

The Early Days of Primitive Methodism in Essex*

An address to the Hall Street Guild, Hall Street Methodist Church, Chelmsford, on 21st October 1937, delivered without notes, by Mr. Henry Clark, when 91 years of age. Mr. Clark was a Deedpoll member of the Primitive Methodist Church.

Well, it is just seventy-five years this month since I first gave my heart to God. Three or four of us boys attended a cottage prayer meeting in Union Yard and we became converted. We were under conviction of sin for several weeks but the time came when we found peace with God and we were introduced to Primitive Methodists.

You want to know how we began and what we have done. I cannot tell you all because Essex is a big County and although I have travelled from Harwich to Stratford, the boundaries north and south, east and west, there is much more than I can tell you tonight.

However, we started at Chelmsford. There was a young man named Cooper and another converted in Sheffield who was a Scissors Grinder in the street, who later became a Methodist Minister, connected with the Wesleyan Church who were dissatisfied with the condition of the church and their services. They had heard of Hugh Bourne and William Clowes and understood they were thrown out of the Wesleyan connexion because they preached the Gospel. These young men were willing and wanting to preach. They had an instinct for preaching and believed that they would be the means in God's hands of winning others for Christ. The consequence was they began out-door services and in their wanderings they went to Galleywood. There they met with considerable success. People flocked to hear these young men and listened to what they had got to say. They were so encouraged after preaching once or twice that they said "*Well, we will start a meeting, but how shall we do it?*" Well, one suggested to the other "*Write to the London Primitive Methodist Missionary Committee and ask them to send us a Minister. Tell them what we are doing. Tell them we want to form a Church and to preach the Gospel and get people converted.*" They did so and the Missionary Committee looked favourably at that letter and sent them a missionary by the name of William Monkman. He came to Chelmsford. These young men stood by him as he preached his first sermon on the Stone Bridge here in Moulsham Street. Of course, it caused a bit of surprise, especially among the Wesleyan body, because they were more strictly church people than they are today.

However, Monkman was very successful in winning men to Christ and he was favourably received in Chelmsford, as well as the surrounding district.

Having now begun he could see what the future might be and the consequence was he said "*We shall have to form a circuit. If the Missionary Committee will stand by us, we must do what we can to raise a certain amount towards the missionary's salary.*" The consequence was that they formed the first class meeting and although they had a room in Union Yard at their disposal they wanted something more public. There was an old paint shop in Springfield Road where the Empire Theatre now stands, occupied by people of the name of Stock, who lived opposite. They were asked if they would give up this room, for it was of considerable size. The length of it was just the length of the front of the present theatre. They consulted their landlord, a Mr. Hardcastle, who was a brewer at Writtle, and he favourably received the application. A condition was that they should put this room into a presentable appearance and take care of it so far as they were concerned. This they undertook very willingly and the old paint pots and rubbish were cleared out and the room made presentable and comfortable. The outside was painted; the inside was white-washed and painted and forms were added. The pulpit was put in and services were announced. Mr Monkman only remained here one year and then a very energetic man by the name of John Guy was sent as the next Minister and he remained for three years.

* Title by Noel Howard Clark, great-grandson of Henry Clark. The address was copied down verbatim in shorthand by an unknown member of the audience on that day, and the typed manuscript preserved at Hall Street. A copy of the typed manuscript was provided by Mr. Peter Batey, Property Steward at Hall Street, in August 1998.

I remember hearing him for the first time preaching on the path right opposite Springfield Road and I thought what a strange man in appearance. He was small and spare and pale, and did not look at all suitable for a minister to take on missionary work. However, he was as tough as wire and John Guy took an interest in these young men, continuing services in that room and then they made up their minds as to what they would do, where and how they should begin.

Connected with the Wesleyan body were a man and his wife by the name of Peck. They had come from Halstead and one of the young men happened to be a son of the old people. So you see there was just a small circle to begin with and they started to preach, announced their services three times on a Sunday and once or twice during the week, and then they were to go outside.

On the Writtle Road you know there happens to be, or was, a water mill. The miller there, whose name was Brignall, came from Norfolk, he and his wife and daughter. They heard about the service in Springfield Road and came to see what it was because they were Primitive Methodists down Norwich way. The consequence was that they joined the Society and then another one or two, who were gamekeepers in the employ of Arthur Prior of Hylands joined, and thus commenced Primitive Methodism.

Well now, afterwards the question was what was to be done? Here was Peck, a local preacher, another Tyler, a local preacher, Brignall, a local preacher, and another friend, although not taking any prominent part was one of those who stood by and was willing to support the church. So they decided that they would make a commencement at Writtle. They were not very successful because Writtle had then a very prominent and good Congregational Minister and Writtle was not then what it is today. If you look back 74 or 75 years you can understand it was sparsely occupied and there were not many, apart from those who were engaged in the Writtle Brewery and the agricultural work of the neighbourhood, so that they were really not doing much at Writtle, but they determined to try somewhere else and so they started at Great Baddow, and just at this side of the hill they opened their preaching service. They sung their hymns and preached the Gospel, and then went further afield.

The time came when they occupied a room at Great Baddow and they were partially successful, but the Peculiar People were very strong and the consequence was there was not an opportunity for our people there as they expected.

So they went further afield. They tried Galleywood and there they met with considerable success. People were very pleased to see them and there the opportunity came that they must have somewhere to preach and somewhere to work and they were bold enough to hire the Grandstand that was then, not the present one but the one previous. The gospel was preached there and the consequence was they had considerable congregations. Not only that, but they had people converted. That was what they wanted; that was what they were anxious to see and the consequence was they were stimulated and encouraged in their work of faith and their labour of love.

Then they decided to go the other way. They went to Broomfield, but success did not meet them there, so further afield they went to Great Waltham. Here they met with considerable success and there were three or four farmers who were favourable and who had got sense enough to know that religion for their men was a good thing. It made them better men, better servants. Made them more honest, and they kept to their time better, and looking at it from that standpoint the farmers fell in with sympathy and help to those who were engaged in the work. The consequence was they (were) lent a barn called Garnetts and here they conducted services for a considerable time. So Galleywood with the Grandstand, and Great Waltham with the barn, something must be done in Chelmsford and they decided that they would have to get a bit of ground. They would have to build a church at Waltham. They would build one in Galleywood.

The consequence was they entered into a contract with Mr. Thomas Moss, who was a brickmaker and occupied that field in St. John's Road where all the glass is. (The earth was cut away to form the bricks.) Mr. Moss was a real friend to Primitive Methodists. He found the bricks and undertook to build two Churches. His son happened to be in the building line. They were only shells it is true, that is, just the frame. There were no seats. There was no plaster or anything of that kind but they were occupied, and I remember going to Great Waltham when that Chapel was opened and we had to stand all the service. There was just the rostrum, it is true, but there were no seats, no plaster on the walls or whitewash. They were just delighted to think that they had got a house of prayer, and so Waltham was crowded.

Then they got a little money and they got encouragement and they got people converted and Waltham Chapel used to be crowded. After that they plastered the walls and provided the seats. I should think for twenty years on a Sunday afternoon there was not a vacant seat and the work of God prospered immensely at Great Waltham.

Not so much at Galleywood but for all that, they were encouraged to go forward and to preach the everlasting Gospel.

Well I was but a boy. John Buy was but a boy. John Harvey was but a boy. Arthur Stokes was but a boy. We were all boys in the Sunday School when they sent us out to preach the Gospel.

Well, what could we do? We had not ability sufficient to preach sermons but we could tell people that we were converted. We could tell them what religion had done for us, how it made us happy, and we used to sing the old songs:

"I shall never forget the day, when Jesus washed my sins away."

It was a great attraction and we boys were very successful. Thank God. I often think of the time when in our weakness and trembling, sometimes we tried to speak for the Master. There was a lot of sympathy with the older people, mothers and fathers thought what a splendid thing it was for young people to be engaged in Christian service and so it was, and Primitive Methodism began to spread.

Our room in Springfield Road was tolerably successful. It was in an unfortunate position because there was no path and the road at the time was terribly dirty but we managed to hold on and we strived and persevered to get men and women converted to God. So we had the idea of a church but what was to be done? Here was Mr. Guy, he must have help, and we applied for help to the Missionary Committee and they sent him a young man by the name of Cooper and another by the name of Southport and the whole County was to be visited by a missionary and the Gospel preached. So the plan was made and these young men were sent out. They visited Great Baddow, Sandon, Danbury, Little Baddow and further on. Then they started at Hatfield. From Hatfield to Witham, from Witham to Braintree, from Braintree to Bardfield and Halstead. All these places were on our plan and were worked by us. At Gt. Waltham success attended their efforts. Not only was Gt. Waltham the centre of religious life but the men were uneducated, a terrible thing. I have seen men who were six feet and more high but could not read their own name, who scarcely knew what their own name was. They had been brought up in such a condition. Just fancy a little child at their side being able to sing and to read, and great big men like that, all they could do was just to learn, if possible, a chorus of some hymn, "*Happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away*". It was a wonderful hymn was that, and we had some wonderful services.

We went further afield in that direction. We went to Little Green, Chatham Green. We went to Banners Green, we preached day and night and wherever we went thank God we had success.

Now not only so, but there was something to be done here. What was to be done? We had no money, none of us, and we wanted a church and the consequence was application was made to John Copeland an old lawyer living in London Road. All this neighbourhood was one vast garden, right away from the Waterworks here to St. John's Road, occupied and owned by a man whose name I cannot exactly remember, but his son is one of Hilliard's Auctioneers. John Copeland was quite favourable to a church being built in this neighbourhood, although houses were not built. These houses were not built, everything then was vacant but he could see what the future was going to be. He was a Godly man, a religious man. He was a help to Methodists, he could preach and was interested in Christian work and Christian service, so he made a bargain.

Mr. Guy had left us and we had a Yorkshire man by the name of Jacob Dawson. He was broad in his talk but he was a good man, one of the very best. He found friends where other people failed and there were those whom he associated with who were willing to become Trustees. The consequence was there was no difficulty and the London Authorities gave their consent for us to make arrangements for the building. I remember the day very well. Mr. Hardcastle was to lay the stone and George Lamb and two or three of the big officers in London came down to the stone laying. Arrangements were made and Dawson, our Minister, collected a considerable sum. Just at that time the Lancashire famine was on. He collected a considerable sum for that and in introducing one thing, the people were willing to help our church as well as those who were starving in the North. So Mr. Dawson found friends unexpectedly and the consequence was we had a church. The stone was laid. There are some of the old seats about now.. Mr. Moss was one of those careful men who take care of anything he had, and everything that came within his reach, and he supplied us with seats for all the centre of the church and the trustees decided to have new ones for the sides. There was to be no back entrance. There was a piece of ground vacant, about 10' wide the whole length of the building. That was just a yard, you know. The time came when the Church was completed and the opening services were held. We had them for six weeks and we did fairly well. The weather was very cold. There was no screen at the front doors, so there was plenty of fresh air. We had seats down each aisle and the Rev. Bishop from Manchester came to preach one of the opening services on one of the Sundays and Mr. Creagh, who afterwards became one of the leaders. He was stationed at Maidstone. He gave us one Sunday, and an excellent man he was, one of the very best that ever walked the face of this earth.

So we got over the winter and then an application came from the Band of Hope Society asking whether we would grant them the use of Hall Street Church for one evening in the week. Well, we did not all happen to be teetotallers. Just previously I remember, when I went to the British School for a little while, a Mr. Lively I think it was, came and wanted the School Master to form a Band of Hope. There was not one then in Chelmsford and he was going to hold the meeting, he said, in the room in Springfield Road. He and Jacob Dawson were friends, and in that Room the first Band of Hope in Chelmsford was started and I was one of the boys to sign the pledge.

So we were in full sympathy with temperance work and the consequence was there was no hesitation in opening this place to advocate temperance work. Then the question was to spread out. Where should we go? We decided to mission Margaretting. We decided to mission Ingatestone. We decided to mission Brentwood. How was it to be done? There were old men at Hatfield, good men, pious men who had been converted and men in a fairly decent position in life. There were agricultural labourers it is true, but there were two or three shopkeepers, a boot maker and so on so at Hatfield we had considerable help on which to rely. The consequence was we started these missions and then the time came when we must go further afield and the young men were sent out on Monday and had to visit so many families during the week, preach so many sermons and give an account of their stewardship to the Superintendent.

So they went to Braintree and Halstead and they were favourably received at Braintree, and a church like those at Waltham and Galleywood was built.

After two or three years we decided to make a change and a young man by the name of Godfrey Shaw was sent. He was alright as far as preaching was concerned, but that church, like Galleywood and Waltham was left unplastered and unfinished, so Godfrey Shaw set about having it done and the consequence was he was just so energetic he collected £100 towards expenditure and, bless me, if he was not seen again and the report was he took boat for America and took the £100. That was what happened at Braintree Church and so somebody else had to shoulder the burden and pay the bill which he had contracted.

Now we, even in those days, were very generous. Mr. Cooper we gave up to the Congregationalists. We had a Mr. Newall for a year or two but we had to give him up to the Congregationalists. They were hard up for Ministers and we were willing to take any man who could preach the Gospel. Then there was a Mr. Bull, who was a good man who took a church in Yorkshire for the Congregationalists, and so we lost three straight away in those early days. However there were plenty of men willing to preach the Gospel and waiting and wanting an opportunity for Christian service. Others were sent and the work of God was carried on.

We were successful at Margaretting and also at Ingatestone but there was not an opportunity at Ingatestone for Christian service as there was in some places. We had to preach in the street on the Sunday afternoon and Sunday evening. No one would seem willing to open their house. At Margaretting we could have had half a dozen houses. Then the young men went to Ongar, so we covered that side. How about Little Baddow? Well there was not an opportunity for Christian service at Little Baddow. It was very sparsely populated then and there was a good Congregational Church which had an excellent Minister so we felt our service would be worth more somewhere else. At Boreham we had a room and did very well, but in the course of time our people thought it best to give it up to the Congregationalists who were willing to take it because in our little Church at Boreham there were several Congregationalists and so there was no difficulty whatever. We gave it willingly and freely and the Congregationalists built a little church.

Well we had a lady here as a missionary and she was an excellent lady and an excellent missionary. We had several people converted under her and then she went round the villages. She went to Boreham, there was a young farmer there who had not led a good life but had wasted his substance in riotous living and his parents scarcely knew what to do with him. He was down on his haunches but he went to one of these services. He was converted. He was a new man. Old things had passed away and all things had become new. He had spent his money. He had spent his energy. He had lost his self-respect, what could be done? Some friends said "*Let's lend William a hand*", so they built him a bungalow. William became a leader of the Bible Class in London Road for many years. You cannot tell what is going to come. You sow the seed anywhere and everywhere. That man was the means in God's hands of converting several young men. He has passed away now, it is true, but he did his work after he had recovered his sanity.

We had a young man by the name of Whiteman. He was a Scotchman and was rather strange in his talk. However, he was a good fellow and he did us good service. Then one day, one Sunday morning, Mr. Wilkinson in London Road was taken so ill that he had to leave the service, and leave the congregation. What were they to do? A member said "*I know what you can do. Send for Whiteman. Send for young Whiteman!, you have him and try him*". Whiteman wrote a note to me "*Will you take Hall Street tonight Henry? I am asked to go to London Road.*" I said "*Go and God bless you.*" I took his appointment. He went to London Road and the people were just delighted. Sunday after Sunday they went. They paid him well and he conducted their services. Then the time came when Mr. Wilkinson got worse and worse. Somebody must fill his place and they offered Whiteman the pastorate and offered him £500 a year and a manse, but he said to me "*I am not going to leave you. Do not worry and get your hair grey over that. I shall never go to London Road as their minister.*"

Unfortunately he belonged to a Society in Chelmsford and they discussed many things that were good and some things that were not so good and there was some influence somewhere that went against the grain of truly Christian pious men. There was a good man by the name of Gibson who was distressed at the

ideas that were advanced at some of these meetings among those learned men. These ideas so influenced Whiteman that he came to me and said "*I must resign.*" "*What?*" I said. "*What?*" he said "*I must resign. I cannot preach your gospel any longer. My views are altered. I must keep outside of the church. It is hopeless.*"

He was made a master for a time at the Home School and then eventually got a church in South London and he laboured there for that denomination, who did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. During all these years I have occasionally heard from him. About two years ago whilst crossing the road he was knocked down by a motor car and killed instantly. Thus we lost an excellent man because it had only to be announced that Whiteman was going to preach and there would not be a vacant seat. The whole congregation from London Road would come and hear what he had got to say. It was a distress to them, more so than to us at the church.

A young man was sent to us by the name of Atkinson and we carried on with considerable success. Waltham progressed and there we had one of the best revivals that ever I knew. It was winter time and one who came under our Ministry was an old Dutch woman, and she was so delighted, the Church was so much to her, that the next day she must tell everybody at Chatham Green and the people were surprised and could scarcely understand and they said "*If that service was so good and that Church was so wonderful why cannot we have more of them?*", and they sent us word, would we come? And three or four of us did go and for three months we carried on that work for Christ. Four or five nights a week until in every house in Chatham Green someone was converted. We had cottage meetings here and there and elsewhere. Every time somebody was saved. "*I feel like singing all the time*" we used to sing. We did not keep very good time sometimes, you know, but they could sing "*There is a fountain filled with blood*" and all the hymns that were appropriate. We had to close as Springtime came and Mr. Hasler lent us his barn to have a Thanksgiving service. It was a meeting for young people. The young children came out of school, and Mr. Wardle, one of our Ministers, was going up to Chatham Green and so the children got round him and said "*Can't we sing, Mr. Wardle?*" He said "*Sing what you like.*" So we went to Chatham Green led by the children singing "*Hold the fort for I am coming.*" Presently they changed to "*See a mighty host advancing, Satan leading on.*" He said "*That won't do – not Satan, Wardle.*" So they went on singing until they went to Chatham Green.

Well, it was an eye-opener to the public. Then on the Sunday morning in Waltham Chapel we had a thanksgiving service and 96 people testified their salvation.

I shall never forget the experience we had one night at one of our Prayer Meetings. From a public house they sent a drunken man, sent him to upset the service but there was such an influence as can be felt and instead of this man persecuting and deriding and saying unpleasant things, he had to kneel at the penitent form and cry for mercy. Fred Harris the worst man in Waltham was converted. He ran home as if he was wild and when he related his experience he said he could hear the devil behind him. Fred had been a drinking man but when he got converted he could preach like a prophet and after two or three years at Gt. Waltham he went up to the East End of London and there joined the Salvation Army. Religion does wonderful things. I want to see it more, how it will come. Why it is that it does not come. We have got to live the life of faith, God says, try me, prove me, see if I will not open the windows of Heaven and pour you out such a blessing there is not room enough to contain it.

There is nobody here remembers Hammond coming to London Road. He was the agent for the Sunday School Association of England. He came from America and at the Sunday afternoon and evening services in London Road he used to preach as well as address the children. After the preaching service there was a prayer meeting in the vestry. There were several people on their knees crying for mercy. Nobody could help them. Mr. Walter Perry, who was associated with the church, a very nice man, good man, was the only man who could kneel down and point out to a woman I knew that Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. One of the oldest Deacons came to talk to that poor woman but turned on his heels and shot out of the door. I

was surprised next morning when Mr. Walter Perry came to me and asked if we could not send some help. They did not understand the revival work. They wanted not only people who prayed but people that could point sinners to Christ. I made the thing known to our friends at the Wesleyan Church and for three weeks nightly those services were carried on. When the end came and he asked for a show of hands as to had been converted, 120 held up their hands. Thank God it has not been labour in vain. We have not spent and striven for naught but God has made the labour of our hands successful.

Two or three young men who were converted in that service became ministers. It gave that Church such an impetus as it had never had. Mr. Walter Perry was a believer in revivals and a believer in conversation. It does not take God long to save a man, he lifts him out of the miry clay and puts his feet on a rock and puts a new song in his mouth. What a change, Paul says, you know, when speaking of the future, *“We shall all be changed in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye.”* That is a wonderful thing, that is how God saves us. He does not want you to mourn for a week or a month, or a year. Godliness is profitable to all men. It has the promise of life.

I want to see a revival in our church and I want our young men, our young lads engaged in Christian service. Oh the joy of it! You know we used to enjoy it when we went over to have a camp meeting. When we got there we had a wagon in the field and they expected great things. There were four of us lads to conduct the service. Well we went on, preaching and praying. At the afternoon service we had what we called breakdown. People wanted to turn the preaching service into a prayer meeting and then the time came for somebody to take hold of God and point these men and women to Christ. We did and when we came away at night fifty people had been converted to God. We were only lads but you know it gave us such joy. It seemed to take hold of our very nature. We could sing:

*“I need Thee every hour, most precious Lord,
No tender voice like Thine can peace afford,
I need Thee; oh I need Thee,
Every hour I need Thee.”*

and so we lived or tried to live as Christian lads and I would like to see our boys do the same thing.

The opportunities are the same, but the work is different now to what it was sixty years ago.

I went on a mission to London. There were twelve of us, twelve men, all country men too. We went down the street, in Commercial Road, right through into Redcliffe Street. We sang our songs, our hymns. We used to have lively ones, you know. On the way people were very benevolent. They thought we were singing for cash, so they threw coppers in the road so we got a tidy collection in that way.

We made our way into Sutton Street. We got crowds of people so we announced an evening service at 7 o'clock and invited anybody and everybody to come. We were going to have what we called a love feast. Some people did not know love enough for a common meal but we were going to have a feast for one hour and I wanted sixty people to give us their experience to tell us in one minute what God had done for them. We met, the chapel was crowded and the service began. Among us was a farmer's son. He could not preach but he could pray. He seemed to be in Heaven itself. That service I shall never forget. Sometimes two or three were on their feet and there were about sixty to give their testimony in that love feast. A prayer meeting followed and we did get some characters to it who came to see what a love feast was like. They did not understand but they had come to see and they got caught.

We had got to what seemed like a standstill and a young man with a tenor voice – I hear it now – sang *“There are angels hovering around to carry the tidings home.”* There was one man sat at the left-hand side. We could not make anything of him. We asked him to come out and ask for pardon and he did. We wanted

to know what his difficulties were. All he said was "*Who was that lady sat beside me tonight?*" We knew who she was. She was Mrs. G...., the wife of what they call a book translator, and he said "*Do you think she would forgive me?*" He put his hand in his pocket. "*I took this. I picked her pocket tonight while the meeting was on.*" He had got £4.10s.0d. We felt sure Mrs. would forgive him and told him so. Then he said "*I will be a Christian.*" He came out from his pew to the penitent form and the brethren got around him and sang and prayed. It was not long before he found the light. Then the question was "*What was to become of him?*" He said "*I am nobody. I do not live anywhere. I am a pick-pocket. I have never done a day's work in my life.*" And the question was what was to be done with him. He said "*If I go back to my old haunts I will have to follow the life I have lived. I do not want to do that.*" One of the Trustees was a foreman in the Docks, so he said "*Well my friend, will you work if you can get it?*" He said "*Yes.*" He said "*I will do anything. I do not mind what. Anything to the life I have had.*" Then he said "*If you come to the Docks at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning I will take you in.*" That man became a Sunday School teacher and lived a good life.

The possibility came. Is anything too hard for the Lord? No! No! Why can't these changes take place in Chelmsford. Now nothing is too hard for God and if we do right, the end will be alright.

So may we always ready stand with our lamps burning in our hand. Amen.