THE CHAPELS SOCIETY

Newsletter 73 January 2020

Humberstone Christians Meeting House, Leicester (1910), built for a cooperative housing development for workers from the Anchor Boot and Shoe Co-operative Company – see further details in Peter Ackers' article on page 9 (photograph copyright Moira and Peter Ackers)

ISSN 1357–3276

ADDRESS BOOK

The Chapels Society: registered charity number 1014207

Website: http://www.chapelssociety.org.uk

President: Bill Jacob, 4 St Mary's Walk, London SE11 4UA; e-mail: wmjacob15@gmail.com

Secretary: Martin Wellings, 26 Upland Park Road, Oxford OX2 7RU; e-mail: ChapelsSociety@googlemail.com (for general correspondence and website)

Treasurer: John Ellis, 24 Shrublands Court, Mill Crescent, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 1PH; e-mail: john.ellis@urc.org.uk; phone: 01732 353914

Visits Secretary: John Anderson, 3 The Vale, Congleton, Cheshire CW12 4AG; e-mail: andersonhillside@btinternet.com; phone: 01260 276177

Membership Secretary: Stuart Leadley, 52 Southwood Avenue, Cottingham, East Yorks HU16 5AD; e-mail: sjleadley@hotmail.co.uk

Casework Officer: Michael Atkinson, 47 Kitchener Terrace, North Shields NE30 2HH; e-mail: info@atkinsonarchitecture.co.uk

Editor: Chris Skidmore, 46 Princes Drive, Skipton BD23 1HL; e-mail: chrisskidmore@waitrose.com; phone: 01756 790056 (correspondence *re* the *Newsletter* and other Society publications). **Copy for the next (May 2020) *Newsletter* needs to reach the Editor by 31 March 2020, please.**

NOTICEBOARD

CHAPELS SOCIETY EVENTS

Saturday 2 May	Visit to Doncaster, Gainsborough and Epworth (John Anderson)
Saturday 20 June	AGM with Andrew Worth lecture given by David Wykes and London chapel itinerary
Saturday 26 September	Visit to Altrincham (Roger Holden)

EDITORIAL

It is with some sadness that I have decided to give up the Editorship from the next AGM. I have greatly enjoyed doing this job for more than 12 years but I feel now is the time to move on. Council will of course be looking for someone to take over and I will be very happy to discuss the job with any member who thinks they may have the time and inclination to take it on. It essentially takes a very few days three times a year to prepare copy for the *Newsletter* – the rest is done by our very efficient printers.

PROCEEDINGS

VISIT TO NORWICH AND THE WAVENEY VALLEY – 28 SEPTEMBER 2019

If some people may have thought that the AGM day in the Potteries was too exclusively Methodist, then it was amply compensated for by the September visit to Norwich and the Waveney Valley which did not touch Methodism at all. Instead it focused on Old Dissent and our starting point at the Old Meeting House in Colegate, Norwich, set the themes for the day. First, Congregational, or Independent, churches arising from the period of the Commonwealth and secondly long-wall chapels, that is rectangular buildings, the main frontage on one of the long sides with entrances at either end with, inside, the pulpit on the opposite wall, flanked by tall pulpit windows and galleries round the other three sides. Such a plan is typical of meeting houses built before the nineteenth century when the gable-end plan became the most common.

Under the leadership of John Anderson, we were also joined for the day by John Clements, the minister at the Old Meeting, and Joel Halcomb, lecturer in history at the University of East Anglia who has studied the history of this and other Congregational churches as part of his research into religious practice and religious politics in Britain and Ireland during the British Civil Wars.

The congregation at the Old Meeting House originated in 1643 when a group of separatists returned from exile in Holland and a church was constituted under the pastorate of William Bridge, formerly rector of St Peter's Hungate. During the Commonwealth the church met in St George's Tombland, subsequently in two other locations before building the present Meeting House in 1693. This is hidden down an alleyway from the street but is nevertheless a building of some grandeur. Built of brick, the south front is of five bays divided by pilasters having carved stone Corinthian capitals. The interior, which is some 44 feet by 64 feet in size, has a flat ceiling with the gallery supported on eight Roman Doric columns with an upper order of Ionic columns rising to the ceiling, presumably supporting the roof structure. I believe these columns are of wood, although I have been unable to find a definitive statement on this. The Meeting House is full of many monuments, two prominent ones either side of the pulpit occasioning some discussion because although they referred to people said to have been ministers, they do not appear to have been ministers of this church. Another feature which was remarked on was the display explaining the five *solas* of the Reformation – Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. In direct line from its founders the church still preaches these and has remained as a Congregational church which did not join the United Reformed Church.

We now moved a few doors down the street to the Octagon Chapel, so called because of its plan, which seems to be trying to outdo the Old Meeting

in grandeur. By contrast to the Old Meeting, it is wide open to the street, not hidden up an alley, but it is regrettable that the area in front is used for the parking of vehicles. This chapel was the odd man out today since it does not have Commonwealth origins, nor has it been Congregational, nor is it a long-wall chapel. Instead its origins are in the Restoration, being formed as a Presbyterian cause soon after 1662 under John Collinges, the ejected minister of St Stephens. Although theologically the Presbyterians might have been close to the Congregationalists, they differed in their ecclesiology, the Presbyterians seeking a comprehensive State church rather than the Congregational gathered church of visible saints. They built a Meeting House on this site which was registered in 1689 but by 1753 it was found to be unsafe so it was pulled down and the present edifice was constructed in its place. The architect has in the past been considered to be Thomas Ivory, but more recent research suggests that the basic scheme came from the chapel's highly capable minister, John Taylor. At its opening he grandly declared that: 'This chapel therefore we have erected and here we intend to worship the living and true God, through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ; not in opposition to, but in perfect peace and harmony with all our fellow Protestants. This edifice is founded upon no party principles or tenets, but is built on purpose, and with this very design, to keep ourselves clear from them all.' In retrospect we might find this statement disingenuous because Taylor had adopted Arian views, which he would have known to be controversial, and ultimately the congregation moved to a Unitarian position, adopting that title, which clearly declares a tenet, in the next century. This is of course what lies behind the final sentence of John Wesley's 'snooty' comment that he wrote in his diary when visiting Norwich on 23 November 1757: 'I was shown Dr Taylor's new meeting-house, perhaps the most elegant one in Europe. It is eight square, built of the finest brick, with sixteen sash windows below, as many above, and eight skylights in the dome, which are indeed purely ornamental. The inside is finished in the highest taste, and is as clean as any nobleman's saloon. The communion table is fine mahogany; the very latches of the pews are polished brass. How can it be thought that the old coarse gospel should find admission here?' Wesley evidently considered the place to be more suited to the preaching of enlightenment reason than the gospel of salvation through faith alone, by Christ alone. However, he did like its most notable feature, the octagonal plan which he recommended as a plan for the Methodists.

As John Wesley said, the Octagon Chapel is indeed built of the finest brick, laid Flemish bond in contrast to the somewhat irregular brickwork of the Old Meeting. The main entrance is approached through a grand porch with four Ionic columns. The tiers of windows, together with the dormers in the roof, result in a very light interior which is galleried on all eight sides. Even the stairways to the gallery are wide and grand. Perhaps because of the shape and the galleries it is not immediately obvious that the Octagon is almost as wide, at 60 feet, as the Old

The Octagon Chapel, Norwich (photograph copyright the author)

Meeting is long. Eight Corinthian columns support the gallery and domed ceiling. One assumes that originally a light fitting of some sort was suspended from the central ceiling rose. The columns have been variously painted during their lifetime, but are currently green, considered to be a suitable Georgian colour, although not all were convinced. For the intrepid, and none of us were, a ladder and hatch gives access to the roof space which would reveal a timber-framed roof of considerable complexity and ingenuity. The pews were replaced in the late-nineteenth century, so John Wesley's polished brass latches have gone. The original pulpit has been replaced by a rostrum and in the gallery behind there is now an organ.

From the Octagon we returned to the Old Meeting where we were provided with tea and coffee while we partook of our lunches before setting off at 12.40 prompt for the second part of the day. Although entitled 'Waveney Valley' strictly only one of the three places visited is in the Waveney Valley. But the River Waveney forms the boundary between Norfolk and Suffolk, the first two places visited being across the boundary in Suffolk. So first we travelled about 25 miles in a south-easterly direction to Wrentham, a village which stands on the Ipswich–Lowestoft road, about 5 miles north of Blythburgh. Our objective here was the Congregational Chapel of 1778, built for a congregation which again had origins in the Commonwealth period. The rector John Phillip was influenced by the 'Congregational Way' but was forced to leave for New England in 1638. He returned in 1641 and began to order church life on the New England pattern, forming a new church on Congregational principles in 1649. After his death in 1660 the congregation continued under Thomas King but he was ejected in 1662. A Meeting House in the village was established in 1672, a new one being built at some distance from the village in 1710 from whence they removed when the present Meeting House was built in 1778.

The Congregational Chapel, Wrentham, Suffolk
(photograph copyright the author)

The 1778 Meeting House was built and possibly designed by one John Owchin, a local master carpenter. Like the Old Meeting in Norwich, Wrentham is a long-wall chapel, but plainer and smaller, being some 27 feet by 40 feet internally. Built of red brick in Flemish bond it has a hipped mansard roof. The doorways are on the east elevation with the pulpit on the west wall, with a vestry behind. The gallery on three sides stands on turned wood columns but those who find that the gallery affords the best view of a chapel were nonplussed to find that access has been removed, possibly when the building was restored in 1972. Downstairs it retains box pews. There is an organ below the east gallery. The ceiling is at collar level with a tie-bar below, presumably of wrought iron, to counteract the tendency of the roof to spread. Now part of the United Reformed Church, services are held on Sunday afternoons.

The next visit was perhaps the highlight of the day. While the Octagon in Norwich may come within the realm of polite architecture, Walpole Old Meeting House is definitely vernacular, having been converted from a late sixteenth century timber-framed house. This stands just outside the village of Walpole in the valley of the River Blyth, south-west of Halesworth, some nine miles drive from Wrentham. This church also dates to the time of the Commonwealth, being formed in 1649. The first indication of the use of the current building by the church is in 1689. At some time after this the building was enlarged by moving out the back wall by about 8 feet to give an interior of some 50 feet by 28 feet. The timber frame has wattle and daub infilling, except the south-west wall which has been infilled in brick at some later date. Apart from the tall arched pulpit windows in the rear wall, the windows are of domestic appearance. The roof is double pitched, with the central valley supported internally by three

timber posts. Two of these appear as superimposed pairs supporting the side galleries. The other is free standing in the centre of the chapel. There seems to be a suggestion that this was inserted later but it is difficult to see how they could have inserted this at any time other than when the building was being enlarged. We were told that this was originally a ships mast, with the elaboration that they may have found it floating in the sea after some battle. But there seems no evidence for this and it is an unlikely story, thrown out as an idle speculation that has come to be repeated as fact. After all it has a moulded capital, as do the other posts. Christopher Stell countenances no such speculations, simply describing all three as timber posts. He would also have been aware that there were timber posts of similar dimensions and date in other meeting houses, both nearby such as Ipswich or Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk or Oulton in Norfolk and further afield, such as Daventry in Northamptonshire (definitely not near the sea), Frenchay near Bristol, Ringwood in Hampshire and Ottery St Mary in Devon. The origins of such timber posts is certainly a matter of some interest and worthy of further study. The gallery on the side facing the pulpit is supported by two square timber posts and two ornate twisted iron posts. There are box pews on the ground floor and benches of very crude construction in the galleries.

The meeting house ceased to be used for services in 1970 and its future lay in the balance for 25 years, during which time at least one attempt was made to purchase it for conversion back to a house, until acquired by the Historic Chapels Trust in recognition of its historic importance. No modern congregation would countenance regularly using such a building, particularly without electrics.

We then returned back across the border into Norfolk for our final visit of the day at Denton, some ten miles north-west of Walpole and approached only

The Old Meeting House, Walpole, Suffolk
(photograph copyright the author)

by minor roads, which presented a challenge to our coach driver. This was the newest chapel of the day, only built in 1821 and of gable-end plan rather than long-wall. But nevertheless of red brick, laid Flemish bond, and entered through a pair of doorways with galleries on three sides. The exceptionally large railed communion area in front of the pulpit occasioned some comment and speculation. Was this a singers' pew or was it for the deacons in the manner of a Welsh *sêt fawr*? The pulpit is entered through a door and steps from the vestry. The gallery supports are cast iron. Notable also are the square box pews round the sides, with a fold-down seat across the doorway so giving continuous seating on all four sides, which means some people can sit with their backs to the pulpit. The exact origins of the congregation are obscure, but probably originated in the mid-seventeenth century as the first meeting house was built on this site in 1701. Originally Congregational, now United Reformed it works in an ecumenical partnership with the local Anglican church.

This was not quite the end of the day as we had to return the 13 miles northwards to Norwich where we repaired to the Revelation Café for tea. The Revelation Café is housed, alongside a Christian bookshop, in the former church of St Michael at Plea on Queen Street. The weather had been kind to us, we had seen some interesting buildings and a considerable swathe of the Norfolk and Suffolk countryside for all of which we had to thank our guides and leaders for the day as well as the people who had opened the chapels for us and also supplied refreshments.

Roger N. Holden

TONY CROSS (1932-2019)

The death of our member Tony Cross was announced in the last *Newsletter*. Here follows part of an obituary written by Julian Smith and published recently in *The Inquirer*:

'Born an Anglican, Tony's love of history, beauty and ritual attracted him to high church Anglicanism. However, his small-'s' socialism, liberal outlook, intellectualism, and interest in radicalism, also attracted him to the Unitarians. Amongst us he found a warm reception. Indeed it was not long before he was training for the Unitarian Ministry.... Following ministries in Plymouth and Lewisham, he went on to teach at Trinity Boy's School, Croydon. During those years in London Tony became editor of *The Inquirer*....

Tony returned to ministry as an assistant minister with the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Thereafter he went to Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead where he built a flourishing congregation. In the mid-1980s, Tony left Hampstead to become principal of [Harris] Manchester College, Oxford, where following his resignation, he was made an honorary fellow of the college. Tony then accepted a ministry at Mansford Street Church and Mission,

Bethnal Green. During that time, he and others set out to create a 'Unitarian Christian Association' (UCA) to promote the Christian tradition within the denomination… Thereafter Tony took early retirement….

Tony continued his lifelong academic studies in church history and was awarded a Reading PhD in his 80th year.'

NONCONFORMIST CHAPELS AS LOCAL 'WORLDS OF LABOUR': RELIGIOUS HERITAGE, SOCIAL HISTORY AND CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

AN ARTICLE BY PETER ACKERS

1: *Introduction: Why Social History?*

According to our web-site: '*The Chapels Society* seeks to foster public interest in the architectural and historical importance of all places of worship that might loosely be described as Nonconformist. These primarily comprise the buildings of Christian bodies (Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox) outside the Established Church but may include those of other faiths.'

In this lecture, I'll follow Christopher Stell's narrower emphasis on the buildings of protestant Nonconformity, while focusing on their larger, social historical significance. For Stell the architectural history of fine chapels was important, but so too were more humble buildings. As the back cover of his paperback edition points out, 'little red-brick "Bethels" are reminders of a freedom of expression that is an essential part of English heritage'. This sense of chapels as 'tents' for gathered congregations of people – churches in that radical protestant sense – whose beliefs and practices have changed over time, has been my personal preoccupation for the past six years on the Chapels Society Council. And I cast my mind back to an earlier AGM in 2015 on a visit day organized by Moira Ackers. This was held at the Christians Meeting House (1880) Loughborough, illustrated here, precisely one such little, red brick 'backstreet Bethel'.

So, how does this relate to the Chapels Society's historical mission? Architectural history and the preservation of fine buildings is certainly a central

element; but so many buildings of popular protestant Nonconformity are not distinguished in this sense. Instead, they are vernacular brick sheds, similar to houses, factories or farm buildings, erected and used by the working poor. Here we must reach for a broader sense of the importance of Nonconformist Christianity to the heritage of ordinary English people, linked to our continuing sense of national identity. In this second, non-architectural sense, these building are crucial imprints of social history on our local landscapes: markers of our past. Sadly, they are also the easiest traces to erase through conversion or demolition. These modest chapels matter for secular reasons too. They have been central to English associational life and civil society, fostering organizations like trade unions and co-operatives.

Many lives were formed in chapel and Sunday school. Important employers, such as Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry (Quaker); Salt and Lever (Congregationalist); or Rank (Wesleyan) emerged from these religious communities. So too did numerous leading politicians, as diverse as Arthur Henderson, a Wesleyan Labour leader, or Margaret Thatcher, a Tory Prime Minister brought up as a Methodist. Chapel history is a 'broad church' in every sense – religious, social and political – and remembering this is central to the preservation of a national cultural Christianity capable of reaching beyond those with strong religious faith. Our house has many mansions.

2: *'More Methodism than Marxism?' Chapels and the English labour movement*

The above claim came from Morgan Phillips (1902-1963), a former coalminer and General Secretary of the British Labour Party. Hence today I'll address Labour History, broadly defined, as the story of working-class trade union, co-operative and political figures. We can follow this thread in the popular imagination from the scandal of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, through George Eliot's 1859 *Adam Bede* to this chapel word-picture from D.H. Lawrence's 1913 short story, 'Strike-Pay'.

> 'Strike-money is paid at the Primitive Methodist Chapel. The crier was round quite early on Wednesday morning to say that paying would begin at ten o'clock.
>
> The Primitive Methodist Chapel is a big barn of a place, built, designed and paid for by the colliers themselves. But it threatened to fall down from its first form, so that a professional architect had to be hired at last to pull the place together.
>
> It stands in the Square. Forty years ago, when Bryan and Wentworth opened their pits, they put up the "squares" of miners' dwellings…
>
> Ben Townsend, the Union agent, has a bad way of paying. He takes the men in order of his round, and calls them by name. A big, oratorical man with a grey beard, he sat at the table in the Primitive school-room, calling

name after name. The room was crowded with colliers, and a great group pushed up outside.'

In similar ways, for a century and more, 'chapel' became central to attempts by working-class people – manual workers and their families – to organize, improve and protect themselves.

We're meeting in Stoke, near where Primitive Methodism began on a day devoted to that theme. Nearby Englesea Brook Primitive Methodist Museum preserves this heritage; and it's thanks to industrious Nonconformist historians like Robert Wearmouth, that 'the Prims' became so central to a debate about the relationship between protestant Nonconformity and the emerging English labour movement. We think of prominent figures like Joseph Arch (1826-1919), farm labourer then union leader and Liberal MP or later Sam Watson (1898-1967), the Durham miners' leader and member of the Labour Party executive. But there are many others, closer to home in our own family histories. I've inherited this Primitive Methodist commemoration plate, which I'd like to believe came down from my Grandad Ashcroft, who was a Lancashire farm labourer and Methodist until he married a strongly Anglican farmer's daughter.

So, was Primitive Methodism some unique 'labour sect', as you might gather from certain historical discussions? I think we need three caveats here. First, the Prims were clearly particularly strong in certain parts of the country amongst two very large, if atypical, rural or often semi-rural groups of manual workers, farm labourers and coal miners. Historians like Robert Moore and Robert Colls have shown how they dominated the Durham Miners Association and local Labour Party for generations, up to the Second World War and beyond. But they were less predominant in other regions or in engineering and textile cities. Second, the Prims were far from being a homogenous proletarian group. Rather, they included many middle-class people and some large employers, such as Hartley, the jam maker; and these men provided much of their denominational leadership. Third, working-class labour activists were found in most strands of Methodism and in most other Nonconformist denominations, notably Congregationalists and Baptists. For instance, up to the Second World War, MPs for the Wigan seats, controlled by the miners' union, included a Wesleyan, a Baptist, three Congregationalists and two Anglicans. Typically, many Nonconformist denominations balanced some union activists with a smattering of the big employers who funded so many chapels! Thus, the historian's task is much more complex than identifying the odd 'labour sect'.

How have the influential Marxist and militant socialist Labour Historians seen the problem? Generally, they have been intrigued by the early radical protestant beliefs arising from the English civil war but much more critical of Methodism and the evangelical trends associated with it. Thus E.P. Thompson, a Methodist Minister's son, regarded Methodism as an escapist alternative to radical politics. Eric Hobsbawm recognised and explored the 'labour sects' but tended to regard them as 'primitive' not only in the original sense of a return to New Testament Christianity, but also as socially backward. In this light, working-class faith becomes an anachronism and an irritant in the forward march of labour. No one could deny its influence in the nineteenth-century English working classes, but most wish it away for the 'modern' twentieth-century proletariat, which is supposedly destined to be secular and socialist.

For Cole and Postgate, Nonconformity represented the prejudices of the puritanical and vulgar 'shopocracy' imposed on the working class; another variation on the well-visited theme of religion as 'false consciousness'. Few acknowledge that Nonconformity remained indigenous to English working-class life well into the twentieth century and was a creative intellectual force in the formation of our distinctive labour movement with its preference for non-statist, associational solutions to social problems. If we must talk about 'faith' at all, many prefer the 'progressive', 'rational' end of Nonconformity – Quakers, Unitarians and Labour Churches – since they presage a secular and socialist future. Inconveniently, many real flesh-and-blood working-class people were and are drawn to 'irrational' faiths like the Prims, or Pentecostals today!

3: *The Nonconformist effect was much wider than Methodism*

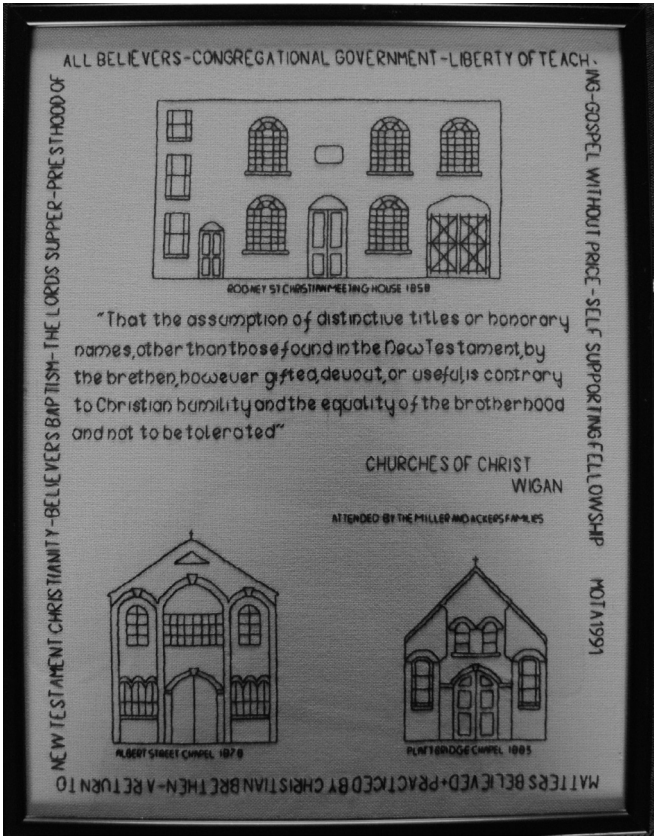
Methodism is important, but only part of the story. The organization of skilled workers, radical democratic ideas and religious Nonconformity are closely linked, across a whole range of radical protestant groups. An interesting question, which I've often discussed with our past President, Tim Grass, is why two groups with similar theology and ideas of church government, the Churches of Christ and the Plymouth Brethren, have such different historical relationships to the labour movement. This may come down to something as accidental as location. One was heavily located in certain key industrial areas, say mining communities, the other wasn't. In late Victorian England, most working-class Nonconformist activists shared a radical Liberal politics, which produced the first Lib-Lab working-class MPs. There was no great, subsequent working-class conversion to Marxian Socialism. Rather, the power of employers in the Liberal Party and legal attacks on trade unions stimulated a separate Labour Party, initially as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. After 1918 'socialist' becomes synonymous with a pragmatic, reformist Labourism, but liberal-pluralist associational ideas ran deep in the trade unions and co-operative movements.

The Nonconformist effect is not just or even mainly about numbers. After all, very many English working-class people were Anglicans or Roman Catholics. But why did so many Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and others become working-class leaders, particularly in that formative era before the Great War? In my view, this was less to do with the official denominational 'Social Gospel' articulated by middle-class ministers than the local chapel culture. And this is where our 'backstreet Bethels' come back into play. Due to the lack of a professional, paid ministry they provided the opportunity for working-class men to develop preaching and leadership skills. Democratic forms of chapel governance became a model for other voluntary organizations. The Christian faith and moral integrity of Nonconformist leaders won respect even among those who didn't share their views on Temperance, Gambling or the Sabbath. They were less likely to run off with the funds or drink them away!

4: *The Churches of Christ and the labour movement*

My Dad's Wigan family belonged to a little-known Nonconformist group, the Churches of Christ, which I studied for my 1993 PhD. This new-found religious interest first spurred me to join the Chapels Society and you can read my account of the Wigan chapels in *Newsletter 4* of June 1991. The Churches peaked at 16,596 members in 1930. Their original plea was to 'restore' primitive New Testament Christianity. As in Loughborough, the datestones of their Victorian chapels often say just 'Christians'. On that 2015 visit day, I recalled an anecdote from my great-uncle Sydney, when he joined the army for the Second World War: 'What's your religion? Churches of Christ. Never heard of it. Well, it's the only church in the Bible!' Originally, they rejected any Church authority or creeds beyond the New Testament to follow a distinctive admixture of radical protestant beliefs and practices: there was congregational government and mutual ministry with no full-time ministers; a rational version of believer's baptism; and a closed Sunday morning Lords' Supper followed by an open evening gospel service. The Churches were particularly strong in the industrial North and Midlands.

Yet, to return to my general theme, even in this obscure, provincial group there were prominent employers and other middle-class figures, who tended to play national leadership roles. I borrowed the distinction between 'west end' chapels and 'backstreet Bethels' from Hugh McLeod, to characterise these residential social class divisions. In my view, the obscure chapel, located in a poor area, was usually the religious engine of labour movement activism. W.T. Miller, a Wigan coalmining trade union leader and my great grandad, illustrates this. He became National Secretary of the colliery safety officers union (later NACODS) before the Second World War. His approach was not class war, but moderate, constructive industrial relations. These leadership qualities were learnt in two backstreet Bethels: Victoria Road, Platt Bridge and Albert Street, Newtown – chapels where working men played leading roles.



A sampler embroidered by Moira Ackers shows the three Churches of Christ Meeting Houses in Wigan

But Miller's life was only one side of the local story. For the Timothy Coop business dynasty dominated the town-centre Rodney Street chapel, with its upper room worship area, and funded chapel building throughout the coalfield. Without them, there would have been less 'backstreet Bethels' in the first place. On the other hand, such employers and professionals led the Churches' metamorphosis from an outsider sect into a respectable, mainstream Nonconformist denomination, culminating in the 1981 merger with the United Reformed Church. David Thompson's history charts this twentieth-century transition to liberal theology, free church ecumenical activity and full-time, trained Ministers. Religious arguments never read-off class divisions, but an emerging 'Old Paths' resistance, dramatized by the Great War conscientious objection movement, was centred in 'backstreet Bethels', like Platt Bridge. Working-class preferences were often for the older, more dogmatic, less centralized church.

There are yet other complications. Not all working-class church members followed Miller's path to the moderate, right-wing of the labour movement. My essay, 'How my Grandad, the Churches of Christ and the Steam Engine Makers Society lifted our family into the professional classes', portrays the life of Harry Ackers (1902-1997) a life-long working-class Tory. He joined the Albert Street Sunday School, became a craft apprentice at Walkers mining engineering company, going on to Wigan Mining College and an external London University Engineering degree. Through individual application aided by collective institutions he became a factory manager at BTR, Leyland. What he and Miller had in common was that chapel helped them build a career, make something of themselves.

Another interesting variation is Arthur Horner (1894-1968), post-war General Secretary of the NUM and one of the best-known British Communist trade union leaders. He became a South Wales preacher in the Churches of Christ and trained to be an Evangelist, until his life took a revolutionary political turn. As I've argued before, those figures who shed their Nonconformity are as interesting as those who stay the course. It wasn't hard to uncover a link between Horner's early earnest biblical literalism and his later Marxist-Leninist theology. There are many other potential angles to explore. The classic Labour History debate was all about men. Women played an important if different role, even in the most patriarchal chapels.

I'm currently working on Leicester, another centre of the Churches of Christ. Here two working-class men, Amos Mann (1855-1939) and J.T. Taylor (1864-1957) became major figures in the Co-operative movement. At Taylor's instigation, a group of boot and shoe workers met at Crafton Street chapel and decided to form the Anchor footwear co-operative co-partnership (1893-1935). Later, they built and moved to Humberstone garden suburb, another co-operative co-partnership initiative which survives to this day – as outlined in my December 2017 *Chapel of the Month* [www.chapelssociety.org.uk/com-december-2017/]. Like Miller they were on the moderate wing of the labour movement, but while Mann remained a Lib-Lab, Taylor joined the socialist Independent Labour Party (ILP). Mann became a major national figure in the Co-operative movement. Once more, they'd used associational methods, or collective self-help, to make something of themselves and do something for other working-class people. They didn't wait for middle-class professionals or the state to do it for them.

Conclusion

I'm an over-educated, agnostic Anglican trying to understand and appreciate how the fundamentalist religious beliefs of these working-class autodidacts, from another time and social world, propelled their lives and the movements they created. In our current politically correct culture, I sense a growing intolerance of such Christian worlds of labour. When American members of the Churches of Christ read my articles and met me in London some years ago,

they were surprised to discover I didn't share the beliefs of the people I was writing about. This pleased me because it showed I had developed sufficient empathy to get inside their faith – without belonging to it. Social historians need to grasp faith worlds different from their own! Conservative evangelical groups like the Churches of Christ or the Primitive Methodists are too easily dismissed as backward and fundamentalist by the liberal middle-classes. Such prejudice continues today in relation to other Bible Christians and Pentecostals. Yet, as Robert Moore explained in a 30 January 1990 letter to *The Guardian*: 'The earliest Labour MPs were not "jolly friar" types. They were local preachers, teetotallers and working-class intellectuals. Even if they found them personally uncongenial, the local voters pitched out of the pubs and clubs to vote for them because they recognised the merits of orderliness, honesty and intellectual self-discipline in their representatives.'

In sum, to understand genuine working-class chapel religion of the sort that formed the English labour movement, we need to: recognise that 'the past is another country'; address the local chapel rather than middle-class Church elites; and be aware of big social, religious and political differences within the same denomination. Our regular trips to visit old chapels are not just art history tours, they are journeys of the heart and mind, exercises in understanding and empathy. For this reason, these backstreet Bethels matter for the mission of the Chapels Society!

This article is a revised and expanded version of the 2019 Stell Lecture given following the Chapels Society AGM, on 6 July 2019. The associational side of working-class life is something we've explored in a recent book [Ackers and Reid (eds) Alternatives to State-Socialism: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century, *Palgrave, 2016]. My 'Protestant Sectarianism in Twentieth-Century British Labour History: From Free and Labour Churches to Pentecostalism and the Churches of Christ"*, International Review of Social History, *64:1, 2019 reviews two interesting new books [P. Catterall,* Labour and the Free Churches, 1918-1939, *Bloomsbury, 2016; and N. Johnson,* The Labour Church, *Routledge, 2018]. For more on the British Churches of Christ, look at D.M. Thompson's history,* Let Sects and Parties Fall, *Berean Press, 1980; and my 'West End Chapel, Back Street Bethel: Labour and Capital in the Wigan Churches of Christ c 1845-1945',* The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, *47(2), 1996.*

Here are some classic texts I've referred to and other relevant reading on this theme: G.D.H. Cole and R. Postgate, The Common People, 1746-1946, *Methuen, 1946; R. Colls, 'Primitive Methodism in the Northern Coalfield', in J. Obelkevich, L. Roper and R. Simon (eds)* Disciplines of Faith, *RKP, 1987; E.J. Hobsbawm: 'Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain' in his* Labouring Men, *Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964; 'The Labour Sects' in his* Primitive Rebels, *Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971 and 'Religion and the rise of socialism' in his* Worlds of Labour, *Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984; H. McLeod,* Religion and the Working Class in nineteenth-century Britain, *Macmillan, 1984; R. Moore,* Pit-men, Preachers and Politics, *Cambridge University Press, 1974; E.P. Thompson,* The Making of the English Working Class, *Penguin, 1980; and R.F. Wearmouth,* Methodism and the Trade Unions, *Epworth, 1959.*

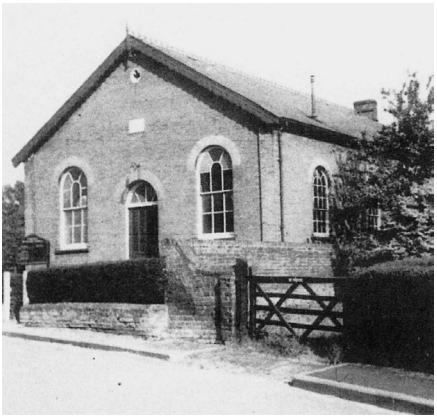
NEWS AND NOTES

Historic Chapels Trust

Our Friends at HCT in November issued a long-awaited document in the form of a Strategy for 2019-2022. It gave as its ambitious vision that it 'should be the principal organisation in England through which the most significant non-Anglican historic places of worship that are no longer in regular use may be conserved, made accessible, and understood and valued by society.'

The HCT's strategy includes 'identifying and pursuing a wide range of funding opportunities', 'building trust and improving relationships with the communities around our chapels' and 'improving our operating efficiency'. The current operating partnership with the Churches Conservation Trust will continue and staff have been recruited to head up the first two arms of the strategy.

The Council of the Chapels Society agreed recently to continue financially as a supporter of HCT and to encourage further liaison.



The two buildings associated with Primitive Methodism in Hadleigh, Suffolk – the purpose-built chapel of 1875 (left) and 'Thorpes' (right) (photographs Hadleigh Archive)

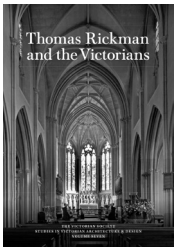
Primitive Methodist Chapel, Hadleigh, Suffolk

Following the picture of its renovation shown in the last issue, the site www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk has allowed us to confirm John Dearing's identification of the chapel shown on the left as the Primitive Methodist Chapel of 1875. However it also provides the intriguing information that the building on the right – 'Thorpes' – also in George Street, was taken over by the Prims from an unsuccessful Wesleyan cause and was used by them from 1836-1848. It was described as 'an old antiquated looking place, fitted to produce the impression that in the dark ages it had been a monkery or nunnery'. They built a chapel on adjacent land in 1848, which was rebuilt in enlarged form in 1875. Both 'Thorpes' and the neighbouring chapel are now in residential use.

(continued on page 20)

BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Rickman and the Victorians edited by Megan Aldrich and Alexandrina Buchanan. London: The Victorian Society, 2019. 152 pages, paperback. ISBN 978-0-901657-56-5. £25



The seventh volume in The Victorian Society's series of collected essays *Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design* is dedicated to the legacy of the Quaker accountant, architect, and antiquary, Thomas Rickman. Rickman is best, possibly exclusively, known for his seminal book *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture from the Conquest to the Reformation*, first published in 1817, which established the basic classification of styles still used in describing the medieval churches of England. There was more to his life, career, and legacy than this though. It is the legacy that is the focus here; those seeking a biography of Rickman or an assessment of his architectural work will need to look elsewhere.

There are eight papers, with their origins in a conference held in Liverpool (where *Attempt* was published) in 2017. First by way of a scene-setter is William Whyte's 'Introducing Thomas Rickman' and then follows Megan Aldrich on 'Thomas Rickman and the Victorians' which promotes Rickman as an early exponent of 'preservation' rather than 'restoration'.

Despite the title, William Walker's 'Thomas Rickman, Commissioners' Churches, and the Victorian Church Builders' is of some relevance to those whose interest is in chapels rather than churches. The established church and dissent did not develop and erect their buildings in isolation. This case study of Lancashire shows the influence of interaction and competition between denominations on the designs adopted for their various buildings.

William J. Ashworth digresses somewhat in 'William Whewell, Fundamental Ideas, and Gothic Architecture'; Whewell was a friend of Rickman's but best known for his career at Trinity College, Cambridge. Book history and use are tackled by Alexandrina Buchanan in 'Attempting to Discriminate: Thomas Rickman's Readers'. Stephen Clarke's 'Hints to Some Churchwardens, *The Ecclesiologist*, and the Pleasures of Churchwardens' Gothic' has little about Rickman but does include some very entertaining illustrations of alleged architectural 'improvements' to parish churches from a nineteenth-century pamphlet.

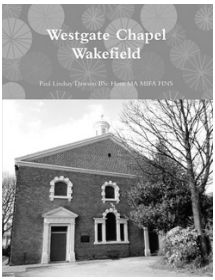
The next essay, by Johanna Roethe and entitled 'Of Singular Elegance and Dignified Simplicity: Quaker Meeting Houses and their Architects', is probably the one which will be of most interest to members of the Chapels Society. Roethe explores the changes and variety in Quakerism and its meeting houses during the nineteenth century in three distinct sections, on meeting houses, on architects, and on patronage. Despite the special features of meeting houses, Quakers

were not cut off, but instead integrated into, the wider context of Victorian architecture as is clear from the careers outlined and buildings illustrated in this article. Quaker meeting houses were not only designed by Quakers, and Quaker architects did not only design for Quakers. The summary coverage in this article suggests there would be plenty of material for a longer more detailed study.

Joseph Sharples closes the volume with 'From Rickman's Liverpool to Victorian Liverpool' exploring the architectural development of the city in the nineteenth century. Production of the volume is up to the usual standards of this series. Printing is in full colour on substantial paper, with clear and sharply printed pictures, and each essay has its full complement of notes.

Stuart Leadley

Westgate Chapel Wakefield by Paul Lindsay Dawson. Wakefield: Westgate Chapel, 2018. 112 pages, paperback. No ISBN. £8 [available on-line at www.lulu.com]



This is a substantial 'our chapel' volume by a member of the congregation rather than an academic history or architectural description of Westgate Chapel and its place in the history of Wakefield and the Unitarian movement. It lacks footnotes and bibliography and other scholarly apparatus. More seriously, it also lacks a contents page, which makes navigation of the material included tricky. And it is surely the only book about modern Wakefield which does not so much as mention rugby league.

A private publication, roughly A4-sized but a slightly odd shape, the book is printed in full colour throughout, with a variety of illustrations on nearly every page.

After some prefatory remarks about Unitarianism, the book moves into a brief history of the congregation and chapel building, generously illustrated with reproductions of pertinent documents. Unfortunately the quality of the printing lets these down a little, and this, combined with the eighteenth-century script, makes them difficult to read.

The next section, 'Our People' is the heart of the book, taking up over half of the total length; clearly in this case at least, the church is the people not the building. Those included range from ministers to MPs to 'ordinary' members of the congregation. They are presented in alphabetical order by surname, which keeps members of the same family together but makes following the 'story' awkward. The chronological jumping around is mitigated only slightly by arranging those in the same family in order. And it is definitely a story of families. The names of Briggs, Burrell, Clarkson, Gaskell, Lumb, and especially Milnes occur multiple times, some of these in each others' entries: inter-marriage is a feature. Entries vary in length and incorporate a wide assortment of supplementary material, not only about chapel life but also the economy and

society of Wakefield in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some sort of index, and perhaps some family trees, would have been useful.

Six prominent ministers are removed to a section of their own. Again, they are in (almost) alphabetical rather than chronological order, and there is no complete list of ministers. This section is followed by brief features on the catacombs and chapel yard, stained glass, and music making, before closing with a return to the theme of the preface and an outline of Unitarianism today.

Despite the quibbles, a valiant, entertaining, and useful effort – much material of great interest has been collected by the author and smartly presented.

Stuart Leadley

Featured Chapel

The regular feature on our website, hitherto known as 'Chapel of the Month' is being renamed 'Featured Chapel' to recognise its slightly less than regular appearance. Our webmaster, Sara Croft, would like to encourage members to submit brief (300 word) descriptions and photos of notable or simply favourite chapels for this page. These should be sent to ChapelsSociety@googlemail.com in the first instance.

Chapel holidays

My ever-assiduous correspondent, Frank Law, sends details of a holiday letting agency which actually identifies converted chapels as a subset of its properties. This is Coolstays – www.coolstays.com/inspiration/ChapelsChurches – which offers a variety of chapels to stay in, including at least two 'tin tabs' and one especially luxurious property consisting of two linked cemetery chapels in Dover with the anachronistic name of 'Arcadia'!

Rescuing Welsh chapels

One heartening story was brought to my attention by an illustrated article on the BBC Wales website (www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/Vowy7nKBPo/welsh-chapels-one-mans-mission). It tells the story of a retired Congregational minister, the Revd Robert Stivey, who moved to South Wales and has, over the last seven years, bought with his own money some 12 redundant chapels. His aim is to re-open them all, or at least keep them in safe hands until the congregations return. 'I am intent on attracting new fellowships,' he says. 'Spreading the Gospel and using these chapels not as museum pieces, but centres of worship.'

In some places he has had success, with chapels becoming social centres or used for village funerals, in others congregations have yet to return. However Robert Stivey remains undaunted by the scale of his project. 'The Lord will provide', he says.

DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY JOSHUA HORGAN PRINT & DESIGN, OXFORD