

Churches in Shillington (Beds) in the Nineteenth Century

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Shillington was a predominantly agricultural village. In ¹⁸¹⁷~~1802~~ the land was enclosed, the principal beneficiaries being major landowners who were non-resident. Many of the holdings were small and most of the men were agricultural workers; their wives and daughters were straw plaiters. The most important people in the village consequently were the handful of tenant farmers, whose farms were of any appreciative size. *Good concise introduction*

The census returns show a steady growth of population from 899 in 1801 to 1788 in 1861. Then, however, there was an explosion to 2173 in 1871, the population reaching a peak of 2226 in 1881 and then dropping as suddenly to 1873 in 1891 and 1629 in ^{9?}~~1801~~. The explosion was caused by the discovery of coprolite in 1862 and from then until 1877 there was considerable coprolite digging in the village with the attendant washmills as the first stage of converting the coprolite into valuable phosphate fertiliser. By 1877 the seams were practically worked out and cheaper imports were available, so many left the village as no alternative work was available. It was, however, a period of prosperity, not only for the tenant farmers, but also for the labourers. Compared with the average agricultural wage in Bedfordshire of 9s a week¹, a coprolite worker received 15s².

At the beginning of the century the only church to the village was the Anglican All Saints, the patron being Trinity College, Cambridge. By the time of the religious census of 1851, there were also two nonconformist chapels, Congregational and Wesleyan Methodist. Later in the century a Primitive Methodist was added, but the records for this are not available so this study concentrates on the three churches existing in 1851. Each had its distinctive ethos. The Book of Common Prayer provided the services for the Church of England, its sixteenth century language giving a dignity and other-worldliness in comparison with the daily speech of the congregation. Their principal participation came from hymn singing, accompanied early in the century by a clarinet, after 1857 by an organ. For most of the century there were 2 services on a Sunday: Matins and Evensong with a Communion service following immediately after Matins once a month. In the 1880s the pattern changed

1. T. May: Economic and Social History 1760-1970. p 88
2. B. O'Connor: The Coprolite Industry in Shillington p 19

to a fortnightly Communion service after Matins as well as the addition of an early Communion service at 8.30 am. The number of communicants was not high. In the summer months it could drop to three or four, although figures in the thirties were more usual. Even on Easter Day in 1883 there were only 48, sixteen at the early service and thirty two after Matins³.

In contrast, participation in the Lord's Supper was an important obligation for the members of the Congregational Church. The service was held once a month and it was agreed in 1861 that 4 absences from the service without good reason should result in suspension of membership. The register of attendance 1854-74, still exists and any absence is rare⁴, perhaps the result of the firm application of the decree : four were expelled in March 1865 for non-attendance.

The distinctive character of Congregationalism can be discerned from the printed statement on Principles of Religion and Principles of Church Order and Discipline at the front of the new Church Book purchased in 1876 from the Congregational Union of England and Wales⁵. This declares that the New Testament is the sole source of authority and 'that human traditions, fathers and councils, canons and creeds possess no authority over the faith and practice of Christians' and further that the New Testament authorises every church to elect its own officers and manage its own affairs 'to stand independent of and irresponsible to, all authority, saving that only of the Supreme and Divine Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ'. The church records show how Shillington Congregationalists exercised their independence by choosing their ministers, electing deacons to run church affairs and making decisions not simply about financial and administrative affairs but also about who should be admitted as members and the behaviour expected. The choice of minister was particularly important : on him depended the conduct and content of the services as, unlike the Anglican church, there was no set format. The usual procedure when a vacancy arose was for a prospective replacement to take the services for two or three Sundays. The quality of the sermon and the role given to lay participation in the service was crucial. If the members approved, the deacons then negotiated terms. For example, in 1863 Rev. Fairfax was invited to become minister but

3. Register of Services, Sermon, Offertories : All Saints

4. Union Chapel, Shillington, Church Book 1852-76

5. Records of the Congregational Church assembling at Shillington 1876-1907

declined when he discovered three services were expected on a Sunday. He subsequently accepted when the afternoon service was dropped but this uneasy start apparently did not make for harmony. Eighteen months later, he resigned pleading 'failing health' so that he was unequal to his duties and 'discouragement' (only 20 out of 100 members attended the weeknight service) and 'a feeling of disaffection' resulting from agitation for the return of three Sunday services and a charge that port wine had been used at the Lord's Supper instead of a non-alcoholic beverage⁶. By November 1865 Rev. Culpin was appointed with the three services restored. This time the relationship was a good one which lasted till his retirement in 1890. *Were vacancies advertised?*

The Congregational mission to evangelise in Shillington began early in the nineteenth century from the church in Hitchin. A congregation was established in the mid 1820s and by 1840, the chapel in Church St was built⁷. In that same year the Wesleyan Methodist chapel was built, also in Church St, some 200 yards from the Congregational. How and when the Wesleyans arrived in the village is obscure⁸. Unlike the Congregationalists, the Wesleyans were a nationally organised church, governed by the Wesleyan Conference of ministers. Organised in 1851 into 428 circuits, each of approximately 20 churches, a circuit had between 2 and 4 ministers who were regularly moved round. The effect of this was to give considerable influence locally to the lay members of the congregation, in particular the elected elders and the lay preachers. Thomas Mott, a coachman, was one of Shillington's lay preachers who also took services in other local Wesleyan chapels. He 'usually walked to fulfil his appointments, making, for example, the return journey to Barton twice in a day as he had horses to tend between services. He had walked at least eighteen miles'.⁹ Unlike the Congregational church, Wesleyans did not appoint their ministers but neither were they dependent on them for the conduct of services which were often taken by lay preachers. They were, in fact, very similar in the importance attached to the sermon and extempore prayer with full lay participation, not least in the hymn singing. Indeed, the Wesleyans had meetings where hymn singing was the main activity. It is not surprising that both chapels had acquired an organ by the 1870s. By then the Wesleyans had moved: the 1840 chapel proved too small and was sold, becoming the Liberal Hall. A new chapel with a small schoolroom behind was built not far away in the High Rd in 1872.

6. Union Chapel Church Book 1853-76

7. Peter Stapleton : Shillington Congregational Church 1825-2002

8. The Sacred Flame. A Record of Methodism in Shillington 1872-1972 p 8

9. The Sacred Flame p 9

The Ecclesiastical Census of 1851 required each "meeting place" to make returns about church attendance and Sunday School numbers as well as other details such as the number of free and appropriated sittings in the pews. The returns for Shillington were¹⁰:

	Sittings		Services			Sunday School
	Free	Appropriated	a.m.	p.m.	eve	
All Saints	400	100		152		49
Congregational	160	130	150	154	190	am : 125 pm : 130
Wesleyan	70 +30 standing	84		159	192	50

As there were 1,598 living in the village in 1851 and 944 seats in the churches, there would not have been room for all unless they were spread across the services! In fact, it is impossible to know how many did attend more than one service - certainly not an unusual custom. A conservative estimate can be reached by using the maximum number at a service for each church and that gives a figure of 33.4% of the village attending services. However, to show church involvement, Sunday School scholars should be added in, which raises the proportion to 47.7%. Even allowing for the conservatism of the estimate, it scarcely fits the tradition that 'everyone' went to church on Sunday in Victorian England. It is, nonetheless, a significant and influential group. ✓

How does this compare with national figures for attendance?

Of the three churches, undoubtedly the Congregational was the most vigorous with three well attended services and a substantial Sunday School, most of whose pupils would have attended all day. Given the size of the building and that this was before the side galleries were built, there must have been considerable juggling between service and Sunday School as it seems highly unlikely both could have been accommodated at once. The Wesleyans, too, could expect substantial numbers at their two services but the Sunday School was less developed - it was to become sizeable in later years.

The vicar, Rev. R. McNeil, was clearly aware that his return was going to be substantially lower than his nonconformist neighbours : only 1 service, though well supported and a Sunday School as small as the Wesleyans. He added the revealing note : 'All landowners

10. D.W. Bushby ed. : Bedfordshire Ecclesiastical Census 1851 (B.H.R.S.54, 1975)

non resident and little interest taken in the labouring population. Great ignorance prevails¹¹. His suggestion is certainly relevant : nationally, closed rural parishes with a resident landowner did show high returns for the Church of England¹². To follow the employer's example might be genuine; it could certainly be expedient. In contrast, Shillington was an open parish with a few tenant farmers of moderate substance. The issue of social status is also implicit in McNeil's comment. The vicar in 1816 was the Rev. J. Hull who was also a J.P. John Frere who became vicar in 1853 was Senior Dean and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. His successor, J.A. Bonser, appears to have been a personal friend. All, therefore, moved in social circles outside the village and among the gentry. The stipend was low - £142 compared with the median value of £248 for Bedfordshire stipends¹³, but there was a substantial vicarage, built in the eighteenth century and extended in the nineteenth. Socially, therefore, the vicar moved in different circles to most of his parishioners and though concerned for their welfare as will be discussed later, he may well have been seen as a distant figure. In contrast, Congregational members chose their minister so they knew he spoke their language. They were responsible for his stipend and could only afford to raise £50 and the rent for a manse, so he was obliged to live simply.

Tradesmen and labourers attended All Saints, but the two laity in leading positions in the church, the churchwardens, again came from a different social group. One was chosen by the vicar, the other by the vestry and they tended to hold office for long periods so that the annual election was a formality. Between 1871 and 1899 the office was held by Joseph Pollard and Henry Ruffell. Joseph Pollard did not live in the village but was a farmer of prominence at High Down on the outskirts of Pirton. Henry Ruffell farmed at Upton End in Shillington, a substantial farm for the area, of 390 acres and employed 14 men and 6 boys¹⁴.

The Congregational Church provides a sharp contrast. The Trustees for 1888 are recorded¹⁵. The 1881 census shows they comprised 2 farmers but of 18 acres and of 8 acres, a baker, a butcher and a shoemaker together with 3 labourers (presumably coprolite workers) and an agricultural labourer¹⁶. In including labourers as well as tradesmen, they were more

-
11. Ibid
 12. K.D.M. Snell and Paul S. Ell : Rival Jerusalems
 13. Ibid p 86
 14. Vestry Minutes of the parish of Shillington
 15. Records of the Congregational Church 1876-1907

representative of the congregation. Examining those admitted to membership in the ten years from 1882, there were 8 labourers, 11 straw plaiters, 1 seamstress and 1 scholar. A further 7 men and 13 women do not appear in the 1881 Census for Shillington and so may have come from neighbouring villages as there was no Congregational church in the surrounding villages.¹⁶

In terms of social status the Wesleyans were more akin to the Congregational than the Anglican church but when it came to choosing trustees, they were able to pick men of substance. Belonging to the Luton circuit, their trustees in 1871 were Luton hat manufacturers and merchants with one Shillington man, Michael Mason, a coprolite merchant who had moved into the village from Cambridge. By 1887 all the trustees came from Shillington : 1 farmer of 8 acres, a butcher, grocer and baker, a straw factor and a coachman¹⁷ - but no labourers!

Membership of the churches has been referred to, but a distinction should be drawn between attending services and becoming a member and so entitled to participate in Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. For example Congregational records regularly show a membership of between 90 and a 100, below the figure shown attending the church in the 1851 census. For Anglicans, admission was through Confirmation by a bishop. This was preceded by special classes in the catechism and articles of faith often as part of Sunday School and consequent recommendation by the vicar. The churchwardens' accounts¹⁸ show payment for 84 to go to Bedford for confirmation in 1829, 42 in 1832, 40 in 1835. Whether this was the number to be confirmed or included accompanying members of the family is not clear. By the 1880s the service was more local; 19 were confirmed in Shefford in 1882, 24 in All Saints in 1889¹⁹. The vicar obviously tried to ensure continued involvement in the church. There was, for example, a special service a year after confirmation but the obligation to attend Holy Communion was not strong as the figures already discussed make clear.

The process for the Congregational church was strict and in contrast to the Church of

16. 1881 Census returns for Shillington

17. Wesleyan Chapel Trustee Minute Book 1887-1952

18. Churchwardens' Accounts, All Saints, Shillington 1829-1936

19. Register of Services : All Saints

England the lay leaders were centrally involved. The names of those considering membership were reported to the leaders' meeting and 2 deacons were appointed to see the individual and report back. The acceptance was not automatic, although presumably some advice had been offered before this public stage was reached. The report of May 1877 gives an insight into the discussions²⁰ 'Austin was led through much affliction and temptation. After recovery he intensely longed for God's home and for the Society of the people of God. The first Sabbath he was able to go out to hear the word he found peace. He had long before been engaged in Sabbath school work but now with a new inspiration. He resolved to do more for his mother and enabled to begin to pray in public'. If this suggests a traumatic experience, it was not always so : 'Mary Ann Austin was gently and quietly drawn to Christ. She found in her husband a great help and appears to exercise a child like faith in Christ'.

Evangelisation, not surprisingly in view of their origins, was an on-going concern of Congregational members. Their minister, the Rev. Darley reported in 1860²¹ twenty to forty enquiries^{was} "generally present at my house and in several cases taking up the evening from 6 till 10 so as to give me an opportunity to converse personally with each one. The result of this gracious visitation was a large ingathering into the church, some of whom previously led very abandoned lives, making their change much more apparent." It was only to be expected, therefore, that the church should respond to the wave of evangelical meetings throughout England in the late nineteenth century. In June 1894 they invited the Wesleyans to join them in special services to prepare for a visit of someone from the Evangelisation Union²². The outcome of the visit was not reported. Not to be outdone the Church of England invited the Church Army (its equivalent of the Evangelisation Union) for a fortnight's mission in 1899²³. *Is there evidence of other evangelical meetings locally?*

The main vehicle, however, for all the churches in maintaining and extending membership was the Sunday School. For much of the century, this was the sole means of education for most children and where many learnt to read. In Bedfordshire a high proportion of children

-
20. Records of the Congregation Church 1876-1907
 21. Union Chapel Church Book 1852-76
 22. Records of the Congregational Church 1876-1907
 23. Register of Services : All Saints

worked, the boys in agricultural labour, the girls lacemaking in the north of the county, straw plaiting in the south, including Shillington.

% Bedfordshire children returned as occupied in the censuses²⁴

	Aged 5-9		Aged 10-14	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1851	11.9	21.4	49.6	50.6
1871	4.9	10.5	44.4	46.4

The figures for girls are the highest in the country, exceeding those of the industrial centres in the north and midlands. Some went to plait school where they took their own straw and their parents sold what they produced. As straw plaiting was a relatively simple skill and quickly learnt, the schools were little more than workshops where they worked between five and eight hours when they were under 10 and ten hours after that²⁵. There were 5 plaiting schools in Shillington in 1875. Little wonder then that Sunday was the one opportunity for learning and here the Church of England led the way - in Bedfordshire 49.2% of Sunday School pupils went to Anglican, 9.17% to Congregational/Independent, 24.4% to Wesleyan in 1851²⁶. The comparable figures for Shillington were 21.4%, 56.8%, 21.8%.

The Sunday School minutes for the Shillington Wesleyans in the latter part of the century have survived. From 50 in 1851, they had 160 scholars by 1886 with 12 women and 8 men teachers. The average attendance that year was 120 in the morning and 127 in the afternoon. After that the figures dipped to 120 in 1894 and 92 in 1897²⁷. The Wesleyan Conference had decided in 1827 that writing should not be taught in their Sunday Schools but reading as well as religious instruction was important : everyone should be able to read the Bible for him or herself. Handbooks and primers as well as Bibles and hymn books were bought for the teachers and the highlight of the year was the Sunday School Anniversary. Special preachers were invited for the Sunday services with the children turned out as smartly as possible. The excitement continued on the following Tuesday with

24. W.B. Stephens : Education, Literacy and Society 1830-70. Appendix B

25. Ibid : p 173

26. Snell & Ell : p 277

27. Shillington Wesleyan Sunday School Minute Book

a tea for the children at 4 pm and everyone else at 5 pm. This was followed by a public meeting to which those from other churches were invited. It was a prestigious event with guest speakers. In 1894 the meeting was chaired by S.H. Whitbread M.P. 'chapel was crowded' with a collection of £5-2-0d²⁸. That with the collection of £5-5-10d on the Sunday was the chief source of Sunday School revenue for the year for the purchase of books, 'rewards' for good attendance and a tea for teachers and scholars. The spirit in which the teachers approached their work is clear from a typical entry in the minutes of the annual teachers' meeting in 1899²⁹. After the business part of the meeting 'the Superintendent and several teachers spoke and each one seemed very anxious for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us as workers in the Master's Vineyard and also earnestly pray for the conversion of the Scholars in the School during the year'. The evangelical spirit is clear.

Other than those for 1851, the numbers for the Congregational Sunday School are not recorded but the need for a new building discussed later, makes it clear they were at least maintained. The school and the way it was run including the annual anniversary services mirrors the Wesleyans. Congregationalists, too, were concerned for the spiritual welfare of the children. As for the children, one cannot help wondering whether, after a week's work they would not have preferred the freedom to run and be physically active. Perhaps the Anniversary celebrations were some recompense.

Perhaps because it was directly under the vicar's control, no records exist of the Anglican Sunday School though it certainly existed. Indeed J.A. Frere (vicar 1853-77) as befits a Senior Dean of Trinity College was very concerned about education. The fact that he had a dual role does not appear to have lessened the attention he paid to All Saints. He established a National School in the village in 1856 for 120 pupils and built two schoolrooms where the old vicarage used to stand on land behind the almshouses opposite the church. There was an emphasis on religious instruction but as was usual at the time this was often the vehicle for teaching reading and writing. Even arithmetic was given a religious slant! He opened a subscription list to finance the school and doubtless contributed himself, but the school struggled so following Forster's Education of 1870, the school became a Board school.

28. Ibid

29. Ibid

The schools were an important aspect of the churches' concern for the spiritual welfare of their members but they were also concerned for their physical well being. Even in the coprolite years poverty existed in the village and through parish rates, villagers contributed to Poor Law relief, but dependence on the Poor Law was dreaded and the churches did what they could to help people survive crises. There were regular collections at services three or four times a year for 'the sick and poor'. The money was then distributed by the clergy, deacons or elders but who received it was not normally recorded except in scattered instances. For example in 1864 the Congregational church gave 2s 6d to 'William Flint whose family were ill'³⁰. How dire the poverty could be once the years of coprolite digging were past, is shown by Frere organising porridge and milk breakfasts for children. Between 78 and 134 benefited in January and February of the years 1886-9. Clothing funds for children also existed. All Saints' collection in 1882 raised £4-5-10d for this³¹. The Methodists set up a Clothing Fund in 1898 which lasted well into the twentieth century³². Each child paid 1d a week, teachers and the Adult Bible Class 2d, 'all money taken to be spent with tradesmen in Shillington'.

Sickness was, of course, particularly dreaded. It not only meant a loss of wages for the wage earner but for the poorly paid, the cost of medical help was expensive. The nearest hospital was Hitchin Infirmary. All Saints had a regular collection at harvest festivals for the infirmary as well as the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution³³. The collection would have been used as a subscription to the infirmary which would have entitled the church to recommend someone for treatment. In effect, a collective insurance policy. The Congregational church had a similar annual collection and it is likely the Wesleyans did as well. *Any friendly Societies in Shillington?*

The churches would have put in the same category of social welfare, their support for the temperance movement. The demon drink aroused considerable concern in the Victorian period and was the subject of fiery sermons and polemics. There always had been inns and public houses in Shillington, but with the coprolite diggings, the number grew to twelve. The churches re-doubled their efforts. As a counter attraction Frere set up a Reading Room

30. Union Chapel Church Book

31. Register of Services : All Saints

32. Wesleyan Sunday School Minute Book

33. Register of Services : All Saints

and the church contributed to the Church of England Temperance Society³⁴. Both Nonconformist churches supported the Band of Hope, at whose meetings individuals foreswore drinking any alcohol. This was not a new departure as both churches had long expected their members to be teetotal. Like the Sunday School Anniversaries, the annual Band of Hope festivity and parade was a village occasion.

In 1853 the Congregational church had decided that any one found drinking in a public house should be expelled from membership, a rule which was firmly enforced. It could lead to sad stories like that of John Clark in 1863³⁵, who had often been 'cited as a notable instance of the power of teetotalism'. Unfortunately he was advised by his doctor to take porter to relieve his rheumatism. 'Unhappily the poor man returned to his former habits of intoxication. The pastor expressing his doubt whether John Clark was of sound mind. At the same time stating that if he were sane, the church must condemn his wickedness while pitying him'. The deacons enlisted the support of his brothers and sons and John promised to mend his ways. However, there was 'a sad defection' and he was found in a public house 'even on the Lord's Day' so he was dropped from membership. Whatever his beliefs might be on the effect of this on his eternal soul, he was certainly cut off from a community which had been important to him, lost practical help and became estranged from his family. It is clear that church members had done their best to support him but when this failed, the rules were firmly upheld.

John Clark was not the only Congregationalist obliged to leave the church. In 1864 Mr Roake withdrew after remonstrations "on certain evils apparently arising from his connexion with the cricket club of the village!³⁶. The evils were not stated but were probably gambling : the game of cricket was well known for the number of opportunities for betting on a variety of aspects of the game. In 1853 'connexion with ungodly persons', it was decided, could lead to exclusion and this was the charge against Mary Ann Simkins in 1864. She had become engaged to 'an ungodly man'³⁷. His faults not specified, but Mary Ann dropped her membership and married her 'ungodly' man - at All Saints!

34. Ibid

35. Union Chapel Church Book 1852-76

36. Ibid

37. Ibid

Whether the Wesleyans and Anglicans were equally firm in dealing with the recalcitrant is not recorded, though it is unlikely that the Wesleyans tolerated anyone who was not teetotal. Excommunication was rare in the Church of England but this does not mean that high standards of conduct were not encouraged and expected. Setting standards alongside attendance at services and welfare provision was all part of the community spirit each church created for itself. It may have discouraged some from joining, but a study of the building records shows that the churches were not short of members. A major concern for each was the maintenance of their buildings.

The Wesleyans were concerned with new building as well as maintenance throughout the nineteenth century. The original chapel in Church Street was outgrown by the 1870s. It was sold and it is perhaps no accident, given the political affiliations of many Nonconformists, that it became the Liberal Hall. The new larger chapel on the High Road incorporated a small school room. They also owned two small cottages behind it. The land cost £120 and the new building £600. This was partly met by the sale of the old chapel, part of the money was raised immediately and a quarter borrowed from the Luton Circuit³⁸. By the late 1880s adequate space had again become a problem so in 1888 it was decided 'that the old cottage be no more let but fitted up for a classroom'³⁹. This was insufficient so by 1891 there was talk of a new schoolroom. In 1897 architect's plans were accepted: the new schoolroom was to be built on to the chapel with a door into the previous classroom which was now to become a lobby to the church. A tender of £300 was accepted from Mr King for the new building with a further £49 for pointing and painting the chapel 'subject to the understanding that this internal work may be deferred if necessary'⁴⁰. The work was completed in 1898 at a cost of £356-0-9d. The cost was kept down by some of the church members helping with the decorating. The Sunday School teachers contributed by 'decorating the walls and painting the windows in front of the school room to correspond to the Chapel' as well as giving £5 'the Secretary to see what each Teacher will be able to contribute'⁴¹.

The Congregational church, too, was faced with an increasing need for space and also kept

38. Wesleyan Trustees

39. Ibid

40. Ibid

41. Wesleyan Sunday School Minute Book

costs down through the hard work of members⁴². It was in 1839 that a piece of land 'fenced out from an orchard piece or parcel of land but time since converted into and used as Garden ground situate in or near Church Street' was purchased from James Muckleton, subject 'to a right of foot passage way through part of the said plot'. 'Any parcel of land or ground as shall not be built upon or may be required for that purpose to be used as a Burial Ground'⁴³. The right of way still exists but as the chapel filled practically all the plot, no burial ground was instituted. The land and the building which was opened in November 1840 cost £520⁴⁴, a formidable sum of money to raise by a group predominantly of agricultural labourers. Within ten years, there were too few pews so in 1853 it was decided to install more at the sides of the chapel. Two side galleries were opened in 1859 at a cost of £67 and a further £7-6s expended on yet more pews downstairs. The Sunday School met in the galleries and this was clearly unsatisfactory, so, as early as 1864 building a school room was mooted. When it was discovered this would cost £300, the idea was dropped. In 1875 a porch and oil lamps were added⁴⁵ and wholesale re-decoration of the chapel occurred the next year : the ceiling was whitened, the walls painted stone colour, the pews and organ case cleaned and given two coats of varnish and the windows painted white in two coats of oil - a thorough job carried out it appears by the congregation⁴⁶. It was 1893 before a move was made to build a schoolroom. Isaac Rust was commissioned to enquire about the land at the back of the chapel. A bazaar was held to raise money, appeals were made and model bricks were painted white and sold for 3d each,⁴⁷. There was to be a vestry, hall and kitchen with a copper on the ground floor and a large schoolroom above with a platform one foot deep across the room. Walls were to be plastered with a wainscot 4 feet deep. The ground floor rooms were to be ceiled with boards but the upper room was to be open to the roof, which would be lined with boards and stained. 'Mr Rust to cart all the bricks, Thomas Simkins the wood, James ^{Burckett} ~~Barrett~~ the sand'. However, in May 1895 the tenders for the work ranging from £207 to £325 were higher than expected so the work was delayed for a year when a tender for £168-18-6d was accepted from Messers Elliott and Wilson of Shillington. 6 members of the church including Isaac Rust loaned money to help pay off the bills and the schoolroom was at last opened to everyone's great relief in the

*This seems
to be a high
quality
building*

-
42. Stapleton : Shillington Congregation Church
 43. Union Chapel Church Book 1852-76
 44. Stapleton : Shillington Congregational Church
 45. Ibid
 46. Union Chapel Church Book 1852-76
 47. Records of the Congregational Church 1876-1907

second week of July 1896. The remarkable thing about this venture and the Wesleyan schoolroom is that both were built in the 1890s when money was tighter as it was well past the coprolite boom years and the population was declining. Through the difficulties and delays, the chapels remained confident.

In contrast, the problem for All Saints was not lack of space and new building but maintaining a large fourteenth century structure. The churchwarden's accounts show constant payments to plumbers, glaziers, metal workers and carpenters. In 1830, Mr Stevens, a plasterer was paid £35 and Mr Lot Richardson £5-10s for whitewashing the church and painting the columns⁴⁸. In fact Lot Richardson was constantly at work : in 1840 he was paid £30 for repairing the church roof 'one bay each side of the upper roof the roof not to remain open more than a fortnight from the commencement under a forfeiture of £5.'⁴⁹ In 1846 he was paid 'to strip the roof of the steeple, to recast and re-lay the lead thereon and to make a new weathercock to work on a steel Pevitt and brass socket, to gild the weathercock and paint the spire three times'.

There was embellishment, too. New hassocks in 1834, a new velvet pall in 1842, a new surplice in 1837. The organ was installed 1857 and a curtain hung across the belfry arch.

The fundamental overhaul came in 1882 and cost £855-14-5d. For this, in 1882 the nave was refloored with red tiles, Porritt's heating apparatus was laid down with flues, a large block of close pews in the south aisle and two small blocks at the west end were replaced by 'suitable open benches', the porch was so extensively repaired as to be almost re-built, 4 large windows on the aisle and the 3 clerestory windows above were renewed, a modern fireplace and chimney in the south chancel was removed and an 'ancient square headed window restored in lieu thereof' and, finally, the internal walls, arches and pillars of the south aisle and south side of the nave were cleaned and restored, the paint scraped off the pillars, defective stone work made good and the walls replastered. The north aisle was similarly restored in 1883⁵⁰. This work was basically conservation so that the fourteenth century church was largely preserved.

48. Churchwardens' Accounts
49. Vestry minutes
50. Ibid

And that was just the church. Bell ropes were regularly replaced and part of the restoration work in 1882 included re-hanging and quartering the bells. The churchyard, too, needed upkeep. For example, the churchwardens purchased 20 yards of gravel in 1837, with a further 31 yards the next year. To lay it, 3 people were paid for between five and six days' work each, costing a total of £1-6-7d. The gravel had cost 19s⁵¹. More substantial work was undertaken in 1858 as a sandstone wall was built with two 'iron gates with locks and bolts on' from the White Horse corner to the south west extremity with an iron fence completing the enclosure of the graveyard. The sandstone was given by the Rt.Hon. the Earl de Grey, one of Shillington's non-resident landowners⁵².

The running costs of the churches, let alone the buildings, meant finance was - a constant pre-occupation for all the churches. Here, All Saints was undoubtedly the best placed. When major expense was incurred, the automatic response was to open a subscription list - the restoration work of the 1880s was entirely financed in this way. As the Earl de Grey's gift of sandstone for the churchyard wall shows, the church was able to appeal successfully to those outside the village. For example, the subscription list for a memorial window for Rev J.A. Frere survives⁵³ and half the donors came from outside the village. Furthermore, annual expenses were largely met by the payment of tithes, until they were abolished in 1868. These were usually 2d in the £ on the rateable value of property and were paid by everyone regardless of church affiliation. Only after their abolition did offertories during services become important. The amount so raised each year raised from £59-3-6d in 1881 to £84-5-1d in 1885⁵⁴.

Pew rents contributed an unknown sum to All Saints finances. They were very important to the chapels in constituting a steady income which could be largely predicted. In Bedfordshire 61.7% of the pews in Congregational/Independent churches were rented, 50.1% for the Wesleyan. The comparable figures for Shillington were 44.8% and 54.6%. Nationally in these denominations high numbers renting pews indicated high commitment, measured by church attendance⁵⁵ and this can certainly be claimed for Shillington. For those who could afford it, having a rented pew was a way of identifying

51. Churchwardens' Accounts
52. Vestry minutes
53. Churchwardens' Accounts
54. Register of Services, All Saints
55. Snell & Ell : p 360

with the church community and gave social status (Rented pews were often at the front of the church).

How important pew rents could be is illustrated by the Wesleyan Trustee accounts for 1888⁵⁶.

April 14	Half Year Rent Cottage	2 - 0 - 0
26	Seat Rents	5 - 7 - 2
May 20	Chapel Anniv. Sunday Collection	2 - 14 - 3
	Chapel Anniv. Monday Collection	2 - 6 - 3 $\frac{1}{2}$
	Proceeds of tea	1 - 0 - 4
	Sale of Harmonium	8 - 0 - 0
July	Seat Rents	3 - 6 - 8
Sept 20	Harvest Festival Sunday Collection	2 - 8 - 0 $\frac{1}{2}$
	Harvest Festival Tuesday Collection	1 - 17 - 4
	Sale of vegetables and fruit	3 - 4 - 1 $\frac{1}{2}$
Oct.	Seat Rents	5 - 3 - 4
		<u>£37 - 7 - 6$\frac{1}{2}$</u>

Nearly half of the revenue came from seat rents and, apart from the sale of the harmonium which clearly was a unique event, the bulk of the rest of the income came from the anniversary occasions which were such a highlight of the church calendar. To this would be added any collection in other services which do not appear in these accounts and which often had a designated purpose like care of the sick.

For the Congregational church, too, pew rents brought in between £5 and £6 a quarter. Teas, too, were steady earners besides being enjoyable events, not only on Anniversary occasions but at church festivals like Whitsun. The numbers for tea varied from 80 to 150 and children paid 4d, women 6d and men 8d - differences in appetites were taken account of! In addition it was decided in 1853 that members should pay 2d a quarter for 'incidental expenses'⁵⁷.

56. Shillington High Rd, Methodist Trust Accounts 1867-1940

57. Union Chapel Church Book 1852-76

Unlike All Saints, the Nonconformist churches were unable to look to subscription lists to meet major expenses, though they were prepared to raise small loans from their respective national bodies. Their equivalent of the subscriptions was the hard work of their members, carting materials and painting and decorating so that costs were kept down.

The three churches had common concerns, religious, moral and temporal and they met some of these in similar ways and yet each was distinctive and proudly so. In one way they competed with each other for adherents, but as the 1851 Religions Census demonstrated, there were plenty of people in the village not linked to any church. Occasionally, people moved from one church to another : for an unknown reason, in May 1885 Thomas Prutton and his wife withdrew from the Congregational Church⁵⁸ and two years later he appears as a trustee of the Wesleyan church. Occasionally, too, there are indications of friction. In 1876 the Congregational Church planned to have a bazaar to raise money for refurbishment of the church. The vicar offered the use of the school room but the co-operation turned sour after the minister asked for a school half day holiday on the day of the bazaar. It would be intriguing to know further details behind the note in the Congregational church book⁵⁹. 'A day or two later, I received a note from Mr P (the schoolmaster) stating that Mr F (vicar) wished to see me about the matter. I called on Mr F. He received me very coldly, made some enquiries and said he would see his co-trustees and then communicate with me again late on Saturday eve. I received a letter from Mr Frere. After the letter was read, it was unanimously resolved to decline the acceptance of the schools'.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of good will. Church anniversaries became village occasions. All joined in celebrations of Victoria's jubilees. Members of different churches worked together on the farms or digging coprolite, they traded with one another, they lived alongside one another. While there were undoubted social distinctions between the churches, gaining influence and authority in one church won respect in the wider community. A clear example of this is Isaac Rust, a baker. He became a trustee of the Congregational church and lent £10 towards the building of its schoolroom. As a deacon he was prominent, often leading meetings in prayer. It was perhaps the qualities that showed in these capacities that led the vestry to appoint him in 1867, aged 31, as an Assessor of

58. Records of the Congregational Church 1876-1907

59. Ibid

Taxes, a position he held for many years. Having shown his worth there he was one of a vestry committee set up in 1895 to carry out a valuation of parish land of over 20 acres in one occupation⁶⁰. He most certainly did not have anything like that amount of land while others on the committee like William Hanscombe and George Ruffell had considerably more. He had presumably earned the reputation of a fair minded man of some authority. As in so many other instances throughout the country, influence gained in a Nonconformist church proved to be the basis for prominence on the local and sometimes national stage alongside those born into a higher social status. ✓

60. Vestry Minutes.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- P44/8/1 Vestry Minutes of the parish of Shillington
- P44/5/4 Churchwardens' Accounts 1829-1936 : All Saints, Shillington
- P44/0/1 Register of Services, Sermons, Offertories : All Saints, Shillington
- X846/1/1 Union Chapel, Shillington, Church Book 1852-76
- X846/1/2 Records of the Congregational Church assembling at Shillington, Beds. 1876-1907
- MB 825 Wesleyan Chapel Trustee Minute Book 1887-1952 (Shillington, Beds)
- MB 826/2 The Sacred Flame. A Record of Methodism in Shillington 1872-1972
- MB 2493 Shillington High Rd Methodists Trust Accounts 1867-1940
- MB 1642 Shillington Wesleyan Sunday School Minute Book
- 1881 Census Returns for Shillington
- All in the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service.

Secondary Sources

- D.W. Bushby ed : Bedfordshire Ecclesiastical Census 1851 (Bedfordshire Historical Records Society, 54, 1975)
- Trevor May : Economic and Social History of Britain 1760-1970 (Longman 1987)
- Bernard O'Connor : The Coprolite Industry in Shillington
- K.D.M. Snell and
- Paul S. Ell : Rival Jerusalems (C.U.P. 2000)
- Peter Stapleton : Shillington Congregational Church 1825-2002
- W.B. Stephens : Education, Literacy and Society 1830-70. (Manchester 1987)