

LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY

A large group of people, including men, women, and children, are marching down a residential street. They are carrying several large, colorful signs. The most prominent sign is yellow with red text that reads "BIGGIN HILL MAKE WAY FOR JESUS". Other signs include "Jesus is the only way", "God's peace is for you", "He has come to see you", and "God love you". The marchers are dressed in casual clothing, and the street is lined with houses and trees.

◆ FORWARD BY RAY LOWE ◆

LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY



CUDHAM BAPTIST CHURCH

BIGGIN HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

BIGGIN HILL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

NEW LIFE CHURCH BIGGIN HILL

THE FIRST 120 YEARS

1871 - 1991

Acknowledgments



My grateful thanks to all those who gave me so much encouragement and support during the research and writing of this history.

To Paul Medler for first 'sowing the seed' in 1988 by suggesting that I should write a 'little pamphlet' about the church.

To Ann Stevenson and Ray and Sue Lowe for giving me the freedom of their homes to work in and the use of their word processors and to Ann for patiently instructing me in my first dealings with a computer.

To Frank Abbot, Don Westbrooke, Tom Temple, John Williams, Tom Tyer, John Nelson and many others who have given me their time, shared their memories, or provided historic photographs and other material.

To John Nelson for kindly giving permission to reproduce the following photographs from his own collection of prints from his book *Grandfathers Biggin Hill*: 'The Tin Tabernacle' and 'Temples Stores' on page 21, 'Our Day' on page 23 and the first picture on page 76.

To Jo Medler for proof reading and editing the original manuscript.

To Ray Lowe for all his help and especially for writing the foreword to this book.

To all the people who have prayed for me, especially my husband Geoffrey, who has designed the finished book and without whose support and encouragement I would never have completed the task.

And finally - I want to record my thanks to God for allowing me the privilege of exploring the past exploits of His people and for thrilling my heart as I have caught a glimpse of His eternal purposes.

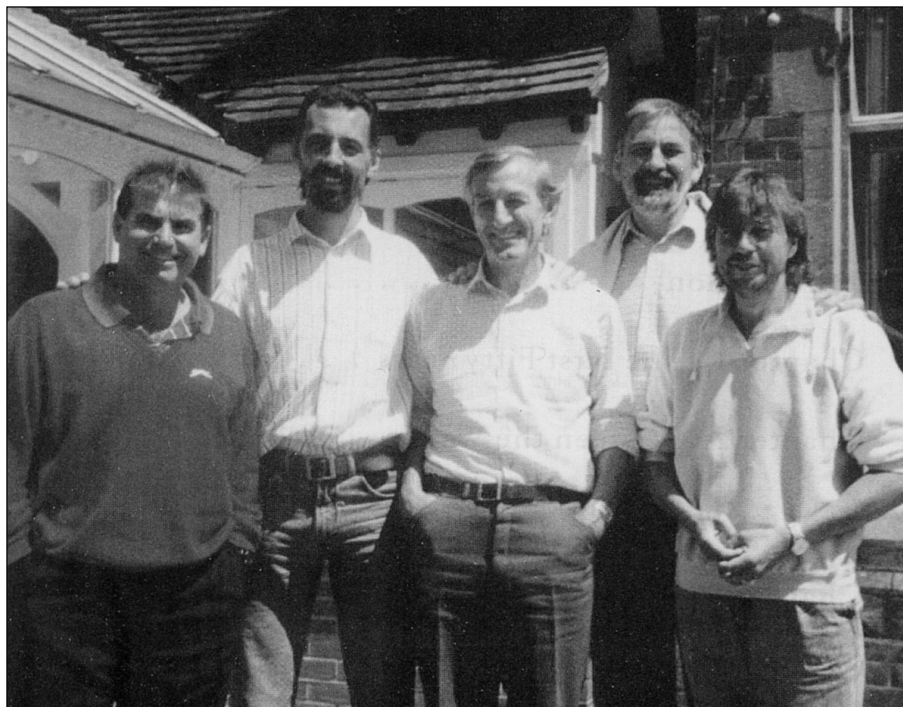
Carol Gillard

LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY



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The Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship leadership team in 1988.

This picture was taken at one of the regular elders' away days. From the left: Ray Lowe, David Gillard, Vernon Small, Geoffrey Gillard and administrator Paul Medler.

FOREWORD

In the thirty years that I have been a Christian, I have always been fascinated with Church History - the records of what God has done through ordinary people throughout the ages despite their many faults and failures. Luke's Acts of the Apostles' (the first Church History Book) tells us of the struggles of that early Church, of the Ananiases and Sapphiras as well as the mighty conquests as the Gospel was pioneered by the first Apostles. Carol Gillard has endeavoured to tell the story of Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship with the same honesty, not just giving us a taste of the good, exciting and successful times, but also the failures, and bad times that make this story so very real.

As for me, I moved to Biggin Hill with my family some twenty years ago, when the church was a small Baptists Chapel with just a handful of Bible-believing evangelical Christians. Little did I realise then that I would soon leave my secular employment and have the privilege of serving the church as its leader to the present day. To see the church grow numerically, to train up and send out ministry to other parts of England as well as overseas, and also to be involved in the planting of four other churches, has been a wonderful experience. But there have also been the sad times, the disappointments, the trials, times when one felt perplexed and frustrated and could merely cry out to God.

I hope this book will help you share some of the experiences of those Christians of Biggin Hill who have gone before, and some who are still part of the Fellowship today. I hope you will be encouraged as you read of the good things that God has done and is still doing, and be reminded that there is still a spiritual battle in which we are all engaged until the Lord Jesus returns.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ray Lowe'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Ray Lowe November 1992 - Biggin Hill

INTRODUCTION

Most people associate Biggin Hill with flying, with the Spitfire and Hurricane and the Battle of Britain. But Biggin Hill is more than just the site of an air field; over the past hundred years the adjacent area of hills and valleys on the North Downs south-east of London has been changing until the scattered farming community has become a large densely populated village.

Books and films have told of the strategic part the airfield played in two world wars and of the brave men who risked their lives in the defense of their country. This book tells another story - a story that began long before the village existed or men flew in airplanes - the story of the Baptists who became Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship and now New Life Church Biggin Hill.

This is more than the personal history of a local church. It tells of the work of God the Holy Spirit that is worldwide and of a prophetic people - a people of destiny. It is a true story - it tells of times of failure as well as success, of defeat as well as victory. God has a strategy, a plan for His people everywhere - to build His Church and to lead them in victory. I pray this book will stir and challenge you to play your part as a member of God's mighty army.

As I'd sifted through piles of newspaper cuttings, letters, church minutes and old photographs, listened as people recalled their childhood memories and looked back on my own memories of the twenty-five years my husband and I had spent among this company of believers, I'd felt an overwhelming sense of the purposes of God at work.

The task of relating the dates and events in a way that would do justice to this remarkable story written in the lives of ordinary men and women had been both a privilege and a somewhat daunting responsibility for which at times I'd felt totally inadequate. I'd tried not to glamourise those early pioneer days or to allow nostalgia to cloud my memories. I was aware of the importance of recording both successes and failures, good times and bad, in order that we can learn from our past but I'd also endeavoured not to over-simplify the apparent causes.

One can trace a common thread running throughout this story. The same vision and mission that inspired it's first pioneers to proclaim the Good News of Jesus and to extend His Kingdom in their community is in the very DNA of this church family but now, in this era of 'the global village', this vision has grown and it's horizons have widened. In the 1980s this church formed part of **Coastlands**, a fellowship of churches in the South East of England under the apostolic leadership of Terry Virgo but as more churches began to join them from around the UK and from overseas it was renamed **New Frontiers International**.

The last page of this book is simply the end of a chapter in an on-going story. In the same year, 1991, the church attended the very first of the New Frontiers Bible Weeks at **Stoneleigh** in the Midlands which were to become such an important resource of teaching, worship music, fellowship and encouragement for churches and families, influencing thousands of Christians worldwide for a decade.

In 2005 this local church, for the third time in it's long history, felt it needed a new title for the next chapter of it's life and became ***New Life Church Biggin Hill.***

Now, in 2020, this church forms part of the **Regions Beyond** family with Steve Oliver as it's father - figure. Their vision is of one church of many nations and they now have brothers and sisters in Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia and the middle East.

Thirty years have passed since I wrote this unfinished life story of a church and much has happened since then to bring us to where we are today. Over the years a number of men have been raised up as elders to shepherd the church. In 1996 Gareth Wales, who had joined the fellowship in 1975 as a teenager and had served as a musician and worship leader, was recognised for his pastoral gifting and brought into eldership to lead the team in Ray Lowe's place when Ray moved on to fulfil a wider ministry.

Gareth continued in this role of senior pastor for twenty years but as he began to have a wider ministry in the Regions Beyond leadership God was preparing a younger man, an elder in the Swindon New Frontiers church, to take his place. In 2016 Simon Turner was invited to join him to lead the New Life team into the next chapter, a new era.

This story began at a time when almost everyone in the UK believed in the God of the bible and in the bible as the word of God and this belief formed the basis for both personal and national morality. It covers a period in which Great Britain experienced two world wars when her people were under attack from a physical enemy and fought valiantly to within an inch of their life. However since then a far more deadly enemy has been waging a more serious and sustained attack on her peoples' spiritual and moral life and this has, for the most part, been un-contested by those who should have been 'salt' and 'light', namely the Church.

The world today is very different from the world at the end of the nineteenth century, but the word of God remains unchanged and so does the nature of man and his need of a Saviour. There were times when this company of believers have been taken-in by the lies of the enemy, listened to the reasoning of man rather than wisdom of God, have been blown off course and forgotten their 'high calling' but God has never forgotten them and will 'complete the good work He has started in them'.

Carol Gillard 2020

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

‘The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed . . .’ Jesus explained to His disciples. The church family which is now known as New Life Church Biggin Hill has its roots in the first proclamation of the gospel in its locality and what began as a tiny seed was to grow into a work whose influence would touch many nations.

The story began almost a hundred and fifty years ago, in 1871, when a farmer and his wife heard from God and responded in obedience. It began in a humble place, in an upper room over a barn, and the first to come were children. The founders were Mr. and Mrs. Wallis and the farm was Costains Farm in Jail Lane, in the parish of Cudham. They were busy people working long hours on the land; they weren’t educated folk with degrees in theology or with any special training; but they were devoted disciples of Jesus who put His Kingdom before their own interests.

The work they started soon became a thriving fellowship of believers who met in their own pretty wooden chapel and called themselves ‘Cudham Baptist Church’. In those days Biggin Hill was just the name of a farm on what was the Aperfield Estate but when the estate was sold off for building land a new village sprang up along the London to Westerham road with homes, shops, a garage and a council school.

In 1924 the church moved house from their country lane location on the outskirts of the village to a brand new meeting hall they had erected on a large plot of land on the main road next to the school and was re-named ‘Biggin Hill Baptist Church’.

A supermarket now stands on the site of the old village school and playground and on land that once belonged to the church, but the overall appearance and character of the old chapel has been preserved and part of the original structure can still be seen.

This history is not the first to be written about this Christian family. In 1922 ‘A Brief History of Cudham Baptist Church’ was published to commemorate the church’s ‘Jubilee’; the first fifty years of its life. The author was Mr Wallis’ successor, the much-loved Pastor Forbes who had faithfully pastored the church for the previous fifteen years.

Mr. Forbes’ reputation lived after him. His daughter-in-law, who was still alive when this was written, remembered her-father-in law with great affection as a godly man who was a loving husband and father and a faithful, kind friend but whose life was not without hardship and sorrow. His wife, a lovely Christian lady, became sick and confined to her bed for the last years of her life and one of their two sons was an invalid and died in his early thirties. In 1924, soon after the church moved to it’s the new premises, he and his family moved to Brasted where he became the pastor of Brasted Baptist Church.

Since he had known those early pioneers and heard their eye-witness accounts, it seems appropriate to let him re-tell the story, as it were, in his own words and in the charming style of his day. The following pages, except for some changes to the original format, are as they appeared in a book published to commemorate the church’s jubilee:

A Brief History of Cudham Baptist Church.



IF all the books that interested us in our youth, none fascinated us more than the stories of courage and heroism as recorded in the lives of men and women who, undeterred by difficulties and dangers, devoted their lives to the prosecution of some great undertaking. The exploration of hitherto unknown regions, the opening up of new countries, missionary enterprises in far-away lands and daring voyages of discovery, are all associated with names with which we have been associated from childhood. By far the greater number of heroic lives, however, have left no chronicles behind them, history has no record, their stories have been buried with their bones, but the generations following have reaped the results of their labours, and built upon the foundations that they laid down. The early settlers of the vast American continent became the great pioneers in a new country, and all the hardships they endured in trekking through unknown forests and crossing wide expanses of prairies made it far easier for those who ventured to follow them. Not only in the histories of peoples and countries has this been the case, but also in the history of the Church. Men and women at home and abroad have placed first and foremost in their lives 'the Kingdom of God and His righteousness', they have lived and worked for the achievement of some great object; for the realisation of some high ideal. No monument marks the spot where they fell, and many of them died unmourned and unsung. Liberty, truth, righteousness, however, live, and live because they gave their lives.

As I took up my pen to write this brief outline of the work at Cudham Baptist Chapel, a vision of noble men and saintly women passed before me, who, undaunted by difficulties and undeterred by opposition, plodded on step by step along an untrodden way, unable to see very far ahead, but certain of the fact that God was with them leading them on.



IN those early days Cudham was but little known, the woods extended then to the main road in Jail Lane, and the folk who settled there gradually cleared the ground, then ploughed and sowed the fields which now extend far and wide in that locality. And just as the men who now farm the lands in that particular district are tilling the soil upon which other men laboured, cleared and ploughed, so the present Church is reaping the result of the arduous effort and self-sacrificing service carried on by the pioneers who, amidst many difficulties and discouragements carried on the cause year after year.

The origin of the work at Cudham Baptist Chapel is known but to few, and as one by one of those who knew the work in its infancy pass away the history is lost and forgotten. No minutes and few records have been preserved, and it has been felt it would not only be of interest to those who are at present connected with the work, but also to those who may follow after, if some account were prepared which would link up the past with the present.

It was in the year 1870 that a Mr. and Mrs Wallis had it very much laid on their hearts to do something for the children in the neighbourhood. These worthy people lived at Costains Farm, which adjoins the present building. At that time no building was available where the children might be got together, but the earnestness of Mr. and Mrs Wallis soon solved the difficulty by erecting, at their own expense, a room where the children might meet for instruction in the Word of God. The room was opened on the 20th of September, 1871, and it still stands to-day. It may be seen at the rear of the farmhouse as one looks over the fence on the

right-hand side of the Chapel, and it is still spoken of as “the old schoolroom”. The inset is a view of the building. The meetings were held in the upper part, which is reached by an outside staircase, reminding one very much of the old Bunyan Meeting House at Elstow in Bedfordshire.



ALTHOUGH the work was originally started with the object of instructing the children, a request was soon made for an adult meeting. One of the first preachers was a young man named Wm. Burnett, a nephew of Mrs. Wallis. In that room he preached his first sermon, and commenced a career which was afterwards to make his name almost a household word for miles around. Burnett's home was at Brasted, where he was destined to carry on a unique and successful work. A church was subsequently formed in that village, and he became its pastor. The attractive building, which stands on the high road at Brasted, is an enduring monument to the noble work which Mr. Burnett carried on for many years.

In the year 1900 the writer came to reside in the neighbourhood of Biggin Hill, and very soon afterwards made the acquaintance of the Rev. Wm Burnett, now deceased. He often visited the Chapel and always evinced the greatest interest in the Church's progress and welfare. From the pages of an old diary Mr. Burnett furnished me with a few data, which have aided me considerably in the present task. Here, for instance, are two extracts: “6th September, 1871 (Wednesday), Special Dedicatory Prayer Meeting in the new upstairs room; an interesting and hallowed time”. “20th September, 1871, Open Meeting; a crowded room, and much interest shown,” Mr. Burnett adds that he took part in both these meetings, and mentions the fact that his dear father was also present. Mrs. Wallis was his father's only sister. From what I have learned, it would appear that the work owed much of its success to this saintly woman.

The first Sunday evening Service was held on the 24th of September, 1871, on which date the Sunday School was formed. It was on Sunday evening, 14th January, 1872, that Mr. Burnett preached his first sermon, to which I have alluded; his subject was *The Prodigal's Return*,” and the room was crowded to its utmost capacity.

One cannot help reflecting on the fact that from that time down to the present there has not been wanting a witness to the truth, and, although there have been times of difficulty someone has always been found ready to give his testimony to the unfailing goodness and love of God.



AN interesting event took place on the 3rd of April, 1872, (Wednesday), when Mr. Wallis celebrated his birthday jubilee. On that occasion Mr. Burnett states: "I ventured upon my first poetical composition in the form of an appropriate verse, which formed one of the features of decoration."

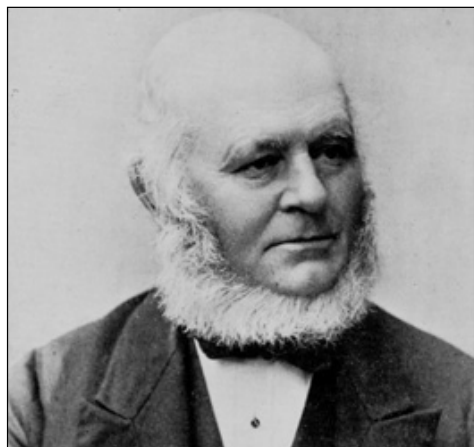
In the same year a Band of Hope was formed, of which Mr. Burnett became leader. It did splendid work, and he mentioned the fact that during the last forty-five years he had met with many who joined it's ranks and remained true to their pledge.

The Adult Services proved so successful that the room was soon found to be too small to accommodate the congregation who came for worship, and sometimes many had to go away unable to get a seat. In the Summer weather the Services were frequently held in the adjoining meadow, thereby getting over the difficulty.

One wonders if people have changed since that time, for when we consider the fact that Biggin Hill was only the name of a farm then and not a village, that the houses were few and far between, it is evident that the majority had to walk long distances. Many of the children would come to morning school, bring their lunch, and remain until the afternoon. Is this spirit the same today?

It was not long before it was felt necessary to erect a larger place of worship. Several meetings were held, with the result that it was decided to build as quickly as possible a more commodious building. There was one difficulty however, namely, that of obtaining a site. There were no plots of freehold ground to be had in the neighbourhood in those days, and the landowners would not sell a piece of their ground for a Nonconformist Chapel. What was to be done? Mr. Wallis held a fifty year's lease on the ground which he farmed, and he generously offered to give a piece for a chapel site.

The difficulty regarding a site having been surmounted, the erection of the building was soon put in hand, the details being left very largely in the hands of Mr. Wallis.



PASTOR WILLIAM WALLIS

It was on the 31st of August 1874, that the foundation stone of the new chapel was laid. This was a memorable occasion, and a very large number of people were present to witness the ceremony. Many worshippers have probably gone in and out of the building for years and never noticed the stone which now lies buried in the right-hand side of the porch. It reads as follows:

**THIS STONE WAS LAID
BY
J. REYNOLDS, ESQ.
31ST. AUGUST 1874.**

It is interesting to note that Mr. Reynolds was a member of the Church of England and lived at that time at Bessels Green.

In the evening of the same day a Service was held in the wheelright's shop, which still exists, and which had been cleared for the occasion. A sermon was preached by the Rev. W. Cuff, the honoured pastor of Shoreditch Tabernacle. Mr. Burnett stated "the Service will always live in my memory, as also it must in the memory of the few others who are left on this side."



THE CHAPEL

THE building work proceeded apace, much of the wood for the framing was cut from trees felled nearby, which was sawn up in a pit in the adjacent farm. Many gave of their substance, some of their time, others their labour, so that it might truly be said, as it was in the case of the erection of the walls of Jerusalem, under Nehemiah, "the people had a mind to work." As a result, the Chapel was soon completed, and Tuesday, 16th February, 1875, less than six months from the time the foundation stone was laid, marked the opening day. On this occasion the Rev. W. Cuff again preached, his sermon being based on Acts 1 vs. 1. Mr. Burnett stated on referring to this meeting, "eight of us took part, and only Mr. Cuff and myself are now left to record the fact." I have never heard if there was any architect or who was responsible for the plans, but the building, although simple in

design, without any outstanding architectural features, is well proportioned. It has a pleasing appearance from the outside, while on entering one experiences a sense of comfort and homeliness which many much more pretentious and costly buildings do not possess.

Mrs. Wallis, who had been such a devoted worker in connection with the cause, did not live long after the chapel was completed, for on the 26th of July of the same year she received her home-call, and her departure made a great gap. From the year 1875 to the year 1900 Mr. Wallis steadily carried on the work, supported by a small band of co-workers, with occasional visits from outside friends, among whom may be mentioned the Rev. Cattell of Bessels Green, Rev. W. Burnett of Brasted and William Harding of Camberwell.

In addition to conducting the usual services, Mr. Wallis also superintended the Sunday School, which had always been an important feature of the work. When he relinquished the school it was superintended by Mr. C. Smither, who for six years devoted a great amount of his time and energy in organising and building up the work, of which he was justly proud of being the leader.

HAD Mr. Wallis kept a diary of those twenty-five years of continuous pastoral service it would undoubtedly have revealed much and supplied matter for an interesting history of the church. Anyone who has had a practical experience of village work can well imagine much that such a record would have contained. There would surely have been references to times of encouragement and hope, and periods of discouragement and fear; to seasons when there was a flocking in and occasion when there was a falling away; to moments when the soul was lifted up, and others when it must have been cast down. These are experiences of every Christian worker and especially the village pastor, upon whose shoulders so much responsibility rests, of whom so much is often expected and to whom frequently so little is given.

He must never be depressed, never be weary, never feel lonely, never have a heartache, but be always fresh, full of inspiration and a continual stimulus to faith.

By a seemingly strange coincidence the writer, the present pastor, came to reside at Biggin Hill in the summer of 1900, the year in which Mr. Wallis died. He was lying seriously ill at the time and never occupied his pulpit again. He died on the 20th October, 1900, at the age of seventy-eight. A record of twenty-eight years' continuous service (twenty-five as honorary pastor) was one in which it was felt should be memorialised in some practical manner. In addition, therefore, to a tablet being placed in the chapel, a fund was raised which resulted in the erection of the present vestries.

The loss of the pastor came as a terrible blow to the church, but the then deacons, viz.: Messrs. W. Blake, N. French, W. Mottram and R. Smith, stepped bravely into the breach and in turn conducted the services Sabbath by Sabbath. Mr. Shawyer, of Westerham, who has always been a staunch friend to the cause, undertook to preach one Sunday each month and conduct the Communion Service. Mr. Shawyer's advice and counsel in the conduct of church matters was greatly appreciated, and in no small degree assisted in promoting the general welfare of the Church. It became the writer's privilege to preach occasionally during this period, and later to conduct the services on two Sundays each month; students from the Pastors' College being invited to occupy the pulpit on alternate Sundays.



HE congregations increased in numbers, and the work grew in volume to such an extent that it was generally felt the time had come when it was desirable, in the interests of the Church, to seriously consider the appointment of a pastor. At a Church Meeting held on the 1st of March, 1906, the matter was discussed, and by an unanimous vote of the members the present pastor was asked to accept the office. Up to that time he had no idea of ever occupying such a position, and his first thoughts were to refuse. The hearty invitation, however, accompanied by the promised support of the members, led him, after much careful consideration, to accept the pastorate in an entirely honorary capacity.

The Recognition Services were held on the 6th of June, 1906, when there was a large and enthusiastic gathering. Wm. Jones, Esq., J.P., of Orpington, occupied the chair, and the following ministers took part in the Service: Rev. J. Lewis, of Brockley; Rev. Walker, of Shoreham; Rev. Fearn, of Orpington; Rev. W. Burnett, of Eythorne.



PASTOR A.R. FORBES

While writing this History I received the following letter from the Rev. Wm. Burnett:

To the Editor of ***"The Searchlight."***

"DEAR SIR, - As one who knows the work of Biggin Hill Baptist Church from the time of its organization, better than any living man, I should like to thank you heartily for the lucid, and deeply interesting history you have given in 'The Searchlight.' My late dear uncle Wallis said to me on the last occasion that I visited him *re yourself*: 'I said to Mrs. Wallis when I saw that young man in the Chapel today, I was sure God had sent him to carry on this work which I must relinquish.'

Thank God, his prophetic words have been so fully justified. Within your available space, it has been impossible to mention many an interesting incident, also names of other helpers, but I think the late pastor, Isaac

Ballard, of Farnborough, ought not to be overlooked. Mr. Wallis was superintendent of his Sunday School at Farnborough before beginning the work at Cudham. May Heaven's richest blessing continue to rest upon you and your fellow helpers.

Yours sincerely, WM. BURNETT."



AM glad to be reminded of the fact that Pastor Ballard, of Farnborough, helped Mr. Wallis very considerably in the work, and that there was a very close friendship between them. From another source I also learn that Mr. Wallis, in order to clear the Chapel of debt, paid the last £50 out of his own purse. There is so much that I might write concerning my first impressions when I first came to the Chapel in 1900, and of my subsequent experiences during later years. I refrain, however, from recording these because many of them are of a personal character, and also because they would hardly be considered to come within the scope of the Chapel history. I will therefore confine myself to the outstanding facts of interest that have since transpired.

In the year 1905 a request was made by a Mrs. Pottinger, who resided at Leaves Green, for a cottage meeting, and she kindly offered the use of her room for the purpose. Such a request, it was felt, ought not to be refused, and the question was - who would go? A Mr. C. French, who was then worshipping with us, volunteered to make a start. The small portable harmonium was carried down and splendid little gatherings were held. The little room was crowded every Sunday. It was not long, however, before the leader had to give up in consequence of removing from the neighbourhood, but fortunately Mr. Gee just at that time came to reside at Tatsfield, and on the 12th of September, 1905, was elected superintendant of what was now to be recognised as a definite part of the work of the Church and designated as Leaves Green Mission.



LEAVES GREEN MISSION

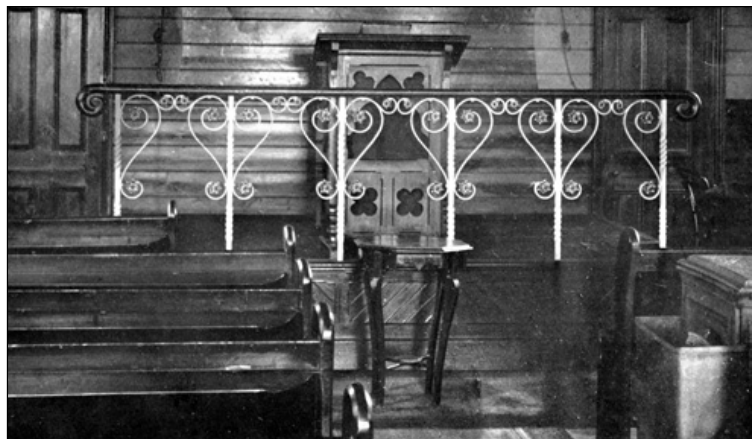
When Mrs. Pottinger removed, the cottage was rented in order that meetings might be continued and it became necessary, in order to find room for all who came, to throw the two small rooms on the ground floor into one. Other meetings in addition to the Sunday service were started. After a time Mr. Standing, the landlord, was approached with a view to obtaining a piece of ground for the erection of a Mission room. At first the request did not meet with a favourable response but one Sunday evening Mr. Gee came home in high spirits with the news that Mr. Standing had offered to give a site and we were to meet him the next morning to peg out the ground. On Monday morning, however, when Mr. Gee and I arrived, we found Mr. Standing, who was a veterinary surgeon had been urgently called from home and was unable to keep the appointment. On the following day we learned that Mr. Standing had passed away during the night. The ground was never secured and subsequently a lean-to shed was rented, a floor put down and the place furnished. This is the present mission room where for years the work has been carried on. It is far from ideal for it is rough in the interior as well as on the exterior, and there are many inconveniences to be put up with. The place, however humble is hallowed by memories and has a warm place in the affections of old and young.

Mr. Gee resigned the Superintendentship in 1910 and since that date the Pastor has been responsible for the conduct of the meetings. Miss Gee still labours there and has from the first taken a very active part in the work. Mrs. Forbes, in addition to being a very active worker in connection with every activity associated with the work as a whole, was, until prevented by illness, a most ardent worker at Leaves Green Mission.

AT the annual Church Meeting held in the month of March, 1905, a proposal was made to erect a baptistry in the chapel. Up to that time those desiring baptism had to journey to Orpington or Brasted, and it was felt the time had come when the growth of the work called for a baptistry to be built. Such an undertaking, which would necessitate the removal of the existing pulpit and the erection of another, together with other alterations, would mean considerable expense: this, however, was not to prove an insuperable barrier. In the month of June of the same year the proposal was adopted, and arrangements made for raising the necessary funds. The work was put in hand in January, 1906, and in the following April the work was completed, and the baptistry opened free of debt.

It may be of interest to mention here that in connection with these alterations the construction of the baptistry, together with the woodwork, was carried out by the late Mr. Wm. Blake - who was then a deacon - in conjunction with Mr. Gee. The wrought-iron work in front of the rostrum was executed by Mr. N. French, who was also a deacon. The oak handrail of the old pulpit which had been worked by the last pastor, Wm. Wallis, was utilised in the making of a handrail in front of the present platform. The small table was presented by Mr. R. Smith, and the reading desk presented by the pastor and made by members of the congregation.

The year 1907 witnessed a further expansion of the work in the commencement of what is known as the Valley Mission. This work was started by Mrs. Chew, who, together with Mr. Chew, laboured hard and continuously until their removal from the neighbourhood. The women's meeting which Mrs. Chew conducted here, and in which she continued to take a special interest, has remained one of the chief features of the work. It is hoped that the day is not far distant when a permanent and more convenient building may be erected, where the work may be carried on more efficiently.



*INTERIOR VIEW
SHEWING READING DESK, PLATFORM WITH WROUGHT IRON FRONT
AND TABLE ALL MADE BY MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION*



URING the year 1908 a proposal was made to erect a kitchen at the rear of the chapel. Up to this time the Church had been dependent on the kindness of neighbours for kitchen accommodation and the heating of water on the occasions when public teas were arranged for. Again a special fund was raised which, together with the proceeds of a sale of work, not only enabled a kitchen to be built, but the present spacious and comfortable hall, which has and still continues to serve so many useful purposes. This building was opened free of debt in 1910.

Since the year 1910, the Church work has steadily progressed, and what has happened since is more or less familiar to all. With the outbreak of war, and subsequent events, the Church, through the enlistment of so many of the men, was greatly handicapped, and it was with difficulty that much of the work was continued.

I am firmly convinced that the future history of the work, which may some day be recorded by another pen, will still bear witness to the continued goodness of God, and speak of greater things that have been accomplished than the past history has revealed.

God grant that we who have been called to continue the work, which others commenced, may so labour that, when our turn shall come to hand it on to those who will follow us, we may have the conscious satisfaction of not only being true to our trust, but that we may be able to say "Lord, Thy pound hath gained ten pounds".



We only have, in this account, a brief summary of all that took place in the life of the church in the first fifty years but one can sense their pioneering spirit which was always looking to the future and seeing new possibilities of service. They seemed to be undaunted by such obstacles as lack of finances and were prepared to take risks and to make sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Those of us who are part of this church family today will feel an affinity with these folk and identify with their vision, their commitment to one another and their generosity.

Many people think that dates are boring and have little relevance when telling a story but these mile-stones of time sometimes reveal some interesting facts. In this story they record periods of rapid growth and activity which indicate a sovereign work of God.

It was in the year of 1870 that the Wallises first felt God was prompting them to teach the local children about Jesus. Just one year later a meeting place had been found and in a single month, September 1871, they held their first meeting for adults, their first prayer meeting and their first Sunday School. A new church family had been born in a day!

New children grow quickly and it must have taken Mr. and Mrs. Wallis by surprise to see the schoolroom soon filled to capacity and finding they were having to turn people away when it was too cold or wet for them to meet in the fields. When one remembers that the entire population of the area that is now Biggin Hill probably numbered only a few hundred, one can see that there was a real hunger to know God in those days. This in itself was a work of God's Spirit as He calls men and women to come to Him.

The next date to be recorded was less than three years from this new beginning when, in August 1874, 'a very large number of people' gathered to witness the laying of the foundation stone of what was to be the meeting place for the Cudham Baptists for the next fifty years.

We have no records of the names and faces of the ordinary church members but we can know a lot about them from the next recorded date. We know that they didn't mind getting their hands dirty and giving their energy, their time and their money, for it was only five months later, in February 1875, that the new building was finished and in use.



The Jail Lane chapel decorated for Harvest Thanksgiving. Note the oil lamps which were the only means of lighting in those days. The original negative, a square of broken glass, was discovered wrapped in paper among the photographs left by the late William Gillard.

It gives us a glimpse, not simply of a building, but of the humble folk who worshipped there who were generous in their giving and extravagant in their praise.

Some churches are 'planted' but others spring up it seems by a direct act of God like this new church that grew from the native soil and when Christians from churches in the surrounding area recognised what God was doing they were ready to lend a hand.

It is clear that Mr. and Mrs. Wallis knew God had called them for this work and given them a personal burden for their country neighbours but they weren't too proud to ask for help from friends who shared their vision and gladly welcomed those who offered to work with them. At a time when most churches only had the concept of a 'one man ministry' it seems that, in this young church, these men shared in the teaching and pastoral work, not in any professional or official sense, but simply as Christian brothers and friends.

This principle of friendship, and the recognition of God's gifts of men and ministries, is evident throughout the life of the church whenever the renewal of evangelistic fervour and the resultant growth signified God's presence with His people. It's exciting to see these principles outworked as the natural result of obedience to the Holy Spirit. Jesus had laid down these foundations in His church and these should have been the basis for all subsequent building however much society and culture were to change.

The timing of these events in relation to the history of the village that was to become Biggin Hill was significant and demonstrates the foreknowledge of God. Twenty years after this new church began to meet in the chapel in Jail Lane, an event occurred that was to change the nature of the area and affect its future in a way that no-one could have foreseen at the time. In the June of 1895 the Manor and estate of Aperfield Court was sold by auction to an enterprising gentleman who lived in London. The 500 acres of farms and picturesque hills and woods and valleys that had been part of the Manor of Aperfield since before the Norman conquest was to assume a new identity. The land was divided up into plots as private building land and people began to move out from south-east London to make a new start in the country, attracted by prices of between five and ten pounds a plot with a deposit of one pound. Some plots were purchased for building holiday homes or week-end cottages and some simply to picnic upon.

How could those early Biggin Hill Christians have known that this place would one day play a strategic role in the defence of the nation, that it would become a large housing area as part of Greater London or that, exactly one hundred years after that first meeting on the farm in Jail Lane, God would once again raise up a militant Church with a vision to reach every man, woman and child with the life-changing gospel of Christ?

These folk probably didn't know the word charismatic, but there is evidence that they did experience spiritual gifts. In his History, Mr Forbes mentions the 'strange coincidence' that brought him to Biggin Hill and quotes from a letter which refers to the prophetic pronouncement Mr Wallis had made concerning him. There were still people living in the village in the 1980's whose parents had been there at the time and had heard the prophecy and they obviously had found the circumstances so extraordinary that they had recounted the story to their children as a miraculous event in the life of their church.

The story they told was this: One Sunday evening in the summer of 1899 as the church was meeting in the little chapel in Jail Lane, Mr Wallis told someone to look out of the window and they would see the young man who "would carry on this work that I must relinquish". The young man in question, Mr Forbes, knew nothing of this. He had simply been enjoying a country walk from Tatsfield where he was spending the weekend on holiday. He had no intention of moving to the district at that time, but shortly after this the 'strange coincidence' occurred that resulted in him and his family coming to reside in Biggin Hill in the summer of 1900. What this was remains a mystery, but what is known is that when Mr Wallis died later that year Mr Forbes shared the preaching over the next five years. By this time the church had grown so much that it was in need of a full-time pastor and in June 1906 Mr Forbes began a ministry that lasted for eighteen years until the next historic event, the move from Jail Lane to the main road in Biggin Hill.

BETWEEN THE WARS

By the nineteen-twenties Biggin Hill had become a village in its own right and most of the houses were now occupied as permanent homes, even those that had originally been built as holiday bungalows or weekend chalets. There had been no restrictions on the type or construction of these homes so many were built mainly of timber and asbestos with covered wooden verandas overlooking the valleys or the tree-lined unmade avenues.

The village now boasted several shops including Temples Stores, a 'department' store which sold everything from food to furniture and the all-important paraffin for the oil lamps and cooking stoves. There was the Black Horse public house, 'The Teapot' tea room and a Council School built in 1914 where the main supermarket now stands. There was also an Anglican Church, affectionately known as the 'Tin Tabernacle', which had been built in 1903 in the Main Road on the corner of what is now Temple Road. This temporary chapel of corrugated iron and timber and painted a deep red, stood among a group of young fir trees overlooking the valley. It had been built as a Mission Church under the parish of Cudham to serve the growing community and continued to be the meeting-place for the Anglicans for the next fifty years. The whole area had all the quaint charm of the American outback as these early settlers built a community for themselves and as, these families 'were fruitful and multiplied', close family friendships formed that drew folk together from the different Christian communities.



The 'Tin Tabernacle' in the snow and Temple's stores. In the nineteen-twenties these two buildings stood on either side of Stock Hill, now Temple Road, where it joined the Main Road.



The nineteen twenties marked a time of change and new ventures for the 'Baptists' and once again the dates of these events reveal a burst of activity and indicate that God was among His people inspiring and encouraging them with faith, enthusiasm and a vision for the future. In 1924 a new meeting place, the Central Hall, was completed in the Main Road at the top of the village, in 1928 the little Valley Mission Chapel in Sunningvale Avenue opened its doors to serve the valley community and just a year later, in 1929, a third new chapel built at the foot of Leaves Green Common on the road to Bromley was opened.



(ABOVE) Leaves Green Baptist chapel soon after its opening in 1929 and (RIGHT) The Valley Mission chapel, now a community hall, taken around 1960.

This became a permanent meeting place for the Leaves Green Mission which had outgrown the converted stable where it had been meeting for over twenty years.

Three new purpose-built church buildings in five years indicate an enthusiasm and commitment to the spread of the gospel and a desire to see a worshipping community of people who knew the risen Jesus as Lord and Saviour in every locality. Once again, we feel at one with these pre-war Christians as we are aware of God imparting that same desire in our own hearts in the church today.

1918 marked the end of a period when the country was at war. Most men had been overseas and many had lost their lives leaving widows and orphans back at home. What a challenge it is to us that this group of disciples, far from taking time off to recover and concentrate all their efforts on their jobs, homes and families, threw themselves into a renewed effort to build the Kingdom of God. It was as if, instead of licking their wounds and excusing themselves from active service, they re-enlisted in God's Army. Perhaps they understood, better than those of us who have not had a personal experience of war for nearly fifty years, that the world is not a neutral place and that we have an enemy who, if not opposed, will take captive, corrupt and destroy. The word of God would not have commanded us to 'put on the whole armour of God' if Christian warfare was optional.

No minutes of church meetings from this period remain as all the official church records were destroyed in a tragic house fire soon after the second world war. However, despite the continual influx of people moving into the district, many of the old Biggin Hill residents remained and, as the events were recent enough to be remembered by these older folk, they were happy to share their memories. Their own impressions and recollections of what their parents had told them provided valuable information for this book as well as insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the church between the wars.

The historic march from the little wooden chapel in Jail Lane to the new premises in the Main Road in 1924 was still remembered by members of the Westbrooke, Abbot, Chilman, Blake, Maynard, Smith, and Gillard families. They remembered marching with the Sunday School to the music of the church brass band under a large banner which read 'Feed My Lambs'. Years later when the whole church once again took the gospel message to the streets of Biggin Hill with music and banners as part of the worldwide March for Jesus initiative it seems it was taking back lost ground and re-discovering its 'roots'!



“Our Day”, a special event to raise money for the building fund on 7th July 1923 at the Central Hall site. The clerical gentleman on the platform is the Curate-in-Charge at St.Mark’s Church.

A local church is a family unit and moving house always causes a certain amount of upheaval and discomfort in any family. This move was no exception for it was the occasion for the first recorded incident of a disagreement that was serious enough to result in folk leaving the church. As with any family argument the causes may seem trivial when years have blurred the memory and stories can often get distorted in the telling. All unresolved conflicts leave a bitter taste however, and arguments in the church are inevitably food for gossip and speculation by those who are looking for reasons to discredit God’s people. Without un-necessarily opening up issues that are now forgiven and forgotten it’s important, if this is to be an accurate history of the church, to examine the apparent reasons for this split in the church for there are always lessons to be learned from past mistakes.

After speaking with a number of people whose parents were in leadership at the time, it was clear that the disagreement was not about Christian doctrine but about procedure and principle. The main issue that is still remembered to this day is concerned with the methods of raising money for the new building in the Main Road, but contributing factors were probably also personal loyalties and perhaps a resistance to change.

The church had prospered under the ministry of Pastor Forbes. As his account of the church’s history shows, he was very aware of the foundations laid down in its early days which had become principles in the life of the church, particularly concerning God’s guidance and His provision of finance. The little chapel where they met had been built from God’s own storehouse as His people gave willingly and generously whether it was land, materials, labour, skills, time or money. Like the New Testament Christians that we read about in Acts, they discovered that by this sharing of their possessions their needs were met and the work was completed without debt. Their little chapel was seen as a very special place which had been built out of love and sacrifice and a great deal of affection was felt for the chapel and for their beloved minister. People recognised his gifts as a pastor and teacher and believed he had been specially chosen by God to lead the work.

Church numbers increase in two ways; by new birth as a direct result of evangelism and by Christians moving from other churches. Biggin Hill was not yet an established community but a growing village with new families continually moving in and many of the members would have joined simply by a letter of transfer from their previous church which was common practice at the time and still is in many churches today. These new members were probably unaware of the history of this part of God's family, how He had guided them, provided for them and what He had taught them over the years. They could not understand the deep affection bordering on reverence that the older members felt for the chapel and for their pastor. This need for people to understand their Christian heritage was probably what prompted Mr. Forbes to write down the church's early history and it is certainly the main reason for this account. It is good for each new member of the family to know its spiritual ancestry in order to understand its unique character.

The Baptist Church has always been the only non-conformist church in the village and this has meant that folk have joined from different traditions and doctrinal emphases. In many ways this has been a great asset to the work as the message of new birth through faith in the atoning work of Christ on the cross and the priesthood of all believers has been unhindered by petty denominational divisions between different churches in an un-godly competition with one another. New members from outside are also often able to make a valuable contribution to the forward progress of the church because their vision is un-hindered by mere tradition or sentiment and their faith by the disappointments and failures of the past. Cudham Baptist Church had always had a vision for winning their neighbours for Christ and maybe it took the new-comers to see that the main population was now a mile away and that it was time for the church to move onto the centre-stage of village life.

Mr. Gee, a retired builder who was superintendant of the Sunday School, offered to the church, free of charge, a plot of land next to the Council school in the Main Road for the erection of a fine new building to be the main meeting place for the church. This seemed, to the majority, to be too good an offer to refuse. It was proposed that a mortgage be raised on the property and that the raising of funds would include donations from non-church-goers as, it was argued, the new hall could be made available for various village activities and would therefore be of service to the community. So often men have a vision or a promise from God, and try to bring it about by human means; like Abraham they try to 'give God a hand' by doing the right thing in the wrong way, instead of having the faith to wait for Him to do things His way.

Both the minister and the church treasurer were among those who strongly opposed the move because of the method of raising money that were being proposed, while others were probably simply resisting change, hating the very idea of forsaking the building where the church had met to worship God for fifty years. Had Pastor Forbes and the leaders who supported him stayed to contend over this common error of the church of looking to the world for its methods and resources, perhaps future problems would have been avoided. However, he was under considerable pressure at home nursing his wife who was bed-ridden by this time and he probably had no heart for a fight so, when Brasted Baptist Church invited him to be their pastor, he decided to accept. At the same time, some of his friends transferred their membership to South Street Baptist Church at Westerham Hill, a mission work that had been planted by the Brasted church at the end of the last century. To the great credit of these folk, there was no major breakdown of fellowship over this issue and good relations were maintained between the two churches over the years.

There is no doubt however that misunderstandings did arise in the minds of people outside the church concerning the purpose of the Central Hall, as was initially called, for to them it was obviously a 'hall' rather than what they considered to be a 'proper church'.

It seems probable that this was because the new building was to have been just the first stage of a complex which would have eventually consisted of a proper 'chapel', workshops and sports facilities. This would explain why the hall was originally built without a baptistry and baptismal services continued to be held at the old chapel until a pool was installed at Central Hall at a later date.

The whole project was seen by many people as a new amenity for the village and for this reason it wasn't difficult to persuade them to contribute to the building fund. People usually want a return on their investment and it was inevitable that to some who helped in the venture it didn't seem that a church who told them they were sinners in need of God's grace was a useful local amenity.

We need to learn from this and remember that, whatever may seem to be the case, the 'World' and the Church of Christ are diametrically opposed and to agree with God that we should not be 'yoked with un-believers'. Because the church made the mistake of asking financial support from those whose aims and priorities were not in sympathy with the ultimate mission of the church, and because this was not recognised at the time, a seed of error was introduced which remained for many years and later grew into a fundamental flaw in the fabric of the church.

As far as the church membership was concerned however, there was no doubt in their minds that this was to be their new meeting place and that the land and premises belonged to them to use as they wished. This must have been the legal position as a loan was obtained from the Baptist Property Board and the deeds, still held by the Board to this day, stipulate that the property is to be used for preaching and teaching according to the evangelical faith held by the Baptist Church.

The church now called another minister. The Rev Felmingham proved to be a wise choice as this pastor, the third to lead the church since its beginnings, was a leader whose faith and character was to leave a lasting impression on all those who remembered him. As a young man in Wales he had caught the tail end of the Welsh revival and he preached the gospel faithfully throughout his long ministry in Biggin Hill which lasted until after the end of the second world war. He was remembered with affection as a 'man's man', holding the chaplaincy at the R.A.F. station, spending much of his time with the airmen and leading the local TOC H group. When the young men of the church were home on leave he would always insist on spending time with them to find out how they were getting on and to counsel or encourage them.



The Rev. Felmingham preached the gospel faithfully.

Mr Felmingham, as he was always known, was also good with young folk and many people could recall his talks in Sunday School when they were children and were thankful for the good biblical foundations he'd put in their lives.

The church now had three new buildings, a new name and a new pastor, and the work entered a new phase of growth and evangelistic activity. The Sunday School was a strong feature of church life with a weekly attendance of around a hundred and scripture exams, picnics and other outings and a yearly visit to the National Sunday School Rally at the Crystal Palace. There was also a thriving Youth Fellowship with its own wooden meeting hall for the teen-agers and a tennis court at the side of the building which was a great attraction as there were few recreational facilities in the village. Uniformed organisations were very popular with young people in those days and the church had both Boys and Girls Life Brigades with parades and annual Camps and their own brass band.

Music played an important part in church life as it does today. Worship would have often been quite a noisy affair for the band consisted of two cornets, double bass, tenor horn, trombone and a euphonium and the walls and the rafters of the hall must have shaken with the sound. The band played once a month for Sunday worship and every week for the Sunday School meetings. They also enjoyed playing at outdoor events and even travelled to other churches for meetings and concerts.

It is said that the home is the greatest influence on the individual and on society. In the Old Testament the well-known proverb states "Bring up a child in the way that it should go and it will not depart from it." In the New Testament, in the very first Christian sermon at Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that the gift of the Holy Spirit, who Jesus had promised to all those who believed, was "to you and to your children and to your children's children."

This biblical truth is born out in the history of this church. The band leader in those days was a Mr Maynard, who also acted as church caretaker, and it was very much a family affair as Mr Maynard's musical family of four sons and a daughter all played instruments in the band. Fifty years later the church worship band once again included four members of this family, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, as both the natural gifting and the spiritual calling of God had been passed on to the third and fourth generation.

Mr Maynard was the grandfather of Daphne, Geoffrey, David, and Rosemary Gillard. Geoff and David were both elders of the church when this history was written, and Daphne and her husband Trevor Beasley both members. Rosemary is married to Chris Smith who 'happens to be' the grandson of Mr Wallis' step-daughter and the great-grandson of Reuben Smith who was one of the deacons who pastored the church after the death of Mr. Wallis in 1900. The Smith family left the district in the thirties but Chris's parents moved back to Biggin Hill in 1967 and in 1970 Chris married Rosemary Gillard. In 1972 Chris and Rosie and Dave Gillard and his wife Susie were all converted and filled with the Holy Spirit on the same momentous evening. By 1980 Chris had joined the leadership team of the church, then became a founder elder in the first church plant into Penge and later in the City Church in Canterbury.

Before the second world war people were more self-motivated than we are today; they made their own entertainment and when something needed doing they did it themselves for this was before the days of the 'welfare state'. It was a time when there was still a sense of personal and national conscience and important issues were thought to be worth fighting for. Hard work, perseverance and honesty were universally considered to be virtues.

These characteristics were evident in the lives of the Biggin Hill Baptists as they sought to take their locality for Jesus. The following leaflet, which was circulated among the south London churches in 1932, reveals a militant people who were committed to this vision and were determined to get the job done.

Aggressive Evangelism

BIGGIN HILL BAPTISTS

:: OPEN FELLOWSHIP ::

Minister - Rev. JOHN FELMINGHAM


◆◆◆
Centres of Work:

The Central Hall, Main Road

Valley Mission Hall

Leaves Green Hall, Keston

◆◆◆

ur work is purely of a pioneering character. During the last few years hundreds of bungalows have been built, and a large, scattered population has become resident. The people are mostly of the working class. Many are struggling with poverty. There are few natives other than the children. The area is a wide one, and in pressing need of the Gospel. Our one aim is to win the people for Christ. The Church was formed some sixty years ago, and a small wooden Chapel was erected in Jail Lane, far away from the present population.

The present pastor settled in 1924. The Church then moved up to the large substantial Hall in the Main Road, which for four years had been in the course of construction, largely by the members themselves who gave their labour gratuitously.

The Adjacent Valley is a district by itself. Here, too, the population has enormously increased. The little cottage room where for many years the work was carried on became quite inadequate. Extension became a necessity. While in prayerful concern about the matter a gentleman came forward with the offer of a splendid site given on conditions that the building be erected within a specified time; that no mortgage be raised on the property, and that it be used distinctly for Mission purposes - free and open to all. Those conditions were gratefully and promptly accepted. A further sum of £100 was given by the Kent and Sussex Baptist Association, and gifts contributed by Church members and others. The work was put in hand at once and the building was opened in February 1928.

Leaves Green Mission was the next centre for aggressive effort. Here a small Mission had been carried on for many years by the Church in a hired stable. About five years ago it was evident that if the work was to successfully continue a site must at once be secured for a permanent building, as the land was rapidly being purchased in plots for building. The venture was made, the money (£200) being advanced on loan from the Baptist Property Board. Two years later faith was rewarded. A second gentleman came forward with such financial assistance as to make the erection of a commodious Hall possible. Voluntary labour again played a large part and the building was opened in July 1929.

There is no debt on the hall in the valley. On Leaves Green site, however, there is still £170 owing to the B.P.B. The debt on the Central Hall has been reduced to £240. This appeal is made in the hope that these debts may be entirely removed to free our hands for further evangelistic aggression.

WILL YOU HELP?

Great progress has been made. Both Church membership and Sunday School scholars have doubled in numbers amongst us. Personal visitation is a strong feature of the work. Large numbers of non-church-goers are kept in touch. Much personal work is done. All our effort is concentrated on making known the Gospel of the saving grace of God.

The members of the Church have given of their means and labour nobly. This appeal for help to clear off our remaining debt is sent out in the earnest hope that it will meet with generous response. The pastor would be most pleased to show visitors through the district.

From B. I. Greenwood, Esq.

"Mr. Felmingham reminds me of Nehemiah. He first 'prays to the God of heaven' and then 'makes request' at the sources of human assistance. He approaches a formidable task with discretion and energy, and appears to succeed in imbuing his folk with a similar spirit for his people seem to have a mind to work' - not half a mind. Nehemiah says that 'he that sounded the trumpet was by me, 'and the trumpet sounded with 'no uncertain sound' at Biggin Hill.

What a blessing it is, when so many trumpeters are sending forth confusing and distressing bugle-calls that only serve to bewilder and dishearten the soldiers of Christ and diminish their confidence and faith in their Captain and in His declared plan of campaign.

Yours sincerely,

B. I. GREENWOOD."

From Dr. J. C. Carlisle, C.H.

'All I know of the work of Biggin Hill is good and full of promise. It is a good investment for the Kingdom.

Yours sincerely,

J.C. CARLISLE, C.H."

From Rev. D. Llewellyn.

"I have personal knowledge of the good work which the Rev. Felmingham and his people are doing at Biggin Hill and district. In my judgement there is not a better, more necessary or more successful bit of work being done in any rural district in Kent.

Yours sincerely,

REV. D. LLEWELLYN."

Please help if you can.

Donations may be sent to:

Rev. John Felmingham, The Manse, Biggin Hill, Kent.

This cry to fellow-Christians to 'come over and help' by giving money to clear their debts shows the same spirit that caused the pioneers of the work to ask for help in teaching and preaching. It is a principle that can be seen in the New Testament church and shows that there was an awareness that they were simply a small part of the whole body of Christ.

A copy of this leaflet was discovered pasted carefully into a faded scrapbook of mementoes from Leaves Green Chapel from the period when the work was re-opened and it is virtually the only piece of documentary evidence to be preserved for the whole period from 1924 -1948 except for a few newspaper cuttings of weddings and funerals of church members. The militant church that it portrays would have probably loved to sing our present - day songs of Christian warfare. It is so easy to dismiss their old hymns as being irrelevant and out of date but the words of this popular hymn of the time seems to sum up their militant approach to winning the world for Jesus. I was told that it was a firm favourite with them so it makes an appropriate end to this chapter of the History:

*Onward Christian soldiers! marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus going on before.
Christ, the royal master, leads against the foe;
Forward into battle, see, His banners go:*

*ONWARD, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS,
MARCHING AS TO WAR,
WITH THE CROSS OF JESUS
GOING ON BEFORE.*

*At the sign of triumph satan's legions flee;
on then Christian soldiers, on to victory!
Hells foundations quiver at the shout of praise,
brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise:*

CHORUS

*Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wain,
but the Church of Jesus us constant will remain;
Gates of hell Can never 'gainst that Church prevail;
we have Christ's own promise and that cannot fail:*

CHORUS

*Like a mighty army moves the Church of God;
Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod;
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity:*

CHORUS

*Onward, then, ye people, join our happy throng,
blend with ours your voices in the triumph song;
Glory laud and honour unto Christ the King;
this through countless ages men and angels sing:*

CHORUS

DECLINE AND FALL.

It was the second world war that put Biggin Hill 'on the map' when it became perhaps the best known of the Battle of Britain RAF fighter bases which made such a vital contribution to the allied victory. The war however took its toll on the church as well as on the nation; much time, energy, prayer and sacrifice was invested and many lives lost and hardly a family was not in mourning.

Throughout the war years the spiritual defences of the church were valiantly maintained by a few faithful older men and women and also by the wives who were left with the responsibility of caring for their homes and families while their husbands were away fighting. In Biggin Hill this also meant living in constant danger as the airfield was a prime target for enemy attack. There is a lesson to be learned from this, for what is true in the material world is also true in the spiritual: Satan, the enemy of mankind, will always see the Church of Christ, when it is equipped and empowered by the Spirit of God, as the chief target for attack. He knows that the Church, as the army of God, has the power and authority to rescue men and women whom he has taken captive.

The Sunday School and Young Peoples Fellowship continued throughout the war years although their premises were used for another purpose. The large wooden hut which had been built in the grounds at the rear of the church as a games and activities room for the young people was now piled high with mattresses, stored there for emergency use in the event of a severe bombing raid on Biggin Hill. The main church building would then have become an emergency refuge and first-aid centre for homeless families. There must have been much prayer that these facilities would not be needed and, although some lives were lost due to the bombing of the airfield, most households escaped severe damage.

One particular occasion, when disaster was averted by divine intervention, is still a vivid part of the boyhood memories of a well-known local resident. This concerned the pastor, Mr Felmingham, who lived in a bungalow in Sutherland Avenue, a muddy track bordered by tall chestnut trees which still remains unsurfaced to this day. Early one morning an enemy plane was shot down and crashed through the roof of his home while he was away at an early prayer meeting with some of the church members. When he returned home he saw a hole in the ceiling above his bed and debris covering the place where he would have been sleeping. The plaque on his bedroom wall declaring the faithfulness of God must have taken on new meaning as he gave thanks for his deliverance.

In addition to the regular Sunday activities, the church buildings were also put to practical use during the rest of the week. Each week the main hall was transformed into a 'reading room' for the forces stationed at R.A.F. Biggin Hill, the soldiers who manned the batteries of anti-aircraft guns positioned around the village, and men who were home on leave. This refuge for the men was run by a Christian ministry to the forces and a full-time worker was employed, a Mr Wanstall, as an evangelist and counsellor. The room was set out with chairs and tables where the men could write letters home to their parents, wives or sweethearts in a peaceful atmosphere away from the barracks. There was also a large bookstall for those who just wanted to sit and read, and tea, coffee and light snacks were provided by the ladies of the church using the limited facilities of the church's little kitchen. A lovely way to offer practical and spiritual help during those difficult days.



This was taken during the war when the heavy slate roof of the lych-gate had been removed to prevent injury during air raids and Rev Felmingham's name is displayed on the noticeboard. The scripture text reads: Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise'

Mr Felmingham was now an old man but he continued to take an active fatherly interest in these young men throughout the war. He must have been delighted that the church's 'home' was being used for such a practical expression of Christian caring. Under his ministry Biggin Hill Baptist Church had remained true to its evangelical roots and had faithfully proclaimed the Gospel, reaching out into the community and generously sharing the blessings of God.

When people are in acute danger, when their lives are at stake and the odds against them appear to be overwhelming, 'they cry out to God and He hears them' but sadly its often the case that when their deliverance comes, instead of turning to Him in gratitude and praise, they take the credit for themselves and forget their Deliverer. The country had been defended against a formidable aggressor, but at a tremendous loss, and when it ended at last most people just wanted to forget about the war and get on with their lives.

The war had been about freedom and ideals. It had been a life and death struggle against an evil ideology that had threatened the whole of Europe and indeed the whole world. There was great rejoicing when victory was declared and we were no longer under the threat of invasion but soon people began to count the cost and directed all their energies towards rebuilding a materially crippled nation.

Materialistic forces were soon to take their grip and few people acknowledged the part prayer had played in the struggle against evil or gave thanks to God for their deliverance. Like the Old Testament people of Israel, the people of Great Britain quickly forgot the wonderful works of their God and began to erect other gods that they believed would serve them better. Little effort was made to rebuild the spiritual life of the nation and the post war years were to herald the growth of materialism, humanism, and moral compromise and old values and assumptions and the whole Christian ethic were gradually discarded.

Spiritual decline in the life of a church or in an individual is seldom a sudden dramatic occurrence: it happens slowly and imperceptibly like the gradual deterioration of a building



This group photo of the church was taken shortly after the war. The white-haired gentleman seated left of centre is their new pastor Rev Farrow with his wife on his left.

which is not maintained, or a marriage where the partners begin to take one another for granted and drift apart until their love is dead.

This should have been a time for the men to return and 'take up their tools' to rebuild the church but there was no fiery 'Nehemiah' to envision and direct them. When Mr Felmingham retired the country was still at war and his successor was an elderly retired minister, the Rev Farrow. It is always a challenge to take over another man's ministry, and enthusiastic leadership and stamina were needed to inspire and motivate the church's flagging zeal. Although his theology was 'sound' and he gave his support to every evangelistic endeavour, he avoided confrontation and is remembered, with affection, simply as a 'gracious old gentleman'.

The church continued to lose ground. In 1948 there was an attempt to revive the work at Leaves Green but this was only continued for a few years and was finally closed down in 1957. Not long after this, the Valley Mission ceased to be a separate work and its members became part of the Main Road Church, although services continued to be held there for those living in the valley.

Of the many lovely Christian folk in the Biggin Hill church who remained faithful to the truth of the gospel both during the war and in the immediate post-war years, two maiden ladies, Miss Chew and Miss Fletcher, deserve special mention. Miss Chew had grown up in the church family; it was her parents who had pioneered the work in the valley and the very first cottage meetings there had been held in their home. Generations of children have fond memories of their Sunday School days and of their teacher, little Miss Fletcher. Much of this lady's life was spent in devoted service to the children and she also served as church secretary for many years. It was her bungalow that was destroyed by the fire that resulted both in the tragic loss of life of her lady companion, and of all the church records.

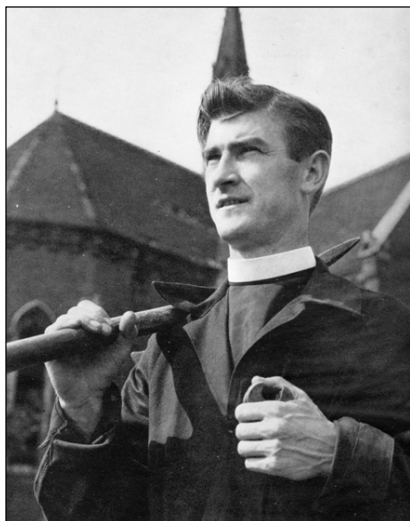
The years that followed the war have left few landmarks to the Kingdom of God in Biggin Hill, but there was one young man who stood out for his enthusiasm and uncompromising allegiance to Christ. Tom Tyer was born in Biggin Hill and he and his sister were both converted and baptised in the fifties. Tom played an important role in maintaining an evangelistic witness in the church and was the first of the church's 'offspring' to train at Bible School to prepare for full-time ministry. He was later to be involved in pioneering new churches and in the Christian book trade.

A significant landmark of the village's spiritual history remains from this time and, as a visible expression of one man's faith in a supernatural God and His personal call to service, it deserves to be recorded in this history. The landmark is the Church of Saint Mark, the 'Moving Church', and the man was the Rev Vivian Symons. He came to Biggin Hill in 1951 to minister to the Anglicans who still met in the pitifully inadequate 'tin tabernacle' and to act as chaplain to RAF Biggin Hill. It seems that he was a militant Christian who had a definite sense of the call of God on his life as is evident from this 'manifesto' to his new flock that was his first contribution to the Parish magazine:

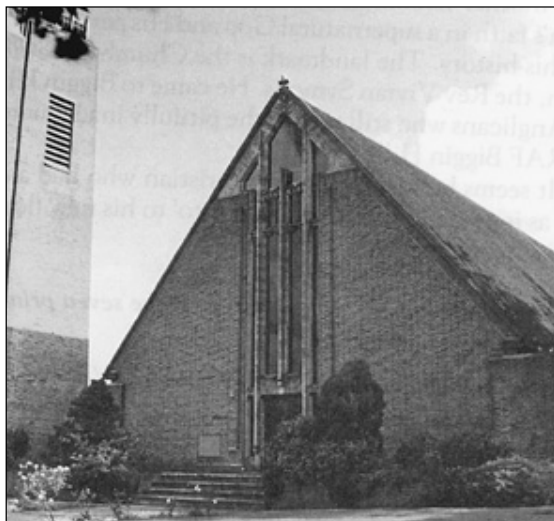
'My ministry here will be based on the seven principles which are always important in the church's warfare; they are:

- 1) Almighty God has sent me here on ACTIVE service - service of the Living God in His battle against sin, the world and the devil. Confidence of victory coming from union with Him who has not only borne the sin of the whole world, but has already given us the victory.*
- 2) On receiving the Cure on the 14th of September, the issue and responsibility for the local battle passed to me as God's appointed Minister. It is the calling and choice of God, who has also given the power to act. Consequently, in the building up of the body of Christ here, it is necessary to decide: What God wants done, when He wants it done, and how He wants it done.*
- 3) After deciding on that object, then we must concentrate upon it. It is far better to advance from definite objective to definite objective than to waste God's time by the dissipation of effort and energy that will lead nowhere, or at worst to defeat in detail.*
- 4) Constructive co-operation with the local authorities, schools, and organisations to show forth the love of God and to achieve His Divine Purpose.*
- 5) Exercise of the Divine authority given by the living God without exercising duplicity or compromising with evil*
- 6) To know those committed to my charge. Consequently visiting will rightly be the emphasis of my pastoral activity.*
- 7) To work with and for the true Christian unit of Ministration, i.e. the FAMILY, which is the Church in the Home; leading to the larger family of God in the Parish Church, which in turn is a component of the One, Holy, Catholic Church. The great truth of the world is that Almighty God has the initiative, and it is for us to acknowledge that the work He has given us to do can and will be done to His Eternal Glory....'*

God has His faithful servants in every age. Here was a man with a white hot zeal that must have warmed the heart of God. He felt his first priority was to replace the outgrown little mission chapel with a permanent Parish Church to provide a more fitting meeting place in which to worship God. The sacrifice, perseverance, energy and endurance he displayed as he demolished an enormous derelict Victorian church building in Peckham, South London and transferred it brick by brick and beam by gigantic beam to Biggin Hill almost single-handed was extraordinary. This seemingly impossible project caught the imagination of his parishioners and, inspired by his example, they enthusiastically helped him in any way they could with their equipment, expertise and time as each member of the body played their part. This unique story attracted the attention of the media and put Biggin Hill in the news and was documented in a book entitled 'The Moving Church'.



Rev Symon with the old church building in Peckham in the background.



The new church of St. Mark, 'The Moving Church' became a well-known Biggin Hill landmark.

One only has to enter the pleasant, light well proportioned building with its lovingly restored bricks and woodwork, the stonework and the pink-tinged windows, engraved by the vicar himself, to know that this was a man who believed that God deserved the very best.

God will often give us a natural, physical example to teach us a spiritual principle. His purpose for Biggin Hill, as for every place on earth, is to raise up a community of believers, growing together in the love and power of the Holy Spirit as a demonstration of His kingdom on earth. We can learn from the Rev Symons' example. He worked with all his mind and heart and strength for a building that will one day crumble away so how much more should we labour to build the kingdom of God that will last forever? Just as this man laboured, through faith in what he believed he was called to do, with all his natural energies and calling on the supernatural resources of God to help him in the task, so every child of God should give all their energy, gifts and resources to the building of the temple not made by hands but built of living stones and call on His mighty power.

But meanwhile the Baptist Church also had a change of leadership for in 1951, the year the Rev Symons arrived at St Mark's, Pastor Farrow retired and the church invited a much younger man, newly married and straight from All Nations Bible College, to serve as their 'lay' pastor. Some in the church may have thought Fred Marlowe's youth and

enthusiasm were all that was needed to revive their flagging zeal but his brief time with them was to bring only frustration and disappointment to the young couple. He quickly deduced that his appointment had not had unanimous approval for, although the church building had been packed with visitors for his induction to the pastorate, there were only nine people present for his first Sunday service.



The young Rev Fred Marlowe conducting a Harvest Festival service.

For the next eighteen months he held down a full-time job, took two services every Sunday and led the afternoon Sunday School, as well as other pastoral duties, but received little personal support from the church for his efforts. He had come from an evangelical free church and was surprised to find the Biggin Hill Baptists spending so much of their energies in money-raising events such as sales of work and jumble sales but all his attempts at reform were opposed. Eventually the strain became so great that he felt unable to continue and handed in his resignation.

Shortly before he and his wife left the village Fred Marlowe found himself in idle conversation with a lady while waiting for a bus. She provided him with an interesting insight into the effect of village gossip and is a reminder of people's tenacity in holding on to a grievance and may well explain one of the reasons for the church's apparent lack of impact in the community. "Now that you're leaving" she said "I'll tell you why your church will never prosper here. They raised money to build the Central Hall by public subscription because we were told it was for public use, but then they built a baptistry and called it a church and the village will never forgive them". It seemed that the church was continuing to pay dearly for the error of looking to the world for finances rather than trusting God to supply a home for them through His own family.

The church's finances had now dwindled with the decline in church attendance and as they sought a new minister they looked for a man who would be able to give them all of his time but without a salary. The obvious candidate was an older man and so the Rev Lambourne, a retired missionary to the Congo, moved into 'The Manse'.

The village was beginning to grow and, as families moved in the Sunday School, Girls and Boys Brigades and Youth clubs were all kept busy but the Sunday services only attracted those who were habitual church-goers and attendance remained poor.



Parents watch a Boys Brigade display in the Central Hall in 1960. *Annual Sunday School coach outings were family occasions. Rev Phillips can be seen on the extreme right of the group.*

The Rev Lambourne, with his history of missionary endeavour, had a keen desire to reach out to the community and introduced a monthly church newsheet to be circulated in the village with the aim of attracting new members but few people appeared to have any interest in God or see a need for a spiritual dimension to life.

The word of God was still being proclaimed publicly in the nation during these years however for Christ still had His faithful servants who continued to preach the gospel. There were calls across the Atlantic to Billy Graham, the American Evangelist, to "come over and help us" and large crusades were held in the nineteen-fifties and sixties in all the major cities and among the thousands of people who made 'decisions for Christ' are many of today's church leaders.

There may have been more genuine conversions but many people fell away because they were unable to find a church which could teach and encourage them to grow in their faith. I was converted in 1960, shortly after the Rev Phillips had succeeded the Rev Lambourne as pastor. He was a thoughtful well-educated man, a bible teacher with a real love of the Scriptures but during times when few people are responding to the gospel it is tempting to water down it's unchanging message. At Biggin Hill Baptist Church, as it was then called, the seeds of compromise were already being sown for, although salvation by faith in Christ alone was still preached at this time, baptism was simply offered as an option for new believers. The letter I received from the pastor after he heard of my response at a Crusade in London offered me baptism by immersion if I wished it but assured me that my profession of faith was all that was required for membership of the church.

As the requirements for membership decreased, numbers gradually increased and an ambitious building programme was put into operation to provide new Sunday School accommodation and a modern kitchen and toilets. The Rev Phillips didn't stay to enjoy the new facilities however for, in 1963, he accepted a pastorate of a church in the Isle of Wight and handed in his resignation.

The homely 'cottage' character of the chapel was radically 'modernised' during the 1960's. The chimney and inglenook on the south wall and the oak panelling were removed and the entire lay-out of the hall was reversed.



Once again the church had to find a new minister and on learning of a married theological student who would soon be looking for a church, and after hearing him preach, they decided to offer him the job on his graduation. The Rev Peter Webb was a popular choice as he was a likable young man full of enthusiasm and bright ideas. He and his wife Elizabeth and their young family made their home in the Manse a place where the younger members of the church were always welcome. He introduced new forms of worship, new terminology, new layouts for the seating in the hall, and each fresh idea resulted in an initial growth in numbers in the congregation. However he preached a 'liberal' interpretation of the gospel and the spiritual life of the church continued to decline. In 1968 Peter was invited to become the minister of a large church in Edinburgh, an offer which he felt he shouldn't refuse. The couple had become highly regarded by the whole church for their sincerity and warmth and their many friends were sad to see them leave.

His successor, the Rev Clive Peglar, had also recently graduated from a 'liberal' theological college. He came highly recommended as a brilliant scholar but he had been taught to question the authority of the Bible and the necessity of conversion or new-birth.

By this time Biggin Hill Baptist Church seemed to have lost its vision and its passionate belief in the power of the gospel of Christ to set men and women free from the power of sin. The main reason for the gradual spiritual decline had been a failure to maintain and defend the biblical foundations on which God had founded the work. Slowly but surely the Bible and the teaching of Jesus, and the apostles' doctrine that it contains, had ceased to be considered as the unchanging word of God for the faith and practices of the church. The humanism and intellectual arrogance that now dominated the western world's philosophy had gradually infiltrated the church and men and women began to question the wisdom and truth of God's word and subjected it to their own reason and philosophy.

Although the church had been a member of the Baptist Union since its earliest days, by the nineteen - fifties the term 'open fellowship' was being used. This meant that people from Methodist or Congregational church backgrounds where infant baptism was practised were accepted into membership without being required to be baptised by immersion as adult believers.

Inevitably, as time went by, some of these folk became part of the leadership, having been elected as deacons by a democratic vote at the Church Meeting. In the minutes of a deacons' meeting in February 1970 it was recorded that it had come to the attention of the Baptist Union that the trust deeds of the building were being contravened as fewer than half of the deacons had been baptised by immersion. In the discussion that followed no suggestion was recorded that a remedy would be to require the other deacons to be baptised nor, it seemed, was there any discussion on the doctrinal position of the church regarding this issue. The solution they reached was certainly ingenious! It was decided that the church secretary and the church treasurer would cease to be called deacons but would retain their appointments. This satisfied the letter, if not the spirit, of the law.

Baptism speaks of a radical break from the past since it symbolises death and new birth and nothing less will do in obedience to Christ's command. He has commissioned us to "go and make disciples..... baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit". When Peter preached the first sermon at Pentecost and those who were convicted of their sins by the Holy Spirit cried out "what must we do to be saved?", he told them plainly to "repent and be baptised". The result of this compromise in the church of the fifties and sixties had been to cast doubt on the necessity of a radical conversion experience. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there were few conversions and even fewer baptisms during this period.

The twenty-five years following the war had seen the spread of Universalism in all the main denominations and the gradual erosion of a belief in the absolute uniqueness of Christ, His divinity, His resurrection and His claims to be the only way to God. The Church of Jesus Christ must speak the words of Christ and do the works of Christ in every nation and to every generation for by this they become the 'salt and light' that exposes evil and prevents moral decay. In our nation there have been many factors that have contributed to the decline in the belief in God and in the bible as God's word and a departure from biblical morality, but the main blame must be apportioned to the Church for failing to speak for Christ. The Bible teaches that 'Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of God' so, if Christ's own followers are silent and appear to be unsure of the validity of His word, why should unbelievers think He is worth listening to?

If any part of the body of Christ begins to doubt its 'Head' and disobeys His instructions to preach the Gospel to all creation, then that part of the body dies. The resurrected Christ rebuked the church at Laodicea with these words "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either one or the other! So, because you are luke-warm neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth"

Another result from the preaching of a liberal theology in the life of the Biggin Hill Baptists was a lack of emphasis on personal and corporate prayer and a gradual erosion of a belief in the promises and privileges which are the birthright of every child of God. The idea that Christians could expect God to provide for their material needs if they put His kingdom first was considered arrogant; to confess an intimate personal relationship with their Heavenly Father was thought to be, at best, a delusion and, at worst, blasphemy. For those who reject the truth of God's word, He becomes One who is far removed from them, reached only through 'acts of worship' and 'good works', a poor substitute for the Gospel of Grace: God's free gift of new birth through faith in Christ alone.

This was a time of financial, as well as spiritual poverty. Not only had the Biggin Hill Baptists, in the main, lost their vision of winning the community for Christ, they seemed to have forgotten that Christians are princes and princesses, sons and daughters of the King of Kings, and had begun to think like orphans and beggars.

For many years the work had been supported by the Baptist Union Homework Fund, a scheme in which prosperous churches assisted poor and struggling ones. Although Peter Webb, and others, had introduced stewardship schemes and encouraged the church to be self-supporting, the main events in the church calendar were still the Christmas Bazaar and the Summer Fete. The residents of the village were invited to come and buy home-made dolls, jam, toilet-roll covers, covered coat-hangers, cakes and pickles to raise money for missionary work and for a church they probably no longer considered relevant. These events absorbed the time and energy of most of the church membership and, although a fruitless exercise in terms of spiritual fruit, showed an admirable commitment.



In the Summer, garden parties and sales of work were held on the field which would later become part of the site for a Safeway supermarket. The land originally belonged to the church but was later sold to the council for a few pounds.

By the nineteen-sixties Biggin Hill Baptist Church had earned the reputation of being a 'liberal' church, a title regarded as a real compliment by some but as a shameful stigma by evangelicals in the church. Among the core of born-again believers were three faithful old men, Will Gillard, Fred Jones and Alf Johnson, who continued to pray for the church and for the spread of the gospel further afield. Alf also regularly visited homes in the village sharing his faith and delivering copies of 'Challenge - The Good Newspaper'.

Other bible-believing Christians continued to preach the gospel to the children in Sunday Schools in both buildings and even ran an open Youth Club in the main road premises but the young people who responded to the Gospel soon fell away, for the church was unable to disciple them and bring them to Christian maturity. Some of those who were baptised and joined the church were idealists who wanted to change the world and, when they didn't find the Church appeared to have the answer, some turned instead to politics where they felt they could have more influence in the affairs of men.



Throughout the 'liberal' years the church's Girl's Brigade leaders continued to sow good seed. Here are Cora Tyer and Mrs Horton with the troupe at the 1965 Summer camp. On Cora's left is Christine Marshall who was to marry Christian writer and journalist Roger Day and to co-author several books with him and the tall young lady in the back row is Susan Hills who would marry David Gillard. Dave and Susie Gillard were to play a significant role in the life of the future church.

During this period the little Baptist Chapel at Westerham Hill where pastor Mr Uden faithfully preached the gospel for forty years until his retirement in 1989, was by then the only evangelical church in the area and consequently it attracted most of the evangelical Christians who were moving into the area.

Meanwhile the three Biggin Hill churches had been getting to be on friendly terms. Church Unity was becoming the worthy aim of the church at large at that time and the term 'ecumenical' was the 'in' word! An Inter - Church Committee had been formed while Peter Webb was the Baptist pastor and the combined meetings they arranged and the various fund-raising events for charity were well attended. There was already unity between those who were 'one in Christ Jesus' of course, whatever their church denomination, but by now few members of the Anglican, Catholic or Baptist church believed in re-birth and most probably held the view that all roads would eventually lead to God so consequently there was no corporate gospel outreach. To the onlooker in Biggin Hill all seemed to be thriving in the 'religious' community as the churches played their part in village life, getting on with one another and leaving everyone else alone. Few people were being rescued from hell of course, but that wasn't surprising if one believed that everyone was probably going to heaven anyway!

To the born again believers in Biggin Hill Baptist Church it seemed as if the church had now reached an all time low and it was probably time to abandon the sinking ship but they were to find that God had heard the prayers they had cried out to Him and that He was about to answer them in a way that would far exceed their wildest dreams.

THE CENTENARY - A NEW BEGINNING

In 1970 four deacons of the Baptist Church, with their wives, evangelicals who were involved in children's and young peoples' work in the Valley Mission building, had begun to meet together for prayer to seek God as to how they might re-establish an evangelical, Bible-believing church to reach the unsaved of Biggin Hill.

These meetings resulted in the four men visiting Baptist Church House, the Baptist Union headquarters, to enquire into the possibility of using the Valley Mission building once again for its original purpose, as the centre for an independent mission work.

This desperate move was not taken without a great deal of heart-searching, for they were aware that such an action would appear both hurtful and divisive, but a certain event had occurred that had brought matters to a head. A case of sexual immorality had occurred but this, though disappointing, would not in itself have been a reason for leaving the church had it been dealt with properly according to the clear teaching of the Bible. There could have been repentance, forgiveness and restitution but instead it continued to be unchallenged by the church until it became a source of gossip in the village.

Eventually the complications and politics of the whole affair became unendurable for one of the deacons, my husband Geoff Gillard. He decided that the time had come to resign both as deacon and member, for we both felt we had now reached 'rock-bottom'. We had seen little or no apparent fruit from all our years of hard work and now that the church had been so discredited in the village it seemed that the time had come to 'throw in the towel'. We had come to the conclusion we needed to move to somewhere where we could bring up our two boys in a good, lively church – but the Lord had other ideas!

It was exactly one hundred years since its humble beginnings in 1871 and the church was probably at its lowest ebb. In April 1971 the minister had resigned and the church was now without a pastor. In a deacons' meeting held in early June it was decided unanimously that it would be inappropriate to hold anniversary celebrations as it seemed there was nothing much to celebrate and no-one had the heart for it. But events were later to show that this centenary was still on God's agenda and there were soon to be celebrations in heaven as men and women in Biggin Hill were born again.

It was to have been the last deacons' meeting that Geoff would attend and he went into our lounge to pray for a while before leaving for the church. The letter of resignation was in his pocket and his mind made up but as he sat with a heavy heart an unexpected thing happened: He had opened his Bible and, as he asked for guidance, he read the words of Jesus from the book of Acts, chapter one "do not depart from Jerusalem. . . ."! He had never been guided in this way before but he was convinced that this must be a word from God and decided that he would tear up the letter and say nothing.

During this difficult time in the church at home I'd felt starved of Christian fellowship but Geoff had been attending lively meetings at an evangelical Anglican church in Mayfair in his lunch hours so when the vicar, the Rev John Kidd, invited him to a weekend house-party at Ashburnham Place in Sussex he jumped at the offer and enrolled our family.

The week-end was to be more of a working party than a conference, with the aim of recruiting the week-day worshippers as an evangelistic team to reach the un-saved of London's Mayfair but for us and our family it was to be the turning - point in our lives and in the life of the church in Biggin Hill.

On their arrival at Ashburnham we immediately struck up a rapport with an Anglican couple and their three children. Keith and Angie Routledge were bible-believing evangelicals whom God had baptised in the Holy Spirit two years earlier and the New Testament-style Christianity that they were experiencing seemed like living water in a desert to the thirsty couple. Keith had somewhat reluctantly agreed to entertain all the children at the house party while their parents were at the meetings and was delighted when we offered to help. We discovered that the two families had been allocated the same accommodation area so we were able to talk together all day and well into the night. We heard about the outpouring of the Spirit that was occurring all over the world, of healings and miracles and of lives being transformed by the power of God.



Geoff Gillard talking to the children in the grounds at Ashburnham. Among those sitting on the grass that sunny afternoon are Keith and Angie Routledge and John Kydd and his wife.

The couple who returned to Biggin Hill were noticeably changed from the care-worn and dis-spirited Christians who had left three days before. Our faith and hope had been rekindled and our friends and family noticed the difference and began to ask questions. Meanwhile, needy people seemed to arrive almost daily on our doorstep. For the next three weeks we studied the promises of Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth and early life of the Church. We became fully convinced that what our friends Keith and Angie had experienced was what Jesus Himself had promised to all believers and decided to invite them to stay for a week-end and to hold a 'Jesus party' to introduce them to our unsaved friends and relatives. We wanted to tap this resource of power that we had discovered in what we saw as these 'super-Christians'. It simply had not occurred to us at that time that the promise could be for us as well!

Late on the Sunday evening after a busy but apparently fruitless week-end of visits and parties, as our exhausted guests were about to leave for home, they asked Geoff and I if we would like them to lay their hands on us and ask the risen Lord Jesus to equip us for His service by baptising us with His Holy Spirit.

In John's Gospel, chapter seven, a promise of Jesus is recorded concerning the Holy Spirit: "If a man is thirsty let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.' As hands were laid on us, His wonderful gifts of overwhelming love, an effervescent joy and a deep sense of peace together with the supernatural gift of tongues were the immediate signs that Jesus had answered our prayer and had given them His living water. The date was the twenty- fifth of July 1971.

It was not until the following morning that we remembered the words of scripture we had been given less than a month before: the words of the risen Jesus "Do not depart from Jerusalem..." which we'd felt was a clear instruction not to leave the church. We had obeyed this word from God without understanding why He should want us to stay. Now we understood! Jesus had followed this instruction with a promise: "... but wait for the gift My Father has promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised in the Holy Spirit." We'd known nothing of the baptism in the Spirit, having been taught that the experience of Pentecost had been for the birth of the church, or at least until it got off the ground, and that the gifts of the Spirit were not available today. Now God had done what He'd promised and we were aware that this was the start of something new and that nothing would ever be the same again.

Only a few weeks later another event took place that was to be of great significance in the new work of the Spirit that began that night. Keith and Angie were having a Jesus Party in their home in London's Hammersmith so Geoff and I invited Geoff's brother David and wife Susie and his younger sister Rosie and husband Chris Smith. The basement flat was soon filled to overflowing as the Spirit-filled Christians joyfully sung praises to God with 'new songs' and told stories of the wonderful things God was doing in our lives while our guests listened with amazement. The room became quiet as believers were invited to share bread and wine to remember the loving sacrifice of the Saviour and to celebrate His presence with them. At that moment Chris knew Jesus Himself was inviting him and, as he ate and drank, he received the gift of new life. Later, after the other guests had left, we prayed together with our hosts in their attic room and by the time we left for home David, Susie, Chris and Rosie were all born again into God's own family and filled with His Holy Spirit.

Soon others were also baptised in the Holy Spirit, among them the church treasurer, David Cannon and his wife Evelyn and Norman and Carol Blows, friends from the nearby Westerham Hill Baptist Church. The Spirit-filled group of believers and enquirers who were hungry for God began to meet twice a week in our home. On Wednesday evenings we all gathered round the dining table for a basic bible study for new believers and on Fridays crowded into our lounge and lifted hearts and hands and voices to praise and worship Jesus. We began to discover and use our spiritual gifts as God gave us prophetic words and pictures concerning His purposes for the church and many promises for the future.

We were also being taught by the Holy Spirit about spiritual warfare. He showed us that Biggin Hill was under a dark spiritual cloud of materialism, adultery, apathy and unbelief and we began to 'wage war', praying in the name of Jesus and claiming the town for Him. We would split up into twos and walk around the streets in the dark, standing and praying for each area. On Saturdays we would gather on the main road outside the church building and sing the new scripture songs set to joyful contemporary music and tell people about Jesus.

We knew that the risen Jesus had baptised us in His Spirit in order that we should be His witnesses and so we threw ourselves into evangelism, expecting an easy victory with revival breaking out and hundreds of people turning to Christ. But God was reviving His people for a purpose and we were to discover that His first priority was His Church which had been on the point of death, that the gifts of the Spirit were to build the church, and that it was through His body that He wished to demonstrate His love and grace and power to a lost world.

The little home meeting grew in numbers as people were born again and filled with the Spirit, got baptised, became church members and attended the Sunday services. Among those whom God was filling with His Spirit at that time were men with a special call to ministry as elders in this church and later to the wider Christian community, both in Britain and overseas: David Gillard as a Christian musician and song-writer and later in teaching in evangelism and worship: Chris Smith as a pastor-teacher who was to become an elder of Penge Christian Fellowship, a young church planted out from Biggin Hill and who, in 1991, was pastor of another new work, the City Church, Canterbury: Norman Blows as part of the leadership team at Biggin Hill where he encouraged the church with his exuberant faith and enthusiastic preaching for many years until he was sent by the church to pastor another of it's 'offspring', The Town Church Sevenoaks. They would also travel to other countries to teach and encourage churches and to share with them what God has taught them here.

When a person or a church is sick they become introverted and are only aware of their own problems and needs and this had been true of the church at Biggin Hill. Now, as the Spirit-filled Christians lifted their hands to receive from God and their heads to look to Him, and as the risen Lord Jesus gave them gifts of prophecy and faith, they began to see things with a heavenly perspective and discovered that they had a part to play in God's Kingdom strategy.

As they began to come out of their isolation and meet with other Christians, they discovered that theirs was not a unique experience. All over Britain God was pouring out His Spirit on thirsty men, women and children, mature Christians and new converts, and on Church leaders of all denominations. Throughout the land small groups of people were beginning to gather together to share their experiences, to study the word of God, and to hear from Him.

Gifts of men and ministries were appearing and bringing teaching and direction from the word of God concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual and the use of the gifts of the Spirit in the Church. The Fountain Trust, a mainly Anglican ministry, was producing teaching tapes and organising conferences and praise meetings while at Post Green, a country estate near Wimborne in Dorset, the Christian Life College and an Easter camp were started that were to provide invaluable teaching and encouragement for those who were newly baptised in the Spirit.

The little group of Spirit-filled believers at Biggin Hill were to have much to thank God for in these brothers and sisters who strengthened and encouraged them in the early days. In the spring of 1972 almost the whole group attended the Post Green Family Camp which not only helped them to understand more about the ministry and gifts of the Spirit, but also deepened their sense of family and their commitment to one another. In the years to come the practice of getting away to camp together as a church to meet with other Christians for fellowship and bible teaching was to become an annual event. It was at a Post Green camp that they experienced their first miracle of healing as God healed one of the children of a serious heart defect, a healing that was later confirmed by a hospital consultant.



Post Green camp, spring 1974. Rosie and Chris Smith walk to the tent meeting. In the background is the old manor house, home of Tom and Faith Lees.



The Biggin Hill friends have their own tent meeting



The author with daughter, Anna, and Julie Cannon, now Cranenburgh, whose heart had been healed by God at Post Green.

They also met Jean Darnall for the first time and heard about the vision God had given her for Britain. It may seem strange to us that God should tell the lady pastor of a Pentecostal church in America to sell her house and all her possessions and come to live in England and then to give her a prophecy for the nation, but God works in mysterious ways! It was in 1966, soon after Rev Jean Darnall arrived in England, that she was given the picture she describes in her autobiography 'Heaven here I come', published in 1974.

'Suddenly the vision appeared within my mind. It had come twice before. I saw the British Isles glistening like a clump of jade in the grey seas surrounding them. It was a bird's eye view. Looking down I saw Scotland, England, Wales and to the northwest, Ireland The tree tops upon the hills and the clustered clouds hid the people. Suddenly small, flickering lights appeared. They were scattered all over the Isles. I came closer to the land. The light was firelight. These were fires burning from the top of Scotland to Land's End on the tip of Cornwall. Lightning streaked downward from the sky above me. I saw it touch down with flashing swiftness, exploding each of the fires into streams of light.

Like lava, they burned their fiery path downward from the top of Scotland to Land's End. The waters did not stop them, but the fire spread across the seas to Ireland and to Europe!

"Lord, this is the third time you've shown me this vision during prayer. Could you give me the meaning of it?" I asked, deeply moved by the Holy Spirit. He revealed to me that the small fires all over the land were groups of earnest, hungry people who were being drawn together by the Holy Spirit to study their Bibles and to pray for a visitation of the Holy Spirit. The words 'pockets of power' were being impressed on my mind. "I'm empowering them by My spirit and I'm teaching them about My gifts. They are being led by My Spirit to repentance, reconciliation and a deeper relationship with the body of Christ. These people are meeting in homes and churches. I'm not leading them out of their relationships in the home and in the church, but into a deeper involvement in both. They are to bring renewal; new life, in preparation for what is to come.

"What is to come, Lord?" I asked, wondering why He should show this to me.

"I will penetrate the darkness with a visitation of My power. With lightning swiftness I will release the power of My Spirit through a renewed people who have learned to be led of the Spirit. They will explode with a witness that will touch every part of the society of Britain. I am strategically placing them to touch the farms, villages, towns and cities. No-one will be without a witness whether they be children in the schools, farmers in the fields, workers in the factories and docks, students in the universities and colleges, the media, the press, the arts or government. All will be profoundly moved and those who are changed by My power will alter the destiny of the nation."

'And the streams of fiery light into Europe, Lord?' My mind seemed to see an army of all types of people moving into the continent with a compassionate ministry. This ministry was not mass meetings, led by powerful personalities, preaching to spectators, but participating, caring communities involved with each other at grass roots level, sharing the love of God everywhere. I saw the cradles of Europe, her churches, holding a new generation of Christian leaders.'

Here was a prophetic overview of God's strategy for the nation and the little group of Spirit-filled Christians in Biggin Hill, together with thousands of others throughout the country, was to have its individual part to play.

During the war, the airfield had played a strategic role in the nation's defence with Royal Air Force fighters taking off to fight the enemy. Perhaps this too was to prove a prophetic picture of the praying Church that He desired to build to wage war against His enemy and to do spiritual warfare on behalf of our nation.

God's timing is always precise, for 1971 was not only a momentous one for the church in Biggin Hill, but it was the year of the Nationwide Festival of Light, a call for Christians to take a stand against the moral and spiritual decline of the nation.

A young missionary, Peter Hill, on returning from India, had been shocked and dismayed by the decline of morality in Britain and by public attitudes to sexual morality in particular. He found many Christians here were convinced that the moral structures of the nation were being undermined by forces determined to destroy society and that it was time to unite and do something positive for Christ. While he was fasting and praying about the needs of the nation he saw a vision of tens of thousands of people, mostly young, marching for Christ in London and standing up for righteousness. He asked God for confirmation of this and one of the three confirmations that he received was the account of the prophetic vision given to Jean Darnall!

As a result of a meeting with other Christian leaders the idea for the Nationwide Festival of Light was conceived and a large rally in Trafalgar Square was organised with a March of Witness ending in a great gathering in Hyde Park. There, in the heart of the capital,



September 9th 1971. The crowds gather in Trafalgar square for prayer and praise before marching to Hyde Park.

the handful of Spirit-filled adults and children from Biggin Hill joined thousands of Christians of all denominations in Hyde Park as Arthur Blessitt led them in prayer for the nation. Such was the sense of the presence of God that not a person was left standing and even the policemen on duty knelt to join the crowd in singing the Lord's prayer.

On September 23rd 1971, as part of the Festival, beacon fires were to be ignited on strategic hill-tops throughout the land to alert the nation to the dangers threatening moral health and family life itself. This was to be a symbolic re-enactment of the ancient means of communication of an enemy attack that was used at the time of the Spanish Armada. The little group of Christians that God was bringing together in Biggin Hill heard about this, and discovered that their church was almost certainly near one of the ancient beacon sites. A recent article in the local newspaper had suggested that, since Biggin Hill Farm, which had given the village its name, had been located on the highest point in Kent, it had originally been called 'Beacon' Hill Farm after the hill on which it stood.

Time was short, but God provided everything that was needed: The proprietor of the local newspaper proved sympathetic to the aims of the Festival and agreed to include an editorial explaining what it was about; Saint Theresa's Catholic Church owned a vacant plot of land in the main road almost opposite the Baptist Church and the priest gladly agreed for a large fire to be lit and a platform erected; the local garage and petrol station next to the church building happened to be moving their premises and the owners were delighted to dispose of all their outdated fittings and the hundreds of feet of hardwood shelves and cabinets were piled high and provided an impressive blaze that lit up the sky for miles around on the night of Operation Beacon.

The vision given to Jean Darnall spoke of lights that were 'pockets of power' that God would strategically place to reach the whole nation. The beacon fire that was lit in Biggin Hill was an outward symbol of the spiritual flame that God had ignited in the hearts of a few very ordinary Christians who happened to be in the right place at the right time.



On Sept 23rd 1971 fires were ignited on strategic hill-tops throughout the land. Here, Cliff Richard lights up the Sheffield beacon.

In many ways this re-birth of the spiritual life of this Church resembled the start of the work a century before. It did not come about through the organisation or planning of men; it started in a very small way with two individuals; it grew rapidly until a church was raised up in a matter of months, and it was characterised by the same whole-hearted commitment to share the gospel.

Just a few months before it had seemed impossible that anything good would come out of Biggin Hill Baptist Church, but with God all things are possible. Even now it was hard to see how God was to rebuild a church that had been so discredited in the local community and had such a poor reputation among evangelicals for its liberal teaching. The work He had begun was to be a testimony to His amazing grace, His power to heal, restore and sustain and His enduring faithfulness. With God, nothing is impossible!

RE-LAYING FOUNDATIONS

To those attending the services at the Baptist Church nothing much appeared to have changed except for a growth in the congregation. Since the resignation of the former pastor, overall responsibility for the church had been put in the hands of a 'moderator', a lecturer from Spurgeon's Bible College. Outwardly the services were the same, except that the pulpit was filled each week by visiting Baptist ministers or by students from the college. These men, though probably unaware of the Holy Spirit revival in the lives of the congregation, nevertheless brought God's word for His embryo church. Week by week the message preached was the same: "This is My commandment, that you love one another" and this emphasis on relationship was to be a foundation of the new work God was beginning to build.

The words of Jesus came alive as the church learned to love and serve one another in practical ways and the Acts of the Apostles seemed almost to have been written about them as they met frequently in one another's homes, breaking bread and praising God together with hymns and psalms and spiritual songs.

In November 1971 the minutes of the deacons' meeting record the application for baptism of Chris Smith and David and Susie Gillard, the first baptisms for many years, and others were soon to follow. The moderator was heard to say that he thought revival could be breaking out in Biggin Hill but that he was somewhat alarmed at the 'pentecostal' experiences claimed by the new converts. He proposed that Graham Fawkes, a mature student from Spurgeon's College, should be called as part-time pastor of the church. By July 1972 the church once again had a man at the helm and he and his young family had moved into 'The Manse', the pastor's residence on the Main Road.

The new minister, although not believing that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were for today, was nevertheless a man who had a love for the word of God and was gifted as a preacher and so, after many years of liberal teaching, the gospel was again fearlessly preached from the pulpit of the Baptist Church. God was re-laying the foundations and the first 'stone' was the message preached by the apostles - that salvation was to be found only through repentance and faith in Christ's death on the cross for our sins.

Aware of the church's liberal reputation, Graham was determined to bring about some radical changes in its doctrines and practices, but was resolved to be patient and take things slowly for, as the saying goes, 'Rome wasn't built in a day!' The Bible, however, poses a challenging question: "Can a nation be born in a day?". What is impossible for men is possible to God! The wind of the Spirit was blowing, the life of God was once again filling His body, dry bones were coming to life, and the monotonous labour of Christian service was being replaced by the excitement of unexpected happenings.

This was demonstrated at the pastor's very first church meeting when he saw a fundamental foundational principal re-instated. This was concerning the whole area of church financing over which he had been prepared for a long hard fight.

The meeting's agenda was to review all the fund-raising activities of the various committees and organisations in the church and people freely aired their grievances, complaining of lack of help and discouragement. Some had filled their appointments for many years and no longer had any enthusiasm for the task so when asked whether, if given the choice, they would honestly wish to continue, the reply was an unanimous "no"! It had taken only a matter of minutes to decide, by a clear majority vote, that the raising of money by holding jumble sales, sales of work, Christmas bazaars and the like would cease and that from that time on the church would look to God to provide for His church through His own people through tithes and offerings. What would normally have taken several church meetings and much heated argument God had accomplished in one evening, much to the new minister's surprise.

God had already brought an instruction and a promise to the church from the pulpit concerning His provision. It was from Malachi chapter three verse ten: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out such a blessing that you will not have enough room for it. . .". Now He had miraculously re-layed this foundation in the church so that the promise could be realised.

As the traditions of men came crashing down, so the church looked again to the word of God for its guidance and re-discovered God's methods of finance, giving tithes to Him so that He in turn could give to them from His endless resources, 'pressed down and running over'! From this time on the church had no financial needs that God didn't meet through His own people; the debts of years were soon paid up, the church came off the 'Homework Fund' and before long were able to give to others and support full-time staff. The minutes of the church meeting of February 1973 records that David Cannon, as church treasurer, had reported that "The church finances are in a very healthy state"!

Although no records remain of the accounts of the first Biggin Hill Christians meeting in Jail lane a century before, their works clearly showed their faith and obedience to this principle as they gave land and built a chapel without borrowing. In the materialistic world of the nineteen-seventies the importance of God having His people's purse strings was another important foundation stone.

The growing group of Spirit-filled members had continued to meet separately for bible study, worship and prayer at 'Summerdown', the old house that was our family home. One Friday evening in the Autumn of 1972 however, God spoke to us through the words of Psalm 122 "Let us go into the house of the Lord" and we all felt sure He was telling us that it was now time to be totally committed to and fully identified with our church.

We applied to the deacons for permission and from then on all mid-week meetings were held in the church building until the introduction of the house groups which would eventually provide pastoral care and fellowship for every member of the church.

If the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit had caused a revolution in the lives of the evangelical believers in the church, the effect of the powerful preaching of the gospel on the remaining members was as unsettling as dynamite. Some who had never understood that God required a personal response to His initiative, gladly received Christ as their Saviour and Lord and were born again; others seemed dismayed by the proclamation of such an exclusive message which guaranteed salvation only to those who would trust in Christ and follow Him. The simplistic faith and confidence of the new Christians may have appeared to them as a disrespectful familiarity with Almighty God.

When Christians have been set on fire by the Holy Spirit their emotional worship, exuberant joy and their enthusiasm for saving the lost is often offensive to those who are used to formal church services and a private faith. This has always been the case since the first outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost when some thought Peter and his friends were drunk and were shocked as it was 'only nine o'clock in the morning!' Sadly, some folk who had served in the church nearly all their lives felt unable to adjust to the change that had occurred so rapidly and eventually they left the church.

One member, Margaret Williams, who had been actively involved in the ecumenical movement in the village in the sixties, was among those who handed in their resignations at that time. My husband Geoff, as church secretary, received her letter with a heavy heart and decided to keep it in his pocket for a while before handing it over to the pastor. Only a few weeks later Margaret was born again and, finding that her resignation had not yet been considered, she joyfully withdrew it. Margaret's gentle strength of character, cheerfulness and tact would have been a great loss to the church. Years later she was to join the church staff as secretary and receptionist in their fine new premises.



The Meet Jesus Music Band performing at a 'Jesus Rally' on Clapham Common in 1972.

Meanwhile, David and Geoff Gillard had become part of a new London-based band called 'Meet Jesus Music' led by song-writer, musician and friend Keith Routledge, who had taken a keen interest in the church during its re-birth. The band presented the gospel through songs and testimony at schools, colleges, churches and prisons and a number of Biggin Hill folk were converted at their concerts and became part of the church. Rallies were still being held in the London parks as part of The Nationwide Festival of Light and by attending these events as well as the meetings organised by the Fountain Trust, the church learned about what God was doing in other parts of His body.

As the number of new converts grew, God also began to call mature Christians with special gifts and experience. In 1972 Ray Lowe and his family visited the church for the first time for the Christmas Day family service. Ray was a lawyer with a firm of solicitors in Bromley and he and his wife Sue and their three daughters had heard about what had been happening in Biggin Hill from a musician friend who played with 'Meet Jesus Music'.

Ray and Sue had been baptised in the Spirit several years before while attending an Anglican church, St Johns Penge, where they'd been involved in evangelism and youth work. They had recently come through a difficult time and felt they needed a fresh start as part of a loving fellowship where they could feel at home without the pressure of responsibility. On their visit that Christmas they knew their prayers had been answered and in February 1973 Ray and Sue joined the church and by August they had bought a house in the valley in Biggin Hill and moved into their new home.

The pastor, who was still completing his studies at Spurgeon's College and therefore unable to devote as much time to the church as he would have liked, was quick to recognise Ray's leadership potential. Within a few months of them joining the church, having learned of Ray's previous experience working with young people, it was proposed that he should be appointed as youth leader and, despite Ray's original intention to take a back seat, he agreed.

The church's One Way Club which had been started by Pete and Trish Vian as a way of reaching out to young people in the community was soon also providing bible teaching and spiritual encouragement for new young Christians. It had become one of the main areas of growth in the church and among those who became Christians at that time were young men and women who were to have significant ministries in the future. Ray was a keen sportsman who enjoyed the company of young people and he threw himself into the work. In the spring of 1974 he took a group of about forty young people to Cornwall on an Easter holiday for fun, fellowship and teaching. The pastor joined them, for by this time the two men had become good friends, and one evening, during a time of worship and ministry, he also was baptised in the Holy Spirit.



August 1978. By now the large Edwardian cliff-top house at Polzeath in Cornwall where Ray took the One Way Club in 1974 had become an annual holiday home for the whole church family.

The new wine of the Spirit requires new wineskins. Many of the church activities which had not been based on the biblical pattern but on tradition, such as the method of financing the work, had already been abandoned. As the the Holy Spirit brought more revelation from the word of God on the structure and ministries of the early Church it became clear that other things needed to change.

The concept of the Baptist Church Minister who had a 'one-man ministry' was found to have no counterpart in the early Church and was inconsistent with the teaching found in Paul's letters which speak of a plurality of ministries in the body of Christ. The bible speaks of gifts of men to the church, some apostles, some evangelists, some prophets, and some pastor/teachers.

The democratic methods of electing a minister and deacons who would then need to obtain a majority vote from the church membership for any proposal, although seemingly a sensible and fair method of church government, was also not found in the word of God. The Church, it was discovered, was a 'theocracy' rather than a 'democracy', a family rather than an organisation. The whole emphasis placed on the church business meeting, when re-examined in the light of scripture, simply didn't tally with the New Testament pattern.

The New Testament writers speak of God-given authority and anointing of leadership, of elders who were appointed to rule over the Church and of the sort of men these should be. The obvious next step was to appoint a team of elders to govern the church. The members were asked to pray about this important step and, although no vote was taken, opportunity was given for everyone to share their feelings on the matter. In due course three men, Graham Fawkes, Ray Lowe and David Cannon, were recognised as elders by the church.

Jesus spoke of the dangers of mending an old garment with a new cloth patch. It is often hard to 'put off the old and put on the new' and in many ways this was a period of transition in the life of the church. The old method of acquiring a minister had been to invite a 'professional' from outside who had the necessary qualifications for the job. The pastor knew a gifted young married man, a fellow student at Spurgeons College who was about to graduate, and suggested to Ray that they should ask him to join the leadership team as an elder with responsibility for the youth work. This would free Ray Lowe to fulfil his growing pastoral ministry. The young man accepted the offer and, in the spring of 1974, having obtained a teaching post at a boys' school in Bromley, he and his wife moved to Biggin Hill.

In some ways this was like history repeating itself as a newcomer, unknown to the church and having no knowledge of the church's people, background or character took up leadership. Although this was an obvious draw-back, he brought with him a fresh breath of the Spirit from another part of the church and was soon accepted as part of the family. He had previously been under the ministry of Gerald Coates, who led the Cobham Fellowship, and was able to pass on some of the scriptural teaching about building relationships in the church that they had been re-discovering.

This was the start of what was to be called the 'House-Church' movement which encouraged a move away from formal church life with its emphasis on services and meetings and stressed the importance of relationships and of loving and caring for one another. Home-based pastoral groups were started and every church member was placed in one of these groups under a leader who, in turn, was responsible to one of the elders. The new talk in the church was about 'shepherds' and 'shepherding'. Leaders were to be like shepherds bringing loving direction and counsel to those in their charge and they, in turn, were to receive their leader's encouragement or correction and respect them as those who were responsible to God for them. Shepherds were to be those who didn't simply preach to their flock but could say "follow me" and set an example by their character and lifestyle.

The church had seen some significant spiritual advances into areas which, for many years, had been closed to the gospel. This was particularly true of the whole valley area of Biggin Hill where people were now being saved and filled with the Spirit.



'House groups' have remained an essential part of church life. This picture was taken in the early eighties. Seated around the room (from left to right) are Cecil Gillard, Will Gillard, Steve Cranenburgh, Duncan Nex, Julie Cranenburgh, Neil McGugan, George Searles, Ann McGugan, Gay Searles and Ella Mayhew.

It was now decided to move out from the valley into the neighbouring village of Tatsfield from which, it was said, Wesley had once 'shaken the dust from his feet' because no-one there would receive him or the gospel message that he preached. Prayer meetings were held there and the young teacher and his wife bought a house in the village and a number of the church members formed a house group under their leadership with a view to establishing a church there.

This would not be an accurate portrayal of the church if the failures and weaknesses were not recorded, as well as its successes and strengths. John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus to be the one who would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. God is described elsewhere in scripture as 'a refining fire' and He was doing a refining work in His servants as the light of His word was illuminating previously hidden areas in their lives. The young leader of the Tatsfield house group was feeling its effects as he struggled with a personal weakness in his own character. Because he knew that he was unable to maintain a good witness for Christ at that time or be an example to those he was shepherding, the couple moved out of the village and returned to the Cobham fellowship where he could receive the ministry of others. It may be that the timing was not right or that the church itself was not ready but, despite its promising start, the whole work at Tatsfield came to a halt, at least for a time.

Meanwhile the pastor also had been coming under the painful scrutiny of the Holy Spirit. While it was undoubtedly true that he was gifted as a preacher and had a love for the scriptures, he had been appointed under the old system; 'called' by the church because he was theologically trained at Bible College and was therefore thought to be qualified to be a Baptist church minister. Jesus said that if the new wine didn't get a new wine-skin the old skin would break and there would be wastage; now this Baptist minister had been filled with the new wine and the old wine-skin of his life required some dramatic changes.

As he began to bring pastoral teaching to the church concerning marriage, family life, and relationships in the family of God he began to experience the uncomfortable fact that the word of God is a two-edged sword. Folk were learning to walk openly with one another, and love one another enough to bring correction as well as encouragement and praise. It became necessary for Ray and the other leaders to admonish him in private and to propose an appropriate action that would give him time to put his life in order away from the spotlight of public ministry. They suggested that he should stand down from leadership for a while to allow him to receive ministry from others and have time to spend with God and with his wife and family. He acknowledged the wisdom of this and wrote a gracious letter to every member explaining, in general terms, the reasons for his decision to take a back seat for a while. The letter was well received as the church respected him for his courage and honesty and they looked forward to enjoying the benefits of his ministry in the future.

Sadly, this never came about and he eventually left the church and some of his friends felt they should demonstrate their personal loyalty and friendship by leaving with him and joining the church of St Mark where he soon became part of the 'lay' leadership. It was not long before he was obliged to stand down from this ministry also and, soon after, he moved away from the district. This was both a personal tragedy for a servant of God and a sad loss for the church in terms of ministry and the breakdown of relationship.

After the full-time minister left, Ray Lowe found himself increasingly in the role of pastor and, although his employers were sympathetic, he was finding it impossible to fulfil his commitments either to them or to the church. A meeting was held with the other leaders to decide whether it was time for Ray to leave his secular employment and become the full-time pastor supported by the church.

In February 1978, for the first time for many years, the church had a pastor who would be supported entirely by the church membership. It was decided that Ray should have some formal theological training and in September he began a four-year part-time degree course at Spurgeons College. This was mainly in order that he could receive full accreditation as a Baptist Minister and so fulfil a clause in the trust deeds of the church property.

Ray threw himself enthusiastically into his new job as he had a great desire to help build a church that would be an example to the community and to the world but, although there were other leaders in the church, he felt conscious of the weight of responsibility and a feeling of isolation. The church had no outside supervision or oversight and no-one who could be an impartial mediator in family disagreements. Having removed the authority for decision-making from the church meeting where grievances and disagreements had been aired in the past, it was now easy for mis-understandings to occur due to personality clashes or a breakdown in communication. The church was in need of a 'father-figure' and again it was found that God had promised this provision in His word and another New Testament foundation was about to be laid. As God had been restoring His Church He had also been raising up apostles to be overseers of the new work He had begun.

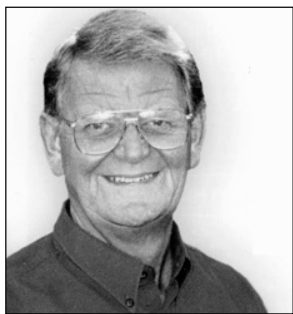
While an increasing number of Christians now acknowledged that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were for the Church today, men with specific and essential ministries were not so easy to accept as gifts from God. Men with pastoral or teaching gifts were being appointed as elders in many churches but the gift of an apostle was not generally recognised simply because, as in the case of the spiritual gifts, the ministry was thought to have been limited to the original founders of the first century Church.

An apostle was someone appointed and gifted by God to be a 'wise master-builder', an over-seer and a planter of churches. As this fresh initiative of the Holy Spirit was bringing revival to God's people and giving birth to new communities of Christians, so He was once again raising up men who would bring order and direction. As in the days of Nehemiah, when the Books of the Law were rediscovered, these men were rediscovering truths from the word of God that had been neglected. They had prophetic vision and a burning zeal for the Church and were already drawing around them groups of men who shared their vision or who looked to them to assist them in the building up of their churches or to bring insight and Godly wisdom.

The church in Biggin Hill had already received input from some of these men as the leaders, fearing they could be in danger of becoming too individualistic or doctrinally narrow, asked men from other 'streams' of the Church to preach and teach. This however had occasionally led to confusion among the flock, sometimes due to mis-understanding the message and sometimes because of an undue emphasis on either holiness or grace. Sheep need a shepherd who knows them and loves them and who they can love and trust.

Among those who had fulfilled a valuable apostolic ministry to the church was Henry Tyler, an older man with a great sense of fun combined with a reverence for God's word and a love for His people. Some of the house group leaders had met Henry in 1975 at a conference organised by 'the Baptist Revival Fellowship' and, at their request, he made a number of visits to the church and soon became a dear friend. Another significant visitor was Peter Parris who brought a prophecy to the church that it would continue to grow in numbers until they overflowed into the car park and people would have to look in through the windows. This prophecy was fulfilled one summer morning in 1984 during a memorable baptismal service. A man walking by noticed a crowd of people in the church car park, some standing on benches and chairs to watch the baptism through the open windows. Intrigued, he came and joined them, was helped to climb through for a closer look, and as a result of what he saw and heard was converted and added to the church.

In 1979 Ray attended a conference in Bradford where another group of men were coming together around the fiery Welsh preacher, Bryn Jones. The speaker at the conference was Ern Baxter, from America, who was to become a regular visitor to Britain as one of the main teachers at the Dales Bible Weeks which drew church groups from all over the country during the late seventies and eighties. One of the other men attending the conference in Bradford was the pastor of a church at Seaford on the Sussex coast, Terry Virgo, who was beginning to earn the respect of a growing number of church leaders in the south-east corner of England for his clear, balanced teaching on New Testament church life.



Terry Virgo - an apostle to the church.

It was suggested to Ray that he should spend some time with Terry and an informal meeting took place as the two men walked and talked together on the South Downs; As a result of that meeting, Terry was invited to visit the church at Biggin Hill and a relationship was forged that still exists today. Both Ray, as pastor, and the church as a whole, responded warmly both to the man and the message he brought and, recognising his apostolic gift, were glad to submit to his oversight. At the family meeting one of the house group leaders, Pete Vian, expressed the feelings of the whole church when he declared "Terry is like the missing piece of the jigsaw!"

The church had been through a painful time. Some of those whom they had looked to for leadership had disappointed them and now only Ray remained with pastoral authority. He knew that other elders needed to be appointed; men whom the people loved and trusted and who would, in turn, love and care for them. He already had three men in mind but felt that he should keep his thoughts to himself until he had received confirmation from his wise new friend.

Terry spent considerable time with the church, getting to know everyone, and was quick to recognise the men who were already acting as shepherds of the flock. He told Ray that he believed these men should be set aside as elders. They were all leaders of house groups; Norman Blows and Geoff Gillard who had been involved from the new beginning of the church, and Barry Gould who, as a mature Christian, had joined the church with his wife and daughters a few years earlier and had become a loved and respected part of the family.

These were the same three men that Ray had already felt should join him in leadership. With this confirmation, and with the enthusiastic approval of the whole church, the three men were 'set apart' as elders. Terry Virgo, in his role as apostle to the church, came to 'lay hands' on them, in New Testament fashion and their brothers and sister gathered round them with prayer and thanksgiving.

As with all building work, digging the footings had been hard, often discouraging, and not without problems, but now the foundations had been laid. From this secure base, the church could grow and develop to become a 'giving' and 'sending' church, reaching out to their community and beyond and engaging in spiritual prayer warfare. A city set on a hill.



Each year a hardy group of singers and musicians, armed with banners and tracts, donned woolly hats, scarves and gloves to brave the cold north wind. On the Saturday mornings leading up to Christmas they were out in the high street praising the Saviour and sharing their faith with their Biggin Hill neighbours.

BUILDING THE WALLS

Throughout the history of God's people they have been exhorted to worship and praise Him in song. The Old Testament Prophets spoke of God's promise to 'put a new song in their mouths, a song of praise to our God' and Paul exhorted the newborn church to 'sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' with gratitude in their hearts.

One of the signs of spiritual revival in the Church is an explosion of creativity, particularly in music and song, and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit that began around 1970 was no exception. All around the world psalms (scriptures set to music) and new hymns and spiritual songs, often prophetic in nature, were being written.

The church in Biggin Hill had its own song-writers. One was Brook Tricket who, on becoming a Christian through the witness of a member of the church, sold up his business and bought a large old house in the valley where he set up a recording studio to produce Christian records. He even produced an album of the church's own songs.

One of the Christian singers who used Brook's 'Soundtree Studio' at that time was the song-writer and evangelist, Rob Newey who was working as a worship leader and schools' evangelist with Don Double's 'Good News Crusade' and living in Cornwall. When Rob and his wife Elaine visited Biggin Hill in 1979, while Rob was making his first record with the studio, their first impressions of the village were distinctly unfavourable. Both remember remarking that they "would hate to live in a place like that!" This would seem to one of those occasions when God, who knows the plans He has for us, smiles.

At a meeting in 1987 Rob and Elaine received a prophesy that was to be fulfilled to the last detail. John Barr, an Elim pastor from East London, prophesied that they would soon be in a church who would love and care for them and be a home-base for them. He even had a picture of the house they would be living in - an end-of-terrace with a red front door and a room for Rob to work in. This seemed a promise that was almost too good to be true but God works in surprising ways. After extensive house-hunting in the south London area, they reluctantly went to look at a house in Biggin Hill and both felt at once that this was the one. It was only later, as they sat outside in the car, that they noticed the red front door! They soon discovered that God had also provided the spiritual home he had promised where they would be loved and cared for. Rob and Elaine were another of God's wonderful gifts to the church in Biggin Hill and it was not long before they could say from the heart "we wouldn't want to be anywhere else".

This emphasis on loving and caring for one another was the theme of the Christian musical, "Come Together" by the American songwriters Jimmy and Carol Owens. In 1974 Pat Boone, the American singer and film actor, performed the musical in the main cities of Great Britain with a touring company of Christian singers and musicians. The following year, many of the evangelical churches of Britain got together and put on their own performances in large meeting places such as cinemas and cathedrals. With a narrative from the Living Bible and Bible words set to contemporary music, it presented a clear challenge to the Church to love one another and to preach the gospel to every nation.

Songs such as “Bind us together Lord, bind us together, with chords that cannot be broken” and “Freely, freely you have received, freely, freely give” began to be sung by Christians in churches of all denominations where the Holy Spirit was moving.

At the very start of this fresh move of the Spirit in the church in Biggin Hill God had given them a command and a promise. They were to be a ‘giving’ church and, if they gave generously and cheerfully of all that He had given them, He would continue to pour out His blessings on them. By this time they were unusually blessed with gifted musicians and singers and, since the other churches in the area were not interested in a combined venture, they decided to stage the musical themselves. This was an opportunity to encourage other Christians, share the gospel and minister with the gifts of the Spirit.

At the performances in their own church building many people heard the gospel for the first time, some became Christians and others received healing as the performers moved out into the audience to pray for those in need. As a result there were invitations from other churches and over the next twelve months they were able to take this powerful message and ministry to Anglican, Methodist and Baptist churches as well as a tent mission in South London.

Most of the evangelistic and missionary endeavours of the past have operated as independent ministries, the gathering of evangelistically-motivated people to ‘go and preach the gospel to every nation’. The New Testament evangelist however had been part of the local church and had worked together with the apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers to ‘go and make disciples’. The church at Biggin Hill shared this commission with every other local church and God had provided musical gifting to help get the job done.

David Gillard was still very involved with “Meet Jesus Music” as lead guitarist and evangelist. The group had been greatly used by God in the past but had never been accountable to a particular church or had any spiritual oversight and David felt it was now losing its way. He had a deep love and a considerable gift for making music but he was an evangelist at heart and since his conversion this had taken first place in his life. To him the band had simply been a tool for sharing the gospel. Two other members of the church, our son Matthew Gillard and the band’s sound engineer Mike Waller, shared his feelings and, although it was hard to part company with those who had become dear friends, they felt they no longer had the same vision and in 1979 all three regretfully left the band.

The church had been enjoying David and Matthew’s ministry as, together with Gareth Wales, Iain Weir and other musicians, they had led the worship each Sunday. David felt it was time for the church to have its own band which could be used as a tool for evangelism. David, Matthew, Iain, Gareth and Mike Waller (on the sound mixing desk) began rehearsing together as a band they called “Kingdom Come”. At the band’s very first concert a young woman, who had been playing saxophone in a jazz band, became a Christian. Sheilagh Rawlins joined the church and before long became the sixth member of the band. For the next eight years they played at schools, youth clubs, churches and prisons and led the teen-age work at the Downs Bible Week from its beginning in 1980.

During the late 1970’s a growing number of families had been making an annual trek with tent or caravan to Harrogate where the Yorkshire Agricultural Showground became the venue for the Dales Bible Week. This was a huge gathering of Christians eager to hear God’s word for the church in Britain through men with apostolic and prophetic gifts. By 1979 the number of churches that were being renewed by the Holy Spirit had increased to such an extent that people were being turned away and it was decided to start other annual Bible weeks for those living in the south of England.



Kingdom Come at the base of Nelson's Column proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom in the heart of the Capital. Sheilagh, Iain, David, Matthew and Gareth taking part in 'Tell-a-Tourist'

A team of men, all pastors of churches in the south east, began to meet together with Terry Virgo to plan a Bible Week to serve the churches of their region and an ideal site was found; Plumpton race-course on the South Downs behind Brighton. Plumpton was not far from where Terry was pastoring the growing church of Clarendon in Hove and that Summer the first Downs Bible Week was held there but the site was only able to accommodate camping for five thousand people so, after a few years, the programme had to be repeated for a second week. By 1989 ten thousand people were camping on site every year as well as many hundreds who were attending as day visitors.

All the family's needs were catered for from the smallest infant, through children and teenagers, to adults. A whole army of volunteers were recruited each year to help set up the encampment of marquees, mark out the camping areas for the various churches, and to teach and entertain the thousands of children and young people.

Neil McGugan from Biggin Hill leads the 'Nines and Tens'. Each year the teams of childrens' workers were amply rewarded for their labours as they saw God powerfully at work.



Each year the church at Biggin Hill provided willing helpers, including team leaders as well as teachers for the children and teens. Its musicians played for worship, both for the main and teen's meetings, and for the seminars that were held each morning. In this way it continued to be a generous, giving church, sharing gifts and ministries as well as their experience with other churches. The teaching, fellowship and fun of the Bible Weeks played an important part in building the Biggin Hill church family and close friendships were formed as they camped together, serving and praying with one another and sharing one another's lives.

The Bible Weeks also provided a valuable teaching resource for all the new house churches as well as the denominational churches like Biggin Hill that God was restoring. Foundations were being strengthened and the fabric of New Testament church life was being put together as people applied biblical teaching to their lives and allowed God to change their attitudes and behaviour.



'The Downs' became an annual holiday for all the family and for many the high-spot of the church's year. This sunny afternoon was a good opportunity to share food and friendship and enjoy a barbeque together.

Much of this was concerned with relationships in marriage and the family and people were discovering how radically God's viewpoint differed from what was generally accepted in society at large. In a 'uni-sex', 'women's lib' culture, women were rediscovering what their physiology had always proved; that men and women had been designed with different functions, had different natural gifts as well as appearance, and had different roles to play in family and church life. People were hearing, some for the first time, the scriptural injunctions: 'wives submit to your husbands', 'husbands love your wives', 'children obey your parents', and were discovering their parental duty to discipline, as well as encourage, their children.

In the nation at large, marriages and families were being torn apart. Christian marriages were becoming the main focus of spiritual attack by the increasing numbers of witches' covens and satanist churches and by those in authority who were promoting or condoning promiscuity and homosexual relationships. The family is the building block of every society and as the fabric of secular society was breaking down, the Church, God's alternative society, began to pay attention to His instructions for their marriages which were to be a visual aid to the world of Christ and His Church.

Since the re-birth of the church in Biggin Hill the wives and mothers had been meeting together in one another's homes to discover God's order for the family and His view of marriage and motherhood. The 'Martha and Mary' meetings, as they were called, played an important part in rebuilding the church as a family as the women encouraged one another to love and obey their husbands and to teach, discipline and care for their children. They also learned to pray, love and care for one another and shared their ideas and experiences for building a home, being hospitable and sharing their faith with their friends and neighbours.

Another way that God had used to build His living stones into a temple of the Holy Spirit was through the bonding that occurs through suffering. As the church had begun to rediscover Paul's teaching on the body of Christ, they began to experience it in practical ways and to learn what it means to feel for one another and to bear one another's burdens. An unexpected tragedy had occurred while the renewed church was still in its infancy and the young Christians were experiencing the euphoria that follows an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

May Gillard, the daughter of Sidney Maynard who'd led the Boys Life Brigade band between the wars and mother of Geoff and David, was one of the few older members who had bridged the gap between the old and the new. She had responded with joy and thankfulness as she witnessed her son younger son and his wife, her younger daughter and son-in-law, and finally her own husband, come to repentance and faith in Christ and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. May loved being part of this exciting new move of God and was usually just happy to watch and listen but one evening, early in 1975 at the weekly prayer meeting in the church hall, she surprised everyone by praying out loud, giving thanks to God for His goodness to her and to her family. "Lord, you have answered all my prayers," they heard her tell Him, "I am so grateful and now I have nothing more to ask you for."

The following afternoon, while visiting a sick relative, she suddenly collapsed unconscious and was taken to hospital. She had suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and later that night all the family were called to the hospital as she was not expected to regain consciousness. The family stood together inside the curtains which had been drawn around her bed and prayed for her in the Name of Jesus, anointing her with oil. They believed the Lord would heal her so were not surprised when she opened her eyes and recognised them. Over the next few weeks she was fully conscious and her family and the whole church prayed for her full recovery but the doctors were concerned that, though peaceful, she seemed pre-occupied and was showing no interest in her surroundings. They sent her for exploratory tests at a London hospital and on her way back she suffered a second severe haemorrhage and returned in a coma from which she never recovered.

May had been a Christian since childhood and had lived almost all her life in the village. Her quiet faith and gentle personality had made her a much-loved member both of the church and of the village community. While she lay for weeks in a coma, poised between life and death with the family taking turns to sit with her and pray, God was doing a work of healing in His body as the resentment and criticism of the rapid changes in the church were forgotten in the presence of a common grief.

There were many opportunities to witness to friends and neighbours of the wonderful reality of knowing the presence of the risen Lord Jesus and the comfort of His Spirit. The Lord let her remain for a while and even in her deep peaceful sleep her life bore fruit as her husband led a fellow patient to Christ. When at last she slipped into His presence, the family's sorrow was mixed with joy that she had won her race and achieved her goal!

The second tragedy occurred later the same year and this time the wound was deeper, the shock greater, and the purposes of God more difficult to understand, for it involved the death of a small child.

Once again, although it was a personal loss affecting one family, it drew the larger family together around them and cemented them in the affection of the whole church in a way that perhaps nothing else could have done. Ray and Sue Lowe already had three daughters when they moved to Biggin Hill in 1973 and the whole family was delighted when, two years later, Sue gave birth to a baby boy. He was a loveable little chap and they called him David, for his father had great ambitions for him and prayed that, like king David, he would be a man after God's heart and do mighty deeds for Him.

For the first four months of his life David had all the appearance of a normal, happy, healthy growing baby but one day the soft spot on the top of his head began to bulge. Within hours he had been examined by specialists at three different hospitals who had diagnosed a serious disorder of the circulatory system and he was eventually taken to Brompton Road Hospital for surgery. His family and the whole church were relieved to hear that the specialist who operated on him could find nothing seriously wrong. Six days later, however, baby David died. The autopsy revealed what the surgeon could not possibly have discovered, that his heart had had five pumping chambers instead of four.

On the evening that little David Lowe had been taken ill the whole church had met for prayer and prayed well into the night. Now they all shared the family's grief and showed their love and care in practical ways by helping with housework, cooking meals and looking after the children. Jesus was building His church into a family and this was becoming a reality.

Ray had always believed that it was men from pious families with a strong Christian heritage who did great things for God. He had had aspirations for his son to be something he felt he, himself, could never be. When David died, Ray believed the Lord was saying to him: "Now you will have to be what you wanted your son to be."



Sue and Ray Lowe with daughters, Catherine, Ruth, Rachel and Deborah when Ray had just become full-time pastor. Ruth had been born in 1977, two years after baby David died.

The church family was not only learning what it was to share in one another's sorrows and how to support and bring comfort in their grief but they were also experiencing times of great rejoicing when God worked miracles of healing among them in answer to their prayers. One such occasion was when a young wife was near to death after giving birth to a severely premature baby and God did a double miracle, raising up the mother to complete recovery in a few hours and doubling the baby's weight over-night.

Another drama that could have ended in tragedy involved the family of one of the church leaders. One of Barry and Maureen Gould's four daughters developed leukemia as a result of a viral infection and was admitted to the cancer ward at Great Ormand Street Hospital for Sick Children. Little Claire Gould was a pretty, fair-haired four-year-old with a sweet disposition who had become very much part of the church family and there were many tears as the whole church met together to pray for her healing.

The prayer meeting was on a Sunday night and the following morning tests showed that all trace of the cancer had gone. Claire was the only child who had left that sad ward without having had medical treatment and the experience left her family with deep and enduring gratitude to God. As each Sunday Claire skipped and danced with the other children, this visual reminder of God's power to heal built up the faith of the whole church.



Little Claire Gould outside the hospital where she was admitted to the cancer ward.

Right. back at home with her family.



The term 'charismatic' was now being used to describe the evidence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the churches. To some people this merely referred to a different form of worship; the raising of hands and clapping and dancing in praise; they failed to understand that these were just the outward expressions of joy and gratitude from a people who had received forgiveness in Christ and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. The 'charismata', or 'gifts of the Spirit', are for the building up of the church and to demonstrate to the world the power of the risen Christ.

One teenage girl expressed her faith in a wonder-working God by asking Ray, as an elder of the church, to anoint her with oil and pray that God would restore her hearing. At fourteen she had become profoundly deaf after an unsuccessful operation to improve her hearing which had been impaired since birth. After persistent prayer, which lasted for over an hour, she suddenly felt a burning sensation in her ears and immediately began to hear. The specialists at the hospital were amazed as the medical tests still showed that she was clinically deaf although hearing tests proved that she could hear.

These testimonies were publicised in 'Alive', the church's evangelistic news paper that was distributed to every home in the village. There were many unpublished testimonies however, of people with emotional and mental sicknesses who found healing through the ministry of the church. Some were delivered from evil spirits which had caused fear and depression, others found healing from the effects of rejection or abuse as they heard and believed the word of God and found acceptance and love among His family.

There were instances where perseverance and patience were needed or when the church was called to fast and pray for a special need. The spiritual gifts of knowledge, wisdom and discernment of spirits are needed for this ministry and the Holy Spirit will often reveal the key that will unlock the door to healing or deliverance. There have been folk who would not receive the ministry of those who counselled them, some refusing to forgive those who had wronged them or becoming bitter and critical and eventually leaving the church, but most people responded with humility and faith and have become mature Christians, able to counsel and pray for others.

There was also another area of healing that encouraged the faith of the church. Biggin Hill in the eighties consisted mainly of young families and this was reflected in the church membership. Because Christians believe that children are a reward from God and are not governed, in the main, by materialistic reasons for limiting their families, there always seemed to be an abundance of babies and toddlers around. This made it particularly hard for the young couples who desperately wanted a family but had found they were unable to have children of their own.

Denise had become a Christian as a teenager and had been part of the revived church since its early days. No-one could have imagined, when she had joined the church as a bubbly, enthusiastic sixth-former, that her early years as a Christian would bring such pain and anguish both to her and her brothers and sisters. Denise was already suffering from the early stages of an illness that was becoming increasingly common in the early eighties. Anorexia has been called the slimmers disease but it is, without doubt, one of the sad results of the uni-sex society. This has devalued the God-given role of child-bearer and homemaker and has encouraged women to compete with and imitate men. Even after her marriage to Geoff Farnham, and despite hours of counselling and prayer, the illness increased its hold and at times threatened to take her life.

When one member of the body suffers they all suffer and, throughout this long battle, many entreaties and prayers were offered up and many tears shed. Eventually she found deliverance and forgiveness and God was able to use her testimony of His power over Satan to speak to people of His love and grace. She was able to help, counsel and warn young women who were in danger of following the same destructive path, but she herself felt that she would never regain the health that she had thrown away.

She had longed to have a family of her own but, after a pregnancy that had ended in a miscarriage, she was told that her internal organs had been so damaged that she would never be able to bear children. 'He will restore the years that the locusts have eaten' is a much-quoted passage of scripture but it aptly expresses the heart of God towards His repentant children. God in His grace gives abundantly more than we could ask or think. In due course Geoff and Denise became the proud parents of six healthy children!

Another childless couple to experience God's healing were Paul and Jo Medler who had moved from Uckfield, in Sussex, to join the church in Biggin Hill. The ladies of the 'Martha and Mary' group soon discovered from Jo that they had been married for nine years and that for most of that time they had been undergoing fertility treatment. Paul and Jo were about to start treatment again, at a local hospital, but the ladies felt God stir them to pray with faith. It was not long before they were all sharing the couple's joy when Jo gave birth to a lovely baby daughter, Ruth. What God could do once He was well able to do again and, two years later, another beautiful daughter, Sarah, was born.

Sometimes there seems to be no reason for infertility except to bring glory to God.

When Gareth Wales was told that he would never be able to father children he felt devastated and his wife, Lesley, found it hard to come to terms with the fact that she would never have a child of her own. Because they both felt safe and secure among their brothers and sisters they didn't keep their sadness to themselves but shared their problem and asked for prayer. God gave them a promise of children through a prophecy but they wondered whether this just might mean that they should take the advice of their doctor and adopt a child.

They decided to believe what God had said and to hold on to His promise although this was difficult at times and a real test of their faith. When eventually Leslie gave birth to their own little girl all the church family shared their rejoicing and two years later Johanna had a baby sister when their second daughter, Bethany was born.



Paul and Jo Medler with daughters Ruth and Sarah and Gareth and Lesley Wales with Johanna and Bethany, two of the childless couples who experienced the healing power of God as a result of prayer.

It seems appropriate that God should bless the barren with children in where He had brought new life to a barren church. It may also have been a prophetic visual aid for the future when the Church would give birth to new young churches in the surrounding area of south-east England.

GROWING AND GOING

If the seventies had been a time of new beginnings, of laying foundations, of learning and being built together, the eighties were to be the decade of growth, expansion and over-seas involvement. While the secular media were portraying Christians as ignorant, narrow-minded and irrelevant and reporting an increasing decline in church attendance and the closure of churches throughout the country, God, by the power of His Spirit, had been quietly reviving dying churches and bringing to birth new ones both in Britain and throughout the world. There began to be a movement of men and ministries from country to country as individuals travelled to encourage churches in other lands, not as 'missionaries' in the accepted sense of the word, but as Christian friends to both share and receive a blessing.

Over the years a number of friendships have been forged between the church at Biggin Hill and churches overseas. The first of these contacts was in 1978 through a member of the church, Roger Day, who worked as a journalist for 'Crusade', one of the best-known Christian magazines at that time. He had been asked to write an article that featured Tibor Ivani, a Methodist pastor in Hungary, so Roger and his wife Christine visited the pastor and his church behind the 'Iron Curtain'. While there they attended a Pentecostal church in Budapest where they received a warm welcome and an invitation to return and to bring their friends. David Gillard and Ray Lowe made several visits to the Budapest church, encouraging the people, sharing some of the new worship songs and bringing teaching on building a radical New Testament church. Gifts and letters were exchanged between the churches and others travelled out to visit them or entertained those who were fortunate enough to obtain permits to visit England.

Terry Virgo and the team of church leaders from the South East of England also began to receive invitations from around the world to meet with other pastors and teachers and to share what God had been doing in the church in England. Ray Lowe was part of this team of men so he soon found himself making fairly frequent trips abroad. In 1981 and '82 when Terry Virgo was invited to Spain to visit Joe Ortega, the pastor of a charismatic church in Valencia, he asked Ray to accompany him to share some of the principles of church life that God had been teaching him in the church at Biggin Hill.

The next overseas involvement was much further afield in the totally alien culture of India where The Living Word Fellowship was coming to birth in the overcrowded and hostile environment of the city of Bombay. Ray was one of those who helped to establish the new church on biblical foundations and he made five trips in 1983 alone.

In England more and more Christians were experiencing the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a result of attending the various celebrations and Bible Weeks or from reading the many excellent books on the subject by reputable bible teachers which were available from church bookstalls or from Christian bookshops which were now in almost every town.

Church leaders were beginning to ask those who had been pioneers in establishing new churches to share their experiences and prophetic vision and their understanding of God's strategy. They wanted to know how their churches could become the 'new wineskins' that were necessary to contain the new wine of the Spirit. Coastlands, the group of churches under the apostolic ministry of Terry Virgo, was only one of many emerging groups providing an apostolic ministry to a growing number of churches. As part of the Coastlands team, Ray began to have invitations to preach and teach and to spend time with the leaders of other churches in the South East of England.

It became increasingly evident that there was hardly a country that was untouched by this new wave of the Holy Spirit, even those that had never previously experienced revival. One such country is Mexico where an adulterated form of Catholicism has kept the people in the grip of fear and superstition for many centuries. Here, too, the gospel has been preached and men and women are receiving the liberating message of grace and are being filled with the Spirit but, because of their religious background, there is a great need for good Bible teaching, particularly concerning the true nature of the Church.

Once again what God has built in Biggin Hill has become both an example and an inspiration to other Christians as Ray and Sue and others have ministered to the church in Guadalajara and through them to other churches in Mexico. Ray has already visited eight times at the time of writing and one of the young single women who speaks fluent Spanish is at present helping with the growing church's administration.

Before each trip Ray would explain the purpose of his visit to the whole church and ask them to support him with prayer. On his return he would gather them together to share his diary and to ask for prayer for the needs of their brothers and sisters so that everyone felt involved with each new venture.



The Mexican church valued Ray's ministry and strong friendships were formed with many of the leaders.

The church also became linked with the Far East as members of the family responded to the call of God to serve Him in Hong Kong and China. When Diana Hodson heard about the work that the English woman, Jackie Pullinger, was doing among drug addicts in Hong Kong she applied to go and help. The two and a half years that she spent leading the addicts to Christ and praying them through withdrawal symptoms changed her life. After studying at Bible College in England she returned to the work in Hong Kong.



Diana Hodson gives one of the Chinese 'brothers' a hair-cut in Hang Fook camp watched by friends from Biggin Hill, Nicholas and Rachel Gillard who were also working at the camp, and Elaine Wall, on holiday in Hong Kong. The broad smiles are due to the boys 'guitar-playing'!

The other 'call' to serve came when a young German couple visited the church one Sunday morning. The couple had been working as English teachers in a remote region of north-west China and, as they spoke about their experiences and the need for more Christian teachers, God began to stir some to pray and some to 'go'. One of those who responded in his heart was Dave White and, when he shared this with his wife Sue a few days later, they both felt that this was for them.

Dave had become a Christian and joined the church at Biggin Hill when he was still a schoolboy studying in the sixth form. He enjoyed music and often played the clarinet in the church's worship band and later married the young music teacher who played the piano. After Dave had left school he had qualified as a research chemist and now had a good job which he enjoyed. He and Sue still played in the worship band, were leaders of a church house group, and now had two small children, but they knew God had spoken and that He had other plans for them. After seeking the approval of the elders, Dave handed in his notice and he and Sue enrolled for language classes in Mandarin and a 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language' course.

In 1988 the little family left their home and relatives, and their Christian family which had become so dear to them, and set out for the language school where they spent their first year teaching English to mature students from all over China. After a summer spent back home with their friends and family they accepted a post in another part of China, and stayed for a further two years, this time teaching academically able young people, many of whom were children of government officials.

Although they were not allowed to evangelise, they made free use of the most famous English book, the Bible, as a text book and, when answering questions about English customs, taught their students the true meaning of the festivals of Christmas and Easter. They found a spiritually thirsty audience, many of whom had never even heard of Jesus, and they made many friends and saw a number of people converted during their time there.



Dave and Sue White with Anna and Phillip.



Here Sue chats with one of the student.

Frequent letters were exchanged and gifts were sent from the church and the Sunday Club who also kept in touch with their two little members on the other side of the world. Although so far away, the Whites were still part of the church family and accountable to the elders and this was to be put to the test when the political climate dramatically changed at the time of the Tienamen Square massacre. Dave and Sue felt they were safe among their colleagues and students, who had become real friends, and had no wish to leave them, but they obeyed the instruction from their elders and escaped to Hong Kong until the situation eased.

Dave and Sue and their two children, Anna and Philip, returned to China, this time for a longer period. They now lived in the same town in the north west region that they had heard about so long ago from the two German teachers. Back at home, their brothers and sisters also had a part to play. They had sent them out as their 'ambassadors for Jesus' and were justly proud of this gentle courageous couple and pray faithfully for them.

In the Biggin Hill church the command of Jesus to "go and make disciples" is taken seriously and the members were quick to respond when Christians from the surrounding area began to meet with them and express their desire to see New Testament churches established in their own neighbourhoods.

While the Biggin Hill church had been enjoying the fruit of its spiritual revival, many people in the traditional churches, who had been baptised in the Holy Spirit in the early seventies, were becoming increasingly frustrated. The exercise of spiritual gifts was often forbidden in the official meetings of their churches and any attempt to implement New Testament church government resisted by the church leaders. This was particularly true of leaders of some of the more traditional evangelical churches who, despite their belief in the Bible, often strongly opposed the implementation of Scriptural practices and the supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Some even suggested that the gifts of the Spirit were Satanic counterfeits and were quick to point to the excesses of some of the young converts to substantiate their claim. What disturbed them most, however, was that it was often those who they had thought to be 'sound' evangelicals, mature Christians and faithful workers in the church, who were claiming this new experience of Holy Spirit baptism.

Those people who had been baptised in the Holy Spirit found they now had a conflict of loyalties between their commitment to their church and responsibility to those in their care and their obedience to the word of God 'not to quench the Holy Spirit'.

This was a painful time as they agonised with their consciences and sought God's will whether they were to stay where they were and patiently pray and wait for a breakthrough, or join another church where God was clearly moving. In the meantime these people were visiting churches such as Biggin Hill for encouragement and teaching, to experience the spiritual gifts in the context of praise and worship and to ask for prayer and counsel.

A number of the members of an evangelical Anglican Church in Penge, in the south-east of London, had been experiencing this dilemma. One couple, John and Sheila Wheeler who were old friends of Ray and Sue Lowe, became convinced while on holiday that they should leave their church. On arriving home they discovered that two other couples had reached the same conclusion while on their holidays and, together with a few other Spirit-filled friends they began to visit Biggin Hill every Sunday morning. They were also meeting together in John and Sheila's home each Sunday evening, and during the week, to study God's word and to seek His will for the future.

They knew that each local church should be a witness to Christ in its community and that the church at Biggin Hill had always encouraged people who wished to join the church to move into the district, but this little group clearly had no desire to leave Penge as they had a growing vision to see a New Testament church established in their own locality. The elders agreed to help them in the task of establishing this new work and they regularly visited the growing house fellowship to preach and teach.

In January 1980 Chris Smith was asked to look after this embryonic church and for the next few months, while they continued to meet in Biggin Hill in the mornings, Chris led their evening and mid-week meetings in Penge. There they continued to share their faith with their families, friends and neighbours until some thirty adults and a number of children were meeting together.

In April 1980 Terry Virgo met with the church at Biggin Hill to share in a momentous occasion in its history, the birth of its first offspring. Chris was set apart as an elder in charge of the new church in true Scriptural fashion, by the laying-on of hands by their new apostle and the other elders, and with prayer and prophecy.

Penge Christian Fellowship (later named Christ Central) was launched with eighteen committed adult members and about a dozen others who regularly attended the meetings. In February 1981 Chris and his wife Rosie and their four children moved from their little modern home in Biggin Hill to a large Edwardian house in Penge and by December 1983 the church had grown to such an extent that Chris was able to leave his secular employment to become its first full-time pastor.



Penge Christian Fellowship outside the building that became their first church home.

As part of God's overall strategy of building strong local churches throughout the land, Biggin Hill seems ideally situated as a base for church planting in the south-east corner of England standing as it does at the intersection of three regions. The political boundaries have changed over the years and, although the postal address is still Biggin Hill Kent, in 1965 the town was absorbed into Greater London and became the southern-most part of the London Borough of Bromley.

The church buildings are situated in a central position among shops that are strung out along the western side of the Main Road from London. As the road continues south it gradually rises to reach the highest point on the North Downs at Westerham Hill and here, just a mile from the church, it passes the official County sign at the crest of the hill that winds steeply down to the Weald of Kent. At the base of the hill it intersects the ancient Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury, then crosses over the M25 London orbital motorway and joins the road to Sevenoaks at the historic town of Westerham where a statue of Winston Churchill stands like an immovable rock to commemorate its famous resident.

To the West, the wooded hill and deep valley that runs parallel to the Main Road extends over the Surrey County boundary to the adjoining village of Tatsfield and to the sprawling mass of council houses and industrial estate of New Addington.

The work at Penge had come about initially through the request from a group of South London Christians to their friends at Biggin Hill to 'come over and help them' but the next venture into church planting, although much nearer to home, was a move into Surrey and was of a more pioneering nature. The village of Tatsfield was still without the witness of a strong local community of Christians despite the earlier abortive attempt at starting a New Testament church there. By 1983 however there were five members of the Biggin Hill church, two couples and a single lady, living in the village and, after prayer and an encouraging prophecy that described Tatsfield as a gateway into Surrey, the elders felt it was time to plant again.

The new church needed a leader who was a man of faith and vision and one of the house group leaders, a young man who had a prophetic ministry in the church, was asked if he would undertake the task. Pete Kourpas was from a Greek Cypriot family and had been one of the first of the young men converted and baptised in the Spirit in the church in the mid-seventies and was still known affectionately as 'Pete the Greek'. He had been brought up in the Greek Orthodox faith and had a burning desire to see people set free from legalistic religion through the grace of the gospel and one day to establish a New Testament-style church on the island of Cyprus. He and his wife, Alex, also an early addition to the revived church at Biggin Hill, were excited by the challenge and gladly agreed to go to Tatsfield. All the church members were asked to pray and consider whether they felt called to Tatsfield and this resulted in a response from three couples who sold up and moved house to support Pete and Alex and to form the nucleus of a new church.

Sunday meetings for praise and worship and Bible teaching were held in the little wood and asbestos Women's Institute hall and every home in the village was visited and friendships began to be built but although a few local people did attend the meetings, the majority were travelling from the neighbouring Surrey towns and villages of Limpsfield, Oxted and Godstone. Eventually it was decided to move their meeting place to where most of the people lived so Pete and Alex sold their house in Tatsfield and, with Steve and Lynne Matthews, moved to the busy little town of Oxted and the young church began to become established there as Kings Church Oxted.

Tatsfield had indeed have been a gateway into Surrey but good seed was sown there and God continued to work in the little village bringing new life. Much of the seed was sown with tears as once again a tragedy had drawn the young church closer together and in this case also built bridges with other believers and the wider village community.

In the bitterly cold January of 1987 two babies in the village died in cot deaths and one of them was Joel McGugan the seven month old son of Neil and Ann who had moved to Tatsfield from Biggin Hill with Pete and Alex. The new young church and their brothers and sisters in Biggin Hill wept with them and prayed for them and Neil and Ann's faith in God and the comfort of the Holy Spirit gave them the strength they needed to minister to others. A week earlier a neighbour's first baby had died in the same way and Ann was able to visit the grieving mother and give her words of hope and pray with her. When people in the village shop and in the street showed their sympathy and asked Ann how they were coping, she was able to tell them about the love and faithfulness of God and the peace that is beyond understanding.



Pete and Alex Kourpas and family in Cyprus where they founded a new work - Grace Church, Larnaca.



Neil and Ann McGugan sowed well, but with tears, in Tatsfield. Later they joined Peter Carter in planting a new church in North Kent at New Ash Green.

Meanwhile the parent church in Biggin Hill continued to grow despite the number of folk who were sent out from them. God was faithful to His promise and as the church, with a mixture of sadness and joy, said goodbye to dear friends and released brothers and sisters to serve God elsewhere in His Church, God gave them many new 'babies' to look after and sent them lovely gifts of keen, serving Christians to help them.

A growing number of these new helpers were from over the Kent border, from the town of Sevenoaks some ten miles to the south west. They were members of an Anglican church in the town which had a strong evangelical tradition but, as was so often the case, there was considerable resistance to charismatic worship and the public use of spiritual gifts. A number of Spirit-filled Christians, mostly young singles or married couples in their twenties, began to visit Biggin Hill on Sunday mornings while continuing their commitments to their own church and attending their evening worship. They had a real love for one another and a desire to see a demonstration of the Kingdom of God in their own town. As they experienced the life of the church in Biggin Hill in worship and teaching, and as friendships were formed, they realised that here was a church with the same vision.

It is always painful to leave a church, even when there is a strong conviction of God's leading, but in the September of 1983, after much prayer and discussion with the elders, and after making sure that they had explained their reasons to their vicar and could leave on good terms, they joined the church at Biggin Hill and wholeheartedly gave themselves to serve and to learn. Although this group of some twenty-five adults and their children continued to live in Sevenoaks and meet in their own house groups for fellowship, prayer and bible study, they were also fully integrated into the life of their new church family.

They brought with them gifts and ministries of leadership, teaching, music, evangelism, and experience in working with children. Their musicians became part of the teams that led the Sunday worship; their teachers served in the children's Sunday Club; the young wives helped to run the creche and, while they probably felt grateful for the training and experience they were receiving, their commitment and serving attitude was an example to the church and earned everyone's love and admiration.

The church supported them as they engaged in evangelistic activities in Sevenoaks and members from Biggin Hill would join them on Saturday mornings as they gathered outside the supermarket in the town centre, praising God in music and song, handing out tracts and talking with passers-by about the love of God and their need of Saviour. As a result of this outreach the little group began to grow as this new Christian family, with its own distinctive character, was being formed within the body of the church.

There was one uncomfortable problem resulting from the steady growth of the Biggin Hill church family that had been clearly evident from the start to the first visitors from Sevenoaks: Their home was too small!

Various alternative seating arrangements had been tried in order to accommodate all the people on Sunday mornings but by 1984, when every seat had been filled and a double row of the youngest and fittest were standing shoulder to shoulder along the rear wall of the hall, it was normal to find the entrance hall crammed with the overflow, some peering through the open doors and others standing on chairs to see over their heads.



In 1971 God had promised "Bring all your tithes into my storehouse and I will open the windows of heaven and pour out such a blessing that you will not be able to contain it".

By 1984 the church was experiencing that promise in a practical way. In this picture the only spare seats are those reserved for the musicians.

There is often a 'straw that breaks the camel's back', an event that finally focuses attention on the seriousness of a problem and triggers an appropriate response. In this case it was one particular baptismal service that emphasised the need for action! It was a sunny Summer Sunday morning and, since the the hall and vestibule were already full to overflowing, people had begun to gather in the car park, unable to get into the building but unwilling to go home and miss out on being part of what is always one of the most joyful occasions in the church. Chairs and benches were carried out for people to stand on so that they could look in through the open windows and others simply sat on the bonnets of their cars and listened to the sound of worship coming through the open windows. This was the fulfillment of the prophesy mentioned earlier when a passer-by was converted after having been helped to climb through a window in order to see what was going on.

The embryo Sevenoaks church continued to swell the congregation and the church continued to pray and prepare for local and national revival but, since there was no room for further growth, plans were made to extend the premises to provide for both present and future needs. The church had been blessed with members who not only had natural talents and abilities but also experience and qualifications: One, Paul Jackson, was a gifted architect and another, Henry Jones, owned a building company that employed a number of other members so the church was able to design and build its own home. When the plans were finally completed, the church family moved out, its material possessions were stored in various homes and offices and for over a year they became one of the thousands of 'house churches' who met each week in schools, cinemas, or town and village halls.

So it was that November 1984 marked another significant landmark in the church's history. Exactly sixty years after their spiritual ancestors had moved from the little wooden chapel in the winding country lane that led to the villages of Cudham and Downe into their brand new home in the Main Road, the Biggin Hill Baptists met once again for Sunday worship in Jail Lane, this time in the large, purpose-built comprehensive school where two of the elders, Barry Gould and Norman Blows, were teachers. Charles Darwin School, whose namesake had lived in the nearby village of Downe, is not far from the old chapel site and was to become the church's place of worship for over a year. This was also a time of more growth, not only in terms of people being added to the church, but also in spiritual fruit as the church's faith in the provision of God was put to the test.



Ariel view of Charles Darwin School where the church held its Sunday meetings for a year.

NEW HOME - NEW NAME

The architect's proposals for the new building were displayed for the church's comments and suggestions and various amendments were made and, by the time the final plans were drawn up and approved, the whole church was enthusiastic about its new home.

In order to preserve some of the original appearance and the distinctive character of the original building, the old oak lychgate and the steeply sloping slate roof of the main meeting hall would remain but the hall was to be extended to seat up to three hundred people. The addition of a two -storey extension to the rear hall would provide facilities for the Sunday Club and a creche, church lounge and office and the kitchen and toilets were to be enlarged and improved. The estimated cost for the project was one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, a very large amount in those days, but the church was resolved to trust God to enable them to find this sum from their own resources as He supplied.

The church at that time only had about a hundred wage-earners in membership many of whom were young people on small incomes while some members were students and others were receiving financial support from the church to meet their own needs. In the materialistic consumer society of the nineteen-eighties and a western culture where logic and intellectual cynicism militate against belief in God's supernatural provision, this commitment of money demanded a heroic exercise of faith that would be amply rewarded.

At the last Sunday meeting in the old building on the eighteenth of November 1984 an offering was taken up, the first of many that were to stretch the resources and the faith of the church more than it could have imagined. A roar of applause and praise greeted the announcement the close of the meeting that the sum given, or covenanted, from those present that morning was thirty-two thousand pounds. There was still a long way to go, but the church went out with songs of victory and a shout of triumph.

Although it was undoubtably inconvenient to be without a permanent place to meet, particularly for mid-week activities, and to have to transport and set up the music and sound equipment every Sunday morning, there were also a number of benefits. The big airy school hall where the church met for worship and teaching provided plenty of room for growth, the class rooms and school canteen were ideal for the children of the 'Sunday Club', and the sixth-form common room with it's arm chairs and carpeted floor made an excellent creche.

There was another benefit from holding 'church' in a school which soon became evident as the weeks went by and people from the community began to turn up for the morning meetings to see what was going on. Some were the parents of children who attended the school and some were simply inquisitive when they saw the many cars and people milling round the premises on Sunday mornings. Others, who may have always wondered what the church was like but had been inhibited by the thought of entering a church building, felt they could visit a school without feeling threatened or being accused of becoming religious by their friends or family.

This was also a time to lose some of the habits in worship which tend to develop in a local church which has its own meeting hall already set up and where meetings can become repetitive. In the new venue the seating was often changed around, and as there was no platform or obvious 'front', people were more ready to come forward for ministry or to share their testimonies or exercise spiritual gifts.

People often have a wrong understanding of the church. Visitors to the school, on these Sunday mornings while the church was 'in exile', were able to see that people do not become a church by entering a holy building but are the body of Christ wherever they meet. On Christmas morning 1984, as the church gathered in the school hall for its usual high-spirited mixture of praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of His Son and for family fun and Father Christmas, one lady who was visiting with her daughter responded to the love of God and received the gift of His Son that morning and later joined the church.

Throughout the year the family of God continued grow and prosper but its members' patience and faith were regularly stretched as they heard the weekly reports on the progress of the building work. The weather provided the first trial as unusually heavy rain hampered the digging of foundations and turned the site into a sea of mud. There was also increasingly depressing news concerning the state of the original structure as the work progressed. The decision to retain most of the original building was based on the assumption that the roof structure and walls of the main meeting hall were basically sound. As the old worn slates were removed, the roof timbers were found to be badly rotted, some having only an inch of sound wood, and when the roof was taken down only three of the single block walls remained. Eventually almost all of the old Central Hall had to be demolished.

Problems were also encountered during the digging of the foundations for the rear extension when an old water source and flooded basement were discovered. Those who visited the site and saw the water-logged trenches, the piles of sticky yellow clay and the pathetic remains of the old building found it a discouraging experience. After Christmas the weather turned cold and before long a thick fall of snow covered all the heavy equipment, the scaffolding and the remaining walls; arctic temperatures froze the mud, and all work came to a halt.



*Once again church members built their own home. The architect who conceived this ambitious project was Paul Jackson and the contractors were J H Builders.
(the J stood for Jesus and the H for Henry Jones).*

This was a time for the church to grow in character and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. It needed perseverance and endurance to maintain enthusiasm and faith for a project that was proving a great deal more costly than had first been imagined. 'Heap offerings' of valuable items such as gold and silver jewellery were taken up on several occasions, as part of the church's worship, a practice that had its roots in the Old Testament when God's people brought their silver and gold earrings for the building of the temple. A great deal was being invested in the kingdom of God in terms of material wealth but for many months it seemed there was nothing much to show for it. As each new problem occurred, the cost increased until it became clear that the final sum would be twice that which had been estimated at the outset.

As the church continued to grow and develop the elders felt the time had come for David Gillard's ministry to be recognised and for him to be appointed as an elder of the church. He was already a house group leader, as well as an evangelist, bible teacher and worship leader and he was finding it hard to fulfil these roles while continuing to work with his brother in their graphics business. It was clear that he needed to be in full-time ministry in order that his gifts could be released to help equip and build the church. However, it seemed impossible to imagine how the means could be found to support him and his family at a time when so much was being given to fund the building project and when so much more would still be needed.

But once again it was discovered that with God nothing is impossible! For the church, as well as for the individual, the promise of Jesus is unequivocal: "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you as well". One of the members believed so strongly that David should be free to devote all his energies to the church that he offered to pay his salary for a full year out of his own pocket. The offer was gratefully accepted and in March 1985 David was set aside as an elder by the laying-on of hands.

For the past eleven years Gillard Brothers Graphics had known the blessing of God as they served Biggin Hill and many other churches and ministries but almost from the start they had both felt that one day David would be called to work full-time in the church. Now the time had finally come and, although it was sad to see the end of what had been a long and happy working relationship, Geoff willingly released his brother from the partnership to join Ray and Barry and Norman on the full-time staff of the church.

Obedience and sacrifice often go hand in hand and there was soon to be an opportunity for the generosity of the whole church to be expressed in a similar way. The Sevenoaks contingent had continued to grow in numbers and maturity and it was clear that they were now ready to launch off on their own. It was hard to part with so many dear friends who had become part of the family but they believed that God's promise of blessing was dependant on the church continuing to 'give' and to 'send' and here, once again, was an opportunity to be obedient. It was agreed that Norman Blows should head up the new work and that he and Carol and their four daughters should move to Sevenoaks as soon as possible. On May the twenty-fifth Norman was set aside as elder of the new church and the following week The Town Church met for the first time in the King's Hall, the dance hall of a large hotel in the centre of the town.

This was indeed a costly gift from the whole church for it had not only given away part of their family they had also lost a much-loved pastor and teacher. The remaining elders would miss Norman on the leadership team for their relationship had been based on a deep friendship and trust and they respected and honoured one another for their differing gifts and qualities of character. Sevenoaks was only a short distance away by car, however, and the strong family bond remained with this as well as with the other Biggin Hill 'offspring'.



A new Christian family had been born in Sevenoaks. Here Norman Blows and fellow-pastor Roger Bye baptise a new baby Christian in the public swimming pool. Roger had previously led Kemsing Fellowship which later joined forces with the Sevenoaks Town Church.

As with each child of God, each family of God is a new creation, a work of the Holy Spirit that often begins quietly and secretly. Although the body of Christ was unaware of it at the time, almost as soon as the Sevenoaks church was born, a new church was being conceived. In the summer of 1985 some Christians from West Wickham and Coney Hall, a middle-class suburban area about seven miles north-west of Biggin Hill, began to pay occasional visits to the meetings. They were members of a traditional Baptist church and had recently experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit. One of the church deacons, Trevor Payne, heard their accounts of the lively informal worship of these 'baptists' who met in a school and he and his wife Rachel and their children came to see what it was all about. The effect of this visit was to give Trevor a desire to see such a church in his own locality, a vision he was later to see fulfilled and in which he would play a leading role.

As Spring and Summer brought finer weather the building work progressed until, by Autumn, only the final finishing and furnishing remained. This proved to be yet another obstacle to be overcome as the cost of providing lighting, carpeting and installing the necessary equipment still had to be found and people's resources appeared to have run out. The builders felt frustrated that they were unable to complete the project on which they had laboured with such pride and commitment. The directors of the building firm, as part of the church family, felt strongly that lack of money should not be allowed to prevent the building being used and decided to complete the work at their own expense. Yet again, God's provision had come through His own people.

Exactly a year had passed when the church had its final meeting in Charles Darwin School. As its name suggests, the ethos of the school was a result of a post-Christian humanistic philosophy and, although there had been a number of Christian teachers on the staff and persistent prayer, this was still the case. This last Sunday morning seemed a wonderful opportunity to declare the Lordship of Christ over this spiritually barren place and, in true biblical fashion, the whole congregation marched round the complex of buildings, claiming His victory over the enemy forces and their destructive works. The people of God have the authority to 'command a blessing' in the name of Jesus and this was to be the church's legacy to the school which had been their temporary home.

They did not have to wait long to see results. Not long after they moved into their new church building, the headmaster, who had been in charge of the school since its beginning, and had fostered the humanist philosophy of the school, decided to take early retirement. There was great rejoicing when the church discovered that his successor was a Christian, a strong caring man with a desire that the children in his charge should have the opportunity to learn about God. In the future the church would have an open door into the school and have regular invitations to lead morning assemblies, take religious studies lessons and occasionally to hold evangelistic concerts, discussion groups and similar special events in the lunch hours.

Now the time had finally come for the company of believers known as Biggin Hill Baptist Church to move back to the site which had been the family home for sixty years and in their absence there had been some significant changes. Their old next-door neighbours, the village Infant and Junior School, had moved to a new building close to Charles Darwin School and the scattered assortment of single-storied buildings and huts and tree-fringed playground which had been a focal point for local families for the past seventy years had been replaced by an impressive red-brick supermarket building, towering like an enormous temple of the consumer society. The twenty-foot high wall that now formed the southern boundary of the church's car park boasted the large brilliant red neon word 'Safeway' which could be seen shining its message above the church's new building as one approached from the direction of London.

The church also needed a new sign for their new building to announce that it was back in residence. Sixty years before, when its predecessors had first moved from Jail Lane to the centre of Biggin Hill, it had been obvious that they could no longer be known as 'Cudham Baptist Church' so their name was changed to Biggin Hill Baptist Church. As a new wooden sign board was being prepared, the elders met to discuss whether this name was still appropriate in 1985. While the elders upheld the principles and practices of the early Baptists more vigorously than most traditional Baptist churches, the 'Baptist' label seemed to express a man-made division in the body of Christ that God did not recognise. Many churches with denominational affiliations were being renamed for this reason and 'Community Church' or 'Town Church' were popular choices but the leaders at Biggin Hill were anxious not to choose a title that could appear arrogant and cause any offense to their brothers and sisters in the other local churches.

Names are often chosen for a person or a group to describe their character or their activities, and this group was no exception. To the outside observer, and to the church members themselves, the most noticeable characteristic of this family of believers was the fact that they were so obviously good friends and had a deep love for one another. The word 'fellowship' summed it up. Church members already referred to themselves as 'the fellowship' so when the new sign-board was lifted into place the words simply described the people, where they were, who they were and what they did. The new sign simply read:

BIGGIN HILL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

'Worshipping Jesus Christ as Lord'

NEW FRONTIERS

Biggin Hill Baptist Church had chosen a new name because the old one had no longer seemed appropriate and at around the same time Terry Virgo and the team of men that worked with him felt they also needed to find a new name for their ministry and the group of churches in their care. The name 'Coastlands' had been inspired by the words of Isaiah: "the coastlands are waiting expectantly for His Law" but by now most people assumed it referred to the location of Terry's home base in Hove on the south coast of England. However, the team's ministry was no longer merely a local one as God had been giving them a wider sphere of influence. Up until this time the main goal of 'Coastlands' had been to see restoration in the British Church but more and more church leaders, both from the British Isles and from around the world, had been inviting them to bring teaching on the grace of God as well as on New Testament church life and they felt it was now time for them to move out into the nations.

As the team met together for days of prayer and fasting, God told them through gifts of prophecy that it was now time to move out into virgin territory and make new paths. Their priority was now to see new churches planted in unevangelised areas and equip and encourage them in their evangelistic endeavours. In view of this new vision they re-named their family of churches and their ministry 'New Frontiers International'.

Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship shared this vision. During the year they had been without their own premises they had been obliged to rent local halls for prayer meetings, band rehearsals and evangelistic events but now that they had its own building again they were full of ideas of how they could share their new home with the community and use the improved facilities to extend the kingdom of God.

As soon as the church family had 'settled in' they held an 'Open Week' when people were given a conducted tour of the buildings and told about the activities that would be going on there. An attractive series of exhibition panels in the main hall displayed a graphic presentation of the church's history and visitors were given the opportunity to ask questions or have a friendly chat over a cup of tea or coffee.

There were many talented artistic members in the church at that time, some working as professionals in photography, graphics or art teaching, some gifted in embroidery and various crafts while a number of others were degree students at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design and an impressive exhibition of their work and various workshops held as part of the 'house-warming' celebrations.

There was also what was to be the first of many 'banquets' in the main hall which, with its pleasant proportions and soft wall lights, was easily converted into an excellent restaurant seating up to a hundred and twenty people. This first meal was a lunch-time buffet for professional men and women from the community, local councillors, and for everyone who had been involved in the building project from the architect to the plumbers and electricians. There was a good response to the invitations and some interesting conversations resulted as the church staff and those involved in leading the various church activities mingled with the guests.

This family home was to be used again and again by the church for fellowship meals, parties, church wedding receptions and outreach meals with special celebrity guests as after-dinner speakers.

Over the years the church has been increasingly involved in what has been termed 'friendship evangelism' and the light, spacious fellowship home has been an enormous asset providing a warm, friendly environment for all kinds of activities.

One of the legacies of the 'liberal' years of the sixties had been an agreement to rent the premises to a nursery school. This no longer had any affiliation with the church but continued to have full use of the buildings during weekday mornings. For some time the church had wanted to start its own playgroup where it could not only care for its own children but also provide a loving Christian environment for the children of other local families. The evacuation of the buildings in the autumn of 1984 gave them the perfect opportunity as their tenants had to find other premises and planning and preparations could begin for the church's own 'Rainbow Playgroup'. One of the members, Gay Searles, a lively lady with a warm heart and a real love for little children, willingly took charge. She was determined to aim at excellence and to make it a very special place for all the children and had already attended a course of training with several other ladies from the Fellowship to qualify them as approved playgroup leaders.



Christmas is a special time for the 'Rainbow' children.



A Summer treat. Mothers join playgroup leaders and children for games and a picnic in the park.

The new playgroup quickly gained such a good reputation that there was soon a long waiting list but its success should not be measured in terms of popularity but in lives touched by the love of God. A number of the parents have found Christ as a result of their contact with the Christian staff and parents, and hundreds of little children have heard about His love for them. Visitors to the building often stop to listen to the sound of the high-pitched cheerful chatter and sudden bursts of laughter or stand to watch the little ones at play.

Among the church membership were people with other abilities or expertise that they were eager to use to build friendships and enrich the hospitality of the church. 'Keep fit' classes had become very popular in the eighties with the advent of the health food and fitness boom and Denise Farnham, combining her training in aerobics with her outgoing, friendly personality, started a class that proved so popular that there was always a waiting list. This activity enabled fellowship members to get alongside non-Christians in a relaxed atmosphere. They were soon thrilled when one lady became a Christian after a special evening meal that was arranged for the class and as a result her husband, who had been a backslider, recommitted his life to the Lord. They were both baptised in water and in the Holy Spirit and soon members of their family and friends and neighbours were saved as a result of their testimony.

It might seem that an enormous amount of time and effort is expended to bring just one person into the kingdom of God, but this reflects the extravagant heart of God who counts each soul of such value that He sent His own beloved Son into the world to seek and save the lost. John's gospel records that Jesus Himself chooses His disciples and appoints them to bear fruit.

Another person who was to become a fruitful disciple as a soul-winner was converted as a direct result of a friendship built on the golf course. Ray Lowe, a keen golfer, had organised a golfing society which had become very popular and attracted a good number of non-Christians. Paul Heather was a likable extrovert who seemed to have everything he wanted in life. He and Ray became friends and as they played a round of golf or had a drink together in the club house their conversation often turned to spiritual matters.

Paul was a spiritualist and belonged to a healing circle. He had always believed that all his supernatural experiences were from God and would not readily accept that he had tapped a dangerous source of occult power. He was a successful businessman, an entrepreneur, and his latest project was a method of using worms to convert human and animal waste products into organic compost. Ray had kept the church informed of his progress with his new friend and, as he began to challenge the source of Paul's power, the church prayed for Ray's 'worms man'!

Eventually there was a spiritual confrontation when Paul attempted to leave the healing circle. He discovered for himself that the enemy does not easily let his servants go and evil spirits began to manifest themselves. His wife, Fran, was also attacked and both she and Paul asked for help from the elders of the church. As the elders prayed, Paul and Fran experienced the power of the risen Christ as they were delivered from the demons. They were both baptised in water and with the Holy Spirit and, after further ministry for healing from the effects of Paul's involvement with the occult, they became strong members of the church.

Paul later became leader of a house group and Fran of the Rainbow play group. God was able to use Paul's business experience in the setting up of a Family Reading Centre, a scheme that uses Christians as agents to place good Christian literature into homes and schools and secular retail outlets. He has also been able to help those who were caught up in occult activity and speaks in schools and to youth groups, warning about its dangers.

Almost two thousand years ago St Paul wrote of his evangelistic endeavours: 'if by any means I can save some'! On Wednesday evenings grunts and groans could be heard as the main hall became a gymnasium. One of the members had had experience in weight training in the army and, with some of the other men in the church, a club was formed where the men could keep fit and bring their neighbours or friends from work.

There were also activities that catered for less energetic interests. I had graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1963 with a degree in painting and taught in adult education for many years but I'd always wanted to use my love of creation, my knowledge of Art and my teaching ability to share my experience of God's love. I started meeting with other artistically gifted church members to pray and make plans to hold Art Workshops in the church lounge which was an ideal venue. We started in January 1986 with five Christians and twelve of my old evening class students. The aims of the class were made clear to each new member and Wednesday mornings became a place where people could find loving acceptance, prayer for healing or friendly help and advice as well as teaching and encouragement to develop their creative abilities.

The account in Exodus of the furnishing of the temple has sometimes been called 'the artists charter', for it speaks of those who were anointed by God with all sorts of creative skills to work beautiful designs in embroidery and gold and silver.



The Art Class discuss their progress at an end of term exhibition and buffet lunch in the fellowship lounge



Biggin Hill's own banner



A gift for the church in Mexico



Marching for Jesus

Avril Norton and a group of other artistic ladies discovered that their creativity and practical skills could also be used to bless and encourage the church. Their gifting was in needlework and they began to meet to pray together and to plan banners that would express visually what God was saying prophetically to the church. The Fellowship had always been richly gifted in the art of music making and in using songs to lead the people into praise and worship, now they would also be exhorted to worship by banners with encouraging words from the psalms or prophecies or promises of God from the scriptures. Special banners were designed to be displayed at times of celebration such as Easter and Christmas and for baptisms and two beautiful wedding banners pronounced the blessing of God on the many Christian couples who make their marriage promises to one another in His presence and amongst their brothers and sisters in the church.

It was also found that banners make lovely gifts to send to family members overseas. The beautiful wall hanging depicting the parable of the sower that was sent to Dave and Sue White and their family, when they were thousands of miles away teaching in China, was a constant reminder to them of the value of their service and the love and prayers of their family at home. It also made a useful subject for conversation and a visual aid for visitors to their flat. In a very different part of the world a banner with the words 'all one in Christ Jesus our Lord' in Spanish encircling a globe reminded the church in Guadalajara in Mexico of the love and prayers of their brothers and sisters in Biggin Hill.

Although banners displayed as wall hangings are decorative and perform the function of encouraging God's people, historically they have always been associated with marches in the open air. They have been lifted high as a visual statement of belief by companies who are united by a common cause or by those who belong to an exclusive society and, in ancient times, by armies marching into battle. God has been raising up His Church as a distinct alternative society, united in a common purpose and with a sense of destiny and has also been equipping them as a spiritual army to liberate an enslaved people.

Now the time had come for the Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship to take to the streets. The banner-making group was asked to design and produce dozens of bright banners proclaiming Jesus as King, Saviour, Healer and Deliverer. These were used to 'make His Name known' to the local community and also through the streets of London when the church joined many thousands of other Christians on National 'Marches for Jesus'.

The principal of freely sharing both gifts and experience, of giving away to others what has been freely given by God, is an integral part of every aspect of the Fellowship's life and banner groups from other churches have been invited for day conferences to learn from and encourage one another.

Every gift of God brings a responsibility and the church members considered their building to be a special gift and a resource entrusted to them by their heavenly Father. As many of the 'New Frontiers' churches have no buildings of their own, the Biggin Hill Fellowship have always been pleased to share its home with these 'homeless families' for baptisms, weddings, celebrations, church house-parties and other family occasions.

The Fellowship was not only rich in terms of its material assets; God has also given them men with spiritual and practical wisdom and experience to share with others. A 'Bible School' was started to provide teaching for the churches where Ray exercises an apostolic role. Lectures, seminars and workshops were held to equip them in handling the word of God, evangelism, administration and ministering in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

All these additional activities required an enormous amount of organisation and this was proving a drain on the elders' time. The New Testament church had had a similar problem and had appointed mature spirit-filled men to take care of practical matters in order that the elders could be free to fulfil their roles as pastors, teachers and spiritual leaders. Once again they realised that God had already provided the man for the job.

Paul Medler and his wife Jo had joined the church in 1981 and Paul had been serving as church treasurer. He was a highly-paid company executive with ten years experience of business management and administration and thoroughly enjoyed his job but now he felt that God was calling him to offer his abilities to benefit the church. In April 1987 he joined the full-time staff as the church's administrator.

No sooner had the church gained an administrator than it lost another elder. Barry Gould had been in full-time ministry as part of the leadership team at Biggin Hill since 1983, but he had also become involved, in a pastoral and teaching capacity, with a small fellowship in the old ship-building town of Faversham on the north Kent coast. When they asked him to become their pastor Barry felt he should accept and it was agreed that Biggin Hill should release him to serve the church there. Once again the Fellowship found it was to 'give away' a whole family, but there was time to get used to the idea. It was many months before the Goulds had sold their house in the valley and found a suitable house in Faversham but finally, in October 1987, they exchanged sad farewells with all their friends at Biggin Hill.

With the church's involvement in the community and among its daughter churches increasing, as well as the continuing growth in membership, there was an urgent need for another full-time elder.

Ray had become increasingly involved in encouraging and establishing new churches both at home and over-seas, Geoff Gillard was still running his own business to support himself and his family, and only David Gillard was available on the church premises to deal with the day-to-day spiritual needs of the Fellowship. David's gift was primarily as an evangelist and he had felt frustrated as most of his time was spent dealing with the pastoral needs of the church. It was Christ who said "I will build My Church" and He had already been preparing the man to fill the gap.

Vernon Small had joined the church in 1984. He and his wife Rita were not in Biggin Hill of their own choice as Vernon was serving as a group captain in the Royal Air Force and had been posted to R.A.F. Biggin Hill as the President of the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre. His previous three years had been spent in Hong Kong in command of the Joint Staff at the Tri-Service Headquarters and the Biggin Hill posting had not seemed at all attractive by comparison. His very first tour as a young fighter pilot had been at Biggin Hill and his memories of the village were of a little shanty town 'in the sticks'.

Vernon and Rita could not even remember noticing a church in Biggin Hill and were surprised when, at a Christian businessmen's dinner in Hong Kong, no less a person than the speaker, the late Arthur Wallis, enthusiastically recommended 'Ray Lowe's Church'. They discovered that this was actually the local Baptist Church and, although they both had Anglican backgrounds, they decided to pay the Baptists a visit as soon as they had settled in. Vernon and Rita had been Christians for a number of years but it was while they were in Hong Kong that they were baptised in the Holy Spirit and experienced charismatic worship. They were surprised and delighted to join this lively Fellowship for what they believed would be only a short stay.

Vernon was nearing retirement from the R.A.F. and certainly didn't envisage spending it in a place like Biggin Hill but God had other ideas. When the opportunity arose for him to continue at the Selection Centre as President for a further two years to complete his service Vernon and Rita had become part of the church family and he gladly accepted.

When the New Testament speaks of each member of the church as a 'living stone' the analogy was to the temple in the Old Testament. Instructions were given that the rough-cut chunks of stone that were quarried to build the temple were to be chiselled into blocks in the quarry away from the building itself where they would be carefully placed so that they fitted closely together. Vernon had been fitting -in with the life of the Fellowship and was now serving as the leader of a house group but his preparation had been going on for many years, even before he had become a Christian. As with many of God's dealings in our lives we experience first the physical, then the spiritual. So much of what he had learned in his career in the R.A.F. was to fit him for his service to the church. The importance of loyalty and discipline in order to wage war successfully on the enemy and the responsibility for the lives of the men in his care were principles that could be applied to the calling of a spiritual leader in the church.

The elders and the church had recognised Vernon's leadership qualities and, since he had now been part of the Fellowship long enough to be known and trusted as a friend, the time had come to recognise the role to which God had called him. Jesus said "You did not choose me but I have chosen you...."; Vernon knew what it was to be a man under authority and that, as God's servant, it did not do to disobey orders. By the time Vernon had completed his final tour with the R.A.F. he had already accepted another appointment, as an elder of Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship and part of the full-time staff.

GO FORTH - JESUS LOVES THEM

David Gillard was delighted that he could now hand much of the pastoral work to Vernon and be free to concentrate on heading up the evangelistic ministry of the church. But the long hours he had spent in counselling, particularly with new Christians, had given him invaluable experience for the days ahead when there would be a flood of new converts to be discipled. He had discovered that most of the doubts and fears that seemed to plague some Christians were the result of a lack of good teaching both before and immediately after conversion. He had observed a lack of understanding of God's amazing grace and mercy in sending Jesus as our Saviour to take away our sins for ever and that, when we are born again through faith in Him, we belong to Him for ever.

Ever since his own conversion in 1971, David had been preaching the gospel of Christ to men, women and young people, calling them to respond to the message of salvation and receive new life. He had seen hundreds of people make a response at gospel concerts in schools, churches and prisons but he had often had to leave them without being sure they had really understood what they had heard.

In the past most evangelists had worked on their own and were often disappointed and frustrated by the poor job that many churches made of looking after the converts. At last God was restoring the role of the evangelist as a teacher to equip the church in what is the task of the whole body of Christ: that of making disciples for Jesus.

David was fully committed to this concept and was determined that evangelism should be a priority for everyone in the Fellowship. He decided that he would work in future as part of a team and started to gather together a group of men and women who had an obvious love for the lost and a gift for sharing the gospel. Their role was to form a 'think tank' to share their experiences and ideas, to form an evangelistic team to be available to counsel enquirers after Sunday services and special outreach events, and to motivate the rest of the Fellowship by encouragement and example.

The house groups had been re-organised and were now 'neighbourhood action groups' and the emphasis was on winning their neighbours for Christ. Barbecues, book parties, Christmas parties and games evenings added many new contacts to those already made as a result of the various clubs and recreational classes. Jesus told His disciples that He would make them 'fishers of men'; these activities had provided a large pool in which to fish, the question was: how to bring them in?

The answer came as a result of a chance meeting that turned out to be a 'divine appointment'. One morning, in December 1989, a husband and wife were walking along the main road deep in conversation and passed the Fellowship building just as David was leaving to go home to lunch. He recognised them as a couple whom he had known for many years but was surprised when they greeted him with such obvious enthusiasm. The husband had been the Gillard brothers' typesetter when they had first started in business in 1972 and, although they had prayed for him and shared the gospel with him, he had shown little real interest in Christianity over the years. David was amazed, therefore, at their opening remark: "We were just talking about God and thinking that we ought to do something about finding out more about Him - and then you came along!"

This promised to be one of those long conversations familiar to every evangelist that always seem to take place on cold windy pavements and often end without a satisfactory conclusion. Although the seed of the gospel is being sown, too often it seems like sowing in the wind and the words are snatched away. But David remembered an idea that he had been discussing with the evangelism team.

As they had shared their experiences of leading people to Christ they had all agreed that people needed time to ask questions and learn more about Jesus before they could be expected to trust their lives to Him. They saw, from the Scripture narratives, that Jesus spent long hours teaching the people about the Kingdom of God and it was from those who listened to His teaching that He called people to leave all that they had and follow Him. Conversion had to be an informed decision of the will, as well as an emotional response to the love of God.

"How would it be" David asked the couple, "if I was to get together a group of people like yourselves who would like to know more about God? We could meet for say four or five weeks, have a cup of coffee, see what the Bible says about who Jesus was, and you could ask all the questions you liked. Would you be interested?". This appeared to be exactly what they had been looking for and David promised to get in touch with them early in the new year as soon as he had got his first group together.

The next step was to prepare teaching material that would be suitable for those who might have no previous knowledge of the Bible and which would be flexible enough to allow for questions and participation by the group. Once again it seemed that God had already provided the answer. As David was leafing through some papers on his desk, he came across a booklet that an evangelist friend had given him a year or so before. He received so many Christian books and pamphlets that he hadn't even looked at it but now the title caught his eye and as he flicked through its pages he knew he had found both the name and the material for the group. 'Just Looking' by John Allen consists of a series of studies designed for youth groups, but David could see they could easily be adapted for any age and with their lively contemporary approach they were just what he was looking for.



The church family crowd around the pool as David Gillard and Roy Fanning baptise new Christians who had come to faith in Christ as a result of attending one of the first 'Just Looking' groups.

The very first 'Just Looking' group of enquirers met in the Fellowship lounge in January 1990 with five couples and these five-week courses continued almost without a break for many years. They proved without doubt to be the 'net' that was needed to bring in the many people who were contacted through personal witnessing and friendship evangelism. Coming to faith in Christ is a process. Some people had already come to Jesus by the time they attended the first session, some came during the course, some at the very end and others asked for an opportunity to carry on looking and formed 'Looking Closer' groups before they were ready to commit their lives to Christ.

There will always be those who reject the claims of Christ or refuse to turn from sin and those who are simply not yet ready but at least seventy-five per cent of those who have come through Just Looking courses have come to faith in Christ, been baptised and joined the church.

All the major denominations had designated the nineties as 'The Decade of Evangelism'. For many churches this had been a new emphasis and people had just begun to 'go out and sow' but for many others there had been much sowing with prayers and tears and the time had come to reap the harvest. The success of the 'Just Looking' groups in this Biggin Hill church had not been due to method alone, for only the Spirit of God can bring about conversion and no-one comes to Christ unless He draws them, they are merely the means of reaping what has already been sown and it will only continue to reap a harvest if the hard work of sowing and the prayer for the lost continue.

God's word to His Old Testament people is still the same today: "If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face, then will I hear from Heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land". Every week since the Spirit revived the little group of baptists in Biggin Hill twenty years ago people have met together to call on God to pour out His Spirit in revival power on Biggin Hill, on the nation and throughout the world. Together with thousands of other Christians throughout the land, intercession has been made on behalf of government and the legislature, the police force and the medical profession, for the educational institutions and for the city and commerce as the Spirit has given them faith.

God's wonderful message of redemption has always come first to the people of God, then to the world; the gospel was preached first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, then in Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. In 1971 God had raised up a prophetic group of men and women from different denominational backgrounds to call Christians to unite and march through the centre of the capital and to light symbolic fires throughout the land to alert the nation of their moral and spiritual plight in the Festival of Light.

Fifteen years later God again raised up men to call the Church to take to the streets, this time with banners and music, prayer and praise, as a prophetic voice to the nation and to declare war on the spiritual principalities and powers that rule over men and women and destroy their lives. Graham Kendrick, a gifted song-writer whose hymns and songs are sung all over the world, began to write material designed for use in the open air, and soon churches up and down the country were practising for 'Make Way for Jesus' marches.

Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship embraced the vision and joined the thousands of Christians who marched and prayed around the centres of commerce in the city of London. The following year they took up their banners again and joined with an even larger crowd in a March of Witness that took place in every major city and declared to the watching world, and to the Prime Minister and government that fundamental, Bible-believing Christianity was alive and well and active to defend the weak and speak out for righteousness.



In 1988 the church joined thousands of Christians in Smithfield Market as they waited cheerfully for hours in the pouring rain to walk and pray around the City of London, the financial heart of the Nation.



'Mighty as an army with banners'. The valleys of Biggin Hill were filled with songs of deliverance and shouts of joy on Easter Saturday, 1989, as the Fellowship took to the streets. Following this march of prayer and praise a number of folk who lived on the route became open to the gospel and some were saved.

In 1990 every local church was encouraged to join together with other Christians in their neighbourhood to stage a local 'March for Jesus' and on Easter Saturday the streets of Biggin Hill echoed to the sounds of songs of praise and shouts of victory. The church that marched out 'like an army with banners' was once again engaging in joyful, militant evangelism as their predecessors had done in the nineteen-twenties, but instead of the stirring cry of 'Onward Christian soldiers' its battle cry was a challenge to the forces of the enemy as the people shouted and sang 'Make Way, Make Way for Christ the King'!

The nineteen seventies had been the decade of renewal, of revival in the church both locally and nationally, as God poured out the Holy Spirit on His impoverished, demoralised and impotent people. It was the time of 'the Jesus people', when Christians were filled once again with the new wine of the Spirit 'as in the beginning', and their love and joy for one another and for their risen Lord was expressed in music and dancing and song.

The eighties were the years of restoration, of making the new wine skins to contain this powerful new wine. It was the time of re-discovering the architect's plans in the word of God for re-building His house, for restoring neglected ministries and establishing a strong biblical structure. In all this, the church in Biggin Hill, together with the other New Frontiers churches and all the other teams and movements throughout the country has had its part to play.

Although the revolution which has occurred in churches throughout the country is a miracle and as such a cause for great rejoicing, it is only a beginning for, as with all the miracles of Christ, it is in order that the glory of God should be seen. The gifts of the Spirit which were being poured out in the seventies were both to build the Church and to reach the nation and the world. God has been raising up churches, teaching them and equipping them to take the gospel to the nation and training them in spiritual warfare and caring for and counselling needy people, preparing them for a greater future harvest. The Biggin Hill Fellowship has had the wonderful privilege of being actively involved in a historic move of the Holy Spirit; what could well be the final preparation for the return of the King. Jesus said that His people should not be found sleeping and unprepared but be working and watching for His return.

The history of the first fifty years of the church by Rev Forbes originally appeared in 1923 as an article in the 'Searchlight' magazine, the popular monthly journal of the then Cudham Baptist Church. The title and cover picture seems worth recording here in the final chapter of this telling of an unfinished story. It tells us of a vision, a sense of destiny and an understanding of the serious nature of the church's mission. It shows a war-time scene of lights shining out over London into the darkness to expose the attacks of the enemy. What God has built, and is still building, in Biggin Hill is not just a house of refuge and security, but a battle station of prayer to be maintained and ready for action.



Was the design of this cover un-wittingly prophetic? Flowers of the countryside surround the dismal London scene of Trafalgar Square at night as searchlights reveal the attack of the enemy.

Half a century later it was here beneath Nelson's Column, monument of a great national victory, that the Biggin Hill Church family stood with thousands of other Christians at a rally to launch The Nationwide Festival of Light.

Later they would light their own beacon on their own hill-top above London as part of a symbolic re-enactment of a communication system used in a previous age when their country was under threat.

An apparently chance meeting with a church leader from South London brought an unexpected confirmation of this prophetic message for the church. He said he'd always taken a great interest in Biggin Hill, particularly in the R.A.F. station and the part it had played in the defence of London so he was delighted when we invited him for lunch.

Around the lunch table he explained the reason for his interest. He told us how the airfield had been the site of the early experiments in the 'wireless telephony' that was to be used in the first world war. Later a radio system was developed there that was used to great effect in the second world war to relay information about enemy aircraft and direct the intercepting fighters. This man had often prayed for God's people in Biggin Hill, sometimes driving up to the airfield to pray. He had heard about the Fellowship, although he had never visited us, and had always felt that God had designated a similar spiritual role for them and that they were engaged in important work for the Kingdom of God.

Revival and renewal has begun in the Church in Great Britain but is yet to affect the nation as a whole but one senses a change in the spiritual climate. The humanism and atheistic materialism, sexual promiscuity, drug culture and the alluring mysticism of the Hindu gurus of the 'swinging sixties' have produced a society that is morally and spiritually bankrupt. Those who have rejected the Christian God have ceased to be atheists and have become pagans, turning to foreign gods, to clairvoyants and mediums, to tarot cards and divination, to astrology and accupuncture and the ancient practices of the dark ages.

It has been said that those who don't believe in God will believe in anything! Many people are becoming mental and physical casualties through involvement with the occult and are beginning to search for a truth that will set them free. As the Church moves out as a liberating army and lives are being changed by the power of the risen Christ, the world has begun to take notice. The tide has turned and the first stirrings of a national revival are being felt.

One Sunday morning, during the time of worship in the new building, the Lord gave a prophecy for the church; "As I look on your land I see a spiritual desert but I have poured out My living water, My Holy Spirit, upon you. You are My harvest for the feeding of My people but you are like a seed harvest in a time of drought. Each one of you is precious, not one must be lost, and I will plant each one of you as you yield your lives to me and you will bring forth much fruit."

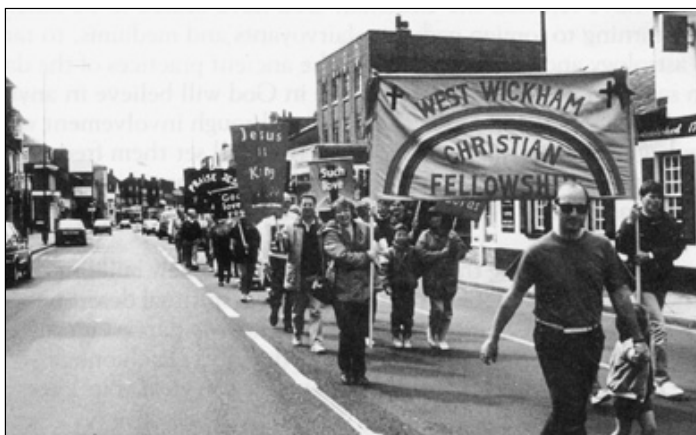
The Spring of 1990 was to be a time for planting part of that seed harvest. It had been five years before this, while meeting in the school, that the church had its first visitors from the West Wickham area just as the Sevenoaks church was about to come to birth. Gradually more and more people joined them as they were drawn to a place where they could learn more of the work of the Holy Spirit. Like the folk from Sevenoaks, they were mostly keen, mature Christians with a willingness to serve and learn and they quickly found a place in the heart of the Fellowship. As the Lord had drawn those to whom He had given special abilities, the elders had given them plenty of opportunity to exercise their gifts in music and children's work as well as preaching and teaching.

Some of the families had moved to Biggin Hill but most were committed to the vision of a New Testament church in their own locality and, by the Autumn of 1989, five house groups were meeting together during the week and a school hall was being used one Sunday in every month for worship and Bible teaching, with a creche and Sunday School for the children. Over the five years 'gestation period' God had been forming a group of people within the body of the church that were now ready to exist as an independent church. Trevor Payne had been developing a pastoral and teaching ministry among the group and, having completed two years theological training at Spurgeons' College, he was now ready to lead the church which would become West Wickham Christian Fellowship.

It was on Easter Sunday morning that they met together in Biggin Hill for the last time as one church. Tears of joy mixed with tears of sadness as, one by one, members of the new church left their seats, with their babies and children, and walked forward to stand side by side at the front, facing the brothers and sisters that they were leaving behind.

The words of the song they sang to one another across the space that had formed between them were words of encouragement, of commission and of covenant. They sang them with deep conviction and, as they sang, their faith rose as they became conscious that the words were prophetic and that this was just a beginning:

Go forth! Jesus loves them,
Go forth! take the gospel,
Go forth! the time is now,
The harvest is ripening,
Go forth!



The Kingdom advances - like an army with banners. The new church join with other Christians in a March for Jesus in West Wickham High Street.

This seems a good place to end this portrait of a church; unfinished, still growing and learning, still waiting to see what God will do next. And you, the reader, may be part of the next chapter, or maybe you are part of another story and have been thrilled to discover, as you have read these pages, that you too have a part to play in the ever unfolding history of the Kingdom of God.

As for this small part of the body of Christ, our hearts will never be satisfied until we see in our neighbourhood what God has promised for the who world “...that the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY



A FAMILY HISTORY OF NEW LIFE CHURCH BIGGIN HILL

Most people associate Biggin Hill with flying, with the Spitfire and Hurricane and the Battle of Britain but Biggin Hill is much more than just the site of an airfield. Over the past a hundred and fifty years the character of the adjacent hills and valleys on the North Downs has changed dramatically until what was once a small scattered farming community has become a large densely-populated village.

Many books and films have told of the strategic part the airfield played in two world wars and of the brave men who risked their lives in defense of their country. This book tells another story - a story that began long before the village existed or men flew in airplanes - the family history of a church, the Baptists who became Biggin Hill Christian Fellowship and are now New Life Church Biggin Hill. Through all the years of change, through war and peace, their mission has been to make known the Good News of Jesus and His love and to call men and women and children to follow Him but, as this is a true story, it records times of failure as well as success, of defeat as well as victory.

This is more than a personal history of a local church. It tells of a work of God the Holy Spirit that is worldwide and of a prophetic people - a people of destiny. God has a strategy, a plan for His people everywhere - to build His church and to lead them in victory. This book will stir and challenge you to play your part in God's Mighty Army.

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