

ROUND THE CHURCHES

Drawing: Peter Murray

59: Regent St Methodist Church

Text: Robin Roddie



The first Methodist preacher to visit Newtownards was Thomas Walsh on Sunday 25 July 1756. He was attacked by a drunken mob and had to spend the night in fields around Scrabo. An unfortunate incident which, according to John Wesley, contributed to his early death at the age of 28. Nevertheless two years later John Wesley himself came to the town and between 1758 and 1789 visited Newtownards 11 times. During that period the membership of

the Methodist Society grew in number.

The first Regent Street Methodist Church was built in 1807, situated on the corner of Lr Mary Street and Regent Street. (It is now the Reformed Presbyterian Church). By 1850 the railway had reached Newtownards and the movement of population into the area increased. The church was proving too small for the growing number of Methodists and so in 1854 the foundation stone

for the present building was laid on 2 May and the church completed on 12 November the same year. (It would be another three years before Scrabo Tower – Newtownards' most notable symbol – was built in 1857). In 1859 a manse was built beside the church.

Regent Street is an example of a 'pattern' church and was the first of four to be built in Ireland based on plans of James Wilson of Bath. The others are Cookstown (1858), Donegal (1859) and Ballymoney (1861). Each of the churches shares the same round-headed entrance door, set below a two-light window and with two outer windows, narrow and round-headed. The façade is topped by a pagoda-like bellcote.

Just over 40 years after the church was opened, in 1896, it was decided to build a Lecture (Wesley) Hall on what was at the time part of the manse garden. Over the intervening years

the Lecture Hall was the venue for many activities including the Boys' and Girls' Brigades, Badminton Club, Youth Club and most recently the Keep-Fit group. During the 1939-1945 war years it was requisitioned by the War Office and later it was used by Regent House Grammar School for Physical Education classes.

In the late 1950s a Minor (Epworth) Hall on the site of old stables at the Mill Street end of the church was built by the voluntary help of 45 members of the congregation at a cost of £2,000.

As the century came to an end it became clear these halls were no longer adequate and they were replaced in 2001 by a new suite of buildings, together with a reordering of the sanctuary at a cost of £550,000. The congregation celebrates the 150th anniversary of their building in good heart and with an exciting youth programme.