

Birkenhead Beckwith Street Chapels

Sketch Map based on maps between 1844 and 1899

Beckwith Street

Beckwith Street is part of the new town grid plan designed by the Edinburgh architect James Gillespie Graham in the 1820s. It lies between and parallel to the main WNW-ESE roads of Conway Street and Price Street and is shown on an 1844 map but largely without any housing. A Mr Beckwith is shown on an 1844 map as owning land within the street grid nearby.

Appendix 1 gives a more detailed early history of the street, and sketch maps at the end of this document show its development based on the Censuses of 1851 to 1891 and maps of the time.

The 1840s Beckwith Street Chapel

The life of this chapel was intertwined with that of the Camperdown Street PM chapel in the east end of the town, as will be described later.

1850-52: A [1923 booklet](#) states: ‘In Birkenhead and district we have two strong circuits. Their history looks back to 1850-52 and the first sanctuary was an earthen floored smithy in Beckwith Street.’ The history probably began rather earlier than this. The smithy has not been identified.

1850: [Kelly's 1850 directory](#) (p. 678) includes: ‘the Primitive Methodists have a small chapel in Beckwith Street’.

1851: Census: no chapels are listed on Beckwith Street; however, although chapels were sometimes included in the census returns, the enumerator was not required to record unoccupied properties.

1857: The [Post Office Directory](#) (p. 45) lists ‘CHAPELS: Primitive Methodist, Beckwith-street, ministers various.’ The chapel is also listed in the street directory section p. 23 (see below).

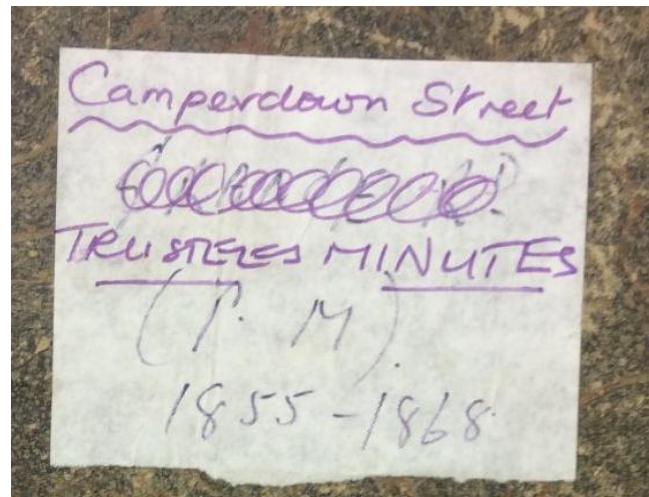
1859: The [1859 Q2 Preaching Plan for the Liverpool Circuit](#) showed that the circuit had a Birkenhead Branch with the following ‘places’: Birkenhead [was this Beckwith Street, Camperdown Street or both?], Liscard, South Tranmere, Poulton, Bebington, Hoylake Open Air, Greasby and Irby.

1861: The Census listed ‘Primitive Methodist Chapel’ between the entries for no. 57 on the south side of Beckwith Street and no. 56 on the north side (the location of the chapel will be discussed later).

1862-68: The chapel is mentioned numerous times in the Minutes of the Trustees of the Camperdown Street chapel (Cheshire Archives); it seems that they had responsibility for both chapels (see below).

1864: [Morris's directory](#) p. 466 lists a PM chapel in Beckwith Street.

1869: The 1869 Q3 Preaching Plan for the Birkenhead Circuit (a copy of which was put in a time capsule under the foundation stone of Grange Lane chapel and is now in the Cheshire Archives) showed the following Places: Camperdown Street (by implication the head of the circuit), South Tranmere, Lower Tranmere, Beckwith Street, Poulton, Bebington, Seacombe and Saughall. There were two Sunday services at Beckwith Street, at 10.30 and 6, led entirely by lay preachers apart from one quarterly visit from each of the two circuit ministers, [Rev T Swallow](#) and [Rev W Thornley](#). The chapel had only one ‘class’ (there were 19 in the whole circuit). For a description of PM Classes see [here](#).



1871: Census: no chapels are listed on Beckwith Street.

1874: [Morris's directory](#) p.217 again lists a PM chapel in Beckwith Street.

1878: The only PM chapel listed in the [Post Office Directory](#) is the one in Grange Lane.

I conclude that the chapel was built in the late 1840s and ceased operation in the mid-1870s.

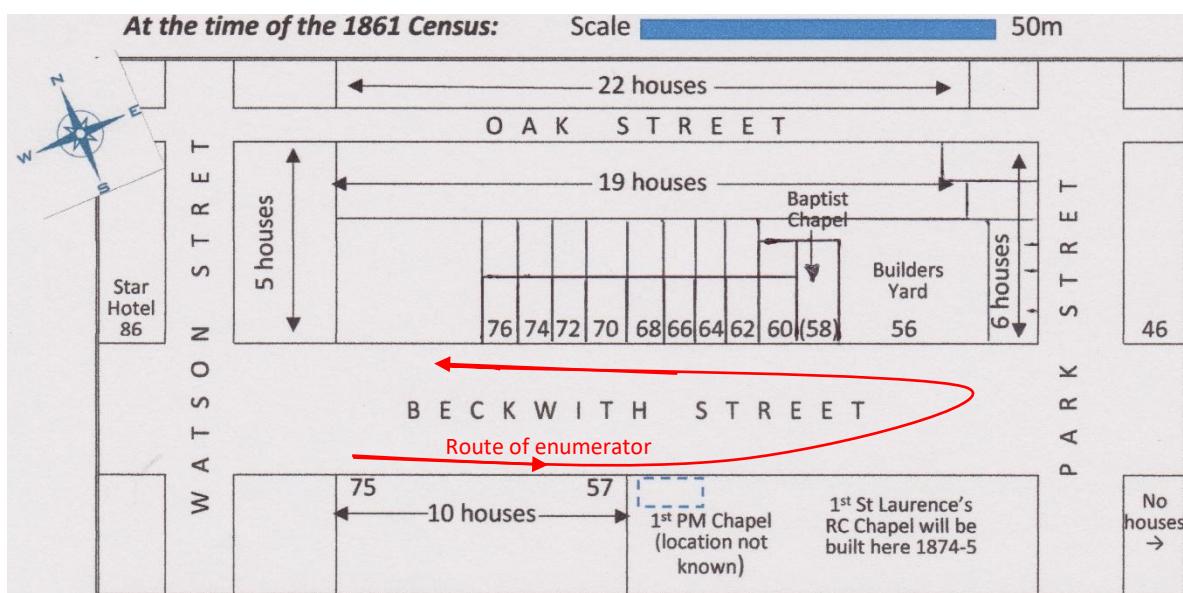
Unfortunately I have not been able to determine the location of this chapel. [The 1857 Post Office Directory Street Listing](#) p. 23 gives:

Beckwith Street [south side, starting at the east end with the Angel Inn commercial hotel which is actually no. 36 Camden Street]
3 Davies Edward, car proprietor
PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL
..... *here is Cathcart street*

Oakfield House ladies boarding school [shown on an 1876 map on the south side]
..... *here is Vittoria street*

This places the chapel on the south side somewhere between Camden and Cathcart Streets, a distance of $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (see sketch map above). An 1844 map shows no housing along this stretch; two 1858 large-scale maps (Birkenhead Central Library) also show no housing apart from a building just before Cathcart Street. It is shown in solid black, as are some chapels, a church and a school, whereas housing is shown cross-hatched; however, this building is unlabelled, unlike those other

buildings. It scales about 44' x 60' with an extension at the back about 20' x 10' (perhaps a boiler house). There is a short path about 14 feet wide leading from Beckwith Street and right round the building. The next maps found – 1870, 1872 and 1875 – seem to show that the building has been replaced with housing, next to where St Peter's Church has been built. Could this building be the chapel? Unfortunately it seems too large to be described as a small chapel – but perhaps the chapel was only part of the building.



It is sometimes possible to deduce a building's location from the listing in a census, following the route taken by the enumerator. The 1861 census shows that the enumerator travelled east along the south side of the street, visiting nos. 61, 59 and 57. He then squeezed in 'Primitive Methodist Chapel' between the lines before he continued with entries for nos. 56 and 60 (no no. 58, the Baptist chapel, as it would have been unoccupied). This suggests a location for the chapel between no. 57 and the junction with Park Street. However, maps from 1844, 1858 and 1876 show empty ground there. Had he passed the building described above, visited houses nos. 75 to 57 and then squeezed in the chapel entry in the wrong place? We will probably never know.

The 1880 Beckwith Street Chapel

1880: As mentioned above, a [1923 booklet](#) states: '... and the first sanctuary was an earthen floored smithy in Beckwith Street. There is still a cause on the site, the church [the 2nd chapel] having been built in 1880.'

1881: Census: no mention of the chapels.

1882: Newspaper report: a meeting of the 'Birkenhead Hope' Lodge held in the [PM] chapel to discuss petitioning Parliament in favour of closing public houses on Sundays; the resolution was carried unanimously.

1883: [Slater's Directory](#) p. 64, Places of Worship: Primitive Methodist: Beckwith Street and Grange Lane.

1883: Newspaper report: a treat for the ‘Sunbeam’ Juvenile Templars held at the chapel; a ‘good tea’ was followed by games and a miscellaneous programme of songs, readings and recitations. Mr and Mrs Wynne were commended for ‘their efforts in training the young in the ways of temperance.’ We are not told how many children attended, but sixteen adults ‘assisted’.

1887: Newspaper report: the *Birkenhead News* of 28 May:

‘PRIMITIVE METHODIST ANNIVERSARY.

The anniversary services in connection with the Primitive Methodist Chapel, Beckwith-street, were held last Sunday in the Welsh Baptist Chapel, Price-street, kindly lent for the occasion. Sunday services morning and evening, afternoon children’s service, Monday evening public meeting. No report of the Sunday school was read but from information received we may state that the number of scholars is now about seventy, who are under the care of thirteen teachers. The school has had to be removed from Beckwith-street on account of the subsidences caused by the Mersey Tunnel excavations, and since its local in Price-street has not been near so successful, there being a decrease of about thirty scholars and a corresponding decrease in the funds.’

The Price Street chapel had seating for 460; it was less than 200 yards away from the Beckwith Street PM chapel so distance was not the reason for Sunday School numbers to fall. Mention of subsidence relates well to the story of the [Roman Catholic Church of St Laurence](#) in Beckwith Street at the junction with Park Street (the PM chapel was immediately opposite on the north side of Beckwith Street). St Laurence’s officially opened in 1875. The Mersey Railway from Liverpool Central under the Mersey to Hamilton Square in Birkenhead opened in 1886. During the next two years a tunnel was built from Hamilton Square (a deep station) to Birkenhead Park (in a cutting). The west end of this line was a tunnel underneath Beckwith Street; the extension was opened in 1888. Unfortunately the foundations of St Laurence’s were damaged by the tunnelling and the church showed signs that it might collapse. The church was closed, never to reopen. Despite litigation, the church was left seriously out of pocket. Nevertheless, the old church was pulled down and a new one built on the same site but further away from the tunnel and turned through 90°; it opened in 1890. It seems as though the PM chapel was similarly affected; we don’t know whether it was repaired or rebuilt.

1888: *Birkenhead News*, 16 June: there was great activity and excitement because of the Primitive Methodist Conference being held in Liverpool. The Birkenhead Circuit had to accommodate 50 of the 200 members attending. Special open-air services were held in Birkenhead, one of which ended after a procession in a field off Woodchurch Road with 2000 people. Further services and public meetings were held in the Grange Road, Mount Tabor (Tranmere) and Beckwith Street chapels.

1891: the Census lists a Primitive Methodist chapel between nos. 56B and 58 (see below).

1892: *Birkenhead News*, 8 October, reported at length on the annual harvest festival at Beckwith PM chapel. Collections were taken on behalf of the renovation fund (to repair subsidence damage?). After the tea and entertainment, ‘the chairman complimented the promoters of the concert upon the high tone and quality of the programme. It is to be regretted that the young gentleman who followed the chairman did not profit by his remarks and so avoided singing a song which was as uncomplimentary to himself as it was to the place in which he sang it.’

1899: [The Preaching Plan for the Birkenhead Circuit 1899](#): a School Anniversary was planned, to be held in [Queen’s Hall](#) (presumably the chapel was too small). This hall was located on the corner of Claughton Road and Kendall Street; it opened in 1862 and operated as a music hall. Films were being screened from 1908 and it was converted into the Queen’s Cinema in 1913, with 1300 seats.

1902: [Kelly's Directory](#) p. 74 lists the chapel between nos. 50 and 58.

1906: *Birkenhead News*, 3 October, reported on the harvest thanksgiving services all of which were ‘well attended’; on the Monday evening, a tea and entertainment was ‘much enjoyed’ by the 110 persons that attended. The offertories will be devoted to the trust fund, etc.

1910 and 1914: Kelly’s Directories pp. 79 and 82 refer to a PM mission chapel in Beckwith Street with services at 10.45 and 6.30pm.

1925: a map shows the chapel labelled as Chap (no denomination).

Unlike the earlier chapel, I am confident about the location of this chapel once it has been untangled from the adjacent General Baptist Chapel. The [1857 Post Office Directory](#) p. 23 provides the following listing on the north side of Beckwith Street:

[travelling west]

..... here is Park street

56 Harkness & Dempster, builders
58 GENERAL BAPTIST CHAPEL,
 Rev. James Glyde
60 Glover George, engineer
 [through to]
74 Love Mrs. Elizabeth, lodging house
..... here is Watson street

Several maps dated 1858 to 1876 shows these terraced buildings (west to east): nine houses (even numbers 76 to 60) and then a building deeper than the houses scaling 20' wide x 48' deep which I believe to be the Baptist Chapel (no. 58). To the east of this building was a builder’s yard, no. 50. The 1861 Census exactly confirms this information except that no. 58 has not been listed (because it was unoccupied?). Morris’s 1864 and 1874 Directories show no. 58 occupied by Miss Susan Newton’s infant school.

Using the 1891 Census, I deduce that by the time of an 1899 map, this building had been demolished and five houses (nos. 52, 54, 56, 56A and 56B) had been built on its site and part of the adjoining builder’s yard. What had been no. 60 has been replaced by the 1880 PM chapel. It scales at about 20' frontage x 45' deep. The houses to the west of this chapel have been renumbered starting with no. 58.

A 1925 map shows the building labelled as ‘Chap’, and houses 50 to 82 unchanged. However, by the time of the 1936 map, there is a space where the chapel used to be. Therefore the life of that building was 1880 until about 1930.

The modern location of the chapel is in the garden of 14 St Anne’s Close, over the road from no. 6 Beckwith Street East CH41 3JE.

The Relationship between the Beckwith Street and Camperdown Street Societies

At the same time as the Beckwith Street PM society was developing, another society was developing in the east end of the town (see a detailed history [here](#)). As mentioned above, the Trustees Minutes 1855-68 survive (Cheshire Archives), giving a wonderful insight into the life of the society. The society must have formed some time before 1855, probably meeting in people’s houses and hired meeting rooms. They began renting accommodation in the newly built Friends Meeting House in Hemingford Street. In 1855 they purchased some land for a new chapel, in Camden Street, quite close to Beckwith Street (was this a joint project?). However, a year later the

Welsh Calvinist Methodist chapel in Camperdown Street came on the market and they decided to give up this land and to make an offer of £550 for the chapel. Opening services were held in September 1859. Up to this time it seems likely that Beckwith Street was the head of the circuit. However, the Minutes Book after 1862 contains numerous references to decisions made by the Camperdown Street trustees about the Beckwith Street chapel, suggesting that they were by then also responsible for Beckwith Street. Also in 1862 the trustees started thinking about a new chapel. They began planning and fund-raising, and in July 1869, laid the foundation stone of an 800-seat chapel in Grange Lane (a detailed history of this chapel can be seen [here](#)). I think the first Beckwith Street chapel closed in the mid-1870s and presumably the society then joined Grange Lane. However, they then built a new chapel in Beckwith Street in 1880 and remained independent until about 1930.

Appendix 1: the Early History of Beckwith Street

Back in 1821, the population of Birkenhead was 200 – just a hamlet. In 1824 William Laird established a boiler works and this site developed into a shipbuilding yard. He had already bought land around Birkenhead on which he planned to build a new town. He commissioned James Gillespie Graham, a leading Edinburgh architect, to lay out a Square and surrounding streets with long, straight, wide avenues lined with elegant town houses. Work started on the eastern side of the new town around Hamilton Square (built between 1825 and 1847). Beckwith Street is part of Graham's grid plan, lying between and parallel to the main WNW-ESE roads of Conway, Price and Cleveland Streets; it was not listed in the 1841 census but probably dates from later on that decade. Another date marker is the Brunswick Wesleyan Day Schools, no. 28 Beckwith Street at the junction with Eldon Street, built in 1857.

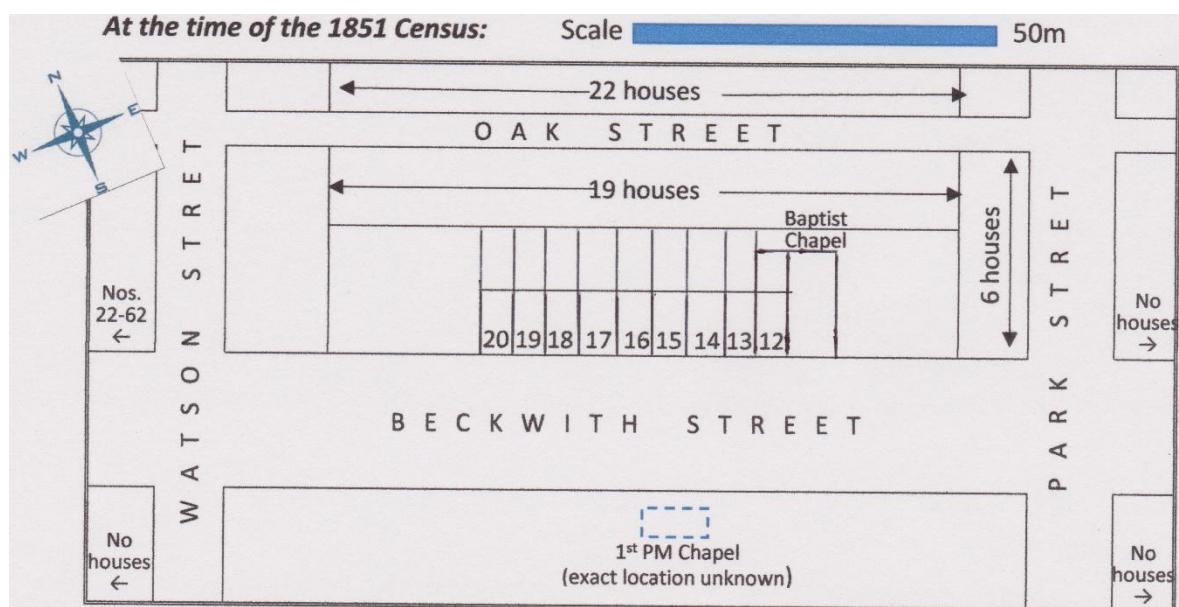
The population of Birkenhead grew rapidly from the late 1820s, reaching 2569 in 1831, 8223 in 1841, 24,285 in 1851 and 36,212 in 1861. The new industrial working-class population would have provided fertile soil for Primitive Methodism to develop.



Beckwith Street: St Anne's Church (1847) and nos. 330, 328 and 326 Beckwith Street (c. 1870)

Sketch maps showing the development of Beckwith Street between 1851 and 1891

Based on the censuses and on an 1876 map and an 1899 map. Note that the house numbers were



revised twice during this period.

