

= Taunton Unitarian Chapel =

Taunton Unitarian Chapel is on Mary Street , Taunton , Somerset , England . It was built in the early 18th century as a Baptist chapel , but later adopted Unitarianism . The exterior was extensively renovated in the 19th century in an Italianate style . The chapel has been designated as a Grade II * listed building .

Despite suffering significant persecution from their peers and the state , Baptists erected their first chapel in Taunton in 1670 , on or near the current site . This was replaced in 1712 with the building that still stands today . During the 18th century , probably during the ministry of Joseph Jeffries , the chapel 's form of worship became Unitarian , although this was forbidden by Parliament until 1813 . The Presbyterians of Taunton merged with the Unitarian church in 1814 , and later that century the chapel underwent significant renovation .

In the early 21st century a range of structural and decorative restoration works were carried out on the building , which continues to serve the Taunton congregation , who meet for services twice a month at the chapel .

= = History = =

= = = Baptist Meeting House = = =

After the English Reformation of the 16th century , an increasing number of people were unhappy with the control that the government and monarch had over the Church of England . This led to the formation of independent churches and schools by what are known as Dissenters . The worship of any faith other than Anglicanism was illegal , and those discovered taking part were arrested and even sentenced to death . Oliver Cromwell imposed a period of religious tolerance , but his death precipitated further persecution of Dissenters , principally through the Act of Uniformity 1549 , which required the use of the Book of Common Prayer as the only legal form of worship in England . The South West of England in general , and Taunton specifically , had a significant Dissenter population . There was a Baptist community in the town by 1646 , and despite continued persecution they erected their first Meeting House in Taunton , on Mary Street in 1670 .

The 1672 Royal Declaration of Indulgence was issued by Charles II in an attempt to introduce greater religious freedom , and within Somerset , 82 places applied for licences to meet and worship , 22 of them for Baptists . However , the Declaration was withdrawn at the urging of Parliament the following year . This led to further hostilities toward Dissenters , which were heightened after the failed Monmouth rebellion , in which a large number of Dissenters fought against the King 's forces . After the Glorious Revolution removed James II , his successor William III introduced the Act of Toleration 1689 , which specifically allowed nonconformist worship .

By 1721 , the Baptist community in Taunton had grown large , and reasonably affluent . They built a new chapel , funded entirely by the congregation , very near to the site of the original Meeting House . The pastor of the church at the time was Joseph Jeffries , and during his ministry the church transitioned from a Baptist church to Unitarianism .

= = = Unitarian Chapel = = =

In his history of Taunton , Joshua Toulmin suggested that the church adopted Unitarian worship in 1722 . This form of worship remained outlawed , as the Act of Toleration did not extend to nontrinitarianism . Unitarianism believed in the " One God and Father of all " , rather than the Trinity of God as three consubstantial persons . Writing a series on " Baptists in Taunton " for the Taunton Courier , H. J. Channon disagreed , placing the change in 1733 . Both agreed that the zeal with which Jeffries preached helped to swell his congregation , although a history of the Baptist church in Wellington notes that Jeffries was obstructive regarding a Baptist church being built in that town . Toulmin himself served as the pastor of the chapel from 1764 until 1803 , during which time he "

experienced unremitted insult and misrepresentation . " At one time , an effigy was burned at his door , and it was said that Toulmin could have suffered the same fate , but for assistance from his friends . During Toulmin 's ministry , the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge occasionally preached at the chapel while staying at Coleridge Cottage in Nether Stowey . In a letter , Coleridge wrote , " I walked into Taunton (eleven miles) and back again , and performed the divine services for Dr. Toulmin . " The Doctrine of the Trinity Act 1813 legalised Unitarian worship .

In 1814 , a Calvinistic Baptist group was formed in Taunton , and the following year they built a church on Silver Street . In the same year , the Presbyterians in Taunton found themselves homeless ; having previously met in chapels on Paul Street and then Tancred Street , the " ruinous condition " of their meeting house led them to abandon it , and they merged into the Unitarian congregation under the ministry of Henry Davies . Upon this merger , the congregation included " a few of the most influential inhabitants of the town " , and the chapel was so full that " children had to sit on the stairs . " An organ was added to the chapel in 1826 , and at the same time , the building renovated and " beautified " at a cost of £ 600 . The chapel was closed for a few months in 1881 , when the building was renovated . At this time , the stucco frontage was added to the building , and a number of internal alterations were made . The building had formerly had two entrance doors , but these were replaced with one central doorway . The Unitarians provided a free school for poor children in Taunton , and were the first in the town to offer this service equally for girls and boys . In 1886 , the Mary Street Memorial Schools were built next to the chapel , replacing a smaller school that had previously stood there . The schools , funded by John Collins Odgers were dedicated to the memory of Odgers late wife , and her father , William Arthur Jones , who had been a pastor of the Taunton chapel . The school was run under the care of the trustees of the Unitarian chapel until it was closed in 1933 during a reorganisation of education in Taunton . The school building was also used by the Unitarians for their Sunday school , and as a function hall for lectures and meetings .

The building underwent a series of repairs and redecoration , carried out by the Steel Coleman Davis Partnership in the early 21st century . These included a significant structural repair , as the main supporting roof truss was badly damaged . The frontage was also upgraded to withstand the weathering effects of being north @-@ facing , and the damage caused by being so close to the road . Services continue to be held at the Unitarian Chapel , and as of March 2015 , are held twice a month , on the first and third Sundays of each month .

= = Architecture = =

The Unitarian Chapel retains much of its original interior , including square Corinthian columns , Oak galleries and a carved wooden pulpit . A large brass chandelier was donated to the chapel later in the 18th century by Nathaniel Webb , one the town 's members of parliament . In 1881 , the building 's frontage was decorated with stucco to an Italianate style . Each floor is split by a number of Corinthian pilasters , and the doorway is framed by two pairs of similar identical pilasters , and topped by a triangular pediment . On the ground floor , there are four round @-@ headed windows , while the first floor has five round @-@ headed window bays , though the outer pairs are blocked . It was designated as a Grade II * listed building in 1952 .