

Chapel Tales

It is 2021 and Fakenham Methodist Church is about to change hands having been converted into housing since the last change of ownership.

Go back 113 years and my uncle Fred and his fellow trustees were planning to build it. The Primitive Methodists were first recorded in the town in 1821 when they probably met in a house in White Horse Street. Before long they were renting William Heath's barn in a yard off Oak Street. In 1825 a generous gift from a Fakenham baker plus some fundraising allowed the trustees to buy the barn for themselves.

The Primitive Methodists relied on itinerant ministers instead of resident ones. In 1828 one minister came from King's Lynn, probably on foot, and encouraged the congregation to 'build a chapel' and so they borrowed money and converted the barn into a chapel. A small house was built on the south-east corner in anticipation of a future permanent minister, they were also possibly one of the first customers of Fakenham Gas Works, gas was installed but only for lighting the pulpit!

By the 1850s the building was needing repairs. Another Minister came from King's Lynn to take up his appointment as a resident minister. He could see that something needed to be done and so, in the 1860s the congregation met at the British School in Norwich Road for two years until the work was complete. The new building had a new front wall with large windows and a porch as well as a new roof. Inside galleries were built in the style of the times.

At the same time the trustees were looking at the property on the other side of the yard. This consisted of a shop with frontage on Oak Street and a row of ancient cottages. If this site could be cleared it would make space for a modern state-of-the-art Chapel. Work on these plans was delayed because one of the cottages had a tenant.

By 1900 all the cottages were clear and so work began on demolishing them apart from the ground floor of one which was retained for use as an undercroft/coal-hole for the new building.

As soon as building was underway the foundation stones were laid, one was laid by the widow of missionary Henry Buckenham to whom the building was

dedicated, another was laid by Sir George White MP who made the sort of speech that would have got him into trouble today!

The Buckenham Memorial Chapel was opened in poor weather on 9th September 1908, it had cost £1,767/15/1 to build and the builder was still chasing the last of his invoices in 1910.

Meanwhile the old chapel was still being used for many functions such as the Sunday school. During the first world war the Army wanted to rent it by the month, however no rent was paid until after the war was over thus delaying the final payment to the builder.

At the time of the Methodist Union in 1932 the Wesleyans (who had been in the town since 1779) vacated their chapel on the other side for the street and joined the congregation in the Buckenham Memorial.

The last service was held there on 15th May 2016 bringing an end to Methodism in Fakenham after 237 years.