

Walpole Old Chapel

Suffolk was a strong supporter of Cromwell, but the Suffolk puritans called themselves Independents because they rejected any external control and would not belong to any organised church. After the Restoration, dissenters were forced to worship in private houses until the Protestant William III succeeded James II.

Sitting close to the road surrounded by long grass waving in the sunshine, Walpole Old Chapel is a delight – our visit enhanced by local resident Phil Stevens.

The congregation at Walpole leased the building, a late 16th-century timber-framed and plastered house, in 1689 from the Corporation of Southwold. They extended it to the rear and rebuilt the roof with a central valley to accommodate a large congregation – demonstrating just how populous was this rural landscape in the 18th and 19th centuries. The ground level is of Georgian box pews whilst galleries are formed mostly of re-used pine panelling from the original house arranged in tiers up to the ceiling, much of it, we discovered, bearing graffiti carved by children bored by the long sermons. With the drift of population to the large towns the congregation dwindled but showed a stubborn determination to survive. The chapel was finally closed in 1970 and came into the care of the Historic Chapels Trust in 1995 who maintain it admirably.

Jeremy Bate