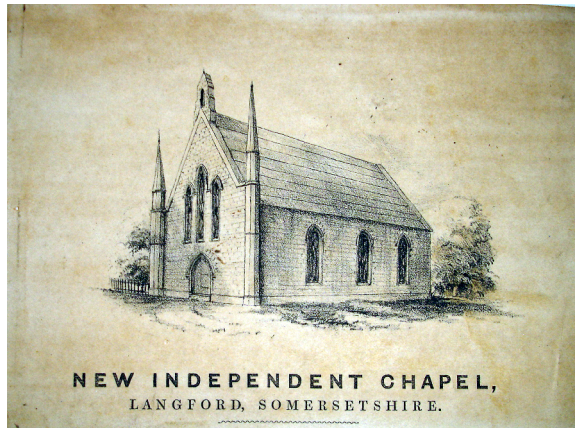


# A Brief History of Langford Chapel



*Artist's impression, April 1846*

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160th anniversary in 2006*

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## The early years

Church records show that a few people were meeting to worship God in the house of a Mrs Tave(r)ner from about 1838, and then in a shed when more space was needed. The foundation stone of Langford Chapel was laid in April 1846 and the building opened on 16<sup>th</sup> September of the same year. The estimated cost was £500 at the start of the work, the land having been given. Among the trustees were two gentlemen named “Mr W. D. and Mr H. O. Wills”!

Constitution as an Independent church came in 1849, membership consisting of “five males and seven females”. William Phillips “commenced his pastoral labours in conjunction with Wrington”, in 1862, when there were 14 members. Early burial records show that several people died young, which must have had quite an effect on the numbers.

The church was receiving help from a body called the Bristol Itinerant Society but in 1865 some misunderstanding arose with them which led to the departure of Mr Phillips in October of that year. His last note in the record book quotes Acts 20 verse 32 and then concludes with a loving prayer for the church – a gracious example to us all of how to avoid bitterness in such circumstances.

The building was not “solemnised for marriages” till 1868, by which year membership had grown rapidly to around 30. The church took a serious view of “inconsistent behaviour” and sorrowfully found it necessary to discipline members who caused concern. Perhaps that has something to say to us in these times when there often is a profession of Christian faith without a change in lifestyle.

It seems that in these early years the hymn singing had been unaccompanied. In 1874 it was decided to purchase a harmonium but according to the minutes of a meeting in 1875 there seems to have been a lack of harmony in choosing who should play it!

Outbuildings were erected in 1876 and around that time there was another period of growth in the membership. In December 1878 special evangelistic services were held. Attendance increased each night and on the Friday the “Chapel was *packed* in every part”! Several persons professed to be blessed by God. A new Pastor, the Rev. David Griffiths, was recognised in 1881, combining this role with his responsibility at Wrington. He remained until 1888.

Three days of Jubilee celebrations were held in 1896. One of the speakers was the Rev. W. Clarkson, who said that the benefit of such an “Evangelical Nonconformist church was that there would be one place where they would be sure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be heard in all its purity and simplicity”. We hope this is still true.

Renovations in 1902 cost over £154, a large sum then. Despite the difficulties of the First World War, the church was generous in supporting the wider work of the Lord and in maintaining its own activities. There were at least two weddings during this time. Electric lighting was installed in 1921.

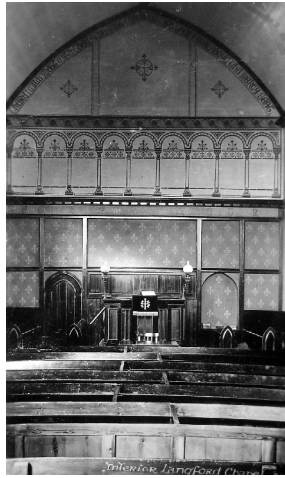


*The Chapel in 1909 – from “Picture Postcards of the early 1900s – The Wrington Vale”, by kind permission of Mr Stan Croker*

## Between the World Wars

By the 1920s it was thought necessary to add an extension but this was not opened until September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936.

Among the well-known locals who joined the church were Mr and Mrs Elsworth in 1923. The shop that they kept stood in front of Wistaria House in Langford Road and Mr Elsworth was the Church Treasurer for many years until his retirement in 1955. One of their granddaughters is still a church member. During a mission in October 1929, their daughter, Mary, came to faith in Christ, recording this blessing in a pocket John's Gospel. She later married Mr Martin Lee, who worked for his brother Reg after World War II in the private hire and market garden business, having previously been a gardener at Barley Wood before his Army service. They were all members of the church over a considerable period of time.



*Before electric lighting*



*Mr Martin Lee at Barley Wood*

In 1938 replacement pews were installed, being a memorial gift, and this is recorded on a plaque near the pulpit. This was when the change to the central aisle took place. This same sturdy seating is still in use in use today. Centenary meetings

were held at that time, which suggests that 1838 was regarded as the start of the work, even though the chapel had not been built till 1846.

## **The post-war years**

After the war, the church continued its association with another fellowship at Wrington and from 1945 shared the services of a new minister, the Rev. Clifford W. Carver, until 1949 when he moved to Tunbridge Wells. The Rev. Erwyn Daniel replaced him in 1950. Centenary celebrations came in 1946, mainly centred on Easter. Anniversary events seem to have often been around that time of the year, rather than in September when the building had first been opened. Perhaps this had to do with the foundation stone being laid in April 1846.

Records from this period show that there was a continued interest in missionary work and a welcome for choirs and others who brought sacred music to the church. In recent years the Bristol Evangel Male Voice Choir has maintained the latter tradition and the church still encourages and supports overseas work.

The 1950s saw some spiritual advances; there was a thriving women's meeting and the still-active Sunday School resulted in some youngsters who attended becoming church members later on. Mr Gerald Underdown and his wife, who were living in Ladymead Lane, were said to have "worked untiringly" among these young people. A mid-week meeting was started. More material matters involved the decision to install mains water and electrical power in 1951 (thirty years after the lighting).

In 1957 an evangelistic mission was conducted at the church by Don Summers of Bristol (who went to be with his Lord in 2005) and several people came to faith in Christ then. Some of these still live locally and attend the church, including Mr Tom

Harris, once a merchant seaman and later well-known as a postman around the Wrington area. Among many others blessed by the Lord through these special services was the late Ron Millard, who worked for Passey and Porter's Ford dealership in nearby Weston-super-Mare.



*After Sunday School in the 1950s*



*Evangelist Don Summers*

(Photo by courtesy of  
Peter Summers)

In the early 1960s there was much discussion as to the best form of Church government. By 1963 it was decided to continue to operate with Deacons. The interest among young people seems to have waned by this time. Mr Tom Harris had now taken up the work with them and was concerned that every effort should be made. Towards the end of the decade there was some desire for a Pastor but the smaller numbers and resources were obstacles to this.

After a long time in membership of the Congregational Union, the church became independent again in 1968, and subsequently became affiliated to the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). However, it took until 1973 for the trusteeship of the building to be transferred.

Despite the earlier decline in young people's work, there was still discussion in 1972 regarding the need for more space for this and some pews were removed as a result.

The ever-busy Mr Harris was also involved in delivering Christian newspapers and still found time to help rebuild the boundary wall.

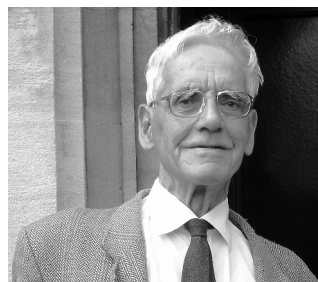
In 1973, the Secretary, Miss Milton, reported that it was getting difficult to find evangelical preachers for the pulpit.

The building was re-registered for marriages in 1974 under its new Trust Deed. A successful mission to children saw 35-50 attending each day and boosted the numbers in the Sunday School. By 1975 a further increase brought pressure for more space and teachers. That year the question of a Pastor was raised again but no resolution of the matter was reached. A retired minister, the Rev. E. W. Bacon (whose wife played the organ for several years) began regular preaching and also conducted a "Preacher's Preparation Course".

The church lost the services of two stalwarts in 1979. A business move led to Mr David Tarling, then Sunday School Superintendent, leaving the district. Mr Reg Lee, described as a man "with a general sunny personality...of great spiritual faith, a believer in constant, incessant prayer and Bible study", was Called Home to be with his Lord. He had been connected with the church for over 50 years.



*Mr Reg Lee*



*Mr Tom Harris*

During the following year Miss Milton was obliged to relinquish her duties as Church Secretary after 31 years, owing to ill-health. She was succeeded by Mrs Mary Lee.

Tom Harris tells a story from those times concerning an unusual solution to the problem of slipping slates, which had



constantly troubled him since he first arrived in 1957. A Mr Cyril Gabell offered to replace all the rusty nails on the roof with brass screws – for £100! Together with a gang of helpers, he completed this mammoth task in less than a day. The schoolroom extension was not included, and still has the problem, despite a coating being applied later on. That the price was very reasonable became apparent some time later, when Mr Gabell ruefully admitted to losing money on the venture.

The burden of the church to reach young people brought another mission in 1980, with as many as 30 attending meetings led by Mr Sarle of Scripture Union. A Mr Davidson served as Pastor for a trial period in 1981. It is recorded that his ministry was a “great blessing” to the church. Ill-health caused Miss Brown to regretfully resign as Treasurer in 1983 after 30 years in the post.

### **Recent times**

The 1980s were difficult years for the fellowship. The Sunday School numbers declined and poor health affected some members. The chapel ceiling was a major concern and a small congregation continued faithfully and prayerfully. Those of us who have joined in recent years give thanks to God that they did not give up.

In August 1991 the state of the ceiling in the chapel became so bad that it was found necessary to move the services into the schoolroom until repairs could be effected. Mr John Vowles of Redhill carried out this work and on June 13th in the following year a thanksgiving service was held. The theme was “The Lord has done great things for us whereof we are glad” (Psalm 126 verse 3).

During the '90s, the church was given a great deal of help by two retired ministers, the Rev. Kenneth Allen and the Rev. Peter Gentry. Sadly, Mr Allen is now not able to preach, but Mr Gentry continues to take services on a regular basis. Other

retired pastors and “lay” preachers have also been a blessing and given much encouragement.

Between 1995 and the start of the new Millennium, there were additions to the congregation and some of these became members of the local church. However, not all have stayed and the Lord has called some others away to Glory, all of whom had had a long association with the Christians at Langford: Mrs Vera Lee (widow of the previously mentioned Reg); Mrs Mary Lee; Mr Martin Lee; and Mr Ron Millard. “Whose faith follow” (Hebrews 13 verse 7).

Now the first half of this decade has passed and the membership is still small, with fluctuating numbers in the congregation and many Christians in the area choosing to worship with larger churches. The world has changed since 1846 but the God who inspired those few pioneers is just the same today. The building of a new extension (using the services once again of Mr John Vowles) and the continuing determination of the church to go on “Holding forth the word of life” (Philippians 2 verse 16) is based on that fact.

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### ***Footnote***

Over the years the church has been known by different names: Langford Chapel, Langford Congregational Church (because of previously being in the Congregational Union), and Langford Evangelical Church. (Originally “church” meant the *people* who assembled, rather than the building, but that distinction has largely been lost and the word now tends to be used in both ways.) To us, the term “Evangelical” means that we believe the Bible is God’s unchanging word and that we proclaim Jesus as God’s Eternal Son and the only Saviour because He paid the penalty for our sin on the Cross and then rose again. Jesus taught that to know Him is to have eternal life (John Chapter 17 verse 3).