

The United Reformed Church

Guisborough United Reformed Church began its life of witness over 200 years ago. It was formed as a result of the long process of the Dissenters Evangelical Revival of the 18th, Century. This in turn had its roots in the 17th, century when many clergymen, who spoke out against the disreputable practices of the established church, lost their 'livings' and were thrown out of their parishes for refusing to conform and accept the existing conditions of service.

These men were committed to the notion of 'free thought' and the practical use of reason in understanding the will of God. Dissenters felt that their advocacy of the reign of reason was directed by God alone. Hence, to go against the dictates of reason was to violate the will of God. For them it was an article of faith that any man – high or low, rich or poor - had the means to communicate directly with his 'Lord and Maker.' without the need for the help or intervention of a priest, bishop or any other member of the clergy. It was a challenging doctrine at the time and many of these 'dissenters' suffered greatly for their beliefs. This changed when the Act of Tolerance, of 1689, gave such people some limited scope to practice their faith.

This meant that during the 18th, century many itinerant ministers and preachers were able to tour the country evangelising small groups of people with their particular brand of dissenting freedom of expression and of faith. In North Yorkshire, as a direct result of this free ranging mission, a total of twenty Independent or Congregational Churches were built during the years 1770 to 1820. The first such Church was established at Whitby followed by similar places of worship in Malton, Pickering, Leyburn, Keld, Reeth, Guisborough, Mickleby, Rillington, Northallerton, Easingwold and in other towns and villages

An early reference to Guisborough, in this story, is of the Dissenter's meetings in the town in 1705. It is not clear, as to how many people were influenced by the campaign at that time but later in 1760 a small 'Dissenting Meeting Room' was registered in the town by Thomas Corney, a skinner, so that by this time the seeds of dissent and independence had effectively taken root amongst a small group of local residents.

In the 1796, Mr William Norris, an evangelist, was sent by the Evangelical Society of London to the North Riding of Yorkshire He preached in Guisborough and in other places within the county. His mission was successful, and we are told: "*In 1802 he left twenty members in the care of Mr. James Scott, a lay preacher, admitted to the church by him.*"

These members continued to meet for worship and fellowship in a small Meeting House situated in Westgate. An early baptismal register indicates that the church was probably founded around the year 1798. The first entry is for a James Scott, son of James and Mary Scott - with the ceremony being performed by William Norris on June 9th, 1799 – the evangelist baptising the son of the future lay pastor of the church.

The Rev. William Hinners, an Independent Minister from Edinburgh in Scotland, became interested in the Guisborough cause. He seems to have been living in the town before 1810, was reported as preaching in various local places since 1806, and may have had oversight charge of a church in Stokesley at the time. Within a few years, under his direction, a church was built and named *The Ebenezer Chapel*.

It was opened on Thursday, 31st, October, 1811. The event is described in an account taken from the *Evangelical Magazine* of the time. Here the writer reveals what took place on that memorable day.

"October 31st, 1811. A neat and commodious Chapel was opened at Guisborough, a respectable market town in Cleaveland, Yorkshire. In the morning Mr Jackson, of Green Hammerton, supplicated the divine blessing, and preached from Isaiah chapter 55, verse II – ("So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.") In the afternoon Mr. Neale, of Thirsk, preached from II Corinthians, chapter 6., verse I. ("We then, as workers, together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.") In the evening the place was crowded; when Mr. Hinners prayed; and the people having been disappointed of some of their friends in the ministry, Mr Jackson addressed them a second time, from Galatians chapter I, verse 24 – ("And they glorified God in me.") And he concluded this pleasing service of the day with prayer....."

The interior of the Ebenezer Chapel (*Stone of help*) was similar in appearance to many of the places of worship that were built about this time. There was a gallery at the south end of the building, supported by two iron pillars, with a clock facing the pulpit. The staircase leading to the gallery was on the right hand side of the entrance. Behind the pulpit there was a door, at the head of a small flight of steps. The building was kept comfortable in the cold weather by means of an iron stove. The front of the building was a plain wall with a central door and two small high windows to give light to the gallery area. It had seating for about 250 people.

William Hinners served as minister until 1824 when he accepted the pastorate of the Great Ayton Independent Chapel and then went onto found a church in Stokesley in 1826. He died, aged 72, in 1846 and is buried in the Great Ayton churchyard.

Beginning with his successor, Samuel Blair, (1826) the church continued to serve as an independent place of worship under a succession of nine pastors until in 1871 the building had its first refurbishment – and perhaps a small change of direction.

A new floor was laid, new seats and pulpit installed and a minister's house bought. Plans dated 1875 show a proposal to build a new church with a spire. These ideas were never implemented – but perhaps are symbolic of a move away from the simple puritanical, dissenting beliefs of the founders to a more conventional view of faith in line with that self confident Victorian image. The later alterations, to the front of the church, do tend to give that impression - with the bolder red brick frontage and stained glass windows – of an inclination to compete visually with other local church buildings – a move, perhaps, towards consensus rather than the strongly guarded independence of former years.

During the Rev. Robert Roberts ministry (1876 - 1882) children's religious education became an important issue - for at that time a sum of money was raised to build a Sunday School – but his removal to the Unitarian Church arrested any further progress.

This project was delayed for some years, with several failed attempts to revive the idea, until the Rev. Wardle Ridley accepted a call to the pastorate in 1901. He was a man of great drive and energy and came to Guisborough on the condition that the proposed building plans were pushed through. On arrival he visited towns throughout Yorkshire, on behalf of the project, and in six months raised sufficient money to build a Sunday School, vestry and effect other alterations.

So in 1904/5 the church was substantially reconstructed, given a new front, gable, seats, windows, gas fittings, pipe organ and stained glass window in memory of Joseph Wright 45 years a member and elder. This was all done at a cost of £1,100 – a substantial sum at this time. Needless to

say the congregation were sadly disappointed when the Rev Ridley soon decided to move on to Burley-in Warfedale, Yorkshire in 1906.

By the time of the church's centenary, in 1911, there was still a debt of £200 outstanding on the cost of these extensive alterations. Members decided to use the occasion as an incentive to clear this burden – and included fund raising activities as part of the celebrations. There was a special concert and a sale of work – with Joseph Hinners – grandson of the first minister - invited from Southport as a special guest. Their efforts were rewarded and the debt was paid off.

There are two war memorials in the church commemorating the sacrifices made by the men of Guisborough in the conflict of 1914-1918. During WWI Thomas Stanley, who would later become a minister in the church, (1928-1931), was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. The Rev Stanley was described as a courageous and determined person - with strong principles. His stand against the war would have led to a hostile response from most people at that time – clearly suggesting that he was indeed a man of strong character.

During the Rev. Albert Ore's ministry (1925-1928) the grouping of Guisborough and Great Ayton Churches took place. At one time Lazenby was united with the Guisborough congregation.

The Rev Frederick Gillson (1932-1938) wrote the earliest known history of the Church. In his account he records the size and activities of the congregation as they were in 1937. Church members are listed as 48, with 16 non-resident and 4 Junior Church. He then goes on to say that there were 90 scholars in all departments of the Sunday School and 10 teachers. Worship was at 10.30am and 6.00pm on Sundays. Activities included: Junior Church – Morning School, Primary Department, Senior's and Young Men's Class; a choir; Guild; Woman's meeting; Prayer Meeting and a Table Tennis club. In fact the church could be described as a very active fellowship.

In 1972 the Congregational Church joined with the Presbyterian Church of England to become the United Reformed Church. This was the first union of Christian denominations since the Reformation and needed to be ratified by Act of Parliament. The Guisborough congregation voted to join the union with only a few 'dissenting' voices speaking against the decision.

This act of ecumenicalism was continued under the ministry of the Rev. David Batchelor (1969-1976) who worked with

the Anglicans and Methodists, in the town, to form a combined fellowship. The covenant negotiations unfortunately foundered and the process was formally terminated in the early 80's.

In 1991 the church, which was then a joint pastorate with Lingdale United Reformed Church, became vacant along with the other local churches of Redcar and Marton and Nunthorpe.

It was then decided that the best way forward, for the future, was to form a Church grouping. This became known as the East Cleveland Group with its first minister being Tim London, called to serve in 1993 and joined in the following year by Norma Johnson. Linthorpe United Reformed Church became a member of the Group a few years later and the two ministers worked as a team until the Rev. London left in the year 2000.

Around about this time (2000) the Methodist minister, Kathleen Bowes proposed the idea of a church organisation to bring the churches in greater contact with the local community – in an attempt to fulfil the mission of the church to serve people and - in the process - bring a greater awareness of faith in Christ to a wider public. The organisation became known as the 'Bridge.' - which through a range of activities such as youth work, Soup and Roll Service, Listening Service, Youth Chat Room, Half Century Club and other work, has helped the various volunteers from Guisborough Churches to form closer ties with the local community.

In 2004 the local URC church organisation was changed with the introduction of a Mission Partnership which linked the five churches of the East Cleveland Group with churches in Billingham, Stockton and Thornaby. The aim of the Partnership was to focus more attention on the spiritual life of the churches. In practice this would have the objective of giving support that would encourage the building up of active, lively fellowships - able to reach out into the community in a creative and helpful way.

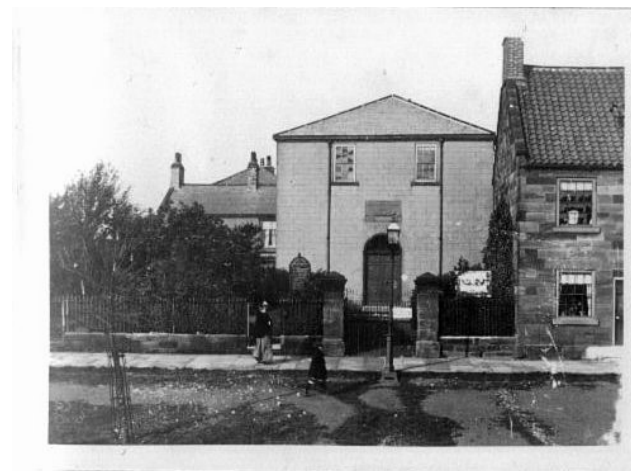
By the time this process had started the Rev Johnson was joined by Rev Meg Robb and together they worked with others on the new organisation.

Norma Johnson moved from the East Cleveland Group, to accept a call to serve as minister for Clithero URC, Lancashire, in 2005. It was essential at this point, in the development of the Mission Partnership, that we appoint another minister, as soon as possible, to re-establish an effective pastoral team in the East Cleveland area. In 2006 Rev. Catey Morrison accepted our call to service and moved, from a pastorate in Dudley and Langley Green, West Midlands, to be inducted as minister on Saturday, 22nd, July.



A SHORT HISTORY of GUISBOROUGH UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

56, Westgate, Guisborough.



Church circa 1904/5 before reconstruction

Ministers:
Rev. Catey Morrison
Rev Meg Robb

2007