

THE CHAPELS SOCIETY

VISIT TO BRISTOL AND KINGSWOOD 28TH OCTOBER 2017

TRAVEL NOTES

By train There are frequent trains to Bristol Temple Meads from many parts of the country including Penzance, Cardiff, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Manchester, Leeds, London and Portsmouth (please do not alight at Bristol Parkway unless changing trains). The station is just to the south-east of the city centre. It is wise to check travel times as engineering work associated with the GW mainline electrification scheme may cause disruption. Take a service 8 or 9 'bus from the station forecourt and alight at Rupert Street or take a walk of about 15 minutes down Victoria Street, Bristol Bridge, High Street, Broad Street, under St John's Gate, along Christmas Street to Lewins Mead. The church is opposite on the north side of the road.

By car Bristol roads and the surrounding motorway network can get very congested so allow plenty of time. The nearest long-stay multi-storey car park is at Trenchard Street, 5 minutes walk from our assembly point.

By coach There are frequent services from many parts of the country. Alight at Bristol 'bus station which is 5 minutes walk away.

Assembly and dispersal

We begin our visit at Emmanuel City Centre, the former Lewins Mead Unitarian Meeting House, at 10.30am.

Our coach which we join at about 1.45pm will return to Temple Meads by about 6pm and will make a final call at the Centre.

Refreshments and the visit to the New Room at lunchtime

Morning tea/coffee and chapel tea are included in the fee for the day. Admission to the New Room Museum is included in the day charge and visits can be made during the New Room visit and the lunch break which follows immediately after. Please be at the Horsefair entrance no later than 1.40pm to take the coach for the next stage of our visits. Lunch purchased in the New Room café can of course be eaten there, but if you wish to bring a packed lunch please use the Broadmead courtyard or elsewhere for this as the café seating will also be in use by the general public using the café.

Chapel Notes

by **David Dawson with a note on the New Room by Stephen Duckworth**

By the 17th century Bristol was well established as the second city after London. It mainly traded with ports of the coasts of Wales, Ireland, south-west England and the Atlantic seaboard of mainland Europe and with the developing colonies of America and the Caribbean. It was also a major centre for the manufacture of textiles from the surrounding area of the West Country and locally for foodstuffs, glassware, pottery, tobacco, chemicals and luxury goods. By 1800 it was losing ground to the rising towns of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

Early evidence of dissent is sketchy as in many places – apart from the execution of the Marian martyrs on the site of which Highbury Chapel was later built. In 1640 the earliest

openly Independent congregation was inspired by Mrs Hazzard, wife of the Vicar of St Ewen's and follower of William Yeamans, Vicar of SS Philip and Jacob. Later they came to be Baptist in persuasion and were established at Broadmead. The oldest surviving Independent congregation is descended from a group who worshipped at Castle Green from c.1650. Thereafter the city developed as a vigorous centre of religious dissent in great variety (for a summary of how dissent further developed see Davies 1955).

Two episodes deserve highlighting: the events of New Awakening and the influence of the Welsh-speaking population of the city. To take the last point first, until the 1960s there were a small number of chapels serving Welsh-speaking or at least Welsh-derived congregations. The Welsh Calvinist Methodists who worshipped at the New Room are an example. It is a reflection of how important was Bristol to the economy of Wales before the revival of Cardiff in the late 20th century. The developing relationship of George Whitefield, John Wesley and John Cennick in the New Awakening has left its mark in the physical form of places of worship particularly in Kingswood (Spittal and Dawson 1983, 21-2; Dawson 2005, 10-11, 16-18). In the late 18th century Kingswood was fast developing as a centre of coal-mining. Yet it lay where the outparish of Bristol SS Philip and Jacob met Bitton parish, did not receive its own parish church until 1820-1 and had a reputation for lawlessness (Malcolmson 1982). The charismatic evangelist, George Whitefield using Bristol as his base, held the first of many open-air meetings throughout the area at Rose Green on 17th February 1739. Anxious the impetus should not be lost and determined to continue with his planned mission to Georgia, Whitefield invited a reluctant John Wesley from London to continue the ministry. Wesley, arriving on 31st March 'could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields' but on 2nd April took up the task on Whitefield's departure for America by preaching in the brickyards in St Philip's Marsh and within the week at Hanham Mount on 8th April. Whitefield's last task before leaving was to lay the foundation stone for a Colliers' Free School. Wesley however was unhappy about the choice of site and on 14th May 1739 'at last pitched upon one between the London and Bath Roads, not far from that called Two Mile Hill'. Here he purchased land and built the Collier's School consisting of a large schoolroom with four smaller rooms at either end partly to serve as lodgings and part set aside for an adult school. It is possible that Wesley fitted the main schoolroom with a pulpit and galleries. On Whitefield's recommendation he appointed John Cennick as one of the two masters. For what subsequently happened, see The New Room, Whitfield Tabernacle, Kingswood Unity Church and Kingswood Wesley below.

The many pressures on the survival of important buildings in Bristol were discussed by this author in 1980 (Dawson 1980). Unfortunately losses continue including the Neo-Norman Ebenezer Primitive Methodist Chapel of c.1850 probably the earliest of this persuasion in the city, despite the Chapels Society's attempts to get it listed. It was the last to survive of three major chapel buildings along Midland Road. There are successful attempts at reuse and we will see three of them on our tour. There is also the remarkable revitalisation of Wesley's New Room.

Emmanuel Bristol Centre (formerly Lewins Mead Unitarian Meeting) (grade II*)



As Christopher Stell explains, ‘a Presbyterian congregation was in existence in Bristol by 1672 in which year John Weeks ejected vicar of Buckland Newton (Dorset) was licensed as a teacher and a room or rooms in the house of John Lloyd lying on St James’s Back was allowed as a meeting place.’ After various vicissitudes during which the congregation split in 1698, one part eventually forming the Clifton Down Congregational Church, the other the Lewins Mead Unitarian meeting, a meeting house was built here at Lewins Mead in 1673-4. This was demolished to build the present chapel in 1787 to the design of William Blackburne of London. It was opened to great acclaim in 1791 (Stell 1986, 70-3; Hague 1986, 58-9). Extensions for educational and other purposes were constructed in 1818 and 1826.

The building became disused in the 1980s but was eventually bought by the architects Feilden Clegg for their offices. They removed the pews from above and below the gallery but retained them in the body of the chapel along the pulpit.

Sadly since then the rest of the pews have disappeared in further office development. Early this year the premises were purchased by Emmanuel Church as their central Bristol base and are now happily back in use for regular worship.

Note the memorial to Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), once ambassador for the Moghul Empire, educationalist and social reformer, founder of the Brahmo Somaj movement, who worshipped here. He lie buried in a magnificent monument in Arnos Vale cemetery and is also commemorated by a modern statue by the Kolkata sculptor, Nirranjan Pradhan, on College Green. The High Commission of India organises an annual commemoration and service in September. The educationalist and social reformer, Mary Carpenter (1807-1877), is also commemorated. She campaigned for education for the poorest children, the extinction of slavery and women’s suffrage among many other causes. Her father, Lant Carpenter, was minister here. By strange coincidence the premises she purchased at Kingswood as her reformatory school had been built for John Wesley.

The original Unitarian burial ground with its Speech House is at Brunswick Square.

Photograph by the author taken in 1982.

Broadmead Baptist Church



Photograph from Swaish 1923.

The present structure was built in 1969 by the congregation who refused to move out of Broadmead as the city planners wished. The Bournemouth architect, R. H. Sims, designed the chapel and ancillary rooms to occupy the upper floors oversailing premises that could be let and fitted the image that the planners were trying to achieve. Unfortunately the laminated timber spire had to be dismantled about 1975 (BSSA 1970, 38).

The church is derived from the earliest surviving dissenting congregation in Bristol (founded in 1640). Early precarious fortunes of the community are chronicled by Edward Terrill who was closely associated with the infant church being baptised in 1658 and dying a respected elder in 1685. His bequest laid the foundation of the Bristol Baptist College. In 1671 the congregation took a meeting-house in Broadmead 'where the heretics called Quakers used to meet'. Following its desecration in 1681 the church met in various places but returned in 1687 to the site to build a new chapel which opened in 1695. This was subject to many alterations and rebuildings during its life not least the new frontage added when Union Street was constructed in 1875 exposing the building which formally was approached by an alleyway off Horsefair (a similar position to the later New Room behind properties facing Horsefair and Broadmead) (Child and Shipley 1940; Stell 1986, 62; Swaish 1923).

The New Room (grade I)

Within six weeks of John Wesley's arrival in Bristol he realised that a 'New Room' for the societies emerging in Bristol itself was necessary. *We took possession of a piece of ground, near to St. James's churchyard, in the Horsefair, where it was designed to build a room, large enough to contain both the societies of Nicholas and Baldwin Streets... And on Saturday 12th May the first stone was laid, with the voice of praise and thanksgiving* (Wesley's Journal).

Initially a much smaller room, with sleeping quarters upstairs for Wesley, it was enlarged in 1748 to become the present building to cope with the growing Methodist movement. Rooms upstairs above the Chapel could now accommodate a number of preachers who helped Wesley in his work. Wesley was required by law to register the newly-enlarged building as a 'dissenting chapel', thus making it the oldest chapel in Methodism.

The versatile open space of the Chapel was used not just for meetings and preaching but as a dispensary for medicines, a lending library and a school – all of which were free to the poor. The annual Methodist Conference met in the room 18 times during Wesley's life. The seats in those days were simple, backless benches which could be moved around depending on the activity (the present ground floor box pews were installed by the Welsh Calvinists in the 1930s).

Preaching services took place here at 5am. Wesley favoured early rising for various reasons, including so that working people could attend. Men and women would sit separately – possibly, following Moravian practice, with a barrier down the middle or with men upstairs and women downstairs as there is a balcony.

The pulpit is central and pre-eminent in the New Room because preaching and *expounding the scriptures to the society* was the original purpose of the building. The upper pulpit was for the preacher, and the lower for leading prayers and reading the Bible. A precentor would stand in the lower pulpit and conduct the unaccompanied hymn-singing. It is peculiar to the New Room pulpit that there is no direct access to it from the ground floor. This is because John Wesley and his assistants had their accommodation in the rooms above, and so would come down to the pulpit from upstairs. Also, whether deliberate or not, the design gives the preacher an element of security, given that preachers could be assaulted by drunken mobs.

The main current purpose of the Trustees of the New Room is the preservation and running of the New Room/John Wesley's Chapel, a Grade 1 listed building. They are also responsible for Charles Wesley's house nearby (Grade II* listed), and statues of John Wesley on horseback by George Arthur Walker and of Charles Wesley by Frederick Brook Hitch (both Grade II listed).

With the help of volunteers every day the New Room is open to visitors from 10.30 – 16.00 Monday to Saturday all year round and at other times for special events. It currently has c.25,000 visitors per year and is the most visited Methodist heritage site in the UK, though with the new development numbers are expected to increase significantly.

The galleried Chapel is on the ground floor and is accessible from either the Broadmead courtyard or directly from Horsefair through a new building opened in summer 2017. On the floor above the Chapel are the Preachers' Rooms where an MLA accredited museum is located.

The new building and redesign of the museum are part of a £4 million plus project, funding for which has come from the Bristol Methodist District, the Heritage Lottery Fund, charitable trusts and individual donations. The museum has been completely redesigned and refurbished. It aims to communicate through the lives of John and Charles Wesley and eighteenth century Methodism the profound effect that the Methodist movement had on the spiritual and social life of Britain and the world.

Facilities for visitors were virtually non-existent at the New Room and could not be created within the Grade 1 building without adversely impacting on it. The project has added an extension building on the north side of the New Room in the Horsefair Courtyard to provide proper conditions to house the extensive library and archives, offices, educational facilities to

cater for large groups, toilets and disabled access to the upper floors by lift. It also generates revenue and gives a service for visitors in a café and small shop.

Gary Best who will be introducing the New Room on our visit is the Warden of the New Room and has recently published *The Cradle of Methodism 1739-2017* about its history to date (New Room Publications, Bristol, 2017, pp.755, £25).

Please be prompt in boarding the coach at 1.45pm. Parking near the New Room is difficult. It will take us up the hill to the northernmost point of the boundary of the 1373 county of Bristol.

Cotham Parish Church of St Mary (formerly Highbury Chapel) (grade II*)

Since 1975 Highbury Chapel has happily enjoyed a renewed lease of life as the parish church for Cotham. The chapel was built here on an initiative from Penn Street Tabernacle. The Wills brothers, William Day and Henry Overton (better known as tobacco manufacturers) had decided in 1840 to invest in chapel building to serve the rapidly expanding city for their chosen persuasion, Congregationalism. Their father joined Penn Street on his arrival in Bristol in 1786 and had quickly been appointed a trustee. Having invested in new chapels at Hanham (1841) and Barton Hill (1843) they turned their attention to Highbury in 1842-3, contributing the major part of the funds required. The site chosen was that of the city gallows and the spot where the Marian martyrs met their end. The architect was a nephew of William Day by marriage, the then young and untried William Butterfield. What he designed is the core nave and aisles of the present church, an interesting essay into serious Gothic revival. When expansion of the building was required in 1862, Edward W. Godwin was engaged. Ayres could not say whether or not Butterfield had been approached but retells the reason given by Godwin's biographer why Butterfield did not submit proposals: '[Butterfield] had to do penance for his only transgression', reflecting Butterfield's extremely ungrateful regret in designing a 'schism shop'. Godwin was an extremely happy choice. He designed the transepts and what was at first a vestigial apse to house the organ behind an oak screen (the apse was lengthened in 1893 and the organ moved all to the design of Frank Wills), the tower and the adjoining cloister and ancillary buildings. Note the two memorials (one outside the other in) to the Marian Martyrs and inside the memorial to the Rev Arnold Thomas who died in 1929, a sculpture and inscription by Eric Gill (Ayres 1963; Alford 1973, 99; Stell 1986, 64).

The building on the north side of the crossroads and just opposite to the church is the former **Western Congregational College** of 1905-6 by H D Bryan.

We reboard the coach to take us to Kingswood. We will pass though the coalfield, the limit is roughly marked by the main Bristol-South Wales railway line. A sea of houses now cover most of the ground once littered with bell-pits and collieries of which there is little trace other than the surprise hole that appears from time to time. We alight at about the highest point. The centre of Kingswood is a remarkable landscape of chapels – a product of disagreement and division but more recently reconciliation.

Whitfield Tabernacle (grade I)

Original building of 1741 by George Whitefield and John Cennick; enlarged in 1802 and 1830 (history, description and plan in Stell 1986, 85-7). As Stell summarises [with comments

by this author]: *'In February 1741 after he had embraced Calvinistic sentiments Cennick left [the Collier's School] with about fifty of his supporters and organised a separate society. In June of that year George Whitefield, who had encouraged the commencement of the former building but who had also subsequently revised his belief [and quarrelled with Wesley who he accused of 'perverting his design' for the school] , wrote to Cennick from London with instructions to 'lay the foundations immediately' of the new Society Room at Kingswood, but to 'take care of building too large or too handsome'. The building was also used as a school-chapel, and in the disputes over its occupancy which followed Cennick's transfer of allegiance to the Moravians, in December 1745 it is referred to as 'Kingswood School' (Stell 1986, 85-6).*

After Whitefield's death the society moved from Calvinistic to Congregationalist. On the opening of the New Tabernacle in 1851 the old building was used as a Sunday School and until 1905 as a day school affiliated to the British School movement. It is to be hoped that when the building is renovated that the sequence of its construction can be ascertained with greater certainty. It has been assumed that the north front retains the form of the original 1741 building. The pulpit was replaced by a stage in the changes after 1851 and when first visited by the Kingswood Chapels Survey in 1983 the interior space had been cleared. Following closure of the New Tabernacle in 1983, there were plans to refurbish the Tabernacle as the church but increasing vandalism and dereliction persuaded the congregation that they were best served by making their temporary partnership with the Moravians permanent. The Whitfield Tabernacle Preservation Trust was formed in 1995 with the intention of repairing the building for community use see <http://www.southglos.gov.uk/documents/pte050058.pdf>

New Tabernacle (grade II)

A much larger building in the Gothic style which was built in 1851-3 to the design of Henry Masters of Bristol. The front onto Regent Street was symmetrical until one of the spirelets was lost to bombing in the war (Spittal and Dawson 1983, 21; Stell 1986, 87). The building was closed in 1983 and has suffered damage from vandalism including arson and dereliction. Its future remains uncertain.

The two Tabernacles share an extensive burial ground.

Kingswood Congregational Church

Built in 1868 as Hill Street Congregational Church but interior remodelled in the early 1900s. Later halls are sited at the rear and side (Spittal and Dawson 1983, 21). The church arose from a dispute between the trustees of the Whitfield Tabernacle in whom complete power of governance of the Tabernacle was vested and part of the congregation who wished to adopt Congregationalist principles of self-government.

Kingswood Unity Church (Moravian and United Reformed)

Founded by John Cennick c.1745-58 (Spittal and Dawson, 1983, 21).

Cennick was a restless dedicated open-air preacher and he became drawn to the Moravian persuasion. Both inclinations led him in December 1745 to resign from the Tabernacle and take some of his followers to found a Moravian church a few hundred yards away to the west. The following year he purchased land at East Tytherton in Wiltshire to found a further chapel which after vesting in the Moravian church in 1745 was developed as a modest settlement on the lines of Fulneck and Herrnhut. It seems doubtful whether anything on this scale was intended for Kingswood beyond in 1792 the addition of the 'single sisters' house' for their education and industry. An infant school was added in 1838. In 1756 Cennick founded a further chapel in what is now Upper Maudlin Street on the north side of Bristol. This closed

in 1955 and upon its development as part of the Royal Infirmary complex, the grave markers were removed to the cemetery adjoining the Kingswood chapel.

The present church was built in 1856-7 further back from the road by Foster and Wood of Bristol who were to produce many designs for chapels and other public buildings in Bristol and a wide surrounding area. Wood himself was a Wesleyan Methodist. In the opinion of many, their prettiest work was Victoria Wesleyan Methodist church (1862-3) in Whiteladies Road, Bristol (Dawson 2017, 14). However their most charming (in this author's view) is the Arts and Crafts Methodist chapel at Bossington in west Somerset (opened 1895).

The present united church congregation came together as a result of the closure of the New Tabernacle in 1985 leading to the decision in 1992 to amalgamate the Moravian and United Reformed church under the Moravian's roof. The wheel has come full circle.

Three very grand chapels of rival branches of Methodism stand within a few hundred yards of each other along Two Mile Hill: Wesley (1843), Zion (1854-5) and Bourne (1873 – Primitive Methodist replacing an earlier chapel of 1841 and now Bourne Christian Centre).

Kingswood Wesley (grade II)

Built in 1843 for the Wesleyan Methodist Society based at the Colliers' School ¼ mile away (Stell 1986, 87-8). The school house is of 1850. On abandonment of the chapel, the building became prone to vandalism and was eventually reduced to a shell. Plans for conversion to 15 flats have been approved and work is underway see South Gloucestershire application PK15/4996/LB for details.

Kingswood Methodist Church (formerly Zion United Methodist Free)

Built 1854-5 for the Reformed Methodists later United Methodist Free (Spittal and Dawson 1983, 26; Stell 1986, 70).

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