

**CHOLMELEY EVANGELICAL CHURCH,  
HIGHGATE, LONDON, 1884-1994:  
A HISTORY FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Pauline Summerton

Thanks to the invention of the water closet and the gradual development of a mains sewerage system, in the early part of the eighteenth century London became for the first time capable of self sustaining growth as a city and began the process that led to a very rapid growth in the nineteenth century. The churches, both Anglican and Free—themselves enjoying the evangelical revivals of the early nineteenth century—were presented with the challenge of adapting their organisation and buildings to accommodate this growing urban population. In London, the Anglican response was represented by the sub-division of former rural parishes such as Islington and Camden and the provision of large buildings with the support of the funds available to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. This was directed from the centre by the Bishop of London and Charles Blomfield, and was a combined enterprise of state, church and societies like the Church Pastoral Aid Society and its High-Church equivalents.<sup>1</sup>

As befits their style, the Nonconformist response was more decentralised and haphazard—the expression of ‘voluntaryism’ as distinct from bureaucratic state activity, and the work of a multiplicity of small trusts (in which wealthy Christian philanthropists and businessmen such as Samuel Morley MP and John Morley, the stocking manufacturers, were prominent) and of a host of unremembered ordained and lay evangelists and missionaries, in part organised by evangelical societies, such as the London City Mission, which were increasingly non-denominational in character.

#### CHOLMELEY HALL

Cholmeley Hall<sup>2</sup> was the product of this latter mechanism. By 1880 the suburbs of London had reached Archway and Highgate (districts to the north-west of the City and near to the eastern edge of Hampstead Heath), the latter famous for its literary associations and for becoming the burial place of Karl Marx in 1883. With the growth of the population came the drive to create churches of all shades and varieties to accommodate this growing urban population. The Brethren made a very considerable contribution to this effort in the second half of the nineteenth century—and even down to 1960 since they were one of the main groups providing Nonconformist places of worship on post-World War II housing estates. In the period 1860 until 1914, Brethren

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1. On Anglican and Nonconformist efforts and rivalries in urban church-building, see A D Gilbert, *Religion and society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740-1914* (London, 1976), pp. 125 - 174.

2. ‘Cholmeley’ is pronounced ‘Chum’ly’.

assemblies were enjoying their period of greatest growth, following the revivals of 1859 and through the preaching of D L Moody in the 1870s, at the Agricultural Hall in Islington.<sup>3</sup>

A little earlier in 1855, John Morley had retired from business at the age of 48 to devote himself to Christian work in association with two of the earliest Brethren assemblies in London, those in Tottenham and Hackney, then areas to the north east of the City. He was responsible for bringing both evangelists and teachers to settle in what was to constitute the North London area. In 1867 Morley established a prefabricated building in Clapton, adjacent to Hackney, known as the 'Iron Room'. From a membership of eleven it grew to over 400 by 1879 and as a result a permanent building was erected, then named Clapton Hall.<sup>4</sup> By 1888 Clapton Hall had over 700 in membership—we need to bear in mind that these would have been totally committed people, who more than likely attended almost all services and prayer meetings held at the hall.

It is not surprising that this group spawned many satellite congregations, under the inspiration of evangelists such as John G M'Vicker and C Russell Hurditch. One of these groups described themselves in 1886 as 'Christians who assemble at the Cholmeley Mission'. They met over a baker's shop at 104 Archway Road, Highgate, just below the Archway Bridge. Archway Road was a turnpike bypass constructed about 1800 to carry the Great North Road past Highgate Village; today it is the A1.

The group meeting in Archway Road was relatively small—some forty-three names were on their members' list. They held a worship and breaking of bread service on Sunday mornings; the gospel was preached each Sunday evening; and there was a weekly prayer meeting. The mission grew rapidly and by 1888 there were eighty-four members. A sisters' meeting had already been added on a Thursday afternoon, and an evening breaking of bread service once a month on a Sunday afternoon, 'for those unable to be out in the morning'—that was, to meet the need of the domestic servants in this late-nineteenth century equivalent of present day high-class Chorleywood or Cobham. The membership lists are notable also for the apparent number of single people and the comparative absence of families with children. By 1890 there were some ninety-six names on the list. It was in the first stage in the typical life-cycle of a suburban church-plant.

While the church was steadily growing, people's minds were turning towards the need for larger premises. Building plots were available by auction in the more northerly part of Archway Road as landowners sought to cash in on the suburban building boom of the period 1885 until 1905. Arthur Boake, an elder of the church and an industrial chemist whose works were in Stratford, east of the City and north of the docks, who lived at a house with large grounds in Southwood Lane, Highgate, volunteered funding

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3. See N W Summerton, 'Christian Brethren Growth, 1850-1960', in Peter Brierley, Graham Brown, Boyd Myers, Harold Rowdon, and Neil Summerton, *The Christian Brethren as the Nineties Began* (Carlisle, 1993), pp. 83 - 94.

4. F Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1976), p. 175.

of up to £110 per plot. This was insufficient, but Boake felt unable to increase his offer as the limit had been set by his wife—which was interesting in view of the characteristic Brethren view of the role of women! It was then in 1887 that a Mr Scrimgeour, who was not a member of the church but a Christian friend of another elder, purchased the two lots being considered for £172. 10s. 0d each—a further example of the role of the person of independent means in nineteenth-century Nonconformist and evangelical activity. The idea was to build a hall large enough for 300, a Bible depot, a caretaker's house and a 'prophet's chamber'. The hall itself was to be designed so as to be capable of conversion into shops.

But clearly funds were not immediately forthcoming for the project. There appear to have been disagreements between the elders, possibly related to premillennial theological concerns (which the Brethren were then mediating to virtually the whole of English-speaking evangelicalism)—that, in view of the imminent return of the Lord, the saints should not be investing money long term in land; rather it ought to be used immediately for the preaching of the gospel. There may also have been concerns, as there were throughout the early years of the church's life about whether the congregation would provide the necessary funds—a reflection of the shoe-string character of much evangelical Nonconformity.

Eventually, in June 1890 Arthur Boake purchased the land from Scrimgeour, who throughout had been living in Mayfair in central London. In the intervening time, the fellowship had erected a tent 'for the purpose of preaching the gospel', to attract those passing along Archway Road on Sundays on the way for recreation and relaxation in Highgate Woods and Finchley—representative of the fashion of the time for seeking rural refreshment at the weekend. This was evidence of the way in which at that time evangelical proclamation characteristically sought people where they were.

A document of spring 1890 suggests that there were several options under consideration for the longer-term use of the plots:

- 1] a brick mission hall
- 2] a drill hall large enough for Sunday services
- 3] an iron building for the purposes of 1] and 2]
- 4] artisans dwellings
- 5] a coffee palace.

Option 2] was selected, on the grounds (or so folk memory suggests) that if the assembly failed, it could be sold as a drill hall. The building at 272 Archway Road was started by December 1890 and completed in 1891. In the middle of the 1890, a further plot was purchased next door, to provide schoolrooms, a bookroom and caretaker's accommodation. The land and buildings remained in the ownership of Boake who leased it to the elders. In 1906, anxious to move away from London to Essex, consistent with the usual locational pattern of wealthy businessmen of the period, he invited the elders to buy the building from him. But after further consideration and evident tension between them, he was forced to hand the land and buildings over to the East of England Evangelization Trust, a Brethren body recently formed largely to act as the freehold owner of Brethren buildings (later absorbed into the United Kingdom

Evangelization Trust Inc. (Stewardship Services), now known as Stewardship, who remain the owners of the freehold of the site). As Boake wrote in exasperation to Frank Hertslet, a solicitor and secretary to the elders, ‘Oh ye of little faith!’ Until 1989 the congregation remained short-term lessees and had to suffer the inconveniences of a building designed for another purpose. By that time, the church had outlasted the popular military Volunteer movement of the late nineteenth century, and no one knew what a drill hall in Archway Road could have been for! In the interim however the hall was invaluable for young people’s clubs, which became one of the main evangelistic activities of the church and one of the main source of converts.

#### MEMBERSHIP

In the 1890s, at the end of Nonconformist century in England, the assembly continued to grow. By 1893 there were over 180 members and 220 by 1895. In 1897 the meetings comprised :

Sunday	
11.00 am	Worship and the Breaking of Bread
11.00 am	Children’s Meeting
3.00 pm	Sunday School
3.00 pm	Young Men’s Class
3.15 pm	Young Women’s Bible Class
6.30 pm	Prayer Meeting
7.00 pm	Preaching of the Gospel
8.00 pm	Monthly Worship and Breaking of Bread
Monday	
8.00 pm	Prayer Meeting
Wednesday	
6.15 pm	Young People’s Meeting
8.00 pm	Address to Christians
Thursday	
6.30 pm	Sewing Meeting
7.45 pm	Young Women’s Bible Reading.

The assembly continued its steady numerical growth, the first fall in numbers (to 234) occurring only in 1918. Through the 1920s, 1930s and into the 1940s it continued with similar numbers.

Pacifist views were widespread in Brethren churches, but during the two World Wars many from Cholmeley Hall went to serve King and country, possibly reflecting the high social class of the Highgate assembly. Their names were continued on the list of members with the annotation that they were away on war service. During World War II, it was said that not one of those involved in the services who belonged to the assembly were lost. This was put down to the regular prayers of the saints left at home. Reflecting the liberty in the matter among the Brethren, the congregation also included conscientious objectors and it is not clear whether they were prayed for, though at least one present member was imprisoned for his stance.

In 1948 the membership stood at 173 but by 1959 it had increased again to over 200 and by 1970 to some 220. Numbers then plunged sharply as a generation of leaders and older people died or moved away in line with the growing fashion to retire away from London, and younger people began to be discontented with the traditional Brethren patterns. Attendance in the late 1970s fell to as low as sixty and in 1985 membership stood at 101. It was at this time my husband, Neil Summerton, a civil servant, was appointed an elder at the age of 30 along with others of the new generation. This was a very difficult time for the church, but growth resumed in the second half of the 1980s, particularly among teenagers. By the late 1980s as many as a third of the regular attenders were between the ages of 15 and 20, and many of the remainder under 40. By 1994 the membership stood at 162 and comprised now two linked congregations as a result of a venture in church-planting in Crouch End (to be discussed below).

It is evident from the membership lists that comparative youthfulness, and indeed singleness, has virtually always been a characteristic of the congregation, though its nature has changed over time. In 1896 there were thirty-five domestic servants (by definition usually single) in membership, as revealed by their addresses, as they were designated in the lists as living 'at'. They were known by the younger members of the more well-to-do families as the 'ats', a hint perhaps of the social divisions of the congregation, which were also evidenced by the kitchen chairs provided for the Sunday afternoon tea meeting for young women, that is servants, who, it was evidently deemed, would not expect anything better. In the early days, too, the grooms, even if they were members, remained outside on Sunday morning, attending to the carriage horses.

In 1900 the membership was 213 and it appears that 118 of these were single people; and in 1929 it was 253 of which 193 were single. In the earlier years, apart from the servants, many of these single people were the adult children of assembly families who continued, of course, to live at home. The characteristic of singleness continued, though by the 1950s many were university students and nurses who had moved to London. In 1994 it was no different: half the membership were single people, although by then few were university students and nurses—they were either out of work, young executives, or sixth-form college students.

The changing character of this body of single people has accelerated change in the congregation. In earlier years, there was an obvious degree of stability resulting from the fact that membership was being fed to a large extent by the large families of existing members—though there was a consequence in that the congregation acquired a commuter character as on marriage these younger people sought accommodation in new suburbs further out. In later years, younger people increasingly tended to be individuals moving temporarily to London, whether for a few months or a period of years, thus accelerating the rate of turnover of membership. It is a figure hard to verify, but it is likely that the church has had some 1,000 to 2,000 different members since 1960. Many of these had a useful and profound experience of developing their gifts in a church where the priesthood and service of all was accepted and expected. Many today serve as mature church leaders throughout the Body for Christ in a wide

spectrum of ministry and denominations. Others have been called upon to hold high office in the governing of the United Kingdom, in the Cabinet, at 10 Downing Street and in the Civil Service. Still others were distinguished in their professions.

#### OUTREACH

In its time Cholmeley planted other churches. In the 1930s it supported the starting of a group in Muswell Hill, a district some two miles to the north east of Highgate. Although autonomous, Muswell Hill has always had some tenuous links with the church in Archway Road. In the late 1980s Cholmeley sought to break away from the traditional Brethren system of complete independency and formed an informal association with Wilton Chapel in Muswell Hill and with Park Hill Chapel to the south of Hampstead Heath, in order to give support to and encourage these smaller groups and provide funds to employ some full time workers for these churches. However, the venture was comparatively short-lived.

The early decades of the church's life coincided with the evangelical missionary moment. It appears that right from its inception missionary enterprise was very important. It is recorded that in the 1890s there were nine overseas missionaries of which six were single women—there was only one man and one married couple. By the 1900s there were a further sixteen commended missionaries, seven being single women and three couples. After that, the flow slowed down, perhaps as the spiritual enthusiasm of the congregation moderated. In 1921 Sidney Adams went out to what is now Malaysia: he stayed for his rest of his life, giving over fifty years of service. Through him in the late 1960s and early 1970s, up to twenty young Malaysians were in membership of the home congregation. After 1920, it was fifteen years before a further missionary was commended, and a further twelve years before the next was commended. Since the Second World War, although the personalities changed, the church consistently supported eight individuals or couples abroad—and married missionaries became the norm. A significant change of practice was to recognise the spouse of a commended missionary as also commended and supported by the church, even when that spouse was originally commended by another congregation. Another significant change was that while in the early days Cholmeley's supported missionaries were all recognised by the Open Brethren missionary organisation, Echoes of Service, from 1960 onwards Cholmeley's missionaries worked with interdenominational societies, reflecting a widespread trend in the more radical Brethren churches. A further change which reflects practice in society at large was the growth in the number of young people undertaking short-term missionary service—a practice which was widely supported by the more radical congregations but only slowly recognised as legitimate by Echoes of Service, demonstrating perhaps that even in radical denominations, denominational institutions are slower to adapt than churches which in turn adapt more slowly than the dynamic individuals who go off and found their own para-church bodies to progress their personal vision. A still further change was the commendation of missionaries to service among minorities in the UK.

A mark of Brethrenism in this century has been the priority which they have given to evangelism among children and young people. Cholmeley was in the forefront. Numbers are less clear from the records, but if the photographs of Sunday school outings are anything to go by, there were many children who attended. It was in 1916 that my father, Arnold Webb started attending the Sunday school together with his brother and sister, Roland and Doris, children of an owner of a building company. Their parents were members of a Strict and Particular Baptist Church in Clerkenwell, in central London, who on moving to Highgate had sent their offspring to the local assembly reflecting the twentieth century shift among evangelical Nonconformists from sectarian to denominational attitudes. All three Webb siblings were in due course baptised by immersion and became members of the assembly. My father became one of the elders of the church in the early 1950s. He and his brother were to have a great influence on not only this church but many other churches of all denominations, as they were instrumental in founding the national youth movement called Covenanters, which had an enormous part to play at Cholmeley over many years. And it is interesting that Doris married one of the instigators of the Fellowship of Youth movement in the Strict Baptists.

Youth work has abounded over the years. Even during the Second World War the Sunday school and young people's meetings continued. Its character changed in the 1930s and 1940s when the London County Council began to build large housing estates within reach of the hall. Numbers quickly rose to 150-200. The Sunday School superintendent was Dr Hedley Chave Cox and was held in high regard for many years after his death by local people who had attended in their youth. My father became superintendent in 1958. He was always full of outrageous ideas; he was very popular and many children attended. I am not sure how popular he was with his long suffering teachers, who would never know what his next idea would be.

In the 1960s Sunday school work led into social work. The Sunday school started holding a toy service at Christmas. On taking the toys to the hospitals, my father soon realised they had too many to know what to do with. He then visited the local social services, and asked if he might have a list of those children who would have little at Christmas. Each gift was specially wrapped and each child had four or five gifts, and on Christmas morning Father Christmas (my father and his helpers) went from address to address, delivering the gifts. It was very apparent that many of these children would have nothing at Christmas—the cold, the poverty and the smell served to put the helpers off any sort of Christmas dinner. The parents were given a card telling them of the Sunday School and the youth clubs, and contact was continued in some cases. There are those whose lives were totally changed, who had no hope of breaking out of their circumstances, except through the grace of God, the camps ministry and a visit from Father Christmas.

From the early 1930s Covenanter classes were held every Sunday afternoon and also as midweek clubs. Each year from 1946 until the time of writing, with exception of one or two years in the 1980s, Cholmeley held summer camps under canvas. In the 1940s and fifties they would normally be 100 strong, the sixties saw a reduction in

numbers, and the seventies saw a further reduction to around forty attending each girls' or boys' camp. In 1987 the camps became coeducational and two took place each year, divided by age. In addition, an adult camp was also introduced in 1994 with 290 attending, including workers. Some camps were held pre-World War II, the only factual evidence being photographs in the family album of me, around the age of two or three, with my father and tents—these could equally well have been Covenanter camps or Cholmeley camps.

The church always had a mission to disciple and teach the young people it had the opportunity of reaching with the gospel. Over the years it had a variety of groups, with titles such as Youth Fellowship, CHYPS ('chips'—Cholmeley Hall Young People's) in the 1930s and 40s. In the 60s it was the 272 club, the address number in Archway Road. In the late 60s there was also a group run for those who as Christians had found themselves lost in the contemporary culture, and were seeking help and answers—many of whom became founder-members of the Arts Centre Group. Since then titles as IT and 4D have been used.

### INNOVATIONS

Cholmeley was a church that was prepared to stick its neck out even if it was uncomfortable. There were other Brethren assemblies in the area who would not 'have fellowship' with it because of its avant garde ways. The elders at the assembly always took the view if the gospel was being preached, almost anything would be allowed. So it was in 1965 and 1966 that it held a number of 'Beat Services', which were so unusual as to be noticed in *The Church of England Newspaper* by David Coombes, now a producer of religious television, but then a youthful reporter. Each service was packed out, even though the older people had prudently been advised to stay away and pray. The recently-converted Cliff Richard was once in the audience, and a schoolboy called Graham Kendrick was a regular performer. These activities were one stream flowing into Musical Gospel Outreach, *Buzz* magazine, and eventually Spring Harvest. In the 1980s, multi-media events were held on a quarterly basis—music, drama, videos, rap, lights, smoke, worship, and the presentation of the good news, all just about consistent with the spirit of the nineteenth-century gospel meeting. It was no wonder that the church was a predominantly young church.

It was not just a question of evangelism—in the 1950s and 1960s, as the opportunity arose, Anglican bishops were invited to minister the word after the breaking of bread, reflecting both the non-denominational spirit of the Open Brethren and growing sense of a single identity among Evangelicals.

Shaking off traditional Brethren shackles was not without pain. One of the elders left in 1963 when his colleagues decided to introduce an instrument of the devil (a piano) in the breaking of bread meeting. It was not until 1980 that the fetter was released of an 11.00 am breaking of bread as a result of a united church mission in the area, from St Aldates in Oxford with Canon Michael Green, which persuaded the elders to move it from a Sunday morning—just on a temporary basis—to



accommodate the mission programme. By the late 1980s the communion service was normally held on the Sunday evening.

It was in the mid-1970s that women were first allowed to participate in public prayer in the prayer meeting and evening service (the younger people had practised it clandestinely at least since the 1950s no doubt under the influence of their experience of school and university Christian Unions); and in 1978 that women were allowed to take audible part in the breaking of bread service in the same way as men. In the 1990s the church had not yet moved to women as elders, but it had women on all its leadership teams.

Exceptionally among assemblies too, the church had a long tradition of full-time workers in the home congregation (as distinct from supporting full-time people abroad). As early as the 1920s, a woman was employed full time to work as an evangelist among the servant girls of the neighbourhood, and a prominent Brethren itinerant minister, J H Large, was an elder for twelve years in the 1960s, on the understanding that he would commit a considerable period each year in total to preaching in the congregation and would be available for pastoral work whenever he was in residence. Early in the 1980s a church coordinator was appointed to assist the elders for a period of three years (though there were difficulties because of the differing approaches to the understanding of Christian ministry between him and the elders). In 1985-6 a full-time British Youth for Christ team was located at the church, with marked effects in the acceleration of evangelism among young people. In the mid-1990s the full-time staff of the two congregations in which the fellowship by then existed consisted of one full-time elder, one Family Centre Coordinator, one Shaftesbury Society Linkworker, one Careforce Worker (the last three staffing the Family Centre in Crouch End—see the next paragraph), and one part-time church planter and leader. In this, Cholmeley was again in the forefront of changes taking place widely in churches of Brethren background. It represented a decisive break with the Brethren tradition in the home churches, though the emphasis on the exercise of the multiplicity of gifts in the church remained, and the leadership of the church continued in the hands of a body of elders who hold office without respect to whether they are full-time in the work and without the benefit of ‘ordination’ in the sense meant in most Christian denominations.

In 1986 the Archway Road building was beyond economic repair, and following consideration as to the correct location for the next century, the elders sought God and the congregation for £650,000 to rebuild on the same site. Meanwhile they bought a former Gospel Hall in Crouch End, a mile to the east of Highgate, with an adjacent house to use temporarily. At the end of the three years, it was felt that the church could not leave the area of Crouch End and simply move back to Archway Road and the beautiful new building. The elders decided to start a Family Centre there: within a very short time parent and toddler groups, playgroups, mother and baby groups, afterschool clubs, and a youth club were run from those premises. In 1991 a small group of twelve or so people were sent from Archway Road to start a congregation there. By 1994 it numbered between thirty and forty each Sunday, not counting the almost equal number

of under-fives. Sunday morning worship, a mid-week fellowship and prayer group, an early morning prayer meeting and a house Bible study group were held. Only some twenty per cent. of this congregation were over 30 years of age. The venture was undoubtedly influenced by the current interest in church-planting in the new church movement. In 1999 it was felt that the 'daughter church' was sufficiently strong to be able to stand on its own feet and take responsibility for itself under its own leadership. The two congregations became two separate self-governing churches, although continuing to be to be closely associated in the support of missionaries and camp work.

I am grateful to God for my life-long association with these congregations, and pray that God will continue to bless them in the years to come.

Sources:

This account, initially prepared in 1994 and only revised to a minor extent since then, is drawn from information in letters, minute books, membership lists, etc, held in the archive of Cholmeley Evangelical Church, and from matters within my own personal knowledge as an attendee, and subsequently member, of the church since 1937.