

A History of Methodism in the Reading Area

‘How many years were we beating the air at this town, stretching out our hands to a people as stupid as oxen.’ This oft repeated phrase summed up the feelings of John Wesley when he visited the town in 1777. How would our Father in God view his followers 210 years later?

The intervening years have seen many changes, and much prayer and sacrificial giving have kept the flame of Methodism alive. Places of worship have been built to serve new housing estates and rural areas. In some cases numbers have declined, populations have moved, and new estates have grown up like those at Tadley Common, Woodley and Lower Earley. Perhaps the most significant change which has taken place is that which came as a result of Methodist Union – one united circuit.

John Wesley paid a number of visits to Reading. On one occasion he met John Cennick who became one of his lay helpers. Little is known of the small band of followers of Wesley who met together towards the close of the 18th Century, except that they met in a room at the top of London Street and not without some opposition, but in 1811 a room was secured nearer to the junction with Queen’s Road which, having been used a school, became known as the Inkpot Chapel. Here the Society flourished, especially during the ministry of the Rev. John Waterhouse from 1815, and it became necessary to seek larger premises.

A market garden in Church Street [on the south side opposite the Friends Meeting House] was secured at a ground rental of £31 p.a. and in 1816 the foundation stone of the chapel was laid by the M.P. for Dover, Mr. Joseph Butterworth. On this occasion the Reverend John Waterhouse preached from the text ‘Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’

Methodism’s famous Reverend Jabez Bunting preached there in January 1817.

Though a struggling cause, efforts were made to operate as a Circuit with new Societies at Blackwater (Hants), Henley, Wokingham, Burghfield (Trash Green), Whitchurch Hill and Twyford. Encouraged by the promise of £300 by a gentleman whose ‘Ship from the East Indies’ was expected, the trustees at Church Street further extended the premises, but the gentleman disappeared and the trustees found themselves faced with a total debt of around £3000. Fortunately, the owner of the land, one James Wild, waived the sum due to him for arrears of ground rent, and grants from the Connexional Centenary Fund, the Chapel Committee and subscriptions, somewhat reduced the debt and enable accommodation in an upper room to be provided for the Sunday School. It was not until the Jubilee Year of the Chapel in 1867 that the proceeds of a three day bazaar at the Town Hall, together with various donations, enabled the Society to wipe the slate clean and to consolidate the work in Reading centre before the great forward movement of the turn of the century.

The Wesleyans

While fund raising played a major part in Methodist life of those days, the spiritual side was not neglected. Every aspect of church life was undergirded by prayer. The weekly prayer meeting was as important as the class meeting and Sunday worship in the life of a Society. Here the great and the humble could meet on more or less equal terms. Many quite wealthy business people, looked up to and respected, and the more humble folk, who were treated with courtesy, learned much from one another. The minister was never addressed by his Christian name. He and his wife would be placed on a pedestal and it must have been a

lonely world for the wife, making do in a draughty manse on a low stipend, yet expected to mix only with the wealthier women of the congregation, though she probably had a resident maid to help with the housework. It was said that the Church Street minister's house never saw the sun in any of its chief apartments – a gloomy place, indeed!

In 1868, twelve ladies met at Church Street and formed 'The Reading Wesleyan Dorcas and Maternal Society'. This was probably the forerunner of the Ladies' Sewing Meetings which were once a feature of Circuit life. Exquisite embroidery and garments were produced for all the many Circuit bazaars, and many hundreds of pounds were raised by the women of the church. Later came the Women's Bright Hour and Women's Own, which ministered to the spiritual needs of many ordinary women on the fringe of the Societies. Now, as Women's Fellowship, it continues to provide a meeting place and friendship for many women, though nowadays mainly church members and adherents.

The needs of the wider world were not ignored. Annual efforts on behalf of Home and Foreign Missions were held in each church and collections were taken for famine relief in India, and, at Christmas morning services, for Dr. Stephenson's Orphanage which later became the National Children's Home. The poor of the locality were cared for, particularly at Christmas time. In 1900, 850 children from the courts and lanes were each given a warm garment, a toy, sweets, biscuits and a card, and plans were afoot to make these gifts available to an even larger number in subsequent years. 1899 saw the introduction of the Connexional 20th Century Fund, of which Reading's part was to be the raising of 1000 guineas.

Synod met in Reading in 1894 and probationers had to preach their sermons in various churches in the town at 7:00 a.m.!

There were some interesting subjects for resolutions passed at Synod – the suppression of slavery in Zanzibar, oppressed Armenians, and the extension of the ministerial term. Conference, meeting that year in Birmingham (with 1000 ministers present) found itself with a female representative, a Miss Dawson from Redhill. This occasioned considerable discussion, and it was finally agreed that she could remain but that this must be the last appearance of a woman for some time!

These were the days of the great orators: Gipsy Smith conducted an eight day mission in the Large and Small Town Halls; Mark Guy Pearse could always pack Wesley Church to the rafters (with every available form from the schoolroom being pressed into service); and Dinsdale T. Young, Lax of Poplar, Hugh Price Hughes and F. L. Wiseman – and later Leslie Church, Will Sangster, Leslie Weatherhead and Donald Soper – all drew the crowds.

There was a sense of purpose in Circuit Life though it cost a great deal in terms of effort. People loyally supported what was being done though it might mean walking many miles. Open air services were held at most churches during summer months but on winter evenings the support was not withheld. Preachers walked many miles to their appointments, spending up to 3 hours walking each way, summer and winter, sometimes in pitch darkness, meeting no one, often having to negotiate plank bridges across swollen streams on their way. To quote one such instance in 1900 'One Brother Avery, aged over 60, walked from Knowl Hill to Burghfield and at 9:00 had reached Reading on the return journey!' There were critics. A letter to the 'Reading Circuit Record' in 1894, criticising the introduction of children's sermons at Morning Service reads 'Business men who come to the House of God do not want to hear mild platitudes addressed to the juveniles, they want something more

satisfying!' He got his answer in the next edition!

Every church had its Band of Hope which aimed to keep the young people in its care from the evils of the demon drink and it was the accepted norm for most adult members to sign the pledge.

The 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon' movement, which seems to have been a conformist association, had great success at places like Oxford Road and Elm Park Hall. It catered for the man in the street and provided many with a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon.

By 1902 the 20th Century Fund target was reached and the Circuit could realise its plans for new churches at the four corners of the town. To this end a most ambitious three day bazaar was held in the Town Hall in 1903. The theme was an old Normandy village and an elaborate handbook was issued. In 1905 another three day event took place, this time with a Spanish flavour, and an 'Abbeys and Castles' bazaar in 1908. Every Society had its stall and the names of those who took part make interesting reading. Some of their descendants are active today in the Circuit and can trace their ancestry back through several generations of Methodists. A present member of Wesley proudly claims an ancestor baptised by John Wesley (not in Reading) and seven succeeding generations active in Methodism.

The Primitive Methodists

The early years of the 19th century saw the rise of Primitive Methodism in the country. Records state: 'it did not owe its popularity to any outstanding personality or to influential patronage but to the contagious enthusiasm of a multitude of humble men and women who had consecrated themselves to ... winning the world for Christ.' Indeed, wherever a few people could be gathered together, a house, barn or hall would be

pressed into service and the cause placed on the plan. During the summer months meetings were held in the open air. When the response to the call warranted it and resources were available, a permanent building was acquired, but without fuss. In 1838 a resolution 'That a chapel be built at Burghfield if all clear, and that Brother Ride and W. Scribbans see to it as possible' and at the autumn Quarterly meeting in the same year 'That Burghfield new chapel be opened on Sunday October 28 by Brother Samuel West.' There was no elaborate opening ceremony, the saving of souls being their first priority.

In 1835 we first learn of the Primitive Methodist Movement in Reading when on Sunday 12th April services were held in the grounds of the Forbury which remained its rallying ground for the next six months. Dreadful persecution, including physical violence, had been meted out to converts in the surrounding area but they gathered from far and wide, joining up with the Reading Congregation at the top of Castle Hill, and, led by the Reverend John Ride, marched to the Forbury. Five year previously, this John Ride and fellow missionary Thomas Russell, had met for prayer and consultation on a cold winter's morning on Ashdown, high on the Berkshire Downs. When the time came to part, something seemed to hold them back. 'Let us have another round of prayer' one said, and, regardless of the snowy terrain and personal discomforts they prayed, 'Lord, give us Berkshire'. Rising from his knees, Ride declared: 'Yonder country is ours and we will have it.'

Sunday 11th October 1835 saw the move from the Forbury to a more permanent site when the Society took over a room at the top of London Street at a rental of £25 per annum. This room had been the scene of Wesley's ministry in the town and the home of the first Wesleyan Church. Here the Society flourished and from this house went out bands of evangelists into the surrounding

countryside and into the neighbouring counties. The London Street room soon became too small for the nightly congregations and too noisy and exuberant for the neighbours, so in October 1839 Salem Chapel was purchased. This appears to have been situated at the end of a passageway near to the north western end of Minster Street [where Heelas extension is] and must have been a place of some significance for a number of years and a rallying point for the work in the south of England. Here was held the first Conference in the south of England in 1841. The 'Fathers' of the Primitive Methodist movement, William Clowes and Hugh Bourne, were present and conducted services which began at 5:00 a.m. Business sessions were held in secret. Conference was again held in Reading in 1885 and 1915, at London Street.

Strict discipline was imposed upon the preachers in those early days. They had to be totally committed and their behaviour exemplary, Woe betide that man or woman who 'neglected' his or her appointments. Admonitions were plentiful:

1839 – 'That Brother Ride admonish Edward Long for long preaching.'

1841 – 'That the preachers in this circuit ... conform to the rules relative to their hair and dress.' 'That Sister Mildenhall be fined 6d for not publishing the collection at Burnt Hill and Buckholt and that Brother Hedges get the fine.'

1842 – 'That the travelling preachers are requested not to wear Dandy Chartist hats.'

1844 – 'That Jesse Herbert have a note informing him that our connexion does not allow its members and official characters to attend worldly amusements.' 'That Brother Gilbert shall wear his hair in its natural form.' 'That Brother Gilbert shall wear his watch in his trousers pocket.'

1846 – 'That Brother Smallbone be admonished for being found on the race course.'

Quarterly meetings often began as early as 7:00 a.m., with a tea meeting to follow at 5:00 p.m. Prayer was offered every hour and a timekeeper appointed. If business was not completed it was resumed the following morning.

The church in Reading went into decline for a while when John Ride, its first minister and a man of amazing ability, was moved to London to become the General Superintendent of the mission work there. However, in the mid 1850s Salem was the scene of revival and again the work expanded. Other churches in the surrounding areas came into being and at Salem the accommodation became grossly overcrowded, records showing that older members clung tenaciously to Salem which for them enshrined hallowed memories. Here most of them had met the Saviour in the way and had communed with Him so constantly that they had become 'men and women of the burning heart'.

Eventually, in April 1866 during the Superintendent ministry of the Reverend Peter Coates, its tenth Superintendent, the Society returned to London Street. Mr. Coates proved a tower of strength and executive ability, and the transition from the beloved Salem to the larger premises, whose façade remains today, was smoothly executed. Again, however, the numbers flocking to the cause fully stretched the resources and it was reluctantly decided that Primitive Methodism should no longer be contained within the Mother Church but that Societies should be formed in other parts of the town. Thus came into being Cumberland Road, Friar Street and Oxford Road churches.

Not until 1899 were pews installed in the London Street church, followed in another five years by the balconies and rostrum. The organ was installed in 1885, and extensions and decorations enhanced the beauty of what eventually became a very lovely building. The London Street Society celebrated its Diamond Jubilee in 1926 when those present gave thanks for the devoted service of many to youth work, uniformed organisations, and the cause of total abstinence, but above all for the fellowship of believers and the ministry of the Word.

Just before the turn of the century open air meetings were held in many parts of the district and efforts made to establish new Societies. United Camp Meetings were planned for Palmer Park, Elm Park and the Caversham Road Triangle. In preparation for the latter, prayer meetings were held at each of the town churches together with processions of witness to the camp sites. The London Street Brass Band accompanied the singing at all camp meetings. The cost of band instruments had been met by the efforts of the young men of the band. In a house in Addington Road regular services were held and members of the Palmer family promised generous support to a project to build a church and Sunday School on a nearby site, but this did not reach fruition.

The Union of the Circuits

From the time of the Methodist Union in 1932 until September 1940, Reading had two Circuits, Wesley and London Street. The Wesley Superintendent at the time, the Reverend Leonard Babb, had a vision of a united Circuit. Unfortunately, because of Mrs. Babb's ill health he was obliged to leave the Reading Circuit before a way was opened for his dream to become a reality. However, his London Street colleague, the Reverend W. E. C. Harris, was able to assume responsibility for the union of the two Societies, move into Queen's Road manse and become the first Superintendent

of the united Circuit. He and Mrs. Harris were greatly loved and it was a time of blessing to the entire Circuit. The service of dedication was held on Sunday 6th October 1940 with a procession of witness from London Street to Wesley and with the chairman of the District, the Reverend Stanley Bishop, conducting the service. The Secretary of the Amalgamation Committee which conducted negotiations so harmoniously was Mr. Corney W. Fisher who, in 1987, was called to Higher Service in 1987 in his 100th year.

The former Primitive Methodist country chapels at Burghfield Common, Woodcote, Gallowstree Common, Swallowfield/Riseley and Pangbourne were brought into the new Reading Circuit. Let us now look in more detail at the histories of these and other former Primitive Methodist Societies, beginning with the town churches.

Cumberland Road

This church [Ebenezer Chapel] in east Reading was built in 1871. It must have been a great source of spiritual and material welfare to the people of the Newtown area. In the 1920s there were nearly 200 scholars in the Sunday School and a large Christian Endeavour class which at Christmas time provided breakfast for 150 poor children of the neighbourhood and food parcels for the sick and aged. They also contributed generously to overseas mission funds and to the National Children's Home. The Women's Missionary Federation also raised large sums for over the overseas church. Sadly, numbers declined and the church closed in August 1972 and is now a Sikh Temple serving the extensive Asian population in the area.

Friar Street

In 1871 several of the young men of the London Street Society began an open air mission in the West end of the town. This

led to the purchase of a site at the end of Friar Street, opposite the Triangle, for a church which carried out a warm and caring witness until the number of members declined, and a move was made to unite with Oxford Road (ex-Wesleyan) Society in 1959. [Site later cleared for building of the Inner Distribution Road.] Meetings were first held on 11th November 1871 in an old workhouse at the corner of Friar Street and Thorn Street and it was known as the Thorn Street Mission. A Sunday School was formed on 3rd December. Later, while the site was cleared and rebuilding took pace, services were held in a small meeting house in nearby Somerset Place. The new church opened on 3rd June 1875 and the debt discharged in 1903.

At one time this area was densely populated, and the kindly folk at Friar Street generously ministered to their neighbours until a great slum clearance programme, and subsequent commercial influx, turned this residential area into an extension of the business world of the town. Those saintly people who remained in the area greatly enriched, and continue to enrich, the life of the Oxford Road Society to which they transferred, resulting in a most harmonious union of two Societies.

Like many other causes, Friar Street benefited under the Will of one Isaac Septimus Nullis who left £500 for the building of a chapel at the West end of the town. Isaac Nullis, born at Ashampton in 1828, became a leader in the religious revival which, in the early 19th century, was sweeping through that part of Berkshire. His conversion took place in the cottage of Ann Street, a saintly woman who had been instrumental in leading many to Christ. Her cottage stood opposite Quick's Green Chapel and became the focal point of a converting ministry in which Nullis and other engaged with remarkable results. He entered the ministry and his exceptional gifts were greatly blessed in London and in

Ireland. Unfortunately, at the age of 40, back in Berkshire, he was stricken with tuberculosis and died. His body was laid to rest in the small graveyard attached to Quick's Green Chapel, the chapel in which his portrait held honoured place and his name was ever revered.

Oxford Road

The Oxford Road Primitive Methodist Society was founded in 1878. It began when meetings were held in a cottage in Oxford Road, opposite Brock Barracks, rented from a Mrs. Mayers. On another occasion the accommodation was referred to as the 'British Workman', an eating house and refreshment rooms, of which there were several in town. In the following year a schoolroom was built on a site at the corner of Beecham Road purchased from a Mr. Verlander (believed to be an accountant of Castle Street) for £160, and in this building Sunday School work and public worship was carried on for around 16 years. In 1896, on Good Friday, the Church, on the same site, was opened by the Rev. Ambrose Shepherd. The cost of the building was £1000. Work among young people had been most fruitful, notably in the 1920s in the Sunday School, with scholars coming from the new council estate at Norcot.

At the time of Methodist union in 1932 when the prefixes 'Wesleyan' and 'Primitive' were abolished, it was decided to retain the title 'Oxford Road' for the ex-Wesleyan church at the corner of Waylen Street, while the former Primitive Methodist church became known as 'Oxford Road (West)' and later 'West Reading'. In 1961 it was decided that the time had come to have one Methodist witness in the West of Reading and the Society found a new spiritual home at Elm Park Hall, to be renamed West Reading Methodist Church. The former church at Beecham Road became a furniture store but in 1986 was demolished.

Swallowfield/Riseley and Pangbourne

In 1894 plans were laid to build a chapel at Pangbourne costing £550 - £600 and a new chapel to replace one built in 1853 at Swallowfield/Riseley Common to cost £350 - £400, where the members, worshipping in a barn, were hampered in their work for the want of suitable accommodation. The new chapels at Swallowfield and Pangbourne were opened on 17th October and 31st October 1895 respectively. A mission was held in Pangbourne with an encouraging result. Swallowfield, once considered 'a splendid cause', with a history of conversions going back to 1835 when missionaries first visited, kept the flame alive until the end of 1976, Pangbourne having closed in September 1970. Both buildings remain, converted into private houses.

The Street, Shurlock Row

The Rev. John Ride conducted the first services here on 29th May 1835 and a Society was formed. The chapel was opened in 1863. 'A neat building', it stood on land given by a Mr. Mortimer whose premises adjoined. A good Society, it maintained its witness until March 1918 when the last services were held. A decision to sell was made in 1925 and in 1928 the building was sold for the sum of £100.

Woodcote

Woodcote celebrated its centenary in 1986 and a comprehensive account of its history was produced at that time. Set among the Chiltern beech woods this small house of God has maintained a faithful witness through varying situations. The membership, which by 1948 had declined to single figures, experienced a revival in the next decade with the advent of several younger families and is now in good heart. [Chapel

closed 1989 and society now meets at the parish church.]



Gallowstree Common

The potential for growth in the Gallowstree Common area would appear to be not so strong, and this is perhaps reflected in the life of the local church. This building, which was opened on 23rd September 1878, is situated in the heart of the Chiltern cherry country. In the immediate post war years the circuit people would gather for the annual cherry tea and rally which was always a happy occasion. As the number of members declined the few who remained were encouraged by the support of a couple from the Caversham Society who, by their regular attendance and devotion to their Lord, kept the Methodist witness alive, but sadly, the local people were not drawn in and the last service was held on 31st August 1987.

Burghfield Common

The situation at Burghfield Common church, opened in 1923, is somewhat different. In a prominent position on the busy main road through a thriving village it has attracted a loyal and devoted congregation throughout the years of its history. A happy, hospitable place, it has welcomed newcomers and entertained members of the Circuit on many occasions, including the annual Easter

Monday rally and tea,. A recently built extension has enabled the scope of services to be widened and one hopes that the ever increasing local population will be drawn to its doors.

The Society here was formed on 17th November 1835 by the Reverend John Ride. Open air services during the summer months, and the hospitality of the local wheelwright's shop in less favourable weather, paved the way for the opening of the first chapel in 1838. That building, now converted to a private house, stands on the brow of the hill a mile away to the north-east of the present church. That first chapel, with its own brass band, served the spiritual needs of the local community until Burghfield 'burst at the seams' due to the extensive building programme on 'The Common', and the present church is at the heart of that development.



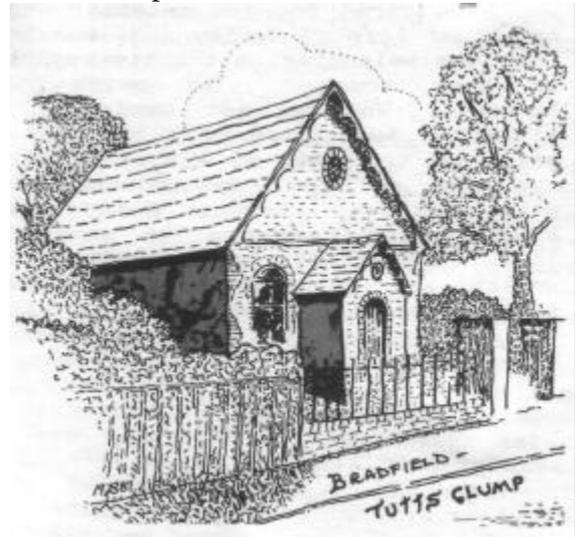
Bradfield Section

Once, Reading and Bradfield were just a small part of an enormous Primitive Methodist Circuit, which in 1835 included a large part of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Wiltshire and the north of Hampshire. Such an unwieldy collection of Societies must have been difficult to administer, and gradually it was broken down into more convenient sections. Thus came into being the Reading Circuit and the Bradfield Circuit. After Methodist Union the latter came into the Reading Circuit as the Bradfield Section, but later the churches of the Section took their rightful places among the Reading Societies.

Work in the Bradfield Circuit commenced when a Primitive Methodist preacher, Thomas Russell, already suffering persecution for his faith in the west of the County, was invited to a local meeting house in 1830. Camp meetings and the evangelical fervour which they engendered caused a rift between the 'Prims' and the more 'respectable' Wesleyans. Preachers walked many miles and endured many hardships, sleeping under hedges and being dependent on their fellow Christians for their sustenance, their sole concern being to push on to their next appointment and to win souls for Christ. We read that at Bradfield there was little or no opposition to the travelling preachers and, in fact, this cordial relationship with those of other denominations has persisted to the present day.

A handbook celebrating 148 years Methodism in Bradfield, and giving in greater detail the history of this fascinating area, was issued in 1978.

Tutts Clump



The chapel at Tutts Clump was built in 1879 and members have faithfully maintained its witness to the Gospel, particularly in their work among children and young people. In 1908 the adjoining graveyard was consecrated, one of the very few in our circuit.

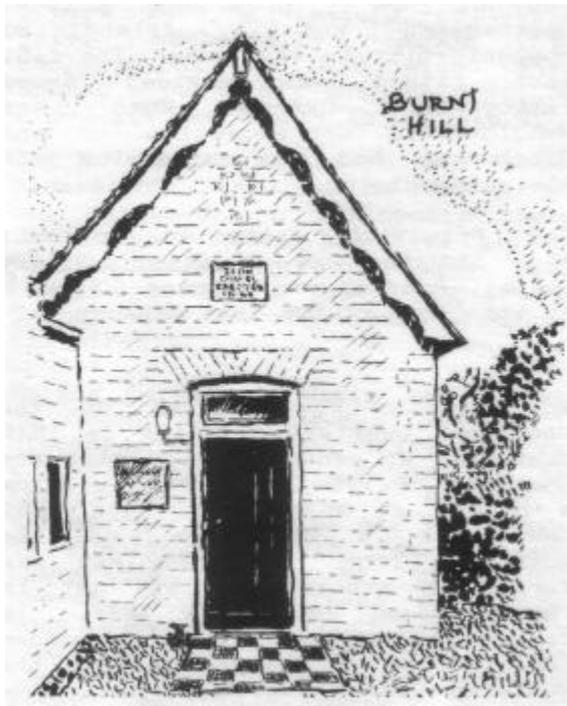
Quick's Green

The evangelical zeal of the Bradfield Society was repeated throughout the area. At Quick's Green, the attractively sited chapel which served the hamlet of Ashampstead Common, cottage meetings for prayer and camp meetings resulted in many conversions. Sadly, the numbers declined, the remoteness of the chapel proving too big a problem for the ageing members, and in 1971 it closed, re-opening for one day in May 1972 to celebrate its centenary.

Burnt Hill

Burnt Hill built in 1864 maintains a witness in this tiny hamlet adjacent to the village of Yattendon, which, in spite of a small membership, holds regular meetings for worship.

[Initially known as Zion]



Yattendon

Little information is available but it is believed that the village of Yattendon itself had its own chapel, probably built in 1851

[opened 28th/29th September in the grounds of Bee Villa, Chapel Street demolished after 1972].

Beenham

Beenham Chapel, once a thriving village cause and part of the old Bradfield Circuit, was closed in September 1969. [A chapel behind Holly Cottage in Clay Lane was replaced by a chapel on the green in 1862]

Theale

The chapel at Theale, in spite of a strong Congregational presence in the village, continued its witness until March 1959. [Built 1868, altered in 1895 and demolished 1992 site now Beaumont House]

Emmer Green

We first read of this Society in March 1855 when services were held, probably in the open air. It was not until 1883 that trustees were appointed, and in September of that year given powers to obtain consent for the building of a chapel on land, valued at £200, donated by Mr. Thomas Rogers. Meanwhile, Brother Moss, was deputed to secure a place for services in the winter, and to rent a room if possible. By November arrangements were made for stonelaying and in December it was noted 'the matter of hand bells for Emmer Green chapel be left with Mr. Butt and Mr. Picket.'

It would be interesting to know exactly where this chapel was situated and something of its history. By September 1893 permission to sell was requested and the purchaser was Mr. Martin John Sutton, a prominent local businessman and friend of nonconformity in the town. The £450 thus raised was divided among Pangbourne, Oxford Road and Swallowfield Societies and Pangbourne had the harmonium for their new church.

Silver Street

The Primitive Methodist movement also had the use of Silver Street Chapel [an Independent Methodist Church shown on maps of 1840 as being on the west side of Silver Street], Reading, for around 50 years at the close of the 19th Century.

Wokingham

The minutes of the September Quarterly Meeting in 1849 contains the exhortation: 'Watch the openings of Providence for building a chapel at Wokingham'. In 1852 there is a reference to the Wokingham room. The Society was formed in around 1839 and met in rent rooms until, in 1857, the chapel was opened. There was some transference of allegiance from the Wesleyan Church, which at the time suffered something of a decline in membership. A Sunday School was built in 1902 and a Band of Hope and Christian Endeavour were fairly well supported, but by 1910 the work became too difficult and the end came. The Salvation Army took over the building for a while.

Wokingham Road, Earley

The outcome of work begun in the open air in Lower Earley, this church [Mount Zion] opened on 9th October 1887 and services were held regularly until June 1926 when a resolution to cease services was made. The building remains and is used by the Assembly of God Pentecostal Church.

Wesleyan Societies

Now follows an account of the former Wesleyan Societies in the Reading Circuit.

Wesley

Opened in 1873, the mother church of the Wesleyan Circuit, Wesley became a worthy successor to Church Street. At the time of the Centenary, an excellent souvenir

brochure was prepared, recording in detail the history of the building, the organisation and the achievements of the members. Its pages bear witness to the skill and artistry of the architect and builders, to the steadfastness of the officers and leaders, and to the devotion and service of the members who have cared for the material and spiritual life of Wesley and made it into the welcoming, attractive place we know today. The names of Beecroft, Whiting and Davis will always be associated with the early years of the life of Wesley church and some of their descendents are with us today. Present and future historians will the name of J. J. Beecroft for he has left us a wealth of information on the activities of the Circuit between the days of Wesley's visits and more recent records.



In his account, in 1899, of the fund raising for the building of Wesley, Mr. Beecroft mentions the generosity of the Gilligan family and goes on to relate the story of one Charlie Pearson, an ordinary man with a great heart. Every morning at 3:30, Charlie walked to the home of an engine driver to call him up for duty and this received sixpence a week. At the end of 12 months Charlie presented the sum of 26 schillings to the Building Fund – a sacrificial gift reminding us of Luke 21, 1-4.

The first ordination at Wesley took place on 11th May 1894 when the Reverend James Claude Whiting was ordained prior to his departure for work in South Africa. The ordination of four more ministers for the South African field took place in 1898. During the present century a further four members of Wesley have entered the Methodist ministry, has had some distinguished ministers who, as superintendents, have diligently conducted the affairs of the Circuit. One, in the 1920s, is reputed to have had an unusual leisure pursuit, that of riding to hounds!

On a visit to Wesley in 1897 the Reverend Dinsdale T. Young urged his hearers 'Not to yield to the sin of the silence in face of the appalling growth of evil in such a time as this'. 'The Lower Hades, or the place and state of the lost between death and judgement' was the topic on which the Wesley minister preached on 28th March of the same year – powerful stuff! Also in 1897, in connection with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, special sermons were preached and collections taken in aid of the Victoria Nursing Home, a scheme to supply the poor of Reading with professional nursing in their own homes.

Work among women was already established in 1894 when mention is made of a Mothers' Meeting and of a Young Ladies' Soiree. In 1896, a hundred women from seven denominations gathered for prayer on New Year's Day, and the work prospered as a number of women's organisations grew up within the church. The work of the overseas church has always figured largely in the life of Wesley, several members having served on the mission field. The Girls' League fired the enthusiasm of young women from around the circuit and many still mourn its demise. Nothing comparable has ever been put in its place. Most of its former members are or have been active in Women's Work, but now that too is losing its identity. Since 1921 Wesley has enjoyed a lively Bright

Hour which, in 1940, was joined by the ladies of London Street. The Annual Daffodil Day, attended by hundreds of women from many denominations, was the highlight of their year. The Women's Guild of Friendship and Service has contributed much to the life of Wesley and beyond, and, in conjunction with Women's Work, has fulfilled its role of service to the community at home and overseas.

The Sunday School, once drawing its scholars from the residential area around the church, now finds its numbers considerably reduced. However, the work of J. M. A., always a strong point, continues and hopefully will expand as once more housing returns to the town centre. During wartime, evacuated children were made welcome in the homes of members and generous hospitality was extended to men and women in the forces.

As at Oxford Road, Wesley Church was generously presented with its organ by Mr. George Gilligan. Music has always been a feature of Wesley life, especially since the amalgamation in 1940 with London Street whose great musical tradition added its own beauty to worship.

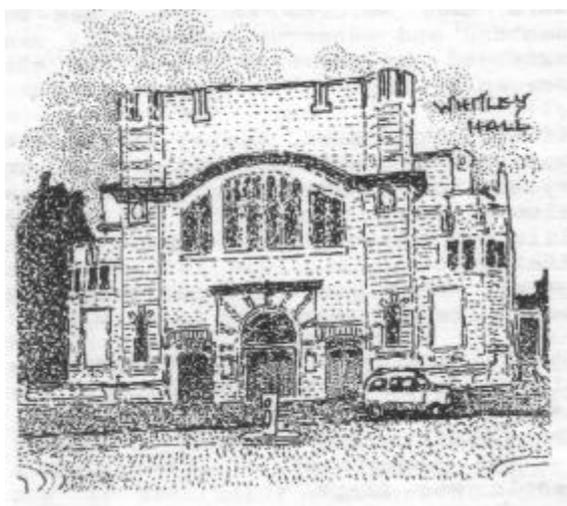
The University Methodist Society has always found a home at Wesley and has enriched the fellowship there. The Circuit, too, has been blessed by the commitment of these young people who share their joy in the Gospel with congregations throughout the Circuit.

Spring Gardens/Whitley Hall

While the Society at Church Street was struggling to discharge the debt upon its premises a new Society was emerging at the top of Whitley Hill. As in most of the earlier Societies the work began in a cottage and, in this instance, among the very young children of pre-school age. These tiny mites soon outgrew the confines of the small cottage in

Tank Road (after the water tank, now a play area, and later renamed Spring Gardens). Sunday services were held in a cottage in Mount Street. Once the Church Street debt was cleared the circuit could concentrate on its plans for Spring Gardens and Wokingham Churches. At an auction sale in 1849 several plots of land alongside what we now know as Boulton's Walk were acquired and in the following years, as they became available, other adjacent plots were added. The son of the Reverend John Waterhouse, who pioneered the work at Church Street, came to lay the foundation stone in August 1870 and the building continued. An enlargement in 1873 became necessary and an iron building was acquired.

Throughout this time and in continuing years the work had been prayerfully maintained by a band of devoted workers, and their missionary zeal had been of the highest order. In the 1890s we read of open air missions which, with the assistance of the Spring Gardens Band and a Cycle Mission, held its meetings at Whitley Pump. In 1934 the Spring Gardens Band, which began its life in the local Methodist Society, severed its links with Methodism but became locally famous and has been a feature of Reading life for many years.



Once again the numbers attending services became too great for the buildings and it became necessary to have a larger chapel.

The last services were held in the old chapel in July 1897 and December saw the opening of the new building and, in 1901, a new organ was installed. By 1904 everyone was looking forward to the new Whitley Hall which we know today. Opened in 1906 at the Whitley Pump crossroads, it has its own history of worship and witness, and of outstanding Sunday School and youth work, notably among Brigades. In 1956, 1966 and 1981, booklets, celebrating 50, 60 and 75 years respectively of the present building were issued.

[Building closed, now Hindu temple; the society meets in scout head quarters]

Wokingham

Records show that the Reverend John Waterhouse, whom we have already met as leader and prime mover of the Wesleyan cause in Reading, set in motion the work in Wokingham. A room was secured for a meeting place until, in 1819, when he left Reading, a barn in Rose Street was converted into the first chapel. The numbers attending were quite small and the cause somewhat despised by the more affluent members of the Wokingham Society until, on an afternoon in 1824 an event took place which was to alter the history of Wokingham Methodism. A young woman from a wealthy family was attending worship in the barn chapel when, through the preaching of the Reverend Joseph Dunning, God spoke to her and her life was thenceforth devoted to His Service. The young woman, later Mrs William Heelas, visited the sick, gathered children of the poor together for Christian instruction, and in many ways supported financially the overseas field and the work at home. Her premature death in 1841 was a great loss to the cause at Wokingham. How William Heelas remarried, and how the new Mrs. Heelas contributed to the life of Wokingham Chapel is told in 'Methodism in Wokingham 1817-1967' by the Reverend E. Ralph Bates.

In the mid 19th century, Primitive Methodism came to Wokingham and received immediate support which led to a decline in numbers attending the Wesleyan Chapel. Baptists and Anglicans were reporting large congregations. At this time two transfers of membership were made to the Wesleyans, one of whom, Isaiah Gadd, threw himself into the work and encouraged his fellow members so that new life was breathed into the cause. We became Sunday School Superintendent, married a Methodist bride, and settled down in Rose Street in a house opposite the Chapel. Mrs. Gadd, and later Miss Gadd, occupied the seat at the harmonium and organ for 52 years.



Plans were drawn up for a new chapel, made possible by generous gifts from the Heelas family and others. On 17th April 1870 the last services were held in the Barn Chapel and on 11th May the stonelaying ceremony of the new chapel was held, followed, on 10th November, by the official opening. Soon, provision was made for a Sunday School and vestry.

We are told Wokingham's contribution to the 20th Century Fund was extremely large, so the new century began with hope. By the good offices of the Perkins family and a grant from the Carnegie Trust, the organ was installed in 1908. During the First World War the Women's Own and the Wesley Guild began. Then came the uniformed organisations with the need for additional accommodation for all youth work, including the Sunday School. Anniversary days were important events in the School's

year with a medal, a prize Bible, and book prizes being awarded by the Superintendent. Those less fortunate were not forgotten, however, for we read that in 1899 flowers were sent to the West London Mission and, later, a London hospital received a gift of primroses.

During the 1930s and after Methodist Union, when all the Methodists of Wokingham united under one roof, the Free Churches of the area began to share in fellowship together. Joint Sunday School outings and united services were held. When war came, members of the armed forces were given hospitality, and work among young people increased and prospered. Work for Overseas Missions, both in the generous fund and J.M.A, was vigorous and the giving generous. Legacies and gifts enabled the original Rose Street Church to be enlarged and adapted for the work of their second century.

Today the Junior Church and Cubs and Scouts are flourishing, together with a Youth Club and two fellowship meetings for young people. The 'Men of Rose Street' have their own monthly meeting, and work among women of all ages continues. The membership of the Church also continues to increase as more young business people move into this attractive town with its excellent communications and proud civic history.

[Wokingham moved to the new South East Berkshire Circuit in 1991 (now Berkshire Surrey Borders). The Bradbury Community Centre opened behind the church in 2006]

Ipsden

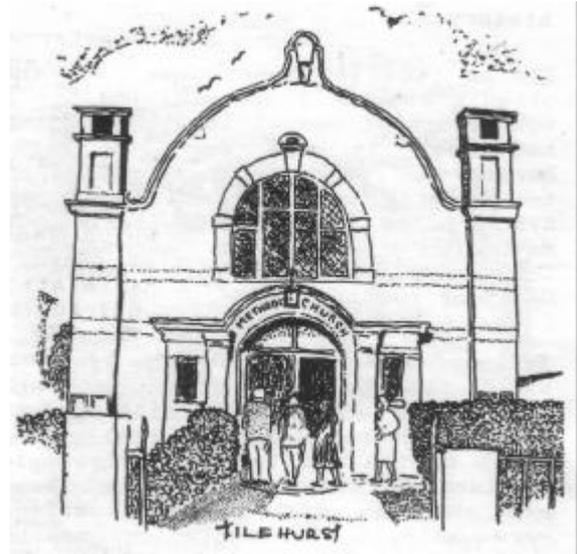
On New Year's Day 1900 the circuit assumed responsibility for a nonconformist chapel in Ipsden which had been in use for 19 years. During that year a Circuit rally and tea meeting has held and two dozen hymn books were presented, but Methodism's stay

was short-lived. The last services were held in 1901.

Tilehurst

Tilehurst was just a small village of country roads and few houses when the first open air services were held in 1861. In front of the Red Barn on a triangle of land at the end of School Road was an open space where meetings were held. Occupants of nearby cottages, and the landlady and customers at 'The Old Plough', accepted an invitation to attend and, having shut up shop, the landlady arrived, bringing with her her Wesleyan hymn book! Meetings continued during the summer months, moving in winter to a cottage with an open hearth, upon which dog irons supported the logs. A Bible, reading desk, hymn books and a few seats were purchased and Tilehurst was put on the plan with afternoon and evening services. So the work continued until the tenants of the cottage, being too old to work, had to leave. The Bible, hymn books and reading desk, having been carefully housed, were brought out again when the congregation reassembled in a coach house and stable kindly loaned by Mrs. Morden.

Here the work grew and prospered until Mr. Martin John Sutton, Mayor of Reading at the time, offered to the Society, on reasonable terms, an iron building. When the present building was completed on 8th March 1905, the iron building was removed to the rear and continued in use for many years. The new church was opened by Mr. H. T. Morley and the Reverend A. Winsor Yeo preached the first sermon. Until 1934 the Oxford Road minister was responsible also for Tilehurst, but from this time Tilehurst had its own minister and the work really took off. The years have seen a gradual expansion both of the 'village' and of the membership and the old iron building has been superseded by the pleasant premises which we see today and already the accommodation has reached its capacity, making it necessary for two services to be held each Sunday.



One of the more fruitful periods in the life of the Tilehurst Society took place during the early years of the war when many young people, servicemen and women from Britain and the U.S.A., were drawn within its orbit. On one Sunday evening 60 young people dedicated their lives to Christ and have since taken his Gospel to all parts of the world. The Christian Commando Campaign of 1943 will long be remembered as a time of renewal and spiritual uplift.

In the post war period the church grew rapidly and regular Fellowship and Youth Services have been held. An increasing number of members have felt a call to preach and have offered themselves for service as local preachers. A door-to-door mission with leaflets and an invitation to attend Tilehurst Church has been conducted in Calcot and, as a result, a fellowship group has been formed on this new housing estate.

A drama group attached to the church has been contributing to the social side and a church orchestra has been formed. The close relationship with Kentwood, forged in the 1930s, had continued, with shared activities and literature, and united worship services.

Looking to the future, plans are afoot to develop the adjoining house into a coffee and book shop, and ecumenical project which should commend itself to many passers-by on this busy main road.

Burghfield (Trash Green)

This tiny chapel maintained its witness for just over a century in this small hamlet on the Theale Road. A Mr. Day, who in his youth had been employed as a carter on a local farm and had been the victim of some hard treatment, ran away to London where he became converted and 'Go prospered him'. In thanksgiving he decided to build a chapel in his native village and it opened in 1836. Devoted members kept the flame alive and later, when the Hews and Parfitt families moved into the area, the work continued to increase.

Mr. Matthew Parfitt, who came from Somerset in 1883, was associated with the Wokingham Society until taking over Moatlands Farm at Burghfield in 1887. He was made a Circuit Steward in 1901 and on numerous occasions entertained the Quarterly Meeting. One can picture the generous farmhouse hospitality to which, no doubt, the assembled company did full justice. Moatlands Farm was for many of the Reading Societies the venue for their Sunday School treats. As early as 1894, and possibly before, the Circuit gathered annually at Trash Green Chapel on Good Friday for tea and evening rally. Traditionally on Good Friday and Easter Monday the country chapels of the Circuit held a tea meeting, and to this day those Good Friday lardy cake teas at Trash Green remain in the memory of many Circuit members. Hundreds went out from Reading on foot, by horse-drawn brake, by cycle, or, later, by 'bus or car. Sometimes as many as 300 attended and, between the 'sittings', went in search of primroses in Hose Hill woods.

A Sunday School was begun in 1893 and at Christmas a tea meeting packed the chapel to the doors as children received presents from the Christmas tree. In 1899 concern was expressed at the difficulty of keeping older Sunday School scholars, leaving the villages in search of work in the towns, in touch with the church. In the following year a united mission with the Primitive Methodist Chapel on Burghfield Common, and the Congregational Chapel at Sulhamstead, was held.

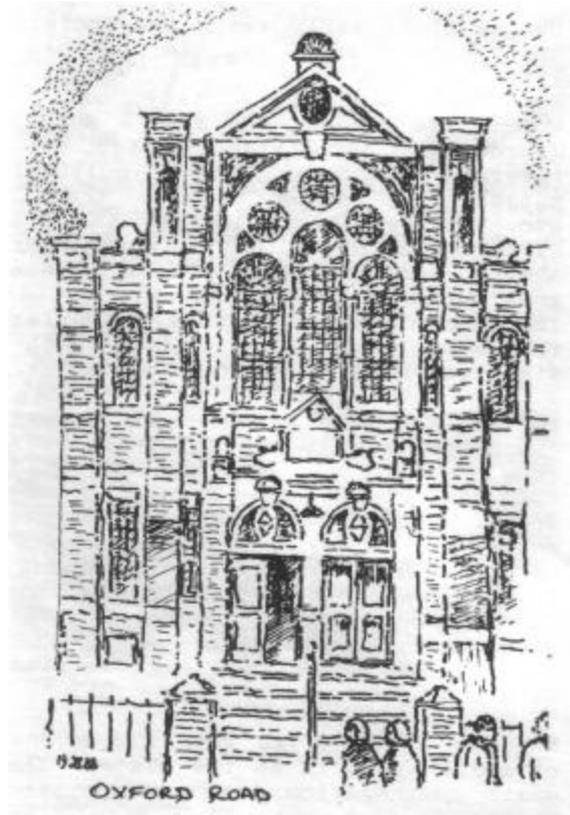
In time the principle families of Burghfield Church either died or moved away, and the remaining few struggled on until, in March 1938, it ceased to be a Methodist church. The building remains but is now a private house.

Oxford Road

So no longer a neighbourhood church, the years have seen many changes on the Western edge of the town since a small band of Church Street members began to meet in West Street Hall in 1871. The Sunday School registers, in beautiful copperplate script, date from this time. Scholars were drawn mainly from that area of Reading now occupied by the Civic Centre and Inner Distribution Road, which was then a maze of tightly packed streets and courts.

Soon a permanent situation was called for and land was purchased from Zinzan Estate at the corner of Waylen Street, and an iron chapel was erected in 1873. The church hall followed and in 1893 foundation stones for the Church were laid. The opening, on 7th February 1894, was a great occasion. The Reverend Dr. R. N. Young, governor of Handsworth College, preached at 3:30 from Ezekiel 17-9: 'And everything shall live whither the river cometh'. Five hundred people sat down to tea and the capacity evening gathering was addressed by Dr. Young, the Reverend Enoch Salt (Chairman of the District) and by the Reverend

Ambrose Shepherd representing the Free Churches of Reading.



Mr. John Minty, a generous benefactor to Oxford Road and Caversham churches, had bequeathed £1600 towards the £4500 cost of the building. In the same year a three day bazaar was held which raised £300. The Manse at the corner of Waylen Street (now Church House) sported a Union Jack, and flags spanned Waylen Street. Each Society in the town had a stall and local businessmen contributed generously. Mention was made of a Mr. and Mrs. Tennant who, by their own exertions, furnished a stall selling useful articles ranging from mustard plasters to chocolate creams!

Also in 1894, on 1st April, began a very successful venture, the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, which was both devotional and educational in character, holding many social events and catering for those inside and outside the church. At this time we first read of the Oxford Road Wesleyan Cricket

Club and also of the formation of the Wesley Guild. In 1896 the first of many annual P.S.A. river outings took place, highly publicised by means of placards adorning the engine or boat.

Gradually the beautifying of the sanctuary was taking place. Mr. Arthur Newbery, an Oxford Road member and local businessman, gave the five carved panels which adorn the pulpit, electric lights were hung in clusters from the ceiling and gallery, and a fine organ costing £400 was given by Mr. G. G. Gilligan in memory of his wife. The schoolroom was redecorated and wall paintings of The Good Shepherd were designed and executed by Mr. L. H. Beecroft. Oxford Road has been singularly fortunate in the financial help given from those early days right down to the present day by the late Mr. Newbery. A handsome, kindly gentleman, who entered fully into the life of the church, he gave generously during his lifetime as the need arose, and the circuit continues to benefit by the generous provision of his bequests.

The Wesley Guild flourished and provided a meeting point for men and women of all ages. In 1904, consternation was expressed that a social evening should end with a 'Sir Roger de Coverley'. Such worldly abandonment as a country dance was just not the done thing! What would they have made of today's disco?

Sunday School work continued, with uniformed organisations, Junior Guild and Youth Fellowship. Dramatic productions were staged in Church and hall, and week-night religious film services were held in the Church. Servicemen and women were made welcome during the 1939-45 war. The advent of the car and television reduced the numbers attending and the gallery is no longer used. After a disastrous fire in 1978 which destroyed the organ, the seating has been reorganised and the whole church re-carpeted. House fellowships, youth work and

a flourishing Women's Fellowship, now 60 years old, form the basis of weekday Oxford Road life today.

A commemorative booklet to celebrate the centenary of Oxford Road was issued in 1972.

[Church subsequently closed and congregation joined Emmanuel.]

Henley

John Wesley found little to encourage him here but he paid several visits and in 1768 writes of having preached in the chapel. This is believed to be the Independent Chapel. There seems to have existed a bond between the two Societies which continued into the next century. The earliest Methodist meeting place was in a stable at the back of a Market Place shop. The animal noises which accompanied the service must have been distracting. It was a very dark and run-down place but the warmth of the fellowship made up for a few minor discomforts. The membership in those days (mid 19th century) was small, and composed mainly of domestic servants with a sprinkling of local residents. The butler and housekeeper at nearby Park Place were among the congregation and contributed generously to the building fund, the latter having donated a sovereign given to her by Queen Victoria and the greater part of a legacy from her late employer. The Minty family were once again generous benefactors to the cause and Mrs. Minty laid the foundation stone of the chapel on 21st July 1873.

During those early years the Society contributed much to the cultural life of the town. A Wesleyan Methodist Musical Society of 30 voices was formed, and also a Mutual Improvement Association, which held regular lectures on cultural subjects – famous people, travel, etc. Several Societies in the Circuit held Mutual Improvement events and probably out of these grew support for the Wesley Guild. The nonconformist churches of Henley for some

years held joint Watchnight services on New Year's Eve.



In 1897 the debt on the building was discharged and in the following year some renovations were put in hand and the church was given a good spring clean. The cost, £110, was met by a 'Gipsy Encampment Bazaar' held in Mr Wm. Hamilton's meadow. In 1899 we find the first reference to an inter-church football match with Wesley, which Henley won 2-0. In 1904 the schoolroom and vestries were provided.

Now the building is gone and a row of smart shops is in its place. The small congregation has moved to the parish church of St. Mary, an ecumenical venture which has met with success and which would have gladdened our Founder's heart could he return to Henley today. We should perhaps pause to reflect on the dedication of local preachers who throughout many years, until the advent of the car and local 'bus, walked the eight miles from reading to Henley in all weathers. On one occasion, when in a Local Preachers' meeting the Superintendent Minister proposed that the cause at Henley should be given up, the local preachers

unanimously rejected the proposal and the work continued.

[Meetings stopped 2003]

Twyford

Little information is available, but we know that friends of the Hosier Street, Reading, Free Methodist Church, built a church and maintained it for 30 years. It was transferred at a nominal price to the Wesleyans and played its part in the life of the Circuit until, in December 1920, the last services were held and it closed in 1921.

Kentwood

In the early 1930s the Tilehurst friends began holding meetings at the bottom of Kentwood Hill and it soon became apparent that a church in that area was needed. Mr. Arthur Newbery, a Methodist and generous benefactor to the Reading Circuit, living nearby, gave land for the building of Kentwood Church which was opened 1937 and has maintained a devoted witness in that part of Tilehurst until the present day. In that growing area it has great potential. On Saturday 12th September 1987 Kentwood celebrated their Golden Jubilee with a garden party, and with a service of thanksgiving on the following day. [Church since closed]



Sulhamstead and Swallowfield

Sulhamstead and Swallowfield, together with Twyford, were lost to the circuit in 1850 by the 'Reform Movement' but Twyford returned to the fold and the wounds of dissension were healed.

Three Mile Cross

Mr. Bromley, a Wesleyan of long standing, opened his house for worship until the first chapel was built in 1860. Having been built over a pond its life was of brief duration as dry rot set in. The foundation stone of the present building was laid in 1876 by Mrs. James Dymore Brown.

Although so near to Reading, Three Mile Cross has preserved its individuality and is still very much a village church. The town churches have always been willing to offer support and have accepted hospitality on many occasions. [Church since closed]



Whitchurch Hill

Built in 1849 and at first a struggling cause, by the end of the first decade it was regarded as the most rewarding country place in the Reading Circuit. Indeed, at the Harvest Festival of 1894 so many came that the

chapel was filled to the doors and many were unable to gain admission and fifty-two people remained behind for a prayer meeting. There was a large and flourishing Sunday School, and a excellent choir which was reorganised in 1897 when a presentation was made to the organist. At the weeknight meeting of the Missions Anniversary in 1898, at which lantern slides of Guiana were shown, tickets had to be issued in order to prevent overcrowding. In spite of all this promise there was a gradual decline in membership and the end came in 1915,

Elm Park Hall

Towards the end of the 19th century a vast, new housing estate was being built at the west end of Reading on a site, which was formerly the estate of Alderman Hill, known as Elm Park. It was felt that a Methodist witness in the area was needed and a former Salvation Army Hall in Elm Park Road was acquired for 12 shillings per week rental. From 1901 services were held here, and in the open air, until a more permanent building could be erected. In the first year 200 scholars attended the Sunday School. The summer treat to Moatlands Farm, Trash Green, when visitors were conveyed by motor car, was a huge success. The Band of Hope, too, was thriving.



On 22nd June 1904 the stonelaying ceremony for the new hall was well supported by the Circuit. Mr. G. G. Gilligan, a generous benefactor to Wesley and Oxford Road, Donated £1000 and other friends gave their gifts as stones were laid. Forty children from around the Circuit (and we know their names) laid bricks. The entire cost of the building was to be £6500. On 1st February 1905 the new building, known as Elm Park Hall Wesleyan Mission, was opened by the President of Conference, the Reverend Sylvester Whitehead, in front of a full Church. The main hall, accommodating 1000, was on the first floor with its gallery and choir rostrum, whilst the lower hall was used for Sunday School and youth work, and, during the 1914-18 war, as a day school. The massive organ commemorated those who gave their lives in the 1914-18 war.

A feature of the early years was the Elm Park Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, with its own orchestra and much support from the men and women on the fringe of the church activities. P.S.A. outings by river and rail were publicised in the local press, such was their popularity. In later years, bazaars and eisteddfodau continued to attract local talent and support and provided funds and maintained the social life of the church. Music had always been a feature of the Life of Elm Park Hall.

[Church subsequently closed and congregation joined Emmanuel.]

Caversham

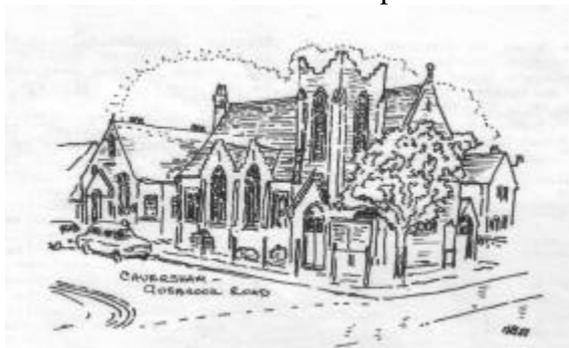
(Now more usually known as Gosbrook Road.) Separated from Reading by the River Thames, Caversham must have enjoyed a quiet rural atmosphere when Methodist cottage meetings begin in the mid 19th century. In fine weather the congregation took to the open air and thus were able to make contact with a wider public. In August 1881 the foundation stones of the first

building, an iron chapel, were laid and the work took on a more permanent basis. At the Quarterly Meeting of December 1893 a most profitable and stimulating conversation on the work of God took place and in particular on the special mission services in Caversham – ‘the blessed influence felt at the prayer meetings, preaching services, and in the Sunday School.’

The Society had a good friend in Mr. H. C. Bound, a member of Church Street, and later of Oxford Road, who, with members of the latter Society, gave help and encouragement to the Caversham friends during their early years as a Society. In gratitude for his help both spiritual and financial, especially to the Sunday School, a tablet in memory of Mr. Bound was placed in the schoolroom and survives to this day. The one placed in his own church at Oxford Road does not! The schoolroom, which also served as a church until the present building was erected, was built in 1891.

In 1898 the stonelaying for the new chapel took place and on 11th January 1899 it was opened. Thanks to another good friend of Oxford Road and Caversham, Mr. John Minty, and gifts at the stonelaying, the new building opened almost free of debt.

A string band, which for some years had accompanied the singing, continued to do so, and the new organ was installed in March 1903. At circuit events the Caversham string band and Spring Gardens Band often joined forces and must have made a useful contribution to events in the open air.



The church, with its spire, was a handsome building, but, unfortunately, the spire became unsafe and had to be removed in 1958. Then, several years later, the weight of the roof caused the walls to bulge and much restoration work became necessary. The work was costly, but by a determined effort, the bills were paid. Financial help came, unexpectedly, from friends in distant places. A ministerial exchange between the Reverend Ralph Rogerson and the Reverend Herbert Glenn had forged a link of friendship between the two societies and the American friends made a generous donation to the Caversham rebuilding fund of £1200. The result is a beautified sanctuary, light and attractive, enabling this devoted and dedicated community to maintain a faithful witness and to serve the needs of Caversham into the 21st century. Perhaps the greatest contribution to the life of the community is the work among young people in Brigades and Sunday School, and among women. To commemorate the centenary of Gosbrook Road a booklet giving background information of the village of Caversham in 1881 and the place of the church in it, and a description of today's activities, was issued in 1981.

Caversham Heights

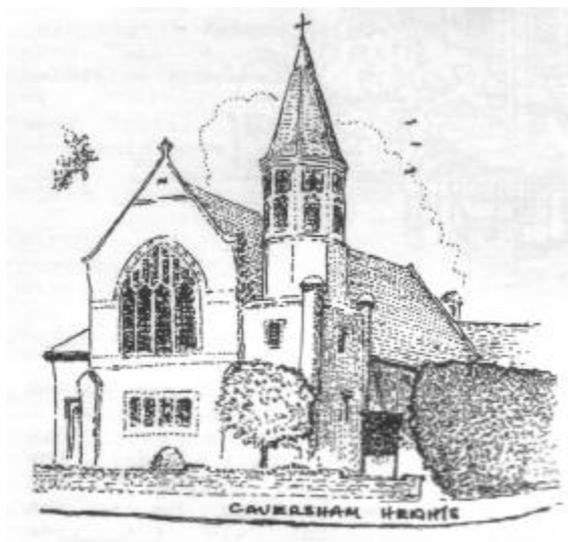
At a Circuit meeting in 1900 it was decided that a Wesleyan church was to be erected on a site on Warren Hill, Caversham. The plot of land was given by Mr. J. C. Fidler and the church was opened on Wednesday 23rd June 1909 at a cost of £2000; it was the last church to be built under the Wesleyan Extension Scheme. Its membership was 25 and due to the sparse population did not rise beyond 100 for the next fifty years.

An American organ led the singing until 1913 when the present organ was purchased from Trinity Congregational Church, Reading, for £100. The organ was overhauled in 1959 and completely rebuilt in

1981 at a cost of £25000, and rededicated at a recital given by the late Dr. W. S. Lloyd Webber. It is one of the finest organs in the area.

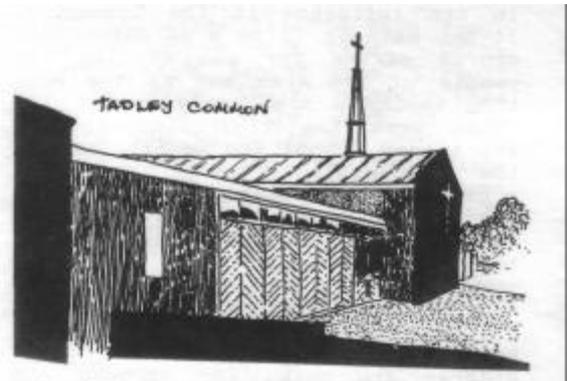
In 1929 a lecture hall was added for £1000, followed by extensions in 1959 and 1974 and a new kitchen was fitted in 1986.

Alongside the building programme of the last fifty years there has been growth in its membership to the present 275, and in its influence in the community. It has set out to be a neighbourhood church caring for and serving the people of the area and at the same time having a missionary zeal. The youth work has flourished through its Sunday School and Squash, and in the variety of uniformed organisations, playgroups and Mother and Toddler groups. There are now two women's organisations meeting the needs of all ages. In recent years a success has been the Caversham Heights Society, arising out of the Wesley Guild, and now having a membership of 200. The elderly are cared for through the 'Stay-a-While' (a luncheon club) and 'Out-a-While' (which takes members out on visits). The spiritual needs are met through two Prayer Groups and five House Fellowships. There is a telephone counselling service, 'Share-a-Care', based at the church, and the Berkshire Polio Fellowship meets regularly on its premises.



Tadley Common

Like many of its predecessors in the Reading area, the Society began its life in the home of one of its first members. In 1956 a small group met together for worship and decided that a Methodist Church was needed in this growing area. The Atomic Weapons Research Establishment attracted a great number of workers, a housing estate grew up, and with it the Methodist Church in Newchurch Road. The attractive layout is in the form of a square with the Manse on one side, the church and hall adjoining and a central courtyard garden. As a Society of young families, work among children and young people predominates, and continues with Women's Fellowship and other activities. In 1982, Tadley Common celebrated its 25th anniversary with ten days of celebration and visits from former ministers.



Trinity, Lower Earley

In the Lower Earley district of Reading, one of the largest housing developments in Europe began in 1983 and shortly afterwards a Methodist and United Reformed society was formed, meeting in the new Radstock Community Centre. Plans were made to build a united church as part of the large District Centre, alongside the health centre, library, leisure complex, youth and community centre, public house and supermarket. As the plans neared completion, the Church of England also

joined the scheme and on 7th November 1987 a lovely new United Church and premises were opened. The cost of £340000 makes a stark contrast with the cost of some of the early circuit churches. The new church is called 'Trinity', with a joint church council of Anglicans, Methodists and United Reformed members, and with a shared ministry of ministers from each denomination. It seats 250 people, and is already full on most Sunday mornings, its membership having risen to over 100.



Winnersh

This cause grew out of an independent mission, first becoming a class of the Wokingham Society, having a good Sunday School, and acquiring its independence within Reading Circuit in 1982. It was, however, closed in July 1985. [Later demolished]

Bourne Memorial

Opened on 11th December 1948, this neat, airy building at the centre of Whitley Estate appeared to have a great potential. A resident Deaconess ensured that the local people could identify with the friendly figure

living among them and working with them. And so, for a few years, it proved to be. The Sunday School and Brigades work flourished and the Women's meeting and Sunday Services were well attended. No one really knows why Bourne did not succeed, but people stopped coming and the vandals took over. Sadly, the end came in 1980, but one feels that the church needs to be present in such areas.

Woodley



In the post war years when Woodley gradually lost its identity as a Berkshire village and became a suburb of greater Reading, a Methodist witness began to take shape and those professional and business people who had settled in the area looked around for a meeting place. Services were held at first in Coronation Hall, but it soon became imperative that a more permanent building should be acquired. In 1963 that became a reality when the Circuit had the foresight to acquire a large site with room for expansion, and within a few years the number of members had outgrown the premises and further expansion became necessary. Ultimately a new Church had to be built and at the same time an amalgamation of the Methodist and United Reformed Churches was effected [1982]. A modern, airy building, with large windows open to the passing world, has replaced the dark original church and has provided further scope for numerous activities among the nearby residents.

A history of Methodism in the Silchester Area

Silchester probably had one of the oldest Christian communities in Britain; indeed there had been a city of the ancient Britons at Silchester long before the Roman invasion, which would have rivalled the cities of Winchester and Cirencester. Excavations in later years have unearthed many important features of early life. There was a Christian Church present in the 4th Century lying on or close to the site of the present 12th Century Parish Church.

The Methodist work in the Silchester area was mainly carried out by the Primitive Methodists and was originally directed from Micheldever and Shefford. However, there is a record of Silchester local preachers taking part in open air services in Reading, and at the Reverend John Ride's first service on 12th April 1835.

The Silchester and Reading Circuits united in 1982.

Silchester

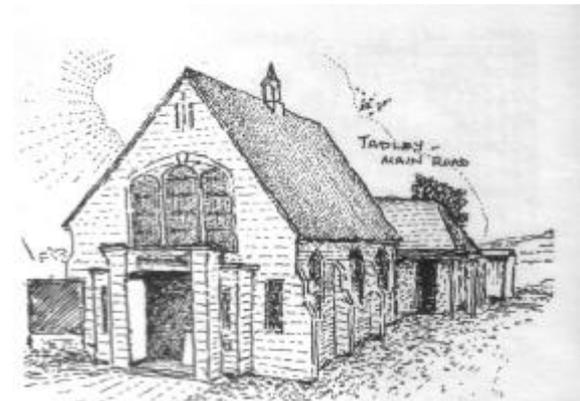
The first house-meetings in Silchester were held in 1834, and the following year a primitive structure of tree branches, covered with furze from the Common, was built. The existing property was purchased in 1839 and registered as a Dissenters' Meeting House on 28th October 1841. The manse was built alongside in 1864 as the Superintendent's home. A new chapel was built in 1927 and the 1839 building became the school room. There are stories told of the Silchester preachers holding open-air meetings in the water meadows near Aldermaston, and the rowdy villagers trying to drive them into the River Kennet. A fascinating account of the work at Silchester was written by the Reverend Edwin Millichamp in 1898, and there is mention of 418 pupils in the Sunday Schools of the section, with 70 teachers in the Circuit's eight Chapels. Plans are now in

hand for the 150th Anniversary celebrations in 1989.



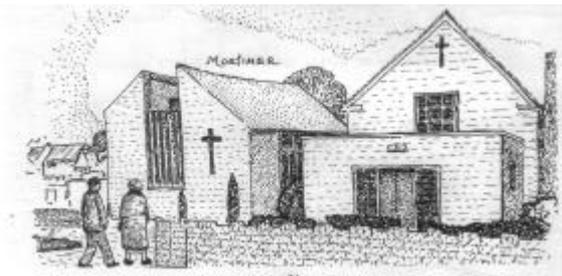
Tadley – Main Road

The original Chapel was built in 1859. Because of the growth of the area a new Chapel opened just prior to the Methodist Union in 1931, the old building becoming the schoolroom. Tadley also had its own band based at the Chapel and a local vicar in the 1860s made the comment 'The beer houses on Sundays are no longer full; the people are gone to the Ranters' Chapels.'



Mortimer

It was in 1867 that the first Chapel was built in Drury Lane for £245 and a schoolroom was added in 1897 at a cost of £220. Adjoining this Chapel is a burial ground which is still in use. Drury Lane is on the outskirts of the village and when new premises were contemplated land was acquired in a more central spot at West End Road. A new church hall was erected in 1955 and the worship and activities were transferred from Drury Lane, although the burial ground continued to be used. Then in the summer of 1972 a church was opened adjoining the 1956 hall. The work at Mortimer has grown along with its buildings, helped by extensive development of the area.



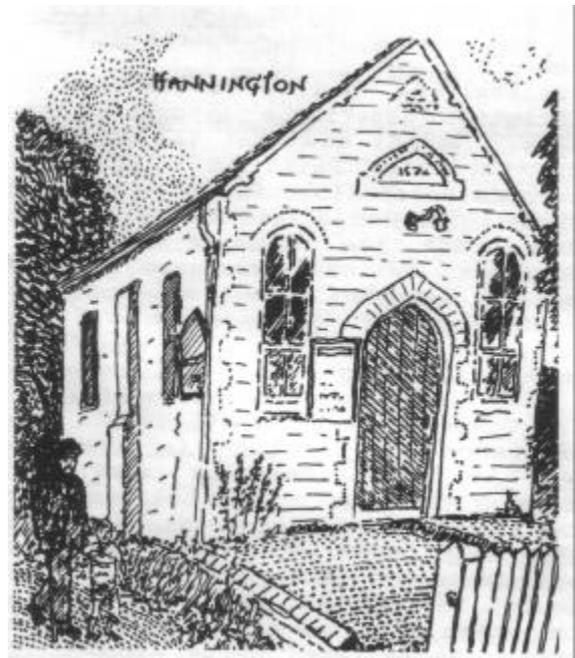
Baughurst



Services were held in a house at Baughurst in 1840 and a small chapel was opened in 1845, with the present larger building being opened on 17th October 1872. Revival Meetings and Camp meetings were a regular feature of the Chapel's life, as was the Baughurst Gospel Temperance Band. The band played for open air meetings and in the Chapel. Membership reached 50 between the two World Wars, but since then has decreased steadily and recently the Chapel was closed [1987].

Hannington

In this quiet little village, isolated in the fold of the North Hampshire Downs, a Chapel was opened in 1871 at a cost of £103 though it has never had a very large membership. Of all the Bands which started in those early days one remains linked to this building, joining in the worship on some occasions. [Closed 1994]



Haughurst Hill

The building started life as an Independent Mission Hall, but its pulpit was often occupied by the Primitive Circuit preachers. In 1929 permission was obtained from the Charity Commissioners to incorporate the Mission into the Silchester Primitive Methodist Circuit. [Closed]



Wolverton Common/Little London/Wootton

Mention needs to be made of two other Chapels which have closed in recent years: Wolverton Common built in 1867 for £107 and originally known as Kingsclere Common [closed 1980s], and Little London, built in 1867 for £146 [closed 1985]. There was also a Chapel at Wootton [St Lawrence – built in 1870 – transferred to Basingstoke circuit in 1915].

Charter Alley

Built in 1852 for £234, this is the oldest Chapel still in use in the Circuit. Some twenty years prior to this, meetings had taken place in a dwelling house. There was a good deal of trouble with the Trust in 1939, as all its original members had died and extensive searches had to be made to discover their heirs-in-law before a new Trust could be legally constituted. [Closed in about 1994]