

# **‘Extending Nonconformity’ in late Victorian Southampton: The Founding and Construction of Avenue Congregational Church 1892-c.1905**

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of its informative and detailed report on the laying of the foundation stone for the new Congregational Church at the southern end of the Avenue, the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express* described it as being ‘an important step in the extension of Nonconformity in Southampton.’<sup>1</sup> This notable event in the ecclesiastical history of the town took place on 4 August 1897. It marked the culmination of the first phase of an initiative intended to implant, in the words of the widow of William Goddard Lankester, one of the founding members of Avenue Congregational Church (hereafter ACC), Mrs Mary Lankester, ‘the principles of Protestantism and Congregationalism’ in one of Southampton’s new prestigious suburbs. She went on to express the hope that ‘it would be a source of blessing and usefulness to the neighbourhood.’<sup>2</sup>

This article considers the genesis of Avenue Congregational Church; the backgrounds and activities of those involved in the building project; what the architect, James Cubitt, was seeking to achieve in the design of the Church; and the ways in which, and the extent to which, ACC extended, in both architectural and human terms, Nonconformity in Southampton. At the heart of the narrative is the question of how far ACC initially fulfilled the hopes vested in it?

## **Genesis**

ACC was ‘planted’ in the early 1890s by ‘seven of the prominent members’ of one of Southampton’s leading town centre Congregational Churches, Albion, including the minister, the Rev Seys Howell.<sup>3</sup> The decision to embark on this enterprise was made

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<sup>1</sup> *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express* (hereafter *STHE*) 7 August 1897.

<sup>2</sup> See R Ottewill, ‘The Avenue Quartet: Exemplars of Edwardian Congregationalism’ *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* Vol 9(4) (May 2014) 227-47.

<sup>3</sup> The other six were Edward Bance, Edward W. Chaplin, James T. Hamilton, John A Hunt, William G. Lankester and Ebenezer D. Williams.

at a meeting held on 11 July 1892.<sup>4</sup> The following month steps were taken to purchase land, specifically the property known as “Avenue House”,<sup>5</sup> and a prefabricated wood and iron structure of a redundant Free Church of England, situated in Clifford Street.<sup>6</sup> The site cost £2000; the buildings, £300; removal of furniture and organ, £200; legal and other expenses, £100; and contingencies, £300, making a total of approximately £3000.<sup>7</sup> In October, ‘the promoters ... having consulted friends at Albion ... finally resolved to carry on the new cause on an independent basis.’<sup>8</sup>

By now it was reported in the press that ‘considerable progress ... [was] being made with the erection of the buildings for the new Avenue Congregational Church.’ However, these were ‘intended to be used only temporarily’ with a ‘permanent building being erected in the course of a few years.’<sup>9</sup> The temporary church was officially opened, with considerable fanfare, on Wednesday 21 December 1892, when the ‘keynote’ sermon was delivered by the leading Congregationalist, the Revd R. F. Horton. Preaching, what was described as a ‘powerful sermon’, based upon Acts ch.11 v2, he launched ‘a vigorous protest against sectarian narrowness, and concluded with an earnest appeal that the name Christian first given to the disciples at Antioch should be the true description of his hearers.’<sup>10</sup>

Something of the character of the temporary church can be gained from this contemporary report:

The church ... has a very cosy look about it inside. It is only iron lined with match-boarding and has no pretensions to external beauty, but internally it is most comfortable. Cocoa matting has been laid on the floor of the aisles, &c, and the place is well warmed. The seats are not of the old fashioned pew type. They have sloping backs and no doors, and umbrella stands are affixed at the end of each seat. The chancel arrangement of the eastern end is preserved, and the enclosure is utilized by the choir and organ, and the pulpit is placed on one side. Surmounting the choir is the text “O worship the Lord in the beauty of

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<sup>4</sup> *Avenue Congregational Church* (hereafter *ACC*) *Record for 1894* 24.

<sup>5</sup> According to *Kelly's Directory* the last occupant of “Avenue House”, 58 The Avenue, was James L. Edwards.

<sup>6</sup> Known as St John's Free Church, there were two buildings, one constituted the Church and the other accommodation for the Sunday school.

<sup>7</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1892

<sup>8</sup> *ACC Record for 1894* 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Southern Daily Echo* (hereafter *SDE*) 29 October 1892.

<sup>10</sup> *STHE* 24 December 1892.

holiness,” and over the organ chamber arch is another text – “Praise ye the Lord”.<sup>11</sup>

In total, the church had 414 sittings.<sup>12</sup> There was also another structure alongside it which would be used by the Sunday school.

It is clear that the principal motivation for the ‘planting’ of ACC was to address the spiritual needs of ‘a vast population to the north and north-east of the town almost wholly unprovided for, and entirely unprovided for as far as Congregationalism was concerned.’<sup>13</sup> As the Rev Seys Howell argued at a public meeting held in December 1892 to advance the cause, ‘they offered no apology for planting the free church standard in the neighbourhood (hear, hear) they were not ashamed of their Nonconformity (hear, hear).’ He went on to extol the virtues of Nonconformity and its positive contribution to ‘national life and character.’<sup>14</sup>

Having secured the site and, albeit temporary, premises, the next major step was to form the Church. This was formally constituted on 26 May 1893 at Mr Goodman’s house with 15 members.<sup>15</sup> During August, four deacons were elected, Edward Bance, William Goddard Lankester, Frank Littlejohn and Ebenezer Williams. The new church now needed a minister. During the second half of 1893, various candidates preached with a view to the pastorate. As the minutes of a church meeting on 24 July 1893 record it was initially proposed to invite the Revd Herbert Davies to the pastorate. However, a vote was then taken with 27 for and 14 against, and in the light of this the proposition was withdrawn.<sup>16</sup> At a later meeting on 20 October 1893, the following resolution was passed in relation to another candidate: “That this Church having listened with considerable pleasure and profit to the discourses delivered by the Rev Charles Craddock is however of the opinion, that taking into consideration the delicacy of his Constitution, and the uncertainty of his health it would be inadvisable to send him an invitation to become our pastor.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *STHE* 3 December 1892.

<sup>12</sup> At the time of its opening applications had been received for 153 sittings.

<sup>13</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1892.

<sup>14</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1892.

<sup>15</sup> *ACC Record for 1894* 24.

<sup>16</sup> *ACC Church Meeting Minute Book*. The Surman index indicates that in 1893 Davies secured a pastorate at Chingford in Essex.

<sup>17</sup> *ACC Church Meeting Minute Book*. According to *Surman Index*, at the time Craddock was serving a church in Teignmouth.

Thus, a pastor had not been appointed by the time the fledgling church celebrated its first anniversary in December 1893. A guest speaker at this event, the Rev Daniel Bloomfield James, from Worple Road Congregational Church in Wimbledon, drew attention to this in rather amusing fashion:

His first bit of advice to them was to get married (laughter). They had been courting ... for a whole year, which was quite long enough, and he thought they would be all the happier if they had selected the man of their choice as pastor (hear, hear).<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, Arthur Davis Martin who had just completed his training at Hackney College was offered the post. Implicit in the choice of Martin seems to have been a desire for a *new* Church to be led by a *newly ordained* minister. However, although Martin had no previous experience in the role, he was a son of the manse, his father George being a Congregational minister, so he was not a complete novice and presumably he would have some insights into what would be expected of him. He commenced his ministry on 4 February 1894.<sup>19</sup> At a welcome event held on Monday 5 February much was made of the favourable impression he had already created. For his part, Martin expressed his gratitude for the ‘kindness that had been manifested towards him’ and that he hoped ‘in due time to make their acquaintance in their own homes.’ He also asked for understanding and ‘for liberty to deal in the pulpit with all kinds of subject, theological and social, as well as the direct teaching necessary for the expounding of the word of God (applause).’ While they might not always agree with him, he believed that ‘God was revealing His will to them, and his Spirit was speaking to them through the difficulties which they had to face.’<sup>20</sup> On 12 April, Martin was ordained in the afternoon, with a public meeting being held in the evening (see Figure 1).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *STHE* 16 December 1893.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of Martin’s career and character see his official obituary, *Congregational Year Book* (hereafter *CYB*) 1942, 427/8.

<sup>20</sup> *STHE* 6 February 1894.

<sup>21</sup> *ACC Record for 1894* 24.

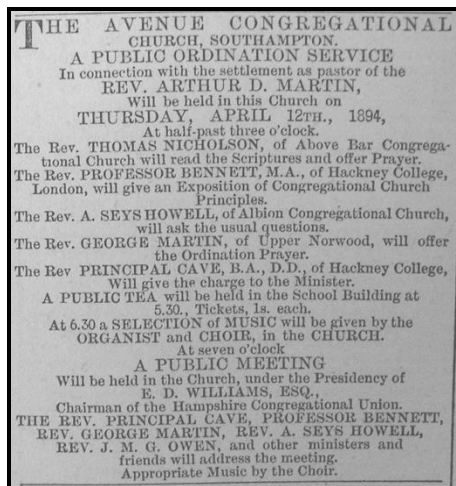


Figure 1: Revd Arthur Martin's Ordination Service

*Source: Southampton Times and Hampshire Express 7 April 1894*

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, much was made of Martin's potential. For example, the Revd Professor Bennett, of Hackney College, stated with confidence that Martin 'possessed many eminently good qualities, and he believed his work among them would bind their hearts to him, and be in every way helpful to them in their spiritual work.' Both he and the Revd Professor Cave, however, stressed the importance of the congregation supporting and helping him in every way and 'for Christ's sake to assist in bringing out his very best qualities.' Martin's father having indicated that, like him, his son would 'adhere to and ... preach of the propitiatory character of the death of their Lord Jesus Christ', he urged those present 'not to let him overwork himself'.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, considerable attention was given to the potential of ACC, with large congregations Sunday after Sunday, and the substantial numbers attending the ordination events. For his part, the Revd Martin (see Figure 2) expressed thanks for the help he had received and the kindness he had been shown and laid:

... particular stress on the necessity for earnest faith. If they determined in their own minds that God was going to do great things and set forward in that spirit, they would achieve much good (applause).

Recognition was also given to the key role that the Revd Seys Howell had played in initiating the new Church.<sup>23</sup> Overall the proceedings augured well for the future.

<sup>22</sup> *STHE* 14 April 1894

<sup>23</sup> *STHE* 14 April 1894.

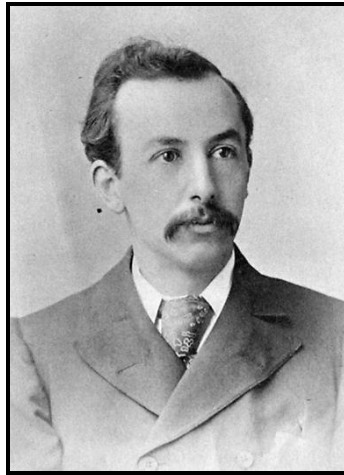


Figure 2: Revd Arthur Martin

*Source: Avenue St Andrew's URC Archive*

Another major event during 1894 was the Revd Martin's marriage on 19 June to Nellie Gertrude Carter at Upper Norwood Congregational Church, where his father, who officiated at the ceremony, was minister (see Figure 3).<sup>24</sup> Nellie was two years older than Arthur and her father was a tea broker.

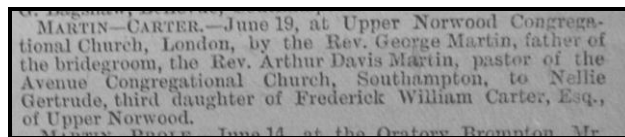


Figure 3: Notice of the Revd Martin's Marriage

*Source: Southampton Times and Hampshire Express 23 June 1894*

A few months later, in October, the Church was engaged in a major fund-raising effort with the organising of 'The British and Colonial Bazaar and Exhibition' (see Figure 4).

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<sup>24</sup> *Croydon Chronicle and East Surrey Advertiser* 23 June 1894.

**A**VENUE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,  
SOUTHAMPTON.

THE BRITISH AND COLONIAL  
**BAZAAR AND EXHIBITION**

Will be held at the  
PHILHARMONIC HALL, SOUTHAMPTON,  
As follows:—

On TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9th, 1894.  
The Bazaar will be opened by  
SIR FRANCIS AND LADY EVANS.  
Chairman—THE WORTHY THE MAYOR OF SOUTH-  
AMPTON (W. Bone, Esq., J.P.).

On WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10th, 1894.  
The Bazaar will be opened by  
HENRY WILDING, ESQ. (Of the American Line)  
Chairman—  
LEVI BUTTON ESQ., J.P., Sheriff of Southampton.

On THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11th, 1894.  
The Bazaar will be opened by  
THE HON. MRS. ELIOT YORKE.  
Chairman—CHARLES COX, Esq.

Open each day at 5.30 p.m.

THE BAZAAR

Will be held in Specially Designed and Decorated Stalls,  
representative of  
ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, WALES, SOUTH AFRICA,  
IRELAND, WEST INDIES,  
INDIA, CANADA, AND HONG KONG.

A SPLENDID COLLECTION OF ABOUT 500  
TROPHIES AND EXHIBITS,  
Lent by very numerous owners, will embrace some speci-  
ally interesting articles, and will comprise a Lion's Skin,  
loaned by Mr. Selous, the great African Sportsman.  
NO EXTRA CHARGE FOR THIS EXHIBITION.

A J ORCHESTRAL STRING BAND  
Will Perform for some hours each day a carefully selected  
Programme of Music.

AN EXHIBITION OF LIVING PICTURES,  
Consisting of Subjects taken from the Royal Academy  
Pictures, Dickens's Works, and Representations of  
Popular Advertisements.  
Exhibition of Dilden's Spinnet and other Articles of  
Interest connected with our Sailing Post.

FIRST NIGHT:—OLD ENGLISH CONCERT.  
SECOND NIGHT:—PLANTATION SONGS.  
THIRD NIGHT:—MISCELLANEOUS CONCERT.

A FIRST-CLASS REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT.

PRICES OF ADMISSION:—  
Each Day up to 6 p.m., ONE SHILLING. After 6 p.m.,  
SIXPENCE.  
Seven Tickets to cover the 3 days, 2s. each.  
Children, Half-price.

Figure 4: Advertisement for British and Colonial Bazaar and Exhibition

*Source: Southern Daily Echo 5 October 1894*

Held at Southampton's Philharmonic Hall, its 'object was to reduce the debt existing on the ... Church.' This was now about £2500 and it was hoped to raise £500. Every effort was made to ensure that those attending would have a memorable experience. Thus:

On entering the Hall a scene of dazzling magnificence met the eye. Arranged around the spacious apartment were stalls – all heavily laden with choice

articles of almost every description – representing many nations.<sup>25</sup> They were all tastefully decorated and draped in delicate colours, the effect produced being strikingly pretty and effective. All the stallholders were attired in costumes characteristic of the nationalities they were supposed to represent.<sup>26</sup> The scene as they flitted about the hall, on money-making bent, with their gorgeous gowns of variegated hues was essentially picturesque.<sup>27</sup>

The net amount raised was £495 5s 3d, just under the target amount.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of 1894, the mood was decidedly buoyant as reflected in the reporting of the second anniversary celebrations.

The establishment of a Congregational Church in the Avenue two years ago has met with a very considerable measure of success, and the heartiness and optimistic tone which prevailed throughout the celebration of the second anniversary on Sunday and Monday point very clearly to the rapid extension of Nonconformist work in this neighbourhood which has been deficient in Free church accommodation for a large population and for whom the Avenue Church is situated in an eminently central position.

Moreover, much of this was due to the leadership of the Revd Martin, ‘who ... puts forth a great deal of energy in furtherance of the many associations connected with the church, and his efforts are being fully supported by a band of faithful workers, while the church is rich in its number of young people who render assistance.’<sup>29</sup>

Fund raising continued during 1895 with a sale of work being held in April.<sup>30</sup> This was in the schoolroom and the proceeds were a modest £33 10s 3d.<sup>31</sup>

In June of that year the first marriage was conducted at ACC. Described as a ‘fashionable wedding’, appropriately it was between Arthur Edward Bance and Gertrude Lankester, members of families intimately involved with the founding of the

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<sup>25</sup> These were England, Scotland, Wales, South Africa, West Indies, Ireland, India, Hong Kong and Canada.

<sup>26</sup> The minister’s wife, Mrs Martin, played her part by serving on the West Indies, Flower Stall.

<sup>27</sup> *Southern Daily Echo*, 9 October 1894.

<sup>28</sup> Total receipts were £602 5s 4d and outgoings £107 0s 1d. *ACC Report for 1894* 17.

<sup>29</sup> *STHE* 5 January 1895.

<sup>30</sup> *SDE* 24 April 1895.

<sup>31</sup> *ACC Record for 1895* 28.



Church.<sup>32</sup> The officiating clergy were the Revds Martin and Henry John Perkins, the Revd Seys Howell's successor as minister of Albion.<sup>33</sup>

This happy event was closely followed by a sad occasion with the death in September 1895 of one of the key figures behind the initiative, Alderman William Goddard Lankester. At his memorial service the Revd Martin paid fulsome tribute to his 'genial, bright, sunshiny and kindly presence.' Reference was also made to his 'many-sided influence', which promoted 'true industry, temperance, righteousness and godliness in their midst.'<sup>34</sup> In April 1896, a special service was held to mark the unveiling of a brass tablet in his memory.<sup>35</sup>

A year later, at the laying of the foundation stone for the new premises, the Revd Martin recounted the progress the Church had made during these early years referring to the 'steady growth in numbers and Christian work.' A Sunday school had been started in July 1894 and a Band of Hope formed, 'to be followed by other useful and educational enterprises.' The latter included a Literary Society and Literary and Musical Evenings. The membership had increased from 56 to about 150, while the Church had striven to play its part 'in missionary work at home and abroad.'<sup>36</sup> One example of this was the Girls' Missionary Society established in December 1894 and later renamed The Girls Missionary Working Society. As explained:

Thanks to the kind suggestions of Mrs A.D. Martin this society was begun ... for the purpose of organising the girls of the Congregation between the ages of six and sixteen, to work for the children in Foreign Missionary Schools. At the first meeting ... arrangements [were] made to send the first year's work to Mrs Owen, one of the China Missionaries. There are about 30 members ... Among the various employments are:- Dressing dolls, making reins, cot quilts and many other useful articles suitable for the distribution of prizes.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Alfred Edward Bance was the son of Edward Bance and Gertrude Lankester the youngest daughter of Augustus Lankester. Both Edward Bance and Augustus Lankester were founding members of Avenue Congregational Church.

<sup>33</sup> *SDE* 18 June 1895.

<sup>34</sup> *SDE* 20 September 1895.

<sup>35</sup> *SDE* 10 April 1896.

<sup>36</sup> *STHE* 7 August 1897.

<sup>37</sup> *ACC Record for 1894* 12.

Donations were also made to the London Missionary Society; the Southampton Women's Auxiliary to Female Mission; the Children's Free Breakfast Fund; providing for 'the children of the very poor in London's slums';<sup>38</sup> the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews; and the Southampton Hospital Sunday Fund.

Another development mentioned at the fourth and fifth anniversaries was the establishment of a branch of the Young People's Society Christian Endeavour. Although originating in the American State of Maine in the early 1880s by the 1890s it was making a considerable impact on youth ministry in many countries, including Britain. In 1897 Avenue's society was described 'as a source of great strength.'<sup>39</sup>

Increasingly, however, in parallel with these developments were the steps that needed to be taken to enable the construction of the new Church. Although the Revd Martin was a leading figure in this respect, being of a modest disposition he would probably have taken exception to the statement in his official obituary that 'he built the beautiful Avenue Church.'<sup>40</sup> Many, of course, were involved in the project, in different capacities, with key responsibilities being exercised by members of the Building Committee, which the Revd Martin chaired.

### **The Building Committee: Members and Activities**

As explained at the time, the Building Committee was 'really an enlargement of the original committee that founded the Church'.<sup>41</sup> At its first meeting on 21 March 1896, it established two sub-committees, Works and Finance. The members of these bodies and, where known, their occupations are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, amongst their memberships was a wide variety of expertise and talent and this undoubtedly served the congregation well when critical decisions were taken concerning the requirements for the new premises.

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<sup>38</sup> *ACC Record for 1895* 18.

<sup>39</sup> *STHE* 18 December 1897. See R Ottewill 'The Early Years of the Christian Endeavour Movement: Innovation and Consolidation at Local Level 1881-1914', in Alec Ryrie, Charlotte Methuen and Andrew Spicer (eds) *Studies in Church History Vol 57: Inspiration and Institution in Christian History* (Cambridge University Press), 300-318, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> *CYB*, 1942, 427.

<sup>41</sup> *ACC Record for 1896* 27.

**Table 1: Members of Building Committee**

Surname	First Name(s)	Background	Age
Martin <sup>w,f</sup>	Arthur	Minister	32
Bance <sup>w,f</sup>	Edward (Col)	Deacon – Estate agent	58
Littlejohn <sup>w,f</sup>	Frank	Deacon – Comm traveller & director of a public co	50
Rashley <sup>w,f</sup>	Sidney C.	Deacon (Church Secretary) – Bank clerk	n.k.
Sims <sup>w,f</sup>	Edward T.	Deacon	n.k.
Williams <sup>w,f</sup>	Ebenezer D.	Deacon	n.k.
Aldridge <sup>w</sup>	James G.W.	Consulting electrical engineer	44
Awbery	Alfred	Postal clerk/Insurance agent	50
Bance <sup>f</sup>	Arthur	House and estate agent	31
Bee	William J.	Coal merchant	44
Blizard <sup>w</sup>	John H.	Associate Member, Institution of Civil Engineers	n.k.
Chamberlain <sup>f</sup>	Frederick E.	Shipping agent	40
*Cropper <sup>w</sup>	Edward	Not known	n.k.
Deagon	Stephen	Lead merchants clerk	48
Gough	Austin	Butcher	n.k.
Hamilton	James T.	Stockbroker and incorporated accountant	52
Hunt	John P. Atlee	Superintendent registrar of births, deaths & marriages	n.k.
Johnson	James H.	Examining officer HM Lustrous	48
Lankester <sup>f</sup>	Augustus	Retired grocer	70
Lankester <sup>w</sup>	Harold B.	Ironmonger. Shopkeeper	29
Lankester	Leonard W.	Ironfounder (1901 – aged 38)	n.k.
Lemon <sup>w</sup>	James	Member Institute of Civil Engineers	n.k.
Montgomery <sup>f</sup>	George	Life assurance agent	60
Parkhouse	William E.	Watchmaker and jeweller	37
Peet <sup>f</sup>	William	Managing Sec to Ltd Co of publishers and printers	36
Richards <sup>f</sup>	Michael	Pensioner. Prov insurance	61
Ridley <sup>f</sup>	Henry D.	Solicitor	n.k.
Rowland <sup>w</sup>	William H.	Registrar of marriages in Southampton district	n.k.
Smith <sup>f</sup>	Frederick W.	Not known	n.k.
*Stanley <sup>w</sup>	Thomas	Not known	n.k.
Wilkins <sup>f</sup>	Alfred	Not known	n.k.

w = member of works sub-committee

f = member of Finance sub-committee

\* = no longer on committee in 1898

n.k. = not known

Sources: *ACC Record* for 1896 and *Census Reports*

The *ACC Record* for 1896 reported that the most important recommendation from the sub-committees was:

That the new permanent building for the accommodation of the Church, should be erected on the site now occupied by Avenue House; that 550 sittings should be provided, to be subsequently increased to 800 if required, in

addition to the choir; that a church parlour should be included in the design, as also cloakrooms at the main entrances.

It was estimated that the cost would be £5000 which together with an outstanding debt of £2000 on the temporary church meant that £7000 had to be raised. It was hoped that half this amount would be promised and paid by 31st December 1898. Amongst the substantial promises of financial support were £500, a legacy of William Goddard Lankester; £500 from his wife; and £600 ‘in Loving Memory of W.G. Lankester from his Widow and Children.’ Alongside these substantial contributions were other more modest ones from all sections of the church. Arguably one of the most endearing was that of the children who, as reported at the fifth anniversary, ‘expressed a very strong wish to do something substantial in connection with the new building, and it was soon found that they would like it to take the form of providing the pulpit for the new church’.<sup>42</sup> This they did by collecting pennies and although the amount raised did not cover the full cost, they received special mention at the dedication service.<sup>43</sup>

During the summer of 1896 ‘arrangements were made with several well-known architects to prepare plans and drawings for the consideration of the Committee.’<sup>44</sup> Once received these were assessed by Mr J.M. Brydon, FRIBA, who recommended that those submitted by James Cubitt most ‘nearly ... [met] their requirements’. These plans were exhibited at the fourth Anniversary celebrations held in December 1896 to keep the members and wider congregation informed and enthused. According to the *ACC Record for 1896*, ‘it was gratifying that the decision [to accept the Cubitt plans] ... [had] been unanimously endorsed, so far as ... [was] known, by all who took the opportunity of viewing the drawings’ (see Figure 5).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *STHE* 18 December 1897.

<sup>43</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1898.

<sup>44</sup> Despite an extensive search details of the other architects who submitted plans have not been found.

<sup>45</sup> *ACC Record for 1896* 27-8.

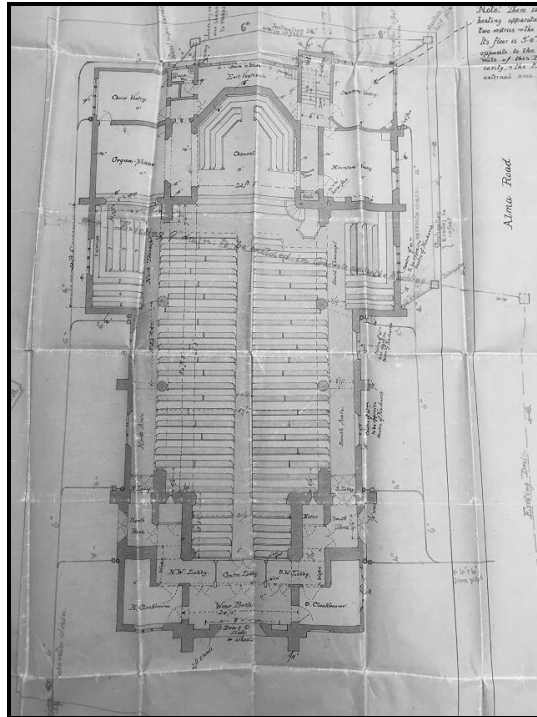


Figure 5: Original plans for the new church

*Source: Southampton Archives*

In 1897 the Committee decided to increase the number of sittings to 674, plus 50 for the choir. This was to be achieved by adding a north and a south aisle. From the tenders received for the work, that submitted 'by Mr J Smith of Middle Street, Bevois Town ... for the sum of £6518' was accepted. Due to the increased accommodation this was substantially more than the original estimate of £5000. Unsurprisingly therefore an appeal was made for all those with 'an interest in the well-being of the Church' to follow the example of those who had made additional contributions to the amounts they had originally pledged. As previously mentioned, the foundation stone was duly laid in the summer of that year with the ceremony being preceded by a service led by the Revd William Clarkson, minister of Above Bar Congregational Church, at which the sermon was preached by the Revd Alfred Rowland BA, LLB, chairman elect of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. It was followed by a garden party at Oak Mount, the home of Edward and Mrs Bance.<sup>46</sup>

The following year the Committee devoted substantial attention to 'the internal arrangements, fittings, and furniture of the new Church' and to 'the plans that were recommended for heating, ventilation and lighting.' Members were also taxed with the need to ensure that the dedication services were held before Christmas and

<sup>46</sup> ACC Record for 1897 28-9.

specifically on a date when the Revd Horton who, as indicated earlier, had preached at the opening of the temporary church, could attend. Since the only possibility was Wednesday 7 December 1898 arrangements were made for the celebrations to be held on that day. In somewhat self-congratulatory mode, the Committee reported that:

The [Dedication] services ... [and those held] on the Sundays following were full of promise for the future, and we have the pleasure of knowing that, notwithstanding the drawbacks, which were inevitable on account of the hurried preparations we had to make, the friends from outside, who worshipped with us, agree that the structure is an ornament to the locality in which it is situated, and that the internal arrangements are according to the most approved modern standard for such edifices. The design is esteemed a credit to the architect and the construction to the builder.<sup>47</sup>

One of the modern internal arrangements was electric lighting with the church being the first public building in Southampton to have such a feature.<sup>48</sup>

The only discordant note appears to have been the upset caused by the Revd Horton's criticism of ritualism in worship in the sermon he preached at the evening meeting as part of the dedication proceedings. He contrasted ritualism with what he described as the Puritan idea of worship. The latter was seen as more demanding for the minister and his congregation and by implication far superior. While, 'Ritualism lighted its lamp in the church ... Puritanism pointed through the window to the light in the Heavens – the infinite truths of God.'<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, this resulted in the vicar of St Peter's, the Revd Henry Percival, sending a letter to the *Southampton Times*, in which he took the Revd Horton to task for his remarks, referring to his 'bigotry and intolerance' and to 'the sad tones of the preacher' compared with the Revd Martin's 'touching letter ... at the end of the published account of the sermon'. He concluded by drawing attention to comments made:

Only a few weeks ago ... by the President of a Nonconformist Council ... here in Southampton "All our powers and all our energies must now be

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<sup>47</sup> *ACC Record* for 1898 29.

<sup>48</sup> C Binfield *The Contexting of a Chapel Architect: James Cubitt 1836-1912* (London 2001) 88.

<sup>49</sup> *STHE* 17 December 1898.

concentrated upon one supreme effort to uproot Ritualism” ... Would to God it had been – “All our powers and all our energies must be now concentrated upon one supreme effort to uproot vice and immorality, which are eating out the inner life of our race.”<sup>50</sup>

The Revd Percival’s letter appeared alongside the very detailed report of the celebrations and was indicative of the underlying tensions which still existed between those who favoured simplicity in worship, as practised at ACC, and those for whom ritual was of foundational importance.

At this point, aside from the issue of ritualism, a major preoccupation remained finance. Despite all the money pledged, it was to take many years for the debt to be cleared. That said, in its design the new Church was a considerable achievement and reflected late nineteenth ideas regarding Nonconformist taste.

### **Architectural Aims**

Underlying Cubitt’s approach to the design of ACC was the application of the principle of what Clyde Binfield has characterised as that of the ‘Nonconformist parish church’ - ‘stately, ample, friendly ... [and] homely’.<sup>51</sup> The exterior, with its prominent tower and ‘red brick dressed with orange-red brick’ had many of the features of an Anglican church built in the late Victorian era for a high status suburban neighbourhood. The overall style was that of ‘late Gothic’ (see Figure 6).<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the interior had the ‘look and feel’ of a ‘low Church’ Anglican place of worship, with the pulpit being situated to one side as opposed to being in a dominant position in the centre which had been the norm for Nonconformist churches and chapels for much of the century. This meant that the communion table, situated in the sanctuary, was more in evidence than was the case in those places of worship with central pulpits. However, in keeping with its Nonconformist credentials the Church was entirely free from the ornamentation associated with Anglo-Catholic churches.

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<sup>50</sup> *STHE* 17 December 1898.

<sup>51</sup> Binfield *Contexting* 84.

<sup>52</sup> *STHE* 2 September 1905.



Figure 6: An Early Postcard of the New Church

*Source: Avenue St Andrew's URC Archive*

It was also intended that, notwithstanding the pulpit's position, the preacher should be visible to every member of the congregation. As explained:

On the original plan the four stone pillars of the nave did not intercept the view of the pulpit from any of the pews. This, in places where the service is not liturgical, and where special importance is attached to preaching, is a point to which careful attention has to be directed. Even with the present widened aisles, however, the amount of obstruction is very slight, the arches which support the clerestory being large, and the stone nave piers of no great diameter ... With the same view as to the practical uses of the building, the nave itself has been made as much as 33ft wide. For the sake of acoustics, again, it has been kept down to a moderate height.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from the main worship area, the church premises incorporated vestries for the minister, deacons and choir and a "church parlour" suitable for small social gatherings. However, unlike Cubitt's masterpiece, Union Chapel Islington, no provision was made for Sunday school accommodation since it was intended to continue using the existing accommodation for this purpose.

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<sup>53</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1898.



## Expansion?

Predictably, in the report of the opening of the new Church premises, much was made of this being ‘a new chapter in the history of Nonconformity in Southampton.’

Although Avenue was a Congregational Church, Free Churchmen of all denominations claimed an interest in ‘the extension of Nonconformist principles’ and a desire for their churches ‘to fall into line in the defence and zealous maintenance of the principles of Protestant Nonconformity.’ This was evidenced by the attendance of ministers representing Baptists, Wesleyans, Presbyterians and Bible Christians at the opening services.<sup>54</sup>

From an architectural perspective it can be said that the location of ACC on a prime site alongside of one of the principal thoroughfares into Southampton ensured that it would be noticed and noted by visitors thereby strengthening the credentials of Nonconformity in the town. It was also a notable addition to the assortment of Congregational churches that made a distinctive contribution to the built environment of Southampton. At that time, these were, in the town centre, Above Bar (the cause dating from 1662), Albion (1844) and Kingsfield (1853); and, in the suburbs, Northam (1863) and Freemantle (1885) (see Figure 7).<sup>55</sup>

In numerical terms, the opening of ACC represented a 20.8 per cent increase in the sittings of Southampton’s Congregational Churches (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Sittings in Southampton’s Congregational Churches in 1900<sup>56</sup>**

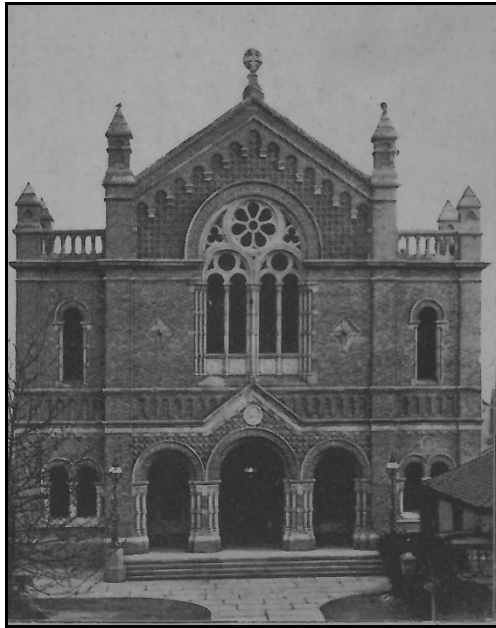
Church	Sittings
Above Bar	1200
Albion	1100
Kingsfield	600
Freemantle	550
Northam	400
Sub- Total	3850
Avenue	800
<b>Total</b>	<b>4650</b>

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<sup>54</sup> *STHE* 10 December 1898.

<sup>55</sup> For full details see R Ottewill ‘“A Splendid Prospect”?: Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton 1901-1914’ *The Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum* No 15 (Summer 2009) 38-64.

<sup>56</sup> HCU Annual Report for 1900 HRO 127M94/62/45.



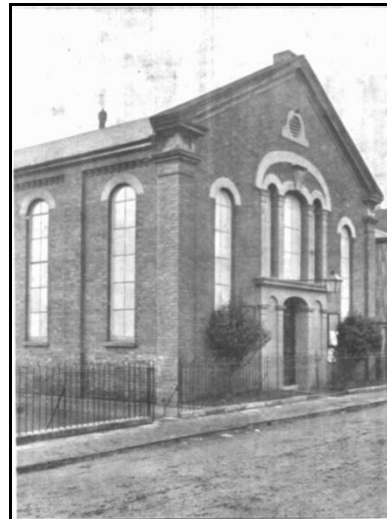
Above Bar



Albion



Kingsfield



Northam



Avenue



Freemantle

Figure 7: Southampton's Six Edwardian Congregational Churches

*Source: Journal of Southampton Local History Forum 15 Summer 2009 42*

Thus, it contributed significantly to the amount of accommodation available for potential worshippers. How often the churches were completely full, however, is another matter. Unfortunately, no censuses of churchgoing in Southampton were sponsored by a local newspaper at the beginning of the twentieth century, as they were in the Hampshire towns of Portsmouth, Basingstoke and Whitechurch. Nevertheless, the construction of ACC was very much a sign that the Congregationalists of Southampton were investing for the future and for what they hoped and prayed would be a period of continued expansion.

In human terms ACC provided a spiritual home for those living in the Church's catchment area which included the newly constructed, substantial properties in Winn and Westwood Roads as well as more modest houses in New Alma Road, Avenue Road and other parts of Bevois Mount. By the time of the ninth anniversary celebrations of the Church in December 1901 there were 218 church members (a net increase of 8 on the previous year).

Additionally, it was not long before ACC, under the Revd Martin's prompting, recognised its responsibility for the inhabitants of a much poorer neighbourhood in the vicinity. As he put it at the 1901 anniversary meeting:

With regard to the present position of the church, he felt very deeply for the need for the church to be engaged more actively than at present in some form of real, downright Christian work. Some time ago some members were much interested in the condition of things in old Portswood, and conducted services there. It was his hope that they might have been able to make the work of those friends a thorough success, and encouraged them to carry it on, but the real reason why it had not been carried further was owing to the lack of funds. He believed they had got the workers but what was required was money to enable those friends to carry on the work. If the debt removed slowly they must be patient, because so long as they as a church were not engaged in some active personal work for the extension of the Kingdom of God they were losing something in their own spiritual life, as well as losing an opportunity of extending the Gospel. The work which was needed to be done in the neighbourhood of which he had spoken was tremendous. He could not speak in a mixed assembly ... of the facts which had come to his knowledge and

under his notice. Their church was the nearest Congregational Church, and it behoved them to look after the needs of Old Portswood.<sup>57</sup>

The Rev Martin's remarks have been quoted at length because they demonstrate his awareness of a mission field on ACC's doorstep that needed to be given priority, notwithstanding the outstanding debt on the new church premises. Martin made it clear that, as soon as funds were available, a building would be obtained so that services could be held in Portswood and evangelism could begin in earnest.<sup>58</sup> This challenge led to the establishment of the Portswood Mission.<sup>59</sup>

## Departures

In 1905 the Revd Martin accepted a 'cordial invitation' to become the minister of Buxton Congregation Church in Derbyshire. His move from Southampton was prompted by his indifferent health and that of his wife. It was felt that the 'invigorating surroundings' of the Peak District would be beneficial in this respect.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the Congregational Church in Buxton was much smaller, and therefore less demanding, than ACC.

As reported at the time his departure was announced:

... [this represented] a great loss to Nonconformity in the borough, and the local pulpit will lose one of the most intellectually gifted and broad-minded of preachers. His ministry at Avenue church has always been most powerful and acceptable, and the relations existing between the pastor and his people have throughout been of the most cordial and friendly character.<sup>61</sup>

Undoubtedly, Martin had made his mark and, in the language of today, was going to be 'a hard act to follow'.

A 'farewell gathering' was held for the Revd and Mrs Martin on Monday 16 October 1905 'in the lecture hall adjoining the church'. This was the old church

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<sup>57</sup> *STHE* 14 December 1901.

<sup>58</sup> *STHE* 14 December 1901.

<sup>59</sup> <https://asauc.org.uk/church-archives/portswood-mission-history/> (accessed 15 March 2020).

<sup>60</sup> *STHE* 2 September 1905.

<sup>61</sup> *STHE* 2 September 1905.

repurposed for other activities. Chaired by the Church Treasurer, Colonel Bance, who also held the office of mayor that year, it was attended by all the leading figures in the Church. Fulsome tributes were paid to the Revd Martin and his wife, with reference being made to 'his highly acceptable pastorate' and the regret that was felt concerning their departure. In 'a feeling speech' the chairman mentioned 'the indifferent health of both Mr and Mrs Martin' and:

... eulogised the former's work and services for that church and local Nonconformity in general during his twelve years' residence among them. He also referred to the great support and assistance Mr Martin had received from his beloved wife, and wished both God speed, restored health, and every happiness in their new home at Buxton.<sup>62</sup>

It was also pointed out that, 'as was well known ... [Martin] had expressed the wish that no testimonial should be subscribed for,' thereby confirming his previously mentioned modesty. However, he did accept as a parting gift 'the pulpit Bible which he had read during the whole of his ministry' at ACC. This had been 'beautifully illuminated and inscribed.' For his part, Martin:

... strongly urged upon the Church the importance of consolidated working, and of the efforts for the Portswood Mission not being relaxed; also on no account to let his departure hinder them from subscribing freely to the Debt Fund, which had been reduced from £6000 to £3000 [once promises were taken into account].<sup>63</sup>

However, with respect to the debt, as the Church historian, Dora Caton points out: 'In 1905 the Church went "all out" to clear a debt of £6000. A Scheme was devised to cover five years but it was not cleared until twenty years had elapsed.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The Martins moved from Buxton to Edinburgh in 1912.

<sup>63</sup> *STHE* 21 October 1905.

<sup>64</sup> D Caton *A Short History of the Avenue Congregational Church* (c1968) 11.

## Conclusion

What is clear from the foregoing narrative is that those involved in establishing ACC laid some very firm foundations not only with respect to the prestigious new premises but also in terms of the quality of the leadership both clerical and lay and recruiting and securing the support of a committed membership. These enabled it to make its mark locally and within the wider Nonconformist community of Southampton. In short, the planting of ACC undoubtedly went some way towards meeting the aim of ‘extending Nonconformity’ in a part of the town where it had previously been under-represented. Moreover, through initiatives such as the Portswood Mission and the Avenue Lecture series<sup>65</sup> together with the activities of various church based organisations, it was able to embed the Nonconformist presence still further.

## Note

The impetus for this article came from research undertaken for the National Lottery Heritage Fund project, Avenue 2020.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Roger Ottewill, ‘Churches and Adult Education in the Edwardian Era: Learning from the Experiences of Hampshire Congregationalists’ in Morwenna Ludlow, Charlotte Methuen and Andrew Spicer (eds) *Studies in Church History Vol 55: The Church and Education* (Cambridge University Press), pp.494-510 (at 506-9), 2019.

<sup>66</sup> See *CHS Mags* Vol 9(3) (Spring 2020) 112-3 and Vol 9(4) (Autumn 2020) 178-9 for details.