

patterns of worship, seriousness of preaching, lay government and dedication to community service and missionary outreach both in Highgate and further afield. Ecumenism and economy alike brought the two congregations together in the 1960s under the ministries of Jeffrey Plowman (Congregational 1959–1968) and George Corfield (Presbyterian 1960–1977). Union was achieved in 1967. Until 1982, worship was mainly based in the Cromwell Avenue church. This building was then converted to an apartment block within its gothic shell and with the sale proceeds and other funding the major refurbishment of Pond Square Chapel was undertaken. Pond Square Chapel re-opened in 1984 for worship, but with the deliberate intention of enabling the building to be used by the community as well as the congregation. Thus it is a venue for the arts, musical performances, social service, education – indeed any purpose consistent with the character of the building and the beliefs of the people who made it and raised it.

With the restoration of Pond Square Chapel a fourth phase of Dissent in Highgate can fairly be said to have begun. It is not for those involved to comment on the present or foretell the future. They have created "a building for others" in the hope and with the prayer that it will be used creatively and to the glory of God.



A fuller history is available, "Highgate Dissenters, their History since 1660", by John Thompson, price £9.

POND SQUARE CHAPEL



William Spencer

Three Centuries of Religious Dissent in Highgate Village

Pond Square Chapel, built in 1859, is a mere punctuation mark in the history of religious Dissent in Highgate. There was almost certainly a strong Puritan connection in the village before close associates of Oliver Cromwell took up residence here under the Commonwealth; among them, Sir John Ireton, Lord Mayor of London in 1659 and brother of Cromwell's son-in-law, General Ireton, Sir James Harrington, one of the judges at the trial of King Charles I, and Sir Richard Sprignell, whose son married the daughter of another regicide, Sir Michael Livesey. Andrew Marvell, poet and radical Member of Parliament, took a cottage in the village after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

However, the actual Christian congregation, or series of congregations, which has ever since continued to worship in the Presbyterian or Congregational tradition, and now constitutes the United Reformed Church, took its form not under the Commonwealth but under the Restoration, through measures of religious and political repression. The first, in 1662, was the Act of Uniformity, which ejected from the Church of England all clergymen who could not conscientiously accept an imposed Prayer Book or Bishops. The second measure was the Five Mile Act of 1665 which barred all such ejected ministers from coming within five miles of any town or city, or where they had been a parson, vicar or lecturer. However, because Highgate is just over five miles from Charing Cross, ejected ministers could lawfully live here and three did, one (William Rathbone) as early as 1662. It is assumed that he used one of his outhouses as a chapel, but the first actual record of a congregation is in 1672 when a second ejected minister, John Storer, was granted an indulgence to preach in his cottage, on the site of what is now Church House. After the Act of Toleration, 1689, had granted Nonconformists limited freedom of worship, the congregation's first meeting-house was built. It survives, though rebuilt in 1809, and is now the Library of Highgate School. By the headmaster's kindness it was also the temporary home (1982–84) of the present congregation while Pond Square Chapel was being refurbished.

The three centuries that elapsed between the ministries of Rathbone and Storer and the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972 (preceded by our own local union five years previously) can be divided into three distinct phases.

The first, heroic but latterly heterodox, phase ended when the meeting-house closed in 1798. Highgate through this period presents the history of religious Dissent in microcosm. Though barred from the universities and from public office, Nonconformists in Highgate and elsewhere still represented a spiritual and political interest which could not in the long run be ignored, hard though it may be to discern the common ground between Isaac Watts, the hymn-writer – a frequent visitor to Highgate – and Israel Wilkes, a gin distiller and father of the radical pamphleteer, John, who used to attend the meeting-house in his coach-and-six. Round about this time, there was an unusual mark of local acceptance when the School Chapel, used by the Anglicans who had no other church in the village, was closed for several months for extensive repair. The local gentry cheerfully transferred their religious observance to the Dissenting meeting-house.

However socially respectable the meeting-house had become, theologically its worship began to take on a liberal, even unitarian tinge, symbolised by the ministry of David Williams (1770-1773), the friend of Voltaire and of Benjamin Franklin, who nicknamed him "the infidel". However, Williams was a great and generous man, who deserves to be remembered in this of all districts as the founder of the Royal Literary Fund "for the assistance of deserving authors".

The result of the theological direction taken by Williams and his successors, including the eccentric Rochemont Barbauld and the noted biographer, Joseph Towers, was a second phase, the Secession Chapel. This was formed in 1778, by an alliance between Trinitarian seceders from the old meeting-house (which struggled on for another twenty years) and a group of evangelical followers of the Countess of Huntingdon. The new congregation occupied successive buildings on the other side of Southwood Lane from the old meeting-house, the second of which opened in 1822 and took the name Congregational. There is an evocative description of a service in this chapel conducted by the poet and hymn-writer, Thomas Toke Lynch who became minister in 1847.

"Along a quiet avenue and beneath overhanging boughs we pass on a Sabbath evening to the dimly-lighted chapel and rest awhile. The congregation consists of about six men and a dozen grown-up women. The young minister, thin and pale, looks on the audience with an air of depression. The psalmody is sweet and solemn; the face of the preacher is thoughtful; his sentences short and epigrammatic; the thinking more remarkable for its quaintness than its power. He has a rich and delicate fancy, not an imagination of a far and fiery sweep. His theology is of like lineage. It sets forth winningly and tenderly one side of the Gospel, its gentle and pitying side. Of the bliss everlasting, he says not much, of the woe everlasting he says nothing; this is middle earth and what I may call the minor and sweet humanities of Christianity suffice him."

"This middle earth" and its people were also the chief preoccupation of the greatest of Highgate's nineteenth century ministers, Josiah Viney (1856-1883). Viney found 46 members when he arrived and when he left there were 281. He foresaw the growth of Highgate's population: "One of the healthiest spots in the kingdom, encircled by a radiant country, contiguous to the metropolis, yet thoroughly rural, it appears destined to become at no distant day one of the most favoured retreats of London's busy citizens". And his energy raised the money to build Pond Square Chapel to the light airy, commodious design of Thomas Roger Smith, which avoided the gothic excesses of later Victorian chapel-building.

From the start, social improvement and popular education were the focus of Viney's ministry. In 1860 he built a Free Library and Reading Room in North Road, in 1861 what later became the Highgate Working Men's Club, in 1863 Verandah Place on North Hill, "the first building in Highgate which provided hygienic dwelling places for the poor"; and throughout the century he ran numerous appeals for causes outside the congregation's local interest, from missionary work and the public education of children, to the Lancashire cotton famine and the Armenian massacres.

The third phase of Dissenting churchmanship in Highgate is conveniently dated from 1877 with the return to the district of Presbyterianism, called "English" but chiefly owed to the initiative of expatriate Scots. In that year they opened a new church in Cromwell Avenue, under the ministry of Alexander Ramsay (1889-1922). Both churches remained strong and active between the wars. The Presbyterians ran a programme of social outreach in their mission hall in Holloway and supported missionaries in the Far East. The Congregationalists sent money and food to the unemployed in South Wales and through the Highgate Camp helped run activities for boys from poor homes. Their congregations were dispersed in the Second World War through evacuation and war service, the Presbyterian spire was downed and the Congregational church closed through bomb damage. After the war, both churches experienced declining membership and influence, hard though they fought to understand and christianise the social and intellectual changes that were taking place around them.

The Congregational and Presbyterian traditions remained readily distinguishable to students of ecclesiastical organisation and social nuance. But there was much that they shared, in the

