

# The History of Epping United Reformed Church

1625-2025



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Epping  
United  
Reformed  
Church

**1625-2025**

## **Beginnings**

The church's traditional beginnings start in 1625, making Epping United Reformed Church (formerly Congregational Church) one of the oldest sites of continual worship in the denomination and possibly one of the oldest non-conformist churches in the country. A few congregational churches are older than Epping including at nearby Waltham Cross (Cross Street) which began in 1600, perhaps suggesting that this was an area of non-conformists, although that church has since closed. Furthermore, Essex had up to this point already had been a notable area where protestant non-conformity occurred. It has often been suggested that the minister of the Epping parish, Rev Jeremiah Dyke began services at Lindsey Street for the benefit of those who were unable to reach the parish church at Epping Upland, two miles away from the town of Epping. There is no documentary evidence to substantiate 1625 as the date when Dyke established services, but there is no reason to believe why it may not have been even earlier given Dyke started his ministry in Epping in 1609. Dyke may also have started services in Lindsey Street due to his failure to secure power in the small chapel on the site of today's St Johns Church. It had been refurbished in 1622 and Dyke had preached the opening sermon there but the chapel was under the control of the priest of Waltham Abbey who only preached there and did not serve the people of Epping like Dyke did. It is not recorded whether Dyke ever preached there again or held any office there. Dyke was also known as a radical and was suspended in 1634, so it may also have been burning zeal to not conform. It has further been suggested that the Countess of Winchelsea gifted Dyke the land or buildings so that he could *"build a little chapel where he could in the week days and sometimes of Sunday evenings meet his people who were not able to go to his church, and in this way it happened that this place was founded."* This suggests that Lindsey Street was known of and was conforming. It is not known as to whether the early worshippers were doing so in secret or the Lindsey Street meeting were conforming, but given Dyke was suspended it is likely some nonconformity was occurring. Dyke died in 1639 and was buried in the usual way in consecrated ground perhaps suggesting that either the Lindsey Street meeting was a known conformist one or had remained secret and he had been suspended for a different reason.

## **Buildings**

### **Early Buildings 1625-1774**

While there has been worship on the site since 1625, there has been numerous buildings used. It is not known exactly what type of building was first used. Possibilities include a malting house, a barn, a meeting house, or a cottage. This area is the oldest part of Epping, there was a brewery and maltings in Lindsey Street at this time (and Maltings Lane is opposite) and the cottages of 1-7 Lindsey Street were also built in 1625 as well as Beulah Lodge opposite which was also built in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Whether meetings in whichever type of building used were in secret or were known about is not known. The

site was secured by members in either 1633 or 1653 and was immediately built upon/rebuilt. It has also been suggested that the site had been presented to Jeremiah Dyke by the Countess of Winchelsea. The first title deed is dated 1653, however the reigning monarchs suggest this may have been written incorrectly instead of 1693, nonetheless, it is stated that there is mention of a current meeting house with no date as to when it had been built, but apparently displacing the old barn or malting house. In 1672, Rev Nathanael Ball takes out a preaching licence for the site and further deeds are dated 1692, 1712 & 1753. In the 1692 deeds, William Stace, yeoman, conveyed to William Nutton, barber surgeon, a piece of freehold land 'now fenced out to be built upon' in Lindsey Street. In 1693 Stace further conveyed to Nutton a small piece of copyhold land adjoining 'the meeting house'. In the same year a Presbyterian meeting at the house of William Nutton was registered by its minister, Henry Dent. Dent, who had taken out a similar licence in 1691 without naming the meeting place. It is not known what the 1692 building or that before it exactly was or what they looked like.

### **Building of 1774**

In 1774 a new building was constructed with the Rev. Sam Saunders giving an interesting account of its construction:

*“The old meeting house in at Epping in the county of Essex- very much decay’d- it was thought proper to take it down and to erect a new one. A committee was appointed viz John Green, Francis Milton, John Pressland, John Archer Rich, Lee W Archer, Michael Allen and Edmund Prentise the last mentioned seldom or ever acted being at such a distance from Epping. According to their agreement, the old meeting house was begun to be pulled down on Monday the fourteenth of March 1774. The Rev Sam Saunders the minister at Epping being appointed sole manager and director in ordering the building and overseeing the workmen with the first brick being laid by Rev. Sam Saunders on twenty fourth day of March in the year of our lord 1774. And what is scarce credible to relate tho at such time of year when unsettled weather is to be expected, yet from laying the first brick to finishing the superstructure and striking the scaffolding the workmen were not hindered half an hour. So that the whole building was completed in one month and one day...”*

The new chapel was registered with the Bishop of London in late 1775 as was according to the practice of the day. The lateness of the application for registration perhaps suggests it was but an afterthought by the church. The written application survived and is as follows:

*A copy of the letter sent for registry of the “Meeting House in Epping.”*

*The note sent or Directed to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London was in the following words. This is to certify you Lordship that a new building intended for the divine worship by Protestant Dissenters of the presbyterian denomination is erected in Lindsey Street Epping in the county of Essex and to request that the said building may be registered*

*agreeable to the act of toleration. Signed by Sam Saunders, Minister. Jn Presland, Rob Graves; Deacons*

A letter was received from the Bishop on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1775 accepting the application.

The new building included an elaborately carved doorway and mouldings outside and a heavy pulpit with a massive carving and square pews for 'family worship', three galleries were also added, one for the use of young ladies, one for the poor and one for singers and musicians. In 1780, the new chapel was put into a trust which was found to have been mortgaged for £200 apparently to the Rev. Samuel Saunders who had recently died, with a new trust-deed found in 1790.

In 1845, an adjoining school room was built on the site of a cottage and stable and was used for thirty years by the British School. The corner stone had been laid in March 1845 by Samuel Gurney Esq with the room being opened by Mr Ince MP and it is now laid in the church garden.

A new organ was added in 1870.

In 1887 the whole building underwent complete restoration and considerable extension which included a large gothic front. During the 1960s, the left wing of the church was taken down and replaced by new buildings containing Sunday school rooms, a kitchen, and toilets. At the same time the gravestones outside the front were removed with some being used for a path.

### **1997 Rebuild**

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century the 1774 church building was in a poor state requiring £200,000 (approx. £400,000 in 2024 money) of repairs. This was considered to be far too much for a building only used once a week and for a congregation of 30 people and without the rebuild the church would probably have to had closed. The plan was to keep and refurbish the 1845 built hall and to build new rooms including a hall, funded by selling an adjacent piece of land which was not needed. There was some local opposition to the plan including an attempt to get the building listed. However, when it was inspected by English Heritage it was deemed as 'not worth saving' and that several alterations had made it of 'not listable quality.' The inspectors also said: *"the 1774 remains are too fragmentary, the 1887 additions are not of special architectural merit and further extensions in the 1960s are insensitive."* Eventually permission was granted and the last service in the church took place in September 1996. During the time of the rebuild the church worshiped in St John's Church. The rebuild was completed in June 1997 and opened with a special service led by the Eastern Synod moderator Rev Elizabeth Caswell. Despite local opposition before the rebuild, afterwards it was greeted positively by the local community and won a certificate of commendation from Epping Forest District Council for its design.



*The 1774 church pictured after the building of the school room in 1845 but before the 1887 renovations -the earliest picture of the church.*



*The 1774 church following renovation in 1887.*



*The church during the 1960's renovations.*



*The interior of the 1774 church on the final service in 1996 before demolition.*

## **Manses**

Early ministers of the church most likely lived in their owned houses as some of them took out preaching licences on their own houses. An adjoining chapel house housing ministers was demolished in 1842 to make way for the school room but it is not known when this was built or what size it was. In 1904 a proposal is made to the church meeting to purchase adjoining land to build a new manse- this would become what is now Lindsay house. It is not known where ministers resided until then. Although, the Revd Leslie Parkin lived in Kendal Avenue and the Revd John Locke minister between 1914-1930 resided at his own house 'Oakridge' located near to Bell Common. This would be the manse for most ministers until the 1960s when the house was sold to the local council and became a care home and the church bought a smaller manse in Thornwood Road. However, when the church began to share ministers with the Methodist Church in the 1970s the Methodist manse in Crows Road was used until the closure of the Methodist church in 2022. From this point onwards ministers will reside at manses in other locations in the pastorate. The church owned the Thornwood Road manse until it was sold in the mid 1990s during which time former minister Rev Bryn Rees and wife Morfydd lived in it.

## **Ministers and Pastors**

Due to the nature of the beginnings of the church, the first ministers were also the parish Church of England priest for Epping (based at All Saints Epping Upland). Nathanael Ball in 1672 is the first minister *of just this church*.

- **Rev Jeremiah Dyke (1609)1625-1639**

Dyke was born in 1584 in Coggeshall and was educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. His father, William Dyke also a minister had been dispossessed of his post at Hempstead near Saffron Walden for non-conformity. He became vicar of Epping (the parish church at Epping Upland) in 1609 succeeding his father and which he probably received from the Countess of Winchelsea, in whose gift it happened to be just at that time (The Countess of Winchelsea was born at Copped Hall and built a new manor house in 1630 opposite Bell Common, although since rebuilt). In 1622 the small chapel originally built in 1550 on the present site of St John's church was enlarged and Dyke preached the opening sermon there (which he published in 1623) but it is not known if he ever preached there again as he apparently did not have any control or hold office there. It is perhaps this frustration which led him to start the Lindsey Street church. In 1628, Dyke preached a sermon before Parliament in which he skilfully seeks to avoid offence to all parties by the neutral attitude he takes. In 1634, Mr Rochester appears on the list of ministers in which it is probable that Dyke was temporarily suspended for his disobedience. Dyke had apparently also made himself conspicuous by opposing and disobeying orders of the leaders of the church by for example not allowing the communion table to be placed against the east wall of the chancel (presumably at Epping

Upland) according to the orders he had received and it remained there for two more centuries.

Dyke died in 1639 and was buried in the usual way in consecrated ground perhaps suggesting that either the Lindsey Street meeting was a known conformist one or had remained secret and he had been suspended for a different reason. By the time of his death, Dyke had published many books which had gone through multiple editions suggesting they had been highly esteemed and in popular demand. He was described as having been a man of cheerful spirit and eminently useful in his ministry.

As well as the non-conformist leanings of his father, much of Dykes family also exhibited non-conformity. Dyke's two sons were ministers, Jeremiah was minister in Stanstead Abbots and Great Parndon. Daniel Dyke was vicar at Eastwick, Sawbridgeworth and Hadham and was also chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and later was ejected as a Baptist Minister. Dykes brother, Daniel was a minister in St Albans and his writings were published in which he is described as the 'the puritan spirit is very strong in that book' and he was also said to be "*one that inveighed against statute-protestants, injunction-men, and such as love to jump with the law.*"

- **Mr Rochester 1634**

Likely a temporary ministry during the suspension of Jeremiah Dyke.

- **Mr Wilkinson 1642**

Before being a minister, Wilkinson was principal of Magdalen Hall, Oxford until he was ejected in 1642. He held a short ministry in Leicestershire before coming to Epping in the same year. In 1648 he signed the Essex testimony and was immediately ejected from the church.

- **Mr Harper 1650**

Harper had been Minister of Nazeing in 1648 and comes to Epping in 1650 having been described as an "*able and Godly preaching Minister in the vicarage.*" Oliver Cromwell at some point visited Epping describing a good, preaching minister there which was probably Mr Harper, whom he had appointed after he had previously been ejected from the church. It is likely Mr Harper left due to the restoration of the monarchy as he had doubts about Charles' good faith and did not wait for the act of uniformity.

- **Mr Holbeck 1662**

Holbeck had been ejected from the church during Cromwell's time but is restored following the monarchy's restoration.

- **Rev Nathanael Ball 1672-1681**

Nathanael Ball was probably one of the earliest, if not the first who served as minister in this church. Before being a minister, Ball had been a distinguished as a classical, oriental, and biblical scholar. Ball had been paster at Barley near Cambridge in 1652 until 1658

when he had been ejected and then ministered in Royston and Chishill and is known to have preached occasionally in Cambridge, Bayford, Epping and other nearby places. In 1668 he took part in two Quaker disputes and in 1669 he was a teacher at a conventicle at Thaxted. In 1672 following the declaration of indulgence, he had been ejected from the Church of England and perhaps knowing Epping and the church already came to the town and immediately took out a preaching license as a presbyterian and licensed his house at the same time. He lived and continued to minister at the church until his death in 1681 aged 57. During his years at Epping, he had fallen into a 'consumption' and suffered much due to his non-conformity but his last words were to bless God he had not conformed. In 1683, a volume of his writings was published and dedicated to "*the truly virtuous Lady Archer of Coopersail, Essex*" who was one of his friends in Epping.

- **Richard Haylies 1672**

Haylies licensed himself and his house for congregational worship in 1672. Whether this was an overlapping or conflicting with Ball is not known.

- **William Smith 1690**

- **Henry Dent 1691-1695**

Dent had been ejected and excommunicated several times from previous positions as a preacher and a teacher to a conventicle. Dent took out a licence to minister at the church in 1691 and was being assisted by the Congregational common fund.

- **Samuel Bourne 1715**

During Bourne's Ministry, the congregation is said to number 300 members.

- **John Nettleton 1718 or 1726-1755**

Before becoming paster of this church, Nettleton had been minister of Ongar but the records do not agree on which year he came here. He married the sister of Phillip Doddridge, one of the early 'leaders' of congregationalism as well as being a prolific hymn writer and friend of Isaac Watts. There is no record of Doddridge ever preaching in Epping, but given the relationship it is entirely possible.

- **Zechariah Hubbard 1755**

- **Peter Good 1759-1767**

- **Rev Samuel Saunders 1770-1780**

Shortly after arriving in Epping, Saunders instigated a lengthy agreement of nine articles and three pages between himself and the congregation in which the latter are to "*give their assent to and if necessary individually to sign a breviary of a confession of faith.*" In this agreement is a section to allow the minister to "*enable him to visit his relations at a distance, and also to attend to his worldly affairs*" and a section precisely detailing a dismission form.

Saunders had been heavily involved in the rebuilding of the church in 1774 and was appointed sole manager and director in ordering the building and overseeing the workmen with the first brick being laid by Rev. Sam Saunders on twenty fourth day of March in the year of our lord 1774.

- **Williams Evans Bishop 1780**
- **James Gill 1791-1799**

Gill came from the independent chapel, Surrey Chapel in Southwark having worked under the Rev Rowland Hill a popular preacher, evangelist, an early influential supporter of the smallpox vaccine, chairman of the Religious Tract Society and a keen supporter of the London Missional Society. Hill apparently was very displeased that his assistant left for Epping. Charles Wight later speculates as to whether Gill ever invited Hill to preach at Epping.

- **William Saunders 1800**
- **Archibald Bell 1809**

He was not known to have been minister of the church until 1872 but when digging a grave, a large lead coffin plate was found bearing the name of Archibald Bell and in the inscription is described as minister and that he died in 1809. Nothing is known about him or when he began his ministry here, although it is possible he was a temporary minister during an interregnum. Unfortunately, the inscription was never copied and the plate was broken up by a plumber.

- **Rev Christopher Muston 1815**

Muston also had an association with Rev Rowland Hill, when Hill opened a new chapel in Farringdon, Berkshire in 1802 and ordained the new minister there, a Christopher Muston.

- **William Beck 1816**

While Beck was likely a temporary supply a proposal in his hand and signed by him to the congregation has survived (now in the Essex Record Office). It lists a range of suggestions including:

- He will spend not a penny more than he receives
- To remain no longer than the congregation are comfortable
- That different collections be taken to meet costs such as candles, coal,
- To ensure that the minister is well supported

Whether these proposals ever came before the church is not known.

- **Rev Joseph Alcott 1817-1833**

This was Alcott's only ministerial position having previously been a successful businessman in the trade of Cagliari Marble. The ministry was suggested to him by his former paster, Rev Matthew Wilkes, one of the fathers of the London Missionary Society,

the Evangelical Magazine, the Irish Evangelical Society, the Bible Society, and the Religious Tract Society. Alcott had considerable means, living in his own house and gave much of his wealth to needy causes. When retiring from ministry he continued to live in Epping and took an active part in the management of the church. A young worshipper later wrote: *"In my very young days the Rev J Alcott and the deacon wore powdered hair; the hymns were given out two lines at a time, the congregation sitting to sing, but standing during the long prayer and the meeting was lighted with candles."* During Alcott's time the congregation was said to number 350 members.

- **Rev Stephen Bannister 1833-1839**

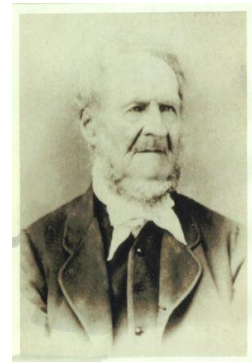
Before he became minister, Bannister preached at Epping for 13 sabbaths and considered the churches invitation for six weeks. He was spoken of as a great teacher, of shrewd intellect and clear perception; he was also an 'acceptable' preacher full of illustration, quaint in style, high in doctrine, but very faithful in spirit. He was disabled from birth and used crutches and for much of his life suffered greatly, but still lived until the age of 73. Epping was his only pastorate and afterwards became a teacher.

- **Rev Josiah Chapman 1839-1842**

Chapman was invited from Billingshurst, Sussex, two days later his acceptance was received and five days later he commenced his ministry! He was the last minister to reside in the adjoining chapel house which was demolished to make way for the school room.

- **Rev George Dempster Mudie 1843-1847**

In a similar quick appointment as Chapman was, Mudie was invited from Portsmouth on the 24<sup>th</sup> December, he arrived in Epping on the 29<sup>th</sup> and started work on the 31<sup>st</sup>! He resigned from Epping in 1847 and moved to South Australia.



- **Rev Samuel Chancellor 1848-1853**

Chancellor was converted to ministry by Rev John Leifchild a Congregational minister and prolific author of Christian texts. He was a very popular minister of the church and during his time at Epping, he married and had a son and oversaw renovations of the chapel which was opened by the Lord Mayor of London. He died whilst minister in 1853- it was surmised that he worked very hard and overtaxed himself in relation to the renovation. He was buried at the church at the expense of the members.

- **Rev John Teesdale Davis 1854-1881**

The longest ever serving minister of the church and was very influential, honoured and beloved by both the church itself and the whole town to the extent that on his

retirement in 1881 he was presented with a 'purse of money contributed to by the residents of the town and neighbourhood, including the clergyman at the Church of England.' Davis remained in Epping following his retirement in 1881 and until his death in 1901 and was a keen historian of the church and town.

Alongside Benjamin Whinstone a local historian and Quaker, Davis was an ardent supporter of Dr Joseph Clegg who was campaigning to improve the health of Epping. Epping's death rate was the highest in Essex with very high rates of Typhoid (Davis's daughter died of typhoid) and Cholera due to a lack of adequate disposal of sewage. Many powerful interests prevented anything being done for twenty years including the Church of England vicar, but eventually Clegg's campaign (with significant help from Davis) was successful with the building of the water tower.

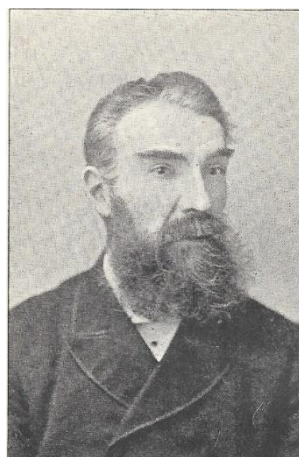
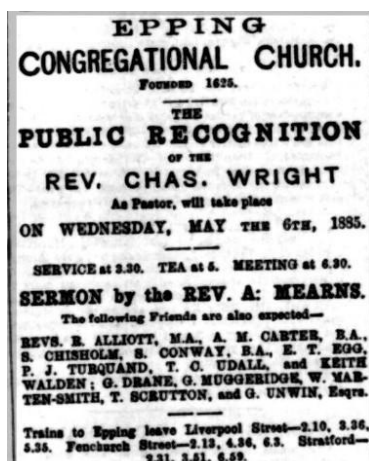
He was also known as being the *"the author of a good many movements for the entertainment of the people in the evenings, and the like."*

- **Rev Frederic Wagstaffe 1883**

Wagstaffe came to Epping having previously served in Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the hope that Epping would be a more 'helpful neighbourhood' to him due poor health, however he was forced to resign just a few months into his ministry at Epping due to his health and died shortly after aged 46. At age 17 he was a well known 'boy preacher' and developed such a literary taste that he had offers to go to Oxford or Cambridge Universities but Frederic did not accept as he did not want to conform (a good trait for a non conformist minister!). He travelled extensively around the country, often on foot preaching which he loved so well. In 1854 he became an ardent abstainer writing many books on the subject and becoming involved in the Good Templar Movement.

- **Rev Charles "Chas" Wright 1884-1898**

In 1895, Wright wrote the book *Nonconformity in Epping: A history of the Congregational Church 1625-1895*, and it is this book we must thank for preserving much of the early history of the church. It was under his ministry that the major renovation of the building took place. He left Epping in 1898 to go to East Cowes Congregational church.



- **Mr H E Nutter 1899**
- **Rev George Dent 1901-1906**

Whilst minister of the church, Dent married Constance Pegrum. The Pegrum family had been long time members of the church. Dent left in 1906 to a pastorate at New Kent Road, South London but returned frequently to the church following his ministry here including during anniversary celebrations.

- **Rev Rhys Williams 1907-1910**
- **Rev Jonathan Calvert 1911**

Calvert was minister at Woodford when he took on Epping initially on an interim basis, but his appointment was made permanent a short while after. However, after only six months he died suddenly. In the newspaper report of his death, he is described as having *“a sterling character and the energy which he threw into all matters appertaining to the work of the church, made him very popular amongst the congregation.”*

- **Rev Leslie Parkin 1912-1913**
- **Rev John Herbert Locke 1914-1930**

The communion table is dedicated to Locke and his long service to the church. Locke continued to live in Epping following his retirement.



*Inside the Church during the 1920s, Rev John H Locke is in the pulpit.*

- **Rev William Simpson 1933-1934**

Simpson was a temporary supply during an interregnum and was a tutor from Hackney College which trained Congregational ministers.

- **Rev Thomas Lewis 1935-1941**

Lewis was ordained in 1909 having trained at Carmarthen Presbyterian College and had a number of pastorates in South Wales before moving to Knebworth, Hertfordshire and then to Epping in 1935. On retiring in 1941, Lewis moved to Henly-on-Thames.

- **Colin Richards 1958-1959**
- **Rev Frank Anthony Shield 1959-1965**
- **Rev John P Carroll 1966-1971**

- **Rev Bryn Austin Rees 1972-1976**

As well as being a very well-liked minister, Bryn was also a prolific hymn and music writer. Whilst minister at nearby Woodford United Free Church, Bryn decided to move to the smaller Epping Congregational church to be able to spend more time writing music. He wrote his most well known hymn, *The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy* whilst minister at Epping. He wrote his first hymn, *Have Faith in God my Heart* during the second World War whilst Minister at Ipswich, his wife Morfydd later recalled:

*“During 1940-45 Bryn and I lived in a large older-type manse in Ipswich, a city which was bombed at times but was also on a route taken by the German bombers going to the Midlands and the North, so we had many air-raid alerts as well as bombing. Following one of these night alerts, when we had stayed downstairs, Bryn got up when it was over, went into the kitchen nearby, sat down and wrote this hymn. He told me afterwards that the words came quite easily, and that he never altered a word or line or the metre. As he said in his sermon at Woodford Green, he simply felt that the hymn ‘had been given to him by the Holy Spirit’. Bryn did not record any specific Biblical inspiration for this hymn, but I think he would approve a reminder of words from Deuteronomy 6, verse 5, recorded in three of the gospels as having been quoted by our Lord: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. That is the greatest commandment. (**Deuteronomy 6: 5 cf. Mark 12: 28-30**)”*

He also wrote the hymn *Glory and Praise to God*.

In collaboration with William Lloyd Webber, organist of Westminster Methodist Central Hall, he wrote several anthems and an Easter cantata, **The Saviour**.

Bryn was ordained in 1935 into the ministry of the Congregational Church in England and Wales. He ministered in Sawbridgeworth (during which he preached at Epping on its 315<sup>th</sup> anniversary service in 1940); Ipswich and Felixstowe; Muswell Hill, London; and, as a United Reformed Church minister at Woodford Green, Essex, and then finally Epping. He was a chaplain to the Royal Air Force during the war. When Bryn retired in 1976 he

remained in Epping until his death in 1983 and Morfydd lived in Epping until her death in 1997. The church lectern is dedicated in memory to Bryn.

- **Rev Leslie Clarke 1976-1981**

The first of three Methodist ministers of the church following the Local Ecumenical partnership with Epping and North Weald Methodist Churches.

- **Rev Frank Jones 1981-1992**
- **Rev Jane Taylor 1992-1999**
- **Rev Raymond Garfoot 1999-2006**
- **Rev Tom McMeekin 2006-2007** (Interim Moderator)
- **Rev Dr Jason Askew 2007-2016**
- **Rev Charles Martin 2016-2017** (Interim Moderator)
- **Rev Cecil White 2018-2022**
- **Rev Kathryn Taylor 2023-2024** (Interim Moderator)
- **Rev Karen Knight 2024-**

## **Denominational History**

As already stated above, it is not clear whether at least outwardly, the very early worshippers on the site were conforming or not (although very likely at least behind closed doors they were not conforming), soon the church was leaning towards congregationalism. Dyke and his immediate successors clearly had non-conformist tendencies, perhaps made easier during Cromwell's time in power when religious persecution had eased and more independent thinking was ascendant. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, it was clear that independents were not going to be included in church life and in 1662 they were formally ejected from the church and other state institutions. In 1672, Nathanael Ball an ejected minister and Richard Haylies both registered formally for non-conformist worship on this site. Throughout the eighteenth century, the church clearly followed the Congregational tendency (although there were some ministers for example who were Presbyterians and the church frequently had speakers who were Baptists and other non-conformists) which had grown significantly but at this time all churches remained independent and conducted their own affairs. When the Congregational Union of England and Wales formed in 1831, Epping joined the Essex branch. The union did not have any specific power over the churches but to offer mutual support and advice, though the centralising of resources, especially financial ones, inevitably gave them more significance and influence. In the 1850s the church was within the Epping & Dunmow district but were later moved into the Romford district for greater convenience. In 1887 the church transferred to the London Congregational Union. Throughout this time the church is still frequently referred to locally as either the Independent Chapel or the Lindsey Street Meeting House. In 1972 when the Congregational church merged with the Presbyterian church to form the United

Reformed church, Epping voted to join the new church thus becoming Epping United Reformed Church from then on (some congregational churches voted not to join the URC including nearby Nazeing and Sawbridgeworth which remain Congregational churches to this day). Upon joining the URC, the church was placed into the Eastern province (later synod) where it remains today.

## **David Livingstone**

During a Sunday school meeting one day in 1839, six young men who were missionary students from the Congregational church in Ongar walked in and preached to the church with one of them being David Livingstone, the future great African explorer and missionary. The Rev Stephen Bannister at once said how pleased he and the meeting were to see them and they must all say a few words; but (pulling out his watch) he should limit each to five minutes. Bannister was unable to remember all their names except Mr Drummond, who went to the south seas and the 'junior student' who spoke last, but not least *David Livingstone!*

In 1913, the church held a special service for the centenary of Livingstone's birth and was given a framed portrait of Livingstone by the school at a special children's service. At the time the portrait was hung near the pulpit. Today this portrait hangs in the junior church room.



## **Children and Youth**

The church has had a Sunday school/junior church dating back to at least 1830 and continues to this day. In 1888, Mr E Winter had been superintendent of the Sunday school for 48 years and was succeeded by his nephew, Mr J Winter. In 1900 there is a newspaper report of the Sunday school celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a special flower service. In 1926 there is a news report of the Sunday school celebrating its 96<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in which the children sung special hymns. In 1935, we here of great things accomplished by the Sunday school when two first prizes with honours having been obtained in the scripture examination. The Sunday school anniversary in 1940 saw the children bring 60 eggs which were then taken to Poplar. There are many other reports

during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries where reports on the Sunday school are often considered to be 'satisfactory.'

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the church ran a regular and popular Sunday school and youth club. In the 2010s, the church employed children and family workers who ran successful events such as holiday clubs and messy church. Beginning in 2002 and continuing today the church runs a very successful Parents/carers Toddler Group in which a wide range of thematically linked activities including crafts and stories are included in each session and a monthly Bible story. At special times of the year such as Christmas and Easter, the group has a short service in the church and the group also regularly fundraises for various charities. In 2008, the church received the URC's child friendly church award.

### **The British School**

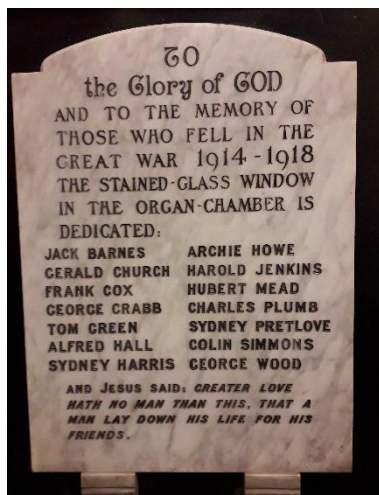
In 1833, the church was maintaining a day school for 80 children. In 1845 on adjacent land owned by the church which included a cottage and stable, and with the aid of a Government grant, a new school room was built. The corner stone was laid in March 1845 by Samuel Gurney Esq and at a later date was opened by Mr Ince MP (the cornerstone is now laid in the back garden). This was a British School which were originally founded in 1808 by the *Society for Promoting the Lancasterian System for the Education of the Poor* which was formed and supported by many evangelical and non-conformist Christians. In 1871, 170 children from the school along with children from the 'Union House' took part in a sports day with toys as prizes and this was accompanied by a music band and substantial tea. By 1872 it had 135 children, but by 1875 it had had financial difficulties and was forced to close. Afterwards it was used as a Sunday school room and the church hall and was referred to as the school room for many decades after its closure. Today this room is the church sanctuary.

## **First World War Memorials**

Following the war, in which 14 members of the church died it was decided that the church would have its own memorial. To raise the money for this during the summer of 1920, there was a bazaar, concert and a sale of work.

It was announced that in November 1920, Dame Margaret Lloyd George, wife of the Prime Minister would unveil a window and tablet at the church in memory of members killed in the First World War. The unveiling proved to be a great success. The minutes of a meeting of Church members described it as a "red letter day in our Church's history". Mrs Lloyd George arrived late as she had lost her way travelling from Enfield. The service was conducted by the Revd Locke. Replying to a welcoming speech by Revd Locke, Mrs Lloyd George said: *"I am very grateful to the members of Epping Congregational Church for allowing me to take part in this solemn and sacred service. It is a privilege rather than a*

pleasure; it cannot be pleasure, for our hearts are heavy with sorrow; the sorrow is real, but it is not the only feeling in our hearts today. There is an old Welsh proverb that says that it is better to die as a hero than live as a coward. There is no shame in our sorrow, and we are proud that our men died that we might live. There is also hope in our sorrow, for we feel that heroes, like saints, are immortal. Our grief is tempered with gratitude, and we remember that when the call came millions of young men came forward ready to endure hardships and suffering and even death, that we might live. I heard with amazement and with pride that from this Church eighty-four men joined up, and fourteen made the supreme sacrifice. These men did not fight in vain, for they achieved a complete victory and gave us security and liberty." The memorial was placed at the front of the church beside the pulpit, and is now on the wall of one side of the sanctuary. The window was at the back of the church behind the pulpit and organ. When the church was rebuilt in 1997 the window was not incorporated into the new building and was sold. Recent attempts to trace what happened to the window since have been unsuccessful.



*The first world war memorial and the now lost accompanying window.*

Another memorial at the Congregational Church was unveiled in 1923. This was the original graveyard cross of Gerald Church a member of the church, son of local butcher Stephen Church. He was killed in action in France in 1917 and was buried in the village of Villers-Faucon. The crosses used to mark the graves of British and Commonwealth war dead were eventually replaced by the white headstones of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Many relatives arranged to have the crosses brought home, and Gerald's family were among them. Up unto recently the cross was in place outside the church, but owing to its fragile state, it was preserved and moved inside the sanctuary beside the other memorial.



*The preserved cross in its new position in the sanctuary.*

## **Graveyard**

There was an extensive graveyard at the church in the surrounding grounds, containing approximately 60 graves. In 1886 burials were restricted to members and was fully closed in 1889. During the 1960s some of the grave stones were removed at the front of the building when new rooms were built and were used as paving stones. When the church was rebuilt in 1997 all gravestones were removed except four which now lay in the garden. At the time there was some concern in the local community about disturbing the graves, but the new building was built on the same footprint of the previous building and the location of each grave was known and taken into account by the architect.

Buried in the graveyard is Samuel Harris Bartlett who sailed on board the HMS Hecla and Fury under Sir W E Parry in the Polar expeditions of 1819-1825 in the capacity of Ship and subsequently Captain's steward. His gravestone is one of the ones remaining in the garden.

Ministers of the church Archibald Bell and Rev Samuel Chancellor are both buried here as is Sarah Good who died in 1766, was the wife of Peter Good who was the minister of the church from 1759-67 is also buried in the church.

## **Associations with other churches**

### **Epping Green Chapel**

Epping Green chapel which opened in 1834 was originally associated with Epping Congregational Church. Indeed, the first sermon preached there was by Rev Stephen Bannister, minister of the Congregational Church. By 1862 when a new chapel was opened slightly to the south, the church was an independent Baptist chapel with the Baptist John Gingell as pastor. When Gingell died in 1885, the church returned to being in the care of the Congregational church led by the Epping Minister Rev Charles Wright. When the chapel celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1894, it is described by the local press as a Congregational chapel and Reverends George Dent, Johnathan Calvert and John Locke all preached there. At some point in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church ceased to be in the care of the Congregational church and returned to be an independent Baptist Chapel as it remains today.

### **Abride (Lambourne End) Congregational Church**

In 1860 Epping Congregational church took over care of Abridge (Lambourne End) Congregational church with a plan to revive the church after their minister Mr Knight left under unhappy circumstances. The church remained attached to Epping until 1881 when it became under control of Chigwell Row Congregational Church at which point the church had a congregation of 90 and Sunday school of 100. The church closed as a congregational church in 1905 but the building was later used as the Lambourne Parish rooms and by Abridge Evangelical Free Church.

## **Mission Halls**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the church was involved in two local mission halls at Ivy Chimneys and Copped Hall/Upshire. The Ivy Chimneys Hall was located near to the former Spotted Dog pub and was built by the Church of England Church in Theydon Bois and remained in use until the 1970s when it was demolished. The Upshire room was the local schoolroom. Exactly what relationship the congregational church had with these mission halls is unknown but the church ran many very successful services and events at them for many years.

## **Ecumenical Partnerships**

For many years the church had good informal relations with many churches in the area. In 1976 a formal ecumenical partnership was formed with the Methodist Churches of Epping and North Weald which entailed a joint pastorate and closer working together. This partnership lasted until 2022 when both Methodist churches closed. During this time the church had three Methodist Ministers; Rev Leslie Clarke, Rev Jane Taylor, and Rev Raymond Garfoot.

In 1989 the church was one of the founding churches of the West Essex United Area, a group of 10 Methodist and United Reformed churches in Harlow, Epping, Roydon and North Weald. In September 2006, a new and larger Ecumenical Area was formed from the merger of the West Essex United Area with the Lee Valley North Methodist Circuit to form the Herts And Essex Border Ecumenical Area (HAEBEA), adding churches in Waltham Cross, Hoddesdon, Hertford, Ware and Watton-on-Stone. United Reformed Churches in Ongar and Hatfield Heath also joined the new Area, bringing the total number of member churches to 16. Over the years some of the partnerships in the area have been dissolved and 5 churches have closed, but in 2023 two new churches in Bishops Stortford and Stansted joined the area. In 2024 the area including Epping URC was replaced by a new ecumenical partnership, the Herts and Essex Border Ecumenical Partnership. All of the above partnerships have seen closer working and sharing of resources including joint pastorates, shared preaching plan, joint services and events and training.

## **Churches Together in Epping & District**

For many decades, the church has been involved in Churches Together in Epping and District a group of all churches in the area including many different denominations. Both the building and members of the church have been part of many different events and occasions through churches together such as joint services, Walk of Witness, children's clubs, hustings.

## **Our twinned church in Mbare, Harare, Zimbabwe**

Since 2008 Epping URC has been twinned with Mbare UPC, Harare, Zimbabwe. Frequent communications are shared between the congregations and both African and English churches continually pray for each other in worship services as well as other times. In

2011 our then minister, Jason visited and Lindsey, a church elder has visited on multiple occasions. In 2014 and 2018 we were visited by members of the Zimbabwe presbytery. We have supported Mbare with fundraising which has helped to build a new school and replacing their water tower. We also share information in our congregation about Zimbabwe and Mbare through special services and events enjoying Zimbabwean food, music, and slideshows.

Through this twinning our lives have been enriched, as by any new relationship: we have learnt a great deal about one another; individual members of congregations have built personal friendships; prayers have been offered and answered; visits have taken place in both directions; we have shared our joys and trials.



*Lindsey Brown, Epping URC elder at Mbare Presbyterian Church.*



*A visit to Epping URC from the Presbytery of Zimbabwe in 2018.*

## Activities

The church throughout its recorded history has always been very active both internally and externally in the local community including a range of activities including having tea/coffee mornings, fayres, bible studies, study groups, other church groups, concerts, one off celebrations, quiz nights, plays, fashion shows, special services to name but a few.

Here are some notable activities from the archives:

- An American bazaar in 1924 and a 17<sup>th</sup> century costume bazaar in 1935
- Magic lantern entertainment in 1885
- Lectures by Revd Wagstaffe in 1883 on ‘why are we Congregationalists?’ and on Martin Luther
- A Sacred Cantata in 1888
- The formation of a gymnasium for the use of the male members of the church in 1912
- A Sunday school teachers conference in 1885
- A play “*The Armada*” was performed at a fete in 1928 but was delayed due to rain

## Anniversary Celebrations

Having reached 400 years of worship, has meant that there have been many anniversary celebrations over the years. Of particular note were the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1925. Dame Margaret Lloyd George, wife of former Prime Minister David Lloyd George visited the church for these celebrations, the second time she had visited after unveiling the First World War memorial in 1920. The church along with Lloyd George had afternoon tea and a garden sale in aid of church repairs at the garden of the Silleys at Theydon Grove, who were local landowners, employers and philanthropists. Lloyd George said she *“agreed with the ladies that there should be no long speeches for they were there to sell and buy and not to talk. She trusted everyone would empty their pockets before they left the sale, which with much pleasure she declared open.”* After the sale, Lloyd George visited the church. The 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary was reported around the country being reported in several national papers and a local paper in Gloucestershire for example.

Other anniversary celebrations in other years included special services, invited special preachers, afternoon teas, coffee mornings, reports on the years’ work. Particular examples include:

- an egg and flower service in 1926
- a flower festival in 2005,
- concerts in 1885, 1895 & 1916
- afternoon tea in 1885, 1915 & 1940
- summer fair in 1999.

- In 1935, the 310<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration coincided with the induction of Rev Thomas Lewis.
- The opening of the rebuilt church in 1997 occurred on the 377<sup>th</sup> anniversary.
- In 2017, on the 392<sup>nd</sup> anniversary, 20 years of the rebuilt church was also marked.
- The 395<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020 occurred during the Covid pandemic lockdown when the church was closed but was marked in a special online service.

When the church celebrates its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025, a range of events and activities will take place including a special service, a concert, afternoon tea and inviting special preachers (all being very similar ways in which the church has previously celebrated anniversaries!).

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