

## **The Chapels Society**

### **NOTES FOR THE VISIT TO SOUTH BUCKINGHAMSHIRE 17<sup>th</sup> April 2010**

These notes outline some of the salient features of the architecture and history of the seven chapels that we are going to visit. We will be visiting them in the order in which they are listed.

#### **Amersham Free Church, Woodside Road** (Grid Reference: SP 965 985)

Amersham has a long history of Dissent; witness the erection of the Amersham Martyrs memorial in 1931. This memorial is very close to the site where five men and one woman were burnt in 1521 for reading the bible in English. Five other martyrs from Amersham are also commemorated. That some of these martyrs were Lollards reminds us of the origins of Dissent in the district. Amersham's puritan minister was ejected in 1662 and left the area but an earlier minister, Edward Terry, continued to preach to the numerous nonconformists in the district. The vibrant nonconformity of the area found architectural expression as early as 1677 when the Baptists built their first chapel in the town and there is a Quaker Meeting House dating from 1689.

The Metropolitan Railway opened its line to Amersham in 1892, but the development of the new suburb of Amersham on the Hill was not practicable until the completion of the Amersham, Beaconsfield & District Waterworks in 1898. Several newcomers shaped the new town, amongst them John Kennard, the architect of many of the new shops and houses, and his friend, Alfred Ellis, a solicitor and Baptist preacher. Ellis formed a local Baptist meeting in 1907 and their new church on the corner of Sycamore Road, designed by John Kennard, was opened in August 1911. It was in the gothic style and had 250 seats.

By the 1960s, Amersham Free Church had outgrown its original building. A new church, designed by Donald McMorran of D.H. McMorran & George Whitby, was built in Woodside Road in 1962. The new chapel and associated complex of meeting rooms was in a more modern and, externally at least, more self-effacing style. The chapel has a long row of clerestory windows on the south wall and a small tower at the west end. Internally the chapel is an impressive essay in laminated timber construction with a series of parabolic arches supporting the roof. At the east end the focal point is a large wooden cross on the otherwise blank east wall. The original design featured both a baptistery and a font to promote ecumenical use of the church.

#### **Jordans Quaker Meeting House** (Grid Reference: SU 975 911)

A group of Quakers were meeting at the home of William Russell at Jordans, two miles east of Beaconsfield, before 1669. Amongst the congregation were Isaac Pennington,

William Penn and Thomas Ellwood. In 1671, Ellwood bought a plot of land at Jordans as a burial ground for members of the congregation. In 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, the congregation at Jordans felt confident enough to buy land adjacent to their burial ground on which to build a meeting house.

The Meeting House at Jordans and the adjacent burial ground is in a beautiful rural setting. It is built of red brick, with a hipped tiled roof. The front façade has a central doorway. The main meeting room, which reaches the full height of the building, is to the left of the door and is identified by two large rectangular windows, while the two storey accommodation to the right of the doorway is indicated by two smaller windows one above the other. The principal meeting room is generously proportioned, being 31 feet by 21 feet, and contains fittings dating to 1773, including the raised 'stand', or ministers' gallery, on the north wall. The room is otherwise sparsely furnished with wall benches and open-backed benches. This room is divided from a lower room to the south by a screen with shutters. A staircase rises from this room to give access to a 'loft' or gallery, also with shutters to the main room.

The Meeting House at Jordans was badly damaged by fire in 2005. The extensive repairs were completed in 2007 and the restoration won the SPBA's *John Betjeman Award* in 2009.

#### References

- i) C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, London, HMSO, 1986, pp 7-10.
- ii) D.M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, London, Friends Historical Society, 1999, pp 25-26.
- iii) *Cornerstone: The Magazine of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, Vol. 30, Number 3, 2009. pp 34-35.

#### **Chenies Baptist Chapel** (Grid reference: TQ 021 981)

In common with Amersham and Chesham, Chenies has a long tradition of non-conformity. The Presbyterian minister was ejected in 1662. In Bishop Wake's visitation returns of 1706 the Rector admitted that there was a Baptist chapel in the parish. In 1773, a congregation of Particular Baptists leased a former orchard at the east end of the village on which to build a new chapel. A plan of the site, made for a new trust deed in 1779, shows a rectangular structure with three windows on the front and two on each side. The building measured 28ft by 24ft and had a gallery around three sides. There was a square vestry built out at the rear. Much of this building survives.

In 1799, the front of the chapel was taken down and the building extended 12 feet to the south west. A new façade was built, with one round-arched window either side of a central doorway, and a row of three similar windows on the first storey, giving light to the gallery. Inside the building now measured 36 feet by 28 feet and the gallery, supported on wooden columns, was extended into the new south west range. The pulpit

and benches date from the late nineteenth century. The vestry was extended in 1833 and a school room was built over it about 1850. The front porch dates from 1838. Internally the church remains little altered since 1850 and is widely considered to be one of the most attractive of the Baptist chapels in the county.

#### Reference

C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, London, HMSO, 1986, pp 11-13.

### **Beaconsfield, Bethesda Chapel, Aylesbury End**

Beaconsfield's Presbyterian minister, William Butler, was ejected in 1662, but continued to preach in the area. The present day United Reformed Church can trace its origins back to Butler who died at nearby Coleshill in 1684. His followers eventually joined a group of Independents who built the 'Old Meeting House' in Wycombe End about 1740. A late eighteenth century schism led to the formation of a separate society for which 'Bethesda Chapel' was built in Aylesbury End in 1800. Their original chapel (44 feet by 22 feet) still stands behind the present church. It is a plain building of brick with three round arched windows in each side wall. This chapel of 1800 had been hidden behind a row a shops and houses. In 1875 these buildings were demolished to provide a site for the new chapel, which was built on to the front of its predecessor. The 1875 chapel exudes all the confidence of late nineteenth century nonconformity, presenting a bold face to street with a three round-arched doors and a row of five lancet windows above. Inside it has a fine curved gallery with a cast iron balustrade.

### **West Wycombe**

Although a strong Dissenting tradition can be traced in West Wycombe, it did not find architectural expression until the nineteenth century.

#### **i) Former Congregational Chapel** (Grid Reference: 830 947)

The village of West Wycombe was owned by the Dashwood family who rebuilt West Wycombe Park and the parish church in the eighteenth century. The house and most of the village are now owned by the National Trust. The 'new meeting house' was registered for Independent worship on 23 July 1808. It is on a steeply sloping site behind the main street and is approached through a narrow entry between the houses on the main road. It has walls of flint with red brick dressings and a hipped tiled roof. On the south front is a porch, supported on wooden pillars and approached by curving steps. On either side of the entrance are sash windows under brick relieving arches. A tripartite window lights the north side. The gallery is the only surviving internal feature. There are inscriptions on bricks in south wall, with initials and the date 1808. The building has been the home of the West Wycombe Band Club since 1975.

Reference

C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, London, HMSO, 1986, p 19.

**ii) Former Wesleyan Chapel** (Grid Reference: SU 831 947)

The Wesleyan chapel of 1815 is on Church Lane, which is accessed from the main road via a wide entry under the former Court House. The chapel is of flint with brick dressings and a hipped roof. The east front has two round-arched sash windows and a smaller round-arched window over the doorway to light the gallery. In the centre of the front wall is an inscription 'I.BIGG MASON 1815'. In its later life the chapel lost most of its fittings when it was in commercial use. Since the 1950s the building has been occupied by a Christadelphian ecclesia. The chapel of 1815 was superseded by a rather unattractive chapel of 1894, sited prominently on the main street. This building was later used as a workshop and has therefore lost most of its internal fittings.

Reference

C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, London, HMSO, 1986, p 19.

**Chesham, Particular Baptist, Red Lion Street** (Grid Reference: SP 960 014)

In common with the neighbouring towns, Chesham has a proud tradition of non-conformity. There is a monument in the parish churchyard to Thomas Harding, one of several local men who persisted in reading the English Bible. He was burnt at the stake in 1532. A Baptist congregation known as 'The Lower Meeting' was formed in 1701, and built a meeting house on a concealed site behind buildings on the east side of Red Lion Street in 1718. It was extended in 1797. The Punch Bowl Inn, which occupied the site in front of the original church, was purchased in 1888 and a new church built on its site in 1897. The new building was in the Gothic style, designed by John Wills of Derby. Reset in the back wall are several bricks inscribed with names and the date 1797 from the former building. Inside the late nineteenth century pews and gallery have been preserved. The church has recently been connected to the neighbouring Sunday School with a cleverly designed two-storey link, constructed mainly of glass.

Reference

C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, London, HMSO, 1986, p 13.