## St John's Free Church, Westcott

At the beginning of the 19th century there was no formal place of worship in Westcott. The inhabitants had to walk to Dorking or to Wotton to attend a church service but itinerant clergymen occasionally preached the gospel on the village green and held cottage services in the village. It is claimed that John Worsfold heard the Reverend Henry Lambert preach one day, either when passing the Green or having been persuaded by his coachman to attend one of the cottage services, and that he was so impressed with the simple earnest teaching that his eyes were opened to the spiritual destitution of Westcott and to the need for his own spiritual enlightenment.



John Worsfold was one of the old-fashioned types of country squire. He always wore brown knee breeches and gaiters, high collar, and white choker, as seen in his portrait in the church. He was fond of all such rural pursuits as hunting and shooting and was a considerable landowner, possessing his own residence fronting the Westcott Road with land extending back across 'The Furlongs' to the Pipp Brook, and also to the south of the Village Green, as well as farms in Sussex and elsewhere. It is said that John Worsfold was walking over that part of his land where St John's Church now stands, contemplating the message of one of the Rev Lambert's sermons, and recalled the text, 'The place whereon thou standest is holy ground'. He thereupon determined

to erect a place of worship upon the spot. When this was known in the neighbourhood he became the object of much ridicule but he persevered. Whether or not this is what happened, it is undoubtedly true that Mr. Worsfold gave an acre and a half of ground for the site of a church and churchyard, and a first donation of £150 towards construction of the building.

On becoming acquainted with Mr. Worsfold's benevolent intention, Mr Lambert put out the following appeal:

'The hamlet of Westcott, in the parish of Dorking, is situated nearly two miles from any place of worship; it is therefore in contemplation to erect a new chapel in a district comprising upwards of 600 inhabitants, the service to be conducted on the plan of the late Countess of Huntingdon. Its estimated cost amounts to £550 towards which John Worsfold, Esq. (a member of the Established Church) has generously contributed £150, independent of an acre and a half of ground. It is humbly hoped that his spirited example will be followed by many, and that the remaining sum of £400 may soon be received, that so desirable an object may be carried into effect. Who that walks and triumphs in Gospel light can refuse to lend a helping hand in so good a work? Is there anything so affecting as the thought that thousands are perishing for lack of knowledge? How can a Christian who knows the preciousness of spiritual light be unconcerned about those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death? Here, then, is ample scope for the exercise of genuine benevolence.'

The original 'collecting book' containing this appeal also records the names of all those who made donations, including:

	£sd		£sd
Attlee, Richd., Esq.	6 0 0	Knight, Mrs.	10 0 0
Bothwell, S., Esq.	5 0 0	March, Chas., Esq.	10 0 0
Bull, T., Esq.	5 0 0	March, Mrs. B.	500
Cheesman, Mrs. R	10 0 0	Miller, Mr.	500
Clarke, Jas., Esq.	5 0 0	Napper, Thomas, Esq.	10 0 0
Connebee, Rev. R.	10 0 0	Sperling, H. P., Esq.	10 0 0
Cooke, John, Esq.	5 0 0	Stone, Mrs	500
Denison, Mr.	10 0 0	Thomson, R., Esq.	500
Ewes, Geo., Esq.	10 0 0	Wellbeloved, W., Esq.	500
Hind, B., Esq.	1500	Wells, Jas., Esq.	500
King, Jas., Esq.	10 0 0		

In addition to the names of the subscribers, the 'collecting book' contains some interesting comments. For example, the Rev. R. Connebee wrote: 'From long residence here, I am

intimately acquainted with the destitute case of Westcott, and most cheerfully and earnestly recommend the cause to the Christian public.' Mr. C. T. Smith, of Bletchingly, wrote: 'Having known Westcott for upwards of forty years, I can truly say that no place stands in need of the Gospel more.'<sup>1</sup>

The necessary money was raised and the names of some of the villagers who contributed are inscribed on bricks on the outside wall of the church close to the entrance to the churchyard.



St John's c1918

The Foundation Stone was laid on the  $28^{th}$  July 1840 by Mr. John Worsfold and the church was opened for worship later in the same year. Henry Lambert was appointed the first Minister at the age of twenty-seven and held the living until his death on  $22^{nd}$  December 1874.

The new church proved to be very popular. In addition to village people worshippers came in their carriages from stately homes in the surrounding countryside.

John Worsfold died in 1852 and is buried within the church, under the altar, and a memorial tablet was erected in his memory

'Sacred to the memory of JOHN WORSFOLD, ESQ., of Westcott, Who departed this life the 17th April 1852 Aged 84 years. He founded this Chapel, which was opened for Divine worship the 27th day of December 1840 CHARLOTTE, wife of the above, Died 14th December, 1859 Aged 89 years.'

A second tablet in the church records the bequests he made in his will

John Worsfold, of Westcott, gentleman, deceased, by his will, dated 30th July, 1850, bequeathed to the trustees for the time being for ever of the chapel the following annuities:

- Forty pounds, payable half-yearly, as a stipend for the minister of this chapel, duly performing Divine worship, as then established here.
- Three pounds for keeping this chapel and his monumental tomb and this tablet in good repair and condition; any surplus to be applied for the benefit of this chapel.
- Thirteen pounds for the purchase of good wholesome bread, to be distributed every Sunday for ever among the poor persons who, for the time being, shall be constant attendants at the services for the performance of Divine worship in this chapel; the bread, on each Sunday, to be of the value of five shillings, or as near to such value as this annuity will allow.
- And also three pounds in aid of the Sunday-school of this chapel, payable half-yearly.

In pursuance of the directions in the said will, the sum of £1,966 13s. 4d. has been invested in Government stock, in the names of a competent number of the trustees of this chapel, to answer the due payment of the foregoing annuities.

The testator also bequeathed to the trustees of this chapel his silver tankard for the sacramental service in the same forever.

The said John Worsfold, in his lifetime, conveyed the house, land, and premises, now know as St. John's Villa, in Westcott aforesaid, to trustees, for the residence of the Minister for the time being of this chapel; and also presented to the trustees of this chapel the silver trowel and other Masonic implements used at the laying of the foundation stone thereof on the 28th day of July, 1840.

Mr. Worsfold's zeal in religious work did not stop at church-building. He became charitable to the poor and frequently had soup distributed among them, and gave them dinners on his birthday (June 21) and at his rent-feast (December 21). At Christmas he would have a fat bullock killed and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> These extracts and much of the content of this article comes from the History of St John's Westcott written by Rev G W L Maeers in 1896/7 and reprinted with an updated introduction in 1995.

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divided among them, and on Good Friday would himself give a bun to each of the Sunday-school children at St. John's.

It is said that when a child, Mr. Worsfold planted an acorn at his home at Lyfield, Sussex and he lived to see this grow into a large tree. A year or two before his death he had it cut down, and had his coffin made out of a portion of it. When it was brought home, his wife naturally objected to its entering the house, so he had it taken to the vestry at St. John's, where it was kept. It is said that he used occasionally to lie inside to confirm that it was still large enough for him. The cover of the beautiful font was also made out of the same piece of timber.



Revd J Nash

Mr. Lambert was succeeded by the Rev. John Nash who held the appointment for seventeen years, resigning because of age and ill health in 1892.

His successor, the Rev. F. E. Ault, reported that when he arrived in Westcott he found the building in a state of dilapidation and disorder 'Ichabod' seemed stamped upon the place, and if 'the glory of the former house' were to be restored, the workmen must 'arise and build.'



Revd F E Ault

An appeal to Christian friends in Dorking and the neighbourhood for the thorough cleaning, reseating, and restoration of the church enabled the building to be put into a proper condition of repair and comfort. The Rev Ault also found that '*The few children that attended Sunday School*, which was held in the church, were most rebellious, and patient firmness, long continued, had to be exercised to bring them into proper discipline. By degrees they were brought under control, and, as the spirit of reform and progress was manifested in every branch of the work, the confidence of the people was gradually regained.'

Exactly how this was achieved is not known but the attendance increased to the extent that the



need of a separate school became apparent. Another appeal was made to local friends, with particularly generous support coming from Sir Arthur Cotton and T A Denny Esq., and schoolroom with accommodation for about 250 pupils was formally opened on Whit Monday 3rd June 1895. The room was made of corrugated iron with a matchboarded interior and furnished with the high-backed 'reversible' seats

which had been used in the church until replaced with the wooden pews which are still in use today. Among other changes to the church at that time were the lowering of the gallery and the pulpit (which was originally of the old 'three decker' type) and the wainscoting of the walls. Gas had been introduced in place of the original paraffin lamps in 1881.

At the turn of the century records show that the St John's congregation occasionally reached 250 and included visitors to Westcott, both Non-conformist and Episcopalian. It was reported at the time that the latter feel quite at home, as the Church of England Prayer-book is the basis of worship, and the service being plain and evangelical, the former can, and do, enter heartily into it. There were also about 180 Sunday-school pupils, with a similar number of members in the Band of Hope. A flourishing Mother's Meeting attracted about 40 mothers and there were also a well attended 'Help Myself Society', a Clothing, Coal and Boot Club and various other church organisations.

In 1900 the Church was formally taken over by the trustees of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, with whose teaching the founder had been in complete sympathy. The first pastor under this new arrangement was the Rev Lewis Llewellyn who planned the replacement of the original parsonage at the top of Parsonage Lane, although he died in 1904 shortly before the new building was completed. During the 20th Century under the successive guidance of Parker Huddleston (1905 - 1910), Herbert Rosier (1910 - 1924), R W Cowdray, David Jarvis, F J

Greatwood, Edwin Tully, Herbert Keeping, Tony Bird, Gordon Wheatley etc. and finally Jonathan Clark (1992 - 1999), with Ben Quant (1999) as assistant Minister, St John's has been faithfully maintained, with extensive renovation in 1994/95. The rear of the church was partitioned to provide an additional room, the floor levelled to ease use by push chairs and wheel chairs and the monuments mentioned above were repositioned in the alcove that had previously housed an organ (acquired in 1912 from a redundant church in Great Yarmouth). In 1966 the old school room was replaced by the present brick building and extended to include a new kitchen.

Declining fortunes at the very end of the Twentieth Century resulted in the withdrawal of a resident pastor and the sale of the manse in Watson Road (that had replaced the Parsonage Lane residence some time before). Although the church was managed by local deacons for a while the trustees of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion eventually decided to close the church and a final service was held on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2003. The future of the building has still to be determined.

"Sometimes throbbing with life and at other times struggling for its very existence. During all its history St John's had found a warm place in many hearts"

## The Countess of Huntingdon and her Connexion

Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was born in 1707, married in 1728 and became a Christian at around the age of 32. She was widowed seven years later and began to devote her energies wholeheartedly to the Lord's work. Like the Wesleys and George Whitefield, she was a member of the Church of England. She used her influence to arrange the appointment of evangelical clergymen in numerous parishes and appointed George Whitefield and other clergy as her chaplains, which was a way of supporting them in their ministry.

The Countess opened private chapels attached to her residences, which she was allowed to do as a peeress of the realm. These were used for the public preaching of the gospel, but they became a source of contention from the local Anglican clergy, with the result that in 1781 she reluctantly seceded from the Church of England.



In 1768 she had opened a College at Trevecca for young men to train for the ministry. The students from Trevecca in Breconshire did much evangelising and church planting, mostly in England. However, it became increasingly difficult for them to obtain ordination in the Church of England, so the first Ordination service in the Countess' Connexion was held on 9th March 1783. The Connexion's Articles of Faith were drawn partly from those of the Church of England, partly from the Westminster Confession and some are particular to the Connexion. They are of the Calvinistic persuasion and allow for infant baptism. By the time of her death in 1791 there were over 60 causes associating themselves with the Countess of Huntingdon. Today there are still 23 chapels in the English Connexion, maintaining an evangelical witness in towns or villages, mainly in the southern half of England.

The Countess was very interested in missionary work towards the American Indians. (George Whitefield was frequently in America preaching along the east coast, in particular in Georgia, where he established the orphanage 'Bethesda', near Savannah. He left this to the Countess in his will, when he died in 1770.) When the slaves who fought for the British were given their freedom after the American War of Independence, students who had been at Trevecca went to minister to them in Nova Scotia. Some of these freed slaves returned to Africa in 1792 - to Freetown in Sierra Leone. There they started up churches of their original denominations which is how the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion in Sierra Leone began. This link was strengthened in 1839 and a strong bond has existed ever since.

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