

Organised religion in Axminster

Introduction

The Church of England parish of Axminster has a parish Church (the Minster Church of St Mary the Virgin) in the town centre, and a smaller affiliated Church (Holy Cross, Woodbury) just outside the town. These are both part of a 'team ministry' which since 1983 has included three further local churches and chapels, in All Saints, Combpyne (St Mary the Virgin) and Chardstock (St Andrew's); and, since 2001, Membury (St John the Baptist).

The town also has a Roman Catholic Church (St Mary's); a United Reform Church; a Methodist Church; an independent Christian Fellowship evangelical congregation (Purzebrook Chapel); and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Most of these churches, together with the Baptist Church in Kilmington and the Quakers of Uplyme, belong to a grouping called 'Axminster Churches Together'.

The Minster Church of Axminster

The Minster Church of Axminster has been in existence since at least AD 789, when it was identified as the burial place of Cynehard the Atheling, heir to the throne of Wessex. The physical fabric of the Church has been re-built, expanded and altered several times since then, not least as a consequence of the damage suffered by the Church when it was besieged during the Civil War, and the related destruction of the town by fire, as described on this website under the heading 'Selected Events from the Town's History'.

Many of these physical changes are documented in James Davidson's 1835 book 'The History of Axminster Church in the County of Devon'. This was re-printed and re-published in 1895 by Edwin Snell of Axminster, with an additional chapter which had been written by Robert Cornish, who also assembled the index to the parish registers which can be found in the Devon Heritage Centre. A copy of Davidson's book is held in Axminster library, as are the 'Notes' assembled by Major W H Wilkin over the period 1932 to 1936¹ in which he adds some additional information about the church and the incumbents which he had found. See also the Church's own website, axminsterminsterchurch.org.uk.

Although the main emphasis of this short account concerns the post-Civil War period, it may be helpful to explain one aspect of the parish of Axminster which is frequently referred to in histories of the town, but which can be quite hard to grasp because of the terminology that is used, which has its roots in Ecclesiastical law, a subject with which few of us are familiar these days.

By the start of the 14th century the right to recommend or appoint a vicar to the parish of Axminster had been granted (by Edward I) to York cathedral, with those rights of recommendation or appointment to be exercised by the Prebendaries of Warhill and Grindal alternately. The vicarage of Axminster had by then already been attached to the Manor of Prestaller (which is in the parish of Axminster, with the farm called Prestaller, which constitutes part of the Manor, and which is located between Beavor Lane and Millbrook, having finally ceased to operate as a commercial farm in about 2014).

¹ Published by Southwood of Exeter. A copy is held in Axminster library.

In this context the term 'vicarage' refers to church endowments and clerical income. As explained at greater length on the Victoria County History website, most churches were endowed with land and tithes when they were first established, to provide the priest with sufficient income for his needs. Where (as in this case) the endowment was granted to a third party, making the grantee in effect an absentee 'corporate rector', the bishop had to ensure that the parish church was properly served by a 'vicar', a word that literally means a substitute for a rector. Part of the church's income (referred to as the 'vicarage') was set aside to support him, while the rest remained with the 'corporate rector', which was said to have 'appropriated' the rectory.

Although vicars only ever received a part of the church's income, that did not on its own make them poor, since some churches, including Axminster's, were well endowed.

From well before the Civil War until the early 20th century, the Lords of the Manor of Axminster were all Catholics, while many of the townspeople were Independents (later Congregationalists) or Methodists. As in many other English parishes, there were changes and dismissals in the years immediately following the Civil War, as scores were settled. There are also gaps in the parish registers around this time, and 'normal service' was not fully restored until about 1660. However, Bartholomew Ashwood, who had been living at Axminster since at least 1657, was the incumbent prior to Thomas Ayshford, who was appointed rector on 13 February 1660², was then ejected from the living under the Act of Conformity on 24 August 1662³. Bartholomew Ashwood had remained in Axminster, where he ministered to the town's original non-conformist congregation (see below for details).

At this time the right to recommend a vicar to the parish of Axminster (see above) was in the gift of the Drake family of Trill and Ashe House, Musbury, and they nominated as Ayshford's replacement Joseph J Crabbe, who took office on 21 November 1662, followed by William Langford on 19 November 1699 and John Pester on 21 September 1731. These three incumbents served as vicars of Axminster for just over 100 years between them.

The next three incumbents were nominated by Joseph Banks: Philobeth Dommatt on 15 July 1765, Benjamin Symes (previously the rector of Musbury) on 20 March 1780, and Charles Steer on 8 June 1782. His incumbency lasted over 50 years: comfortably the longest of any of the post-1660 rectors of Axminster, and extremely unlikely to be matched in future.

On 22 April 1836 the Conybeare family's connections to the Prebendaries of Warthill and Grindal (see above) led to the appointment as vicar of William Daniel Conybeare, the famous geologist and churchman⁴. He was nominated jointly by Charles Rankin of Grays's Inn and William Buckland. Charles Rankin was William Daniel Conybeare's father-in-law, and William Buckland was his friend and fellow geologist, and by then Canon of Christ's Church, Oxford.

² See Major W H Wilkins' 'Notes' for a convincing explanation of what he concludes was a conflation on James Davidson's part regarding Bartholomew Ash and Thomas Ayshford.

³ John Prince (1643 to 1723) was another well-known non-conformist minister, who had been born at Axminster, and ejected from his studies at Oxford before taking up a living. A short biography can be found in the 'People' section of the axminsterheritage.org website, together with that of Ashwood.

⁴ Short biographies of Conybeare, his son and Buckland can be found in the 'People' section of the axminsterheritage.org website.

Anyone interested in a fuller account of how the living of Axminster was controlled at this time, and its links to the income from the manor of Prestaller, is advised to read 'William Daniel Conybeare (1787 to 1857): His family and Axminster'⁵.

William Daniel Conybeare was appointed as Dean of Llandaff (Cardiff) in 1845, but did not move there until 1848, at which point (on 4 August 1848) he was succeeded as vicar of Axminster by his son, William John Conybeare, who was not a fit man, and died young. He was succeeded on 13 January 1855 by Francis Tate, whose appointment was the last in which the Rankin family was involved. His successor was William Bulmer Bailey, who took up the living on 7 September 1867, and was recommended by the last members of the Conybeare family to control the living.

On 21 March 1885 Arthur Newman was appointed by William Brice of Bridgwater. After his 26-year incumbency appointments were controlled directly by the Bishop of Exeter. His first two appointments as vicar were Edward Adams (from 25 October 1911) and Ernest Bramwell (from 19 July 1915). He was succeeded on 24 December 1919 by Frederick Hayne Sanders, and then on 17 March 1953 by Noel Carey Potter. Between the two of them they served Axminster for over 50 years.

John Wilkes Graves Molland then served from 19 September 1971, followed by Frederick Harold Lockyer (21 July 1977), Richard Barry Swift (30 June 1987, and the first Team Minister to be based at Axminster), John Hobart Good (7 March 1995) and John Streeting (7 December 2010). His untimely death on 15 October 2015 has left the living vacant (at the time of writing: August 2016).

The 350 years from the appointment of Joseph J Crabbe (in 1662) saw 20 rectors of Axminster. As well as the book about the Conybeare family referenced above, further factual details about many of the incumbents can be found in Major W H Wilkins' 'Notes' previously referred to.

Axminster churchyard was closed to burials on 1 October 1855, when the cemetery on Chard Road opened.

All Saints

In 1836 Arthur Henry Dyke Acland, whose prominent family owned Killerton House (near Exeter) came to live in Axminster, at Hill House. As recorded in his biography⁶ he took a leading role in gaining permission for, and then funding, the construction of a new church at All Saints, to serve the southern part of Chardstock parish and that part of the hamlet of Smallridge which lay in the parish of Axminster. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Chardstock was at that time part of Dorset, and part of the diocese of Salisbury, whereas Axminster was in Devon and the diocese of Exeter.

The Church was consecrated in 1840, at around the time when Mr Acland moved from Axminster to Dorchester; and celebrated its first baptism that same year. The first incumbent was Rev Theodore A Walrond, who served until 1846. He was succeeded as vicar of All Saints by Rev James Gram Brine, and then (in about 1875) by Rev Charles Woodcock, formerly the vicar of Chardstock, who had been closely involved in the process of establishing All Saints.

⁵ By Christopher Powell (Llandaff, 2008). A copy is in Axminster library.

⁶ See 'A Layman's Life in the Days of the Tractarian Movement: in memoriam Arthur (Acland) Troyte', by John E Acland (James Parker & Co, London, 1904) which can be found on-line.

In the early 1870s a school room, with teacher's residence, was added, with a notional capacity of 128 children⁷.

In 1896 the parish of Chardstock (along with Hawkchurch) was transferred from Dorset to Devon, and the parish of All Saints was created in its own right. From 1840 to 1896, therefore, the civil parish of Chardstock had been served by two churches.

By the early 1900s the vicar was Rev James Hugh Pearson, followed by Rev Allen Wilfrid Bull. The parish registers for All Saints are accessible on-line via the Chardstockwebmuseum.org website, which also provides a large selection of transcriptions from local newspapers, some of which touch on the establishment of All Saints Church.

Holy Cross Church, Woodbury

In 1883 Holy Cross Church was established to the south of Axminster but well within the parish, on Woodbury Lane. It was built on land donated by Lady Emma Tulloch of Old Park, and largely funded by her as well. It was sited next door to the National School for which she had also given the necessary land a few years before.

The first non-Established Church and Chapel

In 1698 an Independent (Presbyterian) Church was set up in Axminster. This was the fore-runner of the town's Congregational Church (see below). It was not, however, the first building erected by local dissenters: there had been a congregation of Baptists at Kilmington by the middle of the 17th century, but following a period of extended persecution they built a remote meeting house at Loughwood, on the Dalwood side of the boundary between Kilmington and Dalwood parishes. It is not known precisely when it was built, but its existence was recorded in 1653⁸. Being in Dalwood parish, the meeting house was physically located in the county of Dorset, and under the ecclesiastical oversight of the diocese of far-away Salisbury. The Loughwood Meeting House is now run by the National Trust.

Other dissenters, and Catholics, generally met and worshiped in private houses at this time.

Axminster Congregational Church

The 'Axminster Ecclesiastica' was written by an unknown author, starting in 1687, with the specific objective of recording the early history of non-conformist worship in and around Axminster. It covers the period from 1660 to the building of the town's first independent Church in 1698. In 1874 the manuscript of 'Axminster Ecclesiastica' was transcribed and published, but the original was lost. It was re-published in 1976, and an explanatory article by K W H Howard can be found on the Gospel Tidings website, from which the following information has been distilled.

In 1660, when Charles II was restored to the throne of England and Scotland following the demise of the Commonwealth government, the vicar of the Minster Church of Axminster was Bartholomew Ashwood⁹. The Act of Uniformity required every ordained minister to accept the 1662 Book of Common Prayer or be ejected from his living, and Ashwood, along with

⁷ Source: 'The Book of the Axe' by George P R Pulman, 4th edition (1875), page 571, re-published in 1969 by Kingsmead Reprints of Bath. This contains several further details about the church which are not reproduced here.

⁸ Inside the meeting house is a copy of an article, written in 1930, which provides this information.

⁹ A short pen portrait of him can be found in the 'People' section of the axminsterheritage.org website.

many hundreds of other dissenting ministers, had already been arrested and sent to Exeter gaol by then, following his replacement as rector of the Minster by Thomas Ayshford.

In response to these events a dozen or so members of his former congregation, and their families, had decided to form a new, independent church, which Ashwood was duly chosen to lead in 1662. The congregation also appointed two elders to assist their pastor in spiritual matters, and two deacons to care for material and practical matters. At first they met "... *in houses and woods, barns, and obscure and solitary places*". In doing so they broke the laws which banned worship outside the parish church, and prohibited ejected ministers from preaching within 5 miles of their former churches. When the authorities got wind of the meetings, they would send soldiers to disperse them. Some members of the congregation were arrested and prosecuted.

In 1672 Charles II issued a 'Declaration of Indulgence' allowing worship outside parish churches, under licence. His main object was to make life easier for Roman Catholics, but many non-conformists, including the congregation at Axminster, secured licences for both meeting houses and preachers. In the case of Axminster, Bartholomew Ashwood was allowed to preach in a room at Weycroft manor. Although these licences were revoked by Parliament the following year and recalled altogether 2 years later, for 10 years the congregation worshipped at Weycroft, with varying degrees of liberty and regularity. Bartholomew Ashwood died in 1680 (sources differ as to the actual year, with the Axminster Ecclesiastica preferring 1678). In the immediate aftermath of his death the elders, Thomas Lane and James Hawker took charge, until a new pastor was appointed, in 1679. He was Stephen Towgood, whose father had been ejected from the rectorship of Semly in Wiltshire.

In 1681 the church had to leave Weycroft when the law was more rigidly enforced, and could not return for 5 years. In the interim they met in secret, sometimes in the open air. In 1685 Stephen Towgood, one of the elders from the Axminster congregation and at least six other members of the congregation joined Monmouth's rebellion as his forces moved through Axminster, in the hope of winning freedom of assembly and worship for non-conformists. Although their hopes were brutally crushed at Sedgemoor, both the pastor and the elder returned safely to Axminster, though others were not so fortunate.

After William and Mary of Orange took the throne the 1689 Act of Toleration was passed, bringing some relief to non-conformists by allowing them to worship freely, provided it was not behind locked doors, and provided their places of worship were registered as such by the bishop of the diocese. The Axminster congregation took their opportunity to build a Congregational Church of their own in the town, with building work starting in 1698.

The original structure was located adjacent to Chard Street, behind what is now the United Reform Church Hall. The original church building (now demolished) was used as a school for some time after the present Church was built next door in 1826, some 5 years before the Congregational Union of England & Wales was formed (in 1831).

Rev Stephen Towgood, the minister at the time of construction, died in 1722. According to 'The Book of the Axe'¹⁰ his three successors were Rev John Stucley (until 1737), Rev Jonathan Wheeler (until 1770) and Rev F G Stephens of Furzeleigh (until 1785).

From 1786 until his death on 22 January 1834¹¹ the minister was Rev James Small, whose second wife, by whom he had two daughters (both of whom died in childhood), was Sarah

¹⁰ Source: Page 683. See an earlier footnote for details of the source book.

¹¹ Source: Obituary of the Rev James Small, accessible on-line via the 'Evangelical Magazine & Missionary Chronicle', Vol.12 pages 265 to 269.

Whitty, daughter of Thomas Whitty, the carpet maker. Rev Small also presided over the Western Academy, where training was given to preachers destined to serve in Churches throughout the South West, and to missionaries.

The Western Academy started life in Ottery St Mary (from 1752 to 1765) before moving to Bridport and then Taunton (where Rev Small (see above) was trained), before it came to Axminster in 1796. It was housed in a building on West Street, close to the junction with Church Street (and marked by a blue plaque). Between 1796 and 1827 James Small oversaw the training there of a total of 54 students. After his retirement, the Western Academy moved to Exeter until it finally closed in 1845.

'The Book of the Axe' and selected local directories between them name Rev Small's successors as Independent ministers at Axminster as Rev G Hunter (until 1840), Rev Alfred John Jupp (until 1846), Rev Richard Penman (until 1850), Rev James Read (until 1853), Rev John Bishop, who lived at Willhays cottage (until 1862), Rev Samuel J Le Blond (until 1867), Rev William Lance of Battleford, Smallridge (until 1873).

Local directories show that by 1878 the incumbent was Rev Ephraim Henry Perkins, who remained a relatively long time, and was succeeded by Rev James Perkins (by 1889). By 1893 the Minister was Rev John Clement Angel, the first Minister to be described as a Congregationalist rather than a simple Independent; followed by Rev Herbert Watts (by 1902), and then by Rev Francis Bullen Wyatt (by 1906), who remained until at least 1919. He was succeeded by Rev Henry Cheney (by 1923); Rev George Saunders (by 1926); Rev N F W McPherson (by 1935); and Rev E D Hughes.

In 1972 the Congregational Church of England & Wales merged with the Presbyterian Church of England & Wales to establish the United Reform Church (a similar proposal for a merger having been rejected in 1945).

A relatively small number of graves can be found in the churchyard.

Axminster Methodist Church

Methodism began as an evangelical movement within the Church of England. It was founded in 1738 by John Wesley, an ordained priest within the Church of England, and did not become a church in its own right until 1795, 4 years after Wesley's death. Nevertheless, prior to this it had its own meeting rooms where members would worship (typically attending Church on a Sunday morning, and Chapel in the afternoon).

Methodists displayed a talent for schism, and there were soon several variants on Methodism (namely the Methodist New Connection from 1797, the Independent Methodists from 1806, the Primitive Methodists from 1811, and the Bible Christians from 1831. Most of these branches were re-united into the modern Methodist Church in 1907). Methodists in Axminster were strongly influenced by John Wesley himself, and generally described themselves as Wesleyan Methodists.

Much of what follows is drawn from (1) 'John Wesley in Devon, 1739 to 1789, Extracts from the Journals of John Wesley relating to his travels throughout Devon'¹²; and (2) 'The Mighty Oak: The story of the Devon and Dorset Mission'¹³.

There was a small Methodist society (or at least a small group sympathetic to Wesley's evangelical approach) at Axminster by the 1740s, reportedly originally established by an ex-

¹² By Michael Wickes (1985). A copy is available in Axminster library.

¹³ Compiled in typescript by James H Temple (1974). A copy is available in Axminster library.

soldier called Payne who retired to Axminster, where he rented a small room for prayer and exhortation. His details have not been confirmed, but a man called William Payne was buried at Axminster on 18 September 1761.

Axminster was the second town in Devon (after Exeter) at which John Wesley preached at the specific invitation of a local congregation. The date was 23 September 1743, and he was on his way back to Bristol from a tour of parts of Cornwall. After an overnight stop in Exeter, where he preached twice, his journal says "*We went by Axminster, at the request of a few there that feared God, and had joined themselves together some years since. I exhorted them so to seek the power as not to despise the form of godliness; and then rode on to Taunton ...*". John Wesley was 40 by this time, and at the height of his powers. He again passed through Axminster around noon on 31 April 1744 where he "*... spent an hour with a little company ...*".

On 10 June 1746 John's younger brother Charles stayed overnight at Axminster, and the next morning he preached to a large crowd (estimated in his journal at over 1,000 well-behaved people) at Axminster on what is described as the bowling green.

In 1748 Methodism was organised into nine societies, with Axminster falling under the aegis of the Western Society.

It was 20 years later, on 30 August 1766, that John Wesley next came to Axminster, on his way towards Plymouth, which was by then an important focus for his followers. His journal records that he and his party got "*... thoroughly wet before we came thither. The rain obliged me to preach within at six; but at seven on Sunday morning I cried in the market-place, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel' (Matthew 3:2)*".

Two years later, on 22 September 1768, he was again prevented from preaching out of doors at Axminster by rain, with the result that "*... the room would ill contain the congregation. Observing many there who seemed quite unawakened, I opened and strongly applied Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. Lord, 'breathe upon these slain, that they may live' (Ezekiel 37:9)*".

On 4 August 1776, having preached at Ottery St Mary to a large and respectful crowd, John Wesley came to Axminster for the last time. "*At five, I preached in the market-place at Axminster to a still larger congregation. I have seldom heard people speak with more honesty and simplicity than many did at the lovefeast¹⁴ which followed. I have not seen a more unpolished people than these; but love supplies¹⁵ all defects. It supplies all the essentials of good breeding, without the help of a dancing-master.*"

In 1778 there were apparently 40 members in the town's Methodist society, and a Wesleyan chapel was built at the southern end of South Street, possibly in 1787, but this later burned down. It was replaced in 1796 by a chapel in a building which at that time adjoined the Market Place, but which is now accessed from Castle Street. In 1795 the trustees of the chapel included Joseph Hawkins, an Axminster watch maker, and other worthies from Uplyme, Chardstock, Chard, Cullompton, Taunton and Ashill. The chapel was attached to the South Petherton circuit.

¹⁴ The Wesleyan 'lovefeast' or 'agape' was a revival of early Christian practice. These meetings usually took place in the evenings and were open to Society members only, which led to a widespread suspicion among the general public that the lovefeasts were an excuse for sexual immorality.

¹⁵ In this context 'supplies' means 'compensates for'.

In 1813 a Methodist 'circuit' centred on Axminster was formed, and the ministers at that time were Alexander Weir (superintendent), John Smith (junior minister) and John Crumpton (missioner). The Axminster circuit included chapels at Smallridge and Bridport, and societies at Uplyme, Morcombelake, Burton Bradstock and Uploders.

Mark Daniell, a Wesleyan Minister, was buried at Axminster (at the Minster Church) on 21 February 1821, aged 55.

By 1831 there were 35 members in Axminster itself (plus 80 in Bridport, 43 in Lyme Regis and smaller numbers at several other centres, including 12 at Smallridge).

At the time of the 1851 census John Collier, a Wesleyan Minister, was living in Market Place, and was probably attached to the local chapel. Local trade directories show that in 1856 the Methodist Minister in Axminster was Rev Alfred Newton, followed a year later by Rev W Pepparell. In 1866 the Minister was Rev George W Maugham, and in 1870 it was Rev John Lamplough. After a gap when no Methodist was listed, but in 1889 the directory names Rev Isaac Rogers, James Duthie and John T Hamly; followed (in 1893) by Rev M Riggall, G M C Fish and Rev J H Maddock.

The present Axminster Methodist Church on Lyme Road was opened in 1894, and in 1902 the Minister was listed as Rev Frank Senior.

After this most of the Ministers named in the directories as responsible for Axminster are shown as being based at Budleigh Salterton. This was the case with Rev John James Brown (1906); Rev Arthur J Pickworth (1910); Rev Edward J Brailsford and Rev W I Bennett (1914); and Rev W H Burden (1919, which also names W G C Elliott of Lyme Regis). In 1923 the pastor resident at Axminster was Edward Aubrey Jackson under the oversight of Rev James Penrose Hodgson of Budleigh Salterton. Rev Hodgson was again listed in 1926, together with William A Edwards as the pastor at Axminster. In 1929 the superintendent at Budleigh was Rev Albert N Walton, and the local pastor was Rev Robert William Houlton of Lyme Regis. In 1935 Rev H Allen Riggall was providing oversight from Budleigh, supported by Rev G Abbott, based at Dalwood.

The Methodist Chapel in Smallridge closed in 2002.

Axminster Catholic Church

A report in 'The Tablet', a Catholic newspaper, dated 30 September 1916¹⁶, tells the story of the early history of the post-Reformation Catholic community in Axminster. The occasion of that report was the re-consecration of St Mary's Church, Axminster following a full-scale restoration. St Mary's falls under the diocese of Plymouth.

Mr William Henry Barns Knight, by then the Lord of the Manor of Axminster, spoke about the origins of the Church in Axminster. In 1763 his ancestor John Knight had moved to Axminster from Cannington, near Bridgwater, bringing a Catholic priest, Rev William Sutton, with him. The Knights soon settled at Hilary House, Axminster, where they established a chapel which served all the Catholics of the neighbourhood, including Lyme Regis, until 1831, when the original Lyme Road church was built.

Rev William Sutton lived with the Knight family at Hilary House for the last 32 years of his life, having been with them for over 50 years in all. During his residence at Axminster Father Sutton served once a month at Exeter, which at that time did not have a resident pastor. On his visits to Exeter, Father Sutton was in the habit of taking up his quarters at The Bear Inn,

¹⁶ This can be found on-line.

South Street (the site of the present Church of the Sacred Heart), kept by a Catholic of the name of Searle. Father Sutton died at Hilary House on 23 January 1800, and is buried on the north side of the parish churchyard.

After several other short-lived appointments, Father Henry Riley was appointed to Axminster in August 1828, and was the resident priest when the church was built and opened on the present site on 15 August 1831. The church was almost entirely paid for by the Knight family, with the foundation stone having been laid by Henry Knight in 1828.

The Rev Henry Norrington came to Axminster in 1837. He was described by Mr Knight (in 1916) as a great scholar, who had travelled much in the East, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Arabia. He was a very learned man, and Axminster was his only mission. He died on 8 December 1848 at Terrace Lodge, by then the residence of Henry Knight, where he had lived as one of the family. He was buried at SS. Michael and George, Lyme Regis. After several other appointments (including Rev P Kelly who was recorded in 1850, and Rev Thomas Lynch who was in Axminster from 1852 to 1856) the living passed in 1856 to Canon John Toohey, who lived for over 40 years with the Knights.

The present (and larger) church was built on the original site during his pastorate, and opened on Ascension Day, 29 May 1862. Canon Toohey died in 1898 and was succeeded by Rev Michael L O'Reilly, who was still at Axminster in 1914, but later moved to the mission at Poole.

Local directories name subsequent Catholic priests to have served at Axminster as including Very Rev Mgr Canon Charles Edward Gandy (from the end of World War I, possibly earlier, until the mid-1930s), then Very Rev Provost M J Burns, then by the outbreak of World War II Very Rev Canon John Lee.

For at least 25 years from about 1900 there was a small community of Catholic nuns living at the Convent of the Sisters of Charity of St Paul on Lyme Road, very near the church. They played a role in the running of the Catholic primary school which had been built in 1862.

There are some graves adjacent to the church.

The difficulties faced by local Catholics as late as the 1820s (i.e. prior to the building of the church on Lyme Road, Axminster) can be seen from a 'memorandum' inserted into the (Anglican) Parish Church register in 1821¹⁷ which says "*Births of the children of John Taunton by Sarah his wife (born Sarah Saunders, spinster) both parents being Papists*" and then lists five children born between 1806 and 1821. Right at the beginning of the register is a further note which says "*At page the 82nd there is a memorandum stating the births of the children of the late John Taunton Esq, which was given to me by Mr C A Helme and which I believe to be correct.*"

The Plymouth Brethren, and Axminster Gospel Hall

There was a Plymouth Brethren chapel on Chard Street in 1873 (it is recorded in a directory covering that year).

¹⁷ This 'memorandum' is written on an otherwise blank double-page spread in the middle of the baptisms for 1821, with the writing running at right angles to the normal page lay-out. This style was presumably adopted to avoid any doubt that the content of the memorandum should not be confused with regular Church records, and to show that it represented a one-off record made for unusual reasons, which were probably to do with the formalities of proving a will, or similar, in the absence of other 'acceptable' evidence.

Although no further explicit mention of the Plymouth Brethren has been found, in 1880 it was reported¹⁸ that a new hall “... *seating upwards of 400 persons*” had been built at the top of Castle Hill by Mr Heal (almost certainly a reference to George Heal, who ran the Green Dragon inn and the foundry, both at the foot of the hill, and owned other properties on Castle Hill). This is then referred to in an 1883 directory more specifically as the Gospel Hall, and regularly recorded until 1910 (though Kelly’s directory of 1902 gives the seating capacity as 200 rather than 400). By 1914 it was listed as being on South Street, but this may be an error, because from 1919 to 1935 it was recorded as being on the adjacent Combe Road. By 1939 it had moved again, to Musbury Road, and it is now known as Purzebrook Chapel. None of the directories identify a named person in connection with the Gospel Hall.

¹⁸ Source: Bridport News, 21 May 1880.