

The former Congregational Churches of Battle and Robertsbridge – their recent and early histories, with some relevant history of Methodism in Robertsbridge



The early histories of the former Congregational churches of Battle and Robertsbridge are quite different, that at Robertsbridge evolving by secession in 1876 from the local Wesleyan Methodists and that in Battle being founded by some disillusioned Particular Baptists in 1881.

The reason these now disused churches are now discussed together is because they were built at nearly the same time and had the same architect, Thomas W Elworthy¹ of the firm Elworthy and Sons of St Leonards on Sea, who also designed several other churches in Hastings and St Leonards. Elworthy himself was an active teetotaler, Congregationalist and amateur geologist. He later pointed out that the upper Brede Valley was likely to be able to provide large sources of underground water for Hastings, which was running short of water as it rapidly expanded as a sea-bathing resort. This led to drilling of three deep bores at Brede and the installation in 1904 of the first of the 'Brede Giant' steam pumps² to move the water from Brede to Fairlight and Baldslow. The giants were also used later to pump the water from the 1930s Powdermill Reservoir at Brede.

Robertsbridge

Much like Battle, Robertsbridge has a long history of Non-conformity. In 1676 Salehurst parish (the parish church is at Salehurst not in Robertsbridge itself) had the second highest number of Non-conformists (28) of any parish in the area: it was second to Rye, whose Non-conformist population was increased by Huguenot refugees.

Robertsbridge Congregational church has – just – a slightly longer ecumenical history than Battle Congregational church as it evolved from a Methodist meeting formed there in about 1770. This meeting was part of the early Sussex Wesleyan Methodist Circuit centred on Rye and the valley of the river Rother which John Wesley set up in 1756 and strongly supported.

Wesley, in his Journal, records five visits to the 'little town of Robertsbridge'. He stayed with George Pike and his wife, at the " Old Grange House" Academy. This house was demolished a long time ago, but stood opposite the entrance of the George Hotel yard. Wesley's first visit was on 31 October 1771, on his way from Rye to London and his fifth and final visit to Robertsbridge was on 7 December 1784. Edmund Austen, in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society records that Edward Piper (initially a prominent local Methodist and proprietor of a boarding school) wrote that Wesley preached in a large schoolroom attached to the house of George Pike, which would accommodate 150 persons. Piper also gave some details of a possible sixth visit by Wesley which is not otherwise recorded. Pike was leader of the Methodist society at Robertsbridge from 1774 until just before his death in 1792.

The death of Pike and the loss of a meeting house led to problems for Robertsbridge Methodists for some years. Eventually the congregation built a small chapel in Barker's Lane (? location), but it was not until 1812 that regular meetings were revived under the leadership of Thomas Hilder. A year later (1813) they purchased a larger chapel situated in Fair Lane from David Fenner, a Calvinist minister. The price paid for the chapel and house adjoining was £350. A school house was added in 1874. There is a record of the re-opening of this chapel on 17 Aug 1938 when Edmund Austen gave a talk and this suggests a major renovation or rebuild. A chapel remained on that site until 1960 when it closed. It has now been converted into several flats.

In 1876, there was turmoil in the local Methodist Society, and this caused some Methodists to secede. This move was led by Edward Piper, who started holding meetings for Congregational-style worship in a house on Robertsbridge High Street.

Congregational churches were formed based on an early theory published by the theologian Robert Browne in 1592 and developed from the Non-conformist religious movement in England during the Puritanical reformation. Each congregation independently constituted the local church, a concept that can be traced to John Wycliffe and the Lollard movement. By 1850 Congregationalism had been transformed from a string of meeting houses all with a commitment to the complete autonomy of the local congregation, with a network of over 3,200 thriving chapels placed prominently on main streets

So in 1876 Robertsbridge was a late joiner to Congregationalism, but five years later, Piper commissioned Thomas Elworthy to design a new chapel. Piper was helped by Rev. Charles New, pastor at the Robertson Street Congregational Chapel in Hastings. Construction finished towards the end of 1881, but Piper died on 20 November 1881, at the age of 70; just before he was due to preach his inaugural sermon. A stone tablet commemorates him and Thomas Elworthy also inserted a stone inscribed with his own name.



The church remained connected with the former Robertson Street Congregational church in Hastings into the 20th century, and was also served by ministers from Burwash.

The Methodist chapel continued in parallel until it closed in 1960, after which the remaining Methodists in Robertsbridge transferred to other nearby Methodist churches or finally joined worshippers at the Congregational Church.

In 1972, the Congregational Church, Presbyterian Church of England and some other denominations merged to form the United Reformed Church, and the church at Robertsbridge became part of that denomination. Robertsbridge United Reformed Church was listed at Grade II by English Heritage on 13 May 1987. Robertsbridge United Reformed Church closed on 9 September 2015.

Battle

Battle Congregationalists had nothing of Methodism in their history, but spun out of the Battle Particular Baptists who had formed in 1793, whose history has been covered in a separate article.

Battle Congregational chapel and Sunday school was another late Congregational arrival when it opened, just before Robertsbridge, on Battle High Street on 28 July 1881. It can still be seen today as an architectural anomaly, as it is set back from the line of the shop fronts. Like Robertsbridge its façade is built in Italian Renaissance style (much favoured by Elworthy) in weathered red brick with a cream stone porch. It has two steps up from the recessed pavement, with two large windows to each side of the porch and a smaller one over it, all headed with the same cream stone. To the rear it has zero architectural merit (the modern equivalent would be a steel box warehouse), but nevertheless it is Grade II listed by English Heritage, presumably for its façade.

Battle Congregational Chapel was founded in Battle by a group of 22 persons who had initially been welcomed by the Baptists, but left the Zion Chapel when they re-instated adult baptism by total immersion in 1880. The 22 obviously considered that their previous infant baptism should have sufficed. Prominent amongst these was Jonathan Jenner who had done much for the Baptists as a Baptist lay-preacher as well as at some time being their treasurer and a deacon. He was a local farmer³ who had been born in 1823, married Mary Pursglove and had eight children. The group funded the building of a chapel 14m x 6m (46 ft by 20 ft) with a rear room of 5.6m x 4.9m (18 ft 6 in x 16 ft) on High Street, Battle.

Its architect was once again Thomas W Elworthy who also designed housing schemes and some public buildings and at least three other churches locally – St Leonards Baptist Church, Chapel Park Road, St Leonards on Sea in 1883; and a church at Hughenden Place, Mount Pleasant, Hastings (demolished 1972) and a replacement of the 1707 wooden Croft Chapel (in Hastings Old Town, also demolished 1972). All show the Italian Renaissance patterns seen on to the Battle High Street church (see images below). Not to be left out it is probable that Elworthy and Son designed Bulverhythe Congregational Chapel which opened in 1895 using the same pattern book.

One wonders why the Battle church appears so anonymous. It almost hides itself away. Maybe it appears so self-effacing as Battle High Street is such a busy shopping area with all the shop fronts on the same medieval building line.... and it is so obviously not a shop, not in line and certainly has no medieval features.

In 1891 delegates from this church to the Congregational Eastern District meetings were W C Jenner and R B Allwork, but after that only the occasional minister is noted at these meetings. In 1901 the church contributed £5 19s 0d to District funds. The only other event that is recorded (found on a genealogy site) is that Rosie Newbery of the local Newbery family of preserves, jam and sweets fame who were Strict Baptists married in this church in 1909. From 7 September 1923 it was regulated by a Charity Commissioners scheme, with the Sussex Congregational Union being the trustees. Its last services look as if they were

held in 1949 or 1950 just after the Second World War during which the Baptist pastor had held services on alternate weeks between his own church and the Congregational Church.

Its list of ministers can be found from the Surman index⁴

1882-1888 Chapple, George Porter
1889-1893 Morgan, John
1893-1897 Nicholson, William
1897-1901 Dakin, David Samuel
1902-1906 Eldridge, William James,
1906-1914 Roberts, William John
?
About 1928-1931? Weller, Thomas Cyril
1931-1933 Martin, Henry
?
1936-1940 Heming, Clarence William Wesley
?
1942-1946 *Cover by Baptist minister*
1947-1949 Hooker, John Mitchell

Clearly the numbers of Congregationalists in Battle waned to nearly zero post WW2 and the church was closed. It remains unclear as to exactly when but in 1948 the Battle Congregational Church was still receiving monies from The Congregationalist's Sussex Eastern District and the last recorded mention of Battle in their minutes was in 1950 - when it was considered that Battle should 'be included with Robertsbridge'. Curiously the organ from Battle Congregational Church somehow found its way to Wymondham Abbey in Norfolk in 1972.

For many years the chapel stood forlorn and empty and, when asked, few seemed to know what it had been. It was finally sold in 1976 (sale details below) and was bought by the Jenner family for use as a storeroom and offices. To the rear it abutted the old Jenner and Simpsons Mill. The Jenners sold it on in the early 1990s as part of the Jenner's Mill site re-development. The building is now Grade II listed and its façade in particular is protected. Interestingly when the old mill was demolished in 1999 an extensive archaeological survey was made which suggested that the site was closely associated with the old marketplace and courthouse which once occupied much space around the High Street/Mount Street junction and it must be possible that this may have also involved the chapel site, particularly to the rear.

Since the early 1990s the old chapel has had many uses, as a speciality food shop, as restaurants and most recently (2017) as a short lived bookies office. As it is Grade II listed and its façade cannot be altered it is difficult to see how it can be made commercially attractive.

Congregationalists merge to form the United Reformed Church

As early as the late 1800s some Congregationalists had been alarmed at the diminution in their membership. They had called for union with another denomination to increase the size and effectiveness of the churches. At one stage, some consideration was given to the idea

that the Baptist Union and the Congregational Union might unite. A joint assembly of these two bodies was held in 1901. Even though the only substantial difference between the Baptists and Congregationalists was on the issue of baptism, many Congregationalists preferred to look to the Presbyterians for union. Eventually talks with the Presbyterians were held after the Second World War but came to nothing. In the meanwhile at a local Battle level things had got closer as in 1906 there was serious consideration given to merging with the Baptists who were also struggling.

Finally in the late 20th century English Presbyterians, English, Welsh and Scottish Congregationalists and members of the Churches of Christ amalgamated through a series of unions in 1972, 1981 and 2000 to become the United Reformed Church, but way too late for Battle.

In the end it was also too late for Robertsbridge United Reformed Church.

Keith Foord 2011/2017 ©BDHS

Thomas Elworthy's Churches



Robertsbridge URC (built 1881, closed 2015)

Image from Wikipedia 



The former Battle Congregational chapel (built 1881, closed circa. 1950)

From www.genuki.org.uk



St Leonards Baptist Church (built 1883, active)

Image from Wikipedia 



Mount Pleasant Congregational in 1911 (built 1878-9, demolished 1972)

From <http://www.stmarksurchastings.org.uk/history/>



**Croft Congregational Chapel, Hastings Old Town
(built 1877, demolished 1972)**

From:
<http://friendsofhastingscemetery.org.uk/nonconinfo.html>

Property Data Sheet



GRAHAM WALKER & CO. INCORPORATING **JAMES WOODHAMS & SON**
CHARTERED SURVEYORS • ESTABLISHED 1860
26 High Street • Battle • Sussex • Tel. 2237 (STD 04246)

Ref 1976



VIEWING: By appointment with the Agents.

55, HIGH STREET,
BATTLE, SUSSEX.

A FREEHOLD PROPERTY LAST
USED AS A CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH

The property has a frontage to the High Street of about 23ft and a site depth of some 91ft.

The accommodation of the Church at present comprises:

CHURCH. Abt. 46'3" x 20'. ROOM AT REAR 18'6" x 16'3".
KITCHEN. Sink. External W.C.

At the rear of the property part is let to Jenner & Simpson.

PRICE: £12,000 Freehold. Vacant possession on completion of the main part and subject to the tenancy of the rear.

Subject to contract.

**Sale details of Battle
Congregational Chapel in
1976**

Courtesy Norma Jenner



Probably also by Elworthy and Son, Bulverhythe Congregational Chapel (built 1895, vacated circa. 1975, now used by the Hastleons Musical Theatre Society)  Wikipedia

Endnotes

¹ Elworthy has a good biography at <http://friendsofhastingscemetery.org.uk/elworthyt.html>

² <http://bredesteamgiants.co.uk/history/>

³ Jonathan Jenner farmed at Little Park Farm, having left the family farm at Boreham Street.

⁴ The Surman Index Online, Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, <http://surman.english.qmul.ac.uk>

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NC/10/2/1 Aug 1890 - Sep 1909

NC/10/2/2 Nov 1909 - Sep 1931

NC/10/2/3 Jan 1932 - Nov 1960