

Persecution at Bicester

Transcription of an excerpt from Petty, pages 445ff

Wallingford circuit pursued its missionary enterprise in the face of the most inhuman and brutal persecution. The following scene, which occurred at Bicester, in Oxfordshire, reflects the highest disgrace upon the magistrates and other influential inhabitants, as well as upon the ignorant and infuriated rabble that were allowed unrestrained to treat the pious and inoffensive missionaries in so brutal a manner. On Monday, July 31, 1843, Messrs. S. West and C. Elford went to the town, partly with a design to obtain an interview with the magistrates and to request their protection while peacefully proclaiming the gospel of Christ, and partly with the design of preaching there. For several months previously the missionaries who had visited the town had been treated in a very brutal manner, and it was reasonably hoped that the magistrates, on being informed thereof, would afford them legal protection. Only one magistrate could be seen on that day, and he gave the missionaries not a very encouraging reception.

In the afternoon they visited many families in the back streets, and held several short preaching services in the open-air without interruption, and announced their intention to preach in the market-place at six o'clock in the evening. At the appointed hour they repaired to the place, and commenced the service. They were allowed to sing and pray in peace, but Mr. West had not preached above ten minutes before the mob began to pelt them with rotten eggs, of which a plentiful supply had been provided. Mr. Elford responded to the beck of a lady by escaping into her house. He was, however, pursued by some ruffians, who knocked the bolt off the door of the house, and cursing him awfully, seized him with a view to abuse him, and were only prevented by the interference of the lady, his humane and generous protector.

Mr. West was now left to brave the fury of the storm alone, which beat upon him with redoubled fury. He stood a few seconds under the window of a respectable house, where he might reasonably hope to find some shelter; but in this he was disappointed, the inmates poured a quantity of dirty water upon his head. He then forced his way through the mob to an inn on the opposite side of the street, hoping to obtain shelter therein, but he was doomed to disappointment. The ladies (!) and gentlemen (!) were highly diverted with his appearance, besmeared with dirt and rotten eggs, and one of them said it afforded as much *fun as a bull-bait*. But he was not allowed to remain in the house; he was ordered out into the back-yard, to which the mob had access.

The gates were soon surrounded by a multitude who cursed and yelled like madmen, eager to apprehend him, that they might beat him cruelly, if not to take away his life. He had already received many severe blows, when a savage-looking man seized him by the collar of his coat, and with a heavy push forced him towards his persecutors. As he was driven down the street he was again beaten with the fists of the infuriated rabble, and pelted with eggs, gravel, mud, and everything available for the purpose. At the bottom of the street, perceiving that an outer entrance of one of the magistrates' houses was open, he ran into it, but was at once followed, seized, and dragged back into the street, where a quantity of water was poured upon him as he passed a pump-house. He was then pelted and beaten with augmented fury; and one man jumped upon his back, and rubbed mud and gravel about his head and into his right ear. The rage of the persecutors rose to such a height that Mr. West's life was evidently endangered. But a humane gentleman at length interposed. Approaching Mr. West, he kindly said, "Sir, I'll protect you; come along with me," and the persecutors, as if terror-stricken, ceased to beat him, and allowed him to depart in peace.

These cruel and inhuman persecutors were not arraigned before any earthly tribunal for their lawless conduct and their barbarous treatment of the missionaries, but several of the ringleaders were in a few months afterwards summoned into the presence of their Maker, and one of them, the savage-looking man who dragged Mr. West out of the public-house yard, was cut off very suddenly, being found dead in bed.

Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion*, 1880, p445