

## History of Walton Churches Partnership (WCP)

The geographical area now covered by the Walton Churches Partnership LEP was once a very rural and sparsely populated area having the villages of Wavendon and Milton Keynes as its major centres of population with smaller communities at Broughton and Walton. Only Wavendon had significant numbers of non-conformists and it was the only village to have a chapel – in this case a Methodist one.

As was general after the Second World War, the parishes struggled for viability with a declining population. Wavendon absorbed the much smaller parish of Walton and Broughton became linked to Newport Pagnell. This arrangement was changed in 1961, when Broughton was coupled with Milton Keynes in the hope that the joint stipend from the two parishes would enable the Rector to pay for the upkeep of the huge rectory at Milton Keynes. This did not succeed for long and Milton Keynes Rectory was sold and the then Rector went to live at the new rectory at Broughton. When he retired, the Rector of Moulsoe was asked to look after the two parishes as well as his own and this continued until the Milton Keynes Development Corporation came into being and Revd Stephen Little, whose main job was with the Corporation, was given the rectory at Broughton as housing and in return he took responsibility for the churches at Milton Keynes and Broughton.

In 1984 the Revd Norman Cotton became Rector of Wavendon with Walton and Milton Keynes with Broughton thus forming a parish with approximately the same boundaries as the present WCP. Norman Cotton enthusiastically espoused the ecumenical movement which was springing up all over the new city. From the beginnings of the new town project in 1967, the main Christian denominations had agreed to work together and Milton Keynes became a 'designated area of ecumenical experiment'<sup>1</sup>. In 1977 the adjacent area to Walton, Woughton Parish was established as a Local Ecumenical Partnership.

Norman Cotton already had close relations with the Methodist Minister who looked after the Wavendon Chapel as part of the Circuit containing Woburn Sands. Additionally, from a previous appointment at Water Eaton, he had a good working relationship with the local Baptists. In 1985, with the help of both Methodists and Baptists, and unusually, the blessing of the Roman Catholic Church, he was instrumental in setting up the Local Ecumenical Project which was the forerunner of the WCP. There was much debate about the name which should be adopted for the new grouping and eventually it was decided to adopt the name of Walton. It was central to the area and was acceptable to both the large parishes of Wavendon and Milton Keynes having a very small population of its own.

One of the first tasks of the project was to cater for the needs of the new areas of housing springing up in Walnut Tree and later Kents Hill. Services were begun for a small group of people in the community house at Walnut Tree and some larger services were held at Heronsgate School. When Walnut Tree Community Centre was opened, services were held there. Much support was needed from the existing congregations at Wavendon and Milton Keynes but gradually a small local group took over.

The Roman Catholic Church was also interested in the area and wished to build a church at Kents Hill. The then Bishop of Northampton was ecumenically minded, and so it was that the idea of a shared church at Kents Hill was born. Once again, the problem of a

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<sup>1</sup> For a full account of the pioneering years of ecumenical church development in Milton Keynes, see Robin Baker (2005): *Milton Keynes is Different: the story of the ecumenical movement in Milton Keynes 1967-2005*, Milton Keynes Mission Partnership.

suitable name acceptable to all parties came to the fore. After more debate, the name of 'Christ the King' was chosen.

Sharing agreements were entered into for the two mediaeval C of E churches to enable services to be held by the other denominations in the LEP (Baptist Union, United Reformed Church, Methodist and in the case of All Saints, Roman Catholic). The sharing agreement for St Mary's at Wavendon could not include the Roman Catholics as it was in the RC parish of Aspley Guise which already had an RC church. In 1986, St Lawrence, Broughton was declared redundant since the parish could no longer afford to conserve the mediaeval wall paintings and the building was not suitable for modern church purposes. It was taken over by the Redundant Churches Fund (now the Churches Conservation Trust). With their permission it is possible to hold occasional services there – principally at Harvest time and Christmas. St Michael's Church Walton had already been leased to the Open University.

The foundation stone of Christ the King was laid by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Northampton on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1992. The building was jointly funded by the participating denominations and was designed to contain a Community Centre, so some further funding was obtained from Milton Keynes Development Corporation. The construction of the building was not without its problems, notably the ceiling panels of the worship area, but was eventually opened in 1993 with Father Sean Healy as the Catholic Priest and the Revd Ruth Matthews as the Baptist Minister. Revd David Meill, who had a half time appointment with the MK Development Corporation as Community Enabler, joined the staff in the half time post of Team Vicar representing the Church of England. The Methodist Church continued to offer part time help (initially from Woburn Sands but later from Bletchley). Revd Norman Cotton remained as Team Rector of the whole parish until he was appointed Rector of Stewkley and Revd David Lunn took his place. At about the same time, permission was obtained from the Diocese to employ Revd David Meill full time as Team Vicar, and the opportunity was taken to reassess the responsibilities of the clergy team. It was decided that the minister residing nearest to each church should have the prime responsibility for the congregation of that church, although all the ministers involved continued to take services from time to time at all three churches.

In Wavendon, in 1991 services ceased at the Methodist Chapel and the congregation merged with that of St Mary's. The building continued to be used for a while as a meeting place, but was eventually sold and the proceeds used to update facilities at St Mary's church.

Rearrangements in the Roman Catholic Church have resulted in the Priest having responsibility for both the congregation at Christ the King and St Bede's in Newport Pagnell. In 2012 there was a reduction to a single Church of England minister. So there will now be two full time ministers (one Church of England and one Baptist for the three ecumenical congregations).

The population of the parish is set to rise dramatically as the areas of Broughton, Brooklands and Oakgrove are filled with housing. There are no plans for any more church buildings. However, funding has been obtained to enable a Pioneer Ministry post to be set up in the area to address the needs of the newcomers.

Geoff Dawe, 2012

With contributions from Martin Creasy and Stephen Potter