

DOVER UNITARIAN CHURCH

- *a description*

S.S.G. HALE

Since 1940 at least eleven Dover churches have disappeared. Only three were destroyed by enemy action — the rest fell victim to town planners. Of the remainder, the Dover Unitarian Church, Adrian Street is one of the oldest — and yet it was only built in 1820 and is a good example of a Georgian church. Architect Thomas Read designed an irregular octagon shape which required relatively short roof beams two storeys high with four brick pilasters constructed of yellow brick. The front elevation has a round window in the tympanium topped by a classical pediment with a large Venetian window with characteristic Georgian panes as the centre piece. The other windows are round headed sashes. A stone stair case with a cast iron railing leads up to round headed main door. The vestry is a two storey rectangular building adjoining the north side. In the vestry is a door half way up the interior wall — apparently leading nowhere. Surrounding the building is the burial ground closed in 1854. There is a crypt!

Accompanying music was provided by an harmonium located at the back of the balcony but in 1888 this was replaced by a full sized organ purchased for £60 from the Croydon Unitarian Church. (The harmonium was donated to the Ditchling church). Pre-reformation churches were places of worship with the mysteries of the altar and sacristy being the focal point. Post-reformation churches became more places of instruction and the focal point was now the pulpit. Dover Unitarian Church pulpit was centrally located on the north wall entered from the vestry by a

doorway half way up the wall. The organ tower of pipes displaced the pulpit to the north east wall and the services are conducted from this position. The organ also conceals the immersion font. The congregation use box pews.

There has been a baptist presence in Dover since 1643. Originally such congregations were unlawful but the members were of such good standing and so well respected that they were rarely prosecuted. There have been as many as 7 baptist churches with congregations of around 100 members, centred on Trevanion Street, Snargate Street and the Pier district area. Self governing churches tend to develop along different lines. The Particular Baptist followed the severe Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The General Baptists followed the Armenian philosophy of salvation through individual effort and toleration for individual differences and from this branch was founded the English Unitarian tradition and thus the Dover Unitarian Church.

Reverend Benjamin Marten was the baptist minister in 1820 and it was his son John Marten who was the minister in 1828 when the church became unitarian. Entry the church was by Gubbins Lane, renamed Chapel Lane after the erection of the Unitarian baptist chapel. In the September 1944 bombardment of Snargate Street it was feared the church had sustained structural damage. There was no direct hit but the blast shattered all the roof tiles. Services continued in the church hall located in the present York Street until 1952 when the roof had been

28 repaired and the church reopened. Both the interior and the exterior of the church have been essentially unchanged for almost 200 years and the building was 'listed on 1st March 1974. The destruction of Snargate Street and the demolition and clearance of the tenement slums has had two effects. It is only now that one can appreciate the dignity and attractiveness of the simple classical building. But the other effect is that most of the congregation have moved away. There are still members

who come from Ashford, Canterbury and Folkestone — since there is no other unitarian church in the area. The fundamental belief in one god would find no fault with Moslems or Hindus. In some countries Jews and Unitarians use the same building for their ceremonies.

The current congregation, much diminished, still acts as host to foreign visitors and historians and still carries the torch of the search for knowledge and toleration to hand on to the next generation.

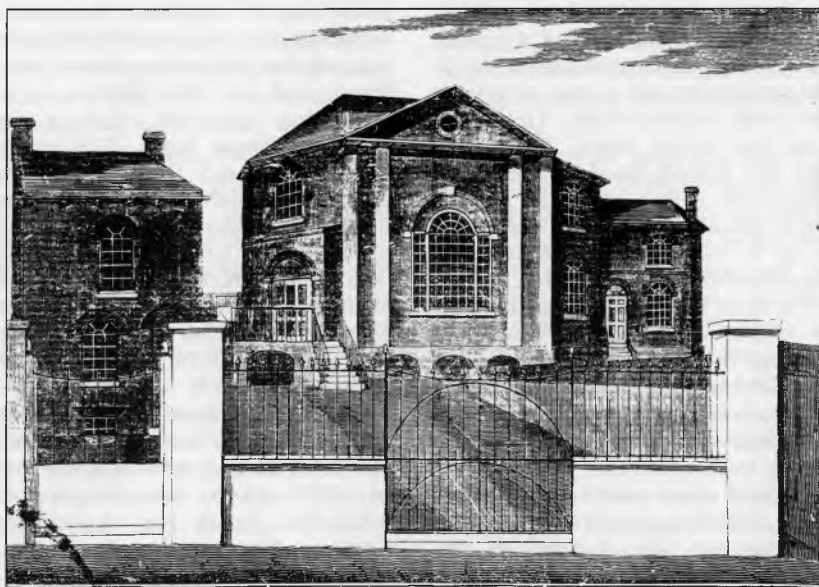
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UNITARIAN BAPTIST CHURCH, DOVER.

SUBSCRIPTION LIST,

TOWARDS PAYING OFF THE MORTGAGE DEBT OF £400 ON THE ABOVE CHURCH

Note: the subscription list was for 1828. The building to the left has been replaced by a new church hall to compensate for the loss of land when the York Street By-Pass was built.