

History of Whitfield Chapel

Martyn Webster

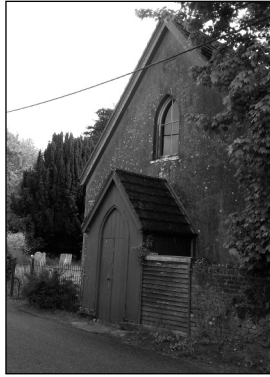
In Chapel Lane, Whitfield, near Dover, stands unassumingly on the left, a small building with a modern tiled roof. Giving directly on to the road an adjacent green board to the left of the double doored porch (now unopenable) painted weathered green on wood records "Whitfield United Reformed Church, Congregational Presbyterian, Sunday Services 2.45 pm" (the lower line painted out probably once gave the name

of the minister). A modern sign post on the main Sandwich Road nearby points to "United Reformed Church" which is one and the same giving clear indication of the building's religious use.

There is very little on record now traceable that enlightens upon the history of this unique little chapel and its attached small burial ground located in its appropriately named Chapel Lane. It went up for sale in the year 2019, its religious purpose having lapsed at the end of 2018 through dwindling congregation.

The best source of information on this site appeared in an article in the Dover Express newspaper of 23rd September 1938 reporting upon an account read by a Mr J. Holman on the bi-centenary of the Whitfield Chapel, then known as the Whitfield Congregational Church, at one of its celebration meetings at that church (later chapel) on Wednesday 21st September 1938.

In the year 1738 the Zion Congregational



Whitfield United Reformed Church (Martyn Webster)

Church in Queen Street, Dover was recorded as supporting the work of one of its evangelists preaching and visiting Whitfield having the use of cottage rooms there as a place of assembly, probably where the chapel is now. In 1780 a barn on the site, with a house and garden, was purchased for the use of Congregational Church worshippers, which was subsequently demolished when the need for improved accommodation arose. In

1781, in what must have been open countryside, the first chapel was built here with burial ground attached.

In 1867 the Queen Street Church approved plans for a new chapel which is the building in place today. An inscribed stone at the apex of the front façade with numbers and letters now barely discernible bears the legend "Erected 1781. 1867 Rebuilt". Until modern housing surrounded it this chapel must have stood in open country with only cottages dotted around nearby.

In 1900 the original cottage on the site, had apparently remained after the demolition of the barn, was replaced by a school room required upon the need to house the growing number of school children in the village of Whitfield. The configuration of this is very clear today in its obvious modern use as a meeting room with large table, chairs and an upright piano etc. Access to the chapel itself is by way of a side door to this room leading off a path to the side of the building from the front gate of the burial ground.

The interior of the chapel itself, when viewed in July 2019, shows its recent use as a place of worship and devotion, with altar, pulpit, hymn board and bibles poignantly stacked up as though ready for use at any moment. A war memorial tablet in marble bearing the names of local fallen soldiers is on the north facing wall, with a poppy wreath still at its foot.

Over the years the buildings were used for not only devotional purposes but also social related events, for example Women's Guild meetings etc. amongst others. The pastorate was centred from Dover itself with appointed evangelists who also covered adjacent village responsibilities.

The attached burial ground probably reaches back to 1780 and work has been done to record the surviving memorial inscriptions. A transcription of all the headstones with plan has been undertaken, the earliest burial dating from 1792 and the latest from 1977. There is no evidence yet of any surviving burial, baptism or marriage registers.

Application has been made by the United Reformed Church, the current owner, for its closure under the Disused Burial Grounds Act 1884 presumably as a precursor to the delicate question of its clearance. The fate of the headstones and the interments has yet to be determined.

Photographic record has been made of the headstones as well as views of the interior of the building as seen in July 2019.

It is sad to see the end time for this very unusual and mostly unseen place of God in its tucked away location off the Sandwich Road in Whitfield. One can only but wish all the very best for its transformation in the future.



Interior Whitfield United Reformed Church (M. Webster)

COWGATE CEMETERY

Jeremy Cope

I have to report the sad loss of Jeremy Fox, one of our long time volunteers. Jeremy was the best of companions and workers and, although his attendance was inevitably rather spasmodic in his last couple of years we shall miss him.

We have had a summer's weather that made for an easy working environment and indeed, a good one to work in. The weather has now taken a wetter turn, to be expected and much needed to replenish the aquifers and water gardens. However that means that arranged meetings may have to be cancelled or re-arranged, but

that is readily dealt with by our volunteers.

An interesting challenge is to improve things so that we make the cemetery a better living space for wildlife, whilst at the same time keeping it so that visitors continue to be happy to use it. I hope to be able to report progress on this in future newsletter reports.

If anyone would like to join our happy band you will be most welcome. Phone me on 01304 211348 or email me jeremycope@willersley.plus.com