

Croydon Unitarian
& Free Christian Church

THE
FIRST
HUNDRED
YEARS



A history by
Roger Thomas M.A.

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THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

of the
Unitarian and Free Christian Church
in Croydon
1870 – 1970
by Roger Thomas, M.A.

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCH
CROYDON FLYOVER
CROYDON
SURREY
1970

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The Reverend Roger Thomas, contributor to various publications on the history of Dissent, takes responsibility for the final form of this short history, 'Errors and Omissions *not* Excepted,' but in fact he is indebted to many others in its preparation, especially Miss E. M. Butcher who, in spare moments of a busy life, has been collecting material for a fuller history of the church. He is indebted to the Reverend A. B. Downing for giving him the benefit of the study he intends to publish on Edmund Geldart, and also to members of the congregation who can remember the recent life of the church as far back as 1914, a period during which, for all the plenitude of miscellaneous information, true understanding of the times is hard to come by. The history is indebted to Mr. J. W. Ashdown for the illustrations and for designing the cover which embraces the whole.

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THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

The Free Christian Congregation first met for worship on 9th October, 1870, in a borrowed church building on London Road with their first minister taking the service. Rather curiously the foundation was until very recently celebrated each year on the second Sunday in December, a date which commemorates the first occasion when the congregation met in a building of its own, an iron building in Wellesley Road, bought from the Baptists after they had moved to Spurgeon's Tabernacle. The choice of the December date for the anniversary each year would seem to have been because the founding fathers, mostly Unitarians who had come to live in Croydon since the coming of the railway, were men of property who did not feel that their church had properly come into being until it possessed a building of its own. It could have been said of any of them, with Cowper, that he was

An honest man, close button'd to the chin
Broad cloth without, and a warm heart within.

For the opening of the Iron Church on 11th December, 1870, they invited James Martineau to be the preacher. The choice has a significance beyond the fact that he was the head of Manchester New College, London, (now Manchester College, Oxford). Martineau was associated with two movements affecting the congregation, one looking to the past and the other to the future. Moreover he had been instrumental in finding the congregation its first minister.

First, then, the very name "Free Christian" was due to the influence of Martineau, who objected to a church being called Unitarian. It was only a quarter of a century since the passing of the Dissenters' Chapels Act which had been needed to secure to Unitarians the continued enjoyment of the old Presbyterian chapels which formed the majority of the chapels where they met. Originally these English Presbyterians had been Calvinists; as time passed many in later generations came to be Arminian in outlook, and later still, under the influence of Joseph Priestley, the teaching had developed into the Biblical Unitarianism of the early 19th century. Martineau had fastened on the salient fact that these old congregations had exercised a freedom to grow in doctrine, and so he objected to their being tied to Unitarianism; he had indeed been

instrumental in getting the Chapels' Act modified so as to give freedom of change for the future. So, while members might be Unitarians and their ministers might be Unitarian, the congregation ought not to bear a sectarian label standing in the way of future change.

In the second place, the Martineau school of thought was already moving away from the old Biblical Unitarian position, with its reliance on the evidence of miracles and the resurrection and was putting reliance rather on reason and conscience.*

For these reasons Martineau pressed upon the congregation the desirability of adopting the unsectarian name of "Free Christian".

Martineau's third connection with the new congregation was that he introduced to it Robert Rodolph Suffield who became its first minister. Suffield had left the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church earlier in the year after a long intellectual struggle arising out of the controversy over papal infallibility, a doctrine which had offended his reason and had led him to the reluctant realisation that the basis itself of the Roman Church was unsound. With this outlook and judging of Unitarianism by Martineau he chose to throw in his lot with the Unitarians whose faith he regarded as "a rational but religious and moral form of Christianity".

It is significant of Martineau's unsectarian cast of mind that he should have introduced such a man with no close Unitarian associations to a newly formed congregation with as yet no formed traditions of its own.

Though strange to his new surroundings, Father Suffield, as he was fondly called, was a warmhearted man and was soon at home especially with the younger members growing up in the families of the founders. For them he began social gatherings named the Alfred Society from his home in Alfred Villas, and this led later to the formation of what was long known as the Soirée Committee. For them, too, in 1875, he founded the Socratic Society, a name that sufficiently indicates his rationalistic outlook and his encouragement of rational discussion. In its turn the Socratic Society set up a free library; very soon it became a public library, some ten years before the Croydon municipal library was opened in 1890. In 1903 most of the books went to The Dennett Hall Mission.

It is not difficult to note a considerable divergence from normal rather more staid traditions of other Unitarian churches, especially, as we shall see, on the social side. Suffield's health broke down in 1877 and the following year he felt obliged to end his Croydon ministry.

*For a fuller account see *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, xiv (1969) pp. 107—111.

The congregation's choice of its second minister, Edmund Martin Geldart, was even more remarkable. A former Anglican, he had had a short ministry at Hope Street, Liverpool, after leaving the Church of England, but it so happened that he was teaching in Croydon and had regularly supplied during Suffield's illness. Without hesitation the congregation invited him to become its minister. His welcome meeting at Croydon was remarkable in one respect; the usual speeches were followed by a social evening at which amongst dramatic and other items the new minister was regaled with a rendering of 'Come into the Garden, Maud', an item that stirred the Editor of *The Inquirer*, who entirely disapproved of such levity on such an occasion, to some ponderous jocosity.

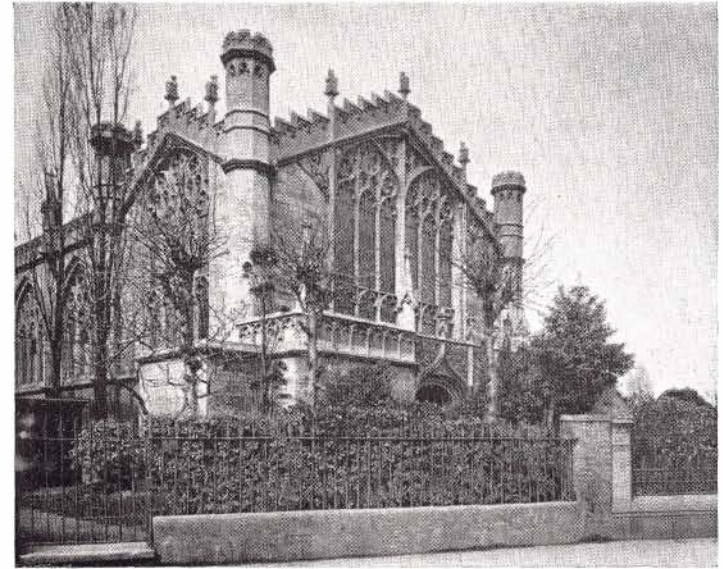
The social life of the congregation continued as refreshingly with the new minister as with the old. Geldart was a companionable soul, often entirely out of this world, and always in danger of putting his foot in it or getting into a scrape. There was an incident with a gamekeeper on a ramble in the country when the poaching extended no further than the capture of a few inconsiderable moths in connection with his interest in entomology (on which he was something of an authority, though he would have been the last to make any such claim). We hear, too, that in the midst of an evening stroll with a friend and in the middle of a profound metaphysical argument, he noticed an unusual moth on a lighted street lamp. Without more ado he climbed the post, captured his moth, pocketed it in a pillbox, and went on with the argument as if there was nothing unusual in a parson up a lamp post. He had an essentially questing mind and, with no professional interest in any set orthodoxies or unorthodoxies, he would never have been safe with any orthodox congregation, Anglican or Unitarian. He would pursue a line of thought with as much eagerness as he would pursue a moth, and in the process more staid susceptibilities might squirm, doubtless to his innocent surprise. But Croydon, on theological questions at least, was not given to such susceptibilities. He spoke his mind—whatever it happened to be at the moment. He wrote his sermons late on a Saturday night and explained to a friend who caught him at it that he did not write them earlier or he would have been tearing them to pieces for the rest of the week.

A New Church Building and its Music

In the controversial climate of the day, the interest created by Geldart's preaching and his lively interest in what he had to say was considerable: the congregation grew and it was not long before it decided that the time had come to have a building more to its mind and prospects than the iron church which had been its home for the past dozen years and which was moved bodily to the rear of the church site to become the congregation's social hall, fondly referred to as the "Cake Tin".

The new and very remarkable building was opened in 1883. Externally it was of grey-faced stone walls and with large gothic windows and pinnacles. Internally its plan was unusual. The entrance gave into a very large and lofty vestibule, so large indeed that when the other end of the building was destroyed by a German bomb in 1941 the vestibule made an adequate church with pews brought in from the damaged part of the building. The church itself with two aisles had a slightly sloping floor with a hardly noticeable gradient down towards a very large dais with a low curtain in front for the choir and also for the organist whose organ console was so placed that he faced his choir. The organ itself, a gift from Sir Henry Tate was in a comparatively small square apse behind the choir. The pulpit, was originally at one side (near the vestry door) but was later moved to the centre in front of the choir when Page Hopps was minister, acoustically not nearly so good a position.

The attention given to arrangements for the choir in the new building illustrates the care that was given to the musical side of the worship. From the beginning the congregation had seen that the music was not neglected. Dr. F. R. Walters long afterwards, when an old man, recalled being taken as a child to the house of the Mallesons for the choir practises before the opening service in 1870. Later the church owed a great deal to the Moore family, Henry Moore and his three sons, Francis, Keatley and Ernest who though they were resident in Croydon when the church was founded, continued to attend South Place Chapel in Finsbury, London, an old English Presbyterian foundation. It was not until a disagreement arose there in 1876 over music in which Keatley Moore was involved, that the family joined the Free Christian Church. They soon made their musical, and indeed theological, interests felt at Croydon. At the annual meeting in January 1880 Keatley Moore raised objections to the hymn book then in use, which not very surprisingly was Martineau's *Hymns for the Christian Church and Home*. A committee was formed to go into the matter and later in the year it came back with a compromise recommendation (for there were some who did not want to give up the Martineau book, amongst them Thomas Matthews, secretary of the church from 1885 to 1896, and later treasurer from 1900 to 1910). As a result The South Place Hymn Book of 1873, in whose compilation Keatley Moore had had a very considerable hand, was introduced for use as a supplement to Martineau's book. There were apparently only ten hymns common to both books. It is revealing to find the new book recommended on the grounds that it supplied hymns "expressive of ideas and sentiments now especially distinctive of liberal theology, such as progress, freedom and universality in religion, the immanence of God in Nature and the spiritual value of scientific truth". The chant book, long in use in the church, was compiled by Francis Moore in 1885.



The Free Christian Church in Wellesley Road.



An Interior View.

The ending of Geldart's ministry can be called tragic without misuse of this much abused word.

It was quite in character that Geldart was moved by the youthful socialist movement of William Morris, and also, incidentally of his close friend at Little Portland Street Chapel, London, Philip Wicksteed. It was in Geldart's house that the Croydon branch of the Social Democratic Federation was founded; characteristically and doubtless never sensing any danger, he did not keep this new-found moth he had captured (or which had captivated him) out of his sermons. One cannot help a smile at the innocence of such preaching before that congregation, dressed in its Sunday best broadcloth and its paternalistic capitalist outlook. The outburst of horror and protest was immediate, but what gives the affair its tragic cast was that even the protesters felt that they were not opposing some little opinionated upstart with a new notion, but a man dearly loved, with whom at bottom they were united in independence of thought. Under the guidance of one or two of their less emotive seniors, this deeper respect did triumph (in spite of real fears of a disrupted congregation) and the difference was virtually overcome. The minister's right to liberty of speech was not denied while Geldart for his part promised to exercise greater tact. Geldart was not asked to resign but, after the reconciliation, he did resign. What added to the gloom was Geldart's death. He was of a manic-depressive temperament; on earlier occasions (one in the first year of his Croydon ministry) he had had to take prolonged rests in order to regain health. An attack of depression supervened now, and, on medical advice, he set out for an extended holiday. He boarded a boat for the Continent, but never reached the French coast; suicide is the only explanation. He was still minister at Croydon when the news broke of this abrupt end.

Dennett Hall

Geldart died in April 1885. In January the following year Christopher James Street was appointed minister. He will be best remembered for his work in connection with the foundation of the Ministers' Pension and Insurance Fund in 1902 and also in the formation of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches out of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association and the National Conference in 1928.

He came to Croydon as a young and energetic minister of thirty, the first that the congregation had had who had been trained for the Unitarian ministry, and his preaching had more of a denominational flavour than the congregation had been used to. Perhaps too he had a youthful and rather masterful lack of tact.

It was to Street's initiative and social concern that the congregation owed the foundation of Dennett Hall Domestic Mission. Explaining the purpose of his proposal he said:

I want to bring the beneficent influence of our religion and social life to bear upon a class who feel the pinch of poverty and the burden of family cares, who cannot afford to dress in broadcloth, would not know how to bear themselves at a Soirée in our Social Room and rather shrink from entering so grand and comfortable a Church as ours, which one poor person said the other day to one of our visitors "seemed to be only a church for ladies and gentlemen".

It was only six months after his appointment that he outlined his plan for the Mission, which was opened in a modest way in two small shops in Dennett Road on 27th November 1886. It was managed by a committee appointed by the church committee but largely gathered by Street from supporters and helpers in the work of the Mission. The activities were those usual for such philanthropic work and included a savings bank, a mothers' sewing meeting, Saturday evening penny readings, a library and reading room with tea and coffee at modest prices, a Band of Hope, a medical club, a singing class and undenominational services on a Sunday. Street was president and Mrs. Street secretary and among the committee of 27 may be noted the names of Henry Green, treasurer, Miss Fanny Harris, Mr. C. L. Hingston and Mrs. Grover, doubtless the mother of Miss Grover of Fabian fame.

Early in the next year Street was pressing for the purchase of land in Dennett Road on which to build a mission hall. He had the promise of £500 as a gift from Frederick Nettlefold. This left only a comparatively small amount to be found and the church committee was asked to guarantee this sum lent by several supporters of the Mission. The church committee showed considerable reluctance; it still had an outstanding debt on the Church building of £1,000; also there were some who argued that charitable work by the congregation should be undertaken individually and not corporately. The rift between the two committees was eventually overcome by an amicable arrangement whereby the management of the Mission was dissociated from that of the church.

Considering that the church committee cleared the £1,000 on the church building by the end of the same year, and that it had been unwilling to back the Mission scheme to the extent of a guarantee of about £160, Street may well have felt that he lacked the confidence of the Committee. He had the misfortune, too, to become involved in an acrimonious dispute with Keatley Moore, who was choir master, over a mere triviality about choice of hymns; over this a decent veil of silence had best be drawn. By old custom

amongst congregations deriving from the English Presbyterian tradition, the minister did not attend church committees. Street felt that lack of proper contact with the committee was at the root of his troubles and he rather acidly complained of "the cold disregard of the minister shown by the official representatives of the congregation in discussing the affairs of the church and shaping their plans, without consulting him at all". He therefore asked to attend committee meetings. Instead the committee offered quarterly conferences with the minister. This Street refused and when a congregational meeting upheld the committee he resigned and his Croydon ministry ended in 1892.

Hymn Book Compilation

For some years it had been apparent that something would have to be done to replace the two hymn books in use since 1881; they were in poor condition and in short supply. Characteristically Street had suggested the denominational book, *The Essex Hall Hymnal*, a suggestion very coldly received in the Moore family. This was in 1890 and nothing was done until after the appointment of John Page Hopps, who succeeded Street in 1892. A much older man than Street, the congregation had wanted to invite him to be minister in 1886, but could not see its way to offering the hundred pounds a year more than the three hundred pound stipend previously and subsequently paid. The increased salary was now promised in the hope both of the congregation and of Page Hopps himself that the success of his fifteen year ministry at Leicester would be repeated in Croydon. Francis Moore described him as a man of strong personality and geniality of character; he certainly had tact and the patience born of long experience in the ministry, but he was not one to let the grass grow under his feet. Within the first year, he had started a book table; he got the committee to move the pulpit from the side to the centre; he wanted a liturgy introduced but accepted the committee's rejection of the idea with a good grace; he started *The Recorder* which was the forerunner of the present church calendar; and he reminded the congregation that they were "short of hymn books" and added that they were also "short of suitable hymns" and he offered to compile a new book for the congregation, to which the prompt response was to set up a special committee to assist him in the work. It must have taken all his tact and geniality to endure the meticulous scrutiny that the committee applied to each individual hymn considered for inclusion; Francis Moore claimed that he and others "succeeded in squashing a good number of the twaddleyest, and in edging in some conspicuous omissions". One would dearly like to know what remarks the minister made to his wife when he got home after a lengthy and argumentative meeting of this Special Committee. The book came into use in July 1894. The tune book to accompany the hymn book was completed in 1905.

Although Page Hopps was able to organise special services at the Public Hall with attendances of 700 and more and although attendances at the Sunday services increased during his time, the large accession of strength to the congregation that was hoped for did not take place. Seeing the financial difficulties of the committee he offered to forego part of his salary and at the end of three years it reverted to the former £300 a year. One of Page Hopps's strengths was the sort of radicalism that had led him, regardless of what anyone thought, to chair a meeting for the notorious secularist, Bradlaugh, in Leicester. Perhaps radical 'crotchets' were not so attractive in Croydon as they had been in 'Radical Leicester', where his congregation had had in earlier times a long history of fighting for civil liberties against a local Tory oligarchy. With the near approach of the Boer War, Page Hopps was in the forefront with the protesters (in Trafalgar Square and elsewhere) against what Herbert Spencer christened the 'rebarbarisation' into which England was reverting. Though this was a divisive factor in many parts of the country at the time and a widely supported protest nearly unseated the editor of *The Inquirer* as a 'Pro-Boer', there was no dissention in the Croydon congregation though there was some falling off in the morning congregation that may have had this for its cause.

There are no grounds for saying that the ministry of Page Hopps was in any sense a failure though it disappointed his own and the congregation's rather oversanguine expectations. In 1902 he felt that it was time to retire; he was 68 and, by his own account, it was fifty years since he preached his first sermon. His ministry in Croydon ended in 1903. There is interest in Francis Moore's comment that "Possibly both he and we were a little too much accustomed to having things our own way". It is a comment that might have been made also of other times at Croydon, but it says a good deal for Page Hopps that, with his strong feelings on many subjects, there was no clash as a consequence while he was minister.

Continuance in a New Century!

As the new century got under way the life of the church leaves a number of contradictory impressions. The minute books give an impression of a congregation passing through difficult and unsettled times. On the other hand we seem to see a congregation little troubled by these difficulties and well content that Sunday observance should continue to keep its traditional place in the customary round. Yet again the character of the congregation was changing. Street's supporters in the work of Dennett Hall were to some extent a new element with a manifest social conscience. Page Hopps drew in a number of members who were not so fearful of radical innovations as the founding fathers, who by this time had

most of them passed away. Their paternal care for their church and their readiness to make good each year the recurring deficits had passed away too, but had left behind it two somewhat debilitating legacies: an assumption that it did not lie with the congregation to make sacrifices to provide the church with adequate financial support; and an ingrained assurance that a minister by his preaching and his position in the town could and should build up the congregation.

The minister who succeeded Page Hopps was William John Jupp, who came to Croydon from Ancient Chapel, Liverpool, at the beginning of 1904. He was no stranger to the congregation for he had not infrequently taken services for them when he had been a Congregationalist minister at Thornton Heath some years earlier. In many ways he was peculiarly well suited to the congregation though his coming brought no marked increase in membership and consequently no spreading of the financial burden of the committee. If he did not fill the church, it is interesting to note that a special service for the Croydon Trades Union Council in 1905 drew a congregation of four hundred and the church was again filled when Keatley Moore was mayor of Croydon in 1906 and attended service in civic state.

In outlook Jupp might be called a Romantic with a Wordsworthian love of nature and very many found his conduct of worship inspiring, even if an alleged fondness for illustrations from his walks over Croham Hurst at dawn was remembered by members with a touch of amusement. But he was no mere unwordly visionary as his several very readable publications clearly show; he had also wide social interests as may be seen, for example, in his personal recollection (in his sermon before the mayor in 1906) of a Liverpool slum where a policeman dared not walk alone. Despite this and his friendly relations with the congregation he felt that things were not going as he wished. As a one-time Congregationalist minister he could hardly be expected to understand or appreciate the exclusion of the minister from the business meetings of the congregation, an exclusion that was not ended until 1929. Moreover, his sensitive nature always rebelled somewhat against the exacting and, to him, soul destroying routine of a settled ministry and the constant strain of maintaining a freshness in his preaching twice each Sunday weighed on his spirit. In order to give of his best he proposed preaching, as a rule, only once on a Sunday, finding a supply for the other service. Although the committee agreed, a proposal was made for a reduction in salary which was less than generous and which can only be excused by the church's chronic financial stringency. By this his feeling of failure was increased and he resigned his charge at the end of 1910 and retired from the ministry. When he left, his many friends in Liverpool, London and Croydon raised a fund which purchased an annuity covering the lives of himself and his wife, enabling them to retire in Letchworth.



Interior Views of the New Church

With the resignation of the minister and that of a certain number of members, the committee seemed to fall into a dispirited and negative mood. There is no need to list the various suggestions for increasing the congregation and other proposals that were one after another discussed and abandoned.

There is however a more pleasing incident, the committee's decision to make a gift of £15 to Charles Pay, the verger (who had been appointed in 1902 and who was still in service in 1930) to enable him to replace his horse—he was a jobbing builder during the week—which had been lost in an accident.

The committee's doubt and hesitation at this time is reflected, too, in the number of ministers heard as candidates for the pulpit, and perhaps also in the almost indecent haste with which an appointment was ultimately made. Walter Moritz Weston, an ex-Roman Catholic, first preached on 2nd July, 1911, was appointed minister on 20th August and took up his duties the following Sunday. It may have been that Weston demanded a quick decision, but the reason may have been partly what Francis Moore called his "insinuating address". Somehow he did not fit into the Croydon scene and we are told that "his discourses were utterly distasteful to the majority of the substantial old supporters of the church, who either stayed away, or threw up their membership altogether". One can only guess at the reason, but perhaps, like the snuff he took in the pulpit, the said discourses had too much of the savour of Rome in the morning and of Bernard Shaw in the evening. There was, however, no serious rift for Weston departed as suddenly as he came, resigning his ministry in May 1916, "on returning to the Catholic Church".

William Alfred Chynoweth Pope, who became minister at the beginning of 1917 following a twenty year ministry at Lewisham, with his wide experience and considerable ability should have been able to bring more settled times at Croydon, but like Weston he too was a misfit. Doubtless he had become set in his ways and he could be obstinate and even brusque. To his mind the congregation were too "High Church", and in such trivial matters as wearing a preaching gown instead of a frock coat he was unwilling to fall in with their wishes, when with their fine church and the beautiful service that they had evolved over the years such a concession would not have been out of place. Whatever the cause, there was discontent, and though Francis Moore, who got on well with Pope, records that he "never understood or enquired into the why and wherefore", the discontent grew and Pope found himself compelled to resign early in 1920.

Rejuvenation

In 1921 George Coverdale Sharpe began his long Croydon ministry, at a moment when the congregation's fortunes were at a low ebb. He seems to have made a fair assessment of the situation. As he put it at a later date: "Times have changed and it cannot be said that the right man in the pulpit will fill the church as could have been said in 1911". In preaching he gave of his best, and a very good best it was, but he was under no illusions that it would fill the church, nor was the congregation left long under the illusion either. The days were past, too, when a church could thrive by just maintaining the Sunday services as almost the only life of the church. As Sharpe put it: "A church should be, at least in part, the home of every proper spare time interest". His policy was in the main to link members as much as possible in such interests. Interestingly the new activities he set going recall the early days of the church; it was, too, in line with thinking in numerous other churches at the time. Within a few years new activities included a Badminton Club, a Tennis Club, a Dramatic Society, a Choral Society, a Croydon branch of the Fellowship of Youth, and two rather oddly named societies, a Unifloral Society (which organised a flower show) and a Thrift Club 'which enabled members to save money to spend at the annual church bazaar'. Tramps through the beautiful country near Croydon were also regularly organised.

At the outset Coverdale Sharpe had insisted that he regarded his ministry as being on a *pro tem*. basis for five years. Punctually nearing the end of five years, when all but he had forgotten it, came his promised resignation. It was not merely that he felt bound to keep a promise but his settled belief, doubtless influenced by his early experience as a Methodist, was that the right time for a resignation was when things were still going well and before staleness and weariness set in. Very naturally the congregation would not hear of his going and year by year it was the same story. By 1930 he was smilingly reporting that his resignations had "reached a respectable total". But he felt and said: "I have long ended the task which I set myself at the beginning", and added: "It is rarely possible to combine two different policies in a single ministry". In fact he did supply a different policy or helped others to supply it: he had fostered the numerous institutions of the church, but in running an "institutional church" there is a serious risk that the institutions flourish while the church declines; it so easily happens that the church more and more becomes the preserve of the old while the institutions become the province of the young. There were signs that such a cleavage could soon become dangerous at Croydon. This danger, he thought, should be actively combated. "He thought it an essential principle of organisation that no office be held so long that other people took advantage of the self-

sacrifice and willingness of those two or three who officiated . . . It was most important that our young people should realise that they must qualify for posts of responsibility and take their full share of the work of the church”.

This was not the only item in the new policy. He also pressed for better provision for the church's intellectual life, something that can become a casualty in an over-institutionalised church. He wanted, too, to see an intake of new voices into the choir, which though purely voluntary, had become so “professional” that its very perfection discouraged possible new entrants. He would have liked to see the “Cake Tin” replaced by a better social hall, but this came to nothing because of the difficulties of the site and perhaps too because of the Great Depression.

One outcome of the new policy was a thorough overhaul of the Church constitution in which one noticeable change was the introduction of a retirement rule for officers and committee. Another was the formation, in 1934, of the Literary and Discussion Society.

These changes followed hard upon the heels of the Church's celebration of its Diamond Jubilee in 1930, which in several ways marks a divide in the history of the congregation. One personal link with the earliest days was broken when Francis W. Moore, chairman of the congregation, died in 1927. Only a few of his many contributions to the life of the church have been mentioned; one more may be mentioned here, the delightful reminiscences of early days that he wrote in 1923, to which the present history is indebted for a number of quotations. His niece, Frances E. Moore who also held office at this time as secretary, resigned at the time when the revision of the constitution was being undertaken. His brother Keatley Moore lived on to the great age of ninety, dying in 1937. By a coincidence the hymn book to which he and his brother had contributed so much went out of use in 1930 after 36 years of good service—the cost of reprinting would have been prohibitive—and was replaced by *Hymns of Worship*, the denominational hymn book recently published in 1927.

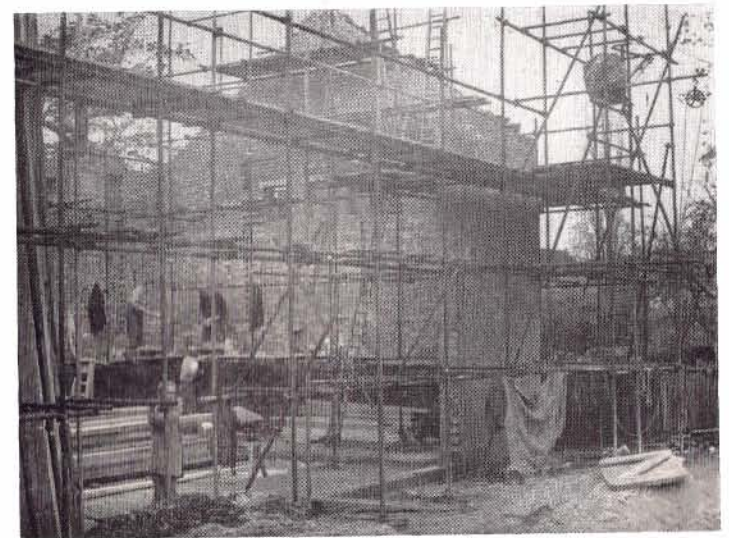
With these years also we become familiar with the names of a number of members who are active in the life of the church today and who for that reason will not be individually named.

When, after sundry more routine resignations, Coverdale Sharpe closed his ministry early in 1937, he left behind him a united congregation with numerous activities and institutions closely integrated into the whole life of the church. The influence of these years of advance and consolidation undoubtedly helped to bring the congregation through the disruptions of war time and has contributed something to the strength of the church today.



Bomb damage 1941 and the end of the “Iron Church”.

Photo—Croydon Times.



Rebuilding in Friends Road, 1958.

War and Aftermath

Roger Thomas came as minister in the autumn of 1937. Two years later the Second World War broke out and bid fair to disrupt the life of the congregation. Almost immediately Government schemes of Evacuation and other causes took a considerable number of members far from Croydon. Otherwise life went on fairly normally until late in 1940, when in the heavy bombing of that winter and the following spring the church building was twice damaged. In October 1940 blast damaged the roof and leaded lights, and one of the unforgettable memories of the time is the patience with which Arthur Breens not only repaired the roof but teased back the leaded lights into position. On Saturday night 19/20th April, 1941, a bomb fell on the Social Hall ending the history of the "Cake Tin" and brought down the masonry around the organ and did other considerable damage to the church building. The first news that the minister had of the damage was when a man from the Gas Board called at 7 o'clock on the Sunday morning asking for the position of the church gas meter. On eliciting the reason for his interest in the meter and ascertaining the precise position of the damage, the only possible answer was that the bomb had fairly hit the meter. His face fell for gas was aflame through the surrounding rubble of nearby houses and his hope of cutting off the supply was gone. Despite the damage, service was held that Sunday morning; the same afternoon six or seven members of the congregation gathered at the church to salvage what they could, and a little later cleaned up the dirt that had fallen in the vestibule and even polished the wooden panelling and made a habitable church. It is pleasant to remember that earlier in that same winter the congregation had been able to offer the Society of Friends a refuge for their meetings when their own building in Friends Road was damaged. Fortunately, they had been able to return to their own building before the April bomb fell; the clock, a gift from them, in the present church commemorates their sojourn with us in those days. The Friends offered a home in their restored building, but it was more convenient to all concerned for the congregation to move its services to Dennett Hall, to return sometimes in the summer months to the vestibule of the damaged building.

In 1944, on the sudden death of the secretary of Dr. Williams's Trust and Library, Thomas was called upon to take over the secretarial duties of the Trust, but in the uncertain days of the last period of the War his ministry continued at Croydon on a part time basis until 1946.

In 1947 Arthur Benjamin Downing was appointed minister. In the same year the vestibule was more adequately fitted out with pews, sufficient to seat about 80 people. A. W. Pearce, who had been organist since 1928, gave a good organ. The pulpit was one

which had come from Dennett Hall just before the War and which had originally been given to the Mission in memory of C. J. Street's little daughter who died in 1892. The congregation still had to return to Dennett Hall for the winter months until adequate heating was installed in 1949. Dennett Hall itself ceased to be the home of the Sunday School in 1957 and was sold soon afterwards.

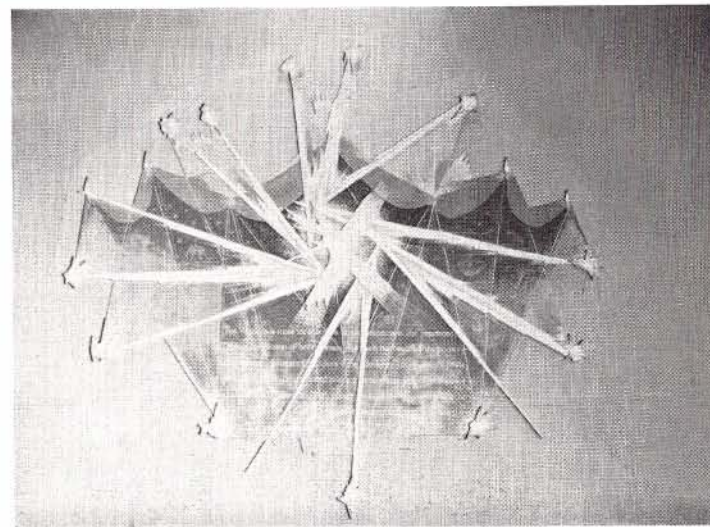
Towards the end of 1948 Downing felt acutely that the ministry was not his calling and to the disappointment of the congregation after the beginning of a friendly and promising ministry he left in the middle of 1949. At the end of the same year the congregation was able to settle down under the ministry of James Percival Chalk. Of his ministry, which continued until 1960, it may be said that the position at Croydon was consolidated. The work of the Sunday School, of the Women's League and the Literary and Discussion Society were all forward pursuing a regular course of useful service.

A New Home

What most prominently absorbed attention in these years was the preparation for the erection of a new church building in Friends Road on a site promised by the Croydon Corporation when the Wellesley Road site was scheduled for town planning. Of the complex negotiations with the War Damage Commission and the Corporation, little need be said. In accordance with the War Damage rule the new building had to be what was designated a "plain substitute building". Even so, the compensation was such that part of what the architect considered necessary had to be dropped. Moreover it allowed no provision for the heavy cost of furnishing and fitting out the church, a cost met by the generosity of a number of members and friends. Discussion with the architects, David Evelyn Nye and Partners, began in 1954, but building operations did not begin until July 1958. The Foundation Stone was laid on 13th December the same year and the opening of the building took place on Saturday, 17th October, 1959. The following year Percival Chalk retired from the ministry and was succeeded early in 1961 by the present minister, Gabor Kereki, who has the distinction—not his only distinction—of having been trained for the ministry in the World's oldest Unitarian Church at Kolozsvár in Transylvania.

Soon after the removal to Friends Road (now, in 1970, re-christened "The Croydon Flyover"—such being the historical sense of Croydon's City Fathers) the name of the church was modified by the inclusion of the title *Unitarian*, making it the Unitarian and Free Christian Church, which is a better identification of its place in the religious spectrum.

In 1870 Unitarianism had been a call to move forward from a Calvinistic and Trinitarian orthodoxy to what could be claimed to be a more reasonable faith, while the choice of the name Free Christian had been a successful effort to revive the catholic tradition of an older English Presbyterianism that had made change and advance possible. Today, whichever term is used, it means a community of worshippers sufficiently mindful and magnanimous to respect each other's reasonable and responsible convictions. If sometimes the consequent diversity makes its history diverting, it does not make it depressing or destroy the blessings of a freely united and understanding community.



The Mural by Mr. Lawrence Lee, designer of the windows in Coventry Cathedral; he also designed the three windows above the Mural

The Words on the Mural from Wisdom of Solomon are:—

For Wisdom is more mobile than any motion; yea, she pervadeth and penetrateth all things by reason of her pureness. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty; therefore can nothing defiled find entrance into her. For she is an effulgence from the everlasting light, and an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.

**Scanned by
James Barry
as a volunteer**