

ROUND THE CHURCHES

Drawing: Judy Pearson

62: Tullamore Methodist Church

Text: V Lumley



Tullamore Church in County Offaly is in the trio of chapels on Birr, Athlone & Tullamore Circuit, located in the heart of Ireland. From originally heading a District in the mid-19th century, Tullamore has been attached to various circuits, and to the present one since 1973.

The church on Church Street is the third to occupy the site. John Wesley visited Tullamore on 23 separate occasions between 1748 and 1789, and mentions a chapel there in 1762 – the location of which is uncertain, and may have been destroyed in a fire which resulted from an experimental balloon flight in 1785.

In 1787 Conference gave permission for the erection of a new chapel on what was then 'Church Lane'. Twenty-five years later, because of the members' growing needs, this chapel was demolished and a new one built on site.

As elsewhere in the early 19th century when the schism occurred, the Primitive Wesleyan Methodists built their own chapel. Following the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1870 the fold was reunited, placing a strain on the accommodation in the Church Street chapel.

In 1887 a decision was taken to remove the roof of the existing building and raise the walls, making room for a lecture hall on the ground floor and a chapel upstairs; a small wing provided a couple of additional rooms. The cost totalled £2,199, Tullamore circuit subscribing two-thirds of this.

The present reconstructed church was dedicated on Thursday 25 April 1889, and is described in contemporary reports as externally 'free from pretension' and 'beauty and harmony' within. The façade, of dressed limestone, is 60 feet high; a series of short flights of stairs brings one into the chapel, which seats 180, with the rear

area tiered. Much use is made of wood – pitch-pine arched roof with beams, wainscoting, mahogany handrails and an ornately carved oak Communion table with pair of matching chairs. Original fixtures, such as brass brackets and cups for umbrellas at pew ends and delft numbers on pews, are still retained. A manse adjoining the church was sold in 1975, no minister having lived in the town since 1967.

As expected in a rural area, the membership has always largely comprised retailers and farmers – the backbone of any community – and in the last generation Tullamore has provided its share of sons to the ministry, namely Bagnall, Morris (2) and Lumley (2).

The acumen of our forefathers in providing a spacious hall has proved itself, especially in the 1930s and 40s, when an enthusiastic CE existed. Presently, various youth organisations and groups use the hall – this has the two-fold benefit of much needed rental income and practical outreach to the wider community.

Over the years the story of Tullamore Church has been varied, but in good or bad times the members have been sure of God's providence, and faithful in their service and witness – they have kept the faith and could echo Wesley: 'The best of all is God is with us.'