

HIDDEN IPSWICH: Inside the Unitarian Meeting House

You may just have walked past this building, with its impressive façade and striking yellow doors! But what is inside? Here we take a look...!

Situated in the centre of Ipswich is a beautiful white building. Its front features two striking mustard yellow doors, surrounded by a number of windows.

But do you know what it is, what it's used for, and its history? You may have walked past it time and time again, noting its impressive façade... wondering what it would be like to take a peep inside?

That building happens to be the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, and impressively dates all the way back to 1699.

But before heading inside, it's important to understand the context behind the building, and how the Unitarians came to Ipswich.

Unitarianism is a liberal religious movement, and originated in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

"Unitarians departed from the orthodox line after a group of people studied the bible for themselves and came to the conclusion that some of the doctrines of the church were not supported by scripture. And one of those doctrines which they found to be unscriptural was the doctrine of the trinity, and the idea that God is three-in-one. They said the bible says God is one - and that's where 'unitarian' comes from," explains Cliff Reed.

Cliff is a local Unitarian, and was the meeting house's minister for 36 years before retiring a decade ago.

"As Unitarianism developed throughout the years, the idea was that each person came to faith in their own way, and their particular beliefs might differ as everyone has a different experience of life and the divine.

"When the Civil War ended, Parliament enacted a law which said that people needed to subscribe to the Church of England - and any ministers who didn't would be expelled. This happened to around 2,000 clergy across England and Wales. They were forced out of churches, and took a lot of supporters and laypeople with them."

So these people started their own groups, initially meeting in secret.

"In 1672, there was a relaxation and some of the ministers were able to obtain licenses to preach.

They gathered groups of believers together, and two of the places they met in Ipswich were in the old Blackfriars, and on Silent Street."

And in 1689, a law was passed which gave dissenters the freedom to build their own places of worship. However, uncertainty still loomed in the air, and the Ipswich Unitarians decided to wait 10 years before constructing what is now the town's Unitarian Meeting House in 1699.

The land for the Meeting House was purchased for £150 by Ipswich mercer Thomas Bantoft, and the contract for the building was signed on August 5, 1699 by six signatories.

Ipswich's 'house carpenter' Joseph Clark built the meeting house, which cost £256, 14 shillings and sixpence. The contract - a copy of which can be found in the back of the Meeting House to this day - provided for 'four Barrells of good small Beere', to be supplied to Clark and his workmen while 'imployed in said Building'. It is thought this beer was supplied by local brewer Thomas Catchpole (who was also one of the congregation's signatories).

Construction of the building didn't take long - and the timber-framed structure came together in just two and a half months. Its official opening ceremony took place on April 26, 1700 - and that first sermon, which was preached by Reverend John Fairfax, still survives, and can be found framed in the back room of the meeting house.

The meeting house measures 18 metres by 15 metres, with a ground area of 252 square metres. The ceiling is 6.6 metres high, and the building stands on brick plinths, with timber-framed stud walls.

"It's a classic dissenting meeting house of the 17th century, and you will notice how different it is to a traditional church. It's a radical departure, which was quite deliberate and reflects the distinctive theology," explains Cliff.

The meeting house's focal point is the pulpit, which is located in the centre of the south wall. "The pulpit is in the style of Grinling Gibbons, who was one of the great woodcarvers of the period. We don't think it's actually by him, but rather



ABOVE:
The first ever sermon,
which dates back to
1700

Picture:
LINDA KING/IPSWICH
UNITARIAN HOUSE



someone who studied with him."

Handcrafted from pine and limewood, it is the original pulpit and is in great condition.

The windows and doors are also original - and if you look closely, you'll notice that the windows are clear glass rather than colourful stained glass that is typical of most churches. Once again, this is to denote the move away from Protestantism.

"The idea behind the building is that it would be unadorned. Stained glass windows and statues were idolatry, a violation of the second commandment, and a distraction. You want the light to come in through a clear window, unmediated between God and the believer," explains Cliff.

And on one of the doors on the side, there's an eyehole. "When the dissenters became Unitarians through theological changes, they often found themselves politically and religiously at the wrong end of the authorities and rival sects. During that time, some meeting houses were subject to attacks and burned down.

"To our knowledge, the Ipswich one wasn't attacked, but they did put a spyhole in the door. When the meeting house was built, this door was the main entrance, and people would come down the alley from St Nicholas Street. If people inside the house felt like they may be attacked, they could have someone keeping an eye open for any hostile people approaching."

Two more original features in the meeting house are the central three-tiered chandelier (which holds 24 candles), and the hexagonally-faced clock on the north gallery.

A few things have changed over the years however, including the box pew seating arrangements. "When they were first built, the pews had seats on all four sides, but in 1900 they decided to make all of the seats face the front. It's likely that in the early days, men and women sat separately."

And a century after the building was constructed, an organ was finally added.

"When the place was built, it was built by people who still



belonged to Puritan tradition, and one thing they didn't approve of was music in church. But by 1799, they had loosened up a bit, and an organ was put up in the gallery."

This organ was then replaced in the 19th century with the one which currently sits downstairs. "It was built by a local organ builder, Bishop and Sons, who still maintain it to this day."

Undoubtedly, the Unitarian Meeting House is very proud of its well-preserved history and heritage, and framed portraits of some of its earliest ministers can be found in the vestry (which was added in 1900) - including Reverend Winifred Elsie May Brown, who was the first female minister in Ipswich. "She was a minister in the 1940s and was the first female minister of any denominations in Ipswich," adds Cliff.

Today, the meeting house is open every Sunday for service - but also opens its doors

throughout the year for a number of charitable endeavours.

"In terms of social action, we support a nominated local charity each year in order to raise funds. This year, we're working with domestic abuse charity Lighthouse Women's Aid - but in the past we've helped dementia charities and a school in India," explains Paulette Reed.

In addition, the meeting house also hosts a Build Your Own Theology course, allowing attendees to develop their own personal viewpoints and beliefs - in line with the Unitarian ethos. One of the few Grade

I-listed buildings in Ipswich, it is open three days a week between May and September for people to learn more about it and its heritage. "Historically, it's one of Ipswich's most important buildings," adds Paulette.

To find out more about the Unitarian Meeting House, visit unitarianipswich.com



ABOVE: Some of the Unitarian Meeting House's former ministers - including first female minister the Rev Winifred Elsie May Brown

RIGHT: The pulpit

INSET LEFT: Paulette Reed

RIGHT: The organ

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND/ARCHANT

