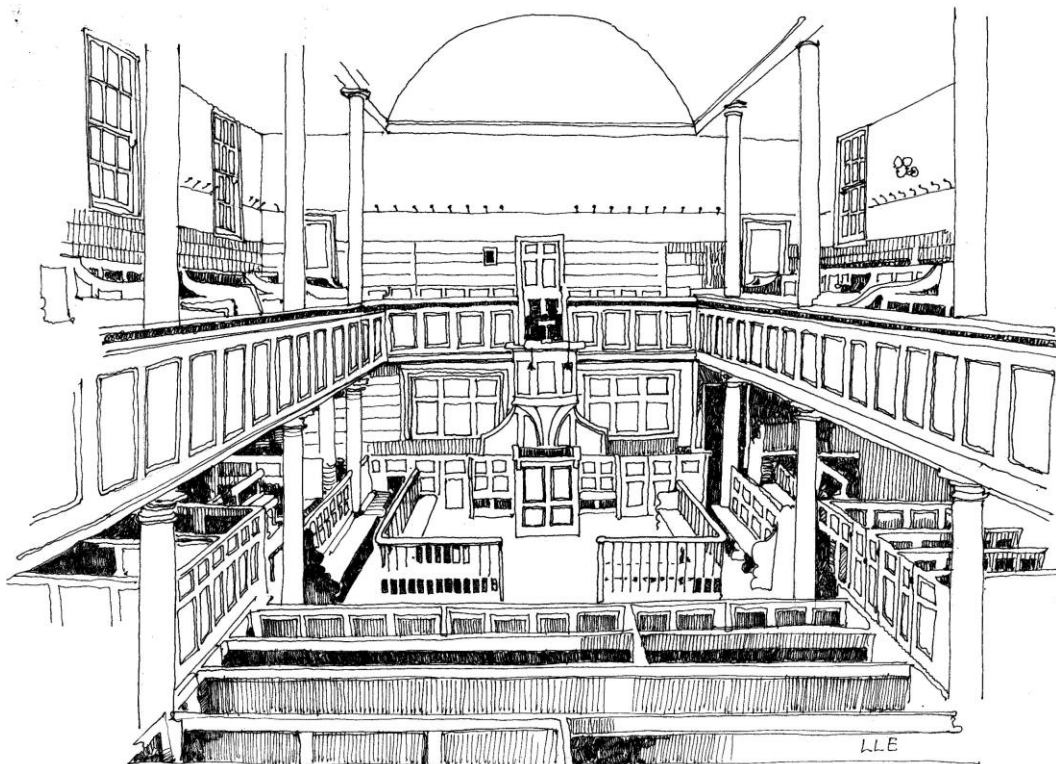




Heritage Open Days

Jireh Chapel, Malling Street, Lewes

The Jireh Chapel in Malling Street is one of only two grade I listed buildings in Lewes, the other being Lewes Castle. It was originally built in 1805 but was greatly enlarged in 1826 when the interior was remodelled. On the outside, the chapel is quite plain with two tiers of sash windows, the upper tier lighting the galleries. A timber-framed building with a brick base, it is clad in slate on the south side, mathematical tiles to the east and north, and plain tiles to the west. The main entrance is to the east, through a porch supported on two Tuscan columns.



The reason for the grade I listing is the chapel's fine late-Georgian interior. Colonnades of five Tuscan columns support galleries with plain panelled fronts that continue around all four sides of the chapel. Slender columns, with decorative capitals, extend up from the galleries to the ceiling level to support the roof above. The ceilings above the side galleries are flat but is barrel vaulted over the centre of the chapel. There is staircases to the gallery in the corners of the building. The handsome octagonal pulpit at the western end of the chapel stands above the clerk's desk and is reached by a bridge from the western gallery. There is a balustraded communion area in front. Box pews occupy the remainder of the ground floor.

The chapel was built for the Revd. Jenkin Jenkins WA (Welsh Ambassador of God's truth) who had been the minister at the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel in Chapel Hill nearby. However, from 1792 Jenkins's preaching began to be influenced by William Huntington. The chapel congregation noticed this change which produced a rift. The trustees terminated his appointment, and Jenkins left together with some of the congregation. Land was purchased for a new chapel which was completed in 1805 at a cost of £1750 10s 10d (about £106,000 today).

Jenkins died in 1810 and was succeeded by John Vinall. Such was the success of his ministry that by 1826 it was necessary to significantly enlarge the chapel. It was extended by about 10 feet at the eastern end, and the whole of the interior was turned around with the pulpit and vestries moving from the eastern to the western end. The barrel vault ceiling was constructed as well as the entrance porch at the eastern end. The emphasis was upon preaching (The Word of God) with the pulpit as the central feature. Services would have been quite simple with several unaccompanied hymns and extemporary prayers.

In the early 1980s there was growing concern about the state of the building, particularly rot in the timber structure. The building was declared unsafe in 1985, and the congregation had to move out. They began meeting in the Christian Alliance Hall in Mount Place, Lewes, and continued to do so until they were able to return to the chapel in 1996.

As a grade 1 listed building, the chapel could not be demolished or converted to another use involving internal alteration. A report on the condition of the building was commissioned in 1985 by English Heritage with a view to its restoration. This was still under consideration when the great gale of 1987 caused extensive damage. Nearly a third of the roof was blown away, half of the wall to the north of the chapel collapsed, as did the chimney stack. When the chimney stack collapsed, it caused extensive damage to the Huntington tomb (see below) in the chapel garden. This storm damage was quickly followed by rain water penetration which caused further internal damage. After protracted negotiations with English Heritage and other organisations, external repairs were undertaken in 1989 and 1990 thereby protecting the interior from further deterioration.

The Sunday School Hall, built in 1875 had been unused since about 1960 and was derelict. In 1995 a scheme was agreed with Lewes District Council to develop both the site of the Sunday School Hall, owned by the trustees of Jireh Chapel, together with adjacent land owned by the Local Authority. This was for the construction on 12 flats for the English Churches Housing Group for letting to elderly or single people, and a new church hall for the Jireh Chapel. This scheme also released funds for the full restoration of the interior of the chapel to its 1826 condition. The floor was renewed and the original box-pews, the deacons' grand pew, the clerk's desk and the 'wine-glass' pulpit were all restored. Following this work, the congregation was able to return to worship at the chapel in February 1996.

In the chapel garden, at the western end of the building, there is a large tomb dating from about 1810. There are 10 interments including the Revd. Jenkin Jenkins and William Huntington whose inscription reads *Here lies the coalheaver who departed this life July 1st 1813, in the 69th year of his age. Beloved of his God, but abhorred of men. The Omniscient Judge, at the grand assizes, shall ratify and confirm this to the confusion of many thousands: for England and its metropolis shall know that there hath been a profit among them. W.H.S.S. (William Huntington Sinner Saved).*

The Jireh Chapel has been without a resident minister since 2005. It is overseen from London by the minister at the Walthamstow Free Presbyterian Church in London. There is still a congregation of "Protestant Dissenters of the Calvinistic Persuasion" which meets regularly for worship on ?

These notes are based on *List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest: District of Lewes, East Sussex (Town of Lewes)*, Department of the Environment, 1985; and *A History of the Jireh Chapel, Lewes*, James E North, The Huntingtonian Press, 1998. Drawing by Lawrence Littleton Evans © reproduced with consent.

September 2022