

The History of Bootle Evangelical Church



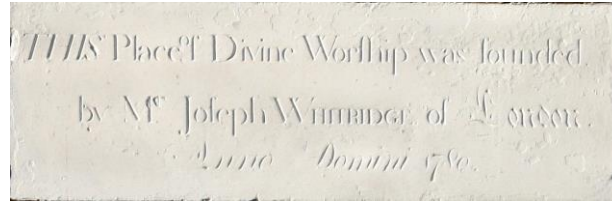
Background

In the 18th century the Industrial Revolution was darkening the horizon, and there was a considerable moral decline. The Anglican Church was losing some of its influence. Despite the fact that non-conformists had many disadvantages (they could not be in Parliament, a Justice of the Peace, an officer in the Armed Services, or hold any other public office under the Crown, nor could they enter the Universities) there came what has become known as the Great Awakening. It started in Europe, but soon spread to Britain. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon was a great patron of Evangelical worship, and among the famous preachers of the day were Whitfield and Wesley. When the latter visited the 'remote and barbarous county' of Cumberland, his comments on the road from Bootle to Whitehaven were not complimentary!

The Whitridge family, together with a Mr. Parke had occasionally managed to get a minister into the parish church to preach. Amazingly this was strongly resented by many of the ordinary folk. On one such occasion the local blacksmith arranged to have the church locked. On this particular day however Mr. Romaine (the preacher) was too astute and gained entry despite the blacksmith's efforts. At much the same time Joseph Whitridge of Millholme, Bootle had moved to London and become a wealthy merchant. He entered the emerging Evangelical Movement in London and later, following the example of the Countess of Huntingdon, he founded an Evangelical congregation in his native town. He also paid for a minister to be appointed for the emerging Church.

The Foundation

The Church first registered a private house and then a barn as a place of worship. Soon a purpose built Chapel was provided (together with a manse and schoolroom) at the expense of Joseph Whitridge. It opened on 30 July 1780, the Reverend Daniel Gibbons, from Ulverston, preaching the first sermon.



Engraved Stone above the Chapel

The first minister of this congregation was Mr. Derbyshire who had studied at Lady Huntingdon's non-conformist training college at Trevecca in South Wales. The Reverend Daniel Gray, also from Trevecca, arrived in 1782 later taking over the ministry until his death in 1806. He was succeeded by his son, but he, after about three years' ministry, took orders in the established church and left. The then Rector of Bootle, the Reverend Thomas Smith, being much against such non-conformity, referred in 1789 to the place as "a chapel built by Lady Huntingdon's fanatical society who took much pains to pervert the whole parish to their idle notions which cost the lawful minister much trouble". At this time the chapel remained the private property of Joseph Whitridge. On his death in April 1808 it was found that he had willed the Chapel to his brother, William. Unfortunately he had predeceased Joseph and though it was clear that both had intended the Chapel for the future use of the people of Bootle, neither of them had recorded their intentions.

This left the position somewhat confused, and legal proceedings continued for some years. The Chapel, however, continued to be used and the endowment for the Ministerial stipend continued.

In 1819 a group of Bootle's residents decided to end the legal tangle by purchasing the Chapel back from Stephen Whitridge who had been declared the owner. Using their own money, they were all set to complete the purchase when one of their number (another William Whitridge) died suddenly. Fortunately he had recorded his intentions in a will and the decease only temporarily held up the transfer.

In January 1822 The Chapel and the endowment passed into the hands of a board of trustees for the benefit of the Bootle congregation of 'Protestant Dissenters of the Independent Persuasion respecting Church Government' Thus the "fanatical society" persisted and was set on a clear legal foundation.

The Buildings



The Chapel is recorded in several early local Histories as seating over 200. One cannot but wonder about the size of the people, even allowing for the fact that there

was a Gallery at the East end of the Chapel. The Chapel was remodelled in the Victorian period, and it is likely that the gallery was then removed. It is also likely that the Vestry and the pews were provided at that time. After that date, there was then little change to the premises until the early 1950s when a toilet was added on the South side, and in 1956 the School Room was built. In 1993 a renovation program costing some £25,000 was put into effect. This involved structural work to the East end, especially about the windows, and cosmetic improvements to the exterior. So successful was this that a Conservation award was given by the Lake District National Park Authority.

The Chapel and Schoolroom buildings were purchased in 1999, after many difficulties, by Rural Ministries. They have continued to support the work, and recently funded renovation of the kitchen, toilet and School Room. The Congregation, with the help of a local Trust provided wheelchair access to the premises, completed in 2005. Although there is a house attached to the Chapel, this was not included in the 1822 Trust, and there is some confusion about the provision of a Manse for the Minister. There is clear evidence that there was once a doorway from the house to the Chapel, but again the evidence as to the date of its closure is vague.

The Trust appears to have purchased a house in Mill Lane (locally known as Pig Street) soon after its inception, which remained its property until 1963. It seems to be occupied by the Minister in the 1851 Census. The house attached to the Chapel was not occupied by the Minister in the 1861, 1871 or 1881 censuses; however in 1891 it was the residence of Rev Ralph Dunn. In 1901 he is living in the Mill Lane house!

The old manse (now known as Manse Cottage) having been sold, the present Manse at Beck Brow was first rented and then purchased by Rural Ministries for the use of the Chapel Pastor.

The Congregation

From its very beginning the Congregation appears to have been independent of Denomination. Although founded by a friend of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, it does not appear to have been formally part of her 'Connexion'. At the end of the 19th century it is referred to as being 'Congregational' and became part of the United Reformed Church in the 1970s. Joseph Whitridge endowed the Chapel with funds to supply a Minister. With only the usual interregna, this continued until the death of Rev Frederick King in 1949. The list of Ministers is incomplete, but from Post Office Directories and census returns a fairly full list has been made. When funds no longer covered the cost of a full time minister, the Chapel Congregation continued with Student Pastors and assistance from ministers from Whitehaven, Millom and the surrounding areas.

Much good work was also done by the Members themselves, and the Chapel continued to stand for the Gospel in Bootle.

By the 1990s, however, this was becoming difficult, and the Chapel membership took a huge step of faith deciding to seek a full-time Pastor. With the assistance of Rural Ministries, Rev Peter Lolley commenced Ministry in 1995. About this time the congregation decided to secede from the United Reform Church and return to the 1780 ethos as an independent Evangelical Church. The Congregation now looks forward to following God into the future, walking by faith and seeking to do His will.

Rev. Peter Lolley was followed by the Rev James Thomas, who was appointed in the Spring of 2004 who served the Lord faithfully in that post until the Autumn of 2013 when he succumbed to Cancer and return to Glory.

The Chapel was without a permanent minister for some time. However, Rural Ministries arranged for Ministerial cover by enabling some Ministers from Texas, U.S.A. to work at the Chapel for short periods. The efforts of these American Ministers, and their wives, were greatly appreciated.