

## Our Centenary in Oldham

### Transcription of article published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. T. Bullock

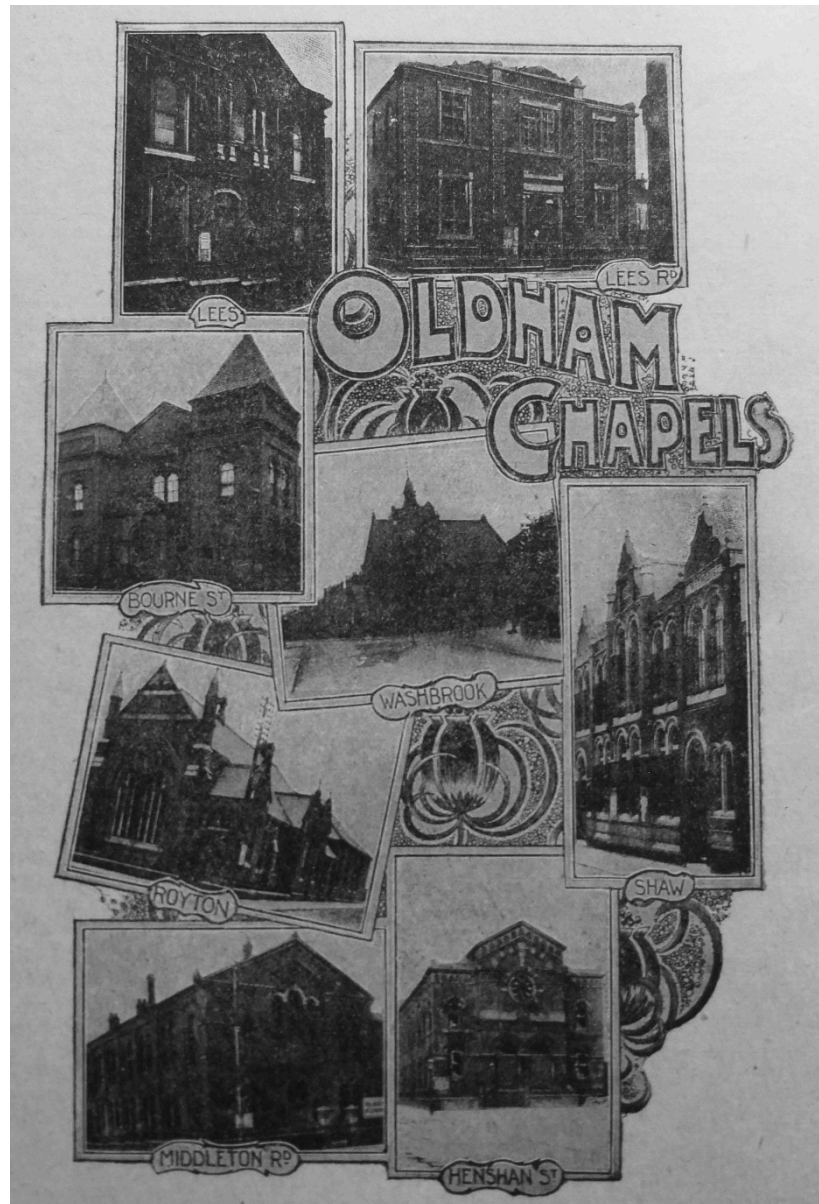
ON Bartholomew's Day, 1662, the Rev. Robert Constantine, the Vicar of St. Mary's, the Parish Church of Oldham, was ejected from his benefice. About ten years later he took out an authority to preach, and opened a conventicle on the eastern side of the town. The cause he established still flourishes, and marks the beginning of a Nonconformist appeal, which was destined to find a hearty and increasing response in a town, the industry of which has demanded large and rapid progress. The Free Churches occupy a strong position, and are well represented in the public life of the borough, having supplied eight of the last ten Mayors, three of whom have belonged to our Church. It is not surprising to find that, at a time when Oldham was a village on a hill, upon the slopes of which shepherds watched their flocks, much sympathy and following were found for those who stood for liberty of thought and worship. The dense population of to-day is of a robust and vigorous type, thinking aloud, almost boisterously, whom we cannot imagine as resting content to be a mere repository of ancient symbols, or to remain docilely in an ecclesiastical rut. Large crowds gathered around our early missionaries in field and street, many attracted by the unconventional services, and others merely inquisitive, but the hearts of not a few warmed to the gracious message and rejoiced in newness of life. Preaching in the open air, however, was not new to the neighbourhood, as in 1802 the Rev. James Hare, a Wesleyan, was speaking in the market-place, when James Wild, one of our earliest workers, was converted. In 1820, Wild attended a great camp-meeting at Droylsden, being convinced of the importance of this apostolic method of extending the Kingdom of God. At its close



THE OLDHAM MINISTERS.  
TOP ROW : G. R. BRAKE, T. BULLOCK, J. HENDERSON.  
BOTTOM ROW : H. SMITH, H. G. MARSH, M.A., B.D., S.  
BUCKLEY, C. H. RATCLIFFE.

he exclaimed: "Would to God these men would come to Oldham!" The Droylsden meeting was one of many held by missionaries sent from Tunstall to Lancashire.

They soon reached Oldham, and in 1820 house meetings were established which were supplied with preachers from Manchester. In addition to these services, two classes were formed. Robert Ashworth and James Wild led one at Brook, Bardsley, and Peter Macdonald was leader at Oldham, helped by Wild and Ashworth, and the names of Thomas Mannock and Joseph Riley, are also recorded in connection with this class. We do not know the names of those who first missioned Oldham, and the first occasions on which men of prominence are mentioned in association with the place are not happy. On June 17th, 1821, S. Waller, who had preached twice that day and walked fourteen miles, was accosted by Samuel Newton, a constable, for blocking the public thoroughfare at Ashton-under-Lyne, and was summoned to appear at the Petty Court at Oldham. From this court he was sent to the New Bailey Sessions, Salford,



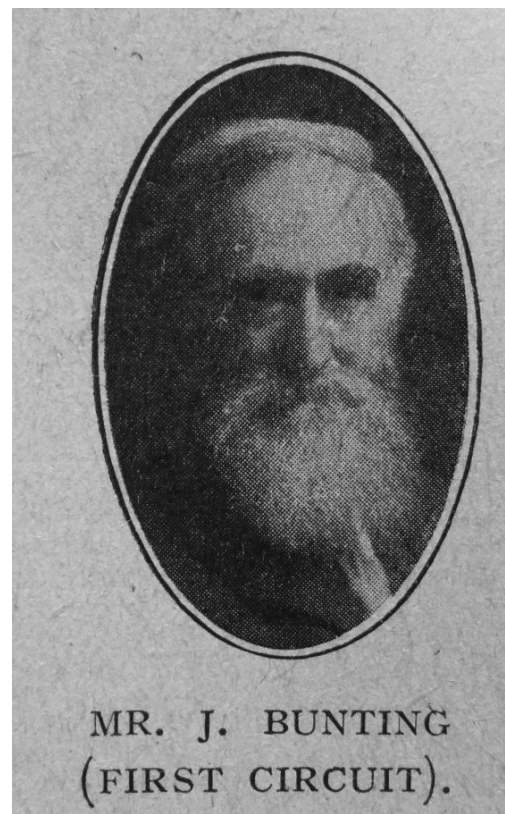
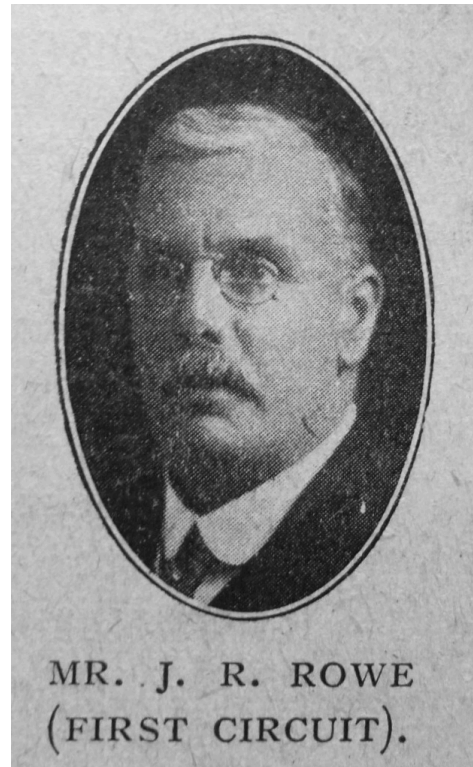
where he was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Walton Carter tells in his Journal how on July 8th, 1821, he preached in the open air at Ashton to a large congregation, but whilst preaching he was interrupted by the constable, who asked him to desist, and on his refusing to do so, he was knocked off the steps amongst the people. "After this," he says, "he took hold of my coat collar, shook me and tore my coat. Here the crowd was ready to take up arms for me; the people, on seeing the constable use me so ill, came forward in a body, and had he attempted to take me to prison (as he threatened) no doubt something worse would have happened. All this time the people cried: "Preach! preach!" When the constable had gone he finished his sermon. Four days afterwards, however, he was summoned to appear before the magistrates at Oldham. Several others were summoned to appear, but charges were only proceeded with against Carter and a Mr. Gibson. They

avowed the Lord had commissioned them to preach, and they regarded not bonds and imprisonment for His sake. They declined to find bail, and had to wait at an inn until night when they were sent for and their own bail taken to appear at the sessions.

Much interest was taken in these cases, and soon after the testimony in the police court—on September 2nd—the voice of John Verity was heard in the streets. He records that he “preached in Oldham afternoon and evening; thousands crowded to hear the word of life in the open air, and a life-giving word it proved; one got liberty, two backsliders were reclaimed, and seven persons united in society with us.” On the following day he “spoke again at Oldham, two or three got liberty, two backsliders were recovered, and eleven joined our Society.”

The Revs. James Farrar and John Abbia also visited Oldham. With the enlarging membership house meetings and classes multiplied, and arrangements were made for more open-air services. The most notable camp-meeting was one held at Bardsley on May 19th, 1822. The preachers came from Manchester, and whilst in the morning one preaching stand was sufficient, two had to be arranged for the afternoon, and these were scarcely adequate to the need, for it is recorded that fourteen thousand people were present. Walton Carter was in charge, and five praying companies were appointed to link up the preaching periods. Two other companies took up a position at such a distance as to arrange for continuous prayer during the whole of the time. Many were won for God, forty making immediate public declaration. This camp-meeting was a source of much uplift, and helped to establish the cause which had already registered much success, for the first Manchester Minute Book records in 1821: “Mumps and Oldham, one hundred and sixty members.”

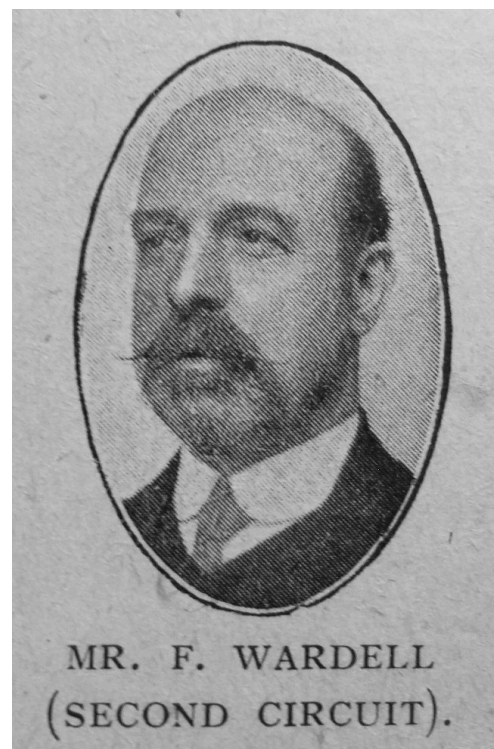
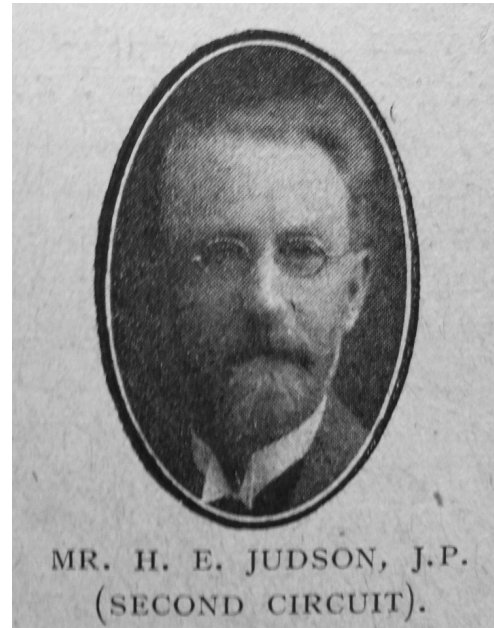
In September, 1822, Oldham became a separate circuit with two hundred and sixty-five members. This step was speedily justified by the revival which followed within its area, and the extensive operations from the new centre, the report to the succeeding Conference showing four hundred and eighty-three members. The first plan of the new circuit contained places in four counties — Cheshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire, in addition to Lancashire. There is evidence of the self-discipline and sacrifice with which the people entered into the work on the first plan, as a footnote announces that a fast day had been appointed to precede a special offering.



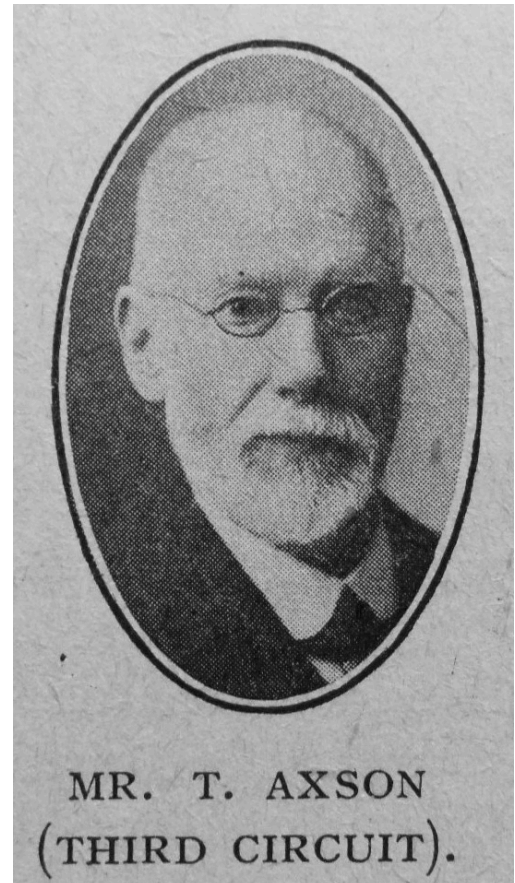
With one exception—Peter Macdonald —only very scanty sources are available for gleaned information of the men who laid well and deep these foundations, and then, with untiring zeal, penetrated the regions beyond. It would seem to have fallen largely to the local men. Macdonald was an Irishman, with all the characteristics of Erin deeply impressed. He was reared and rigidly instructed in Roman Catholicism, and became a zealot of the family faith. As a boy he acted as an acolyte, and “tinkled the bells at the celebration of Mass in his native county of Carlow.” After he came to England he was attracted to Methodism. Its members were living epistles unto him, and led him to the open Bible, by which he was led, under the guidance of the Spirit, into light and liberty. In public speaking and matters of procedure he was an invaluable leader. James Wild was also of the robust type. He had served in the Army abroad, and indulged in varied wickedness, but on his return home he changed the bravado of the world for the bravery of the Christian, and through him the pilgrim Songs of Zion roused many an Oldham street. Robert Ashworth, a saint of the quiet life, abundant in labour, should be mentioned as representing many who did much to serve and establish the cause. The ministers on the first plan were Thomas Bradshaw and James Smith, and the other preachers were Joseph Bold, John Howcroft, Thomas Hannam and William Whipp, in addition to whom there were two on trial and twelve exhorters appointed in couples.

Our first “church” was known as “Ashworth’s Stable,” and was situated in the heart of the town. It was transformed and arranged so as to meet the needs until more suitable premises could be found, but the original purpose of the building did not impede the outpouring of the Spirit upon the crowded congregation, nor dimmed the glory of Him of whose humble advent it constantly reminded the people. The tenure was short because the accommodation was very inadequate. Again only temporary premises could be obtained, a machine shop in Grosvenor Street being adapted for our purposes, which, however, made it possible to commence a Sunday school. In the same street a church was built in 1826, which served until 1836, when a more commodious building was erected in Boardman Street, of which Hugh Bourne preached the opening sermons. Whilst on this visit he headed a procession and delivered seven one-minute-and-a-half sermons in the street. The Henshaw Street Church was built in 1871.

Under the strenuous ministry of John Garner, a revival began in 1829, and continued until 1831, by which time



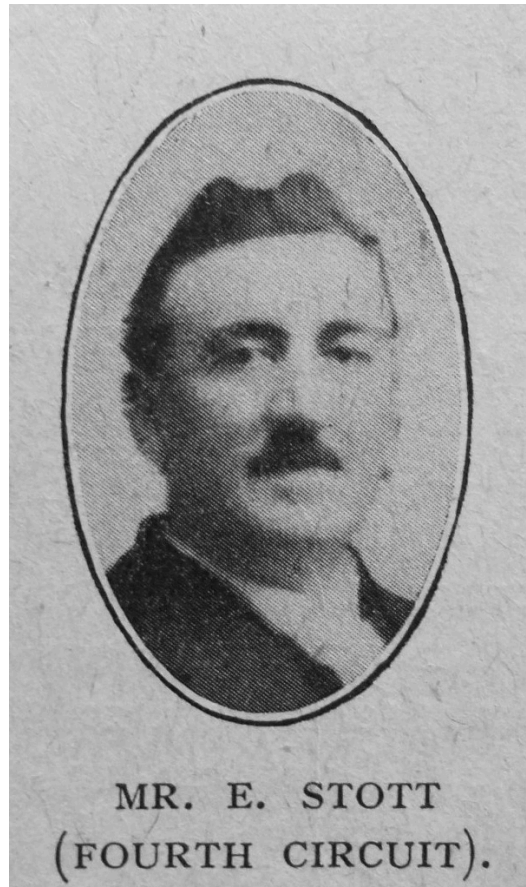
two hundred members were added, but the services were marked by strange features which caused him some apprehension. Some suddenly fell to the ground, others would “go into trance conditions, or yet again, would leap or dance.” The report of these proceedings soon spread to Manchester, whence several went that they might see these peculiar accompaniments of the revival, and found them to be, as Jonathan Ireland said, “general all over the chapel.” Garner, however, believed in the sincerity of his people, and deprecated that any suspicion of cultivating the abnormal for its own sake should be cast upon them. The increased membership of this period led to the securing of a home in Vineyard Street for the Mumps Society, which, though mentioned first in the Manchester Minute Book, had been so hustled from place to place as to prevent the conserving of its strength and the organising of its forces. In 1840 it removed to a more spacious room over a shop at the junction of Lees Road with Cross Street. In this upper room there were many seasons of rejoicing and refreshing, notwithstanding that, during the week-days, the throb of industry in adjoining rooms fell upon the ear. Just a decade afterwards, the first church and school were erected in Lees Road, though for a time the front basement was let as dwellings. Prosperity, however, soon demanded that these should be added for school purposes. This church became the head of the Second Circuit in 1862, but two years later the present church was built. The revival of 1829-31 also led to definite steps being taken to obtain a home for the society which had been commenced at Hollinwood, for its close synchronised with the opening of a chapel there. This served until 1861, when it was succeeded by the church which in 1880 became the head of the Third Circuit.



The early 'sixties deserve to be specially noted because of the way in which our own people, under the stress of great industrial hardship, met and mastered their difficulties and made much progress. Lancashire was in the grip of the cotton famine, caused by the American Civil War. As the struggle between North and South proceeded, by which eventually the dark skins of the west were loosed from the bands of their slavery, the pinch of poverty was very acutely felt in the County Palatine. But in these days of little material resource, when we might have expected to find the reign of despondency rather than the Spirit of adventure, our fathers with magnificent daring laid broader foundations than had hitherto been undertaken, and in nothing daunted, raised their walls. With ringing “Hallelujahs,” the doors of new churches were opened. It would be difficult to find a more pronounced triumph of soul over circumstance. But the height of achievement was not in the rearing of churches; it was in the reclamation of men. The depression at the commencement of the industrial unrest had occasioned the reporting of decreases for two quarters. This, however, was only temporary, for special evangelistic work was begun, and in the Hollinwood area, where the Rev. James Travis had been placed in charge, this led to the establishing of the society at Washbrook. After successful open-air meetings, a loom-house was hired, and regular services and Sunday school

opened. This cause prospered for many years, but more difficult days came, and it was during the ministry of the Rev. Joseph Yearsley that another revival took place, the result of which was not only a great ingathering of souls, but also the labour and sacrifice by which the church was made structurally safe and its finances put on a sound basis. In 1899, the Middleton Road Church was made the head of the Fourth Circuit. The society goes back to the early 'fifties, when an old school-room at Cowhill was used for services. This building stood on ground now utilised by the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company. Subsequently meetings were held in a house in Middleton Road, not far from which a site was secured, and the present church built in 1869, for which purpose this society steadily pursued its course, and gathered its strength, during the lean commercial years.

Space forbids more than a passing reference to our other churches. Bardsley Church represents the original Brook Society, and therefore takes us back to our beginnings. Lees follows closely, tracing its house meetings as far as 1822. Shore Edge and Healds Green, of old-song fame, lie on the hills flanking the westerly side of the town, and are rich in lore of the days of long ago. Royton and Shaw are highly prosperous churches in populous adjacent districts. Waterhead, North Moor, Albert Mount, Copster Hill, and Hollins Road are within the borough, the importance of whose story is only exceeded by the enormous possibilities clamant on all sides. New Moston is within the Manchester city boundary, and in a residential area which presents a challenge to us. Burnley Lane, our most recent undertaking, is in Chadderton, and the gradual overcoming of its financial demands is giving a larger opportunity for manifold service in a promising neighbourhood. With eighteen churches, sixteen hundred members, and a wealth of young life, which bears its tribute to past labours as it gives also rich hope for the years to be, the centenary is being celebrated. The incubus of debt is not so heavy at any point but that it can be lifted, and confidence is everywhere expressed in this result during the months just ahead. But above all, our churches deeply desire to gather around the central fires, whence the glow and consuming passion of other days came, that now as of yore, the streets may reverberate with the songs of victory, and the shouts, of liberty may be heard within their walls.




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#### References

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