

RISLEY CHAPEL, LANCASHIRE

by Christopher Stell

The distinction between Church and Chapel, between orthodox conformity and dissent in its many and varied forms, is sometimes very fine indeed. Richard Baxter of Kidderminster, pre-eminent amongst the Presbyterian divines who left their livings following the 1662 Act of Uniformity, strove hard to find an acceptable place for Presbyterians within the established Church. Some Lancashire ministers such as John Angier of Denton retained their positions after 1662 without conforming or, like Samuel Newton of Rivington, returned to their congregations shortly afterwards with the support of the local gentry, reading such parts of the public service as their consciences would permit. Few appear to have proceeded so far in their attempts to resolve the problems of conformity as Thomas Risley, Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, who surrendered his fellowship on 24 August 1662 when the act came into force but was persuaded by his college to consider the matter for a further year. He is even said to have received episcopal ordination on 10 November 1662,¹ but he was unable to find any living which he could conscientiously accept.

Thomas Risley was fortunate in having an estate at Culcheth in his native parish of Winwick to which he then retired and combined private preaching with the study and practice of medicine. Although invited to return to Oxford in 1666 and receiving other tempting offers of employment he could not again cross the bar of conformity. In July 1689 he took advantage of the Act of Toleration to register a barn at Croft as a meeting-place for Protestant Dissenters which served his congregation until the erection of a permanent chapel in 1706-7.²

The subsequent history of Mr. Risley's congregation followed the pattern of many of the older Presbyterian societies. Thomas Risley, who might well have been described as an orthodox preaching minister, also trained students for the ministry, one of whom, Thomas Andrews, is named as his pupil in 1693-95.³ After his death in 1716 Thomas was succeeded by his son John who continued in office until 1743. Subsequent ministers began to introduce doctrines which deviated from the orthodox and in which the influence of the nearby Warrington Academy⁴ was probably felt, two ministers coming from that place in 1762 and 1780 and others from churches where Unitarianism was already in the ascendant.

Growing concern amongst orthodox dissenters in the early 19th century over the changed doctrines being preached in the older chapels led to a series of legal actions against Unitarian trustees for which the Wolverhampton Chapel Case⁵ set a precedent.

Before a halt had been called to what promised to be an unseemly and interminable display of legal rancour by the passing in 1844 of the Dissenters' Chapels Act a petition for the removal of the minister and the trustees of Risley Chapel had been filed and approved in 1838. The Risley property was then transferred to the newly formed Presbyterian Church in England and the dispossessed Unitarians built themselves a smaller chapel a short distance away at Croft. The change in ownership can hardly have been amicably arranged and it is therefore not surprising that no old records of the congregation have survived. The presumption that all but the trust deeds were carried away into private ownership and subsequently lost is supported by the existing register of births which commences on 18 November 1838 and the absence from the records of the Unitarian chapel of any earlier register. The Presbyterian Church of England, as it became in 1876, retained possession of Risley Chapel until 1971 holding a final service there on 26 September before removing to temporary premises on a nearby industrial estate. Although the congregation survives as a part of the United Reformed Church the chapel was totally demolished in October 1971 during the construction of the M62 motorway. The necessity for this demolition of an important building which did not stand in the direct line of the motorway but on the extreme edge of generously wide cutting, the haste with which it was removed and the failure to give it any statutory protection may now be dismissed as questions of only academic interest; they nevertheless illustrate the frightening ease with which the history of two and a half centuries is reduced to a mere pile of rubble.

Risley Chapel in the hamlet of Risley from which its founder's family took its name no longer stands, as it might have done, a monument to 18th-century sanity on the verge of 20th-century motorway madness. In its burial-ground, which alone remains, lie the bones of its founder, but all else has irrevocably changed. The chapel was a small rectangular building of brick with a stone slated roof and a square wooden bellcote at one end not unlike many Lancashire chapels of that date, but it had one unusual and significant feature in that it included a chancel at the east end. This was hardly regarded as a necessary adjunct even by Anglicans in the 18th century and for a nonconformist meeting-house it may be unique. The Puritan chapels of Bramhope and Great Houghton in Yorkshire, built 1649-50, have no such feature, only their eastern windows indicating a continued liturgical orientation. The earlier Puritan chapel at Toxteth near Liverpool, of 1618, was built with a chancel and still has its pointed chancel arch, but the building was not orientated and the chancel no longer survives. It is just possible that the Presbyterian chapel at Tunley,⁶ also in Lancashire, built in 1691, had a comparable chancel, a

contemporary vestry at the east end demolished in 1880 may have served this purpose but all evidence has now gone. At Risley the evidence was quite clear although the chancel had long been separated from the body of the chapel, perhaps since 1838, by a wooden screen and served as a separate vestry. It was restored to use as a chancel following alterations in 1953 although at the same time the chancel arch, which from the evidence of early photographs appears to have been original, was rebuilt in a different form. The provision of a chancel seems to reflect Thomas Risley's theological position of near conformity, to speak of his desire to proceed as far as his conscience would allow, and when the comprehension which Richard Baxter so earnestly desired proved abortive to give to his own people a building which in its essentials was a parish church rather than the single-cell chapel-of-ease with which most of his fellow ministers were perfectly content.

When the chapel was recorded by the present writer in 1967 (Fig. 1) it had already suffered a number of changes at the hands of its several owners few of which could seriously be regarded as improvements and some as disasters in a building of such simplicity. While the earlier society had been content with leaving the building in its original state but reforming the standards of doctrine the new owners of 1838, conservatively retaining the earlier doctrine, expended their efforts on reforming the building. Not only did they convert the chancel, for which they had no other use, into a vestry, but they added a plaster ceiling, later taken down, which cut across the original roof trusses at about the level of the lower pulins. The principal external features were, however, suffered to remain, with three segmental-arched windows in the north and south walls of the main body of the chapel, the latter more closely spaced to allow for a doorway at one end of the south wall, and a similar window in the east wall of the chancel, the only one which survived unaltered in 1967. There was also a window in the north wall of the chancel, similar in size to the east window but without an arched head, which had been blocked at an early date. The windows were originally glazed with diamond leaded panes, larger rectangular panes being substituted in the south windows after 1885 (Fig. 2). The chief disaster occurred in 1914 when 'an energetic local Committee, with the assistance of several members of the Manchester Presbytery' were 'appointed to carry out a Restoration Scheme'. Unfortunately their enthusiasm seems to have got the better of them and the windows in the north and south walls were entirely rebuilt in a style which can only be described as that of a jobbing builder and in a harsh red brick quite out of keeping with the mellow 18th-century walling. A stained glass window subsequently inserted in the lights of the middle window on the south side did little to remedy its appearance. When the 1914 'restoration' proposals were

Risley Chapel, CROFT
Lancashire

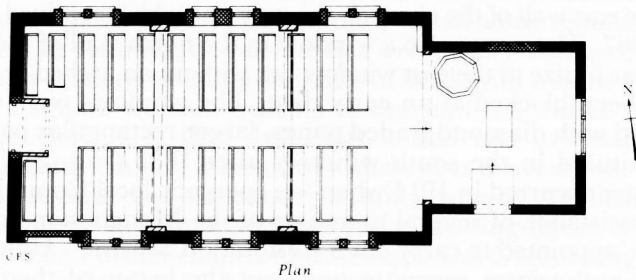
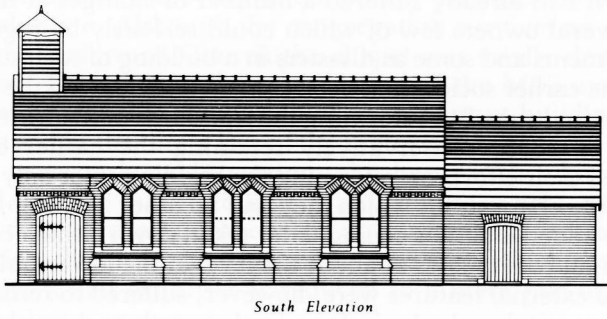
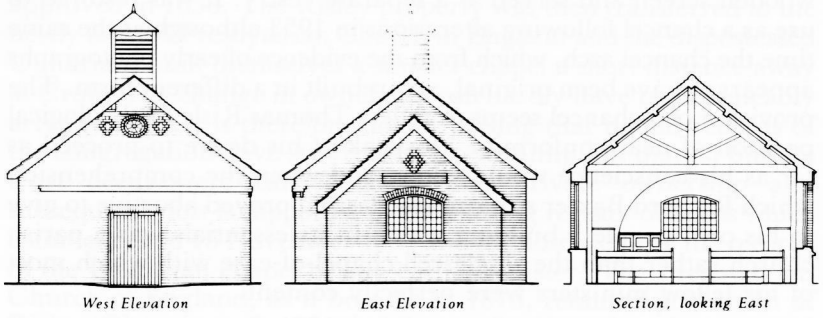
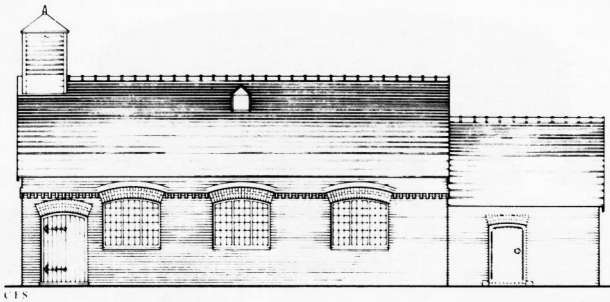


Fig. 1

RISLEY CHAPEL

CROFT, Lancashire



South Elevation c.1892 showing original tenementation

5 feet 0 5 10 15 20 25 30

Fig. 2

announced a pamphlet was issued reprinting the external photograph earlier published by Nightingale⁷ and with an interior photograph (Fig. 3) in which is seen the original chancel arch, a wide flattened arch with keystone of clearly 18th-century proportions. A further 'Renovation Scheme' was announced in 1953 which, although filled as always with expressions of good intentions, was in some ways equally disastrous. One praiseworthy result was the removal of the inserted ceiling fully exposing the roof structure with its two king-post trusses, the carpenters' marks in Arabic numerals at the joints, and curved wind-braces above and below the ends of each pair of purlins (Fig. 4). Less acceptable was the internal blocking of the south doorway, the insertion of a new doorway at the west end, and, above all, the total removal of the Chancel arch and its replacement of one of semicircular shape. These changes, together with a rearrangement of the pews, could hardly have been carried out, as the relevant brochure states, 'without destroying the character' of the building.

Even after all the changes lavished on the chapel by an over-loving but ill-advised congregation sufficient remained of the original structure and its fittings for it to have merited a better fate. In the east wall the window with a short brick band above and a decorative lozenge overall remained intact. The south doorway and



Fig. 3: Interior before 1914

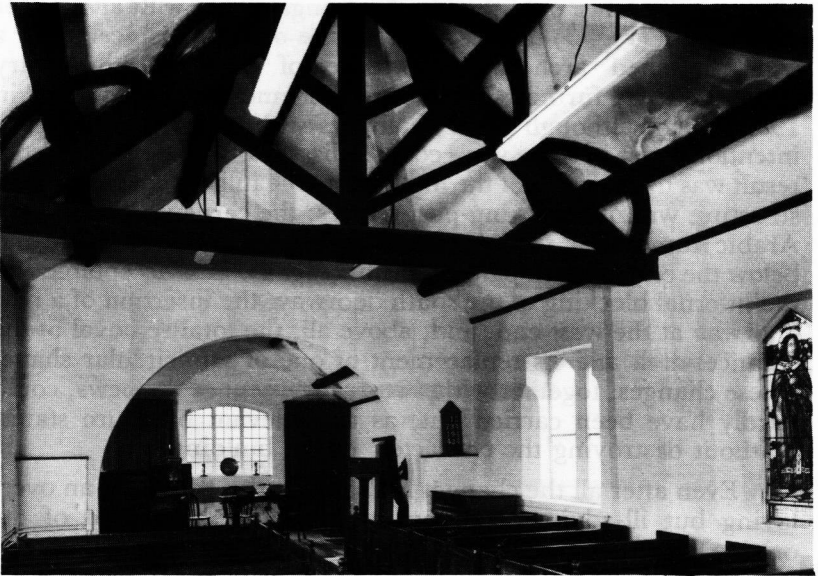


Fig. 4: Interior in 1969

the dentil cornice which linked the arches of the windows were still in place. In the west wall was a small oval window high in the gable, flanked by brick lozenges, which may once have shed a feeble light on a long-forgotten gallery. The north side, facing away from the road, lacked any cornice between the windows. The pews, reset clear of the side walls, had been altered to make more comfortable sloping backs, but they still had many of the original fielded panelled doors carved with initials and on several the date 1706 which, in spite of the wording on the 1707 trust deed expressing only an intention to build, may be the true date of erection. The octagonal pulpit, also with fielded-panelled sides, arbitrarily resited on the chancel floor, was of a similar date. The bell, which now hangs in the new chapel at Birchwood, was made by Ralph Ashton of Wigan and is dated 1718; it is one of very few nonconformist bells by a known maker. Although the Unitarians were unable to take away the bell they probably removed any communion plate when they left in 1838 as being their own property; no earlier plate is known, the set of Britannia Metal vessels latterly belonging to the congregation, comprising two cups, a flagon and three plates, included a plate 'purchased by the Presbytery of Lancashire October 30th 1843'.

The repeated refurbishment and final demise of Risley Chapel should serve as a reminder of the cumulative damage to which simple buildings are most prone. From this constant meddling which transforms a Queen Anne building into 'Mary Ann' and finally disposes of it in the guise of a Mary Rose, sunk almost without trace, a few parts, a bell, a pulpit, perhaps a few pew doors, survive from the wreck of time. Two burial-grounds still remain at Croft, silent witnesses to the sites of Risley Chapel and its Unitarian counterpart.⁸ The problems of their trustees have been solved by the simple solution of demolition. But what value is a trust which takes no account of its duty to its neighbours and treats buildings as matchboxes to be thrown away once they are emptied? Will the nonconformist denominations ever shoulder their public responsibilities in a mature manner and seek to care for their heritage, and ours, with as much vigour as they once quarrelled over their own theology? Perhaps that day may come, but until then the danger is ever present and the watchful eyes of the amenity societies are needed more than ever to spare us from a repetition of the tragic and unnecessary loss of unique but little-known monuments of which Risley Chapel was a prime example.

NOTES

1. A.G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (1934), 412, differs from other sources in giving the year as 1661.
2. B. Nightingale, *Lancashire Nonconformity*, vol. 4 (1892), 252-61.
3. F. Nicholson and E. Axon, *The Older Nonconformity in Kendal* (1915), 592-93.
4. H. McLachlan, *Warrington Academy*, Chetham Soc., vol. 107 new ser. (1943); Nightingale (1892) *op. cit.*, 271-87.
5. T.S. James, *The History of the Litigation and Legislation respecting Presbyterian Chapels and Charities* (1867), 209-27.
6. Nightingale (1892) *op. cit.*, 23-37.
7. Nightingale (1892) *op. cit.*, 260.
8. National grid references SJ 650930, 639932.

(Plates: National Monuments Record: Crown Copyright.)