

# Nonconformity in Darlington: the Buildings

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*A documentary and field study of nonconformist chapels and meeting houses in Darlington, covering the period from the 17th century up to 1914, revealed 50 buildings either purpose built or modified, for worship. The majority of these belonged to various strands of Methodism. The study identified various denominational distinctives, and changes in architectural taste; a large number of buildings have been lost in the last 50 years or so, and some of these have been virtually undocumented.*

This study, of the nonconformist places of worship in a Northern market town, was funded by English Heritage and follows a series of studies of similar buildings in the more rural background of the Northern Pennines, carried out between 1997 and 2003 in the recently-designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (covering parts of Durham, Northumberland and Cumbria) and also Lower Weardale. Its purpose was to locate all nonconformist chapels and meeting houses which were either built as, or adapted to form, places of worship, up to 1914. Roman Catholic buildings, and public buildings used by congregations, were not included. The majority of the buildings were identified by an examination of Ordnance Survey maps (1st edition c1860, 2nd c1898, 3rd 1915) and lists in various trade directories. The local studies library, the local newspaper and current ministers were also very helpful.

## Nonconformist Places of Worship in Darlington: A Gazetteer

*In the following list only the period of use by the founding denomination is given; names in italics indicate the building is now demolished. The letter R indicates that the chapel was rebuilt after 1914.*

1. *Albert Road 'Iron Chapel'* 1884-1890.
2. *Albert Road Chapel* 1890-1973
3. Archer Street Baptist Church 1847-1870
4. *Blackwell United Methodist Church* 1909-?1937
5. Bondgate, First Methodist Church 1779-1813
6. Bondgate Methodist Church 1813-
7. Cockerton, 'The Old Chapel' 1873-1932
8. *Cockerton Methodist Chapel I* 1823-1875
9. Cockerton Methodist Chapel II 1875-
10. *Coniscliffe Road Methodist Church (Paradise Chapel)* 1840-1971
11. *Corporation Road Baptist Church I* 1897-1905
12. Corporation Road Baptist Tabernacle 1905-
13. *Corporation Road Wesleyan Mission* 1898-1904
14. *Corporation Road Methodist Church* 1904-1965
15. Crosby Street Meeting Room (now Apostolic Church) c1890?-
16. Denmark Street Chapel (now Spiritualist Church) 1863
17. Eastbourne Methodist Church 1883 (as schoolroom)-
18. *Elm Tree Mission* ?c1900-1967
19. Florence Street Chapel (now Bethesda Chapel, Brethren) 1897-1954
20. Friends' Meeting House (Skinnergate) 1678-
21. Grange Road Baptist Church 1871-
22. *Greenbank Chapel* 1879-1965
23. *Harrowgate Hill Methodist I (Lowson Street)* 1871-1903
24. Harrowgate Hill Methodist Church (Lowson Street) 1902-
25. Haughton le Skerne Methodist Chapel (1825-
26. Haughton Road Chapel (Albert Hill Mission) 1870-1988
27. *Hopetown Hall (Society of Friends Mission)* 1872-1937
28. *Hopetown Mission* 1904-1962
29. *Howard Street Mission Hall* 1910-?
30. *Leadenhall Street (Brookside Chapel)* 1865-1879
31. *Louisa Street I (Bank Top)* 1860-1901
32. *Louisa Street II (East End)* 1901-1987 (now Sikh Temple)
33. *Nestfield Methodist Church* 1867-?1960
34. Northgate United Reform Church 1868-
35. North Lodge Terrace, Church of Christ Scientist 1908-1938 (now Mosque)
36. *North Road Methodist* 1872- (R)
37. *Park Street Mission Hall* 1831-1933
38. *Pierremont Chapel (Vancouver Street)* 1912- (R)
39. *Queen Street Chapel* 1822-1879
40. *Rise Carr 1 (or Jane Street, then later Westmorland Street)* 1867-1889
41. *Rise Carr II (or Jane Street, later Westmorland Street)* 1889-c1960
42. Salvation Army Citadel, Northgate 1887-
43. *Springfield Church Centre* 1907-
44. *Thompson Street Methodist Church* 1907-c1960
45. *Union Row Mission* 1894-1944
46. *Union Street, 'Bethel'* 1812-1862
47. *Union Street Congregational Church* 1862-1972
48. *Unity Church, Leayard* c1877-? (Unitarian)
49. *Victoria Road Methodist* 1884-1966
50. *Winston Street Hall (Spiritualist)* Late C19?

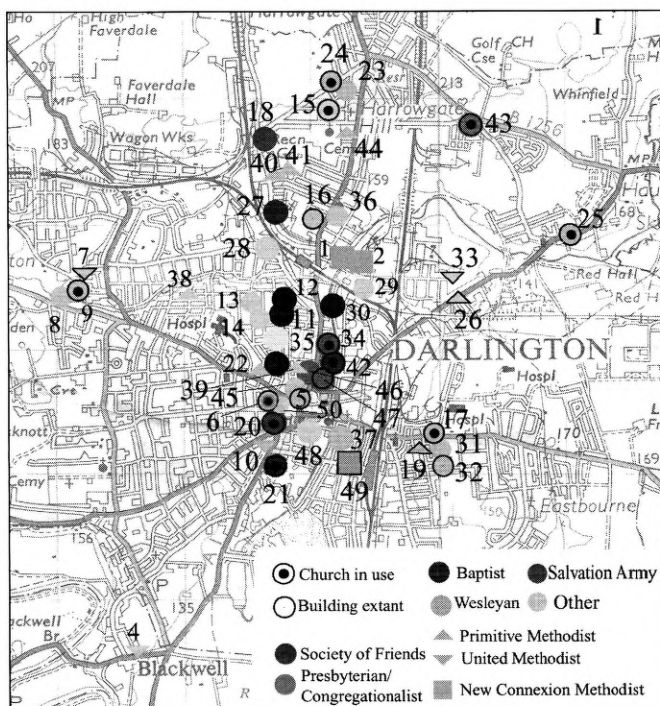


Fig 1 Map of Darlington showing location of nonconformist places of worship, with gazetteer

Despite all this, it remains possible that some minor buildings have been omitted. Structures simply labelled 'Mission Hall' on OS maps were not included, as these might well have been related to Anglican congregations. It had been initially intended to make a ground plan of each building, but this would have taken more time than was available. All buildings were photographed (in digital format at 3mp resolution); old illustrations, and the outline plans of buildings provided by OS maps, were also copied.

Darlington is a market town of Saxon origin, with a fine 13th-century parish church dedicated to St Cuthbert and, formerly, a manor house of the Bishop of Durham, demolished in 1870. Its early links with the railway are well known; industrial growth came with the railway and iron industry, principally in the two decades during which the population grew by two and a half times to reach 27,7000 in 1871 (Cookson 2003, 2). The chapels and meeting houses reflect this social history (Fig 1).

### *The Old Dissent*

All the main nonconformist groups of the 'Old Dissent' that emerged from the religious turmoil of the Commonwealth years - the Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Society of Friends (Quakers) and Unitarians are represented in the town. Of these, it is perhaps the Quakers or Society of Friends that are the best known; as elsewhere their social and historical significance has been far out of proportion to their actual numbers, so much so that Darlington is traditionally known as 'the Quaker Town' and its football club as 'the Quakers'.

In 1679 the Society of Friends bought a cottage in Skinnergate for £35, and converted it into a meeting house; little remains of that original building, but the overall form of its 18th-century successor is still clear - two halls divided by a removable screen, with seating arranged around a central table, except for the 'stand' along one wall, with a continuous sounding board above it, to facilitate contributions from the congregation.

'Independents' (later the Congregationalists and Presbyterians) were meeting during the 18th century in a 'yard' somewhere between the Old Post Office and the King's Head Hotel (off Northgate), but do not seem to have built a meeting house until, following a secession in 1806, 12 Congregationalist members first moved themselves to a room in Union Street and then built Bethel Chapel in 1812. This was replaced by the much grander 'Congregational Bicentenary Memorial Church' in 1862; not far away the Presbyterians built their own St George's Church (now Northgate United Reformed) in 1869. By this time both groups were quite liturgical in practice, and their buildings have the closest affinities with Anglican ones, with towers and spires (the first Nonconformist ones in town) and arcades of tall cast-iron columns that carry the roof structure.

The first Baptists to be recorded in Darlington, a strict

Calvinist group, met in a house c1810 and were officially constituted as a church in 1831, but never seem to have owned their own building. A new group formed a church in 1846 and built the Archer Street Chapel a year later, a simple preaching box with round-arched windows, which survives in a much-altered form as a Masonic Hall. The congregation moved to an impressive new Italianate church at Grange Road, the only incursion of nonconformity into the leafy southern suburbs; it was designed by William Peachey, architect to the North Eastern Railway Company. A breakaway group from the Archer Street congregation built Brookside Chapel in Leadenhall Street in 1865 but ran out of steam financially in 1879 (selling their building to the Anglicans which became the first St Luke's Church) and returned to the parent congregation. Grange Road is a very typical 'town chapel' with galleries, twin stairs flanking an entrance lobby, and a schoolroom block behind the dais. The only real difference from its Methodist counterparts is that the pulpit is smaller and the dais in front larger, to accommodate a baptistery and the deacons' seats. A slightly belated Baptist response to the major northward growth of the town in the later 19th century is seen in the Corporation Road Church, first built as a corrugated iron mission hall in 1897, followed by an ostentatious brick 'Baptist Tabernacle' alongside it in 1905.

### *Methodism*

Inevitably the major theme in the nonconformist history of the town is that of Methodism, responsible for no less than 35 of the 50 buildings identified. The first Methodist meeting in Darlington took place on Whit Tuesday in 1753 in a house on Clay Row, later commemorated by a plaque (now gone) outside Skipper's Garage, St Cuthbert's Way. A thatched cottage was taken over for Methodist use, and John Wesley preached here in 1761 on the first of a number of visits to the town. A former schoolroom in Northgate was rented by the group in 1776, and three years later their first meeting house (Bondgate 1) was constructed. This had not been demolished in the late 19th century, as previously thought, but survived in part in the rear premises of the 'Poundstretcher' shop. It only measured c8 by 4m internally; so if its claimed capacity of 300 is to be believed, the congregation must have suffered uncomfortably close fellowship within its confines.

The spectacular growth of Methodism is underlined by the contrast between this humble edifice and its successor, built in 1812. This, the present Bondgate Methodist Church, is a classic town chapel, in brick, seating 1,400, with a spectacular set of galleries. It was designed by a London Architect, William Jenkins, in an Italianate style to match his other chapels at Southwark, Lambeth and Canterbury (Lloyd 27/1/1993). Like its predecessor this was still a 'preaching box', but on a grand scale. The liturgical focus is on the dais and preaching desk; in the original

construction this concealed the communion table, set in a shallow apsidal recess beyond. The Sacrament was literally eclipsed by the Word.

The 19th century history of Methodism was dominated by a succession of schisms, and the emergence of new groups. The most significant were probably the Primitive Methodists; their first chapel in Queen Street, a simple preaching box with square-headed windows, was built in 1822, but in 1879 their much grander Greenbank Chapel was built nearer the town centre.

A congregation of the Wesleyan Reform Association (later 'United Methodist') broke away from Bondgate and in 1840 built Paradise Chapel on Coniscliffe Road, architecturally very similar to the building they had left. Later came the Love Memorial Chapel on Victoria Road; although part of the Methodist New Connexion (which split away from the Wesleys as early as 1790) it was only built in 1884. The group's link with the town had begun a few years earlier when Mr Love, partner in a coal firm and already a New Connexion Methodist moved to Darlington. His widow gave £1,000 towards its construction, with the result that it became one of a small group of nonconformist chapels specifically named after a benefactor.



Fig 2: Darlington Salvation Army Citadel

These branches of Methodism were all to recombine in the early 20th century; a fifth breakaway group however, the Salvation Army, retained its independence. The Salvationists arrived in town in 1879, embracing the enthusiasm and military jingoism (and the use of women as preachers) that the Primitive Methodists had half a century before. Eight years later, after purchasing land from the wealthy Quaker family of the Peases, they opened their 'Barracks' (later the 'Citadel') on Northgate in 1888. Although unlisted, this remains one of the finest Salvation Army buildings in the

North of England, basically a 'town chapel' but given an embattled brick frontage, flanked by towers containing the stairs (Fig 2).

### *The later 19th century*

By the end of the 19th century a clear pattern of nonconformist building had developed. The town centre was ringed by a series of big 'town chapels', all with fully galleried interiors - those just described representing the various strands of Methodism, along with the Baptist Grange Road, the older Friends' Meeting House and two spired neo-Gothic buildings in stone for the Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The Salvation Army Citadel and St George's Presbyterian Church (now Northgate United Reformed) stand almost side-by-side on Northgate, and make an instructive comparison between buildings raised by a brand new (and working class) group and one already long-established and respectable. The Citadel, apart from its impressive frontage, was very much a utilitarian preaching box with plain wooden benches rather than pews, and decoration restricted to painted texts (and latterly a pair of stained glass windows with the Salvation Army crest); whilst at St George's the congregation, entering beneath the watchful eyes of stone busts of Knox and Calvin looking down from the facade above, found themselves in a refined neo-Gothic interior.

Virtually all these denominations spawned daughter or mission churches (or in the case of the Salvation Army, 'outposts') in the new sprawl of terraced housing around the factories as Darlington expanded to the north. Usually a mission hall or schoolroom came first, before their position was consolidated by a much grander chapel built alongside. In 1890 Dresser related how one Wesleyan group first met in the pattern shop belonging to Mr Kitching in Hopetown Foundry; soon afterwards, in 1871, a chapel (Harrowgate Hill) seating 110 and costing £150 was opened, which was later '*enlarged and beautified*'. A Primitive Methodist group was founded in Rise Carr in the late 1860s, then in 1871 a 17-year old female evangelist, Miss Webster of York came and '*turned a struggling cause into a flourishing society*' (Weatherill 1953, 47). The original chapel of 1867 was supplanted by a much larger new one in 1889, but was retained to become a schoolroom. Corporation Road '*where a large artisan population was growing*' became an intriguing ecclesiastical hotspot around the turn of the century. In June 1897 the Baptists erected a temporary '*iron church*' on the south side of the road, and in 1898 the Wesleys built a Mission Hall and Sunday School opposite; in 1904 both supplanted these preliminary structures by surprisingly grand edifices, so ostentatious that one must suspect an element of competition. The Wesleys in particular over-reached themselves, building a huge neo-Gothic church with a lofty tower and spire. Interestingly, a few years later, the Anglicans joined in and built a new St Luke's Church a little further up

Corporation Road, abandoning the old one just across Northgate from the foot of the street.

It is interesting to compare the architectural styles favoured by various groups. As already noted, the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were building stone churches in the neo-Gothic style in the 1860s; some smaller Methodist buildings soon followed suit (but in brick) although for the large 'town chapels' an Italianate style was usually favoured. In Cockerton, an old village which became incorporated in the prosperous 'west end' suburbs, the original Wesleyan Chapel of 1823 was replaced in 1875 by a stone neo-Gothic building, still a galleried preaching box within, but with a front so ornate that it was locally known as '*Cockerton Cathedral*'. It looked across the village green to the rival United Methodist Chapel. Erected only two years earlier, this was a far humbler structure, in brick, with simple round-arched windows and a paucity of architectural detail; a general style that persisted to the end of the century amongst the brick terraces of the north end of the town however.

By the end of the 19th century other groups on the fringe of mainstream Christianity, such as the Christian Scientists and Spiritualists make their appearance; something of the social class of the former is demonstrated by their small but sophisticated 1908 church in North Lodge Terrace. The only evidence traced of the '*first Spiritualist Hall*' in Winston Street is a sketch of a building that looks like a standard nonconformist chapel, perhaps previously built by another group.

### *The 20th century: change and decay*

At the end of the period studied, around 35 of the 50 chapels and meeting houses identified were in active use. Seventy years later in 2004, 14 remain as places of worship, although their original affiliations may have changed; the First Church of Christ Scientist building is now a Mosque (after a spell as an Elim Pentecostal Church), whilst Louisa Street Methodist Chapel is now a Sikh Temple. Two other Methodist chapels have been rebuilt on their old sites, but remain in use. Of the other 21 buildings, 17 have been demolished and four appropriated to secular uses. Of the demolished buildings, the only ones of any architectural significance were Methodist chapels. The ambitious Corporation Road of 1904 was short-lived; its soaring spire had to be taken down in 1941 and the remainder of the building was demolished in 1968, leaving behind a tradition that it was a '*jerry-built church*'. In the town centre Greenbank Chapel was pulled down in 1966 and Paradise (Coniscliffe Road) in 1973, and in the north end of town Rise Carr Church ended its days as a carpet warehouse before being destroyed by fire in 1990. No illustrations have been traced so far of some more minor buildings - the Society of Friends' Elmtree Mission and Hopetown Hall, the Wesleyan Hopetown and Howard Street Missions, and the

'*tin church*' at Pierremont. Probably the last nonconformist place of worship to be erected in the period studied was the United Methodist Church at Blackwell, but after its opening service and stained glass windows were celebrated in a newspaper report, and a brief appearance on one Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map, it seems to drop out of history. A wall built across the site bears the scratched date '1937'. It may have been a victim of road widening, and its congregation departed to the newly-opened Elm Ridge Church, but this is surmise. Its fate shows how even 20th-century places of worship can disappear without trace.

It is also worth mentioning the loss of interior fittings and furnishings in the buildings that survive. This takes place as part of normal adaptation and modernisation, but it is important that some form of record of old arrangements should be kept. Many of the Methodist churches have seen a shift in visual focus from the pulpit to the altar table, and the removal of fixed pews. The Salvation Army Citadel retained its original internal arrangements until 1977, but has now been completely remodelled internally.

Only four of Darlington's nonconformist places of worship have been afforded listed building status, Bondgate Chapel at grade II\* and the Friends' Meeting House, Haughton Methodist Chapel and Northgate United Reformed Church at grade II. Many of the other buildings are of some architectural interest. Of the two main chapels now put to secular uses, Victoria Road is an assertive building that, despite being shorn of the top of its spire, still makes a major contribution to its streetscape, whilst Union Street, an attractive neo-Gothic building, is sadly scheduled for demolition in the near future.

The Salvation Army Citadel on Northgate was gutted internally in 1977 but retains its impressive embattled frontage, an important element in what is now a conservation area, although the building itself is not listed. Louisa Street Methodist Church is a large but not outstanding neo-Gothic church, built in 1901 but in a style more popular 40 years before; its recent conversion to a Sikh Temple is of interest.

### *Conclusions*

The rapid loss of nonconformist buildings has aroused attention over the last 20 or 30 years, although the majority of publications dealing with them (eg Stell 1994) tend to concentrate on a small selection perceived to be of special architectural or historic interest, whilst the plainer and later chapels tend to pass unnoticed (though see Lake *et al* 2001). It is regrettable that in a town such as Darlington the only photographs traced (in local studies and newspaper collections) of major chapels such as Coniscliffe Road and Greenbank, which lasted until the 1960s and 1970s, are simply of their frontages; it would seem likely that photographs of the interiors survive in private hands, if they can be located.

It is clear that a more detailed search, and a trawl through old newspaper articles etcetera, would bring in further information. It is important that collection of material relating to these buildings continues, and that all gathered material is lodged either with the County Sites and Monuments Record or some other central collection.

### *Acknowledgements*

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