NORTHUMBERLAND
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SOCIETY

Protecting and enhancing our landscape, culture and built environment for future heritage

ANNUAL AGM LECTURE 2016

Neglected Treasures: some of our region's most threatened buildings — its non-conformist Chapels, Churches and Meeting Houses

by Lord Beith

Blagdon Clock Room on 6th June 2016

Alan Beith was a co-founder of the Historic Chapels Trust, a former Chair of Trustees, he is now the Trust's President. He moved to Northumberland in the late 1960s to take up a teaching post in the Department of Politics at the University of Newcastle and served as the Member of parliament for Berwick-upon-Tweed from 1973 until his retirement in 2015. He continues to live in Berwick and sits as a Liberal Democrat in the House of Lords. Alan is also President of the North of England Civic Trust and he is a Methodist local preacher.

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The Venerable Geoff Miller

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WHEN I joined the Northumberland and Newcastle Society, nearly 50 years ago, it was almost a lone voice speaking up for our heritage of notable buildings and attractive townscapes. Around that time there had been plans, thankfully resisted, to demolish Alnwick's Northumberland Hall and to drive a relief road through Berwick's Elizabethan walls. We had seen the destruction of Newcastle's Royal Arcade and of most of Eldon Square. Things have moved on since then, partly thanks to the society's members as well as to a changing national view of historic buildings. But some categories of buildings have continued to be under-appreciated and outstanding examples are still under threat. Pubs and cinemas were slow to be recognised, and the imminent threat to Newcastle's long neglected Odeon cinema is a striking example. A very significant category which is still under-appreciated, and more threatened than ever, is that of Nonconformist chapels.

Ever since the Toleration Act of 1689, nonconformists have been building their distinctive places of worship. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians and others have been huge contributors to the town and village landscape, often out of all proportion to their numbers. Their buildings have been undervalued, not merely by the unlettered observers who thought that a church had to be established by law or at least to have a tower or spire to be worthy of attention. Old guide books, if they mentioned them at all, would speak of "a barn-like structure". The first editions of the Pevsner guides mentioned very few, and showed no enthusiasm at all for them. Far too few had listed status. It was not until John Betjeman, who had an instinctive understanding of chapels and their congregations, published 'First and Last Loves', with delightful illustrations by John Piper, that we few chapel enthusiasts felt that national recognition was coming.

It is a source of satisfaction to me that one of the first buildings to be saved by the Historic Chapels Trust, soon after we set it up, was the early eighteenth century Baptist Chapel at Cote, Oxfordshire which was the subject of one of those Piper drawings. The Georgian Group and the Victorian Society gave increasing recognition to chapels under threat, and several of the County Church Preservation Trusts began to give grants to nonconformist congregations seeking to maintain and repair their buildings. A Chapels Society was formed to promote understanding of nonconformist buildings. The Royal Commission on Historic Monuments published in four regional volumes, the illustrated inventory of many of the most significant chapels which was the life's work of the late Christopher Stell.

However, even this new and wider interest in a hitherto neglected building category was not enough to counter indifference, hostility, and the huge gap between the number of threatened buildings and the resources potentially available to save and maintain them. The indifference was shared by the denominations themselves, who often saw buildings as a distraction from, or a barrier to the advancement of their religious mission. Increasingly buildings, however notable, are seen as a disposable asset which could provide funds either for new projects or to meet pressing financial difficulties in a period of decline. Precisely these arguments lie behind the current sale of Berwick's Methodist Church, built in 1797, by a congregation which intends to continue its services in a rented community hall.

A further significant factor is that several of the denominations massively overbuilt, to the extent that many towns could have accommodated most of their population in nonconformist chapels with seats to spare. This was partly the result of their ambition to grow their congregations, and to make those ambitions more apparent in bricks and stone than their rivals had done. Sometimes it was because a particularly popular preacher could fill the chapel, but his successors could not. And in the nineteenth century most congregations liked to

Berwick Methodist Church

make sure there was enough room for the special occasions, like Sunday School anniversaries, evangelistic rallies and Presbyterian communion seasons with visiting preachers who brought in the crowds. But the sheer number of buildings was mainly the result of divisions within the largest denominations, the Presbyterians and the Methodists. Presbyterian splits ensured that most of the larger villages in North Northumberland, such as Wooler and Belford, had no fewer than three competing Presbyterian churches, and Berwick had six. In most of Tyneside and south-east Northumberland many communities had at least three Methodist chapels: Wesleyan, Primitive or United Methodist. The eventual reunification of these denominations created massive redundancy of buildings which saw many of them turned into carpet stores or houses.

Clearly falling church attendance has been an important factor since at least

the end of the First World War and even earlier. Congregations have become far too small to maintain many of the larger buildings, and even a congregation of 50 or 60 can feel dispirited amongst a sea of empty pews. But successful, well attended churches also present problems – they will often want to 'modernise' by stripping out historically important furnishings or subdividing a magnificent galleried interior so as to provide rooms for a wider range of activities. Brunswick chapel, next to Fenwick in the centre of Newcastle, illustrates this trend.

Brunswick

In Northumberland and Newcastle the most prolific builders were the Presbyterians (along with their close relatives, the Congregationalists) and the Methodists. Let us look first at the buildings of the Presbyterians, who joined with most of the Congregationalists as the United Reformed Church in 1972. It is important to dispel the idea that the North-East Presbyterians were merely a spillover from neighbouring Scotland.

Heaton pulpit and organ

Although in later years they benefitted from Scots migrants and the availability of Scots ministers, they were very much a product of Northumberland and of the religious battles of the 16th and 17th centuries. Almost all the rural and many of the urban congregations in the North East can trace their origins to the 1662 ejection of Church of England parish clergy who held Presbyterian or Independent views about church government. Their buildings began to appear after the 1689 Toleration Act. Throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, their typical building was the T-plan or rectangular meeting house, with galleries and seating facing inward towards a central

Branton interior

pulpit. It is worth remembering that this was not as markedly different as we might now imagine from the layout of parish churches, many of which had prominent pulpits, with box pews facing them and modest communion tables. The parish church at Whitby (St Mary's) and the old church at Robin Hood's Bay (St Stephen's) are rare surviving examples. The ecclesiological movements of the nineteenth century saw almost all parish churches adopting the altar-focussed layout and processional central aisle which people now think of as typical and traditional. Good examples of the meeting house type include the long disused Branton

Bankhill

Presbyterian Church (1781), Bankhill Presbyterian in Berwick (1835, now a house) and Zion chapel, Alnwick of 1815 (recently on the market after many years as an electrical warehouse). Great Bavington (1725, altered) is still in use. The 1756 Presbyterian Middle Meeting in Berwick has been out of religious use for over a century, but the traditional exterior has been imaginatively retained in a recent conversion to flats after many years as a warehouse. The best surviving example in our region of the interior of such meeting houses is the Baptist chapel at Hamsterley, County Durham (1774). An alternative to the plain rectangular or T-plan meeting house style evolved, partly from the need for staircases to the substantial galleries, into a building type with an almost castellated facade – Clayport Presbyterian in Alnwick is one example, and strikingly similar is a Presbyterian building in Tweedmouth which was used for many years (with its windows blocked up) by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and which is now a beautifully converted Art Gallery and residence known as the Watch Tower. The architect of both buildings is unknown, but it is tempting to speculate that it was the same man.

As the urban Presbyterians became more prosperous and moved up the social scale in the nineteenth century, they became more conscious of architectural and ecclesiastical

fashion, and hired some of the most ambitious and noted architects to build new chapels – or churches, as they increasingly liked to describe them. There are three chapels by John Dobson in one small area of North Shields, Howard Street and Northumberland Square. One, St Columba's, is still the home of a URC congregation. Still in use by the Salvation Army in the same area is a Benjamin Green chapel, built for another Presbyterian congregation. Thomas Oliver was hired to design the particularly grand Tynemouth Congregational Church, which dominates the skyline of the old centre of the town, but is now a shopping centre. In Berwick the United Presbyterians brought in the Liverpool architects, J. and I. Hay, who had built several of the denomination's churches in Scotland (Helensburgh West Kirk, for example); their building, which quite deliberately rivals and hides the preaching-house parish church of Cromwell's time, is now Berwick's Church of Scotland church.

Fashionable architecture brought with it a dilemma. The Gothic style was developed from Pugin onwards as a setting for worship in either the Catholic tradition or in either mainstream or Anglo-Catholic Church of England traditions. All but the most determined evangelicals in the Church of England eventually settled for a chancel with a prominent altar, and a processional central aisle leading towards it. It was a layout that was neither designed for nor suited to reformed worship, where preaching predominated, and the table used for the Lord's Supper was not an object to be venerated. Some architects accommodated a reformed layout within a Gothic structure in what became known as "Dissenting Gothic". Hay's Wallace Green United Presbyterian in Berwick was set out in this way; it is still almost unaltered internally, and is a fine example of its type. In other parts of the country the feeling against Gothic was strong, and, rather than compromise, denominations looked for architects who would follow Classical or Grecian styles, like Spurgeon's enormous Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in London and the long disused Wesley chapel in the middle of Hartlepool. Others settled for hybrid Italianate styles. But, in the later years of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, even Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and especially the Wesleyan Methodists, began to accept a "toned down" version of the post-Oxford movement Anglican layout. The "altar" might be only a slightly more ornamental table, but the choir pews faced each other across the chancel, and the pulpit stood to the side of the chancel arch. For some it must have felt more like a "real church", and it went with the assertion that nonconformists

were every inch as socially significant as church folk.

Turning to the Methodists, their earliest surviving buildings are at Berwick, Alnwick and High House in Weardale; the oldest in continuous use is at Newbiggin-in-Teesdale (1760, altered). Newcastle was an important centre for John Wesley's missionary journeys, with the Orphan House as its hub, replaced in 1820 by Brunswick chapel. Wesley travelled extensively and often throughout the region, preaching wherever he went, often in the open air or in secular buildings. He wanted "preaching houses" built, and had strong views on their design. His favourite layout was an octagonal building, and one survives from 1763, albeit altered, at Yarm. There is another still in use at Arbroath. "Build all the preaching houses, where the ground will permit, in the octagon form. It is best for the voice", he wrote. "Let the roof rise only one third of its breadth – this is the true proportion." "Let all preaching houses be plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely necessary." Sadly, he disliked the Alnwick chapel of 1786, which he likened to a scarecrow, and he makes no mention of the 1797 Berwick chapel, despite visiting the town after it had been built. At this stage, of course, Wesley still saw Methodism as a movement within the Church of England, and encouraged his followers to attend Morning Prayer and the Sacrament in their parish churches, while attending sermons and prayer meetings in the preaching house (a pattern which can still be seen in Scandinavian countries). Although Wesley's preachers began to administer sacramental services towards the end of Wesley's life, and universally within a short time of his death, the preaching house style remained the norm for Methodist buildings until well into the nineteenth century and beyond. Large city chapels such as Brunswick, Newcastle or Bondgate in Darlington were rectangular, with galleries around three or all four sides, and with a central pulpit. These were initially of the "wine glass" or the "two-decker" type, to be occupied by the preacher alone, but there was soon a trend for large rostrum pulpits or platforms in which several preachers could all be seated. The communion table was often in a recess behind the pulpit, a pattern still found at Wesley's Chapel, City Road in London, and which reflected the original layout of St James' Piccadilly.

Alnwick Methodist

Methodist building was soon accelerated and multiplied by splits and secessions, generally in opposition to the authoritarian and clerically-controlled leadership of the Wesleyan connexion. Groups such as the Methodist New Connexion (which began in Alnwick) and the Reformers or Free Methodists built in many parts of the north east, but the largest breakaway group was the Primitive Methodists, who grew to outnumber the Wesleyans in County Durham and in mining, fishing and farming communities in the north east. Many of their earlier and smaller buildings were basic preaching houses, rarely adorned with more than a painted text over the pulpit. But increasingly they adopted slightly more decorative styles – dissenting Italianate, for example. And there were grand buildings, like the Wesleyan shipowner-financed Memorial church in North Shields (still dissenting Gothic, with a pulpit-centred interior despite its very ecclesiastical spire). And grandeur was certainly to be seen in Hope and Maxwell's Free Methodist Church at Heaton of 1902 (often known as Simonside Terrace) with its Arts and Crafts decorative features within a dissenting Gothic structure. Meanwhile, the Wesleyans of St John's Ashbrooke in Sunderland, and their architect Robert Curwen, went the whole way with Gothic interior as well as exterior on a monumental scale

Watch Tower, Tweedmouth

– and both of these remain actively used churches. Even as late as 1926 you can see the lingering influence of the ecclesiological movement in the internal layout of the more modest St John's Methodist, Whitley Bay.

The Baptists had far fewer congregations in the north east, but they still produced some notable buildings. They employed the architect James Cubitt, whose father was a Baptist minister. He was a strong advocate of Dissenting Gothic, and designed the monumental Union Chapel in Islington (still in use for both URC services and pop concerts!). In Tyneside he designed a sadly lost chapel in Jesmond, and the still active Westgate Road Baptist chapel in Newcastle's West End. Quaker

preference for simplicity is beautifully and silently exemplified in the 1760 Friends Meeting House at Coanwood, south of Haltwhistle, which is in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust.

Coanwood

The Unitarians, few in number but very influential in 19th century Newcastle, deserve special mention for the only place of worship in the region built during the Second World War. For architects they turned to Cackett, Burns Dick and McKellar. This practice was responsible for the Spanish City dome in Whitley Bay, the Northern Goldsmiths' clock, and a very ingenious and appealing Primitive Methodist Chapel on a corner site in Hexham (1909 – now back in use as a community church). The Church of the Divine Unity, hidden away in Ellison Place behind the central by-pass in Newcastle, is worth the effort of finding.

So what's the problem? We have lost many interesting buildings, most of which had a lot of potential. Ashington Methodist Central Hall, which was the biggest public building in the town and a concert venue; Blyth Central Methodist; Jesmond Baptist, to name a few examples. We have lost buildings which contributed to the street scene, and which were valuable community assets. In some communities, like Crookham, Milfield, Glanton and Hauxley in Northumberland, the chapel is the only place of worship, and the only location for weddings and funerals: it would be a real deprivation for the community if they were lost. Many chapels contain excellent woodwork, attractive glass, and important memorials. Many tell the story of faith and of life in their communities. Sometimes the losses seem careless and irresponsible. When Blyth Central Methodist (1868, Grade

Church of the Divine Unity and Durant Hall

II listed, designed by North Shields architect F.R.N. Haswell) found itself marginally in the way of the planned new shopping area, the Inspector at the inquiry described it as "a

building of outstanding architectural interest which it is desirable should be preserved if at all possible...However, the overriding factor in my view is that of the viability of the town centre redevelopment scheme towards which the Council have worked so hard". Permission was given to demolish – a very bad precedent.

So what are the solutions? First, there needs to be more understanding of the value and significance of these buildings by the community at large and by the denominations which own them. The Methodist church is starting to talk about this in terms of "mission-shaped heritage", but that has not prevented unnecessary losses such as Blyth and the sale of Berwick. There needs to be a real effort to retain the best buildings in active church use, drawing on sources of grant funding and giving support to congregations which may lack the skills to tackle major conservation projects. In some cases, particularly in urban areas, new congregations and new denominations can take on surplus chapels – in London there is actually a shortage of vacant church buildings for the many flourishing migrant congregations which have sprung up. Sympathetic conversion to galleries, concert halls, community halls, offices or flats can retain the external features. But this is not an option for the best examples of buildings whose value lies mainly in their interior fittings and features. It was to deal with some of these that the Historic Chapels Trust was set up, and in a national portfolio of 20 buildings it has three in the North East – Coanwood Friends Meeting House (1760), Biddlestone Catholic chapel (1820, built inside a mediaeval pele tower overlooking the Coquet Valley) and the beautifully furnished Westgate Primitive Methodist chapel (1871) in Weardale. The Trust has had significant success in raising the capital to rescue these buildings (although we are seriously short of what we need for Westgate), but the it faces real difficulty raising funds for the continuing care of, and community access to, buildings which do not have much potential for income generation. It is only a solution for a small number of the most significant and threatened buildings, and it is by no means a secure business model. I hope members of this society will take an interest in HCT's work, and particularly in its North-East buildings.

Do visit these buildings, for they offer a really rewarding experience. Do consider their place in the future. The N and N is used to being a lone voice: on nonconformist buildings and their value. It is not alone, but the task is challenging and everyone's help is needed.

Protecting and enhancing our landscape, culture and built environment for future heritage

Founded in 1924 the Northumberland & Newcastle Society continues to have influence in protecting the environmental wealth and heritage of the County and City, as it has for approaching 100 years.

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