

The Methodist Chapel at Coalpool, Walsall

An original account by Ethel Badger

To the glory of God
This stone was laid by
Mrs R.N.Brewer,
The Firs, Rushall.
Oct 19th 1896.

To the Glory of God
This stone was laid by
Miss Wilkes,
Lonsdale, Rushall.
Oct 19th 1896

Thus are inscribed the twin foundation stones flanking the entrance to this small place of worship, originally a Wesleyan Chapel, but now of course a straightforward and undifferentiated Methodist Church. The story of its erection just before the turn of the century and its use since is not without its points of interest and this brief article is an attempt to set down some of them.

Beginnings

At the time of the Crimean War 1857-1858, a number of small grey walled cottages were built in Coalpool to provide accommodation in the village for the workmen engaged on cutting a new railway line northwards from Walsall towards Pelsall and Lichfield. The cottages were somewhat similar to those seen in Ireland with their very tiny rooms.

The land for the cottages was bought in 1850 by one John Brewer. When building was completed, Coalpool became a hamlet, quite distinct from Walsall, surrounded as it was by fields with a farm house or two nearby.

Wherever Mr Brewer built houses it was his aim to erect also a place of Worship. He had two friends, William Powis and John Bates and all were members of the Centenary Methodist Chapel, Stafford St, Walsall. A site for a proposed Meeting house for Coalpool was chosen and adjacent to it a cottage rather larger than the rest was built for John Bates and his wife on the understanding that when the cottages were completed they would open a general shop for the villagers. A communal bakehouse and wash house were also constructed for the villagers who wished to avail themselves of the facilities.

The first Meeting house, known as the Cross Rooms, was a roughly built structure and for many years it was used for the Methodist services until sufficient funds could be raised for a proper Chapel.

Some reports say that the seating arrangements in the Cross Rooms faced inwards from four sides in the shape of a Cross so that all the congregation had an uninterrupted view of the Preacher.

In the meantime the friends compiled a "book of promises" and interested people gave money and materials - for example a Bloxwich timber merchant donated the roofing slates and a notable effort was made by Mrs John Bates who reared a pig and sold it, giving the proceeds to help the fund. The site for the new Chapel, (In what is now Coalpool Lane) was a short distance away from the Bates' shop and the Cross rooms.

The Building

In October 1896 building was complete and the Chapel officially opened - a plain red brick structure with a grey slate roof, a small porch and an entrance door opened by a brass drop latch. Each side of the aisle, which was covered with coconut matting, were strong wooden benches each fitted along the back with a slot for the hymn books. The pulpit was sited on the left hand side of the Chapel alongside a tiny Communion rail, table and font.

A door led through a dividing wall into the Sunday school which was simply furnished with backless wooden benches and hooks around the walls for the children to hang their coats. a welcoming point was provided by the huge open fireplace where during the winter there was always a glowing coal fire. Fuel was stored in a cellar reached by outside steps and this also housed a coal fired boiler to heat water pipes to the whole of the building. Lighting was originally by oil lamps suspended from the ceiling. The windowsills were usefully wide and the tall windows were opened by operating a simple sort of catch with a hole into which one put a finger and pulled. At the rear of the building were two outside earth closets.

In the early days the hymns were started by a musical member who used a tuning fork, but as time went by a simple string band provided the accompaniment. Later funds were raised for a small pipe organ and this was positioned on a wooden base at the right of the Chapel with three benches beside it for the choir. Air was pumped into the organ by means of a long handle at the side and there were always volunteers among the older boys and girls to do this. Pumping with one hand and holding a hymn book in the other, the youngsters sometimes become engrossed in the proceedings that the handle would be forgotten and the unfortunate organist had to resort to sign language to bring his assistant back to reality!

A statement of accounts drawn up in 1903 showed a weekly income for the Chapel of £1.17s.6d.

The Community

Most of the community life of the village became centred around the Chapel for there was no pub (those who wished to indulge walked to "The Trouper" at Leamore; the lanes had no lighting of course so unless it was moonlight lamps had to be carried at night). For adults there were Guild meetings and "Socials" and for the children the "Band of Hope" where they had lantern slides for entertainment and were urged to sign "the pledge" no strong drink as a beverage. Because the Chapel was so small it was decided at a later stage in its history to remove the dividing wall between it and the Sunday school and replace it with a wooden partition which could be taken down in sections for special events such as concerts and the Sunday school anniversary.

The Anniversary was always a red letter day and to accommodate more people than the Chapel could hold a large marquee was hired on occasions and erected in fields at Ross Farm, people walking from Walsall and District to these popular services. By this time the Cross Rooms had been bought by a very old gentleman and his two sons and converted into "The Pleasure Grounds". The rooms were surrounded by water and small rowing boats could be hired at 3d a trip. The island was equipped with swings etc and it was here during the Summer months that the annual Sunday school "Treat" was often held. If Chapel funds allowed, horse drawn brakes were hired and the children had an exciting journey to Barr Beacon for their treat, as at that time this beauty spot catered for outings such as these.

Recent Changes

The original cottages and other old buildings were demolished in 1938 to make way for what was then Walsall's newest housing estate and just over 20 years ago a new hall was constructed on grounds adjacent to the Chapel. It was joined up to the outer door of the original Schoolroom with a passage leading to a Vestry, cloakroom and toilets and a kitchen. The hall had a stage so that the various social activities were now amply provided for. The hall was officially opened on 21st July 1956 by Mrs R Price and the gathering were afterwards provided with buffet tea at 1s. per head. The addition of a separate meeting hall enabled the interior of the Chapel to be redesigned and enlarged by the permanent removal of the wooden partition, although just enough of this remains to show its original position in the building.

Those old strong and well polished benches have been retained, but the coconut matting in the aisle has been replaced with a blue carpet which extends up to the community rail. The well preserved pulpit has been retained but repositioned to the right of the building, with a modern electric organ and a piano on the left. As would be expected the old dim lights have been replaced by electric lighting and effective radiant heaters hang from the ceiling. The windows are, however, completely unaltered and still open with finger latches. The original entrance door to the Chapel is somewhat special feature even to this day - its brass drop latch still makes a loud noise each time it is opened.

A very recent happy occasion was the celebration of the ninetieth birthday of Mrs Price and a plaque has been placed in the Church as a mark of her loyalty and devotion to Methodism in Coalpool.

Inscriptions

In addition to the two foundation stones at the front of the building there are others stones and plaques inside as follows:-

This stone laid on behalf of the
Sunday School by John Bates
October 19th 1896

Removed from the old Sunday School wall, now in the Vestry

In memory of Mrs J Bates
Born August 1st 1828
Died April 13th 1899

This stone is positioned where the old Communion rail used to be.

Erected to the memory of
John Bates
Born Jan. 19th 1829.
Died Sept. 18th 1896.
He lived a consistent Godly life admired
by the whole Village and for 51 years
faithfully preached the Gospel, 48
of which, when in this circuit.

A Plaque

To the glory and in memory of
Samuel Brunt
Who faithfully served this Church
throughout his life.
Born April 19th 1861.
Died Jan 28th 1933.
He was a Christian gentleman.

A Plaque

To commemorate the 90th birthday on
February 27th 1977 of
Mrs Dora Price
A loyal and devoted member
of this Church

A Plaque

Presented by the widow and
family in memory of the late
W.R.Powis

A brass plate on the front of the pulpit

Also in the porch are several now well worn stones bearing the names.

Mrs Marsh Mrs Goddard
Mrs Brunt Mrs Bradbury
Mrs Bates Mrs Powis

F Beddows - In memory of W.R.Powis

Today the sturdy structure of the Chapel remains the same with it's original iron gate and railings in front

Acknowledgements:

Grateful thanks for comments and material are due to

Mrs J.L. Bickley widow of the late Rev. J.L.Bickley of Wolverhampton,
who is the grandaughter of John Bates and daughter of Samuel Brunt.

Mrs Goodwin of Aldridge, Walsall

Mr and Mrs Richardson, also of Aldridge.