

THE FOUNDING OF KINGFIELD BAPTIST CHURCH

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It is amazing where one little piece of research can take you. I started out trying to find out about the history of the old Kingfield Baptist Church (now the New Life Church), and ended up in Chobham's little museum learning about the curious bell-tower at Westcroft Park on the road to Windlesham, and then museums in Reading and Plymouth learning about making biscuits! The connection is Henry Obelin Serpell, JP, who gave the land at Kingfield upon which the Baptist Church was built.



He came originally from Plymouth where his father had founded a business making 'ships biscuits' before Henry moved to Reading –

using the fortune he made from his own biscuit business to purchase Westcroft Park at Chobham where his love of carillons led to the construction of the tower in his grounds.

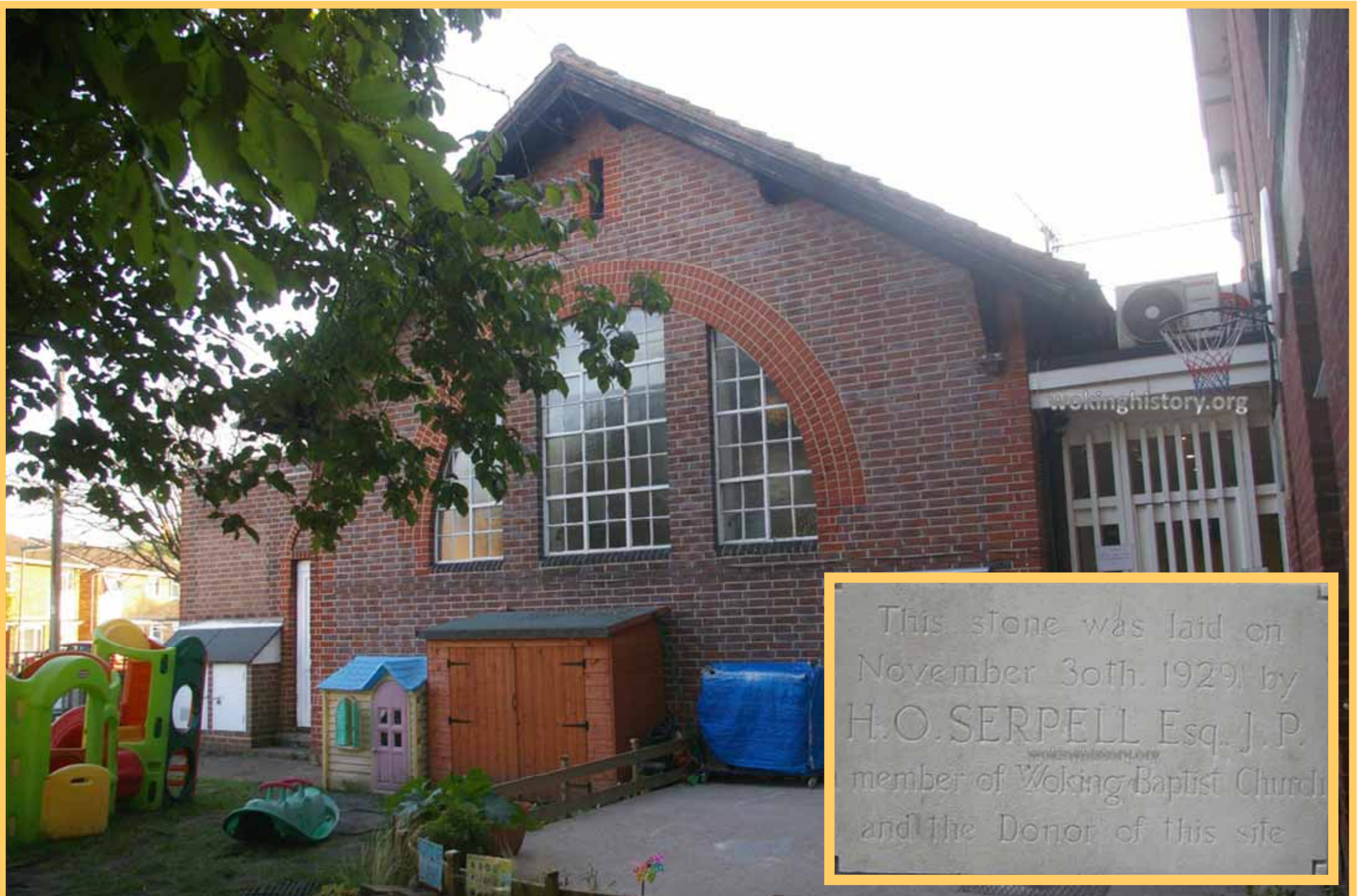
Henry Oberlin Serpell's father, Robert Coad Serpell, founded with George Frean and George Daw the firm of 'Frean, Daw & Serpell' in 1851 at Lambhay Wharf in the Barbican area of Plymouth. Frean left in 1857 (to join forces with a Mr Peek in London) and Daw died in 1868, leaving Henry Oberlin to found the business H O Serpell & Co and move the biscuit factory to Reading in 1899. The firm survived a disastrous fire there in 1904 (when the fire brigade of the nearby Huntley & Palmer factory saved the day), but the family firm doesn't appear to have outlived Henry by long, closing about a decade after he died in 1943.



Along the way I also learned the sad story of his first wife whom he divorced in 1938 on the grounds of 'incurable insanity' (one of the first such cases in the country), but I also discovered that he was another of this area's great benefactors – which seems to be a recurring theme as I look into the Victorian and Edwardian history of Woking and North-West Surrey.

But getting back to the object of my initial research, the Baptist church in Kingfield appears to have begun as a series of open-air meetings in the area in the late 1920's organised by the Rev Middleton-Price and the Woking Baptist Church in Goldsworth Road. Mr Serpell bought the land, gave it to the church and paid for a marquee to be erected in the summer of 1929 so that services and a Sunday school could begin.

The Sunday school got off to a slow start, with the five volunteer teachers finding just one lad attending on the first Sunday, but soon things picked up and eventually it was a great success, although as summer turned to autumn it was soon found that the marquee was not going to serve them long. Apparently a former wooden 'horse-box' on the site was 're-lined, windows and doors added and the whole transformed into a most comfortable meeting





house', which continued in use as the 'primary Sunday school' for some time.

Mr Serpell laid the foundation stone of the new church, designed by Herbert Jones of Swansea and constructed by Norris & Company of Sunningdale (who together had also built the new Baptist Church in Percy Street), in November 1929, after which work appears to have continued at a pace as on the 5th March 1930 it was ready for 'occupation'.

Mr Serpell, of course, was at the official opening, but I can find no reference as to whether he was accompanied by his wife,

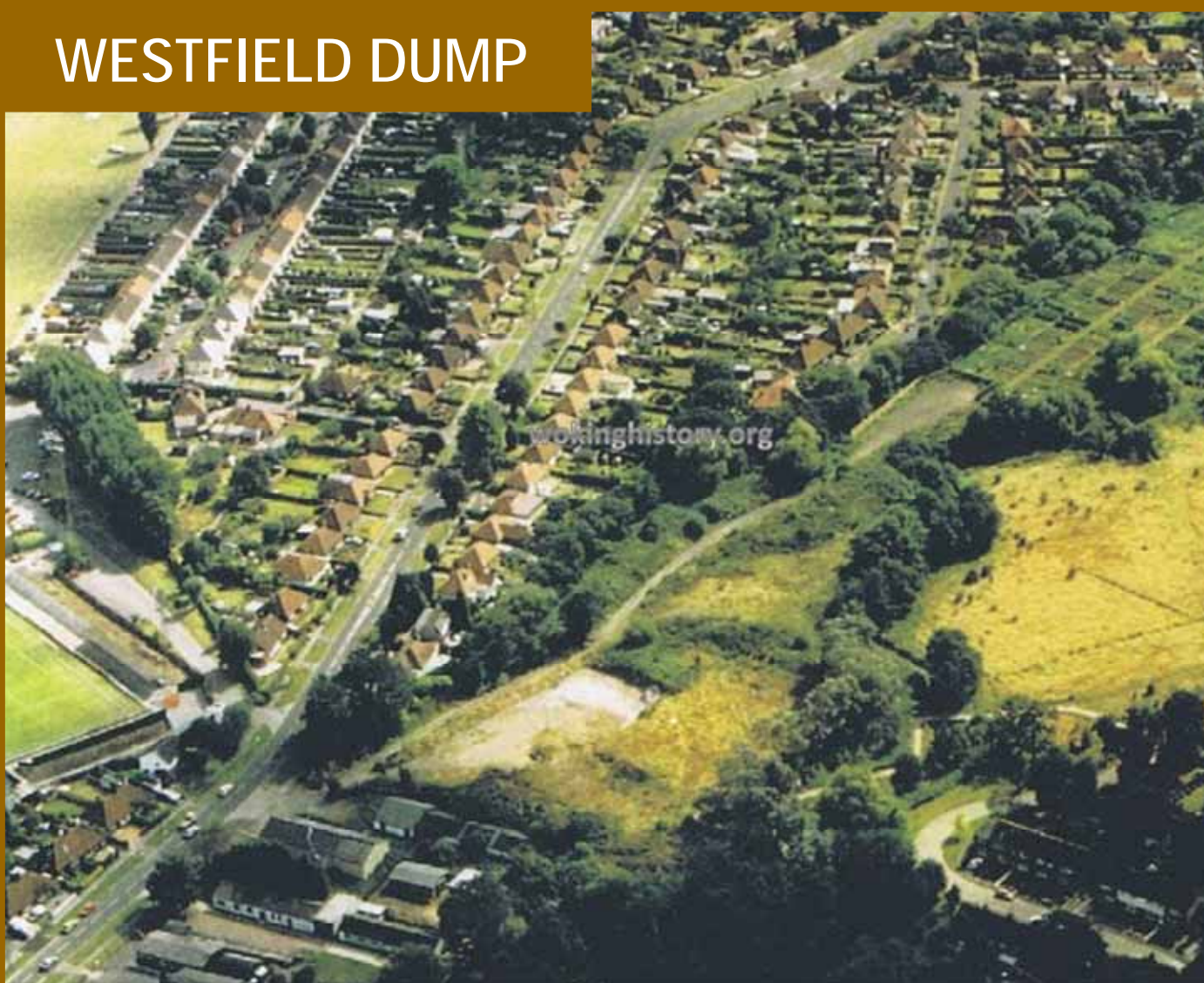
Louisa Jane, who he had married in 1877 and with whom he had two sons, Henry William (1877-1907) and Shutzer Archibald (1883-1965). It may well be that she was already institutionalised by then as it appears that Henry's second wife, Fanny Oliver, had been a family friend for about twenty years and is said to have 'assisted Henry when he was High Sheriff of Surrey' in 1924.

I would love to know more about the Serpell's, especially their connection with Woking and Chobham, and of course the wonderful bell-tower at Westcroft, which is a Grade II listed building, although apparently the carillon

(originally eighteen bells but later reputedly up to twenty-eight) is no longer there.

The listing states that it was erected in 1910 (quoting 'Pevsner's Buildings of England, Surrey, 1965'), but the local parish magazine of February 1923 seems to indicate that the Carillon was installed in December 1922 (although the records of the bell-founders and clockmakers, Gilbert & Johnson of Croydon, seems to indicate they were installed in 1926). Whenever the tower was built and the bells installed, they must have been quite something to hear.

WESTFIELD DUMP



You may recall an article last year about the proposal to build a gas works in 1881 on the site now occupied by the Leisure Centre, or the one about the proposed sewage works (where the swimming pool is now) in the early 1890's. In the end neither plan was acted upon and the council instead decided to use the area as a dump – the idea being that it would help build up the land and prevent it from flooding (presumably ignoring the fact that the displaced water would flood somewhere else).

In 1920 the old dump was closed and covered as a job creation scheme, with four acres closer to Elmbridges bought (for £400) from the Clerk of the Council, Robert Mossop. By the end of the decade that replacement dump was also becoming full, so the council negotiated with the owner of the land upstream of the bridge to buy about eleven acres of land (at just £45 per acre) to extend the municipal dump up the Hoe Valley.

Later that dump too was closed and used as allotments during the war, but that is another story which will have to wait until later in the year to be told!

WOKING GUIDE - 1930



A month ago I featured the delights of Woking as reported in the Woking Guide of 1926-27, produced by Woking Urban District Council. In 1930 it was the turn of the local Chamber of Trade to promote the town in similarly flowery terms, with a wonderful little 'map' of the area produced by 'G W Lewis' illustrating the attractions of the town at that time – if not now. Indeed apart from the motor racing at Brooklands (and perhaps the style of 'cossy' at the pool in the park), you could say that Woking's attractions have not altered all that much!

The cover, too, illustrates what was then one of the area's main selling points - 'Midst Surrey Pines'. It is a motto that could just as easily be used to promote the area today – although the claim of 'health-giving properties' may come under more scrutiny today.

'The phenomenal growth of the district in a comparatively short period is in itself a significant tribute to the neighbourhood's attractions', wrote the editor of the guide in 1930. 'Outstanding among these are its remarkable health-giving attributes, derived largely from its extensive pine woods and heath lands; but Woking offers much more even than this to the community within its borders. Essentially up to date in character – the whole of modern Woking has sprung up in the past half-century – the town may be said to have always kept pace with the times.'

Eighty-six years later the same can be said, as most of modern Woking is still less than fifty years old (much of it considerably less than that)!

