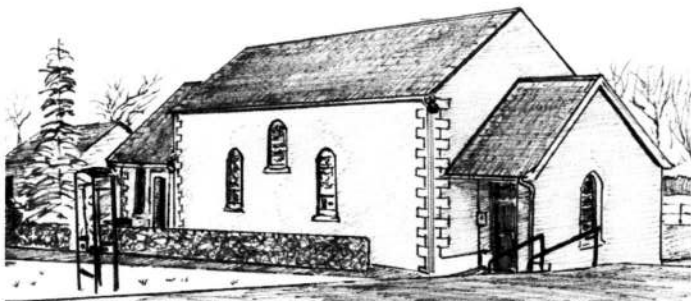


ROUND THE CHURCHES

92: Priesthill (Zion) Methodist Church

Drawing: Mervyn Mawhinney

Text: Isobel Law



"PRIESTHILL METHODIST CHURCH"

Priesthill (Zion) Church enjoys a beautiful rural setting in the Lagan Valley within the City of Lisburn. Situated at Kesh Road about two miles from Hillsborough, it is one of six churches on the Lisburn and Dromore circuit.

The name 'Priesthill' has been carried forward from the first preaching-house which was sited near the former parochial house for Reilly's Trench Chapel. The name 'Zion' derives from the fact that Priesthill was formerly a Methodist New Connexion church and frequently biblical names were attached to their places of worship.

The Priesthill society has been in existence since 1786. Its origin stems from the conversion of a young Roman Catholic man who lived in the area. In June 1776 he attended a meeting in Lisburn conducted by a Methodist preacher, was converted and began to lead class meetings. It was from such meetings that Priesthill society evolved. With 60 people in the society, a preaching-house was built at Aghnatrisk Road in 1786.

In 1798 a division occurred on the Lisburn circuit when lay representation at meetings was requested. A document was signed by 32 stewards

and leaders from various societies and the upshot was that they were expelled from the Methodist Church. C H Crookshank in his *History of Methodism* in Ireland comments: 'It would appear that the preachers considered that the views of the delinquents were the result of the spirit of insubordination and lawlessness so prevalent, and should be dealt with in a very summary manner. The dissentients were, in general, devout and conscientious... men eminent in piety and zeal.' Upwards of 200 people left the parent Methodist body and affiliated with what was later to be called 'The Methodist New Connexion'. Members of Priesthill society were amongst this number. The Methodist New Connexion was later reunited with Wesleyan Methodism in 1905.

In 1838 the present church was built at Kesh Road, replacing the original preaching-house. The building was rectangular and all seats were on level ground. In 1851 there was a tremendous religious revival and the many new members

necessitated the enlarging of the building. This was achieved by breaking through the back wall to extend into the rear garden and adding the tiered seating, which is a unique feature of the church.

A schoolhouse, now termed 'the old hall', was built in 1867. This building served as a venue for the Sunday School, various church meetings and youth activities for over 100 years. Currently it is housing outdoor equipment for the Youth Club and Boys' Brigade.

In 1974 the old hall was replaced by a spacious new hall with kitchen and toilet facilities, which was extended in 1997. In the past few months a generous grant for the refurbishment of the old hall has become available from the Department of Education's Youth Service Branch. The hall will continue to be used for the storage of equipment but the youth leaders have a vision to use the refurbished old hall as part of an outreach to those young people in the 17+ age group in the surrounding community.