

The Old Chapel, The Shallows, Saltford



'The Old Chapel' bottom left and 'The Craig' above. C.1930

Compared to many other historic buildings in Saltford's 'Old Village' Conservation Area, the building known today as 'The Old Chapel' is a relatively recent addition, dating from the mid-Victorian period. The memorial stone for this former Primitive Methodist Chapel was laid on 31st October 1865 by H. O. Wills, a leading member of the Wills Tobacco firm in Bristol. An engraved stone at the top of the front face of the building can be seen marking the year building began. The Methodist Chapel in Saltford could hold 120 people and cost c.£200 to build, with most of the funds for the building raised locally. It is said that the Methodist Chapel at Saltford was a daughter to the one at Westgate Buildings in Bath. Construction was completed by June 1866. 'The Old Chapel' was used as a Methodist Chapel for almost sixty years, followed by approximately 35 years as a Working Men's Club from 1930. From the late 1960s it was mostly left empty, and the building became derelict. It was sold to an architect who converted it into a house in the early 1980s, and it has been a private residence since.

Origins

As a former Methodist Chapel, 'The Old Chapel' naturally traces its origins to the teachings of John Wesley, the leader of Methodism. 'John Wesley's New Room' in the heart of Bristol is the oldest Methodist building in the world. John Wesley's journal shows he visited Keynsham to preach ten times between 1771 and 1787. Following Wesley's example, in the years that followed, travelling Methodist preachers would arrive on horse to the area and preach in the open.

It was a travelling Primitive Methodist preacher - Rev J. Foise of Bristol - who converted a Saltford man, Thomas Collyer and his wife, Ann Collyer. Mr Collyer worked as a gardener at The Rectory on The Shallows and Mrs Collyer was school mistress at the Saltford Parochial School for Boys and Girls from 1861 to 1875 in Queen's Square. A Methodist Society was formed in Saltford attached to the Bath circuit of Methodist societies.

Services were held in Mr and Mrs Collyer's home on The Shallows at No.1 Ferry Cottages (now known as 1 Willow Cottages). Services took place in the kitchen on Sunday evenings, with costs covered by voluntary donations.

Methodist Chapel (1865 – 1920s)

It is likely that increased Methodist numbers in the area led to the requirement of new premises. It is recorded that '*Mrs Collyer and her husband collected most of the money for the building of the small but substantially built primitive Methodist Chapel*' (c.£200). The architect was Mr Ambrose using a design by Mr T J Irvine. A view of the new Chapel could be clearly seen from the windows of 1 Ferry Cottages where Methodist services had been originally held.

The memorial stone was ceremoniously laid by H. O. Wells on All Hallows Eve 1865. The engraving on the commemorative trowel reads '*Presented to H. O. Wills, Esq. on laying the Memorial Stone of the PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL. SALT FORD. Oct 31 1865*'. A mixture of both local stone and stone quarried in Bristol (the reddish sandstone visible) was used for construction. The building formally opened on Thursday 14 June 1866. Mr H. O. Wells, an active Congregationalist, returned to The Shallows for its official opening and reportedly gave a 'earnest, spiritual and catholic' speech. A sermon was preached by Mr Hopson of Bristol, and other speakers at the Chapel's official opening included E. Foizey of Frome and W. C. Pratt of Keynsham. That evening, the gentlemen held a public tea meeting at the Methodist Chapel.

Though records have not been traced to date for the Methodist Chapel's early years, it is known that between 1898 and 1910 services took place on Sundays at 6pm and Thursdays at 7pm. From 1903 to 1910 it is recorded that the organist was Miss Francombe, and the steward Mr G J Roch. From 1913 to 1915 the Minister is recorded as being the Reverend W T Healey; in 1916-1919 the Reverend Charles Crabtree; and in 1920-21 the Reverend W Woodley. The Chapel was actively used for Methodist services for almost 60 years. A 'Primitive Methodist Church' is listed on Ordinance Survey maps in 1884 and 1902.

It seems that the building's role as a location for Methodist services ended in the early 1920s, as between 1923-1927 the Methodist Chapel was documented as being 'a meeting house for non-sectarians'.

In front of the garden wall still adjacent to The Old Chapel, located along the area where the bench is now opposite the Brass Mill, were 'Flower's Cottages'. Percy Sims book published in 1976 says '*Some 30 yards past Mill Cottages was a block of three ancient small cottages – known as Flower's Cottages – where more of the mill workers lived*'. Demolished long ago, the thatched rooves of these cottages can be seen in old photos almost abutting the Chapel building.

Working Men's Club (1930 –1960s)

Following its use as a Methodist Chapel coming to an end, in 1930 the Wills family along with H.S. Radcliffe Esquire JP of Saltford made significant contributions to turn the Methodist Chapel building into Saltford's Working Men's Club.

Some villagers today remember visiting the building with their fathers when it was a Working Men's Club. Known as the 'Men's Club', they recall how in the 1960s the men of the village would meet by arrangement in the evenings to use the building to play snooker or billiards, with keys to the building held by various people. The full-size snooker table was upstairs, with a fire and flat irons to keep the green smooth. The children who visited with their fathers at the time recall sitting on the floor watching – and not being allowed to touch the precious green on the table! They remember the building had gas lighting and that it was a bit cold. At the time that it was the Men's Club in the 1960s the front door was on the side of the building (where it remained till 2018), and one resident recalls there was an oak staircase immediately on the left when entering through the front door that led to the open-plan room upstairs. The kitchen area was also at the side on the ground floor when entering, where there was a kettle to make hot drinks. The use of the former Chapel building as a place to meet socially by local men lasted over thirty years, with its purpose as a Working Men's Club coming to an end in the 1960s sometime after Saltford Hall was built in Wedmore Road.

1970s to the present day

Due to lack of use and maintenance, during the 1970s the building fell into a state of disrepair, though it is known that it was utilised as a boat repair workshop at one stage. One neighbour who moved to The Shallows in the late 1970s describes the former Chapel building as 'derelict'. According to another neighbour, at the point of roof tiles falling off and risking the safety of those below the building was sold to an architect. Rather than demolishing it, which some worried would occur due to its poor condition, the architect looked to convert the building into a private house.

In August 1980 the Keynsham Chronicle published a page article with a photo of the Chapel saying '*Many feared that this fine old building at The Shallows, Saltford, dating back to 1863 [should be 1865] which at one time was Saltford Young Men's Club, would be allowed to fall into disrepair. It fell into disuse at the time the new Saltford Hall was built. But now it is being saved: a local architect is in charge of converting the building into a private house. For many of the older men of Saltford, the building holds many memories, and they will be glad it is to be put to a good purpose*'.

Renamed as 'The Old Chapel', it has been a private dwelling since. In 2018 The Old Chapel was almost entirely renovated from its 1980s conversion and extended to the side and rear. The works in 2018 included reinstating the front door to its original location at the front of the building, as evidenced by a photo dating from the 1930s (below). As much as possible of the original stone and tiles were included in the renovation of the building. Today 'The Old Chapel' is recognised by B&NES Council as a 'focal building' and a 'positive building' in the Saltford Conservation Area Character Appraisal Map.

Written by a current resident of 'this fine old building at The Shallows' (Nov 2022), with thanks for information from long-standing residents, Shallows neighbours, and books by local historians