

The Story of TAVISTOCK COURT



The Story of TAVISTOCK COURT

The Revd Ernest W. Todd

The Free Church Federal Council
27 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HH

CONTENTS

Foreword

Introduction

Chapter 1. Free Church Organisation	7
Chapter 2. The Remarkable Black Family	11
Chapter 3. The National Council and a Permanent Home	19
Chapter 4. Financing the Work of the Council	24

FOREWORD

ON 18 SEPTEMBER 1935, the new offices of the National Free Church Council were formally opened, after a short service of dedication. Thus, in 1985, the golden jubilee of this event will be celebrated.

The story of how this scheme was planned and carried through, and of the tremendous contribution made to it by Mr R. Wilson Black, and later by members of his family, and especially by Sir Cyril Black, is a fascinating story.

The following pages attempt to tell something of this, and to place on record something of the debt which the Free Churches of England owe to the Black family. My thanks are due in the first place to Sir Cyril Black, who despite his modesty in regard to his own and to his family's contribution, allowed me access to the records of Tavistock Court Limited. Then I am grateful to the present Secretary of that body, Mr G. W. Garrett, who facilitated my researches into the Minutes, checked my rough draft of Chapter 4, and suggested a slight addition. My thanks are due also to the Secretary of the Free Church Federal Council, the Revd Richard J. Hamper, who readily agreed to make available minutes and other records of the Council, who read the first draft of this booklet and made helpful comments on it. His secretary, Miss Doreen M. Chaundy, and indeed the staff of the Free Church Council, were most helpful and made my visits to Tavistock Court very pleasant. My debt to Dr Townsend's biography of R. Wilson Black, to Fielden Hughes' *Memoir of Sydney Black*, and Dr E. A. Payne's *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, will be all too obvious to anyone with knowledge of the matters dealt with. I would also record my thanks to Mrs Ursula Batten who converted my poorly typed (and even more badly written) drafts into readable typescript.

Finally I am grateful to the Free Church Council for asking me to undertake this task, because it has proved a fascinating one which I have enjoyed.

E.W.T.



ROBERT WILSON BLACK, J.P.

INTRODUCTION

TAVISTOCK COURT, a purpose built ten-storey block, was erected in 1934-35 and stands at the corner of Tavistock Square and Endsleigh Street, just off Woburn Place. The Free Church Federal Council occupy part of the ground floor and lower ground floor. In addition, there are in all seventy-two flats and a porter's flat; there are two passenger lifts and a carpeted staircase and corridors. The flats vary slightly in size, from one to four rooms, with a kitchenette and bathroom.

The scheme originated with the late Mr R. Wilson Black, who was active in the affairs of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, which later united with the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches, to form the Free Church Federal Council. His labours resulted in the choice and development of the site in Tavistock Square; and the work that he began has been carried on by his sons. Later sections will make plain the remarkable record of service which this distinguished family rendered to the churches and to the life of this country, both locally and nationally.

1

FREE CHURCH ORGANISATION

THE 19th CENTURY saw a great development in the life of the English Free Churches. In the first half of the century, the churches of the various denominations came together in denominational associations; thus, in 1813, representatives of the Baptist churches in this country formed a union. It was not at first remarkably effective but it was reconstituted in 1831. The Congregational Union came into being in the same year; and in 1844, seventy Presbyterian congregations in England formed themselves into the Presbyterian Church of England. In the second half of the century, each group became increasingly conscious of itself and of the tradition to which it belonged. Thus in 1877, the General Presbyterian Alliance was formed to bring together in federation all the Reformed Churches of the Presbyterian pattern. Four years later (in 1881), the first Methodist Ecumenical Conference was held, and similar meetings were held thereafter every ten years up to 1931. In 1891, the International Congregational Council assembled and was to meet on four more occasions up to and including 1930. Then in 1905, there was the formation of the Baptist World Alliance.

In the meantime, the need was felt for a closer association between the different Free Churches in this country, so that together, they might make their voice heard on various important national issues.

There was much to occupy their attention. Nonconformists had for some time been taking a great interest in the field of education. In the earlier years of the 19th century, several new theological colleges were started by the various denominations. The Free Churches had also played a noteworthy part in the establishment of University College, Gower Street, and in the development of London University. Admission to Oxford and Cambridge was not opened to Nonconformists (nor to Roman Catholics) until 1871.

Gladstone's first administration produced the Education Act of 1870, which set up a national system of education; Nonconformists were by no means happy about some of its provisions and there was considerable

controversy between them and the Anglicans. In particular, there was the famous Cowper-Temple clause, a concession to Nonconformists won at the Committee stage of the Bill, which prohibited denominational teaching in provided schools.

Fresh impetus was given to the debate by Balfour's Education Act of 1902, which provided that denominational schools should be paid for out of the public rates; this firmly entrenched the Anglican-owned schools in the national System. In one sense, this Act was a logical development of the earlier 1870 Act, bringing secondary education under the care of local councils. But the fact that Church schools would be subsidised by local rates while government by the Church was retained, presented difficulties to many Nonconformists.

With this kind of debate going on and with other influences at work, it was only natural that many should feel the need for some association of Free Churches. There was a Congress in Manchester in 1892 at which about 370 Free Churchmen met, more than half of them Congregationalists; further meetings were held in Leeds in 1894 and in Birmingham in 1895. This led to the setting up of a loose network of Free Church Councils all over the country, with an annual Assembly – the real beginning of what was known as the National Free Church Council. The annual Assembly became the free voice of Nonconformity.

Its membership was not, however, made up on any principle of representation as far as the different churches were concerned. It did not have any definite basis of membership from a doctrinal or ecclesiastical standpoint. Some looked askance at what they felt was the preoccupation with political questions, but with so much happening nationally in regard to education, this was inevitable.

John Clifford, a leading Baptist minister, was prominent in the organisation of the Free Church Council; he has been described as the 'last flaming apostle of the Nonconformist conscience'. Also prominent was Silvester Horne, a well-known Congregational minister, who became a Member of Parliament in 1910, while still retaining an active role in the Congregational ministry; he was minister of Kensington Chapel and later Superintendent of Whitefield's Tabernacle. Other well-known figures were Dr J. H. Shakespeare, a Baptist minister, who became Secretary of the Baptist Union; and Hugh Price Hughes, a Methodist.

The controversy over Balfour's Education Act, with its provision for the maintenance of denominational schools out of the public rates was a focal point. Many Nonconformists felt so deeply on this subject that they

set about a campaign of passive resistance and with-held payment of part of their rates – the part which they felt might be regarded as being devoted to this object. Thereby they faced distraint of their goods and even imprisonment, for conscience sake. A General Election and the return of a Liberal Government in 1906 eased the situation a little; many of its rising leaders were of Nonconformist origin and upbringing and were pledged to deal with the problems which had been raised.

There were of course other issues of particular interest to Free Churchmen. There was a question of the disestablishment of the Church in Wales; some looked forward to a similar move in England. It was also a time when the Temperance movement flourished; the evils of intemperance were all too apparent, and ‘the seven men of Preston’ took a pledge of total abstinence from alcohol.

With so much happening and bearing in mind the almost casual association involved in the Free Church Council as it then stood, it is not surprising that many felt the need for a much stronger association. Dr J. H. Shakespeare, the President of the National Council in 1916, pleaded for some kind of federation or even closer union; his address to the Assembly was on the theme ‘A United Free Church’. This led to the formation in 1919 of the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches, with a carefully drawn representative basis and an agreed statement of common faith and practice: its Moderator was Dr J. H. Shakespeare. This body existed side by side with the National Free Church Council each claiming to speak on behalf of English Free churchmen. The Federal Council gradually established itself and came to be regarded as the official, rather than the free, voice of Nonconformity.

But this was clearly a situation which could not go on indefinitely, and efforts were made to secure closer co-operation. A joint committee had reported in 1928 that the time was not ripe for their amalgamation; but five years later, in July 1933, it was reported that the Council of the Baptist Union had raised the question of uniting the Federal Council and the National Free Church Council. After consideration, however, it was not thought advisable at that time to approach the constituent churches in regard to this possibility, but it was agreed that it was essential for the two bodies to be drawn together as closely as possible.

Later in that same year, in December, a joint committee of the two bodies agreed a statement defining their relative functions; and further meetings were planned. In September 1934 a closer co-operation between the two Councils was again urged.

Relations between them were again under consideration in May 1936, and in September that year, each Council agreed to appoint an equal number of representatives to a committee to explore the possibility of forming one organisation and to make suitable recommendations to the two Councils. A special conference met on 20 January 1938 and agreed that it was desirable that there should be one National Council, and a small committee was set up to prepare a scheme.

In September 1938, the proposal to unite the two Councils was unanimously approved in principle, and the scheme was referred back to the Committee for further consideration and amendment of details in the light of the suggestions which had been made. In February 1939, the draft constitution of the Free Church Federal Council was submitted and after slight amendments, was approved for submission to the Assembly due to meet in Bradford.

The Assembly duly approved the scheme, and by September it was known that the Baptist Union and Congregational Union Assemblies, the Presbyterian Assembly and the Methodist Conference had all given general approval to the proposed scheme of union. In February 1940 it was reported that the Federal Council had accepted the scheme; and the final details were left to a joint committee. The new constitution provides for an Executive, local councils and an annual Congress (such as the other body knew).

In all the necessary work which had been involved, the name of R. Wilson Black figures very prominently; he had for years been involved in the National Free Church Council, and particularly in regard to property and investments. We shall need to go back and look at the part he played in the acquisition of a central office for the National Council; and also at his quite remarkable contribution. It is necessary to add at this point that when the union of the two councils was announced in 1940, he was able to state that all investments and property held in trust for the Federal Council and the National Free Church Council would be vested in a single corporate body and held by it on behalf of the Free Church Federal Council as successor to the two Councils. Finally, on 16 September 1940, the National Council, as a separate body was dissolved and was merged in the new Free Church Federal Council, the first Moderator of which was the Revd Walter H. Armstrong.

2

THE REMARKABLE BLACK FAMILY

THE MEMBERS of this family played such a major role in Free Church affairs that it is only right that some space should be devoted to them. Robert Black, the father of R. Wilson Black, was born in Twynholm in Kirkcudbrightshire in 1821 and attended first the national Church of Scotland, and later the United Presbyterian Church. When he moved south into England, he attended the Congregational Church in Windsor but on moving to London, he settled in Knightsbridge and joined a Baptist Church in Hammersmith (West End Baptist Church). In due course, however, he along with two friends founded a Church of Christ in London. He married in 1852 Sarah Ann Wallis; she was a relative of Beeby Wallis, in whose house in Kettering the Baptist Missionary Society had been founded in 1792.

Robert Black established a draper's business which proved extremely successful and expanded into a large and prosperous concern. When he was only fifty-four he sold the business to devote all his energies to the service of God and his church, and this he did for thirty years. In all this, he was greatly assisted by his wife (a very gifted woman) who did a tremendous amount of good work among the poor and needy. They had five surviving sons and a daughter (one son had died young, shortly before the birth of R. Wilson Black). Two sons gave distinguished service in national and local affairs, one becoming Secretary of the Shaftesbury Society. Robert Wilson Black was the youngest of the sons; his eldest brother, Sydney, who was his senior by eleven years, was, along with his parents, a lasting influence in the life of Wilson.

Sydney went to the Western Grammar School and later to Bishop's Stortford College, where later he was followed by his brothers. After leaving school, he was apprenticed to a firm of drapers, but when he was twenty-three, his father made it financially possible for him to retire and to devote his talents and energies to the service of the church, as an evangelist in the Church of Christ. He studied for a time at Mansfield College, Oxford, under Dr Fairbairn; later he was also greatly helped

and encouraged by Dr John Clifford. He worked in Fulham in South London and his young brother Wilson was his chief helper.

In due course he was offered 'The Queen Anne' at the corner of Lillie Road in Fulham, then in use as a coffee house, at a price of £2,250; it was secured, and very quickly transformed, making possible a school room, class rooms and a club room, a soup kitchen and a coffee bar; in the yard, an Assembly Hall was built. It was called Twynholm Hall after his father's birth place. By 1903 it had 462 members. He also founded the Twynholm Orphanages which were later merged with Spurgeon's Orphanage.

Sydney was an active member of the National Free Church Council, and this was, of course, in the days of bitter controversy over the Education Bill. He died at the age of forty-three in 1903, and five years later, in March 1908, the Sydney Black Memorial Home for fatherless boys was opened in Fulham Road.

This is the background to the story of R. Wilson Black, who, until he was nearly sixty, remained in membership with the Churches of Christ. The origin of the Churches of Christ in America had been traced to Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander; the latter affirmed the necessity of believers' baptism for forgiveness and salvation, which led to his being accused of preaching baptismal regeneration. Wilson Black longed to see a union of the Churches of Christ and the Baptists, but there were great differences in regard to the practice of baptism. There were many Baptists who did not insist on baptism either before admission to Communion or to Church membership. So despite discussion, no progress was made.

R. Wilson Black was born on 17 April 1871, and in his early years as has been said, worked closely with his brother Sydney in the Fulham area of London; there he saw something of the evils and misery caused by intemperance and this led him to adopt a total abstinence position.

Wilson left Bishop's Stortford College at the age of fifteen and was articled to a firm of Estate Agents. He received the sum of five shillings for every house he was able to sell, and proved remarkably successful. His apprenticeship was completed by the time he was nineteen. Then he saw in South Kensington, four new houses, just sold by Knight and Company, a firm of builders and Estate Agents.

He wrote to them in very polite terms, suggesting that if they would take him into the business, he would, in a very short time, make the estate agency side of it very flourishing. He was not asking for any

salary, and indeed, he would not accept any, until he had proved his worth. The firm made a very cautious reply, but after interviewing him, he was taken on; he received no salary but it was agreed that he should receive one quarter of any increase in the profits which the firm made from the time he joined them.

The firm continued to prosper and within a comparatively short time, he was offered a partnership in it. After an interval of a few years, he purchased the shares of the other three partners, who were elderly and wished to retire; and the firm was his. He remained there for fifty years, latterly assisted by his sons. He was always a man of principle; he used to say that he had never sold a house which had any faults without explaining what they were and what the cost of the necessary repairs would be.

He married on 15 May 1901 Annie Louise North, and later, along with his brother-in-law, M. F. North, started a residential hotel business, which in due course became a public company. Here he was always loyal to his total abstinence principles, and when they had acquired a licensed hotel, its license was forthwith surrendered.

He became a director of a number of companies, thirteen at the time of his death in addition to Knight and Company and M. F. North Limited. He was a magistrate and a life-long Liberal, but from 1931, he supported the National Government. He was deeply concerned about housing and questions of social welfare. His other interests were numerous and his gifts to many good causes, generous, and very often anonymous. He set up a Nurses Home in Twynholm in memory of his father and he gave generously to the YWCA for a Lady North Memorial Hall in memory of his mother-in-law. While he was a member of the Churches of Christ, he was a pioneer in the founding of Overdale College, in Birmingham.

His outlook and attitude were enlightened, showing no intolerant antagonism to Biblical scholarship; and in days of fierce controversy, he stood for neither fundamentalism nor modernism. His manner of life was simple. In his earlier days, his influence was felt mainly in Fulham and then further afield in London, but as the years went by, he became more and more widely known. He became a force in the Baptist Union and urged the need for evangelism, having seen for himself something of the 'deadening effect of empty churches'. In 1931, Twynholm, the branch church in Boston Road, was received into membership of the Baptist Union. From 1936-41, he was Commissioner of the Baptist 'Forward Movement' and became President of the Baptist Union in 1941.

The Baptist Missionary Society had been founded in 1792 and the General Union of Baptist Ministers and Churches in 1813. (It is from this latter organisation as it was reconstituted in 1831 that the Baptist Union traced its descent). But these were two distinct organisations, with two staffs, two headquarters and two separate appeals to the churches. Wilson Black was a strong supporter of closer co-operation; he urged that the two organisations should occupy the same building in Russell Square, but even that modest proposal was defeated in November 1936.

But his interests were wider than those of a single church or denomination; he was deeply interested in the post-war campaign of revival in the Church of England which resulted in the report, 'Towards the Conversion of England'; and when in 1947, after the end of the Second World War, the Free Church Federal Council set up a committee on the same subject, he was one of three lay members; their labours resulted in the issue of a pamphlet, 'The Nation for God.'

This wider outlook lay behind his great and continuing interest in the work of the Free Churches; since the early 1900's he had been a member of the National Free Church Council and for half a century, his membership was destined to have important and far-reaching consequences. In 1934 he became Treasurer of the Council and from then until his death he was a member of all its committees. He believed in the necessity and the urgency of the work of the Free Churches in this country and he saw how the scope of the Council's activity was limited through lack of funds. His plan emerged – a plan to provide a building which would be the headquarters of the Council and which would also provide a source of income for its work.

In the next chapter, we shall have more to say about the details and the working out of that plan. But before going on to that, a word must be said about certain other of his many interests. He was concerned in the construction of Alliance House in Caxton Street, Westminster, the headquarters of the Band of Hope Union. He played no small part also in the negotiations which resulted in the coming together in 1940 of the two Free Church bodies. And his participation in the discussions which resulted in the 1944 Education Act show his continuing interest in the whole field of education, and had a much happier outcome than the bitter controversy of earlier years when he was still a young man. He was Honorary Treasurer of the Free Church Council for 18 years. When he reached the age of 80 in 1951, the Free Church Federal Council (along with the Baptist Union and the United Kingdom Alliance) arranged a

luncheon to celebrate this event, and also the golden wedding anniversary of Mr and Mrs R. Wilson Black. Later that same year, the Free Church Chronicle stated: 'Our present magnificent headquarters will stand for years to come as a striking memorial to his vision and concern for our movement.'

He died on 21 November 1951, and tribute was paid to him and to his work by the Right Honourable Ernest Brown, C.H. In the entrance hall to the offices in Tavistock Court, there is a simple tablet with this inscription:

*In honoured memory of
Robert Wilson Black, J.P.
through whose wise forethought and generosity
this building was erected and these offices
secured for the use of
the Free Church Federal Council.*

How great and how wise that forethought was, will appear in the following two chapters.

We cannot, however, close this chapter without some mention of his family, which is in itself a remarkable tribute to his life and influence. He had two daughters who were active on War service; and three sons who showed the same public spirit and gave generously of time and energy.

The eldest son, Cyril Wilson Black, the present Sir Cyril (and happily still with us), was educated at King's College School, Wimbledon, and became a chartered surveyor. He has served as a member of the Wimbledon Borough Council for twenty-three years, and was an Alderman, and Mayor of the Borough for two years from 1945 to 1947. He was elected a Member of Parliament for the Wimbledon constituency in 1950 and continued to represent them until 1970. He has given notable service in the field of education and on the Regional Hospital Board; he is governor of several schools. He received the Freedom of the City of London in 1943 and of the Borough of Wimbledon in 1957. In addition to all this, he has served the Baptist Union (being President of the Union in 1970) and the Free Church Federal Council. His other interests include the United Nations Association, the Boys Brigade, and the Girls Brigade. He was knighted in 1959. But in addition to all this, he too has shown a similar dedication to the work of the Free Church Federal Council, and has continued the work begun by his father. His generosity has often been anonymous. In the Free Church Federal Council Report



SIR CYRIL WILSON BLACK

for 1966, tribute was paid to his expertise in the management of the affairs of Tavistock Court Limited, the corporate body in which both Tavistock Court and Council's investments are vested; more will be said about this in Chapter 4. But this is only one way in which Sir Cyril has carried on the work which his father began and in which he has continued to take so deep an interest.

His brother Sydney (born 1 June 1908 and so six years his junior) also went to King's College School, Wimbledon, from 1921 to 1926. He then went into the family business, and in 1929, he passed the final examination of both the Chartered Surveyors' Institute and the Chartered Auctioneers' and Estate Agents' Institute, later becoming a Fellow of both Institutes. He had always had a passion for motor-cars. When War broke out in 1939 he volunteered for service with the armed forces but was rejected on medical grounds. He served with the Air Training Corps, becoming a Pilot Officer in the R.A.F. Voluntary Reserve in 1941; two years later he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant and was in command of the 43rd Squadron. After the war he continued to work for the Air Training Corps, becoming a Squadron Leader and later Officer Commanding the East Surrey Wing, and then Wing Commander. He also had a lifelong interest in the Scout Movement.

He became a member of the Wimbledon Borough Council in 1947 and was prominent in the work of education, housing and hospitals. He was elected Mayor in 1952, and again in 1953, and served as an Alderman for twelve years. During his mayoralty, his sister Jean acted as Mayoress. From 1949, he was a member of the Surrey County Council and was Chairman of its Education Committee. He became a Deputy Lieutenant of the County, and was High Sheriff of Surrey for the year 1962/3. In 1949 he was awarded the OBE for his services to the Air Training Corps.

He was Chairman of the Wimbledon Youth Committee for sixteen years and also Chairman of the Wimbledon Football Club. In fact, the offices he held fill three pages in the biography written by Fielden Hughes. He died in April 1968 after a long illness bravely borne, and not then sixty years of age. So much he had crowded into less than half a century of public life.

The third son, Kenneth Graham Black, was a Sergeant in the RAF during the Second World War. When he was demobilised, he gave distinguished service to the Scout Movement, one of the interests he had in common with his brother Sydney. From his boyhood he had been associated with the work of Twynholm Church and he organised a

Scout Troop there. In 1950, with seven London Sea Scouts and their Troop Master, they sailed out of the Thames in the Sea Scout whaler to cross the Channel to France, where they spent a week. Their return was delayed by bad weather and it is not certain when they actually began the return trip; the circumstances of the tragedy which ensued remain a mystery. All that is definitely known is that they completely disappeared, without any trace, despite extensive search; it is thought that a high wind against a contrary tide was the immediate cause of the disaster.

Half of his estate was devoted to the Kenneth Black Memorial Hall, the Scout Headquarters in Wimbledon, and the other half to the Kenneth Black House for the Endeavour Club premises in Morden.

Even from this brief outline, it will be abundantly clear that the heading to this chapter 'The Remarkable Black Family' is no exaggeration. There can be few, if any, families who could surpass, or even equal, a record of service in so many fields such as this.

3

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL AND A PERMANENT HOME

EARLY in the 1930's the question of a permanent home and offices for the National Free Church Council had been raised, and in February 1933, a Consultative Committee was told that Mr R. Wilson Black was carrying out negotiations with the Portman Estate Company in regard to No. 39 Portman Square as a possible headquarters for the Council and that the prospects were quite hopeful. In April it was agreed to leave the question of a visit to Portman Square to Mr Black's discretion. Nothing, however, came of this enquiry and by 20 April this scheme was abandoned.

Instead, two other possible places were named and left for further consideration and enquiry – a site in Guildhall Street and a house in St James's Place. But apparently neither of these was found to be suitable, for on 7 July, when Mr Black again introduced possible new headquarters schemes, the three sites mentioned were:– Marsham Street, Westminster; Woburn Place; and Tavistock Square. It was agreed to visit these and as a result, it was resolved that the Tavistock Square site was 'admirable in every way'. It was further resolved that Mr Black should obtain all necessary details and pursue whatever enquiries seemed helpful.

Towards the end of July however another possibility was mentioned, a specially fine property at No. 12 Gloucester Place; it was visited, and the matter was left in the hands of Dr S. W. Hughes (Secretary of the Council from 1932) and Mr R. Wilson Black. This, and the Tavistock Square project, were again discussed at a meeting in September, when it was finally decided to await further particulars regarding Tavistock Square.

These evidently proved satisfactory because on 9 November, Mr Wilson Black reported that the moment had come when something definite must be decided in regard to the property in Tavistock Square. The plan was to take a building lease on the site occupied by Nos. 25-28

Tavistock Square, with a view to the erection of a building which would provide offices for the National Council and in addition a number of flats, including one for a caretaker. The scheme which he submitted met with general approval and it was agreed that all other schemes which had been proposed should be dismissed, that the plan submitted by Mr R. Wilson Black be endorsed, and that further negotiations be proceeded with. Messrs Knight and Company would continue to act in the management of the property. Everyone present agreed that the guidance and help given by Mr Black had been invaluable and, as the minutes record, 'the meeting concluded in a spirit of gratitude and hopefulness, feeling that in this last decision . . . Free Church history was being made.'

Later that same month (on 28 November) it was stated, in a further report, that control would be defined by the two solicitors in drawing up the Trust Deeds. The National Free Church Council would occupy its place in the new premises on agreed conditions of tenancy. A sub-committee was appointed to consider the requirements of the central office and related bodies.

When the report and recommendations were considered by the National Executive they were received and adopted unanimously, subject only to the solicitors' being satisfied at every point with regard to the proposed contracts. Mr Wilson Black told a meeting in January 1934 that if everything went smoothly they might hope that the new premises would be available by June 1935; this forecast, which exceeded all their expectations, was enthusiastically received.

Later that same month, Mr Black was able to report that the necessary legal documents had been received from the solicitors acting for the Duke of Bedford, the owner of Tavistock Square and surrounding area, and copies were being considered by the solicitors acting for the various parties involved. In April this consideration was still continuing and progressing, and any who might feel that undue time was being taken, were assured that the seeming delay was due entirely to the rightful care and scrutiny of the solicitors acting for the National Council. In fact there was no undue delay, for on 6 June the necessary documents were ready for signature, the solicitors having agreed to everything in connection with the new property.

At a meeting on 28 June, plans and sketches of the proposed new building in Tavistock Square were presented; it was found necessary to put back the date when the proposed new building would be ready for

occupation to 29 September, but this was only three months later than the original forecast. The cost was expected to be in the region of £60,000. Hitherto meetings of the Committee had taken place in the Memorial Hall, where they paid £565 per annum in rental charges, including heating and cleaning. In the new building (it was reported) the sum of £550 would be acceptable to the landlords. Great appreciation was expressed, not only for the scheme itself, but for the spirit in which it had been presented.

It was agreed to rent premises on the ground floor and in the basement of the new building in Tavistock Square, at a rent of £550 per annum on a lease of fourteen years from about 29 September 1935, such rent to include rates and heating but not lighting, cleaning and attendance. The lease would contain a clause that in the event of the Council desiring to vacate the premises or any part of them, before sub-letting the owners should have the option of taking them over. The solicitors were authorised to settle on the Council's behalf. It was further agreed to leave in the hands of Dr S. W. Hughes and Mr R. Wilson Black the giving of notice to the Memorial Hall Trust in regard to the impending removal to the new building.

In January 1935, Mr Wilson Black was empowered to consult with that Trust about the date of expiration of the tenancy. At the same meeting a letter was received from the Women's Free Church Council asking for accommodation in the new building, and enquiring as to the probable rental. On 23 January it was agreed that rents for sub-letting in the new building should be approximately the same as those then being paid by the London Council of Free Churches and the Women's Council, and that all arrangements regarding room letting should be left to Dr S. W. Hughes; and further that the matter of room cleaning should be arranged with the tenants by Dr Hughes and Mr Wilson Black.

Everything was now progressing so smoothly and so expeditiously that it was felt desirable to begin consideration of the arrangements for the formal opening. It was agreed to hold a lunch before the ceremony, the detailed arrangements for which, including the guests to be invited, to be left to a small sub-committee of three (Mr Wilson Black being one). After the lunch, there would be a short service of dedication, to be conducted by the Revd Dr F. W. Norwood of the City Temple; Dame Elizabeth Cadbury had agreed to open the new premises and the date fixed was 18 September 1935. It was hoped to hold a great public meeting in the interests of the National Council in the City Temple; the



THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

first suggested date was 17 September, but this was later put back to October.

Questions of the furnishing of the new offices were also considered, and the necessity of an appeal for funds for this purpose; all of these were remitted to a small group for consideration and report. As to the actual removal, the Women's Council agreed to fit in with the National Council's plans. The actual numbering of the new premises in Tavistock Square was a matter for decision by the London County Council.

But one thing above everything else was prominent in the minds of everyone who had had any share in the discussions – the quite remarkable services rendered by Mr R. Wilson Black throughout the whole operation. It was felt by all that these demanded some recognition; but there were few things that they could do, and fewer still that he would be willing for them to do. Finally it was agreed that a good study Bible should be purchased and presented to him as a mark of the great appreciation which they wanted to express.

On 19 September, the day after the formal opening, they were able to place on record their deep sense of gratitude to Dame Elizabeth Cadbury, JP, MA, for her munificent gift in the panelling and furnishing of the Council Chamber; to R. Wilson Black, JP for the generous spirit and devoted labours which had made possible the erection of the Tavistock Court premises; and to J. D. Marsen, JP of Nottingham, for his generosity in furnishing the General Secretary's room. There is a central panel on the desk on the rostrum in the Council Chamber, which records Dame Elizabeth's gift in memory of her husband, George Cadbury, and other founders of the National Free Church Council. In addition to this Council Chamber, there is an office for the General Secretary; rooms for other members of staff; and adequate provision of a safe and strong room. A flat for a caretaker of the whole building is also provided.

4

FINANCING THE WORK OF THE COUNCIL

AS has been said already, the plan put forward by Mr R. Wilson Black was twofold: (1) to provide a building which would be the permanent home of the Council; and (2) which would also provide a source of income for the Council's work. It is particularly to this second part of the plan that we must now devote some attention, for it is of importance also in the financing of the whole project.

The decision taken in November 1933, and ratified by the National Executive in January 1934, was to obtain a building lease on the site in Tavistock Square, and thereafter to erect a building. This decision involved right away the necessity of funds; there was the obtaining of the lease, the payment of the necessary ground rent and various professional fees, and in due course the meeting of the building costs of the proposed new building. In the future, the flats in this ten-storey block would produce an income for the Council's work; but first of all it had to be erected and the estimated cost was £60,000.

It was agreed in September 1934 to set up a corporate body, Tavistock Court Limited, which was incorporated on 29 September 1934; its first directors were appointed – R. Wilson Black, C. W. Black and Sydney Black, with C. R. Batten as Secretary. Messrs Knight and Company would act as Managing Agents. At the end of the year, at a meeting of this new body, an agreement for 'a building lease, for a period of 99 years from 25 March 1934, at a ground rent of £760 per annum to 24 June 1937, £800 per annum to 24 June 1942, and £1,000 per annum thereafter, on the site situated at Nos. 25-28 Tavistock Square, between the Duke of Bedford and R. Wilson Black, as nominee of the National Free Church Council', was produced for inspection; and it was agreed to accept the assignment of the lease to the company (Tavistock Court Limited) for a consideration of £1,000. The bulk of the shares in this new company were held by the National Free Church Council, the three directors holding one share each. In order to have the necessary funds to enable the building work to proceed, it was agreed to seek overdraft facilities

from the Westminster Bank (as it was then) up to a sum not exceeding £60,000. The first balance sheet of the Company was drawn up as at 20 February 1936 which showed a bank overdraft of £54,048.

Six months later, on 2 July 1936, it was reported that while work was going ahead satisfactorily, the property was still necessarily in the development stage; it was agreed to mortgage it to the Halifax Building Society against an advance of £45,000 – to bear interest at 4 per cent and to be repaid in 30 years. Then in September of the same year, it was resolved to raise £15,000 by the creation and issue of £15,000 Debenture Stock (bearing interest at 7 per cent), such Debenture Stock to be a second charge on the Tavistock Square premises, ranking after the mortgage to the Halifax Building Society. These two together gave the £60,000 estimated to be necessary in the erection of the new building, and enabled the bank overdraft to be repaid. The balance sheet for the year up to 31 March 1937 showed that the mortgage secured on the property stood at £44,375. In addition there was the issue of £15,000 Debenture Stock, and an unsecured loan of £5,000 from the joint account of R. Wilson Black and C. W. Black. There would also have to be met from time to time, the various professional fees, interest charges, and a sum in respect of the repayments to the Halifax Building Society; in July 1936, this was stated to be just over £215 per month, or approximately £2,600 per annum. In fact, the mortgage was completely repaid in March 1965. To celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the Free Church Federal Council, an appeal had been launched for a sum of £10,000, for this purpose. By March 1965, the total achieved was £6,010, nearly £4,000 short of the target. To make good this shortfall, the balance of £4,000 was loaned by Tavistock Court Limited (at 6 per cent) out of working capital held on behalf of the Free Church Federal Council. This involved of course a sacrifice of income, of approximately £240 per annum; and so on 17 March 1965, a cheque for £10,000 was handed over by the Council's Treasurer to Sir Cyril Black. The Silver Jubilee Appeal was consolidated into the Silver Jubilee Reserve Fund, with the intention that as soon as this reached the total of £4,000, the loan could be repaid and the loss of interest made good. By 31 July 1966, this Fund stood at £2,019, and steadily grew as Silver Jubilee promises were fulfilled. Wilson Black's plan was becoming effective.

At the same time as the new Federal Council came into being, the old National Council held 4,797 Ordinary Shares of £1 each and £100 7 per cent Debenture Stock, and these holdings were transferred to the newly

formed Free Church Federal Council. It should also be noted that year after year it is recorded in the Minutes of Tavistock Court Limited, that the Directors waived all right to any fees for their services.

From now on, the plan so carefully worked out by Wilson Black bore fruit and the Council and its work were greatly benefitted. Thus on 27 October 1966 a Deed of Covenant was executed, under which Tavistock Court Limited would pay annually to the Free Church Federal Council for a period of seven years, a sum equal to the profits of the Company, the first of such payments being made as at 31 March 1967. When this covenant expired a new one was executed for a period of twenty-one years, the first payment being made as at 31 March 1974.

In November 1974, Sir Cyril Black pointed out to his fellow directors of Tavistock Court Limited that owing to the incidence of rent control, the income from Tavistock Court was unlikely to increase in the foreseeable future; he raised the possibility of selling the flats on long leases, either to the sitting tenants or on their becoming vacant, in order that the funds resulting from such sales might be invested so as to yield a greater return. The Directors agreed in principle, but felt that such a radical and wide ranging change of policy ought to be referred to the Finance Committee of the Free Church Federal Council for their consideration. To this course of action, Sir Cyril readily agreed, and early in 1975 it was reported that that Committee had given its approval. So the decision was taken to go ahead on this basis.

Over the next two or three years, at successive meetings of the Directors, the sale of a number of flats was reported, and by May 1978, the proceeds of these sales amounted to over £200,000. In August of that year, it was further reported that under expert advice from a leading firm of Surveyors and Estate Agents, two properties had been purchased by the Company with the cash so obtained. It is hardly necessary to point out that this period was one in which inflation was rife, and property was one of the soundest and most remunerative forms of investment. Sir Cyril's initiative had been wise and timely.

Behind the concise and formal statements in the Minutes of Tavistock Court Limited there is abundant evidence of this foresight and expertise, and that his devotion to the interests of the Free Church Council was gratefully recognised by his fellow Directors. In all this he was continuing the work which his father had done in launching the scheme and providing the Council not only with a permanent home but also with an income to enable it to carry on its work, and he was showing a like

devotion to the Council's work.

So in June 1979, it is recorded that of the seventy-two flats, thirty-three had been sold and the proceeds received; in the case of three others, the sale had been agreed and was awaiting completion; leaving thirty-six to be sold. The purchase of other properties in Middlesex was also reported. Later that same year, in September, Sir Cyril presented to his fellow Directors, draft accounts for the year ended 31 March 1979, and an estimated profit and loss account for the year to 31 March 1980. He was still concerned to improve the Company's income position so as to yield the maximum funds for the work of the Free Church Council and he presented his suggestions as to the action which he felt necessary. They agreed in principle and asked Sir Cyril to prepare a memorandum which could be passed to the Executive of the Free Church Federal Council for their consideration, and this he gladly agreed to do.

It is hardly necessary to add that the Executive readily endorsed the proposals, and by November, 1981, forty-seven flats had been sold, the remaining twenty-five being let at registered rents. Other properties (some freehold and some shops and properties with long leases) had been purchased, and of the remaining proceeds, investments in Treasury stocks had been made. A lease had been granted to the Free Church Federal Council to enable that Council to remain in its offices rent free. As a result of all this, not only had the income from Tavistock Court increased by nearly 50 per cent, but it was less subject to variation. Successive Annual Reports of the Council at the beginning of the present decade acknowledge with gratitude the expert and devoted consideration given to its affairs by Sir Cyril. He has continued to honour the memory of his father, R. Wilson Black, and to exercise a similar care, skill and foresight. The plan which the latter originated fifty years ago, has borne abundant fruit, and the Free Churches of this country are greatly in his debt and in debt to his family. It is only fitting, as the Golden Jubilee of the opening of Tavistock Court comes round, that there should be some record of the service which he and his remarkable family have rendered in this twofold provision of a permanent home for the Free Church Council, and a source of income to assist in its work.

PRICE ONE POUND