

# **PRESS RELEASE**

7<sup>th</sup> January 2005

**A special Thanksgiving service is being held on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> January at 5.30p.m.**

**to celebrate**

**The bi-centennial of**

**THE FREE GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH**

**worshipping at the**

**OLD BAPTIST CHAPEL, Nuxley Road, Belvedere,**

**formerly LESSNESS HEATH BAPTIST CHAPEL.**

**The speaker will be Norman Hopkins who will give an overview of the history of the church.**

The church was formally constituted as a church in 1805, although the early history indicates that services had been held on a regular basis prior to this.

I attach a few extracts from the early history of the church which may be of interest to readers.

“An open-air meeting conducted by two young men on August 10th. 1800 - that is how it all started! One of the two young men was John Chin, who, with a companion, was crossing Lessness Heath on his way to Erith where he had a preaching engagement in the afternoon. The minister’s companion being strongly impressed by a passage of scripture, “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them ..” (Isaiah 35. 1) suggested that they should pause and on that spot erect the standard of the cross. To the two young evangelists Lessness Heath must have seemed like a wilderness and a solitary place: there could not have been more than a cluster of cottages in the midst of many acres of heathland, but according to Mr. Chin’s biographer they noticed “a group of unoccupied persons in the attire of labourers” and according to another account of the same happening, they “went to the houses to invite the people to come to hear, and a tolerable company was collected by Mr. Chin and his friend who were so encouraged that they determined before their meeting had ended to repeat it on succeeding Lord’s Days.”

Thus it appears that from that day in August 1800, the Gospel was regularly preached on Lessness Heath”

“Very soon after, one Benjamin Lloyd, a native of Chatham, was led to take a particular interest in the pioneering work at Lessness Heath. This young man was a member of what was then known as “Mr. Freeman’s chapel” at Woolwich”

“There was considerable persecution and opposition to the preaching of Benjamin Lloyd, and the small community were obliged to move from room to room. For a year or so services appear to have been held in a timber-built structure erected for them by a local carpenter and rented for £5 per annum, but before long the landlord determined to sell the meeting house. Mr. Lloyd and his friends bought the structure and soon after pulled it down and built in its place a more permanent building with a baptistry at a cost of £300. There is an entry in the old minute book of “Enon,” Woolwich, dated June 17th, 1804, “Mr. Lloyd had solicited for a collection for to assist having a Meetinghouse at Leaving Heath.(evidently Lessness Heath) It was agreed by the church he should have the next in turn.” It is thought that the building then erected is the same as still stands: certainly there is the date of 1805 clearly inscribed on the pediment of the chapel. At the back of the chapel proper there are two small rooms which have always given the impression of being sculleries to former cottages, as

though the chapel was originally built on the site of the main rooms of those cottages, but of this we cannot be certain.

It was at this time that the church was actually formed on NOVEMBER 8th 1805 of six persons, three called by grace under Mr. Lloyd's ministry and three joining from other places. Almost immediately, actually on December 3rd, 1805, Mr. B. S. Lloyd was ordained as the first Pastor of the church. Nor were those days less stirring or events less momentous than recent days or events: while these few Christians were invading the territory of Satan in this part of Kent, Napoleon was planning the invasion of England, and at the very time Nelson was issuing his famous message, "England expects. . ." Pastor Lloyd was sending forth a yet more vital message that does not date and is still preached from the same pulpit."

"But alas, the infant church was soon bereft of its Pastor: in July 1809, he was taken ill, and though he got about again for a while, he was suddenly called home in September, 1809, when only thirty-five years of age.

One of the last three baptised by Mr. Lloyd was a certain William Coleman: he was an itinerant preacher." "Thus just at the time of their Pastor's last illness the church at Lessness Heath received into it's membership this young preacher. William Coleman proved to be a most acceptable supply, and it is not surprising that he was soon chosen as Pastor of the church, being recognised as such on the 26th of April, 1810."

### **More recently:**

"Henry Mountford was a regular supply minister at Belvedere for some time before he accepted the Pastorate. His Pastorate commenced the first Lord's Day in 1906, the Recognition Services being held on June 5th the same year.

The following brethren took part: Messrs. E. White, J. Jarvis, J. E. Flegg, H. Mountford, J. Bush, E. W. Flegg and C. West of Erith.

During this Pastorate in 1921, a detached Sunday School building was erected at the rear of the chapel, at an approximate cost of £300. Stones were laid by Pastor Mountford and Pastor P. Offord of Gravesend.

Pastor Mountford, who had resigned in April, 1928, because of ill-health, passed away early in 1931."

"Mr. E. J. Wood was recognised as Pastor on Saturday, 9th September 1944. "

### **Mr Wood was an architect and was responsible for the design of several churches.**

"But 1944 and 1945 were dangerous years with flying bombs and rockets falling around. The premises had already been damaged and the heavy plaster ceiling in the chapel seemed to be on the point of falling. During the singing of the last hymn one Sunday evening a rocket fell within half a mile of the chapel and so shook the old building that the congregation was peppered with white dust. Following this warning a large tarpaulin was slung up under the ceiling to catch the plaster if it should fall, and this proved a wise precaution: not long after a large part of the ceiling did fall and as the plaster was found to be nearly two inches thick it might very well have caused fatal injury to some of the worshippers. As soon after the end of the war as possible, the war damage was repaired at a total cost of approximately £300."

"In 1980 the church faced a new and major challenge when they received a letter of resignation from their beloved brother, Pastor Edgar Wood. He had been seriously ill for several years with cancer. He stated in the letter that he would be resigning from the 13th September 1980. In the Lord's providence he was called home before he actually resigned and in fact the thanksgiving service was held on the proposed date of his resignation! He had been pastor of the church for 37

years and was recognised widely as a wise and faithful servant of the Lord and a gifted expositor of the Word of God.”

“It has become very apparant that the Lord, in His providence, has used the expertise and interest of Peter Townsend to broaden the ministry of the church through developing technologies. The Church web site [www.Free-Grace.org.uk](http://www.Free-Grace.org.uk) was first started in 1998, and acquired it's own domain name in 2000. The audio sermons were first added on May 13th 2001. This has been the means of visitors visiting the church and of one brother finding a local church to attend when he moved into the area. Currently over 600 sermons a month are listened to in many countries throughout the world.

The year 2002 stands as another significant year in the recent history of the church as after a long interregnum the Lord graciously led the church to call Mark Gladwell as pastor. The four years leading up to this call had been years of healing for the church.

Mark was born and brought up on the south coast in Sussex. It was there, at the age of fifteen, that he came to know the Lord through the witness of a school friend. Seven years later he met Marilyn in Hove and in 1982 she became his wife. It was during 1983 that his home church, the Baptist Tabernacle in Brighton confirmed that God was calling him to the Christian Ministry. He therefore spent two years training at the London Theological Seminary, and in 1985 he became Pastor of Walthamstow Central Baptist Church in London. Following this, he was called to two further pastorates. The first was to Portslade, where he was pastor from 1989-94 and the second Cheltenham, during the years 1994-2002. It was during 2002 that the family moved to Belvedere where Mark took up the pastorate of the church worshipping at Free Grace Baptist Chapel.

Welcome services were held on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2002 - Douglas Dawson giving the charge to the church and Pastor MacDougal giving the charge to the Pastor. The family; Mark, Marilyn and their daughters Sarah and Debbie moved into a house in Abbeywood.”

I attach a PDF of a brief history of the church which will be available from the church.

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