

From: *The Story of Timperley Methodism*
by Ernest H. Wright, M.A.

BOOTH BANK

Booth Bank still lies hidden away from the traffic of the world. A narrow lane, apparently leading nowhere in particular, leaves the highway in a very uninviting fashion; after a mile or so, it turns abruptly and descends between high hedgerows into a valley - at least, it may be regarded as such in this part of the county of Cheshire. Here a few cottages and a little chapel stand along one side of the road and, from the rising ground beyond, a couple of farmsteads look down across the meadows of the valley. Presently, the lane climbs the opposite hillside, and chapel, cottages and farms are left behind. In Summer it is a place in which to loiter, for the peaceful seclusion and the charm of the countryside are here. But one does not tarry in the Winter when the wind beats the bare branches of the gaunt trees and the cold rain drives pitilessly across the fields.

The seasons, however, have come and gone in this place and one generation of hardworking folk has succeeded another. Men and women have toiled in the fields and on the farm from dawn

until sunset, wresting little more than a precarious living from the soil. They have married, reared large families and in old age been laid to rest in the tranquillity of the churchyard above the Mere at Rostherne. Sons and daughters have left for neighbouring farms, and others have gone away altogether, but the rest have remained, content in their seclusion.

Time is scarcely worth measuring in Booth Bank. The old clock which hangs on the front of the gallery in the chapel has long ago refused to move its hands. Sundays count the weeks and quarter days mark the passing of the year. In any case, the time factor, is unimportant. It was the same Booth Bank a hundred years ago, before the little chapel was built and the worshippers met in a room, or perhaps a converted barn, at the Cross's Farm near by. Nor has there been much change since John and Alice Cross first received the Methodist preacher into their home and entertained John Wesley under their roof.

But if Booth Bank has changed very little, it has played a romantic part in changing the lives of many beyond its borders. Several years before Methodism was established in the neighbouring town of Manchester, Booth Bank had its

preaching house and John Wesley himself had preached there. For during the early years of the Revival, Wesley avoided Manchester. Unfortunately in the year 1745, the town welcomed "Bonnie Prince Charlie" on his march from Scotland in a vain attempt to gain the English Crown. Two of Wesley's friends, the Rev. John Clayton, a fellow of the Collegiate Church, and Dr. John Byrom, the author of the well-known hymn "Christians, Awake," joined in the welcome. But John Wesley was a thorough-going loyalist and, moreover, was anxious to refute the charge, frequently made, that Methodism was sympathetic with the cause of the Pretender. Therefore, when he first came preaching through Lancashire and Cheshire, he prudently avoided the storm centre.

It was not for this reason alone that John Wesley found himself at Booth Bank. In those days a certain farmer and his wife, names John and Alice Cross, lived here. We are told that at one time Alice was "an uncultivated creature," whilst her husband was not much better, except that he was the more docile of the two. Alice happened to hear one of Wesley's preachers somewhere in the district and experienced a complete change of heart and life. The story

is best told in the quaint words of one who knew her, John Pawson, the early Methodist preacher. (We are indebted to the Rev. James Everett for preserving John Pawson's account. See his "Methodism and its Vicinity," published 1827. Everett was resident minister in Altrincham, 1815-17.

"She first began with her husband, who was a man of the same character as she had been. However, she was not to be hindered by him, do what he would. When it was time to go to preaching she would take her straw hat in one hand and hold the door by the other and would say in her plain way, with all possible seriousness, 'John Cross, wilt thou go to heaven with me? If thou wilt not, I am determined not to go to hell with thee.' He was soon prevailed to go along with her, was truly awakened, soon brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God, and lived many years a uniform believer of the Lord Jesus Christ. They now gladly received the servants of God into their dwelling, had a pulpit fixed in their largest room, and had a church in their house for many years. A society was formed and Alice made the leader of the class."

The early success of Methodism in this part of the country undoubtedly owed much to the vigorous personality of Alice Cross. She visited

the sick, whether they sent for her or not. She took beggars into her house, exhorted them, prayed with them, relieved their wants and then sent them away. When a preacher failed to take his appointment, she herself would take his place, although not actually occupying the pulpit. She accosted the gentry in the course of their hunting and warned them of the consequences of their sinful ways. Her husband, John, was made a constable, but since she had more courage than he, she often went in his place to the constables' meetings. In this way she rendered a distinct service to Methodism, for the new movement was held in contempt by the local landowners. "But as she neither feared them nor was at all ashamed of the truth she soon put them all to silence."

John Pawson relates how he first met Alice Cross. "I had often heard a great deal about Alice," he says, "and when I first went to the house, she was standing by the door-way. She was dressed exceedingly plain, but remarkably clean; and if I can form any just idea how a person would look who had just come from the world of happy spirits, I should suppose that she resemble such an one; and more so, I seriously think, than any

woman I ever yet saw in the whole course of my life. I said, 'I suppose I am come to the right place?', She replied 'Yes my dear, I trust you are; come in, my love, come in; and may the Lord bless your coming amongst us.'"

John Wesley and his preachers were frequent visitors to the farm. Some of the preachers left inscriptions on the panes of glass in the window of a room which became known as "The Prophet's Chamber." One of these, still in existence, is inscribed "J. Wesley" and is reputed to be an authentic signature. Another relic is a boot-jack made by the brave John Nelson whilst visiting the farm.

One of the earliest recorded Quarterly Meetings (which have since become such a distinctive part of the Methodist polity) was held here in the year 1752. Richard Barlow, of Manchester, and representatives from other Methodist societies, we are told, "determined upon holding a friendly meeting partly for the transaction of financial affairs and partly for Christian conversation and prayer; and as Booth's Bank, where Alice Cross Resided, was a central place, they

decided to meet there..... Pleased with their interview, they decided to meet again at the end of the quarter." Some of those-or perhaps all- who attended this meeting were entertained at the house of John Hope, the builder of Bucklow Hill, and in honour of the occasion Mistress Hope purchased a couple of silver tablespoons.

The old account book used at the meeting is still preserved. The entry is dated 20th April, 1752, and states:- "A true account of the money brought in by the stewards from each society in the Manchester Round for the use of the Preachers and discharging necessary expenses." Then follows a list of twelve places including Manchester, Bolton, Chester, Daughulme, Booth Bank and Oldfield Brow, together with sums paid in by each, Richard Barlow pays £2 3s 5d from Manchester, Johnson 8s from Oldfield Brow. The items of expenditure and their wants are relieved as they arose. Consequently we find the following entries:- "Buttons for shirts and making," "A new hat for John Nelson," "Peter Jaco, Stockens," "3 Cravats," "Grass for John Wesley's Mare," and Pocket Money for John Nelson."

These are the only records which remain. But as we reverently turn the faded pages of the old account book, we become aware of a realm of romance lying behind and beyond this pale brown handwriting. These pages speak of the courage and sacrifice of simple, devout men and women. They lived too near their own countryside to cherish ambition; they only desired that others might experience with them the miracle of grace. Little more is known concerning John and Alice Cross, except that Alice died at the age of sixty-five in the year 1774, and that John followed her twenty-one years later. Their children maintained the Methodist tradition and a descendant, another John Cross, of Booth Bank, became the first Circuit Steward of the newly-formed Altrincham Circuit in 1838. The years have passed; the quiet valley holds its memories and people of Booth Bank still gather for worship in the simple manner of their forefathers. The little chapel by the roadside is the only memorial to those who were mightier than they knew. They would not have desired it otherwise.

OLDFIELD BROW & ALTRINCHAM

Oldfield Brow is a pleasantly sounding name. It suggests a cluster of ancient dwellings with orchards under the lee of the hill. And such it was when John Wesley first drew rein there in the year 1745. At five o'clock on a Sunday morning in the month of May, the preacher gathered his congregation together in the orchard, and standing beneath a pear tree, he expounded the words; "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation." Two years later, Wesley came again in the same month and preached to a larger congregation. Perhaps the memory of the orchard was still in his mind when afterwards he wrote in his journal: "They now began again to take root downward and bear fruit upward."

The town of Altrincham was only a mile distant and it seems strange that on these first two visits Wesley did not preach there, for Altrincham was reckoned a town of considerable importance in those days. Every traveller on the high road knew it for its hospitality, and earlier in his life Wesley himself had rested at one of its inns on a journey from Oxford to Manchester. The explanation is found, however, in Wesley's record of his next visit in 1761. He then wrote in his journal: "Perhaps this town will not be so furious as it has been." Evidently, Methodism had met with considerable

opposition and it was considered safer to meet in the seclusion of Oldfield Brow. Wesley and his followers were not lacking in bravery, but at the same time they were not wanting in wisdom.

By the year 1761, the danger must have passed, for Wesley preached in the town itself and in the following year we find that Oldfield Brow disappears from the stewards' accounts and its place is taken by Altrincham. Concerning this first preaching place in the town, nothing is known beyond Wesley's description. "We had four rooms which opened into each other, but they would not near contain the congregation, so that many were obliged to stand without." Once established in Altrincham, the Methodist cause developed considerably and in the year 1788 a Chapel was built and opened for worship. The building (with more recent additions) still stands in Regent Road. (It is now used as a Mission Church by the Parish Church of St. Margaret. It served as the circuit Chapel until the opening of the Bank Street Chapel in 1867).

Pasted inside the cover of an old Circuit Schedule Book is a faded piece of paper which reads:- "The Methodist Chapel in Altringham was first preached in on February 17th 1788.

Minister, Mr. Thos. Tealor. text for first Sermon 20 Cha: Exodus ver: 24. Second Sermon

6 Cha; Jeremiah ver: 16. Abner Partington Clerk to Church Service." (At the foot of the paper is a note by the Rev. David Hay (Superintendent of the Altrincham Circuit, 1856-9) stating that the paper was given to him by someone whose name is now illegible).

Here is the relic of a memorable day. Thomas Taylor, misspelt Tealor, was the superintendent of the wide Manchester Circuit and a famous preacher. After the death of John Wesley, he was twice President of the Conference. Abner Partington, who read the prayers, was a well-known townsman and afterwards became Mayor of Altrincham. We are indebted to the unknown person who carefully noted and preserved the texts of the sermons; it must have been a proud and happy day.

Two years later, on 5th April, 1790, John Wesley came and preached in the Chapel. He wrote in the Journal:—"Called at Altringham. I was desired to speak a few words to the people in the new Chapel, but as soon as I got thither the house was filled and soon after more than filled. So I preached on 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again with a lively hope' and many praised God with joyful lips." John Wesley was now an old man of eighty-seven years and he was not to come this way again. "Regardless of fatigue

personal danger and disgrace," he had gone out "into the highways and hedges, calling sinners to repentance." He had lived to see many lives transformed and a great Society established. Truly, according to His abundant mercy, God had begotten men and women again with a lively hope.

Those who heard the news of Wesley's arrival on that Monday morning in April and hurried to the chapel, would surely never forget the great occasion. Imagination readily reconstructs the scene. We can see the pews of the rectangular chapel filled, both floor and galley, with reverent listeners, whilst many crown the aisles and the doorway. The venerable figure (See Robert Southey's description in his "Life of Wesley". "No one who saw him, even casually, in his old age, can have forgotten his venerable appearance." stands before them in the pulpit. The years have made the fine features even more distinguished and many hours spent in the open air have kept the complexion remarkably fresh. His eye, partly dimmed by age, is still quick and active. The long hair, white and bright as silver, falls in graceful curls about his shoulders. His very presence casts a spell over his listeners. The preacher's voice is the only sound which breaks the tense silence. He speaks the words

which only a father dare speak to his children. But other words follow which release the pent-up emotions and cries of joy and gratitude to God escape from the lips of the people. The sermon is ended and a hymn is announced. There is no organ but a strong bass voice somewhere in the gallery gives the lead which is quickly taken up by everyone. They are singing one of the triumphant hymns written by Charles Wesley and which thousands of men and women throughout the land have learnt to sing with fervour, again there is silence and every head is bowed to receive the father's final blessing.

The period following the death of Wesley witnessed an almost inevitable decline. With the passing of the master mind and spirit, difficulties arose and dissensions broke out. The Altrincham Society shared these misfortunes. A cleavage took place which later, in 1821, led to the building of the George Street Chapel and the membership of the "Wesleyan" Society decreased to about fifty persons. But the decline was only temporary. The years following the European War of a hundred years ago proved to be years of steady increase. It was found necessary to station a Methodist Preacher in the town, and finally, in the year 1838, the new Altrincham Circuit was formed with 148 members in the town and 284 in the country

places. The circuit included Booth Bank, Tipperley, Sale, Partington, Carrington, Woodhouses, Sinderland, Ashley, Warburton, Hale Barns, New Chester (now Ashton-on-Mersey) and Northen (Northenden).

In the early days of last century, Altrincham was still an independent, self-contained township, proud of its ancient priveleges, its Mayor and its Court Leet. De Quincey says that it was "a cheerful little town." It contained not more than half-a-dozen streets, in the centre of which stood the old Market-Place with its hostelries and inns. Every morning at seven o'clock, the stage coach, with red-coated coachman and guard, rode into the town on its way from Manchester to Chester. But poorer folk travelled along the Bridgewater Canal by "The Swift Packet", on which they embarked at the Broadheath wharf. Besides catering for the traveller, the town provided a market for the surrounding countryside. The principle occupation of the townspeople, however was handloom weaving. At least a hundred weavers plied their trade in their own homes and the passer-by could hear the noise of the looms coming from the houses in Chapel Street. When the days' work was done and honest folk were all in bed, two watchmen walked the cobbled streets and called the passing hours.

Such was the community in which Methodism grew and flourished; in fact it soon included among its members many of the leading townspeople. First and foremost was the Sheriff's Officer, Nathaniel Pass. Since there was no Justice of the Peace resident in Altrincham and, of course, no police force, he was the sole representative of the law. Many stories are told of his daring exploits. Mounted on his charger "Waterloo", so named because the horse had taken part in the famous battle, ~~hwe~~ he was a familiar figure throughout the district. But above all, Nathaniel Pass was a devout and untiring worker in the Methodist cause. Trust deeds and minute books bear testimony to his faithful service. His name is found among the trustees of the first Methodist Chapel built in Timperley, and together with John Cross, of Booth Bank, he became the first Circuit Steward of the Altrincham Circuit.

William Ashley was another influential townsman. He was a local preacher, steward and leader for many years. He was twice Mayor of Altrincham (1803 and 1817) and his name is frequently found in the town's records. At a general meeting of the townspeople in the year 1816, he and Nathaniel Pass were appointed to receive the money of those who did not desire

to serve in the Militia. This is sufficient indication of the regard in which these two men were held by their fellow townsman.

A number of important businesses were established by Methodists in the town during this period. In the year, 1804, a young man named John Barrow came from Manchester and settled in Altrincham. He opened a grocer's shop in George Street. The business increased and people came in from the country to see the large windows which John Barrow placed in his premises. (After a long succession of proprietors, Wm. Collins, Samuel Warren, Wm Collins, Jun.- all Methodists - the business became the present well-known firm of Messrs. Coupe and Hil Kirk). He became an unofficial banker; money and deeds were lodged with him for security. With his capital, he financed other businesses and loaned money for the building of Chapels. Methodism never had a more devoted servant. He was a leader, trustee, steward, choir singer and Sunday School Superintendent, in fact, he filled every office except that of preacher. Another young man named John Southern came from Millington, and, with money lent to him by Nathaniel Pass, he built a bakehouse in Chapel Street and founded a prosperous business which still bears his name. John Southern was one of the first local preachers in the

Altrincham district and many stories have been told concerning the preacher and his original discourses.

Besides these men already mentioned, there were many others who served the community and served Methodism. Here are a few of them:- Joshua Ashcroft, the grocer in Church Street, and Mayor in 1819; Joseph Arstall, a cabinet maker of repute, and Mayor in 1839; William Worsley, the grocer in the Market Place; Thomas Balshaw, the printer in the Market Place; who printed the Way Bills for the stage coaches; Thomas Potter, the solicitor; John Latham, schoolmaster in Moss Lane; Thomas Potts, the tailor; John Foster, the blacksmith; and Geoffrey Wilde, the postmaster. On going through the records of a century ago, one is impressed by the fact that the Methodists appear so frequently and so prominently in the life of the small town. All these men were not merely associated with the Methodist Society, but were zealous workers, serving as leaders, preachers and stewards. Without doubt, the life of the community owes more than can ever be estimated to the influence of the Methodist Revival.

Before leaving this part of our story, another interesting instance of Methodism's

influence must be given. It concerns the manner in which the Church of England first established itself in the town. Oswald Leicester was the son of a prosperous Altrincham grocer. As a young man he came under the influence of one of Wesley's famous preachers, Samuel Bradburn, and experienced conversion. Eager to serve others, he commenced a Sunday School which met in the upper room of a cottage in Ashley Road, (the cottage stands to-day). he desired to become a Methodist preacher, but since this did not meet with his father's wished, he went to Oxford and was trained for holy orders. In order that he might return to his native town, St. George's Church was built as a Chapel of Ease within the parish of Bowdon, and in the year 1799 Oswald Leicester became its first incumbent. Hitherto, the Parish Church of Bowdon had served Altrincham. Consequently Leicester became the first Church of England clergyman in the town. During his thirty years' ministry, he endeared himself to all. The "neat, prim-looking clergyman, in knee breeches, with silver buckles at the knees" was continually found in the homes of want and sickness. His love for Methodism remained constant.

Sunday evening service was never held at St. George's in order that his congregation might attend the Wesleyan Chapel and the Church choir went in a body, bass fiddles and all, to a place assigned them in the gallery.

The book from which these two chapters was taken, was published for the Centenary Celebrations of Timperley Methodist Church in 1933.

Andrew Keady typed of Mrs Twiss.