

Bridge Village Hall and the early history of Methodism in Bridge

The Methodist Chapel as it now stands in Bridge has recently celebrated its centenary, for the 'Iron Chapel' in Patricbourne Road was erected in 1894. The Chapel Committee in Manchester had preferred a brick building as being more economical to maintain (though the passage of time may have disproved that idea), and were prepared to advance a loan to assist, support which would not be forthcoming if the local trustees persisted in their alternative choice. Furthermore, the Committee decreed that such funds as would otherwise have to be raised must be sufficient in advance, for they would not permit the Chapel to be opened saddled with a debt owed to other sources. The money was however raised (though how long it took is unclear), and eventually the building was completed and fitted out with seating, hymn books, mats and oil lighting for a total sum of £139-17s-0¼d. But what of the period before 1896? The early history of the Methodist Church is complicated by disputes over fine points of doctrine and organisation, leading to the formation of numerous breakaway groups, the reasons for which are not of importance here. They did however result in one decision which has left its mark on the village and in which once more the Marchioness Conyngham was closely involved.

The first record of Methodism in the village is said to be a minute of 1823 authorising one William Fordred to rent a house for Methodist Meetings 'at no more than 2/6 per week'. Whether this was an option taken up is not certain, and William Fordred does not reappear, but the following year support for the cause was evidently already sufficiently strong for the trustees to feel able to buy a plot of land for £50 on which to erect their own Chapel. This was indeed a plot very conveniently and prominently situated, with a frontage of 33 feet on the south-west side of Bridge Street, extending back some 97 feet, adjacent to land belonging to the Rev. Richard Barham, who at the time owned Bridge Farm. This is in fact the site on which the present Village Hall stands. The earliest record of ownership ascribes it to William Ottoway, who owned various properties in the county. On his death his sons sold this piece, which consisted of a house and garden plot, to Stephen Simmonds for £100, in January 1819. Simmonds didn't enjoy the property for long however. He was in debt and died intestate leaving four sons, only one of whom was of age, a few years later.

Joseph Duplock of Ramsgate, gentleman, was the person who thus held claim on the property, passed to him by Simmonds eldest son John, and it was he who sold it on to the Wesleyan Methodist Trustees in June 1824. Their names are worth recording here, though none lived in Bridge:

Thomas Pilcher of St. Dunstan's in Canterbury, Wheelwright,
 Daniel Gouger of Kingston, Miller,
 Thomas Grant of Kingston, Farmer,
 James Sutherland of Canterbury, Tailor,
 Henry Stickalls of Canterbury, Clothier,
 Thomas Hobday of Canterbury, Coal merchant,
 Thomas Finch Cozens of Canterbury, Builder,
 Jonathan Bundock of Canterbury, Upholsterer,
 Robert Clarke of Canterbury, Butcher,
 William Clay of Canterbury, Hatter,
 William Potter of Canterbury, Cordwainer.

As solid tradesmen they were also aware that Mr Duplock's authority to sell was not 100% foolproof, for they also required an indemnity from him to the tune of £150 in case any of the younger Simmonds boys (who were under 15 years old) should later file a claim, contending that they were not party to the sale.

With the property now in their hands, the Wesleyans began to build, and eventually spent £320 on constructing and furnishing the structure which is now in all essentials the Village Hall. Some years

later a note records that the house is tenanted by a Mr Wood, Cordwainer (ie shoemaker) 'with shoemaker's shop, garden and appurtenances together with a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel'. A photograph of the Village hall, or Reading Room as it then was, taken in the early 1900's still shows a 'leather store' adjacent to the hall.

To begin with the chapel flourished. The March preaching plan of 1827 shows that services were held on Sundays at 10.30am and 6.30pm, and 10.30am and 2.30pm on alternate weeks.

The 1820's leading to the Reform Act of 1832 however were marked by a period of political turbulence which was also reflected in the development of Methodism. The agitation resulted in a series of secessions focussed on the tensions existing between the ministers bolstered by the well-to-do laity and the rest of the people generally. While at that time they did not in general affect the development of the creed, the unrest culminated in 1850 in the formation of the 'Methodist Free Churches' and other groups, and between 1850 and 1855 the 'Connexion' lost some 100,000 members, nearly one third of the total.

Bridge was evidently not untouched by these events, for in 1851 permission was sought from (and given by) the President at a conference in Sheffield for the building to be sold, as there had been 'no attendance at late years at Wesleyan Chapel - hence their desire to sell.' The form of consent was eventually signed 'John Scott, 16 August 1852'.

Where had the people gone? A letter from a local solicitor (Mr R Pilcher) to another in London (probably Lady Conyngham's) dated 5 September 1853 reveals that some had undoubtedly reverted to Anglicanism, but others had joined the secessionists:

I am told . . . that no sale is valid unless the consent of the president be had - this was obtained 2 years since when the idea of selling the estate was first thought about - owing I think to the Rev Mr Stevenson [the vicar of Patricbourne & Bridge] drawing the Wesleyans to the parish church - a sect called 'Ranters' now have the chapel at £4 per annum and they disturb the whole neighbourhood. The house lets for £10.

The OED offers the following gloss on 'Ranters':

Ranter: Applied to members of the Primitive Methodist body, which originated in 1807-10. and quotes the *History of the Primitive Methodists* by H Bourne:

When these . . . meetings were closed, the praying people, in returning home, were accustomed to sing through the streets of Belper. This circumstance procured them the name of Ranters; and the name of Ranter, which first arose on this occasion [in 1814], afterwards spread very extensively.

Also (*Penny Cyclopaedia, XV*): The Primitive Methodists, who are sometimes known as Ranters, originated in Staffordshire.

The term describes in fact people of a joyous and evangelical disposition, rather than rowdy. They were however eventually ejected from the Chapel, for, as Mr Pilcher explains:

The Marchioness has verbally agreed to purchase from the Wesleyan Trustees in the Canterbury District, a house, garden and methodist chapel at Bridge for £270 . . . Her ladyship intends turning the Chapel into a Lecture Room or a Village Literary Institution, on payment of a shilling a year for the improvements of the rising generation.

And in due course the sale was agreed (on 21 July 1854) by the then Trustees, three of whom (Bundock, Gouger or Gauger and Thomas Finch Cozens) had survived since 1824, the remainder being

Thomas Grant Cozens of Canterbury, Builder,
Francis Hewson of Wickhambreux, Baker,
Thomas Bird of Canterbury, Brushmaker,
Edward Castle of Canterbury, Gardener,
William Frederick Crippen of Camden Town, Grocer,
Thomas Harnett Gifford of Bridge, Cordwainer,
Henry Allsworth of Canterbury, Baker,
John Smith of Canterbury, Carpenter,
Edward Small of Canterbury, Plumber.

All these were required to state that they had been 'in peaceable and uninterrupted possession of the property for 30 years and upward', and knew of no claim of title of possession since 1824. The reappearance of the younger Simmonds boys was still therefore a remote possibility, as Mr Pilcher somewhat deviously notes:

The father . . . died intestate consequently the sons were equally entitled, and had there been a surplus - under our law of gavelkind John the Elder son did sign as you will observe and the estate passed by feoffment, I think two of the brothers died. I know and believe he has a Brother living nr Romney - or this one by the bye may be John - it strikes me that it might be unadvisable to say anything to either on the subject - it is so far back - I recollect the [piece] of land when it was a garden abutting to the Dover Road. The Primitive Methodists, having been evicted from the chapel, presumably met privately for a while, until they were able to secure a site in Dering Road for a wooden chapel of their own, which was duly erected in 1868. At the time it was the only building on that side of the road (opposite the end of Filmer Road) and fairly well separated from other properties. The building survived (though in the 20th century not as a chapel) until 1951, when it was demolished and replaced by a row of lock-up garages. It is however clearly marked as such in the survey of 1872/1873 (OS 1/2500 map sheet 47.9W), while there is no indication of a Wesleyan chapel at all. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century however a movement for Methodist Reunion was gathering pace, and by 1892 a Methodist Society was re-formed with 14 members, whose efforts then were rewarded with the erection of the 'Iron Chapel'. The Primitive Chapel is recorded still on a map of 1898, but by 1907 it was gone, and the building taken over as a private house.

The history of Methodism since that time has been for bridge uneventful. But what of the Reading Room? The Chapel as originally built in the 1820's (and shown on the 1873 map) was only half as long as the present main hall. It survived until 1874, when major improvements were undertaken, 'in celebration of the coming of age of the Marchioness's son', extending the hall to its present size, and inserting a fireplace. Since then the Reading Room has served many functions, not least as Canteen and Recreation Room for troops in the First World War, renamed as the Village Hall in the 1970's and purchased outright from the Conyngham Estate in

A structural survey of the building does indeed reveal much about its past

MM Raraty
5 April 2000
© mmr