

Saxmundham Chapel

A Brief History

Celebrating 175 years
of faith and service
1850 – 2025



Introduction

This booklet was originally compiled in 2010 when the chapel celebrated its 160th Anniversary. This revised edition includes some additions to the main sections - providing extra information, a new section at the start giving further details of the chapel's origins and a section at the end bringing the story up to date for the 175th Anniversary in 2025. A number of new images have been added to illustrate the text.

The strange mix of tenses in the text reflects that much of the text directly quotes from the minutes of meetings and other church records.

Contents

1	To Begin at the Beginning
4	Branching Out from Rendham
8	The Early Years
16	Times of War
18	Becoming United Reformed
20	More Recent Years
22	Bringing Things Up to Date
27	Pastors & Ministers Roll

To Begin at the Beginning

The back story or prequel of Saxmundham Chapel began over two hundred years before the opening service. The first non-conformist independent chapel established in the area was in the village of Sweffling, in 1650. This ultimately proved too small so was replaced in 1750 by a new chapel at nearby Rendham.

The chapel at Rendham thrived, requiring an extension in 1834. Folk from Saxmundham who attended the services would have quite a walk (some three miles each way) - doubled of course if you wanted to attend both morning and evening worship.



Although the chapel at Rendham (by that time Rendham URC) closed in 1979 the building remains, now converted into a five-bedroom home.

The owners, who purchased the chapel in 1989 and completed the conversion (pictured overleaf standing in the pulpit), featured in a national newspaper article in 2014 when they placed it on the market.

The interior, at the time, retained several of the original chapel features including the balcony rail, pulpit and raised dais.



The most surprising fact was that Douglas Hunter who purchased the chapel in 1989, a fifth generation New Zealander, found out that he was related to a benefactor, whose money helped the chapel to be built.



The relative was the famous congregational minister and hymnwriter Dr Isaac Watts – author of such greats as “O God our help in ages past”, “When I survey the wondrous cross” and “Joy to the World”.

Branching Out from Rendham

It September 1849 several members of the Rendham Chapel, residing in Saxmundham, began their exploration and preparations for building a church in Saxmundham by:

- taking mould from the building ground and supplying sand;
- ordering lime and making arrangements for commencing work;
- finding brick and sand, doing the brickwork, finding lime and labour, fetching the water, finding slate and covering the roof;
- finding all the nails and ironmongery, writing for price of red and white bricks at the kiln or carted in;
- requesting to go to Woodbridge and Ipswich to see chapels and obtain information;
- writing, architect, Chelmsford, for drawing plan of chapel;
- giving £20 to get working plans for the chapel and vestry and a surveyor for the building;
- receiving drawings and plans of pewing – deciding on chapel in Gothic style to be built with front gallery;
- deciding to have the chapel 53' x 32' in clear and the vestry 15' wide.

Alongside the building programme were administrative and spiritual matters to attend to:

4th January 1850 - For some months a feeling of uneasiness has existed among the people on account of the course which some of our friends at Saxmundham have deemed it right to adopt in reference to a new and distinct place of worship.

23rd June 1850 - at our church meeting held this morning which was a most affecting one... the following persons [22 listed] at their own request were dismissed from our communion for the purpose of forming a distinct Congregational Church at Saxmundham.

“We will only add and we do it with devout thankfulness to God that notwithstanding the trials through which the church has been called to pass, its peace has been preserved and its spiritual health continued. God Almighty grant that these blessings may be continued and multiplied a hundred-fold”

These minutes were signed by Rev John Rogers, late Pastor at Rendham, just before he moved to Upper Grafton Street Church, London.

2nd October 1849 - William Wells laid the foundation stone. In the evening of the same day a special prayer meeting was held at the old chapel.

The building was completed and an invitation circular was sent to over 20 churches in the area on 1st May 1850:

Dear Sir,

We have great pleasure in informing you that the new Independent Chapel, Saxmundham will be opened for Divine Worship on Wednesday the 22nd inst. when two sermons will be preached on the occasion; that in the morning by the Rev. James Sherman of London; and that in the evening by Rev Richard Robinson of Whitworth, Lancs. Service in the morning to commence at eleven o'clock, and in the evening at six o'clock.

Also, on the Sabbath, the 26th of May, the Rev. Richard Robinson will preach morning and evening; the morning service to commence at half past ten o'clock and the evening at half past six o'clock.

Collections will be made after each service towards the liquidation of the financial liabilities connected with the chapel.

Inviting your attendance on the occasion,

We remain, Yours truly,
William Wells, Isaac Ashford

N.B. on Wednesday a cold collation will be provided in the Market Hall. Tickets 1s. 6d. each may be had at the Chapel. A Public Tea will also be provided.

From then on details of the church life have a familiar ring as:

- buildings were added to, maintained, renovated;
- worship life of the congregation developed;
- members took cognisance of events in the world around;
- structures and procedures of the church locally and nationally altered.

The Early Years

May 1869 - Church debts of £288 in May were cleared as £300 by December – rejoicing in the freedom (but) resolving to devote ourselves more fully to the Lord our Saviour and to the extension of His kingdom.

June 1873 - Cordial thanks of the church be presented to our friends... who have spontaneously given the excellent harmonium now used by us in public worship... With the assurance that while we value the instrument for its usefulness we do so still more as an expression of loving interest in the prosperity of the church under whose influence they were all trained in early life and we express our sincere gratitude and joy for the fact that they are all disciples of Jesus Christ and useful and beloved members of this church.

30th August 1878 - Spoke about disturbance to the congregation sitting near the gallery on Sunday morning from the noise made by the children during the service... agreed to speak to the children from the pulpit the next Sunday morning.

1887 - The accommodation for the Sunday School being very inadequate and the system of heating the chapel with gas very unsatisfactory, it was resolved at a special

church meeting of the church and congregation, to enlarge the present school room and to heat that and the chapel with hot water pipes. The work was commenced on Monday 13th June 1887. The new rooms were opened with a public tea and meeting [also mentioned is a Harvest Thanksgiving service] on 22nd September 1887, three fourths of the required amount of money having been subscribed.

January 1890 - Several members addressed the church and a strong desire was expressed that some effort should be made to procure an organ. Eventually a committee... was appointed to consider the matter and report on it.

July 1892 - A committee... was appointed to consider the desirability of purchasing an American organ, strengthening the choir, and generally improving the musical part of the service.

October 1892 - The organ committee... had fully considered the matter referred to them and that an appeal for the necessary funds had met with a very liberal response. The organ was later moved from the gallery 1923... to the position now occupied by the choir. The current organ, a pipe organ by Bevington, was purchased later.

November 1893 - It was stated that the ladies appointed to collect the money for painting the chapel were greatly desired that the sum should be raised by a sale of work; which plan was accordingly adopted.

[N.B. it often appears in the minutes that the ladies were appointed to do the collecting of monies!]

June 1895 - The proposal to adopt the New Congregational Hymnal being reintroduced, the pastor suggested that it would be well at the same time to substitute a children's hymn for the usual chant at the morning service, to retain the Bristol Tune Book for occasional use and to let a short address to the children take the place of the second lesson... on 12th July the whole scheme was adopted and started on 1st September.

February 1896 - The pastor was directed, by a unanimous vote of the church, to sign a resolution in favour of the principle of arbitration as applied to the political relation of this country with the United States of America.

November 1896 - It was resolved to make a collection for the survivors of the late terrible massacre in America on 8th November after the evening service.

January 1899 - Motion carried 'That this meeting desires to express its cordial sympathy with the recent rescript of the Czar of Russia and with Mr W.J.Stead in the effort he is making to organise a Peace Crusade.'

1897 - Mrs Cole who died on 10th October 1897 bequeathed the sum of £450 towards the building of a manse. The work was begun in the



spring of the year following and on 5th November 1898 the minister entered into possession of the new house. The memorial stones were laid by George Garrett, Esq, County Councillor on September 22 1898.

N.B. The manse was sold in 1970. It was proposed and accepted with one abstention that the church would be willing to sell the Manse, known as Milton House, at the corner of St John's Road and Chapel Road.

January 1899 - it was resolved to take advantage of the new Marriage Act and the pastor was chosen to act as the Authorised Person for Marriage Registration.

April 1899 - Motion carried, 'That the Finance Committee be instructed to procure an iron fireproof safe, at the lowest possible cost, in accordance with the requirements of the new Marriage Act.'



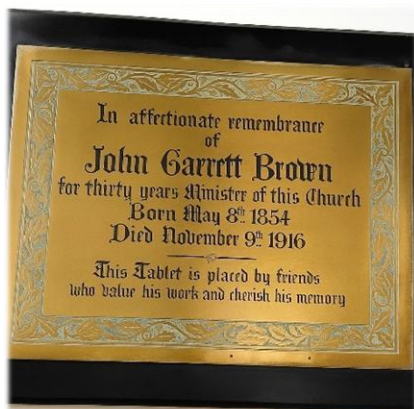
N.B. the safe is still present in the vestry (at the time of printing this edition) although it is no longer used to house marriage registration documents as certificates due to the change in the law in 2021. All certificates are now issued by register offices following the return of a "marriage schedule", signed at the time of the wedding. The key was misplaced so a locksmith had to drill it to provide access. The key was subsequently found but nothing is now stored in the safe.

September 1899 - A letter was read from the executors of the late Mr Isaac Ashford, offering the piece of land adjoining the graveyard as a gift to the church... in the hope that it may be added to the present graveyard. The gift was accepted with cordial thanks.

1900 - The Jubilee of the formation of the church was celebrated on 10th 1900 when the chapel, having been

thoroughly renovated at a cost of about £400, was reopened for public worship.

1916/7 - In recognition of the late Rev J Garrett Brown's thirty years' ministry in Saxmundham... a fund to be raised to erect a tablet in his memory... The treasurer reported that the sum of £141.14s.0d had been received. The sketch of design



for tablet was shown and the following alterations were made: the border to be left plain, not filled in black; on slate 23/4" wide; to be placed on North wall, West side and fairly high up. The commemorative tablet was unveiled on 2nd September 1917.

Revd John Garrett Brown

John Garrett Brown was the second son of Mr Samuel Brown of Halesworth, and had three brothers and three sisters. His father acted as deacon, treasurer, Sunday School Superintendent and lay preacher at Halesworth for many years. John Garrett entered the Congregational Ministry in the 1880s. He married Miss F. M. Rignall.

“Revd J. Garrett Brown of Halesworth entered upon the pastorate on 6th September 1886 and for 30 years maintained a ministry of rare power and influence. Not only in the church of which he was pastor but on several public bodies in the neighbourhood and as secretary for many years of the N.E. District of the Suffolk Congregational Union, Mr Brown rendered invaluable service. During his ministry at Saxmundham the schools were enlarged, the chapel renovated and a commodious manse erected. In 1900 the chapel was thoroughly renovated and repaired at a cost of £400...

Mr Brown continued the ministry until 1916 when after a long and painful illness he passed to his rest. His remains were laid in the burial ground adjoining the chapel amidst evidence of sorrow and regret from a large and representative assembly.”

[From: History of Congregationalism and Memorials of Churches of our Order: J. Hosken 1920]

1932 The pastor: Rev T L Moore... expressed his deep concern for the welfare of the young of the town who seemed to have no desire to be influenced by the church.

1915 [March] - The evening services having been suspended for some weeks on account of police regulations during the war ordering all lights to be covered or extinguished an hour after sunset as a protection from air-craft, it was agreed that the lighter evenings rendered it safe to recommence such services.



1915 [September] - In consequence of the presence of large numbers of troops in the town, it was agreed to print large posters announcing our Sunday services.

1915 [October] - An application having been received from the local committee of the YMCA for the use of the School Room for the troops quartered in the town, who greatly needed facilities for writing and reading during 3 or 4 evenings in the week, the following resolution was passed: That the request of the YMCA for the use of the School Room for 3 evenings in the week be granted...

1916 [March] - Mention was made of the great benefit that our School Room had been to the soldiers

quartered in the town and to the generous help which had been rendered in this department, not only by members of our own church, but by the other churches in the town.

1940 - Mention of the fact that if there should be any trouble in the town due to air raids it may be necessary to take the school room for a clearing station.

1942 [August] - It was the unanimous wish the collection on Sunday 30 August be devoted to Suffolk War Fund in aid of prisoners of war and missing. It was felt that Sunday 5th September should be observed in our church as a day of Prayer and Dedication, if possible to invite the Girls Guides. Also close with the National Anthem. Collection for the Red Cross.



Over the years following the two World Wars there were changes to the administration, the worship styles and the appearance of the church, but throughout the

strong, steady sense of God's presence in the work of the church has been clear and evident. Some of the changes are recorded in the following sections.

Becoming United Reformed

1971 [March] - The minister spoke about the proposed Union of the Congregational Church of England and Wales with the Presbyterian Church of England.

Changes this would make in the local church, none:

The church meeting, one of the treasures of the Congregational Church, would remain the centre of church life. There would also be an elders' or deacons' meeting. Churches would be grouped in Districts which would take the place of the County Unions.

This church would be included in the Ipswich and Colchester District. The Eastern Province would cover several Districts. There would be a Moderator over each province. [N. B. The name Synod was adopted in place of Province in 2000 with the passing of the "United Reform Church Act 2000" when the Congregational Church of Scotland became part of the URC.]

Elders would be ordained to a pastoral ministry for life, the office of eldership being one of the treasures of the Presbyterian church.

1971 [May] - The minister reported on the ballot on union with the Presbyterians made at the May Assembly. The congregational vote was 89.1% in favour of Union, and the Presbyterian vote 79.3%. The next step would be taken by the County Unions, who would make their voices heard, and then by the local churches.

1971 [June] - The resolution was put to the church meeting: "That this church resolves to unite with other member churches of the Congregational Church and with the congregations of the Presbyterian Church to form one United Church under the name of the United Reformed Church [Congregational/Presbyterian] in England and Wales. The resolution was carried.

1972 [September] - The formation of the United Reformed Church (requiring an Act of Parliament) received Royal Assent on 29th June 1972. The first general Assembly will be held on 5th October. In the morning there will be a business session at the Central Hall, Westminster, and at 3.30 pm a Thanksgiving

Service at Westminster Abbey, with an overflow service at St Margaret's Church.

The minister told the church that as a result of the re-forming of districts our Group will be in the Norwich Area.

More Recent Years

1995 - 'Project Facelift' started a train of discussions, enquiries, estimates and surveys which culminated in 1998 with an extended entrance vestibule and disabled toilet. (At this time the screen below the balcony was installed.)



1998 - We have had the floor of the gallery strengthened so that the spare pews [removed when the vestibule was extended] can go up in the gallery.



The decoration should be finished at the end of this week and next week the pews can go up. We should be able to worship in the church in two weeks' time... a special dedication service to be held on 13th June.

2007/8 - Saxmundham United Reformed Church became part of the Ipswich and East Suffolk Area Partnership within the Eastern Synod of the URC, sharing in fellowship with the churches of Framlingham, Leiston, Felixstowe and Ipswich.

Subsequently the church became part of the wider South Suffolk Area Partnership **[2017]** and moved into a new era of appointment and support from ordained ministry within the Synod and Partnership.

The church has also seen changes in its community life over more recent years:

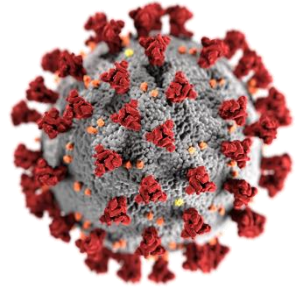
- the Sunshiners' Holiday Clubs that meet in the school holidays were established.
- providing film shows once a month during the autumn and winter months;
- giving ministry once a month to the people living in Chantry House Care Home;
- sharing in worship with other churches in Saxmundham through Churches Together;
- running various social events throughout the year;
- having the organ retuned;
- repainting the outside of the building;
- creating a new look Kitchen.

Bringing Things Up to Date

2017 – With the retirement of Revd Pam Smith, plans for the future provision of ministry to Saxmundham and the other local churches led to the establishment of the Ipswich and East Pastorate. Initially this included Castle Hill URC – Ipswich, St John's URC – Ipswich, Felixstowe URC and Saxmundham URC.

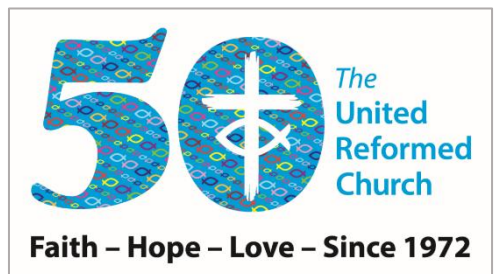
2018 – Revd David Rees was called and inducted to serve the Pastorate with the expectation that a second minister would be called to work in team ministry with Revd David to serve the pastorate churches.

March 2020 – Due to the rapid spread of the Covid Pandemic the country was placed in lockdown which halted worship in the church for some considerable period. During this time and following on from this, much advance was made to provide new technology to the pastorate churches for future use including internet access, laptops and display screens.



June 2022 – Revd Adam Earle joined the pastorate which now also included Leiston United Church (a local ecumenical partnership of the Methodist Church and URC) which had come under the pastoral charge of the URC following changes in the Methodist districts.

October 2022 – The United Reformed Church denomination marked it's fiftieth anniversary with a mixture of celebration and reflection. The



ecumenical movement which led to the establishment of the URC had hoped and intended that the church would be an interim step on a journey leading to further unity and the establishment of a larger, united protestant denomination which was not to be. The

ecumenical landscape has changed considerably over the years but the URC continues to play a significant role in this field despite being small in size.

2022 – The decision was made to hold the regular Sunday service in the church hall (school room). Work began to redecorate the space which included replacing solid wooden panels in the hall entrance to polycarbonate to allow additional light to enter. Lights were replaced with LED tubes to increase efficiency and reduce energy consumption. The hall was repainted with brighter, warmer colours and a focal point for worship was established.

2023 – Increased partnership and collaboration with Leiston United Church, was pursued, sharing some times of worship and events. A commitment to further develop the partnership was agreed.

The Church introduced a number of new initiatives, in partnership with Leiston United Church whose members supported the various activities which included:

Start the Week with a Cuppa: A monthly gathering, on the fourth Monday of each month, to share refreshments, conversation, games, music and other activities.



Film Afternoons: The pre-covid activity was revived with meetings approximately every two months. Gatherings include a tasty lunch or tea often themed to reflect the film which is being shown.

Seasonal Mini-Concerts & Tea: These are offered twice each year; one is held at Saxmundham and one at Leiston. Each concert has a theme and includes a variety of instrumental pieces, songs and other elements which reflect the theme.

Christmas Celebration Meal: For the first time in 2024 we held a Christmas meal instead of a Christmas Coffee morning and sale. As well as the meal there were games, music and entertainment. The aim is to continue with this project alternating the venue between Saxmundham and Leiston each year.



2024 – Further advances were made in progress towards partnership with Leiston and in November a joint church meeting voted to accept a formal partnership agreement and constitution to establish an enhanced local ecumenical partnership.

January 2025 – After a period of prayerful planning and consideration Saxmundham URC joined in partnership with Leiston United Church to form the Leiston and Saxmundham United Church. Both church buildings have been retained and a new pattern of services established. A new logo was agreed and the shared website updated accordingly.



Also, in January 2025 Hadleigh United Reformed Church joined the Ipswich and East Pastorate. The pastorate continues to develop with the expressed intention of enabling each church to flourish.

Roll of Pastors and Ministers

1850	Revd J. Rogers
1851-54	Revd T. Sowter
1855-56	Revd M. Lewis
1859-64	Revd R. P. Jones
1864-68	Revd W. Ockleford
1886-1916	Revd J. Garrett Brown
1917-22	Revd A Platts
1923-29	Revd W. H. M. Mumford
1929-33	Revd T. L. Moore
1933-39	Revd W. H. M. Mumford
1944-47	Revd B. A. J. Boqhurst
1948-53	Revd W. Hurlstone
1954-62	Revd J. E. Evans
1964-69	Revd G. D. Hopewell

East Suffolk Group with Halesworth and Leiston

1970	Revd T. G. T. Newberry Rev A. H. Owens.
1974	Revd W. Cox

In Partnership with Framlingham

1982

Revd A. E. Simmonds

In Partnership with Felixstowe

2002

Revd N. Mark

In Partnership with Castle Hill – Ipswich

2007

Revd C. White

2009

Revd P. Smith & Revd A. Royal

In Partnership with Castle Hill – Ipswich

2013-2017

Revd P. Smith

Part of the Ipswich & East URC Pastorate

2018 -

Revd D. Rees

2022 -

Revd A. J. Earle



View of the chapel from the gallery – August 2025