



# Heritage Statement

Seen from a distance (the building is a prominent landscape component from many parts of the St Just landscape), the St Just Miners' Chapel externally resembles a huge white box of a building, prominently set on the crest of the hillslope above the Kenidjack Valley, dwarfing the modern houses on Bosorne Road which now occupy what was formerly the open hill crest to its west; it was clearly constructed as a statement building at the western end of the town.

Approach it from Chapel Street however, along a road deliberately aligned on it to form a visual corridor linking it to the heart of old St Just around Bank Square and Market Square, and its architecturally confident neo-Tuscan facade dominates the view; a recognition of its significance in the development of the town and its society is unavoidable.

Open the substantial double doors in its facade, and move from the transverse lobby area with its staircases to the upper floor into the body of the chapel and the quality of the building immediately becomes apparent. Lit by tall arched windows, the area was formerly dominated by box pews (replaced in pitch pine in the 1890s and each with a brass holder for the occupants' family name), the walkways between these are focussed on the pulpit and organ at the western end of the building; above, an oval gallery is carried on pillars, and above this three colourful plaster ceiling roses are visible, the central one having originally ventilated the building via a cowl protruding through the roof. Behind the re-sited communion rail, its ironwork cast at the Holman's Foundry in Tregeseal and the double deck pulpit is a colour glazed screen in the Art Nouveau style visually blocking off the original communion area and its circular window.

Upstairs, the comb-painted box pews which fill the gallery space were installed in the 1860 refurbishment of the building, and form the largest group of such features anywhere in Cornwall. Each has a clear view of the pulpit; graffiti scratched in the book rests of those at the back suggest that they were occupied by members of the congregation whose attentions wandered elsewhere during the sermon and lessons. Despite being substantially revamped three decades after its original construction, the interior of the building feels architecturally coherent, and it is, quite frankly, a rare, delightful and inspiring space to experience.



This is the fifth Methodist meeting place in St Just to have been used in the years since Wesley's early visits to the area during the C18th (CHECK DATE). Originally small-scale meetings took place in the Plen an Gwary and in Chenhall's inn opposite the parish church before a purpose-built meeting house was built in North Row; given the rapidly rising parish population and their fondness for non-conformism, this was soon outgrown and a new chapel was constructed on Cape Cornwall Road, soon to be enlarged and provided with a Sunday School next door. In 1832, with local mines booming and the parish population doubling every decade, a plot of land on Bosorne Common was selected for a chapel fit for local needs. It opened in 1833 and the congregation was apparently well over 1000 for the initial service, some reports suggesting that so fervent was the packed congregation that condensation ran down the walls. Even this large building proved insufficient for local needs, and in 1860 the building was enlarged and a substantial first floor gallery added – the refurbished building regularly housed 800 souls during daytime services and 1000 in those conducted in the evening, a further refurbishment of the building took place in the early 1890s. The old chapel on Cape Cornwall Road became its Sunday School.

The chapel was not the only one in the parish, there having been another slightly smaller one in Trewellard, together with smaller examples at the mining settlements of Nanjulian, Crippas Hill, Truthwall, Botallack, Carnyorth, Boscaswell and Bojewyan Stennack, as well as a Bible Christian Chapel in South Place, St Just, all now converted to housing. In addition Pendeen Church had been built in 1851 following the splitting off of its new parish from St Just in 1846.

The history of Methodism in St Just closely mirrored that of that of the local mines and the resultant changes in the population of the parish. There had been mining here during the C18th and beforehand, but it tended to be small-scale and seasonal, focussed on tin streams and a number of coastal tinworks. The rapidly growing demand for copper during the first decades of the C19th, fuelled by the Industrial Revolution was soon met by St Just's coastal mines, as well in other areas of Cornwall and elsewhere in Britain. The bulk of West Penwith's copper mines occupied coastal sites between Priest Cove and Pendeen Watch, and included operations such as those at Pendeen, Levant, Wheal Cock, Botallack and Priest Cove. From small beginnings, all developed rapidly, employing more and more men, women and children, many employing more than 500 people. The population of the parish of St Just (including Pendeen, created in 1846) rose from less than 1000 at the end of the C18th to reach a combined maximum of nearly 13,000 around 1861-1871. During the early stages of this bonanza in the 1830s and 1840s most of what we now know as St Just was constructed, together with the mining villages to its north.



However British copper mining was reaching its peak by the 1860s, as more and more huge unworked copper deposits were being opened up in places such as Australia, many by Cornishmen. World prices crashed during the 1860s and large numbers of St Just miners and their families started to emigrate. The St Just mines also contained tin deposits, however, and these gave them another three decades of work, before the price of this metal, too, was undermined by foreign competition. By the turn of the century only Levant was still at work; emigration was taking place on an epic scale, much of it to South Africa and Australia. By 1901 the population of the two parishes population was less than half (5646) that recorded four decades earlier.

It might have been expected that with the loss of such a high proportion of the mining population, St Just would have returned to the quiet backwater it had been less than a century before, and a building like the Miners' Chapel would have struggled to find a congregation. However, over the preceding century St Just had acquired a sense of its identity, becoming the commercial heart of the parish, whilst emigrant miners' remittances (a proportion of their wages sent back to their families) helped bolster the otherwise rather shaky local economy. Additionally, it should be remembered that in the days before the NHS, the Welfare State and National Schools, the Methodist Church – a fairly left-leaning organisation – provided education and promoted an ethos of self-help to those who could take advantage of this approach, and assistance to those in need from cradle to grave. Unsurprisingly, it remained the heart of the community in these hard times – especially in these hardest of times for the parish of St Just.

The following decades saw new attempts at reviving the fortunes of the local mining industry, all but Geevor being doomed to failure, but the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 spelt a new low point in local fortunes. Many St Just and Pendeen men enlisted and a number did not come home. By the end of the war the population of the two parishes was around 4000.

Like the settlements in some other mining districts in Cornwall, St Just stagnated for decades. Geevor provided welcome employment until the late 1980s, but even as late as 1981 the parish population was still less than 5000. The chapel's congregation had declined since the 1960s and by the turn of the century it had become almost non-existent, except for special services or for burials. Most of the smaller local chapels had been closed through lack of community demand, and it was clearly only a matter of time before the Miners' Chapel would follow them. Meanwhile, however, St Just was on the cusp of change. New faces could be seen on the streets, new families were settling into the old miners' cottages; after the reopening of Geevor as a heritage site in 1992, the designation of the area as part of the Cornish Mining World Heritage Site in 2006 and the filming of a remake of Winston Graham's Poldark at local sites, the tourist coaches which used to travel through the town en route from St Ives to Lands End began to stop in St Just. Former shops reopened as cafes and food outlets, pubs thrived. St Just was buzzing.



And then the Methodist Church announced the closure of the Chapel and its potential sale. It might be thought that the dilution of the long-established local community by incomers would have significantly reduced any interest in taking on the chapel as a community resource, but this was not the case. New connections had been made to the town together with a pride in its former achievements and its long-established quiriness. The public subscription needed to secure the purchase of the building was achieved, mirroring the process used to construct it in 1833. The alternative – almost inevitably the conversion of the building to domestic use and the removal of all internal fixtures and fittings, as well as its removal from the public sphere – had been unthinkable. That would have ripped the heart out of the town.

To summarise then, as well as its nationally-recognised architectural qualities, demonstrated through its high grade Listing, its long and intimate association with the history of the development of the town of St Just, its strong association with the local community though thick and thin, the Chapel is now on the verge of taking on a new role, in many ways one which can be seen as an evolution of the ways in which it had always been used – as the heart of the town, a place in which to gather, in which to learn, and in which to celebrate not only the past but also the future of the community and distinctive spirit of St Just.

## More Information:

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