

The Methodist story in Fakenham

For those who had connections with Fakenham Methodist Church it is sad to see the iconic building being converted into flats.

The story started in the late 18th century when Mrs Mary Parker inherited a considerable amount of money when she was still a spinster. She bought property at the top end of White Horse Street, Fakenham and her house was licensed for worship, she called it The New Chapel. Later she bought an adjoining piece of land where she built a proper chapel handing it over to some trustees in 1779 and then marrying one of them in the same year.

John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist Church, visited and said that he preached in a 'room' built by Mrs Parker. He must have been referring to the recently constructed chapel, he also commented on the number of people who turned out to hear him preach, too many for Mary's house if it was still standing.

Mary used to engage a Methodist preacher for her chapel which did not suit everyone since it was an Independent chapel, so she asked the advice of Wesley. As a result, the chapel became Methodist and the displaced Independents went to join the Baptists until they were able to build themselves a chapel in what is now Cattle Market Street and later, another one at the top of Ratcliffe Road.

In the years that followed, the White Horse Street chapel weathered the storms of the new Methodists movement which were often complex and divisive. In the end the chapel became a Free Methodists chapel for a while and then, in the 1880s, the Dereham Wesleyans leased the building. They found that it was unsatisfactory, the trustees were difficult and there were questions about the legality of the lease, and so they purchased land next to the Royal Oak Public House in Oak street and built a new chapel which opened in 1892.

After the Methodist Union when the Primitive and Wesleyan Churches united, this building was used as a store and for the Sunday School. It was then sold to the Salvation Army who used it until 1941 when it became Fakenham's only bombing casualty of the Second World War.

The Primitive Methodist movement was one of the spin-offs of the troubles in the early 19th century and the first Fakenham Congregation met somewhere in White Horse Street in 1822 until they were able to get the use of a barn in a yard off Oak Street. In 1823 a local businessman donated money to the Trustees to buy the property that they were renting, by then Fakenham was in the Kings Lynn district from where the ministers came, mostly on foot. In 1825 one of the ministers encouraged them to 'build a chapel',

so a mortgage was raised with a local businessman and a proper chapel built with galleries and a pulpit lit by gas.

By the 1850s the building was in need of some repairs and, in 1861/2 it was rebuilt while the congregation met in the British School. Meanwhile plans were being made to build a new chapel on the other side of 'Ranthers Yard' on the site of some shops and cottages. This plan was put on hold while there were some people still living in the cottages. These were never completely demolished and some walls are still to be seen in the under-croft!

The new church was to be called the Buckenham Memorial in honour of Fakenham Missionary Henry Buckenham who had died while on a mission in southern Africa. The Church was opened on September 9th 1908. Henry's widow was there but absent was radical MP George White who championed the cause of 'Dissenting Churches' in Parliament, and had little or no time for others not of his persuasion. Months earlier he had attended the foundation stone laying where he had made a speech which would have got him arrested today! The new church was not without its problems. There was only one door to the yard on the south side. This gave access to a shared pump but was not to be used for shaking mats or for emptying dustpans! In all, the church cost £2500 to build. The project took 14 months and, presumably, Tuthill the builder had only manual labour at his disposal. The old chapel became the Sunday School. It is interesting to note that the Methodist Sunday Schools in the area could boast nearly 600 scholars. In the day before universal education this made a useful contribution to elemental education and time for mum and dad on a Sunday afternoon, increasing the number of scholars in the years to come! During the First World War the Sunday School was rented out to the Army who took until 1919 to pay!

The last service in the Buckenham Memorial was on Sunday 5th May 2016. The White Horse Street Chapel is now a drinking Club as is the chapel in Cattle Market Street while the Salvation rebuilt on the site of the Wesleyan Chapel in Oak Street.

For more information see '*WESLEY'S PEOPLE*' by Jim Baldwin.