

Congregational Chapel

Coombe Street, Lyme Regis

The Search for a Graveyard

Graham Davies, July 2021



The Dinosaurland Fossil Museum in Coombe Street, Lyme Regis, occupies a grade I listed building, a former Congregational (more recently, United Reform) Chapel which closed its doors to religious services in 1985.

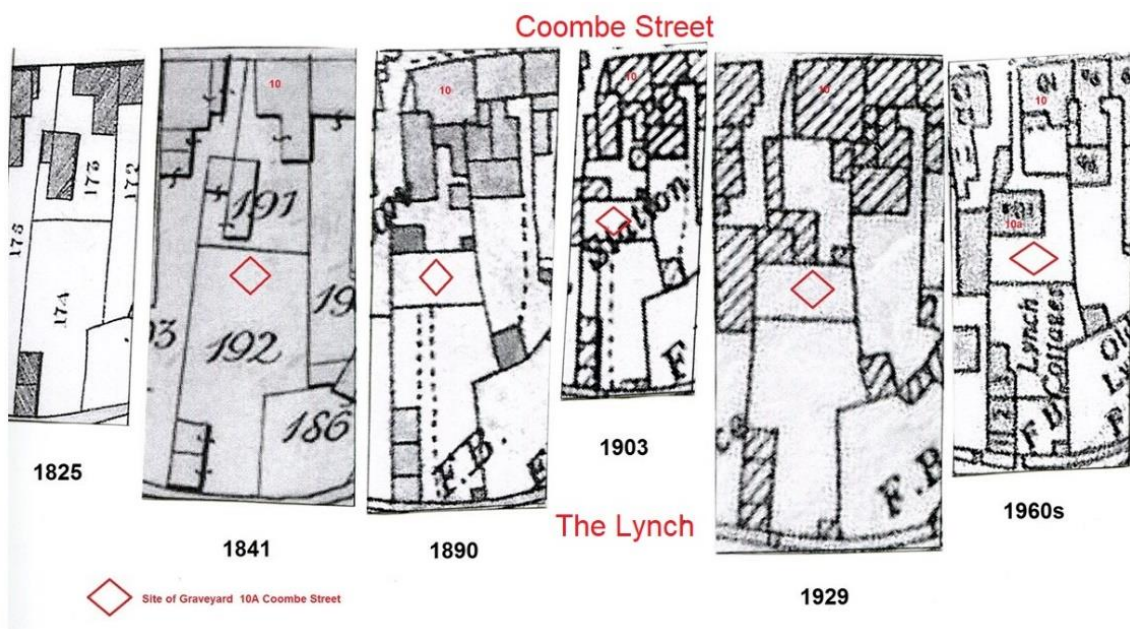
The Congregational (Independent) Church was formed in Lyme in 1662 following the ejection of the vicar, the Rev A Short, for non-compliance with the Act of Uniformity. He subsequently held services in his own house in Church Street and elsewhere, but was constantly hounded by the authorities. He died in 1697. In 1734 the Rev J Whitty became the new minister and under his guidance a chapel was built in Coombe Street in 1755.

Dinosaurland, June 2013

In 2012, research team members, Diane Shaw, Derek Perrey and Graham Davies reviewed the Museum's Congregational Chapel archives. They found a reference to a 'curious little graveyard' on the Lynch, belonging to the Congregational Chapel.

In 1841, on behalf of the Chapel, a piece of ground, with two cottages on it (ref 192, 1841 tithe map), situated on the Lynch, was purchased by Mr Theophilus B Goddard from Mr Fowler, of the Hart Inn, at a price of £250. Extensive alterations were made to the cottages, and the part to be used as the burial ground was walled off from the rest. Mr Goddard hoped the Church would repay him his £250 through rents, burial fees and subscriptions. Through lack of subscriptions, Mr Goddard was set free by the Church in 1873 to dispose of the cottages as he saw fit, leaving them the graveyard.

The graveyard was not identified on any contemporary map. Comparative study of maps led the author to believe that the graveyard was on the site of today's No.10A Coombe Street's garden, access to it in the past was via a pathway from the Lynch through the gardens of the cottages.



Whilst visiting a neighbouring house in 2014, the author was told that human remains had indeed been found at No.10A Coombe Street in the past. At a subsequent meeting with Mr Cooper, the owner of 10A, he was told the story. In 2005, whilst digging out the footings for a proposed study/utility room in the garden, builders discovered human remains of four skulls and bone fragments. The police were called and Steve Wallis, Senior Archaeologist for Dorset County Council, inspected the site on 22nd September, 2005.

His findings tallied with the local belief that the site was formerly the cemetery of a nearby chapel. His report continued, "The burials seem to have been packed into the area, as shown by the close proximity of the four skulls found in one corner of the site and the presence of charnel (fragments of bone from burials disturbed when later graves were dug) in the soil. This would be expected of a cemetery that occupied a small area and was in use for a long period. The skulls presumably belong to burials squeezed into the corner of the cemetery." As a non-Conformist cemetery, he guessed a period of use somewhere between the 18th and early 20th centuries. He suggested that the remains were replaced in the ground as close as possible to where they were found: they now lie beneath the studio.

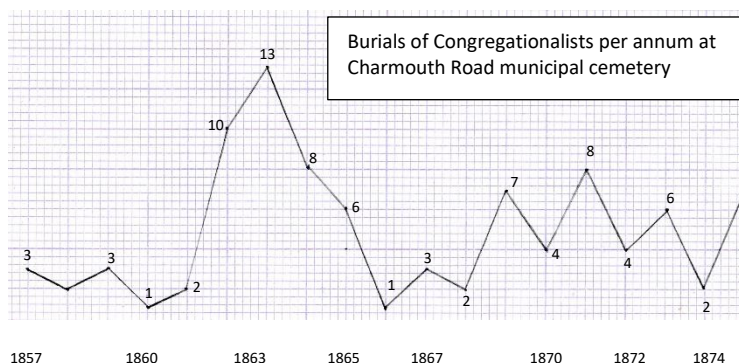
A 'curious little graveyard' (Densham & Ogle, 1899) is the briefest of descriptions. Curious in what way, how many burials, over what period was the graveyard used, and when did the land return to secular use? The Congregational Church Book, dating from March 1839, would answer some of these questions. The book is presently housed and on display at Dinosaurland but not available for study. The author has sought answers from the Lyme Regis Museum archives and further work by the Museum's research team since 2014.

Theophilus Bartlett Goddard owned Bank House (today's Rock Point) in the 1840s (1841-54). During that period, or part thereof, he was a wine merchant, dealer in timber and corn, borough treasurer, agent for the Norwich Union fire & life assurance and an agent in the sale of property. He was also a senior deacon in the Congregational Chapel in Coombe Street. He became Mayor of Lyme Regis in 1853 and left the town to live in Cheltenham the following year. Mr Goddard's friend Sarah Govis died in March 1847. He was the executor and trustee of her will in which she provided the funds for Goddard to liquidate the debt on the freehold of the burial ground.

The first person to be interred in the new burial ground was Miss Elizabeth Canes, the oldest member of the Church, who was 90 when she died, after 65 years as a member. It is believed that the aforementioned Sarah Govis (1847) and her brother William Govis (1843) were also buried there, to which may be added Mary Anning (1842), mother of Miss Mary Anning, the famous fossil collector. The Rev F Rice was the tenth pastor of the Church. His ministry was short-lived; he died of a 'brain fever' after only three weeks in service. He was interred in the Chapel burial ground (1844).

The Lyme Regis parish church of St Michael the Archangel closed its churchyard to further burials in 1856 because the site was threatened by the continuous erosion of Church Cliff by the sea. The last burial was on the 13th October of that year. The new municipal cemetery in Charmouth Road was consecrated by the Bishop of Salisbury on the 1st November. An area of land in the cemetery (Section A) was not consecrated, allowing for burial plots for the Non-Conformist religious communities in the town.

How did this affect the Congregational Chapel's graveyard?



Of the 31 burials, 1862-64, 14 were children aged 16 years or under.

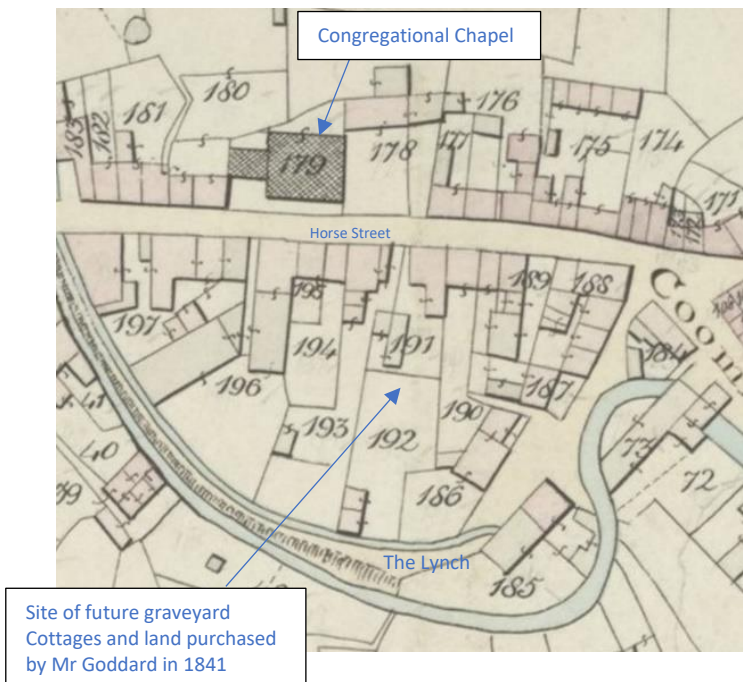
Between 1857 and 1874, 85 people were buried, with a Congregationalist minister officiating, at the municipal cemetery on Charmouth Road (Section A).

During this period, the chapel had eight ministers, was closed and the Church dissolved for nine months in 1857-1858 and shared the pastorate with Charmouth for a short period in 1865-1866.

When the Church was once more re-organised in December 1859, there were 24 members.

The author believes that there were probably very few burials in the Chapel's graveyard in the 1860s and possibly none after 1870. There was still access to this small burial ground from the Lynch up to at least 1903, but the pathway through the cottages' garden is no longer shown on the 1929 OS map. 10A Coombe Street first appears in the 1814 electoral register but when that property acquired the former graveyard has not yet been discovered. The property deeds¹ and the 'Church Book' are sources for future research.

Annotated 1841 Tithe map



References

Ancestry.co.uk
Lyme Regis Congregational Church - Dorset History Centre (ref NP11)
Lyme Regis Museum Archives:
 Bicentenary of the Opening of Lyme Regis Congregational Church Building (1755-1955)
 The Story of the Congregational Churches of Dorset by Densham & Ogle, 1899
 A History of Lyme Regis Congregational Church, 1662-1962, by John R W Paull
 Lyme Regis Cemetery, Research Team's project, from 2012 to the present day (digital archive)
 Will of Sarah Govis, 1847
LRM Research Team's Digital Archive

¹ The deeds subsequently provided no additional information.

The site of the former Chapel's graveyard is private property where there is nothing to see of its past.