

## THE FREE CHURCH AT STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The Chapel at Stanstead Abbotts was built in the year 1808 and for many years the pulpit was supplied by the Students from Cheshunt College.

Towards the end of the year 1848, the ministrations of the Students having become irregular, the congregation invited an elderly Minister, Mr. Raban by name, who lived in the Village at the time, to take on the oversight of the work. He consented to do so and commenced his labours in early 1849. Shortly after this a Church was formed and two Deacons were appointed. A Sunday School was established with a good prospect of success - everything looked prosperous and encouraging. The work however proved too arduous for Mr. Raban's failing strength and, after some months of patient suffering, he fell asleep in July 1851.

Mr. Raban was succeeded by the Rev. E. Smith, who continued for five years with marked success. Mr. Smith, however, was induced to remove to Roydon. After his resignation some of the Members of the congregation, who held strongly to the propriety of believers baptism, expressed a wish to have a Minister whose views on this question agreed with their own and the matter was referred to the President of Cheshunt College. By way of compromise it was arranged that the pulpit be supplied on alternate Sundays by Students, leaving the congregation free to select their own supply on the intervening Sundays. The arrangement does not appear to have been satisfactory. It was then suggested that Students take all services and the offer was gratefully accepted.

It appears that in the year 1864 the Chapel and large Vestry, which also served as a Sunday School, having fallen into considerable disrepair required the expenditure of some £45 to put matters right.

There is little information available for the years 1864 to 1874, except that a tract distribution was undertaken throughout the Village. It was said at the time that "The belief seems to be gaining ground that the highest aim of a Church is not so much to seek its own spiritual joys as to give itself to God and to His service in self-denying Christian work." How right they were. At the same time there appears to have been an improvement in the Sunday School,

described as an "interest little short of enthusiasm". Numbers had risen to eighty. As it was difficult to cater for the different age groups it was decided to open twice on a Sunday with the result that there was an average attendance of 50 in the morning and around 60 in the afternoon.

Anniversary Services were held in the month of May 1871 when a sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Allon and at a numerously attended meeting which was held in the evening, the pressing need for the erection of a new Chapel, in place of the old inconvenient and ill ventilated building, was urged.

As donations to the amount of £80 had already been promised it was decided to press on with the project.

It was in the year 1874 that the foundation stone for the present structure was laid by Mrs. Best. Services for the next few months were held in rooms kindly lent for the purpose by Foxwell Buxton, Esq.

There is no information concerning the exact date of the opening of the new building. One assumes it to have been around the end of 1874. Rev. Dr. Allon preached at both Services. The evening Service, being presided over by the President of Cheshunt College and attended by a large number of ministers and friends of the neighbourhood.

The debt was scarcely cleared when the capacity of the place seemed hardly adequate to the demands of the increasing congregation and of the large and flourishing Sunday School, and a gallery was erected to remedy these wants. The total outlay was £141; the gallery costing £57 and the rest going for improvements and repairs.

It was said at this time that "A very abundant spiritual blessing followed leading to numerous additions to the Church."

There is little information available from then on to the year 1905 but there is one thing worth mentioning, it is that all things for the Church were done decently and in order. No-one was admitted into membership of the Church without an acceptable confession of faith. In one instance a lady wished to join and "Two members were required to wait upon her. Their report was in every way satisfactory and she was recommended for admission to Church fellowship."

It was in 1905 that the Rev. F. Higgins commenced his Ministry on Sunday 2nd July. The Church was re-organised and a Diaconate formed with regular monthly meetings. Individual communion cups were adopted and used for the first time on Sunday October 8th. A recognition service was held on Thursday September 28th when a large number of Minsiters were present.

The enlargement and renovation of the Church was carried out in 1909, including the renovation of the Schoolroom, at a total cost of £468.13s.09d. The re-opening services were held on August 12th 1909. The Rev. F. Higgins served the Church (which was then known as the Congregational Church) as Pastor for 28 years being actively interested in the affairs of the Village and a good friend to all, he won the respect of everyone and he retired on the 30th June 1933 at the age of 72 years. His farewell Service was held on the 28th June 1933.

Mr. Charles Andrews became a Member of the Church in 1906 and served as Deacon, Secretary and Treasurer for the rest of his life. He was loyal and faithful in all his duties, always cheerful, despite considerable discomfort, a keen gardener and, I believe, his favourite flowers were chrysanthemums - he certainly grew some fine specimens - but above all he was a man of God and served Him all his days.

There was a steady decline in the Church in the latter years and when Mr. Andrews was no longer able to carry on through ill health it was on the point of closing. The Trustees of the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion then asked me if I would take the oversight to see if the work might be revived and I agreed to do so and took over in March 1974.

We were fairly successful until 1981 when, due to circumstances beyond our control, the Church was forced once again into a state of decline.

Now through lack of interest and support, we are once again faced with the prospect of closure. The difference this time is that there is no-one waiting in the wings to take over. The Trustees of the Connexion have now said quite clearly that they can no longer support a work that has so little hope of a meaningful future, bearing in mind the amount of money that needs to be spent to put the buildings into good repair, and so it is with considerable regret and disappointment that I have to say that all Sunday Services in the Church will cease on last Sunday in October. Rev. Sydney Smith.



Countess of Huntingdon Free church, Cappell Lane.  
Demolished march 1987  
Photo Brian Johnson