

The origins of Trinity URC and the Bowerham Centre

The origins of Congregationalism in Lancaster are to be found in the eighteenth century. At a time when Lancaster was both a busy market town and prosperous port, a small Independent Chapel (the old name for Congregationalism) was erected in Mount Street, now High Street, in 1773. The congregation was made up from former members of the Presbyterian Chapel in St Nicholas Street and a number of “respectable families wearied with the dull preaching of the Church (of England)”. (see *Origins of Trinity URC at the High Street Centre*)

As the population of the town grew during the succeeding century so too did the congregation. By 1833 the Mount Street (High Street) building had to be extended to provide an additional 310 sittings while in 1851 the galleries were extended and the building re-pewed. By 1854 there were 283 full members of the church. In addition there would have been large numbers of adherents and this 700 seater church would have been full most Sundays. In 1855 a large Sunday School building was erected which two years later had 631 scholars on the roll with 41 teachers!

By 1871 Lancaster had a population of 17,245 and with the growth of manufacturing industry had grown in size especially to the north of the town centre. The desire by members at High Street to expand the work of the church into this new area saw the start of missionary meetings held in a wooden schoolroom in Cable Street. This missionary work was led by eleven young men and it is in these meetings that we can discern the beginnings of Centenary Church, the inaugural service of which was in October 1873. The chief aim of the church was *‘to bring the means of religious culture more directly before the inhabitants of the particular locality in the midst of which the new church is built.’* In addition to the eleven ‘missionaries’ the new congregation was augmented by other members of High Street, some of whom had left that place of worship because of a disagreement over the use of fermented or intoxicating wine in the Communion Service.

The new church (named after the centenary of High Street) was opened in 1873 on St Leonardgate at the top of Phoenix Street. It occupied a former mansion, which was converted into a 300 seater church with a schoolroom underneath and eight small classrooms for the Sunday School. The building still stands today, although much altered later when the Army incorporated it into the new Phoenix Street Barracks for the Territorial Army. Located as it was in a growing working class area which lacked a church of any denomination it is not surprising that it grew rapidly, the thirty-nine members of 1873 becoming seventy-five a year later. The Sunday School too was *‘drawn from the ranks of those of the population who had hitherto attended no church at all’* and had 170 scholars in its first year. By 1878 the growth in size of the congregation made a new church imperative and a new building was erected in Stonewell (closed in 1964 and now the Friary Public House) with seating for 491 persons. Designed by Hetherington and Oliver of Carlisle in a Gothic style, it cost £7,500.

From both of these two churches in Lancaster ministers and lay preachers carried the work to the rural areas of Caton, Galgate, Kellet, Carnforth, Aldcliffe, Halton, Bolton-le-Sands, Hest Bank and Dolphinholme. Centenary not only sent out preachers but in the case of Halton (1898) and Hest Bank (1903) erected new mission churches at a cost of £1,100 each. By 1900 the Centenary church, as well as having a Minister, had two assistant Ministers who had among their duties, oversight of these branch chapels.

Beginnings of the Bowerham Centre

In 1900 the Centenary members stood at 420 and additional buildings were erected to house the Sunday School and other activities like P.S.A. (Pleasant Sunday Afternoons). Just as a desire to bring the Christian message to a new part of the town had led to the creation of Centenary, now it was perceived that there was a need to bring mission to the growing suburbs of Lancaster. The **Bowerham Mission** arose out of Sunday evening services held by the Rev. J Davidson, Assistant Minister at Centenary, in an upper room in a house on the corner of

Clougha View, now Golgotha Road. The meetings became so well attended that the room was found to be too small and was condemned by the Corporation as unsuitable for the purpose. The success of the Mission led Centenary Church, with the aid of the Lancaster and Cheshire Chapel Building Society to purchase land at the corner of Ulster Road for the erection of a mission chapel with space to build a church there at a later date.

On October 19th 1904 E B Dawson (a descendent of the Isabel Dawson of High Street), laid the foundation stone and Miss A P Dawson opened the completed hall using a silver key on February 5th 1905.

Why did Centenary choose the Bowerham area for their third branch chapel? It is likely that the founders were aware that by 1900 Bowerham was one of the fastest growing parts of the town. The arrival of the Barracks (1873-1880), to serve as the Regimental Depot of the Kings Own Royal (Lancaster) Regiment, with its families and single soldiers requiring a range of services, obviously stimulated the development of Bowerham. Between 1880-1900 streets of terraced houses were erected, for the soldiers and others who worked in the town and on the LNW Railway, along with shops, a public house (The Bowerham Hotel) and other services.

Further growth was aided by the opening of the Tramline in 1903 from Dalton Square via Bowerham Road and Coulston Road to its terminus at Williamson Park. It is after 1903 that Bowerham rapidly developed, as a "Tramway Suburb" in all directions from the Primrose Estate to Barton Road.

Growth of the Bowerham Church 1903-2004

(i) 1903-1928 the growth to independence

After an initial period of consolidation the first 25 years at Bowerham were ones of steady growth leading to independence from Centenary in 1925. The erection of the Mission Building was intended to serve the dual purpose of church and Sunday School until a growth in numbers justified building a separate church.

In 1916 the Mission Hall became known as the Bowerham Congregational Church but as late as 1919 it was still being called the Congregational Hall by members. At first serviced by lay preachers and students from Lancashire College, in 1906 the Rev. F W Bryan, the newly appointed Centenary Minister, held a ten day mission in Bowerham and in 1907 had oversight of Bowerham and Halton churches. One speaker who visited the church and preached in its early days was Mr Thomas Mawson F.R.I.B.A of Hest Bank, the famous landscape gardener.

On Sunday afternoons there was the Sunday School which like the adult church grew rapidly – 235 children on the roll in 1916!

On August 20 1925 the church became independent, taking over from Centenary responsibility for paying off the outstanding debt on the premises.

Everything known about Bowerham in these early days suggests that though small, it was very lively and active with a Band of Hope, a Christian Endeavour Society and both Girls and Young Men's Guilds. By 1925, after independence, there was a Womens Social Hour, Ladies Sewing Society, the 7th Girls Guides and the Brownies had a hut on the site of the Hall and a Scout group was set up.

On a more muted note the Roll of Honour of the 1914-18 war records forty seven members of the Church who had died in the 'war to end all wars' and a central panel records eight men who died in the second world war.

(ii) 1930 – 1953 'Slow but sure'

There is little information about this period except for Diaconate and Church Meeting minutes and little is recorded by the local newspapers. One of the few reported incidents is in 1943 when Church Meeting refused to accept the requisition of the gates and railings for the war effort on the grounds of the security of the Hall.

In 1950 a Recreation Club for Young People was begun and for about six years in the late 1940's and early 1950's young people from Bowerham were involved with the Junior Council of the Congregational Church.

(iii) 1953 – 1979 The revival of growth

In 1954 the Church was re-roofed and in 1955 an extension planned. The new hall built at a cost of £2,310/6/ was opened by Peter Hall of Sunderland Point, grandson of Mr E.B. Dawson, on January 4th 1959, oversight of the church coming from Revd Harrop, minister of the High Street church, with Mr James Thompson as Lay Pastor. Since 1959 the hall has proved a great asset for church organisations including Sunday School and the Young Peoples Fellowship set up in 1956. The gates into Ulster Road were put in to allow for the access of vehicles.

In 1964 Bowerham came back into the main stream of Congregationalism in the city when reorganisation of the Lancaster churches took place. The Rev. Alan Coles of Burnley was appointed to a joint pastorate with the Rev. James Harrop of the Congregational Church of Lancaster – Bowerham, High Street and Scotforth, whilst sadly Centenary was closed.

The Congregational Church of Lancaster was comprised of two Centres now, High Street and Bowerham. With the departure in 1969 of the Rev. J Harrop (to Macclesfield) and Rev. Alan Coles leaving the full time Ministry in 1970 a new Minister was appointed to the two churches – the Rev. E. Wyn Parry. In 1972 Mr Parry was succeeded by the Rev. Robert W Courtney from Wilmslow. In 1972 the United Reformed Church was created and, in Lancaster, Trinity United Reformed Church was formed from the uniting of the two Congregational Churches and Trinity Presbyterian Church. Trinity Presbyterian Church was sold.

The early years of the URC were exciting ones for Bowerham under the leadership of Robert Courtney with minister and congregation working hard together, with missionary enterprises including in 1977 the 'Entry in Bowerham' campaign held over three weeks.

Around this time the decision was taken to move to a morning service at High Street and an evening service at Bowerham rather than two services per Sunday at each Centre. This proved a great success and again increased attendance at Bowerham and has continued to the present day.

In 1971 there were thirty-five Junior and twenty Primary members of the Sunday School. There were thirty members of Pilots begun in 1970, the Young Wives (the forerunner of today's Tuesday Group) had fifty members and the Women's Guild twenty-nine members. In the 1980's Fellowship Groups were begun in order to enable the congregations of the two Centres to mix and these continue to the present day. In September 1971 the Girl Guide movement returned to Bowerham with the formation of the 19th Lancaster Guide Company and Brownie Pack. Today both units continue to thrive and in 1977 to commemorate Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee they planted a Crimson Acer in the church garden, today a mature tree over thirty years old.

(iv) 1979 – 2006 Trinity URC Bowerham Centre

The last twenty-seven years of Bowerham has been as part of Trinity URC, the two Centres with one minister, a shared eldership and management committee but each with its own activities. In 1986 the Revd Robert Courtney moved to Highgate and the Revd Anthony Tomlinson from Marton and St. George's URC, Blackpool became minister of Trinity. After his retirement, in October 2001 the present minister, the Revd Robert A Canham, from Brentwood and Ingatestone, Essex, was called.

In Bowerham Centre's centenary year, 2004, many events were organised to raise the awareness of the church in the local community, culminating in the Centenary Celebration Worship when the preacher was the Revd David Cornick, the General Secretary of the United Reformed Church.