

Chapel marks the 350th Birthday of “The Father of English Hymnody”

Isaac Watts, the first prolific author of hymns in the English language, had his 350th birthday marked with a short service at his tomb in Bunhill Fields on Wednesday 17th July 2024.

Watts is best known as the author of beloved hymns such as “Joy to the World”; “When I survey The Wondrous Cross”; “O God Our Help In Ages Past” and “Jesus shall Reign Where’er the sun”.

The Service, led by the World Methodist Council’s chairperson on Ecumenical Relationships Rev. Tony Franklin-Ross, was attended by a small group of clerics connected with Wesley’s Chapel & Leysian Mission as well as a member of the chapel staff. Flowers were laid on behalf of all the Churches who have benefitted from Watts’ work.

Watts was the first person to establish the idea of singing non-biblical hymns in Church. Holy Songs about Christian Life, Belief in God, who God is etc, while a common feature of most churches today, were extremely uncommon in the 17th Century, Churches at most singing the Psalms of David.

Watts himself wrote amended versions of the Psalms, which not only worked musically much better in English, but are said to have “made David a Christian” by adding in New Testament ideas to the content of the Psalms. Joy to the World is based on Psalm 98.

Wesley’s Chapel and Leysian Mission, London’s oldest surviving Methodist Church, is across the City Road from Bunhill Fields. John Wesley, considered the founder of Methodism along with his hymn-writer brother Charles, knew Watt’s work and they used it in their Evangelism which became the Methodist Church.

Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts were admirers of one another’s work, and Watts said Wesley’s “Wrestling Jacob” was worth all he written. Charles meanwhile, included Watts’ hymns as well as his own in services. The three men were friends and all shared in the common work of the Gospel.

Bernard Manning, the Congregationalist Scholar said “no one can read Watts without having Wesley in mind, and nothing will enable a man to see the greatness of Watts’s hymns so well as a thorough knowledge of Wesley’s.”

Congregationalists and Methodists the world over continue to love Watts and Wesley’s hymns, as well as many other churches, not only in English but the many other languages their words have been translated into. A Monument to Watts stands in Westminster Abbey, while his papers are held at Yale University in the USA.

The tomb is within one of the fenced off areas of Bunhill Fields, London’s historic non-conformist burial ground, in use between 1665 and 1854. Some 123,000 people’s mortal remains were deposited there during its years in use.

Today Bunhill Fields is managed by the City of London Corporation, thanks to whose kind assistance the service was able to be held at Isaac Watts’ Tomb, which is normally inaccessible.

Born in Southampton on 17th July 1674, Watts was educated at the Dissenting Academy in Stoke Newington (Oxford and Cambridge not being open to Non-Anglicans in those days) and became a Congregationalist Pastor in London.

He first started writing when he complained of the singing in church not being good, to which his father replied “write something better”.

He worked at Mark Lane Congregational Chapel in London and was noted not only for preaching but also his promotion of education. He was also considerably more ecumenical than was usual at the time, with relations between the Established Church and the "Free" Churches being greatly strained in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

As well as hymns he wrote a book on logic which became a standard text for over a century, he also was one of the first people to outline the difference between a chemical compound and a chemical element. He studied and wrote about Philosophy, mathematics, theology and other disciplines, and was well-versed in Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

He lived with the Hartopp Family first in Stoke Newington before moving in with the Abney Family for 36 years. These two families shared what is now Abney Park in Stoke Newington, and many of Watts' hymns were written there. It is also said he helped Lady Mary Abney design the gardens. Her husband, Sir Thomas Abney, a Lord Mayor of London and one of the original directors of the Bank of England was noted for the faith he shared with his friend and guest Watts.

Watts had originally gone to stay with the Abneys for a week in 1712 when his health broke down, however he remained with them the rest of his life.

Other events have been held across the country, with a special service at Methodist Central Hall recorded on Sunday 14th July for broadcast on Radio 4 on Sunday 25th August. His Former School, Southampton's King Edward VI School held a special event on Tuesday 25th June, and one of its Houses is named for Watts. A statue of Watts in Southampton is to be restored as part of the commemorations.

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Wesley's Chapel & Leysian Mission is at 49 City Road, London EC1Y 1AU. The Chapel's 250th Anniversary will be in 2028.