

WEST MOORS AND ITS CHURCHES

A visitor to our corner of Dorset in the early part of the nineteenth century would have found an isolated community that had changed little for centuries past: a handful of small-scale tenant farms alongside small streams – providing just enough income to pay rents to the major landowners. The principal highways passed by to the north and south.

By the 1840s, efforts were being made to bring schooling to youngsters in such rural areas where little or no formal education was available or affordable. One movement was the National Society for the Promotion of Education of the Poor, whose facilities became known simply as 'National Schools'. The principal aim was religious instruction but basic numeracy & literacy teaching was also offered: the aim was to establish such schools in every parish in England.

In 1843 a National School was built on land slightly to the north of where the Memorial Hall now stands. There was also a small school chapel (with turret and bell) licensed for divine service and for the celebration of the Holy Sacrament & Baptism. Marriages and burials were not performed – for these functions, parishioners would have to travel to the parish church in West Parley. Country-folk would be used to undertaking such journeys on foot in their day-to-day life but the distance, especially for young children and the elderly, would be a considerable challenge.

In 1859, with the school-age population having increased with the development of the railway & nearby Stewart's Nursery, a new school was erected opposite the original building, just to the north of the current parish church. This is also marked on old maps as 'School and Chapel' so we must assume that there was a continuity of local worship. Alongside this new school was the 'Iron Room' (timber-framed, corrugated-iron clad construction) which had been erected in 1854 on the site of the present-day St. Mary's church.

The growth of West Moors during this time was steady but unspectacular; by the last decade of the 19th century there were no more than 250 folk in around 50 households. There was a recognisable 'centre' clustered around the station, the small village school & chapel and the nearby trading store – but this was about to change!

In 1887, the Rev. Claud Brown was installed in

the newly-created living of Verwood, which had been 'carved-out' from the much larger parish of Cranborne; the infant parish encompassed Verwood and much of Three Cross and also a large area of the northern portion of West Parley, which included West Moors. Brown was a generous man – with his time, energies and money! He funded, almost entirely out of his own pocket, the building of churches & schools throughout his new parish, including the building (1897-98) of St. Mary the Virgin here in West Moors, the associated school, the school-house and the house for the curate. All these are still with us – the school-house and curacy (later vicarage) are now in private ownership but the church & school serve the purpose that the Rev. Brown intended – though much extended!



St. Mary's church, and school-house, early 20th century

The funding of these buildings was a great act of faith; West Moors was still sparsely populated and it would need the arrival of the Brewer brothers from Verwood in the early 1900s to initiate the development of the modern village.

Many changes have taken place over the years: an extension to the west end of the Church was added in the late twenties; the small cemetery, opened in 1908 (when the Church was consecrated) was taken out of use in the 1930s when the village cemetery was opened in Priory Road.



And in the 21st century, a hall, attached to the main fabric of St. Mary's, was opened in 2010 (see *image*). And on the roof – solar panels – the church moving with the times!

The corrugated-iron clad hut mentioned above was moved to the opposite side of the road prior to St. Mary's being built – being used for a variety of purposes over time as the 'Parish Room'; it was finally demolished in 1971 having served the community for well over a century.

During the first dozen years of the twentieth century, West Moors was thriving. The 1901 census indicated a local population of approximately 300; just 10 years later, this figure had risen to around 700, a more than doubling-up in that period. St. Mary's church had its place as a focal point in the community. However many newcomers to the village would not be comfortable with worship according to the tenets of the 'established' Anglican church. In 1903, a small 'non-conformist' chapel, known as the Protestant Evangelical Church, was built on land on the corner of Moorlands and Station Roads.



In 1925, the name was changed to the West Moors Congregational Church – by which name it

thrived over the following decades. Above is an early 20th century photograph of the original church. In 1970, the hall was modernised, and in 1972, following the union of the Presbyterian Church (in England) and the Congregational Church (in England & Wales), the name United Reformed Church was adopted. In 1979, a major expansion of the church building was undertaken – not without some difficulty, but a link with the earlier church was maintained as wood from the original pews was re-used to provide a Pulpit, Communion Table and several other artefacts. Further alterations, including the addition of a fine entrance hall fronting Station Road (in 2013), provide us with the St. Martin's church of today – very much '*In the Heart of the Village*', hosting many community activities (below, left-centre).



Followers of the Catholic faith were initially served by the religious house of the Cistercian nuns at Stapehill Abbey. This community had been established in 1802. (*Now defunct, since 1991 – relocated to Whitland, Wales*). However, in 1922, with the population of West Moors, Ferndown & Verwood all growing, Holy Mass was said in a house known as "Lisheen", adjacent to the present-day church – and for a short time, as the congregation grew, a temporary wooden church served until the building of a more permanent structure in 1928 – more later.



A little earlier, in 1925, land further down Pinehurst Road (opposite the modern-day 'eastern access' to Woolslope Road) was acquired, with financial help from Lord Shaftesbury, a major local landowner at the time, and from Mrs. Helene Stainer (née

Frampton). An unused 1897 wooden chapel was disassembled and moved from Rowe Hill, in the neighbouring parish of Holt and erected on the land for use as a 'chapel of ease': at this time, the 'middle' section of Pinehurst Road was being slowly developed with both Elmhurst and Oakhurst Roads hosting a large gypsy community. A team of 15 men volunteered to do the work, which took four months to complete. The chapel was known as St. John's, being dedicated by the Bishop of Sherborne. The view (*above*) is of St. John's late in its life – not long before being taken out of use in 1999.

By the start of the Second World War, West Moors, with a population of no more than 1800 had four churches. Then, in 1943, the Evangelical Church, already having a presence in Three Legged Cross (since the mid-1930s) decided to initiate a children's Sunday school in a temporary building on the present site of Pinehurst Church; the original building – as so many of the type – was a corrugated-iron building. The teachings soon encompassed the adult community based on the doctrines of the Open or Christian Brethren and the building was known as the "Gospel Hall". In 1967,



the present Pinehurst Chapel (now Church) was built and with later enhancements and additions over the years, we have the building seen today – *here in 2018*.

In the dozen years after the Second World War, West Moors grew only slowly, held back by the poor state of the national economy and also because main drainage was unavailable until the early 1960s. However, with the expansion of the Fuel Depot and the post-war 'baby boom', St. Mary's school, then the only local school – and taking children to age 11, had over 100 pupils on its roll and both the 'Iron Room' and St. Martin's were used as 'overflow' classrooms until new extensions were built during the 1960s.

The railway succumbed to Beeching's 'Axe' in 1964 – almost exactly coinciding with a boom in house building! Between 1965 and 1971, large-scale development spread across the heathland and poor-grade farmland. By 1971, the population attributed to West Moors parish was 5400.

Throughout this period, the village had no fewer than *five* places of worship: St. Mary's, St. Martin's, St. Anthony's, Pinehurst Chapel and St. John's. Nationally, church-going was declining; slowly at first but accelerating with the arrival of the 'swinging Sixties', but local churches remained an essential and vibrant part of the community.

In 1970, after several decades and further expansion in the Catholic community, a campaign was initiated to raise funds towards the building of what would become the present church of St. Anthony of Padua. The culmination of much hard work by the then Priest Fr. Philip French resulted in the opening of the present hall, presbytery and church by December 1976.



The Hall was opened first – and services were held there before the church itself was built: this is why the church hall still has a large crucifix on the wall.

1999 saw one of the five local churches reach the end of its life – not for lack of a congregation though! St. John's, being a wooden construction, was deemed unsafe by insurers in November of that year and with no prospect of economic repair



or alternative use, it was demolished in May 2000, with a bungalow being built on the site – *shown here*. There was a loyal congregation until the end – it was known locally as the "Gypsy Church" and was much missed.

Before leaving the past, a couple of 'interesting' items:

1. Newcomers to West Moors might assume that the names of the roads leaving the 'far' end of Pinehurst Road, Priory Road and Abbey Road, indicate that there was once a large monastic establishment hereabouts. This is not so, but there are links with historic religious establishments. Until the Reformation, much local land was in the

ownership of Cranborne Priory – which in turn was associated with the Benedictine Abbey at Tewkesbury. Small wayside chapels were established under the protection & patronage of these monastic estates, and one such stood on land close to the confluence of the Moors River and Uddens Water, near the important river crossing there (Palmer's Ford). Leonard of Noblac was venerated across Europe in the Middle Ages – but St. Leonard's chapel fell out of use with the doctrinal turbulence of the 16th century, and little trace of it was found by the end of the 18th century – though its location was indicated on maps until the early 19th century and gives the name to the Farm & local community. A more substantial local religious house was that of Stapehill Abbey, established in the early 1800s. Given all these antecedents, it may be that the builders and local authority in the 1930s decided to allude to this history.

2. Towards the end of the 16th century, one William Pike (or Pyke) is reputed to have lived and worked 'in or near' West Moors: he was variously described as a 'joiner, carpenter, wheel-wright'. In this latter part of Elizabeth I's reign, it was certain death to openly proclaim adherence to the Roman Catholic faith – this Pike did on a number of occasions and he was tried for Treason along with others. He was executed, in the brutal fashion allotted to such, by being hung, drawn and quartered at Dorchester in 1591 – St. Anthony's community remember him each year on his 'Feast Day', 4th July.

Today, we should be thankful that such practices are long in the past – and celebrate the fact that the different paths taken by followers of Jesus of Nazareth are no longer a cause of strife. Indeed, in the local area, faiths exist side-by-side and come together under the 'Churches Together' umbrella for joint services such as 'Songs of Praise'.

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[The history contained in this leaflet is based mainly on the information carried on the web sites of the four churches active in West Moors: refer to those for latest information on activities, services etc.]