

METHODIST CHURCH, Birchington

The first part of these notes come from "The Origins and Progress of Methodism in Margate" published in 1908, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the formation of the circuit.
The book is held in Margate Local History section. (pp. 40 – 41)

Methodism in Birchington dates without interruption back to 1778, When Mr Coleman, already referred to, "raised a Society". In 1785 this Society makes its first appearance in the Steward's Book with a contribution of 13/-, which in 1789 rose to 30/-.

There is a tradition in Birchington that there was a Chapel in the village before there was one in Margate. This seems to be true, for Myres the Methodist historian, gives the date of the first Birchington Chapel as 1780. The old Chapel stood at the corner of Quex Park Road, and was hired from the Baptists. It was a brick building with a gallery on three sides and a large window opposite the pulpit.

The present Chapel was opened on Thursday September 16th, 1830 and is now a Grade II Listed Building. The Rev. John James and the Rev. William Naylor, both from London, preached in the forenoon and afternoon respectively. The Sunday following, Mr Elliot of Camberwell preached. The amount of collections at these opening services was £75 10s, 0d. "which far exceeded general expectation". In addition to this, £132 6s. 6d. was subscribed towards the erection of the Chapel. The entire expense of the land and building was defrayed by Mr W. Tomlin, with the exception of the sums already mentioned, and a further £50 which was borrowed by the Trustees and allowed to remain as a debt. The remarkable generosity of Mr Tomlin (the exact amount of which no one knows) was further shown in the conveyance to the Trustees of the adjacent burial ground for one guinea. Mr Tomlin lived at "Hollydene" in Alpha Road in 1898. This house stood next to the level crossing, where Olantigh Court now stands. At the same time the Rev. Arthur Thomas Bannister M.A. lived nearby in "Highfield" Alpha Road (now a residential home). Mr Bannister appears to have been the Minister serving the Chapel at this date.

The dimensions of the Chapel were as follows :-

Length within	41 feet
Height of walls	20 feet
It has an end gallery of 25 ½ feet deep	
It contains sittings for 300 people.	

In 1830, 120 of these sittings were assigned as free for the poor, and upwards of 100 were let "to the more respectable villagers". The basement consists of a schoolroom and two vestries, described at the time as commodious. The tower of the Chapel contains a clock with four dials, the first public clock in the village. At the Diamond Jubilee in 1890 it was restored by public subscription. At the beginning of this year (2004) Thanet Council decided to do a cost-cutting

exercise and have the clock mechanism changed, in order that it did not have to be wound up regularly. The clock is now electrical.

The cause has enjoyed of late years the service of a succession of probationary Ministers. For the past two years the appointment has been on a different footing and the Rev. W. H. Milward, a Supernumerary Minister, whose fifty years of ministry have by no means worn him out, has pastoral charge.

The first Trustees of the Chapel were :-

William Tomlin	-	Birchington
Jesse Harlow	-	St Nicholas-at-Wade
Job Holman	-	"
Francis Gouger	-	St Nicholas-at-Wade
Thomas S. Rowe	-	Margate
George Gaskell	-	"
William Gaskell	-	"
Daniel Gouger	-	"
Moses Harrison	-	"
John Dadd	-	"
Vincent Page	-	"
Vincent Page	-	"
Richard Grant	-	"
Clare Bone	-	"

The Chapel is built of stock brick with a central crenellated clock tower. The rest of the building is also crenellated with three double lancet windows with tracked heads. It has a simple door-case with a pointed arch and 'Gothic' glazing. The side elevation has three windows.

The clock is older than the Chapel as it was made in about 1700 by John Fagg of Margate. Its earliest history is uncertain, but it was definitely moved from the old Margate Pier to the Methodist Chapel tower in 1830. In 1902, the clock was repaired after being silent for two years to commemorate the Coronation of Edward VII. The two people who had much to do with the raising of the funds to complete this task were Mr James Pemble and Mr George Pointer. Oddly enough, it was these same two people who were so vociferous in getting the public to reject the erection of the fountain in Birchington Square, when it was first mooted. Mr Pemble was a Butcher with a business in the Square where P.W.D. Butchers used to trade (now a fast food outlet), while Mr Pointer ran East End Farm by the corner of Epple Road and Canterbury Road.

During a severe gale in 1916 the dial on the rear face of the tower blew down. This stopped the clock and between the Wars, nothing was done until 1932-3, when the clock was eventually restarted, with both its striking and chiming mechanisms restored. During another gale in the 1960s the dome and the weather-vane were dislodged. They were then declared "dangerous" and were

dismantled. Also during the 1960s, the bells were taken down and sold to a bell foundry in Bow.

In 1884 the Rev. Thomas Perfect was serving the Chapel and living across the road in Yew Tree House. His widow was still living there in 1905-6. He also owned the land behind what we now call the "Smugglers" and had a terrace of houses built on his land, now called "Perfect's Cottages".

For some years, Mr Butcher who lives in Southdown House on the left of the entrance to the forecourt of the chapel maintained the clock. Later the clock was adopted by Thanet Council, who now pay all the expenses for maintaining and winding the clock. The work is carried out by John Smith of Derby. The only other public clocks in Birchington is the one on the Church Tower and the one on the clock tower among the stable buildings in Quex Park.

When excavations were being dug for an extension to the Chapel in 1966, some graves were discovered. On the 1840 Tithe Map the plot was occupied by what was termed the Meeting House and graveyard. This was presumably where the Quakers used to meet. The cottage two doors up the street towards Margate was called "Providence Cottage", which almost certainly had connections with this site and certainly stood here when the Meeting House was functioning. The Chapel appears to have been built on what was all, or part of, the Quaker Burial Ground.

One of the outstanding members of the church was a lady called Miss Lilian Wilkes, who died, aged 102 in 1984. She was a local preacher, the Choir leader of the Wesleyan Methodist Choir and also almost certainly a Sunday school Teacher. It is understood that she taught at Woodford House School in Station Road Birchington.

The Chapel was re-dedicated in July 1966 after a major restoration. In 1976 the clock was repaired again, this time by two Naval Officers and a team of Marines led by Lieutenant Butcher, who scaled the 60 foot tower to remove the hands from the clock face and restore the clock mechanism. There are photos of this event in the Chapel's Archives.

In 1925 there was a report of the death of the Wesleyan Minister, the Rev. S. Wilkes with the following week carrying a report of his funeral and the third week a report about Mr Wilkes by Mr Erlebach, Headmaster of Woodford House School and a staunch supporter of the Methodist Chapel. On the 25th July 1925 a letter was printed asking for donations to a memorial headstone to go on the Rev. Wilkes' grave in the churchyard. It had been decided that £30 would cover the costs and another £5 was still needed to complete the fund. Donations were to be sent to Mr Erlebach or any other member of the committee.

In addition to the Chapel, the members bought up the cottages that once stood on the corner of the entrance to the forecourt of the Chapel. These were then demolished and two schoolrooms were built in 1928 with a medium sized Kitchen adjoining it, which is used by a number of organizations within the church and some secular users too.

There are a number of plaques around the Chapel and Schoolroom, which are noted below.

On the wall around the Chapel:

“In loving memory of our dear father
Thomas Shonk who died November 2nd 1882
And of our dear mother Elizabeth Shonk
Who died August 18th 1897 aged 78”

On the Schoolroom:

“In grateful memory of George William Newing”

“In loving memory of the Rev. Samuel Wilkes”

“Stone laid by Mr W. Tomlin J.P., on behalf of the Trustees 3 May 1928”

“Mayor of Margate, Councilor E. Tofts Fasham J.P. on behalf of the Margate Circuit”

“Miss Jarman on behalf of the Sunday school”

ACOL CHAPEL

There used to be a small Wesleyan Chapel in Acol at the junction of Minster Road with Plumstone Road, which was opened in 1867. It was finally closed in the last quarter of the 20th century and sold to a local undertaker, who now uses it as a Chapel of Rest.

PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL

This chapel was built in 1875 and stood on the north side of Albion Road on part of the ground now occupied by Taplin Court. It appears to have had a fairly short active life as a place of worship, because it had already ceased to be used as such by the late 1880s. The Primitive Methodists strove to return to their Wesleyan roots and have much freer worship with fewer restrictions on the way their church was run. They found, as so many such movements do, that they made their own new ‘rules’ of government, becoming more and more like their ‘parent’ denomination and so eventually rejoined the original Wesleyan Methodist congregation at the old 1830 Chapel.

Mrs Gray of Birchington Hall bought their old building and then granted the local school to use it as an Infant School from about 1892 until 1926, when they moved up to join the rest of the pupils in the Park Lane premises. Mrs Gray leased the Chapel to the Vicar and Churchwardens for a peppercorn rent of one shilling (5p. in modern money) a year.