

## A chapel by any other name...



It is not clear what this building in Chapel Lane, Milborne Port, should be called! It was sometimes referred to as a church, sometimes as a chapel, sometimes as a meeting house; its various past names included the words and phrases *Congregational*, *Presbyterian*, *Old or Independent Meeting House* and *United Reformed Church*. Whatever its moniker, the story behind its people, its location and its physical structure has a rich and varied history, both in its previous and present incarnations.

The history of what many Milborne Port residents know as the site of the Congregational Church was begun by Reverend William Hopkins after he was ejected from the Church of England and his role as the Vicar of Milborne Port in 1662 because he was considered to be a dissenter<sup>1</sup>, and by 1669 he had a congregation of 60 ‘hearers’ and was described as a Presbyterian<sup>2</sup>. Mrs Emma Pitman writes in her *Memorials of the Congregational Church, Milborne Port (1883)* that Hopkins was opposed to ringing the bells on the Sabbath and also tells of a plot to murder him, with the wrong person being killed and the murderer hanged. Hopkins conducted services from his own house in Church

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<sup>1</sup> Dissenters and non-conformists were critical of The Common Book of Prayer, finding it too constraining, restrictive and limiting, that it encouraged recanting without meaning and did not promote authentic engagement with ideas or with soul-searching. A Victorian analysis of the different terms for different types of dissenters can be found in Emma Pitman’s book, the full text of which can be found here:

[https://archive.org/stream/memorialscongre00pitmgoog/memorialscongre00pitmgoog\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/memorialscongre00pitmgoog/memorialscongre00pitmgoog_djvu.txt)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/presbyterian>

Street until the Conventicle Act<sup>3</sup> of 1664 made this illegal. According to tradition, the meetings then took place at Gospel Ash<sup>4</sup>, a place conveniently situated near the borders of the parish, making it possible to avoid the attentions



of one constable by moving into another's territory. Hopkins opened a school in order to support himself but following the Five Mile Act<sup>5</sup> of 1665, another piece of anti-puritan legislation, he was forced to close it.

Emma Pitman (who lived in the house called Stonegarth on South Street) also tells us that in the early 1700s, Reverend John Sprint, a Presbyterian, *enjoyed the liberty of the Toleration Act<sup>6</sup> of William III and was at liberty to preach either in his own house, or in a room, or 'meeting house', provided such buildings could be obtained, without fear of molestation. Soon after his settlement here, he licensed a room, belonging to one Mr Hallett, and afterwards occupied by Mr Brett, a hosier. It is stated that this room stood upon ground now in occupation of the writer's family<sup>7</sup>, as a garden. In later days, this room grew to be spoken of as 'The Old Meeting House' and was licensed as a preaching-room under that name. By the assistance of some friends, it was fitted up in a decent manner as a place for public worship... but was just a little old barn.'*

By the time of his death in 1717, he had established a thriving Presbyterian congregation (300 in 1718) and a grammar school.

Sprint was a very interesting character worth some attention. He was either well educated or self-educated; we know that he subscribed to publications such as *The History of England, during the reigns of the Royal House of Stuart* and

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<sup>3</sup> An Act of Parliament that forbade religious assemblies of more than five people other than immediate family outside the auspices of the Church of England and the rubrics of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/dec/09/milborne-port-somerset-gospel-ash>

<sup>5</sup> It sought to enforce conformity to the established Church of England and to expel any who did not conform. It forbade clergymen from living within five miles (8 km) of a parish from which they had been expelled, unless they swore an oath never to resist the king or attempt to alter the government of Church or State. The latter involved swearing to obey the 1662 prayer book. Thousands of ministers were deprived of a living under this act.

<sup>6</sup> The Act of Toleration, 1689.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Pitman, writing in 1883, says that this was part of her garden and from her descriptions this was probably number 67 South Street on the east side, called 'Stonegarth', still there and with the same name.

Bishop Burnet's<sup>8</sup> *History of His Own Time*. He featured in an article by Roger Guttridge in the March 2023 edition of the online Blackmore Vale Magazine:

*It's not difficult to arouse feminist feelings today – but local preacher the Reverend John Sprint managed it 300 years ahead of schedule.*

*The colourful cleric regularly preached in towns and villages in Dorset and Somerset including Stalbridge, Sherborne, Milborne Port, Wimborne and Gussage All Saints. But his views were nothing if not controversial. Way back in 1699, when Sprint was the Minister at Stalbridge, he succeeded in offending an early generation of women's libbers. At a wedding in Sherborne, he preached a sermon which he later had published under the title *The Bride's Woman Counsellor*. His biblical text for the sermon was I Corinthians 7:34, which speaks of the difference between married and unmarried women. He claimed it was 'the duty incumbent on all married women to be extraordinary careful to content and please their husbands'.*

*'The sermon caused quite a stir,' the Rev Anthony Jones, Minister of Bournemouth and Poole Unitarian Church, told me some years ago when he was writing a thesis on early Protestant dissent in Dorset. 'Even in those days, such views were difficult to accept.' Mary Chudleigh, an intellectual and poet, hit back with a poem (1701) called *The Ladies' Defence: or a Bride Woman's Counsellor Answered*. It was written as a dialogue between Sir John Brute, Sir William Loveall, Melissa and a parson, who, cast as the villain, speaks of teaching women 'their husbands to obey and please, / And to their humours sacrifice their ease; / Give up their reason, and their wills resign, / And every look and thought confine.' Melissa, on behalf of her sisters, replies: 'Why are not husbands taught as well as we: / Must they from all restraints, all laws be free? / Passive obedience you've to us transferred, / And we must drudge in paths where you have err'd.'*



*But it was not only feminists that the Rev Sprint outraged. One contemporary document describes him as 'a gentleman of too liberal principles for some pious and rigid Nonconformists'.*

*Such was the opposition he encountered at Stalbridge that in 1700 Sprint moved across the Dorset-Somerset border to Milborne Port. There, at his daughter's*

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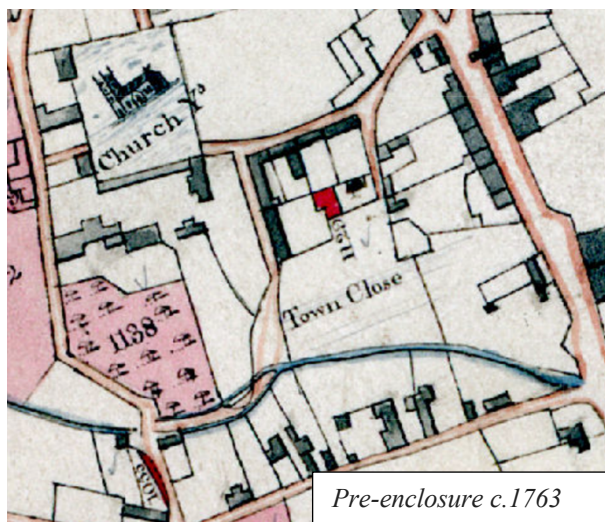
<sup>8</sup> Burnet was highly respected as a cleric, a preacher, an academic, a writer and a historian.

wedding, he preached another sermon called the *Bridegroom's Counsellor and the Bride's Comforter*. 'It was a rebuff to the Ladies apologetic,' said Mr Jones. This time the chosen text was I Corinthians 7:33: 'I shall prove that it is the duty of husbands to please their wives,' Mr Sprint began.

Sprint went on to build up a large Presbyterian congregation in a hosier's house at Milborne Port, where he continued his ministry until his death in 1717. He also founded a grammar school in the village. Mr Jones described Sprint as a 'great eccentric'. 'He always wore a cassock when he took services and a rose in his hat,' he said.

Subsequent ministers were supported by the likes of Robert Everard who, in his will of 1734 made a bequest to the *Minister of the Presbyterian Meeting* of three pounds per year, also making allowances for any future *supply of other Ministers to preach whenever there shall be wanting a settled Minister*.

Until 1743, the main congregation remained Presbyterian but, in that year, became also known as Independent, later known as Congregational. In 1749 or 1750, the lessee, Simon Paine<sup>9</sup>, agreed to give up his lease and Thomas Medlycott, the owner of the land, very generously agreed to donate it to the church as a freehold property. (This was not the first occasion on which the Medlycott family was magnanimous towards these early Nonconformists; this Thomas's grandfather, Thomas Medlycott of Abingdon, had supported dissenters in that town in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.) Permissions were given and the foundation stone was laid on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1750; costs were expected to be £150-£160 and neighbouring churches were asked to help.



In 1754, the Reverend Francis Newton, from Scotland, became pastor and remained at Milborne Port for over 30 years. During his ministry, the Scott family became involved with this church; Mary Scott (1751/52–1793), was a poet, born in the village and ironically, John Sprint's granddaughter, known for writing *The Female Advocate* in 1774 in defence of women

writing. In 1786, Mary's mother left a generous legacy for augmenting the minister's salary and keeping the meeting house in repair; her children and Edward Hallett (possibly a deacon of the church) were given the responsibility

<sup>9</sup> a tanner, who was much involved with the life of the church.

of overseeing the use of the legacy. The Scott family had their own pew in the building, as did the Newton family (unrelated to Reverend Newton) who seem to have become connected with the church in this period.

By the time of the 1781/2 survey, the land was no longer the property of the Medlycotts, as per the agreement of 1749/50, and the building was called *The Presbyterian meeting house and burying ground*.

The building was enlarged by the addition of side galleries in around 1806 during the ministry of Reverend Paige - described by Emma Pitman as a *good classical scholar* [who] *for many years kept a boarding school* – and then lengthened in the late 1820s by 10-12 feet by moving back the west wall and gallery. More development took place in the 1840s when it was almost entirely rebuilt and the new chapel – the one that we more or less know today - opened on 15th October 1844 during the ministry of Reverend Perkins, who had been the pastor since 1842; he had the pulpit moved from one end to the other. The ordination and reopening services made it to the pages of the *Sherborne Journal*, and are described in great detail, so it must have been considered a particularly important day with much to celebrate; an excellent dinner was provided at The King’s Head (now The Tippling Philosopher) or tea at Mr Rumsey’s in Kingsbury. Numbers anticipated for the evening service were so great that tickets had to be sold in advance at 6d each! Reverend Paige told the congregation that he had preached in the old meeting house on the same spot sixty years before...



Survey  
1781/2

On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1846, one of the church’s frequent teas was held, this time to raise funds towards paying off the debt incurred when rebuilding the church. Mr Rumsey of Kingsbury hosted a staggering 400 people!

In 1850 a schoolroom was erected, partly on the graveyard adjoining the church and partly on more land, given by Sir William Coles Medlycott; this became the British School which continued until the opening of the Council school off North Street in 1912.

On the 1851 Census Sunday, the congregation numbered 180 in the morning and 386 in the evening, with 120 Sunday School children attending the morning service too. In the 1883-1888 maps series, it was referred to as the Independent Chapel.

When Emma Pitman wrote her book, the profit was to go to the renovation fund. The pastor at the time was Reverend Edwin Dawe from Michigan, USA and during his time many of the leading members left and became attached to the Anglican and Wesleyan Churches.

Emma Pitman thanked those friends who helped her by lending old records bearing on the subject of the Congregational Church, including Reverend Perkins and Dr Samuel Newton Parsons<sup>10</sup>, who allowed her to take extracts from an old church book in his possession, and who indicated the existence of information in other quarters. She explained that her book would have been published sooner but that she had promised Dr Parsons that it would not be published in his lifetime. Curious... One wonders what might have been the reason behind this. In 1878, he gave an antique silver cup to be used in the communion service of the church.



1873-1888 series

The Church closed as a place of worship in 1991, its final incarnation being as the United Reformed Church from 1981. The building is now The English Organ School and Museum, Chapel Lane, and is the only collection of historic mechanical action English organs in the UK<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> A relative of the Newton family who had their own large square pew on the right-hand side of the pulpit; they were prominent members of the Old Independent Meeting House.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.margaretphillips.org.uk/eos.htm>

## Memories of Mary Clothier

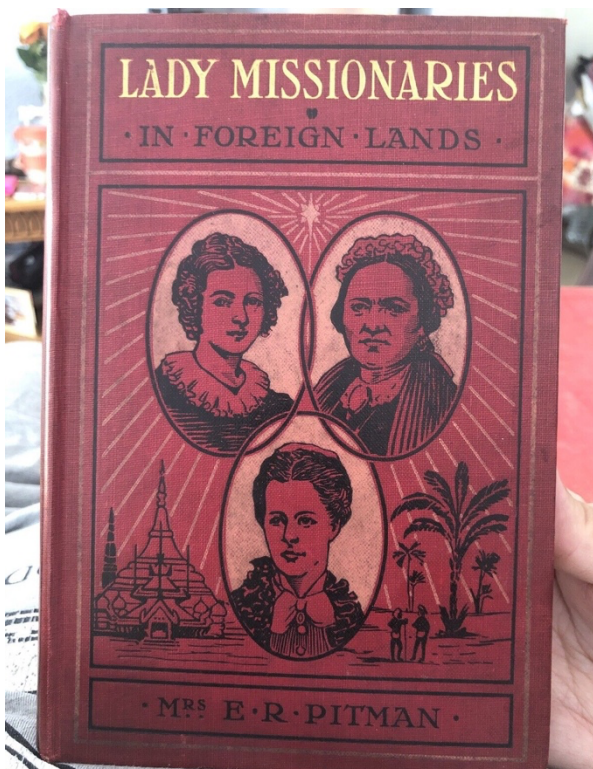
*My memories are of going there as a child for social events (concerts, jumble sales, tea parties etc.) and parading with the Girl Guides to services. Later on, I sang there in the United Choir (the United Choir sang at all the churches as required).*



*My second cousin, Annie Bartlett, had been to school there in about 1906 (I believe called the British School.)*

*Alan King has the Baptismal Roll of Names, also the chapel Bible. He has one of the pews in his garden. The table used as an altar is now in the church (made by John King; Alan was one of the last Elders at the Chapel; also his brother John was an Elder. Their father Ernest King was an Elder when I was a child.*

## Gallery

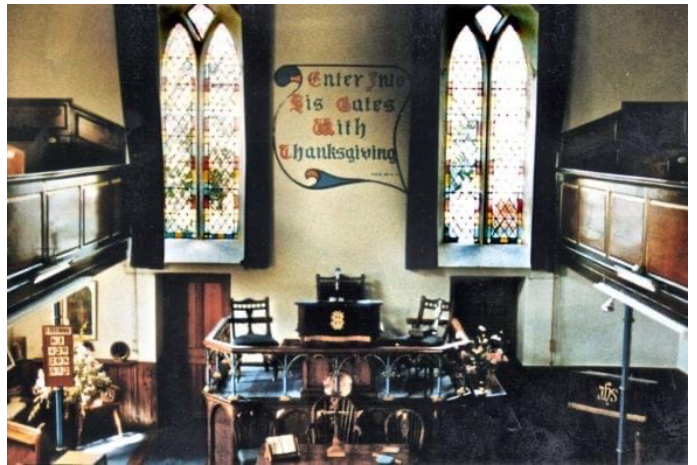
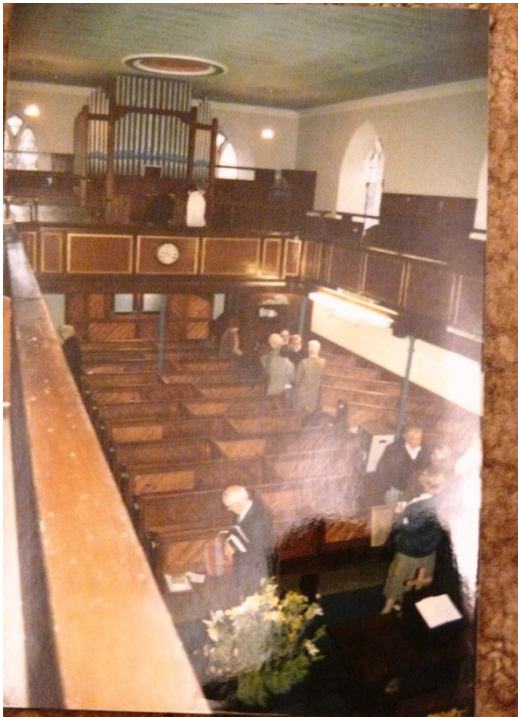


*Emma Pitman is pictured at the bottom of the front cover.*

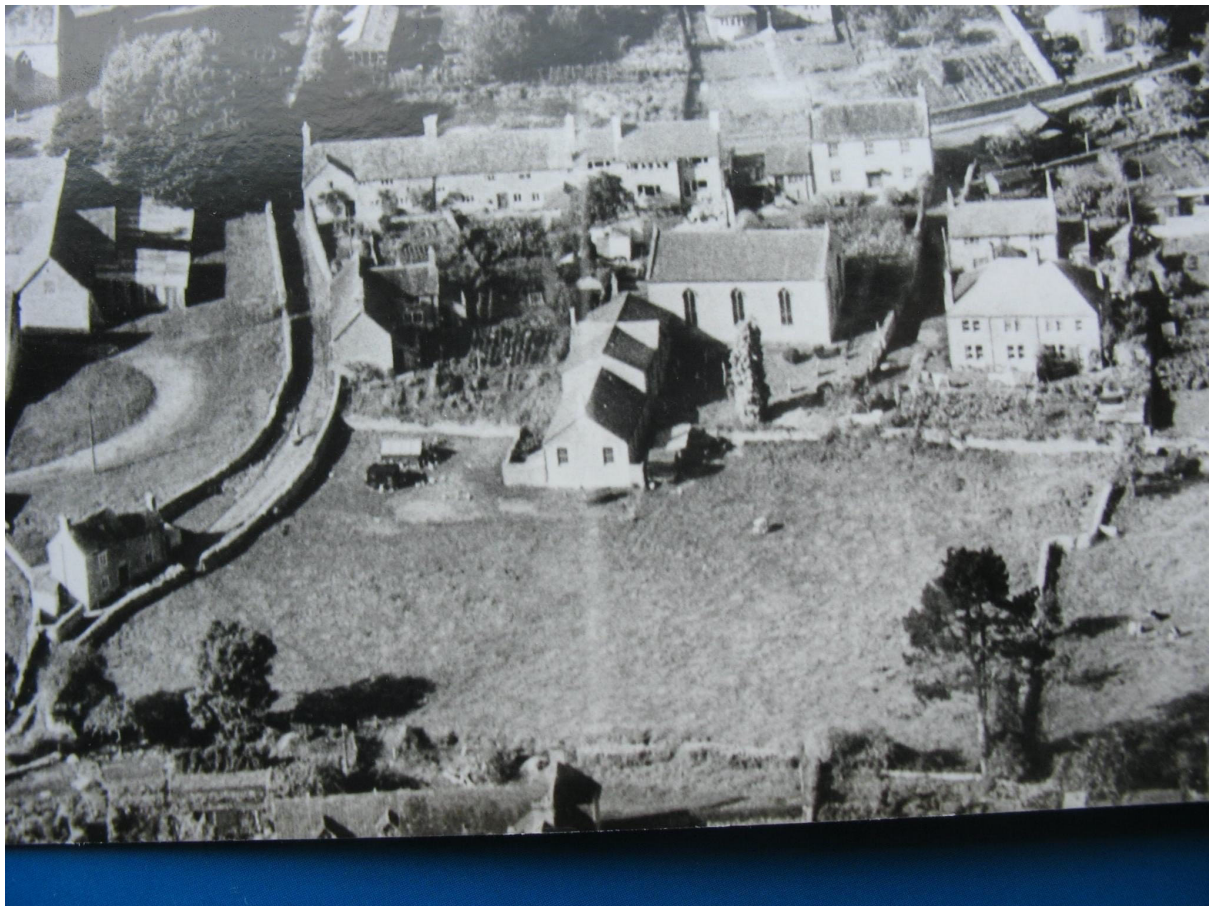










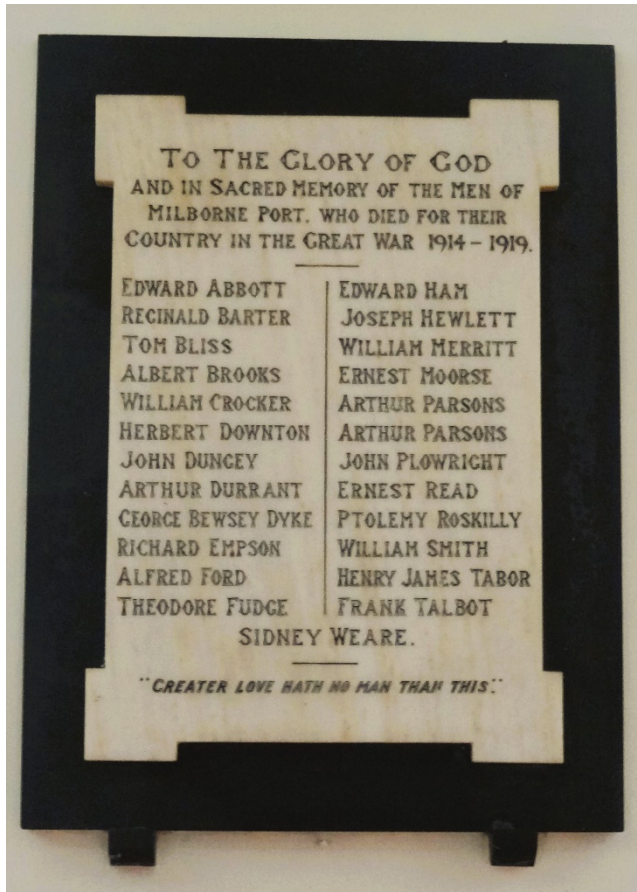


This ariel photograph was taken after 1952; the chapel and schoolhouse can be seen in the centre.





On Friday 14th July 1922, The Western Gazette reported: *THE GREAT WAR. MILBORNE PORT MEN WHO DIED. CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH COMMEMORATES THEIR SACRIFICE. UNVEILING OF MEMORIAL TABLET.* For the third time, Milborne Port publicly did honour on Monday evening to the memory of its sons who died in the war. It is some time since the beautiful memorial in the Churchyard was unveiled and dedicated at a memorable ceremony, and later the Wesleyan Church also fittingly commemorated the sacrifices of the fallen. On Monday evening, the Congregational Church was filled for the unveiling and dedication of memorial tablet erected as the Church's tribute out of the balance of the money subscribed by the townspeople from a town memorial fund. Many ex-Service men and the Boys' Brigade Cadets, under Lieut. T.E. Dyke, formed part of the congregation. The memorial, which is a white Sicilian marble tablet on a black slate background, was unveiled by Mr. G. R. Read (secretary of the British Legion), and dedicated by the Rev. Edward Skilton, of Martock, who served as chaplain with the Forces during the war. Mr. Bernard Southcombe presided over the proceedings, and was supported by the Rev. Edward Skilton, the Rev. M L. Foyle (Wesleyan), and Mr. G.R. Read. The Vicar of Milborne Port (Rev. G.S. Richards) was unable to be present through indisposition. The service was an impressive one, and the hymns sung were 'O God our help', 'Jesu Lover of-my soul', 'Rock of Ages' and 'Peace, Perfect Peace.'



*Mr. Bernard Southcombe said that when they were assembled on an occasion like that to honour the men who had died, they should look forward to the future and try and see what they could do to complete the work for which they gave their lives. The great lesson which the Churches taught was love, and it was their mission in life to love not only those amongst whom they lived, but also their enemies. Now that the war had been over nearly four years they were able to look upon their late enemies with a little more toleration, and they should endeavour to help them as well themselves and so bring peace throughout the whole world. Big forces were at work to achieve that aim. The Churches were endeavouring to secure unity among themselves, organisations existed to solve the problems between capital and labour, and the League of Nations was working to achieve the greater work of preventing*

*war. Wherever possible, they should lend their voices, their sympathy for and support of those movements. They had to work hard to make good. They could not expect something for nothing. They had to endeavour love and help each other, so that that town of Milborne Port, their country, the Empire, and the world might be a happier place to live in.*

*The. Rev. Edward Skilton, in his address, said those tablets and memorials which were rising on every side and every land reminded them that they had been bought at a great price. The years of the war would stand out in history some of the greatest years in the history of the world, days of incomparable grandeur and marvellous splendour. Those memorials represented Milborne Port's contribution to the world's sacrifice. But the world as they saw it to-day with its international jealousies, its prejudices, its social barriers, and its old hatreds flaring up from time to time, was not the world for which those men died, and they who were left must all work now to bring in the better order of things for which they gave their lives. The best memorial to them was that wars should cease for ever. Now that the war was over we had to learn to forgive Germany. He did not say that she should escape the just punishment she deserved for bringing this war upon the world, but they must make it possible for her to live as a nation. They had to find to-day the way of Christian forgiveness. It was not the soldiers who fought in the war who were the greatest haters. They had their job to do, and they did it. Education, science, Governments, and statesmen had failed to prevent war, and now the statesmen told them that the task rested on the Churches. He was convinced that the only solution for the troubles this world was the spirit and the love of Christ.*

*Mr. G. R. Read, secretary of the local branch of the British Legion, unveiled the tablet. In a short address he expressed the sympathy of those who were spared, with the widows and relatives of those who had fallen, whom, he said, they were anxious to treat with the utmost consideration and kindness. He spoke of all that the men fought to gain, and urged the need of unselfishness on the part of those who remained to complete the work which those men had begun.*

*The Rev. Edward Skilton then dedicated the memorial, and the 'Last Post' was sounded. Mrs. B. Southcombe sympathetically sang the solo 'Calvary', accompanied Miss Estcourt Southcombe, and members of the choir (Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Pullen, and Mr. H. King) rendered 'In Memoriam' very effectively. The Rev. L. Kenfig Morgan (pastor) expressed the thanks of the church to the Chairman and others who had contributed to the beautiful service, and then pronounced the Blessing. Miss Iris Morgan presided at the organ. Muffled peals were rung on the Parish Church bells before and after the service.'*



1904/5



1908?