

Harberton's Wesleyan Chapel

Anyone who knows Harberton knows of St Andrew's church. But the village's Conservation Area also boasts another, less prominent, church building: the former Wesleyan Methodist chapel. Older residents still remember attending services there before its closure in 1967, and it played a significant role in the life of the village over the previous century or so. Today, the chapel building, and its historic setting, remind us of Harberton's rich social and religious history, and how that history still shapes the distinctive character of the village and the parish.



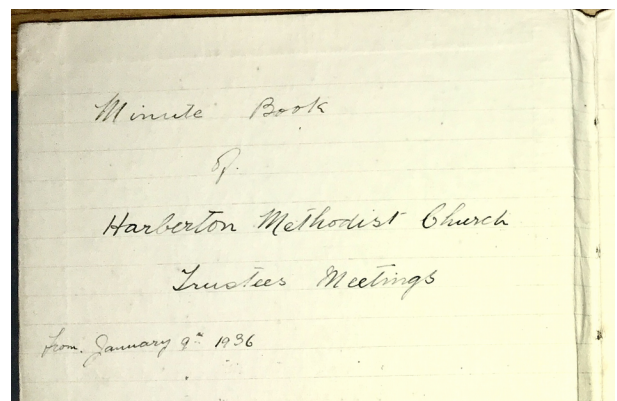
The chapel building in the 1970s, after its closure

The building - at the lower end of the village next to the bus stop and telephone box - has the classic form and design of a Wesleyan chapel, still immediately recognisable despite its conversion to a private dwelling in 1974. The original front entrance porch is clearly visible, as is, to its right, one of the four foundations stones, inscribed 'Harberton' (others read 'Ebenezer' and 'Lancashire' (where Wesleyanism began). The building is known today as Wesley House, and the adjoining cottages still bear their historic name, Wesley Place.

How sweet the sound

It's not hard to imagine the chapel in its heyday, say around 1890, when it was described by a contemporary Wesleyan survey as "model little chapel"¹. This part of the village, which included a row of lowly thatched dwellings known as 'Fleas Alley', was more working-class than the area around St Andrew's and the vicarage. Historically it was the site of a forge (near present day Old Forge Cottages) and carpenter's yard. On a Sunday morning, however, we might imagine that the bustle and noise of the working week has quietened - the lowing of cattle moving through the village streets from one of the nearby farms (like Preston Farm just opposite, now Grade II listed); perhaps some late night exuberance spilling out of the Globe Inn just round the corner. Instead, we can hear the organ, or perhaps harmonium (the chapel had both), and the congregation singing a melody that, perhaps, we might recognise: Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Wesleyan Christianity along with his brother John (1703-91), was a prolific writer of enduringly popular hymn melodies, including 'Amazing Grace'.

At the end of the service, on a sunny morning, worshippers linger for a while to chat before heading home through the village, or along the public footpath to Harbertonford, which never had a Wesleyan chapel of its own. Or perhaps some of them stay on for a meeting on practical business: the chapel was run by ordinary volunteers from the village, like Thomas Bennett, listed in local directories as a baker and shopkeeper in the village in the 1880s. The minutes of their meetings, preserved in the Devon



Chapel Trustee minute book from 1936

Record Office, read like those of parish working groups we know today - from serious deliberations over whether to install electric lighting and heating in the 1930s, through to pinning down who would get hold of crockery for a village social occasion.

Electrifying events

Much like the Harberton Church Community Fund (HCCF) today, the chapel brought together villagers of all religious persuasions for social and fundraising events, which gave it a significant role in creating and celebrating the village's community and identity. An article from a local newspaper in 1891 describes a fundraising bazaar reminiscent of HCCF's Open Gardens events today. Craft work, garden produce and household objects were on sale, along with "a number of nick-nacks arranged in a tempting manner to fascinate the eye and empty the pockets of visitors". Entertainment included singing and poetry recitation from villagers, and a fortune-telling doll. A particular "source of much merriment" was the novelty of a "medical galvanic battery", from which incautious villagers received electric shocks (presumably mild) when attempting to fish a piece of silver out of a bowl of water.



Chapel marked on 1906 Ordnance Survey map

The bazaar is a charming illustration of the role of the chapel in village life - but also points to its place in the social and political context of the times. The day was opened by Robert Harvey, who had recently bought the Dundridge estate. The reports of his speech, and of the responses to it, make it clear he was out to promote his bid to become the local MP, and to improve his reputation for active participation in the village. Various local dignitaries were also in attendance, including Mr Windeatt (as in the solicitors firm of that name in Totnes today). The sitting MP and the Vicar of St Andrew's sent grapes and flowers to show support, and there was much emphasis on how "a spirit of good feeling exists between the Methodists and the Church of England in the village". Harvey himself was an Anglican (his imposing family tomb is in St Andrew's churchyard), but he placed particular importance in his speech on how the Wesleyans "had played an important part in elevating the morals and improving the social positions of all classes in the community".

This was more than just hot air. Harvey went on to regenerate much of the lower end of the village, including building St Andrew's Cottages (1901) and replacing 'Fleas Alley' with St Clement's Terrace (1904). These buildings are literally arranged around the chapel, and architecturally pick up on some of its features. Taken together with the adjoining Wesley Place cottages, the farms, former workshop and pub buildings nearby, this leaves us today with a whole section of the Conservation Area that has a coherence and a particular historic focus which is quite different from the area around St Andrew's, and which speaks eloquently of the social, religious and local political history of the village.



The building speaks...

When we look at the chapel building today, how does it speak to us about the village and its past? The essence of the chapel building is its simplicity, its relatively small scale, and its symmetry. Methodism, from its appearance in the 18th century, was a grassroots Christian movement that gave people of working and 'middling' classes a 'Nonconformist'

alternative to established Church of England. Like other Nonconformist church movements, Methodism was associated with social as well as religious reform. The essential design features of the chapel express the Nonconformist values of modesty and restraint, and the avoidance of worldly display, and of excessive luxury or expense. They also reflect the fact that the congregation would have been mainly local tradespeople, servants and labourers, and in its scale and materials the chapel has much in common with surrounding houses and farm buildings, also built in simple, 'vernacular' style.

The design follows the classic 'preaching box' design used for Nonconformist chapels: a tall and plain, symmetrical single-storey meeting room, to accommodate rows of pews facing the communion rail and a raised pulpit for the preacher. Village chapels of this size often had a simple entrance into the main building, but Harberton's is distinguished by a neat gabled porch. The original doorway is still clearly visible: its round arch is a form ultimately derived from Classical Roman architecture, and was widely adopted by the Nonconformist movement to distinguish their chapels from the medieval Gothic buildings of the Church of England.

Yet despite the modesty of the overall design, the chapel has a distinctive decorative feature: its coloured ('polychrome') brickwork. Contrasting bands of red and yellow brickwork are used to highlight the door and window surrounds and the corners ('quoins') of the porch and main building. Polychrome decoration was often used for chapels and other public buildings during the mid-Victorian period. However, its use in this way is uncommon, and in Harberton it was similarly adopted for the main entrance front of St Andrew's Cottages: their window surrounds, in a direct reference to the neighbouring chapel, are picked out in the same contrasting bands of red and yellow brick. Town Farm, a few steps up the hill from the chapel, built by Robert Harvey around the same time as St Andrew's cottages, also displays yellow and red brickwork.

Then there's the location. In Victorian times, as now, the chapel was at the hub of the lower end of the village, at the convergence of several footpaths and roads. This positioning speaks of the confidence and prominence of the Wesleyan movement in the village.



Distinctive brickwork picked up on nearby buildings

Unspoken subtexts?

The chapel's design, its setting and its location in the village give it architectural significance, but also remind us of the particular ways that historical forces have shaped the village and the parish as we know them today.

Harberton was historically very much under the influence of local Anglican landowners like Robert Harvey. Harbertonford, Harberton's sister village in the same parish, was always more working-

class in character. So it's not surprising that it had a Nonconformist (Calvinist Baptist) congregation as early as the 1795, and a Nonconformist chapel by the 1820s, with two more added by 1900 (Congregational and Primitive Methodist). By contrast, it is striking that Harberton, as a relatively small village dominated by land owners, had a Nonconformist chapel at all - and indeed that the local gentry not only accepted it, but even encouraged it. As we have seen, Harvey's regeneration of the lower part of the village, whose residents are likely to have been sympathetic to Methodism, centred on the chapel, both geographically and in terms of building design, and also, perhaps, politically. It is possible that Wesleyanism, which was a mainstream, broad-based form of Methodism, may have been more acceptable to estate owners like Robert Harvey than the more working-class oriented Primitive Methodism down the road in Harbertonford.

A rising tide - and a crowdfunding success

The chapel building also embodies and illustrates the part that Harberton has played in broader social and religious changes over time. There was a Wesleyan Methodist congregation in Harberton from 1858, initially meeting in someone's cottage. This is listed, with capacity for 60 worshippers, in an 1873 survey that the Wesleyans conducted of all their congregations - which notes that the Methodists had been "quietly but perseveringly continuing their aggressive effort among village populations, erecting better chapels and making ample provision for the spiritual necessities of rural districts".

Baptisms solemnized in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel					
the County of <i>Devon</i> in the					
Baptized.	Child's Name, Sex or Daughter.	Parents Name.		Abode.	Child's Age when Baptized.
		Christian.	Surname.		
<i>19</i> <i>7 30</i> <i>81</i>	<i>E. Emily</i> <i>Louisa</i> <i>daughter of</i>	<i>Henry</i> <i>Samuel</i> <i>and</i> <i>E. Emily</i>	<i>Glanfield</i>	<i>Harberton</i>	<i>15 mo</i> <i>Sept</i> <i>30</i> <i>1886</i>
<i>9</i> <i>7 30</i> <i>82</i>	<i>W. Maria</i> <i>Henry</i> <i>for</i>	<i>Henry</i> <i>Samuel</i> <i>and</i> <i>E. Emily</i>	<i>Glanfield</i>	<i>Harberton</i>	<i>15 mo</i> <i>12 th</i> <i>1889</i>

Extract from the Methodist register, showing baptisms of Harberton residents

In Harberton, the expansion was clearly successful. According to a contemporary newspaper report, when the cottage had to be sold in 1878 a fundraising drive raised the £329 to needed build the "long desired"² chapel we know today, with a capacity for 110 worshippers³. The cost, a significant sum at the time, was raised entirely from the local community, reflecting Nonconformist values of self-sufficiency and self-determination that are also expressed in the design and location of the building. The congregation remained vibrant enough to contribute to the wider Methodist movement (e.g. its "Worn-out Ministers' Fund") into the middle of the 20th Century. The trustees were even considering building on a new Sunday school classroom ("with convenience") and Minister's vestry in the 1940s. As was normal Methodist practice, visiting preachers conducted many of the services, and so connected the village into wider networks of influence in the region.

Waste nothing of value

Eventually, however, changing patterns of religious expression led to a shrinking congregation which could no longer financially support the maintenance of the building. The last service took place on 25 June 1967, and the building sold for £750 the following year. (The conveyancing was handled by one of the chapel trustees, Mr E L Windeatt - presumably a descendant of the Mr Windeatt who attended the 1890 fundraising bazaar). In line with Nonconformist principles of avoiding waste, the font and hymn books went to the Methodist chapel in Harbertonford⁴, with the communion set, china crockery and three electric lightbulbs going to the one in Totnes.

The building was converted in 1974 into a private residence. This was just before the Conservation Area was designated, so unfortunately some of the original architectural features of the building

were obscured or lost in the conversion. But enough remain, and with its distinctive overall form and shape, the building is immediately recognisable as a Victorian Methodist chapel. It stands as a significant testament to this estate village's close and very particular relationship with Nonconformism in the wider parish, which was bound up with issues of religious expression, social class and local political influence which shaped how the village and parish are today.

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Notes

1. Memoranda book in Devon Record Office (see sources below).
2. *Western Morning News*, Friday 30 August 1878 (see sources below).
3. The chapel's architect was Samuel Johns of Saltash, Cornwall. He was also the architect of the Grade 2 listed St Andrew's Church at Cawsand, built in the same year and with similar materials. Like Harberton's chapel, St Andrew's also has stone walls and brick surrounds to its windows, although there the design, as befitting an Anglican church, has pointed Gothic-style doors and windows in chamfered brick.
4. ie to the former Primitive Methodist chapel - the Primitive Methodists had joined with Wesleyan and other Methodists in the Methodist Union of 1932.

Sources

Harberton & Harbertonford History Society, Village walkabout
<https://www.harbertonandharbertonfordhistorysociety.org> (accessed 16/1/2023)

Kelly's directories of 1878, 1889, 1893, 1914 (1889 and subsequent editions list the chapel)

Ordnance Survey maps of 1887 and 1906 (include Wesley Place and the chapel itself, respectively)

Returns of Accommodation provided in Wesleyan Methodist Chapels, published 1875 (lists the chapel), https://www.mywesleyanmethodists.org.uk/content/research-resources/wesleyan_chapels (accessed 16/1/2023)

Totnes Weekly Times, Saturday 29 August 1891: 'Wesleyan Bazaar at Harberton'

Western Morning News, Friday 30 August 1878: 'Opening of a Wesleyan Chapel at Harberton'

Devon and Dartmoor Historic Environment Records (HERs)

MDV47796 for Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and Wesley Place in Harberton

MDV45774 for Historic Environment Record for Baptist (Zion Hill) chapel in Harberton[ford]

MDV45776 for Historic Environment Record for Primitive Methodist chapel in Harberton[ford]

Documents in Devon Record Office

Harberton Methodist Chapel - Trustee Minutes 1964-68, record 2275D/0/90

Harberton Methodist Chapel - Trustees meetings minute book 1936-60, record 7271D

Harbertonford Methodist Chapel - Trustees meetings minute book 1936-69, record 7271D

Memoranda book: notes on chapels and state of the cause, 1890, record 2275D/0/57

Circuit schedule book, Buckfastleigh circuit 1889-1900, record 2275D/0/22

Register of baptisms, Buckfastleigh circuit and section 1857-1938, record 2275D/0/47

Registers of Chapel Deeds, record 2275D/0/49-51