

METHODISM IN NORTON CANES

Bethel Primitive Methodist Church	1853 — 1944	
Trinity Wesleyan Methodist Church	1882 — 1905	Burntwood Road
	1905 — 1968	Brownhills Road

In the days before Methodist Union there were both Primitives and Wesleyans at Norton Canes. The Prims of the Lichfield Circuit were first in the field and their society flourished for many years. They built a fine church and schoolroom which they named "Bethel" but which became known throughout the circuit as "The Cathedral." Primitive Methodist Local Preachers regarded an appointment to preach at Bethel as an honour. Twenty-eight years behind the Prims the Wesleyans of the Cannock Circuit moved in. They built a small chapel in Burntwood Road which, in contrast to "The Cathedral" was known in the area as "Noah's Ark." However the Wesleyans outgrew their tiny chapel and purchased, in 1905, a corrugated iron structure which they erected beside the Brownhills Road and named "Trinity." The society continued to grow and at one time had five Local Preachers amongst its members—Messrs. Jarvis, Weldon, Leadbeater, Mills and Bullock. They were happy enough in their tin tabernacle but they could never have regarded it as other than a temporary home, good enough until means could be found to build something better. They took good care of it, how else would it have lasted so long, but the best of care will not keep the ravages of time at bay forever. The building not only suffered the effects of age and weather, mining subsidence produced a list to starboard of about 10° which had a most disconcerting effect upon strangers entering the church for the first time.

The damage caused by subsidence at Trinity was small compared with that suffered by Bethel where it was so serious that the building was condemned as unsafe and demolished in 1944. The Trustees received no compensation for the ruin of their property. All they could get was a few hundred pounds from the sale of the organ and such materials as could be salvaged during the demolition. The Bethel society continued to worship in a hut adjoining the old chapel, but the golden age of Norton Methodism had passed, the intake of new members had not kept pace with the losses due to death and removals and in about 1948 they abandoned the hut and joined forces with Trinity.

It was at this time that the Trinity society was transferred to the Brownhills Circuit. It was not now a large society, but led by Mr. Enock Bullock it carried on the work. The tin tabernacle was becoming more and more of a problem as the years went by and the prospect of raising funds for a new church seemed almost hopelessly remote. By 1957 the Circuit Superintendent was complaining to the Connexional Chapel Secretary that the building was in desperately bad condition and reporting that the Trustees were negotiating the purchase of a new site. They actually purchased a site for a new church in 1959. It was an act of faith since all the money they had amounted to about £1,000, what remained of the proceeds of sale from Bethel and the Burntwood Road chapel plus accrued interest. The faithful few, under the leadership of Mr. Elijah Read, who took on the leadership after the death of Mr. Enock Bullock, worked hard in the face of severe handicaps to raise money for the Building Fund. With the building in such bad condition there was little hope of increasing their numbers. Houses were being built all around and people were moving into Norton, but not even the Methodists among the new comers would face the prospect of worshipping in that tumble-down tin shanty. The Trustees of Walsall Wood Methodist Church voted £1,000 from proceeds of sale but the position would still have been hopeless had not the Rank Benevolent Trust come to the rescue. The General Chapel Committee and the officials of the Rank Trust agreed to find between them half the cost of an £11,000 scheme—£4,650 from the Rank Trust and £850 from the General Chapel Fund. Messrs. Birch and Caulfield, Architects, prepared plans for a church and schoolroom to the satisfaction of the Trustees and the Connexional Chapel Secretaries.