

## 30 A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

by Lesley Gordon

September 14th and 15th have been announced by the Civic Trust as this year's Heritage Open Days, when buildings of architectural or historic significance, not normally accessible, open their doors to the general public. If the past three years of the scheme are anything to go by, Doverians will have a thin time of it as the event usually passes unnoticed locally, except for one staunch supporter of the scheme. The Unitarian Church in Adrian Street will, once again, throw open its doors to welcome visitors, free of charge.

Most locals and visitors driving up York Street will have wondered about the large octagonal, church like building sitting high above the carriageway, back from the road. Its yellow stock bricks have, over the years, given it a brooding presence which belies its light and delicate interior. Yet, though it is a Grade II listed building and the oldest surviving Dissenters' Meeting House in Dover, built in 1820, it is known only to a few. It is well worth a visit.

The many round-headed windows let light flood in onto pale cream painted walls and the octagonal shape is at once spacious and intimate. Then there are the wooden box-pews, all neatly grained and varnished. The organ, built in 1855 by G.M. Holdich, is now at the front of the chapel and conceals the former baptistry - a full immersion font! At the rear there is a small semicircular gallery, entered by a concealed stairway. The chapel is virtually unaltered since its early days, although war damage and a severe fire in 1987 mean the roof, two rows of box-pews and the choir stalls have had to be replaced. A local community of General Baptists founded the church in 1643. Following the Restoration, persecution and confiscation of their goods led them to meet for worship and discussion in private houses. In 1692 Pastor Samuel Tavenor (a former captain of a troop of horses in Cromwell's army and Governor

of Deal Castle) let the congregation use part of his dwelling in Market Square for their meetings and set aside part of his garden as a burial ground. In 1745, the congregation purchased the house and grounds and secured a licence to use the building as a permanent meeting house. The year 1800 saw the formation of the first Sunday school in Dover and by 1813, the size of the now emerging Unitarian congregation led to plans being drawn up for a new (i.e. the current) chapel, which was built at a cost of £2,100.

The new chapel has served its congregation well for nearly 200 years. Sadly, that congregation has declined to the point where, in Dover, only a small band of followers are left, striving to uphold the Unitarian principle of freedom of belief and form of worship. Strange that this principle, fundamental to the modern world, has played its part in Unitarians being excluded from fellowship with other churches in the area and elsewhere. In their time Darwin, Charles Dickens, Joseph Priestley and Benjamin Franklin, were all Unitarians, as were Elizabeth Gaskell and Josiah Wedgewood. But despite declining congregations, common to virtually all churches today, the Unitarian movement still has strongholds in the north of England and in America.

So, take advantage of the opportunity to visit this conspicuous yet unknown gem of the Dover scene. The chapel and vestry will be open both days (**14th & 15th September between 11am and 4pm & 12 noon and 3pm respectively**). There will be an art and craft display in the adjoining hall and music and singing in the chapel itself. As a final incentive, there will be an excellent selection of tea and cakes available, provided and served by the loyal band who make it their duty to keep this little bit of Dover's heritage fit for the visitors it so richly deserves.

*Pedestrian access is available from the York Street entrance. Vehicular access is via Albany Place and Adrian Street. Park in the Council car parks below Cowgate Cemetery and admire the view of the harbour before descending via Adrian Street.*