



A touch of Moravia in the Wye Valley

by Mary Booth

A small Moravian church with a fascinating history lies on the banks of the River Wye. The village of Brockweir was a busy little port in 1833, as it was the highest point on the river which was navigable by larger ships. Many men lived and worked in the village, loading and unloading the boats.

It was described at the time as 'a city of refuge for persons of desperate and lawless character'. Although it was called a city, the population was only about 350. There were seven public houses, but no church or place of worship. The local doctor thought something needed to be done and approached some Moravian Christians in Bristol.

The Moravian Church, also known as the Unitas Fratrum (Unity of the Brethren), originated in 1457 in Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. Jan Hus formed the breakaway Hussite movement there. They translated the scriptures and issued hymn books in the language of the people. They were the first in modern Europe to do so. They also established schools and became the first Protestant church, now known as the Moravian Church. Then there was the Counter-Reformation and the Thirty Years War, with the famous Battle of Bílá Hora (White Mountain). Comenius, known as the father of modern education, was a follower. The Moravian Church later influenced John Wesley.

To return to the Wye Valley in the 19th

century, the Moravian minister in Bristol agreed to help found a church in Brockweir. The Duke of Beaufort gave some land in a beautiful spot by the River Wye, the site of a former cock-pit. (Cock-fighting with betting had been a popular but cruel pastime there for the men on Sundays).

Money was raised through local voluntary contributions and the church was built. It was opened and dedicated in May 1833 with 400 adults and 120 children attending. Things quietened down in the village.

Time passed, ship-building declined, the railway came up the valley and a new bridge was built over the river. The congregation declined and the Moravian Christians found it hard to keep the church open. The Baptist minister in Monmouth stepped in and helped, in a modern ecumenical experiment in 1961.

This joint Moravian/Baptist initiative became well-known. By 1993 the Brockweir church was able to 'stand on its own two feet' again. Now this is the only church in the village offering regular public worship and all Christians and people of other denominations or none are welcome at services.

The simple faith with a willingness to help others that Moravian Christians follow is based on the Sermon on the Mount. There are currently about one million followers around the world. They do not believe in accumulating wealth. They recognise themselves to be a church of sinners who require forgiveness daily.

In the Wye Valley crime was reduced through this approach and a peaceful, law-abiding, friendly community was the result.

So there is a corner of England close to the Welsh border that can be said to have close links with the history of the Czech Republic.

■ Some information for the above article has been sourced from a lecture in 1927 by the Rev CH Shawe entitled *The Moravian Church and what it stands for*.

