

SUTTON PARK CIRCUIT 1899-1999

A PERSONAL VIEW

This is not an academic history; it is a very personal view of events and lifestyles in the circuit since 1899. The main sources of reference have been the minutes of meetings preserved in the archives stored in the Public Library in Sutton Coldfield. I have to thank many individuals for their personal memories and for the carefully preserved memorabilia which have been made available to me.

The growth of the circuit- from 298 members in 1899 to a maximum of 1896 in 1967- has matched the growth of the Birmingham suburbs of Stockland Green and Erdington and the town of Sutton Coldfield. It has also been altered by the re-arrangement of other circuits and now stretches from the inner city to rural Warwickshire.

Innumerable lay people, and 111 ministers have served the circuit and inspired its growth. I have avoided the mention of names (except in the list of ministers) for those who played minor parts in church and circuit life were and are as important as those whose names appear frequently in minutes. Nor have I named the generous benefactors whose donations of land and money in the first half of the century made the rapid establishment of churches possible; the scale of their giving has since been unmatched, but their generosity was undoubtedly equalled appropriately by many less fortunate members.

There are omissions and no doubt errors, but this is not the definitive work on the subject; some future historian will be writing that!.

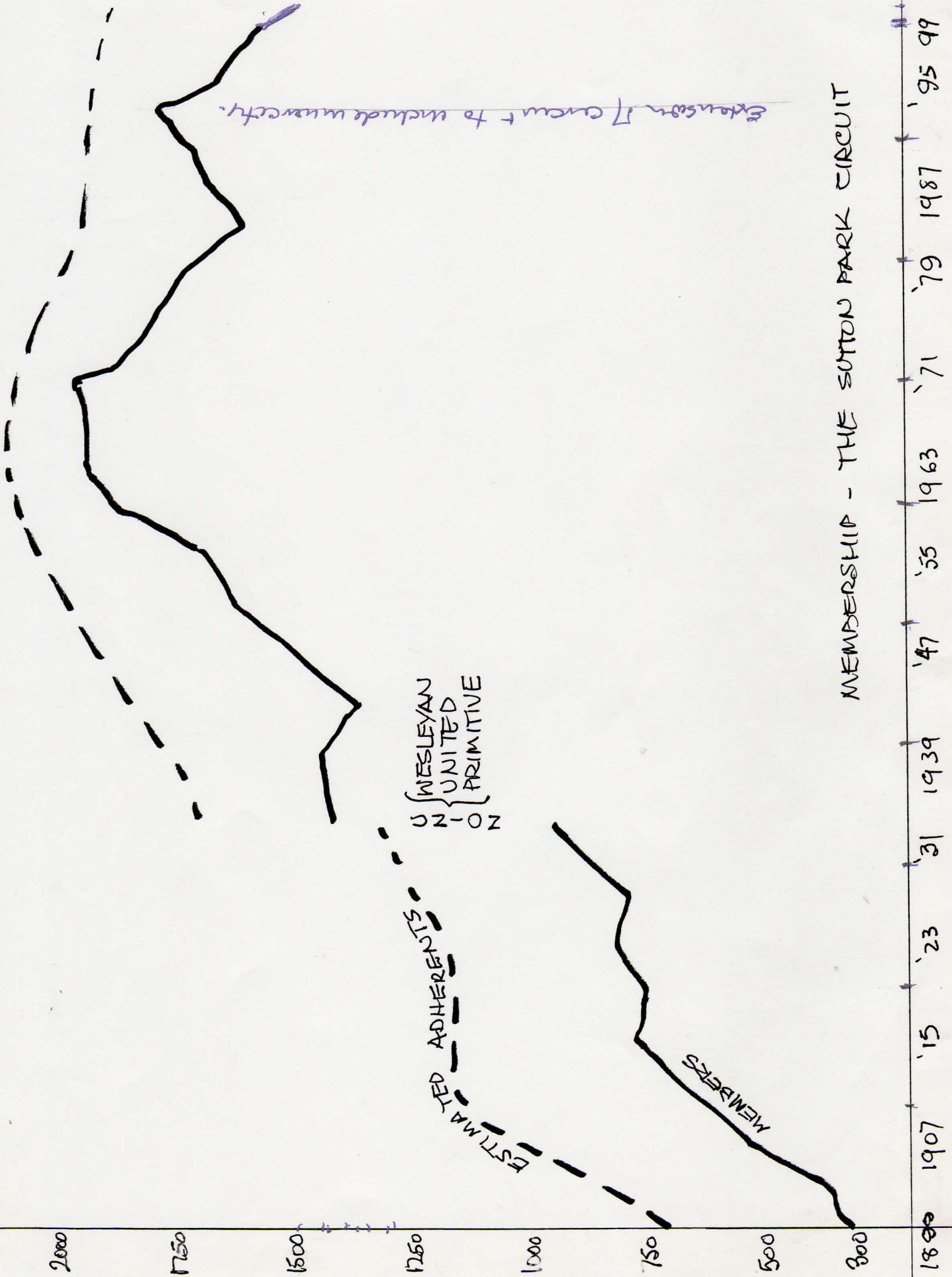
Alfred Hancox.

Alfred Hancox

I have found that many Methodists have only a very general idea of how a circuit is organised. If you are knowledgeable in these matters, you will therefore forgive the sometimes simple explanations you will find in the text.

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THE SUTTON PARK CIRCUIT
BIRMINGHAM DISTRICT
1899-1999

The Aston Park Circuit met on March 20th 1899 to pass a resolution; "that the circuit be divided at the next Conference as follows:- The Aston Park Circuit shall comprise

- Lichfield Road
- Birchfields
- Perry Barr
- Ten Arches Mission
- Water Orton

The Sutton Park Circuit shall comprise

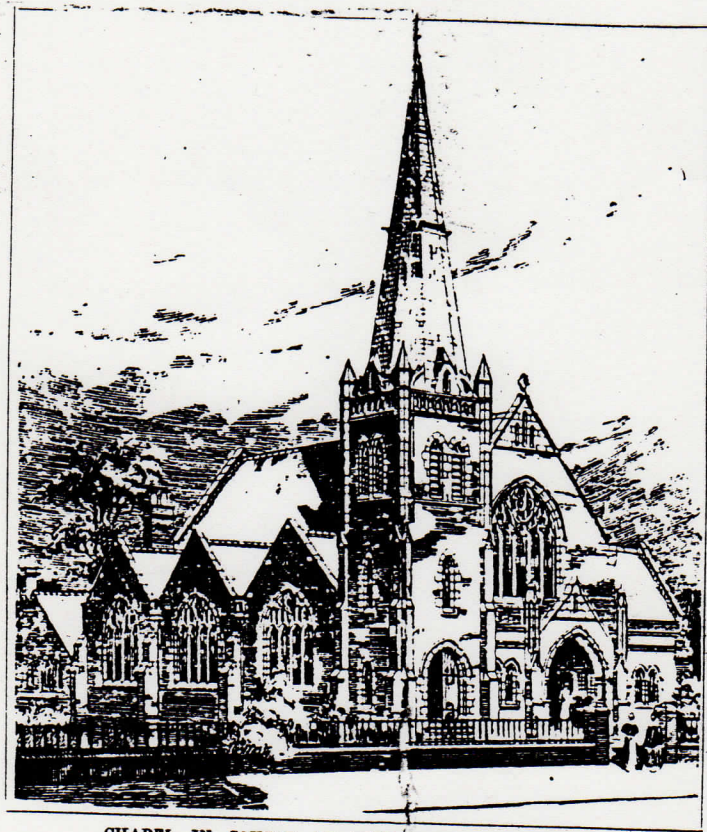
- Erdington
- Sutton Coldfield
- Princess Alice Orphanage
- Stockland Green
- Tyburn
- Curdworth

and the Birmingham Mission Circuit shall take responsibility for

- Nechells Park Road
- Kingsbury
- Whitacre
- Bodmoor Heath

A preliminary meeting of the new circuit was held on July 19th at which some circuit officers were appointed. Then on September 18th, 1899 there was a final meeting of the "old" Aston Park circuit at which the circuit stewards were presented with their photographs "framed in gold", a token of their part in the amicable division of the circuit. The meeting then separated, the circuits proceeding to their own business. The Reverend W.R.Dent presided as superintendent of the Sutton Park meeting, noting an initial membership of 298. There were two ministers, the superintendent having Erdington as his main church, and the Rev. G.J.Ayre at Sutton.

Within a year expansion was on the way. A syndicate at Four Oaks had acquired a site for a church and the Society at Maney Institute had applied to join the circuit and had been accepted into the Methodist Connexion. The Institute was located at the corner of Maney Hill Road and the Birmingham Road; but unfortunately within a few years congregations had declined so far that local preachers



CHAPEL IN COURSE OF ERECTION AT ERDINGTON.

1901 The building stopped at the tower
The steeple was not proceeded with.

Four Oaks New Wesleyan Church

(OPPOSITE FOUR OAKS STATION)

The ...
Ceremony
of Laying



FOUNDATION STONES

WILL TAKE PLACE

On WEDNESDAY, October 22nd, 1902, at Four o'clock p.m.,

BY THE FOLLOWING:

MRS. GRANVILLE S. BUCKLER.

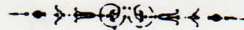
C. H. BRAMPTON, ESQ. SOLOMON JEVONS, ESQ.

G. KETTLEWELL, ESQ. G. E. LOWE, ESQ.

J. RUSHBROOKE, ESQ.

Rev. Dr. THOMAS ALLEN (*Chairman of District*), Rev. C. A. COLLINGWOOD, Rev. FRANK COX,
Rev. A. J. T. Le GROS, Rev. W. H. BOOTH, Rev. R. S. ARMSBY, B.A., G. SQUIRES, ESQ.,

AND OTHERS WILL TAKE PART IN THE PROCEEDINGS



PUBLIC MEETING

In BOYS' SCHOOL ROOM, MERE GREEN, at Seven o'clock p.m.

CHAIRMAN: EBENEZER PARKES, Esq., M.P.

SELECTIONS of MUSIC by CHOIR from PRINCESS ALICE ORPHANAGE.

OFFERTORIES FOR BUILDING FUND.

were faced with less than six people at times and the Institute was closed as a chapel. The Baptist church later used the building as a Sunday school. Mere Green and Roughley were areas considered for new societies but no openings were found at Mere Green while Roughley "was being worked by Baptists". In 1899 the oldest building to be part of the new circuit was the chapel at Curdworth, built in 1828. This society was very much in contrast with the suburban churches in the rest of the circuit at the time. Its income in 1909 was two pounds and ten shillings; it was lit by oil lamps until 1933. There was a Sunday school and a Bright Hour in the 1920's but dwindling congregations led to closure in 1940, after which the building was let for wartime storage until 1948. In 1948 the Crusader organisation opened a Sunday school which prospered for a few years, and evening services were held. In 1958 the trustees decided that the cost of urgent repairs was not justified and the building was sold to the Drainage Board for fifty pounds.

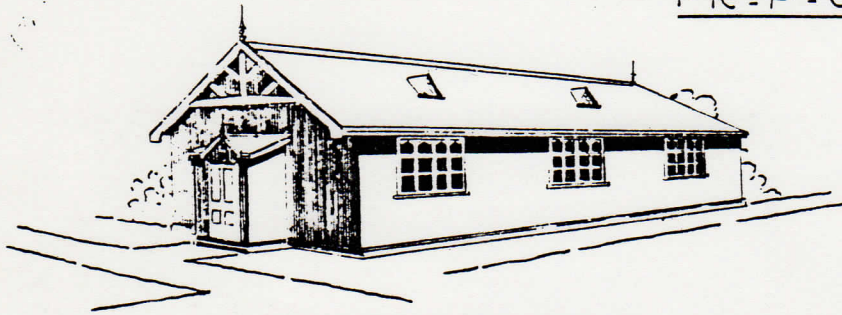
The beautiful chapel at Princess Alice Orphanage in Chester Road remained on the plan for many years; besides evening services daily prayers were the norm for children and staff. Changes in policy by the N.C.H.O. led to the children being taken to other churches by their housemothers and the chapel became little used. A disastrous fire in the 1980's reduced the building to rubble and it was not rebuilt.

The first decade saw major building programmes in the circuit. At Station Road Erdington a new church was built on ground in front of the existing church with seating for 650. This was no indication of membership; it was 140 at the time. At the opening in 1902 the President of Conference preached the sermon. The old buildings were converted into a hall and classrooms. In 1905 the prospect of local housing growth at Tyburn led to the replacement of the existing chapel (1864) with a new building to serve the growing village community.

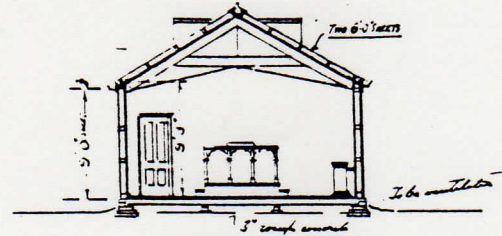
At Four Oaks the rural lanes between Sutton and Mere Green and beyond were being rebuilt as roads and houses began to line them. The site for the imposing building planned at the corner of Lichfield Road and Walsall Road was thought to be ideal. Although the Gothic style church was opened in 1903, it was not finished until the tower was completed in 1910. By then classrooms, a church parlour and a caretakers cottage had been added. On an adjacent site a manse, the gift of a local member, was built for the first

PROPOSED MISSION ROOM.

SCALE - 1/8" TO FOOT.



PERSPECTIVE VIEW.



SECTION A-A.

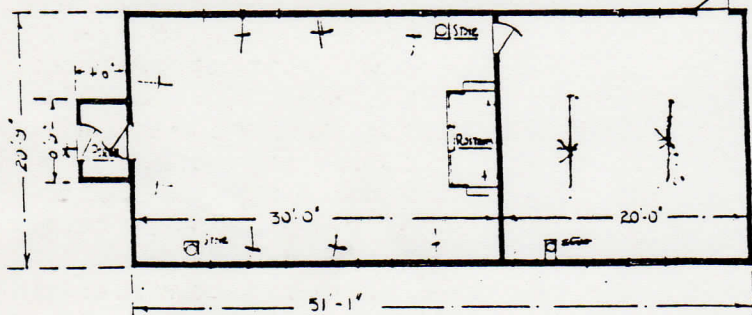
ERDINGTON URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL.
SURVEYOR'S OFFICE,

Received 19th July
and Registered 21st July.

J. HARRISON & Co. No. 1115
DENMARK RD LONDON S.E.
DRAWING NO 678
J B 3 06

ERDINGTON URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL.
NOTE.—These Plans are approved
subject to all the stipulations
contained in the Bye Laws
being complied with.

31st Aug. 1908
Chairman.
Surveyor.



PLAN.

Tube built of
all brick

BROMFORD WESLEYAN MISSION CHURCH.

BUILDING ACCOUNT.

	£	s	d
Cost of Land	28	12	0
Cost of Iron Building	140	0	0
Cost of Foundations and Brick Erections	105	7	3
Cost of Stoves	10	5	3
Cost of Chairs	8	4	5
Cost of Iron Railings	7	12	6
Sundries	22	12	10
Estimated cost of gifts in kind such as bricks, gasfittings, architect's and solicitor's fees, &c.	34	19	0
	<u>£357</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>3</u>

	£	s	d
Donations	164	18	6
Lectures, Services, &c.	98	16	0
Estimated value of gifts in kind	34	19	0
11/2/08. Special Donations per Mr. Harbord	35	0	8
June 13 to Feb. 11, 1909, ditto	23	19	1
	<u>£357</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>3</u>

The original account of which this is a summary was audited and found correct by the
Rev. C. T. HORNE and Messrs. G. E. LOWE, J.P., and C. T. AVERY.

full time minister who arrived in 1909. The buildings were Listed as of historical or architectural interest in 1976.

The small chapel at Stockland Green (in Stockland Road) seated about 70 people and had been purchased by Wesleyans in 1887, but the development of the area into a suburb of Birmingham led to ambitious plans for a new church. After a two year search a site was obtained fronting Slade Road. Despite financial difficulties resolved as usual at the time by generous gifts from members of other churches in the circuit, the church was opened in 1907 at a cost of 1733-15-6d. The stonelaying ceremony itself resulted in a collection of over £200 pounds, a large sum bearing in mind that the stipend of a minister was about £180 pounds at the time. As usual the grants from the Chapel Department were dependent on the raising of local funds to match, so besides the gifts a series of fund raising events ensued. The church was the responsibility of a succession of retired ministers until the first full time minister was appointed in 1925.

Bromford and Boldmere were also areas considered by the circuit stewards in the first decade of the century. At Bromford services were held in a cottage until the purchase of an "Iron Room" was proposed. This was a corrugated iron building 50 feet by 20 feet which was installed on a site in Wheelwright Road, Erdington in 1906. It was moved in 1915, but not far- the local authority required some of the site for road widening. But at Boldmere no action was taken at the time or until forty years later.

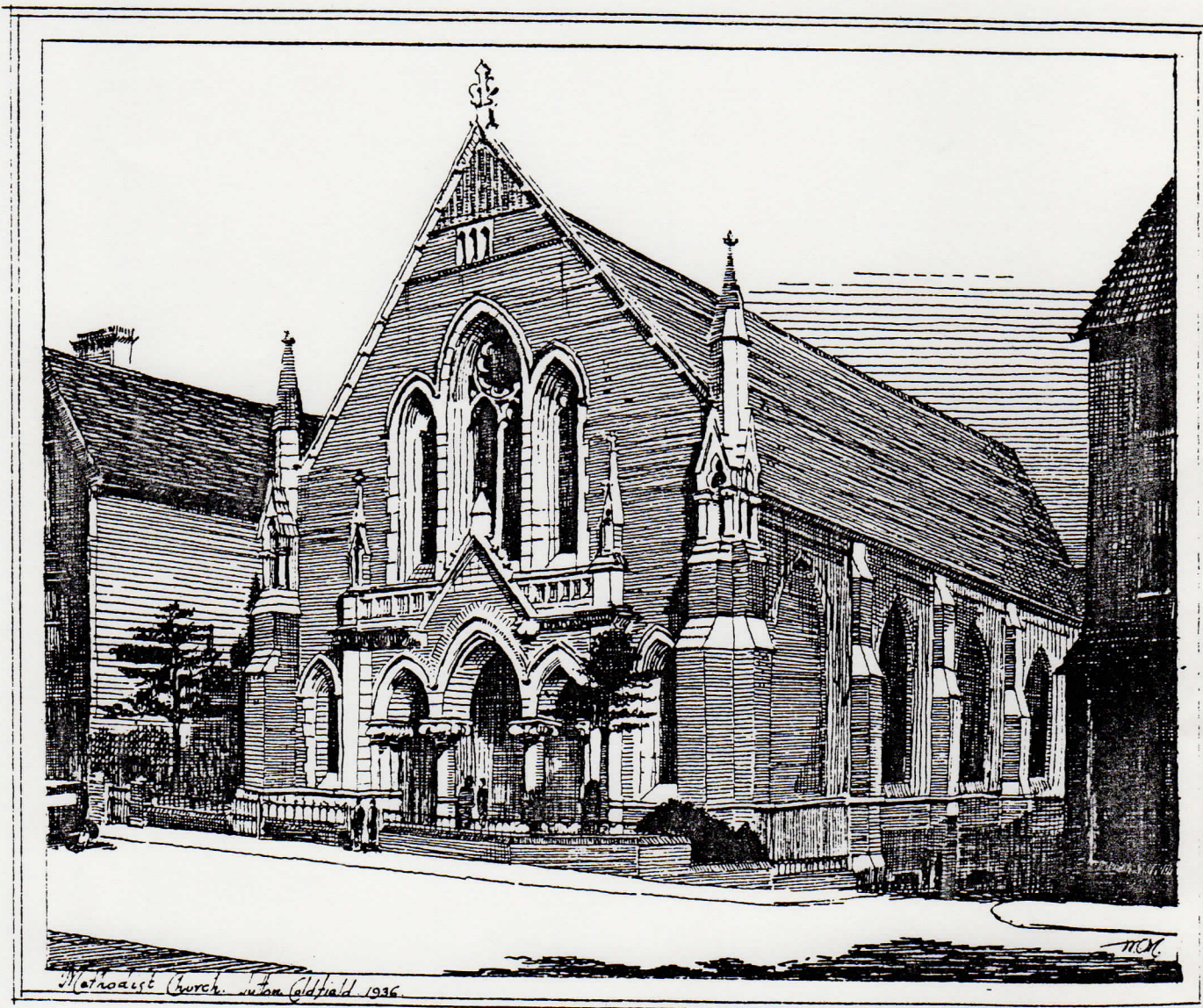
At Streetly early in 1909 a site for a church was obtained at the junction of Thornhill Road and Hardwick Road. Trustees were appointed and eventually the lowest builder's tender was approved at £1195 pounds plus £55 pounds for a frontage of Chipping Campden stone. Within a year the new church was opened on Thursday January 20th 1910. The secretary of the trustees left an unusually detailed account of the subsequent expenditure which brought the final bill to over £2100 pounds. For instance, a piano was required (not more than 20 guineas to be spent); later a harmonium for 40 guineas. Chairs were ordered, 230 at four shillings each, and then proved to be an embarrassment for within months 30 chairs were offered to Four Oaks, only to be refused. Erdington was tried but a chapel at Aldridge bought the chairs at a reasonable price of 3/6d each. 150 hymn books were ordered and 12 Bibles at 1/3d each. Seats in the church were for rent at 2/- per annum, with 30 places free. There was a ballot to allocate the rented seats, but by 1920 all seats were free; most churches had abandoned renting seats

by then. A central feature of Streetly church is the painting "Christ blessing the children" a valued gift in 1920. The final cost of the building and its furnishing was double the original estimate; an example of the common experience in new church commissioning then- and even today.

A site at Walmley at the junction of Eachelhurst Road and Walmley Ash Road was purchased in 1924, but it was never developed by the circuit. After use as allotments during the second world war, part of the land was taken for road widening and the remainder judged to be too small for a church building, so the land was sold in 1962. In view of the later development of Walmley in the 80's it is strange that the circuit took no steps to develop a Methodist presence there, although it was briefly considered in the 70's.

An ambitious programme of new buildings in 1932 at Stockland Green resulted in the opening of the third church to be built on that site. While retaining the Slade Road frontage a new church seating about 500 was built, and conversion of the existing accommodation provided three halls with ancilliary offices. This was the last building on this scale in the circuit. The President of Conference, the Rev. Maldwyn Hughes, preached the dedicatory sermon. While building was in progress the Sunday school anniversary was held in the nearby Star cinema.

Schoolrooms were being enlarged or rebuilt at several churches between the wars. Stockland Green and Tyburn provided new youth accommodation in 1931 and 1932. At Sutton Coldfield the church on the Parade was experiencing mounting pressure on its limited site, and trustees were grateful for the gift of land in South Parade which enabled them to build a new Sunday school. Each department of the school had its own room and there was a hall for joint worship and other activities. At the time the suite of rooms was judged to be the finest in Methodism and parties from other circuits came to inspect them. The original buildings were erected on three sides of a courtyard which during the war was roofed and for some years was taken over as a British Restaurant by the Local Authority, providing low cost meals to supplement rationing. The metal trays used in the restaurant were purchased when it closed and, suitably refurbished, are still in use today. Modernisation in the last twenty years has enabled these rooms to be of considerable value to the youth organisations and clubs and societies in the community which keep the buildings fully occupied.



Sutton Coldfield church in the Parade
1888-1936. The building became a Public
Library, then a Drop-in Centre. later
demolished.

In 1933 Kingsbury and Bodymoor Heath were transferred to the circuit and Witton joined from the Aston Park circuit. There had been a chapel in the small village at Bodymoor Heath since 1844; the trustees first action on joining their new circuit was to install electric light.

The union of Primitive, United and Wesleyan Methodists in 1933 was achieved locally without undue difficulty, although elsewhere was the cause of some friction. The Primitive Methodist church in High Street, Erdington, and the United Methodist church in Gravelly Hill (both since demolished) joined the circuit formally at a grand celebration at Stockland Green church, bringing the circuit membership to 1003. There were of course many "adherents" to the societies which more than doubled their congregations. The Gravelly Hill church at the junction of Kingsbury Road and Gravelly Hill was a gothic building which had had only one minister in 30 years, and was known locally as the Hart Memorial after its long connections with a family of that name. Its links with the United Church nationally had been very few, so it was indeed a change for the society to become a part of a formerly Wesleyan circuit. The Primitive church in Erdington was a thriving and well-established church which continued to prosper for the next thirty years in the circuit, until a re-organisation led to its sale.

At Sutton Coldfield, the Sunday school was now separated from the church by a five minute walk and after ten years of this split site the trustees were favourably disposed to consider building a new church in South Parade. The offer from the Borough Council to purchase the Parade church for use as a public library was therefore welcome.

After many visits to the Mayor's office by the minister and the treasurer, a sum was agreed by the Council. The minister was later congratulated on the "sagacious handling" of the negotiations. The design of the new church was a combination of two architects' proposals; this led to a resolution when the work was under way "that only one architect shall give instructions to the builders". The seating capacity of the church showed a marked difference from the ambitious plans of thirty years previously. No longer were four or five hundred seats considered; in line with the slow reduction in church-going habits the seating was set at 250. The gothic tradition was also discarded, for the brick building with a square tower followed contemporary simple lines, though inside the familiar nave and chancel were retained. The church was opened in 1936 but strangely

no provision was made for undercover access to the adjacent Sunday school building until 1980.

During the second world war church premises had varied uses besides their normal functions. Initially church stewards were faced with the problems of blacking out large church windows or restricting worship to daylight hours. Bromford was host to a Home Guard unit, services having been suspended in 1940. Air raid damage occurred at Stockland Green, High Street Erdington and Bodymoor Heath; much of this was not properly repaired until well after the war. Some churches opened their halls to refugees from the bombing; Four Oaks for instance, gave shelter to homeless people from Coventry after the blitz on that city, and parties from Birmingham's inner city enjoyed weekend rests at Curdworth. Bromford, like South Parade, housed a British Restaurant in the later years. Mid-week meetings languished due to the absence of the younger members in the Forces or away on war work, while the voluntary services occupied the older members. In some cases services were held only once on a Sunday, often in the afternoon, as the Home Guard and other civilian services including the Air Training Corps and other youth organisations regularly met on Sunday mornings for exercises or training. Towards the end of the war, some degree of normality returned, but in many cases this was only achieved well after 1945. In 1948, not only food was still rationed, but many essential goods were in short supply; an application for permission to purchase a small quantity of timber for a church repair was refused by the local Timber Controller.

Soon, however the spirit of expansion returned. At Gravelly Hill a plot of land adjacent to the church was purchased with a view to building a Sunday school there when circumstances permitted. At Boldmere in 1948 the Brotherhood Society in Boldmere Road approached the circuit to establish a Methodist cause ; this was welcomed, a trust formed, and services commenced in the existing building, followed by a Sunday school in 1952. Some members from other churches, particularly South Parade, joined the new church.

Post-war building programmes in the circuit area included the prospect of a large number of houses at Falcon Lodge. A committee was formed to negotiate a site for a church, and as the houses were occupied South Parade ran a bus service to bring children to Sunday school there. The Local Authority built a community hall which was at first used for services until with aid of generous gifts and

grants a Methodist Church was built and opened in 1960, to be followed by a church hall in 1964.

At Streetly, a group of enthusiasts started about this time to hold a Sunday school and some services in Bridle Lane, also near the site of a large housing programme. They used the huts belonging to the Walsall Council Holiday Scheme. This was so popular(though the huts could only be used out of the holiday season) that a site was acquired for a new church in Blackwood Road. By 1957 Blackwood was on the plan with temporary buildings and 95 scholars with 11 teachers in the Sunday school.

In 1962 the Gravelly Hill society built the Cedars Hall next to the church to provide modern accommodation for meetings and youth activities, and of course something that was becoming essential- a car park.

At Erdington the High Street church was situated in the middle of commercially valuable property. After a serious fire some years before, the Sunday school had been rebuilt but by 1964 falling numbers and rising costs had made economic maintenance difficult and the trustees began to look for another site. Their efforts were in vain, for no appropriate site was available anywhere near Erdington, and a proposal to merge the two Erdington churches on a new site failed for the same reason. So it was decided to build a new church on the existing Station Road site for both societies: the majority of the funds required to come from the sale of the High Street church. This church was closed in June 1969 and the two congregations temporarily suffered much disruption. The church life of the new society began in a number of locations while building proceeded; Princess Alice Orphanage (bus provided), Friendship Hall, the Congregational church and members' Homes. Their patience was rewarded when in 1972 the distinctive new church was opened, with its airy, square interior and the seats facing one corner diagonally towards the jewelled cross that is the focal point of worship.

Seven years before this the Birmingham Council were making plans to build houses for 20,000 people on the former Castle Bromwich Airfield. In keeping with the architectural fashion of the sixties most of the accommodation (mainly for people moved from the city areas being cleared of sub-standard housing) was to be in high rise tower blocks. Eventually the area would house more people than the population of Stratford Upon Avon at the time, so there were sites allocated for community amenities.

Anglicans and Methodists saw an opportunity for an ecumenical development. It was reported that the Bishop of Birmingham and the Chairman of the Methodist District "greeted the proposals with joy". Anglicans were to build the church, and Methodists the hall and offices. Two manses were to be provided for the Vicar and the Minister. The circuit took up the venture with initial enthusiasm; grants from the Chapel Department and a large grant from the J.Arthur Rank Trust found the majority of the money required to build the hall. The circuit's share of fund raising included the sale of 50p "bonds". One steward photographed the estate as it was built and toured the circuit with a slide show to encourage interest. The Partnership was established in 1967 and by 1969 the minister had moved into his manse.

The church- St Cuthberts- was dedicated in 1973 but sadly the glorious venture soon began to founder. During the short life of the partnership two Anglican vicars, a curate, and three Methodist ministers strove to cope with personality strains and clashes of method and procedure. The Sharing Agreement itself- a legal document dated the 2nd of May 1973 - was several years in the making before the solicitors involved on both sides allowed the trustees and the parish councillors to sign it. All this despite the existence of many similar but successful schemes in other parts of the country.

In January 1978, after eleven years of contention a crucial circuit meeting took place. The current vicar and minister spoke at length and seven possible courses of action were considered. Finally and reluctantly the vicar concluded that the partnership should be terminated; the Methodist minister agreed, for after a decade there were only seven Methodist members, none of whom lived on the estate. The Regional Sponsoring Body supported the decision and the minister was withdrawn in September 1978. It must not be thought that insufficient efforts were made during the life of the project by both sides to improve the situation; endless meetings between Bishops, Chairmen, Superintendents and circuit stewards failed to overcome the initial intransigence of the persons involved which cast a shadow over the life of the partnership and proved in the end, despite changes in vicars and ministers, to allow for the growth of insuperable problems. It is undeniable that the Methodist ministers (and their wives) felt isolated and often in some despair in their pleasant manse in the midst of the huge estate, despite the warm support of the circuit and their colleagues. The partnership ended, at least in the Methodist view, with very mixed feelings and some relief.

Twenty years later, the majority of the tower blocks were demolished as a housing association began to build in their place a more environmentally friendly housing complex. St Cuthberts remains- an Anglican church.

At Gravelly Hill and Bromford declining membership and mounting maintenance costs led to a District Commission being appointed to examine the situation in 1972. Six months later another ecumenical experiment was under way, Anglicans and Methodists having agreed to bring together the membership of Bromford, Gravelly Hill and St Chads to worship in a new church on the St Chad's site. At the time the Gravelly Hill church was situated on the A 38 trunk road and the prospect of a lucrative sale of the site to a petrol company implied plenty of capital for the new church. Unfortunately within a few weeks the Highways Authority had designated the road as a B road and the best sale that could be obtained after that was to a housing company at half the previous expected price. In the interim the three congregations joined in worship at the three sites in turn. The "Iron Room" at Bromford was sold in 1975 and the Gravelly Hill church demolished in 1976. The new building at St Chads was opened in 1978 and this time the "experiment" succeeded, the Vicar taking services in other churches in the circuit as a member of staff. About 15 members "ceased to meet" as a result of the move, but this was not unexpected

Meanwhile Blackwood had established its society in a new church opened in 1965, and Falcon Lodge had added a new hall in 1967. Plans for a new church on the Boldmere Site were approved in 1970. Built behind the existing buildings in Boldmere Road, it was opened and dedicated in 1972.

At Erdington in 1972 the congregation looked forward to a new era in their complex of modern buildings, but within a few years the saga of the Erdington roof began. The church had a flat roof and it leaked. As the years of temporary and unsuccessful repairs went by, the costs of the eventual solution rose alarmingly. Negotiations with insurers and architects dragged on and contractors went bankrupt until finally a new pitched aluminium roof was installed in 1988. It was in 1990, 18 years after the opening of the church, that this long standing item was removed from the circuit property meeting agenda.

Kingstanding church in Kings Road was transferred to the Sutton Park circuit in 1985 from the Asbury circuit, but within three years the need for

widespread repairs was such that alternatives were considered for the site - chiefly a rebuilding programme in conjunction with the release of land for housing. This was not found to be feasible; the solution was partial demolition with rebuilding incorporating new plumbing and wiring. By 1991 this had been accomplished.

At Kingsbury a surveyors report in 1987 revealed such serious defects in the church fabric that demolition was the only economic answer. With the sale of a portion of land it was possible to build a dual purpose hall and rooms to serve as a church and meeting place. Opened in 1989, the building has proved its value having been the venue for many conferences and study days on a circuit basis, besides its weekly role as a fine church for the ever growing population of Kingsbury.

A re-organisation of the city circuits in Birmingham following the closure of the Central Hall led to the addition of Nechells Park Road church and Lichfield Road Aston church to the circuit in 1988. This brought the number of churches in the circuit to 15, ranging from inner city churches to rural and suburban churches with a diversity of memberships from 10 at Bodymoor Heath to 323 at Sutton Coldfield. And following a direction of Conference, talks were held in the Midland region in the 1980's with the United Reformed Church to explore the possibilities of union. One result was the experimental inclusion of Bloomsbury U.R. church in the circuit for several years. As the talks were discontinued in 1997 the Methodist involvement with Bloomsbury ceased in 1998.

Throughout the latter part of the century all the circuit churches improved their property through modernisation schemes. Generous grants from local charities often made this possible, especially where it could be shown that the community at large would benefit from the improvements through the use of up-to-date facilities. There were other factors which prompted improvements; the growing awareness of the needs of the handicapped made easier access to buildings an important requirement, and Health and Safety Acts required radical changes in kitchens.

The audibility of preachers and others in our churches had been questioned throughout the century. Eventually this led, when the technology became available, to the introduction of sound systems in churches, not always with great success. At one church the members saw five different systems follow each other with varying results, mainly due to the difficulty of pleasing people with different hearing standards, and coping with buildings

having peculiar resonance effects. In the 70's the installation of induction loops made life easier for those with hearing aids. providing they could adjust their aids to the system. Ministers soon got used to using microphones, and the use of radio microphones became common. The question of audibility has not, however, been totally resolved; there is a fine adjustment of sound output required to suit different speakers and not all stewards have the equipment to do this, or (if they have) are able to control it adequately. Complaints will no doubt continue to be part of the church steward's burden.

Finally, throughout this saga of building and re-building, of nine churches which have disappeared and fifteen which remain, there is a host of men and women whose devoted work has accomplished it all. The Property Stewards (formerly Chapel stewards) have laboured on behalf of their congregations for 100 years and continue to do so. Often being a property steward has meant that there is manual work of all kinds to be done, sometimes at unsociable times. The quinquennial inspections now mandatory in Methodism have ensured higher standards, but the day-to-day maintenance of every church relies on those property stewards who willingly choose to do it, and without whom this story would have been very different.