

# Hebden Bridge Baptist Heritage Trail

Drive through Hebden Bridge on the A464, towards Todmorden. At the turning circle on the left, turn back and then fork left up the hill for Heptonstall. Continue on the main road for Blackshaw Head and Widdop, avoiding the village. At Slack Bottom, veer right, taking the right fork for Widdop, parking up to view Robertshaw Farm (1) opposite the small garden centre and Slack Chapel (2). Continue a mile or so to the National Trust car park on the right. Walk back on the road to Greenwood Lee (3). Then, continue a couple of miles to Blakedean (4) to view the unusual former Baptist Chapel.

Return into Hebden Bridge via the turning circle and take the A6033 Keighley Road. At the entry to Peckett Well, take the sharp right turn, proceeding along the ridge, but not turning up Wainsgate (a private road). At the houses, either turn in sharp left on the track to park on the verge in front of the graveyard, with Wainsgate Chapel (5) ahead, or turn right and park on Old Town Mill Lane and walk back to the chapel.

Leaving Wainsgate, continue on the ridge road through Old Town. After about 3 miles, past the Gold Club and the Mount Skip B&B, take the sharp right down the hill. Proceed with care, noting Higher Needless (6) on the left. Continue down Wadsworth Lane until reaching Birchcliffe (7) on the right. Drop down back into Hebden Bridge.

Leaving the car in a safe parking place, start on foot in the centre of Hebden Bridge at the junction of New Road and Bridge Gate. Walk along West End, crossing Hebden Water and into Market Street. The former Ebenezer Chapel (8) is on the right. Retrace your steps, turning left along Old Gate to the riverside walk. Continue to the old pack horse bridge. Cross the bridge and turn left, past the White Lion pub, before walking round the square into Commercial Street. Proceed along here, passing the long flight of 106 steps which ends the descent via various streets from the Birchcliffe hillside.

At the end of Commercial Street, on the left, is Machpelah (9), John Fawcett's house. Turn right at the main road, crossing Albert Street and Hope Street. Hope Chapel (10) is ahead. The main entrance is on New Road, with a rear entrance on Cheetham Street.

## Places of interest on the trail

### 1. Robertshaw Farm (site of Stone Slack Chapel)

Greater toleration led to the licensing of Mitchell and Crossley's buildings for worship. Two were at Rodhill End in 1703 (off the road to Todmorden) and in 1711 at Stone Slack, where Robertshaw Farm is the original site. Here, in premises dating from at least 1617, Thomas Greenwood of Slater Ings purchased a barn in 1711 and converted it into a meeting place for the Rosshill End/Stone Slack congregation. At first, they were part of the Church of Christ in Rossendale, but in 1717 became independent, worshipping alternatively at both places. This is the first Baptist church in the Calder Valley, witnessing until 1783. Its members came from a wide area and were very influential locally and further afield. It provided the first minister for the new causes at Salendine Nook in Huddersfield, which led to founding many others.

### 2. Heptonstall Slack

A General Baptist Church founded in 1807 by 40 members of Birchcliffe. Until the chapel was completed, the congregation met for a year in the disused Stone Slack building. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had over 500 members and founded several rural causes, including Blake Dean. It closed in 1973 and its purchase by a Baptist minister prevented it becoming a centre for witchcraft. It is now used by an independent congregation and the graveyard is administered by the Yorkshire Baptist Association.

### 3. Greenwood Lee

A preaching station used by William Mitchell and David Crossley, who were Heptonstall cousins. William Mitchell, described as the Father of Baptist causes in this part of the North of England, was born in Heptonstall in 1663. In 1684, he began an itinerant preaching ministry and, as a Dissenter, he was twice arrested and imprisoned in York Castle. He was joined by his cousin David Crossley who was also born in Heptonstall in 1669 and reported to be the largest man in Yorkshire. He had embraced Baptist views and Mitchell also became a Baptist. They set up preaching stations in houses across West Yorkshire and East Lancashire. Some 20 groups, which came together in the Rossendale Confederacy, became Baptist. Mitchell remained in the North, but Crossley was a rolling stone and a somewhat wayward character. His adventures took him to the Midlands and London before returning north. Mitchell died in 1705 and Crossley in 1744.

### 4. Blakedean

At the head of Hardcastle Crag is Blakedean, which was founded by Slack and in use from 1820-1959. Its construction on a hillside gave rise to the local phrase 'downstairs to the gallery and upstairs to the bottom'. For a time, the building was used by the Scouts.

## 5. Wainsgate

A Particular Baptist Church founded in 1750 by converts of Rev William Grimshaw. The first minister, Richard Smith, came from Barnoldswick. On his death, he was succeeded in 1764 by the young John Fawcett, who had been baptised by William Crabtree, minister of Westgate Baptist Church in Bradford and who had himself been a member at Wainsgate. John Fawcett wrote the hymn 'Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love' in 1772. The need for larger premises and better facilities for his school led to his move into Hebden Bridge in 1777. The present building dates from 1859 and it was lavishly furnished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The church closed in 2001 and the premises are in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust. John Fawcett is buried in the graveyard.

## 6. Higher Needless

An independent group were worshipping here when Dan Taylor, a young man born in Halifax, joined in 1762 and became the leader. He had become convinced about the Baptist position, but local ministers would not baptise him because of differing views about salvation. He found a group in Nottinghamshire willing to baptise him and returned to baptise his congregation, which formed the Baptist church. A plaque on the wall records this fact. Needing better premises, the congregation purchased a piece of land along Sandy Gate and built the first Birchcliffe Chapel in 1764.

## 7. Birchcliffe

A General Baptist Church where much of the building work for the original 13 yds x 10 yds chapel was carried out by Dan Taylor. He was minister in 1783 and became a national figure, especially after moving to London, where he died in 1816. Later chapels were built in 1825 and 1898 and the present magnificent building seated 1,000 people. In 1934, a new Sunday School was built using stone from the original chapel. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church was well-known for its musical tradition, the involvement of its members in the civic life of the area and for thriving social and cultural organisation. The church closed in 1974 and the premises were bought by the Joseph Rowntree Trust. Springs on the Birchcliffe hillside supply water to houses in parts of the town. A small part of the gathering area for the water is the burial ground of the chapel – hence the comment; 'Good stuff this Birchcliffe water. Plenty of body in it'. The water was the cause of many local disputes.

## 8. Ebenezer Chapel

The chapel was built in 1777 for John Fawcett on the main turnpike road from Yorkshire to Lancashire when he moved from Wainsgate. The space in front used to be the graveyard. This has shrunk with each widening of the road, but all the gravestones are still under the grass. John Fawcett's daughter's grave is on the right, near the door. Near this, upright against the wall, is that of John Foster the essayist, who had been a pupil at Fawcett's school. Wording on the stones reflects the Calvinist beliefs of the Particular Baptists. One gravestone

is of a Henry Riley murdered in 1818 'because he became poor'. The building served as a chapel until 1858 and has subsequently been the home of the Hebden Bridge Times, an arts centre and antiques shop.

#### 9. Machpelah

John Fawcett ran a school at Bearley Hall and Ewood Hall, where he also lived, before moving to Machpelah in 1805 to be nearer Ebenezer Chapel and leaving running the school to his son. It is a handsome building with a built-up arch on the right reminiscent of a small coach house. Before the houses in the row could be built, large sections of the hillside had to be cut away. They all have back yards and steps climbing up the hill, as well as their own water supply from the hillside. Fawcett named the house after the cave mentioned in Genesis chapter 23, which Abraham bought as a burial ground. Fawcett had a vault built at the rear as a private burial place for his wife, who died in 1810. Her body was later removed and reburied at Wainsgate.

#### 10. Hope Chapel

The need to replace Ebenezer Chapel with a larger building led the congregation to move a few hundred yards to the West and build Hope Chapel, which was opened in 1858. A separate Sunday School building was opened in 1873 across the road on Cheatham Street. In 1879, further seats were added to accommodate the growing congregation. This was sold in 1961 to the West Riding County Council for a library. Inside the chapel is a memorial to John Fawcett and the church has numerous reminders of this heritage, including a members' roll book, in which the first entry is John Fawcett himself. The church continues to meet for worship and to serve the local community.