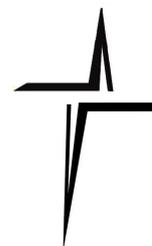


# A Brief Guide and History of United Church Dorchester



## Introduction

United Church Dorchester (UCD) was founded in 1978 when the town centre Methodist and United Reformed Churches came together. It is a member of the Churches Together in Dorchester and is partnered with the Lutheran churches of Lubbecke, our German twin town. We welcome and value diversity, believing that everyone has something special to share. We aim to serve each other, our community and the wider world, sharing Christian love, identifying with the poor and powerless, and striving for a sustainable, just and peaceful world.

## Historic Links

Our United Church has interesting historic links with the First Parish Church, Dorchester, Massachusetts. The church and settlement was founded in 1630 by Puritans from this town, who felt so threatened that they braved the hazardous Atlantic crossing to practise their faith in peace, and then to establish the first American free school and the first democratic town meeting.

Here in Dorchester, England, the earliest roots of the United Reformed Church were grounded in a similar insistence on freedom of conscience. When William Benn, Rector of All Saints, refused to accept the Act of Uniformity in 1662, he lost his living. Despite frequent fines and imprisonments, he and his congregation continued to meet as an underground movement until eventually in 1689, Parliament passed the Toleration Act and they, too, could practise their religion in peace, provided that the doors were left wide open for surveillance!

The first Methodist preacher in Dorchester in 1748 was John Haime, a close friend of John Wesley, the Methodist founder.

Our United Church also has strong historic links with the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The trial of these desperately poor agricultural workers at Dorchester Crown Court in 1834 became a landmark case in establishing the legal rights of workers to unite for fair wages and conditions. Five of the six labourers were members of the Dorchester Methodist Circuit and two were local preachers. Today, within the membership of the United Church, we still have some direct descendants of the Martyrs.

## The Victorian Church Building

The church is a grade 2 listed building, built in 1857. It is constructed in the Gothic revival style, which was inspired by the architect A.W.N. Pugin, who declared that the medieval “middle pointed” architecture of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was the “most Christian” and the only proper style for churches.

Externally, the spire, constructed of Bath stone, is a prominent feature of Dorchester’s skyline, which Thomas Hardy described as “a town of spires, towers, gables and chimneys”.

On entering the church, the outstanding feature is the arched inner roof which is a fine example of Victorian craftsmanship. Another unusual architectural feature is

that the side walls each curve slightly towards each other, as if seeking to embrace us, communicating intimacy, warmth and welcome.

The organ was installed in 1857, but it is thought that it may have some older pipework. It has twice been rebuilt, in 1888 and 1982, but the character of the original organ has been carefully preserved. The organ case is the original Victorian design and the organ pipes are decorated with the fleur de lys or lily, with three distinct leaves. This symbol is widely used in medieval heraldry to signify purity.

## **Furnishings**

In 1982 the church interior was completely redesigned. The original stone pulpit and fixed pews were removed. The Victorian pews were replaced with more flexible chairs so that both traditional and new forms of worship can be enjoyed. Until then, the seating capacity of the church was 600. It is recorded that for Queen Victoria's memorial service in 1901 every seat was filled and there was a large overflow out into the street! In the gallery, the pews have been retained and the Victorian nameplate fittings are still visible, a relic of the old practice that families could pay rents to have their own private pews.

The sanctuary furnishings (communion table, pulpit and lectern) are relatively recent installations, following the removal of the lofty Victorian pulpit in 1982. The font is the original 1857 font, made of Caen stone imported from Normandy. One of the very first babies to be baptised here in 1857 was William Isaac Last, who later in life became the first Director of the South Kensington Science Museum.

The wall hangings are the work of the United Church patchwork group.

## **The Windows**

In the south east corner is a memorial to the Reverend William Benn, the first minister of the Dorchester Congregational Church from 1662 until his death in 1680.

The memorial window was installed in 1912 to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Benn's ejection from All Saints. One panel depicts the open bible, symbolising Benn's emphasis on the preaching of scripture. The second panel depicts the dove or Holy Spirit.

In the North aisle there is a window commemorating the Revd.J. McClune Uffen, Congregational minister here from 1891 to 1911 during years of great social unrest. He was a leading campaigner for the poor and, unlike most men of his time, a strong supporter of votes for women. He launched the original Hardy Players, who achieved national fame for their dramatized versions of Hardy's novels. The centrepiece of this window is the chi-rho symbol, in Greek the initial letters of Christ. The adjoining window commemorates his wife Elizabeth.

The East window (behind the organ) features a six-pointed star, symbolising the six days of the creation story, as told in the Book of Genesis.

The West window features colourful butterflies, symbols of new life and hope.

## **Symbols**

The most frequent Christian symbol is the cross. In this broad, ecumenical church, it is appropriate that the cross occurs in many forms, including;-

- the Latin cross, where the lowest arm is longer than the other three),
- the Greek cross, with four arms of equal length
- the Celtic cross, where a broad ring surrounds the intersection, signifying God's all-embracing love for the whole universe.

The United Church logo (depicted on the front of this guide) combines the time-honoured symbol of the Christian church with some fresh and surprising angles, suggesting movement and new life. The apex of the cross is a uniquely symbolic representation of the United Church spire.

The chancel arch, door frames and font are decorated with vine leaves and grapes. These are a visible reminder of the gospel message, "I am the vine, you are the branches".

## **The Modern Church**

In 1982, as well as redesigning the church interior, a new church hall and meeting rooms were built for church and community use.

In 1984 the United Church entered into partnership with the Lutheran Church of St Andreas in Lübbecke, Germany. The Bürgermeister of Lübbecke presented the church with the town's coat of arms. In 1995, there was a particularly memorable joint celebration for the 50 years of peace in Europe.

In 2000, the church premises were significantly extended and improved with the opening of the coffee lounge and quiet room, as well as the church shop.

## **Church shop and coffee lounge**

Coffee is normally available every morning except Monday in the coffee lounge or main hall. The United Church shop is open every day except Sunday from 10am – 12.30 pm for Fairtrade goods, Christian books and CDs, gifts and cards for all occasions.

The shop was originally a Georgian coach house and later a grain store. The hoist for lifting the grain is still visible on the external wall at the rear of the church.

## **The Methodist Circuit and URC pastorate**

The United Church works closely with other members of the Dorset South and West Methodist Circuit. The Circuit was formed in September 2018 by the merging of three former circuits -- Dorchester & Bridport, Weymouth and Portland Circuits. The new circuit is part of the Southampton District. This includes 12 Methodist churches and chapels covering Dorchester, Weymouth, Portland, Bridport and surrounding villages, as well as the two united churches of Dorchester and Bridport. One of these chapels is Tolpuddle.

The United Church, Dorchester is part of a joint URC pastorate with Bridport, within the Wessex Synod area, and has links with the Hope and Radipole churches in Weymouth.

## Key dates in the life of United Church Dorchester

1630	Families from Dorchester emigrated to Massachusetts in order to be free to practice their religion in peace and build the first Congregational church in New Dorchester
1662	William Benn became the first Congregational Minister in Dorchester.
1689	Freedom of Worship granted with the Toleration Act.
1748	John Haime, a close friend of John Wesley, was the first Methodist preacher in Dorchester.
1813	Congregationalists opened the first Sunday School in Dorchester.
1831	Formation of the Dorchester Methodist Circuit.
1834	The Tolpuddle Martyrs – (six desperately poor members of a newly formed agricultural workers' union, including five Methodists) were sentenced at Dorchester Crown Court to seven years transportation.
1849	Thomas Hardy became a pupil at the British School and was taught by an outstanding Congregational Schoolmaster, Isaac Last.
1857	Opening of Dorchester Congregational Church – now United Church Dorchester.
1875	Opening of South Street Methodist Church (now demolished)
1978	United Church formed by the union of Dorchester Methodist and United Reformed Churches.
1982	Present church reopened following alterations and refurbishment.
1984	Partnership of United Church Dorchester with St Andreas Kirche, Lübbecke, Germany.
1990	United Church joins Churches Together in Dorchester
1999	Opening at United Church of first Credit Union in Dorset
2000	Opening of United Church shop and coffee lounge.
2001	Opening of Dorchester Child Contact Centre (sponsored by United Church)
2015	Launch of Dorchester Town Centre chaplaincy
2018	Merger of 3 circuits to form Dorset South and West Methodist Circuit