

Methodism in Hampden Park

A short history of St Stephens Methodist Church
1960-2010



‘The Church in the Park Field’

By Dr Walter Wigfield

In the Beginning

During the early 1950s, Hampden Park started to expand away from the “Village” around the railway station. There were plans for both private building and Council estates. A vast housing development was envisaged. As early as 1952 the Eastbourne Methodist Circuit had a vision for a Methodist church there, and on 27th February 1955, in the Brodrick Road Infant School, a Sunday School began meeting weekly, followed by adult worship at 3.30pm.



The Brodrick Road Infants School - 1955

A newspaper cutting of that time speaks of house-to-house visiting to publicise the new Sunday school, taking care not to take children away from the existing churches in Hampden Park. It became remarkably popular, and soon the Sunday School was filling every class room in the school each afternoon. The roll rose to 62 children. The leaders, Clarice Whybrow and Joyce Piper, sent for help from Gwen Ledger’s Central Methodist Youth Club, and 6 “volunteers” (you, you, and you) responded. One of these was David Allan, on whose memory and artefacts, this part of the history is based.

In 1956, under the leadership of Rev David Stacey, Rev H Chadwick-Smith, David Dougall and Derek Skinner, the afternoon church and Sunday School leaders resolved that a “Buy a Brick” scheme be launched in the Sunday School, for a new church building. The children (and their parents no doubt), were very enthusiastic about having a proper church to worship in, and by 1957 they had collected £200 in pennies, towards the building fund These were the large pre-decimal Id coins - 48,000 of them. Pity the Sunday school teachers carrying that load down to the Bank!

In 1957, the Eastbourne Methodist Circuit took up the challenge of fund-raising for the new building. The Circuit, under the leadership of Rev Wilfred B Bridge took on the mammoth task of financing the venture, with the promised aid of the Joseph Rank Benevolent Trust. Thanks to Mr Hugh Riddick and Rev David Stacey, the Chatfield Estate agreed to sell for £1000, the “Park Field” adjacent to an area designated for the Broadway shopping centre. This would provide for a multi-purpose building, a car park, and space for subsequent extension of the church in the future. The Stonelaying took place in November 1959, and the photo shows Gordon Head (Circuit Steward at the time) helping the Sunday school children put the bricks into position.

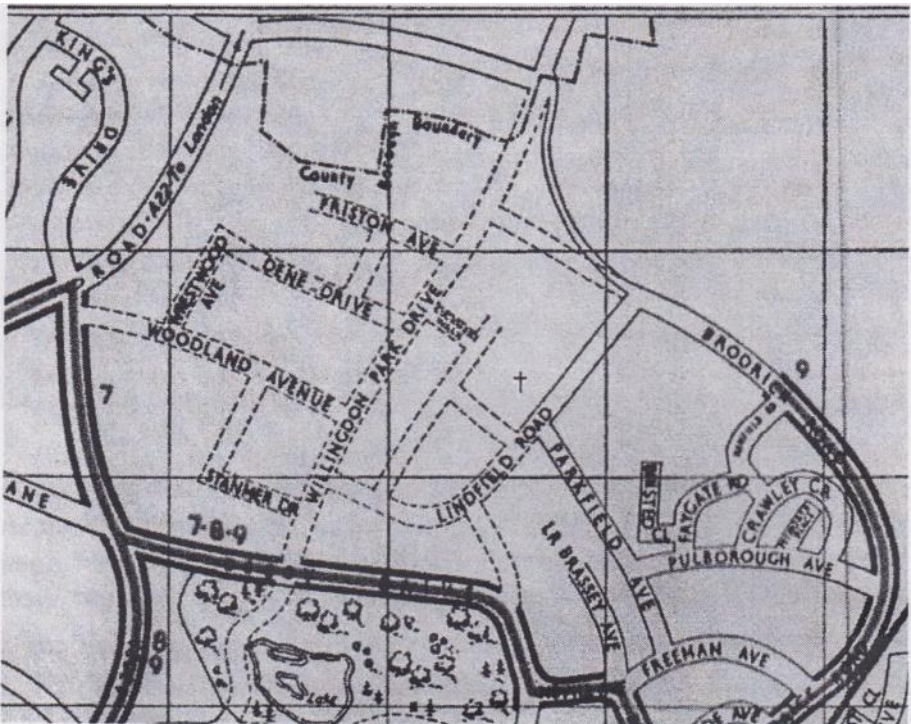


1960 - The Church Opens

On 23rd July 1960, the church itself, in the form of a "Dual Purpose Hall" was opened free of debt. It was an amazing response to the challenge of the situation. The whole neighbourhood turned out for the occasion, even the Boys' Brigade from Victoria Baptist Church in Old Town marched over to form a Guard of Honour.

At the time there were no shops, no Timberley Road, no Branston Road, and the top end of Meadowlands Avenue was not built. The bus map of the time shows how the estate was planned, with the dotted roads awaiting construction, and many roads not marked at all.

Until the Broadway was built, the address of the site was "Top of Parkfield Avenue". (The Cross marking the church has been added)



A Methodist Deaconess, Sister Mary Wadland, was appointed to develop the church activities, under the oversight of Rev F Morris Kedward. The attached photo shows Sister Mary leaving the new church, which stands alone in an empty field.



1961 - Establishing the Church

In March 1961, my family and I moved from Middlesbrough to Eastbourne, to a newly built Council house in Chelworth Road, some 200 yards from the church. While my wife instructed the moving men where to put the furniture, I took the two children down the road in the pushchair. I was surprised to find a little church standing in the middle of a rather muddy field. It had a notice board which said it was a Methodist Church, and the service on Sunday would start at 10am. We went, and were warmly greeted on the doorstep by Sister Mary. Young Ruth aged two, slept in her pushchair, with my wife Mary. Caroline, aged 4, wouldn't separate, so I went with her into the Sunday school room and met Clarice Whybrow. That was my undoing. Mrs Whybrow discovered I could play the piano (they had no pianist at the time), and also discovered that I could tell the children Bible stories without reading them, because I knew them by heart. I was promoted to Sunday school teacher! (But this does demonstrate how a successful church welcomes visitors, discovers their skills and offers to use them).

The dual-purpose hall could hold about 100 people. At one end was a sanctuary with communion rail, which could be closed off with sliding doors. At the other end was a small raised stage, so by turning the chairs round we could stage a Nativity play or sketch. The floor was of plastic tiles. The windows faced South, so it was very light inside. The acoustic ceiling was made of perforated aluminium, so the Boys Brigade could march with their drums without deafening everybody.



*The Sanctuary end of the new church
Note the stacking chairs and new (radio valve) organ*

Sister Mary was a great “enabler”, discovering members’ skills and getting church activities started. By the end of 1961, St Stephens had a Boy Brigade with Sid Nice in charge, and David Allan as his Lieutenant, a Young Wives Club with Barbie Bennett as Chairperson, a Bible study group meeting at the church, a Brownie Pack with Sister Mary as “Brown Owl”, and of course a Choir with Mrs Jameson and Mr Frank Busby as Organists. See photos on next page...



Jill Coldwell and the Life Boys





Les Store with the choir, Mr Busby at the organ



The very first wedding held in the new church was that of David Allan and his new bride, Jenny. They have remained faithful members ever since. Sadly, David died in June 2010, just before our 50th anniversary for which he was preparing with his usual enthusiasm.



Some of the Sunday school children (Timberley Road is now being built)

The dual purpose hall worked well for the young congregation, though in the winter the overhead electric heaters gave the congregation hot heads and cold feet. The tiled floor allowed the Sunday school to have a real live donkey (thanks to Sandra Gillam (now Creasy), on Palm Sunday. The stage was good for Christmas Nativity plays. And having chairs instead of pews allowed a variety of seating patterns for different activities. But space was a problem. One Sunday school room was not enough, and even when the kitchen and Minister's vestry were pressed into service, there was still a need for a second Sunday school session for the older children. There was no doubt about it; we needed a Church Hall. The grounds outside were a great asset. We used them for all sorts of activities; church festivals, jumble sales, children's sports, Brownies games, and on occasion, Sunday school classes. That was when we discovered that the "acoustic ceiling" in the church let the sound out; all the houses around the church could hear what the organ was playing, inside. "Noise pollution" was not a problem in those days. We had a loudspeaker rigged up with a reel-to-reel tape recorder, to play carols to the shopping centre at Christmas time. Our neighbours knew we were here!

1971 - The New Church Hall

An "Extension Fund" was started and by 1962 had reached £264. The Eastbourne Methodist Circuit agreed that the building was too small, and in 1966 Hubbard Ford & Partners (Architects) was approached to draw up plans for a Church Hall, kitchen and toilets. By 1968, with the help of the Yearsley Trust, the Extension Fund had grown to £5206. The new building was opened on 30th January 1971, at a total cost of £12,000.

This enabled the Sunday school to meet all together for the first time, and as the various organisations had the hall to use, we could set about beautifying the old building as a worship area. Carpeted floor, comfort-able chairs to replace stacking ones, curtains at the windows, and warm air heating. The 1960 organ, which used valves to make the sound, regularly went off-tune, so we set up an Organ Fund to replace it with a modern instrument. Unfortunately, the carpet and curtains further compounded the deadening effect of the acoustic ceiling, and led to poor sound quality for worship, only partially overcome by our enthusiastic Methodist singing!

The church was at its largest at this time, with a membership of just over 100 people, five classes of children, and a Youth Group which met on Sunday evenings in the hall.



Saturday, 10th October 1970 at 3 p.m.

1980 to 1999 - Ecumenical Ventures

St Stephens has always has happy relationships with the other churches in Hampden Park, ever since 1955 when we took care in recruiting children for Sunday school, not to take them from other churches. In the 1960s, Vatican 2 eased difficulties with the Catholic Church, and the local Council of Churches encouraged worshipping together. The churches comprised St Marys in the Park and St Peters in the Hyde-ey (Anglican), St Lukes in Elm Grove (Presbyterian - later URC), St Joachims in Brodrick Road (R/C), and Frenchgate in Frenchgate Close (Evangelical).

The clergy agreed that the previous united services had lacked interest, and that future services should reflect the style of worship of each host church. We started at St Joachims, in Lent. This service took in the Stations of the Cross, and used the Roman Missal in Latin. This, it was agreed, was a step too far, but it set the scene for many united services in which we learnt the worship style of the other churches.

In 1980, a large housing development took place on the Willingdon Trees Estate, half a mile from St Stephens - 5000 people, but no shops, no pub., no church, and a bus service to these facilities that ran once an hour. The estate lay in the Parish of St Mary Willingdon, geographically and socially very separate from Willingdon Trees (so named because all the roads were named after trees). The Anglican Bishop asked for a church presence on the Trees, but the Vicar was not a young man, was single-handed, and his parish had suddenly grown from 7,000 to 12,000. So the Bishop called on Tony and Di Jones, a couple living in the posh end of Eastbourne, and persuaded them to move house to the Trees, and start a mission church in the Community Centre as soon as it was built.

The situation was put to the Minister at St Stephens, who immediately said, "We'll commission two of our members (it's scriptural to go in pairs) to go and help this Church in the Trees as part of our missionary outreach". So at Pentecost 1981, Janet Townsend and Walter Wigfield were dispatched from our Sunday school staff to help: Janet with the children, and Walter to play the keyboard and take turns in leading worship. The nickname, "The Church in the Trees" was adopted by the little church, and it, and "Friday at Five", which was their equivalent of Sunday school, both flourished.

In 1997, with the arrival of a Curate and a musician to play the organ, Walter left the Church in the Trees, and with an ecumenical team helped our new Minister, Rev Melvyn Cooke, set up a new mission church in the harbour area. This eventually grew into the "Haven Church", an Anglo- Methodist ecumenical project which now meets in the Haven School, near the Eastbourne Harbour.

The next ecumenical venture was to share services with St Lukes United Reformed Church. Rev Margaret Bethel, a retired Methodist missionary from Kenya had been their Interim Moderator, while they were looking for a new minister. She then came to St Stephens as our minister. Evening services in both churches were sparsely attended, and we agreed to worship together in the evening, with a view to possibly uniting later on.

In 1999, a new charity named PARCHE asked St Stephens members to lead worship services in two of the local residential care homes for the elderly. They offered training, and two teams were formed, one for a small Home called "Kiamah", the other an Home for elderly people with dementia called "The Gates" (later renamed "Rosebery House"). This called for a larger team, and members from St Lukes joined forces to help.

Community Ventures 2000-2009

Rev Margaret Bethel and others had the vision of providing a weekly lunch for older and lonely people in the community around the church. But the existing kitchen attached to the hall was too small. In faith, building work was undertaken to enlarge and equip the kitchen, relocate the toilets, and to make it all wheelchair accessible. "Community Lunches @ St Stephens" opened in August 2002, with the help of a £500 grant from the Circuit, and proved an immediate success. Again, helpers from St Lukes joined the St Stephens team to make it a joint effort. It became so popular that at Christmas we had to limit the numbers to 45.

The association between the two churches increased until 2005 when the two churches formally united to form an Local Ecumenical Project. We held a meeting to decide on a name for the united church - To call it "St Lukes and St Stephens" was too much of a mouthful. We couldn't decide. At the third meeting, someone at the back was heard to say, "Well, whatever you do, don't call it "The Broadway Church" - the Broadway is a God-forsaken place; half the

shops are empty, the garages are all broken down, and the kids do drugs in the evening". We looked at one another - "that's exactly where we need Jesus!" And so the name was chosen; the Broadway United Church.

The field behind the church, now somewhat smaller since the building of the hall, had been giving us concern for some years, it had been an asset to various church groups, but now groups of teenagers frightened the Brownies, set fire to the trees, broke windows, climbed on the flat roof, damaged the heating system, and occasionally actually broke into the hall and left it in a mess. When the annual bill for repairs rose to over £1000, it was time to act, and with the help of Chris Hicks who supervised the whole project, the field was sold to Warden Housing and 12 flats for rent by older people were built. A real asset to the community, and the problem with vandalism just disappeared.

In 2004, the circuit acquired a Methodist Deacon, Jean Duckworth-Lloyd. Her initial role was to work with the St Stephens congregation as they moved towards uniting with the St Lukes congregation in 2005, and then to work with the whole group to help them as they became one church. Subsequently she met many young folk to explore their needs, with a view to setting up a Youth Cafe in one of the empty shops in the Broadway. The scheme remains active, to be carried forward when the time is right. Jean also spent time getting to know the folks in the shops, who all knew our "Mad Vicar" as they affectionately call her, and the "broken down garages and the kids doing drugs" problems were tackled and cured. The Spirit of Jesus has undoubtedly been present.

Jean's services were different. We had Cafe Church and films in the evening, singing and drama with the young people, and all-age worship in the morning services. Recently, we have seen less of her as she took on the role of coordinator of the newly formed Street Pastors. We shall be sorry to see her go in August, and wish her well in her retirement.

Perhaps because of Jean's example, one of our members, Jen Woodfin gave up her career as a music teacher and decided in 2006 to go for training as a Methodist Deacon.

In 2009 our most recent community project came to fruition, when "Broadway Babes", a Mother-and-toddler group meeting

once a week, was started. Numbers have been consistently low, and its future is in doubt.

The Way Forward - 2010 and beyond

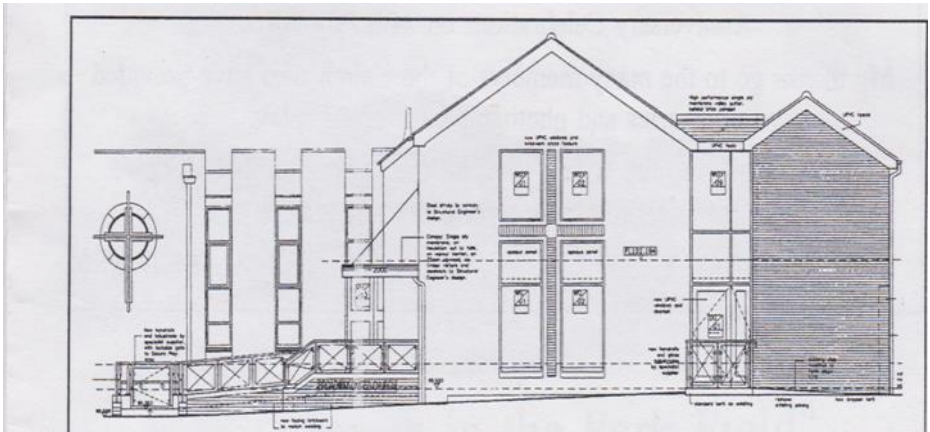
The Methodist Circuit has disappeared, being replaced by a United Area combining United Reformed and Methodist churches, and stretching far wider than the Eastbourne Methodist Circuit. Wish Hill Methodist Church has closed, uniting with the URC/Baptist church in Coppice Avenue Willingdon, to form Trinity Church. Our present Minister, Rev Philip Osborn has come to us from the United Reformed tradition. Joint services between the local churches in Hampden Park having fallen fallow for a few years, have been enthusiastically re-started recently.

What should the churches of the new century be doing? Should we concentrate on attracting teenagers as the "future of the church"? Should we concentrate on our faithful older members, who enjoy a thoroughly traditional service? Should we concentrate on the social activities - meals, fellowship groups, and child care? Just like in the late 70s, we need a "prophetic voice" - "This is the way, walk in it."

The church development group was formed to consider how our 1960s building should be developed to make it more user-friendly for the future. Access is difficult. The entrance too crowded. The acoustics and the loss of heat from the ceiling need attention. The stage is now redundant. The steps from church to hall are too steep. The meeting room is a thoroughfare. And the electrical system and heating both need replacing.

The following plan shows how the entrance will be brought round to the side where the slope of the ground is not a problem, and the stage area will be turned into a coffee and reception area. This will lead through sliding glass doors into the worship area, but over it will be a new mezzanine floor, with one or more meeting rooms. And the narrow communion area closed off by sliding doors and the communion rail will be replaced by an open dais for leading worship.

Work is scheduled to start in September 2010, funded by two generous bequests and the sale of the St Luke's Church site.



View of the Church from the Broadway showing the new entrance on the left

Presented with the compliments of the Minister and
Elders of the Broadway United Church, on the
occasion of our 50th Anniversary Celebrations

Acknowledgements

Before his death, David Allan asked me to prepare a display of the history of the building, on the Hall notice board, in time for our Anniversary Celebrations on 24th July 2010.

My thanks go to the many members of the church who have provided memories and photographs for the display.

My thanks also to my wife Susan, for the suggestion that all these materials might be turned into this booklet.

Walter Wigfield