

QUEEN'S ROAD FREE CHURCH

THE EARLY YEARS

by

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PRELUDE

In Victorian Manchester, its Unitarian Association, formed in 1889, was essentially a body of well-to-do gentleman subscribers. It did valuable work in promoting new causes, but a new impetus was gained when it was reformed on a representative basis in 1891 as the body we now know as the Manchester District Association of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. It began to look around for promising areas where the Unitarian faith could be planted and nurtured and had soon pinpointed four promising locations of which Urmston was one.

THE PLANTING

The meeting of the MDA Executive Committee on 1 May 1894 considered new work to be undertaken during the coming winter. The President, John Dendy Jun., a prominent Manchester solicitor, made special reference to the claims of Urmston as a new centre. It was decided to break new ground in this "thriving residential area some miles to the westward of Manchester" by arranging for evening services to be held from October to Christmas and then assess the response. A Mr. George Henshall of Urmston was particularly anxious for services to start. The following month the MDA Mission Committee was authorised to advertise for support and advertisements were placed in the **Manchester Guardian**, the **Manchester City News The Inquirer**, "**Christian Life**" and the **Eccles and Patricroft Journal**.

There was no response to any of these advertisements, but the MDA's hierarchy was made of stern stuff and not easily discouraged. The President and its Superintendent Missionary (Rev. Dendy Agate) visited Urmston and contacted 14 families, including some previously connected with the Upper Brook Street, Longsight, and Moss Side congregations. Not all were inclined to help - a Mr. Richards, who obviously believed in only backing winners, said "he might attend sometimes if successful" - but the overall response was sufficiently encouraging to confirm the project for an autumnal series of services.

A TOE IS DIPPED IN THE WATER

Six services were arranged beginning on 21 October 1894 in the Public Hall. The preachers were Rev. Dendy Agate, Rev. S.A. Steinthal (retired from Cross Street), Rev. J.C. Hirst (Hale), Rev. George Evans (Brookfield) and Rev. W.R. Shanks (Swinton). The subjects of the addresses are interesting as indicating contemporary ideas of the aspects of religion in which Unitarianism had a distinctive message - "*A Religion for Today*", "*The Bible*", "*Our Father*", "*The Christianity of Christ*", "*The Gospel of Self Respect*" and "*Eternal Life*".

By November, the success of the initiative was so pronounced that the MDA Governing Body decided to secure the Hall for a year and ask local friends to defray the future expenses of services and contribute to the costs of the Missioner. The first three services had in fact produced attendances of 62, 120 and 90 with excellent offertories and support from 25 "heads of families". Furthermore, the response from Urmston and the other nascent congregations involved in the "Forward Movement" was such that the MDA Mission Committee recommended that ministerial assistance be engaged for Mr. Agate for a period not exceeding 12 months. The meeting was a long one and the President had to leave, but he was an old hand in over-optimistic forecasts of Unitarian development and his final shot prior to departure was that "the new movement at Urmston . . . had so far been most encouraging, but there was not sufficient data as yet to

warrant the conclusion that the cause was likely to be permanent; further if the movement was to be carried on efficiently some ministerial assistance would become essential".

Thus encouraged, a second series of 5 Sunday evening services was arranged during December. Rev. Dendy Agate and Rev. S.A. Steinthal again contributed, and they were joined by Rev. A.W. Fox (Altrincham), Rev. G.A. Payne (Knutsford) and Rev. Charles Roper (Moss Side). Subjects in this series included *"What is Prayer?"*, *"Our Message"*, *"Believers and Unbelievers"* - and understandably for Christmas and the New Year *"Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men"* and *"Past and Future"*. Explanatory literature could be obtained from Miss Evans of Broom Lea, Stretford, the first woman to be mentioned in connection with the congregation.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

The first heady days were now over, and the local people began to think about the cost of running a new cause. Attendances had never been less than 78 and "the lowest offertory was over £1" - this seems to confirm the notorious Unitarian reluctance to drop meaningful contributions in the collection plate, but of course the value of money was different in those days. After one of the services 40 adults had stayed to consider the future of the movement. "A genuine spirit of earnestness pervaded the meeting" and it was generally felt that Urmstonians would have no difficulty in defraying the local expenses of services and raising a guarantee of £20 - £30 towards the cost of a ministry - this implied continuing financial support from the MDA, as the typical ministerial stipend was £150 p.a. Eight people promised the sum of £8.19.6d and a Committee was appointed to canvass for subscriptions. Sums promised were soon raised to £21.19.0d and a Memorial was presented to the MDA signed by 59 persons, asking for services to be continued throughout 1895, looking forward to the establishment of a permanent congregation and undertaking to pay local expenses and advertising estimated at £40. This intimation was received with great gratification, as it was more encouraging than hard experience elsewhere had led them to expect.

THE RUN UP TO RECOGNITION

So, 1895 dawned with **The Inquirer** printing a glowing account of Urmston's involvement in the **Forward Movement**. The district was fast becoming a populous suburban centre linked to Manchester by a splendid train service: the inducement for city businessmen to live there was well recognised. Many of the attenders at the services were old Unitarians, but many more were converts, who *"by themselves have wrestled with the problems of orthodoxy and longed to be able to join in services where fetters would not bind and indeed where God was worshipped as a God of Love"*. There was, it was said, *"a heartiness, a devoutness, a true ring about the whole business, which is prophetic"* - and there was a desire to start a Sunday School to influence and interest young people.

Mr. W.H. Burgess BA, formerly Gaskell scholar at the Unitarian Home Missionary Board (as UCM was originally called), was appointed as Assistant Missionary to help with the new causes, including Urmston, which undertook to contribute £25 to his stipend. A local Committee had now been elected with G.W. Henshall in the Chair, James Plowman as Treasurer and Sydney Harrop as Secretary. There were 50 householders on the visiting list and attendance at services varied between over 50 to 80, although bad weather in the early weeks of the New Year reduced the average to 44. Nevertheless, the Committee was beginning to spread its wings and it arranged a Soirée at the end of February to which the MDA was invited to send a deputation. The MDA President, the Superintendent and two others were duly appointed. There must have been a productive exchange of views at the Soirée where there had been "a pleasant character . . . and a good spirit", because at a very short meeting of the MDA Executive Committee it was suggested that Mr. Agate invited Urmston to affiliate itself as soon as possible to the Association: it was obviously felt that in under 6 months Urmston was fit and ready for recognition as a fully-fledged congregation.

At the MDA Annual Meeting in March the President's mention of the remarkable success at Urmston was greeted with applause, but he then went on with his habitual caution *"How far was the vitality to be maintained or how far was it to be a temporary accompaniment of a novelty and destined to die gradually away, leaving them face to face with increased responsibilities?"*. He felt grave anxiety that could only be discharged if there was a corresponding increase in vitality within the older churches. John Dendy, the habitual pessimist, obviously had doubts on that score.

In fact, after the first flurry of enthusiasm, the adherents at Urmston were now stabilising on the basis of a more modest, but committed, membership and an average attendance at services of 42. Provision for the young people was kept very much in mind and in May there was a Children's Flower Service. The Committee would have liked a more suitable meeting place for a Sunday School, but it decided to take the plunge in the existing rented premises. An afternoon Sunday School was launched on 29 September 1895 under the direction of the Ministers in charge (Agate and Burgess). It was explained that there was no desire to detach children from existing Sunday Schools. At a subsequent MDA meeting J.R. Beard (Brookfield) doubtless speaking from his experience of his own church's very large Sunday School, emphasised that a Sunday School should always be part of the church and not a separate organisation. The publicity leaflet featured suitable quotations from Wordsworth, "Tom Brown's Schooldays" and the Bible, including a rather odd verse from Genesis 48 v.16 "God bless the lads". 25 children attended on the first Sunday.

Meanwhile Ministers from established congregations loyally continued their support. The autumn services were conducted by the Missioners together with Rev. S.A. Steinthal, Rev. Walter Reynolds (Ainsworth) and Rev. A.H. Dolphin (Pendleton). Sermon subjects included "*The Eternal Goodness*", "*Mind and Heart in Religion*", "*The World's Harvest*", "*Hindrances to Religious Progress*" and "*Christ the Liberator*". The Harvest Festival featured special hymns and collections for the Sunday School with an additional Young People's Service in the afternoon.

Concern was, however, being increasingly felt within the MDA at the implications of supporting no less than 4 Mission Stations. The lynch pin of the **Forward Movement**, Dendy Agate, would inevitably move on. Money must somehow be found to get the new causes into their own buildings with full congregational status. Mr. Beard thought £10,000 was required and proposed a Grand Bazaar. Mr. Harding, a somewhat diffident Lower Mosley Street Schools Sunday School teacher, who had reluctantly succeeded John Dendy as President, said that he had a dread of bazaars, but could see no other way of raising the money and would throw himself heart and soul into the project. Meanwhile an appeal was made for subscribers to the **Forward Movement** for a three-year period - Urmston, like the other Mission Stations, was said not yet to be ready to assume entire responsibility for its finances but was progressing and might be reasonably expected to contribute a larger sum each year.

CONGREGATIONAL STATUS

Urmston was formally constituted as a congregation on 24 November 1895 with adults and children from 40 households, an average attendance of 51 and a Sunday School with an average attendance of 28 scholars and 4 teachers. On 3 December 1895, its application to join the District Association was approved by the MDA and its representatives, S.O. Harrop (The Ferns, Gladstone Road) and James Plowman (Arrandale, Crofts Bank Road) were welcomed to the Governing Body's meeting.

The new congregation lost no time in approving rules (8 December 1895). These were commendably brief. A member, qualified to vote in congregational affairs and to sit on the Committee, had to have attained the age of 18, pay a minimum subscription of 2/6d, and then wait for 3 months before enjoying the privileges of membership. The Committee was to be 12 in number and to elect its own officers. No time was wasted on theological statements or objectives - the rules simply stated, "*There shall be no doctrinal test of membership*". In fact, Dendy Agate said they were so simple that he had not deemed it necessary to submit them for approval to the MDA Committee. A membership roll containing between 50 and 60 names was being compiled.

THE GRAND BAZAAR INITIATED

Urmston may have become a congregation, but like other churches fostered by the **Forward Movement** it was without a home of its own. In January 1896 after much debate and disputation the MDA finally decided to hold its Grand Bazaar for providing church buildings at the same time as the Royal Agricultural Show in 1897. At the Annual Meeting in March, it was stressed that in none of the "Forward Movement" congregations were there people of accumulated means to provide the necessary finance - in other words, if the MDA did not set them up in buildings of their own, there was little possibility of their managing it themselves. However, Urmston was determined to do its bit and undertook to "raise a stall" at the Bazaar to fetch in £500 and opened a Subscription List for the Bazaar.

Good progress was being made. By June 1896, the Sunday School had 40 scholars on its books and a Sewing Society was formed. 110 were present for the Flower Service and 77 at a Scholars' Service, but there still existed the old Unitarian bugbear of derisory contributions to the offertory, which was said to be "*sometimes scarcely up to a desirable level*": in fact, the collection from the 187 present at the two Flower services only raised a very modest £2.9.7d. Perhaps there was hope for the future, for Mr. Henshall was said to be conducting "a good class of lads."

1897: THE YEAR OF THE BAZAAR

1897 dawned with a programme of preachers in January, including Rev. C. J. Street (Blackley), Rev. W.E. Atack, Rev. Dendy Agate and Rev. G.D. Hicks and a series of sermons on "Great Teachers of the Victorian Age" - Thomas Carlyle, John Bright and Matthew Arnold being covered. G.W. Henshall ("Aliwal", Roseneath Road) was Chairman, W. Canning ("Ablaton", Princess Road) Treasurer and S.O Harrop Secretary. A Children's Dramatic Performance with recitations had the high admission charge for the era of "Adults 1/-, children 6d." Principal Alexander Gordon of the Home Missionary Board, the famous Unitarian historian, preached at Urmston on Mission Sunday in March.

Preparations for the Grand Bazaar were proceeding apace - MDA congregations had already raised £1,000 apart from contributions in goods and there were plans to include a picture gallery of works by Unitarian artists. Concurrently building plans were being progressed. The MDA Executive Committee was willing to consider any proposals put forward for the sites of the new churches. Urmston was concentrating on fund raising, having already raised, nearly £300 in money and goods for the Bazaar, but it was not yet ready with a site. Meanwhile the **Forward Movement** had a ministerial crisis - Rev. Dendy Agate resigned in November on accepting a call to Altrincham and his assistant, Rev. W.E. Burgess, wanted his appointment to terminate at the end of the year. The MDA Executive Committee managed to persuade the latter to continue into the New Year subject to 6 weeks notice terms.

The Grand Bazaar was duly held over 5 days 2 - 6 November 1897 and raised the extraordinary sum of nearly £10,000. Support was given from London, Bolton and elsewhere outside the District and there were 24 stalls; there were three different refreshment rooms, the Band of the Royal Marine Light Infantry played each afternoon and evening and the Art Gallery included 250 works. The Urmston stall raised £424.1.2d under the direction of Mrs. McLeod, Mrs. G.W. Henshall, Mrs. A. Henshall and Miss Evans - planning of the bazaar had been conjointly organised by a male General Committee and a Ladies Executive Committee, but the stallholders on the day were practically all women.

If the Bazaar had been a notable example of co-operation, distribution of the proceeds proved otherwise. There were opposing views as to whether need or the amounts raised should be the criterion. Some felt that resources should be husbanded and there was an accusation that the Committee represented conservative elements in the Association. Whatever the rights or wrongs, Urmston obviously felt it had to strike while the iron was hot and sent Messrs. Canning and Matley to a meeting of the Bazaar Committee three days before Christmas. They urged early erection of a building, as there was no chance of progress in the Public Hall. Rev. S.A. Steinthal suggested erection of a temporary iron church and Rev Dendy Agate favoured the erection of a small building under the supervision of the two missionaries.

1898: BUILDING PLANS

Urmston representatives continued to urge that a building was more important to their cause than a Minister. Plans should be passed to the MDA which would also approve Trust Deeds and provision for payment of Chief rents. On completion the property was to be transferred to Trustees - otherwise the MDA would have power to close the Church and sell at its discretion. The plans of a possible site were put into the hands of surveyors. A triangular plot on Stretford Road was thought most suitable. Strangely the congregation was not inclined to take any initiative in finding a site, so responsibility devolved on the MDA. Mr. Paterson (MDA Vice-President) interviewed the agent for the site, but in the course of his visit observed an apparently more convenient site on Queen's Road at a much lower Chief Rent and Urmston was asked for the considerations inducing them to prefer a triangular site to the Queen's Road plot, which was square. By June 1898, the congregation had decided to accept Queen's Road at a lower Chief Rent of £10/12/-, whilst pointing out the decision was based on the MDA suggestion rather than its own judgement. It was decided to

proceed with the conveyance and the MDA agreed to pay £9 to the tenant of the Queen's Road site for the purchase of his turnip crop (the vendor Mrs. Ridehalgh paid a similar sum).

By July Mr. W. Canning, the congregation's Treasurer, had been appointed architect and a Notice Board was erected on the site. The land (853 1/3 sq. yards) was purchased, and the architect authorised to proceed with obtaining builders' estimates at not more than £1,400. His list of constructors was approved, and five tenders were submitted between £1,682 - £1,786. The MDA noted that the target was being exceeded by around £300: it thought that a porch and vestry were not absolutely necessary. The two lowest tenderers were contacted for revised quotations and reductions in respect of the vestry and porch of around £250 were obtained. William Shaw's estimate of £1,436 was accepted and the overall MDA grant was increased from £1,400 to £1,550 (Canning said that 200 chairs would cost another £35). Eventually the porch was reinstated in the plans subject to the congregation's assurance that it would meet any expenditure above £1,550. Its Secretary gave the guarantee and £75 was pledged by the stalwart G.W. Henshall, who lived at Field House, Stretford Road.

1899: THE CHURCH IS BUILT

Building operations began on 7 March 1899, but all did not go smoothly. In September the architect, who lived at Rothiemay Road, Flixton, reported that the work was behindhand. The Terra Cotta had been delivered late and in the wrong order. The walls and roof were practically complete, concrete floors and joists laid, internal joinery well forward, leaded lights and other work in hand. A plasterers' strike had however had a serious knock-on effect and another 3 months would be required. The new Church was finally opened on 27 January 1900, although not until March did the MDA finally approve its name "**Queen's Road Free Church - Unitarian services**". The final bills were paid by the MDA to the contractor and architect and a vote of thanks given to the architect for his interest. There were obviously some advantages in retaining a Church officer as architect - the extras above the builder's contract price amounted to the princely sum of £1.3.7d.

1900: PROGRESS TOWARDS A SETTLED MINISTRY

The congregation had repeatedly urged the priority of the building. In wintry weather the Public Hall had proved impossible to heat. With the Church built it could turn its attention to the desirability of a settled ministry. From August 1899 Mr. Davison, Senior Student at the Home Missionary Board, had successfully undertaken pastoral duties - he lodged in Urmston, was paid 15/- per week plus a rail contract between Manchester and Urmston. At the end of the College year in June he did not wish to renew his engagement and another student Mr. Schroeder was invited to take charge of Urmston from July - September - conducting services, visiting, and supervising Sunday School and local work for a fee of £1.11.6d per Sunday. The congregation was well pleased and wanted him on permanent basis, but the student would not commit himself beyond the completion of his studies. The MDA Mission Committee asked the congregation if it would guarantee £150 towards the appointment of a Minister; the MDA would pay £100 towards this sum during the first year, diminishing by 5% per annum. The congregation accepted and in May 1901 offered Rev. H. Kilsey White the pulpit and the appointment was effected from 1 July.

The new Minister inherited a congregation with an average attendance of about 60, a membership of 59, a Sunday School attendance of around 40. Monthly social meetings with lectures were being held. A Guild for young people with a membership of 53 held monthly meetings and weekly classes in singing, wood carving and sewing. A Rambling Club arranged Saturday excursions and there was a much-improved choir. At the MDA Annual Meeting in March 1902, it was stated that the congregation and its Minister were in hearty accord and the latter was aiming for 100 members before the end of the year.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

With the congregation firmly installed in its own building and with its own Minister it is now appropriate to conclude this account of the early years of Queen's Road Free Church. One final word - on 2 February 1900 George Highfield Leigh, John Dendy, and George William Rayner Wood on behalf of the MDA put the land and buildings in Trust to be "*used for the worship of God, religious purposes or promotion of education, literature and science*". The MDA was required to appoint trustees and only in 1994 has a new Trust Deed

been drafted to replace the individual trustees by the MDA itself in its present capacity as a Trust Corporation. The MDA still has the residual power to determine regulations and conditions for the use of the buildings, but for nearly 100 years the congregation through good times and bad times has proved well capable of looking after its own affairs and giving witness to the Unitarian cause.

[This presentation was delivered at a church event on 12 February 1994 and is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.]

AND AFTER THAT

**by
Robert Haslam & Frances Teagle**

Some historical notes from those early times until the present

Members

The registered number of members in 1902 was 89 including Mr Thomas Crabtree of Manor Hey, Stretford Road, Urmston, Dr E Quayle of 'Belmont', Flixton Road, Urmston, Mr W Canning (Architect) of Rothiway Road, Flixton, Mr Dickenson of Western House, Western Road, Flixton, Mr Alfred Henshall of Irlamere, Irlam Road, Flixton, Mrs Noar of Carrington Lodge, Carrington, Mr Robert Mayer and family of 43 Lily Street Urmston, Mr George Thomas of Old Hall, Irlam, the Chadwick family of 41 Princess Road, Urmston.

The Literary and Social Union

A look at the records for the early years reveals a busy social and educational programme. The Literary and Social Union was the main focus of activity outside of church services and Sunday School. It met on Tuesdays and Saturdays at 8.00 pm and provided programmes of music, Shakespeare, lectures, lantern lectures and general socials. These meetings were always well attended.

Among the other events in a typical month in those pre-television days were the Scholars' Recitation Class and the Shakespeare Reading Class, the Gymnastic and Recreation classes (boys and girls separately, of course), wood-carving classes, choir practice, and a choir social.

Committee Meetings - December 1894 to October 1895

All this activity required organisation and supervision, beginning with a Congregational Meeting on the 16th of December to elect their committee members. The new committee met for the first time at Urmston Public Hall four days later and chose their officers. At the next meeting on January 6th, 1895, they fixed their regular venue as Mr Plowman's house, on Wednesday evenings.

Not surprisingly, with a new congregation to organise, their meetings were rather more frequent than ours. Another eleven had taken place by the beginning of October, 1895, in which they debated their responsibilities, Mission Sunday and their relationships with other churches, canvassed the congregation's opinion on starting a Sunday School, resolved that the Sunday School should open in September (it duly did so on the 29th September, with 26 children attending), discussed MDA membership and recommended the congregation to join it. And, of course, heard the Treasurer's Report: rent £7/10/-; Hall Keeper 21/-; printing 15/-; cash in hand £5/3/-.

Almost as busy, were the Soirée Committee, who met six times during this period, fixing dates, ticket prices (1/- and 6d) and who should provide the refreshments.

Services

At that time two services were held every Sunday, morning and evening, and Sunday School in the afternoon. The morning services were not as well attended as the evening services, the average offertories being 8/2d for a morning service and 14/7d for an evening service. There were three special Sundays where attendances were well above average, these were:

Harvest	27 September	18/6d morning	£2.2.0d evening
Choir Sunday	29 November	18/- morning	£1.15.6d evening
Special Music	30 December (evng.)	5/8d morning	£1.2.7½d evening

The lowest attendance and offertories occurred on 2nd August 5/6d morning; 5/7d evening.

Income and Expenditure in 1902

The total income of 1902 was £219 of which £ 97/5/- was by way of a grant from the MDA. Offertory totalled £ 66/7/- and subscriptions and registrations £41/4/-, the balance being donations from the Literary and Social Union and several other groups.

The main items of expenditure in 1902 were as follows:

Minister's stipend		153.1
Caretaker	15.1	
Gas, coke, and water		13.3
Furnishings	13.7	
Hire of piano and organ		5.2
Chief rent & insurance		11.3
Other items		19.3
		=====
Total		£ 231.0
		=====

Sunday School Extension 1910

In 1909 plans were made to extend the church building to provide two additional classrooms for the Sunday School. These plans were approved on 27 June 1909 at an estimated cost of £330. Mr Crabtree of 'Manor Hey' offered to pay for the redecoration of the church and schoolroom (including the new extension) as he had not been able to assist directly in the bazaar of 30 April/1st May. This 2-day bazaar, held in the Public Hall, raised £135, of which £100 was allocated to the cost of the Sunday School extension.

The Sunday School extension was opened officially on 24 September 1910. According to the programme, in the afternoon there was to be a cricket match, a team representing the Urmston congregation would play against a team from the three other churches in the circuit, to finish at 5.30 pm. Tea would be served in the schoolroom at 6.00 pm. Should our stock of crockery be insufficient further crockery would be borrowed. Mrs Crabtree would declare the extension open at a meeting to be held in church at 7.00 pm. Two hundred tickets would be printed for the event to be sold at 1/- each for adults and 6d each of scholars. The out-turn cost of the extension was less than the estimate, £316.6 compared with £330.

The period 1910 - 1950

This was blighted by two major wars. By 1916 it was noted that "*The war so far has not diminished our numbers nor our fervour though our advance has certainly been checked, the average attendance at our evening service was 37 and at our morning service 21. The congregation is working in excellent spirit and unity.*" However, morning services were discontinued in 1917.

By 1935 attendances had kept up well despite not having a regular minister but on average were down to about 25 per service. The Rev E J R Cook became minister in the second half of 1939 and from 17th September service times were changed from 6.30 pm to 3.30 pm because of blackout conditions. The average attendance declined further this year to 22.5 and this decline continued falling to 11.5 for 1945.

Attendance after the war began to recover, 12.1 average in 1947. A congregational meeting after service on 23 November 1947 agreed to the proposal of a part-time ministry of Rev E R Vallance. This was confirmed on 4 January 1948 at a cost of £25 p.a., and she was inducted on 14 February 1948.

Elsbeth Vallance took on her ministerial duties with dedication and vigour and this is evident from the revival of the church including new members, new activities, and a rise in average attendance at services (evenings) to 19.0 in 1948, 22 in 1949 and 1950. Women ministers were a novelty then and the local press printed a photograph of Elspeth on the autocycle she used to do her rounds on.

The period 1951 to 1994

The 28th of February 1951 saw the death of Mr R S Mayer, Treasurer, and member since 1894 - the end of an era. In May there was a YPL rally of the N W Region which included 4 German boys and 4 German girls representing the German Unitarian church. On 28th September, a concert was held by the Urmston Orchestral Society in aid of the Building Restoration fund, with 92 people attending. And on 18th November a special service (6.15pm) celebrated the dedication of the pipe organ from Mill Street Unitarian church, Bradford, Manchester.

The Pipe Organ

A notable DIY performance, this organ, weighing several tons, was acquired from Mill Street Unitarian Chapel, Bradford, Manchester and was rebuilt, under the supervision of the organ builder Tom Ball, in the northwest corner of the chapel by church members, notably Ben Hodkinson, William Mason and Robert Haslam. Stanley Pollard performed the vital task of reinforcing the floor to take the extra weight. This enterprise featured in the local press and there exists a delightful photograph of Ben blowing into an 8-foot pipe, held up by Robert. For a while, the organ had to be hand pumped, but in March 1953 an electric blower was installed, to the relief of the pump handlers.

Between 22 March and 7 October 1953, we hosted the Urmston Branch of the Christian Scientists whilst their own new building was being erected.

By 1956 average attendance was 16.5. Morning services were held all year.

Ministry of Rev P B Godfrey 1956 - 1968

There was another change when afternoon services were begun on 13 October 1957 and morning services were discontinued. A new beginning was made when the Dramatic Society was established in October 1957. During this period Peter Godfrey established the Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow Fund.

The Annexe - 1958 to 1983

When Cross Street Chapel in central Manchester, a casualty of the Blitz, was rebuilt, the concrete temporary building that had housed the congregation was offered to Queen's Road. Being practised at DIY, Queen's Roaders carefully numbered all the sections, dismantled the building, transported it to Urmston and re-erected it. In a very sharp move, the new floorboards were acquired from a row of quite new houses which were being demolished to make way for the M63 motorway. Again, local interest was aroused, and photographs of the builders at work got into the local newspapers. Work went on through 1958 and the Annexe was officially opened on 14 February 1959.

The Annexe served as a vital focus of activities for the whole community for about 25 years. Regular whist drives, organised by church members, were a great feature of local life. Among the societies using the premises were: The Urmston Historical Society, The Urmston Camera Club, the Amateur Dramatic Society, and a ballet school. However, in August 1982 the renewal of planning permission was refused by the local council, owing partly to dilapidation and maintenance problems, and partly to complaints by neighbours about noise. The committee called in an acoustics expert from Salford University who testified that there was no excess noise, especially above the background level of the traffic, but its days were numbered, and it was demolished soon after.

Ministry of Rev J A Midgley 1968 - 1988

During this period John Midgley established the Flower Communion Service and the Toy Service (in aid of Manchester's Family Service Unit) as a regular part of our calendar.

Dry Rot, Drains and Watermains

The bane of every church, it seems. 1929 saw the expenditure of £12/19/3d on dry rot repairs in the schoolroom, a comparatively new building, plus £1/5/- for a new water main. 1951 saw another severe episode of dry rot, and in 1956, the kitchen was attacked by the dreaded fungus as well. To bring things right up to date, 1994 has had two episodes of drains and sewers and more dry rot in the schoolroom. Watch this space.

Ministry of Rev Celia Midgley and Current Activities

This era has seen the arrival of new members and the rapid expansion of congregational activity. The church is still very much a focal point of community life. The ballet school has gone from strength to strength, its pupils winning prizes and scholarships at national level; the St. John's Ambulance Brigade is also a regular user of our premises. The collection of wastepaper performs a valued local service, besides netting some extra income for the church.

New Buildings

In these recent years, a Creche and a Mother and Toddler group were founded at the suggestion of Liz Bazley, a service of inestimable value to the local mothers. And it was this, in a way, which led to our next building project. In order to comply with new regulations, we had to improve our toilet facilities, which were rather ancient and lacked provision for wheelchairs. It was decided to demolish the small lean-to building and build anew, incorporating a ramp for wheelchair access as well. After struggles with the planning authorities, work started in January of this year and was recently completed. It was realised that there was an excellent opportunity to put in a new kitchen under the stairs, and this was duly done, to the infinite satisfaction of the congregation and other users. MDA loans and grants financed this work, plus a burst of fund-raising activities which will continue in order to pay off our loans.

Romanian Link

Both John and Celia Midgley had taken part in a rather undercover scheme to support Unitarians in Romania who were suffering under the yoke of Ceausescu's brand of communism. After the fall of the regime, members of Queen's Road and Dunham Road, Altrincham combined to form Romanian Link. A fact-finding visit arranged by the Rev Austin Fitzpatrick of Mill Hill Chapel; Leeds swiftly identified the main needs. We now support a clinic in Sighisoara, a hospital in Odarheiu Secuiesc, and have given aid to several other projects as well, notably the Francis David Conference Centre at Homerudszentmarton. Members have raised money, bought medicines and equipment, driven cars and ambulances to Transylvania and kept in constant touch with our Romanian friends. To do this, we have enjoyed the support of the local community and the denomination at large.

Some Other Activities

Thanks to Liz Bazley, who has a brother in the business, we now hold a bedding plant sale every year, sometimes two. Spring and Autumn Fairs are other important items on our fixture lists. These sales are greatly appreciated by the local people who attend in large numbers.

The Great Hucklow holiday home has enjoyed our support frequently in recent years, the family weekend, the one-day visit, visits to their open day, etc. (The Barrel Inn further up the hill has also enjoyed our custom.)

Centennial Junketings

The congregation made up their minds to celebrate in style throughout 1994. On the serious side, a Centenary Exhibition was prepared and shown for two weeks in Urmston Library in March, where it attracted a lot of favourable comment. It has just been updated and exhibited again in October. A Civic Service was held on Sunday 20th of March in the presence of the President of the General Assembly, the Mayor of Trafford, MDA officers and friends from Altrincham congregation.

On the far from serious side, wine and cheese evenings, treasure hunts, an Old Time Music Hall concert by the Knutsford Knuts (uproarious), a ballet and barbecue evening (lovely) and a weekend at Great Hucklow which included a buffet dance with an unforgettable auction of craftware brought from Transylvania (proceeds to the new church at Albesti).

The visit of our Sighisoara friends, the Rev Ferenc Nagy, and his wife Piroska during the month of July was a great highlight, starting with an impromptu garden party at the Haslam house. Lots of church members took their summer holidays and showed Feri and Piroska the sights. Feri's "*Let's go*" address on Sunday 17th was later printed and handed round the congregation as a memento. A marvelous and exhausting time was had by all, and the weather remained perfect.

The Centenary Celebrations ended with a Buffet Dance and the Centenary Service on the 23rd of October, to mark the 100th anniversary of the Founding Service, attended by former ministers, with contributions from members old and new. This was followed, in the schoolroom, by a warm toast to the future of this resilient and notable church and congregation.

The Present Congregation

Feri Nagy remarked upon the happy family atmosphere in the church. Our age range is from two to . . . well, that would be telling. Our activities extend far beyond church services, but we value our Sunday meetings immensely as a time to gather and reflect on the 'moral maze' and gain comfort and support from our minister and each other. The children attend the first part of the service, which usually contains a children's story, before departing for their own activities in the schoolroom. After the service people tend to stand around chatting, arranging events or clearing the chairs in preparation for the ballet school. Birthdays and special events are often celebrated with a cake and drinks and newcomers and visitors are welcomed.

The congregation believes that Queen's Road Unitarian Free Church is there to serve the whole community. They work hard to keep the building in good repair and up-to-date and they are glad to see it used by local people. Long may it continue.

October 1994.