



# Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

## **An archaeological building record of the former Union Chapel, Grendon, Northamptonshire**

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# The former Union Chapel, Grendon, Northamptonshire

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### Summary

A Level 2 building record shows Grendon Union Chapel dates from 1861, later extended before 1884, with its interior overhauled in 1925. Little survives of its interior, but a considerable archive of related documents and accounts from 1902, involving many village families by name, is deposited in Northamptonshire Record Office.

### Introduction

Property owners have applied to convert the former Grendon Union Chapel premises at 12a Main Road, Grendon, Northamptonshire, NN7 1JW into a four bedroom home; application no WP/19/00133/FUL). Since the former non-conformist chapel is considered to be an undesignated heritage asset lying within Grendon Conservation Area, the Assistant Archaeological Advisor to Wellingborough Council has advised that an archaeological survey of the building would be appropriate. Iain Soden Heritage Services was accordingly asked by the applicants to carry out a Historic England Level 2-compliant survey by way of a Heritage Asset Survey of the property to accompany the application.

The property lies on the east side of the north-south-aligned main street through the village at NGR: SP 8795 6040.

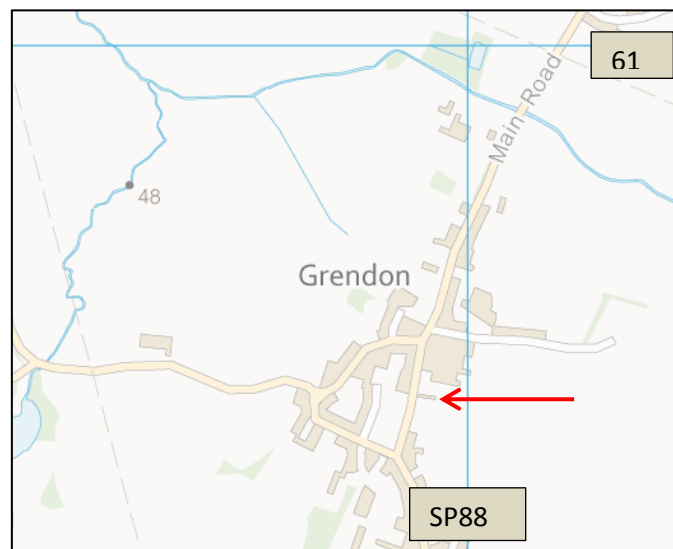


Fig 1: Site location (arrowed). Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown Copyright and database right 2019

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## Historical background

Unaccountably, the chapel is not mentioned in the county-wide and regional survey of such non-conformist buildings by the former RCHME (1986).

No records in public ownership have been found regarding the foundation or early years of the chapel. However, a number of entries in Kelly's Commercial Directories (for instance 1894 and 1906) make it clear that the building was constructed in 1861 and was designed to seat 200. The earlier entry of the two indicates that it was built as a Congregational Chapel. By 1906 it was simply called 'Union Chapel', the reasons for which will be seen below.



Fig 2: The village with chapel, surveyed in 1884 for the Ordnance Survey. Chapel is arrowed.

A later source (NRO: Acc 2009/90), relating to a public address in 1925 notes that when the chapel was first founded it had faced local opposition and numerous difficulties. The reference does not elucidate further in this respect.

In 2009, when the chapel had closed and been sold, the closure led to the deposition of a bundle of records by the Baptist Union. They date from 1902 onwards and relate to the life of the chapel, including accounts, meeting minutes, Sunday-school attendance records and some invoices and receipts. Although the majority of the data it contains is almost entirely related to the people of the chapel, most named, a little is also building-related. It is from this single, boxed accession (NRO Acc 2009/90) that almost our historical information on the building is derived. The following is extracted from various hand-written books, booklets and bills or receipts in that collection:

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- Grendon Union Chapel was a union of Baptist and Congregational churches dating from 1902.
- The formal formation of the union took place on 14 September 1905. Support was not universal and there was some secession from the newly combined congregation, notably in Yardley Hastings. Deacons were appointed 9 Oct 1905.
- After losing casualties amongst families during The Great War, the chapel was offered, but declined, its own war memorial, writing to the War Memorial Committee that one memorial to serve all (in St Mary's churchyard) would be sufficient for the village (22 Oct 1919).
- A newspaper cutting (source unknown) of 21 December 1922 notes that the chapel schoolroom was re-opened after undergoing a thorough renovation and redecoration, including a new block-floor.
- An organ was purchased in 1923, later renovated in 1949 and again in 1957.
- From 1924 ideas coalesced to completely re-order the chapel interior, which took place in 1925. Costing a sum of about £500, and put out to tender, this included:
  - New floor
  - New fixed pews
  - Walls panelled to six feet height
  - Semi-circular pews for the choir on a platform
  - New pulpit
  - New lamps
  - New outside porch
- The same works included a decorative scheme which saw all the (pine) woodwork given a light-oak paint effect, although an alternative was also put forward for 'walnut staining'. The surviving few pews, roof beams and main door show that the light oak scheme was employed throughout. It even extended to an umbrella-stand in the porch. The chapel was closed for 8 weeks for the works and re-opened 20 August 1925 amidst great pomp, religious ceremony and a public address on the early history of the building (the last of which no written trace has been found).
- In 1932 (at the depths of the Great Depression), new lighting and heating was introduced, probably to save money by replacing costly and outdated systems.
- Early schoolroom timber windows were replaced, also in timber, probably in the 1960s or 1970s.
- Schoolroom exterior was cement-rendered.
- Chapel windows (all but the sides of the porch) were replaced by modern UPVC equivalents by the time it closed.
- WCs inserted into the former schoolroom premises, together with an interior lobby.

Most of the simple accounts from 1902 onwards are related to regular individual payments, the recipients mentioned by name, sometimes to the minister, sometimes to traders, but mostly concerning the weekly upkeep of the chapel, listing expenses for coal, paraffin, numerous clock repairs, lamp glasses and chapel-cleaning. Annual meetings of the chapel elders are minuted, but with little of relevance to changes in the fabric of the building. There are references to male and female WCs lying in an outbuilding to the rear of the property, since demolished.

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Numbers attending in fact began to dwindle after the First World War, and only 21 (child) baptisms were recorded in the period 1920-34, insufficient to maintain the roll, even then. Had the elders realised it or not, 1925 arguably saw the apogee of the chapel, but their one-off investment did not presage times to come. With a steadily-falling roll and unable to attract new generations in sufficient numbers, the congregation dwindled and the chapel closed around 2006. The building since became a village crèche/children's playgroup.



Fig 3: View of the chapel just before closure. This is essentially the re-ordered layout of 1925. The organ had stood far right against the end wall. Note the un-boxed high level ventilator above the panelling on right, and the memorial tablet on the east gable wall. Copy of a photograph in the owners' possession, with thanks.

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## Field record



Fig 4: Street-facing west gable of the chapel, 1861 with the porch added in 1925; scale 2m

The chapel itself is comprised of a simple brick box of four bays with a pitched slate roof over it, and measuring 12m x 6.2m internally. It was constructed in 1861 and is of the decorative Flemish Cross Bond on the most visible, street-facing west gable, using smooth-faced well-engineered bricks, with rougher-finished bricks laid in English Garden Wall Bond on the sides (three courses of stretchers between courses of headers) (Brunskill 1997). It stands on a chamfered brick plinth at least one brick wider than the walls, but most of which has been covered over by ground build-up. At the east end is an attached second, slightly smaller brick structure – the former chapel schoolroom, measuring 8.2m x 6.2m, also under a pitched slate roof, but cement-rendered on the outside (along with the east gable exterior of the chapel). A small area of exposed brick forms abut-joint of the two buildings and shows that the schoolroom was an addition, present on historic maps from 1884. At

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the west end lies the main entrance to the chapel, sheltered by a shallow brick porch with slate roof, known from records to date from 1925.

The schoolrooms contain no historic features, although a former fireplace is visible in the north wall, with a chimney above it. The room has in modern times been divided up to accept an array of WCs.



Fig 5: The fully-cement-rendered schoolrooms (foreground) added to the east gable of the chapel; scale 2m



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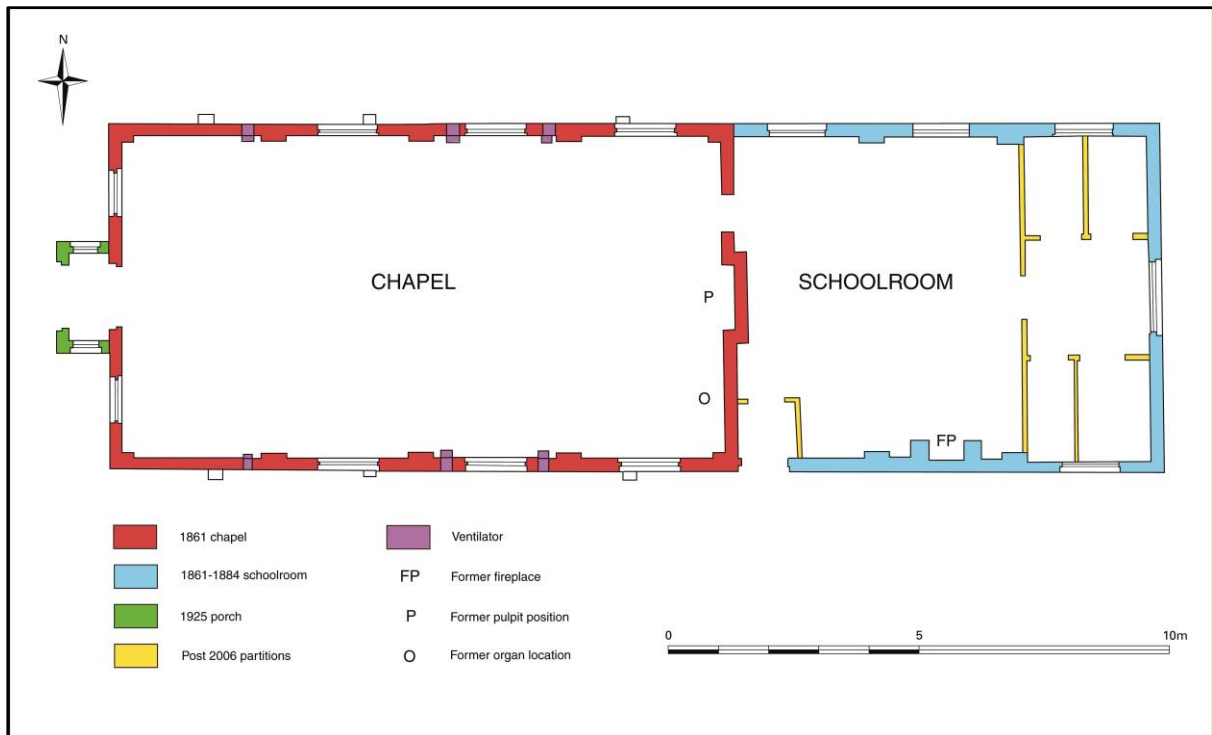


Fig 6: Plan of the chapel, schoolroom and porch, phased. Andy Isham, after Coles Architects, with thanks.

There is a row of partly infilled ventilation holes along the foot of the chapel side walls (projecting from walls on Fig 6, and see Fig 7). These appear to have been to create a passage of air under the floor. They have been largely bricked-up, possibly when the 1925 works introduced panelling over their interior wall surfaces.



Fig 7: Bricked-up ventilator at ground level (three to each long side), probably reduced in size and efficiency in 1925; Note chamfered brick plinth integral to the chapel

Further, high-level ventilators have been inserted above the panelling and were finished in the same paint scheme (purple on Fig 6 and see Figs 8a & b). Operated by means of turning a small handle in the shape of a fist gripping a bar, they have been boxed in with plasterboard. Inspection of the exterior brickwork shows that these were an introduction, probably to replace those at the foot of the long walls when the panelling was inserted.

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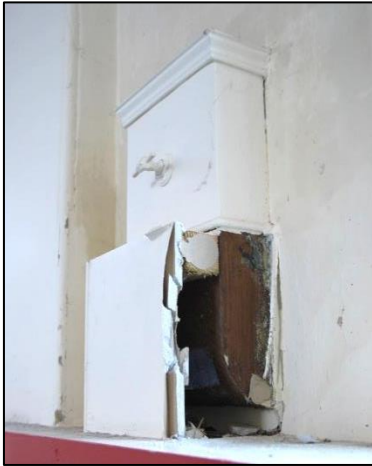


Fig 8a: Interior ventilator, head-height; side unboxed, showing the 1925 colour scheme



Fig 8b: Related ventilator grille, inserted.

The roof of both principal elements, comprising trusses and purlins, with internal edge-to-edge cladding, is of pine, with collars and braces in slender steel angle-iron, braced in the centre with long vertical threaded bolts. The wooden portions have all been painted in a light-oak grained finish, known from documents to be the scheme of 1925. Steel elements are painted black.

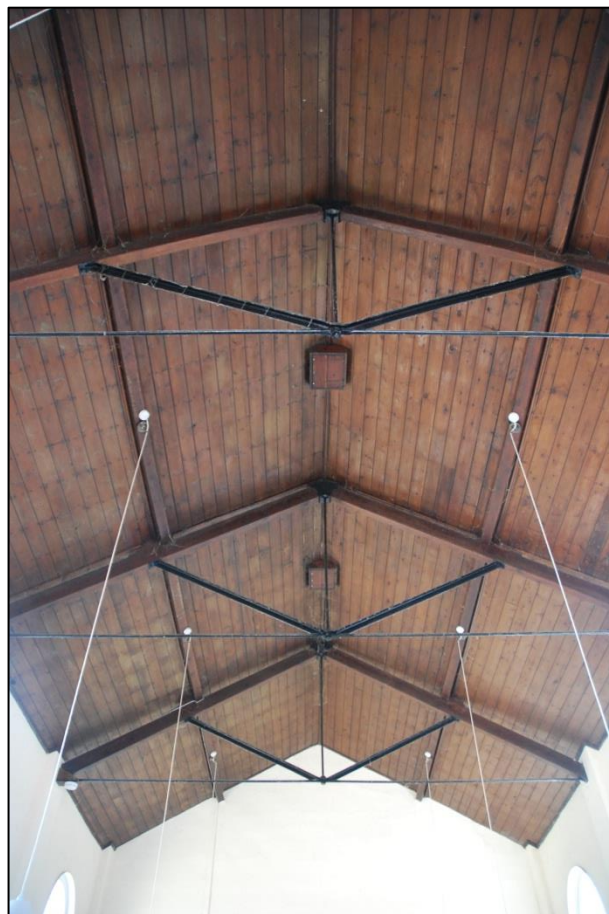


Fig 9: the chapel roof looking east

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The walls are all painted and where there was formerly wood panelling, the same height has been covered or boxed-in using modern plasterboard. Where investigated it does not appear to have covered the old panelling, which seems to have been taken out. What is boxed in seems to be electrics, pipework, insulation etc.

With the exception of the porch, the chapel windows are all modern UPVC double-glazed examples. The westernmost bay of the four has no side windows, probably because the chapel possessed, or was built to accommodate, a lobby with a gallery above. It is not now apparent whether a gallery was present or not, and no reference has been found in the documents.

A few oddments do survive from the former 1925 interior; principally three or four pews, painted light-oak, and the old communion rail remains in-situ. Organ, pulpit choir stalls and 95% of the former interior otherwise has gone.

The ornate round arched alcove which once framed the pulpit still survives, flanked by a pair of columns with developed Romanesque capitals and a rolled cable moulding between.



Fig 10: Round-arched alcove in the east gable framing the former pulpit location; scale 1m

Some memorial tablets were noted around the walls:

On east gable, in red-veined marble:

*'Sacred to the memory of James Longland, 1823-1875, and of Jane, his wife, 1832-1913. Also of James Herbert, their son, 1860-1920, whose lives were dedicated to God in the service of this chapel, and whose characters and noble qualities in heart and mind were inspiration and example to their fellow men.'*

On north wall, machine-chased powder-coated metal plaque:

*'In loving memory Arthur William Underwood, Dec 15<sup>th</sup> 1958. Annie Jane Underwood Dec 24<sup>th</sup> 1958.'*

On south wall, in red-veined marble:

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*'Sacred to the memory of Albert Frost, a loyal and devoted worker for this church 1887-1945. Until the day break and the shadows flee away.'*

On porch exterior, machine-chased powder-coated metal plaque:

*'This clock is to the memory of Mrs Amy Goodes, died Nov 20<sup>th</sup> 1964, organist of this chapel for many years'*

The plot is fringed on the west (the roadside), the south and the east by a brick wall with some areas of iron railings between stone-pedimented gate-piers. The wall, surmounted by Staffordshire blue engineering brick copings, has been heightened at least once for privacy and, where the former WC block stood at the east end of the chapel yard, been entirely rebuilt. On the north side the wall encloses only the schoolroom yard and appears never to have enclosed the chapel on that side. The recent use of the premises as a crèche and playgroup has led to the ground surface being covered in a soft, rubberised mat; it is believed that the chapel yard was formerly probably of Staffordshire blue engineering bricks.

## Conclusions

This non-conformist chapel went unreported in the RCHME survey published in 1986.

Level 2 recording shows that nothing but the basic shell of this chapel survives from its earliest construction in 1861. The schoolroom on the back is probably slightly later in date, but was present on maps by 1884. The porch is from 1925.

An outbuilding, probably containing the chapel WCs once stood at the back of the plot. It has subsequently been demolished.

The interior was completely overhauled in 1925 and vestiges today date entirely from that scheme, although very little of that has survived the closure of the chapel and subsequent use.

A good social history of the chapel survives in public ownership from 1902-2006 at Northamptonshire Record Office (2009/90), and is a valuable resource for historians of rural non-conformist Christian worship and fellowship during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Bibliography

Brunskill, R. W, 1997 *Brick Building in Britain*, Gollancz

RCHME, 1986 *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses; Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire*  
Extracted from: *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*,  
Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England

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## Appendix

### OASIS data

Project Name	An archaeological building record of the former Union Chapel, Grendon, Northamptonshire
OASIS ID	iainsode1-350717
Project Type	Building Recording
Originator	Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd
Project Manager	Iain Soden
Previous/future work	No
Current land use	In use as a building
Development type	Domestic conversion
Reason for investigation	Planning condition
National grid reference	SP 8795 6040
Start/end dates of fieldwork	17 April 2019
Archive recipient	Northamptonshire Archaeological Archive
Study area	0.1ha



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