

# HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING AT SMALLRIDGE METHODIST CHAPEL, CHARDSTOCK DEVON

Stewart Brown Associates 2009

## *Summary*

*The former Wesleyan Methodist chapel at Smallridge, Chardstock, Devon, is a small, single-storied structure built c. 1800, probably in 1796. It has a curious lozenge or boat-shaped plan with bowed front and rear walls. The building was recorded during repairs associated with its conversion for residential use.*

## **The Project**

Location: Smallridge Methodist Chapel, Smallridge, Devon EX13 7JJ  
Parish: Smallridge  
District: East Devon  
County: Devon  
NGR: 330209.100929  
Listed Building Grade II  
Planning Application no: 08/1763/COU  
Historic Environment Service ref. ARCH/DC/ED/13700  
Images of England no. 87802

Development of the former chapel comprised change of use and conversion to form one unit of letting accommodation for use in association with the adjacent public house. Historic building recording was a condition attached to planning consent. However, repairs were begun before a building recording programme had been prepared and approved by the local planning authority. Once this oversight was realised in September 2009, Mr. K Baulch, the owner of the property, commissioned Stewart Brown Associates to undertake recording at the site and to produce a report on the building. The local planning authority reviewed the circumstances and decided that the situation would be best carried forward by implementing the relevant planning procedures belatedly.

Repairs to the building consisted of: replacement of the front door and windows to existing designs; replacement in kind of the internal and external lime render; replacement of some ceiling timbers; minor repairs to the roof timbers; and replacement in kind of the existing corrugated iron roof covering. The existing stone structure was left intact. The impact of the development has been to leave the building essentially unaltered in appearance apart from infilling the interior in order to make it habitable.

The description of the structure presented below relies in large part on a series of photographs taken by Mr K. Baulch during repairs before Stewart Brown Associates became involved with the project (Plates 2-5 and 7). Plates 1 and 6 were taken by S. Brown when repairs were already well advanced. The accompanying plan and elevations are based on a site survey by Paul Rowe Architectural Services (April 2009). Plate 8 is a copy of a photograph taken of the chapel interior on the day of the last service on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2002. The original photograph was taken by Mrs G. Retter, a local resident aged over 80 who attended the chapel for much of her life. The furnishings shown in the photograph were removed from the chapel before Mr Baulch acquired the property.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The chapel is mentioned in a published survey of chapels and meeting houses titled 'Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in South-West England (Stell, 1991). This states that the chapel was opened in 1813 and describes its plan as 'unique with convex front and rear walls', adding that its roof was formerly thatched but now covered with corrugated iron. The survey cites its source of information as a pamphlet written by James H. Temple in 1974 on the Methodist mission in Devon and Dorset (Temple 1974, 23-4). Temple's account suggests that the chapel had been built some years earlier – 'There were Wesleyans in the village in 1810 and the chapel was believed to have been built in 1813, yet a Devon Guide of 1850 states that the chapel was built in 1796, a year later than that in Axminster. This is one of the societies included in the original circuit of 1813 and is still proud of its continuous existence, although never with anything other than a small membership. There is a Deed of 1799 and, if the Devon Guide Book is correct, this may be an instance of the chapel being built on land before the legal formality of conveyance.' The description goes on to mention the former thatched roof.

The chapel was built at a time when the numbers of Methodists were greatly increasing in England and Wales, from 80,000 in 1791 to 338,000 in 1848 (Barton 1990, 24). The source of inspiration for its unconventional plan is unknown, but the layout could have been intended to represent the form of a boat, possibly Noah's Ark. The chapel is likened to a boat in lines from a poem by Kenneth E. Moulding quoted in James Temple's pamphlet:

'The Methodist chapel – a quaint eight-sided tub,  
With pointed roof and gothic windows, shields  
A little flock. The young man's sermon yields  
One simple thought: Christ made yokes not to rub.'

Mrs Retter, mentioned above, remembers her grandfather re-roofing the chapel with corrugated iron about 80 years ago, ie c. 1930, as well as the construction of the present lean-to store against the north wall some 5-10 years later. She also relates that before her time there was a gallery at the north end of the chapel, reached by an external stair against the north wall.

### DESCRIPTION (Figs. 1 and 2; Plates 1-7)

#### *Fabric*

The chapel walls are built of local yellow/grey limestone rubble and flint nodules, with dressed and squared limestone quoins. The limestone comes from the nearby Tolcis quarry on the south-western outskirts of Axminster. The flints come from river gravels in the Axe valley. The masonry is bonded with buff lime mortar containing lime flecks and sand. The walls were covered with lime render both internally and externally. In places, the masonry incorporates timber lacing, a feature of post-medieval buildings which became common in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (eg. Plate 6).

#### *Original architectural features*

The chapel front is divided into three bays by four plain pilasters (Figs. 1 and 2, front cover). The central doorway and two flanking windows are pointed and gothic in style. The windows contain Y-tracery and glazing bars. A smaller window with a pointed head survives high up in the rear (west) wall (Fig. 7).

Evidence for a gallery comprises the doorway high up in the north wall and a series of joist sockets revealed in the internal wall face below and to each side of the doorway during removal of the old plaster (Plates 5 and 6). These show no obvious sign of insertion into the surrounding masonry so the gallery appears to be an original feature. The doorway is round-headed rather than pointed like the windows. It has been blocked and reduced in height to form a niche. It is presently only 1.45m high, but was formerly 0.3m taller. Mrs Retter identified it in photographs as the entrance into the former gallery. The sockets for the gallery's former floor joists are small and square, and have been infilled, some with bricks.

The gallery was removed sometime before the construction of the lean-to store building adjoining the chapel's north wall, which according to Mrs Retter took place *c.* 1935-40 (above).

The roof is hipped. Its middle section comprises two tie-beam trusses with queen struts, butt-purlins, and an angled ridge piece (Plates 1 and 2). The joint between the principal rafters and tie-beam is a mortice-and-tenon (plate 3). The trusses and purlins are pegged. The side purlins have tusk tenons projecting through the principal rafters and pegged on the other side (Plate 2). Most of the common rafters are trimmed softwood poles. The ceiling joists (now replaced) adjoined the sides of the tie-beams so that their undersides were flush, forming a flat ceiling. The ceiling plaster was applied to a layer of straw set across the joists and held in position by laths nailed lengthwise along the joists (Plate 7).

#### *Later alterations*

The tie-beam roof trusses have secondary, inserted king posts attached with iron straps (Plate 1). These are additions dating perhaps from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The corrugated iron sheeting which replaced the thatched roof *c.* 1930 was nailed to three narrow timbers set across the backs of the common rafters to each side of the ridge (two of these are shown in Plate 2). The original thatching laths were doubtless removed at this time.

The masonry blocking of the gallery doorway is likely to date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barton D.A. 1990 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *Discovering Chapels and Meeting Houses*.

Stell, C. 1991 *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in South-west England*, RCHM.

Temple J.H. 1974 *The Mighty oak, the story of the Devon and Dorset Mission*.

#### ARCHIVE

The project archive is deposited at The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Queen Street, Exeter, Devon EX4 3LS (Accession No. 375/2009).