

Brief History of Oxhey Village Baptist Church

Jill Ibbott

On Saturday evening, 1st April 1911, a company of 9 gentlemen and 7 ladies met at Osborne Villa, Chalk Hill, the home of Mr and Mrs Arthur Pearson Ibbott. 'A meeting of friends', so the record says, 'to consider what steps should be taken to arrange for mutual fellowship and, further, to consider starting a scheme for permanent, aggressive Christian work in the district.'

The chairman of the initial Committee, which continued until the Church was formally constituted in the autumn, was Mr Tom Willis (father of Eva who was later to become Mrs Claude Ibbott (my mother-in-law).



After prayer and discussion, it was resolved that: 'it was the desire of those present to meet together for fellowship with the idea of inaugurating permanent work later on, should that be found practicable,' and that: 'those present form themselves into a Committee to endeavour to carry out the objectives mentioned.'

It was also agreed to meet one evening a week for fellowship, to start Sunday afternoon classes immediately, to open a building fund (which incidentally reached over £50 in that first month, and that is about £3,800 in today's money!) and to look for a suitable plot of land – and among other sites mentioned in subsequent meetings was one in Upper Paddock Road at £4.0s.0d per foot which, though at first said not to be worth the price as: 'it had been filled in to the depth of several feet at least', was eventually agreed upon and negotiations for purchase started by the end of the month.

During May, June and July weekly meetings were held and sub committees formed, one to oversee the building of the church, and one to formulate the constitution and rules, the fundamental one being that: 'the Government of the Church be vested in the Members, and shall be exercised at Church Meetings'.

During June the purchase of the land took place which, with Solicitors fees (three guineas) and stamp duty (12/6d) cost just under £120. Watford UD Council passed the plans (that was quick!). The cost for building the Church (just the church itself, no vestries, but including fencing and gas lighting) was estimated by Messrs Field and Hemley to be £315 and in a quaint note: 'the amount of any savings they found able to make to be utilized in various minor improvements'. A note you'd rarely find in a quotation today!

Meanwhile, things were not standing still – the Sunday afternoon work was growing with a girls' class led by Mrs Leader and Mr Willis teaching the boys.

The last meeting of the founding Committee was held in September 1911 when the main subject for discussion was the future name and it was agreed that this should be Paddock Road Baptist Chapel, which remained in use until 1923 when it became Paddock Road Free Church. Later, in 1989, the name was changed again to Oxhey Village Baptist Church.

On 11th September 1911, 23 founder members met at Osborne Villa to constitute themselves into a Church and the first triennial elections were set in motion and were completed in just 2 weeks, the elected officers being as follows:

Mr Arthur Ibbott	Church Superintendent
Mr Bernard Almond	Secretary
Mr Tom Willis	Treasurer
Mr George Wilks	Sunday School Superintendent

And Messrs F Fisher, E Leader and S Nash as other Members of the Executive.

Although the Church Anniversary was always celebrated in November, being the date when the building was first opened for public worship, the actual birthday was 11th September 1911.

The Minutes of both Executive and Church Meetings during October 1911 are full of innumerable details being settled as the building work proceeded apace. For instance:

The addition of a 'Wind Screen and inner doors at the entrance.

Lady members authorized to purchase doormats.

Several alterations thought necessary to the Weekly Offering Box (situated at the back of the Screen).

2/6d paid for the first 1000 weekly offering envelopes.

'Pale Rose' – the colour chosen for the glass in the windows, (incidentally, quite impossible to match in later years!)

Mr Bertram Ibbott nominated and duly appointed as organist.

The provision of a board for Parish Notices and the decision that the words 'All Seats Free' should appear on the Church Notice Board.

The purchase of the reading desk (£1.17s.6d.) and rails round the platform, like the chair, were donated by Mr Austin.

And lastly it was agreed that the Lord's Table be open to all believers, whether members or not – and the Communion set of Flagon, Cup and Plate be purchased for £1.2s.0d.

There was one other item which took up a good proportion of our forefathers' time and energy – the production of a monthly leaflet known as 'The New Bushey Gospel Messenger' (New Bushey became Oxhey by about 1920). The first issue was distributed in the district in November 1911. They cost £4.7s.6d for a whole year's stock of 10,000 sheets with printed front cover, and details of services etc. (including a mid-week gathering for all on Wednesday Evenings) were printed on the back. The centre pages contained quite a lengthy article, the first of which was written by the Church Superintendent and discussed and approved by the Executive.

Less than 8 months after the first Committee meeting had taken place, the Church was opened for public worship on Sunday 26th November, though it is recorded that the first event to take place there was the opening Social (or 'Tea Meeting' as it was then called) on Wednesday 22nd, to which the young people already attending the two Bible Classes were invited. One of the founder members, Miss Lillian Almond, wrote years later: 'This event proved to be a very successful evening, in which the Church was packed to such an extent that someone suggested it would soon need stretching. The builder, the late Mr Hemley of Bushey, was one of the speakers and during his address he remarked that if the Church needed stretching he could soon stretch it!'

During the next four months the Sunday School grew from 41 scholars to 68, two thirds being boys.

Arrangements were made for cleaning the premises at the rate of 3d. per hour with a minimum of 2/6d in the summer but 5/- in the winter when the 2 coke fires had to be attended to.

A decision was made to support the Evangelical Union of South America (EUSA) Missionary Society with 10% of the Church quarterly income plus the Sunday School collections.

There were a series of firsts in those early years: the first distribution of Christmas gifts (total value £2), first Special Fund for the Baptistery and Second Vestry, the first Baptismal Service, the first 'Lantern Lecture' (with all the window sills occupied!) and then of course the first Anniversary.

But at the very first Church Meeting held in the Church, on Thursday 21st December, 1911, the Church Superintendent was able to bring forward the first of many applications for Membership and, at the end of that meeting: 'it was decided to place in the Minutes an expression of our deep thankfulness to God for His help and guidance'.

The Church had many tests of faith throughout the ensuing years, the first major setback 3 years later when all the young men and boys joined up to fight in the 1914-18 war. Five young men from the church were killed, including 2 of Arthur Ibbott's sons, their names inscribed on the plaque which was placed in the Memorial Hall built to commemorate their lives. It was opened in 1922, a special fund was set up to pay for it and it was half the size of the church and twice the price!

In 1923, after much discussion, the name of the church was changed to Paddock Road Free Church. Circumstances have changed since those days when many of the children who attended Sunday School suffered from the effects of poverty and were ragged and roughly behaved. A lot of them attended just to get warm in winter! At the Sunday School Teas the children used to pocket the food to take home for they had little to eat. There were Entertainments with recitations and songs, mostly the sad Victorian ballads about dying children etc. The popular Sunday School outings were always to Bricket Wood where there was a roundabout, miniature railway, coconut shies; later a helter skelter and races were organised.

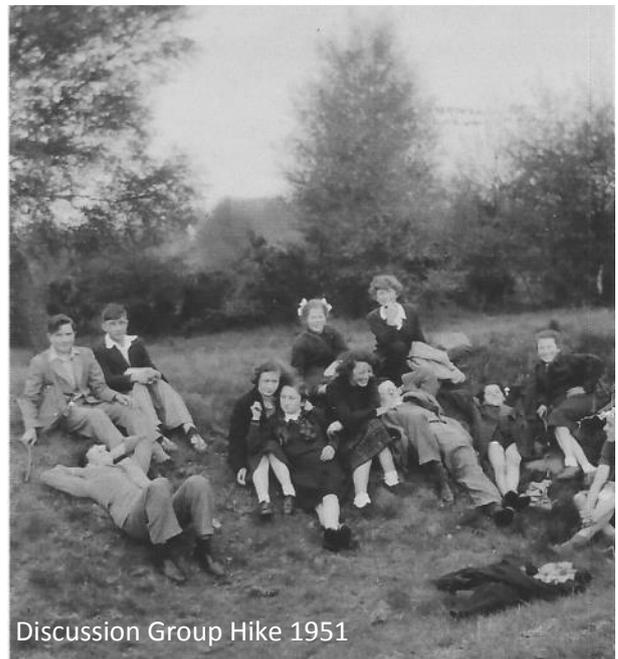


The first Church Outing to Bricket Wood in 1912

The Second World War was another major setback. Claude Ibbott took over as Sunday School Superintendent just before it started. He had already been Church Secretary for some time and his father Arthur, after having moved away, had come back because they were desperately short of younger men to fill the role, and had taken on the Sunday School Superintendent's position at the age of 71. Later, Bernard Almond resigned as Church Superintendent and Arthur Ibbott (now aged 74) agreed to take it on if Claude did most of the work. Claude, already Church Secretary and Sunday School Superintendent, ended up running the church almost singlehanded. Those were really dark days, when many people were evacuated, the young people weren't interested and there was the "blackout" to contend with, so evening services were held in the afternoon instead and no weekly evening meetings were held. Often there would only be 12 people attending the communion service. Some people said it would have to close down but members had faith in God and just hung on.

After the war, in 1946, Ralph Ibbott (Harold's son and Claude's nephew) who was in the forces, wrote to say he would help with the Sunday School when he was demobbed. That provided a great uplift to the Church and it ushered in a new era when the church faced the challenges of post war progress; it gradually grew in numbers and had a thriving young people's group (which I attended and where I met my husband). Those were inspiring times when Ralph ran a successful Friday night discussion group for teenagers, and there was also a popular youth club run by Florrie and Joe Clewlow, and a well-attended afternoon Sunday School.

Then, in the early 1960's as those young people matured, went to college/University, national service, then married, many of them moved away to pursue their careers, and often to achieve a higher standard of housing because Watford was, as today, a desirable and therefore expensive place to live. However, many a life in Christian service was inspired by those youthful years at Paddock Road Free Church. The 60s and 70s were challenging decades for, as the social and economic climate changed lifestyles, especially those of teenagers, churches everywhere were less well attended. Claude Ibbott retired from the post of Sunday School Superintendent in the early 60's but carried on as Church Superintendent, in spite of ill health, until he died in 1969.



Subsequently the pastoral role was carried out by several people who contributed to the work of the church over the years, to whom are owed grateful thanks.

Gordon Ibbott, Claude's son, (d. 2011) was already Church Secretary when his father died and carried this role through to 2003 when the church, sadly, finally decided to close its doors on Sunday 12th October. On that day, when over 100 people - past and present members and friends, gathered to give thanks to God for 92 years of Christian witness to the community of Oxhey, a special tribute was paid to Gordon and his wife, Elma (d. 2007), for their many faithful years of service to the church.

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The plaque from the Memorial Hall was removed for safekeeping by Ian Mackay when the Church was demolished and has now been installed on a Memorial at The Green in Lower Paddock Road where a Service of Re-dedication was held on Sunday 28th September 2014. Later a small plate below the plaque will commemorate the church.

On 9th November residents of Oxhey Village gathered at the Memorial for a short service of Remembrance when a wreath was laid by myself on behalf of the Ibbott family and another, by Ian Mackay, on behalf of the Community. Everyone then processed through Oxhey Village to the Memorial Cross on Watford Heath where the Remembrance service was continued. Thus the two memorials were linked and this is an event which will be repeated every Remembrance Sunday.

