

The origins of Primitive Methodism in Chester and Saughall

Notes for a talk that was to have been given by Tim Macquiban to the Saughall History Society in March 2020

- A Context of emergence of PMs – origin of title
- B Earliest developments of PM movement
- C Coming of PMs to Chester and Saughall
- D The early itinerants
- E The Chapels – building and rebuilding
- F The early members and ministers – how many ? who were they ? reasons for increase and decrease eg. Expulsions and cattle plague 1866. Rev. George Stacey and difficulty in retaining/recruiting ministers
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WESLEYAN METHODISM, HUGH BOURNE AND MOW COP

Background to John and Charles Wesley until deaths in 1788 and 1791.

Hugh Bourne was born in North Staffordshire on 3rd April 1772 and the area around Bemersley and Englesea Brook in South Cheshire where he settled has a very special significance for the people called Primitive Methodists. He is associated with the movement of revival which started in that area over 200 years ago and played a central role, along with his colleague William Clowes, until his death in 1852. He died that year on 11th October and there was a tremendous outpouring of grief. On the day of his funeral on the 17th, folk gathered at his brother James` brother`s house in Bemersley and then there was a procession from there to Englesea Brook where he had requested to be buried. Sunday School children joined this and sang along the way. The echo went up: “Mortals cry, a man is dead! Angels sing, a child is born!”

His parents Joseph and Ellen made sure that he had a good education, in a Church school. He loved reading from an early age, books given to him by his mother including the life of saintly John Fletcher and the sermons of John Wesley. His father was often in his cups and wasn` t such a good role model. He trained as an engineer and millwright with his uncle, travelling around the area, probably more fortunate than many of the simple country labourers and working men of the mines and potteries of that area who didn` t go far from home. And when he got to be a preacher, he travelled mostly on foot, upwards of 20 miles a day, which left him with problems with my feet. To the end these plagued him.

For him, as for many of the early Primitive Methodists, the turning point came when he was reading and meditating and praying one Spring Sunday morning in 1799: he wrote; “I was

able to believe in Christ with my heart ... the burden of my sin was quite gone.” It was an experience of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins similar to the one that the founder of Methodism John Wesley had in 1738.

He joined the society of Wesleyan Methodists at Burslem, and attended their prayer meetings, listened to the sermons of the itinerant preachers and participated in the love feasts which were occasions of great spiritual renewal. What he experienced for himself, he wanted to pass on to others, starting with his dissolute cousin Daniel Shubotham who had a change of heart and life and became useful to the Primitive Methodists for some years.

It was at Mow Cop, an outcrop near Biddulph, that he preached for the first time. On 12th July 1801. “It was settled fine weather ... and the people lined the hillside in the field, sitting on the dry warm ground. Almost everything showed the work of the Lord.” He was so nervous he didn’t once look at the congregation but mopped his brow. He gave an account of his conversion and one person was moved by it. Mow Cop was that day “consecrated to the Most High”. Someone later wrote that he had “caused a camp-meeting to be held without a name!”

And that’s where the trouble began. Times were difficult. They were in the middle of the war with Napoleon and the government was afraid of any troubles at home. So open air preaching, especially if it involved ordinary uneducated people, especially when women too were involved, caused them to be anxious. Even though the numbers of those converted and becoming members greatly increased. Nevertheless the Wesleyan Methodists became cautious. They didn’t want to end up in jail or to have them banned from preaching. So when Bourne and others started to advocate for more open air preaching, for camp meetings and for the use of the gifts of the women preachers, then the more traditional people drew back.

It was in 1805 that he first met William Clowes. He was 8 years his junior so Bourne acted as a mentor to him as he cut his teeth in preaching. That same year Lorenzo Dow came to the area. Cousin Daniel Shobotham had heard him and thought that camp-meetings would be a good way to increase their impact in this area.

They had a great gathering up on Mow Cop on 31st May 1807. Maybe as many as 4,000 came. It was difficult to count them all. And so successful was it that many lives were changed. You’d think the Wesleyans would have been glad for them to add so many new members. But the conference meeting in Liverpool that year had outlawed camp meetings, declaring them to be “highly improper”. And then the local Burslem Circuit meeting turned against them and turned Bourne and Clowes out! Why? Because they chose to follow their conscience in this great revival. They put up three tents there as a sign that they intended to continue the work. And they held camp meetings in Staffordshire and Shropshire too which were equally successful. As they were forced out of the chapels, so they moved to the fields

and into the kitchens and barns of their supporters. Many started to leave the Wesleyan chapels in disgust. Despite not wishing to form a new denomination, their continuing to preach in defiance of the authorities meant that was inevitable.

Lorenzo Dow, that great American evangelist who inspired the camp meeting movement this side of the Atlantic, was a real revivalist preacher and so eccentric that they called him “crazy Dow”! It’s just as well he moved on so often otherwise the government might have locked him up for stirring the crowds. He was republican by sympathy. The only Kingdom he believed in was the Kingdom of God! And that was evident in the hymns the early Primitive Methodists sang:

See how the scriptures are fulfilling,
Poor sinners are returning home;
The times the prophets were foretelling,
With signs and wonders now is come.

And what a prophet he was, calling the fire down from heaven like Elijah, and announcing the Kingdom of Heaven was coming just like Jesus did. Repent all you sinners before it is too late!! Bourne and Clowes tried to be the sort of preacher he was in stirring up the crowds and calling them to repentance. “Pardon, and holiness, and heaven” in the words of one of our spiritual forebears, Charles Wesley, that great hymnwriter.

Of course, there had been revivals before. Bourne heard about them in the 1790s when he was a young adult soon after he’d been converted when living at nearby Bemersley. And many left the Wesleyans to join Bourne and Clowes when they decided to form the group which was the acorn that became a mighty oak when the Primitive Methodists were formed. It was hard work in those early days as they and the preachers they recruited trudged from hamlet and village to the towns of the Potteries and beyond. Bourne used to put two or three hard boiled eggs in his pocket with a little dry bread. When he got to a well he would stop for a drink.

When did the Primitive Methodist Connexion come into being? And why Primitive Methodists? Well, the name came from John Wesley on a visit to Chester in 1790 when he reminded his followers that they should go back to the primitive simplicity of the early days of Christianity and of the Methodist movement. The Connexion emerged over a whole decade, from the first camp-meeting here at Mow Cop in 1807, to the formation of the first circuit and printing of class tickets in 1811, to the first assembly or Conference held in Hull in 1820. By then they were beginning to take on the shape of their rivals the Wesleyans. But they were very different in the way they used the gifts of lay people and the status of the itinerant preachers. Bourne wasn’t the first President of the Connexion. Nor was William Clowes. They were the servants of the local circuits, even though Hugh Bourne was privileged to do much of the work, with his brother James, on the publications, of

magazines, and tracts, and hymnals which resourced the movement. Many of them were printed on their press at Bemersley.

Inevitably money was short, and the preachers were not given much to keep themselves – they needed other employment to support their ministries. Many members were poor and illiterate, in contrast to the rather better off Wesleyans. They were content to be a people on the move without the debts of building large chapels around their necks. Their enthusiasm soon meant that Primitive Methodism moved rapidly beyond rural Cheshire and Staffordshire, to the towns of Derby and Nottingham and beyond as the word spread with the fire of their preaching and praying in the way the Ranters did, loudly and enthusiastically, without regard for the polite reserve others thought religious people ought to exhibit. And thousands came to their meetings and got signed up as members - over 16,000 in the space of the first ten years.

THE COMING OF PMs TO CHESTER AND SAUGHALL

Just over 100 years ago, Saughall celebrated the centenary of Primitive Methodism coming to the area. On 19th June that year they had a demonstration on Whit Monday (a Day beloved in Methodism and other religious groups for celebrating their identity with open air festivals and walks). A garden Party and rally was held in the field of Mr. E. Williams JP at The Croft, with tea from 4pm to 5pm followed by a great public meeting presided over by Alderman William Vernon. in a marquee with a united choir from the three circuits in Chester and district leading the hymn singing. Hundreds attended.

So what were they celebrating? It was the arrival of PM preachers of the Burland (near Nantwich) branch of the first circuit who came to Chester city and surrounding area, establishing preaching places which in time became chapels and societies. In the Spring of 1819, John Wedgwood inaugurated a mission, starting in Huxley and moving into the city the following year. It is recorded that “the countryside was moved at his coming. His open air and even his early morning services drew crowds”. From Churton, the preachers moved into the city and to Saughall and beyond. Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Brownsword and others came. Often they preached at the Cross in Chester to hundreds of onlookers, moving down Watergate Street to a yard off it and on to Handbridge (places where there was open ground). Afterwards, sympathisers who became members opened up their humble cottages for prayer meetings. The first place licensed for worship was in Steven Street in 1821 and the first chapel was established in the poorer neighbourhood of Boughton in Steam Mill Street, on land given by Ephraim Sadler.

From the beginning the Sadlers were involved in the spread of Primitive Methodism.

At Huxley, Sampson Turner, another itinerant preacher, visited the farmstead of Ephraim Sadler who with his brother William at Tiverton did much to encourage the early growth of PMism. From this farm much of the organisation and support for the early causes was orchestrated. It was there that John Sadler, son of Ephraim, was born, who went on to serve

35 years as a local preacher and class leader. He was converted in 1819 under the preaching of Sampson Turner who came to the village saying: "Turn to the Lord and seek salvation". His tragic life included the early death of his wife and a cattle epidemic in 1843 which virtually ruined him. He died in Kelsall in 1871.

By 1822 Chester and its surrounding area became a separate branch of the Burland Circuit as the movement accelerated. In the Spring of 1822 Thomas Brownsword wrote: "I went to Chester and at eight o'clock preached on the Cross to 500 people. Many seemed much affected." After meetings in Watergate Street and Handbridge they had intended to have a meeting in Boughton " .. but the weather was so unfavourable that we were obliged to divide into companies and go into three houses and hold prayer meetings". It must have been such occasions that made them determine to find larger and enclosed premises. So the chapel in Steam Mill Street was obtained, helped substantially by the Rev. John Sadler's father (John?). Here and elsewhere the early PMs encountered much hostility as the rowdier low life of the city "hooted and howled and ran up against the worshippers". The city magistrates were unsympathetic as they said that it served them right for disturbing the peace of the city. Such was the reputation of the so-called Ranters! But by October 1821 when Thomas Bateman arrived to preach he found the situation much calmer: "Surely the bitter persecution will now drop?" As we shall hear later, that was a pious hope only!

By 1824, the cause had grown so that Chester was made a separate Circuit with its own itinerant minister stationed. By 1863, it had grown to having three ministers, 80 local preachers, 15 chapels including a new one at Saughall, the second largest society after what was soon to become George Street, the head of the circuit, 27 other preaching places and over 750 members.

EARLY ITINERANTS AND THE FIRST CHAPEL

Many of the itinerant preachers who came to lead services and mid week class and prayer meetings were very temporary, some staying as little as 6 months, others up to two years at the most for much of the first half of the nineteenth century. Only one stayed three years in exceptional circumstances. Many of those who served in Chester in the 1820s came from the Burland circuit, covering much of West and South Cheshire. Many of them were native to the area or across the border in Flintshire or neighbouring Shropshire. Most were young converts, often in their late teens and unmarried. Most were farm workers or related to agriculture, or craftsmen, shoemakers and the like. They served a short apprenticeship as local preachers and then were sent to their stations to commence their ministry. Many had to cover great distances for three or more preaching appointments on a Sunday. Their stipend was meagre; £36 p.a. for a married man (this rose to £50 p.a. by 1851) and £16 for a single man. To which was added the rent of accommodation and subsistence.

William Holt was the minister in the circuit when Saughall had its first chapel established in 1831, a cottage subsequently known as , Dorina on Church Road, occupied in the 1960s by Mr and Mrs Joe Reynolds. Before that the Primitive Methodists had met in a cottage near

The Towers. William Holt wrote in the PMM that "On Sunday 15th January 1832, our new chapel at Saughall was opened for divine worship, by Brothers Wedgwood and Bateman from the Burland Circuit. This chapel is eight yards long, six and a half yards wide, and twelve feet high to the square. The whole expense including a coal house amounts to about £112. This chapel is an ornament to the village; the congregations are good and the Lord is reviving his work." He wrote again in the summer of the increase of work in the circuit: "backsliders are healed, wanderers are reclaimed, and the preachers, leaders and members in general are seeking after holiness of heart and expecting a more general revival ... the preaching places have been crowded to excess, sinners have cried for mercy, and the meetings could not be concluded till eleven or twelve o'clock at night." In another article described the "holy fire burning in the circuit and several of the adjacent villages have caught the flame." "The barren places are becoming fruitful and the rough places made plain". On the 2nd September he recorded that at Saughall: "The Lord was with us and we rejoiced together. Our new chapel here has been a blessing. It is well attended and souls have been converted in it." A month later on a Sunday afternoon they held a love feast which was the occasion of a lively meeting.

The 1832 chapel was freehold, held on the connexional deed deposited with William Vickers one of nine trustees who included E Williams JP of The Croft, Thomas Langford, James Shone, Thomas Whitley, Thomas Hughes, William Jones, Richard Hallows, and Richard Frodsham. At that time the population of the village was 480 of which 48 (10%) were PM members. The chapel could seat 108, of which 27 were rented pews and 81 free seating. Of the £120 spent on the building of the chapel, they had a debt of £87 to pay off. The rented pews, six of them, cost £15/15/6d at some later stage. By 1863, when they came to build a new chapel they had reduced the debt on the original chapel to £5.

So what do we know of the chapel and its members in the early 19th century? Bagshaw's Directory of 1850 records that there were two nonconformist chapels (a Primitive Methodist and a (Welsh) Calvinistic Methodist, later called an independent or congregational chapel, and that the Baptists were creating a small chapel on Hermitage Road, also called the Church of Christ. Sadly the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851, the only ever national listing of (supposedly) all churches and chapels, their date of establishment, numbers of sittings and attendances on the Census date in March of that year, fails to record entries for Saughall. The only Anglican presence in the village was that of the National School created at the expense of Thomas Wedge until the building of All Saints later in the century. Of the 500 inhabitants, the more substantial landowners, farmers, craftsmen and tradesmen were listed. Of these the following have been identified from the Circuit membership records as beings PMs. Prominent amongst these was the patriarch, Ephraim Sadler described as a farmer (though as an annuitant in the 1851 Census) along with James Sadler his grandson. Also listed were the farmers Thomas Shepherd, Joseph Corbin and George Shone who had smallholdings in the village. Thomas Johnson lived at Parkgate House. Robert Carter was listed as grocer and baker. Robert Jones as wheelwright

and William Vickers, original trustee and occupier of land on which the new chapel was to be erected, a bricklayer.

The first membership list we have is that of 1838, soon after the first chapel was built. Thomas Langford, William Jones and James Shone were listed as class leaders. All told there were 27 members and 8 on trial, a total of 35. By 1840 this had risen to 43. By the 1850s and 60s, this number rose to the upper 50s and 60s, making Saughall the second largest society in the circuit. The Chapel schedules in the circuit records record 68 members in 1859 with over 100 attending chapel and 30 in the mid week service. That necessitated the building of a new chapel opened in 1865. But the growth was halted in the late nineteenth century.

The stonelaying for the new chapel took place on 7th September 1864, when the stone was laid by Mr Charles Lee, a local preacher from Chester. The silver trowel used was given to the trustees by Ernest and Richard Oulton Lee, his grandsons. The chapel was rapidly built and opened on 20th March the following year. In the Thomas Wedge School Log Book it was recorded that the attendance today was much below average in consequence of a tea party held in the PM Chapel to commemorate the opening of that edifice." It cost £839 and the debt of £400 took until 1901 to clear. The chapel schedule of 1868 showed that the building had 126 seats which had pew rents and 174 which were free, a total accommodation of 300!! But only 200 people were known to attend (though the membership was only 63, declining to 44 by 1871). The accounts show income of around £70, of which £17 came from pew rents, and £29 from special efforts. The rest came from voluntary gifts and the income from the graveyard and rent from a field and cottages. Out of this income, the chapel had to be lit and heated, the caretaker paid and repairs and supplies financed.

A century later, a United Village Centenary Service was held, with a special concert given by the circuit choir the day before.

On the Circuit Plan for 1859 were listed as Society Stewards for Saughall T. Warrington of Poplars Farm, T. Sutton of Strawberry Lane, Mollington, and W E Roberts of Shotwick House. This alerts us to the fact of a gathered membership at Saughall which included members not only from Great and Little Saughall, but also neighbouring Blacon-cum-Crabwall where there was a class and preaching place at one time, at Sands, and in the rest of the parish of Shotwick, as well as the adjacent townships of Mollington and Backford. Some members probably also crossed the border from Sealand down the hill, rather than risking the ferry to nearby Buckley as the nearest society in Flintshire. As the Circuit Quarterly Account Book records, the membership fluctuated in the 1850s from a low of 28 in 1851 to a high of 68 in the years 1858/59. Each society was divided into classes, each with a leader who was the principal lay person locally, leading the weekly class meetings in prayer and bible study when the itinerant minister was unable to be present. Saughall always had two classes, for the main village and for Little Saughall, and occasionally a third for a satellite group, in Upton, or Sands or Blacon.

The membership rolls record when members were sick and unable to attend or when they died or were removed ie migrated elsewhere. But it also recorded when members had to be struck off, for a variety of reasons. Some lost faith (doubtful), some fell away from the high moral standards required for members (as with Samuel Willey removed in 1838 for drunkenness) when they were recorded as “fallen” or “neglect”. Sadly the more precise details are rarely given which means we can only speculate as to what misdemeanours had been committed!! The 1848 circuit report records that John Lockwood was expelled as “not a peaceable man, John Foulkes and John Lee Jones struck off for immorality and Thomas Joinson who “went off as a soldier”. In the early 1850s the circuit was rocked by internal divisions. Two LPs were forced to leave “as a result of unpleasantness” and two the following year “one intoxicated and one fell from grace”. The numbers at Saughall seem to have recovered in the late 1850s particularly under the ministry of Rev. George Stacey. He came aged 45 in 1859 with a family of wife and 7 children (he had been refused some appointments because of the size of his family). Notwithstanding his own personal contribution, the SS at Saughall grew to 94 the following year with 17 teachers. The Circuit requested that the District allow him to stay on an extra year in order to lead the effort to build two new chapels in the circuit, including one at Saughall. The other was to be George Street. He stayed until 1863, superannuated in the circuit in 1869 and when he died the following year was buried in the churchyard at Saughall. His son in law, James Frodsham Robinson, was a druggist in Frodsham and a distinguished topographical botanist and part time lecturer at the newly formed Owen`s College in Manchester. He was an expert on Cheshire meres and the flora and fauna of such.

The circuit reports are full of statistics about all the chapels which enables us to build up a picture of how the local causes were doing. These allow us to see how important Sunday School work was in feeding the increasing membership. In 1838 the SS comprised 4 male teachers, 20 boys and 19 girls as scholars. By 1846, this had risen to 66 scholars, taught by 7 male and 3 female teachers.

Saughall as well as being part of the Chester Circuit was part of the Manchester District of the Primitive Methodist Connexion. Occasionally there was a District meeting held in Chester, as in 1843 when the Chair wrote of the gathering at the Cross where all formed as hollow circle and sang and prayed. “Brother W. Garner from a flight of stairs [by St. Peters`] delivered a short address. Then there was a grand procession towards the camp ground. The inhabitants conducted themselves in a very orderly manner and seemed rather disposed to oblige us than to offer any annoyance ... highly creditable to the ancient and dignified city of Chester.” The camp meeting was held in a field [probably in Boughton] where 5 or 6,000 souls were present. Then in the evening a love feast was held in the chapel nearby in Steam Mill Street. The Chair concluded his report: “Notwithstanding the protracted and severe commercial distress by which the district has been afflicted, we have the pleasure of reporting an increase of 940 members for the year.” In July 1854 similar

events were held on a Sunday reported by Ambrose Kirkland. This time there were 4 or 5,000 persons present.

We know that there were Methodists in Saughall listed in 1790 who were Wesleyans, attending the chapel in the city or the preaching places around. These included Charles and Mary D,one, David Price, Sarah Yoxhall, Margaret Rigby, Ed and Martha Thornton, Silvester Warrington, Benjamin Hancock, Jane Jones, Ann Williams and Catherine Price. Much more work needs to be done to establish whether any or many of these defected to the Primitive Methodists. The family names suggest many did.

So what were the highlights of chapel life in the 19th and early 20th century? We get glimpses from the account books of money paid in to circuit funds as well as expenditure. Special services were held to fund different aspects of church work. Eg. the missionary work overseas, particularly in Australasia which Saughall supported. Sermons were preached on a particular Sunday and funds raised through then collections. The young people had their special efforts as the Juvenile Missionary Association. Christmas was an occasion for the Singers to raise extra funds for causes through the carol singing and the special concerts put on in the chapel. Week by week, services were held at 10-45 am and 6pm on Sundays and then a weeknight service also on Wednesdays or Thursdays, led by the minister or local preachers. Saughall supplied the circuit with a number of LPs in the mid years of the century, notably in 1869, there were as many as 8 LPs from the society (though 3 were supernumerary), two from Sealand (Richard Hallows and William Jones) and the rest from Saughall (T. Whitley, R. Jones, W. Jones, R. Jones and F. Wood). In 1927, the death of Frank Woods aged 78 was recorded in the QM Minutes: 60 years as local preacher, class leader and Choir Master, Sunday School Teacher, Superintendent and Secretary of the Trustees. "Tho` never robust in health his quiet contemplative life and thoughtful service to his native village, part during the Great War 1914-1918 when he acted as Honorary Chaplain at the Village Hospital, will have an abiding influence". Frank Woods epitomises many for whom the chapel was there whole life and world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the PMs were a central part of village life and culture.

Frank would have been part of the society which experienced Black Sunday in 1882. From the beginnings of PM chapels had been associated with the temperance movement and with teetotalism. So too the Salvation Army, founded by William and Catherine Booth who broke away from mainstream Methodism. They formed an organization modelled on militaristic lines to combat societal evils, particularly the "demon drink" and to entice the working class to religion. Their condemnation of intemperance and public houses provoked hostility especially with their methods of singing hymns, clapping, shouting and loudly showing emotion. In Chester they started their activities in November 1881. On Wednesday 26th January 1882 the local paper recorded popular concern when the corps had marched through Saughall, encouraged by local PMs, and residents of the village complained about the noise. Action was demanded of the local council to curb their activities. Things came to a head one Sunday in March when the SA provocatively marched through the working class

and mainly Irish Catholic neighbourhood of Great Boughton on their way to a rally at the Pavilion Rink when fighting and rioting occurred and several were injured. Arrests were made and restrictions put in place as the SA had to rein in their activities.

In Holy Week, there was generally a tea following the Good Friday service. In later years the Chester Male Voice Choir came to give the concert as in 1930. In the summer there was always a circuit garden party, sometimes on occasions held in Saughall, as in July 1896 when it was held at Sunny Bank, by permission of Mr. Jones.

THE POST WAR YEARS

The ministry of Rev R Wilfred Callin (after whose son Brian the Chester MHA home is named) was particularly distinguished as the time when annual sermons were given and the community outreach of the chapel was developed through the purchase of the Town Hall. This became the base for the outstanding youth work done in the village and the basis for a new community hall in the 1960s, as well as the meeting place for such groups as the Foresters Club and the Co-operative Society's Womens` Guild, the Women`s Temperance Society and the newly formed Boy Scouts. The latter group was told in 1937 to vacate the premises as the "rough usage of the property and the nuisance caused in the neighbourhood" had been reported. On occasions some groups advertised a Whist Drive on the premises and had to be reminded that cards, dancing, drinking alcohol and gambling, were not allowed on Methodist trust premises! But healthy sports were and there was a tennis court in the grounds. During the war the premises were used as the base for the ARP activities and meetings of the Home Guard.

The year before the Union of 1932, the chapel was singled out for special attention when one of its members, William Dodd, was sent congratulations by the circuit meeting for his brave conduct in the rescue of a child from drowning." For this action he was given a book.

Tim Macquiban

for the Saughall History Society: March 2020