

The Shut End Primitive Methodist Chapel

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Shut End

The name Shut End simply means “steep hill / place” (1) and the area that it refers to is roughly that part of the modern parish of Pensnett to the north of the Dudley - Kingswinford Road, which does indeed slope steeply from the Dudley ridge to the east towards the Smestow valley in the west. The name however no longer appears on modern maps, although it will be familiar to those who are interested in Black Country history as the location of James Foster’s huge iron works and the destination of the Kingswinford Railway on which the historic Agenoria locomotive travelled backwards and forwards for 50 or more years pulling its loads of coal, limestone and finished iron products. In the nineteenth century this area went through massive changes. Figure 1 below shows the 1822 Fowler map of the area and compares it with the 1883 OS map. The 1822 map shows an essentially rural landscape, dominated by Shut End Hall (the ancestral home of the Bendy family but at this stage owned by John Hodgetts Foley of Prestwood and leased to the ironmaster Thomas Dudley) and the avenue of trees that led down to Kingswinford village. By 1883 the landscape was wholly industrial, dominated by the ironworks, and its associated mines and railways and the inevitable swathes of waste. The line of the avenue has become a railway incline. The original Kingswinford Railway can be seen as the straight dotted line in the bottom half of the map.



Figure 1. Shut End in 1822 and 1883

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the population of the village of Pensnett, which included the Shut End area, varied between 4000 and 6000, with over a quarter of the population being below 10 years of age. In 1881, around 60% of the employed population were working in the coal, iron or brick making industries. Many of these would have been employed at the Shut End works and its associated mines, but there were other major sources of employment in the Corbyn's Hall iron and coal complex, and in the mines and railways of the Dudley estate. Perhaps most interestingly, the graph in Figure 2, which shows the birth location of each ten-year age group in the 1851 census, shows that there was a significant migration into the area in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly from Shropshire. Pensnett, including Shut End, was very much a migrant society at that time.

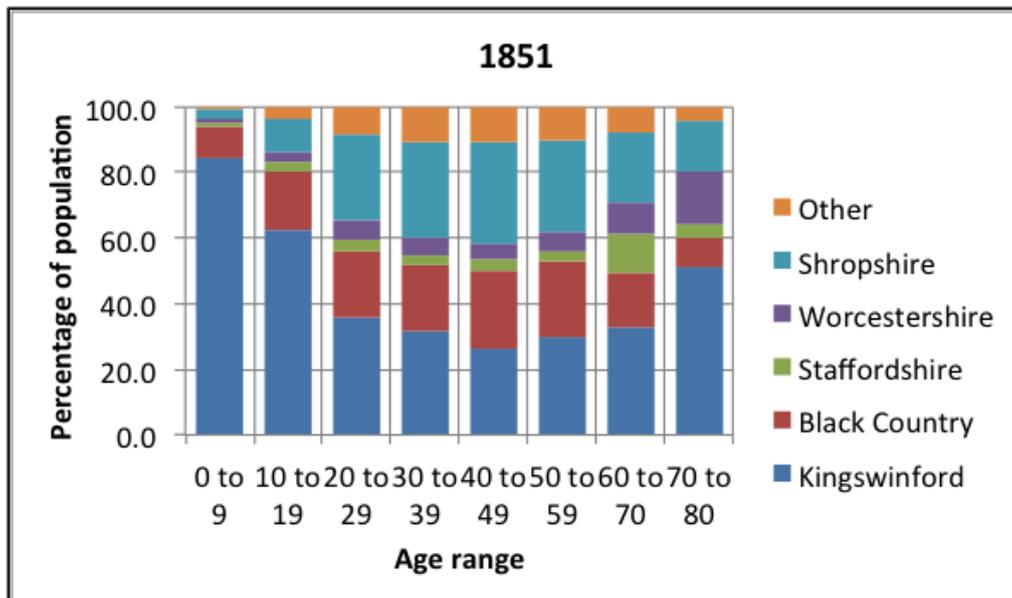


Figure 2. Population origins in Pensnett from the 1851 census

In this article however we will not consider the area in general or the ironworks and railway networks - but our focus will be on the small Shut End Primitive Methodist chapel, shown as the red circle on the 1882 map of Figure 1. We are able to tell the story of this chapel in some detail, largely because of the transcript of Baptismal Registers and associated notes given in Dodd (2), as well as a few other references in historical sources.

The chapel

At the religious census of 1851, just after the parish of Pensnett was formed in the mid-1840s, there were a number of non-conformist chapels in the area, as well as the rather grand new parish church of St. Mark - two Wesleyan Methodist chapels, two Primitive Methodist chapels, and an independent congregation. In the census it is clear that the latter thought they were the remnant of the true church of God in the area, and the others were not really Christian! The Primitive Methodists broke from the more established Wesleyan organisation early in the 19th century as though espoused “camp meetings”: lengthy open-air meetings involving public praying, preaching and Love Feasts.

One of the Primitive Methodist chapels was that located in Shut End, the history of which begins in 1832. The Chapel was situated on Tansey Green Road and ultimately consisted of a Chapel Building and a Schoolroom behind the Brickmaker's Arms. Directly behind it was the Shut End Pit, and there were later to be subsidence problems due to this (Figure 3). The first services were held in December

1832, and by 1836 meetings of some sort were also being held in Commonside on Pensnett and at Shropshire Row in The Oak in Kingswinford parish. The chapel is mentioned a number of times in the 1837 diary of J. Petty (3), an itinerant Primitive Methodist preacher, which gives a good indication of the life of the church at the time.



Figure 3. The Shut End Primitive Methodist Chapel and the Brickmaker's Arms (in 1996) from (4)

Sunday April 2. — In the morning and afternoon, I spoke at Shut End. I was pleasingly surprised to see so many people present and was much refreshed with the consolations of the Spirit. It was also a very profitable time during the administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Sunday, May 28. — At seven in the morning I renewed tickets to two classes at Brierley Hill. I then hastened to Shut End to conduct a Camp meeting. The Lord blessed us with a fine day, and with the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit. A large assembly listened with becoming attention to the word of life, and much evident good was done. We had a love feast in the chapel in the evening, and one backslider or more professed to be reclaimed. Praise the Lord.

The chapel continued to flourish over the years. The 1851 Religious Census records morning, afternoon and evening congregations of 110, 134 and 120 respectively, with 120 sittings provided, and in 1887 there were over 250 children in the Sunday School and 20 teachers. Later various directories in the 1880s indicate that there were only two services on a Sunday – at 10.45am and 6.00pm, but there was also a mid-week service on Wednesday at 7.30pm, which probably existed throughout the life of the chapel. Similar midweek services were common practice for all the

churches in the area at that time. The Church also operated its own Friendly Society – the Shut End Primitive Methodist Economic (Sunday School rooms) with 54 members in 1878, and assets of £200.

On the 1839 Tithe map of Kingswinford, only the chapel building existed and is described in the Directory to the map as being owned by the “Trustees of William Porter and others”. The southern half of the plot was owned by Joseph Downing, but occupied by Ephraim Guest, William Greenway and William Morris. These surnames occur frequently in the Baptismal Register. By the 1883 OS map, the Schoolroom was present, and the open cast mine to the west was very clear. Both the Chapel and the Schoolroom were rectangular in form, roughly 14m by 8m in plan. Over the years the building deteriorated and there were repeated moves to persuade the local Primitive Methodist circuit to purchase land for a new chapel. Matters came to a head in the early 1890s when the congregation purchased land for a new chapel on Commonside themselves and were expelled from the circuit. It seems that payment of the quarterly circuit fees was also an issue at the time (5). In 1893 the original building, which by that time was badly in need of repair, was finally sold and the new Independent Methodist chapel on Commonside built. After the congregation moved to the new building it would seem that the old chapel was in use as a sewing factory. The 1910 OS map indicates that they had become a “Picture Theatre” and the Chapel and Schoolroom had been joined together into one long structure.

No details of the interior of the building as a chapel survive, but these can perhaps be conjectured by what was built to replace them on Commonside (figure 4). This had a balcony at the front of the chapel for the choir and organ, with the raised preaching desk and the table for the Lord’s Supper placed centrally at the front of the Chapel beneath the balcony. Pews occupied the rest of the chapel building. Although the original chapel was unlikely to have had a balcony, it would almost certainly have had a preaching desk / pulpit of some sort of simple communion table at the north end.



Before moving on to consider the congregation, there is an interesting aside for Black Country railway historians. In 1861, the minutes of the Trustees of the Church (2) reveal an offer for the purchase of the building from the proponents of the Dudley and Bridgnorth Railway, part of the Welsh and Midland Counties Junction Railway – a line that was never given parliamentary approval and about which little detail is available. The fact that the chapel was on the potential line however, suggested that it was the intention to incorporate the Kingswinford Railway into the route.

The congregation

It is a commonplace that the church is defined by a worshipping community rather than by a building. So can we say anything about those who worshipped in the Shut End chapel? We are in a position to do just that because of the information contained in the Baptismal Register already mentioned (2).

These cover the period from 1845 to 1887 with 777 entries over that period, with 514 different couples represented. To enable this information to be analysed, all the entries were transcribed to an EXCEL spreadsheet, which was a thoroughly mind numbingly boring experience, but this did enable some detailed information about the Shut End congregation to be obtained.

Firstly, it is clear that the chapel served the local population. The breakdown of the residences of the couples bringing children for baptism show the large majority of baptisms were of those in the 1845 ecclesiastical parish of Pensnett (Pensnett, Commonsides, Shut End, Tansey Green and Bromley – 83% in total) and most of the rest from closely surrounding areas (Kingswinford, Coopers Bank, Oak Farm, Brockmoor, Brierly Hill and Wordsley – 14%). The remaining entries were geographically widespread, from as close as Dudley to as far away as Wigan, and probably indicate married children returning home for the baptism of their child at their home chapel. But it is clear that in general the chapel served a very local congregation.

Secondly, the congregation very largely consisted of manual workers of various skill levels. The breakdown of the fathers' occupation shows that 34% were miners; 31% were labourers; 13% were iron workers, 3% engineers, 3% blacksmiths; 2% stock takers; 2% brick makers and 1% boiler makers. The labourers could be working in any of the other industries included in the list. The iron workers included on a large variety of forms including moulder, furnace man, roller and puddler. Some of these, particularly the latter, were regarded as highly skilled jobs. The remaining 11% includes trades such as groom, keeper, horseman, boat builder, shoemaker, grocer, butcher, with a very small number classified as managers or clerks. Now to some degree these figures will reflect the fact that the fathers of those baptized were relatively young and unskilled, and thus more likely to be labelled as labourers than their elders, but nonetheless they do show that the congregation at the chapel were overwhelmingly manual workers of various skill levels - perhaps more so than the make-up of the general population of Pensnett.

Thirdly it was very much a congregation of migrant families, many of whom migrated from the Shropshire area in the first part of the nineteenth century. Several of these families can be traced through several generations in the register, the most prominent being the Astons, Shukers, Kendricks, Cottons, the Dodds and Greenaways. There were numerous intermarriages between these families, Typical of these were the Cottons with 18 baptisms in the chapel over three generations. Their common ancestor George (b1792) came from the Wombridge area of Shropshire (near Oakengates and Wellington), and the family migrated to the Kingswinford area in the early 19th century. There were several marriages of Cottons to others within the church. After the family moved to the Pensnett area, they all lived around Shut End / Coopers Bank / Tansey Green for three or four generations. Without exception, all the males mentioned in the register were miners – there was nothing by way of social mobility.

Fourthly, the ministers at the church came in the main from the same social group as the congregation (the manual working class) and were themselves long term members. The five most common baptizing ministers were Abraham Dodd (40 baptisms between 1871 and 1887 – a miner living in Oak Farm); Samuel Kendrick (38 baptisms between 1856 and 1874 – a miner living in Smithy Lane who was born in 1811 in Ketley in Shropshire); Robert Bowen (30 baptisms between 1860 and 1885 – no details available); and Joseph Homer (28 baptisms between 1871 and 1886 – another miner); and William Dudley (18 baptisms between 1855 to 1884 - a tailor and draper from Kingswinford).

A number of others performed just a few baptisms performed and these were likely to have been Circuit ministers. Only two such can be identified with confidence by their appellation – Rev R

Brewen in 1861 and the Rev J Hawkins from 1881 to 1884. Dodd (2) draws attention to another itinerant preacher – Henry Higginson – and says that he was nicknamed the Roving Ranter. Unfortunately the census records reveal no more about him, which is the greatest of pities, as the name suggests there are stories to be told.

Concluding remarks

The Shut End chapel grew up in the shadow of James Foster's huge Shut End Ironworks with its associated mines and railways and served the local industrial working-class community. It seems to have been set up to serve the spiritual and community needs of migrant workers, largely from the Shropshire area, and was in a many ways a "family" church, with several generations of the same families worshipping there throughout its existence. That state of affairs continued into its successor chapel on Commonsides and the same families worshipped there throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. But that is another story for telling at some stage.

References

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Much of this article is drawn from the author's four part eBook "Kingswinford Manor and Parish" that can be downloaded free from his web site at <https://profchrisbaker.com/kingswinford-manor-and-parish-new/kingswinford-manor-and-parish/>