

Founded 200 years ago by Christian men



Still a beating heart in beautiful Dales Village

By Peter Lowerth

GRASSINGTON Congregational Church was founded and built by lead miners, mill workers and farm labourers in the nineteenth century – early Congregationalists who were at the very centre of their village's economic and religious life.

Exactly two hundred years on (events will be held throughout 2011 to mark the anniversary) the church is still a beating heart in Grassington's village community, though the lead mines and mills have long gone.

Today its membership is more diverse, but every bit as enthusiastic and go-ahead. And not just on Sundays. The church offers a range of weekly activities for people of all ages from Bible study groups and youth leadership programmes to social gatherings.

It also participates actively in the wider Grassington community. It works closely with Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists and other faith groups which come together, for example, for an Easter service in the village square and combined carol services.

Rev Peter Thomas, who arrived in 2003 after a 10-year ministry in Grimsby, says this sense of teamwork and community are two key ingredients of the church's success.

"The congregation are very good at picking up a project or new venture and working together. Different members will take responsibility for different activities. It's very much a team effort," says Peter.

Under Peter's leadership, membership has grown significantly. Around 20 new full members have joined – some from different denominations, others newcomers to this beautiful Yorkshire Dales village.

Sunday services, including a monthly youth-friendly Excite service, now regularly attract around 40 worshippers and in the tourist season, from Easter onwards, it's not unusual for the church to welcome up to half a dozen holiday-makers to its main weekly worship.

There is also a thriving children's and young people's section called Pilots, which continues the work started by Peter's predecessor, the late Rev Graham Adams and his wife Andrea.

Pilots offers children fun-based activities, as well as looking at aspects of Christian faith through drama, worship and singing. More than 40 youngsters from local primary and secondary schools regularly take part.

The emphasis on young people is no coincidence. Peter Thomas combines his role as minister with work for the Northern Schools Inter Christian Union. He is responsible for assisting with assemblies, clubs and Christian discussion groups at 13 local schools.

Peter's talent for 'showmanship' in assemblies and church services make him a high-profile figure in Grassington, where he is now the longest serving local minister.

He is vice-chairman of the village's popular pre-Christmas Dickensian Festival and plays the 'baddie' in the annual pantop.

But the serious messages of Peter's ministry are clear. The church is a place of welcome and inclusiveness for people from all kinds of backgrounds and lifestyles: "Our style is very relaxed and informal, and I rarely wear a clerical collar except when I'm taking weddings or funerals," he says.

"I believe it's important that I am able to be here almost every Sunday in the year to lead the Sunday service, because it makes for continuity."

Continuity is seen also in Peter's approach to reading scripture: "We take a complete book in the Bible and go right through it in the services. Between September and Christmas we read the book of Acts and from New Year through to Easter we will be focusing on the whole of John's gospel."

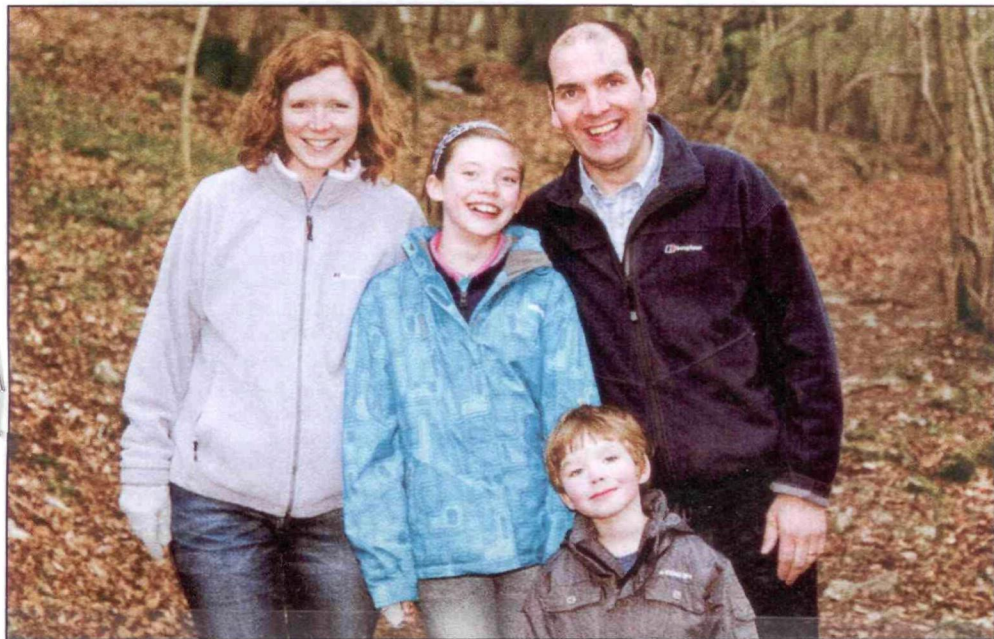


● Young people in the church Pilots group

● Below: members of the church congregation.



from mines, mills and farms



● The Thomas family take a stroll through the woods.
Kathryn (mum) and Peter with their children Bethan and Joseph.

The church's secretary, Christine Chisholm, a member since the early 1970s and former Sunday School leader and newsletter editor, says the church appeals to many different groups: "Existing members have brought new members and children have come up through Sunday School. There is even a group of walkers from Manchester who visit every year."

Church deacon Ken Brand moved to the Dales with his wife Pat, after enjoying walking holidays in the area. They joined the Congregational fold because it is, as Ken says: "The most welcoming church I have ever been to. There's a lovely spirit here amongst everyone."

That feeling is echoed by Terry and Pat Haycock, also a church deacon, who came from the West Midlands: "I had been brought up in the church, but hadn't been for many years. Then when I moved here I just found this church so peaceful. There aren't a lot of formal procedures in the services, and I really like that," says Terry.

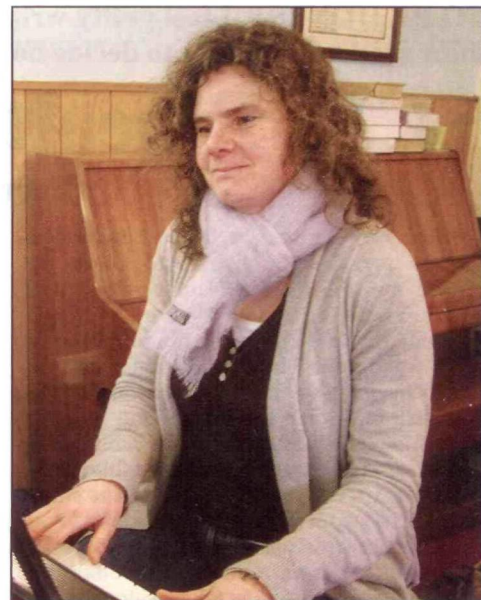
Jim and Alyson Gill were also drawn by the church's welcoming atmosphere and are involved in the bi-centenary plans. Alyson, a deacon and

one of a number of teachers in the congregation, is co-ordinating a new embroidered banner to commemorate the anniversary: "There will be 16 different panels showing various aspects of the history and life of the church," she explains.

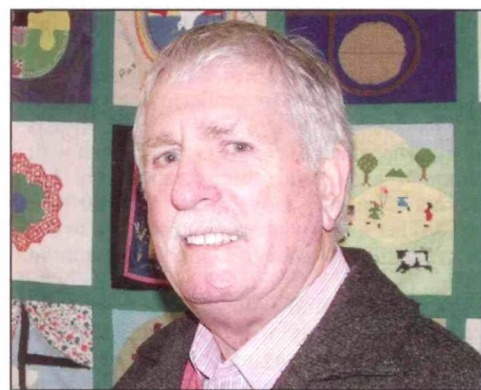
John and Pat Currie previously belonged to the Methodist church and were introduced by former minister, Graham Adams. After retiring from business, John found it was provided an ideal introduction to the local community: "It really helped me to get to know people which I probably wouldn't have done," he says.

All pay tribute to the energy and drive which Peter Thomas has brought to their church. His charismatic presence is clearly a huge factor in its appeal and, in partnership with the membership, embodies the 'can do' attitude which has enabled Grassington Congregational Church to remain a place of worship continuously for 200 years.

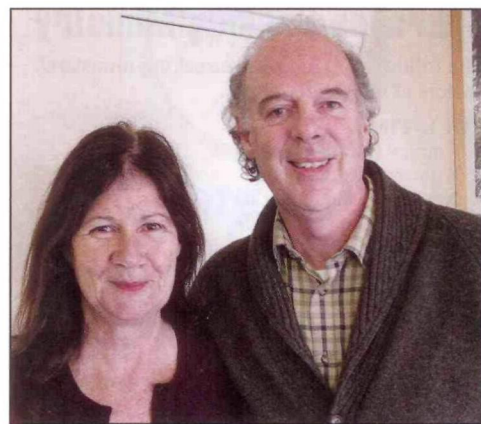
● Left to right: Jim Gill, Alyson Gill, Terry Haycock and Pat Haycock.
Alyson and Pat are both deacons.



● Helen Kerr is one of the music team.



● Deacon Ken Brand.



● John and Pat Currie.



● Church secretary Christine Chisholm.