

CHAPTER 18

Building matters

The growing freedom for Dissenters in about the year 1690 allowed them to form a more settled congregation at Chishill, where they obtained a licence to use a barn in May Street for religious worship shortly before the coming of the first minister, Rev.J.Nicholls.

It is recorded that in about the year 1700, a building (later made into a meeting-house) and 15 rod of ground were purchased by Mr. Nicholls for the congregation at Chishill, and made over in trust to them.

Whether because repairs were urgently needed a century later upon a decaying building or the life of the church began to improve rapidly after the arrival of Rev.J.Dobson, it was nevertheless decided to undertake work upon the structure.

On 22nd February 1798, however, a fire became out of control, as this account dated 10th April 1789 from a local miller (Mr. Jon Andrews) vividly tells:

'The town burnt 22nd February 1798, began at the meeting-house by Deall Shavings being put in to the Vestry House Chimley, and it was said the Lad hung on the Blower and left it for to go for a can of Beer by order of the Workmen who was at that time working in the New-Built house for the Decenting Minister to live in, and that in the absence of the Boy in a few minutes went up the Chimley and fell on the Thatched part of the Meeting and in a few minites got to go ahead so that the principle part of the Town was down in less than two Hours, it began as near as could be thought at two o'clock in the Afternoone. Lucky no lives was lost nor Cattle except three or four Hogs.'

'The wind was west and very strong, such that the Millers call a 'Middle Sackwind' i.e. struck up the middle of the sail.'

By way of post-script, Mr. Andrews describes the fortunate escape of the Parish Church from this conflagration :

'The Church was also on Fier i.e. The roof and above the Bells and the Toller or the floor under the Bells, the two Breaches had got about the Bigness of a common Fan. But very luckeily I and Mr. Ridenton (of the Hall) with the asistane of teen or a dozen more mannged to get it Extinguish'd. '

It was necessary as a result of the fire to build a new meeting-house, part of which remained as the 'old schoolroom' until demolished in 1991. This was achieved by the fund-raising abilities of Mr. Dobson, the liberality of his congregation even though the fire had destroyed much of their property and livelihood, and the aid of the religious public.

The architecture of the building did not universally impress. One brief account offers the comment:

'Its four square walls were plain to the verge of ugliness. It was held together by large beams, with spacious galleries running along three sides of the square. The pulpit was stuck up very high, and scarcely large enough to contain an ordinary-sized man, while the large, square pews, with narrow seats and high straight backs, warned the hearers not to sleep'.

Others no doubt showed much affection towards the building. Ornamented with brass rods and curtains, these pews showed their occupants to be of some local standing. The unheated chapel had a brick floor.

Several enlargements to the building were later required to accommodate the large numbers that attended during the latter part of Mr. Dobson's ministry.

A series of transactions in the years following the re-building traces the widening responsibilities. An Indenture dated 15th December 1802 conveyed a piece of land for use as a burial-ground, and a Feoffment dated 18th January 1803 transferred both meeting-house and burial-ground in trust to Rev.J.Dobson. This was in turn passed to a new group of trustees by a document dated 6th May 1803. Reference is made to conveyance of the minister's house to the meeting-house trustees in a document dated 14th July 1880.

The building served well for almost a century, but when Rev.J.Butcher arrived in 1889, it soon became apparent to him that the structure was becoming unsafe and it would be necessary to build a new one.

The building stood on the brow of a considerable hill, exposed to the weather. Being built originally of lath and plaster, it had often needed repairs.

As the wind and rain drove through the walls and roof, with the principal beam broken in two and the building shaking to the foundations, it was obvious to a church-builder like Rev. John Butcher that a more substantial structure would be needed if the work of the congregation was to be carried on.

This was not a good time economically for such an enterprise, for agriculture was passing through a difficult time. There was much hope and enthusiasm amongst the members, however, and encouragement was given by many who had moved away from the village for whatever reason.

As an example, a donation towards the chapel-building fund was received from some who had emigrated

forty years previously, as an expression of their continued interest and their appreciation of Sunday School teaching. Another group of eight who had worked on the land at Great Chishill earlier but moved to the towns in search of work, sent a combined donation of £50.

The necessary money was raised with such speed that the former building was closed on 23rd September 1894, the foundation stone laid on 8th November and the new Chapel received from the builder Mr. Parker and opened for worship on 3rd May 1895.

The church was illuminated by oil-lamps and heated after a style by a 'tortoise stove'. This stove consumed wood and coke in very smokey fashion and took some time to have any effect upon the temperature, resulting in cold Morning Services. Lighting the stove was the responsibility of the chapel-keeper, for which he was paid a shilling per week (with extra sixpence for special weeks).

In the early 1930's it was increasingly felt that the lamps and stove should be replaced by electric light and heating. An appeal was issued in July 1935 and sufficient money was raised to bring electricity into the chapel, schoolroom and manse.

This advance in facilities was marked by Dedication Services on 12th December 1935, consisting of afternoon sermon, with Public Tea and Evening Service. The heating and lighting system was dedicated to the memory of Mr. Joseph Pegram, who had served the church throughout his lifetime. The total cost was £93.3s.1d.

It is of note that the chapel and manse did not have a mains water supply until 1950. Until this date, water had to be carried in buckets from nearby houses and emptied into copper cauldrons for boiling.

Whether by necessity or as a mark of support at

the coming of Rev.F.Oliver, church members agreed to install a hot-water system and boiler in the manse.

Other improvements to church property included a new electric organ which was dedicated in memory of Mrs. Jessie Pegram on 6th October 1984. In addition, new electric wiring was installed in the building, and this was dedicated in memory of Mr. Ken Burling on 16th February 1985. A public address system was fitted in March 1987.

During this time, much thought had been given to the need for retaining the manse, seeing that it was unlikely that a future minister would reside in it. Its location within the grounds of the church was likely to make demarcation very difficult, but interest had been shown by various prospective purchasers since 1977 and a purchase price calculated.

A decision was taken in 1986, however, not to sell the manse but to retain it for letting, so as to create a source of income. This entailed an expensive renovation, which was not completed until 1990.

Concern had been expressed for many years over the decaying state of the old schoolroom, and when a severe gale caused the structure to be declared irreparable, a special Church Meeting was held on 20th November 1990. Plans were submitted by the church secretary (Michael Livings, a practising architect) and the following resolution was passed 'It is recommended that the existing hall should be replaced by a new building as outlined by the plans submitted'.

The work was begun and the opportunity taken also to replace the slates on the main roof and renovate the hall floor. The new wing, consisting of kitchen vestry and toilets, was opened at a Service held on 30th November 1991.