

The Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Swithland

An article by Mark Temple

The memorial to the Methodist presence in Swithland, lies in a building. Their meeting house still stands, albeit now a private dwelling, at the Woodhouse end of Swithland village, within the Forest End complex of cottages.



Sign in the gable of the chapel

John Wesley first came and preached in the locality in 1783. The following year he was to 'ordain' men for the Methodist mission in America. In 1786 he

came and preached again. The 'preaching house' on both occasions was Stonehurst Farm, Mountsorrel, just a couple of miles from Swithland.

At the time, Baptist witness in the area was strong and developing rapidly. But as Baptist witness in Swithland declined after the turn of the century, centring more on Rothley and Woodhouse Eaves, so Methodist witness in the village seems to have expanded.

The first reference to a Methodist living in Swithland is in a 'bargain and sale' document of 1801. Daniel Bates of Swithland and his brother William Bates of Rushey Fields were amongst a group of seven men, Trustees, who bought a piece of land for the Methodist Church in Woodhouse Eaves, where they had earlier built a Chapel for Methodist worship. (Bargain and Sale of Premises at Woodhouse Eaves 3 July 1801 between John Getlepp of Woodhouse Eaves, Cowherd (1) and Joseph Foulks, John Squire, Jonathan Tillson of Woodhouse Eaves, Framework Knitters, and Daniel Bates of Swithland and William Bates of Rushey Fields, William Smith of Mappelwell, Yeoman and Joseph Spencer (2)).

A vivid impression of the Woodhouse Methodist community in its earliest years is given in an obituary of Benjamin Squire, who died in 1820 at the age of 95. Squire was one of the first members of the Woodhouse Eaves Chapel.

He first heard the word from a Methodist preacher at Markfield and then travelled far and wide to hear the word. He did so and heard Mr Wesley and Mr Whitfield and others of the Old Veterans in the Cause, and the word was spirit and life to his soul. He was set at liberty while



The chapel from the road showing the cast iron sign in the gable.

returning home from Mountsorrel. He felt his mind powerfully impressed with these words: 'Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord'. He first invited the Preachers to Woodhouse, and gladly received them under his humble roof. Frequently did he climb the adjacent Forest Hills to watch for their arrival, and 'on the Mountains their feet appeared beautiful' to him. The Preaching was long in his own house, and he witnessed the prosperity of the work of the Lord.

Not until 1819, however, is there any evidence of an official Methodist 'class' in Swithland. The Loughborough Methodist Circuit Membership Book (1803-24) gives tantalising glimpses of the early days of that little congregation. We know that there was a class of eight people meeting in Swithland in that year, and that Richard Preston was its class leader. In 1820 the names of members of the class are listed as: Richard Preston (leader), William Brookhouse, Elizabeth Brookhouse, Matthew Hodges, Thomas Bruxby and Samuel Thorpe. In 1823, Richard Preston's little class had as members William Brookhouse, Elizabeth Brookhouse, Samuel Thorpe, William Morris, John Burton, William Bramley and Elizabeth Bramley. These are the only Swithland references from the circuit records to those early years. William Brookhouse and William Bates were previously members of the Woodhouse Eaves Class from 1813-1815 and 1814-1815 respectively, which may indicate that Swithland might have been a Methodist 'church plant' from Woodhouse Eaves. Richard Preston, however, was not listed as a member of any of other circuit congregations before taking up the leadership in Swithland in 1819, so it sounds as if it might have been his spiritual gifts that enabled the formation of the Swithland class.



The chapel interior

By 1825, the Methodist congregation at Swithland was an established part of the Loughborough Circuit. The Circuit Stewards' Accounts 1825-75 indicate the Swithland class as paying a regular quarterly contribution to the Circuit. Their financial contributions were relatively small compared with other chapels. Swithland were paying 10/- a quarter in 1825, which rose to 15/- in 1832, but then declined.

During these early years, the congregation used an old Malt Office as a chapel, which they fitted up as a Wesleyan Chapel in 1828. Circuit records of 1833 indicate a service at Swithland every Sunday at 6 pm. Diocesan records contain a meeting house certificate for 1849. Local preachers travelled from Mountsorrel, Quorn, Loughborough, Woodhouse and Shepshed to take services. In the 1851 Census, the building was described as being used exclusively for public worship. It had 120 'sittings' of which 70 were free. The number attending Divine Service on the evening of Sunday 30th March 1851 was 64. This is the only statistic we have that might indicate that the little congregation grew. In 1856 a purpose-built Chapel was erected on the site. Fronting on to Main Street, it was set back 21 feet from the road. The Chapel was built right up to the two side boundaries and to the rear boundary of the site. It consisted of a single room, 26.5 feet by 19 feet.

After 1856, evidence from the Loughborough Circuit Quarterly Meeting Minute Books of 1854 - 1896 points to a story of continuing decline. In 1856, for example, Swithland was listed as one of the congregations that refused to promise a regular quarterly contribution to Circuit funds. In addition, Swithland was rarely represented at the Quarterly Meetings. Although the minutes rarely identify the chapels of members, they do show that in 1857 Mr William Cuffling was appointed to collect Swithland's contribution towards the reduction of the circuit debt. After that date, and the first quarterly meeting he is recorded as attending, Mr Cuffling is only listed as attending two more such meetings. He was however a key member of the Swithland congregation, coming originally from the Methodist Societies at Quorn (1813-14) Mountsorrel (1815-23) Chapels. He offered refreshment hospitality in his home after services in spite of its distance from the Chapel: he had become tenant of Hall Farm, Swithland, in 1851. He is recorded in 1860 as volunteering to preach on occasion. William Cuffling died in 1876 and was buried in Swithland churchyard.

In 1873 Swithland was again requested to contribute towards a fund for paying off the circuit debt. The amount of £1, relative to other allocations, indicates that Swithland was one of the smallest congregations in the circuit. By 1877, Methodism in Swithland was causing concern to the other members of the circuit. In the Quarterly Meeting minutes of June 1877 it is recorded: 'After some serious conversation, the cause there, and the work of God, it was resolved that a few of the Brethren attend when the Superintendent preaches, and investigate the state of affairs at Swithland'. And from the meeting on September 24th: 'Some conversation having taken place respecting the state of the cause of God there' (at Swithland) 'the meeting expressed a sincere hope that the brethren appointed there for the future will endeavour to take their appointments and try to improve the place.' Despite the hopes, it would seem as if there was little response. In March 1882, another Mr Cuffling made an appearance at a Circuit Quarterly Meeting. In 1886, he appears to have been succeeded as the Swithland representative by Mr Charles Bunney. Like his predecessor, Bunney attended Quarterly Meetings very infrequently. During the 1880s, there was a service at Swithland each Sunday evening at 6 pm. and a quarterly gathering on a Monday evening at 7 pm.

In 1888, though Methodist numbers in the Loughborough Circuit had risen to 806, membership at the Swithland Chapel was just 3, making it by far the smallest congregation in the Circuit, with an annual income of just over £1. (The two highest memberships that year were recorded as 327 at Loughborough and 93 at Shepshed.) After 1888, numbers in the circuit generally showed signs of gradual decline, e.g. Loughborough 265 in 1890, Shepshed 59, Swithland 2. But of all the seventeen societies in the Circuit, Swithland was a particular cause of concern. Matters came to a head in 1894. A record of the January Quarterly meeting records: 'Swithland Chapel. A conversation took place respecting the very unsatisfactory state of the Society and Congregation at the above, when it was moved by Mr Richards, seconded by Mr Mayes and carried that the Secretary be requested to write to the Society Steward informing him that unless an improvement was made, the quarterly meeting is considering the desirability of closing the Chapel.' It would appear that no such improvement was forthcoming, for the next quarterly meeting in March decreed that 'it be worked for the ensuing Quarter by Mission Bands, and that the question (of closure) be again considered at the June Quarterly Meeting.'

The discussion continued at the next Quarterly Meeting in June. 'The question of the desirability or otherwise of continuing Services at Swithland was continued from last meeting. A letter was read by the Chairman from the Rev R Brewin offering on behalf of a Friend the sum of £5, and on his own behalf the sum of £1, towards the cost of an Evangelist for Swithland for work amongst the navies employed at the New Water Works.' Considerable discussion ensued, concluding in a resolution to send the thanks of the Meeting to the Rev R Brewin for his kind offer, and to set up a committee to

make enquiries and act if necessary. At the September Quarterly Meeting, the committee reported that they thought it advisable to take no action regarding the question of a Resident Evangelist for Swithland and Neighbourhood. The Meeting then resolved by a majority of 25 to 1 that 'Services in Swithland Chapel be suspended for the present.' At the same meeting, details of membership numbers in the circuit churches were listed. Swithland had only two members and no juniors.

In 1891 the Trustees of Swithland Wesleyan Chapel, who included Charles Bunney, farmer, and Thomas Hill, labourer, began to keep a Minutes and Accounts Book. The book records the annual accounts and gives one or two clues that fill out the history of this little chapel. There is, however, evidence only of decline. In 1891 the annual turnover was £8 12sh 6d, and only two meetings are recorded: a Whitsunday Festival Tea and Evening Meeting, and the Chapel Anniversary Service in August. In 1898, the trustees agreed that local preachers should be asked whether the chapel should be re-opened to hold services during the summer months. The following year, it was agreed that such services should be held, if possible, and the Chapel was re-opened for Divine Worship. From then on two or three services a year were recorded: a June Tea Meeting, the Harvest Festival and the Chapel Anniversary. There was a mention of a Chapel Outing in 1906. 'Services of Song' seemed to be in fashion from 1908 to 1910.

In 1894 the chapel keeper was Mr Boyer. In 1899 Mrs Hubbard was caretaker, and Mr Boyer chapel keeper. Mr Hubbard, chapel keeper, left Swithland in 1900, when the services of Mr Charles Pratt were secured. Mrs Pratt cleaned the chapel in 1900. In 1903 Mrs Bunney was cleaning it and in 1931 and 1945 Miss Bunney. In 1949 the Misses Bunney were thanked for their services as caretakers. Mrs Edenbrow was caretaker in 1955.

There were occasions during the later history of the Chapel when it was able to offer some hospitality to the members of the Church of England in the village. During 1924 and 1925, when major restoration work was taking place in the parish church, Anglican worship was conducted in the Methodist Chapel. This was an encouraging sign of ecumenism, at a time when even Methodist Union was still some seven years away.

In 1947, major repairs to roof, chimney, floors, ceiling and windows were effected, and electric light and power were installed. Fund raising for the repairs raised £107 7sh 3d, of which £35 was a grant from the General Chapel Fund. The total cost of repairs came to £164 2sh 1d. Chapel Services at Easter and Harvest continued until October 1964, when the building was sold. At the time of the sale, all the Trustees of the Swithland Chapel lived in Woodhouse Eaves. The last entry in the minutes was signed by the Superintendent Minister, Dennis Robson. It recorded that the final balance in hand was £7 8sh. 11d.

When the Wesleyan Chapel was sold in 1964 it was described as having its internal walls plastered, and with wooden wall panelling, in keeping with its religious use. It had only three windows, and therefore a dark interior. There was electric light and one power point. The planning authorities noted that it was not a site that could be developed. At the rear the chapel abutted immediately on to cottages, and it was built right up to the two side boundaries. The only possible adjacent land that

might be purchased in order to develop the site was on the southwest of the building. The firm valuing the property wrote that 'the only land which we consider likely to be available for extension purposes was on the south-western side, and upon enquiry of the lady owner of this land whether she was prepared to sell, she informed us that she had obtained planning permission for a house on the plot in question and 'would not sell one inch of her land.'

At the time of the proposed sale, the Methodist Church, offered the Rector of Swithland the courtesy of consultation. The rector, Bishop Alec Maxwell was appreciative

of the gesture, but said that the church needed no extra accommodation since the Memorial Hall offered sufficient accommodation for church meetings and social activities. In 1964 the Chapel was sold for £1750 to Mrs Linwood Wright, 'an Anglican lady who had been supportive of efforts to keep it open in the past and who had indicated that after purchasing the building she would see to its repair and redecoration before reopening it as a Private Chapel.' The major part of the proceeds of the sale of the Swithland Chapel was passed to the Trustees of the Woodhouse Eaves Chapel whose members had financially 'carried Swithland' for some years.

From Mrs Linwood Wright the Chapel passed to her son-in-law, Canon Lindesay Godfrey who incorporated it into the adjacent dwelling-house. Until his death in 1984, the chapel was regularly used for mid-week Church of England Holy Communion Services.

The cast iron sign from the chapel was stored for several years at Woodhouse Eaves Methodist Church until 2022 when it was donated to the Mountsorrel Heritage Centre where it is on permanent display.



The rethatching of Canon Godfrey's cottage behind the Chapel