

Willaston Primitive Methodist Chapel (1838)

Buckley Lane, Willaston, West Cheshire CH64 2TT

The history of the two PM chapels in Willaston is described in detail in a booklet produced in 1989 to mark the centenary of the laying of memorial stones of the second chapel [1]. Much of the following has been drawn from that source.

In the 19th century, Willaston was a village of farms and agricultural workers; the population grew steadily from 196 in 1801 to 317 in 1851 and 597 in 1901. In the early 1830s there were two pubs, a number of artisans (wheelwright, shoemaker, blacksmith, tailor) but no places of worship -- Christ Church (Anglican) was not built until 1854. It is possible that the first encounter Willaston had with a Primitive Methodist preacher was as early as the Autumn of 1819 when [a John Wedgwood](#) visited Chester and also travelled northwards to Two Mills and Neston "and other places in the Wirral peninsular". This led in 1819 to the formation of a society in [Little Neston](#) (about 2 ½ miles west-south-west of Willaston) where the 1872 chapel still exists with an active society.

The beginning of the 'cause' in Willaston however dates from a camp meeting in 1831 that established a class of about five women. The following year, preachers from Chester (where Primitive Methodism had been established since 1823) held 'cottage meetings' (we would now call them house fellowships) in the kitchen of a widow, Mrs Huntington.

[Rev William Rowe](#) (1817-1888) had an amusing connection to the Willaston society:

'When young, William was 'full of frolic and mischief'. Looking to find a source of mirth, he went to a Primitive Methodist service at Willaston, Wirral [presumably a cottage meeting]. He found himself converted rather than finding a joke on 10 April 1834 and immediately joined the society at Willaston.

'He was a local preacher for five years. William declined two invitations to ministry before his own circuit Chester convinced him to become one of their ministers.'

He was in ministry from 1839 to 1878; in 1874 he was President of Conference. The *Cheshire Observer* of 30 June 1888 reported that 'On Monday evening [at Willaston PM chapel], the Rev. J. Travis delivered a funeral sermon for Rev. W. Rowe who spent his early days in this district. There was a good attendance.'

Willaston came under the Chester Circuit; the head of that circuit was [Steam Mill Street Chapel](#) from 1825 to 1863, then the first [George Street Chapel](#) until 1888, and finally the second [George Street chapel](#). The circuit records give the number of class members at Willaston:

Year	1832/3	1833/4	1834/5	1835/6	1837/8	1850	1866
Class members	5	12	21	34	21	6	22

The first chapel in Willaston was built in 1838. It is intriguing to note the sharp fall in membership the very year the chapel was built; did the new building cause dissention? The chapel lay about 100m south of the village green, near Corner House Farm (now the Pollard's Inn), on the site now occupied by Weint Cottage (built in the 1990s). The chapel's south wall was aligned with the stone wall that now runs across the front of Weint Cottage. The chapel is labelled on an 1872-4 map [2] and scales at 46' x 23', split into two rooms 28' x 23' and 18' x 23', presumably the chapel and schoolroom respectively.

Some information on this chapel is provided by the report in the *Cheshire Observer* on the occasion of the laying of memorial stones of the [second Willaston chapel](#), 21 September 1889:

'After years of patient waiting, during which considerable embarrassment was experienced from inadequate accommodation [the old chapel], the denomination have at length been fortunate in acquiring an excellent new site ...'

[Rev. J. TRAVIS](#) [minister in the Chester First Circuit] gave a brief account of the circumstances leading to the consummation of the movement that had so long been on foot for the erection of a [new] chapel in Willaston. So long as 50 years ago, services were commenced in a cottage in the village, and with the lapse of time the old building about to be deserted came to be erected at a cost of about £90 [a different source gives £96]. Though perhaps not very powerful in itself, there were, he ventured to affirm, very few village churches that had done more substantial good during the last half century. (Hear, hear.)'

[Mr Duncan Graham, Chairman of the Cheshire County Council] 'His recollection of Willaston now extended over a great number of years – back to the time when the little old chapel was the sole place of worship in the village and when the Church of England services were conducted in one or other of the neighbouring farmhouses where accommodation could be found.'

The *Primitive Methodist* of April 1890 [3] reported:

'The new chapel of Willaston in the Chester First Station has been opened for public worship and the church has now a better opportunity to do the will and work of God among the inhabitants of the locality. The former sanctuary, though a plain and unornamented building, was for years a hill of Zion for that neighbourhood, but we trust the glory of the second house will exceed that of the former house.'

We learn from the following newspaper report in the *Cheshire Observer* of Saturday 7 December 1878 that the chapel had shutters, presumably over the windows:

'NESTON PETTY SESSIONS

'DISTURBING A CONGREGATION BY "MURMURING CHRISTMAS CAROLS." – James Tushingam and Wm. Blackburne were summoned that they, on the 17th of November, did disturb a certain meeting and congregation of Protestant Dissenters at Willaston. – Mr. J. Carter, farmer, a trustee of the Willaston Primitive Methodist Chapel, said on the Sunday evening in question he was in the chapel, and the congregation was very much disturbed by a noise outside of singing and the rattling of the shutters of the building. The noise went on for about a quarter of an hour, and it nearly stopped the service, and the minister discontinued preaching. These disturbances were of frequent occurrence. – P.C. Costello said he caught the defendants outside the chapel. They had a book of comic songs, and they were singing out of it. He told them if they wished to sing hymns they should go inside the chapel, but if they wished to sing comic songs they should go elsewhere. – The defendant Tushingam, who appeared, said they went to the building with the intention of going inside, but when they got there they found them at prayers. They waited outside and "murmured Christmas carols," and some other young man shouted out "pom-pom." (Laughter.)—The Chairman said it was a most disgraceful offence, and they were determined to put a stop to that kind of annoyance. They were each fined 20s. [about 3 days' wages for a skilled tradesman] and costs.'

I wonder whether the existence of protective shutters was a reflection of an aggressive attitude of some local people toward the Primitive Methodists.

The conversion of Mr John Stockton of Ellesmere Port occurred in Willaston in about 1838 when he 'came from Burwardsley [about 9 miles south east of Chester] to work in the locality. He was a serious-minded, impressionable youth, but in no way associated with religion or the Church. His parents were Primitive Methodists in the Burland Circuit – his father being a local preacher, co-operating in mission work with the revered [Thomas Bateman](#) and others of Connexional renown. Soon after his arrival in "the Port," Mr. Stockton attended a great camp-meeting at Willaston, was converted, and henceforth walked in newness of life.'

Membership recovered during the 1850s and 1860s from about 6 to 22 but during this period the average Sunday attendance remained fairly constant at 80 – a substantial proportion of the village population. It seems that most of the participants wished to attend chapel services but not to take on the obligations of membership. The original seating capacity was about 150 but in 1868 there seems to have been some rearrangement reducing the capacity to 100.

Sunday School was an important part of the chapel's activities from the beginning. By 1842 there were 54 children (about equal numbers of boys and girls) and eleven teachers (eight male and three female); over the next twenty-five years there were on average 67 in the Sunday School.

The chapel was listed in the [1867 Register of Places of Worship](#) in the Wirral Registration area of Cheshire, along with Hoylake Hoose and Moreton (both on the north west coast of Wirral) and Puddington -- 'a building' (a small village about 3 miles south of Willaston).

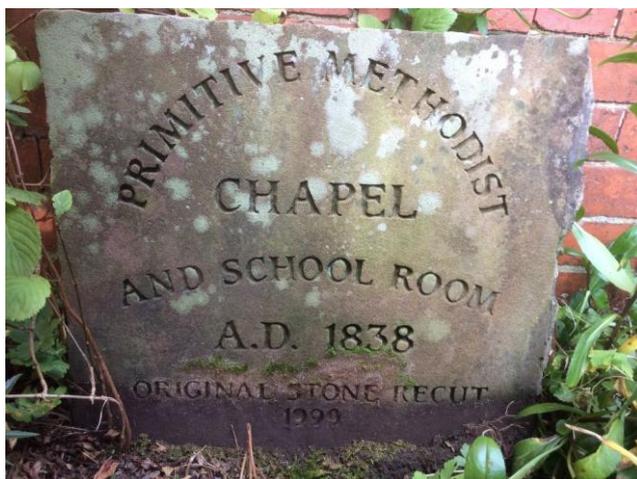
Activities at the chapel were reported briefly in the *Cheshire Observer* from 1875 onwards: a Band of Hope meeting, a tea party, Chapel Anniversary Service, Harvest Thanksgiving Service, a Temperance meeting, and the annual sermon of behalf of Home and Foreign Missions.

The Chester First Circuit Preaching Plan for 1882, Q4, shows the (first) Chester George Street Chapel as head and eleven other chapels including Willaston. Sunday services at Willaston were at 10.30am and 6pm, both services being led by a local preacher. A weekday service was held on alternate Tuesdays led by one of the ministers.

By the 1880s the chapel had become too small and was described as dilapidated. Some difficulty was encountered finding a suitable site for a new chapel but one was eventually found; building began in 1888 and the new chapel was opened in 1889.

After the society moved into the new chapel, the old chapel was sold off by auction and later demolished. All that survives of it is an engraved stone (right) which now stands in the garden of the 1889 chapel.

Reference 1 says that remains of two cottages were visible on the site in the late 1980s but these are not shown on any maps; the site was a garden until Weint Cottage was built in the 1990s.



References

1. History of Willaston Methodist Church, 1838-1989. Author not named but most if not all of the work was done by John Isherwood, retired lecturer in Church History and Greek (see <http://www.mwrc.ac.uk/john-stuart-isherwood>). Copies of the booklet may be requested from wells@virginmedia.com
2. <https://www.old-maps.co.uk/#/Map/332855/377808/12/100093>
3. *The Primitive Methodist*, April 1890, Our Monthly Chronicle.

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