

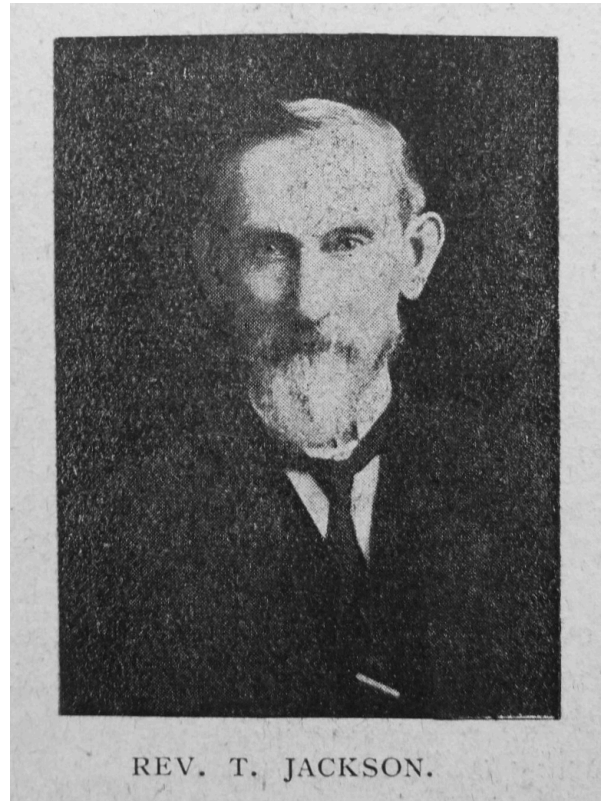
The Whitechapel Mission

Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. William Potter

WHITECHAPEL Mission began its work many years before its formal inauguration. In those remote days, Mile End Waste —now railed off and planted by a benevolent County Council— was, on Sunday mornings, the favourite rendezvous of wonderful agitators. Every form of belief and of unbelief was represented. Here were Secularists and Christian Evidence Men, Roman Catholic Ransomers and Protestant Defence Leaguers, Socialists; and in more recent times, Theosophists, Christian Scientists, and even Tariff Reformers in hot debate with Free Traders. The speakers, raised on temporary platforms, flung statements mixed of argument and abuse at one another over the heads of their auditors. One orator was sure that “Charles Darwin had knocked religion on the ‘ead”;

another was equally certain that “the erpostle Paul knew his wye abaht”;

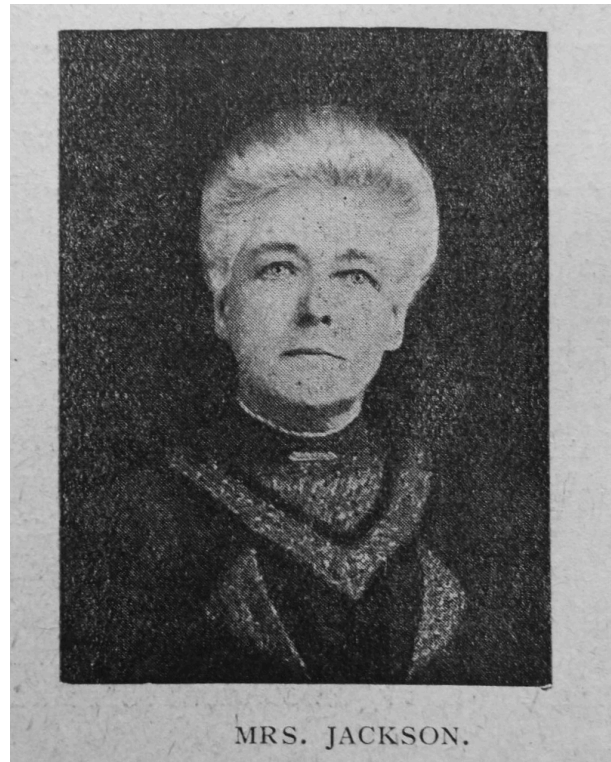
a third regarded “this ‘ere princerple a life” as alone worth the attention of a rational being; while the most violent man on the ground ventilated his strong desire “to wipe the floor” with anybody who denied his identification of the “Powp of Rowme” with the “Man of Sin.” But as this wiping of the floor was meant only in an argumentative sense nobody took fright.



In such a setting the Founder of Whitechapel Mission began his London career over forty years ago. On a bright Sunday morning, the frequenters of the Waste heard the unusual sound of singing. It proceeded from a slight, fair young man. “Hark! The Gospel news is sounding” was unfamiliar. The oldest *habitué* had never heard a speaker invoke a hearing in song before. Surprise was still greater when the singer bared his head and asked Divine aid in his effort to preach. This was “some new thing.” The man was serious and the people listened. At the close of the address, one who felt the utter hopelessness of this latest interference in the life of the Waste, and was rather sorry for the young enthusiast, said: “You’re from the country. You’re green, you are. Better go back to the country”; to which the preacher, sure of his commission, made answer: “It is true I’m from the country, but I’m not as green as you think, and I’m not going back to the country. I have come to London to preach the Gospel and here I mean to stay.” But not in Whitechapel. At any rate, not then.

Whitechapel introduces the Christian worker to problems that are well-nigh insoluble, and to practical tasks of immense difficulty. Not only is it the centre of the vastest area of primary poverty within the bounds of civilisation, but its perplexing inter-racial life puzzles the most experienced.

This is not work for a “prentis han.” Training’ and practice in simpler, if not less arduous, spheres is indispensable. So in the providence of God, Thomas Jackson spent twenty years in regions which skirt Whitechapel, and which present its problems in mitigated form. But even the Whitechapel work scarcely eclipses that of Clapton, where, on bitter winter’s mornings, the pinched faces of shivering children were made to glow by the gift of hot breakfasts; where the sick received expert medical attention; and the poor, who often lose their rights because they do not know them, had free legal aid. Long before Education Authorities were endowed with powers enabling them to find food for impoverished school children, or the State offered public medical service in the Insurance Act, these things were being done by the Clapton Primitive Methodist Mission.



This is the invariable order. Religion pioneers the cause of social relief. The first and most thorough investigator into the life of the poor is the missionary. He, too, is the earliest experimenter in methods of social succour. Only when Christian philanthropy has shown and proved the way, does the State walk therein. But during all these years the missionary’s heart was hankering after Whitechapel—the place of feeble beginnings. The opportunity came in the year 1896, when he astonished the General Missionary Committee by proposing to buy the Working Lads’ Institute at a cost of nine thousand two hundred pounds, and to make it the headquarters of a Primitive Methodist Mission for East London. The proposal excited grave misgivings. It was thought that there was no constituency for our denomination in Whitechapel. Besides “a debt of nine thousand two hundred pounds, well—!” Even Mr, Jackson’s best friends were fearful. They did not believe much in the mission, but fortunately they did believe a great deal in the missionary. Only when he stated that he was so convinced of the Divine call that he was prepared to live as well as toil in Whitechapel did the Committee, by a very narrow vote, sanction the project. The property was thus acquired, and afterwards, a further extension made by the purchase of Brunswick Hall (an abandoned Congregational church) at a cost of seven thousand pounds. For a while the General Missionary Committee paid the interest on the Institute mortgage, but this was soon repaid, and Whitechapel Mission is unique in that it has made no charge, either towards original cost or subsequent maintenance, on our Connexional Funds. All its property is now freehold and debtless. During the twenty-one years of the Mission’s existence, over seventy thousand pounds has been raised for all purposes. Surely this is modern confirmation of the ancient belief that he who would risk all on faith’s venture may depend upon his steps being “ordered by the Lord.”

When we took possession of the Institute, our denomination was solely represented by the Missionary, his wife and family. This was no case of a society moving into more commodious premises. There was the empty, silent building— a reservation for prisoners of the Cross. But they



had to be captured. A flank movement against the powers of darkness, in the shape of social ministries, was sure to be made; but a frontal attack, a direct public assault was not less necessary. For this, that first Sunday morning on Mile End Waste set the type. There is no finer place on earth for the proclamation of the Gospel than Whitechapel Road described by Sir Walter Besant as "the finest thoroughfare in the world." At night-time, when life is normal, its immense breadth is illuminated by brilliant electric arc lamps, and beneath that fluctuating glare, passes the motliest procession that ever the sun shone on. It is drawn from every country in Europe, and in addition are negroes, lascars and celestials from the dock districts of the Thames. Jews, uncompromisingly advertising their race in facial contour, are preponderant. But natives of our own isle are here too; mostly of the poorer sort, unfortunate and broken. It was not ever thus with all of them. The man who slouches past in the shadows may have journeyed through brilliance into his present unrelieved gloom, from gleaming height to torturing depths of shame. The ruthless beast of evil habit has pounced upon him, brought him down, torn, maimed, and almost devoured him. Fortunately, the

majority of the passers-by are not pierced by this sharp sense of contrast. They were born into poverty; and are now just ordinary poor folk relieving their almost un leisured lives by this evening stroll down the Road. In the very widest part is a little company of people grouped round a portable harmonium. The leader announces a hymn, to which the throng gives little attention. Just a few stragglers gather round. Then a girl with a sweet voice will sing a solo. Just a simple, homely song with a refrain like:—

“At the close of the day, ’twill be sweet to say,
I have brought some lost one home.”

The music is very restful, and the crowd is very tired. Some hundreds linger on the dying notes of the simple melody. The missionary pushes his advantage. If Jacob’s ladder can be set up from Charing Cross, why not build a bridge for recollection from Whitechapel Road across, leagues of land, even over the grey sea itself, to some homestead, the memory of which is a sweet pain? When the home-hunger is set up in the heart, people don’t resent being told that they are not so good as in the old days. Many such have followed the group of Christian workers into Brunswick Hall and have found their Father’s home.

Work of quite a special kind is done for the poor women of the district. The first meeting for women was far from cheering. Only four attended and two of these were in a drunken state. Four times in a month the same four women met. It seemed as if the number was to remain at four. However, at the fourth meeting, they were all quite sober. One of the workers in downcast mood, suggested to the Superintendent that the meeting should be given up. °Given up?” said he. “Why, when we began, two of the four had been drinking, to-day they were quite respectable. That is an improvement of fifty per cent in a month. I’m satisfied. We must persevere.” Perseverance was signally rewarded. Now a great gathering of women takes place week by week at Brunswick Hall. Scores have been converted and have joined the Church. The influence of that meeting in promoting sobriety, cleanliness, thrift, and health, is immeasurable.

An innovation in Primitive Methodism was the furnishing and opening of a Rescue Home for destitute lads and juvenile criminals. Homelessness leads to deterioration, physical and moral. Owing to its extraordinary temptations it is a public peril. What can be done for the venturesome youth, who, through any cause, finds himself stranded in London? Often his appearance before the magistrate is the first public indication of his condition. Whitechapel Mission provides dormitory accommodation for forty lads of this class. Each lad is tended and tested, and when he has proved himself, employment is found for him and he becomes self-supporting. Over two thousand have passed through the home, and very rarely has an employer complained of the conduct of any. This branch of the work has especially appealed to magistrates, who in handing over first offenders to the Probation Officer have requested that the youths shall be taken to the Whitechapel Home. In the “City,” this work is so esteemed that its anniversary meeting is almost invariably graced by the presence of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs.

In every greatly populated tract of our country there are many children who sleep in a place called home, but who find neither comfort nor enjoyment there. A real home is surely the birthright of every child. The boys of East London find it in the Institute. Its clubs, games, library, reading-room and gymnasium cause the place to throb with juvenile life. The needs of slum children have always Had the chief place in Mr. Jackson’s sympathy. The man who has given one million free meals to the

waifs may safely claim to be the friend of “nobody’s children.” In recent times the National Service Dinners have been an unspeakable boon to the little folk. For a penny a dinner is provided consisting of soup, potatoes, and bread, followed by plain pudding and jam— yes, jam! Thirty thousand of these dinners were supplied last year.

But what of the adult sinner—the man who has had his chances and lost them? Is it possible to win back to moral vision and self-respect, the lost soul? It is a grim task, often threatening to drain the liveliest optimism. Nothing short of an invincible faith in the Saviour of men can maintain the belief that

“The vilest sinner may return.”

Whitechapel. Mission witnesses to that undying faith. The plan of giving a plain supper to the men of the “doss houses,” and to discharged prisoners was adopted twenty years ago. A short evangelistic service follows supper, and by personal dealing the men are helped towards reformation. The night shelter for men was opened during a winter of great severity, and was continued through the following winters as need became urgent. Each man admitted to the shelter was given a supper on entering, and a breakfast early the next morning. Facilities were offered for repairing clothing, mending boots and generally improving the appearance of the men in the hope of assisting them to procure employment. These efforts often succeeded, and better still, some of the erstwhile “wasters” of the shelter are now local preachers and church officials.

Much might be written of The Holiday and Convalescent Home at Southend-on-Sea, where nearly ten thousand visitors have found enjoyment and health; of the Poor Man’s Lawyer, deservedly popular because of invaluable legal advice given to thousands of the poorest: but the Primitive Methodist Mission in Whitechapel is, above all, an evangelistic agency. In the effort to further the Work of Redemption in the world, a church has been formed which demonstrates in its specifically spiritual institutions the operations of vitality and power which might well be the envy of more affluent communities. Because its members have not forgotten “the horrible pit” whence they were digged they give themselves with zeal to Christian service in the Sunday school and open-air meetings, and with gladness to Christian testimony in the class-meeting and Endeavour society.

The boundaries of the Mission are very elastic and change according to denominational requirements. Southend-on-Sea was missioned from East London. The first service was held on the Marine Parade, and there a collection was taken for the new chapel which then existed only in the missionary’s intention. Southend is now a circuit. Goudhurst, a rural mission station in lovely Kent, was to be closed down, and sanction was actually given for the sale of its chapels. Instead, it came under the care of Whitechapel Mission. Goudhurst is a mission station still. When the Walmsley Orphan Home and Mission, at Leeds, was offered to the Connexion, it was accepted subject to its becoming a branch of Whitechapel. For two years Mr. Jackson gratuitously superintended the work and established the present “Brudenell Road Home for Friendless Boys.”

Thus achievement has followed faith. While other Free Churches have deserted the habitation of the poor “through lack of funds,” Primitive Methodism has become increasingly known and esteemed. Its influence upon the public movements and general life of the East End is increasing. By every approved test of success, spiritual and material, Whitechapel Mission has conspicuously succeeded. How much of this is due to the quick initiative, the firm resolution, the tremendous industry, the unconquerable courage, and the glowing optimism of the Founder will never be known. But to him,

and to the lady, his companion of the toilsome years, the love of our people is given. It is the only reward they covet among men.

“To many a foundering soul they stretched
The hands of help; and on their eyes was caught,
The light of Heaven, that brightens into hope,
The sinner’s hope, from Him, the Crucified.”

References

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