



A Brief History of Haywards Heath United Reformed Church

Mostly taken from the book Yesterday and Today written in 1987 by former Church member Lillian Rogers.

In 1854 Hurst House Farm was bought for a site on which the Sussex Lunatic Asylum was to be built in the then Parish of Wivelsfield. The Sussex Home Missionary Society, aware of the spiritual needs of these people, appointed in 1857 Mr Charles Trigg as a missionary to preach the word and visit at a salary of £50 per annum. A large room was placed at his disposal furnished as a chapel and the asylum subscribed £20 per annum towards his support.

However, in 1859, the asylum being completed the room was required for its original purpose and the finding of a fresh venue for worship was necessary. In the meantime services were being held firstly in a school room then out of doors and later still in the assembly room at the New Inn later called the Ugly Duckling. It was recorded that at one service in the afternoon approximately 90 worshippers were present while on the same day the service in the evening saw upwards of 130 people present.

A plot of land was purchased and towards the end of 1859 it was proposed to erect a chapel to accommodate about 200 persons and it was calculated that the sum of at least £350 would be required to meet all the expenses involved.

The building, of Gothic design, was opened on the 30th of April 1861. In May of that year the building was registered as a place of worship and in 1870 a Sunday school was formed. This new Church had been affiliated to the congregational church in Cuckfield but in 1871 it became independent. It would seem that no records were kept from 1871 to 1876, but in 1879 the building was registered for marriages. Seat and pew rents were introduced but later discontinued.

Haywards Heath had no Library or Youth Club and it's Cinema was not to open until 1911. The record player along with radio and television were all in the future so the church provided for leisure hours and formed a mothers' meeting to relieve the stress in the lives of women. Other social activities were introduced. In 1901 the school room was enlarged and a kitchen, vestry and toilet accommodation added.

Fundraising was by jumble sales of work and a self-denial and thanks offering fund. 1909 saw the introduction in the country of a pension payable to persons over 70 years of age, of five shillings (25p) a week maximum.

In 1911 reference was against made to the possibility of the church's move into a more central position in the town. A few shops had opened in South Road a public hall there was well established. This, then it was thought, was the part of town in which to erect a new Church building. Haywards Heath had then 5,900 inhabitants.

During 1912 a site was viewed in Haywards Road but the owner declined to sell upon discovering its future purpose. A second site was inspected this time in Hazelgrove Road but at the same time a plot of land situated in South Road was offered at £375. It was agreed that the church purchase the South Road plot, its present site.

The site was secured and paid for almost entirely by members who had decided to erect the building to seat 300 at a cost of £2500.

In July 1913 the then minister and his wife promised £500 if the foundation stones were laid by the following spring. So an appeal went out to members and the response was such that the building committee was formed. Plans were considered and tenders invited. Before building work commenced summer services were held on the South Road plot.

Building commenced on the 21st of October 1914. On the 9th December, the day of the Stone laying ceremony and dedicatory service, it was very very wet and a tarpaulin was erected to shelter the 200 people of all ages who attended, which included many Sussex Free Church Ministers

The ceremony was performed by the Minister's wife and the Church Secretary and the stones were laid. Each was presented by Mr R Palmer Baines with a silver trowel. In 1953 the trowel given to the Church Secretary was donated to the church by his grandson and hangs today on an interior wall of the church in a case made by a carpenter member.

In 1918 the former building was sold for £400 for use as a furniture store but the Church maintained the use of the school room, vestry and kitchen as none of these facilities were to be immediately forthcoming at the new building.

It was a day of great rejoicing on Wednesday, the 21st of July 1915. The day the new church was opened. The congregation was told that the cost including the site was £3,075 towards which, in cash and promises, £2335 had been received. When the day was over there was a general feeling that the Hayward Heath Congregationalists had been greatly blessed.

On the 1st of November 1915, the organ was installed. The country was still at war and members were suffering bereavement because of it. Retiring collections were taken for the men at the front and soldiers in the London rifle brigade were stationed in the town. Followed by others, they were all offered hospitality by the Church in the former school room.

A badly drawn curtain in the Church during a choir practice caused an infringement of the blackout regulations and a £1 fine was imposed.

The autumn of 1918 saw the finish of the war throughout which intercession services had been held. In 1926 came the first suggestion of purchasing a manse, however nothing then came of it with the coming of a minister in that year the church was still renting a manse in Haywards Road.

In 1929, the church signed a petition advocating amendment of the law regarding capital punishment. 1930 saw the first appointment of caretakers with a variety of duties at a salary of £15 yearly, however some extras were paid for additional work.

The church continued to thrive and grow, however from 1935 the church went through a period of difficulty and a declining membership which meant less giving of money and a first deficit. The minister at that time offered to cut his stipend, which the church accepted in 1937. Despite the offer of a second cut the following year, he later withdrew his ministry. This was a sad time for the Church however the Minister's memories of his time spent at the church did bring him joy, for upon his retirement he chose to name his house Haywards.

There followed a 10 month interregnum and the Church agreed to try and rid itself of its debt by using part of the building fund. After the interregnum there followed from 1938 a time of challenge and experiment all of which helped to deepen the life of the Church. At last membership increased, friends returned, teacher training classes were started and membership classes. A Youth Club was formed and a Men's Fireside, later to be called the Men's Forum. Other organisations flourished.

Then on Sunday, the 3rd of September 1939, the Church having met for morning worship heard at 11:15 am from a portable wireless set brought along by a member, the voice of the Prime Minister who announced that the country was now at war.

The government evacuation scheme was immediately put into action and Haywards Heath being a reception area saw many evacuees both adult and children coming from London into the town. So although Church members both male and female will be called up into service, numbers remained high in both the adult Church and Sunday school. Throughout the war, the timing of services was variable according to the season and time of blackout.

1940 saw the celebration of the Silver Jubilee year, the Church having worshipped for 25 years in the building, and a fund was set up which raised £85 for Church funds. Various efforts to support those serving in the armed forces were held. The fifth Hayward Heath company of Girl Guides met in the hall. Its colours were kept in the Church and parade services were held. The guides undertook responsibility for attending the church's front garden.

Yet more evacuees arrived this time from the Lydd area of Kent, a Girl Guide company from that area was amongst them. 1941 saw volunteers from the youth of the Church forming themselves into a youth service bureau with a register being kept for easy and quick reference of what task could be done and by whom.

Membership still increased in fact the large congregations necessitated the purchase of

additional hymn books. The church was still open daily for prayer and prayer meetings were held. National days of prayer were well attended.

At this time the church took out a war damage insurance on the fittings, furniture and the organ and a group formed themselves into a fire watching party in order to deal with the many small fires caused by incendiary bombs. During this period London was blitzed, with many casualties, and one of the dead was the Church's organist and Choirmaster who had been on duty on the 10th of May 1941 in the capital.

The Church welcomed a Brownie pack, the fifth Haywards Heath, and a Junior Youth Group was formed to cater for young people between the ages of 13 to 16. During the war, Church services continued both for adults and children, many of whom attended other local Churches, including some who were evacuated as part of the Great Ormond Street Hospital who stayed locally.

During 1944 concern was again expressed over the lack of a manse and a manse fund was set up. It was decided to have a closer contact with the Church at Cuckfield once again and ties with Plumpton and Otehall were discontinued.

The forces canteen which had opened in 1940 closed in 1945. It had been open 365 days of each of the five years from 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm. The Padre of one of the military units stationed locally wrote a letter of thanks especially for Christmas Day openings and the wonderful times given to the men.

1946 saw the reorganisation of the Children's Church, with the children having their own service on a Sunday morning and not as part of the main service.

1947 saw German prisoners of war from Ardingly invited to a morning service. Around this time many of the local Churches were also in vacancy and it was felt there was a unique opportunity for unification. However after many meetings and much discussion a resolution in its favour put to the Church was defeated. 1947 ended with a Carol Service at which the Carols were accompanied by the Haywards Heath Town Band.

The next few years were relatively quiet with events and services continuing. It is not noted that a Christmas Bazaar held in the public hall raised only £217 out of the £500 hoped for.

In 1952 an important event was the departure of one young member to commence her missionary work and a pastoral visiting committee was formed to give care to the Church members. Much help was given to the Church with voluntary labour redecorating the hall and kitchens and even the front fence was given a coat of paint.

By 1955 with two teachers and 17 Bible class members squashed into the small vestry, and the hall itself not being equipped for class teaching, Church Meeting requested the deacons to have plans drawn up and estimates obtained for an extension. The Church of just over 100 members envisaged a single story premises costing something in the region of £3,000. 1960 saw the widening of South Road and to that scheme the Church lost its gate, fencing and garden - the one which had been so lovingly cared for by the guides.

The Centenary of the church was celebrated in 1961 and took the form of services of Thanksgiving and an At Home at which was staged an exhibition of the Church's history. Sadly no record of this exists.

In 1962, with a generous offer in memory of a late member, the installation of central heating in the Church was undertaken. However it was decided not to paint the organ pipes despite raising some £200 at an autumn sale of work.

1963 saw the demolition of houses next to the church and permission was granted for building on this site with very careful restrictions placed on the height and design of the buildings.

The summer of 1967 saw the completion of the new hall extension, two stories having been built above the existing hall, with gratitude expressed to the Church member architect for his honorary services. This was also the year when the opportunity arose for the church to purchase a manse more suitable than the Western Road property. This was to be at 53 Ashenground Road. Inevitably a better property meant a difference in costs to be raised and between the selling of the old and the purchase of the new the debt was £2,450. An appeal brochure went out for direct giving.

1968 saw the formation of a mothers' group, a weekly get together in the mid morning where mothers met for a chat and a coffee whilst their toddlers played. This group was to continue for many many years.

Moving forward some 10 years 1978 was a particularly busy one. It was the year when the young people started meeting together on Sunday evenings and the beginning of coffee being served in the hall after morning worship. The Church still had a choir at this time and members took part in hymn singing for Songs of Praise, broadcast from Saint Wilfrid's Parish Church by the BBC.

Numbers at worship, however, declined and it was decided to cancel evening services. 1979 saw a link formed with a Church in Dieppe and regular visits between the Churches took place on an annual basis for a good number of years. A Huguenot Cross given by the Dieppe Church still hangs in the sanctuary.

1981 saw joint services held with the Sussex Road Methodist Church and a proposal from that Church that we join each other as one Church was put forward. However, after much prayerful thought and discussion this proposal was eventually rejected by members. Vandals struck the Church again during that year and damage was done to the roof costing some £500 to repair.

The United Reformed Church, which had been formed following the amalgamation of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in 1972, saw in 1981 the union also take place between the URC and the Churches of Christ.

During the following years many events took place. It was decided to open the Church every Saturday morning from April throughout the summer until September. The practice

continues year-round today, in the form of Open Doors. Ploughman's Lunches in the hall started to be served each Thursday this also continued for many years.