

## **BROAD OAK CHAPEL**

The chapel at Broad Oak came into existence due to a policy of “home mission” being carried out by the Countess of Huntingdon Congregational Church in Watling Street, Canterbury. Under the leadership of the Reverend Valentine Ward, church representatives were sent out from the city to preach in several of the nearby villages. The visits to Broad Oak were entrusted to Mr. William Acomb, a lay preacher of that church. He began his work in October 1866 and quickly discovered that, unlike other places on his itinerary, many people in the village desired a place of worship. Several village meetings were held to discuss this ambition and in January 1867 a local landowner, Mr. William Austen, offered a piece of ground on which to build a village chapel. Work began on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1867 and the building must have been completed exceptionally quickly as the official opening took place just over a month later on August 14<sup>th</sup>, the formalities being carried out by the Reverend Ward with 160 people in attendance. The event was captured in a remarkable photograph taken just outside the chapel. One hundred and sixty persons was a large number of people for such a small building (Acomb wrote that it was “crowded to excess”), and over the following months it became clear that the chapel could not accommodate everyone who wanted to attend. Fortunately, Mr. Austen allowed the further use of his land to extend the building a further 13 feet at the rear. A Sunday school was also started; a year later the summer school treat was attended by 80 children.

Although both the Reverend Mr. Ward and William Acomb left the Canterbury area in 1870, the chapel continued to be overseen by the church at Watling Street. However, the day-to-day running of the place was carried out by a group of local people from Broad Oak and Sturry. A generation after its opening the chapel was proving quite an expensive building to maintain – the roof had to be completely renewed in 1882, and chapel funds were often very tight. Much of the monies needed to keep the chapel in working order had to be raised by local subscription. At this time there were two services on a Sunday - one at 10:30am, then again at 6pm, taken by the minister from Watling Street. Unfortunately by the 1890s there were very few people associated with the managing of the chapel, although those few that were involved were very devoted to the work. Among these were Mr. Laythorne Blackman of Sturry, who in 1895 became the chapel superintendent, and Mr. Albert Curd of Broad Oak who became the secretary. There were also regular visiting speakers to the chapel. Reverend William Edmondson became minister of the Watling Street church in 1896, and from the very start of his 21-year ministry took a keen interest in the work at Broad Oak. The Sunday school treat became a regular event for the village; at first this was held locally but in later years would be held at both Herne Bay and Whitstable. The Sunday school held an annual prize-giving session from 1898 to reward the most regularly attending Sunday school scholars. After negotiations with the appropriate landowners, the chapel was further enlarged slightly at the rear in the spring of 1899. At the turn of the century, an attendance of around 100 people could be expected. The 1905 Sunday school treat was a very grand affair; judging by the photograph of the occasion, seemingly the whole of Broad Oak village coming to wave off the party on their way to Whitstable. Mr. Amos Baldock of Tyler Hill supplied his traction engine to transport the three large cartloads of people to the coast. By all accounts the trip was a very popular one and an identical visit took place the following year.

When war broke out in 1914, services were suspended and the chapel was commandeered by the War Office, who paid £29 7s 6d for the use of the building as a military sickbay. (Many years later, some World War One uniform buttons were found in the chapel field opposite and are now on permanent display). Albert Curd left the chapel in 1916 and William Edmondson died the following year, leaving a new generation to see the chapel into the post-war period. When the chapel reopened after the war, attendance at services and the Sunday school had declined considerably. Edmondson’s successor was Reverend Alexander Snape, a headmaster-turned Congregational Minister who, like his predecessor, paid great attention to the work at Broad Oak. Under his guidance, the chapel was steered through quite a lean period following the Great War. He left the area in 1926.

When the Broad Oak Village Hall was built in 1928 there was a strong link between the two buildings; one of the driving forces behind the Village Hall, Mr. Ernest Stennett, became leader of the chapel Sunday school for the next seven years. It was another prosperous period for the school, which had 76 scholars on the books in 1933. The chapel installed gas lamps in 1935.

During the Second World War, the chapel's parent church at Watling Street was completely bombed during two air raids in June and October 1942. Nevertheless, the chapel again thrived during difficult times. In the absence of an overseeing Watling Street minister (who had resigned in 1940), Mr. Maurice Cooper and his wife were leading a very successful chapel Sunday school. However, as before, after the war there was a decline in adult support. This appears to have occurred quite swiftly as by the end of 1950 the chapel was almost abandoned and closed, and although this did not happen, Mr. Cooper described 1952 as "a difficult year in an apathetic village". Then came Mr. Laurence Russell and his wife from Herne Bay Christian Conference Centre, who enjoyed a very successful five-year stint in charge, drawing much praise from the new minister and congregation at Watling Street church (in a temporary building from 1948-1955 when work on the new church started.) Several Sunday school outings took place to the Christian Conference Centre, still in use today. Mr. Russell officiated at the first marriage to take place at the chapel – on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1959, between Doris Mayo and Stanley Thompson. The chapel appears to have become detached from its parent church at Watling Street at the end of the 1950s, which again left it without a minister. But over the next few years a very dedicated group of local helpers moved in to administer the Sunday school, including Mrs. Agnes Pout (the granddaughter of Mr. Austen), Mr. Ted Todd & Mrs. Ellen Todd, Mrs. Martha Grier, and Mrs Alexandra Hill. An outdoor toilet was installed in 1962, with running water supplied in 1966 as the area at the rear of the building was converted into a kitchen. A "restoration fund" was launched that year to try and deal with some structural failings (the chapel has always suffered from damp), with the chapel floor being heavily treated. Sixty scholars regularly attended the Sunday school in 1968.

Mr. Andrew Reed, a trainee minister, had filled the pulpit as often as he was able from 1963 to 1967, but thereafter the chapel was without a regular minister until September 1972 when Reverend Tom Cooper of Herne Bay arrived. This was the first time the chapel had had its own minister independent of Watling Street. He remained in charge until his death in June 1981, and then numbers started to decline. The chapel was again without a minister, and although the Sunday school continued (largely thanks to the wonderfully dedicated Mr. Ron Barnard of Tankerton who ran the school from 1980 until 1995), the adult attendance was very low (dropping to just two in 1985) which seemed to mean that the chapel would have to close. However, in recent years, Jonathan Clark (1987-1992) and Reverend Ted Hamer (since 1992) have held dedicated ministries and the chapel is again playing a part in the life of Broad Oak village.