

Nonconformity in Toft

The “Parley in the Barn” and Methodism

Evidence of nonconformity in Toft goes back to the 17th century. We know that Daniel Angier of Toft used to invite John Bunyan to preach in a barn (believed to be what we now call Bunyan’s Barn on Mill Lane). In May, 1659, Bunyan was conducting a service in the barn when Thomas Smith of Cambridge walked in. Smith was rector of Gawcat, Professor of Arabic, lecturer at Christ’s College and Keeper of the University Library. Bunyan expressed a concern in his sermon on that day that some in the congregation were unbelievers. Smith challenged Bunyan on this at the end of the service, asking what right he had to make such an inference, suggesting that in this uncharitable comment he had shown himself unfit to preach. Bunyan retorted that Christ taught that there were four kinds of ground into which the good seed of the sower fell, and that only one of the four brought forth fruit. Bunyan argued that Christ had condemned a large proportion of people to have failed to bring forth the good fruit, therefore he, Christ himself, might be seen as unfit to preach the Gospel. Daniel Angier also sprang to Bunyan’s defence and quite a row seems to have ensued!¹

In 1669, a conventicle (a meeting or assembly, often in contravention of the laws on religious observance) in Toft had a congregation of between 50 and 60, many of them coming from nearby parishes. The group was described as consisting of 'mean, inconsiderable people', with the exception of the 'chief abettor' (or instigator of the offence), Joshua Eversden, and in 1670 William Eversden was prosecuted for allowing a conventicle to be held in his house. Around that time there were three teachers: Oliver Scot of Gamlingay, a weaver, John Croke, an itinerant preacher, and John Waite. In 1672 John Waite's house was granted a licence to be a meeting house.

In 1676, there were 16 known dissenters in Toft. In 1690 it received three-weekly visits from Harris and Hunt, two dissenting ministers, who alternated the visits. By 1775 there were seven dissenting families. John Wesley is also said to have preached in a barn at Toft. By 1819, two more houses had been licensed.

¹ Source: Brown, J. (1888) *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press.

The Foundation stone for a Primitive Methodist Chapel in Toft was laid on 10th June 1862 on land leased from R. Beldam. The new Chapel building cost £136. Preachers would have come from what is now Castle Street Methodist Church Cambridge and the early Primitive Methodists in Toft would have been farm workers and their families and one or two local farming families. Services on Sunday were at 11.15 am and 6.15 pm, with Sunday school at 2.30 pm and a mid-week evening service. By the late 1890s it boasted an average attendance of 40. The chapel underwent alterations in 1940, with the pews being replaced by chairs, and a schoolroom was added.

Relationships between Anglicans and Methodists were mixed, reaching a low point in the early 1900's when a dispute over teaching the catechism split the school into two, one meeting in the Chapel and the other in the original building for about 5 years.

By the late 1930's the building was too small; land was purchased adjacent to the original plot and the Chapel building extended to include a schoolroom, kitchen and conveniences. The old raised pulpit was removed and the church interior modernised. This was opened in April 1940. In 1950 Rev John Crowlesmith took oversight of Toft Methodists and he dared to call a meeting for all the village, from which Toft Village Fireside was formed. 45 people attended the first meeting held in October 1950; in 1965 the two ministers became joint Presidents and to this day 'Fireside' serves the community, though the format has changed.

In 1958 small changes to the sanctuary were made, placing the communion table in the centre below a wooden cross made by Gordon Gibson, with the pulpit to the right and a new communion rail. By 1980, the Methodist congregation was so large, with a highly successful Sunday School, that further enlargement was needed and in September of that year the Chapel in its present form, with New Room, lobby, kitchen and toilets was dedicated.

In 1984, a huge BBC lorry could be seen parked outside the Chapel as two services were televised on Faith and Doubt and the Resurrection, with the Rev Whitfield Foy as the Preacher.

Over the ensuing years the congregations of the Methodist Church and St. Andrew's have worked towards greater unity, inspired at first by

Fireside and then by the work of Whitfield Foy and the Rector John Beer. At last in 1999 a Covenant was signed leading to the Local Ecumenical partnership in November 2003, when the Church in Toft came into being. In 1940 Rev Sidney Cartwright, the Rector had the courage to say that there should be one Church in the village and that is what Church and Chapel should strive for. It took 63 years!

The Methodist Chapel's website is <http://www.eamethodist.org.uk/churches/toft/>

Baptist Missionaries

On 3 November 1653, Henry Denne and Christopher Marriatt toured Cambridgeshire, visiting Kingston, Toft and other nearby villages. Their report tells us that Denne preached the Gospel to great effect and baptised a number of people. He also “administered reproof and admonition” to those who had strayed from the Baptist community.²

Compiled by Ann Mitchell and Mike McCarthy, with many thanks to Mr Clifford Tebbit



Bunyan's Barn, Mill Lane

² Source: Taylor, A. (1818) *The History of the English General Baptists*. London: Printed by T. Bore.



War Memorial and date of the Chapel. Below: an early photograph.





The Methodist Chapel 1940



Chapel interior s.d.



Chapel interior 2007



Rev. W. H. Tebbit



Framed declarations of The Church in Toft Covenant (Anglican-Methodist Local Ecumenical Partnership), 2003



Toft gallery Band play at St Andrew's Church during the celebration of the 10th anniversary of The Church in Toft Covenant, 2013



1980: *Opening the new building – Deryk Collingwood
Whitfield Foy and John Dover with his wife.*



Toft Methodist Chapel

2010



Celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Church in Toft Local Ecumenical partnership 1st Dec 2013

