

What I've learnt while researching my Primitive Methodist ancestors

Perhaps in common with many people today, I had never heard of 'Primitive' Methodism until I began to research my family history.

The impetus for wanting to dig deeper into my family history – a 13-year journey that has culminated in publication of my book *From Coffin Grease to Love Feasts: A Primitive Methodist Family in Westmorland* – was the stories my grandmother told about her father, Tom Robinson. His 'killjoy' ways included throwing a fish caught by one of his sons on the Sabbath onto the fire, or being less than pleased when he discovered his daughter on a bus on a Sunday after being out with flash boys who had a car (this was the 1920s). Tom was only on the bus because his bicycle had a puncture and he therefore had not been able to reach his preaching appointment. My great-grandfather sounded like a bit of a character, and I was intrigued. He was clearly zealous in his faith but I knew nothing else about him, given that he had died 30 years before I was born.

A lost world

I started to dig deeper, and discovered a whole world that I had known nothing about – an almost lost social history of 'Ranthers', love feasts, camp meetings, temperance rallies and Bands of Hope. But a world preserved and waiting to be discovered in Methodist records, local newspapers and the memories of some of my older relatives.

As all family historians are encouraged to do, I began with asking my living relatives to recall what they could about their parents (Tom and his wife Anne) and the world in which their family lived. My grandmother and a great aunt recalled the strictness, the Sabbatarianism, the discipline – misdemeanours were punished with a wallop with a slipper. The only affection they received from either of their parents was a hug after their Saturday night bath in a tub before the fire. They spent most of Sunday at church, in one form or another. Their small village of Newbiggin-on-Lune, in the Westmorland dales in the north-west of England, was home to about 200 people but had both a Primitive Methodist chapel and a small Anglican church. Chapel services were held in the afternoon – possibly to avoid clashing with services at the tiny Anglican church which was diagonally across the road from their home. So they went there in the morning, then to Sunday school after lunch, then to the main chapel service, which would be followed by a prayer meeting. When I asked my

grandmother why they had gone to the Anglican service in the morning as well as to chapel in the afternoon, she replied 'to fill the time in'.

I came to know so much more about my great-grandfather, Tom Robinson. It was touching to find that so much information about him had been preserved *because* he was a Primitive Methodist. I was delighted to discover his name on circuit plans, in the meticulously kept records of circuit preachers' meetings and in reports of missions and camp meetings in local newspapers. Indeed, on his death, the obituary in the local newspaper was headed 'Loss to North Westmorland Methodism'.

A 'wonderful' conversion

Like many Primitive Methodists, Tom grew up in rural poverty. He was born in 1879 in the village of Crosby Garrett, Westmorland, in the limestone hill country between the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, and baptised at the Anglican church there. He had a rudimentary education at the village school until the age of 10 and then found work as a thresher in the local fields. At some point he met Anne Holme, the daughter of a local innkeeper and, with a baby on the way, they were married in an Anglican church and moved over the fells to the small village of Newbiggin-on-Lune, a community of farmers, millers, drapers and grocers. The village had a train station, and the influx of railway construction workers had swelled attendance at the Primitive Methodist chapel, which dated from 1837.

Perhaps divine providence was at work in Tom and Anne's move to Newbiggin-on-Lune, or at least some family scheming! Tom's new job was as a carter for a firm of grain millers. One of his maternal uncles was the miller at this firm and another lived in the same village. And both were staunch members of the village's Primitive Methodist chapel.

Had these uncles heard (for this was the family rumour) that Tom was a bit of a drinker? Did they have their sights set on his eternal soul?

Tom and his young family moved to Newbiggin-on-Lune in 1901. The Primitive Methodists in the village were active in evangelistic endeavours and a mission was held at the chapel just before Christmas 1905. It seems highly likely that Tom was converted as a result. According

to a woman who remembered hearing about his 'wonderful' conversion, the story went that he put off giving his heart to the Lord for a few days. As it was coming up to Christmas, Tom knew that as he went on his round delivering grain to local farms, he would be offered a tippie to celebrate the season. So, the Lord had to wait. However, these were the last drops of alcohol to cross his lips – from them on he would call beer 'coffin grease' – as it was sure to ease you into an early grave. And The Oddfellows Arms pub in the village, which was two doors up from the family's cottage, lost a customer (It was later bought by a local Methodist, who promptly shut it down).

Tom was an enthusiast, throwing himself into things with gusto, and once converted became zealous for the cause. So it was that on 7 January 1906, Tom's four children, then aged from 5 years to 7 months were baptised together at Newbiggin-on-Lune Methodist chapel.

Becoming a local preacher

From them on, I traced Tom through Methodist records, which give a fascinating insight into how people from poor working-class backgrounds, with little in the way of formal education, became respectable, and respected, local Primitive Methodist preachers.

Shortly after his conversion, Tom became a Sunday school teacher (an esteemed role in local Methodism). Then in 1908, Tom and Anne joined the Christian Endeavour meeting, which by that time served as a class meeting. Around the same time, he was earmarked as someone with potential to be a local preacher, coming on to 'plan' as an exhorter in March 1908 and as a local preacher some four years later, shortly before the birth of my grandmother, in June 1912. Not bad for someone who had a congenital heart condition and laboured in a hard physical job all week (not to mention now being father to six children – another six were to follow). By 1933, the year after Methodist Union, he was one of 11 preachers from Newbiggin-on-Lune on the preaching plan for the local circuit. These preachers included his uncle John, who had come onto plan in 1881.

Prior to Methodist Union, Newbiggin was part of the Brough Primitive Methodist circuit, which covered a geographical area of 30 square miles and some inhospitable territory on the edge of the Pennines. Despite occasional bouts of ill-health (which is also occasionally noted

in minutes of preachers' meetings), Tom would walk or cycle many miles each Sunday to preach at other chapels in the area. Only in his later years, with his health failing, was he driven to his appointments.

Once when we drove through the market town of Appleby (famous for its annual horse fair), my grandmother remembered her father preaching from its market cross. We know that Tom and his colleagues also preached at the horse fair – part of the Methodist 'war on the village' and its boozy entertainments. Appleby and the nearby town of Kirkby Stephen were also the sites of the annual Band of Hope rallies, which my grandmother remembered with fondness as they were given the day off school to attend and there was a picnic!

Delving into Methodist records also gave me an insight into the compassion of Tom and Anne for women who found themselves pregnant out of wedlock. Not only did they bring up two of their own grandchildren whose mothers were unmarried (allowing these mothers to go on to make respectable marriages to other men), but I also discovered that Tom had baptised the children of many unmarried mothers.

Growing up Methodist

Tom and Anne brought up their children in the Methodist way – Sunday school, the Band of Hope, strict Sabbatarianism – though that rule was easy to break when father (Tom) was away at preaching appointments and their exhausted mother snoozed in front of the fire. So off the children would go on a forbidden Sunday walk, only for one of them to fall in a beck and to have to dry off their clothes before returning home, in order not to give the game away.

My grandmother recalled these times with fondness. Yet I was also aware that somehow Primitive Methodism had not 'stuck' with her – she didn't possess a Bible, was not a churchgoer and was sceptical of any kind of religious 'enthusiasm' – she had been concerned when my mother started attending an evangelical mission in Carlisle.

What had happened between the generations? Why had my grandmother not followed in the footsteps of her parents?

I think there were personal reasons why she turned away from her upbringing. While Tom's strictness, particularly when it came to Sabbath rule-breaking, was recalled by her with humour, it is clear it was also off-putting. As soon as she married, my grandmother moved away first to the town of Penrith, then to the city of Carlisle. Here she could be more anonymous, perhaps, and wasn't being judged for her behaviour as a child of Tom Robinson, respectable Primitive Methodist preacher. In Carlisle, she even ended up working in a pub, a purveyor of 'coffin grease' and loved it. What would her father have made of that?

Conclusion

Nonetheless, I am proud to be the great-granddaughter of Tom Robinson. His obituary noted: 'To the last his thoughts were with the Church that he loved and to which he had given many years of unstinting service. It can honestly be said that Tom Robinson had a passion for souls. He had no greater joy than that of winning men and women for the Master. All his prayers and energies were concentrated to this end.' There is still a Methodist chapel in Newbiggin-on-Lune with a small but devoted congregation. His name is commemorated there on a plaque inside a piano stool (he loved music and singing). His legacy endures, and can be traced because of the meticulous records kept by Primitive Methodists!

Tracey Messenger's book, From Coffin Grease to Love Feasts: A Primitive Methodist Family in Westmorland is published by Bookcase, priced £12, and is available from www.bookscumbria.com