

Beccles

John Wesley first preached at Beccles whilst on his journey round the Methodist societies along the east coastal area of south Norfolk and north Suffolk in the autumn of 1776. He wrote: 'I preached at Beccles. A duller place I have seldom seen. The people of the town were neither pleased nor vexed, as "caring for none of these things." Yet fifty or sixty came into the house either to hear or see.'¹

When Wesley returned ten years later in 1786 he was far more pleased with what he found, preaching 'to more than their preaching-house could contain and all of them appeared as serious and attentive as the congregations at Yarmouth.' At this time six formal members were listed in the Circuit Book although there would have been far more informal members attending services.

Three years later he again visited the town, arriving by chaise from Stubbs Green near Loddon. He held a prayer meeting and then left three-quarters of an hour later.

Local tradition believes that at this time the Methodist congregation met in the Old Cockpit adjoining the Falcon Inn in the New Market and, in consequence, in 1890 the Wesleyan church commissioned a painting of the cockfighting venue, but there is no contemporary evidence the congregation ever met there. Indeed it was the Baptists who registered the Cockpit as a preaching place and later built a chapel on the site.

A Wesleyan meeting place was registered on 6 April 1830 and a chapel was built in 1833 in Northgate. It seated about 200. A school room was added at the front of the building. At this time Beccles was listed as part of the Lowestoft Circuit.

The anonymous author of a *History of Wesleyan Methodism in Lowestoft* published in 1843 wrote that although Beccles was almost as populous as Lowestoft, there were relatively few Methodists there. Indeed there were still only 57 members of society in 1897. Certainly in Suffolk there was strong competition from Old Dissent with strong Congregational and Baptist churches as well as active Anglican hostility to Methodism in many places although there is no direct evidence of this at Beccles.

The Religious Census of 1851 recorded 20 people present at the morning service as well as 28 scholars. In the afternoon there were 55 at worship together with 30 scholars and in the evening 63 attended the evening service. At this time the disruptions of the Reform dispute were disturbing the congregation and for a time the Wesleyans lost their chapel, but then managed to recover it and continue the cause.

A new chapel was built in 1872 in Wellington Street (now Station Road), a more imposing site. It seated 280-300 people and its final cost was £1007. The land for the chapel was given by John Crisp, a local farmer; the architect was J.L. Clemence of Lowestoft; the bricklayer was R. Ling and the carpenter Jonathan Blunderfield. The foundation stones were laid in September 1871 and the chapel opened the following June. A school room was added in 1887.

The application by Rev. G. Scrivenor in 1878 for the expenses of £9.3.4d incurred in travelling from the circuit to his new circuit at Cinderford was rejected by the Quarterly Meeting. The explanation for this was that 'the furniture in the house had been almost entirely destroyed during the time Mr Scrivenor was in the circuit and which has been replaced at considerable expense.'² For many years thereafter the circuit refused to pay travelling expenses for any of the ministers, neither would it pay any of their medical bills.

At this time numbers in the circuit were steadily falling from 332 in 1880 to 271 in 1889. Thereafter numbers began to improve. From 1855 Beccles had been part of the Bungay Circuit. In 1890 it was renamed the Beccles Circuit. Then in 1906 the circuit boundaries in the area were reorganised with the new circuit named the Lowestoft and Beccles Circuit.

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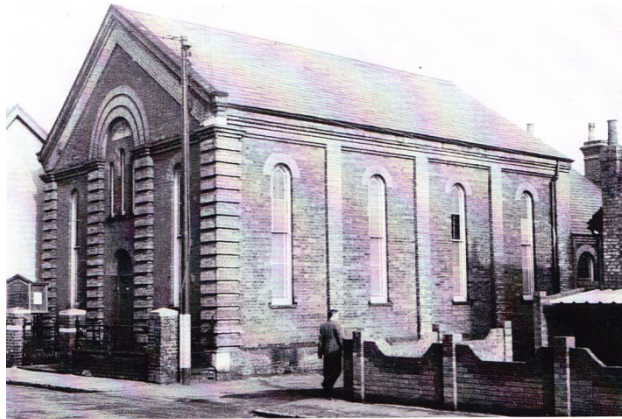
There is no evidence as to when Beccles was first missioned by the Primitive Methodists. However Beccles was listed in the Great Yarmouth Primitive Methodist Circuit by 1830 when a chapel was registered on 6 April in Bridge Street. By 1835 it had been transferred to the Wangford Circuit, but it moved backwards and forwards

¹ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, London, 1909, vol. vi, p.132. The cost of the chapel was about £150.

² Lowestoft Record Office, 224/A1/1, Bungay 1865-90.

between the two circuits during 1836 and 1837 until finally taking its place in the Wangford Circuit as a Branch of that circuit.

The congregation then met in a chapel in Northgate, but it was relinquished when it became difficult to find the rent. A preaching room was hired in the autumn of 1841 with 36 members, but when it was sold by the owner the congregation was forced to worship in the open air. A pipe shop was then rented in an obscure corner of the town. By that time there were no members meeting in class and no lodging for the preachers.



Smallgate Primitive Methodist Chapel

In 1847 a piece of ground in Peddars Lane was secured and Ebenezer Chapel was built. It was opened on 5 September 1847. It had seats for 150 people and measured 35 feet by 20 feet and was 16 feet high. Its cost was about £150.

The return for the Religious Census in March 1851 recorded that 20 attended the morning service, 100 in the afternoon and 80 in the evening. There were 36 formal members in society at this time.

In 1863 permission was given for the congregation to organise a Sunday school and build a schoolroom and two years later a gallery was added to the chapel to cope with growing congregations, but still it proved too small.

A property was bought for £300 in Smallgate in 1871. It was demolished and a chapel built in its place. The architect was William Wright Woodroffe and the builder was Mr Hindes. The foundation stones were laid in June 1872 and the building was opened in January 1873. In 1894 a schoolroom was added at the rear of the chapel.

The new Beccles and Bungay Primitive Methodist Circuit was formed in 1892. In 1908 the circuit boundaries were again changed and Beccles became part of the Lowestoft and Beccles Circuit.

At Methodist Union, the new circuit was named the Beccles, Bungay and Loddon Circuit. Both chapels continued to be used as before until December 1958 when the Smallgate church was closed and sold to an electrical company.

In 1977 the former Wesleyan chapel at Beccles was closed and the congregation combined with that of the URC to form the Methodist and United Reformed Hungate Church. It then became part of the United Bungay Circuit. The Station Road church was sold for £7500 and later demolished to be replaced by two houses.

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