

THE HISTORY OF GOTHERINGTON CHAPEL by Caroline Meller

‘I preached to a little earnest company at Gutherton’. So reported the great John Wesley on his visit to Gotherington on 13th October 1743. Seven months later he returned to preach for a second time imploring a local pastor to ‘keep the people at Gutherton, if you can, in that lovely simplicity (of faith)’. The message he preached inspired villagers to turn away from the established church and to found a Methodist Society within their community; the first to be formed in the Cheltenham area.

For many years after John Wesley’s second visit the villagers would congregate for services on the village green (where the War Memorial now stands). Applications were made to worship within local homes; for example, in 1802, Richard Williams of Elm Tree Cottage, applied for a license and in 1809 John Wall of Agg’s Lane did likewise. The non-conformist approach to religion gained popularity and in 1823 a Sunday School was founded. Attending this school gave local children the only opportunity they were ever likely to receive to read, write and to benefit from religious and moral instruction. So many children were keen to learn that a local barn was requisitioned for lessons.

It became apparent by this time that the use of houses and a barn did not fulfil the needs of those wanting to worship as non-conformists. The Honourable Henry Craven (1776-1836), owner of the Gotherington estate, was persuaded to sell a small parcel of land to the non-conformist villagers for the nominal fee of five shillings. The community then pulled together to provide materials and labour in order to build this place of worship. The chapel subsequently opened on 10th June 1833, appropriately in the same year the Sunday School movement celebrated its 50th anniversary. It became licensed to be used as a place of worship in June 1834. Fifteen men were elected as Trustees: five farmers, two other villagers and eight Cheltenham tradesmen.

It was estimated that by 1839 two thirds of Gotherington’s population had become dissenters. News of this eventually reached the ears of the Bishop of Gloucester who, in March 1843, made it known that he was unhappy Gotherington had no Anglican Chapel of Ease. It was thought that in part the villagers chose to follow a non-conformist faith because of the ‘badness’ of the roads and distance from the parish church at Bishop’s Cleeve. Providing a Chapel of Ease would perhaps bring villagers back into the fold but this idea never materialised.

Whilst faith kept them spiritually strong the villagers soon discovered that the chapel building was constantly in need of repair. Although subscriptions and donations ensured provision of a chapel had cost only £200, this provided little more than the bare necessities rather than a substantial place of worship. It seems there was never enough money to undertake anything more than basic renovation work and even when there was some money the committee could never agree what to prioritise. Only fifty years after its construction the building was described as ‘dilapidated’ and by the 1890s it was in need of serious repair. Local craftsmen who were also members of the congregation provided what they could but their generosity only stretched as far as short term stop-gaps.

Part of the challenge for the congregation was accepting support which wouldn’t threaten their independence. The chapel had been established with help from the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion, a national organisation, but members were always wary about accepting the fifteen Articles of Faith that it adhered to. The Connexion could also appear remote and closer ties were forged for some years in the late 19th / early 20th centuries with St. Andrews Church, Cheltenham. Preachers from there would ride out to Gotherington to lead services and members to the two congregations would attend events at each other’s churches. The chapel paid for these preachers to visit and this included the cost of someone to mind the pony and trap. Tea and cake was also provided to sustain the pastor on his journey back to Cheltenham. However, St. Andrews could also be financially supportive. In 1913 for example Lady Baden-Powell, a

member of the congregation there, donated a quarter of the money needed towards the cost of a new organ at Gotherington.

Attention was diverted during both world wars when members focussed on supporting those residents who had left the village to defend the nation's freedom. It was only later, in the 1950s, that the need to strengthen both the spiritual and physical state of the chapel took on a renewed vigour. Phyllis Rhodes suggested that to give it a defined status within the community the term 'chapel' should be replaced with 'Free Church'. Some groups associated with the chapel years such as the Women's Fellowship began to hold regular meetings again. Events new to the Free Church began to be celebrated. Harvest Festival had always been the most important celebration of the year but by the early 1950s the Sunday School Anniversary took on this mantle. In 1955 a Mothering Sunday service and a Christmas Carol Concert were introduced giving residents the opportunity to worship within the village more frequently. In turn, this encouraged new groups to form who held regular prayer meetings, bible study classes and, for younger members of the congregation, clubs called '66' and 'Allsorts'.

Alongside this spiritual growth the need to yet again improve the facilities became ever more pressing. Even in the 1960s an earth toilet was still in use, a small hole in the back wall of the building providing the only ventilation. Neighbours voiced concerns that roof slates were likely to fall off during spells of bad weather and could either hit a pedestrian or seriously damage cars parked nearby. Fortunately, the expansion of the village at this time attracted many white collar workers. Their support for fundraising events enabled the Rev. Norman Lloyd, the Free Church pastor, to initiate and organise a series of renovations throughout the late 1970s which it was hoped would secure the building's future once and for all. Regular services and meetings were then able to continue throughout the 1980s and into the 90s including joint events held for the first time with the local Anglican congregation. In 2000 though, despite all these efforts, the Trustees, unhappy with the state of the building, decided the Free Church should close for good. The building then remained dormant until 2005 when once again it received a face lift. Short-lived use was followed by closure just one year later.

By 2012 it became clear that use of the building could help to prevent rapid decay as well as providing additional space for village events. This time around a broader section of the community was allowed to make use of it and it was renamed the Church Centre. As well as a monthly act of worship (to keep within the rules laid down by the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion) the parish council began to hold their meetings there and Connexion meals were organised for older residents. Regular use, which brought in much needed revenue, enabled further essential repairs to be carried out. However, in 2016 a structural survey forced an abrupt closure of the building; it being deemed unsafe for any use whatsoever.

Throughout its history the chapel has been sustained by the faith and loyalty of local people. William Wyman, Edwin Oakey, Charles Price, Marion Holmes, Rex and Phyllis Rhodes, and Peter Lewis are just some of those who have ensured a thread of continuity across the centuries. The future fate of the Church Centre now lies once again in the hands of the Trustees and in the support that local residents are undoubtedly willing to give.

Acknowledgments

Gotherington Free Church 1833-1983 by Rev. Norman A. Lloyd B.Ed.

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