

The Sawbridgeworth Congregational Church

By Theo van de Bilt - Published originally as part of the High Wych History Series

This time we are looking at the Congregational Church on London Road Sawbridgeworth. The building is outside the civic and ecclesiastical borders of High Wych but there is a lot of common history. Before anything else I should say that the opinions expressed below are my own which readers are not obliged to share.



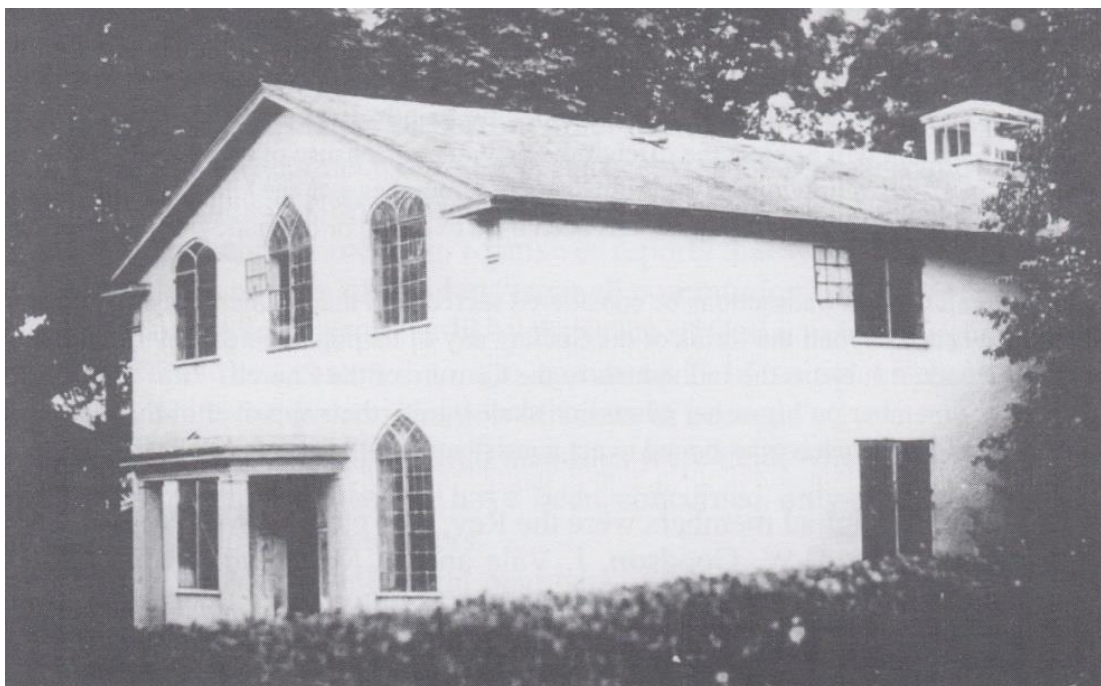
Today the Evangelical Congregational Church, to give it its formal title, calls itself the only Free Church in the town and has amongst its members people from Methodist, Baptists, Presbyterian, Church of Scotland and Congregational fellowships.

The story really started in 1517 in Wittenberg, Germany when Martin Luther published his 95 theses. Luther taught that salvation is not earned (or bought!) by doing good deeds but received as a gift of God's grace through belief in Jesus Christ. A few years later John Calvin stressed God's power and humanity's predestined fate. In England, the Reformation began when Henry VIII broke with Rome following the pope's refusal to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry's motives were perhaps more political than religious but in line with Luther and Calvin he did work to place the Bible in the hands of the people. Beginning in 1536, every parish was required to have a copy! After Henry's death, during Edward VI's reign, England became truly protestant. This was then followed by five years of reactionary Catholicism under Mary 1st.



Naturally, local happenings reflected developments in the rest of the country if not the wider world. In 1643 Christopher Webb, the vicar of Great St. Mary's Sawbridgeworth and Gilston, was 'ejected' from his post. Over the next 17 years Webb was succeeded by 4 'ministers' Samuel Ainsworth, John Eldred, John Paine and John Ewer. John Paine was the more important of these and served from 1646 until 1658. The title of minister rather than vicar obviously indicated a change in local religious teaching. Religion was extremely important then and locals were not reticent in expressing their opinions. During the time of John Ewer quakers were even welcomed in Great St. Mary's. By 1660 however the monarchy had been restored and Christopher Webb was reinstated. Webb then served for another ten years.

With the coming to the throne of William of Orange and the act of toleration of 1689 independents were once again allowed to worship freely except that is for Catholics. Religious diversity had returned. Registration was however required. From those registrations we learn that in 1805 the house of Daniel Brown was registered for Independents and Baptists as certified by B. P Severn. Nine years later a chapel was registered in the place where the Church is now and certified by James Stuart (or Stewart) minister. This was known as the 'neat place of worship'. See picture below.



'On Sabbath evening 24 August 1817 we formed ourselves into a Christian Church on the most liberal plane' and 'we joined ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant'. So it said in the Congregational Year Book describing the actual start of the Congregational Church in Sawbridgeworth. James Stuart had retired by then and Herbert Tyler became the first minister. At that time there were 63 subscribers and 126 children attended Sunday school. The first infant baptism took place that very same year and the first wedding in 1841. The first burial, in 1834 sadly was of the pastor's 14 year old daughter; later that same year her 17 year old sister was also buried. Of the first 20 burials 16 concerned persons under twenty, a sad sign of the times! In 1846 Tyler was followed by John Gill and in 1851 James Wood came on the scene. He served for 53 years.

By 1862 the chapel was in a bad state of repair and no longer fit for purpose and it was decided to build a proper church. This is the building that still stands on London Road today. A committee was formed and after a visit to Milton near Sittingbourne to see a chapel there decided that the new church should be modelled on that house of worship.

On 29 April 1863 the new building was finished. James Wood describes it as 'a new and commodious sanctuary dedicated to the worship of God'. The cost of building had come to £ 2050 which amount was completely paid off by 1867. In 1904 a piece of land was bought next to the church and after a lot of fundraising a block of classrooms was built which was finished by 1911, See below for a picture of the laying of the first stone.



James Wood stayed in place as minister for a very long time indeed, from 1851 until 1904. As a recognition of his service he was allowed to stay on at the old Manse on Fair Green until 1915 when he passed away. Wood was followed by James Dyke who served until 1913. Under his stewardship a new organ was installed and the Sunday school classrooms were built. The need for that was obvious. By 1904 no less than 193 children were on the Sunday School roll. Dyke was followed by William Rosewarne who in turn was followed by Lansdowne West.

In 1919 to mark the end of the Great War an oak frame was unveiled naming both the young men from the congregational community who died during that conflict and those that survived. The frame was later transformed into a memorial book. A landmark in the life of the church was the Herts Congregational Union which took place in 1923.



An important feature during the interwar years was the bible class or young men's mission. The YMM was started by Mr. Sidney Parmiter in 1921. Mr. Parmiter was a great favourite with the boys and led them on many a happy outing and on camping trips to places such as Lowestoft and Clacton. The class carried on until 1940 when war made it impossible to continue. How much Sidney Parmiter was liked was shown on his 80th birthday in 1960 when some 60 of his 'boys' returned to the church for a celebratory party

In 1937 the Little Hallingbury mission asked to be united with the Sawbridgeworth church. The union only lasted for four years. In September 1941 the Mission asked for the agreement to be terminated. In 1938 the baptistery was built in order that those who wished, might be baptised by immersion. The baptistery is still in use.

The church's organ was built by Norman and Beard with two manuals and a detached console and did cost £ 475 in 1905. In 1962 the console was moved to the North side of the church to make room for a communion table and chairs. Sadly in a way it is not in use anymore. The costs of repair would be unjustifiably high. Music is made by other means nowadays.

Today the church is a listed building, its stark structure somehow symbolising the no nonsense and back to the roots attitude of the reformation. At the back is a smallish graveyard, which, because of lack of space, is hardly ever used for actual burials. There is however a garden of remembrance where ashes of loved ones can be interred.



In 1973 the Presbyterian Church joined with the Congregational Federation to form the United Reformed Church. The Sawbridgeworth Church however, along with many others in the land, decided to remain independent. That decision, talked through and decided upon by the entire congregation was reached after lengthy discussions organised and steered by Edward Guest, the minister at the time. Guest served from 1956 until 1974, when he left to become general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches.

The Church does not have a collection. It is felt that this would needlessly interrupt services. There are however collection boxes in the church, there is personal giving and occasionally there is fund raising for specific purposes. Originally 10%, but nowadays 12.5% of church income is devoted to missionary work.

Of the more recent ministers Alan Taylor, who served from 1988 until 1997 went on to serve as pastor in Manningtree. Peter Sampson, who served from 2001 until 2008, is remembered for his pastoral care and for much needed refurbishment of the church. Peter already lived locally and was a member of the congregation when he took over.

Gary Hanson took over as minister in 2008. He had previously served in Bangladesh and South London. His informal, open and dedicated approach is appreciated by many. Church activities include such things as a Sunday service in the Hailey Centre, the 'Make Lunch' initiative offering food to those who need it, carol services, and a youth club with two 'zones', for older and younger kids respectively. The latter is of course a continuation of many differently named youth related efforts over the past 80 years or so. There is also the Open Door, started in the early 80s by Sylvia Taylor, wife of the minister then. Along with a number of other local women she started a sort of 'mums and toddlers club' where children can be looked after, parents can gather for a coffee and where advice is available for people in need of it. The Open Door still thrives.



Today the Congregational Evangelical Church Sawbridgeworth flourishes as never before. Attendance at Sunday services regularly tops 150. As we have indicated before, the people who worship there come from a variety of Christian traditions. Some of them are occasionally described as ‘happy clappy’. Gary Hanson when confronted with that characterisation answers ‘what’s wrong with that, if you have a message of joy there is nothing wrong with showing that to the world’.



Information for this article was drawn from a 1963 publication marking the centenary of the new building, from ‘the Story of Sawbridgeworth’ and from conversations with Dian Sapsford, Paul Stevenson, Gary Hanson and Chris Catling. Contributions to and help with this continuing History of High Wych are (is) always welcome. Please get in touch. Contact me at theo@vanderbilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468