

THE 18th CENTURY



John Wesley

John Wesley (1703-91) is generally considered to be the founder of Methodism. He was ably supported by his brother Charles (1707-88), the celebrated hymn writer, who enabled early Methodists to sing their faith. The preface to the 1933 hymnbook rightly declared that Methodism was born in song. Yet the vital contribution of George Whitefield (1714-70) to the Evangelical Revival cannot be overlooked.

Born in Epworth in Lincolnshire, the fifteenth child of the Rev Samuel Wesley and the remarkable Mrs Susanna Wesley, John in childhood narrowly survived a fire at his father's rectory. After graduating from Oxford, he was ordained into the Anglican priesthood and returned to the university as a fellow of Lincoln College. The Wesley brothers belonged to the Holy Club which met in Oxford from 1729 until 1735. Members regularly fasted, took weekly communion, abstained from luxury and frivolous amusement, and visited prisoners as well as the sick and poor. Strict habits earned them the nickname 'Methodists'. Whitefield was also a member of the Club.

Aldersgate Street



Charles Wesley

In 1735 the Wesleys set sail for America as Anglican missionaries, Charles having also been recently ordained. The most notable consequence of John's stay in Georgia was that he developed an affinity with the Moravians, admiring their calm fortitude on a hazardous Atlantic crossing. Originating in the fourteenth century in the present day Czech Republic, the Moravian Church had established a base at Herrnhut in eastern Germany in 1722.

John Wesley found little joy or success in ministering to the new colonials in Georgia. Returning to London in 1738 disappointed and lacking conviction, he attended a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate Street where his heart was 'strangely warmed'. Wesley became firmly convinced that salvation was available to all through faith in Jesus Christ. After helping to organise a society in Fetter Lane, he parted company with the Moravians late in 1739 following his success in open-air preaching earlier in the year. Subsequently he initiated the first Methodist meeting house in a disused iron foundry in Moorfields.

George Whitefield



George Whitefield

Like the Wesley brothers, George Whitefield was an Anglican clergyman, and like them he found many pulpits barred to him because of his evangelistic preaching. A fine orator with a powerful voice and theatrical flair, he decided to preach outdoors to coalminers in the notorious area of Kingswood near Bristol.

The results were so spectacular that in April 1739 he urged Wesley to join him. To a high churchman, field preaching was almost a sin. 'Consenting to become more vile', Wesley overcame his instinctive aversion for the sake of saving souls. The stage was set for his life's mission.

The Countess of Huntingdon



Countess of Huntingdon

An early attender at the London meetings was Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-91). Born in Staunton Harold the daughter of Earl Ferrers, she married the ninth Earl of Huntingdon. His Leicestershire family had former royal connections, taking their seat in the castle at Ashby-de-la-Zouch after the Wars of the Roses. A lady of great piety and substantial wealth, she became a pivotal figure in the religious revival of the eighteenth century, founding 64 chapels and spending an estimated £100,000 (a vast sum in those days) on religious causes in her lifetime. George Whitefield was appointed her personal chaplain. Encountering disapproval within the Church of England, she set up the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion. Twenty-three chapels survive, one being in Herbert Street, Loughborough.

Walter Sellon

Another Anglican clergyman, Walter Sellon (1715-92) was of Huguenot descent and before ordination had been a baker and lay preacher. Initially opposed to the Methodist movement, he changed his mind after meeting Wesley in 1745 – the year in which Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, marched south as far as Derby in an ill-fated bid for the English throne.

Sellon was a considerable scholar and later wrote extensively in support of Wesley's theological position. A Methodist school had been founded at Kingswood for the sons of travelling preachers, and Sellon taught there for three years from 1748. Later he held curacies at Breedon on the Hill, Smisby and Long Whatton, no doubt under the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon. But in 1779, when Vicar of Clerkenwell, Sellon took successful action in the Bishop of London's Consistory Court against two appointees of the Countess. They were based at a huge chapel which she had acquired in Spa Fields. Thereafter her 'chaplains' had to desert her or be registered as dissenters.

Methodism comes to Sheepshed



Breedon Church

In 1757 a party of friends walked seven miles from Sheepshed to Breedon to hear Walter Sellon preach. The group is thought to have included George Hewitt, Thomas Hucknall and Jane Sarson.

Much impressed they asked for a Methodist preacher to be sent to Sheepshed, and in due course John Brandon, a local preacher from Ashby-de-la-Zouch, arrived to preach at Hewitt's house. However, intimidated by threats of violence, Hewitt had fled taking his belongings with him.

A riot ensued, and Brandon and Hucknall prayed together in a barn where they had taken refuge. Their prayers were answered when Robert Bentley allowed them to preach in his croft. An aggressive parish official who tried to interrupt was tossed unceremoniously into the briars! On another occasion Methodist preacher the Rev W Danby was pelted with mud. Despite unpromising beginnings and continuing harassment the cause took root, and in 1760 a society class of six members was meeting regularly. By 1805 the number had risen to 45.

Revolution

To-day it is hard to understand the fierce hostility which early Methodism sometimes provoked. The Church of England of the time frowned on revivalism, viewing 'enthusiastic' evangelistic preaching with suspicion and open-air gatherings with disdain. Methodists were charged with fanaticism, provoking mass hysteria among simple folk and threatening the *status quo* by raising expectations among the lower orders. Worse, with Jacobite tensions simmering, Methodists were seen as a potential vehicle for Catholicism.

Some saw the evangelists as killjoys, challenging popular excesses and disreputable pleasures, while magistrates disliked any activity with the potential for civil unrest. Revolutionary it certainly was, yet for many it offered personal salvation and an assurance of dignity and worth. Some commentators believe that Methodism's spiritual revolution saved England from the horrors of political upheaval, like those shortly to erupt in France.

A Spreading Flame



*Wesley Statue
New Room, Bristol*

Only 5'6" in height and slightly built, Wesley was in all other respects a towering figure. Though not quite the equal of Whitefield in oratory, he had learning, energy and commitment in abundance. Neat in appearance and with a bright, piercing gaze, he possessed a keen intellect and ready wit. Declaring the world his parish, he rode astonishing distances on horseback for many years, preaching several times daily as he went.

Often crowds of thousands gathered to hear him, and he was as little deterred by mob violence as by the disapproval of the Establishment. Displaying a remarkable organisational talent, he structured his societies to ensure their cohesion and survival. A driven man, he would not allow even his most cherished beliefs to obstruct the overriding imperative of bringing salvation to those in need.

Autocratic yet still plagued by self-doubt, at the age of 63 he wrote to Charles "I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed, in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen... And yet to be so employed of God!"

Doctrine



*Jakob Arminius
1560-1609*

John Wesley established a distinctive theological stance. He distanced himself from the 'quietude' of the Moravians who were content passively to await the divine initiative. In addition he disagreed with George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon who inclined to the doctrinal view of the Frenchman Jean Calvin.

This implied predestination, believing that salvation was at the behest of God alone, and only for those divinely selected. Instead Wesley shared the belief in freewill of the Dutch theologian Arminius: salvation was offered to all by God but it required individual human acceptance.

And so Wesley's theology characteristically combined personal piety with social engagement. This had been in evidence from the earliest days of the Holy Club in Oxford where he had concerned himself with nutrition, employment and debt relief. Now his interests extended to literacy and healthcare. He was passionately opposed to slavery, unlike many of his fellow churchmen. Slave labour was a feature of the overseas estates of the Countess of Huntingdon, and even Whitefield later owned slaves in America.

A New Church

In 1791 John Wesley died, exclaiming 'The best of all is, God is with us!' 135,000 Methodists and 541 preachers were a part of his legacy. He was laid to rest in City Road, London near his former home and beside an elegant chapel bearing his name. Neat but not fine, he described it.



Wesley's Chapel in London c1820

Until that time Methodism had been a movement within the Church of England. It is likely that most Methodists were Anglican despite the habitual disapproval of the parent body, and the Wesley brothers remained Anglican clergymen until their deaths. In fact the attitude of the Established Church softened in Wesley's latter years, and he was posthumously accorded a tablet in Westminster Abbey. But much to the dismay of his brother Charles, he had broken the rules.

Though privately scorning the doctrine of apostolic succession whereby ordination could be validated only by a bishop, Wesley had acquiesced for many years in the interest of church order. However, in 1784 after the refusal of the Bishop of London to ordain Methodist preachers, Wesley himself ordained Dr Thomas Coke to serve as his superintendent in America. He also ordained other ministers destined for posts outside England.

Wesley never intended to found a separate church, but increasingly he recognised that Methodism would be unable to function effectively within the Anglican Communion. Shortly after Wesley's death the rift became inevitable and a new church was born. Its growth would be dramatic.

THE 19th CENTURY



Queen Victoria

For newly autonomous Methodists the 19th century was a time of spectacular growth at home and abroad. During the reign of Queen Victoria the British Empire spread across the globe, and Methodism spread with it and beyond. Missionaries carried the word to distant lands and inhospitable climes, often at the cost of their lives.

But it was also a period of fragmentation. After the death of Wesley, the unity of Methodism was short lived. Numerous Methodist denominations emerged, and their redundant chapels are still visible to-day all over the country. In retrospect it seems like an excess of zeal. The original church styled itself 'Wesleyan Methodist' to distinguish itself from later offshoots from the parent body.

Why Divisions?

The passing of John Wesley created a power vacuum. Methodism was generally low church despite the high church inclinations of John and Charles Wesley with their love of Anglican liturgy and tradition. Popular elements which had previously been kept in check now came to the fore. At the same time the new leadership, conscious that Methodism was no longer a part of the Church of England, felt the need for greater discipline in order to define the stance of the new church.



Hugh Bourne

There were political considerations too. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the British Establishment was fearful of rebellion in this country also. Anxious to avoid repression, the Methodist leadership was keen to emphasise its loyalty to the Crown. It discouraged the fervour of camp meetings and expelled from membership any who appeared to act without due restraint. Two local preachers so expelled were Hugh Bourne, a former wheelwright, in 1808 and William Clowes, a potter, in 1810.

Wesleyan membership suffered in the Midlands and Yorkshire. The town of Loughborough lost over 100 members and the surrounding villages more than 200, though there is no evidence of any great loss in Sheepshed.

For many ordinary Methodists, official Wesleyan support for the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 was more than a step too far. The leadership was out of touch.

Primitive Methodists



William Clowes

Of the various breakaway groups from the parent church, Primitive Methodists were the largest and the most relevant to the subsequent history of Sheepshed. Charismatic evangelists Bourne and Clowes led an open air camp meeting at Mow Cop near Stoke on Trent in 1807, so beginning the Primitive revival of which the bicentenary has been widely celebrated this year. The 'Prims' took their cue from the field preaching of early Methodism and based their title on a statement made by John Wesley in 1790: 'I still remain a primitive Methodist'.

The first Primitive chapel was built in Tunstall in 1811. By 1842 the movement had nearly 80,000 members, 500 travelling preachers and more than 1200 chapels. In 1875 national membership had risen to 165,410. Unlike Wesleyans, the 'Prims' encouraged women

evangelists, and later provided many trades union leaders. John Skevington, a Loughborough preacher, strongly supported the Chartist movement and went to gaol when the Bill was overthrown in 1841.

Differences

Wesleyans and Primitives worked within similar overall structures, but the 'Prims' were on the whole more democratic and decentralised. Initially the laity had considerable power and freedom. Wesleyan congregations, often comprising artisans and the lower middle class, tended to respectability. Their sermons frequently aspired to literary allusions and high-flown rhetoric.

The 'Prims' by contrast numbered mill workers, miners, farm labourers, servants and framework knitters in their following. Their preachers, often ill-educated, plainly dressed and poorly paid, had a more direct approach. They kept a visible profile, identified with popular culture and had an exuberant preaching style, earning them the nickname 'Ranters'.

These are of course generalised comments – for example, there were plenty of poor Wesleyans. Perhaps the better-off Wesleyans dominated more by influence than by number. At all events, relations between the two Methodist churches were more cordial by the middle of the century.

This chapter will now need to be sub-divided to take account of Methodism in 19th century Sheepshed.

WESLEYANS IN SHEEPSHED

As already stated, there were 45 Methodist members in the village in 1805 led by Mr Hanforth. Meeting initially in members' homes, they probably later assembled in crofts and rented rooms. Their first known meeting house was in Church Street, situated on the right near the top of the hill. In 1842 the Wesleyans (as they were now called) built a new chapel in Hall Croft, selling their former place of worship to Fr Gentili for use as a Catholic school.



The Catholic School c1896

Fr Gentili, an Italian priest, had recently arrived in Sheepshed at the invitation of Ambrose, son of the Squire of Garendon. Distinguished visitors to the school later included William Gladstone, Stanley Baldwin and architect Augustus Pugin. The house now occupying the site bears the name *Antigone*, recalling the title of Sophocles' drama, once performed

there. The school remained in the former Methodist building until moving to Britannia Street around the turn of the century on the initiative of Canon Aloysius Martens.

Hall Croft Chapel

The front of the new chapel was close to the present entrance of the Co-op Superstore. The building lay parallel to the road behind a cottage, and the approach from Hall Croft was up a sloping path. Poorly lit steps led into the chapel, which had a small gallery in addition to seating on the ground floor. Heating was provided by a central stove venting through the roof via a long pipe. Later the rear of the chapel would be visible from the playground of the Council School.

Soon the building proved inadequate for expanding needs, and the search began for a new site. When the Wesleyans finally vacated the premises in 1878, the chapel was bought by the British School Trust who initially hoped that it would form the basis of the proposed new school. In the event it was let to the Young Men's Institute and later sold for £160 to the Loughborough United Methodist Free Churches in Sparrow Hill, who held services in the Hall Croft chapel for several years. The premises were eventually acquired in 1922 by the Shepshed Club & Institute Ltd (a men's social club) and were thereafter known as 'The Institute' or 'The Stute'. Demolition finally took place in the 1960s.

Land in Field Street

Land on the south side of Field Street was formerly known as Charnwood Fields. In 1835 the area now occupied by Christchurch and the erstwhile HSBC Bank belonged to Thomas Cotton, a farmer living in Pipe House, Ashby Road. The bank portion of the site comprised two shops fronting Field Street with a cottage at the rear built at right angles to the road. Ownership passed to James Hall, a grocer trading in one of the shops. In 1874 Mark Cashmore, a draper and assistant overseer of the parish poor, acquired the whole site for £800 subject to a mortgage of £400. Cashmore was also a Wesleyan trustee, and he promptly sold to his fellow Methodists for £250 sufficient land on which to erect a chapel and school rooms. The following year he sold them a further small triangle of land for £40 to enlarge the access from Field Street.

The venture was a circuit affair, and only six of the fifteen trustees were from Shepshed. Besides Mark Cashmore, these were John Parker (hosier), William Roberts (farmer), Henry Lakin (grocer, whose shop in Queen Street was later run by his granddaughter Jemima Bexon), John Ball (another grocer, trading in the shop afterwards owned by Daniel Blood & Son), and George Hudson (labourer). The superintendent minister was the Rev John Smith Vickers.

Unfortunately Cashmore failed to keep up payments on his mortgage, and Henry Lakin came to the rescue by taking over the debt and settling outstanding interest. But Mark Cashmore made no repayments to Henry Lakin either, and in 1877 Lakin sold the area of the site not owned by the chapel to a tailor, Charles Foston, for £584. Whether any of the profit was shared with the overseer of the poor is not known, but the Cashmore family shortly afterwards emigrated to Hartford, Connecticut.

Field Street Chapel

Undeterred by these events, the Wesleyans proceeded to build an imposing new chapel in Field Street, but not before bricks had been delivered to a site in Kirkhill by mistake. Costing £1800 in total, the building was intended to incorporate a gallery at a later date similar to that of the circuit chapel in Leicester Road, Loughborough. In the event this never materialised. The chapel opened for worship in 1878 when members marched in

procession from their former location in Hall Croft. School rooms on two floors were added at the rear in 1884.



Field Street Wesleyan Chapel

Fifteen commemorative stones of the period can still be seen at the property. Besides trustees Henry Lakin and John Parker, they include the young children John and Ann Roberts whose Northamptonshire-born father William Roberts, another trustee, farmed 300 acres at Hurst Farm near Snell's Nook.

In 1873 William Roberts had married farmer's daughter Mary Ann Peberdy from Houghton on the Hill. Their son John, being less than twenty months old at the time of the stone laying, may have had no great recollection of his part in the proceedings. However, a lasting memento was provided by a ceremonial silver trowel, still preserved at Christchurch, which he no doubt treasured in later life. It bears the inscription: *Presented to Master John Peberdy Roberts on the occasion of laying a memorial stone of the Wesleyan New Chapel, Sheepshed October 8th 1877.*



Other Sheepshed stone layers were Henry Lakin's son Samuel (ale merchant living in the Bull Ring), Benjamin Berresford (shoemaker), and framework knitters Thomas Needham and Henry Smith. Another stone bears the name of Miss Fanny Wragg, a lady of independent means residing in Burton Street, Loughborough. Her father, George Wragg, had kept a drapery store in Loughborough's High Street before moving into property investment.

Debt

Twenty years after the opening of their new chapel, the Wesleyans were still in debt. £300 was owing to Miss Wragg on a promissory note. A grant application to the connexional Chapel Committee resulted in an offer of £25, with a further £25 to be claimed when half the debt had been repaid. An appeal to the congregation produced £78. Just how long Miss Wragg had to wait for her money is not clear! At the time the society had 58 members in addition to numerous adherents. Seats in the chapel could be reserved at a cost of 9d per quarter in the centre pews and 6d per quarter at the sides. Wesleyan title deeds show that a document of the period was witnessed by Primitive stalwarts John Harvey and William Mounteney. Evidently relations were reasonably cordial.

Iveshead Road Chapel

Sheepshed grocer, the Wesleyan trustee John Ball, resolutely believed there was a need for a new chapel in Oaks in Charnwood parish. For some years a group had been meeting for fellowship in a small chapel with a schoolroom above (now Myrtle Cottage) next to the Jolly Farmers inn. A nearby croft was used to accommodate larger numbers. Presumably John Ball wished to provide a more appropriate venue. Accordingly he and his wife Naomi led a fundraising campaign in the area, and eventually a chapel was opened on Iveshead Road in 1879, just one year after Field Street.

It was variously described as Wesleyan Reform and Methodist Free Church. The new venture flourished for a time but sadly proved unsustainable. It closed after about 30 years despite the best efforts of John Ball, William Brown, Arthur Johnson and chapel keeper Edward 'Nedden' Spencer, whose unfortunate speech impediment made him the butt of local wags. The chapel was converted to dwellings (now known as Angel Row) and can still be identified as a former place of worship.



Iveshead Road Chapel to-day

PRIMITIVES IN SHEEPSHED

In 1822 Sheepshed was visited by Hugh Bourne and Williams Clowes, the founders of Primitive Methodism. A new society was born. The preaching plan for that year showed that two services were being held each Sunday. By 1828 there were 22 members. It may be imagined that they were people of very modest means, desperately struggling to support themselves and their families.

Difficult Years

Subsequent years were very difficult for Sheepshed 'Prims'. In 1830 they were excluded for four years for non-payment of circuit dues. Membership of the Loughborough circuit lapsed again in 1836. They had no regular meeting place. A room in the village was rented for thirteen shillings per quarter in 1840. Later Brother T Smith tried to obtain a reduction. In the following year he was instructed by the members to discontinue use of the room, but first to take a collection!

Somehow they weathered the storm. By 1845 membership had reduced to 13 but the situation was becoming more stable. Prominent members at this time were Messrs T Smith, Wightman and Savage. At some point the regular venue for the Primitives was a loft or barn in Jacques Yard off Forest Street. William Jacques, described as a hosier, farmer and grazier, lived in an imposing Georgian house in Forest Street, now the Richmond Arms. He was well-to-do, kept fine horses and owned land extending from his house to the Style-tw-y-chell at the top of Loughborough Road. Jacques gave land for the erection of Bethesda Baptist Chapel in 1823 where he was eventually buried. It seems that he lent a helping hand to the 'Prims' too.

Search for a Meeting House

In the 1860s rooms were rented from a Mr Handford, followed in 1868 by a move to the premises of Mr Swift after an advertisement had been placed in the *Loughborough Monitor*. The search for a permanent home gained impetus in 1874 when the Loughborough circuit asked Robert Lacey to lead a mission in Sheepshed for thirteen weeks. The Lacey family would later play an important rôle in the chapel's development.

In the same year, freehold land was bought in Charley Way from T J Webb and John Freeman for £125 subject to a £100 mortgage. With a frontage of 20 yards, it extended for 50 yards from the road. Charley Way, formerly known as Navigation Road, was soon to change its name again to Charnwood Road.



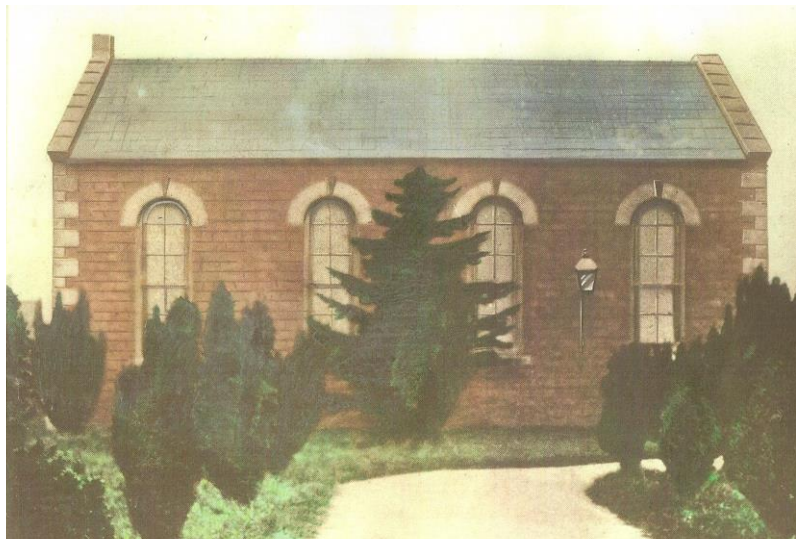
Meanwhile the society withdrew to Forest Street where a Sunday School began. A valued member at this time was framework knitter John Harvey (1844-1915) who lived nearby.

Once an Anglican, he with other parishioners had taken offence at some injudicious remarks by the vicar and had left St Botolph's, never to return. The Church of England's loss proved to be the Primitives' gain.

John Harvey

A Chapel at Last!

A building committee comprising George Barker, Henry Clarke, Samuel Clarke, William Cotton, William Fisher and Gilbert Tucker was constituted in 1876 and plans for the new chapel began to take shape. 1877 began sadly when William Draper, a much respected member, died suddenly during a service after announcing a hymn. Foundation stones for the new building were laid shortly afterwards, the first three bricks being laid by John Harvey, his son William Harvey and brother-in-law Samuel Holas. By the end of 1877 the chapel was completed.



With foresight it was built at the rear of the site with the intention of extending the premises towards the road at a future date. Building costs totalled £778, with a debt of £450 initially outstanding. Membership had now risen to 40, though as many as 200 people were known to be present on special occasions. In 1878 additional funds were raised to buy books for the choir, and a new harmonium costing £26-10-0d. The building still survives to-day as part of a printing works. The front door has been bricked up, but the legend *1877 Primitive Methodist Chapel* remains clearly visible.

Steady progress was maintained during the remaining years of the century. Trustees in 1890 were Thomas Batley, Henry Clarke, Samuel Clarke, William Cotton, William Fisher, Isaac Grain, John Harvey, Isaac Mounteney, Charles Shaw, John Simmons and Gilbert Tucker. The minister of the day was the Rev Thomas Harry Richards, based in Loughborough. Within 36 years of the opening of the first Primitive chapel in the village, the most modern chapel in Sheepshed would be erected on the same site.

EDUCATION IN SHEEPSHED

Illiteracy was widespread in 19th century Sheepshed. Despite the best efforts of Sunday Schools, opportunities for education were limited, and children were generally required to take an active share in the domestic economy. Marriages were invariably solemnised at the Parish Church, and marriage certificates of the period show that couples often made marks when completing formalities, being unable to sign their names.



National School design by William Railton from an original steel engraving

The Anglican National School (the 'Top School') was built in 1836 after Squire Charles March Phillipps, patron of St Botolphs, had provided an acre of land for the purpose. The architect was William Railton, who achieved lasting fame with his design for Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square.

A report published in 1846 stated that on weekdays 140 boys and 123 girls and infants attended the National School. On Sundays the figure rose to over 600! This would include working children and some adults. The plight of ordinary people of the period is highlighted by the 'Ten Hours Bill' of 1847, which *reduced* the hours worked by females and young persons to 58 per week.

The Catholic school in the former Methodist meeting house in Church Street had opened c1844, with the support of the Squire's son Ambrose. Free church non-conformists who wanted to educate their children were consequently affronted at having to choose between the Church of England and the Church of Rome.

A glimmer of hope appeared when the 1870 Education Act encouraged the establishment of voluntary schools. By 1875 a non-conformist day school in Sheepshed was being seriously considered. The British School Committee was formed. Its secretary was Michael Smith, whose grandson Arnold Smith would in due course play a prominent part in local affairs. Both Wesleyans and Primitives were actively involved as educational pioneers.

The British School

On Monday 3rd January 1876 the school opened in the Baptist schoolrooms in Charley Way (Charnwood Road). Its headmaster was the newly qualified Thomas Higman. 167 children turned up, including many who had transferred from the National School. By the end of the week the number had risen to 182. They had no books or equipment except the school bell! Quite how they survived the first term remains a mystery...

In 1879 the committee bought land in Hall Croft from Squire de Lisle, planning to incorporate the adjacent former Wesleyan chapel into the school. However, the architect advised against it. Memorial stones for a new building on the site were laid in 1884 and the school moved from Charley Way later in the year. Mr W ('Daddy') Baker was appointed headmaster in 1888, and great progress was made during the 36 years in which he held office.



British School class c1905 – Mr Baker on left

From 1911 Leicestershire County Council assumed responsibility for running the school, though ownership still vested in the founding trustees. Thereafter it was known as the Council School. Future teaching staff would include Enoch Smith (once a pupil of Mr Baker) and sisters Jessie and Lucy Cooke.



The photograph shows the Council School in the 1960s, with the well-remembered mulberry tree on the left. The old Wesleyan chapel (later the Institute) was formerly situated to the right of this scene.

The Way Ahead

At the outset government funding had been minimal. Children had to pay fees, often with the help of local charities. Having received a basic primary education, many attended night classes to extend knowledge and develop potential. The Adult School movement, begun in Nottingham many years before, took root in the British School in 1896 before moving to its own premises in Loughborough Road in 1936.

In the next century, the children of poor families would have the opportunity to attend secondary schools, colleges and universities. It would be a far cry from the British School in Charley Way. But here is where it all began. Early chapel involvement in education survives to-day in the Non-Conformist Educational Trust.

THE 20th CENTURY

For Britain the 20th century was a time of unprecedented change. Two world wars overwhelmed our society, and unrest in the intervening period culminated in the General Strike of 1926. Following post-war austerity, spectacular advances in medicine, science and technology brought widespread benefits and growing prosperity. Permissiveness in education coincided with more relaxed attitudes and declining respect for authority. In multi-racial Britain extensive car ownership led to increased travel and job mobility. People took holidays abroad, while media coverage brought the world into the nation's homes. To earlier generations the prospect might have sounded Utopian. Inevitably new social problems emerged.

Methodist Union

In the previous century, Methodism had experienced growth accompanied by fragmentation. Now reunification and rationalisation were the order of the day. In 1907 the United Methodist Free Churches, Bible Christian Church and Methodist New Connexion merged to form the United Methodist Church (not to be confused with the much larger American church of the same name). Even more significantly, the United Methodists in turn joined with the Wesleyans and Primitives in 1932 to create the Methodist Church of Great Britain as we know it to-day. Unity was driven in part by declining strength in the combining churches.

The results of the 1932 Union were far-reaching. Where there had been parallel organisations, there was now one ministry, a single circuit in each location, and a shared Methodist Hymn Book. But congregations continued to occupy their original chapels for the next 30-40 years. There was a great duplication of energy and resources. Often rationalisation of buildings was not achieved until a generation grew up which had never known the earlier distinctions. In some places it still remains a dream.

The Methodist Triumvirate

The middle years of the century saw the newly reunited Methodist Church making a visible impact on the life of the country. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in London. During and after the Second World War, Methodist preachers spoke and the nation listened. Principal spokesmen were the Rev Drs William Sangster, Donald Soper and Leslie Weatherhead.



William Sangster



Donald Soper



Leslie Weatherhead

Brought up in Leicester, Weatherhead developed an early affection for Charnwood Forest. Long queues formed to hear him preach at the City Temple on Holborn Viaduct. His congregations regularly included Fleet Street journalists, dispatched by their editors so that the great man's views could feature in the first editions of Monday's newspapers.

Reaction to Radical Change

In the 1960s, radical shifts in society were matched by liberalising changes in the religious climate. The 2nd Vatican Council was conciliatory to non-Catholics, while nearer home John A T Robinson, an Anglican bishop, published his compelling best-seller *Honest to God*. First steps were taken towards the ordination of women, and union between Methodism and the Church of England was explored. Talks between the two churches proved abortive, but in the new millennium a covenant relationship would be established.

In reality, the pace of change may have been too fast, for the next decade brought a reaction. By the 1980s a conservative stance predominated. Mainstream churches in Britain reported falling membership, and the church occupied a shrinking place in society. Was this the consequence of the retreat from liberalisation, or did churches adopt a defensive strategy in the face of diminishing influence? Chicken or egg? We may have to await the verdict of history.

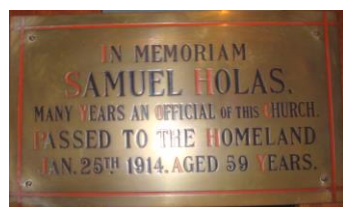
Only groups with charismatic or fundamentalist leanings, perhaps offering more certainty than faith, appeared to buck the trend of declining numbers. They included new black churches. Elements of their patterns of worship soon found their way into the practice of other churches. Methodism experimented with alternative forms of worship and new ways of 'being church', and initiatives continue to the present day.

In the view of critics hoping for new insights or a return to former glories, such innovations were more to do with style than content. But the church, while distancing itself from society, was at the same time seeking to retain its appeal. What is indisputable is that the Methodist Church which emerged from the 20th century was markedly different from the Methodist Church which had entered it.

Sub-divisions of the chapter will again be necessary in order to chart the progress of Shepshed Methodism during these turbulent years.

CHARNWOOD ROAD METHODIST CHURCH

In the early 1900s Primitive numbers were growing. Success brought a pressing problem. Their chapel, built in 1877 and not yet paid for, could not accommodate the congregation on special occasions. In consequence Charnwood Road Baptist Church provided the venue for the 'Prims' Sunday School Anniversaries for a number of years.



In 1904 the Rev Edward Hancox was minister. Trustees were George Button, Henry Clarke, Thomas Coulson, Benjamin Harvey, John Harvey, William Harvey, Zachariah Harvey, Benjamin Hemmings, Samuel Holas, Samuel Kidger, Harry Mounteney, John Mounteney, William Mounteney, William Newbold, Gilbert Tucker and Jarvis Walker.



For John Harvey, a trustees meeting would have been a family affair. It included his three sons William, Zachariah and Benjamin, two brothers-in-law William Mounteney and Samuel Holas, and son-in-law William Newbold. Then there were William Mounteney's son John, nephew Harry, and sons-in-law Samuel Kidger and Benjamin Hemmings. It may have been a working majority!

Memorial Plaques

A New Chapel

Although still £100 in debt on the existing building, the trustees resolved to press ahead with a new chapel in 1913. Arthur Lacey (a nephew of Robert Lacey who had led the 1874 mission), later to be elected Mayor of Loughborough, submitted the lowest tender in the sum of £1070. It was duly accepted. With accommodation for nearly 300 people, the chapel in plain gothic style was constructed of brick with dressings of Derbyshire stone. Corners of the building featured octagonal tapering piers, and windows had elegant glazed heads with leaded lights.



Charnwood Road Primitive Chapel

The foresight of an earlier generation was vindicated. Retaining the original chapel as a school room, the design incorporated a vestry and three further school rooms. Final costs totalled £1208. The opening ceremony was performed by Joseph Harriman, a respected local dignitary, and the first sermon was preached by the Rev R W Keightley, who had championed the project from the outset.

Still visible to-day are commemorative stones bearing the names of Miss R Else, Mrs E V Holt, Mr C Lacey and Mr M Smith. Bricks on the side of the building recall the following people who also subscribed to the venture:

Elsie Bond, Evelyn Bond, Olive Caurah, Hardy Chadburn, J R Chadburn, M E Chadburn, Albert M Cotton, Mrs W Cotton, Ernest Coulson, Bernice Else, Hilda Flint, Mrs C Freeman, Emma Grimley, Martha Grimley, Maurice Harvey, Annie M Hemmings, Ernest Hemmings, George L Hemmings, Gladys M Kidger, Arthur Lacey, Sydney Lacey, Constance Mountney, Dorothy Mountney, John T Newbold, Harry Thompson, Florence M Thorp, Mrs C Walker, Ernest Walker, Everard Walker and Mary E Walker. Other bricks carry the carved initials FAA, EB, CC, DC, PF, CWH, MH, GMJ, RS, CW and DW.

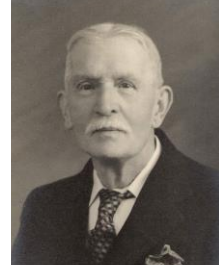
The Lacey Family

In 1914 the Primitives were fortunate to welcome John Lacey, elder brother of Arthur, who had taken up residence in Charnwood Road. The family had close connections with the Swan Street chapel in Loughborough, and other brothers Joseph and Charles operated a dyeworks in the town. John moved from Derby, where he had been managing a



John Lacey

hosiery factory, to establish his own business in Shepshed. Lacey Court to-day marks the site of his enterprise and of adjacent houses occupied by the family. Eventually he would complete 50 years of exceptional service to the Primitive cause, latterly as superintendent of the Sunday School. His photograph would hang in the chapel alongside that of Bill Harvey, patriarchs of 20th century Primitive Methodism in Shepshed.



William Harvey

Sunday School Anniversaries

Sunday School anniversaries ('The Sermons') were a highlight of church life in the village. Packed congregations assembled to hear specially rehearsed singing by the children and to be regaled with vigorous and lengthy orations from the pulpit. The occasions were also a vital source of income. Ill-disguised competition existed between the churches to see who would raise most money. Prominent citizens were routinely invited to 'take a plate', collecting the offertory from a few pews, and leading off with suitable generosity. One such worthy (not to be named here) would extract a £1 note from his inside pocket and twirl it ostentatiously before depositing it on the plate! From 1936 Arnold Smith conducted singing at the 'Prims' anniversaries in succession to his father, Michael Smith.



A Sunday School Parade in 1913

All the Sunday Schools had banners, and these would be paraded through crowded streets on religious festivals and national occasions. Although the essence of chapel life was devotional, social activities were not neglected. Music spilled over from Sunday services into concerts and cantatas, and teas and suppers were endlessly popular. Carol parties toured the village at Christmas, vying good-naturedly with those of other denominations.

Later the Primitives had a flourishing tennis club, and a cricket team which eventually re-emerged as Shepshed Methodist Cricket Club ('The Meths') before finally amalgamating with Shepshed Town CC.



Pictured here in 1958 are (left to right) Eric Fitchett, Ray Curtis, Albany Hoyle, David Stevenson, Joe Bennett, Ivor Brown, David Barrett, Ernie Brown, Peter Fox, Graham Gibson, Roland Johnson, Norman Peberdy & Tom Hull.

Methodist Union 1932



Reg Walker

Meanwhile in 1928 the Primitives had gained an energetic young secretary in Reg Walker, who would continue in office for over 40 years. By the following year outstanding debt was repaid, and in 1930 electric lighting, improved heating and redecoration were undertaken at a cost of £275. The organ was replaced in 1932 for an outlay of £90. This was also the momentous year of Methodist Union. The society, previously known as the Shepshed Primitive Chapel, now became Charnwood Road Methodist Church.

Women were now taking an active part in the business life of the church. Trustees in 1939 were Hilda Barron, John Clarke, Thomas Coulson, Harold Dring, Clarence Else, Minnie Else, Benjamin Harvey, Prudence Harvey, William Harvey, Thomas Hull, Harry Lacey, John Lacey, Hilda Newman, Sidney Unwin, Lily Walker and Reginald Walker. Iron railings fronting the road were commandeered for the war effort, and replaced in 1944 by a feature brick wall.

A Golden Era



The post-war years were a golden era in the life of Charnwood Road. In 1948 the church reopened after extensive internal redecoration and refurbishment. This also featured the installation of a new organ, with impressive specification and detached console, supplied by J H Adkins of Derby. Total outlay was around £2,000. The resident organist, appointed four years before and still only 20 years of age, was Doreen Rennocks, granddaughter of William Harvey. She is currently organist at Birstall Methodist Church, having completed 44 years' service there.

Fundraising had included performances by celebrated artistes including Isobel Baillie and Heddle Nash. An address by Rev R L A Tingle on Sunday 23rd May followed a recital by distinguished local organist Barton Hart. Nor were fundamental aims overlooked. The souvenir brochure expressed an appropriate sentiment. "May the quality of our worship, the reality of our consecration, and the warmth of our fellowship be in keeping with the beauty of our Church."

Well pleased with their success, the 'Prims' pressed further ahead. A modern kitchen and gas-fired central heating boiler were added in 1950 at a cost of £600. In the following year, trustees were named as Lily Anderson, Hilda Barron, Ernest Betts, Charles Bowns, William Carvill, John Clarke, Thomas Coulson, Clarence Else, Kathleen Else, Minnie Else, John Gibson, Leonard Gibson, Prudence Harvey, William Harvey, Thomas Hull, John Jarvis, Constance Lacey, Lydia Peat, Norman Peberdy, Sidney Unwin, Bernice Walker, Reginald Walker and Violet Wortley.

Anniversaries and an Ordination

The Ruby Anniversary of the present church was celebrated in exuberant style in 1953. A week of special services and meetings were addressed by the President Designate of the Methodist Conference, a former President, the immediate past Vice-President, and the Home Missions Secretary. Representatives of Nottingham Forest and Derby County football clubs attended a sportsmen's service. In the next year an additional 400 square yards of land at the rear of the church were acquired from Clarkes Boxes Ltd. at a cost of £200.

No less impressive was the decision of Brian Newbold to candidate for the ministry. After training at Handsworth College in Birmingham, he was ordained in 1959 – as far as is known, the first Shepshed person ever to serve as a Methodist presbyter.



Here he is seen with friends of the Sunday afternoon fellowship. Top row left to right: Brian Newbold, Norman Peberdy. Centre: John Gibson, Marjorie Turner, Dorothy Gibson, Kathleen Else, Graham Gibson. Front: Iris Spacey, June Quemby, Marion Hull, Joan Meeks.

In the meantime the Sunday School continued to flourish in the wake of Messrs Lacey and Harvey. Tom Hull, Minnie Else, Annie Clarke, Graham Gibson, John Gibson, Doris Walker, Norman Peberdy and Dorothy Bottrill are among teachers still remembered with affection.



Church Interior in 1958, with Keith Bailey and Patricia Davison

In 1963 the Golden Anniversary was celebrated with equal enthusiasm. Visiting preachers were Rev Edward Rogers (a past President), and Rev Thomas Lee of the Home Mission Department. An array of special events included a celebrity concert, and a sportsmen's service attended by players from Leicestershire County Cricket Club.

Amalgamation

Around this time, the question arose of amalgamating the two Methodist societies in Shepshed. It was argued that this would create a stronger united church and eliminate unnecessary duplication of resources. Field Street had plans to modernise its premises, and wanted a decision before committing itself irrevocably. A meeting of representatives from both societies was held at Charnwood Road under the chairmanship of superintendent minister Rev Dennis Robson. Although there was considerable support for the proposal, some were strongly opposed. Agreement could not be reached and the scheme was rejected. Its time had not yet come.

But it was not long delayed. Already there were shared meetings and a joint newsletter. Financial pressures mounted, and in 1968 the Charnwood Road church found itself unable to pay its way. All reserves were exhausted. Reluctantly the trustees voted (6 for, none against, 4 abstaining) for "a creative act of renewal... by the uniting of the two Methodist societies in Shepshed." Final services were held on Sunday 16th February 1969. Despite the powerful symbolism of an infant baptism, it was a painful occasion.

Leaving a beloved church where members had worshipped for so long, and for which they and their forebears had sacrificed and toiled, was hardship enough. Perhaps there were also fears of lost identity in combining with a larger society. For some it was too painful, and they found spiritual homes elsewhere. However, the majority of members were able to make an indispensable contribution to the new united church. It was not a death, but a rebirth.

Eventually the building was sold and used for a time as a carpet warehouse. The present occupiers, The Shepshed Knight Printing Service Ltd., are mindful of the history of the place and treat it well.

FIELD STREET METHODIST CHURCH

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the end of Queen Victoria's long reign, and the coronation of a new king signalled the beginning of the Edwardian era. Shepshed Wesleyans for their part renewed the trust. The list of trustees recorded in 1904 was: William Brown, Joseph Caurah, John Dennis, George Fleming, Thomas Heath, William Jarvis, Arthur Johnson, James Murphy, John Newham, William Paltridge, Joseph Perkins, Arthur Richards and Thomas Whittaker. It was still predominantly a circuit affair, with only six of the trustees living in Shepshed.

Renovation

Having presumably at length discharged their indebtedness to Miss Fanny Wragg, the trustees embarked on a programme of renovation in 1911. Following installation of an improved heating system in 1910, the chapel was now closed for more than a month. Work included reduction in the height of the pulpit, modification of the upper windows, organ repairs and the fixing of umbrella stands to the pews. Linoleum covered the floor, with carpet provided for the twin aisles. For good measure, the outside of the building was repainted and the chapel yard landscaped. Thanks were expressed to Messrs P Griffin and J Manderfield and the Misses L A Bailey, M Gibson, E Johnson and M Smith. In the preceding two years, they had collected nearly £50 towards the project in small weekly contributions from members.

Temperance

Temperance suggests moderation, but in the context of alcoholic beverage it more usually implies total abstinence. Drunkenness was perceived as a major cause of poverty and domestic violence, and the temperance movement gathered momentum around this time. In the USA it acquired the force of law under Prohibition. Many members 'signed the pledge', and alcohol was banned from Methodist chapels, manses and colleges. There would be some relaxation of attitudes later in the century, but most Methodist church premises remain alcohol-free to the present day.

The Sabbath Day

Strict Sunday observance in Victorian England continued unabated into the first half of the following century. Shops were closed as well as industry and commerce, while games and recreation were frowned upon by the faithful. Reading and music were not acceptable unless of a religious nature. It was a day to be kept holy. Chapel goers would attend both morning and evening services if they were conscientious, and children were also expected to be present at both morning and afternoon sessions of Sunday School. Intending sinners required exceptional enterprise.

Yet the Wesleyans managed to let down their hair on other days of the week. Besides ever-popular teas and suppers, chapel concerts were enthusiastically supported. In 1911 Field Street took over the British School in Hall Croft for a triple bill featuring the operetta *Christmas in Dreamland*, a humorous address given by Mr Garrett, and a comic sketch *Seaside Lodgings*. It provoked 'much merriment' and was repeated on the following evening.

Two World Wars

The Great War of 1914-18 incurred appalling casualties on an unprecedented scale. One Shepshed woman, having lost two sons in action, heard that a third had been wounded. "Thank God!" she cried. At least he would be invalided home alive. Little more than twenty years later, a second global conflict erupted. As sirens wailed, German bombers droned overhead towards Derby. Field Street's gates, like Charnwood Road's railings, were commandeered for the war effort. It seemed like 'swords into ploughshares' in reverse. Soldiers were billeted in the upstairs schoolroom, and an air-raid shelter appeared at the bottom of the chapel yard, shielding the entrance to a Home Guard site in the Co-operative Society's basement.

Between the Wars



Potter's Charabanc

frequent demand for chapel outings - with regular stops for the engine to cool. Cliff College became a regular Whit Monday venue.

The inter-war years provided a brief respite. Despite economic instability, people managed to enjoy themselves. Silent films with piano accompaniment were on view at the *Palace* cinema. An extensive rail network encouraged the growth of coastal resorts, and a week's paid annual holiday gave opportunities for short breaks by the seaside. Charabancs (open top vehicles with bench seats) were in

Sunday School anniversaries, harvest festivals and chapel anniversaries were highlights of the year. In 1920 there was a shortage of fruit at the harvest, but an abundance of vegetables and flowers. Collections were a record.



Decorated for Harvest



After many years in which the Rev John Rossell had presided at Sunday School anniversaries, the gauntlet was taken up by the Rev George Hopper.

A minister in the circuit in 1900-03, he thereafter preached to packed congregations annually for over 40 years. 242 scholars and 35 teachers were in attendance in 1920, when collections realised £65-5-0d.

Rev G Hopper

Local Preachers

In 1926 Percy Guyler, Ernest Manderfield and Horace Stevenson were admitted to full plan, laying the foundation for a long line of Field Street local preachers. In future years these would include Rex Thompson, Sid Hopper, Albany Hoyle, Gordon Danvers, Roy Severn, Ivor Mounteney and Spencer Lewin.

The trust had been reformed in 1924, this time with a Shepshed majority: William Brown, Joseph Caurah, George Cross, John Dennis, Percy Griffin, Percy Guyler, Thomas Heath, Henry Jacques, Douglas Manderfield, Isaac Mounteney, Owen Mounteney, James Murphy, William Paltridge and Arthur Richards. Methodist Union in 1932 brought a change of name from the Wesleyan Chapel to Field Street Methodist Church.



Last Wesleyan Quarterly Meeting – September 1932

Electricity and a New Organist

Electric lighting was installed in the building in 1933, a list of donors appearing on a plaque still preserved at Christchurch. New trustees were again appointed in 1934, the list now

reading: Jack Bexon, Joseph Caurah, Alfred Cross, George Cross, Percy Guyler, Thomas Hardy, Thomas Heath, Roland Johnson, Isaac Mounteney, Owen Mounteney, James Murphy, Henry Perkins, Horace Stevenson, Thomas Stevenson, Arnold Wilde and Matthew Wilde.



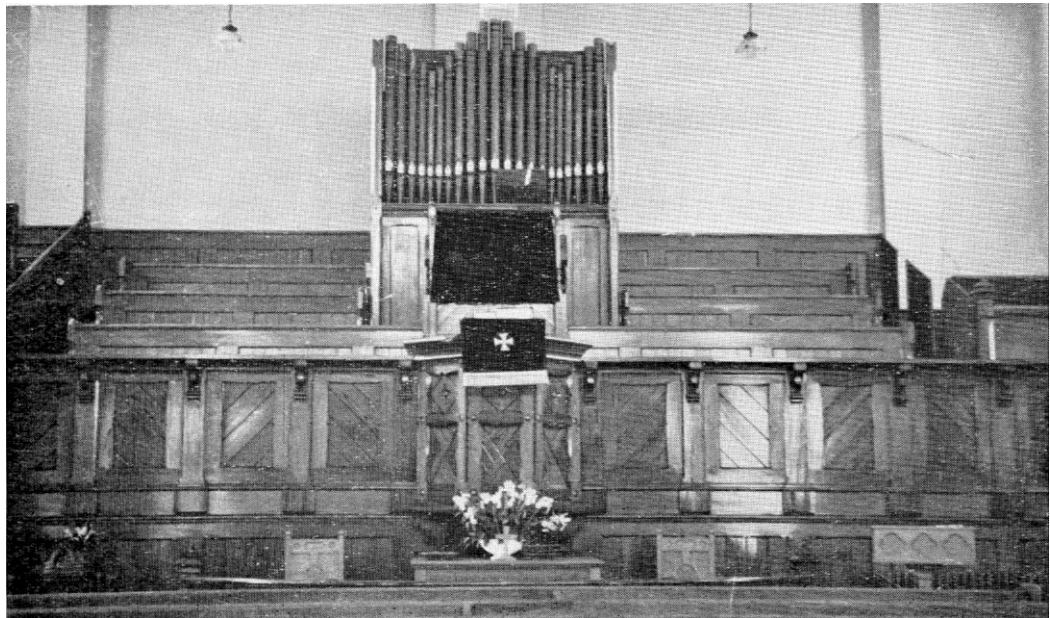
One of their first acts was to appoint an 18-year-old organist and choirmaster who had trained in Loughborough under Barton Hart. His name was Rex Thompson, an electrical engineer by profession, and he quickly established himself in many areas of church life. In 1955 he would play a key rôle in extending the rear premises.

This photograph of Rex was taken near Tower Bridge on one of many chapel outings to London.

Church Life

Church life, though centring on Sunday, thrived throughout the week. A popular all-age midweek meeting during the first half of the 20th century was the Wesley Guild. Beside devotional evenings, educational and topical subjects were discussed with the support of visiting speakers.

Social events were also an important part of Guild activity, and even dancing was known to take place on Methodist premises! A thriving tennis club played on a court in Hathern Road and afterwards in Iveshead Road; while the Sisterhood offered a welcome afternoon fellowship meeting for women of the church.



Interior prior to modernisation

Shortly after the war, the Youth Club was formed on the initiative of Rex, affiliating to the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs. Annual visits to the MAYC Weekend in London provided young people with valuable experiences and lifetime memories.

Well-remembered personalities of the time included Clarice Bennett and Flora Lester. Generations of Primary kids learned to sing choruses, half-understood but never forgotten, and sat each year in Clarice's birthday chair. Mrs Lester, wonderfully eccentric, lived with her daughter Thelma in a tiny cottage in Hall Croft where the library now stands. She could recite great chunks of verse from memory, and frequently did.

Suffragettes and the Model Deed

In 1947 the trustees formally assented to the property being held on the new model deed of the Methodist Church. Legal ownership now vested in the Connexion, while local trustees remained responsible for day to day management.

Thanks to the efforts of Emmeline Pankhurst and her supporters, women might have won voting parity with men in 1928, but it was some time later before they achieved equal recognition in Methodist circles. Field Street ladies waited longer than their sisters in Charnwood Road. At last their time came with the final renewal of the Field Street trust in 1949.

Trustees appointed were: George Bailey, Clarice Bennett, Joseph Bennett, Olive Caurah, Roy Clarke, Gordon Danvers, May Deacon, Thomas Evans, Sidney Hopper, Albany Hoyle (snr), Albany Hoyle (jnr), Gertrude Johnson, Ivy Johnson, Roland Johnson, Ernest Manderfield, Florence Mawby, Owen Mounteney, Henry Perkins, Horace Stevenson, Vera Stevenson, Rex Thompson and Edna Vesty.

New School Rooms

In 1953 new gates and walling were donated by Mr W Nelson of Long Eaton. Originally fronting the road, they replaced the gates commandeered during the war. As part of the 1960s modernisation they were later moved to the side of the church.

Built on a shoe-string budget in 1884, the rear premises were overdue for attention. An open fire burned in the Guild Room, hot water relied on a gas-fired copper, and ascent to the first floor was by a steep wooden staircase. Behind the building, unpretentious toilets, for use only in desperation, stood beside a stokehole prone to serious flooding. Mercifully there was no known causal link between the two.



Roland Johnson

All this changed in 1955. Roland Johnson, trust secretary and treasurer, bought and presented to the church a small piece of land behind the Co-op site. This allowed an extension to the side as well as to the rear.

On the ground floor, the Primary room, kitchen and coffee bar were added while the toilets and boiler were brought in from the cold. Two further upstairs rooms were provided, and the upper hall was enlarged.

Total outlay of around £8,000 was substantial relative to incomes in those days.

Willersley and the Squash

Around this time, a Youth Squash met regularly on Sunday evenings after church. Young people would gather at the manse or in the homes of members of the congregation. On other occasions a larger interdenominational group would meet informally on church premises.

One 'Squasher', Maurice Perry, qualified as a local preacher and later candidate for the Methodist ministry. He was ordained in 1966 after training at Handsworth College.



Annual residential weekends at Willersley Castle in Derbyshire were also a feature of the period.

Here Shepshed gained a reputation for boisterous behaviour, which was of course entirely unjustified.

Musical Tradition



Keith Bailey

In 1951 a youthful Keith Bailey returned from National Service in Hong Kong and was offered the post of organist, Rex Thompson continuing as choirmaster. Keith's arrival coincided with the marriage of Florence Mawby LTCL (who had been organist during the war years) to former Shepshed minister the Rev John Morgan-Williams. The old organ, once pumped by hand, was now powered by electricity.

Rex inaugurated the Junior Choir in 1955 before moving to Sheffield a few years later. Keith then also assumed the rôle of choirmaster, training both Senior and Junior Choirs in addition to numerous other initiatives in religious and popular music. His service has continued unbroken to the present day, greatly enriching the musical tradition of the church.

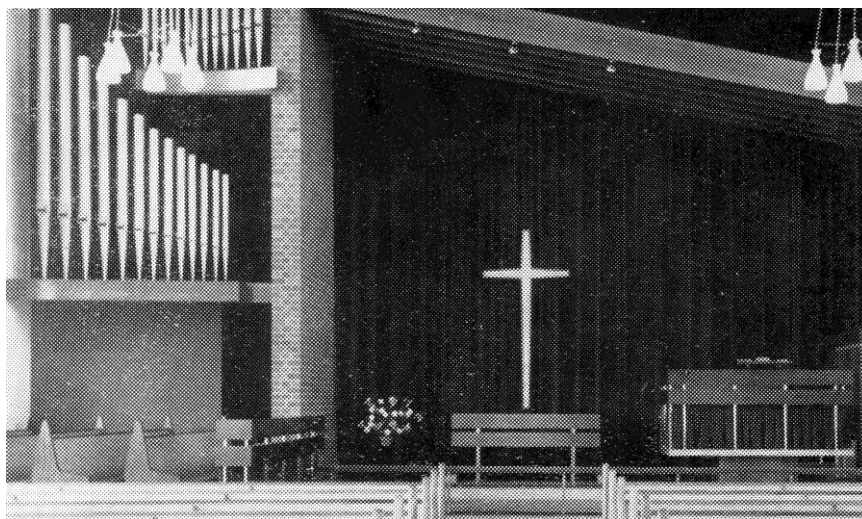


Sunday School Anniversary c1955

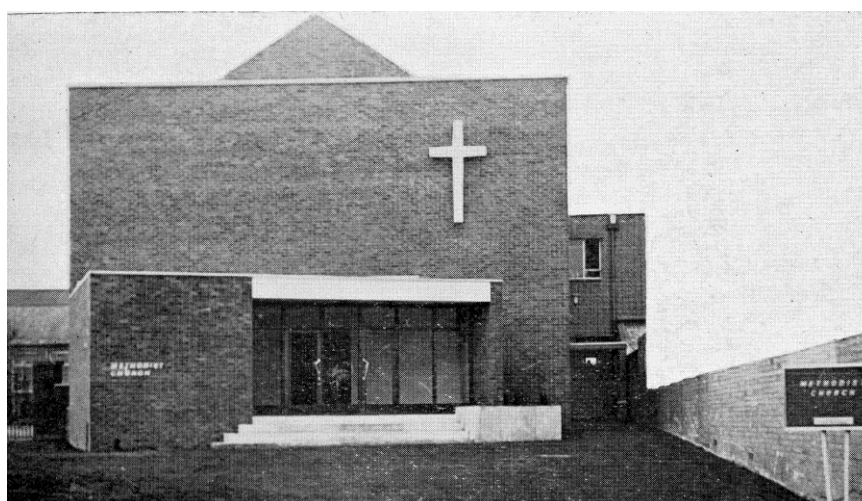
Like Rex, Keith played an important part in modernising the premises. He liaised closely with architect Roy Hardy of Allcock & Grieves in the 1960s modernisation, which was highly acclaimed by the connexional department for Chapel Affairs in Manchester.

Modernisation

After talks of amalgamation with Charnwood Road had broken down, Field Street began an ambitious programme of modernising the church building. Radical movements of the period in church and society were reflected in architectural styles. In the first stage of modernisation, completed early in 1965, the interior of the church was transformed and a new pipe organ installed – a Walker *Positif* with pedals and two manuals.



Meanwhile the adjacent land acquired by Charles Foston in 1877 had passed to his niece Marion Berrisford. Her husband Owen continued the family drapery business in Field Street. When the Berrisfords retired in 1963, Roland Johnson on behalf of the trustees negotiated the purchase of land at the side and back of the church for a nominal payment of £80. Midland Bank (later HSBC) bought and demolished Nos.10 & 12 Field Street and the cottage at the rear, building a new bank on the site. The church entered into an agreement with the bank for shared use of the forecourt as a car park.



In January 1967, the church was reopened after the second stage of modernisation. This involved complete remodelling of the facade of the building, with new vestibule and toilets, and provision of new congregational pews. Maximum impact was achieved with minimum structural alteration. Modernisation costs were of the order of £12,000. In little more than a decade the entire premises had been substantially updated – a tribute to the effort and generosity of all concerned.

Tragic Events



Rev Brian S Smith

Regretfully the euphoria of modernisation was clouded by the unexpected premature deaths of three key figures. Roland Johnson died in 1966 followed in 1967 by Albany Hoyle.

The third tragedy was shared in equal measure by the Charnwood Road church. Popular serving minister, the Rev Brian S Smith, died suddenly in December 1967 after providing transport to hospital for a member of the congregation. Later Marion, his widow, presented a set of scarlet robes to the Junior Choir in his memory.

CHRISTCHURCH METHODIST CHURCH



Rev Kenneth Cracknell

A fugitive from the civil war in Biafra, where he had been working as a mission partner, the Rev Kenneth Cracknell served briefly as Shepshed's minister until the summer of 1969. Subsequently he held appointments in Loughborough and with the British Council of Churches before pursuing a distinguished academic career at Wesley House Cambridge and in the USA. While in Shepshed he accepted responsibility for amalgamating the two Methodist churches.

As previously stated, some members of the Charnwood Road church sadly felt unable to join the united society. However, the amalgamation otherwise proved remarkably successful. Although meeting in the former Field Street premises, this was a completely new church taking Christchurch as its name. All existing offices were abolished, a fresh set of officers being duly elected. Drawing strength from the traditions and resources of the combining churches, it had an exciting potential. Opening services were conducted by the Rev Kenneth Cracknell on Sunday 23rd February 1969.

This was also a time of unprecedented partnership with the Anglican, Catholic and Baptist churches. If enthusiasm subsequently waned, at least a valuable precedent had been established.

Property Improvements

The following trustees appointed in 1971 reflected both former societies: Leonard Armstrong, George Bailey, Keith Bailey, Joseph Bennett, Eric Blood, Ernest Brown, Raymond Curtis, May Deacon, Thomas Evans, Frank Eyres, Graham Gibson, John Gibson, David Haddleton, James Harrington, Sidney Hopper, Phyllis Hoyle, Keith Lester, Harold Perkins, Henry Perkins, Maud Perkins, Rosemary Perkins, Marion Smith, David Stevenson, Rex Thompson, Gertrude Walker, Alben White and Peter Wood. Subsequent legislation transferred trusteeship to members of the Church Council.

Money released from the sale of the Charnwood Road building allowed further improvements to be made at Christchurch. Land at the side and rear of the church was paved and landscaped, with newly installed patio doors giving access from the Primary Room. The kitchen and coffee bar were enhanced, and former coke storage space was converted to accommodate tables, chairs and other equipment when not in use. Finally, curtained screening was provided in the upstairs hall to minimise distraction between Sunday School classes.

Breathtaking Start

The combined energies of Charnwood Road and Field Street gave a breathtaking start to the fledgling Christchurch. The place buzzed with activity. Augmented choirs were a feature of Sunday worship. Boys and Girls Brigades, initially under the captaincy of Keith & Margaret Lester and later of Alf & Hazel Thompson, flourished as never before. A playgroup pioneered by Marion Smith, Alben White and Irene Walton eventually operated on four mornings weekly in term time.

Sisterhood, Wives & Mothers (later the Wednesday Group) and Men's Fellowship catered for varying interests. Sunday School with an increased teaching staff progressed under the superintendency of Joe Bennett and later Joan Eyres, while the Squash had earlier been retitled 'Meeting Point for Youth'.

Ernie Brown, Frank Grimley and Len Armstrong continued valiant work in the Youth Club, while Keith Bailey fostered an enduring interest in Gilbert & Sullivan and John Lewin launched the Christchurch Theatre Club.

Beside those named, many more contributed invaluable to the thriving scene – unsung heroes and heroines, working faithfully and unobtrusively for the Kingdom of God. They remain indeed the salt of the earth.

Fundraising

A range of fundraising events was part of the life of Christchurch from the outset. Jumble sales presided over by Norah Hopper were among the most distinctive. A popular Friday coffee morning for shoppers, devised by Pauline Perrin, quickly established a permanent place in weekly activities. But the annual Christmas Fayre was the highlight of the social and fundraising year. All sections of the church joined in a concerted effort, initially under the scrutiny of Ernie Brown, and later of Peter Wood and Richard Perkins. Spreading to the capacity of Hind Leys College, the Fayre presented a splendid array of stalls, refreshments and entertainment, raising thousands of pounds each year for church funds.



Betty Armstrong, Peter Wood, Dorothy Wood, Gladys Watret and Joan Eyres in action at the Christmas Fayre.

Helping Others

The focus was never introspective. Every year courageous volunteers collected door-to-door for Christian Aid and the National Children's Home. Regular contributions were made to an assortment of connexional funds including Home and Overseas Missions, while Deptford Mission, the Bible Society and the Victoria Leprosy Hospital in India received generous annual support. High profile disaster appeals never fell upon deaf ears.

Local commitment to mission was generally conducted at the level of personal invitation. At the same time visitors to the sick and elderly, usually bearing gifts, were wonderful ambassadors for the church.

Reinforcements from Hathern, and Local Preachers

Methodists in Hathern had experienced their own amalgamation, former Primitives from Tanners Lane having joined forces with ex-Wesleyans from Dovecote Street. The united congregation finally proved unsustainable, and most of the membership transferred their allegiance to Christchurch.

The tally of Shepshed local preachers now included Keith Lester, Ernie Mould and Eric Wiser. Later Audrey Jordan, Michael Collins and Matthew Collins would be added to their number.

Property Matters

Thanks to the innovations of the 1950s and 1960s, property endeavours centred mainly on maintenance of the premises. As most of the building dated from Victorian times, constant attention and frequent expense were required. Christchurch was fortunate to have members with appropriate professional skills to undertake much of the routine operation. Graham Gibson, Brian Grigg, David Harrington, Roger Herrod and Peter Wood spearheaded the enterprise.



Unforeseen problems inevitably arose. After the church had been re-roofed, heavy joists in the roof cavity dried out and contracted. The first sign of trouble was when the suspended ceiling in the church was seen to be sagging. Hasty corrective action was needed to secure the beams.

Women in the Church

The 20th century had seen the growing responsibility of women in the church. This reached its zenith in 1991 with the arrival of the Rev Dorothy Lloyd Williams as the circuit's first woman presbyter.

She was not only female but (in the eyes of HM Customs) an alien, being American by birth and nationality. Dorothy had been the first woman to train in the hallowed portals of Richmond College, and after leaving Shepshed, she moved on to become superintendent of a West London circuit.



Rev Dorothy with a Sunday morning congregation

The value of her ministry was endorsed by a growing band of women presbyters. It seemed that the struggle for recognition had been truly won when the Rev Dr (later Baroness) Kathleen Richardson was elected President of the Conference. The Rev Sidney Y Richardson, fondly remembered as a Loughborough supernumerary minister, was justifiably proud of his daughter-in-law's achievement.

However, pockets of sometimes unconscious prejudice remained. Other denominations struggled even harder. Having comprised a membership majority since at least the end of the nineteenth century, women formed an increasing and indispensable proportion of local church members.

Methodism in Decline

In common with other mainstream churches, Methodism in Britain found itself in consistent numerical decline from the 1920s onwards. Initially Christchurch bucked the trend, no doubt benefiting from the impetus of its early years. Supported by a regular choir, it maintained a viable Sunday evening congregation when attendances were dwindling elsewhere. But *anno domini* took its toll, and social pressures could not be defied indefinitely.

The perennial battle to retain the interest of young people after the age of fourteen intensified. Sport and other activities, unthinkable on the Sabbath fifty years before, now competed for attention. The Sunday School reluctantly abandoned afternoon sessions and concentrated its efforts alongside morning worship. The anniversary platform, once full to overflowing, visibly shrank in size.

Relations with Theatre Club, not always comfortable, came to a head. A production chosen by the Club was felt by many to be inappropriate for a church-based society. It led to a parting of the ways, which other church members strongly resented. Theatre Club for its part continued on an independent course, maintaining an enviable reputation in local theatrical circles.

Whatever Next?

The success of recent years possibly made Christchurch reluctant to experiment with untried methods. However, a few innovations were attempted, and several new concepts were shortly to appear on the horizon and take root.



These would include the office of worship leaders, an alternative style of worship, and sharing the church premises with a community partner.

THE 21st CENTURY

Evidently the history of the 21st century has yet to be written. We shall be part of it. However modestly, we are all helping to shape a future which others will inherit.

As we survey the Methodist scene to-day it is easy to be despondent. In line with other mainstream British churches, membership numbers are in persistent decline. No doubt a demographic profile would confirm the rising age of Methodist congregations. There are insufficient ministers to fill available posts, and we can no longer afford to provide the training which their former colleagues once enjoyed. A regularly restructured central organisation has diminishing resources to support the demands of work at home and overseas.

The message which so impressed the miners of 18th century Kingswood cuts no ice in our post-modern world. And the state has now assumed responsibility for much of the social welfare which so concerned John Wesley. We endlessly disagree about the way forward. Has Methodism finally run its course? Like the apostle Peter we are tempted to exclaim *Quo vadis Domine?* Where are you going, Lord?

Grounds for Hope

On further reflection we perceive that there are also grounds for hope and even optimism. Methodism can be proud that it has helped to influence state policies on welfare, and we have seen that disagreement has been a feature of our movement from the very beginning! British Methodism currently has a membership of nearly 300,000 – many more than in Wesley's lifetime – and around 800,000 claim an active connection. Methodist membership worldwide extends to an estimated 70 million, with burgeoning congregations notably in Asia and South America.

Where rivalry and even hostility once existed between church denominations, there are now signs of growing respect and willingness to work together. Christians are slowly learning to focus on shared convictions rather than upon issues which continue to divide. And importantly in a world torn by religious fanaticism, the value of inter-faith dialogue is increasingly recognised.

The Mantle of John Wesley



Leslie Griffiths

Is there still a need for Methodism's trademark blend of spirituality and social awareness? Despite the best efforts of the secular authorities, insistent news headlines suggest that there is.

Insofar as the mantle of John Wesley can be considered to have descended upon any individual in our time, it seems to have fallen on the Rev Dr the Lord Leslie Griffiths.

Appropriately he is based in multi-cultural Wesley's Chapel in London - affectionately regarded as the cathedral of World Methodism - spreading the good word through radio, television and the press and never afraid to engage in political debate.

Whither Christchurch?

As far as Christchurch is concerned, recent innovations have included the use of worship leaders, introduced by the Methodist Church to supplement the duties of ministers and local preachers. Despite initial misgivings, the Loughborough circuit responded with enthusiasm and led the district in recruiting worship leaders. Lynn Hobson, Nicole Jordan, Jo Unwin and Chris Watkins volunteered their services at Christchurch, and shortly afterwards Chris additionally aspired to local preaching.

Another novel concept is WOW – or Worship on Wednesdays. The brainchild of Nicole and friends, this offers an alternative form of worship backed by a lively five-piece band. Meeting on the first Wednesday evening of the month, WOW attracts blithe spirits from Anglican, Baptist and Shepshed King's churches as well as from the host Christchurch.



The picture shows the WOW band in rehearsal, with David Harrington, Al Jordan, Sarah Harrison, Nicole Jordan and Adrian Dobson.

The ecumenical flame, which burned so brightly in Christchurch's early years, has been reignited through Churches Together in Shepshed. Christchurch now enjoys active co-operation with St Botolphs Parish Church, St Winefride's Catholic Church, Charnwood Road Baptist Church and the Shepshed branch of the King's Church.

Renovation and a New Project

Probably the most striking recent innovation has been the New Fields project. The Christchurch premises, dating from 1878, had not been extensively refurbished for many years and were again in need of renovation. The Methodist Church Property Office currently expects local churches to develop community-based partnerships before getting grants or approval to proceed.

Accordingly with leadership by property secretary Michael Collins, the rear ground floor premises have been revitalised in 2007 and leased to Leicestershire County Council's Adult Social Care for ten years to provide a day service for Shepshed adults with learning difficulties.



New Fields Day Centre

Building work involved removing some walls and installing new boilers, windows, lighting, toilets, and fire alarms to comply with current legislation. Total costs of £145,000 have been funded with the aid of grants and loans from the County and District Councils and other organisations and individuals, as well as by the church's fundraising activities.

Looking Ahead

Further plans to renovate the sanctuary, controversial in some quarters, have been agreed in principle by the Church Council. It is hoped that energy will be generated for a new round of fundraising, inspired by the belief that God still has work for Methodists to do in 21st century Shepshed.

It is clear from this short overview of the past 250 years that Methodism in Shepshed has been an evolving process, never standing still for long. Doubtless it will so continue, for better or worse. We are all involved in the outcome.

Ministers since Methodist Union in 1932

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|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Rev John Morgan-Williams</i> | <i>1934-1937</i> |
| <i>Rev Charles Jewell</i> | <i>1937-1940</i> |
| <i>Rev Andrew Crawford</i> | <i>1940-1945</i> |
| <i>Rev Harry Harrison</i> | <i>1945-1950</i> |
| <i>Rev Ronald J Bradwell</i> | <i>1950-1954</i> |
| <i>Rev James Douglas-Hunt</i> | <i>1954-1957</i> |
| <i>Rev T W (Bill) Barrett</i> | <i>1957-1961</i> |
| <i>Rev Harold W Ward</i> | <i>1961-1964</i> |
| <i>Rev Brian S Smith</i> | <i>1964-1967</i> |
| <i>Rev Kenneth R Cracknell MA BD</i> | <i>1967-1969</i> |
| <i>Rev John R Appleby BD</i> | <i>1969-1974</i> |
| <i>Rev Ronald M Smith BD</i> | <i>1974-1980</i> |
| <i>Rev John F W Payne</i> | <i>1980-1987</i> |
| <i>Rev Graham McIntosh BMus</i> | <i>1987-1991</i> |
| <i>Rev Dorothy Lloyd Williams BA</i> | <i>1991-1995</i> |
| <i>Rev James C Poore BD</i> | <i>1995-2001</i> |
| <i>Rev Anthony J Perry</i> | <i>2001-2006</i> |
| <i>Rev Kim Goh BA</i> | <i>2006-</i> |

Acknowledgements

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