



Built in 1708 as a 'Meeting House for Protestant Dissenters' on the site of an orchard just inside the old town walls, the Great Meeting Chapel is the earliest domestic brick building in Leicester and has been Unitarian since the early 19th century. The organ, parts of which date from 1850, is reputed to be one of the best in Leicestershire. The interior was significantly modified and improved in 1866 and is little changed since, giving a 'time capsule' effect. There is a fine collection of internal memorials. Outside, the old graveyard has been converted into a garden, one of the few green spaces in the city centre.

1 GRAFFITI

A child. It will have been done, over 100 years ago, by one of the children who was bored during a service! In old times, parents would have come to Chapel with their children and there will have been a special 'Sunday School' with bible stories and singing. There was also a day school for children of poor families in the big building the other side of the car park – every child was given a free lunch and the boys all got a pair of leather short trousers. It was not until 1870 that all children had to go to school by law, free of charge.

2 MARRIAGE WALL PLAQUE

In a 'Church of England', the main and official church of the country. This was a dissenting chapel which means that its members did not agree with how England's main church taught and practiced Christianity. They wanted everybody to have the right to practice religion according to their own beliefs. Disagreements were very strong at the time, so dissenters were prevented from taking part in many activities and jobs, although they were allowed to set up a business such as making clothes and shoes, which some of them did, very successfully. That's why they had enough money to build and maintain this Chapel as well as giving money to charities. After the 1835 Municipal Reform Act things got better for the dissenters and they were allowed to do a lot more in society, such as become doctors, lawyers, teachers and politicians. They quickly became leaders of the council and after 1835 the next seven mayors of Leicester were all Unitarians, earning the Chapel the nickname of 'The Mayor's Nest'. (An unflattering pun on 'Mare's Nest', a saying from the 19th century meaning 'awful muddle' which opponents of the chapel no doubt found hilarious).

3 BRASS HANDLES

For holding umbrellas. Before cars and buses, everybody would walk to the Chapel, whatever the weather, unless they were wealthy enough to have a horse-drawn carriage.

4 HOOKS

'Top hats'. These would be worn by those men who could afford one. If you were rich, you would be sure to buy a really tall top hat.

5 SIDE DOOR

Latecomers. But the little sliding hatch at the bottom – we've really no idea! Maybe to let the cat out! What do you think?

6 TUBES

Gas lights. Installed in 1832. Gas was made from coal dug from local mines and sent in pipes around the town. There was no electricity then and the chapel would also have used candles for lighting. There used to be a big chandelier hanging down from the middle of the ceiling but the cord snapped 20 years ago and it came crashing down just after a service, but luckily nobody was underneath it. Some people would call that 'divine intervention'.

7 PEW NUMBERS

So that families could rent a numbered pew for their own use, with the number recorded. They could place a little ticket in the holder on the back of each pew with their name on it, and then they could say 'that's my pew, number 31!' The cheapest pews were £20 per week in today's money and the money that was raised paid for a minister, for the chapel's upkeep and for its charitable work such as the school and the Domestic Mission. Poor people could still come to Chapel though – they would sit on the balcony in the 'penny pews'. Actually, it's quite nice up there and a great place to hear the organ properly.

8 PLATE

Definitely to collect the money. No biscuits. Sorry.

9 MEMORIALS

Annie Clephan's is the alabaster one. Edwin's is the 'Swedish Green' one – a marble that is very hard and tough and quite rare. It comes from a small quarry in Kolmarden, Sweden. White alabaster is softer than marble and outside it would eventually just dissolve in the rain so we never clean it with water. There are lots of different materials used in making our collection of wall memorials – stone, slate, brass, wood, marble and alabaster. Have a look round to see which is which.

Annie Clephan (1854-1930) was one of many prominent Unitarian women who were active in public life – for example she opened a school for girls with special needs. She was forward-thinking and a strong supporter of "Votes for Women". Her family has a building at De Montfort University named after it in recognition of their work for the School of Art and generosity towards it.

The Unitarian Chapel on Narborough Road (now the Elim Pentecostal Church) was led by England's first female minister – a German lady called Gertrude von Petzold. She later moved to Birmingham but unfortunately was deported during WW1. Elizabeth Heyrick (née Coltman) and her sister Mary Ann, were influential opponents of slavery and organised an effective sugar boycott in Leicester. (Sugar came from West Indian plantations). There are many other examples of notable women members of the congregation.

10 PULPIT

The pulpit is high up because in 1866 there were no microphones and speakers so the minister had to talk in a very loud voice from high up to be heard. The side of the little staircase has been cut in a special way out of one piece of oak wood to show off the grain. This is very difficult to do and not many carpenters can do it nowadays. And look how the master carver even carved the underside of the book rest. People would travel a long distance to hear the best ministers preach a sermon and some of them became as famous as rock stars are nowadays.

11 ORGAN

2000. Each pipe produces a different sound. The organ console has 3 keyboards and a keyboard played with the feet. The organist uses both hands and both feet at the same time so has to practice a lot, like every day. The organ was built in 1866 and re-built in 1928. The choirmaster in the early 19th century was William Gardiner (1770-1853), whose efforts led to the first performances of Beethoven's music in the British Isles and whose protégée at Great Meeting, Elizabeth Austen, became an internationally known and very highly paid opera singer and performer.

12 TILES



These terracotta tiles are 160 years old and were given to the Chapel by Mr Joseph Whetstone who owned the Ibstock Brick and Tile Factory. These tiles are very much back in fashion now and there are more under the carpet, so if Mr Whetstone was alive today he'd probably tell us to polish them all up a bit. We have to be very careful though, if we use the wrong sort of cleaner all the colours will fade.

13 WINDOW

'Hope'. From the left it is 'Faith', 'Charity' and 'Hope'. The anchor is the symbol of hope – it meant that sailors had put down their anchor in a safe harbour, something which they always hoped for when out at sea. You will see that there is a Christian cross in the top left window – the only one in the chapel – there is not even one on the top table, (where there is an altar in other churches), there are flowers instead. This is because Unitarians follow the teachings of Jesus Christ but think that he was a human being and not the son of God, so Christian symbols are not much used, only occasionally as a sign of respect. Unitarians love art, stories and music, but they do not have a book or set of rules which tell them how to think – they prefer to do that for themselves, based on wisdom drawn from many different sources. If you want to learn more about the Unitarian faith there are excellent leaflets on the table next to the entrance.

14 NUMBER BOARD

These are the numbers of the hymns which are to be sung that day. The coloured square tells the congregation which of the three hymn books, which you can see on the piano, will be used. Many of the hymns are poems put to music and (most of) the tunes are easy to follow and sing along to.