

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE

HERITAGE OPEN DAY



OLD MEETING HOUSE, DUDLEY

This 1717 building is the oldest existing building of worship in Dudley and is one of the half dozen oldest buildings in the town. It was Grade II listed in 1949, meaning it is a building of special interest and warranting every effort to preserve it. It is now a Unitarian chapel.

FIRST CHAPEL 1702 - 1715



Although this 1855 map is from nearly 150 years after the first chapel was built, it shows the chapel was located on the very edge of town, even in 1855!

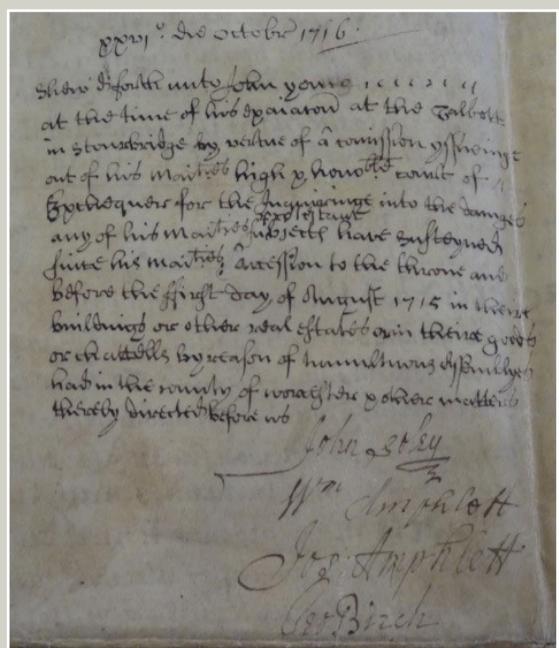
The first chapel on this site was built as a "dissenters' meetinghouse", probably for Presbyterians. The trustees of the Old Meeting House (OMH) used monies collected from the congregation, as well as their own money, to fund the building of 'a convenient house for the congregation to meet together and worship'. The site is a usual one for early dissenting meeting houses, being down an alley from the main road (see 'Persecution of Dissenters').

A 1703 legal document confirms that at that time the land contained 'buildings, gates, walls and road and in the said buildings a pulpit, tables, galleries, seats and other things used for the worship and service of God'. An account of the time refers to 'the two great pillars that bear up the roofe', being all we currently know about the look of the original building.

This original chapel was destroyed by rioters in July 1715 (see 'I'm reading you the Riot Act!').

EXISTING CHAPEL, BUILT 1717

The rebuild cost was £299 17s. 2d. and was paid for by government compensation. The following text is a transcription of the formal record of application for compensation:



'26 October 1716

Shew tiforth[?] unto John Young at the time of his ex[am]inat[i]on at the Talbott in Stourbridge by virtue of a commission yssueing [issuing] out of his Maj[es]ties high and hon[ora]ble court of Exchequer for the Inquieringe [inquiring/inquiry] into the dam[a]ge any of his Maj[es]ties subjects have susteyned [sustained] since his Maj[es]ties accession to the throne and before the first day of August 1715 in theire buildings or other real estate or chattels by reason of tumultuous Assemblies had in the county of Worcester and other matters thereby directed before us

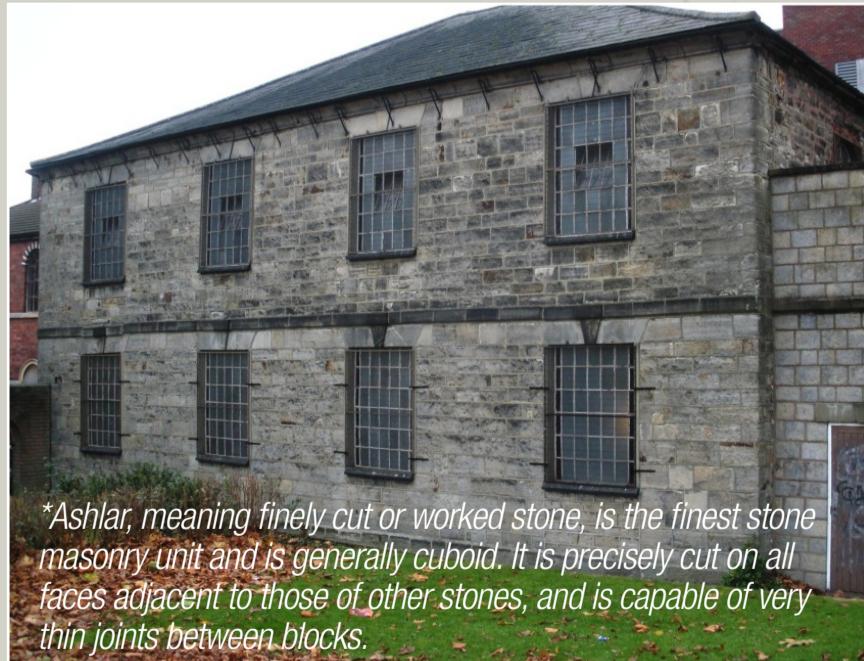
[Signatures of...] John Foley, W[illia]m Amphlett, Jos[eph] Amphlett, Geo[rge] Birch, Th[oma]s Jukes Jr.

BUILDERS

Some of the workmen who were engaged in the building include Samuel Clement of Dudley, carpenter and joiner; John Conquest of Oldswinford, joiner; Daniel Bate of Dudley, stonemason; and Benjamin Cookesey of Stourbridge, also a stonemason.

EXTERNAL WALLS

These are local sandstone, mined mostly in Lower Gornal. The OMH is the earliest complete building of Gornal stone that can be dated with any accuracy. The visible parts of the original walling show random rubble to the south (pulpit end) elevation and ashlar* blocks of 24 x 10.5 inches maximum size to the west (Inhedge side). These have the characteristic tooled surface treatment found on virtually all Gornal stone work.



*Ashlar, meaning finely cut or worked stone, is the finest stone masonry unit and is generally cuboid. It is precisely cut on all faces adjacent to those of other stones, and is capable of very thin joints between blocks.

The west wall (Inhedge side) is decorated with a platband (horizontal band or string course between the lower and upper windows) and a moulded eaves cornice.

WINDOWS (external view)

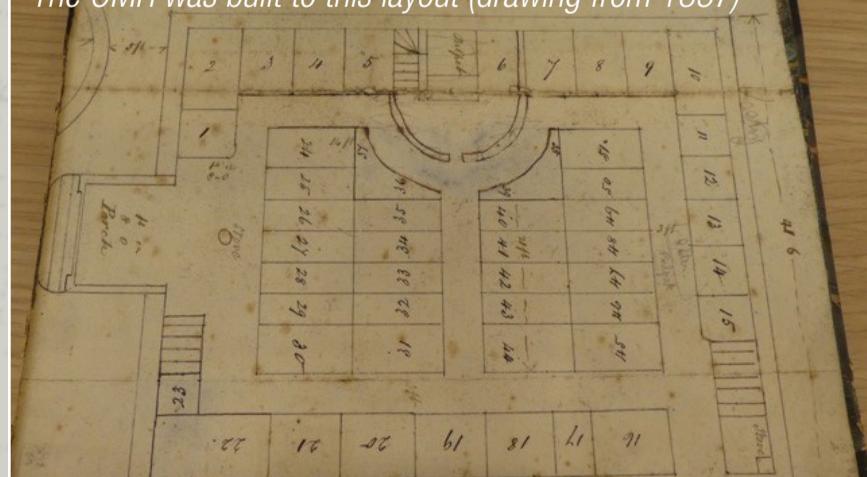
Eight windows on each side with 'keyblocks', a wedge shaped stone in the lintel. The east wall windows, however, have timber lintels (not currently visible). The two tiers of windows reflect the galleried interior.

INTERIOR

The interior (38ft by 48ft) has a gallery around three sides and pulpit at the south end. The gallery seating and pulpit are believed to be from the 1700s. Galleries provide extra seating closer to the pulpit than a larger floor area would. In 1840 the OMH had new roofing, new iron-framed windows and was re-painted.



The OMH was built to this layout (drawing from 1857)



REFURBISHMENTS 1840 AND 1869



In 1840 the OMH had new roofing, new iron-framed windows and was re-painted.

In 1869 it was closed for more than six months for further refurbishment. The Dudley Herald reported that 'not a single feature of the interior of the meeting-house remained'. In another account '... the chapel has been beautified to such an extent that it is scarcely recognisable to anyone who saw it before the alterations. Upwards of £850 have been expended on the interior and exterior of the building... The alterations have been carried out by Messrs. Bodin and Grove, builders, and the painting and decorations by Mr. Humphrey, of the Inhedge'. Mr Bodin and Mr Grove were both members of the OMH, renting a pew there. No details of an architect have been found.

The layout was turned round, with the pulpit facing the entrance rather than being on the left side as you enter. The original walls were retained and plastered. The former organ was replaced by a new one built by Messrs. Bishop and Starr of London.

FRONT EXTERNAL WALL

The north wall was stuccoed and an entrance-porch and organ-chamber tower added. It has a central angular bay, a moulded stone door-case with arched fanlight, triple arched windows either side of the door and wood bracket eaves. The Italianate styling reflects interest at this time in using such architecture in houses, municipal and commercial buildings.

WINDOWS

Two tall round-arched windows at the south (pulpit) end replace two tiers of windows of which the upper lintels remain.

ROOF

Hipped slate roof. Hipped means all sides slope downwards to the walls, i.e. no gable-end, usually with a fairly gentle slope.

COLUMNS

The cast iron columns supporting the galleries, which reflect the importance of the iron industry in the area, were probably installed in the 1869 refurbishment, to replace wider stone ones. The more slender columns would have improved the congregation's view.



PEWS

The original high box-like pews were replaced in 1869. These pews (and dado rail) were removed in the late 1900s due to rot.

PERSECUTION IN THE LATE 1600s & 1700s

BACKGROUND

Dissenters, who also became known as non-conformists, ultimately included Unitarians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists and the Salvation Army. Dissenters are those that refuse to accept certain doctrines of an established church, in this case Protestants who dissented from the Church of England.

PERSECUTION

Following the Restoration in 1660, five acts of parliament were passed specifically to limit the religious and civil rights of Dissenters. The restrictions included: no right to assemble and pray; exclusion from public office; and dissenting ministers were forbidden from coming within five miles of incorporated towns and forbidden to teach in schools. Combined with other acts, all Dissenters were prevented from holding civil or military office and prevented from being awarded degrees by the universities of Cambridge and Oxford. One of the acts, the Act of Uniformity in 1662, required Anglican ordination for all clergy. Some 2,000 dissenting ministers were ejected from their jobs (the 'Great Ejection'). Some set up dissenting congregations with members of their old congregation despite the risk of fines or imprisonment if they were caught worshipping in what were regarded as illegal gatherings. They had effectively been driven underground.

This changed for most Dissenters with the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689. As a 'reward' for supporting the avoidance of a Catholic monarch in 1688, they were allowed their own places of worship and their own schoolteachers, so long as they accepted certain oaths of allegiance. However for non-trinitarian *Unitarian dissenters, although no longer being hunted down, the above relaxations did not apply.

Dissenting congregations spread significantly, particularly in the Black Country. In the 1690s a Rev. Willets preached at the house of a Joseph Smith in Wolverhampton Street, Dudley. In 1702 the first dissenting meeting house was built on the same site as the existing 1717 chapel, in a typical site down an alley away from the main road, reflecting society's lack of tolerance at that time. This original meeting house was destroyed in one of the 'church and king' riots in July 1715, 'the mob crying out "Down with the Roundheads" and "High Church and Dr. Sacheverell for ever". The mob broke down the gatts... and about 11 o'clock at night sett fire to the two great pillars that bear up to the roofe, which fell at two o'clock" (see 'I'm reading you the Riot Act!').

During those early years, the Dissenters' belief in civil and religious liberty; their advocacy of greater social justice; and their opposition to slavery, possibly alienated the Government as much as the Anglicans, both (it is rumoured) of which encouraged mobs to attack the dissenting chapels.

Attacks by orthodox Christians continued during the 1700s, including assaults on Quakers and Methodists in the 1750s.

A local attack in 1791 relates to Dr Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) who was a Unitarian minister at Birmingham Lower Meeting House (near New Street) between 1780 and 1791. He was admired by many for some of his religious views, but his many talents included discovering oxygen and he was a member of the Lunar Society (a monthly gathering which included Matthew Boulton, James Watt and Josiah Wedgwood). Priestley was a strong believer in civil and religious liberty and spoke out about the need for social reform and greater justice for the common man. He was a friend of Benjamin Franklin, then American Ambassador to the Court of France. All of this must have annoyed and/or felt threatening to the Government and the Church of England. Dissenters' attempts to gain full civil rights, and their support of the French Revolution, was also causing controversy. On the second anniversary of the French Revolution in 1791 (which Priestley had intended to publicly celebrate), a mob looted and burned down both Priestley's home and laboratory in Sparkbrook and the Birmingham Lower Meeting House. Other Dissenters' homes and chapels and those of people associated with them, many of them respected Birmingham citizens, were also attacked. The Riot Act was not read by the authorities until three days after the riots started. These became known as the Priestley or Birmingham Riots. Priestley subsequently fled to America where he founded the first American Unitarian Church in Philadelphia.

TOLERATION

Toleration of all non-conformists gradually improved between the late 1700s and end of 1800s.

One of the first members of the Dudley Old Meeting House was John Finch, a local nailmaker. One of his descendants, William Smith, was an independent MP who in 1813 sponsored the Doctrine of the Trinity Act, making it legal to practice Unitarianism.



Finch House, a fine Grade II* listed building, built for John and Mary Finch in 1707 in Wolverhampton Street.

* Definition of 'Unitarianism'

In the 1500s some readers of the Bible found that it spoke of one God, without qualification. This did not square with the orthodox Christian doctrine of the trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As these people believed God to be a 'unity' rather than a 'trinity' the term 'Unitarian' was born and was first recorded in the late 1600s. Unitarianism became a formal denomination in 1774.

DUDLEY DISSENTERS' CHARITIES AND SOCIETIES

BAYLIES CHARITY SCHOOL

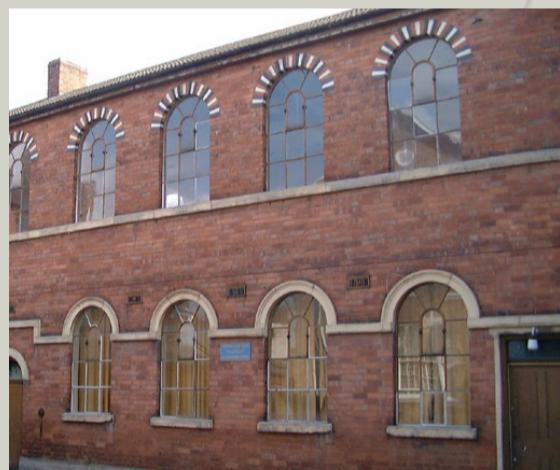


In 1732 three members of the Old Meeting House (OMH), Robert, Samuel and Anne Baylies, used their own money to set up

the Baylies School Charitable Trust. The trustees included members of the OMH and its minister. Its purpose was 'teaching, instructing and clothing fifty boys, to be chosen from the surrounding parishes, whose parents would not be able to give them learning'. The clothing included distinctive blue coats. The school was eventually closed, taken over by state education, but the 1823 grade II listed building still stands in Tower Street displaying two statues of pupils on its front wall. The trustees continue to make educational grants to needy students from Dudley.

DANIEL PARSONS CHARITY SCHOOL

A second charity school was founded, adjacent to the yard at the front of the OMH. One historical account refers to a building from 1786 which was demolished



and re-built in 1865, being the existing building. Daniel Parsons, a local nail ironmonger and member of the OMH, had left £10,000 in his will to found the school 'for the education and clothing of boys and girls being children of poor persons, parishioners of Dudley'. The pupils here wore a maroon and grey coat. A former pupil writes about the obligatory attendance each Sunday at the OMH, where the Parsons boys sat on the left hand balcony and the Baylies boys in their blue coats sat on the right hand balcony. It must have been a very colourful sight! This school too was taken over by the state education system and the building was relatively recently sold off. The trustees also continue to fund educational grants to needy students from Dudley.

GIRLS SCHOOL OF INDUSTRY

The OMH provided trustees and, as the school was supported totally by voluntary contributions, hosted fundraising 'Annual Sermons on behalf of the Girls School of Industry' from 1786 to 1865.

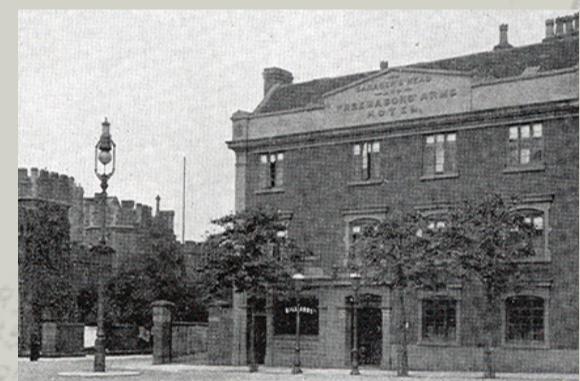
The school was set up 'to teach and instruct 30 poor girls to read, write, sew and knit, and to clothe annually 10 of the poorest of them' and appears to have been established by 1757. It was reported that 'the girls take in work, and make clothes for the blue-coat school and Sunday School... and they are allowed to work for their parents two half days in each week. They also make their own clothing... Besides female work, the girls are otherwise well educated'.

DUDLEY BOOK SOCIETY

The society was founded in 1732 and is probably the oldest continuing book club in the world.

Samuel Baylies, an original trustee of the OMH, founded the society to further the cause of civil and religious liberty and to provide members with books which were 'difficult to purchase and dangerous to own' (see 'Persecution of Dissenters'). These seditious books were circulated among the members of the society using small boys to avoid detection by the authorities. The dissenting members were joined by other leading tradesmen of Dudley, some of whom were members of the established church but who sympathised with the ideals of the society.

As well as gathering in the Saracen's Head to discuss business, politics and religion (where many schemes for



the advancement of education and for the reform of local government and parliament were hatched), the members of the society held an annual dinner at which the toast to 'civil and religious liberty' was proposed.

Ministers of the OMH were generally the presidents of the society and for many years one of the masters at the Baylies School held the post of secretary.

The society currently has around 30 members who meet for dinner each year to hear a guest speaker propose the usual toast and to listen to a response from a Unitarian. The books purchased during the preceding year are auctioned off and any member who fails to attend the dinner, or fails to buy a book, is fined! The auction proceeds are used to purchase new books for reading and then auctioning off at the following year's dinner.

“I’M READING YOU THE RIOT ACT!”

The sort of riot that caused the burning down of the original 1702 meeting house in July 1715 (see ‘Persecution of Dissenters’) was what led to the passing of the Riot Act in 1714 which came into force in August 1715.

BACKGROUND TO THE ACT

From 1710 onwards there had been a series of ‘church and king’ related riots across the country.

The **Sacheverell** riots were serious outbreaks of public disorder, generally by Tory supporters and Anglicans, across England in 1710. They were a reaction to the prosecution of Henry Sacheverell, a high church Anglican, whose sermons had been depicting what he saw as threats to the Church of England. He was effectively verbally attacking Dissenters and indirectly the Whig party, rivals of the Tories. He was tried by the House of Lords, at Whig instigation, which ruled that his sermons should be publicly burned and he was banned from preaching for three years. This made him a martyr in the eyes of many Tories and triggered the riots.

Dissenters’ homes and meeting houses were attacked because Dissenters tended to support the Whigs. In addition many Anglicans were unhappy that the growth in the number of Independent, Baptist and Presbyterian chapels was being tolerated. The Anglicans felt this diminished the apparent authority of the Church of England. The attacks on Presbyterian meeting houses started in London and spread across the country.

The **Coronation** riots of October 1714 resulted from the coronation of the first Hanoverian king of Britain, George I. By the time of his coronation George had already dismissed the Tories from office and replaced them with a Whig-dominated government. The rioters supported High Church and Sacheverell’s sentiments and targeted Dissenters’ chapels as well as disrupting the loyalists’ coronation celebrations.

Further violence during the spring and summer of 1715 became known as the **England or Rebellion** riots. The riots, again against George I and the new Whig government, were also aimed at Dissenters’ chapels due to their support of the Whigs. The violence started in London and reached the Black Country area in late June. Some 40% of the Midland Union Churches were attacked and set on fire, sometimes during a service.

The Sacheverell and Rebellion/England riots are regarded as perhaps the most serious instances of public disorder in the 1700s.

THE ACT

The Act’s full title is “An Act for Preventing Tumults and Riotous Assemblies and for the more speedy and effectual Punishing the Rioters”.

It makes reference to “many rebellious riots and tumults [that] have been [taking place of late] in diverse parts of this kingdom”, adding that those involved “presum[e] so to do, for that the punishments provided by the laws now in being are not adequate to such heinous offences”.

This law strengthened magistrates powers and allowed mayors and Justices of the Peace, etc., to disperse demonstrations (any group of 12 or more people unlawfully assembled to cause (or begin to cause) serious damage to places of religious worship, houses, barns, and stables) without fear of prosecution. Those assembled were ordered to disperse or face punitive action. Anyone still gathered within one hour was guilty of an offence punishable by death or transportation to a penal colony.

For the Act to be enforceable the following had to be read to the gathering: “Our sovereign lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons, being assembled, immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business, upon the pains contained in the act made in the first year of King George, for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies. God save the King.”

Similar laws were passed in countries that were colonies of Great Britain, for example Australia and the USA, and in some cases the legislation is still in force.

In the UK the Act was repealed by the Statute Law (Repeals) Act 1973 by which time it was no longer punishable by death.

“I’m reading you the Riot Act!” is still a stern reprimand or warning which many of us will have said, or have been on the receiving end of, at some point in our lives.

Julie A Clarke, Dudley Heritage Volunteer
August 2018

Acknowledgments: Arthur A Rollason ‘The Old Meeting House... Dudley’; Graham Hague ‘The Unitarian Heritage. An Architectural Survey’; GE Eyre ‘Midland Churches: A History of the Congregations on the roll of the Midland Christian Union’; Tim Bridges ‘Churches of the Black Country’; Blocksidge’s Dudley Almanac 1884-86; Ned Williams ‘Black Country Chapels’ (Three Selections); Ned Williams ‘Dudley Rediscovered’; John S Roper ‘Dudley: The Town in the 18th Century’; Keith Hodgkins ‘The Building Stones of the Dudley Area’; Historic England ‘Nonconformist Places of Worship’; Sandy Ellis ‘Old Meeting House, Dudley’; James Scott ‘MS History of Cradley Pres. Church’; Inquirer, Scott MSS Stourbridge; Parliamentary Gazetteer 1845-6; Various Dudley Herald articles; blackcountry-unitarians.org.uk; unitarian.org.uk; unitarianhistory.org; midland-unitarian-association.org; blackcountryhistory.org; historicengland.org; dudleyrotary.org.uk; jpb.co.uk/booksoc/index; Dudley Archives.