

# ST. NICHOLAS MEETING HOUSE IPSWICH A.D. 1700



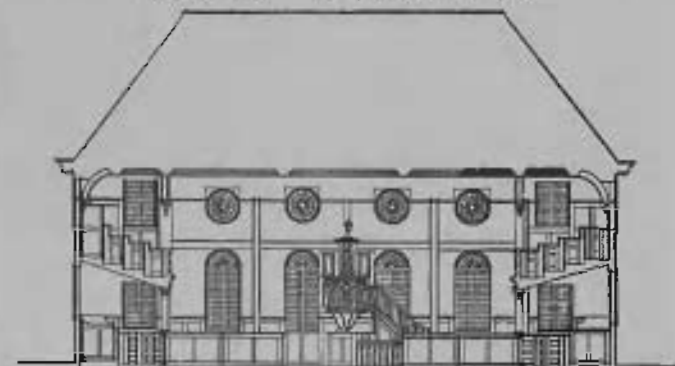
NORTH ELEVATION



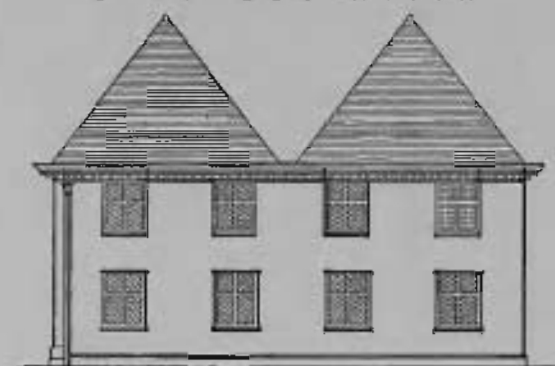
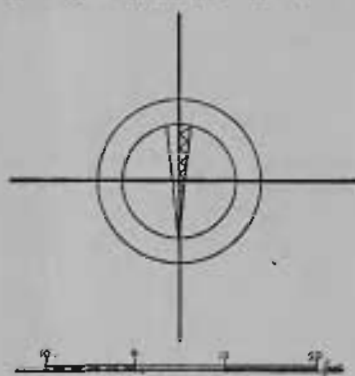
SECTION A-B



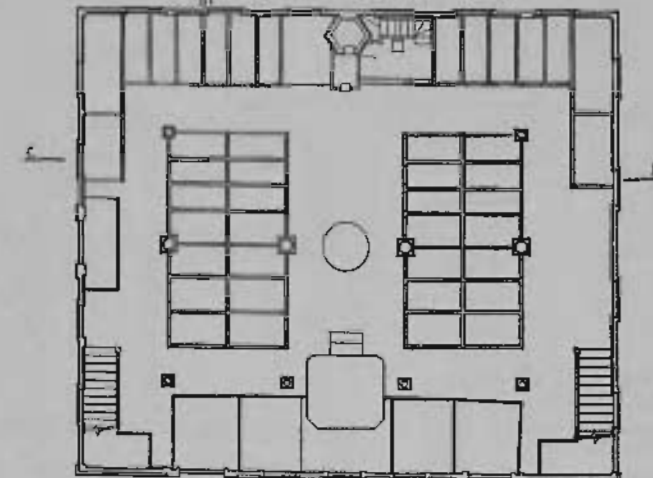
EAST ELEVATION



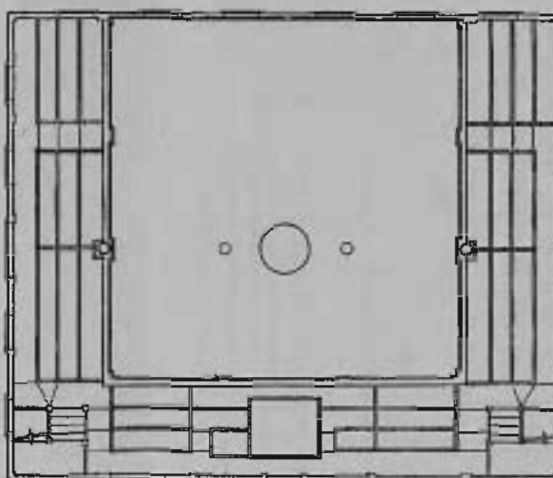
SECTION C-D



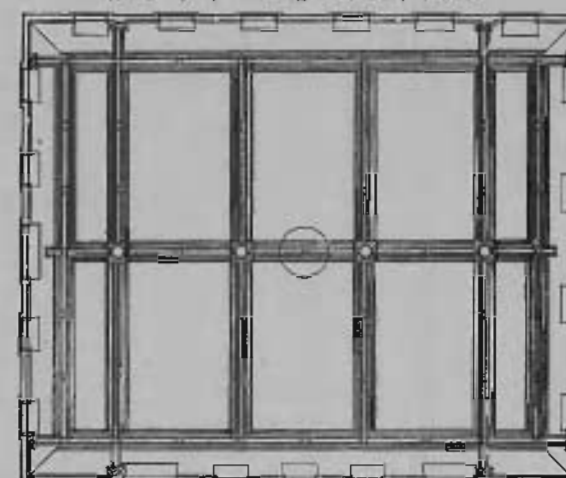
WEST ELEVATION



GROUND PLAN



GALLERY PLAN



CEILING PLAN

## THE UNITARIAN CHAPELS OF IPSWICH AND BURY ST. EDMUNDS

By WALTER H. GODFREY

The various Acts which removed the restriction on public worship by nonconformists, from the Declaration of Indulgence of 1672 to the Toleration Act of 1689, allowed the growth of regular congregations and prepared the way for special places of worship. In the eleven years following the last Act nearly 2,500 buildings were registered for this purpose, and many of these were newly designed and constructed.

So widespread a religious movement, heretofore forced to an underground seclusion, found open expression in a type of building, which, though not entirely novel,<sup>1</sup> assumed immediately a more or less consistent form. The problem was to produce the most simple and effective congregational auditorium, and the almost stark direction of this aim resulted in a type of architecture that attained much dignity and no little beauty. Sir Christopher Wren had many opportunities of pondering the problem, and in his old age wrote a wise letter<sup>2</sup> on the building of the national churches provided by the Act of Queen Anne. But although his churches had been for protestant congregations they were designed for a ritual that retained the altar or communion table at the east end. The nonconformist churches, on the other hand, centred on the pulpit and the two chapels, the subject of this paper, which were visited by the Institute during their summer meeting in Suffolk, give characteristic solutions of the problem. We will now examine the two buildings.

Something should, however, be said first as to the denomination of their builders. In the 17th century nonconformity was broadly divided into two bodies calling themselves Presbyterians and Independents. There were, of course, other bodies like the Friends or Quakers which had a considerable following, but the two dissenting communities first named were the main opponents of the Episcopalians, and many of each sect occupied the pulpits of our parish churches during the Commonwealth. The chapel at Ipswich, like that at Bury, was built 'for the use of the Presbyterian congregation'. Thomas Bantoft (one of the signatories of the contract) bought the site from Thomas Bloss of Belstead near Ipswich, and devised it to the care of twenty trustees. Early in the 19th century many of the ancient meetings (chiefly Presbyterian) became Unitarian, influenced by Dr. Joseph Priestley and others. The trinitarian members seceded and built another chapel, now the Tacket Street Congregational Church.

<sup>1</sup> There were earlier chapels, a few of which have survived, e.g., Horningham in Wiltshire (1566), Toxteth near Liverpool (1618), Tewkesbury (1623), and Walpole near Halesworth,

Suffolk (1647). See *Puritan Architecture* (1946), by Martin S. Briggs.

<sup>2</sup> *Parentalia*, quoted in *extenso* in *The Wren Society*, ix, 15-18.

The chapel at Ipswich, styled St. Nicholas Meeting House (it lies behind St. Nicholas and Friars' Streets), was begun in 1699 and finished in 1700. The contract for its building is extant and is printed *in extenso* as an appendix to this paper. The builder was Joseph Clarke, described as house-carpenter, and the chapel is framed in wood, measuring just over 60 ft. x 50 ft. on plan and 22 ft. from floor to ceiling. Like many other contemporary chapels, it was covered by two parallel roofs, by means of four tall columns on the axis, and was furnished with wide galleries on three sides, the pulpit occupying the centre of the fourth, one of the longer sides. There are two entrances in the wall opposite the pulpit and a side entrance as well, all with vestibules and particularly beautiful external door cases, with pediments carried on carved brackets, and key blocks to the two main doorways. The fenestration is remarkable; the south wall has four tall semi-circular headed windows, two on each side of the pulpit, with four circular lunettes above. Over and beneath the galleries on this wall and the others are two ranges of the usual mullioned two-light windows divided by a transome, but over each doorway these are replaced by elliptical lunettes. The pattern of the lead lights to the glazing is very attractive. Externally the walls are rendered in plaster, the roofs are tiled and hipped, and at the eaves is a wooden modillion cornice of good design.

But it is in the interior that the most surprising skill has been shown. The pulpit, hexagonal in plan, with fielded panels surrounded by carving, stands high on a tulip base, with a beautiful stair with twisted balusters on the west side. Behind and above it is a panelled composition rising to a vase finial and below is the clerk's desk, with a railed enclosure. The box pews are arranged east and west of the pulpit, and also in two blocks in the centre allowing a wide aisle between. The columns, where free, stand on pedestals, the height of the pews; the end ones engage with the gallery and are in two heights, the lower ranging with the gallery supports. The gallery fronts are panelled, with a full entablature below and a rail above, and the ceiling is in broad panels with moulded plaster ribs, and a cove round the whole with angle brackets springing from corbels richly modelled with fruit and flower. The staircases which are in the NW. and NE. corners of the chapel are fine examples of their period with spiral balusters. In the centre hangs a handsome brass chandelier of three tiers, the weight of which is given in an inventory of 1862 as 1 cwt. 3 qrs. 18½ lbs. The chapel also possesses some good communion plate, four silver cups of 1691, 1703 and 1708, and two patens of 1632 and 1764.

The scenic effect of the elaborate pulpit against the array of arched windows and lunettes around which the gallery and pews are assembled is no less striking than the finished craftsmanship of every detail of the building. The contract stipulates that the whole shall be completed in ten weeks, but it took, in fact, eight months to build. The cost, exclusive of glazing, was £257, but we are not told if this included the



A. IPSWICH, UNITARIAN CHAPEL: DOORHEAD



B. IPSWICH, UNITARIAN CHAPEL: INTERIOR

(Photos: National Buildings Record)



BURY ST. EDMUNDS, UNITARIAN CHAPEL: STREET FRONT

(Photo: Seaman & Sons)



ittings. The chapel was restored in 1900, under the direction of Mr. Ronald P. Jones, whose brother, Mr. C. Sidney Jones, High Sheriff of Lancashire, bore the cost of its redecoration.

The chapel in Churchgate Street, Bury St. Edmunds, is built of brick, and is a more ambitious architectural design as far as the exterior is concerned, but its internal arrangement shows a close resemblance to the one at Ipswich. The minute book of the chapel is preserved at the Bury St. Edmunds and West Suffolk Record Office, and the assistant archivist, Mr. M. P. Statham, has kindly sent the two following extracts relating to a meeting of the feoffees on 22nd March, 1710-11 :—

2. That the Old Chappell or Meeting-house and Vestry that Now is shall be taken down with all Convenient Speed And the Materials thereof Carefully disposed for further Use, or Sold, or Exchang'd for others, as shall afterwards be judged most proper.

3. That a New Chappell or Meeting-house and Vestry shall be Erected upon the Same ground and for the same purposes of decent form, and as large Dimensions as shall be thought Necessary.

No architect or contractor is mentioned, and the work seems to have been carried out by direct labour under the supervision of 'six managers', who were commissioned to 'contract and bargain with all manner of workmen'. It was presumably completed by the 3rd April, 1712, when the treasurer, Samuel Bury, presented his accounts, amounting to £832 10s. 8d. He had received £778 8s. 4d. and was to recoup himself for the balance from subscriptions not yet collected and the future profits from the pews.

The plan of the chapel is internally 47 x 43 ft., with the pulpit, as usual, set against the longer (north) side opposite the entrance. A gallery, 11 ft. 6 ins. deep, surrounds the other three sides. Like the chapel at Ipswich, it is covered by two parallel hipped roofs (here, with a cross roof between them), supported by one central column, and three side columns on each side which support the galleries as well. They are all cased in their lower part and are free turned columns above, with caps and bases. The middle side columns are ingeniously designed to support the king posts of the elaborately trussed roofs. The fenestration is interesting, the north side having two tall semi-circular headed windows divided by two mullions which arch over the centre light, and transomes to the side lights at the springing. Between these are two lunettes, elliptical in shape, with the major axis vertical, set as near together as possible behind the pulpit. The windows in the side walls are in two storeys, three arched lights above with one mullion and transome, and two small two light windows below, besides a side entrance. Those of the south wall will be described with the entrance façade. There is an external door for the minister leading into the pulpit enclosure.

The gallery fronts are panelled in the usual solid fashion and stand on a continuous moulded entablature, the ample staircases with turned

balusters being in the angles of the building as at Ipswich, but SW. and SE. Originally no doubt there were pews over the whole area, but, probably since the late 18th century, the space under the galleries has been enclosed by glazed screens, with semi-circular headed lead lights. The space behind is utilised as vestries, class-rooms, etc., and the effect is to make the building look much smaller. At gallery level, however, the old effect is maintained, since the pews which have been removed below are here preserved with their boldly designed numbers painted on oval panels. The hexagonal panelled pulpit, with a fine sounding-board and circular stair with spiral balusters is a handsome piece of work. It stands in an enclosure with the clerk's desk below. Like Ipswich, the leading to the window glazing is most attractive.

The brick front to the street is the most striking architectural feature of this chapel. It is a brilliant example of the bricklayer's art and shows off all his skill. Curiously enough, in so finished a piece of work, old English bond has been used (i.e., alternate courses of stretchers and headers), although some headers appear in the stretcher courses. The front is divided into three sections by plain pilasters, over which breaks a fine continuous moulded brick cornice, and a stone-capped plinth below. The side sections are each filled with a semi-circular headed window, similar to those already described in the north wall, set within a recessed arch which has moulded responds and a scrolled keystone and block over which the entablature mitres. Beneath the window is a moulded panel and above the entablature a parapet with two sunk panels.

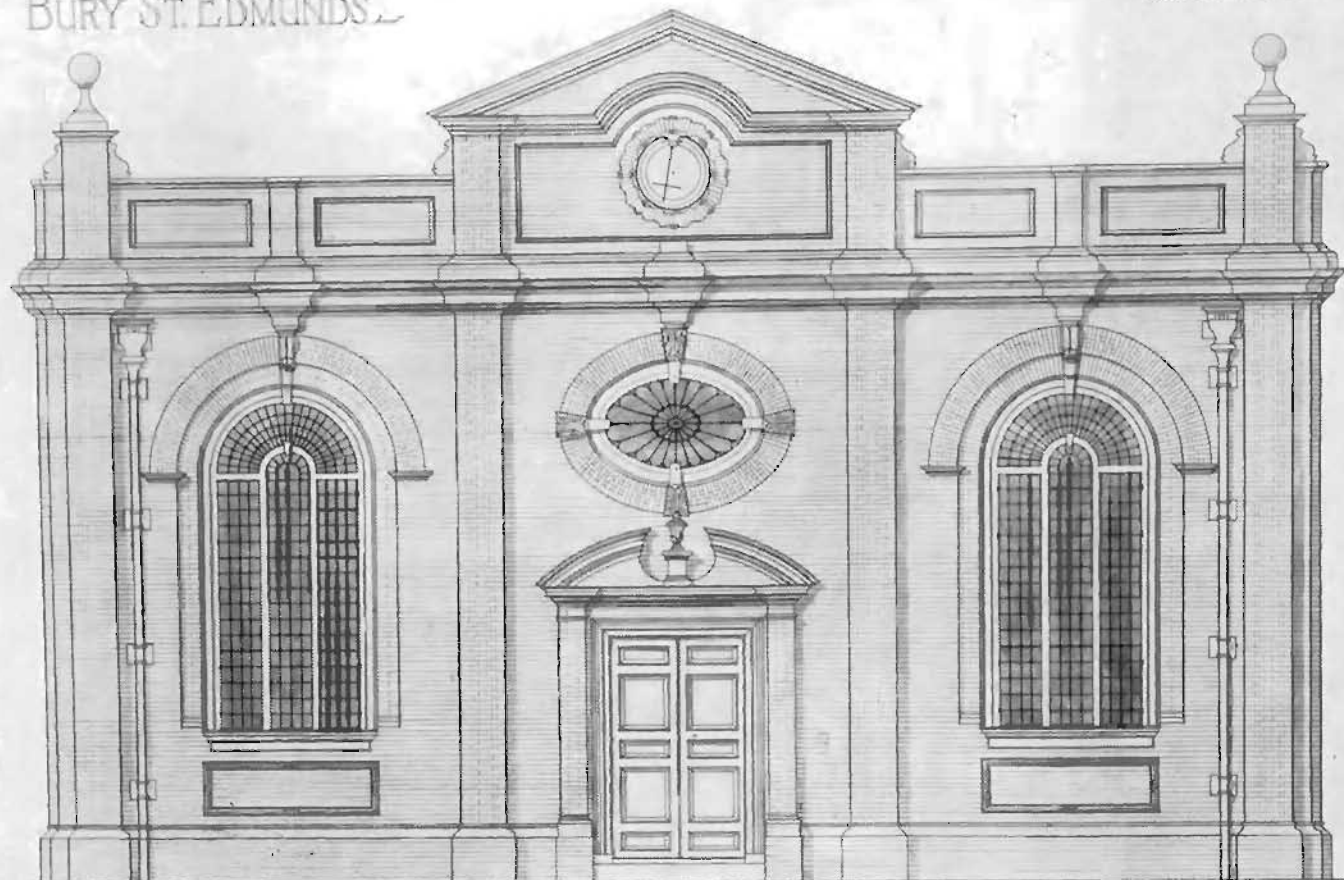
In the centre section is the entrance door, flanked by brick pilasters with a curved cleft pediment, enclosing a pedestal and urn. Above this is an elliptical window, surrounded by a ring of rubbed bricks, with four key blocks carved with foliage. This lunette is glazed with radial panes with curved ends. The centre parapet is raised with a brick cornice, arched in the centre, following the lines of a panel that contains an elaborate circular sundial, with a brick fimbriated border. The whole centrepiece was originally surmounted by a pediment which has now disappeared, together with the ball finials on the angle pilasters of the front. They are shown on Mr. Ernest Scott's drawing. The filling of the parapet panels is done entirely in stretchers.

Finally, along the street front is a dwarf wall carrying excellently designed wrought iron railings and a pair of gates. The latter are hung to iron piers made up of interlacing panels between the stanchions and surmounted by acorns. The rails have spearhead tops, with stanchions with cast urn finials and a panel of interlacement in the centre of each section. There are two good lead rainwater heads on the front, dated 1711.

I have to thank the trustees of both chapels, and especially Mr. R. H. Mottram; also Mr. H. J. M. Maltby, Mrs. M. E. Clegg, Miss L. J. Redstone, and Mr. M. P. Statham for their help in preparing this paper. My

UNITARIAN CHAPEL  
BURY ST. EDMUNDS.

SHEET No.1  
SCALE 1/2"=1'

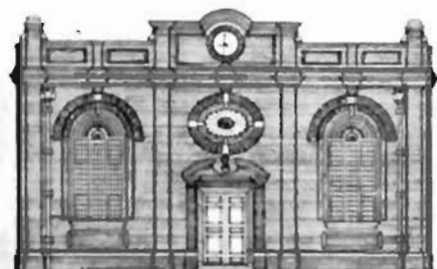


FRONT ELEVATION

Measured drawing by Ernest Scott



# THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL BURY ST EDMUNDS



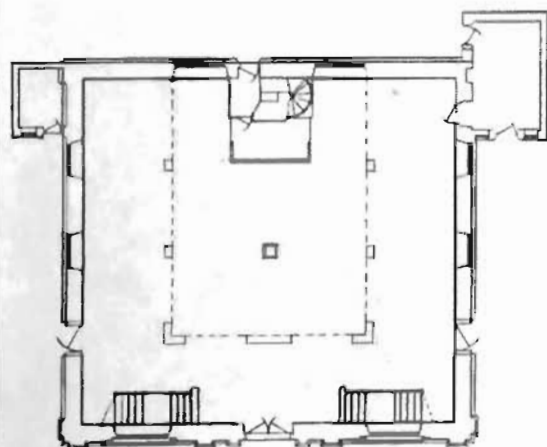
SOUTH ELEVATION



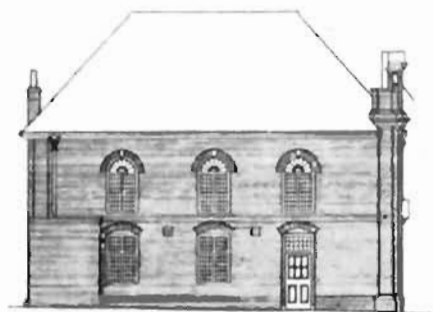
SECTION



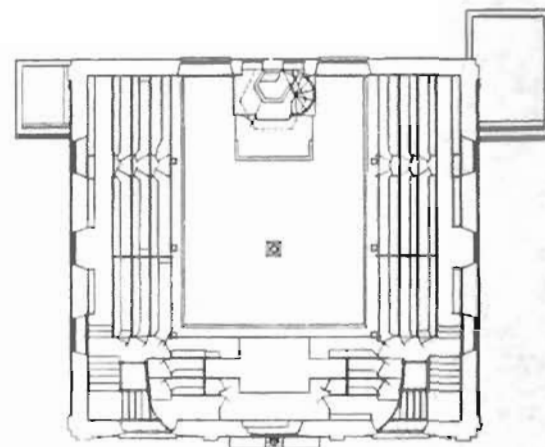
NORTH ELEVATION



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



WEST ELEVATION



GALLERY PLAN

SCALE 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 FEET

MEASURED AND DRAWN BY  
F. JOHNSON

acknowledgments are also due to Mr. John C. Butters for permission to reproduce his drawings of Ipswich, and to Mr. F. Johnson and Mr. Ernest Scott for a like permission to use their drawings of Bury St. Edmunds. Mr. Butters, whose great-grandfather, Frank Woolnough, curator of the Ipswich museum, was connected with the Ipswich chapel, informs me that, at its bicentenary celebration a folio volume of drawings and sketches of the building and its fittings was prepared.

## APPENDIX I

## UNITARIAN CHAPEL, IPSWICH. BUILDING CONTRACT, 1699

Articles of agreement indented made the fifth day of August Anno Dom. 1699 And in the Eleventh Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord Kind William the third over England etc. Between Joseph Clarke of Ipswich in the County of Suffolk housecarpenter of the one part, Edward Gaell of the same Towne Gentleman Robert Snelling of the same Towne Gentleman Thomas Bantoft of the same Towne woollen Draper, John Groome of the same Towne Lynnen weaver, John May of the same Towne Clothier and Thomas Catchpole of Ipswich aforesaid Beere brewer of the other part as followeth Inprimis the said Joseph Clarke for and in consideration of the Sum of Tenn Pounds of lawful English money to him in hand already payd And of the sum of Two hundred fferty and seven pounds of like money hereafter in these presents mentioned to be paid him the said Joseph Clarke by the said Edward Gaell, Robert Snelling, Thomas Bantoft, John Groome, John May and Thomas Catchpole or some of them, he the said Joseph Clarke doth for himselfe his Executors Adminstrators and Assignes Covenant promise and agree to and with them the said Edward Gaell (etc) by these presents in manner and forme following (that is to say) That he the said Joseph Clarke his servants and assigns shall and will at his own proper costs and charges take downe All those outhouses and old Tymber-wall designed to be taken downe standing on the West side in the Yard belonging to the Capitall Messuage which the said Thomas Bantoft hath lately purchased of Mr. Thomas Blo[ss] situate lyeing and being in the parish of St. Nicholas in Ipswich aforesaid and that he the said Joseph Clarke his Executors and Assigns shall and will at his and their proper costs and charges in good orderly and workmanlike manner make and newe build to and for the user of them the said Edward Gaell (etc) in the aforesaid Yard and upon the ground where the said Outhouses are to be taken downe A good new strong and substantiall house for a meeting place which shalbe in length sixtie foot and in Breadth fiftie foot, To be built with a double Roofe and to have four Lucuins<sup>1</sup> in the Roofe thereof fronting to the North, The Roofe of which said building to be boorne up in the middle with four good and substanciall Cullums, The Height to be one and twenty foot from the floore to the seeling, The Inside to be lyned next the studs with good slit-deeles. The floore to be planchered with good whole deales and good Gitei<sup>2</sup> Lathes without side with good red furr-wood And the said building to have to payr of good substanciall double dores, and as many necessary girt-windows four foot wide and six foot deepe to be all made of Redd wood furr as they the said Edward Gaell (etc) or the major part of them shall think Convenient and to be set and placed as they shall think most Convenient and Advantageous for the said Building. And to laye a convenient gutter of lead betwixt the two Roofes of the Building the whole length thereof And that he the said Joseph Clarke his Executors, Servants and assigns shall and will doe performe and finish all Carpentors work and Masons' work as is usual and necessary to be done in the building of such a house as well not mentioned as mentioned (Glazeing work only excepted) And shall and will finish and

<sup>1</sup> Dormer windows. These may have been to light the roof space, but they are not now in existence.

<sup>2</sup> Query 'Jetty'. It may have been the intention to weather-board the exterior.

compleat the said Building in A workmanlike manner at or before the sixteenth day of October next Ensueing the date of these presents. And it is agreed by and betweene all the said parties to these presents that he the said Joseph Clarke shall have and take all the wood Tymber Bricks Tyles and other materialls belonging to the outhouses and old tymber wall to be taken done as aforesaid And shall make use of the same or such part of the said Materialls as shalbe convenient in building of the afore mentioned meeting-house.

In consideration of the premises aforesaid They the said Edward Gaell (etc) do for themselves their Executors administrators and Assignes Covenant promise and agree to and with the said Joseph Clarke his executors and assignes by these presents that they the said Edward Gaell (etc) or some or one of them their Executors or assignes shall and will pay or cause to be payd unto the said Joseph Clarke his Executors or Assignes the said afore mentioned sum of Two hundred ffortie and seven pounds for the afore mentioned building so to be made and finished as abovesaid in manner following (that is to say) ffortie pounds part thereof on the eight day of this instant moneth of August And the sum of one hundred pounds more thereof on the day the said building shalbe raysed up And the Sum of One hundred and Seven pounds residue thereof when the said building shalbe fully finished according to the true intent and (or) daning of these presents And further shall provide and give unto the said Joseph Clarke and his servants four Barrells of good small Beere for to drink whilst Employed in the said Building In Witness whereof the said parties to these Articles of agreement have Interchangedly set to their hands and Seales the day and Yeare first above written.

(Joseph Clarke's seal)

*Dorse Receipt, 29th Sept. 1699, from Joseph Clarke for £50 received for work done and to be done at the new meeting House.*