

Village Echoes

Kilndown Methodist Chapel

In Kilndown there is a building that is so well disguised it is difficult to imagine it was once a Methodist chapel. Even people living in Kilndown may not be aware of the previous use of this very modern looking house which prior to 1960 served as a place of worship for the village.

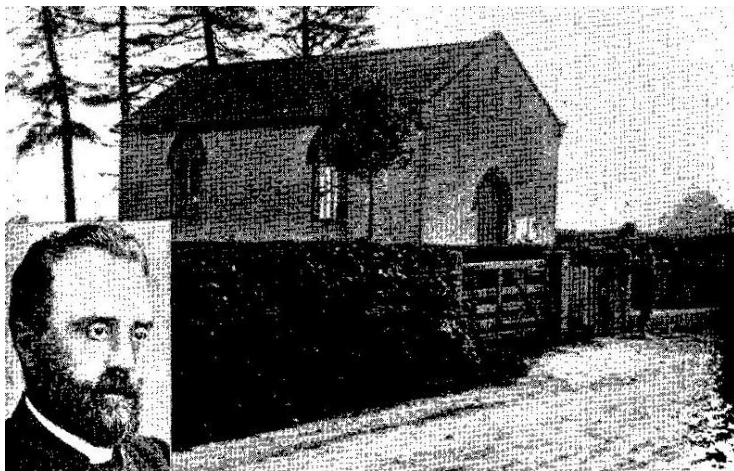
The Methodist Church movement was inspired by the preacher John Wesley (1703-1791) and its early churches were described as Wesleyan Chapels. Wesley held open-air meetings as he travelled about the country and gradually recruited other preachers who also went from place to place to spread the word. Eventually these preachers were assigned to a particular circuit and confined to an area covering several villages and towns in their remit.

Before 1835, when the original Wesleyan Chapel was built in Kilndown, there were no religious buildings in the village. From 1820 Methodist sympathisers had been meeting in two rooms in a cottage occupied by a Mr Freeman, that was licensed for the purpose. In 1833 Kilndown Common was enclosed under an Enclosure Act and became the property of Mr Stephen Stanbridge. He leased a portion to the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion for a year for five shillings and in 1835 he sold it to them for two pounds. Sadly, he allegedly dropped down dead whilst discussing the size of the plot that would be needed. However, his brother George carried out his wishes and the new building, large enough for a congregation of eighty, was built and the foundation stone laid by a Reverend Thomas Collins, a very popular preacher in the Sandhurst circuit.

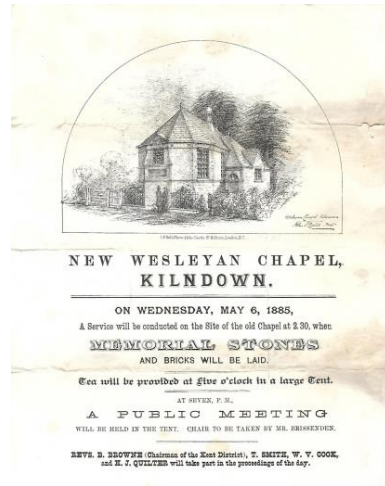
Kilndown's parish Church, Christ Church, was built in 1841 thus allowing residents choice but also splitting the potential congregation of the village. However, there was still a need large enough for the two places of worship, and in 1885 it was decided that the old Chapel should be demolished, and a larger building constructed. Members of the congregation helped knock it down and it was rebuilt for £550, using some of the material from the old building. A brick with Stanbridge carved in it was inserted into the back of the new chapel. The architect was the brother of Rev H J Quilter, the Ticehurst circuit minister. In its heyday there were numerous services – Sunday School, class meetings Sunday and Thursday, and a prayer meeting each week. In the summer there were two open-air services on Sunday held by four local preachers and Sunday School teachers.

By 1960 worshipper numbers had dwindled, the Chapel was deconsecrated, and the building put up for sale. It was bought by Hazel Smith, a native of Kilndown, and her husband James who had been running a general store in Lamberhurst for many years but were losing the tenancy of that building. They jumped at the chance to re-locate to the Chapel building, taking much of their custom with them, which included a home delivery service to surrounding villages. They also continued to sell a wide variety of goods from perishable food to haberdashery and hardware, using the Chapel building much as it had been left. Eventually the pews and other Church fittings were removed, and the space replaced with shelving, shop counters and refrigerators. After her husband's death in 1967, Mrs Smith continued to run the shop for a while with her son and daughter. However, after a year or so she decided to sell up the shop as a going concern and it was bought by a family from Horsmonden. They only stayed for a couple of years, finally selling the building to developers who converted it to a detached house that remains today. Chapel Field is the area between Shernfold and Little Orchard.

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Original Chapel with Rev. Quilter inset



Notice for opening of New Chapel



The Old Chapel in 1986