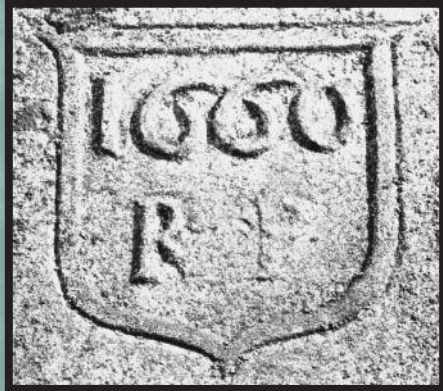




THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



GUYHIRN CHAPEL

Guyhirn, Cambridgeshire



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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www.visitchurches.org.uk Registered Charity No. 258612 Winter 2006

£1.50

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GUYHIRN CHAPEL

by Brian Payne (Local historian and Trustee of the Wisbech & Fenland Museum)

INTRODUCTION

Guyhirn Chapel, also known as the Old Church, or Guyhirn Puritan Chapel, is a small rectangular building situated in the centre of the village on the road to Wisbech St Mary. A stone over the door records the date 1660 and the initials 'RP'. Whatever fascinating riddle those initials may present to the historian, it is surely the date that is significant, and which endows this little place with an importance out of all proportion to its size and location.

The year 1660 was a turning point unique in English history. It was the year in which England ceased to be a Commonwealth and reverted, following the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, the subsequent retirement of Richard Cromwell, his son and successor as Lord Protector, and the accession of King Charles II, to what it had always been and has remained since, a monarchy. So Guyhirn Chapel has the rare distinction of embodying that turbulent period.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south
(Kate Weaver)*

Left: The Pulpit (Kate Weaver)



What makes the chapel of special interest, however, must surely be the fact that it was built, or rather its building was finished, at the very 'turn of the tide'. The simple architectural style and, more particularly, the austere interior furnishing, are more typical of Cromwellian Puritanism than of Restoration Anglicanism, indicating that the building was probably intended for a type of worship common enough *before* 1660 but outlawed *after*. It must be remembered that, with the return to a more orthodox form of Anglicanism upon the accession of the new king, the extreme Calvinism of the Commonwealth was proscribed. The passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662 and the reintroduction of the Prayer Book made its profession, and the free

forms of worship with which it was associated, illegal, whilst the Conventicle Act passed two years later laid down severe penalties for those caught in acts of dissenting worship.

Judging by the limited evidence available it can fairly safely be said, therefore, that the chapel is a building which was planned during the Commonwealth for a congregation whose beliefs and manner of worship were those of the 'Puritan' Party prevailing at the time. Ultra-Protestant and Calvinistic that they were, it is difficult now to imagine the fanaticism with which those beliefs were pursued. All festivals, especially Christmas, had been abolished. Kneeling in church was frowned upon, sports and entertainments were strictly forbidden, and

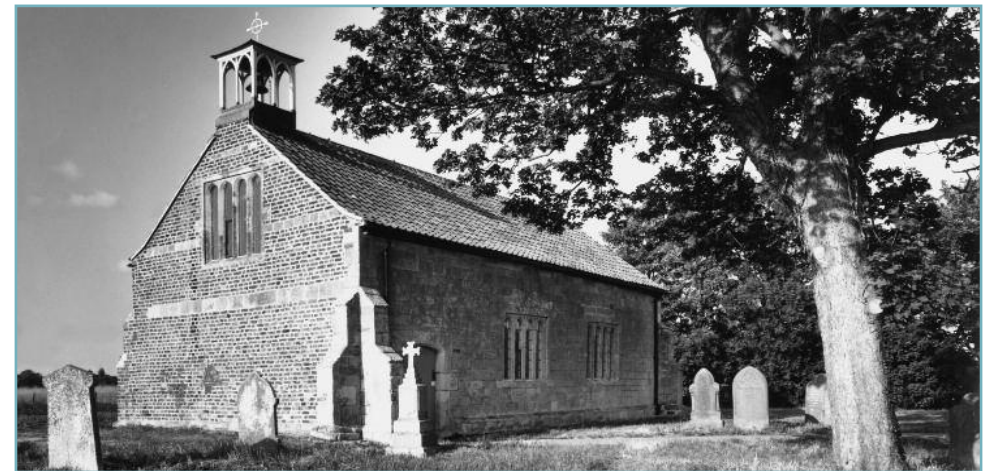


non-attendance at church on the Lord's Day was punishable at one time by a heavy fine. Even such an innocent custom as the giving of a ring in the marriage ceremony was suspect as being superstitious.

It is interesting to note that Guyhirn Chapel reflects all these beliefs almost perfectly. The preaching of the 'pure word of God' was held supreme, so the pulpit is the most dominant feature in the building. The narrow pews prohibit kneeling (held to be a 'popish practice'), whilst the plain interior is evidence of the Puritans' distrust of all art forms. Here men could concentrate on prayer without the distractions of art, and that, we may suppose, is precisely what they did with long sermons from a preacher dressed in grave

black gown and contrasting white 'Genevan' bands, and equally long prayers and psalms, all requiring earnest attention. Such was the pattern of worship in this place almost 350 years ago.

Such strict nonconformity is no surprise in Guyhirn. David Culy, son of a French protestant refugee, was born in Wisbech. In 1695 he founded an extreme sect of Anabaptists, called the Culimites, who numbered between 700 to 800 when he died in 1725. They may have met in what became the Baptist chapel, which was closed by 1875. The tradition of nonconformity could be said to have continued when, in 1872, news of a proposed meeting of 200 agricultural labourers at Guyhirn was enough to cause an immediate pay increase.



THE CHAPEL

EXTERIOR

The land on which the chapel was built was owned by Thomas Parke of Wisbech who had Puritan sympathies. After his death in 1630, some of the land was purchased by Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and it is on part of this land that the chapel was built. It stands upon slightly higher ground, surrounded by the village burial ground (which was licensed by the Bishop of Ely in 1840), and sits alongside what was previously

a trackway connecting the towns of Wisbech and Peterborough. The chapel is constructed partly of brick and rubble (north and west walls), and partly of Barnack stone (south and east walls). Although simple, the building is of fine proportions. There are five windows of clear leaded glass set within stone mullions. The window in the west wall is set much higher than the others which, together with uneven brickwork on the north and south walls, and the



HISTORY

raised ceiling, indicates the former existence of a gallery. The roof is of red pantiles, and a particularly attractive feature is the charming timber bell-cote framing a bell older than the building itself. The bell has been identified as the work of Thomas Norris, whose foundry was in Stamford, and is dated 1637. The decoration and lettering on the bell are typical of Norris. A chantry chapel, founded in 1337 by John de Reddik, possibly once stood on the same site as the present chapel. This was dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, in whose name there was a guild existing in 1517.

INTERIOR

The interior is a classic example of Puritan austerity, having survived without restoration in the Victorian period. The visitor of today sees the place very nearly as it must have looked in 1660, even down to such details as the absence of any form of lighting or heating. Nearly all the original pews remain, narrow, stall-like and inscribed, and as uncomfortable now as they must have been then. There is evidence that at some later stage the pews were painted. The pulpit represents only a part, unfortunately, of a larger structure that may have been brought in from another place. The walls are plain and fixed to them may be seen the crude wooden hat-pegs used to accommodate the high-crowned headgear of the period. The floor is of handmade brick. In the ceiling are two Regency-style ventilators.

The turbulent period of the Commonwealth is perhaps notorious for the difficulties it presents to the modern historian. Much of the documentary evidence so vital in historical research was simply not kept and in many cases such evidence as did exist, e.g. church registers and records, was either lost or deliberately destroyed. Even in this respect Guyhirn Chapel seems to typify the period. No service registers of any kind can be traced and no firm evidence as to who built it, why and for whom. This, of course, is disappointing, but by no means surprising. Indeed, it is just what one would expect.



The earliest ecclesiastical reference so far traced is one of 1665 in a document recording the appointment of churchwardens at nearby Wisbech St Mary, under whose oversight the Guyhirn Chapel came. Two of these wardens, Robert Welby and John Neile, were for Guyhirn. In the same year it was ordered that churchwardens and sidesmen of Guyhirn

'doe not suffer one MALCOME JOHNSON a pretended minister to officiate or doe any ministerialle office there under payne of contempt'

The next reference comes 20 years later. Bishop Turner's visitation memoranda of 1685 record the following:

'Guyhorn. A small unconsecrated Chapell of Ease built in the times of the rebellion. About 30 or 40 houses belong to the place'

In this entry we stumble upon yet another oddity of the period. The chapel was never consecrated. The ancient custom of consecration and licensing of churches was suspended during the Commonwealth. The visitation of the same year, 1685, records also the following order:

'... that you forthwith provide a surplice for your minister'

This is of particular interest since the wearing of a surplice signified that the minister was 'sound in doctrine', and forsook the Puritanism of the earlier regime whose attire was the black gown.

Later still, in the Rural Dean's return of 1783, it is stated that:

'This is a Chapel of Ease to Wisbech St Mary. The endowment originally £8 per annum from nine acres of land. The service formerly performed once a month is now being performed once a fortnight'.

The Church of England continued to serve the hamlet of Guyhirn through a curate from Wisbech St Mary.

In 1820 the chapel was repaired by the vicar of Wisbech St Peter, Dr Abraham Jobson, a man of some substance and a local benefactor. He also increased the Guyhirn Chapel endowment. In 1871 the new parish of Guyhirn with Rings End was created, and the Revd William Carpenter was appointed curate-in-charge. A year later repairs were again carried out and some communion plate was donated.

Following the erection of the new parish church in 1878, William Carpenter became the first vicar of Guyhirn. (His grave is immediately outside the Chapel door.) The new church, designed in the Gothic style by Sir George Gilbert Scott, effectively made the Chapel

redundant. However, monthly celebrations of Holy Communion continued, and, after repairs to the 'paving, roof, walls, bell-turret', and renewing the 'colouring and glazing', it was decided in 1898 to preserve the building as a mortuary chapel. Repairs continued to be carried out occasionally, including re-roofing in blue slate in 1917, but, unfortunately, the building was living on borrowed time.

By 1954 the 'Old Church' was in serious need of attention. At the invitation of the then vicar, the

Revd Eric Siddall, and the Wisbech Society, an architect, Mr Alan Read, of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, inspected the chapel and made certain recommendations for repair and improvement. These, alas, were not acted upon and the building continued to deteriorate to such an extent that in 1960 it was declared unsafe. The last service was held on Sunday 5 November of that year. So ended an era in local church history which lasted 300 years exactly from 1660 to 1960.



RESTORATION

From the time of closure in 1960 13 years of neglect and decay were to elapse before any further active interest was taken in this historic building. The years had taken their toll and the 'Old Church' was by now close to demolition. In February 1973, the recently appointed incumbent, the Revd Donald Dickinson, called a public meeting in an effort to revive interest and promote constructive action to save the building before it was too late. As a result of that meeting a body known as 'The Friends of Guyhirn Chapel of Ease' was formed with the objective of ensuring the repair and preservation of the chapel, and to promote its existence. Although this body was the creation entirely of local initiative, it soon became obvious that the preservation of the building was beyond anything that could be achieved locally. The Friends had to look to outside help, and in particular to those bodies and institutions dedicated to the protection and preservation of England's architectural and historic heritage.

One such body, only recently created, seemed to be the answer to their prayers; the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). It seemed both sensible and right that the chapel, effectively redundant for the best part of a century, should formally be so declared and its ownership transferred to a body which would repair and preserve it for posterity. So, on 26 October 1973, by an Order of Her Majesty in Council, the chapel was formally declared redundant as a place of worship, and

on 12 February 1975 transferred to the Redundant Churches Fund as being a building

'of such historic and architectural interest that it ought to be preserved in the interests of the nation and the Church of England'.

On 19 July 1975, Guyhirn Chapel came to life again, newly restored by the Redundant Churches Fund. A service of thanksgiving was held attended by parishioners, clergy, Friends and well-wishers. A memorable sermon was preached by the Bishop of Ely, Dr E J K Roberts. One person present on that great occasion wrote afterwards

'Emotion clouded my eyes to tears and I knew that my silent witness was now a living, singing witness of faith that would not die'.

Those words expressed the thoughts of the many who had been concerned with the chapel during the previous 15 difficult years.

With the permission of the Bishop of the Diocese, two services are held in the chapel each year. In July a thanksgiving service celebrates the restoration of the building, and an Epiphany service in January heralds the New Year. Those attending these services testify to the unique atmosphere of a Puritan building with very little comfort but a great deal of spirituality. They feel at one with those people who trudged great distances through the fen to hear the word of God 300 years before.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 335 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY IS THE TRUST CHURCH OF St John the Baptist, Parson Drove 6 miles W of Wisbech on B1169

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the work of Mrs M B Turner, one-time Secretary of The Friends of Guyhirn Chapel of Ease.

Back cover: The stone over the door that dates the construction of the chapel (Christopher Dalton)