

METHODISM IN MIDSOMER NORTON

Although it is not possible to say exactly when Methodism gained a firm hold in Midsomer Norton, it would probably have been somewhere around 1750.

The first Methodist services were held in a Weaver's cottage owned by Joseph Fry who was a member of the early Methodist Society but, as the number of members increased, a larger room was found in a local farmhouse belonging to a Mr & Mrs Clements. This couple were also shoemakers and, being both thrifty and childless, bequeathed £100 towards the building of a chapel even though there was, at that time, considerable opposition towards the growth of Methodism in the town.

A piece of land in Rack Furnell was then given to the Society by a Mr James, a member of the Oakhill Presbyterian Church. Mr James also provided a quantity of stone for the new chapel but, while he was away on business, most of the stone was removed to repair the local roads. However, in spite of these difficulties, the chapel was finally completed in May 1775.



First Methodist Chapel – 1775

In 1772, Mrs Frances Rooke, a lady who lived at Norton Hall, joined the Methodist Society. As it was most unusual for a lady in her position to support the poor, persecuted followers of John Wesley, this must have had a strong influence on the future development of the Midsomer Norton Society.

The Midsomer Norton Methodist Society was originally part of the Bristol Circuit. This continued until 1783 when it was transferred to the Shepton Mallet Circuit and it was not until 1813 that the Midsomer Norton Circuit was formed. By this time, the chapel at the end of Rackvernal Road was too small to hold the congregation and so was enlarged by the addition of a gallery. The accommodation was increased again several years later and again in 1834 but still the numbers grew so that, by 1836, the membership had increased to 204.

THE NEW CHURCH BUILDING

By 1845 it was decided that a new chapel should be built and £1,480 was offered for this purpose. The new chapel was to seat between 800 and 900 people and was to be 132 feet long and 43 feet wide. The sum of £50 was then offered for the best design. Several designs were submitted but the design submitted by Foster & Wood of Bristol was finally accepted. However, the original spire was never built because a man who had offered £1,000 threatened to withdraw his offer if the spire was built.



**NEW WESLEYAN CHAPEL
MIDSOMER NORTON**

TUESDAY JULY THE 19TH, 1859

The religious services in connection with the above will (D.V.)* be as follows:

THE REV. GERVASE SMITH
Of Bristol

Will preach in the morning at half-past ten o'clock

THE REV. S. BROADBENT
Of Retford

Will preach at three o'clock in the afternoon.

THE REV. W. MORLEY PUNSHON
Of London
at seven o'clock in the evening

On LORD'S DAY JULY 24th, at half past ten and six,

THE REV. JOSEPH LAWTON
Of Burnley.

A collection in aid of the Building Fund will be made
at the close of each service

**ON THE DAY OF OPENING
A PUBLIC TEA WILL BE PROVIDED**

Under a tent in an adjoining field at five o'clock
Tickets 1 shilling each.

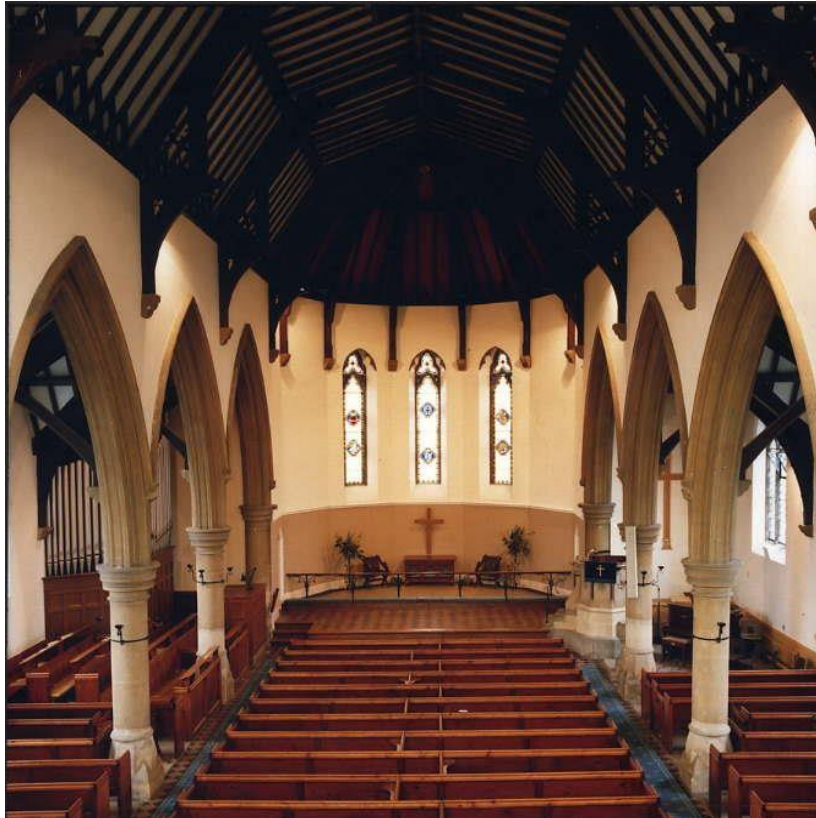
For those friends not otherwise provided, Dinner will be prepared
at 1 shilling each in the Schoolroom of the old Chapel

Your presence and aid, together with that of your friends
is respectfully invited.

1859 – 1902

Unfortunately, there are few records of church events between 1859 and 1890 except for a few interesting items to be found in the old Circuit Minutes. The first of these tells us that the Quarterly Meeting felt itself unable to invite two of its ministers for a further year because their voices were too weak. Then, in 1869, the offer of a horse and trap for the use of the ministers on Sundays at a cost of £30 a year was agreed.

In 1890, a new Trust for the High Street Church was formed. Then, in 1893, the pulpit with its inscription from John 3. 16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." was moved from its central position to the right hand side of the church where it has remained ever since thus reflecting the changes of attitude so that the Communion Table and later the Cross, rather than the preacher, take centre stage.



*Here are symbols to remind us Of
our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table font and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.*



THE METHODIST CHURCH HALL

As a result of the sale of the Methodist school premises to the Somerset County Education Authority in 1957, plans were then put forward for the erection of a church hall on land to the west of the church and immediately in front of the school building. £14,000 had been raised from the sale of the Wesleyan School to the Somerset County Council but a further £7,500 was still required and this was raised through donations and various fund-raising schemes. The architect who designed the hall was Mr Gerald Day and the builders were Plummer & Hockey of Radstock.

The foundation stone for the new building was laid by the Rev. Ernest Young on 5th May 1957 and, on 16th November, the new hall was opened.



The Church Hall 1957 – 1996

REFURBISHMENT

Since 1988, several schemes for the rebuilding and refurbishment of the High Street premises had been proposed and rejected. However with the closure of Redfield Road Chapel' in April 1990, the Redfield Road and High Street churches combined to form a new church to be known as The Midsomer Norton Methodist Church.

It had not been an easy task for members to share in a common vision of how the church should be refurbished but, at a special church meeting in February 1993, it was agreed that work must go ahead to repair and replace most of the windows, to replace the floor which was in danger of collapse, to install a new heating system and to have the front of the building cleaned. It was also agreed that the pews should be removed and replaced by chairs in order to give greater flexibility.

The refurbishment started in January 1994 at a cost of 1200,000 and was completed in time for the re-opening of the Church on the 4th and 5th June. On Saturday 4th June, the church was open all day with an exhibition outlining the History of Methodism in the town, Morris dancing , and, in the evening, a party for all the contractors. On Sunday, the morning service began with a service of celebration while, in the evening, there was a "Songs of Praise Service" with hymns chosen by those who had worked on the building.

THE MIDSOMER NORTON METHODIST CHURCH CENTRE

After completion of the refurbishment of the church, building work was started in 1995 on the second phase. The design, undertaken by David Beresford-Smith involved a complete remodelling and modernisation of the original hall together with the construction of a link building to connect with the church. The outside of the building being faced with reconstructed stone which would eventually weather to match the church. The old stage in the hall was then removed giving a larger floor area and four new toilets were installed together with a fully equipped kitchen.



The new Midsomer Norton Methodist Church Centre 1996

The link building connecting the new hall with the Church was designed not only as means of access from the Church to the Hall but as a building in its own right and as the Centre's main point of access; leading immediately into the reception area.

The New Church centre was opened at 11.a.m. on 7th September 1996 with the Rev. Douglas Brewer conducting a short service of thanksgiving. Tony Sims, the Clerk of Works, then cut the ribbon to open the centre. Mr Leslie Shearn, a 91 year old lifelong member of the church, opened the door with an electronic key so that members and friends could enter the foyer where ten year old Rachel Evans, representing the young people of the Church, unveiled a commemorative plaque designed and executed by David Brown.



After the unveiling ceremony, members and guests moved into the refurbished hall where a ploughman's lunch was served from the new kitchen.

REDFIELD ROAD CHURCH

1877 – 1990

The history of Redfield Road Chapel started in 1840 in a small cottage in Church Lane owned by James Jones, the first class leader. In the same cottage lived John Hoare who joined the Society in 1845 and, in 1849, became one of the first local preachers in the Radstock Primitive Methodist Circuit of which Redfield Road was a part. Preaching services as well as class meetings were then held in James Jones' cottage.

In 1875, the trustees purchased 363 square yards of land in Redfield Road on which to build a chapel. On 18th May 1876, Mr Catley's tender of £695 was accepted and an architect named Hicks was asked to draw up plans; then, on 16th June, the foundation stone was laid and provision made for 600 people to have tea in the Market Hall. The church was finally completed in 1877 and special opening ceremonies were held on three successive Sundays between 27th February and 12th March.



Redfield Road Church

In 1880 gas was installed in the chapel and a caretaker's cottage constructed under the rear of the building. Then, in 1907 a pipe organ was purchased from the Parish Church. At this time, Redfield Road Chapel had 45 members, 105 Sunday school scholars, 11 teachers and 20 members of the Christian Endeavour.

Over the following years Redfield Road chapel made a great contribution to the spiritual life of the town with the formation in 1968 of Scouts, Cub Scouts, Guides and Brownies under the leadership of Jack & Janet Robins. The life of the church was also reflected in the vitality of its Sunday school.



Sunday School Anniversary 1976

The Chapel Choir under the conductorship of Alex Dando and later Colin Dando travelled to London on four occasions to take part in the festival of Evangelical Mixed voice choirs.

WELTON METHODIST CHAPEL 1858 – 1935

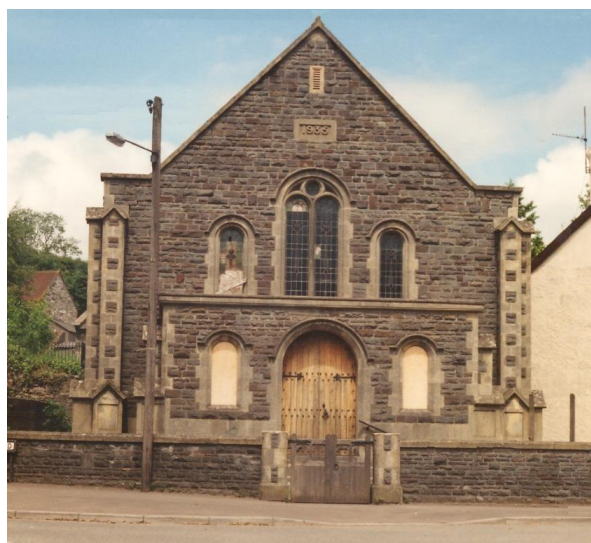
Welton Methodist Chapel, like the other Methodist churches in Midsomer Norton, started in a cottage owned by a coal miner, Mr. George Clark. Meetings were held here for several years until a site, offered by the Prince of Wales, was leased for ninety years at the rate of five shillings a year.

As soon as the land became available, plans were drawn up and, on 5th October 1858, the foundation stone was laid by the Rev. T. Hartley of Bristol. Underneath the stone was placed a bottle containing the date and the names of the donors, trustees and minister.



The chapel was 31 feet long, 21 feet wide and high enough for a gallery which was added a few years later. The opening services were so packed that a number of people were unable to gain admission and ended with a tea attended by 150 people. A few years later the chapel was extended to 54 feet.

On 9th July 1934, work commenced on the building of a new chapel which was opened on 3rd April 1935. The old chapel was then adapted for Sunday school and social use and the old pipe organ installed in the new building.



Welton Chapel 1935 – 1987

During the 1980s, the membership gradually decreased and the chapel finally closed in 1987.

STONES CROSS CHAPEL

In the early years of the 20th Century, the Primitive Methodist Society at Welton decided to build a Mission Chapel at Stones Cross. However, during the construction of this new building, many of the new members decided to leave Welton and form a new Society at Stones Cross; As a result, a new trust was formed.



Stones Cross Chapel 1907 – 1963



Harvest Festival at Stone's Cross

This new Society continued to flourish for many years with a strong Sunday school, a Ladies Guild, a Choir and an active Christian Endeavour. However, over the ensuing years, because of a decline in membership it was agreed, in 1963, that the chapel should be closed and the members transferred to the High Street Church.

The Stones Cross premises were then used as a Methodist youth club and this continued until 1973 when it was realised that £5,000 would be needed to maintain the building. It was decided therefore that the Youth Centre should move to the High Street Methodist premises.

Stones Cross Chapel was then purchased by the local Salvation Army to replace their previous premises in Rackvernal Road - premises which had been the original Methodist Chapel built in 1775.

MINISTERS WHO HAVE SERVED IN MIDSOMER NORTON SINCE 1900

Redfield Road belonged to an independent circuit until 1955

REDFIELD ROAD

| | |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1901-1905 | C. Ross |
| 1905-1908 | J. Cushing |
| 1908-1912 | C.E. Clark |
| 1912-1914 | J. H. Hemshall |
| 1914-1918 | F. Bell |
| 1918-1921 | I. Brentnall |
| 1921-1923 | M. H. Chapman |
| 1923-1926 | J. G. Cushing |
| 1926-1930 | W. Yeomans |
| 1930-1933 | J. L. Baggott |
| 1928-1932 | J Birchenhall Longden |

HIGH STREET

| | |
|-----------|---------------------|
| 1901-1903 | Richard Harding |
| 1904-1906 | E. Ashton Jones |
| 1907-1908 | G. Talulon Newton |
| 1908-1909 | Robt. E. Bamborough |
| 1910-1912 | Joseph Wells |
| 1913-1915 | S. Birt Coley |
| 1916-1918 | Arthur E Hutchinson |
| 1919-1921 | Philip Hawkes |
| 1922-1924 | Verrant Wills |
| 1925-1927 | James Goudie |

METHODIST UNION 1932

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 1933-1939 | F. A. Mayes | 1932-1936 | Horace J. Gliddon |
| 1939-1944 | W. Fisher | 1936-1939 | Francis G. Gray |
| 1944-1946 | J. W. Thurlby | 1939-1945 | Walter Bradshaw |
| 1946-1951 | T. Bates | 1945-1950 | W. James Beckett |
| 1951-1955 | E. R. Burnett B.A. B.D. | 1950-1957 | Ernest G. Young |

REDFIELD ROAD JOINES THE MIDSOMER NORTON CIRCUIT

| | | | |
|-----------|------------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1955-1956 | Frederick Raine | 1957-1960 | Vernon Stones |
| 1956-1962 | Carlos Wiles B.A. | 1960-1964 | Raymond Scott |
| 1962-1967 | Geoffrey Bell | 1964-1970 | N. Tasker Colley |
| 1967-1970 | Edward Lacy | 1970-1975 | Redvers Cornfield |
| 1970-1975 | David Grinter MA.B.Sc. | 1975-1979 | John Barker |
| 1975-1986 | E. Peter Pomery B.D. | 1979-1986 | E. Peter Pomery B.D |
| 1986-1989 | Reg. Bailey | 1986-1989 | Reg. Bailey |
| 1989-1990 | Ric Fellows | 1989-1990 | Ric Fellows |

MIDSOMER NORTON METHODIST CHURCH

| | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1990-1994 | Ric Fellows |
| 1994-2002 | Douglas Brewer M.Mth., B.A. |
| 2002-2008 | David Watson |
| 2008-2009 | Jill Flowers |
| 2009-2011 | Barry Bishop |
| 2011-2012 | Ian Souter |
| 2012-2022 | Stephen E. Robinson M.Th. B.A Hons. |
| 2022-present | Christine Coram |

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