

The History of Copse Road Meeting House

The early years of the nineteenth century were times of spiritual unrest in many quarters, and especially in the Church of England. The powerful influence of the Wesleyan Movement was still felt throughout the land, but certain scholars were seeking to return to pre-Reformation doctrines and practices. The 1830's saw the rise of the 'Oxford Movement' with its emphasis on restoration of High Church and Roman Catholic teaching. This greatly disturbed many Evangelical clergymen, among them, John Methuen, Rector of Corsham in Wiltshire and a member of a famous family of statesmen and soldiers. He resigned from the Church of England and came to lodge in Copse Road, Clevedon in 1832. For some years, many people flocked to his lodging house (probably situated where the 'Royal Oak' now stands) to hear his expositions of Scripture, until advanced age forced him to return to his native Wiltshire.

His 'flock' felt bereft – like sheep without a shepherd – but the famous George Müller heard of their need and urged them to call John Victor as their pastor. A Cornishman by birth and a Methodist by upbringing, John Victor was the first pastor of Unity Chapel in the St. Philip's district of Bristol. Soon after his arrival in Clevedon in 1851, two merchants (a soap manufacturer by the name of Thomas and a sugar trader called Finsul who was of German descent like George Müller) built the first part of our chapel. This was the section which stretches from the entrance to the organ.

Such was the blessing of God upon John Victor's preaching that the building was lengthened in 1855, and further extended by adding the transept in 1865. The Clevedon guide of 1871-76 stated: "Copse Road Meeting House is built in the form of a cross. It is capable of accommodating six hundred persons and was erected in 1851 from the designs by Foster and Wood of Bristol. Clearly the Victorians did not mind 'close fellowship'! The school hall was erected in 1877, and preaching stations were established at Tickenham, Cleeve, Yatton and Kingston Seymour.

After forty fruitful years of faithful ministry, John Victor retired and was followed by Dr. David Anderson-Berry. His time here was also greatly blessed, but very much shorter than his predecessor. After just two years he returned to medical practice in Boscombe and then Harley Street. During this time the Chapel was often over-crowded, possibly influenced by the revival spread from the United States, via Ireland into England. The next pastor was Waiter Brealey, who had been a schoolmaster, and head of one of Muller's schools in Blackdown Hills at Clayhidon. His pastoral oversight lasted for seventeen years before ill-health led him to retire.

Then followed a time of great testing. The next pastor, James Sprunt, endeavoured to take the church into the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, but the deacons wisely refused. Sadly, there was a bitter division, and in 1922 Mr. Sprunt, together with the greater part of the church and congregation withdrew and began to meet in the premises in Station Road. Only forty loyal souls remained to carry on the work and for some years there was no pastor until Walter Clarke was invited to care for the flock in 1926. Thence began a memorable ministry lasting almost forty years. During the Second World War the Chapel narrowly missed being burnt down by enemy action, but the prompt action of the caretaker and some troops (who were using the school hall as a rest room) saved the building. A plate on the ceiling of the Chapel commemorates this deliverance. However, far more wonderful, is the fact that within these walls, throughout the church's history many precious souls have been saved from everlasting destruction, and have become children of God and faithful servants of Christ. The next pastor was Raymond Lawrence, a fine preacher and wise pastor, who served the church well for seven and a half years. Upon his retirement in 1983, he was succeeded by Basil Howlett, formerly of Cheltenham, who carried on a systematic and faithful expository ministry until his removal to Wrexham in 1993. After a period without a pastor, Trevor Smetham was called to the pastorate. He moved to Clevedon from Sussex and led the church into the new millennium, serving for four years until the Spring of 2002.

Over the years, the church has known many blessings and not a few trials. But we praise God for all His goodness and mercy to the church from the time of its inception until the present. We thank Him that the Word of God has been faithfully preached within these walls and outside. We realise that to us is entrusted the responsibility of maintaining a faithful witness, and of preaching the Gospel of redeeming grace to lost sinners. Our trust is in the same gracious, powerful Lord to guard, guide and bless us in the future

