



Bluntisham Baptist Church

Established: 1786

Heritage Walking Tour

Welcome to Bluntisham Baptist Church! This leaflet will take you on a self-guided tour around the church, hall and grounds of this incredible site. You will discover a little of our over 230 years of history including some beautiful craftsmanship and surprising facts.
(map provided on back page)

1. Start by walking to the grave of Coxe Feary, first minister of the church.

As a child Coxe Feary was raised in the local Church of England parish church. However, as a teenager he became dissatisfied with the conduct of the worshippers. He initially read James Hervey's 'Theron and Aspasio', which challenged Feary's religious understanding and he was deeply offended by its arguments. He put the book down without finishing it but two years later decided to read it and give it a fair hearing. The result was his conversion, and he was seized with a passion for the salvation of the lost in his village. By 1784 Feary was travelling to listen to the preaching of Henry Venn in Yelling, twelve miles away.



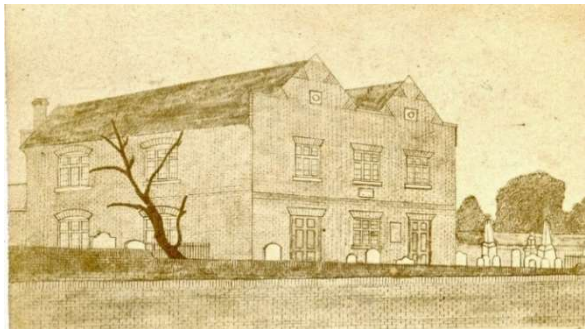
During 1784, Coxe Feary came across a book of sermons by George Whitefield. He was so inspired that he began reading them aloud to shepherds and farm labourers. It made such an impact that the following evening other villagers asked Feary to read another sermon. Flustered by the group, and afraid of being considered 'a Methodist preacher', Feary refused. But the congregation would not take no for an answer and Feary relented. A poor woman was so deeply moved by Whitefield's words that she urged Feary to read yet a third time at her house the following evening. Feary agreed



on the condition that she would tell no one, however when he arrived at the house it was packed with her neighbours. Feary continued reading sermons in the woman's home until the spring of 1785 when the congregation moved to a larger home to accommodate the numbers attending. Eventually, Feary ran out of sermons and began to prepare his own sermons. A barn had been fitted out for the congregation by John Kent and, on 28 December 1786, Coxe Feary and twenty five other believers joined together to form a Congregationalist church.

In 1791 Coxe Feary adopted Baptist views, leading to himself and some of his congregation becoming baptised in River Great Ouse. The church has remained part of the Baptist denomination ever since. During this period, a number of the congregation came from a great distance away therefore a number of 'satellite' churches were established in the villages nearby. In 1822, Coxe Feary sadly died, having developed the church to a membership of over 800.

2. Walk towards the main church building.



On 10th April 1787 the building of the first church began and by 27th October the work was completed. The building originally was 40 ft by 31ft but a further 14 feet was added in 1797. In 1805 a vestry was added to the rear of the building and in 1817 a gallery was added for the school children.

Many Baptist churches of the time had a much simpler, more puritan design than C of E churches. As the construction had to be funded by the congregation, in many cases, such as Bluntisham, it is likely that only a simpler building could be afforded.

In 1874, the church raised £1000 to rebuild the church and purchase a house for the minister. The original intension was to alter and improve the old chapel (pictured below) including a new roof. However, when the old roof was removed, the walls were in such a poor state that they also had to be pulled down and rebuilt. The plan was to do this without disturbing the interior to save costs.

In the Spring of 1874, a passer-by would have seen the strange sight of the galleries, pews and entire interior of the church standing in the open air with no walls or roof! On pulling down the walls it was then discovered that the foundations of the old chapel were also unsafe therefore these were also replaced. This meant that the old pews, and the large pillar in the centre of the building were also removed. In total the repairs and alterations plus the new manse cost over £2300. This was a vast sum for an agricultural community when average wages were less than £50 pa.



By 8th June 1875 the new building was complete, incorporating many of the original materials. When rebuilding, it was of vital importance that the new building looked very similar to the previous building, in order to retain some of the character of its predecessor.

3. Go into the church entrance and turn left.

Displayed are portraits of the first ministers of the church. Of particular note is Rev Goadby, significantly younger than his predecessors he oversaw the building work that took place in 1875 with much success. He was also a well-known Baptist hymnist, writing a song specifically for the reopening of the church entitled 'Our Fathers' Friend and God'.



Nearby is an ornate flower stand with poppy detail. During WW1, a national appeal was given for villages to take in Belgian



refugees. Bluntisham village responded by 'adopting' two families. The Pittoor family was accommodated by the church, taking up residence in the church hall. Mr Pittoor was an ornamental ironworker, who was provided with a small forge and supply of Swedish iron which he crafted and sold in order to keep his family. In 1916 the Pittoors were obliged to leave the village and undertake munitions work. After the war the Pittoors returned to the village several times. On one visit, during the unveiling of the war memorial, Mr. Pittoors presented the church with the flower stand as a sign of thanks and respect to those who had died in the war.

4. Enter the door into the church building, turn right and look at the pictures at the back of the room.

Here you can see portraits of more recent ministers of the church. Of particular note here is Rev. Willings, who was enthralled by the history of this church and wrote books and newspaper articles to detail its formation and development. Rev. Willings had also served and was injured during WW1, meaning he was greatly respected in the village. In a situation which was completely unheard of at the time, Rev Willings was given special permission by the Bishop of Ely to preach at the United Armistice Day at the local C of E church. This is believed to be the first occasion locally, if not nationally, that a non-conformist minister was permitted to preach in a C of E church.

Later, when Rev. Blake began his ministry at the church, he found it difficult to get to know his congregation, as it was the time of year when many were employed locally as fruit pickers. In order to meet his congregation and minister to them, Rev Blake decided to also take a summer job as a fruit picker, working in the fields alongside the villagers.

5. Walk down the left aisle to the front of the church.

This is a good opportunity to see how the church has changed over the years. Gone are the oil lamps you can see in the photograph, in favour of electricity. Although the pews still remain, the pew rents which were charged to families to attend church have long gone. Baptisms now no longer take place in the river, but in a baptistry concealed under the carpet at the front of the church.

At the front of the church are a number of memorials, commemorating significant church ministers and leaders. There are also memorials to those who died in the first and second world wars. In a small village where everyone knew each other well, it shows the significance and esteem to which these people were held that their memorials were placed at the front of the church.



6. Go through the door below the stained-glass window and straight through the next door into the vestry.

This is the vestry where the church youth groups currently meet. But why do we have stairs to nowhere? These stairs date from the very first church building and were originally located on the outside of the church. They were used by the minister to reach the pulpit which hung from the other side of the wall in the main church. However, the pulpit was removed during the renovations, leaving the staircase.

In 1982, both the church and church hall became grade 2 listed. The building was included for historic interest as 'the traditional centre of local non-conformity.' This staircase, as well as the hand carved furniture in the church were the main features that were highlighted in the report.

7. Walk back through to the church and take a look at the carved furniture. Then continue through the door into the vestibule. Just after the door, turn left and up through the door to ascend into the gallery. Please take care to mind your head and footing as the stairs are quite steep.

The gallery provides a close-up view of the ornate woodwork that cannot easily be seen from the ground floor. In 1875, John Wheatley was one of the key craftsmen doing the renovations. He was a local carpenter, inventor and astronomer; and had already had a long history of involvement with the church, being most well known locally as the Sunday School Superintendent. He was asked by the deacons to craft



most of the woodwork in the church including pews but was instructed to keep them in a simple manner, in fitting with the rest of the church. Wheatley responded by completing the carvings you see today, with ornate vines trailing along the gallery and intricate agricultural decorations along the roof line. Wheatley clearly decided to have the last say, tucked into the corners at the back of the church are two carvings, one with his name and

the date but also the Latin 'deo optimo maximo' which translates: "to God, the greatest and best".

Another addition in 1875 was the pipe organ. This elaborate organ was made in London by well-known organ builder G.M.Holdich. Holdich had previously built an organ for the Great Exhibition in 1851 as well as Litchfield Cathedral in 1861. Transporting such a large piece of equipment must have been difficult, especially as the local train station had not yet opened in 1875. A scholar of Holdich's work recently surmised that the organ was likely to have been brought to Bluntisham on a boat via the River Great Ouse.



On a sunny day, the light shines beautifully through the stained-glass windows at the front of the church. The first shows Jesus as a man, blessing little children, the second shows Jesus as a child listening in the temple. The windows were paid for by the local Tebbutt family in 1875 and show the importance the church has always placed on the children of the congregation and village.

8. Walk out of the church, into the grounds between the church and church hall.

Here we can see some of the early gravestones and grounds and across to the manse on the right. Our burial ground contains gravestones from the earliest years to today (including a gravestone to Mary Christmas!) Several years ago, one of the trees in the manse garden collapsed, workmen soon realised it was due to the presence of a crypt being located under the tree. It was discovered to be the crypt of Rev. Simmons, a previous minister leading from the graveyard towards the manse.

The grounds are currently maintained by a dedicated team of volunteers and not the goats who originally cut the grass up until the beginning of the 20th Century!

In 1987, the church celebrated the 200th anniversary of the church building by holding several events. At one event, dressed up in period clothing, the congregation

processed through the village with the Minister leading on a Shetland pony and trap. A service was also held where they re-read the original sermon given by Coxe Feary 200 years earlier. However, the sermon was much longer than expected and there were a number of burnt dinners that day!



9. Walk into the entranceway of the church hall.

Take a look at the plaques on the wall to your right. spaces. Although the plaque on the wall here says 1887, the church hall was actually built in 1842 as a school room.



The second plaque refers to the renewal project which took place in 2010. At this time, the church hall was extended and renovated to create up-to-date facilities including a new kitchen, toilets and meeting rooms. Here we can see where the old and new buildings have blended together to provide an essential modern space.

10. Turn right and walk straight into John Wheatley Hall.

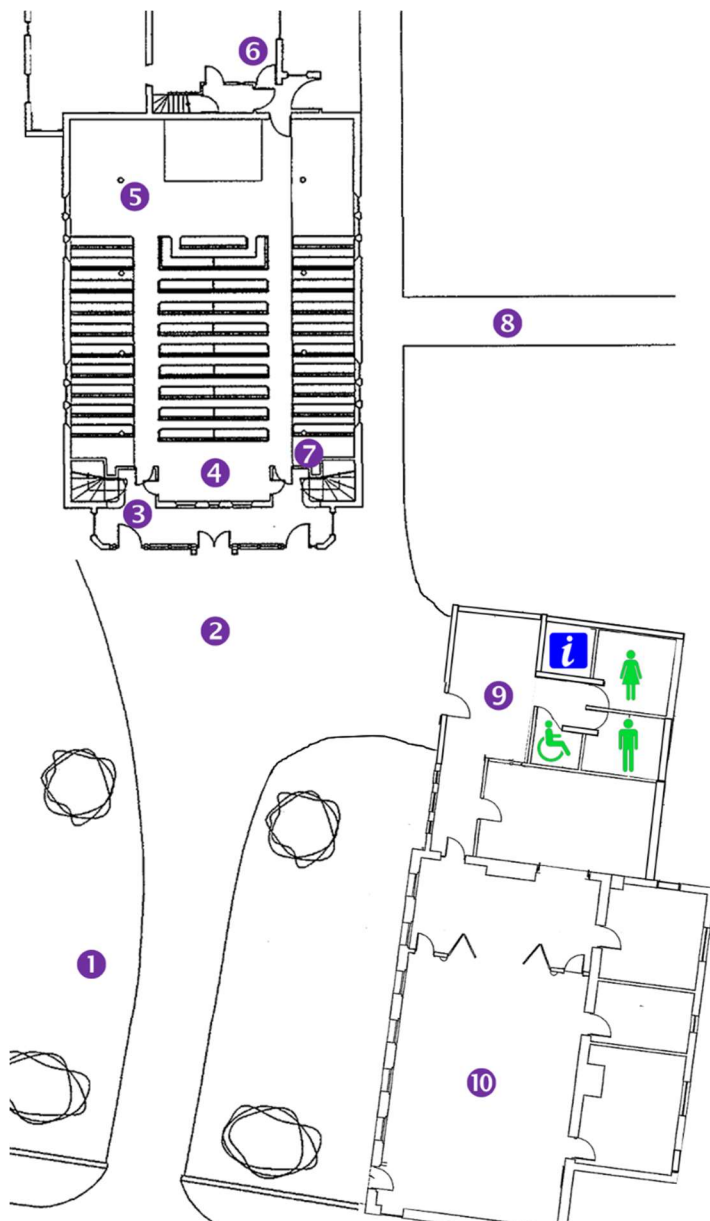
During WW1 this building was where the Pittors family lived and worked. Later, in WW2 the room was used as a school to teach children who had been evacuated from North London into the village.

The hall is dedicated to John Wheatley, with a memorial plaque in honour of him above the fireplace. This room again shows his intricate art work, love of detail and exacting standards. As well as the decorative screen, of particular interest are the 'busts' around the ceiling which show some of the deacons and church ministers. Look at the series near the fire door, can you find the bust that represents Wheatley?



The hall is now used throughout the week for both church activities such as Beacon Café and community groups such as keep fit and Brownies.

Having paid off the debts from the renewal project, the church is in a period of looking forward; thinking about how the buildings need to be adapted and improved to be continue to be used in the future by the church and local community.



We hope you have enjoyed this tour around our interesting church. We would love to see you at one of our services or weekly activities. Please get in contact for further information:

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