

THE PRIMS Primitive Methodism in Hull

Methodism, founded as a single movement by John Wesley, soon split into several factions, known as “connexions”. One of the most influential of these connexions, and one that was prominent in Hull, was Primitive Methodism.

The Prims grew out of the camp meetings held in Mow Cop in Staffordshire. One of the attendants at the first camp meeting in 1807 was William Clowes, the son of a potter, Samuel Clowes, and Ann Wedgwood, a member of the famous pottery family. Legend has it that young William led a dissipated life until his conversion in 1805. After the 1807 camp meeting he became a Local Preacher, but quickly fell out with his church and was taken off the preaching plan and expelled. He joined with Hugh Bourne and others to found a new connexion, the Primitives, in 1810.



The movement spread from the Midlands quite rapidly, characterised by “aggressive evangelism”. They differed from the other branches of Methodism in several ways; they emphasised the work of lay people rather than ordained ministers; they encouraged female preachers; they rejected the Anglican influence on worship, preferring simplicity; and they stressed the political implications of the Christian message, where the Wesleyans were nervous of political involvement. The Primitives first arrived in Hull under the influence of a number of women, notably Jane Brown, who had been sent by Hugh Bourne to mission to the area. She had preached at Hessle and in a building which had been a female penitentiary in Church St, Wincolmlee, Hull. Other pioneers were Mr and Mrs Woolhouse who used a factory in North St as a place of worship. They asked the Nottingham circuit to send a preacher, and in 1819 the decision was taken to send a formal mission. Clowes was to be the missionary. He wrote,

“I arrived in the town of Hull on Friday, the 15th January, 1819, and made my way to the residence of Mr Woolhouse. As soon as I entered the house, Mrs Woolhouse and John Oxtoby, commonly called Praying Johnny, fell down upon their knees and returned thanks to God for my safe arrival. This act of devotion was very encouraging to me, and became a prelude to greater things. On the very day of entering into Hull I preached in the evening in an old factory in North Street. Vast numbers of people attended, many influenced by curiosity, others with an intention to create disturbance, having heard of the arrival of the “Ranter preacher”; however, God was present in my first effort to make known the riches of his mercy, and the wicked were restrained, so the meeting terminated in peace and quiet.”

Clowes was soon joined in his work by John Harrison and his wife Sarah, and in June of 1819 Hull and the surrounding area was formed into a circuit. By September they were ready to open their first Hull chapel, in Mill Street. Built at a cost of £1,700, it had seating for 790 people. (*Mill Street Chapel closed in 1910, and was used as a dancehall until destroyed by bombing in 1941.*) A Circuit Plan of 1819 lists 19 churches, including North Cave and Market Weighton, and 15 preachers, headed by W. Clowes. It was reported that in six months three hundred people joined the society. The first Conference of the Primitives was held in Hull in 1820.

Clowes went further afield than the city of Hull. He visited Kilnsea, where he was welcomed by William Hodge. The Hodge family eventually moved to Hull and became very prominent in the Primitives. John, son of William, lived in Church Street and made his house available for worship. The Society formed



Emma Robson

there moved to Lincoln Street and built a chapel known as the Samuel Hodge Memorial Chapel, after another of William's sons. Henry Hodge, born in 1813, married Jane Simpson and prospered as an oil miller on Holderness Road. He became a Local Preacher and spent some years living and working in the Louth circuit. His daughter, Emma, was born there in 1837. Emma grew up steeped in the life of the church, attending Little Mason Street chapel as a child. This had originally been built by the Baptists in 1822 but was sold to the Methodists in 1837. Later she attended the new church at Bright Street on Holderness Road. This was opened in 1864, designed by Joseph Wright. Wright was himself an active Primitive Methodist,

and was responsible for many chapels in Hull, East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire. The Bright Street chapel was built at a cost of £5,116 and had seating for 1,200 people. Henry Hodge laid the cornerstone, and contributed a great deal of the money. Unsurprisingly he became General Treasurer.

Emma Hodge married Joseph Robson, a church member who became a Local Preacher. Emma died in 1871, apparently of septicaemia, and the Rev. Joseph Wood was inspired to write "Sunset at Noonday - Memorials of Mrs J T Robson". The book, published in 1872, is more hagiography and sermon than biography, but gives a picture of the religious climate of the time.

"Praying Johnny" Oxtoby preached at the Mill Street Chapel in 1825. A witness said, "The power of God was felt in a most glorious manner. He laid his mighty hand upon one woman, who fell down in her pew, and she cried as loud as ever they had done in Weardale. Some were afraid and ran out of the chapel; the devil roared; and there was such an uproar as they had not before witnessed."

The hey-day of chapel building began in 1849 with Great Thornton Street in the Hull West circuit. This Italianate chapel, designed by William Sissons, was burnt down in 1856 but rebuilt. In 1851 the Clowes Chapel in Jarratt Street, another Sissons design, was opened. It was a huge and expensive building, seating 1,400 and costing £7,410. In 1873 the Henry Hodge Memorial Chapel was opened on Williamson Street, Holderness Road. It was conceived before Hodge's death, and he himself contributed £1,000 towards the total cost of £7,300. The Hessle Road chapel was built in 1881 (and still stands as an increasingly derelict ruin). Other chapels included St George's Road (1873), Bourne, Anlaby Road (1869), Fountain Road (1877), Hodgson Street (1884), Bethesda, Holland Street (1902), Portobello (1906), Hedon Road (1894) and Sutton (1876). By 1881 the Prims had 14 chapels with a total capacity of 12,650. However, despite phenomenal growth, the building programme was over-ambitious. Wealthy people had built the chapels but the cost of their upkeep fell on poorer members of the congregations, and they were never full.

William Clowes himself chose to stay in Hull after his official retirement in 1842. He married twice; he left his first wife after an argument with his mother-in-law. He continued working until just before his death on 2nd March 1851, and was buried in Hull's General Cemetery. In 1898 Primitive Methodists erected an obelisk at his grave, recording that Clowes was "a burning and a shining light." The grave became part of the "Primitive Methodist Corner", resting place of prominent Prims such as Charles Kendall, George Lamb, Parkinson Milson, Henry Hodge, William Beckworth, Jane Holliday and Elizabeth Hodge.

The Hull circuit was a powerful influence on the North of England, and at one point its territory stretched from Carlisle to Spurn Point. It existed alongside other connexions like the Wesleyans, the New Connexion and the Independent Methodists, who were all brought together by the Union of 1932. A few chapels

refused to join the Union, and throughout the country there were Primitive congregations who opted to be "Primitive Continuing". The last such in Hull is the Redbourne Street Chapel.

Sources include:

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