

# Rowlands Castle United Reformed Church A History



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## INTRODUCTION.

House groups are today a familiar and helpful part of the Christian Faith. They are growing and have been growing for some years, but in almost all cases they are supplementary to church worship. Long years ago house groups usually met for lack of a church building wherein to worship. Rowlands Castle was one such place, the appropriate Parish Churches, Chalton and Warblington being some three miles distant, as were other churches in the area, including the Nonconformist Church in the Pallant at Havant.

Records say that the Gospel was preached in a cottage standing on Bulls (Bowes) Hill, and that services were conducted by lay preachers from Havant. That was well over two centuries ago and their work was continued by others until, in 1798, a chapel was built and opened, followed 83 years later by a larger chapel opened in 1881 which we now know so well.

THE BEGINNING

In the introduction to this history of the Rowlands Castle United Reformed Church it was related that, during the closing decades of the 18th century, services were conducted in a cottage on Bulls (now Bowes) Hill by lay preachers from Havant. They were from the "Nonconformist" chapel in the Pallant, which was built in 1728 when nonconformity was growing rapidly across the Country. An interesting local background may be found in notes recently written for an historical celebration of the Havant United Reformed Church.

"The origins of the United Reformed Church in Havant go back to the very beginning of "Nonconformity" in the town. With the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, many ministers of the Established Church dissented from, and refused to conform with, the doctrines and disciplines then imposed, and resigned, or were 'ejected' from, their livings. Among them was the Rector of Warblington, the Rev. John Harrison, who, despite the penalties imposed, continued to preach. The State Papers for 1670 record that "John Harrison and others continue their assemblies, refuse to discontinue and are willing to accept the penalties". In 1672, during Charles II's brief, flirtation with religious toleration - the "Declaration of Indulgence" - Harrison applied for a licence to be a Presbyterian teacher at Havant "in the house of Thomas Bayly", and this was granted. A similar licence was granted to Thomas Ridge of Hayling Island in the house of Thomas Miller, and there were many more across the country. 1689 and the passing of the Act of Toleration, brought many changes. At last, Nonconformists could worship; according to their consciences without fear of legal retribution".

The work in Havant prospered as did that in Gosport, which was founded by the Rev. Walter Marshall, who had been vicar of Hursley - a similar story to John Harrison at Havant.

Nonconformity in Portsmouth was a little later, but it contributed much to the early work at Rowlands Castle, to which this story must return, but before that return it may be interesting to mention various descriptive titles used over the years. "Nonconformist" has already been mentioned; "Dissenter" meant much the same - and church members at Havant and Rowlands Castle described themselves as "Protestant Dissenting Congregations". The term "Independent" came into use, followed by "Congregational" and\* in 1972, by "United Reformed", referring to the union of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches whose roots go back to the Reformation of the 16th century - hence the style "Reformed". The term "Free Churches" means any not tied to the State.

John and Charles Wesley left the Anglican Church and, in 1739; began the itinerant preaching which led to the founding of Methodism. Contemporary with them, George Whitfield followed the same pattern and became almost as famous, but his preaching followed his Calvinistic leanings, and in this respect differed from theirs. One of the towns influenced by his teaching was Portsea where, stirred to action, the people in 1734 built an "Independent" chapel in fields at Orange Street, near what is now the Marlborough Gate of H.M. Naval Base.

The work prospered, and in 1773 a larger chapel was built close to the first which it replaced. In 1793 the Rev. John Griffin, a famous preacher, began there a ministry which was to last for forty years. So successful was his ministry that when weather was favourable, services were held in the field outside the chapel because of overcrowding inside. The progress continued in 1806 with the building of King Street not far away, to accommodate 2500 people. Orange street continued, and King Street was soon filled.

SPREADING THE FAITH

Such was their dedication and sense of mission that they soon began to think of those beyond their immediate neighbourhood, and the first support they gave was in the building of a place of worship at Rowlands Castle. Soon afterwards they helped with similar projects at "The village of Buckland", and on a site just outside the fortifications of Portsea near where the old Unicorn Gate now stands, they built a chapel named "Zion" which was destroyed in World War II. The Buckland project is now Buckland U.R.C.

At Rowlands Castle a man was building three cottages at the southern end of the Green, but for want of means he was only able to complete one. Led by the Rev. John Griffen, members of Orange Street purchased the land and foundations of those unfinished with a view to building a place of worship. Meanwhile the services previously held at Bulls Hill were conducted in the completed cottage on the Green.

Building of the chapel abutting the cottage proceeded (the chapel building and cottage are still there) and the Evangelical Magazine of 1798 recorded that on Tuesday the 3rd of September a small chapel was opened at Rowlands Castle in the Forest of Bere, about eleven miles from Portsmouth, where the Gospel had recently been preached by members of Mr. Griffen's Church at Orange Street, and that preaching would be continued by these same members. Ministers who took part in the opening services were from Southampton, Fareham, Gosport, Petersfield and two from Portsea.

An extract from the Life of the Rev. John Griffen refers to "a small Chapel on the verge of a forest overlooking the village green which oft had been the gathering place for Sunday revellers".

Some notes from the memoirs of the Rev. Thomas Guyer, referring to when he was a student at Dr. Bogue's Academy at Gosport (for the training of ministers and missionaries) said that on March 6th 1814 after taking the morning service at Rowlands he walked with John Griffen Junior (another student) "through an adjoining wood. The beauties of Nature now attracted me. I felt delighted with the situation. In the midst of a valley surrounded by wide spreading oaks stood the little mansion where I had first attempted to preach the Gospel". In the evening the two young men attended a service at Havant "and Mr. Scamp preached an excellent sermon from Psalm xvi. 2. I think this was the happiest Sabbath I ever spent. As long as memory lasts will this day be remembered by me."

These words give us a glimpse of the surroundings of the little building which became known as "Providence Chapel". They also give us an insight into the people who took the services in those days and their effort in travelling, which in those times was difficult. The towns listed from whence Ministers travelled to the services of dedication were a long way from Rowlands Castle, and in those days - seven years before the Battle of Trafalgar - there was no public transport. The lay preachers from Portsmouth or Gosport may occasionally have been helped by a horse and trap, but much of their travelling would have been on foot, with an added rowing boat voyage across Portsmouth Harbour for those from Gosport. But their faith was commensurate to the task and they succeeded.

THE FIRST PASTORS

Within a few months of the opening of Providence Chapel a baptismal register was commenced. The address shown was "At Rowlands Castle in the Chapelry of Idsworth, parish of Chalton, in the county of Southampton". Baptisms were conducted by ministers of churches in the area, notably John Griffin and William Scamp already mentioned. They all signed as "Protestant Dissenting Ministers". It is of interest to note that in those early days five children of a family named Marshall were baptised in the Chapel. These Marshalls were the ancestors of the writer of these notes, and were the first of six generations, which, without a break, have been members and active supporters of the chapel.

After some years of support by lay preachers and visiting ordained ministers, the church was able to engage a pastor and tradition has it that a Mr. Baker was the first, though nothing is known of him but his name. Then in 1830 the Rev. John Slatterie filled the pastorate. He occupied a house, with garden and orchard, shown on a tithe map as being situated where the terrace now stands to the south of the Fountain Inn, whilst Benjamin Marshall, a church member, lived in a house which had to be demolished for the building of the Inn.

In 1837 when State registrations of birth deaths and marriages began only the Established Church retained the responsibility for such registrations. All other churches had to surrender previous registers to what is now the Registrar General, and the Providence Chapel register was so surrendered. It is now held in the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane London where it may be seen and the accompanying forms inspected. The handwriting on the forms and the nicely worded accompanying letter was that of John Slatterie and was impeccable.

In 1838 just to the South of the village, and close to the first crossroads on the road to Havant, further strength was given to the Faith by the building of a Church of the Anglican denomination, named St. John's, whilst close by and associated with it was built an excellent school for the education of local, children. Both are still serving the community as they did a century and a half ago.

The 1851 census shows the Rev. Slatterie living at Rowlands Castle with his wife and five children, and that is the last information we have of him. History is silent about the next few years, but we know that towards the end of the 1850's the church was closed for two years because, it is said, of some disagreement possibly due to different views too strongly held of various aspects of the faith; we do not know. Neither do we know what happened during those two years. Perhaps they reverted to house groups, but we may be sure that their faith was undimmed. By 1860 their difficulties had been overcome, harmony had been restored and the church reopened.

Mr. George Canning (father of the later John Canning) who was the proprietor of the iron foundry at Finchdean, was very interested in the spritual welfare of the villagers, which is another story, but in 1859, at Mr. Cannings expense, a Rev. Mr. Snell was appointed as a pastor and schoolmaster there. It is presumed that he remained at Finchdean for five years, for in 1864 he became pastor of the Rowlands Castle Church which, in 1866 joined the Hampshire Congregational Union thereby establishing wider connections. It is interesting at this point to observe that Mr. Snell was the father of the Rev. Bernard Snell, said to have been a very handsome man, who became the Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1917 - 18.

The Hampshire Union soon observed a field open for more extended labours, and in 1867 appointed a Rev. Wilson as a "missionary" to Rowlands Castle, assisting in the payment of his salary, and for nine years Mr. Wilson "occupied the position of an evangelist".



THE WORK EXPANDS

Mr. Wilson was followed in 1876 by the Rev. J. Savage, a fine happy looking man whose portrait hangs- in the church vestry. The ministry of Mr. Savage was one of great advance and lasted for 23 years. An interesting letter which he wrote in 1879 to Mr. Canning is still in existence and is worth a brief review.

This letter gave a resume of Christian work in the Village and then gave some figures. He said that the average attendance of adults at Providence Chapel in 1879 was morning 24, afternoon 40, evening 30. Counting children as well, the figures became 60, 80 and 40. 18 were church members. Sunday School membership was 75 and the teachers numbered 7 - this in a village with quite a small population.

A LARGER CHAPEL

The chapel, ownership of which was vested in eight trustees, was small, too small for such congregations, and thoughts of erecting a new church began to exercise those responsible. About this time, with the availability of the railway, Rowlands Castle was becoming popular as a country holiday resort (the station then had a short third platform for excursion parties) and some families regularly took holidays in the village, becoming interested in the chapel and in the ideas about a new building. Help was soon forthcoming particularly from Portsmouth, Lake Road Baptist Church being in the forefront - support for the chapel had always been very ecumenical - and plans were soon afoot to build.

Sir Jervoise Clarke Jervoise, of Idsworth estate, gave land in a commanding position at the western end of the Green in exchange for the old chapel building,

when it should become available, and financial help was soon forthcoming from quite a wide area. No time was wasted, and on 24th. May 1881 a foundation stone was laid by James Griffin Esq. J.P. of Portsmouth, grandson of the founder in 1798 of Providence Chapel.

In the afternoon of 1st December, six months after the stone was laid, at a service conducted by the Rev. C.A. Davies of Ventnor, the completed building was opened. A tea followed at the Fountain Hotel, catered for by Mr. Rook, and in the evening there, was a public meeting conducted by Mr. Dimmer of King Street Chapel, Portsmouth. Of the building cost, amounting to nearly £1000, well over half had already been subscribed, and on the great day of opening generosity was such that the Church was opened free of debt. In those days, to help church finances, many people reserved and paid a rent for their sittings, and it is recorded that most of the 130 sittings in the new building had already been taken up when the church was opened.

The new church was a beautiful building in the Gothic style, of red bricks and native flints, with Bath stone dressings, and its rather good looking tiled roof was surmounted by an artistic open work spire, inside, the pine timbered ceiling was supported by pine roof trusses designed with an eye to beauty. Church minutes record that from time to time there was anxiety about the safety of the spire, and its removal was considered but, suitably maintained, it still graces the building and, together they undoubtedly add beauty to the village green.

Some words about the building, its facilities and history may be of interest. The Sunday school room was originally open to the sanctuary, opposite the short transept, to accommodate large gatherings, a curtain

providing separation. The curtain, however, was not draughtproof and the consequent discomfort was overcome by permanently closing the opening - though its outline may still be seen.

When built there was an aisle between the side wall and a row of pillars, all pews extending from this aisle to the opposite wall. The arrangement proved inconvenient, so a centre aisle was provided, with pews of equal length on either side. The building was, designed to obtain the greatest possible length from the available land, and this left insufficient room for a porchway at the end of the aisle. In the 1930s a road and boundary re-alignment gave room which could have been used, but there were other calls on church finances.

Heating was first provided in the schoolroom by a suitably guarded large open fire, but the church had a heating system which was truly modern - high pressure-hot water. Wrought iron pipes with thick walls but relatively small outside diameter encircled the building's lower walls, and in very cold weather were kept extremely hot - at a temperature which, unguarded, would now be frowned upon. The heat came from a coil of similar pipe in a coke fired boiler within a sunken outside boiler house, and history tells that the boiler was once lit on a frozen system. and that the subsequent explosion removed the boiler house roof. The system kept congregations warm for seventy years, and was followed by an electric tubular heating system which is serving well after forty years of use.

THERE'S MUSIC IN EVERYTHING

Music for accompanying singing in the old Providence Chapel was provided by violins and cellos, some of the instrumentalists being the ancestors of the writer of these notes.

Within two years of the opening of the new church an American (reed) organ was provided, the organist being Mr. Grove, a music teacher who lived on the Green. In 1885, on his removal to Havant where he became organist of the Congregational Church, his place was taken by one of his pupils, Miss Marshall (Later Mrs. Barrett, the mother of the writer) then in her teens, who served as church organist for over half a century.

By the turn of the century a choir of some sixteen singers had been assembled, and in 1902 a tonic sol-fa class was formed by Mr. W.G. Barrett (who became choirmaster) to teach singers the reading of music. In 1906 a choir of 34 was mustered to join the Portsmouth contingent of singers at the second Temperance Fete at the Crystal Palace, London, where there was a total of 4000 singers. The choir maintained its strength until the first World War, singing an anthem each week, and giving entertainments from time to time in the village and other venues, names recorded being Finchdean, Walderton, Bosham and Emsworth. There was carol singing too, to raise money for charities, with a walk to Stansted House, by invitation, for the same purpose.

The first World War depleted the choir, but immediately after the war a new pipe organ was installed and a new hymnbook, "Congregational Hymnary" introduced, to replace the "Congregational Hymnal". By 1921 the choir was in good form again, and a 1923 photograph shows fourteen ladies and eight men, a total of twenty two.

In 1928 the first of a series of annual Free Church Musical Festivals was arranged by Havant Congregational church, other well practiced choirs taking part being from Rowlands Castle and Emsworth Congregational Churches, Emsworth Baptist and Drayton Methodist Churches.

For seven years the festivals continued, being repeated each year in one of the participating churches, and on one occasion at St. Thomas' Church at Bedhampton. The Rowlands Castle occasion, held in the Parish Hall in 1931, was a performance of Gaul's "Holy City". The second World War again depleted the choir and from this serious set back it never fully recovered. As with many churches singing in four part harmony fell into disuse, and the choir in its earlier form diminished to extinction. Again following trends, an electronic type has replaced the pipe organ for music in the church.

#### WIDER ACTIVITIES

Ancillary bodies and activities have their place in most churches, and Rowlands Castle was no exception, as these notes will show.

The Band of Hope was a branch of the United Kingdom Band of Hope Union, a temperance organisation, which flourished greatly during the latter half of the last century and well into this. A photograph dated 1898 of the Rowlands Castle branch shows Mr. Starling, the Superintendent, with three helpers and fortysix children. The organisation nationally was effective, and played an important part in greatly reducing the scourge of alcoholism, which today is again on the increase. The Union is still in existence and in close association with The Western Alcohol and Drugs Education Society.

A Friendly Society somewhat like the Oddfellows or Foresters but with a temperance basis was The Rechabites, and associated with the church was a "tent" as a branch was called. Nothing is recorded about this tent but it existed until perhaps 1920.

A Slate Club is a society whose members make weekly contributions towards benefits against misfortune or to getting Christmas cheer. In 1911 such a club was inaugurated by the church for the benefit of the village in general, at a time when unemployment benefit was just being considered, when old age pensions, only two years old, provided just five shillings a week (£6.00 in 1992) and when there was no National Health Service. The club began with 31 members and grew to 160. For years over £400 (almost £10,000 in 1992) was distributed to members of whom, in 1943, there were still 130. With the introduction of more adequate state benefits, and the N.H.S. the club's usefulness diminished and it was closed.

During the 1920s and 1930s a Young People's Fellowship flourished. Admission rules allowed a wide age tolerance and Mondays provided happy evenings with a widely varying social programme.

#### THE SOCIAL SIDE

On social matters records of the last century are silent, but in this century various activities can be recalled. In addition to such events as choir socials and choir outings (to such places as Tunbridge Wells and Cheddar Caves) annual church "At Homes" were held in the Parish Hall. Bazaars were held at the same venue, and it is recorded that one in 1926 raised £70 (about £1500 in 1992) for church funds. The Ladies' "Sewing Meeting" met every Tuesday afternoon to make garments, and other items of needlework or embroidery; hence the alternative name to bazaar - a Sale of Work.

Spring cleaning was almost a social event for one day of the year. Then a bevy of ladies could be seen dusting, scrubbing and polishing the premises. It was a much appreciated labour of love and gave no impression of imposing a heavy burden.

LIGHTING

Amongst miscellaneous notes it may be interesting to record some additional items connected with the building fabric. Lighting in Providence Chapel before the days of petroleum - would have been by tallow candles, but the new building of 1881 was provided with good looking hanging "oil" lamps with large opal glass shades. In 1927 when gas became available in the village the system was changed to gas lighting and in 1936 with the coming of electricity the present lighting system was installed. In 1938 with a new village drainage system available a kitchen was added but, sadly, since then, a large, beautiful old yew tree which grew in the lawn not many yards from the schoolroom windows has ceased to be.

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

Robert Raikes, whose bronze statue may be seen in Embankment Gardens, London, established a Sunday School in 1780, in Gloucester, and this began a movement which spread. Some twenty years later a non-denominational body, the Sunday School Union was formed to link up towns and villages across the country, with a headquarters in London. Much of the work of the early years included the teaching of basic literacy to the children of a largely illiterate population, and this was combined with religious instruction. Later on, with a headquarters in Ludgate Hill, London, a hymnbook was published which became very popular and was widely used in all denominations - the Sunday School Hymnary by Carey Bonnar. It was used at Rowlands Castle.

It is likely that a Sunday School was begun in the very early days of Providence Chapel and, as mentioned earlier, the scholars in 1879 numbered 79 and the teachers 7. It is recorded that in 1882, a year after the new church was opened, a Mr. Harding was the Sunday School superintendent, and he was followed by a Mr. Trusler Senior and then his son Mr. G. Trusler.

Early in this century Mr. W.C. Morgan became superintendant, and by this time the scholars numbered over one hundred. Mr. Morgan trained a drill party of scholars who gave displays, and concerts with tambourines, and singing, in the Parish Hall. A photograph of them shows fifteen children. Musically, "Services of Song" were introduced for a while and the children were trained for these occasions. So large was the Sunday School attendance that the building of extra classrooms was planned, but the Great War of 1914-18 caused the removal of so many families that the rooms were not needed. In 1921 Mr. George Drew followed Mr. Morgan, and continued until his death in 1943.

Every February, after a tea for the children, there was a prize giving of books, and on a Sunday in July the Sunday School Anniversary was celebrated. This popular event included much singing by the children, who had been well trained, and the church was always crowded. After the Anniversary came the outing to Hayling Island. In early days the children journeyed in farmers' waggons. Speed was to suit the horses and it must have been great fun. Then came the railway, with a change at Havant to the "Hayling Billy", which gave great excitement rumbling over the wooden railway bridge at Langstone. In 1901-3 Southsea was the venue, but so many children got lost that Hayling was again selected. It was almost a village holiday because so many grown ups went with the children.

Scripture examinations were held for many years and the scholars who qualified were presented with appropriate certificates at a Portsmouth Ceremony.



THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The story of the ministers before the opening of the new church building in 1881 has already been related. The minister at the opening was the Rev. John Savage who continued to make a total service to the village of 23 years. In 1899 the Rev. F. Eades followed, but within two years he was called away for family business problems. In 1901 the Rev. Fred Hern began a most successful ministry, ably assisted by his wife Lily, and it lasted for 36 years until his retirement in 1937. Fred Hern was an excellent preacher and very successful in pastoral work. A keen chess player and a great reader - his study was lined with books - he was for 21 years the Secretary of the Hampshire Congregational Union. Responsible for both Rowlands Castle and Finchdean chapels he was aided by lay preachers in conducting the two evening and one morning service each week. Not very musical himself he strongly supported the musical life of the church, and it is interesting to record that almost coincident with his retirement there were two other long service retirements:- William Barrett his choirmaster after 36 years service, and Louisa Barrett (nee Marshall) his organist, after 54 years. Another loss to the congregation at this time was caused by the death of H Admiral O'Callaghan who resided at "Deerleap", and had worshipped at the chapel for a number of years. It was he who gave the wall tablets displaying the ten Commandments which he thought we should always keep in mind.

In the vestry hang portraits of the Reverends Savage, Eades and Hern, together wjth a photograph of the church, with members, in 1882. Among them is George Marshall, the grandfather of the writer of these notes, wearing a top hat.

Following a year's interregnum, the Rev. C.W. Carver from Essex was inducted as minister in 1938. Soon after this the country was at war, and the schoolroom was taken for daytime use as a school for evacuees (of whom Mr. and Mrs. Carver made a home for three) and in the evenings it was opened, with such refreshments as were possible, for the many soldiers encamped around the village. Evening services continued with "black-out" curtains on the windows during the winter months. Mr. Carver became Free Church Chaplain to the R.A.F. Station at Thorney Island, and represented the village on the Petersfield District Council. In 1945 he removed to Somerset and the Rev. T.W. Bond from Orpington, well supported by his wife, commenced a successful though short ministry in the Church, following Rev. Carver as Chaplain to Thorney Island. In March 1948 Mr. Bond left to take up a pastorate in Newport Essex.

Not long after Mr. Bond's departure in 1948 there was an important historical celebration; the 150th anniversary of the founding of the church by the opening of "Providence Chapel" in 1798.

The church was now without a minister and was in the able hands of its secretary Mr. C.E. Smith, an excellent speaker who took services and arranged for lay preachers as necessary at Rowlands Castle and Finchdean.

It was now thought wise for the church to own its manse. Mr. John Hern, son of Rev. Fred Hern, shouldered the responsibility and a pleasant house was built about half-way between the church and Castle Road. In 1952 the pastorate was accepted by the Rev. John Rogers, who came from Manchester, and lived in the new manse. After four years of ministry he accepted an invitation to a Bristol church and completed his pastorate at Rowlands Castle in September 1956. The church now found, sadly, that it could no longer support a full time ministry so, with much regret, the new manse had to be sold.

As in earlier periods of its history the church was now fully dependent on its lay ministry. From the opening of the Finchdean chapel in 1830 lay preachers had assisted the Rowlands Castle minister in maintaining a ministry in both villages but now, without a minister more support was needed and was gladly given. Some years later Finchdean became independent and this lightened the load on Rowlands Castie.

Welcome help has been given whenever possible by Anglican friends from St. John's Redhill. Particular help was given by the Rev. E. Forse, the Rev. R. Stone and the Rev. M. Ridley, the last two - both Priests-in-charge at St. John's, being inducted also as ministers of the United Reformed Church, Mr. Ridley in 1981 the centenary year of the building. These were a most welcome ecumenical lifeline, and form an important record for this history.

The church in common with many others these days is smaller in numbers but, led by a Presiding Elder, Mr. Kenneth White, and supported by faithful members, it is helping to keep burning the flame of Christian Faith which, important today, is likely to be increasingly so in the Society of declining standards in which we live. i

In expressing gratitude for favours already received, we pray for strength in these difficult days to continue, and expand, to the Greater Glory of God, the good work begun so long ago by those dedicated souls whose lead we follow.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise Him all creatures here below,  
Praise Him above ye Heavenly Host,  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Jack Barrett.