

# TANNING-BARN TO CHURCH



The Dissenting Congregation of Wheatley  
over Two Hundred Years

John Fox  
1997



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## Foreword

It gives me a lot of pleasure to pen a brief word to begin the fascinating history John Fox has written for us. It is good to have one who knows the background of the village so well and who is able to set us in the right context. And it is great in this ecumenical age to have our historian who is a Roman Catholic writing it up. That is something our forefathers would not have dreamed could happen.

Our village church has always been a small one, but according to the records and taking the present into account, it always had a big heart. That is evident now in the way we work together for each other and for the village as a whole. We are getting along really well with the other churches and moving forward together. It is evident in the substantial amounts we give to charity every year. It is clear in the concerns expressed and the time people give to understanding and acting for the poor and oppressed of the world.

Our leadership team is as good as you will find anywhere. We are very fortunate to have many people who will help in many ways, from worship to cleaning, from fundraising to visiting the sick. So much goes untold. There is a warmth of fellowship that you need to feel to believe. We try to share the leadership and always want to hear what people think we ought to be doing and praying.

Carolyn and I have been here since 1963. At this point in time I am the longest serving minister in any one church in the URC. I am proud of that and pleased with what we have been able to do, especially with worship, music and service in the church. We have benefited from close friendships and relationships of trust and mutuality that go beyond a mere professionalism. My work with ordinands at Mansfield College has been given depth because of my Wheatley experience, and I hope that has worked in reverse too.

Histories are always incomplete. We can never know everything that went on and we will not be able to plumb the depths completely on what we were like then. But it is important to know our background and what we mean by it. So much of what we think and do now is dependent on our past, even if we are not aware of it. So we welcome this account, not just out of curiosity, but in the knowledge that we will come to a better knowledge of ourselves.

When we read it we will ask ourselves the question—where do we go from here? I cannot answer that, but I do know that we should go from strength to strength if we keep our sights on God. There is much for us to do in Wheatley and where we live and work. There is much to question and there is much to pray about. Our church needs to keep on asking the crucial question—what is our church *for*? If we keep that in the forefront in prayer and discussion, we cannot go too far off track with the grace of God challenging us and holding us in his hands. It is the right question and we will receive, as time goes on, the right answers.

*Charles Brock*

The Manse, Wheatley, 1997

## Preface

Two hundred years ago, an “Independent” church congregation was founded in Wheatley. It was at the time of the French Revolution and of England’s wars with Napoleon. The village had a reputation for pit bull terriers, violence and drink. Ironically, Independent or “Dissenting” Christians were also accused across the countryside of being lawless anarchists, like the French. The mob called them “Jacobins”, after the rural revolutionaries who had marched into Paris and triggered the French Revolution. That Revolution brought down the French monarchy and with it the landowners and the Catholic Church in France. Translated into England, a similar revolution could also bring down Crown, gentry and the established Church of England. It was no idle fear. The Americans had rebelled against the British establishment in 1776 and succeeded; the French copied the Americans in 1789 and succeeded; the Irish followed in 1798 and nearly succeeded. The resulting fear and panic created a wave of hysteria on which village mobs could surf. They found soft targets and simple scapegoats. Some villagers were in ‘Home Guard’ uniform (Cuddesdon Company, Oxford Volunteer Militia) ready, presumably, to fight on the streets of Wheatley in defence of King and Church. In the absence of Frenchmen on Ladder Hill, it became patriotic to attack Dissenters instead, and their “village preachers”. Free drink from local landowners fuelled the violence.

The Wheatley chapel community in Crown Square has been through many phases, all of them reflecting village and wider national circumstances. It began in the 1790’s as a tiny minority at prayer in a couple of licensed Meeting Houses. Their first minister, James Hinton from New Road Independent Chapel in Oxford, warned against what we call today “league tables”, seeking numbers rather than spirituality as a sign of success: salt should flavour, not smother; light should illuminate, not dazzle.

In the 1880’s came increased numbers and with them the hazard of respectability. The Dissenters distanced themselves enough from their roots to charge Pew Rents (at 20 inches per posterior). Up the hill, their old rival, the Church of England, abolished them! David did occasionally challenge Goliath, over education or the misuse of charities, and blood was often bad between Church and Chapel. There were also moments of single purpose when the village faced unemployment, hunger or the Victorian problem of alcohol. We simply do not know how much informal warmth existed, for instance when Vicar Elton, Minister Faith and Bishop Wilberforce queued for horseshoes near Frederick Sheldon’s smithy, as they might have met today over the ASDA petrol pumps.

Chapel-goers have their feet of clay. Churches consist of those who acknowledge their frailty. There were walkouts, dismissals, ‘misunderstandings’, bad behaviour, even vandalism. At one point a former pastor apologised publicly for the damage he had done to the community in starting a separate church. The

strength to say “Sorry” and the magnanimity to accept it shows through the records many times.

I am proud to have been asked to write this small history, being neither Chapel member nor even Protestant. We live in a time when old labels have lost their adhesive. I have been “offered the right hand of fellowship” by so many in that congregation over so many years, I do not feel a stranger. My task here is to bring out something of the real life and spirituality hidden behind the homespun words and copperplate writing of Minute and Account Books. I have dug much further afield than the village. However much I try, in the end the real achievement of such a community remains elusive, much of it silenced in hearts and minds long gone. They had what they called “a cause”, a belief, and they furthered it according to their lights. As the salt became an invisible part of the village community, the Chapel earned itself a reputation and helped change village life for the better, but in ways not easily recorded.

Two problems face the writer. A living community still worships at the eastern end of High Street. The Shepherds, whose Wheatley family goes back to the earliest chapel days, the Hintons, the Wheelers and many others have been part of my own twenty-five years here. The families of Munt, Gomm, Tombs, Messenger, Currill, Ring, Merrett, Allen, Bax, Dungey, Trinder, Washington, Funge, Quarterman, Shorter and Putt recur in Chapel as they do in village records over two centuries, right up to the modern war memorials. I have decided that “history” becomes the “present day” around 1970, just as memories become personal. By then decimalisation had changed the shape of church account books, which in 1890, reported collections in “*gold, silver and bronze*”! The Congregationalist Union of churches joined with the Presbyterian churches in 1972 to form the United Reformed Church. The Wheatley railway also disappeared in the 1960’s: it had featured in the expense claims from the early chapel days along with hired horses, traps, drays, brakes and charabancs. Several railwaymen were on the Membership Roll.

1973 also saw out the first decade of the ministry of Charles Brock. At 34 years (1963-97) and still going strong, his has been the longest ministry here since 1794. Charles and his wife Carolyn arrived in 1963 and were duly noted as, “a new minister who had an excellent wife” (8 words) before the Annual Church Meeting moved on to report “trouble with the boiler” (in 20 words). Both would approve of such priorities. (Wheatley chapel-goers have always been preoccupied with heating.) Charles speaks of a “background ministry” as the essence of the Nonconformist tradition. So many in the wider village as well as the chapel hold them both in particular affection and gratitude for what they have brought from “over there”. I feel that a church member should write a tailpiece, but not an “Epilogue”!

The second problem is, *when* is the Chapel Anniversary? The Queen has only two birthdays; ladies of mature age sometimes deny they have any; Lauren Bacall warned, “My age tells you when I was born, not how old I am.”

Wheatley Chapel, Wycliffe Chapel, the Congregational Chapel, the URC Church, has as many birth-dates as it has had names. The first community of Dissenters, inspired from New Road Chapel, met in Samuel Standley's house after April 1794; they also met in Sarah Allen's house in 1796. Churches are people, not buildings, and the first of those two would seem to be the main anniversary. It has, however, always been read as 1797 simply because the Church Minute Book of 1845 records it as "*about 1797*".

Our next record is of a Wheatley "Home Missionary Station" set up in 1841 by George (Lane) Street Congregational Church, Oxford, with the support of the Oxford and West Berkshire Congregational Association. (This was marked in 1941 by the recognition of Wheatley as a Congregational Church.) In 1842, Great Haseley Chapel, founded from Tetsworth, was combined with and served from Wheatley. That same year a new chapel building was converted from William Waine's old tannery barn at the southern end of Wheatley High Street. (Three out of four Wheatley village churches are housed in former barns, giving an added lift to the phrase 'barn conversion'.) Either year would be the second "birthday". Another anniversary, however, marks the first formal Members Roll of March 1843. This was marked by the Good Friday Tea for many decades. However, due to Sunday School work conducted here by the likes of Joseph Thornton, the Oxford bookseller, from 1839 onwards, the Sunday Scholars for generations celebrated yet another anniversary each July!

The Chapel building has been condemned, repaired and adapted many times but retains its 1842 outline and site. In 1897, the "Oxford friends" from George Street, on whose finances Wheatley depended, pressed for a new Chapel and conversion of the old barn-Chapel into a Schoolroom. Wheatley congregation opposed this as extravagant and in 1898 erected a new Schoolroom on the site of a cottage attached to the east wall of the chapel. Local independence is a hallmark of Congregationalism. Finally, there was nearly another birthday when, in 1946, the Chapel was again thought to be unsafe. The community tried to buy land on Church Road between Friday Lane and the (then) Doctors' Surgery from the Tombs family. The plan was shelved and repairs were made instead.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the end of the first three pages of the Church Minute Book, the writer of 1845 added, after describing achievements from "1797" to date, the simple humble Scriptural reminder, "The credit is not ours, Lord, but yours." It set a tone for the next two centuries.

*John Fox*  
Wheatley  
1997

# I

## Protestants, Dissenters and Nonconformists

The New Road Independents of Oxford in 1780 were a mixture of Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists looking for simple Bible Christianity without ritual. They called themselves, “A Protestant Catholic Church of Christ”. To modern ears, even in an age of church unity, the phrase still sounds odd. We have changed or lost the meaning of many words we use and turned them into labels. To add to the confusion, when the New Road “Protestant Catholic” Christians started work in Wheatley in 1794, a medieval chapel between Bell Lane and High Street had already been part of the established “Protestant Catholick” Church of England for two and a half centuries and of the old European “Catholic” church for one and a half centuries before that. Why such confusion?

### **The Ancient Traditional Churches**

Around AD 320, the Roman Emperor Constantine officially “established”, the Christian church. Bishops became governors and pagan temple money went to new churches. The old gods of Rome were shelved. The new state religion was described, like the Empire, as “Katholik” (Universal) and “Orthodox” (True). The Empire had two capitals, old Rome in the Latin west and New Rome (Constantinople) in the Greek east. Two capitals meant two Archbishops (Patriarchs). The one in the west was known as Papa-Bishop (Godfather) or Pope. East and west grew apart and fell out. The west clung to the title “Katholik” and the east clung to “Orthodox”. In both of them, unofficial Christianity was “heresy” (separatism).

One heretic culture, the Lollards or “Mutterers”, grew up in south-east England in the 1400’s, objecting to ritual, priests and the superstition, which had come to encrust belief. They also demanded to read the Bible for themselves. Like our own “Sixties”, it was a ferment rather than a movement. They were harassed, burnt or branded by bishops, but anti-church muttering persisted. Mainstream congregations dwindled as cynicism grew, clergy were unable to cope and church buildings were neglected. In 1521, one Thomas Baker of Wheatley was reported to the Bishop of Lincoln for reading a religious book in English during a wedding reception near Didcot. With him at the party were known offenders. Reading such a book, even though it was not the Bible, and even when spurred by alcohol, was a dangerously independent religious activity. This early religious non-conformity was especially strong in a swathe of country between Uxbridge and Gloucester. Oxford lay between the two. Travellers, weavers and churchmen fed the ferment and gossip along main highways. The “Reformation” followed, part reform, part revival, part driven by vested interest.

## **The Protestant Break**

In the early 1500's the western "Catholic" part of the church was split by internal "Protests" for the reform of corruption and ignorance. Rome responded, but too slowly. At first England under Henry VIII was pro-Rome, then in a series of turns and turns-about, England under four Tudor monarchs severed with the Pope, then became radically Protestant, then dramatically Catholic again, and finally Protestant again under Queen Elizabeth. These changes were imposed by Act of Parliament. People were divided into "Protesting Catholics" and "Romanising Catholics". Both still said the Creed and spoke of "the holy Catholic(k) church". Today's "Protestant" and "Catholic" are shorthand versions, which we have inherited as handy labels.

The state church remained England's only legal way to God, just as the Pope's European church had been. Some corruption was reformed, but much was left untouched. For instance, Queen Elizabeth kept Oxford Diocese without a Bishop for forty of her forty-five years reign: the Crown took the revenues. A radical movement ("Puritans") grew up within the Church of England demanding more reform and "purification". They argued that, if a King did not need a Pope, they did not need Bishops; if the move from Pope to Bible was to purify the church, the purifying should not stop half way.

## **The Nonconformist Break with State Protestantism**

By 1642 and the English Civil War, some Puritans had given up the Church of England altogether and formed illegal "Independent" congregations. Some of these believed in "Baptism again" (Anabaptists), others in preachers but not bishops (Presbyterians) and still others in bowing to no man-made authority whatsoever (Quakers). Alongside of them, also claiming freedom, were English Roman Catholics who had refused (Recusants) to attend the Church of England parish church despite hefty fines and some executions. Catholic members of local manor house families—the Archdales of Wheatley, the Horsemans of Great Haseley, the Curzons of Waterperry—had long refused to conform to the state Church. One of the last Archdales of Wheatley Manor, a Quaker, became Governor of Virginia but was eventually deprived of his seat in Parliament because he refused to swear (Non-Juror) to become a member of the Church of England.

In 1647 Parliament abolished the Crown and Church of England. Presbyterian ministers took over local parish churches. Compulsory attendance was abolished, although the ministers and military rulers of the period earned a reputation as "righteous" killjoys. Marriage took place in front of a JP, like a modern Registrar. Names given in local baptism ("Birth") registers were markedly Biblical—Repent, Pleasance, Nimrod, Abbiathar. In 1660 King Charles II in exile agreed to be restored (The Restoration) to his father's throne. All calendars were adjusted as if there had been no English Republic. Church bells, football, and maypoles were again allowed, but it was also made compulsory again to attend church. By now,

however, church courts had lost their authority over the people. “I don't go to church because I am a church” argued an Oxford Quaker defiantly before the new Bishop’s court in 1662. Uniform religion was demanded by the Act of 1662 and the thousands who would no longer conform were called “Nonconformists”.

### **Nonconformists become Dissenters**

Once the horse had bolted it was hopeless to pretend England had not changed. Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and Independents (Congregationalists) barely bothered to go underground. In 1669 there were many Presbyterians and Baptists in Watlington and about 220 in Thame, along with Sabbatarians. A Test Oath made sure everyone going for public office was in the Church of England, which angered Nonconformists even more. Catholics suffered too, but their penalties, severe in the past, were now relatively lighter. The Catholic James II Stuart came to the throne in 1685. He wanted toleration for *all* Nonconformists, including Catholics. He found little sympathy, however, among the leaders of the Church of England and he reacted rashly by throwing all public offices open to Catholics. This in turn fanned deep-rooted folk-fears of Papal power. James was driven out and William of Orange came from Holland. His first act, ironically, was to issue an Edict of Toleration for those Protestants “Dissenting” from the Church of England. From then on, they could meet and worship in their own way after registering with the local bishop. They might have “Conventicles” (Meeting Houses) or Chapels, but never churches or bell towers. They were still banned from public office and the Universities. Quakers and Catholics too began to enjoy similar freedom, although unofficially. Marriages outside the Church of England remained illegal until 1836 and finding a burial plot outside church-owned cemeteries posed practical difficulties. The distinction, social, religious and political, between “Church” and “Chapel”, was now enshrined in law.

### **Wheatley Before 1790**

Wheatley, along with Denton, formed part of the medieval Catholic parish of Cuddesdon under Abingdon Abbey. It had a small chapel dating from about 1400, which was found “much neglected” in the 16th century. Unlike quiet Cuddesdon, Wheatley lay on a main road vital to trade, civil war and the stagecoach service. After the Reformation period the population swelled and Wheatley outgrew its tiny chapel. Conflict with Cuddesdon parish church added spice to an already unruly village life. Records from 1600 show unlicensed cottages, illegal games, unlicensed drink sales and fly-dumping in the High Street brook. From 1628-41 the Cuddesdon Registers listed Wheatley baptisms separately from the rest of the parish—the annual birth rate was so much higher. In 1629 the villagers demanded the right to appoint their own Chapel warden and Verger. At the end of the same year many in the village combined unlawfully by night to bury the body of a elderly recusant Catholic lady under the Communion Table in Holton church,

literally on Twelfth Night, January 5th-6th. Within weeks they were refusing to give anything to the repair of Cuddesdon church. In 1633 the last Archdale of Wheatley Manor House, Abraham (who gave it its present form), publicly snubbed the Cuddesdon mother-church several times in his long will. Church still mattered in Wheatley, for whatever reason.

The population of the village may well have reached 400 by the mid-18th century. (It was nearly 700 in 1801). This meant a growing number of paupers, “the numerous poor we are constantly burdened with”, Wheatley Parish Overseers told Bishop Seeker in 1747. The village had its own Workhouse or Poor House until 1835. The same Bishop lamented that servants were no longer being brought to church for religious instruction, and that immorality and irreligion were growing “almost beyond the reach of ecclesiastical power”. Wheatley had the twin problems of finding money to repair the medieval chapel on Bell Lane and to pay a curate’s stipend. Money from Queen Anne’s Bounty would be available for the latter, if the Parish could raise a like sum. The curate suggested tapping a descendant of the Archdales, but “unfortunately he is a Dissenter”. (Another gentleman, the master of Mulberry Court on Crown Road, “cares not to part with money save for horses and dogs”.) Mr Bray, curate of Wheatley 1751-85 put the place on the map for his politicking against University Tories. To a modern mind it was hardly what he was there for, but in fairness, he also helped village charities sometimes to the tune of £20, “to contribute my Mite”. Otherwise, everything depended on the “shillings and sixpences” of the people.

During Bray’s long curacy a tiny school existed in Wheatley for six pupils, paid for by the Bishop. William Tombs who died in 1750 may have been tutored there: six books appear in his house inventory, as well as two cricket bats! In 1753 the schoolmaster was reportedly of poor character and, worse still, married to a Roman Catholic. Money left by the Curzons of Waterperry, had never been properly directed towards the education of the poor in Wheatley as intended. At least, by the 1780’s, most of the “substantial inhabitants” of the village were able to sign their names, whereas in 1720 most could only make marks.

In 1786, the churchwardens, overseers and 37 “substantial” inhabitants petitioned the Bishop for a new church in Wheatley. “The want of room” in the medieval chapel on Bell Lane, they argued, “is such that the principal inhabitants when they have a friend or friends to stay cannot take them to church with them ...every part of it has been falling into decay and ruin ... the roof falling in and the tower in the greatest danger.” The Bishop agreed, but to a small building, so it would not burden the village. Significantly the petition explains that “Divine Worship is too often neglected, contrary to the wish of the inhabitants.” The picture emerges of a Wheatley short on organised religion and with a growing population. By 1800 the village had nearly 700 inhabitants. Ironically, in years to come, the replacement Anglican church in Bell Lane was scathingly described by its own Vicar as “a hopeless Conventicle pattern” and in a guide book as having “nothing but a tower to distinguish it from a Meeting House”.



## **The Dissenters' Meeting Houses**

John Allen (d.c.1788) was one of those “substantial” villagers petitioning for a new church in 1786. In April 1794, Sarah Allen, his widow, a mother of three children, countersigned a petition to the Oxford magistrates of Quarter Sessions, for a Meeting House in Wheatley on the premises of Samuel Standley (1760-1833), former landlord of *The Sun Inn*. Along with Sarah Allen's, Samuel Standley's and Dissenting Minister James Hinton's signatures was that of William Gardiner (1750-1812) (*Quarter Sessions Records, Vol. 8, Meeting Houses*). Again in October 1796, either to accommodate an overflow or because of changed personal circumstances, the same people with the exception of William Gardiner approached the Bishop to license a large room in Sarah Allen's house for Dissenting worship (*Oxford Dioc. Mss. PP, c.44, f. 313.*)

The setting up of a free place of worship in a village which had hardly known Dissent, which had a growing population, many uneducated rural poor and where a new church was already too small, would have been welcomed by some and not by others. The fact that it took place at a time of backlash conservatism and unrest in the face of the French Revolution made it all the more remarkable a development.

## II

### The Hinton Years

James Hinton (Dissenting ministers were not to be titled “Reverend”) came from an Otmoor family. His grandfather Charles was strict Church of England and locked his son, Thomas, out of the house when he defiantly attended Bicester Presbyterian Meeting House. Thomas married and, in turn, his son James was professed a Christian at Chesham Baptist Church in 1775, aged 15. James remained an Open Baptist (allowing infant baptism) but was himself baptised as an adult in 1781. A sponsor paid for him to study at Bristol, from where he came in 1787 to help at New Road Independent (mixed Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregational) Chapel, Oxford.

#### The Man

It appears he was a small man, tolerant of most, except himself, and with a good sense of humour. His preaching seemed to attract by its warmth. He was a reflective type who often hid away to pray. His diary in which he took his spiritual temperature regularly, is shot through with self-doubt, self-dislike and what he called “latent half-infidelity”. He was a driven man, riding miles in a day to outstations like Wheatley and preparing sermons in the saddle. John Wesley or the Franciscan friars would have been glad of him.

Hinton reluctantly ran a school in Oxford, “a sepulchre of devotion, but it enables me to serve the cause I love”. He felt he was wasting time in which he could be teaching the Gospel, but it did pay for his mission. For recreation he also swam, played cricket and enjoyed a drink, although he grew angry if anyone tried to make him drunk. Only later did the chapels identify with the mid-Victorian Temperance and Tee-Total crusade against alcohol. After all, a former landlord of The Sun Wheatley, countersigned both of James Hinton’s licence applications.

#### The Harassing of Dissenters

Oxford University, exclusively Church of England until 1871, was no friend of Dissenters; Town went along with Gown—“Corinth city”, Hinton called it disapprovingly. His evening services in New Road included “many members of the University and many respectable citizens, together with a number of profane and abandoned persons.” The latter included gentlemen undergraduates of substance. When they disrupted services, Hinton would demand “Name and College”. No gentleman of honour could refuse to reply. Proctors or College heads would then order written apologies to avoid Hinton’s suing in Court. Eventually the University banned students from attending, to preserve good order and its own name.



Rev. James Hinton (senior), (1761—1822), Pastor of New Road Baptists. He preached in Wheatley 1794—1802 and founded two Meeting Houses here, 1794 and 1796.

Hinton never objected to Bishops or the established churchmen who made his preaching difficult. According to his son he “never said anything disrespectful of the English hierarchy”. He wanted to be recognised as a co-worker (also suggesting innocently but unwisely that they share tithes and collections!) “Oxford had no episcopal pulpit in which evangelical sentiments were declared.” Sunday schools, to which Baptists and Congregationalists wedded themselves for another century, were strongly supported by Hinton. There were four in Oxford, one belonging to the Dissenters, three to the Church of England. The four were the only provision for the education of poor children. Every November, Hinton, with the agreement of his congregation, gave equal funds to all four schools. “It is religion itself, rather than any one form of it, which I wish to see flourish.”

### **Village Preaching In Wheatley, 1794**

When Hinton and his enthusiastic helpers came to the outlying villages, more serious problems arose. In 1794, just after French revolutionaries had executed Louis XVI and anti-French fervour was at its height in England, Hinton and friends came to preach in Woodstock. They were attacked by uniformed soldiers and local mobsters, shouting “Jacobins!” after the peasants in clogs who began the revolt against the French establishment. Hinton was angry at the attack but more worried that local magistrates might try to curb his “village preaching”, and find excuse to infringe the freedom given a Dissenter by law. The same magistrates were landowning gentry and pillars of the Church of England. “It is hard to see ruffians supplied with liquor for two hours and then to be charged [oneself] by their employers with having broken the peace,” Hinton complained.

The New Road Chapel preachers had their baptism of fire at Woodstock and were not put off. In Wheatley that year they asked for their first Meeting House in April 1794. Hinton felt a need to target Wheatley, described by his son and biographer as “a village deeply sunk in ignorance and wickedness”. The Parish Overseers were paying weekly payments to 50 “paupers” in 1793, and paying bills of up to £20 per month for the poor in the Wheatley Workhouse. Even “The Constable of Wheatley ran away” (*Wheatley Overseers Book, Poor Rates, 1727-1813*). The new Anglican church on Bell Lane had still not been built. Details are hard to glean, but Hinton’s son, writing more generally of the Oxford villages, explained, “The ecclesiastical superior [vicar] of the parish usually considered Mr Hinton’s village labours a reflection on his character, an invasion of his rights and would exercise an open hostility.” Requests for Meeting House licences were “repeatedly neglected”.

### **Wheatley’s Second Meeting House, 1796**

An application for a second Meeting House licence in Wheatley was granted without any delay (unless the first request of 1794 had been blocked and this was a

repeat attempt). It was forwarded by James Hinton from Wheatley on October 24th 1796, and the Certificate was granted by the Bishop within five days.

*“We whose names are underwritten do hereby certify that a large room, being part of a dwelling house situate at Wheatley in the County and Diocese of Oxford, and now in the occupation of Sarah Allen, will henceforth be used as a place of religious worship, under and by virtue of the Statute of the First (Year) of William and Mary entitled “An Act for Exempting their Majesties’ Protestant subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the penalties of certain laws etc., and we do hereby require that the same be registered in your Lordship’s Court accordingly”*

The next five years of Hinton’s work, “*from about 1797*”, were outlined in 1845 in the Congregational Church Minute Book. The writer drew on local memory. At least one of Hinton’s original founding congregation survived in 1845. By then the village population had increased from the 700 of Hinton’s time to nearly 1000 in 1841. Hostility from the Established Church was also making itself felt.

*“Hinton”, the 1845 writer recorded, “pastor of the church assembling at the New Road chapel [accompanied by] some of the most devoted young men in his church, supplied Wheatley with the word of Life—sometimes preaching in the open air and at other times in the room. In consequence of the degraded condition of the people whose sabbaths were often employed in bull and badger baiting, their deeply rooted prejudices and the interference of parochial authority, these efforts appeared to produce little effect. Frequently has he been insulted and abused while proclaiming the tidings of salvation. Still his labours were not in vain, for a few females, far advanced in life, received the Word in the love of it and were admitted as members of the New Road church. One only of these now [1845] survives, the others having entered upon their rest. Soon after the year 1802, Mr Hinton’s health began seriously to decline and the friends at New Road, finding they could not sustain the [Wheatley] station, finally gave it up.”*

Hinton’s own diary for August 1798 records his preaching in Wheatley to a “large and attentive congregation”, presumably outdoors, given the numbers and the month. There were many fields and open spaces close to Wheatley (High) Street. The Green was still a green. While he was probably encouraged by the numbers—he also baptised eleven people in one day at Abingdon—he constantly warned against measuring spiritual success by numbers, “an advance in show” which he felt was always “attended with a decline in the substantial blessings of religion.” By James Hinton’s death in 1823, the New Road church had “increased

from 9 to nearly 200 members with several branches”. Wheatley was one of those branches. We know a little about the first members.

## **Pioneers**

Both Samuel Standley’s and Sarah Allen’s Wheatley houses, large enough to contain Meeting House rooms, remain unidentified. Sarah’s husband John had signed the petition for a new Church of England chapel in 1786. He owned two properties on which he paid Poor Rate. Sarah was a widow by 1789. In 1797 one Sarah Allen was paid by the parish Workhouse for repairing the shoes of the poor. Between 1793 and 1803, Samuel Stan(d)ley was also paid by the Workhouse for firewood faggots, for mending shoes of the poor and for building work. Landlord of *The Sun* 1788—91, Standley appears to have been head of a long line of stonemasons in the village. He married Elizabeth Wagesfield in 1787.

These two early Dissenters in Wheatley are known because they countersigned both of Hinton’s applications for Meeting Houses. What of the “few females far advanced in life” who, according to the Minute Book of 1845, were admitted to Hinton’s New Road chapel? Who was the “one now surviving” who passed on her memories to the Minute Book writer?

New Road Chapel Membership Roll records a Mary Gomme of Wheatley joining the congregation in 1796, a Mrs Stanley enrolling from Wheatley in 1800 and a Mrs Hayward of Wheatley who came in 1817. Two Mary Gommes from the Cuddesdon-cum-Wheatley parish registers could qualify: one 1737—1813, nee Willis, was certainly far-advanced and married to John Gomme; the second, 1758—1836, nee Best, from Thame, was married to a William Gomm. Both were from Littleworth where the name has been known for two centuries. Mrs Stanley may have been Elizabeth Stan(d)ley, wife of Samuel (1760—1833) and the surviving founder member in 1845. Mrs Hayward is described in the New Road Roll as dead in 1836, although she does not feature in the Cuddesdon Parish Burial Register. (In the Wheatley Chapel Membership Roll starting in 1843, a “Mrs Allen” is noted for the years 1845 and 1847 with a later comment by Charles Murray, Pastor 1862—66, that neither he nor Mr Knight, Pastor 1853—62, knew anything about her. It is unlikely that she and Sarah Allen of the certificates were the same person.)

## **The Breaking of Ground, 1802—41**

The 1845 Minute Book recounts briefly the years from James Hinton’s ill health in 1802 to the founding of the Wheatley Wycliffe Chapel in 1841/2. It poses more questions than it answers. According to the writer of 1845, drawing on at least one witness memory,

*“From [1802] many attempts were made to establish an interest at Wheatley, especially by one of Mr Hinton’s sons [James,] who imbibed the sentiments of Irving, and by the Wesleyans, but meeting with little success they withdrew and it was once more abandoned. About this time a pious lady of the establishment felt a deep interest in the welfare of Wheatley and its neighbourhood and engaged an Independent minister by the name of [John Thomas] Smith who came to reside at Wheatley and preached there and at Headington, a village three miles distant. He was occasionally assisted by Messrs Williams, Davis, Blackwell and others, members of the Independent Church, George Street, Oxford. In 1839 the lady already alluded to withdrew her support and consequently Mr Smith resigned the labours at Wheatley.”*

Fourteen of the New Road Baptists removed themselves in 1830 to found a Congregational church, less racked by disputes over Baptism. After initial friction, they were wished well by their New Road companions and the Baptist minister attended the opening of the new George Street chapel. Meanwhile, James Hinton’s younger son, James, had founded a Baptist chapel in St Clements, and tried to continue his father’s work in the villages. “I preached to several village congregations before I had been baptised [as an adult] and I did so with the knowledge and concurrence of my father.” One source even suggests the Hintons had a Wheatley house, but no further clue can be found. The St Clements chapel closed in 1836 and left no records. That same year the Congregationalists of George Street took on Wheatley as part of an inherited mission. John Smith’s place of residence in Wheatley is unknown, although the “Establishment lady” may have been Lady Pusey then living at Holton Park and certainly interested in finding alternative lifestyles for “the savages” of Wheatley. It may have been Mrs Earle, the tenant of Shotover House. Another source suggests it was the Rector of Holton himself who encouraged Smith. There is no Wesleyan Methodist record of work in Wheatley at this time, save for a single baptism from Littleworth in 1838 and a flourishing Methodist mission at Forest Hill (where “Mr Shepherd” preached, 1839).

In 1836 Mr Smith set up a Dissenter Night School in the village. Five years later the Head of the Church of England National School in the village, William Saunders, in evidence to a Church court, made a revealing disclaimer. “I cannot judge of the wisdom or propriety of receiving at National School on weekdays the child of a Dissenter who attended a Dissenting place of worship on the Sabbath. There are rules of admission, but personally I do not know that I should object to receive a child because he went to a Dissenting place of worship on the Sabbath.” The inference was that the local Curate, William Langley, *was* so objecting. Langley’s fellow Curate in Cuddesdon, Frederick Denison, also proclaimed that religious toleration would only lead to democracy—another way of shouting “Jacobins!” as the 1794 village crowds had done.

## Changing Wheatley 1801—41

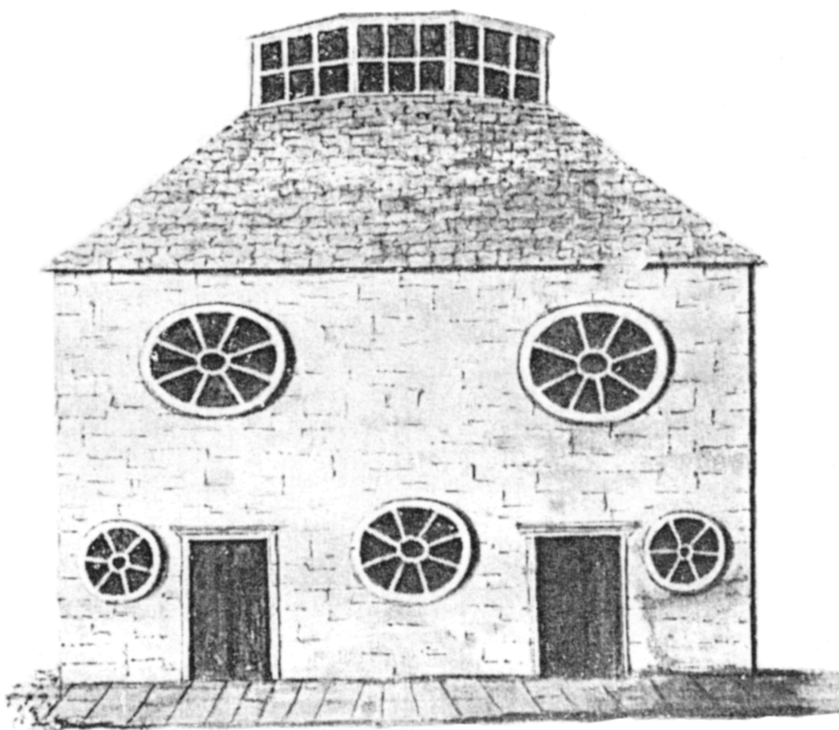
Village life in Wheatley changed rapidly in the period up to 1840. The population rose by nearly 50% in forty years, from 685 to 995. The Parish Workhouse closed in 1834 when the new Poor Law Union was created: Headington became the nearest pauper home and hospital. This law took away responsibility for the poor and sick from the local parish church; control of spending on the needy was taken from “substantial” parishioners. Social issues like education, poverty and health, once the exclusive property of the church, were gradually taken into civil hands. It would culminate in the civil parish of today’s local government, with nothing to link it to the religious parish save an inherited name. It was a difficult transition, but it allowed the church to begin to distance itself from the local and national “establishment”.

In 1832 eight Wheatley married men asked for additional relief, claiming their parish allowance was not enough. They were Edward Shepherd, William Towersey, Richard Merritt and Thomas Allen with large families and John Holder, Thomas Holder, John Tombs and Robert Hayward. They were refused by the Parish Vestry Committee. “They must be better off than at any period in the last twenty years... a loaf and threepence per head for themselves and their families and the advantage they receive from the price reduction of many articles they consume...” The story would have been told throughout Littleworth and Blenheim. Such memories died hard, especially in the tense class-atmosphere of the village in the 1830’s. When a Dissenter chapel started, Edward Shepherd’s brother Richard joined and became a deacon. Richard Merritt’s three sons joined too—John, Richard and William, the last marrying a daughter of Thomas Allen. Her brother, Thomas Allen’s son Henry, joined and married a Shepherd. Both wives joined. Robert Hayward’s son, James, also joined. There were others. Many in those days were alienated from established church religion for social and economic reasons: “Godlessness” was too facile an explanation. The horrific 1880 newspaper descriptions of Wheatley in 1850 are often quoted uncritically: they are loaded and need reading with care.

Civil Registrars, established in 1837, took away from the Church of England the exclusive right to process Births (Baptisms), Deaths (Burials) and particularly Marriages. William Lovelock, draper, grocer, “Vendor of British Wines” and postmaster, was Wheatley’s first secular Registrar, subject to no religious authority, not even to the state church, only to Whitehall. It was a difficult transition for some parish clergy and a Bishop of Oxford needed the wisdom of Solomon to see them through.

Enclosure (re-distributing the medieval allotment-like strips of land) created large fields by Act of Parliament in the first years of the century. They were efficient, but treeless. They also caused unemployment and cut across ancient rights of Common, such as that between Littleworth and Shotover,





Independent Baptist Meeting House, New Road, Oxford 1799.

which had long given the poorest villagers fuel and pasture. Enclosure helped polarise classes already divided, poor against rich, Church against Dissenter, gentry against peasant. On nearby Otmoor serious agrarian riots and sabotage took place from 1830. Unrest (and a token machine burning) spread to Wheatley. In 1834 the gentry built the pyramid-shaped lockup, the Round House, by the stone pits where “pauper” villagers on parish ‘workfare’ broke stone for the roads. At the request of the same local gentry, police companies, mounted and foot, were formed to protect property. One was commanded by the local church Curate, William Langley.

*"It was about this time that the energies of the George Street church were called forth on behalf of Wheatley and a band of young men consisting principally of Messrs J[oseph] Thornton, Gillham, Castle, Hoar, Hardwick and Plumridge, devoted their Sabbath afternoons and evenings to the distribution of tracts, the instruction of the young and the preaching of the Gospel. With the cooperation of their pastor Eliezer Jones, a congregation was collected and a Sabbath-School was formed.*

*"Wheatley was in 1841 adopted as a Home Missionary Station. To this sphere of Christian enterprise, Mr Davis, formerly of Swansea South Wales, was invited and after interview with and preaching before a group of ministers at Abingdon, an engagement was entered into on July 19th 1841 and he commenced his labours in the following October. In 1839 the Gospel was introduced to Gt. Haseley by the efforts of [the Independent church, Tetsworth] and a small chapel erected. In consequence of the removal of [the Tetsworth minister] the interest at Gt. Haseley was in May 1842 attached to that at Wheatley and was regularly supplied by Mr Davis, with a service on the Lord's day and another during the week." (Chapel Minute Book, 1845)*

### III

## The Cause in Wheatley

The new Dissenting congregation enrolled in 1841. Charles Davis' Swansea accent would still be novel in a village which listed only one Scotsman and one Irishman in the 1851 Census and where most of the thousand population were local born. It would be even more noticeable in Great Haseley where he rode twice a week. The North Wales lilt of Eliezer Jones' voice made a suitable counterpoint when he came out from George Street to help Davis.

It was not a good year for the Established church in Wheatley. A church court case involving the curate of Bell Lane revealed an unhappy parish. They could not hear his sermons; he had wanted to ban Dissenters' children from school; he had been stoned and threatened in the street; he was felt to have been in league with or in hock to local figures of substance. Adding to the difficulties—possibly as a result of them, the headteacher of the church National School resigned in 1846. With good timing, a reforming and spiritual Bishop, Samuel Wilberforce, came to Cuddesdon Palace in 1845 and became involved in Wheatley on pastoral, cultural and practical grounds. He lived within sight of the village and came through it regularly, visiting from time to time the church (National) infant and elementary schools. He elevated the village into a parish and replaced Bell Lane chapel with a roomy new church in a dominant position: Back Side road became Church Road. He took a personal interest in the discovery of a Roman villa on Castle Hill. He also had his horses shod at Mr Sheldon's smithy not far from the Nonconformist Chapel.

### The Bark Barn Chapel

*"The room in which Divine worship was conducted at Wheatley becoming too small and eligible premises at the eastern end of the southern side of High Street belonging to William Waine being offered for sale, through the kind efforts of the Rev. Jones of Oxford, the Rev Harris of Wallingford and the Oxford [George Street] friends, purchase was effected in August 1842. Operations forthwith commenced in converting them into a neat chapel capable of seating 250 persons, without galleries, and on 6th October 1842 it was dedicated to the service of God."* (Chapel Minute Book, 1845).

A month of building cannot have changed the barn very much and it remains a mystery how a barn the size of today's chapel could ever seat 250. A wagon entrance in the south side wall was filled in and a pedestrian door took its place. The same building, only slightly altered inside, still serves the purpose today. In 1851 it was known as Wycliffe Chapel, after the 15th century reformer and heretic.

Many ministers lent moral support at the opening of the new chapel. They came from chapels in London, (Clerkenwell and Fetter Lane), as well as from nearer home at Wallingford, Oxford, Thame, Stokenchurch, Abingdon and Brill.

Their congregations too had inherited memories of James Hinton and son as “village preachers”. Certainly a number of those on the first Wheatley Membership Roll remembered or had heard tales of the Hinton years. One of Hinton’s founder members from the village was still alive in 1845, possibly Samuel Standley’s widow, Elizabeth. The language of the Chapel Minute Book is inherited from the earliest Puritan independents. Like them it speaks of the Scriptural “Lord’s-day” or “Sabbath”, never the pagan “Sunday”: this changed abruptly in 1876. It also speaks of “friends”, the old Independent and Quaker titling: again, from 1876, members are referred to as “Brother” and “Sister”. The early Trades Unions inherited and continued this chapel style.

*“The chapel was soon filled and in March 1843 a Christian church was declared, consisting of nine members, six from Gt. Haseley and three from Wheatley.”* They ordained Mr Davis in October 1843. The anonymous recorder of the Chapel Minute Book of 1845 says, *“The congregation has experienced little variation, the church has increased to 25 members, the Sabbath-school consists of 85 children and 12 native teachers, two good libraries have been established, [a Wheatley village library was established in 1854] one for the congregation and one for the Sabbath-school. Fifty periodicals are circulated monthly and two hundred tracts distributed weekly.”*

### **William Waine, Fellmonger**

William Waine (1799—c.1870), tanner and hide-dealer (fellmonger), had sold to the Congregationalists his bark barn and tannery yard at the end of High Street. Oak bark containing tannic acid was soaked in water pits along with the skins until the “ooze” “tanned” them into leather. The barn was probably at least 50 years old by the time it was sold; it was high enough to allow hides to hang for drying. The whole eastern end of High Street was occupied by tanners, fellmongers and parchment makers, most notably by the extended Crook family, some of whom were early Chapel members. An upper room of Cromwell House is said to have been used for drying tanned skins; number 94 was the site of a tannery while 90 and 92 were the site of a fellmonger’s and parchment maker’s businesses. A butcher had premises at number 82 and presumably worked closely with the tanners who in turn supplied local shoemakers and saddlers. Ed Robbins, timber merchant, probably supplied the bark.

The leather industry—tanning, parchment making, fellmongering, barksteeping—was a smelly business, making the bottom end of High Street and its open brook a less wholesome part of town. At least there were open fields above what is now Crown Square. The square, like the rest of village roads, was not macadamised. Nothing but occasional cart traffic hindered children playing games there in summer and sledging down the slopes of Louse Hill in winter.

Waine pulled out of the leather business to “diversify” into brewing and coal. Although a churchman, he was happy to sell to Dissenters. During the local

Church unpleasantness of 1841, a year before the sale, “he got up in his pew [in the Bell Lane Anglican chapel] during service and uttered some words relative to the manner in which Mr Langley [the Curate] performed the church service.” After being a successful brewer, Waive went on to serve as Relieving Officer for the poor of the village, a post attached to Headington Poor Law Union and Workhouse.

## **An Enlightened Bishop**

The resignation in 1846 of William Saunders, Head of Wheatley National School, brought a rapid response from Squire James Ashurst of Little Milton, just nominated as a School Trustee in Wheatley. He wrote to Bishop Wilberforce in January 1847, “there is no master to take Mr Saunde’s place at the Wheatley National School and that in consequence of the Boys School being closed the Dissenters have opened one and some of the boys who used to attend the National School have already been sent there.” Fear of Chapel Dissenters ran deep among members of the Established Church. If Cleanliness was next to Godliness, Dissent (and Romanism) was next to Godlessness. The fear was partly inherited, partly to do with social class division and partly a conservative fear of revolution if the threads which made up the established fabric were picked loose. It was a long way from the attitude of John Henry Newman, Anglican curate of St Clements, who in 1824 wrote of the younger James Hinton, a Baptist minister in his own right, “A good Dissenter is incomparably better than a bad Churchman, but a good Churchman, I think better than a good Dissenter ... there is too much irreligion in the place for me to be so mad as to drive away so active an ally as Mr Hinton seems to be.”

Fortunately for the Church of England, Bishop Wilberforce proved nearly as generous-minded towards Dissenters as was Newman. The world was changing and the religious and social spheres were separating, although much voluntary plugging of gaps remained for Church, Chapel and philanthropists like the Millers of Shotover. Civil Registrars, Poor Law Unions and Local Government were taking over much of life. Some of the clergy felt seriously undermined and defensive. Wilberforce himself, a traditionalist and former royal chaplain, mellowed with the years. “Henley” he admitted in 1846, “is overrun with Dissent and Godlessness”, but in the same year he ordered his clergy that they must allow the marriage in church of all parishioners, as long as they had not been *personally sentenced by a church court*. In other words, Dissenters, Catholics and others were not to be discriminated against. The state church clergy, he insisted, were tied by a “legal bond as Public Officers to the population of the national church, even if not as Presbyters to the people.”

In 1847, probably with Wheatley in mind as part of his own parish of Cuddesdon, he demanded “the largest charity to Separatists”. The clergy were not “to exclude on the ground of religious opinions.” If Dissent was to be preached against, it must be done “in a loving way” (but not so lovingly as to preach jointly

anywhere!) He admitted that there was a problem with the new Civil Registrars. Their work, he said, was rightly a relief to the conscience of Dissenters, but it did on occasion shelter from public rebuke those with misdeeds to hide. The good Bishop constantly tried to come to terms with the new tolerance of many beliefs and none and the increasing alienation of people from the church. He tried to make his clergy do the same.

## Foundation Membership Roll

Wycliffe Chapel, Wheatley, kept an informal register of baptisms and adult members. Between the formal enrolment of eight founder members and the minister's wife in March 1843, and the end of 1850, the Chapel community recruited a total of 45 members, all under the same Welsh minister, Charles McCardie Davis. Between 1845 and 1847, (the record stops abruptly until 1852,) six child baptisms were recorded, two of them the minister's children, two from Great Haseley and two from village families—the sons of William Putt, post messenger and shoemaker, and of Edward Pearce, village druggist and grocer. The annual village birth rate was about 30. Five of the congregation emigrated to America in that brief period. Poor Law Unions, local landowners and shipping agents encouraged emigration with great publicity and practical assistance. America was a haven for Dissenters of all types. In Ireland it was the decade of the Great Famine: there, they had to emigrate or die. It was nothing new to Wheatley. There was also constant internal migration to places like London and Birmingham. At the turn of the century village pauper boys had been encouraged by the Parish Overseers to join the Navy.

The Chapel Membership Roll was kept with some efficiency. It records:

1843

*March:*

*Charles M. Davis, Minister, (b. Swansea. 1806. went to Kirkham, Lancs., 1854)*

*Susannah Davis, (Minister's wife, b. 1807; 4 children, 2 Swansea, 2 Wheatley)*

*Elizabeth Crook. To America. (William and Noah Crook, tanners by the Chapel, both had daughters Elizabeth, both born 1825.)*

*William Putt. (b.1810; shoemaker 1851; restored 1877 as "old attender", with wife Mary Ann; died 1879 "trusting in Jesus"; left £5 to Chapel.)*

*Ann Mersum, Gt. Milton*

*Ann Arnott, Lt Haseley. To Oxford, New Rd Baptist. Died 1884*

*Charlotte Wright. Gt. Haseley, To Tring.*

*Ann Hicks. Gt. Haseley. To Chalgrove.*

*Sarah Richardson. Gt. Haseley. To Thame.*

*James Arnott Died 1845.*

*May:*

*Ann White. Died 1871. (Forest Hill; married Wm Thornton)*

*James Hayward.* (b. 1805; pauper 1871 census: agric. labourer; unmarried)  
*Caroline Spiers. Died.*

1844

*Mary Beesley. To America.* (b.1826; father, James, a labourer.)

*Hugh Petin. To Lincoln.*

*Mary Crook. Died 1846.* (daughter of William or wife of Noah Crook, tanners by the Chapel; William's daughter b.1825; Noah's wife inherited 90 High Street on his death in 1825 and was living there 1845.)

*Thomas Gould.* (1790—1852; labourer.)

*Mary Chapman To America.* (daughter b.1816 of Joseph, farmer; or b.1817 of William, butcher.)

*Eliza Ring. Dismissed!* (?1783—1863? Or b.1835?)

*Mrs Putt.* (b.1807; wife of Wm above, Littleworth)

*Thomas Adams. Gt. Haseley. To Cookham.*

*James Wise. To America.*

1845

*Mrs Allen.* (Two ministers denied any knowledge of her. See again, 1847)

*James Jordan. Suspended.*

*Mrs Quarterman.* (Elizabeth, 1803—81; wife of Eli. 3 children; restored 1863)

*Mary Dover. Dismissed!* (?1814—67. w. of Wm. agric. labourer; or, b.1821, living at The Sun Inn, 1861 census, with sister licensee)

*James Adams.*

*Sarah Perkin. Dismissed!*

*Anne Currell.* (wife of John C., labourer, Littleworth; 2 children 1844, 1846)

1846

*Mrs T Munt.* (Harriet, dressmaker, b.1831; w. of Thos, 1827—90, woodcutter and beerseller, 'Blenheim')

*Thomas Parrott. To America.*

*Elizabeth Thornton. Forest Hill.*

1847

*Mrs Allen.* (see above, 1845)

*Ann White.*

*Richard Merritt.* (1823—1907; son of Richard 1758—1836; Deacon 1878. Married twice)

*Sarah Merritt* (1820—64)

*William Thornton. Forest Hill.*

*John White. Died 1884.*

*William Shepherd. From Wood Green. Left.*

1848

*Ann Brind.*

*George Slatter. Haseley. Died 1877.*

1849

*William Merritt. Good for nothing!* (1828—71; brother of Richard above; agric. labourer; married 1861; restored 1867)

*Sarah Soanes. Suspended.*

1850

*Mary Smith, Lt Haseley. To George St Chapel 1866.*

*Martha Hunt. To London. (b.1827; daughter of a labourer and baker.)*

*Richard Shepherd. (1802—75; agricultural labourer; great-grandfather, via youngest son Charles and Charles' son Frederick, to Bruce, late of the URC Chapel. Was he the 1839 Methodist preacher in Forest Hill?)*

*Robert Hunt.*

Members lapsed ("backslid", as the Methodists put it bluntly), were suspended for unchristian behaviour pending regret, or simply dismissed by congregational agreement. Behaviour, not ritual observance, marked out a follower of Christ. They also left through migration: one Mary Ann Skidmore of Gt Haseley was admitted in 1875 and later left the district; her departure has become part of the Chapel folklore: "*Gone to Birmingham. Still a Christian.*" Most of the early members were "*admitted from the world*", or from no previous church membership. An occasional one came "*From the world through the Church.*" Only in the 1870's did numbers start to come from other Dissenting groups such as the Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists and Salvation Army. By then people were more mobile in every sense of the word. A railway network had revolutionised the country's travel and taken Wheatley firmly into its web (1864). In turn, this mobility loosened people's ties to the religion and community customs of their village ancestors. The ties were already quite loose when they took the religious census in 1851.

## **The Sunday Census, 1851**

On March 30th 1851 the Government invited all recognised places of worship to send in figures of their attendance. The results confirmed what observers like Dickens (who hardly mentions church or clergy in any of his works) had long believed. Much less than half the country went to church—7 million out of 18 million. Of those 7 million, only half went to the legally established Church of England. The figures made uncomfortable reading for some and because they were incomplete (the Rector of Gt Haseley, like a number of others, refused to send in figures) they were disputed. The recent arrival of half a million Irish Catholics in the wake of the Famine made little difference to the overall picture.



Only half the Irish went to church, partly because they had so few churches. Across the country, it was the large mass of the poor who were missing. Church and Chapel alike had lost touch with a population which had swollen from 9 million in 1801 to 18 million in 1851. In that time, new buildings had increased the number of church and chapel “sittings” (seating places) by only 5 million, when already in 1801 the number of sittings had already been woefully inadequate.

Wheatley reflected the national scene only in part. In 1801 its population was 685. By 1851 this had risen to 1042 where it stayed until 1881. The Church of England curate, Arthur Dendy, sent in his figures. Out of 600 Anglican “sittings”, 153 were taken up by Sunday morning worshippers, 96 by Sunday Scholars, and in the evening by 236 worshippers and 90 Sunday Scholars. It was commonplace for churchgoers to go more than once on a Sunday and the figures have to be adjusted accordingly. The accepted formula is best attendance plus one third of the rest, plus Scholars—in this case 236 plus 51 plus 96 Sunday Scholars, a representative total of 383. Universally the evening service was the more highly attended.

The Chapel under Mr Davis also sent in figures for their 250 “sittings”. Morning worship attracted 58 with 61 Scholars; the afternoon service brought 61 and evening worship 135. Chapel-goers often went three times on Sunday. The representative total is reached by adding 135 to 20 plus 20—and probably the 61 Scholars, a representative total of 236. Out of a village population of 1042 that Sunday, well over half, or 619 on the best estimate, attended formal worship. This represented much more than the national figure, both in total and in numbers attending the Church of England in Wheatley. It was after all a rural village, not Dickens’ London. The grim reputation of Wheatley at that time may have been deliberately overstated, both then and in later years. A lot had already been achieved by the mid-century.

## IV

### The Missing Quarter Century

1850 — — 75

Chapel records for the next twenty five years barely exist. The Minute Books were not composed with posterity in mind, only as a handy record of everyday practical decisions. In some years they were not composed at all or have been lost. They point to, rather than map out events and issues. The great issues of the time, education, temperance and social relief were all part of Wheatley life.

#### **The Known Facts**

In 1854 Mr Davis left for Lancashire. He was succeeded by Thomas Knight for nine years and then by Charles Murray in 1862, the year a hundred labourers moved in on the village to build the Wycombe to Oxford spur of the Great Western Railway. Henry Jones, a local field worker, was taken on; his daughter had been baptised by Vicar Edward Elton in the new St Mary's church in 1857, but his son was baptised by Mr Knight in the Chapel in 1859. When Jones died prematurely in 1864, his funeral was performed by the Railway Chaplain, John Richards, a temporary curate appointed by the Church of England for the construction period. The new mobility applied to religion as well.

When Mr Murray returned to his native Scotland in 1868, there were no deacons to take up the slack before a new appointment. It may have been a lean time. George Shrimpton, a deacon of Tetsworth living temporarily in Wheatley, was asked to step in. James Jefferies was then appointed by the congregation, his stipend paid by George Street, the Congregationalist County Association and the Home Missionary Society. Wheatley agreed to meet his house rent and incidental expenses. Two years later Mr Jefferies left and Mr Shrimpton, who had perhaps stayed longer than he intended, died within months. One Oliver Brand then came down from Liverpool and spent nine months as Minister; he "repaired and very greatly improved" the chapels at Wheatley and Haseley, leaving no debt behind. The Congregationalist ministry was flexible and diverse, hinging mainly on democratic self-help.

Brand must have lightened a doldrum period. Within a few months it was said, "*The congregation at Wheatley greatly improved and the Sabbath School became more settled and promising. Several dozen Sabbath School hymn books were sold to the children of the village at the greatly reduced price of one penny as an inducement to attend the Chapel and practise the singing.*" We should not underestimate the hymn revival. The later 19th century produced a torrent—some would call it an effluent—of hymns. The bands of the Temperance Movement and the Salvation Army took the best tunes from the Devil or the Music Halls. In 1873, Sankey and Moody brought from America the first hymn-singing Mission of the later Billy Graham type. For the popular ear it was a welcome contrast to the

flat psalm-singing of much church music. Mr Thornton's Bookshop obliged with discounts.

*"The weekly offering has been instituted and...the afternoon congregation has greatly increased in number and in the evening the Chapel is frequently crowded."* The aptly named Mr Faith, a slightly intense and fervent 24 year old, was then accepted to the pastorate in 1869. Alongside him served two strong young characters, Fred Stamp, postman and grocer who owned Oxford House Store on High Street, and Joshua Harris, a former Methodist, who even before being admitted as a Chapel member was chairing its meetings and acting as its treasurer. He owned the grocer and draper shop on High Street (and extracted teeth without anaesthetic!) next to today's Bank.

The Congregationalist community became a social and religious melting pot. In 1870 a former Primitive Methodist minister was taken on, possibly through Mr Harris' connections, to preach at Haseley morning and evening as well as to provide the usual afternoon and weekday evening services. A public Bible Class began *"as a more familiar way of promoting the Scriptural edification of the people"*. Sabbath services were to be held at Tiddington; the Miltons were to be visited; open air meetings were to be held in the villages in the summer; people were to be visited in their homes and offered Tracts and Periodicals. *"Increased services, tract distribution and visitation"* was the strategy. *"There is already a visible improvement in some of the villages."* In June 1875 Mr Faith went to Bicester leaving what he called ambiguously, *"comparative peace and prosperity"*. He also left a new Church Discipline agreed unanimously by the congregation. Any proposed new member was to be visited by the pastor and two appointed brethren. They might defend themselves against any objections privately to the pastor or the deacons. Three months absence amounted to lapsing. Public misbehaviour was to be met with rebuke, suspension (immediate such for drunkenness, fornication and dishonesty) and finally with exclusion for continued flagrant immorality.

## **School For All**

It is difficult, when compulsory schooling into the mid-teens is the vogue in education, to understand the age of Sunday School, Night Class and purely voluntary child-schooling. Wheatley had a tiny school for six in the 18th century, but money left by Lady Curzon in 1688 for the apprenticing and schooling of poor village children had not been properly supervised. In 1811 Bishop Moss of Oxford left money in his will for a National School at Wheatley. National Schools were for *"Educating The Poor in the Principles of The Established Church"*, in response to the rising number of Dissenting schools, known as British Schools.

The school was never built on its Ladder Hill site. Costs rose and when villagers stole the surveyor's stakes marking the plot, it prompted fear about *"visits of the same kind to the school itself when erected."* The National School organisers advised an entrance age of six for Wheatley children and *"bribery"*

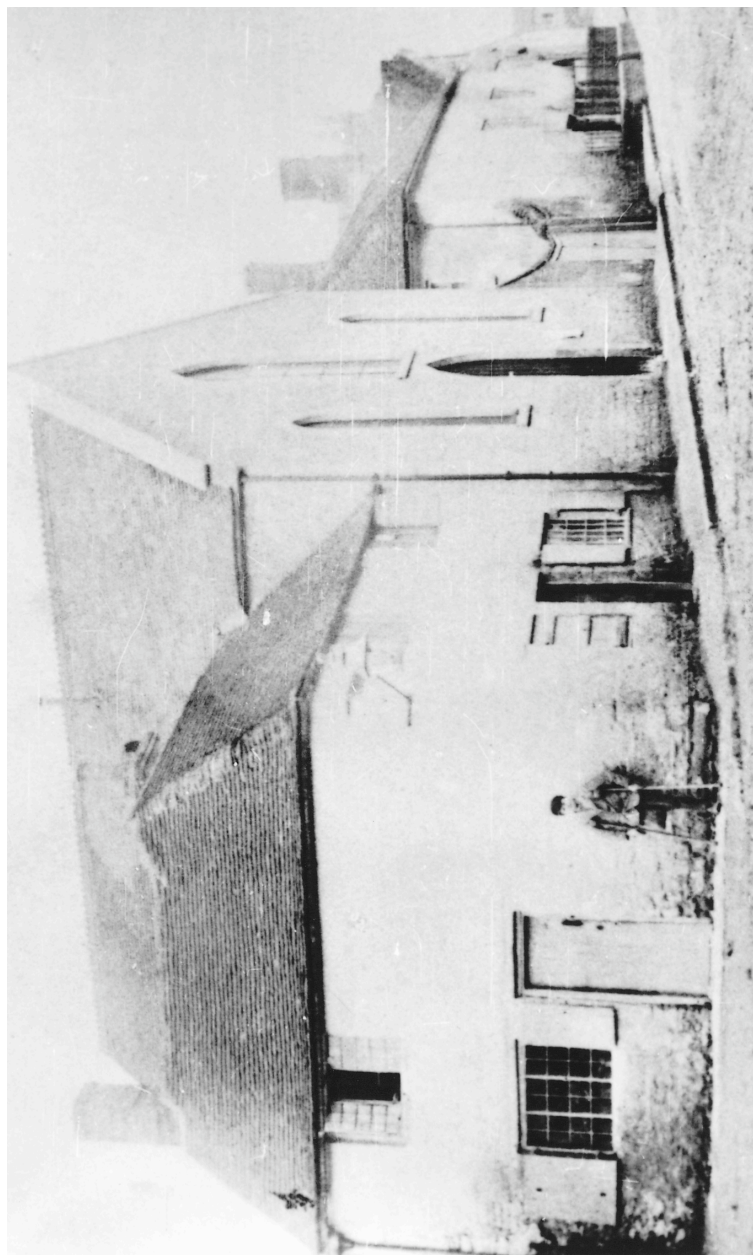
(sic!) by offering cut-price clothing and blankets to get them to come. A suggested sanction was to refuse poor benefit to parents with children on the loose during the day.

In 1818 Mitcheldene in High St became the National School. 59 boys and 56 girls attended in 1826. In 1836 the Dissenters opened a Night School for young men under Mr Thomas Smith. In 1841 the Head of the National School revealed that there had been dispute over enrolling the children of Dissenters. When the Head resigned in 1846, Squire Ashurst accused the Wheatley Dissenters of opening a school to take advantage of the vacancy. He may have been right. There was also an infant school on Bell Lane. The new Vicar (Elton) of the new Parish of Wheatley set about building a Vicarage (Morland House) a Church (St Mary's) and a new School (next to the Church). In 1863 Vicar Elton added a Night School, two nights a week, which lasted until 1914 with an average of about 30 scholars.

Nationally the Nonconformists hitched themselves to the cause of non-denominational schools and Sunday and Night School. They had neither the funds nor the existing parish structures which gave the Established church such a head start. In 1870 universal schooling became law and local Boards had to be elected by popular vote. No record survives of the numbers attending Wheatley Chapel Night School nor the Sunday School until 1888, although the mid-19th century censuses often refer (under *Occupation*) to children as "Sunday Scholars". The village had around 200 boys and 200 girls in the middle of the century, out of a total population of 1040. Parish School logbooks also refer to the Chapel Sunday School.

## **Social unrest**

The rural economy boomed and busted for the rest of the century, depending on wars, empire and trade policies. The population continued its rapid increase but enclosure, mechanised farming and market fluctuations meant there was a surplus of country folk. They were encouraged to emigrate as colonists and Wheatley people joined them. Vicar Elton noted in his diary in 1873 "Many emigrants are leaving the parish". In 1870, riots on Littleworth Common involved two to three hundred at a time. They turned loose the local farmers' cattle which had been put to pasture on the poor man's common land. Labourers with established village names and related to chapel members were arrested and charged—Munt, Tombs, Messenger, Shepherd and Clark. The first were sent down in May, and a second riot broke out in June. "Riot" was a measure of anger on one side and, as a serious crime for which the military could be called out, a measure of fear on the other. The National Agricultural Labourers Union was formed and Wheatley had two representatives (both from Chapel families) at County level in 1873—4, but they were powerless against the landowner interest.



Barn-chapel and cottages after 1880 when the chapel gable was raised and before 1898 when the schoolroom was built. Note stovepipe on roof for the heating. The one-legged villager may be Richard Summers, a Crimean War pensioner, who married Martha Tombs in 1860 and ran a sweet shop in High Street till his death at 76 in 1905. (OCC Photo. Archives. DLA)

## The Membership Roll 1852—75

(See back for Roll 1841—50)

- 1852 *Harriet Messenger* (b.1830 Miles; m. Richard, son of Holton Parish Clerk)
- 1854 *Henry Allen* (1833—1915; son of Thos and Frances; brickmaker and railway worker; m. Martha Shepherd; Chapel Deacon 1875)  
*Mr [James] Cornish* (1828—1906; agric labourer; m. Maria Currill, Littleworth; d. Sarah m. Wm Merritt.)  
*Thomas Knight* (Pastor)  
*Mary Knight* (Pastor's wife)
- 1856 *Ann Bishop* (possibly wife of Jas B., blacksmith and farrier)
- 1857 *Edward Cook, Tetsworth. Left for Melton Mowbray*  
*Mrs Sherwin, Gt Haseley.*
- 1859 *Mrs Ann Hayward, from Luton, later Mrs R. Merritt* (Cottage used for meetings)  
*Sarah Fowler*
- 1860 *Mr Shrimpton, from London, to Chip. Norton, to Wycombe.* (Possibly Gt Haseley)  
*Mr [Moses] Thorn, Forest Hill* (1804—98; labourer; Bell Lane)  
*Ellen Betts, Gt Haseley*  
*Sarah Parker, to Melton Mowbray*  
*Mrs Thorp, (nee Stone, 1833—71; fieldworker and housewife)*  
*Rosa, Mr and S Walker.*
- 1862 *Mrs Lamb*  
*Mrs [Thomas] Munt* (Harriet, dressmaker, b.1831; m. T. Munt, 1827—90, woodcutter and beerseller of 'Blenheim')  
*Joseph Chapman, (Butcher and probably uncle of Mary who went to America)*  
*Leon Poynter; to Wood Green.*  
*John Merritt, Died 1883* (son of Richard and Elizabeth)
- 1863 *Mrs [Elizabeth] Quarterman, restored, died 1881* (b. 1803)  
*Mrs Murray* (Pastor's wife)  
*Thomas Talent* (Cuddesdon)  
*Henry Howard* (Cuddesdon)
- 1866 *James Cornish* (see 1854)
- 1867 *Sarah Harriet Stamp* (1844—1909 Woodstock; shopkeeper; wife of Frederick)  
*William Merritt* (1828—71, agric. labourer.)  
*Emma Merritt, (nee Bull, 1829—72; second wife of William)*  
*Martha Allen* (nee Shepherd; married to Henry Allen above)  
*James Jefferies* (Pastor)

- 1868      *Fred Stamp* (1846—1922; Rural Post Messenger; ex Cheltenham; m. to Sarah.)  
             *Mrs [Mary] Brown*, (b 1815; wife of William 1805—c.1881)
- 1869      *William Faith* (Pastor)  
             *Mary Faith* (Pastor's wife)
- 1870      *Elizabeth Quarterman* (see above 1863)
- 1874      *Mary Dover* (1813—95; nurse; m. to William, agric. labourer)
- 1875      *Phoebe Stanley*  
             (Eleven named from Gt Haseley.)

The circle of “Attenders” has always been wider than that of enrolled “Members” of the Congregation. Save for the Gt Haseley “Eleven”, admitted in March 1875 but little seen afterwards, it seems to confirm the Minute Book record of December 1876, after twelve months of the ministry of Edwin Bird: *“The congregations were very thin when Mr Bird first came, particularly Wheatley. They have very much increased. The church has received 13 new members, six by confession [profession] and seven by transfer. The Sunday School Wheatley has both scholars and teachers added to it. The year [1876] was brought to a close with a Watch Night Service at which about 70 persons met. Some were present who had never entered the Chapel before. Many felt it good to be there. A Band of Hope was started in November and when the year closed it had nearly 50 members.”* A broom was sweeping, even if a wind was not quite blowing and Fred Stamp's enthusiasm for the new start shows clearly throughout his Minutes as Church Secretary.

## V

# The Energetic Ministry of Edwin Bird

### 1875—87

Mr Bird and his wife Emma came from the Stokenchurch Independent Chapel. An energetic forty, he went down well with the Wheatley congregation when supplying the vacant pulpit in 1875. They asked unanimously for him to stay on. At the end of one year, Joshua Harris (1843—1917), with Frederick Stamp (1846—1922) and soon Charles Shepherd (1844—1905) were Mr Bird's keenest and most energetic young supporters. Mr Stamp wrote in the Minute Book, "*if facts are allowed to speak for themselves it must be pronounced a very successful year. An effort was made to make the Wheatley Chapel more comfortable... to put in a new gallery, reseat the Chapel throughout as far as the front of the Gallery. The money was got and paid by the end of the year.*" Harris went on to note an immediate increase in numbers.

It is basic to Congregationalism that the congregation decides. Neither pastor nor committee can foist their wishes on the meeting. They can swing or steer meetings, depending on their personality and strength of persuasion. In 1875, everyone agreed something needed doing. Edwin Bird had charisma, belief and energy. He made things move from the outset and spent 12 years in post, putting the Chapel on the map again. Harris, Stamp and Shepherd attended meetings faithfully and no chore was too much. For the first Good Friday Tea (anniversary of the first Chapel Roll, March 1843), Mr Harris made and supplied a cake weighing 100lbs; Mr Stamp provided the tea and sugar. Both, as successful shopkeepers in Wheatley High Street, brought business sense to the running of the Chapel. Mr Harris acted as Chapel Treasurer for years, Mr Stamp as Secretary and Mr Shepherd later as Sunday School Superintendent.

### **The Pew Rent Experiment**

Mr Harris proposed and took charge of collecting Pew Rents. The pew seats, newly installed, were duly measured at 20 inch intervals, labelled, mapped and offered at a sliding scale of between one shilling and sixpence per posterior. The most expensive were to be nearest the entrance. Those nearest the pulpit were "quite free". (Was this significant, or merely inspired by theatre and music hall seating?) Renting 82 places on the ground floor and 40 places in the gallery did bring in an annual income of between £7 and £8, 1876—86. It should have brought much more.

At first, in 1876, 26 rentals were left untaken out of 122; this figure doubled and trebled by 1880. When they closed the gallery that year after misbehaviour, the harmonium had to come down to ground level and 20 rent places were lost. Paradoxically, renting increased, with only 36 left untaken out of 102. For some



CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL,  
HASELEY.

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# AN EIGHT-DAYS MISSION

WILL BE CONDUCTED IN THE ABOVE CHAPEL BY

**MR. & MRS. ORE,**

OF WHEATLEY,

Commencing on SUNDAY, February 19th, 1893.

SPECIAL HYMNS WILL BE SUNG.

*Services commence on Sunday at 3 and 6 p.m.  
Each Weeknight at 7 o'clock.*

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“PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD.”

---

OXFORD HOUSE,

WHEATLEY *Oct 27 1887*

*Wheatley Chapel*

THE INDUSTRIOUS SHALL PROSPER



NOTHING WITHOUT LABOUR.

Bought

*Frederick Stamp*  
Grocer & Tea Dealer.  
Provision Merchant, &c.

GENERAL DRAPERY, CLOTHING, & BOOT WAREHOUSE.

*1. 11. 7. 11*

Wheatley and Great Milton,

*July 26<sup>th</sup> 1912*

*M. Sunday School apt*

Bought of **J. HARRIS,**

Grocer, Draper & General Warehouseman.

BEDSTEADS, BEDDING, LINOLEUMS, MATTINGS, PAPER HANGINGS,  
LAMPS, &c.

BOOTS AND SHOES.  
READY-MADES.

TERMS—  
CASH.

BOYS' AND MEN'S  
HATS AND CAPS.

CHINA, GLASS AND EARTHENWARE.

Bread		2	1
4 Butter $\frac{1}{4}$		5	4
Milk		1	6
Nuts		1	6
Qy Sweets		2	6

Billheads from shopkeepers Fred Stamp and Joshua Harris, 1887 and 1912.

reason Mrs Bird herself stopped renting in 1884. By 1885, 52 places were unrented out of 102 and in the last year some 68 were left vacant. The serious depression and hard winter of 1886 helped account for much of the slump. In 1887, the year Edwin Bird resigned and the income halved, pew rents stopped. They were never resumed. It seems odd that they were tried in the first place. One of the abuses rooted out of the Church of England some years before was the reserving of seats. It hinted at exclusiveness and brought money and class distinction too close to the liturgy. In times of depression such as 1886, those who had to stop payment were shown up by having to move seats—or did not come at all. The innovation may have been a yearning for “respectability”, common among dispossessed minorities. Working class chapels across the country were becoming increasingly middle class.

It was proposed at the outset that the pew rent income be put towards an extra £20 “bonus” for the pastor, along with the Good Friday Tea takings and a door collection. It was called “The Minister’s Supporting Fund”. Joshua Harris was a warm advocate of the idea. Payment by results was, after all, a Victorian ideal, already realised in schools—money (capitation grant) for pupils and staff was cut or raised according to school standards. (The “ideal” was abolished in 1890.) The congregation objected to this use of the money. A second meeting was called. Twenty voted for some increase, £5 per annum, but five did vote against even that. Edwin Bird’s honeymoon period was perhaps ending. Like many ministers of the time, he frequently dipped into his own pocket in later years to donate or to see that no bills were owed.

## Temperance and Alcohol

Drink flowed in the mid-nineteenth century. Cheap gin, porter and beer also made up for the lack of tap water. Littleworth had no running water as late as 1874 and no sewer until 1951. The Victorian Army suffered so badly from drink-related problems that it allowed a Temperance movement in the ranks. The Irish Catholics had Pledge and Pioneer Societies for some decades. Wheatley had many public houses and beermakers, considerably more than now. *The Chequers* ale-house was just across from the Chapel. *The Sun* innkeeper had been one of the earliest chapel founders. Several members, including Mr Elderfield from *The Bell* were from public house families. Even in school mathematics, children were taught wine measures.

We have no Minute Book or details of the Band of Hope, which formed in Mr Bird’s first year. It may be that most of the 50 founder members least needed it! Already in 1874 a Temperance Association was meeting in the National School in the evening. Mr Bird allowed the Band of Hope to use the Chapel. In 1877 one Chapel member, “*a reformed man*”, was re-admitted after re-signing the Pledge, but he failed to appear on the Sunday of his welcome, having “*disgraced himself with drink*” the previous week. From that same year the Millers of Shotover made

regular donations to the Chapel and to its social work. Mrs Miller later built *The Merry Bells* Coffee Tavern, the non-alcoholic public house in High Street, in 1888. She was keen on the Temperance movement although no prohibitionist herself. She was also well-disposed towards the Dissenters.

Temperance involved providing alternative attractions—evening classes, evening entertainment, bands. The sight of a Temperance Band or the Salvation Army Band was a village event. A wholesome message was conveyed with wholesome music. Uniform and marching bands appealed to everyone at the height of the Victorian Empire. In fact, along with rising membership rolls throughout the period of Mr Bird's pastorate, signs appear of Chapel members linking with, if not being lost to other religious groups: "*left for the Salvation Army*"; "*left to help the Wesleyans in Wheatley but not to be members of them*". Dissenters had a flexibility which allowed them to respond to situations, which established churches did not enjoy.

In 1888 at the Good Friday Tea, when volunteers seemed hard to get and a cloud hung over the chapel community, "*a number of young people connected with us met for the practice of hymns and with the assistance of members of the Salvation Army, many of whom had been allied to us, a most enjoyable time was spent.*" It was a far cry from the knee-jerk of 1883, when a Church Meeting announced, "*Some of our members, teachers and scholars have been wearing the badges of the Salvation Army. All must do their best to discountenance it in the future.*" In the National School up the lane the children learned and sang "Temperance songs" and had "Temperance Teas" in the classroom, (after learning the wine measures!) In 1889 the entire community combined for a village "Temperance Fete", no doubt encouraged by the new *Merry Bells* the pub with no beer.

## **The Sunday School**

The Chapel Sunday school registered 61 Scholars attending in 1851. The next figures are found mirrored in the logbooks of the Church of England School up the lane on Church Road. School was a place for hard work and great treats—from the Millers of Shotover and the Eltons of the Vicarage. Acknowledgement was made every summer of Dissenters' children attending their Chapel Sunday School Treat and Tea. The total infant school population peaked at 80 in 1874; the Headmistress recorded in September 1872, "Had very good attendance until Friday when most of the children were absent at a Tea Party"—no mention of Chapel. In July 1879, "Very small attendance due to a Tea Party being held at the Chapel" — after seven years this was progress! Each year the same report was made, until in 1883 a half-day holiday was given to allow for the Tea Party. In 1884, perhaps connected with Vicar Elton's departure after 36 years, it was given twice, for "Chapel Sunday School Treat" in July and then, most sympathetically, "half holiday to enable the Chapel Sunday School Children to go to their Tea" in August. (As good Independents they had been going for years anyway.)

In the older school they were already giving half-holiday “in consequence of the Chapel feast” in 1875. The following year “only 67 children present, the rest gone to Chapel Tea Party.” This was from a school roll of some 150. In 1890 when the school roll had again gone down to 120, the Head could still write in the logbook, “40 or 50 children away at Chapel Sunday School Treat”. It was also a sign of warmer feelings between Church and Chapel in the village after the waspishness of Mr Elton. He was a product of his time — his diary for 1880 records that a Deanery meeting “decided that the bells should not be used at Dissenting funerals.”

Mr Bird was old enough to remember the worst of bad blood between Church and Chapel and to be affected by the suspicions which accompanied it. His paramount need was for money for his projects. With a new Vicar in Church Road and a warmer relationship between church and chapel, it seemed a good time to act. In 1886 he walked the short distance from his large house on Church Road opposite the top of Friday Lane to attend a Parish Church meeting. There he asked to borrow an old account book to examine Wheatley charity bequests. Money had long been invested in land, the rent of which was to pay for the education of the village poor. He found rents long unrevised, some not even paid since 1844 and Squire Ashurst of Waterstock enjoying some benefit as a result. A considerable sum was still in hand. Money, it appears, had gone to the Parish Sunday School and the National School: Bird felt it should have been distributed more fairly, including to his own Scholars. They too were village children, among the poorest, and the Chapel was helping school them. *“I made this known to the Board and they preferred to know nothing; I went to the Vicar [Firmstone] and he knew nothing. The late Vicar [Elton] said there had been a new scheme.”*

## Depression

Unemployment, poverty and savage winters hit the village badly in the mid 1880's. The gentry and the clergy of Holton, Wheatley and Shotover did their best to help through the schools and the churches. Colonel Miller of Shotover created work, like leaf-sweeping, in order to give dignity as well as a dole. Mrs Miller had *The Merry Bells* built, partly as a job creation. The Chapel had a thriving Coal and Clothing Club with local shops, started under Mr Bird, but many proved unable to keep up payments in the depression. Membership dropped from 90 to 20; village shopkeepers lost the trade. Gifts to the poor and sick dropped from £3 to £1. Pew rents were affected badly. The Good Friday Tea which had been 8 pence in 1877 was fixed at 6 pence in 1879 (and incredibly remained at that price until the Great War of 1914, no doubt with reduced content!) Mr Bird also took a pay cut, *“in consequence of the inability of the church to raise the larger amount.”*

*“Toward the end of January [1886] as the weather was severe and many were out of employment, a kind gentleman, Col Miller, put a sum of money into the Pastor's hands to spend as he thought fit in relieving the distress. A portion was given away, in cash to urgent and deserving cases. The balance was spent firstly*

*in preparing a soup supper for all the poor children of the village, about 120 being present. Bread and Jam followed the soup. All enjoyed it most thoroughly. Secondly, in preparing an excellent tea for all the men out of work, married and single. The wives of the former were also invited. A goodly number of friends assisted. Several were present who had never entered the Chapel before and a few earnest words were spoken such as will not be forgotten by those who were present."*

The Chapel's more direct contact with the poorer end of village society was acknowledged. Two years later Mrs Miller invited the labourers and their wives of Wheatley and Shotover to a meal for the grand opening of the Merry Bells. Some 450 attended that occasion. By then Mr Bird had resigned under a cloud. Mrs Miller made sure he was not forgotten, even though the invitation reached him only the evening before. He spoke, briefly and wittily, sharing the platform with the Vicars of Wheatley and Forest Hill. In the body of the hall Fred Stamp and Joshua Harris did the catering. Destitution, and soup kitchens had been a part of Wheatley life. In tackling this distress, Church and Chapel came closer together. They could actually meet in public at last and share the same prayers and concerns.

## **Bursting Seams**

The membership expanded in Mr Bird's time and so did the walls of the old bark barn. In 1878 *"the exterior of the chapel is so unsafe we must make an effort to put it in order."* There was even talk of a schoolroom being built over the chapel. An estimate was received for re-roofing, and raising the front gable above the roof. Colonel and Mrs Miller donated to the fund; a "Bazaar" was held to meet the £100 bill and Slater's Yard, complete with awnings to guard against rain, hosted the scene. It lasted two days. On the second it rained, so a third day was added *"more goods having come in"*. It was also in competition that day with Wheatley Feast held in the old cattlemarket in *The Crown* yard. The bill was well and truly covered and surplus was even sent down to help the new Cowley Rd Chapel make some more money. Another bill was also met from the proceeds: *"the cottage adjoining the chapel as damaged by us in putting the chapel in order [to] be put right at our expense."* In 1881 the south wall still bulged and iron S-ties were used *"to prevent it spreading further"*.

To put the mark of approval on the way things were going in Wheatley, Joseph Thornton, founder of the Oxford booksellers and *"one of the founders of the Sabbath School"* and Charles Davis the first minister from that same period, now serving Wallingford, were invited to the next Good Friday Tea in 1879. About 120 sat down, *"not quite as good as former years."* Between 1876 and 1887 over sixty new members were enrolled, not to mention unlisted "attenders". Mr Bird inspired. One woman was *"led to the Lord by the pastor"*; another spoke of *"our present Pastor as instrumental in God's hands leading her to the Saviour."* Posthumous membership was even given to Hannah Gomm, *"she having looked on herself and spoke of being in membership."* Not surprisingly, they asked the

Congregational Union to see to Mr Bird's ordination. Ordination gave some status alongside the Established clergy.

The Minutes start to speak of Sunday, rather than the Sabbath or Lord's Day; members are referred to as Brother and Sister, not just Friends. The Cripps family of Wheatley Mill started to attend, strict Baptists from Waddesdon whose children's names—Obadiah, Ezra, Amos and Ebenezer—reflected their parents' evangelical belief. Bird preached on the death of William Pull in 1879, one of the founder members of 1843. *"All his children were present and many of their relations also attended."* They were, hopefully, not the youngsters who, that same year, were responsible for the closure of the gallery due to *"misconduct of the young people not being as good as it ought to be"*.

Bird led a Christmas Mission in 1879 lasting fourteen days. *"Services every week night in the Chapel, on Sunday in Chapel and at two cottages at the upper end of the village ...well attended ..."* Expenses were paid for use of part of the subdivided Manor House belonging to Mrs Brown and for a cottage at Littleworth. Speakers like Professor Legge from the University, a famous missionary to China, were brought in on weekday evenings to raise money, to edify and to distract from drink. Collections were held for the Radcliffe Infirmary, for Indian Famine relief in 1877 and the annual gifts to the Poor and Sick of Wheatley went up from £2 to £3. Even Huntley and Palmer biscuits (who have long made their money from church meetings!) donated ten shillings to the chapel.

They bought an organ second-hand from Thame. Until then, Joshua Harris had played a harmonium which was evidently going home. Thame Congregationalists offered theirs for £20. Mr James Ring carried it by cart *"with one truss of hay for packing"* for another 14 shillings. A Huddersfield company came down to install it *"where the pulpit now stands"*. It proved impossible, however, to sell off the pulpit.

True to Congregational principles, in 1882, 30 or 40 members, including the Sunday School teachers, discussed the effectiveness of their mission tactics, including services, preaching, open air sessions and the prayer meetings in chapel and cottages. *"Many wise suggestions were made"* including being more punctual, shorter prayers and *"more direct, better singing, especially at outdoor services."*

Whatever problems lurked in the shadows, Mr Bird's time was one of expansion, concern and activity. James Hinton had warned against the paradox of such times of success. Something spiritual, he said, was always lost to pay for it. Edwin Bird's resignation in March 1887 cannot now be explained. There may have been marital or personal reasons, or some sort of breakdown after spreading thin so much of his energy, or a crisis of faith or even some unrecorded friction within the community. One clue survives in a scribbled draft minute of a January meeting in 1887 at the back of an account ledger. *"After a discussion of personal matters, Mr Bird came in by request of the meeting."* This is omitted from the formal minutes of the same meeting. The resignation itself was drawn out and painful for all concerned.

## The Pastor Resigns

Mr Bird resigned in March and left in June 1887, hoping *“they should so part that it would be a pleasure to meet again. He was not leaving the neighbourhood for a short time. He hoped to be present at the Sunday School anniversary. He hoped they would keep together and that a greater blessing would rest upon them in days to come than in the days gone by”*. They had asked Bird to stay on until he finally removed from the village, but this was opposed by the County Association, who advised *“It was best for him to resign and leave at the end of June.”* In November they advertised the vacant pulpit in *The Christian World*.

The Congregation limped along for another year, in some financial straits and having to ask for £50 from the Church Aid Society. A special meeting was told in October 1877 that the deacons had been handed 277 names of people wanting to *“return Mr Bird to the pastorate of the above church”*. Fred Stamp, Church Secretary, spoke warmly of Mr Bird’s work and how he had raised £200 for the building *“and what is more gratifying, giving the names of those won for Christ through his instrumentality, many being there to witness for the same.”*

Despite a counter-motion, it was agreed by nearly all the 65 present that the 277 names were not to be read out. The voters would not even allow a committee to be formed to deal with the issue. In what seems to have been a “packed” meeting in every sense, 58 voted for Mr Bird’s return, 7 voted against. Fred Stamp in the chair tried desperately to find a way through the impasse. The villagers were usurping the rights of the Congregational members. Perhaps this was the price to be paid for Bird’s realising the Congregational principle of identifying with the local community

In December 1887, an ordinary Church Meeting agreed that the *“names now on the Church book be considered the Church”*. In other words, no “packed” meeting could vote as if it was a church vote. The meeting then agreed to ask Oxford (George Street) to approve Mr Bird’s return. Again in January, they voted the same, seconded by Mr Stamp. Oxford ignored them. However Mr Bird, still living on Church Road, heard of the meeting and asked *“that his name be left out of our considerations”*. At this a bitterly disappointed Fred Stamp, angry at the way George Street had gone against the wishes of the Wheatley congregation, resigned as Church Secretary. He also *“withdrew himself entirely from the Cause and left the meeting before the [last] motion was put.”* He took with him the Church Book, en route to a new congregation which was already forming in Mr Bird’s house just a stone throw away.

In March 1888, with minds firmly set because of the breakaway congregation, the Church Meeting voted unanimously against a motion for Mr Bird’s return. Feeling ran so high that an additional unanimous motion was carried that he should not return. *“Dr Murray from George Street gave a short address urging all to charitable and kindly judgement of those who differ from us and have gone out from us and hoped that they may one day see their way to return.”*



## The Henley Hearing

In April the County Association met at Henley and considered “*the conduct of the Rev Edwin Bird*”. It was reported that he had “*refused to give up possession of the Church Book*” after resignation; that “*returning to the place, he had tried to get himself re-elected minister by a minority*”; finally that “*failing to get possession of the Church, Mr Bird has commenced services in his own house attended by some of his old congregation. They had elected him their minister and he and they claimed to be the Independent Church at Wheatley, and demanded possession of the building, refusing arbitration. They had destroyed the peace and unity of the Church.*”

In response to these damning accusations, Bird admitted that he had been approached by 300 men, women and children of the village to come back. This was also endorsed by a public meeting in the Chapel. He admitted too that he had had services at home and still held the Church Book, “*in his house, if not in his power*”.

Mr Bird then lunched, listened, reflected and withdrew his defence altogether, apologising and asking “*forgiveness from God and his brethren for any rash or hasty statements he had made.*” An impasse caused by human frailty took on the character of some of the good people involved. That summer Mrs Miller thoughtfully placed Mr Bird on the platform at the opening of *The Merry Bells*.

## VI

### To the Eve of War 1889—1914

Alexander Pay was invited to become minister in June 1889. While the Chapel was re-limewashed and cleaned, services were held upstairs in *The Merry Bells*. Attendances rose (after slumping in the uncertainty of the previous two years,) a Young People's Guild was started and application was made for the Chapel to be licensed for marriage. They also added Venetian blinds at the front of the gallery to curtain off a schoolroom. New members were enrolled, but due to death, removal and lapsing, the overall roll was down by one third. A small breakaway congregation also worshipped elsewhere. Edwin Bird, torn between his public apology and local demand, conducted at least two funerals in Wheatley, 1890-91: Ada Ring aged 12 and Isaac Weller aged 83. He lived with his wife on Church road (today, No 49), with Anne Munt as a young maidservant and two middle aged lady lodgers from Essex, one of them blind. The 1891 Census listed him as "Congregational Minister", titling the then minister, Albert Ore as "Congregationalist evangelist preacher".

Annual collected income remained roughly at £37 until 1898, although in 1891 they did ask the minister to say ominously on a Sunday morning that the collections were "*not enough to continue Divine worship in Wheatley,*" a threat which can only be used once! By the turn of the century, the membership roll was less than 20 and Sunday attendance down to about 20 adults with 20 children. Income went down accordingly. Matters had improved by the three recorded years 1907—1909 when adult attendance rose back to over 50 and children to around 35; income went up to nearly £50 p.a. The one constant under Charles Shepherd's superintendence was the number at Sunday School. Annual average attendance was 50 in 1888, rising to 80 in 1892, levelling down to some 40 p.a. up to 1902 and then averaging 55 between 1906—1909. By then Charles Shepherd was dead.

*"Considering the very trying experience the Wheatley church went through in the last two years, there is much reason to thank God and take courage,"* wrote Mr Pay at the end of 1889. *"The state of the cause in Wheatley is full of promise and hope and the money raised during the year is believed to be greater than the amount raised in any former year in the history of the church."*

WHEATLEY  
Congregational Chapel.

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THE  
ANNIVERSARY SERVICE

WILL BE HELD ON

*Good Friday, April 13, 1900,*

WHEN

A PUBLIC TEA will be provided in the Schoolroom

AT FIVE O'CLOCK. TICKETS, SIXPENCE EACH.

---

*At Seven o'clock the Guild will render a SERVICE of SONG,*

ENTITLED

“THE RIVER SINGERS,”

CONNECTIVE READINGS BY

Rev. S. B. DIXON, of Tetsworth.

Rev. J. PLOMMER will preside.

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Tickets for Tea may be had of Mrs. Taylor, 186, Cowley Road, and Mr. Geo. Howes, 48, Walton Street, who will be glad to receive the names of any desiring to go out by brake.

A Train leaves for Oxford at 10.40.

THE PASTOR WILL PREACH ON EASTER SUNDAY,  
APRIL 15TH.

A HEARTY WELCOME TO ALL.

Collections in aid of Church Fund.

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## Street Violence

Mr Pay and the congregation had the support of Joshua Harris as Treasurer and the Cockney newcomer, William Iliffe Pike, as Secretary, now that Fred Stamp worshipped elsewhere. Pike lived on Church Road, two doors from Edwin Bird. Tragically, by the end of February 1890 the new minister was in trouble, which he himself described to a Chapel Meeting. *“He was sitting at home being very unwell when his son [Ebenezer, a schoolboy at Wheatley School] came running in with his face bleeding and saying that he had been assaulted by a young man. Mr Pay, without taking time to consider ran out and the young man abused him and struck him. Mr Pay was not certain whether he returned the blow, but stated emphatically that if he did it was in self defence and that no man in Wheatley was more sorry for the occurrence. The Deacon [Mr Plumbridge] said it was excusable for any parent to defend his son. 19 out of 20 fathers would have done the same, [but that in Pay’s place] he would have considered it incumbent on him to resign.”* Mr Pay attended no more meetings after that sympathetic March discussion. He went in June and his three children, Ebenezer, Benjamin and Joseph, were withdrawn from school that summer. The Chapel lent him the money to pay the Magistrates Court fine.

Mr Ore was offered the pastorate for an initial twelve months. The congregation was now cautious and scandal-weary, as well as forgiving. Life resumed again. The chapel was finally registered for marriages. *“We are doing our utmost,”* wrote Albert Ore in 1890, *“to attract the careless non-churchgoing part of the population to our Chapel by holding Open Air services on Sunday and giving lectures and entertainment etc in the week, as well as conducting Cottage meetings at Littleworth. At Haseley, things are not so encouraging. Deaths, removals, Church influence etc have reduced us to a small company.”* Overall membership at Haseley was 37, of whom 8 were nominal. Mr Ore was appointed by unanimous vote to a permanent post after 12 months. He lodged with the Hancock family in Kiln Lane.

## Albert Ore, Pastor

Fred Stamp, who had not been seen on Chapel premises since he walked away with the Church Book in 1888, appears to have been with another ‘free’ congregation worshipping in the old schoolroom at Mitcheldene. He was asked—and agreed—to be a new Trustee of Gt Haseley chapel. It was a conciliatory way towards ending an unhappy episode. He continued to act as Oxford Chronicle agent (reporter) for the village and for Chapel events, but held no further office until his death in 1922. Haseley and Wheatley were also made a “United Church” in an effort to maintain the little outpost. A minor ‘spat’ took place with Mr Kingerlee the builder, a Congregationalist himself. A diplomatic but firm Joshua Harris showed his business teeth as Treasurer. Mr Kingerlee had

done the repair works of 1890. His bill was long outstanding. He was one of their own and had donated generously (£5) to the fund which was eventually to pay his bill. On Feb 18th 1891, Chapel Meeting expressed “*indebtedness for the repairs done to the Chapel*” and asked for the bill. A week later, reeling from shock, “*we regret the account was not rendered earlier as the amount is much larger than we anticipated and also that the repairs are not quite satisfactory.*” They asked him to remedy the defects and reduce the bill!

An older and seamier split between Church and Chapel seemed to be coming to an end. Mr Ore married and a letter was read out from Mr Sturges, Vicar of Wheatley, wishing happiness to the newly-wed couple. Colonel and Mrs Miller continued to give to the chapel annually. On the negative side, windows were smashed and a reward notice put up. Measles and diphtheria reminded all villagers of their mortality.

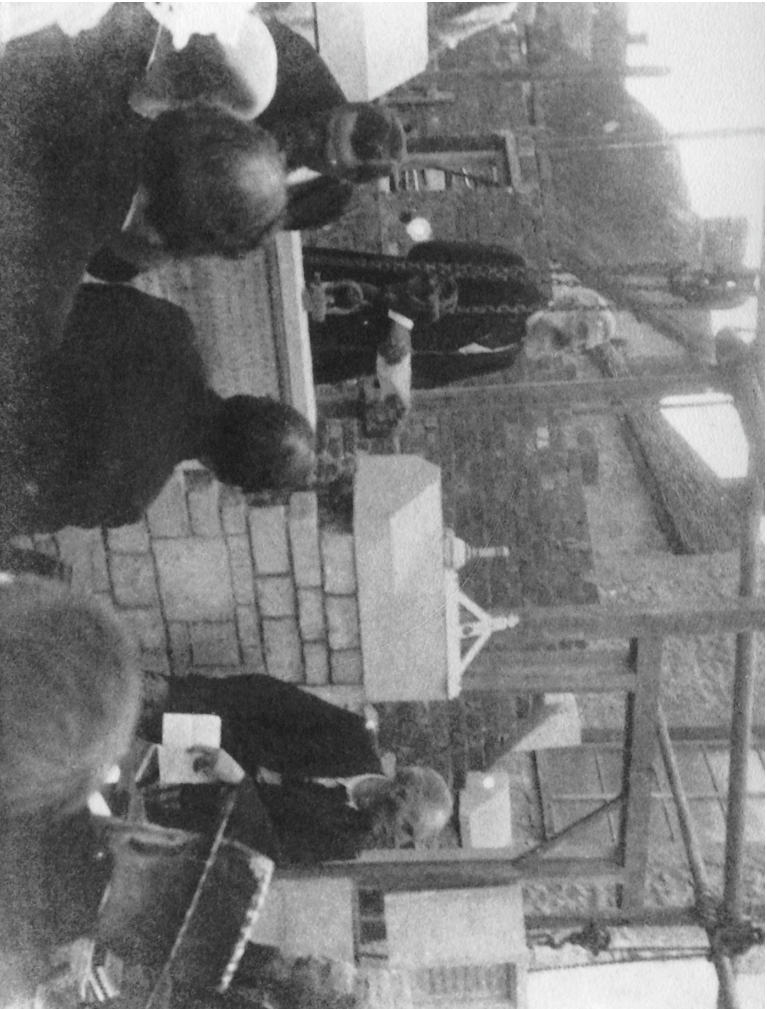
Albert Ore worried about the gradual decline at Haseley since he came. It was put down to death, removal, the opening of a new chapel at Lt Milton and Established Church influence. Members added that an Institute or Reading Room now drew a lot of younger people from afternoon service. They also suggested the services needed younger people to lead them— “to assist” Mr Slatter who had joined the chapel in 1848! A new young harmonium player should also be encouraged. Mr Ore patiently (or witheringly) observed that she was 12 years old and knew “*no more than three or four tunes by ear*”.

In March 1894 he resigned and, in June, left for Castle Coombe. About 124 sat down for Good Friday Tea in *The Merry Bells* that year. After the summer, Albert Plommer was invited to be Pastor. Mr Harris thought him “*the most acceptable pastor they had had in many years ... loyal to the old gospel.*” In turn Mr Plommer promised to proclaim “*the Protestant evangelical faith and take a special interest in the young.*” The George Street pastor presided over Mr Plommer’s induction and said “*Wheatley has its special difficulties—rally round this pastor. I have married you to Mr Plommer but I have not put the ring on his finger as few of our ministers wear rings!*”

## **New Schoolroom or New Chapel?**

The pastor “*healed souls*” and “*repaired stovepipes*”. (Heating has always been a non-Biblical priority in Wheatley Chapel.) In 1896 when the anniversary tea was held, as usual in *The Merry Bells*, Joshua Harris compared the declining state of things at the end of Mr Ore’s pastorate with matters 21 years ago—significantly at the start of Mr Bird’s time. The loyalty which Edwin Bird had inspired was still there.

William Iliffe Pike, a Shoreditch Londoner, was enrolled as a member in 1896. He owned the lean-to cottage property on the side of the Chapel and gave it to the congregation for a building site. The problem was, what to build? The



Henry Hall, Sunday School Superintendent, lays Schoolroom Foundation Stone, September 1898

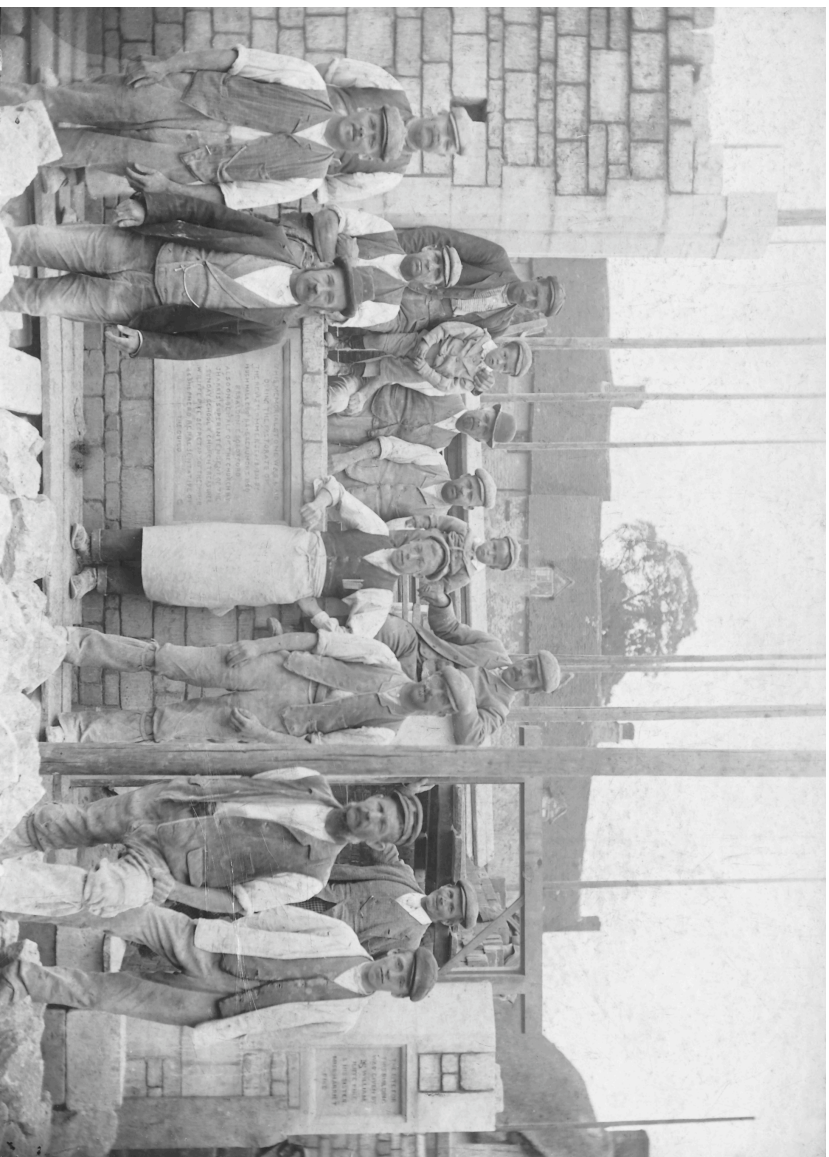
congregation wanted a new Sunday Schoolroom; the friends at Oxford on whom Wheatley depended financially wanted a new Chapel and the old one converted into a schoolroom. It could have been a destructive impasse. *"The majority were averse to building a new Chapel feeling it quite unnecessary, at the same time knowing we would need the aid of George Street whichever we built."* The meeting voted reluctantly to follow the George Street advice. George Street in turn and independently (in good Congregationalist tradition) conceded that expanded premises would be a burden for the future.

The local press gave great prominence to the laying of the foundation stone for the Schoolroom in September 1898. Henry Hall, a Sunday School Superintendent of many years, noted that *"village churches feed places of worship in cities and towns."* He spoke of the Puritan *"pioneers of the religious liberty we now enjoy"* and he said schooling was *"a spirit of enquiry"*. Then he warmed to his theme with some of the religious belligerence of the time. *"Now there are more Methodists than members of the Established Church. Independence has produced more strength of character than subjection to Bishops and priests. With them every man was a priest. Dissenters had brought popular education to any child in the land, [but he warned off] men behind the scenes who said "we shall build the schools and take care nothing shall be taught there save the Church Catechism. "No other working church [save nonconformists] could enable Christianity to live in the villages of England."* It was strong stuff. Iliffe Pike followed in similar vein: *"Nonconformity is opposed to sacerdotalism."* Councillor Kingerlee, builder, nonconformist and soon to be Mayor of Oxford, reserved the strongest attack for the evening. *"He respected pure Roman Catholics among whom there were some really good men, but not those at heart RC's who remained in the C of E because of the loaves and fishes attached to it. As Protestants they must live in permanent opposition to these people ... the schools were for the most part in the hands of priests whose one desire seemed to be to train the children for the great Church of Rome, which was making seven hundred converts a week."*

On Friday December 2nd 1898, Mr Kingerlee came back, this time as Mayor, to open the Schoolroom. He spoke again with passion, but observed a Mayor's neutrality. A week later the congregation were discussing the alteration of the Chapel front with *"decorated Gothic"* windows to correspond to the front of the new Schoolroom. The Victorian age not only poured out hymn books, but created a moonscape of mock-Gothic church architecture which still gives worship a ghostly mould. The Chapel was, after all, a simple bark barn or tannery building, symbolically non-conforming.

## Debt

The County Association advised against getting deeper into debt at this stage. Mr Robertson of George Street earthed the issue with an unusual observation, echoing



A day or two after the laying of the Schoolroom Foundation Stone, Charles Shepherd (centre back, standing) poses with son Frederick. Bruce Shepherd's father and the building team. September 1898.



James Hinton. *"He had an uneasy conviction, when he thought about their churches and schoolrooms and organs and furniture, that they made a dear reckoning."* Four years went by before the debt on the new building was lifted.

They were in considerable difficulty in 1900. New plant meant a round of sales of work and money-raising events. The Treasurer himself was owed money. Wheatley also had to subsidise the Pastor's journeys to Haseley, because Haseley had no funds. Mr Plommer was asked to take a £10 cut in salary and, understandably asked for a few days to consider the position. He *"stated his disinclination to accept the reduction of his stipend"* and by September 1900 he was preaching his farewell sermon. The business acumen of the local shopkeeper members came to the rescue. They trimmed even further, informing the County Association in 1901 that they did not want to consider a new Pastor, *"the best interests of the church will be served for the time being by local supplies"*. (Besides, a new stove was needed!) No annual return was sent, *"not having a good report to read and as we do not intend to ask for a grant this year there is no necessity to send in the schedule."* Only 10/- instead of the usual £2 was sent to the County Association. It was belt tightening with a vengeance, but they kept the price of the Good Friday tea down—three tickets for 1/- and 5d per single ticket. Only 40 attended in 1901. As usual the Millers of Shotover stepped in with donations knowing the chapel was on hard times. They had already given £25 towards the building fund.

As a final economy, Mansfield College was asked for help from their Pastor Students Scheme. They promised to put Wheatley on their books, but *"at present they were unable to take on any more out-stations."* In October 1902 the congregation decided two years without a resident pastor was enough. They would advertise and ask candidates themselves what they thought was a suitable stipend.

## **A Division Healed**

Meanwhile, Fred Stamp and the Friends at the Mission Hall were approached over a decade after the chapel community split. They were closing down their temporary place of worship in the old Boys National School building in the grounds of Mitcheldene, High St. Here the Anglican congregation had once worshipped in the 1850's while the new Church of St Mary's was being built. A letter was sent to Mr Stamp, *"inviting them to worship with us in the future and assuring them of a cordial and brotherly welcome."*

This and the advent of Mr Bell at the end of 1902 meant a report could be sent in saying the congregation had risen from 20 to 50 on Sundays and the Schoolroom debt was cleared. The week night service attendance doubled from 15 to 30 There was cause to celebrate as the July newspaper noted, *"Scholars and teachers accompanied by the Pastor and headed by the School Banner*

*perambulated [Wheatley] singing suitable hymns and afterwards took tea in Mr Harris' field. Games were engaged in and kept up till past 9pm."*

## **"Broadening Sympathies"**

Times were changing, and with them tastes and needs. In 1904 they voted that *"weeknight services be abandoned and that Mr Bell inaugurate a young people's service in its stead."* Mr Bell left for Brill and Mr Newton came into an altogether more cheerful situation with numbers up and finances improved to the point where they could now offer £35 towards the minister's total stipend of £70 instead of cutting it. They still asked Mrs Miller for her donation. The listing of *"influential names for the bill"* of the Good Friday anniversary Tea was routine. Harvest festival goods were also bought out by members. Mr Newton seems to have felt that moneyraising for the fabric, while necessary, was still inward-looking. Mr Thornton of the foundation Sunday School in 1839 was still able to turn up to the Good Friday Tea in 1907. Fred Stamp, back in the community and recently widowed, wanted to put up a memorial to his wife. That same year 1909 Mr Newton wrote his annual report to the County Association saying money had been raised, not only for redecorating (they introduced the middle aisle and closed the two side aisles) and the minister's salary fund, but also *"for the following objectives—County Union, London Missionary Society, Radcliffe Infirmary, Dr Barnardo's, in addition to gifts to the poor—for this broadening of the sympathies of our people we are truly grateful. In addition to our own Band of Hope work, a number of our people have rendered efficient service to the undenominational Temperance Society which has held many well-attended meetings in the village."*

No sooner had Chapel and Schoolroom been redecorated than the flood of 1910 swept down the High Street and defied the culverting of the Brook, depositing three feet of debris and water across floors and walls. Caleb Harris was paid £1 10s *"for washing Chapel and Schoolroom after the flood of June 9th."*

## **The Changed Anniversary**

The weekday cottage prayer meetings revived and a Gospel Mission was held in 1913, the year Mr Pike died. William Iliffe Pike left his house on Church Road, (Iliffe Cottage, now No 47), as a minister's house (Manse) and had already given property he owned for the Chapel school room. (The Manse house was sold in 1924, when the Chapel was under joint ministry with Cowley.) In 1914, after some seventy years, they changed the Good Friday anniversary. *"For some years the attendance has been small and it has been very difficult to obtain speakers."* The former Pastor, Mr Bell, was turned down in 1913 as a speaker, because travel reimbursement from Brill was too much for the Chapel to meet. Instead they asked the singers to fill in with a "Service of Song", which usually had an uplifting theme. *"The Puritans Daughter"* was presented again for the fifth time in a decade. Even the successors of the Puritans felt it was wearing thin. They moved

the Anniversary to Easter Sunday, a sign of greater interest in traditional liturgy and theology due to outside influences. It was 1914 and more than the Anniversary was to change that year.

## VII

### Modern Times 1914—1970

They always remembered that summer of 1914 as warm and unending. Territorial part-timers of the local Ox and Bucks Light Infantry were on summer fortnight camp when war broke out in August. Camp lasted another four years. A small professional Army was quickly swollen by Territorials and New Army civilian volunteers. The war with Germany and Turkey was fought in France, Belgium and the Middle East. The backbones of all the imperial armies were agricultural labourers in uniform. Conscripts replaced volunteers in 1916. Controversial writers and soldier poets came to Wheatley Station and were driven to stay at Lady Morrell's anti-war commune at Garsington. Over one hundred and eighty Wheatley men went away and thirty six did not return, including three Munts and a Shepherd. It was the end of closed community worlds. Villages, congregations, schools and social class would never be the same again after four million civilians had experienced active service and the reality of "patriotism". They came home changed and wanted to change home.

#### The Great War At Home

The Home Front saw rationing, the emancipation of women and the raising of skirt hems, time off school to pick hedge fruit, patriotic fund-raising and a great many tears for absent men. Life went on, irritably. Something certainly went wrong during the Sunday School Anniversary in 1915: "*We regret any misunderstanding over the playing of the organ on the School Anniversary and hope Mr B. will continue.*" He did continue, as he had done for fourteen years, but resigned in 1916. They sent him a silver-mounted ebony walking stick. It prompted a letter of complaint from him saying "*He had not even received a thank you from the church*", thinking the cane was from "*a few friends outside the church*". They wrote and explained and patiently thanked him again. Peacemaking and reconciling has been one of the Chapel's greatest characteristics. By now Fred Stamp was back in the bosom of the community and, with friends, organising "Services of Song" which were appreciated "*with great pleasure*". He also chaired Anniversary evening meetings.

The Chapel Anniversary was moved to November in 1915. In 1916 it was timed to coincide with "*a moon on that date*": anti-Zeppelin blackout was now law and there had been huge raids on London that summer. Meetings were adjourned from the Schoolroom to the gallery of the Chapel, due to lack of heating. Joshua Harris died in the fierce winter of 1916—17 and his old colleague Fred Stamp was the first to move a letter of condolence from the Congregation to Mr Harris's widow. Mr Stamp was now present at every church meeting and, in that same year, agreed to be reinstated to the Chapel membership roll, as if to fill Mr Harris' vacancy.

Pastor Newton was able to “*beg half pound of tea, one pound of butter and the bread for the Tea*” in 1917, in spite of that year seeing the highest tonnage of food convoys sunk by U-Boats. (The Tea remained at 6d as it had been since the 1870’s.) Money, not the enemy, was still the biggest problem in a Chapel community which traditionally disliked living beyond its means. It was mooted that a choir be formed to attract larger congregations; these in turn would give more to the collection plate. They sold the Chapel’s stringed instruments for £10. Leverhulme, the nonconformist manufacturer of “Sunlight Soap”, kindly donated £5. It was better that way.

## **Conflicting Anniversaries**

The congregation decided on the Anniversary Tea for November 10th 1918. A new enemy, more powerful than either warring side, stepped in—Spanish Influenza, the Grippe. It laid low half-battalions in all the armies. Schools closed across Europe. Thousands died. Resistance was low everywhere due to malnourishment on rationed and artificial food. The Wheatley congregation had to postpone the Anniversary Tea “*on account of the prevailing influenza.*” The following day, Monday the 11th, the guns went silent and peace followed seven months later. It would have proved hard to continue the annual Tea on such an anniversary.

Perhaps the casualties of war and of influenza prompted Fred Stamp to donate a bathchair to the Chapel “*for the use of convalescents or others needy of such a chair.*” The congregation threw in an air cushion and bedrest to complete the vehicle. The Temperance Society met to consider its future. A lady approached the Chapel with a tempting offer to open a private school in the Schoolroom. “*It was thought there was no opening for such a school in Wheatley.*” The congregation then decided to set up a Men’s Meeting. Many had come back scarred from the experience of war and were on the scrap heap either through disability or unemployment: “*If some of the men would like to smoke ... we would not object.*” It was a chastened if not a brave new world.

The Anniversary Tea remained at its mid-Victorian price throughout the period of the Depression. 70 attended the Tea in 1925. That year they straightened out the London Road as part of a job creation scheme and hunger marchers passed through from the North to London. It was also the year that the Oxford newspapers alleged serious religious discrimination behind the abrupt dismissal of a newly appointed Wheatley Village Nurse who was also a Chapel Member. She was replaced by a Church of England parishioner. Church and Chapel bigotry was still alive and well. Electric light came to the Chapel in 1929 and a baptism font was given in 1936 by the sister of the then minister, Mr Fry. Membership Rolls are missing and Chapel minutes are telegraphic.

## The Second War

The sirens sounded for another war and by Christmas 1939, *"permission was refused to use the Schoolroom for the entertainment of Evacuee schoolchildren owing to risk of damage. The old Mission Hall and the Hut being suggested as more suitable premises."* It was also agreed in January 1940 to have a combined Christmas party for all the children, village or Londoner, *"as long as the Sunday School children have another of their own."* The Sons of Temperance were also found to be in arrears with the rent. Times had certainly changed. The Vicar and the Minister even arranged each year to have Harvest Festivals on different Sundays to avoid clashing.

On the outbreak of the Second War the Chapel had 28 on its membership roll, 77 on its Sunday School roll and an attendance of 62 each Sunday. On the Anniversary, 1941, Frederick Thornton, bookseller and son of the founder of the 1839 Sunday School, was present, aged 81. *"Splendid services although they were held in the days of a bitter world war."* Another generation of men left the village in uniform, as their fathers had done, for many parts of the world. Nine did not come back.

Wartime brought its own unique attractions. In 1942 the congregation voted thanks to Mr Charles Harris *"for the fine way he blacked out our Chapel [for evening services] which is so much admired by all. It has added dignity to our evening worship and given pleasure to all who have taken part in our services."* Sadly this monument to good taste was removed in February 1945. Other churches with equally attractive blackouts were not so lucky. At first the Chapel refused to give to the Bombed Churches Fund. The Congregational Union, it was felt, had ignored them in recent years, *"only wanting our Church when it could be financially useful."* They felt more sympathetic in 1944, when the Fund asked for a collection "on the first Sunday after hostilities ceased": the Chapel raised £70 for the appeal. Chapel members also formed a Knitting Circle, (motto: *"Keep Moving"*) and made over 300 garments for the Services and Red Cross. In 1945 a Red Cross speaker prompted a collection in April. On the first Sunday after hostilities ceased, there was an agreed united service in the village Parish Church for everyone. The First War had levelled the fighting soldier; the Second War levelled the civilians.

As in 1919, great enthusiasm was voiced for memorials, *"a peace memorial ... something useful... even decorating and repairing the roof... an illuminated Roll Honour;"* none of which had materialised by 1948: Mrs Hinton wanted to know why. (The Chapel has two brass vases marking the deaths of Charles Hay and Edgar Pratt, together with the altar cross from the Military Hospital chapel at Holton Park, donated by Mr Watts.) There had been other distractions. The Chapel had been declared "unsafe". A Fete was held to raise money. They looked at Mr Tombs' land at the top of Friday Lane, along Church road to the right, but Mr Tombs refused to sell. No other sites were available and, given the hardships of 1947, the issue was closed. Severe winter cold made them abandon the AGM in

February 1947; villagers' ration books were issued again for the year at the Schoolroom; the wartime Nursery School in the Chapel closed down, reducing revenue still further. A building fund existed but it was low. Miss Cullum's house on Ladder Hill was offered to the Chapel at a good price but Congregational Union rules forbade purchase without a minister in residence. Ironically, there was no minister because there was no Manse, but without a minister, no Manse could be bought! James Hinton might have approved. In 1948 there was no Fete, although it was to become an annual event.

## Postwar

Bruce Shepherd came back from the war and, with a Chapel pedigree through two grandfathers, (Charles Shepherd and Caleb Harris,) back to great grandfather (Richard), revived Sunday School attendance back to between 60 and 70. The Church membership itself was at 70, a 90% increase in the 5 years since the war. With five dead and 5 removed in one year it rose again to 86 in 1953. The new minister was Mr Mackintosh, an American. This was no more strange than having Welsh ministers on the 1845 Chapel scene. Wheatley's first recorded American tourists passed through and stopped at The Crown in a stagecoach with Dr Johnson in 1784, in Sarah Allen's and Sam Standley's time. American Congregationalist students came out to help from Mansfield at the turn of the century. The great Universities of Yale and Harvard, not to mention the Pilgrim Fathers themselves, were of Congregationalist, Independent origin. However, "*one or two disturbing remarks as to whether Mr Mackintosh was suitable*" were heard. In the spirit of Congregationalism, an AGM saw the remarks challenged to the vote. Full confidence was offered to the Pastor.

It was a time of increasing fellowship between the churches. The American minister thanked, on leaving, "*all in the village for their help in his ministry and this meant thanks to people of both churches ... all who work for the same goal in this village.*" A visiting lady preacher in 1957 remarked "*What a listening people you are*". That year saw Membership at a healthy 61. A Prayer Fellowship Union met weekly with an average 25-37 attendance, although Sunday School attendance was dropping. The Chapel Summer Fete was now an event on the village social calendar. The minister's "*link with Morland House (Council Home)*" in 1960 brought "*special permission to include RC children in our activities, which was rather unique.*" In Rome, 1200 miles away, a new, reforming Pope was asking for a new unity between "all people of good will" whatever their labels. A Day of Prayer "*for all denominations in the village for the first time was declared [in 1960] and it was hoped to form an inter-Church committee in Wheatley.*" This time Catholics were involved too.

Times had certainly changed. It was a far cry from shouting "Jacobin!" at James Hinton, from Mr Kingerlee's polemic and from Mr Elton's waspishness. It was nearer to Newman and Wilberforce. There was, however, always a danger of

looking backwards to some golden age of churchgoing which never existed and getting depressed at the thought of how impossible it was to retrieve.

## **Doors Close, Doors Open**

It depressed Mr Thomas, the minister in 1957. *“He had gone from door to door in all the new estates but he could see no tangible result. He did his utmost to acknowledge everyone he met on his rounds of the village. While there were many who did respond, others just stared as if he was not there and it was the same with the children. Some smiled, others’ attitude was much less pleasing. On the other hand our relationship with the Parish Church was more satisfactory. A joint New Year’s Eve social, united services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, united Procession of Witness on Good Friday.”* By 1972 unity was forged with the Presbyterians, as “The United Reformed Church” which we know today. A new Pastor, again from America where so many Congregationalists and Presbyterians had once fled, put it to the AGM of 1967 that he wanted to *“decentralise, with certain leaders for certain functions. Historically in Congregationalism the minister took on most duties. Our forefathers were partly to blame for this. The church is calling me to move more into the background. It would be wrong for me to go round and chat you all up!”*

James Hinton might have understood. Something about long-term vision, unseen goals, crops sown by some, harvested by others, owned by neither. He would probably be gratified and relieved to see the Wheatley community 200 years later. It has left its mark, bringing not only a certain social warmth to the village, but also providing a space for worship and silence where people feel welcomed. Sam Standley’s and Sarah Allen’s houses must have been welcoming places too. In 1968 it was remarked, *“People not attending church are always willing to help, and people inside and outside the church affectionately help towards its success.”* This was said of the Chapel Fete, but it could be said of the tanning-barn community itself.



# Towards The Millennium

by Colin Thompson

In 1972 Wheatley Congregational Church underwent another of its periodic transformations, when it became part of the United Reformed Church, a union of churches from the Congregational and Presbyterian traditions in England and Wales. The union has brought with it many positive changes: the development of the eldership, working in partnership with the minister not simply in practical matters but also in pastoral care; a growing sense of what it means to be part of the Reformed tradition; a concern for issues of social and environmental justice; and a sense of ministry as reaching outwards into local communities. All these have affected Wheatley United Reformed Church and its sense of mission. It is probably true to say that its outlook is more international than it has ever been, while at the same time it remains a local congregation in the heart of a village with many of its members living within walking distance.

Charles and Carolyn have been in Wheatley for 33 years and their energy and enthusiasm shows no signs of flagging. What began as a temporary arrangement has become the longest continuous ministry in one place in the United Reformed Church. Since 1970 many new developments and initiatives have been undertaken, and major celebrations are planned in connection with the bicentenary of the gathering of the congregation and the forthcoming Millennium. The Church has grown in numbers and its finances are on a secure footing in a way which would have astonished and delighted those who kept it going through more difficult days. This has enabled the church to give away a significant proportion of its income to outside charities. For the membership of the church to have increased at a time when national membership has almost halved since the union must be accounted something of a success. There were 56 members at the formation of the United Reformed Church, 68 by 1981, 82 in 1991 and 85 by 1996.

There have been losses too. The Hintons, the Whites, Arthur Wheeler, Bruce Shepherd and many others who have been mainstays of the congregation over several decades have died and are remembered with affection and pride. There are fewer children than there used to be, though the church still has a good number for its size. It remains difficult to attract teenagers and the twenties. Young families sometimes come and go too fast: no sooner have they settled into the life of the church than they are off to a new place of work. After a long period of declining attendance, the evening service was finally discontinued in 1993, though a monthly ecumenical evening service remains, shared between all four churches in Wheatley, and Taizé prayers are held every Sunday evening at the Bainbridges' home. Holy Week services have been extensively developed; there are monthly Prayer Breakfasts and early morning prayers on Thursdays each week.



The congregation of Wheatley United Reformed Church, January 1997

The life of the church has been deeply marked by the short but powerful ministry of Yvonne Workman. Yvonne read a degree in theology as a mature student in London, came to Mansfield College to train for the URC ministry and was ordained in St Mary's Parish Church, Wheatley, in 1988, the URC building being too small for the occasion. She combined in rare fashion personal warmth, a lovely sense of humour, a profound personal spirituality and a keen and active concern for the great issues of the day, especially for those raised by the World Council of Churches programme *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. Not long after her ordination the first signs of cancer appeared, and, having battled bravely with the disease for more than two years, she died at home in Oxford, where her husband, Wesley, was minister of St Columba's URC, at Epiphany 1991. No one who was with her in her last months and days will ever forget it, for she made her dying a gift to us all. Her work lives on in the concerns of the church and in a fund which bears her name, from which grants are made to students involved in studying the ethical issues of the environment. She is buried in St Mary's churchyard, with Wesley, who survived her only by two years.

The links with Oxford University and Mansfield College remain strong and continue to keep the church in touch with the wider issues of contemporary theological thinking. Ecumenical developments in the village have speeded up after a long period of relative lack of interest. For the last three years an annual joint Eucharist with St Mary's has taken place during December and marks a real reconciliation between church and chapel mentalities and rivalries of the past. The Roman Catholic congregation and members of the Granary Church are fully involved in local ecumenical activities.

It may be interesting to provide a snapshot of a typical Sunday morning at Wheatley URC. Most of the services (10 am.) are led by Charles, Richard Bainbridge or myself. The church will be well filled, with some people in the balcony. Average attendance is around 60, with 8—10 children. Holy Communion is celebrated on the first and third Sunday mornings and on other major feasts as appropriate. Once a month there is a Prayer Breakfast at 8 a.m., led by a member of the congregation. *Partners in Learning* material and the Lectionary are both used, though with some freedom, and the liturgical year is kept to a degree unusual in the URC: not many congregations will have had a service to celebrate the quarcentenary of the death of St John of the Cross (1991) or the feast of St Thomas à Becket (1996). The Biblical readings, music, hymns and prayers will be chosen to fit together and the sermon will explore some of the themes suggested for the day, but always in connection with the real world and their importance for contemporary Christian living. During the first part of the service, the focus will be on the children and often they (as well as members of the congregation) will participate in some activity. Laughter is rarely absent at this point. Participation is an essential feature of the church's life, with over 50 people holding some kind of responsibility in it. After the service, coffee is served in the hall (and on special occasions something more celebratory) and there is a

flourishing Traidcraft stall for Sunday shoppers with a difference. Music plays a central part in the life of the church, thanks to the energy and leadership of Carolyn and the commitment of local musicians. The organ postlude has become part of the service. The choir sings on major occasions and a Junior Choir and a chimes choir has been formed. The publication of Rejoice and Sing, the URC's new hymnbook, in 1991, has greatly enriched worship and has proved a real publishing success. Both Carolyn and I served on the editorial committee. The major festivals are especially joyful and uplifting occasions.

The Church remains committed to serving the life of the growing village community, as its regular use for baptisms, weddings and funerals demonstrates. The community itself shares in all the problems of English life at the close of the second millennium and Wheatley URC is neither immune to these nor a stranger to tension and conflict. From its local base it looks outward, into a world of great poverty and suffering. In its own small way it seeks to reconcile, heal and bring light and hope. Over the last quarter of a century it has come to be a spiritual home for hundreds of people and it faces its as yet unwritten history, of which the Brock presence will inevitably become an important part, with confidence and faith.

## Pastors Of Wheatley Chapel

### 1794—1997

James Hinton, New Road Chapel, “Village preacher”	c.1794—1802
James Hinton Junior, St Clements Chapel, “Village preacher”	c.1820—35
Thomas Smith, resident Independent from London	1836—9
Eliezer Jones, Pastor, George Street Chapel	1839—41
Charles McCardie Davis, resident Wheatley	1841—54
Thomas Knight	1854—62
Charles Hardie Murray	1862—66
James Jefferies	1866—68
Oliver Brand	1868—69
William Faith	1869—75
Edwin Bird	1875—87
Alexander Pay	1889—90
Albert Ore	1890—95
John Plommer	1895—1900
John Bell	1903—05
William Newton	1905—21
Percy Rose, Joint Ministry with Cowley Rd Chapel	1921—22
William Fry, Joint Ministry with Cowley Rd Chapel	1922—38
Charles Ashelford	1938—39
Robert Ives	1939—44
Sidney Record	1944—48
Peter Broad	1948—50
William Mackintosh	1950—55
John Thomas	1955—57
John Sturney	1957—63
Charles Brock	1963
<b>Associate Minister</b> Yvonne Workman	1988—91

## Reading and Sources

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Thanks are due to Chapel Members for memories, notably Vera Shepherd and Marion Wheeler, and to many for scrutiny of the draft manuscript.



JOHN FOX first met with Wheatley URC through village Ecumenical Group meetings nearly a quarter of a century ago. He values greatly his continuing friendship with the congregation. An experienced teacher and writer, he has had work published nationally and locally on a range of historical topics.

The Rev COLIN THOMPSON became involved with the life of Wheatley United Reformed Church while a student at Oxford University. He is now Fellow in Spanish at St Catherine's College, Oxford and is an elder of Wheatley United Reformed Church.

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