

# History



Part of the frontage of the Church, between the entrance to the courtyard and the front doors of the Church itself.

**Stoneleigh Methodist Church** can surely trace its origins to the stirring of Methodist activity in the area in the 1930's when there was a network of roads, even before the houses appeared. It was then that the Rev Thomas Martin of Raynes Park spent much time cycling around the locality in an effort to find a site suitable for a Methodist Church.

It was in the early months of 1936 that a small group of dedicated Methodists began to share fellowship in their homes, and to think of the time when they might have a church of their own instead of having to walk to Worcester Park or elsewhere for a service. The Stoneleigh Fellowship commenced to meet soon after in a room hired from the local Council School, and friendships developed to such an extent that in December they formed a **Building Committee** to plan a church. From that time work steadily progressed until the Fellowship met as a Methodist Society for the first time in corporate worship on Whit Sunday, 1937, in the Stoneleigh West School; the service was led by the Rev Wilfred Hannam, BD, Superintendent Minister of the Upper Tooting Circuit.

A Sunday School was begun in the same premises in September 1937; a Wesley Guild followed shortly after, and its meetings and rambles enabled the members of this new church family to get to know one another. Meanwhile, the acquisition of a site for a church building had been made possible, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1937 became a very special occasion in the history of our Church with the ceremony of the laying of the Foundation Stone of the new building, which became known as 'The Church on the Hill'. The stone was laid by Miss Ruth Holloway on behalf of her Grandmother and, as friend Jack Garner recorded later, "those of us who had fostered the scheme from the start felt a deep thankfulness to God in our hearts". The building work proceeded with enthusiasm and the new structure, which was both church and hall, was officially opened with joy on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1938. The dedicatory sermon was preached by the Rev Ensor Walters, the Secretary of the London Mission.

Membership of the Church steadily developed in those early years, and the records show 76 in December 1937, and 101 a year later. Despite wartime difficulties, with January 1941 recording 24 evacuated and others in the Services, the membership continued to increase; it reached 135 by September 1945, when hostilities ceased.

The Women's Fellowship was formed early in March 1938, together with a Thursday Evening Fellowship for Bible Study. The number in the Sunday School during May of that year was recorded as being 69; within twelve months this figure had doubled and it continued to increase. A choir was also formed in 1938 and a Leaders' Meeting in February 1939 recorded ten new members! A Choir Festival was held in May 1939, such was the talent and enthusiasm! A Brownie Pack was begun in February 1938 with 23 members, and there was a Cub Pack with 12; and these units are still as lively as ever!

During the period 1940 to 1950, Stoneleigh Methodist Church became an active Christian Youth Centre with over 600 young people regularly attending a variety of weekday meetings on the premises, including Young Christian Citizens, Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Brownies, Youth Club, Badminton, etc.

For eight years the Society had no resident minister; the work at Stoneleigh was under the pastoral care of the Rev Edwin Nodder of Martin Way and Leslie Craif from Raynes Park Churches. When the Rev G R Gostelow followed in 1946, the premises seemed full to overflowing, with the uniting of families disjointed by the war. By the end of 1946 the need for more accommodation for the ever increasing uniformed and youth organisations became very urgent, but an extension to the Church Hall was not approved. Eventually, after much pressure by Mr Gostelow, permission was obtained to erect a hut on the plot of land behind the church and, despite various problems from local and other authorities, the Youth Hut was duly completed and opened on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1948 by Mr Leslie Wade, Senior Circuit Steward, to the relief and thankfulness of the membership.

It was at this stage in 1949 that the Methodist Conference appointed the Rev Reginald Walker to take charge and, with a manse then available, things really started to move!

There was a fairly large plot of land at the rear and side of the original building, and this had been let out as allotments as part of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign during the war; it was said that these allotments produced vegetables in abundance and, according to a Trustee of the 1949/50 vintage, the plot was called 'The Holy Ground'.

For some time after the war ended all building work required Government licence, and often this was difficult to obtain. However, pressure of the right variety soon produced a building licence, and planning went ahead immediately for a building designed as a church. Concerted efforts by many culminated in the laying of the Foundation Stone by Mr & Mrs T J Moulin on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1954, and the new church was opened with great joy and thankfulness on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1955 by Mrs Margaret Walker (see pictures on our images gallery).



The ministry of the Rev Reg Walker was uplifting, and during his all-too-short stay he was instrumental in bringing several members of the church into the service of the Methodist Ministry, and we were delighted to have some of these ministers join in the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1987. Then followed the Rev Austin Rees, a minister with great interest in the cause of youth; during his ministry the Young Wives' Club was formed and developed.

The 1950's were years of growth, and the local community really felt the effect of the Methodist Church, calls for outreach demanded an assessment of time and talent of the membership, which a Christian Stewardship Campaign early in 1960 duly revealed; this was marshalled under the enthusiastic guidance of the Rev Kenneth Richardson, with his emphasis on the Healing Spirit of God in the community.

Expansion and outreach continued during the 1960's; the uniformed organisations and youth club were full, with waiting lists, and the Junior Church had classes meeting in local homes as all rooms in the building were already occupied on Sundays. The Community Roll stood at about 1,500.

At about this time the Rev Cecil Smith had arrived from Richmond College as a probationer and, under the tutorship of that saintly preacher, the Rev Arthur Cannon, the Church enjoyed a period of education in leadership in the true Wesley fashion which will long be remembered.

Meanwhile, the need for more accommodation became even more urgent; eventually the Trust decided in 1967/68 to build on the remaining area of the plot, and to join the Church and the Hall with a room to be used in support of organisations and the local community. An architect, Mr Denis Hull, designed the 'Link Room' with true Christian inspiration, and to him we will be ever thankful.

The early 1970's saw the many efforts to provide the funds needed to build the new accommodation, and by this time the extension scheme had the enthusiastic support of the Rev Donald Knighton and his wife Anne.

The Foundation Stone was laid on 10th September 1972 by our oldest, well loved,

and most generous member Mrs Juliet Miller. The subsequent building work was watched with keenest interest and it was a day of great rejoicing on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1973 when the Link Room was dedicated by the President Designate of the Methodist Conference, the Rev Donald R Lee, and opened by the Trust Secretary Wg Cdr Ronald Fiddick.

This new room provided an ideal means for developing community participation on Church premises, and brought many people into contact with the Church. These included those associated with the Playgroup, the Toddler's Club through to the Townswomen's Guild, and the Luncheon Club for the more elderly of the locality; there was thus opportunity for closer contact, or just thankful fellowship as needed. The Link Room indeed linked an ever-increasing Church Family and brought a new meaning to Christian Fellowship.

The later years of the 1970's were marked by the very active participation of the many teenagers who had grown up within the Church. They, with their friends, in the spirit of the time, united to make their own music, often with a spiritual flavour. Fortunately an adult singer, Mr David Smith of the English National Opera Company, encouraged their efforts to such an extent that they sang as a choir in many of our services, and also at the Methodist Conference in 1979, and at many other places. As the 1970s ended this choir, known as 'Thanks', brought the Church into the 80s with their emblem 'Let us Give Thanks' proudly displayed for all to see, and very much with the sentiment which this story opened. Long may it continue!

In the ensuing years the Rev John Rowland encouraged these young people, and there were many who took their talents through various training colleges and other establishments into the wider world strengthened, we are sure, by the close fellowship of 'Thanks'. John went all too soon to Cornwall, leaving us with the flavour of his several pilgrimages to the Taize Community; those haunting chants and refrains will long remain to remind us of his interest and care in Stoneleigh.

For the Golden Jubilee year the theme of the Church was 'Caring', and during 1985 the Rev Robert Teasdale brought the whole membership together in a 'Caring and Sharing' weekend of special fellowship, led by the friends of the Lay Witness Movement under Tom and Margaret Moyle, which opened new channels of Christian Service to the whole community. In particular, the setting up of the Stoneleigh Care Scheme on the Church premises was achieved, offering a listening ear and helping hand to all in need throughout the week in an ecumenical effort of a truly practical nature in which the local churches give their most willing support.

***The Story continues . . . . . Let us Give Thanks . . .***

*Personal accounts submitted for the Church's 60th Anniversary are reproduced in the sub-menus to this history overview.*

Historical records of the Church between 1937 and 1988 are stored in the Surrey

History centre.