THE CHAPELS SOCIETY

Newsletter 52 January 2013

The handsome Grade II listed Greek Revival façade of Christchurch (formerly Congregational now URC) Needham Market, Suffolk (photograph copyright Paul Gardner) built in 1837.

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ADDRESS BOOK

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NOTICEBOARD

CHAPELS SOCIETY EVENTS

13 April 2013	Visit to Stowmarket area (Tim Grass)
13 July 2013	AGM and visit to Liverpool (Alan Petford/ Chris Wakeling)
28 September 2013	Visit to Taunton area (Peter Daniel)

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

We welcome new member Ian Serjeant of Newnham-on-Severn, Gloucestershire: Ian was before his recent retirement Property Secretary for the Methodists and has been involved with the Society, in that guise, for some time.

We have also heard recently of the death at the end of November of Ray Honey after a short illness, aged 87. Ray, originally from New Zealand, was an architect of some repute with an international career. He had been a member of our Council, contributed to the *Newsletter* and led a memorable tour of Herefordshire chapels.

PROCEEDINGS

VISIT TO HARROGATE AND NIDDERDALE, 22 SEPTEMBER 2012

The visit to Harrogate and Nidderdale took place on Saturday 22 September on a bright autumn day. Beginning with an early Yorkshire chill in the air, the day warmed us, and the sun shone on our churches and chapels. Blue skies and high cirrus clouds gave a clarity to the lovely landscape. We were guided expertly by David Quick who, as an architect and Methodist, organised an erudite programme and a rich contrast of chapels for our delight.

Wesley Methodist Church 'of plain character with the exception of the front which is in the Italianate style' is an excellent example of the aspiration of the growing Methodist presence in Harrogate at the end of the 18th century. From 1824 a church existed at the corner of Beulah and Oxford Streets: it seated 500, even though the congregation numbered 212. When in 1860 plans for the present building were drawn, it was planned to seat 1,000 despite the congregation remaining at 212. The decision to enlarge was both a reflection of the determination to have a Methodist presence in the district and a response to the rapid growth of the town with the coming of the railway.

Wesley Methodist Church, Oxford St, Harrogate: Methodist aspiration (photograph copyright the author)

The interior of this grand space exudes confidence. The stately two-tier approach to the high centralised pulpit provides a spacious platform whilst a vast gallery runs uninterrupted around the church. The preacher was well-placed to see his entire congregation both upstairs and downstairs.

When the railway arrived in Harrogate its centrally sited station stood at the heart of the Victoria Park Company's lands. This enterprise was founded to develop the area between the two ancient settlements of High and Low Harrogate. The link between the two was to be a grand avenue — Victoria Avenue — a showcase for the Victoria Park Company which opened via gates from the open land of Low Harrogate's West Park and ran up to High Harrogate with its fashionable spa and hotels. A plaque

St Paul's United Reformed Church, Victoria Avenue, Harrogate: telling the times (sic) (photograph copyright the author)

records that 'the combination of wide roads and pavements, grass verges, trees and noble buildings provided an example from which future generations could obtain inspiration'. The Company planned to line the new avenue with the churches and chapels of the main denominations in order to attract a wide section of the population — a consideration which allies itself firmly to a bygone age. St Paul's United Reformed Church (formerly Presbyterian) is one such church and was completed in 1885 to a design by Newcombe and Knowles of Newcastle. It is grandly conceived externally: it imitates elements of the Established Church, especially the multi-dial clock supplied by Smith of Derby and bell by Gents of Leicester, housed together in a tower and octagonal belfry. Now converted to electrical winding the clock bell has an override mechanism to allow tolling for services. The clock itself was given in memory of Robert Crawford of Ayrshire in 1940.

West Park United Reformed Church was the product of the Victoria Park Company's desire to frame the entrance to Victoria Avenue with imposing buildings. The two prime sites were offered to a banker, John Smith, who built the Belvedere Mansion on the one side and to the Congregational Church on the opposite side. Lockwood and Mawson of Bradford were required to make an architectural statement in their design. As in St Paul's there are borrowings from the Establishment in the tower which rises to an octagonal lantern, topped by a substantial spire. The gargoyle heads of the south wall imitate a medievalism whilst their subjects (which include Tyndale and Bunyan) strike a reforming note. Perhaps, too, the empty stone roundel at the second stage, beneath the lantern, is an embellishment that marks the traditional position of the church clock that is so rare in Nonconformist architecture.

West Park opened in 1862 but in 1880 Trinity Methodist Church opened nearby across the Stray. This latter building aspired to prominence and, like West Park URC, demonstrated its own version of Nonconformist Gothic. Internal architectural modification has resulted in corresponding liturgical modification and we were drawn into the debate among Methodist congregations whether 'to rail or not to rail' for the purposes of the administration of Holy Communion — a discussion to be continued later in the day at Pateley Bridge Methodist Church where the rail has been permanently removed in the recent refurbishment.

It was in Wesley Methodist Church, Oxford Street, that we had been introduced to the day's contrast of aspiration and humility. In 1896, in this building full of architectural confidence, the choir committee nevertheless found the anthems too difficult and sophisticated, claiming that 'the Art of Music ... [should be] used ... in all humility and without vanity or pride': they added this note to the choir rules. But it was our

Satisfaction! Lowering the panel to reveal the gallery at Darley Methodist Church (photograph copyright the author)

visit to Nidderdale that perfected the contrast. We heard how Methodism expanded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries along the valleys of the Nidd and Washburn where water-powered spinning mills were sited and where lead miners were also at work. The circuits held training classes in the area and local farmers and other workers would become local or itinerant preachers. John Wesley himself visited the dale seven times.

Darley Methodist Church built in 1829 is a plain street-chapel in a small village but in the survey of 1851 a morning service totalled 38 adults and 39 children and an afternoon service totalled 91 adults and 39 children. The church had 19th century commemorative glass panels in the doors. Notable also was a gallery with sliding vertical panels opened for additional seating and obscuring a space which might have been used as a schoolroom, preceding the present room of 1929. It reminded us of those seen on a recent Chapels Society visit to the Quaker meeting house at Jordans in Buckinghamshire. Here at Darley we heard of the social implications of Nonconformity in this area with references to the levy of 6d per member in 1889 to be paid to the Worn-Out Ministers Fund and mention of the Local Preachers' Horse Hire Fund.

Wath Methodist Church, surely the smallest of chapels, was built across the end wall of a run of cottages owned by a Robert Norris. With 5 irregular sides it seats 50 by means of a compact balcony. Today it continues as a place of worship with a small congregation, but, before the building was erected, Methodism was growing by means of classes held in the local farmhouses. One such class met at Broomfield Farm

Wath: the westering sun
(photograph copyright the author)

where the Crown pub stood: here William Craven — farmer, joiner, wheelwright, undertaker and landlord — was also a local preacher. On the building of the chapel in 1859 he became one of the first trustees. The discovery later in the day that David Watts, of our number, was the great-great-grandson of William Craven added enormously to the pleasure of the visit to Wath. The builders of the chapel are thought to be Messrs Thorpe of Pateley, with William Craven as joiner.

A striking aspect of Wath Chapel lay above its doorway: bearing the name TThorpe was the antithesis to the aspiration and confidence of the grand town churches of Harrogate. The sundial, the poor man's clock, was a fitting embellishment for this humble chapel.

Judith Bartlett

FROM SYNAGOGUE TO CHURCH

Members of the Chapels Society have on two occasions visited St Mary's, Castle Street in Reading, the former Church of England Proprietary Chapel, now used for the worship of the Church of England (Continuing) but they may not be aware that the denomination has one other place of worship of considerable historic interest, namely St Silas, Wolverhampton. This is the former Fryer Street Synagogue which the congregation of St Silas purchased in 1999.

Its history goes back to the late 1840s when Jews in the town began meeting in a house in St James' Square. In 1857 they acquired land in Fryer

Street for a purpose-built synagogue and the first building was consecrated in August 1858 with the ceremony performed by the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Nathan Adler. This building was severely damaged by fire in 1903 and a new synagogue built on the same site, opened in 1903. The architect for this was a local practitioner, Frederick James Beck, who adopted an Ashkenazaic style, in keeping with the congregation's continental origins.

The synagogue flourished during the first half of the 20th century with influxes from Jews escaping the Nazi persecutions and later Jewish servicemen stationed at nearby RAF Cosford. However, with inter-marriage and greater mobility the congregation shrank to around 20 during the second half of the century and in 1999 the painful decision was taken to sell up. Some of the congregation who had survived the Nazi holocaust remembered the kindness that they had been shown by Christians in Germany and were, therefore, pleased to be able to accept a bid from St Silas. This group of Christians had split off from St Luke's, Wolverhampton in 1994 over the issue of women's ordination.

This venture was a great step of faith for the small congregation but the cost of the original purchase and the extensive repairs and modifications needed have been providentially met. In adapting the building for Christian worship, features of its Jewish heritage such as the Star of David were retained, where possible. The architect for these works was another local man, Mike Coleman. Although some problems with drainage and consequent damp remained, the building was consecrated on 20 March

2010. During recent works to resolve the continuing damp problems, remains were discovered of the original rabbi's house.

John Dearing

The author is indebted to the pamphlet entitled 'The Former Fryer Street Synagogue' by George F. Hope Hall, published by Wolverhampton Borough Council and to Bishop Edward Malcolm.

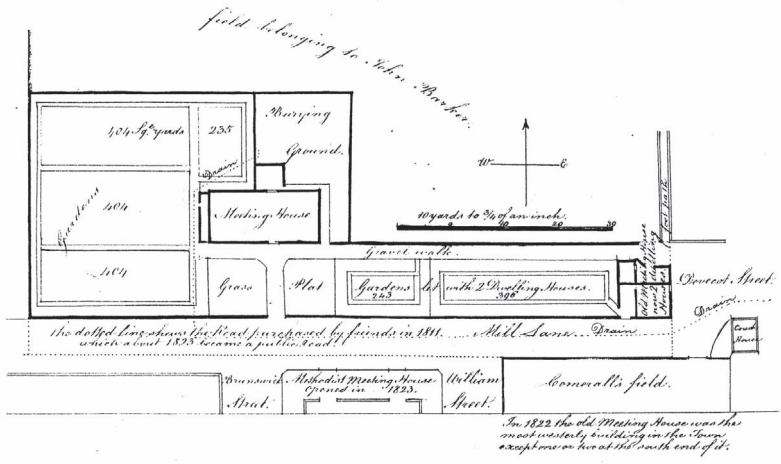
THE FORMER FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, STOCKTON-ON-TEES

Stockton is an ancient borough whose importance as a port was established by the building of a substantial castle in the early 14th century. By the end of the 17th century Stockton was eclipsing Hartlepool in trade with London, a transition which was marked by the transfer of the customs office from Hartlepool to Stockton in 1680. Following the building of a new parish church in 1712 the town began to expand on land east of the High Street between the new church and the borough boundary.

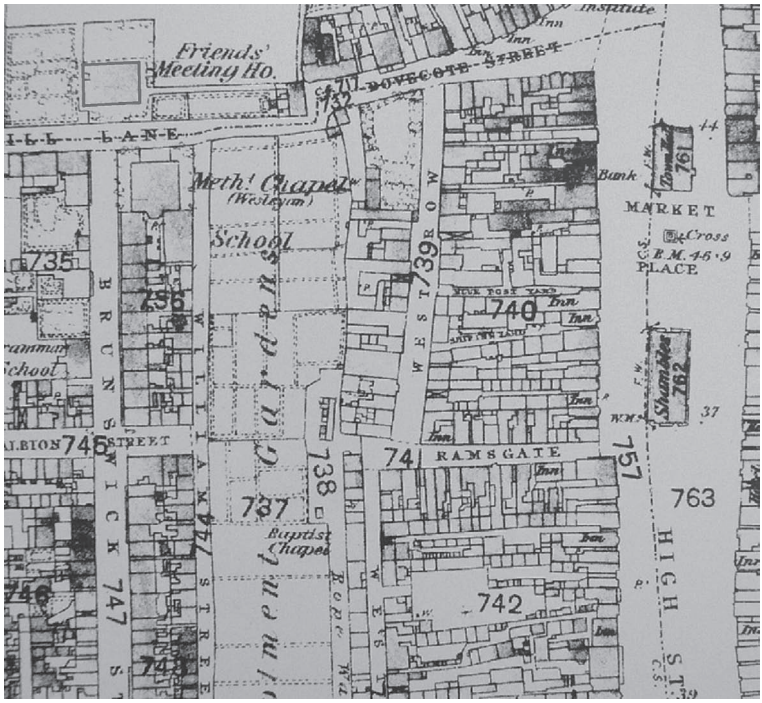
The land west of the High Street however remained largely underdeveloped as open fields and gardens until the early 1800s. A large portion of this area was developed for housing circa 1820 by William Smith, a Stockton cabinet maker who was responsible for laying out a grid of new streets: William Street, Brunswick Street, Skinner Street, Albion Street and Lodge Street. The land upon which the former Friends Meeting House of 1814 was sited is immediately north of this new street pattern off the east-west thoroughfare of Dovecot Street and was bought by the Friends from John Barker, occupation unknown.

Quakerism had existed in the area since the 1650s. Joseph Besse's book *A collection of the sufferings of the people called Quakers* contains details of those individuals who suffered fines and/or imprisonment due to their Quaker faith from 1657 onwards. A Meeting House in the neighbouring village of Norton is purported to have been in existence from *c*. 1671. There were regular public meetings for worship in Stockton by 1684. In 1701 land was acquired for a Meeting House which was built across the end of Dovecote Lane and which was among the most westerly buildings in the town.

By 1809 it was considered that the old Meeting House could not be made adequate for Friends' needs so in 1814 it was adapted for use as two dwelling houses. The replacement Meeting House was built in Mill Lane (now 62 Dovecot Street) in the same year. Both the old and the new Meeting House are shown on the plans below. The old Meeting House



A plan of the Quaker land in Mill Lane and Dovecot Street in the 1820s.



A section of the Ordnance Survey map of Stockton-on-Tees dated 1857 showing the town west of the High Street. The Quaker Meeting Houses are at the top left.

was sold in 1868 to Joseph Dodds for £750 and demolished sometime afterwards, possibly when Dovecot Street was realigned.

Thomas Richmond's Local Records of Stockton reported: 'The new Meeting House of the Society of Friends, in Mill Lane was opened this day (September 15th, 1814) for worship. It will seat above 200 persons; cost about £1,800. The burial ground contains 17 roods.'

The new Meeting House was set in large gardens extending some 115 yards along Mill Lane from the old Meeting House westwards and 42 yards deep northwards. Some of the gardens were let to local Friends for cultivation.

The Meeting House of 1814 was originally a simple rectangular brick building with duo pitched roof covered with slates. It was laid out as a traditional Quaker Meeting House: the single room was flexible enough to be divided into two. This separation then created two individual business meeting rooms for men and women. A minister's gallery would have been located at one end of the meeting room where those individuals charged with travelling and spreading the word of Friends would sit. A bench reserved for senior members of the Meeting would be located in front of this gallery. To the North side was access to the burial garden at the rear and along the West side accommodation providing toilet facilities.

Early photographs show a bell fleche existing over the ridge of the roof positioned asymmetrically most probably constructed in wood. Sadly these original features no longer exist. No indication exists of the architect or builder employed by the Friends. The new Meeting House would have been a humble but elegant building, contributing greatly to character of this underdeveloped part of town.

By 1853 the accommodation provided at the Meeting House was inadequate and improvement of the existing facilities was needed. This second phase of building represents the external appearance of the building in the present day. A two storey extension was built on the front in brick with occasional header courses. This extension provided new accommodation for a lobby, women's room, committee room and elegant staircase to a further two rooms above. At first floor level access was given to a new gallery floor built over the East end of the original meeting room. The front elevation consisted of five bays with windows, the central bay breaking forward of the building line. Each window opening was dressed with stone together with a projecting stone cornice at eaves level. A hipped slate roof covers the extension with a hipped gable to the central bay. Centrally above the stone cornice is located a stone panel with the words 'Friends' Meeting House' inscribed in relief.

The Meeting thrived in the 19th century particularly as the nearby Norton Meeting ceased to meet between 1830 and 1902. In 1868 an Adult

The frontage of the former Meeting House today (photograph copyright the author).

School hall was built on Dovecot Street and in 1877 a school room was built next door to the Meeting House, which can be seen in the photograph above.

However over time the adjacent gardens and land within which the original Meeting House had stood were gradually sold off. After the Second World War the use of the former Friends Meeting House declined although regular meetings for worship continued until the late 1960s. It was identified that a lack of numbers gave opportunities to lease parts of the building out to organisations primarily for education and learning purposes. Both Stockton Technical College and Stockton Education Authority occupied the building over a fifteen year period. All the while the Friends continued to meet regularly in a single room until eventually in the early 1970s the meeting in Stockton was laid down and amalgamated with the meeting at Norton as Stockton & Norton Preparative Meeting. An active gathering of Quakers still meets at Norton today.

The former Friends Meeting House at Dovecot Street was sold in 1977 to Cohen, Jackson, Scott & Simon, Solicitors. Sadly the building has since undergone dramatic unsympathetic alterations that have greatly affected the historic character of its internal spaces. The existing gallery floor installed in 1853 has been extended providing first floor accommodation over the whole of the rear former meeting room space. Each floor has been subdivided into a labyrinth of rooms, offices and corridors. A concrete escape stair has been placed into the North West corner of the building and a low long incongruous extension externally to the north has been

used as a strong room. All existing furniture, fixtures and fittings relating to the original Meeting Room have long since disappeared.

This grade II* listed property has been derelict for some time and now has a planned future use to provide flexible and office workspace for creative individuals within the digital industry. The design proposals look to sensitively conserve the external fabric of the building alongside the interior spaces of the second phase of building dated 1853. Sadly the impact of those detrimental previous alterations has meant that the interior character of the original 1814 build is no longer legible. These spaces are to provide a mix of cellular and open plan accommodation respecting the existing fenestration patterns. The project is to be complete and the building ready for its new tenants early in 2013.

Michael Atkinson

QUERIES

Two Wesleyan architects, William Jenkins (1763–1844) and Charles Bell (1846–99)

Martin Wellings is starting to investigate the careers of the Wesleyan architects responsible for the 1818 and 1878 chapels in the centre of Oxford. William Jenkins (1763–1844) was a Wesleyan minister, and designed several prominent London and provincial chapels. Charles Bell (1846–99) was born in Grantham, practised in London from 1870, and was responsible for a wide range of public buildings in many parts of the country, including 'over 60 Wesleyan chapels', according to his obituaries. Any information about their lives and work would be gratefully received by Martin at martin.wellings@oxfordmethodists.org.uk or 26 Upland Park Road, Oxford, OX2 7RU.

George Baines FRIBA, 1852–1934

His obituary in the Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects credited George Baines with 'over 200 church and school buildings', but he does not gain his own entry in many architectural reference works, and is frequently dismissed in few words by Pevsner and the professor's successors. Baines was born in Huntingdonshire and after serving an architectural apprenticeship in London and Great Yarmouth, set up independent practice in Accrington in 1871. He relocated to London in 1884, and took his son Reginald Palmer Baines into partnership in 1901. From then until George Baines retired in 1929, most works are credited jointly to father and son. Although possibly most associated with a distinctive 'art nouveau' gothic incorporating flint and terracotta, Baines produced a variety of chapel designs in both gothic and other styles. There

are concentrations of his buildings in Lancashire and in the home counties, but there are also examples in many parts of England, from Newcastle to Lowestoft and Southampton.

Stuart Leadley is attempting to locate all of George Baines' ecclesiastical buildings. So far, he has traced about a half of the probable total, including a number which are no longer standing and a few designs which were never constructed. He is looking for any information about the construction and history of Baines chapels, or suggestions for avenues for investigation, would be much appreciated, and he would be happy to share his findings so far with anyone who might be interested. Contact Stuart at 52 Southwood Avenue, Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 5AD.

The history of the 'chapel tea'

Tim Grass, our current Visits Secretary, asks whether any member knows when a traditional 'chapel tea' began to be the inevitable culmination of one of our visits. Could it have been from the very first?

PERSONALIA

Michael Atkinson agreed in 2011 to take on the Society's casework and at the last AGM became a member of Council.

Hello fellow members of The Chapels Society! I have been asked to write a few words to introduce myself as one of the newest members of Council. I am an accredited conservation architect based in the North East of England with over 10 years experience in the design, conservation and management of architecture within the historic environment. Since 2009 I have also taken the role of lead principal of Michael Atkinson Architecture + Heritage, an RIBA Chartered Practice.

My interest in historic buildings stems from an early love of touring both National Trust and English Heritage properties as a child. In practice my experience is very much focused on the repair, maintenance and alteration of ecclesiastical buildings most notably in the Anglican tradition but of late a developing involvement in Nonconformist chapels and meeting houses.

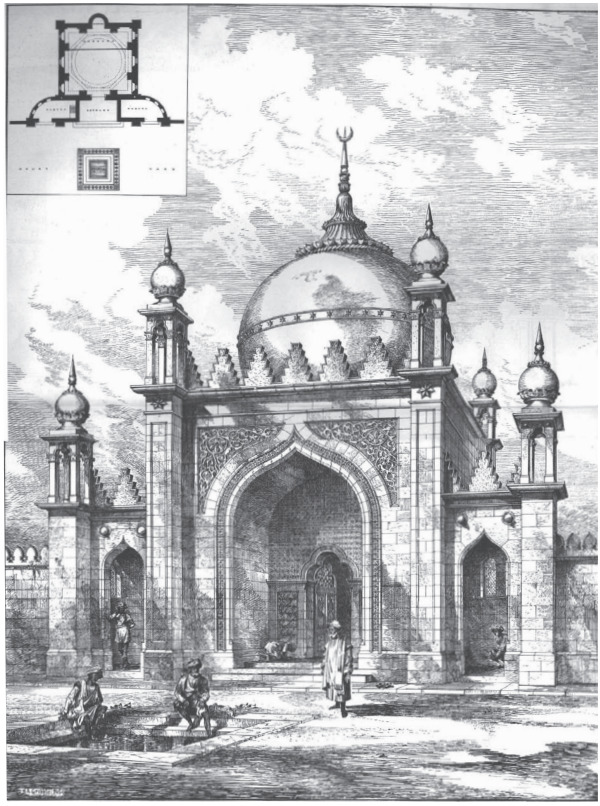
I am fascinated by the varied architectural and social histories that are tied up in our stock of church architecture. It is indeed a special responsibility and privilege to care for these beautiful buildings.

I look forward to developing my role as Casework Officer within The Chapels Society. Please do come and say hello and share your own chapel interests at future events!

NEWS

History of the mosque in Britain

Members interested in the architecture of other faiths will find great interest in the article *A history of mosques in Britain* by Shahed Saleem which appeared in Architects Journal in the issue of 19 April 2012 and which can be read on the website at http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/a-history-of-mosques-in-britain/8629263.article. A book-long treatment of the same subject by the same author will be published later this year by English Heritage.



The first purpose-built mosque in Britain was built in Woking in 1899 and this engraving was published in The Building News *and* Engineering Journal*, dated 2 August 1889, shortly before the Mosque was completed.*

Ecclesiology Today Issue 45

Chapels Society member, Stuart Leadley, draws our attention to this latest issue of the journal of the Ecclesiology Society, As usual, he notes, the production of the volume, on glossy paper and smartly printed, is of the highest quality and he continues:

> …[a] major article in the journal, by Christopher Webster on Holy Trinity, Leeds also invites speculation about the possibilities for nonconformists — if the Wren Revival style adopted at Holy Trinity had been the style of choice for the Church of England in the nineteenth century rather than gothic, would the latter mode have been adopted earlier and more widely by dissenters?

Cameron Newham's piece consists of some highlights from his project to create a digital atlas of English architecture (www.digiatlas.org). Fine photography is accompanied by notes of variable length and a considerable amount of white space preserves the facing pages layout.

The journal is rounded out with a selection of book reviews, twelve substantial and eight shorter notices. All the volumes reviewed are of potential interest to members of the Chapels Society, ranging from a major biography of Nikolaus Pevsner to a study of church music in post-reformation England.

Chapel enthusiasts should not be deterred by the bias towards the established church in this journal. All of the articles are highly readable, written by a distinguished team of contributors, and should be of relevance to anyone with an interest in ecclesiastical architecture.

Managing Major Building Projects in Places of Worship

Members in the North-West involved with building projects in churches and other places of worship may well be interested in this training event on Thursday 21 February 2013 at All Saints Church, Daresbury, Cheshire (http://www.daresburycofe.org.uk/).

The day will help with managing all stages of a building project in a place of worship, from start up through to making sure benefits are achieved over the long term. It is being organized by the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, in partnership and with significant financial support from PurcellUK. Further details about the day and how to book can be found at http://www.hrballiance.org.uk/?page_id=5.

Ushaw Lecture Series

As part of the effort to raise awareness of the nationally-important holdings at the former seminary at Ushaw in Durham — including documents from the period of Catholic persecution and rare first edition books — the Centre is arranging a series of lectures.

The lecture series is continuing in 2013, with topics including the Pugin architecture of Ushaw and its silver, before a major conference on Early Modern Catholicism is held at the college next summer. The events will also lead towards the publication of a book about the treasures of Ushaw. Find out more at http://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/conferences/forthcoming/. All Lectures are free, but you must register for your free ticket with Theresa Phillips at ccs.admin@durham.ac.uk or 0191 334 1656.

The launch of new grant programmes for places of worship

On 14 December the Heritage Lottery Fund are launching their new grant programmes for listed places of worship. This scheme will provide £30m of support for repairs and adaptations to historic places of worship. The Scheme replaces the former English Heritage Repair Grants Scheme and allows for much greater flexibility in eligibility and application of funds, and a more frequent and speedier application process. It aims to increase sustainability as well as meeting urgent repair needs.

The first deadlines for submission of applications will be February/March 2013, and there are expected to be quarterly deadlines for applications thereafter. Assessment will take 12 weeks to the first decisions in June 2013.

Pugin Heritage Visitor Centre now open until March 2013

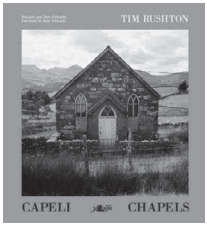
The Pugin Heritage Visitor Centre in Cheadle, Staffordshire which celebrates the bicentenary during 2012 of A. W. N. Pugin, one of the foremost architects of the Victorian age, was written about by Christopher Wakeling in *Newsletter 50*. Originally, the project was to come to an end at the end of 2012, but is now open until the end of March 2013.

War Memorials Online launched

A scheme allowing the public to upload pictures and information about their local war memorials (including their conditions) has been launched by English Heritage, in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum and the War Memorials Trust. This website at http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/ brings together for the first time information from leading experts on UK war memorials and provides a snapshot of war memorials across the country.

BOOK REVIEWS

Capeli/Chapels by Tim Rushton. Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2012. 136 pp with 120 colour photographs, paperback. ISBN 978–1–84771–465–7. £14.95 from www.ylolfa.com



Chapels are often the most distinctive architectural elements of the Welsh landscape. Although nonconformity was a dominant feature of Welsh culture from the eighteenth century, there was probably only ever double the proportion of the population that was 'chapel' in Wales, compared to England and Scotland. Yet there are four times the number of chapels: the Royal Commission's Chapels Building Project has identified nearly 7000 chapels in Wales! Part of this is due to the provision of chapels for worship in both Welsh and English but also to the continuing split between the Wesleyan and Calvinistic Methodists in the principality.

This is a beautifully produced book, the product of a twenty-year obsession of artist and designer, Tim Rushton, to record photographically Welsh chapels. The 120 selected colour photographs are laid out in pairs, each across a double page spread, providing fascinating opportunities to compare and contrast both the images and the architecture. They also provide a trenchant response to the canard that all Welsh chapels look the same! Naturally there is a predominance of gabled-ended chapels with rounded windows and central doors although the variety of building materials and styles still belies accusations of uniformity. There are even two examples of the 'long wall' design with entrances at either end of the façade — one surprisingly rafish with gothic detail and the other looking much more sedate in red brick.

Geographically the sample of chapels pictured in this book is biased towards Gwynedd and the north coast, understandably for a Manchester-based photographer. Care has been taken to avoid obstructed views and the percentage of overcast skies is remarkably low! There is one stunning picture of a Unitarian chapel in Ceredigion where the light grey of the stuccoed façade in broad sunlight is wonderfully set off by the gathering clouds of a summer storm.

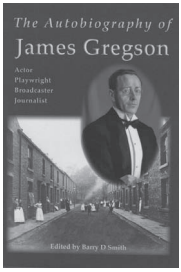
Although this is essentially a picture book, Chapels Society members will appreciate the substantial introduction to Welsh chapel buildings provided by Susan Fielding of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. The book also contains a map and an index to chapels, with OS map reference and National Primary Reference

number which will allow ready access to the further information contained in the Commission's Coflein database (www.coflein.gov.uk).

Capeli is a book full of great riches which I can happily recommend to Chapels Society members.

Chris Skidmore

The Autobiography of James Gregson. Actor, Playwright, Broadcaster, Journalist. Edited by Barry D. Smith, foreword by A. J. Petford. Brighouse: E. R. Smith Publications, 2011. 252 pp, hardback. ISBN 978–0–95700–010–0 £20 [but available to Chapels Society members at £15 + £4 p&p]



In the days that we had proper 'household names', James Gregson was one of them, first in his native West Riding of Yorkshire, then after the War on the national stage. An amateur actor, producer and impresario, and then a local journalist, the events of 1939–1945 gave him the opportunity to become a significant figure in BBC radio news, drama and briefly in television documentary. In the 1950s he was almost as well-known as his friend and Yorkshire compatriot Wilfred Pickles. However, by the time of his death in 1981, at the age of 92, he had been largely unnoticed for two decades.

At the height of his fame, Gregson wrote his autobiography, though whether it was ever intended to be more than a private record of a diverse life is unclear. Barry Smith, in what is clearly a labour of love, has prepared it for publication. It is a long book, as Gregson had very many stories to tell, and a harsher editor might have pruned it. Smith has consciously chosen to stay faithful to Gregson's text, entrusting to the reader an extensive chronicle of a life begun in working-class Brighouse and culminating with his own BBC publicity photos. Gregson wrote only of his life up to 1949, when he was aged 60. There is a brief epilogue, but the heart of the story runs from the start of his working life until the height of his BBC fame.

Gregson emerged into adulthood as a part-timer in the spinning room of a cotton factory at the age of twelve. He was to work there for six years, but had already been entranced by the prospect of drama, at the new Albert Theatre on Huddersfield Road, Brighouse. His autobiography takes the reader on a fine tour of Yorkshire theatre, amateur and professional between the wars. As well as being an actor and producer, Gregson wrote plays with titles which evoke a lost time of the northern 1920s: *The Way of an Angel, Saint Mary Ellen* and *The Devil A Saint*, as well as comedies such as *T'Marsdens* and *Young Imeson*.

Those years come especially alive in his autobiography. He writes fully as well about his time with BBC Northern Drama, working with J. B. Priestley and Wilfred Pickles, including acting in the radio adaptation of the former's *The Good Companions*, but Gregson is uncharacteristically more perfunctory in writing of his move to the BBC in London, to work on *Radio News Reel*. Here and throughout the book his editor, Barry Smith, had done him proud in researching and including extensive illustrations and photographs, which help bring a past era to life.

One brief chapter will be of particular interest to the Chapel Society. The evangelistic religious culture in which he had lived unquestioningly in his early years culminated in a Revival Meeting during which, prayed for by name, he recalls being 'hot with embarrassment and anger'. That experience led him to the Wesleyan community based around the Birds Royd Wesleyan Methodist Mission, of which Smith has managed to unearth a poignant, grained black and white photograph. After a three-year probation, Gregson was elected a lay preacher, and the whole experience proved also to be a stimulus for his enthusiasm for acting and drama which was to dominate his interesting life. Taken all together, this book is a remarkable and evocative memorial to times long gone.

Tony Stoller

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