

The United Reformed Church

by Jim and Amy Myers

The United Reformed Church in Maidstone Road closed its doors in 2013 and the site was sold for housing, ending well over three hundred years of evangelical ministry in Lenham.

Its final minister was the Reverend Andrew Mills whom many residents will still remember for the numerous children's holiday clubs he led. The building itself had been erected sixty-one years earlier, 350 years from the date that the Reverend Thomas Shewell founded the first independent church movement in Lenham in 1662. He had been Lenham's vicar but in that year had made a stand against the second stage of the current Act of Uniformity. In May that year every clergyman had to formally declare his acceptance of the revised liturgy. Thomas Shewell was one of the twelve hundred who refused to do so, preferring to resign. He chose instead to preach the gospel at his own private school.

Little is known about the next hundred years or so, but by the late eighteenth century and often to much opposition, travelling preachers would give sermons in the market place. Their popularity, however, led to the establishment (through the determination of a lady from Harrietsham) of the first chapel building here in 1784. So many crowds flocked to it that the chapel had to be rebuilt in 1824 to seat 500 worshippers. This became an Ebenezer Chapel (meaning 'stone of help') and the original namestone was built into the wall of now demolished building.

In 1940 the Lenham Congregational Church, as it then was, together with its school hall, were completely destroyed by a bomb accidentally dropped from an Albacore biplane from 826 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm, based at Detling. The aircraft was returning from a raid on Nieuport Harbour, where the bomb had failed to drop. Luckily the church and school hall were empty at the time, although Lenham resident Beryl Wiltshire remembered that her mother had a narrow escape. She was the cleaner and had only just finished her job there.

Undaunted, the church continued to function and a new building, by now the United Reformed Church, opened in 1952. In the late 1960s two cottages standing in front of the chapel were demolished, and in their place a Memorial Garden of Remembrance was established in the early 1970s with villagers donating rose trees in memory of their loved ones. Behind the church lay its former graveyard which was in use until late in the nineteenth century.

Attitudes have changed much since Victorian times when the church minutes recorded the expulsion of a member 'for running footraces for money' thereby bringing 'scandal upon the cause' – especially as the culprit refused to promise the church that he would discontinue 'these disgraceful activities'.

Much of Lenham's history vanished with the loss of the United Reformed Church building, though many of its members joined the present Pathways church (www.pathwayschurch.org.uk). The old church has left its legacy in another way too, as many of the names in the early Congregational Church register are still familiar in Lenham today.