

Memories of Kibworth Harcourt Congregational Chapel

by Betty Ward (1922-2017)

Part 1

Heritage - a fulsome word - and my village - Kibworth Harcourt - is steeped in it. I am proud to become its Heritage Warden, and I thank the Parish Council for the appointment.

A heritage building very close to my heart is the Congregational Chapel - now a private residence bearing the illustrious name of Church House. To us all in my young days it was always the Top Chapel.

Everything went on there, as well as the Sunday services and the Sunday School, as the school room up the winding staircase above the gallery was the only public meeting place in the village. The Parish Council used to meet there, - committee meetings were held there, - public addresses were held there, as well as concerts and shows and Sunday School activities. In addition to the main room there was the 'bottom room' (down three steps) which acted as a changing room and store room etc. We had a big coke stove for heating, and good solid wooden forms to sit on, and even a little stage.

In the corner of the school room I remember the large banner saying '1652' - the year the Chapel was formed.

To the side - through a door - was the gallery to the church- very rarely used, and this was hallowed ground to us kids. This was screened off from the school room by a removable screen, which was never removed, and at the front was a huge clock looking down on the Chapel, but which had to be wound up weekly from the gallery.

To the rear of the vestry we had a kitchen with a sink and running water - a gas ring on which to boil the big brass urn to make the tea. We had toilets - a visit to which meant going out of the back door and round through the graveyard - a

bit scary for us kids especially in the dark, but once you found the loo it was a double, so you could sit side by side (very matey), but goodness knows who emptied the buckets!! Later on - no doubt when Kibworth Harcourt got what we called 'the town water' laid on, inside toilets were installed off the kitchen - ladies and gents - very posh!

I started life at the top Chapel at a very early age - in fact I was christened there! And years later I was 'in at the kill' being the one who had to call a meeting to make the awesome decision to close it down. By then I had become secretary and treasurer, and general factotum, and there was only me and two or three old ladies attending the monthly services. We had a lay preacher - a Mr Harold Wright - a very dedicated man - who used to come from Market Harborough on the bus to take the services, but I will give more about this and the Chapel itself in my next report.

Part 2

The Kibworth Harcourt Congregational Chapel was quite unique in that it had no central aisle. Nowhere, after much research, have I heard of anywhere similar - most churches have a main central aisle. We had a right and a left, with a block of pews going down the centre, but we always used the left aisle.

The pews, in my young days, were high, with doors which locked. Our pew (each family had their own) was the second from the back on the left, and we never sat anywhere else. It was great for us kids as no-one could see what we were doing, so we could read a book, play a game, or even eat the odd toffee surreptitiously during what was to us a boring sermon. Having said that though, we were taught to respect our church and what it stood for - no running around - like today - and of course every lady always wore a hat in church.

Later on more modern pews in light oak were installed. I always regret not buying one of these for a garden seat at the end of the day.

We had an altar rail and an altar table and a distinctive pulpit which is still there to this day, and behind the pulpit – high up on the wall - were three large marble plaques. The biggest, in the middle, was in memory of Philip Doddridge, the famous preacher and hymn writer, who started his career at our Chapel. As you will know, his famous hymn ‘O Happy Day’ is still sung in many forms to this day. This plaque is still in situ.

We had a pipe organ which had to be pumped when played, and this was done by a school boy sitting behind a curtain at the side - OK as long as he stayed awake and did not miss his signal. Incidentally I still have a friend – 92 years of age like me – who did this job as a boy at the Top Chapel. Later we had a new very good pipe organ installed, which was electrically operated. Eventually it became my job to arrange for this to be tuned, by an expert, once a year.

Obviously, we did have electricity, and the church was heated by three or four large cast iron radiators. Again it became my job to go up to the Chapel, at the crack of dawn once a month for our monthly service, to crank the very large lever to switch on the heating! But the place never did get really warm!!

There were choir stalls right next to the organ and in my young days we had a very good choir. My dad, my uncle and my aunts were all in the choir, being good singers, and they once performed a very impressive cantata. Another impressive thing the choir did was to tour the village singing carols on Christmas Eve. The sound of something like ‘Silent Night’ being sung in harmony under your bedroom window at 4.00am was quite something.

The ladies went round next morning, Christmas Day, with the collecting boxes.

All the usual events took place at the Top Chapel – we had the Sunday School anniversary when we

were all lined up at the front behind the altar rail to sing. I remember to my dismay I was always detailed to sing a solo – not I suspect because I had a good voice, but probably because my mother always dressed me in a pretty dress, which incidentally she would have made herself by hand – no sewing machines in those days! Our sister Chapel at Tur Langton always joined up with us for this event, as we did with theirs, a group visiting each other on the day.

We always had our annual Sunday School tea party on The Munt, and I have in my possession an old photograph showing some 50 or 60 kids at this event. We had a Sunday School outing too, once a year, when a bus was hired to take us to Wicksteed Park!! Fantastic!

We had the Harvest Festival services in the autumn, when the church was profusely decorated with fruit, vegetables and flowers. Certain neighbours, who did not actually belong to our church would offer to help on this occasion by perhaps volunteering to decorate say a window. These special services were always well attended, and in my young days there was always a harvest supper held in the schoolroom on the following Monday evening. At that event the produce was auctioned off – the proceeds going either to church funds or some local good cause.

Later on, when we were much depleted, we carried on these traditions as best we could. But there was no harvest supper, and the produce was either donated to a local old folks’ home or auctioned off (by yours truly) after the service.

Part 3 The Outside

I had thought there was going to be very little to report under this heading, then I came across an old file dated 1980-82 with all the information on the Department of Transport’s compulsory purchase of part of our premises for a road widening scheme along the A6.

A veritable can of worms!!

The Manse, no. 81 Leicester Road, was a large house and no. 83 was semi-detached. Both properties, bordering on the A6, belonged to the trustees of the Congregational Chapel.

When I was a child the parson always lived in the manse. I remember Rev Thomas, a lovely white-haired old man, and the Rev Plaskett who resembled Capt Mainwaring in Dad's Army! Next came a lady preacher, Rev Williams, but I don't think she lived in the manse. When it became empty of course it gradually deteriorated.

The other side, no. 83, was occupied by Mr W Norman – a shoe mender – with a substantial wooden workshop in the garden, and his daughter, Miss Kathleen Norman, who was a dressmaker.

The vehicle right of way to the rear of the Chapel led up right next to their house, and then there was a large garden beyond.

In the early 1960's the Dept of Transport brought out a scheme to widen the A6, taking off the dangerous bend in the road by the Chapel – a large piece of land taking in part of The Manse and the Chapel House. Numbers 81 and 83 were taken over by a compulsory purchase order.

Both The Manse and the Chapel are listed buildings.

This scheme was obviously later shelved and the church was able to buy back the commandeered property.

It was decided to put both dwellings up for sale by auction. This sale was to take place at the Grand Hotel in Leicester and I have copies of the sale particulars in my file. But all hell broke loose!! A 'Save the Manse' campaign was started, supported by the newly formed Kibworth Harcourt Conservation Society, and so many objections were received that the sale was abandoned.

Snow & Astill of Bowling Green St, Leicester, were the agents at that time, but by then I was working

for Shakespear, McTurk & Graham based in Market Harborough, and somehow I managed to get them in as agents, which meant I was doing all the correspondence.

The sale never took place, and as I said, the two houses were never lived in again until after the Chapel closed and was eventually purchased by a private buyer and turned into a substantial private residence.

The Manse and the Chapel House, nos. 81 and 83, were also purchased by a private buyer and became one residence with the entrance via the large garden of no. 81.

All the gravestones were removed from the graveyard and placed around the open space in the front of the Chapel, with the largest, a prominent white edifice, being placed in front of the old manse front door. This one is in memory of Rev Islip – a prominent preacher in the old days, and we at the Chapel were always committed to the upkeep of his grave by a sum of money left for this purpose by the family.

Part 4

This is the fourth and last of my accounts on the history, during my lifetime, of the Chapel.

My dad's side of my family – the Wards – were all devout members of the Congregational Chapel, and in the early 1970s my dad's youngest sister – my Aunt Elsie – died and left a legacy to the Chapel. Aunt Elsie had married late in life to an older man – Arthur Webster. Uncle A was 'worth a bob or two' but no-one knew this, and of course when he died he left his small fortune to his wife – my Aunt Elsie. My Auntie Elsie, although quite a lady in her way, was not worldly and knew nothing about money. When Uncle Arthur died, naturally he left her the lot, but again in her simple way when she died in the early 70s she left a few bequests to members of the family with the residue to go to the Congregational Chapel. This proved to be a tidy sum!!

That was when I stepped in!! I was not going to see that money end up with the Congregational Union – or some such body – Aunt Elsie had left her money to the Chapel and to the Chapel it was going to go. Especially by then as we were well on our beam ends for cash – water was coming through the roof – wallpaper was peeling off the walls, and windows and electrics needed repair.

The deacons agreed to my suggestions and I drew up specifications and obtained quotes from local builders and decorators to get the repairs done. I supervised all the works as they progressed. In retrospect I do not know how I managed this but no doubt my employers Shakespear, McTurk & Graham were always very helpful.

Suffice it to say we got the place put in order and redecorated and thus were able to carry on for a few more years. But this was all thanks to my Aunt Elsie and it was agreed that a small plaque in her honour should be erected on the wall inside the Chapel, but that went missing after the closure and I have never been able to trace it.

That ends my story about the Congregational Chapel. I have files still in my possession recording most of this and anyone is welcome to see these.

Postscript

Apart from my narrative, there are one or two characters I should like to mention.

Mr Ted Lord

Ted was a character and a devout supporter of the Congregational religion. I remember him parading up and down the aisles singing his head off during his favourite hymns.

Miss Annie Lee

Annie was a deaconess and again a devout member of the Chapel (as were all of her family). Annie was a worker and she would always set to and run a sale of work or a raffle when funds were needed. She made enough money that way to purchase carpeting for the aisles and all the area under the altar table, and also started the fund for a new front door.

Miss Annie Ward (my Aunt Annie)

Auntie Annie was my dad's oldest sister – she always remained a spinster but loved children and ran the Sunday School (it seems like forever). It was Auntie Annie who organised the summer tea party on The Munt and later it was Auntie Annie who organised the annual outing to Wicksteed Park.

I and my cousins always loved Auntie Annie's tea parties in their tiny cottage. There was no room to run around but she always kept us entertained with games sitting around the table.

A strong, capable, intelligent lady – helping her family all her life, and my last memory of her is sitting with her head in her hands (obviously in pain) just before she died. RIP Auntie Annie.

Our last vicar was a handsome young man called David – with a beard. The first time I had called a vicar by his first name! He did not come very often though – he was often ill (or something). Mr Harold Wright always took over on those occasions and was eventually appointed as our regular lay preacher.

Written by Betty Ward during the autumn of 2014