



## TOLPUDDLE OLD CHAPEL TRUST

Company Number 8908950 Registered Charity Number 1159578



@TolpuddleOCT



info@tolpuddleoldchapeltrust.org



www.tolpuddleoldchapeltrust.org

### *Tolpuddle Old Chapel – Narrative.*

The Chapel is a heritage asset of national and international importance. It was built in 1818, offering a dedicated place of worship in place of a cottage in the village which had been used for at least eight years previously.

It is a rare example of a purpose-built rural ‘independent’ Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, simple in design and reflecting the agricultural skills of those who built it.<sup>1</sup>

The little chapel was used for ‘non-Conformist’<sup>2</sup> worship from 1818 until 1834. It was a place where the worshippers studied the Bible, listened to sermons, sang hymns and prayed. Under the guidance of the lay preacher, George Loveless, they also grew in their understanding of the social injustice of their harsh living and working conditions.

The Chapel’s key significance lies in the fact that in 1833 George Loveless and others of the group met with delegates from the Grand Consolidated Trades Union from London, and perfectly legally, decided to set up an agricultural trade union – The Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers. This initiative deeply disturbed the local

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<sup>1</sup> As an ‘independent’ Wesleyan Chapel, it was not under the tight control exerted by the Wesleyan Conference (because, as far as we know, no money came from the Conference for its building).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Non-Conformist – also called Dissenter or Free Churchman: any English Protestant who does not conform to the doctrines or practices of the established Church of England.

landowners and other authorities, who launched a prosecution against them on the dubious grounds of their swearing an illegal oath as part of members' initiations. In 1834 six of the labourers were arrested, tried in Shire Hall Courthouse in Dorchester, and then transported to Australia and Tasmania. The enormous public outcry at this injustice resulted in a pardon being granted in 1837, after which they returned to England. Subsequently, in 1844, five of the six labourers emigrated to London Ontario in Canada to start a new life. These men were called 'theb To olupuddle Labourers' at the time, and are now popularly known as the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs.'<sup>3</sup>

After the loss of the leaders of its congregation, it is thought that the building continued to be used as a chapel. It is listed on the 1843 Tithe Map as belonging to 'The Wesleyan Soc'. It ceased to be used as a chapel sometime between 1843 and 1851. Dorchester Methodist Circuit records show that there was still 'a Methodist class' of at least 13 members in Tolpuddle in 1850, contributing cash, although not necessarily meeting in the former chapel. By June 1862 a new Methodist chapel was open in Tolpuddle, and ownership of Tolpuddle Old Chapel reverted back to the ground landlord, 'the Squire.'<sup>4</sup>

The building then became a useful agricultural roofed space providing a single-storey animal house with and enclosed yard to the east. Later it was adapted to become a two-storey building with a hay loft, a cobbled floor and a new wider door to the east. It was subsequently used for storage.<sup>5</sup> The Chapel was listed by English Heritage in 1989 as a Grade II\* building. Its condition gradually

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<sup>3</sup> For further details, see Philip W. Martin, 'Tolpuddle Martyrs or Dorchester Labourers', <https://tolpuddleoldchapeltrust.org>

<sup>4</sup> Extract from A Conservation Statement for the Former Chapel, Tolpuddle for the Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust – Keystone K/865 Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants March 2015. - 2.8

<sup>5</sup> All details here are from Extract from A Conservation Statement for the Former Chapel, Tolpuddle for the Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust – Keystone K/865 Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants March 2015.- 2.9.

deteriorated and it was put on Historic England's 'At Risk Register' in 2008.<sup>6</sup>

Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust purchased the Old Chapel in 2015. Renovation of the building was completed in November 2022.

*TOCT is a registered charity, Number 1159578.  
It is a non-political & secular building preservation trust.*

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<sup>6</sup> Listing by English Heritage, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1989 as Grade II\*. Historic England Listing No 1119849.