

## History of Bethany Evangelical Church

(by Roger Fruen)

On 6 March 1976 a double wedding (believed to be of the Evans sisters) took place as the first service in the recently completed new building of Bethany Evangelical Church in Union Street, Newport. It marked the start of a new chapter for the church which started off with very humble beginnings in the 1840s when a small group of Christian Brethren rented rooms above Reads Posting Establishment in Holyrood Street and then Holyrood Hall, in the High Street. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first chapel they owned was the small gospel hall which stood further up Union Street on land owned by Albert Midlane (author of many hymns, including "There's a home for little children above the bright blue sky") and in 1930 Bethany then moved to a larger building on Coppin's Bridge, currently known as "The Church on the Roundabout". The gospel hall was initially retained as an outlying Sunday School.

By the 1970s the Coppin's Bridge premises whose main room measured some 22' x 50' (6.7 x 15.24 metres) were considered "too small and too old". The Homestead in Union Street (a 1830s house set in a large garden) was purchased at a cost of £8,000 as the site for a new church. This church was designed by Dr Charles Stanley Hudson, OBE and was almost entirely built by members of the congregation which included carpenters, plumbers, roofers and builders, as well as a large number of willing labourers. Building materials cost around £18,000 and the funds for the new building were raised by the congregation by means of gifts and interest free loans, as well as the sale of the former Bathany Hall. The building work itself was completed within four years.

There must be many tales surrounding this building work, but they include how John Poingdestre realised the day before installation that the tall window frames for the north side of the building appeared to him to be "wrong". A quick check with a tape measure confirmed his suspicions – they were over-height by a couple of inches! Overnight work with a saw and chisel, resizing the frames to fit and remaking the joints, resulted in a perfect fit the next morning. *[I wonder if the carpenter concerned ever learnt of his error?]*

The formal opening of the new church took place on Saturday 8 May 1976 when members of sister churches at East Cowes, Ryde, Shanklin and Ventnor swelled the numbers to close to its 300 plus capacity. The speaker was John Knight of Chandlers Ford and the event featured the Bethany Gospel Singers.

Just over a year after the building was completed it was the venue for the funeral of Dr Hudson who had played such an important role.

Although we celebrate 50 years of the current building, the history of the church goes back many years and has played a vital role in the spiritual life of many people who have passed through its doors. Historical connections with Newport (including a direct connection with the first fish and chip shop on the Island, Stotesbury's) and its people are many, and it continues to fulfil its role first established almost 200 years ago. The church continues to operate without a minister in charge, administered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation by a group of unpaid trustees. The Breaking of Bread service continues to be an essential part of the weekly worship. A variety of speakers, including some from non-members of Bethany, give sound teaching based heavily on the God/Jesus centred teachings of the Bible as established in the new testament Christian church.