

Downley Local History Group

How Downley embraced the Prims (Part II)



The Chapel of Chapel Street, c. 1920

You may recall that by 1851, eleven percent of High Wycombe were Primitive Methodists, according to the religious census of that year. If that proportion was reflected in Downley, then about fifty Downley folk may embraced the Prims. By 1864 they had finally raised enough money to build themselves a place of worship, albeit a small one, and applied to Lady Dashwood for some land, which was gifted, *sans* the mineral rights. The Chapel of Chapel Street had a platform, a pulpit, a table, chairs, and an organ, which had to be pumped by a volunteer. On the side, there was a small room (now demolished) that was used for a Sunday School.

Downley now had two chapels, and there seems to have been an intense rivalry between the two. They each attracted a different sort of person, perhaps, with the Chapel Street worshippers probably coming from the poorer houses. Even when the two branches of Methodism – the Wesleyan and the Primitives – formally united in 1932 on a national scale, there was little co-operation in Downley. Ignoring the new ‘union’ with the Sunnybank Methodists, The Chapel held its own services, at 6 or 6.30 pm every Sunday for a further thirty years.

Norman Brown remembers these early evening services well: he was the only child present, since he came to help his blind father, Leslie, the village shop keeper. The Chapel’s square interior was plain and spotlessly clean. In the 1940s, about thirty people attended, with enthusiastic singing accompanied by Mrs Hatton of Commonsides on the organ, and stirring sermons provided by a guest (Lay) Local Preacher from within the High Wycombe Circuit. Reg Langley recalled one sermon that made sparks fly: ‘Arthur Hawkins [the Steward] became so angry with the preacher for talking politics that he jumped up and told him to be quiet!’

Four times a year, Communion was held, in a more informal way than in an Anglican church, but still requiring an ordained Minister, who was usually the Circuit Superintendent Minister based at Wesley Chapel in Priory Road, High Wycombe. The table was covered with a linen cloth and then, for reasons he never fathomed, Norman was always asked to withdraw.

In addition to services, a successful Sunday School met in The Chapel at 2:30 pm (so timed because the bus service only started after lunch on a Sunday). It drew a wider crowd ‘from more distant parts of the village like Littleworth Road’, remembers Norman, and was run by Arthur Hawkins, or his father, Leslie. Singing at Sunday School was unaccompanied; occasionally there was a guest speaker. There is a wonderful photo of a Chapel Sunday School meeting, taken at the end of the Second World War or shortly thereafter, when film became available once again. Norman recalls that someone in the village

with a Kodak Brownie box camera had offered to take a photo, which explains the larger-than-usual turn out, smart coats, and ribbons in hair.



Sunday School, c. 1945-46

From left to right, the back row were: Peggy Mines; David Hawkins (the son of Arthur, and soon to be a Sixth Form prefect at RGS); an unknown young lady; Arthur Hawkins (The Chapel's Steward, not ordained, who died in 1962); Ethel Hawkins, his wife ('a lovely soul, very caring'); Leslie Brown (who was blind, and ran the village shop); and his son **Norman Brown**, aged 10 or 11, in Cub Scout uniform. Norman went on to become an Anglican priest: now retired and in his 80s, he 'realises how much [he] was influenced (for good) at The Chapel'.

In this fashion, with its Sunday Schools and evening services, baptisms and weddings (after it was licensed for weddings in 1943), social evenings, youth club, harvest auctions, and events for the Sick Fund, The Chapel stayed in use until 1964. By that time numbers had so declined that the decision was taken to end 100 years of Primitive Methodism in Downley.



Chapel wedding: Jeanette Brooks (Pam's sister) & Gordon Alderman, 12 September 1964. It is said that the Chapel had closed a week before but was reopened just for this wedding.

For a while, the building was used for storage, then in 1985 it was sold and converted into private dwellings. The conversion sadly covered up most of the evidence of the building's past, other than the internal 1887 memorial plaque, and a round window high up at the back. The Prims had the final word, though: by its deeds, no inhabitant of The Chapel can host a wrestling match, sell alcohol, gamble, or operate machinery, within.

There is a pleasing incidental postscript to this history: The Chapel's original windows and railings ended up in Blacksmiths Cottages, where the windows are now part of the conservatory, and the railings hold up the compost heap. It seems appropriate: it was the wheelwright of Downley who welcomed in Reverend James Pole, 150 years earlier.

