

The Church began its life of witness 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.

The people involved in this ‘dissent’ 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 any 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.

In 1796 the Evangelical Society of London, on being informed of the poor state of religious observance in Cleveland, sent William Norris, an evangelist, as a revivalist preacher for our area. His fervent oratory attracted many people back to faith in Jesus - and so by 1798 a new church fellowship appeared in Guisborough. In October of the following year the Protestant Dissenting Meeting House was opened in Westgate - funded by a wealthy local widow, Elizabeth Dunn.

“In 1802 he left twenty members in the care of Mr. James Scott, a lay preacher, admitted to the church by him.” An early baptismal register shows that 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.

In 1805 the Rev. William Hinners, an Independent Minister from Edinburgh, having failed to be included in a mission to India, became interested in the Guisborough cause – declaring “If I can’t convert heathens, abroad, then I will do it at home,” Within a few years he built up the congregation, revived the fellowship in Great Ayton and, under his direction, a church was built and named *The Ebenezer Chapel*.



Rev. James Jackson.

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.

“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.”)

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 onto 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.

Ecumenical Cross 1974 *David Batchelor far left*



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.

This was the first coming together of separate Christian denominations since the division of the church during the Reformation in the 16th, century. A further change of organisation took place in the 1990's when several United Reformed Churches, in the area, were brought together to form the East Cleveland Group. 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, Food-stop 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.

In 2009 the United Reformed Church mounted a spiritual revival, with the aim of renewing our faith, called Vision 4Life. This campaign focussed on how we view the Bible, prayer and the call to evangelism in the 21st, century - and ended, in our bicentenary year, with meetings, aimed at promoting evangelism, being organised by

the East Cleveland Group. This was followed later by a further national initiative for renewal – Vision 2020.

In 2019 the members of the church decided that if we were to be more accessible to the local community of Guisborough we needed to adapt, our relatively small building, to be more flexible in its use by removing the pews from the sanctuary. The closure of the church in March 2020, to comply with pandemic regulations, created difficulties in doing this work, but when the church was re-opened, by the Reverends Ken and Margaret Harris on 23rd May the congregation were seated in chairs.

Today, the Guisborough is part of a new pastorate all seven URC churches in the Teesside area: Billingham, Hartlepool, Thornaby, Stockton, Guisborough, Marton and Redcar. Synod has brought us together in order to attract a minister to provide professional spiritual support as we recover from effects of the pandemic.

Recent church meetings have shown that members have hope for the future, with some encouraging new ideas being raised for engaging effectively with the local community. In the absence of a minister, for spiritual guidance, we need to look back at the founding reasons for establishing a fellowship in Guisborough. Way back in 1798 the concept of ordinary people having the ability to find direct access to God, without clergy as an intermediary, was a fundamental belief, which is still relevant today. The ordinary members can carry out the mission of Christ in the local community showing clearly its real, unchanging value in modern society. During this long period, of more than 200 years, the church's presence in the town has been an available source of spiritual support for the people of Guisborough – the ordinary members and a total of 36 successive ministers having served towards this end.



A SHORT HISTORY of GUISBOROUGH UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

56, Westgate, Guisborough.



Church circa 1904/5 before reconstruction of the frontage