

Wheatley Congregational Church
Memorial Stones Laying

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During the past few years Congregationalism in Wheatley has made rapid strides and further progress has taken place this year in attaching a Sunday School to the vigorous Congregational Church in the High Street, which has been established for some considerable period. It was at first suggested that the existing church should be converted into a Sunday schoolroom and a more commodious building erected for the purposes of worship. However, after the matter had been carefully weighed, this idea did not commend itself to the Pastor, the Rev. J. Plommer, and several of the most ardent members of the 'church', as it was thought the erection of a new church would entail too great a responsibility and tax upon the worshippers at the chapel. The majority of whom are naturally not overburdened, in these days of competition, with the riches of life. Eventually it was decided to build a Sunday School on a piece of land attached to the church. Ever since the advent of the new pastor, the congregation of the church have been doing their utmost to attain this object, and about twelve months ago the scheme began to take a practical form. Two friends of the church offered to give £100 to the church if Mr Harris, the present Superintendent was willing to contribute a similar sum. Mr Harris accepted the invitation and a large proportion of the sum which will be necessary to erect the school, has already been contributed by people of the village and friends of the church in Oxford. Mr Iliffe Pike and his sister have generously given the site for the school, which will be attached to the church. The work is being carried out by Mr C. C. Robinson of Wolvercote, from the designs of Mr Mardon Mowbray, of Oxford, and is well on the way to completion, the ceremony of the laying the memorial stones taking place on Thursday. There will be a large schoolroom, measuring 30 feet by 18 feet on the inside, to which will be added at the back and communicating with it, a vestry and a kitchen. A new porch will be built to the church which will be entered from the schoolyard, the front of which is to be surrounded by a dwarf wall with ornamental railings. The building is in a decorated gothic style, with stone dressings, and is situate on an angled comer on the east side of the church. The schoolroom, as disclosed by the plans, contains two three-light windows at each end, and two single light windows on each side, whilst the walls are match-boarded inside, with an open timbered roof, the exterior being covered with tiles. The ventilation has been carefully attended to, and altogether the school will be a most compact and commodious building, admirably suited to the purposes for which it is erected.

The ceremony of laying the memorial stones took place on the space in front of the school on Thursday afternoon, Mr E. Beaumont, of Oxford, occupying the chair. There was a large number of villagers and friends of other denominations present from Oxford and the surrounding district, including the Revs. J. Robertson, J. Dann, E. J. Hammond, G. J. Plommer, and J. Moore, Messrs. Hugh Hall, T. H. Kingerlee, J. H. Thornton, W. Iliffe Pike, F. H. Alden, E. C. Alden, E. W. Dann, H. E. W. Phillips, J. Harris, W. Betts, C. Shepherd, Mardon Mowbray, and C. C. Robinson.

The proceedings opened with the singing of the hymn, "O God, our help in ages past," after which Palm 132 was read by the Rev. J. Moore, and prayer offered by the Rev. E. J. Hammond.

The Rev. C. Plommer (Pastor) said three months after coming to Wheatley a church meeting was held, at which it was decided to take steps to erect a new school. In July they had a successful Sunday school anniversary, and on the following Tuesday morning Mr Harris came to his house just as he was leaving for his holiday with the good news that two kind friends would give £100 towards the new school if he (Mr Harris) would give a similar amount towards carrying out the scheme. Mr Harris agreed to accept so handsome a challenge, and they could congratulate themselves upon having in their midst two such friends, without whose munificence it would have been impossible for them to carry out their scheme. (Applause.) Such had been the inspiration of the noble example they had set, that all their friends were doing their utmost to rise to the occasion and to ensure the success of the enterprise. Some of them thought that it would be advisable to build a new church and convert the present edifice into a schoolroom, whilst circulars were issued with that object in

view. However, the majority of their friends were of the opinion that the erection of a new chapel would entail too heavy a responsibility and impose a greater burden than they would be able to bear. Therefore, after much consideration they determined to abandon the proposal and to erect a schoolroom. He undertook to raise £50 by the time the memorial stones were laid. He did not realise the weight of responsibility which he had imposed upon himself at the time, but he was thankful to say that he had raised more than the amount he promised. The new school, with the alterations they proposed to make to the chapel, would cost from £550 to £600, and that day they hoped to raise a considerable amount - say not less than £200 (Hear, hear.) He was sure they could find no better cause, for it was the cause of God and humanity and of families with little children. It was a cause with which the future well-being of the church and of the world was interwoven. He appealed to them to assist them in carrying out the great work to which they had put their hands, and to endeavour to open the building free from any financial liability. He pointed out that the village churches were the feeders of the places of worship in cities and towns, and referred to a large number of illustrious men who had taken in their time a leading part in the religious life of England, and whose birthplaces were situated in villages. They at Wheatley remembered the great kindness they had received in the past, and the generous interest taken in their church by friends present that day, and they knew that their appeal would not be in vain, and that they would receive a liberal, and hearty, and enthusiastic response. They were hoping 'ere long to erect a manse for the minister, and when that had been carried out he thought no village church would have more complete machinery for carrying on its work. (Applause.)

Mr Hugh Hall then laid the large memorial stone, upon which was inscribed: "This memorial stone was laid during the pastorate of the Rev. J. Plommer, September, 1898, by Hugh Hall, Esq. B.A., E. Beaumont Esq., R.R. Alden Esq., Oxford: also on behalf of the church by J. Harris, superintendent of the Sunday School and Church Treasurer, and W. Iliffe Pike, Secretary of the Church, and C. Shepherd, representative of the Guild." Mr Hall declared the stone to be well and truly laid, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and remarked that this duty had been laid upon him, possibly because he had taken in the past some interest in their cause at Wheatley, but he had great pleasure in laying the stone on other grounds than that. He saw in course of erection a new school in which the great gospel of their Lord would be set forth, as he trusted, for the salvation of many souls. Possibly he was the oldest Sunday school scholar present. It was 60 years since he first went to Sunday school and since then he had passed through all the graduations of teacher and secretary and superintendent, and his last experience of the kind took place about ten years ago, when he had the pleasure of teaching a large class, principally of railway men. Therefore he had a special interest in seeing a new course in which this great work could be done but beyond that he must say that he supposed he had been asked to lay that stone as the representative in a certain sense of the churches of Oxford, because they felt naturally a deep interest in the welfare of the sister church at Wheatley. He claimed for their denomination that through them came 300 years ago, or if not absolutely first, they were the great pioneers, of the religious liberty that they now enjoyed in this country. That school would be most richly blest in that the children would be taught the value of religious liberty, of freedom of thought, and freedom of speech, and of freedom to know and serve God in the way that most appealed to their consciences. When one thought that only 300 years ago the numbers of those who dared to worship God in any fashion except in the churches of the Established Church of this country was so few that several little ships carried them over to America, it was marvellous to reflect that the dissenters of to-day numbered more than one half of the population of this country, (Hear, hear.) He reminded them that an Act was passed which was expressly designed to prevent Dissenters from going to their American Colonies because the Government of the day found that these men who had emigrated were raising up a State which was not in conformity with the Established Church, and pointed out that this persecution aroused a spirit of enquiry in the very places in which it was expected it would be put down. After all that dissent spread far and wide throughout the land, and the result was that in the last century they saw that great uprising of Wesleyanism under Wesley and Whitfield, and more and more of that spirit of religious freedom which has made its way in this country and the world until no man dared to make them afraid, and they could worship as they liked, without let or hindrance. He observed, in enumerating some of the advantages of religious liberty, that social order instead of the oppression

of landed proprietors had been the result. It had brought security of capital, liberty and freedom for the working man, freedom of trade, a largely extended commerce, immense progress in science, large and enlightened literature by which they could all learn, and the greatest of all blessings, Christian missions. Now there were more Methodists than members of the Episcopal Church, and when the other denominations were added the Episcopal Church might sink its head. There was an active propaganda going on against the forms and ceremonies and the bowings and scrapings in the English Church, both in London and in the South and North of England, and he hoped it would be successful. (Applause.) Independence had produced strength of character as opposed to subjection to bishops and priests. With them every man was a priest. Of course, he meant every Christian man, and they did not need to go to their own ministry or those of any other denominations, because they were as competent to preach the word of God when they had received it as when the bishop had laid his hands on them and told them to receive the Holy Ghost. He wished he could believe it was true, but he could not. By the efforts of the dissenters of this country, popular education had been brought within the reach of every child within the land. He knew there was a great activity going on to prevent that popular education spreading and doing good. There were two things, the power that Parliament had to make an Act to do certain things, and there were the administrators who had to carry out that Act. Parliament had said there should be popular education and every child in the country should have access to it, but they had behind the scenes men who said, "we shall build the school and we shall take care nothing shall be taught there but the Church Catechism." (Hear, hear.) They as dissenters had fought those people in the past, and they would go on until popular education should be free, and they should have none of these drawbacks of which he had spoken. (Applause.) As that church had gone on from small beginnings, he trusted it would continue still to prosper as a working church for no other than a working church would enable Christianity to live in the villages of England. (Applause.)