

# CHEAM METHODIST CHURCH

# 75 YEARS



# 1935 - 2010

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The story of a suburban church  
1935-2010



Church Hill Road  
Cheam Sutton  
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[www.cheammethodistchurch.org.uk](http://www.cheammethodistchurch.org.uk)

## INTRODUCTION

*The recommendation of the Sutton Methodist Circuit could not have been clearer: “This church should close or join with another.” Cheam Methodist Church had been serving its community for more than 70 years, but the 2006 review painted a gloomy picture of its future. The review pointed out that congregations were now averaging no more than 15 to 20 people and described them as being “set in their old ways of doing things, lacking a desire to move with the times.”*

*The verdict came as something of a shock to the members of this once thriving church as it struggled to find its role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Was it accurate, and time for the church to be sold off to provide funding for Methodist work elsewhere, or was it too harsh a judgement?*

*The fact that our Church, Cheam, is currently celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and is in good heart, has embarked on a positive programme of worship, outreach and community activities ... and has a growing congregation ... may provide some of the answers. Perhaps the view of the Circuit provided a timely wake-up call for members, and through prayerful action we have been able to halt the Church’s decline.*

*This modest history of Cheam Methodist Church, commissioned for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, tells something of the story. However it also poses some questions about the relevance of a church’s role in a suburban community, and about the need to understand how changes in society’s attitudes have presented real challenge for churches like ours.*

*While we thank God that we have not closed, and are able to celebrate this event as a church, our story is far from complete, and numerous difficulties still face us. But we do value our past and are grateful to our predecessors for what they have achieved. But we need to learn from it, and from them.*

## THE STORY OF A SUBURBAN CHURCH

The name of the Surrey village of Cheam is unique in the country, unlike that of the borough town, Sutton, which is to be found more than forty times in any atlas of the British Isles. Cheam is thought to be derived from a Saxon word ‘kaggaham’ – the village by the stumps, possibly the stumps of large trees on the knoll where Cheam Village’s original church, St Dunstan’s, now stands.

Although the earliest settlement of Cheam dates back to the 6th century, the village remained a farming settlement until the 1920s. It avoided the Victorian expansion of so many other areas of outer London. Then, in the mid-1920s there was a real growth spurt in the area, with the population, and the number of streets in Cheam, doubling in just five years.

Developers and builders struggled to keep up with the scramble for new homes, and to cater for the demand for building materials, a brickworks was established below St Dunstan’s on land known as Church Farm Estate. For some years, the tall chimney of the brickworks dominated the area, standing on the site occupied today by the Cheam High School all-weather pitch, a rare case of playing fields replacing buildings. The new estate was proving to be extremely popular. In North Cheam, 1,600 new homes were built, attracting about 6,000 people, many of them from inner London. In Church Hill Road, a new semi-detached home could be bought for £725, or for £750 if you needed a garage.

This was not the only area near Sutton to develop rapidly in this post-war building boom, and members of Sutton Trinity Methodist Church took on responsibility of identifying and catering for the spiritual needs of the growing population in the Methodist Circuit. Taking the lead were Harold Hartley, an accountant and local preacher, Fred Ohlson, who was to provide strong financial backing for the project, and Gervase Wood, a county councillor, local preacher and youth worker. The Trinity group agreed there was a real gap in provision in North Cheam, and what was most urgently required was a Sunday School for the children and young people.

The only building available for such a project was the council school, and permission was granted for its use for this purpose. One attraction of using the school was the availability of a nearby block of land, on the corner of Church Hill Road and Chatsworth Road, which might be suitable for a hall if the Sunday School experiment should work. It was being used for accommodation for builders' huts and mess rooms for workers on the estate. Before any funds could be committed to a building project, however, a strong case had to be demonstrated – and this needed to be achieved by identifying potential demand.

There is no doubt that the members of Trinity Church were determined to make as strong a case as possible. They began by visiting all 1,600 homes in North Cheam to talk to parents and children. The feedback was especially positive and on 17 September 1933 the Sunday School opened its doors in the school for the first time. A contemporary photograph shows about sixty pupils and teachers. Following this initial success, it was clear there was also demand for an evening service for parents, providing further evidence of the need to build a dedicated hall on the nearby site. As a result a case was made for a change of use for the land, and it was accordingly designated for religious purposes.

## **Wesley Hall**

A trust was created and held its first meeting held on 15 June 1934, and resulted in a firm decision to build a 'Wesley Hall' on the North Cheam site. Harold Hartley, Fred Ohlson and Gervase Wood accepted the challenge of raising the £400 needed to buy the land, and thanks to a mystery donor, half the amount was raised immediately. Initially it would serve as a dual-purpose building, but the eventual aim would be to establish a church on the site.

The detailed costings of the project showed that the building itself would cost £3,850, but other expenses would bring the total to more than £5,000. For example, architects' fees were £279.15.9, £230 was allowed for furnishing, £173 for fencing, and £37 for the car park. One curious addition was £21 for armoured window glass. A written explanation justifying the expense said: "Owing to the spirited scholars we have in our Sunday School it was thought necessary to guard the windows against stones. After consideration it was agreed to fit armoured glass to the windows on the side and the back of the building, this being the most vulnerable point." To complete the project 250 hymn books were bought at a cost of 2/6 (about 12p) each. An ambitious order was also placed for 260 adult chairs, and 60 primary chairs.

On 21 July 1934 two hundred people gathered for the stonelaying and appropriately the seats in front of the platform were reserved for the children of the Sunday School. Nearly £250 was raised on the day towards the scheme.

As work proceeded on the hall, the trustees began a major promotional campaign of letter writing, to 750 members of churches in the circuit, and 150 to parents of pupils. Shortly before the opening itself, 2,000 leaflets were distributed to local residents. They made their ambitions clear to all: "The

officers and teachers of the school send you their best wishes that 1935 will be a very happy year. During the first fortnight of the new year the Methodists of North Cheam will open the Wesley Hall in Church Hill Road. This hall will be the centre for religious and social life in North Cheam, and it is sincerely hoped that you will join with your neighbours in the Sunday evening services.”

## **Opening**

The opening of the new Wesley Hall was held on Wednesday, 9 January 1935, with the doors officially opened by the Deputy Lieutenant for the district, Major W J Mallinson. In his opening sermon, the Secretary of the London Mission and Extension Fund, Rev C Ensor Walters, said: “This building is as sacred as Westminster Abbey or St Paul’s.” By the end of the opening day a total of £3,000 had been raised or promised.

Harold Hartley, who had done so much to realise the opening of the new hall, summarised the aims of the trustees: “We desire that this hall shall be a centre of moral and spiritual education, and that Wesley Hall shall be a home for helpful worship, prayer and service.”

The first baptism in the new building, of David Mills, son of Donald and Gwendolin Mills of Matlock Place, took place on 23 June 1935 and was conducted by the Rev H Crawford Walters, who had been appointed the first minister.

A year after the opening, the Sunday School had more than 200 pupils on its books. A Women’s Friendly Hour group was attracting 40 to 50 people every Monday. Other activities included a creche, a literary and social circle, Guides and a choir. By February 1937, a boys’ club had been started and the following year, a Boys’ Brigade Company established. In 1943 a youth club was launched, in 1948 a PT class was held regularly, and by 1952, the Apex Youth Club had opened. In 1954, the hall was registered for the solemnisation of marriages, and the first wedding took place in 1956, of Derek Hooker and Audrey Shepherd, both active workers in the church.

While activities thrived, financially, the early years were a struggle. Following strong initial support from outside for the establishment of the church, the burden of fund-raising began to fall more heavily on members living in North Cheam. The war and its austerity made the challenge even more difficult and a continuing debt of £800, substantial in those times, emphasised the task. An added blow was the discovery, comparatively early in the life of the building, of extensive dry rot in the roof. Restorative work added £600 to the burden of the liability.

## **21st anniversary**

To celebrate the church’s 21st anniversary, the church members undertook a fund-raising programme to pay off the remaining debts. They were aided by an anonymous gift of £100, organised other fund-raising activities including a bazaar, and with further help from the wider church community the debt was finally cleared and in 1955, a small credit balance was reported for the first time.

After thirty years, Cheam Methodist Church (its name was changed from North Cheam Methodist Church in 1965), had established a strong programme of activities for people of all ages. In addition to its core use for divine worship on Sunday mornings and evenings, and Sunday School on Sunday mornings, activities listed included a youth club tea on alternate Sundays, and a cinema session after the Sunday evening service. During the week, Brownies and Guides were held every Monday;

Women's Friendly Hour, Life Boys, teachers' training class and choir practice on Tuesdays; Guild and (in the summer) ministers' fellowship on Wednesdays; a fortnightly Derby and Joan Club and weekly Boys' Brigade on Thursdays; and Apex Youth Club on Fridays.

In addition, church members were involved in a range of outside activities. For example, in the great Methodist tradition, bible and religious study classes were regularly held in members' homes, while an inter-church group met monthly at St Dunstan's Church with members of that church for bible study. The Youth Club ran a regular canteen and cinema show at Queen Mary's Hospital for Children in Carshalton. It also organised boating outings in its own dinghy at Ham Dock. During Derby Week women members helped to run a dry canteen on Epsom Downs.

### ***Pioneers' Dream***

In 1965, the story of the origins of the church, and a record of its activities, were recorded by the then minister, the Rev C Leslie Craig in a well-researched booklet, *Pioneers' Dream, the Story of Methodism in North Cheam*. He explained his purpose in his introduction: "A church that is less than thirty years old is not usually in danger of losing sight of its origins, but in the suburbs of London, where the population is so mobile and changes of personnel are so rapid, the story of the origins of a church can soon pass out of memory. If no tablets have been erected in memory of the pioneers their very names can pass into oblivion. This could easily happen at North Cheam, especially as here a further factor enters in.

"Methodist work here was started, as part of the outreach of their own church, mainly by people living outside their immediate neighbourhood. Some of these have now passed on; others have moved away. This record is written to do honour to their toil and sacrifice. It is also written to remind their successors of their debt to them, and to stimulate them to follow their example."

Leslie Craig ensured that none of the church's early pioneers was over-looked – from Mr Cushion the caretaker to the Rev Frederick Greeves, then a young minister at Epsom, who read the lesson at the stonelaying.

In recording his tribute to the pioneers of the past, Leslie Craig also drew stark attention to the challenge of carrying out all the church's activities in the original building. As he noted: "Our work began with a Sunday School. This work continues to flourish; but we are becoming increasingly aware of the disadvantages of a dual-purpose building. Immediately after the Sunday evening worship the long aisle carpet has to be rolled up and put away, and the hall chairs moved into one of the side rooms so that the hall can be used for week-night activities – and all rearranged again for the next Sunday morning." He observed wryly that the work "naturally falls upon those who do most of the other work." Because of the shortage of accommodation, the Sunday School was forced to return to its roots – using the local (by then secondary) school as a temporary measure.

There was a growing desire among members for a sanctuary reserved exclusively for worship. In addition there was evidence that new-comers to the district were not attracted by a dual-purpose building, preferring to attend a church rather than a hall. As Mr Craig put it: "Surely in a suburb like Cheam, Methodism should have a church."

## **Expansion**

Ambitious plans were therefore drawn up to enlarge the premises by extending them over part of the former car park, and by erecting another storey at the rear of the building. The total cost was estimated at about £15,000, three times the amount for the original building. A range of funding sources were identified, including Connexional grants. The treasurer appointed for the project was Arthur Stannard, who with his wife, Violet, proved to be real stalwarts of Cheam Church over many decades.

Raising the necessary funds did not prove easy, and by 1972, only £6,300 had been secured. As an alternative a successful application was made to Sutton Council for a substantial grant on the basis that the extension would be used mainly for youth work. It was decided that the extension would be called the Cheam Methodist Youth and Community Centre. Tenders for the project were awarded in early 1973, at a total cost of £37,500, significantly more than estimated when the plans were first developed in the mid-1960s.

Work on the building continued throughout the year, and it finally opened in early 1974, providing far greater flexibility for the Church and its many activities, and even allowed its use by adjoining Cheam High School for students during the day, and providing helpful income through rent. To meet the terms of its grant, the hall was regularly used by Club 74 for young people. Through extraordinary commitment and dedication of members the debt for the project was fully cleared early the following year.

The opening of the new hall allowed the original multi-purpose hall to be dedicated as a church, and used specifically for worship. Indeed the Church Council agonised at a number of meetings whether it should allow the church to be used for extra space for the Christmas Fair. The minutes of one special Church Council meeting called to discuss the issue reflected the seriousness of the discussion: The debate centred on whether the “use of the church would be an offence to God. If the answer was ‘no’ then it ought not to be an offence to us.”

The following decade saw a period of consolidation and growth with strong attendances at services and other church and secular activities. Church membership was climbing steadily, and the January 1984 meeting of the Church Council heard that numbers had reached 115, the highest level since the church was opened.

## **Golden Jubilee**

The next milestone for the church was the celebration in 1984-85 of its golden jubilee. Under the inspiring leadership of the Rev Len Barnett, the front of the church was transformed in time for the celebrations to make it more attractive. In addition, a busy programme of events was organised to mark two 50th anniversaries, of the laying of the foundation stone in 1934, and of the opening of the original Wesley Hall in January 1935.

As the *Sutton Herald* reported the events (and there is a suspicion of Len’s own input in the language): “From broiling high summer ’84 to bleak midwinter ’85, Cheam Methodists have been celebrating in no uncertain manner the fact that for half a century they have been very much part of the community scene in the Cheam section of the London Borough of Sutton. In July 1934 the

foundation stones were laid of what was already becoming a lively centre for friendly outreach and community service; a tradition which has widened and strengthened over the decades between.”

It went on: “The great second Golden Jubilee Weekend was held as near as possible to the original opening date of the church on January 9, 1935, and indeed it seemed as if a kindly Providence was at work in the provision of a sunlit lull between snowstorms on the Saturday; and a Sunday which, although bitter, was free of snow.”

Another highlight of the celebrations was a broadcast on the BBC World Service of the church’s covenant service led by Len Barnett. The congregation listened to the transmission which had actually been recorded in the Church a few weeks earlier. The minister’s introduction brought home the fact that this broadcast from Cheam was being heard all round the world, and of our Church’s place as a part of the international family of Methodism. He welcomed the listening audience: “Warmest New Year greetings, wherever you are, from all of us here in the Methodist Church in Cheam, Surrey, one of dozens of small neighbourhood village-type communities which together form Britain’s capital, London. We’re especially happy to share with you this traditional New Year Methodist Covenant Service of Rededication since we’re also celebrating half a century of local services and witness round here – our Golden Jubilee. So, in the name of our Lord Jesus, we welcome you, and rejoice in our worldwide faith.”

Further examples of the Cheam Church’s international links have been demonstrated over subsequent decades through increasing numbers of members from ethnic minority groups, through several exchange visits by Cheam ministers with American counterparts, and through an active connection with a Lutheran church on the outskirts of Leipzig in Germany, then behind the iron curtain. The third link was established through an enterprising visit by a party of Cheam Church members to the Lutheran Church community in Sommerfeld. They stayed with local families, and assisted with a church building project. In spite of difficulties in travelling outside East Germany the Lutherans reciprocated with subsequent visits to Cheam, and by sharing services via telephone links. During one visit, in 1987, the East Germans were invited to the Sutton Civic Offices for a Mayoral reception, and to receive the borough’s coat of arms.

## **Church organisations**

Over the years a range of church organisations have served the needs of different age groups, and people with different interests. The most enduring have been the Women’s Friendly Hour, the Boys’ Brigade, and the Apex Youth Club. Perhaps the common feature of each of these groups (and a secret of their success) has been the long-term commitment of a number of individual church members. The WFH group is the longest-running, having been launched soon after the opening of Wesley Hall in 1935. Current members celebrated the group’s own 75th anniversary in May 2010, an appropriate lead-in to the Church’s own celebrations.

For a number of years Apex was a strong supporter of London Weekend, the annual gathering of the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs (MAYC), and played host to young people from many other parts of the country during their visits to the capital. Initially such visits were the subject of earnest debate by the Church Council whose members met to discuss whether young people should be allowed to stay in the Church hall over the weekend. The weekend event was enormously popular with young people who were easily identified by their yellow and green outfits and, in some cases,

vivid yellow and green hair colouring. They joined thousands of others at the Albert Hall or Battersea Park for the climactic concert.

The 1974 extension of the building with the provision of hall at the side and rooms on the first floor at the rear introduced not only new church and community activities, but also provision for income from tenants. Notable among these have been their use by the Rev Rob Frost's Easter People organisation, the St George's Counselling Service (a Methodist-based advice and counselling service), and currently by the Sutton Schools Christian Workers Trust. All of these have promoted Christian outreach in different ways.

## **Other activities**

Cheam Methodist Church has always had a strong tradition of fund-raising for a variety of good causes, church and secular, local, national and international. Support has been provided for a range of organisations including Christian Aid, Crisis the charity for homeless people, Ryelands, the Methodist home for older people, and various church-based charities. For more than 20 years parties of carol singers have toured local streets in the weeks before Christmas raising money for Action for Children, formerly NCH, a charity with Methodist roots. The tradition has become so strong that many residents, in spite of being bombarded by months of pre-Christmas retail promotion, describe the visit by Cheam's carol singers as the real start to their Christmas celebrations.

Another strong tradition in Cheam has been music for services, based mainly on organ music. Special recognition should be offered for the contribution made by Alan Bugden, who has faithfully served God over many years in playing the organ. The Church also invested in a computerised system, nicknamed Sebastian, to provide a further back-up. On occasions too piano and percussion have been introduced to services.

It would not be appropriate to produce a history of our Church, however modest, without recording the strong sense of family which has always existed – through good times and bad. Visiting worshippers and preachers often comment on the warmth of the church, and the friendly welcome they receive from members. Much of this has developed through the range of activities, engagement in regular class meetings, in Alpha courses and other religious study and discussion and members providing dedicated pastoral support for one another. The church's long-running newsletter *The Link* (edited for many years by Roy and Vera Collis) has also served to communicate important and regular information to the church community.

The positive spirit of the church has also been maintained through its continuing programme of church-based social activities organised for members and friends. Examples over recent years have included regular faith lunches, coach trips to such centres as Canterbury, Gloucester, Cambridge, Oxford, Winchester and Salisbury, pantomimes starring talented (and not so talented) church members, beetle drives, sponsored walks and other fund-raising events, and church maintenance weekends.

In 2001 ambitious plans were drawn up to reorganise the layout of the church to make it more open and inviting to potential worshippers. Church members visited a number of other churches and looked at a variety of options for ideas. Detailed proposals were produced and a target of £375,000 was set. However after further consideration of the cost and fund-raising, the major project was abandoned in favour of smaller schemes to improve the kitchen and other facilities. In the words of the then

minister, Rev Simon Leigh: “Is it right for us to use our precious resources on maintenance ministry rather than on mission?”

## **Cross-roads**

At this stage the Church was at a cross-roads with a declining and aging membership, the closure of a number of its activities including its Junior Church department, and rising costs of maintenance and problems with vandalism. In just 20 years or so, Cheam Methodist Church has seen its numbers dwindle by two-thirds, the loss or decline of many of its groups and activities, and perhaps a lack of vision of a way forward.

Matters came to a head in 2005 when officials of the Sutton Methodist Circuit, in a major review of all its churches, painted an especially gloomy picture of Cheam. In their report to the main Circuit body they reported that Cheam’s congregations were averaging no more than 15 to 20 people, and described the members as being “set in their old ways of doing things, lacking a desire to move with the times.” The real body blow in the report was an uncompromising recommendation about the future: “This church should close, or join with another.”

This verdict came as something of a shock to the members, many of whom remembered a once-thriving church but one which was now clearly struggling to find its role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps the judgement was rather harsh, but it served to provide a wake-up call which stung members into taking a long hard look at their future. After much deliberation and prayer, Cheam members were determined to demonstrate to the Circuit that its review, and recommendations, were quite wrong.

## **Five-year plan**

A questionnaire was circulated to all Cheam members asking for views about the future, with the opportunity to accept the Circuit view of closure or a merger. Both these options were rejected out of hand, and a clear consensus emerged that the church still had a future, but that it would require the full commitment of all church members. A five-year plan was developed with a strong emphasis on worship, prayer, biblical learning, sharing, outreach and responding to injustice. Specific proposals were drawn up with the aim of increasing the worshiping congregation and membership, of attracting more families and of raising the church’s profile in the local community.

Practical measures included the employment of an outreach worker to develop closer contacts with local families and church user groups, the development of a programme of appropriate courses, promotion of the church in the area, and inviting prayer requests from residents. Other proposals were the creation of a church website, making the church more inviting for children, increasing the number of house groups, and renovating the church to make it more welcoming to local residents.

The plan was adopted with enthusiasm at the December 2007 meeting of the Church Council, and many of the proposals, including the appointment of an outreach worker and the creation of a lively website, have been implemented.

There is a new spirit in Cheam Methodist Church, with strong leadership from its minister and leadership team, and fervent support from the members. Many new initiatives have been undertaken. The church hall now serves as a polling station for Cheam Ward, and an invitation is extended to

voters to enjoy tea and coffee in the church. This has been well received by local residents, some of whom have not been in a church before. A notice board encouraging church users to leave prayer requests has also been very successful.

And the outreach worker, strongly supported by his wife, is making positive contacts with hall users, and young people from the nearby high school who congregate outside the church. In 2009, five church members trained as worship leaders and have since been contributing regularly to services. What is also encouraging is the gradual but steady turnaround in congregation numbers, which is now usually in the 40s and growing steadily.

### **75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the future**

As it celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Cheam Methodist Church still faces many challenges, not the least facing up to a steady decline in church attendance throughout the country. Cheam still needs to find its place in the wider community, and determine how it can be more relevant in an increasingly secular age. It is also imperative that it is able to reach out to, and attract, more young people. The origins of Cheam Methodist Church are strongly rooted in provision for young people, and it is no accident that many of those who were initially attracted to the Church as youngsters stayed with it through their adult years.

Our church owes so much to the vision of those members of Sutton Trinity who saw the need, and the opportunity, to establish the original Wesley Chapel so many years ago in North Cheam. It is our duty to follow their example and to continue to follow their lead. The approach has to be appropriate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it must be underpinned by the faith and spirituality which helped to create the original church 2,000 years ago.

*Looking to the future*  
**List of Ministers**  
**Cheam Methodist Church**

1935-39	Rev H Crawford Walters
1939-46	Rev H Waldron
1946-47	Richmond College Students: E W Griffin; Norman Thomas; John Prescott; R D Redman
1947-48	Rev Eric Lord
1948-49	Rev Bernard J Ward
1949-50	Rev Alan Cox
1950-52	Rev Derek H Jefferson
1952-54	Rev Alan P Triffitt
1954-55	Rev Geoffrey Stone
1955-61	Rev John S Dykes
1961-65	Rev C Leslie Craig
1965-69	Rev Trevor Martin
1969-72	Rev George Sharratt
1972-73	(various including Rev Michael Meech)
1973-76	Rev Derek House
1976-79	Rev Leslie Goulden
1979-81	Rev Michael Meech (and Rev Roger Ducker)
1981-83	Rev Arthur Freeman
1983-86	Rev Len Barnett
1986-89	Rev John Morgan
1989-94	Rev John Clark
1994-98	Rev Brian Skinner
1998-2000	Rev Michael Whelton
2000-07	Rev Simon Leigh
2007-10	Rev Nigel Wright
2010-	Rev John Amankwatia