

Yesterday, Today and Forever

By Joan Lees

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Yesterday, Today and Forever

"This is the great and first commandment - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

Matthew 22 v. 37-40

This book is dedicated to the men and women who have believed in and practised those commandments over the last 150 years at Mills Hill Baptist Church. Middleton.

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Joan Lees 1995

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Introduction

Mills Hill Baptist Church - 150 Years of Faith 1845 - 1995

The story between the covers of this book is unique in its location, characters and events, yet a similar testimony could be told of many churches throughout the land. It tells of men and women of great faith in God from whom they drew the inspiration, the strength and the skills to establish, firstly, a school to educate the children of the district and then an enduring place of worship - all this at a time when many lived on the brink of survival by our standards.

But it is not just a piece of historical nostalgia, it follows the development and progress of that faith through 150 years, through wars and peace, through periods of apathy and periods of revival, culminating in the fellowship as it stands today. There are personal testimonies from all age groups, giving insight to what it means to worship and participate in the life of the church today and its relevance to the 1990s.

We have travelled a long way in many respects since the founding of the church, yet we still have much in common with those earlier Christians who made it possible. The world has never needed to heed the message of God's love and salvation more than it does today, yet the church has borne the brunt of much criticism and ridicule. Let us examine the achievements of just one fellowship and make a fair assessment of the truth: then let us stand up and be counted, as our forefathers did, and work and pray together to promote His Kingdom here on earth.

“Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.....”

Thessalonians Ch. 1 vs. 3

Chapter 1

The Wind of Change – Mills Hill 1800-1850

I suppose if one were to identify an area typical of the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, the Mills Hill District on the Middleton/Chadderton boundary in North Manchester would provide very satisfactory material. The Rochdale Canal from Sowerby Bridge in Yorkshire and connecting with the Bridgewater Canal in Manchester was completed in December 1804. In July 1839 the first section of the Lancs. and Yorks. Railway, Manchester to Littleborough was completed. A station was built at Mills Hill and with a little imagination one can picture the scene as the very first steam engine carrying George Stephenson and local dignitaries chuffed along. Thousands of people came to witness the extraordinary scene and the band of the 86th Infantry Regiment was present to play the National Anthem. At that time Mills Hill was the only station between Manchester and Rochdale and its proximity to the canal was of great importance for the development of the cotton industry – there was now a direct line from the cotton port of Liverpool and distribution potential throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire (see map of 1844).



Mills Hill House – Home of the Gregson family

Between the canal and the railway was a large house, known as Mills Hill House. This was how it was described at auction later:

“The house contained – Entrance Hall, Drawing Room, Dining Room, small Study, Kitchen, Scullery, Larder, Butler’s Pantry, 6 Bedrooms, dressing Room, Boxroom and separate W.C. Outbuildings comprised large brick-built Wash-house, 2 stalled stables and Coal Place. There are two large Lawns (one a Tennis Lawn) and Gardens to both front and side of the House, also a good Kitchen garden.”

The late Mr. S. S. Hall remembered that as a child he often stared open-eyed through a hole in the privet hedge at the tennis parties given during the First World War for the officers at the nearby army camp on the land now occupied by the Rydal Avenue Housing Estate. He recalled that the parties were particularly flamboyant when the Anzacs were in camp! (The house and grounds stood on the land now occupied by a builders merchants, on the corner of what is now Mills Hill Road and Middleton Road).

An article appeared in the Middleton Guardian in 1970 by ABC of Moston which helps to create it picture of the place. Under the heading "Parcel Boy of 50 years Ago" he related a very wet day in his delivery schedule when he was instructed to take a parcel to Mills Hill House.

"I had to go round to the tradesman's entrance door where I was greeted with pity and sympathy by the two maids who took me into their warm kitchen. They took off my rain-soaked boots and socks, packed the boots with paper and put them to dry in front of the biggest fire I had ever seen inside a house. The socks, which were more holey than Godly they threw on the fire. They gave me a pot of hot cocoa. a plate of cream cakes, dried me off as much as possible and one of them put ointment on my sore and tender feet. Even after 50 years I think I saw halo's above those two kind servants at Mills Hill House!"

The map of 1844 shows the surrounding area to be mainly farmland with very few dwellings, now dissected by the canal and the railway. The municipal boundary runs between the two, and because of this, Mills Hill is on the outskirts of both Middleton and Chadderton and has, in some respects, been left to its own resources. There are no strong allegiances to either town and this gave rise, particularly in the days before public road transport, to a strong sense of community independence.

There had long been a cottage industry of handloom weaving in these parts. The damp climate due to the proximity of the Pennine hills is ideal for spinning and weaving as it gives strength and stability to the thread. There is a fulling mill called Walk Mill by the canal on the 1844 map – fulling was a finishing process for the woollen cloth. Silk weaving flourished in the area too

and in 1851, a group of about 15 men in Middleton Junction, less than a mile away from Mills Hill, started an early form of 'co-operative trading' at a farm they called Lowbands. They wove silk shot with cotton and made velvet waistcoats which they sold in Manchester. They farmed the land as well, 6 acres in all, with spades and other primitive equipment. They had great technical skill but must have lacked business acumen because sadly their worthy venture failed. The hand-loom weavers had been very influential people prior to the Industrial Revolution, their skills had been a great asset to the wealth of the community, but their importance waned with the coming of the mills and their machinery. The men of the Lowbands venture must have been quite visionary for their time, for the farm played a part in the formation of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Co-op Insurance Society. Meetings were held there in the 1860s at the instigation of these ventures to make plans for the betterment and progress of the working classes.

There was a small hamlet in the vicinity known as Drummer Hill, which was built for the miners who worked at Ferney Field Coal Pit and their families. It was approached by way of a swing bridge over the canal, along a lane thickly edged with hawthorn, past the grounds of Firwood House, the gates of which were just to the left over the swing bridge (see map of 1844).

Another group of houses was situated in an area called Jumbo on Grimshaw Lane, Middleton Junction. Most of the early pastoral activities of the new Church whose development we are about to learn, was centred around these two groups of houses.

And so the district was preparing for great changes, from a simple rural farming economy supplemented by cottage weaving, to a more densely populated industrial-based environment. Movement of goods, cotton in particular, was now readily available, and coal, the fuel of the new steam engines, was to hand. The first cotton mill, the Firwood was built between the railway and canal, just south of the Joshua Lane Bridge. It provided employment for 500 operatives in both spinning and weaving.

Houses were springing up in response to the demand as families moved into the area, but as yet there was no place of worship of any denomination. There had been groups of Methodists meeting in houses in Middleton Junction but no Churches had been built. The only education available, for those who could afford it, was at the local "Dames's school" on Foxdenton Lane, run by a Mrs Turnbull. This lady taught reading, writing and sewing but no "sums" except simple addition.

These had to be taken to Wheelers School in Middleton so the teacher there could check them for accuracy. At some time during its long history there was another Dames School at Chadderton Hall as well but, for the majority of children, there was no education except that which they might receive at home if they were fortunate.

The owner of the Firwood Mill, who lived at Firwood House, was James Cheetham. He was also a deacon at the Manchester Street Baptist Church in Oldham (this fellowship is now in King Street). A group of members from this church came to work for Mr Cheetham at his mill in 1845, and came to live in the vicinity, most likely some of them at Drummer Hill and others in the Jumbo area.

Because of the difficulties of travelling at that time, they were unable to attend services in Oldham regularly. A very graphic picture of the problem was painted by Miss Gregson whose family lived at Mills Hill House during the latter part of the 19th Century. She remembers Mills Hill Lane "as a place most difficult to get along". When they went to visit her Uncle's family at Firwood House they had to first decide whether to go in shoes and socks or galoshes, and she often had to take them off and carry them in her hand. Her cousins at Firwood House kept a pair of stilts at the station so that "when they returned from Manchester in the evening they could more easily step through the mud!" There was, of course, no street lighting either at the time.

Apart from the difficulty of travelling to the Oldham Chapel for worship, they were concerned for the lack of a Sunday School for their children and the lack of provision for education generally.

And so it came about that on 18th October, 1945, they "engaged a room formerly used as a barn (behind Mills Hill House) for public worship and Sunday School work".

There were 18 scholars that first Sunday morning, gathered in the hayloft reached by a ladder. Two weeks later. 2nd November, there were 82 scholars attending. By the following year the numbers had risen to 233 and in 1847 to 266. It was impossible to accommodate all the children and young people all at once in the barn, so different times were arranged for several classes. Services were held in the evening and the fellowship must have grown in great faith and with a powerful vision for the future of Mills Hill. Anyone involved in Sunday School teaching must appreciate the amount of planning and preparation which would be necessary to teach such large numbers of mostly illiterate pupils in cramped circumstances. The teaching must have been inspired and the children ready to learn. However, it was becoming increasingly evident that the barn was becoming more and more inadequate and it would be necessary to provide more commodious premises.

Chapter 2

The Salt of the Earth

Having looked at the locality and the factors which brought our little group of cotton operatives to Mills Hill, let us look at the kind of people they sprang from and the society in which they lived.

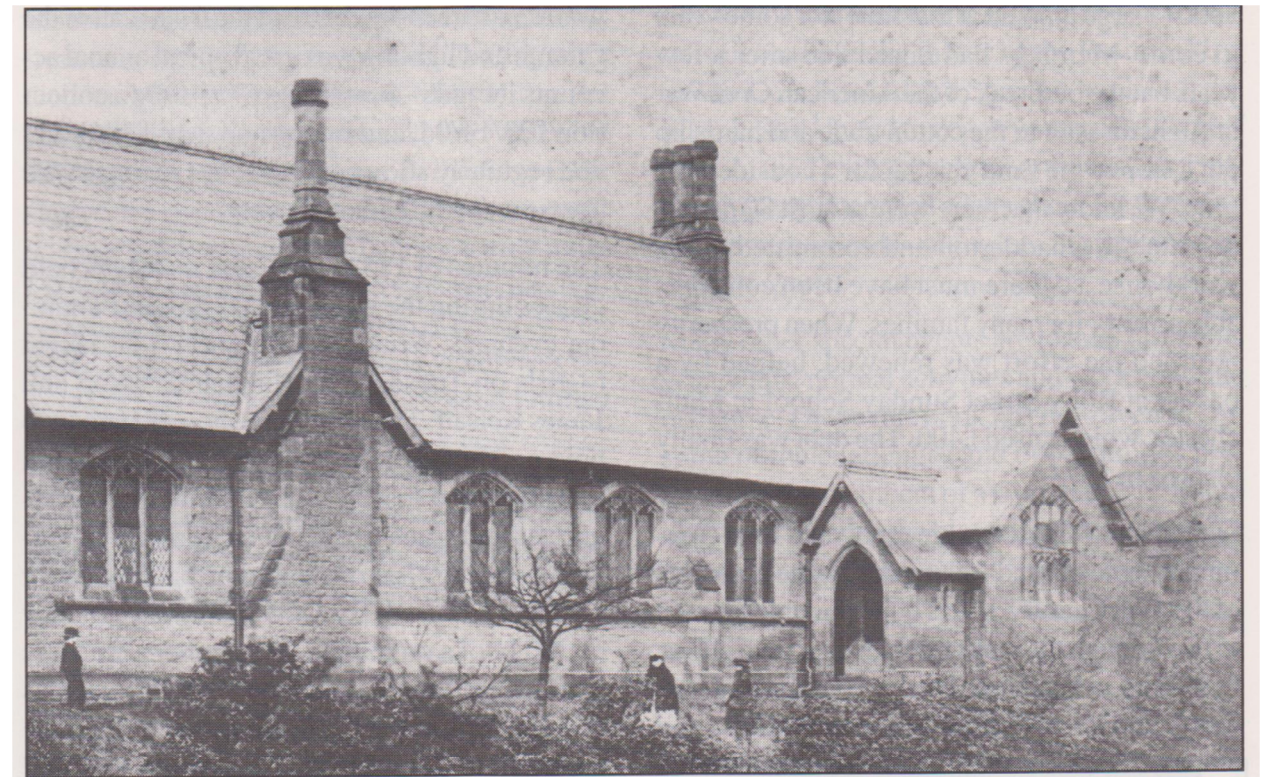
During the first 50 years of the 19th Century, many working people, especially the hand-loom weavers, had suffered great hardship due to the invention of machines which could be housed in large buildings and produce the cloth at a fraction of the cost. Their income was reduced from about 15 shillings a week to 5 shillings, and they had to work about 15 hours a day even to make that amount. Added to that, the price of wheat had increased 50% because of the Corn Laws. In order to survive, many families were forced to send children as young as 6 into the mills to earn a few shillings. We know that some of the local weavers used to meet in the local inn, the Rose of Lancaster, whose landlord was a Mr O'Connor. Government spies were despatched to Chadderton, and as a result James Jackson of Acres Farm was only one of several men sentenced to 7 years transportation for "administering an illegal oath". Around 1811 came the Luddite rebellion when armed gangs of workers set out to destroy the machinery in the new mills. Healds Green was a focal point for the dissidents and on 16th August. 1819, the Chadderton contingent set forth for a peaceful demonstration with their brothers and sisters at Peters Field, Manchester. They carried their own green and white silk banner bearing the words:

Chadderton Political Union
United we stand
Divided we fall
No Corn Laws
Universal Suffrage
Vote by Ballot
Labour the Source of Wealth.

The authorities in Manchester thoroughly alarmed at the huge crowd of 50,000 from all over South East Lancashire and keen to prevent another French Revolution, sent in the cavalry with sabres drawn into the unarmed crowd. Four people were killed and more than five hundred injured. Three local hand-loom weavers - Thomas Ashton, Thomas Worthington and Abraham Whittaker - were imprisoned but discharged later. The tragedy later became known as

"Peterloo". Community links must have been very strong to have organised such a huge demonstration without benefits of telephones and motor cars, and the people must have had great courage and determination to see it through knowing the dangers. Two things strike me about this episode; one is that the carrying of banners is an old tradition of the churches in this part of Lancashire, still to be seen in the annual Procession of Witness at Whitsuntide. The second is the consistent use of the words "the cause" in relation to the establishment of the church and school at Mills Hill. This was still being used 50 years later in documents and speeches.

It would appear that in the mid-19th Century the new church here was able to provide a meeting place for the worship of God and for mutual support, education and encouragement which was not available elsewhere. At any rate, the growth in commitment and attendance rate at lessons was tremendous and it soon became apparent that a new building was essential.



An early picture of the church with no retaining wall

The land next to Mills House, previously the site of Cheethams Farm, had been conveyed in 1841 by James Cheetham the mill-owner, to two Oldham men - Alexander Holland (tailor and draper) and James Brooks (brick maker). These two men were not on the first members' list at Mills Hill so we do not know their interest in the Church but the new building was erected on this land in 1849, and the deed conveying the land to the Church Trustees was not drawn up until 31st December. 1851. This document states that members "have by voluntary

subscriptions and borrowing erected a building on the land to be used as a chapel or school for Baptists". On payment of 5 shillings each from Robert Gregson, John Cheetham, Thomas Crompton, John Firth, William Mason and J. Barratt, this deed conveys the land and building to those named "to have and to hold the plot of land forever subject to payment of rent and observance of covenants". The rent was £10 annual to be paid in two equal instalments. Some of the covenants were mentioned in the 1841 conveyance, but these were extra to that agreement:

1. The building is to be used as a place of worship and Sunday School
2. Men members to elect 6 superintendents for the following:

2 to teach boys

2 (married men only) to teach girls

1 treasurer

1 secretary

All to be over 27 years old and appointed annually

3. It is agreed that it shall be lawful for trustees to raise a mortgage on land or buildings conveyed.

We do not know how much the building cost, but we do know there was an outstanding debt of £600 (a large amount at that time) for some years to come. Members had raised £60 after a few years but the outbreak of the American Civil War brought disaster to the cotton trade and hard ship put a stop to the fundraising for a considerable time. We know that there were at least 80 people destitute in Chadderton and committed to the workhouse, so there must have been considerable poverty for many families. When prosperity returned the effort was renewed, helped by a bazaar at Roby Street Sunday School in Manchester, which raised £400. The debt was finally cleared in 1873.

Oldham and districts were renowned for a community style of fund-raising during the latter part of the 19th Century. It was quite possible for men to rise through the ranks through their own efforts to start up in business. There was a spirit of harmony and co-operation between workers and employees which was not to be found elsewhere, maybe due to lessons learned through bitter experience of the previous 50 years. Capital was raised locally through the issue of £5 shares paid in part and loans could be obtained at an interest rate of 5%. The Sun Mill in Chadderton, built in the 1860's and one of the largest in the country at the time was founded as a workers co-operative. Money was available, on loan, to churches and groups of workers who had the vision and determination to build, and they grasped the opportunity with enthusiasm.

The driving force behind the building of Mills Hill appears to have been James Cheetham (President). James Kelsall (Secretary) and Robert Gregson. As the building was not officially recognised as a church at this stage, there was no Diaconate.

In the early days funds were not obtained through collections but by a charge for seats. "Pew rents" were common practice in most churches but Mills Hill provided only forms as the building was also used as a school. As from 1st November, 1849 the seat rent was one shilling (5p) per quarter. The first caretaker was Mrs Charles Davies who received 1/6d (71/2p) per week. Special services were held in aid of running costs for heating, lighting, cleaning etc. There was a coal fire in the centre of the front wall of the Church and lighting was gas. Typical annual accounts include - Seat Rents £79/10/0d, collection £ 23/ 14/ 0d and interest on debt £28/0/0d and regularly showed an amount owing to the Treasurer at the end of the year.

The minutes of 1854 reveal that members held classes during the week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Writing and arithmetic were taught to girls on Tuesdays by Hannah Gregson and James Kelsall. The same subjects were taught to boys on Thursdays by Robert Gregson, William Stansfield and Joseph Mills. Permission was requested and granted to Edmund Matthew to conduct a singing class on condition that he paid for coal and gas used. By 1855 there was a library of 300 books on loan to 45 members. Readers paid 1d per month (less than h/p today). It was 50 years before the Carnegie Library was to be endowed to Chadderton. There was a Sick and Burial Club which catered for very real needs at a time when people generally died much younger and medicine was only available if you could afford it. Of course there were no state benefits for those families who fell on hard times. In 1863 this Club had to register in compliance with the Friendly Societies Act. It survived well into the next Century and provided an annual tea party and social for its members (see chart of benefits etc).

In 1909 the annual accounts show £56/9/6 d. paid on account of sickness and £36/0/0d on funerals. The balance at the end of the year was £989/ 19/ 10d . There were 173 members (157 aged between 16-30). All in this age group not attending the Annual Meeting will be fined 6d . Tea was on the tables at 4.30p.m; meeting to commence at 6.30p.m . Females 6d, Males 8d. (Why we can only guess!). The Society was dissolved in 1912 and the funds divided among the members. Today the sums appear ridiculous, but before the Welfare State it could mean the difference between having bread to eat and having nothing, if you were sick. Apparently one wasn't admitted after the age of 30 - perhaps you were considered too high a risk! Life expectancy was much lower and death was a frequent occurrence at any age due to diseases like T.B.

MILLS HILL DISTRICT AND SCHOOL SOCIETY

(Sick and Burial Fund)

SCALE OF SUBSCRIPTIONS AND BENEFITS - 1906

Age	Class	Entrance Fee		Subs per Week	Allowance in Case of Sickness				Sum Paid at Death
		s-d	d		Weeks 1-10 s-d	Week 10-20 s-d	Week 20-30 s-d	Rem s-d	
1-10	-	0-3	1/2		-	-	-	-	£2/10s
10-16	1	0-3	1		3-D	2-D	1-6	0-9	£3
16-21	2	1-D	2		6-D	4-0	3-D	1-6	£6
21-25	3	3-D	3		9-D	6-D	4-6	2-6	£9
25-27	3	5-D	3		9-D	6-D	4-6	2-6	£9
27-30	3	7-6	3		9-D	6-0	4-6	2-6	£9

NUMBERS IN CHADDERTON SCHOOLS

	Teacher s	Boys	Girls	Books
Healds Green Church		76	108	
Chadderton Primitive Methodist	3 1	110	150	
Mills Hill Baptist	18	11 0	150	300
Lane End Unsectarian	16	70	70	

The first suggestion of a Day School was raised in 1854. William Butterworth was give n permission at the end of the year to use the building for teaching pupils for 3 months, at a rate of £4 per annum "provided always that he keep the place clean and find his own coal".

Butterworth's history of 1856 gives information concerning the growing number of Chadderton schools shown in the above table. Lane End Church h was situated at the corner of Lees Street and Grimshaw Lane opposite J .W. Lees' Brewery. It was of Wesleyan Methodist Connection. Mills Hill scholars met up with their's on Whit Fridays for a walk and finished off the day in the grounds of Firwood Hall where the teacher s had erected swings.

16 years later, in 1870, Parliament finally agreed to its first Education Act, when all children were supposed to go to school from the ages of 5- 13. Even then, attendance was not free and depended on parents being able to afford the few pence a week required. As far as we know, teaching provided by members at Mills Hill prior to this Bill was free. These photographs, taken about 1885, outside the Church show some of the boys playing their traditional games.



Boys playing marbles outside church/school 1885.



3 fashionable young girls

Chapter 3

Go Forth and Multiply

From the very first in 1845, in the barn and later in the new building, until 1853, these stalwart Christians remained members at the Oldham Baptist Church in Manchester Street (now re-sited onto King Street). On 30th March, 1851 there was a countrywide survey of attendance at places of worship. The records show that at Mills Hill on that day, which was Mothering Sunday, there were 245 Sunday School scholars in the morning; 263 in the afternoon and 87 general congregation in attendance at the evening service. It was signed by Robert Gregson, "manager of the above named place of worship". Unfortunately, services and Sunday School were closed on the first Sunday of each month to allow members to attend Communion at the parent Church in Oldham. It was finally decided that it was time that "the cause here at Mills Hill should be an independent organisation" and a letter was duly despatched to the Pastor and members of the Baptist Church Assembly in Manchester Street, Oldham on 20th August, 1853, as follows:

Dear Brethren and Sisters.

We the under signed fellow members with you beg affectionately to lay before you the following statement and request. Many of us once resident in Oldham have in the Providence of God moved to Chadderton. During the last eight years we have assembled for worship and have conducted a Sunday School in a room.

Three years since, through the liberal assistance of Mr James Cheetham and others of our fellow members, a commodious school and preaching room was erected in which we have assembled for worship and hearing the word of God preached twice on the Lord's Day; also for prayer and praise on Tuesday evenings besides conducting various classes for our improvement on other evenings.

We take this opportunity of expressing our gratitude to God for the spiritual benefit we have received during the term of our communion and with the Church at Oldham; for the valuable instructions and kind sympathies of the Rev. John Birt, our pastor; and the brotherly kindness manifested by our fellow members. For both pastor and members we maintain unabated Christian love.

The township of Chadderton, where we reside contains from thirteen to fourteen thousand inhabitants, the only places of worship in it are a small episcopal church and our own school room.

We believe it would very much conduce to our strength and usefulness were we formed into a separate church of the Baptist Denomination. We therefore beg you to grant our dismissal and again expressing our attachment to our beloved Pastor request him to preside at the formation of our Church on the 29th. instant.

This letter is signed by the following members:-

William Gregson	Sarah Kelsall
George Grafftey	Sarah Wild
Eliza Royds	Amelia Smethurst
Samuel Ashton	Ellen Brogden
William Stansfield	Ann Ogden
Susannah Heywood	Hannah Partington
James Kelsall	Olive Whittaker
Jane Gregson	Joseph Mills
Samuel Smethurst	Eliza Priestley
Susannah Mills	Mary Boardman
Hannah Wilkinson	
Robert Gregson	
Isaac Wild	
Jane Ogden	
Eliza Wright	
Hannah Pendleton	
Rachel Bedford	
Alice Royds	
Hannah Greg son	
Sarah Grafftey	
Betty Halkyard	
Hannah Ashton	
Mary Stansfield	
Eliza Wild	

The letter of dismissal sent in return from Oldham contained the following paragraphs:

"We are much delighted with the Spirit of Love and of Christian unity towards the Pastor and people who compose this Church, with which your letter is animated, and desire to reciprocate in the strongest manner that love of unity and spirit, so that we part with the same mutually affectionate regards, as those which have hitherto bound us together in one Church.

We therefore, give a loving and cordial dismissal for the above mentioned purpose, to those brethren and sisters whose names are underwritten, and fervently pray that the blessing of the Head of the Church may now and forever rest upon you. May your little ones become a thousand, and your small ones a strong nation! "

We are.

Dear Brethren and Sisters,

Yours affectionately in Christ.

JOHN BIRT Pastor

ANTHONY FRITH

JOHN DAVIES

THOMAS CROMPTON Deacon s

JOSEPH GLOVER

JAMES SHEPLEY

JAMES CHEETHAM

Signed on behalf of the whole at our Church Meeting; August 24th 1853.

On Monday the 29th day of August 1853, The Baptist Church at Mills Hill was formed. 24 of the original signatories to the letter requesting dismission from Oldham assembled by 2.30p.m, and one arrived later. Of the remaining nine, one Susannah Heywood expressed the desire not to be connected and eight were added to the Church at the first Church meeting on September 12th. Naturally, a Tea Party was held to celebrate the occasion of the official formation of the new Church and one can imagine the joy and anticipation felt by those present.

By the following year, 1854, the newly-fledged Church was able to appoint its own Minister, Rev. Joseph Kightley, then a student at Horton College, Bradford . The following year an organ was purchased and installed on August 13th. The Church was now independent of Oldham

except in one respect it did not have a Baptistry. This is a small pool below the floor of the Church, filled with water on the occasion of the full immersion of a mature believer in the Faith, as Christ himself was baptised by John in the River Jordan. Baptists bring their infants to be Dedicated by the parents and congregation, but no water is used in this ceremony. (The Baptistry at Mills Hill has been "borrowed" quite frequently in recent years by congregations of other Denominations whose members have decided to witness their belief in God by full immersion as mature Christians, not just relying on the promises made on their behalf by parents and Godparents as babies at their Christening). In the early days, Baptisms were conducted at the Oldham Church, indeed, 5 were recorded in 1846 when the Barn was the only meeting place. A footnote in the minutes thanking God states that these were "the first fruits of the efforts here ". That a vigorous discipline was enforced on members after commitment we learn because one of these early converts, Eliza Mellor (nee Wild) was suspended from receiving Communion for 3 months in 1854 (we don 't know why!).

Most of the pastoral activity, cottage meetings and the like, seems to have centred around Jumbo and Drummer Hill (Jumbo was later to become the location of a Primitive Methodist Church) but for some reason the annual procession of witness at Whitsuntide took a route via Chadderton Hall where there was very little property at that time. Whet her the Hall was open to the public at that time, as in later years, we don't know, but the previous owner Sir Watts Horton (1753- 18 11) had been High Sheriff of Lancashire and had greatly improved the Hall and parkland. A current account describes the Hall as - "A brick building surrounded by shrubberies and pleasure grounds laid out with great taste. At the front of the house is a beautiful park from several eminences of which are delightful prospects. A commodious shooting ground is laid out within view of the house, for the amusement of the archers of the district".

Perhaps the amenities of the park were so appealing to the teachers and children that they would not consider the humbler venue of their own area, or maybe the roads were easier to walk in the park. A third possibility could have been they were hoping to touch the hearts of the rich occupants and enlist their support for "the cause"! At any rate, the route was not changed until 1867, when it went via Hercules Green, Lane End. Then Drummer Hill to the wood (Firwood), Middleton Road was not included until 1914.

The minutes of the Church meeting on July 20th 185 6 record the following resolution passed by the members:

"That candidates for membership, whether new converts or Christians belonging to other Denomination s, be received on Profession of Faith without immersion, provided the subject of Believers' Baptism has had their serious consideration and they can say that they do not feel it their duty to observe it".

This was to prove very important later, when members were received into Fellowship from the Methodist Church in Middleton Junction which sadly had to close down.

In 1859 the Mills Hill Choral Society was formed, the beginning of a long, successful and very varied musical commitment. The same year, the Sunday School trip was to Southport, commencing by train from Middleton Junction Station. 100 tickets were originally ordered but another 50 were required later. Trains would be chartered to places like Blackpool, Morecambe and Southport, and we can imagine the excitement of the children on these unaccustomed journeys, and the organisation involved by their teachers in preparing picnics etc.

Tea parties were quite frequent in the Church, which is all the more surprising when one realises that water was not laid on until 1876! Prior to this, some of the young men were delegated to fetch it in buckets; we don't know where from, presumably a nearby well or by courtesy of Mills Hill House. In 1861, they settled for a copper boiler heated by gas which must have felt a real luxury after boiling water on the coal fire.

In the same year a Grammar class (English) was started on Friday evenings, taught by Mr S. Cheetham, with an attendance of 20. There were no classes specifically for reading, presumably it was felt sufficient to read the Bible on Sundays. Mills Hill Church was registered for marriages in 1862. The first burial was that of Hannah Gregson.

After 9 years, in 1863, the first Minister Rev. Kightley resigned, and for the next 9 years the Church was served by Lay Pastors, Messrs. McDougall, Barker and Webster. In 1874 the latter gentleman was ordained and accepted a call to minister in Royton. It should be remembered that these last years were difficult ones financially for the whole area because of the American Civil War. As funding for Ministers salaries had to be found by the congregation, possibly they could not afford a full -time Pastor. Freewill offerings were instituted in 1864 instead of seat rents.

Further income came in 1871 when the Chadderton Education Committee began to rent the classrooms for £10 per annum. In addition, "Should they however require at any time to use any or all of the large room (i.e. the main body of the Church) they should be charged one shilling (5p) extra per week". The Church agreed to contribute £ 10 (one year's rent) towards the erection of "outbuildings"(toilets). A special collection was made for this purpose and the Education Committee allowed them to erect on condition that they paid all costs in excess of £ 10. So it is clear that this Church, like thousands of others, led the way in pioneering education for all regardless of income in this country. They provided the buildings and encouraged local officials to use them to promote a more fair and just society where every child had equality of opportunity, and adults too could develop their potential and find a better way of life.

Chapter 4

"Love Thy Neighbour"

(The Cheetham and the Gregson families)

The Cheetham family of Firwood Hall and Mill were not only generous benefactors at the foundation of the Church and School, they became increasingly involved in the "cause". James Cheetham had been a Deacon at the Oldham Baptist Church on Manchester Street prior to 1856, when he and his wife Elizabeth requested transference to the membership at Mills Hill, newly built on his land. Elizabeth asked for Baptism and was visited by Robert Gregson and James Kelsall. (This is standard procedure for the Baptist denomination, the visitors then report back to the members meeting as to their recommendation for acceptance or not). She was accepted and Baptised in April 1857; Jane Cheetham (probably their daughter) was also baptised at the end of the year and she and Elizabeth soon became Sunday School teachers - there were 19 teachers in all that year. A minute of 1858 records that "the offer of Brother Cheetham to see to the warming of the chapel" was gratefully accepted. Presumably he supplied coal for the open fire on the front wall of the Church approximately where the pulpit is now situated. There was considerable financial difficulty during 1859 and "Brother Cheetham promised that the Pastor's salary should be forthcoming when required". Helen Cheetham was Baptised in December that year, and James was voted onto the Diaconate at the A.G.M. in January. By that time the teachers' list included William Cheetham, and Septimus was added in 1862. (He received some short-lived notoriety in July when he and Anne Lees were requested not to sit in the Choir Gallery for the present - but this was rescinded at the next meeting when it was minuted that there was no substance in the "mischievous circulation"!).

This wonderful tribute was recorded in the minutes on the death of James Cheetham for his service to the Church –

Resolved - "That this Church humbly recognises, and submissively bows, to the hand of Almighty God in the removal from us, by death, of our brother and Deacon Mr Cheetham. That we express our gratitude to the Great Head of the Church for having continued him to our fellowship so long. That we thankfully acknowledge the Divine Goodness in the manner of his removal to the Higher fellowship of the Church - so in accordance, as we believe with his own desire. That while we rejoice in his gain, we at the same time record our deep sense of the loss we have sustained in his removal from among us, and that we sincerely sympathise with the family of the deceased, and offer them our heartfelt condolence in this distressing bereavement".

Fortunately the Church could still rely on the willing service of Robert Gregson, James Kelsall and others to fill the gap left by this generous Christian man.

Mrs Cheetham must have had connections in Southport, for she went to live there later, but requested that her membership at Mills Hill remain open for a time. Perhaps due to her influence, George Cheetham came here from the Baptist Church at Southport in 1865, but two years later he asked for transference to the Church Assembly in Calcutta. It is interesting to speculate whether he went to buy Indian cotton for the local mills, who were refusing to process cotton produced by slave labour in the American South. The manufacturers of Oldham were the first to use Indian cotton and because of this they pulled out of recession earlier and extended production faster than other Lancashire mill-towns. Another James Cheetham was transferred to the Church in Calcutta in 1877. A Walter Cheetham was baptised and received into Fellowship at Mills Hill the same year. The whole family were committed Christians who despite wealth and status were involved in the hard work and evangelisation of the growing Church.

Robert Gregson was related in some way to the Cheethams, for his daughter speaks of her cousins at Firwood House in her Sale of Work speech years later. He was one of the first Deacons and remained in office for 30 years, until 1875 when he declined nomination. His name was at the forefront, along with his wife's whenever any hard work was required - be it setting up tables for a Sunday School tea-party, organising the Whit Saturday treat, visiting candidates for Baptism and membership and any other task required of him.

From 1863 until 1873, Mills Hill was served by lay Pastors, James McDougal, Mr Barker, and Mr Webster and as is the case when a Church does not have a full-time Minister, the burden of administration and leadership has to be shouldered by the Deacons. 1874 seems to have been a difficult year, there was apathy within the membership. It is recorded that Robert Gregson and William Stansfield refused to take office as Deacons because of the low turnout at the meeting. The Deacons, Gregson and Samuel Burgess, when elected later, recommended that Mr Webster who had been studying at the Manchester College, be invited to accept the Pastorate of the Church at a guaranteed remuneration of 30/-per week (£1.50) plus any increase of the weekly offering above that amount. It was decided to apply to the Pastors Augmentation Fund for a grant of £ 10 for the year. But the independent spirit reasserted itself and the Church soon resolved to return the money on behalf of Mr Webster, even though it meant asking the Treasurer of the Day School to advance £7/10/Od. of the rent. However, Mr Webster, now qualified, accepted a call to the Baptist Church in Royton and left Mills Hill on 31st January, 1876.

By this time vigour had returned to the Church and several new members had been Baptised at the Oldham Church. There was a determination to call a new Minister and build a Baptistry of

their own. The Rev. William Wiggins from Burnham accepted the call in May, and by July 10 men and women had applied for Baptism and 4 others were restored to Membership. Robert Gregson's leadership qualities had recognised the dangerous signs of apathy within the fellowship and had applied the discipline necessary to put the Church on course again for renewal.

In 1877 Robert and his family moved from Mills Hill House to Bradford and thus ended an era. 18 years later his daughter was invited to open the Sale of Work and the Chairman Mrs Bridges in her introduction of Miss Gregson, speaks of her "revered father and mother's intimate association with the cause. What I and a good many more owe to Mrs Gregson's gentle life is best known to ourselves. Both Mr & Mrs Gregson were beloved by us all. I can pay them no greater tribute than to say they were beautiful in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided".

Miss Gregson in her opening speech assures the audience that "Some of the happiest times of my life were passed here and nothing could have given my father and mother more satisfaction than to see this building, this gathering, and everything they betoken of the progress that has gone on since..."

At the time of Miss Gregson's visit, in 1895, there were 400 scholars attending the school, plus a class of 60 men and 57 young ladies. Miss Gregson must have gone home feeling that her parents efforts for such a large part of their lives had not been without reward.

Chapter 5

“Faith can move mountains - Church and School United”

It is worth remembering that there was no State provision for education prior to the 1880 Education Act. Locally, administration was in the hands of a body known as the Board of Guardians of Oldham Union and seems to have been a largely hit and miss affair depending on where you lived. It did improve after 1872 when Chadderton became self-governing under the Board for the District of Chadderton. Influential citizens and local pressure brought gradual improvements in educational provision but not overnight. Provision was patchy and there was some conflict between private (fee-paying) schools and Church Schools which were free to all. School places were not evenly distributed because of the way in which buildings had been voluntarily provided.

In 1875 an Oldham Inspectors report found nearly 2,000 children on the streets during school hours and 279 were not registered at any school. The Education Act of 1880 made schooling compulsory until the age of 13, but this was often ignored by parents of large families struggling to make ends meet, some employers seeking cheap labour and others who saw little value in it. Not until 1914 was it made illegal to employ a child full-time. After that, if a Labour Certificate could be produced certifying that the child had passed the fourth standard in 3 R's they could work part-time between the ages of 11 and 13.

So if you were bright you could go to work early - not be encouraged to stay on to receive higher education, as the situation is today. Working-class children were generally perceived as destined for manual work, except by a few enlightened individuals who could see progress in living standards for all through better educational opportunities.

The Baptist denomination in general did not participate in political agitation, indeed it was frowned upon, and yet there was a bold vision to improve the lot of the poor through evangelising, educating and lending practical assistance where necessary (See "Baptists and the Working classes in mid-Victorian Lancashire", by L. Lea in "Victoria n Lancashire", ed. Peter Bell). This is borne out by the early minutes of the Church Fellowship at Mills Hill and is liberally sprinkled by details of arrangements for relaxation and entertainment for the children which made life more exciting and pleasant for everyone (although involving a lot of hard work!)

By 1876 attendance at the Day School was approaching 300 and the idea of building a separate school was considered. It was proposed to start raising funds by holding a bazaar and materials were distributed to create items to sell. This was to be the inaugural year of the sewing class whose members helped to pay for new windows two years later, giving entertainments also,

along with the choir, to raise funds. A yearly fund-raising event came to be known as the Sale of Work which tradition continued for about 100 years, more to be disclosed later.

We are given a description of the Whit Saturday treat which for some years consisted of a visit to the Shrubbery at Firwood Hall, Mr Cheetham's house (see map of 1891). The teachers had erected swings there previously, courtesy of Isaac Wild. Provisions were listed meticulously in the Sunday School Minute Book (1863) and consisted of:

8 doz . lbs. of flour to be baked in currant buns

2 doz. lbs . of flour to be baked in plain tea cakes

9 x 4lbs . plain bread loaves

3lbs of tea

41bs of coffee

121bs of lump sugar

121bs of raw sugar

10lbs of new butter

3 quarts of afterings

10 quarts of milk

54 quarts of buttermilk

Resolved - that Mr Lees be requested to bake the currant buns

Resolved - that Mrs Partington be requested to bake the plain tea cakes and plain bread

Resolved - that E. Matthew and Thomas Bardsley and Isaac Wild be requested to make tea and coffee.

Resolved - that Mr R. Gregson superintend the arrangements,

Then follows a list of persons requested to act as waiters, 13 ladies in all beginning with Mrs. Gregson. The children and teachers were to leave the school at 1 o'clock and return at 5 o'clock. Games and races were organised - the prizes seem to have been nuts.

A Committee was set up for each of the events organised throughout the year. Typically, the Christmas Party catered for 250 with a similar menu. In 1864, it was resolved that "Mr Gregson look after the hewers of wood and drawers of water" and that "George Cheetham be superintendent of the decorations". It must have been a very busy scene as the Teachers bustled about, putting up the tables, buttering the tea cakes and bread and warming the place as best they could with one coal fire. The teachers sold tickets to help defray the costs, but it was made clear that if a child could not afford to pay, they were still encouraged to participate.

A gathering was also held on Good Friday and in 1865, 150 people were expected. Mrs Lees and Mrs Partington were once more delegated to bake the tea cakes and bread, this time several young men were asked to wait at the tables. The number of Believers Baptisms was growing rapidly as new members were witnessing their commitment to Christ at the new Church. Initially these events took place at the Church in Manchester Street, Oldham, but members decided it was time to have their own Baptistry and a fund was inaugurated. The work was completed in 1878 at a cost of £27.2.91/2d, and the pool is still in use today. The first existing record of a Baptism was in January 1891, the candidates being Mrs Mary Simpson, Annie Thornton, Edward Rushton, Timothy Ellis Jnr. , and another lady whose first name was Harriet.

The Sunday School teachers must have been an enterprising group, for it was they who requested permission from the Church to build the present retaining wall to the front and side. As can be seen on the photograph (on page 13) there was just an earth banking with wooden stakes for many years. This was completed in 1882 by Messrs. J & O Partington after more fund-raising and collections.

However, the costs of improvements to the building for the worshippers and children at Day School were a constant drain on Church Finances. The Treasurers report in 1879 was able to show a balance in hand of 1/2d , but the following year times were harder and the Pastor Rev. Wiggins was owed £10.4.6d. He consequently tendered his resignation in January to take effect on March 27th, on condition that he be paid at the rate of £1 per week till then. For the next nine years the Church was ministered by students from the Congregational and Baptist Colleges in Manchester.

The Government Inspectors report of the Day School in 1880, the year of the Education Act, was very complimentary. "Mills Hill again takes a very high position; the results of the examination are most satisfactory. The children are under good discipline, the elementary work on slates and on paper are accurate and both spelling and arithmetic are very strong subjects".

In 1886 it is minuted that a Church Committee took over the management of the Day School. Two years later the headmaster, Mr Bridge, and his assistant Miss Boothman, resigned to take up positions elsewhere. A lone voice moved that the school should be discontinued, but this was heavily defeated and the Church's commitment to the present and future cause of a Christian education was firmly established. Responsibility for running the Day School was handed over to the Chadderton School Board in 1893, but Church members were united in their determination to provide a new School with separate accommodation from the Church and up-to-date facilities. On June 24th 1898 they decided to step out in faith and a mortgage was obtained to purchase the land opposite the Church for the sum of £440. An appeal leaflet was sent to friends in the District stating their intention to build a new school and asking for support.

Chapter 6

Jubilee year 1895

"Faith without works is dead" - James Ch . 2, v.17

And so it was that 40 years after the commencement of the cause at Mills Hill the Church sent out a special appeal to friends in the District reminding them of the achievements of the past and inviting them to look to the future. With this in mind, it gave details of a "Grand Bazaar" to be held on October 17th, 18th and 19th "for the purpose of raising a considerable sum of money to form a nucleus for a Building Fund with a view to building a new school, larger than the present one, and to make the present building into a Chapel".

The circular explains that in 1873, after 24 years of effort to clear the heavy burden of paying the debt on the Church/School.

"The premises were in a very dilapidated condition. Not having a Boundary Wall, the cattle from the adjoining farm often came through the fence and trampled the graves, so the friends set again to work, and after a time sufficient money was obtained to build the Boundary Wall. Now again, the floor was causing much anxiety, for dry rot had done sad work with it and another effort was made, and money obtained to put in a New Floor, and to buy New Furniture.

"During the past few years we have plastered all the inside of the building; also put in New Stained Windows, rearranged the Gas Fittings, and lastly, beautified the building, and it is now more beautiful and bright than at any previous time. Thus, during the past 12 years £450 has been raised for special purposes.

We have also concluded, during the present year, the purchase of our Freehold at a cost of £250. Now, dear Friend, can you help us? You will see that we have undertaken a great responsibility, but by your help and God's blessing, we hope to accomplish all that we have set ourselves to do. We have the promise - "As thy day, so shall thy strength be."

Yours on behalf of the Jubilee Committee,

Henry Fairbrother (Treasurer)

William Simpson (Secretary)"

The Jubilee Bazaar was opened on the first day by Councillor Crapper, who had bought Mills Hill House, and by Councillor Chadwick on the next two occasions, so the appeal had the support of at least some of the Chadderton Board. Among the list of Patrons were Robert Ascroft M. P., J. F. Oswald Q.C., and M.P., J Partington JP., and Lord JP.

An "Old-Fashioned Sing" took place in the Church on Sunday August 11th, in the afternoon, at which the Preacher was the Rev. Hyland Webster, of Darwen. The appeal was the first effort on a grand scale to raise funds for the work of Church and School. It was followed over the years by many initiatives such as the Gilbert and Sullivan Society, operettas, tea parties with a theme such as the Japanese Cafe and of course the annual Sale of Work for which both men and women worked tirelessly all the year round, making toys, household goods, sewing, growing vegetables and flowers etc., for sale. Indeed, the Church in general has been criticised for being over-concerned with making money, but it has to be remembered that these were times when ordinary people had very little to spare and a few coppers from many pocket s added up to a lot more than churchgoers alone could supply. I think the achievements speak for themselves, and in any case the events served other purposes which perhaps we should consider in the 1990's. They offered an alternative family- style recreation to the pubs which were causing such misery in some households where the father was addicted to drink. There was a national movement called the Band of Hope, very strong in non-Conformist circles, and Mills Hill had a branch, affiliated to the Middleton Union. Some of the Music Hall songs of the time take up the theme of family suffering due to drunkenness, and of course it was one of the prime concerns of the Salvation Army.

Working-class life was hard, and it was all too common for men to want to drown their sorrows in drink; there were 11 public houses in Middleton Junction. But if the family could be enticed along to the innocent entertainment provided by the local Church or Sunday School there was a hope of something better. The main focus of the movement was on the children, believing that if they could become aware of other possibilities in life this would prevent them falling into the trap of degradation and despair in adult life. In the life of the Church, with its many interests and activities and goals, they were able to share in a variety of experiences, secular as well as religious which helped to shape character and develop skills to stand them in good stead later.

The Church and Sunday School were the hub of life for many families, offering the security of a spiritual belief in the afterlife at a time when many died young and life expectation was much shorter. In the Church minute book are several copies of letters sent to grieving partners and parents whose loved ones were taken from them prematurely.

Being a Christian does not provide exemption from suffering and grief, but feeling the nearness of a loving Heavenly Father and the support of a caring Fellowship of believers does give immense comfort. Even the Minister Rev. George Jones lost two children in May 1894, and

received a letter of Christian condolence and love from the Church. A trip round any churchyard dating back to the 19th century will make us grateful for the advances made in the prevention and treatment of disease and illness.

After 41/2years at Mills Hill the Rev. Jones resigned in 1895 and the Church called Rev. Frederick Oliver to the Pastorate in 1897 from Meltham, Huddersfield. In his letter of acceptance he wrote "Like Carey, I expect great things from God and will attempt great things for God." and the period of his Ministry was indeed one of vigorous growth and development of the Church. His initial salary was £85 per annum plus a grant of £20 from the Pastoral augmentation Society, however, by the next year the Church was able to pay him £100. It seems that having new leadership and the challenge of building a new school injected new life into the Fellowship. The numbers of Scholars in Sunday School rose from 258 to 330 with 26 teachers, and the offertory doubled from £37/8/2d. to £75/2/101/2d. in the next two years. Another appeal was sent out to the community in 1899, pointing out that there were "great inconveniences sometimes arising from the same place being used for so many different purposes ". In particular, the school had to be closed every time there was a funeral, and of course this led to disruption of the children's education, giving the Education Committee cause to complain.

On June 24th 1898, following a meeting of the men members. (women were not yet emancipated !) the Trustees resolved to raise a mortgage of £440 on the Chapel and land "for the purpose of buying a piece of land opposite on which to erect a new school". Apparently the Education Committee was applying pressure on the Church to get started and for a short time they withdrew all financial support. This meant that the parents from Chadderton and Oldham whose children attended Day School had to pay fees for the first time. Middleton children had been paying previously because there was no school Board rate drawn from that town.

The men of the Church began digging the foundations in 1901, the end of Queen Victoria's reign, and at last, on May 5th, 1902. a ceremony took place on the "cutting of the first sod of the New School Building" . Plans had been quickly drawn up and accepted by the Education Department for a "one-story building, containing a space of 84ft. x 64ft. with 4 classrooms, 2 on each side of a large central hall intended to seat 350 persons. Each classroom is to accommodate 60 persons and 2 more are planned for a later date adding to the area of the hall and giving accommodation for 500. (These were never built). On each side of the entrance are cloakrooms, whilst at each end of the building is a playground for the children. The building is to cost a sum of about £2,300 and is to be of Gothic character. Towards that sum, already about £540 has been got together".

(Remembering that the Minister's stipend at that time was £100, I suppose you can multiply these figures by at least 100 to appreciate the modern equivalent. If we today had raised

£54,000 in order to begin the work, it would mean we had still to find £176. 000 to complete! Those of us who were involved with rebuilding the Church in 1981 will acknowledge the financial challenge facing the members in 1902 - no doubt there were some who were quaking in their shoes!).

Anyway, the determination was sufficient to overcome the fears. Mr S. Burgess of Middleton Road was chosen to cut the first sod. He was financial Secretary and Treasurer and Choirmaster of the Church and held the position of Schools Inspector for Chadderton, so could represent the Council as well as the Church. He had been organist for 28 years until 1894 and his son, J . W. Burgess who was also a Deacon , was to become the first Headmaster of the new Day School when completed . In 1903 the Diaconate was unable to find enough money to pay the bills to continue the job, and Mr Burgess Senior helped out by offering an interest-free loan of £430 for 5 years (multiply by at least 100 to find the equivalent amount today).

The loan was still not fully repaid in 1908, when he passed away, and was paid in instalments to his family when possible. The Baptist Building Society came up with a loan of £400 in 1905 which helped to settle some of the debts, but it was a heavy burden for the Deacons for many years . The Rev. Oliver had resigned in 1902 before building began, presumably he could see that the Church would be struggling for finances for some time to come. A farewell party was held, a presentation given, and he and his wife transferred their membership to Astley Bridge Baptist Church, Bolton. Unfortunately, the mainly self-financing structure of Baptist Churches does sometimes force these difficult decisions but it also creates a strength and determination to see things through which can be lacking where finances are arranged by the Diocese, as in other denominations. There seems to have been some pressure by the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of the Baptist Union for the Church to share a pastorate with the nearest Baptist Chapel in Temple Street, Middleton. This was put to a vote by the members, after prayer, and accepted but the Church did not feel able to promise more than £40 p.a. towards the stipend. Nothing further is recorded on this matter.

A newspaper item recorded this speech by Mr W. Simpson, Secretary to the Building Committee, which expresses the feelings of the friends at the ceremony -

(He) "Felt that the scheme on which they were now embarking was a gigantic undertaking – one which they had looked forward to with interest for many days. It had been said that Mills Hill in the past was scarcely anywhere - they were outside Middleton Junction; they were isolated and a good distance from Oldham and it could, a year or two ago, scarcely be said where they were. But now with the electric cars (trams) bowling past, a large jam works in front of them , and houses he could almost say springing up like mushrooms, they were beginning to make themselves known and felt."

After the ceremony, work began on digging the foundations for the new school, undertaken by the men of the Church as seen on the photograph. The picture speaks for itself as to the hard work and commitment of these dedicated Christians.

Only six weeks later, Saturday June 21st, 1902, the foundation stones were laid by the following men and women :-

Miss McDougall

Mrs. B. Crapper

Mrs. R. K. Hartley

Miss Inchboard

B. Taylor Esq.

W. Mallinson Esq.

A. Wolstencroft Esq.

S. Burgess Esq.

(on behalf of Church and congregation)

Mrs H. Fairbrother W. Simpson Esq.

(on behalf of the Sunday School)

(Their initials are carved in stone on the front wall of the school, unfortunately some have become illegible due to weathering).

A procession involving friends from Temple Street Baptist, Middleton Junction Wesleyan, Jumbo Primitive Methodist as well as Mills Hill and led by the Middleton Junction Brass Band wound its way down Oldham Road, Sandy Lane, Grimshaw Lane, Green Lane and up Mill s Hill Road "to the site".

As ever, tea was provided at 5 o'clock, followed by a meeting and an address given by the Principal of the Manchester Baptist College and other Ministers and friends.

Chapter 7

"With God All Things Are Possible"

Luke Chapter 19 v 27

As soon as the building work was under way Deacons and members began planning the interior arrangement of the Church, which had not been possible when it was used as a Day School. The Chadderton School Board was requested to remove their furniture as soon as convenient and ten pews were ordered from Robinsons of Padiham at a cost of £70, the remainder of the seating to consist of forms. The layout was quite different from that of today. The Communion platform was between the two entrance doors and the choir and organ were on a gallery above it. Three rows of pews were facing the platform with two aisles down the centre. It could be rather daunting for those entering late as all eyes were upon you! *(see photo taken in 1950's showing interior of Church as it was prior to 1981).*

The timber for the Communion dais was promised by Mr. S. Burgess and his son provided wood for the rails and pillars. A subscription list was opened for the Communion table and chairs, and Mr. Haslam was to make them. It was resolved at the same meeting that from now on the building was to be known as a chapel, but this was not often adhered to in practice judging from old printed programmes of events etc. The chapel was closed for a short time whilst work was in progress and we can imagine the great joy felt by the fellowship after all the years of worshipping amongst the paraphernalia of classroom equipment, to have the place arranged permanently as a Church.

That year, 1903, was a very busy one indeed. There were big events almost every month as well as the normal teaching and services, with the planning and organisation essential for success, and there was no Minister at the helm for guidance. Each of the groups within the Church contributed to the life of the Church throughout the year starting on New Year's Day with the Sunday School childrens' annual party with games and a visit from Father Christmas. followed by the Churches tea party before the evening AGM on the first Saturday in January. The Choir held a social during the month and members were given a present by the Choirmaster. Books were distributed to the Sunday School children at a special service as an incentive to attend regularly, and the men held a party with entertainment consisting of songs, glees, Lancashire readings, piano and violin solos.

A tea party, concert and stall was held in March, and April 25th saw the official opening of the new Sunday School by Councillor T. Wade of Middleton Junction. Addresses were given after tea, the principal speaker being Rev.J.E. Roberts, Moderator of the Lancashire and Cheshire

Association of Baptist Churches. May was the month for the annual Whit Saturday Procession of Witness followed by childrens' games, and the Sunday School outing. An innovation round about this time was a trip on the electric tram to Heaton Park. The cost, to include hot water, tea and sugar, was 4d. (less than 2p) for classes 1-5 and 6d(2 ½ p) for classes 6-8. July 12th saw the 58th Anniversary celebration of the work of the Sunday School in the newly reopened Church, at which the preacher was the Rev. Stuart Caldwell of Oldham. During the early Autumn it was preparation time for the big fund-raising event, the Sale of Work and Fancy Fair held in October which was to be so important for the next 20 years or so to pay off the huge debt for the school. And of course the annual Harvest Thanksgiving Services and supper, after which the produce donated was distributed round the District to the elderly and the sick.

The Sunday School Christmas Party held on Christmas Day was a real family affair, and must have had a special gaiety about it that year, for it was held in the new school for the first time. There were musical items by various individuals. Some serious such as "City of Light" by Miss A. Gardner and some light-hearted like "Pussy in the Well" sung by some of the men stalwarts, Messrs. Gresty, Gardner, Stott and Bentley. The choir also performed items and finally there was a play entitled appropriately enough "The Factory Girl ". Tickets were priced 1/-d (5p) for tea and entertainment, or 6d (2 1/2p) if you came just for the fun. It seems to compare well with the 1990's Christmas spent eating too much food and watching TV experienced by many families today!

There was support and fellowship with other Churches too, particularly in Middleton Junction. The Wesleyans lent their chapel for a performance of the oratorio "Elijah" by Mendelssohn in October 1902, given by members of the Halle choir. Admission was by programme, 2/-d (10p) and proceeds were in aid of the Mills Hill School building fund. What a grand idea - but then none but the best would do in the service of God! This chapel stood on the corner of Grimshaw Lane and Potts Street with its Day School (built 1873) next to it. They were both quite large buildings, expensive to heat and maintain, and much of the finances of the Church were dependent on the grant from the Oldham Education Authority for use of the school. Unfortunately, after this was withdrawn in 1967 the congregation could no longer afford to carry on and sadly the last service was held in April 1970.

There was also the Primitive Methodist Chapel (known as Jumbo (1868-1966) on Grimshaw Lane, on ground which is now the car park for the Jumbo social centre. In the 1930's all Methodist churches were united under the one name, but locally the old names survived. For 100 years or more these fellowships were the core of that community, providing spiritual and moral welfare, Christian teaching and education and a vigorous, creative social life. Whilst no-one would pretend that all was perfect, at least it was possible to leave one's door unlocked at night and it was safe to walk the streets.

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point of the mushroom growth of industrial building at that time in the area of Mills Hill Road. From being the boggy country lane of Miss Gregson's youth it now echoed to the sound of hundreds of marching clogs early every working day and evening as the mill-workers went to and fro past the Church and school. The Firwood Mill employed 500 operatives from the mid-1800's and these were added to by the workers at the Boundary Mill in 1860, which stood at right angles to the road where the Waterford Dairy (ex Co-op) now stands (it was demolished in the early 1930's).

Next to the Boundary Mill site is the Malta built in 1905, which ceased production in 1963 and now stands empty. The Laurel Mill further down, was built in 1905, and ceased production two years after Courtalds bought it in 1964. During the war it was annexed by A. V. Roe for aircraft parts manufacture. The Baytree Mill, next to it, was a fine spinning mill until 1959. These two mills with their massive floor areas were used for other trades, storage and distribution until quite recently.

In addition to the hundreds employed in the cotton mills in 1896 the C.W.S. Ltd. opened a 9 acre site next to the Church for the manufacture of jam, pickles, preserves, canned and bottled fruits, mincemeat and Christmas puddings! (This has now been bought and expanded by the manufacturer of Sarsons Vinegars). At the back of the Church, beyond the railway lines is the Co-op mineral factory which makes aerated drinks. It can be seen that for more than 100 years, local work was plentiful. Generally, people did not need to travel very far to work, and neighbourhood bonds were very strong - people worked, played and worshipped together and knew each other well. Family bonds were also strong, young people tended to find partners within the local community and stayed there to rear their own children. It is not difficult to imagine the sense of pride and achievement which must have been felt by everybody in the area when the school was opened, for many of them had either been involved in the project, had supported it in some way or were close to someone who had.

But even as the friends at Mills Hill were rejoicing in the fulfilment of their dreams, an Education Act was passed in 1902 which was to affect its financial security and prove a source of conflict for many years to come. The Act placed control of the school into the hands of the local Authority who were then obliged to pay 5/ 6 of the running expenses, which covered mainly the teachers' salaries, and the Trustees, appointed by the Church, paid the remainder. Between 1902 and 1906 the Trustees purchased furnishings, books etc. "for the purpose of educating the children" amounting to about £150. However, the Chadderton Authority refused to pay any rent to the Church as they had done previously, and which obviously the Church had been expecting to continue. It was a large building, expensive to heat and light, the caretaker was paid £39 per annum and there were maintenance and decoration costs to bear. It was 1908 before the Trustees were able to negotiate a rent of £150 a year and during this time the

mortgage debt was becoming an increasingly heavy burden, despite the vigorous fund-raising to pay it off. Matters came to a head when the Authority gave notice in 1910 that the Day School would close the following year, and the Church had no way of preventing this happening. When a deputation was sent to meet the Education Committee by appointment they were interviewed by only one man, who indicated quite abruptly that £150 per year was too high a rent and it had been decided to build a new school anyway. So the children were directed to alternative schools. Either Eustace Street in Chadderton or Elm Street in Middleton (to whom the Chadderton Authority had to pay 10/-d (50p) per year per child) and the teachers redeployed elsewhere.

There was a great uproar in the district about the closure. A petition bearing many names was sent to the Clerk of the Council, Mr Whitehead and a Ratepayer 's Protest Meeting was called, which was attended by 200 or so angry parents and residents. The local newspaper took up the story and gave its backing to the Church managers when the situation was explained by Mr Mugg, the Chairman, on behalf of the school managers. Despite the tremendous local support, all the Council offered was a reduced rent of £ 100 per year and a statement that the reason for closure was that Mills Hill was a "border school" (i.e. on the boundary of Chadderton) and they had decided to build a new one more central to the district. At this, parents protested that the education given at Mills Hill was good. One letter quoting figures for the County Council scholarships - 21children from Chadderton had sat the exam. 7 had passed. And of these 5 were from Mills Hill. Others pointed out that the school had a good health record, having only once been closed for an outbreak of measles (childhood infections and diseases were life-threatening in the days before vaccination and many children died of ailments we consider minor these days. The new spacious well- ventilated school would help to prevent the spread of infection).

At last the Trustees gave in to the dispossessed parents and accepted the reduced rent with the added burden of financial debt so that the children could return to the school and their education so unfortunately interrupted. The parents Protest Committee delivered a heartfelt thanks to the Church managers at their last meeting.

Soon afterwards at the Sale of Work in October 1911, Councillor Grundy, J.P. of Middleton, the Opener, referred to have been very impressed by the sight, some years earlier, of the young men of the Church digging the foundations of the new building on their "Saturday afternoon's holiday". He thought then that it was "an exhibition of muscular Christianity".

In 1911 there were 490 scholars on the Sunday School registers. 96 names are listed on the programme as stall-holders on the refreshment, Young Men's Group, Congregational, Young Ladies, Children, Scholars, Flower and Ice-Cream Stalls. Total receipts amount to £ 190.

The following month the Parkinson family of Barton-upon-Irwell gave their popular Travelgram entertainment, on tour with the Camera through Norway in limelight picture, story, song and music. One wonders whether this enterprising family, on their travels through Europe, could have foreseen the horror that was to engulf the continent in three years' time, bringing death, destruction and grief to millions of families, including some of those who had been scholars in Sunday School or Day School.

Chapter 8

“The Valley Of the Shadow”

Psalm 23

From time to time after the new school was built the question of the Pastorate at Mills Hill was raised by Deacons and Church members at meetings, but after studying the current finances and praying together the matter was left in abeyance. The school was becoming a focal point for the community, being let out for all sorts of occasions for a fee i.e.

Middleton Junction Brass Band Rehearsals		
Wedding celebrations	15/-	(75p)
Funeral teas	5/-	(25 p)
Inquests	2/6d	(12 ½ d)
Shop meetings - per hour Co	2/6d	(12 ½ d)
Cooperative Penny Bank - per annum	£2/0/0d	
Political meetings and lectures	15/-	(75p)
Concert s (extra for care taker)	15/-	(75p)

Nevertheless, strict control was exercised over the purpose and conduct of the letting - it "must be consistent with the objectives for which the school was built and such activities as Dancing, Skating, Gambling and Smoking (except in a room provided for the purpose) are not allowed”. Despite having no Spiritual leader in the form of an ordained Minister, there were 10 candidates for Baptism in 1904 following instruction in Baptist principles. Students from the Baptist College in Manchester often came to preach and lead the worship and did their best to fill the gap. However, the Church remained in the grip of financial pressures for the next seven years or so and perhaps spiritual matters tended to take a back seat until 1911 when it was decided to hold an outdoor evangelical mission on Middleton Road, facing Brompton Terrace. This was led by several students. The leader being Mr D. G. Sutherland assisted by Mr Whalley. They began with a prayer meeting and continued to hold services each evening for nine days with 3 meetings on the 2 Sundays. 2,000 leaflets were printed advertising the gatherings and 1and half gross of the Mission hymnals. Singing was led by the Salvation Army Band and Mills Hill choir.

It seems that the effort was rewarded, for a spiritual revival and a new determination to call a Minister is to be discerned in the minutes and four new candidates for Baptism came forward at the end of the month.

But the Deacons were growing weary over the financial wrangling with the Education Committee and Mr James Mugg indicated his intention of retiring from the position of Financial Secretary and Treasurer at the end of the year. The Secretary Mr. Nicholls also gave notice of retiring and it became apparent how needful the Church was of spiritual leadership.

Accordingly the Deacons began to study the lists of Ministers looking for a Pastorate and some were invited to come and preach "with a view" . However Christmas came and went with no decision taken but a grand rendering of "Messiah" with a choir of 50 .

At the January Annual General Meeting of 1912, Mr Mugg, far from taking a break from the worries was appointed Chairman of meetings in addition to the job of secretary. His loyalty and personal sacrifice are made apparent in the letter of sympathy sent to Mr and Mrs Mugg "in the long illness of their son" Only another Church secretary can appreciate the hours of work involved particularly when there is no Minister to lead the fellowship and the pulpit has to be filled each week by suitable preachers.

By the end of 1912 the remainder of the loan owing to the Burgess family was at last repaid and an organ fund was inaugurated.

The following February the Church invited Rev. Edwin Jones of Barmouth to become Pastor, but he felt could not accept because the vote was not unanimous (44 for, 16 against). The reply was received with "mixed feelings" and the meeting closed with prayers for guidance. Following that, the disappointment and lack of direction were demonstrated by poor attendance at meetings and a general loss of enthusiasm. It is evident that the conflict within the membership arose because of continuing problems with finances due to the new school and the Deacons had a difficult task to promote confidence and allay fears. A further interest -free loan was obtained from the Baptist Church building fund which was then used to pay off the debt from the Oldham Sunday School Union. This body had apparently been applying for repayment to honour the agreement made years before which seemed to have involved the payment of quite a large sum in Income Tax. Once this debt was settled the Deacons called a special meeting to discuss the general "disinterestedness" prevailing throughout the fellowship.

Having faced the problem in unity at last, a month later a unanimous decision was taken to invite the Rev. J. Yeomans of Lossiemouth, Scotland to become Pastor of Mills Hill and a new spirit of hope shone through the hard -pressed friends. Rev. and Mrs Yeoman accepted the call and about 250 members of the fellowship attended an "At Home" to welcome their long awaited man of God and his family. The next few months were fairly bristling with energy and

evangelical enthusiasm. Congregations were reported as "exceedingly good" for a series of sermons he preached in March and April, particularly one entitled "Why be a Christian? " and later "Why should we join the Church?". At the Christian Endeavour Anniversary services he preached on "The Waters wear away the Sins" and "Things that accomplish Salvation".

The Band of Hope, the Temperance organisation, was still very active and the children presented an operetta "The Magic Key" in April. The Church outing to Hardcastle Craggs on Easter Monday was very enjoyable (even though it rained!) - about 60 people went by train from Middleton Junction station. The football team played a match with the young men of a Church in Bury and won, tea was provided by the young ladies and a concert followed. The married ladies gave tea and an entertainment to an audience of 330 and gave the proceeds £12 to the organ fund, now standing at £100. And all this in one month - April!

May saw the annual Procession of Witness on Whit Saturday comprising about 400 teachers and scholars and the Church was then closed for "beautifying" and improvements by Mr Webster with a tender of £71. About 50 choir members went to Whalley by train and then took wagonettes to Mytton Church thence to Stoneyhurst College and Clitheroe. "Here an excellent tea was provided after which the choir gave a short programme of music concluding with the Hallelujah chorus to a good audience". The next day saw the Church reopened to special music by the choir and large congregations assembled to hear Rev. Yeoman's address.

In July three young men of the Sunday School were baptised during the week, followed by the Anniversary. This began with a procession at 9am led by the Middleton Junction brass band and special music was given by the children at each of the three services. The Band of Hope went on a picnic to Heaton Park on the 25th travelling by special cars but the Tennis Clubs' ramble had to be postponed due to bad weather. But far worse storm clouds were gathering in Serbia in July of 1914 triggered by the murder of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo . War broke out in August which was to blight the whole of Europe for many years to come and which tested the faith and indeed the stamina of the Minister. Deacons and members of the Church family at Mills Hill as it did throughout the country. Rev. Yeomans took a very positive stance immediately and in August preached with "passionate earnestness" on the "huge German military system which is a menace to civilisation". He later entitled another sermon "The Kaiser or Christ. Which?" and compared the Kaiser to Herod in the slaughter of the innocents, after which the choir sang the Belgian national anthem.

Several young men of the Church enlisted in the War and it was decided in November to have a Roll Call at the end of evening service to keep the Church in touch with the news of their progress. Next March a newspaper cutting tells of a "touching little ceremony" when those young men who had joined the Oldham Pals were presented with New Testament Bibles by Mr. Coates Superintendant of the Sunday School, on behalf of the teachers. They had been

stationed at Chadderton camp (where the Rydal Avenue Estate now stands) and were bound for Llanfairfechan before being sent to the battlefields. Mr Coates said "A large number of our young men have offered themselves for their country's service, some of whom are now fighting in the trenches. We are exceedingly proud of them and wish them all a speedy and safe return." There must have been some very heavy hearts the following Sunday when the sermon was delivered appropriately, "The afflictions of God".

In April Rev. Yeomans received honorary certificates for studies in advanced Hebrew Archaeology, New Testament Greek and Exegesis. He was already a Fellow of the Society for Archaeological and Biblical research. Little did he realise at the peak of his success how soon he was to be tested. Two months later on June 6th 1915 the congregation stood silently at the end of Communion and were given the following news:-

"It is with profound regret that we learn of the death of Lance-Corporal William Algernon Yeomans, son of our Pastor having fallen on the field of battle whilst serving his King and country. We desire to place on record our deepest sympathy with Mr & Mrs Yeomans in their sad bereavement and sincerely pray that every comfort and consolation may be vouchsafed to them by the God of all Grace and Love".

William was 19 years of age. a regular soldier with the 1st Seaforth Highlanders, serving in France at the time of his death.

As time went on the war impinged more and more on the life and activities of the Church. The school was used for drilling by members of the Citizens Defence Corps. being the only building large enough in the vicinity. The Church contributed regularly to the National War Fund for the relief of those affected and a box in the porch was for donations to the Red Cross augmented by money raised by special concerts and efforts.

In 1915 a Red Cross hospital was opened in the Providence Sunday School, Middleton (now sadly closed) and the young ladies of Mills Hill organised an event to "bring them some cheer". 32 wounded men and their nurses who attended were given a "splendid tea" followed by games and singing and left with gifts of cigarettes and chocolate. The young ladies also contributed £5 towards the purchase of another hospital bed and £2 to the comforts section of the local Red Cross branch. Harvest produce was given to the wounded soldiers instead of the sick and elderly of the District.

As the war wore on it became necessary to restrict the use of coal and gas due to the declining numbers of miners and social gatherings had to terminate by 10pm, yet a very rich community and family life still continued within the fellowship. There was the shared comfort of praying together and the hope of Christians that better things were to come, the continuity of seasonal celebrations and the need to keep busy with normal activities to assure the continuation of

Church and school when hostilities ceased. With most of the fit young men on active service, though, the older men and women had to tackle work previously done by others such as setting up and putting away school furniture trestle tables and forms etc.

One new initiative was the choirs' Cafe and Operetta. This was the menu:

Served in Café			
Jellied Pies	3d	Fancy cakes (assorted)	1d
Buttered scones	2d	Jellies or Blancmange	1d per plate
Trifle	4d	Tea	1d per cup
Mineral waters	1 1/2 d		
Chocolates and other sweetmeats can be obtained from the Waitresses at reasonable prices.			
Served in Supper-room only			
Hot meat pies and potatoes		4d per plate	
Peas		1d per plate	
Tea or Coffee		1d per cup	
Notice - Musical items will be rendered at intervals.			
Request - Will Patrons please endeavour to be as quiet as possible during the time the Artists are rendering their various items?			

Despite the war there were still seven annual parties of different kinds for the Church, Sunday School and choir. The Sale of Work had to continue as the main fund-raising event to pay off the debt and the Parkinson family still came to entertain, with their glimpses of a Britain as yet foreign to most people who rarely travelled out of their own area.

Fund-raising was becoming increasingly difficult as many families lost their main breadwinner to the war. In 1915 the new caretaker's wife, Mrs Turner, asked for permission to hold a Christmas party for needy children in the district. I suppose she was in a position to pick out those families who were suffering privation and hardship. This was a custom which continued many years, as well as the Christmas parties for the Church's own organisations.

By 1916 finances were once more becoming desperate. The debt seemed a bottomless pit and the Deacons were so despondent that two of them offered their resignations. Iron railings, gates, wood fencing and walling for the school perimeters were now essential for the childrens' safety, and the Deacons were pressed into asking for help from the Pastors sustentation fund. The Superintendent of the Baptist Union came to visit and was sympathetic but unable to help in the current economic climate. The Choir and Sunday School held events quickly and raised £6/5/0d but this was a drop in the ocean and Rev. Yeomans sadly took the decision to terminate his Ministry in October 1916.

One of the last services he took, on July 22nd, was a happy event - the opening of the new organ which had been so long-awaited. The organ builder was T. Pendlebury, of Leigh. He used the original outer case and a few of the old pipes, but the rest was entirely new. A memorial tablet inscribed with the name of the late Samuel Burgess, organist and choir master for many years as well as benefactor, was placed on the organ. How happy he would have been to play on it.

In fact, the organist Mr J. T. Smith had to resign because he was a member of the Citizens Defence Corps and had to take part in the Sunday drilling. The Church applied to the Chadderton Tribunal for exemption, but it was refused. Far more serious was the position of a student Minister called to the Pastorate at Mills Hill in June 1917. W.A.Pearson was studying at Manchester Baptist College when it was requisitioned for war use and the students were given placements in Churches on the understanding that they would be exempt from military service. However, an appeal was made to the Lancashire Tribunal and he was ordered to report for duty on July 31st. The Church asked for him to be given work of national importance so that he could continue with the Pastorate but this was refused. Being a Pacifist his conscience would not allow him to fight so he was confined to Wormwood Scrubs Prison until the following March. He came back to preach for the first time in his Church on May 12th 1918 but was still subject to work conditions imposed by the Home Office.

The Education Committee in Chadderton at last were persuaded that an increase in rent for the school was essential due to the rise in the price of fuel and general increase in the cost of living during the war. The caretaker was now a Mr Rushton and he was given a rise of 5/- (25 p) per week but had to carry out sexton duties without extra payment as part of the job.

That summer of 1918 the Church subscribed to the Prisoners of War Fund knowing that some of its own boys were held in this way.

Finally, on November 11th, came the end of the "war to end all wars" and the survivors and the wounded returned to the bosom of their families and their Churches to resume some kind of normality after the carnage and horror which left millions dead and was to change society forever.

Every year on Remembrance Sunday the names of the men who died during the war or afterwards due to wounds are read out in Mills Hill Church so that their ultimate sacrifice will not be forgotten. They are as follows :

<u>Killed in Action</u>	<u>Died on Services</u>
Bentley, Joseph C.	Jessop, Fred
Blackman, Harry	Wood, Brierley
Bottomley, Samuel	
Cook. C. A.	<u>Died after Discharge</u>
Crossley, Wilfred	Heyes, Tom
Curran, Eli	Newsham, James
Duckworth, William	Pickering, Ernest
Newton, John	Smith, Albert
Newton, George	Wood, Frank
Prendergast, Alfred	
Simpson. Harry	
Sowden, Robert	
Turner, Willie	

As well as those who lost their lives 119 men of the Church, some little more than boys at the outset of the War, served in some capacity to liberate Europe from the grip of tyranny and evil. It is impossible to be involved or even to live through such privations without changes taking

place in ideals, morals and even faith - it will either deepen or be lost. We shall see what was the outcome at Mills Hill as the threads of normality began to return with the men folk who came back.

Chapter 9

"Be not overcome of Evil, but overcome Evil with Good"

Roman s Ch. 12 v. 2

Although the Church at Mills Hill had faced many troubles during the War, it had not suffered the destruction of some areas. The Baptist Church at Hartlepool had been bombed by the German fleet in 1914 and a donation towards rebuilding was sent as soon as hostilities ceased. At home, the hard-pressed and mainly elderly Diaconate proposed a sharing of the workload in the form of an elected Church Committee of 7 members to consider all business matters. For the first time 3 ladies served on this committee - a move towards equality which was typical of attitudes in general after the Great War. A finance committee was also created, and the Diaconate enlarged to 6 - also including a lady, Mrs. Nicholls.

The peoples of Europe were determined to ensure a lasting peace after the death and destruction all over the continent, and at home the Church Secretary Mr Mugg gave an address on the question of the proposed League of Nations, a body known now as United Nations Organisation which is still striving to keep the peace in troubled areas. Churches throughout the country, as at Mills Hill, prayed fervently then and continue to pray constantly that the time will soon come when nations will be united in love and peace and "swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks" as prophesied in the Old Testament. When the nations signed the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919 the Church held a Thanksgiving Service and planning for the future began in earnest. There were 10 Baptisms that Spring; despite the horrors of war the people had not lost their faith in the love of God.

The student pastor Mr. Pearson was released from Wormwood Scrubs and sent to Knutsford gaol after the war, where he was visited by some of the young people from Mills Hill who admired his stand against aggression. He had hoped to continue his studies at the college on release from prison, that he might be ordained as a Minister, and the Church unanimously supported him in this, offering to pay his salary in the meantime. But the feelings against conscientious objectors was so strong, even at the college, that they would not accept him back. He resigned in December 1919 when his father died in Bradford, having to support his mother and sister. Those who remember him do so with great affection and sympathy for the treatment he received because he held steadfast to his Christian belief in peace. The Church in a letter to him expressed a "deep feeling of sorrow at circumstances arising which severs a

Pastor from a loving flock, his ministry with us for the past 21 years having been most fruitful and blest".

Another event on a lighter note that year was a request from the Recreation and Social Club. They asked for permission to dig out a room underneath the school, at the back, for the purpose of an Institute. Permission was granted, a committee of 3 elected to superintend the work, and the Church agreed to pay for materials.

There was some concern expressed however, about erosion of land to the rear of the school, and the Rochdale Canal Engineer suggested that a permanent wall should be erected behind the building and the canal temporarily staked.

The new Diaconate resolved to organise the sick visiting properly, and this was done by allocating a district to a volunteer with information about the sick and elderly within it. The Wednesday night services continued to be led by Deacons. Committee members, Mr Mugg and college students - the first one was taken by Miss E. Gardner. The young people were now becoming increasingly determined to enjoy more social and sports activities supported by the Church and Sunday School. The men members of the Church Committee met with the Committee of the Recreation Club to discuss their proposed rules to govern games etc. but permission to hold dances was refused, albeit politely.

Finances were still giving cause for concern. In 1920 the Education Authority was still only paying £9 rent per month and the caretaker's wage alone was nearly £12. The offertory at that time was around £15 per month, but there were two buildings to heat, light, decorate and maintain as well as pulpit expenses and publicity materials etc. When the Canal Company submitted their bill for £56 general consternation ensued, and the various sections of the Church and school i.e. married ladies, young men, young ladies Recreation and Athletic Club were all asked to consider giving financial aid to the Church, which they did.

The local authority finally recognised their responsibility in December and granted £90 towards the loss on the school in the previous year. The Baptist building fund was again approached for a loan and the Church prayed together after morning services on the matter of calling another Minister.

But despite local difficulties a Church must respond to appeals for help outside its four walls and a request was met for donations to "Save the Children Fund" initiated by the Council of Christian congregations for the aid of the many children left homeless, orphaned and injured in the wake of the war. It was also decided to honour those of the Church who served and lost their lives in the battle and a fund was opened for a stained glass window. This was installed in May 1922 when a special ceremony was held. (This window depicting the Resurrection of Christ, was destroyed in the fire of 1981 and has been replaced by a different design).

By the end of 1921 following the annual Sale of Work. At last the debt on the Sunday School was cleared. The Deacons conveyed "their deep gratitude to God for His help, and to the building committee first appointed in 1898 for the purpose of obtaining monies in order to construct and equip a new school. "A total of £4.73 had been raised in addition to many grants at times when the Church was in need of financial aid. I suppose we could add at least two noughts to that figure to comprehend the amount today.

Soon afterwards Mr Dawson, Headmaster of the day-school was thanked for his work and best wishes and prayers given for his safety and progress in his new job in Natal. S. Africa. Early 1922 brought a request from 20 children and young people for a new class to be formed "to teach them a fuller knowledge of Jesus Christ". Their teacher was to be Miss Lealand, a day school teacher who was also a Church member, illustrating at its best the link between Church and school. As a direct result later that year, 7 young candidates were Baptised into the Church, including members of the Hardwick family who were to play an influential role later.

But there were sad events that year too. In June the tragic death was reported of Mr I.W. Burgess, son of Sam who following in his father's footsteps, had given gladly a lifetimes service to the Lord. He had been a Church member for 35 years, a Deacon for 20 years a Sunday school teacher for 15. He had gone to Llangollen to convalesce after an illness, slipped and received a fatal blow to the head. Soon after Mr and Mrs Mugg's only son, Stanley, died whilst quite a young man and Mr. B. Crapper of Mills Hill House, also passed away. Only one month before he had unveiled the War Memorial window. After his death his widow paid the outstanding amount. £12/ 15/Od out of a total of £331. She left the house and gave several items to the Church and Athletic Society - garden forms and chairs, lawn mower and roller, ½ size billiard table with accessories, tennis equipment, garden tools, golf clubs and balls and a set of bowls.

In November, confident again, the Church made an offer of £1,100 for Mills Hill House. The intention was eventually to use it for a manse and caretaker's living accommodation. Mention was also made that if at some time in the future the Church proved too small, there would be room to extend. The purchase was achieved by yet another loan, which will partially offset in the early days by the rent paid by the tenant Mr Brooks, official of the Ministry of Health, who stayed until 1926 retaining the maids. When he left, the house was divided into two as planned, and the hay loft above the stables at the back was converted into what became known rather grandly as the Assembly Rooms, where I remember attending the Primary department of the Sunday School from about 1945. The Church had come full circle in this building in its 80 years or so, for this is where it is believed the Sunday School first met and services were held in 1845.

There were other parallels to be drawn in the growth of believers too. As in the early days, many were baptised and 30 new members joined the Church in the year 1922-23. By September, the Church fellowship felt it light to call a new Minister, Rev.W.H. Jones of Glendwr

Baptist Church Llanhilleth, at a salary of £250 to be met by Mills Hill. The tenancy of Firwood House was obtained for Mr. & Mrs. Jones at a rent of £1.0.0d per week (inclusive of rates) and the Church was ready to beg in another chapter of teaching and preaching the word of God and serving the community in a tremendous variety of ways, with gusto and generosity.

Chapter 10

"Safer Than a Known Way"

"And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown".

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God .
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way".

by Minnie Haskins

A new phenomenon to be seen in Churches throughout the area after the 1914 War was the birth of a very flourishing and vital social life. This was the first generation of young working people with time and energy to spare for, whilst their hours at work were long in comparison with today, they were shorter than previous generations had experienced. Better education, opportunities for travel and communications had gradually opened new vistas for exchange of ideas, and expectations were generally higher for a more socially and culturally satisfying lifestyle. Women had greater freedom of opportunity due to the suffragette movement plus the emancipation which followed their contribution to the war effort.

The elders of the Church were inundated with requests for help throughout the 1920's in particular, whilst many groups of young people worked hard to get things off the ground. I imagine also that the older generation were keen to encourage their children to enjoy life to the full, having endured the loss of so many young lives only a few years before.

One of the first recorded requests in the minute book was for a loan to the cricket club who wished to buy an ex-army hut from the camp field to use as a pavilion. This was readily agreed, and the young ladies quickly sewed some smart red curtains for the windows. It was sited on a rented field near Mills Hill Bridge, between the canal and River Irk, and teas were served from it every Saturday afternoon after the matches.

One of the mainstays of the cricket team was Mr. J. Jameson, father of Mrs Dora Lawley who is a Church member. He was an administrator of the Middleton and District Sunday School league and donated a cup to be presented annually to the winning team. His grandson Malcolm Hilton

went to play for Lancashire and England and had the distinction of bowling out the great Don Bradman later in his career.

The tennis section was formed in 1930 and shared 5 courts with Healds Green Methodist Church in Chadderton Fold. An annual tournament was held there between the two Churches and provided an enjoyable day out when families and friends took a picnic and stayed all day. Later they played on "Clappers field", to the west of Chadderton Park between the lane and river. The tennis section was affiliated to the Chadderton and District Sunday School league.

It was a condition of membership of these clubs and leagues that regular attendance was recorded at either church or Sunday School and this rule was strictly adhered to. Competition was very keen to play on the team s and other Sunday Schools were reputed to have inside knowledge of exceptional skills. If Church attendance was not satisfactory they were occasionally known to make advances to enhance their own team's performance! The cricket hockey, football and tennis teams all enjoyed considerable success in their respective leagues due to their strong sense of identity and discipline.

All this inter-Church activity also led to closer links with nearby fellow ships and a leaflet printed in 1924 for the annual procession of witness includes a united "sing" with other nonconformist churches in Middleton Junction i.e. the Primitive Methodists, the Brotherhood Church and the Wesleyans, led by Rev. Jones from Mills Hill. A new banner was purchased that year for the Whit Walk, costing £27/10/10d (£27.50p) and the old banner was cut into strips for bookmarks.

Mills Hill had made a reputation throughout the district for musical excellence, with annual performances of Messiah and other wide-ranging, but always tasteful, concerts and operettas etc. Now the young people decided they wished to produce Gilbert and Sullivan operas, so formed a new society dedicated to that purpose.

In 1936, they decided that the platform in the Sunday School was too small for their production of "HMS Pinafore" and so the stage was enlarged beyond its present size and new curtains were purchased.

Alongside these secular social activities however, other groups promoting Christian teaching were being founded. The Christian Endeavour Branch was formed in 1928 and flourished for many years , numbering amongst its members many who were also active in the Sports and Athletic clubs and or the amateur operatic and dramatic groups. About this time an innovation of a different kind was the installation of electricity into the Church. a convenience which we take for granted. But which must have made life easier for the caretaker and his wife. It is worth noting all the paraphernalia of modern technology which is in use around the Church for worship in the 1990's and was then not even invented.

Sunday School and Church outings were still popular in the days before the family car, and in 1926 113 teachers and scholars went by train to Belle Vue in Gorton, Manchester, where there was a zoo and other attractions (the "Theme Park" of its day, I suppose). The total cost, including train fare, entrance and the inevitable hot water for drinks was between 11d (5p) and 2/6d (12 ½ p) depending on age. In the days before television and foreign holidays the exotic animals, snakes and birds which are commonplace today, were very exciting for the children and a pleasant outing was had by all.

The elders of the Church raised in the Spartan Victorian era, might have been expected to be somewhat dismayed by all this social activity but on the contrary they seem to have supported and encouraged it. They did have a problem with the idea of allowing dancing in the school and it was only after several deputations from the young people and firm promises about behaviour that they finally capitulated. They also insisted on consultation about club rules with every group as it started and would not grant permission for cigarettes to be sold on the premises. One stringent condition was that groups must clean up after themselves and this was particularly necessary after muddy football teams etc. had changed in the school after matches.

1928 was a year notable for the deaths of two of the Deacons who had seen the Church at Mills Hill through many developments and changes. One was Mr. Henry Gardner, aged 77, a member since 1894, holding variously the offices of Secretary and Chairman, and having taught young men's classes for over 50 years. He and his late wife had been representative Treasurer and President to the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches. Mr Mugg, Church Secretary at the time, wrote to his daughter on behalf of the Church in October. "we pray for you in your sorrow and bereavement. In the days when the loss to you seems greatest may the presence of God be most precious". Sadly, only one month after the death of his friend, Mr Mugg himself passed on. A newspaper report commended their life and work so: "Both these gentlemen had the satisfaction of knowing that the cause they had worked so hard for was securely founded in the hearts and minds of not only the Church fellowship, but also the people of Mills Hill district whose people had much cause to thank God for the work that had been done on their behalf".

The last year of the decade, 1930, brought Rev. Jones ministry at Mills Hill to a close, when he accepted a call back to Wales, at Bethel Baptist Church, Cardiff. In his letter of resignation he paid members the tribute that "never once under any circumstances had the Church refused to follow his leading". He indicated that the "industrial condition of the county and the ever-growing world attractions" had been a factor in his decision to move. Perhaps the army of clogs marching to work and back six days a week to the mills down the road were too much for a family from the Welsh Valleys and the flourishing social activities were against his principles. Whatever the real cause, once again the Church was faced with the task of finding the right

minister to lead the fellowship, and he was found in the person of a student from the Brighton Grove College, Manchester. The ordination of Rev. W. Arnold B. A., took place on May 2nd, 1931, and this was to be the beginning of a long and successful pastorate which many older members and friends recall with great pleasure and affection. He moved into the newly-separated manse with his mother, the tenant of the other half of Mills Hill house now being Mr Newsham, father of Mrs Hilda, another much-loved older member of the Church today, Rev. Arnold continued to study during his two years ministry and received the heartiest congratulations of the Church on adding the Bachelor of Divinity to his B.A . The church seemed to be on a sounder footing financially during the 30's. More satisfactory arrangements had been settled with the Chadderton Education Authority. They were now paying a fair rent for the Day School and this removed a great deal of worry) ' and pressure from the Deaconate and members,

Unfortunately, the Athletic Club disbanded in 1936 because their field was no longer available. The owner having put it up for sale at £300. The Church, although sympathetic, considered the purchase, but felt the cost was too high for the ground, which eroded every year, and no other suitable field could be found.

International affairs were beginning to give growing cause for alarm from 1934 onwards to all thinking people including the Churches who had lost the flower of its youth from 1914-1918, and feared a repetition. A National Peace Congress was held at Leeds and Mr. A. Stott, Deacon, was nominated Mills Hill delegate. There was an Anti-War group in Middleton also which organised a United Peace Demonstration, and the Church gave a donation to its expenses. There was also a branch of the League of Nations Union in Middleton which was supported by the Church.

An appeal was received from the Lord Mayor in 1937 "" assistance to the Chinese in their war with Communism, and also for the Spanish medical aid fund in their bloody civil war. At home, after 6 years of Mr, Arnold's ministry)' in 1937, the membership had grown by 29, and many of those who witnessed their belief in Christ have proved their lifelong commitment and are still with us. They included Miss Marjorie Bourne. still representing the Church as the Oldham Baptist Missionary Society Secretary, and Miss Annie Grice life Deacon.

On a domestic note, the caretaker Mr J.T. Ston resigned and was followed by Mr Orlando Sutcliffe, father of the present Church Secretary. Stanley Sutcliffe, his duties commenced on Christmas Day 1938 – one of busiest days on the church calendar.

The following year, 1939, was the year which saw the closure of the Day School in the Church's premises and its transfer to the new local authority school called Mills Hill Primary and situated on Baytree Avenue. Considering the amount of public attention of previous years and the hard

work of 20 years in paying for it, it seems to have closed with the minimum of publicity, barely even receiving a mention in the Church minutes. Probably the terrible threat of another War in Europe placed a different perspective on everything. When the events of that year finally culminated in the German invasion of Poland in September and Chamberlain made his dreaded announcement on the radio that hostilities would commence, the Deacons were immediately requested to grant the use of school premises in case of national emergency.

There followed, for the first time in the history of the Church, a 2-year period where there were no records at all in the minute books until November 1941, when 12 candidates were baptised. There were no nominations for Deaconate, and only 3 Deacons were present. Messrs Smith, Park and Stott. Concern was also expressed on the decline of the numbers of children attending Sunday School, and the difficulty of catering for the AGM and other annual events due to rationing.

The minutes remained scanty throughout the war years, lacking any details of personal excellences, but times were dangerous and the fewer remaining older or physically infirm men were called upon for Home Guard duties and fire-watching. Unlike the first World War, bombing by enemy aircraft was a constant scare as the Church is in close proximity to the Aerospace factory (which was then A.V. Roe and busy making Lancaster bombers) so was an obvious target for attack.

The Mills Hill Home Guard Unit met once a week in the Sunday School for drill and instruction. Many women, including mothers of young children, were called upon to work in munitions, food production, nursing the wounded, or on the land. Time and energy were at a premium and it is a testament to the endurance and faith of the churches that they managed to keep worshipping and praying together for peace on earth. These childhood memories of Stanley Sutcliffe remind us of the hard work and dangers faced daily by young and old going about their normal business.

"During the war my father was caretaker, full time now because the school was no longer in use during the day time. He was also the grave digger and in my teens I earned my pocket money by helping him with the work. The boilers in both church and school were coke fired so they had to be filled with coke at about 10 o'clock each night in order to last until the morning and then required relighting at about 6.00am. Next day (there were no automatic feeds or time clocks in those days). On Sundays I got up with him about 6 o'clock and went up to church and whilst he dealt with the boilers, I had to dust every ledge and pew in the church, and every ledge and form in school in all the rooms. Then we could go home for breakfast and be back again for morning Sunday School at 9.30am.

During the war all the windows of the school were wither permanently painted black or had curtains to them, but none of the curtains had draw strings to open and close them. Instead you had to get a ladder to every individual window, including those near the roof in the hall, and either draw or close them from the top. On one occasion whilst doing this job on my own in the school hall, the ladder, with me right at the top, slipped on the floor and came down the wall with me still on it. Fortunately I let it take me down and I came to no harm but today's Health and Safety rules make you think!

On another occasion, Dad and I were digging a grave near the fence which is now the boundary with Lewis's land, when the air raid sirens sounded. We joked to each other that we had our own private trench if there was any enemy action and carried on digging, me in the hole and father on the surface. Suddenly, we heard an aeroplane and flying very low over where the railway station is now, there was a German bomber following the railway track towards Avro's or what is now British Aerospace. In no time at all, Dad was in the grave with me but we could plainly see the crew in the plane as it went past. The bombs dropped on A. V. Roe's shortly afterwards failed to explode.

The Sunday School cellar was an air raid shelter and if the sirens went whilst you were there you had to go down below. The only way down then was to go outside by the door at the back of the Stage, down the wooden steps and in again to the boiler house at the bottom. As there was an air raid on, all this had to be done in the dark as no lights were allowed at all. Many social evenings were interrupted in this way and you stayed there until the "All clear" was given.

Another wartime memory is when aluminium pots, pans and kettles were collected for the war effort to make aeroplanes and the resulting mountain of aluminium ware which people brought to the present Playschool room.

Other memories concern the Men's meeting, known as the Men's Fireside. This was started in the 1930's by Rev. William Arnold. 11 met on Monday evenings in the assembly Room. 11 always had a speaker who spoke about their work, their hobby or some particular interest. There was always plenty of lively discussion afterwards and the meeting always had to be drawn to a close at 10 o'clock or it would have gone on all night. I remember seeing my first television pictures when Bert Stott, Mrs Phyll Stott's husband and one of the first T.V. engineers in Manchester, setup a T.V. set and aerial and we were able to see those grainy, black and white pictures. Each year the Fireside organised a Men's Weekend with a tea and party on the Saturday and special services on Sunday. One feature of both the party and Services would be the singing of the Fireside Quartet, four members with excellent voices who sang in harmony and developed quite a reputation for singing in the area. One of the tenors was Sydney Stott, later to become Church Treasurer and husband of Hilda (nee Newsham) and the two bass singers were two brothers, Percy and Sidney Hall. Sidney also became a Deacon and Sunday

School Superintendent and he was the husband of Kathie, who being the oldest church member at that time, reopened the church building in 1913 after the fire. Kathie died in 1993 aged 90. (She passed on to me extensive notes which Sidney had made about the early years of the church. which gave me a good start on which to write this book!).

Stan also remembers "One Sunday evening when I was about 8 years old, sitting just in front of the large memorial window, The organist in those days was a Mr. Fred Forrest who had carried out this task for many years. He lived opposite the Old Cock Inn on Oldham Road and gave piano lessons to pupils. This Sunday evening when it came to the offertory, Mr Forrest played a piece of music which was a set of variations on the tune "Holy, Holy, Holy. Lord God Almighty". I can still remember how the whole place was spellbound, it really was quite magical".

One of the few minutes taken during the war record is the Church's gratitude to Mr Forrest for half a century of musical service to the church, enriching the worship and the enjoyment of so many individuals with his talent and faithfulness. He retired in 1914 for a well-earned rest.

The war in Europe was reaching a climax that year with the Allied D-Day landings in Normandy, and the following year saw the Germans surrender at Rheims on May 7th, followed by the Japanese forced to capitulate after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August.

After six years of slaughter on a scale never seen before in the history of the human race, the casualties of Great Britain, the Commonwealth and Empire totalled over 1 million, of whom 300,000 were dead. Even this pales into insignificance against the 6 million Jews, men, women and children killed out of hatred and prejudice against their religious beliefs. The world had sunk into an abyss of evil and those who returned after active service had had their ideals and belief systems put to the test - could they still believe in God after all they had experienced?

What would be their reaction when they came back to Mills Hill, to the Church which was on the verge of celebrating 100 years of witnessing to the love of' our Heavenly Father, expressing that love through action and evangelism in the district? 79 men and women from Church and Sunday School returned after service of one kind or another, each of them affected in some way by the war, all with stories to tell. Mrs Phyll Stott who still helps to make the coffee after Sunday morning services, lost her first husband Albert Lockett in the D-Day landings. She later married Bert Stott, whose sister Martha (known as Pattie) was a nurse at Salford Royal Infirmary. She was killed, along with many others, when the nurses home was destroyed by a bomb. She had attended the service at Mills Hill the same evening and had returned to the hospital ready for duty. Her name is recorded on a plaque near the organ. 1995 is not only the 150th anniversary of the Church, it is also 50 years since the end of the war, and it is fitting to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. As we are reminded every November:

"They grow not old as we that are left grow old,
Age will not weary them nor the years condemn,
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them".

Killed in Action

Coates, Fred

Hayes, Norman

Lockett, Albert

Lord, James

Killed whilst training

Simpson, Allan

Died during service

Ashworth, John Travis

Killed due to enemy action

Rhodes, Fred

Stott, Martha (Pattie)

Died during imprisonment

Topping, John

Chapter 11

*"Greater love hath no man than this
that he lay down his life for his friends"*

John Ch. 15 v, 13

Perhaps it was unfortunate that the centenary year of the church coincided with the end of the war, but never the less, celebrations there were, and a committee to organise them. A booklet giving brief history was printed and distributed, researched by Rev. Arnold who was still the Minister.

In another printed souvenir booklet, giving details of the programme of celebration services, between October 13th -18th 1945. Church organisations are listed as:

1. Sunday School
2. The Sisterhood (fortnightly speakers and Devotional Service)
3. The Married Ladies (met for tea and sewing for Sale of Work)
4. The Ladies Fellowship (met monthly, speakers and discussions)
5. The Ladies Sewing Class (also preparations for Sale of Work)
6. Sale of Work Committee – met when required
7. The Mens Fireside (weekly, invited speakers)
8. The young people's social club (every Friday evening, games etc.)
9. The Cub pack (every Monday evening)
10. The Bible Class (every Wednesday evening, partly towards Sunday School planning)
11. The Church Choir (rehearsals every Thursday evening)
12. The Flower Committee (responsible for distributing flowers, visiting sick and elderly, distribution of Harvest Festival gifts)
13. The Missionary Committee
14. The WVS (a knitting class responsible for running an auxiliary Rest Centre at the School, and supplying comforts for the services - socks etc.)

Not a short list of activities by any standards and presented after 6 years of war, quite an achievement of stamina and organisation! The social, emotional and spiritual support given to the members or these groups during those difficult times must have been a great help to families and people of all ages. Could we rely on our TV set, today's substitute for friendship and co-operation in times of severe difficulties and challenges'? I doubt it.

The opening service on Saturday October 13th was quite a grand affair, with many invited guests taking part including the Bishop of Hulme, the Mayor of Middleton, the chairman of Chadderton U.D.C. and representatives from the various Baptist Associations . Tea was served in School afterwards followed by a "brief historical survey of the past century", addresses by Rev. W. A. Pearson (minister during the First World War) and Rev. W. H. Jones of Cardiff, another former minister. A "reunion and entertainment" then took place to complete the celebrations.

In his annual report to members the following March. Rev. Arnold noted how enjoyable the events had been, but then in his own words apparently, "we went down with a flop and are only just coming up again. We have been hampered."

Attendance at evening service in particular was poor, and the number of friends coming along to the various organisations was depleted. It was time for new ideas, people were ready for change. And were demanding answers to questions which disturbed them. Rev. Arnold had been approached with a view to holding a public discussion after the evening service at which the congregation could raise subjects mentioned in the sermon. The Diaconate felt this would not be appropriate and would destroy the atmosphere of worship, but it was decided to place a box in the porch so that questions and other matters for the attention of the Minister could be written down, opened, and dealt with later.

It was also decided to invite members to open their houses for College meetings, as in the early days before the church was built. These were primarily for members of the family and neighbours who did not normally attend church and Rev. Arnold would initially take the services,

The caretaker Mr O. Sutcliffe, who had loyally stuck to his post through the war years resigned soon afterwards and it proved quite difficult to find a satisfactory replacement for the cleaning and maintenance of the three buildings, two of which, the Church and assembly rooms, were needing constant attention due to age. Mills Hill House was also a drain on resources and a lot of time and effort was needed to keep the occupants comfortable, particularly as far as the plumbing and heating were concerned.

The young people were eager to revive the Athletic and Social Club and a sub-committee was elected to look into the position and report back to the Deacons, but it wasn't until 1950 that

anything was actually done about this. Meetings were then recommenced in the Institute room in Sunday school. Finances during these years were extremely difficult as repairs neglected out of necessity during the war became essential and costs were escalating. An envelope system for offerings was commenced so that people could promise how much they could contribute in the year and keep a check on it even when they did not attend. This system is still used, alongside the "covenanting" option which enables the church to recover income tax by the giver.

The Church, despite its own parlous finances, promised £50 to the Blitzed Churches Fund, a reminder that other towns and cities had suffered greater losses.

In May 1948 Lancashire Education Committee requested the use of the school again for educational purposes. This was because the local school in Middleton. Elm Street (now Elmwood Primary), could not provide enough places for the large numbers of children born straight after the war when family life resumed. Once more the Church was able to provide a vital centre for educating the children of the district. In 1958 it was handed over to Moorclose Secondary School who used it as an arts and crafts centre for a time. No doubt the rents received were helpful to the Church in a time of financial constraint so it was mutually beneficial.

As we looked at the founders of the Church and School in 1850 and 1900, let us remember some of those men and women who continued the work during the first half of the 20th Century giving their time, skills and talents as an expression of their love for the Lord.

Alderman Tom Coates was Sunday School Superintendent from 1903- 1930. Deacon 1906 - 1948. Church Secretary 1906-1926. Other members of his family were active in the Church and Sunday school too.

Mr J.T. Smith was Church Secretary after him for over 20 years, Choirmaster for more than 40 years and Sale of Work Treasurer for the same length of time.

Mr John Park was a Deacon and Trustee for many years chairing the meetings.

Three generations of the Sutcliffe family have been Deacons – James, Orlando and Stanley (present Church Secretary). They have also worked in Sunday school and held office in many other capacities.

Ina Hodson (Nina's brother -in-law) was a Deacon, Trustee and Church Treasurer for many years. He was related to the Burgess family who helped the Day School in its early years.

Norman Hardwick became Church Secretary in the 1950's after J. T.Smith, he was the Head master of Yew Tree Primary School and later a Schools Inspector. His sister Ruth married Rev.

Arnold and other members of his family were teachers in Day and Sunday Schools. Beth his wife was involved in the sports activities.

Arthur Stott was elected Deacon about 1930 and soon became President of The Oldham Baptist Union. He was made a life Deacon in honour of his service in 1951. His son Herbert became second husband to Mrs. Phyllis Stott who was widowed in the D-Day landings. Phyll, as we all know her, is still very active in the Church. She was choirmaster for about 15 years and still helps in the Sisterhood.

Miss L. Lealand was a very dedicated lady throughout her life too. She was a Day and Sunday School Teacher and started a group called the Childrens' Circle which attracted as many as 100 children. She was helped by another teacher, Miss Charity, who was a member of Middleton Parish Church. Hilda Stott played the piano for the children during her late teens then sat with them during the address which was given by a visiting speaker. She remembers that most of them came from very poor families at Drummer Hill (Those houses have now long gone and a very large private housing estate covers the area). Apparently, the war brought the meetings to an end. Miss Lealand was also the Church Missionary Secretary for many years.

Sidney Stott (no relation to Arthur) was very active on the cricket and tennis teams (see photo chapter 10) and sang as a tenor soloist in the choir. He became a Deacon, then Church Treasurer from 1951 until his death in 1983. His wife Hilda (nee Newsham) was baptised in 1923 and taught in Sunday school for nearly 50 years in the Primary department. She has had many other roles during her Church life as well - playing on the hockey and tennis teams, choir member, Home Mission and Missionary Secretary, Secretary of Sisterhood and long-time sick visitor. She also makes the welcome drink of coffee after morning service and tea for the ladies. Not bad for a lady well into her 80s.

Despite the teaching, frequent meetings for planning future progress, fund-raising, stewardship of finances and large buildings, and other necessary on-going work till' the Church, there was still plenty of time for family enjoyment and relaxation. Hilda remembers:

"There was some entertainment every Saturday in the winter, socials and cafe's. At the "Gypsy Cafe" we wore bright coloured blouses and skins, long ear-rings, and at a "Japanese Cafe" we dressed in Kimonos and made a lot of chrysanthemums for our hair and for decoration" (Hilda's photo of this is in Chapter X) . "We were not allowed to have ballroom dances but we could have Country Dances - like Jolly Miller and Strawberry St.

"There was a Jolly Miller who lived by himself", we sang as we walked arm-in-arm with a partner round the room.

"As I was going down Strawberry St, I met a piece of paper. What do you think was written on it?

Merrily goes the Quaker".

It may seem nothing now, but we certainly enjoyed it. Orlando Sutcliff entertained us by singing "Apple Dumpling". Sidney Hall and my Sidney sang solos and duets. One was "The moon hath raised her lamp above", Joc Bourne (Marjorie's father) sang too with his lovely deep voice. Annie Coates who had learned elocution said recitations.

We had a good Operatic and Dramatic Club and performed Gilbert and Sullivan operas and later concert versions of them.

On Whit Saturday we joined with Junction Methodists, Jumbo Primitive Methodists and the PSA in the Procession. We had different "sings" on the way and finally sang on spare ground behind Greenhill Road. Ministers and Superintendents stood on a coal lorry belonging to Mr. Frank Jacques. Then we went back to school for tea consisting of salad, jelly and custard and "slab" cake. After tea we went on the Sports Field for races etc. and to see the children run you would not have thought they had had a long walk in the afternoon. Before we went home all the children had to sit on the ground and the teachers came round with nuts and sweets, as many as little hands could hold.

The choir went out carol-singing on Christmas Eve and anyone of suitable age was invited to join them. We met in school at 11.30pm for a supper of hot roast meat, gravy and bread and mince pies. At midnight we set off up Middleton Road to Chadderton Park Road, singing at different houses on both sides going up and coming down. "Christians Awake" was always first. Then back to school for sandwiches of the remainder of roast beef and more mince pies. Off again, down Mills Hill Road or Oldham Road, finishing with more sandwiches and mince pies at Mr & Mrs Hodsons or Mr & Mrs Fred Forrests. (He was the Church organist). Usually we arrived home about 8.30am.

On Christmas Day we always had a tea, followed by the performing of an Operetta. My earliest recollections are of being a fairy in "Beauty and the Beast". My brother, who was 11 years older than me, was the "Beast", covered in somebody's fur coat. Mr. Joel Bentley was Musical Director. What good times we had!"

There were of course many others who contributed to the life and work of the Church, but these were some of those amongst the fellowship when Rev. Arnold accepted a call to Bethel Church, Waterfoot, in the Rossendale Valley in April 1949. A presentation was made at a farewell social to him and his wife Ruth, in gratitude for his 18 years Ministry at Mills Hill, and

once more the Church was without a spiritual leader to take the flock into the second half of the century.

Chapter 12

“The Body is one and has many members”

“You are the 'Body of Christ”

1 Corinthians Ch. 12 v, 12.27

And so began another period of change in the life of the fellowship as preparations began to call another Minister. The Church had struggled through great difficulties during and after the war, a period of spiritual depression and personal anxiety for many folk, yet there were several young people who were enquiring for Baptism and this must have given optimism and hope for the future of the church. In 1950 Rev. Arnold returned to baptise eleven candidates at one service, held on August 7th, among them being Stanley Sutcliffe, Sidney Stott and Margaret Broadhead (Ethel and Charles' daughter, who had recently transferred their membership from Pitt Street Baptist Church, Glodwick, alas recently closed).

The Deacons made a tour of the Manse and found it to be in urgent need of repair, in fact, several options were discussed including demolishing part of it. In the end the decision was taken to divide it into two flats if a housing grant could be obtained under the '49 Act (this was an emergency Act of Parliament to encourage the provision wherever possible of homes for returning servicemen and their families, due to the fact that very little new building had taken place for a decade). In the event it took 14 months before the grant was obtained to cover 50% of the cost. Perhaps it was for the best, for in 1950 the Church had a debit balance of £300! The income from the annual Sale of Work was just as vital to the Church's finances as it had been 50 years before, particularly the ongoing sale of coupons towards purchases. Mrs. Stott has fond memories of these events. which took place on the last Saturday in October followed on Monday by a childrens' opening:

"Usually some celebrity was asked to open the Saturday Sale (perhaps hopeful of a good donation). How proud we children were if asked to be the opener on Monday or to be the chairman. The speeches had to be learned word perfect. Even to move a "vote of thanks" was an honour.

"There were numerous stalls, the young mens' hardware, the young ladies' - fancy goods, married ladies - blankets and household linens (they used to meet on Wednesday afternoons to sew their goods and have tea). There was a flower and fruit stall, and the Primary had a toy stall and Bran Tub, containing hidden small toys. It cost one (old) penny to dip into the Bran Tub.

The Primary held a Black Pea Social to help boost their takings on the previous Saturday, and of course there were the Tea and Supper Rooms presided over by the Mrs Rachel Stott, Agnes Hodson, Heaton, Wood and other elderly ladies.

How enjoyable were the potato pie, mashed potato and peas and black peas. The Sale of Work was undoubtedly "work" but they were a good source of income. Unfortunately, after the war it became increasingly difficult to find warehouses to supply us".

1948 saw the beginning of another facet of the work of the Church - the formation of a Scout troop by Mr F. Simpson and Mr. Harrison. They were given permission to meet on Friday evenings in the Assembly Rooms. The Girl Guides were formed in the early 1950's and the Church now provides the venue for several other groups: the Beavers, Cubs and two Brownie packs. They are encouraged by their leaders to attend morning service once a month for a parade service, when their flags are presented. Hundreds of boys and girls during the last 40 years or so have experienced the satisfaction of learning new skills, enjoying games and camping adventures with their friends. 'They learn the discipline of working individually or in groups to achieve a goal. Whether this is the earning of a badge to sew on their uniform or putting on a display or a Gang Show for parents. Through their activities children come to know true values and can feel the security of belonging to another caring family group outside the home .When they attend Church Parade this is extended further as the service is geared to their level of understanding and contains enough enjoyment to hold their attention whilst the Christian message is conveyed.

Stanley Sutcliffe led the Cub Scouts for a while and eventually became District Commissioner for Middleton until being retired. The organisations have been led by many hard-working and dedicated men and women over the years, and it is a tribute to them that the groups are still active in the 1990's. The children of the Mills Hill district who have belonged to them have had their lives enriched and learned many important lessons in preparation for adulthood. Cub leader Mrs. Rene Hartley has recently been presented with a long service award for over 25 years work. The recent renovation of the school building should ensure that this vital community work can continue undeterred into the next century.

Returning to 1950, the Church was repaired and redecorated at a total cost of £649, quite a sum then. Eight new Trustees were appointed for the Church, bringing the total to twelve, four of them standing as surety for the mortgage still outstanding on Mills Hill House. The Assembly Rooms were redecorated by the Mens Fireside Group and the Athletic club was now reformed and using the Institute Room again in the cellar of the school building. They requested permission to make tennis courts behind the Assembly Rooms and this was granted.

Later the Church paid for materials to repair and redecorate the Institute room and the young people provided the muscle. There was a determination as ever to encourage youngsters and a meeting was held on Sunday evening after the service "to discuss their winter programme" with them. Soon after this further improvements were made to the stage and lighting effects in the school and amateur dramatics and pantomimes became annual events over the next few decades, providing family fun and musical entertainments for all ages.

Another facility enjoyed by the community was an Old Folks Party (before the days when the politically correct Senior Citizens title was coined') given by Chadderton U.D.C. in the school. The school was then and still is the only large building in the vicinity which lends itself to community activities and has proved its worth time and time again.

At last the grant to convert and repair the Manse was obtained the Church's financial situation was improving and the time was right to call a Minister. His name was Richard R. Garrett and he was a student at Brighton Grove Baptist College. He has kindly written of his pastorate at Mills Hill in the following words:

"I commenced my Ministry at Mills Hill Baptist Church on 18th July 1953 when I was ordained and inducted to the pastorate there after training at Manchester Baptist College. In his letter forwarding the Church's invitation to become its Minister the Church Secretary, Norman Hardwick, wrote "we shall do all that we can to make your ministry here happy and successful.

Mills Hill provided us with seven very happy years - others must judge their success.

'The early 50's were post-war austerity years with shortages of jobs, fuel, food and consumer goods, but there was a spirit of optimism that life would eventually get better. Mills Hill Road at 7.30am and 5.30pm echoed with the sound of workers going to their jobs in the mills and at the Co-op Preserve Works. The church is centred between the residents of Middleton and Chadderton and the industries and commercial activities of the towns, and is a focal point of the area; so it should meet the spiritual as well as the social needs of the community.

"In the fifties Sundays at Mills Hill followed a strict regime: morning Sunday School was followed by morning Service with the children leaving half-way through. This service was attended by the smaller congregation of 30 people. Then came afternoon Sunday School and the evening service averaging about 80 worshippers .

For special services such as Sunday School Anniversary, Harvest Thanksgiving and Choir Sermons, the church was comfortably full. The hymns were led by the choir which was always at full strength for the evening service and often rendered an anthem. The church has always been blessed with dedicated choir leaders and competent organists.

"The childrens' and young peoples' activities were a strong feature of the church; the Sunday School with its primary junior and senior departments, Cubs, Scouts, Brownie, Guides, the Christian Endeavour Society were fortunate in having corn milled and loyal leaders. Sporting activities were always encouraged, with an excellent cricket team and snooker and billiards in the Institute.

"The Sisterhood as always met fortnightly in the afternoon and another ladies group met every other week at night. About 20 -30 men attended a Mens Fireside. Other annual events which brought together all sections of the Church included The Sale of Work and the Pantomime, which produced several "stars".

"Throughout my Pastorate I had the full support of a strong and dedicated Diaconate. For special events we circulated invitations to a list of contacts – over 300 adults. These people formed the Mills Hill community and provided me with many pastoral opportunities to reach out to people in the name of Christ and the Church. To help in this service I had two reliable contact points, Orlando Sutcliffe's skip shop on Mills Hill Road and Albert Park's newsagents on Middleton Road (now Watlings). Both men were "au fait" with what was going on in the locality and I called on them every few days for a "briefing" which led to useful contacts. From these and others I experienced the generosity, the kindness, the sacrifices, the humour and the loyalty of Mills Hill people which made my pastoral task so rich and satisfying.

In 1960, God called us to move on and utter the last service at Mills Hill as I stood in the church porch shaking hands and shedding tears. I thanked God for people who had given me so much more than I had been able to offer them.

We went on to serve in three other Baptist pastorates; in the rebuilt city of Coventry, the ancient port of Hartlepool, and on a housing estate in Stockport. What I was able to offer them was what I had learned from the folk at Mills Hill, who took me as a student and taught me how to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament and Pastoral care".

Richard R. Garrett

Chapter 13

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be"

Matthew c h. 6 v. 2 1

Those of us who remember the late 50's and 60's will know that it was a period of rapid social change which resulted in what we know as the "generation gap". The reasons for this are well known i.e. pop culture, greater affluence, TV, the car etc; the result was a steady decline in church membership as older members died and were not replaced by the next generation as had previously been the case. During the decade from 1956, active membership fell by 100 from 157 to 52, although social activities and groups were flourishing. There were many longstanding loyal workers and friends who just seemed unable or unwilling to make the commitment of becoming full members. In 1957 in an attempt to challenge the fellowship into facing this problem, the Secretary, Norman Hardwick, is reported thus in the minutes of the A.G.M.:

"What is Mills Hill? A bus stop, a bridge, a road or what? The only community here of that name is the church, and though there are not many people here, there is no limit as to what can be done".

A few years later in his speech he questioned:

"Whether the Church was providing sufficient challenge; were we going out into the world to help others? Other organisations without church connections were doing good work and succeeding where the church was failing". (i.e. Social Services, voluntary organisations).

In September 1961 the church appointed a new minister Rev. David Pountain, and these were some of the problems he wrestled with during his pastorate. Just down the road in Middleton Junction, two once-flourishing churches had been forced to close their doors forever due to lack of support; some of their members came to join Mills Hill bringing with them different denominational beliefs and expectations. One of his first tasks was to confirm with the Deacons and fellowship the basis of church membership at Mills Hill as established at its foundation:

- (a) that membership of the church shall continue to be given to all who seek it after Believers' Baptism by immersion.

- (b) that in addition church membership shall be open without Baptism by immersion to all adults (i.e. those over 21 years of age) who profess repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and whose lives bear evidence of the Christian profession.

The following is a resume, in his own words of Rev. Pountain's ministry, expressing some of his concerns and some of the joys of his time at Mills Hill.

"Just a few days after I arrived at Mills Hill Baptist Church, 25 years of age and fresh from Manchester Baptist College, there was a knock at the Manse door [the ground floor flat of Mills Hill House]. "Good afternoon", I said, wondering whether this was someone I ought to know. The woman who obviously wished to consult the new minister, stared at me, mouth wide open, but uttering not a sound. "How can I help you? ". I prompted. This time she breathed deeply and stammered, "Ooh, you are young!" and disappeared quickly down the path. "This is not going to be an easy pastorate". I thought. It wasn't. Yet it was exciting, difficult, challenging, frustrating, rewarding and many other adjectives. And I wouldn't have missed one moment of all of those years.

Of course all times are times of change to some extent, however, these years saw momentous changes at Mills Hill and in the wider community and church.

Earlier in 1961 the New English Bible version of the New Testament was published. Then, in 1962 the Baptist Hymn Book replaced the 1933 hymn book and introduced congregations to some of the music being produced by Beaumont and others in the 20th Century Church Music Group.

So at Mills Hill we began to experiment with modern language for prayers. This meant more than replacing "Thou", "Thee", "Thy" and words like "Didst" and "Doth". Sentences had to be constructed in a different way which meant having to write out my prayers. Over the years this has developed to the point where I have been able to offer to the denomination a volume of prayers devoted particularly to mission.

The sixties were the years of the Beatles and our young people were counted amongst their fans. In fact we had our own Beatles very talented sound-alike group. On one occasion they were introduced into a youth service. However, not everyone approved and there followed an "interesting" if not lively deacons' meeting.

In the early sixties BBC TV produced the "Forsyth Saga" which had an enormous effect on evening congregations. What had been the pattern for a 100 years of large evening attendances and smaller numbers in the morning was virtually turned around overnight.

This was encouraged by the development of Family Worship when afternoon and morning Sunday Schools were merged and parents encouraged to attend with their children.

Whit-walks were still in vogue and Mills Hill processed, banner and all, behind Newton Heath WMC band which seemed to reserve most of its wind to blast out somewhere near the CWS Jam works and the mill where the sound bounced and echoed better than any modern acoustic system.

However, other changes were taking place. The Christian Endeavour Society struggled for a while but was eventually replaced by a freer youth group meeting in rooms beneath the school room.

Cubs and Scouts were strong but there was nothing for the girls. However, a young lady who had recently started worshipping with us, volunteered to start Brownies. This grew very quickly. There was an attempt to revive the Men's Fireside but the competition from TC was too strong.

"Honest to God" was published at this time and many people within the church and without began to ask serious questions about long accepted beliefs. This linked with a growing prosperity, increased car-ownership and mobility meant that people were no longer looking to the church as a focus of community life.

The local community too was changing. King Cotton had been deposed and mills, including the Malta mill, were closing everywhere to be replaced by newer industries.

Times were tough for the Church generally and I saw many of my ministerial colleagues leaving the pastorate to go into teaching or social work. Churches elsewhere were closing but Mills Hill Baptist Church saw a moderate amount of growth. Several people were transferred into membership from other fellowships and a number of our people confessed their faith in Baptism. Looking back, however, I see this time and some of the years which followed as a period not just of maintenance or holding on but of preparation for a grasping of opportunities which are now presenting themselves.

Mills Hill Baptist Church was full of characters who are remembered well. It was always good to meet and talk to them, benefiting from their practical wisdom and experience.

People like Miss Dewhurst, who, well into her nineties and blind, talked of the old days and passed on some of the memories of her parents. She retold the stories of a generation that remembered the coming of the railway to Mills Hill and Middleton Junction. She explained how the organ was known as the "toffee organ" because each of the choir members had been given a shilling to use and make a profit to purchase it. They mostly made toffee for sale.

Miss Lealand, a former primary school teacher who had taught many of the older members of the church was a fervent supporter of the BM. She was always encouraging me to talk about the Society and was overjoyed when I was appointed Secretary to the Oldham and District BMS Auxiliary and later co-opted on to the BM General Committee.

Landa (Orlando) Sutcliffe was a great encourager and full of background knowledge of the church and its people. And so I could go on....

There is so much to talk about - weddings and funerals, pantomimes and sales of work, youth weekends and outings, dry-rot and decoration, missionary garden-parties in Mills Hill House grounds, Good Friday processions with other churches, United Services with St. Gabriel's carol singing..... then there was my own marriage to Dorothy who lived next door and the service in the church with the young people standing on the pews to get a better view.

So I am grateful to Mills Hill Baptist Church for so much. It is the place where I cut my pastoral teeth (and made many mistakes). I also believe that the sixties were years when minister and congregation grew in faith as they together struggled to understand what God was saying through all the bewildering changes taking place".

by David Pountain

Minister of Mills Hill Baptist Church 1961 -1967

Chapter 14

"The measure you give will be the measure you get and still more will be given to you"

Mark Ch. 4 v. 24

Although there were many changes and uncertainties during the 1960's, there was one thing for sure - the church needed an interior renovation. New lighter wooden panelling replaced the old in the pulpit area and the organ was given a new casing to match as well as a much-needed overhaul. The windows were double-glazed at last, some new carpet was laid and the whole church was repainted. The total cost £2,500 the cost of a modest house at that time. Reopening services were held in October 1968, led by the two previous ministers Rev. Garrett and Rev. Pountain.

The following year Chadderton Music and Arts Society requested use of the building for their amateur stage productions, which were annual events for quite a few years. The LC.C. again began to use the school during the week as an adult training centre for the handicapped, paying £500 p.a. plus heating costs. The school boiler was converted to a more efficient oil-burning system and a shower installed. Two years later, when they moved to the purpose-built centre on Chadderton Park Road, negotiations led to the payment of nearly £1,000 to cover damage and delapidation to the school premises – toilets, floors, doors, broken furniture etc. Round about this time a large quantity of lead was stolen from the Sunday School roof causing it to leak like a sieve the first time it rained. (This and a further theft was the cause of the subsequent problems with the roof timbers discovered 20 years later).

In 1970 the church called Rev. Brian Wilson as their Pastor, initially full-time but on the understanding that it would be part-time eventually. He was studying to be a teacher and intended to combine the two vocations. (This has been successfully achieved at Beulah Baptist Church, Hollinwood by the Rev. David Joynes who became Head of R. E. at Counthill Comprehensive School, Oldham, and gives opportunities for Christian influence amongst many young people who perhaps would not be reached otherwise).

Rev. Wilson ran a childrens' holiday club during August, a project which the Sunday School revived in 1992 and which has been very enjoyable and successful for the children of the district who have come along (not to mention the many adults).

However, on completion of the teacher-training course, Rev. Wilson took up a teaching post in the Midlands and left Mills Hill in the summer of 1971. Rev. Richard Gurrett offered to lead services for two Sundays every month during the winter, which offer was gratefully accepted. It becomes quite a task for the pulpit secretary to find someone suitable to lead two services a week when the church does not have its own minister, and continuity of preaching and relationships do not develop in the same way. Of course, this is only part of the minister's work but nevertheless it is the public face and a vital part of the life of the church.

600 letters were circulated in the district that year, giving details of youth activities, Christmas arrangements, and a warm welcome to attend services. This has grown to 2,500 cards containing information distributed every Easter and Christmas, and many people have responded to the invitation to join us, in some instances joining the fellowship in Christian witness and commitment later.

Mrs. Ethel Broadhead's husband Charles, a Deacon at Mills Hill for some years, was called to be with his Lord in 1971, and Mrs. Broadhead gave the fellowship new communion trays in his memory.

By 1974, attendance at evening service was giving a real cause for concern, and it was decided to hold an informal meeting in Sunday School once a month to encourage younger people. Films, discussion and favourite hymns took the place of a sermon. Attempts were also made to make contact with the families who had moved into the new private housing estate across the canal, Drummer Hill. Concern was expressed that many of the parents of children belonging to the youth groups and Sunday School were strangers to all other aspects of church life.

Yet there was plenty of initiative on the social side; the church gave permission for a playgroup to form in the Sunday School each morning; a youth club was restarted, initially for the children already attending Sunday School or uniformed groups but opening out later, and a young wives group was started and flourished for quite a while. The cost of oil for the heating escalated rapidly about this time due to the crisis in the Middle East, and all groups were asked to contribute to the cost, although it was only a small percentage of the bills for the two buildings.

The church was finally forced to consider the sale of the manse and land. Mills Hill house had deteriorated so badly it was beyond the church's means to renovate and was not even fit for sale on the open market. At that time Chadderton U.D.C. were widening the bridge over the canal on Middleton Road and the builders merchants J. W. Lewis, who were situated next to the Rose of Lancaster public house had to be re-sited. Protracted negotiations with five district surveyors (due to local government reorganisation at that time) finally led to a compulsory purchase order on the manse and land and the council paid £27,500 to the church. Out of that money a house was purchased on Springwood Avenue for the tenants of the manse, Mr. and

Mrs. Sidney Hall. In 1974, the church also received a legacy of £8.000 in the will of Mr. P. Barker of Rhodes, so financially at least things were on a sounder footing, although inflation was beginning to spiral reflected in escalating heating, maintenance and repair costs.

It was necessary to appoint new Trustees as there were by now only two of them left , so it was resolved by the church that all four male deacons, S. Sutcliffe, S. Stott, S. Hall and L. Boone would be the named Trustees.

The Chairman Sidney Hall addressed the members at the AG.M. for the next three years, and I quote -

1975 - "Are we maintaining a social meeting place for the district or are we bringing people to church? There is a remarkable crop on the ground, but a reaping is needed - and this requires a Minister". (Echoing words spoken almost exactly 100 years before by Robert Gregson, Deacon).

1976 - "Let us go forward in faith, it is better to have loved and lost than never loved at all". The Secretary reported two distinct halves of church life which did not know or understand each other. Urgent changes of attitude were necessary or very serious problems were bound to arise.

1977 - "We must not be complacent because the church now has investments" (from the sale of the land) – "many of us are getting too old to take an active part. Young people's organisations have not shown much interest in the religious side of church but this could alter by the advent of a minister".

Indeed the "social" groups did proliferate during this period and worked very hard in unison for the financial needs of the young people's groups and the church. (I know because I was a youth club leader and on the combined fund-raising committee). We held Spring and Autumn fairs, a Lancashire fair, Flea markets, pantomimes, concerts and all manner of other activities. As the Guides and Scouts came to the end of their age-groups we started Rangers and Ventures, and one year we hired two large cruisers on the Norfolk Broads and took them on holiday. The Scout group were given permission to build a new staircase at their own expense, into the old institute room in the cellar, because the ground floor of the school, despite its size was not sufficient to accommodate all the activities on some occasions. (A personal flashback, we used this room for the boys dressing-room when doing shows and pantomimes, whilst the girls used the "playschool" room to the right of the stage. At one performance we had at least 100 children ready in these rooms to start the show, and I was on the stage making the introduction to a "full house" when the main fuse blew and plunged the whole building into inky blackness! It says a great deal for the experience of the leaders and the childrens' trust in them that nobody was distressed, not even in the window less cellar, and as soon as the necessary repair was effected we continued as if nothing had happened").

But the other side of the coin was a very worrying increase in vandalism and theft to both church and school - somebody even shot at the windows at the back of the school from over the canal causing danger as well as damage. Gas and water pipes were removed from the school cellar causing flooding and risk of explosion, followed by the inevitable outbreak of dry rot in the old timbers.

Despite the flourishing youth groups etc. the congregation was steadily shrinking and the offertory was averaging less than £10 per week – symbolising a dangerously low level of commitment that was threatening the future of Mills Hill church, as had been the case with so many others.

At last in 1978 the Baptist Training College in Manchester approached the church with an invitation to participate in a new "Ministerial training experimental scheme" (its official title). The idea was that a student gave part-time commitment to a church whilst attending the college for theological teaching and/or a degree.

The church made the decision to participate and a student called Esme Parsons from Bristol was allotted to Mills Hill. She was provided with a flat close to the church and commenced her training in the summer of 1978. She had been a music teacher and a librarian prior to accepting the call to enter the ministry, and I and many others responded immediately to her warmth and the obvious sincerity of her Christian commitment. Within a short space of time, after enquirers classes, three of us were baptised and two others became members on profession of faith. These were the first baptisms at Mills Hill for about ten years; there were three more the following year and two more professions, plus one returned to active membership - the church seemed at last to have sown the seeds of a revival.

New carpets and furniture, a typewriter and a duplicator were purchased to create an office in the vestry where Esme could work undisturbed in her new life as a candidate minister-cum-student.

She put her musical experience to good use almost immediately; she organised a partial performance of "Messiah" with invited soloists and an augmented choir. In an effort to bridge the troublesome "generation gap" which was most obvious in musical preference we presented "Rock on to Easter" in the spring of 1979. It was a compilation of Bible-based sketches for the children, a slide show of the Holy land given by Esme's father and musical extracts from "Jerusalem Joy" by the adults.

Esme was an authority on the late Kathleen Ferrier, and one evening she invited us to listen to recorded extracts of her wonderful rich voice and shared her knowledge of the great singer's life. Her approach to the missionary week end was very stimulating; entitled "Festa Brazilia" we were encouraged to learn about Brazil in different ways the food, the culture, the lifestyle

through role play - to try and understand all aspects of what it means to be a Brazilian, positive and negative.

However, with hindsight it is obvious that the workload she took on was far too heavy for someone studying for a degree, and the college agreed afterwards there was a lack of professional, caring support on the ground for a student under pressure. Esme found it difficult, if not impossible to regulate her own workload and eventually became ill at the beginning of 1980, about 18 months after starting training. Her recovery was very slow and painful and she was unable to come back to us. The college has since revised the scheme and built into it a framework of conditions and supports to prevent such problems occurring again.

The church was determined to call another fulltime minister as soon as possible and the Treasurer was asked to explain the financial situation. The members decided to take the responsibility of increasing annual income by covenanting (a tax efficient declaration of weekly giving or lump sum donation), increased offertory, and fund-raising, and this goal was beginning to be realised by the end of 1981, when the church was to undergo the biggest challenge in its 150 years of history.

Chapter 15

"A Blessing in Disguise"

Contributed by Len Boone Deacon and Stanley Sutcliffe, Church Secretary

Christmas 1981 had been celebrated in a very traditional manner. The children presented a Nativity during morning service, we had a service of lessons and carols, and an enjoyable Church Christmas party was held for our families. Who would have thought that in five day's time disaster would strike and that the only thing left of the Church building would be its walls and a few pews, everything else being destroyed by the catastrophic fire which engulfed the Church.

No, the night of 30th December, 1981 will never be forgotten. There had been a number of severe frosts during the last week of 1981 - this had required constant checks of the central heating; there had already been two burst pipes that winter. My last visit to the church was on Tuesday, 29th December, in the afternoon when all was safe and secure. Little did I know my next visit would be at 11pm on 30th December.

I was in bed when the telephone rang. "Len the Church is on fire!" I have never dressed so quickly. 10 minutes later I was standing outside the Sunday School with a growing number of church members and friends. There was nothing we could do, we were absolutely helpless due to the ferocity of the fire. It was the night watchman at the Co-op Vinegar Works who had reported the fire to the Brigade. He discovered the fire at 22.44pm informed the fire brigade at 22.46pm; the first tender arriving at 22.49 pm. So you can see no time was lost once the blaze was discovered.

By the time I arrived additional appliances had been sent for, there were three vehicles in attendance, 28 fire officers and 4 senior officers.

Flames were beginning to show through the vestibule roof. It was obvious that the Organ and Pulpit could be badly damaged, they seemed to be in the centre of the inferno. The arrival of the telescopic laddered vehicle sent a cheer around those gathered. At last we would see more action to fight the blaze. It was very frustrating not being able to help other than to share information with the Chief Fire Officer on the position of the boilers and gas supply to them. Turning off the gas supply was proving to be a major problem.

I was informed that there were originally two separate fires, one behind the main entrance, the second in what was the choir vestry. These had now spread and become one massive fire fuelled by the flow of gas into the building. Attempts were made to get to the gas meters just

inside and to the left of the main door. All to no avail. The heat from the burning gas was too fierce and prevented entry.

Further discussion and plan number two evolved. It was decided to locate and drill into the external gas pipe which was the main feed to the Church, inject a foam substance which would set solid and block and seal the gas pipe, thus prevent gas getting to the source of the blaze. This was successfully achieved.

By now, however, the main roof of the church was well ablaze. The Church was burning in front of our eyes. It didn't help to see the frustration on the firemen's faces, who despite their efforts were struggling to bring the fire under control. A further decision was taken to break the windows and try to stop the fire spreading even more. The deliberate destruction of the windows was a heart-breaking sound especially the beautiful stained glass memorial window. The time was 12.30am. Gradually the blaze died down the last fire tender completing the dampening down at 9.41am, approximately 12 hours from the start of the fire. What a start to New Year's Eve.

At 9.00a.m. a meeting had been arranged with the Chief Investigating Fire Officer, to examine the Church. A step by step examination began. The acrid smell of burnt timbers burst on my senses. My emotions were running high seeing the devastation and total destruction of all that was known to me as Mills Hill Baptist.

A number of vital pieces of information were quickly obtained. The flexible gas pipe from the gas meter to the main had been disconnected from the meter. The scorch marks and discolouration of the pipe clearly indicated that the flexible pipe had been used like a flame thrower. This explained why the vestibule, organ and pulpit had been totally destroyed and how quickly the blaze had taken hold.

The next clue came in the choir vestry. The chairs that were normally placed against the walls had been piled into the centre of the room. A wall fitted gas fire had been torn off the wall and thrown onto the chairs. All this furniture had then been set on fire as well as the fire started behind the entrance. The floor had been destroyed in the vestry, yet more evidence of arson.

In the church, all the side windows were of leaded light glazing. Every window except one i.e. the first window on the railway elevation had molten lead upon it. On the floor beneath this window was a pair of old pliers, which had presumably been thrown away by the arsonist, once he had gained entry to the church. The bottom section of glazing was eventually found intact on the graveyard. There were no signs of any molten lead on this windowsill.

It seems entry was gained by climbing onto the old oil tank directly underneath this window, cutting away the glazing to climb in; confirmation if ever it was needed that an arsonist had been busy.

A blessing in disguise? Well at the time I and others certainly did not think so. In the grey light of day there did not seem to be anything left of the Church.

A salvage party did their best to retrieve hymn books and bibles, pews and communion trays, brass wall fittings and memorial plaques, plus the safe with all the Church records.

On Saturday, 2nd January, our heartfelt thanks went to all the people of this community who turned out to help. An amazing scene. People who had not set foot in the church came to help and all gave the message that the Church should be rebuilt. Mills Hill without a Baptist Church – it wouldn't be the same.

On Sunday, 3rd January, our Secretary spoke to everyone and gave a picture of the damage. There was no doubt about peoples' feelings. They echoed the thoughts of the whole community – we must rebuild the church at Mills Hill.

A Blessing in Disguise? Yes. Now 13years later I can say this truthfully.

Len Boone

Following the fire on Wednesday 30th December 1981, the services were held in Sunday School for nearly two years. On the Sunday following the fire, a meeting was held after the morning service when a report was made to the congregation about what had happened. In the afternoon people had just appeared in their old clothes and wanted to do something to begin the rebuilding. This included a group from the Rose of Lancaster Public House who just wanted to be involved. This spirit eventually pervaded the whole of the area and did much to bring the people together at a very difficult time. That afternoon the pews which were not damaged beyond repair were removed, washed down outside, and then stored in the Sunday School. The smell of smoke which they took with them into Sunday School was awful but when this had passed they were later removed to the vinegar works for storage there. On Monday 4th January, the Baptist Insurance Company was informed and they appointed a loss adjuster who then made the first of many visits. On Thursday, 7th January, only one week after the fire, a meeting of the Church members and Congregation was held at which the following decisions were taken, although much of this was made in faith as we had no idea of costs or practicalities at the time. The Church was to be rebuilt within the existing stone walls, which still remained, if these were safe, but with a lower, well insulated roof. The possibilities of not having a separate storey for the choir and organ and for a different layout inside the Church were to be investigated. The latter would have meant that the memorial window would have been at the

front of the Church and the vestibule at the rear, the opposite of the situation before the fire. Toilets were to be included in the building, there had only been outside toilets originally and none at all for many years! A new fire exit would also be required by the memorial window complete with steps, railings and lighting. Various committees were set up to discuss for example the possibilities for a new organ, a new banner, for fund-raising and other activities. Each Sunday afternoon working parties were held until all the rubble had been removed from inside the Church. On Monday 11th January, the Deacons held a meeting at which the claims to the insurance company were agreed and the appointment of an architect was discussed. On Saturday, 23rd January a group of church representatives visited various churches on Merseyside designed by the Liverpool architects Messrs. Weightmann and Bullen and the next day the Deacons held a special meeting to appoint them as our architects in the rebuilding. We really felt the hand of God to be at work when we discovered that both architects involved, their quantity surveyor and the loss adjuster, were all sincere Christians and well connected with their own churches.

All this happened in less than a month from the fire and people were excited by the prospects ahead. Unfortunately, we now had a long period of discussion and negotiations when, to most people, little was happening and things seemed rather flat. Behind the scenes much was going on. Details were having to be settled about the new layout, including the toilets, the adherence to modern building and fire regulations and all within a price which could be met from the insurance payment and any additional funds which we could raise. There was an interesting situation with the insurance cover as two years previously the church had doubled its cover, on review, and then a year earlier had doubled it again to a more realistic value. Without this, rebuilding would not have been possible. Eventually in April 1982, the loss adjuster, architects and quantity surveyor, agreed with the church on a rebuilding estimate of £146,000 of which approximately £100,000 was expected from the insurance company. The additions and improvements could not be met from the insurance costs but had to be raised from our own resources.

Collection boxes were placed in local shops. Other churches both local and some distance away were generous with their donations; one small church in Norfolk gave their weekly offertory on reading our story in the Baptist Times. Another church in Buckingham offered us a set of Communion chairs. One member of the congregation, Mr Gordon Kemist, painted a picture of the church as it used to be from a photograph and gave the picture to be raffled for the restoration fund. However, the membership decided to keep the painting in the Church as a memento and opened a subscription list instead to "buy" the painting. It now hangs in the entrance porch and is used in the anniversary year as the design for commemoration pottery. However, vandalism in the empty shell was a growing problem. Slates, lead and floorboards

were removed and one meeting discussing the rebuilding was abandoned when men were seen carrying materials away from the site.

The redesigning, obtaining the necessary planning permission and the advertising and placing of contracts took about eleven months. Eventually, at the end of 1982 rebuilding began, the first job being to clear all the deep drains underground which were still blocked by debris washed into them from the fire. The site itself still posed problems as no cranes could be used for the roof. The graves prevented cranes from being positioned near the church and Mills Hill Road was too far away to be useful. All the materials had to be placed in position by hand and this included the ten large roof trusses, five on each side of the building. Surprisingly, it was decided that the walls were not strong enough to take the load of a slate roof although they had done so for the past 130 years, and so a lighter artificial slate had to be used. It was decided to retain the original gable ends and, hence, the steep roof is a feature of the building but the roof was insulated this time.

A lot of time was now spent in meetings which were deciding the final details of things like wall finishes, colour schemes, carpets - a luxury which was not there previously, chairs to replace the pews destroyed in the fire, the new layout, lighting lanterns, a sound amplifier system, the new organ and its speaker closures, commemoration plaques for those lost in the fire, the new pulpit, communion table, pew bibles and hymn books - the list seemed to be endless. At one stage the members had before them the proposed design for the memorial window. They had asked for a theme which stressed baptism. The first design showed Christ at his baptism being sprinkled with water by John from a large shell until it was pointed out to the designer that this is not what happens in the Baptist Church! Many items were donated by friends often in memory of loved ones.

Eventually, the excitement grew as people could see the new building beginning to emerge, on the outside very similar to the old building, but inside very different. It was agreed with the builders that the completion date would be on 5th September, 1983, when a new chapter began in the history of Mills Hill, with a building which retained much of the atmosphere of the old one but was much more appropriate for worship in the present day.

Although the fire was a disaster at the time, the rebuilding had done much to bring the fellowship together and it was not just the fabric of the building which arose from the ashes, but also a renewed commitment to His cause in the rapidly developing Mills Hill area.

Stanley Sutcliffe

Beside the major task of rebuilding, there were two other considerations of importance to the church; replacing the organ and the banner, and committees were appointed to proceed with these. After several visits to churches far and near to assess the merits of various organs, it was

decided to order an electric one as to replace the pipe organ would have been too expensive and not really suitable for the new layout of the church. The organ was made by Makins of Rochdale and has served the church well, played by Mr John Hall, organist for many years. Recently there have been concerts given by well-known musicians i.e. Nigel Ogden and Doreen Chadwick, which have been much enjoyed by the audience.

After making enquiries as to the cost of purchasing a new banner (about £3,000) the committee decided to make their own. A dedicated group of people met regularly for planning and sewing for 12 months or so until the work was finished. Mr Barry Jackson drew out the design and the sewing was done by:

Mrs Nina Hodson

Mrs Winifred Boone

Mrs Miriam Atkins

Mrs Alice Scantlebury

Christine Myers

When the Methodist Church on Garforth Street, Chadderton, closed down, they kindly passed on their banner and the scroll-work, fringing and poles were utilised in the new one for Mills Hill. After the fund raising efforts of this committee the total cost to the church was only £20.

Mention must be made too of the heart-warming efforts of Mills Hill Day School, then under the Headship of Mr Donald Smith. They had a sponsored walk and spell which raised over £2,000 and it was followed by an in-depth history study of the origins of the Day School which raised awareness within the community of the Church's contribution to the area.

There were three massive Jumble Sales quite soon after the fire and obviously friends were anxious to help considering the amount of good quality goods and clothes that were contributed. These alone raised £900, quite a sum.

Childrens concerts "Raise the Roof", "Reach for the Sky" and "Oliver" raised over £900 and a great deal of fun was had by all in the process. Other churches gave £993 to the restoration fund. All in all the total raised was £17,421 and the total cost of rebuilding was £152,369 - the Baptist Insurance Company funding the major part of the work.

As Len and Stan have said, destroying the building did what probably nothing else could have – it shocked the community into realising what the church meant to its well-being, and galvanised people out of apathy and into action.

Chapter 16

"All things work together for good to them that love God"

Romans Ch. 8 v. 28

As can be imagined, the period of time after the disastrous fire was one of intense activity. Fund-raising became vital and jumble sales, coffee mornings, theatrical entertainments with children and adults were regular occurrences, plus all the attendant committee meetings. It is true to say that the church was glowing with energy and purpose and the community spirit attracted many new friends to help, some of whom stayed to worship and find out more. However, there was an awareness that the Church needed a Pastor for spiritual leadership and continuity of preaching and teaching, and much discussion took place on the financial situation in view of the building costs. The decision was taken to seek a Minister in 1982 but despite several enquiries, none of the candidates felt the call of the Lord to Mills Hill. In his speech at the A.G.M. in January 1983 the Chairman Mr. Sidney Hall spoke of the church's frustration in this and expressed his concern that "it was probably a daunting prospect for candidates to see a burned out church and a debt of £20,000".

Yet, later that month Stephen Henderson a student from Bristol Baptist College came to preach with a view and to meet with the Deacons. He must have felt that God was presenting him with a challenge. The Church felt that his vigorous preaching and warm personality were right for Mills Hill.

A coach full of well-wishers went to Bristol to Keynsham Baptist Church to be present at his ordination and the induction service took place on 17th September 1983, at Mills Hill. A great deal of preparation was necessary beforehand in order to secure the mortgage for a house of which the church was to pay 2s.5d and Stephen the remainder, a new arrangement for Mills Hill. Due to inflation, the housing market was in an upward spiral and as a young man at the start of his career Stephen felt that he needed to get a "toehold" on an eventual home of his own, and of course there was no Manse at the time. A house was eventually chosen on the new Firwood Park housing estate, said to be one of the largest private housing estates in Europe. It was felt that this position presented ideal opportunities for outreach among the newly settled families. And indeed many of the fellowship in the 1990's do live there. Stephen moved into his new home/ Manse in October.

November 26/27th saw a weekend of celebration as the church was reopened at last. A commemorative plaque is situated on the wall at the right-hand side of the church near the doorway. It was unveiled by Mrs. Kathy Hall, Sidney's wife who was the longest serving church member at that time.

At the following A.G.M. in January the church Secretary Mr S. Sutcliffe reported that the outstanding achievements of the year created a spirit of great optimism for the future (unfortunately there were only six members present to hear these words because of a severe snow storm – maybe this was just as well).

It seems as if having reached a pinnacle of achievement in the Autumn of 1983 the fellowship was to plummet into further difficulties. Because of the period of time spent without a roof the old timbers of the church had received a real soaking and a serious case of dry rot was discovered in the cellar. This had to be eradicated immediately by specialists, and the church was closed again for some weeks due to the dangerous fumes, so services were once again held in Sunday School. The treatment cost almost £8,000 which again threw the fellowship into frantic fundraising (including a childrens' review called "Stop the Rot" to follow a previous show called "Raise the Roof!").

With the passage of time and reflection, it is clear that these first few months of his Ministry must have been quite difficult for Stephen, in his first Pastorate straight from Theological College. The Church Fellowship had grown very close during the anxieties and hard work after the fire and must have seemed pre-occupied with practical and financial matters of which he had not been a part. He on his part was committed to serve the Lord in spiritual and pastoral nurture and it must have been difficult for the enthusiastic young Minister to redress the balance and lead in evangelism.

However, his challenging and thought provoking sermons led to a steady growth in attendance and several Baptisms took place during his Pastorate, of whom three, Mrs. Linda Rimmer, Kath Bailey and Shaun Cole, are now Deacons. George Sutcliffe too helps to print the Church magazine, another innovation during Stephen's Ministry which gives information and spiritual uplift every month.

Another strong feature of his work was the introduction of modern praise songs and hymns into the worship, which were appreciated by the younger element of the congregation who perhaps were not familiar with the traditional church music. Of course, as many churches have found, this is a two-edged sword and some of the older generation find them less to their taste. It is a matter of finding the right balance and toleration between different musical generations and requires time and sometimes tact.

Then Stephen was very ill in the late Spring of 1984 which culminated in a serious operation. His first official duty whilst still recuperating from this was to conduct our wedding, an occasion for which Leslie and I have very fond memories. And we will always be grateful that he kept his promise to marry us.

Other happy memories of Stephen's pastorate include his meeting and marrying Alison from Heywood Baptist Church and the birth of their first child Claire. I will never forget either, his portrayal of the character Fagan in our production of "Oliver" with the youth club he helped to restart. He had a good rapport with the young people of the church and youth organisations.

But money sadly continued to create an anxiety within the Diaconate and membership. The Sunday School heating broke down and had to be replaced at a cost of £6,500 and the roof was continually needing repair. Vandalism and theft were increasing throughout the District and large gangs of young boys were posing a threat to the elderly. The P.A. system and Pulpit Bible were stolen from the church and St. Matthews Church of England was damaged by arson. A burglar alarm system was considered necessary and extensive repairs had to be carried out on the property owned by the church and let to Mrs. K. Hall.

In view of the increasing financial pressure on the church an approach was made to the Home Mission Fund for help to pay the Minister's stipend but this was not forthcoming. Disagreements centering around finances, made more pressing because of Stephen's marriage and parenthood, eventually led to his decision to accept a call to East Street Baptist Church, Newton Abbott, in Devon from 15/2/88.

During his pastorate he initiated and fostered house groups which have multiplied since and are a great strength of the church today as a source of teaching, outreach and good fellowship. The Church membership increased to 35, and these were mostly younger people. Attendance at church services improved, noticeably so in the evening which had been dwindling. Greater co-operation was fostered with another local C of E Church, St. Gabriel's and a mid-week joint Communion service was held. He introduced an Easter Day breakfast and a Christmas candlelight service, both of which continue to bring joy and good fellowship and are now treasured events in the annual church calendar. He is especially remembered by many for his pastoral visits, particularly after family trauma and bereavements when he was able to bring a real spirit of love and compassion into a situation. He was trained to be a marriage guidance counsellor (now known as "Relate") so brought some skill into his relationships as well. Alison is a music teacher and sometimes played the French horn for us in church, and her happy disposition and welcoming smile endeared her to us as well as her husband.

Chapter 17

"Where there is no vision the people perish"

Proverbs Ch. 29 v. 18

If any friends from earlier times at Mills Hill come back to see the restored church and school in our 150th Anniversary Year, they will be struck by many changes in the immediate environment. Turning into Mills Hill Road from Middleton Road on the right they will see the builders merchants J.W. Lewis instead of Mills Hill House, then the Church which looks virtually unchanged from the outside although the interior is quite different.

Next comes Sarsons vinegar works (owned by Nestle) who bought the old C.W.S. jam works and have since extensively rebuilt and renovated the site. There was quite a network of railway sidings behind the factory and the church (see map of 1930) which in the height of the season would deliver up to 70 wagons of fruit a day to be bottled and canned etc .These lines have largely disappeared now as have the hundreds of jobs both permanent and seasonal which were necessary before the advent of mechanisation and modern technology.

After the jam works they would remember two rows of houses, sixteen in all, on the site of KEB packaging and lorry park. There was a large wartime air raid shelter here in which Stan remembers spending many hours during the night. Crossing the end of Baytree Lane on the other side of Mills Hill Road were the Laurel and Baytree Mills, once employing hundreds of cotton operatives – now the site of a pleasant private housing estate between the road and the canal. Coming back up Mills Hill Road the Malta mill still stands but is partly empty. Beyond that stood the CWS dining room (where Rev Garrett celebrated his induction with the fellowship and I enjoyed seeming lavish post-war Christmas parties children of employees) – now the site of Waterford Dairies, a milk distribution depot ex-United Co-operative Dairies. The Sunday School is next, sporting new windows and doors installed by the firm of B&B Windows, the last building before Middleton Road. Previously there stood on the car park of this firm a branch of the Middleton and Tonge Co-operative Society, built about 1900, and two houses. These shops, a butchers and a grocers, were well used by the hundreds of workers passing daily who looked forward to 'divi' paid to members at the offices in Middleton (the money came in very useful, especially at Whitsuntide for the childrens' new clothes!).

One event of note was the reopening of Mills Hill railway station in May 1985, closed since 1842 just before the church began in the stables of Mills Hill house. Several of the congregation are now able to travel in comfort to Manchester to work or study, and it is well used for shopping and visiting theatres and exhibitions in the city.

By 1980, many of the Deacons who had known Mills Hill Road as a busy thoroughfare were becoming elderly. The fire was a cruel blow to all of us, but they must have felt it all the more keenly. Sadly, Sidney Stott the church treasurer met his Maker in 1983 before the restored building was quite finished. Sidney Hall, who chaired so many meetings during the difficult times of the 70s and 80s and had helped Mills Hill Primary school complete its in-depth history, passed on quite suddenly in 1985 having seen the church reopened and reviving.

Miss Annie Grice was made a Life Deacon in 1985 in honour of her long and faithful service and Mrs Mary Taylor retired from the Diaconate, leaving Secretary Stanley Sutcliffe Leonard Boone the only two long serving Deacons, although Mrs Hilda Stott brought her many years of Christian witness and commitment to yet another role, that of Deacon.

When the Church was again without a Minister in Nov 1987, the District Superintendent of the Baptist Union Rev Trevor Hubbard, recommended that we appoint a moderator for the interregnum. The then Minister of King Street Baptist Church, Oldham, Rev David Williams, was approached and accepted the call and we are much indebted to him for steering us through this difficult time. There were important decisions to be made and feelings were running very high on certain issues and his experienced counselling and paternal approach were just right for the situation. He guided us back into corporate prayer and this cleared our vision of the way ahead for the church, reminding us who was Lord of our lives and reconciling our differences. Another great strengthener at the time was David Bailey, a candidate for the Ministry who moved into Chadderton with his wife Gillian and teenage family. They came from Sheffield to be nearer the Northern Baptist College whilst David studied for his Theological degree. David worked with us for 8 weeks on a summer pastorate and alongside Rev David Williams gave us a spiritual uplift.

Another need was met by Michael and Linda Newton, helped by David and Gillian, when they started the 'Pioneers' group for young people over 11 years of age, meeting on Sunday evenings after the service. The aim is to bring its members to Christ "in a real and exciting way" and they are encouraged to join us for the preceding service. The Group has grown steadily and there is a strong bond between the teenagers, some of whom have already witnessed their belief in Baptism. The original leaders have moved on, David (now Rev) Bailey to minister in Chesterfield with his family and Michael and Linda to Perth in Scotland to a new job after redundancy forced a move. The group is now led by Ian Parsons and Ronnie and Doris Evans and it is a very encouraging site to see so many fresh young faces amongst our numbers.

At this time a group started to hold Saturday night Celebration services, an outreach for young people using an informal participatory approach with guitars and keyboard accompaniment. The young people and their leaders began to organise the last Sunday evening each month. This has now become known as "The Last Sunday" but is an outreach to all ages using modern commitment music and mime to illustrate messages from the Bible in a more direct fashion.

Gradually the generations have learned to understand and respect different ways of expressing belief and it is true to say that we are a family church today not only in name but practice.

Looking back to the late 80's, one of the difficulties at that time probably helped to bring this about. For the first time in its long history the Sunday School could not find enough willing and suitable teachers for the children who still came along. As a temporary measure we tried a rota of nine members who were only called upon occasionally to teach the older classes. This had some advantages in that more of us got to know the children and came to recognise the importance of the role of the teacher, not to mention some of the hurdles! In the long term of course it is not the best solution because continuity of relationships and teaching material cannot be maintained, and I am glad to say that for some years now we have had a very stable and growing Sunday School with dedicated teachers under the able leadership of Mrs. Shaun Cole (see her testimony in the last chapter).

Some special highlights of the late 80's were the Toy Services, held in early December, when the children of the School and organisations bring "good-as-new" toys which are received by representatives on behalf of the youngsters who are perhaps not so fortunate. At this time they went to Booth Hall hospital and a nursing sister, Mrs. Stott, came to hold a special place in our hearts as she told us about her work. The Brownies and congregation helped her to raise the money for a mini-bus to help the children.

The Davis family, father and two sons were baptised on different occasions and Marcus brought his drama teaching experience to Mills Hill, with his Tottington High School pupils in a production of "Godspell". Later he worked with our own youngsters, who presented "Noah", "The Light of the World" and a pantomime.

In October 1989 a team of four Americans came to Mills Hill to participate in the "Good News Mission" an evangelistic outreach across the country numbering 124 members in all, from different parts of America. Our team consisted of three ladies, Mrs. Beulah Reynolds, Alfreda Ham and Gladys Henderson, led by the Rev. Tommy Toms. Coffee mornings were held in several of our homes, inviting friends and neighbours to meet the visitors, followed by house-to-house visits, talking to local school-children, childrens' activities and nightly rallies. After a very busy week the congregation took our American friends to Wigan Pier for a taste of Lancashire tourism. Correspondence is still active across the "pond" and some have visited members of the team in America.

Chapter 18

*“Faith, hope, love abide, these three:
but the greatest of these is love.”*

1 Corinthians Ch. 13 v. 13

The first task, not an easy one, was to find a suitable manse for Rev. Brawn, his wife Ruth and their four children, Simon, Phillip, Nicholas and Lydia. (The previous house on Firwood Park vacated by Rev. S Henderson was sold six months after he left, it would not have been big enough for a family in any case). There was a great urgency because it was felt important that the children should start their new schools at the beginning of September. After looking at almost every house for sale in the area, a three-bedroomed link-detached house was chosen on Partridge Way, which was conveniently close to the church and Mills Hill Primary School. There was a separate room downstairs for a study and potential to create a fourth bedroom from the large garage.

The mortgage proved difficult to obtain because of the recession following rapid inflation and high interest rates, building societies being very cautious about lending to an organisation. Several churches in the area had been forced to close, it was pointed out, and the interests of investors must be safeguarded. Eventually, the local Society in Middleton (by then known as the Lancastrian) agreed to provide the mortgage on condition that three trustees could be found to guarantee payments on behalf of the church. An interesting fact has come to light during my research for this book; the money which paid for the original Mills Hill church/school was loaned by a group of men (including a John Cheetham) who in 1867 started a society called the Oldham House and Mill, based initially at the Oldham Co-operative Society on King Street. Later they moved to offices in Union Street and the name was changed to the Lancastrian Building Society. Further amalgamations, including the Middleton branch, have changed its present name to the Northern Rock. So it appears that the local men who made it possible for the first members to build the church have done a great service to many people throughout the area by giving them the opportunity to buy their homes or set up in business; and the society they started has come full circle by providing a mortgage for the manse at Mills Hill 150 years later! The first prospectus of the Oldham House and Mill is in keeping with some of the objective of the founders of the Church in 1845; although not specifically Christian, it offers help to the working classes to improve their future prospect. There is a strong temperance

message conveyed e.g. the price of a pint of ale a day over a year would buy 10,000 bricks – enough to build a house (more information on microfilm in the local studies centre, Oldham).

Back in 1991, it was possible for the mortgage to be arranged immediately, and a good friend offered to provide a short-term mortgage until the following March, when the Lancastrian completed the deal. Rev. Brawn and Ruth moved to Chadderton on the 9th September and the children started their new schools the following day, no mean feat. The induction service took place on 21st September led by Rev. David Williams and Rev. Keith Hobbs in recognition of their vital roles in bringing our new minister to us. Rev. Williams was presented later with a motorised gold trolley as a token of our gratitude, with the hope that he would find it useful for his impending retirement to Shrewsbury in 1993.

In October the church received a very welcome and unexpected legacy of £10,000 in the will of Mrs. Clara Gentles “in memory of the happy hours she had spent at Mills Hill”. Mrs. Alice Lees, who had attended the church all her life but was not baptised until she reaches her late 70’s met her Lord shortly after and also left a legacy to the church, the Home Mission Fund and the Tear Fund. The money these two ladies gave came as a real blessing to us in view of the drain on our resources at the time, i.e. the mortgage on the manse, creation of fourth bedroom etc., and the ongoing renovation of the school building.

Christmas 1991 was a particularly happy time of celebration with our new Minister and his family among us at last and work proceeding well across the road. Three new friends witnessed their faith in Baptism, and we renewed the old custom of carol singing around the district on Christmas Eve (although by no means attempting the feat of endurance of years ago – three hours is the limit nowadays!). The annual Church Christmas party was a great success, with a tempting buffet to which we all contributed a plateful of party food followed by family games, dancing and a visit from Father Christmas. The children presented their special Nativity service, and the candlelight service the same Sunday evening was packed with worshippers. Mrs. M Sutcliffe and Mrs A Holt made the first of their by now annual Christmas dinners for those who live alone, transport being provided by others. Indeed with the organisations’ own parties and carol services there is hardly a day in December when celebrations are not taking place! This year the 2,500 Christmas card distribution in the area contained an invitation to anyone living alone to join families in the school for food and friendship on Christmas Day.

After Christmas the church began a wide-ranging evaluation of all aspects of its work and activities, past, present and future, called Action in Mission (AIM). This took more than 18 months to complete, led by outside evaluators from other churches a distance away, Rev. Norman Wade, Mrs Jean Prior and John Talbot. A critical survey was made of all the groups connected to Mills Hill, a cross-section of individual members were interviewed and a questionnaire delivered to 300 homes in the area. Many diverse points of view emerged in

answer to suggestions about the way forward, but frequent mentions were made of making a priority of work with young people. Others felt the church buildings could be used even more as a resource for all ages within the community. Some said the church should offer moral guidance which is lacking elsewhere, co-operate more fully with other denominations, teach old-fashioned values and give more support for people on their own. Quite a number pleaded for more social events for families, "like it used to be".

The evaluators, in presenting their report, concluded that the church was "in good spiritual health, conscious of great opportunities and having a keen desire to grasp and fulfil them".

Mission Oldham in 1992 presented such an opportunity, when several churches of different denominations combined in a special outreach to local secondary schools to tell young people about God's love for them. Ian Parsons was particularly active in the mission and brought several teenagers to our church as a result. Recently, Ian has felt a vocation to the ministry, and has applied for theological training at the Baptist College in Manchester. He is the co-ordinator for all youth activities at Mills Hill, which now includes a Youth Club of about 50 meeting weekly, led by members who have taken a Baptist Union Course called "Spectrum". One of the mid-week house groups for Bible Study is specifically aimed at the needs of young people and some of them meet to enjoy music with Iain Fogg (see his testimony).

1992 was also the year of the William Carey bicentennial celebration and we took part in another mission with America. A team of four came from Richmond, Virginia, this time with the aim of reaching out to the parents of the children already belonging to church organisations, and also to local schools. Rev. (Whitey) Davies led the team which consisted of James Proffitt, Mrs Kathleen Le Seur and Mrs Mildred Deer. Later four of our own fellowship paid a return visit to Richmond, led by our minister Michael. They were Audrey and David Holt and Leonard Boone, and they all found the experience very stimulating if somewhat exhausting! The sharing of different life-styles, forms and presentation of worship and fellowship activities has been an enriching experience on both sides of the Atlantic (see Len Boone's testimony).

A less rewarding discovery was the theft of Yorkshire stone flags from outside the Sunday School, followed by the disappearance of the path leading up to the church. It seems that nothing is sacred to some, not even the ground under our feet. Also taken around this time was an old wardrobe used by the Sunday School for storage of materials, and a decrepit old table in the kitchen, presumably both considered to have antique value. There are no such pieces of furniture left in the renovated building.

In 1993 the church Treasurer for 10 years, John Hall, retired and was presented with a gift in recognition of his services. He also indicated he would no longer be able to play the organ on Sunday evenings in future. The church appointed Mrs. Audrey Holt the new Treasurer, assisted

by Malcolm Bailey, also the Graveyard Secretary. Mrs. Marjorie Sutcliffe has accompanied hymns on the organ during evening worship recently, supported by Iain Fogg on the piano and keyboard. We are also led at most services by the praise group, George and Margaret Sadowski, Andrew Evans, Mark Drane and Gillian Bradshaw.

At the A.G.M. in April Rev. Brawn reported a very encouraging year with 7 Baptisms and 5 Professions of faith, all coming into membership. Later that year, Mrs. Phyllis Stott who had attended the church for 50 years and is now in her 80's was baptised during a most moving service.

Sadly, the oldest member, Mrs. Kathie Hall departed from this life aged 90, after much suffering. Consequently the church property of Springwood Avenue, where she had lived, was sold and some of the money released helped to reduce the mortgage on the manse. The Gift weekend again produced donations of just over £5000 plus future promise of over £4000 per annum (including tax on covenants).

The members could now contemplate a time when maybe the church would be self-supporting, thus releasing money for the Home Mission Fund to direct to needy churches elsewhere.

It was decided that year to ask for donations of non-perishable foods or money for the Harvest Thanksgiving Service and to pass them on to the Manchester City Mission and the Salvation Army for distribution to the needy and homeless. Hungary, Romania and Albania were chosen as recipients of the Christmas offertory, as a further response to the terrible suffering of some sections of the population of those countries due to the break-up of the Communist regimes. In 1994 we were twinned with a Baptist church in Hungary and this year Mr. & Mrs. D Holt are planning to go and help with a project called "House of Hope" for homeless youngsters, work in which they have years of experience.

The roof of Skipton Baptist Church collapsed in 1994, and remembering the generosity of others in our time of need, members sent £200 to help with the cost of repairs.

Indeed 1994 was mainly memorable for planning and working in the Sunday School, with working parties busy at every opportunity. It would be impossible to list all those who helped, there were so many, but gratitude must be expressed to Mr. Michael Stahl and Doreen, our caretaker. Mike has spent many hours over the years renewing wiring, joinery and many other tasks, all voluntarily. Doreen has had to do extra cleaning after the builders and working teams, as well as supervising the successful mother and toddlers group and being Sunday School Secretary.

The jobs were finished just before Christmas and the school is now in good enough condition to host all our celebrations for the 150th anniversary and to continue to serve the many groups who meet there for years to come.

“The Celebration” committee was formed two years ago, and have met regularly to plan activities for this special year. We hope that many friends from near and far will join us in celebrating what God has done for the people of Mills Hill in the last 150 years, what He is doing in 1995 and what will be achieved in His Name in the future. We started the year by reading the Bible from cover to cover in the first week of January, a truly moving experience for those who took part and others who listened, followed by an evening of Victorian entertainment in costume which was enjoyed by all. We have had a weekend holiday together at Grange-over –Sands, a new experience for Mills Hill but one which I think we will want to repeat. A creative arts weekend organised by Mrs. Rosemary Jeffries was most successful, producing some wonderful paintings on silk, drama and mime, and some brand-new music- all based on the theme of the Psalms. Mrs. Shaun Cole booked the Sports Chaplain from Manchester United to coach youngsters for half a day in the February school holidays, later addressing any interested adults about the fostering of Christian attitudes and values through the medium of sports.

Many other special events are to take place this year, whilst normal activities and work continue of course. I hope this book has portrayed to you some of the challenges and opportunities presented to the members of a Christian fellowship like ours, and also the blessings you can receive when you accept the love of God into your life.

Chapter 19

“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever”

Matthew Ch. 28 v. 20

The following testimonies were written in their own words by some of the members of the fellowship at Mills Hill, people of different ages and circumstances who wanted to tell you their experiences. Some of them have suffered through illness, bereavement, unemployment, financial hardship, broken relationships, family problems, depression – all the things which beset men and women from time to time, but they have found comfort through their belief.

Service in Sunday School

“Sadly to say, my knowledge of Mills Hill Baptist Church was December 31st 1981 when I heard the local radio news tell of how fire had swept through the building on Mills Hill Road that night. My name is Shaun Cole. I am thirty seven years old and the now restored church, its people, and the Lord we serve are very much the centre of my life. I began to attend service regularly, then held in the Sunday School, in Spring 1983, having moved to Chadderton shortly before the fire. My daughter was then three years old and I was to have a second daughter that autumn.

Having been nurtured all of my childhood and teenage years in a Baptist Church, it was not an unfamiliar setting or pattern of worship I found, what surprised me most at Mills Hill was that familiar images of people I had known so well at my old church seemed to surround me. The similarities were marked even to the minister (designate) who was fresh out of Baptist College and soon to have his inductions service in the newly refurbished church. (My previous minister had just come straight from the Northern Baptist College shortly before I moved away). I had to get to know these people in their own rights and separate them from the memories of my own Sunday School days. I don’t remember consciously setting out to do this but everything was so familiar that I never considered moving or looking for another church. The Lord had led me to Mills Hill and I felt I was to do his work there as he directed.

My first involvement was to organise a crèche so that Mums like myself could join in morning worship and relax in the knowledge that their young children were being cared for in another room. After that, and for the last eight years, I have served the Lord in the Sunday School,

where children and young people from nursery to senior school age are nurtured in Christian faith and love. Their backgrounds are mixed, some come along as part of a family, some with their friends, and others are dropped off and picked up later.

If I were to compare our situation with that of the other Sunday Schools around us, it would seem to have excellent attendance and facilities second to none. But to me numbers are not of paramount importance. The children are not part of some maintenance programme aimed at keeping them regardless of what they learn. I like to see them grow up in a happy relaxed Christian environment where they can learn in an interesting and fun way.

I think the role of those working with children in church today is to plant the seed of our Christian faith, keep it well watered and pray that in the years ahead our young people will develop into happy, stable adults as we move towards the next century.”

Shaun Cole (Sunday School Leader)

MY JOURNEY SO FAR

My journey to find the Lord began about ten years ago, although at that time I was unaware that I had even begun it. I truly believe that God was working in my life all those years ago, working in a very gentle way, leading me by the hand slowly as you would a small child.

Looking back over the years I have met many Christians who have in some way had a very special influence on my life, although at the time I did not recognise it as such. I had attended a local church on and off for about six years, and had heard many different preachers talking about Jesus and how he had sacrificed Himself for us on the cross. But none of this seemed real to me, to me Jesus was just a character out of a storybook.

Then in 1988, my family and I moved to Chadderton and after searching for a local church, my wife Dot was led, I believe, by the Lord to Mills Hill Baptist Church. She was immediately made to feel welcome there, and was overjoyed with the love and warmth she had found there. After a year, I found myself (reluctantly at first) going along to the odd service with her, and then almost without knowing it I began attending on a regular basis. Even then I was full of doubt and uncertainties about the claims of the Bible. I could not accept God loved me just as I was with all my faults, and was just waiting for me to repent and ask Him into my life.

Then on Easter Sunday 1992 the most wonderful thing in my life happened. It was on that day that I met Jesus in a very real and certain way. On that morning I was faced with a decision that was to change my life. I felt the presence of the Lord Jesus very close to me, it was as if He had been standing next to me for all those years, and now He was standing before me with

outstretched arms drawing me to Him. I knew there and then that I had only one decision to make and that was to accept Jesus into my heart as my Lord and Saviour.

Well since that time many things have happened in our lives, some good and some not so good. One of the good things (the best one I think) was on the 26th July. That was the day I was baptised, that day will stay with me forever.

Shortly after I was faced with redundancy from the Post Office, then the business Dot and I bought failed, resulting in the loss of all of our money. But through all of this the Lord has been faithful to us. He has shown His love for us in so many, many ways. I believe he has used His people at Mills Hill greatly in our situation in a loving and caring way.

I have come to realise over the last two or three years that without God I am nothing, but in Him there is real hope and a future that we are certain of.

May God bless and keep you.

Your brother in Christ. Alan Pugh

HOW THE LORD HAS CHANGED MY LIFE

I became a member of Mills Hill Baptist Church 30 years ago, upon transfer of membership from a Methodist Church in Levenshulme. I had recently married and joined my wife in worship here. I have always attended church, being taken in childhood by my parents, and hold strong Christian beliefs.

I have been a Deacon at Mills Hill for 26 years, but I was not baptised until June 1991. I would like to share with you why after worshipping at Mills Hill for all those years, it took 27 of them to make me realise the significance and importance of Baptism.

I was happy and content in my youth and felt I was a real Christian. In 1979 whilst on holiday in the Hebrides I started with an illness that affected my vision. I was walking along the beach with my wife and children when suddenly my eyelids closed. I had no power in the muscle of the eye-lids to open them. When I held them open and used tape to keep them open I had double vision. A bible text came into my mind, but I had no idea what the words were (Isaiah 1:6)

“From the sole of the foot even unto the head, there is no soundness
in it but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores, they have not been

closed nor bound up, neither mollified with ointment”.

When I discovered these words I was even more puzzled. Other muscles were being affected and I was off work six months. Happily during this time a diagnosis was made which, following an operation, was controlling my symptoms through medication. Whilst recovering from the operation in the Intensive Care Unit at Manchester Royal, I was in a semiconscious state with tubes everywhere, I overheard someone receiving the “last rites” and believed that person to be me. I clearly recall thinking “Not yet Lord, I’ve too much to do for you”.

Years later my wife told me it was another patient. Think what you may of this, I know it made me change my career. I trained and qualified as a Social Worker and I am currently working on a Child Protection Team.

During these years of training I was challenged by my tutors, who questioned my beliefs in Christianity. This only served to strengthen them, and I was one more step nearer to Baptism. I was also influenced by many friends at Mills Hill who like me were not Baptised, having experienced other Christian training. Particularly Anne Lees – her Baptism was yet another challenge in the process of self examination which had begun on that eventful holiday.

Opportunities were opening up in my career and in witnessing. One of these was a chance to go to America, and take part in revival weeks with churches in West Virginia. As part of a team of four comprising Rev. Brawn and Mr and Mrs D Holt, I had a truly remarkable experience. Unforgettable. Experiencing the love and hospitality of total strangers who were brothers and sister in Christ will always be in my memory. I was enriched by them through God’s good grace they gave me a peace I had never experienced before. One more step.

My employment as a Child Protection Officer meant carrying out investigations and planning for childrens’ futures, part of which was representing the local authority in legal proceedings. “I promise to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth” was and is a regular part of my life when giving evidence. It was after being in the witness box one Wednesday afternoon, the hearing over early, I decided on my way home I could not put off any longer the need for Baptism. I had made all sorts of excuses to myself, none of which were sufficient reason on their own or in their entirety to present a strong enough argument against Baptism. I called to see our Minister, Michael. Arrangements were made quite quickly as there were already a number of candidates.

At the Baptismal Service I was the last of the candidates to be Baptised. It was very emotional for me. Even now I become emotional when thinking about the experience.

Following my Baptism and still in the water Michael whispered to me that the Praise group (bless them all) were going to sing my song. I immediately thought of the words “And can it be

that I should gain an interest in the Saviour". However, I was totally surprised by them singing the words I had put to the "Shenandoah" when in America. A flood of tears erupted, I was unable to move and totally overcome with emotion, praise and thanksgiving, that I had been led to this vital moment in my life.

The story behind the words to "Shenandoah" is another chapter in my life and one for another occasion. Here are the four verses I wrote, expressing that Jesus is the central figure in my life, wherever I happen to be.

Lord Jesus Christ I want to hear you

Every hour of every day –

Lord Jesus Christ be close by me

When I bow my head to pray –

Draw me closer – to you.

Lord Jesus Christ I ask forgiveness

For the ways that I have failed you

Lord Jesus Christ my risen Saviour

Stretch out your arms and hold me fast

Shielded from temptation.

Lord Jesus Christ I want to help you

Bring to all the name of Jesus

Lord Jesus Christ be thou my captain

May I obey without delay

To walk beside – my Saviour.

Lord Jesus Christ I hear you calling

All the way across the ocean

Lord Jesus Christ my loving father

Unite me in your bonds of love

To live with you forever.

Lord Jesus Christ I want to hear you

Every hour of every day –

Lord Jesus Christ be close by me

When I bow my head to pray –

Draw me closer – to you.

One other text which came to my mind during Baptism is (1 Corinthians 12: 12, 27)

“Christ is like a single body which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts”.

“All of you are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it”.

God is working His purpose out in my life; allowing Him to take over was a hard lesson to learn, indeed I am still learning. But every day He is revealing more of Himself to me and I know He wants you to receive His love also.

Len Boone

THE DESERT STORM

October 1990 is a time Carmen and I will always remember. We had gone to Edinburgh for a short holiday and to see our son Miguel who is in the RAF stationed near Edinburgh. Imagine our surprise when we met him in Edinburgh and he said that he would be spending a few days with us at our hotel. Our immediate response was “Grand, instead of a few hours we had days”. But this changed when he told us he was being posted overseas for three months to take part in the Gulf conflict known as DESERT STORM and would be stationed at OMAN.

It was alright him telling us not to worry, but Carmen and I were devastated at the news, because we didn’t know what to expect and having read our newspapers and seen the films of the war on the television we certainly didn’t want him to go.

The final day of his leave came and he said goodbye to us and we stood together watching through the hotel window as our son walked off to duty waving to us as he went. The memory of the feelings of joy and sadness, fear and hope, and helplessness experienced in those few days will be remembered for the rest of our lives.

We returned home that day feeling very sad. When we went to our church on Sunday and told people what had happened the church as one prayed that Miguel would return safe and sound and that the Lord would support his mother and myself until he did. Stanley Sutcliffe wrote to Miguel on behalf of the church, a letter which Miguel was pleased to receive and he has since commented how this experience strengthened his belief in the power of prayer.

The prayers of the congregation were not just a one off, but regular and consistent prayer to support us, and calling on our Lord for Miguels safe return. God answered both requests and after four months of war, Miguel was returned to us safe and sound.

This is written to witness to the power of PRAYER and in appreciation of the support and love of the Mills Hill “family”.

George and Carmen Sutcliffe

BELONGING AND HELPING

Dannie and I used to go to another church on Sunday morning. David Holt preached there occasionally and we got to know him. We started to go to Mills Hill on a Sunday night because our church was closed. Then we started to go to Margaret and George's House Group on Wednesday night, and I also started to go to the Sisterhood. Dannie and I felt very close to Mills Hill Church because of the friendliness of the people there and the events going on.

We prayed about changing membership. Then one week I had been told it was a prayer meeting on a Friday night, but when I got there I found the meeting was the week after. Michael was in church on his own and I realised that God was saying this was the time to talk to Michael about changing membership. We are now members and are looking forward to helping with the 150th year celebrations, and all the future events.

We feel at last we belong to a church where we are able to help to do God's work which is being done at Mills Hill, and we are happy to be there.

Joyce and Dannie Wright

SECOND CHANCE

As a child I never went to Sunday School – my family never went to church. I can remember not believing in God. My parents always worked hard, and I grew up believing that to be conscientious and reliable in the work situation was all important.

In 1963, when I was 31, I emigrated to Australia with my husband Ron and son Neil who was then seven years old. Whilst there, in 1965 Ron became friendly with a Christian man he worked with who shared his belief in God with him. Ron was impressed with his life style and wanted to know more.

Several times Ron asked me to go to church with him and I refused – I didn't want to be bothered. I finally agreed after further persuasion, but felt uncomfortable about it. Off we went to the nearest church which was Pentecostal. I found the service strange and embarrassing; I felt it was all too much for me. These people were very open about their love of Jesus, praying out loud during the service, and afterwards trying to encourage and welcome

us. This was all new to me, and very up front. It seemed to threaten the fact that I was capable of looking after myself – I didn't need anybody's help. How wrong I was!! I came away declaring I would not be going back there.

Ron brought up the subject of going to church again during the next couple of weeks (looking back I see the Lord prompting me again). I tried to dig my heels in – I really didn't want to go back, but once more I was persuaded to go.

This time the words the Pastor was speaking seemed to be directed at me. He was talking about Jesus and what He had done for each of us, then he asked if anybody would like to come to the front to be prayed for and to receive Him. I remember being quite startled that I was squeezing past everybody on the row and heading for the front. I was prayed for - hands were placed on me. I prayed too and asked Jesus to forgive all my sins, there seemed to have been so many. My world was spinning. It seemed like a big heavy curtain had been drawn back and there was Jesus accepting me as I was – forgiving my sins. One of the texts that spoke to me was "The Lord chastises those He loves", that meant a lot to me then and still does. This was a very dramatic event; I was completely overwhelmed. I thought nobody else had had such an experience – it wasn't until I heard of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus much later that there was anything to equate it with. I had a very intense week after that not sharing with anybody what had happened to me. It was a time of joy and confusion. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed.

Off I went to church the following week eager to go this time. The Pastor spoke about Baptism. Several people were to be Baptised the following Sunday. An invitation was issued for anybody else. The following week I wrestled with this thought. I felt very self-conscious, and was really quite afraid to do this publicly. Saturday came – the struggle went on- but Jesus was urging me, I had a very close walk with Him that week. Finally, rather late Saturday evening, I knew I had to accept Jesus in this way. I felt guilty at arriving at the Pastors home so late, but he was overjoyed and prayed with me and explained what would happen the following morning. I was baptised. This was my special time – never to be forgotten.

We had decided to return to England in 1966 that gave us about three months with this church. This was a very short time, and maybe, this was why I was never invited into a nurturing situation, I don't even know if they did such a thing.

Back home in England, a large church quite a distance from our home was chosen. I went there for almost a year – looking back I realise there was no nurturing there either. Ron stopped going after a short time and I gradually stopped. A year later our marriage of 17 years failed and we divorced. With this came many painful times and although I still believed in God I chose

to go my own way. When I think of those awful times the one thing I'm thankful for is that the Lord didn't forget me.

I was eventually married to Frank very happily, and we had 22 years together, but sadly he died in 1990.

In 1991 I felt the need to get back on course, and went to church with a friend, but this wasn't local. I remembered having received Christmas cards from Mills Hill Baptist Church on a couple of occasions that had been individually typed. This had made an impression on me, that somebody had been prepared to do that, it must have been quite a task to type so many to circulate in the area. I had lived on Chadderton Park Road since 1977, and didn't know where the church was. I set off to find it, it seemed tucked away and easy to miss when driving by in a car. Having found it and the time of the Sunday service, I walked in the next Sunday to be greeted by David Holt in a very warm and friendly way. His wife Audrey came and spoke to me after the service and said she would call round to see me, which she did. We had a coffee and got to know each other a little better.

From that day on I slowly came back to Jesus. I felt God led me to Mills Hill, He knew I needed some encouragement and guidance, and Mills Hill is the place that gives it. This has been a time of steady growth for me – learning from so many people and becoming more open to the Holy Spirit.

I met Jim about three months after I started worshipping at Mills Hill, and as our relationship developed I did say to him that I would be going to church regularly, I wanted it to be clear that this was important to me. Jim was not a Christian, but he said he would go with me. The Lord was now leading Jim.

Jim and I eventually realised we were not living right and outside of God's commandments. We were married in October 1992, by Michael. It was the first wedding he had taken at Mills Hill and he made it very special for us. This was a beautiful day for us, a day that gave me a sense of peace that we had God's blessing.

We continue to be blessed in so many ways. Four months later, Jim accepted Jesus into his life and was Baptised on his birthday, and now we are travelling the same path.

Through the leading of the Holy Spirit and the example of our Minister Michael and his wife Ruth, our Deacons and leaders, and so many of the fellowship we have been guided and nurtured. This is our strength at Mills Hill Baptist Church. We are greatly blessed by our Lord and I thank Him that his Holy Spirit ministers to us through His people. My purpose in life now is to put Jesus first. I thank Him that he never gives up on us.

With love in Jesus' name

Norma Holt

From when I became a Christian in 1987, I had been a member of a Brethren Church in west Manchester where I was very settled. I never really imagined leaving there, yet God isn't limited by our ideas. As I look back over the past two years, it is so clear to me that God brought me from the church where I was into membership at Mills Hill, and brought me from my previous house, which was some distance away, to a house which is within a few minutes walk of the church.

Whilst at Mills Hill, I have really been encouraged by many warm and loving Christians who have done so much for me, both spiritually and practically; although I live on my own in the area, I feel part of a close family, which is obviously very reassuring. The church has brought out of me a commitment which I have never shown before, and has allowed me to serve God in a number of new and exciting ways. I really pray that as we move through and beyond our 150th Anniversary, we can commit ourselves more and more to God, offering back to Him the many gifts which He has placed in the church, to fully serve Him in this continuing work at Mills Hill.

Iain Fogg

"He Meets Our Needs"

I first committed my life to the Lord Jesus Christ in January 1979. It wasn't until tragedy came to me in 1990, when every human "prop" had been taken away, that I truly clung to the Lord Jesus as never before in my life.

Even then my commitment was not total until Wednesday, July 17th 1991. After the evening meeting at the Keswick Convention I went back to the hotel, completely at the end of my resources, and the two Christian friends who were with me pointed me again to the Lord Jesus who could meet my every need. I knelt down amidst the tears and surrendered my life in total commitment to the Lord. From then on He began to change me. I returned home that weekend to what I knew would be extremely distressing circumstances, and I suddenly realised that I had been given a calm, quiet strength, which was indescribable. Through this indwelling spirit I was able to face the immediate situation ahead of me.

During the past few years, many has been the time when the “waters” seemed to be coming over my head, but the Lord Jesus Christ never allowed me to go under. Each time I came up out of the darkness of the experience, the Lord allowed me to grow a little more in Him.

May I say in all humility, the Lord has wrought a great miracle in my life. It is only through the deep sad pain of these past few years, my great need for the Lord, the fact that I know I cannot live without Him, that this miracle came into being.

I feel like saying, as Joseph said to his brothers after the death of their father,

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” Genesis 50 : 20

Brenda Perkins

As you can see being a Christian does not guarantee immunity from pain. But what it does do is to give an assurance that through it all, we have a loving Father who will share our burdens if only we turn to Him, who will forgive our wrong doing and help us to live better lives in future.

The fellowship at Mills Hill are not perfect, we have our ups and downs, as many will testify; but we have the supreme advantage over secular groups – an allegiance to a God who does not change as the years go by, to whom we owe our very being and from whom we receive a certainty that we will join Him at the end of our time here on earth.