

HALESWORTH ROAD
WALPOLE, SUFFOLK
IP19 9AZ

WALPOLE OLD CHAPEL

HISTORIC CHAPELS TRUST

TRADITION: INDEPENDENT
BUILT: 16TH CENTURY, ACTIVE AS
A CHAPEL FROM 1689
CONGREGATION ACTIVE
UNTIL: 1970
LISTING: GRADE II*
OS GRID REFERENCE: TM37352

A 1689 CHAPEL - ONE OF THE
OLDEST NONCONFORMIST
CHAPELS IN ENGLAND



TRANSPORT

The nearest rail station at Halesworth, approx 2 miles away, thence by taxi.

From Halesworth by car, follow the B117 signs heading to Stradbroke/Laxfield. As you enter Walpole village the chapel is on the right-hand side, about 20 yards after the telephone box. Limited car parking nearby.

VISIT US

The Chapel is open from May to the end of September on Saturdays only between 2pm-4.30pm. To visit outside these hours, please contact our volunteer keyholder: secretary@walpoleoldchapel.co.uk

Kitchen and WC in detached building.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Converted from two sixteenth-century timber-framed farmhouses, Walpole Old Chapel was adapted into a meeting house by the local Independent (or Congregational) movement in 1689. To this day it still looks rather domestic.

Independent congregations had broken away from the Church of England, rejecting episcopal control, and believed that they should be able to choose their own style of worship, their own minister, and run their own affairs. Similar to the many other nonconformist movements at this time, they believed in the literal authority of the Bible as the word of God, and that worship should be simple and unadorned, with an emphasis on preaching. The first local meeting of Independents had taken place in Cookley in 1647, but it wasn't until 1689 that the chapel was registered for worship. There was severe persecution of dissenting congregations under Charles II. While James II took a more liberal attitude to religious freedoms, it was only after his forced abdication and the reign of William III and Mary II that the Act of Toleration was passed in 1689. This is the date Walpole Old Chapel became registered as a chapel although there is a suspicion that the congregation had long used the houses in a clandestine way, hiding in plain sight behind the domestic elevations. This Act, passed on 24th May, allowed the freedom of worship to all protestant nonconformists who had taken oaths of loyalty to the Crown.

The year the Act was passed six members of Halesworth's Independent congregation were granted the farmhouse and an acre of land by the Corporation of Southwold for an annual rent of ten shillings on 19th August. Walpole chapel is therefore one of the oldest nonconformist chapels in England. Among the trustees were two yeomen, a grocer, a leather shoemaker and a local gentleman, illustrating the appeal of the Independent movement across the social spectrum.

The chapel was radically altered around this time, to make the houses more like a meeting house. The congregation prospered for more than two and half centuries but in the post WWII years the congregation was dwindling. By 1958 the trusteeship passed from the local people to the Suffolk Congregational Union, and it was formally closed in 1970.



The Pulpit.

ENQUIRE & HIRE

THE CHAPEL IS AVAILABLE FOR BAPTISMS, WEDDINGS, BLESSINGS. IT CAN BE HIRED FOR POETRY READINGS, EXHIBITIONS AND MEETINGS

To find out more visit www.hct.org.uk or contact chapels@hct.org.uk

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A concert in the chapel.

THE EXTERIOR

Befitting the beliefs of its congregation, the chapel is unadorned, and despite its later adaptation, still looks much like the houses it originally was.

A timber-framed and plastered building, with double plain-tiled roof, there is a small burial ground, containing many headstones which is species rich and carefully managed by volunteers to preserve the rich mix of wild flowers.

THE INTERIOR

In contrast to the exterior, the interior vividly conveys the atmosphere of seventeenth and eighteenth century dissenting worship. Wood-panelled entrance lobbies lead into the chapel, where 11 box pews face the impressive hexagonal canopied pulpit, the focal point of worship and the building itself. There is a tiered gallery on three sides of the building, containing enough wooden benches and box pews to seat two hundred, indicating the size of the original congregation.

The upstairs pews have been altered and repaired many times; some incorporate re-used fragments of medieval panelling. The irregularity of the structure and of the wooden fittings gives this building its powerful appeal. The roof is held up by three timber columns, the middle one said to have been a ship's mast. The furnishings at the lower level are mostly late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and the chapel is lit by two large round-arched windows on either side of the pulpit. The floor is paved with yellow Suffolk bricks.



There is a mix of benches and box pews of different shapes and layout.



Harvest Tea at the Chapel.

FURTHER READING

www.oakcottage.org.uk hosts many documents and a comprehensive history of the chapel.

www.walpoleoldchapel.co.uk contains information on current events and activities taking place at the chapel.

SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

The chapel was transferred to the Historic Chapels Trust in 1995. Repairs have included careful structural work to tie together the tottering timber frame, the construction of modern facilities in a detached out-building, and the re-instatement of the historic paint scheme in the interior.