

Primitive Methodism in Thetford

The first small congregation met in a cottage in Magdalen Street. Then George Wharton of North Lopham, who had received communion from John Wesley, bought a property in Guildhall Street and opened it for worship in November 1829. It seated 90 people. It was enlarged by incorporating two adjoining cottages, but the cause failed.

The town was again missioned in 1838 and was included in the Saham & Watton Circuit. A small chapel was built in a garden behind a cottage on Melford Bridge Road. It was registered for worship on 25 March 1839 and had 57 members.

The *Primitive Methodist Magazine* of December 1839 recorded the new chapel at Thetford.

Our people tried the place repeatedly and for a while occupied a preaching room, but were compelled to relinquish it on account of the heedlessness of the people. After a while the place was re-missioned and now we have a good connexional chapel, about ninety-seven members, a large Sunday school and excellent congregations.

Thetford was made head of a branch of the Brandon Circuit in 1851.

The chapel was enlarged in 1859 with additional seating, a larger gallery and a yard, but with numbers increasing, a new building was needed and this was opened in September 1863 in Guildhall Street/Cage Lane. The old chapel was sold and converted to a house.



The interior of the new chapel

A large number of chapel members were involved in the Agricultural Trade Union.

In 1865 the District Meeting declared that the annual report from the Thetford Circuit was unsatisfactory and attributed the decrease in numbers to the failure of the two ministers, Thomas Swindell and George Rudrum, to complete the required number of visits to families. When examined more closely, it emerged that both ministers had suffered illnesses which

had limited their work. These reasons were accepted and it was acknowledged that much of the decrease had been mainly caused by emigration from the area.

During the same meeting, Thomas Swindell gave an address to the probationers at their recognition service. He was thanked ‘for his very able address...not soon to be forgotten’. He was urged ‘to publish his address at his earliest convenience’.

A great District camp meeting was held in Thetford in 1904 with religious gatherings, public meetings, concerts and tours of the town. A vast number of people attended.

In December 1905 a Thetford Circuit Committee made the unprecedented decision that ‘in consideration of the interests at stake to Nonconformity, we deem it advisable for our ministers to put all their energies into the Electoral Campaign and therefore abandon all ordinary week-night services until after the elections are over’.



The Primitive Methodist chapel is on the right of the picture

At Methodist Union the Primitive Methodists joined the Wesleyans at their church. A ‘Methodist Union Celebration’ was held in the Primitive Methodist chapel, now renamed the Methodist Central Hall with both the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist ministers involved. The chair was taken by the Mayor, Sir William Gentle, JP and an address was given by Milner Gray, ex-Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Labour.

The memorial tablets in the Primitive Methodist church were taken down, re-lettered and transferred to the ex-Wesleyan chapel at Tanner Street.

The Primitive Methodist church was retained as a Central Hall until 1957 when it was sold.

Reference – *The Length of Days: A history of Methodism in Thetford*, Norma Virgoe, 2018.