton (son of Samuel and Sophia).

On 17th April 1884 a foundation stone was laid and on Thursday 23rd October, the first sermon was preached by Rev. Chown from Bloomsbury Baptist church in London. There was the chapel itself, seating an estimated 350 at ground level and in a gallery; an adjoining schoolroom and stable block - accommodating up to twenty horses - as well as a kitchen, vestry and storerooms. It may be that the speed with which the chapel was built reflects the quality of the building. Certainly there seems to be no reference to any architect and only a passing reference in the accounts to the builder, a Mr Evans. Minutes from the deacons meetings since 1886 are littered with references to repairs and renovation. However, the loan to pay for the building was paid off by 1889. The cost of the new chapel totalled some £1950, but this was partly offset by the sale of the Ingham properties. The meeting house in Ingham was demolished though the minister's house was sold to become a private house and still stands. The adjoining burial ground continued to be used by the fellowship.





A view of the chapel, circa 1930s. The schoolroom is to the right and the stable block set back behind the wall to the left.

New chapel, new rules

In 1886 Rev. Woods came from Regents Park College. It was during his eight year ministry that an important change was made to membership entry. Membership of Stalham and Ingham church had always been only open to those who had been baptised as adults. However, in 1888, practice was altered after much consideration, The vote of the members present was 35 for, 1 against and 16 neutral, for the following resolution, 'That we, as a church, ..grant admission on satisfactory evidence of conversion to God, to those who have been members of, or associated with any other Evangelical Church. Each case to be dealt with separately as a special case by the church and decided upon on its own merits.' (underlining in original text). In practice, there were very few cases where this happened until after The First World War.

Incidentally, the recording of the votes in this issue implies that by this stage women were allowed to vote. Maybe this came about in the time of James Venimore who certainly pushed to introduce votes for women members.

Despite the link between trade unions and free churches, a request to hold trade meetings in the schoolroom in 1890 was refused by the deacons. However, in 1893, it was agreed that a meeting and service for the Temperance Society could be held. Alcohol was clearly an issue. In 1890, unfermented wine was introduced into communion. In 1891, the deacons discussed one member who had been intoxicated, but the matter did not go to church meeting as he was sincerely penitent.

Hard Times

In 1894, Rev Woods moved to Manchester and was succeeded by Vernon Bird. Since the 1870s, agricultural areas had again been suffering, this time from cheap imports of grain from America, though Stalham survived to some extent with its new role as a market town. In his letter of resignation, Rev. Woods wrote that the depression in the agricultural industry was seriously impairing the financial prosperity of the church, rendering it difficult to give an adequate support to the ministry. He added that under these conditions, he felt it impossible to find his life work in Stalham, not finding sufficient scope for his energies in the service of God. It has been written elsewhere that Rev. Woods had a heart for working men and he may have considered the developing urban areas had a greater need for his services.

Also telling is a message of sympathy from Rev. Bullimore on a visit in 1896 representing the Baptist Association "which recognises the difficulty of country church work". Rev. Bullimore urged the importance of union and of regular contribution. Shortly before his visit, subscription had been replaced by weekly offering in envelopes. Other fundraising was provided through the holding of bazaars, but the deacons and treasurer were anxious that the pastor was supported through regular financial commitment. In a later obituary of the treasurer Edward Slipper, it was written that he had 'sterling business ability and managed the finances of the church with scrupulous care'. In 1896 a manse was built (not far from the vicarage), quite a feat for a financially struggling congregation, though even then perhaps it was recognised as a future investment. Since the move from Ingham, pastors had lived in rented accommodation.

It is recorded in the church minutes from 1896 that the gallery was reopened after a period of being closed due to bad behaviour. This may imply there were goings-on upstairs, but other minutes record that boys had been throwing stones outside and breaking windows (so much so that the local police force had been approached). Fronting onto the High Street, it may be that sitting in the gallery could have resulted in being showered by broken glass. Maybe this should dispel the idea that such vandalism is limited to modern times.

In 1901, several church members expressed an interest in a monthly evangelistic meeting with hymns from Sankey's 'Sacred Songs and Solos'. However, this interest was not shared by Rev. Bird, who considered that all services were evangelistic (but his style was obviously not like that of Moody).

Of interest is a record of the church meeting in June 1902 relating to the imminent coronation of Edward VII. The vicar of the parish church of Stalham had invited the pastor to read a lesson at a service to mark this event. In giving the invitation, the vicar made clear that he did not recognise the baptist community as a 'church' or its pastor a 'minister'. The invitation was not accepted in these circumstances by 16 votes to 7, though several abstained.

Into the 20th century

In 1903, Rev. Bird was succeeded by Rev. David John who was to hold the position until 1917. The early years of the twentieth century seemed quiet when reading the minutes of the church meetings. There were fewer such meetings and the minutes are somewhat brief. However, in 1905 there was a thorough renovation of chapel which seems strange given that it was only 21 years old. One suspects that this was primarily redecoration.

The members achieved success where they had failed with Rev. Bird when 60 new Sankey hymn books were bought in 1913.

In 1914 came the death of Edward Slipper aged 92. As well as his commitment to the fellowship at Stalham, he had been the honorary pastor at Neatishead Baptist chapel. He was buried in the Ingham burial ground alongside where the old chapel had been, showing that it was still in use.

Since 1914, the fellowship has continued to meet, with times of decline and growth. A war memorial records the names of 11 men connected with the church who lost their lives in the conflict of 1914-1918. The buildings have been converted to adapt to the needs of the fellowship, notably the stable block which is now used for sales, lunches and other events. However with 350 years of history behind it, the fellowship at Stalham Baptist Church, or 'The Chapel', continues as ever to witness to and serve God in the local community and strives to look forward to the future.



A view of the side of the Baptist chapel, looking up the High Street and dating from c1915

Bibliography and Acknowledgements

Primary Sources:

"Stalham Baptist Church 1653 - 1953" by C.B. Jewson

"Memoirs of Mrs Sophia Cooke" printed by Fletcher & Alexander 1857

"Continuation of the History of the Baptist Church at Ingham and Stalham from Mr Hook's ministry (1774-1810) to the opening of the new chapel at Stalham 23rd October 1884.", [author(s) unknown, possibly sermon transcript preached at the time of relocation] (NRO)

Church Meeting Minute Book 1888 - 1949. (NRO)

List of members compiled from various sources in NRO

Religious Census 1851

NRO = Norfolk Records Office. Much archive material is held in the Norfolk Record Office, though the items noted were especially useful along with an original copy of the Church Covenant reproduced on pages 6 and 7. Notes were made of these records by the late church archivist Mr Peter Cooke and passed onto me, with other records collated by him, by the current pastor Rev Ron Skivington. The original source of the photographs and drawing of Ingham chapel are unknown.

For local history:

"A History of Norfolk" by Susanna Wade-Martin.

"Historical Atlas of Norfolk" Norfolk Museums Service.

Map produced containing data by Ordnance Survey and with reference to Bryant's map of 1826.

Census figures from Trade Directories for Norfolk.