

HONEY HOLE ROAD  
TODMORDEN, W YORKS.  
OL14 6LE

# TODMORDEN UNITARIAN CHURCH



TRADITION: UNITARIAN

BUILT: 1864-9

CONGREGATION ACTIVE  
UNTIL: 1987

LISTING: GRADE I

OS GRID REFERENCE:  
SD935239

A SOARING SPIRE AND BEACON  
FOR THE CALDER VALLEY



Photograph: Craig Shaw, Blu Planet Photography.

## TRANSPORT

The church stands on Honey Hole Road, at the Rochdale end of the town, above the Morrisons supermarket. There are WCs, a kitchen and disabled access.

The church is a five minute walk from Todmorden Station (from where its 59m spire is clearly visible), which is on the Leeds-Manchester Victoria line. The church is seven minutes from the bus station in the centre of the town.

## VISIT US

Open days and many other events are organised by HCT's local committee; see [www.hct.org.uk](http://www.hct.org.uk)

[www.todmordenunitarianchurch.org.uk](http://www.todmordenunitarianchurch.org.uk)

We welcome visits by prior arrangement with the keyholder, please phone 01706 815407.

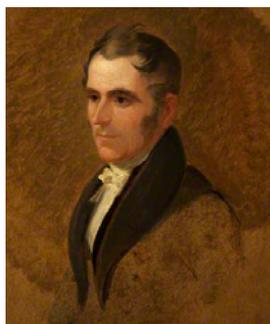
## HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Todmorden Unitarian Church was built between 1864-69 by Samuel, Joshua and John Fielden, the three sons of 'Honest' John Fielden MP. Fielden Snr was a mill-owner and Radical responsible for the 1847 Ten Hours Act, a law limiting the hours that could be worked by women and children in textile mills to no longer than ten hours a day, five days a week, and eight hours on a Saturday. Originally a Quaker, Fielden moved first to Methodism and then to Methodist Unitarianism, a nonconformist denomination that rejects the idea of the Holy Trinity, viewing God as one being and Jesus as a prophet and moral authority.

After his death in 1849 the chapel that he had supported was unable to cater for the growth in the local Unitarian community, and so in 1864 his sons decided to replace the existing chapel in his memory.

To build the chapel the brothers employed John Gibson, an architect who had worked under Charles Barry in the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster. Gibson concurrently built Dobroyd Castle for middle brother John – the two buildings are positioned so that they can view one another across the valley. Continuing his connection with the Fielden family, he later designed Fielden School in 1872 and Todmorden Town Hall, both paid for by the family.

Gibson designed the church in the Decorated Gothic style, a far cry from the simple unadorned chapels of early Unitarianism. In the inaugural sermon, delivered by William Gaskell (widower of Cranford and *North and South* novelist Elizabeth), he devoted part of his address to arguing that despite Puritan inclinations to the contrary, there was nothing wrong in employing art to enhance religion. The church and grounds were property of the Fielden family until 1882, when a trust was set up to allow it a degree of independence. An increasing shortage of funds led to its closure in 1987.



'Honest' John Fielden MP.



Dobroyd Castle – The Fielden family home.



A wedding at Todmorden.

## ENQUIRE & HIRE

TODMORDEN IS VERY POPULAR FOR WEDDINGS AND CAN BE HIRED FOR CONCERTS AND OTHER EVENTS

To find out more visit [www.hct.org.uk](http://www.hct.org.uk) or contact [chapels@hct.org.uk](mailto:chapels@hct.org.uk)

THE HISTORIC CHAPELS TRUST | ST. GEORGE'S GERMAN LUTHERAN CHURCH,  
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*A concert at Todmorden Unitarian Church.*

### THE EXTERIOR

The Fieldens were very wealthy, and no expense was spared in the construction of the church. The cost came to £35,000, six times the original estimate and equivalent to around £2m today.

The church, set in a landscaped cemetery, is a fantastic example of Victorian neo-Gothic, and is unusual in that it faces south-west, rather than the traditional east. Whether this was out of a desire for the optimum view from Dobroyd Castle, or Unitarian disdain for the idea that God is only approachable from one direction, is unclear. The tower, with an octagonal spire reaching a height of 59m (192ft) features projecting figures of a man, lion, eagle and ox beneath the pinnacle, symbolising the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, John and Luke. Several grotesques can be found around the building at lower levels. The tower contains a clock and a peel of eight bells which plays four different tunes.

Beyond the tower at the church's western corner are the graves of Samuel and Joshua Fielden, while all three brothers are remembered by plaques inside the building, with the subtle differences in wording on each said to reflect their differences in temperament.

*An art installation in the church.*

### THE INTERIOR

Built in stone, oak and marble, the interior is richly decorated. Beside the tower porch-door is a monument commemorating those who fell in the First World War, while on the floor beneath the tower is a stone naming the three Fielden brothers. Entering the building via the main porch, one walks through a central aisle with blocks of pews on either side. The pews all possess subtly different carvings on their 120 end-panels.

Separating the nave from the aisles stand marble pillars, which in turn support pointed moulded arches. Above the arches, windows of stained glass help to illuminate the church's interior. At various points around the building are carvings of alternating male and female heads, nicely suggestive of the Unitarian emphasis on sexual equality.

*Photographs: Craig Shaw, Blu Planet Photography.*



At the front of the church, the chambers behind the choir-stalls contain the church's most elaborate ceilings, with intricately carved foliage and decorated bosses. Before the chancel are the pulpit and font. Each is supported on a plinth of eight marble colonettes, echoing each other. The christening bowl of the font is carved from a single block of white marble, while the pulpit is adorned with an eagle lectern. Beyond the pulpit, in the chancel itself, is a window by the Belgian artist J.B. Capronnier. The central window depicts episodes in the life of Christ, while those on the sides illustrate some parables. Opposite, the rose window above the main entrance is said to contain over thirty thousand pieces of glass. The church organ was made by William Hill and originally employed a water-powered air pump, a mechanism that was only replaced by electricity in 1939.

### SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

Following the transfer of the church into its possession, the Historic Chapels Trust has completed a £1 million repair programme at Todmorden, embracing the repair of the church roofs and stained glass, the rehabilitation of the listed lodge, and the refurbishment of the interior of the tower including the repair of the clock and peel of eight bells. The historic landscape has been restored and modern facilities have been installed.