
THE ROCHDALE BAPTISTS

1773 - 1973

A SHORT HISTORY

Written in 1973 to commemorate the Bi-centenary
of the West Street Baptist Church Rochdale.

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THE 225TH ANNIVERSARY IN 1998.)

By: **A. Whitehead.**

“On 18th September 1773 friends at Rochdale asked at an Ebenezer (Bacup) Church meeting exemption from supporting the ministry there any longer in consequence of the expense attaching to the infant cause at Rochdale. Their prayer was granted by the famous Rev. John Hirst and his people without demur.”

That part of the Christian Church known as the Baptists is less than 400 years old, although in earlier times sections were in existence whose fundamental principle was that of the immediate and direct accountancy of God of each individual; that between God and the individual there was no mediator save Jesus Christ. These were the Anabaptists who rejected the priestly notions of Christian ministry and all forms of State support. They maintained their preachers by free-will offerings; whose one qualification must be a divine call to such service. Anabaptism in England was never organised and lacked leadership, for this reason it cannot be regarded as the seed-bed of the English Baptists.

John Smyth was the first English Baptist. He first took orders of the Church of England, then became a Puritan Separatist and finally a Baptist Separatist, eventually fleeing to Holland and becoming the pastor of a Church of English Separatist there. In 1609 he first baptised himself and then baptised Thomas Helwys, a gentleman of Basford in Nottingham, who financed the emigration of a Gainsborough Separatist Church to Amsterdam, and others. Thus was formed the first Baptist Church - but not in England.

Thomas Helwys concluded that the flight from persecution had been a mistake and so returned to England at the end of 1612 and founded the first Baptist church on English soil at Spitalfields, a church led and officered by laymen. The church survived until the end of the 19th century.

The Baptist church in this part of England began about 1650, being centred in the Mersey and Lower Irwell valleys, spreading into Cheshire and into the Rossendale Valley. It is in this area that we are most interested as the roots of West Street are here.

A group was meeting in 1672 at Pendle and in the 1680's, houses in Bacup were licensed as being "set apart for public meetings for Protestant Dissenters in religious worship". The church at Cloughfold was founded in 1701. One of the signatories to the document was Richard Holden of 'Stubble' Rochdale. The church at Bacup was formed at some date between 1720 and 1735.

Whitley related that the life of the churches from 1738-1757 is better imagined than described, better perhaps not even to imagine unless the aim be to see the need of a vigorous reaction. But great changes were near, due to the Industrial Revolution and the Evangelical revival begun by George Whitefield and carried on by John Wesley. Amongst the early Lancashire Puritans was Richard Midgley, a sound Protestant and able preacher, appointed vicar of this parish by Archbishop Parker in the third year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He and his son were persecuted for their nonconformity and successively driven from the living, but they spent their lives in a successful endeavour to evangelise the neighbourhood. When in 1662 the Act of Uniformity ousted the best men in the Established Church, one of the sufferers for conscience sake was Robert Bath. Round him the puritans of the town rallied, and he ministered to them, at first in a cottage and subsequently in a large house licensed for preaching. Thus was founded the dissenting interest in Rochdale

which was represented by the old Presbyterian meeting house in Blackwater when first the history of our Church begins.

In 1767 this congregation appears to have been in a very divided condition. John Hirst of Edenfield, then a young man came to the chapel by invitation to preach one Sunday morning in that year and found the doors locked against him by a rival faction. He was obliged to wait outside whilst entrance was forced by crowbar and picklock when a crowded audience, perhaps as a consequence, rewarded the persistency of his friends. The fact that Presbyterianism was lapsing into Unitarianism may possibly account for the opposition to this young preacher. His appearance there on that Sunday morning is of great interest for he had but recently been baptised and was shortly to become pastor of the church at Bacup.

Rochdale people were members of the Rossendale church from the very first; they were mostly farmers. The town itself must have had little to commend it. When Wesley preached here he said that the lions at Rochdale were lambs in comparison with those at Bolton, although his description of his first visit suggests that a Rochdale 'lamb' was formidable enough.

"The streets were lined on both sides with multitudes of people shouting, cursing, blaspheming and gnashing their teeth at us" he said, but a handful of Godly folk, mainly woollen weavers, were anxious to bear their testimony in the town. When weather or other reasons prevented them from crossing the hills to Bacup to worship under the ministry of John Hirst or to Wainsgate under Dr Fawcett, they would meet together for prayer and exhortation.

Before very long ministers from Wainsgate, Bacup and elsewhere found their way to Rochdale and preached in cottages to these brethren. One man who assisted at these meetings was Abraham Greenwood, a pupil of Dr Fawcett, who was later to become the first pastor of this Church.

The real beginning of the church came with the baptism of nine persons in the River Roche on 12th October 1773. A great crowd gathered on the banks to watch the ceremony which was conducted by the same Mr Hirst who had preached under such disadvantageous circumstances in the Presbyterian meeting house six years before, and who, incidentally was born in Blackwater Street. A report was circulated the Mr Hirst had demanded five shillings from each person baptised. In consequence all nine made a solemn declaration that the charge was an absolute falsehood, each signing his or her name to the document. Thus began a religious cause which has continued for two centuries.

In the teeth of much opposition the Baptists secured a room attached to the Bull Inn at the bottom of Yorkshire Street which they occupied until April 1775. The Church Books at Bacup and Wainsgate record the dismissal (or transfer) of the Rochdale members to the newly formed church, and the cordial feelings may be inferred from the fact that Bacup made a liberal contribution towards building the new church. At the same time the church at Bacup transferred Abraham Greenwood to the new cause to become its first minister. A building was erected on a site in Town

Meadows, near to the site of the new Police Headquarters. The only traceable record of a description of the building is in a signed article in the Rochdale Observer of 10th August 1849 by James Holden. It is described as being 14 yards by 12 yards and costs short of £400. At first it was barren of both gallery and pews; unbacked seats sufficing. It is interest to note also that at the end of the 18th century the only baptistry within a building was at Rochdale. A part of the lower rooms formed the minister's and deacons' vestries and the other half the infant's school. The second storey was given up to the females and the third storey to the males. Folding or sliding doors betwixt the latter and the chapel were thrown open during service times so that the classes might benefit by the hymns of praise and ministrations from the pulpit. The boys sat in the "upper circle" in the morning and the girls in the afternoon or else vice versa.

The graveyard, about 12 yards square, could rank as one of the smallest cemeteries in the three kingdoms. It was closed as from 11th March 1855 by decision of the Lords in Council. The Meeting House itself survived until 1932 when the property was sold to the Corporation for development purposes for £125. The money for the purchase was given by Mr Frederick Lye, and put in trust for the purposes of the ministry. Prior to this the building had been converted into cottages. After the sale the building was demolished. The remains were exhumed from the graves and re-interred at Rochdale Cemetery in 1957.

Here Greenwood laboured for six years. He was one of the four present at the great service of baptism in 1773, the others being John Hirst of Bacup, Charles Bamford who held pastorates at Accrington and Halifax, and William Crabtree of Bradford. It is not clear whether all four performed the baptisms or only Hirst. The earliest written record of the Church contains a list of members in which the name and signature of Greenwood appear at No.15. Four documents appear in the book, unfortunately none of them is dated and therefore the date of writing can only be conjectured. Two lay down the 'Principle Doctrines of the Baptist Church at Rochdale' and two the 'Covenants of Engagement', the earliest of which is copiously annotated with scriptural references. Comparison of the handwriting in the first 'Principle Doctrines' with Greenwood's signature suggest that this was written by him. It comprises twenty-three paragraphs each beginning "We believe", many of which would hardly be acceptable today - even if they were comprehensible to modern Christians. Yet the people who were entering the Church in those days signed the book, even though many had to 'make their mark' and were probably unable to read. No closer date can be estimated for the second and revised Doctrines than the early 1800's although the handwriting could be that of a much later minister, the Rev. W.F. Burchell. This later document is far more comprehensible to our modern minds.

Both documents stress the importance of Baptism by immersion, and the Lord's Supper. The earliest record reads:

"We believe that the believers in Christ are the only proper subjects of baptism whose duty it is to comply and submit to that solemn ordinance which is to be performed by immersion, or overwetting the person decently in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; wherein is held forth

the death and resurrection of our Lord and they as dead unto sin but risen to newness of life.

“We believe the solemn ordinance of the Lord’s Supper; performed by the elements of bread and wine, broken and poured out by the minister, do hold forth the death of Christ and the redemption of his people by his blood, and such are only to partake who believe and are baptised.”

The closed communion and the conditions of participation are still present in the later declaration:

“We believe the baptism of all believers by immersion and the Lord’s Supper are ordinances of Christ to be continued until His second coming, and that the former is absolutely requisite to the latter, that is to say, that only those are to be admitted into the communication of the Church and to participate of all the ordinances in it who, upon profession of their faith, have been baptised by immersion in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

Although many of the doctrinal propositions are Calvinistic in origin it is evident that the men who drew up these documents whilst using Calvinism as a base had, like John Smyth, begun to leave it behind. We can still see traces of it though in paragraph 5 of the first ‘Doctrines’ and in paragraph 3 of the second, apparently later statement: that only the elect could realise everlasting salvation. On the other hand there is no reference to the retention of infant baptism, and the use of secular power for the execution of religious policy, which was expected to assist the church to “rule and discipline the ungodly in the interests of the church.”

We have no evidence to show when the church began to accept such Anabaptist principles as that of the immediate and direct accountability to God of each individual, and that between God and man there was no mediator save Jesus Christ, or the Armenian principle that God created man with freedom of will.

One tenet that we hold now that has been with us from the beginning is that Baptism is to be administered only to penitent and believing persons and that we disclaim all notions of baptismal regeneration. Baptism too has never been a sacrament but an ordinance; that both baptism and the Lord’s Supper only serve to support and stir up repentance and faith.

The practice of public declaration before acceptance for baptism and membership is also part of this covenant:

“Lastly, that we admit none into our communion unless he, she or they do give faithful relation of their experience of the dealings of God with their souls; and also a confession of the fundamental articles of their faith, and that before the Church when met together upon a unanimous agreement on both sides to be admitted to all the privileges of God’s House.”

After 1858 this public declaration became optional, and although many availed themselves of it, the practice gradually fell into disuse.

In the first of the two Covenants of Engagement a long preamble is followed by ten clauses, each laying down a strict code of conduct for the members. A direct reference to Calvinism occurs in the first clause: "We . . . closely adhere to . . . the Doctrine of Special Grace which doctrine is commonly known by the name of Calvinism." Any who opposed or attempted to overthrow this Doctrine of Grace should be reported to the Church "Tho' it be the wife of our bosom". If admonition was ineffective the church would then "proceed to the solemn ordinance of separation, or cutting off". Constant and regular attendance at services and meetings is stressed; "We will not be detained at home by friends or relations visiting us on those days we are called to worship". Non-attendance at church had to be accounted for in obedience to the clause: "We will faithfully and truly render our reason to the Church of the real cause of our absence . . .". Other clauses are concerned with the contributions towards the maintenance of the Church, secrecy of church affairs, Sanctity of the Sabbath, duty to family and to one another, "sinful conformity and communion with the world", and just dealings in business. The second, and later Church Covenant is a much shorter and condensed document comprising a preamble and seventeen paragraphs dealing with similar matters to those in the first. One gains the idea from these that they considered themselves a people apart from the world. There is nothing here to suggest that they should endeavour to preach the Gospel or try to convert those outside the church. The following paragraph speaks for itself:

"That we will, to the utmost, separate ourselves from the world . . . and have no converse, fellowship, or society with vain, disorderly persons in any place whatever any longer than we have business with them in our lawful calling that it may appear that we are not of the world."

This introspective attitude evidently changed over a period of about forty years for, in a minute dated February 28th 1841 we read:

"Several brethren reported their visits to the surrounding poor &c from which it appeared

1. That there are multitudes in the most deplorable condition in a spiritual point of view and who claim our Xtn. sympathy & effort.
2. That they are generally accessible to Christian kindness.
3. That the Socialists, those enemies of God & man are making great efforts to proselyte them & not altogether without success.
4. That it is our duty, as disciples of Him who "came to seek and to save that which was lost" to redouble our exertions on their behalf if we would be free from their blood."

Further it was:

"Resolved that a monthly prayer meeting be held on the second Thursday of every month to invoke a divine blessing on the several departments of Xtn. labour and especially on behalf of the brethren who visit the houses of the ungodly."

A memorial written by the Rev T. Harwood Pattison on the occasion of the Church's Centenary confirmed that many were not illiberal to others who differed from them. No kindlier spirit, for example, ever directed the actions of a church than Thomas

Littlewood. When his congregation dwindled to a very small number in the winter of 1802 he thus records the fact in the Church Book:

“Our numbers small, feeble, cold and indifferent. The congregations this winter smaller than before, owing in part to the new (Independent) Chapel in Bamford; but let us rejoice if good be done any where and by any means.”

The history of any church must needs be interspersed with names of people, for, after all, the “Church! is people - people who have led and guided our Church through 200 years of life. Ministers and laymen who were leaders and a host of honest, God-fearing people who were willing workers, giving whatever talent and substance they possessed to the task of keeping a place of worship in being so that the world around might know of that God in whom they believed and His Son, Jesus Christ whom they loved.

The first minister was Abraham Greenwood who led the Church for six years from 1775 to 1781 when he was sent to Dudley, then to Oakham in about 1786, and further to Killingford, Lincoln in 1796. He was one of the thirteen subscribers at the meeting which led to the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. Whitley in his book ‘Baptists of the North West England’ writes that Greenwood was “the first pastor of Rochdale, which church had the knack of being in touch with the beginning of many a good Movement.”

He was followed by John Dracup, who after pastoring at Steep Lane and Rodhill End came to Rochdale in 1781, labouring for three years when he returned to Steep Lane, Sowerby Bridge and where he died the following year. He is buried in the graveyard of that Church. The signature of both he and his wife can be seen against the Covenant. It was during his ministry that the start of the new cause at Ogden so reduced the membership that there was a grave danger that the birth of this daughter church would cause the death of the mother.

James Howarth of Bacup, a young man of great promise and piety became minister in 1795 but must have held the post for less than a year before he too followed his predecessor to the grave.

The church began to develop with the arrival of Thomas Littlewood. A young Yorkshireman, a schoolmaster, 30 years of age living at Clayton and desirous of settling in Lancashire, he was invited to become pastor of a newly formed church in Preston in 1783 but he preferred to stay in Manchester. In 1786 he received a call to Rochdale which he accepted, preferring a church “Free from conservatism and intestinal trouble.” A man of exceptional rank and abilities, and free from financial worries by keeping a school, he and the Church led the denomination for thirty years.

His are the earliest written records of church business in a book now in the Archives in the Rochdale Library, the first entry being dated July 4th 1789. These records continue until 1808; why he stopped writing them at this point is not known. The concern of the Church for itself is shown here in that the records are mainly of a domestic nature - differences of a disagreeable nature between Church members

such as led the pastor to write: "Awful catalogue indeed, may we suitably weep for the afflictions of Joseph." The importance of attendance at Church and especially at Communion is underlined in a Minute of October 30th 1789:

"The Church is dissatisfied with Mary Wild's conduct both in absenting herself from the Church, and in resuming her place without first consulting them and assigning some sufficient reasons for her so doing. John Fitton to acquaint her with this - and report the result at our next meeting."

We are left wondered what the result was, for the next entry reads:

"Omitted taking minutes for the last 3 meetings."

The Church has in recent times at any rate, always considered itself to be the final arbiter in all matters. One of the Covenants states that the Church shall "proceed to the solemn ordinance of separation, or cutting off", for being constantly obstinate in the holding of heterodox opinions. An example of this is seen in the incident in December 1808 when six people were excluded for "erroneous sentiments and neglect of duty" and for adhering to another interest. These formed the nucleus of what became the Hope Street Particular Baptist Church. According to the records of this (Hope Street) Church these people declared that they were "expelled from the church at Town Meadows by the unscriptural authority and command of Mr Littlewood . . . because they would not desist from going to hear Mr Gadsby from Manchester who came to preach about once a month." They first met in a room "in Mr Greenwood's School in the new road leading to the canal."

On the 30th May 1787 representatives from seventeen Baptist Churches in Lancashire and Yorkshire met at Colne and formed "A Christian Association for the promotion of the Communion of Churches". Among these seventeen was the church at Rochdale, and during the first quarter of a century the name of Thomas Littlewood is amongst those conspicuous in the affairs of the new association. During that period he preached twelve Association sermons, wrote five Circular letters, and was elected Moderator four times. Led by such men the work of the Association allied itself with the stirring question of the times; in 1791 for example, the iniquities of the slave trade were condemned and the sympathies of the Churches claimed for the band of men who were waging the conflict against this national crime. It is unfortunate that between 1790 and 1794 an unexplained gap occurs in our records. Following the Association meeting held at Hebden Bridge in 1804 a special meeting saw the formation of the Northern Baptist Education Society with Littlewood as its first secretary. One of the rules was that subscribers and other friends shall meet on the first Wednesday in August at the Baptist Meeting House in Rochdale "to pay their subscriptions . . .". The first subscription list contained donations of £20 from the Rochdale Church and ten guineas from Littlewood. The subsequent history of the College at Horton and Rawdon stamps the work done that day as one for which we have to give God thanks. Our Church's association with Rawdon College continued until its recent amalgamation with Manchester in the Northern Baptist College. Mr Richard Watson was for many years a Trustee and an Honorary member of the Committee.

Thomas Littlewood died in harness on September 28th 1817. He had preached at the services and also conducted a Church meeting in the evening of that day, and died

before midnight. He was 64 years old. A tablet was erected to his memory in the Town Meadows Meeting House being a tribute to his 32 years as pastor of the Church and "Head of a respectable seminary in this Town". It was removed and re-erected in the West Street premises when the Church moved in 1833. He was amiable in manners and remarkable for hospitality; of an active mind, judicious, pious and exemplary. The building which housed the school he founded stood at the junction of George Street and Yorkshire Street. John Bright was for a time a pupil there. The building was demolished in February 1971. The Church possesses a portrait of him, but whether it is an authentic likeness or not is doubtful, as it was painted in 1861, but Dr Underwood's 'History of the English Baptists' lends some credence with the remark: "He was noted for his generosity and hospitality, for his heart was as large as his body - ". So closed the ministry of a man who had a great influence upon the cause of the Kingdom, not only in Rochdale but in the wider field of the Baptist denomination.

Statistics were not a strong point with those who recorded our early history, but the Church must have made progress as only thirty years after Littlewood wrote about his "small, cold, feeble and indifferent congregation", it was moving to larger and more commodious premises. This was against the situation in the northern counties in the beginning of the 19th century.

In 1818 the Association meetings were held in Rochdale and in the Circular Letter written by Moses Fisher of Liverpool which had the rather awe-inspiring title of: 'The necessity of attempting the more extensive spread of the Gospel at home, and the means to be adopted', he wrote: "If we examine the map of the globe we shall not find a spot under the sun which has equal claims on us with Lancashire and Yorkshire." He writes of the "black catalogue of crime" presented at the Lancaster assizes in 1817: "Instances of murder so cruel, unnatural and unprovoked that they seem to belong to the annals of a savage and barbarous people . . . ". He accuses Lancashire of being famous for supremacy in wickedness and does not let our Yorkshire neighbours off the hook with: "it is no breach of veracity or charity to say that the moral and religious state of its inhabitants is generally not far superior to that of Lancashire."

Into this situation and barely a month after the death of his predecessor came the Rev. William Stephens. At the age of 52 he had already become a well-known figure in the denomination. The church books contain no record of his ministry whatever, his signature in the Church Roll and in one other place being the only writing of his we possess, but a good deal of information has been obtained from other sources. T. Harwood Pattison records that he had a life of "strange and varied experiences." He was born in London in 1765 and there is a family story that at the age of fifteen he ran away from home to join a circus, or go on the stage, but was persuaded against it as a permanent occupation. He subsequently settled in Leeds and was converted under the ministry of the Rev. Edward Parsons. In December 1796 he was ordained as the first pastor of the Independent Church in Bingley. Four years later he moved to the Belmont Congregational Church in Aberdeen, again as the first pastor of a comparatively new church, and 1803 went to the Tabernacle, Edinburgh where he was co-pastor with James Haldane. In addition to being co-pastor he became one of

the tutors at the Theological Academy there, taking charge of the fifth Theological class. The Edinburgh Tabernacle was built in 1798 specifically for the Haldane brothers who were the Scottish equivalent of the English Wesleys and Whitefields. It was modelled on the Whitefield Chapels in England where different evangelical ministers would declare the Gospel to a multitude of hearers and had a seating capacity of 3,200.

During this period, in 1806, Stephens became convinced of the unscripturalness of infant baptism and was himself baptised in the Water of Leith, near Cannonmills, very close to the site of the Tabernacle, by the Rev. James Young. His example was followed by Haldane himself.

Having embraced Baptist principles he was unable to continue at the Tabernacle, and in 1807 became pastor of Prescott Street, London (which is reputed to be the earliest Baptist Church in the Metropolis). He followed a man, Abraham Booth, whose church had been in the forefront of many developments. Booth was at the church for thirty years and whilst he was basically a Calvinist, retaining his belief in election, he was in no way hampered in calling upon all to repent and believe in Christ. He consistently supported the Missionary Society whilst leading an Itinerant Society for preaching in villages on the plea that there was enough work to do at home without sending people overseas. He trained his deacons well; one founding a society for the Establishment of Sunday Schools and two others, one purchasing the premises for, and another being the treasurer of the Baptist Academical Institution at Stepney in 1810 which later became Regents Park College. Booth died in 1806 and therefore Stephens would be minister when this project was begun, and yet in connection with these happenings reference is always made to Abraham Booth's Church. One cannot help feeling that Stephens must have had rather an unhappy time with Booth's ghost virtually still sitting in the pulpit four years after his death.

His ministry here was quite brief; he offered his resignation in September 1810. He had doctrinal differences with a considerable section of the church, and when he resigned ten brethren and twenty-one sisters seceded and formed themselves into a separate body worshipping in Artillery Street (Lane). It was whilst he was at Prescott Street that he married his second wife, Miss Elizabeth Blackett, a lady 21 years his junior.

Then followed six years from 1811 to 1817 as the first permanent pastor of the church at New York Street, (now Moss Side) Manchester, which church had been formed in 1808.

Thus, in November 1817, he came to Rochdale. A man of considerable experience and of mature years, he came to a church which appeared to have made little progress numerically for a long time, but where the spiritual temperature must have been very high. When the persecution ended about the end of the 17th century and the Toleration Act became law, a cold fog of religious indifference descended upon the nation. The granting of their heart's desire was followed by a leanness in their souls. Morality sank to a low level and in all classes of society gambling and drunkenness were rife.

What little information is given in the Church books of this time is purely statistical and might lead to the conclusion that the Church was at a standstill. Numerically this would appear to be so. Details are given in the Church Roll of the figures reported annually to the Association. Between 1820 and 1831 the total membership fell from 108 to 86. Details of admissions due to baptism, etc., and dismission due to death, exclusion and transfer do not tally however, but they show that in these twelve years only 36 people were admitted by baptism and 29 names were removed due to death and 22 by exclusion. Other figures show that up to two years before the end of Stephens' ministry the total never rose above 100.

How then can we account for the fact that during this period the Church found it necessary and possible to erect a new building on the present site in West Street?

If the Calvinistic principle of election was still being adhered to it is quite possible that the numbers of 'elect' might remain fairly constant, but many more could have been attracted by the preaching. Stephens was reputed to have an excellent voice due, no doubt, to his early experience on the stage. A year after he arrived in Manchester we find his name in the records of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association. He was the writer of the Association letter in 1812 and also appears amongst the preachers. He again contributed to the letter ten years later and was one of the preachers on eight other occasions - once, in 1814, on the same panel as Thomas Littlewood. He twice became Moderator of the Association, once in 1833 when the meetings were held in Rochdale.

The necessity for a new building is recorded in a small notebook, 6" by 4", somewhat damaged by time and damp, but with most of the writing still legible. The first four pages contain a letter written by James Littlewood setting out the reasons for building and appealing for funds. The book was evidently taken round to possible subscribers who entered their names and the amount of their promises. These ranged from a few shillings to one of £800 by Henry Kelsall.

For the purposes of history the letter is given in full.

Rochdale 26th January. 1831

The Baptist Church now assembling in Town Meadows occupy a chapel which was built in the year 1772 (?), when the number of dissenters in the town was very small, and they were very much condemned. The Building is furnished with seats for about 450 persons, it stands in the very worst situation in the town; every way of access to it being very unpleasant. The walls and floor are extremely damp and it appears upon examination by a builder that the rebuilding of one side of it would, in a short time, be essential to its security.

The adjoining rooms used for a Sunday School are very inconvenient, and much too small for the purpose.

Whether fact, fiction or hearsay, one can capture some of the thrill and exultation which these pioneers experienced. Stephens described the church as a 'plain but elegant and commodious building in a very good situation' and of the schoolroom he says that 'although beneath the chapel it is both lofty and spacious with every convenience.'

Stephens voluntarily resigned an endowment of nearly £70 per annum bequeathed by Miss Betty Stott for the benefit of the minister. The estate was sold for £1,693 and, after deduction of £231 for legal fees and other expenses, the sum of £1,448 was devoted to the cost of the new building. Miss Stott was buried in the Town Meadows graveyard.

Births, marriages and deaths were registered by the churches prior to 1837 and a copy of the original register was made by the Rev. W.F. Burchell before the book was lodged in the Public Records Office. The births of six children to William and Elizabeth Stephens are recorded. Three of these became members of the Church. Two sons, Thomas and John emigrated to Australia about the middle of the century. Thomas became the second Mayor of Brisbane, and his son, William the first Mayor of South Brisbane and a member of the Australian Legislature.

Stephens' pastorate continued until 1835 when he resigned his office, but resumed for a short period at the request of the members. What difficulties faced the Church at this time are not recorded, but a minute of 3rd March, 1839 indicates that something was wrong:

"After an absence of nearly two years from the Lord's Table without assigning any reason, James Cropper and his wife appeared at the Table. That they were allowed to sit down without satisfying the Church as to their absence is not to be taken as a precedent, but it is thought prudent and wise to forbear owing to Mr Stephens, our late pastor, continuing to absent himself for so long a period without assigning any cause - and believing that it would only have a tendency to continue the Division of Feeling, which it is most desirable should be avoided."

Next month: Mr and Mrs Stephens ---

"who have been absent for a very long period but without assigning any cause to the Church generally - attended but no observation was made."

The strictness of Calvinism was beginning to bear heavily and the rules were being bent in the interest of expediency.

His last public appearance was at a United Missionary Prayer meeting in the Providence Chapel on August 2nd 1839. He died on the 16th of September and a Memorandum in the Church Book contains a record of the visit of two ministers: The Rev. J. Harbottle of Accrington, a man of considerable influence in the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association, and the Rev. Edward Steane of Camberwell, for 50 years Secretary of the Baptist Union, in which the conversation is recorded, noting that some of his sentences were not concluded due to weakness and that he "spoke in faltering accents". That these two men should be at his bedside so shortly before his death confirms the belief that Stephens was a man who was held in high esteem not

only in his own church but in the wider field of the Baptist denomination. He is buried in West Street graveyard. The inscription on the gravestone has been obliterated by vandalism but we know that three others lie with him in the vault: Henry, who died at the age of 10 months from measles, James who was aged 12, after a fall from a horse, and James who only lived one month. His widow with her sister Abigail Blackett, and her daughter Emma went to Knutsford in 1852 after Emma's dismissal from the Church for misconduct. After Abigail's death the following year, Elizabeth and another daughter Laura went to Ireland where Elizabeth died at Fiddown, Co. Kilkenny in 1876 at the age of 89. Emma subsequently married the man she had been associated with and they too went to Australia where they progressed well and were happy.

The Church's concern for these cases is shown in a minute of December 23rd 1851:

"Pastor mentioned the affecting cases of Mary Lord and Emma Stephens and, deeply affected by their fall, the Church separated them from their fellowship. It was then resolved that next Tuesday evening be set apart for special prayer and humiliation before God, on account of the distressing cases of delinquency which have been dealt with in the course of the present month."

This seems to have had a measure of success in both cases; Mary Lord was restored two years later.

After over fifty years of continuous pastoral oversight, four years elapsed before another minister came to lead the Church for any long period. Into this gap, in 1837 came the Rev. Beniah Hoe from Bromsgrove, but he left to go to America nine months later. During this time the Church resolved to hold prayer meetings every Thursday evening with special reference to the ministry: "earnestly to implore the Great Head of the Church that He would guide us by His unerring wisdom in so . . . important a matter as the choice of Pastor."

It is in times like this - which the Church had not experienced before - that the quality of the lay-leadership becomes vital. One good thing which came out of the 1745 rebellion was the arrival in Rochdale of a deserter: George Williamson, who hailed from Annan. Along with several others he settled in Syke. His son, John was baptised in 1812 and it is recorded in 1838 that: "The Church, being without pastor, Bro. Williamson presided." John's son, James, baptised in November 1837, was appointed a deacon in 1854, two years after his father's death, and continued in that office until his own death 37 years later on December 13th 1891. This man guided the Church through many difficult and even critical periods. He possessed more than ordinary gifts and was an acceptable preacher as witness the minutes of 29th March 1840 where: "It was unanimously agreed that Bro. James Williamson should exercise the talent that God has given him in preaching the Gospel whenever occasion offered." His son followed on the diaconate and two of his grandsons, Birkett and Nevil likewise served the Church in this important office. A third grandson was H. Raymond Williamson who served the denomination in China for many years and of whom more will be written later.

Towards the end of 1839 the Church decided to invite the Rev. W.F. Burchell of Falmouth who accepted, but owing to illness in his family he was not able to begin his ministry until February 1840. The time required for a change in pastorate appears to be very short, in some cases barely two weeks elapsing between the acceptance of an invitation and the commencement of a ministry. The Rev. T.H. Pattinson referring to Burchell in his Centenary Sketch wrote of the

“fervour of his piety, the patience and perseverance with which he worked for souls, the Christian courtesy which marked his intercourse with rich and poor alike, and the genuineness of his sympathy in the care and pleasures of your lives.”

The Methodist revival in the middle 1700's had little impact on Baptists in general, being viewed with suspicion, particularly on the question of infant baptism, but hyper-Calvinism was beginning to break down; men like Andrew Fuller claiming that if it was impossible for any but the 'elect' to embrace the Gospel it was hopeless to invite the unconnected to put their trust in Christ. Increasing concern for the unconverted as instanced in the minute of February 1841 quoted earlier could be responsible for the fact that nearly 300 people joined the church during the 20 years of Burchell's ministry. The records show, however, that members were still subject to a strict discipline, particularly in regard to attendance at the Communion Table. Burchell suggested the use of tickets 'as a means of ascertaining who may be absent from the Lord's table' but a decision on this was postponed "to ascertain in the meanwhile how far fraternal and mutual supervision will supersede their necessity".

Matters of national and international importance were often discussed, for example, consideration of the best means of separating the Church and the State in British Realms; petitioning against the Corn Law, which it is stated, were injurious to the cause of humanity; of public morals and of religious liberty and zeal; and of the House of Commons' intention to endow a Roman Catholic College at Maynooth in Ireland: being an infringement of our liberties and the public violation of the Voluntary Principle. Special weeks of prayer were often arranged, and it is interesting to note that we joined the Presbyterians in these. The beginning of social life in the Church is suggested in a minute of 1844 which reads:

“It was resolved that we avail ourselves of the general holiday of April 5th as an opportunity of taking tea together as a Church and indulging in the cheerful freedom of social intercourse”.

an event which was repeated the following year.

In 1884 Cutgate was adopted as a preaching station, devout people having met in a cottage near Cutgate Farm for some time. Shortly afterwards a building was erected for the preaching of the Word and as a Sunday School, and many prominent West Street people took part in this work. A larger building was erected in 1881 on the original site which was paid for by Mr Thomas Watson, whose family have long connections with our Church although he himself was a Methodist.

In July 1920 application was made for a separate Church and fellowship to be formed and on April 26th 1922 fifty-five people were transferred to the new cause. On Tuesday, May 16th 1922 the Rev. W.H. Condy conducted a service at which the

Moderator of the Association, the Rev. J.D.M. Robertson read the Declaration of Allegiance and Loyalty after which the friends of both West Street and Cutgate joined in Communion.

1845 seemed to be the year of the beginnings of new causes. A mission started in the Drake Street area under the care of West Street until a new Church was formed in 1863. Sixty-three people who were nominally members of West Street were transferred to form the new Church.

The Church at Bury was also organised in 1845, several prominent West Street people being members of the committee which organised the erection of the Church building. People who formed this Church came from Haslingden and Rochdale but there is no record of any dismissals to this Church in our books.

At this time three services were held each Sunday. In discussions over a period of two years during which the minister argued his inability to preach so often, very little was done to alleviate the situation except to suggest that the Domestic Missioner, the Rev. Simpson Todd who was working at the Drake Street Mission, alternate with the minister for the afternoon and evening services. It was not until 1849 that the difficulty was resolved by a decision that two services were amply sufficient, but it took two hours of discussion and a ballot vote to decide by a majority of six that the second service should be in the evening. The amount of work in the church, the town, and in the denomination was evidently proving to be a burden to Mr Burchell. In 1842 he became the first secretary of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association after the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association split in 1837 and he continued in this office for 18 years until he left Rochdale in 1860.

The subject of having a co-pastor was discussed "in the most Christian spirit showing that the Lord was in the midst" at a meeting held on 20th July 1858. There must have been a considerable division of opinion, however, as only three votes out of a total of 65 determined that an invitation be given to John Horne of Horton Academy. The partnership lasted short of two years. Surface ripples caused by small matters such as who should conduct which service, suggest deep disturbances and the end of this dual ministry does not make pleasant reading.

In a little over one year the Church was asked to decide "once and for all" the order in which the two men should occupy the pulpit, and the decision was taken that Burchell should conduct the morning service and Horne the evening, except for the last Sunday in the month when the order was reversed. A few months later Burchell announced his intention to administer the Lord's Supper every Sunday. In view of his earlier complaints about the number of services he had to conduct, this would appear to be some kind of strategy to assert his seniority.

When in September 1860 he announced his intention to resign the pastorate, Horne did the same. Burchell, as is usual on these occasions, retired from the meeting, but a proposal was made that he should stay to hear what Horne had to say. He refused to acknowledge the proposal and walked out. Horne then read a statement replying to the charges circulated "either by Mr Burchell or by those intimately associated with him". A suggestion that Horne should continue as sole pastor, however, was

not accepted by him and his membership was transferred to Trinity Road, Halifax the following February.

Burchell's work in the Church and in the town was recognised shortly before his decision to leave was taken, by the presentation of two illuminated addresses.

A long report in the Rochdale Observer of 22nd September 1860 gives a very full coverage of the meeting at West Street Chapel of the presentation of an address by James Williamson who spoke of a rich and evangelical ministry. "He had," he said, "for many years sustained the oversight of the church and congregation, and notwithstanding all the discouragements and difficulties he had met with he had worked with a degree of credit both to himself and to the religion of Jesus Christ." He also received an embroidered purse containing £62.

The 'Observer' of 3rd November 1860 gives a two-column report of the visit of a deputation to his home in Roche Place. The members of the deputation were: R.T. Heape, J.P., J. Petrie, Jnr., and Thomas Watson. The testimonial was signed by the Mayor, (T. Ashworth), two ex-Mayors, (one would be R.T. Heape, seven J.P's., eight brother ministers, The Rt. Hon. Hon John Bright, M.P., and one-hundred "men residing in this town, most of whom have had ample opportunities for observing your work amongst them." He also received a leather case containing £175. 10s, an amount raised by public subscription.

The address speaks of his consistent career as a Christian Minister, his gentlemanly demeanour, his calm and consistent avowal of his own convictions, and his kindly feelings towards all who might be regarded as differing from him, all of which gained for him the good feeling of persons of every name. Mrs Burchell received a visit from the Mayoress that evening, and was presented with a valuable timepiece and a set of silver desert knives and forks.

The eloquent style of Burchell's preaching can be gathered from the Observer's verbatim report of his reply to the presentation of the Town's gifts:

"... from all I have received the most courteous treatment, so I have been effectually taught that excellence is not conferred to any one party; and that it is delightfully possible to exemplify the amenities of kindest neighbourhood while still firmly retaining and actively supporting private convictions and personal predilections."

Mrs Burchell also showed her capabilities as a public speaker in her equally charming and eloquent reply.

The effectiveness of his ministry needs no further testimonial than the fact that 297 people joined the Church during his pastorate.

Horne did not leave unhonoured either. He too was presented with an address signed by 78 members and 93 members of the congregation. One speaker at the presentation could not resist referring to a dispute, but his remarks are not reported

by the local press. One can imagine that this would be an embarrassing moment, even the reporter taking time off to sharpen his pencil.

Burchell publicly resigned first his membership and then his pastorate at the close of his farewell sermon on 21st October 1860 after preaching from Act 20: 32 - "and now brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace." He went, at the request of the Baptists in Blackpool to work in a new cause in Abdingdon Street, which later became the Tabernacle in Springfield Road. He died after an attack of bronchitis at Lee in Kent on 6th April 1876 at the age of 77.

And so a ministry which had been so successful came to a rather sad end. So too came and end to the period of long ministries. Three ministers: Littlewood, Stephens and Burchell served for a total of 72 years. The next three ministers served for only 14 years.

Little time was lost in obtaining a successor. The name of the first of the trio, the Rev. Edward Carey Pike was placed before the Church who voted in his favour. His father, the Rev. J.G. Pike was well known in Baptist circles, being President of the Baptist Union in 1842 and secretary of the Missionary Society of the New Connection.

Baptised by his father at Leicester in 1852 he subsequently entered Regents Park College from which he came to his first pastorate at West Street in 1861. As can be expected from a young man, changes began to take place. Three months after his arrival the Church adopted the new Psalms and Hymns - "so that all could have one edition". In other matters the Church began to be more strict; for example: anyone wishing to do cottage preaching had first to obtain the sanction of the Church (1862) and, dismissal from the Church became automatic if members failed to join at the Lord's Table, or communicate with the pastor for twelve months. Two years later the period was reduced to six months.

He devoted himself mostly to the work of the Church and does not appear to have been involved in Association work except when the Association Meetings were held in Rochdale in 1864 when he was elected Moderator. It is said of him that few could read a hymn as he could; he had the gift of finely declaiming poetry.

In 1863 he baptised Sarah Gartside, sister of John Gartside of Bury Road whom he subsequently married. She died in 1882. Pike's sister, who apparently came to Rochdale as housekeeper, married Richard Cunliffe, their family being connected with the Newbold Church.

Pike resigned his ministry on 15th May 1866. His letter of resignation recorded in the Minute book, however, suggests that there was some estrangement between Church and pastor. After holding pastorates in Coventry, Birmingham and Exeter he retired from active ministry in 1893. He died at Crouch End, Finchley in 1911 and is buried in Abney Park, Stoke Newington.

In the 19th century the Calvinistic principle of election divided the Baptists of England into two groups, the Particular and the General. This latter group gradually

opened the Communion to Christians who had not been baptised by immersion. One argument frequently stressed by the advocates of closed-communion was that the admission of unbaptised persons to the Lord's Supper was bound in time to their being admitted into full membership of the Church. We have evidence of the correctness of this forecast in our own area when an open membership church formed in Manchester in 1842 to which Alexander MacLaren ministered for nearly 50 years. It may have been a result of Pike's ministry or merely the grasping of an opportunity afforded by the vacant pastorate that a notice of motion was given on 20th November 1866 by James Williamson and John Noble:

"That whilst adhering to our present plan of admitting to membership of this Church only baptised believers on a profession of their faith in Christ we will welcome to communion at the Lord's Table sincere Christians of other denominations who desire to commune with us at the Lord's Supper."

A ballot vote resulted in the acceptance of this motion by: 83 for; 33 against; 1 neutral. This caused the first and only split in the Church on Doctrinal ground. After the communion service on 6th January 1867 a letter addressed to Mr Henry Kelsall was read:

To the Church of Christ assembling at West Street Rochdale.

Christian friends,

We, the undersigned, believe it to be the duty of the Church of Christ to observe the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the order set forth in the New Testament and practised by the primitive churches.

As the resolution on Communion passed at the Church Meeting held on 20th November is in our opinion, not in accordance with the same, we request you to remove our names from your church book for we intend to form another church where we may have the ordinance administered according to the practice of the primitive churches.

Praying that the great Head of the Church will vouchsafe both to you and us His blessing, we remain

Yours in Christ Jesus, "

The 43 signatories to this letter formed a church which met at Lyceum, later purchasing premises in Water Street. Subsequently they joined Newbold with others from Hope Street.

The second of the trio began his ministry in March 1867: the Rev. Samuel Chapman. At his first meeting he addressed the Church on the purpose and conduct of Church meetings, requesting that all business be first submitted to the minister and deacons and be introduced by them, members having the right of appeal if submissions were refused, by giving one months notice. At the same meeting 'Weekly Offerings' were adopted as a means for raising all the incidental expenses of the Church, and also as a substitute for all congregational collections except those for the Sunday School and Baptist Missionary Society. Such was the success of this method of fund-raising that

two months later it was announced that the Church was free of debt. A tribute to his preaching was paid some 40 years later by Mr Walter Scott, proprietor of the Rochdale Observer, who said of him that he was perhaps the finest preacher of his time in Rochdale - certainly amongst the non-conformists.

He resigned in 1870 to go to Glasgow. His letter of resignation indicates a much happier relationship between pastor and Church - he "remembers how happy our intercourse has been. It is good to think that there has hardly been a single word of unkindness."

At the end of 1870 an invitation was sent to the third of this trio of ministers: the Rev. T. Harwood Pattison who accepted. At the recognition services on 30th March 1871 the Rev. C.M. Birrell presided. Birrell was a well-known man in the Liverpool area who that year was president of the Baptist Union. One of the speakers was the Rev. W. Fawcett of Crosby, Westmorland, who had preached at the opening of the Chapel in 1833 and whose grandfather, the last Dr Fawcett of Wainsgate, was one of the originators of the Baptist cause in Rochdale. During the four years of this pastorate some important projects were started. First he proposed for conducting week-evening meetings and the reformation of a Domestic Mission beginning with Tract distribution. The Mission came into being with the employment of a Bible Woman, Rachel Lord. He also accomplished something which Chapman tried but failed to do: to hold prayer meetings on Saturday evenings. The practice of singing Chants was adopted. The Chapel was closed for cleaning and painting during August 1871.

The effect of local events is recorded in a minute of 20th September 1871 which reads: "It was resolved that the week-evening service in the following week should be held on the Tuesday evening instead of Wednesday evening, the latter being the day on which the Rochdale Town Hall would be opened".

Pattison was given two months leave of absence in June 1874 to visit the United States "for reasons which he assigned". The visit took place in September and October of that year during which he received an invitation to the pastorate of the First Baptist Church, Newhaven, Connecticut. In spite of expressions of confidence by the West Street Church he decided to accept the invitation and intimated his intention to commence his new pastorate in January 1875. Later, in 1881 he became Professor of Homiletics in the Rochester Theological Seminary, U.S.A. In 1873 the Annual Meetings of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association were held in Rochdale and at one of the meetings Pattison presented a Centenary Sketch of West Street church. This was reprinted in the handbook produced on the occasion of the Church's 150th Anniversary and has been widely used in the preparation of this present history.

Two other projects had their beginnings during Pattison's ministry; one was the formation of the West Street Men's Society which was inaugurated in 1871, the pastor being its first President, John Howard Scott its Secretary, and with a membership of 54. It existed with varying fortunes for 23 years during which meetings were held from the end of October to the beginning of April. The

programme included formal lectures, discussions, readings (in which members took part), and Bible Study. After the second year the latter subject was dropped from the syllabus. During the existence of the society the ministers took a prominent part both as speakers and in the conduct of meetings. Pattison gave several musical lectures, usually assisted by Mr B.C. Crossley, conducted Bible studies and gave a series of five lectures about Baptist Groups. Another man closely linked with the society was the Rev. A.H. Drysdale, M.A., of the Presbyterian Church. He lectured occasionally in the first three years, then in each of the next three sessions gave a series of five lectures on such topics as Mental Science, Wealth, and Morality and Ethics, and continued to feature in the lecture list until he left Rochdale in 1883. With a fall in interest and membership about 1880 the organisers felt that it was not worth-while inviting outside speakers and a note in the record book says: "Outside lecturers abandoned, only lecture by Rev. A.H. Drysdale (who might almost be reckoned as one of the class, so great and beneficent has been his interest in us from the start)".

The popularity of this form of activity was such that in 1879 a Union of Improvement Societies was formed in the town, all the member societies joining for the major part of their annual programmes in the Public Hall, the remainder of the session being spent in their own churches. What effect this had on the individual societies is not recorded, but four years afterwards West Street withdrew from the Union and appeared to gain a new lease of life, for it continued to flourish until 1893 when its affairs were wound up. The proceedings of the Society have been preserved and make most interesting reading, especially the Annual Reports presented by Mr Hugh Henry Scott during his long period as secretary. Two of his comments are worth quoting:

"The objects of the society set forth in its second rule are: the Religious, social, and intellectual improvement of its members. Of the first of these I can perforce say nothing - it lies with each individual member to settle with himself the question as to whether the society in this, perhaps its main object, has failed."

Commenting upon a fall in attendance he writes:

"... and perhaps I may be allowed here, without in any way commenting on the fact, to mention the fatally destructive affect which marriage has upon the activity of a member!"

In addition to Mr Scott other men well known in West Street held the secretarial office for shorter periods: Messrs Richard and Thomas Watson, Thos. E. Thorley, James R. Fenton and Edmund Lord. For 20 years its finances were efficiently cared for by Mr Edward L. Taylor, son of Alderman Taylor, and a well known solicitor of this town.

The second important project begun in Pattison's time was the building of the new school.

Before the Education Act of 1870 the Church was virtually the only organisation concerned with teaching. Many private schools, or academies were started by Baptist ministers as early as the end of the 17th century, but the main object was the

training of ministers. Abraham Greenwood established a school during his time in Rochdale, "on the new road leading to the Canal". The Industrial Revolution was claiming children for work in mills and factories, so that the only time available to teach them was on Sunday. Early Sunday Schools were not solely, or even chiefly for religious instructions; they gave all the schooling that most children ever had the chance of receiving. Most of the Baptist Churches of the 18th and early 19th century provided accommodation for the instruction of children. The provision for this work in the Town Meadows Meeting House has already been referred to; men who were prominent in it being James and William Littlewood, Henry Kelsall and Robert Henry. When West Street was built provision for the continuation of this work was provided by a "schoolroom which, although beneath the chapel was both lofty and spacious with every convenience". Contemporaries who were young enough in the first decade of the present century to attend the "Primary" might agree with "spacious" but would doubt the description "lofty".

Our earliest book is a record of attendances at school dated 1833-1836 showing that over this period there were between 250 and 300 scholars on the books. School met both morning and afternoon, and although the numbers on the books were recorded faithfully, the actual attendance was only entered occasionally; as an example: on 25th August 1833 when the total on the books was 277 the attendance at morning school was 157 and at the afternoon 152. These were taught by a staff of 18. Some of the Superintendent's comments are most revealing as is that by J. Littlewood on 18th August 1833:

"This morning a great (number) of children are absent especially boys. The morning has been very wet, and perhaps it being that vain and wicked season called Rushbearing, some have stayed away - the Lord have mercy on them."

At a special church meeting convened on 15th October 1843 at the request of the Sunday School Committee, the pastor (the Rev. W.F. Burchell) on their behalf submitted to the Church the necessity, purpose and plan of a day school, asking for its permission and support. It was decided to establish such a school, and in November it was reported that Brother J. Grindrod was in a course of training preparatory to managing the day school to start after Christmas. This was achieved, and the school was opened on 15th January 1844 with an attendance of 40 boys. Mr Grindrod was paid ten shillings per week at first, later increased to fifteen shillings. A commission in 1862 resulted in legislation which limited the hours of child labour and gave general leisure for schooling. The extra expense of this work was beyond the resources of the churches, and as the state provided secular education they were relieved of the necessity to teach mere reading and could concentrate on religious education.

In view of the passing of the Education Act it is rather surprising that on 26th March 1872 the teachers and deacons were asked to confer on the proposal to erect new Sunday School premises. The year almost ended before the committee and the deacons met to put the proposal into effect. The general spaciousness and equipment of the building suggest that it was still intended to be used as a day school, but this intention was never fulfilled.

The buildings designed by John Showell, a member of the Church who came from Darlington in 1870 comprise a large single storey hall, 58 feet by 40 feet by 28 feet high, with a gallery. This is fronted by a three storey block in which the ground floor was a lecture hall flanked by two entrances. The basement contained heating apparatus, kitchen and preparation room, whilst the upper floor was divided into seven classrooms, the occupants of which had direct access to the gallery. Mr G.T. Kemp negotiated with the Rochdale Corporation for the purchase of the 'stone-yard' in Buckley Street and the architect was told that the buildings had not to cost more than £1,500 exclusive of internal fittings. By the time the foundations were completed £1,854 had been promised towards the cost. The foundation stone was laid by Mrs Kelsall, "then a venerable old lady" on 12th June 1873. The Right Hon. John Bright had been invited to perform the ceremony but had for health reasons 'to decline the flattering and complimentary proposition'. A bottle was placed in a cavity in the stone containing copies of the three local newspapers, a Baptist newspaper, a circulate of Association meetings, and a written statement containing the names of the Trustees of the Chapel and the officers of the School.

A series of meetings was held in May 1874 to mark the opening of the premises. Speakers at the opening included the Rev. J. P. Chown (President of the Baptist Union), the Rev. A. H. Drysdale (Rochdale Presbyterian minister), the Rev. Charles Williams (Accrington for 50 years and a leading Lancashire Baptist), Alderman Taylor and Mr Thomas Watson. The Rev. Charles H. Spurgeon spoke at two meetings, one in the Town Hall and one in Baillie Street Methodist Church where the collections taken raised over £200. By 1875 the number of Sunday School scholars on the books was 580 and the teaching staff numbered 66. This was probably the peak, and although immediately prior to the First World War the attendance bordered on 300, from then on the numbers gradually declined. This could be attributed to the general decline in religious fervour and its consequent effect on the practice of Churchgoing. Haley in 'History of the English people' points to the increasing indifference to religion of the general public in the decade 1895-1905 and A.E. Payne in his 'History of the Baptist Union' (1958) says that the reasons for the decline are not easy to analyse. Nor are they yet all apparent; political, social and economic factors playing their part as well as the more specifically religious ones.

In 1831, James Lister who ministered in Liverpool for nearly half a century deplored that schools were too often independent of the churches, were staffed by those who were not members or even pious characters, and so were not nurseries of religion. That criticism could not be levelled at those who have led the young in our Church. In addition to those already mentioned the number of dedicated men and women who have given their talents and their time to this work would fill a volume. The generations they taught have followed them into a higher service, but there are still those with us who can remember the reverence with which their parents recalled Charles Horbury, Mrs Calvert, the Misses Kemp, James Lund, Hugh Scott, Frank Brierley, Herbert Rice, John Albert Williamson.

The exclusion of Dissenters from the Universities led to the private schools kept by ministers, who were thus able to induce promising students to specialise for the

ministry, and from these eventually sprung the Theological Colleges of our denomination. But no such provision was made for the purely religious teaching in Sunday Schools. The job of teaching the young was for a long time in the hands of a dedicated band with varying degree of academic attainment. The selection of lesson material was entirely their own and the lesson itself delivered to a class of a dozen or so in a large room with perhaps 25 or 30 other groups covering a wide age range. Early in the present century much thought was given to this situation and the Graded System was developed. This divided the School into a series of groups, each with a much narrower age range; where possible each of these groups was placed in a room of its own. Teacher's lesson guides were provided and the Preparation Class was an unquestioned necessity.

The first phase of grading came in 1910 when the old school under the Chapel was decorated and equipped for the use of the younger children. About 100 children were accommodated, taught by a staff of 38 which included two Superintendents, a pianist and a secretary. The next older age group remained in the large schoolroom, in smaller and fewer groups, but with a weekly preparation class. The next age group, the Junior Department, was formed in 1935, the Intermediate in 1936, and finally the Senior in 1938.

These measures to offer prepared teaching in adequate and congenial conditions failed to stem the general decline in attendance of the young people to such an extent that the afternoon school was finally abandoned in favour of the Family Church idea. It is open to speculation whether this serious situation could have been prevented had not ministers, except in this last phase, failed to participate in this form of Christian education; or were they not allowed to?

Three years were to elapse after the end of Pattison's ministry before the Church was successful in its call to a minister. In the interim a former pastor, the Rev. S. Chapman conducted a series of evangelical services with such success that a special Church meeting was held on a Saturday evening to receive reports and to hear twelve candidates so that they could be baptised by Mr Chapman - six on the Sunday and the other six on the following Wednesday.

Sanction was given in October 1875 for the commencement of a meeting for 'young people not in the habit of attending any place of worship'. These meetings were held on Sunday evenings, and the following July the president, Miss E.J. Kemp reported that 109 were present at the first service. Two years later there was a regular attendance of 250. This later report was given by Miss F. Scott, as Miss Kemp had in the meantime departed for India as a missionary, the first of a line from this Church. In a letter to the Church she wrote:

"... it has been a disappointment to many that no one should have hitherto gone forth from our midst as a messenger of Salvation ..."

By 1876 it was reported that the total outlay for the School buildings was £3,761 11s. 2½d., and that the amount still to be raised was £1,359 14s. 1d.

At a Church meeting in March 1876 it was decided by 124 votes to 2 to invite the Rev. Robert Lewis of Plymouth to become pastor. Lewis accepted the invitation on 18th March and was welcomed two weeks later. He was the youngest son of the Rev. W.J. Lewis of Cheltenham and a cousin of the Rev. E.C. Lewis, at one time pastor of St Stephens Church, Ball Street who was present at the recognition service.

Of Mr Lewis it has been said that he was an excellent preacher, his command of language was most remarkable as was shown by the fact that whenever there was a choice of words he always chose the right one. Gifted with a most retentive memory, he had no difficulty in recalling quotations, He was very effective on the platform, his speeches often sparkling with a natural quite humour. He took an interest in local affairs and was one of the first to be associated with the Charity Organisation Society. For three years he was secretary of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association and in 1890 was elected Moderator.

Minutes of the Church meetings which were held monthly were faithfully and fully recorded by the minister, but contain little of outstanding interest, being mainly concerned with domestic matters: admission and discussion of members except, as on one occasion when only one trustee survived and the male members of the Church only were hastily called to remedy this. It cannot be implied that the Church was not serious in matters concerning its members. A suggestion of dishonesty made in an unguarded moment led to one member absenting himself from 'the Table' and was thus in danger of erasure. It took nearly six months to settle this case amicably. Another case with a less happy ending led to the dismissal of four people, but only after many interviews, letters, and much discussion.

These were the only problems to worry the Church for six years, but the relative calm was broken when Lewis received a call from Myrtle Street, Liverpool in December 1880 to become co-pastor with the Rev. H.S. Brown. His impending departure brought a swift reaction from the members. Resolutions were passed recording their dismay at the prospect, and asking him to consider retaining the pastorate - "and yet fear lest by any action of ours we should be a hindrance to his coming to a decision". In January, to their great relief, he announced his decision to decline the invitation and the Church assured him of: "its love and esteem and its hope that the peace and prosperity would continue and increase".

A meeting of the Church and Congregation on 1st February 1881 passed unanimously and with enthusiasm a resolution:

"That in recognition of the Rev. R. Lewis retaining the pastorate of the Church and Congregation in this place we hold a Congregational Tea Meeting, and as a testimonial to Mr Lewis and as a proof of our love and esteem we recommend the Trustees of these premises to enlarge and remodel the Chapel, and assure Mr Lewis that whatever increase is realised in the income of the place through such movement he shall have the full benefit."

He was presented with a copy of the resolution engrossed on vellum, and a gold watch.

The enlargement of the Chapel was proceeded with, the minutes only recording the names of the 35-man committee entrusted with the project which was expected to cost £1,800. The alterations, to the designs of Mr E. Simpson Butterworth were carried out in seven months. The back of the Chapel was removed and the building lengthened by sixteen feet, giving larger vestries and more commodious accommodation for the choir. Two stairways from the rear enabled the children to proceed from the schoolroom, the ceiling was taken down and panelled, increasing the height by fifteen inches and improving the acoustics. The old pews in the body and gallery were removed as well as the old pulpit. The organ was remodelled and enlarged by Maskell and Wordsworth of Leeds and installed in a large loft in the upper part of the new portion. Reports of the re-opening in the local paper were rather sparse as this event coincided with the 70th birthday of John Bright.

The services on Sunday, 13th November were conducted by the Rev. John Aldis, one of the leading Baptists of that time, and the Rev. J.G. Greenhough, M.A. of Leicester, both of whom achieved presidency of the Baptist Union. The organ which cost £650 to remodel was incomplete at the time of the opening; not surprising seeing that the order was only given eight weeks before! The press comment on the quality of the instrument was that the committee could safely congratulate themselves on having secured a really good and beautiful organ. The total cost of the alterations finally reached £2,280 and the new carpets and cushions £258. Congregation accommodation was increased by over 200 to about 950.

In June 1883 an unprecedented event took place when the Rev. A.H. Drysdale of the Presbyterian Church prepared to move to Morpeth after sixteen years in Rochdale. A meeting of the Church was specially called which resolved to present him with an address and a gift "in grateful recognition of his frequent and willing acts of kindness to this Church". In presenting the gift - 22 volumes of the 19th Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica bound in half Russia, - James Williamson remembered "the many acts of kindness and the valuable services you have rendered in connection with the cause at West Street from the first day of your settlement".

In spite of the upset and expense of alterations to the church, Lewis again offered his resignation on receiving an invitation to the pastorate at Princes Gate, Liverpool. The resolution accepting the resignation referred to the peace and harmony which prevailed even though matters had been introduced on which there was a difference of opinion. His pastorate closed on 8th January 1885.

Some interesting thoughts are stimulated by reading the Minute books of this period. The Sunday School Committee governed with such autocracy that when the church was being enlarged the Deacons had to ask permission to use the schoolroom for the Sunday services. Secondly, a regular source of income came from the renting of seats. Many families rented whole pews and one remembers a chart in the porch indicating which sittings were 'let' and which were 'free'. These latter only were available to the non-renters or the occasional visitor even though rented sittings may not be occupied. A suggestion was made that an invitation be given to those who go to no place of worship to occupy vacant sittings and that "if the seatholder's consent and concurrence be obtained, the experiment should be tried".

Before he left Mr Lewis suggested that the Church should appoint a secretary. On 8th December 1884, Richard Watson who had become a deacon two years previously, was appointed. This appointment was for a term of one year only, but he continued in the office for over fifty years, resigning in 1935.

By March the Church was in pursuit of a new minister. After two abortive 'calls' the Rev. S.R. Aldridge of London accepted the invitation and began his ministry in November. The Church appears to have reached a high plateau of prosperity in this decade; statistics given to the Association in 1888 show a membership of 375 (including Cutgate), a Sunday School Scholars roll of 540 taught by 54 teachers and there were 12 Lay preachers attached to the two churches. Cottage meetings were being held at Durham Street, Ogden Street, Regent Street, Halifax Road, Victoria Place and Shawclough, with Mother's Meetings at West Street, Cutgate, Holland Street, Henry Street and at the Sudden and Shawclough Coffee Houses. Each monthly meeting reported new applications for baptism and Church membership, sometimes as many as eight or nine, which pays tribute to Mr Aldridge's claim to "the right to teach the old doctrine in his own way".

At the invitation of the Church the Association of Lancashire & Cheshire and Yorkshire held their joint Annual Meetings at West Street in 1887. The occasion celebrated the centenary of the formation of the Lancashire & Yorkshire Association and the Fiftieth Anniversary of their existence as separate bodies. The Moderator, Mr Richard Watson, delivered an address on the importance of harmony in the Churches, and at the United service the Rev. John Aldis gave an address on Reminiscences of Association Leaders in 1837 - he being present at those meetings. The Sunday School Conference (held in the Baillie Street U.M. Chapel) was addressed by the Rt. Hon. John Bright M.P., his last public speech in Rochdale. Preparation for these meetings cost the members quite a sum as we read that renovation of the vestries and chapel cost about £240, the purchase of a Communion Table and Chairs (number not stated) £56, and "entertainment of Associations" left a balance due to the Treasurer of £38.

"Sectional Church Meetings" were held at this time when, after tea, some subject such as 'prayer' would be introduced followed by a conference. That these occasions were well attended shows the part which the church played in the social life of the time.

In 1888 a crisis occurred - believed to be connected with the bachelorhood of Aldridge - which resulted in him tendering his resignation. Many Church meetings were held at which as many as 200 members were present in an endeavour to get him to change his mind, but to no avail, and he went to Waterbarn where he ministered for six years. His popularity led to so large a part of the congregation attending his recognition services that a report of the occasion stated that it was "difficult to say whether the West Street or the Waterbarn people predominated".

Feelings ran so high that, in spite of pressure from the officers, the members refused to discuss the matter of the pastorate until the late pastor had been invited to preach

again, but a majority of the deacons could not adopt such a course holding that it would not be wise at that time, and pressed for a settlement after which arrangements might be made for a visit by Mr Aldridge.

Over two years passed before an invitation was sent to the Rev. G. Williams; a phrase in the letter of invitation shows that during the interval there had been considerable difficulty. In explaining the reason for a 2½ year vacancy James Williamson writes: "... but there has been such a want of harmony and good feeling both in the church and congregation that we feel it would be useless to introduce the name of any person as suitable for the pastorate". It is little wonder that Williams refused the invitation. Almost another two years passed during which concern was expressed about the fall in membership and the dearth of applications for baptism; a total of only three in three years. At the end of 1891 the Rev. W.J. Packer of Scarborough was invited by a letter carried by a two-man deputation. This was accepted, but as the Church prepared to welcome its new pastor, its senior deacon passed away. James Williamson died on the 13th December 1891 having been a member for 54 years. He must have been in failing health for some time as the last meeting at which he took the chair was on 21st October 1890. He was one of a long line of Williamsons who served the church, his grandfather becoming a member in 1808 and his father in 1812. In addition to membership of the diaconate for 32 years and a trustee, he was very acceptable as a preacher and was one of the team of preachers when Cutgate was adopted as a preaching station in 1865. He was registrar of Births, Deaths and marriages for Whitworth and Wardle districts for 40 years.

Packer's recognition services were held on 17th May 1892 and after a dearth of baptisms in the interim the number of applications rose to over 40 in the first year but thereafter suffered a severe decline. A report in the 'Freeman' of 2nd September 1892 by a casual visitor to the church gives a brief history of the Church along with his impressions of the minister: "He is evidently in middle life, is tall and thin, and has a prepossessing appearance. His delivery is clear and distinct; his reading of the scripture impressive; the sermon giving indication of being well studied; and when he felt he could trust himself to speak to the congregation apart from his manuscript his remarks and appeals told home". One thing struck the writer of the article as unusual, that Mr Packer began the service by reading a Psalm. The Service lasted an hour and a half and "was bright, cheerful and including as it did, a well-rendered anthem by a full choir". The minutes give no hint of anything wrong until October 1895 when Packer tendered his resignation. A phrase in the resolution accepting his resignation: "... and that, guided by His Spirit he may be directed to a sphere of usefulness where he may have joy in the Master's service" confirms that he had at that time not received a call to any other church. In April the following year the Church expressed satisfaction that Mr Packer had received and accepted a call to the Back Street Church, Trowbridge. He closed his ministry on the 12th of that month and the Church faced another three years without pastoral oversight. One can never account for the moving of the Spirit in a church, and it is surprising that, in spite of the low spiritual temperature at the close of Packer's ministry over sixty people were baptised during the pastoral vacancy.

The folks at this time were evidently not averse to combining business with pleasure. At a social gathering a month after Packer's departure, tea was "... both well arranged and well served", and was followed by a discussion on "Our present position and needs".

The search for a new minister began at once and a tentative move to invite the Rev. J. Brown Morgan of Chester received no backing, which, in the light of subsequent events seemed a pity. Morgan was later intimately connected with the Young People's Union, and a leader in the formation of a touring club offering young Baptists holidays both in Britain and abroad. Two years passed before an invitation to the Rev. Thomas Phillips of Kettering proved equally unsuccessful.

At a meeting held on 16th April 1899 a decision was taken by a large majority of the 127 members present to invite the Rev. Thomas Woodhouse of Stourbridge and at last the appeal was successful. He claimed to have "the best years of his life before him", and was welcomed on 17th June but his public recognition meeting was not held until October. At the time of his appointment he was unmarried, as a minute in July records that it was agreed to send a congratulatory telegram to Mr and Mrs Woodhouse on the occasion of their marriage. He was a man who took his pastoral duties seriously and who believed that it was necessary for ministers to make themselves useful in voicing righteousness and New Testament teaching in public affairs.

The interest of the Church in Foreign Missions had always been prominent; Andrew Fuller's appeals in the early days met with a most generous response, but when the Church's Centenary was held in 1873 regret was expressed that it had not been honoured to send even one missionary to the foreign field. After that time Miss Emily Jessie Kemp spent some time in India with the Zennana Mission, then, after her marriage to Thomas Pigott went with her husband and her sister and brother-in-law, Dr and Mrs E.H. Edwards to China to work in the China Inland Mission at Tai-Yuan-Fu; the Edwards on medical, and the Piggott's on evangelical work. All of them were independent of any official missionary organisation. Trouble arose out of the Boxer Movement secretly supported, if not actually inspired by the Dowager Empress of China in 1900.

The rising was not in its inception anti-missionary; it was anti-foreign feeling, but officials connected the missionaries with the anti-foreign feeling. Before the troubles broke out Dr and Mrs Edwards had returned to England, but Mr and Mrs Pigott stayed on. Grave fears were entertained for their safety, but it was not until the end of August that a Reuters message brought the terrible news that thirty-three missionaries had been brought to the official residence of the Governor of Shansi Province, ostensibly for protection, then passed into the Yamen and cruelly murdered one by one by the Governor's orders. Although the massacre took place on 9th July it was not until the meeting in September that confirmation of their deaths was reported. At the same time one of those accepted for baptism and church membership was Henry Raymond Williamson, grandson of James Williamson. Shortly after his baptism he became a Sunday School Teacher. Moved by the martyrdom of Mr and Mrs Pigott he declared his intention to study for the ministry,

subsequently to become a foreign missionary. During his preliminary studies prior to entering college he found scope for his zeal in conducting meetings in cottages, mills and in the open air. In 1904 his application to enter Bristol College was supported by the Church which promised to make an annual contribution to the college during his course. In college he showed remarkable aptitude for languages and succeeded in obtaining a B.D. degree of London University. He was studying for his final B.A. when the call came to go to China and he went, knowing nothing of the language and little of what the country and its people were like, but, thanks to the experience gained in cotton mills and with rubbing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men, he went with a deep knowledge of human nature.

Another member of West Street, Miss Emily Stevens had felt the call to missionary work and sought practical experience in Gibraltar and Tangier, and also trained as a nurse and midwife. She and H.R. Williamson became engaged before he left for China and she followed about a year later, her passage being paid for by Miss Kemp. Until their marriage in September 1910 they worked in places 600 miles apart; so began a partnership which lasted 56 years. After 30 years he was called home to take up the post of Foreign Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society which he held until 1951 in which year he became president of the Baptist Union. It is not within the scope of this history to detail fully his work in China and in England where, during the second world war and after he assisted the BBC in its Chinese services, but his Memoir written after his death in 1966 by the Rev. J.B. Middlebrook gives an account of a very full life. In 1922 he was made an honorary life deacon of the Church. In later years two ladies of the Church served the mission in China. Miss M.L. Watson (now Mrs F. Buckley) from 1919-1925 and her cousin, Miss Marian Watson from 1920-1949. The Church itself was not unmindful of its obligations and large sums of money were raised annually to support the work.

The ministry of the Rev. Woodhouse was very successful in many ways. In 9½ years 250 people were baptised and the membership total reached a peak of over 500. Work in the open air and in Lodging Houses continued as did that in the Christian Endeavour movement. In 1901 the Rochdale and District Baptist Union asked the Church to take over the responsibility for the Castleton Baptist Mission and within a month plans were prepared for the erection of a School-Chapel to seat between 250-300 at a total expected cost of £1,500 and huge committees were appointed for both fund raising and building. The School-Chapel was opened in September 1902; the 20th Century Fund granting £250 towards the cost and a great Bazaar in 1904 realised £707. Also in 1901 a decision was taken to erect a memorial to Mrs Pigott and her husband and their son in the form of a marble tables to be erected in the chapel. This was unveiled by Dr MacLaren on 13th May 1902.

The Church was not unmindful of events in the country and registered its protests against any alterations of the King's Oath that would make it possible for a Roman Catholic to sit upon the English Throne, and against certain provisions of the Education Act on the grounds that it would compel Baptists to pay for the teaching of sectarian dogma, provided no remedy for the wrongs done to non-conformists where the only public elementary schools were those which trained in the principles of the Church of England, and that the act excluded nonconformists from civil

service posts by sectarian tests. Another committee anomaly came to and end in 1905. Until that time no member of the choir was eligible to sit on the Choir Committee, but the Church relented to the extent of allowing the choir to appoint two of its members to join the four appointed by the Church. The rules for the election of deacons laid down in 1906 were not the first or the last in an attempt to regularise the appointments to this vital office.

On the ground of hygiene the Church adopted the individual communion cup without much discussion. The now redundant cups and flagons were offered for sale to friends at: 21/- [£1 1s. 0d. or £1.05p] for a cup and 50/- [£2 10s. 0d. or £2.50p] for a flagon. One of these latter pieces of Communion Plate was presented to Mr Richard Watson in recognition of his having been secretary for 23 years.

Little can be gathered from the records of how the finances of the Church were administered until about this time. The main sources of income were weekly offerings placed in boxes fixed at the entrance to the body of the church, and pew rents. It is safe to assume that the former were to cover the general expenses and the latter the remuneration of the minister, but at no point can we discover the amount of the ministerial stipend. By 1879 it was evident that the weekly offerings were insufficient to cover the expenses, so in addition to these a monthly collection "from pew to pew" was introduced. A Balance Sheet of December 1905 still shows no minister's salary on the debit side and no income from the pew rents on the credit. It is interesting to note the Auditor's names on this account: Percy Sutcliffe, who later became Borough Treasurer, and Walter Scott, proprietor of the Rochdale Observer. Early in 1906 the deacons recommended the formation of a Finance Committee to deal with the General Expenses Fund only, but within a month they were asked to take the Pew Rents Fund into their control also and merge the two funds. The next Balance Sheet shows that this had been accomplished and that the Pew Rents brought in over "£300, and that the Minister's salary was £350 per annum.

On 24th November 1908 Mr Woodhouse tendered his resignation upon receiving a call to the Brownhill Road Church, Catford, London. The resolution accepting his resignation, after paying tribute to his success as a pastor, his work at Cutgate and Castleton, and his work in various organisations in the town states: " - that throughout so long a pastorate there has been nothing to disturb the peace of the Church", and that Mrs Woodhouse had "endeared herself to all by her sympathetic interest and kindness of heart." His ministry closed on 13th December.

The Church's policy of avoiding as far as possible a vacant pastorate immediately began the search for a successor. By the following June an invitation was sent to L.H. Marshall who was then completing his studies at Rawdon. He had, however, planned to go to Germany for at least one, possibly two years of further study. Thus the Church was unable to obtain the services of a man later recognised as a brilliant scholar; for 17 years connected with Rawdon College, 12 years as a tutor and a further five as its President.

After nearly three years a call was given to and accepted by the Rev. R.C. Law of Middlesborough. Born in Liverpool he was baptised by the Rev. Robert Lewis,

former pastor of West Street, and started his life in commerce, eventually representing his firm in Manchester where he came under the influence of Dr Maclaren. His promise as a public speaker led the leaders of Union Chapel to persuade him to train for the ministry and he entered Regents Park in 1898. After pastorates at Biggleswade and Middlesborough he commenced his ministry with us in March 1911.

He was noted for his fearless and eloquent preaching and displayed a ready sympathy in all questions of public interest and especially in temperance work.

It is accepted that a person who wishes to be baptised is of mature years, but even our earliest records show that young people were accepted, the age of sixteen being the youngest that can be ascertained. Baptism and Church Membership carries the right to vote at meetings, but in October 1911 a suggestion was made that members under a certain age should not have this privilege - especially on important matters. Four months later the deacons were still in doubt and finally a notice of motion was given that the age limit of 21 should be adopted. At the next meeting this was rejected by a large majority.

Decisions concerning the misconduct of members had, from the very beginning been the prerogative of the Church meeting, but the Church now delegated part of its responsibility to the Pastor, deacons and ladies Visiting Committee to deal with these cases. This group could require withdrawal from the privileges of the Church for a time "if there was any sign of repentance".

In 1913 the Baptist Union Settlement and Sustentation Scheme was launched with the object of ensuring that the minimum stipend of the ministers should be £120. The amount raised was £¼million. At the beginning of the century a similar amount was raised - the 20th Century Fund - specifically for the erection of new church buildings. At the same time there was also a drift from the centre of large towns to the suburbs. With our present hindsight one wonders if we should have been facing some of the problems of the present day had this fund been administered more wisely. During the meetings one speaker, the Rev. J.W. Ewing, D.D., President of the Baptist Union posed a question relevant today: "Will the emergence of the working classes result in them using their power for selfish ends and for a more triumph of class interests, or will they work for the true interests of the whole community?"

The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 began to drain the churches of their young men; it was reported at the September meeting that nineteen from West Street, Cutgate and Castleton had already volunteered for service in the forces. Thereafter, until the cessation of hostilities 21 men lost their lives.

In March 1915 Dr G.K. Edwards, who was House Surgeon at the Rochdale Infirmary, and a son of Dr and Mrs Edwards, left for China where his parents along with his uncle and aunt Mr and Mrs Pigott had laboured.

In June of that year the Lancashire and Cheshire Association meetings were held in Rochdale for the eleventh time, the first being in 1797. It was inevitable that the

Church's role during hostilities should form the basis of the addresses and discussions. It was insisted that the responsibility of the Christian Church was to utter both by speech and action the Christian Message; that it was still the faith of the Church in wartime. Even at this time it was insisted upon by one speaker that we should have to make friends with Germany after it was all over. The pacifist point of view was put by the Rev. A.H. Hawkins who at that time was at Stretford. It was obvious that the church in general was torn between the wrongs of war and the need to oppose aggression. Other speakers were the Rev. L.H. Marshall (who was still in Germany at the outbreak of war and was imprisoned for several months as a spy), and Gordon Harvey, M.P.

At the close of the Annual Church meeting in January 1917 Mr Law indicated his intention to resign the pastorate, and in spite of pleas to withdraw it his decision was final. He had not received a call to any other church and the resignation was accepted with the proviso that he should continue if he had not received a call before September, but in July he announced that he had received a call to the church at Rushden, Northants, and that he intended to terminate his ministry on 23rd September.

A new departure in the search for a new minister was tried: a selection committee composed of five deacons and seven members of the church and congregation was set up to recommend suitable men. Their eventual choice fell on the Rev. W.H. Condy of Worcester who commenced his ministry shortly before the cessation of hostilities.

After the doldrums of the war period the relief from the anxiety about the men in the forces and their impending return led to a fierce bout of activity with special emphasis on the young people in an endeavour to get things moving again. Proposals were made for Special Young People's Services, Bible Study; the Morning School was abandoned and a Young Worshipper's League formed, the purpose of which was intended to guide the young into the Church. The diaconate was enlarged by raising three deacons to the office of Elder and appointing in their place, for the first time in its history, three ladies as deacons. A Social Hour after the evening service was held monthly. Also proposed were Scouts and Guides, a Young People's Union and an Autumn and Winter Campaign to win 3,000 souls. As a memorial to the men who lost their lives in the war the classrooms behind the school gallery were converted into an Institute with billiards room, games and reading rooms and a canteen. After long and sometimes heated discussions dancing was allowed on the School premises.

Condy was the first of a series of ministers who began to try to find a practical outlet for Christianity; who began to look outside the Church and to preach the social implications of the Gospel. He tried to tell the people how to apply Christianity rather than to evangelise. In this, however he met with all the difficulties of a pioneer; fierce opposition on the one hand, equally fierce backing on the other, and between, a large group of sympathetically puzzled people. A change to straightforward evangelism in the year before he left met with little success or enthusiasm and he departed a disappointed man. After the meeting of

21st December 1921 it was reported that the deacons had received a letter from Mr Condry resigning the pastorate. This was accepted, again with the proviso that if he had not received an invitation to another church before September the resignation should not necessarily take effect on that date. A further resolution expressed sincere regret that Mr Condry had not been more loyally supported. Before closing his ministry on 21st May 1922 he conducted the opening service at the newly formed Church at Cutgate on Tuesday, 16th May 1922. He went to Llandudno and subsequently to pastorates in Nottingham and Ilfracombe.

The general decline in Sunday worship and the use of Sunday as a holiday is reflected in a resolution passed in September 1922 that we: "discountenance by word, action and influence any looseness in regard to the observance of Sunday."

By September 1923 no move appears to have been made to invite a minister and so the pastorate was vacant when the Church celebrated its 150th Anniversary. For this occasion a full programme of the meetings was arranged covering a period of nine days with the usual Sunday services and two special week evening meetings, interspersed with prayer meetings. No particular theme appears to have been set for the speakers, but it is interesting to read fifty years later the newspaper reports (much fuller than today) and to notice that the Church's problems have not diminished, nor are some of them much nearer solution, although in certain directions some progress can be seen.

The Rev. Charles Brown who was about to retire after thirty years of ministry at Ferme Park Church, London spoke words that are as relevant today as when they were spoken:

"The primary work of the Churches is evangelism," he said. "Let them work on character - not on conditions, for if all men were Christians the conditions we were seeking to change would no longer continue. Christ fed the hungry and healed the sick, and His ear was ever open to the supplications of the suffering, but He was after something deeper than that - man himself."

Later in the same address he said:

"Some people are afraid of modern thought. I am not - what I am afraid of is modern thoughtlessness."

The Rev. A.T. Pitt, Vicar of St James pleaded for Christian Unity saying that whilst there would always be varied forms of worship it was desirable that all branches of the Church should unite to bear witness for the truth with a single voice.

The Ven. Archdeacon Sale, Vicar of Rochdale also referred to Church Unity saying that we had too small a vision of what Christ was to the world, but that the last half century had seen great changes - one of the greatest being the formation of personal friendships between members of different churches. With regard to unity of the churches, it was not the mere outward sign that counted, but the spirit. The problem of increased leisure was touched upon by Mr J.L Paton, the High Master of the Manchester Grammar School, saying that the way a man behaved when his work

was done would show what sort of a man he was. A warning of the Church's attempts to cope with this problem was given at the final meeting when the Rev. S.W. Hughes observed that it was not the duty of the church to amuse the world, but to bring a knowledge of Christ to it. "The church has never been more powerless than when it endeavours to be popular" he concluded.

Proceedings in Parliament were kept under close scrutiny as instanced by a resolution sent to the local member regarding the proposals to apply a tax on betting, appealing to the Government not to give legislative sanction to that disastrous practice.

In November an invitation was given to the Rev. A.H. Hawkins of Stretford which met with success and he commenced his ministry on 31st January 1924. A man in the prime of life and full of energy, he preached the total adequacy of God and the necessity for a Christian to be associated with a church. His opinions on war and conscientious objection had been well voiced on a previous visit to the Church. Now, six years later, he was equally strong about those who expressed their religious instinct in social and philanthropic service, and in political and industrial reform.

Early in 1925 the forty-year service of Mr Richard Watson as Church Secretary was recognised by the presentation to him of his portrait in oils painted by Hall Neale of Liverpool.

Most of those baptised during the latter part of Condry's and the early part of Hawkins' ministries were of the younger generation; in one group of twelve where the ages of the candidates have for some reason been pencilled in against their names, two were twelve years old, several thirteen and fourteen and the eldest seventeen. Yet it is significant that, although these people (if alive) must be in mid 60's today, not one of the names remain on our Church Roll.

Hawkins' ministry was a busy one. It was notably a teaching ministry. His efforts to win the young people into the Church were unflagging. He organised classes for prospective candidates for baptism and sought to lead those, particularly in the thirteen-year age group, towards decision and Church membership. These classes were planned to give three years continuous study. A local cinema was booked for several Sunday evenings for evangelical services in an attempt to attract those people who shied away from formal church-going. These were not very successful but were considered worthwhile on the grounds of experience. He played a great part in the 'Rochdale for Christ' Campaign organised by the Mayor: Alderman Charles Dearden in October 1929. In October 1926 nine churches in Rochdale and district joined in the four-day Missionary Exhibition in the Town Hall for which he was the secretary. Other movements started during his ministry were a group of Temperance Crusaders, Bible Study meetings, and the Baptist Women's League 'Bright Hour', an organisation which still continues at this time of writing. He also introduced a series of Passiontide services of music and meditation which have continued, with modifications, and which became joint with other Baptists in

later year. In this period of industrial depression his sympathy and work for the unemployed won praise from many of these unfortunate people.

It is difficult to discover the Church's attitude to all this activity. Evidently the premises were being used for work with the unemployed, but complaints about irregular and objectionable conduct resulted in demands for strict observance of rules and conditions, authentication by production of unemployment cards, and discontinuance of the supply of papers and pencils. Yet, a month later the report speaks of growing interest and usefulness.

Numerically the decline continued, the numbers baptised being between two and five per annum whilst dismissals, mostly due to default, averaged ten over the same period. In 1928 the matter of restricting the privileges of Junior Church members by denying their right to vote at meetings or being eligible for admission to the diaconate if under eighteen years of age was again considered, and this time the resolution given effect to this met with the success it failed to get in 1911. It received a unanimously favourable vote from a meeting at which only ten members were present. It was also resolved that these young people would be expected to attend a class in which they should be instructed in the teaching and policy of the Church.

Mr Hawkins came to the pastorate with a time limit, but at the end of his fourth year, however, he was invited to continue indefinitely.

He declared his intention of terminating his ministry in Rochdale at the end of August 1931 upon receiving a call to the Brownhill Road Church, Catford, London, thus following one of his predecessors, the Rev. Thomas Woodhouse. There he worked for twenty years - through World War II - and after a further six years at Worcester Park he became Pastor Emeritus in 1959, and in 1907, at the age of 87 celebrated the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the ministry at Warminster.

Between 1927 and 1933 the Church lost by death a number of its most influential people. Mr Richard Potterton (85) a local preacher at the age of 17, 37 years a deacon and elder; his daughter, Mrs Edmund Lord, lifelong attachment after baptism at the age of 15, deacon for 14 years, President of the Baptist Women's League in 1932, and her husband, Mr Edmund Lord (63), twenty years deacon, Church treasurer; Mrs Richard Watson (72), and Mr Ed. Lyon Taylor, Sunday School treasurer and Chairman of the Finance Committee. Losses like these led to the breakaway of the 'inherited families'.

Within twelve months the Church had invited its next minister, the Rev D.I. Morgan who was welcomed on 6th August and recognised on 27th September 1932. He had previously served at Nantwich and Sabden.

In June 1933 the Lancashire and Cheshire Association again held its Annual meetings at Rochdale. At this period of industrial depression at home and the disturbed situation abroad it is not surprising that the addresses should reflect these and also be concerned about the general decline in religion in general and church attendance in particular. Speakers declared that men were putting the lesser

loyalties before God. One of the most striking addresses was that given by the Rev. H. Inqli James of Coventry who accused the church of weak, inept and uncertain leadership in offering a solution to the problems of the time caused mainly by the expectation of personal monetary gain. On Christian Unity he contrasted the way in which the first Christians startled the world by their unity in conviction, character and conduct with the way in which the present churches scarcely seemed to preach the same Gospel. Communists repeatedly claimed that religion was 'dope' taken to avoid the sterner realities of life, and whilst admitting that that was true of a good deal which passed for religion it was not the religion of Christ which was one of ruthless reality inspired by personal contact with God.

There are many references at this time in the minutes to the Baptist Union Forward Movement and the Discipleship Campaign to arrest the steady decline in membership. The Discipleship Campaign was launched in 1932, the object being that every Church member should lead at least one person into the direct service of Christ and the church. In 1936 the Forward Movement was launched with the dual aims of fund raising and evangelism. E.A. Payne in his History of the Baptist Union says that the latter "did little more than stay the continued decline in membership". In our own Church the first reference is on 25th May 1932 and over a period of five years there are many indications that attempts were made by meetings, canvas of the district, 'Question Hours', etc. to comply with the Baptist Union's promptings. It would appear that E.A. Payne's summary of the national effort applied equally to our own.

Mayoral Sunday in 1934 coincided with Remembrance Day. The newly elected Mayor, Alderman Ashworth Ashworth and his wife the Mayoress were both members of the Church, and he elected to have the service at West Street. As Mayor's Chaplain, Mr Morgan used the opportunity to impress on the public men the obligations of their office, stressing the religious basis - Christian faith and practice - as the true foundation on which to build the best civic life. If the Mayoral Oath meant anything at all it meant that God became a reality in civic life. It was the failure of nations to recognise the truth that lay behind this that led to four years of war, and the continued rejection of it that was leading towards a great international crisis.

By 1935 the churches were facing economic difficulties; many being unable to afford a minister. A scheme to promote a Fellowship of Baptist Churches in Rochdale was put forward by the Rev. Herbert Motley, the secretary of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association. The details of the scheme are not recorded in the minutes but they were discussed at several meetings. It was evidently an attempt to pool the resources of the churches which would be governed by a council which would elect ministers and pay them and any lay assistance out of a common fund. The first scheme was rejected by three churches, and as one other refused to accept an amended scheme it was dropped. The links between local Baptist churches have always been friendly but very tenuous; preferring to work in closely knit communities rather than as a co-operative body. The gradual decline in attendance, especially at such times as Christmas, Easter and the Town's holidays did begin to break the isolation, and joint services on these occasions occurred more often.

In 1938 Mr Morgan was again invited to act as Chaplain to the Mayor, Alderman L.W. Taylor who had rendered valuable service to the Church through the Chairmanship of its Finance Committee. His wife, the Mayoress, a member for over thirty years was an ardent worker, serving on many committees especially those connected with Missionary work. Morgan again took the opportunity of stressing the necessity of carrying religion into business and civil life.

So, within four years two men connected with West Street attained the honour of first citizen and one minister the honour of serving both. Mr Morgan's ministry can be summed up as one of quiet pastoral oversight and sincere preaching. Throughout his ministry he kept to the declaration he made at his induction that he did not intend to go outside the church, believing that he would have his hands full at West Street. His object would be to keep the people in the Church. A Welshman, he had his compatriots command of language, and his carefully prepared sermons were delivered with a clear enunciation and a native lilt which captured the attention of his hearers and enabled him to drive home his points with telling effect. Upon receiving a call to the Tabernacle Church, Southport, Mr Morgan brought a quiet and friendly ministry to a close. At his farewell meeting he paid tribute to the help and encouragement he had received, particularly from Mr Richard Watson, little knowing that within two months he would be one of those officiating at the funeral of that pillar of the Church.

Mr Watson died at the age of 85 after a membership of 67 years, for 51 of which he had served as Church Secretary. Trained for the ministry at Regents Park College there is little doubt that that would have been the career he would have been most happy to follow. As a layman however, he was able to use his talents in the work, not only of the Church he loved but in the wider spheres of the Association and the denomination in general, and especially in that part of the work concerned with overseas missionary work.

One of the annual fund-raising efforts was the Sale of Work. Started first as a missionary enterprise, some £300 to £400 were contributed each year to various sections of the Baptist Missionary Society. Later, as costs at home began to rise and the wealthier supporters of the church died or left the town it was reluctantly decided to divide the proceeds between the B.M.S. and the Church. In 1941 due to difficulties brought about by the war situation the Sale of Work was abandoned and replaced by a Gift and Thanksgiving Day held at the time of the Church Anniversary.

Attempts to obtain another minister were successful when an invitation to the Rev. Maxwell Berry of Preston received a favourable reply and he was inducted in March 1942. He built his ministry on two pillars: the absolute authority of God's revelation and God's Sovereignty.

The difficulties of this mid-war period presented a challenge to both Church and minister. Service times were altered to avoid the black-out and heating of rooms reduced to a minimum by not using the large chapel during the winter months. During the flying-bomb and rocket attacks the premises were used as a reception

centre for evacuees, the members of the church taking responsibility for manning the centre voluntarily; much of the time for twenty-four hours of the day.

In 1946 the Corporation offered sites for churches on the new housing development at Kirkholt. In the first instance the Church was not willing to take this offer alone but sought the co-operation of other Baptist churches in the town and discussions began. There appears to have been little urgency as another four years passed before a decision was taken. In the meantime after a rather quiet and somewhat uneventful ministry Mr Berry left for Princess Risborough and his successor, the Rev. George Dearden was inducted in May 1949. He was a deeply sincere man, his compassion led him to perform many acts of help and kindness which are unrecorded, and in many cases unknown except to the recipients. The excellence of his preaching was only exceeded by the deep sincerity of his words, but when necessity arose he could be outspoken, especially on the subject of Sunday observance, in such a way as to rouse considerably opposition from vested interests.

As he came, arrangements were in hand to celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the beginning of the Baptist cause in Rochdale. Although centred in the church, the arrangements were made by the Rochdale and District Baptist Union. A reunion was held on Saturday, 9th October which was attended by about 200 members, scholars and friends. On the following day a Commemoration service was held on the site of the original church in Town Meadows addressed by the ministers of West Street, Newbold and Park churches, after which all churches formed in procession to a further assembly on the Town Hall Square. The churches further assembled on the date coincident with the first Baptism: Tuesday, 12th October. During this meeting Mr Dearden read from the first minute book the names of the nine baptised 175 years previously:

Benjamin Whitehead	Johnathan Kershaw
James Law	John Shaw
John Gartside	Abraham Broadbent
Susan Ogden	Susan Rhodes
Grace Butterworth	

Two interesting points arise from this list: one, a descendent of John Gartside is still a member of our Church at the time of writing (1972) and secondly, Benjamin Whitehead was transferred to Ogden and it was a descendant of his family who opened the new Ogden Church in Newhey in 1972.

Another Discipleship Campaign was proposed in May 1949, the minutes giving a broad outline only. Whether this met with any more success than previous ones is left to conjecture as no further reference is made to it.

In October 1950 meetings were again held to try to resolve the matter of building a new church at Kirkholt. Even though one church was on the point of closure and others not in a position to invite a minister there was great reluctance to "close their little Bethels". Many West Street people supported Mr Dearden in his belief that this was an opportunity for the Baptists to emerge from old buildings and decaying areas

into a new and promising field. There the matter ended and the site was eventually taken by the Methodists. The Church's attitude to this kind of expansion was again shown when in March 1951 another attempt was made, this time by the local Baptist Union, to form a group of churches, and its reply was that although it had every sympathy with the pastorless churches it was not at present affected by the proposal. Although during the six years of Mr Dearden's pastorate the number of baptisms was sufficient to keep membership numbers stable in spite of many deaths, (three deacons in one year) the general attitude of the church towards expansion and evangelism was one of apathy. It is little wonder that this attitude affected the minister in such a way that in March 1952 he gave formal notice to terminate his pastorate in May 1953, the end of the term of engagement. He was, however persuaded to continue, the church easing the situation somewhat by the purchase of a manse. Nevertheless in the three years from 1952 to 1955 he suffered three breakdowns of a nervous character.

The Chapel was closed from April to September 1954 when the ceiling of the organ chamber collapsed, showing the 'dust of ages' over the whole church and doing considerable damage to the organ, such that it was thought that it would have to be scrapped. Many hours of voluntary labour removed the debris and restored the instrument to a reasonable working condition with the loss of only four ranks of pipes.

A group of students under the direction of Rev. H.D. Logan of Bishop Stortford led a campaign from the 6th to the 18th September 1955 which met with a considerable amount of success, but as it reached its climax the death of Mr Dearden under tragic circumstances on the 14th came as a severe blow. The presence of Mr Logan and his team did more to stabilise the Church than can ever be recorded. It is little wonder that the people took Logan to their hearts, and shortly afterwards invited him to the pastorate, but without avail.

The crisis seemed to rally the Church and the minutes record the depth of resource in the Church's laity in continuing the work of conducting the services, oversight of various organisations, visitations, etc., which were normally the sphere of the minister. Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary effort, but a laity which is normally of the work-a-day world found difficulty in sustaining such effort for long, and the desire for a leader soon became apparent. Although an invitation to the Rev. W. Bannerman Fletcher of Farsley was given in February 1956 and immediately accepted, it was not until September that he was inducted. His declared intent was to strengthen the Church life but in spite of many conferences, the general decline in attendance at worship throughout the country as a whole, and especially in the North, was reflected in our own Church.

The question of open membership was raised, but again the Church finally adhered to its original doctrine that only those baptised by immersion should be eligible for membership.

Maintenance of large premises became increasingly difficult and so sub-letting portions became an attractive proposition as a source of revenue. From 1957 onwards some part of the premises has been let.

Combined service of worship began to occur with greater frequency. On Sundays affected by holidays, arrangements were made with the local Congregational and Presbyterian churches for joint services in addition to which an interchange with a nearby Anglican Church widened the field of co-operation.

In 1960 the branch church at Castleton where West Street had had oversight since 1901 expressed its desire to become independent. Why this should be in view of the gradually diminishing numbers is difficult to understand. They were making contributions towards the West Street minister's stipend for which they had his services one Sunday per month. The Trust Deed only required them to make a request to the parent Church which would then merely grant permission. The matter appears to have been pursued no further for the cause at Castleton was abandoned five years later.

In October 1962 Mr Fletcher announced his intention to resign the pastorate upon receiving a call to Manor Park Baptist Tabernacle in East Ham, London.

Now began a disturbing period in the Church's long history. The usual approach to the Area Superintendent produced the disappointing news that ministers were reluctant to come to the North of England 'with a view' even though many men were seeking a change of pastorate. Four churches in the town were now pastorless and the Superintendent put forward suggestions for uniting these either by disposal of their present buildings and building a new church, or retaining the existing set-up and forming a Fellowship of Churches under the care of a team of ministers. So the Church found itself facing a situation which it had faced only twelve years previously, but this time with the disadvantage of having to search for a site if it wanted one.

On the 1st February 1962 a meeting took place which was attended by deacons from all the six churches in the town. After explaining the idea of a team ministry, it was mentioned that a group of students at Spurgeon's College, London had been working together on mission work and were looking for a challenging situation in the North of England. The Superintendent was asked to arrange for the senior man of the group to visit the town and to conduct the service and to meet the deacons. All five members of the team subsequently visited the churches and then the momentous decision was taken to invite the team and to form a Fellowship of Baptist Churches in Rochdale. The senior student was to take up duties as soon as possible, and the other four students would join the team as they completed their studies over a period of three years.

The induction of the first member of the team took place in September 1962 and he began the work of laying the foundations of a new and vigorous approach to the work of the churches in our own areas. In calling the Churches to meetings for fellowship, training, discussion and prayer he wrote: "We have set clearly before

ourselves the vision of a town in which the challenge and promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be avoided by anyone who lives in it. Just because of this we have to leave the security of the past and travel across fresh and sometimes frightening ground."

To churches so long steeped in tradition, slow to change, jealous of their autonomy and conscious of their shortcomings the new thinking and whirlwind tactics of youth were to prove more than they could cope with. Perhaps a little more patience on the part of the leader in view of the long term plans might have yielded better results, nevertheless the churches fell in with his wishes. In spite of their being a band of young people in the churches who were strong, enthusiastic, and who could have formed the nucleus of the leadership in a few years, a youth leader was brought in who unfortunately was not acceptable to the authorities of the Union or the College. This was perhaps seen as a stop-gap in view of the circumstances. One of the two ministers next due to join the team failed his examinations and the second for no reason which was explained, decided to withdraw from the scheme. West Street premises were selected as the best for this form of work and a free hand was given to adapt the old schoolroom under the Chapel for a club which eventually attracted over 100 members. The general behaviour and serious increase in the amount of damage to premises, coupled with lack of co-operation with the Church authorities led to disputes and the defection of most young people from the Church and in some cases from the club also. Financial aid to the Fellowship scheme was given by the Baptist Authorities who, realising that a steadying influence was needed, suggested that a more senior minister should be appointed. This was resented by the team and regretted by the Churches and a manifesto sent to the Baptist Union and the College by the Church stated their confidence in the leader and that it would be their wish that the scheme be allowed to proceed instead of trying to alter it after so short a time.

In August 1964 the second member of the team was inducted. The work of the Youth Club had continued but was of little benefit to the Church, nor was the Church allowed to influence the club at all - only to provide the premises. With the object of extending the work towards a complete Community Centre further demands were made for more room. The termination of the Industrial Tenancy of our buildings released the large schoolroom and a smaller meeting room, but with increasing costs and diminishing congregations a Church building capable of seating over 900 became far too large for the Church's needs and it was decided to hand this building over for social work and convert the smaller meeting room for the dual purpose of a sanctuary and general meeting room. This was done and on Sunday, 1st August 1965 the Church met for the last time in the old chapel which it entered 132 years earlier.

The Church and the Fellowship found it impossible to meet the financial demands of the Community Centre which gradually became dissociated from them and sought its support from various charities and interested people, forming its own administration and endeavouring to obtain a body of trustees so that the building could be leased to them. The leader reported in January 1966 when the Centre had been in existence for three months that there were 15 groups with a total

membership of 250, that there were hopes of a grant of £1,000 and that it was hoped to double the programme - and also to decorate the hall from which all the pews had been stripped, the organ scrapped, the floor levelled and the heating installation altered.

There was no lack of ideas but there was a lack of planning and so slow progress led to frustration. As most projects required structural alterations, inevitably by volunteer labour, enthusiasm soon cooled and the leaders were often left to try to finish with inadequate help. In pursuance of this gigantic enterprise the spiritual needs of the Churches were being neglected and the team must have been aware of this, but continued to make the Centre their priority. This led to considerable friction, and meetings of the Churches at this time tended to generate more heat than light. In the meantime another member of the original team failed to come to Rochdale but the last member had done so and the Rev. Michael Wood was inducted into the Fellowship in September 1965.

Recognising the state of affairs and seeing the dangers, he endeavoured from the beginning to restore something of a balance, but as the junior member he had little success. By November 1966 matters were in such a state that two members of the team were asked to seek employment outside the church but to continue ministerial duties on a part-time basis. One entered the teaching profession and the other the Social Services. Five months later the Fellowship was finally abandoned and in March 1967 Mr Wood accepted the invitation to become minister at West Street.

The Community Centre continued to function for another two years, its most satisfactory and satisfying project being a Workshop for the Elderly which provided simple work and congenial company for many elderly but active people in addition to a welcome supplement to the State pension.

What can be said of the last years? Under the ministry of Mr Wood the Church has become a caring Church. It must be recorded that the traumatic experiences of the last decade would have closed many a church, but thanks to the guidance and leadership of the minister it still exists. If its members are elderly and small in number there is nevertheless a spirit of hope which holds them together. Their demands on their minister have been light which has enabled him in the name of Christ and the Church to do much good work in the town; in hospitals, and, in the ecumenical sphere to cement relationships with Catholics, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches.

Any history of a Church could be littered with names and naturally those of its ministers are the easiest to deal with. Many will regret the absence of names of notable and beloved leaders and workers, especially during recent years, and of some still living whose service and giving has been above measure. The truth is that the Church has been, and still is so rich in devoted workers and sacrificial givers that the number of these is an embarrassment to the chronicler! It would be an injustice to include some and not others. Let it simply be said that the names of loved friends, revered elders and devoted workers are written in heaven, and their memory, enshrined in our hearts, is their memorial. They would desire nothing better.

The Church now faces a future of uncertainty, but with hope. Never in the last 100 years has the message of Christ been needed more. Our prosperity is recorded by a curve which rises to a peak at the beginning of the present century and then falls to the present day. Can we hope that it may again begin to rise? Not for the first time do we regret the hope that history will repeat itself and that this extract from our first Minute Book dated 26th February 1790 and penned by Thomas Littlewood, so applicable today may foreshadow a great awakening:

“This day we lament greatly that when assembled together we are so few. We in our hearts blame and enter this protest and disapprobation of the conduct of our Brethren in forsaking the assembling of themselves together according to the divine commandment. We grieve before God for our own and our Brethren’s lukewarmness and request our pastor to warn and if possible to stir up our own and our absent brethren’s minds to remember from whence we are fallen, to repent and do the first works, believing it in vain to hope for a blessing upon us in our personal or social capacity while we are negligent in the use of God’s appointed means.”

ADDENDUM

SCHOOL REGISTER 1827

Since the original research of matter on *PAGE 22* another and older book has been discovered relating to the educational work of the early church, the first leaf of which appears to be missing. This would contain names as the second leaf is that of a marked register. From the way in which subsequent registers are made out it is obvious that the missing leaf would contain the names of the first, or Bible Class, and would contain nineteen names; then:

2nd,	or Testament Class:	23 members
3rd,	or Great Spelling Class:	11
4th,	or 2nd Little Spelling:	18
5th,	or 1st Little Spelling:	21
6th,	or Alphabet Class:	30

Although our Church records show that both males and females were catered for in Town Meadows this register contains only the names of boys. A break in the records occurs between March 1833 and January 1839 when classes would now be held at West Street and for the first time we find boy's and girl's classes.

The following classes are listed in the register for 1839 :

BOYS	
CLASS	TEACHER
Select Class	George Henry
2nd Bible Class	James Jackson
1st Bible Class	Joseph Littlewood
2nd Testament Class	Thomas Holt
1st Testament Class	John Brierley
3rd Spelling Class	John Mills
2nd Spelling Class	Thomas Wrigley
3rd Class in 1st Spelling	James Williamson
2nd Class in 1st Spelling	Abraham Howarth
Alphabet Class	R. Henry Jnr.
2nd Spelling Class	Jeremiah Gartside
GIRLS	
Class	Teacher
2nd Bible Class	James Littlewood
1st Bible Class	Jno Wrigley
2nd Testament Class	Miss Blackett
1st Testament Class	Miss Ward
Testament Class	Alice Collinge
Spelling class	Jane Clegg
Spelling Class	Rachel Schofield
Spelling Class	Sarah Clegg
Alphabet Class	Catherine Littlewood
Alphabet Class "k"	Miss E. Littlewood
LIBRARIAN:	T. B. Stephens

LETTERS OF GREETING FROM FORMER MINISTERS

From the Rev. A.H. Hawkins.

It is with pleasure that I add my quota to the story of a church with such a fine tradition as that of West Street. Few churches have played such a part in the affairs of the Baptist denomination both at home and in the Mission field. My memory calls to mind such wonderful people who supported their church, not only by their substance but also by their spiritual way of life. What a host they were and what loving and loyal support they gave to their minister and his family.

I recall the Church's interest in the Mission field; Dr Williamson who became a lifelong friend, Marion Watson whose hymn tune 'Carey Hall' has been sung in each of my subsequent churches. In this connection I remember the measure of boldness needed to engage the lovely Town Hall for a B.M.S. Exhibition, and what a success it was, even to the extent of having to dismantle some of the exhibits in order to accommodate the crowds at the final thanksgiving meeting. There was also the 'Rochdale for Christ' campaign when every home was visited and presented with a message from the Mayor, Alderman Dearden, a Christian layman, and the effort to relieve the boredom of unemployment in that time of industrial depression.

But it was not only in these more public ways that the church made its impact upon the life of the community. Its members played their part as Christian men and women in industry and in the municipal and social life of the town, and as they dropped out of leadership the church inspired younger people to take their places. In the seven years of my ministry I baptised 68 people, as much an indication of the work of the church as it is of the ministry. A flourishing and active time, full of life and the joy of the Lord.

My sincere greetings to you all.

From the Rev. D.I. Morgan of Earby.

My wife and I have very happy memories of West Street during 1932-40. Nearly all the Deacons at that time have died, but I remember them as devoted men and women, loyal to the Church, and very tolerant of the inadequacies of an inexperienced minister. Space only permits mention of one: Mr Richard Watson, who was not only the Church Secretary, but who had filled nearly every office in the Church and Sunday School and was loved and respected by everyone.

We remember with gratitude the many kindnesses we received from all the members, and are not surprised to learn that the same kindness is being shown to the present minister.

We send our greetings to the few who still remember us, and pray for God's blessing on the work in the future.

From the Rev. Maxwell Berry of Watford.

I am very grateful for the invitation to contribute a short message to the West Street Bi-centenary booklet. The Church has a great past with outstanding leaders among its ministers and members. Perhaps equally great is the courage and faith of those who have kept the work going during the more recent intensely difficult years. Now that more and more people are wearying of the deserts of unbelief and materialism, and there are many signs of spiritual awakening, I pray that West Street will be among the first to feel the new breath of the Holy Spirit, and will have a future as glorious as its past.

From the Rev. W. Bannerman Fletcher of London

So West Street attains its Bi-centenary. That really is something to celebrate. I am proud to have been a former minister of a church with such a long and fine history. It was partly this historic element of West Street which influenced me to accept the invitation to become minister in 1956 when I had my heart set on moving to a London church, and about to enter into negotiations with it. I was not disappointed, for I found at West Street a band of very devoted people. My wife and I have very happy memories of our time at the church and are delighted to send you our congratulations and greetings on this occasion which we hope to share with you in person.

I would remind you that this Anniversary is not only an occasion for rejoicing in the fact that the Fellowship has survived and that full time ministries have been sustained through the years, but also celebrating a great tradition. Briefly it is a tradition of Faith. Faith in God as Creator and Father, in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; in whose death and resurrection God has acted for man's salvation; in the Holy Spirit as the Strengthener and Inspirer. It is also a tradition of loyalty. Our forefathers were loyal to their consciences, prepared to worship in the way they deemed to be right, no matter what it cost, and to have a Church government which they judged to be closest to the New Testament. They were prepared to suffer if needs be to have a church free from Papal authority and State domination. They loved their church, and gave to it an unswerving loyalty.

The challenge of this Anniversary to all now associated with West Street is to pledge oneself to stand fast in this fine tradition, echoing the spirit of Martin Luther when he said, (defying the power and pomp of a corrupt church and ushering in the Protestant Reformation): "Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

“And here I will make an end.
And if I have done well,
and as is fitting the story,
it is that which I desired:
but if slenderly and meanly,
it is that which I could attain to.”

From the Second Book
of the Maccabees; 15
Apocrypha.

In preparing this record of the beginning and continuance of the Baptist cause in Rochdale, no more than a brief outline of the start of the Baptist faith has been included. The student who seeks information on the first 200 years of the faith will be advised to search elsewhere; not a difficult task as this is well documented. Fortunately the records of the Church have been lovingly cared for and are still available. Although the earliest dated record is in the year 1789 it is quite feasible that two of the books which carry no date lines go back to the very beginning. For most of the succeeding 200 years ministers and secretaries have industriously recorded the Church business in such detail that selection of what to include and what to leave out has been difficult. Where at times there have been gaps in our records and for a good deal of the background information reference has been made to such works as:

“Baptists of the North-west England”	by Dr. W.T. Whitley;
“A History of the English Baptists”,	Dr A.C. Underwood;
“The Baptist Union - A short history”,	Dr. E.A. Payne;
“A Centenary Sketch”	Rev. T. Harwood Pattison (1873)
“Fifty Years Reviewed, 1873-1925”	Mr R. Watson (unsigned)
[150 Anniversary Handbook of West Street]	

My sincere thanks are offered to the Librarian, Archivist and staff of the Rochdale Library for assistance in the perusal of the files of the Rochdale Observer and Times, to Mrs Hilda Mason in connection with the early life of the Rev. Wm. Stephens and also to that gentleman's great-grandson Mr Wm. Stephens of Brisbane for information from the family records.