

Bishop's Stortford Methodist Church 1903-2003

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The Methodist Church

Methodism - How it all began

John Wesley was the founder of Methodism. He was born at Epworth in Lincolnshire where his father, Samuel, was the rector of the Parish Church. He was the fifteenth child of a family of nineteen children and his brother, Charles, the famous hymn writer, was the eighteenth. When John was six and Charles, two, they almost lost their lives when the rectory caught fire during the night. John later said that, "he was plucked as a brand from the burning." John was educated at Charterhouse and Oxford University and served for a while as his father's curate. In 1729, he went back to Oxford to teach and, there, he and Charles formed a group of men called The Holy Club. They met regularly to read the Bible and pray together. It was a disciplined and systematic way of life. They tried to live according to the methods or rules found in the New Testament and, hence, they were rather derisively called Methodists. They gave all they could to the poor, visited the prisoners in Oxford jail and helped people to understand the Bible.

Samuel had a great influence on their lives and they owed much to his teaching. After Samuel's death in 1735, the two brothers decided to go to America, which, at that time, was an English colony. Voyages, at that time, were by sailing ship and the journey lasted many weeks. Also on board were some Moravians. Moravia was part of Czechoslovakia and these people had adopted a way of life very much akin to that of the Wesley brothers. The Moravians were persecuted for their beliefs in various countries and they had eventually settled in Germany. John and Charles had many conversations with them and found that they were able to offer a new understanding of the gospels which, in turn, influenced their thinking.

The Wesleys went to preach to the colonists and the Red Indians and, whilst there, Charles became secretary to the State Governor. They returned to England three years later but they felt dissatisfied that their teaching was not reaching the ordinary people. In London, John met

Peter Bohler, one of the Moravian preachers, and he began to attend services in the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane.

On the evening of 24 May 1738, John went to a meeting in Aldersgate Street, where he heard Martin Luther's preface to a book on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans being read aloud. Suddenly, he realised what had been wrong and how mistaken he had been. His religion had been too cold to comfort ordinary men and women who needed to learn, above all else, that God loved each one of them, even the poor and wretched. It was as if a light had been lit in his mind and a fire in his heart. He wrote in his journal: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine." He was full of great joy and felt he must go out and tell everyone that they might know of his great happiness, too. A few days earlier his brother, Charles, had a similar experience and so they set out together to tell the good news of the gospel to everyone. John said, "All the world is my parish", meaning that his message need not be confined within one church. He soon began to attract huge crowds of people wherever he went and these followers began to be called Methodists.

The English towns and villages to which they went were vastly different to the same places today. Eighteenth Century society was very unequal with a huge difference between the conditions of the rich and the poor. The poor had little or no education and were often depressed and hopeless. They had little to look forward to and, in order to alleviate their misery, often got drunk. Religion had no meaning for them. It was to these people that Wesley and his followers came with their good news of salvation for all. They preached that God was not a far off being but cared for each individual person and would help each one to find happiness, both on earth and in Heaven. When the Methodist preachers were forbidden to preach in Anglican churches, they spoke in the open air. John Wesley went into the fields and on to the moors and preached wherever there was an open space where crowds could gather. People learned the hymns that Charles Wesley wrote; hymns of faith, hope and love. During his lifetime he wrote well over a hundred hymns, many of which, today, are still some of our best-loved hymns.

Miners in Bristol, smugglers in Cornwall, shepherds in the countryside all thrilled with the new faith in Jesus Christ and felt they could make a

fresh start with sins forgiven. They formed societies and small groups and people drawn from within these societies met together to share in prayer.

Each group or class, as it is still known today, was under the guidance of a leader who took pastoral responsibility for each one making sure that they lived a holy life. The leader collected from each person one penny a week. The classes shared fellowship together and helped their neighbours.

Methodist preachers covered enormous areas of the country on horseback, founding societies, preaching and helping to improve the living and working conditions of the people. John Wesley travelled as much as 4,000 miles a year. There was a great need for improvement in living and working conditions. The Industrial Revolution had begun and people moved from the country to new industrial towns, where they often worked and had to live in dreadful conditions. Many social reformers were Methodists.

John Wesley was always finding ways to help the poor and disheartened. He opened dispensaries for the sick and helped others pay their debts freeing them from prison. He supported William Wilberforce in his efforts to end the slave trade. Despite all his travelling and hard work, he lived to a great age. He died on 2 March 1791, when he was nearly 88 years old.

John and Charles Wesley died as Anglicans. In 1743, John drew up the rules for Methodists and the first Methodist Conference took place the following year, when the societies were organised into circuits. A circuit was an area that could be comfortably covered by a man on horseback. It was obviously impossible for one man to cover the whole country himself, so Wesley began to ordain preachers to assist him in his work. He felt he had this right as he was an elder in the Anglican Church. This action was to lead to a break with the Anglicans after his death and this was when the Methodist Church was founded. By 1770, there were growing numbers of Methodist chapels; these were given legal sanction in 1787 under the Tolerance Act of 1689. Methodism had grown, too, in America and, by 1784, John Wesley had appointed Francis Asbury as joint superintendent for America.

Many people believed that Methodism, with its great social influence on the poorer classes, had much to do with averting a revolution, as had

happened in France. Methodism had a great impact on the working class and poorer members of society.

During the Nineteenth Century divisions arose. The parent body was known as the Wesleyan Methodist Church. The Primitive Methodists were founded in 1811 and originated from the open-air camp meetings. They were more rigid in their views than the Wesleyans. The first leaders of the Labour movement belonged to the Primitive Methodists and Trade Unions, at the beginning, were organised into Chapels similar to a class meeting, where a weekly subscription was collected. The Wesleyan Methodists were drawn more from the middle classes. Jabez Bunting was a dominant influence. There were also United Methodists. These were all united into one Methodist Church in 1932.

Anglican Methodist Covenant 2003

With the passing of the years, greater understanding has developed between all denominations. For a long time, there have been many attempts to unify the Anglicans and the Methodists with the two denominations having much in common. Recently, many communities have found it economically and spiritually necessary to share buildings.

A big step has been taken towards the goal of total unity. In November 2003, an Anglican Methodist Covenant was signed setting out the commitment to seek ways in which full unity might be achieved. It acknowledged the points of faith that the two churches had in common, with its shared history, and hoped for a full interchange of clergy in the future.

METHODISM IN BISHOP'S STORTFORD

John Wesley visited Bishop's Stortford and stayed at the Crown, a large inn, one of four, situated on London Road at Hockerill. The year is not recorded but he is said to have declared it, "the dearest house that I was ever in." There are no records that he preached in the town although he might very well have done, as, even in the Eighteenth Century, Bishop's Stortford was a thriving market town. Hockerill crossroads, and in particular the Crown Inn, was a convenient and well used stopping place for the changing of horses for journeys between London and Cambridge and Newmarket racecourse.

The first group of Methodists in Bishop's Stortford met under the trees in the Causeway in 1823. The Causeway of those days was a wide, leafy lane and so it was probably a pleasant place to meet. The following year they purchased an old seed warehouse in Church Street and converted it into a chapel. The first Minister was appointed in 1828. Numbers grew and, in 1866, they moved to 1 South Street, the present site of W H Smith. There, a small chapel was built and later, behind it stood an iron building which was used as a schoolroom.

By the turn of the Century, the chapel was not big enough for their needs. Bishop's Stortford was an expanding town: the railway had brought new prosperity and church going was the norm for much of the population. A larger building was needed.

The business of the church was in the hands of the Trustees who were men drawn from the town and the villages around. The Trustees met in February 1900 to decide what should be done. One Trustee was Mr Arthur Ashwell, who was the owner of a jeweller's shop in North Street. His father, James Ashwell, had died in 1894 leaving a legacy of £21 in his Will. This money was to be devoted to the "Wesleyan Methodist Cause". It was decided to use this sum to begin the fund for the New Chapel Scheme. This was launched in October of that year. Another Trustee was Henry Laugher who had a draper's business in Potters Street (roughly where the entrance to Jackson's Square now is), and he headed the list with £200, a very generous amount. This was in memory of his wife who had died in 1898. Mr Ashwell made up his contribution to £100 and the other Trustees contributed varying

amounts, bringing the total to £500. It was decided to hold a Public Meeting to launch the scheme and this took place in October 1900.

The Trustees hoped, at first, that they could expand on the same site. The minutes of a meeting in May 1900 record that there were some enquiries about an adjoining shop property. Obviously, it was not feasible as, by January of the following year, approaches were being made to Sir Walter Gilbey for five plots of land further along South Street and on the opposite side of the road - in fact, the present site. Sir Walter owned a great many properties in Bishop's Stortford. Negotiations continued until November, when Sir Walter replied to say that the Trustees offer had been accepted. It is not recorded the exact amount paid but it must have been around £1500.

By March 1902, plans for the new chapel had been drawn up by two firms of architects and a Finance and Building Committee set up.

The plans of Messrs. Jordan & Gunton were accepted, subject to some small alterations, and tenders for the building were invited. Eight were submitted, mostly in the region of £5000-£6000. The lowest was from Mr A Feast for £4845 and this was accepted. Further to this, certain alterations were made to the specifications which reduced it by £220. It was also decided to defer building the rooms for the Sunday School until a later date, which reduced the cost still further, to a final figure of £3780.

In the meantime, there was discussion as to what to do with the old chapel and site. The Trustees needed to raise money for their new chapel. Various ideas were put forward. Queen Victoria had recently died and Edward VII had come to the throne. Mr John Barker suggested that the site be sold and some kind of memorial be erected to the new King. Obviously, nothing came of this idea because, in April 1902, Mr Laughher offered to buy the old chapel and site for £1200. He asked that, if his offer was accepted, he would like the honour of laying the foundation stone for the new building. Furthermore, he would, "place thereon an additional £50-00".

The stone-laying day was on 11 June 1902 and it was a very big occasion. There are two engraved stones on the outside of the church which commemorate the event; the one on the left bears the name of Mr Laughher and the other, on the right, that of James Ashwell, whose legacy was the original inspiration for the project. There were, in fact,

seven stones laid on that day by various interested people and they all contributed to the building fund. Mr. Laugher's contribution was the most - he was said to have given £75 - apart from the Wesley Guild's contribution of 100 guineas, which was probably collected from a good number of people. Following the stone-laying ceremony there was a luncheon in the Great Hall and, in the evening, there was a talk by Mr R W Perks, MP, of Lincolnshire, again in the Hall. His speech was reported in great detail in the local newspaper. He spoke at length about the independence and freedom of Nonconformists to worship as they wished and contrasted it with the difficulties that the established church had to deal with. The report included a large picture of the projected building. It is correct in every detail to the later picture of the finished building. The event raised over £550 in donations.

In the meantime, Mr Laugher agreed that he would allow the church to have use of the old chapel and premises for a period of three years, free of rent.

The chapel would later be used for a variety of purposes. Firstly, it was a venue for the Temperance Movement. These meetings were for men and were semi-religious in nature. They were advertised as "Pleasant Sunday afternoons", and the annual outings to Walton on the Naze were said to empty the town. In 1911, it became a cinema for many years. It was then demolished to make way for a supermarket and, later still, the site was developed for use by W H Smith.

Building for the new chapel went ahead rapidly but finding the money to pay for the project was proving to be more difficult than the Trustees had envisaged. The main source of weekly income at that time was from weekly pew rents. It was common practice to charge worshippers for the exclusive use of a family pew. The pew would be reserved and would bear their name. It was proposed that, in the new chapel, central pews would be let at 2s.6d. per quarter, side pews at 2s. and the gallery at 1s.6d. each. However, this was for the future and, by April 1903, it was obvious that there was going to be a shortfall, so various bodies were approached for loans. The cheapest was the Star Assurance Company who would charge three and a half per cent. It was agreed that they must borrow £1000 in order to pay for the building. This would take very many years to repay.

The new chapel needed to be insured and this was done through the Wesleyan Methodist Trust Insurance Company. The building was insured for £3500 and the furniture for £250.

No provision in the building programme had been made for an organ and so, in the Trustees' report of a meeting in February 1903, it states that Mr Conyon expressed his concern about the lack of an organ for the new church. He therefore, "asked for the consent of the Trustees to work and beg for funds." He said that he would be responsible for raising £250 if the other Trustees would be responsible for raising a further £250. It was agreed, providing Mr Conyon did not start fund-raising until after the church opening. It was obvious that they needed every penny for the building and did not want to jeopardise this, no matter how desirable the acquisition of an organ was to the musical life of the church. It was agreed that the organ fund would take half of the profits and the other half would go into the building fund. Mr Langdon gave his support and booked the Great Hall for 9 June, a week after the scheduled opening of the church.

The Great Hall was used for many large social events. It had formerly been an Agricultural Hall in Kilburn and been acquired for the use of the Working Men's Club. It was the only hall that could accommodate a large number of people in the town. It stood a little further along South Street, behind what is now Ottaker's bookshop. It was last used at Christmas time in 1937 and was taken down shortly afterwards.

Mr Conyon and Mr Langdon must have worked very hard in the week following the opening to sell tickets because the concert was a success and raised some more money, although not enough for an organ.

Finally, the Church was finished and the long awaited opening day had arrived. It opened on Wednesday, 3 June 1903. The occasion was given good coverage in the Herts. Mercury of 6 June. The whole day was reported in great detail. It said that the day started with a luncheon in the Great Hall for about 200 people. Various dignitaries, including Sir Walter Gilbey, had been invited. However, his name was not on the report, so presumably he did not attend. A Mr Albert Scarfe of Colchester presided at the lunch and, afterwards, a number of people made congratulatory speeches concerning what was described as a beautiful building. Mr Langdon said that, previously, many people had to be turned away and that the chapel books had numbers of names of people,

waiting for vacant pews. He thought that, now, a fair representation would be possible and, that, with "this opening a unity of opinions would be possible." (Perhaps this was a reference to the Primitive Methodists, of which there were a small number in the town, although it is not known where they met).

Mr Laugher felt it now meant that "Methodism had at last come of age in the town."

The report stated, "The company then repaired to the new building which Mr Scarfe unlocked with a silver key. The spacious church was then speedily filled and the opening sermon preached by Rev J T Wardle of Stafford." A full description of the building was given and is as follows:

"The new church is in Gothic Style in red brick with Bath Stone facings. The building and site cost about £5,500. The church contains a lobby running the whole breadth of the building from which it is separated by a tinted glass screen: over the lobby is a gallery. The main building will hold 600 worshippers and contains a spacious rostrum, choir stalls and a space is reserved for a large organ which it is hoped will eventually be obtained. All the interior fittings are pitched pine and the roof is that known as hammer-beam, the same kind of wood being used. The floor is formed of maple blocks. There are two large vestries in the rear. The interior is well lighted by day by five windows on the south side, four on the north and a fine large Gothic window on the East. All are filled with Cathedral glass. At night the interior can be lit with incandescent burners and it can be warmed with hot water. (Pipes filled with hot water laid under grills in the floor). The architects were Messrs. Goddon & Canton of London and the builder H. Feast of Haddenham. After the service, tea was served in the Great Hall and a public meeting in the evening was presided over by the architect Mr. J. Gunton. The collection in the afternoon amounted to £112-8s.-8d. and in the evening to £38 -4s.-0d. In addition, all the comestibles at the luncheon, tea and supper were given, so all the tickets sold were clear profit. The musical arrangements during the day were under the direction of Mr. W. G. Young."

It appears that music, at first, was provided by an American organ presumably brought from the former chapel. An American organ was a

reed organ similar to a harmonium but giving a smoother tone. The reeds were free and the air was sucked through them, not blown as with a harmonium but it was operated in a similar way. Although fund raising had started, it was still not possible to purchase the new organ. However, fund raising went on and, finally, in 1907, at the annual church meeting, it was announced that a new organ had been obtained. The Rev Green was the minister at the time and he applied to Mr Andrew Carnegie. He was an American philanthropist who, incidentally, sponsored the building of Carnegie Hall in New York and he was well known for his interest in helping to promote music to many sections of the community. He gave the church a generous donation of £150 and with that money, together with the money raised and other smaller donations, they were finally able to install the organ into the organ loft. An Organ Blower, a Mr Gallard, was employed for £3 per year.

For many years, finance was a great problem. The church was heavily in debt. The loans that had been obtained to pay for the building took a long time to repay. Not all the monies that had been promised were forthcoming. In 1905, at the annual meeting of the Trustees, it was decided to ask for help from the Grant Committees, "to relieve the disastrous position the Trustees found themselves in." A collecting box would be put in the lobby of the church.

Despite the financial difficulties, the Trustees obviously thought that the needs of the children and the young people should be met. There was not enough money as yet to contemplate building a room for the Sunday School and so, as a temporary measure, Mr Laugher offered to present to the Trustees the Iron Schoolroom which was still standing behind the old chapel. The Sunday School committee and teachers offered to pay up to £50 for the removal of the schoolroom. It was duly erected behind the new church at a cost of £98-15s. and the Trustees asked the Sunday School to pay 15s. a quarter for rent in winter and 10s. in summer. This sum covered the heating and cleaning. The building was insured for £200.

In 1908, a piece of land on the south side of the church became available for purchase. This, too, was owned by Sir Walter Gilbey and the price was £270. The Trustees wanted the extra land but the price was considered too high, especially as money was still a problem. However, some years later in 1917, three years after Sir Walter's death, the land

became available again and, thanks to the efforts of Jeffrey Ashwell, was bought for £140.

It appears that, at that time, each church group had to be self-sufficient as far as finance. For example, the Sunday School was charged a quarterly rent to cover heating and cleaning. Likewise, there is a note in the Trustee's minutes of 1910 to say that the Wesley Guild, a social week night gathering for adults, was to be charged £1 per annum as rent for the premises.

The number of children attending the Sunday School at that time averaged between fifty and seventy or eighty in the morning and up to a hundred in the afternoon. It was obvious, too, that Christmas made very little difference. In 1910 Christmas Day fell on a Sunday and, in the morning, attendance was as usual. Although there were fewer children in the afternoon there was still a good number present. (Even as late as 1938, when Christmas Day again fell on a Sunday, there were still four services; Holy Communion at 8-30 am and 12-00 noon, as well as morning and evening worship).

Listed in the Sunday School registers are the addresses of the teachers and many of them seemed to have lived in the Newtown area and would have been within very easy walking distance of the church.

The 1914-18 war claimed the lives of ten members of the congregation, two members of the Ashwell family being among them. A plaque on the wall of the church was put up after the war in remembrance of them all.

Practical effects of the war were orders to reduce lighting and a payment for aircraft insurance was paid. Presumably, this was in case of air attack. There is a note in 1917 to say that a payment of £8-11s.8d. was made to the War Emergency Fund.

There were a good many soldiers living in the town during the war and, in 1917, the church received a letter from the authorities stating that accommodation might be needed for the troops. The Trustees asked that a strong letter be sent back asking for alternative arrangements to be made. We can assume that they were as there was no further correspondence on the matter.

The presence of young soldiers from very varied backgrounds living in the town, who were suddenly freed from the restrictions of home, must

have been difficult for the strictly teetotal Methodists of a country town. There were a good number of public houses, some very near to the church. The authorities must have been similarly worried about too much consumption of alcohol because, in 1914, an Act of Parliament had been passed called the "Intoxicating Liquor (Temporary Restriction) Act". This stated that no intoxicating liquor could be sold after 10 p.m., not 11 p.m., as previously.

This restriction did not satisfy the minister and other members of the circuit and so, in 1915, they wrote to the licensing authorities in Hertford expressing their disquiet. They had a reply telling them about the Temporary Restriction Act but it seems they were still concerned and so the minister, William Jones, wrote to the Prime Minister. His office courteously acknowledged the letter but no further action was recorded.

In July 1918, the Trustees distributed a leaflet showing all the monies spent on the building from the beginning. It stated that the church was now freed from all debt. It listed the amounts raised under the leadership of individual ministers and showed that the total cost, including purchase of additional land and the organ, amounted to £6278.

Church Life in the years between the wars 1918 to 1939

In the early 1920s, it was decided that the time had come at last to build again. The old iron building, which had been installed as a temporary measure behind the church, was still in use. The Sunday School was large with over one hundred children attending each week. More room was also needed for weekday meetings and activities and, although money was still short, the Trustees decided that the church must be extended. In the summer of 1925, plans were drawn up for the new building. It was to be at the rear of the church and connected to it by a covered passageway. The builders were to be Bacon & Sons and the cost £2000. In the previous year, donations from the congregation were sought and, again, Mr Laughher headed the list of subscribers with a donation of £250. There were many smaller donations, too, all of which were published with the amount beside, an approach that we would, undoubtedly, find unacceptable today. The building went ahead and it was opened in March 1927. There were two rooms and a small kitchen; the main room was called The Wesley Hall.

Fortunately, Mr Laughher, who had been such a great benefactor to the church, lived long enough to see the opening. He was, by then, eighty years old. He died on 9 December of that year. He is buried in the churchyard in Cemetery Road and a large memorial was erected to him.

In 1929, there was a request to the organist to arrange a concert in order to raise funds to buy a piano for the schoolroom. It was not recorded whether he did so.

During the time of the opening of the church, Mr Young had been the choirmaster and, by the records of church activities, a very active one. It does not give his age but, it is noted, that he was still the choirmaster in 1922, some twenty years later. The Trustees were concerned that "there was no choir and no prospect of one". It was noted that there had been problems with the choir as long ago as 1915. This, of course, could have been the result of losing the men of the church to the army. The secretary was therefore asked to write to Mr Young asking for his resignation. The letter was a masterpiece of tact in expressing their thanks for what he had done but, at the same time, making it clear that

the time had come for him to go! His place was taken by Mr Penn and, by 1923, thanks were being recorded to the choir. So, for a while, all seemed to go well but a note in June 1935 seemed to infer that they were not very proficient. It said that, until the choir was able to sing anthems, they should be invited to sing the occasional new hymn in order to familiarise them to the members of the congregation. It was further suggested that the organist be asked to play a few minutes of music before the service began. One can only assume that his role up until then had been merely to accompany the hymns.

During the years there are notes of repairs to the organ and, in 1934, an electric blower was installed. The job of the organist, being such a key one with the Methodist tradition of lusty hymn singing, was always a paid position. The salary paid to Mr Gammon in 1937 was increased to 20 guineas. In 1934, copies of the updated version of the Methodist Hymn Book were purchased. There had been suggestions many years earlier about trying out Sankey hymns.

The important event of that time concerned the whole church when it was unified in 1932. It was now officially The Methodist Church, although many people would continue to call it the Wesleyan Church for some years.

In 1937, money seems to have been short and the Trustees were concerned that the church might go into debt. At a Trustees meeting, they discussed the possibility of letting the premises to outside organisations. This needed alterations to the rules and it did not go ahead. Also, that year a car park to the side of the church was laid out, a sign of the changing times. In the quarterly plan of the time, giving the list of preachers at weekly services for the circuit, details and times of local buses were given. General car ownership is taken for granted nowadays but this serves to remind us of how things used to be.

For the ladies there was the weekly Sewing Circle. The ladies of the church would spend a pleasant afternoon together, making items to sell at Bazaars held from time to time throughout the year. They probably made items for the church, too. There was a note thanking the ladies for the curtains supplied for the vestries.

At the beginning of 1922, the Envelope System was introduced into Methodist churches. This meant that a set amount was contributed weekly. A year later, the chairman of the Trustees declared that it had

been their financial salvation. At the same meeting, it was agreed to increase their contribution to the "Worn out Minister's Fund" that year. They would give £3-16s. However, although their financial position had been eased for a time, this was not the end to their worries by any means. In 1931, it was reported that they were again in trouble owing to a serious decrease in income. Mr Ashwell was asked to see the manager of the Midland Bank to procure an overdraft of £100 and they would further ask the Grant Board to reconsider the Bishop's Stortford assessment, from £45 to £40. They also circulated a pamphlet asking for increased giving. At about the same time, it was agreed to start a collection for the poor at Sacramental Services. This was possibly a reflection of the financial position of many people in the Thirties. There is a note in December 1933 to say that Mr Eliff was asked to serve on the Unemployment Committee.

Throughout these years there was concern for the young people of the town. In January 1924, it was decided to hold a monthly Young People's Service on a Sunday evening. It is not recorded how long this lasted. In 1927, Mr Lednor suggested holding Community Hymn Singing in the schoolroom after the Sunday evening services with the idea of "getting some of the young people off our streets". It was still a problem in 1935 when there were complaints of many young people frequenting the streets. A "Sunday Evening Social Hour" was tried during the winter of 1935. This was discontinued in 1936 with the coming of a new minister who proposed replacing it with monthly discussion groups on "Christian Doctrine and Conduct".

During this period the Methodists were becoming less insular and were meeting with other Christian denominations in the town. There are reports of United Services of prayer and a United Watchnight Service. This was a service held in several Methodist Churches for many years to herald in the New Year.

Most people worked locally, in the town itself or on local farms. There was a busy, weekly cattle market and the malting businesses. All of these provided work within the town and so it was possible for the various members of the church committees to get there soon after finishing work. For Circuit meetings, a tea would be provided soon after half past five and the meeting would start at six o'clock or six thirty. Most were based in Bishop's Stortford although some were in Saffron Walden.

The War Years and Beyond: Church Life 1940 to 1960

The war brought change to everyone. Soon, many families would have men called up into the armed forces leaving their places to be filled by women or older people, both at work and within the church.

There would be children and their teachers sent to the town to escape the dangers of the bombing in London. Bishop's Stortford was a comparatively safe place. Many families in the town opened their homes to these evacuees and this included people from the church. Later in the war, the Americans were stationed at Stansted and some of these men came to the church. The airfield there, in those days, was quite small and was only developed into the International airport of today many years later. The Air Force padre used to come to church and would preach from time to time. Sick and wounded servicemen were treated at the hospital and some of these also attended the church wearing the bright blue suits that were the regulation wear for soldiers receiving hospital care during the war.

Many people have contributed to this part of the story of the Church's history and I am very grateful to them. We begin with Martin Gunn:

"Here I am now, at the age of 67, living not far away in Saffron Walden but with my spiritual roots firmly in the Methodist Church at Bishop's Stortford. Nor do I have to think hard to discover the reason!

My parents moved to Stortford in September 1939, just at the outbreak of war and my brothers and I were immediately enlisted to the Sunday School, then under the leadership of Don Goacher or Jimmy Ashwell. Compared to the church we have today, the premises were drab and poorly lit but that didn't concern us because we associated the building with happy times and, most importantly, were surrounded by people who really cared for us, people who, on reflection, are partly responsible for the attitudes that I still aim for today. Jimmy's wife, Grace, Henry Murrell, Miss Barber and Miss Saitch, Mary Beswick, and, more latterly, Don Mansfield and Will Richardson - all wonderful, dedicated people who gave us so much and instilled in us much of the

mental and spiritual tool kit which still controls the way I, and my peers, behave today.

The highlights of the year were the festivals; firstly, the Sunday School Christmas Party. Although rationing made things tight, our three bakers, Messrs. Barker, Glasscock and Pavey always ensured there was enough food. I still remember their benevolent smiles as they witnessed us demolishing so much food so quickly. I recall the wartime lighting in that room, the choir Vestry - one light bulb hanging from the pitched ceiling on a flex, but a great atmosphere! Then we were sent home with our Christmas present, an orange and a threepenny bit wrapped in tissue paper.

The second highlight was the Sunday School Summer Treat. This must have been a headache during the war with all the transport and fuel restrictions in force. But Jimmy Ashwell had his car and a few gallons of petrol put by in cans. He ferried us in stages up to Stortford Park just on the west of the town, where we walked through one large field to get to another where the party was to take place. In the middle of the first field was a haywain - a four wheeled cart which had been left in the middle of the field - this we were told was the farmer's effort to stop enemy aircraft landing! Once at our destination all was squeals of delight as we competed in the sack race, egg and spoon race, three-legged race and the relays followed by a picnic tea. The final highlight of the year was the Harvest Festival. Because of the war, people cultivated every corner of land available, which enabled much larger displays and gifts of fruit, vegetables and flowers to be possible at harvest time than is the case now. Sheaves of wheat made a great show, another dimension which has disappeared with the passing of time. Wheat or bunches of flowers would have been tied to the pew ends down both sides of the Church and the whole Communion area was a riot of colour! The vestibule was decorated, too.

Life for a youngster in the forties revolved round home, school and Church, with church attendance three times on Sunday being commonplace. This is not an implied criticism, just the reverse in fact, because without realizing it we were being given a framework in which to order our lives and we thoroughly enjoyed the fellowship in the process. Nowadays, life can be so much more complicated for young people who are bombarded by endless attractions, infinite in variety. We were lucky,

very lucky and so privileged to have been given so much by those wonderful people."

To add to Martin's wartime narrative, Colin Mansfield has also supplied some memories of that time. The Mansfield family also moved to the town in 1939, shortly before the war broke out in September. Among the first people that they met were Gladys and Will Richardson and their children, Alan and Doreen. They attended the Sunday School and Colin particularly remembers a teacher called Mr Prior who was a poster painter and who did all the posters for the Church. The Sunday School children were given Biblical pictures each week. For example, there was one of Jesus sitting on a rock surrounded by children with the caption of "Suffer the little children and let them come unto me."

Colin remembers going on a Sunday School outing as well, to a farm which was somewhere behind Bishop's Stortford College. He thinks it was perhaps called Pryors.

The Mansfields had, at first, two boy evacuees. These were later exchanged for a girl. It is possible that several other church families welcomed children into their homes but there are no records. Whole schools were evacuated, too.

Roland Ashwell recalls that girls from Clapton High School, together with their headmistress Mary Beswick, came to stay in the town to escape the bombing of London. Mary enjoyed her time here so much that she decided to return and settle in the town when she retired.

During the war, no lights were allowed to be shown anywhere and all windows had to be blacked out. It would have been very difficult to provide full blackout for the main Church building and, so, during the winter, evening services were held in the Wesley Hall. Peter Lednor recalls that they made a very good job of the blackout and that the double curtain at the door leading to the car park was almost impenetrable.

After the war was over, several newcomers settled in the town, among them Joe and Molly Lungley and Roland Ashwell's wife, Peggy. The Youth Club was started in 1946 by Will Richardson and when Roland returned from the war, he became the secretary and treasurer. Joe was also a helper. It was affiliated to MAYC (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs) in 1947. Colin took over as leader when he returned from National

Service in the army in 1952. He continued to lead it with Mary Mascall until the Mansfield family moved to North Wales in 1959. The leadership then passed to Martin Gunn. It used to meet on Tuesday and Saturday evenings. The club often acted as host for the London Weekend extravaganzas.

A number of plays were produced over the years - "Meet the Family", "The Coming of Simon Eval", "Laburnum Grove", "Tobias and the Angel" and "The Vigil" being some of them. Fred Davies who taught English and History at the Boy's High School was an enthusiastic producer. There were also a number of Youth Club holidays; the first was to Morley, a Methodist youth hostel in Guernsey.

The Club had two table tennis teams and they took part in the local league.

John Banks was a member of a preaching group of young people. This was led by Jack Halsey who was the local postmaster. The group met for bible study and also assisted at services throughout the Circuit. Members also went to run schools at the Methodist churches at Manuden and Stansted each Sunday. This involved cycling there in all weathers!

During the Fifties, before the time of general television ownership, the evening services were better attended than the morning ones. There was then a Women's Teachers Training College at Hockerill and several students from there attended services.

For a number of years after the war, American servicemen continued to be stationed at Stansted. Some of them were engaged in work to extend the runway and they came to the church, too.

There was a well attended Sunday School which met at 3 p.m. This was then under the leadership of Mary Beswick who, on retirement, had since returned to the town.

In September 1956, a Junior Youth Club was started. It was called "The To Be's", a name suggested by Rev Harold Picken, to identify that the boys were 11 to 14 year olds and met on a Friday evening. There were around 30 youngsters. The leaders were John Banks and Stephanie Swain (later Gunn) and the team was later joined by Ken Ashwell. At 14 years old, the children moved on to Senior Youth Club. Activities were games and hobbies and the evening concluded with a devotional time. Outside trips were arranged, for example, to Whipsnade Zoo and St. Albans. The club also presented the occasional

entertainment show and also provided items for the senior show, "Goggle Box Capers", in 1957.

The Youth Club went carol singing each year and usually ended up at a couple of members' houses. John says, "If you picked the right one you were given a glass of sherry instead of coffee!" Things were beginning to change from the strict teetotalism of the Methodists of earlier days and girls were still expecting greater things.

On Easter Monday they would go on an outing to places such as Felixstowe or Clacton.

Young Wives

During the fifties, a group for the young women of the church was formed. The minister's wife, Mrs Richardson, noticed that there were a number of young women bringing their children to the Sunday School who, otherwise, had no connection to the church. So she called a meeting with the wives of the Society Stewards to discuss the matter. These were Peggy Ashwell, Molly Lungley, Dorothy Argent and Barbara Rhodes who were all young, too. The only group that was especially for women was the Women's Fellowship, which met in the afternoons; for mothers with young children this was impossible. An evening meeting after the fathers had arrived home to take care of the children was obviously the answer. They decided to start a group and to call it "Young Wives". They would meet on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month.

The first meeting was held in 1958 and, within a short time, had a membership of thirty. The group flourished and attracted membership from ladies within the church and, as hoped, many others with no other church connection. The programme was varied with a broad range of subjects from practical things like cake making demonstrations to missionary evenings with a speaker. There would be several changes of leadership as the years went by.

In the early days of the Methodist Church, the Wesley Guild had been an important group, responsible for organising much of the social life of the members. There was evidence that it was very active prior to 1903 because the records state that they contributed £1000 when the

foundation stones for the present church were laid. Unfortunately, no records of their activities seem to have survived. The Ashwell family have provided some pictures of outings, somewhere in the countryside, made by the group in the 1920s. Peggy Ashwell recalls that meetings were resumed in the Forties, after the war. The Guild was divided into sections, such as devotional, social or cultural, with each section being responsible for their interest. They met on weekday evenings. It gradually lost support and seems to have ended probably in the late fifties.

The Girls' Brigade: 1st Bishop's Stortford Company

The following account is by Miss Olive Dobson who, for many years, ran the Company:

"In 1940, Mrs Wyn Harding formed the 1st Bishop's Stortford Company of the Girls' Life Brigade (G.L.B.). In 1947, alas, she had to discontinue as her family had grown. She now had three young children, Ian, Helen and Beryl. Moreover, the war had meant that attendance had dwindled, so the company closed.

In 1949, Miss Olive Dobson and Miss Annie Harvey moved to the town from Sawbridgeworth, where they had settled after evacuation from London and had been running a G.L.B. Company for nine years.

In June 1949, they re-started the Company with ten girls, the maximum number of girls permitted. The Rev J Barmby was the minister at that time. Numbers grew until there were more than sixty members who attended regularly for several years. Time fled by with competitions, sports days, displays camps, etc. The camps, usually a week or ten days, included the Channel Islands, North Wales, Norfolk, Suffolk, Sussex, Kent and the Isle of Wight and were the highlight of the year. Mrs Harding often came as cook and, later, Mrs Jean Chapman. When the girls camped in Jersey with a company from Bristol, they paid £10 for a fortnight's holiday including the fare. As they received free luggage transport and were unable to have a proper dinner on the train on their return journey, since there was no restaurant car on the train, costs were lower than expected and a large profit was made. This was used to

purchase instruments, so forming a company band which flourished with much valuable help from Mr Joe Lungley.

Later, the Girls' Life Brigade joined with the Girls' Guildry and the Girls' Brigade of Ireland to form a new organisation, known henceforth as The Girls Brigade. As part of the Bishop's Stortford Battalion, girls took part in Parades, sports and competitions. Training days were held for N.C.Os. and a lot was gained in these meetings for the girls and officers. Eventually, Miss Dobson reached retirement age and Barbara Wright took over as Captain, while the slightly younger Miss Harvey continued as Lieutenant. Christine Chapman and Julie Finbow were also Lieutenants. Miss Harvey took special responsibility for a group of less able girls from Hassobury. Two of these, Teresa Norris and Christine Wright, gained their Duke of Edinburgh Gold Awards, as did Helen Shirley, Dorothy Reed, Christina Dunn and Julia Hwang. When Barbara Wright retired, Christine Chapman became Captain. Later, the leadership passed to Julie Finbow who is still doing an excellent job with the girls aided by Olive Leader, Linda Courtman and Lucy Harrison, helped by Sue Unitt and, until recently, Heather Harrison."

Miss Dobson's and Miss Harvey's work with the girls was invaluable and there must be many girls who remember them with great pride and affection. They became a very important part of the youth work of the church. In fact, they were so successful that they were persuaded to begin a similar group for the boys, which they did.

The Boys' Brigade

Begun by Olive Dobson and Annie Harvey, it was then handed over to male leadership. Roy Benson and Peter Young were the leaders in the late sixties and into the seventies. They ran a very successful group and often joined with the boys from St. Michael's.

Audrey Jackson and Peter Noton were leaders after this for a while and then Eric Allen took over the leadership of the Company. The Company Section was for older boys of over eleven years, whilst the Juniors, run by Peter, was for the over eights. During the Seventies, a group for boys aged five to eight years commenced. Initially, they were called the Robins

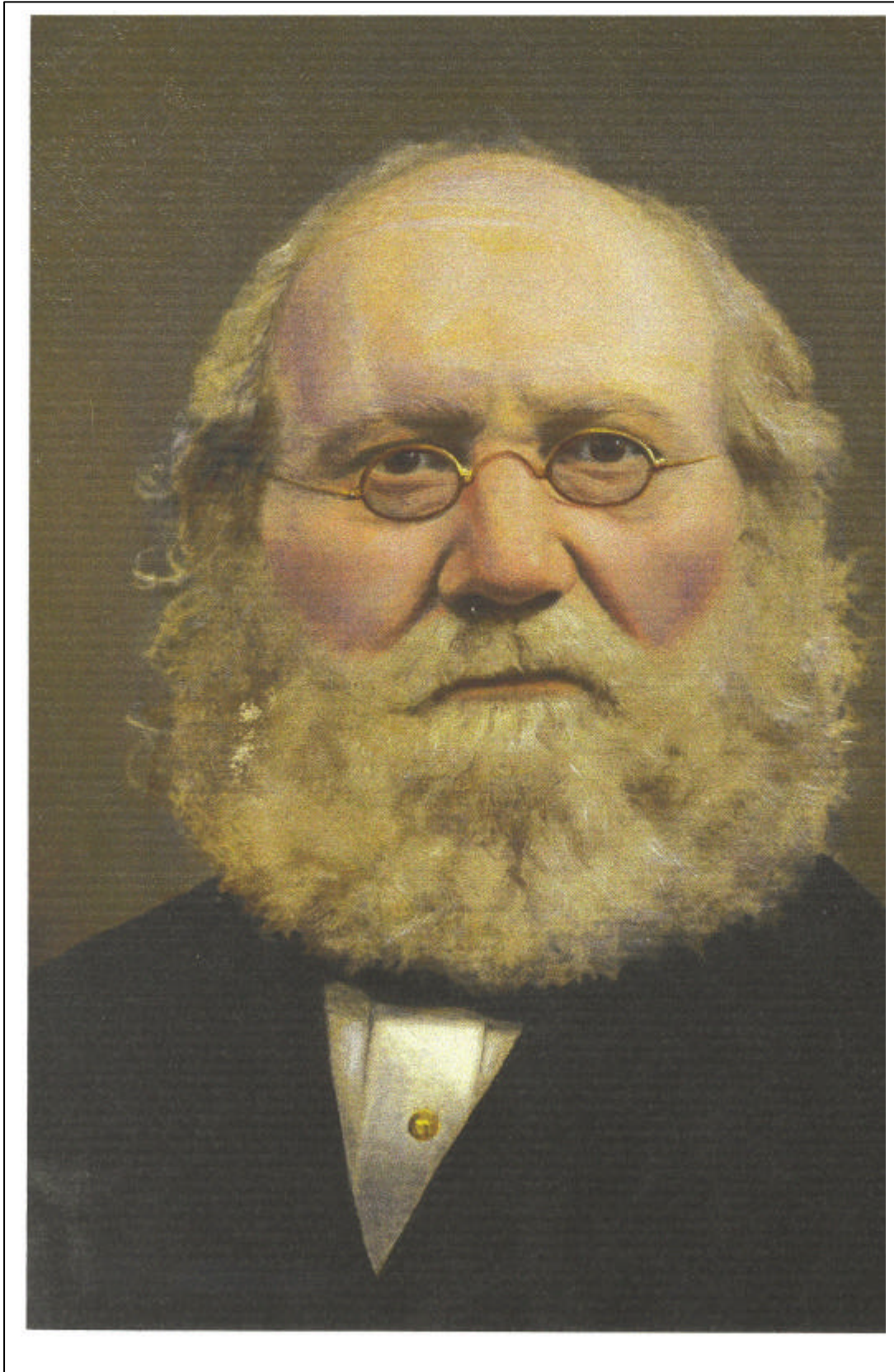
but later the name was changed to the Anchor Boys. Naomi Ellis took over in 1980 and served for twenty years building up a very strong and lively group. She retired in 2000 and the group is now being run by Michele Thompson with David Hughes in charge of the Juniors. Sadly, the Senior group had to close in 2002 due to lack of leaders. All sections follow a wide programme of activities which includes games, craft and sports challenges as well as religious instruction.

The Women's Guild of Fellowship

This has been part of church life at least as far back as 1927 when Alice Carter was the leader. Later, Mrs Lilian Ashwell took over and led it from 1932 to 1955. It still has a loyal membership, particularly amongst the older ladies. Some of them are too frail to make the journey to the church alone and there has been a mini-bus service organised for their transport for many years. This is an example of the many small ways in which church members have been able to demonstrate the caring aspect of the church. The ladies have a different speaker each week. A great variety of subjects are covered, after which a cup of tea is provided with an opportunity for chat. For many years Mary Mansfield was the leader until she and Colin moved away.



The Opening Ceremony, 3 June 1903 “Mr Scarfe opened the door with a silver key.”



James A Ashwell He died in 1894 and left £21 to be devoted to the “Wesleyan Church Cause”. This legacy was the beginning of the Building Fund for the present church. A foundation stone bears his name.



Methodist Chapel built 1866 in South Street Now the site for W H Smith. After the building of the present church, it was used for Temperance meetings and later as a cinema.



South Street, prior to 1900

Photograph taken from the same location around 1915. The Anchor Inn is now a motor works; there are soldiers on the streets; the buildings on the right have been demolished and we now have the church.





Hannah Ashwell (wife of James)



View of the interior of the church, December 1992, prior to redevelopment. Note the organ pipes, elevated choir stalls and pulpit. Heating pipes were under grilles in the floor, between the aisles. Much of the original wood was saved and used in the “new church”.

Below. View of the back of the church.





Carol Service 1992

1960 Onwards

Further Building and Expansion

With the coming of the electrified railway line in the early Sixties, many new houses were built and the population of the town grew rapidly. This brought many families to the church with new talents and fresh ideas. The success of the Young Wives group led to the setting up of a similar group for men. The inaugural meeting was held on 26 January 1964 and attracted about twenty men. They invited guest speakers who talked to them on a variety of subjects, from the expansion of Stansted Airport to Bishop's Stortford in Roman Times and aspects of the Roman Catholic faith. A logbook was kept to record each meeting. These were held during the winter months only. The record ends in 1967; the A.G.M. of 1966 records that numbers were falling.

The influx of new members, all with energy and enthusiasm, was obviously good but there were problems as well. Patterns of family life were changing and, when it was decided to hold Sunday School classes on Sunday mornings rather than in the afternoon, there were difficulties in providing a place for them all to meet. Each age group needed a separate room. In the afternoons, the Seniors were able to hold classes in the church itself. A demountable building was acquired and was erected in the car-park. This provided two temporary classrooms. For a time, the adjacent bingo hall on the north side of the church was used by the Seniors on a Sunday morning. By the end of the Seventies, it was obvious that a more permanent solution had to be found. The needs of the young people were of paramount importance if the future of the church was to be maintained. Discussions were held as to whether it was better to abandon the present site and build a purpose built church elsewhere in the town, or to maintain the witness to the Christian faith within the town centre. In the end, this point of view prevailed and plans were drawn up to extend the building on site. This was difficult as no further land was available and therefore the only way was to develop the car-park. The idea was to enclose the whole area between the church and the adjacent building, at that time a bakery. This would give a new hall, purpose built kitchen and improved toilet facilities. By partitioning the Wesley Hall, three smaller meeting rooms could be created. The main problem was that, after the erection of the new hall, all natural light would be cut from the south side of the church, thus blocking light from the Sanctuary. Many people strongly protested against this idea. However, eventually after much discussion, all opposition was overcome. The advantages of increased room for the various social activities of the church outweighed all other

considerations. Initially, it was hoped that there could be windows in both the new hall and the Sanctuary but this would have caused a noise problem when both rooms were in use. Eventually, it was decided that the only solution was to put up a thin skin behind the windows and then to brick over. This would help to soundproof the rooms as well.

Mr Ernest Glasscock, a senior member of the church, laid the foundation stone after the Family Service on 4 October 1981. Work continued well and included extensive renovations to the church roof, which cost around £15,000. Various economies were made to the original plan of the extension in order to keep within the budget of £130,000. This included modifications to the layout of the Wesley Hall. Eventually, fixed partitions were erected rather than flexible ones, preferred by some of the committee members, as this saved several thousand pounds.

Grants to help with the cost of the improvements were obtained from the Joseph Rank Trust, the Central Property Board of the Methodist Church and from London Missions. These amounted to £40,000 and the rest was raised by donations, covenants from members and the usual variety of fund raising activities, which had the added bonus of giving a boost to the social life of the church. It involved many people in great sacrificial giving. The extension was officially opened by Mr Paul Lang of the Joseph Rank Benevolent Trust on 3 April 1982. A name had to be found but, after much debate, it was simply called The New Hall. The builders, J A Elliot Ltd., the Mayor and the Chairman of East Herts. District Council, together with representatives from all the different churches and denominations in the town, were invited as well as people from the other Methodist churches in the Circuit. Many people gave willingly of their time, talents and money, too, but the whole project owed a great deal to Colin Mansfield who gave generously of his time in the supervision of the work.

The New Hall made a great deal of difference to the social life of the church. It could not only be used by the youth organisations and the Sunday School but also for informal church services, where a less formal atmosphere was more appropriate. It has been used very successfully for concerts and several Gilbert and Sullivan productions, which have involved all age groups. It is used regularly for Badminton and is also let out to non-church groups. One important use is for the regular Thursday and Saturday coffee mornings, which have social as well as commercial value.

Separate reference should be made to the Gilbert and Sullivan productions mentioned above. Eric Rankin was a leader in the Youth Club and thought there would be enjoyment from putting on a production of the "Pirates of Penzance". He

found he needed a number of additional ladies and asked the "Young Wives" group to help. A few had taken part in similar productions previously but, for many, it was a new and enjoyable experience. Many people from the church became involved, from those who were persuaded to take on the major roles, to all those "behind the scenes" personnel. These included the ladies who made the costumes, scenery makers and shifters, make-up ladies, refreshment sellers, ticket sellers and "Front of House" helpers on production nights. Eric was helped by his wife, Mary, who was a very able pianist. The first production took place in the Wesley Hall in the spring of 1970 and was a huge stage success. This was followed in 1971 by a further production, HMS Pinafore. Sadly, there was then a gap of six years as Eric's wife died and he felt unable to continue.

Happily in 1978, he was persuaded to take up his baton again and a production of Iolanthe followed. When the New Hall was built, a stage was put in at one end and this was a great improvement for the group. So a year after the opening of the hall, in 1985, Patience was staged, followed by The Gondoliers in 1987. A more sophisticated version of the Pirates of Penzance followed in 1989, this time using hired costumes, and, in 1991, another production of HMS Pinafore. In 1993, Iolanthe was staged, followed by a Gilbert and Sullivan Concert in 1985, Ruddigore in 1997 and The Mikado in 1999.

Coffee Mornings

Coffee mornings have been held at the church on a Thursday morning for many years. It is not recorded when they began but it was probably in the early fifties. They provide a chance for people to get together for a chat, somewhere warm for village folk to sit while waiting for their buses and are a valuable source of church income. Church members are able to socialise, too, whilst serving the coffee, washing-up and clearing tables.

Nowadays, they are also held on Saturdays when both church organisations and outside organisations are able to raise funds for their own groups. Non-church groups sell cakes, coffee and bric-a-brac in return for a percentage donation for the use of the premises.

In the early days, equipment was very basic but, nowadays, the kitchen is as well equipped as any modern home and helpers have to conform to all hygiene and safety standards. For very many years, Muriel Hilder was the chief organiser but,

now, Margaret Denton ensures that everything is in order and arranges a rota of people to help each week.

The Timbrel Band or Tambourine group

This began in 1983 and the ladies were taught by Mrs Wendy Thake, a member of the Bishop's Stortford Salvation Army Corps. The ladies were brought together through the inspiration and energy of Mrs Jean Gill. The original team was Jean, Brenda Ayliffe, Mary Mansfield, Muriel Hilder, June Varley and Christine Heyhoe. The Band ran for ten years and, during that time, entertained in a great variety of venues. They have taken part in concerts at the church, at Thursday coffee mornings before Christmas and at Women's Guild parties. They have gone to Old People's Homes, including Elmhurst, the Herts. & Essex Hospital and to the New Hall School at Chelmsford. They were invited to play at the Whitechapel Mission, at Middle Lane Methodist Church, at clubs and societies of all descriptions and at an Overseas Missions Fete held at Homerton College, Cambridge. Other ladies joined the group over the years, mainly Methodists, although some were from other churches. Those who joined were Margery Dunbar, Kathleen Allen, Ann Gwyer, Sheila Hayman, Anne Jack, Therese Mearing, June Rankin and Enid Brownlie. The group hung up their tambourines around 1993 but, says Christine, they could be resurrected!

Looking forward to the Twenty First Century

By 1990, Bishop's Stortford and, indeed, our whole world was a very different place to that of the builders of the church in the early years of the century. Huge changes had taken place, not only in the town but in the outlook, education and religious thinking of the whole population. The time had come to consider the role of our church within this changing world. It was felt by many that the interior of the Sanctuary was not very welcoming and that it was being under used by reason of its fixed pews and Victorian appearance. Others held that it was a beautiful building, typical of the age in which it was built and that nothing should be altered. Very lucrative commercial offers had been received in 1988, as the church occupied a prime site in the town. Decision had to be made as to whether it was better to remain within the town, with the potential for mission and service to the community, or to re-locate to one of the new estates on the outskirts of the town. Much debate took place within the various groups of the Church. Eventually, a decision was reached to stay on the present site but with the proviso that much thought must be given to the idea of the premises becoming more multi-purpose and flexible so that greater use could be made of them. In all buildings, upkeep costs are high and are much the same whether used or not, so there were financial considerations, too. It was argued that, whereas the New Hall was being used extensively, the Sanctuary was being utilised on a very limited basis - for Sunday Services, occasional weekday meetings, choir practice and a small number of weddings and funerals. With its fixed pews, high pulpit and raised choir seating at the front, it was not very suitable for lay activities. Some sections of the church membership felt that it was not appropriate to use the Sanctuary for secular purposes, whilst others saw no reason for doing so. There was a great deal of discussion, consultation and debate within the whole church community. Gradually, the objectors gave way to the prevailing opinion that opening up the Church would make it accessible to a far wider section of the people of our town and to many who might never before have entered a church.

In order to make the Sanctuary suitable for a wide variety of purposes, it was necessary to drastically change the interior. The last services were held in December 1992 and worship took place in the New Hall. For the next few months, activities were restricted and there was much curiosity about all the changes taking place.

Inside the Sanctuary everything was removed - the pews, the pulpit, the high choir seating and the organ pipes at the front of the church. This revealed the beautiful arch and it was decided to make a feature of this. It was entirely blocked in and concealed lighting was installed to illuminate it. On this blank wall was placed a simple, illuminated wooden cross. This meant that when the church was being used for secular activities, the background lighting could be switched off. The building by this simple means could fulfil a dual purpose.

Much of the wood from the pews was retained and was used to cover the heating panels, which were placed around the sides of the room. The old original under-floor hot water pipes were removed and the whole area was carpeted and flexible seating installed. A modern lectern, Communion table and font in light wood replaced the former dark furniture. The Communion Rail was constructed so that it could be taken apart and used, if necessary, in a different position or removed completely when the church was being used for another purpose.

A new organ was installed which could be moved to a different position, if the need arose.

There was a need for a crèche area nearby. The crèche had formerly been situated further away and this was not entirely satisfactory. There was also a need for a counselling area so that people requiring help could talk in privacy. It was felt, too, that a small bookshop where books, cards and other items of a religious nature could be bought was desirable. Finally, an area where the congregation could talk after services and have refreshments would be a great asset. Creating a welcome area around the entrance catered for all these needs. The size of the interior of the Sanctuary was reduced a little and two small rooms were put in on the right-hand side. On the opposite side, a tea/coffee bar was installed. On the far left, opposite the entrance to the New Hall, a bookshop was put in together with new toilets that conformed to the new regulations. A ramp for wheelchairs was later installed. The old wooden doors at the entrance to the building were removed and a new, large, glazed window was put in instead. This gave the church a more welcoming look, allowing passers-by to see into the interior of the church.

At the same time the kitchen areas of the church were modified and brought up to date.

Yet, again, there was a need to find the money to pay for it all and this was done by obtaining grants and personal donations from church members. The whole project cost £337,000. The grants came, principally, from the Joseph Rank Foundation and the Central Methodist Fund. Some members were able to offer interest free loans but, fortunately, unlike the original ones, were paid back within a

very short space of time. Despite the scale of modern costs, people at the end of the twentieth century were much more affluent than at the beginning.

The alterations being complete, the Church re-opened on 4 September 1993. This time the opening ceremony was performed by two members of the congregation. One was Jane Holman, the younger daughter of Martyn Holman, who masterminded the whole operation. Martyn was the senior steward at the time and it was he who was the driving force behind the whole project. He spent many hours working with the architects and ironing out any problems as they arose and the church owes him a great debt of gratitude for the work that he put in that year. The other was Mrs Molly King. The Rev Ronald Crewes JP, Chairman of the London N.E. District, was also in attendance.

Afterwards, there was an opportunity to see at last all the radical changes that had taken place.

Most of those who had reservations about the change have been won over to the view that the Church, like the rest of the world, must adapt and move with the times in which we live and that greater use of the premises has been a good thing. The Sanctuary is now regularly used for monthly meetings of the National Trust and the University of the Third Age use both that and the New Hall for their meetings, too. It has been used for public meetings, mainly where there has been an issue of social importance that requires discussion and debate. There have also been flower festivals and exhibitions.

The church members have used the Sanctuary for concerts, too, as many more people can be comfortably seated there.

In spring 2002, the Minister's vestry, a small room to the right of the front of the Sanctuary, was gutted and re-decorated and new windows installed. It was supplied with a computer and new equipment to bring the church up to date. Finally, in September 2003, Lindsey Hughes began work as the first Church Manager. She is responsible for co-ordinating all the many aspects of a very busy church, one that is, perhaps, very different from that envisaged by the builders in 1903. However, I would like to think they would be happy with the outcome of all their hard work of one hundred years ago.

Recent Church Activities

During the nineties several new things became possible with the enlarged premises:

The Bookstall

In the foyer of the re-built church interior, space for a bookstall was provided. This opened in 1994 and is the only place in town specialising in selling Christian literature and cards. It is manned by volunteers and is open each morning from ten to one o' clock. It attracts a steady number of customers from all sections of the community.

Kickstart

Mention should be made of Kickstart. Whilst this is an independent initiative, it is run by church members for the good of the community and is therefore very much a part of Christian service to the people of the town. Soon after its re-opening in 1993, the minister, Michael Hayman, spoke to a number of people in the church about the need to make greater use of the now improved premises.

John Banks, Don McGregor and Peter Scarlett, all long time church members, had recently retired. They met together weekly for walks round the nearby villages. Over an ensuing pub-lunch one day, the idea for starting Kickstart came about. At the time, there was quite a high unemployment rate in the town of 6.7% and, as they all had expertise in the business world, they felt that they could do something to help those seeking work. Soon afterwards, they set up a Job Search Roadshow in the Wesley Hall, inviting 23 representatives to attend to offer advice. Those invited were everyone who had anything to do with employment, including local councillors and Rotarians. They were all very supportive of the idea and so Kickstart opened in the summer of 1994. Other men joined the initial group: Derek Varley acted as Treasurer and Ralph Friend and John Gwyer helped, too. Obviously, money was needed to help start the scheme but none of the work is financed by the church. It is entirely self-financing through grants from local councils, Stansted Airport, Rotary Club and the Herts. Community Foundation.

During the past nine years, over 5000 people have sought advice and 1000 of them have been placed in employment. A team of men operate on a rota basis to operate this valuable service; most are from the Methodist Church but a couple of them are from the Baptist Church. It is recognised by the employment service as making a huge contribution in this field. Help has been given to many people suffering from redundancy who may be very inexperienced in finding a new

opportunity. Happily, unemployment in Bishop's Stortford is now very low but help continues to be needed. Although not strictly a church organisation, the Church provides the premises free of charge and the work is a practical demonstration from its members of Christian Service and caring.

The American Exchanges

In 1989, Methodists celebrated the anniversary of 250 years since John Wesley's conversion. A party went to London from Bishop's Stortford to join in the celebrations and met there a party from America. They were from Fullerton in California and were headed by Henry Jones. The Gill family headed the British group. Both groups wore sweatshirts especially made for the occasion. The two families decided to exchange sweatshirts. This exchange heralded a larger one as, the following summer, 30 people from Bishop's Stortford were invited to visit Fullerton and Sedona. The next year, a party of Fullerton Methodists had a holiday based in Bishop's Stortford, staying with church families, visiting the area and travelling to Yorkshire, too. Many lasting friendships were made. In 1992, an even larger party, again organised by the Gill family, set off for California. Not only was the immediate area explored but the group was again hosted by its members in Sedona in Arizona. Visits to the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas took place. Since then, private visits have occurred and many letters have crossed the miles. More recently, a party of our Young People have exchanged visits. In 2001, our youngsters went to California and, in 2002, the Americans came to England and enjoyed a host of activities together.

Mothers and Others & Town Toddlers

On 24 May 1989, a group of young mothers from the church met with Rev Harold Fisher, the minister at that time, to start what was to become a regular meeting. The group was formed from a need to get to know each other better, to share concerns and experiences and to explore and deepen Christian faith and beliefs. Several had belonged to the church for some time but did not really know each other. A crèche was set up by Molly Lungley and the mums were able to talk without the usual distractions of demanding toddlers; everyone was happy.

After a while, growing numbers made it difficult to meet in homes and so the group began to meet on alternate Tuesday mornings at the church. Under the leadership of Lynne Ling and Lindsey Hughes, speakers were invited, topics of interest and concern were looked at, doubts aired and friendship and support was provided. Through times of open prayer, and the sharing of personal experiences,

awareness grew of each other's needs and those of the wider church family and the world.

The group meets in the evening now that the children have grown and many of the mums have gone back to work but the aims remain the same in providing an opportunity to meet and share experiences. The group has always welcomed newcomers and membership has varied as folk have moved away or their circumstances have changed. During Tom Allen's short ministry, his wife, Kathleen, particularly deepened and blessed the group. It has been very supportive and encouraging to many dealing with difficult situations when God may have felt very far away.

As part of the Methodist Women's Network, Mothers and Others has been involved in workshops, services, projects and fundraising.

In 1994, a grant was given from Network to set up a Mother and Toddler group at the church with the encouragement of Rev Michael Hayman. Today, Town Toddlers continues to thrive and meet weekly to provide a safe and happy place for more than thirty mums/carers and their little ones to come together. Many lasting friendships have been formed.

Both Mothers and Others and Town Toddlers continue to enable the Church to bring together those who share a common need for friendship and fellowship when, often, family circumstances can leave a young mother feeling lonely and isolated. The existence of such a group is another instance of how church members of the twenty first century choose to demonstrate to the wider world, God's love in a practical way.

The Thursday Group

This is the present name for the group that started, originally, as the Young Wives Group. Over the years the name has changed twice as the members began to be drawn from a slightly older age group. From Young Wives, it became known simply as the Wives Group and then subsequently as the Thursday Group. Its activities and aims are very similar to those of the original group, of providing stimulating and interesting topics and friendship to women of all ages. They do welcome men, too, from time to time!

Pastoral and Community Visitors

When Methodism first began all members belonged to a Class, under the direction of a Class Leader. The Class Meeting was an essential part of early Methodism. Great importance was attached to regular attendance and back-sliding or non-

attendance was a case for severe reprimand and possible withdrawal of church membership, up until the time of the First World War. The Class meeting was a time for prayer and bible reading and possibly of education, too. Gradually, these weekly meetings ceased although all members were still under the care of a Class Leader. Nowadays, members are all within the care of a pastoral visitor, who issues them with a class ticket annually, which reminds them of the duties of membership of the Methodist Church. These pastoral visitors are a large group of senior church members who undertake to care for those members who live in their vicinity and offer friendship and support when needed. Community visitors undertake to keep those connected to the church aware of any activities and special services. They are commissioned annually at a special service.

The Choir

The choir is an essential part of all church services providing backing for the hymns and singing Anthems at special services. Members sang at both morning and evening services originally and their only Sundays off were for Sunday School Anniversaries. These were splendid occasions with large numbers of children attending all three services, as there would be an additional service in the afternoon, too. The choir, for many years now, has only sung in the morning. Choir practice is on Friday evenings but it was not always so, as in the twenties and thirties it was often on a different weekday. In earlier days, there was a special choirmaster in charge of the choir and the organist accompanied them. Nowadays, the organist has to perform both jobs, which makes it more difficult for both him and the choir. The choir usually performs a special oratorio for Easter and, at Christmas, special carols are sung at the annual Carol Service. This has always been a very special occasion and, for many years, there has been an orchestra made up of members of the Bishop's Stortford church, together with other volunteers, some from other churches in the Circuit. In 1991, the choir was invited to go to France as part of the Town Twinning Exchange. Joe Lungley was the choirmaster at the time and was an enthusiastic "twinner" and encouraged members of the choir to go. Since then many exchanges have taken place. The choir has been to Germany as well and several visits by the choirs from both countries have been made to Bishop's Stortford.

The Junior Choir

This is open to any youngster in the church who loves to sing. They sing at services and special occasions and have joined with the senior choir to give concerts. There

have been a few changes of leadership and of pianists over the years. It was started in the early nineties by Joyce Bee and Enid Brownlee. Later, Olwen Hughes was the leader and Martin Scott, who was also one of the Church organists, played the piano. Later still, Avril Woods and Maureen Kinsey led the choir. At the moment they are ably led by Hilary Eaves and accompanied by Alastair Hotchkiss. They sing with great enthusiasm and, hopefully, will go on to join the Senior Choir.

Church Decorations: Flowers and Banners

There has been a tradition for many years of placing flowers in churches of all denominations, usually on the altar or a pedestal at the front of the church, and providing additional flowers to celebrate special occasions. It has been a way of appreciating the beauty of God's creation.

In our present church, there are two places where beautiful flower arrangements are placed weekly by a rota of people, at the front of the Sanctuary and in the foyer, at the entrance to the church. Cynthia Friend has for many years had responsibility for drawing up the rota and also for distributing the flowers on a Monday morning to any who are unwell or in need of cheering up. She has been responsible for the extra arrangements at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

The Banner group has produced some arresting and beautiful banners, which are usually placed in the front of the church and are used for all special celebratory events. There are banners for Harvest, Christmas, Communion Sundays and many more. A special one was made for the Centenary Year.

Alpha Groups

The Alpha groups have provided a new look at Christian life. After starting with one, originally, there are now several groups active within the church that meet regularly for prayer, bible reading and discussion. From time to time members have been responsible for the Evening Service.

Miscellaneous

Finally, mention must be made of the many people who work within the church organisation, whose work is extremely necessary but goes largely unnoticed. They are those who stand at the entrance to the church and welcome members of the congregation to each of the Sunday Services. There are those who cheerfully hand out the hymn and service books. There are the Communion stewards who prepare the elements and lay everything ready and help to organise the communicants and after the service, clear away and wash the glasses. There are the compilers of the

weekly newsheets and the monthly newsletters so that everyone knows what is happening within the church. There are the caterers for social occasions within the church, such as the Women's Fellowship Christmas party, Easter Breakfast or Harvest and Anniversary celebrations. All require much organisation and hard work.

There are, too, the people who make sure the buildings are in good order, those responsible for all the financial affairs of the church and the countless people who make sure that every function within the church runs smoothly.

There are also many who work for other people. Ralph Friend raises money for Methodist Homes for the Aged by the sale of Christmas cards. There is a committee that stages various events throughout the year to raise money for the National Children's Home.

Special Church Services

The Covenant Service: the origins of the annual covenant service go back to the time of John Wesley. On 25 December 1747, and on many other occasions, John Wesley strongly urged Methodists to renew their Covenant with God. His first formal Covenant Service was held in the French church in Spitalfields on the 11 August 1755, when he used the words of Joseph and Richard Alleine, which he published in "The Christian Library". This service was used separately in 1780, and was the official Wesleyan form for nearly a century. Each of the other Methodists traditions developed its own form. As a result of Methodist union, a single, thoroughly revised, form was authorised in 1936. This has now been further revised. In addition to its regular use in Methodism, usually on the first Sunday of the New Year, it has been widely used in other Christian communions.

The Communion Service: this has been known by various names, such as The Lord's Supper and celebration of the Holy Sacrament. Originally, only members who had been taken into church membership or confirmed, as it is known in the Anglican Church, were allowed to participate. Nowadays, all who profess to love the Lord Jesus Christ are invited to take part.

Ministers of the Church 1900 to 2003

1899	Rev J Wolfendale	1901	Rev H J Atkinson
1904	Rev J Paskyn	1905	Rev E Green
1908	Rev J Musson	1911	Rev W J Winters
1914	Rev B Stanley	1918	Rev R E Little
1921	Rev Samuel Hulton	1924	Rev Arthur E. Southon
1927	Rev Louis Porri	1930	Rev Frank Hawkey
1933	Rev Ernest Ackeroyd	1936	Rev Norman Knock
1940	Rev William Evers	1942	Rev George W Appleby
1944	Rev Percy S Toye	1947	Rev Leonard J Barmby
1952	Rev H Lovering Picken	1957	Rev Eric Richardson
1962	Rev William Moralee	1968	Rev J Leslie Hall
1971	Rev J Wesley Woods	1977	Rev Harold Fisher
1990	Rev Tom Allen	1991	Rev Michael Hayman
1998	Rev John Graham	2003	Rev Keith Page

There are some photographs of the more recent ministers and references to others in the accounts of meetings. The ones who have served the church over the last fifty years or so are remembered in various ways by the older members of the congregation. However, it is difficult to report about them, personally, as very little has been recorded. The manse, until 1927, was 54 Grange Road. When Rev Louis Porri came, he moved into 18 Grange Road. Successive ministers lived there until 1962 when William Moralee was appointed. However, Peter Lednor recounts, "When

Bill Moralee came in 1962, he said he didn't want to light coal fires every day." The house, in Grange Road, was old and needed modernising. It was decided to sell it and use the proceeds to purchase the more modern place at 2 South Road. This is still being used as the manse although there have been some improvements since. Rev Harold Fisher became Minister in 1977. Methodist ministers are usually only allowed to be at one church for a maximum of seven years but Harold remained our minister for thirteen years, a reflection of the high regard in which he was held by the whole congregation. When he left it was decided to invite a younger man to lead the church.

Rev Tom Allen came in 1990. Sadly, after only a few weeks of arriving, he was taken ill. He died of a brain tumour just a few months later. Few of the congregation will ever forget the courage of his wife, Kathleen, during that sad time. A few years later, she decided to enter the ministry herself and is now the Superintendent Minister of the Brighton Circuit. During the remainder of 1991, a caretaker minister was needed; our supernumerary minister, Rev Ronald Rawlings came out of retirement and ably stepped into the breach.

Rev Michael Hayman was transferred in the September of 1991 and became a very popular minister. Soon after he took office the wheels were put in motion for the major refurbishment of the church. He remained at the church until his retirement in 1998. As both he and Harold have retired to Essex, they have been able to visit since and both participated in the centenary celebrations.

Rev John Graham, having been with us for five years, was able to be present for the first half of the centenary year. He then moved on to take up new challenges at another church during the summer.

In September of 2003, we welcomed Rev Keith Page.

Centenary Events 2003

During 2001, a centenary committee was set up to decide how the hundred years, since the opening of the present building, should be celebrated. A banner was erected in front of the church to tell the public and special celebratory events for every month of the year were arranged.

Saturday, 25 January	Concert by Graham Hepburn, Musician
Sunday, 26 January	Service conducted by Rev Michael Hayman
Saturday, 22 February	Entertainment by actor Andrew Harrison
Sunday, 23 February	Rev Dr. Nigel Collinson, Secretary of Conference
Saturday, 8 March	Younger Church presents "Joseph"
Saturday, 22 March	Quiz Night
Sunday, 23 March	Rev Dave Pope (Saltmine Trust)
Saturday, 8 April	Youth Organisations Fun Day
Sat.3-Mon.5 May	Flower Festival and Arts & Crafts Exhibition
Saturday, 3 May	Organ Recital/Alastair Hotchkiss and Richard Morgan
Sunday, 18 May	Rev Valerie Fisher
Sunday, 1 June	Anniversary Tea, followed by Songs of Praise Centenary exhibition of photographs and memorabilia
Fri.6-Sun.8 June	Church holiday weekend at Willersley Castle.
Saturday, 12 July	Younger Church Carnival Float Helen Shapiro Gospel Outreach Service
Saturday, 20 September	Methodist Youth Brass Band
Sunday, 21 September	Rev Ermal Kirby, Chairman of District
Saturday, 11 October	Church Concert
Sunday, 12 October	Rev Kathleen Allen
Saturday, 22 November	Rev Roly Bain, Holy Fool
Sunday, 23 November	Rev Harold Fisher
Saturday, 6 December	Bumper Christmas Fayre

A Note From The Author

I came to live in Bishop's Stortford in 1962, not expecting to stay very long as, up until then, my husband's job had meant a move every three years. I was busy too, with a growing family and so did not take as great an interest in things that were happening here in our own community, as perhaps I should. However, we settled here and, about fifteen years ago, I joined the Bishop's Stortford & District Local History Society. Since then, I have become very interested in finding out how the town has developed and about the way local people used to live.

As a life-long Methodist, some five years ago I started to make enquiries about the origins of Methodism in our town, particularly as I realised that the present building was, at that time, almost one hundred years old. I felt sure that there must be old records that would tell me about the present church building and something about when Methodism in Stortford began. I started by making enquiries to various church members and questioned Rev Michael Hayman, our minister at the time. No-one seemed able to help me but Michael recalled that he had disposed of some books, found in his garage, which might have contained something of interest. The books had been given to Margaret Richardson of Chrishall church, who was interested in Circuit history. Margaret returned the books to me as most were specific to Bishop's Stortford and, fortunately, these contained some relevant information and a few interesting records related to the 1866 church. From her I learnt that some early books had been deposited in the Hertfordshire Archive Office. I also tried the Local History Museum but they had very little information apart from some interesting pictures of South Street, in earlier times, and a picture of the 1866 church. Next I searched through the early editions at the Herts. & Essex Observer office and at that time found nothing. Later, earlier newspapers were made available and I was able to gain valuable information from them. (There was a full page report on the foundation stone laying ceremony as well as a large picture of the projected building; also, excellent coverage on the opening day.)

Eventually, I made my way to Hertford to examine the books there. They contained the minutes of the Trustees meetings from 1900 to 1922 and, from these, I have been able to deduce the early history.

These Trustees were drawn from various backgrounds and were not necessarily members of the church in Bishop's Stortford but members of the circuit. The circuit of that time included churches in Harlow. Below is a list of the members and their occupations:

Arthur Ashwell	Jeweller	Bishop's Stortford
Robert Fincham	Blacksmith	Hockerill
Samuel Barker	Baker	Bishop's Stortford
James Lanyon	Farmer	The Friars, Standon, Ware
Daniel Congdon	Farmer	Knights Hill, Buntingford
William Francis	Saddler	Harlow, Essex
Henry Laughner	Outfitter	Bishop's Stortford
Jabez Scantlebury	Farmer	Rickling Hall, Nr. B/Stortford
Edwin Lanyon	Farmer	Warren Farm, Braughing
Charles Lyon	Farmer	Pethybridge, Farnham
John Skinner	Gentleman	Hockerill
William Smith	Draper	Bishop's Stortford
William Percy	Farmer	Oldmead, Elsenham

The interesting thing about this list is, firstly, that Hockerill is listed almost as a separate place to Bishop's Stortford; that John Skinner was listed as "gentleman", implying that he was a man of independent means; and, finally, the high number of farmers giving an indication of the rural occupations of the town at that time.

There were some other records of meetings up until 1938 but the rest of the information has come from many sources.

The Ashwell family has been very helpful. It was Roland's great-grandfather who left the legacy which started the erecting of the present building and the family have been closely involved ever since. Flora Wilkins, the daughter of Grace Ashwell, who many will remember as a Sunday School teacher and speaker at the Women's Fellowship meetings, has many souvenirs and photographs which she shared with me when she heard of my enterprise.

Joy Cox had served as secretary to the fund-raising/project committee for the building of the New Hall and she made her records available to me; thankfully, she had kept them all. The 1992/3 major face-lift records were eventually tracked down; these were being held by the Property Committee.

I am very grateful to the many people who have supplied information. It has been a mammoth task; far larger than I envisaged at the outset, but I hope will be of interest to all who read this text.

To the many people who have over the years given so much of their energies, talents, money and time to our church, I dedicate this account. It is a story of foresight, courage and care for others, passed on through time, so that the knowledge of God's love might be known to all people.