

Church Attendance in Past Times

Ewelme News, June-July 2013

In Victorian and Edwardian times community life was centred on the school (as a venue for indoor social events), the Church and the two non-conformist chapels. The Parochial Notes entry for May 1913 for St Mary's Church reported the meeting to elect the Church wardens and sidesmen. Volunteers were hard to come by and the writer bemoaned the fact that the attendance was small and ... *'it might be wished more interest was shown in these meetings.'* However, volunteers came forward and the long serving Mr R T Franklin was re-elected People's Warden; the Rector nominated Mr H W Orpwood as a Church Warden and Mr L Palmer and Mr G Hartnup were proposed as Sidesmen. The Church accounts showed an adverse balance of £5 19s 10d for the year as special expenses had been incurred with the cleaning of the church walls. However, the deficit was reduced to £2 19s 10d by the addition of £3, being the visitors' contributions for the year. The writer added – *'We think the members of the congregation might be a little more liberal in their offerings for the maintenance of the Church and its Services.'*

Church and chapel attendance was still high as it was socially 'the thing to do' to be considered respectable on a Sunday. This was highlighted by a census taken on Sunday March 30th 1851 of the numbers attending Christian church or chapel in England and Wales. As the social and religious habits of a small agrarian community had not changed appreciably in the 62 years since the census, we can assume that the services were still well supported in 1913.

The census returns provide some enviable statistics.

In 1851 Ewelme was credited with a population of 673 souls. 'The Parish Church of St Mary. Free sittings (including school children) 220, other sittings 184. Twenty inches allowed to a sitting except with the school children. On the 30th March 1851 the morning congregation was 163. Sunday Scholars were 97, (lower than normal due to the absence of the mistress). In the afternoon the congregation numbered 203. The average attendance over the year for morning services was 170 and 220 for the afternoon. Sunday scholars averaged 110. The report submitted by the Curate, Rev Thomas Gillam and signed by William Jacobsen, (Rector).'

'Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. [The present Village Shop] Erected in 1826 as a building used exclusively for worship. Free sittings 64; other sittings 45. On the census day the morning congregation numbered 48 and 90 attended the evening service. Average attendance during the previous 12 months was 45 for the morning congregation and 70 in the evening. The report was signed by James White. (Steward).'

'Primitive Methodist Chapel. [Situated on the site now the car park at Suffolk House] Erected 1849 exclusively for worship. Free sittings 60; other sittings 39. On the census day the afternoon general congregation was 60 and the evening 88. Average attendance during the previous 6 months for the afternoon service was 50 and the evening service 60. Signed by the Minister - G Wallace.'

As we advance into the 21st century the decline in village church attendance is extending to all rural places of worship and is not particular to Ewelme despite the benefice being enlarged.

Ewelme Village Archive