

# NEWSLETTER 137

AUGUST 1997

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## Notes & news

L & DHS chairman Chris Pond was elected Chairman of the Loughton Town Council in May. He said one principal aim of his year of office would be to raise the profile of the town, and increase its self esteem, much lacking since the abolition of the Loughton Urban District Council in 1933.

The 'missing arms' of the two old signposts – at the foot of Traps Hill and the bottom of Forest Road – have apparently been taken into storage and will be replaced when the Town Centre Enhancement Scheme takes place.

Loughton Hall's future is still uncertain, as it is on the market. We have made representations to keep it intact, and as much as possible in community use.

Former Chigwell UDC Surveyor, Robert Edwards, has kindly given a number of documents and photographs to the Museum, the Library, and to the chairman. Extracts from these may be published in the *Newsletter* from time to time.

One of the first large factories to be erected on the Langston Road Industrial Estate (Hilger & Watts, 1952) was demolished in May and June to make way for a new home for local company PFE.

By way of contrast to the subject of John Redfern's article on page 3, a new Rectory Lane Health Centre (replacing the Loughton Hall Clinic) was officially opened in July. The architecture appears to owe little to Essex tradition (what happened to the County Council guidelines?)

## A brief look back to previous meetings

In February, Tricia Moxey talked about the people who set in motion the chain of events which led to the Epping Forest Act of 1878; a different perspective on a familiar story that has many facets.

We stayed with the City of London in March, when David McCarthy provided an illustrated guide to the Corporation's Cemetery and Crematorium at Aldersbrook. This gave rise to numerous questions from the audience, which came as no surprise to the speaker – and perhaps explains the success of recent Open Days.

London itself featured as the subject in April, when Susan Foreman's survey of the Whitehall area was presented by her husband due to her indisposition.

The May Annual General Meeting was followed by a talk on the history of the church in which our meetings are held, given by administrator Brian Walker with assistance from the Chairman. In the ten years of the present building's existence, it has become a centre for many people who regard it very much as 'their' church.

*In view of the interest expressed in the 'history' of Methodism in Loughton at our recent AGM we are reprinting an article by John Howes, our Secretary, first published in the December 1991 Newsletter of The Chapels Society. The essay sets the history of nonconformity in this area into the wider context of the County and underlines the need to record (and try to preserve) our nonconformist buildings which are as much part of our 'heritage' as parish churches.*

## Essex chapels: the legacy of the dissenting forefathers of 'Essex man'

Writing to Bishop Bonner in 1557 one of his chaplains stated 'would to God the honourable Council saw the face of Essex as we do. We have such obstinate heretics, anabaptists and unruly persons as never were heard of'; and, in 1863, when writing the history of dissent in Essex T W Davids, a Congregational pastor, could fairly state that 'the prominence of Essex in the annals of Evangelical Non-Conformity is second to that of no other County in the kingdom'.<sup>1</sup> Later works such as Keith Wrighton and David Levine's study of the village of Terling<sup>2</sup> and William Hunt's book on the Puritan movement in Essex<sup>3</sup> confirm that from 'John Ball' onwards 'Essex man', that target of the modern media, certainly did not 'conform' in religious matters whatever else his standards!

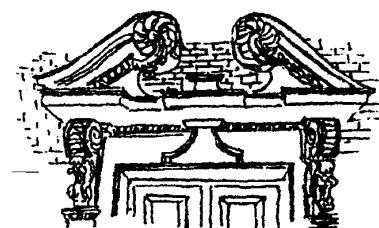
The legacy of this strong dissenting attitude is twofold: first, the excellent collections of records of dissent in the Essex Record Office and the several hundred meeting-houses and chapels still remaining in the county, albeit many in a sorry state. From the county records it is obvious that the county was influenced in religious matters by three main sources of dissent: (1) contact with the Protestant ideals being expressed in the Low Countries reaching the county via the very active port of Harwich; (2) views being expressed in the University of Cambridge just beyond the northern boundary of Essex; (3) similar opinions freely stated in the City of London which adjoined the county in the south. With such pressures it is hardly unexpected that by 1643 the redoubtable John Hampden could also state that 'Essex is the most Protestant county in England'.

The predominant nonconformist group in Essex were the Congregationalists. Their chapels were usually plain but distinguished. Examples remain all over the county, including Great Bardfield, Ongar, Thaxted and Stebbing.

The actual 'buildings of dissent' still standing in the county are in truth not equal in quality to the records of dissent in the County Record Office, but if what is now 'London in Essex' is included in the historic county of Essex there remains plenty to interest members of the Chapels Society. Certainly there are no buildings to equal the Old Meeting House or Octagon Chapel in Norwich, and far too many, especially in the London suburbs (once part of Essex), that now serve as carpet showrooms, small factories and car repair workshops. There are, however, several charming Friends' meeting-houses, many well-designed (and some ugly!), Methodist chapels, and just one chapel still exhibiting the name of the 'Peculiar People', a sect which originated in the county.

The Friends' meeting-houses include a now rather sad red brick building in the village of Stebbing, with a date of 1674, which Pevsner concluded must have been taken from a previous building. In far better condition is the simple meeting-house in Great Bardfield, dated 1804, complete with a humble, secluded burial-ground. Maldon also has a delightful meeting-house of red brick of five by three bays and a hipped roof of about 1800, again set in a small burial-ground full of flowering shrubs and mature trees. A far larger and grander meeting-house still exists in Chelmsford, built in 1826 in white brick, it boasts a timber roof spanning some forty-two feet and is now part of a technical college.

Chapels and 'churches' of other denominations, as in other counties, are sited in almost every village and town but few can equal for sheer elegance the Baptist chapel dated 1756 in Potter Street, Harlow: a simple, well-proportioned red brick building with



a quite exceptional doorway with scrolls and foliage as decoration. The interior has been enlarged and 'modernised' but some of the original interior fittings have been saved and are now in the Harlow Museum.

Possibly the only outstanding chapel interior to be seen is the Congregational chapel in Maldon, built in 1801 and refronted in 1860. Inside, an elegant U-shaped gallery is supported on delicate cast-iron columns and the whole interior is bathed in light from the many clear glass windows. Other fine interiors may still exist in the county, but, as usual, few chapels are open for inspection to confirm this.

One unusual chapel must be mentioned, 'The Lighthouse' in Walthamstow. It was built in 1893 for the 'United Methodist Free Churches' with financial help from a wealthy shipowner; the light in its tower still functions as it did in Victorian times, flashing (rather weakly) over the now largely indifferent suburban residents. The once splendid 'Music Hall' style interior, complete with balcony and a proscenium arch behind the pulpit has been destroyed, as I have been informed, by the insertion of a mezzanine floor.

One amazing Essex chapel now gone was the twelve-sided Wesleyan building in Maidenburgh Street, Colchester; surely unique. The nonconformists seem to have less regard for actual buildings than the Church of England – our own Union church was replaced in 1973 and our Wesleyan church in 1986, the latter of course by a very fine building.

A fine survival is the little Primitive Methodist chapel at Clavering, still well used today.

Finally, no essay on dissent in Essex, however superficial, could ignore the 'Peculiar People', an Essex sect founded by James Banyard in 1852 and by 1920 able to muster over 1,300 to its annual harvest supper in Chelmsford. Although providing lurid 'copy' for the popular press of the period the sect was in practice quiet and devout, only their opposition to medical treatment being worthy of comment. Legal action resulting from the deaths due to this objection to formal medical treatment eventually led to the decline of the sect which in 1956 became 'The Union of Evangelical Churches'. The author can only trace one chapel still proudly proclaiming that it was of the 'Peculiar People', and that is in the remote marshland village of Tillingham.<sup>4</sup>

Much needs to be done to record the meeting-houses and chapels of this 'most Protestant' of English counties and it is hoped that a survey, such as was carried out in Suffolk and Norfolk, will soon be arranged with the help of relevant local societies<sup>5</sup> and, hopefully, with guidance from the Chapels Society.

JOHN HOWES

## Notes

1. Davids, T W, *Annals of Evangelical Non-Conformity in the County of Essex* (1863).
2. Wrighton, K, and Levine, D, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village, 1525–1700* (London: Academic Press, 1979).
3. Hunt, W, *The Puritan Movement – The Coming of Revolution in an English County* (Harvard, 1983).
4. Sorrell, M, *The Peculiar People* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979).
5. Walthamstow Historical Society has published one of the few surveys of chapels in the county: Batsford, M E, *Nonconformity in Walthamstow* (1979).

## First Women's Health Centre, 1912

The article in the April 1997 issue of the *Newsletter* by my good friend Alan Smith, concerning Sylvia Pankhurst, reminded me of another local, but lesser known, campaigner for 'Votes for Women' before the 1914–18 War. But it is not about Miss Thoumaian's suffragette activities that I wish to comment but, instead, concerning her pioneering work in the field of female health, some 20 years before the advent of the 'Women's League of Health and Beauty'.

The daughter of the Reverend G Thoumaian, a refugee Armenian priest, whose house was described in 1906 as a 'Home for Destitute Armenian Boys', she lived with her family at 'Oakhurst', Hainault Road, Chigwell (which occupied the plots nos 104–108 when numbered, but is now the site of a small bungalow development called Hainault

Grove). This dwelling was still known locally as 'the Armenian house' as late as the 1950s, just before its clearance for redevelopment.

Miss Thoumaian seems to have been a rather 'modern' young lady in the late and post-Edwardian period leading up to the start of the Great War, for she espoused many feminist causes – votes, fashion, education and the health centre movement. Indeed, her health 'camp' for upper class ladies at her family home in Chigwell was claimed to be the world's first Health Centre for Women, where ladies of means were encouraged to come from London to enjoy 'the fresh air of Chigwell and the delights of the countryside'. The advertising brochure of 1912 (the year of the centenary of her hero Charles Dickens) states that 'according to statistics it has been found that rainfall is lower in Essex, and the amount of sunshine higher, than elsewhere: constantly when going to town we leave radiant sunshine in Chigwell and find a heavy fog or drenching rain in London'. Essex 'displays remarkable healthiness with the death rate less than for the whole of England and Wales: Essex is remarkable for its long life: people there again and again reach greater ages than almost anywhere else; people of 90 years of age are common, especially in Chigwell'.

The reasons given for starting 'our movement for Health Centres by one for Women of the Upper classes' are:

1. Being the educated portion of society, they would more thoroughly and quickly grasp the idea.
2. It will be more possible for them, once the good habits have been formed, to continue to carry them out at home.
3. Their influence as we see in fashions, in dress, in hats (in luxury, alas!) in everything, will be greater than that of the so called 'lower classes'.
4. They alone will have the means to continue the movement, and
5. They will be imitated so that, by reaching them, you will reach the whole community and the poor will see how one should live whilst in health still.

And so the wealthy ladies of the city were bidden to

'Come away to Chigwell,  
Speed from London town;  
Bonny Spring hath here unfurled  
Her fair banners to the World.'

JOHN REDFERN

## Twittens and widdens

Stephen Pewsey's interesting article in *Newsletter 136* prompted me to ask half a dozen or so elderly folk, with some 450 years of collective Loughton memory between them, if they had heard of widdens or twittens. Without exception they had not! The lady (now deceased) who called the Staples Road alleyway 'the Widden' was born in the district, but had married a man from Hampshire. Perhaps the phrase had come from him? By the way, it was not the Forest Road–Staples Road path she meant, but the one leading down the slope to The Drive.

CHRIS POND

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