NONCONFORMISTS NOW

Gerard Liston
Hebden Bridge is the epitome of a nonconformist community. Inspiring, uncompromising, independent and vocal – the town clings as stubbornly to its purpose as its buildings do to the hillside.

Nonconformism is our theme for the 2018 Arts Festival but it’s in the town’s DNA - whether you’re local or offcumden, visitor or retailer – it’s what makes the place so unique and explains why it has stood the test of time and tide. Being adaptable and receptive to change is what has allowed Hebden Bridge to reinvent itself to meet the needs of a modern, diverse community.

Helen Meller, Director, Hebden Bridge Arts Festival

When we learned of the severe flood at Hope Chapel the first thought was how could we help to reinstate what was very evidently an outstanding work of perseverance and faith. Insurance cover was an issue but, after visiting the leadership team and experiencing first-hand their vision for the building and its impact in the community, we stretched the terms of the policy.

We became partners with Hope Chapel in seeing restoration to the delightful property it has now become. It is a privilege for Baptist Insurance to have been a small part in the transformation project and to practically support the ground-breaking work they do.

Malcolm Hayes, Chairman, Baptist Insurance Company

Cover photograph: ‘Lunchtime Live’ performance, 2018
When Martin Parr started photographing Hebden Bridge and the surrounding area in 1975, he was documenting a traditional, but declining, way of life. The title of his book, ‘The Non-Conformists’, both referred to the characteristic Baptist and Methodist chapels in the area, but also the gritty and independent nature of the people he found there.

In 1975, he was fresh out of art school in Manchester. Now he is a world-famous Magnum photographer. His return to the town in 2018 as part of the annual Hebden Bridge Arts Festival was prompted by the theme chosen for the year: ‘Nonconformism’. So, it seemed as good a time as any to ask what ‘The Non-Conformists’ might look like forty years on as a series of black and white images, particularly looking at chapel life.

Like Martin Parr, I moved into Hebden Bridge with my wife from a big city (Leeds) and have an interest in photography. But there the similarity ends. Except that, he became connected with the place, people and activities at Crimsworth Dean Methodist Chapel on the ‘tops’ above Hebden Bridge. Over the past ten years or so, I have become deeply involved in the life of Hope Baptist Chapel in the centre of the town.

It was a friend from Leeds who encouraged us to pay a visit to Hope Chapel one Sunday morning. To be honest, we had barely noticed the old building, with its grand Corinthian pilasters, across the road from the Picture House. In fact, we assumed it was probably closed. Although we found the congregation keeping warm in one of the rooms at the rear, rather than the cavernous chapel space, we were struck by the sense of optimism and purpose among the two dozen church members.

The sleeve notes on Martin Parr’s book suggests it, ‘… presents a remarkable and touching historic document of the region’s disappearing way of life’. But my experience of the past decade suggests that at least one nonconformist chapel has found ways of remaining vibrant and connected to the needs of the community it serves.
The façade of Grade II listed Hope Baptist Chapel rises above the main road.
Most of the old pitch pine pews remain in the chapel, which originally seated 1,000.
Every pew gave members a clear view to the pulpit – and the preacher.
When the members of Hope Baptist Church decided to build a new chapel in 1856, they purchased a large plot on what was empty land ready for development alongside the turnpike road. Now, the chapel finds itself in the centre of a town that is often described as ‘funky’. It is an award-winning market town with a line-up of independent shops and choice of great venues for music, art and many cultural activities.

It was this characterful town and lovely surrounding hills that initially attracted me to the area. But Hope Chapel responds to the needs of the people of the town, not some charming tourist poster image. Incomers like myself find ourselves alongside past hippies who moved in during the 60s and 70s and families who have lived in the area for generations. The result is a place that is diverse, tolerant and has a reputation for being inclusive, embracing a significant LGBT community.

Hope Chapel is one of a number of churches in the town and is part of the Churches Together group. But a glance at noticeboards outside the cafés reveals interest in many shades of spirituality. Details of church activities have to find a place alongside information about healing, therapies and many ‘alternative’ beliefs and traditions.

Given this apparent competition, it may be tempting for a church to become defensive or insular. But the members of Hope Chapel felt a responsibility to fix the deteriorating heritage building and to open it as a welcoming place where people could explore the big questions of life – whatever their beliefs or stage on their own spiritual journey.

The recent story of Hope Chapel has had its ups and downs. The people of the town have seen scaffolding come and go and have read articles in the Hebden Bridge Times about progress. But it is often in less visible ways that community engagement has meant most; when volunteers have appeared from nowhere to help clean up flood damage or when a lone visitor sits quietly in the Reflection area and lights a candle.
Sid Jones from Muse Music. One of many great independent shops in Hebden Bridge.
Annual Steam Punk Festival: Part of the town’s packed cultural diary.
Doors wide open for the street closure during the Tour de France 2014.
Valley Organics moved temporarily into the back of the chapel after flooding in 2012.
Churches Together Good Friday procession of witness. The cross is stored in Hope Chapel.
Same-sex marriage conducted and celebrated at Hope Chapel, Spring 2016.
A helping hand from the community, putting up screens after flooding in 2015.
Church Family

It would be difficult to imagine other places where a single cause draws together a group of people with such a variety of ages, backgrounds, education, personalities and work skills. But there is something profound about a church where the people become a close-knit family – and are not just there to fill pews each Sunday.

I have been delighted to play a part in the life and work of Hope Baptist Church, although raising funds and supervising building projects are not exactly my idea of fun. I feel a sense of responsibility to use what skills I have and am acutely aware that I just happen to be passing through at this moment in time, following on from generations of others. For those who formally choose to become church members, they are reminded of this heritage when they sign the membership book in which the first signature is that of founder Rev John Fawcett, dated 1777.

In her writing to accompany Martin Parr’s photographs in Non-Conformists’, Susie Parr describes how their interest in Crimsworth Dean Methodist was misinterpreted as a desire to keep the chapel going in the future. In contrast, the efforts of both myself and my wife, Ann, are driven by a shared faith and sense of belonging and commitment to the church family.

Many of the individuals we have encountered have been both an encouragement and an inspiration – some of whom are long-standing members and deeply-rooted in the area. After Slack Chapel closed at Heptonstall, Jean used to catch a bus down the hill from her moor top home and tended to be seen with a teapot, cloth or mop in hand. Connie lived in Old Town and would astonish people with tales about driving a tractor on the farm, building Lancaster bombers during the war years and, when discussing the Tour de France, about cycling up Cragg Vale on her heavy steel bike – with no gears.

Both Jean and Connie were women of faith and their loss in recent years was deeply felt by the church family. Others come and go but still leave their mark. Family life goes on.
Sheila Shackleton, church member for over 80 years.
Roz Goodwin creating one of many Prayer Shawls offered to local individuals.
Christine Smith and Vikki Uttley – and a cuppa.
Cynthia Nikolich and Isobel Woznicki at the weekly ‘Chatty Crochet’ group.
Muriel Miller helping with the auction of produce from the Harvest Festival display.
Greatly-loved and greatly-missed Jean Forrest, characteristically pouring tea.
Standing in the pulpit allows you to see every one of the pews around Hope Chapel. There was no hiding place from the preacher’s wagging finger for the 1,000 who used to fill the place on Sundays. But the history of the church, particularly after the two great wars, is a catalogue of slow and steady decline in numbers. Nowadays, a couple of dozen folk gather for worship services, often using the rooms at the back to avoid the high cost of heating the chapel.

Rather than being discouraged by this trend or critical of new generations, the church family at Hope Chapel has looked afresh at what it offers and how it remains relevant. Hymns, prayers and a sermon do feature in many worship services, but café-style services and other formats help to stimulate discussion, sharing of experiences and mutual encouragement. Even the major events in the Christian calendar are times for creative thinking, with a ‘Matzos and Meanings’ Passover meal at Easter and a candlelit carol service attended by at least four dogs this year — one of which joined in with the singing. Nonconformism still means questioning the value and purpose of traditions.

Decisions about the chapel space and how it might be developed have been guided by feedback from the community. When Valley Organics set up their store at the back of the chapel for 2-3 months after the 2012 flooding, customers calling in to collect fruit and vegetables offered their thoughts. Even those who had never previously stepped inside commented on the unique ambience and sense of a sacred space, where the walls have been soaked in a community’s prayers over many generations.

The mid-week ‘Still Point’ service is short, with more emphasis on candles and silence than speech. No sermon and certainly no collection. At other times, the chapel doors are open for personal meditation or just a place to find peace and quiet. Guided activities make use of resources such as labyrinths to encourage people of all faiths or none to explore their own spiritual journeys.

Distinctly Baptist traditions, such as believer’s baptism do — literally — make a bit of a splash. But the future for Hope Chapel is likely to look like a small group of Christian members continuing to provide a place that allows many people to explore matters of faith in their own way, rather than setting direction from the pulpit.
Communion service in one of the rooms at the back of the chapel.
Communion service in The White Lion, during flood restoration work.
Young families are few and far between at Sunday worship services.
Service of believer’s baptism in the refurbished baptistry.
Service of believer’s baptism in the chapel garden, during flood restoration work.
Sid meditating with Harry the church dog – now with a memorial in the church garden.
Creative approaches to spiritual development, offered alongside traditional services.
There is no getting away from the fact that Hope Chapel had been neglected for many years. Income had declined along with church membership and the costs of maintaining such a large building are huge. But with a new vision of creating a place that is ‘Christ-Centred and Community-Focused’, the members set about getting to grips with the problem.

The first step involved emptying the church’s own coffers. The demise of an ancient cast-iron boiler laid claim to a chunk of the money, but other funds paid for ‘blue sky’ ideas and drawings from a local firm of architects. Small grants were followed by larger grants and by 2017, the church had raised over £1m to pay for a series of improvements and various phases of repairs and restoration work, largely supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

People interviewed on TV programmes about major restoration projects often say they would never have started if they had known what was going to be involved. We have some sympathy.

Initial stages of each development project involved establishing the scale of the work and confirming the costs. Without exception, this work threw up surprises, most of which were expensive. The floods in 2012 ruined brand new boilers in the cellar and required replacement of all electrical wiring. The floods in 2015 rose right up the stone steps from the main road and filled the place front-to-back with 18 inches of muddy water. Then the church discovered it was hugely underinsured. Even the major restoration work presented challenges, with faults in the new ceiling plaster and near catastrophic failure of a ceiling truss requiring litigation to secure a solution.

Throughout the years of building work, the church has retained a sense of being custodian of a community heritage building and a sanctuary space. There remains work to be done (and probably always will be), but the emphasis is now more on maintenance. The memories – good and bad – of the restoration work fade over time. The end-result is at least one nonconformist chapel that has no intention of becoming trendy apartments or a carpet warehouse any time soon.
The Fire Service pumps out flood water from the cellar in 2012.
Over 100 original cast iron grilles: Shot-blasted and coated to resist flood damage.
Creative wall paintings barely disguised the state of toilet facilities before refurbishment.
New ceiling plaster crashed to the floor – a month before the chapel was flooded in 2015.
One of three sets of scaffolding erected during phased repair work in the chapel.
Dozens of steel rods secure the beams after the ceiling was lifted back into position.
The first definition of ‘sanctuary’ in the Oxford dictionary is, ‘a place of refuge or safety’. It also means ‘holy place’. The members of Hope Baptist Church intend their nonconformist chapel to become both.

Hope Chapel is, and will remain, a place for worship, prayer and personal reflection. It will also become a place that explores how its unique space can help to promote spiritual and emotional wellbeing for all. Two weekend blues festivals in 2013 and 2014 showed what was possible and filled the place with folk who might have been surprised at how well the events worked in a church building, complete with bar facilities in the back rooms. People may also be surprised to discover how many of the beer mats, specially printed with a cartoon of Rev John Fawcett, disappear as souvenirs. Some of the church forefathers might be turning in their graves.

A visit to Union Chapel in Islington, London encouraged bold thinking about how a large chapel space can be used. The group that spent a weekend down there was encouraged to find the congregation for Sunday worship about the same size as at their own church. But they had also been in Union Chapel the night before, when it had hosted an event with an audience of over 1,000.

Inspired by Union Chapel’s ‘Daylight Music’, Hope Chapel launched ‘Lunchtime Live’ in the Autumn of 2017. Currently running once a month, these events are a celebration of emerging talent from around the area and seem like a perfect use for a sanctuary space. Performers are now requesting spots in the line-up and events receive great coverage. But so has the chapel: ‘Lovely community venue’ and ‘It’s so cool and so old’ are just two of the reviews on Google Maps.

Perhaps the reaction of people who are facing the audience is most telling. Poet Hollie McNish was first on stage for a Hebden Bridge Arts Festival event after the chapel reopened in 2017. Her work explores issues of life, including breastfeeding and sex. At the end of the evening, she looked upwards and said, ‘Sorry about the language’. When columnist George Monbiot shared his evangelistic message about ‘rewilding’ at another Arts Festival event, he asked to use the pulpit; a request repeated by various performers singing at ‘Lunchtime Live’.

Life at this nonconformist chapel looks quite different from what it did when the place was opened in 1857. It looks quite different to life in the chapels photographed by Martin Parr in the 1970s. And it looks different from what is likely to be happening in Hope Chapel in another forty years time.
Two award-winning blues festivals gave a taste of what is possible in a Baptist chapel.
Bar facilities pop up in the back rooms, with beer mats to protect pews in the chapel.
Pews and prayer candles sit comfortably with bold artistic expression.
Annual ‘Open Studios’ makes use of most spaces throughout rooms at Hope Chapel.
Good food events have helped to enrich the theme of wholeness and wellbeing.
A Syrian refugee incants a prayer for people in his homeland at ‘Lunchtime Live’.
Pay-as-you-feel ‘Lunchtime Live’ audiences can come-and-go at this informal event.
Hope Chapel is probably the most dog-friendly church in town
A ‘Children’ corner helps to ensure the chapel offers something for all ages.
Chapel pews (with cushions) work just as well for audiences as for congregations.
Mid-week ‘Still Point’ with readings, reflections, candles and silence.
‘Nonconformists Now’ is inspired by the book of photographs taken by Martin Parr in the 1970s, ‘The Non-Conformists’. His work documented life around Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, not just nonconformist chapels. This book focuses on chapel life, specifically on changes that have taken place at Hope Baptist Chapel in the centre of this lovely Pennine town.

Photographs and text recall people and the events from over the past ten years. This is the period when Gerard Liston and his wife Ann have been members of the church. The journey has included many ups-and-downs for the church but now leaves Hope Chapel as a community venue for performances and activities that help to develop spiritual and emotional wellbeing in inclusive and relevant ways.

To find out more about Hope Chapel:  
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