

Triumph over adversity – The Congregational Church’s 200th Anniversary

In these days when most expressions of Christian religious belief are tolerated (or, sadly, ignored) it is easy to forget that for much of our history intolerance and persecution have been the norm.



Congregationalists can date their origin to 1592, though they were most influential when, together with Presbyterians and Baptists, they formed the religious backbone of the country during the civil war and the Commonwealth that followed (1642-59). In 1662, after the Restoration of the Stuarts, Congregational ministers were expelled from their churches and a long period of persecution followed. Congregationalists were banned from universities and public office, and the denomination only survived

through the courage and perseverance of a small number of committed people. One such individual was the remarkable William Vint (1768-1834) who started the Idle Independent Academy from his home near Bradford, and in the course of his life trained nearly 100 students for the ministry. Some of these students preached at Grassington in the homes of sympathisers. They were powerful speakers, and soon local cottages became too small for the size of congregation they attracted.

The present building (now Grade II listed) was constructed by both paid and voluntary labour and was opened on Christmas Day, 1811. The dedication services were conducted by the Revs Parsons and Farmer of Leeds, and William Vint himself. Then, in 1812, the church called its first minister, John Calvert. The burial ground (still the only one in Grassington) was consecrated on 31 January 1814.

Most of the early congregation were weavers, lead miners and agricultural workers – poor people keen to improve themselves. Although one might expect the church to have flourished during the Victorian era, this was not the case. Saddled with a large mortgage debt, the Trustees struggled to make ends meet and church attendance took a dive - first when Linton Mills closed down in the 1840s and second when local lead mining entered its inexorable decline in the 1870s. Indeed, by 1879 there were only four remaining male members! The church survived, however, and the inter-war years saw the community thrive.

These days, the church is blessed with the leadership of a fine minister, Peter Thomas, ably supported by an excellent team of lay persons (deacons). Work with young people is a priority, and Peter also exercises his ministry through the Northern Inter-Schools Christian Union (NISCU). Attendance is increasing, not least because of the church’s emphasis on tolerance, compassion and social action. Everyone is warmly welcomed at the 10.30am Sunday service.

(For further information see the church’s web site <http://www.grassingtonchurch.org>)

Dr E Andrew Wyatt 5.8.11