



## HASTINGS & ST LEONARDS OBSERVER REPORT FOR 15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 1881

### LOCAL CONGREGATIONALISTS AT SEDLESCOMBE PLEASANT EVENING AT THE CHAPEL

(See also "Sedlescombe Congregationalists where this evening is mentioned")

"A large gathering of a most interesting character was held in the above place on Wednesday evening. At five o'clock the children of the Sunday School, with their teachers and a few friends, in all about seventy, accepted the invitation of Mr Tuppenney to tea.

"The little ones having had their wants supplied, the teachers partook of tea together, after which an adjournment to the vestry was made, for a "business" meeting at which matters concerning the welfare of the school were discussed.

"Mr Avann, was requested by the teachers to undertake the duties of superintendent for the ensuing year, and Mr Cook was unanimously appointed librarian. About thirty volumes have been presented as a nucleus by Mr Large, of Hastings, and it was stated by Mr Tuppenney that he had no doubt that help in this respect would be forthcoming from other friends.

"At seven o'clock the chapel was filled to overflowing, when a Service of Song, illustrative of 'The Pilgrim's Progress', was given with dissolving views, etc.

"The Service commenced with prayer by Mr Morris, and the congregation singing 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus'.

"Mr Tuppenney then gave a short account of the life of Bunyan, and threw upon the screen about forty splendid pictures, photographed from life, showing the journeyings of the 'Pilgrim'. These were interspersed with connective readings and about a dozen hymns which, with the music, were also thrown upon the sheet and effectively rendered by a choir of ladies and gentlemen from Battle, under the leadership of Mr Caleb Jenner. Miss Pepper presided at the harmonium; the service brought to a close with prayer by the reader (Mr Tuppenney). A collection was then made on behalf of the proposed new chapel at Robertsbridge, which realised £2. After this a variety of views, chromotropes, etc., were shown (including views of Sedlescombe Chapel by day and night, summer and winter scenes, snowstorms, etc.), to the great delight of those present, who at half-past nine, seemed most reluctant to make the homeward journey. At the close oranges were distributed to the children by a lady who had come from Hastings.

"Amongst those present were several who had walked from Robertsbridge, Brede and other distant places. Thanks were given to those who had made the evening enjoyable, including Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Cook, Mrs. Crampton, etc., who managed the tea.

"It was stated that the Sunday school, which commenced with three scholars in August, now numbered between fifty and sixty, the average attendance being about fifty."



## **ANALYSIS**

An analysis of this Hastings & St Leonards Observer newspaper article gives a brief glimpse into Victorian life in Sedlescombe.

## **SUNDAY SCHOOL**

The meteoric rise in numbers of children attending the Sunday School detailed at the end of the report illustrates how successful the teachers and helpers at the Chapel were in encouraging Village children to the new Congregational Chapel at a time. Compulsory education had quite recently been introduced and, therefore, most, if not all, the children would have known each other because they would be attending the Sedlescombe Church of England School in the Village at the bottom of Church Hill.

## **TEA-TIME**

The time was important as 5 o'clock was the time for afternoon tea in late Victorian times. Feeding seventy children and their teachers would have been quite a task. There certainly was no room for tables and chairs and the tea must have been taken sitting in the pews. The invitation to a free light meal of cakes, biscuits, bread and butter and tea would have been inviting for children living in the village, most of whom would have come from relatively poor working class agricultural families.

Making a cup of tea would not have been straightforward.

- There was no gas or electricity. The Chapel only had electricity installed in the early 1930s and it still does not have a gas supply even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- The light, such as it was, may have been provided by oil lamps that had the disadvantage of being smoky or bad smelling or even candles which were quite dangerous and not very bright in a large space.
- There was no running water. All water had to be pumped from the well at the rear of the Chapel, carried into the Chapel and boiled.
- There were no tea bags; tea was sold loose, and care had to be taken that it was not counterfeit or recycled and that it did not include leaves from trees.
- Probably large catering sized tea pots would have been used to pour out the tea.
- Milk was usually taken and that could have been quite easily obtained from the dairy farm opposite (Luffs Farm).
- The addition of sugar to the tea was a common practice and often preferred by children.
- And when all the eating had been done, how was the washing up accomplished? There were of course no dishwashers.

## **TRAVEL TO THE SEDLESCOMBE CHAPEL**

When the children arrived for tea, they would not have been dropped off at the door by their parents. In the early 1880s, there were no motor vehicles at all and it would be a further twenty years before they could be seen on English roads and then they were never owned by the ordinary "man in the street". The children would have come along the roads and lanes in



twos and threes or on their own, sometimes walking but often running along. We know that some families attending the Chapel came from distant farms and cottages.

Many of the adults who arrived for the evening event in such numbers that the article described the chapel as “overflowing” would have come on foot (or Shanks’s pony as it was called). Those attending from reasonably closer to the Chapel, particularly those living in the cottages in the centre of Sedlescombe or on the surrounding farms, would certainly have done so. At the end of the article, mention is made that some of those who walked came from Robertsbridge (7 miles away), Brede (3 ½ miles) “and other distant places”. Brisk walking of 7 miles was bound to take at least two hours. There and back would of course mean a four-hour trek along pitch black roads and lanes and possibly cross country via the fields as well.

Frederick Tuppenney would have come from Hastings where he was living, as would some of the others who attended, and they would have arrived by some form of pony/horse and trap. This would not have been pleasant in inclement weather conditions and this event was held in the middle of January when snow and ice may have been on the ground. Certainly, the country roads would not have been made up with tarmac. By the mid-1880s, waste cinder from the piles left over from Roman ironworking sites in Sedlescombe had been used to give some kind of surface to the roads but Sedlescombe’s roads even in the centre of the village were not properly made up until 1912.

A newspaper report in June 1878 of the Anniversary of the Congregational Chapel at Dallington which was led by Frederick Tuppenney details that people arrived: “*in Brakes<sup>1</sup> (pair and four-horse), carriages. Carts, vans etc.*” and it can therefore be presumed that similar modes of horse transport would be used for this meeting at Sedlescombe. Wherever would the conveyances park when they did arrive at the Chapel and who looked after the horses while the passengers were inside the Chapel?

A letter to the newspaper from Frederick Tuppenney dating from a few months before the Chapel was built explains the difficulties of travelling by horse drawn vehicle at night from Hastings to Sedlescombe. Frederick and his companion had hoped to reach Sedlescombe from Hastings in an hour but anyone walking from Hastings would have taken double that time. Frederick goes on to explain what happened:

“2<sup>nd</sup> February 1879

“..... On Sunday last I started about 6.30 pm intending to reach Sedlescombe in an hour; but owing to the wind and weather (it was a very rough and dark night) we were longer than usual in reaching the Harrow. Our spirited animal then started off at a brisk trot down the hill, but we had not proceeded more than two hundred yards when my companion (a well-known minister) exclaimed “What is that?” I immediately pulled up and found that “that” was a barrier placed across the road and that we were within a yard or so of it. By the aid of our carriage lamps, we discovered a *dark* lantern hung upon a post, and a notice “that the road was stopped, owing to the Harrow Hill being impassable”.



Frederick goes on to explain that with a lot of trouble they managed to light the candle in the lantern, but it was blown out again at once. They had no option but to turn round and return to Hastings. The next day Frederick went back to see what had happened to the road and found that behind the barrier the road had subsided “causing a chasm of at least six or seven feet deep and ten or twelve feet wide across the road”.

(Interestingly, subsidence occurred on the same hill in 2023, when the road again had to be closed for a time.)

## **GIFT OF BOOKS**

Frederick Tuppenney would have been very interested in starting a library in Sedlescombe Chapel especially when someone made a start by gifting about thirty books. Ordinary working-class people were unlikely to have owned books, apart from their Bible and many of the older ones would have been unable to either read or write.

## **LIBRARIAN**

Mr Cook was appointed librarian. He was probably the gardener who, according to the 1881 census, lived with his family in Manor House Cottages in The Street, Sedlescombe. Mr and Mrs Cook had three daughters, eight-year-old twins and a 4-year-old who by the time of the 1891 census was described as a “cripple”.

In 1875, another one of Frederick’s many voluntary jobs was Secretary of the Mechanics Institute in Hastings which ran from 1833-1885. Mechanics Institutes were opened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century throughout the country to provide education for working men’s families and often included libraries. Even as a youngster in Tunbridge Wells, Frederick had been on the committee of the Mechanics Institute and there is a strong likelihood that he owed his own



*1The Brassey Institute, Claremont, Hastings built by Thomas Brassey in 1877-78 and still in use as a public library in the 21st century.*

high educational standard that allowed him to chair meetings, to debate and persuade, to lecture and preach in such a way that many were encouraged to listen, to the Mechanics Institute. Frederick was on many committees through his life, and he was often chosen to chair the meetings. His ability to play the organ that is mentioned in the newspaper report of the Dallington meeting referred to earlier, was probably learned at the Institute. The Institutes provided various classes in literacy, numeracy, French, geography, science and technical subjects as well as music. The cost was often borne by employers who were keen for their employees to be educated.

In Hastings, it was Thomas Brassey MP’s wish to build a multi-purpose building that would be a real benefit to the working classes in Hastings and St Leonards. In 1877-78 The Brassey Institute and the Observer Printworks were built in Claremont <sup>2</sup> quite



close to Robertson Street Church. As a committee member of the Mechanics Institute Frederick would have known all about it.

On the ground floor of The Brassey Institute was housed a library, reading room and classrooms for the Mechanics Institute. In 1881, it was turned into a public library. Even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Brassey Institute still houses the Hastings Public Library.

### **“PILGRIM’S PROGRESS” BY JOHN BUNYAN AND THE MAGIC LANTERN**

Although the ability to project images onto a sheet or screen was already quite old, in the 1870s and 1880s the use of magic lanterns became very popular with the advent of photographs that could be used on glass slides in halls and churches. The trade in lanterns and slides greatly increased at this time and firms selling them sprang up all over the country. In London alone, there were thirty firms.<sup>3</sup>

Despite John Bunyan’s Christian story book being written in 1678, it was the subject chosen for the magic lantern show given by Frederick Tuppenney in the Chapel in January 1881 that attracted so many people to attend. The newspaper report provides the information that the pictures illustrating the “Pilgrim’s Progress” were “photographed from life” and that there were about forty of them. “Pilgrim’s Progress” seems to have been a popular subject and copies of the slides themselves can be seen online today, some even for sale on ebay. The slides were in sets of various numbers, forty being quite a large set, and the pictures were photographs of people dressed in relevant costumes with painted scenery behind. Later slides were coloured, but it is probable that those shown in Sedlescombe in 1881, were black and white. Photography, particularly portraits was beginning to be available through professional photographers, but most people would not have access to cameras. The show given in Sedlescombe’s small Chapel would have been one taken from a published programme of readings and music that were available to users of magic lanterns. There were no cinemas, no television, no photographs in newspapers so it must have been particularly special to be able to see the photographs of the Chapel at different times of the year that were shown later in the evening.

Although this newspaper article does not specify the type of lamp used, a little earlier newspaper report described how Frederick Tuppenney, who was Chairman of the Board of Guardians of the Hastings Workhouse, was thwarted in his attempt to show the John Bunyan set of slides to the Workhouse inmates because “there was no gas in the house”<sup>4</sup>. The report explained that the magic lantern used by Frederick was lit by oxy-hydrogen limelight that gave a very bright light and was a real improvement on previous lighting methods.

Frederick Tuppenney was very interested in photography and was President of the Hastings & St.Leonards Photographic Society which did not start until 1888. After Frederick’s death in 1910, Mr Fred Judge speaking for the other members said that Frederick had “a warm corner in his heart for the Photographic Society”.<sup>5</sup>

The final welcome surprise at the end of the evening was a lady standing at the door of the Chapel giving out oranges as they left, everyone chattering about the pleasant evening in the



Chapel. Oranges had to be imported from Spain and were always expensive and would not have been something that rural agricultural workers often had.

Well done, Mr Tuppenney!

#### SOURCES:

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<sup>1</sup> Information online from Horsey Hooves that “brakes” were open country vehicles that could carry up to 6 people often with a raised box for the driver.

<sup>2</sup> From Hastings Chronicle.

<sup>3</sup> Information online from The Magic Lantern Society.

<sup>4</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1878, Hastings & St. Leonards Observer, “Entertainment at the Workhouse”.

<sup>5</sup> 11th November 1910, Hastings & St Leonards Observer “Photographic Society”.

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