

# Primitive Methodism in Basingstoke c1833 to 1932/9

## Introduction

The principal purpose of this paper is to provide an account of Primitive Methodism in Basingstoke from its origins in the 1830s/40s until the outbreak Second World War. Following the Methodist Reunion in 1932, although no longer a separate denomination, the Church on Sarum Hill in which Primitive Methodists had worshipped since 1902 continued to serve, along with the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Church Street, as one of Methodism's two, town centre, places of worship.

In what follows, consideration is given to a number of as to how Primitive Methodism came to be established in Basingstoke; the character and qualities of the ministers; and aspects of church life, including the organisations which Primitive Methodists sponsored. For nearly all of the period covered, Basingstoke was the centre of a circuit which embraced a number of chapels and causes in the town's 'spiritual hinterland'. On the circuit preachers plan for July to September 1901, these were listed as: Dummer, Sherfield, Newnham, Potbridge, West Green, Rotherwick, Basing, FlettOakley, Farnborough, Crookham and Herriard. However, the focus of this paper is very much the progress of the cause in Basingstoke itself.

For source material a considerable reliance has been placed on reports in local newspapers, initially the *Reading Mercury* and from 1878 the *Hants and Berks Gazette*. These often provide a great deal of information but, due to the vagaries of reporting, need to be treated with a certain amount of caution. It is not known whether or not the Primitive Methodists of Basingstoke had their own magazine but if they did no copies appear to have survived. With respect to 'official records' apart from the previously mentioned preaching plans, minutes of quarterly circuit and committee meetings are lodged with the Hampshire Record Office.<sup>1</sup>

## Origins

The precise origins of the Primitive Methodist cause in Basingstoke are not known for certain.<sup>2</sup> However, at an event in 1923 to celebrate the clearance of the debt on the new church premises which had been opened 21 years previously, the Church secretary Mr J.T. Myland 'made an interesting statement on the history of Primitive Methodism' in the town. With respect to the very early years he had this to say:

... [the Primitive Methodist] movement found no definite establishment in Basingstoke before the year 1833. In that year, Mr. Edward Bishop, a properly appointed minister, preached in the open air in a locality still familiar to us as Totterdown. Mr. Bishop encountered much opposition and found the same spirit in the people which the revered John Wesley did when he visited this locality and was moved to say of our forefathers that they reminded him of the beasts of Ephesus.<sup>3</sup>

This information was taken from Francis Baigent's impressive history of Basingstoke published in 1889. As he recorded:

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<sup>1</sup> HRO 57M77/NMC5-11.

<sup>2</sup> Primitive Methodism began at the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. It represented a desire to recapture something of the origins of Methodism with the adjective 'primitive' signifying a 'simpler' or 'more basic' form of evangelical Christianity with particular importance being attached to 'camp meetings.' In many ways it was a re-action against what was perceived as the 'conservatism' of Wesleyan Methodism.

<sup>3</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1923.

The “Primitive Methodists” had no regular footing in Basingstoke before 1833, when Mr Edward Bishop one of their ministers, preached in the open air at Totterdown, amidst much opposition. The use of a court in Bunnian Place was afterwards allowed to their preachers, the hearers standing in the road. Services were then held in a timber-yard lent by Mr Etheridge. It was not until 1847 that a small chapel was built in Flaxfield ...<sup>4</sup>

Basingstoke does not appear in any official records of Primitive Methodism until 1840.

It was initially on the Preaching plan for the Micheldever Circuit. The somewhat sparse circuit minutes first make reference to Basingstoke in an entry dated 23 May 1840. This reads: ‘That Mr Elford take Basingstoke providing Mr J. Baines? be not there.’<sup>5</sup> Later entries mention the search for suitable accommodation ‘at a reasonable rent’. According to David Young:

Primitive Methodist preachers first visited Basingstoke in about 1840 or 1841. They met with considerable opposition. William Merritt was apprehended and confined for preaching in the open air. A few hours later, some friends connected with the Independent Church secured his release, and someone gave permission for services to be held in his yard. This was suitable in summer, but inconvenient in winter. When G. Price came to the circuit in 1845 the Primitive Methodists still had no place of worship, and the congregations were small. In time land was purchased and a house and chapel were built. Opening services were held on 25th, 28th, 29th March and 4th April 1847. It was felt that “a gracious unction attended the several discourses and addresses.”<sup>6</sup>

The chapel was situated in Flaxfield Road (see Fig. 1) and its year of opening, 1847, is confirmed by the 1851 Religious Census return. According to Myland the cost of the premises was £387.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1850s the Micheldever Circuit was renamed the Basingstoke Circuit.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Joseph Baigent and James Elwin Millard, *A history of the ancient town and manor of Basingstoke in the county of Southampton: with a brief account of the siege of Basing House, A.D. 1643– 1645* (Basingstoke: C.J. Jacob, 1889), pp 550-1. See also *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 December 1933.

<sup>5</sup> Primitive Methodist Connexion. Micheldever Circuit Minute Book HRO Ref: 96M72/NMC/G1.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/basingstoke?path=0p2p45p>

<sup>7</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1923. Myland incorrectly gave the year of opening as 1846.

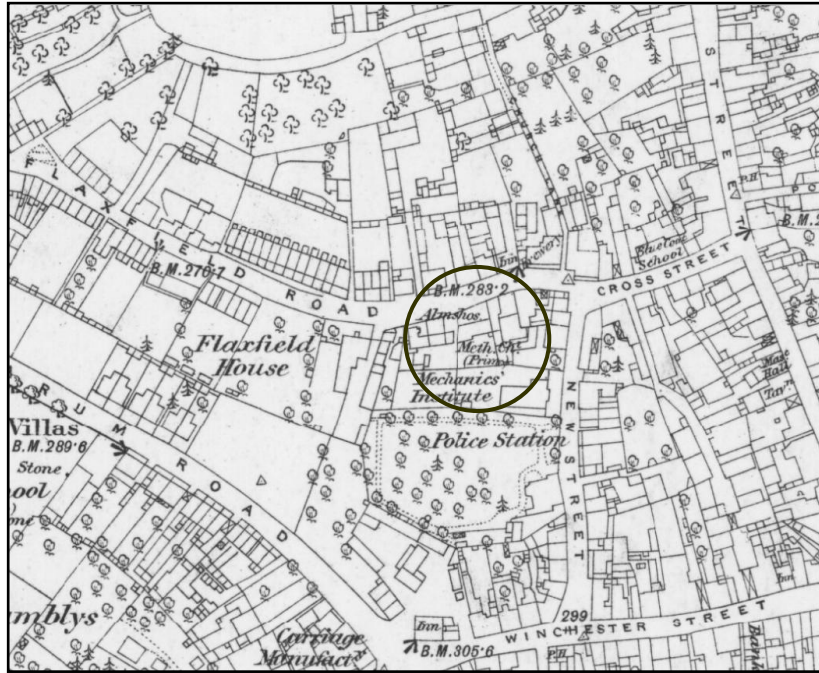


Fig. 1: Extract from an Ordnance Survey of 1871/3 showing the location of the Primitive Methodist Chapel

Thus, the Primitive Methodists put down roots in Basingstoke approximately 25 years before the Wesleyans, who did not get established until the 1870s. They can therefore lay claim to being the pioneers of Methodism in the town.<sup>8</sup>

### Premises

The first Primitive Methodist chapel in Flaxfield Road could accommodate 127, which was sufficient for the size of congregation recorded in the 1851 Census, with 40 in the morning and afternoon and 100 in the evening. However, subsequent increases in the size of the congregation meant that on two occasions the chapel had to be enlarged (see Fig. 2), followed by the construction of a brand new church at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The first enlargement was in 1864. As recorded in *The Primitive Methodist Magazine*:

RE-OPENING OF THE BASINGSTOKE CHAPEL. – Eighteen years ago, our friends purchased some property in the town ... and erected a small chapel. We have recently taken down the greater portion of our old chapel and built another nearly double its size at a cost of £373 3s. 8d. A few weeks ago this chapel was opened for divine worship, when three sermons were preached: those in the morning and evening by the Rev. J. Cooke, and that in the afternoon by the Rev. N. Glass [minister of London Street Congregational Church]. The day following about 200 sat down to a well arranged tea, which was followed by a public meeting. Our brethren, Wake, Schofield, and Brazier, gave £121 and donations from other friends and the opening collections amounted to £35 16s 1½d ...

G. Wallis<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For a few years in the nineteenth century another branch of Methodism, the Bible Christians, also had a presence in Basingstoke, see Roger Ottewill, *Bible Christians in Basingstoke*, <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/bible-christians-basingstoke> (accessed 23 May 2018).

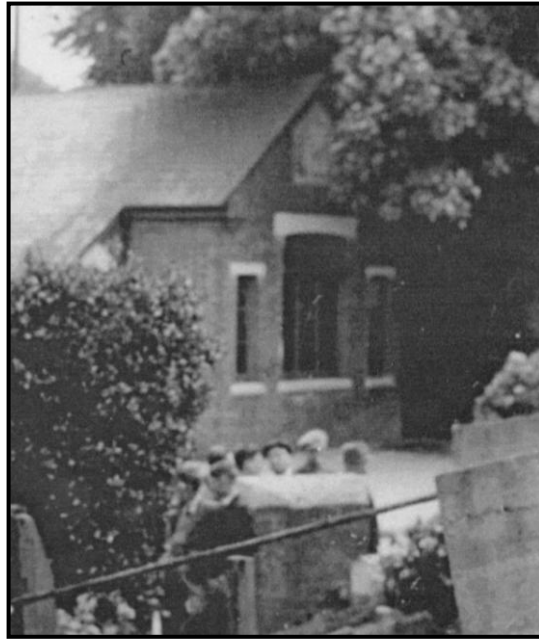


Fig 2: Primitive Methodist Chapel in Flaxfield Road

In Myland's account 'the chapel was enlarged in 1863 and again in 1881 at a total cost of £940.'<sup>10</sup> The second of these involved:

... an addition to the length of the chapel of twenty feet at the back, besides a small school or classroom connected with the chapel by a lobby ... [giving] access to the minister's house adjoining.

In addition, the whole building was re-seated and re-lighted with provision being made for heating by hot water pipes.<sup>11</sup> The re-opening services were held in late October, with a lecture being given on Monday evening by Tom Horrocks entitled "Sixteen years of a drunkards life".<sup>12</sup>

As previously mentioned, these enlargements were necessary to accommodate the increasing congregations, which as recorded in the 1882 church census were 138 in the morning and 147 in the evening. At the 1894 anniversary of the chapel it was reported that: 'Even since the [last] enlargement they had seen the congregations overflow.'<sup>13</sup>

However, one consequence of these building projects was an ongoing debt, which in 1897 'stood at £365'.<sup>14</sup> By 1898, however, it was reported that 'a scheme for building a new chapel in another part of town ... [was] being considered.'<sup>15</sup> Cost notwithstanding, plans for a new church proceeded apace and 'over £600 was raised to form a basis for the new project.'<sup>16</sup> A site on Sarum Hill was purchased and the new Church was opened in July 1902 (see Fig.3).

Designed by Mr T.E. Davidson of London, it was described as a 'creditable addition to the public buildings of the town from an architectural point of view ... the red pressed facing bricks with Portland stone dressings ... [gave] in the impression of at least one

<sup>9</sup> *The Primitive Methodist Magazine*, 1864, p.743. See also *Reading Mercury*, 16 January 1864. In 1865 the Chapel was 'registered for the solemnization of marriages'. *Reading Mercury*, 6 May 1865.

<sup>10</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1923.

<sup>11</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 3 September 1881.

<sup>12</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 November 1881.

<sup>13</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 May 1894.

<sup>14</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 May 1897.

<sup>15</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 14 May 1898.

<sup>16</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1923.

competent and independent expert, one of the best examples of this class of work in the town.<sup>17</sup> The cost was approximately £4000 and as indicated earlier, it was not until 1923, that is twenty-one years after it was opened, that the debt was finally extinguished, with much rejoicing and relief.

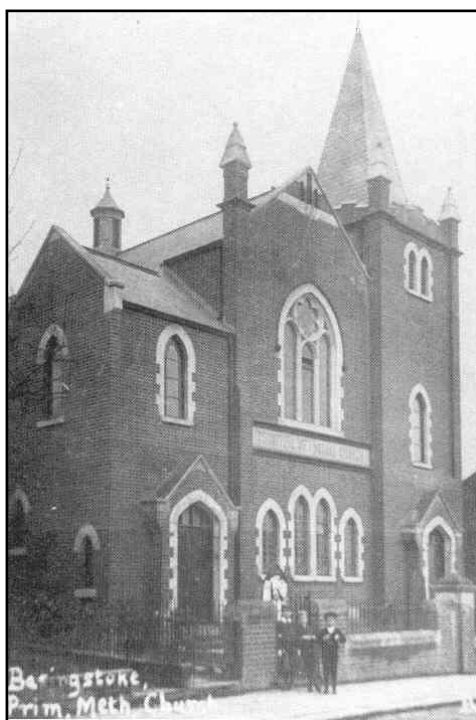


Fig 3: New Primitive Methodist Church on Sarum Hill

The Church was demolished in July 1970, nearly 70 years after it had been opened.<sup>18</sup>

### Ministers

In researching Basingstoke's Primitive Methodist ministers a heavy reliance has been placed on the *My Primitive Methodist Ancestors*' website for biographical information and insights into their personalities. Details have been collated by Geoff Dickinson and, in so doing, he has made extensive use of their official obituaries. These are to be found in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* and the minutes of the Primitive Methodist Connexion Conference. From 1878, material from the website has been supplemented with that from the *Hants and Berks Gazette*.<sup>19</sup>

Once Basingstoke became the principal Church of the Circuit in the 1850s, its ministers were designated superintendent. Quite a number of these had exemplary reputations and made their mark in not only Basingstoke and district but also other circuits and the Connexion as a whole.

Basingstoke's first Primitive Methodist minister in the early 1850s was the Revd George Lee. Little has discovered about him, beyond the fact that he completed the returns for the 1851 religious census. In his official biography, there is no mention of his time in Basingstoke. He was superannuated at the 1857 Connexional conference 'and came to reside in Lynn' until his death in 1875. During his retirement 'his health was shattered and at times his sufferings were severe.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 19 July 1902.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Brown, *Basingstoke: A Pitcorial History 1935-65* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1994), image 167.

<sup>19</sup> See separate asset for images of many of the ministers.

<sup>20</sup> *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1877, p.303.

Lee was followed by the Revd William Brewer, who was minister from 1854 to 1856. Brewer came to Basingstoke from the Wallington Circuit and it was said of him that he 'took a lively concern in the spiritual welfare of the connexion. He was a thorough believer in the doctrine of a present salvation at every service. He wanted souls converted at every meeting.'<sup>21</sup> From Basingstoke Brewer moved in Sturminster in Dorset.

Brewer was succeeded by the Revd Edmund Rawlings (1856-1859). Like Brewer his previous circuit was Wallingford. In a biographical sketch of his life by Grapho, which was published in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, it was noted that although 'a man of no dazzling gifts ... [he] was full of the "milk of human kindness," while undistinguished by commanding powers, or brilliant attainments, there were unmistakably present these qualities which more than compensated for the absence of these, and without which great gifts are more repelling than attractive.'<sup>22</sup> After Basingstoke, Rawlings' next circuit was Poole.

Moving to Basingstoke from Newbury, the records indicate that the Revd John Hill (1857-1859) overlapped with Rawlings. He was 'a poet, artist and scholar ... [he] shrank from public recognition and preferred to labour in remote country districts. While his obituary records that he was a faithful minister, a diligent pastor, a true friend, had a passion for soul saving and his spiritual children are all over the south of England.'<sup>23</sup> From Basingstoke, Hill moved to Brinkworth in Wiltshire.

The successor to Rawlings and Hill was the Revd George Betts (1859-1861) who had previously been superintendent of the Highworth circuit, which was also in Wiltshire. His obituary records that: 'His natural disposition being meek and gentle, he was imposed upon by unreasonable men; but he met all in the spirit of his Master. Indeed few have equalled him, perhaps none excelled the deceased in close, holy living, and calm Christian confidence in the atonement; and though in the pulpit he was not what some call brilliant, yet he was invariably sound, and often successful in winning souls to God.'<sup>24</sup> Betts' next circuit was Stratford.

The Revd Thomas Jackson's years in Basingstoke (1861-1863) were preceded by the superintendency of the Witney circuit and followed by that of the Aylesbury circuit. Unfortunately, it is not possible to comment on his character or approach to ministry.<sup>25</sup>

Jackson was followed by the Revd George Wallis (1863-1867), who had previously spent three years superintending the Leamington circuit. Interestingly, Wallis' obituary taken from the *Newbury Weekly News* records that as a young minister in Hampshire during the 1830s 'he was subjected to brutal treatment from infuriated mobs for no other offence than that of preaching of the gospel. He lived however to see the hostility shown in this infant community, entirely cease, while the devoted labours of himself and his colleagues have been so blessed that the Primitive Methodist chapels and preaching places in the county are probably more numerous than of any other Nonconformist body.'<sup>26</sup> From Basingstoke Wallis moved to Newbury where, from 1870, he served as a supernumerary and eventually died in 1894.

Moving in the opposite direction, the Revd George Price (1867-1869), having been Newbury's superintendent, replaced Wallis at Basingstoke. His 'obituary records that he was a strict disciplinarian ... [and] a leader from the front. He took his pastoral work seriously often visiting 10-30 families each day ... [he] observed Fridays as a fasting day and day for spiritual exercises.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_823.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__823.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p).

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/edmund\\_rawlings?path=0p3p78p155p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/edmund_rawlings?path=0p3p78p155p). *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1903 p.565.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_1156.aspx?path=0p3p78p145p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__1156.aspx?path=0p3p78p145p).

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_401.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__401.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p).

<sup>25</sup> There is nothing about Jackson's personality on the *My Primitive Methodist Ancestor's* website and the Conference Minutes of 1879 (p.9) and the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* of 1879 (p.434) in which his obituary appears are not yet available online.

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/george\\_wallis?path=0p3p78p160p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/george_wallis?path=0p3p78p160p). *Newbury Weekly News*, 18 March 1894.

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/george\\_price?path=0p3p78p153p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/george_price?path=0p3p78p153p)

Price's successor, the Revd Charles Portnell, served as Superintendent of the Basingstoke Circuit on two occasions. The first was from 1868, when he moved to Basingstoke from Sturminster in Dorset, until 1870 and the second from 1883 to 1886, having relocated from Winchester. Comments about Portnell are made later in connection with his second spell as Superintendent.

Portnell was succeeded by the Revd Henry Yeates who was on the Primitive Methodist roll of ministers for 56 years, '39 in active service and the last 17 years on the list of supernumeraries.'<sup>28</sup> Like Portnell, Yeates served the Basingstoke Circuit on two separate occasions - first, as superintendent from 1869 to 1873, having moved from Motcombe in Dorset, and second as a supernumerary from 1879 to 1883, his previous circuit having been Brinkworth in Wiltshire. Further details of his ministry are provided a little later.

Between 1873 and 1876 the superintendent was the Revd Daniel Harding having moved the short distance from Newbury to Basingstoke. In his obituary, the Revd William Rowe wrote that: 'Though not one of the most brilliant of men, Daniel Harding was a laborious, plodding and successful labourer, and the Church wants more of such.'<sup>29</sup> He was clearly remembered with affection at Basingstoke since he returned as guest preacher at a number of chapel anniversary celebrations. For example, in 1894 the 'congregations were unusually large' and 'the straight talks from Mr Harding seemed to enthuse every attentive listener'.<sup>30</sup> At the public meeting on the Monday evening Harding spoke about the importance of 'individuality' and expressed the view that:

If all the members of Christian churches would shake themselves a little bit from their surroundings and consecrate their special talents to the service of God, he believed that the Church would prosper abundantly, for there was talent enough and means enough in the church to ensure prosperity if they could only wake it up.<sup>31</sup>

It would seem that Harding endeavoured to 'practice what he preached'. As recorded at the time of his death under the heading of "A Strenuous Ministerial Life": 'He retained through his ministerial life the confidence of his brethren, as proved by the official positions he held; his name was to be found on some of the most important Connexional Committees, and on three occasions was a member of the Annual Conference.'<sup>32</sup>

Relocating to Aylesbury, Harding handed over the superintendency to the Revd Thomas Kench (1876 to 1880), previously of Andover. He died in 1897 and in his obituary it is recorded that he was:

... hopeful and joyous in nature, he was deeply pious and had unbounded confidence in God. His piety was of a quiet character, but was healthy, vigorous and manly, growing with his growth and expanding with his improvement in knowledge and advancement in years. His discourses were instructive, evangelical, practical and edifying, acting most effectively on the understanding and conscience of the hearers.

Moreover, his business ability was of a high order. In superintending his circuits he was 'sound in judgement, wise in counsel, conciliatory in spirit and pure in intention'.<sup>33</sup> These high opinions were echoed in an obituary which appeared in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*:

The deceased was well known in this district and held in high esteem by his brethren and also among the churches to which he had from time to time ministered ... he had

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<sup>28</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 14 December 1895.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/daniel\\_harding?path=0p3p78p145p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/daniel_harding?path=0p3p78p145p)

<sup>30</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 May 1894. At the time Harding was Superintendent minister of the Newbury Circuit.

<sup>31</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 May 1894.

<sup>32</sup> *Newbury Weekly News*, 9 March 1905.

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_1306.aspx?path=0p3p78p148p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__1306.aspx?path=0p3p78p148p)

endeared himself to all with whom he had been brought into contact by the nobility of his Christian character. The characteristics of ... [his] ministry were an intense earnestness for the souls of men and a willingness to be anything so that Christ might be glorified. He was a friend of the temperance cause and indeed of every movement which aimed at bringing men nearer to Christ.

As reported, a number of these observations were made in an "In Memoriam" address given at Newbury Primitive Methodist Church by a Mr Thompson.<sup>34</sup>

Moving to Wallingford, Kench was succeeded as superintendent by the Revd Mark Trevethick (1880-1883). It was said of him that:

... [he] aimed to be a successful preacher of the Gospel. His great work was the building up of the Church and the salvation of men. As a preacher he was evangelical and expository rather than argumentative. His discourses were well thought out and revealed careful preparation.<sup>35</sup>

In his obituary reference is made to Trevethick's business skills and success in erecting new chapels. With respect to Basingstoke, he was in post in 1881 when, as previously indicated, the chapel was enlarged for a second time.

During his superintendency, Trevethick received assistance from the Revd Henry Yeates who had, as mentioned earlier, returned to Basingstoke as a supernumerary and remained in post until 1883. Something of the dangers faced by clergy can be gauged from the following incident in which he was involved in 1881:

The Rev Henry Yeates narrowly escaped a good drubbing from a man inflamed with drink on Wednesday evening last. The individual referred to invited the reverend gentleman to his cottage on the pretext of having some spiritual conversation, but not thinking the man was in a fit state of mind to "receive with meekness the ingrafted word" Mr Yeates declined but promised to call upon him on a future occasion. However, the man induced Mr Yeates to accompany him down Essex-road for the purpose of showing him the house in which he resided and eventually drew him inside. No sooner had he done so and closed the door than the individual placed himself in a fighting attitude. The position as may be imagined, was somewhat dangerous, but the wife came to the rescue and opened the door to Mr Yeates, who, in crossing the doorstep fell down. On rising he proceeded some few steps, when he again fell. At last he commenced to run down the road, followed by the infuriated man. Fortunately Mr Yeates took shelter in a neighbouring cottage, and escaped to the attic with cries of "Help" and "Murder." The man finding himself baffled, then turned upon Mr. Thomas Martin, who was hard by, and dealt him a few sharp blows on the face.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding this unfortunate episode, Yeates' commitment to Basingstoke remained undaunted. Indeed it is noteworthy that he served as a borough councillor for three years from 1884 to 1887 as a demonstration that he had 'always showed a keen interest in municipal, social and educational movements.'<sup>37</sup>

His large charge was at Wootton Bassett, after which he retired to Basingstoke. At the time of his death in 1895, fulsome and heartfelt tributes were paid to him.

[After retirement] although a supernumerary, he continued to take a very active part in the religious movements of the Methodist world, and his venerable appearance, picturesque eloquence and his wonderful energy made him welcome wherever he was

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<sup>34</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 October 1897.

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/mark\\_trevethick?path=0p3p78p157p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/mark_trevethick?path=0p3p78p157p)

<sup>36</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 3 September 1881.

<sup>37</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 November 1895.



appointed to conduct a service or address a meeting. In his earlier ministerial career he did a vast amount of hard and toilsome work in the propagation of the Gospel in the rural districts, and he became one of the most popular preachers in the connexion and from time to time was honoured by his ministerial and lay brethren with the chairmanship of his district and other important posts.<sup>38</sup>

Yeates' obituary records that: 'He was especially gifted to stir and edify a congregation. He had a commanding presence, a rich deep voice, robust health, mental alertness and facility of expression, combined to produce a personality of no mean order'.<sup>39</sup>

Trevethick's successor as superintendent was the other returnee, the Revd Charles Portnell (1883-1886). His ministry was again characterised as 'one of hard work, but he delighted in it. He was a good pastor, visiting thirty to forty families per week, and seldom left without prayer. His preaching was plain, but forceful, and hearers were interested and helped by the quaint manner in which his thoughts were expressed'.<sup>40</sup> In its report of the chapel's 1884 anniversary, the *Hants and Berks Gazette* made reference to the fact that Portnell preached at both Sunday services and that 'since the last anniversary steady progress had been made in the cause'. It also expressed the hope that 'the same signs of spiritual life will continue'.<sup>41</sup> A year later, at the equivalent celebrations, Portnell was joined by two of his predecessors, Harding and Yeates. On this occasion the 'congregations were large and attentive ... [and it was] the most successful anniversary ever held in the chapel'.<sup>42</sup>

Following Portnell's departure for the neighbouring circuit of Micheldever, the Revd Thomas Whitehead (1886-1889) took over as superintendent. Arriving from Cirencester, his obituary records that: 'he was a model circuit minister, and never sought district office or honour, though he could not altogether escape it. He was an able and powerful preacher, and his sermons always gave evidence of thorough preparation. He gave practical and clear expositions, occasional flashes of humour, and impassioned evangelical appeals. He always aimed at strengthening the spiritual life of the churches, and converting the unsaved. However, he did not leave other work undone. Few ministers did more in reducing debts and building new churches and schools'.<sup>43</sup>

The next superintendent, the Revd George Hunter (1889-1892), who was previously superintendent of the Stewkley circuit in Buckinghamshire, was 'a splendid visitor, and a true friend and practical helper in cases of distress. In the pulpit he was earnest, simple, practical and good. He aimed not at display. He preached not to please the ear and tickle the fancy, but to touch the heart and reach the soul. His sole ambition was to save souls'.<sup>44</sup> From Basingstoke moved on to Andover.

The obituary of Revd Richard Evans, who was superintendent between 1892 and 1894, records that 'he served his church acceptably and successfully, being a painstaking and plodding minister of religion. He was a diligent pastor, ever welcome in the homes of the people who loved and trusted him. He believed ministers should know their people in their homes'.<sup>45</sup> Soon after his arrival from Wallingford there is a report of him preaching 'two appropriate and powerful sermons' at the morning and evening Harvest services. Moreover, 'the congregations were large, and at the evening service seats were put up in the aisle'.<sup>46</sup> He preached his farewell sermons in Basingstoke to 'good congregations' before his move to Salisbury.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 November 1895

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_964.aspx?path=0p3p78p161p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__964.aspx?path=0p3p78p161p)

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/charles\\_portnell?path=0p3p78p153p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/charles_portnell?path=0p3p78p153p)

<sup>41</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 May 1884.

<sup>42</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 May 1885.

<sup>43</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/thomas\\_whitehead?path=0p3p78p160p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/thomas_whitehead?path=0p3p78p160p)

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_1509.aspx?path=0p3p78p145p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__1509.aspx?path=0p3p78p145p)

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_1964.aspx?path=0p3p78p142p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__1964.aspx?path=0p3p78p142p)

<sup>46</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 October 1892. At the evening service Evans 'discoursed from Psalm cvii, 31.'

<sup>47</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 July 1894.

Relatively few traces of the ministry of Evans' successor, the Revd John Henry Harradine (1894-1897), have survived. For example, there is no entry for him on the *My Primitive Methodist Ancestors'* website and neither his arrival nor his departure appears to have been reported in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*. Nonetheless, there are a few glimpses of his time in Basingstoke. In October 1894 he attended the mayor's banquet<sup>48</sup> and in January 1895 he spoke on "Christian Fellowship" during the week of united prayer.<sup>49</sup> While at the church anniversary in May 1895, he:

delivered an able speech on the need for holy living. They were here to do good. How could they most effectually accomplish it? The secret of the Apostle's success lay not in their learning or their eloquence. If it had they would have signally failed. The secret lay in the fact that they glorified God by a life of Christ-like action.<sup>50</sup>

However, he was absent from the 1897 anniversary celebrations due to ill-health and an evangelist, Mr Fellowes, provided cover for him.<sup>51</sup> Harradine moved from Basingstoke to Southampton.

By the time of the Sunday school anniversary in July 1897, the Revd Samuel Ainsworth, had arrived from Wallingford, to serve as Harradine's replacement.<sup>52</sup> However, for reasons which are unclear, he was destined to remain for just twelve months. That said, his early departure appears to have an amicable one since he was guest preacher at the 1901 anniversary, the last held at the Flaxfield Road chapel.<sup>53</sup>

To compensate for Ainsworth's brief ministry, his successor, the Revd Joseph Beal, who had previously superintended the St Austell circuit in Cornwall, served for six years from 1898 and 1904. Thus, he oversaw the construction and opening of the new church on Sarum Hill and the move from Flaxfield Road. Moving from St Austell to Basingstoke His preaching style was described as:

clear, intelligent and evangelical ... [with] his supreme aim ... [being] the salvation of his hearers, and the improvement of the churches entrusted to his care. [While] 'the general impression of his congregation was that he improve[d] as a preacher the more frequently they hear[d] him. In his six years at Basingstoke he preached over four hundred and fifty sermons and retained his reputation for freshness. (see Fig. 4)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 27 October 1894.

<sup>49</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 19 January 1895.

<sup>50</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 May 1895.

<sup>51</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 May 1897.

<sup>52</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 July 1897.

<sup>53</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 May 1901.

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_1984.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__1984.aspx?path=0p3p78p139p)



Fig: 4: Interior of Sarum Hill Primitive Methodist Church showing the Central Pulpit from which the Rev Joseph Beal would have delivered his sermons

Beal was undoubtedly one of the most renowned and revered of Basingstoke's Primitive Methodist ministers. At a gathering held to mark his departure much was made of the length of his stay in Basingstoke and his achievements while there:

The Primitive Methodists of the Basingstoke circuit bade farewell on Thursday to their minister ... who has been superintendent for the long period (Methodistically speaking) of six years. No other minister in circuit has ever exceeded a stay of four years, so Mr Beal's ministry is a record in this respect. But it has also been an important period in the history of Primitive Methodism in this circuit, for during the past six years a marvellous advance has been made. The large and handsome new church has been erected in Basingstoke, giving accommodation for 530 worshippers, besides admirable Sunday School premises. Nearly £5000 has been raised for circuit and connexional purposes. Altogether the six years of Mr Beal's ministry have been a period of advancement and progress,

Amongst other comments the Chairman referred to the fact that when Mr Beal first arrived 'they were down in the slums; now they were in the West End'; the Revd Capes Tarlbolton of London Street Congregational Church bore testimony to Mr Beal's 'sterling character and his genial disposition; Mr Charles Myland observed that 'the influence' of Mr Beal's ministry 'would never end; Mr E. Hopwood recalled 'the glorious and happy times they had had together'; and Mr George Cook drew attention to 'the friendly relationship which existed between Mr Beal and the other ministers of the town.' For his part, Beal paid 'tribute to the persistent and self-sacrificing efforts of the friends most immediately connected with the erection of ... the church.' He continued by wishing them:

... every success financially, numerically and spiritually. While he was first their minister he yet had tried to discharge his duty in the town as a citizen, and he had always been willing to render any support he could to better the social and moral condition of the people.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, Beal was going to be, in modern terminology, 'a difficult act to follow'.

His successor was the Revd Jonas Holroyd, who Beal described as 'an old friend' and 'a real Methodist every inch of him'.<sup>56</sup> He served as superintendent until 1908. In its report of

<sup>55</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 July 1904.

<sup>56</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 July 1904.

his 'tragic and painful death' in 1911, which came as 'a great shock' since it was so unexpected, the *Primitive Methodist Leader* made reference to the fact that he was 'so kind and genial.'<sup>57</sup> No doubt these qualities were much in evidence during his time in Basingstoke, with the *Hants and Berks Gazette* referring to the 'distressing suddenness of his death' and the 'profound impression' it created amongst the delegates to the Primitive Methodist Conference in Bradford which he had been on his way to attend at the time of his death.<sup>58</sup>

Holroyd's replacement was the Revd John Jones who moved to Basingstoke from Southampton in July 1908 and served until 1913. At the church anniversary in 1911, the comment was made that 'they had a good leader in their minister'.<sup>59</sup> According to his obituary, he was 'gifted with a voice such as few men possess, he could be heard by deaf people in his congregation, and was a favourite preacher at district camp-meetings and open-air services. As a preacher he kept to the evangelical aspect of ... [the] work and was an earnest soul-winner.'<sup>60</sup> At his farewell gathering, there were representatives from every chapel in the circuit, the other Free Churches and the Salvation Army. In their contributions, ministers 'spoke concerning ... [his] brotherliness towards the Free Churches and wished him God speed in his new sphere of labour', which was to be the Watford circuit. He was presented with a gold watch and his wife 'an electro-plated flower stand.'<sup>61</sup>

The recognition meeting for the next superintendent minister, the Revd William Gladstone Rutherford was held in conjunction with the church anniversary in late July 1913. In his response to words of welcome, Rutherford 'showed that he possessed a spirit of cheerfulness and humour.' This was evident when he explained how he acquired his Christian names. He had been 'a delicate baby, and when the minister, who was a bigoted radical, called to christen him, his parents had not decided what to call him, and before his mother could say anything different, and before his father – a bigoted Nonconformist Tory, yet one of the best men he ever knew could protest, the minister had christened him William Gladstone.' He went on to say that, with their cooperation he believed 'this Church would be a mighty force.'<sup>62</sup> It was said of Rutherford in his obituary that: 'He was a most brotherly and unselfish man, with a marked gift for making friends.'<sup>63</sup> He was clearly a valued minister since he returned in 1920, while serving at Rotherhithe, as 'special special' at the Sunday school anniversary with 'large congregations ... [bearing] witness to the fact that the rev. gentleman's visit was very much appreciated.'<sup>64</sup>

In July 1916 the Revd Frank Hull was formally welcomed as Superintendent Minister of the Basingstoke Primitive Methodist circuit. His previous circuit had been Tunstall in the Potteries. It was reported that at this event he gave an 'address conspicuous for its earnestness and sincerity, and made an excellent impression, as he also did on the Sunday when he preached at the services.'<sup>65</sup> A major preoccupation during Hull's ministry was debt reduction and there were many initiatives to raise the necessary funds to achieve this goal. However, although he remained in Basingstoke for five years it was to be under his successor that the debt was finally extinguished.

Hull left in 1921 when he was succeeded by the Revd Frank Davidson. It was during his superintendency that the Primitive Methodists finally paid off the debt incurred when they built their new church on Sarum Hill. Unsurprisingly, there was reference to this at the circuit rally at Oakley to mark Davidson's departure in 1924. In response to various expressions of gratitude for 'the conscientious and devoted service' he had rendered and a gift of Treasury notes, Davidson:

<sup>57</sup> *Primitive Methodist Leader*, 6 July 1911.

<sup>58</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 17 June 1911.

<sup>59</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 July 1911.

<sup>60</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/john\\_jones?path=0p3p78p147p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/john_jones?path=0p3p78p147p)

<sup>61</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 July 1913.

<sup>62</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 July 1913.

<sup>63</sup> Obituary from the Minutes of the Methodist Conference 1950, p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 15 May 1920.

<sup>65</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 July 1916.

... expressed his sincere appreciation of the many manifestations of goodwill he had received ... They had had many difficulties to overcome, but the position he was passing on to his successor was an improved one. His ministry would be memorable in association with the clearing of the fine property at Basingstoke of all capital debt ...<sup>66</sup>

The exact nature of the difficulties to which Davidson is not known, but no doubt the financial position had been one of them.

The beneficiary of the fact that Sarum Hill was now debt free was the Revd Thomas Sandford, 'late of Bilston, Staffordshire', who was welcomed at the same circuit rally as the one at which circuit members bade farewell to Davidson.<sup>67</sup> In his remarks, Sandford:

... said he had been impressed by the kindness of his ministerial brethren in coming to say words of welcome and to say them so nicely. He had also been impressed by the evident appreciation of the work of his predecessor. I am here to do the best I can ... and if you desire that this Church shall prosper and grow, then you have not only to watch but to work. If you pitched your expectations high, but are looking only to me, you are doomed to disappointment. But if you say - Well, perhaps he can do something; he can lead us and we will follow, we can cooperate and pray all the time that He who gives power to the faint will help and strengthen us, then the blessing of God will not be lacking and there are good times ahead of us. What we need today is an increase in the number of people in the world who practise Christianity and I pray that the ministry of my brethren here and my own may be so blessed that the number of people who practise Christianity may be largely augmented.<sup>68</sup>

His obituary records 'that he was a faithful pastor and also a gifted and effective preacher. He read widely, and with originality of mind he stimulated and enriched his hearers by his exposition of the Scriptures and his proclamation of the great themes of the Christian faith. With evangelical passion he always sought to bring men back to his Lord. He was a keen fisherman and gardener, and revelled in the beauty and wonder of God's creation. His personality was 'good and gay' and brought joy and light into the lives of those amongst whom he lived and laboured.'<sup>69</sup> This 'evangelical passion' was reflected in the fact that during his superintendency in 1927, the evangelist Tom Holland, made his first visit to Basingstoke (see later).

Following Sandford's departure for Redhill, the new minister, who arrived in July 1928, was the Revd Ezra Ramm from the Wangford circuit in Suffolk. He was well known, in part, because 'a small feature of his unique ministry ... [had] been his discourses broadcast from Bournemouth, most of which ... [had] been published in "The Christian World" pulpit.'<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, like his predecessor he was 'appreciated for his ability as a preacher.' At his welcome meeting, he expressed the hope that, anticipating the Methodist reunion, 'the time would come when all the Churches should be joined in union and there should be one great witness for the Redeeming Lord.'

In 1931 it was announced that Ramm had 'accepted an invitation to become Superintendent Minister of the Portsmouth Circuit' and would be moving to Southsea in the following year. However, because 'under his virile and energetic leadership, the Sarum Hill church ... [had] progressed both in vitality and in membership ... a pressing invitation' was issued for him to stay in Basingstoke for a further period.<sup>71</sup> In the event, this was declined and

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<sup>66</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 July 1924

<sup>67</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 July 1924.

<sup>68</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 July 1924.

<sup>69</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/thomas\\_sandford?path=0p3p78p156p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/thomas_sandford?path=0p3p78p156p)

<sup>70</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 July 1928.

<sup>71</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 May 1931.

Ramm moved to Southsea in July 1932, just at the time of the Methodist Re-union.<sup>72</sup> Something of the high regard in which he was held can be gained from remarks made by clergy and laity alike. For example, the Revd Arthur William Sansom, minister of Immanuel Church, spoke of him being ‘a good comrade to stand next to in the Lord’s battle.’ He continued:

I regard him as a man sent from God, as a preacher fearless and true, a man among men. For four years he has moved through the lives of men, women and children in Basingstoke, leaving love and laughter along his way. To serve the people through this church as the channel of communication has been his absorbing purpose, and to this end neither time, nor strength, nor any resource at his command have been spared.

In a similar vein Councillor Dear commented that Ramm had been the best of the eight ministers who had served the Church during the time he had been associated with it. In his words: ‘We love him ... because of his lovable disposition.’ Moreover, ‘he had upheld the dignity of the church.’<sup>73</sup> In turn, Ramm thanked the officers and members of Sarum Hill for their support and hoped that friendships he had made during his time in Basingstoke would be life long.<sup>74</sup>

Judging by comments made at Ramm’s farewell, it would seem that his successor, the Revd William Briggs had not been the circuit’s preferred candidate. Nonetheless, when Sarum Hill bade farewell to Briggs at the end of August 1937, it is clear that he had made a very favourable impression during the years he had spent in Basingstoke. As reported:

During his five years’ ministry in the Basingstoke Circuit, Mr Briggs, by his constant and zealous attention to all matters appertaining to the welfare of his church, both spiritual and material, has won the deepest affection and esteem of the congregations of all the churches which the Circuit embraces. In all his labours he has had the loyal and devoted assistance of his wife ...

In his comments at the farewell gathering, the Circuit Stewart observed that Briggs ‘had always been most helpful in times of trouble and difficulty, and he ... had never seen ... [the minister] when he had not had full control of himself and of every situation.’<sup>75</sup>

A few weeks later Briggs’ successor the Revd Harold W. Pope, who was to remain until 1940, was welcomed by representatives of his denomination, including the Revd Weddell of the Church Street Methodist Church, and, on behalf of the Free Church Ministers’ Fraternal, the Revd Sansom of Immanuel Church. In his remarks Mr A.T. Kimber one of the circuit stewards quoted a ministerial friend from a neighbouring town who said that ‘Harold Pope is one of the most sincere men that I know in the ministry, and he will serve you well.’<sup>76</sup> His obituary records that he was ‘remembered for his lively and vigorous preaching, his great administrative ability and above all for his faithful care of his people. His pastoral gifts were many and were exercised with such warmth and sympathy, that people in trouble, both within and outside the church, found him a tower of strength.’<sup>77</sup> It was during Pope’s ministry in Basingstoke that the very difficult days of the Second World War began.

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<sup>72</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 May 1931.

<sup>73</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 July 1932.

<sup>74</sup> Ramm is intriguing since, notwithstanding the high regard in which he was held in Basingstoke and elsewhere, he disappears from Methodist records in 1943. However, sources accessed via the *Ancestry* website, such as telephone directories, indicate that he retained the title of ‘Rev’ and that in the late 1960s and early 1970s he was living in Swanage. He died between July and Sept 1971, with his death being registered in Poole.

<sup>75</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 August 1937.

<sup>76</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 September 1937.

<sup>77</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/harold\\_william\\_pope?path=0p3p78p153p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/harold_william_pope?path=0p3p78p153p)

## Aspects of Church Life

Sunday and weekday services were naturally the focal point of Primitive Methodist church life. In a similar manner to most Free Churches acts of worship were, by comparison with the Anglican liturgy, relative simple with hymn singing and, above all, the sermon being the key ingredients. Primitive Methodists were also prepared to experiment with more informal types of service. Examples from 1906 were, taking their inspiration from the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon/Men's Own Brotherhood Movement,<sup>78</sup> a People's Pleasant Hour for men and women between 3.00 and 4.00 every Sunday Afternoon;<sup>79</sup> Services of Song on Sunday evenings; and a People's Service, to which young people were especially invited.

In keeping with their origins, alongside their indoor services, Primitive Methodists held frequent camp meetings. For example, in late May 1892 'they held their annual spring camp meeting ... in a meadow at the bottom of Flaxfield kindly lent by Mr Thornton. Services were ... held in the morning at half-past ten and in the afternoon at half-past-two, and were well attended.'<sup>80</sup> The equivalent meeting in 1900 was held in a meadow off the Worting Road, with 'processions, headed by the Circuit Brass Band ... [being] formed before each service and marched through the streets.'<sup>81</sup> However, camp meetings appear to have died out by the First World War.

Every year, the Church anniversary was observed with considerable fanfare. During the period when the Primitive Methodists worshipped at the chapel in Flaxfield Road celebrations were held in May. The earliest newspaper report of an anniversary dates from 1859. This records that:

The Anniversary Services at the Primitive Methodist Chapel, took place on Sunday last. The Rev. W. Bone preached in the morning, and the Rev. Mark Wilks in the afternoon. In the evening the Rev. – Brocklehurst preached in the London Street Chapel, which was lent for the occasion. A collection of about 8l was made.<sup>82</sup>

The fact that the Congregational minister, the Revd Mark Wilks preached at this event was an early indication of the fraternisation that was to characterise relations between the principal Nonconformist denominations in the town in the years to come.

Thirty years later in 1889:

The PRIMITIVE METHODISTS of the town celebrated their chapel anniversary on Sunday and Monday. On the former day two expressive sermons were preached by Mr James Godfrey, of Newbury, and the afternoon service was taken by the Superintendent of the Basingstoke Circuit, Rev. T. Whitehead. On Monday, nearly a hundred sat down to tea. There was an average attendance at the annual meeting which followed. Mr Hibberd, a grey headed, hearty, and hale old Primitive, presided, and, in a speech which was characterised by its denominational enthusiasm, reviewed his past experience in connection with the Chapel, extending over a considerable number of years, he being now one of its oldest members. Among other circumstances he related, was that their chapel had been enlarged three times since he had known it, and these additions necessarily entailed expense, and they had now, he was sorry to say, a heavy debt resting on the building ...

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<sup>78</sup> <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/men%E2%80%99s-own-brotherhood-movement-basingstoke-1899-1929>

<sup>79</sup> As it was put in the newspaper advertisement for the service: 'Everybody invited. Go tomorrow and you won't regret it. Once you have been you won't need inviting again' *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 March 1906.

<sup>80</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 June 1892.

<sup>81</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 June 1900.

<sup>82</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 21 May 1859.

Also mentioned in the report was the fact that the debt was £495, with interest payments being over £22 per annum. Indeed, financial difficulties were very much to the fore on this occasion. However, the minister sought to rally the congregation by closing the meeting 'with a forcible address in which he said he believed their anniversary ... had never been more financially successful.'<sup>83</sup>

In 1901 the final anniversary was held at the Flaxfield Road Chapel. Again there were special services on the Sunday, at which there were 'good congregations' and a public tea followed by a public meeting on the Monday. The Secretary's report indicated that 'it had been a year of success throughout the circuit.' In his address the minister, the Revd Joseph Beal:

... remarked that the chapel was built the same year as he was born, and was therefore about 55 years old. Some of the older members could trace back in their memory the work that had been done in those early days, and remember those that had been called to rest, and others that had come to take their place. Probably this would be the last anniversary held in this chapel, for he hoped that by this time next year the new chapel would be built. No doubt some would feel it very much, having to leave their old church, in which they had been brought up. In conclusion he expressed the hope that all would do their utmost to help the cause of God and the Church.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, predictably perhaps, there was an strong element of nostalgia combined with high hopes for the future.

Since the new Church was opened in July, thereafter anniversaries were celebrated in that month. For many years, the major preoccupation at the meetings was the reduction of debt on the new place of worship, which as mentioned above, was not extinguished until 1923. The format of these anniversaries both in the years leading up to the First World War and during the inter-war period continued to follow the pattern established in the earliest days of the cause. On the Sunday there were often guest preachers and on the Monday a meeting to review the life and witness of the church.

In 1911, marking the eighth anniversary of the new Church, the preacher at the Sunday Services was Mr E. Smith of Highworth in Wiltshire, who commented that 'without fear of contradiction ... although he had seen larger churches he had never seen one which for the neatness and beauty of its interior surpassed this church at Basingstoke.' He also made reference to the fact that he had attended the recent Primitive Methodist Connexion conference at Bradford and although 'there was a decrease in membership, they were not pessimistic but looked forward hopefully.' On the Monday evening much attention was given to the financial position which was outlined by the minister, the Revd John Jones. During the year £324 had been raised 'which was not quite sufficient to meet the expenditure, which amounted to £333 19s 11d.' Outgoings included £100 debt repayment and £91 in interest payments.<sup>85</sup>

Over the next few years, the visiting preacher at anniversary services was the Revd William Wardle from Chatham who, it was reported in 1914, 'had visited the Church every year since it was erected'.<sup>86</sup> The son of a coal miner, he also worked in the mines before entering the ministry. His obituary records that he 'preached vital truths in a spirit of fervent devotion, and had many souls to his ministry'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 June 1889.

<sup>84</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 May 1901.

<sup>85</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 July 1911.

<sup>86</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 July 1914.

<sup>87</sup> [http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_2260.aspx?path=0p3p78p160p](http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page_id__2260.aspx?path=0p3p78p160p)



Two examples from the Inter-war period confirm the importance attached to the anniversary celebrations. In 1924 they were held over two weeks, with the series of events being described as ‘very successful and helpful’:

On Sunday ... a visit from the Rev. William Sawyer of Southampton, was much enjoyed and the services were inspiring in character. On Monday a meeting was held under the chairmanship of the Mayor (Alderman G.W. Willis), who received a cordial welcome ... [and] said he was glad to be able to express appreciation of the work carried on with energy and self-sacrifice by the members of the Primitive Methodist Church on Sarum Hill. They had their share in strengthening the hands of those responsible for the proper control of civic affairs, and in dealing with various matters it was well the town authorities should feel the support of the churches on moral issues ... The Rev. Wm. Sawyer gave a very delightful and breezy address, which was greatly enjoyed. He referred to the fact that this was the first anniversary in a debt-free church and how glad they must feel that now they now had a free hand for greater achievements. In a speech full of pithy humour, Mr Sawyer held the attention of the meeting and made a great appeal to the young people to take up their obligations of devotion and self-sacrifice.

Unsurprisingly, the minister, the Revd Thomas Sandford expressed the hope that Sawyer’s appeal would ‘find a worthy response’. On the second Sunday, Sandford ‘conducted special services’ and in the afternoon there were musical contributions from the Sunday School scholars. The Monday evening meeting included a lecture by Sandford on “Ian Maclaren”,<sup>88</sup> which was ‘full of humour and pathos’; solos; and a financial report by the Treasurer which was deemed to be ‘satisfactory’.<sup>89</sup>

In 1931, as usual:

The Church anniversary was held on Sunday and Monday last, the preacher being the Rev G.E. Wiles of London. Special music, under Mr J. Peck, was given by the choir, Mrs E. Griffin being at the organ. On Monday the public meeting was held, His Worship the Mayor (Councillor W.E. Ward) presiding. The Mayor said he was pleased to be there and to be associated with a church which he felt was doing a great work in the town and neighbourhood. He had known Sarum Hill Methodist Church many years, but it was stronger today than he had ever known it before.

In a ‘very able speech’ on the value of Christianity, the Rev. Wiles concluded ‘by stressing the point that the Church existed to discharge a ministry of restoration and recovery for the lost.’<sup>90</sup>

The reference to music and the organ in the report of the 1931 anniversary highlights the central role which these had come to play in the life of the church. Alongside its role in acts of worship, from time to time the Primitive Methodists organised concerts. A good example is a sacred concert held in December 1921. Following an evening service:

... a programme of sacred music was excellently rendered by the choir – largely augmented for the occasion – and local soloists. The music rendered by the full choir was a selection of five choruses from Handel’s “Messiah,” ... [and] it was clear the choir had been well trained in all departments.

At the end of the concert the minister having thanked all concerned ‘expressed the hope that such a concert might have an uplifting effect on all who had been privileged to listen.’<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ian Maclaren (1850-1907), was a Scottish author and theologian.

<sup>89</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 July 1924.

<sup>90</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 17 July 1931.

<sup>91</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 December 1921.

Sarum Hill's commitment to music was demonstrated a few years later when the Church installed a pipe organ at a cost of approximately £1000. Needless to say, a number of musical events were organised both to raise the necessary funds, such as two 'excellent concerts' given by 'a party of Bournemouth artistes'.<sup>92</sup> Mention was also made of this initiative by the mayor at an Armistice Day concert held at the Church in 1929 and given by the Thorneycroft military band, with 'many being unable to gain admission.' This was described as 'one of the most successful concerts held in the history of the church.'<sup>93</sup> The opening ceremony for the new organ was held on the afternoon of 20 February 1930 and was followed in the evening with a recital given by the organist of Salisbury Cathedral.<sup>94</sup> Its contribution to the life of the Church was symbolised by the fact that in 1935 an organ recital was held to celebrate the anniversary of its installation. On this occasion, the recital was given by the organist of Weybridge Congregational Church.<sup>95</sup>

For many years, Sarum Hill Methodists also sponsored a band, which performed at not only their church but also events organised by other churches. For example, in April 1935 they attended and performed selections at a circuit rally held in Crookham Methodist Church, with the premises being 'so crowded for the gathering that additional chairs had to be placed up the aisle.'<sup>96</sup>

Other 'red letter' events in the life of the Church included visits from the President of the Connexion. These occurred on at least three occasions - 1917, 1920 and 1929.<sup>97</sup> In 1917, the Revd James Tolefree Parr spoke on theme of "Britain after the war- What shall it be?",<sup>98</sup> in 1920, the Revd James Watkin, delivered a lecture "The Most Unpopular Thing in the World" - namely work;<sup>99</sup> and in 1929, the Revd John George Bowran 'gave an eloquent address on "The Methodist Witness."'<sup>100</sup>

A further key feature of church life was evangelism, in general, and support for missions, in particular. Indeed the very first newspaper reference to Basingstoke Primitive Methodists dating from 1851 relates to missions. Following an item about the holding of anniversary services for the London Missionary Society on Sunday 23 February at the London Street (Independent/Congregational) and Wote Street (Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion) Chapels, it reads:

PRIMITIVE METHODIST MISSIONS. – These were advocated at the P.M. chapel, on the following Sabbath, as also on the Monday evening, at a public meeting held in the same place. This useful and zealous body of Christians has increased during the year, as have also the contributions in this immediate locality. Their meeting was also crowded and a cheerful spirit prevailed, other Christian friends sympathizing in their self-denying labours.<sup>101</sup>

In 1892, the Primitive Methodists participated in a Foreign Missions Convention. As reported:

<sup>92</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 December 1929.

<sup>93</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 November 1929. The minister also appealed for financial support from 'music lovers' through a letter to the local paper, in which he stated that: 'No minister ever had the privilege of serving a more active or harmonious church and a people more sacrificial in their giving. They deserve all the help you can give.' *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 December 1929.

<sup>94</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 March 1930.

<sup>95</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 3 May 1935.

<sup>96</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 April 1935.

<sup>97</sup> There was also to have been a visit in 1916, but the President, the Revd Arthur Guttery, was taken ill and his place was taken by the President elect.

<sup>98</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 July 1917. This coincided with the celebration of the Church's anniversary.

<sup>99</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 March 1920.

<sup>100</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 15 June 1929.

<sup>101</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 8 March 1851.

A large and enthusiastic gathering consisting of members of the Congregational, Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist and Countess of Huntingdon's churches of this town met together on Thursday evening last at the Congregational chapel to hear the Rev. John Walton M.A., representing the Wesleyan Foreign Missionary Society, and the Rev. William Pierce representing the London Missionary Society on Foreign Mission.

This was chaired by the mayor and a leading lay Congregationalist, Thomas Edney. Its purpose was to generate interest, inspire and raise funds.<sup>102</sup>

Primitive Methodists were also closely involved with the collaborative Free Church missions held in the town in 1894, 1901, 1930 and 1936.<sup>103</sup> The missionary in 1930 was the well known evangelist, Gypsy Smith. Although the arrangements were made by Church Street Methodist Church:

... the Free Churches of the town generally ... united in the endeavour to make the mission a success. The ministers of the various Free Churches have been present at the meetings and with other helpers have dealt with the large numbers that passed into the enquiry rooms.

Indeed, the numbers attending required the services to be relayed from Church Street to Sarum Hall thereby increasing the numbers who could be accommodated.<sup>104</sup>

In addition to these collaborative ventures, Sarum Hill also organised missions on its own account. For example, in February 1927:

The gospel in song and story ... [was] presented to Basingstoke audiences at the Primitive Methodist Church by Mr Tom Holland, the singing evangelist. His appeals were presented with burning earnestness and spiritual power, in which wit, humour and pathos were blended ... During the week-end Master Kenneth Purves (winner of the first prize at the Blackpool Musical Festival) and Mrs Lunn, daughter of the missionary came along to help in the work ... The next visit of the party is eagerly anticipated.<sup>105</sup>

The return visit was in June 1928.<sup>106</sup> Tom Holland was clearly favourite because there is a record of another visit in 1933 when he and his son contributed to a concert on Saturday evening; a 'song service' on Sunday afternoon; a sacred concert after the evening service; and a concluding concert on Monday evening. As reported:

... although 65 years of age he retain[ed] a voice of remarkable freshness and vigour and his solos were much applauded, while bits of personal experience with which he interspersed the musical items were very interesting. In his early days he worked as a miner and endured dire poverty until through the agency of the Salvation Army his father was converted and gave up his drunken habits. "We should never have had a chance," he said, "if my father had not been converted."<sup>107</sup>

Thus, through a combination of music and personal testimony there was a strong evangelistic edge to all the events.

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<sup>102</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 February 1892.

<sup>103</sup> For further details of these missions, see Roger Ottewill, 'A Brotherly Spirit': Free Church Collaboration in Basingstoke from c.1860 to 1939', unpublished paper.

<sup>104</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 January 1930.

<sup>105</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 February 1927.

<sup>106</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 May 1928.

<sup>107</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 September 1933.

Primitive Methodists, like their fellow Nonconformists, were involved in establishing a plethora of organisations to facilitate their various ministries and to strengthen the bonds of fellowship. Thus, the Basingstoke church had a Sunday school from a very early date. The first reference in a newspaper to the celebration of the Sunday school Anniversary comes from 1867:

On Sunday, anniversary sermons were preached in the Primitive Methodist Chapel, in connection with their Sunday Schools, by the Rev. G. Price, and the Rev. G. Trotter. On Tuesday afternoon a public tea meeting was held after which addresses were delivered by the Revds. G. Price, W. Young, J. Trotter, H. Portal and Mr Woodman. The children of the schools recited several pieces, and took part in dialogues. The chapel was filled on each occasion.<sup>108</sup>

An ongoing feature of anniversaries was the contribution of the scholars. Thus, in 1906 ‘an orchestra, ‘which, with the large choir of children’s voices made the musical portion of the service indeed enjoyable’;<sup>109</sup> in 1927 on the Monday evening ‘some of the scholars gave a missionary sketch, which was exceptionally well done and much appreciated’;<sup>110</sup> and in 1929 on the Sunday afternoon ‘a sacred cantata ... entitled “The Divine Architect” [was] delightfully’ rendered by the children.<sup>111</sup>

For young people, and to provide a strong link between the Sunday school and church membership, in the late 1890s the Primitive Methodists established a branch of Christian Endeavour (CE). Initially, it could be said to have been overshadowed by societies attached to London Street Congregational Church and Immanuel Church. However, by the 1930s it appears to have become the leading society in the town with its annual rally usually being reported. This was the case in 1938 when the chair was taken by the Revd John H. Hill the Baptist minister who was also President of the Basingstoke and District CE Union. He reminded those present that the CE motto for that year was “Present yourselves Unto God”. From Secretary’s report, it is possible to gain insights into the activities of the ‘26 active, 5 associate and 3 honorary members’:

The attendance at weekly meeting throughout the year had been well maintained. The number of committees had been increased and they now had six, namely, Executive, Musical, Look-out, Sick visiting, Social and Floating Endeavour. They had visited a number of societies on the occasion of their rallies and enjoyed fellowship with them. Eastertide, when the Convention was held, was a very happy time, and as a result of one of the meetings addressed by Mr Clark, who was brimful of enthusiasm for work among seamen, the Floating Endeavour Committee was formed. Later a meeting in support of this work was held on the lawn at Essex Lodge ... and a collection was taken for the purchase of materials, for socks, etc. In November a social was arranged in aid of the same work ... [and] the sum of 30/- was raised. In the meantime some Endeavourers and older ladies of the Church were busy making necessary things for the sailors ... On 29 Nov. the Society supported Mr Anstey at his organ recital at St Michael’s Church as a token of appreciation of services rendered to the Society on several occasions. The juniors had again united in the Easter egg service, the harvest festival, and the carol service, and as result of these services fruit and flowers were sent to sick folk, and the cash to the Orphanage and the local Hospital.

The point was also made that the newly arrived minister the Revd Harold Pope and his wife ‘had shown interest’ in the CE movement and this was ‘appreciated very much’.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 21 September 1867.

<sup>109</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 2 June 1906.

<sup>110</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 June 1927.

<sup>111</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 May 1929.

<sup>112</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 February 1938.

Another organisation was that specifically for women. Known as “Women’s Own” there is a report of its anniversary celebrations in 1935. On this occasion, appropriately a woman, Mrs Scruton of Newbury, preached at the Sunday services and on Monday evening there was a women’s rally at which ‘it was encouraging to see a splendid attendance ... [with] most of the women’s meetings from neighbouring churches being represented.’<sup>113</sup>

From what has gone before it is clear that alongside their undoubted spiritual priorities, for much of the time covered by this paper the Primitive Methodists were preoccupied with fund raising. Whether it was to enlarge their premises, build and maintain a new church or install an organ, ensuring an adequate flow of income to cover their outgoings was a constant and, on occasions, preoccupying feature of church life. While finance was seen as a means to a far higher end, it undoubtedly took up a considerable amount of time and energy. Thus, there are frequent reports of events, such as bazaars, sales of work, garden parties and concerts, which combined an element of fellowship with a pecuniary motive.

Two examples are provided to illustrate the character of these events. In January 1913 a sale of work was held in the schoolroom, an effort intended ‘to reduce the debt on the Church’ There were a variety of stalls selling ‘fancy and useful items’, sweets, refreshments etc. ‘Two half hour concerts were given ... [and] an efficient orchestra ... played some capital selections at intervals.’ There were also competitions and a ‘gold and silver tree’. The total amount raised was about £20.<sup>114</sup> Many years later in June 1931 a garden party was held at Manor House. As reported:

The Rev. E.W. Ramm was the chief organiser of the garden party held at the Manor House gardens on Thursday afternoon, and by his customary ardour and cheery optimism quickly imbued a mid-summer spirit into the hearts of his numerous helpers. In spite of the gloomy weather and the occasional drizzle Mr Ramm was determined to carry through with his project, and the injection of his gaiety spread through the gathering ... The general plan of the business side of the party (on this occasion to wiping out the debt on the organ) was on nursery rhymes. For this original notion Mrs. Ramm was responsible and great ingenuity was displayed in arranging these.

The garden party was formally opened by Viscountess Lymington ‘under the shelter of a beautiful copper beech tree on one of the lawns.’ The mayor and mayoress were also present, thereby symbolising the civic as well as the ecclesiastical nature of the occasion. To complement the stalls, ‘during the afternoon the Farnborough Boys Band (National Children’s Home and Orphanage) ... played a very pleasant programme of music, and in the evening the Tadley Silver Prize Band was in attendance and played selections.’ Additional entertainment included ‘the Farnborough boys ... [giving] displays of musical drills’ and the children of the Sunday school ‘several action songs.’<sup>115</sup>

Arguably, one of the most far-reaching events during the Interwar years was the Methodist Re-Union. In 1932 the Primitive Methodists joined with the Wesleyan and United Methodists to form the Methodist Church. For Methodism, this was a momentous event and it was duly celebrated, with considerable fanfare, in Basingstoke.

The recent consummation of the union of the Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist Churches was celebrated at Basingstoke on Monday night [3 October] by a great public meeting in the Church Street church. On the previous day special services had been held at both the Methodist churches in the town, and following the evening services there was a united gathering for Holy Communion in the Church Street church.

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<sup>113</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 November 1935. See also *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 October 1938.

<sup>114</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 January 1913.

<sup>115</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 12 June 1931.

All the other Free Churches were represented. The Sarum Hill minister, the Revd William Briggs began his contribution by claiming to be ‘an embodiment of union, for when he was five years old he began attending a Sunday school in a United Methodist Church; he afterwards developed in the Wesleyan Church; and finally in the Primitive Methodist Church; and after he became a Primitive Methodist minister he married a Wesleyan young lady; and he wanted to say that that union worked wonderfully well (Laughter).’ In his peroration he made the point that for the union to be a success they must possess the Holy Spirit.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

By the late 1930s, Sarum Hill Methodist Church undoubtedly remained one of the premier places of Free Church worship in Basingstoke’s town centre. This was confirmed by the fact that in November 1938 it hosted the civic service. The event was also of significance since it ‘was the first occasion on which a member of the Sarum Hill Methodist Church, ... [had] attended as mayor.’ Also present at the service were all the other civic dignitaries as well as representatives of the Territorials, Fire Brigade and Police. The minister the Revd Harold Pope preached on a verse from Revelation, Chapter 21:

And I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.<sup>117</sup>

The service was clearly indicative of the extent to which what had originally been a religious group that aroused hostility had now become part of the socio-cultural establishment of the town. In the process, however, it could be argued that its earlier ‘spiritual cutting edge’ had been eroded.

That said, within Basingstoke, for most of their history Primitive Methodists had willingly collaborating with members of other Free Church denominations in promoting the gospel. As it was said of many of the Primitive Methodist superintendent ministers, such as the Revd John Jones, they displayed ‘brotherliness ... towards the Free Churches’.<sup>118</sup> Indeed on being officially welcomed as superintendent minister in 1921, the Revd Frank Davidson explained that ‘he was an ardent believer in church fellowship, friendliness and federation, and he was an ardent supporter of Methodist union as a step towards the larger federation of the churches’.<sup>119</sup> In short, Primitive Methodists were ‘team players’ as far as Evangelical Nonconformity was concerned.

Roger Ottewill  
October 2018

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<sup>116</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 October 1932.

<sup>117</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 November 1938.

<sup>118</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 July 1913.

<sup>119</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 23 July 1921.