Huddersfield Local History Society

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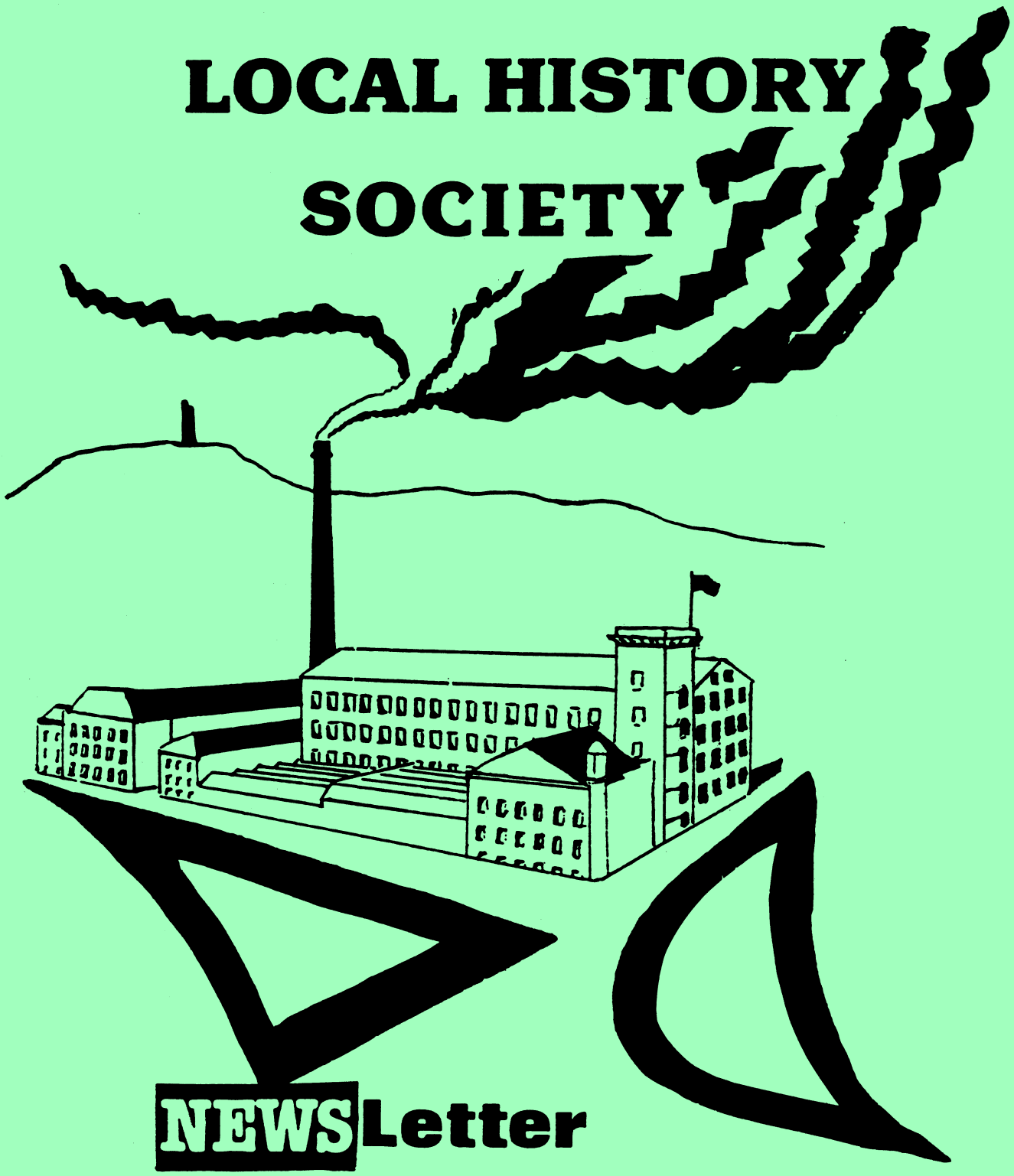
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



NEWSLetter

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BISHOP BICKERSTETH'S VISITATION AT HUDDERSFIELD 1858

One effect of the Industrial Revolution was the expansion of small villages into large towns with the original village church the only foothold the Church of England had in these new conurbations. Pews in church were rented by the rich, the tradesmen and professional families and as this section of society increased so the free and open forms used by the poor were appropriated to convert into private pews. This meant the poor were pushed further and further towards the back of the church and finally outside the church building. These people went to the local dissenting chapel which had not yet become respectable. Almondbury may be taken as an example with a population of 15,195 and seats for only 2,800. (1)

Until 1818 it was necessary to obtain an Act of Parliament in order to divide a large parish and build new churches. Although the evangelicals were anxious to compel clergy to reside in their parishes, hold one benefice only and work amongst the parishioners, yet the system in 1820 was slowly driving people from the Anglican church to dissent and all the time widening the gulf between church and people.

It was resolved to build numbers of new churches, basically as war memorials for the victory at Waterloo in 1815. The proposal was widely welcomed for it was believed, quite erroneously, that with more new churches the poor would attend in large numbers to their benefit. So between 1818 and 1823 no fewer than three Church Building Acts were passed (2) to facilitate rapid erection of churches.

There were problems to solve; the interests of the patron of the existing parish church, the interests of the incumbent, concerning fees, and these interests had to be protected in the sacred name of property. The Privy Council limited the cost of any single church to £20,000 maximum unless a higher sum was officially agreed. The character of the new churches would be such as externally and internally they would be suitable for divine worship according to the rites of the Church of England. The earlier Waterloo churches were basically four walls and a roof, a God Box, with a tiny chancel added at a later date. Gothic towers became fashionable again as did Early English architecture.

The new churches at Golcar, Lindley and Linthwaite are built in Early English style, those in the Spen Valley tend to be Gothic and at Milnsbridge it was Victorian Norman style; viewed from across the valley this church looks like Noah's Ark in full sail. Costs were all important. Huddersfield parish church was demolished, except the tower, in 1834 and rebuilt at the lowest price by an incompetent York architect who used as much of the old material as he could. The end result was a massive repair bill for restoration of the church in 1984. (3)

The Church Building Commissioners tended to specify seating for 1500. Archbishop Vernon Harcourt, stated in 1825, that smaller churches to seat 1,000 would be far more beneficial because large churches required a minister with a very powerful voice and when his voice could not be heard, then congregations tended to be thin in number. The archbishop wanted the new churches in the West Riding to seat between 800/1000 but when he asked the Commissioners to reduce the seating at Linthwaite church to a maximum of

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1,000 in 1826, the Commissioners rejected his plea, insisting that it must seat 1,500. Hamon Roberson, vicar of Birstall, writing about the new churches proposed for the Spen Valley, hoped the Commissioners would not imitate Linthwaite. He proposed that new churches should be small but capable of enlargement when the need arose. Although the West Riding clergy supported the archbishop, the Commissioners pursued their policy thus sowing the seeds of problems for the 1980's of building maintainance.(4)

When Bishop Longley undertook his primary visitation of his new diocese of Ripon he found many problems that he would have to deal with. The archdeaconry of Craven, which covered the industrialised parts of the diocese, contained 75% of the Methodist Chapels in his diocese and of these 90% were Wesleyan. On the whole church buildings were in a reasonable state of repair, with the exception of Denby of which he recorded; 'I have never seen such a dirty, dilapidated chapel in my life. I have ordered the parishioners to pull it down and raise money to rebuild immediately.' Indeed the traditional sources of income for repair of churches was drying up. Church rates were no longer being levied for dissenters would not pay to support a church in which they had no interest, so at Almondbury - 'no church rate for 2 years' and at Huddersfield - 'no church rate for 4 years'. The lack of parsonage houses was another problem for Longley found seventeen clergy looking after fifty two parishes. Low stipends meant there was a shortage of curates for the maximum at High Hoyland was £60 and All Saints, Wakefield but £150 p.a. (5).

Longley faced a tremendous task, for in 1839, the year of his visitation, there were but 220 churches for 780,000 souls in the Craven archdeaconry and a total of 330 for a diocesan population of one million. So church building went ahead as rapidly as possible. Longley soon discovered that there was widespread hostility towards the Church of England in the new industrialised areas, an hostility which he had to overcome, but for all the efforts to provide free seats in churches, only one third were really free and many remained empty week after week and year after year.

In 1743, Archbishop Herring had undertaken a visitation of his diocese and a study of the returns reveal an insight to the conditions that were to become serious and dangerous to the Church of England. The non-conformists were steadily taking over control in many West Riding parishes, many clergy were non-resident and there was a shortage of clergy. Edward Rishton, vicar of Almondbury commenting upon his problems stated, 'I have no curate yet there is work here for six clergymen. On Sacrament Sundays I go into Church at 10.00 in the morning and it is near two o' clock before I have finished the Communion Service.' (6)

As industrialisation expanded the increasing population tended to be concentrated in the new and also the older towns where the church was physically and psycho logically at its weakest so the difficulties of administering to a growing community were increased. The majority of clergy preferred to hold a rural semi rural benefice like Emley or Cawthorne where they had the support of the local gentry and were part of the traditional landed, social and political establishment that governed the country between 1714 and 1860. The clergy, by tradition, co-operated with those whose education, attitudes and politics they shared and upon whose patronage they depended. By 1850 there was no shortage of churches for, in the future diocese of Wakefield, some fifty five new churches had been built. Division of large parishes such as Halifax were well in hand but reforms were undertaken with reluctance.

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The same economic and social changes that brought problems to the church were also changing the system of political control in the country. Men were coming into positions where they could exercise authority and who had little sympathy with the privileged position of a grossly inefficient pillar of the state. So after the Reform Act 1832 the Church was on her own. Walter Landor writing in 1836 stated,

> 'There is no church and there never was one in which the ministers of religion have so little intercourse with the people as the English. Sunday is the only day that brings them together and not in contact. No feelings are interchanged, or sorrow or joys or hopes communicated. Unpreceded by inquiry or advice, command and denunciation follow the roll call of the day.' (7)

Many knew that vast numbers of working class people were not receiving the limited benefits of denunciation on Sunday for they were beyond the hearing of the clergy, their spiritual shepherds. Overall, it was feared that the Church had little strength to make its way among the urban masses of the new industrial world. The government decided that it would attempt a census of the worshipping habits of the English to be taken on Sunday 30th March, 1851 of those who attended church that day. When Horace Mann presented the report in 1855 the returns were a shock. Of the 19 millions some 12.5 million could have attended workship at any one of the three services held that day. The returns reveal that only 7.25 million did so and of those several had attended more than one service. Those who believed the English were a church going people were shocked to discover that 5.25 million did not share their religious inclinations. Whatever privileges the Church of England might enjoy it was clear that it did not rank first in the hearts of Englishmen - so the non-conformists were delighted. (8)

It was evident there was no need to provide more church accommodation for only 47% of the seats in the morning were occupied and 66% of seats in the afternoon or evening were empty in Anglican churches. The non-conformists fared about the same with 45% of the seats occupied. Hence, the picture emerged that only 25% of those who claimed to be Church of England members attended divine service and that the majority of the working class attended neither church nor chapel.

In the urban working class areas more than five million were absent from worship, all from the labouring poor. True, these people filled both day and Sunday schools, yet they rapidly became strangers to religious ordinances, so in the words of Bishop Sumner, 'this vast and intelligently important section of the population is estranged from our religious institutions.' (9) Only one town, out of those surveyed in the North, had a majority of Anglicans and that was Halifax. Huddersfield (St. Peter) on the other hand had a minority support. Therefore by 1855 the working class lived in a world apart following their own inclinations.

Realising that the years of preaching resignation to one's station in life could not be changed by promises of charity, the bishops now stated that the church of the future would have to concern itself with housing, sanitation, adult education, reduction in working hours, the provision of libraries, reading rooms and lectures to the working man to show he was respected. The one thing that was not required was more churches. Many of those built between 1820 and 1855 were virtually empty and the free

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seats rarely occupied. It was clear that church expansion had made little impact upon the urban population for many were already empty for the gap between attendance and accommodation was huge. So a drive was on to fill the churches by using lay workers, lay readers outdoor preaching missions and if necessary following the sinners to their homes or the alehouse. Too many clergy assumed their charges were in a state of grace while the missionary knows his are not.

The Industrial Revolution created class antagonism, a feeling of social inferiority that made the unwashed and ill clothed poor ashamed of appearing amongst their richer neighbours. Their ignorance made them incapable of understanding the liturgical language of the Prayer Book (10). The Tractarian inspired ritualism attracted the poor because what they saw meant more to them than what they heard or read. Naturally, Mann assumed that the labouring population of 1851 were as ignorant of christianity as were the heathen Saxons when St. Augustine landed in 597 AD.

To what extent is the situation revealed in the returns made to Bishop Bickersteth in 1858? In the eighteenth century, the custom of asking churchwardens to present a detailed report on their parish was abandoned for they had become too dishonest to make a reliable return, so the clergy were asked to do this. The first feature is the growth of population when compared with the returns of 1743. (Longley had not asked for this information in 1839) Huddersfield (St. Peter) had 1,100 families in 1743 but in 1858 this had increased to 12,000. Almondbury which had been some 1,500 now had grown to 9,000 in the township but 40,000 in the parish and Meltham Mills which did not exist in 1743 had a population of 1,500. Likewise in the suburbs growth of population had been rapid. Lindley had increased to 5,000, Honley chapel 6,500, Holmfirth 6,000, Golcar 5,000, Huddersfield St. John, 4,000, Milnsbridge 2,281, Slaithwaite 2,852, Marsden 2,665, Meltham 3,700 and Cumberworth 1,000. Taking into consideration the amount of new church building that had taken place since 1820 what accommodation was there for those who could not afford a pew rent? At St. Peter's out of 2,040 seats only 717 were free. At St. John's some 200 out of 700, were free while at Lindley, Milnsbridge and Holy Trinity, Huddersfield some 50% were free. Golcar had no free seats and the 200 free seats in Linthwaite church, 'are so badly placed that no one will sit in them.' Again at Slaithwaite some 1,360 persons could sit in pews but 150 had only loose backless forms to sit upon. Honley had only 140 free seats out of 1092 and Meltham had 30 free seats out of a total of 967.

This accommodation had a bearing on attendance. In many churches the morning congregation at 10.30 a.m. was the largest. Huddersfield parish church had an attendance between 1,000 and 1,200. This increased to 1,500 in the evening but according to the vicar there was no growth. On the other hand, St. John's with an average attendance of 250 was said to be growing. The congregation at Golcar varied between 500 in the morning and 700 in the afternoon and a further 500 in the evening. The vicar of Milnsbridge reported an attendance of 250 adults in the morning plus 50 children but few, if any, men attended in the evening. Although there were seats for 867 at Lindley the congregation was a mere 66 to 70, the reason for this being, 'the Baptists have too great an influence here.' Albeit there were increasing congregations at Slaithwaite and Honley but those at Meltham, Meltham Mills, and Marsden were stationary while that at Cumberworth was variable, the church being 'sometimes full, half full or only thirty depending on the weather.' Not altogether an unsatisfactory situation but one that could bring problems for the future.

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Was the staffing of these parishes as generous as popular myth would have us suppose or was it the reverse bearing in mind the present situation? The vicar of Huddersfield was the only incumbent with two curates. The vicars of St. John's, Holy Trinity, Golcar and Meltham had a curate each but there was no additional assistance for the vicars of Lindley, Linthwaite, Meltham Mills and Milnsbridge while the vicar of Almondbury had to make do with a Lay Reader. So staffing was not over generous and little in the way of instruction could be undertaken.

It must have been quite impossible to give any instruction on the meaning of baptism for the numbers returned concerning admission are very large indeed. Today it is the practice to administer baptism in public when a congregation is present. In 1858, there were no public baptisms at St. Peter's and the vicar of St. John's reported 'I cannot give the number of baptisms since whole families are baptised on the same day.' At Golcar there were about fifty baptisms each year and at Milnsbridge it was stated that 'sometimes adults and infants are baptised together.' At Linthwaite, bapitsms were restricted to the first Sunday in the month when, 'I baptise publicly 135 but in 1857 I baptised 237 plus adults and neglected children of dissenters.' Lindley, because of the influence of the Baptists, could only muster a dozen baptisms each year. at Almondbury the number had been 500 annually but the building of new churches had reduced the number to 150. Birstall was the parish with the largest number of baptisms averaging fifteen each Sunday and forty on the festivals. (11)

Many were convinced that the only way to increase the relevance of the church was by education. The foundation of the National Society in 1811 followed by the formation of the York Diocesan Society in 1812 having the intention to build a national school in each parish, was a difficult task. Attempts to provide a truly national system of education for the children of working parents was frustrated by the manufacturing interest which saw the threat to their supply of cheap labour in jeopardy. Building national schools on a large scale proved to be expensive and many parishes had difficulty in financing their schools although financed to some extent by the York Diocesan Society. (12)

The visitation returns reveal a widespread system of education including some for adults. Remembering that attendance was not compulsory until 1876, the numbers on the books are far greater than the attendances. Huddersfield parish church school had a roll of 356 but an average attendance of 132. The Sunday School of 413 was the largest in the area but the poverty in the town made it essential to run a ragged school as well. The school at Cowcliffe had 120 children plus a night school for adults which was attended by sixty men. Milnsbridge also ran a night school and at Meltham Mills the vicar held a lunchtime service in the mill each Wednesday which 400 operatives attended. This was followed by the Litany and a lecture in the infants school on the same evening and fortnightly cottage lectures in the parish. Meltham people appear to have a keen interest in education for the school achieved a 90% attendance. Education did not in the end solve the problem for when school ended then attendance at church very quickly followed into decline.

Communicant life was deplorable. There were only 100 communicants at St. Peter's, fifty at Golcar, thirty-four at Milnsbridge, eleven at Linthwaite and only eight at Cumberworth. Confirmation numbers were low for the Baptists opposed it in Lindley and at Cumberworth the parishioners opposed it and refused to learn the catechism. So full committed membership of the Church of England

was not visible in Huddersfield in 1858, except on a small scale.

The incumbents added comments upon parochial life as they saw it. The vicar of Golcar wrote, 'It would be an advantage in the esteem of people if this church were altogether independent of the vicar of Huddersfield receiving its own revenues and fees.' If an income could be obtained for a curate not to be paid out of the small stipend of the living it would stimulate others.'

I need more schools and more efficient appliances of various kinds and more curates might be employed to meet the pressing demands of so large and increasing population, very scattered and difficult of access.'

The vicar of Milnsbridge also had problems for as he wrote, 'The church has been very cheaply and badly built and has been altered three times to remove the echo and plaster is falling off the walls. The organ and day school are in debt. I have been after eleven years hard work, after declining a much better living, disappointed of the endowment promised by the Church Commissioners for I have six children under nine years of age.'

The vicar of Slaithwaite was of the opinion that parochial work in that parish was of a missionary character. The vicar of Honley was suffering from over exertion.

Fees were also a sore point for at Honley these were paid to the vicar of Almondbury and those at Lindley and Slaithwaite to the vicar of Huddersfield.

In the following twenty-five years, the church had spent millions in restoring and building churches, national schools, training colleges and home missions only to discover that its influence with the working class was little better than in 1851. The bitter pill to swallow was the realisation that millions of Englishmen were uninterested in the saving truths of Christianity preached by any denomination and that the church had never had the loyalty of the working class: the task was to win them.

The incompetence of eighteenth century parochial life had permitted generations to grow up with tenuous links with the Church of England. When thousands moved to the industrial towns, they shook off what remained of their Anglican loyalty. They were absorbed quickly into a secular culture which had interests associated with their immediate earthly needs and concerns of which religious worship formed no part. The clergy and church leaders were ill prepared to work in a missionary society for they knew nothing of working class culture although they had attempted to influence it by building hundreds of churches, thousands of schools, reorganising parishes, sharing out ecclesiastical revenues, and pouring millions of pounds into lay visitors, lay readers, and missionaries with small results.

The church in 1860 was working in a hostile and bewildering environment, speaking in many parishes to the educated middle and upper class citizens but not to the labouring sort. The Victorian Church did try to make contact with the working class which in the end rejected it.

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We have inherited from this period many large church buildings that are too expensive to maintain. Do we demolish them and provide a building that meets the needs of the local congregation or spend the money needed in repairs on a more worthy cause? Many churches have never been full despite the myth that they were, 'when I was young.' The church now means little to working men and women who are divorced from church life except for weddings and funerals. The majority today have a folk religion with as much superstition as any fifteenth century ancestor.

However, from the evidence presented, one must conclude that Faith in the City was there in embryo in 1858.

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