

## MAIDSTONE VISIT – SATURDAY 26<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2014

### STUDY NOTES

#### A AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOWN OF MAIDSTONE<sup>1</sup>

By the time of the Roman invasion of Britain, Maidstone began to develop as a settlement and one which would expand into an important market town and eventually, the administrative centre of the County of Kent. It was already a small trading and communications centre, as the River Medway gave it access to the wider world, whilst trackways led from Rochester in the north (and which would be part of the Roman's Watling Street) through Maidstone towards the coast and iron workings to the south. No evidence, however, has been found of any substantial Roman buildings in the town, which meant that it was somewhat on the periphery of their transport plans – something that would happen again in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the railways. Indeed, at the time of the Norman invasion, Maidstone consisted of 88 households, according to the *Domesday Book*.

Access from the west to east banks of the River Medway had, up to the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, been via a ferry but then a wooden bridge opened up the west bank and the town began to develop as a market place, with traders coming and buying and selling agricultural produce and household goods. There were, in addition, four fairs a year. One discovery in Maidstone was a plentiful supply of fuller's earth, necessary in the removal from the natural grease found in wool and which enabled clothmaking to be established in the town, using also the plentiful supply of clean water from the river. Indeed, there was so much fuller's earth in the area that it was exported also. Another local resource was ragstone and this was used in parts of the Tower of London and the College of St. George at Windsor Castle. And it was in 1381 that the *Peasants' Revolt* came to Maidstone from other parts of Kent and neighbouring Essex and it was here that the rebels elected Watt Tyler as their leader.

The town received its charter from Edward VI in 1548 and one Richard Heeley became its first mayor in that year. This charter described Maidstone as the chief port on the Medway, as roads were in poor condition and not able to carry heavy loads – thus the river was the transport of choice for most goods. And it was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that dissent arrived in the town, with an unknown person distributing Lutheran tracts in the town in 1522. Eight years later, Thomas Hilton (a Curate) was burned at the stake for having such publications in his possession. Other dissenters soon followed and by the 1550s, Anabaptists a meeting place in Maidstone – one (schoolmaster Thomas Cole) recanted but three of this group were burned at the stake in 1555 – their names were Nicholas Sheterden, Humphrey Middleton and George Brodbridge. One other, Dunstan Chitterden, died of starvation in Canterbury Gaol. There were other known Anabaptists in the town but it is not known what happened to them but it is recorded that dissent was suppressed successfully in Maidstone for some afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Cooper, *Maidstone – A History*, Phillimore Press, Chichester, 2008 (chapters 1 to7)

Elizabeth I gave the town a new charter in 1559, including the right to elect two members of Parliament – these were Nicholas Barham and Henry Fisher, duly elected in 1562. Shortly afterwards, there came a number of Protestant refugees from the Low Countries and which included some Huguenots, although many of these would move on later to London. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also that the important Kentish industry of hop growing and ale making took hold, which would culminate in Maidstone in the large Fremlin's Brewery, near to the river. Another important development in the town's history took place in 1588, when barracks for 3,000 soldiers were established in the north of the town, to deal with the impotent threat of the Spanish Armada. This doubling of the town's population would have a significant effect on its infrastructure, especially the inns.

Dissent was recorded again in Maidstone in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when a number of locals formed an unnamed Calvinistic group, who believed in Christianity as a personal faith, rather than one of communal public ceremony. Although Maidstone played little part in the Civil War against Charles I, a battle was fought in the centre of the town in 1648 : the Parliamentary forces were led by General Sir Thomas Fairfax and advanced with perhaps 4,000 men on Maidstone, which had about 3,800 loyal to the King. However, most of the Parliamentary forces were trained soldiers but the Royalists were not and after five hours of intense fighting, General Fairfax had routed the town's defenders and their leaders were killed or captured. Around this time two Quakers, John Stubbs and William Caton, were put into stocks in the town and whipped with cords, whilst several more were incarcerated in Maidstone gaol. Dissent was persecuted in Maidstone with its first Baptist Minister, Joseph Wright, being imprisoned on one pretext or another for some twenty years but was released by James II and he became the town's chief magistrate.

Many of the dissenters to this point had been allowed (from time to time) to worship publically at St. Faith's Chapel and these included a Presbyterian congregation at the time of the Reformation. Four of its Ministers (George Swinnock, Samuel Borfet, Robert Perrott and John Durrant) were expelled and the congregation moved to Market Street Chapel in 1736, when it was first erected. The appointment of a successor in 1745 to Benjamin Mills led to a schism, with most having Arian beliefs and denying the Divinity of Christ appointing William Hazlitt, who shared these beliefs. Others who wished to remain Christians formed the Week Street Congregational Church and appointed Herbert Jenkins as their Minister.

By the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, transport began to become faster and more organised. This started with a regular boat service between London and Gravesend, which connected at the latter town to a horse-bus service down the Medway valley to Maidstone. This service was followed by 1830 of a direct coach 7 times a day direct from Maidstone to London. However, the Town was disappointed to have been overlooked when the South Eastern Railway from London Bridge to Dover passed to the South : inhabitants of Maidstone had to transfer from a later branch line onto the main line at Paddock Wood. This was followed by a line from London through Gravesend to what is now Maidstone West station. A direct line from what is now Maidstone East Station to London Victoria was not opened until 1874.

## B VICTORIAN CHURCH AND CHAPEL ATTENDANCES<sup>2</sup>

We are all aware of the 1851 Religious Census but Maidstone was fortunate that a further enumeration was held 1880 of Church and Chapel attendances in the town : whereas the former included all scholars, the latter was for children of twelve upwards. And while the 1851 exercise was carried out over morning, afternoon and evening services on one day (Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> March), the latter was taken on morning services on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> January 1880 but on the 25<sup>th</sup> January for the evening services. So, no account was made for afternoon services in 1880, which makes direct comparisons difficult. What must be remembered is that the town's population grew significantly during these (almost) thirty years, from 20,901 in 1851 to 29,632 in 1881 – an increase of almost 42%.

A summary of the attendance statistics for Maidstone in both years was as follows :-

Denomination	1851 attendances and percentage of total		1880 attendances and percentage of total	
Church of England (total of 5 in 1851 and 7 in 1880)	7,974	67%	4,376	65%
Independents or Congregational (1 in 1851 and 2 in 1880)	564	5%	477	7%
Baptists (total of 3 in 1851 and 2 in 1880)	1,456	12%	520	8%
Unitarians	140	1%	137	2%
Society of Friends (Quakers)	57	0%	Nil	Nil
Wesleyan Methodists	798	7%	577	9%
Primitive Methodists	59	0%	77	1%
Lady Huntingdon's Connection	800	7%	Nil	Nil
No specific denomination (total of 2 in 1851 and 1 in 1880)	62	0%	451	7%
Presbyterians	Nil	Nil	133	2%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>11,910</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6,748</b>	<b>100%</b>

Actual attendances per head of population for each year (and ignoring the fact that one person could have attended more than one service on each day) would therefore be as follows : 57% in 1851 but this reduced to 23% by 1880.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Yates, Robert Hume and Paul Hastings, *Religion and Society in Kent*, Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, 1994 (Chapter entitled "An Age of religious Pluralism 1830 – 1914", pages 53 to 90).

These figures pose many questions, including the identity of the ‘undenominational’ Causes mentioned in both of these years. We know that these were ‘Christian only’ Tabernacle and the ‘Committed with all’ Maidstone Town Mission existed in 1851 but we have no record of whether either of these survived to 1880 or later. Similarly, there is no reason known as to why the Quakers attendances were not recorded in 1880. The Countess of Huntingdon’s Connection left the town in the 1870s and there are no records of any permanent Presbyterian presence or building in Maidstone.

There is no denying, however, the power of the Church of England in Kent in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as these figures for Maidstone reflect. Their overall dominance across the County (as it existed in 1851) was approximately 63%, although in three towns (Sheerness, Chatham and Margate) Dissenters were in the majority.

### C BRIEF NOTES ON PLACES OF WORSHIP TO BE SEEN TODAY<sup>3</sup>

We will visiting (or at least passing by) the following during our tour of Maidstone – the numbers refer to the associated map. All photos are copyright Paul Gardner and were taken on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2007, except where stated otherwise :-

#### 1 EARL STREET UNITARIAN<sup>4</sup>



See above regarding the initial Presbyterian congregation and its move to Unitarianism.

This was built in 1736 and is a square building, with brick walls and has a pyramidal roof. There were originally doorways in the outer bays, which were replaced with the present central doorway in 1921. The upper three windows are originals and below the central one is a stone with the inscription ‘1736’. Interior.

The inside was reordered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and has a gallery around three of the sides of the 39 feet square interior and which is supported by five columns with moulded caps and bases.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Homan, *The Victorian Churches of Kent, Phillimore, Chichester, 1984 (Gazetteer)*, except where stated otherwise

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses in Eastern England, English Heritage, Swindon, 2002 (page 180)*

2 FORMER BETHEL BAPTIST AND FORMER SALVATION ARMY CITADEL



The photo shows the former Chapel and Citadel in its guise as The Comedy Club – it is now The Raja of Kent Indian restaurant. In between, it was a ‘Ministry of Sound’-style nightclub.

Built for the Bethel Baptists in 1834 by Samuel Cornford and it was described as plain and of brick construction. A classical style frontage with a pediment was added between 1877 and 1888. The Baptists moved to Knightrider Street in 1905 and it was taken over by the Salvation Army, until the opening of their new Citadel.

The only internal relic that can be seen is the Chapel clock, although the galleries have been retained (albeit rebuilt).

3 WESLEYAN METHODIST



Built in brick but with a stucco façade in 1823 and which replaced an earlier building on this site that was built in 1805. The building survived arson in 1977 but this has meant an internal reordering. At its zenith, it had seating for 900 (in pews), making it one of the largest Methodist places of worship in Kent and Sussex.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Methodist Church Buildings, Statistical Returns including seating accommodation as at July 1<sup>st</sup> 1940, The Department for Chapel Affairs, Manchester, 1947 (page 35)*

#### 4 CONGREGATIONAL / UNITED REFORMED



Formed from the schism in the (then) Presbyterian congregation in Earl Street and by those who wished to remain Christians.

Built by Habershon & Pite in 1865, at a cost of £2,149, plus a further £500 for the school. It is of white brick with stone dressings.

The classical frontage has been compromised, following the building of a department store building to the north in the 1930s.

It will not be possible to see inside the school today.

#### 5 ST FRANCIS' ROMAN CATHOLIC



Designed by C G Wray and built by James G Naylor of Rochester at an estimated cost of £2,044, although the outturn could have been as high as £3,098.

The building is of decorated red brick with stone dressings – there was once a spire, which has now been demolished.

A 1960s front extension has been replaced by a more modern entrance.

## 6 LIFE CHURCH



The picture shows the building as the Manna Christian Fellowship.

It was built for the Particular Baptists by Jas Steer in 1831, at a cost of £1,000. The front was pointed and had a brick finish. The Countess of Huntingdon's Connection used it from 1838 and until they left the town in the 1870s. After that, it was used as a Masonic Hall in the 1880s and then various secular uses, such as a drill hall and a toffee factory.

It was acquired by the Assemblies of God in 1945 and these were succeeded by the Pentecostals, Manna Christian Fellowship and now the Life Church.

Presumably following war damage, the frontage was rebuilt into the present uncompromising modernist style in 1959.

## 7 FORMER PRIMITIVE METHODIST



Built after 1881 for the Primitive Methodists, in stock brick with yellow dressings and a slated roof.

Union with the Wesleyans in 1932 meant that this was surplus to requirements and it passed to the Rechabites.

Since then, it has been used by *Peter Preedy's Dance School* and now appears to be flats.

## 8 SALVATION ARMY CITADEL<sup>6</sup>



Built to a brief for a suite of halls for Christian worship, as well as being suitable for community service and outreach.

Community facilities are to the front, with 2 large multi-purpose halls on the ground floor – there are similar rooms (for general usage) on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor.

The main worship hall, to the rear, can hold up to about 200 people and it has a square plan with seating on a diagonal axis. There are over-spill areas with folding partitions.

Constructed of red-multi brick with dark mortar and window surrounds finished in 2 shades of grey.

## 9 SOCIETY OF FRIENDS / QUAKERS<sup>7</sup>



After an initial Quakers meeting in the town from 1668, it was revived in 1807 when a room was registered for meetings. This was followed by a permanent building in 1811 Wheeler Street and which was demolished in 1975, for a car park.

The present hexagonal building, opened in 1976, was designed by Maidstone Council architect Norman Frith.

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Spears, 'Salvation Army Hall Union Street' in *Church Building*, Issue 72, November – December 2001, Gabriel Communications Ltd., Cheadle, 2001

<sup>7</sup> David M Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain Volume 1*, Friends Historical Society, London, 1999 (pages 284 and 285)



10 BAPTIST



Built in 1909, when the Bethel Baptists moved from Union Street.

It now boasts a large 20<sup>th</sup> Century extension at the north side of the Church building.

11 STRICT BAPTIST<sup>8</sup>



Built in 1886 in lancet style and stone faced, the building suffered war damage in 1940.

For many years John Hervey Gosden, the editor of *The Gospel Standard*, was the Pastor (from November 1923 onwards).

The Cause began meeting in cottages in 1844 and they discontinued a few years later, only to reform and they met in a room until the present Church building was opened.

This picture was taken by Paul Gardner on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

**Paul Gardner**  
**March 2014**

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<sup>8</sup> *Ralph F Chambers, The Strict Baptist Chapels of England – Volume III Kent, The Strict Baptist Historical Society, Ealing, 1957 (pages 100 and 101) and S F Paul, Further History of the Gospel Standard Baptists Volume 5 – Some Surrey and Kent Churches, published by the author, Brighton, 1966 (pages 155 to 171).*