

RECTORS, RANTERS AND RECUSANTS CHURCHES, CHAPELS AND MEETINGS IN MALPAS

from 'A Malpas Miscellany' (2017)

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In most aspects of its history, Malpas is not a unique place. What went on during past centuries in this small Cheshire town reflects what happened nationally and in many cities, towns and villages across the country. This is particularly true in the case of its 'religious' history, or rather the history of the various Christian congregations which have found a home in Malpas over the years.

The imposing fourteenth century parish church of Saint Oswald, which dominates the view from all roads into the town, probably had its origins as the private chapel to the castle. The church was at the heart of a large *ecclesiastical parish*, similar in size to many found in the North West of England. Until the second half of the nineteenth century it comprised twenty-five *townships* (with roughly the same physical boundaries as the modern *civil parishes* which bear their names), including Malpas itself. Twenty-four of the townships are in the modern county of Cheshire and the remaining one (Iscoyd) is in Wales. The parish stretched from Broxton and Bickerton in the north to Iscoyd (in the detached portion – the *Maelor* - of the former Welsh county of Flintshire) in the south, and from Cuddington and Oldcastle in the west to Bickley and Cholmondeley in the east. At one time it may also have included the ancient chapelry of Harthill. The ecclesiastical parish was reduced in size from 1863 onwards, with the formation of the new ecclesiastical parishes of Tushingham (1863), Bickerton (1876) and Bickley (1892), all of them incorporating a number of the former Malpas townships. In the late 20th century the former *extra parochial* township of Threapwood was incorporated into Malpas ecclesiastical parish, which now incorporates eleven civil parishes.

Those interested in the detailed history of Saint Oswald's are well served by two publications. These are *An Architectural History of the Church of Malpas in the County of Cheshire* by Fred Crossley and J C Wolley Dod (1949) and *An illustrated history of Saint Oswald's, Malpas*, by the late Canon Michael Rylands (published in the late 1960s).

The story of the parish church as a social focus for the community is of equal interest to its architecture. During the Middle Ages, in parishes throughout the country, the parish church would be the centre of annual celebrations to mark the festival of the saint to whom the church was dedicated. The 'Wakes', which in many parishes (e.g. Tilston) have survived through to modern times as the occasion for rather more secular festivities, were the natural successors to these medieval celebrations. Organised by the long-forgotten parish guilds, they would have involved elaborate decorations and the erection of shrines in the church, and processions to the church by the clergy and parishioners. The guilds also served as early forms of mutual protection or friendly societies, providing forms of insurance for sick and elderly parishioners. As such they were perhaps the forerunners of the Friendly Societies which came into existence from the late 17th century onwards. The Malpas United Friendly Society was formed in 1802 and held its annual celebrations, including a procession to the church, during the annual Malpas Wakes over the August holiday weekend, which included the Feast Day of Saint Oswald. Later in the 19th century other Friendly Societies were formed in Malpas, including two 'lodges' of the Oddfellows, who also held annual celebrations over the Saint Oswald's Wakes weekend. The Malpas based Loyal Clutton Lodge of Oddfellows still exists.

Until the Reformation, when King Henry VIII made the historic break with Rome and declared himself head of the Church in England, the parish churches of England had all paid allegiance to the ultimate rule of the Pope in Rome. Therefore for the first two hundred years of its life Saint Oswald's was a Roman Catholic church. The first stage of the

Reformation in England was brought about mainly by the Pope's refusal to allow Henry VIII to divorce his first queen, Catherine of Arragon. In 1530 the king started to campaign for a divorce, enlisting the help of lords and nobles across the country. In this he had the assistance of Sir William Brereton, a Malpas man. He was the sixth son of Sir Randle Brereton, whose magnificent chest tomb still stands in Saint Oswald's church. William is one of the children – we do not know which one – depicted in relief around the base of the tomb. Ironically many of those carved on the tomb have lost their heads or have been defaced, by accident or intentionally. Sir William Brereton really did lose his head, when he was executed on Tower Hill on 17th May 1536 along with four others, all five of them having been accused, probably falsely, of adultery with Queen Ann Boleyn. The Queen was to lose her own head two days later.

This was the violent end to a successful career during which William Brereton had amassed considerable estates and had been promoted to posts of importance in Cheshire, North Wales and elsewhere in the country. Among the offices he held were those of Chamberlain of Chester, Steward of Holt Castle and, perhaps most importantly, Groom of the Privy Chamber to Henry VIII, a position which brought him very close to the monarch. He was one of three King's Messengers '*who were sent to divers parts of England*' in 1530 to collect signatures for a petition to Pope Clement VII, pleading King Henry's case for a divorce from Queen Catherine.

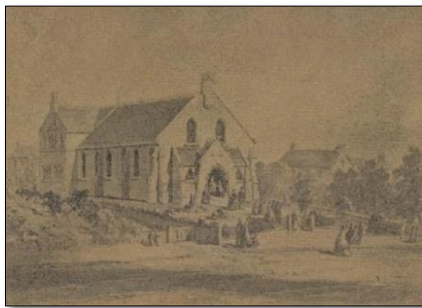
The Reformation marked the beginning of over four hundred years of change in the Christian church in Europe, in Britain and in Malpas. After Henry had declared his independence from the church of Rome, there were others who began, in their turn, to seek independence from the Church of England and from the forms of worship set down in the Book of Common Prayer. And so it was that, from the 17th century onwards, the town of Malpas witnessed the rise and fall of Christian congregations calling themselves Quakers (or the Society of

Friends), Independents (Congregationalists), New Connexion Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists.

There were others, known as 'recusants', who would not denounce their belief in Roman Catholicism, refused to attend the parish church and were persecuted by the authorities. In fact there were many in Malpas who were made to suffer for their beliefs, particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries, reflecting the persecutions that took place across the country. In these days of religious freedom, it is difficult to credit that during the 16th century many Malpas Roman Catholics suffered long terms of imprisonment for standing by their religious principles. During the 17th century the same fate was suffered by local Quakers and Presbyterians, who held illegal meetings, known as 'conventicles', in private houses, barns, or even in the open air. It was in 1653 that the first Malpas Quaker Meeting was recorded, although it seems to have died out by the early 18th century.

The nationwide growth in religious nonconformity from the late 18th century and right through the 19th century had a huge effect on national history. Nonconformity and Liberal politics went hand-in-hand. The increasing availability of elementary education, such as that provided by the Alport School in Malpas, meant that many labourers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and similar members of the 'lower' social classes had the opportunity to learn to read and write. In Malpas many of them might have found the atmosphere of the parish church of Saint Oswald to be rather aloof and unwelcoming. The 19th century rectors were drawn from the higher levels of society. Among them were members of the local gentry and land-owning families: the Egertons of Oulton; the Tyrwhitt Drakes; and the Kenyons. The services tended to be rather 'High Church' so that the more informal worship to be found in the Malpas chapels, belonging to the Independents (later to be known as Congregationalists and who finally became part of the United Reformed Church), Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists (also known as 'Ranters') would be of more direct appeal to many local people. The parish church at that time was

largely the preserve of the middle and upper classes, while the Nonconformists provided opportunities for their members to become very practically involved in chapel life, as chapel trustees, as 'lay' preachers, as deacons, and in a variety of other offices. At a very human level, the chapels offered opportunities for labourers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and their like to become 'somebody' and to feel valued in the work they undertook for their chosen cause.



L-R: TOP Saint Oswald's church – New Connexion chapel(?) CENTRE Opening of Congregational chapel (1862) – High Street Church (1995) BOTTOM Wesleyan Methodist chapel (1892) – Primitive Methodist chapel (1894) – Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic church (1950)

Another dimension was added to the religious life of the town in 1868 when the first post-Reformation Roman Catholic mass centre (bearing in mind that before the Reformation the 'mass centre' had been Saint Oswald's church) was established in Malpas. This was in Hugh McCaffrey's lodging house in Church Street (now the Lloyds Bank building) and was introduced mainly to cater for itinerant harvest workers, many of whom came over from Ireland on a seasonal basis. Hugh McCaffrey himself was among the many thousands of Irishmen who had emigrated to Britain following the devastating Irish potato famines of the 1840s. In 1950 one of the outbuildings at *The Beeches* in Tilston Road was converted to become St Joseph's Roman Catholic church but this closed in 2013.

There is evidence that by the late 19th century the Malpas nonconformist chapels had established friendly relationships among themselves, even to the extent of sharing their buildings at times. It is said that after the Wesleyan chapel, built in 1874, had been burned down (due to an over-heated boiler) in January 1891, the Wesleyan Methodists attended the Congregational and Primitive Methodist chapels until their re-built chapel opened in March of the following year. There is also evidence that by the early years of the 20th century the parish church was strengthening its relationships with the nonconformists, when all the Christian denominations in the town supported an open-air rally on the Ox Hayes in August 1902. The rally, which is said to have attracted a crowd of around 1,300, was addressed by the famous travelling evangelist 'Gypsy' Smith.

In 1922 there was a foretaste of something which was to come to fruition eventually (73 years later!) when discussions took place over a proposal, which came to nothing then, to link the Congregational, Wesleyan Methodist and Primitive Methodist congregations in Malpas. However, in 1995 the bond was finally forged when the combined United Reformed/Methodist High Street Church (finally known as Malpas Community Church) was opened, following the closures of the Wesleyan Methodist chapel in 1969 and the Primitive

Methodist chapel in the late 1980s. High Street Church stands on the site of the former 1862 Congregational (later United Reformed) chapel; the Wesleyan chapel in Old Hall Street was demolished in 1985 and its site is now occupied by the four houses known as *Chapel Rise* (their garages are the former chapel stables); and the Primitive chapel has been converted into a private residence.

So it can be seen that by the late 20th century there had been redundancies, reorganisations and unifications, leading to the situation in which the town had just two Christian congregations, each with its own place of worship: Saint Oswald's Anglican Church and the High Street Church (United Reformed/Methodist). Sadly, at the time of writing this, it has been announced that due to declining membership the High Street Church (Malpas Community Church) will close this summer (2025) with the result that Saint Oswald's will be the only remaining place of religious worship in Malpas.