

# **ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF CANNING TOWN EVANGELICAL CHURCH**

## **This account was written to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church in 1973**

### **THE BEGINNINGS**

In 1873 Canning Town was still mainly fields, ditches and marshland<sup>1</sup> but the scene was to change dramatically over the next few years. The Royal Victoria Docks had been completed and the Royal Albert Docks were under construction. Factories were springing up and were to increase in number; Silver's Works, Tate and Lyle Sugars, John Knights soap, Beckton Gas Works; all emerged in a very short space of time. Men flocked with their families to Canning Town after the new jobs. The population of the district was just about doubling every decade at that time.

Four members of an evangelical church at Plumstead in Kent (south of the River Thames) were concerned about all the newcomers to Canning Town; concerned that they should have the opportunity not only to work but to worship God. So the four of them left Plumstead to come and do something about meeting the need.

They began with open-air services; Mr. Daniel Tansley preaching and his wife and two friends supporting him in the singing. There must have been some response for they then hired a former cowshed in Anne Street, Plaistow for indoor meetings. Later they built a chapel in Cliff (then Church) Street, Canning Town, which was opened in 1913. A year later this had to be extended to seat 250, an indication that Mr. Tansley and his friends had been guided and blessed to meet a very real need of the local people.

They were not the only ones. There were the Methodists in the Barking Road and along in Plaistow, the West Ham Baptist Tabernacle. The Salvation Army followed about ten years later. The Quakers had worked and worshipped in West Ham and Elizabeth Fry (1790 - 1845) had lived in the Borough. Further north around Stratford, Christianity was making a fresh impact as a result of the campaigns of Dwight L Moody.

### **AN AGE OF DEVELOPMENT**

Comparing the press headlines then with now, one could almost doubt the word 'development'. One hundred years ago there were reports of "Women's Lib" and "Independence for Ireland" prompting protests and demonstrations, miners on strike for more pay and a great outcry at increased rail fares. The Duke of Edinburgh made speeches about pollution being a social issue. Abroad, famine in Bengal (Bangladesh) and fighting in Indo China (Vietnam) although then these places seemed rather remote to the East End of London. What did matter was that Income Tax was three old pence in the pound. Another item from old press-cuttings was that hopes were expressed for church unity!

Nevertheless, what advances there have been in the century! Compulsory education had been introduced only three years earlier, in 1870. Radio, television, the motor car, cinema, telephone, air travel followed. The petrol motor car was not invented until 1884 (by Daimler in Germany) and the law that a man must walk in front of a motor vehicle carrying a red flag was not repealed until 1896. At the same time, the maximum speed was raised from 4 to 12 m.p.h. and then seven years later to 20 m.p.h.

Not until 1875 were working hours limited by Act of Parliament to 56 per week.

The first 28 of the church's 100 years were in the Victorian age. Gladstone was Prime Minister in 1873. Church and Chapel-going were much more common and Sunday observance was a prominent

feature of people's lives. It was in this world that these four friends from Plumstead set out on a mission to establish a new church at Canning Town.

### **WHO WERE THE PEOPLE FROM PLUMSTEAD?**

The group of churches to which they belonged, had its origin in the village of Rochford, Essex. Some 40 years earlier, according to reports in the local press, a farm worker who was a Wesleyan local preacher, had come into contact with an Anglican clergyman who had received a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit. This local preacher was so impressed that he sought and obtained a similar experience. The outcome was the formation of a new church group which was known by a number of titles until its members decided on "The Peculiar People" from a verse in the Authorised Version of the Bible, 1 Peter 2v9. Two distinctive characteristics were a reliance on divine healing and a refusal to fight in wars. Several members faced Court actions as a result. In 1956 the name, known affectionately as "The PPs", was replaced by "The Union of Evangelical Churches" (U.E.C) and later an association formed with The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (F.I.E.C.) a fellowship of non-conformist churches and missions apart from the major denominations. Therefore the congregation was initially known as The Peculiar People, Canning Town, one of up to 43 such chapels from the Essex coast to Camberwell in London.

### **CHURCH SERVICES IN THE EARLY DAYS**

It appears that services in the new church at Canning Town followed a pattern similar to that of most Free Churches of that day. They were longer than now and for many years there were four services every Sunday. One distinctive feature was the time devoted in one service to the giving of personal testimonies, in which everyone was free to take part. This practice may have had its roots in the Methodist Weekly Class Meetings. The preaching and teaching emphasised the importance of Bible study and of putting into practice the teachings of the Bible in daily life and showing a practical concern for the welfare both of fellow members and of neighbours outside the church.

### **MUSIC**

Until about 1930 no instrumental music was used in church services. This did not in any way inhibit the singing which always played a prominent part in services, perhaps more so than today. People sang well, enjoyed singing and were greatly helped in their worship through song. With no instrumental help they depended much on the tonic solfa method developed by the Reverend John Curwen from nearby Plaistow. Church members took a lot of trouble to master the reading of music, attending evening classes for this purpose. At times special choral evenings were arranged, when a choir of 40 or more would present some of the well-known songs. From 1860 there was a Peculiar People's Hymnal published and this and later editions lasted until 1960s.

### **SUNDAY SCHOOL**

Although Sunday Schools had been initiated by Robert Ralkes a hundred years earlier in Gloucester, the idea was slow to catch on in Canning Town. It was fifteen years or so before a Sunday School came into being and then it was initially manned entirely by men — armed with canes for disciplinary purposes! As the school developed, so more premises were needed. The house next door was acquired and provided ground-floor accommodation for children activities; then rooms in the house next door to that were rented. In 1926 Tyrell Hall in Star Lane was purchased. In 1950 land was purchased the other side of the chapel and a prefabricated building (known as "The Hut") erected for youth work. The Sunday School reached its peak in 1936 with attendances ranging between 250 and 350 each week.

## **MISSIONARY**

David Livingstone died in Africa the year the church was opened and in that same year Dr. H. Grattan Guinness opened his Institute for Home and Foreign Missions in Stepney Green.

In the early days in this church, missionary interest appears to have been confined to the needs of the immediate locality. Large open-air meetings were held at the corner of Barking and Beckton Roads and numerous were the testimonies of men and women being arrested by the Holy Spirit through these. Meetings were also held in the quieter back streets of Canning Town and Custom House. Then there was outreach to other districts. Just as the group from Plumstead had started the work at Canning Town so now a group from Canning Town set out to start meetings at Barking. A room at Creekmouth was hired for services and then, as the Barking Church became self—supporting, an old chapel was acquired in Queens Road, since demolished and now sited on the Thames View Estate. Similar ventures were started at Poplar and Silvertown and Peculiar People chapels established.

Later came the consciousness of the needs of missionary work in other countries. Once such interest and concern was aroused, members responded by supporting established missionary societies. Prayer and giving has been shared at Canning Town for work in Africa. South America, Asia and Europe, and this has gone on consistently for many years.

## **THE DARK YEARS**

Soon after the chapel's opening in 1873, the country was experiencing a depression in farming and many workers left the land. This was good for the developing towns but only up to the point of saturation. After this initial boom of prosperity, and consequent high level of employment, came the dark days of West Ham (later combined with East Ham and called Newham). There was a sharp rise in unemployment and pauperism without any National Insurance or Social Security — only the Poor Law to help those in the deepest throes of poverty. Individual church members were affected and the general effect upon church life as a whole was to deepen the fellowship between members and their concern for one another's welfare. Sometimes a special prayer meeting would be held for a member out of work. A Benevolent Fund was set up to which all members promised to contribute regularly to provide help in cases of special need. In 1920s, unemployed members were paid to make new pews and these lasted until 1984 – a few still are in use.

Another aspect of the “caring” shown by church members was the hospitality given, even by poorest families, to country girls who came to London for domestic service and needed somewhere to spend their days off—and somewhere to worship.

## **THE WARS**

The second world war made a greater impact on Canning Town as a district than the first. Practically all children were evacuated to safer districts resulting in a drastically reduced Sunday School — sometimes a class or two being held in local homes. Enemy activities affected the lives of all. Church services were reduced to one a week, though never entirely abandoned. Bombs, land-mines, flying bombs and rockets interrupted services, although the chapel premises suffered little damage. It was estimated that in Canning Town about 30% of the property was demolished or damaged beyond repair. Several church members died in the bombings. Many members evacuated to quieter parts of the country and some were moved by their employers. A few returned after the war but many found new homes so that membership settled down to about half the pre-war number.

## **CHURCH BUILDING**

In view of the extensive damage in the area, the West Ham Council decided to redevelop the streets around the chapel, involving the demolition of the old premises. The new chapel and schoolrooms were opened in March 1959 on the opposite side of Cliff Walk, as Cliff Street was renamed, although the main entrance was now on Star Lane. The pattern of the premises is quite different. Where the original was very much of a main chapel building surrounded with odds and ends of accommodation to suit the steady development, now the new plan provides a more comprehensive and convenient unit embracing most other departments and services.

## **MINISTRY**

The church has never had a paid full-time minister. Instead, several men are appointed as “elders”, one being the Leading Elder or Pastor or Minister. In recent years the church has often employed a part-time or full-time Church Visitor.

Throughout the years this Evangelical Church has believed and taught that the Bible is God’s Word; Jesus Christ is Divine and His birth miraculous. His death on the Cross was in order that sinners who accept Him a Saviour might be forgiven; He rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and is coming again. All will be resurrected from the dead and there will be the Judgment by the Lord Jesus Christ. Conversion to the Christian faith and continuance therein is the work of God’s Holy Spirit. A practical belief in the Bible, personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, communion and prayer are considered essential. Strength is given by God to combat weakness, reality instead of artificiality, peace in place of strife, courage for fear, certainty for uncertainty, joy of life and assurance for eternity.

## **OUR THANKSGIVING**

This short survey of one hundred years in Canning Town provides opportunity for the present membership to record their praise and thanksgiving to almighty God for His gracious forgiveness, His guidance and His loving care. The sacrifice and labour of so many in connection with the church and its departments and activities is remembered with reverence. We recall very many who, though poor in this world’s goods, were rich in faith and whose lives were as lights shining in dark places.

Through the years members have reached out to others by visiting in hospitals, helping in lodging houses and visiting the sick in their homes.

Lives have been changed, homes transformed, many healed in answer to prayer, and for all this we rejoice and thank our Heavenly Father. There is a precise record of it all down in God’s Book of Remembrance. It will be opened one day!

*How good is the God we adore,  
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend!  
His love is as great as His power,  
And neither knows measure or end!*

*‘Tis Jesus First and the Last,  
Whose spirit shall guide us safe home;  
We’ll praise Him for all that is past,  
We’ll trust Him for all that’s to come.*

JOSEPH HART 1712-68