

Sprowston Methodist Chapel

A history of the early years by an unknown author.

The Village of Sprowston in 1830

One hundred years ago, Sprowston was a small village of widely scattered houses, lying just north-east of the City of Norwich. The Parish church, situated at its most northerly point, was far away from the majority of the inhabitants and perhaps it was the remoteness of the local church which accounted for the bad reputation of the village, noted at that time for its lawlessness and drunkenness. It is stated in local records that policeman would only venture on the Sprowston Road in pairs! The thriving, local industry of the time was the Brickmaking industry- there were over 15 brick works in the Sprowston area, which has still left its mark on the Sprowston of today. This fact also helped to account for the bad reputation of the area, for such work produced a hardworking, hard living type of person, and it was among such people as these that Primitive Methodism began to flourish in Sprowston.

Sprowston is Missioned

A few brave and stout-hearted people, who used to meet in a small house in Sidney Row off Sprowston Road saw the great need for missioning Sprowston, and, despite much local opposition progress was made. Among the leaders of this movement were Mr. G. Want and his father, and Mr. Noah Rudd who later went to Old Catton Society. Gradually the number of people who met together increased and they moved to a "lean-to room," attached to a row of cottages near the present chapel. During the period 1870-75 great efforts were made and it was decided to erect the chapel on the site adjoining the temporary meeting place. This was originally part of a large orchard and there is still a member living who remembers the trees being cut down. On April 16th, 1875, the first foundation stone was laid by the Minister, the Rev. Gunns, for J.J. Colman, Esq., and the opening service took place that same year.

Sprowston's Young People

Meanwhile the Sunday School movement was growing in the District, begun in 1830 by Christian workers from Norwich. These people were Baptists and occupied a cottage situated at the present junction of Wall Road and Sprowston Road. After carrying on the work for several years they found difficulty in supplying sufficient personnel and eventually the Baptist friends handed over the care of the School to the Sidney Row Methodists now firmly established. The Superintendent of the School at that time was Mr. Drake and with many willing helpers the School quickly expanded. Only three years after the building of the Chapel, on September 19th, 1878, the foundation stone of the Sunday School was laid and the scholars vacated their former premises, which later became a boot shop, before finally being destroyed.

Problems of the Early Church

Local opposition was still strong and in the days of the Sidney Row meetings, local "toughs" often caused disturbances by yelling and shouting while a service was in progress, but the

Society carried on bravely even in the midst of such opposition. Another ever present problem was - as it still often is - that of finance. For instance, an organ fund was started, as the society first began with a small harmonium, and little by little the fund grew, but before a sufficient amount was collected, Miss Calver, a member, presented a new harmonium to the Society in 1893. The Society owed a great deal to this lady for she loaned a considerable portion of the money for building. For many years there was a constant financial burden on the Society, composed mainly of working-class people, and it was not till 1921 that the main debt was paid off.

Progress in the Sunday School

The Sunday School was having much success and soon increased its average numbers to approximately 100 members. Among many willing workers in the Sunday School were such people as Messrs. English, Lusher, Patterson and Drake; Mesdames High and Holborn and a little later came the Lovetts and Watsons, who worked hard both in Chapel and School. The School was well organised, with the building divided into three sections - the Seniors meeting in a room where the present stage is now sited, the Main School in a large centre room and the infants in a small room at the west end of the building. There was a library which continued till 1908, when the first decline set in, and a choir of children was supplied for the Chapel services. There was even a string orchestra at one time - Messrs. Gooch and Lovett often taking part in this activity - which performed creditably at anniversaries and other suitable occasions. Sunday School treats were great events and were held in Moore's field far up the Sprowston Road. Then, on one memorable occasion, a local contractor volunteered to take the School to Beeston Park, with a Traction Engine pulling two large wagons laden with children, teachers, food, etc. Perhaps the event would not have been so well remembered if it had not been for the performance of "stoking up" on the way. This occurred twice, with the result that the unfortunates in the first wagon arrived at Beeston smothered in soot! The leaders of the School also took an active part in the activities of the Chapel. There were the weeknight services alternating with the Prayer Meetings while another regular feature was the open-air services, with an annual camp meeting when the Society marched down the Sprowston Road towards the City singing hymns, stopping near Humphrey Lusher's timber yard (near Hoopers Lane) to hold meetings there morning and afternoon. At night a Love Feast service would be held in the Chapel, with members giving testimonies. So we must leave the early days of the Church remembering such names as those of Want, Pointer, Rudd, Patterson, Drake, Holborn, Lusher, Lovett, Ribbons, Watson, Marsh and many others.

Difficult Days

From the year 1900 onwards, the Society was held together by these stalwarts but little outside progress was made. The financial problem remained a big strain, but this was now ably handled by Mr. George Barker who became Trust Treasurer in 1905 and remains so to this day. Money was raised mainly through bazaars, supported by every department of the Church, and the Harvest Festivals, which have always been a unique and magnificent feature of Sprowston when the gifts were sold - as they still are - by public auction on the Monday evening. Various improvements were made to the structure of both Church and School. In 1909 the School was enlarged by removal of one of the inside walls and heating stoves were

installed. Renovations and repairs were often carried out by members, to be done usually as the Trustee's Minute Book tell us "as quickly and cheaply as possible, and done well!"

The War Years

During the war years, in 1916, a Guild was started which became very strong and continued. For some years. Devotional meetings were held once a month and other meetings consisted of lectures and sometimes competitions such as the following. Each member wrote an essay on some selected subject within a specified time, and it is recorded that Mr. Joshua Lusher won a prize for writing an essay on "The ideal Wife" - a brief description to the point somewhat in this vein - "Monday - washing and drying: Tuesday - baking shortcakes: Wednesday - ironing, etc". This Guild became very strong after the war years and even had a successful football team which competed in the Norwich Junior League. This was commenced in 1921, Mr. W. S. Lusher being President and Mr. G. Barker, Secretary, and continued till 1925. The war took its toll and left its mark on the Society but the work continued and the Society slowly progressed_ A great date to be remembered is that of 13th May 1921, when this Minute appears, "That Rev. C. H. Spivey make a statement at the School Anniversary re the Chapel debt being paid off and that a Thanksgiving Meeting be arranged later.

The Fruits of Endurance

After all these years of struggle and hardship, as the Society became firmly established, came a time of gradual improvement and growth. On July 31', 1924, Mrs. S. Watson laid the foundation stone of the extension to the building which linked the School with the Chapel and improved the facilities both of church and school. The cost of this work was £535, which sum was collected with great sacrifice and effort, the pounds being amassed by such schemes as collecting one pence per week from members, as did Mrs. Watson, over a period of 30 years. In 1928 the Sisterhood was commenced with Mrs. S. Watson as President and Mrs. W. S. Lusher as Secretary. This had great success and is still one of the great weekly attractions for our women folk, who can there enjoy both spiritual blessing and their gossip over the traditional Sisterhood cup of tea. The Christian Endeavour movement grew out of the Guild and partly through this minute, "That we all agree to Mr. W. S. Lusher's offer to try and get the young men to his house to form a C. E. class." This was in 1925 and it was in these meetings that the young people of the Church received their Christian education and training to fit them for full Christian service in church and circuit. Its value cannot be overestimated.

In 1932 the Chapel and the School were once again completely decorated, and in 1937, a Youth Club, incorporating a tennis club was started, which flourished indifferently till the war put an end to it. Garden parties had also entered the Church calendar, held at local places such as Meadow House, Catton, while the work of the Benevolent Fund also enlarged its scope, buying coal for needy people of the church and parish. At a Trustees Meeting held at George House, Old Cation, during a garden party it was agreed to "purchase the pipe organ from Plumstead Road Methodist Church for the sum of £50." This meant another radical change in the structure of pulpit and choir, but it was an improvement which certainly added to the dignity and beauty of the chapel, and to the musical range of the choir now ably led by Mr. Fell, who succeeded Mr. Marsh. This took place in 1941. While in September 1942 the Chapel was licensed for the Solemnizing of Marriages, and the first couple to be married

there, Mr. B. Baxter and Miss I. Walker, were both chapel members. Since the war has come the return of the Youth Club, the formation of the Men's Brotherhood –an invaluable asset to our Church life - the Boys' Brigade and Girls' Life Brigade. The organisation of activities in the week is now one of the major problems of the church, due to restricted space but it is one that we hope soon to overcome.

Sprowston and the Future

On July 14, 1949, a ceremony took place which marked yet another milestone in Sprowston Chapel's history. This was the handing over to the Trust of the Deeds of a parcel of land, 1.3 acres in extent, situated in the Parish of Sprowston, as a site for a new church. Thus, the future lies full of promise for the work in Sprowston. Gradually through the years by quiet persistence and great sacrifice the movement which started in Sidney Row has grown into the active and complex society of today. If that same faith in God and willingness to serve persists in the Sprowston Chapel of today, then the future should see still greater witness and evangelisation in the Parish of Sprowston.