

Shamley Green



History Society

The Story of the Dependants

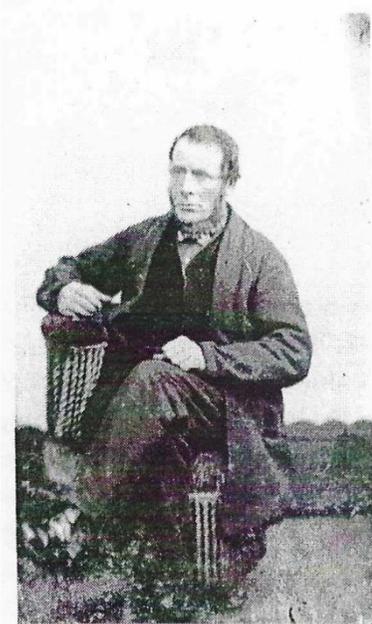
by
Marion May

Publication 2

THE STORY OF THE DEPENDANTS

By Marion May

The first time I actually saw the Dependants was during the 1970s. Whilst I was resting one summer evening on a seat near the pond at Loxwood, a mini-van stopped nearby and out stepped an elderly gentleman, soberly dressed in black, who opened up the doors at the back of the van, whereupon two elderly ladies clad in ankle length black coats and flat black bonnets, descended and went to fetch another old lady to take her to chapel in Spy Lane. When I was a child living in Compton, I had heard stories from my grandfather, Fred Jackson, concerning this sect, and also from a cousin, Mabel Jackson who worked at Lords Hill Stores. As I was interested to learn more about these people, I made some enquiries and this led to research into their history.



John Sirgood

The Society of Dependants (Dependant on Christ) was started by John Sirgood - born 1820 - a humble shoemaker by trade, who originated from Avening in Gloucestershire. In 1840 the Sirgood family moved to Kennington, London and John became a disciple of William Bridges, a hat-block maker, of the Peculiar People (Peculiar = set apart). Members believed that their Christian faith was more effective than medicine and this belief resulted in public hostility being aroused when several of them were brought before the courts and charged with negligence leading to the deaths of some members of their families. Later, in 1850, Sirgood, having preached unsuccessfully on

Clapham Common received 'the call' and decided to move down to the country. So, with his wife, Harriet, (born in Godalming, and whom

he married in 1845), and all his belongings on a handcart, he travelled to the Surrey/Sussex border and found hospitality in Loxwood. He started to preach in local cottage gardens and in the fields and during the late 1860s a chapel was built in Spy Lane, which still stands today.

In 1861, Sirgood received a threatening letter from a solicitor representing some landowners and the local vicar, to the effect that if he continued conducting services in the village, he would be fined £20 on each occasion. Sirgood replied to this at great length with many quotations from the bible. He even had a booklet printed entitled: 'Religious Intolerance in the Rural Districts of Sussex.' Price one penny, or 6s per 100. Certain villagers were hostile to the Brethren and forced entry into meetings and armed with sticks, breaking windows and crockery and threatening the preacher. Even as late as 1895 their Northchapel service was visited by a band of 27 young men intent on mischief. Because of the Group's increased following among the poorer inhabitants, the local landowners evicted their agricultural workers who were adherents, from their tied cottages, and these found new accommodation with local farmers who sympathised with Sirgood's doctrines.

The Body (or Society) of Dependants was a plain living group. The Bible was their only literature, and passages were learnt by heart. They did not advocate marriage, and thought celibacy a desirable belief rather than a doctrine, their belief resting on St. Paul's injunction to remain single and so be free to serve the Lord (Corinthians 1 Ch. 7 v. 32-33). "But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife."

However, a few members did marry and for these ceremonies they would have gone to a local non-conformist chapel. They did not consider the Lord's Prayer applicable as they knew where their daily sustenance was coming from, unlike Christ's disciples. Instead they preferred to use the whole of the 17th Chapter of John. Neither was there any communion service. No cross or crucifix was allowed in the chapel and music was frowned upon, so hymns were sung

unaccompanied. The Leader plus three firm believers sat on a raised platform at one end of the chapel to conduct their services.

In the early days, the congregation sat on benches. Hymns and prayers were committed to memory, but in 1958, a book of 461 hymns was printed; mainly written by Sirgood, a few by his wife Harriet, and some by William Booker and Charles Taylor.



The Dependants attended services on Sundays from 10.00 - 1.00 in the morning, 2.30 - 4.00 in the afternoon and 5.30 - 8.00 in the evening, as well as various services during the week. The Dependants were strong pacifists and total abstainers. They thought little about their wearing apparel and patched and mended their rather unfashionable clothes. In the photograph of Mary Kilner she is wearing a dark jacket and skirt. Their hairstyle has remained the same for many years, the hair being parted in the middle and taken back into a flat plaited bun.

After his success in Loxwood, Sirgood founded more chapels in the surrounding district and further afield. They were situated in Lords Hill (Shamley Green), Northchapel, Warnham, Chichester, Hove, and South Norwood. At the time of Sirgood's death in 1885, he had around 2,000 followers. During the height of the sect's popularity, the Loxwood chapel on occasions was full to overflowing, causing windows to be opened so that the service could be relayed to the congregation outside. This happened especially at Easter and on Bank Holidays, when they had large assemblies from neighbouring chapels. The origins of the nickname 'Cokeler' (which the Dependants disliked) are unknown, but it is certainly nothing to do with their drinking cocoa — milk was their staple drink.

During the 1870s a Combination Stores was built in Loxwood selling grocery, confectionery, meat, bread, haberdashery and ironmongery. It had a petrol pump and later had a taxi service. For many years the Stores was run by Aylward, Smith and Company. Female domestic servants, who had little time to spend on their religious beliefs, found that there was some congenial employment and living accommodation in the village. The Northchapel Brethren opened their stores soon after, and this was owned at one time by Brown, Durant and Co. Ltd., and in Warnham where they employed 36 men and women in 1904, they sold china with "Lindfield Luff" stamped on it.



Lords Hill Stores, Shamley Green

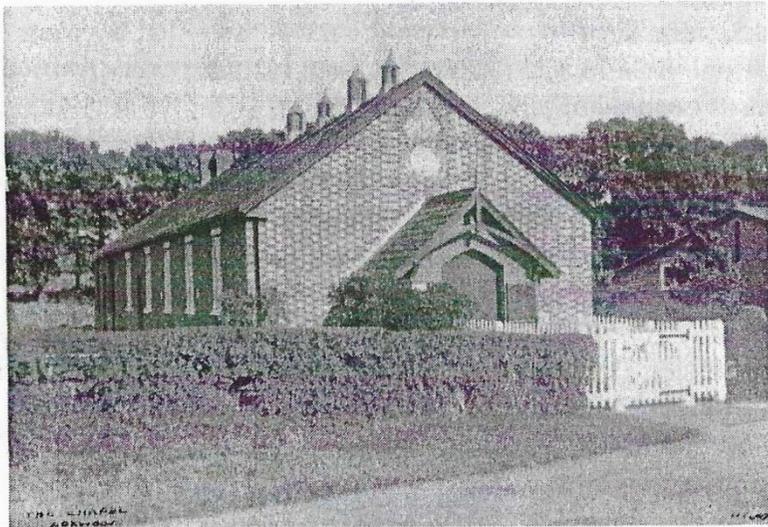
During the period 1855-1967, this unusual sect was active in Shamley Green. In Lords Hill the stores had their own butchers and baked their own bread, and later they incorporated a post office. At the time of the First World War, the shop went under the name of Bradshaw, Foster, Street & Co. This name continued for many years, only changing to Smith and Croucher in 1937. In 1951 the stores were sold to a Mr. Partridge, and a Mr. Cox took over the butcher's business. Later in the 1960s the Stores closed completely, and the various buildings were converted into four private dwellings. One half of

Loxwood Stores has been retained as small shops, the other half demolished and new flats built.

From around 1855 the Shamley Green Dependants held services at Gate Street Farm, near Bramley. The congregation travelled by foot, and horse and cart from Rushett Common and Selhurst, and also from Guildford. During the 1860s their chapel was built at Lords Hill. The first Elders were William Hampshire and John Rugman, and with their housekeeper Hannah Cock they resided at Holly Cottage. Several houses were built by and for the Dependants eg. 'Dursley' and 'Averning' (named after villages in Gloucestershire associated with Sirgood), and 'Earlsfield Cottages'. In 1905, the Elders were Stephen Franks (miller) of the Mill House, Womersley and Jacob Earl (dairyman) of Tanyards, Woodhill Lane, Shamley Green who later lived at 'Peaceful Place'. They were followed by Polly and Eliza Stemp, Caroline Cumber and Polly Foster. Other members included Gwendoline Bradshaw, Mrs. G. Newman, Mrs. S. Leswell and Walter Smith from Cranleigh.

Sirgood was an itinerant preacher regularly visiting and corresponding with his brethren, and it was whilst he was living at Lords Hill, that he died on October 19th 1885, of a kidney disorder, and was buried at Loxwood in the graveyard adjacent to the chapel in Spy Lane. The census for 1881 gives his trade as a draper, so presumably he was working in the Lords Hill Stores. By 1916 membership had dwindled to 600, in 1942 to 200, and to only 30 in 1983. By 1966 only Warnham, Northchapel, Loxwood, Hove and Lords Hill chapels remained open. The last two members of the Lords Hill Chapel were Miss Eleanor (Nelly) Franks and Mr Frederick Kelsey. Miss Franks was housekeeper for many years to Jacob Earl, until his death, when she looked after Mr. Kelsey. The last meeting held in the chapel was in August 1967, when Mr. Kelsey preached to Miss Franks — a congregation of one! It is believed that with the exception of Mr. Kelsey, all the above-mentioned elders were buried in Shamley Green churchyard. No headstones were erected on Dependants' graves, each one bearing only a number. The chapel was sold in May 1968, and the new owners converted it into a playroom. It was later sold in 1974 and demolished; a large modern house was erected on the site. The last

chapel to close was Loxwood in 1984, but the Emmanuel Evangelical Church now holds services there.



The Chapel, Spy Lane, Loxwood

Although some families joined the movement, because of the members' adherence to celibacy, it was obvious it would eventually die out. The last known Dependant was Mrs Elsie Piper who died in 2002 aged 104! A member of our History Society attended a service in the early 1980s and was made very welcome. Mr Rowland Leswell (who kindly provided a wealth of information for this article and died in 1984), was an Elder, and he and other Elders would read verses of the hymns, which would then be sung alternately by the congregation. Passages were then read from the Bible, there were moments of silence, and later in the service, various testimonies would be given. My great uncle Mr. George Jackson of Horsham, who supplied cars to the Warnham Brethren told me of a picnic he was invited to by one of their members, and what a jolly time was had by all! They were very happy people.

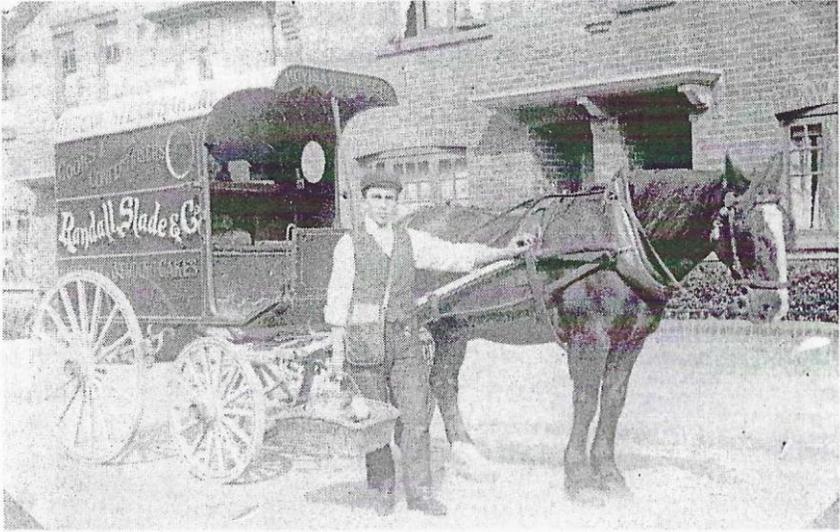
Mr Norman Booker who lived in 'Peaceful Place' (formerly the house of Dependant Jacob Earl), near the Shamley Green school, said that at funerals the Dependants held the service in their own chapel and then proceeded to the churchyard, where they held another short service.

A number of the Lords Hill Brethren were buried by the vicar of the church, who used the church service. At other times an Elder from Loxwood came to conduct the service, but the Brethren would not go into the church. There was always great rejoicing at funerals, thanking God for the good life the deceased had led, and repeating all the time: 'Thank the Lord', 'Praise Him', and 'Amen'. They also thanked God that they had left no encumbrances behind. Mr. Booker's grandfather was a member at Warnham, and then left the brethren. Upon his return, a 40-verse hymn was written to celebrate the occasion!

In 1935 through a newspaper article the brethren visited a similar sect in Schobdach near Wassertrudingen in Southern Germany, and return visits continued for over 40 years.

In 1976, Mr. (Bunny) Raggett of Sherston', Lords Hill, told us that his father was a member of this sect for thirty to forty years, and as it was natural in those days for children to do as their parents did in matters of chapel-going, his son started to attend the 'Cokeler' meetings a few years after his birthday in 1909. Sunday was very much the Lord's Day about six hours being spent in the chapel attending morning, afternoon and evening meetings. Although the chapel was well attended when he first went there as a child, the numbers decreased through the years, the old folk dying and the younger ones tending to drift away from the regular attendances as soon as they were old enough. The plain, simple single-storey building a short way up the drive behind their Stores could hold approximately 150. The congregation stood only for the first hymn.

Mr Raggett recalled that 'Amazing Grace' was often sung, and sometimes, popular tunes were borrowed and sung with new words, one such being 'Auld Lang Syne'. Although there were a number of Lords Hill children at the meetings, no concessions were made, and there was no Sunday School. The one form of worship was thought suitable for all ages. Mrs Molly Welch from Lords Hill remembers going to her wedding at the Parish Church around the time of the First World War, her transport was the Dependant's horse and cart!



Randall. Slade & Co's bread van. South Norwood

In conclusion, what can one say other than it must have been a privilege to have met and dealt with these good and kindly people, and it is hard to realise that their beliefs and way of life may soon be a thing of the past, and the people themselves no longer seen walking about in the various Surrey and Sussex villages. But during the time they lived and worshipped in them, they contributed much to the life of the communities in the way of offering employment to many, helping neighbours, tending the sick and aged, and above all, doing it with a sense of caring and understanding, which stemmed from their great love of God, to whom they dedicated their lives.

I am indebted to the following persons who have so kindly assisted with the research and have helped in many ways in compiling this booklet, particularly the following:

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The Society of Dependants — Dr. Roger Homan 1981
John Sirgood's Way — Peter Jerrome 1999

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SHAMLEY GREEN HISTORY SOCIETY

The initiative for founding the Society came from Mrs Edna Thompson of 'Apple Trees' Guildford Road and the first meeting was held at Northcote Farm, the home of Mr and Mrs T. Vaughan, in December 1982. The first official meeting was held in 1983 when some forty members were enrolled, which by 2002 has increased to nearly ninety. The Society has produced four booklets, a walks leaflet, a comprehensive book of the village and two videos. Apart from several exhibitions their major event was the Millennium Exhibition, which lasted three days.

Many of us who have heard passing references to the 'Dependants' will be grateful to Marion May for pulling the threads together and compiling this story of their activities, both in Shamley Green and some of the neighbouring villages. It certainly brings home to us their fervour and dedication and will, I am sure, be appreciated by its readers.

Further information can be obtained from the author on: 01483 898206

