

302 Years Of Free Church Worship

C.T. April 27, 1962

SUNDAY is a big day of thanksgiving for Congregationalists in the Christchurch area. They are to celebrate 302 years of Free Church worship in the town.

This year is actually the tercentenary of the Congregational Denomination but there was an independent Free Church in Christchurch for two years prior to 1662.

The Christchurch worshippers celebrated the tercentenary of their church two years ago and while most other Congregationalists in the country will be celebrating the tercentenary of the denomination, this year, Christchurch is giving thanks for 302 years.

There will be thanksgiving services throughout the day on Sunday and attending the evening service will be the Mayor of Christchurch, Ald. Miss E. I. Padwick, members of the Council and representatives of other bodies in the town. Preacher on this occasion will be the Rev. Howard Stanley, secretary of the Congregational Union of England and Wales.

Conducting the service will be the Rev. Geo. J. Nelson, who has been minister at Christchurch for over two years.

On the following Thursday, the Church will hold its gift day in conjunction with another thanksgiving service for the 302nd anniversary. This will conclude the celebrations at Christchurch.

LIVELY

The Rev. Nelson told the C.T. that the congregation at Christchurch had increased considerably during the past two years and there are now particularly good attendances at the morning service. The church has also several lively organisations and there are activities almost every night of the week. These include the Boys Brigade, Women's Guild, Monday Evening Fellowship, Men's Forum, and the Young Peoples "20" Club.

Over the years nine other churches have sprung from the mother church in Millhams Street and the latest offspring is the one at Somerford which was opened last September. And together with Poole Congregational Church, Christchurch was responsible for the foundation of Richmond Hill



Pictured above is what is described as the original Congregational chapel at Pokesdown.

Congregational Church, Bournemouth.

The church was almost unique among Congregational churches when it celebrated its tercentenary two years ago. A number of churches such as Poole, Ringwood and Wimborne, locally, originated in 1662, when ministers were ejected from the Church of England under the Act of Uniformity. But Christchurch had a somewhat different beginning.

The Rev. John Imber, who had been made Vicar of Christchurch Priory Church in 1640, had been suspended in 1647 in consequence of refusing to officiate according to the Directory which about this time was by the authority of the Parliament ordered to be adopted in lieu of the Liturgy, in the churches of the Church of England.

RESTORED

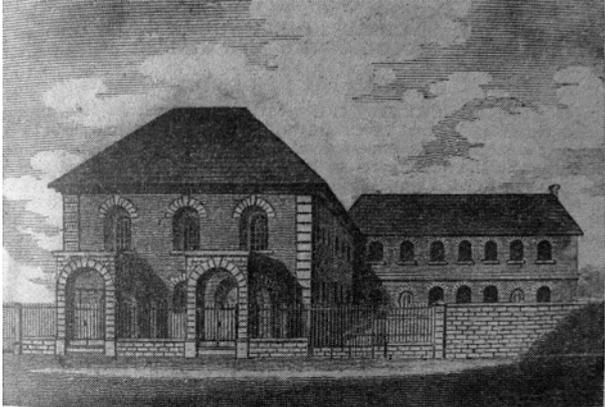
In his place the Rev. John Warner, M.A., was appointed but on the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660 he resigned and the Rev. John Imber was restored to his benefice.

Mr. Warner did not leave Christchurch until he was compelled to do so by operation of the Five Mile Act 1665, when he moved to the neighbourhood of Ringwood. Thus he became leader and minister to those who were like-minded, and so the "gathered church" came into being.

In those days there was a spirit of persecution abroad and the principle of religious liberty had not won its way. It was then that Congregational ancestors attended divine worship on St Catherine's Hill with one of their number always on the watch to give warning of approaching danger.

The records for the next 100 years or so are very incomplete, but it may be said that the membership of the church in 1815 was composed of residents in all parts of the neighbourhood from Redhill to Ripley.

OLDEST DEED



Similar in style to the present building in Millhams Street, this is a picture of the church prior to 1866. In that year, it was demolished and the following year, the present church was opened for worship.

The oldest deed relating to the church is a lease dated September 29, 1655 to Martin Stoakes of a barn then newly erected and a close adjoining half an acre called Culverhayes in a lane then called Back Lane. In 1730 this lease was assigned to a Thos. Burden.

In this deed it is stated that the barn had for many years past been converted into a meeting house and was still used as such. At the same time the freehold was purchased.

It is interesting to note that the building was then described as "All that pyle of buildings called the Meeting House in Meeting Lane".

In the same year, the property was put upon trust for "the Minister and Congregation of people for the time being called Dissenters and which shall from time to time for ever hereafter belong to the Congregation of Dissenters in Christchurch". In this deed of 1730 provision is made in case the liberty of dissenting from the Church of England should by law or otherwise be restrained and taken away.

FIRST ELECTION

There is little information relating to the early years of the church but the first election of deacons sees have taken place in March 1797 when Mr. George Aldridge Snr. and Mr. Edward Tizard were appointed.

At the time of the settlement in 1779 of the Rev. John Wise the church members numbered only 25. By 1810, the membership was 80.

It will be noted that trustees had been appointed the years 1745, 1775, and 1795 but these appointments had no legal effect in transferring the church property to the new trustees. Therefore proceedings had to be taken in the Court of Chancery to rectify the error.

By a deed dated third August 1836 a nominee of the Court vested the property in new trustees. At the same time the Court approved a new scheme for the appointment of new trustees. Thereafter the power of appointment was to be vested in the major part of the deacons and men members of the church being communicants. It was the Ministry of the Rev. Daniel Gunn (1816-1848), that the church showed great vigour and enlarged its borders. In 1816 the church could hold about 400 but during his Ministry the church was enlarged twice so in 1826 it would hold 1,000.

PETITIONS

During Mr. Gunn's Ministry there were several petitions to Parliament—one in favour of ameliorating the laws opposed to civil and religious liberty and in favour of Catholic Emancipation (1829); one for the abolition of slavery (1830); another for a charter to the London University so that all denominations could avail themselves of its advantages without compromising their religious opinions (1833); one for the abolition of slavery apprenticeship (1838); another against the endowment of Maynooth College (1845); one as to the treatment of the Queen and people of Tahiti (1846); and another against compulsory imposition of Church Rates.

In 1886 the old church buildings were demolished and the present church erected the architect being Mr. W. J. Stent of Warminster, Wilts, and the builder, Mr. W. Walden, of Christchurch. The present seating capacity of the church is 650. This church was opened for public worship on April 19 1867 when the Rev. David Thomas, of Bristol, was the preacher.

LEADING CITIZENS

Throughout its history the church has had in its membership many leading citizens. Several have served on the Town Council and have held the office of Mayor, and in the majority of cases, the family name will be found amongst the list of trustees.

During the last 150 years the church has been very active in founding and supporting work in the neighbouring villages and hamlets. Throop was founded in 1828 and became an independent church in 1829; Cranemoor Chapel was founded in 1825 and the chapel opened in 1834; Waterditch Chapel was founded in 1836 and Burton Green Chapel in 1875.

Pokesdown was founded in 1820 and became an independent church in 1873, and at Ripley, work was started as far back as 1797, the chapel being opened in 1822 and becoming independent in 1829. In 1939 this chapel entered the Christchurch group of churches to which Cranemoor, Waterditch, and Burton Green also belong.

Kingston Chapel was founded in 1841 and is now attached to Ringwood.

At Bargates services and a Sunday School were held as far back as 1835, then in 1855 a mission room and school was opened.

In 1872 a new building was erected called Bargates Mission Hall or Chapel, but in 1883 the services were discontinued and the premises sold.

Services were also held at Middle Bockhampton as far back as 1821 and at St. Catherine's Hill from 1837 until about 1838.

Ministers at the church prior to the Rev. Nelson and during the past 54 years were: the Rev. W. R. Stokes (1952-58), the Rev. George Musgrave (1947-50), the Rev. William Robinson (1946), the Rev. Leslie J. Thompson (1933-45), the Rev. Howard P. James (1918-32), the Rev. H. Coley (1908-).