

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 76: Agneash Chapel, Agneash Lonan, Isle of Man

Christianity came to the Isle of Man in the 5th century, spread by Celtic monks, many of them followers of St Patrick in Ireland. Each monk would have a small chapel, known as a keeill, where he would offer prayers, blessings, hospitality and spiritual accompaniment for pilgrims who visited or locals who lived nearby. Over the following centuries, scores of these sacred places were established, and many of today's churches and chapels were originally built on the site of an ancient keeill.

One such chapel is at Agneash, which stands on one of the ancient pilgrimage routes that crossed the island in Celtic times. It is a small village on a steep hill between Snaefell Mountain, the island's highest peak, and Laxey, a small town on the rugged east coast. The current building stands on the site of a keeill built in about 690AD. I met hospitaller Hilary Simms there, where we talked in the central aisle of the single-room building with views through



the windows of the small garden and, further afield, the winding gear of one of the mine shafts that pepper the hills. Hilary explained that a Primitive Methodist chapel was opened here in 1857, when much of the of the congregation would have been made up of local farmers, farm labourers, miners and their families.

Primitive Methodism was a breakaway from the Wesleyan movement in the early 19th century. Nicknamed the "Ranters" because they preached outdoors, they attracted many labourers and miners, especially on the Isle of Man. The congregation had been meeting



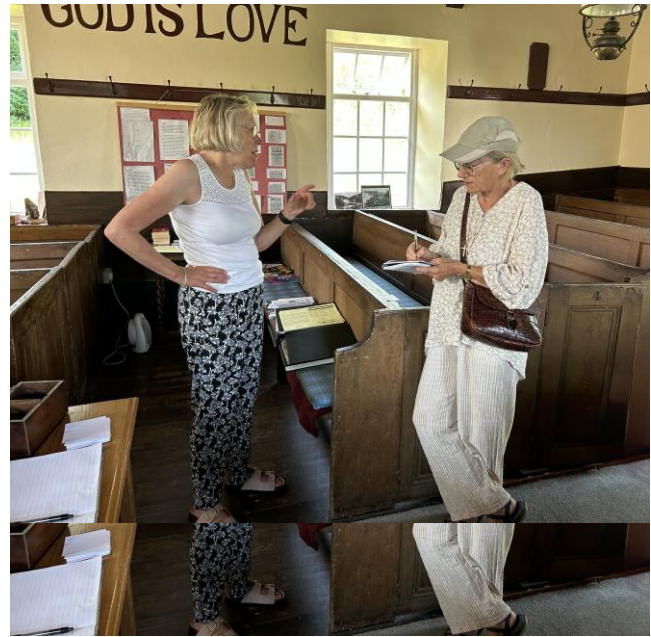
for worship in local cottages for several years, so the new building allowed them much greater space. There are records of two hundred people meeting for a service here in 1890. The building was deliberately kept plain and simple, following the Primitive Methodist tradition of having chapels that could be converted for other purposes should the need arise.

Those who pause here today will find information about the history of the building. There are notice boards around the walls, and leaflets for people to take

away. A visitors' guide invites people to look around and find inspiration for reflection and prayer. Pews fill much of the interior, with a pulpit set at one end under a text on the wall, "Praise ye the Lord". In front of it is a harmonium which originated front of it is a harmonium which originated in Ontario, Canada in the 1920's.

One feature that has survived the building's Methodist history is another text painted on a wall: "God is love". To Hilary this is a foundational aspect of the chapel's outreach today. The weekly worshipping congregation is small, but its ministry reaches out to its many visitors from the UK and across the world. Some are groups of walkers dropping in on impulse; others are tracing their family history, often connected with local miners who emigrated to Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Many of those who step through its doors speak of a special atmosphere, what Hilary (and her Celtic forebears on the island) would call a "thin", prayed-in place.

All visitors find the doors open, refreshments available and an opportunity to sit quietly in a welcoming space. This, for Hilary, is now the mission of the chapel, sharing God's love through the offer of hospitality and friendship.



Hilary Simms, L, talks with Ali Green in Agneash chapel