

## **CAVERSHAM BAPTIST CHURCH**

### **History of the church building from 1877 – 1980**

**Written by**

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The present building on the corner of South Street and Prospect Street was built in 1877 to replace a smaller chapel (now converted into flats) on the opposite side of Gosbrook Road which dates back to 1866. Until then, there had been no place of worship in Caversham for dissenters as they were called. This chapel was relatively small by Victorian standards and was used purely as a preaching station for those who could not cross the river to King's Road via the old wooden bridge in the dark. The land was given by Richard Talbot, £1,000 was given by Ebenezer West (whose name the chapel now bears) and Alfred Waterhouse was invited to design the building. As early as 1875 the need for larger premises was felt and the land on the opposite corner was bought for £316. A subscription fund was started and £2,000 was raised. Again, Waterhouse was commissioned to design the building, which was built by a local man called Searle, with the internal woodwork undertaken by Messrs Warwick, two brothers with connections with the church. The building was opened for worship in 1877.

That such an eminent architect as Alfred Waterhouse should be involved with both of these buildings can be considered quite an achievement, indeed "a feather in the cap" for "Caversham on the Mud" as it was then known. Born in Liverpool in 1830 to a Quaker family, Waterhouse's earliest work centred on the North West. However, by 1853, at the tender age of 23, he had established his own practice and very soon his work became more widely known. He moved his practice to London and his family moved into Berkshire, firstly to Foxhill at Whiteknights and later to Yattendon Court. At about this time, he entered the competition for the Assizes Court and built the National History Museum and Manchester Town Hall. He was later to build Reading School (1871), Reading Town Hall (1875) and to become chief architect for the Prudential Assurance Company designing their Head Office at Holborn and many further projects for the company. Again, it was strange or perhaps fortuitous that with so many prestigious commissions on hand, he should undertake the relatively modest task of building a local church – perhaps it was the influence of his Quaker background and family.

The site was an awkward one being on a corner and virtually triangular in shape, not unlike that of Manchester Town Hall. Not being restricted by the Anglican constraints of having the nave run in an east/west direction, Waterhouse was able to build the church on a north/south axis and thus maximise the length of the building. It is oblong in shape, predominantly of red brick with an imposing tower at the south west corner. The roof is steeply pitched and gabled. Waterhouse's skilled use of brickwork is obvious in this building with its horizontal bands of light coloured bricks all the way round. This horizontal pattern is repeated in the roof tiles. There is a double banded brick and stone plinth around the building and above this on each side of the main building, six window bays each containing a pair of lancet windows. These bays are defined by brick buttresses and each bay is surmounted by decorative corbelling which is repeated just below the roof line. These pairs of windows are also to be found in the tower. The windows are leaded and made up of small plain squares bordered by triangular shapes in pastel shades. This being a non-conformist church there are no stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible or lives of the Saints. The only decorated window is the circular one at the north end which consists of seven circles of geometric designs in pastel colours. Unfortunately, this is the one side of the church that cannot easily be seen because of the buildings nearby. The main entrance to the church is on the south side, the widest of the two gable ends and is approached by steps up to a gabled porch decorated in a style taken straight from street; Brick and Marble.

Above the doorway is a set of three lancet windows set in the gable wall. A smaller less imposing door is set in the tower with a stone staircase leading to the gallery. On the north side, which is the rear of the building there is a two bay projection one storey high to house the vestry and boiler room. In order to use the available space up to the boundary wall as effectively as possible, the eastern side of this "lean to" is wider than the western end, the former boasting a side door and three windows and the latter a door, but only two windows. This awkward shape provided an opportunity for architect and builder to demonstrate their skills, as each row of slates for this roof section had to be hand trimmed to maintain the continuity of the pattern.

Inside the main door there is an entrance porch with the original black, cream and terracotta coloured tiles. Double wooden doors lead into the main body of the church. In keeping with non conformist traditions, the interior is plain, but the overall effect is very light and spacious and beautifully proportioned. Plain white walls lead the eye up to a fine wooden roof supported by enormous beams. A gallery at the rear used to take up about one third of the space, but the eye is immediately drawn to the north, where three beautifully proportioned arches frame the organ and the pulpits and the communion

table – still the focal point of worship to-day. Looking higher above the alcoves one sees the beautiful coloured circular window.

Within a few years of building, alterations were beginning to be made to the interior. For example, in 1894 a pipe organ built by Walkers of London was installed to replace the harmonium which had been used up till then. In 1898 improvements totalling £120 included relocating the organ and re-arranging the choir stalls. In 1905 further improvements included the provision of an under-floor baptistry and the necessary relocation of the pulpit and choir stalls. Over the years, many such alterations were made, but in 1980 the largest project, costing in excess of £50,000 were undertaken. The area under the gallery and the gallery itself were taken out of the body of the church and turned into a lounge and kitchen on the ground floor and a large hall upstairs. This, of course, altered the proportion of the church and reduced the seating capacity from 600 to a more realistic 250 and offered much more useful space for meetings and outreach work such as luncheon clubs and youth work. At the same time the dark pews were removed and replaced by light coloured chairs and the pulpit, lectern and communion table were all replaced by light oak furniture. A three part screen in the same light coloured wood acts as a backdrop and masks the organ. The whole effect is very light, spacious and one hopes that Waterhouse would approve. None of these alterations affected the exterior of the building. It being Grade II listed no alternation would be permitted and indeed none would be desirable.

Dismissed by Peusner as “typical red-brick gothic”, it is in fact a handsome building, substantial but not unduly ornate. When it was first built, the church must have been very impressive – standing on its commanding corner site and towering over the low level buildings around it. Standing as it does at the centre of the village at the junction of three roads, I think the building still has impact today.