

The Life of a Country Chapel

Yelvertoft, Northamptonshire

1791 to 2012

Robert Palmer

Robert Palmer was born on 28th April 1952 into a well-established non-conformist family whose roots go deep into the history of dissenters. Robert was baptised as an infant at Yelvertoft Congregational Church. Named after his two grandfathers, one of which like his mother was 'high church', Robert grew up under the influence of Chapel life. Like other village children he was sent along with his one penny collection money to Sunday School, which was conducted by his aunty between 2.00 and 3.00pm each week.

So it was that Robert has been able to cast his mind back to the 300th Chapel anniversary in 1962. He recalls that his aunt was a competent piano player but never played the chapel organ. He also remembers being allowed to empty and count the collecting box money, which started a personal hobby of collecting coins based on their date of minting. This simple joy compensated for being branded a failure after scoring only 23% in a scripture examination.

As he grew older chapel going faded and apart from assisting his father during the 1964 chapel refurbishment his only attendance was for family funerals. That was to change when towards the end of 2010 he ventured over the threshold once again. Undertaking a history trail had led him to discover via the internet that the chapel had managed to continue despite his abandonment of it.

On arrival he was confronted by Leslie Freer whose faithfulness had kept the chapel open through a particularly difficult time. Leslie was treated to a fairly exhaustive history of Robert's past association with the chapel. So began a pattern of regular attendance and active involvement. Rob likes to sit in one of the side pews which carries for him memories of his past. Though relishing the warmth of the fellowship among his new friends, Rob remains somewhat uncertain about personal faith; though more than happy to identify himself as a temporary dissenter and non-conformist.

As we have approached this landmark anniversary Rob has reflected on some of the practical aspects relating to this chapel that sits in the middle of the village, which he happily shares here, as he invites you to come with him on a tour of the building and grounds. The term 'chapel' is commonly used for rural free churches. Technically it refers to the building; the church is the congregation that meets within it.

To the undiscerning eye the chapel looks like a typical 19th century ecclesiastical building. But closer inspection reveals some fascinating architectural features. The cast iron gates at the threshold bear the name of the manufacturers on the lock carrier: Mobbs of Northampton. Mobbs was a fairly large concern in the late 19th century, having taken over another similar concern. The company operated until about 1929. The gates will have been cast at either the Lion or Vulcan Foundries in the Swan Street area of Northampton. There remains some evidence of the large lantern carriers that originally topped the columns on either side of the gates.

As you step through the gates you will see a gravestone to the left marking the burial place of the Reverend and Mrs Evan Bryant. Before Mr Bryant became the minister at Yelvertoft he and his wife had worked as missionaries in China for the London Missionary Society since 1866. The LMS had been established in 1795 and was the second major international missionary society established in Britain, and had numbered among their many missionaries the famous David Livingstone, Eric Liddell whose athletic skills and personal faith were featured in the film, *Chariots of Fire*. A little further towards the chapel building, and on the opposite side is the grave of Thomas Plimsoll, father of Samuel Plimsoll whose knowledge of physics brought about the famous 'Plimsoll Line' on merchant ships. The now compulsory Plimsoll Line to prevent the overloading of ships has probably saved millions of lives. Both

Thomas and Samuel were well respected Congregationalists who worked for the betterment of society.

If you cast your eye along the brick wall that separates the Chapel from the neighbouring farm you will see that a number of bricks bear the initials of former members who, no doubt, contributed financially towards the upkeep of the premises. The wall also carries a historic notice declaring the right to draw water from the well in the farm garden – a right unexercised for many years by chapel or farm!

Before going any further take time to examine the brickwork on the front elevation of the building. The various pattern of bricklaying is deliberate. Some courses provide decorative quality while others provide strength. The oldest brick bond is known as English and consists of a row of 'stretchers' (9 inches wide) and followed by a row of 'headers' 4.5inches wide. This was common in Tudor times. But you will also see examples of 'Flemish Bond', which was introduced in the late Tudor period, popular in Georgian times, and is considered a more attractive bond. This consists of rows of alternating headers and stretchers.

The building that is currently home to the Congregational Church in Yelvertoft can certainly be dated back to 1791 and has undergone some alterations and additions over the years. There is some speculation that it might have been adapted from an agricultural building. In his booklet "A Hundred Years Ago" written by the Reverend Evan Bryant in 1908 the building is shown as of a fairly symmetrical design, though with a chimney stack at the front corner (looking from the road). Deep arch-topped windows within the main part of the chapel complement the symmetry. Each of these has a decorative box for housing blinds.

On entering through the main doors you will find yourself in a small hall separated from the main worship area by a pine screen. The

screen was relocated to its present position during the 1980's reducing the seating area in the main part but creating a useful smaller meeting room. At one time there would have been windows on either side but one of these has been bricked up when an enclosed stone staircase to the upper gallery was created.

At one time the central section of the chapel would have had pine pews to match those still on either side. These were removed to enable more flexible use of the premises. Old photographs also show that the platform in front of the pulpit was screened off by simple wooden railings.

The room was illuminated originally by oil lamps, some of which were suspended from the centre of the room and lowered on chains. The ceiling roses can still be seen. There is evidence of additional wall mounted lamps around the room and lamps on either side of the pulpit. Ventilation would have been important and this was provided by the vent still visible in the ceiling with adjustable air intakes set at a lower level in the corners, also still visible.

Look carefully at the area where the side pews join the wall and you will see cut out sections where hot water pipes from a closed gravity fed system used to run the water heated from a boiler located in the scullery behind the pulpit. On the end of the pews are cast iron and brass fittings to hold walking sticks and umbrellas at times of inclement weather. Rows of side facing pews near the organ and on the opposite side of the pulpit would have been used to seat choir members. Most of these have been removed to accommodate an electric keyboard instrument and to provide wheelchair access to rear rooms and outside door to the rear.

Before the installation of the electric powered blower, situated in the vestry, the single console chamber organ would have been pumped by hand. The organ was given a major overhaul in 1964 when the local firm of Palmer and Son redecorated the interior of the building.

The restoration of the organ was made possible by a financial gift from Mr William Morris of Elkington Road.

Today the gallery houses the village History Group's records and is periodically open to the public. Sliding panels screen it off from the main worship area, though this has to be opened from time to time when a larger than average congregation is present. Robert Palmer believes that the rounded arch behind the pulpit might have once opened to a choir gallery, though there is no record of this. The gallery, he believes was removed and the roof on the rear extension to the building lowered. An alternative explanation suggested by a builder in 2011 is that the external brick courses suggest that this was once a large entrance from the farm land that would have allowed a loaded hay cart access. We may never know. The text painted on the interior of the arch is in a form of English more common in the 19th century, though this proves nothing.

Behind the rear wall is the minister's vestry, a small kitchen, toilet that was clearly once a crude gent's toilet.

The building has been lovingly cared for over the years. Better electric lighting and heating has ensured that the chapel is bright and welcoming. A sound reinforcement and loop system for those with impaired hearing was installed round 2009. In 2012 various alterations have been made to improve access, especially for wheelchair users. This has included alterations to the threshold and gates, provision of a ramp to the side door on the front elevation, creation of a new doorway to one side of the pulpit, the removal of a pew and relocation of a modesty panel, and alterations to the toilet area.

In May 1972 Mr Timmins (Mr Robert Palmer's uncle) produced a history of non-conformity in Yelvertoft and the surrounding vicinity. This excellent publication is still available today. His thorough

research, together with such information that exists and Robert Palmer's memory, provides us with the following simple summary:

1662 A dissenting congregation met in homes within the village.

From 1689 onwards licenses were obtained for allowing dissenting congregations to meet in several village homes.

1738 a house in the centre of the village and occupied by a Thomas Bosworth was licensed for worship. In the mid-18th century there is reference to an old barn that was used as a meeting house in the centre of the village. It is possible that house and barn might have been together.

1747 this property, possibly on the site of the current chapel, was conveyed as trust property to the trustees of the Non-Conformist Church.

By 1791 the chapel was either built or premises significantly altered, much as we see it today.

1807 a Sunday School was started.

1832 a new frontage was added to the chapel.

1897 the interior was refurbished with seating for 160 people.

1903 square oak pews were replaced with pine seating.

1964 major internal redecoration carried out on wooden scaffolding seated in large oil drums filled with sand. Organ restoration takes place.

Circa 1980 wooden screen removed from back of the church to line up with the edge of the gallery, and rear pews removed to create a meeting room.

Mr Robert Palmer's family association with Yelvertoft Congregational Church goes back over 300 years through their relationship to the Bolton family. The members of the church are delighted that Rob is

keeping up the tradition. Alongside his ancestors there have been many others, most of whose names have long since been forgiven. Each has played his or her part in maintaining a Christian tradition that has had substantial impact not only on British society but throughout the world.

Over more recent years the members of Yelvertoft Congregational Church have been happy to make their chapel building available from time to time to serve the local community.

The relationship between that living church and the building appears to have been a healthy one. Church buildings exist to serve the life of the church and not the other way round. But usually, given appropriate and loving care, the buildings can adapt to usefully serve the living church that meets within its walls. Such has been the history here.

This written record was drafted by Mr Robert Palmer of Lilbourne and edited by the Rev'd Barry Osborne, October 2012.