

VICTORIA GARESFIELD PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL



METHODISM IN THE LOCAL AREA

Methodism was brought to the area in nearby Low Spen by local farmer John Brown who had been converted by John Wesley at Tanfield Lea. Wesley himself visited Spen on several occasions, the first being 14 June 1784 when he preached on the steps at the granary steps of Low Spen farm:



The granary steps at Low Spen, where John Wesley preached at an open-air “camp” meeting.

“I preached at the Lower Spen, 7 or 8 miles from Newcastle. John Brown had been obliged to move hither from Tanfield Leigh, I believe by the providence of God...”

It was at one such camp a century later that William Gardner, who headed the chapel at Victoria Garesfield in his time, was converted to Methodism and a more virtuous way of life.**

In the 1881 census, Sarah Peart, aged 15, a ‘Preacher of Gospel’ figured amongst the residents in Victoria Garesfield.

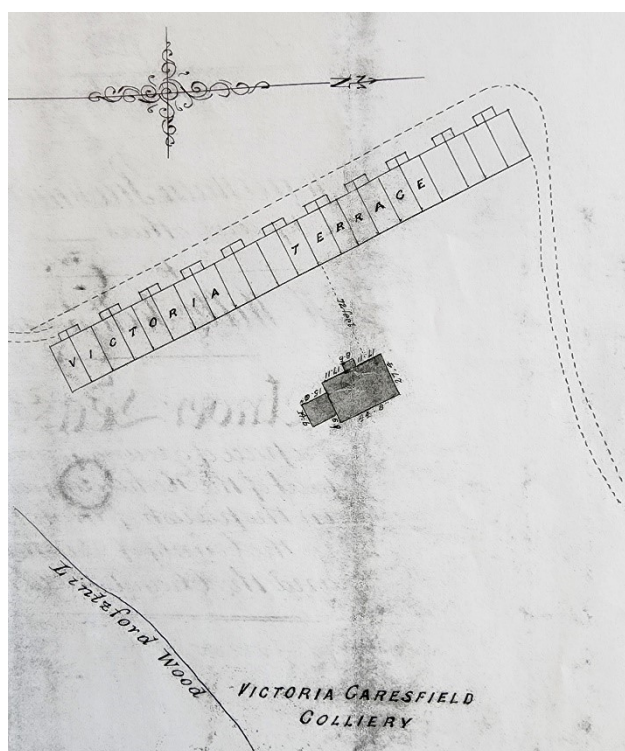
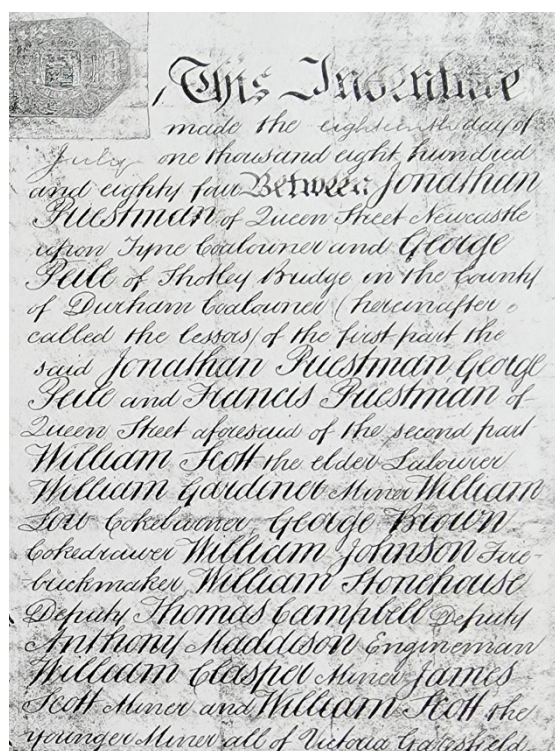
VICTORIA GARESFIELD

Victoria Garesfield was part of the White-le-Head circuit (White-le-Head being near Tanfield), the circuit's Superintendent (head) Preacher in 1884 being William Bowe of Stanley House.

THE CHAPEL

Methodist Chapels were a common feature of mining villages in the Durham Coalfield and Victoria Garesfield was no exception.

On Saturday, 3 May 1884, at the annual Primitive Methodist District Meeting held in Gateshead it was announced that permission had been granted to acquire a site at Victoria Garesfield. ¹



In July the same year, an under lease for a plot of land on which to construct the chapel - located between the school and Victoria Terrace - was signed at an annual rent of £1. ²

Trustees of the Primitive Methodist Connexion signed the lease with coal owners Jonathan Priestman, George Peile and Francis Priestman, the 10 members of the connexion mentioned in the lease, all reportedly of the village, being:

William Scott the elder, labourer
William Ion, coke burner
George Brown, coke drawer
William Johnson, fire brick maker
William Stonehouse, deputy

Thomas Campbel, deputy
Anthony Maddison, engineman
William Clasper, miner
James Scott, miner
William Scott the younger, miner

The foundation stones for the chapel were laid on Saturday 9 August 1884. The ceremony was performed by Johnathan Priestman, Francis Priestman and Sunday School Superintendent William Lowe amongst those having the honour of laying the corner stones.

VICTORIA GARESFIELD.
FOUNDATION STONE LAYING.—To-morrow (Saturday) afternoon, the ceremony of laying the foundation stones of the New Primitive Methodist Chapel at Victoria Garesfield will be performed by Mr J. Priestman, J.P., Shotley Bridge; corner stones being laid by Mr F. Priestman, Shotley Bridge; Mr W. Lowe, Sunday School Superintendent, and others. A number of ministers and gentlemen will take part, and a public tea and meeting will be included in the day's proceedings.

Consett Guardian, 8 August 1884



Primitive Methodist chapels were generally of a very plain design.

The chapel, with seating for 250, was built using bricks donated by the colliery owners and carried by its members to the building site. It was, in the main, built by the voluntary labour of the men of the village and the pews were said to have been carved inside the building.**

The chapel was officially opened on Saturday 15 November 1884, before construction was completed, and the services held the following day reportedly attracted large congregations. ³

VICTORIA GARESFIELD.
The New Primitive Methodist Chapel at Victoria Garesfield, the erection of which is about to be completed, was opened for divine worship on Saturday, when special services and meetings were held. The services were conducted on Sunday, and were attended by large congregations.

George Henderson, colliery manager at the time, was also involved in the project. His 'valuable services' were recognised by the friends and trustees of the chapel in a service on Wednesday 17 June, during which he was presented with a marble timepiece. On the same occasion, John Iley, John Robinson and Thomas Lodge each received a bible. ⁴

James Joicey M.P. is also known to have made a contribution to the cost of building the chapel. ⁵

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Sunday Schools were organised to promote self-improvement: via a combination of discipline, preaching and education, voluntary teachers sought to improve the morality of their pupils.

Members of the Victoria Garesfield Primitive Methodist connexion organised and ran a Sunday school. In its early days, the school would have been held in a room in one of the houses in the village, and children who attended would have been taught to read and write.



Victoria Garesfield Primitive Methodist Sabbath School
Presented to Annie Clarkson for Reciting at the Anniversary Held June 16th 1878
W. Stonehouse, Secretary

A bible** presented to Annie Clarkson in 1878, indicates that the Sunday School was in existence well before a dedicated building was built.

Annie Robson Clarkson would have been 14 when she was presented with this bible. In the 1881 census she was living in one of the wooden duckets (Victoria Terrace) with her parents James, cart man, born 1840 in Aberdeen and Hannah, born the same year. In addition to her four siblings, Diana 14, Hannah 11, James Lancelot 6 and William 4, two lodgers were also recorded living with the family.

In July 1893, the Sunday school had 34 scholars, and the school secretary was Mr J. Barker.⁸ A system of star attendance registers used at the village Sunday School, reported to be effective for encouraging regularity and punctuality at the quarterly Teachers' Council Meeting held at the chapel at the end of May 1898, was cited as an example and to be adopted by other nearby schools.⁹

Sunday school anniversary

The Sunday school anniversary, that spanned an entire weekend, was a major social event and annual highlight for adults and children alike. It involved great preparation and included recitals along with musical and theatrical performances. Celebrations were often rounded off by a meal for adults and children were treated to a tea.

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In earliest times, the colliery owner, Mr Priestman, is reported to have chaired the anniversary, donating generously to the chapel fund on the same occasion. Mr Priestman is also reported to have supported the White-le-Head circuit through an annual donation of £5.¹⁰⁺

In 1903, plans for a school annex to the chapel were submitted to Blaydon Council and the Sunday school building was added in 1904. The new wing included a Sunday school room as well as an infants' room with two movable partitions that made it possible to link the school with the chapel, providing space for large congregations or social events. The school had a separate entrance, and a small tea vestry was located to the rear of the building. A porch was also added to the chapel and a choir and organ station created.

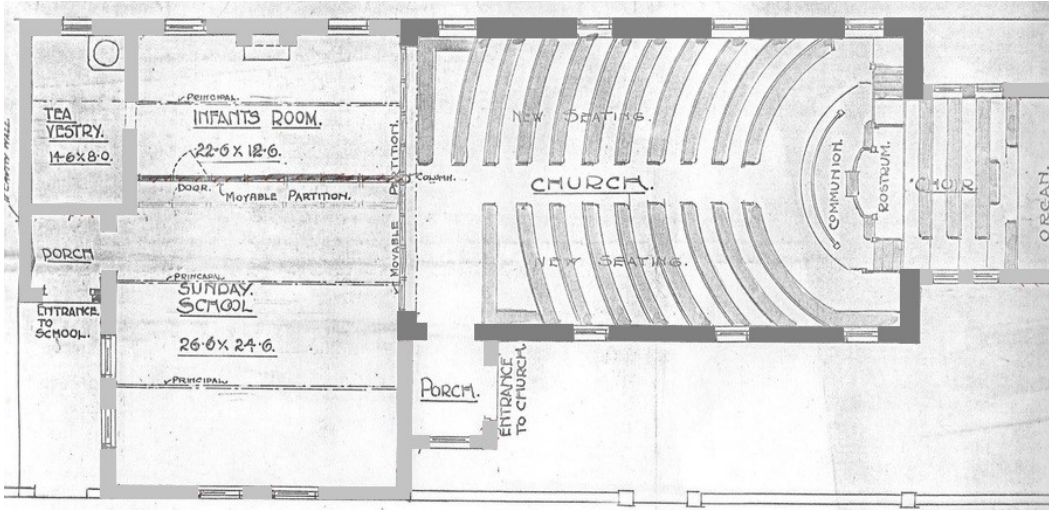
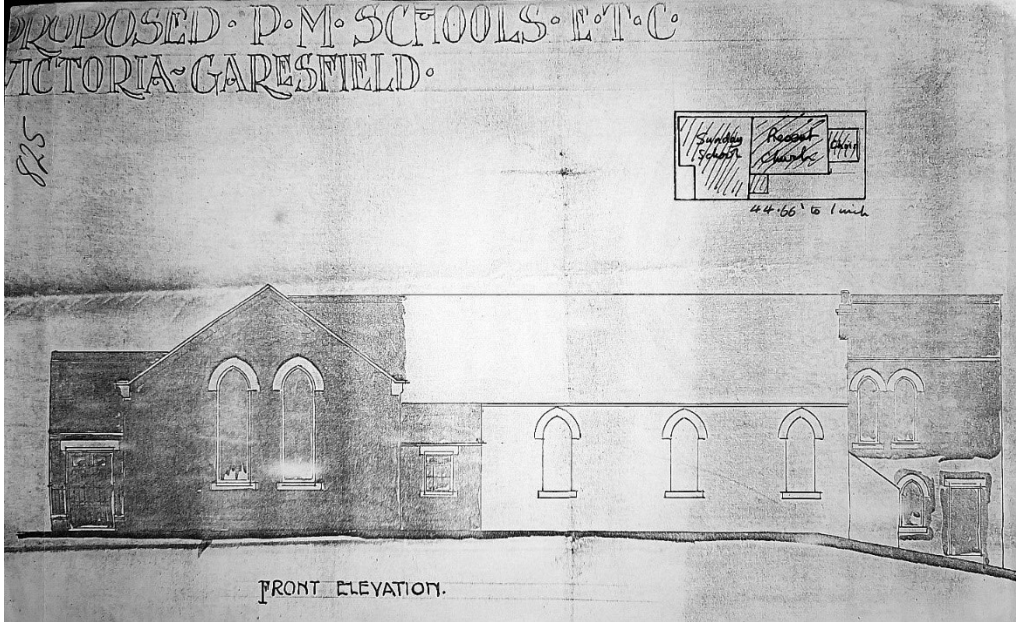
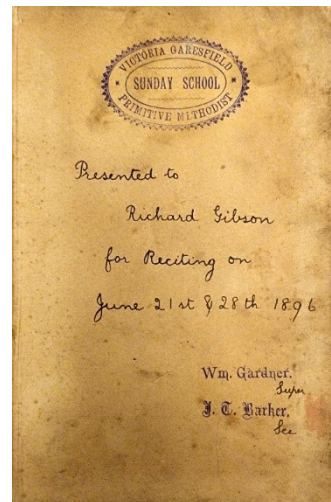
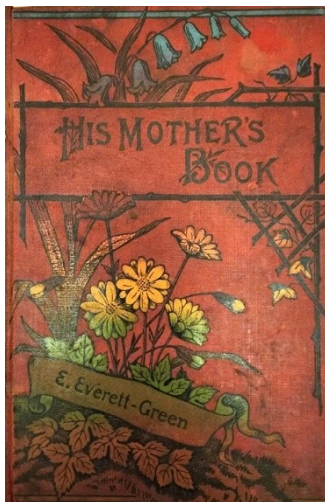




Photo showing the Sunday school annex with separate entrance.

Chapel members who were regular attenders and those who gave reading performances on special occasions, were rewarded with books.***



Inscriptions found in presentation books, indicate that William Gardner was Superintendent from 1896 – 1913, with J. T. Barker secretary.

In addition to nurturing literacy and social skills, Primitive Methodism Sunday Schools promoted Christian values.

In February 1913, the Daily Chronicle recorded that in response to an appeal by the PCHA and Rescue Society, Newcastle, the Victoria Garesfield Primitive Methodist Sunday School made a donation of 14s towards the cost of caring for consumptive children.¹¹

Extract from a poem entitled 'Reflections'^{11b} – recalling life in Victoria Garesfield in the late 1930s - by Anon.

“Sundays we went to Sunday School
 There to learn the Golden Rule
 Two Supers readily come to mind
 One very severe, one very kind

Wm Gardner Sen. whose spoken word
 Filled us all with the fear of God

Billy, his son, well loved by us
Talked about the love of Jesus”



Sisters Pamela and Jennifer Smith, with friend Margaret Storey,
on their way to Sunday school. View Terrace c. 1950

BAND OF HOPE

A sober outlook on society and morality was at the base of the teachings of Primitive Methodism, as such, the movement sought to promote temperance.

A Band of Hope, under the name ‘Lily of the Valley’, was formed in Victoria Garesfield in 1891, and 67 individuals connected with it were reported to be abstainers.¹²

On Christmas Eve the same year, the Victoria Garesfield Band of Hope performed in the Temperance Hall at the Leazes, Burnopfield, providing an evening of entertainment with dialogues, recitations and melodies.¹³

In the 1894 Band of Hope examinations set by the Church of England Temperance Society, scholars from Victoria Garesfield - J H Richardson, Isabela Bessford, Mary S Clasper, J W Hamilton, W Robinson, M Bolton, J T Wilkinson, Isabel Simpson, Josephine A Bessford, and Ada Nixon - were amongst those who received Honours and Merit certificates.¹⁴

The Band of Hope Union was founded in 1855, during an era when excessive drinking amongst adults was common, adding to the problems of poor living conditions and health, and maltreatment of children and child mortality. Alcohol was freely available to youngsters.

It was an organisation for children under 16, with the aim of preventing them from starting to drink alcohol, but it also functioned as a children’s club, embracing all sorts of activities.

<https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/>

CHOIR

A choir, reportedly performing to a very high standard, was associated with the chapel at Victoria Garesfield and as was common practise, it travelled the local area giving performances.

In 1886, it provided a musical selection at the White-le-Head Primitive Methodist circuit annual meeting held at Burnopfield.⁶



In 1925, the choir, conducted by William Gardner senior, won first prize in a competition at the Burnopfield Flower Show, and at a concert performed at the Burnopfield Wesleyan Chapel Harvest Festival the same year, performers included Mr and Mrs Lowe, Mr Gardner and Mr Scott.⁷

A poem written in 1938 recording the choir hymn singing around the village on Christmas Eve, would point to an annual event that was highly appreciated by its residents.

THE CENTER OF VILLAGE LIFE

In addition to baptisms and weddings, the chapel was also the venue for concerts and social evenings, including the Harvest Festival in the autumn. In earlier times, an inquest was even held there.

MINER'S SUICIDE – INQUEST HELD AT PRIMITIVE METHODIST SCHOOLROOM VICTORIA GARESFIELD
Body of *miner* found in colliery pond at Victoria Garesfield Colliery on Sunday.

Evening Chronicle – 18 February 1919

In later years, the Cox of Albert Street were the village's go-to couple for baptism and wedding cakes. Mr Cox, a blacksmith at the colliery, made the cake tins as well as the cakes, while Mrs Cox decorated them.



Mrs Lilian Cox of Albert Street



Many a marriage was celebrated at the chapel, Pauline Smith of Victoria Garesfield and Joseph Henry Raey of Chopwell being the last couple to be married there on 13 October 1962.



14 June 1938
Marriage of
Jane Ellen Cox to Cecil Burns



17 March 1956
Elizabeth 'Betty' Atkinson
with her father Robert



Betty with bridesmaids sister Jean (left)
and Margaret 'Nancy' Harrison (right)

PEOPLE

Early Senior Primitive Methodists

John Slee – brickworks manager – prominent Methodist who gave ready assistance to all social efforts on the villagers' behalf (died age 74 July 1924).

William Gardner senior – Sunday School Superintendent 1896 – 1913

William Gardner junior – deputy overman – superintendent of PM Sunday school and local preacher (died in accident at work 1926).

J. T. Barker – Sunday School Secretary (known dates) 1893 - 1913

1930s

Johnnie and Jenny Armstrong: both sang in the chapel choir, Johnnie was also chapel treasurer and a 'big union man'.

Walter and Mary Gardner: Walter (brother of William Gardner senior) was choir master and knew the number of every hymn in the Methodist hymn book. His great nephew, Bryan Harbottle, remembered him as a melancholic man who played the organ at the chapel at a surprising speed and with great spirit. Come June, Walter became unpopular with the village children whose playing time he commandeered for practising for the Sunday school Anniversaries.

Mary, his wife, was reportedly an 'old-fashioned' Methodist. Adverse to dancing at chapel socials and to Sunday papers, she also disapproved of ginger beer and cards. A great supporter of overseas missionary work, she organised the village children to collect for the cause every year.

Billy Turner – colliery engineer – ran the chapel choir as of 1952 after Walter Gardner.

- 1 Jarrow Express, Fri 09 May 1884
 - 2 Durham Archives document ref. D/CG 7/1752
 - ** High Spen and District by Thomas William Pears (e-book)
 - 3 Consett Guardian, Fri 21 November 1884
 - 4 Consett Guardian, 26 June, 1885
 - 5 Consett Guardian, 13 August 1886
 - 6 Consett Guardian, 9 July 1886
 - 7 Consett Guardian 23 Oct 1925
 - ** Bible kindly given by Allan Rayner of Barnard Castle.
 - 8 Consett Guardian 2 June 1898
 - 9a Consett Guardian 2 June 1898
 - 9 Consett Guardian 7 July 1893
 - 10 Consett Guardian 7 July 1893
 - 10+ Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, 29 December 1888
 - *** Presentation books kindly given by Alan Wainright of Highfield.
 - 11 Daily Chronicle, 21 February 1913
 - 11b Shared by Kathleen and Gwendolyn Watson 2021
 - 12 Consett Guardian, 7 July 1893
 - 13 Consett Guardian, 30 Dec 1881
 - 14 Durham County Advertiser, 27 April 1894
- <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/John-Wesley/>
- ** See poem 'The Patriarch' by Bryan Harbottle in section on William Garnder

References

Christian Messenger 1921/18 – [Transcription of Article in the Christian Messenger by Rev. Henry Fletcher](#)

https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/industry/primitive_methodism_and_the_miners

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primitive_Methodism_in_the_United_Kingdom