

## A WORTHY HERITAGE

The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bethlehem Unitarian Church  
Newchurch-in-Rossendale

### **PREFACE**

To mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the congregation of Bethlehem Unitarian Church, it was decided to publish a small commemorative booklet. This task was placed in the hands of a small sub-committee, composed of Mr Ormerod Ashworth, Mr Leslie Proctor and the Minister.

Here is the fruit of their deliberations. It does not pretend to be a history of the cause. That would require far more space and a far longer period of preparation. It does, however, attempt to throw some light on our origins and to reveal some links between past and present. It is offered in the hope that its readers may find not only something of interest from the past, but also inspiration for future loyalty and effort.

### **THE BACKGROUND**

UNITARIANISM has arisen in differing circumstances in different parts of the world, and in this country it cannot be traced to any one historical circumstance. In most parts of the country, however, the movement had its foundations laid in the Puritanism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Rossendale variety, once known as Methodist Unitarianism, betrays in that title the peculiarity of its origin. There has indeed been one other Unitarian offshoot, the "Bakerite" movement, but otherwise the foundations of our faith were laid in other quarters.

That Unitarianism in Rossendale did not arise from 17<sup>th</sup> century Dissent must be in due part to the remoteness and inhospitable character of the district. For many centuries Rossendale was a "Forest" – an area reserved for hunting under the authority of the Crown, and protected, particularly in Norman times, by savage penalties.

One noticeable effect of the Forest status of the district is in the large number of places named after animals. The names Boarsgreave, Hogshead, Sowclough, Swinshaw, Wolfenden, Deerplay, Stacksteads (evidently Stagsteads), Harthill, Buckearth, Rockliff (Roe-cliff) and Brockclough (Brock, the badger) have obvious animal associations.

The Forest was released from its status by Henry VII, who granted certain portions to the inhabitants as vaccaries. Like Jacob, who "journeyed to Succoth and built him a house and made booths for his cattle, therefore the name of the place is called Booths", these people established their farms and gave to the district another characteristic place name, as in Crawshawbooth, Goodshaw Booth, Wolfenden Booth and Bacup Booth. The names Lee (lea, a pasture), as in Stubblelee, Rough Lee, Constable Lee and Holme (a rich level pasture by a river) as Forest holme, Sagar Holme, Hareholme and Reeds Holme may also have arisen in this period.

Although the population grew from the time of the disafforestation onwards, it remained relatively small for a long time, being only about 1,000 at the time of the Commonwealth. It was with the introduction of cotton manufacture towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that it began to show a remarkable increase; while the opening of the turnpike roads (Bacup-Rochdale 1810, Bacup-Waterfoot 1826, Lumb Valley 1826) made communication much easier.

These changes provided some of the conditions which made the rise of Unitarianism possible – a growing concentration of population and better communications. Other impulses were still necessary – a stirring of heart and mind, and personal leadership. These were provided by Methodism on the one hand, and by Joseph Cooke and John Ashworth on the other.

### **THE BEGINNINGS**

METHODISM reached the Rossendale valley about 1744, and cotton manufacture about 1770. These two facts together are very significant.

On the one hand, Methodism awakened an interest in religious matters. Over the whole country it had overcome the spiritual lethargy into which both the Establishment and Dissent had lapsed. On the other hand, cotton manufacture led not only to better communications within the Valley and the outside world, but also to conditions which obliged men to turn their thoughts to social problems.

The connection between the two facts may be seen in the Methodist Unitarian interest in social questions; for instance in the work of John Fielden, of Todmorden, for factory reform, in their participation in the founding of the Co-operative movement in Rochdale, where their chapel was nicknamed “t Co-op Chapel”, and in their interest in Chartism. James Taylor, the Todmorden minister, had for a time a hat factory at Rochdale, where he made white hats for Chartists.

It must not be thought from this that Methodist Unitarianism came into being primarily as a social gospel. Fundamentally the interest of our founders was in discovering true Scriptural doctrine. They believed (see below) that the Bible teaches personal responsibility; but they found that social conditions tended to deny men the exercise of responsibility. It was for this reason that they encouraged self-help and advocated a political reform that would give to working men a voice in government. They were opposed to the use of violence, and had no time for the secular Socialism of the disciples of Robert Owen.

These things must be borne in mind when we consider John Ashworth’s secession from Methodism. He, like his fellow preachers, with the exception of Cooke, was a working man, a hand-loom weaver. Poverty was to him an enemy of religion. So too were those ministers who preached a gospel which elevated faith at the expense of duty. Social concern and religious truth could not be separated, and it is not surprising that in some of John Ashworth’s “Letters”, when he is pursuing a theological argument, there are hints of a Chartist anti-clericism.

Methodist Unitarianism sprang into life and, during the first half of the last century, made rapid strides because it had a message for the times.

### **JOSEPH COOKE AND METHODISM**

THE causes of the appearance of new churches are always interesting, yet it is often true that even the members of the congregation are uncertain as to the reason for the founding of their church.

In our case the prime cause was the preaching of Joseph Cooke, He believed that his message was good Wesleyanism: the Methodist Conference disagreed, and expelled him.

We have to remember that the strength of Methodism lay in its emphasis upon certain doctrines – the New Birth, Justification, Assurance, and the Witness of the Spirit. John Wesley taught that there was an opportunity offered freely to every sinner to repent of his sins and to have faith in God and in the redemptive work of Christ. By this faith he is justified, or pardoned, and the Holy Spirit bears witness directly to him that pardon is granted. This assurance changes his whole outlook from penitential sorrow to the joy of the saved. Undoubtedly the preaching of God's free pardon brought great relief to burdened souls. Methodism swept through England like a breath of fresh air.

Unfortunately, however, there were certain dangers in the emphasis, and Wesley himself became aware of them. It was possible for some people to feel assured of pardon without having truly repented. It was equally possible that others, in spite of having sincerely turned to God, were still unaware of any comfortable assurance. Which of them is in fact "saved"? It depends upon whether you regard **being** good or **feeling** good as the fundamental factor in salvation. The Wesleyan argument was that one led inevitably, through the grace of God, to the other. But that is very doubtful. Sinners can be cheerfully unaware of God's displeasure. Sincere and earnest souls can be unaware of God's delight in them. Furthermore the emphasis on assurance led some Methodist preachers to proclaim the astounding doctrine that those who know that they were saved need have no fear of sin, and that any sins they might henceforth commit were of no account. Such preaching was castigated by Wesley himself and by his friend Fletcher of Madeley. At the London Methodist Conference of 1770, Wesley set forward the view that faith and works could not be separated: assurance was not enough.

Cooke followed Wesley in this, and when called to account for his sermons on Justification by Faith, and the Witness of the Spirit, offered to defend himself before the conference from the writings of Wesley and Fletcher. However, he was not allowed to do so, on the grounds that he would merely quote "a few insulated passages," and, being unwilling to acknowledge the error of his preaching, he was expelled from the Methodist Connexion.

He had considerable support amongst members of the Rochdale circuit, and was able to gather together a congregation in Rochdale itself, and to establish others in a number of other places in the district, one being at Newchurch, where a number of people left the Methodist Church. One of these was John Ashworth,

and it is clear from his “Letters” that he and his friends were troubled by the same doctrinal differences.

### **JOHN ASHWORTH AND UNITARIANISM**

JOSEPH COOKE was not a Unitarian. Had he lived, he would probably have become one, for Unitarianism has often arisen when men have tried to grapple with the inconsistencies of Christian doctrine and have turned to the Scriptures. It is interesting that when Cooke realised that the same inconsistencies as he had found in Methodist doctrine appeared in the Methodist hymns, and when he therefore prepared a new hymn-book for his own people, the collections of hymns which he found to suit his purpose were mostly Unitarian ones.

Unfortunately he died young. For the sake of his scattered flock he endured great hardship in his travels, crossing the moors between Rochdale and Rossendale in all weathers: eventually he was stricken down at the age of 35.

It was left to John Ashworth to continue the pilgrimage. Reference to his “Ten Letters to a Friend” will give the detailed story. There we can detect the temper of mind which spurred on inquiry into religious fundamentals and eventually produced a vigorous Unitarianism.

We find that one of the characteristic of our forerunners was a keen sense of personal responsibility. It was this which led them to follow Cooke in disapproving of a doctrine which offered comfortable assurance, but did not sufficiently stress the importance of effort and of good works. They came next to see that to describe repentance and faith as the gifts of God may be to overlook the factor of human duty which the Bible stresses. The doctrine of Original Sin, they saw, was also an evasion. John Ashworth waxes warm against parents who neglect or pamper their children then put the blame on “old Adam”.

Not unnaturally, a doctrine of Atonement according to which the sins of mankind are taken away by the sacrifice of Christ was soon submitted to examination and found wanting. How can the God who is so wrathful that he demands the price of an infinite sacrifice, and the god who “so loved the word that he sent his only begotten Son” be one and the same Person? How can it be that, if the Father and the Son are one in nature and essence, the Father can be offended by the sins of men and the Son not? For if the offence against the Father can only be met by an infinite sacrifice, surely the same should have been applied in the case of the Son? Many more searching questions and cogent arguments were brought forward, and eventually John Ashworth and his friends came to the conclusion that a sacrificial theory of the Atonement was neither rational nor scriptural, but “that all and everything that Jesus Christ did He did, not to make God willing to save men but to make men willing to be saved.” The death of Jesus was an example to sinners, not a substitution for their sins. Man’s responsibility remains, but in Jesus he has the example of a godly life, and if he repents of evil, there is the free grace of God to pardon and restore the prodigal.

From this point to Unitarianism was but a step. The movement had been in being only a few years, when John Ashworth and his friends discovered that there were

others who thought as they did and that they were a self-sown branch of Unitarianism.

### **MAKING A HOME**

IN 1807 about 30 or 40 people, including John Ashworth, then a young lay-preacher, left the Methodist connexion and invited Mr Cooke to Newchurch.

It is conjectured that the Newchurch friends first met in a barn at the rear of New Barn, Turnpike, later the house of the late John Henry Proctor, later the Treasurer of our Church. It was originally intended to build near Mill End, and a contract was actually let, but this was prevented. The Cookites, as they were known, certainly used the upper room of a house in Booth Fold, approached by an outside flight of stone steps. This house was vacated in 1952 and demolished in August-September 1955. It was known as 1 and 3 Spring Gardens, and was at the rear of Clough House, where the Rev John Ashworth later lived.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1808, a plot of land on the north side of Old Street, Newchurch, was purchased for £25 10s. and the first chapel was built at a cost of £500, of which £400 was borrowed. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1809, the first service was held, when the collection was £20 14s 1d.

At this time the members were not attached to any denomination. The chapel is described in a Court copy surrender, dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1810, as "the Dissenting Chapel in Rossendale called Cooke's Chapel". It was small and bare, with white-washed inside walls. It had pews in the gallery, whilst the body of the building was without pews, so that it could be used as a school-room. Four months after the chapel was opened (on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1809) the Sunday School was begun, and shortly afterwards a library was opened for the use of members of the chapel and school.

The library eventually grew to a collection of hundreds of volumes, ranging over history, science biography, travel, religion, poetry and fiction. With the erection of the Carnegie Free Library at Rawtenstall, the need for a Sunday School Library was lessened, and it gradually fell into disuse until the books were dispersed at some time about 1930. The last librarian was Mr Law Ashworth, who testifies to the cultural value and benefits gained by scholars at a time when education was wanted but not readily obtained. Besides religion, reading, writing and arithmetic were taught in the Sunday School. Some present members can recall having seen a pile of school slates in the cellar.

Good Friday, 1865, marked the opening of the second and present chapel. The foundation stone was laid on Good Friday, 1864 and the chapel cost £2,200, of which £1,715 had been raised by the congregation.

Until September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1868, when a church organ was installed in the new chapel, music was provided by a bass viol. There is a record of the purchase, in 1817, of an organ for £4. This would be a barrel organ which played a limited number of hymn tunes. When the church organ was opened, the organist was Colonel Munn,

J.P., of Stacksteads, and the choir of St James's Church Waterfoot, sang selections of sacred music. Tea was provided at a charge of 6d per person.

The first organist was George Holt, followed by his son, Richard. Next was Richard Oliver Holt, nephew of Richard. The present organist is Olive Mary Holt, I.R.A.M., daughter of the late Richard Oliver, whom she succeeded. On the West side of the Church, a tablet is erected to the memory of George Holt; the memorial to his successors is the reputation for good music possessed by church and choir.

In 1874 the old chapel in Old Street was demolished and the present Sunday School erected on the site. There were some internments in the chapel, but they were undisturbed. The next major alteration, in 1902, was the making of the lecture room, provided with a folding partition to make two class rooms for adult scholars. During the war years, 1939-1945, this was used as a chapel, to avoid the expense of heating, lighting and "blacking-out" the much larger church. It was then described as the "Upper Room".

The houses at the corner of Old Street and Turnpike were bought in 1906, followed by the purchase in 1922 of "Daily Mount", as a parsonage at a cost of £1,600. Thirty years later (1952) the latter was altered to two houses and in 1955 one of the houses, 64 Old Street, was closed for habitation by the Church Committee.

## **A BACKWARD GLANCE**

AS the records are incomplete, it is not possible to give a very full account of the life of the Church and Sunday School during the last 150 years. However, in 1888, the Rev W.R. Shanks published "The Remembrancer", a joint Calendar for the Unitarian Churches of North-East Lancashire. The issues for that year are full of interest because not only do they carry us back nearly half way to the time of our foundations, but they also provide a number of links with the present.

For instance, the Newchurch agent for the "Remembrancer" was Miss A. A. Haworth, who died on New Year's Eve 1953 aged 89 years. Here, then, we have a glimpse at an early chapter of the story of a life-time's service to our cause.

The other two Officers were: Church Secretary, Mr T.O. Ashworth, followed by Mr F.W. Nuttall: Sunday School Superintendent, Mr John Ashworth: S. S. Secretary, Mr Richard Burrows.

There was a "Gild of the Great Teacher" of which the Secretary was Mr J. T. Ashworth. (From May onwards the more usual spelling, 'guild', was used). The Choir practised on Wednesdays at 8 p.m., preceded by the Junior singing Class at 7 p.m. The Ladies' Congregational Aid society met for tea at 4-30 on the last Wednesday of the month. There was also a dramatic section and a French class.

For the New Year's Tea Party, tea was taken in Bethesda School at 4 p.m., and the entertainment given by your own School at 6 p.m.

“3 – Tu            Eating –up Party, 6 p.m.  
7 – S              Repetition of New Year’s Drama, 6.30.”

So successful was this repeat (‘crowded audience. Over £13 taken”) that it was given again on the 14<sup>th</sup>. There is no record that a repeat of the “Eating – up Party” was necessary!

At a Tea Party and entertainment on Good Friday, a portrait was presented to Mr John Ashworth.

On April 21<sup>st</sup>, the Ladies’ Aid society presented a new tea service of “492 pieces or twelve trays,” to the Sunday School. “Over 340 persons had tea, and between five and six hundred witnessed the evening performance of “The Lancashire Weaver Lad” by the old scholars.

“April 29<sup>th</sup>. Successful meeting of the Guild. 110 present. Mr James H. Lord, read, in a very effective manner, the beautiful allegory, “A Spring Morning”. Mrs Elliot and Miss Haworth sang a sacred duet, “Saviour, lead us,” and Ada Stanley the solo “Jerusalem the Golden”.

At the Sunday School Anniversary the Rev A. Lazenby was the preacher.

“The result of the Sunday School annual collection is regarded by everyone as satisfactory, in view of the state of trade and our recent personal losses. The sum obtained, viz £41 5s is less than that of last year by £3 17s 2½d.”

The School Field Day was held on July 21<sup>st</sup>. “Procession, headed by band, leaves School at 2-30 p.m.” “The Scholars were favoured with a pleasant afternoon, and enjoyed themselves greatly in a meadow generously set apart for their use by Mr James Law, Edgeside.”

At the Floral and Harvest Festival Services on September 16<sup>th</sup>, Prof Dvijadas Dutta, of the University of Calcutta, preached to between five and six hundred persons at each service. The following day, an audience of about 200 heard him lecture on “Hindu Society.”

In addition to these and other special events, there were lectures with the magic lantern, “Essays” on various topics by members, and occasional Tuesday evening services, after which questions were invited.

At the end of the year, rehearsals were in full swing for the main items of the New Year Entertainment – the Cantata “Freddy and his Fiddle” and the popular drama, “Colleen Bawn”.

### **FOR THE RECORD**

FOR the benefit of future historians, it would perhaps be helpful to summarise the position in 1956.

Photographs of the Church and School Committees are given elsewhere in this booklet. Other officers are the Pew Rent Superintendent, Mr H Lord, and the Envelope Steward, Mrs. H Ashton.

The main Auxiliary Societies are the Ladies' Aid Society (Secretary, Mrs E Watts), Women's League (Miss E Maden), Players' Society (Mr H. Ashton), Good Fellowship Secretary (Miss A. Holt), and Young People's League (Miss B Walmsley).

The tradition of holding a New Year Tea-party and Entertainment is still kept up (though an eating-up party is no longer found necessary), but this year began on a Sunday, and the Party was held on New Year's Eve. The next day a Nativity Play was presented in the afternoon, and in the evening a Service of Dedication in preparation for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year.

Other special services have been those arranged by the Choir, the Young People, and the Ladies and Mothering, Flower and Harvest Services. For the Sunday School Anniversary the preacher was the Rev Dudley Richards, B.A., B.D, and the collection, £465, the highest on record. During the Celebrations in October, there will be Junior and Young People's Services, Primary Harvest, a Musical Service with singing by the Rossendale Male Voice Choir, a Re-union service (Preacher, the Rev C. G. Bolam, B.A, B. D, Minister, 1938-44), a Marriage Commemoration Service (Preacher, the Rev Sokell, Minister, 1945-1951), a Pageant Service, and the Church Anniversary Services (Preacher, the Rev H. J. McLachlan, M.A., B.D, D Phil, of Belfast). Later there will be the Young Men's and Good Fellowship Services, and the special services for Christmas, including selections from "Messiah", when the Choir will be accompanied by the Quilla Orchestra and organ.

Social events have been arranged by most of the societies, and have included a "Jungle Cabaret" (the U.Y.P.L.), Concerts by the Juniors, an 'April Shower" (the Ladies) and an "Indoor Garden Party" (the Minister and family) an outstanding success was the full length play, "Sarah Ann Holds Fast," given by the Players' Society.

In place of the Field-day the scholars now have a Pic-nic, which this year was held at Southport, while a group of junior boys went Youth Hostelling with the Minister during Whit week.

An important contribution by the men has ben the repainting of the Sunday School in bright modern colours.

This year has not been without its share of sorrow. In particular of the whole fellowship suffered a severe loss by the sudden death of Mr W. H. Cunliffe, the Vice-Chairman of the Church Committee and a Sunday School Superintendent. He was active in every branch of our life and as a lay-preacher, extended his influence over a wide area. Had he lived he would shortly have received the Long Service Medal of the Sunday School Association. It is significant of the loyal



service of our members that half a dozen are now eligible for this award, given for 25 years service, but there could have been no worthier recipient than Billy Cunliffe.

This brief record shows that our fellowship, though not numerically so impressive as in 1888, is still as lively and commands an affection and loyalty which augur well for the future.

### **THE FUTURE**

THIS has not been a complete record: nor can we think in terms of completion, for there remains the future. Of that we can say little except to affirm our faith that the cause will continue to flourish.

The last 150 years have seen great changes, not in people and buildings only, but also in thoughts and convictions.

“We may not think our fathers’ thoughts,  
Our lips their creeds may alter.  
But in the faith they dearly bought  
Our hearts will never falter.”

That faith, as we have seen, was concerned with a belief in personal responsibility. For our founders there could be no evasion of duty to seek the truth, to live for the right, and to serve the brethren. That, we have said, was a message for the time: but it was a message for all time. While we have that faith we cannot fail.

If we believe in personal responsibility, then the service we shall render to God, to the fellowship of the Church, and to the wider community, will make us one with those generations of devoted and humble souls who have passed on to us a worthy heritage.

## CHURCH COMMITTEE 1955-6



## Seated:

Mrs T.W. Kenyon (Joint Secretary)  
Rev. E. Basil Short  
Councillor Mrs L. Proctor (President)  
Mr W. Hirst (Treasurer)  
Miss B. Walmsley (Financial Secretary)

## Standing:

Mr J. Warburton  
Mr. W.H. Cunliffe  
Mr. V Ashworth (Choirmaster)  
Mr J. Sisson  
Mrs J. Harwood  
Miss O. M. Holt (Organist)  
Mr J. Seddon  
Miss E. Maden  
Mr B. Taylor (Joint Secretary)  
Mr A. Taylor (Vice-President)

## SUNDAY SCHOOL EXECUTIVE 1956-7



## Seated:

Mr J. Sissions (Superintendent)  
Mr H. Ashworth (Superintendent)  
Rev. E. Basil Short  
Mrs W. Hirst (Primary Superintendent)  
Mr W. Harwood (Superintendent)

## Standing:

Miss M. Maxwell  
Mr J. Seddon (Registrar)  
Mrs W. Hall  
Mrs L. Walmsley  
Mr R. Walsh  
Mrs J. Smith  
Mrs J. Sisson  
Mr J. Warburton (Secretary)  
Mrs T. Schofield