

Chapels in Leicester

Start location: Outside Sant Nirankari Bhawan, 2a Prebend Street, Leicester, LE2 0LA

Time taken: 40 minutes (approximately, steady pace); **Distance:** 1.3 miles 2.1 km **Linear**

Description:

Leicester has many interesting chapel buildings – a legacy from the time when different denominations of the Christian faiths gained a large following here. Some are actively used as places of worship today, while others have been repurposed. This walk of just over one mile passes statues of prominent figures and buildings linked with the history of these faith groups in Leicester.



- Main route
- Alternative route
- 1 Stage / waypoint
- A Point of interest

*Time is calculated at a steady pace of 2mph

This route was developed by staff and volunteers for Leicester City Council:

www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks



Walk starts: Outside Sant Nirankari Bhawan, 2a Prebend Street, Leicester, LE2 0LA

This former 'Friends Meeting House' is a short walk from Leicester railway station. To help plan your journey visit: www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk

Safety tips:

Remember to keep a 2m social distance from others.

Watch out for cyclists, including London Road cycle lane, New Walk and when crossing cycle lanes on city streets. Take care when crossing roads and use pedestrian crossings when available.

Background:

This walk passes statues of prominent figures and buildings associated with some of the non-conformist Christian faith groups. These were Christians who refused to "conform" to the Church of England and so set up their own churches, and were also referred to as "dissenters". Many of these groups have their origins in the new ideas that developed during and after the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Europe. In 19th century industrial Leicester with its rapidly growing population, the non-conformists grew to attract a significant following. Their values underpinned their actions in every-day life (such as charitable acts for the community, civic duties, treatment of employees) and some key individuals campaigned for social reform.

There are differences between the non-conformist denominations in their theology and their governance. To go into this is beyond our scope, but information can be found online if you wish to discover more.

Route directions:

Note: The points of interest along this route are mentioned very briefly below but for more detail please see the information section at the end.

1. Start on Prebend Street by the building bearing the inscription 'Friends Meeting House' above the archway.

(A) Former 'Friends Meeting House', Prebend Street

Quakers are officially called the Religious Society of Friends. This former Quaker building was designed by architect Edward Burgess (from a Quaker family) and built in 1876 and was a Quaker meeting house until the 1950s. It is now a place of worship for the Sant Nirankari Mission.

Leave Prebend Street and turn right on London Road. Cross at the pedestrian crossings and turn left on the far side (watch for cyclists on London Road, there is a cycle lane along the footway, keep clear).

2. Soon turn right into De Montfort Street and continue to the corner with pedestrianised New Walk. On the opposite side of De Montfort Street is St Stephen's Church.

(B) St Stephen's United Reformed Church

In the early 1890s this church was moved here stone by stone from its original site in London Road. It is a United Reformed Church now but was previously Scottish Presbyterian and Congregationalist.

Continue along De Montfort Street to the statue of Robert Hall.

(C) Robert Hall, Baptist minister

Robert Hall was a high profile Baptist minister who led the congregation at the Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester for 18 years. He was a renowned preacher and he defended the rights of framework knitters. The Baptist Church drew many followers in Leicester during the 19th century. There were chapels on Harvey Lane, Belvoir Street, Dover Street and Charles Street.

Now take the footpath behind the statue to cross the green space of De Montfort Square to join New Walk.

3. Bear left along pedestrianised New Walk and pass (D). (Watch out for occasional cyclists who use this route, even though cycling is prohibited here).

(D) New Walk Museum

The building was designed by Joseph Hansom and built in 1836 originally as a school for the children of the growing non-conformist denominations.

Continue about 100 yards further along New Walk until you reach the church on your right.

(E) Holy Cross Priory Church

While not a non-conformist chapel, this Roman Catholic Church was built at a similar time and has an interesting history. This church was founded by the Dominicans and opened in 1819. The red brick buildings date from the 19th century while the larger building in lighter brick was built in the 20th century.

Continue along New Walk to the junction with King Street.

4. Turn left a short distance to the junction with Marlborough Street. Pause for (F).

(F) Formerly a factory, at corner of King Street / Marlborough Street

This former textile mill dates from 1845, designed by Leicester architect William Flint for Richard Harris & Sons. Richard Harris was an industrialist and convert to Baptism. He also served as an MP and Mayor of Leicester. As an employer he implemented practices to support the welfare of his workers.

Now retrace your steps back down King Street and bear left onto the continuation of New Walk which passes between the Mattioli Woods building and the red brick corner house/shop.

5. Turn left along Welford Place a few paces to where you can see (G) on the traffic island.

(G) John Biggs - hosier, reformer and Unitarian

John Biggs (1801-1871) was a hosiery merchant, political reformer, MP and three times Mayor of Leicester. He was a Unitarian and attended the Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel on East Bond Street (not on our route, but worth a visit).

Then turn right along Welford Place, which becomes Belvoir Street. Pause at (H) where there is an information panel.

(H) Belvoir Street Chapel

Built in 1845 and designed by architect Joseph Hansom it came to be known as the “Pork Pie Chapel”. Built to accommodate growing numbers of Baptists, it could seat up to 1,500.

Turn right along Albion Street. Cross over Chatham Street and continue to the next junction on your left, York Street. Pause to look at (I) on the corner.

(I) York Street Chapel

An example of the Gospel Hall movement which started in the 1800s, established in Leicester in 1889 and purchased this building in 1911.

Now continue on Albion Street to the next junction.

6. Turn left on Dover Street and pause half way along it, opposite (J).

(J) The Little Theatre. Formerly Dover Street Baptist Church, then the Rechabite Chapel

A Baptist Chapel from 1823, then used by the Independent Order of Rechabites from 1922. Leicester Drama Society rented part of the building in 1929 and later went on to purchase it as their theatre.

Continue to the end of Dover Street.

7. Cross over Granby Street with care, watching for both motorists and cyclists (caution: pop up cycle lanes in place here). Turn right on the far side then turn left into Northampton Street and continue to the end. Turn left on Charles Street and continue to (K).

(K) Central Baptist Church, Charles Street

Built in 1830 by architect William Flint. Eventually all the Baptist churches in central Leicester merged into this one.

Continue on Charles Street to the next junction and cross ahead at the pedestrian traffic lights.

8. Turn left on Rutland Street and continue to Granby Street. Cross over with care and turn right. Take the next left into Bishop Street. Finish at (L).

(L) Bishop Street Methodist Church.

This area was once Leicester’s cattle market and the land cheap. The Methodist church was built here in 1815, designed by architect Rev. William Jenkins, himself a Methodist minister.

The route finishes here on Bishop Street.

Places of interest passed on route – detailed information

(A) Friends Meeting House, Prebend Street

A former Quaker building. Officially the Religious Society of Friends, their members are referred to as Friends or Quakers. This building was designed by architect Edward Burgess (from a Quaker family) and built in 1876. It served as the Friends Meeting House until the 1950s and still bears the date and inscription, although it is now a place of worship for the Sant Nirankari Mission. The Quakers built an earlier meeting house on Soar Lane in 1680 on land they acquired for a burial ground. In 1876 the site was sold to a railway company for development (for the Great Central Railway, completed 1899) and

the Quakers moved to Prebend Street. Their current meeting house in Clarendon Park was built in 1955.

The Quaker movement was founded in England in the 1640s by George Fox. He visited Leicester in 1684, where there was already a following. The Quakers' beliefs included equality, equal rights for women and anti-slavery.

Amongst the 19th century Quakers were the prominent Leicester businessman John Ellis and his family. Ellis is remembered for bringing the first railways to Leicester in 1832, was later an MP and supported the abolition of slavery. The Ellis family were committed to their Quaker beliefs and were concerned with social welfare, supporting hospitals, schools, charities and the anti-alcohol 'temperance' movement. Nationally, the well-known chocolate companies Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree were established by Quakers.

(B) Robert Hall, Baptist minister

Robert Hall (1764 – 1831) was high profile Baptist minister. Born in Arnesby, Leicestershire, he was a good scholar and attended the University of Aberdeen. He led the congregation at the Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester for 18 years (which once stood where St Nicholas Circle is now). Robert Hall was a renowned preacher attracting large crowds. He defended the rights of the Leicestershire framework knitters and was popular across the Christian faith groups.

The Baptist Church first established around 1609-12 in England. They drew many followers in Leicester during the 19th century and included businessmen (like Thomas Cook), successful industrialists and local dignitaries. There were chapels on Harvey Lane, Belvoir Street, Dover Street and Charles Street. In 1901, a large new Baptist chapel was built on Narborough Road and named in recognition of Robert Hall.

(C) St Stephen's United Reformed Church

In the early 1890s this church was moved here stone by stone from its original site in London Road, to make way for the rebuilding of the railway station and adjacent buildings. It is a United Reformed Church now but was previously Scottish Presbyterian and Congregationalist. Congregationalists believe the church should be free of the state and of centralist control. Congregationalism began around 1590. Presbyterianism traces its origins to the Church of Scotland. In England there are still Congregational chapels but many linked together as the United Reformed Church in 1972 along with some Presbyterian churches.

(D) New Walk Museum

Known as a long-standing museum, the building was designed by Joseph Hansom and built in 1836 originally as a proprietary school for the children of the growing non-conformist denominations

(E) Holy Cross Priory Church

While not a non-conformist chapel, this Roman Catholic Church was built at a similar time and has an interesting history. In the 19th century a dedicated place of worship was required for a growing Catholic community in Leicester so Richard Raby, a local wool manufacturer and prominent Catholic, gave land to build a Catholic chapel here. The new church was founded by the Dominicans - a religious order of the Catholic Church - and The Holy Cross church opened in 1819. It was the first public building on New Walk. As you look at the church, the older red brick buildings date from the 19th century while the larger building in lighter brick was built 1928-1931 to house a larger congregation.

The Dominican friars had first established in medieval Leicester around 1247 and were given the church of St Clement beside the river Soar, in what is today known as the 'Blackfriars' area of the city. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII, the friary was disbanded in 1538 and the Dominican friars fled to Flanders. The church of St Clement has long since gone.

(F) Formerly a factory, corner of King Street / Marlborough Street

This former textile mill dates from 1845 and was constructed in a fashionable classical style for Richard Harris & Sons. The building was designed by Leicester architect William Flint who also designed the Corn Exchange. Richard Harris (1777 – 1854) was an industrialist who learnt a lot from minister Robert Hall, whose statue we looked at earlier. Harris was a convert to Baptism and was Mayor of Leicester in 1843. He was elected as an MP for the Radical party in 1848 (only the second non-conformist MP in the country at that time). At its height, Harris & Sons employed 4,000 people making 200 textile lines. Harris instituted an innovative form of health insurance for employees whereby they paid a small sum, which Harris topped up from profits and which was distributed to employees if they were sick. He also retained older employees (who struggled to adapt to new technology) to work on the old-style framework knitting machines, even when it was no longer profitable to operate them. Other employers would likely have cast them off. The company went into liquidation in 1886.

(G) John Biggs - hosier, reformer, Unitarian

John Biggs (1801-1871) was a hosiery merchant and political reformer. John and his three brothers built up their father hosiery business into the successful company John Biggs & Sons, with a factory on Belvoir Street. Biggs was seen as a model employer and he used his commercial powers to further the local hosiery trade in Leicester. Biggs exposed the malpractices in the industry, welcomed a bill to abolish frame-rent and demanded greater regulation of children's employment. He was a Liberal MP and Mayor in 1840, 1847 and 1858. Biggs experienced financial failure and died poor in 1871. He is buried in Welford Cemetery. His friends launched a public subscription which gained huge support and paid for a marble statue. The original was damaged and later recast in bronze, the version you see here.

The Biggs family were Unitarians and attended the Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel on East Bond Street, which is not on today's route but is well worth a visit. The Unitarians were prominent in Leicester, particularly in the early to mid-19th century. The Unitarians believe in the single unit of God, rather than the holy trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), hence the term Unitarian. Unitarianism originated in Poland and Transylvania in the 1560s. Unitarian ideas were discussed in England around the mid/late 1600s and the first Unitarian congregation was at Essex Street Chapel in London in the 1770s.

(H) Belvoir Street Chapel.

Built in 1845 and designed by architect Joseph Hansom. It came to be known as the "Pork Pie Chapel" due to its shape. The Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel had become over-subscribed and the new building on Belvoir Street could accommodate up to 1,500 people. It cost £6,000 to build, funded by donations. The Baptist congregation was active in local community activities to support the poor and also supported overseas projects and foreign missionary work. In the 1940s the congregation joined the Baptists at Charles Street and this chapel was sold. Today it is part of Leicester Adult Education College.

(I) York Street Chapel

This is an example of the Gospel Hall movement which began in the 1800s. Gospel Hall assemblies are independent of each other or any central body and may be known by other names such as Plymouth

Bretheren, Open Bretheren. The Gospel Hall movement became established in Leicester in 1889 and purchased this building in 1911. They also purchased a horse-drawn 'gospel car' in 1914 in which to spread the word in the villages. In the 1930s they established Gospel Halls in Braunstone and Syston. During World War II, the York Street chapel provided Sunday refreshments to service personnel and later to German prisoners of war, holding some gospel meetings in German.

(J) The Little Theatre, formerly Dover Street Baptist Church, then the Rechabite Chapel

This building was a Baptist Chapel from 1823 until 1919. In 1922 it was sold to another non-conformist denomination, The Independent Order of Rechabites, which established in England in 1835. The Rechabites require members to pledge to abstain from alcohol. In 1929 the Leicester Drama Society rented the upper part of the Rechabite Hall and later went on to purchase the building in the 1930s. Due to a fire, parts of the building were rebuilt in 1955 and little survives of the original chapel. A few gravestones remain in the yard at the back of the theatre.

(K) Central Baptist Church, Charles Street

Eventually all the Baptist churches in central Leicester merged into this one. This fine building in the classical style was built in 1830 by architect William Flint. It seated around 700 and the congregation included influential people, amongst them MP Richard Harris. There was a big fire here in 1921. The firemen chose to focus their efforts on saving the church, while sacrificing adjacent industrial buildings.

This chapel has a museum to William Carey (1761 – 1836), minister of the Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel. Carey founded the Baptist Missionary Society, became a pioneer Christian missionary to India and translated the Bible into six Indian languages. He was a social reformer, teacher and founded Serempore University in India.

(L) Bishop Street Methodist Church.

The Methodist movement originated in the 18th century as a revival movement within the Church of England. It was started by John Wesley and became a separate denomination after his death in 1791. Wesley visited Leicester 12 times. The first Methodist meeting place was founded in 1758 on Millstone Lane in a barn, later replaced by a chapel. It closed in 1865, superseded by the Bishop Street Church.

Before the Town Hall was built, this area was once Leicester's cattle market and land could be purchased cheaply. The Methodists built their chapel here in 1815 designed in the Georgian Neo-Classical style by architect Rev. William Jenkins, himself a Methodist minister who designed chapels across the country. One prominent member of the congregation was the architect Arthur Wakerley, Leicester's Mayor in 1897. He was a Wesleyan lay preacher and advocate of the anti-alcohol 'Temperance' movement. There is a small museum at the back of the church and a café at the front (usually open 10.00am - 3.00pm, but currently closed during Covid-19 pandemic).

Acknowledgements: Developed by Jim McCallum.

References:

The information provided here was sourced mainly from online content. The reference list is in a multiple-page separate document, to save unnecessary printing.

[Click here to access the reference list.](#)