



HISTORY

East Finchley's Religious Heritage

By Ann Bronkhorst

In the late 1970s, the United Reform Church in Muswell Hill Broadway faced demolition. Local people campaigned to save the building as an arts centre or a library – and they were half successful. It wasn't demolished; it became a pub.

Since 1997 nearly 150 London churches (of all denominations) have been 'secularised'. In Islington the Union Chapel is now a rock music venue as well as a church and the United Reform Church in Muswell Hill Broadway became a pub. In Shaftesbury Avenue the Welsh Presbyterian Chapel became the Limelight Club and is now a Walkabout pub.

More reforms on the way

At last month's Church of England General Synod they discussed selling off parts of church naves or crypts to coffee shops and bar chains, to raise funds. And once church law changes, even nightclubs will be possible. Until now, only a redundant church could have its use changed. Developers

profited from the conversion of former churches into restaurants or flats. Now church buildings that remain primarily places of worship can be partly leased to commercial enterprises and the profits ploughed back for church funds.

In East Finchley, our own churches, chapels, church schools and halls have been through many changes of use over the last century. Congregations have grown, sometimes dramatically, and later have dwindled; fire and wartime bombs have played a part. None (yet) has become a pub or a nightclub but who knows what may happen in the 21st century? This series of articles will chart the on-going course of those originally religious buildings.



The methodist centre on the corner of Park Road Photo by Alison Roberts

Non-conformist Beginnings

By Ann Bronkhorst

In the mid-nineteenth century East Finchley was still a patchwork of small settlements within the Parish of Finchley, bordering what remained of Finchley Common and all sharing Finchley's parish church at Church End.

One settlement had grown up around the northern tollgate of what had been the Bishop of London's mediaeval hunting park. There (just north of its modern successor, the Old White Lion), the Dirthouse was a coaching inn for waggons and travellers. Further north was Market Place, the real centre of East End, as the hamlet was known. Further north still were the cottages around Red Lion Hill, once called Cuckolds Haven. Rapidly the little settlements spread, joined up and filled the long V-shape between the Great North Road and East End Road.

Methodist missions

Through the second half of the century East End was the poorest part of Finchley and the one with the highest birth rate. Nonconformists were active in setting up mission chapels mostly to the west of the Great North Road.

By the 1890s there was a Wesleyan Methodist chapel and Sunday School at Red Lion Hill. The Primitive Methodists (theologians may understand the distinction) built a small iron chapel on East End Road in 1872 which is still a place of worship. On a 1911 map it's called a Gospel Hall, the Primitive Methodists having moved in 1905 to a prime location on the now bustling High Road. There they built a chapel 'roughcast in a Gothic style'. By the mid-twentieth century it had become a secular building, a Youth Hall; now it's



Finchley Youth Theatre on a sunny day Photo by Alison Roberts

Finchley Youth Theatre – and a Polling Station. Meanwhile the Wesleyan Methodists were also on the move. In 1897 they built a large red-brick church at the corner of Park Road and the High Road quite near the Baptists' and Salvationists' buildings.

At the western end of Creighton Avenue on a Sunday in, say, 1905 the cheerful noise being made unto the Lord must have been splendid. The Wesleyans' new church became a

centre for the community in the twentieth century.

It has hosted many activities: dance classes, playgroups, Weight-Watchers. Now the complex of buildings also houses a school of English and a firm of chartered accountants. The church has never ceased to be a place of worship, however.

Part 2 will cover the Baptists and Salvationists to the east of the High Road



Gospel Hall, East End Road Photo by Tony Roberts

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