



the unitarians

IPSWICH UNITARIAN MEETING HOUSE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



INTRODUCTION

Ipswich is a university town and our Meeting House is very near to the town centre, the waterfront area and the university buildings. We have had connections with the University and would like to explore these further as we believe there is scope for expanding our links with young people who may be looking for a faith home where

they may be respected for having liberal beliefs and can find inspiration. The congregation has a long history with traditions of welcoming new people. Despite the challenges of the Covid shutdowns, our congregation has maintained and rebuilt in numbers. Services are simultaneously run via Zoom and in person with attendance varying between low to high twenties and more on special occasions.

HISTORY OF OUR CONGREGATION

Shortly after the 1662 Act of Uniformity, a dissenting congregation of Presbyterians and Independents worshipped in the Old Monastery House a short walk from the present Unitarian Meeting House.

John Fairfax was appointed as Minister to this congregation in 1680 and continued as Minister to the Presbyterians when they departed company from the Independents in 1686.

Ten years after the act of Toleration 1689, the Presbyterians, who up to now had been worshipping in a rented room, commenced work on building a place of worship. The original contract describes it as '*a good new strong and substantial house for a meeting place*'.

John Fairfax preached at the opening service of this new Meeting House on 26th April 1700. In February 1711 an Indenture was signed transferring the ownership of the Meeting House into the hands of 21 Trustees with the stipulation that it be a '*meeting place for the worship of Almighty God*'.

During the course of the 18th century the congregation and its Ministers gradually moved towards a Unitarian position and with the passing of the Trinity Act in 1813, the congregation became officially known as Unitarian.

Between 1680 and 2022 there have been 30 Ministers, plus two interim Ministers from the USA and in 1992 a five month exchange with an American Minister.

Rev Cliff Reed was Minister here from 1976 until his retirement in October 2012. Rev Jim Corrigall served a two year interim ministry and Rev Lewis Connolly served with us for two years until he resigned to focus on his academic studies. Since then we have invited a variety of Ministers and lay preachers to lead our services each week and the congregation has assumed responsibility for supporting the meeting.



OUR PROFILE

Our Meeting House is Grade 1 listed and of historical importance both locally and nationally. We open to visitors on three days per week throughout the summer months (May to September) which gives us the opportunity to publicise both our building and Unitarianism. We attract over one thousand visitors each summer, especially in September for the Heritage Open Days and the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust Ride and Stride event. We also offer special interest visits for groups with focussed talks and presentations.

We have recently undergone an extensive restoration project with the support of Historic England and other grants, with fundraising by the congregation amounting to over £800,000. This establishes the continued stability of the fabric of the building for the future.

Most of this work happened during the Covid pandemic when life was very restricted because of lockdowns and our services were held via Zoom. During this work we took the opportunity to add a toilet with facilities for access for people with a disability and baby change.

We also now have a Friends of the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House group who are interested in supporting the building because of its historical and architectural importance. This is a new and active group which organises events as fundraisers for the building. The group involves people from local business and historical societies, the Blue Badge Guides and attenders of services, as well as members of the public who may not be part of our congregation.

Our monthly newsletter 'Ipswich Unitarian' (latest copy included as part of this pack) is sent by email to our congregation and friends with some paper copies available in the Meeting House and this gives us a regular contact with the local media, who often follow up on our events.

We have a website – www.unitarianipswich.com which is regularly updated and a Facebook account. We would like to expand our profile through social media.

WORSHIP

We hold a service each Sunday at 10.45. During the Covid pandemic all our services were held online. Since June 2021 we have returned to the Meeting House in person but have continued to hold services concurrently on Zoom. Gradually people are building their confidence to return in person, but we envisage continuing to offer the in-person services online as some participants join us from abroad and this option also gives some of our older members who live further away the option of joining us via Zoom. We try hard to be innovative and inclusive.

Each year we traditionally hold special services at Christmas (and a Candlelit Carol Service), at Easter, for Harvest festival, Membership and our Anniversary celebration. These are often followed by a congregational shared lunch. We expect the Minister to join us for these occasions and to stay after services for coffee and discussion as an opportunity to engage directly and personally with the congregation.

We have an experienced organist who takes responsibility for the music during services and has given recitals for fundraisers.



ADULT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In 2022 we are offering a Build Your Own Belief/Theology course, based on the Unitarian BYOT materials. This encourages discussion and reflection to support our congregation and friends in developing their own clarity about their personal beliefs.

CHILDREN

Recently there have been fewer children as regular attenders, so currently we have no structured activities for children. We do have a 'Children's Box' with toys and entertainment for any children who come to a service. We welcome them all and we enjoy any 'happy noise'. There are members who are interested in offering more support for children when there is a demand and this is an area for development.



MEETING HOUSE ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

The management and administration of the Meeting House relies on a board of Trustees – currently five members who are elected each for a period of three years by the voting members at the AGM. Bylaws govern the operation of the Trustees (copy attached). Trustees may opt to stand for re-election after their term of office expires.

The Trustees have overall responsibility to execute contracts, manage investments, safeguard Meeting House assets and ensure compliance with charity law. The Trustees also manage the maintenance of and income from the Trust properties. They meet approximately every six weeks with email contact in between. Members of the congregation may attend meetings of the Trustees at the Trustees' discretion. A summary of the business discussed is sent to every member after each meeting. Extraordinary General Meetings may be called by seven or more members of the congregation.

PROPERTY HELD IN TRUST

Timber framed Grade 1 listed Meeting House (1699)

The Meeting House is situated a few minutes' walk from the centre of the town and is close to bus and train services. There are regular trains to and from London and Norwich, the journey taking just over an hour.

Our Meeting House lies in a conservation area between the waterfront (old docks) where the University of Suffolk campus is located and the town centre. The adjacent roads of St Peter's Street and St Nicholas Street (in which our retail properties are located) are lined with 17th to 19th century buildings which now house restaurants, cafés, hairdressers, antique shops, nail bars, clothing shops – many of them independently run.

The Meeting House forecourt is leased in part to an adjacent insurance company for parking during the week.

The Meeting House has a newly installed toilet with facilities for baby change and for people with mobility problems.

Following the Restoration Project which was completed in 2021, we have won three major awards – The Ipswich Society, the Suffolk Preservation Society and RIBA have all recognised the success of the work.

Hall

The Grade 2 listed building to one side of the Meeting House is on two levels. The lower level of the Hall is rented to the Garden House Nursery for use in the daytime during the week. We can have access as a congregation in the evenings and weekends. There is a kitchen and two toilets (one with access for people with a disability).

The upper hall has a large meeting room with kitchen facilities and one toilet. Access is via a wooden external staircase which limits its use. We hire this to groups for meetings and activities (e.g. yoga/meditation). During the Covid lockdowns it was not used and is now starting to be opened for use again.



Shops on St Nicholas Street

We own and rent out for regular income two shops, one of which is currently used as an art gallery/framing shop and we in the process of finding a new tenant for the second one.

Upper storey premises on St Nicholas Street (above the art gallery) – this area is also rented to the Garden House Nursery

House

A semi-detached 3 or 4 bedroom Victorian property in a residential area approximately one mile from the Meeting House, close to Christchurch Park. This is currently rented out.

The British and Foreign Unitarian Association are Custodian Trustees of all our properties. We are currently in the process of preparing to apply for independent charitable status.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We have always been a congregation which focuses on supporting good causes on local, national and international levels. When we had to raise funds for the restoration of our Meeting House, that became our priority and we are pleased now to be able once more to broaden our focus.

Each year we vote to support one local charity and this year it is the Lighthouse Women's Aid project which has been chosen. We raise funds, organise talks to raise awareness of domestic abuse, offer our upper hall as a venue for drop-in meetings with the Lighthouse workers and have volunteers to staff the venue and support the workers for their security. We also make and fill care packs with emergency items to be given to women and children in need, many of whom will have fled with no possessions from abusive households.

We also support other charities and needy people during the year – food items for the refuge at harvest time; collections for Christian Aid; sponsoring our toilets for Water Aid as well as donations and practical help such as for Ukraine. We have held Baroque concerts and organ recitals; entertainment evenings; book sales; poetry readings; a Music on the Green concert outside; raffles for a handmade patchwork; a Classics and Cream Tea cello and piano concert and individual sponsorship fundraising, among many ideas.

Our monthly newsletter is sent by email to a broad range of people and organisations and includes articles of local interest as well as our own events.

We have close links with the local press and BBC Radio Suffolk and before the pandemic lockdowns had a regular slot on Sunday mornings to review the news.

It is important to us to broaden our perspective outside our own congregation and to engage with our community.

We are proud of our building and its heritage importance nationally as well as locally, so are keen to invite any interested visitor.

We believe that if we open our building to as wide a variety of people, we may interest some of them in joining us at some point for worship too.

For more information, contact Tessa Forsdike, Secretary of Trustees –
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