

High Street Church History

The church was built as a Congregational Chapel in 1773-4 by a congregation made up of former members of the Presbyterian Church on St. Nicholas Street and a number of "respectable families wearied with the dull preaching of the church (of England)". John Dawson was the leading light of this group and purchased the land for the chapel before conveying the building to nine trustees, three Ministers and six self-employed small businessmen, all bar one of whom is commemorated by a plaque in the church.

Robert Gardner	d. 1814	Sailcloth Maker
Richard Edmundson	d. 1801	Sailcloth Maker
Henry Walmsley	d. 1821	Bookseller
John Eskrigg	-	Tallowmaker / Merchant
John Jackson	d. 1831	Spirit Merchant

A small rectangular building without ornamentation, of local dressed stone with a Westmorland slate roof, the chapel faced onto Mount Street (now High Street) and had one central door. At this date it probably had a gallery and some of the memorial tablets, e.g. to Isabel Dawson died 1781. The central part of the Pulpit, of Mahogany from the West Indies, dates from this period.

In 1777 George Burder became the Minister and was one of the leading Congregational Ministers of the day, leaving for Coventry in 1783. A bust of George Burder can be seen on the window sill near the pulpit. His successor Peter Charrier 1792-1808, commemorated by a plaque behind the Pulpit, was the Minister when the Sunday School was started by William Alexander (1763-1855) in 1796.

By the time of Samuel Bell's pastorate (1823-45) the chapel was not large enough for the congregation. Therefore in 1833 the chapel was extended to the east to accommodate a further 310 sittings, beyond the paired columns nearest the pulpit. The vestry was added and a schoolroom built under the Church at the east end for the Sunday School. The building was illuminated by gaslight and a stove installed.

In 1851 the galleries were enlarged and the chapel re-pewed. The pews - 'high backed and with doors' are still in the church today. In 1855 the Sunday School building was erected to the design of E G Paley. Amongst the trustees was Robert Mansergh, draper, commemorated by a plaque, who died 1863. In 1858 there were 631 scholars and 41 teachers in the Sunday School.

The church finally took on the present appearance in 1873 when to celebrate the Centenary an organ was provided by Mrs. Mary Barton in remembrance of her father William Jackson, cotton mill owner. The organ gallery was extended and two stained glass windows installed either side of the pulpit. It took until 1911 for the front elevation to return to a central door replacing the two doors put in sometime in the previous century.

The number of plaques and memorials in the church is somewhat unusual for a Congregational Chapel and records past ministers and members. At the end of the north side of the upstairs gallery is a brass plaque to a member, Bessie Hoyland of the Army Nursing Service Reserve, a descendant of the Jackson family, who died during the course of the South African War at Bloemfontien in 1902. She was remembered locally as the 'Florence Nightingale' of the Boer War and Lord Roberts when he came to open the Kings Own Chapel at the Priory also visited High Street to see this memorial.

In front of the church is the graveyard opened in 1773 and closed in 1837. This contains the vault of the Welch and Walmsley families. In all there were 575 burials, the last of which took place in the 1850's with the Home Secretary's permission.

The name Trinity United Reformed Church, as the High Street Chapel is now known, dates from 1972 when Congregational and Presbyterian Churches merged nationally to form the United Reformed Church or U.R.C.