

Mary Bidwell – Society Steward at Wootton in the Witney Circuit

Transcription of Sketch in the Christian Messenger by E Millichamp

THE position and influence of woman in the Church was recognised by the Apostles, and those without spoke of Christianity as a religion propagated by women and children. History records the names and deeds of distinguished women, and sometimes the names of women of Christian note who rendered service. Methodism owes much to the agency of woman. John Wesley's life was brightened and his heart kept warm and tender by their influence, and much of his success may be traced to their co-operation. Hugh Bourne, beyond the influence of his mother, does not seem to have been so greatly indebted to the sex. His natural reserve and apparent coldness in their presence held their zeal in check, and yet the work was so great that he was compelled to admit them to the ministry, and they became some of the most successful pioneers in the missionary operations of early days. We have not now female travelling preachers, but rejoice to say we have still some successful evangelists and local preachers.



We give here a picture of a woman who, if not of the highest rank, is yet one of many to whom our Church is greatly indebted for success and even for its very existence in some of our villages.

Mary Bidwell, of Wootton, is now 82 years of age, and has been associated with our Church in this village for 60 years, and since the death of her husband in 1872, has been society steward and caretaker of the chapel. She attends all the meetings, and is careful to provide a fire and make the place comfortable for the class and prayer meetings. She is one of our eight missionary collectors in the village, and one who looks forward with great interest to the anniversary of the Society.

Mrs. B. has five children, thirty-two grand-children and thirty-three great-grandchildren, all living away: yet she remains here alone, that she may serve our cause. She is but a poor woman, but rather than sacrifice principle and yield to the domination of the Rector, she has steadfastly refused public charity, and when she had a grandchild staying with her, rather than send him to the Church Sunday school, she sent him to Woodstock, two miles away, for his week-day education. She has survived six Rectors and seems likely to live on and make up a hundred years.

We have much pleasure in giving our readers a picture of Mrs. Bidwell's residence. It is not quite so imposing as the Rectory, and yet there is something about it that has attracted every P.M. minister and local preacher for the last sixty years.

The first Primitive Methodist sermon in Wootton was preached by the late Rev. J. Hallam in front of this house. The service was interrupted and the sermon cut short by the agent of the rector; but a private house being secured and licensed by Messrs. Hedges and Whiting, the work got established and carried on, the above house sheltering the Ark of the Lord for several years, until a chapel was built. The venerable Hugh Bourne came here in 1841 and lodged under their humble roof. The room in which he slept is held sacred and is used by the minister of the circuit at the present time.

Mrs. Bidwell has entertained all the preachers; such as S. West, T. Jackson, G. Watts, W. Hazel, and their successors, and is never weary of talking of the Lord's servants, and of the days of struggle and storm. In her will she has directed that she is to be laid to rest at a service conducted by one of our own ministers



References

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