

## **Tamworth: A Short History of Wesleyan Methodism in Tamworth Town Centre**

### **1771 – 1815**

The first Methodist to visit Tamworth was none other than John Wesley himself! Following the disturbances in the Black Country earlier in 1743, he had ridden over to Tamworth to take legal advice from a Counsellor Littleton who lived here. It was not, however, until 1771 that there is the first recorded visit of Methodist preachers to the town. They met with others, first in the home of Samuel and Ann Watton and later with others in a room in Bolebridge Street. In 1787 John Wesley had met the first Sir Robert Peel whose family was to have such a great impact on the town. As a result of this connection, he was sympathetic to an appeal from Methodists for a site for a permanent chapel. He granted them a licence to use a plot of land in Bolebridge Street along with exhortation "My lads, do not build your chapel too large. People would like to go to a little chapel well filled better than a large one half full". On 15th July 1794 the chapel was opened.

### **1815 - 1875**

The chapel was clearly not built too large; for by 1815 it had become inadequate. Sir Robert agreed to long lease the existing site and adjoining land and in 1816 a new and larger chapel constructed at the cost of £1000 was opened.



*A reconstruction of what the 1816 chapel may have looked like.*

In the mid 19th century a split occurred in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, which led to the formation of the Wesleyan Reformers later to become Free Methodists. Families, notably the Wattons, felt the future of their faith lay with them and they left the Bolebridge Street Chapel, at first meeting in a room nearby, before acquiring a room in Aldergate which was affectionately known as The Hut. Both societies continued to flourish and like the first Wesleyan chapel in Bolebridge Street the second one also became inadequate, and in the 1870s it was decided to build a new one.

### **1875 - 1972**

In 1877 a plot of land on the corner of Victoria Road and Back Lane (later to become Mill Lane), comprising almost 1000 square yards, was donated by Thomas Argyle; the Wesleyan treasurer and a local solicitor. On 21st May 1877, memorial stones were laid for what would become the Wesleyan Temple. "This being the most appropriate and truthful designation for God's own house" wrote Ezekial Burton, the resident minister. The next landmark was the

topstone service or topping out ceremony held on 28th November 1877 when the choir mounted the scaffolding and sang hymns and, reputedly, the Hallelujah Chorus. The final one was the opening on 9th April 1878.



*The New Wesleyan Temple*

The Temple had been constructed at a cost of £4307 2s 6d which had been raised by subscriptions, services and bazaars. One stall realised £123; a considerable sum in those days! The Sunday School continued to use Bolebridge Street Chapel until the schoolrooms were constructed in 1898 at which stage the old chapel was sold to Woodcocks Printers and used by them for many years.

In the late 19th century the Free Methodists felt that The Hut did not meet the needs of the ever-growing congregation. A plot of land was available in Aldergate and purchased for £250. The memorial stones were laid at Easter 1886. Instead of inscribing the names on the stones themselves, leaving them to be erased by the elements, they were instead engraved on a brass plaque, which can still be seen today in the entrance to the Church. By late summer 1886 the building had been completed, resplendent with spirelet at a cost of £2250 (a more modest affair than The Temple), and was opened for worship on 29th September 1886.



*Aldergate Free Methodist Church 1886*

In 1907 the Free Methodists became United Methodists. In 1933 the United, Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Churches became one Methodist Church, but it was many years before this became a reality in the Town Centre. In the 1960s the congregation at Victoria Road was joined by families from the Bolebridge Street Mission which had sadly closed. Representatives of two of these families attend Central today. For many years a bomb had been ticking away at Victoria Road Methodist Church (as it had become known). Serious defects had become apparent and the costs of remedying them were far beyond the resources of the Church. In early 1972 the sorrowful but correct decision to close and amalgamate with Aldergate was taken and the building, which could seat 600 on the ground floor and around the oval balcony, waited for its future to be determined. The magnificent Victorian edifice of the Church was preserved and at first accommodated squash courts before finally flats. The schoolroom was demolished and a fitness centre now occupies its site.

### **1972 - 2013**

The combined congregations became known as Central Methodist Church.



*Central Methodist Church*

Following amalgamation, it became quite clear that the premises in Aldergate were inadequate for the needs of the new congregation. The Church faced east to west with the members facing the pulpit and organ. Two doors from the rear upper schoolroom gave access to the choir stalls. It was impossible to extend laterally so it was decided to extend vertically.

The fixed pews and floorboards were removed by the members. For grant purposes this voluntary labour was assessed at £2000. The ground level was excavated to a depth of some 4 feet and a concrete mezzanine floor put in so that the area above became the new Church with the congregation now facing east with the organ, on the west, now behind it. The old pulpit from the former Congregational Church became Central's new pulpit and one of the former doors to the old choir stalls became another entrance to the worship area. A lift was installed. The side entrance became the main one and from the vestibule a staircase was constructed to gain access to the new first floor Church.

The total cost was approximately £59,000 - over half of which came from grants from the Joseph Rank Benevolent Trust and the Division of Property. The Church was re-opened by the Secretary of the Trust, Paul Bartlett-Young, on 16th September 1978. The re-opening was followed by a Service of Re-dedication led by the Chairman of the District, the Rev. Christopher Hughes-Smith. In 2005 a further upgrade was undertaken to improve access arrangements, toilet facilities and the kitchen.

## **The Sunday School**

The history of the Sunday School in the post war years shows an important aspect of Methodism's ministry in Tamworth.

Following the Second World War, parents were determined that their children would grow up in a better world and so, while they themselves might not consider entering a church or chapel themselves, they were insistent that their children should receive a Christian education. As a result they sent their children to Sunday School. Like children following a pied piper, score upon score would follow Sunday School Superintendent, Jack King from the new estate at Bolehall to the Sunday School at "Victoria Road" as it had become known - the name Temple had long since fallen into disuse. Though fewer in number, they would also follow Harry Baker to Aldergate.

On normal Sundays, the children would assemble in the main Sunday School room; sat in rows with the teacher at the end facing the Superintendent who would open with a prayer and an address. There would be singing from the Sunday School Hymnal before the children went off to their classes. Such was the premium on space that every nook and cranny was used, even the kitchen! Such also was the demand for teachers that often promising youngsters aged only 14 or 15 were asked to take classes!

The main highlight of the Sunday School year was the Anniversary held in June. The platform erected in front of the pulpit held upwards of 100 children and the choir stalls were filled with older scholars and teachers. The Church was crammed with adoring mothers and fathers, aunts & uncles and elder brothers & sisters who had come to listen to the singing, recitations, duets and solos.

The picture was much the same at Aldergate although it had less scholars. The platform here was in two parts on either side of the pulpit. Anniversaries continued following the amalgamation in 1972 and following the extensive alterations in 1978 a new platform was constructed.

Much hard work went into the choice of hymns and those with the responsibility were fortunate that, from the 1970s, many new songs became available which were sung for the first time by the children before becoming established favourites in our hymn and song books. Some examples are:

Tell out my soul / Come and join the celebration (with the words altered) / Seek ye first the kingdom of God / Praise Him, Praise Him / Give me joy in my heart / Make me a channel of your peace.

The atmosphere and excitement of Anniversaries is faithfully captured in the following poem by Colin Robey.

We practised hard both day and night  
To get the songs and poems right  
For this, the children's day of days  
When trained young voices join in praise  
The mums and dads sit there so proud  
As words come out, but not so loud  
It's hard reciting to a crowd.  
They didn't practice with all those folk  
And nerves bring some to nearly choke  
Upon their words as they do their best  
To overcome this awesome test.

It started earlier in the morn  
They got up at the crack of dawn  
New suit trousers yet to press  
And for the girls a lacy dress.  
A day of special atmosphere  
For older folk perhaps a tear  
As they think back to days gone by  
When they stood on that platform high  
And sang out in the morning sun  
The anniversary had begun.

Folk return on this great day  
Some come from near and far away  
Who left this place a while ago  
Now meet with friends they used to know.  
A day of pleasure and great joy  
Of happiness that ne'er will cloy  
We sit and wait what seems an age  
As children rustle on the stage  
In wait to entertain the throng  
With poems, rhymes, and sweet, sweet  
songs.

Afternoon gives way to night  
The younger ones have lost the fight  
With happy thoughts to fill their heads  
They're tucked up safely in their beds.  
The evening service passes on  
Once more the day of days has gone  
It's not as bad as we may fear  
There'll always be the one next year  
And soon again our friends we'll meet  
As we go off on the Sunday School treat.

Yes, the treat was another highlight! In the early days these were locally based. For example, perhaps a trip along the canal on Samuel Barlow's narrow boats. From the 1950's onwards, they became more ambitious with as many as 10 Bunty buses to take everyone to Wickstead Park or Rhyl which was often a child's first view of the sea. Later, trains were chartered from British Rail.

The remaining highlight was the Autumn Fayre with the choosing of the Sunday School Queen to welcome everyone.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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