

Earby of Long Ago
Methodism through 75 Years
People, Praise and Progress

(Written By John Hartley in the Craven Herald 7th August 1936 Transcribed by Stephanie Carter)

The Methodist cause in Earby had its rise about the beginning of the 19th century, and the small society was connected with the Colne Circuit. That old Lancashire town has always been regarded as the market town of the Earby area, and as Colne was one of the first strongholds of Methodism, and frequently visited by John Wesley, it was quite likely that Earby visitors to Colne would be brought into association with the new religious movement which eventually penetrated into every nook and corner of England.

The first services were held in cottages, and also in a barn which stood at the bottom of Stoneybank Lane.

In 1805 there was a comparatively strong society of 20 members and their names appeared on the Class Book in the following order: George Emmott (leader), Reuben Wilkinson, Sarah Sunderland, Ann Ridehalgh, Isabella Wilkinson,, Christopher Emmott senior, Mary Emmott, Hannah Ashworth, Betty Whittaker, Parker Greenwood, Ann Greenwood, Mary Emmott, John Windle, Christopher Emmott junior, Alice Emmott, Jenny Whittaker, Thomas Pickles, Betty Pickles, John Rishworth, and John Slater.

The first chapel was erected at Stoopes Hill, in Stoneybank Lane, opposite where Spring Mill now stands. The building at first was used as cottages in the lower part, and the chapel occupied the upper storey, with access by a flight of stone steps at the end.

The ministers stationed in the Colne Circuit at that time were Thomas Gee and William Ash and the services were usually conducted by local preachers. The class leaders were George Brown and Richard Holdsworth, and the latter person, who was familiarly known as 'Dicky Alder' continued to serve the cause until 1858 and he was held in very high esteem.

Methodist Families

Other names of prominent Methodist families who were connected with the Earby cause at that period include John Ingham, John Harrison, Edmund Lund, Elizabeth Lund, and John Thornton, Margaret Bracewell and James Dodgson. The old chapel was converted into an enlarged place of worship in 1840, the cottage dwellings being absorbed and a gallery erected at one end. (The chapel was later made into Alms Houses through funds provided by Mr W Crowther). The chapel steward was Mr John Wilson of Thornton-in-Craven and he was also one of the Colne Circuit stewards for a long period.

The new chapel became a necessity after the erection of the Victoria Mill by the Rileys of Huddersfield, which mill was taken over by the Bracewell family.

One Sunday night in 1860 a company met at the house of John Wilkinson, and they discussed the need for a new chapel. In her downright way Mrs Wilkinson told them "if they didn't start nobody else would" and before they separated they all agreed to put £1 each

down, and Mr & Mrs Wilkinson made their contribution into £5. Collection books were given out and the people made great sacrifices and worked nobly.

Eventually a site was secured, which was the gift of Miss Bracewell of Gargrave. The first sod was cut on Saturday afternoon in the presence of the Rev. Peter MacKenzie, who had to preach on the following Sabbath Day. The tradition has survived that Peter cut the sod and John Wilkinson and John Taylor filled the first barrow while Peter prayed for God's blessing upon the work. The chapel which is in the Gothic style of architecture, cost over £2000 and provided accommodation for 400 persons, and the opening services were in July 1861.

Chapel Unsafe

A great misfortune befell the Methodist community in 1877, when it was discovered that the chapel was unsafe, in consequence of the high gabled roof being too heavy for the walls. Acting upon expert advice, the trustees decided upon improvements which cost £520, and which included strengthening the roof by bolting additional timber to the existing beams and the introduction of four tie rods jointed by right and left hand screws which span the chapel horizontally. To strengthen the walls the roof had to be lifted and propped, and the walls were strengthened by means of a powerful jack, three of the buttresses having to be taken down and rebuilt. This part of the work was successfully undertaken by Mr Thos Varley of Marton and reflected very great credit upon his skill and enterprise.

Other improvements effected included a new wood ceiling as an inner roof; and new artistic installations for the lighting, and a beautiful rostrum with communion rails in carved oak and pitch pine. To crown the restorations a fine organ was introduced, the framework being of Gothic design, and the musical parts of the finest workmanship. The organ had previously been in use at Didsbury College, Manchester and Mr Christopher Bracewell presented the organ to the trustees.

It should also be noted that the windows throughout the sanctuary are of diamond pattern, and lavishly ornamented with stained glass in various colours, the central front window being undoubtedly the finest work of art of the kind in the district.

The spiritual work of the society was well maintained in the new chapel and there were 72 members on the Class Book in 1862. Five years later a memorable revival broke out which had a marked effect upon the whole village. Several lads were converted and brought into the fellowship of the church, some of whom became the foremost leaders in the following years. In June 1867 the number of full members reported was 52 with 59 "on trial" and at the close of the year there were 95 members with 10 "on trial".

Class Leaders in the Sixties

The class leaders in 1868 with the number of members in each class were as follows: John Pickles 25, John Wilson (Thornton) 3, Thomas Smith 20, John Taylor 10, Edmund Lund 11, and Samuel Smallpage 17.

From 1866 to 1868 Green End House was occupied by the Smallpage family, and there resided with them the Rev. Isaac Keeling, a supernumerary minister, the father of Miss Annis E Keeling, the famous authoress of Methodism.

The mill fire in 1884 seriously affected the attendance at the chapel services, owing to the removal of some families, and others who had to find temporary work elsewhere.

The calamities that befell the Bracewell family, culminating in the removal of the village master, Mr C Bracewell, to Denver, Colorado, USA, along with Mrs Bracewell and most of the family in 1885 was another blow to the cause, as they had always been generous supporters.

With commendable pluck the Earby Wesleyans met their obligations and in the following year – September 23-25 1885, a bazaar was held in the school with a view to wiping out the remaining debt of £300 upon the premises. This bazaar took the form of an “Old English Fair”, and the construction of the stalls and the decorations were supervised by Mr W H Bracewell, who still resided in the village. The bazaar was opened by Sit Mathew Wilson of Gargrave, and he was supported by His Honour Judge Ingham of Marton House. Sir Mathew expressed his pleasure in meeting his Earby friends, from whom he had always received the greatest possible kindness. Judge Ingham created a pleasant surprise by providing a picture of “The Holy Club” at Oxford, the group containing his grandfather, Benjamin Ingham, along with John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield. He had very little doubt that both John Wesley and Whitfield preached in Earby, and he could assure them, without the shadow of a doubt, that within a short distance from that building where they were assembled Whitfield, Wesley and Benjamin Ingham preached, and the pulpit from which they spoke was in the old chapel at Salterforth.

Bazaar Success

The results of the bazaar exceeded all expectations, and the subscribers in addition to the gentlemen associated with the opening ceremony included Mr W Morrison M.P., Mr H Bracewell, (Gargrave), Mr W Tunstill (Reedyford), Mr Wilkinson (The Mount), Mr M Berry (Kelbrook), Mr John Dawson (Skipton), Mr Dyson Mallinson and Mr Robert Greenwood. Mr Lindley was the bazaar secretary and Mr James Brown the treasurer. By a grant from the Connexional Chapel Committee, and a sale of work at Christmas, the whole indebtedness of the trust was extinguished.

The chapel was in danger of being destroyed by fire in 1892 and considerable alarm was felt at the time. The outbreak occurred on a Sunday afternoon, having spread from the heating apparatus to the vestry floor, and had obtained a good hold when discovered. A young man who had just come to reside in the village, organised a chain of buckets and the fire was soon overcome. The damage done to the vestry and contents was estimated at over £100.

The enlargement of the organ was carried out in 1894 at a cost of £150, the work being entrusted to Driver and Haigh of Bradford.

A swell organ and new pedal stops with couplers were incorporated with the old instrument, and the result was a splendid up-to-date organ. The preacher at the organ opening was Rev Arthur Moorhouse, MA, BD, of Headingley College and the special vocalists for the occasion were Mr W Thornton of Bradford and his niece Miss Edna Thornton. This was Miss Thornton's first outside engagement, and this led to further engagements at Colne and Accrington, which did much to give her a secure and popular place in the musical world. Miss Thornton paid several visits to Earby in later years and her career as one of the leading artists in the country was followed with ardent admiration.

Transepts Added

Consequent upon the continued industrial development in the district, an extension scheme for the chapel was decided upon in 1897, which included the erection of transepts on each side, with an organ chamber and choir gallery, and the addition of two large vestries.

The first transept on the western side was erected in 1899 and the foundation stones were laid on April 15th of that year by Mr W H Bracewell, Mrs Stables (a daughter), Mr C Bracewell, Mr T B Hamilton, Mr C Duckworth, Mr Charles Lowcock, Mrs Simpson, Miss C Reid, Miss Lilian Dodgson and Master John D Green. The visiting preacher for the occasion was the Rev. J T F Halligey of Bolton, chairman of the district.

The larger part of the extension scheme was completed in 1898, and the stone laying ceremony took place of April 25th. Stones were laid by Mr H K Bracewell of Gargrave, Mrs John Wilkinson, Mr Hartley Windle, Mr G P Hartley, Mr James Moorhouse, Mr P Greenwood, Mr Thomas Wilkinson, Mr Watson Bradley, Mr W Crowther, Mrs Taylor, Mrs E Brown, Mrs Moorhouse, Mrs Hugh Duxbury, Mrs Thornber, Miss H Robinson, Miss E Moorhouse, Miss R A Moorhouse, Miss G T Hargreaves, Miss B M Goodwin, Master A H Lindley, Master W H Green and one in memory of Rev. J H Wilkinson. The Rev. John Shaw Banks DD, President of the Conference, gave a memorable address. The Rev. W Galloway Mitchell was the minister in charge at the time, and at the opening services the preachers were the Rev, Jas. Hind and the Rev. G H McNeal. The total cost of the extensions and alterations was £2,500 and extra accommodation was provided for 250 persons.

A very fine effort was made in 1909 to clear off the last £500 of the extension scheme. The Chapel Committee had offered £75 on condition that the amount was raised in two years, and to achieve the result a bazaar was held in April during the Easter holidays in the New Road Council School. The event was an unqualified success and not only was the requested sum raised but after paying all expenses £200 remained which was devoted to renovating the chapel and school premises.

250 Workers

The openers of the bazaar were Mr A J Birley JP, Mr John Moorby CC, Mr Charles Gibbon and on the children's day Miss S Green was the opener, and Mrs John Slater of Barnoldswick received the purses from the children.

For this event there were over 250 organised workers and the Bazaar Committee had the benefit of the advice of the '@Bazaar King', Mr W Sherratt JP of Lytham. The principal officers of the Bazaar Executive were the Rev. Arthur Shipman (chairman), Messrs. A Humphreys and E Whitehead (general secretaries), Mr John Hartley (treasurer), Miss Crowther and Mrs W Jones (secretaries for the Congregational stalls and Refreshment Committee).

The local trustees in 1909 were Messrs. A H Brown, Tom Brown, J W Brown, Jos. Carlisle, G P Hartley, C G Hartley, John Hartley, A Humphreys, Jos. Kay, Jas. Lindley, W Pawson, R Pawson and Alfred Waring.

Another bazaar was held in 1926 in the same building, for the renovation of the chapel and school, and to wipe out a debt on the trust. The net result of this financial effort was £520.

The Rev. S L Evans was the minister who presided over the arrangements committee, and the secretary was Mr J W Knight, with Mr A H Brown as treasurer.

The spiritual work of the church has been well maintained in modern times. During the ministry of the Rev. W Millican (1891-94) the membership was more than doubled by accessions from other places, and as the result of special missions. One of these conducted by the Rev. G H McNeal, then a student at Headingley College, is very well remembered. When the pastorate was in the charge of Rev T P Spencer, the wave of temporal and spiritual prosperity reached the 'high water mark' and the place literally throbbed with spiritual vitality.

Baptists' Troubles

Owing to trouble at the Baptist Church, many of their families found a temporary spiritual home with the Wesleyans, but after eight years, after there was a change in the pastorate at their own church, they returned to their former allegiance. These Baptist friends however, have always since maintained a grateful spirit towards those with whom they had spiritual fellowship during the period referred to.

Special missions have been held from time to time by Connexional and Home mission evangelists, and only last November, two young men from Cliff College, Messrs. Smith and Hudspeth, conducted a very successful mission.

The church has been fortunate in the possession of capable and enthusiastic class leaders, and those who have held this office in recent years include James Brown, James Lindley, James Moorhouse, Tom Brown, John Hartley, John W Brown,, William Pawson, H Lumb and J W Knight. The present leaders are J H Willcock, J Hartley, J E Palmer, Mrs Carlisle, Miss Ann Howarth, Mrs Lofthouse and Miss F Carter.

Young men who have entered the ministry are John parker, who is a Congregational minister at Birmingham, Henry Preston, who joined the Primitive Methodist ministry and is now a minister of the United Methodism and has just been appointed as superintendent of an amalgamated circuit at Ludlow, Staffordshire, Fred E Brown, who is the Methodist chaplain at Gibraltar, Harry Pawson, who is in the United Church in Canada, and Daniel Penman, who is stationed at Abergavenny, Wales.

Tune Starters

A strong Wesley Guild has been in existence for more than 30 years, and those who have rendered efficient service as general secretary include Eddie Pawson, Nellie Cummings, Hartley Gibb and Alfred J Carter

Music has always been a special feature of Early Methodism. At the old chapel there used to be 'tune starters', and among those who employed the 'pitch fork' are remembered John Pickles, Henry Pickles and John Green.

At the anniversary service a string band was usually in evidence.

The organisers at the new chapel have been John Wilkinson, William Holgate (who removed to the Temperance Hall Cottage at Skipton), Hugh Curren Smith, Robert Cowgill, Robert Smith, Arthur Wilson and the holder of the post Rennie Pawson LRAM.

Mr H C Smith and Mr R Pawson have also officiated as choirmaster, and in addition, those who have held that position include William Pawson, John W Binns, William Hartley and Joseph Peel.

Fifty years ago the choir used to visit neighbouring villages and the Temperance Hall, Skipton, for annual concerts, and these visits are well remembered today in the places served. The choir has always been a tower of strength to the cause, and this is especially the case at the present time.

Although time has brought many changes and many standard bearers have passed to their reward, the church today remains in good heart, and even believes that "the best is yet to be".