

*The History of the Methodist Church
in the Southend and Leigh Circuit*

New Road



One in a Series
by
George Thompson Brake

Photograph on main cover:

Members of the Society Class led by Mr. Edward Collins, 1902.
(Photo secretly arranged for purpose of presentation to him)

Back Row:

Frank Bridge, Henry Johnson, Dick Deal, James Deal

Centre Row:

Albert Going, Tom Ritchie, Richard Harvey, William Kemp,
Jape Cotgrove, William Bridge, Tom Robinson, Fred Partridge,
Charlie Robinson, Jim Noakes, William Emery

Front Row:

Joe Deal, Bob Emery, John Brock, William Oliver, Elijah Risby,
Richard Kirby, Daniel Lister, Robert Ford, Pilot Harvey

The Rev. A. E. Whitham, once a Minister in this Circuit, wrote of
these men and their comrades:

I remember the fishermen I came into contact with years ago at Leigh-on-Sea. They were old men with no scholarship. They told me of their thoughts; the things they said within themselves as they sailed with the stars and with the wild waters about and beneath them. For sheer poetry I have never heard more beautiful things than fell from the lips of those unlettered men. It was the poetry of the Grace of God.

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Author's Preface

Of all the histories of individual churches in this series, none is more significant in the story of the emergence and growth of Methodism in the Rochford Hundred, than that of Old Leigh, or New Road as it came to be known. No other church in the present Southend and Leigh circuit can trace its origins back to John Wesley himself. His visits to Old Leigh, as he recorded them in his *Journal*, are fully documented here. It was from Old Leigh that the first Methodist preachers, all fishermen, went out into the surrounding villages to preach and found societies. There are stories here of preachers from Old Leigh, leaving home at an unearthly hour on a Sunday morning to preach at Maldon, besides regularly conducting services in villages nearer home, but nevertheless considerable distances.

It has been a special privilege to write this story, because for a brief time I had close associations with this church. The following pages recall how I took over a young people's Bible Class on the unexpected death of its leader; and my name is among those who constituted a renewed Trust in 1964. The future of this historic church is a matter of great concern to those who care about it. The effective membership is small, but there is a commitment to maintain worship and witness. Not for the first time has the membership declined; but a church that has survived for nearly 200 years has something to live for. A song that has been sung in other situations has meaning for those who care about this cause - "God is on our side. We shall not be moved".

This would be the sentiment of the late Brubbs Bridge, to whose memory I would like to dedicate this history of his church.

George Thompson Brake

Hadleigh 1995

The travels of John Wesley are so well-documented in his *Journal* and other records that he kept, that anyone writing about his visits to particular places has no difficulty in tracing the source for information. In Methodism, the fact that John Wesley preached somewhere, immediately endows the place with a sense of history. This is certainly true in respect of Leigh in Essex.

The place itself has a history going back far beyond the time of John Wesley. Fortunately, in spite of the development of nearby Southend-on-Sea as a somewhat brash seaside town, frequented by people from London's East End, Leigh has retained much of its character as a small fishing village, in which such public houses as *The Crooked Billet*, *The Smack* and the *Peter Boat* remain as reminders of the tales of the sea that have been told there for centuries.

As with most places in the Rochford Hundred, there have been variations in the spelling of Leigh. The finding of numerous Roman coins in the area, indicates that it had a very early origin. "From the earliest records we find it possessed a seafaring population" observes Benton¹. By the 17th century it had become a place of some consequence, being the only town on the coast between Gravesend and Harwich. When Benton was writing, he said that there were about 100 boats engaged in the fishing trade at Leigh. In 1835 the population was 1254 and by 1861 it was 1459; at the census ten years later it was 1679.

Legends abound

Legends abound concerning Old Leigh. There is one such legend about John Wesley's first visit to the place. This is recorded by Sheila Pitt-Stanley in *Legends*

of Leigh (1989). In conversation with her she recounted that the legend had come down by oral tradition from John Little. He was her great-great grandfather. She began her account of the legend - "In 1748 two or three Leigh boats were forced by a Channel storm to take refuge in Shoreham Harbour, Sussex. Having slept aboard, they were awakened in the morning by singing. A group of local people on the harbour wall were engaged in an open-air service". The Leigh fishermen were told that the preacher was John Wesley. After the service they begged him to visit Leigh, and this he promised to do later in the year. They returned with an experience of conversion, to which they began to bear witness. One who was impressed by their testimony was Dr. Cook, the medical officer of Leigh, who wrote to Wesley offering him hospitality when he came to Leigh.

John Wesley's *Journal* records his several visits to Shoreham, but there is no record of a visit there in October 1748. However, in his *Sermon Register*, which includes nearly 400 visits not recorded in his *Journal*, there is a record that on an unknown date in October 1748, he preached three sermons at Shoreham. His first visit to Leigh, which is recorded in his *Journal* and in the *Sermon Register*, was the following month, that is on the 21st November 1748. This seems to indicate that if the legend is correct, he kept his promise to visit Leigh later in the year. It is regrettable that if John Wesley was approached by the Leigh fishermen, he did not record this incident in his *Journal*. Sheila Pitt-Stanley also records that on his first visit, which was recorded in his *Journal*, the weather conditions which he described, were so treacherous that as dark began to fall, John Little went out by coach to guide Wesley to Leigh. This detail

is not recorded in Wesley's account, and so again we have to rely on oral tradition.

Six visits

His *Journal* records that he came to Leigh on six occasions, but his *Sermon Register* indicates three other visits, the 26th and 27th December 1751 and in January 1759, though the precise days are not recorded; these are to be reckoned with the reference to his visits in October 1748. The visits recorded in the *Journal* have received extensive treatment in the introduction to this series - *The Scene of early Methodism in the Rochford Hundred*. Nevertheless, a history of Methodism in Old Leigh could not be written without significant references to these visits as John Wesley recorded them in his *Journal*. He came to Old Leigh for the first time, as we have already recorded, on the 21st November 1748. His description of the weather conditions shows the hardiness of the man and the persistence with which he pursued his ministry. "It rained hard in the former part of the night", he wrote, "which was succeeded by hard frost, so that most of the road was like glass; and the north-east wind set just in our face". He arrived at Leigh by four in the afternoon. Recording his impressions of the place he wrote - "Here was once a deep harbour; but the sands have long since blocked it up; and reduced a once flourishing town to a small ruinous village". He preached to "most of the inhabitants of the place in the evening, to many in the morning and then back to London".

A *Note* in the published *Journal* records that he stayed the night at the home of Dr. Cook. His second visit appears to have been on the 18th December 1749, when no doubt again he

stayed with Dr. Cook. He preached "in as awakening manner as I could". Leaving Leigh on the 20th December he wrote, "I left the little flock in peace and love, and cheerfully returned to London". He seemed to arrange his visits to Leigh in November and December, for on the 10th December 1750 he came again. "I rode to Leigh in Essex", he wrote, "where I found a little company seeking God, and endeavoured to encourage them into provoking one another to love and good works".

Incessant schedule

It was three years before he recorded his next visit, which was on the 12th November 1753. "I set out in the chaise for Leigh", he wrote, "having delayed my journey as long as I could". This was because he had been suffering from an ague on a visit to Canterbury. This returned several times, but he did not allow it to interfere with his incessant schedule. At Leigh he preached at seven in the evening, "but it was extremely cold all the time, and wind was strong from a door behind and another on the side, so that my feet felt just as if I had stood in cold water". The next day he still felt the cold and found the room in which he was sitting "much colder than the garden". He could not keep warm even when he was close to the fire. There was no reference to preaching that day, so he possibly spent the time at his lodging before returning to London the following day "by chaise".

Two years later he made another tortuous journey to Leigh on the 27th November 1755. This is best described in Wesley's own words -

We set out for Leigh, in Essex, but being hindered a little in the morning, the night came on,

without either moon or stars, when we were about two miles short of Rayleigh. The ruts were so deep and uneven that the horses could scarce stand, and the chaise was continually in danger of overturning; so that my companions thought it best to walk to the town, though the road was both wet and dirty. Leaving them at Rayleigh, I took horse again. It was so thoroughly dark that we could not see our horses heads. However, by the help of him to whom the night shineth as the day, we hit every turning and, without going a quarter of a mile out of our way, before nine we came to Leigh.

There are no details of this visit, only that he returned to London on the 29th November.

The following year Wesley visited Leigh again. Preaching the day before to "a huge multitude" in Moorfields, he commented on his journey on the 11th October 1756 - "It is field preaching which does the execution still; for usefulness there is nothing comparable to it". His visit to Leigh next day was marked by kindness to a poor woman with two little children, who came to the door where he was dining. "They seemed half-starved", he wrote, "as well as their mother, who was also shivering with ague. She was extremely thankful for a little food, and still more for a few pills which seldom fail to cure that disorder".

The entry in his *Journal* also includes a reference to him reading on "this little journey", Voltaire's *Henriade*, and some comments about another as "a perfect master of the French language", which

compared with German or Spanish was "as a bagpipe to an organ". He visited other towns in Essex, including Colchester, Chelmsford, Braintree and Maldon. On the 20th February 1758 he describes his visit to Maldon. "This new preaching house is large, but it would in no wise contain the congregation which flocked together in the evening". This has some interest, because much later the Wesleyan Methodists had a Maldon circuit, which included their chapels in the Rochford Hundred.

Lost records

Regrettably, if there were any written records of the Methodist witness in the years immediately following Wesley's last visit to Leigh, they have been lost. We know that in the 1840s there was a circuit covering the whole of Essex, with the circuit chapel at Colchester. On researching for this history, five certificates for public worship in private houses were discovered. These were all issued in the 1840s for the premises in Southchurch, to the Wesleyan minister at Chelmsford, which indicates that he had charge of the Leigh area.² In 1811 the society at Leigh acquired a small site measuring forty feet by twenty, leasehold for sixty-one years, at the end of Hadleigh Road. Here the first chapel was built. On the 20th September 1854 "the persons interested", and in this case the Wesleyan Methodist Trustees, received from the Eastern Counties and London and Blackwell Railway companies, "notice of intention to take over and use the said building, and in compensation the said company built the present chapel, which is more superior to the former one, and leased for 21 years to the Wesleyan society. However, December 30th 1860 on receiving payment of £200, the company

enfranchised the land and chapel to the Wesleyans forever; and the Deed was enrolled in Chancery March 16th 1861. During the interval between pulling down the old and the erection of the new chapel, preaching services were held in the open-air, on the square, not always without opposition, notably so on one occasion, when constables were sent to 'pull the preacher down'.⁽³⁾ The second chapel referred to was built south of the railway line and facing the High Street. It is identified on a Royal Ordinance map of 1873, which was later reproduced with sketches of Old Leigh surrounding it.

In 1879 a serious structural problem was revealed. Although the railway company disclaimed any responsibility, the trustees were faced with extensive damage to the foundations, caused it was believed by the vibration of the trains within a few feet of the building. The cost of excavation and re-enforcement was such that it was decided to build a new church on a new site in New Road. As we shall see, in 1932 this chapel was replaced on the same site by the chapel which is at present in use. Various invoices and receipts relating to the chapel built in 1879-1880 have been preserved. The earliest is a handwritten statement dated the 30th June 1879 by the Superintendent minister, the Rev. Alfred Abbott -

Received of Mr. William Thompson of Leigh in the County of Essex the sum of Ten Pounds being a deposit on the purchase of the W (Wesleyan) Chapel Trust property at Leigh, Essex. In order to remove of a difficulty wh (which) stood in the way, the sum of £262 was the amt (amount) named as the price asked for the property. But it was distinctly understood that

Mr T (Thompson) wd (would) only have to give £250, being the amount he agreed to give. The bal (balance) of £12 will be allowed at the time of the completion of the purchase, or made up by friends at Leigh and Southend who entertained for him a high regard as well as his beloved wife for the valued services they have rendered to our cause at Leigh for many years past. It is agreed that our chapel be used for Div (Divine) service until the new one is ready for opening, and that the fittings in the old chapel be used for the new one - not being included in the purchase.

Signed on behalf of the Trustees
Alfred T. Abbott
(Supt)
June 30 1879

No doubt inspired by the building of a new chapel, the gift of a new Communion set was made to the church in 1880. The details of the gift, which was initially anonymous, were given in a letter. The set consisted of one flagon, two cups and two plates enclosed in a box for use in the Wesleyan Chapel, Leigh, Essex. The letter contained a request that it "be duly handed to the friends at Leigh at a Tea meeting when collecting cards with money came in". The donor wished that his name should not be mentioned nor whether "he does or does not live in Leigh". The gift was made from one "being grateful to Almighty God for mercies received both Temporal and Spiritual, trusting that we may all meet in heaven is the desire of the donor". A note was added at the end of the letter by the Superintendent minister, the Rev. Trethewy, recording that the gift was presented by Mr. C. E. Watson

for use of the society and dated the 27th December 1880. The Communion set is still in possession of the church at New Road.

Retrace steps

With Methodism established in Old Leigh, we must now retrace our steps to the early part of the 19th century. Benton describes the state of religion in Leigh at that time as "destitute". For instance, there was no infant school or adult classes for religious instruction. The lack of such facilities was remedied by the Rt. Hon. Lady Olivia Bernard Sparrow of Brampton Park, Huntingdonshire. She opened a day school at Leigh in December 1834 and appointed the Rev. Ridley Hershell to take charge of it. He had been warned by the Anglican incumbent that it was not safe to go down to Leigh. This was in 1835. "At his first service in the schoolroom the fishermen attended in white or blue querusays, without coats at all and came to the door with pipes in their mouths. He was at Leigh fifteen months and endeared himself to the people. His first congregation was about 30 but grew to 500, and when he left 700 subscribed a penny each towards buying a Bible and a Prayer Book in token of their love".⁴ There was, of course, a parish church. This was dedicated to St. Clement, referred to only once in Philippians 4.3. The first incumbent of any note was George Gard who was instituted in 1488. He was also vicar of South Benfleet and in 1506 resigned both livings.

The Leigh fishing village attracted other preachers besides Methodists. About 1890 a young man of nineteen, Arthur Sidey, began preaching on Bell Wharf. When he was roughly handled,

fishermen intervened and saved him from a ducking. He had serious thoughts about entering Spurgeon's College to train for the ministry. Meanwhile, invited by two elderly friends he held services in their house, and there a church of about twelve people was formed. Urged by his two friends and encouraged by gifts from others, including a piece of land in Seaview Road, a chapel was built in 1893. This was a "tin tabernacle" and became the home of "The Leigh Particular and Calvinist Baptist Chapel". In 1899 the minister resigned and during the ministry of his successor the chapel was closed and sold. Services had also been held in the minister's house, and this led to the formation of Leigh Road Baptist Church in another iron building, which was opened in 1900 and five years later became affiliated to the Baptist Union. There were then 53 members and 47 Sunday School scholars. A new church seating 650 people was opened in 1928. Thus Old Leigh gave birth to a notable extension of church life, as we shall see with special reference to the spread of Methodism.

Early Trustees

The earliest records we have, seem to be the minutes of a meeting of the Leigh Trustees on the 27th September 1863 at which the Superintendent, the Rev. W. H. Major presided. There were five Trustees present. The main item of business concerned a previous meeting at which £50 was raised towards paying off the debt on the chapel. This amount was "in various hands" and the meeting appointed Misses Little and Kirby "to collect the above sum by the last week in October". A further decision was taken to hold a Tea meeting the last week in October, followed by a public meeting "the object being to raise more money towards paying off the

debt on the chapel". The monies raised were to be placed immediately in the hands of the treasurer, Mr. Baxter. The other decision taken was - "That all the male members of the Society be requested to give or collect at least sixpence each towards defraying the expense incurred by the new pews".

There was another meeting held on the 3rd October 1863 when the amounts received from each collector were announced. The list was recorded in the minutes. Of the ten listed, four had contributed nothing. The remainder raised £1.13.3½. between them. The minister recorded - "As it was intended to raise £3.15.0. by this means, and only about half the sum had been gathered, the collectors were desired to collect the remainder by the last week in October". A month later, on the 3rd November 1863 another Trustees' Meeting was held. It was resolved that the £4.10.0., the half year's interest due on the chapel debt, be paid. The minister was requested to go the London the following Thursday, in order to see Mr. George Baxter, to consult with him as to the best method of disposing of the £50.

After this one entry concerning Old Leigh, the Minute Book becomes that of the Southend and Leigh Circuit general Trustees Meeting, the first of which was held on the 22nd January 1870. Between the circuit Minutes are those of the individual churches such as Southend, Hadleigh and Benfleet.

"The Mother Church"

In every sense, the cause at Old Leigh, may be described as "the Mother Church" of Methodism in the area largely covered by The Rochford Hundred. The Society itself emerged directly from John

Wesley's visits, and the first chapel enshrined the tradition of prayer and preaching out of which new societies were formed. Of course, there was some romance attached to this witness, because the preachers were all fishermen, who went out from Old Leigh to preach in their blue jerseys, walking miles on Sundays to take the Gospel to outlying villages such as Rayleigh, Rochford, Hadleigh and Canvey Island. Some walked as far as Maldon. And in early Minutes of Local Preachers' Meetings there is a reference to taking the Word to "the tiny hamlet of Southend".

Who were these fishermen? Most of them have left no record of their labours. Fortunately, newspaper cuttings enable us to recover details of two of them who may be typical of others. The first was Robert Harvey, known to everyone as "Pilot", and who is identified in the picture taken outside the chapel in 1905 or 1906, which is reproduced on the cover of this history. A tribute in the Southend and Leigh circuit magazine of 1909 gives a graphic picture of this man who was born in 1824 and died in 1909 at the age of eighty-five. "In the Class Meeting - where he was perhaps at his best - on the Bay, in the street; in fact, wherever men and women who have known him meet, the conversation quickly veers round 'Old Pilot'".

Convert and Witness

He was converted at the age of twenty-four, but "went through great trouble of soul". It was a struggle for him to be assured of God's pardoning love. "Of course he had to run the gauntlet of the jibes and taunts of his old companions. The brimming mug was often held out to him, with a mocking invitation, but he

came through it all with flying colours". The secret, it seems, was "the marvellously clear apprehension he had of God's presence". This was expressed most clearly of all in his prayers. He seemed to be oblivious of his surroundings as he turned to God. "Oftentimes the phrases were quaint and curious, and to a stranger would seem to border on the irreverent, but it was quickly realised how truly it was intimate communion with his Father". As he prayed in the Class Meeting, it is said that a sense of awe fell upon the members as though God was in their midst. However, this man was not so immersed in spiritual things that his faith failed expression in action. He was not a "one day a week Christian". He was prepared to take a stand even if it was detrimental to his personal interests. "Many good jobs he refused because Sunday labour was involved".

When past active work he spent a great deal of time on the wharf, engaging in conversation with old fishermen and visitors. He took any opportunity to bear witness to his faith. Once a man from London was irritated by some minor incident and he used some blasphemous expressions. "I haven't said such a thing as that for sixty years", said Pilot. Somewhat flippantly the man replied, "Sorry if it's hurt your feelings". "Yes, said Pilot. "It does hurt me very much, when anybody says such a thing about my Master". The man went back to London, but the next year he came to Leigh again and sought out Pilot and thanked him for his reproof.

Beneath the window of his cottage a few doors beyond Bell Wharf. Pilot placed a text. One day a Christian man was on a visit to Leigh at a time when he was experiencing great trouble and anxiety. He felt his faith was slipping. Passing Pilot's

cottage he saw the text, "Redeemed by the precious blood". It brought back to his mind the foundations of his faith. From his home he wrote to - "The occupier of No. 2. High Street, Leigh", warmly thanking him for the help the text had been to him. Pilot became very ill and his triumphant death came as a friend sat by his bedside. "Do you remember?" Pilot whispered. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God?" Then with a look of joyous anticipation he cried, "Clothed in white", and passed into the presence of his Lord.

Other stalwarts

Another of this remarkable body of fishermen was Henry Ritchie. He died in 1904 at the age of seventy-three in his house at No. 3 North Street. A native of Leigh, he was, of course, a fisherman and a Local Preacher, who joined the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1847 at the age of sixteen. His conversion was brought about by the preaching of some special sermons by the Rev. Samuel Coley, at what his obituary referred to as "the first of four Wesleyan chapels which had been built in Leigh". His first ticket of membership was given to him by the resident minister at Leigh, the Rev. F. F. Edmunds, in 1847. In 1861 he became a Local Preacher and continued until 1868; but from 1868 to 1880 his name was omitted from the plan. He then resumed his status. In the interval and for fifteen years, he walked to Benfleet every Sunday morning to conduct his class. For a short time he lived at Grays, where he kept a shop. At his funeral at Leigh cemetery, one of his classmates, Mr. F. Robinson offered prayer.

The *Notes* by an anonymous author, to which references are made in this series of the history of Methodism and its

chapels, contain some interesting items which add to the story of New Road Chapel. The *Notes* were written in 1897. They are so authentic that the omission of the author's name is not essential to the integrity of the manuscript. "Of Leigh workers", it is recorded, "much might be said, names long before this period which are still well known, though some have gone to their reward, Osborn (Snr), Emery, Risley, Watson, Harvey and others nobly sustained the work". These are some of the names identifying the group of fishermen photographed outside the chapel in 1905 or 1906.

The author of the *Notes* thought of what stories could be told "in these days of interviewing" (1897!) about some of these characters. He recalled especially John Osborn who could have told the story of Leigh Methodism over a period of 50 years. Preachers at that time tramped over to Burnham, where there was a small cause. Then there was Teddy Read whose visits from Sheerness were "always a festive time". Standing over six feet tall, with broad shoulders, "he never had to mourn and cry 'O for a trumpet voice'". Teddy Read had a voice such as had never been heard. He lived to a great age and died triumphantly at Stanford-le-Hope.

Stepping into a new era

Before we step into a new era in the life of the church at Old Leigh, we ought to identify, as far as we are able, others among the band of men who led the church from the middle of the 19th century to the early years of the 20th. They are all in the picture which shows Pilot Harvey and Henry Ritchie to whom reference has been made. What has to be recorded is the fact that Old Leigh consisted largely of a few families who intermarried. These

were Bridge, Ritchie, Osborn and Cotgrove, and there are Methodists today, many living in the area of Southend and Leigh, who trace their family line back to these and other families. One is Cyril Robinson, who for over twenty years was secretary of the Local Preachers' Meeting of the former Leigh-on-Sea circuit. His grandfathers are both in the picture. His paternal grandfather was Tom Robinson, a fisherman, who was also a Local Preacher; and his maternal grandfather was Frederick (Lemon) Partridge. They were all known by their nicknames. The fishermen usually worked in pairs and Norah Thompson, for many years a member at Hadleigh, has a picture of her father Tom Ritchie mending nets with Frederick Partridge. Cyril Robinson believes also that Frederick Partridge worked with "Jape" (Japhet) Cotgrove, father of three daughters. These were among the people who "went up the hill" to form Leigh Wesley Church in Elm Road. Winnie married Albert (Bert) Mussett, who became a Local Preacher, and she shared with him his year of office as Mayor of Southend. Her sisters Freda and Norah continued in active membership at Leigh Wesley.

Frank Bridge was a shop-keeper. He ran a little shop in Old Leigh, and in times of depression in the fishing trade, he is reputed to have enabled households to survive by offering credit to his customers. He and his wife were the parents of "Brubbs" Bridge, about whom there will be an extensive reference later. Another fisherman, reputed to be successful in his calling was known as "Fiddler" Bridge. Whether it was his business acumen that earned him this nickname can only be surmised. His family later became associated with Leigh Wesley and the connection has been maintained by his

grand-daughter, Hazel Ladd, who with her husband Gordon has played a prominent role in the church. Another member of the Bridge family, whose early life was spent at the chapel, was Henry Ritchie Bridge, who founded the Green Line bus company, which ran buses originally from a garage at Victoria House corner, Hadleigh, to Benfleet station. The ramifications of the Old Leigh families would provide material for a separate book. The marvel of it is that these large families were brought up for the most part in two bedroomed fishermen's cottages, some of which remain today.

Robert Harvey and Henry Ritchie do not appear to have been Trustees of the chapel. Their names, unlike that of John Osborn, are not mentioned in the early Trustees' minute books. However, they were clearly members of the society and would have engaged in the church life that emerges from the early records. We have referred to what seems to be the earliest Trustees' minute book which began in 1863.⁵ The most complete records begin with the minutes of a Trustees' meeting at the chapel on the 9th February 1893, at which the Rev. G. Frayn presided. It contains a list of the Trustees at that time, eight altogether, but only two lived at Leigh; the remainder were all given the same address, 42, Garfield Road, Plaistow, Essex. At the next meeting on the 8th February 1894 it was recorded - "In response to a request from the Wesleyan Extension Fund for which £100 grant was given towards the erection of the chapel, 10/- (ten shillings) was voted as a subscription to the Fund".

Money and alterations

It would seem that the calling of a special Trustees' Meeting on the 11th

October 1894 was to agree to a contribution of £10 being paid "towards circuit expenses". Financial resources were limited. When the question of painting the outside of the church and the cleaning of the interior was discussed on the 19th September 1895, it was agreed that the work would be done "if the money needed could be obtained". The Trustees "stated that three collecting books were out and some donations promised". Whether the work was done or not is not clear from the minutes, but at a Special Trustees' Meeting on the 3rd July 1900 it was decided to ask Mr. M. Risley (Junior) "to give price for the decorating of the chapel", and in September another meeting was held, when a committee was asked to meet Mr. Risley "to suggest alterations in work for the chapel".

In 1904 a report was given on proposed plans for alterations to the chapel and the schoolroom which would "involve an outlay of £150". It was decided to call a meeting of church members, so that the scheme could be put to them. The following year a "Workers Committee" was appointed to undertake a thorough cleaning of the schoolroom. All through the minutes there is evidence of great care taken of the premises by the Trustees. However, there was prolonged discussion about what repairs and decorations could be undertaken. As far as on the 16th October 1908 it was proposed that "the consideration of tenders be postponed and that a committee be appointed to inspect and modify the specifications as far as possible". Then as though anticipating that the work would be completed, it was decided that "the opening of the new schoolroom take place conjointly with the Harvest Festival on the 25th and 26th of October". The matter of repairs was still being discussed in 1913, when the Trustees

deferred the matter until the immediate cost had been brought "within our means". Six months later a decision was taken to accept an estimate of £34.5s.0d. and instruct Mr. H. Johnson on the basis of his estimate to proceed with the work.

Was this the end of the matter? No! At a Trustees' Meeting on the 29th January 1914, "The Treasurer reported that extra repairs had to be made to the schoolroom over and above the builder's estimate, and resolved that Mr. Johnson be thanked for the extra work he had done free". A fair amount of "Do it yourself" work was done. However, in February 1929 it was reported that the renovations were complete, but an offer from Mr. Partridge to grain and varnish the rostrum free of charge was accepted, but the pews also would be varnished with the church bearing the cost.

Renewal of Trust

In October 1929 the Trustees decided that the Trust should be renewed. The meeting for their appointment was held on the 16th December 1929. The new Trust, unlike the previous one, consisted of people living in Leigh. Among them were seven fishermen, two butchers, a baker, a boat-builder, a decorator, a printer, a civil engineer and a roundsman. This new Trust was faced with the architect's report on the serious condition of the building. He suggested that it should be shored up at once and that the chimney should be taken down. The owner of the adjoining land was to be seen for permission to open his ground to discover whether the foundations were moving. The seriousness of the problem was reported to a further meeting in March 1931, when it was decided to enquire about the future plans of the railway company. An emergency meeting a few days later

agreed to the removal of those parts of the building which were a danger to the public. The organ would have to be taken down and stored.

Thirty church members turned up to a special meeting with the Trustees on the 9th April 1931 to hear about the problem facing the church. There was no doubt about the enthusiasm with which it was decided that the New Road church should carry on. When the church members left the meeting the Trustees examined the plans of the railway company and accepted the advice of their architect, that it would be expedient to build a new church further West. The Rev. J. H. Maddock, the Superintendent, said that the attitude of the connexional authorities was very sympathetic towards any rebuilding scheme. Mr. Maddock reported on conversations he had had about the purchase of the preferred site touching Billet Lane. The Trustees authorised Mr. Maddock and Mr. Stibbards to arrange for the purchase of the site, if possible in exchange for the present one. Mr. F. E. Smee, the architect, was asked to prepare sketch plans for a building to seat 150 to 200 persons. At a later meeting it was reported that the connexional "Anonymous Donor" had offered £1,000, but the owner of the land was not prepared to name a price and wanted the Trustees to make an offer. In the event of the offer not being acceptable, the Trustees would consider the alternative of rebuilding on the old site.

New church planned

Having the Trustees' Meeting minutes from 1931 to 1974 when the Church Councils replaced the Trustees' and Leaders' Meetings, we have a record of the various steps taken towards the

building of the chapel. On the 28th August 1931, when Mr. J. Cotgrove intimated that he wished to be relieved of the secretarial work in connection with the new church, it was decided that "the scheme should be worked under the Church Building and Extension Fund until the new building was within compass of the allowed debt". The meeting heard that Mr. F. E. Smee, the architect, had offered to prepare the plans for the church "free of cost". The Superintendent minister, the Rev. J. H. Maddock, reported the recommendation of a committee that had been set up to confer of the possibility of moving to another site. The following resolution was adopted -

Having heard the report of the committee on the subject the Trustees decided that the vendor of the land off Billet Lane (Mr. Turner) be advised that the price of the land prohibited them from further considering his offer in his letter of the 7th August and they must fall back on the old site.

The meeting authorised Mr. Smee to prepare plans for the new church on the old site. It was decided to secure the use of the hall lately used by St. Thomas church, for services during the rebuilding. In fact, subsequently Mr. W. Theobald offered the use of the Custom House for services, and this was accepted subject to effective insurance cover being arranged.

At a Trustees' Meeting on the 21st September 1931 a plan to provide suitable premises to accommodate 150 in the church and 60 in the schoolroom was accepted, and Mr. Smee was asked to complete the plans and secure tenders. It was agreed to keep the scheme within £2,300. However, when the tenders were

opened on the 24th October 1931 they all exceeded that figure - J. E. Johnson £3,660, F. J. Green and Son £3035 and A. D. Jackson and Son £2530. It was resolved to accept F. J. Green and Son's tender and Mr. Smee was asked to confer with them to modify the plans to bring them within the limit of £2,600. Mr. Smee agreed. When the Trustees met on the 20th November 1931 they learned that the plans had been approved by the London Mission and Extension Fund surveyor, which would be confirmed when the committee met. The plans had not yet been approved by the Borough Council. In the expectation of financial help, it was agreed to submit the plans through Mr. Smee to the Sunday School Union.

The Borough Council's response, which was reported to the Trustees on the 22nd December 1931, raised a problem that had not been foreseen. They requested that the rain water outflow should be connected to the sewer in the High Street. Mr. Smee reported on his interview with the Council to allow the present system to remain, but he had not succeeded. To comply with the Council's request would cost £50. Mr. A. Stibbards asked if he might try again and if he failed the architect could be instructed to make the necessary amendments to the plan. The Trustees agreed and authorised Messrs. Green and Son to carry out the work on the basis of the price they had quoted of £53. In March 1932 the Council informed the Trustees that they agreed to bring the rain water sewer to the front of the church.

Rebuilding work

The rebuilding work began and arrangements were made for the opening on the 31st May 1932. The opening ceremony would be at 4 p.m., followed

by a service at 4.30 p.m. Arrangements had been made for the hall at Wesley Church to be used for tea and a public meeting at which Alderman Burrows would preside. The secretary of the Trustees was asked to contact the railway company for permission to take a collection at the station approach. The minutes included a financial statement of the rebuilding scheme -

Expenditure	£	Income	£
Green and Son	2535	Anon Donor	1400
Johnson (dismantling old chapel)	65	London M & S Fund	260
Chairs	64	GCF	105
Organ	18	GCF (Special)	50
Architect	150	Wesleyan Meth Ins Co	100
Hymnbooks	5	Stonelaying	312.10
Printing, postage, deputations etc.	30	Opening	203.10
Memorial tablet	10	Architect's donation	150
Gifts of material and labour	15	Gifts of material and labour	15
		Debt remaining	289.19
	2892		2892

Once the new church had been built, during the next few years various adjustments and improvements were discussed, relating to the entrance and the Lower Hall. Some were carried out and others deferred. In 1946 a fund was opened for the complete redecoration of the premises externally and internally. A tender for the work was accepted at a Trustees' Meeting on the 18th August 1947, and though there is no reference to it, the assumption is that it was carried out.

Another new Trust

The Trust was renewed in 1951. As in other sections of this history of the Southend and Leigh circuit, we identify the occupations of the Trustees because these details indicate something about the character of the church membership at the time. The meeting for the appointment of Trustees was held on the 7th February 1951. Many of the Trustees were members of other churches in the circuit, but all lived in Leigh, with the exception of one or two in neighbouring areas of Thundersley and Benfleet. In the new Trust there were three butchers, a retired baker, retired civil engineer, three bank officials, company director, Post Office overseer, textile manufacturer and merchant, accountant, insurance clerk, printer, lorry driver, local government official, executive public utility corporation, fisherman, retired railway official. It is interesting to note that by this time only one fisherman was among the Trustees.

Final Trust

On the 19th November 1964, what proved to be the final body of Trustees before the creation of Church Councils in 1974 were appointed. These consisted of a printer, local government officer, executive of public utility corporation, retired railway official, retired traffic manager, decorator, retired chemical engineer, office manager, driver, sales representative, commercial executive, clerk, bricklayer, machine assembler, journalist, Member of Lloyds, housewife (married), housewife (widow) and bakehouse manageress. Again most of them were members of other churches, though the proportion of New Road members was greater than before. The other feature of note is that in 1951 there was only one fisherman, and in the most recent there was not one.

The "Bridge Stores"

Reference will be made to "Brubbs" Bridge. Here is an appropriate place to refer to his parents who died only a few years before he died himself. "Brubbs" was the youngest of four sons born to Frank and Lily Bridge, three of whom died in infancy. The third boy who lived to be four or five used to refer to his younger brother as "Brubber", and from this came "Brubbs", by which he came to be known ever after. Frank and Lily Bridge lived "over the shop", known as "Bridge Stores". The shop across the road from the original station in the Old Town, is still in use.

Frank had a boat called "Peggy", which during the summer, ran from Chalkwell beach, giving trips to holiday-makers. "Come for a sail", cried Frank with a voice that carried almost to Old Leigh. There had been three boats called "Peggy"; the last of which was lost at Dunkirk in the great evacuation of British troops. Like so many of the original families, the Bridges were keen chapel-goers; and "Brubbs" maintained that tradition. They were so loved and respected, that at a Trustees' Meeting on the 13th June 1958, it was suggested that a new heating system be installed in the chapel as a memorial. Their son "Brubbs" stressed that the present furnace was old and could not last much longer; also it compared unfavourably with present day systems. There was general agreement for a new system.

The Gas Board had estimated that a new system would cost about £150. As the church was used infrequently, enquiries were made concerning special rates for Sundays, as Belfairs church had negotiated for electricity. Gas could normally be paid by slot meter by those who used it, as at Wesley Church. The secretary was instructed to obtain details.

The meeting was adjourned until the 28th July 1958 when reports were given on various systems by gas, electricity and oil. It was agreed to proceed with specifications and estimates from the Gas Board. The treasurer said there was a balance in hand of £195, but the repayment of the loan had to be borne in mind. An interest-free loan was offered to tide over and enable the heating system to be installed as soon as possible, hopefully by the Harvest Festival in September.

The base for Mission

With four chapels being built during its history, the New Road society may seem to have been pre-occupied with property matters. Already it can be seen that this was not the case. Especially in its early history, the chapel was the base from which preachers went to fulfil Wesley's instruction - "Go not only to those who need you but those who need you most". We have recounted some of these exploits. Fortunately, we have the Leaders' Meeting minute books covering the period from the 15th December 1916 to the 10th April 1957 and on into the period beyond the formation of the Church Council. The minutes in the early period after 1916 are brief, but various references help to build up a picture of the church's life after it emerged from the War. At a meeting on the 20th January 1919, for example, Sister Charlotte was appointed leader of the Women's Class. A Wesley Deaconess, she had been appointed to the circuit to give pastoral oversight of New Road, in response to a request from the Circuit Quarterly Meeting on the 18th December 1918. References in Leaders' Meeting minutes give some indication of the work she was doing. For instance, it was decided to have cards printed, announcing the times of services,

which she would distribute on her visitation. At a Leaders' Meeting in June 1919 she was told she could apply to the Poor Stewards if she wanted money for needy cases. The December Leaders' Meeting the same year decided to have a Deaconess Anniversary. This was held on the 4th February 1920, with a service in the afternoon followed by a tea (Tickets 9d each!) and then an evening meeting. Later, though no date is given, but it was in 1921 or 1922, it was decided to "have a meeting of the members to decide what shall be done respecting the deaconess". There is no further reference to this matter, and clearly there were no complaints about Sister Charlotte, but after 1921 the circuit discontinued the Deaconess appointment.

After the War

It was with real commitment and vision that the church approached its task after the War. Classes met and leaders were appointed, a Wesley Guild was active and a Band of Hope was formed. It was decided at one Leaders' Meeting that "a form of service" should be prepared and printed, which could be sent to every minister and Local Preacher appointed to New Road. It was also requested that "there should be one hymn from Sankey's collection at the evening service". The Minutes of the meeting when these matters were decided ended appropriately - "The Leaders' Meeting expressed their thanks to Almighty God for his goodness in bringing us through this great struggle that has been going on for four years and a half". Three months later, on the 13th March 1919 it was decided that Sister Charlotte should see Miss Girling about taking a Junior Girl's Class and that the minister, the Rev. W. H. Lawson, be asked to see Mr. Frank Bridge about starting a class for boys. It was hoped to begin a

Young People's Society sometime in October. For the first time in the minutes the church membership was recorded. There were 45 full members, 10 On Trial and 14 Juniors. From time to time the membership was recorded, but not regularly. So that it was not until 1951 that the figure was recorded again, when there were 32 full members. The lack of figures is a strange omission, because every year the membership roll was read, but there were few changes. However, on the 2nd April 1951 the Superintendent, the Rev. Stanley Southall, led a discussion on church membership and said he proposed to visit a number of members who had not attended services for some years, and also six adherents with a view to becoming members.

Still vigorous

It is unfortunate that although Trustees' Meeting minutes are complete for almost the whole period of its history, the Leaders' Meeting minutes end abruptly in 1957. It is helpful, therefore, to have an account of the Annual Society Meeting on the 12th January 1956. Here, brief accounts were given of the church's various activities. The Sunday school was reported as "still vigorous" and the leaders were encouraged because some Youth Fellowship members were remaining for the sermon during the morning service, and were also coming to the evening service. There were 12 to 15 boys in the Cubs, but the Scout Master announced he was unable to continue and an appeal was made to the Wesley and Highlands churches for help. The Girls' Brigade which was formed in 1954 with Mrs. Jean Card as leader, was strong, with 20 members. From a total of 70 members in the Sisterhood there was an average weekly attendance of over 30. It should

be noted that in 1951 Mr. Oswald Waite, who had been Circuit Quarterly Meeting secretary and a Local Preacher, was appointed lay pastor at New Road.

At this time, and until his unexpected death in 1964 at the age of fifty-two, it was generally recognised that the key figure in the church's life was "Brubbs" Bridge. His death marked the end of a succession of men who epitomised the ethos of Old Leigh. We have recorded the fact that he was the surviving son of Frank and Lily Bridge. After his Primary School days he went to Westcliff High School, never to distinguish himself as a scholar. Years later when he was inducted as President of the Rotary Club, he succeeded a man who was headmaster of his old school. In his speech, this Rotarian said, "I thought I would look up your school record. You were a bit of a duffer, weren't you?" That may have been true. It did not diminish his character. Leaving school, he went to work for the Leigh Building Supply Company, which had been founded by members of the Bridge family. His job was to act as a tracer boy. Supplies of sand, bricks, timber and other building materials came on barge to Benfleet. These were then off-loaded onto wagons which were drawn up the hill by horses. The loads were too heavy for one horse to draw, and a trace horse was used at the front until the top of the hill was reached, then a tracer boy had to lead the horse back to Benfleet for the next load. It says much about his character and native ability that he made his way in the firm to a directorship and the acknowledged chief. In the borough of Southend he became one of its most respected and loved citizens, becoming a Magistrate and active in the Businessmen's Luncheon Club and Rotary. However, his first love was New Road chapel, and he had been known to

excuse himself from a function in Southend to slip down to the chapel, still in his dinner suit, to give a few minutes support to an event run by his fellow church members. Once when the vestries at the church needed redecorating and furnishing the secretary noted in brackets (The donor wished to remain anon. but everybody knew it was Brubbs!). It was only after his death that his wife Eunice learned of numerous kindnesses he had done for people he thought needed support.

He was taken ill with a heart attack while watching a football match at Southend United and died three days later in Southend General Hospital. His death was deeply felt throughout the area, and the affection in which he was held was demonstrated at the funeral service at Leigh Wesley Church. People who could not get in stood in the rain on the steps of the church. Besides being regular in worship, he devoted every Sunday afternoon to leading a young peoples' Bible class. So important was this work conceived to be, that a group of stewards came to see the author of this history to ask him to take over the class. It was a privilege to respond to this request, and the joy has been to see some of these young people continuing in the church and occupying positions of leadership in it. "Brubbs" would regard this as one of his most rewarding achievements.

Change and challenge

The modern period, say the last twenty years or so, spans years of considerable change and challenge for New Road. The Leaders' Meeting minutes from 1972 and those of the Church Council since 1974 provide a glimpse of the church's life during that time. At a

Leaders' Meeting on the 24th May 1972 the church membership was reported as 52; and the fact that a church car rally had recruited eight cars and 29 people indicated a participating membership. The Wesley Guild was obviously active and remained so for some years. At a Leaders' Meeting on the 20th November 1973 the minister, the Rev. Frank Ames, reported that he was holding a membership training class for a group of young people. Throughout the early 1970s the various funds of the church appeared to be maintained at a satisfactory level. Problems arose later, but they were effectively solved, so that by a meeting in October 1979 there was a balance in hand on the current account of £1024.87 and in the deposit account of £606.31.

With the introduction of local Church Councils in 1974 new appointments were made at a meeting on the 20th May 1974. For the record these were - Church stewards Keith Threadgold and Les Lightfoot; church treasurer, David Cox; class leaders, Mrs. E. Bridge, Miss Grayson, Mrs. Wells and Mrs. Thompson; property stewards, Eric Card and Cyril Phillips and church council secretary, John Bradford. The first report on church membership since restructuring was on the 24th February 1975, when following the death of two members and the transfer out of three others, the membership was 50; a year later it was 47 and continued to decline. At the time of writing this history it is fifteen.

New Project

In 1980 the church became involved in a new project initiated by the Rev. Peter Hudson, the District Education and Youth Secretary. He indicated to the church that New Road premises were ideally situated

to be used as a conference and holiday centre for groups of young people. He was willing to meet a committee appointed by the church to discuss this project and this was done. The minutes of a church council on the 11th November 1980 recorded that the premises were being used for this purpose. The caretaker was receiving 10 per cent of the fees paid by the participating organisation for extra work.

On Sunday the 23rd January 1983 a general church meeting was held to discuss three proposals which had come from a special church council meeting. These were: (a) that due to the falling off of attendance at evening services, largely because of age, it should be discontinued and a morning service only should be held; (b) that once a month a community service should be held, followed by a lunch for lonely people, and four women members were asked to look into this suggestion; (c) that consideration be given to the possibility of the premises being used more than at present by the youth of Leigh. A year later, the Church Council discussed the need for a Bible study class, and it was decided to hold this on alternate weeks with the Wesley Guild which was meeting fortnightly.

In the same year a Sunday school which had not met for some years was recommenced under the leadership of Keith Threadgold. At the end of the first year it was reported that there were 19 scholars. Other youth work had been undertaken. Cubs had functioned for some time and then ceased. A Scout troop became too small to be effective on its own and united with that at Wesley. For some time the Girls' Brigade had been a strong element under the leadership of Jean Card, and then of Margaret Cox who assumed joint leadership with one at Westcliff

United Reformed Church. The acceptance of Eric Card into the ministry deprived New Road of his leadership and that of his wife. Soon after Margaret Cox entered the order of Deacons of the Methodist Church. However, this little fellowship at New Road, productive in the early days of great leaders, can rejoice that in recent times the bread cast upon the waters has been seen after many days.

Notes

1. *The History of Rochford Hundred*,
Philip Benton, A. Harrington (1867)
p.34
2. See *The Scene of Early Methodism in
the Rochford Hundred*, in this series
pp 1 and 2.
3. *The History of Rochford Hundred*,
Philip Benton p 395.
4. Benton Op cit pp 321, 322.

Before his death in 1994, Laurie Gage, a Local Preacher and much more, in the Southend and Leigh Circuit, discussed with the Rev. George Thompson Brake the importance of producing a history of Methodism in the Southend and Leigh area. Laurie Gage was a second-hand religious book-seller, with a business that extended worldwide. His knowledge of Methodism was phenomenal. He had a close relationship with George Thompson Brake, who, for his major historical works, including *Policy and Politics in British Methodism 1932 to 1982*, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. In planning this history it was decided to produce it in a series, which at this point in time, 1994, is an on-going exercise.