

A HISTORY OF METHODISM IN STAVELEY

By Marie Holland

Methodism is first recorded in Staveley in the early part of the nineteenth century. The village was becoming industrialised at that time, owing to the rapid development of bobbin-turning mills to supply the needs of the growing spinning industry of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Staveley's population doubled between 1800 and 1850, reaching 732 in 1851 in Over Staveley, the main township or parish. Many of the workers came to live in Staveley from Kendal, nearly five miles away, where some must have been influenced by the growth of the Methodist movement.

Wesleyan Methodism was well established in Kendal by the end of the eighteenth century. Primitive Methodist preachers first reached Kendal in 1822 and consolidated the work in and around the town from about 1829.

From 1830 both Wesleyan and Primitive cottage meetings seem to have been held in Staveley. With the increasing population, it was not very long before each Methodist society was planning to erect a chapel. The Primitive Chapel was the



Primitive Chapel on the 1859 Ordnance Survey map first to be built, in 1834, in School Lane, off Kentmere Road. Two years later, work began on the Wesleyan Chapel in the middle of the village, on the north-east side of the main street. Financial records show that the bill paid by the Wesleyans to William Jackson, mason, amounted to £48-8-0 and to John Fisher, joiner, £70-8-4. Deal was used for the pulpit, seats and panelling which included the top of the gallery stairs. It must have been a struggle for both societies to raise the funds for their building schemes and it was not until 1848

that the debt on the Primitive Methodist building was removed.

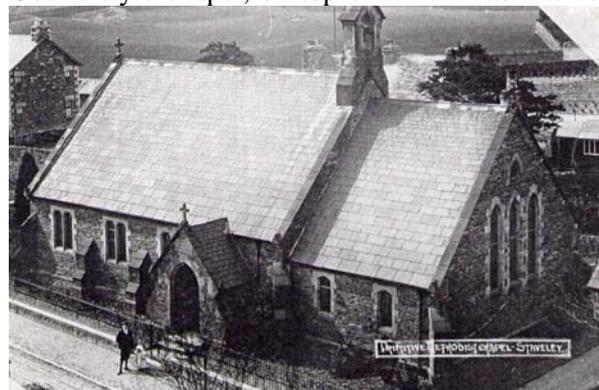
Staveley Primitive Methodist Chapel belonged at first to the widespread Barnard Castle Circuit, and later to the Preston Circuit. In 1857 the Kendal Primitive Circuit was formed, to include only five chapels, all of them in the Kendal area, including Staveley. This circuit was usually served by just one minister. Kendal Wesleyan Circuit was, by contrast, extremely large. Founded in 1805, it had up to 30 chapels, including societies as far flung as Ambleside and Ravenstonedale. Even after shedding about a third of its outlying societies to other circuits later in the century Kendal Wesleyan Circuit remained quite large and continued to be served by three ministers.

The Years of Expansion

Membership of both Staveley chapels increased. In 1845 the Primitive society had 22 members and the Wesleyan membership was probably similar. Chapel congregations, however, were larger. An ecclesiastical census of Sunday March 30th 1851 showed that at the Primitive chapel, 56 adults and 88 Sunday School members attended the morning service and 101, probably including children, attended in the evening. At the Wesleyan chapel the attendance was 50 adults and 89 Sunday School members in the morning and 162, including children, at the evening service. Both Sunday Schools also met in the afternoon. As each chapel could only seat about 150, it is not surprising that in the next two decades new premises were built.

New Premises

The Primitive society led the way in 1866 with a Gothic style chapel, on top of which was a turret



The new Primitive Chapel on Main Street with one bell, an unusual feature. This building, between the River Gowan and Main Street, had

350 sittings.

In March 1874 a proposal to erect a new Wesleyan chapel at Staveley was approved by the Circuit Quarterly Meeting. Looking for land for the new chapel, the Wesleyan trustees wrote to Mr. Richard Wilson Buckley, a London barrister, who lived near Guildford, Surrey, and asked him to let them have a suitable site. Mr. Buckley had inherited a considerable amount of land in the Staveley area which he often visited and where he was a benefactor. (Land on which the Primitive Methodist chapel was built in 1866 was formerly his). After some correspondence, in the course of which Mr. Buckley suggested a site on the Ings side of Staveley and the positioning of a burial ground beside the new chapel, the trustees' preference for a site in the north of the village was accepted and the idea of a burial ground was abandoned. Mr. Buckley sold the land for the new chapel on the east side of Kentmere Road for £117, drawing up the deed of conveyance himself.



The new Wesleyan Chapel on Kentmere Road

He also subscribed £150 to the building fund. The indenture conveying the land was signed in the autumn of 1875 by the Rev. George Thomas Dixon, superintendent minister of Kendal Wesleyan Circuit, and by fifteen trustees headed by Benjamin Turton, Gentleman, and James Tyson, Bobbin Mill Manager. Seven of the eight other local trustees were bobbin-turners, the eighth being a farmer. The remaining five lived in Kendal, two grocers, one chemist, one bank clerk and a rope-maker. The indenture also included a clause permitting a Christian burial service to be held in the chapel on any weekday "upon payment of a fee not exceeding the fee payable to the vicar of Staveley". In this way, Mr. Buckley's aim, that nonconformist ministers should be able to officiate at the funerals of their members, was partly achieved.

The architect of the new Wesleyan chapel was George Rigg of Kendal. In late 1875 tenders were accepted from three other Kendal residents - John Edward Hine for "Mason's and Waller's Work, £426", William Ward for "Carpenter's and

Joiner's Work, £256", and Lawrence Airey for "Plumbing, Painting, Glazing, Heating, £136". The total cost of the chapel and the schoolroom, to



The interior of the Wesleyan Chapel in 1911

the rear, reached £1,400. The chapel, with 300 sittings and in Gothic style, included, over the front door, a large circular window around which was the inscription, "Wesleyan Chapel Erected 1876". The building was officially registered for public worship in September 1876 and in 1879 was licensed for marriages, the latter entitlement being held by only a few of the circuit's chapels at that time.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Staveley's main industry, bobbin - turning, declined, owing to different methods of manufacturing being developed and the setting up of bobbin-making in some Lancashire and Yorkshire mills. Other occupations kept Staveley's population from falling, but the previous rapid rise in numbers was halted.

The two Staveley Methodist chapels continued to flourish. Each held, in addition to two Sunday services, a fortnightly Tuesday evening service. The Primitive society had 47 members in 1893. Probably the Wesleyan membership was similar, but records are missing. Wesleyan records provide more information about the Sunday School and state that, in 1876, 42 children usually attended on Sunday mornings and 46 on Sunday afternoons, with an average of eight teachers.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, several leading members of Staveley Wesleyan chapel, all trustees, died. In 1878 and 1882 the Circuit Quarterly meeting recorded the deaths of William Beetham and Benjamin Turton, respectively. James Tyson died in 1911, leaving generous legacies to the chapel and Richard Stainton Beetham died in 1914, having been chapel caretaker for many years. A memorial tablet to each of the latter two was placed inside the chapel. The tablet on the right hand wall (from the main door) reads, "In memory of James

Tyson, J.P. of Hopefield, Staveley who died March 26th 1911, aged 75 years. For over 50 years a devoted Christian Worker and an earnest class leader and supporter of this church. This tablet is erected by his widow in most loving remembrance. 'Until the day breaks'". On the opposite wall, the other tablet reads, "In affectionate remembrance of R. Stainton Beetham. Born 25th March 1847. Died 4th October 1914. For many years a faithful officer of this Church and Sunday School". The chapel's members subscribed to this tablet.

In 1912 the Wesleyans bought a new organ from J. Wilkinson and Sons of Kendal. Money raising-efforts, including a Sale of Work, paid for the organ and for other improvements such as alterations to the pulpit and choir seats.

During and after the Great War, the membership of the Primitive chapel declined. In 1913 it was 37; by 1921 it was 28. The Primitive Circuit, as a whole, in 1913 began to experience financial problems which led to difficulties in paying the minister who normally received a stipend of £30 per quarter, plus his house. Staveley managed to raise £5-14-0 for Primitive Circuit funds, by means of a social and by subscriptions and was complimented in the Quarterly Meeting.

The Uncomfortable Years

In the Spring of 1918 a desire to strengthen the Primitive Sunday School, by allowing scholars to join the choir, led to a dispute between the Sunday School staff and the choir. A circuit deputation visited Staveley to try to settle the matter. It recommended that those scholars who could sing be admitted to the choir and that a choir committee should include the Sunday School Superintendent, George Threlfall.

This averted the latter's resignation, but relations between choir and Sunday School continued to be unsatisfactory for some time.

From about 1930 concern was voiced in the Primitive Methodist Quarterly Meeting about the financial situation of the Staveley society. Other societies were asked to encourage the Staveley members and "promote a more hopeful spirit among them". Early in 1932, as Staveley was still not paying its full allocation to the Primitive Circuit, a deputation consisting of two laymen and the Rev. William Armstrong, superintendent minister, visited the society to discuss the problem. In September 1932 Staveley Trust was authorised to withdraw from their last investment

enough to pay the debt to the Circuit Fund.

Methodist Union in 1932 brought no immediate changes to the two Staveley churches, except in their names. The Wesleyan and Primitive churches became known, respectively, as Kentmere Road Methodist and Main Street Methodist. The names of the Kendal Wesleyan and Primitive Circuits were altered to Stricklandgate and Lowther Street Methodist Circuits.

Main Street church was still in difficulties and various remedies were tried. A new Trust was set up in late 1932. Lowther Street Circuit Quarterly Meeting planned in 1933 to send a Young Men's Group to conduct a mission at Staveley. The new superintendent minister, the Rev. John Williams, and three circuit representatives went to meet the Main Street members. Finally, it seemed that the solution was to amalgamate the two Staveley churches. Implementing this idea was to be a long and painful process.

Amalgamation

In February 1934 a united meeting of 25 Staveley members with the two superintendents from Kendal, the Rev. John Williams and the Rev. Robert Armstrong, took place in Kentmere Road church. It was agreed almost unanimously to hold united services in turn at each church, to amalgamate the societies as soon as possible, to ask that a District Independent Tribunal should investigate the situation and to abide by the recommendations then made. A joint Trustees Meeting, held later in Main Street church, approved the agreements.

In May 1934 the District Home Mission Sub-Committee met at Staveley and inspected both sets of premises. They observed that each was "sound" and free of debt, but that Main Street had a more modern heating system and room for building extensions, that it had a central position in the village and that the traffic noise would be reduced by the by-pass which was planned. (It did not materialise until 1988!) Therefore, it was recommended that the two societies and Sunday Schools should unite at Main Street, that the united society should be linked with Lowther Street Circuit, although contributing to both circuits financially~ that the union should be in July 1934, that Kentmere Road's organ, communion rail and pews be moved to Main Street and that Kentmere Road might be used as a Methodist Institute.

The Main Street members and trustees and their circuit accepted the report, but the Kentmere Road society was horrified, feeling it was quite unfair. Kentmere Road's trustees and Stricklandgate Circuit's officers were in a quandary. They believed that they should fulfil their pledges to abide by the recommendations, but they thought that the recommended measures would be expensive and unreasonable and that they should retain their church's fittings for a while.

In October 1934, at Main Street, a meeting was arranged, to consist of the trustees and members of the two churches and the officials of both circuits, in order to discuss the impasse. This meeting was a disaster. No members or trustees of Kentmere Road attended, except for trustees who did not live in Staveley. It was reported that very few Kentmere Road members attended the united Sunday services. Stricklandgate Circuit's officers despaired of any agreement to the District's recommendations.

The Quarterly Meeting of Lowther Street Circuit decided in December 1934 that the recommendations could not be implemented and advised that the amalgamation attempts should be abandoned or both churches might collapse.

Kentmere Road and Main Street churches struggled on separately for a few years, with declining membership and with services reduced to one each Sunday, in the evening. Six years' records, from 1934 to 1940, are mysteriously missing from the Trustees' Meeting Minute Book of each church.

Finally, on August 3rd 1939, at a joint meeting at Main Street, a resolution was passed that measures be taken to unite the two societies and that they should worship together at Kentmere Road church. The last service at Main Street, according to the circuit plan, was on Sunday evening August 27th 1939 and was conducted by Mr. G.E. Whitwell of Sedbergh.

The Main Street premises stood empty and deteriorating until 1941 when, in January, the trustees met to consider two proposals. An application had been made by South Westmorland Rural District Council to rent the building for use as a communal feeding centre. There had also been an offer from Councillor W. N. Shepherd of Kendal to buy the building for £450 and, at the end of the war, to convert it into housing. The Rev. Bertram Dewhirst, superintendent minister, faced opposition to the sale from the trustees to

whom he referred in his correspondence as "a particularly awkward set". Nevertheless, the sale was eventually agreed upon, although three trustees voted neutral, being unwilling to be instrumental in the sale of their beloved building. The Main Street premises, rented from Councillor Shepherd, were used as a feeding centre or British Restaurant, during the war, and some time afterwards did become housing.

Meanwhile, another change was under way. Negotiations to amalgamate the Stricklandgate and Lowther Street Circuits were opened in 1935, but collapsed for financial reasons connected with the ex-Primitive Circuit's deficit. The re-opened negotiations in 1937 were temporarily soured by a disagreement about the Staveley churches which both circuits felt should be united if circuit amalgamation were to be achieved. The Lowther Street officers said that they still felt bound by the District recommendations of 1934. The Rev. Robert Armstrong, Stricklandgate Circuit's superintendent minister, pointed out to the Rev. John Williams, his opposite number, that Lowther Street seemed to have forgotten its own resolution advising the abandonment of the recommendations. Before long, however, all difficulties were overcome and in September 1939 the two circuits united as Kendal Methodist Circuit, with 18 churches 13 ex-Wesleyan, 4 ex-Primitive and one newly amalgamated. John Williams having retired, the superintendent minister of the new circuit was Robert Armstrong who was succeeded in 1940 by Bertram Dewhirst.

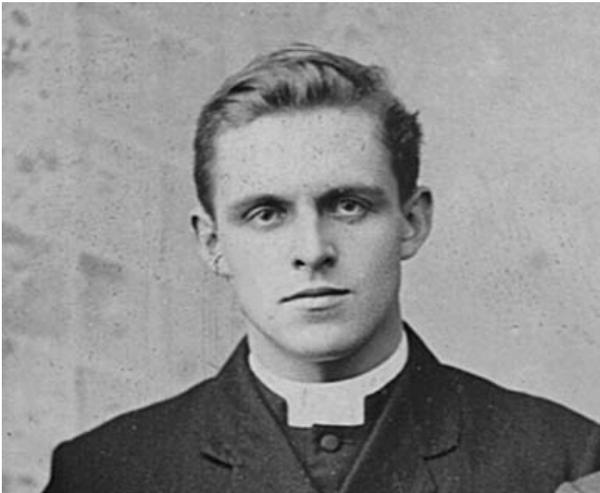
Future Hope?

Methodism in Staveley now seemed to have a new lease of life. The Kentmere Road membership had fallen from 20 in June 1934 to 15 in June 1939, but then rose to 26 in September when Staveley Methodist Church came into existence.

In the following years, various improvements were made to the church premises, sometimes using funds from the sale of Main Street Church. The organ had not been cleaned since its installation in 1912 and to clean and repair it in 1944 cost £98. New iron gates and railings were erected in 1950 to replace those requisitioned by the government during the war. Compensation from the Ministry of Works paid two thirds of the cost of £65. It was considered urgent to replace the railings, to prevent local children from over-running the church grounds. The church premises had neither running water, nor sewerage, nor electricity. (The situation had been the same at Main Street.) Supplying electricity for lights and

power points cost £54 in 1946, replacing the old gas lighting. A water supply cost £37 in 1947. New toilets (water closets), however, were not installed until the early 1950's, at a cost of over £100. As the solid fuel boiler was wearing out, it was decided to adopt a new system of electrical heating for the church and this was installed in 1955. A sink unit was fitted in a corner of the schoolroom in 1965, there being no kitchen.

During the 1950's the Rev. Albert Brockbank made generous donations to Staveley Methodist Church, to be used for fabric repairs, Sunday School seating and a minister's vestry. Mr. Brockbank had been brought up in Staveley, attended the Wesleyan Chapel, became a local preacher in 1897 and then entered the ministry. When writing to the stewards from his retirement in southern England, he said that he owed so much to Staveley Sunday School and Society whose "revival and growth are much on my heart". The vestry was Mr. Brockbank's idea and it was built in 1952 within the church, in a corner to the left of the front entrance. Pitch-pine for the partition walls was taken from unused pews at the opposite corner of the church. It was decided that



Albert Brockbank

the plate on the door should read "Preacher's Vestry", not "Minister's". At Mr. Brockbank's request, a memorial tablet to his parents was placed on the vestry wall, with this inscription - "Sacred to the memory of Mary and Joseph Brockbank. Faithful members of this church". After Albert Brockbank died, a communion table was given to the church, inscribed as follows "In grateful remembrance. Albert Brockbank, Methodist Minister. Born at Staveley 1878. Died at Tunbridge Wells 1958. He served as a Methodist Missionary in South India for 30 years. This communion table was presented by his

family".

Albert Brockbank's brother Walter (1881-1941) was also a Methodist Minister. Capable and



Walter Brockbank

enthusiastic, he served mainly in the north of England and died suddenly at Derby in the active work.

From the 1950's to 1970's a number of church organisations flourished. The fortnightly week-night services of previous times developed into the Tuesday evening fellowship of a spiritual nature, from 1958. Having faded out, the Women's Bright Hour was revived as the Women's Fellowship in the 1950's. A Young Wives' Group, founded in the 1960's, continued to thrive into the 1970's. Fund raising activities, including coffee mornings and concerts, also promoted the social life of the church.

The Sunday School had about 50 members in the early 1960's, but fell to 20 in 1968, with a slight increase for a few years after that. In 1962 a change to morning, instead of afternoon, sessions had temporarily raised attendances. Monthly Family Services were held on Sunday mornings from 1963. Weekday young people's activities took place also. From the 1950's there were Guild meetings for younger children and a Youth Group for teenagers. Church anniversaries were held in June, with Thursday events as well as Sunday services. In 1976 special Centenary celebrations were planned, including a Rally on Saturday evening June 5th. There were three Centenary Sundays, the main one being June 6th when the preacher at the 6 p.m. service was the Rev. Ernest Hardy; former Chairman of the Carlisle District, living in retirement at Llandudno. The preacher on May 30th was the Rev. Leslie Gregory,

superintendent minister of Kendal Circuit and, on June 13th, the Rev. Edward Ager, Staveley's minister. Later, a Centenary Garden Party was held. So financially successful was this, that every summer afterwards, until 1985, there were garden parties or fairs, in the church grounds or the village hall. There were no more after that date, because of insufficient helpers.

An undated report of the Circuit Policy Committee, probably of the mid-1970's, gave the membership figure as 27, the church congregation as 20, the Sunday School as 10, the Tuesday Fellowship as 12 and the Women's Fellowship as 25. The comment was that there were too few wage-earners and a shortage of lay leaders, along with a lack of local ecumenical contacts and, owing to transport problems, a lack of links with the circuit. The situation worsened in the next decade. Membership had reached a peak of 46 in 1962 and then fell steadily, until by 1983 there were 20 members.

For many years, only evening services had been held on Sundays, except the monthly family worship in the 1960's and 1970's. The evening service was replaced by a 3 p.m. one, during the winter from October 1973 and all the year round from October 1984. In March 1984 the moving of Church Council Meetings to 2 p.m. from 7.15 p.m. was another sign of the ageing membership, as was the Tuesday Fellowship's move to afternoon from evening. By this time, the Sunday School and the Women's Fellowship had disappeared.

Re-alignment

In 1994, when the membership and congregation had fallen to about six, closure became inevitable. At a Church Council meeting in February it was agreed to continue Sunday services only until the end of the current circuit plan in May 1994, after which the members would attend services at Stricklandgate Church, Kendal.

The final service at Staveley Methodist Church was on Tuesday October 11th 1994 at 7 p.m., conducted by the Rev. Ian Mason and attended by friends from the circuit as well as Staveley people. The last hymn sung was, appropriately number 652 (H.P.) "Lord, dismiss us with Thy blessing... may Thy presence with us evermore be found".

In 1996 the building was sold to Kentmere Limited whose Photographic Department adjoined the church grounds. The communion table and the memorial tablet from the vestry are now in the

possession of the Brockbank family. A wooden cross which formerly stood on the communion table, as a memorial to Mr. & Mrs. John Robinson, is now in the home of their son, Norman Robinson, where the midweek afternoon Fellowship Meetings have continued to be held.

According to the Rev. Albert Brockbank, nine ministers were products of the two Methodist Churches in Staveley. It has been impossible, however, to trace them accurately apart from Albert and Walter Brockbank. Although there is no longer a Methodist church in the village, the influence of Staveley Methodism has, through these ministers and many other people, spread far and wide. The seeds that were sown did indeed produce a harvest.

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