

## CHAPTER 7

### Revs. James Mirams and James Irwin (1847 - 1883)

The attention of the congregation was immediately directed to Rev. James Mirams, who was open to an invitation by virtue of his having resigned the pastorate of Esher Street Church, Kennington, in South London, although continuing as Assistant Secretary to the Christian Instruction Society.

He had earlier trained for the ministry at Hoxton Academy and become a missionary in Berbice, South America, before his pastorate at Kennington began from November 1838.

Mr. Mirams conducted worship on three Sundays in January 1848, and proved very attractive to his congregation. After a short delay he accepted the invitation to become the new pastor.

Amongst the noticeable events of his ministry was his success in securing and fitting up a barn for public worship at Elmdon, this being later opened as a preaching station in June 1849. He also set up a daily British School at the church in Great Chishill in 1852, which continued in operation for some time after his departure.

In the summer of 1852, extensive emigration to Australia began to take place, continuing for about three years. Several members of the congregation departed during this time.

The desire to emigrate affected Mr. Mirams as well, and he gave notice of his intention to resign his charge in the summer of 1855. Certain events prevented him from leaving, however, and with the agreement of the congregation, he continued his ministry.

This did not prove long lasting, for on 20th December 1856, Mr. Mirams announced a second time that he was planning to emigrate to Australia. The Valedictory Service was held on 3rd July 1856, when a purse containing 100 guineas was presented to him in appreciation of his ministry at Great Chishill. Mr. Mirams was inducted as pastor of Carlton Church, Melbourne, Victoria, in 1858.

The invitation to Rev. James Irwin to become the new minister at Great Chishill placed him in a severe dilemma. Born in Cumberland in 1827, he had moved to the vicinity of Luton and engaged in lay-preaching in the surrounding villages from 1847 onwards. His visit to the village of Shillington brought an invitation to become their pastor, which he accepted and was ordained there.

His dilemma arose from receiving invitations from two quite different churches in 1857. One came from a large town church, and the other from a village congregation, namely Great Chishill. He had difficulty in deciding between them, but we are told that 'with characteristic humility' he chose the village church.

At about this time, many conveyances might be seen taking worshippers from surrounding villages to the chapel, and numbers walked or rode. The morning Service was at 10.30 a.m., after which many ate their lunch in the schoolroom or repaired to a local hostelry for the purpose. The afternoon Service followed after a short interval at 2 p.m.

Concentration could often be a problem, for sermons were long, and men who were used to working in the open air often felt quite sleepy and would stand up in order to keep themselves awake.

The later years of Mr. Irwin's ministry saw great economic difficulties amongst his flock, for it

was a period of great agricultural depression. It was said that every farm in the Great Chishill neighbourhood save one had seen a change of tenant, a most unusual and worrying phenomenon. A large proportion of the farm labourers had scattered or emigrated.

During this unsettled time, Mr. Irwin's 'sound evangelical ministry proved a blessing to many souls'. He and his wife were kindly and generous people, he was a good preacher and a man of great piety.

Mr. Irwin continued to care for other village churches and preaching stations, but failing health obliged him to restrict his efforts to his own congregation in Great Chishill. They marked his 25 years of service in 1882 with 'very handsome tokens of their esteem and affection' at a special Service.

His poor health eventually forced him to resign the pastorate the following year, and on 1st February 1884 at Bedford he passed away in gentle sleep at the age of 57 years. His wife and daughter kept up their interest in the chapel for many years afterwards.