

## A History of May Street Congregational Church, Basingstoke: 1913-1941

On the evening of 20th November 1913 the Nonconformist Mission Hall in May Street, Basingstoke, was formally reopened after having been renovated at a cost of about £100. Previously the home of the Railway Mission, it had been purchased by London Street Congregational Church earlier in the year and renamed the Congregational Mission Hall. The location of the Hall (circled in blue) is shown in Figure 1.

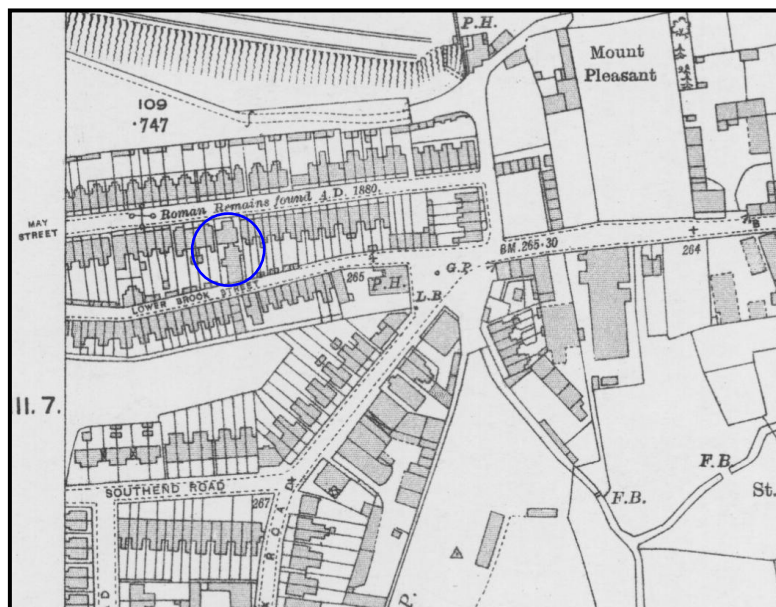


Fig 1: Location of May Street Congregational Church as shown on an Ordnance Survey Map of 1932

As can be seen the Hall complex abutted Lower Brook Street as well as May Street. This is confirmed by Figure 2, which provides more detail.

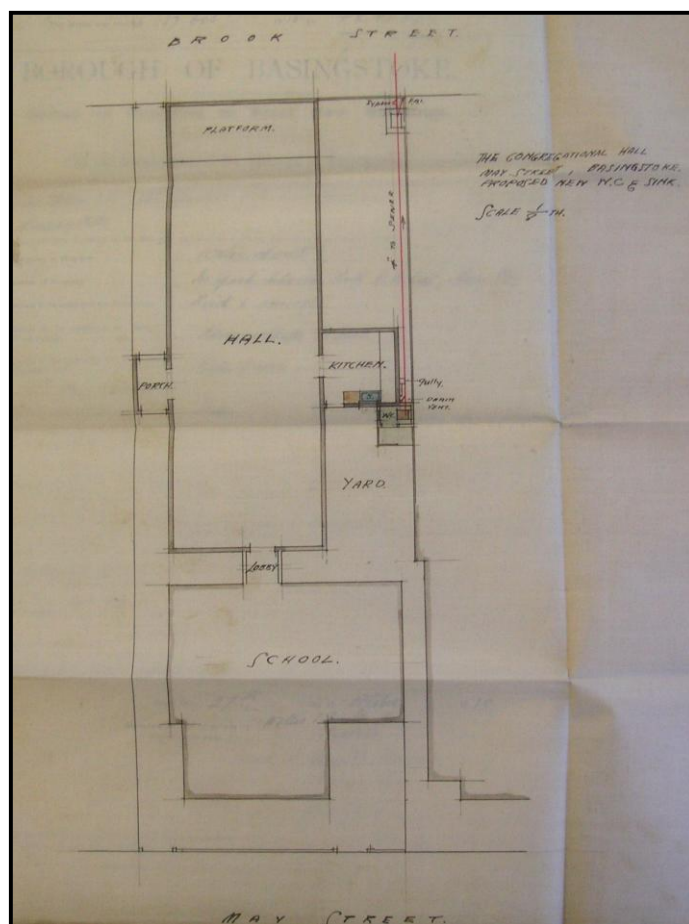


Fig 2: Plan of May Street Congregational Church dating from 1913<sup>1</sup>

At the meeting to celebrate the Hall's reopening, which was 'characterised by great heartiness and enthusiasm', the Revd J. and Mrs Gamble, who had been appointed to oversee the Mission, were formally welcomed. They had previously been in Manchester where they had done 'good work ... especially ... of a social character and in the homes of the people.' The Revd Maxwell Kirkpatrick of Dulwich who had been 'connected' with the Gambles in Manchester assured those present that:

They could rely on Mr. Gamble preaching the certainties of God. He was a man who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ with all his soul and he preached about the Master. He would preach with conviction the Word of God and would proclaim the divine grace which alone was effective in human redemption.

<sup>1</sup> 'Basingstoke Building Control Plans: Congregational Mission Hall, May Street: new WC for the Trustees of the Congregational Church', Hampshire Record Office: 58M74/BP624.

While the minister of London Street, the Revd Roccliffe Mackintosh indicated that Gamble had been the ‘unanimous’ choice of the diaconate and he looked forward to keeping in ‘the closest possible touch with the work’ at May Street. For his part, Gamble said that he was ‘God’s ambassador’ and as yet he did not have a programme but ‘would consult with friends here and see what could be done’, he also made ‘an earnest appeal for workers to join him.’<sup>2</sup>

One of Gamble’s earliest innovations at May Street were ‘lantern services’, which, perhaps not surprisingly, appear to have been extremely well-received. Their character can be gleaned from following account:

The Pastor ... is now conducting special services ... using his powerful lime-light lantern for illustrating his subjects, taken from real life. The illustrated songs are the very latest published, and are superb in design and colouring. It is difficult to say which give the most effective impression, the illustrated hymns or the subject views, but the two combined make a very interesting and instructive service, and cannot fail to produce good. Last Sunday the Hall was crowded, many having to stand.<sup>3</sup>

On Sunday 29th March 1914 the theme of the lantern service was “Christ’s Journey to Calvary, Resurrection and Ascension”. This consisted of 50 fully coloured slides featuring paintings by ‘Hoffman, Tissot, Rubens, Copping, Raphael and others.’<sup>4</sup>

The following month, on Good Friday, a tea and service of song were held with the proceeds being devoted to a Sick and Poor Fund which had been started in connection with May Street.<sup>5</sup> This was indicative of the poverty within the community which the Hall served and reflected the influence of the ‘social gospel’ in Christian witness at this time.

The Gambles left at the end of 1915 for reasons which are not entirely clear. At their farewell gathering, they were presented with gifts reflecting the ‘high appreciation of ... [their] labours’ over the previous two years.<sup>6</sup> Reference was made

---

<sup>2</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 22 November 1913.

<sup>3</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 31 January 1914.

<sup>4</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 March 1914.

<sup>5</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 April 1914.

<sup>6</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 January 1916.

to 'the many happy gathering[s] at May Street' and their departure was undoubtedly keenly felt.

Thereafter, the May Street Mission Church did not have a dedicated pastor but shared one with London Street's village chapels.<sup>7</sup> The first appointment under this arrangement was Noah Brewer. A native of Hampshire, he was born at Penton near Andover, and between 1901 and 1916 he had been employed by the Hampshire Congregational Union as an evangelist and had served a number of different churches, including East Meon and Locks Heath.

One memorable event during Brewer's pastorate was a visit at the beginning of 1918 by 'the famous Congregational minister, Rev. Dr J.D. Jones of Bournemouth' on the occasion of May Street's fifth anniversary celebrations. In his 'encouraging' account of the work at the Hall, Brewer referred to 'the steady improvement in the congregation ... [and] the flourishing Sunday school with 125 scholars.'<sup>8</sup> Later in the year, at the Sunday school Anniversary, reference was also made to the Band of Hope, with a membership of 90, and a Young People's Guild, with 35. These were both 'offsprings of the [Sunday] School' and were 'in a flourishing condition'.<sup>9</sup>

At Brewer's fifth anniversary celebration in February 1921 the work at May Street was again described as 'most encouraging', since 'although the period covered ... [had been] a most difficult one real progress had been made.' The Sunday school continued to thrive with 'a membership of 160 children', as did the Band of Hope, Young People's Guild and a Mother's Meeting.<sup>10</sup>

A year later, Brewer left Basingstoke for Chatteris in Cambridgeshire. His contribution to May Street and the village churches was recognised in a gift of £35 and the comment that 'the churches had never been in such a healthy condition as at present.'<sup>11</sup> In his official obituary Brewer was described as:

... a man with a great heart, who was beloved by all who knew him, and especially by those to whom he ministered. He was a man of firm convictions

---

<sup>7</sup> At the time there were six: Ellisfield, Farleigh, Mapledurwell, Pyotts Hill, Winslade and Worting.

<sup>8</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 January 1918.

<sup>9</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 May 1918.

<sup>10</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 19 February 1921.

<sup>11</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 4 March 1922.

and evangelistic fervour; he was of fine physical appearance, with a deep and strong voice, and was always a helpful messenger of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, he possessed qualities which made him ideally suited for ministering at May Street and in the villages.

Brewer's successor was John William Jefferson,<sup>13</sup> who was in post from 1922 to 1927. He had long been associated with the Primitive Methodists and was serving as an evangelist, in connection with the Fleet and Crookham circuit, prior to his move to Basingstoke. As recorded in the church magazine: 'Representatives from May Street and the villages had an opportunity of hearing Mr Jefferson preach at London Street one week-night and all seemed anxious that he should be invited to take Mr Brewer's place.'<sup>14</sup> He was duly appointed and at a meeting to welcome him a fulsome tribute was paid to his work at Fleet. For his part, Jefferson promised to do his best and gave the 'impression of quiet strength and much sincerity'.<sup>15</sup>

A notable achievement during Jefferson's pastorate was the renovation of the church premises in the autumn of 1925. As reported in the church magazine:

The re-opening of our May Street Church took place on Thursday, Nov. 26th. A Public Tea given by our friends was well attended, and was followed by a Public Meeting, presided over by A.R. Alder Esq ... Including the proceeds of the Tea about £36 had been raised towards the decorations which was £46, and the Chairman made a challenging offer, that if the collection at that meeting reached £5, he would write out a cheque for the other five ... When the collection was counted to our joy it was five guineas, to which Mr Alder promptly added his gift ... We are now desirous of raising a further £10 to pay the cost of the renovation of the School Room and then the whole of our premises will be in good condition.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Congregational Year Book*, 1949, 510.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the 1911 census Jefferson was aged 43, single, and living in a Mission Car/ Van situated in Waltham Chase, Bishop's Waltham. His occupation was shown as 'Evangelist - Primitive Methodist' and his place of birth as Hinderwell, Yorkshire.

<sup>14</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.15 (New Series), No.3 (March 1922).

<sup>15</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.15 (New Series), No.5 (May 1922).

<sup>16</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.19 (New Series), No.1 (January 1926).

Although the practical aspects of running the Church were often to the fore, spiritual considerations were by no means ignored, with a week long mission that ‘was well attended and greatly appreciated’, being held a fortnight after the re-opening.<sup>17</sup>

Jefferson also served as President of the Basingstoke Sunday School Union for the year 1925/6 thereby symbolising a very real commitment to work with children and young people. At the annual meeting of the Union in 1925, which was held at May Street, discussion was stimulated by papers on: ‘(1) The responsibility of the Church for the Sunday School ...; (2) The Parent and the Sunday School ...; (3) Is there danger of over-organisation in Sunday School work? ...; (4) What the Union can do for the individual Sunday School.’<sup>18</sup>

By all accounts Jefferson had a very engaging personality and was happy to enter fully into the social, as well as the spiritual, aspects of church life. Thus, in reports of church entertainments there are frequent references to his contributions. He was something of a raconteur, with his ‘piece de resistance’ being a ‘popular lecture’ on “Love, courtship and marriage”,<sup>19</sup> which is somewhat surprising since he was unmarried. Although this was laced with humour, in the words of the church magazine, it brought audiences ‘face to face with solemn realities of life.’<sup>20</sup>

In early 1927 deteriorating health led Jefferson to move back to Yorkshire to recuperate. However, shortly after doing so, following two operations in Doncaster, he died. As reported at the time, ‘by his amiable disposition and gracious ministry ... [he] had made host of friends in the town and neighbourhood’ of Basingstoke.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, ‘he was a good organiser, musical, and a very faithful preacher of the Gospel.’<sup>22</sup> Consequently, he would be sorely missed and would be difficult to replace.

In the event, Jefferson was succeeded by the Revd William Edwin Robinson, who also had a Primitive Methodist background. Shortly after his arrival at May

---

<sup>17</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.19 (New Series), No.1 (January 1926).

<sup>18</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 19 February 1927. Jefferson’s funeral took place at Misterton in Nottinghamshire on 16 February 1927. *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 26 February 1927.

<sup>19</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 April 1923. The titles of other lectures in his repertoire included “Jack and Jill”; “How to be happy tho’ single”; and “Pillow Shams”.

<sup>20</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.16 (New Series), No.4 (April 1923).

<sup>21</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 November 1925.

<sup>22</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.20 (New Series), No.3 (March 1927). Later in the year it was reported that a re-established Young People’s Guild would be seeking to raise £10 towards the “Jefferson Memorial Fund” which would be used to purchase a piano thereby fulfilling a ‘long felt want’. *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.20 (New Series), No.12 (December 1927).

Street in July 1927, it was recorded that ‘increasing congregations and a splendid atmosphere ... [was] evidence of a quickened interest in ... [the] work here.’<sup>23</sup>

As the earlier example highlighted, an ongoing preoccupation at May Street, in common with Free Churches more generally, was that of raising the funds necessary to sustain the work of the Church. At the annual sale of work held in October 1928, London Street’s minister, the Revd Howard Stanley, expressed the hope that ‘the result of the sale would be to free the hands of the May Street Church for the work they were seeking to do under the splendid leadership of Mr and Mrs Robinson.’<sup>24</sup> Underlying this comment was the view, perhaps, that although sales of work and bazaars were opportunities for fellowship and maybe even outreach they were a distraction from the Church’s principal task of saving souls and in this sense a necessary evil. Robinson remained at May Street until September 1931 when he accepted a call to the pastorate of Bitterne Congregational Church in Southampton. As his official obituary states while here ‘he won wide esteem and affection.’ It went on to stress that: ‘He was a man’s man, human and sporting, but, above all, a zealous and devoted minister, commending his Gospel by the way he lived.’<sup>25</sup> While in Basingstoke he had ‘made many friends’ and served ‘at a time when the work at both May Street and the Villages ... [had become] more and more difficult.’<sup>26</sup>

Robinson’s replacement was Frederick George Ewen, ‘a keen sportsman .. with his greatest attribute as a pastor ... [being] his love of people of all ages, combined with an inexhaustible sense of humour.’<sup>27</sup> He arrived in February 1932. As well as affording insights into the life of the Church, reported events during his pastorate, confirm its ongoing vitality. In November 1934, for example, an entertainment was held in aid of the funds of the Sunday School, with the producers being praised for ‘a fine performance and the memory of a very happy evening’<sup>28</sup> and in December there was ‘a very successful Christmas fair.’<sup>29</sup> Further examples, from 1935, include harvest celebrations in September and a concert in October, with over

---

<sup>23</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.20 (New Series), No.9 (September 1927).

<sup>24</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 October 1928.

<sup>25</sup> *Congregational Year Book*, 1948, 502.

<sup>26</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine*, Vol.24 (New Series), No.3 (March 1931).

<sup>27</sup> *United Reformed Church Year Book*, 1980, 252.

<sup>28</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 16 November 1934.

<sup>29</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 21 December 1934.

80 attending the harvest supper<sup>30</sup> and the concert ‘in add of the hymn book fund’ being ‘well supported.’<sup>31</sup>

In late 1936 Ewen left for Sarisbury Green near Southampton. At a farewell event held in November many fulsome tributes were paid to his ministry and that of his wife. London Street’s minister, the Revd Cyril Follett, referred to Ewen’s ‘administrative and organising ability and ... fertility of mind which expressed itself in the originality of his ideas’. He went on to observe that he had managed to steer ‘in fair weather and foul’, what he described as the ‘frail craft’ of the Ministers Fraternal, with ‘the skill of a master mariner.’ In speaking of Ewen’s faith and his assurance in the saving power of Jesus Christ, Follett praised:

... a reality in his testimony, a sanity of outlook and a clarity of judgment which demonstrated to everybody that his contact with God was real and that his understanding of men was actual and genuine. He had been a good man to know as a personal friend. He was blessed with an even temper which had enabled him to meet not only success but also failure with a balanced mind. His cheery smile had helped over moods of depression and perplexity more people than he was probably aware of ... [That said] he would not be half the man he was if it were not for his wife – a woman of real spiritual grace and generously endowed with tact.

As Miss Diane Goddard, speaking on behalf of the Women’s Meeting, had already mentioned Mrs Ewen was ‘a good friend to them all and had always been ready with a kind word and smile.’<sup>32</sup> Even after making allowances for the eulogistic nature of such events, it is clear that the Ewens, both husband and wife, were going to be sorely missed.

Although it was not anticipated at the time of his appointment, May Street’s final pastor, who served from February 1937 to October 1940, was Kenneth Boxall. At his induction in February, he expressed the view that:

---

<sup>30</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 September 1935.

<sup>31</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 25 October 1935.

<sup>32</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 November 1936.



... there was full scope ... [at May Street and in the villages] for his energies and although the work ... was not going to be easy, yet so far as God gave him strength and trusting in the guidance of His Holy Spirit he was prepared to devote himself to this work, he prayed .. that with their cooperation God's kingdom could be extended.

Later in the proceedings, his predecessor congratulated May Street 'on having called to its ministry a man of great wisdom and experience and one whom they could implicitly trust.'<sup>33</sup> In his official obituary, it was said of Boxall that although 'quiet and unassuming, he retained through prolonged suffering a quick sense of fun and a deep interest in the welfare of the Church.'<sup>34</sup>

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, every effort was made to carry on as usual by continuing to hold regular services and arranging special events. For example, in May 1940 the Sunday school anniversary was celebrated, which on this occasion incorporated a reunion attended by 'the former overseer [superintendent] and ministers and their wives'.<sup>35</sup>

A few months later, however, Boxall's pastorate came to an end. In his farewell letter, which was published in the October 1940 edition of the church magazine, he wrote, somewhat poignantly: 'Throughout my ministry at May Street and the Villages it was my constant aim to maintain a truly spiritual ministry ... Today I rejoice as I look back that the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has not been sacrificed to merely social activities and the dignity of the Christian Fellowship maintained.'<sup>36</sup>

In the following month's magazine, it was announced that: 'Under present difficult conditions it has not been easy to maintain services at May Street and we have reluctantly been compelled to curtail most of the weekday activities, but I am glad to say that with the willing help of Lay Preachers and friends we have been able to continue the Sunday Morning and Evening services also the Sunday School.' However, the Evening Service was due to be suspended for three months. Somewhat dramatically, it was pointed out that 'our Church owing to enemy action has been in

---

<sup>33</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 5 March 1937.

<sup>34</sup> *United Reformed Church Year Book*, 1973-4, 270.

<sup>35</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* Vol.33 (New Series), No.6 (June 1940), 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* Vol.33 (New Series), No.10 (October 1940), 7.

the danger zone and we are very grateful that it has been spared to us for worship.<sup>37</sup> During the first couple of months of 1941 evening services only were held at 3.30. However, by April since congregations had ‘steadily dwindled ... it was impossible to continue them.’<sup>38</sup> A month later it was reported that May Street Sunday School Teachers and scholars had joined with London Street and shortly church members would do the same. Thus, the existence of May Street as a separate church came to an end after just over 27 years.<sup>39</sup>

May Street’s demise had undoubtedly been hastened by the War. However, it also reflected the difficulties involved in sustaining a place of worship in a deprived part of town. Nonetheless, for nearly three decades it had been blessed with effective leadership, both clerical and lay, and offered a spiritual home and social centre for those living within its catchment area.

#### Note

Despite an extensive search no images of the Hall, while it was in use as a place of worship, have been found. However, one has survived from 1960s when the Hall was lying derelict (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Former Premises of May Street Congregational Church

Roger Ottewill, November 2017

---

<sup>37</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* Vol.33 (New Series), No.12 (December 1940), 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* Vol.34 (New Series), No.4 (April 1941), 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Basingstoke Congregational Magazine* Vol.34 (New Series), No.5 (May 1941), 5. In the same issue, it was announced that two of May Street’s Sunday School scholars had performed exceptionally well in the examination and essay competition held under the auspices of the Congregational Union’s Young People’s Department.