

**Christ Church, Lewes
United Reformed and Methodist**

The Tabernacle 1816-1829

Cliff Geering



**200th Anniversary of the Tabernacle congregation
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This booklet has been derived from the notes and research papers left by Cliff Geering, who died in 1993 and was Church secretary from 1972 to 1977. They were given to the Church by his daughter Dorothy. This booklet is one of a series describing the Tabernacle, another gives an account of the Cliffe Chapel, the first Congregational Church in Lewes. They are published as part of the celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the Tabernacle congregation in 1816.

The original sources used in the booklets are the minute and vestry books of the church, surviving letters and legal documents, and pieces published in the local press. These form part of the East Sussex Record Office collection deposited in The Keep, Woollards Way, Brighton, BN1 9BP. [thekeep@eastsussex.gov.uk]

Lewes at the beginning of the nineteenth century

In the years after the Battle of Waterloo Lewes was even more of a county town than it is today. Most of it lay within the bounds of its ancient walls and much of that area was garden, orchard or paddock. Some houses followed the cobbled High Street beyond Westgate into St Anne's; others reached past Eastgate and the Friars to the river. Over the bridge, the picturesque but not too healthy Cliffe High Street (or West Street) where the buildings almost touched across the narrow roadway, provided the only approach to the town from the East. The suburbs of South Malling, Cliffe and Southover were not part of the borough. The modern estates that fringe the town cover what was then open country.

As a county town, Lewes was the focus of the life of a wide area. Here, at the petty and quarter sessions and at the Assizes, justice was administered. The gentry had town houses and numerous schools provided education according to their station for the children of squire, yeomen and tradesmen, and even of the poor. In the inns and taverns, landowners, farmers and merchants discussed their own interests and the state of the nation. In the markets and fairs of Lewes and the Cliffe, sheep and cattle and the produce of field and orchard were bought and sold. At wharves along the river, barges unloaded the goods and materials with which the tradesmen and craftsmen supplied the needs of town and countryside.

The long war with France brought prosperity to East Sussex and especially to those engaged in agriculture on which the nation depended for food. In spite of the severe wartime taxation the profits derived from the soaring price of corn and the low wages paid to agricultural labourers enabled many farmers to build and furnish the fine houses that still adorn the Sussex countryside and to become, as the radical journalist William Cobbett scornfully put it, 'transmuted into a species of mock gentlefolks.' The brickmaker, the tanner, the chandler, the brewer all thrived. In the Cliffe the iron foundry cast ordnance for the war. The large bodies of troops in the area, some of which were stationed at Lewes, contributed to this prosperity.

When the war ended the boom collapsed. Corn from the continent once more became available and, as prices fell, many farmers faced ruin. Wealthier landlords like Lord Gage, reduced or waived their rents rather than see their

lands go to waste. Some clergy reduced their tithes. Government measures to protect the price of corn aroused angry protests in the towns. Other measures, *e.g.* the abolition of income tax and a new game law, favoured the rich at the expense of the poor. Discharged soldiers and seamen added to the number of unemployed and vagrancy became an increasingly serious problem. In 1819 the population of the Lewes House of Correction, mostly vagrants, was greater than it had ever been.

‘The country is in a state of gentle dissatisfaction: the agriculturists are almost starving and the manufacturers are the same,’ the Lewes geologist and surgeon Gideon Mantell wrote in his journal in June 1820.

Yet during the unsettled decade or so after the peace the Lewes tradesman in general seem to have been able to cope with their problems. If demand had fallen off or if particular trades had their special problems, as did the iron trade, the markets and fairs continued and services and commodities were still required. The picture of Lewes given by Cobbett when he visited the town in January 1822 shows no sign of hardship. A farmer’s son and something of an expert on agriculture, he noted that the chalk bottom around the town made for good corn country. ‘There is a great extent of rich meadows above and below Lewes. The town itself is a model of solidarity and neatness. The buildings all substantial to the very outskirts; the pavements good and complete; the shops nice and clean; the people well dressed; and, though not least, the girls remarkably pretty as indeed they are in most parts of Sussex.....The inns are good at Lewes, the people civil and not servile, and the charges really (considering the taxes) far below what one could reasonably expect.’ There is every sign of confidence in the number of improvements and developments undertaken during this period. In 1821 work began on the new houses in Albion Street, linking the High Street with Poplar Row; 1822 saw the new road to Offham via White Hill, and in the same year the streets were first lit by gas, which was supplied to the principal shops. During 1824 and 1825 the cobbled High Street from the Cliffe to St Anne’s was resurfaced with macadam. In 1828 the demolition of the south side of Cliffe High Street began as part of a plan to widen the roadway and bridge.

This reflects the condition of people of ‘the middle sort’, whose ultimate ambition was to secure a competence that would earn them the title of

'gentleman'. Their relative comfort, and that of those above them in the social scale, depended on the labouring poor, who formed the major part of the population. As the social historian J. F. C. Harrison observes in *The Early Victorians 1832-1851* (1971): 'A poor man was one who had to work with his hands to support himself and his family. He was not by definition indigent, though he was always liable to fall into indigency for some reason, culpable or otherwise (in which case, if he had no means of livelihood, he became a pauper)...This vast army of people was called the labouring poor.' The town labourer who had acquired a skill might by hard work and good fortune become a tradesman or an employer. The country labourer, by a system that augmented the miserable wages paid by the farmers with contributions from the parish poor rate, was reduced to pauperism. For such, these were harsh years.

The accession of William IV in 1830 brought a general election at which the moderate Whig Thomas Reid Kemp, founder of Kemptown in Brighton and the Tory Sir John Shelly, were again returned as members for Lewes. Kemp headed the poll but with a reduced majority. His nomination was seconded by George Adams, one of the founding fathers of the Tabernacle, who was clearly recognised as one of his leading supporters. Before the county polls were held news came of the short and successful July revolution in France which overthrew the reactionary king Charles X and brought in a more constitutional monarchy under the new king Louis Philippe, welcomed in England, particularly by reform-minded dissenters. Thus in the middle of the election the French example brought renewed demands for reform in England. About this time signs of unrest began to appear amongst the agricultural labourers of Kent. A symptom of the plight of these workers was seen in the hordes of Irish and other labourers who, with their wives and children, 'infested the neighbourhood' of Lewes during August. Some 200-300 were encamped in Winterbourne, gradually dispersing with the approach of harvest. Such migrant labour was inevitably cause of resentment to the local unemployed.

In September, following the recognition of Louis-Philippe and the new July monarchy in France by the British government, a town meeting sent a congratulatory message to the citizens of Paris: 'Brave Citizens, your struggle has been a fight for Freedom and most nobly have its Victories been achieved.... It is our earnest prayer that the liberty which has been so nobly won may for ever exist among you and that the voice of the people which has so

triumphantly prevailed may remain undisputed. Your glorious and successful exertions in the cause of freedom are identified with the freedom and happiness of all mankind....' The publication of this message shows that it was directed as much to London as to Paris.

On 18 and 19 October William Cobbett, on a lecture tour of the south east, speaking at the Lewes theatre, reiterated his familiar demands for the freedom of the press, a reformed suffrage and the removal of taxes and sinecures. He urged the farmers of Sussex to make common cause with the people.

Meanwhile the arrival of the King and Queen in Brighton at the end of August provided another focus of attention. Whilst the king was holding court in Brighton and the question of reform floated in the air, the anger and frustration of the agricultural labourer mounted until it burst out in a series of disturbances that, despite the efforts of the magistrates to contain them, spread rapidly from Kent westward across Southern England. In November, numerous towns and parishes in East Sussex were troubled by demonstrations and meetings of labourers demanding higher wages. Ricks and barns were set on fire and threshing machines broken; in some places farmers received threatening letters signed by the legendary 'Captain Swing'; others, faced by an angry mob, agreed to the labourers' demands. At Ringmer, Lord Gage, the principal landowner, met some 150 labourers on the village green on 15 November, where he was given a letter setting out their case in detail. Clearly the work of a well-educated man, this letter shows that the labourers were not without friends. Two sentences give the gist of it '....we say we want sufficient to support us, without being driven to the overseer to experience his petty tyranny and dictation...We also request that the permanent overseers of the neighbouring parishes may be directly discharged...' When it was announced that their demands were granted, the labourers dispersed. While the labourers complained about wages the farmers complained about tithes and at Lewes a joint meeting of farmers and labourers attacked the parsons. On the night of 18 November two ricks and a barn were destroyed by fire at Priory Farm, Southover.

Whitefield and Hill

The Lewes Tabernacle was a product of the religious and social movements that were developing during the 18th century and which, by the end of the war with France, had gained considerable momentum. The arrival in Brighton of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, in 1755 marked the beginning of a campaign to introduce the doctrines of the Methodist revival into Sussex. Lady Huntingdon had herself been an early convert to Methodism and became the friend of John and Charles Wesley and also of George Whitefield, and she used her wealth to support their work. Methodism, however, was not congenial to the established church: its 'enthusiasm' gave great offence and its itinerant preachers were regarded as intruders by parish clergy. Bishops would refuse to ordain men suspected of Methodist sympathies. As a peeress, Lady Huntingdon had the right to appoint a number of personal chaplains and she gathered round her a group of distinguished evangelical preachers, including William Romaine, Henry Venn and George Whitefield. When in 1749 Whitefield's Calvinism led to his parting from the Wesleys it was to him that she gave her support.

George Whitefield established two chapels in London: the Tabernacle in Moorfields and, later, Tottenham Court Chapel in the growing and fashionable West End. These he served until his death in 1770. He was succeeded in 1775 by another famous preacher, the 'zealous, sagacious and eccentric' Matthew Wilks (1746-1829). Since no trust deeds had been executed the affairs of the chapels were in the hands of a few gentlemen known as managers, who, sensitive to the widespread prejudice against dissenters and especially against Methodists, took every care to avoid any occasion of offence to the educated and respectable members of their congregations. No discussion was allowed at Church Meetings, for the members had no voice whatever in the business of the societies. This anxiety of the managers becomes easier to understand when it is realised that one of the principal managers at Moorfields Tabernacle was John Wilks, the son of the minister. He was an attorney by profession, a man of culture and considerable eloquence, who became famous, if not (in some quarters) notorious, as the founder and joint secretary of the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberties. This society, bringing together Methodists and Old Dissent in a common cause, representing the more militant dissenters, had played an important part in the successful agitation of 1811 and 1812 to block parliamentary legislation that would have severely restricted the

licences issued to Dissenting preachers, and to secure the repeal of the Conventicle Act and Five Mile Act in 1812, and it worked with other Protestant bodies and individuals, including Revd Thomas Horsfeild of the Westgate Chapel in Lewes for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. In such circumstances dissenters needed to be recognised as respectable and responsible citizens.

Another significant influence on the life of the new chapel was that of Revd Rowland Hill. [This is not Sir Rowland H Hill (1795-1879) associated with postal reform.]. Although it is not always possible to say when and where that influence was felt, the fact that in nine out of the first thirteen years of the chapel's existence there was some contact with him shows that the influence was real. It seems certain that he had an important part in the choice of the first permanent minister at the Tabernacle.

The Revd Rowland Hill AM [older way of writing MA] (1744-1833) was the sixth son of Sir Rowland Hill (1705-1783) of Hawkstone Park, Shropshire. Whilst still a student at St John's College, Cambridge, he had begun preaching in the open air, and because he refused to give up the practice, his application for ordination was refused by six bishops in succession. At last, in 1773, he was ordained deacon by Dr Wills, Bishop of Bath and Wells, but when he applied to the Bishop of Carlisle for priest's orders, these were refused on the instructions of the Archbishop of York. For a time he became a chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon but was of too independent a spirit to continue the association for long. His preaching in churches and chapels and out of doors attracted large crowds and, sometimes, angry opposition. To many people he seemed to be the true successor of Whitefield. 'His doctrine, his preaching talents, his popularity, his want of any definite system were all Whitefield again,' wrote his biographer.

Each year he spent some time at Wotton-under-Edge, in Gloucestershire, where in beautiful surroundings he had built a house and chapel. In 1783 at the expense of a number of his admirers in various denominations, a new chapel was built for him in St George's Fields, London. Here he ministered for the rest of his life, devoting the summer months to preaching tours all over the country. In his own words he was 'Rector of Surrey Chapel, Vicar of Wotton-under-Edge, and Curate of all the fields and commons etc throughout England and Wales.' From time to time his travels brought him to Sussex. In spite of his experiences, Rowland Hill remained deeply attached to the Church of England and used the

liturgy of the Prayer Book regularly at Surrey Chapel. He was ready to welcome to his pulpit ministers of any denomination whose preaching was consistent with the doctrine of the established church. His recognition of evangelical faith wherever it might be found made him a strong supporter of interdenominational ventures such as the British and Foreign Bible Society and the London Missionary Society, of which he was one of the first directors. His interest in children led him to lead the way in the introduction of Sunday Schools to London. Attached to Surrey Chapel there were eventually thirteen such schools, with a total of 3000 children.

In 1759 Whitefield came to Brighton and preached in a field behind the White Lion Inn, not far from Lady Huntingdon's house in North Street. His preaching led to the formation of a Calvinistic Methodist Society, for which in 1761 her ladyship built a chapel at the rear of her house, selling her jewels to raise the money required.

Dissenters in Lewes

One of those who heard Whitefield preach in Brighton was a young bricklayer, Henry Booker, a preacher at a long established General Baptist Church at Ditchling (of which the church in Eastport Lane Lewes, was one of several branches). The General Baptists in Sussex were leaning towards Unitarianism and the Calvinistic views that Booker now adopted soon led to his expulsion. In 1763 he founded a Particular (i.e. Calvinistic) Baptist Church at Wivelsfield, where he was ordained pastor in 1768.

The chaplains who attended Lady Huntingdon at Brighton were sent on preaching expeditions to the surrounding country town and villages. In 1765, according to her biographer, she 'began to concert measures for introducing the Gospel to the town of Lewes, where already her chaplains had reaped fruit. She first obtained for Mr Romaine one of the pulpits but his preaching gave great umbrage.

On 29 January 1770, the *Lewes Journal* reported: 'On Wednesday last a journeyman carpenter, who has lately commenced Methodist preaching, was hung in effigy on a signpost in the Cliffe, Lewes; and in the evening taken down and committed to the flames.' This must refer to George Gilbert, a converted

soldier who in 1767 had been brought to Heathfield to work on General Elliott's estate. After his discharge from the army he took up his former trade of carpentry and at the end of his day's work would tramp for miles to preach in the surrounding villages. In 1770 he built a chapel at Heathfield, where in 1777 he formed a church. Gilbert's preaching throughout East Sussex led to the creation of a number of churches, including one at Alfriston, and he became known as the 'Apostle of Sussex.' In 1778 Lady Huntingdon built a chapel at Ote Hall, Wivelsfield.

In the path of the itinerant preachers there grew up little communities of believers who would meet wherever they could, in a cottage, farmhouse or barn; later they would build a chapel. In 1773 Thomas Dicker of Buxted left the parish church and held meetings in his own house at which the Countess of Huntingdon's preachers could be heard; ten years later he gave a piece of land for the erection of a chapel nearby.

Meanwhile, Lady Huntingdon had renewed her efforts. She 'obtained a pulpit for Mr Madan and Mr Fletcher. The clergy opposed this violently, and they betook themselves to a large room, where they preached alternately to great numbers.'

By this time there were two dissenting chapels in Lewes: the General Baptists in Eastport Lane and the Presbyterians at Westgate, who had been joined by Congregationalists in 1711 to form a united church which anticipated the national union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form the United Reformed Church in 1972. Both these chapels were tending towards Unitarianism and it is likely that the new Calvinistic Methodist teaching gained a ready response from people who favoured more orthodox doctrine. Evidently a little community of Calvinistic Methodists was formed in the town, although nothing was heard of it until 1775, when a chapel was built at the foot of Cliffe Hill under the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon, the money being raised by voluntary contributions. It was registered on 28 June as 'a meeting house for a congregation of Protestant Dissenters under the denomination of Independents' and was opened for worship on 13 August by Revd Henry Peckwell, Rector of Boxholm, Lincolnshire, and 'Chaplain to the Most Honourable the Marchioness Dowager of Lothian' and Revd Mr Penticross, Rector of Wallingford, Berkshire. On 4 April 1776 a society was formally constituted, and on the day following, Good Friday, the members

communicated together at the Lord's Table. Despite the idealistic tone of its constitution the new society seems to have been unsure of itself. When, scarcely a year after its formation, Richard Cecil, the new rector of the parishes of All Saints and St Thomas-à-Becket won considerable popularity, most of the congregation at the Cliffe Chapel deserted and attempts were made to close it. The few who remained resisted these attempts and, with the help of preachers from the Tabernacle in London and from the college that Lady Huntingdon had opened at Treveca in 1768, managed to keep it open. A regular minister, Joseph Middleton was ordained in 1781, when Henry Booker took part in the service. Middleton himself was a Baptist at heart and was forced to resign in 1784. He carried with him the nucleus of the Particular Baptist cause in Lewes.

In 1767, Thomas Dicker, son of Thomas Dicker of Buxted, became managing clerk to the Lewes bankers Herben, Flight & Co. Some years before he had been accepted for training as a minister by Treveca College, but conversations with Henry Booker of Wivelsfield led him to become a Baptist, and he abandoned his plans to enter the ministry. He became a member of Mr Middleton's chapel in Foundry Lane and in his spare time began to preach in the villages. We hear of his addressing a crowd in a farmhouse kitchen at East Chiltington, riding 40 miles on one day to preach two sermons, and at Ripe conducting a Sunday service at the farmhouse of Matthew Manington. Later he joined the new bank of Whitfield, Comber, Molineux and King (of which he eventually became a partner) and in 1803 became the pastor of the Baptist Church at Hailsham, working in Lewes during the week and riding out to Hailsham on Sundays.

Cliffe Chapel remained without a regular minister until in 1789, or perhaps earlier, Jenkin Jenkins, the 'Welsh Ambassador', was appointed to the pastorate. He came under the influence of the eccentric hyper-Calvinist, William Huntingdon, and, after some discussion, he was dismissed by the trustees and left to build Jireh Chapel, which was opened by William Huntingdon in 1805. It may not be a coincidence that on 25 May 1788 another chapel was erected by Thomas Mantell, a shoemaker and a staunch Methodist, whose famous son Gideon Mantell was not yet born. It seems to have been used by preachers of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion until about 1805 (when Revd G S White of Cheshunt reopened Cliffe Chapel on 7 July) and was purchased a few years later by the Wesleyan Methodists, who thus established a foothold in Lewes.

Until 1808, when Joseph Kerby became pastor, Cliffe Chapel was served by preachers from the Evangelical Academy at Hoxton. Kerby had probably been a student at Northowram Academy in Yorkshire which had been closed after the dismissal of its principal for incompetence. He had apparently had no previous association with the Countess of Huntingdon's churches. His pastorate continued until 1826.

In 1808 the Particular Baptists of Lewes reported: 'The number of professors has greatly increased at Lewes in the past year. We now have seven dissenting meetings in the town. There is a spirit of hearing among the inhabitants and we trust that good has been done, but of instability and a love of novelty too much prevails. It is difficult to trace all the many Lewes dissenters during the early years of the century, The rather confusing evidence suggests the growth of a number of separate groups which met during their brief existence in small chapels already forsaken by their forgotten founders.

The death of Jenkin Jenkins in 1810 left Jireh Chapel without a pastor, although a Mr Hudson, a tax collector, conducted services there for some months. In 1811 some followers of William Huntingdon occupied a chapel in Lancaster Street built in 1804 (It is now part of the fabric of the Little Theatre). This was served by a Mr Marculla, an itinerant Huntingdon preacher from London. The Refuge Chapel, as it was known, was used by the sect until about 1815, the year in which John Vinal, not yet ordained, began his long ministry at Jireh. He was 39 when he preached his first sermon in 1811 and a year or two later a chapel had been built for him at Lower Dicker.

It was clearly to the advantage of these evangelical churches to establish some sort of relationship with each other, both for consultation and to coordinate and finance the development of their mission. In 1779 the Kent and Sussex Association of Particular Baptists was formed and by 1805 the independent churches were linked by the Sussex Ministers Association. In 1804 the newly formed Society for Spreading the Light of the Gospel in the Dark Towns and Villages in our County met on 21 February at Alfriston, when Revd George Gilbert of Heathfield preached the sermon.

In 1809, as the war with France dragged on, the Particular Baptists of Lewes wrote to their association:

‘In the midst of Judgment God is remembering mercy. The Gospel is spreading in various parts of the nations and we hope it will soon be sent into the dark Towns and Villages in our County. For this end a society has lately been formed called the Sussex Mission, in which Baptists and Independents have cordially united. The Society has already been patronised with liberal subscriptions and we hope will be crowned with an abundant blessing.....’

One of the fruits of this cooperation was the erection of an independent chapel at Lindfield, which was opened on Good Friday 1813.

In 1816 Cliffe Chapel suffered another upheaval when some of the leading members of the congregation broke away to open the Tabernacle. About the same time another group, apparently also from the Cliffe Chapel, established the Bethesda Chapel in St John Street, with one of their number, John Gibbs, a shoemaker, as their minister.

The growing number of dissenters, especially among the artisan and middle classes did not please their opponents in the established church and in Parliament. The legal disabilities imposed on dissenters had been designed to prevent them from becoming a threat to the constituted authority of Church and State, but, so long as no threat was apparent, successive governments were content to pursue a policy of toleration. Although the disabilities remained the law was not always enforced; but this did not prevent widespread harassment by magistrates and others. In 1811, Lord Sidmouth, alarmed at the prospect of ‘a nominal established church and a sectarian people’, attempted to check the spread of dissent, and particularly of Methodism, by making it more difficult for would-be ministers to obtain licenses. So strongly did the dissenters protest at these proposals that they did not become law. Encouraged by this success, the dissenters renewed their campaign for religious liberty. As already noted, their efforts led to the repeal in 1812 of the Five Mile and Conventicle Acts and to the extensions of the reliefs given by the Toleration Act of 1689. In 1813 the New Toleration Act of 1812 was extended to Unitarians. The dissenters’ next objective was the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, by which, unless they were willing to receive the sacrament at the parish church, they were excluded from all municipal offices and from all military, executive and administrative offices under the Crown. This they were not to achieve until 1828. No doubt there were many humble worshippers in dissenting chapels who did not concern themselves with matters that were for them of little practical

importance, but for the educated or more prosperous dissenters, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between their evangelical aims and their political and social ambitions.

The opening of the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle was built in 1816, a particularly bad year for the people of Lewes. The initiative for the building seems to have come from the Wille family, which had been associated with the Cliffe Chapel for many years. The name of George Wille appears among the members of the original society at the Cliffe and his son Charles took an interest in its thriving Sunday School. They were supported by George Adams and George Wille's son-in-law Nehemiah Wimble. All were local tradesmen who had prospered during the years of war. The Willes were in the building trade. In 1804, Charles Wille, advertising for two or three good journeyman carpenters, could offer 'constant employ and good wages', and in 1810 the firm of Wille and Co bought the timberyard and buildings it occupied in South Street, Cliffe. Nehemiah Wimble's father had been a blacksmith. The son was now a partner in the ironmongery firm of Atwood and Wimble, whose substantial premises can still be identified at 14 High Street. His elder brother had moved to Hull, where he was established in the iron trade and may have acted as agent for shipments of iron to Lewes. Nehemiah Wimble had set up one of his workmen in the business in Guildford, where his nephew, Charles Wille the younger, was serving his apprenticeship in the iron trade. George Adams was an upholsterer and furniture broker at whose shop in the High Street the latest appliances for home comfort could be obtained. All four were of good standing in the town and were active in its affairs. George Wille had been Headborough (or parochial law-enforcement officer) in 1795; his son Charles held the office ten years later and was elected Junior Constable in the year in which the Tabernacle was opened. George Adams had been Headborough in 1813. Nehemiah Wimble's father John Wimble had been Constable in 1789.

On 13 May 1816, the local newspaper, the *Sussex Advertiser and Lewes Journal*, reported:

'A new chapel, designed for a congregation of Protestant Dissenters, was, a few days ago, commenced building in this town....We understand that, when completed, it will be more spacious, handsome and commodious than any of the chapels at present in

use here.’ It appears that the chapel was to be built in stages, for a portion of the site at the rear was later let as a slate yard to Messrs Gott and Ticehurst; and the chapel as Horsfield describes it, with a capacity of 800 was hardly ‘more commodious’ than the existing Jireh Chapel, which could hold well over 900.

When the foundations were dug, one of the workmen found an old coin on which was inscribed a quotation from the Vulgate *Verbum domini manet in eternum*. (‘The word of the Lord endures for ever’ 1 Peter 1:25). The *Advertiser* drew attention to the context: ‘And this is the word which, by the gospel is preached to you’, adding, somewhat drily, ‘We do not know how this incident may be regarded in the present day, but, connected as it is with the object of the building, it would certainly in former times have been regarded as a most propitious omen.’ The incident became part of the Tabernacle tradition.

By the beginning of July, the masonry bearing the name ‘Lewes Tabernacle’ with the year 1816 had been hauled into position. Charles Wille made a number of journeys to London probably to consult some of the leading ministers there. On one occasion, George Adams also went to make arrangements for the opening. Invitations were sent to a number of ministers in the area and in London and announcements of the opening were made in the *Brighton Herald* and the *Advertiser*. The notice in the *Advertiser* appeared on 28 October 1816 as follows:

THE LEWES TABERNACLE
Will be opened for DIVINE SERVICE
on Wednesday, the Sixth of November, 1816.

The Rev. MATTHEW WILKS,
will preach in the Morning.
Service to begin at Eleven o’clock.

The Rev. R. STODHART,
will preach in the Afternoon.
Service to begin at Three o’clock.

The Rev. John HYATT,
will preach in the Evening.
Service to begin at Six o’clock.

On the same day the Lewes Tabernacle was registered in the Archdeaconry of Lewes according to Act of Parliament as a chapel for Protestant Dissenters. The application was signed by George Wille Charles Wille, George Adams, Nehemiah Wimble, Henry Skinner and John Harvey.

Matthew Wilks, Gorge Whitefield's successor at the London Tabernacle, preached on 'Divine Forgiveness'. Robert Stodhart, for a while tutor at Cheshunt college for the training of ministers, was minister of Pell Street Chapel in the squalid Ratcliffe Highway on the fringe of London Dockland. His subject was 'the Calvinistic doctrine of the Final Perseverance of Saints'. John Hyatt, who preached last, was a former cabinetmaker and co-pastor with Matthew Wilks at the London Tabernacle. He had the unfortunate experience of hearing Matthew Wilks preach in the morning on the text that he had intended to use for his own address in the evening. He hastily prepared another sermon, only to hear Robert Stodhart announce his second text in the afternoon. 'Thus', says Charle Wille Jnr, who tells the story, 'he was again compelled to look for another text, which prevented him from expressing himself (on 'the compassion of God for backsliders') with his usual style and liberty.' It appears that the preachers took no fees for their services at the opening, although their travelling expenses were paid. An entry in the accounts: 'Cash paid for dinner at the Bear Inn for Opening £4.7s.3d' suggests that the founders and their guests marked the day with a celebratory meal.

A notice of the opening, inserted in the *Evangelical Magazine* for February 1817, contained the following comments: 'Notwithstanding the great numbers of places of worship of different descriptions in the town of Lewes, it was judged by some persons that such a place as the Tabernacle was desirable and, from the prospect that presents itself, it is believed that the building has not been erected in vain....' After mentioning the discovery of the coin, it concludes: 'We devoutly wish that 'the Word of the Lord' may be the means of salvation to thousands of the inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood of Lewes.

Thomas Read Kemp

T R Kemp was the son of the wealthy Thomas Kemp, who for many years was one of the borough's two Members of Parliament. After taking a degree in theology at Cambridge he married, in 1806, Frances Baring, a daughter of the

financier, Sir Francis Baring, and entered fashionable society. When his father died in 1811 he inherited the bulk of his property and at the ensuing by-election won his father's seat in the Commons. In the same year, with the Baptist Thomas Dicker, he helped to promote the Sussex Auxiliary of the Bible Society. The British and Foreign Bible Society, which had been founded in 1804 by a Calvinistic Methodist minister Thomas Charles, with the support of the Clapham Sect, was at that time little known in Sussex. At the inaugural meeting at the Star Inn, Lewes, in August 1811, the clerical secretary of the Society, Revd John Owen, and William Wilberforce were both present, and Kemp was for a time its chairman. In 1815 Mrs Kemp's youngest brother George Baring, who was a clergyman of the Church of England, seceded from that church. He was followed by several others, including his brother-in-law Thomas Read Kemp. In 1816 he began to proclaim his own doctrines from the pulpit of the Octagon Chapel Taunton, where Kemp also preached on Good Friday. The sect's general position was evangelical, strongly Calvinistic, and stressing salvation by faith rather than by works, although unorthodox in its doctrine of the Trinity. It was said of Baring and his associates that 'as they did not insist much either on experience or practice, the tendency of their ministry was rather lax. Their own lives, however, were such as their foes could not impeach.' When in 1816 Kemp resigned his seat in Parliament to become a minister of the sect, this brought him closer to the evangelical dissenters in Lewes. Unfortunately he was no preacher and before long he abandoned his excursion into dissent and returned to the Church of England. At a by-election in 1823 he was returned to Parliament as member for Arundel. It is clear that he intended to return to his constituency in Lewes, where his liberal opinions and pleasant personality assured his widespread support. William Cobbett tells how, after attending a meeting at County Hall in January 1822 to consider Agricultural Distress he was induced to dine at the Star. Here, 'after some previous commonplace occurrences, Mr Kemp, formerly member for Lewes, was called to the chair. Cobbett found himself the centre of a heated debate and there was 'a considerable hubbub'. Kemp's conduct of the proceedings however 'was fair and manly.'

During the divorce proceedings against Queen Caroline in 1820 opinion in the town was strongly in her favour. The news that the Bill had been abandoned was greeted with jubilation. 'I was awoke at five o'clock this morning by the ringing of the church bells, the tolling of Old Gabriel, and the rejoicings of the people in the streets, in consequence of the bill against the Queen having been

thrown out in the House of Lords', wrote Gideon Mantell in his journal. 'All business is at a stand, everyone is rejoicing; the poorer classes decorated themselves with laurels, every huxter's horse or mule had branches stuck in their harness: the genteel folks wore red roses. This evening the band has been parading the streets. The town is to be illuminated on Monday evening.' Charles Wille's house was one of many that displayed an illuminated device. At a town meeting on 3 January an address of congratulation was sent to the Queen and another to the King calling for the dismissal of his ministers and the restoration of the Queen's name to the liturgy. The address to the King was proposed by Henry Blackman and seconded by Kemp.

The abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807 did nothing to relieve those already enslaved. In 1821 Wilberforce began a campaign against slavery itself. In January 1823 a society was formed 'for the amelioration and gradual abolition of slavery in all the possessions of Great Britain' and in May the House of Commons passed a resolution for the purpose of gradually improving the lot of the slave population in the colonies and preparing them for emancipation.

Throughout the 1820s dissenters continued their efforts to achieve political equality. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike sought the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, though they did not necessarily support each other and Lewes retained its strong anti-Catholic tradition, in which the Tabernacle congregation seems to have participated. In addition to the disabilities they shared with Protestant dissenters, Roman Catholics were barred from sitting in Parliament, a provision resented particularly by Irish Catholics since the union of Ireland with the United Kingdom in 1800. Catholic emancipation had thus become a major political issue. On the general question of repeal opinion was divided: many people feared that political equality for dissenters of any denomination would threaten the Anglican Constitution. Among these were the Anglican clergy and Wesleyan Methodists. An opposite and more liberal view prevailed among the Protestant Dissenting Deputies and their allies in Parliament, who believed the principle of religious liberty required that there should be no discrimination on the ground of religion. Between these came the body of evangelical dissenters represented by John Wilks, son of Revd Matthew Wilks of the London Tabernacle at Moorfields, who had been a guest preacher at the opening of the Lewes Tabernacle in 1816, and the Protestant Society,

who wanted concessions for Protestants but not for Roman Catholics. Amongst these were the Calvinistic Methodists, such as Matthew Wilks and many of the original members of the Tabernacle.

In 1825 whilst the bodies representing Protestant dissenters were trying to agree a common policy, a Catholic Relief Bill was introduced into the House of Commons. This development caused considerable alarm amongst the anti-Catholics and in April there were various Sussex petitions against it. One was presented by Kemp (then member for Arundel), whose liberalism extended to sympathy with Jewish civil disabilities but not those of Roman Catholics. Others were from the Clergy and Deanery of Lewes brought by Mr Curteis (the member for Sussex); from the Wesleyan Congregations, and from the inhabitants in general of Lewes and its vicinity brought by Sir George Shiffner, one of the members for Lewes. There is no direct evidence of the views of the Tabernacle but since many of the congregation had been Calvinistic Methodists it is safe to assume that these coincided with those of the anti-Catholic John and Matthew Wilks. A petition supporting the Bill was prepared apparently by the Unitarians at Westgate Chapel. On this the *Advertiser* commented : 'We do not expect the petition will be very numerously signed, but the signatures contain the names of many, if not all, the different sectaries in the town.' Other petitions were sent to the Lords, including one, a copy of which survives, from the Jireh Chapel. The rejection of the Bill by the Lords in May was greeted by the ringing of bells in many places.

A general election was due in 1825, but in the autumn the Government, fearing the consequences of a 'No Popery' appeal to the electorate, decided to postpone it until the following year. Early in 1825 Kemp was active in Lewes. He had the support of 'The Bundle of Sticks', a Whiggish and reform-minded dining club formed in 1820 and composed of Kemp's supporters. It took its name from the Roman *fascis*, a symbol of justice (In 1821 Kemp transferred from the Royal Clarence Brighton to the South Saxon Lodge Lewes). Nehemiah Wimble and probably George Adams were then members. In October Kemp presided at the Tabernacle auxiliary of the London Missionary Society, when one of the founders of the Society, Dr David Bogue of Gosport, was on the platform. Matthew Wilks, a friend to the Tabernacle from the beginning, had been another of the founders.

Catholic Emancipation was again an issue in the 1826 election. The two Lewes seats were contested by Sir John Shelley, Kemp and the more radical Whig Alexander Donovan. The first two were elected, with Kemp getting almost as many votes as Shelley and Donovan together.

In the new Parliament a motion for Catholic Emancipation was defeated in March 1827. The Protestants, after the interruptions of the previous two years, also resumed their campaign. A United Committee, made up of the committee of the Dissenting Deputies and representatives of the other societies, failed to get the cooperation of the Protestant Society. It was not until 1828, after the United Committee on the advice of its contacts in Parliament had decided to pursue a campaign without reference to the Roman Catholic claims, that the Protestant Society consented to join the committee. Jireh Chapel, which had regularly petitioned against the claims of the Catholics now opposed those of the Protestants. A petition to the House of Lords in April 1828 urged 'that all Political and Legislative Authority may continue vested solely in the hands of those who uphold and maintain the Doctrines and Articles of the Church of England.' Opinion at the Tabernacle would have followed that of the Protestant Society. Parliament moved swiftly and on 9 May 1828 a Bill replacing the objectionable sacramental test by a declaration to be made by *all* candidates for office 'On the true faith of a Christian' became law. This satisfied Protestants but gave no relief to the Jews. Kemp had supported Repeal but Sir John Shelley opposed it, rightly perceiving that it would open the way for Catholic emancipation. In spite of widespread protest in Sussex the Catholic Relief Act was passed in 1829.

The Tabernacle Building

The circumstances leading to the building of the Tabernacle are obscure. The site was acquired by Charles Wille as early as 1812, when he paid £425 to the Trustees in Bankruptcy of Joseph Goldsmith, builder, for two plots numbered 3 and 4 High Street (together roughly 60 feet wide and 100 feet deep) that had originally formed part of the Friars estate. It is unlikely that at that time he had any intention of using the land for a chapel: that idea was probably born soon after the victory over France, when Charles Wille, who was clearly a leading figure, offered the site for that purpose and the three others agreed to share the cost. The financial arrangements for the building must have been made about the same time.

The chapel was at the bottom end of the High Street, adjoining the counting house of Sir Henry Blackman, on the West side of what is now known as Railway Lane. On the opposite side of the street stood the building we know as the Dial House, then without its two wings and top floor, and probably without its dial. An iron gateway in a flint and brick wall gave access to an open space in front of the chapel, crossed by an unpaved path leading to the entrance. In the absence of a contemporary description of the chapel building, our picture of it must be uncertain. The following seems to fit the information that we have. It was a large but simple brick building, almost square in plan, with a slate roof. The picture of the north façade shown here is of the church after 1832, when the portico was added. The original building had a plain front, which may have had a porch, relieved by windows symmetrically placed, and above, set in the gable, was the stone tablet bearing the name of the chapel. Inside, doors on left and right of the vestibule below the gallery led to what the *Advertiser* described as 'a very pretty and uniform interior'. Its most prominent feature was the central pulpit, raised high on four pillars, where a large bible rested on a tasselled cushion of red velvet. The pulpit was reached by stairs on the right; immediately before it stood the communion table on which was a reading desk. Flanking the pulpit at the south end were two tall round-topped windows fitted with Venetian blinds to shield the eyes of the congregation from the sun. In each of



the east and west walls were matching smaller windows and a baize-covered door leading to a vestry. At the north end was the gallery. The plain walls were plastered and the ceiling, with a central cupola, was supported by three pairs of iron columns. High box pews were probably arranged around the pulpit and communion table, leaving a space at the rear of the chapel and in the gallery for the free benches, which comprised nearly half of the total seating accommodation. The chapel seems to have been typical of the more prosperous Independent chapels of the time; austere but not without elegance.

The responsibility for the building was left with Charles Wille. There is no record of the architect but one of the partners in the timber business of Wille and Co at that time was Amon Wilds, the Lewes builder and architect, who a few years later was to work with Charles Busby on the designs for Thomas Read Kemp's great new estate, Kemp Town, in Brighton. It is tempting to suppose that he was the architect of the Tabernacle. Another circumstance gives some colour to this suggestion. In October 1816, as the Tabernacle was nearing completion, Amon Wilds began work on the new chapel near the castle built for the new dissenting sect Kemp had founded with his brother-in-law. It seems likely that Amon Wilds was the obvious choice for such an undertaking.

What we know of the Lewes Tabernacle suggests that its founders thought it desirable to establish a chapel in keeping with the dignity of the county town, where the leading townspeople could feel at ease. It is noticeable that they achieved their purpose not by building a new chapel for the existing congregation at the Cliffe, but by severing their links with that chapel and making a completely fresh start, apparently looking for their model to chapels like those of Whitefield in London. It is perhaps significant that the name of Joseph Kerby, minister of Cliffe chapel, does not appear among those who conducted services at the Tabernacle, although some of his successors are listed.

In 1816 there were at least seven other dissenting chapels in Lewes and its immediate neighbourhood. With the exception of the Unitarian Westgate Meeting House, they were all on the fringe of the town or in side streets, and some were quite small. In contrast, the Tabernacle, an elegant if plain building, was in the High Street. As Horsfield put it: 'in an eligible situation in the borough, near the bridge.' Only a few steps away stood the Friars, 'one of the most distinguished houses in the town' at this time, where the judges resided during the Assizes.



The Friars

The report on the opening already quoted goes on to say, not without a touch of self-satisfaction: 'The building has been erected without any design to apply to the public to assist in discharging the expense. No collection was made at the opening. This is as it should be, when it is practicable.' This declares the social standing of those responsible for building the chapel, for it was common practice for a poorer congregation wishing to build a chapel to appeal for help to other congregations. One of the functions of the County Associations was to assist such 'begging cases.'

The name 'Lewes Tabernacle', with its allusion to Whitefield's Chapel or 'Tabernacle' in London, and the presence of his successors at the opening, firmly identified the chapel with mainstream Calvinistic Methodism. It is possible that the way in which the affairs of the Tabernacle were conducted owed something to the practice of its London counterparts. It seems unlikely, however, that such rigour was applied in Lewes, although, as we shall see later, the arrangements at the Tabernacle were designed to ensure that aims of the founders were achieved. It is worth noting that the sect formed by Kemp during his brief excursion into dissent 'attracted a certain amount of notoriety rather from the rank of its adherents than from any particular merit or novelty of its tenets.'

The year 1817 saw a number of important events, which were to set the pattern for the future of the Tabernacle. Although it will be necessary to refer to some of them in more detail later it is worth setting them out in order here.

29 January It was decided to establish a Sunday School at the Tabernacle for 'the gratuitous education and religious improvement of the children of the poor.' This is not surprising; Charles Wille had shown his interest in the Sunday School of some 200 children that already existed at the Cliffe Chapel.

20 April On this Sunday Revd Rowland Hill preached at the Tabernacle for the first time. His reputation drew 'a very crowded and respectable congregation,' including many members of the established church. In spite of his 72 years, Rowland Hill was still full of vigour and thought nothing of preaching six or seven sermons a week in addition to his other activities. He must have stayed in the neighbourhood for several days, for, on the following Wednesday, he preached at the Cliffe. His contact with the Tabernacle was to extend over a number of years, which suggests that he was held in special regard there. It also makes it likely that during this visit his advice was sought on the future of the chapel.

30 May At a second meeting of the Sunday School detailed 'Rules and Regulations' for the conduct of the school were approved. A printed notice, possibly a handbill advertising the Sunday School, is still in existence. It bears the manuscript note: 'Drawn up by the Rev Rowland Hill, AM [now written as MA]' Rowland Hill's interest in Sunday Schools has already been mentioned and it is clear that he was consulted about the Tabernacle school, possibly during his visit in the previous April. The new rules may well reflect his advice. The Tabernacle Sunday School grew rapidly: it had 250 children and 40 teachers by 1824. It was to be one of the great successes of the Tabernacle in the nineteenth century and subsequently, providing instruction for hundreds of children.

20 June The final accounts for the purchase of the chapel site and building and for the opening of the chapel were drawn up and agreed.

23 July A church was formally constituted at the Tabernacle. Sixteen members signed the roll and three deacons were chosen. The doctrinal basis could show the influence of Rowland Hill.

6 November A Juvenile Missionary Society was formed to raise funds for the London Missionary Society.

Church Life

John Hyatt, who had preached at the opening of the Tabernacle, returned to Lewes for a week in May 1817 and again for four weeks during July and August. On 23 July, at the Wednesday meeting, he presided at the formation of a church, another indication of the Tabernacle's close relationship with Whitefield's chapels in London. Until a church had been formed the sacrament of the Lord's Supper could not be observed. John Hyatt's teaching on the subject closely resembles that of the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession and Shorter Catechism*, which were also used by other Calvinistic bodies. 'God,' John Hyatt told the little company, 'is pleased through Christ to hold communion with us on earth,' yet indiscriminate admission to the Lord's Supper was unscriptural. The necessary condition was to discern the Lord's body, to understand why he suffered and to see him by faith as the only way of salvation, to know conviction of sin and to have a sincere desire and firm intention to live a life of faith in the Son of God in the world. No one should come to the Lord's Table without self-examination, after which each should be led by his

conscience. Nevertheless, the real Christian must come; for him it was not optional. There was such a thing as a sin of omission: 'Do this in remembrance of me' was Christ's command. 'May God give you grace to come to the Lord's Table,' he concluded, '...I shall now leave you with the most effective prayer for your spiritual prosperity. Though so small a number will celebrate the love of Christ I am encouraged by that assurance: "He will not despise the day of small things."'

The basis on which the church was formed was set out in the rules, inscribed at the beginning of the church roll book. They showed the Anglican origin and Calvinistic emphasis of Whitefield's Methodism.

Tabernacle
Lewes, Sussex 23rd July 1817

The following rules were agreed upon by the Church of Christ formed at the Tabernacle, Lewes, on the 23rd day of July 1817 to be observed in the admission of members to the said church:-

First, that no one be admitted a member of this Church whose religious principles are not conformable to the doctrinal articles of the Church of England, and the Assemblies Catechism, and whose moral character is not consistent with a profession of discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, That applicants for admission to the Church be named at a Church Meeting which shall be held once a month and that two male members of the Church be deputed to converse with such applicants on their religious experience, and to enquire into their character, who shall report the same, and if approved by the Church they shall be admitted at the following Church Meeting.

Thirdly, That if any charge of immorality or of anything inconsistent with Christian propriety be alleged against any member, two or more of the Deacons of the Church shall investigate the same, and if found to be true, such member shall be suspended from the Lord's Table till the Church shall think it right to readmit the said member to his or her former privilege of Church fellowship.

Fourthly, That if any member object to the admission of anyone who shall be proposed to the Church, that member shall assign the reason of his or her objection at a Church Meeting and immediate enquiry respecting the ground of the objection shall be made by two or more of the Deacons.

Fifthly, That no member of any other Christian Church be admitted into full communion with this Church who shall not obtain a regular dismissal from the Church with which the individual has been united unless the Church be satisfied that such dismissal be unjustly withheld.

Sixthly, That any member of a Christian Church holding the same fundamental doctrines which are held by this Church be admitted an occasional member upon producing a recommendation from the Church to which such person belongs.

Seventhly, That every Church Meeting commence and conclude with singing and prayers.

Eighthly, That no revision of, nor any addition to, these articles be allowed without the consent of a majority of the members of the Church.

We may suppose that at the same time the first deacons were elected. After the morning service on the following Sunday, 27 July, John Hyatt administered the sacrament to the newly formed church and sixteen members signed their names on the church roll in token of the covenant into which they had entered. The three deacons James Stonach, George Adams and Charles Wille signed first, followed by

George Wille	George Martin	Audrey Marchant Wimble
Thomas Smith	Thomas Lloyd	Mary Wille
Jane Mary Smith	Sarah Gravett	Mary Meane
John Harvey	Mary Nutley	Martha Adams
		Nehemiah Wimble.

A service of Holy Communion was held after the morning service on the first Sunday of each month. Only members of the church and those admitted as occasional members were allowed to participate. The layout of the chapel, similar to that of the Jireh Chapel, with the communion table below the pulpit and enclosed by a rail, within which pews are provided on each side and in front of the table, indicates that the communicants took the elements while seated around the table. Indeed, John Hyatt, in a sermon preached before the first celebration at the Tabernacle, referred to 'a few of our friends this morning who are coming forward to give themselves up to the Lord.' It appears that the practice of members receiving the sacrament sitting in their own pews had not yet become the rule.

The minister was probably assisted in the administration of the sacrament by two deacons. A pewter chalice crudely inscribed 'Tabernacle' that passed into the hands of Ringmer Chapel still exists. This may be part of the original communion set. In 1826 a more elaborate set of silver plate came into use: this comprised two plates, two chalices and a covered jug for wine [stolen in 2004]; '2 bottles of port for ordinance' is one of several similar entries in the accounts.



A collection, probably a retiring collection, was taken at the communion service for the benefit of needy members of the congregation. Attendance at the Lord's Table was regarded as obligatory for church members and continued absence without good reason could lead to the suspension of membership.

The expenses of opening and maintaining the chapel to the end of 1816 were added to the cost of the building. Thereafter funds were raised, as was customary, by subscriptions for pews and by quarterly collections augmented by the rent for the slate yard.

Frequent collections were not popular and were presumably taken to allow the poorer members of the congregation to contribute. Special candle collections were taken on two Sundays during the winter, usually in November and February, to provide lighting. Money for special purposes was obtained by special subscriptions or collections.

On 20 June 1817 the final accounts for the site and for the building etc were drawn up. The price paid to Charles Wille for the site was £490. Nehemiah Wimble had erected a wall at the rear at a cost of £35, making a total of £525. Towards the payment of this George Adams gave £75 and the other three £150 each. No formal conveyance of the land was executed. A statement, signed by the four founders and witnessed by John Jones and the wine-merchant and brewery-owner John Harvey, forming part of the account for the site, shows that the money, 'being the amount of the Ground for Building the Lewes Tabernacle upon' was given 'upon condition the same shall be conveyed, and put in such Trust' as the founders or a majority of them 'shall think advisable on the best Plan to secure the Gospel of Christ to be continued to be

preached there for ever.' Charles Wille bound himself to execute such conveyance in law when called upon to do so, but he died before this was done.

The cost of the building and all expenses to the end of 1816 amounted to £1761.14.6 'which sum was advanced by George Wille Snr, Charles Wille and Nehemiah Wimble in equal proportion as a Debt on the Chapel, with interest to commence from 20 June' A statement to this effect formed part of this account and was signed and witnessed by the four founders and the two witnesses as before.

These accounts and the attached statements show the founders' intentions at a time when the Tabernacle had no legal identity: the land was to be a gift to the future church; the contributions to the cost of the building were sums to be recovered with interest at some future date. The documents also show the claim of the various individuals on the Tabernacle property viz the building erected by Charles Wille on land held in his own name.

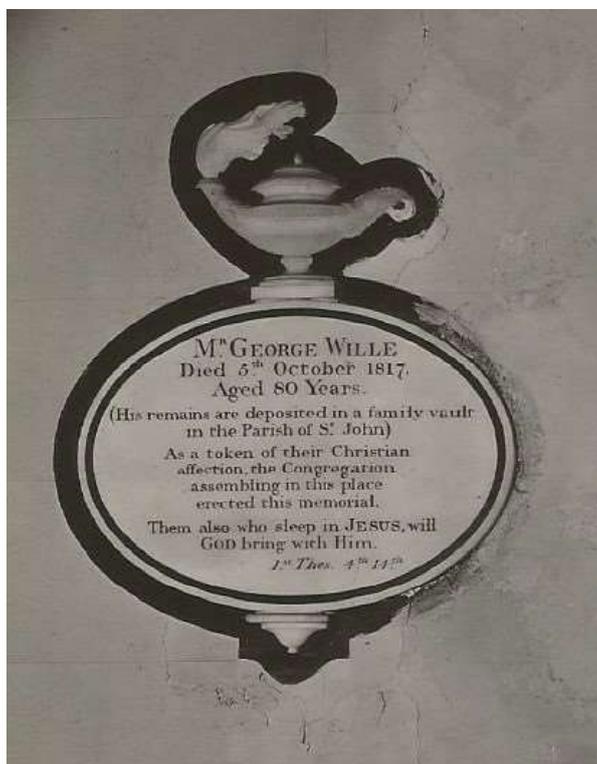
From the outset, the Tabernacle drew good congregations, justifying the optimism of its founders. This is shown by the list of subscribers. In 1817 there were 130 subscribers, who, with their families probably represent at least twice that number in the congregation. By the end of 1828 the number of subscribers had risen slightly to 140, although a comparison of the lists showed that many changes had taken place in the meantime. The local tradesmen whose names appear on the lists during this period include William Attwood, ironmonger and partner of Nehemiah Wimble; John Baxter, the printer; Charles Boore, cabinet maker; the two Thomas Bryants, father and son, whitesmiths; William English, cutler (whose shop in the Cliffe gave its name to English's passage); the Inglis brothers, saddlers; Reuben Lower, stationer; and Venus the butcher in the Cliffe. There was Thomas Dicker, one of the partners in the Old Bank; and William Boys, John Button and James Tracy Dunn, all proprietors of private schools. It was at John Button's Classical Academy in the Cliffe that Dr Gideon Mantell was educated. No doubt many of the free seats in the chapel were occupied by the journeymen and workmen, apprentices and servants of the subscribers.

Church members formed only a small part of the congregation. Twenty-four joined the church in 1817; by the end of 1828, 74 had joined. Allowing for

deletions from the roll (not always dated) the 1828 membership could not have exceeded 60. Although there were many willing to support the chapel and its work, only a few would accept the obligations of church membership.

Among the subscribers in 1817 was John Morris of Wellingham and later of Ryders Wells on the Uckfield Road. With his second wife Ann he joined the church in July 1818. Several of the children also became church members, in particular Frances (1819) and Arthur (1822).

During the next few years a number of unrelated events occurred that were to influence the Tabernacle for several decades. On Sunday 5 October 1817,



George Wille died, leaving to his grandson, Charles Wille Jnr, his share of the timber business in South Street. On the day his grandfather died, Charles Wille was still in Guildford, 'Sabbath breaking', as he later confessed, but in December he returned to Lewes to join the timber business under the guardianship of his father. In March 1820, when Amon Wilds withdrew from the partnership, the name of the business was changed to Wille and Son and in due course Charles Jnr took over the management. In 1820 Charles Wille's daughter (Charles Jnr's elder sister), Mary Ann Cooper Wille, married James Berry, a young architect, The

bridegroom's family seem to have been attending Jireh Chapel. In September 1822, Frances Morris married Charles Wille Jnr. Although his wife was already a church member, Charles Jnr. did not join the church until 1825. About the same time, Sarah Button married George Adam's son John and both became church members in 1823. Finally, in April 1824, Elizabeth Penfold married Arthur Morris, grocer, of the Cliffe.

Church membership required regular attendance at chapel and at Holy Communion. Failure to attend or behaviour considered inconsistent with a Christian profession could lead to the loss of privileges of membership, temporarily or permanently. The Tabernacle was not alone in enforcing a code

of discipline. The early minutes of Cliffe Chapel and of the Particular Baptists also record details of various kinds of misconduct by members leading to suspension. It is noticeable that there were no suspensions recorded at the Tabernacle until 1829, although there were a number in later years. This perhaps reflects the dedication of the early members. An example of church discipline in 1817, which is not without a touch of irony, comes from the minutes of the Particular Baptists, then meeting in Foundry Lane.

John Stone had been a member of Cliffe Chapel for 15 years, when, towards the end of 1817, it was noticed that he had been absent from its services for some time. Upon enquiry it was learnt 'that it was not out of any disrespect to the Church that he did not fill up his place as a Church Member, but being poor and out of work at the time he accepted the offer made to him to be a pew opener at the Tabernacle....' Following a visit from two brethren appointed by the church meeting, Mr Stone decided to return to take his place at the church, leaving a vacancy for a pew opener at the Tabernacle.

It appears that no minutes of church meetings were kept at this time or for many years afterwards. This is significant and fits very well the circumstances as we know them. The church rules were concerned almost entirely with membership matters and decisions could be recorded in the church roll book. This is, in fact, what the roll book shows: the names of members and occasional members, dates of death or leaving the chapel (although these were not always complete), dates of suspension of membership and of readmission. It also records the names of those elected as deacons. The business of the church meeting was confined to these matters; all the other affairs of the chapel were handled by the managers. Although it was an Independent chapel, the Tabernacle [business] does not appear to have been conducted on strictly Congregational principles.

The first deacons were James Stronach, a Scot who earned his living as a gardener, Charles Wille and George Adams. At the end of 1817 there were 24 church members (13 women) so the influence of the managers in the church meeting was considerable. Whether they consulted the church on general matters we cannot tell. As they were proprietors of the chapel it seems safe to assume that they allocated the offices of secretary and treasurer amongst themselves. We know from the accounts that Nehemiah Wimble was treasurer for many years and there are indications that Charles Wille acted as secretary. The dominant role of the managers is demonstrated in a newspaper report of

June 1825: 'On Sunday the 22nd of May, two sermons were preached at Lewes Tabernacle, by the Rev Dr Belfrage of Falkirk, Scotland, for the benefit of the Irish Evangelical Society, when the collection amounted to £26. We are happy to see this cause so laudably taken in hand by the managers of the Tabernacle, who are always ready to promote the best interests of society, and set an example which we wish to see generally imitated.'

Another apparent gap in the records is information about any meetings of the managers. We must suppose that their decisions were reached informally and that the chapel accounts were regarded as a sufficient record of their activities, although they could never cover them all.

A clerk seems to have been employed to prepare the accounts after the close of each year. They give details that illuminate the domestic life of the Tabernacle in its early years, a few of which have already been mentioned. They identify the pew openers, John Beech and William Taylor, and show William Taylor and his wife 'going round' to collect subscriptions. We see Mrs Taylor and Mrs Punker cleaning the chapel with hartshorn [ammonia] and turpentine. An entry in 1822 for a shilling 'lost on light guinea' is a reminder that even gold currency presented problems.

In 1818 a number of finishing touches were made to the premises. Inside plaster cornices were added to the big windows behind the pulpit, the walls were coloured, another pew was installed, backs were added to the free pews, and carpet was laid on the pulpit stairs. Outside the walls were cemented to prevent damp, paving was laid and an oil lamp placed over the iron gate. Most of the money was raised by a special subscription. In 1824 the oil lamp was replaced by a gas lamp.

Sunday Services

The services at the Tabernacle were as follows.

- Sundays Sunday School 9.30-10.30
- Morning Service 10.45, followed by Communion on the first Sunday of the month
- Afternoon Sunday School 2.30
- Weekdays Monday evening Prayer Meeting

Wednesday Bible lecture
Friday Church Meeting (once a month)
Tuesday and Thursday Sunday School writing classes
7-8 pm in winter, 8-9 pm in summer.

For many years there was no regular minister. Revd John Bishop, Sussex-based agent of the recently established Home Missionary Society, seems to have been associated with the congregation in the early 1820s. The pulpit was supplied, and baptisms were conducted, by visiting ministers, many of them from London, who stayed for several weeks and carried out all the duties of a minister during that time. Usually men of some reputation, with churches of their own, they included the well-known preacher and writer Revd Dr John Leifchild of Hornton Street church in Kensington and Revd Dr John Styles of Union Chapel in Brighton. Some returned year after year. To avoid too frequent repetition texts used in services were recorded in a Text Book. The experience of John Hyatt at the opening showed that this was necessary. The pattern was varied from time to time when there were deputations from bodies such as the Irish Evangelical Society and the Moravian Mission. Lodgings had to be provided for these ministers. At first these were at the house of Mrs Massey, opposite the chapel. It is plain that her guests were well looked after. According to the taste of the visitor items such as rum, brandy, gin, port, madeira, current wine, tobacco, pipes, peppermints and even slippers were charged to church accounts. These were days before total abstinence became an issue, and also before central heating. It was the custom of the time to give the preacher a glass of wine in the vestry after the service. He probably needed it after a service in a cold church.

In contrast to Methodist sermons, which tended to be long, emotional and popular in style, those at the Tabernacle reflected Calvinistic theology in the manner of Whitefield. The sermons preached in Lewes by John Hyatt were taken down by one of his admirers and transcribed, apparently in an abridged form, in an exercise book that survives. Their emphasis is on personal piety and separation from the evils of the world. There are hardly any references to particular events; but it is possible to make one interesting comparison.

Despite his actively Methodist father Dr Gideon Mantell was not himself a frequent churchgoer, though he and Mrs Mantell had been known to go to the evening service at the Tabernacle, which he described approvingly as a 'neat

dissenting chapel with an Ionic façade.’ On 10 August 1820, he gleefully wrote in his diary: ‘Our races began this day; the weather was very favourable; I walked up with my sister-in-law Miss Woodhouse. There are an immense concourse of people; and upwards of 500 vehicles of different description; the most attractive novelties were some elegant booths fitted up in a most luxurious style each having bands of musicians.’ But three days later, at the evening service at the Tabernacle, John Hyatt preached on the text: ‘For the love of Christ constraineth us’ (2 Cor 5:14). ‘Every Christian’, he declared, ‘can give a reason for the hope that is in him; why did you not go to the race ground in the week, and to the theatre at night (that sink of iniquity, that antichamber of hell)? Because the love of Christ constrained you.’ He concluded: ‘In proportion as we feel the love of Christ in our hearts we shall be zealous in promoting the honour of Christ.’ For John Hyatt, as for John Bunyan, such diversions belonged to Vanity Fair. The old Puritan hostility to secular amusements and the theatre in particular continued well into the nineteenth century. Popular preachers could not resist associating the theatre with the pit of hell.

In these early days the nearest approach to social occasion took place on the afternoon of Good Friday, when for many years it was the custom for the children of the Sunday School to be given a treat at the Bear Inn (sited on the opposite side of the river). The treat consisted of a glass of wine and a piece of cake. After the children had gone the teachers and their friends sat down to tea and enjoyed a social evening. These gatherings were quite large. The singers and their wives were from time to time given a supper at the house of one of the more prosperous members of the congregation.

It is tantalising that little information about the services at the Tabernacle has survived, for worship and the preaching of the gospel were the prime reasons for its existence. By putting together material from various sources it is possible to obtain a general picture.

Dr Horton Davies describes the typical dissenting meeting house as ‘gloomy beyond imagination’. He seems to be referring to mood rather than absence of light. Certainly, the interior of the Tabernacle, however elegant in design, was free of embellishments that might draw the mind of the worshipper away from heavenly things. The one prominent splash of colour, the large crimson cushion supporting the pulpit bible, was a pointer to the source of divine truth. The drab

box pews, which like little private chapels separated subscribers from the occupants of the free pews, did not contribute to the warmth of fellowship.

One hymn book was provided for the pulpit at the outset. This was *Psalms and Hymns* by Isaac Watts, the basis of many future collections such as The Congregational Hymnbook (1836). Watt's hymns are still well represented in the current United Reformed Church hymnbook *Rejoice and Sing* and the recent Methodist hymnbook *Singing the Faith*, both in use today in Christ Church Lewes, the 1950s building that replaced the Tabernacle. There was to begin with no accompaniment to the singing, which was led by a group of singers directed for many years by a local musician, Thomas Goldsmith, who gave the note on a pitch pipe. From the practice of a few years later it is safe to assume that during this period the words of the hymns were read out, line by line, for the benefit of those members of the congregation without a hymn book or unable to read, by a clerk at a desk below the pulpit. Circumstances did not encourage good congregational singing and it appears that not everyone took part or even stood to sing. But by mid-century an organ had been installed (it was remodelled in 1880), and this supported not just hymn-singing but also chanted psalms and canticles.

The central position of the pulpit signified the importance of the sermon, the preaching of the word, in dissenting worship. Four books of sermons were kept at the Tabernacle, from which a sermon could be read in an emergency. There is no doubt that sermons, like prayers, were long; an hour was not unusual for a sermon and the long prayer could last for half an hour. Some people evidently thought sermons too long. A rueful comment appeared in an epigram in the *Advertiser* for 20 February 1826:

Some churchgoing folk, in full chat t'other day
With looks as devout as mock penitent sinners,
Of long sermons complained, and of time preached away
Lamenting the loss of their piping hot dinners.

Appreciated or not, the preacher deserved his glass of wine. When he rose to preach in his voluminous black gown, white cambric bands at his neck, he was like a prophet who could say, with unquestioning confidence in the authority of scripture: 'Thus says the Lord'. He knew his duty. No doubt he still held to the traditional Calvinistic doctrines of Original Sin, Election and the Final Perseverance of the Saints; but the influence of the Revival brought a gradual change of emphasis.

The biographer of Rowland Hill tells us that 'In his theological opinions Mr Roland Hill leaned towards the tenets of Calvin, but what was called Hyper-Calvinism he could not endure. In a system of doctrine he was the follower of no man, but drew his sermons fresh from a prayerful reading of the Bible....' Again 'The term *particular redemption* in opposition to *universal redemption* was never used by Mr Hill. He offered Christ freely to all, telling them at the same time, that by nature the withered hand of man was unable to receive the gift of salvation, until restored by his power who commanded him to stretch it forth.' He approved of the advice given to his students by Dr John Rylands, President of Bristol Baptist College from 1793 until 1825: 'Mind, no sermon is of any value, or likely to be useful, which has not the three Rs in it - Ruin by the Fall - Redemption by Christ - Regeneration by the Holy Spirit.' The Victorian Congregationalist preacher R W Dale of Birmingham describes the change: 'The old Calvinist phrases, the old Calvinist definitions, were still on the lips of Independents when George III died; but in spirit and tendency of their theology they were Calvinist no longer.'

From an early date a Text Book was used to record the names of the preachers at each service and the passage of scripture expounded. It was no doubt a benefit to both minister and congregation and prevented a repetition of John Hyatt's unfortunate experience at the opening. The practice of reading sermons was falling out of use, perhaps because it was not adapted to the more direct emotional style of the evangelical preacher. Some idea of the development of the sort of sermon that might have been given at the Tabernacle can be obtained from a summary of 'A Funeral Sermon, occasioned by the Much Lamented Death of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte of Wales, preached at the Old Chapel Cliffe, Lewes, Sussex. Lord's Day Evening, November 16 1817 by its Calvinistic Methodist minister Joseph Kerby UDM. [standing for *Verbi Dei Minister*, Minister of the Word of God, implying rather uncharitably that some minister were not!] The Princess who was the daughter of George IV and the ill-used Queen Charlotte died following the birth of her child. The sermon was subsequently printed.

An impression of a Sunday evening service at the Tabernacle is given by Revd Edward Boys Ellman in *Recollections of a Sussex parson*. Writing of his boyhood in the 1820s he says

‘About this time I remember my uncle Revd James Boys, coming to stay with us before going out to India. On the Sunday he was very much surprised to learn that there was no evening service in any Lewes church. My father told him there was an evening service at a place called the ‘Tabernacle’. My uncle thought he would like to attend, and that being a stranger in Lewes, if he disguised himself he might find out what kind of service there was at a dissenting chapel. So my uncle put on a brown greatcoat of my father’s with a bright coloured shawl round his neck, and attended the service. He afterwards said he was certainly not edified thereby, and when the sermon, which was very long and prosy, began he felt inclined to doze off to sleep - but was aroused by the words “The light of the gospel is a very good thing” - which he said was the only sensible thing in the sermon - “but as we cannot have the light of the gospel without the light of candles, there will a collection after the service,” continued the preacher, so my uncle slipped out.’

Apart from this any picture of the services must be built up from miscellaneous information and hints scattered amongst the records and from our knowledge of the practice of other chapels of a similar character. The Tabernacle appears to have been very conservative in its habits so such material can be used with some confidence.

A question that cannot be answered with complete certainty is whether use was made of the Church of England liturgy. In chapels of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion the Prayer Book continued to be used even when their ministers had ceased to be episcopally ordained. The Anglican liturgy was used regularly at Whitefield’s chapel in London. Rowland Hill, himself a maverick kind of Anglican, who had taken deacon’s orders in the Church of England, favoured its use, although he did not insist on its use in the chapels that he founded. It was still being used at Surrey Chapel late in the century. Eric Gill, the sculptor, recalls its use in the 1890s at the Countess of Huntingdon’s chapel in North Street Brighton, where his father was assistant minister. These late examples were probably exceptional for, according to Dr Elliott Binns, by the end of the 18th century ‘though the Prayer Book was in use in Tottenham Court Road Chapel, it had fallen out of favour in most other chapels.

In view of the origin of the Tabernacle and its early association with the ministers of Whitefield’s chapel and of Surrey Chapel, it is not impossible that its services were based upon the Book of Common Prayer. There is however no positive evidence and such hints as there are seem to suggest otherwise. Revd James Boys would surely have taken a more favourable view of the service he

attended if the Prayer Book had been used. The evangelical revival seems to have found a response in Lewes amongst the representatives of Old Dissent, the Presbyterians and the General Baptists, in whose chapels views similar to those of Unitarians were gaining ground. It seems likely therefore that in the chapels they built they used forms of worship to which they were accustomed, with little or no reference to the Prayer Book, as that was associated with a different tradition.

The normal Sunday service at the Tabernacle included the singing of psalms or hymns, bible reading, prayer (probably extempore) and a sermon. The order of service was probably similar to that used at the Bury Street Independent Meeting in London:

Sung psalm
Short prayer desiring Divine Presence
Half hour exposition of scripture
Psalm or hymn
Minister prays more at large
Sermon
Short prayer
Benediction.

At the Tabernacle three psalms or hymns were sung, taken from Dr Watts' *Psalms and Hymns* or, more rarely, from the Countess of Huntingdon's Collection.

Some of the verse paraphrases are still in use. e.g.

Ps 100	Before Jehovah's awful throne
146	I'll praise my maker while I've breath
103	My soul repeat his praise
84	Lord of the worlds above
19	The heavens declare thy glory, Lord
92	Sweet is the work, my God, my King

This account is continued in Cliff Geering *The Tabernacle 1829-1864*, Christ Church Lewes, 2016.

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