

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
LISTER HILL BAPTIST CHURCH,  
HORSFORTH, LEEDS**

**Compiled by  
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**on the occasion of the  
Opening of the New Extension  
on the 24 March 1979**



## THE ORIGINAL CHAPEL IN LISTER HILL

### LISTER HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

Lister Hill Mission was founded over 100 years ago. Times have changed somewhat from those early days and certainly the people who formed those first congregations would hardly recognise the Horsforth we know today. The small closely built cottages in their rural setting have now given way to a sprawling big city suburb with all its modern estates, shopping centres and commuter residents.

Horsforth then, at the end of the nineteenth century, with Queen Victoria on the throne, was vastly different to what it is today, although reminders of those days can still be seen in certain parts of the village. The people lived in poor conditions by today's standards and often there was no running water in the cottages, sanitation was poor and, of course, there was no electricity as yet. The local industry was mainly textiles with a considerable amount of home weaving being done, although this would not be so for much longer owing to the introduction of mechanical looms.

However, it was to a home weaving chamber that the attention of a Mr. W.H. Bilbrough was drawn in the early part of 1878, and he saw in it the possibility of conversion to a Mission Hall. In fact Mr. Bilbrough eventually acquired two adjacent cottages, each with living accommodation on the ground floor, sleeping on the first floor and hand weaving looms on the top floor. He had the two top rooms made into one large room by demolishing the joining wall. This was the beginning of Lister Hill Mission and it would seem that the early worshippers had a somewhat hazardous journey to reach the room, first having to climb fourteen stone steps on the outside of the building and then having to negotiate a further flight of steps on the inside before reaching the top floor. The interior of the room was whitewashed and the ceiling simply bare beams and rafters. So the Word of God was preached and as the Mission could not afford a pastor it was served by students and lay preachers with Mr. Bilbrough meeting all the expenses himself. Unfortunately little is known of the background of this early benefactor, except that he lived in Montfort House, Brownberrie Lane (which still stands today). We assume he was fairly wealthy, obviously a man of God, and a man who saw the need to provide a place of worship in the area.

In 1891 Mr. Bilbrough died and it was left to his two daughters, Miss Louie and Miss Charlotte, to carry on the work. They were joined in 1892 by a Mr. Murdoch who served as leader for five years before moving to Leeds. So it was in 1897 that an association which was to last 48 years began, with the arrival of Mr. John Ford.

Mr. Ford was a Spurgeon's Colporteur (an itinerant distributor of books; esp. bibles), living in Gildersome, when he was asked to take over the Mission and he brought with him his wife and family of five children. (A sixth was born two years later).

He found the building as described, an old room with a small platform, a desk and a wheezy harmonium which was usually played by Miss Charlotte Bilbrough. His first service was attended by four old women, one man and twelve unruly children, some of whom ran out when the old ladies supply of sweets had been exhausted. At first there was no morning service or Sunday School, only an evening service at 6.30pm. This allowed the local girls who were in domestic service to come, which, in fact, some of them did and eventually became regular attenders. It is interesting to note that the upkeep of the Mission at this time was 1/6d per week for rent and 1/- per

week for the caretaker, these costs being paid by the Bilbroughs as there was no collection in those days.

Mr. Ford's work as a colporteur paid 26/- per week and this called for him to walk to Rawdon, Yeadon, Rodley, Farsley and Pudsey, as well as around Horsforth selling his books and spreading God's message. His work was mainly among the poor people - often none too clean. It is recorded that for presents he was always pleased to receive a hanky and perfume which, like the herbs in days gone by, were a real need when visiting certain houses. He said at the time "we reached a class not reached before".

The work at the Mission carried on and continued to grow. Miss Louie Bilbrough began a Women's Bible Class on Sunday afternoons, there was a Band of Hope, which was very popular, and Mr. Ford introduced a Bible Class on Monday evenings. It was not all smooth going, however, and at times the work being done came in for a certain amount of ridicule with the Mission being dubbed with such names as "T'owd Women's Chapel" - "Poverty 'oil" and "T'Charity Box". In spite of this the congregation continued to grow, so much so in fact, that during the cold weather, with the sole source of heat being a central stove, the worshippers had to keep changing places with each other in order that all should receive a fair share of the warmth.

The limit for the number of worshippers was about 50 in the top room. Eventually this room became too small, but the Lord provides, and at about this time the whole building became vacant thus enabling Miss Charlotte to buy the premises. Alterations were then made and the place of worship was brought down a storey which had the effect of doubling the floor area and providing for a congregation of 100. It was no longer necessary to climb the indoor stairs, and the outside steps were improved.

It was around this time that there was a notable addition to the congregation in the person of Mr J.B. Gaunt, a schoolmaster from Leeds who lived in Batchelor Lane and whose wife had a bad heart, a condition which caused them to join Lister Hill, being nearer to their home than Cragg Hill. It will be recalled that there was no offering taken in the Mission, but when Mr. Gaunt joined he began a weekly offering as he had been used to in the past, and he decided to give Mr. Ford 5/- (25p) per month. Other members heard of this and decided that they also wanted to give, but Miss Bilbrough and Mr. Ford were against it. A compromise was reached, however, and they approved an offering box which raised (13/2d) (approximately 66p) in the first month. This amount grew as the congregation increased and Mr. Ford found this extra giving a great help.

Mr. and Mrs. Gaunt also decided that there ought to be a Sunday School, so it was begun, with a good response and the teaching being shared by the Gaunts. Mrs. Gaunt began to interest the children in Foreign Missions, giving a monthly missionary address and taking a collection for it. Later a Home Mission collection was also taken.

So it was that God blessed the work and guided Mr. Ford, so much so that in 1910 he was asked to take Kirkstall Baptist Church under his care. He held a dual pastorate for 21 years, until Kirkstall closed because most of its members had removed. The years around this time were very hard but there was always help from the loyal and devoted members, including Mr. Ford's son Willie (J.W. Ford) who lived at "Lonicera" 33 Long Row - next door to his father at Carlton Cottage.

In January 1915 at a meeting held at the Mission it was resolved that a secretary be appointed. So it was that Mr. A.A. Reeve became the first Lister Hill Church secretary. During this time Mr. John Ford was attending Rawdon College and in 1917 passed the Baptist Union examination to become Reverend John Ford, and it is recorded that all the church were very proud of him. It must have been quite a year for the new minister, because at a meeting on July 4th that year it was agreed to increase his salary from £45 to £70 per annum. At the time it was stated that this was only for the duration of the war and six months afterwards and was conditional on the suspension of £8 per annum for home rent. To help in raising funds for the extra expense, a series of concerts was arranged.

The year 1918 opened rather sadly for the Mission with the death of Miss Charlotte Bilbrough, her last words being "I am happy — don't play the Dead March over me, I want the Hallelujah Chorus". So it was that her wish was granted at her funeral service in The Grove Wesleyan Chapel. The passing of Miss Bilbrough brought further problems for the Mission with the realisation that the room was no longer adequate and, indeed, much the worse for wear. Before her death Miss Charlotte would have built a church in Lister Hill but no title deeds could be found for the land so the idea fell through. As she died without leaving a Will, the Lister Hill fellowship had to shoulder the whole financial burden themselves.

The spirit and the faith of the folk did not falter and on April 10th 1918 the Reverend J. Gyles Williams, Secretary of the Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches was invited to give an address on the ideas of a Christian church and the constitution of a Baptist Church. Afterwards it was decided to form the Mission into a Baptist Church and formal application was made. So it was that on April 30th 1918 the church was formed and on May 15th the same year the first members' meeting took place with the election of officers and deacons, and with Mr. John Ford as the first pastor in charge. This then was the beginning of our history as a Baptist church, albeit without a baptistry and without a real teaching of believers' baptism and still regarded by older established Baptists as just a Mission Hall.



**1914 Group photograph of church members**

The immediate post war years were fairly uneventful with the new church carrying on the good work but it is worth noting that in February 1921 a Young Men's Club was formed with Mr. Fred Taylor in charge. The membership was open for young men aged 12 years and upwards with a subscription of 1d per week. Any member who found himself more than six weeks in arrears had to appear before the committee. At about this time the caretakers, who lived on the ground floor of the church building, were offered an increase in wages but declined, agreeing to continue receiving the 1/1d per week they had been paid up to that time, plus of course free accommodation and coal. In January of 1924 permission was granted to form a branch of the League of Nations Union at the church. At the same time it was decided to send a donation of 5/- to Cleethorpes Baptist Church to help in rebuilding their premises which had been destroyed during the war by a Zeppelin bomb. The sum of five shillings seems a small sum to give for such a large project but no doubt it represented a sizeable amount to the church in those days. This was particularly the case as they were having problems of their own with the old building showing signs of leaning and having to be shored up at the side with huge beams. What could be done?

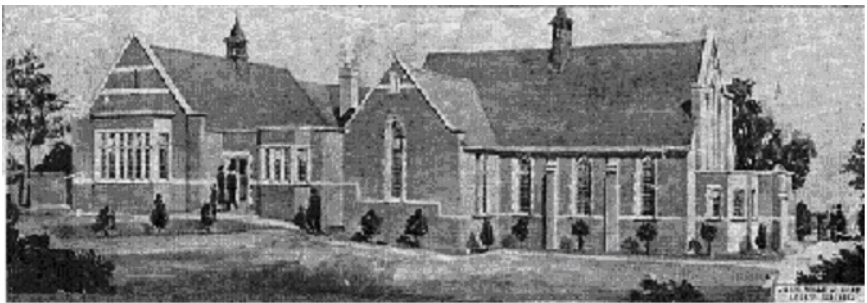
The Lord has a way of showing the answer to us in time of need and this was to be no exception. This was the time when the Brownberrie Estate was being built and there was a vacant plot at the end of Brownberrie Avenue which had been earmarked for shops or a bank but which had not been built on as yet. There was a possibility that the church may be offered the spare plot. Reverend John Ford heard that the architect had been involved in an accident and had knocked down a little girl who had been badly injured and taken to Leeds Infirmary. Mr. Ford visited the little girl in hospital and when the architect heard of this he was very grateful and after thanking him for his caring he asked Mr. Ford if there was anything he could do in return. What an opportunity! One which was not lost! The architect was asked to give the church first refusal for the plot of land. God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform and so it was that the church was given first chance of buying the land at a cost of £500 (quite a sum in those days). The pastor first called the church together and after prayer told them what had happened and said to them "If we can raise £300 we can borrow £200" and so the church had a mind to work. It was finally decided to purchase about 2000 square yards which would be sufficient for a church to seat 250, a schoolroom to accommodate 150 plus a flat for the caretakers. A deposit of £50 for the plot of land was paid on the 13th December 1926.

So far so good, but agreeing to buy the land wasn't a church, so once again the members offered prayers and worked with a real sense of purpose. Everybody helped. Small amounts and large amounts were given. Fund raising efforts were arranged and Mr. Ford spared no effort himself as he visited other churches in the area asking for help and speaking on the work at Lister Hill. The first priority was to pay for the plot of land and we still have in our possession the receipt for the first £250 paid on the 17th June 1927. We must assume that a further £200 was paid shortly afterwards, although it would be some time yet before funds would be available for starting the building itself. In the meantime, the money raising activities continued. At a meeting of members on the 14th July 1927, Mr. Fred Taylor proposed that the church endeavour to raise £1000 during the following four years towards the cost of the building. This proposal started off a fervour of activity. A Bazaar was arranged for later that year, the details of which are worth relating because of the sum raised. The Bazaar was to last from Wednesday to Saturday

with the admission price being 9d for Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, and 6d for Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, with the alternative of buying a season ticket for 1/6d or a family ticket for 4/-d. In the end the financial rewards amounted to £220/16/- clear profit, on takings of £267/10/-, a tremendous achievement when you consider what that amount represented in those days.

It was, however, still going to be some time before a start could be made on the building. Although it was agreed in April of 1931 to go ahead with the building, it wasn't until February of 1934 that the church was in a position to make an application for a building grant, having heard that there was £100 in the bank £800 in the Building Society and promises of a further £100, making a grand total of £1000. To this amount a further £1000 was added by the Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches in the form of a grant. Things were now moving and in a short time plans were drawn up for a church and a school, with caretaker's flat, costing £5000. However, after careful thought, it was decided to proceed with a smaller plan to house a church/school with a primary room at a reduced cost of and so the plans went ahead.

During all this time Reverend John Ford was the pastor in charge and in 1934 he celebrated his 70th birthday by holding a party in the United Methodist Schoolroom, Batchelor Lane, and friends from all over Yorkshire were invited. Over 200 people sat down for tea and no doubt, with the need to raise funds for the new church very much in mind, a charge of 1/- per head was made, thus raising a further £11/10/- from tea alone. In addition, John Ford himself gave £70 to the church, representing £1 for each year of his life. Several people spoke at the meeting afterwards and all tendered their good wishes and spoke words of appreciation for the pastor's work. During the interval presentations were made to Mr. Ford, including an easy chair, a cushion, and also a beautiful clock. Afterwards there were musical items, recitations and monologues, all well presented and thoroughly enjoyed. It is reported that the evening realised a total of £103 for the building fund.



### **ORIGINAL SCHEME 1936 ALTHOUGH IT DIDN'T TURN OUT LIKE THIS**

The much awaited time of starting the building had now arrived and on the 29th February 1936 the stone laying ceremony was held with the new church being opened and dedicated on the 19th September the same year. A new era had now begun, thanks to the grace of God and the generous giving of many people over the years, all the time led so zealously by the Reverend John Ford. Many people now helped with the furnishings; Mr. Ford gave the Communion table in memory of his wife who had passed away in October 1931 and there were other gifts of tables,

chairs and flower bowls. One of the early worshippers gave the Communion cloth. How grateful the church was to all these donors. The final cost was just over £4000 and Mr. Ford wrote at the time "It is a beautiful place. Built of the very best material and best workmanship put into it. We are very proud. We have given God the best." So 1936 saw this building opened with half the site not developed.

Unfortunately the church and its members were destined before long to be involved in another world war and it was a sign of the gathering storm clouds that in September of 1938, just two years after opening the new church, it was agreed to allow the use of church rooms for the assembly of gas masks during the international crisis. During the 1939-45 war years the problems of the church became very difficult with the result that the services were moved to the afternoon. In 1941, owing to ill health, Reverend John Ford retired after being pastor for 44 years. Four years later, in 1945, John Ford died in his 80th year and so the church at Lister Hill lost its much-loved leader.

The earlier retirement of Reverend Ford had made it necessary to appoint a successor and eventually, in 1943, Reverend J.R. Blackburn was invited to joint pastorate of Lister Hill and Cragg Hill. This arrangement only lasted for two years and in 1945 Mr Blackburn made Lister Hill his sole pastorate. However the duration of his charge was very short and in 1946 he left to take over a teaching appointment.

There followed a few years when the ministry was maintained by the students at Rawdon College and by the Lay Preachers Association until, in January 1951, the Reverend C.H. Robinson undertook to be minister in charge of the church. During the years up to 1955 things became very difficult at the church, the attendance decreased and a sense of discouragement became felt. There were however still men and women who had a faith and in spite of the apparent decline these loyal souls continued to pray and work for the future of the church. Their faith in God and the church was justified for, from 1955 onwards, events began to take an upward trend. At this time there was considerable building both in Horsforth and Tinshill and in consequence new members began to arrive on transfer from our sister churches at Blenheim, Hunslet and Stockport. So 1957 saw the church entering its 21st year with a new found spirit of fellowship and inspiration.

In 1962, under the pastorate of George Holt, a scheme was drawn up for two classrooms over the existing primary room, but this did not develop. In 1974 the church received a legacy of £1000 in the will of Mr. Stanley Pick and the church's Building Fund was inaugurated with this money. It was proposed in 1976 to build a £35,000 extension as a sanctuary, but the Yorkshire Baptist Association made a counter proposal that a multi-purpose building would be more suitable.

Early 1977 the church sought the help of Rod Russell from Moortown and he drew up the plans for the extension as we now see it, and indeed Rod had acted as adviser, site superintendent and general factotum throughout all the building. The time came to obtain financial help and with £3,600 in the Building Fund and pledges from the members of £1800 a year, the church was able to obtain a grant of from the YBA and a loan of £10,000. Job Creation gave approval to the application to use their scheme for labour. The first labourers began to clear the site on March 13th 1978. Great difficulty was had in obtaining skilled labour under the Job Creation scheme but in between the spring rains one skilled bricklayer, in 17 weeks, laid almost every brick. The Lord provided. As well as sub-contract work there had been much voluntary labour. People from the church had done all the electrical work,

plumbing and decorating, plus a hundred and one other jobs. The service rendered by some was magnificent and sacrificial. Three people must be mentioned by name. The mass of administrative work involved by utilising the Job Creation scheme was handled by Harold Jevons. Reverend John Holmes acted as on-site foreman — the number of hours he gave to this work could not be counted. But, humanly speaking, the church could not see this extension being built without Rodney Russell. He had been honorary Architect, Quantity Surveyor, Building Engineer, Site Supervisor and skilled workman. In Jesus' Name heartfelt thanks were given to Rod.

For several years the church had been helped by the Home Mission Fund and they praised God that in January of 1978 they were able to say "Thank you for all your past help but we feel now is the time for us to be self sufficient". By releasing money for other churches they prayed that God would answer their needs as he had answered theirs.

A Thanksgiving Service was held on Saturday 24th March 1979 on the occasion of the Opening of the Extension.

Presiding Minister - Reverend Alan Hellowell

Statement read by Mr Vincent Smith - Church Secretary

Scriptures read by Mr George Holt, former Pastor and President of the Leeds District

Address by Reverend Keith Dixon, President of the Yorkshire Baptist Association

Act of Dedication led by Reverend Tasker R. Lewis, North Eastern Area Superintendent

**TO GOD BE THE GLORY, GREAT THINGS HE HATH DONE**

BJC 11/08