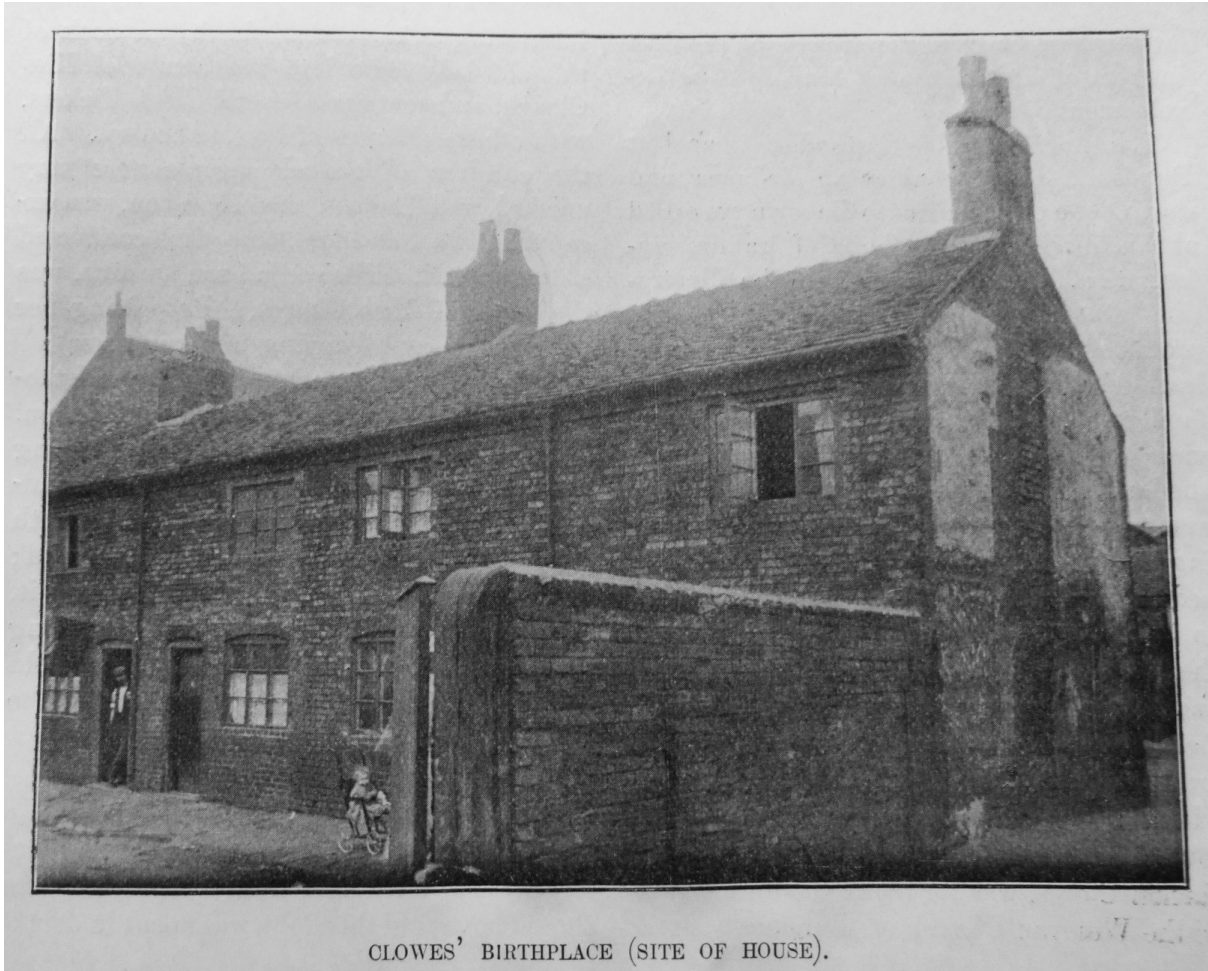


Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes

Chapter III

Transcription of Article in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by J.T. Horne

Few things are more interesting and more revealing than the birth-places of famous men; for we can read in them a whole history of the past and a prophecy of the future. When we reconstruct upon the old site the house in which Clowes was born, it has a strange story to tell. Everything bears a tell-tale mark of the great change that has taken place.



The plastered walls, the adjoining ale-house, the heaps of worn-out potters' crates, the quantity of broken and defective pots and ware - indeed, everything shows the present ruinous condition of the locality. Yet one hundred and twenty-five years ago a man was born here who helped to save our nation from hell. No one of that day surmised the possibilities which that young life possessed. The men of Huntingdon never imagined that the devout farmer, walking along the shady banks of the sleeping Ouse, would one day make the name of Cromwell so feared, hated, and admired. The rude and boisterous potters, indulging in their rough sports, little suspected that the young child watching them would one day play an important role in the drama of English history. What a revelation would come in our view of human life if we but developed a new organ of perception!

In one of his essays Emerson writes of the way in which society almost automatically adapts itself to its varying surroundings. Certainly Clowes, in a sense adapted himself to his environment. The poisonous moral atmosphere checked the growth of the finer instinct of his nature and hindered the development of his soul.



The first Primitive Methodist Chapel at Burslem is now used as an ale-house, and during one of our visits to the town, we called at this place with the hope of gaining information. It will be seen from the illustration that the name of "Clowes" stands prominently in the front, and we wished to learn whether the landlord belonged to the family of the Evangelist. During our interview we obtained the address of a member of the landlord's family, upon whom we called, and from whom we gathered several interesting incidents. My esteemed colleague, who accompanied me, Rev. G.E. Wiles, succeeded in obtaining a photograph of this member of the family. Her name is Ann Clowes, and she is seventy-eight years of age. Her grandfather, Daniel Clowes, was a brother of the father of William Clowes. For a long time the old people lived in one of the houses on Ball's Bank. The grandmother, Rachel Clowes, was for many years a member of the Wesleyan Church of Burslem. It is interesting to know that the hymn book of this old lady came into the hands of Miss. Clowes, and contained several Class Tickets, with other evidences of her Methodism. All the children of the old people were very musical, and Thomas, the eldest son, was exceptionally so, and for some time conducted a brass band. The second son, Joshua, was the father of Miss Clowes. Respecting her parents she says, (copying from my notes):

"My father and mother were both Methodists, and lived in Navigation Road, Burslem. For upwards of thirty years a Class Meeting was held once a week in their house. Grandfather Clowes had not much sympathy with Methodism, nor anything else that was good; but I never heard of his

actively opposing it. You know he was a drunkard. His drinking was a sore trial to my father, who once sold his house to save grandfather from going to prison."

"How did that come about?"

"Why in this way. Grandfather was a shoemaker, and he once bought a large quantity of leather. The money with which he should have paid this debt, was spent in drinking with his tippling companions, and to save him from ruin father sold his house."

In reply to further enquiries she added: "My parents were good. Father died in 1841. In his last illness he was visited by many people, for everyone respected him. Some of his Methodist friends asked if they could do anything for him, and he said, 'Pray that God may give me supporting grace during my affliction, and then take me to heaven.' "

This interview was of an interesting and revealing character. Although in very feeble health, at times Miss Clowes brightened, and then we were particularly impressed with the magnetic power of her eyes. We spoke to Mr. Griffin and Mr. Wiles, who were with us, of the close resemblance between her eyes and those shown in the published portraits of William Clowes. This conversation gave an interesting glimpse of the surroundings of the childhood of William Clowes. We were shown a Methodist aunt living near him at Ball's Bank, and it is certain that she helped to shape his character. We also know that she heard John Wesley preach during one of his visits to Burslem. Was she in that large congregation on Sunday, March 28th, 1790, of which he wrote: "At Burslem, also, I was obliged to preach abroad, such was the multitude of the people"? Miss Clowes could not say; but from another source we learn that at this period Wesley was greatly influencing the town, for Burslem had become the head of a Circuit numbering 1,327 adherents.

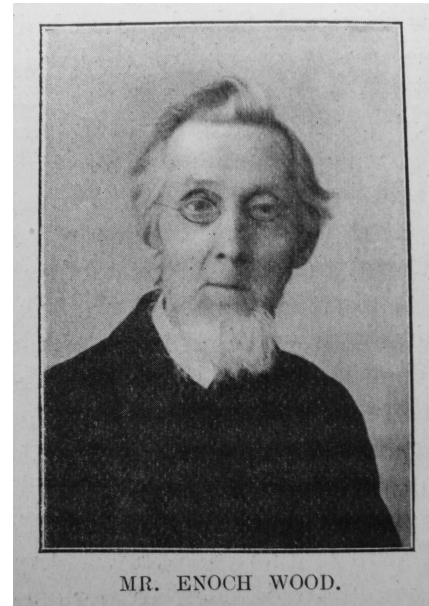


One of Clowes' biographers tells us that he received "early culture of that humble kind which a Sunday and Common Day School could supply." Where did he obtain this education? The writers give no information that will help to answer such a question.

In those days there existed at Burslem an "endowed school" which was opened in 1749, and according to the local histories it "was an English Day School, and thirty-four boys and ten girls were instructed in reading, writing, and accounts, and such as were of the Church of England were to attend divine worship and learn the Church Catechism." Now in all probability young Clowes became a scholar in this "Ancient Free School." There could be no great difficulty in securing admission for the poor grandson of Aaron Wedgwood, whom we know to have been a subscriber to its funds. The application of the mother on behalf of her son could not fail of success. The Sunday School, to which reference is made, was the "Burslem Sunday School." This important institution was opened in 1787, and very rapidly acquired great popularity and support. Its scholars were "instructed in reading, writing, and literary exercises"; and as "the managers disclaimed for it any sectarian character the children rapidly increased, and it received from the manufacturers very liberal support, because it was a means of withdrawing the youthful population from vagrant and vicious habits on the Sabbath

Day " (Ward). Now as Miss Clowes' father and uncle lived at Ball's Bank, and were amongst the first scholars in this school, which was the only one available, we know that William accompanied his cousins; and it was there and in the Ancient Free School that he obtained the little education of his childhood.

But his school days were few, for at the early age of ten years he was apprenticed to his father's trade of potter, with his uncle, Joseph Wedgwood, the third son of Aaron. It was in the "Churchyard Works" that this apprenticeship was served. These works were demolished in 1893-4, and on the site the new National Schools were built. At that time a potter's apprentices lived a hard life, and his services were poorly paid. In the biography of the "Royal Potter" it is stated that an apprentice received for the first three years of his term one shilling per week, the next three years one shilling and sixpence per week, and the seventh year four shillings weekly. But in addition to his wages he annually received a new pair of boots. Admitting that the condition of the labourer had slightly improved by the time of Clowes' apprenticeship, everything points to a low wage, and the degrading nature of the potter's employment at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. The following picture drawn from life, by one who had himself experienced the hardships of which he writes, shows the life of Clowes during his apprenticeship. "Wedging clay for a boy was as common as it was cruel. What is now done hydraulic pressure was then done by the bone and muscle of, perhaps, a



MR. ENOCH WOOD.



MRS. E. WOOD, NIECE OF WILLIAM CLOWES, AND HER DAUGHTER AND GRAND-DAUGHTER.

half-fed boy. He had to take a lump of raw clay upon a plaster block, cut it in two with a piece of wire, lift one half above his head, then bring it down upon the lower half to mix them with whatever force he could command. This had to be repeated till the clay was brought to the consistency of something like putty. Doing such work as this was 'rest' from the mould running. Imagine a mere boy running in and out of the stove room, winter and summer, with its blazing iron stove, his speed determined by his master's speed at the work. Coarse oaths and threats, and brutal blows in many cases following any failure to be at the bench at the required moment. Thank God, there is no mould running or wedging now. . . . My wage was to be a shilling per week. For this large sum I had to work from between five and six o'clock in the morning till six, seven, or eight o'clock at night." (*When I was a Child*).

There was not much fitness in this work for a lad of his tender years, and no consideration would be shown him because of his relationship to the master. Still he quickly proved himself a sharp active boy with an aptitude which gave early promise of an expert craftsman. Ancestry soon showed itself. He had inherited great physical strength, and possessed such an abundance of animal spirits that he seemed to be largely a compound of life and fire.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was once asked, "At what age should the training of a child commence?" and the "Autocrat" replied, "Two hundred years before it is born." The training of Clowes, as a potter, had been in progress for many generations, and when he was put to the actual work he rapidly reached a high degree of proficiency. As we watch him producing his tale of work we can trace the evolution of his deftness, directness, and thorough knowledge of the craft, to those inventors and manufacturers from whom he had inherited such wonderful skill. Every article coming from his hand bore in its shape and quality the thoughts and experiences of the preceding generations of potters who were directing his thoughts and guiding his fingers.

It is not surprising that such an apprentice quickly took first place in the factory. The proficiency of his work gave such satisfaction to his superiors that, quoting from his "Journal": "For my encouragement I was paid for all the work extra to that which was due to my master. This placed a little money at my disposal." This extra money he used to improve his education and sought the help of a night-school; for he had aspirations which neither his home life, nor his pot-bank surroundings could wholly stifle. Breathings after a higher position, yearnings for something better than the bench of a common workman, were stirring within, and this thirst for knowledge was a hopeful indication which we shall do well to heed.

Proficiency in the craft required a knowledge of its various branches, and when Clowes had completed his term with his uncle he turned his attention "to that branch of pottery business called *turning*," and apprenticed himself to a "Mr. Mear." Clowes has made some mistake in the spelling here, for there is no trace of such a name at Burslem. But about the close of the eighteenth century there existed in Waterloo Road a potting factory belonging to "Mayer and Co."; and it was certainly in these works that Clowes completed his training as a potter. This Mr. Mayer was in his day a prominent Methodist. He joined the Church in his fourteenth year, in 1780, and died in 1832, when his remains were followed to the grave by about six thousand persons.

At the completion of his apprenticeship Clowes was able to earn a high wage, and with care could have secured a good income. But the quantity of his work was oftentimes seriously restricted by the errors and excesses into which he plunged, largely as a result of the temptations from his surroundings and the extravagant character of his passions. We must remember that he was a thorough athlete, and bulked largely in the popular mind as the local champion. Very few could equal him in foot-racing, jumping, boxing, dancing, and all such sports; and he indulged his passions to infatuation. Proficiency in these sports points to a physique approaching perfection.

As Emerson says, "every efficient man is first a fine animal, and a certain degree of refinement added to such a vivacious nature will make that man a formidable antagonist," then William Clowes was no mean antagonist. A massive brow, bold, piercing eyes, voice rich and melodious, with muscle tough and supple, possessed of marvellous magnetic power, with a varied and practical knowledge of life and men - these all showed that he was no ordinary man. Power and audacity, impelling faculty and fruitful endeavour, a man with strong passions and marvellous endurance - these marked his kinship with the men who have helped to make history. He was organised to be something more than an ordinary potter, and when in after days the Divine Spirit rested upon him, He acted upon an organisation already present for the work of a pioneer in the Evangelistic field.

As one of the leading spirits in the local athletic group he would be required to participate in the preparations for contests. These arrangements were generally made at the taverns, and the "Turks Head" was the popular centre for this purpose. Every meeting was incomplete without the "flowing bowl" and its accompanying song. Clowes was a famous vocalist in these gatherings, and a favourite song of his began:

"Come, push the grog about,
Strong beer drowns all our sorrows."

His conscience used to lash him when he sang these words, and he tells us in his "Journal," that "with power and force the Scripture was occasionally applied to his soul, 'For all these things God will bring thee into judgment.' " The description which the old people have given us of these foot-races agrees in broad outline with that left by Clowes. As he figured so largely in such exhibitions it may be interesting to give a description of the preparation for a wager-contest as it has been told to us. The prospective competitor was first drenched with an aperient, and then placed upon a feather bed. A second bed was then placed above him and held down securely on either side; and heavily weighted to produce profuse perspiration. He was then taken from the bed and rubbed violently from head to foot, after which he was dressed in flannel. For the next month or six weeks he was fed on half cooked slices cut from the prime joints of beef or mutton, and made to drink strong old ale. Each day after feeding he was put to bed for at least an hour, after which he was taken to the ground for exercise, carrying heavy weights in the pockets of his garments. Arriving on the field all clothing was thrown aside, except a pair of drawers and light shoes; and the athlete took his place at the head of the marked course, and ran the required distance,

(To be continued.)

References

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