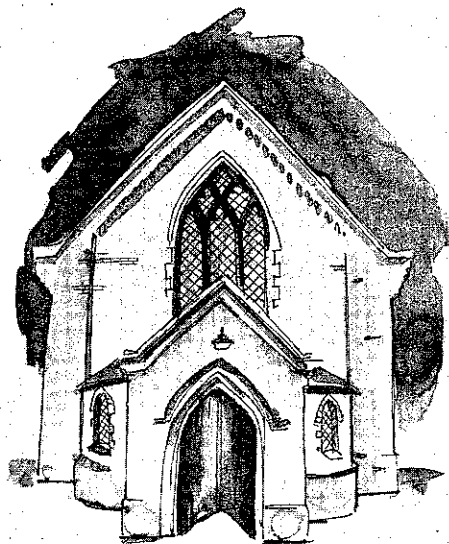


WELLS NEXT THE SEA METHODIST CHURCH

1891-1991

CENTENARY CELEBRATION



METHODISM IN WELLS

*The Story so Far*

SOUVENIR BOOKLET

£1

WHEN DID WELLS METHODISM BEGIN...? THAT IS A GOOD QUESTION, AND LIKE ALL GOOD QUESTIONS THERE IS NO EASY ANSWER TO IT. OUR PRESENT CHURCH BELONGED TO THE PRIMITIVE METHODISTS, BEING THEIR SECOND CHAPEL IN WELLS. BUT THE WESLEYAN METHODISTS, THE PARENT BODY, WERE HERE EARLY ON TOO; AND BEFORE THERE WERE ANY CHAPELS BUILT THE METHODISTS WORSHIPPED IN PRIVATELY OWNED, BUT PROPERLY LICENSED 'PREACHING HOUSES'. THESE NEVER BELONGED TO 'OFFICIAL' METHODISM, BUT THEY WERE THE PLACES WHERE ITS WORSHIP BEGAN. HOWEVER, BECAUSE WE ARE NOT ALWAYS SURE WHERE THESE PREACHING HOUSES WERE SITUATED, IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO TRACE WHERE THE FIRST METHODISTS ACTUALLY STARTED THEIR 'SOCIETIES'. WHAT WE ARE SURE ABOUT IS THIS: THE FIRST RECORD OF METHODISM IN WELLS IS NOT A HUNDRED YEARS OLD, BUT IS DATED 3RD MAY 1772, ACTUALLY, 219 YEARS AGO. SO WE COULD HAVE HAD OUR BICENTENARY IN 1972, IF WE HAD THOUGHT ABOUT IT! BUT TO GO BACK TO 1772, THAT WAS WHEN THOMAS MENDHAM, MINISTER AT BRISTON, APPLIED FOR A LICENCE TO ALLOW ANN MILLER'S HOUSE TO BECOME A PREACHING HOUSE. SO, EVEN THOUGH OUR RECORDS ARE A BIT VAGUE, WE ARE OLDER THAN WE THINK!

### John Wesley in Wells

In 1781, John Wesley himself, riding his horse from Fakenham, arrived in Wells, which he described as a '*considerable seaport*'. At 10am Tuesday 30th October, he preached in '*a small neat preaching house*', probably one of three such houses in Wells at the time. Referring to his congregation Wesley records: '*.....all but two or three were very attentive. Here are a few who appear to be in great earnest. And if so, they will surely increase*'.

### Growth and Enthusiasm

Increase they surely did. Six years later the Wesleyans opened their church on what is now Station Road. They converted what had been the "Rose and Crown" public house: clearly their evangelism didn't just reach people but buildings as well! Later, the premises were enlarged and a gallery installed. About the time of Methodist Union in 1932, their building was sold and the members united with the now ex-Primitive Chapel in Theatre Road, thus reinforcing the good relationships already existing between the two societies.

### The 'Primitives'

The Wesleyan Methodists grew and advanced successfully in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but in parts of Norfolk the Primitives showed an even more dramatic growth and advance in the first half of the nineteenth century. A letter written in 1821 affirmed that '*the Primitives are carrying all before them in Kings Lynn...*' When their energetic preacher GW Bellham was appointed there in 1825 he began a remarkable 24 year ministry in the Norwich District. Not content with the huge task confronting him in his native Kings Lynn he set about missioning places much further afield. His name appears at the top of the list on the Primitive Methodist Preachers Plan for the Fakenham Circuit in 1827. Wells is shown on this plan with 24 other societies. The plan also gives details of Sunday services and weeknight preaching meetings, and exorts the preachers to '*take heed how ye hear*'. They were reminded that '*Quarter Day at Hindringham would be on August 28th, Preachers' Meeting to commence at half-past*

ten o'clock in the morning'. Just as bluntly was the order given: 'Let no one preach in our pulpits whose name is not on the Plan, for there are imposters strolling about'.

### Cocks Yard

As we have already seen, the Methodist use of the word 'society' indicated that people came before buildings. Worship often happens long before official chapels are built. We are not sure whether we actually owned a Primitive Methodist building in Wells in 1827, even though the plan mentioned above shows Wells as a place on the circuit. The nearest we can get to a date for the first such chapel may be seen from a stone set in the wall of a modern building now on the east side of what was Cocks Yard, and built on or near to the actual site of the old chapel. On this stone is carved "W.N. 1836", which possibly indicates the builder's initials and foundation date. What we are sure of is that the 'Prims' continued there for well over half a century. A measure of their strength and enthusiasm can perhaps be gauged from the fact that Cocks Yard became known as *Ranters Yard*. "Ranters" was the nickname given early on to this branch

of Methodism; and even though the modern name is the more respectable 'Chapel Yard', many of the older folk in Wells today still call it 'Ranters Yard'.

### Gas Lights

Arthur W Purchas in his book 'Some History of Wells next the Sea' quotes from a Minute of The Town Improvement Commissioners for 4th August 1873: 'The sum of £1 17s 0d was paid to William Parkinson and Co for a 5-light gas meter for the Primitive Methodist Chapel'. By 1894 the building had been sold to a John Warren. Years later, on 10th November 1927, when it was advertised for sale, Andrews and Dewing described it as 'Brick, Stone and Tile Barn (formerly the Primitive Methodist Chapel) measuring about 54ft by 28ft'.

### Theatre Road

Our present building on Theatre Road was opened on 18th May 1891, but for some time after the opening the Sunday School still met in the old chapel. The new chapel originally contained 350 seats and was built at a cost of one thousand pounds. The erection of the choir and organ gallery, costing £150,

and the installing of the pipe organ, costing £450, took place in 1929. Later, in 1953-4, the Sunday School extension was built. The comparing of building costs a century ago with those of today is interesting if not entirely relevant. The recent (1990) work of replacing weathered brickwork and roofing, plus the interior refurbishment cost the equivalent of thirty times that of the whole suite of premises in 1891.

### 'Suitable Hymns'

Evidence of the vigorous nature of Methodist life can be seen in a booklet containing information and hymns to be sung at 'The Primitive Methodist Sabbath School Anniversary Services' held in Wells on Sunday 4th June 1893. In the morning a Sermon was preached by Miss Knowles of Guildford, in the afternoon at 2pm a 'Service of Song' was rendered, while in the evening at six 'the Children will recite Dialogues and Pieces and sing Hymns suitable for the occasion'. One such 'suitable' hymn began:

*There is out of sight the fair land of the blest,*

*Which Jesus has made for His followers' rest.*

*He calls us to come and invites us to stay;*

*Then march to the land of the blest, march away*

Almost all the children's hymns in the booklet made strong reference to that future 'endless, heav'nly day', where 'Jesus ever dwelleth, None but the good are there...' Ideas as to suitable children's hymns certainly change. Obviously, what was regarded as suitable in those days would not be regarded as either suitable or sensible today.

### 1906 - In Debt

On the Primitive Methodist Plan of 1906 this item appears: 'Our friends at Wells are still working for a Bazaar (DV) on 17th May to reduce the debt upon the Chapel which is now £325. The given Teas and Suppers have succeeded splendidly. They will be most grateful for any assistance in money or goods which may be sent to one of the Society Stewards or the Rev J Davidson'. Obviously, the thousand pounds which their new chapel had cost them fifteen years earlier was taking some time to raise. In fact, fourteen years later, another money-raising event was organised. An old photograph of a 'Gold and Silver Arch' has come to light. It

shows a great flower and greenery arrangement surrounding the pulpit, piano and harmonium. Pinned on to the decorations are dozens of valuable envelopes presumably holding the hard-earned gold and silver coins given by members and friends. Pencilled on the back of the photograph is written :

*' Primitive Methodist Chapel, Gold and Silver Arch to Clear Debt, 4th February 1920'*

#### **'From Street Arab to Methodist Pastor'\***

On that Plan of 1906, mentioned above, one of 47 preachers mentioned is 'AJ Mahomet, Wells'. Cyril Jolly of Gressenhall wrote an article in the 'Eatern Daily Press' in 1969 about this man after he had read his fascinating autobiography\*. I pass on the following pieces of information from Cyril's article. AJ Mahomet was born in London in 1858. His mother, from Wells, met and married his father, an Indian from Calcutta. After some years the father deserted his wife leaving her with six children.

Mahomet's mother found the struggle to bring up the children alone too great. She took to drink. Albert describes his

poverty-stricken childhood: basement flat in Bow, attendance at a Ragged School, and, after his mother was gaoled for street brawling, life in a Limehouse Workhouse. After a year, Albert and one sister were sent to Thursford Union, via Liverpool Street and Walsingham railway stations. The Thursford Governor, a Mr Gray, was particularly kind to Albert, who, eventually worked in Wells, and got to know Samuel Gooch, a farmer in Burnt Street, who was also the Wesleyan Sunday School Superintendent.

After much hard work, he saved enough money to buy himself a bible from Mr Fryer's shop in the High Street. Reading his bible under the influence of Mr Gooch, lead eventually to Albert's conversion and enthusiastic work in a United Methodist Free Church Sunday School in Lincoln, where he became an evangelist with the Christian Mission. Years later, he settled in Wells, and took up photography with a studio in Lugger Yard. He assisted Sam Peel in his evangelistic work, and, as the Plan reminds us, was recognised by the Primitive Methodists as one of their preachers. AJ Mahomet is a classic case

of one who was literally 'saved' by the Gospel of God's love in Christ, and from what seemed an impossible start was given the strength and will to break the shackles of poverty and privation and live a useful life in society as a servant of the church.

#### **'...Go Forward'**

On their 1912 Plan, the Primitives had this as their text: *'Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward'*. The Wells Circuit had certainly gone forward. This Plan shows them having twelve chapels, thirty-nine preachers, six preachers on trial, five prayer leaders and thirteen auxiliaries. The 225 members organised Camp Meetings in nine places. And Wells itself had three services every Sunday, a Band of Hope on Monday, Preaching Meeting on Tuesday, and Class Meeting and Christian Endeavour on Wednesday.

### Back to the Present...and Future

Things have certainly changed. In the half century or so since Methodist Union the world has seen more changes than in the five hundred years before 1932. In our own lifetime Methodism has had to face drastic and dramatic changes. Church based activities are only a shadow of what they were and Sunday worship particularly appeals to much smaller numbers of people than in the early years. This reflects the fact that nowadays only a small percentage of the population attends church regularly. Against this sad fact we must clearly recognise a brighter fact, namely that the majority of our population believes in God and has a vague kind of faith in Christian principles. But apart from coming to our Coffee Mornings and Harvest Suppers, they seldom join us in what we see as worship. They appear to see no link between their private faith and our public worship. Yet often they remember with great affection, sometimes with tears in their eyes, their Sunday School days, and would probably express violent opposition to any suggestion of closing the church they never go to!

### Challenge and Change

We all know people who were 'made to go' to church when they were young, but who now, for one reason or another, have left us. They can find no practical reason for the church either in their own lives or in their world. We are still in the church because we feel worship to be important and believe that God has an important role for the church in today's world. But, and here's the rub, *our role today is a different one from what it was a hundred years ago*, and adjusting to our changed and changing role can be both long and painful.

### Changed Buildings

Altering a building causes some people some pain; especially when the building concerned is their church. At Wells, a large part of our recent expenditure has been on 'invisible' repairs and renewals; but a very significant part of the scheme has produced obvious and visible results. The outside boundary wall which used to separate us from the folk passing by, has been demolished, and the inside vestibule wall which kept our worship a closely guarded secret from those same passers-by, has been replaced by large,

clear glass screen. The vestibule now is bigger and more beautiful than we ever thought it would be, and the church is altogether more open and inviting than ever before. Every week, people are telling us how they appreciate the changes, which, of course, include new carpeting, fine, new, movable pews, and a new lighting system.

### Changed Evangelism

Bright, warm, friendly and comfortable premises are necessary, but a church is more than just fabric and heating. *A church, the church, is people.* But like the building, the people need to be bright, warm and friendly; and they need to be comfortable folk to be with too. The best asset and advertisement for any church are the people who are its members. This is where evangelism begins and ends: with us, the members of the church: talking with others, becoming their trustworthy friends, and sharing with them our faith - in small, digestible doses. Recent experience suggests that the Mass Rally, the National Crusade, are far less effective now than they were. Certainly, any form of 'evangelism' which resorts to

undue emotionalism, coercion, or any other aspect of manipulating people's minds, has nothing to do with the Jesus Way, and should be avoided at all cost.

### 'Lord God, by Whom all Change is Wrought'

My purpose has not just been to evoke memories of past days, although the attempt to fill in a few gaps in our little history hasn't seemed to me to be an entire waste of time. Not only is it valuable to fill in the gaps before everyone forgets them, but to realise that there are parts of our past history of which we can be justifiably proud. For example, the remarkable devotion, discipline and enthusiasm shown by the founders of our church are Christian values from which we can certainly learn and benefit. Which, of course, does not mean that we are called to copy and reproduce their words and ways of witness. Our Wesleyan and Primitive forefathers experimented with, what were then, new forms of worship and evangelism, and God used those methods to add to His church. Methodism came in on a wave of change, and as such proved an effective instrument in God's

About three years ago we began thinking about how to celebrate our Centenary. Aware that parts of our premises needed repairing and modernising and considering our worship here in the next century, we employed an architect to advise in these respects, and on the better use of the space available, as we had room to expand. The plans duly arrived, and then began the long task of modifying them to meet what we could afford. Unfortunately, plans for the kitchen and schoolroom had to be shelved because of the cost.

This was a hard decision to make, but with hindsight, a right one, for coupled with the presentation of these plans came a quinquennial inspection which revealed more exterior problems than we had anticipated. But even this inspection did not show the full extent of the work which eventually had to be carried out.

What started out at work costing at £6,000 ended at over £20,000. The 150 weathered bricks needing replacement rose to nearly one thousand, a few square yards of re-pointing became the whole south gable and large areas on either side of the church, plus the complete renewal of the schoolroom roof. All this work, added to the cost of the new vestibule, pews, and carpet, brought the total up to £31,000.

How has this been financed...?

£3,000 came from existing church funds. Donations and efforts to date have realised £8,500, and as several of these donations have been very substantial we have availed ourselves of the government's new "Gift Aid" Tax Refund. This has added £875 with another £530 to come. The Circuit Advance Fund has granted us £1,500, and promised another £3,500. £4,100 has been received from various Charitable Trusts, and £1,800 will come from our headquarter's Property Division.

To enable us to pay for the work as it has been completed some very generous members of our church and circuit have provided us with interest-free loans amounting to £13,000: a marvellous gesture, for which we are profoundly grateful.

We still have a long way to go to clear the debt, but very soon we shall be able to commence repaying some of the loans. Then, when all the outstanding grants are received, the amount to be raised will be £6,000.

**We are glad now, and certain, that we made the right decision to have the work done, and we look forward to the future with renewed hope and confidence. This church has a marvellous product to sell, and, for want of a better word, we now have an excellent 'shop' to sell it from.**

**Incidentally, if you would like to send us a donation, but are unable to come to any of our services, we shall be pleased to receive your gift.**

John Pechey (Church Treasurer)

5 William Road

Fakenham

Norfolk

Wells Methodist Church....today

We return a Membership of 52. On Sundays our Morning Congregation numbers 45, and at the same time our Sunday School meets with a dozen children. Our Evening Congregation averages 20. During the holiday season a significant number of visitors join us as well. Many of these visitors have been worshipping with us for years.

A recently formed choir has a dozen very keen members. They practise weekly and lead the singing on Sunday mornings.

The Ladies Fellowship meets at 2.30pm on Tuesdays. This well-attended meeting has a membership of between three and four dozen ladies.

The Prayer and Praise meeting is held on Wednesdays at 10.30am. It has a 15 minute devotional period which is followed by tea and coffee. The numbers attending vary between 15 and 20, and often include holiday-makers.

A small group attends a short hymn-singing service at Wells Hospital at 8pm on the third Sunday every month. This service is much appreciated by the patients. Members and friends support circuit events and give distinctive help in circuit administration. They enjoy friendly contacts with members of other congregations in the town, and are actively engaged in very worthwhile activities in Wells.

I am grateful to the many friends whose ideas and information have helped in the production of this booklet. In particular, I must thank:

Dorothy Yarham, for the loan of photographs, booklets and preaching plans.

Cyril Jolly, for information from his book "The Spreading Flame", his article on AJ Mahomet, and copies of circuit plans.

Peter Colman, who very kindly asked his friend Martin Crotch, if I could borrow his IBM Computer. And Martin, who immediately, and with great bravery, said, "Yes, certainly!"

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Rev Roy Coppack and the YCENI Workshop of Great Yarmouth for generous help in printing the booklet.

Any mistakes are mine, not theirs.