

RISE AND PROGRESS OF PRIMITIVE METHODISM
IN LEICESTER AND ITS VICINTY.

BY T. MORGAN

The first P. M. missionary who entered Leicester, took his stand at the Cross, in Belgrave Gate, in March, 1818. After singing "Come ye sinners, poor and needy," &c. he preached from, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his." Multitudes heard the word, many of whom were deeply affected. A supply of labourers being procured, Foundry square and Orchard-street became the usual battle ground. The work opened powerfully, and the first class was raised in the house of Mr. J. Bennett, (who is since gone to Abraham's bosom.) The second at Mr. Johnson's, Queen-street. The third at Mr. Pool's, Orchard-street, and the fourth in Belgrave-gate. In these classes there were mighty doings; numbers of souls getting converted to God! Meantime, the street work spread to Frogesland, Infirmary-square, Hickling-square, Horsepool-street, and other places, where the word ran like fire.

Having made an effectual lodgement in the town, the adjacent Ratby, Thurmaston, Syston, Belgrave, and Wigston, were amongst the first that were taken. The open air work being zealously followed up, strengthened the labourers, and raised up fresh ones. A Camp meeting was held at Wigston, and another at Round Hill, which greatly promoted and extended the work. Some of the town classes were now become very large, especially that led by Brother William Goodrich, and which was divided into three. The house in which this large class met, was called the "healing spot!" in consequence of such numbers finding the Lord there.

Millstone Lane chapel was taken on rent, and occupied for a time, but a new one was contemplated; and ultimately Messrs. Whitworth, Goodrich, and others, purchased the land on which the George-street chapel now stands, for five shillings per yard. Great zeal was manifested; and, after encountering many difficulties, the shell was raised, covered in, and opened by Mr. J. Bourne, of Bemersley.

Towards the erection of this chapel, J. Day, Esq. of Thurmaston, who had been touched by the open air preaching, gave one of the largest trees on his estate, on condition of it being taken to Leicester (a distance of three miles), without horses. Accordingly a tree was selected, cut down, and drawn by men (scores willingly offering themselves,) out of the field opposite Mr. Day's house, where the procession halted; and one brother got upon the tree, and preached from "And now the axe is laid to the root of the tree." This service over the procession moved onward, tugging the tree to Leicester in triumph, surrounded by a vast concourse of spectators.

J. Day, Esq. afterwards lent our friends what money they wanted on the chapel, became a trustee, and his descendants, (for he is gone the way of all flesh), though high church people, still treat the trustees kindly.

The work rolled on, notwithstanding some severe society trials; and Leicester became the head of a new and flourishing circuit. After a time some of the official characters got into a system of wrangling, and of wasting time at official meetings: Diotrepheses sprung up, the converting work slackened, and the circuit became enfeebled. However, about 1833, the Diotrepheses split off from the Connexion, took all they could away with them, and set up for themselves. This division, though troublesome at the time, proved a blessing afterwards: as

peace was restored to the official meetings. The rules of the Connexion became more respected, and a foundation was laid for future prosperity.

In the year 1836, I and my colleagues were stationed to the Leicester circuit. We found the circuit generally in peace, upon rule, and the way more open for usefulness than it perhaps had been for our predecessors. At the December quarterly meeting, the circuit, which was rather unwieldy, was divided into three branches; a measure which has answered beyond our most sanguine expectations. During this year, we had peace, and an increase of one hundred members. The second year, viz. 1837, the circuit came up more fully into the open air, and missionary work. Also Providence opened our way to improvements relative to places of worship. Friar's chapel was galleried, and a dwelling-house erected on the chapel property. Desford chapel purchased, fitted up, and opened; and notwithstanding a terrible depression in trade, with great distress, the Lord gave us another increase of one hundred members. The third year, 1838, was a period of still greater operation. Thurmaston chapel was galleried; Belgrave chapel, with two houses, was erected; land for a new chapel at Ratby was purchased; a town missionary employed, and a third cause raised up in the town. A fifth preacher was taken out, the converting work still progressed, and the good Lord gave us an increase of one hundred members. The fourth and last year, 1839-40, the work went forward on a still greater scale. The branches were extended, and an increase of missionary spirit rested on the circuit. Land for a new chapel was purchased at Rothley, and likewise at Ansty. The old chapel at the latter place was become too small, and consequently was disposed of. But George-street chapel, which was unroofed, raised, somewhat enlarged, and improved, was the most weighty chapel case. This chapel, which was well filled, was very incommodious in consequence of the extreme lowness of the roof; the raising of which had been contemplated for some years; but being a complicated and heavy business, had hitherto not been ventured on. This year, however, our attention was fixed on the case; and after examining the building, taking counsel on the business, and estimating the probable cost, we resolved to proceed. Accordingly, we drew up the following address, and inserted it in the Leicester *Chronicle* and *Mercury* newspapers. "To the Christian public of Leicester and its vicinity: Christian friends, it is now turned twenty years since the first Primitive Methodist missionary lifted up his voice, in the open air, near the Cross in Belgrave-gate. Great was the impression then made, (and in many cases, on the minds of the most profligate and reckless characters) by the plain but energetic preaching of him and his coadjutors. The singular and somewhat unique proceedings of these street apostles, brought upon them much opposition, not only from the vicious and ignorant, but from some persons in whom antiquated prejudices rather than lack of intelligence must have predominated.

"When the late truly catholic and noble minded Robert Hall, was asked whether some systematical opposition ought not to be made against such new fangled innovations, the answer of that great man was worthy of his penetration, and characteristic of his humility; 'God forbid,' said he, "that I should oppose those people, Sir! I should fear I was fighting against God ! They are doing much good, Sir; much more than I am, Sir!'

Though much persecuted, they succeeded in forming a society, and (in 1819,) in erecting the shell of a large, but rather incommodious chapel in what was then termed Barkley lane. Continuing to increase, they managed, in 1827, to complete the erections of large galleries, which accommodated a considerable number of additional hearers. In 1835, the Sunday school had become so large, that more room was much needed; and two valuable and commodious school rooms were erected. To these erections and enlargements it might be added, that the Primitive Methodists have either erected or purchased a chapel; or taken on rent a preaching room, and established a society in each of the following villages, viz. :— Ansty, Ratby. Desford. Barlston, Barwell, Shilton, Enderby, Countesthorpe, Wigston, Belgrave, Thurmaston, Syston, Rothly, Humberstone; besides Gilmorton, Dunton, Chamford,

Stanton, Burbage, Bagworth Colliery, Newbold, &c. and other places opened more recently. In these places, including Leicester, they have upwards of three thousand souls under their ministry, exclusive of nearly one thousand Sunday scholars and teachers. Thus, Christian friends, we trust you will perceive the Primitive Methodists have not been idle, nor has the Divine Being withheld his blessing from their labours; nor have your donations so kindly given been thrown away. Indeed when it is considered, that the society is composed chiefly of the working classes, that deep rooted prejudices, and powerful opposition have been met and conquered, it must be admitted that nothing but uniting perseverance, aided by the Divine blessing, could have accomplished so much in the face of such difficulties. But to return to George-street chapel, Belgrave-gate, Leicester. Owing to the extreme lowness of the roof, and other inconveniences, this place of worship is very incommodious; and it is on some occasions much too small. But as every person who has been in it during divine worship, must be acquainted with these facts, further description is, perhaps, unnecessary. We propose, therefore, to raise the roof a few feet higher; to somewhat enlarge the gallery, and to effect other necessary repairs and improvements. But the extent of our operations will be ruled by the amount of your contributions; and to ascertain which, one or more of the undersigned will wait upon you as soon as convenient.

“N.B. Donations of any amount, and from any persons, to the fund for raising, enlarging, and otherwise improving this chapel, will be thankfully received by

“J. BLACKLEY, Free Lane.

“F. DERBYSHIRE, Willow Bridge.

“T. MORGAN, } Ministers

“J. ECKERSLEY } and

“S. BOTTOMLEY, } Secretaries

“February 6, 1839.”

As a first fruit of the circulation of this address, a gentleman, belonging to the established church, came down to the chapel, and gave us £5. to start with. Also we found our way opened with -the public. J. Easthope, Esq. M. P. and W. Ellis, Esq.M.P. members of parliament for the town, gave us £5. each. We then made application to the public, commencing with the mayor, and proceeding or gravitating down through the aldermen, councilmen, to the inhabitants generally. We soon found ourselves sure of more than half the cost of our undertaking! We then wrote out specifications, threw the work into the market of open competition, obtained some very reasonable estimates, and the lowest estimator, a respectable builder, took the work, and performed the whole in a workmanlike manner. The whole of the walls were bond-timbered round, and then raised four feet six inches higher; the building was re-roofed, re-ceiled, more gallery room put in, windows repaired, &c. and all completed for under £155! The whole of which was begged except about £15. Also, in addition to paying off some small sums, we made arrangements for lowering the chapel debt annually. During the alteration of the chapel, the society and congregation had to betake themselves to their original chapel, the open air, “the streets and lanes of the city.” Fears were expressed that we should suffer in our congregation and seat holders; but we followed up the street work, and left consequences to the Lord: and when the chapel was re-opened our old seat holders and congregation returned with additions, numbers having been reached by the street labours, who now came and settled under our ministry.

Meantime, the missionary work rolled on in the villages. Belgrave society processioned the streets every sabbath. Rothly pushed on the converting work. Humberstone young converts went from house to house praying with sinners. Desford took the street; old Ansty came up in to the revival; Burbage was shaken, and numbers were converted to God.

Also seven or eight open air services were held every Sunday, in the streets of Leicester, chiefly by the local brethren, and which greatly helped the town societies.

When we came to make up the returns at the end of this the fourth and last year, we found the good Lord had given us another increase of more than one hundred and thirty-six members. So that in numbers, we found our circuit now at the head of the district, with above one thousand one hundred members, and moving onwards with increasing speed. Indeed, the more the brethren laboured and prevailed, the greater became their expectations. Hence the circuit kept rising in faith and power. Perhaps we may recapitulate the progress of the circuit during the four years, as follows: Friar's chapel galleried, and the house erected; George-street chapel raised, and its debt lowered; a mission room taken, on Welford Road, furnished, and a new cause raised up; Desford chapel purchased and furnished; Thurmaston chapel, galleried; a new chapel and two houses erected at Belgrave; a new chapel erected at Ratby; a new chapel at Ansty; a new chapel at Rothly; land purchased at Shilton, [the chapel now up;] much ground missioned or re-missioned; about fifty souls died happy in the Lord, and above four hundred and thirty-six members added to the societies. But if we reckon the increase, deaths, removals, expulsions, and fallings away, the aggregate number of souls brought to God and added to the societies, cannot be less than from six hundred and fifty to seven hundred in the four years. To the everlasting God, whose right hand has made us t and amen.

Several conversions have taken place, which, with some circumstances that have transpired, it might be well to record. An infidel who found the Lord, during the revival, collected together a number of infidel books, by which he and his house had been poisoned; and in the presence of several persons, committed them to the flames in triumph. One of the persons present, who had himself been rescued from the midnight darkness of infidelity, seized the portrait of .Tom Paine, and said, "Let this, as one of the worst, burn first, and kindle fire to all the. rest." And thus the pile of infidel productions flamed away, while gratitude to God ascended up to heaven from each breast of the reclaimed, for deliverance.

Another person, a wretched backslider, who having taken poison with an intent to destroy himself, was snatched from the jaws of destruction, by timely medical aid, came to our chapel, and the Lord cast the old murderer out of his soul, and delivered him.

Another person finding the power of God seizing him in the chapel, scrambled over the pew back, and attempted to rush out of the meeting; but not being able to get away, was obliged to commence crying for mercy, and ultimately found mercy to the joy of his soul.

Some of the new ground broken up or re-missioned, yields encouragement to perseverance, and illustrates that glorious scripture which says, "All things are possible to God, and to him that believeth." Rothly, a village with a population of one thousand souls, had been missioned years ago, and given up. Humberstone, within two miles of Leicester, had been visited several times, but apparently with little effect. Both these villages, however, have been now successfully taken, a good chapel erected in the former, and a promising society raised up in each.

Earl Shilton, a large village containing above two thousand inhabitants, and not two hundred of them, it is supposed, converted to God, had been repeatedly tried, and given up at last as incorrigible. But Primitive Methodism, worked out on the scripture above quoted, does not despair. After powerful repulses, it returns again to the breach, with new modes of attack; and confiding in Him to whom "all things are possible," and who has taught its "hands to war, and its' fingers to fight," perseveres till victory crowns the day. A firm lodgment is now made in Shilton, a society raised up and land purchased for a chapel, (since up and opened.) Thanks be to God, "who is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

Lutterworth, a small market town, celebrated as the scene of Wickliff's labours, had been tried some years ago, and given up. Our entrance into this place, in July, 1839, was

rather remarkable. Having previously reconnoitred the ground, and made arrangements to hold a powerful camp meeting as the opening service; we proceeded on a Sabbath morning with a body of labourers, of the right sort, from twenty-eight to thirty-two strong, from Leicester to Lutterworth, thirteen miles. A little before we entered the town we halted, and formed into a properly arranged processioning company, so that each person might know both his place and work, when he came into action. We then sang through the town, to the Camp ground, in two companies, the strongest bringing up the rear. The first company had scarcely got to the far end of the town, and the inhabitants not recovered from the surprise which had seized them, when another and still stronger company came marching in, singing as the sound of many waters, "Come ye sinners poor and needy," &c. The town was roused, and a large concourse were soon on the Camp ground. We set up our banners near the spot on which good Wickliff's bones were burned, and near the brook into which the ashes were cast. The Camp meeting was very powerful, some trembled under the word, and much good was effected that day. We concluded the day's work by holding a missionary meeting on the Camp ground, and which was well received. A cause is now raised up, and the town is become the centre of a promising mission. Such was our entrance to the town and spot where, four hundred years ago, blind papistical zeal committed a silly outrage on the bones of pious Wickliff, the morning star of the reformation. Little did the bone-burners think, that in an age to come, the gospel, which Wickliff contended for, would be proclaimed near, or on that very spot, where intolerant and savage bigotry then reared up its proud crest, in triumph over a dead man's bones, the gospel, the free, full, and unshackled gospel, should be preached with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven to hundreds of souls, and under such safeguards of religious liberty, "that none dared to make us afraid."

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm!"

The causes of our prosperity, as far as human means are concerned, may be stated thus:-

1. Union amongst the preachers and official characters; and consequently great peace, and dispatch of business at official meetings.
2. All persons of piety, brought forward and set to work. None idle for want of something to do.
3. Missioning and re-missioning followed up. At it, and always at it, in some way or other.
4. The missionary spirit fostered by Local Preachers' Missionary meetings, Magazine reading, &c.
5. Permanent praying companies at the Town Camp Meetings.
6. The young converts encouraged to hold Missionary Prayer Meetings out of doors, and from house to house.
7. The Chapel interests looked after; and last, but not least, effects, present effects, expected in all movements, through the blood of the Lamb.

Approved by the Leicester Circuit Committee, July, 1840.

I cannot take leave of Leicester, without acknowledging the vigorous and valuable cooperation of the official brethren. Their willingness to enter into the plans of usefulness; their missionary spirit; their kind treatment of the travelling preachers; and their confidence in them. Also the harmony in which we lived and laboured together, during the four years. The praying labourers likewise were a noble band, and mightily helped in the work. The people were kind, and loved their preachers. Nor must I forget my excellent colleagues;

“companions in arms,” who nobly seconded our efforts, led up “God's sacramental hosts to war.” Our hearts were one, we fought side by side, and God gave us the victory. May we meet in heaven, and spend eternity together. Amen! and Amen!

THOMAS MORGAN,