

### **St John's Chapel at the foot of Gun Hill.**

St John's Chapel, the earliest chapel recorded in Dedham, stood at the foot of Gun Hill. It is mentioned in 1523 in the Will of John Webbe, a major benefactor of the parish church. He left instructions to his executors to "*make substantially the highway from St John's Chapel to the Church gate of Dedham next unto the Vicarage,*" which must refer to what is now the Stratford Road. By 1671 the small building, known by that time as the Lord's Chapel stood on a triangular site owned by Palmer Firmin, who lived nearby at the Rookery. It survived until 1826 when it was replaced by a pretty thatched cottage with a trellised front and 'gothic' windows. The footpath from Dedham towards Stratford bridge ran along behind it. In the twentieth century this cottage was repeatedly damaged by vehicles running out of control on the dangerous bend at the bottom of the hill and it was finally swept away during the construction of the A12 Stratford Bypass in 1965.

### **The United Reformed Chapel in Brook Street.**

Besides those who attended the parish church there were Protestant Christians in Dedham known as Congregationalists, who refused to conform to the Church of England or recognise the authority of its priests and bishops. For them it was both both a right and a duty for congregations to govern themselves independently of any higher human

authority. In the early eighteenth century they worshipped in East Bergholt but it was probably the flooding of the River Stour during the winter months that made them want to have a separate congregation here. In 1738 Mary Blomfield's house in Dedham was licensed for their meetings and five years later John and Henry Blomfield bought a site at the western end of Frog Meadow from Timothy Peacock, owner of the Sun Inn, in order to build a new meeting house. This was a stuccoed two-storey building with a three-bay classical front, pedimented doorcases and a hipped roof. A timber-framed and plastered Manse for a resident Minister (now Lindsay House) was built at about the same time. The chapel was registered on 2 September 1739 and had trustees who were local merchants, tradesmen and farmers. At the opening service the sermon was preached by the Rev. Benjamin Nowell of Colchester and the Rev. Bazaliel Blomfield from Nayland acted as the temporary pastor until Dedham's first permanent minister, the Rev. Davidson, was appointed. Later pastors included the Rev. William Bentley Crathern who served for thirty-six years (1786-1822) and the Rev. John Trew who died in 1868; he was greatly loved in Dedham and an inscription to his memory can still be seen at the base of a sadly cracked headstone in front of the Craft Centre, which once marked his grave outside the Chapel. In the time of his successor, the Rev. Ebenezer Evans (1869-77) it was decided to replace the small meeting



The cottage which took the place of the the Lord's Chapel at the foot of Gun Hill, photographed in the 1920's.



The Congregational Chapel built in 1738. Note the separate entrances for men and women

house, which was in poor condition, to make more room for the growing congregation and allow for future expansion. The new Chapel was built in 1871 in the red-brick Gothic style with white brick decoration, rose windows and a small bell tower. The main space was designed with a gallery, so that it could seat four hundred worshippers and it was possible to enlarge it when necessary by "raising the shutters" dividing it from the schoolroom (to its west) which accommodated the flourishing Congregational Sunday School.

English Congregationalists eventually became part of the United Reformed Church and that was what the the Chapel was called when I remember it. The name of a minister, the Rev. Alfred J. Basden, who served there from 1891-1906 and again from 1926-1933 can be seen on a tablet placed on the front wall of Barfield's Almshouses in Crown Street recording a legacy from his son in his memory. The Chapel had good regular attendances until the mid twentieth century but after the congregation dwindled in the 1960s and '70s it closed for worship and the building was converted to a Craft Centre in 1984. The bold quatrefoil roof lights were installed at that time and two new floors were inserted.

### **The Primitive Methodist Chapel on Long Road East.**

The original Primitive Methodists (later known simply as Methodists) were

established in Staffordshire in the early nineteenth century by two men who had been expelled from the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. They ministered to the poorest in society and therefore established themselves on the fringes of towns and villages rather than in the more prosperous centres. By 1841 the movement had spread to Essex. It took hold in the Colchester area around 1860 when Dedham's Primitive Methodist congregation had a presence somewhere in East Lane but were hampered by the lack of a suitable place to hold their services. In 1863 they bought a plot on the Heath with three cottages and garden ground on which to build themselves "*a neat and substantial connexional chapel*". This little red-brick building which still survives on Long Road East was simple but attractively detailed with Gothic windows and decorative bargeboards. The front was enlivened by quoins and other ornamental patterning in white brick. The sash windows at the sides had marginal glazing with coloured panes in the corners. The land cost £132.10 and construction around £200. Money was raised and the Chapel was established, governed by Trustees all of whom lived in Colchester. The foundation stone was laid on 2 November 1863. At a service to mark the occasion the Rev. O.O. Britain preached a sermon and afterwards laid the stone in the name of the Holy Trinity, depositing in a cavity prepared for that purpose a variety of relevant documents. These included a list of the trustees, the names of the builders and those of

## Feature: Dedham's Chapels

circuit ministers. Afterwards about sixty people sat down to an excellent tea, provided "in Mr. Felgate's barn", followed by a well-attended public meeting at 7 o'clock. "Although the rain fell in torrents the greater part of the time," it was reported afterwards, "We will not murmur, but thank God and take courage."

For over a century the Chapel was well supported by its loyal members but by the mid twentieth century the cost of structural repairs and necessary improvements put a great strain on the resources of a now much smaller congregation. By 1988 numbers had fallen to around 20 and the Chapel finally closed in 2008. However the building is now used as a Meeting Room for the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church; so it is still a place of religious worship.

### **The Heath School.**

When the Church of England School was established at the Heath crossroads it was not called a Church or Chapel but it was licensed as a place of worship and services continued to be held there for a hundred and twenty years. Purpose-built in 1858 at the expense of Dedham's Lecturer Dr Thomas Grimwood Taylor, the building consisted of a single room open to the rafters with an entrance at either end. In December 1951 after the children had left the Vicar, the Rev. A.R. Johnson, wrote in the Parish Magazine that: *"We must continue to refer to our Chapel as the Heath School until the*

*ownership and future status has been decided. In the meantime,"* he added, *"a very generous response comes to all our efforts to improve the fabric and make the building into a House of Worship. The P.C.C. have purchased two oil radiators which promise to be quite adequate. A large illustrated Bible and two brass candlesticks have just been presented to us."* A whist drive held at Malting Cottage by kind permission of Mr and Mrs Hillier raised £16 towards the cost of redecorating the School. From 1953 it was jointly owned by the Diocese and the Parochial Church Council. Regular services were held and there was a weekly rota of ladies who worked in pairs to clean the building but it was not until 1969 that the Parish Magazine began to call it the Heath Church. Worship continued until 1978 when the building was sold and converted into a private dwelling, its history perpetuated by the name Old Church House.

### **The Roman Catholic Chapel at Upper Park.**

The only Roman Catholic place of worship known in Dedham was a private chapel at Upper Park on Cole's Oak Lane which is recorded in 1871; it appears to have been licensed for marriages ten years later but is not mentioned after that. The Chapel, which was probably intended only for the use of Roman Catholic residents, occupied a room on the first floor of a building to the west of the house. I remember it while the Watsons were living there in the 1940s

## Feature: Dedham's Chapels

and '50s when it was used as a lumber room, presided over by a tailor's dummy. The cross which survives above the western gable end of the building serves as a reminder of its period of ecclesiastical use.

© Lucy Archer

*I am indebted to Paul Gallifant's excellent article on "The Primitive Methodist Chapel at Dedham Heath" in the Dedham Vale Society Newsletter No. 56, Summer 2004 also very grateful to Kevin and Alison Ward for valuable information on the history of the Heath School/Church and permission to use their photograph of the building in 1978.*

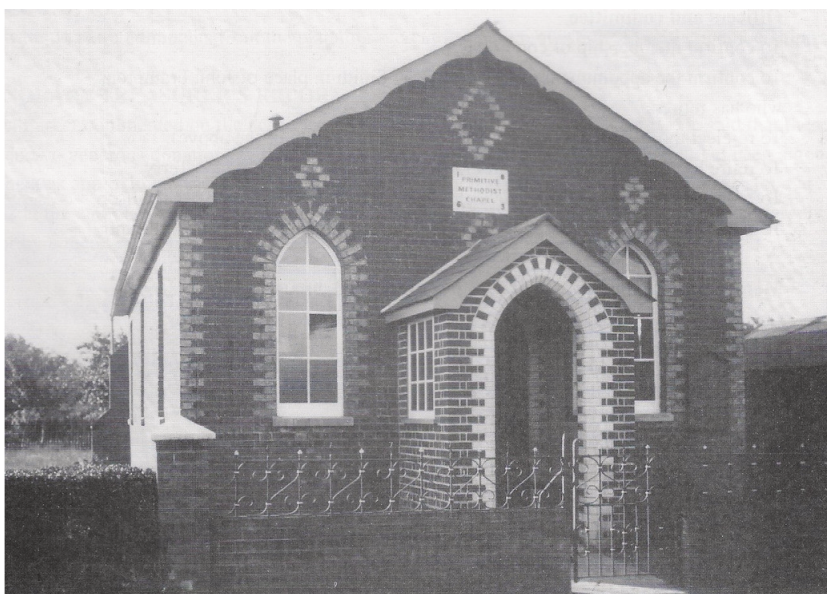


The Congregational Chapel as rebuilt in 1871 and the Manse for the Minister dating from c.1738



Tablet on the front of Barfield's Almshouses in Crown Street commemorating Congregational Minister the Rev. A.J. Basden





The Primitive Methodist Chapel on Long Road East built in 1863. The decorative gate has survived but the matching railings have gone.



The Heath Methodist Chapel when still in use c. 2000



The former Roman Catholic Chapel at Upper Park which still retains the Cross on its gable end.



The Heath Church in 1978. Note the crucifixes in the ironwork of the gate. The tablet on the front recorded its foundation as the Heath School in 1858.