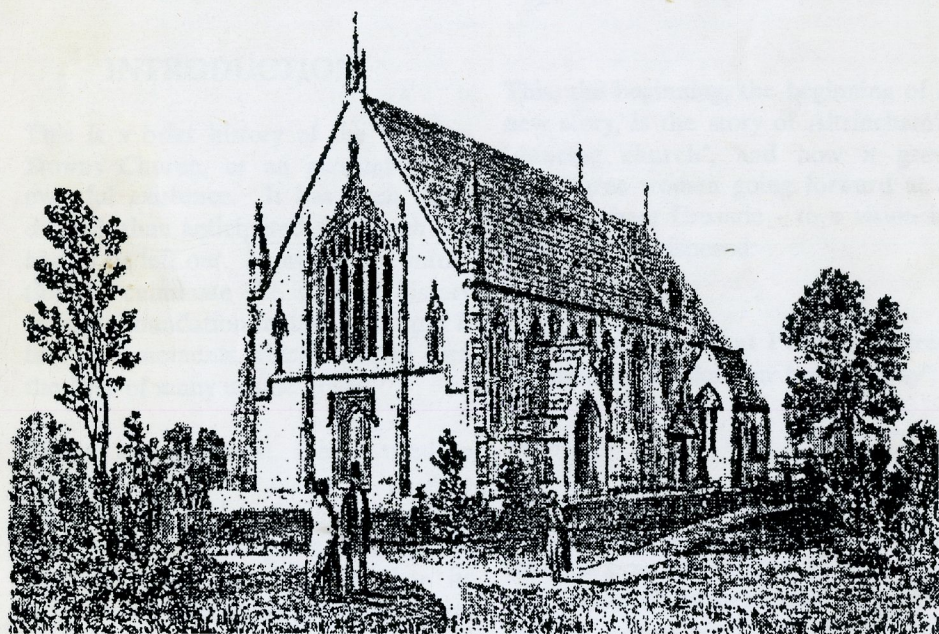
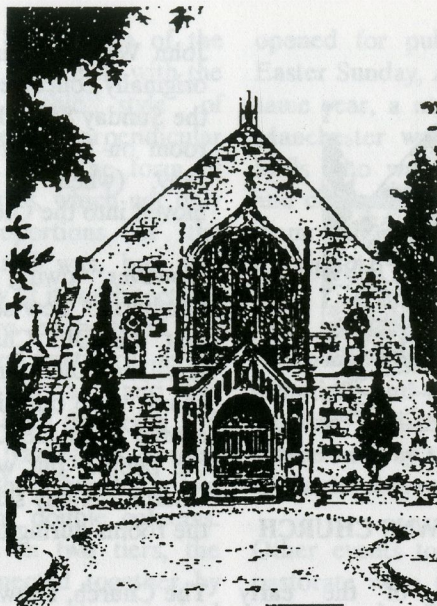


History of the Bowdon Downs Church





INTRODUCTION

This is a brief history of the Bowdon Downs Church, or an account of its eventful existence. It has been more difficult than anticipated and much has had to be left out. However, my intention to culminate the Church history from its foundation in 1848, has split it into two moments which were to turn the lives of many upside down.

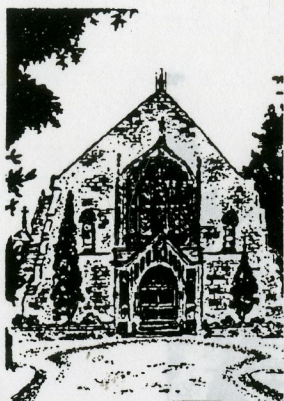
Firstly, and foremost, I have tried to indicate the many positive contributions which the church made, from its prosperous years, through the decline, to the day in 1970 when its doors were closed to public worship. Yet eight years later they were opened again, but by whom?

This, the beginning, the beginning of a new story, is the story of Altrincham's "dancing church", and how it grew from three women going forward at a Billy Graham Crusade - to a vision in which God whispered:

"When you see what I have prepared for you, it will take your breath away".

and it did!

This beautiful but derelict 130 years old listed historic building, seating 1,000, in Bowdon's most distinguished Downs, was "claimed" by a handful of people with no money, but a lot of faith! And this was only the start.



THE BOWDON DOWNS CHURCH

The building, built of the early Perpendicular period, was originally formed in July 1839 by a few worshippers in a small chapel already existing at the foot of the Downs in Altrincham.

Bowdon was a quaint rural village then, and this was the third attempt to form an Independent Church, the first having been made in 1803 by the Reverend James Turner of Knutsford, who travelled about this district, and held meetings in a widow's thatched cottage. A second attempt was made by the Reverend Joseph Whitworth, but it was not until 1839 that a church, other than a Parish, was established.

In June of 1849 the old Chapel was left, and the congregation moved to the present building. It was dedicated and occupied after the death of Reverend

John Wilkinson, in whose time it was originally conceived. At the same time, the Sunday School, which had met in a room on New Street from its start in 1839, (when 42 scholars enrolled) moved into the Old Chapel.

However, owing to the increasing numbers of new scholars, it was found that the Old Chapel was much too small, and therefore in 1861 new school rooms were built in Oxford Road, half a mile from the Chapel. This helped the people, but was not ideal for the Church. A day school occupied one of the rooms during the week.

The Church, known as one of the most beautiful in the country, only prospered throughout this time to the extent that it was able to give support to churches at Hey Head, Gatley, Mobberley, Broadheath, Partington, Baguley and Lymm. This progress was continued under the Reverend Henry Griffiths F.G.S., who accepted the call in 1864. Under his direction, the congregation took up the question of the enlargement of the Church with great earnestness, and a representative committee was appointed to raise the necessary funds.

Originally, the proposal was for the erection of an entirely new Church, at a cost of £7,000, but this was finally abandoned in view of the difficulty in obtaining a suitable site. However, the situation was resolved with the alternative plan of extending the

existing building. The design of the enlargement was to harmonise with the original in its Gothic style of architecture of the early Perpendicular period. Additions took the form of transepts with galleries, which not only increased the proportions of the Church in a material way, but also enhanced the dignity of its architectural features. The nave or body of the building was extended westwards as far as the site would permit, and the transepts added on both the north and south sides. Each transept is divided from the body of the Church by two arches, supported by double columns. These columns are in two tiers, the lower portions connected together by carved capitals, carrying the principal support of galleries and the upper portions supporting the arches, having similar capitals. The galleries provided in the transepts each have separate means of access. There were also two new vestries.

The new west end and each of the transepts have large wheel windows in the gables, each of different and original designs, and two windows of two lights each under the heads of the wheels are filled with tracing of the Perpendicular type. The wheel windows in the transepts lighting the galleries are the same. The gables are surmounted by crosses.

The work carried out, provided extra accommodation for about 530 people, and the cost of the scheme was about £3,000. The enlarged Church was

opened for public worship again on Easter Sunday, April 12th 1868. In the same year, a new organ by Jardine of Manchester was opened by Mr John Mills who was the honorary organist and choirmaster from 1868 to 1883. A memorial in the Church bears the inscription:

"In memory of John Mills of Northwold Dunham Massey, honorary organist and choirmaster of this Church 1868-1883. This tablet was placed here by the choir in recognition of his devoted service. October 1887".

Other events to be noted during this pastorate were that a Mission Chapel was opened at Broadheath in 1866 and the British School Mission started at the Sunday School buildings in 1873.

In the year 1876, the Reverend Alexander Mackennal, B.A., commenced his long pastorate, coming from the Gallow-tree Gate Church in Leicester. Under his guidance, wise, strong and gentle, and his thoughtful, cultured and inspiring ministry, the church became identified with every movement for righteousness and brotherhood and the kingdom of God.

In those days, there were 650 scholars on the books of the Sunday School, with an average attendance of 340 in the afternoons, and 120 in the mornings with 34 regular and 13 occasional teachers. During this time, in order to provide means of accommodation for

the various societies connected with the Church, a handsome, well-appointed vestry, kitchen and a fine lecture hall were built at a cost of £2,540. They were built in red sandstone having a gabled front with five light perpendicular style windows under an Ogee drip mould which are flanked by small canopied empty statue niches. There is a centrally projecting porch with a pointed doorway and gable, thus harmonising with the existing features.

Later that same year, the Downs Chapel was decorated and alterations were made to the organ. Three beautiful stained glass windows were installed, as well as a plaster cast of the "Singing Boys". These 3 windows, and the one over the vestibule are all hand painted and are all beautiful memorials presented to the Church. The "Singing Boys" frieze, of which 5 sections are in the choir, and one near the entrance to the Church parlour, were designed as panels for the singing gallery in Florence Cathedral by Luca del Robbia. Owing to fear that it was sustaining irreparable damage, the original was taken down and 2 plaster casts were taken of it before it was placed in the Museum in Florence. One of the plastercasts replaced the original in the Cathedral, and the other was kindly presented to the Bowdon Downs Church by F.W. Crossley.

In 1891 Dr Mackennal, who had receive his Doctorate of Divinity from the Glasgow University in 1887, the year of his Chairmanship of the

Congregational Union of England and Wales, was ungently invited to become the Secretary of this Union. The Church, of course, wished otherwise and so the appointment was declined.

This, however, led to the appointment of an assistant, a decision which had been debated for many years as the work of the Church had grown so much.

It was during this time that the fine, carved stone, Gothic style pulpit, and a commemorative marble group in memory of Jesse Haworth LL.D., and his wife, were presented to the Church.

The pulpit was one of two commissioned by Queen Victoria for St. Georges Chapel, Windsor. The finer of the two was to go to St. Georges Chapel, and the other was received by the Downs. Also, the Sunday School buildings were again extended during this period. The accommodation had grown quite inadequate to the requirements of modern teaching methods and subsequently the numbers were at a standstill, if not actually falling. There fore, 23 class and club rooms were added and furnished. This enabled a great increase in the use of the buildings, especially during the week. There were 32 regular weekly meetings by the time the account (£2,687) was paid, in 1894. In order to raise the last £500, a bazaar was held, a most unusual event for the Downs. The school

buildings, which were in use night and day were further equipped with new heating and lighting systems. Also, an improvement scheme of heating and lighting was carried out in the chapel, and a start was made for providing a club house near the school. This, which was later called the "Mackennal Institute" was designed by one of the Downs people, and was opened on December 9th 1913, in memory of Dr Mackennal and Mr and Mrs Alexander Mackennal.

By this time, the Church was without a pastor - for the first time in 37 years, and this continued for 17 months, until the Reverend Leyton Richards M.A., took up the position on September 1st 1914. There now seemed every prospect of a happy and fruitful ministry, but unfortunately the war had broken out. One hundred and sixty of the men from the Church went on, but in a more routine fashion. The lecture room and Church Parlour were given up for use as a hospital for the wounded - mainly walking cases from the main hospital.

There was a general feeling of unrest creeping into the Church, as there was everywhere, and eventually in 1916, Reverend Richards, who was known for his constant outbursts on military matters felt compelled to resign. He felt that members of the Church were gaining little profit from the Sunday Services, although truly Christian forbearance had been exhibited, to the "liberty of prophesying" and consistent

courtesy. To him, war and the situation incidental to it, was simply a flagrant challenge to his whole conception of Christianity, and he could not remain silent.

The war continued, and many felt that the Church should try to get a Pastor, and in 1917 meetings were held, culminating in instructions being given to the deacons to take immediate steps to that end. Meetings previously held had been content to wait with the hope of Mr Richards returning. The situation, however, was not resolved, and when the war was over the feeling that Mr Richards was the one to whom to turn, grew.

On April 14th 1919, an overwhelming vote was given by ballot that Mr Richards be invited, and then an open vote was taken of all present, with the addition, that loyal co-operation would be extended in the work if he were to accept. The proposal was carried unanimously.

Mr Richards did accept the position, and during this year various schemes were considered, to commemorate those who fell in the war who had belonged to the Church and school. A porch was decided upon, and forthwith commenced. The design was made by Mr G.F Armitage and his first concern was to harmonise the new work with the existing building. He spared no pains in this labour of love, both for the building and for those who had died.

The memorial was opened on Sunday morning, February 20th 1921, and followed by a dedicatory service in the Chapel, conducted by the Pastor. The side windows of tastefully stained glass bear the names of those commemorated. The two side windows on either side of the doorway bear the sentences (one on each):

"A loving tribute to the brave men of this Church and congregation who gave their lives in the Great War"

and

"A visible testimony of the Church's faith in the virtue of that life which takes away the occasion of all war"

After a few years of 'normal' life when all seemed bright and promising, the Church had another disturbance. Mr Richards felt again compelled to leave - this time to the call of another Church. Every effort was made to keep him, but to no avail. He resigned, and it was decided that he should be released at the end of the year.

In January 1925 a unanimous call was given to Mr John Seldon Whale B.A who had made a great impression when visiting the Church on two previous occasions. One of the early events of his ministry was the opening of the new organ, on Sunday May 2nd 1926, when a crowded dedicatory service was held. This organ scheme had been entered upon after much consideration, as the old organ was worn out and out of

date. A specification by Messrs Rushworth and Dreaper was accepted. The cost was to be £2,600 with parts of the old organ being used wherever possible. The money for this was raised by Gift days and concerts which Mr Alfred Higson, the Downs organist, and his well-known choirs gave.

The Church went on quite happily, and with great hopes, until July 4th 1928. It was on this date that a special Church meeting was called, to hear a statement from Mr Whale. This was to the effect that he had received an invitation to take up Lectureship in Church History at Mansfield College - a very attractive appointment. The Church felt that it could not stand in his way and therefore, with great reluctance, felt compelled to let him go. By the grace of God, the Church was spared a long interval of searching, as an invitation was conveyed to Reverend George Knoyle Davies who had previously preached as a supply on March 29th. Mr Davies took up his duties in July.

Previous to this, it had been decided to re-decorate and modernise the Sunday School Buildings, partly with the view of increasing the work done there, and to improve the letting qualities as the upkeep was so great. The raising of the necessary £600 was to be the responsibility of the Young People in the hope that it would bring them more together. The scheme was successfully carried out, and at a social meeting held for the re-opening, a presentation

was made to Mr T Harold Hill for his help with the architectural work.

Two years after, the Church was approached by the Y.M.C.A. who wished to establish a branch in Altrincham. Negotiations were entered into, and eventually an agreement was drawn up. The Y.M.C.A. were to take over the whole of the premises, school and institute, on a lease of 10 years, with a rent of £30 per annum. (As chief rent was £18 this really meant £12 per year). The Sunday School was to have use of the premises on Sundays. The step was approved, as it was felt that the Y.M.C.A. would make full use of the buildings in the way for which the founders had intended, and which the Church was not doing, nor likely to be able to do.

During the following years, the Church suffered the loss of many of its older supporters who had been the mainstays of its activities for a long time. These losses drastically affected the Downs Church. Also, in the growing districts around Bowdon, other churches were being established and were growing at Broadheath, Hale, Timperley and Sinderland. The effects of this hit many well established Churches by dividing the congregation. Also, by the end of the 1930's the mood of the people had changed, due to the upturn in the economy of the country. After the dark days of the 1920's, money was becoming more plentiful and the general mood was one of optimism and

fun, with everyone out to have a good time.

The class barrier was being broken down, and people were finding themselves with more free time, but were not led by the Church into constructive ways of using it. The Church, unfortunately, did not move with this mood, and tried to keep to its old dogmatic attitude. It had religion, but it was not the 'catching' kind. The result was that the people began to lose interest and found other outlets for their energy. The reaction of the Church was to preach 'fire and brimstone', but this had very little effect.

By the late 1930's the Church began to see that it was not really meeting the needs of the people, and relaxed its attitude some what to the effect that a slight upturn in attendance could be seen. However, the second World War intervened, and took away the younger element leaving only the older element to carry on in its accustomed way. By the end of the war, a large proportion of these were too old to carry on, leaving no-one to whip up enthusiasm among the cynical homecomers from the fighting. Also, the improvements and more scientific approaches to education of the masses during this time led them to question the teaching of the Church, and sadly very few of the clergy had any real answer to their questions and problems. Practical

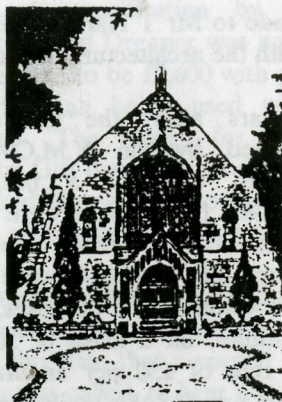
Christianity was what was needed - the people didn't want to be preached at.

Gradually, over the years the numbers attending the Downs Congregational Church decreased. Numbers became so low that when the new proposals were put forward for the formation of the United Reformed Church - a merge proposed by those of the ecumenical movement where the Congregational Churches were to merge with the Presbyterian Churches - the few members of the congregation were easily outvoted by those of the Presbyterian Church on matters arising from such a proposal.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, situated just around the corner from the Downs Church had quite a large congregation, and as many 'immigrants' from Scotland worshipped there, the ideals and principals of the Presbyterian Church were very similar to those of the Church of Scotland.

Many meetings and discussions were held, and it was decided that although the Downs Church had a larger capacity, the Presbyterian building was in a better state of repair and cost of upkeep would be less.

Therefore, in 1970 the two churches combined to form Trinity United Reformed Church.



THE FUTURE IN THE BALANCE

The Church which was in need of attention before being left derelict, had over the years fallen into a state of disrepair, and was earmarked for demolition.

A campaign was started by members of the Bowdon Downs Residents Association to save the building, as fear was that flats, or more disturbing, warehouses were to be erected in its place. Such an uproar was created by the association that the Department of Environment termed it as being a listed historic building, due to its attractive design, setting and distinguished role in the beginnings of the ecumenical movement.

Various schemes had been forwarded for the future of the building but all had failed due to lack of finance. One of the proposals was made by the

local Arts Council, many of whose members once attended the Bowdon Downs Church. They suggested that the building be turned into an Arts Centre.

This was the only scheme ever to get off the ground, but after 3 months work and £1,000 being spent, the Council pulled out with the view that the cost of renovation was going to be too high. The building was still therefore up for sale.

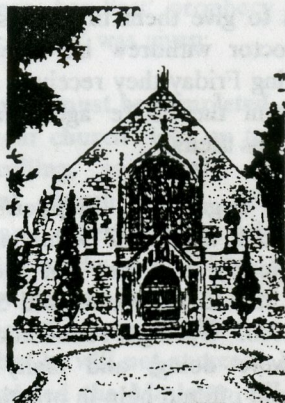
One day, however, the daughter of an architect who attended The Upper Room Christian Fellowship, told her father that there was a Church for sale next to the Grammar School that she attended.

On going to look at it, his first reaction was that the building was in too bad a state of repair - riddled with dry rot and damp, but everyone that saw it said "doesn't it take your breath away".

These very words, uttered by many, were actually the fulfilling of a prophecy given by God to members of the fellowship at a prayer meeting.

The building was 'claimed' by The Upper Room Christian Fellowship, a handful of people with no money and a lot of faith!

It seemed that they were taking on the impossible.



THE VISION

In 1961, Billy Graham, the American Evangelist was preaching at Main Road football ground, Manchester. An Altrincham family were there and gave their hearts to the Lord Jesus. Their lives were completely changed, and they started to go to a local church.

The Lord used them in many ways - they even took into their home boys who were in trouble with the police, on probation or from broken homes. As they had 3 children of their own, Les and Mary Hailes realised that their semi-detached house was too small.

They found a house in Barrington Road, but were told that it had already been sold to a doctor. Mrs Hailes refused to give in - she was sure that the Lord wanted them to have that house - and so she asked the estate

agents to give them first refusal when the doctor withdrew his offer. The following Friday they received a phone call from the estate agents and the house was theirs!

Things began to happen in a miraculous way, their semi had to be sold quickly, but they got the house which had 15 bedrooms and 5 cellars for £4,000. Word got round about what they were doing, and many people came and offered help in practical ways - for example, one man repaired the roof simply for the cost of the materials, another did the cellar floors and yet another gave a boiler and 20 radiators for central heating. When people heard that Mary and Les were making a home for the boys, much of the furniture was donated.

During this time, a couple who lived in Sale were waiting on God to do a work in the area. Phil and Flo Cornish were baptised in the Holy Spirit, and had the gift of prophecy. One day Phil saw a lovely black ledger in a shop, and knowing how Flo loved to write, he bought it for her. She opened it at the first page and as she did so, God spoke to her. He gave her the scripture, Mark 14 v 15 about a large upper room, furnished and prepared. She wrote it down along with the date, and put the book away.

The Lord spoke to them again a few days later, and told them that a meeting would start at the home of Les

and Mary Hailes. By this time the Hailes' house was full of boys. A large room had been furnished upstairs for them, but they preferred to live with the family. Then one day, Les and Mary met a man named Brian Smithyman who prayed for them, and they too received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They could not keep quiet about this, and also felt that they had to leave their church, and so they started a meeting at their own home. They informed Phil and Flo Cornish, who they had met previously, that they were going to hold their own meetings. Phil asked them what they were going to call it, and Les said that as it was to be held in the upstairs room he thought "The Upper Room". Flo Cornish brought out the ledger in which she had written two years earlier, and confirmed God's word.

And so, the Upper Room Christian Fellowship began. Five people used to meet every Tuesday night for prayer. One particular night, Mrs Cornish began to prophesy that they would go to another building and that that too would be an upper room. The room was to have back stairs as well as front, and they would go winding down into the town where the members of the Fellowship would go out to meet the lame and sick and help them. A long while after, another prophecy was given which said:

"The Church I have for you is already built, and it will take your breath away when you see it".

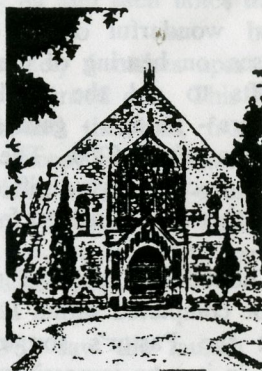
After a few years, it became obvious that the room in Barrington Road was no longer big enough, and so they began to look around for a room to rent. Eventually they were offered the use of a room belonging to the Salvation Army, and when they moved in, they were amazed to find that although Mrs Cornish had never been there, it exactly fitted the description of the first prophecy. While they were there, an evangelist came and held a series of meetings and the sick began to come in hundreds for healing. However, while this was going on, the Salvation Army wanted their room back, and so the Upper Room Christian Fellowship were given 6 weeks in which to find alternative accommodation.

During this time, they heard that the Bowdon Downs Church was empty and up for sale. Although it was in a state of disrepair, all those who saw it said "doesn't it take your breath away?" This building fulfilled the second prophecy. The asking price was £16,000 and the "Upper Room" offered £9,000 - eventually they bought it for £12,000. One man gave a deposit of £1,200 which he drew on his life insurance, and everybody helped, even the youngest Sunday School children.

Mrs Cornish had moved to Clacton-on-Sea before all this came to pass, and one of the women of the Fellowship went to see her. While she

was there, her 'last' prophecy for the "Upper Room" was given:

"The vision must be completed. As you build your church right up to the very high ceiling, so I will build my spiritual church within. Some will leave, and others will be added, just like old bricks are taken out and replaced by new ones. While you are building, the enemy will try to tear down, but he will not succeed. When it is completed the Minister will not be able to minister, for the Glory of the Lord will fill the house".



NEW LIFE FOR THE BOWDON DOWNS

It's hard to believe that in so short a space of time, this small movement of people could be achieving so much; it's nothing short of a miracle. To them though, it was all so simple. They were just believing in what God had told

them, as after all, it had only been in His timing.

Not only had they managed to find the deposit for the loan, but they were now contemplating the phenomenal task of renovation; a list of expenses which seemed endless.

The expense of revitalising the building was staggering, but the amazing fact about it was that the Church was surviving, and solely on the money spared by its members and gifts received.

It was wonderful how Christian businesses, on hearing of the project, sent gifts to aid the work. The contractors - Laing's - gave £500 and Cadburys a gift of £200. The Historic Churches Society gave a gift of £1,000 and a further £2,000 interest free loan.

It was hoped that most of the work would be completed within 12 months, so that the Pastor's son could be married in it. An impossible task but their faith drove them against all odds.

Firstly, the lecture hall needed to be cleaned up for use while the main church hall was being renovated. Little work was required here other than rendering and decorating, except for the floor which was in such a state that this alone took a week of sanding and varnishing; but after a few weeks it was finished and opened for worship in August 1978.

As the work began on the main hall, so the expense grew. It was estimated that the re-plastering, painting and general restoration of the church was going to cost £15,000 and a further cost of £18,000 was going to be required for repair to the roof which was rotting. The Department of Environment were to provide 30 per cent of the total cost of work carried out.

Nevertheless, the undying optimism of the church members and their belief in God carried them on towards their goal.

The 2 main problems that they were faced with in the restoration was that it was damp and full of dry rot. The fear was that if all the dry rot was not found, it could start again and spread throughout the building. The problem they were faced with, with the damp, was that although it could be prevented from happening again, it could only be cured through time - once the heating had been started.

However, work was progressing. Walls that were not infiltrated with dry rot were scraped ready for painting and all the woodwork, such as pews, were being cleaned up.

After 6 months work of breaking out stone walls and plaster to get at the dry rot, the building was ready for re-plastering. This was done by one of the fellowship members who was a master plasterer by trade.

The hall was finally beginning to take shape again, but there was still much to do. It still had to be decorated and all the pews finished. Two of the roof trusses and one of the beams to the balcony, which were rotten, also had to be replaced.

The roof, although in quite a state of disrepair, was temporarily patched up until after the wedding - a time that was to see the final touches of the work, such as the laying of the carpet, being completed on that very day. The hard slog had paid off though, as the church looked beautiful.

The following year it was decided that the roof had to be repaired, and so an outside contractor was brought in to do the work. This relatively simple work was later to set the restoration back several years and with added expense.

The result of a bad decision to remove all the roof, instead of repairing it in stages, led to thousands of pounds worth of damage - most of which was to work that had just been completed.

Appalling weather hindered future work, and it was not until 3 months later, when the roof was completed, that the hall was cut off from the elements - the effects of which left the hall in a terrible state.

The place had become so damp that all the paint had started to flake off again. It was, therefore, decided to dry the

place out as quickly as possible. However, as a result of the sudden change in temperature and moisture content caused by the heating, dry rot, which must have been lying dormant, began to spread rapidly. This was not discovered until a year later - just when it was felt that the building was close to being ready to be decorated again.

The cost of repairs throughout this ordeal, had risen from an original £18,000 to an staggering £30,000.

It took months of stripping walls to locate it all and then holes had to be drilled into the brickwork approximately 6 inches apart, after it had been burned out. This was done right around the hall, from top to bottom, except on the East and West walls, where only a few courses at the top were drilled. A chemical was injected into each hole to prevent any further outbreak.

April 1982 saw the launch of a 12 month Government Scheme to restore the outside of the building. The work was carried out by the Community Task Force which was financed by the Manpower Services.

The idea was for the church to pay for the materials and supply the necessary tools, and they would supply the labour. The only work that could be carried out, though, was that which was considered to be of beneficial value to the community as a whole, i.e. work on

the exterior. It was also argued that work carried out on the schoolroom and the provision of new toilets were of beneficial value to the children of the community. The once overgrown perimeter of the church was paved, and the outside of the building was cleaned at a total cost of £5,000.

The church members battled on despite the set-backs, to complete the work caused by the return of dry rot, which was also feared to have got in and around the organ (valued at some £100,000). It was, therefore, decided that half of one of the West galleries should be removed, and the organ placed there.

As work progressed it became apparent that the organ had been severely affected by the dry rot. With the escalation of cost, the decision to have it removed was finally made when a grant to salvage it was rejected.

Discussions were also carried out at that time as to whether to keep the pews in or replace them with chairs. It was decided that the pews were too restrictive and should be replaced.

September 1984 saw work begin with new vigour. The aim to have it ready for another wedding - namely my own.

The task seemed impossible, but once again with a great deal of effort and hard work by Church members, the building was transformed beyond belief

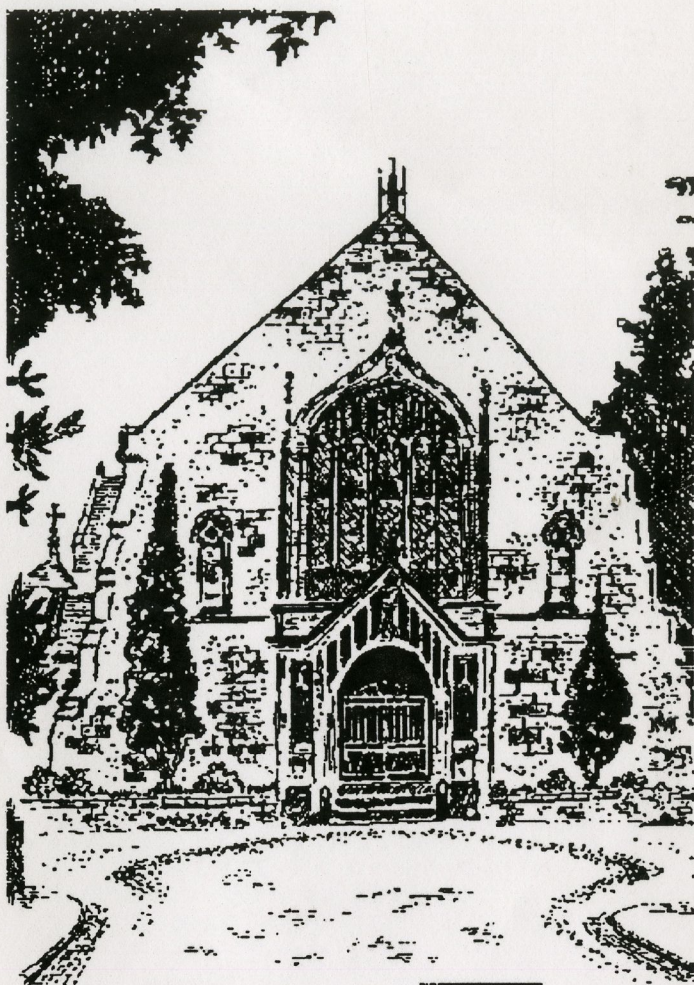
with only a few hours to spare before the ceremony.

To those who walked in on that day, it really did **"take their breath away"** and continues to do so even today.

The Main Church Hall was finally opened for worship on Sunday 17th February 1985.

John Lee 1985

updated 1991



**The Upper Room Christian Fellowship,
Bowdon Downs Church
Bowdon Road
Altrincham, Cheshire
061 941 5712**