

**THE
LEWISHAM
UNITARIANS
1897  1997**



**A Commemorative Booklet
Compiled by
Gordon Dennington**

**Introduction by
Rev Ashley Hills**

INTRODUCING UNITARIANISM

Unitarian churches in England date mostly from the 1660's when they became gathered together under a series of eminent leaders. It is also a fact of their story that the spirit which has always characterised their outlook is much older. There have been, for almost two thousand years, those individuals who have never hesitated to ask difficult questions, and then go on to question the answers. As far back as the famous Council of Nicea in the fourth century, serious questions were raised about the Unity of God. Bishop Arius drew up a statement defining this, but he was defeated, and the dogma of Athanasius adopted. This was that Jesus was of the same essential nature as God.

What really brought Unitarians into focus was their questioning of the doctrine of the Trinity: they believed it was neither reasonable nor scriptural. The first Unitarian church was founded in 1568 by the Reformed Bishop Francis David in Transylvania. The ruler of Transylvania himself, King John Sigismund, became an Anti-Trinitarian. In this country in the seventeenth century the debate over the authority of the Book of Common Prayer resulted in some two thousand clergy in the Church of England, who conscientiously felt they could not conform to the Prayer Book, being ejected from their livings. These were men of broad sympathies, and their continuing, often clandestine ministries, laid the foundation for much of subsequent Unitarianism.

It was illegal to hold Anti-Trinitarian opinions until the passing of the Unitarian Relief Act of 1813, although in April 1774 the Rev Theophilus Lindsey, formerly vicar of Catterick in Yorkshire, opened a chapel in Essex Street, London, "for the Worship and Service of Almighty God", and used the specific word 'Unitarian'. Until the passing of the 1813 Act it was customary to refer to those who held Unitarian opinions as Socinian or English Presbyterian, and likewise the chapels in which they worshipped.

Nowadays theological battles over the Doctrine of the Trinity are largely outdated, and it is surprising the extent to which Unitarian thought has become assimilated into other religious denominations. From its outset it has recognised the importance of tolerance and reason in all religious discussion. In fact, 'reason' would be a key word in Unitarian circles where 'faith' would be a key word in orthodoxy. Today, Unitarians place high importance upon the individual's own personal response to ultimate reality, rather than the acceptance of traditional creeds and dogmas. So today Unitarianism reflects a collective seeking for significant values rather than an inheritor of traditional beliefs, or obedience to a holy book.

The subject of the following fascinating pages is that of the Unitarian Church (later Unitarian Meeting) in Lewisham over the past one hundred years. The story does not concern itself with large doctrinal issues or religious developments. Its concern is more to do with bread-and-butter activities of a Unitarian Congregation striving to establish and maintain a foothold in south east London. We are extremely grateful to Gordon Dennington for his careful researches which have produced this very readable booklet.

ASHLEY HILLS.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gordon Dennington is a relative newcomer to the Lewisham Meeting, indeed to the Unitarian movement itself, although like many more in the population at large he has probably been a Unitarian 'without knowing it' for most of his life. Perhaps it is too fanciful to put this down to the fact that he was born not one hundred yards from the Lewisham Unitarian Church Halls, and regularly frequented the Central Library next door to them from an early age!!

Having decided at the end of his National Service to do something about repairing a war-ravaged education, Gordon went on to take bachelor's and master's degrees from London University in sociology and economics, and P.P.E. at Oxford. In later years, after half-a-lifetime spent in the world of finance and economics, he also took a London BA in philosophy. Gordon has written various local history works mainly relating to the war years, so for him it proved a welcome challenge to research and write an account of the Lewisham Unitarians for their centenary year.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On behalf of the Meeting House, the author wishes to acknowledge and thank:

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- Vera Dennington for the typesetting and for the many improvements to the final outcome.

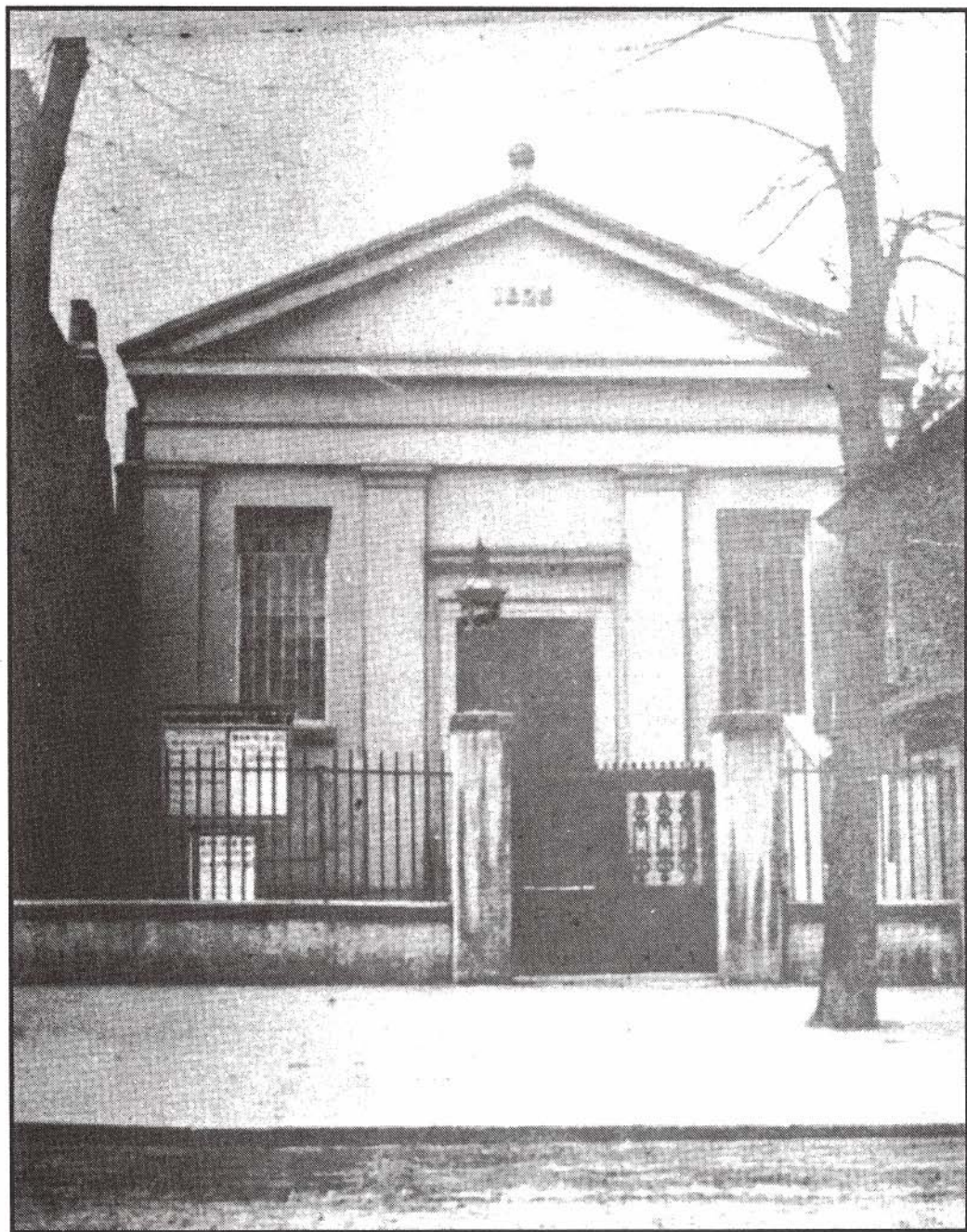
THE OLD CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL

This was the first home of the Lewisham Unitarian Congregation, a 15-year lease being taken out in March 1897, some two months after the formation of the church on 3 January when the Rev. W.W. Chynoweth Pope was appointed minister. The chapel had been vacated by the Congregationalists thirty years before, in 1867. It was dank, musty, freezing cold and had been neglected for many years. The Unitarian congregation named it the Unitarian Christian Church and continued to use it until their own purpose built premises further down the High Street, between St. Mary's Parish Church and Lewisham Central Library, were ready for occupation in June 1910.

The founding congregation numbered just 17 persons, rising to 24 by the end of 1897 and to 71 a year later. A Sunday School started from scratch on 16 May 1897 and ended the year with 27 enrolments - slightly more than the total adult membership. A Literary and Scientific Society was founded on 15 September 1897 and soon boasted 55 members, with lectures attracting non-members as well. Also in September the ladies of the congregation got together to form a Dorcas Society. That very first Christmas saw a large parcel of hand-sewn garments sent to Rev. A.J. Marchant of Deptford, "for distribution among his poverty-stricken congregation".

The small band of pioneers who first brought a physical Unitarian presence to Lewisham showed true Victorian self-confidence in what they could achieve with faith and hard work. A report by the Church Committee in 1898 stated:

"The few who were pioneers have held bravely together, and their fidelity to the cause has resulted in an increased number of weekly services.....A close acquaintance with our position cannot fail to inspire one with confidence for the future".



PROGRESS IN THE EDWARDIAN DECADE

A number of the original congregation lived in, or in the vicinity of, Courthill Road, which is pictured opposite (circa 1910) looking towards Lewisham High Street. It was only a short walk for them to their church in the old Congregational chapel. Straight down the hill to the High Street, cross the road, turn right, and then about 200 yards - just opposite Limes Grove.

It speaks volumes for the progress made in the first years that by about 1906 Lewisham had grown into probably the strongest Unitarian church in south east London, despite the others being older foundations, viz., Deptford (inherited from the General Baptists); Bermondsey (founded 1888); Peckham in Avondale Road and known as the 'Avondale' church; and Woolwich in Dallin Road, though for a time using, it seems, the Carmel Chapel in Anglesea Road. All these Unitarian beacons have since fallen into darkness - sometimes as a result of war-time bombing - leaving Lewisham as the sole survivor.

In 1906 Lewisham could boast a Band of Hope, a choir, (choir practice 8 pm, Fridays), a boys swimming club (Ladywell Baths on Tuesdays), and could also field a cricket side (3 pm Saturdays, Ladywell Recreation Ground). A Ladies Committee formed February 1906 quickly proved its worth in raising funds and organising garden fetes, bring-and-buy sales, and many special events. Under one guise or another - e.g., branch of the Women's League - a ladies committee existed almost continuously in Lewisham until December 1961.

The Rev W.W. Chynoweth Pope served as Lewisham's first minister from 3 January 1897 until 14 February 1917. His was a powerful personality, and the fact that he combined the ministry with the chairmanship of the church (as well as effectively running Deptford church for three years, 1909-1912) is testimony to his energy and commitment. He received his training at Meadville, Chicago and Manchester College, Oxford.



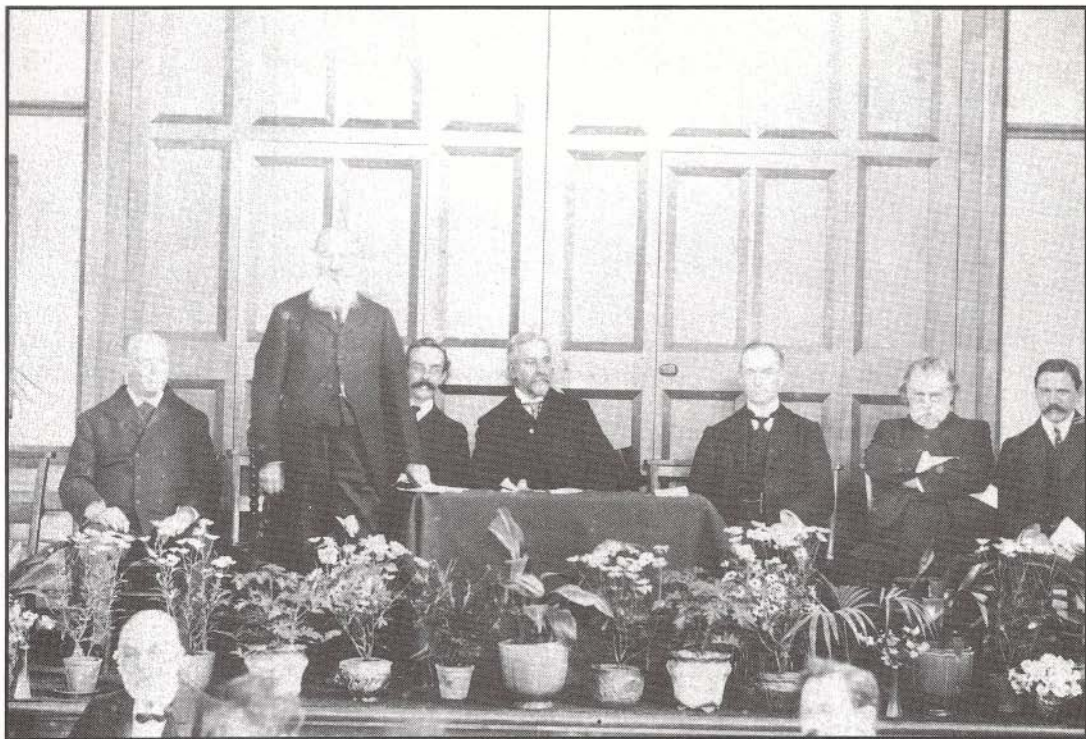
Courthill Road, Lewisham

A GENEROUS BENEFACTOR

In this faded Edwardian photograph the gentleman standing is Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence, Bt., MP, whose generosity made possible the eventual move of the Lewisham congregation to their own purpose built property (which came to be known as the Unitarian Halls) in 1910. Seated third from the right is the Rev. W.W. Chynoweth Pope.

Mr. Pope announced to the Church Committee in November 1903 that Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence had successfully bid at auction for Sion House in Lewisham High Street on behalf of the church. Total costs of the purchase worked out at £2,319, financed by £300 accumulated in a church building fund, a £700 grant from the London and District Unitarian Society, and a loan of £1,319 from Durning Lawrence. Sion House was not itself suitable for a church, but it did have grounds at the rear and at one side on which a church could be erected, as soon as the necessary finance was available. From 1903 onwards the financing and erection of the Unitarian building became the main pre-occupation of Mr. Pope and the committee until the Halls were completed behind Sion House in 1910. During this time Mr. Pope played a major role by raising large sums from personal contacts, and by his unremitting drive and energy on behalf of the scheme.

Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence was born in 1837. He and his family had long associations with Unitarianism in Britain. He became a barrister in 1867, and about this time contested a number of Parliamentary seats, being elected first for Stockport and then as Liberal Unionist MP for Truro (1895-1906). 'Durning' was added to the family name in 1898 when the baronetcy was created. Sir Edwin's only son pre-deceased him, so when in 1914 Sir Edwin died the title became extinct.

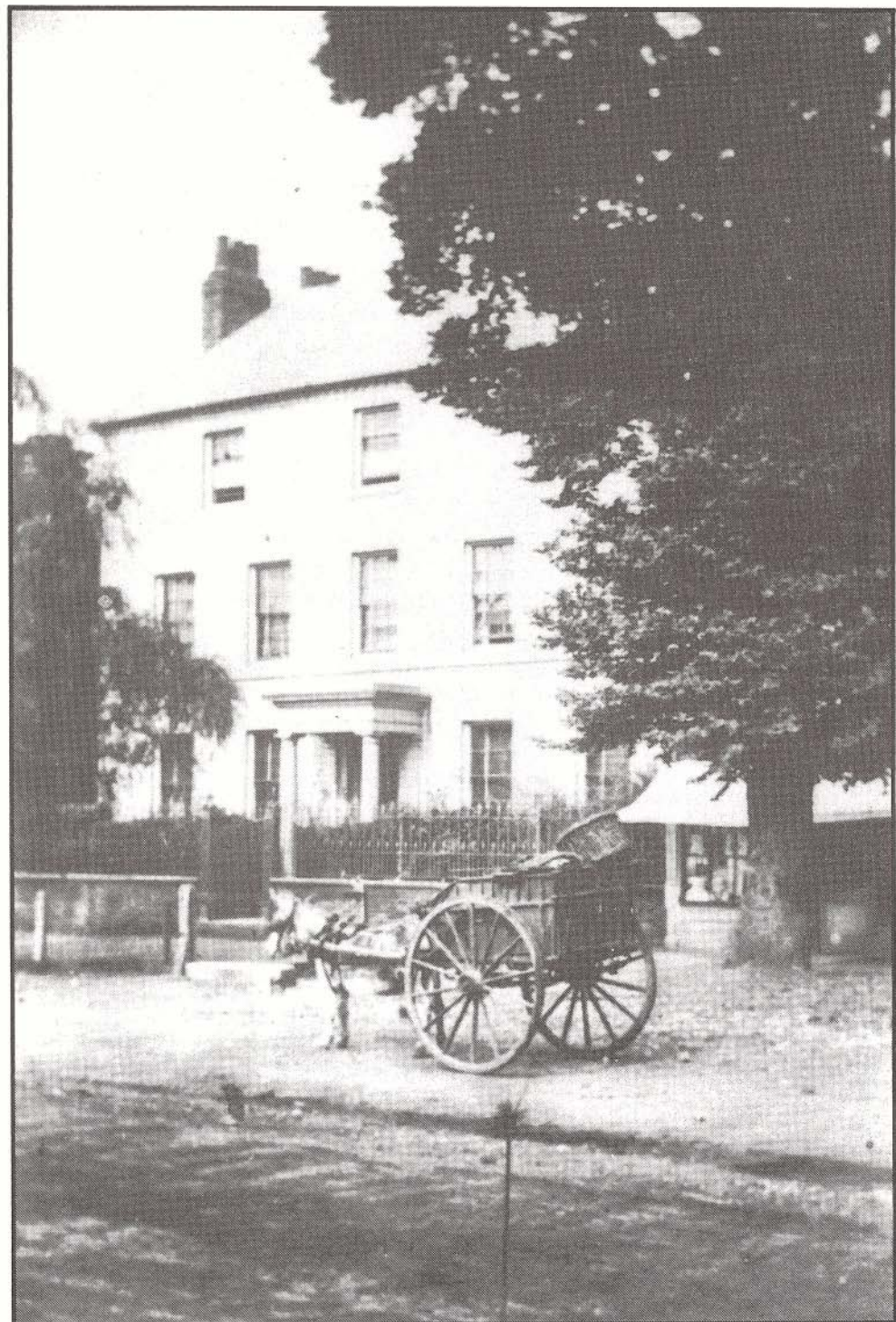


THE BUILDING OF 'THE HALLS'

In 1903 Mr and Mrs Pope vacated their rented accommodation at 27, Vicar's Hill, Ladywell to take up rent-free tenancy in Sion House, from where they could keep a close watch on the building of the promised church in the grounds at the rear. The picture on the facing page shows Sion House as it was in the 1850s. By 1909 some £1,100 had been raised towards the cost - about half by Mr Pope persuading wealthy and influential benefactors to assist, and the rest from a ceaseless stream of small subscriptions, garden parties, concerts, bazaars, jumble sales, lectures and anything else which might produce a little profit. To this sum the London and District Unitarian Society was prepared to add a grant of £1,000.

Unfortunately, the combined sum fell far short of what was needed to pay for the kind of church building wanted by the congregation. As a compromise, a decision was taken to erect premises comprising a small hall to provide for a Sunday School and a larger hall able to accommodate over 400 for services, as well as for concerts, drama productions, exhibitions, and the like. 'The Church Halls' or simply, 'the Halls', as they came to be referred to (though the official name remained the Unitarian Christian Church) were intended as an interim measure until funds could be raised for a 'proper' church alongside.

The Halls were formally opened by Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence on Saturday, 25 June 1910. 'The Inquirer' reported that "the robust Unitarian congregation of Lewisham...for the last thirteen years compelled to occupy hired rooms, has at last entered a home of its own...handsome and spacious." How handsome we do not know, because no photograph or sketch of the original building has, as yet, come to light. Earlier in the year Mr John Harrison, President of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, laid the foundation stone, for which ceremony W.G. Tarrant wrote specially the hymn 'Set Wide the Gate of Liberty'. (See page 61 for the words of this hymn and the tune 'Lewisham' composed for it by Liz Hills in 1996). Mr Harrison, referring to the indefatigable exertions of Mr Pope and his friends, said, "All honour to them for their unwearying efforts and congratulations to them on their great success."



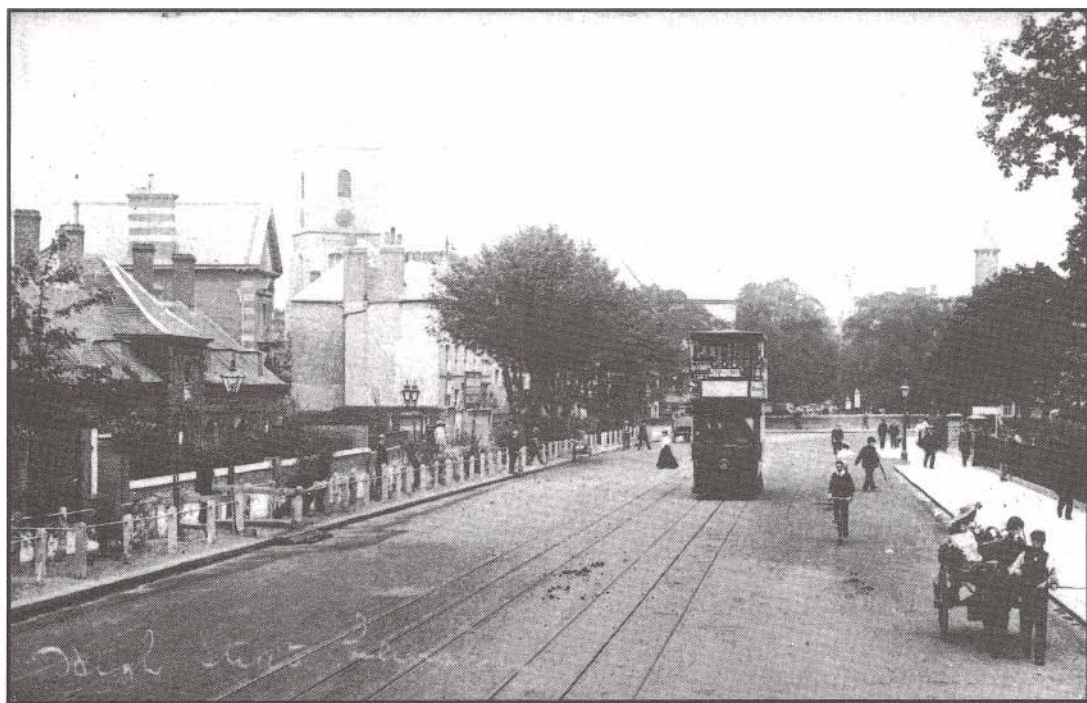
THE WAR TO END ALL WARS

Chynoweth Pope's long ministry encompassed the entire Edwardian period, the tail-end of Victoria's reign, and the early years of George V's reign. Taken in 1910, the picture opposite shows Lewisham High Street as it was in the heyday of Mr Pope's ministry. Though scarcely decipherable in the photograph, a signboard on the left in the gap between Lewisham Central Library and Sion House declares this to be the building-site of a Unitarian Church. Those years from 1910 until the outbreak of war in 1914 were among the best in the history of the congregation. The new Halls played host to ambitious dramatic and musical productions, such as a concert of Coleridge-Taylor's *Tale of Old Japan* in 1912. Supported by a firm membership of over one hundred, the Minister could sincerely say in 1913, "In view of the disintegration of religious beliefs in orthodox circles, the position of this Church in such a district as Lewisham is bound to be of very greatly increased importance in the future...."

In 1913 a small shop adjoining Sion House and separating it from the 'Jolly Farmers' pub was purchased for £375, made possible by the generosity of Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence. The reason for the purchase is not clear; it was never put to any real church use. Perhaps the idea was to prevent the pub extending into it and becoming an immediate neighbour to the church.

Seventeen years of almost uninterrupted progress for the congregation came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of war in 1914. Membership fell sharply, the financial position deteriorated due to reduced attendances and the loss of Hall lettings, and strains developed between the congregation and Mr Pope. Maintenance costs increased, and Sion House was damaged in 1917 from the blast of the Silvertown munitions explosion four miles away. Nonetheless, members played their part in the war effort on behalf of the convalescent Canadian soldiers in the area, Belgian refugees in Catford and Blackheath, Indian troops encamped in the New Forest, and many others. The Halls were used by the Red Cross without charge throughout the conflict.

These efforts, and especially Mr. Pope's work on behalf of wounded soldiers which was reported in the 'Lewisham Borough News' week-after-week, did not prevent an angry crowd, under the mistaken impression that pacifist meetings were being held in the Halls, from preparing to burn the church down until they were dispersed by the police. Mr Pope himself received death threats at this period.



A.H. DOLPHIN REPLACES W.W.C. POPE

Mr Pope's break with Lewisham came without ceremony at the AGM on 14 February 1917. He announced his resignation "to take effect forthwith", before going on to review "twenty years' uphill work", adding that he felt his severance deeply.

Alick Herbert Dolphin replaced Chynoweth Pope as Minister in March 1917. Before his arrival in Lewisham he had spent fifteen years as minister of Sheffield Unity Church. His task of rebuilding the congregation was severely constrained while the war lasted. A visit by Col. C.S. Bullock of the Canadian Expeditionary Force on 18 March 1917 was treated as an occasion for an "improved musical service". Colonel Bullock had been a Unitarian minister in Ottawa. In 1918 the members 'adopted' a British prisoner-of-war in Germany - the man chosen was Pte. D.E.G. Evans of the South Wales Borderers whose sister was in the congregation - and parcels of food and clothing were henceforth sent to him.

The Armistice came into force on 11 November 1918, and at the next AGM Mr Dolphin spoke "earnestly of the need of every helper in the new and splendid times before us". Financially, the church got a welcome boost in September 1919 when Lady Durning Lawrence forgave the outstanding mortgage from her late husband, amounting to £1,827, and transferred the deeds to trustees of the church. The congregation thanked her for the "magnificent gift in discharging the debt upon the church buildings as owing to our late revered friend and benefactor, Sir Edwin Durning Lawrence".

Much of the pre-war congregational life was restored during the ministry of Mr. Dolphin. The Ladies Committee went back on a formal and active basis in 1918, and a vigorous Young People's Society flourished from about 1921. The standard of choral singing was raised by the engagement of a professional singer, and the Minister's interest in music was also reflected no doubt in the visit to the Halls of the English Folk Dance Society under its famous founder Cecil Sharp, in September 1920.

Alick Dolphin left Lewisham for Scarborough in January 1922, his farewell service taking place on 15 January. A generous subscription was presented to him "as a token of regard from the congregation". After a lapse of about one year, his place was taken by the Rev. Jesse Hipperson.

UNITARIAN MONTHLY

(Established as "Unity," October, 1903).

An Organ for the propagation of the Doctrine of Unity
in Religion, Theology, Philosophy and Society.

No. 283 (Vol. XXIV.—+).

APRIL, 1927.

ONE PENNY.



REV. JESSE HIPPERON (Lewisham).

(see page 56).

THE HIPPERSON FAMILY SETTLE IN

The Rev. Jesse Hipperson preached his first sermon in Lewisham on 4 February 1923. Owing to the fact that Sion House was now rented out to commercial tenants, it proved necessary to purchase a suitable home for Mr Hipperson and his family. Accordingly, the lease of No.211 George Lane (pictured opposite) was bought for £650, nearly all the sum being financed by a bank loan and private loans from individuals in the congregation. For the next six years, 211, George Lane rejoiced in the name of 'The Manse'.

Mr Hipperson's previous ministries included Bermondsey, Oldbury, Macclesfield, and he came to Lewisham from Blackburn. A close rapport developed between him and the Lewisham congregation, who warmed to his obvious sincerity and concern for the welfare of others. Attendances at Sunday services, both morning and evening, doubled, and the number of subscribing members was restored to almost pre-war levels. He re-instated the monthly Church Calendar, which thenceforth appeared without break until June 1940. The Literary Society met regularly during the winter months, hearing talks and recitals, and engaging in debates with the Societies of other churches. Miss Agnes Pharaoh was for many years secretary to the Literary Society. Another flourishing group was the Young People's Society, led by Frank Crome. It described itself as "for all who are still young, who believe themselves young, or desire to re-new their Health". Unfortunately, it was wound-up in 1927 for reasons which included failing to give regular and sustained support to the church.

One of the happiest occasions of Jesse Hipperson's ministry was the marriage of his elder daughter at the Halls on Whit Monday, 1926. He wrote "My dear friends, Mrs Hipperson and I wish to...express our thanks for the spontaneous and almost bewildering outburst of kindly feeling which was evoked by our dear daughter's marriage to Mr E.A. Letts...we are deeply moved by this signal expression of your affection and regard, and ask you to accept this assurance of our affection and gratitude."



THE GRAND JAPANESE BAZAAR

The biggest and most ambitious single event during Hipperson's ministry was the organisation of a Grand Japanese Bazaar at the Halls in November 1924 to help raise funds to pay off debts on the manse in George Lane. The pictures opposite show a few of the people who participated in this major event. The three principal church officers were obviously closely involved in the planning. Lt. Col. Assheton Pownall, MP, opened the proceedings on the second day, while Lt. Col. Eric Ball took the chair. Among other official participants were Sir Edward Penton, KBE; Sir John Brunner, Bt.MP; Hugh Rathbone, MP (President, B & FUA); P.M. Oliver, MP; and the Rev S.H. Mellone (Secretary, B & FUA). Practically every member of the congregation was engaged in running stalls, side-shows, games, and so on, but the real architects of the event's success were the Ladies Committee who worked tirelessly in the preparations. Profits of some £200 were achieved (say £6,000 as the modern equivalent), which helped considerably in re-paying all debts on the property. When Mr. Hipperson left Lewisham in 1929 the property was sold, realising net proceeds of £674, which then became part of a fund intended for building a church alongside the Halls.

It was with great regret that the congregation bid farewell to Jesse Hipperson in June 1929, when he left for Mossley. Just five years later he died, aged 54, following a "distressing illness courageously endured". His passing was deeply mourned by all those who had known him. That he and his family had spent six happy years in Lewisham is reflected in the return of his widow and younger daughter, Ruth, to the area and to re-join the congregation. Jesse Hipperson's approach to life and religion may be summed up in words he used himself:

"With us it does not matter so much what a man believes as what kind of man he is trying to be...The criterion of truth in our opinion is the reason, conscience and experience of man. If any statement does not appeal to our reason or conscience, and is not confirmed by the experience of man, then that statement is not true for us."



Mr. D. WALLS
(Treasurer)

Treasurer, 1922-27.
Member 1918-1934.



Mr. W. L. JACKSON
(Chairman of the Congregation)

Chairman, 1922-25.
Member, 1917-1947.



Mr. F. W. DOWSON
(Secretary)

Secretary, 1911-32.
Member, 1904-1947.



Lt.-Col. ASSHETON POWNALL M.P.

MP for East Lewisham, 1918-45
Royal West Kent & 20th London
Regts, 1897-1921.



Lt.-Col. ERIC BALL, L.C.C.

LCC Member for E. Lewisham
Commanded 20th London Regt
Wounded at Loos, 1915.

HENRY DAWTREY'S INDUCTION

The Rev Henry Dawtreay came to Lewisham from Wood Green as Jesse Hipperson's replacement on 4 April 1930 and remained until 22 April 1940, when he moved on to Horsham. He never actually applied for the vacancy, although there was no shortage of applicants, but received an invitation from the congregation which came to him as a complete surprise. The background to the invitation almost certainly involved the fact that after many years of hard and devoted work for Toc H, Mr Dawtreay had been ejected from that organisation in 1929 because it decided that Unitarians were "not Christians". Influential in this decision was the Sidcup branch of Toc H, which had been addressed by Cllr James Kerfoot (Chairman of Lewisham Unitarians) and Jesse Hipperson on the subject of Unitarianism, specifically with a view to helping Sidcup Toc H on how to vote in the matter of Dawtreay's membership. Following the meeting with Kerfoot and Hipperson, Sidcup Toc H concluded that Unitarians were not Christians, which later influenced the vote against Dawtreay.

James Kerfoot was also chairman of Chislehurst & Sidcup Urban District Council and hence a leading local politician of some influence. He would not have appreciated being effectively branded a 'non-Christian' on his own doorstep. It is tempting and almost certainly true to conclude that when the Lewisham pulpit became vacant he used his influence to obtain Dawtreay's services, both to serve as a snub to Toc H and as a token of support and 'solidarity' for Dawtreay.

Henry Dawtreay had a reputation for involving himself in local community activities. He was a man given to social and religious commitment, which extended to the international scene. He was a strong supporter of the League of Nations Union (LNU) and the cause of peace and disarmament, as showed itself in the Lewisham church becoming a branch of the LNU. Members also attended the great Albert Hall peace demonstration in 1932, and they petitioned the government in the cause of world disarmament.



REV. HENRY DAWTREY B.A.,

A DECADE RICH IN CHURCH LIFE

The ten years of Henry Dawtrey's ministry were rich in church activities and social events. The Literary Society had a full and varied programme, with speakers including the Astronomer Royal (Sir Frank Dyson), Professor I.C. Grondahl, and Mr. F. Cotterill of the London Museum. The Ladies Social Circle (later to work under the auspices of the Women's League) almost single-handedly raised hundred of pounds for the church and the building fund. It was referred to as the church's "financial fairy godmother". The Men's Society enjoyed a rich programme until 1935 when it was discontinued because of falling attendances. Other societies included the Church Guild, the Unita Badminton Club, and the Unita Dramatic Society.

A Sunday School re-started under Mrs Mary Crome in 1930, just before Dawtrey's induction. Over the years glowing reports complimented her on the Sunday School's vitality and activities, but her methods and approach eventually met with the Minister's disapproval. In January 1939 Mr. Dawtrey made it as one of his conditions for continuing as Minister that the school be taken out of Mary Crome's control. This was agreed to by the congregation on a majority vote. In essence, the Minister wanted the Sunday School to pursue the traditional role of making the children "denominationally conscious", whereas Mrs Crome had 'progressive' ideas influenced by Pestalozzi methods concerned with the healthy development of the whole child.

On 19 December 1932 the congregation bade a fond farewell to Mr F.W. Dowson and his wife. Mr. Dowson had served the church faithfully as Secretary since 1911 through many trials and tribulations. Though retiring to North Yorkshire, he remained a member and trustee until his death in 1947.

In 1937 an anonymous donor offered a gift of about £2,000 to the building fund, which, with the money already saved, could have realised the congregation's dream of having a purpose-built church next to the Halls. Unfortunately, the offer was later withdrawn due to delays in getting a scheme agreed. Maybe it was as well, because in the 1940-41 Blitz it would surely have been destroyed, as happened to the Halls (see page 26).

SOME SPECIAL OCCASIONS IN THE 1930s

Each year on Good Friday or Whit Monday country rambles were organised, walking and hiking having become popular pursuits in the 1930s. On Whit Monday 1930 the destination was Westerham. Participants were told to catch the 9.47 am train from Hither Green, arriving at Westerham 10.38am: return fare 2s 4d (12p). It was "...a very happy affair. The weather was perfect..." The picture opposite shows some members taking a rest near Sevenoaks during the ramble on Good Friday 1939. Mrs Pam Sweet kindly supplied the picture. Her late husband, Frank Sweet, is the young man on the left, and it is thought that the woman in the centre may be Mrs Dawtrey. In 1932 there was also a 'Dickens' Ramble in the City of London, and another in 1933 to Dickens' Rochester, both led by Mr Frank S. Johnson (Chairman 1926-1928), who was a popular authority on Charles Dickens. Another annual summer event during the decade was a party for members in Cllr and Mrs Kerfoot's beautiful garden at their home, 'Savernake', Sidcup.

A Burns' Night was held at the Halls on 18 January 1932, arranged by the south east London Scottish Association, with bagpipes, sword dancing, Scottish songs and recitations. The Church Calendar announced, "There should be a mustering of the Clans to the sound of the pibroch, pouring in from the wilds of Hither Green and Bellingham and other haunts of chieftains fra' hame..." A strong Scottish presence which existed in the suburbs of S.E. London from Victorian times to the Second World War was exemplified by a branch of the Church of Scotland in Catford. This held Sunday afternoon services in the smaller Unitarian Hall through the mid-1930s.

June 1935 marked the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Halls. This Silver Jubilee - coming one month after that for the reign of King George V - was celebrated with special services and public meetings attended by Mr G.G. Armstrong (General Assembly President), Mrs Sidney Martineau, and many other well-known Unitarian figures, including the man most responsible for it all - Rev W.W. Chynoweth Pope. The Church Committee noted that the Silver Jubilee "had been most successful".



HENRY DAWTREY'S DEPARTURE

In June 1939, just a few months after the contretemps over the Sunday School (see p.22), Henry Dawtrely submitted his resignation to take effect on 30 September. It had become clear that the clash with Mr & Mrs Crome and their supporters had left a bitter taste. The congregation was effectively divided over Dawtrely's leadership, who in the circumstances "felt no good purpose could be served by his remaining..." The outbreak of war on 3 September, however, confronted the church with such a serious crisis, financial and otherwise, that he generously offered to remain as unpaid Minister for the time-being. The offer "was received with acclamation". He was there to guide the church through the difficult first winter of the war, remaining until 22 April 1940 when he answered an invitation to serve at Horsham. The congregation recorded their appreciation to Mr & Mrs Dawtrely for their "unselfish devotion to the Church at Lewisham throughout the whole of ten years, and more especially since the outbreak of war". They were wished every happiness and good wishes at Horsham. A cheque was presented, which Dawtrely returned to church funds, referring to "the happiness of his ministry in Lewisham and the warm friendship they had enjoyed".

The last issue of the Church Calendar (see opposite page) was produced in June 1940. On paper, at least, it appeared to show a fairly flourishing church, despite the war-time conditions, the Sunday School in particular being something of a surprise in view of the evacuation to safer areas of most children. The deteriorating war situation changed the picture radically. A curtain of silence descended on congregational affairs as the threat of invasion, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz threw members' lives into disarray and left the normal routines of existence in suspense. No further monthly bulletins of any kind appeared again until 1953. The Church Committee met only five times in the course of the war, while congregational meetings were held only twice.

The virtual destruction of the Halls in two air attacks (4 November 1940 and 19 March 1941) meant that meetings and Sunday services took place in one of the rooms in Sion House. From the summer of 1940 onwards church life was reduced to the bare essentials, which meant, to all intents and purposes, Sunday morning services and very little else.

Please take one and Retain for Reference

Unitarian Christian Church

HIGH STREET, LEWISHAM, S.E.13.

Next door to Central Library.

"Here let no man be a stranger."

"In the freedom of Truth, and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ,
we unite for the Worship of God and for the Service of Man."

CALENDAR

Vol. XVII

JUNE, 1940.

No. 191.

Minister

Sunday Services

MORNING 11

Church Institutions

Sunday School during sermon time. Sec.—Miss W. Hinkins,
41, Avondale Road, Bromley, Kent.

Literary Society, Meetings cancelled till further notice.

Secretary—Mr. W. L. Jackson, 12, Copers Cope Rd., Beckenham.

Women's League, every Wednesday, at 3 p.m.

Secretary—Mrs. A. G. Jackson, 16, Wickham Avenue, Shirley.

Young People's League. Secretary—Miss Margaret Henderson,
46, Tressillian Road, S.E.4.

Dramatic Society. Secretary—Miss Ruth Hipperson,
358, High Street, Lewisham, S.E.13.

Badminton Club,

Secretary—Miss Annie Davies, 81, Winn Road, Lee S.E.12.

Chairman of Committee—Mr. J. Cecil Griffin, 81, Bellingham Rd.
(Tel. HIT. 3355.)

Secretary—Miss Pharaoh, 11, Benbury Close, Bromley, Kent.

Treasurer—Mr. E. T. Barnes, 45, Rushey Green, S.E. 6.

Organists—Mr. Arthur W. Harris and Mr. P. Milton.

Hall Lettings—Mr. Fisk, 358c, High Street, Lewisham, S.E.13.

Marriages and Baptisms Solemnized

COPING THROUGH THE WAR YEARS

The advertised concert at the Halls on Saturday, 22 June 1940 was almost certainly the last organised event by the Lewisham Unitarians until after the war. It is by no means certain that even this event went ahead as planned. The committee meeting scheduled for 12 July was certainly cancelled due to worsening war conditions. The minutes of the next one on 9 August consisted of just a few pencilled jottings, with no mention of the concert having taken place. Ruth Hipperson, who would have organised the concert and is named as one of the pianists, lived with her mother in Sion House, but both were evacuated to Exmouth soon afterwards. Later on Ruth Hipperson was to marry Sidney Easling, the baritone at the concert.

A small band of dedicated men and women kept a much-depleted congregation together during the dark years of the conflict, despite air raids, the loss of the Halls, the black out, destroyed or damaged homes, transport problems, and a host of other difficulties and hazards. The main burden fell upon the officers: Mr J.C. Griffin (Chairman); Mr E.T. Barnes (Treasurer) and Mr G.G. Gardner (Secretary). Mr & Mrs Fisk, the church caretakers, remained loyal throughout. They lived in Sion House, despite its suffering severe damage, and offered a place in their flat for the holding of meetings and services. Members were called upon to act as lay preachers to fill in the gaps, and none was in greater demand than Mr Wilfrid Reeve, who lived to serve the church for several decades to come. The service on 23 March 1941 was held four days after the destruction of the Halls. A sombre occasion made more so by the recent death of Mr E.F. Barker, FRCO, who had been the church organist for 38 years until he retired in 1939 due to ill-health.

In such times as these the support of the wider Unitarian movement was urgently needed, not simply in practical and material ways but for moral encouragement and to give reassurance that congregations like Lewisham were not overlooked in their acute difficulties. Close liaison by representatives of the LDPA and a steady supply of visiting preachers greatly assisted the church to emerge from the war bruised but unbowed, and ready to pick up the pieces.

CONCERT

to be held on

SATURDAY, 22ND JUNE, 1940, AT 7 P.M.

Artists :

LADIES' RUSHEY GREEN CHOIR

SHORNELL'S ORCHESTRA

Conductor - Mr. JOHN RODGERS, MUS. BAC.

MR. SIDNEY EASLING, Baritone

Pianists :

Miss MARY RIDGWAY, L.R.A.M.

Miss RUTH HIPPERSON

Admission by Programme One Shilling


PLEASE COME AND BRING YOUR FRIENDS

THE RE-BUILDING OF THE CHURCH HALLS

War-time bombing reduced the Halls almost to ground level, but the foundation stone on the north wall survived as the picture shows. However, the stone laying ceremony actually took place on 12 February 1910, not 26 January, because in the event John Harrison was too ill to attend on the earlier date. The task of re-building after the war had to wait its turn owing to shortages of all kinds and a massive back-log of re-construction work in the London area. There was also little prospect in 1945 of recruiting a minister, even a shared one. Not that Lewisham was altogether sure that it could afford one. As well as the buildings, the congregation itself urgently needed re-construction. Fortunately, the church inherited a strong cadre of competent and experienced members from pre-war days, along with an injection of new blood from the Peckham church, which was destroyed in the Blitz and never rose from the ruins.

The Women's League (led by Mrs A.G. Jackson) did stalwart work for the Red Cross during the war and continued to thrive in the post-war period, raising funds for the eventual re-furbishment of the Halls. Attempts were made as early as 1947 to re-start a Sunday school and a Young People's League, but space and facilities were lacking at Sion House, where all meetings and services still had to be held.

The London District secretary, the Rev Magnus Ratter, attempted to convince members from time to time of the value of a joint ministry. Wandsworth, Bessels Green, and Croydon were among the churches recommended in the late-40s, but Lewisham invariably demurred, usually on the grounds that the Halls should be re-built first. It was not until 1951 that the War Damage Commission agreed to pay £8,170 (plus £250 for contingencies) for the work to be done - this was additional to the £1,838 compensation for repairs to Sion House. However, there were many extra costs not covered by government compensation which could only be met from central grants and local fund raising. At last, on 29 March 1952, the re-built Halls were officially opened by Dr Dorothy Tarrant (GA President) in an "exceptionally severe snowstorm". Those present included Sir Adrian Boulton, Dr Mortimer Rowe, and the Rev W.W. Waddington.



THIS STONE WAS LAID BY
JOHN HARRISON
PRESIDENT OF THE BRITISH AND
FOREIGN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

26th JANUARY 1910

CHURCH LIFE IN THE RESTORED HALLS

The final account for re-building costs met by the War Damage Commission came to £10,284, plus £618 for chattels lost due to enemy action. The picture shows the re-built Halls as they looked in 1994 shortly before they were demolished to make way for an extension of Lewisham Hospital. It is fairly apparent that the building was much plainer than the one it replaced, judging by the descriptions of the latter in the congregational records.

From February 1953 the congregation enjoyed for 12 months the services of a visiting Minister (shared with Hackney) from the USA - the Rev David P. Osborn, BA, BD, who proved to be popular from the start. "...we were all impressed by our Minister's sincerity, quiet dignity, and earnest desire to further the cause of Unitarianism", the church magazine reported on his welcome meeting. It was with a sense of real regret, therefore, that Mr and Mrs Osborn were bidden farewell on 26 February 1954. Their temporary stay had broken 13 years without a minister, and it would be five years before Lewisham welcomed another.

The restored Halls opened up many new opportunities. A small "but very brave" Sunday School started under Mrs Mary Crome, in which "No creed or dogma will be taught, but children will be encouraged to live the good life". In 1956 Unita Dramatic Society was revived by Mr Frank Crome and continued successfully for several years, though Mr Crome died suddenly in 1957. His wife, Mary, died the following year, resulting in the struggling Sunday School being wound up. A very successful long-running venture, started by Mrs M. Milton in 1954, was an old time dancing club. Over the next ten years the club raised some £2,000 for church funds.

In the absence of a minister until 1959 much reliance had to be placed on visiting preachers. Among many regular preachers to enhance the devotional life were Dudley Richards, W. Waddington, John Kielty, R.W. Sorensen, MP, and Dr Mortimer Rowe.

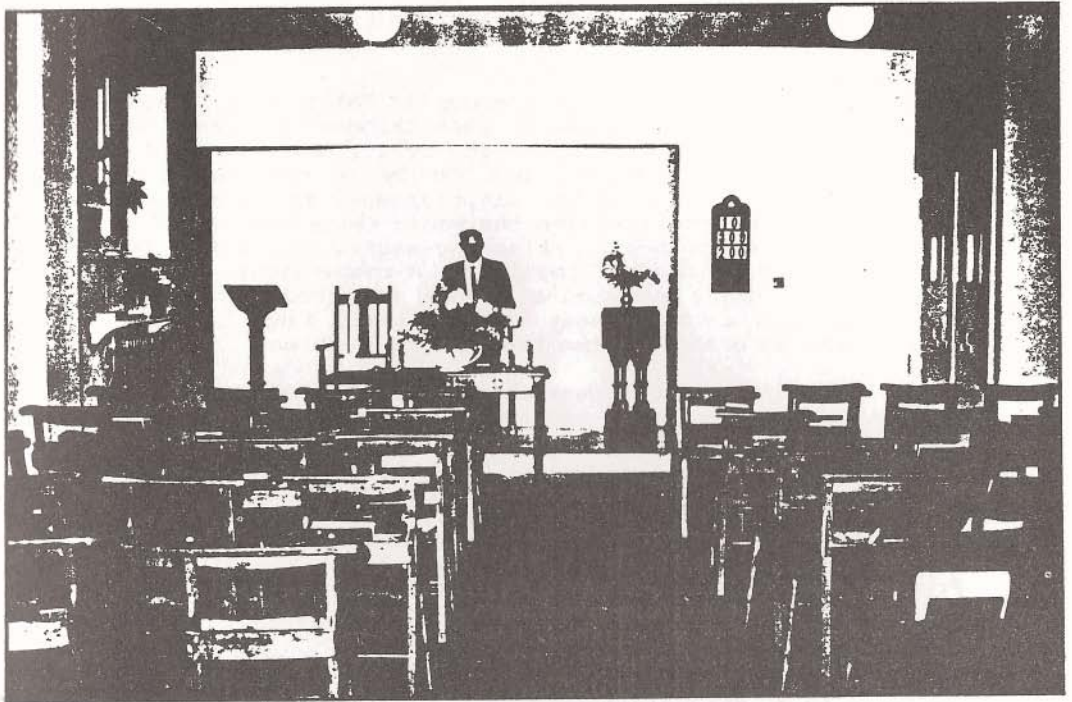


THE SMALL HALL BECOMES A CHAPEL

At the AGM held 25 February 1959 it was unanimously agreed to invite Jeremy Goring to become Minister, the church's first permanent holder of the post since 1940. His ministry commenced 3 May and his induction took place on Saturday, 9 May 1959 in the large Hall, which was filled to capacity in witness of what was described as "a most impressive service".

Jeremy Goring's youthful energy and charismatic personality seemed to galvanise the congregation into a level of activity not seen for some years. Among the early results of this 'new broom' was a decision to convert the small Hall into a permanent chapel, thus rectifying at a stroke the absence of a building dedicated solely to church services - something which had troubled members ever since the original Halls were built in 1910. The top picture opposite shows the inside of the converted chapel and the lower picture is a sketch of the outside by Mrs Tarbuck, wife of David Tarbuck, Chairman, 1970-1973.

The first service in the chapel was held on 20 November 1960, and the church magazine commented, "The dual-purpose 'small hall', with its secular associations, has now gone forever and in its place there stands a charming little chapel, complete with well-lit entrance lobby and a handsome panelled porch clearly visible from the road". The Mayor of Lewisham (Cllr M.R. Butler, JP) formally opened the chapel on Saturday, 4 February 1961, an occasion well-reported in the local press and in 'The Inquirer'. Two other events were celebrated on the same date, namely, the holding of the LDPA quarterly meeting in the large Hall - addressed by Mr A.L.Blake, OBE (General Assembly President and father of Mrs Rosemary Goring) - and the 50th anniversary of the church on the site behind Sion House, for which the service was conducted by the Rev T.L. Jones.



LEWISHAM
UNITARIAN
CHURCH



CHRISTMAS DAY FOR THE LONELY

Without question, the idea for opening the Halls on Christmas Day 1959, with a full programme of entertainment and seasonal food, not just for members but for outsiders, too, especially those living alone, turned out to be a spectacularly successful event. Admiration was expressed for David and Valerie Tarbuck, who conceived the whole thing and played a leading part in the ambitious arrangements. In order to create the right 'homely' atmosphere, a roomy alcove in the large Hall with its own coal stove was carpeted with rugs, furnished with settees, easy chairs, table lamps, coffee tables, and decorated in the traditional fashion.

The dinner menu included roast chicken and Christmas pudding - cooked on the premises by members of the congregation - with mince pies, fruit salad, etc., for tea. In the afternoon there was music, dancing, and party games, which resumed in the evening after a devotional epilogue by candlelight and went on until after midnight. The originality, generosity - both material and spiritual - and the sheer goodwill of the event attracted much publicity in the local and national Press. Its success ensured that it would be repeated for some years to come.

The congregation grew strongly during Jeremy Goring's ministry, reaching a peak in 1963. In July of that year the Chairman (W.J. Shearring) said he had "writer's cramp from sending out so many letters of welcome to new members". Attendances at services also increased substantially, with average figures during October 1962 attaining a level not seen since before the war. A willingness on the part of the Minister to experiment and innovate doubtless helped to kindle that vital spark of interest which attracts regular attendance. A form of communion Service on occasions was secured by him "in that persuasive way which breaks down all obstacles". Morning services followed a traditional pattern, while evening services were more experimental, with meditations, audience participation, recorded music, and on at least one occasion Rosemary Goring accompanying herself on the guitar while singing 'Nearer my God to thee' to a 'beat' tune.



Father Christmas (73-year-old Mr. Albert Roach) was a welcome visitor to the party organised in the Unitarian Church Hall at Lewisham High-street on Christmas Day for the "lonely" of the district. The party—the fifth successive year on which one has been held—attracted seventy guests, including an aged man who confessed to having spent Christmas Day alone for the previous twenty years. Several helpers brought along their children who formed a percussion band to entertain the aged.

LEWISHAM FESTIVAL OF LIVING ARTS

On Sunday, 11 June 1961 the church united with members of the Brahma Samaj to celebrate the centenary of the birth of their leader, Rabindranath Tagore. Some of the participants appear in the picture opposite, including Jeremy Goring in the second row, seen standing between two windows, and the Rev R. Sorensen, MP, (later Lord Sorensen) on the far right of the group. The occasion was typical of the rich, outward-looking and liberal ministry of Dr Goring.

Perhaps the supreme event of Jeremy and Rosemary's time in Lewisham was the organisation of Lewisham's highly successful and first ever Festival of Living Arts in June 1963. Though strictly secular, it too was an expression of religion as "something to do with the whole of life, that the 'common' and the 'divine' have no separate confines," to quote Jeremy Goring's own words. The illustration on page 40 shows Dr Henry Collins, the prospective Labour Parliamentary candidate for North Lewisham modelling for sculptor, Stephen Rickard. Sir Adrian Boulton was patron of the Festival and when it was organised for a second time in June 1964 he conducted, to everyone's delight, a local choir in a Bach chorale. Other notable occasions during Dr Goring's ministry included a special exhibition in the large Hall in May 1962 commemorating the tercentenary of the 1662 ejection (about which the Minister delivered a memorable lecture to the Lewisham Local History Society), and the sponsorship by the church of the Lewisham Abbeyfield Society, providing housing for elderly people.

The church was fortunate at this period to number among the congregation many able, long-serving and hard-working members, such as Agnes Pharaoh, who served in many capacities over 40 years until her death in 1965; Wilfrid Reeve, who served for 23 years as Treasurer, and was highly-valued as a lay preacher and as a hymn writer of great merit; and Will Shearring, who took over as Chairman in 1961, having been an active member since 1931, including Secretary, 1932-1936.



Lewisham's First Ever

FESTIVAL OF LIVING ARTS

(Patron: Sir Adrian Boult, D.Mus.)

Dancing - Drama

Painting - Pottery - Singing

Instrumental Music

Saturday, 22nd June, 1963

at

LEWISHAM UNITARIAN CHURCH





Fanfare for Sir Adrian Boulton

SIR ADRIAN BOULT opened Lewisham's Festival of Living Arts at the Unitarian Church Hall on Saturday and afterwards conducted. He was welcomed by a fanfare specially composed for two trumpets. Local talent was displayed in singing, pottery, music, dancing and painting at the festival. "It is enjoyment that matters, so we purposely held no competitions nor asked for a very high standard," said the Rev. Jeremy

Goring of Hither Green-lane, Lewisham, who thought of the idea of holding an annual festival a year ago. Mr. Derek Hill, National Savings Officer for South East London, of Burgess-rd., Stoveham, was joint secretary of the festival's committee with Mr. Goring, and Councillor F. B. Page, last year's mayor, was chairman. Nearly 200 people took part and entrants were of many ages. Towards the end, Mrs. Rosemary Goring played the guitar when folk singing took place.

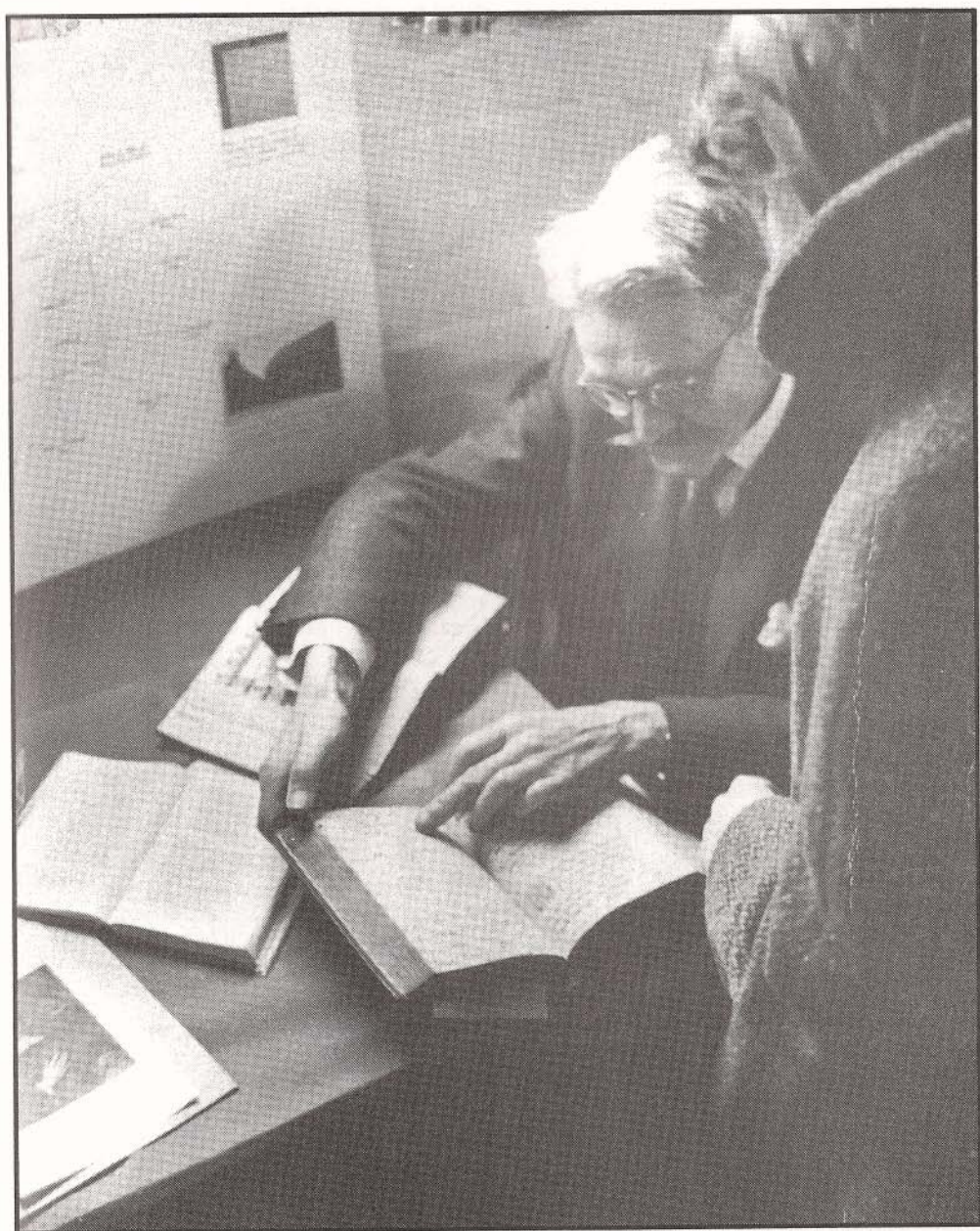


CHURCH SELLS UP IN THE HIGH STREET

In March 1965 it became clear that Jeremy Goring would be giving up his position as paid Minister in order to take up full-time teaching at Goldsmiths' College. His reasons concerned his belief that the church should be "a web of relationships, with widely diffused responsibility, self-reliant, outward looking.... rather than a spoked wheel with a minister at its hub". He took his last service as Minister on 26 July 1965, thereby ending six years of dedicated and inspiring leadership and selfless devotion to the church and to his fellows. For a spell afterwards he remained as an ordinary member of the congregation.

The departure of a minister frequently causes in a small Unitarian congregation a 'crisis of the spirit', none more so than for Lewisham in 1965. In addition, the whole future of the church on the Sion House site was being called into question by declining numbers and the heavy costs of running the chapel, the large Hall, Sion House, and the adjacent small shop. Various ideas were considered for re-developing the site, or moving to more modest premises, or joining up with another congregation (even forging a link with Blackheath Congregational Church), and so on. Eventually the inevitable happened in view of the local borough's expressed interest in acquiring the existing site - the whole complex of properties was sold to Lewisham Council for £30,000 in 1967, although the church continued to use the chapel for services until November 1968 (for payment of £4 a week to the new owners) while a suitable alternative home was found. Mr W.J. Shearring (Chairman) reported on the "tonic effect selling our premises has had. No longer do we have to worry about burst pipes or enter an ice-box for our services..."

(The facing photograph is of Mr George Gardner (Secretary) at the 1662 tercentenary exhibition, May 1962. He is pointing to a text written by one of his 18th century ancestors. Members were greatly saddened by Mr. Gardner's death in April 1967).



A NEW MINISTER AND A NEW HOME

After a break of about two-and-a-half years, Lewisham was pleased to welcome a new Minister in the shape of the Rev A.J. Cross, whose induction took place on 9 March 1968. Tony Cross came to Lewisham from Plymouth (an entirely different kind of ministry) initially on a part-time basis, which until August 1970 was combined with the editorship of 'The Inquirer'. Like Jeremy Goring, he pressed for more experiment and more searching ways of worship, saying that "most Unitarian services are too static, too tepid..". Will Shearring spoke for the congregation when he wrote, "...in Tony we have someone who is appealing to both old and young, someone who is preaching the most powerful sermons, and someone who is answering our spiritual needs."

The timing of Tony Cross's arrival meant that he was pitchforked into the hectic arrangements for the church's move from the High Street to a new home at 41, Bromley Road, Catford, an undistinguished detached, suburban house. A large amount of essential improvement and conversion work delayed the actual move until November 1968, and the first Sunday service was taken there on 17 November 1968. At the suggestion of Mr Ernest Tytler, editor of the monthly newsletter, the name 'Lewisham Unitarian Meeting House' was officially adopted, though somewhat confusingly the newsletter was called 'The Catford Unitarian' until 1973.

Mrs Amy Howarth, President of the General Assembly, officially opened the Meeting House on 1 February 1969. Over 80 people packed the worship room - designed to hold 42 - on this happy occasion, including Cllr Mrs Rose Bartlett (Deputy Mayor of Lewisham), Rev E.D. Davies (London District Minister), and Mr David House (President of the London District). After extensive conversion work the congregation now had "...a simple but beautiful Meeting House; already the quiet and reverent atmosphere can be felt". It was the final fruition of much demanding labour over several years, during which Wilfrid Reeve and Will Shearring, in particular, gave "unstintingly of their time and knowledge", the Annual Report for 1968 stated.

(The photo opposite shows the official opening of the Meeting House, with, from left to right, Cllr Mrs Rose Bartlett, the Rev Tony Cross, Mrs Amy Howarth, Miss 'Bessie' Jeffries (a long-serving member), and Mr W.J. Shearring).



41, BROMLEY ROAD - BEFORE AND AFTER

The pictures on the facing page show (top) 41, Bromley Road in a somewhat rundown condition just before it was taken over as the Meeting House, and (bottom) the property 25 years later, looking spruce and re-invigorated despite the passage of time. The congregation, too, seemed tired and a little dispirited in the wake of Jeremy Goring's resignation and prior to the purchase of 41, Bromley Road and the appointment of Tony Cross. Will Shearring lamented that "our congregations are so much smaller than a couple of years ago...I find it depressing". Ernest Tytler wrote, "Too few are doing too much for too many." George Gardner, however, thought "our age is obsessed with numbers...instead of worrying about smallness, we should worry about bigness. At what point does a worshipping group become too large for members really to meet one another?" Again, like the building itself, things brightened up after the arrival of Tony Cross and the move to Catford.

The Minister lost no time in immersing himself, and hence the Meeting House, in local community life, in "socially relevant" action, and in the issues of the day. All additional to breathing new life into the devotional side of the church. Half-day teach-ins included speakers on Civil Rights, Black Militancy, and Housing and the Coloured Citizen. 'Intergroup' - a venture to bring together homosexual men and women - was successfully introduced in 1970, attracting some hostile comment in the local press. AMNESTY met in the Minister's flat above the Meeting House. The church affiliated with the Lewisham Society and the National Council for Civil Liberties. A Meditation Group met on Sunday evenings; a Discussion Group on Fridays. Worship Workshops, 'Freedom Suppers', a Social Responsibility Subcommittee, a Junior Church, and a Sunday creche were also set up. And especially pleasing to note, the Christmas parties for lonely older people started by the Tarbucks continued at nearby St. Laurence's church hall, though regrettably the Unitarian contribution petered out after about the tenth year.

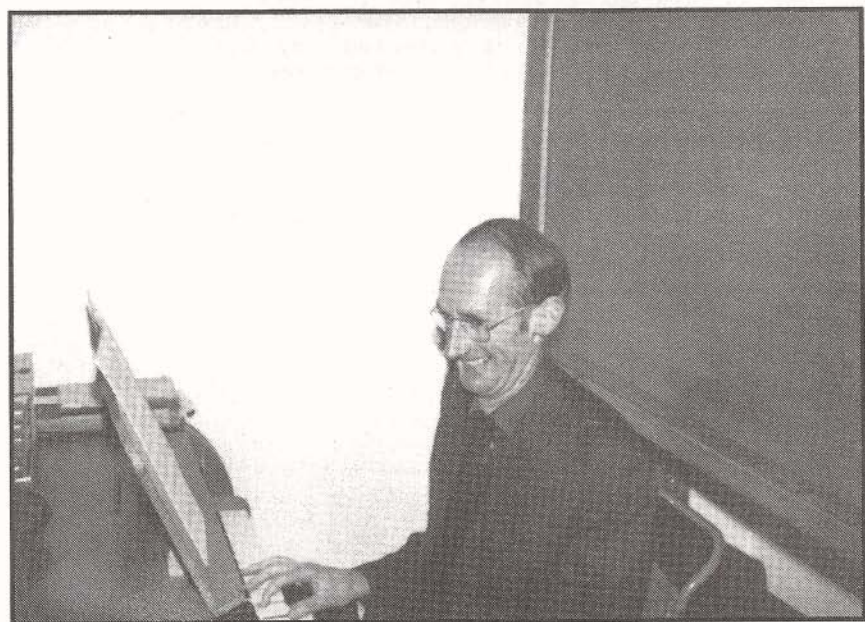


"GALLOPING OFF IN ALL DIRECTIONS"

Remarking on the diversity and intensity of Tony Cross's activities, the 1970 Annual Report said, "Our Minister...has resembled no-one as much as that fictional character, Lord Ronald, who jumped on his horse and galloped off in all directions". One 'gallop' carried him to Trinity School, Croydon as part-time teacher of divinity in 1971, a post he gave up in 1972 in order to give himself full-time to the Lewisham ministry. To general regret, however, he resigned the ministry in August 1973 to return to Trinity School as head of religious education, which offered him "fresh fields and pastures new".

The early 1970s also witnessed the departure of some of the oldest and most faithful members, who could be ill-spared in a congregation where numbers were in long-term decline. W.J. Shearring moved to Sussex in 1970, after a 39-year connection with the church. Mr & Mrs Tarbuck left for Canada in 1969, returning for about three years before leaving the district for good. An old connection of a different sort, Sion House, was demolished circa. 1971 by its new owners, Lewisham Council, to make room for a car park in front of the former Unitarian Church Halls. The picture opposite shows Sion House in 1971, with the little shop adjoining it on the far side and the entrance gates to the Halls, through which generations of Lewisham Unitarians passed, nearer the camera.

The lower picture shows Martin Tayler, then on the staff of Eltham College and a much-esteemed member, running his expert fingers over the chamber organ made especially for the Meeting House in 1972 by Geoffrey Ramsden and his son of the Horsham Church. Ron Farquhar, who had recently become a member, transported the organ from Horsham, and it was dedicated on 28 October 1972 amid sentiments of deep gratitude to the Ramsdens for the fine work they had put into it. It is pleasing to record that the instrument is still giving stalwart service at the time of producing this commemorative booklet.





LEWISHAM'S FIRST WOMAN MINISTER

On the initiative of the London District Minister, the Rev Sydney Knight, the possibility of a joint ministry with Brixton was explored in 1977 as a financially viable way of replacing Peter Roberts. In the end it was thought that Brixton's requirements were unlikely to coincide with Lewisham's, and the matter was dropped, though revived nine years later, again without result. In the aftermath of the failed Brixton initiative it was decided to advertise for a part-time minister. This produced an approach from the Rev Bruce Findlow to the effect that his student, Mrs Joy Croft, would be interested in the post. A couple of visits by her as preacher and candidate quickly prompted an invitation from the congregation, and on 30 September 1978 the induction service for her was conducted by the Rev Islwyn Pritchard. Thus it was that Joy Croft became the first woman minister of the Lewisham Unitarians.

Joy Croft soon made valuable contacts with the local community, including Lewisham Voluntary Action, the Humanists, the council children's home next to the Meeting House, Amnesty, Lewisham Peace Council, South London Inter-Faith Group, and many others. At the 1981 AGM Wilfrid Reeve thanked her for her work in the congregation and the district, "which was enriched by the warmth of her personality". The Minister, who saw local contacts as not really part of her prime function, which was "the conduct of worship", thought members should be more involved in the outside community. Moving with the tide of liberal opinion, she conducted blessings of homosexual unions at the Meeting House on occasions in 1983, members having advised her that the matter was one for the exercise of her ministerial discretion.

A warm congregational fellowship marked Joy Croft's time in Lewisham, with social evenings, 'at-homes' and garden parties aplenty, yet membership remained obstinately static or in a gentle decline, following the long-term trend. In March 1984 she left Lewisham for Norwich, her departure "accepted with sorrow and regret". Gayaura di Franco, a student for the ministry at Union Seminary, New York, took her place for a six-month period.



SOMETHING WORTH HOLDING ON TO

With total membership scarcely touching a score and every year witnessing losses through death or removal of some of the best and longest-serving members, the 1980s, not surprisingly, were marked by deep soul-searching concerning the future of the Meeting. Doubts over the viability of the congregation reached a critical point at the end of the decade, but it was agreed eventually that there was in the small Lewisham group something good and worth holding on to.

Among those members lost was Mrs Gwyneth Dowds, who had served both as Chairman and as Secretary at various times. She died at the end of 1980. John and Pamela McCormack left in 1980, followed by the Cox family in 1982. 'Bessie' Jeffries died in 1988. Most grievous of all was the death of Wilfrid Reeve on 3 November 1984. For nearly 50 years he served the congregation with total commitment. As far back as 1942 he was presented with a gift of books for regularly taking Sunday services after the church was blitzed. A gifted preacher, hymnist, poet, and graphic artist, he was also Treasurer for 23 years and auditor after that, as well as newsletter editor and publicity officer. He wrote a short history of the church in 1981, from which the sketch of the Meeting House (see the title page) is taken. Men of such calibre are rare indeed in the modern world, and irreplaceable.

Between May 1986 and November 1988 the Meeting House enjoyed the valuable services of the Rev Anne Arthur. However, her ministry was very part-time - the equivalent of only one day a week. Even so, the Chairman (Rev Fred Ryde) could say at the 1988 AGM that it was largely due to her worship, pastoral and organisational efforts that the Meeting was holding its own. She went on to Golders Green "with the thanks and good wishes of all of us".

(The facing pictures show the demolition of the old Unitarian Halls in 1994 following the sale of the property by Lewisham Council to the Lewisham Hospital Trust. In the top picture a hole in the wall on the right is where the foundation stone was removed. It was put in the garden of the Meeting House as a memorial to past congregations. The lower picture shows the site briefly cleared, with St Mary's Parish Church visible through the trees, before the erection of a hospital building)

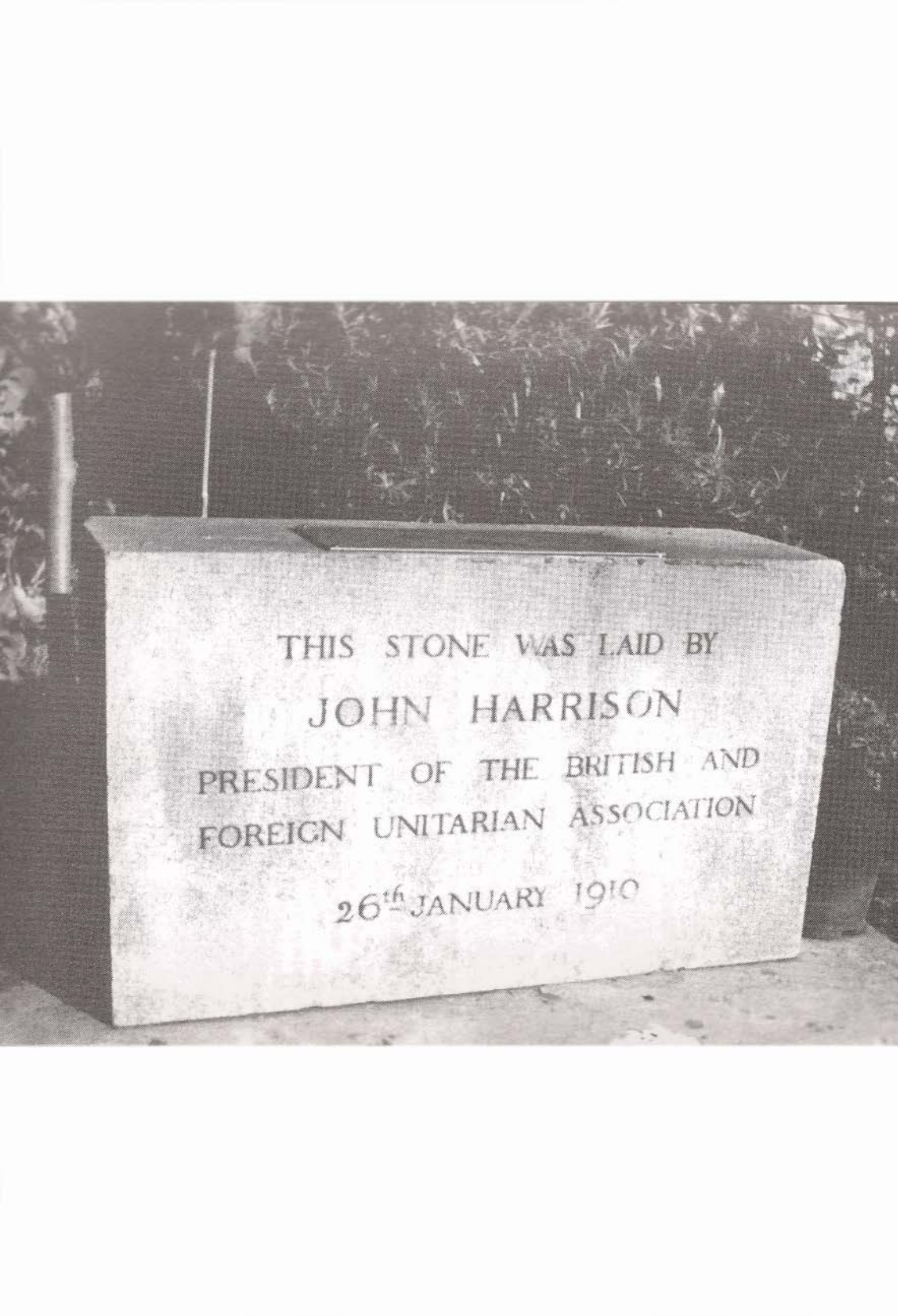


AN INFUSION OF NEW BLOOD

'Every cloud has a silver lining' - a saying banal and hackneyed as any overworked cliché, though nonetheless generally found true in everyday life. The cloud of closure which hung over the Lewisham Meeting at the end of the 1980s was not uniformly dark. There were some bright spots for those who would lift up their eyes to seek them. Putting the problem into perspective, the Rev Fred Ryde remarked in committee that if every Unitarian church which was stagnating were to close, then there would be many closures, and that there was an obligation to those who continued to attend to remain in existence. Then there was the recruitment of the Rev Ashley Hills in 1989 as part-time Minister, shared initially with Stratford. In his formal welcome Fred Ryde spoke for everyone when he said that "the meeting was very fortunate to obtain Rev Ashley Hills' services". Thirdly, the arrival in the congregation of Frank, Marie, and Holly Field in 1991 introduced an element of new blood which was keenly needed and appreciated. One of the first things Frank and Marie set about was the complete re-furbishment of the worship room, with Marie making fine new curtains throughout. The result was a lovely freshness, pleasing to the eye and restful to the soul.

The deaths at about this time of Martin Tayler, Fred Ryde, and Bertha Sheppard (a member having a very long association with the Meeting) were severe blows to a struggling congregation and might have proved fatal to it a year or two earlier. All three have been commemorated in different ways by the Meeting, but the best memorial to them - and to hundreds of others who over the years devoted their time and spirit to the cause of Unitarianism in Lewisham - has surely been the continued physical presence in the borough of what they believed in and worked for.

As mentioned previously, the foundation stone of the old Unitarian Halls in Lewisham High Street was retrieved from the site when the premises were being demolished in 1994. The facing photograph is of the stone in its new resting place in the rear garden of the Meeting House, where it serves as a memorial to past congregations. (NB. The actual date it was laid was 12 February 1910 - see page 30).



THIS STONE WAS LAID BY
JOHN HARRISON
PRESIDENT OF THE BRITISH AND
FOREIGN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
26th JANUARY 1910

SILVER JUBILEE OF THE MEETING HOUSE

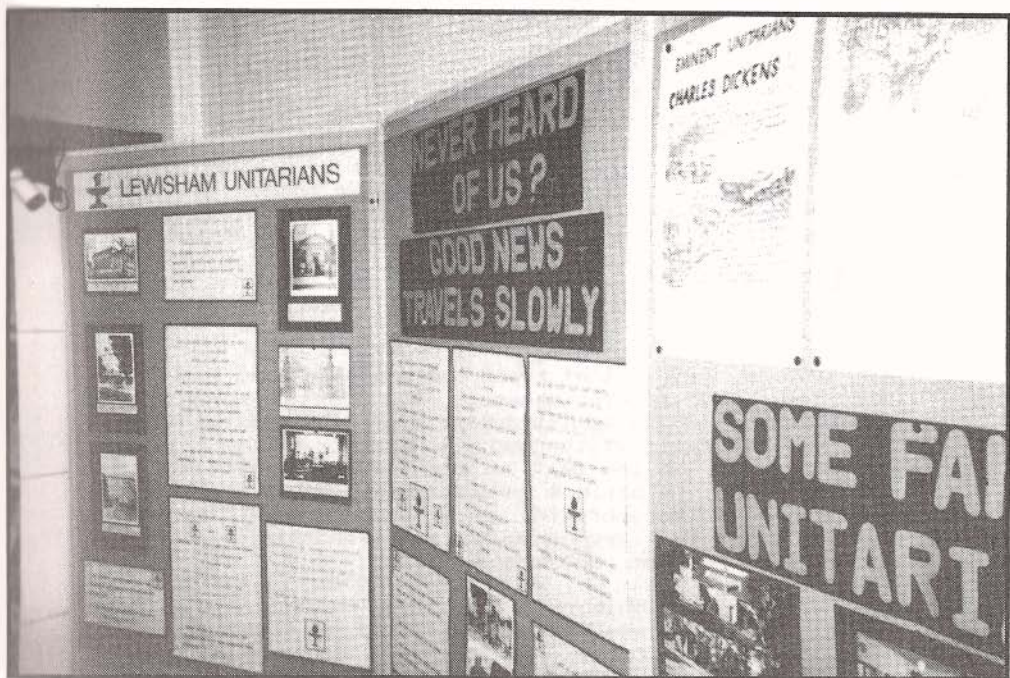
In 1991 Frank Field replaced Fred Ryde as Chairman, Holly Field replaced Martin Tayler as Treasurer (in turn replaced by her mother Marie, when Holly moved to Norwich), and Liz Kendall - a gifted teacher whose musical talents made a welcome showing as principal organist for the Meeting House - took on the task of Secretary.

In the concluding years covered by this commemorative booklet the congregation has, in the words of Ashley Hills the Minister, "continued its happy way..." Sunday attendances have tended to rise a little since the nadir point of the late-1980s and the membership has held steady or shown a slight increase. At the 1992 AGM, Frank Field was able to report that "the general feeling was one of optimism (which was) very encouraging." An especially happy occasion in 1992 was the marriage of Liz Kendall to the Rev Ashley Hills at the Meeting House. Although this was not the first time a minister had been wedded while serving in Lewisham (it happened to the Rev David Osborn in 1953), it was the first time the ceremony itself had taken place in the church or Meeting House.

The joint ministry with Stratford having terminated at the end of 1990, there was break in Ashley Hills' Lewisham ministry until October 1991. From 1 April 1993 Ashley added the oversight of Billingshurst to his responsibilities, and since then individual members have occasionally joined the congregation at Billingshurst, though the distance involved has inhibited close contact between the two groups.

It was with pride that members celebrated in February 1994 the 25th anniversary of the official opening of the Meeting House. The Silver Jubilee was marked firstly by a four-week display in Catford Library of the history and meaning of Unitarianism (a section of the display is pictured opposite), and secondly by a special service on 13 February attended by the Mayor of Lewisham (Cllr Sinna Mani), the Rev Peter Godfrey (London District Minister), Tony Cross, Keith Gilley, and about thirty others. Ashley Hills conducted the service, and there were short speeches by the principal guests. (The lower picture opposite shows, left to right, Cllr Sinna Mani, the Rev Ashley Hills, and the Chairman, Frank Field). Both the library display and the special service were reported as "excellent occasions" enjoyed by all.

The members' current programme typically includes daytime discussions, evening talks, musical occasions, and "at home" gatherings for music, poetry, and refreshments. Lack of numbers inevitably restricts the range and frequency of activities but that said, great store is held by having a social programme, however modest it might be.



A VIEW ACROSS THE YEARS

In May 1997 the Meeting will celebrate the centenary of the church's foundation, for it was in May 1897, that the Rev W.W.C. Pope was inducted as Lewisham's first Unitarian minister. The occasion will be a moment to savour. Alone among the Unitarian churches in south east London, Lewisham has survived all the vicissitudes of the past century. Survival itself may not be the highest of achievements, - though it rather depends upon what has had to be overcome in the process - but it is a necessary prerequisite for the attainment of greater things. One must live if one wishes to fight again.

The pages of this booklet trace the successes and failures, the joys and disappointments, the crises and their resolutions...of the church during those one hundred years. Here is a story of vision and commitment, of sheer dogged determination, on the part of ordinary, unheroic men and women, anxious to build a community of kindred spirits in individual, yet co-operative, pursuit of things of religious worth - truth, understanding, friendship, justice, celebration of life, and many more.

To write a church history is generally to write about only those things which can be seen, measured, or counted. It is important, therefore, to distinguish in one's mind between 'church' and 'religion' or matters of the spirit. The first can be written about as history because it is public, directly observable, and recordable in quantitative terms. The second does not easily lend itself to historical treatment, because it is private, inaccessible to direct observation, and lies qualitatively within the human breast. Only the participants of a religious community, each for himself or herself, can judge the true spiritual value of what is achieved and of what is experienced.

Having said that, it is surely still possible to make reasonable conjectures from the evidence about the beliefs held, then and now. It cannot be without significance that the title 'Lewisham Unitarian Christian Church' has been gradually superseded by 'Lewisham Unitarian Meeting'. The dropping of 'Christian' from the title has to be a public signal of changing emphasis in beliefs. What it appears to signify is that from worshipping Christ as the proclaimer of a divine message (though not himself divine) and as the greatest moral teacher of all times, the emphasis has shifted to celebrating the human spirit as a manifestation of the divine message and as intrinsically capable of living according to its moral teachings. If there is any truth in this interpretation, then it is probably the main 'spiritual' change to have occurred among Lewisham Unitarians over the years. Only time can tell what the future holds for a community of this kind in south east London.

SET WIDE THE GATE OF LIBERTY

Lewisham C.M.

Liz Hills

Set wide the gate of liberty
 For all to enter in,
 That all, set free, at last may see
 The golden age begin.

Too long the captive people wait
 In sorrow and in sin;
 At last, though late, set wide the gate
 And let their joy begin.

The temple of our God is wide,
 All faiths of man akin;
 Here, side by side, let all abide
 Till perfect love begin.

Here may the weary find a rest,
 The worker courage win,
 And east and west, together blest,
 Full brotherhood begin.

In love and truth to God and man,
 Whate'er the past has been,
 The task our Master once began
 Once more let us begin.

To bless the rich, to bless the poor,
 To still the strife and din,
 For evermore, set wide the door
 Till heaven on earth begin.

W. G. Tarrant

(Words written in 1910 specially for the laying
 of the memorial stone of the former Lewisham
 Unitarian Halls in Lewisham High Street.
 Music (c) Liz Hills, 1996)

APPENDIX 1

MINISTERS

Rev W.W. Chynoweth Pope,	1897-1917
Rev Alick Herbert Dolphin,	1917-1922
Rev Jesse Hipperson,	1923-1929
Rev Henry Dawtrey,	1930-1940
Without a Minister,	1940-1953
Rev David P. Osborn,	1953-1954
Without a Minister,	1954-1959
Rev Dr Jeremy J. Goring,	1959-1965
Without a Minister,	1965-1968
Rev Anthony J. Cross,	1968-1973
Duncan McGuffie,	Xmas Period 1973
Rev Peter Roberts,	1974-1977
Rev Joy Croft,	1978-1984
Gayaura di Franco,	3/1984-9/1984
Rev Peter Roberts,	1/1985-4/1985
Rev Anne Arthur,	1986-1988
Rev Ashley Hills,	1989-

CHAIRMEN

Rev W.W. Chynoweth Pope,	1897-1917
Robert Donaldson,	1917
J. Mercer,	1918-1919
Robert Donaldson,	1920-1921
William L. Jackson,	1922-1925
Frank S. Johnson,	1926-1927
J.D. Wright,	1928
Clr James Kerfoot,	1929-1932
J.D. Wright,	1933
Arthur W. Harris,	1934-1937
J.C. Griffin,	1938-1947
Philip H. Milton,	1948-1958
Agnes M. Pharaoh,	1959-1960
Wm. J. Shearring,	1961-1969
David Tarbuck,	1970-1972
Gwyneth Dowds,	1973-1974
Mary Cox,	1975
Peter Johnson	1976-1981
Maisie Brown,	1982-1983
Rev Frank Ryde,	1984-1990
Frank Field,	1991 -

VICE CHAIRMEN

E. Frank Crome,	1948-1957
Clr Frank Miller,	1957-1961

PRINCIPAL ORGANISTS

Mrs. G.W. Hodgson	1898-1901
E.F. Barker FRCO,	1901-1938
A.W.Harris/P.H.Milton,	1939-1942
P.H. Milton,	1942-1962
Bessie Jeffries,	1962-1971
Various,	1972-1990
Elizabeth Hills, (also	1991 -
P.Tayler, G. Ward)	

APPENDIX 2

SECRETARIES

J.J. Hodgson,	1897
Alex. G. Warren,	1898-1907
J.C. Griffin,	1908-1910
Francis W. Dowson,	1911-1932
Wm. J. Shearring,	1933-1935
Agnes Pharaoh,	1936-1942*
George G. Gardner,	1942-1962*
Peter R. Stubbings,	1963-1965
Florence Trinder,	1966-1968
Gwyneth Dowds,	1969-1972
Mary Cox,	1973-1974
Peter Johnson/Sylvia Roberts,	1975-
Pam McCormack,	1976-1979
Elsie Sudlow,	1979-1983++
Rev Fred Ryde,	1984-1991++
Elizabeth Hills (nee Kendall)	1991-

*Agnes Pharaoh was evacuated with her school in 1939 and it appears that George Gardner may have done the job from 1940.

++ Elsie Sudlow continued to take the minutes after 1983, while Fred Ryde acted as correspondence secretary.

TREASURERS

Capt. McKenzie	1898-1899
C. Vogan,	1900-1901
W.H. Coltart,	1902-1903
T.H. Davis,	Part 1904
C. Vogan,	1904-1907
J.L. Jeans,	1908-1910
W. Gaylard,	1911-1914
James Mercer,	1915-1916
Rev W.W.C. Pope,	Part 1916
Robert Donaldson,	1917-1918
Mrs E.C. Trist,	1919-1921
David Walls,	1922-1927
E.F. Cowlin,	1928-1935
E.T. Barnes,	1936-1946
Wilfrid Reeve,	1947-1969
Esther Neil,	1970
Peter McLachlan	1971-1972
Martin Tayler,	1973-1977
John McCormack,	1978
Martin Tayler,	1979-1991
Holly Field,	1991-1992
Marie Field,	1993-1996
Peter Tayler,	1996-

APPENDIX 3 - SOME NOTABLE DATES

- 1895: First lectures on Unitarianism delivered in Lewisham.
1896: Congregation formed under the guidance of the LDUS.
1897: Formal founding of the church under Rev W.W.C. Pope.
1903: Sion House purchased in December for £2,200.
1910: Unitarian Halls opened by Sir E. Durning Lawrence, 25 June.
1913: Small shop adjoining Sion House acquired for £375.
1917: Sion House damaged by Silvertown munitions explosion, 19 January.
1922: 211 George Lane purchased to accommodate the Minister's family.
1924: Grand Japanese Bazaar held, 6-7 November.
1927: Church affiliated to the League of Nations (LNU).
1929: 211 George Lane sold for £700 following the departure of the Minister.
1935: 25th anniversary of the opening of the Halls marked by special services, 23-25 June.
Church became a separate branch of the LNU.
1940: The Halls and Sion House badly damaged by bombing, 4 November.
1941: The Halls virtually destroyed by bombing, 19 March.
1952: Re-built Church Halls officially opened 29 March.
1953: Church magazine revived after a lapse of 13 years.
1959: The first Christmas Day party for lonely old folk.
1961: Formal opening of the chapel conversion by the Mayor of Lewisham (Cllr M.R. Butler), 4 February.
1963: First Lewisham Festival of Living Arts, 22-23 June.
1964: Second Festival of Living Arts attended by its patron, Sir Adrian Boulton, who conducted a Bach Chorale, 27 June.
1968: Last service held at the chapel (small Hall), 10 November.
First service held at 41, Bromley Road, 17 November.
10th Christmas Day party for lonely old folk held in concert with St Laurence Church, Catford in their hall.
1969: Meeting House in Bromley Road, Catford officially opened by Mrs Amy Howarth (General Assembly President), 1 February.
1973: Mayor & Mayoress of Lewisham attended special service for the 5th anniversary of Tony Cross's Ministry, 4 February.
1978: FOY Society Easter Conference at the Meeting House, 27 March.
1987: Meeting House damaged in October hurricane.
1992: Marriage of Elizabeth Kendall and the Rev Ashley Hills at the Meeting House, 23 May.
1994: Special service on 13 February to mark 25th anniversary of the opening of the Meeting House, attended by the Mayor of Lewisham. Also a special exhibition mounted in Catford Library.
1997: Proposed celebration in May of the centenary of the founding of the church, to include a special service and other events.