

Dedham Vale Society

The Primitive Methodist Chapel at Dedham Heath

A large number of small, usually classically-styled chapels were built throughout much of England and Wales during the nineteenth century and above the door a stone plaque inscribed with the words, "Primitive Methodist Chapel". The word "primitive" has generally been obliterated in more recent times, but what an intriguing title!



The word 'Primitive' has been painted out

DEDHAM
ESSEX.

COTTAGES
Garden Ground.

FENN, COOK, & FENN

ON FRIDAY, JUNE the 10th, 1863,
AT THE MARLBRO' HEAD INN, DEDHAM,
AT FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON,
BY DIRECTION OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE LATE MR. WILLIAM DEGATE
TWO LATH AND PLASTER BUILT AND TILED COTTAGES,
With capital Garden Ground to the same, well stocked with Fruit-trees, and situate at the East end of No. 1 Road in the Parish of Dedham, and in the several occupations of James Deane, Manufacturer, and James Gowers, at Bents amounting to £10.0.0 per annum, Land-tax and Out-goings.
They are well supplied with Water, and are customary Copyhold of the manor of Overhall and Nettlehall, and subject to a Fine of 5s. in the pound on their said sales.

LAND-TAX, &c. QUIT-RENT,

Further Particulars and Conditions of Sale may be had of HENRY DANIELLS, Esq., Solicitor, Nayland; and of Messrs. FENN, COOK, & FENN, at their Offices, High Hall and St. Head Street, Colchester.

FENTON, PRINTER, HIGH STREET, COLCHESTER

Auction Notice 1863



The “vandal” who inscribed this in 1880 ran out of brick and had to add the remainder of his name around the corner!

Wesleyan Methodism was well established in Colchester by 1800 although many of its members were poor, having been connected with the cloth industry which, by then, was in terminal decline.

The Primitive Methodist movement was founded in Staffordshire shortly after 1800 by two men who had been expelled from Wesleyan societies. It flourished from 1811 onwards as an evangelical movement which gave the layman more power, attracting the rural working-class in particular. Although well established locally, it wasn't until 1859 that Primitive Methodism began to expand rapidly throughout the Colchester area, ten chapels being established by 1866.

Dedham had a large and prosperous Church of England at this time, of course, but the Congregational Chapel, erected in 1739 at Frog Meadow, eventually replaced by a Victorian successor, was also well-attended, there being a total of 625 souls counted on Religious Census Sunday 1851. Most Wesleyan churches were similarly well-positioned on prime sites in towns and villages but the Primitive Chapels were nearly always on the outskirts, perhaps rarely welcomed, and drawing support from only the poorest in the community. Thus Dedham Heath and not Dedham itself became the site chosen for the new chapel in 1863.

Before the establishment of chapels, the Primitives often worshipped at open-air meetings known as “Camps”. Membership returns for the Society prior to the opening of the chapel are recorded as 15, 13 and 19 for the years 1860, 1861 and 1862 respectively, although attendance would have been about four times this number. Minutes record that by December 1862, “the best possible arrangements be made at Dedham towards purchasing a piece of ground for a Chapel”.

On June 19th 1863 the land upon which three cottages already stood was purchased for £132.10s.0d and the chapel built within the year on an eight-rod plot adjacent to the dwellings. The three nominated Trustees were prime-movers in the spread of Primitive Methodism in the Colchester area and were not specifically connected with Dedham Heath.

The Trustees, all of whom lived in Colchester, were Joshua Elsdon, a builder who contracted to buy the land, John Marshall, a bricklayer, and John Bloomfield, a gardener and Circuit Steward, responsible for a number of chapels in the area. Within only ten years, however Elsdon and Marshall, “had left and severed their connection with the Chapel and retired from the Trust”. Elsdon was probably insolvent by 1870 and had left Colchester under a cloud. John Marshall was likewise expelled.

The cost of building the chapel was approximately £200, the funds raised by mortgage which in part was paid-off by rent from the three cottages, (two buildings), this being £13 in the first year but a variable, usually smaller, amount subsequently, due, no doubt, to the variations in the fortunes of agriculture.

Thus the chapel at Dedham Heath was established although care seems to have been taken never to refer to it as being at Dedham!



Simple 19th century Gothic style in polychromatic brickwork. Red brick with white brick dressing on window surrounds, quoins, and decorative diamond-shaped patterns over windows and door. The top of the windows and the door are pointed. Main front entrance door is grained and varnished. It has plain sash-windows with marginal glazing, translucent glass with coloured corner-sections. Ironwork along the front fence is a mixture of cast and wrought, but only the gate now remains. Decorative barge boards. Interior is much as it was when the chapel was first built. However, the raised dais was removed some years ago so that the pulpit is now at floor-level.

By 1963, a century after its establishment, it had become clear that a number of renovations and additions would be required and these were carried out at various times over the subsequent twenty five years but in 1992 major work was required to underpin the foundations to counteract subsidence. This remedial work stabilised the main building, but faults have begun to appear more recently in the vestry wall.

General attendance seems to have been good throughout most of the Chapel's existence, the leaflet published for its 125th anniversary reporting that the building would have been almost full at services held in the late 1930s. This number had reduced to an average of 20 by 1988 but the Women's Fellowship with its monthly meetings could still muster between fifteen and twenty members.

Congregations are now very small and it seems that closure is a distinct possibility in the near future. Yet more work is required to stabilise the vestry and access for the disabled will need to be provided if the Chapel is to continue its mission.

The United Reform Church at Frog Meadow closed in the late 1970s and it would seem that the last bastion of non-conformity in Dedham will soon follow suit.

Thanks are due to the following for helping compile this short history: Martin Broom, Emily Houghton, Kevin Houghton, Bernard and Joan Houghton.

Paul Gallifant