

## **The History of Chalkwell Park Methodist Church**

An old iron building, which served as a Congregational Church from 1911 to 1928, stood on this site at the corner of Eastwood Lane South and Kingsway. In 1926 the Rev. E. Douglas Bebb, a Congregationalist, began his ministry here and he was followed in 1928 by the Rev. Bryan H. Reed, a United Methodist Minister, for his first appointment after completing his training in college. These two men worked with a small, but devoted, band of lay people to encourage folk moving into this rapidly growing area to make this church their own.

In 1928 plans were put in hand to erect the present buildings. The main publicity for this project was the Chalkwell Park magazine of eight printed pages which had a free distribution of 2,000 in the area each month. Bryan Reed was tireless in visiting every house in the neighbourhood, and much of the successful completion of the very ambitious building scheme, and the growing church membership, was due to his efforts and enthusiasm.

The church was built in 1930 at a cost of £9,000, and the remaining buildings were constructed in the following year. The union of the Wesleyan Methodist, the Primitive Methodist and the United Methodist Churches in 1932 brought changes in organisation and pastoral oversight.

In a few years the threat of war, the eventual 1939/45 conflict, and the large scale evacuation of this area, gave rise to great difficulties. There remained a large debt on the buildings, and few resources were available. In spite of the obstacles, a loyal band maintained the premises, and the work and witness of the Church continued.

When the war was over, there began a long, hard, struggle to clear the debt, and increase the membership, to match this large building with 513 seats. At times during the years 1946 onwards, there were lean periods, when little progress was made. However, it was during the ministry of the Rev. Owen Johnson, with his "Tree of Memories" in 1958 that the last debt was cleared.

When the Church was built, a pipe organ had been installed, which had previously been in the Mascot Cinema, then in London Road, Westcliff-on-sea. By the end of the 1950's, the instrument was showing signs of its age. It was then replaced by the Compton Cinema organ from the Gaumont Cinema, Haymarket, in London. To find out more read 'The History of the Church Organ'.

In 1963 a legacy from the estate of Miss Clara Salmon enabled the Trustees to undertake a refurbishing of the Church with part of the money, this being the first major work on the Church since it was built. Five years later, in 1968, another project provided some extra accommodation in the lower hall, and new heating arrangements.

However, it was the much more ambitious scheme for further improvements which made the biggest changes. The sanctuary area was altered, and a screen was constructed across the middle of the Church, creating the present lounge and a new kitchen. A new entrance to the Church, through the present foyer, linked the Church to the school halls, so that the entire premises became one unit for the first time. This was opened in January 1976.

It was the patience and perseverance of the Rev. John Stanfield, supported by the Rev. Kenneth Price, and generous help from various Methodist funds, which made this very extensive scheme possible. Splendid help in so many ways from members and friends of the Church enabled the whole work to be paid for in a very short time.

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Church in 1980, during the ministry of the Rev. Stanley Field, a number of special services took place to mark the occasion, including the broadcast on Radio 2 of 'Sunday Half Hour' on the second Sunday of December in that year.

In 2005, the church celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and a Celebration Sampler was created with twenty squares each individually created by various organisations in the Church. This was dedicated by the Rev. Michael Hayman at the Church anniversary service on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2005. It is now on display in the foyer of the Church.

In 2020, the church would have had celebrations for its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary but these had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. A 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary brochure was produced instead with members sharing their memories plus some memories of events from the past. This can be found on the church website under the history section. It also includes photos/brochures from the past.

In a town where there are several instances of churches being very close to one another, Chalkwell Park is well placed in one respect for there are no mainstream Christian Churches in the immediate vicinity, but in the other hand it suffers because its location is not well known through being on a side road and because it is sited some distance from the park after which it is named.

Chalkwell Park is one of seventeen churches in the centre of the Southend and Leigh circuit. Originally it was part of the smaller Southend-on-sea circuit until that was amalgamated with the Leigh circuit to make the greatly enlarged circuit.