

FINE CHURCH STILL DOMINATES OLD MEETING HOUSE LANE

NEWS of the probable demolition and rebuilding of the Christchurch Congregational Church, one of the best known landmarks in the area, has sparked off much discussion in the borough.

THE history of the church makes interesting reading. Following the series of three articles taken verbatim from the Christchurch Guide of 1897 which was printed by the Christchurch Times, this article by the present minister, the Rev. H. Carter Lloyd, brings the history of the church up to date.

In it, Mr. Lloyd traces the later ministers of the church, and discusses some of the reasons why it may be necessary to replace the church with a new building.

A CENTURY has passed. Meeting House Lane, now Millhams Street, is little changed, and the fine church still dominates it. The spire pierces the Christchurch skyline a foil to the square tower of "that other magnificent structure" and a landmark to be seen from all the approaches to the town.

The spire though, has needed to be repaired several times during the second half of the century. Work was done on it in 1909-12. In 1920 the deacons considered dismantling it, but agreed it should be maintained, despite the cost of the work necessary, about £500. A 100,000 pennies scheme helped to raise this money.

More repairs were needed in 1936 when a steeplejack reported that "great strips of lead were coming away". Gales in December 1966 again loosened some of the strips of lead and further repairs have just been completed.

General repairs and redecoration required the closing of the building for a month in the summer of 1877 and again in 1891. Services were held once more in the town hall. Redecoration was again undertaken in 1931. Morning services were then held in the church hall and evening services in the town hall. Presumably, as was common at that period, larger congregations attended the evening services. Complete redecoration was undertaken in the spring of 1960 in readiness for the church's tercentenary celebrations.

It is odd that while the church was lit by gas, in 1901 "the pastor reported that he found the existing means of lighting the pulpit by candles unsatisfactory and it was resolved to substitute gas light." While there was not sufficient light in the pulpit, it was also recorded that there was insufficient gas in the vestry!

However, In July 1903 it was agreed that "the electric light" be installed throughout the premises. An amendment to confine electricity to the halls was defeated. Further improvements to the lighting followed in 1920.

The hot air heating system was replaced in 1923. But the effectiveness of every system depends on the efficiency of the man in charge! The church meeting later reported "Mr. Cafe has now undertaken the heating. In consequence it appears that the church requires more than the usual ventilation."

The decision to install electric heating was made in the autumn of 1947. The electric heaters are still in the church, but an oil fired heating system was installed in January 1966 and this now provides the basic heating.

The organ has received attention from time to time and has been moved forward nearer to the front of the gallery. It was cleaned in 1878, but a proposal to increase the stops was abandoned as too costly. Cleaning and restoration again took place about 1920.

There was a further overhaul in 1934 when an electric blower was installed. By 1958 the need for major repairs was recognised. More work was carried out in the autumn of 1963. Parts badly affected by woodworm had to be replaced, the action was re-bushed and re-felted throughout, the reeds re-voiced and tuning slides were fitted to the fluework.

Three generations of one family of organ craftsmen have worked upon the organ since 1920 and they write, "We hope now the instrument will be good for another hundred years!"

The zealous ministers, deacons and members of 1867 have been followed by others who

have served with like faithfulness through the years. The joint pastorate of Joseph Fletchers and John Woodwark having ended by the death of John Woodwark in 1869, followed by the retirement of Joseph Fletcher in 1873, the Rev. J. W. Walker of Cheshunt, was called to Christchurch in 1875. He served for a brief but happy period and moved to Huyton, Liverpool in 1878.

Then came a nine years ministry by the Rev. William Houghton, who came from Bradford in 1879 and went to Guildford in 1888. The Rev. W. T. Moreton came from Dewsbury in 1889 and served till 1900. He was followed by the Rev. James Learmount of London, 1901-6. The next minister was the Rev. Henry Coley, a former missionary of the London Missionary Society in India and minister at Ryde. His ministry lasted from 1908 to 1917.

In 1918, the Rev. Howard P. James made the short move from Winton and began a most effective ministry which was to last till 1932 when he accepted an invitation to the present Isaac Watts Church in Southampton. From 1926 Mr. James also served as secretary of the Hampshire Congregational Union.

The Rev. L. H. Thompson then came from Woking in 1933 to serve for twelve years till he was called to Winchester in 1945. The church at Southampton which had called away Howard James next provided the Rev. William Robinson. He was inducted in April, 1964 but alas, was stricken with illness within a month and he died at the end of the year.

The Rev. G. H. Musgrave came in the following year from Rothbury Hall, Greenwich and worked in Christchurch till 1950 when he accepted an appointment through the Commonwealth Missionary Society in British Guiana.

The Rev. W. R. Stokes of Pontnewynydd, Pontypool. was inducted in 1952 and led the church till called to Newport, Isle of Wight in 1958. Then from the Isle of Wight, and again from Ryde, came the Rev. G. J. Nelson in 1959.

During his ministry yet another work of building was accomplished, a dual purpose hall for worship and fellowship in the developing area of Somerford. Mr. Nelson retired in 1964.

Five months later, in February 1965, the present minister, the Rev. H. Carter Lloyd, came from Ramsgate, by coincidence a 1662 church with a parallel history.

Since Mr. Lloyd's settlement in February 1965 more improvements have been carried out. Oil-fired heating has been extended to the halls and new lighting has been installed in the main hall.

In the church, the choir rostrum has been enlarged providing more choir seats— all of which are needed by the choir. New robes have been presented to the choir. New curtains and pulpit frontal have also been provided and new carpets for the rostrum, aisles and pulpit. A new organ screen has also been erected.

SECOND HALL

In the autumn of 1969, a second hall was added to the premises at Somerford. This was opened on the first Sunday of January 1970 and this hall is now used as a church with appropriate furnishings provided.

The financial system of the church has been reorganised. An annual budget now indicates to worshippers the amount needed each year to enable the church to do its own work and to support the denomination, its missionary council and other causes. They respond to this with their weekly offerings which make further financial appeals, efforts and gilt-days unnecessary.

During this present ministry 72 new members have been received bringing the total of communicant members to 165, including 21 who exercise their membership at Somerford. There are also another 11 non-resident members and many regular attenders who are not full members. The number of children attending the junior has also increased.

The church is now in good heart, ready to move forward to develop its work with, perhaps, new premises in the new town centre, equipped for a new era.