

Pett Methodist Chapel 1848 - 2023



An Illustrated History

A 175th anniversary is an important moment in the life of a church, and we have reached that milestone in the life of Pett Methodist Church in 2023. This booklet gives us insights into the story of Pett Methodist Church from its beginnings to today. The early origins of the Chapel were within the Bible Christian movement, which is unusual in East Sussex, as the Bible Christian strand of Methodism is rooted in the West Country - you will have to read on in order to find out why this is the case! Since its beginnings, rooted in the Methodist Christian traditions of Preaching, Pastoral care and Social Action, members of the chapel at Pett have explored how faith and life interact and this is something which continues to this day.

Through the years the way of sharing faith in our communities has changed as society has changed and ways of approach to God have developed. One of Charles Wesley's hymns has the line, 'To serve the present age, my calling to fulfil'. The folk at Pett Chapel have embraced these changes over the years and continue to seek ways of discovering and sharing the way of the Christian faith in the Methodist tradition for today.

I would like to offer my congratulations to the members and friends of Pett Methodist Church on this important Anniversary and end with words of another hymn, often used on these occasions. The hymn writer Joseph Hart from the 18th century, in talking of the providence and presence of God, gives us these words which remain applicable to us today.

'We'll praise him for all that is past
And trust him for all that's to come.'

May God's blessing, hope, light and peace be with us all as we continue our pilgrimage of life and faith in Pett Chapel and in the communities and churches around us.

Philip

Rev Philip Wagstaff

Minister, Pett Methodist Church

Superintendent Minister Hastings, Bexhill and Rye Methodist Circuit

*Cover picture: The earliest photograph that we have of the chapel,
probably taken towards the end of the 19th century.*

18th CENTURY PETT.

A village in need of the Gospel

The earliest reference to the Manor of Pett dates back to the 12th century when the area was very rural and sparsely populated. Situated on a ridge running East to West, the ground slopes down to the sea at Pett Level, where an area of marshland meets steep or sheer cliffs.



By 1538, the estate was in the hands of the Thatcher family, who practised the Catholic faith. The current Parish Church of St Mary and St Peter was built in 1864, replacing an earlier church. The date of that church is unclear, but records and remains suggest that there could have been a place of worship of some sort on the site as early as the 11th century.

Despite this apparently strong Christian presence, lawlessness was rife in the area during the early/mid-19th century. Aided, no doubt, by the rugged terrain, smuggling seems to have been a popular local pastime. The coastguards were quite inept at dealing with the problem, mostly preferring to turn a blind eye. So, coastguards from the distant West Country were drafted in to deal more vigorously with illicit trading.



Many of these new arrivals were Methodists who belonged to the Bible Christians, who trace their origins to Devon, and one William O'Bryan (1778-1868), a local preacher in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Finding many of the villages of Devon and Cornwall in almost complete ignorance of the Gospel, he extended his own very successful evangelism beyond the limits of his own Circuit. In the conflict with the local Wesleyan authorities which ensued, O'Bryan, not without hesitation and regret, separated himself, and in 1815 he founded the first society of a new community at the village of Shebbear in Devon.



Shebbear Methodist Chapel,
birthplace of the Bible Christian
movement.

Although faced by much opposition and persecution, the new movement spread rapidly. At the end of the first year there were 567 members, and after only five years of work in the West, missionaries were sent to London, Kent, and Sussex. The Bible Christians held the doctrines common to all the branches of Methodism and placed the Bible and preaching very much at the centre of life and worship.



Billy Bray

One of their greatest pioneers was Billy Bray, tin miner and reformed drunkard, whose simple and no-nonsense application of biblical principles won him an enduring reputation. It is said that, when challenged about his enthusiastic singing and shouting, he would respond thus; "If they were to put me in a barrel, I would shout glory out through the bunghole. Praise the Lord!"

The first Bible Christian evangelist known of in Pett was a Cornish coastguard named Matthews, stationed at Cliff End. He was a fervent member of the Bible Christians and, with the help of others, built a strong group of enthusiastic worshippers.

It is easy to fail to appreciate just what a great endeavour it was back in the mid-1800s to move far from home and start a new life. The journey from Devon would have taken several days on foot or on horseback, with probably only the most essential possessions piled onto a cart. It is also unlikely that they would know much about their destination, so this really was a leap of faith into the unknown. However, as we shall see, such difficulties did not deter these faithful people from their mission.

“Class tickets” issued prove that the Bible Christians in Pett were operating on organised lines by 1847, and it is understood that they originally worshipped in Barden’s Forge.



*Barden’s Forge, the original meeting place for the Bible Christians in Pett.
The Two Sawyers can be seen in the background.*



As time went by, they grew in numbers and, on 30th May 1848 purchased a piece of land measuring eleven and a half 'perches' for the sum of £10. The chapel here in Pett was completed and opened in 1848. It was officially registered as a place of dissenting worship on 7th March 1849, and registered for marriages in 1852.

The original trustees were George and Richard Griffen, Thomas and Spencer Davis, Charles Beeching, William Cloke and James Foster, who could not sign his name, but made his mark with a simple cross.





The original chapel, named Mount Calvary Bible Christians Chapel, and now used as the church hall, was built at the western extremity of the plot, leaving room to the east for a small cemetery.

Right next to the chapel lies the grave of Delias Down, presumably one of the original settlers as the gravestone indicates that she originated from the Scilly Isles. She married Richard Down, an early Bible Christian minister, in 1864, and sadly died less than a year later, following the birth of Emily, who herself died at the age of just 17 days.

One of the earliest members was Joshua Foster, son of the aforementioned James. Born in 1829 at Barden's Forge, he had already turned to religion and to the Bible Christians by the time that the chapel was built. In 1852, aged just 22, he became an itinerant local preacher, travelling extensively across the south of England and, in 1853, was appointed as a minister in the Shanklin circuit on the Isle of Wight.

It was here that he met Harriet Rayner, then 16 years of age. They married on 8th August 1856 and, just twelve days later, set sail from Liverpool aboard the clipper "White Star" on a journey of some 5 months or so to Australia, where Joshua had been posted as a missionary. One must admire the zeal and determination of these early Bible Christian pioneers.



In 1907, the Bible Christian denomination was merged into the United Methodist Church. Ahead of the merger, new trustees were appointed at a special meeting on 8th May 1906, as every one of the original 1848 trustees had died.

One of the new trustees was Richard Scrase Moon, who was described as a Temperance Hotel Keeper. This reflects the power of the local squires, the Shadwell family, who were able to impose their temperance principles on the entire village.

The hotel in question is now the Royal Oak Inn, where children once went to buy sweets. To enjoy a pint in those days, villagers had to trek down to Pett Level.



Teetotalism is a discipline often associated with Methodists, so it is interesting to note that such observance was not a condition ever imposed by Mr. Wesley himself, although he did warn against the dangers of gambling and drinking. The Methodist Church became involved in the Temperance Movement as a response to the problem of alcohol abuse prevalent around the late Victorian period. The rules were relaxed in 1987 (to the great delight of many) but members are still expected to drink only in moderation, and the sale or consumption of alcohol is still not permitted within Methodist premises.

Other trustees mentioned in the 1906 document emphasise the importance of farming in and around Pett at that time. Surnames such as Merricks and Dunlop are still well known in the local farming community, and we have a picture of Charles Griffen (known as Henry) working in the fields.



The next picture, thought to be from around the same period, shows sisters Ruth and Rosina Griffen in the doorway of the chapel, while the distinguished looking lady below was known as “Chapel Granny” because she never missed an event.



We Will Remember Them

Between 1914 and 1919 Pett, like every other community in Britain, saw many of its young men go off to war. A memorial inside the chapel honours the memory of 17 such young men who gave their lives as the ultimate sacrifice in that conflict. The first lost his life within weeks of the outbreak of war, the last five months after it ended, as a result of his wounds.





It is important, from time to time, to think of these entries, not just as names, but as sons, brothers, husbands and fathers. Each entry here records one life lost and others changed forever, as this letter from Signalman Bernard Foster illustrates. It was written in 1918, only days before his death, and sent to his daughter, Mary, then aged 4.

Monday Sep 9th
 My own Dear little Mary today it
 is your birthday and Daddie sends you
 a little letter wishing you many happy
 returns of the day and I trust I may
 that you may be spared to see many
 more and Daddie prays that before
 another birthday comes he may be
 with you all again and the awful
 war finished. Daddie has so long
 to be with little Mary again and
 I know you want to see Daddie
 again. You must get Mamma to
 send this to you & I sending her
 a few lines with Yours. I hope you
 will have a happy birthday and
 may God Bless you and soon bring
 me back to you again. With love
 and kisses from Daddie x x x x x
 x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x

Children have always been important in the life of Pett Methodist Church and, for many years, a highlight of the year was the Sunday School outing.

In the early years, it seems that Winchelsea Beach was a popular destination and, while making such a journey on foot would not be considered unreasonable (except perhaps for children with very short legs), the prospect of descending the precipitous Chick Hill in a horse-drawn wagon must have been a great draw. We can't be certain, but this



could well be the wagon used for the journey.



Later on, more ambitious journeys were possible. Here we see (left to right) Charles Foster, Len Coomber and William Cloke during a trip to Guildford in 1935.

Another picture (date unknown but certainly post WWII) shows leaders Dorothy Brooker, Charles Cooke and Mrs. Coomber.



And, just to prove that children were allowed too, here are some of them, date and destination unknown.

The Post-War Years

After the World Wars, the nature of the village gradually changed to become more of a dormitory and residential centre. This was reflected in the life of the church. New trustees in 1949 were mainly people from elsewhere in the local Methodist circuit.

The only representative of the original village families was Charles Thomas Cooke, and the church building as we know it today stands largely due to the generosity of the Cooke and Griffen families.

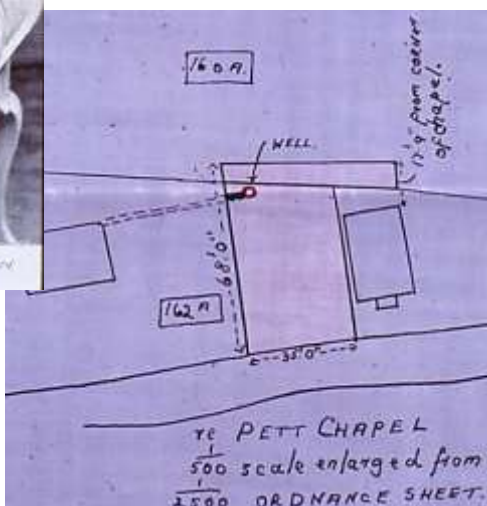
In 1950, Mrs. Anne Cooke, who lived in the bungalow next to the chapel and was affectionately known as "Cis", gave £50 to the

church in memory of her brother, Percy Griffen. Subsequently, on the death of Charles Griffen, and in accordance with the wishes expressed in his will, Mrs. Cooke and her sister, Mrs. Davis, gave the church a plot of land to facilitate the building of an extension.



MRS. COOKE. FORMERLY ANNE GRIFFEN

Since the plot included a well, arrangements had to be made for a new water supply to the neighbouring property.



Initial plans for a new schoolroom costing £1,000 soon became plans for a new chapel with a budget of £2,500. Grants from the circuit, the Rank Trust, and the Isabel Blackman Foundation, along with local fund-raising, helped achieve the target.

The old building was retiled to match the new, and the cost of seating was reduced by transferring some of the pews from the original chapel. To meet the budget, however, one small sacrifice had to be made: the new church is three feet six inches shorter than originally planned.

An opening service took place at 4.00pm on Wednesday, 29th August 1956. Mr. R.E. Burstow, the architect, handed the keys to Miss Isabel Blackman to perform the opening ceremony, after which a service of celebration was led by Rev H Crowson Muncey, the District Chairman of the Methodist Church.



PETT
METHODIST CHURCH

Opening Services

Wednesday, 29th August, 1956





As more people moved into the village and began attending the church, the 1960s saw further building work. A new schoolroom was added to the north side of the premises, at a cost of £1,400. The opening and dedication took place on Saturday, 25th January 1969. Even with this addition, during the 1970s the lively junior church filled every room in the building!



Lasting Reminders

Over the years, many individuals, far too many to mention by name, have left their mark on this chapel and added to its legacy to the local community. Some, however, have left a physical reminder and, as you look around the building, you will find items, each representing a gift of skill and artistry, and each given with love and gratitude.



Taking centre stage over the sanctuary area, a stained-glass cross by Alice Wilcock combines light and movement in a way that never fails to lift the spirit.

Look down a little, and you will find a carving in wood of the Good Shepherd. This is the work of artist and poet Geoffrey Etherington, whose wife, Muriel, was a leading figure in the Sunday School at its peak during the 1960s.

‘A cantankerous old bugger’

For many years, Bernard Kemp fiercely resisted anything to do with Church, which he regarded as an instrument of domination, manipulation and oppression. It was as a result of bereavement, leading to a friendship with the Wilcock family, that his views began to change, and he subsequently married Pen Wilcock, who was the minister at Pett at that time.

At Pett, he felt welcome, comfortable and included, and the cross that now hangs behind the pulpit was his way of expressing gratitude for that acceptance.

This was the last large piece of work that Bernard completed before his death in 2004.

Bernard died at peace, blessed by the presence of Christ in his heart: but this might not have been the case if he had not been welcomed, just as he was, ‘a cantankerous old bugger’ as he used to say, here in this chapel at Pett.





The Chapel

Here, nothing is broken
For this is not a mighty temple
Full of awe and fear
But God's humble home

Here, nothing is broken
It's a friendly space
Where strangers are welcomed
And the singing cheerful

Here, nothing is broken
No crumbling spires or ancient naves
No hallowed halls or hollow ceremony
Just a simple chapel, clean, well kept

Here, nothing is broken
For when things go wrong
Humour, skill and common sense
Solve problems in time for a cup of tea

Here, nothing is broken
For love runs through it all
Like letters in a stick of rock
Touching everyone

Here, nothing is broken
It's a human place
Where you can be yourself
And even God wears carpet slippers

Brenda Desborough 31/05/09

Grit and Determination

Alas, at least in terms of attendance, the 1960s/70s marked the high point of the chapel's history. By the mid-80s, work with children had ceased, services had decreased to fortnightly, and parts of the building were in urgent need of attention. Church membership fell so low that closure seemed almost inevitable.

However, a faithful few refused to give up and, under the leadership of Rev Godfrey Johns, a working party was assembled to give the drab church hall a much-needed facelift. Materials were donated, equipment loaned, and the hall was transformed amid much singing and merriment. This, almost miraculous, achievement appears to have been something of a catalyst for further revival.

It was shortly after this that Wendy and Ken Hatch, having felt a call at Easter People, moved with their family from Calvert Methodist Church with a vision of re-establishing work with youth in the village.

Unbeknown to Wendy, members at the Parish Church were also attempting to address a similar issue, but they had no suitable building to meet in. Working together was the obvious solution to the problem, and in July 1990, the Pett Village Junior Church was born.

There followed a very fruitful few years, both in terms of youth work including junior church on Sunday, a youth club and a parent/toddler group, and increased co-operation between the Christian community in Pett.





Another fruitful collaboration , and one which persists to this day, is with our friends at the Pett Level Independent Rescue Boat Association.

This team of dedicated volunteers give freely of their time and energy, to keep beach-goers safe and to rescue those who get into trouble, sometimes at considerable risk to their own safety.



Since the 1990s, along with our Anglican friends, we have been supporting the crew especially around Sea Sunday, which is marked every year in July with a special service to offer thanks for their work, and prayers for their safety.



In the early years, they would bring the inflatable life-boat to the church for a blessing, but our practice now is to take the service to them, holding it, whenever possible, in the open air to encourage passers-by to join in.

In recent years, what the Pett chapel has lacked in numbers, it has more than made up for with enthusiasm and innovation.

A major refurbishment of our premises in 2008 has resulted in a much cosier and more welcoming space.



Top left - Pews removed and stacked

Top right - An old pew re-fashioned into a garden bench

Centre - New comfy chairs

Left - Curing the squeaks

Though small in number, this worshipping community has produced one ordained minister and five accredited worship leaders.

Within the membership, there exists an abundance of musical talent, both vocal and instrumental, whose creative output has reached far and wide.

We have also led the way locally in embracing technology. This started with the installation of a screen and data projector, opening up new possibilities for worship with text, images and video.



We were the first church locally to design and build our own website and subsequently, the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown led us to experiment with different forms of online worship. Together, these innovations have allowed us to vary our forms of worship and present the unchanging Good News of Jesus in interesting, relevant, and challenging ways.



Neither have our efforts been confined to the walls of the chapel.

Our annual Carols In The Barn event, kindly hosted for us by Tim and Anne Jury at Pickham Farm, has become a popular fixture of the advent season, attracting wide support from the local community and raising valuable funds for the charity Farm Africa.

Members have been instrumental in establishing a much-needed youth club in neighbouring Fairlight, a



club which has itself recently marked a significant 25-year anniversary. More recently, a village choir has met in the chapel, welcoming members of all faiths or none, and singing a wide range of music, both secular and spiritual.

When the Post Office in Pett closed its doors, we were quick to offer to host a twice-weekly mobile service to ensure that local people, and especially the less mobile, are able to access this vital community service.



The most recent engagement with the local community came when the newly formed Archive Resource Centre, an organisation seeking to preserve important local records and memories for future generations, decided to adopt Pett Chapel as its base. As a result, many more people, including those with no personal connection to any church, are coming to recognise the importance of this chapel to the community.

The ARC
Archive Resource Centre for Fairlight, Guestling and Pett

Home About us Subjects Events News Get involved

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YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS

Pett Coast 1930s

Welcome to the ARC

The Archive Resource Centre covers the parishes of Fairlight, Guestling and Pett in East Sussex, England. This website records, in photographs, recordings and documents, the histories of the communities found within the boundaries of these three neighbouring rural parishes, including Pett Lawn and Three Oaks and occasionally adjoining communities such as Winchelsea Beach and Sidesham. [Find out more about us or get in touch](#)

So, what of the future?

We cannot halt the march of progress, but amid all the changes, Pett continues to offer a place of welcome and sanctuary and, hopefully a beacon of hope and joy to all.

Does a little chapel like ours have an important role to play in the 21st Century?

Would anyone miss it if it closed?

Can a little country chapel really make a difference in today's world?

We've asked ourselves all of these questions, and time and again, we come up with the answer "Yes".

After all, John Wesley began his ministry in the little village of Epworth, and yet, with the aid of his bible and a horse (and no internet), he started a worldwide movement.

With God, nothing is impossible!



Rev Derek Brice as John Wesley in 2003, marking the 300th anniversary of Wesley's birth

Over the years, Pett Methodist Chapel has seen many ministers come and go. Many individuals have served, some in prominent roles or positions of authority, others in supporting roles, equally important, but often un-noticed.

Throughout this publication, a few have been mentioned by name, most have not. To attempt to do so would be an impossible task, and one which could cause unintended offence through omission.



So, we end with this picture from our 100th anniversary in 1948. Information recently received has enabled us to identify many in this group but, by leaving them un-named, we pay tribute to everyone who has contributed to the life of this chapel throughout its 175-year history. Every one has left his or her mark and, through their work and witness, they have touched the lives of countless others. Long may they continue to do so.

Acknowledgements:

Page 3 - Historical references, East Sussex Records Office

Page 5 - Picture of Barden's Forge, Pett On The Net

Page 8 - Picture, Archive Resource Centre

Page 12 - Picture of wagon, Archive Resource Centre

Page 20 - Pett Level Independent Rescue Boat Association

Pages 1-28 - Pictures from various personal collections

Much of this booklet is based on research carried out for our 150th anniversary by the late Rev Derek and Mrs Topsy Brice. We remain indebted to them.

Bricks and Mortar

A song by Keith Miller



I could take you to a building
You've likely seen it many times
It doesn't shout at passers by
No flashing neon signs
It very quietly stands where it has stood for many years
It's seen its share of laughter and it's soaked up many tears

*This is the house of God, it is more than bricks and mortar
It's the place where I can feel His presence near
It's the place where I can taste the living water
And if these stones could speak
They'd tell you stories of the people who've met with Jesus here*

Every brick bears testimony to the Holy Spirit's power
Every window to God's blessings multiplying hour by hour
Every timber His protection and the strength that He provides
Every nail a sharp reminder of a Saviour crucified

Some folks will say it's nothing but a relic of the past
A symbol of the way things used to be
But ask around the neighbourhood and very soon you'll find
Someone who says "it's been a help to me ... and me ... and me"

The road outside is busier than it ever was before
Like the lives of all the people living just outside the door
But the chapel waits there patiently, its message still the same
A message of salvation if you trust in Jesus' name

*This is the house of God, it is more than bricks and mortar
It's the place where I can feel His presence near
It's the place where I can taste the living water
And if these stones could speak
They'd tell you stories of the people who've met with Jesus here*

(written by Keith Miller, Worship Leader and organist at Pett Chapel since 1991)

To listen to this song, and others written by Keith,
go to Youtube and search for "The Songs of Keith Miller"



www.pettchapel.org.uk