



A Short History of Kelvedon United Reformed Church 1812 - 2022

*This picture was painted by our former member and
Elder, John Allard and is reproduced with the kind
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The members of the Kelvedon Congregational Chapel met regularly from 1812 and made a declaration concluding with these solemn and binding words:

“As many of us have a disposition to give ourselves to the Lord, we believe it is both our duty and privilege to walk as brethren, to cultivate love and kindness and watch over one another, to pray for each other, to bear one another’s burdens, to visit in affliction and strive to comfort each other in adversity; thus, shall we manifestly declare that we are Christ’s disciples because we love one another. We therefore subscribe our names as hereafter put down as testimony to the Redeemer.”

By 1814, a Meeting House was erected behind a High Street shop. The first Minister was a Kelvedon man, Francis Hunwick, who served until his death in 1841.

In 1851, The Congregationalists decided to undertake the challenge and expense of building a larger place of worship. On Monday 18th August 1851 They drew up proposals, which included raising £600, mostly by subscriptions. These proposals were approved at a General Meeting on the Tuesday of the following week. A plot of land in the High Street was purchased and a design agreed for the building, despite some argument and ill feeling. The foundation stone was laid on the 14th June 1853, and later an advertisement in the Chelmsford Chronicle newspaper read:

“KELVEDON NEW INDEPENDENT CHAPEL.

The above Chapel will be opened on Tuesday next 15th November.... After the Morning Service a Public Dinner will be provided by Mr B. Revett of the Star Inn. Tickets 2s 6d each may be had of the Committee...”

The eventual cost of the enterprise rose to some £950, and all debts were not cleared until February 1858. Over £551 was brought in from subscriptions, some £66 from collections at the opening and the following Sunday Services, £23 from collections after 3 Annual Special Sermons and nearly £200 from neighbouring Chapels and other friends and the sale of land surplus to requirements. Other money came in from social events like Public Tea Parties.

The Trustees with legal responsibility for the building included John Moss and Thomas Butler, farmers; William and Jabez Braddy, builders; Jeremiah Osborn, bootmaker; John Humphreys, blacksmith and Samuel Matthews, fellmonger – his trade was preparing animals’ skins for tanning.

Few Ministers in the 1800's served at Kelvedon for more than 2 or 3 years. Exceptions were the first Minister Mr. Hunwick, Rev S Cawsby (1845-51), Rev T. Just (1870-74) and Rev A. Smith (1874-95). A Manse to accommodate the Minister – 87 High Street – was built in 1874. An extension for Sunday School use was added to the Chapel building in 1879.

This happy spiritual harvesting continued into the start of the 1900's. Attendances at Services were so high that in 1901 the sanctuary was re-seated. A proposal to extend the gallery and add a second staircase at the entrance, while not carried out, was evidence of further growth.

A kitchen and bathroom were added to the Manse in 1906, during the ministry of Rev F. Tucker (1903-09). A new organ was installed in 1908, and the new burial ground was purchased in 1912 while Rev W. E Davies was Minister (1910-15).

A General Congregational Union had been formed in 1831 to bring together the County Associations of the denomination. In 1919 the office of Moderator was introduced, and England and Wales were divided into several Provinces. These changes were to help cooperation between local Chapels, but each Chapel continued to be sturdily independent. There was no centralised dogma. Another change was in referring to Chapels as Churches, and from this point the name Kelvedon Congregational Church was used.

The population of Britain had soared in the 1800's, from around 11 million to an amazing 40 million by the end. Most of the growth was due to new industrial towns. Kelvedon in the early 1900's had approximately 1,500 inhabitants, the majority engaged in agriculture and seed growing.

Rev G. Ward Siddall served as Congregational Minister here between 1916-22. He had an earnest, pleasant manner. Rather short, he stood on a small platform in the pulpit. During the war a lot was done to help soldiers billeted in and around the village.

Rev F. W. Walter (1923-30) had, in the Manse garden shed, a generator to make electricity. He also had the first "wireless set" in the village. He took a keen interest in the winter activities of young people, and in the summer organised rambles, both walking and cycling, and playing tennis. He was a widower, but his housekeeper, Miss Tasker, helped in Sunday School and at Mothers Meetings. He and the Catholic Priest, the jolly Father Gay, were friends.

The Church's social side flourished, with outings for Sunday School and adults to the seaside, a Choir visit to Crystal Palace in London and the Fellowship Orchestra

winning prizes. Throughout the years the Church responded to charity appeals, especially for overseas aid.

Rev D. Arthur King (1930-41) was a younger man, with three young sons. He was energetic in working with young people and older Church Members. Mrs King was President of Women's Happy Hour. Sunday School Anniversaries were made much of. On a Sunday evening the parents and others were entertained by the children. School Superintendent Harry Osborne wrote a play one year about the apostle Paul's shipwreck. There was a painted piece of canvas in front of the stage for the ship's side, and a mast with a sail that could be hoisted and lowered in the stage's centre. By a spot of obvious trickery, the same sack of cargo was thrown overboard again and again, to represent lightening the ship, to the accompaniment of lots of laughter. Geraint, son of Rev E. Jones (1942-46), was an accomplished organist who, on one occasion, gave an organ recital.

The Institute in Kelvedon High Street was built as a venue for village activities by George Braddy, financed by Congregational Church Members.

The Vestibule at our Church was erected in 1924 and the Sunday School rebuilt in 1937 by Mr J. W. Moss in memory of his father John Moss, who had served in many capacities including Secretary. Wise guidance by the Deacons and especially the Secretary was essential to the Church's continued existence.

George Thomas Skingle, of provision merchants Messrs Pluck and Skingle and grandfather of present-day members Joyce and Helen, served as Secretary for 18 years. He died in 1940, and his grave is by the notice board outside the Church.

During the Second World War, 1939-45, the Sunday School building was used on weekdays as a canteen for Servicemen. The C of E St Mary's Hall was a NAAFI, with a "sixpenny hop" (dancing) some evenings. On the village outskirts was an anti-aircraft gun, a searchlight unit and the Observer Corps. Two airfields were a few miles away.

By the early 1950's the village population reached 3,000. The building of new housing, Council and private, pushed the figure up further, with Kelvedon and adjacent Feering merging almost into one. The combined population in 1991 was 4,885. The number of shops decreased as people travelled to Witham and other towns by bus and car.

Skingles Stores, a village landmark, closed in 1983. Few people worked in agriculture, and the Seeds Warehouse by the Railway Station was converted into residential flats. The attendances at the Churches, including the Congregational, did not increase proportionately to the population.

Rev Dr R Dunkerley (1950-58) was a prolific author and from 1935 to 1945 was Principal of Westhill Training College, Selly Oak, Birmingham. He had held pastorates at Colchester, Cambridge, Gloucester, Birmingham and Hockley (Essex) before arriving at Kelvedon. He and his wife tried hard, but some of his sermons tended to “go over the heads” of many. He wrote quite despairingly:

“Looking back through the seven and half years we have been here in Kelvedon, I realise how heavily the Church has lost by death – rather especially so, I think. A line from a familiar hymn comes to mind – ‘Make good the loss so heavy’, and it is my earnest hope that more of the younger generation will come along and volunteer for Membership and service in the Church. If only they could realise it, it is a great life!”

Michael Murton was the last person to be inducted into Membership by Rev Dr. Dunkerley. By 1960 he was Secretary and served with only a short gap until 1995. He also doubled up as Treasurer from 1971 to 1998.

Volunteers redecorated the Manse for Rev O. Lloyd Roberts (1959-61), a bright, enthusiastic young man. He and his wife had a baby girl within a few months. He started the Church Magazine and called it “Greenleaves”, after the cottage in Great Braxted where the founders of our Church first met together. He attracted in some younger people, but his stay was brief.

Another Welshman, Rev G. F. Phillips (1962-68) could not stem the decline in attendances. In 1965 pews were restored and some floorboards renewed by Michael Murton and other volunteers, and a new carpet put on the rostrum and nearby floor, paid for by a donation. £50 was raised for carpet down the aisles and along the back. £200 was needed to complete payment for redecorating the interior, and at the last moment 80-year-old Miss Orst donated it.

At the beginning of the 1960’s Church Membership totalled 80, and by the end it was 60. Non-members also came to Services, so actual attendances were more.

Rev Frank Jones (1968-81) was already Minister of Wethersfield when he became our Minister too. We were integrated into Braintree Congregational Team Ministry. Three Ministers co-operated to serve Braintree, Coggeshall, Kelvedon and Wethersfield, plus small Churches at Finchingfield, Shalford and Rayne. Somehow it was possible to have a Minister at Services in Kelvedon except for two each month, which were taken by Lay Preachers. Rev Jones lived in Braintree, and the Kelvedon Manse was sold.

Meanwhile at National level, Congregationalists were discussing merging with the English Presbyterians. The result, in 1972, was the United Reformed Church. The Churches of Christ joined in 1981. A statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church refers to.

“the faith of the Church catholic in one God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit... the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the

Holy Spirit...open at all times to the leading of the Holy Spirit... its right to make such new declarations of its faith and for such purposes as may from time to time be required by the same Spirit...upholds the rights of personal conviction... the Church, in safeguarding the substance of the faith and maintaining the unity of the fellowship, to determine when these rights are asserted to the injury of its unity and peace."

The statement insists the URC is "*in things spiritual*" not subordinate to civil authorities and intends "*to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humankind.*" The URC is in favour of the unification of all Christian Churches "*as Christ wills and in the way He wills.*"

Disappointingly the decline in Membership of the URC afterwards was sharper than any other denomination. At Kelvedon many sorts of activities were experimented with in the hope of appealing to more people.

In 1983 Rev C. Thomas was inducted as Minister of Kelvedon and Coggeshall. The next year, with Baptist representatives he took part in a Service held at our Church to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of the famed preacher C. H. Spurgeon. Rev Thomas left after only 2 years in 1985.

Kelvedon was then without a Minister until 1993. Payment of Ministers in the URC was now centralised, while the advertising of vacancies rested with the Provinces.

Michael Murton and other Elders (the new title for what were formerly Deacons) carried on. Michael and Brenda Woolnough and others worked with young people and there was a Junior as well as an Adult Choir. Ministers and Lay Preachers from other Churches helped with Services – special mention must be made of Chris Thorby, Chris Heather, Wesley Sandford and Sue Helman. Michael Murton and Horace Dale acted as kind of caretakers for the buildings. Church income continued to be helped by letting the Schoolrooms for some weekdays to a local Dance Studio run by Andrea Pridham, now Andrea Wash and a prominent member of the Church.

The customary round of events continued, like Easter Sunday, Summer Fete, Harvest Festival, Harvest Supper, Christmas Bazaar, the Candlelit Carol Service, New Year Party, Women's Fellowship and Jumble Sales. The Candlelit Carols were "*standing room only*", with the Choir augmented and the readings shared with participants from other Churches.

What a big welcome the next Minister received! She was Rev C. R. Haward – she preferred to be called Ruth. Kelvedon was now in a Joint Pastorate with Tiptree and Great Totham and Ruth worked to bring all closer together with occasional Joint Elders Meetings and social gatherings for the congregations. Ruth married in 1995 and moved to a Church in the Cotswolds. Our Kelvedon Membership now hovered around 35.

Eastern Province did not delay in advertising and Rev Audrey Proffitt was inducted in 1996 into the Joint Pastorate. She had been serving at a large Church in Romford and

found dealing with three smaller Churches a little difficult. However, she had the support of a robust non-Stipendiary Minister Rev Jerry Priest and the new, younger Secretary Trevor Andrews. The Church constitution was altered to limit the continuous service of Elders – and as a consequence that of Secretaries – to six years and the post of Treasurer could now be held for an unlimited time by someone not in the Eldership.

Rev Harold Bignell (inducted 1st Sept 2002) and his wife were a complete contrast, with Virginia throwing herself into Church work, particularly on the musical side. She sang well and played the guitar. Rev Jerry Priest stayed as Associate Minister serving with Harold. More new faces appeared in the congregation, the Membership rising to 46. A new Manse and Hall had been built at Tiptree on the proceeds of the sale of the old Manse and surplus land. At Kelvedon, after much discussion and some changes of mind, we now had the new extension and renovation of the rest of the premises to celebrate.

Many people assisted in very many ways, including the fund raising. Nevertheless, special thanks must be recorded to Trevor and Janet Andrews, Jim and Lynn Hyde and Christine Saffell for their perseverance on the Building Committee – which functions on an informal basis though reporting regularly to Elders and Church Meetings.

Rev Harold Bignell retired in 2007 and the non-Stipendiary minister, Rev Jeremy Priest stayed to look after the needs of the congregation at Kelvedon. The new minister, Rev Kenneth Thom, joined us in 2012. Rev Thom has endeavoured to get a youth club up and running in both Tiptree and Kelvedon with limited success and is due to retire in September 2022, at which time we will be in a vacancy again waiting for a new Minister to be appointed.

In March 2020, something that two world wars had been unable to do, occurred; the Church had to close its doors because of the Covid 19 Pandemic. Initially the building closed for 3 months; but thanks to Matt Rigden, a trainee Minister who had been assigned to the Pastorate, worship continued online for both the Kelvedon and Tiptree Churches. The highlight of these services was the playing of hymns by the Peacock family (Neil on Keyboard, Jasper on drums, Ethan on keyboard and trumpet and Theresa on vocals). Over the first two years of the pandemic, the church had to adapt to the various regulations imposed by the Government, eventually returning to the Church building in July 2020. A further closure was imposed on us in December 2020 until March 2021.

Despite all of this, our membership has continued to remain around the 40 marks, with regular attendances of more than 30 members and friends. There are plans to start a Young People's Club (years 3 – 6) this summer (2022).

A mother and toddlers' group (Little Lambs) has been successfully run on a Thursday morning (term time only) for nearly 20 years and more recently Place of Welcome has opened on a Tuesday morning, offering free tea, coffee and hot chocolate as well as

biscuits. The purpose of Place of Welcome is for people to meet up for friendship and to have a chat. It is open to everyone regardless of age and faith (or no faith).