# **GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGH STREET**

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***SHANKLIN***

***A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE TOWN AND THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH.***

**By Keith Towers**

**Introduction.**

We are greatly indebted to Keith Towers for the time he has taken in putting together this informative and stimulating insight into our church’s history. It is good to see the gifts of God’s people being put to such good use.

The United Reformed Church represents a coming together of three traditions all rooted in the Reformation in 16th century Europe. In Shanklin, the congregation is a real ‘mixed-bag’ made up of people from many different backgrounds that are drawn by the warmth of the fellowship and by its worship, which is lively, Bible-centred and relevant to today’s world.

 What we cherish today is just what led to the church being founded over 150 years ago. In our concern to avoid being bound by tradition, we often fail to realise just how important the past has been. The S.U.R.C is on a prime site in the very centre of the town and this we owe to the vision of our forebears who built on what was the edge of Shanklin village in the 1840’s. Their evangelical zeal laid the foundation for subsequent generations to build on. This has been true physically with the fine building we have inherited but it has been just as important in spiritual terms with a lively faith being passed on.

##  I hope that you enjoy this brief delve into the past and that you find encouragement in seeing how the wonderful name of Jesus has been faithfully proclaimed through the years, giving glory to God in the High Street.

## ***Rev Brian C Harley***

The Beginnings Of Christianity On The Island

It would be very easy to think that the Romans (in passing) might have made some mention of the Gospels of Jesus Christ during their time on the Island; but, of course, there is no evidence to say that they did so. It was much later, in St. Wilfred’s[[1]](#footnote-1) time that the seeds of Christianity fell upon the ears of the largely pagan Jutes who populated the Isle of Wight at the time. This was long after their Kentish counterparts had embraced the faith.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the 11th century, entries in the Doomsday Book showed there to be four churches on the Island. *(At Arreton, Bowcombe, Calbourne, and Shalfleet)*. The manorial landowners built these churches for themselves and their servants. Most of them are still standing, given a few architectural changes here and there, and are in use to this day.

After the Norman Conquest, William the Conqueror redistributed the land to those who had been loyal to his cause. The Island came to William Fitz Osborne, its first Lord. He was a devout man who continued to support the Christian faith here on the Island, donating six churches to the Abbey of Lyra in his time, which remained with the Prior of Carisbrooke until Henry V’s suppression of all alien monasteries.

The wars and revolts of the 15th century continued to plague Europe throughout the 16th. There were dark and dangerous times ahead. Henry V111’s pronouncement that he was to be the supreme head of the church in England, gave way to the bloody act of dissolution of all monasteries. At that time, many irreplaceable works of art were confiscated or destroyed and hundreds of priceless books burned. A wall painting, hidden with coats of whitewash during this period, was re-discovered in the South transept of *‘All Saints Church, Godshill’,* and restored so that we can fully enjoy its beauty once again.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***The 17th And 18th Century***

The seventeenth century was a turbulent period of change, revolution and restoration.

A small number of non-conformist churches sprang up in the Isle of Wight after the ‘Act of Toleration was passed by Parliament.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

They were, in the main, small groups of dedicated worshippers who became known as Baptists, Quakers and Congregationalists, gathering in the tiny rooms of private cottages.

The eighteenth century saw the transfer of power from monarchy to state. There were new influences in architecture; the novel was born and a new age of poetic romanticism fired the imagination of the rural classes.

***Shanklin - The Established Church & The Bible Christians***

In the early part of the 19th century, Shanklin’s spiritual needs were being met by the Rev. Joseph Hewson at *St John the Baptist Church*, situated on the outskirts of the town. The church, founded by Geoffrey de Insula, remained unchanged until it was rededicated to *St Blasius.[[5]](#footnote-5)* Other than serving the congregation at *St John the Baptist Church* in Shanklin, the Rev. also shared a living with Bonchurch.

Nestling, almost secretly on a ledge above the sea, is the 11th century, *St Boniface church*. This tiny structure was built on a much earlier religious Saxon site. However, this is not the Victorian *St Boniface Church* of Rev Hewson’s care. His church is further up the hill and is no less tucked away.

The records show that Rev. Hewson was a warm and gentle man, and most obliging towards his parishioners. He was highly regarded by the people in the town, but his successor, the Rev. Hill, was not so accommodating, it is said. Unlike Hewson, Hill enjoyed forcing his narrow-minded views upon his flock; his anger targeted towards the flourishing non-conformist movement now spreading through the Island. He was at home in his pulpit, delivering sermons of hellfire and damnation. Here, high on his pedestal, he would categorically point out to his captive audience how he utterly disliked the non-conformist doctrinal belief. One Sunday morning, Hill’s strident message, aimed against the non-conformist movement as usual, came well within earshot of his own Bishop. The Bishop, thoroughly pleased by what he had heard that morning, immediately promoted Hill to the position of Archdeacon of Buckingham.

Rev. Hill’s continued outbursts were to be the final straw for many of his parishioners. Disillusioned, they drifted to the more relaxed style of worship that Hill had tried so hard to destroy.

Seething with anger, the Rev. Hill summoned one particular family to his study and remonstrated angrily with them. So incensed was he, that he did not even allow the poor dumbfounded group the courtesy of an explanation. When they did try to speak in their own defence he would interject, screaming wildly at the top of his voice: *“But hear me – But hear me.”*

He continued to deliver his utter dislike for the non-conformists, making the most outrageous accusations from the pulpit. Not only did he give itinerant non-conformist preachers a hard time, but was also known for his criticism towards preachers of his own Church. There were times when he was heard to remark that: *“Certain gentlemen of the cloth are acting in a manner that resembles the non-conformists.”* He was referring to the Rev Legh Richmond, Author of *Annals Of The Poor* and Rector of St Mary the Virgin Church, Brading [[6]](#footnote-6)as one such gentleman.

In 1820, a lady by the name of Burchell came with her daughter to live at Eglantine Cottage, in Shanklin. After settling in, she became quite amazed to hear that the clergy in the town found no time in giving much needed tuition to the children, during the week or on Sundays. In view of this, and at her own expense, she opened a Sunday school for both boys and girls, which soon became a great success. The school continued for a number of years until she had to leave the area. This put some doubt upon the children’s further education until a lady by the name of Percival came with her family and servants to live at a Mr Rayner’s newly built cottage in Shanklin.[[7]](#footnote-7) She soon saw the need for the school and took it over, inviting every one to participate in her new project, including her own family and servants.

 In time, Mrs Percival also had to move away, but before doing so, she asked a local man, James Warder, to continue the work she had gladly started. With the help of his sister, the Sunday school continued for a further nine years.

James Warder was a prominent figure in the affairs of Shanklin. For many years, he was in charge of the municipal works and fully involved with the non-conformist movement in the town. He was also proactive in the field of Education.[[8]](#footnote-8)

James Warder was also the town’s first historian. He captured the essence of life during his youth in his book: ‘Shanklin 60 years ago’ (1821).[[9]](#footnote-9)

It was a deep sense of community spirit, a strong faith in God and an interest in local education that encouraged him to form the first non-conformist house fellowship in the town.

A breakaway group in the 1830’s who came from the Wesleyan tradition set themselves up as ‘The Bible Christians’. They began holding meetings in a small cottage situated at Warders Corner, on the edge of Shanklin’s Old Village. James Warder remarked in his book: *“We recollect witnessing some persecution encountered by opposing inhabitant. With rotten eggs and potatoes being liberally used against them, followed by a hooting mob.”* However, this did not put the new group off, and they resisted the bad behaviour shown by some of the townsfolk, turning the other cheek and continuing with their meetings. Their tolerance paid off as the abuse dwindled away and finally stopped altogether. At last, their presence in the town had become accepted as normal.

The cottage fellowship became a resounding success and it wasn’t long before they needed more room. A fund provided the necessary money for another new building and a builder by the name of B.Cooper appointed to build it. A room built of weatherboard and slate, measuring 20 feet by 17 feet, having two side windows and an entrance door, resulted.[[10]](#footnote-10) They had no money left to complete the building or its interior, leaving it without a proper flooring, inner lining on the walls or pews. They prayerfully considered what they should do next knowing that if it were the Lord’s will, their small church would be completed and stand as a witness to the town. It would need a good deal of faith and a lot of hard work to make it possible. The Bible Christians were not short of either.

Borrowing a horse and cart from a willing neighbour they went to the Downs and brought back several loads of chalk. Many hands joined in with the task of pounding the chalk into the floor; a stonemason friend agreed to do the lathing and plastering for a sum of £6, payable on the church’s future prospects. The church opened its doors on The 17th April 1835. Mr. Richard Sedwell, who was the superintendent of the Bible Christians at that time, conducted the first service. The collection, taken at morning service, amounted to £1/11/00 (£1.55). The collection for the evening service amounted to £1/4/00 (£1.20)

The church fellowship continued to grow and the building, being again too small for their needs, was extended by another 12 feet. The old seating arrangement, hurriedly put together with old iron drums and builder’s planks, were replaced with eighty comfortable seats. Mr Cooper once again obliged the church by installing the seats from his own pocket on the condition a small charge of 2 shillings (10p) was raised by yearly lettings to pay for them. Other purpose-built seating in the church was free of any charges.

As with the other two churches, the newly extended building prospered until 1858, when a brick built church on a new site in Victoria Avenue replaced it. In 1885, the church was again rebuilt and renamed as The United Methodist Church. That building, is no longer a place of worship, but has functioned as ‘Shanklin Youth Club’ for many years.

***The Independent Congregationalists***

Without the hard work of the Bible Christian’s in Shanklin, we may never have seen the strong growth of the Independent movement here. As the population of the town grew steadily, so there was a need for more religious accommodation. This was a good time for the Independent Congregationalists to make their presence more strongly felt in the town. With the co-operation of local people, and those associated with the Brading Congregationalists, a small church was built on the site of the present ‘*Shanklin* *United Reformed Church’*. The church opened its doors for worship on August 12th 1841. The first Pastor who preached there was the Rev. Samuel Barrows, who had ordered the building at a cost of £250. Fifty pounds of this was raised from local friends. However, even though there had been great expectations for the church, it was not to be the success first thought, and it coasted along quietly until the death of the Pastor a few years later.

***1872-1883***

For a short time, Shanklin Congregational Church shared its ministry with the Congregational church in Sandown. It separated in 1872, when it experienced a rapid growth in its fellowship and needed a pastor of its own. The Shanklin people accepted this with regret, their feelings recorded in the church minutes as such at the time.

The coming of the Steam Railway, a decade earlier, had had an escalating effect on the town. The pace of Victorian life was on the increase, the steam railway allowing people to move around more freely. This new appetite people were developing for travel, in turn encouraged a renewed interest in church building.

To keep pace with the expanding population in the town, it was decided to replace the Independent Congregational Church yet again. In 1879, a local man - Mr. J. Sulman, F.R.I.B.A. - was duly appointed as the chief architect for the new project. The old church was demolished in 1882 and the timbers and stones used to build a church hall in Palmerston Road (a night club and restaurant at the time of writing). On May 29th of that same year, the Lord of the Manor, F. White-Popham, Esq., laid the foundation stone of the church hall, and on October 26th, laid the foundation stone of the new church building. The foundation stone for the clock tower was laid on the same day by Mrs. Scaramanga. The new church re-opened August 1883.

***Two World Wars And The Church Tower***

Looking through the old church records one would be amazed at just how economic members were with their comments about both world wars. One might imagine an Elders Meeting where everything was discussed with a whisper, a nod and a wink, just in case walls really did have ears. A crafty nod and a wink and a gentle tap of the nose is still quite usual with real Island folk these days; but war or no war, it was business as usual for the much-reduced membership of Shanklin Congregational Church. Like everywhere else, in a country now at war, they took things very much in their stride and just got on with it.

***1914-1918 War***

The first mention of the Great War in the *minutes* was set to record in the form of a proposed special service for the *‘Men in Khaki’*. This took place on the 31st January 1915, when the men were invited to take tea at the Palmerston Road church hall. The event, it was reported, having been received with varying degrees of success, was generally appreciated by those who attended.

On the third anniversary of the war, a public meeting was held on the steps of the Town Hall, (Shanklin Theatre). It was agreed that the following day, being a Sunday, it would be nice to hold a service on the sea front, conducted by all the ministers in the town.

***1939 – 1945 War***

On September 28th 1939, the church minutes reported a concern for the young people now being evacuated from their homes in the Portsmouth area. A war with Germany was looming closer by the hour.

During the war, the church continued to function admirably, even thoughits finances were in a less than satisfactory state. Jumble sales and other fund-raising events were held to subsidise the lack of funds; but by May 1941, it was clear that they could not support a full time minister. The minister, at the time, was Reverend Walmsley. He had realised how grave the situation was becoming and when a wartime post with the YMCA in Yorkshire came up, he felt led to apply for it. His resignation was accepted with great sadness and was to leave the church without a resident minister for the next four years.

Enemy air raids were frequent on the Island, with a relentless pounding coming from an assortment of missiles. Church members were asked to play their part as volunteer ‘Fire Watchers’ at this time. Their duties were the responsibility of the church.

On Wednesday nights, with officers on alert, they would collect the key from Number 25 Shelter and report for duty at Number 49 in the High Street. From this station they would patrol the streets keeping their eyes open for any danger. This was an official government posting, so if a member was unable to attend their duty, then it was up to them to find a replacement.

** 49**

The old ‘accountability’ regulations had made it hard for the church to get hold of volunteers for fire duty before 1943. Now, new regulations relieved the church from any liability and members were happy to oblige when asked, even loaning buckets and brooms when turning out for patrol.

The church did not escape enemy air raids either. Its clock tower was severely damaged by a blast from several bombs that fell nearby in 1945. The tower was inspected within the first ten minutes of one devastating explosion, but the extent of the damage did not become apparent until 1946 when large cracks began to appear in its fabric. With some concern for safety, the church secretary ascertained the reasons for the cracks and reported his findings to the minister. The clock tower would have to be demolished and a new one built.

Suggestions were made for a tower to be built of a much lighter material to replace the old damaged one. A full report was submitted to the membership and in December of 1949, Basil Phelps, a local architect, met with the ‘Technical Advisor of the War Damage Commission’ to discuss the matter further. In May 1950, good news arrived. The W.D.C. had accepted the liability for the damaged tower.

Plans for a new porch and tower were immediately submitted and approved. Estimates were received and negotiated, and by June 1952, a contract to begin the work had been signed.

The foundation stone for the porch and tower was laid in 1953, and apart from a short delay because of the shortage of steel, the reconstruction went ahead unhindered and was completed in 1954. When the new clock tower was finished, the Town Council accepted responsibility for the upkeep of its clock, which has become a useful landmark[[11]](#footnote-11) for residents and visitors alike. A later date revealed that it was necessary to strengthen the apse. Tie rods were stretched across the top of the archway and below at crypt level.

***PALMERSTON ROAD CHURCH HALL.***

The church put Palmerston Hall up for sale in the 1980’s because of the high maintenance costs it incurred. It had been built from the stones and timbers of the previous church on the site.

***TOWARDS THE FUTURE***

No one can predict what the future holds. The future is Gods business. Nevertheless, if we are not to decline as a church fellowship, we must always try to provide for its future, and ensure that it is met with great sensitivity. We must be a people of vision; good stewards of our inheritance, so that those who follow on behind can feel a real sense of belonging to the past as well as the present and the future, here at Shanklin United Reformed Church. To be complacent about this would be to deny the spirit of faith that has kept this place of worship alive for so many years. In 1971, a great challenge came to the members of the Shanklin Congregational Church. For some time, a proposed link with the Presbyterian Church of England and Wales had been on the minds of the membership. Now things were taking on a more serious tone and it was time to come to a common agreement. Whilst not all Congregational Churches on the Island wanted the holy alliance, 26 out of 28 Shanklin members saw the future possibilities of such a union and gave their vote to join. In many respects, the alliance was an inevitable move forward. The call for reforms in the 16th century Church of England had led to much persecution, and now the struggle for non-conformist recognition was ending. However, this was not time to sit back and enjoy the new found recognition, but a time to build upon the struggles of the past, giving all the glory of victory to God.

***INSIDE THE CHURCH***

As one enters the porch from the street, they will see a framed sketch of a much earlier building. This was the church as it appeared in 1853. A niche on the same wall contains a small stone cross. This was donated by the Master Mason who was the builder in charge of the clock-tower restoration. The main church has a fine tongue and grooved ceiling of pitched pine, installed at the same time as the pulpit, carved from Japanese oak, just before the start of the First World War. The pulpit does have a very definite ‘Jacobean’ feel to it, but it is not that old. Oak panelling seen at the front of the church was donated by the wife of Earnest Holmes, a member of the church fellowship. Skilful embroidery work created by members adorns some of the walls in the church. The copy of Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘The Last Supper’[[12]](#footnote-12) was the work of Louise Duncan, the wife of a former Pastor.

**THE ORGAN**

**** The original church organ was built by ‘*Alfred Kirkland of London’*, and installed in the church in 1892. It was replaced with the dismantled organ from the Sandown church when that closed in 1979.[[13]](#footnote-13) The whole thing was rebuilt and installed in the Shanklin U R C by Cyril Coleman in 1982. An electro-static action was added at the same time.

The pipes are purely decorative. The functional pipes are housed in a special room at the front. There are over one thousand functional pipes in all, ranging from 6 inches in height to 16 feet.

***THE BOOKSHOP AND THE CRYPT***

The extension to the East end of the church was undertaken in 1986 to create a small Christian Bookshop as an ‘open door’ to the community and to the many visitors who come to Shanklin throughout the year. The matching stonework was chosen carefully to blend with the original fabric of the church. The crypt, once serving as the vestry, was converted to create two useful rooms. These two rooms host the Junior Church and other fellowship activities.

***THE JOHN WILLIAMS V1***

There is a fine model of a cargo ship displayed in a protective glass case in the church. It was made by Mr Harold Moody, a past member of the now closed, Sandown United Reformed Church. The ship has no connection with the history of the church, but is a reminder of the importance of spreading the Word overseas.[[14]](#footnote-14)

***THE GARDEN***

The small area at the front of the church was a gift in memory of a former member – donated by her son. The two seats were also memorial gifts.

*CONCLUSION*

Our heritage has given us a strategic site right in the heart of the town. We are not just known for our clock, or its mellow chimes – informing folk of the hour on the hour - but also for our lively fellowship that goes out of its way to welcome those who care to join in the worship. Like many other churches, we have had our difficulties; but survived and continue to faithfully serve our King in much the same way as our Bible Christian forbears did. As we go about God’s business, we remind ourselves of the dedication and hard work that came from men like James Warder. The decisions that were made all those years ago for our church has affected the way in which we serve and worship there today. It is now up to us to continue the good tradition for those who come in the future.***Appendix***

***Ministers of Shanklin Congregational/United Reformed Church***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1841-47 | Rev. Samuel Barrows. |
| 1847-48 | Rev. T Smith. |
| 1848-51 | Rev. W. T. Skinner |
| 1851-54 | Rev. J. Greener |
| 1854-55 | Rev. Walter Scott |
| 1858-59 | Rev. E Turner-Warren |
| 1861-62 | Rev. W. Beresford |
| 1862-64 | Rev. J. C. Westbrook |
| 1865-66 | Rev. I. G. Stephenson |
| 1866-72 | Rev. W. J. Craig  |
| 1873-78 | Rev. Josiah Andrews |
| 1878-86 | Rev. G. Avery |
| 1886-96 | Rev. E. P. Powell, M.A. |
| 1896-1906 | Rev. J. L. Fraser |
| 1900-02 | Rev. A. S. Welch, M.A. (Hon Co-Pastor) |
| 1908-24 | Rev. F. W. R. Dorling |
| 1925-33 | Rev. J. H. Cox |
| 1934-41 | Rev. A. A. Walmsley, M. A. |
| 1945-52 | Rev. Owen Skilleter |
| 1953-60 | Rev. I. E. Moore, B. D. |
| 1960-62 | Rev. Edna Rowlingson, B.A. |
| 1964-76 | Rev. R. C. Lambourne |
| 1977-81 | Rev. D. Godfrey, B.D. |
| 1982-93 | Rev. R. H. Duncan |
| 1994 | Rev. Brian. C. Harley |

1. St Wilfred, English Prelate and Bishop of York 655 AD [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anglo Saxon Chronicles. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Christ on a Triple Lily Cross’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1689 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Circa 1900 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1797-1805 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daish’s Hotel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. He and his sisters, Sophia and Maria, opened the Institute for Mechanics in the early 1850’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Published in 1881 to raise funds for the present S.U.R.C church and republished in 1905 as: *Shanklin – 80 Years Ago.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The site for this building is where Cooke’s Furniture Store now exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A ‘Time-Capsule’ containing an Island guidebook of the period, local and national newspapers, and current coins of the realm was buried by the architect at the time of rebuilding. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This embroidery work can be seen above the communion table. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The organ from the Sandown church was built by Forster & Andrews and was installed in 1880.

Sandown URC closed for worship in 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Not now on display. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)