

EARLY STRUGGLES OF WESLEYAN METHODISM in ASHTON -IN- MAKERFIELD

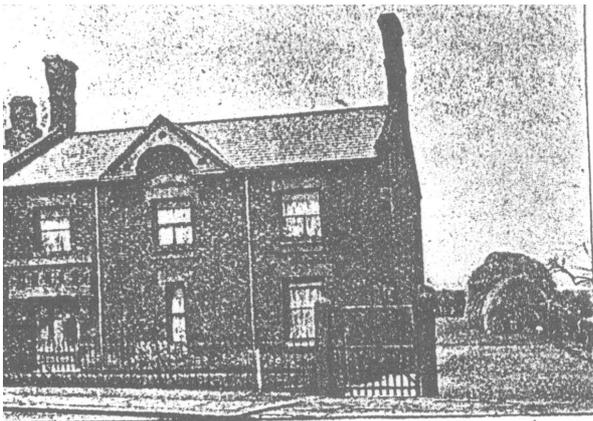
About 1834 Dr. Adam Clarke pessimistically predicted “*If Ashton in Makerfield Methodist Chapel be sold, Methodism will never again rear it's head in that village.*”

John Wesley's journal contains a reference for May the 9th 1759 of a visit to Downall Green, about a mile away from Ashton in Makerfield in this manner – “*I rode to Downall Green, near Wigan, a town wicked to a proverb. We had a specimen of the manners of it's inhabitants in the behaviour of a man that met us, and accosted us with such language as would have become an inhabitant of the bottomless pit. Looking around the congregation it seemed a good part of them were of the same spirit; but in a short time the word of God prevailed and all their fierceness melted away.*”

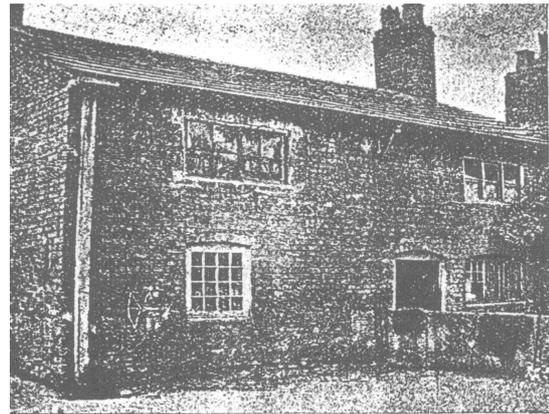
Two years later, April 13th 1761, Wesley wrote, “*About noon I preached to a serious congregation at Downall Green, near Wigan.*”

These references to Downall Green and the fact that one of the pioneers of Ashton Methodism, Mr. Philip Callon, was a connection by marriage of the Downall family, suggests that Methodism may owe its introduction into Ashton to the labours of some of the Downall Green converts.

When Philip Callon appeared in local Methodist history about 1805 Ashton -in -Makerfield was an important village, boasting, in addition to several collieries, half a dozen cotton and other factories. Philip Callon was the proprietor of one of these factories as well as owning a farm.



Mr. Philip Callon's House, Ashton-in-Makerfield.
About 1805 - 1818



Mr. Wm. Johnston's Preaching Room, 1810-47.

A cottage owned by Mr. Callon, in Lodge Lane was used for preaching services.

The Methodist Movement grew rapidly and it wasn't long before Philip Callon felt justified to consider the building of a Chapel.

The only available documentation to indicate the progress of Methodism generally in this period is information collected by the Rev. Edmund Sibson who spent 37 years (1810 – 1847) first as Curate and subsequently vicar of St. Thomas's in Ashton in Makerfield.

On May 19th 1811 the Rev. Edmund Sibson, curate at St. Thomas's Ashton in Makerfield wrote to the Bishop of Chester, in response to his enquiry:- There are about 70 Methodists, they have at present no Meeting House, but they preach in private houses. In Haydock they meet in Jonathan Nailor's house, Mr. Draper, of St Helens and Philip Callon are their teachers. I should think they have increased in number of late.

Again in 1814 the Bishop requested information and Rev. Sibson replied:- From the 1811 Census there were 160 Methodists, I should think they have increased considerably in number. They have one Meeting House and many private houses are used for meetings.

It appears from these records that there was no Methodist Chapel in Ashton prior to May 1811, but there seems no doubt that between that date and the end of 1812 one was erected, because Rev.

Sibson's report in 1812 contains a record of Ashton Methodist Chapel Baptisms.

John Harley May 2014

Mr, Callon undertook the greatest part of the financial responsibility involved in the erection and maintenance of the Chapel.

The building was galleried, had accommodation for 200 persons and was known locally as Philip Callon's Chapel.

In 1815 The Rev. Edmund Sibson was requested by the government to compile a list of educational statistics from which is shown there were two weekday schools described as "Methodist," one kept by Fanny Cottam, with 9 boys and 12 girls and another with 8 boys and 8 girls kept by Rachel Edleston.

A list was also compiled of Sunday schools and this showed the Ashton Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School contained 38 scholars and is stated to have started in 1814. The teacher's names are given as Philip Callon, Thomas Birchall and Samuel Dickenson.

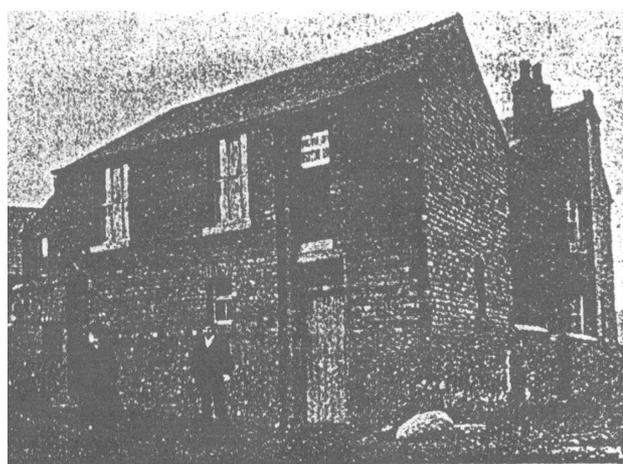
At Downall Green a Sunday School had 30 scholars and was taught by Samuel Houghton, Peter Fearnley, William Fearnley and Josh Downall, this was established in 1815.

It is interesting to note that the Rev. William Fearnley, who entered the Methodist Ministry in 1791, was born in Ashton in Makerfield.

In a memorandum dated September 9th 1834 it is stated that according to the census of 1831 the number of persons belonging to Wesleyan Methodists in Ashton in Makerfield was 138 and it also stated that the Wesleyan Methodists have a Chapel in Ashton in Makerfield.



About 1838
Abraham Fort's Preaching Room, Ashton-in-Makerfield

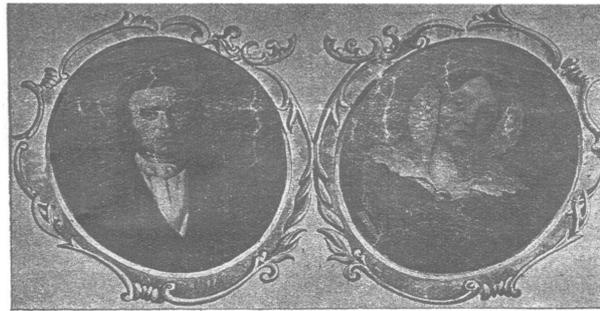


Present Preaching Room, Ashton-in-Makerfield.
1902.

Shortly after 1834 the burden of financial difficulty which had been growing since the death of Mr. Philip Callon in 1818 became too heavy for limited local resources. Regrettably in view of the fact that Mr. Callon and his family had greatly impoverished themselves in the attempt to keep things going it was felt that with a declining cause there was no alternative to the sale of the chapel unless the Connexion came to the rescue. Appeals for assistance were, however, in vain. Dr. Adam Clarke, who was well acquainted with the facts of the case, brought his great influence to bear with a view to the retention of the Chapel, but his powerful protests against the sale went unheeded, and it was under these circumstances that he expressed his fears for the future of local Methodism in the words at the beginning of this narrative.

In the end the chapel was closed, and after a time was offered for sale. A bid of £600 by the Roman Catholics was refused, but ultimately, probably about 1836, the building was sold to a firm by whom it was converted to a brewery, with an ale house attached.

In spite, however of this apparent blighting of their hopes, a few ardent souls determined, if possible, to keep Methodism alive in the village, and about 1838 preaching services were recommenced in a room not far from where the chapel had stood. These services were carried out by Mr. Abraham Fort who lived at Haydock.



Mr. and Mrs. William Johnston. (From Old Paintings.)

In 1840 a family of Methodists from Liverpool, Mr. William Johnston, with his wife (a granddaughter of Philip Callon) and their two daughters arrived in Ashton and boosted the work Mr. Fort had inaugurated. Misfortune, however seemed to dampen every effort to make substantial progress and Mr. Fort was compelled to move to Liverpool and not long afterwards died at Torquay aged only 33 years.

Responsibility for maintaining the work in Ashton fell upon Mr. Johnston and he converted part of his property in Lodge Lane into a preaching room.

In 1847 due to business arrangements Mr. Johnston moved to Manchester, his withdrawal was a serious blow, for there was no-one to provide a preaching room or hospitality for the preachers.

The result is recorded by Mr. Thomas Cooke in his history of St. Helens Circuit:-

The Schedule of the number of members in the St. Helens and Prescot Circuit, in which Ashton appeared in 1847, with thirty two members contains the following addendum

“Ashton – the removal from Ashton of Mr. Johnston, who took a lively and active interest in the cause, occasioned its decline and extinction”.

This closed another chapter in the history of Ashton Methodism and it was not until Thirty Five years had elapsed that the next was opened – largely through the efforts of the elder Miss Johnston who, surviving her parents, was in 1882, living once again in Ashton in Makerfield where she had spent her youth.

With the help of a few others, a class meeting was established and a room for preaching services was opened in Bolton Road and the society was once more placed on the St. Helens plan.

Mr. John Howard of Golborne took an interest in the new venture in Ashton in Makerfield.

For a time the work succeeded but in a year or two, for various causes, chiefly lack of local workers, it was found impracticable to maintain the services and they were reluctantly abandoned.

At the end of the 19th Century Ashton developed to a remarkable extent. The discovery of a new rich seam of coal led to a large influx of colliery workers in addition to one or two factories being started. The Great Central Company's new railway between Manchester and St. Helens, via Golborne and Ashton, was another important factor in the progress of Ashton. The population had risen to 20,000. Due to the efforts of a few English speaking Welshmen and other Methodists living in the town who gathered together into a fellowship group, a room over a stable was rented and with the assistance of local preachers from Earlestown, Sunday Services were commenced in June 1902. At the Quarterly Meeting of St. Helens Circuit the Ashton “cause” was formally taken over and officers duly appointed.

The local workers were full of ***Hope and Enthusiasm*** and were eager for the time to arrive when a Wesleyan Chapel worthy of the Connexion would be erected in town.

Negotiations began as soon as possible to purchase a piece of land on Queens Road for the erection of a new Wesleyan Methodist Church between representatives of the Lord Gerard Estate and Trustees of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

The Indenture was signed on the 8th of November 1904.

The building that was erected in 1905 is the building still in use at the present time having undergone a number of modifications and improvements over the years.