

A Baptist Squire Built Church

By I. G. REES

BECAUSE of the close association between the Birmingham and Coventry Lay Preachers' Unions, and the sharing of Lay Preachers' Sunday, I recently conducted services at Christ Church, Umberslade, near to the village of Hockley Heath on the Birmingham Stratford Road. Here, in a rural setting, the Church is doing a fine work under the present ministry of the Rev. Rowland West.

This beautiful Baptist church is often taken for an Anglican edifice. It is somewhat off the main road and approached by a long avenue of trees. Built in truly Gothic style the church is the gift to the village by a Mr. George Frederick Muntz, one-time squire of Umberslade Hall and a truly great Baptist who was not afraid of standing by his beliefs. The pinnacled structure is built of Bath and Wilmcote stone and has a lofty steeple and spire. A clock adorns the tower containing eight bells.

Siting of Baptistery

The Church was opened in September, 1877, and was built to the design of George Ingall, a Birmingham architect. From its battlements a fine view of the surrounding country can be obtained. Between the pulpit and the congregational seats is situated a white marble open baptistery-this indeed an answer to our searchings for the correct placing of such an important structure.

According to John Belton, a local historian, Mr. G. F. Muntz suffered much from ill-health in his latter days, and had the church wired to his home so that he could listen-in to the services.

He also pioneered in other ways, for the church had its own gas plant for illumination purposes. There was the squire's own special door into the church, which has remained shut for many a day.

Silent Bells

Sunday School-is still carried on in the old temporary building of wood that served as a church in the early days. This building is surrounded by tall trees and is hidden from view from the main road.

It is a pity that the bells of Christ Church are silent, and do not ring out over the Warwickshire country-side a witness to Baptist worship-but £2,000 is needed before they can be heard again.

History Of The Bells

This church was built in 1877, being financed by the owner of the Umberslade Estate, George Frederick Muntz, a wealthy Birmingham industrialist and staunch Baptist. The bells - all completely devoid of inscriptions - are hung dead and sounded from a chiming machine were provided by Gillett & Bland of Croydon in 1878, being amongst the first products of the Croydon foundry. The cost of the installation, including the carillon and clock was £705/10/-. The machine played a set of 7 tunes. They hang in a two tier wooden frame with 1, 2 5 & 6 above the others. All have canons

After being derelict for some years, the bells were brought back into use in 1978 when the chiming machine was restored by members of the Hockley Heath Steam Association, led by Jack Marshall. The installation is largely intact, but is out of use due to a lack of an electricity supply to the church.

The church has been closed - but the building still stands and is in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust.

Umberslade Baptist Church, dating from 1877, was built by George Frederick Muntz, a Baptist convert in the park of his splendid house at Umberslade, ten miles east of Birmingham. The trust has spent £500,000 on repairs. Rich stained glass and encaustic tiles complement the open baptistry in front of the large central Gothic pulpit.

Mr G. F. Muntz also instigated the building of Umbers Baptist church and adjoining school in 1876 and in 1892 the Institute, later renamed King George VI Memorial Hall, in memory of the late Mr Walter Higgs of Nuthurst Grange. In 1978, the hall was modernised, thanks to the generosity of the adjoining Men's Social Club, and is now run by this organisation.

In 1913 a new council school was built for 120 pupils, including those from the now closed Baptist school and school in School Road. In 1920 it became a central school and pupil teachers training college, drawing in children from a wide area of the surrounding countryside. It was extended in 1935 to accommodate infants. It is now a primary school with 140 pupils, who leave at the age of eleven years to go to schools in Solihull.
