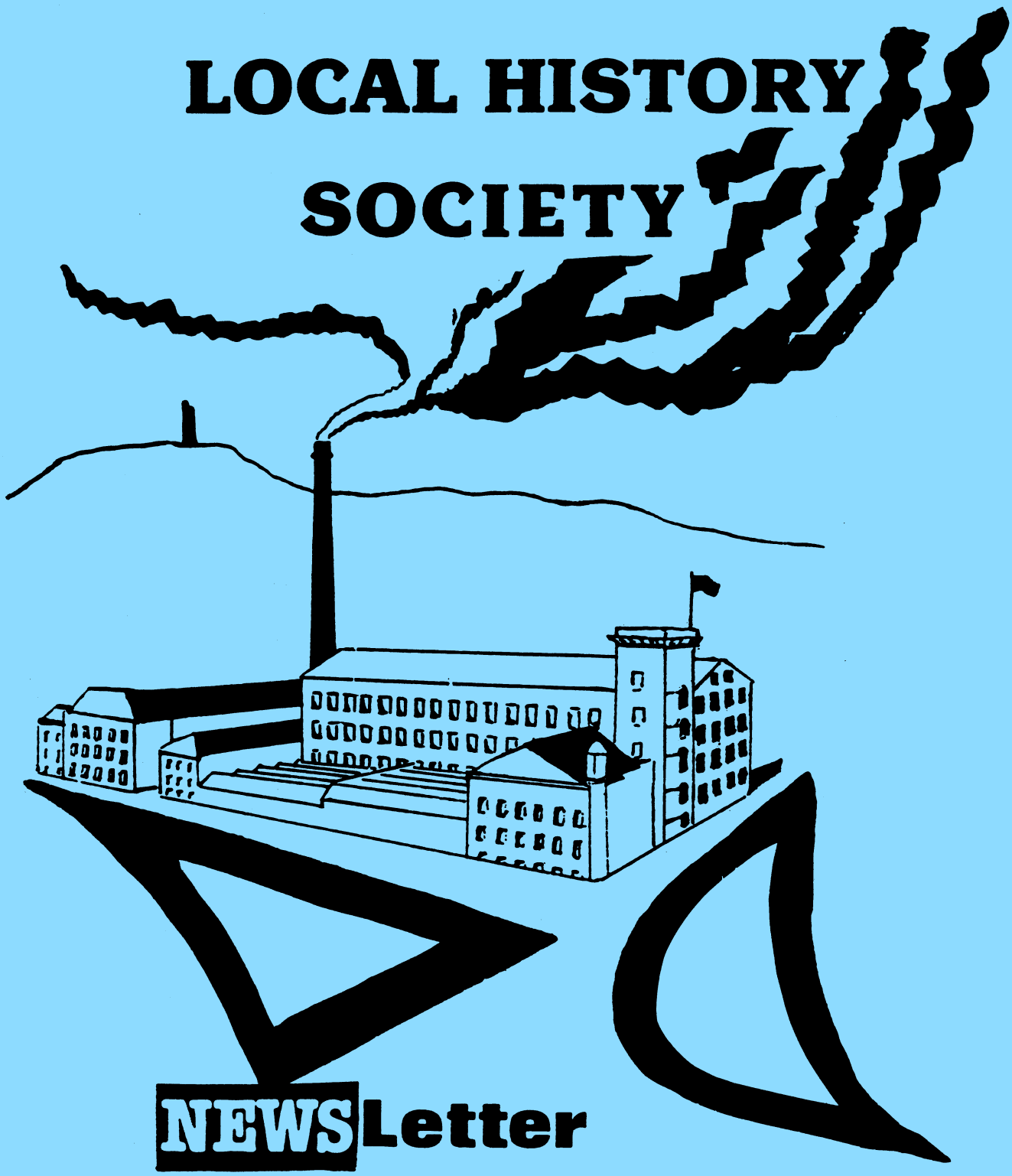
Huddersfield Local History Society

Huddersfield Local History Society
huddersfieldhistory.org.uk

Newsletter No. 7
1988

Huddersfield

LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



NEWSLetter

No.7 1988

THE REVEREND HENRY VENN

Henry Venn, vicar of Huddersfield 1759-71, friend of Grimshaw of Haworth, Whitefield and the Wesleys, a father of the Evangelical Revival in the Church of England, is one of the most significant figures in the history of Huddersfield. Yet he awaits a definitive biography, and even an easily accessible account of his ministry in Huddersfield.

Venn was born at Barnes on 2nd March, 1725. His father was a Jacobite high church clergyman, who refused his London pulpit to George Whitefield. As a boy Venn was jealous and precocious, but serious and studious. He graduated at Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1745, and was a fellow of Queens' from 1749 until 1757, when he married Eling ('Mira') Bishop.

Venn was ordained deacon in 1747, below canonical age, and priest in 1749. From this time a new seriousness engulfed him – he gave up playing cricket – which later developed into a definite Evangelicalism, the product of no single individual's influence, but born of his own inner struggle and study of the scriptures.

After curacies in Cambridge and London, Venn became curate of Clapham in 1754. Here he met the evangelical banker John Thornton, and through him George Whitefield. Here too he suffered his first serious illness, from overwork. Evangelicalism was not favoured by the rich and respectable people of Clapham. Venn felt rejected, and was happy to accept Sir John Ramsden's offer of the living of Huddersfield.

The move involved hardship. Huddersfield was worth £100 per annum – half Venn's stipend at Clapham. Venn came with two children, and three more were born in Huddersfield. The needs of a growing family, and entertainment of the galaxy of Evangelical worthies who increasingly visited Huddersfield, ate up any saving resulting from a lower cost of living in Yorkshire. Thornton and rich Evangelical friends helped, but money was always short. However Venn would not accept donations from persons whom he had influenced through his ministry. Mira persuaded him to stay in Huddersfield, when he would have returned to Surrey, and her excellent household management eked out their meagre resources. Before he went visiting, she would make him empty his pockets, lest he gave away what was needed at home. But both were extremely generous to the poor.

Mira's influence upon her husband extended beyond the domestic to the dogmatic. A clergyman's daughter with strong beliefs on Christian perfection, she drove her husband towards Calvinism. This identified Venn with Whitefield, and made for bad relations with Wesley and with the Huddersfield Methodists, for whom the vicar was too extreme.

Mira died in September 1767, aged 43. Venn continued to bring up his children with great seriousness. A family visit to the still unfinished Harewood House occasioned a sermon on the transitoriness of even men's finest works compared with God's unending glory.

Venn proposed to Priscilla Hudson, who refused him, but moved into the Vicarage as his curate's wife. He remarried in London shortly after leaving Huddersfield.

In 1759 Huddersfield was an overgrown village of about 5000 souls, but was also the first developing industrial town to receive an Evangelical incumbent. Venn's clear preaching of the cross of Christ quickly made a great impact, and drew crowds from all around. It was 'dignified, masculine, energetic', 'nervous, free and spirited, combining energy and tenderness, at once rousing and pathetic'; it moved its hearers to tears, and made them feel drawn to the edge of heaven. It was vividly remembered half a century after Venn's departure.

Venn took equal care in the conduct of services. He insisted on reverence and devotion, read the service with great solemnity, delighted in Anglican liturgy, and introduced the singing of hymns, particularly those of Isaac Watts. The highpoint in Sunday worship was the celebration of the sacrament.

Venn also endeavoured to surround worship in church with Sabbath observance by the town as a whole. He published **An Earnest and Pressing Call to Keep Holy the Lord's Day** (Leeds, 1760). He and his churchwardens ('the Venn men') toured the town and succeeded in stopping butchers from slaughtering on Sundays. During service he would go outside to speak to the 'loiterers and dissolute' in the churchyard, and draw them gently into church.

Venn's Evangelicalism attracted much opposition, including that of local clergy, especially, Edward Rishton, vicar of Almondbury. The freethinking Socinians sent James Kershaw to Venn's service to scoff, but he was converted and became Venn's most faithful disciple. Venn won over his enemies by his courtesy, kindness, love and sincerity – but the hard work this necessitated broke his health.

Venn came to love 'favoured, dear Huddersfield', and determined never to leave. In 1767 he refused the offer of the living of Halifax. But his health and his financial situation continued to deteriorate. A chest complaint in February 1766 put him out of action for seven months. Coughing and spitting of blood prevented him from preaching more than once a fortnight, and left him exhausted for days. Severe heart palpitations while preaching at the Huntingdonian chapel in Bath in 1770 persuaded him of his need for a lighter cure, and he accepted the offer of Yelling in Huntingdonshire.

Venn's Yorkshire people attributed his impending departure to desire for lucrative gain, and remonstrated severely with him. In fact little extra stipend was involved. When they learned the truth, they were devastated. One Sunday evening near his departure the curate Riland broke down in tears. Venn preached his last sermon on Easter Day 1771, on the text 'Christ is all and in all', and left Huddersfield the same week.

Venn feared that his successor would be hostile to his work, and this fear was realised. The Revd. Holcar Crook immediately discontinued most of what Venn had initiated. The congregation began to disperse, to Slaithwaite or Elland (where Venn's former curates, Powley and Burnett, were the incumbents) or Hopton chapel.

Those who were left formed the desire to found an independent evangelical chapel under their own minister. Sir John Ramsden would not permit such a building on his land, and he owned most of Huddersfield, but a site was eventually procured at Highfield. Much of the building work was done by the congregation themselves; Venn subscribed. The chapel opened on 1st January, 1772, under the Revd. William Moorhouse, one of Venn's disciples, who was to serve as minister for fifty years. The chapel quickly proved too small, and had to be rebuilt.

Venn approved the project from the beginning. At the chapel's opening, he wrote a letter of support from Yelling, to assure his people of the rightness of their action, and to express the hope that they would continue to employ Anglican liturgy and devotional practice. Venn regarded the minister of Highfield, not the vicar of the parish church, as his successor in Huddersfield.

Venn was hasty. Crook was quickly succeeded in 1773 by Joseph Trotter, who was sympathetic to Evangelicalism. But Highfield was not the only dissenting institution Venn encouraged. He also supported the Dissenting Academy in Heckmondwike and the Independent Chapel in Halifax. In so doing, he followed Grimshaw, who had built a Methodist chapel in Haworth.

Venn's and Grimshaw's ministries briefly overlapped (1759–63). Venn preached at Grimshaw's funeral, and published his first biography. The two were very different, in pastoral technique, and in doctrine – Grimshaw was an Arminian and no Calvinist, who stood with Wesley rather than Whitefield. But much greater things united them: fervent evangelical preaching unfettered by parochial and denominational boundaries; revival of sacramental devotion; strict sabbath discipline; committed pastoral care; and encouragement of dissenting congregations.

Generosity towards dissenters however exposes neither to the charge of being ' a lax churchman'. Methodists and Huntingdonians were still 'ginger groups' within the Church of England, and common cause was possible and right. When these bodies clearly departed from the Established Church, in 1780 and 1784, Venn would no longer preach in dissenting chapels, and discouraged younger Evangelicals, notably Charles Simeon, from doing so. Venn may have been the 'father of Nonconformity' in Huddersfield, but kept the Evangelical Revival firmly within the Church of England.

Venn worked with Wesley, who preached on three occasions in Huddersfield. Venn attended Methodist Conference in Leeds in 1762. But he always had serious reservations about Methodism. Locally relations were far from harmonious, since the Methodists insisted on retaining their own preachers, while Venn wanted all gospel preaching in Huddersfield under his own control. Venn and Wesley met in Bradford in 1761, as a result of which Methodist preaching in Huddersfield was reduced and subsequently suspended for a year. But in 1765, in the teeth of Venn's opposition, it restarted. In June 1765 Wesley wrote to Venn offering a further period of suspension, to remove 'the bad blood' between them. Wesley's highhanded action had hurt Venn, who seems to have responded by forbidding Wesley his pulpit. Even when making peace, Wesley continued to be seriously concerned by the fundamental doctrinal difference – Arminianism versus Calvinism – which divided the two men and their work.

With Whitefield Venn was much more at ease. He accompanied Whitefield on his preaching tours, and invited him to Huddersfield to preach in 1767. Venn shared Whitefield's Calvinist belief and coolness towards Wesley, and preached at Whitefield's funeral in Bath in 1770.

For, Selina, countess of Huntingdon, Venn felt the highest admiration. He preached at her chapels and ministered in her house, and she stayed with him in Huddersfield. But when the Connexion left the Church of England in 1780, Venn severed all links with it.

Venn was a definite Evangelical, who disliked popish ceremonies, but was neither narrow nor joyless. He regarded himself as a very moderate Calvinist. Ten of his nineteen published works date from his Huddersfield period. **Man a Condemned Prisoner, and Christ the Strong Hold to save him** (1769) indicates their flavour. His **magnum opus** was **The Complete Duty of Man** (1763), a complete handbook of Evangelical religion, which made a great impact. His spirituality was one of prayer, Bible reading, worship, sermons, fellowship and 'much retirement' (retreat).

A deep sacramentalist, Venn took issue with the famous Joseph Priestley, native of Birstall, minister of Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, discoverer of oxygen, freethinker and political radical, over Priestley's teaching on the Last Supper. Priestley thought the Reformers should have gone farther towards abolishing the superstitions of popery. Venn held they were right not to 'cashier the whole system of divinity', but to remove distractions and so highlight original sin, atonement, justification by faith, etc., 'the truth with which the errors were intermixed' in popery. Priestley's offence at atonement by Christ's blood was unbelief, and his inability to adduce scriptural support for his position the result of disaffection from 'the blessed word of God'. Priestley responded with an unworthy attack on Venn which taunted him as a Dissenting fellow-traveller disloyal to the Church which paid him.

Venn revisited Huddersfield on 8th October, 1780, when he preached at morning and afternoon services (for fifty and fifty-three minutes). Church and churchyard were filled; hundreds more could not get near, and went home. The gallery was so overloaded that it began to give way, and had to be shored up with a prop.

Venn never lost his love for Huddersfield. He told James Kershaw in 1786: Your description of your Sabbath day's journey to Huddersfield brought to my mind some of the "sweetest hours of my life".

Venn remained rector of Yelling for twenty-five years. He died in June 1797, at Clapham, where his son John was now rector. His daughter was convinced that joy at the prospect of leaving the world kept him alive an extra fortnight.

In 1836 a new Huddersfield parish church was built. A plaque was erected to Venn, 'a burning and a shining light in a dark day of the Church'. John Newton feared he might overrate his dear friend, who was 'but a man, but I think him an uncommon one; an eminent instance of the true Christian spirit'.

DAVID B. FOSS

NOTE

This article summarises a longer unpublished paper, **Henry Venn, Vicar of Huddersfield 1759–71**, a copy of which is deposited in Huddersfield Public Library. This gives full reference to sources, and includes extracts from relevant documents.

The main printed sources for Venn's life and ministry in Huddersfield, from which the above information is derived, are:

Venn, H. (the younger), ed., **The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Revd. Henry Venn, M.A.**, 2nd ed., 1835 (and other editions).

Venn, J., **Annals of a Clerical Family**, 1904.

Memoirs of the Revd. J. Cockin, Idle, 1829.

Most of Venn's works are available in Huddersfield and Leeds Public Libraries. A typescript list of his works, compiled by W.K. Stockton (of Massachusetts) may be consulted in Huddersfield.

THORNHILL EXCURSION

Although many of our meetings take the form of lectures, each summer members have the opportunity to exercise their legs as well as their ears on the "June excursion", and this year's event, despite the poor weather, provided a most interesting evening.

Commencing at St. George's Square we travelled to Dewsbury by way of Grange Moor and the suprisingly rural Briestfield area. Climbing steeply through narrow country lanes, we arrived at the ancient hill top village of Thornhill, whose present suburban status belies its long history. Outside the Parish Church Dr. Redmonds, our guide for the evening, outlined Thornhill's rich past before leading the party through the extensive Rectory gardens (which once boasted their own heated vinery) towards Thornhill Hall.

Little now remains of this once important residence of the Saville Family and the moated site stands, somewhat incongruously, on the edge of a public golf course. It requires some imagination to picture the time when the local population played for much higher stakes and the Hall was destroyed in a Civil War battle. The Savilles left Thornhill, never to return and their mansion survives only as rubble, while, ironically the adjoining Hall Farm continues not only as a working farm but as an architectural monument in its own right. With an unusual mullion windowed barn, extensive outbuildings and duck pond centered yard, this is a remarkable enclave well worth a visit in its own right.

Thornhill Hall's importance was its own undoing, but fate has been kinder to its near neighbour, Thornhill Lees Hall. That this is so, is largely due to the efforts of its owner, Mr. Mortimer, who has devoted much of his life to its preservation.

Bumping down an unmade track between industrial premises and farm buildings to arrive in a yard overshadowed by a railway viaduct and the former Thornhill Power Station, it was difficult to imagine that a building of historical significance awaited. Yet there it stood, black and white gables rising defiantly above the drab surroundings, so small and out of place that it might have been dropped there by accident. This is most definitely a house that needs a knowledgeable guide, for no unaided visitor could ever appreciate its historical significance or piece together the architectural jigsaw dispersed among the farm buildings (1).

Lees Hall dates from the 15th century and has survived many vicissitudes, not least the drastic separation and rebuilding of its western end to form an entirely separate stone house. This has left only the east wing and central hall of the original timber framed building standing. A map of 1634 shows a large house built around three sides of a courtyard and named after the Nettleton family, its builders and owners for over two centuries. The present building represents only a fraction of that structure, but provides a "text book" of timber framed construction. Stout oak beams and studded walls filled with lath and plaster, support massive roof trusses, which in the hall itself, are clearly visible. This open construction emphasises the medieval atmosphere of the hall, which is enhanced by a well preserved canopy at the east end. The massive stone fireplace on the opposite wall is of modern construction but does not detract from the hall's authenticity.

Passing beneath the canopy into the east wing is actually to enter a separate building, for wing and hall are structurally self contained and jointed together with wooden pegs. Improvements in the 17th century lead to a remodelling of this wing and the creation of a fine apartment on the first floor. Regrettably the fireplace and panelling were shipped to the U.S.A. in the 1930s but the "uncommonly fine plaster ceiling" (2) survives as a monument to both its period and the dedicated restoration skills of its owner.

Lees Hall might not be the most spectacular timber framed house but it's an important one and its survival has been achieved without official or professional assistance. There is much work still to be done, particularly on the 17th century hall, but inclusion in the Schedule of Listed Buildings has at last provided some measure of security for these rather vulnerable buildings as their once mighty neighbour, the power station, succumbs to the hammers of the demolition men.

K. Brockhill

NOTES

1) A comprehensive history of the Hall, with photographs and architectural drawings was published by T.G. Manby in **Yorkshire Archaeological Journal** Vol 43. 1971.

2) PEVSNER, N. **Buildings of England: Yorkshire. The West Riding.** 2nd edition. 1967.