

Nonconformist Chapels: the Conservation Challenge

by

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INTRODUCTION

Christian followers of a particular denomination as a body, and the building in which they worship, have both long been referred to as the 'church'. Nonconformist denominations, in search of a bible-orientated religion, coupled with simplicity of worship, have always laid greater emphasis on 'people' and been content with relatively humble places of worship, eschewing the glories of Anglican and Roman Catholic architecture as expressed in our cathedrals and period churches; their spiritual fount was the austere Puritanism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The founder of the Quakers, George Fox, inveighed against the 'steeple houses' of the Established Church. And yet any casual visitor to a British town is likely to find at least one example of a classical Nonconformist Georgian chapel, a bespired Gothic equivalent from the nineteenth century and a chapel or 'church' from the beginning of our own, the time when Nonconformity produced its most individual style, so far unsatisfactorily christened, but a hybrid of Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts. Something had clearly happened to the rhetoric. Or perhaps that rhetoric is just assumed to be anti-architectural. The very modesty and charm of the early Quaker meeting-houses did not preclude an excellent standard of joinery in the internal panelling, seating, stand and screens. John Wesley in his oft repeated reference to the Presbyterian Octagon Chapel in Norwich of 1754-6 described it as 'perhaps the most elegant in Europe . . . finished in the highest taste and as clean as any nobleman's saloon'. A Wesleyan minister writing in the nineteenth century, F.J. Jobson, argued strongly for the Methodists to adopt the Gothic revival, whilst James Cubitt in his *Church Design for Congregations* (1870) suggested as models Santa Sofia and Torcello, practising what he preached in the production of some of the finest domed structures of the Victorian period such as the Union Chapel, Islington.

The earliest requirements of a chapel building were simply to house and to conceal an often financially-straitened and oppressed congregation. Any ideological justification for modesty so often seems *post facto* rationalization. The earliest Nonconformist places of worship tended to be in converted structures, particularly barns. The Baptists at Tewkesbury were housed in a building that began life as a house. The first Methodist Chapel at Tunstall in Staffordshire was built so that it could be easily converted to provide four houses if so desired. The Methodists at Framlingham in Suffolk moved into a converted corn mill in 1868 and as late as 1951 a cottage at Lea in Lincolnshire was adapted as a place of worship, also by the Methodists. Without the income guaranteed to Anglicans by tithes, and by respectability, Nonconformists had to wait

sometimes well into their second century before they could afford to be more architecturally assertive. Uncertainty was such that the Old Meeting at Newcastle-under-Lyme closed and re-opened some five times in the nineteenth century. There was no centralized funding among the Wesleyans until a General Chapel Fund was established in 1818. This was the inspiration for the later Watering Places Chapel Fund that helped to build or enlarge chapels of the same denomination in thirty-seven holiday resorts and the Metropolitan Wesleyan Chapel Building Fund of 1863, largely financed by Sir Francis Lycett, who gave £1,000 each to fifty new places of worship.

The early Nonconformists were not just poor: they were outsiders. A number of communities were established by founders who were in prison. Civil disabilities endured until 1828 as did the ban on admission to Oxbridge until 1871. It was more than a hundred years after Nonconformity had become identifiable before the Toleration Act of 1689 allowed chapel buildings to be licensed (an Act that spawned 2,418 in the eleven years up to 1700). Even thereafter physical danger persisted. The meeting houses at Wem and Whitchurch in Shropshire were destroyed in riots in 1715 and a twenty-four hour guard had to be mounted to protect the chapel at Chinley in Derbyshire in 1711 in case it was burned down before completion. Later in the century Wesley himself was the subject of a number of physical assaults.

Self-help became all-important and part of the appeal of Nonconformity is its adoption from the start of what has now found new fashion under the term 'community architecture'. The joiners, the glaziers, the bricklayers, the stonemasons very often came from among the ranks of the denomination; as did the designer. The minister-architect became surprisingly common—in Wales the Revd Thomas Thomas is said to have designed 800 chapels. William Jenkins, for twenty-two years an itinerant Methodist preacher, counts among his works the outstanding chapel in Carver Street, Sheffield. Another great Methodist preacher in Yorkshire, John Nelson of Birstall, was a stonemason. Dan Taylor, a collier, is said to have built the Baptist Chapel at Heptonstall in the mid-eighteenth century single-handed, even quarrying the stone himself. The so-called Cathedral of Welsh Nonconformity, the great Capel Tabernacl of 1872 at Machynlleth was the result of a remarkable joint effort. As well as raising some £25,000 to pay for it, members of the congregation toured Britain in search of inspiration for the design, the accredited architect John Humphreys seeing his role as being editorial rather than authorial. Inevitably exemplars were adopted. Particularly among the Methodists, these were the Octagon or the four- or five-bay pedimented front modelled on Wesley's chapel in City Road. The professional architect did establish himself more and more and the corpus of Nonconformist design includes work by Lutyens, in Hampstead Garden Suburb and the little Methodist Chapel at Overstrand in Norfolk, by Butterfield, in Highbury Chapel, Bristol, and by W.D. Caroë, in the United Reformed Church at Huyton, Merseyside, of 1889. George Dance has been credited with the City Road Chapel, Islington, and Carr of York with the Westgate Unitarian chapel at Wakefield. The average grander chapel would be the design of a local architect—one unlikely to be afflicted by denominational prejudice. The famous Bevis Marks Synagogue on the outskirts of the City of London of 1701 was the work of a Quaker whilst in Norwich the Corporation Surveyor, Mr

Patience, designed chapels for the Jesuits, Methodists and Quakers. Even now the professional has not secured a monopoly. The new Methodist Chapel of 1969 at Toftwood in Norfolk contains fittings designed and made by local craftsmen including panels on the front by an art teacher who doubles as a preacher (continuing a noble tradition—the impressive Bethesda Chapel in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent was constructed in 1819 to the designs of a local schoolmaster, a Mr Perkins).

Nonconformity is so naturally fissiparous that the proliferation of sects outran the ability of each to adopt a distinctive style. The Quakers are perhaps readily distinguished in their early meeting houses by their complete rejection of all references to 'polite' architecture whilst the citadel style of the Salvation Army set up in 1865 is rarely confused. Even the chapels of the smaller groupings such as the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion established c.1780 are only loosely related one to the other. Plymouth Brethren (1832) rarely went beyond the simple Mission Hall style although an architectural ornithologist is required to differentiate between the buildings of, say, the Primitive Methodists (1811) and the Bible Christians (1815). A slightly firmer house-style was established by the Methodist New Connexion of 1797 which tended to employ Northern architects even in the south-west. The outstanding new book, *The Unitarian Heritage, An Architectural Survey*, shows that denomination's quite bewildering stylistic unpredictability.¹ In Wales Gothic tended to point to an English-speaking, Classical to a Welsh-speaking congregation. The mysterious Catholic Apostolics (alternatively known as the Irvingites) housed themselves in proud, normally Early English Gothic, buildings of cathedral proportions. They employed Pearson to design one of the very best (in Maida Vale) and Raphael Brandon for what is now the University Church, Gordon Square, London.

KEEPING CHAPELS IN USE

It is a truism that the most appropriate use for an historic chapel is as a place of worship, yet every conservationist is painfully aware of 'Ecclesiastical Exemption'. The Government announced in the Autumn of 1986 that it had accepted the need to trim back this Exemption by bringing under normal listed-building control, works of demolition involving Listed churches in use and the equivalent unlisted examples in Conservation Areas, other than those of a minor nature (although at the time of writing the precise details have still not been announced). It has to be said that demolition under the Exemption has been threatened on more occasions than it has been carried through but Listed chapels have been lost, as with the Methodist Church at Jesmond, Newcastle-on-Tyne and Dovedale Road Baptist Chapel, Liverpool.

Many others have undergone internal modifications, in the execution of which planning authorities have had no hand, whether this be complete gutting, the insertion of internal floors or the ejection of particular fittings. The Department of the Environment's reaction to the truncation of the Rhyddings Chapel at Oswaldtwistle in Lancashire has been to remove it from the Lists altogether. The fine Centenary Methodist Chapel in Eastgate, Louth, of 1835 was gutted internally in the late 1970s following a threat, in 1974, to demolish it completely under the Exemption.

And yet the majority of the most celebrated early chapels of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remain in use and intact. To pick just a

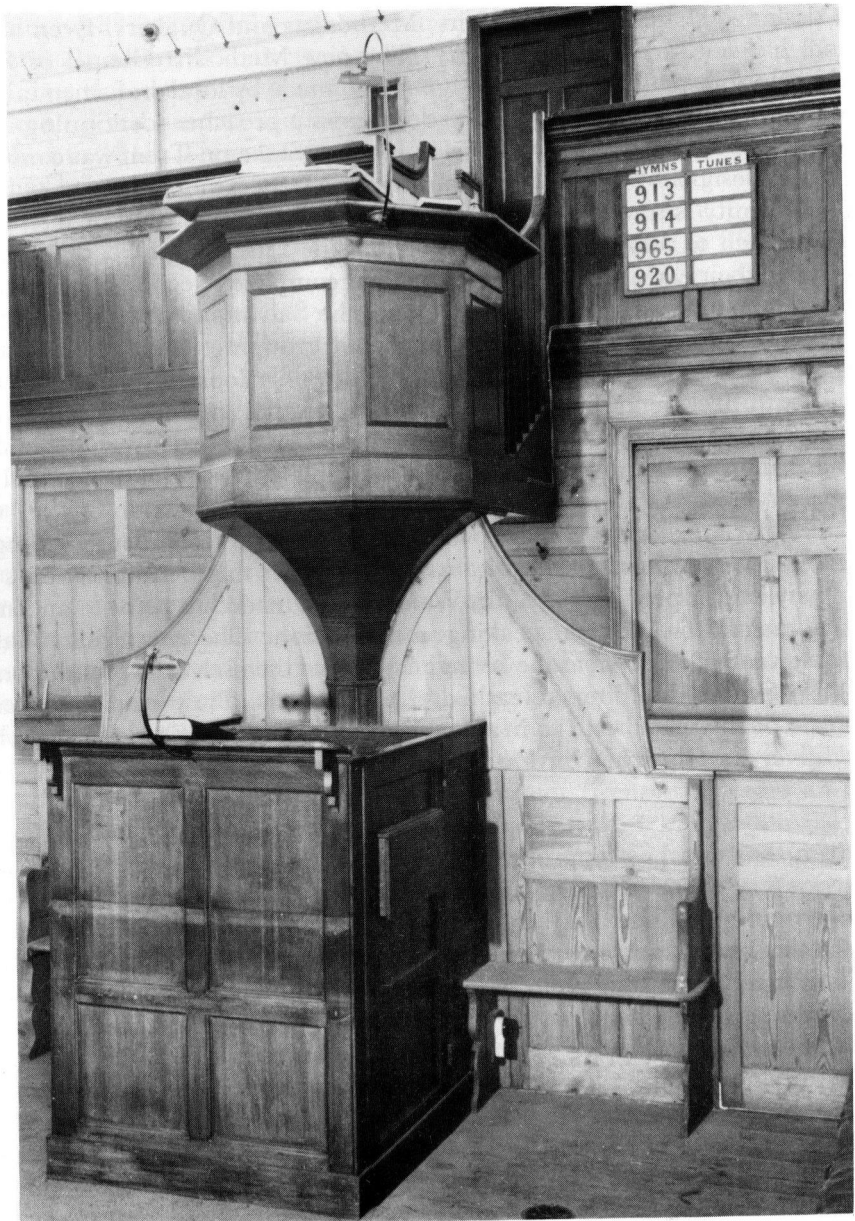


Fig. 1

Calvinistic Independent (Jireh) Chapel, Lewes, Sussex. A remarkably untouched interior of the early nineteenth century, which must be preserved intact. Any new use would compromise its character and its fittings and cannot be contemplated.

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

few examples, visitors to the Quakers at Hertford (1670), at Almeley in Herefordshire (1672), and Ifield in Sussex (1676), to the Baptists at Tewkesbury (late seventeenth century), and Winslow, Buckinghamshire (1695), to the Unitarians at Knutsford (1689) and Friar Street, Ipswich (1700) and to the Methodists at the New Room, Bristol (1748), to Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London and to Carver Street, Sheffield (1804) will be richly-rewarded and perhaps pleasantly surprised. Except with the last two which are regularly open to the public, finding the keyholders may prove an adventure as very few chapels are open to the general public. Further welcome exceptions to this rule, well worth the trek, are the Unitarian Chapel at Bury St Edmunds (open Wednesday, 11.00-3.00 in June, July and August), the exceptionally complete large Quaker Meeting House at Jordans, Chalfont St Giles, in Buckinghamshire of 1688, and the Methodist Octagon at Heptonstall, West Yorkshire of 1764.

A further truism, frequently observed, is that chapels of this age and quality are expensive to maintain and repair well and that this burden is falling on fewer shoulders as so many congregations are in contraction. An obvious solution is external subsidy. The principal source of help in the last decade in England has been the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, commonly known as English Heritage, and prior to 1984 its immediate predecessor, the Historic Buildings Council. (The HBCs in Scotland, Wales and Ulster survived the 1984 reconstruction.) The system of State Aid for Places of Worship in Use administered by the HBMC is proving increasingly generous towards Nonconformity. This is particularly welcome as the system has hitherto been geared almost exclusively to the Church of England. In many ways this was a function of the disparity in the total of Listed buildings (12,189 Anglican places of worship Listed by the end of 1985 compared with 1,200 Nonconformist, with considerably fewer included in the topmost Grade II* or Grade I categories). Nevertheless even this ratio was dwarfed by the statistics of grants offered and accepted. Out of 667 made in 1984-5 only thirteen went to Nonconformist and seven to Roman Catholic applicants. In 1985-6, out of 402 the equivalent totals were a mere seven and five (there were 136 additional grants in that year to buildings previously granted of which four were Nonconformist and three Roman Catholic). These figures are not a reflection of any prejudice on the part of the HBMC but testify more potently than anything else to the relative sophistication with which the Anglican Church has approached State Aid compared with other denominations. With such demand on its resources the HBMC is rarely in a position to canvass applications actively and unless Nonconformist trustees ask for money they will not get it. Grants are not automatic; those rejected include the United Reformed Chapel at Maldon in Essex and the Baptist Chapel at Cirencester, but the range of successful recipients is cheerily wide—the Baptists at Windsor (£20,000), the Clarendon Park Congregational Church at Leicester (£26,000), the Chapel Lane Baptist Chapel at Chippenham (£3,300), the United Reformed Chapels at Daventry (£5,600), Wellingborough (£18,500) and at Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire of 1860 by Poulton & Woodman, The congregation at Romsey Abbey United Reformed Church, Hampshire was dissuaded from demolishing its cupola by a modest offer of £6,400. Far more substantial grants have proved crucial in the success stories at the Jireh

Chapel, Lewes, Newbury Methodist and Union Chapel, Islington (Fig. 1). A very large grant (£150,000) has gone to the Memorial synagogue at Chatham, Kent and the Salvation Army has enjoyed one (for its Citadel at Stroud, a former Methodist Octagon of 1776).²

In a number of cases grant has been the crucial deterrent to closure. The Grade II* Listed Baptist chapel in Hope Street, Rochdale, Lancashire of 1810, 1845 and 1855 was offered and accepted £99,278 early in 1988, some 70% of the total required (which has to be compared with the average grant of 40%). Without it the congregation of thirteen, which has now sold its Sunday School, would have given up. The far more vigorous congregation at Chowbent, also in Greater Manchester, might have thought twice about staying in its eighteenth-century building with its original three-decker pulpit and vivid glass by Shrigley and Hunt, had not the HBMC assisted in the excellent rebuilding of the rear wall. The 100% HBMC offer for emergency repairs at the Grade I listed Unitarian Church at Todmorden, West Yorkshire was crucial in the arrangement by which it is hoped that the congregation will worship in the lodge whilst a new trust takes over the responsibility for the principal listed building for communal and civic use. This solution takes the building out of



Fig. 2

Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel, Worcester, at the time when it was threatened with total demolition. It is now the Elgar Music Centre, saved through the hard work and courage of the Worcester Civic Society

Ecclesiastical Exemption. The HBMC can assist in such cases under the programme for secular structures. In 1985-6 it gave a grant of £133,000 towards the conversion of the Grade II* chapel of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion at Worcester to provide the Elgar Music Centre (in a building previously the subject of an application to demolish by the local authority) (Fig. 2). Chapels are also eligible under a third programme known as Section 10 which dispenses grants towards the conservation of buildings of importance within Conservation Areas. Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust has found a user for the long-derelict Methodist Chapel in The Dale, Wirksworth, Derbyshire of *c.* 1850 willing to take over the building after restoration following a Section 10 grant of £35,000 offered in 1985-6.

District, County and Town Councils are empowered to offer grants or loans under the terms of the Local Authorities (Historic Buildings) Act of 1962. Normally these are very modest and the level and availability differ dramatically throughout the country. However local authority action can be as lifesaving as that of the HBMC. The 1987 offer by the Peak Park National Parks Board to meet 50% of the £10,000 cost of repairing the small but delightful Methodist Chapel of 1801 at Hollinsclough, Staffordshire was very welcome in a parish that is remote and sparsely populated. Local authorities can find it easier to help indirectly—many denominations would balk at receiving any proceeds from municipal lotteries but other assistance in kind is more acceptable. In mid-Glamorgan the County Council used a Job Creation Project to record all chapels in its county and in Barnsley the 120 employees of its MSC-manned Conservation Workshop have worked on a number of projects including the 1791 chapel in the town centre, now in use as a boys' club. Inner City Partnership money was used for the adaptation of Brunswick Methodist chapel in the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (unfortunately with an inserted floor).

Yet more modest sums can be harvested from the 2,400 bodies given in the Directory of Grant Making Trusts published by the Charities Aid Foundation at 48 Pembury Road, Tonbridge, Kent, TN9 2JD. The Pilgrim, Carnegie, Monument, Dulverton, Manifold, Rowntree and Chase Trusts have a track record in the offer of grants to historic buildings work. The Leche Trust specializes in the repair of eighteenth-century architecture and artefacts, complementing the newly invigorated Cleary Fund of the Georgian Group at 37 Spital Square, London E1. The Joseph Rank Benevolent Trust can give grants to conservation works through the Methodist Church Division of Property if this is incidental to the expansion of the church's pastoral work. The Historic Churches Preservation Trust offers grants but normally no more than a few thousand pounds. Its interest in Nonconformity if doubted, is affirmed by the Commendation it granted in 1987 to Richard Pedlar RIBA for his renovation of the seventeenth-century Meeting House, now the United Reformed Church, at Middle Lambrook, Dorset.

Money is no unequivocal blessing. Sometimes it simply does not work. The Methodists at Brunswick Chapel, Macclesfield (Grade II*) were offered 60% by the HBMC towards the cost of repairs but decided instead to vacate the building and move to relatively undistinguished late nineteenth-century premises (Fig. 3). Once a grant has been accepted the HBMC does have more power, requiring to be consulted on any subsequent alterations that would affect the building's historic character. It

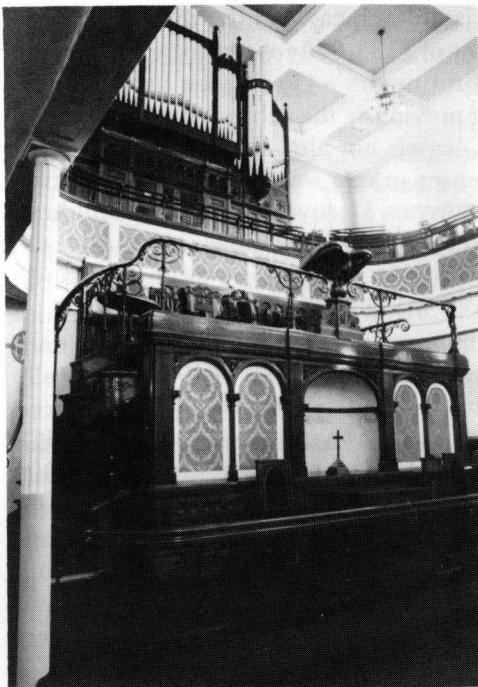


Fig. 3

Brunswick Chapel, Macclesfield, Cheshire. Although listed Grade II* this major chapel was vacated by the Congregation in the face of sixty-per-cent English Heritage offer towards the cost of repairs

has tough powers in theory but the easiest sanction is simply to refuse to entertain any future grants if the changes planned are damaging and/or irreversible. The direct threat, however, is the most difficult to avert—that of closure. A congregation cannot be forced to continue to use the building even if it has received State aid. There was a real threat in 1987 that the outstanding Quaker Meeting House at Kendal which had been granted aid by the Commission would have to be sold. One of the grants offered by the HCPT in 1974 went to the delightful thatched Methodist Chapel at Roseworthy in Cornwall. This has now closed and has been virtually rebuilt in replica as a house. A more insidious threat is posed by a desultory approach to maintenance. The Methodists, like the Anglicans, have a system of *Quinquennial Inspections* under which every chapel is meant to be inspected by a professional for any faults every five years. The Guidance Note urges all managing trustees to maintain a log-book giving details of repairs and ‘strongly’ advises them ‘to enter into a contract with a local building contractor for the cleaning out of gutters and down-pipes once a year’. The Methodist and Anglican experience coincides in a distressing number of cases where congregations either fail to heed this sound advice or follow that offered by the Inspecting Surveyor or Architect. Grant aid on roof repairs can so easily be undone by a faulty rainwater disposal system.

The European Regional Development Fund of the EEC has given financial assistance towards the conversion of a chapel at Llandoverly to a theatre and craft

exhibition centre, and there has been a special EC grant to the Grade I listed Jireh Chapel, Lewes (Fig. 1).

THE CONVERSION OF REDUNDANT CHAPELS

It must now be the case that more nonconformist chapels have been converted to secular use than survive as places of worship. As we have seen, some chapels are themselves the products of conversion, whether it be of a house or a barn. Whilst therefore in some minor cases there might be a satisfying historical symmetry, conversion as reversion, financial hard-headedness rather than sentimentality has decided the fate of most such buildings and informed the decisions on new uses for them.

When a nonconformist chapel closes, it almost always faces the harsh vagaries of the market—'no use, no future'. Each conversion brings its problems. Some are particular but others overarch a lot of cases. Firstly there is the imposition of restrictive covenants by the Methodists requiring that former chapels be not used for the sale

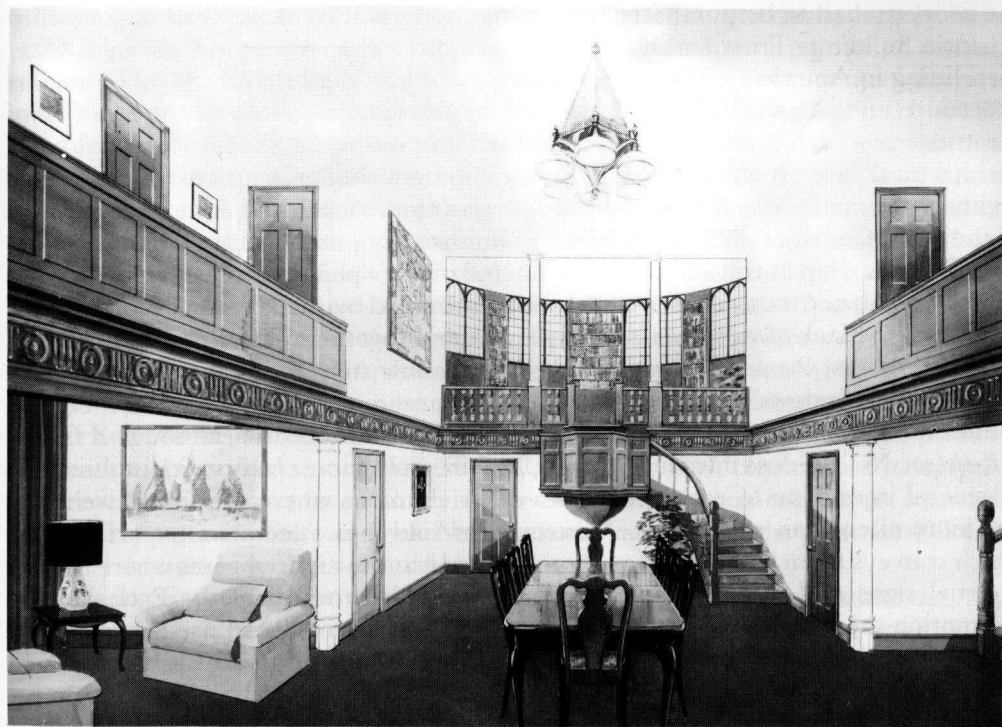


Fig. 4

United Reformed Church, Bassingbourn, Cambs. Drawing by East Hope Perrin Associates showing proposed conversion (not executed). One of the better examples of new use that respects the spatial quality and important fittings of the chapel

of intoxicating liquor, for gambling in any form, as a public dance hall or for Sunday trading. Religious use requires the express consent of the Board of Property Division. These bans are not inflexible but inevitably they limit the possibilities of commercial adaptation. It appears that the United Reformed Church takes a less strict view on the alcohol connection. Secondly, all trustees operating under the Charities Act have a duty to sell property only 'for the best price that can reasonably be obtained' and this is reflected in individual legislation such as the Methodist Church Act. When the trustees at Waddesdon Hill Particular Baptist Chapel, Buckinghamshire, offered to give that chapel to the Friends of Friendless Churches so that it might be preserved intact and the resources of the Friends devoted to repair rather than purchase, the Charity Commissioners prevented the transaction. They insisted that the building be offered on the open market so that any proceeds could be given on the *cy-près* principle to the nearest surviving congregation of the same denomination. The market was tested and not surprisingly the front runner was a lady wishing to convert for residential purposes in a way that, whilst it could have been much worse, did involve considerable internal alterations in a chapel, the charm of which lies in the survival of its pews and gallery, the Victorian stove and early baptismal tank. The conversion scheme was rejected by Aylesbury Vale District Council. After almost three years the property had to be purchased with the joint assistance of the Buckinghamshire Historic Buildings Trust and the descendants of the chapel's builder, Francis Cox, then living in America, who conveyed the building to the Friends. Such a tortuous procedure and the ability of the Charity Commissioners to overrule the wishes of the trustees where they are more concerned to preserve a chapel of historic and architectural interest than to make money, renders similar solutions in the future highly problematic. We are pressing the Government to tackle this issue in its revision of the 1960 Charities Act which it has announced is imminent.

Thirdly, chapels will sometimes be offered on the open market as stripped shells. Whilst on balance most users are likely to be attracted by the absence of font, pulpit and pews, the lack of windows is another matter altogether. Standing Order 934(4) of the Methodist Property Division urges all possible steps to remove 'stained glass or memorial windows' together with pulpit, communion table, communion chairs, communion rail, font, memorial tablets, crosses and notice boards, although *A Charge to Keep* (see Note 2) does introduce greater flexibility and more conservationist thinking. A general injunction to resite fittings in other churches where possible is welcome but more often than not they are destroyed or sold into a lucrative export market which conveys them to America or Japan. There have even been cases where carved external signs and dates have been erased. Under the terms of the Ecclesiastical Exemption the removal of such fittings from places of worship in use is permitted. That exemption lapses on disuse and where fittings are important to the historic character of the building and can be retained in conversion schemes, planning authorities are certainly within their rights to insist that they are not alienated. South Cambridgeshire has issued consents conditional upon the keeping of monuments in the churchyard.

In residential conversions size normally dictates single rather than multiple units. The greater the number of people to be accommodated, the greater the divisions,

the sacrifice of internal volume and the obscuring or destruction of detail. Planning permission was granted in 1988 for sheltered accommodation within the former United Reformed Church in Heckmondwike, West Yorkshire, a huge and dominating Baroque design of the late nineteenth century justifiably compared to a town hall and listed Grade II*. This is now its best hope in view of the unsuccessful application to demolish in 1983, the subsequent one in 1985 to strip out the interior (an exercise now largely completed by the vandals) and the long and distressing years of dereliction. At the time of writing there are fears that this last lifeline will be cut as English Heritage has refused to offer grant aid.

Nevertheless, converting a chapel into what in effect is a block of flats cannot but write off the interior as a recognizable space. With single-unit occupancy that risk is much reduced. The architects East Hope Perrin Associates of Royston produced a sketch scheme in 1986 to show how the former United Reformed Church at Bassingbourn-cum-Kneesworth, Cambridgeshire, could absorb domesticity without visual violence (Fig. 4). Sadly this scheme was replaced by one involving rather more change. Work on site seems to have begun. The chapel originated *c.* 1791 but the internal galleries supported on Roman Doric columns and partly fronted with an elaborate entablature are dated 1802. The former Congregational Chapel at Rendham, Suffolk, was erected in 1750 and extended in 1834. The interior is largely intact, retaining a gallery on three sides supported on wooden columns painted to resemble marble. The pulpit is also of 1750 as are many of the box pews, some with raised and fielded panels. The building was quite correctly upgraded to Grade II* in 1986. Having closed in 1979, application to convert to a pair of dwellings was submitted in 1985. This was 'called in' for Public Inquiry by the Secretary of State but the hearing never took place as the building changed hands and a more sensitive scheme was adopted. This has been granted consent although the changes proposed (but as yet unexecuted) are still fairly radical. The pulpit remains but only a pair of box pews is to be retained, reused within a lobby. The gallery sides framing the pulpit remain as bedroom space but the western gallery is brought forward so that it occupies fifty per cent of the internal space. Two of the columns are reused to frame a new centrally-placed imperial staircase giving access. 'Sleeping galleries' mark the best conversions. These are normally the original galleries as found, albeit with the elimination of the raked seating. Where they are entirely new, construction independent of the existing shell can prevent that visually-disturbing phenomenon of the suspended floor visibly cutting across windows. New transoms can disguise the presence of flooring but they cannot hide the sight of legs walking across!

Among commercial conversions two recently completed examples stand out, those of the Unitarian Chapel, Lewins Mead, Bristol, and George's Meeting, South Street, Exeter, the first II*, the second Grade I (Fig. 5).

Lewins Mead, designed by William Blackburn of London, was registered in September 1791. The interior although redecorated in the late nineteenth century retained most of its original fittings, including the galleries to the east and west approached independently by semicircular stone staircases, the singers' gallery to the south, the mahogany pulpit, the clerk's desk, the communion rail, box pews with seats for doorkeepers, directly accessible from the staircase lobbies and some particularly

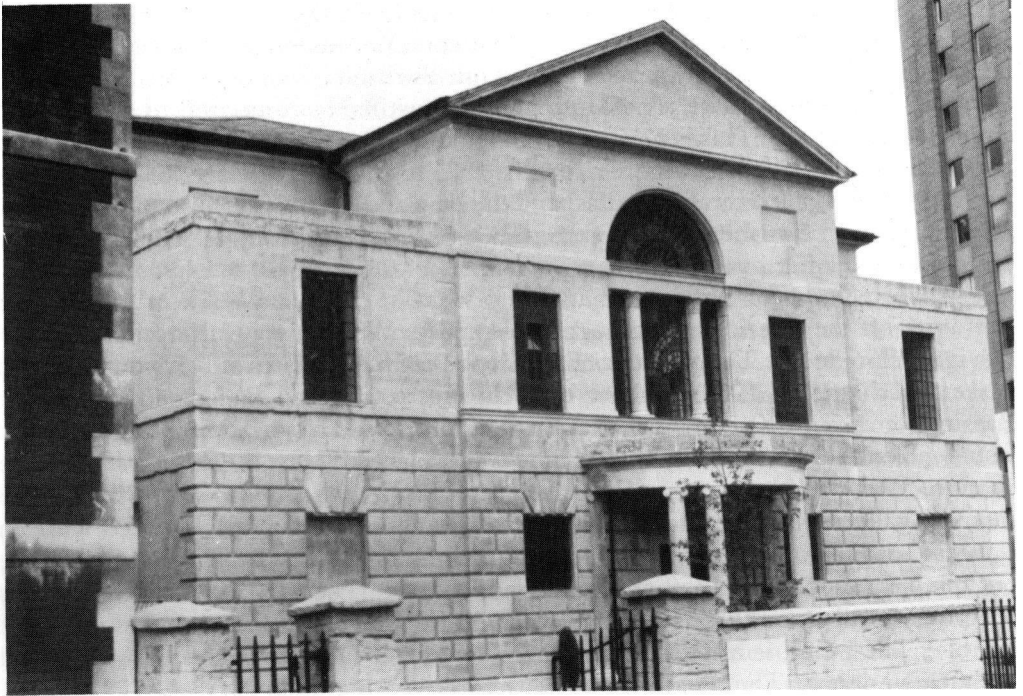


Fig. 5

Lewins Mead Chapel, Bristol, of 1791. Saved by the skin of its teeth and now well converted to provide a showroom and offices

fine neo-classical monuments to Lant Carpenter, pastor of 1840, and Christopher Thomas, a former Mayor of the city. Its future had been in doubt for a number of years not least because it lay in that part of the city redeveloped after the War to an oppressive scale and banal standard of design. An unsuccessful application to demolish was submitted in 1973-5 but the congregation managed to struggle on until 1985. In 1986 it was purchased by the Business Design Group who specialize in fitting out office interiors. They appointed as architects, Fielden Clegg Design, of Bath, already renowned for their conservation work and, with the help of grants from English Heritage and Bristol City Council, the building has been repaired and adapted for use as a design studio and showroom. The cost was high, particularly in the loss of most of the pews (some small areas have been retained) but fortunately the user is one who is able to exploit the main volume, limiting the subdivision to four glass-fronted enclosures under the balconies. A later addition of the 1930s to one side is used for mocking-up installations for clients, the principal worship area now being used for displays of system furniture. These impinge relatively little on the structure and are entirely removable. The loss of the stepped floors in the gallery is unfortunate but it has created a storage area largely concealed by the parapet. For the most part

the heating equipment has been located there. The floor was raised as well as levelled necessitating a new circular rail running the length of the gallery fronts for safety. The WCs, boiler room and kitchen have all been located in the inter-War extension. There has been some de-Victorianizing with the loss of the organ, the wall decoration and some non-figurative stained glass. The exterior, formerly heavily blackened, has been cleaned and this has either revealed or necessitated some rather obvious repairs in plastic stone. The building is open to the public free of charge at certain times of the year. This was an interior sufficiently good and sufficiently intact to be preserved by the putative Redundant Chapels Fund discussed later. However if a use had to be introduced this is one that reflects credit on the architect, the owners and the general contractors, Ken Biggs of High Littleton, near Bristol.

George's Meeting, Exeter, is slightly earlier, taking its name from the Coronation of George III in 1760, the year of its construction. Like Lewins Mead the denomination was Presbyterian (latterly Unitarian), and the congregation prosperous. This is reflected in the really quite extraordinary pulpit reminiscent of Continental Baroque in the swirling drapes carved in wood. The canopy is of the late seventeenth century and imported from elsewhere. The pulpit was probably originally freestanding but was moved to its present position against the rear wall in 1809. The galleries in polished oak are supported on Ionic columns. Although never the subject of application to demolish, disuse did prompt the local Freemasons to suggest an adaptation to a lodge that threatened a suspended floor and the blacking out of all the windows. Fortunately the building has found a kinder fate in the hands of Stephen Emanuel, RIBA, of Drewsteignton. Work commenced in January 1987, is now finished internally. The façade has been cleaned and is floodlit at night. The only item permanently removed is the organ of 1813 which has been fully restored and installed in Broadclyst parish church. In the galleries one row of upper pews has been moved back. There is unequivocal gain in the revelation in the rear hall of some fine monuments previously boxed in. There are two tenants, a retail emporium in the main space which sells high quality Third World artefacts and runs related exhibitions and events and a restaurant in a new mezzanine in the later rear hall which also organises art displays. All this was achieved without any grant aid. In appropriate rapport with the noble eighteenth-century tradition of the architect developer, Mr Emanuel has taken a considerable financial risk where others had failed to act and he and his team of craftsmen, including the carpenter foreman, deserve the plaudits due to those who see surmountable challenge where others identify only nuisance and burden. The only jarring note is the garish colouring of the Rococo clock surround on the west gallery.

A third scheme granted listed building consent in 1987 may, once executed, rank alongside Lewins Mead and George's Meeting. The Brunswick Methodist Church at Macclesfield, Cheshire of 1823, upgraded to II* in January 1984, was closed and amalgamated with a neighbouring congregation despite the offer of grants from English Heritage towards repair (Fig. 3). The first scheme for conversion mauled the interior mercilessly but the second, prepared by the architect Graham Holland, reserves the offices to the galleries which are partitioned off by Venetian windows incorporating the good nineteenth-century stained glass resited from the ground-floor windows. The pulpit which the Methodists proposed to remove would go but the rostrum remains

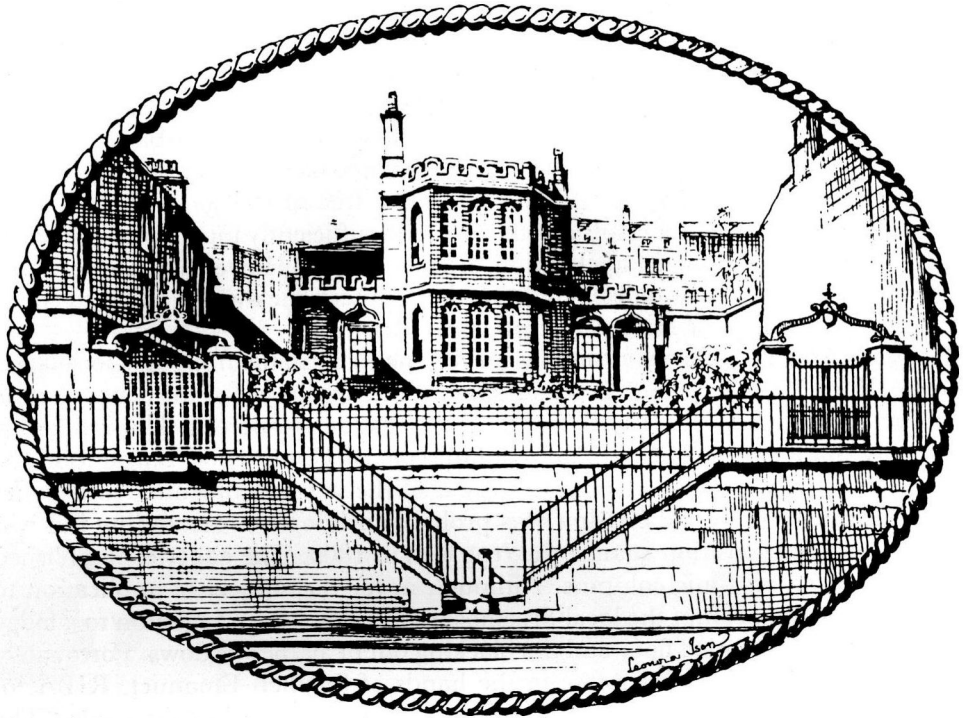


Fig. 6

Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel, Bath, now converted to an arts centre and meeting rooms for the Bath Preservation Trust

to take a new staircase to the gallery. The organ remains, later infilling to the portico is reversed, and the chest tombs in the graveyard resited rather than destroyed.

After residential and commercial uses come those which can be broadly defined as communal. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, was the unwitting provider of two of the most successful of these. Her chapel in Deansway, Worcester of 1804 was reopened in August 1987 largely through the endeavours of the Civic Society as the Elgar Music Centre, having surviving demolition by the proverbial skin of its teeth (Fig. 2). Its equivalent in The Vineyards, Bath, of 1765, somewhat exotic in that city in its Gothic dress, was adapted by the Bath Preservation Trust to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 1984 (Fig. 6). It now serves as the Huntingdon Centre providing offices for the Trust and meeting rooms. The principal features of both spaces remain, including the paired eagle lecterns but inevitably the fresh paint, the spick and the span has cancelled some of the evocative overlay of the years. The peeling missionary maps showing the progress of Christianity across the globe, pinned to the walls of the Sunday School at Worcester, have gone. At Bath the wholesale loss of the box pews and the substitution of stackable seats has exchanged the more formal, if

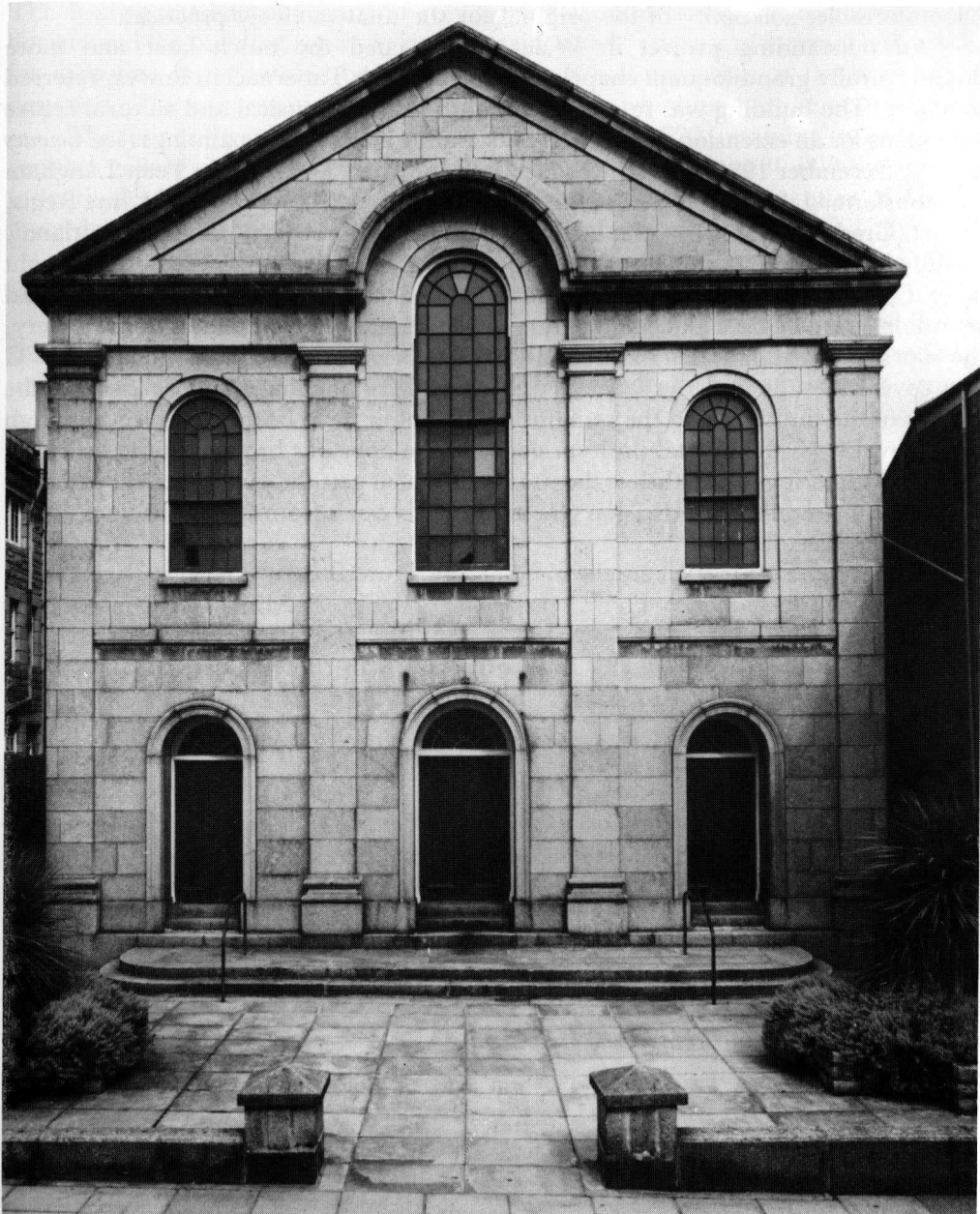


Fig. 7

Truro Baptist Chapel. To be converted by the adjacent Museum and Art Gallery after an earlier application to demolish

uncomfortable, solemnity of the original for the unattractively practical.

An outstanding project in Wales has rescued the much later and more architecturally grandiloquent chapel, the Machynlleth Tabernacl in Powys, referred to above. The building was re-opened in late 1986 as a musical and cultural centre with plans for an extension to house an outstanding collection of paintings (see *Country Life*, 11 December 1986). An entirely private venture by Mr and Mrs Peter Langham has transformed the former United Reformed Church in Coombe Street, Lyme Regis, Dorset (Grade I, 1750–5 by John Whitty, Minister and Architect) into 'Dinosaurland'. Closure in 1984 despite an offer of grant towards repair from English Heritage, brought an end to religious use, which had latterly condoned the sawing-off of the steps and sounding board of the eighteenth-century pulpit which were abandoned in the gallery, the stairs to which had then been cut away. The original pews had gone and UPVC tiles covered the floor of the sanctuary. Mr and Mrs Langham are conscious of the history of the building and the remains of the pulpit have been preserved although its removal from the pivotal position opposite the door has broken up the liturgical logic of the interior. Nevertheless the use is one which gets the public into the building and does not require sub-division (the building is open from 9 a.m. to dusk, from Easter to 21 October).

Rather more up-market are the plans for the Truro Baptist Chapel in River Street designed by the deaf architect Philip Sambell in 1850 (Fig. 7). Minds were concentrated by a 1984 application to demolish and by 1987 an appeal had been launched for £400,000 to convert the building (unfortunately with three inserted floors) as an extension to the adjacent Museum. It was the exterior which mattered and it is that which will survive.

PRESERVATION INTACT

But what of those chapels too good to convert, let alone to demolish—chapels which must be preserved intact? At present solutions tend to be diverse and improvised without the directing hand of any single co-ordinating agency. Firstly, there is what might be called the predominantly religious solution, although I do have in mind rather more than the simple transfer of a chapel to another denomination—itsself quite common throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Many Manchester synagogues often began in converted Nonconformist chapels; Roman Catholics succeeded the Methodists in their chapel at Hayle near St Ives in Cornwall, whilst Anglicans now use Butterfield's Highbury Chapel at Bristol of 1842 and the cathedral-like Irvingite church in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury. The Salvation Army has converted a number of chapels to Citadels, as in Roe Street, Macclesfield; the great Unitarian Chapel at Bury St Edmunds has been seen through some difficult years by letting to a Pentecostalist sect. Rather, one thinks of more overtly Christian conservationist action epitomized by what has happened with the chapels at Frenchay in Avon and Grittleton in Wiltshire. Frenchay Chapel at Frenchay Common near Bristol (Unitarian), dating from the late seventeenth century, was re-opened for public worship in August 1980 having been closed and partly vandalized for sixteen years. The first Minister after the re-opening, Peter Jenkins, came across the Chapel in 1979, fell in love with it and determined that it should resume its original purpose.

The newly-gathered congregation received great assistance from the local Preservation Society and the building is now very well maintained. The loss of internal box pewing for carpeting is regrettable but the new church hall extension at the back is well designed. The congregation of Lewins Mead now worships here temporarily.

The former Strict Baptist Chapel at Grittleton of *c.* 1720 (retaining an eighteenth-century gallery and pulpit) was recently purchased for about £20,000 by a private individual who has vested it in a trust as a place of worship. An offer of £10,000 towards repairs from the HBMC in 1985-6 has been accepted.

The cob-and-thatch Ebenezer chapel at Cripplestyle remains a moving testimony to the faith of the country folk who built it in 1807. It is open to visitors.

The body calling itself South West Missions exists 'to re-open closed and disused chapels in the Western Counties and to help those that are threatened'. It made an unsuccessful attempt to buy the New United Reformed Chapel (formerly

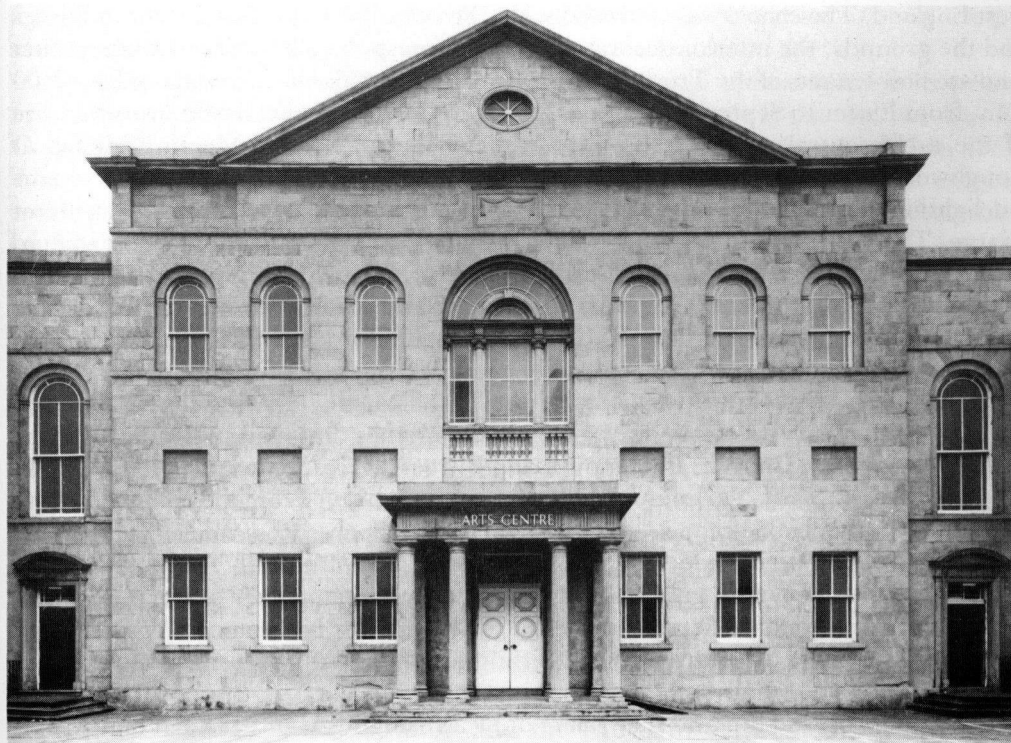


Fig. 8

Queen Street Methodist Chapel, Huddersfield, of 1819 and listed Grade II*. Converted to provide squash courts in the 1970s and now to be adapted as the Town theatre.

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Congregational) at Lyme Regis and has been in negotiation for another URC at Stoke Fleming near Dartmouth, South Devon of 1846. A similar body of believers, affronted by decay, the Guestwick Christian Fellowship, attempted to purchase the long-derelict chapel in that Norfolk village for use as a place of worship which is now the subject of a highly distinctive residential conversion (*Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society* 34 (1990), 18). The Friends Historical Society have taken over the Meeting House of 1729 at Claverham, Somerset (Avon).

The second group of organizations is drawn to the rescue, less through a sense of Christian witness betrayed than that of affront at historic buildings left to rot.

The National Trust is associated in most people's minds with country houses and countryside. However the Trust will take on disused places of worship although only in exceptional cases. It owns the former private Anglican chapels at Gibside, County Durham and at Clumber, Nottinghamshire. It came into possession of the Norcliffe Chapel (Baptist), begun in 1822, at Styal in Cheshire almost by accident. The building is architecturally modest and certainly not intrinsically 'Trust-worthy'. However it happens to fall within the village-and-mill complex given to the Trust shortly before the Second World War and now one of its premier attractions in north-west England. The chapel was conveyed to the Trust in 1979. It maintains the buildings and the grounds, the interior decoration being the responsibility of the Congregation who are now tenants of the Trust. It is open to the general public on Sundays 2.30-5.00 p.m. from Easter to September. The only Nonconformist chapel that it owns because of the architectural merit of the building itself is the Baptist Meeting House at Loughwood in Devon, four miles west of Axminster. This was built c. 1653 and retains a delightful interior of the early eighteenth century. It is open all the year round without charge. The Trust's sensitive repairs have included a reinstatement of the lost thatch.

The other great holder of historic property, English Heritage (the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England), has a similar record. It has as places of worship the Anglican Rycote Chapel in Oxfordshire of 1449, the Langley Chapel in Shropshire, 'an extraordinarily complete survival of seventeenth century Puritan church layout within a medieval shell', the Mistley Towers chapel in Essex of 1766, all that survives from one of only two churches designed by Robert Adam, the Royal Garrison Church, Portsmouth and Burges's great masterpiece, St Mary's, Studley Royal in North Yorkshire, near to Fountains Abbey. From the Nonconformist legacy it too has only one chapel—Goodshaw Baptist chapel at Rossendale, Lancashire. Built in 1760 on a hillside site, its closure in 1863 ironically prevented later modernization. The pulpit, galleries and pews, mostly contemporary or if not, repaired in sympathy, helped to evoke a self-sufficient strong-minded Nonconformity as moving in its way as a castle or country house. Sitting amid its rustic carpentry, closed eyes can conjure up the small orchestra of string and wind instruments documented in early accounts of worship and the 'Larks of Dean' singing Handel. Each family had its own rented pew and even the intramural burials seemed to respect the area of the pew sittings. There are three different pew numbering systems.

Goodshaw chapel was rediscovered by Christopher Stell in 1970. It took six years of negotiations before it finally passed into the guardianship of the Department of the Environment. The HBMC prides itself on the care and comprehensiveness of

its conservation campaigns, and the painstaking repairs were accompanied by an extremely thorough archaeological excavation published, with HBMC subsidy, in the *Antiquaries Journal* (1986). It seems surprising, given the modest size of the building, that the repairs cost some £100,000, of which £60,000–£70,000 was spent on the roof (the whole building had to be enveloped in scaffolding and polythene sheeting). The pulpit had to be rebuilt from scratch following vandalism but this has been done very faithfully. A DPC has been inserted. The old nineteenth-century radiators remain but the eighteenth-century quality has been recaptured by careful detailing, including a tasselled velvet pulpit cushion, the retention of the rough whitewashed walls and the painting of the pews in authentic colours. There is a fine chandelier incorporating a winged bird. An entirely pardonable inscription 'The Department of the Environment 1982' has been carved on a new stone kneeler on the roof of an outbuilding. There are no guides but tray-shaped 'flags' are available. The display cabinet with material on the history has been specially made and old posters advertising sermons and an original 1783 licence have been framed and hung on the walls. The building is open Monday–Friday 10.00–6.00, Saturday and Sunday by appointment. Goodshaw may be the only direct vesting, but the HBMC can argue with considerable force that when it offers 100% towards essential repairs, as with the Unitarian chapel at Bury St Edmunds, this is guardianship in all but name.

The Landmark Trust, established by Sir John Smith to save historic structures for use as holiday accommodation, counts amongst its portfolio the tiny two-bay Tŷ Capel at Rhiw Ddolion in Gwynedd, adapted at a cost of just over £2,000 in 1969. The bedroom is in the gallery, the kitchen and bathroom underneath. The original wood-panelled ceiling has been retained and highlighted in colour. This is salvation by adaptation rather than retention as a monument but in the latter too this marvellously inventive Trust has shown the way, at Maesyronen Chapel, Glasbury-on-Wye, Powys. The chapel, converted from a barn in 1696, retains its simple layout and furniture added in the first half of the eighteenth century including box pews and pulpit. The chapel remains the responsibility of the Trustees and is still used but in order to obtain funds a lease has been taken by the Trust on the adjacent cottage. It is now possible to stay there 'perched on a high shelf above the valley of the Wye with wonderful views to the Black Mountains'.

Among the many denominations only two, the Methodists and the Unitarians, have chapel museums and that of the latter only covers Wales. This is the Llwynrhydowen Chapel near Llandysul, Cardiganshire of 1726. The two most famous shrines to Methodism are Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London, probably designed by George Dance, and the New Room, Bristol of 1748. The City Road Chapel, repaired in 1972 and 1978 at a cost of nearly £1,000,000 (half of which came from America), is immaculately and beautifully maintained. It is just one attraction on a site that includes Wesley's house and the Museum of Methodism, opened in September 1984 in the restored crypt. This covers the past and future of the denomination and has a special section on chapel architecture. Visitors sit in a genuine pew to watch the slide show. Exhibits include the original pulpit from the Foundry Chapel in Moorfields which preceded the existing building.

The arrangement at Bristol is much the same with the chapel preserved completely

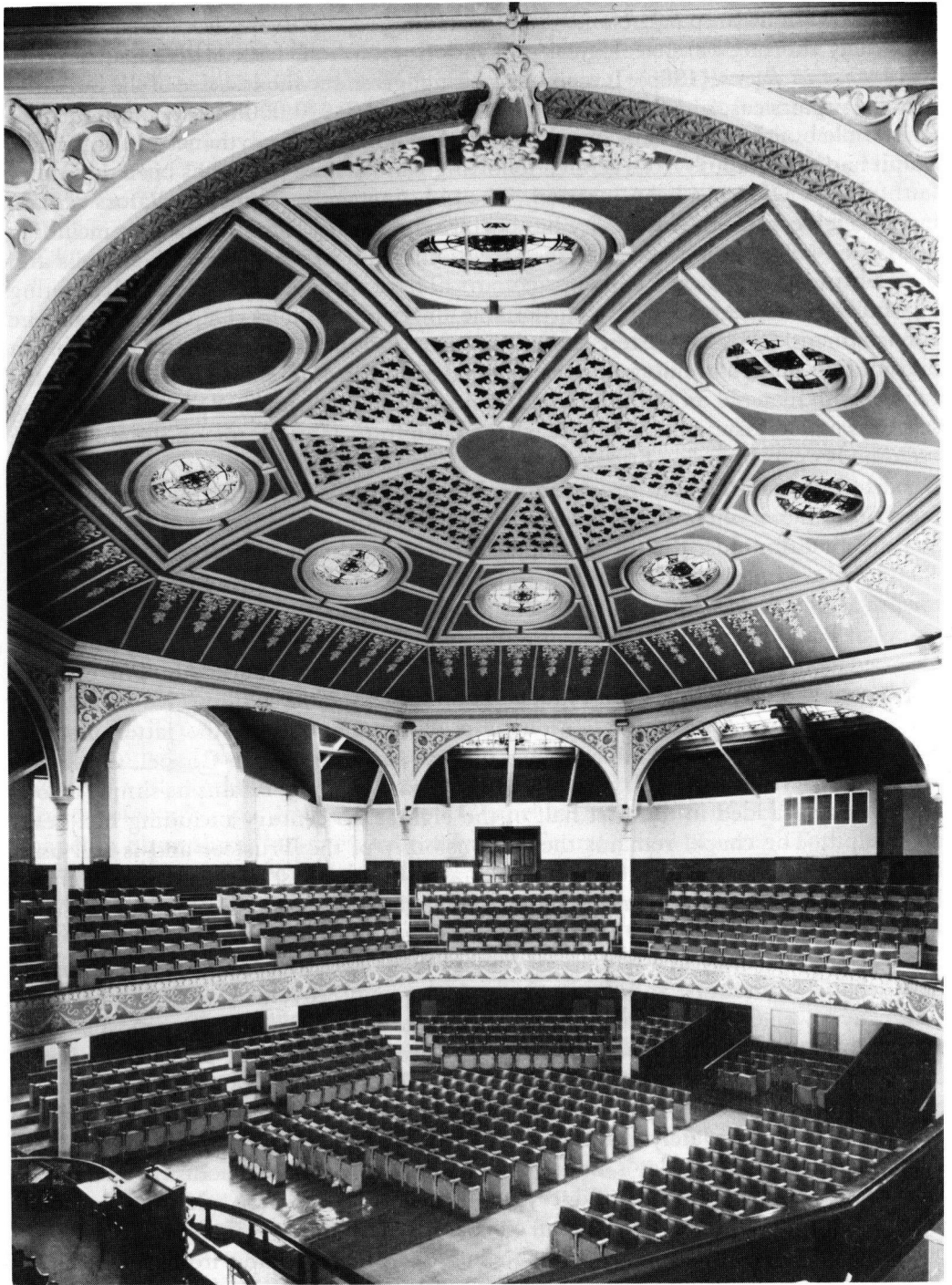




Fig. 10

Baptist Church of the Redeemer, Hagley Road, Birmingham. Demolished 1975. An unforgivable loss of one of the great domed spaces that resulted from James Cubitt's *Church Design for Congregations* of 1870.

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Fig. 9 (*Opposite*)

Eastbrook (Central) Hall, Bradford of 1903. The subject of several applications to demolish and still at the time of writing in need of a new use.

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intact with an exhibition in the adjacent accommodation. The Methodist Conference meets in the building every four years and apart from their own use the Methodists allow the Welsh Calvinists to worship there as their tenants. Both at London and Bristol there are resident custodians. (There is, strictly speaking, a third Methodist shrine, the Epworth Rectory purchased by the World Methodist Council in 1954 and opened to the public three years later and a fourth in the Asbury Cottage Museum, Sandwell, the home of bishop Asbury, the founder of American Methodism. However there is no place of worship as at London and Bristol.) The Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum of Primitive Methodism of 1828 near Barthomley, Cheshire is open on Sundays 2-4 p.m. from Easter to September.

The Jewish community has established an outstanding museum in the former Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue at Cheetham in Manchester. The building, listed Grade II*, was opened in 1984. The main worship area is entirely unaltered and only the pewing in the galleries has been removed to allow display cases. The former Communal Hall at the rear houses temporary exhibitions. There is an intensive programme of education in the School and the staff offer not only simulated Jewish weddings but demonstrations by craftsmen of traditional skills of the immigrant. (The Museum is open on Sundays 10.30-5.00 p.m. and on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 10.30-4.00 p.m. It is closed on Fridays, Saturdays and Jewish Festivals. The admission fee is 50p for adults, 25p for students and senior citizens. There is a Museum Shop.) The Museum of Jewish East End holds occasional exhibitions in the former synagogue owned by the Spitalfields Trust to the rear of 19 Princelet Street, Spitalfields, London.

Welsh Nonconformity as a whole has its museum in a former Wesleyan Chapel at Dre'r-ddol between Aberystwyth and Machynlleth, run by the Welsh Folk Museum as one of its specialist branch museums. The newly-opened Museum of Christianity in the eighteenth-century Bar Convent in Blossom Street, York is the only Roman Catholic equivalent (open Monday-Saturday, 10.00-5.00, Sunday 2.00-5.00). Plans were announced in June 1989 for a National Nonconformist Heritage Centre, encompassing all denominations in the Grade II* listed United Reformed Chapel at Rothwell, Northants of 1735. The concept of the chapel as a giant 'exhibit' is carried to its logical conclusion at the Open Air Museum at Beamish, Durham, which is to include a re-erected Methodist Chapel from a colliery village whilst the Preston Hall Museum at Stockton-on-Tees plans to erect a replica chapel, the interior of which will offer a museum of ecclesiastical architecture. There are already re-erected chapels at the Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans, and at the Black Country Museum, Dudley.

CONCLUSION

As welcome as these schemes are, there is a limit to the number of successful conversions and possible museums and severe restrictions on the possible vesting of redundant chapels in the National Trust, which normally requires a substantial endowment and in English Heritage, which is now strongly non-acquisitive. The Friends of Friendless Churches which has the Waddesdon Hill Chapel Buckinghamshire of 1792 (listed Grade II*) in its care cannot take any more unless its financial position is transformed.

What is now urgently required is a Nonconformist equivalent to the Redundant Churches Fund which operates for Anglican churches. When one of these passes out of pastoral use but is too good either to be demolished or converted, it can be taken into the care of the Fund. This was established in 1969 and is financed at present 70% by the state and 30% by the Church of England. Some 270 buildings are now under its wing. The Ancient Monuments Society has long been pressing for such action and the writer is at present serving on a working party convened by English Heritage to set up an organization for non-Anglican places of worship modelled in some measure on the Fund. The Government announced its support for the principle of such a body in the White Paper on the Environment published in September 1990 and I hope that with this fair wind words may be translated into deeds before long.³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Unitarian Heritage, An Architectural Survey*, is available from The Revd P.B. Godfrey, 62 Hastings Road, Sheffield, S7 2GU.
2. An excellent summary of one denomination's equal-handed approach to its listed buildings is given in *A Charge to Keep? A Methodist Response to Listed Buildings and Conservation* (1990), available for £3.00 from the Methodist Church Property Division, Central Buildings, Oldham Street, Manchester, M1 1JQ.
3. All those interested in Nonconformist Architecture are invited to join the newly-founded Chapels Society. Enquiries to the Honorary Secretary, Christopher Stell, Esq., O.B.E., F.S.A., Frognal, Berks Hill, Chorleywood, Herts, WD3 5AG.