

Remember St Paul's church?

New Hope's predecessor had a long and varied history. Jonathan Dart investigates...

All that remains now of the old St Paul's church which stood at the corner of Newport Road and York Road is the foundation stone. The stone commemorates William McIlroy, who in 1897 defrayed the cost of a preaching station on the site, which became part of the Presbyterian Church of England a year later. McIlroy was able to be so generous because he owned a large shop in the building opposite what is now Broad Street Mall. By 1901 the premises had become inadequate, and McIlroy donated the land on which the church was built. It opened on 9 April 1902 as Caversham Road Presbyterian Church, and the preaching station became the church hall. In 1915 it was decided to change the church's name to St Paul's.

From its inception St Paul's emphasised its links with the community. During his tenure its first minister was highly successful, doubling the number of communicant members to 228, the highest in its history, by 1907. The church also had 200 pupils in its

Sunday school and was forced to operate two sessions. By 1906 its activities included a men's social club, a sick benefit society, youth bible classes and a women's guild. As well as McIlroy himself, it also counted Councillor E P Collier among its members.

The church continued to focus on missionary work until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Like the rest of the country, most families in the congregation were affected and many were bereaved. Six months into the war, it was decided to write out the names of the men serving in the forces in a permanent manner and display them in the church vestibule. This became the church's war memorial and this is now in E P Collier School.

The 1920s were turbulent years for St Paul's. Many of its congregation had left the area and attendances at services dropped from an average 82 in 1920 to 36 in 1929. The situation was not helped by the minister becoming ill and by 1930 becoming unable to participate in the life of the church. The fall in membership and the recession of the 1920s caused a financial crisis, and by 1929 the managers said they were unable to manage the church's budget.

However, a new minister arrived and there was a drive to recruit members from the local area. The tradition of the McIlroy family as benefactors continued, with William's son - also called William - donating a valuable tapestry of the marriage of Joseph and Mary (this was reportedly stolen from a church in Russia). According to Colin Ferguson, secretary of the church from most of the period from 1984, this tapestry was eventually auctioned off in the late 1990s. McIlroy Jr continued to boost the church, paying for a Sunday school outing in 1934 and using the church for civic services for the five years he was mayor of Reading from 1938. By 1937 attendances at Communion services had risen to 80. During World War II the church's activities were restricted by the blackout rules, but it continued to focus on youth work and outreach to the local community.

This work went on after the war but, as with other churches, there was a steady decline in attendances and it

was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the building. In the early 1960s the top of the tower had to be taken down, giving the church a truncated look. As early as 1970 the church decided to set up a committee to look into moving to a new site or redeveloping the present one. However, a referendum of the membership revealed that 76% thought St Paul's should continue in its existing premises, and a lack of funds prevented plans for new premises on the site.

From 1996 the church had no full-time minister, and attendances had dwindled to 25-30 people. The church hall became condemned due to dry rot and dangerous electrical wiring. The repair bill for the church, a building English Heritage described as being of no significant architectural interest, would have been around £1 million. The United Reformed Church, into which the English Presbyterian church had merged, decided it was better to sell the site and use the proceeds to renew other URC premises.

The one part of the church that was listed was the organ, which was removed before demolition and is now in Malta. The foundation stone was kept and split; its back half was inscribed with the text from St Paul's letter to the Romans and was also included in the New Hope building, as a symbol of continuing Christian worship on the site.

Acknowledgement: A History of St Paul's Church by Alec Watson



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● ABS Printing would like to thank everyone who has donated used postage stamps for the Harefield Heart Hospital. Please keep them coming! And E P Collier's Yellow Pages collection has had a great response.

● Finally, please remember E P Collier School when you receive school vouchers from Tesco, Sainsbury's and other supermarkets. These help the school obtain valuable equipment.



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