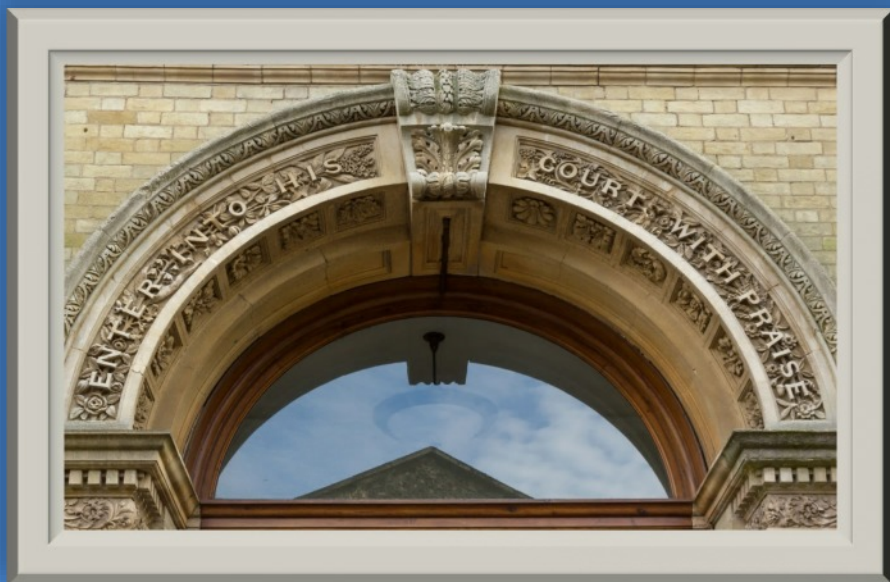


200 YEARS OF FAITH AND SERVICE



PRINCES STREET
CONGREGATIONAL/
UNITED REFORMED
CHURCH

1819-2020



Above: The congregation in the days of the pews

Below: The Lille Muko choir from Copenhagen perform during the Bicentenary celebrations in 2019



The first thing a visitor to any church sees is the building and perhaps particularly the entrance. But however impressive or beautiful a church building is, what really matters is the church within the walls, that is the people who worship there and present the face of that church to the world outside.

It is perhaps hard for us now as we stand inside Princes St United Reformed Church to imagine it seating up to 1,000 people and having a membership of well over 800. On Sunday March 30th 1851 a national religious census was carried out to find out the number of seats provided in places of worship as well as the number of worshippers on that day. Princes St, with 573 morning worshippers (plus 191 children), was the third biggest congregation in Norwich.

Over the past 200 years the people who attended Princes St ranged from those who might be called “The Great and the Good” to those who worked in the local factories, shops and offices, but all had their part to play not only in worship but also in the wider life of the church and beyond into the life of the City of Norwich itself.

It is of course the minister who largely sets the tone of a church especially a non-conformist one and Princes St has enjoyed the pastorates of several exceptional ministers.



The first minister from 1819-1866 **Rev John Alexander** was instrumental in the founding of Princes St. Born in Lancaster but of Scottish descent, he came to Norwich as a student minister at Easter 1817 to preach at The Tabernacle in Bishopsgate (a Countess of Huntingdon Connexion church).

He was invited to return to Norwich for the summer vacation when a dispute within the congregation over control of the church reached a head, resulting in 400 members breaking away and inviting John Alexander to be their minister. The new Congregational church building in Princes St opened in December 1819. The cost of the site and construction was £4,800, a huge sum to have been raised by a congregation of fairly modest means.

John Alexander was a noted preacher who attracted large congregations on a Sunday but he also worked hard in the wider community. He was chairman of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, at a time when it was unusual for a non-conformist to hold such an important position and was a great supporter of the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Buxton. John Alexander was on excellent terms with the important people in Norwich from the banker Gurneys to the Bishop of Norwich. It was often said that Norwich had two bishops, Bishop Stanley and John Alexander!

John Alexander retired in 1866 and died in 1868. He was buried in the Rosary Cemetery and the congregation for the evening funeral service was so large that it had to be held in St Andrew's Hall.



Princes St's second minister **Dr George Barratt** was also distinguished. He came from a family which was connected by marriage with many of the important non-conformists of the day.

Not long after Barratt became minister J.J. Colman the mustard manufacturer moved from St Mary's Baptist Church to Princes St, mainly because of a dispute within the Baptist congregation but also because he had become friendly with George Barratt.

Like John Alexander, George Barratt spent the whole of his ministry at Princes St. He was very involved in local philanthropic activities and was a noted writer and hymnologist: he edited the Congregational Church hymnals. In 1894 he became chairman of the national Congregational Union.



Another of his interests was the Forward Movement of the London Missionary Society and it was Barratt's work in this area which influenced Oliver Tomkins, a young member of the Princes St congregation, to become a missionary.



Tomkins was the son of a schoolmaster from Yarmouth and at the age of 17 he moved to Norwich to take up a position at Colmans. He joined the congregation at Princes St and, inspired by Barratt's preaching, became a Sunday school teacher as well as being active in the Y.M.C.A. In 1895 he applied to become a missionary and was ordained at Princes St in 1899. Under the auspices of the London Missionary Society (of which Ethel Colman was a director) he was sent to New Guinea to serve with James Chalmers, a very experienced missionary.

At first all went reasonably well, but in April 1901 Chalmers and Tomkins sailed to Goaribari Island in the Aird Delta of the Gulf of Papua New Guinea. Here they were murdered by local tribesmen who were cannibals.

The terrible details of Tomkins' death did not reach his family for many months but Princes St was packed for a memorial service at which Dr Barratt was the preacher.

Under Barratt the membership of Princes St increased to 840 and the church building needed to expand. In 1869 the chapel was extended, followed later by the construction of a Sunday School building next door.

One of the remarkable things about Princes St is that for almost all of its first 100 years it had only two ministers.

The strong tradition of excellent preaching at Princes St was continued by **Rev Sydney Myers** who was minister from 1942-1970. Sydney Myers also had a strong sense of the importance of serving the local community. He served on the education, library and youth service committees in Norwich and also on the panel which prepared the first religious studies syllabus for local schools. He also helped to set up the Marriage Guidance Council in Norwich and the Norwich Council of Churches.

Sydney Myers was very aware of the changes which began in Norwich after the second world war as more housing was constructed and the city began to expand into new suburbs. He was instrumental in the opening of a new Congregational Church at Ipswich Rd, but he was also concerned with the ways in which the role of Princes St as a city centre church might need to change with the times.

He set up discussion groups to consider this, resulting in three initiatives: the Wednesday Club which organised activities for the handicapped and able-bodied to join together (now BUILD), a Luncheon Club which provided a weekly meal and fellowship for elderly people living alone, and a playgroup. Another very successful idea was to hold a carol service by candlelight, the first time this was done in any Norwich church.



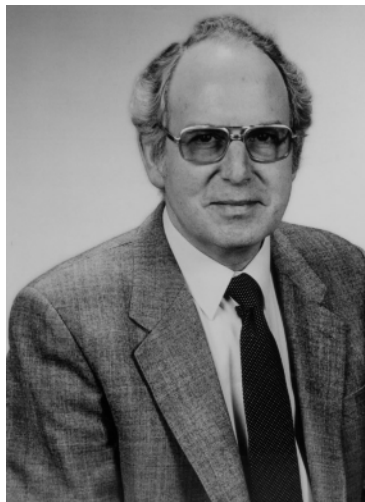
Sydney Myers retired in 1970 and in 1971 **Rev Donald Hilton** became the sixth minister of the church. He too was an excellent communicator and inspirational preacher and his sermons were both thoughtful and insightful. These gifts were reflected in three anthologies and collections of material for worship which are still much used and valued by ministers and lay-preachers today.

Donald Hilton steered Princes St through the transition from Congregational Church to United Reformed Church in 1972.

Maintaining the tradition of participating in local affairs Donald Hilton was chair of the Historic Norfolk Churches Trust and continued Sydney Myers' role on the panel which devised the RE syllabus for local schools.

He wrote a two-weekly column for the Eastern Daily Press expressing a Free Church viewpoint, as well as being Religious Affairs Advisor to Anglia Television.

Donald Hilton left Princes St in 1985 to become Moderator of the Yorkshire Synod of the URC and went on to become national Moderator in 1993-4.



Princes's St last minister **Rev John Marsh** served from 2000-2005 and brought a new vigour and energy to Princes St. He initiated a Church Office and organised some re-development in the church building. Woodworm meant that the beautiful lofty pulpit which looked down on the congregation had to be removed, enabling the front of the church to be remodelled. The entrance to the building was also enhanced by installing glass doors allowing passers-by to see inside the sanctuary during the week.



A substantial legacy enabled the church to seek a World Mission partner minister, **Rev Henry Ipatau** and his wife Maressa from the Church of Western Samoa, who joined Princes St for two years and played an active part in church activities and worship. During their stay in England they had a daughter who was baptised at the church and called "Dorothea Princes" in honour of their time in Norwich.

John Marsh's other interest was music and with the appointment of Peter Stephenson, recently retired

from the music department of the University of Hong Kong and a professional organist, the musical life of Princes St was re-invigorated. Under Peter's touch the Father Willis organ rang out Sunday after Sunday and the congregation were treated to performances of works from the organ repertoire at the end of the service, establishing a new tradition. The choir was also re-established, and minister and organist collaborated on anthems for some special occasions.

John Marsh retired in 2005 but in retirement became national Moderator of the United Reformed Church from 2008-2010, the only minister to serve a two year term.

From 2005 Princes St became a member of the Norwich Area United Reformed Church, sharing a minister with other congregations.

The membership of Princes St reflected the strong leadership of its ministers. A number of families involved in local trades and businesses attended the church and contributed to the leadership as deacons. The Copemans were wholesale grocers and another Copeman owned the Eastern Daily Press. The Reads were millers, the Tustings building supplies merchants, and the Cozens Hardys solicitors. However, pre-eminent amongst these families were the Colmans and the Boardmans. In their very different ways these two families put their stamp on Norwich and symbolise the influence of Princes St as the leading non-conformist church in the city.

Jeremiah James Colman was born in 1830 and at the age of 24 became sole manager of the family mustard business. Originally a member of St Mary's Baptist Church, he was above all a Liberal in outlook and in 1870 moved to Princes St, feeling more in sympathy with the Congregationalist tradition and the minister Dr George Barratt.

J.J.Colman was already involved in local politics having been elected to the City Council in 1859 and serving as both sheriff and mayor before being elected as one of the two Norwich MPs (standing as a Liberal) in 1871. He continued as MP until 1895 and entertained William Gladstone at Carrow House when he visited Norfolk.

Colman contributed to civic life in a number of ways. In 1870 he was involved in the launch of the Eastern Daily Press, and, having helped to set up the Norwich Y.M.C.A. in 1856, he gave generously in support of the purchase of the house in St Giles St which was home to the Y.M.C.A. until 2015. He was also connected with the setting up of the Norwich Museum and Art Gallery in the Castle.

He was known as an enlightened employer: the Carrow Works was the first factory in Britain to employ a nurse for the benefit of its workers, and he also supported his wife Caroline's work in setting a school at Carrow.

J.J.Colman's daughter **Ethel Mary** continued her father's work. She was one of the first women deacons at Princes St and indeed in the wider Congregational Church and was made a life-Deacon in honour of her service to Princes St. As a member of Norwich City Council she served as the first woman Lord Mayor in 1923-4.

Ethel Mary and her sister Helen founded the Stuart Court Memorial Trust, which in 1915 built Stuart Court in Recorder Rd to provide homes for the elderly poor.



Ethel Mary Colman
Picture © Norfolk Record Office
MC 2183/15, PH10.

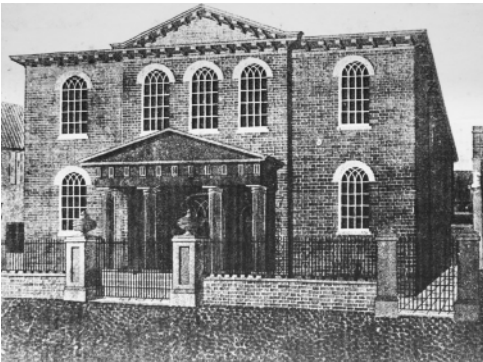


Jeremiah James Colman
© Norfolk Museums Service
(Norwich Castle Museum & Art

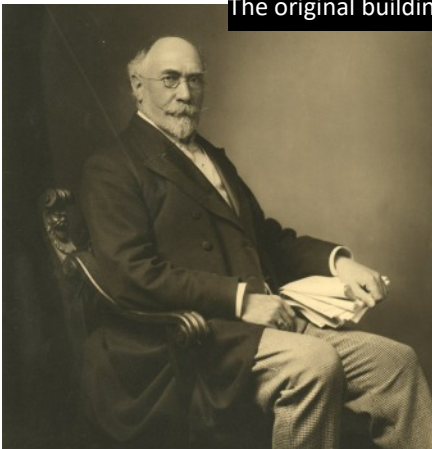
Another deacon at Princes St was the grocer James Boardman. His son chose to train as an architect, setting up his own office in Norwich in 1860

and for the next 30 years (eventually in partnership with his son E.T.Boardman) **EDWARD BOARDMAN** became the pre-eminent architect in the city. As a member of an established non-conformist church (Edward also served as a deacon) he was the obvious choice for congregations and businessmen planning new buildings.

Boardman's first notable project was a Sunday school building for St Mary's Baptist Church built in 1868, but the following year he was given the task of redeveloping Princes St by extending the building to provide an entrance vestibule as well as raising the roof.



The original building



Edward Boardman: © Norfolk Museums Service
(Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery)



The current building

The old meeting house style facade was replaced with the front we know today, more in the style of a temple, an impression emphasised by the words over the doorway "Come into His Courts With Praise". The interior with its

high ceiling decorated with elaborate mouldings now became more impressively spacious.



Ten years later Boardman went on to design a new building next door which provided a lecture hall, church parlour and offices, a library and a Sunday school for 700 to 800 children at a cost of £15,000 (the price of building an average size chapel). Now known as Boardman House it is the school of architecture for the Norwich University of the Arts.

Boardman went on to design the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Queen's Rd (1872), the Baptist Church (where Trinity URC now stands) in Unthank Rd (1875), and Chapel Field Methodist Church (1881), as well as non-conformist chapels in nearby towns.

It is no exaggeration to say that Edward Boardman changed the face of Norwich and as you walk through the heart of the city today many of the buildings you pass were designed by him. During the second half of the 19th century Norwich was changing from a medieval city to a modern Victorian business centre requiring all sorts of commercial premises. Edward Boardman designed factories for the boot and shoe manufacturers of Norwich: Haldinsteins at Nos 2-4 Queen's St, and Howlett and White in Colegate. Later, in partnership with his son who joined him in 1889, the Caley's factory was designed (now the site of Chapelfield shopping mall) as well as a works for Norman and Beard who were the largest organ makers in Europe (in 1899 they built the organ at Norwich Cathedral).

In 1876 Boardman was appointed architect to the London St Improvement Committee. The aim was to improve routes through the city by widening London St and re-developing some of the side streets such as Castle St,

Opie St and Davey Place. Not all of what Boardman achieved is left today but the corner facing the market (now Jack Wills) and at the junction with Castle St (now Whitards) were part of the scheme. Boardman designed new offices for Cozens Hardy, Castle Chambers in Opie St (still their main office today), and offices for the Royal Insurance Co. on Bank Plain (now an estate agents). 57 London St (now the British Heart Foundation) was designed by the Boardmans in 1890 to house a new headquarters and printing works for the Eastern Daily Press. The editor of the EDP from 1902-1937 was Archie Cozens-Hardy who was also a member of Princes St and after attending an evening service he would cross the road to his office to check the Monday morning edition.

Boardman also designed the central pavilion at the (old) Norwich and Norfolk Hospital and Chester Place, an elegant terrace of houses off Earlham Rd. In collaboration with the local banker John Gurney, Boardman designed the interior of Norwich Castle to create the museum we have today. Not surprisingly Edward Boardman was made an Alderman of the City of Norwich in 1890.

Through their own marriages (and in the case of Boardman his siblings) and those of their children the Colmans and the Boardmans were threads in the extensive network of non-conformist families in Norwich, the majority worshipping either at St Mary's Baptist Church or Princes St. These were the "movers and shakers" of their day, owning and running the businesses which created the commercial wealth of the city and playing their part in the running of local government. E.T. Boardman became mayor in 1905-6 and Henry Copeman was Lord Mayor 1911-12.



As the 20th century progressed and Norwich began to change again, particularly after the Second World War, members of Princes St continued to serve the city, **Osborne Tusting** was sheriff 1954-5 and **Raymond**

Frostick a Norwich solicitor, served on Norwich City Council and was mayor in 1976-7. As a member of the Norwich Junior Chamber of Commerce, he was involved in the early days of the University of East Anglia, later becoming a member of Council (the governing body of the university) and going on to be Treasurer and then Chair of Council. He was also instrumental in setting up the Citizens Advice Bureau in the city.



As manufacturing in Norwich declined in the last years of the 20th century, service industries emerged as the dominant employers. Norwich Union Insurance Co had long been a major business in the city and several Princes St members have worked there. The most important of these was **Victor Hughff** who, with his wife Grace, was a life-long member of Princes St. Victor Hughff spent his whole working life at Norwich Union, filling the role of Chief General Manager from 1984 until his retirement in 1989.

This account of the congregation at Princes St has, of necessity, concentrated on the “big names” and most prominent families, but we must not lose sight of the many hundreds if not thousands of people who worshipped at Princes St week by week over its two hundred years. The names on the church First World War memorial, for example, record young men who had probably attended the Sunday School. Details of these are listed in a separate booklet. Various activities also took place in the church buildings, members’ homes, or beyond: amongst them a Rambling Club which organised walks and walking holidays, The Princes St Guild which met to hear a speaker followed by a chance to chat, and House Groups.

Like any church, Princes St was and is made up of many many “unsung” members who work to keep the life of a congregation going. The Deacons (known in the URC as Elders) were the elected leaders of the church, led by

the Secretary, but there are others who undertake the tasks which “keep the show on the road” - those who give out the hymn books and welcome visitors, and make coffee after the service, those who sing in the choir, read the lesson or lead prayers, and those who arrange the flowers and decorate the church so beautifully for Christmas, Easter or Harvest as well as someone to edit the newsletter and prepare it for distribution. Over the years there have been the cooks at Luncheon Club and those helping to cater for Church events and those who organised the activities for Princes St members.



Left: A typical Tuesday Lunch club



Right: A Sunday flower display

In 1994 Princes St celebrated its 175th anniversary with a weekend of events including an exhibition about the church opened by the Lord Mayor of Norwich. The church was decorated with displays about the activities run by

the church and of course there was an anniversary service. This was a strong and lively congregation which still had a clear voice in the church life of the city. I doubt whether anyone could have foreseen that 25 years later the Sunday congregation would barely average 25 and a decision about the future would have to be faced.

Several factors have combined over those 25 years to bring this about, perhaps most notably the fact that Sunday is no longer a day set aside for church worship. Sunday is now a “leisure day” where “worship” takes place in shopping malls, and a wide range of activities provides more exciting entertainment than sitting in a church.

As this change took hold, Norwich City Council in its wisdom ended free Sunday parking in the city centre and made on-street parking more and more restrictive, as well as introducing increasingly complicated traffic systems. The result has been that access to churches such as Princes St has become more and more difficult and the impact of this is all the greater when the majority of the congregation live out of the city centre and have to travel in on a Sunday.

Most recently changing styles of worship and the setting up of more lively churches appealing to the younger generation around the edge of the city have left Princes St with an elderly congregation facing an inevitable decline.

Despite an imaginative re-modelling of the interior of the church in 2014-5 the building has become too big a financial burden for a small congregation to bear, and so, 200 years after its foundation, Princes St has taken the hard decision to close.

Those of us who have been fortunate to have enjoyed often inspirational and faith-affirming worship alongside strong and warm fellowship at the church can only reflect on a past in which Princes St was one of the foremost non-conformist congregations in the UK and certainly the largest in East Anglia: a church which fulfilled its role in serving God and the local community.

To paraphrase St Paul's words to Timothy, Princes St has fought the good fight, it has finished the race, and it has kept the faith.

Barbara Searle

PRINCES ST CONGREGATIONAL/UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

1819 – 2020

This was a place
built on faith and hope.
A shelter from the storms of life;
a rock of consolation.
A place where praise and thanks to God were sung
(at first without an organ).
Where prayers were said in words and silence;
Scripture read with thought and care,
and then expounded by the preacher,
standing in the pulpit, high above the congregation.
This was a place
where families brought babes to be baptised,
and then as children to Sunday School
before taking their place in grown-up worship.
A place for weddings
so that, in their turn,
the next generation joined
the warp and weft of the fabric
which makes a church family.
This was a place of joy, laughter and celebration
as well as grief and tears
when lives ended
and were remembered with thanksgiving.
a place of service, proud to contribute to the
Fine City.

This was a place with open doors;
a luncheon club, Tuesday prayers, house
groups,
carols by candlelight and Easter break-
fasts.
A space for local charities to flourish,
a community within the community,
This was a place
of fellowship and love.
This is a place
where prayer is silenced now;
the organ voiceless
and the words of preachers stilled.
Faint echoes in the walls of worship past.
This is a place
which can live on in faith and hope;
its new purpose as yet unknown.
But let our prayer be this;
May its walls provide shelter
and the space within them give inspiration
to all who come here.
And may we who have loved this place
be led by Christ on new paths
to new joy in him
wherever that may take us.

Poem by Barbara Searle