

James Steele

Apostle and Directeur of Early Primitive Methodism

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by John W. Chappell

“Every respect is due to the living: to the dead nothing except truth.” - Mothe

It was a matter of immense importance to the future of the religious community, which may be said to have been born on May 30th, 1811,¹ with the unification at Tunstall of the several “separate and detached” (Clowes) evangelistic agencies, cut off from the central mother Church of Methodism, that a man of such mental calibre, of such wide experience in government and organisation, and of such rare spiritual insight and force should be placed at its head. Not any of the leaders of these variously organised bands had, at this critical moment, either the experience or the genius for such wise and consummate statesmanship as was required, and was furnished to their hands in this man, whose spiritual apostolate is manifest to all who think and feel.



There was no man in or about Tunstall who was so universally esteemed, or who exercised so powerful an influence. His mere presence was a veritable triumph - he was powerful enough to centralise the “separate and detached” evangelistic organisations, and overwhelming enough to dispel the force of all external critical opposition. His consummate ability, the quiet but irresistible logic of his method, the strong intellectualism of his character, and the resoluteness of his conviction, gave dignity and strength to the new community, which, but for his expulsion from Wesleyan Methodism, might never have come to the birth.

Elsewhere² I have appraised the character and the genius of the seraphic Clowes and the philosophic Bourne, typical men, standing at the two poles of thought, to whose piety and greatness the Connexion, to so large an extent, is itself a tribute. Its fervent evangelicalism was the marked contribution of the one, while the other contributed its polity and left the mark of his genius on its literature. But Clowes was the saint, gentle, benignant, impassioned, too obsessed by the Evangel of Grace to be a great practical and constructive force; and, devoid of the penetration and the power, he was also free from the temptation to the pride of ecclesiastical statesmanship. And Bourne, always shy and grave and bearing about upon him the wild moorland melancholy, was the indefatigable and disinterested toiler, who, despite his fertility of ideas, initiative, practical sagacity and doggedness, did not possess, in those early days, even the gifts of construction and consolidation which he displayed at a later time. Crawfoot, the mystic and fanatic, whose charm lay in his supernaturalism, yielded up his secret to the valiant trio - Clowes, Bourne and Steele - and by so much enriched their character and extended their usefulness. But my conviction is that neither the indefatigability of Bourne, the evangelism of Clowes, nor the mysticism of Crawfoot, nor all together, were sufficient, at that time, to give security and permanency to the organisation which

was to issue forth in strength. James Steele was the *need of the hour*, and, born to direct and govern, became the *architect* and the *upbuilder* of the destinies of our church.

It is recorded that Hugh Bourne found in him, from the hour of his first acquaintance, which occurred within one month of this actual association with Methodism, in July, 1799, at the formal opening of the Wesleyan Sunday School at Tunstall, a friend and confidant; and he had such a "high estimate of the wisdom and piety of James Steele that he frequently sought, at his home, counsel and instruction from this venerable Christian father." Further, a quotation used by Walford³ gives point to the delineation of the great crisis in Steele's career, when, on Sunday, April 21st, 1811, he was ordered by a co-trustee (instructed by the Rev. John Aikinhead) to leave the pulpit of the Wesleyan Church where he stood to perform his duties as the Superintendent of the School, his parting glance, cast sympathetically upon his beloved people, was sufficient instantly to compel the whole school to follow their devoted superintendent into the street, determined to share whatever fate might befall him. "Some men have a native dignity which will procure them more regard by a look, than others can obtain by the most imperious commands." In the judgment also of Clowes,⁴ James Steele was "great in the sight of the Lord - one of the excellent of the earth. . . . He was an intellectual man, having read much, and acquired extensive information. He was one of the best class leaders that I ever knew. Many overwhelmed with trouble and spiritual distress, have, by his counsels and the *power of his faith*, suddenly entered into the liberty of Christ. God honoured him at the last; for he died in peace, aged sixty (sic) years;⁵ and his works of faith, labours of love, and patience of hope, form a monumental column to his memory, which will remain imperishable."

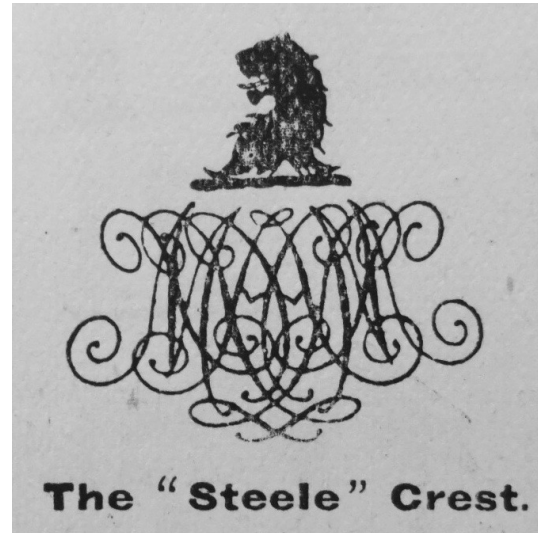
This is the only "monumental column" which exists to the memory of one of our greatest men. At the moment of writing there is no adequate memorial of him in our literature, and there is none in actual fact. There is not even a graven stone to mark the place of his interment. Yet he was - one of those of whom Sir Edwin Arnold sings, delivered to eternal honours, who -

"healed sick hearts till theirs were broken,
And dried sad eyes till theirs lost light."

This eminent and godly man was born of honourable and industrious parents, on Tuesday, Feb. 7th, 1764, in a double fronted cottage, which stood detached, surrounded by a well kept garden with its orchard at the rear, in what became known, at a later period, as Watergate Street, in the "little village" of Tunstall. And Tunstall in those days was "a dark place," without a church or school of any description, but with abundant facilities for carousal and foolish diversions of a varied character. But his parentage guaranteed his respectability, and what education could be afforded was provided. It speaks highly for the moral discipline and the refinements of his home that, as he grew to manhood, he ventured not into forbidden paths, but found healthful occupations, and engaged in ennobling pursuits. He had a magnificent physique, with a mind as healthy and as vigorous as his body. At the age of twenty he came under the influence of a simple but pious man, who had recently come to Tunstall from the borders of Cheshire, and found employment as a labourer in the service of Mr.



Joseph Smith, the cousin of James Steele. This Mr. Joseph Smith had been cradled in Methodist doctrine, and, before he settled at Tunstall, had served the Wesleyan Church as a preacher more than twenty years. When he came to Tunstall, about ten years before the time of which we write, he bought a portion of, presumably, the Goodfellow estate, on which stood, fronting Well Street, a large hall, built early in the 18th century, the largest in the district, and in this he resided. He subsequently became the possessor of other valuable property in the neighbourhood of Tunstall. But his commercial enterprise operated disastrously on his faith, and though still nominally a Wesleyan, attached to the Burslem Society, he declined in piety. He took his cousin, James Steele, into his service, in a responsible capacity, and within a few years entrusted to him the complete control of his estate. James Steele and the pious labourer, whose name cannot now be ascertained, had frequent opportunities of converse on religious topics, and the young man's soul awoke to a new illumination. There was no difficulty in enlisting their master's interest, who advised that the man should answer his own prayer by himself commencing religious services. And this he at once set himself to do - he had been a Wesleyan some years in Cheshire - and had a meeting established in the house of a certain Jane Leigh, who was a member of the Burslem Wesleyan Society. Then he opened his own house for class meetings; and James Steele, who attended these meetings, entered at this time upon the new life (1784) and never swerved to the end. Then James Steele persuaded his cousin to open his house for public worship, and the large dining room was fitted up for the purpose, and preachers were invited from the Burslem Circuit. These services were held on week evenings, and a prayer meeting was established on Sunday mornings in the house of Mr. Charles Hulse. The membership increased to thirty in 1785, and the class was then divided into three, and the leaders appointed were George Austin, James Steele, and Thomas Leese. This Thomas Leese was converted at the Sunday morning prayer meeting, and the solemnity and the power manifest at these simple and unconventional services is disclosed in the following record of his conversion:



*James Steele
Tunstall*

"Kneeling at a table, his soul was in ardent expectation of receiving the blessing, and in a moment he was overwhelmed with divine light and love, and he was thrown back into the middle of the room, and springing up, he declared that God had pardoned all his sins, and that he could rejoice in God his Saviour."

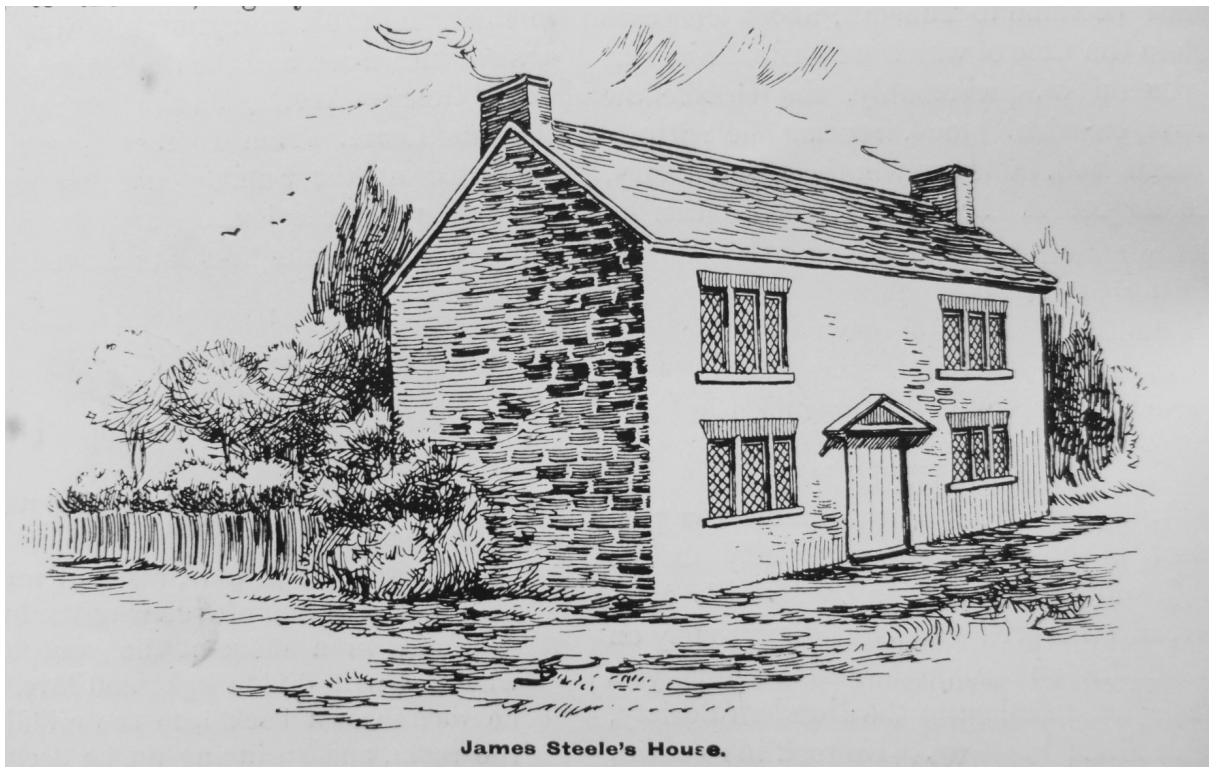
So we find James Steele at the age of twenty-one a leader of the second Wesleyan Society Class in Tunstall. This little society soon increased in its numbers, and began to exercise a beneficial influence. Encouraged by their successes and strong in faith, they projected a scheme for a new chapel; for Smith's dining-room was too small for the people who thronged to the services. And when, in April, 1787, John Wesley visited the Burslem Circuit and met these enthusiastic workers, he took pen and paper and there and then invited subscriptions, and the subscription list was headed thus:

A NEW CHAPEL AT TUNSTALL.

Mr. Joseph Smith will give land and twenty guineas.

John Wesley ten guineas.

The Chapel was built in 1788, and opened in March, 1789, by the Rev. Melville Horne, successor to the saintly Fletcher of Madeley. Of this first Wesleyan Chapel James Steele became a trustee, and his devotion to the interests of the society was very great. But a circumstance occurred at an early date which, as we can well believe, for he was, to the last, rigidly unconventional, occasioned him pain and anxiety, and not him alone but also those earnestly associated with him. John Wesley had insisted, as there was then no Established Church in Tunstall,⁶ that the pulpit should have a reading desk beneath it, and that the Church prayers be read. So strong, however, was the opposition which was raised, both by leaders and people, that the church prayers were speedily discontinued. Wesley preached in this chapel on March 29, 1790, within twelve months of his death, and declared it to be "the most elegant chapel he had seen since he left Bath."



It was about this time that the parents of James Steele died, and he married a pious lady, Miss Mary Alsager,⁷ the memorials of whose family are still to be found in Congleton - a family whose large Cheshire estates suffered confiscation for their Nonconformity. This lady was a refined and cultured person who gave her full support to her husband in all his efforts. He had become a local preacher, and his influence, which at this time was powerful, extended beyond his native town. On Friday, January 18th, 1794, their eldest son was born, whose name was John. From 1790 to 1794, however, despite the greater facilities furnished by their new chapel, their success was scant and progress lagged - several causes operated to militate against their prosperity. Then in 1796 the Burslem Circuit was shaken by the revolt and expulsion of the Hanley Society. A period of decadence ensued, when the circuit membership declined.

This decline was the occasion of great heartsearching and prayer on the part of those who were deeply concerned for the church's prosperity. At Tunstall, a Sunday School was established in July, 1799, with Mr. Hugh Wood as Superintendent for one year only. Then James Steele (in 1800) was appointed to the office, and retained the position with growing influence to the time of his expulsion in 1811. In the opening years of the century James Steele became a somewhat important factor in the counsels of the circuit, for we find him appointed, in 1804, on a Circuit Finance Committee, whose specific duty it was to devise a scheme to liquidate a circuit debt. Notably it was at Christmas of this year that he was converted into a "Revivalist" at a love feast at Harriseahead in which he took a leading part. Within one month of this event (January 20th, 1805) William Clowes was converted and joined Steele's class at Tunstall.

We have now reached the period which brings us into immediate contact with that combination of circumstances and influences, described at length and with such discrimination and force by the cultured historian of our church⁸, which made Primitive Methodism inevitable. But there are several factors in the local situation which require to be recognised in order fully to understand this inevitability, besides, or in fuller explanation of, the general features of incompatibility between the types of Methodism understood as "Primitive" and "Modern." In a book which lies before me of local historic sketches, dedicated, by permission, to the Mayor of Hanley, and dealing with the expulsion of the father of Wesleyan Methodism in Hanley in 1796, the writer says:

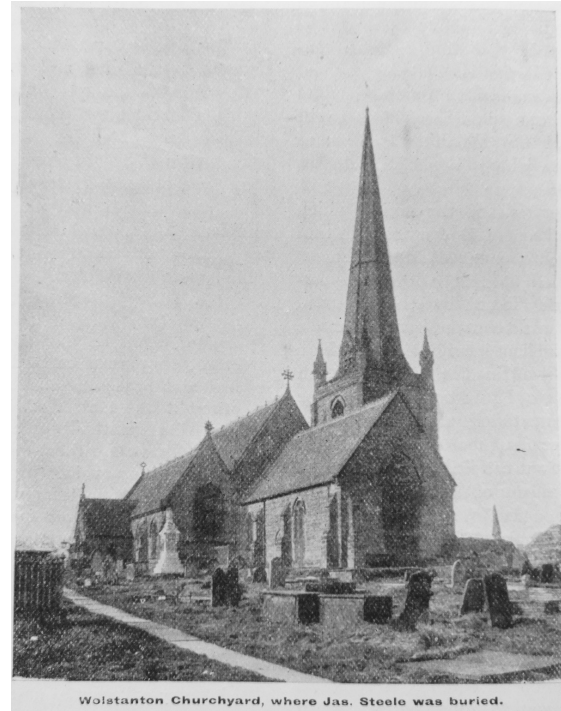
"In those days, as far as liberty was concerned, as far as equality in religious communion was in question, Wesleyan Methodism might have stood side by side with Spanish Catholic Christianity. It was one of the severest despotisms ever formed by religionists."

Wedgwood describes the situation at Hanley, and largely in the words of this devout man, Job Ridgway. He tells how a petition was presented to the circuit officials at a meeting held in their own chapel asking for the redress of their grievances. The majority of the trustees of the Hanley Chapel lived at Burslem, and were high churchmen, and had fixed the hours of service on Saturday at 7 p.m., and on Sunday at 7 and 9 a.m. They asked for more convenient hours of service, amongst other things. When the petition was presented it was adopted. The grievances were to be remedied. But one of the ministers forthwith arose and shouted to the trustees: "Now exert your powers." One ran to the door and secured the key. "Now" said the preacher, "deliver up your plans and class papers, for not one of you who have voted for this petition is any longer a member of our society." And they were ordered to leave the chapel, the door was locked, and the key taken to Burslem. In a published apology, Job Ridgway gave the account of these grievances which were as follows:

1. The privileges of the people were partial, some places having the Lord's Supper, Baptism and Burial, while to others they were refused. Some places had also preaching in church hours, to others it was denied.
2. The Conference made laws for the people, but the latter, who had to obey them, were not allowed to have any voice in making them.
3. Many of their laws were kept secret.
4. The undue power possessed by the superintendents, which I have seen shamefully abused in silencing local preachers, turning out stewards and class leaders, and appointing others after their own will - often sending men of ability to small congregations, and those of no ability to large ones; thus acting in an arbitrary and partial manner, and not by rule or for the general good.

5. No regular time of trial—no proper leaders' meeting - no coming to the quarterly meeting - no admittance to the district meeting - no coming to the Conference but by permission of preachers, who ruled on all these occasions by their own pleasure, and, in short, were both judge and jury."

These local conditions continued largely to prevail, aggravated by the "irregularities" of the "Revivalist" leaders. And Clowes in his journals⁹ describes the dissolution of his association for the suppression of Sabbath breaking in the Potteries, because the Burslem Circuit steward, a wine and spirit merchant, was threatened with loss of trade, and the Wesleyan Superintendent, Rev. J. Riles, who had at first sanctioned it, now anathematised it, and intimidated its leaders. There is little wonder that finally a party arose "with James Steele at their head, and some others in the country, who were dissatisfied with the Church government . . . a party formed upon what they called the simplicity and uniformity of *Primitive Methodism* . . . who maintained that Methodism had lost its original character, and its members were conforming to the world, in spirit, manners, dress, etc."¹⁰



Wolstanton Churchyard, where Jas. Steele was buried.

I need not dwell further upon the historic details antecedent to the birth of Primitive Methodism, except to say that James Steele had been more or less associated with Clowes and Bourne in all their movements, and that at the time of his expulsion, by order of a leaders' meeting held on Tuesday, April 16, 1811, he was "one of the first members in the Tunstall Society, a steady, sensible man, of great influence, a person to whom considerable deference was paid, a local preacher, a leader of two large classes, a trustee and steward of the chapel, also superintendent of the school, and withal a person highly respected, but he could not brook any superior . . . The division robbed us of one half of our members and about half of our Sunday scholars."¹¹ William Clowes had established a society class which met in his own house at Tunstall from the time of his expulsion - the *first* society class which existed independently of Wesleyan Methodism. Steele joined this class on April 23rd, and Bourne came down to the meeting and actually led the class, and "some were set at liberty." Then Steele preached on Friday, April 26th, and Bourne says: "He preached in great power. It was a glorious time. I spent much time in conversation"¹² - presumably as to their future intentions. On Sunday, April 28th, a Sunday School was established in a large room in the Warehouse of Mr. John Boden. Friday evening services had been held in Mr. Smith's house by the "Revivalists" from 1807, at which Steele, Clowes, the Bournes, and others preached regularly, and these services were continued even after the expulsion of Bourne and Clowes, and until the death of Mr. Smith, which took place *circa* May, 1811. Then Mr. Boden consented to the use of his large room for Sabbath Worship, and in May, 1811, William Clowes and Richard Bayley had the honour of opening Sabbath preaching in Tunstall. On May 10th we find Bourne in consultation at Tunstall again, and a definite understanding appears to have been arrived at, for on the 13th they sought out a piece of land for a chapel; and on June 11th the Bournes alone entered into a legal contract respecting the site.

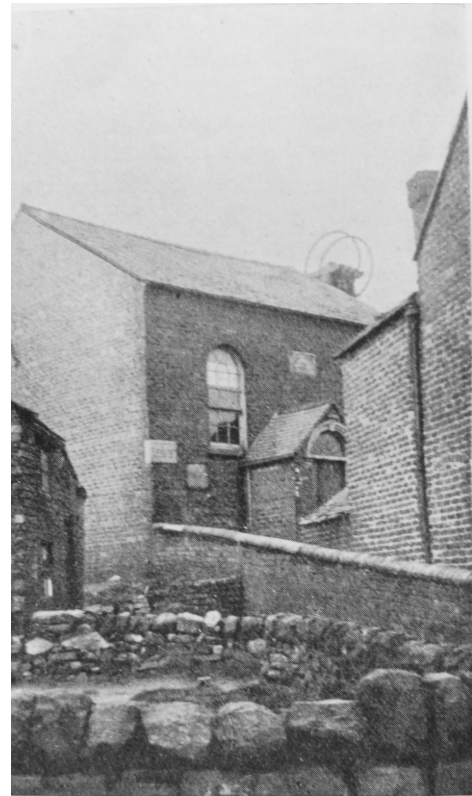
The meeting of May 30th, 1811, was the one of greatest importance which, by adopting Society Class Tickets and issuing a (written) plan, with its first date of June 2nd, unified the several sections; and the organisation was completed at a meeting held in Steele's house on July 26th, when James Steele was appointed Circuit Steward. It was about this time that James Steele entered into business as a china manufacturer - and specimens of his china are still to be found bearing the Steele name or

Crest - and on his death he was succeeded by his son, who, in that disastrous year of 1829, suffered severe reverses.

Within five weeks from the date of the actual association of Steele with Clowes, Primitive Methodism was born, and this connection of events above named reveals the power of this dominating personality. He who had been so mighty a force in Wesleyan Methodism brought his wide experience and remarkable genius into operation in his new sphere. He held the position of Circuit Steward to the day of his death. The circuit, it will be remembered, until 1816, comprised the Connexion, ever enlarging its borders. After that date it was still a ponderous circuit, with 80 preaching places and 93 preachers in 1819, and increasing. From the retirement

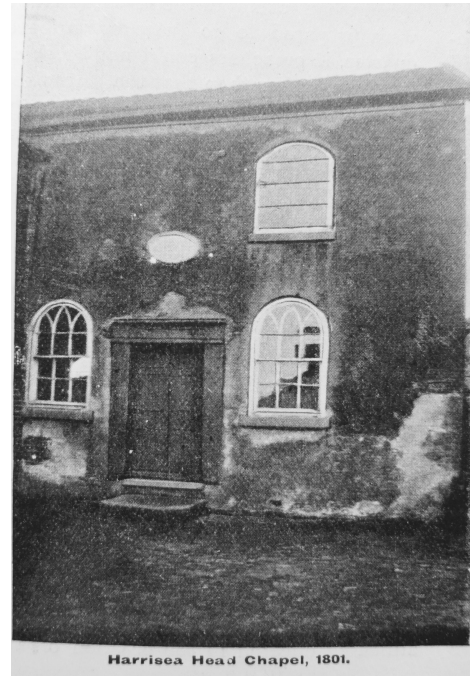
of James Crawfoot, in February, 1813, Mr. Steele held to the end the premier position on the circuit plan. His power of control and initiative was extraordinary. There is a tradition that only once was he ever known to have been crossed, and that was when, on behalf of the local preachers, he pleaded that two or three of the most distant and poorer places be abandoned; but he surrendered when several of the brethren said they were prepared to go twice or thrice each quarter, if preachers could not be obtained for them, rather than that the places should be sacrificed. Difficult situations were created, controversies arose, but his personal influence in their settlement was great. A controversy arose as to the ownership of the chapel. The Bournes claimed it, and the deeds were held by them, so their legal claim was apparently incontrovertible. But the extent of their outlay was in the purchase of land, which, for that site of 309 superficial yards, could not be much, but the amount is not disclosed even in the deed of transfer, dated August 20th, 1830.¹³ A clause, however, in the last-named deed, a true copy of which (with other interesting matters) I possess, makes it clear that the chapel or rather "school-house for the instruction of poor children in religious and useful knowledge," was erected at a cost of all the members of the society. Hence the controversy. A settlement was, however, amicably effected in the erection of a new chapel, which should be their own, in 1821.

The Conference of this year was held in Tunstall, in May, and at this Conference a "Book Depot" was established, and the name of James Steele stands first on the committee. His name appears in the same position on the General Committee.¹⁴ The influence of James Steele was marked in this Conference, though he bore upon him traces of deep sorrow. He "strongly impressed upon the board the necessity of the travelling preachers establishing a fund, to be supported by themselves, and be under their own control and management."¹⁵ And the Preachers' Friendly Society, first



Harrisea Head Chapel, 1861, Primitive Methodist.

suggested by him, was definitely established by order of the Fourth Conference, held at York, in 1823. But in April of 1821, he had lost his wife: she who had been his stay and actually laboured with him in the Gospel, and by her sweet evangelism had won many to the cause they both had so much at heart, had passed triumphantly into the presence and joy of the Lord. This stroke of over-mastering sorrow, great and powerful as he had been, with family troubles which subsequently came upon him, greatly unmanned him. He, however, laboured on to the end; and among the last things to engage the attention of this man of God, was the Deed of Settlement which the Conference of 1825 ordered to be prepared, and executed by himself and others. But he died before its completion. Then the "directorship" may be said to have fallen into the hands of Bourne. When the end drew very near he was visited by Bourne and Clowes. Clowes had been ill himself for three months,¹⁶ and was for a great portion of this time in the neighbourhood of Tunstall, frequently visiting his venerable friend. He had made a visitation of the classes on the previous evening, and Steele was anxious to have an account of this visit, and listened with great interest. And, still sitting in his chair, in a few moments, he passed away, Tuesday, May 8th, 1827, and was buried on the following Sabbath. His death was "improved" at the Manchester Conference held the following week by Hugh Bourne and Thomas King; and Clowes preached his funeral sermon at Tunstall, from the words in 2 *Peter* i., 10-11. He says, "while I was discharging this painful duty God was near at hand, and a blessed influence rested on those who heard me." But the last resting place of this great hero-saint, "directeur" of our Church in the early days, as the testimony of local historical authorities phrases it, was actually forgotten. After great research I have traced it in the burial registers of the church at Wolstanton, but the grave cannot be found, for "in the early half of last century" writes the Vicar, "no record was kept of localities in this churchyard," and so the exact place of his sepulchre is lost forever. God buried him; it remains for us to rear an altar in our hearts.



Harrisea Head Chapel, 1801.

- 1.- The date of the Meeting which ordered the issue of Society Class Tickets; and which tickets, it was directed, should bear this date.
- 2.- See "In the Power of God."
- 3.- Walford's Memoirs of Hugh Bourne I. 318.
4. - Ibid. I. 515.
- 5.- to be accurate, sixty-three years.
- 6.- Journals of William Clowes. p. 281.
- 7.- In both branches of their descendants their maiden name recurs.
- 8.- Part I.—"Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church." Rev. H. B. Kendall, B.A.
- 9.- "Romance of Staffordshire," by Henry Wedgwood.
- 10.- p. 47-52.
- 11.- "Wesleyan Methodism in Tunstall," published 1842.
- 12.- Ibid. p. 11.

- 13.- The land was bought from Mr. John Tomlinson, of Cliff Vale, Stoke, the grandfather of the present Bishop of Shrewsbury, and the new chapel was opened on Sunday, October 15th, 1811, sermons being preached by James Crawfoot.
- 14.- Not 1821 as stated by Walford; I, 322.
- 15.- Thomas Steele, who was already a member of the General Committee, and General Missionary Committee, succeeded his father in 1827, on the Book Committee.
- 16.- Clowes' Journals, p. 199.

References

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