Chapter 15
Churches

Upton is served by four churches, the oldest of which dates back to 1854 and the most recent to arrive was in 1987. As well as being places of worship, churches traditionally have been at the hub of village life. This can been seen by the popular use of the church/community halls. The value parishioners put on their churches is shown by the expansion of the buildings, over the years, to keep in line with the growth of the population.

Church of the Holy Ascension

The Churchyard is entered through the Lych Gate over which is carved a short prayer: '*Grant, O Lord that through the grave and the gate of death we may pass to our joyful resurrection'* The gate was a gift of the Potts family who lived at 'The Oaks', (now the golf clubhouse). From the Lych Gate the path leads to the church with its 93ft spire.

Nearby is the ancient plague stone, which is covered in detail in chapter 3.

Entering the Church through the porch with its side seating there is a plaque recording the grant of £100 towards the building fund from the '*Incorporated Society for Promoting the Enlargement of Churches'* on condition that '*184 seats should be reserved for the poorer inhabitants of this parish for ever'*. Going on into the Nave these seats can be seen. Apart from the '*free'* seats Upton Parishioners would have been able to choose where they sat by paying a seating fee, those paying the highest fee would have first choice. The recommended rate was 7 shillings per seat or 2 guineas per pew; pew rent was paid in advance twice yearly and was used for various church needs such as cleaning, repairs, candles and two shillings for the Bishop.

The focal point of the church is the altar and associated with it, the east window. When the church was built there was an 'Ascension' window in this position but in 1885 it was removed – to where is a mystery. The space left was increased by 3½ feet and the new window, the crucifixion scene, put in.

Built as a Chapel-of-Ease to St. Mary's on the Hill, Chester, Holy Ascension was under the ministry of Rev. William Massie. The first Sunday Service was on 4th June 1854, conducted by curate Rev. Henry Ireland Blackburne. The singing was led by Colonel E Evans-Lloyd of Plas Newton, at first with a pitch pipe until the following August when a harmonium was provided. A tablet on the north wall records his 30 years service as organist. He was also treasurer of the Church School, and churchwarden from 1854 until Upton became a separate parish some 30 years later.

William Massie died in January 1856, aged 50, there is a memorial to him on the floor of the south transept and his picture hangs in the vestry. The churches

he built and the Chester Archaeological society which he founded are continuing signs of his life and work. His successor at St. Mary's was Canon Charles Bowen whose grave is in Upton Churchyard near the Lych Gate. For the first fourteen years of its life, Upton Church was a Chapel of Ease to St. Mary's and was served by various clergy from the mother church, but from about 1868 the Reverend H M Towers was curate-in-charge until the appointment of the fist vicar in 1882.



c1930

Unknown, Unknown, H Griffiths, Ms Morris, P Snelson, Mrs Stacey, Mr Stacey, Ms Corfe and Ethel Corfe

Mrs Westbury, Ms Davies, Ms Duff, Mr Westbury, Rev Sparling, Ms Smethurst, Emily Griffiths, Betty Harrison, Frank Hewitt.

The Duke of Westminster appointed his son's tutor, the Reverend Wilfred Sparling MA, to be the first vicar. He was a Cambridge rowing 'blue' who was ordained at St John the Baptist Church in Chester and served as curate-in-charge of St. Barnabas. He died on 10th May 1933 having served Upton for fifty years. His grave is in the old part of the churchyard and a record of his long ministry is carved on the wall near the lectern. Seven years after his appointment it was decided that the new parish should have a vicarage and by the efforts of Colonel Evans-Lloyd a fund was started, supported locally and the balance made up by the Duke. The decision to build was made in March 1889, the foundation stone laid by Mrs Emily Logan on August 15th of the same year and the vicarage finished and occupied eleven months later! Wilfred Sparling's successor was the Rev. F S Gardner Brown who stayed only three years before being replaced by the Rev. T O C East whose ten year tenure included the difficult days of the Second World War. In 1946 he left Upton to become vicar of Neston.



Rev. T O C East with members of the parish, early 1940s

With the end of the war came a building boom and the population of Upton increased rapidly. The man to whom the chance came to deal with this new situation was the Rev. J Wheldon Williams and the impact of his leadership and ability was felt immediately.

A high point was reached on the occasion of the church's centenary in 1954. For this occasion the church was not big enough to accommodate parishioners during the eight days of celebrations. It was necessary, therefore, to hire a marquee together with 500 seats and a stage. At Festal Evensong on the first Sunday the preacher was Canon S J Marriot, Sub Dean of Westminster Abbey, there then followed 8 days of services, dramas, concerts, and parties until the final Festal Evensong when the Lord Bishop of Chester preached. The marquee was on the open field between what was then the British Legion hut and the War Memorial. The hire charge for tent, seats and stage was only £111.

During the months following the celebrations, several possibilities for enlarging the church were considered but the plan finally adopted in September 1955 was to build transepts. The first phase included a south transept and new choir vestry. Completed by the end of 1957, these were consecrated by the Lord Bishop of Chester on 16th February 1958, and none too soon either, Easter Communicants were rising in number, there were 841 in 1956.

Plans for the north transept, were put on hold as there was a more urgent need, the decision to build a new Church Hall was taken within a month of the south transept consecration. Two sites were considered, one roughly where Grangeside now is, and the other at the end of the Vicarage garden. On this latter site the hall was built and opened in September 1959 by Mrs Ellison, wife of the Bishop of Chester. A dance took place that evening at five shillings per head. Money for the hall had actually been partly raised by an unusual method - door to door collections by approved volunteers round Upton houses.



After the addition of the south transept in 1957



The newly opened Church Hall in September 1959

Then the north transept, clergy vestry and organ project went ahead. The organ was not entirely new. Overhead platforms were built at the west end of the church to carry the pipes, and a detached console was placed by the choir-stalls. An opening recital was given by Dr Roland Middleton, the organist and Master of Choristers at Chester Cathedral. All this work was consecrated by Bishop Eric Mercer the Suffragen Bishop of Birkenhead on 7th May 1967. By this time new choir-stalls, communion rails and other furniture had been designed and installed, all in beautiful light oak and all given in memory of various church members whose names are recorded on small bronze plates.



The Rev. Wheldon Williams, died suddenly in July 1969. The Rev. Fred Lapham came to Upton in 1970 then moved to Warrington in 1981. The present incumbent Rev. Glyn Conway has been in office since that time.

The Vicarage Garden Party has been a major annual event for many years. Post-war everyone looked forward to this occasion, good weather was 'ordered' and usually happened. In Wheldon Williams' time it was nicknamed 'Vicars Weather'. For many years Kay and Alix Joseph arranged the Rose Queen ceremony and a beautiful bouquet was given by Peter Snelson from his rose nursery. Entertainment was arranged by Miss Gladys Davies, usually country or maypole dancing; latterly local schools or youth organisations have been important participants. Successive Rose Queens were crowned by well known ladies of the village but in 2004 the mould as broken when Brian Cox officiated.







Some past Rose Queen ceremonies

Some interesting first events, recorded in the parish register:-

The first baptisms were on 4th June 1854, five babies were baptised

The first marriage was solemnized on 1st June 1875, between William Holland and Mary Ellen Stockton.

The first burial was on 1st December 1853, that of E. Smith.

The first confirmation service was on 27th March 1893 when there were 21 candidates.

From Stan Whaley's memoirs, 1920s

For many years, the Upton Sunday School had an excursion in August, going alternately to Rhyl and New Brighton. This was a major event in the village because it was still something of a thrill to ride in a coach and Jimmy Hazelden's good nature allowed everyone in the village to join in, including some who had never once been near the Sunday school. The chance of a free ride was too good to miss and the expenses of the outing were defrayed by the church. But it was on these annual outings that Jimmy showed what a tremendously generous person he was. He bought many of the pupils ice creams, and always insisted on treating the teachers to tea. On the New Brighton outings, he always took us to the fun fair and for a ferry boat sail over the Mersey. Sometimes the old Vicar (Rev. Sparling) joined us as well, but for him it must have been an ordeal and he used to walk slowly up and down the promenade until it was time to return. He was conspicuous because of his saintly white beard, his black shovel hat and his umbrella.

United Reformed Church

Until 1860 the Congregational Church in Upton held their meetings in the Wheelwright's shop, the owner being one of the group's enthusiastic members. It was a comfortless place, lit with naphtha lamps, the oil from which used to drop on the clothes of the villagers who sat on backless wooden benches. In 1860 a Chapel, capable of holding 120 people, was erected at a cost of £250. The opening service was conducted on 27th November by Dr Raffles of Liverpool and it is believed to be the last service he conducted as he died soon afterwards. The sermon was preached by the Reverend Charles Chapman the Minister of Queen Street Chapel. This building still stands and is now Jackson's, a village newspaper shop (see chapter 6).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, largely due to the vigour and earnestness of Mr and Mrs Clarke, membership increased and better provision for the ministry was deemed necessary. The old Chapel was in a state of disrepair and in view of the ever increasing population, it was decided to build an entirely new Church at a cost of £1,500.

The new Church was designed by Messrs J H Davies and Sons of Newgate Street, Chester and the builders Messrs George Wright and Sons of Kelsall. It was to be built in gothic style in Ruabon Brick and would seat 300 people. An unusual feature was a carved ornamental screen which separated a large schoolroom from the main Church. This could be removed so that the schoolroom could be utilised as part of the Church. The site of the Church was given by Mr Anthony Bradley of Chester who also presented a beautiful stained glass window, representing Christ blessing little children, in memory of his brother William Bradley.

Wednesday 20th June 1900 was a great day, at a special ceremony the foundation stone was laid, appropriately, by Mrs Mary Clarke and Mrs Sidney Clarke. Over one hundred and fifty members and friends also contributed by laying bricks. After the stone laying ceremony an evening meeting was held in a large tent in the field in the centre of the village, with records stating '*over 200 people sat down to a sumptuous tea*'.



Inside the new Church

The building progressed well and less than six months later on Wednesday 5th December 1900, the opening ceremony took place. The proceedings were conducted by Rev. D Wynne Evans and a hymn sung which was specially composed

for the occasion, by Mr. J W Jones of West Lorne Street, Chester. Following which the memorial window to the late William Bradley was unveiled by Mrs. Musker and Mr Anthony Bradley. The commission for the window was given to Messrs William Bros. of the Kaleyards. The Church was still affiliated to Queen Street and was to remain so until early in 1947

The next event of note came in April 1920, when the opportunity arose to buy the land between the Church and the Wheatsheaf, an area of 900 square yards, costing £113. The deaconate and members agreed to purchase the land through a loan from Parr's Bank and by January 1921, the transfer had been completed, the trustees being Messrs Gray, Hinde, Pearson and Young. In 1928 the first extension of the building took place. The Church had been connected to the main drainage system and it was proposed that adequate toilet facilities be built on to the building. This was made possible by a donation of £100 by Mrs Pearson.

1946 was one of the most important year's in the Church's history, time to make a call for their own Minister and become independent for the first time. The Moderator introduced to the Deacons a Mr E F Gurney who had been a missionary in India. Mr Gurney was invited to preach at Upton in December and subsequently invited to be Minister. A house in Heath Road was bought as the Manse and Mr Gurney settled in Upton in March 1947, where he was to reside for two years.

In May 1947 a building fund was set up, with a view to providing a new Hall on the ground adjoining the Church. Also in the summer, a series of open-air services took place outside the Zoo at Upton, conducted alternatively by Rev. E F Gurney and Rev. Wheldon Williams from the Parish Church. It was at this time that the members saw the departure of their first full-time Minister in October 1949. He was succeeded in July 1950 by the Rev. Donald Robertson. During the interim period the existing Manse, 'Greenfields' in Heath Road, due to the heavy cost of repair, was sold to Mr Gould, one of the Church Deacons.

In September 1955, Mr Robertson moved to Accrington and for next three years the ministry was shared by lay preachers and local Ministers. Rev. H T Donaldson, M.A. of Ward Chapel, Dundee was inducted as Minister on Wednesday, 11th May 1960. Prior to then a house in Mill Lane, Upton - 'Rose Cottage' - was purchased as a Manse with the assistance of a mortgage. During the next three years plans were formulated and approved for the erection of a Church Hall adjoining the Church. A great deal of the money raised was due to the efforts of Mr Donaldson including donations from previous Churches at which he had been Minister and £100 from Upton Parish Church.

Due to ill heath, Mr Donaldson had to retire from the ministry just as plans for the Church Hall reached the 'tender' stage in May 1964. The years he had been at Upton had *"Been happier than any of the other years spent in my fifty years ministry"*.

George Eastwood and Son were awarded the building contract and work on the Hall began in June 1964. This was completed in January 1965, the same month the Rev. J W Barraclough was asked to become minister. On 27th March

1965 the new hall was officially opened, fittingly by Rev. H T Donaldson. The ceremony was attended by the Minister elect and many local Church dignitaries including the Rev. C E Wright who presided, and the Vicar of Upton, the Rev Wheldon Williams who gave the address. A wall plaque commemorating the event and Mr Donaldson's Ministry, was later placed in the New Hall.



Rev. Barraclough in his Upton AA kit c1966

Rev. Barraclough was ordained and inducted as Minister on 8th October 1965. In March 1967, Northgate Congregational Church was closed and many of the congregation joined Upton. In May it was decided to proceed with plans to extend the Church and sanctuary. After consultation with the architect, Mr K W Patterson, plans for enlarging Church and hall were approved by the members.

In July 1968, Rev. Winston Barraclough, decided to give up the ministry to train as a teacher. Rev. D M Mr Buckle B.A. was duly inducted on the 29th November. The year ended with the acceptance of Messrs George Eastwood and Sons tender for the extensions and as 1969 began, members at last saw the work begin. During the demolition of the front of the existing sanctuary, the foundation stone of the building laid in 1900 by the Misses Clarke was removed and a tin box, placed underneath the stone at the foundation ceremony, was found. It contained copies of the local newspapers, the Chester Chronicle and the Cheshire Observer, together with the Church and London Mission Society publications of the day, some of which were still in readable condition.

Along with the extension, the enlarged sanctuary and car park were completed in 1969 so that Upton Congregational Church and its members entered the 1970s very well equipped. In 1970 Rev. Buckle left and the Church saw Rev. S M Thornton inducted in 1971. It was during Rev. Thornton's time that the Congregational Church became part of the United Reformed Church. In 1981 Rev. J H Oldershaw took over the ministry and subsequent ministers have been Rev. A F E Wise 1989 - 1993; Rev. G Thompson 1993 - 1994; and the present day Minister Rev. J Kingsley from 1995.

Meanwhile the Church continues to grow. 2002 saw a new front entrance onto the building; the back hall enlarged; the sanctuary refurbished and front pews were replaced by chairs.

Saint Columba's Church

Saint Columba's was the first Roman Catholic Church in the Diocese of Shrewsbury to be dedicated to Saint Columba, the Irish missionary who sailed to Iona in a coracle.



A modern Scandinavian design ahead of its time

In the early 1960s Canon Murphy, with the help of James Tatton, made arrangements to buy a large site fronting on to Plas Newton Lane. The plot had not been built on before, probably because it was susceptible to flooding, due to being criss-crossed by small streams but modern day drainage soon solved the problem. The site had an interesting history as it had once belonged to the Catholic Church. Originally owned by the Earls of Chester, it was donated to the Abbey of St. Werburgh where it remained until the dissolution of the monasteries when ownership passed to the Dean and Chapter of Chester Cathedral. Eventually the land passed into the hands of the Hurleston family and in 1738 Ann Hurleston married John Needham, Viscount Kilmorey, whose country seat was in Ireland.

Having settled on the site, Canon Murphy chose Messrs L A G Pritchard, Son and Partners as the architects and Costain's as builders. Canon Murphy was given a free hand in decision making by Bishop Graser. The modern Scandinavian style of the New Chapel of Ease was considered ahead of its time,

yet reminiscent of the rotundas in ancient Rome. The 675 worshippers St Columba's is designed to hold, congregate around the Alter in a semi circle, where everyone is within 50 feet of it.

Contractors started in 1963, the foundation stone being laid by Canon Murphy in September 1964 when 200 people attended the ceremony. The foundation stone, inscribed at a cost of £110, bears the Latin inscription

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM
ET IN HONOREM SANCTI COLUMBAE
LAPIDEM HUNC PRIMARIUM SACRAVIT DEDICAVITQUE
ADM REV. D FRANCISCUS CAN. MURPHY
DIE 6A SEPTEMBRIS 1964

Translated it reads

To the greater glory of God
in honour of Saint Columba,
this foundation stone was blessed
by the Reverend Canon Francis Murphy
on 6th September 1964

The estimated cost of the new church was £80,000 and at this ceremony contributions were collected in wheel barrows - and amounted to £62.

In December 1964 the Church Spire (rising to 115 feet) was lowered into position, this was built in one complete section and weighed 6½ tons. The entrance hall situated centrally, together with the old baptistery, supports a timber framed gallery which is occupied by the choir each weekend. The main alter, weighing almost 2 tons, is in Kilkenny and White Perlato Marble. The wooden carving of Saint Columba on the side alter was created in Newry, County Down. One unsatisfactory installation was the underground heating which was totally inadequate. On bitterly cold winter mornings, Father Warnock had been known to mumble *"Too cold for a homily"* and would move on to the Creed to the relief of shivering parishioners. Gas central heating replaced the earlier system at a cost of £13,000.

By the end of 1965 the building was finished and Canon Murphy blessed the new church on Saturday 18th December at a ceremony attended by 200 people and the first mass, which was held the following day, was attended by 600 people. The official opening, in February 1966, was a grand affair. A high Mass took place which was attended by Colonel and Mrs Adrian Howell, Mayor and Mayoress of Chester and M.P. for Chester Mr Temple and Mrs Temple.

The new church was used as a Chapel of Ease for the next two years with masses being said by the priests of St. Werburgh's but marriages, burials and baptisms took place at the Mother Church. As there was no presbytery Canon Murphy bought the house next door, as soon as it became available, number 1 Newhall Road. The site at the side of the church was developed as a car park at a cost of £20,000.

On 8th November 1967 the Bishop appointed Father James Malloy as the first priest of the new parish of Saint Columba in Upton and Plas Newton. In 1971 the duties passed to Father Warnock who looked after the parish until, following illness, he moved to a smaller parish and Saint Columba's passed into the capable hands of Father Lennon in 1983. Father Lennon was ordained in 1959 and celebrated his silver jubilee while at Saint Columba's in 1984.

In the early 1970s there was an obvious need for a church hall, but plans were put on hold until 1978. With the church supplying the materials and the Manpower Services Commission supplying the labour, it became a reality. As no professional builder was involved, a building committee was formed with Charles Houlden as foreman-in-charge. He had nine young workers under his command that became affectionately known as 'Charlie's Angels'. Work was completed on time and the hall was officially opened by Bishop Grasar on 5th July 1978.



Father Lennon

The Church suffered the loss of the stained glass window to the rear of the building. The design, depicting St Columba in the coracle, was set in soft wood which began to rot and the whole structure became loose and dangerous. In 1986 Father Lennon sought estimates to replace the windows but the cost of £100,000 proved too great. For safety reasons the windows were replaced with plain, toughened glass at a cost of £75,000 (almost as much as the building of the Church). However, Father Lennon eventually managed to purchase a new stained glass window for his beloved St. Columba's.

Father Lennon died in September 1997 and at his own request was buried in Ireland. The new priest to be appointed was Father Russell Cooke who moved from St. Saviours, Ellesmere Port in December 1997.

Of the two choirs in the church; the main, adult, choir sings at 9.15 Mass and on special occasions and the junior, folk, choir sings on alternate Sundays at the 11 am Mass and is ably supported by guitars, flutes, recorders and keyboard.

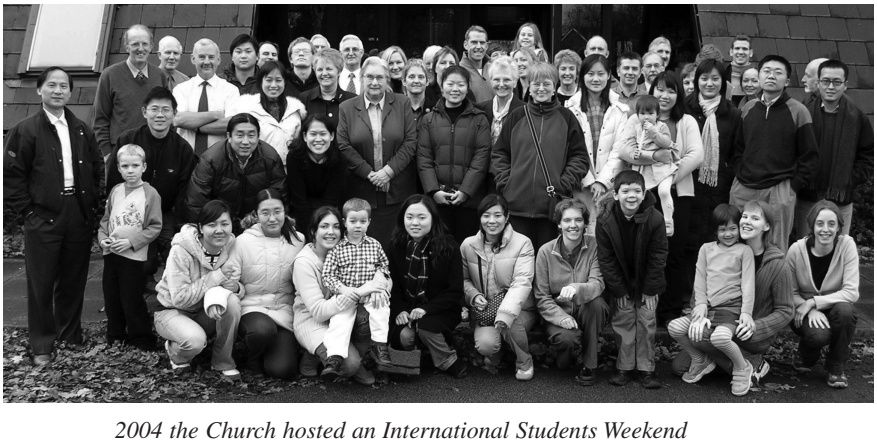
Upton Baptist Church

In the late 1970s the Baptist Church in Grosvenor Park, Chester needed to find a new location due to the extensive road building programme in that area. In September 1979 the Church began a dialogue with Chester Zoo about a plot of land in Flag Lane South in Upton. This plot eventually went for auction later that year and when the Church's bid was put forward, it was accepted.

The Church of about 35 members moved to Upton in September 1980, changing its name to Upton Baptist Church. Meetings were held for some years in Upton Manor (now Upton Heath) Junior School, conveniently adjacent to the building plot, while the old building was sold and the new one designed and built. The building work was carried out in three phases: firstly the base; then the 'A' framework, which was prefabricated in Scandinavia and finally the interior. In the summer of 1987 the work was complete and the first service of worship held in September.

From its roots in 1875 as Chester oldest surviving Baptist Church, they are now in their 3rd building where, in September 2004, they celebrated their 17th anniversary and appointed Jim Waterworth as their new Pastor.





2004 the Church hosted an International Students Weekend