

THE CHAPELS SOCIETY  
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**LEICESTER: METROPOLIS OF DISSENT**

## **Notes on the Chapels**

### **Bishop Street Methodist**

Bishop Street is the oldest surviving Methodist church in Leicester. John Wesley first visited the town on Whit Sunday 1753 and a Society of Methodists was formed soon afterwards. In 1757, the Society was given a barn on Millstone Lane by William Lewis, a Presbyterian from Great Meeting, but, by 1815, the congregation had outgrown the barn site and was ready to build a permanent chapel. Land was purchased near the cattle market and a square chapel erected to the designs of the Rev William Jenkins, a Methodist minister. The chapel's current setting, overlooking Town Hall Square, is accidental; the Town Hall was not built until 1874–76 and Square followed shortly afterwards.

Work started on the Chapel in September 1815 and the building was ready for worship in August 1816. The local Churches Preservation Trust describes it as 'a beautiful example of classical nonconformity' and notes, for example, its simple but dignified exterior, the horseshoe-shaped gallery, the raised pulpit and the barleytwist communion rail posts. The central pedimented doorway is a Victorian addition, as is the 'sanctuary' bay behind the pulpit which houses the organ, installed in 1858. The organ case is older still and resembles 'Father Smith' cases in Oxford and Cambridge.

The Church is celebrating its bicentenary this year. In a recent project, the entrance area was opened up to create a café and exhibition space which gives access to the public throughout the week. The 'Chapel Café' is run by a social enterprise in partnership with the Zinithya Trust. Methodist central funds have supported research into the Church's history and a 'heritage room' has been opened in a former vestry. Work has just finished on restoring the organ. Meeting rooms at the back of the chapel continue to be used by a wide variety of self-help and community groups.

### **Great Meeting Unitarian**

The Meeting House was opened in 1708 and is the oldest significant brick building in Leicester. It was built jointly by Independent and Presbyterian congregations but, by the early nineteenth century, had espoused the Unitarian cause. Members of Great Meeting were particularly influential in the political, social and economic life of Leicester in the nineteenth century; they dominated the Town Council after 1835 and provided the first seven Mayors of the reformed Corporation, earning Great Meeting the title of 'The Mayors' Nest'. The feat was repeated over 160 years later when Sir Peter Soulsby, a member of the Meeting, took office as Leicester's first directly elected Mayor in 2011.

Great Meeting is now hidden away behind the massive Highcross shopping centre. The original building, set in a graveyard, was almost square, two windows in height and with a

hipped roof. It was refurbished about 1860 when two porches, separated by an open loggia, were attached to the west front and a 'chancel' extension added to the rear. The interior has galleries and is dominated by a high pulpit. The plaster ceiling dates from 1786. Much more recently, the potential of the building has been enhanced by the construction of a 'Garden Room' to the south. With glass walls and a slate roof, this contrasts attractively with the original building and makes full use of the graveyard setting.

### **Central Baptist**

The Particular Baptists established themselves in Harvey Lane in the mid-eighteenth century and grew to be one of the largest and most prominent congregations in Leicester. They moved to new premises on Belvoir Street in 1845 (see below). Prior to that, an 'offshoot' from Harvey Lane had formed a separate congregation in Charles Street (originally Upper Charles Street) and, in 1831, it opened the Chapel which is known today as 'Central Baptist'. Designed by William Flint, its neat classical façade is set slightly back from the street and has recently been redecorated. The interior is light and airy; it has a gallery on four sides, supported on a series of slender columns. Sadly, the original high pulpit has been removed.

In 1789, Harvey Lane Chapel invited the young William Carey to be its minister. During a short pastorate, he became one of the 'leading lights' behind the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society and was appointed its first missionary in 1793. He spent the rest of his life in India, translated the Bible into many languages and founded Serampore College. Central Baptist Church houses an exhibition about Carey and holds a collection of papers and artefacts relating to his life. The Museum receives visitors from across the world.

Behind the Chapel lies a complex of buildings based on the Victorian schoolrooms of 1888. Refurbished in the 1990s, they are now home to the 'Centre Project' which serves isolated and vulnerable people during the week. 'Central' is now the only Baptist congregation in the City centre, having merged with Belvoir Street in 1940 and Victoria Road in 1983 (see below).

### **Belvoir Street Baptist**

The congregation at Harvey Lane steadily increased during the pastorates of the Revs Robert Hall and James Phillippo Mursell, both of whom played a major role in town affairs on the side of social reform. When the Church eventually decided that a larger chapel was needed on a new site, it turned to Joseph Hansom, a national architect of some distinction and the inventor of the 'hansom cab'. Hansom produced a novel building which provoked widespread interest. It was opened in 1845 and provided seating for about 1,500 worshippers. Professor Jack Simmons describes it as 'a strange extravagance'.

Approached at street level, the building appears as a large rounded tub, stuccoed, without windows and sparingly decorated with classical columns. On either side of the tub are semi-circular entrance pavilions. Unsurprisingly, the building is known locally as the 'pork pie chapel'. However, the outward appearance is deceptive. Inside, the Chapel itself is 'U' shaped with a straight wall on its southern side. Originally, the pulpit projected from this wall and was flanked by two doors. The interior is lit from above by windows which are not easily visible from outside; they were probably the architect's response to the requirement that noise from the street should be minimised.

Belvoir Street was a prominent and influential Chapel in the nineteenth century but, after the First World War, it began to decline as members of the congregation moved to the suburbs. The building proved expensive to maintain and, after a series of financial crises, it closed in 1940 when the remaining members moved to Charles Street (see Central Baptist above).

The Chapel was sold to the City Council in 1946 and has served as part of an adult education college for over 50 years. The building has recently been altered and refurbished with a view to promoting it as a performance venue. The former 'worship area', now known as the 'Hansom Hall', was used for the Leicester Comedy Festival and is home to the Leicester Theatre Group.

### **Victoria Road Baptist**

The former Victoria Road Baptist Church is a prominent landmark on London Road as the highway rises up the hill from the railway station. The church was opened in 1866 to serve new middle class suburbs which were being built beyond the Midland Railway. Although an initiative by Baptists, it aimed to be a non-denominational place of worship in an area where there was, as yet, no Church of England presence. Its Basis of Union, signed in 1867, allowed for 'freedom of judgment on the question of baptism and every other matter not essential to salvation' and the title of 'Church' was chosen deliberately.

The building clearly reflects the approach and wealth of its founders. Victoria Road Church was probably the first Nonconformist place of worship in Leicester to adopt the Gothic style and did so with exuberance. There is a tower and spire and even the side windows are gabled. Inside, there are galleries on three sides and a large 'crossing' area. The architect was John Tarring of London.

Although Victoria Road survived as a Baptist Church for over 100 years, it never fulfilled the ambitions of its founders. By 1874, St Peter's Anglican Church had opened nearby and a variety of Nonconformist chapels also took root in the area. A schism at Victoria Road in the late 1870s was unhelpful and exposed the Church's middle class limitations. In 1983, the congregation joined the cause at Charles Street to form Central Baptist Church (see above). Ever since, the Victoria Road building has been home to a Seventh Day Adventist congregation.

### **Clarendon Park Congregational**

The foundation of Clarendon Park Congregational Church seems to have been remarkably straightforward and harmonious. In 1884, the County Union appointed a committee to establish a new church in the Clarendon Park area and, by March 1886, the current building was opened for worship. Local Independent churches 'observed with great joy the erection of a Nonconformist place of worship in a district which has long been destitute of spiritual agency and are especially glad that Christian work will now be carried on under Congregational auspices'.

At first, there were only 27 members but the Union had evidently recognised the potential of the location and the numbers steadily increased. By 1909, there were 177 members and an average Sunday school attendance of 454. The Church waited for its first minister until 1888 when it appointed the theologian, the Rev P.T. Forsyth.

The Church building is faced in stone and dominated by a monumental tower over the entrance; this forms a striking landmark on the main London Road (A6) into Leicester. The architect was James Tait. Local architectural historian, Richard Gill describes the style as Gothic 'in a free Arts-and-Crafts manner'. It is thoughtfully detailed and has been little altered. Visitors should note the stone and wood carvings, the unusual clerestory windows and the pastel shades of the glass. The same care was lavished on a lecture room at the rear of the building.

Early in the twentieth century, the Church also established a presence in the centre of Clarendon Park by building schoolrooms and an institute on Queens Road, just over a quarter of a mile away. In 1971, it declined to join the United Reformed Church and was a leading member of the Congregational Federation. Relationships have been close with Stoneygate Baptist Church (see below) for many years but a recent proposal to merge the two churches did not go ahead.

### **Stoneygate Baptist**

Standing back from the London Road, Stoneygate Baptist Church exudes confidence and solidity but this suggests a prosperity which the congregation has never enjoyed. The Church began in 1900 when a group of about 70 members withdrew from the nearby Clarendon Hall Baptist Church. The reason for the 'serious division' is not recorded. In 1901, the new congregation adopted a constitution and appointed a minister but continued to meet in rented rooms. Ten years later, the 'Knighton Public Hall Church' was still without a building of its own.

Around this time, a group of local businessmen, including the President of the Leicester Association of Baptists, decided to erect a Baptist church and schoolrooms on the current site and set up a Building Committee to finance and organise the project. They intended that the Knighton fellowship should form the nucleus of the new Church but it was the Building Committee which took the initiative, decided on the design and set the terms of a trust deed under which the Church would operate. The foundation stone was laid in April 1913 and the Knighton congregation finally accepted the invitation to occupy the building a few months later. The new Church opened formally in March 1914.

The Building Committee appointed G. Lawton Brown as architect and he produced the grand baroque façade which is still a major feature of the Church. Behind, there is a spacious interior beneath a wide barrel vault supported on slender columns. Tip-up seats were provided instead of pews. Church records suggest that poor acoustics were a recurring problem until a loudspeaker system was installed in 1975. The organ is by Stephen Taylor and Son, a local firm which also built the organ in the De Montfort Hall.

The trust arrangement proved difficult, not least because it had provided buildings which were beyond the congregation's financial capacity to support without further involvement from the trustees. The Church finally took on full responsibility for the buildings in 1943. The early constitutions and the trust deed were theologically conservative but, as the twentieth century progressed, the Church gained a reputation for its liberal approach.

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