

## **Our First Travelling Preacher**

### ***James Crawfoot – The Old Man of the Forest***

#### **Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Albert A. Birchenough**

CHESHIRE shares the honour with the Stafford county in being closely associated with the origin of Primitive Methodism. In a field fronting a Cheshire cottage, Hugh Bourne preached his first sermon to a crowd of eager listeners. The pioneer Camp Meeting of 1807 was held on the Cheshire slopes of Mow Hill, and largely attended by devout Methodists from Congleton, Knutsford, Macclesfield and other places in the county of Chester. Some of the preaching places on the first printed plan, and the earlier written 'plans, were located in the County Palatine, James Crawfoot, our first travelling preacher, and the pioneer Home Missionary, was a sturdy Cheshire man.



Tarvin Village and Church.

He was the youngest son of Thomas and Mary Crawfoot, and was born in the year 1758, at Stapleford, in the parish of Tarvin. His life was chiefly spent within the radius of the famous woodlands of Delamere; consequently he is referred to by Hugh Bourne as "The Old Man of the Forest." His parents were adherents of the Anglican Church. His mother, with commendable zeal, sent youthful James to a day school, in order that he might be enabled to read the Word of God. In his first years Crawfoot was divinely impressed, and his early conceptions of divine realities

foreshadowed that deep mystical insight into the spiritual realm which so largely characterised his matured manhood. In his personal reminiscences he writes: "When I was a child my understanding was opened respecting God and the devil, life and death, heaven and hell, rewards and punishments after this mortal life is ended. These views were so impressive that I knelt down to pray, and while thus engaged I wept. From this time I had light and knowledge to distinguish between good and evil." He was also greatly indebted to the teaching of his mother, who gave him further "instructions respecting the Lord Jesus, and these made a deeper impression on my mind."

James Crawfoot's conversion was genuine, and to the end of his eventful life he remembered the circumstances connected with his change of character. After wrestling at a midnight hour, at two o'clock on the Sabbath morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, 1783, he "received the remission of sins through the blood of the everlasting Covenant." At the time he was twenty-five years of age, and immediately he united himself with the despised Methodists of the Chester Circuit. He became a devoted and successful local preacher. Crawfoot was a great admirer of the founder of Methodism, and never missed an opportunity of hearing him whenever he visited Chester. In the year 1790 Crawfoot was privileged to attend what proved to be Wesley's last service in the city. After the preaching service the ministers and lay preachers assembled in the vestry, when the venerable evangelist addressed the church workers present on the important subject of being instant in season and out of season. With uplifted hands and tears flowing down his cheeks Wesley concluded his urgent address by saying: "Fellow labourers, wherever there is an open door enter it and preach the Gospel: if it be to two or three under a hedge or a tree - preach the Gospel." This earnest exhortation stimulated Crawfoot to greater activity in the service of the Master, and afterwards he embraced every possible opportunity to preach the Gospel, whether to many persons or to few. The memories and influences of Wesley's parting words lived with James Crawfoot to the end of his days.

Some ten years after his conversion, Crawfoot removed from Dudden, and settled at Brinn, on a sequestered plot of cleared land, which he had leased in the forest glades of Delamere. Mainly through his exertions, a Methodist Society was formed and a chapel was erected in the solitudes of Brinn. It was widely known as the Forest Chapel, and was associated with the Northwich Methodist Circuit. He also was successful in training several pious workers with varied gifts, who became successful labourers in the Lord's vineyard.

It was James Crawfoot's custom to hold a Monthly Saturday Evening Prayer Meeting in his own house, for the promotion of spiritual life. These select congregations were mainly composed of the devout followers of Wesley, who were known as "The Forest Methodists." At these meetings Crawfoot generally gave a pointed address on the nature of faith, or the conflicts and victories of the believer over inbred sin, or the privileges of Christian life, or some kindred practical subject bearing on holiness of character and the perfect life. Following his address, the rest of the time was spent in relating Christian experience, bearing testimony to their spiritual cleansing, and singing and prayer. It was a common custom for some of the worshippers to go into a trance, or vision state, beneath the weight of glory, when they fell upon the floor of the cottage and became unconscious of their surroundings.

Crawfoot's Saturday Night Meetings became the theme of conversation in the towns and villages for miles around his dwelling. Some Methodists looked upon them suspiciously, while the baser thought that the promoters of the meetings and their followers were in league with Satan, and they stigmatised them as *Magic Methodists*. Bourne and William Clowes, who were "hungering and thirsting after righteousness," heard of these remarkable Forest Meetings, and they determined to see and hear for themselves. In June, 1807, they made their first visit to the Forest Methodists. Hugh Bourne, in describing the first meeting that he attended, says: "When we got to the meeting there were a number in the house, and a tall man sat in a two-armed chair preaching, as I thought, and it seemed an idle way. But, after I had sat down and hearkened, I thought he spoke good things; but he dabbled in politics, and then he was quite out. After a time, some spoke of beginning the meeting. It then appeared that the old man was only occupying or redeeming the time, and this I thought was excellent. The old man read a few passages of Scripture, and a brisk, short prayer-meeting commenced. Ere long a female appeared to struggle, as if in distress, and I wondered why the friends did not pray with her. But on turning my head again, I saw two women placing her on a chair, and I thought 'This is the vision or trance work.' She seemed to be fainting away. After a time Mrs. Elizabeth Prescott, a farmer's wife, from near Great Budworth, spoke earnestly, and I rested, but was not edified. When Mrs. Prescott had closed, the meeting went on as before. After a time, Nancy Foden, the woman on the chair, began to speak, and to praise God. She went on this way for some time, and then came out of her vision state, and several women shook hands with her. I went among them to make inquiries, and one woman said, 'These things strengthen our 'faith,' and this was all the information I could get of them."

William Clowes, in giving his impressions of the meeting, writes: "On our arrival at the house where the meeting was held, we found ourselves just in time. It began always about seven o'clock on a Saturday evening. The house was situated in a very lonely part of the forest, but vast numbers of people attended. The old man began the service by reading some passages out of the Holy Scripture, then singing and prayer followed. The old man invited any to speak on the things of God that felt liberty. A respectable farmer's wife then arose, and gave an exhortation, accompanied with a powerful influence from on high. It was truly good to be there; my soul felt it to be so. The meeting was thus carried on with prayer and exhortation until about twelve o'clock, and then it concluded. Some of the people before they departed took a little tea, and my friend and I departed also about two o'clock in the morning. I was greatly satisfied and benefited by my visit to this meeting. The next day I heard the old man preach in the open air, and afterward had a private conversation with him, the result of which was a more fixed and determined resolution to seek a knowledge, of the deep things of God."

During the memorable year of 1807, in which Bourne held the first Camp Meeting, James Crawfoot experienced several sharp trials. In October his wife Phoebe died at the early age of 48. At the December quarterly meeting of the Northwich Circuit, Crawfoot was charged with "irregularities" in his having preached for the Quaker Methodists at Warrington. Crawfoot in self-defence referred to the memorable address given by John Wesley in Chester, some seventeen years previously, He further addressed the Chairman of the meeting by saying, "If you have deviated from the old usages, I have not. I still remain a Primitive Methodist." His case was adjourned, and at a subsequent quarterly meeting his name was deleted from the plan, on account of his labours outside the pale of the Methodist Church.

Old James Crawfoot's house in the lonely retirement of the forest of Delamere was the college for the Bourne brothers, and William Clowes, where they were taught "the mystery and importance of faith, of the method of opening heaven, and bringing down an influence that caused believers to thirst for more purity of heart and sinners to grieve for their sins, of the necessity of watchfulness and the constant exercise of faith." Apart from Crawfoot's mysticism they were also instructed in "the most happy method of bringing a penitent sinner through the blood of the everlasting covenant."

Walford says: "We cannot help but feel grateful to the Donor of all good who in his wise providence first led Hugh Bourne beneath the shelter of the old man's cottage on the Forest of Delamere; for there he found an invaluable treasure, viz., an insight into the deep things of God with which (with all his piety, learning, and deep theological research) he was previously unacquainted."

In the month of November, 1809, Hugh Bourne engaged James Crawfoot as a Home Missionary, or Minister of the Gospel. The following characteristic engagement was drawn up by Bourne, and mutually entered into by the parties concerned: "I, Hugh Bourne, agree to pay to you, James Crawfoot, ten shillings per week until Lady-day, to labour in the Lord's vineyard as a travelling preacher." The expense was jointly honoured by Hugh Bourne and his brother James. They further determined that if Crawfoot received any occasional financial help from any of his friends, it was to be devoted to the aforesaid payment of ten shillings. During the period that Crawfoot was engaged by Hugh and James Bourne he received the sum of £40, which they munificently contributed from their own private resources. Crawfoot's sphere of operations comprised the various places that had been opened through the agency of the Camp Meeting Methodists and the labours of Lorenzo Dow. It was arranged that Crawfoot was to spend one fortnight in visiting the places on the Cheshire and Lancashire side of the Mission, and the other fortnight on the Staffordshire border. It was further decided that Crawfoot should advise the new converts to join a church of their own preferment. Their design was to make Christians, and not denominationalists.

James Crawfoot was fifty years of age when he was engaged by Bourne as a travelling preacher. In stature he stood fully six feet in height. Physically he was a good specimen of a Cheshire man. He is described as having "a long visage, a high forehead, and his eyes beamed with kindness, affability, and mildness." He had a vivid imagination and was very perceptive. He was a great reader of the Scriptures and specially admired the striking imagery and denunciations of the Hebrew Prophets. He was devotedly attached to private prayer, and had a strong faith in God. Frequently in public as soon as he bowed his knees, and commenced to supplicate the throne of heavenly grace, "the invisible world would appear to open, and all present were often made to feel whom he was addressing." As a preacher he was above the average, and was well received. Being Wesleyan in doctrine, he aimed at the conversion of sinners and the sanctifying of believers. His sermons were delivered in a sonorous voice, which increased their general effect.

For about four years he devoted all his time to the work of an evangelist. He visited from house to house, spoke at camp meetings, preached in cottages and in the open-air. He was very successful in winning souls for Christ, and in administering consolation to sorrowing saints. In the year 1810, in company with Hugh Bourne, he visited London. They preached in several parts of the great

Metropolis, and had the pleasure of seeing several persons converted. During this memorable visit, Crawfoot, by his strong faith, healed a crippled woman who had been run over by a cab; and who had been dismissed from a London hospital as an incurable. Bourne speaks of it "as an astonishing miracle."

In the year 1813, and after four years faithful service, James Crawfoot retired from the itinerancy, which to many persons was a source of profound regret. The causes of his withdrawal were threefold. After being a widower for some considerable length of time he married Hannah Mountford, a domestic servant, who had been in the employ of Mrs. James Bourne at Bemersley. She, along with her mistress, had frequently taken part in public services, and was treated by her as a companion. She is said to have been the same person to whom Hugh Bourne had proposed marriage in a class meeting, and who, under the peculiar circumstances, had refused him. Her rejection of Bourne, and her preference for Crawfoot, caused estrangement between these two distinguished men. After marriage Mrs. Crawfoot suffered from ill-health, and as her husband had to wait upon her he sometimes neglected his preaching appointments. Again, he was thought to be too sympathetic in some matters, and that he allowed his compassion to overbalance his judgment. Bourne was a rigid disciplinarian, and he could not tolerate Crawfoot's movements. In the last place, James Crawfoot's great forte was evangelism, and not Church government. When the brothers Bourne and their co-adjutors formed a Circuit and began to administer Church government, he could not be submissive to those who had been his disciples, and whom he had instructed in the higher principles of the Gospel. John Petty says: "Crawfoot was defective in judgment and perhaps in Christian humility. He appears to have cherished a very unfriendly feeling towards Mr. Hugh Bourne, which proceeded chiefly from Mr. Crawfoot's mortified feelings at seeing Mr. Bourne acquire greater influence in the Connexion than himself."

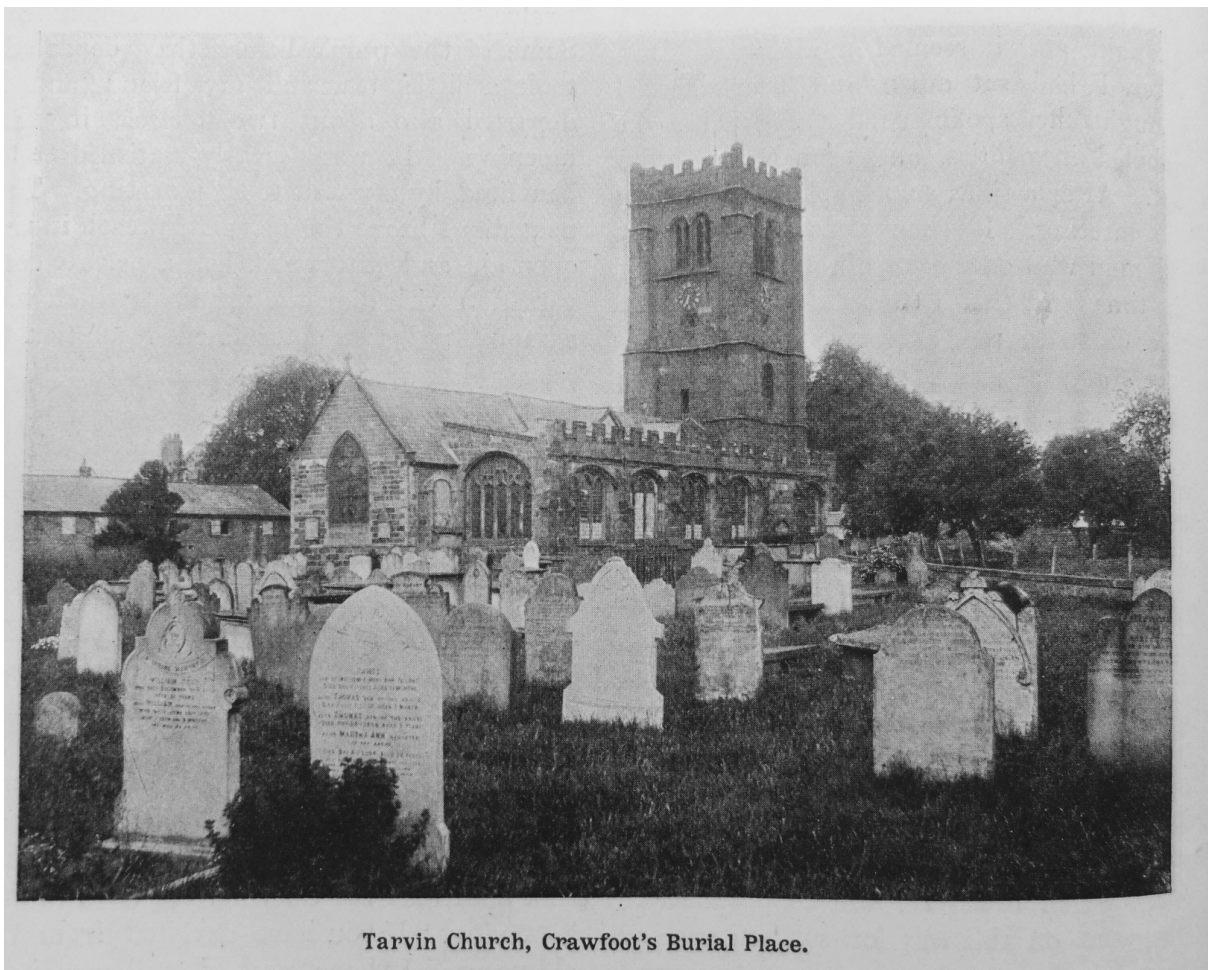
Apart from Crawfoot's unfortunate estrangement from Bourne, and his early retirement from the itinerancy of the infant community, he was one of the makers of the Primitive Methodist Church. During the nine months ending September, 1810 he had largely assisted in gathering one hundred and thirty-six persons into a distinct communion, who were known as the Camp Meeting Methodists, and afterwards as Primitive Methodists.

Walford, the relative of the Bournes says: "We consider that James Crawfoot possessed at the time he was taken out by Hugh Bourne greater ability and a happier method for leading sinners to Christ in conversation than any man we ever knew or read of. We candidly acknowledge that both Hugh Bourne and William Clowes were under the greatest obligations to the old man of the Forest, and that much valuable information taught from the pulpit and from house to house by those two fathers and others in the infancy of the Primitive Methodist Connexion was traceable to this source."

Immediately following Crawfoot's retirement from the Camp Meeting community he suffered from severe reversals in his temporary circumstances. In the month of May, 1814, his homestead unfortunately was burnt to the ground. Being homeless, he sold the remainder of the lease on the little farm for £100. A professing Christian man, with more guile than grace, affected much sympathy with Crawfoot in his misfortune. He offered him a lodging, and he, becoming possessed of the £100, decamped to the United States of America. Shortly afterwards he removed to the hamlet of Dudden, where he was aided by his son.



On the day of Crawfoot's sudden death, he had engaged a woman to assist his afflicted wife in the discharge of her domestic duties. At the dinner table they eagerly engaged in religious conversation. Crawfoot in a casual manner asked the startling question, "I wonder which of us will die first?" to which his wife replied, "I think I shall go first." After partaking of the midday meal, Crawfoot said: "I will fetch a bundle of gorse to be ready to put in the oven when thou hast taken out the bread." As he crossed the field towards the woodlands he was overheard to shout "Glory," and he lifted his hands and eyes heavenwards, as if in holy meditation. As he was returning, he fell beneath the load of gorse; his last words being "Blessed Jesus." His tragic death took place on January 23rd, 1839, he being in the eighty-first year of his age. His body was laid to rest, in Tarvin Churchyard. The grave-stone bears the inscription: "Here lie the remains of the Rev. James Crawfoot, Minister of the Gospel."



One writer says: "James Crawfoot was an *extraordinary man*, possessing talents but rarely found among the peasantry in lonely localities, like the Forest of Delamere, and his ability to elucidate the mystic and obscure parts of Scripture — when we take into account his native rusticity, ignorance of the common civilities and occurrences of social life, and his general want of education — will appear so great and extraordinary as to be only accounted for on the supposition that he received an infusion of ideas from a superior power, which power we believe was the Spirit of God, whose influence illuminated in an unusual manner the darkness of his intellectual faculties, and enabled

him to discern the deep things of God, and to impart to others a knowledge of the same." He had gifts and graces, and the fruits of his ministry was seen "in leading sinners to repentance, and believers to a more intimate acquaintance with the Holy truths of God's word. We believe him to have been devoted to God, and an able minister of the New Covenant."

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**References**

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