

CHAPTER 22 – NONCONFORMISM

Wesley Place Chapel.

Of the once many Non-conformist places of worship in Stapleford, the oldest and one most particularly worthy of note is Wesley Place Chapel standing at the junction of Pinfold Lane with Nottingham Road, a site anciently known as Jillings Cross (a corruption of Julyans's Croft, alias Jennings Croft). Because of its association in its early years with the founder of Wesleyan Methodism it is a treasure which, I feel, Stapleford does not wholly appreciate.

First building 1773

In the Return in response to Archbishop Herring's questionnaire of 1743 the Minister of Stapleford categorically affirms that there are no dissenting families in his parish; we can, therefore, assume that Methodism had not yet reached Stapleford. The Movement had been going 34 years to the month when, on October 4th 1773, in response to a petition of John Greasley of Stapleford, a presbyterian, a building formerly used as a barn was licenced for public worship;¹ NQS 18th C. thus came about the beginning of Wesley Place Chapel. Records suggest that John Greasley retained ownership of the original building and the land on which it stood for many years before transferring them to the Trustees in 1806. Deed. This branch of the Greasley family was engaged in baking and had its premises in what is now Kerr's paper shop, but David Greasley, the younger and surviving son of John, who sold more land to the Trustees in 1843, before he emigrated to the U.S.A., and which paved the way for the extension at the rear of the chapel in 1848, had forsaken Wesley Place and transferred his allegiance to the Methodist New Connexion chapel.

New church 1776

In 1776 a licence was granted for a building "recently erected in Stapleford for Protestant Dissenters-presbyterians". The signatories to the application included Henry Taft, a name not perpetuated in the annals of Wesley Place.² NQS 18thC

Visits by John Wesley

The chapel stands close by the field in which John Wesley preached to the people of Stapleford, an event which took place about noon on Sunday, 27th March 1774 and was held in the open because no house could hold the congregation.³ From local accounts which have been handed down it is said that on the occasion of this visit

¹ NQS 18th C.

² NQS 18thC

³ J.W.Diary

Wesley tethered his horse in a cavity of Bob's Rock nearby, and whilst preaching placed his Bible on the shoulders of a young lad, Thomas Harrison, then aged 14. Thomas later became a pioneer of the Methodist New Connexion in Chilwell.

Wesley paid us a second visit (though not an intended one) on June 5th 1780 when on his way to Nottingham from Derby. He was recognised by some of the villagers who, in Wesley's own words, "begged me to look into their new preaching house, many following me and the house was soon filled, when we spent half an hour to our mutual comfort"⁴.

It appears from local accounts of long ago, that he made a third visit to Stapleford in the summer of 1782, the year in which the present chapel (before alteration) was built. It is popularly claimed that he laid the foundation stone (if they did such things in those days), though there is no mention in his Diary of either this, or his visit, which, anyway, would be coincidental with the rebuilding of the chapel but could well have taken place, for on July 2nd that year he preached in Nottingham and on the 4th in Derby. This visit to Stapleford was probably on Wednesday 3rd July when he again preached in the open and placed his hand on the shoulder of young Samuel Hazzledine, then aged about 14, whilst so doing. He frequently related the incident how he had been Wesley's "pulpit" and it is through people who were younger than he, and who knew him in his later years, that this information has been handed down; being young at the time of the event, Samuel could have got the wrong impression for Wesley's visit and time and re-telling have a tendency to blur facts somewhat.

Chapel enlarged in 1848

In 1848 it was decided to enlarge the chapel. The entrance was improved by the addition of a lobby, the gallery extended round each side and a vestry built. The circular announcing the opening services contained the following statement. "In consequence of the old chapel being so very low and inconvenient, the friends have for a long time felt the great necessity of a better place of worship. It was at length resolved to enlarge and improve the building which had been done at considerable cost and the present neat and commodious chapel is the result. There are excellent family pews and other sittings to be let at a moderate rental, but the principal feature of the interior on which the Trustees rely for assistance of a discerning and benevolent public, is the ample accommodation for the poor in the shape of good substantial rail-back benches which occupy the entire centre of the chapel. Besides the alteration already described, a large and commodious room has been erected at the rear of the chapel for the two-fold purpose of Sunday school room and vestry". The re-opening took place on November 29th 1848.⁵

⁴ J.W.Diary.

⁵ Notes compiled by Fred Cooper.

Branches of Methodism

It has been almost everything I could be in Methodism by turns. First a Methodist chapel; then for a short time a Methodist New Connexion chapel; next a Wesleyan chapel again, until the troubles that followed 1849 when it passed over to the “Reformers” through whom it came into the Ilkeston United Methodist Free Church Circuit. Finally, through the union of 1907, it came into the Long Eaton and Stapleford Circuit of the United Methodist Church. ⁶

Wesleyan Methodism-Church Street

It was at the time of this “reformation” that several members who adhered to the original body formed a splinter group which then met in a room (referred to by the members as “the upper room”) formerly belonging to a public house, at the back of “The Square” (i.e. the top of Albert Street on the site now occupied by the “Rates Office”.) and used as a work room during the week. The approach was through the disused brew house up a flight of wooden steps; the furnishings were meagre and consisted of six common forms without backs, and a pulpit made out of two boxes covered with green baize. This was c1853 but by 1859, due to hard work and a lot of faith, the Wesleyan Chapel in Church Street had been built and held its opening ceremony on April 28th of that year. It was later rebuilt and opened again on March 4th 1886; now it is destined to move once more, to a less central position and, according to some, an inferior site. ⁷

New Connexion-Nottingham Road

Nottingham Road (Top Hat) Chapel, later it rejoiced in the name “St. Pauls”, believe it or not, (now Carr Fastener Company) was the result of an earlier breakaway group from Wesley Place. John Wesley had died in 1791 after which Alexander Kilham formed a breakaway movement which affected Stapleford by 1797. The members of Wesley Place were divided but they continued to worship in the same building for several years. The final break came and the Kilhamites took to meeting in a member’s house, then in another’s barn before building Cburch Walk Chapel in 1806. The membership increased and a new chapel was erected on the south side of Nottingham Road. It was opened in 1830 and enlarged in 1839; this is the building to the rear of the later chapel which was built in 1883-4 and opened on May 1st 1884. This much valued building closed its doors some 70 years later (1954) and its members joined with Central Stapleford (Old Prims) at the Roach.

Brookhill

An off-shoot of Nottingham Road Chapel was Brookhill Chapel (originally known as Brockhills Mission), brought into being c 1885 by members of Nottingham Road,

⁶ Heralds of the Cross p.109.

⁷ Notes by FC.

particularly Thomas Towle, to serve the needs of Bessell Lane, known in those days as Canary Island. The premises were sold to Stapleford Boys Club in 1968.

Primitive Methodist

Yet another breakaway group from Wesleyan Methodism which was to be found in Stapleford were the Primitive Methodist. A Hugh Bourne, William Clowes and James Steel developed an open-air type of service which was frowned upon by the Wesleyans and as a result they were expelled from the Wesleyan Connexion in 1812. This type of worship found favour with many Stapleford folk who were known, locally, as the “Ranters”. They built a small chapel in Mount Street in 1839 and 60 years later moved to new premises at the Roach; these were demolished in 1973.

Baptists and Salvation Army

For nigh on a century the Baptists have had their chapel in Albert Street. The Salvation Army, too, have been active in the parish for almost as long. Both, I am sure, have their own particular histories.