

THE WIGAN MIRACLES

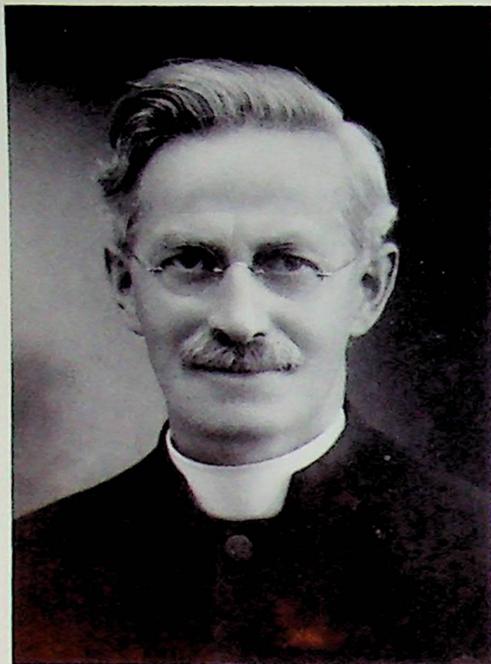
by

MURIEL GUYLER B.A.

Dedicated to my parents – the Rev. & Mrs. W. A. Harrison
to whom I owe so much



*This is a story of how wonderfully God can use us when we
are utterly committed to Him; a story of humour and
pathos, of tragedy and triumph.*



Rev. W. A. Harrison

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Rev. Richard Keen and the Rev. Ronald S. Charlton for the interest they have shown and the help and constant encouragement they have given to me in the compiling of this record; to Mrs. Enid Culshaw for the hours she has spent so willingly in typing the script; to Mr. Frank Barton for his help and advice, and to the many friends who have urged me to write and publish this story of the Wigan Mission in its beginnings.

Muriel Guyler

Introduction

The story of the beginnings of the Wigan Mission is legendary. The effects of the amazing work which saw dramatic changes in the attitude and life style of a large number of people are with us to this day. There are people with us still who bear glad testimony to the transformation which took place in their family life when the Mission went to work under the inspired pioneer leadership of Rev. William A. Harrison at the turn of the century. There are few who know the cost borne by Mr. Harrison and his family as he burned himself out in search of people to whom he could offer the love of Christ. "The Wigan Miracles" is a phrase often quoted by those who remember from personal experience the difference Christ made to their home when His Standards were accepted, and His Power brought a new reason for living into a hitherto dark and dismal life.

In these days when the work of God is under constant pressure in a secular age and also when the present generation of Wigan Mission people are seeking to understand the pattern of future work, it is a good thing to have the full story of our heritage told in as much detail as possible. Perhaps some of the inspiration of those former days will take hold of us today and send us on into the future with renewed hope and confidence. God can do what He has done before. God can also do more. God can do a new thing beyond all our dreams.

No one is better fitted to write the story than Mr. Harrison's daughter — Mrs. Muriel Guyler — who, herself, has given a lifetime to the work of God in the Methodist Church.

Ronald S. Charlton

Called and Commissioned

At the end of his course of training for the ministry at Headingley College, my father, the Rev. W. A. Harrison, was attached to the Mint, a newly opened Mission Hall on the verge of Holbeck Moor, Leeds, and revival quickly broke out as this enthusiastic young minister visited and prayed in the Hall and on the Common wherever people gathered. The work so eagerly and successfully begun continued for several years. The Central Hall movement was everywhere being crowned with success, and evangelism was strong in the land. A man was needed to undertake aggressive work in the colliery town of Wigan, and the Home Missions Department chose W. A. Harrison, the ardent young missionary who already had made an impact wherever he had been.

The Beginning

In 1902 he and his wife and three little girls moved from Bolton Wesley to Wigan. 14, Park View was lent rent free to be our home. My father began with nothing but a strong faith and determination to succeed. There was no church, no Mission Hall, no committee, no money. Father began his work in the open air, offering Christ to the needy, jostling crowds. Then the Wigan circuit lent a small schoolroom in School Lane for Sunday worship. School Lane Mission Hall soon became wholly inadequate to house the many who packed in. Preparation was needed for work on a much larger scale. Father went among the people in cap and muffler, day and night, to see how they lived. The whole town was visited. Probably no house was left without an invitation. 15,000 handbills were distributed. Sandwich men paraded the streets announcing services to be held on the coming Sunday in the Hippodrome.

The Hippodrome

The Hippodrome was a new theatre that had been built in the most populous part of the town where thousands upon thousands passed to and fro day and night. The proprietor was a member of the Roman Catholic Church. He was so impressed by the work that was being done that he not only lent the theatre but promised to do all he could to meet the wishes of the missionary and the friends he had gathered around him. He

advertised the Mission services on his theatre programme every night, and the brewery company next door had a large poster on its walls.

At the first service in the Hippodrome my father read of the Pentecostal Power at Jerusalem — a fitting preparation for his bright, earnest address on “A Man on Fire” — Nehemiah was the man he had selected. In the evening he gave a timely address on “Finding a Fortune”. Many in the congregation were so unaccustomed to a religious service that they did not bow their heads during prayer, nor remove their caps during the service. It was a service of great power attended by many young people.

Often during the singing there was competition as, on one occasion, a travelling circus behind stage joined the rousing chorus of the congregation as it sang:

“For the lion of Judah shall break every chain
And give us the victory again and again.”

Every Sunday the Hippodrome was used for worship and School Lane for week-night work. There was no doubt that from the start God was in it all and there were many wonderful life transformations with abiding results.

On the rare occasions Mother couldn't be present I remember sitting on a high stool on the stage which was Father's pulpit, dangling my legs and gazing out on the sea of strangers and wondering what it was all about. We had a brass band to lead the singing, and I can hear now the clang-clang of the tip-up chairs as the crowd rose to sing.

Of course there was much raw material that needed careful handling. One Johnson, a convert who didn't realize that cleanliness is next to godliness, was always dirty and uncouth, but would stand at the door and give out hymn sheets and tended to drive folk away. Father, with his consummate tact, found a new job for him. Band instruments had been disappearing, so Father asked Johnson to sit on the box and guard them, a job that he was proud to do.

The Hippodrome was packed on Sundays; School Lane Mission on week-nights. A band of helpers had gathered and financial help was coming in. The Walker family of Bolton gave very generously. Gifts came from all over the district and from the Home Mission Department.

Special tribute must be paid to Mr. Samuel Melling, J.P., and to Mr. W. R. Deaken of the then well known jams and jellies, who gave liberally of their money and spiritual help.

A Dream Realized

The time had come to build a Mission Hall. A site was bought in Market Square. There was a great procession of witness. My sisters and I were in the procession carrying our holiday spades to have a share in the sod cutting. Mother cut the first sod. There followed months of fervent prayer, of strenuous work and brave witness. My father and his helpers were often in great danger from the Roman Catholics and from the publicans. He was a staunch temperance advocate as he had seen so many lives and homes wrecked by the curse of strong drink. As he marched in procession stones and broken beer bottles were thrown at him; but he remained unharmed.

Our first deaconess was Sister Florence Thornton — a very tall and stately woman. Once when she was walking at the head of a procession with my father a bare-footed urchin called to his pals “Hi, fellers! There’s a bloomin’ procession and they’ve gotten Queen wi’ ’em!”

Two years after our arrival in Wigan we had the stone-laying of Queen’s Hall. A tremendous crowd gathered from all over the district. The foundations stones were laid by people of wealth and influence, bricks by humble folk and even children, who gave £1 for the privilege. I remember being lifted up to put my brick in position and felt a thrill that I was helping to build a church.

There was tremendous enthusiasm as the building grew. Father went daily to note the progress. There were times when he carried me up ladders on his shoulders to watch with him. Our hearts were full of thanksgiving on the great opening day of Queen’s Hall. The Hall was crowded. Every one of the 2,000 tip-up chairs was occupied and seats had to be put down the aisles. From the start we could never doubt God’s presence and guidance.

Child though I was I was caught up in the spirit and power of it all and shall never forget the crowds that assembled week by week, the mighty

singing, the cries of “Glory!”, “Praise Him!” — “Hallelujah!” One Sunday during the singing of the old hymn “Showers of blessing” with the refrain “Let some drops now fall on me,” Obadiah Rigby broke in with “Never mind the drops, Lord, give us a soaking”! The after meetings were a great challenge and God-given opportunity. Men, women and young folk from every part of the Hall made their way to the Inquiry Room where a group of counsellors waited to help them — to listen to their problems, to advise them and pray with them as they gave their lives to God whilst the rest of the congregation sang quietly:

“Jesus is tenderly calling thee home”

“Hark: there comes a whisper — ’tis the Saviour calling
Give thy heart to me!”

“Keep on praying, the Lord is nigh”

“Just as I am, Oh Lamb of God I come”

Harry Sharrock was the first convert and became the first caretaker.

I was only a child, but in those far-away days I became sensitive to the atmosphere in which God speaks.

Occasionally I was carried away by enthusiasm for the Mission. Once I gathered a group of my young friends together and we marched up Park View singing:

“The Lamb, the Lamb, the bleeding Lamb,
I love the sound of Jesus name,
It sets my spirit all aflame,
Glory to the bleeding Lamb.”

then we rang the bells of numerous houses and held out our J.M.A. boxes. Of course the words meant nothing to us, but the tune was a good marching tune and we felt we were helping. When Mother heard what was happening she suggested a better way of supporting the Juvenile Missionary Association!

Testimony Meetings

A great feature of the Mission in those early days was the Testimony Meetings held on Sunday afternoons when converted miners told of what Christ had done for them and meant to them. There were often telling

illustrations, graphic word-pictures, and often pathos and unconscious humour.

One man told how, as a child, he visited the pit where his father worked. He kept hold of his father's hand and felt safe for every step of the way was known to his father. But there came a time when the father jumped to a lower shaft and the child was alone and afraid.

"Where are you, Dad?" he called

"I'm here, son, you are all right," came the father's voice.

"I can't see you," cried the child.

"But I can see you," called the father. "Jump, I'll catch you." — and because the child knew and loved and trusted his father he jumped — into the darkness, but into his father's outstretched arms. So with us and our father God. There are times when all is dark about us and we are afraid, and God seems to have left us. But He is always there in the darkness and His eyes are ever upon us, and He is ready and eager to help us when we dare to trust Him.

Another convert told how he was sorely tried when he gave his heart to God. His workmates chaffed him and tried to drag him back to the old ways of drink and gambling. "If only I could get away to another district where I am not known and find work in another pit" was his daily yearning. One night when he turned into the street where he lived he found the only lamp to light the street had gone out and the street was in terrible darkness. He was conscious that God was challenging him. He stayed his ground and was the means of helping many to find God.

There were tears in the eyes and voice of another as he said "God gave us a little lamb to tend, but we didn't tend her. She was often cold and hungry, lonely and afraid whilst me and her ma were in the pub. So the Good Shepherd took her to His fold to be looked after. We miss our little lamb, but we know she is safe; and praise God th'old sheep's follerin' on."

"I were goin' 'ome from work," said another, "and jumped inter't train just as it were pullin' out. I fund mesel' in fust class carriage with a third class tucker. So I spreads mesen out like a lord, and all the way to Wigan I prayed 'Lord, Thou mun get me out of this scrape' — I reached barriers with a third class ticket in one 'and and th'excess fare in t'other. 'Good

neet, Sam' says chap as was collecting tickets. 'Good neet' says I and went on my way saying 'Praise the Lord! He allays finds a way out for His children!'

Christ and the Devil

The streets of Wigan were crowded on Saturday nights with men and women with nothing to do but spend their week's wages on drink. So Father started Saturday concerts in the Hall — admission 2d and hot pot supper served during the interval at a charge of 3d. The programmes were very varied. Talented artists sang Scottish songs — "Ma ain wee hoose" — "The crooked bawbee" — English favourites — "Madam will you walk and talk with me?" — "There's no place like home". Irish and Welsh songs, and sometimes a film show as a change. The concerts were a success from the start. All honour to those who were busily making and serving hot pot — to say nothing of the washing up afterwards! They little realized the valuable part they were playing in hindering the Devil from enticing folk into the pubs and brothels.

Outreach

One weekend we had a group of Indian boys at the Mission — singing, speaking and doing their native dances. Two of the boys stayed in our home and helped to forge a link with the world church that has grown stronger and ever stronger with the passing of the years. I remember one boy of only 8 years old singing a solo in the crowded hall — a hymn that made a great impression on me and has remained my favourite children's hymn —

"God make my life a little light
Within the world to glow;
A little flame that burneth bright
Wherever I may go."

We had Sunday School concerts too, when a high percentage of our big School turned up to "help" with the singing. It was at one of these concerts that I sang a solo — all dressed up for the part —

"I am the captain of the May Queen's band"
and the children behind coming in with

(“And we are the band”)

“I hold my staff in my hand you see”

(“And so do we”)

Of course these concerts attracted parents and sometimes were the means of winning them for the Mission and for Christ.

The Sunday School Anniversaries were something to look forward to. We had a procession of witness (as we did each Whit Monday). The Brass Band was out in full force and we had splendid banners. I can feel now the pull of my ribbon as I proudly helped to hold up and steady my banner. Many had a new suit or a new frock for the Anniversary and where we couldn't afford a new frock we had a new sash. The Anniversary was a great occasion.

Each Christmas Day morning breakfast was given to hundreds of bare-footed youngsters, and it would be hard to say whether the givers or the workers or the children enjoyed them most.

Strain

Father worked 7 days a week spending himself for the folk he dearly loved and who dearly loved him.

Sundays began with a 7 am prayer meeting. Before the morning preaching service at 11 am there was an open-air service. My father was blessed with a magnificent voice. Every word could be heard. In the afternoon he was at the monthly Testimony Meetings or visiting the Sunday School. Before the 6.30 pm preaching service there was another open-air service — singing, praying and inviting passers-by to come in. Then always there was an after meeting. Father sometimes didn't get home till midnight.

Disturbed nights

In the early hours of the morning when Father was in bed there was a loud ring at the bell. Two men, in caps and mufflers, had come to ask Father's help. They wanted him to go to a family they said was possessed with devils. Father didn't hesitate though he knew he was in danger. He found the family — even the baby in the cradle — shaking all over. He hardly

knew what to do. He hadn't been taught at college how to deal with such a situation. But he remembered how Jesus had dealt with devil possession and prayed "I command thee in the name of the most high God to come out of them." Immediately the shaking ceased. Father talked to them and promised to go round in the morning. He kept his word and found that fear had completely gone and life was going on normally.

Another night two women sought his help during the night. "Tha mun pray for Bill Melling" they said. Bill was a notorious criminal — the worst man in the district — drunk more often than sober. His wife was stone deaf because of his violent treatment. Recently he had put a noose round her neck and the end of the rope in the wringer and begun to turn the handle. The children's screams roused the neighbours who sought Father's help. He set the classes praying for Bill. Then, one Saturday night he and his lay-agent, Mr. Gorwood, went to see Bill. "You keep watch and I'll pray said Father. He first talked about the pit and Bill's workmates and pit props and worked round to talk of God supporting us in our weakness. Then he knelt to pray. Bill was seemingly unmoved — utterly unresponsive. That night he had a dream. He saw in a vision God coming to him in his filth and washing him clean. He awoke to the realisation of his bestial condition. He rushed out ashamed and in despair. Soon he heard singing. "That's 'arrison's Mission" he said to himself, and joined the open-air meeting. Then and there he knelt down on the flags and gave his heart to God. Imagine with what feeling he sang:

"In loving-kindness Jesus came
My soul in mercy to reclaim,
And from the depths of sin and shame
Through grace He lifted me.
He called me long before I heard
Before my sinful heart was stirred;
But when I took Him at His word,
Forgiven He lifted me.
From sinking sand He lifted me,
With tender hand He lifted me,
From shades of night to plains of light,
Oh praise His name, He lifted me."

There was no more wife-beating; no more wages spent on drink and on meat for whippet dogs and the bones given to the wife to make soup for the family.

Sometimes the doctor would send patients to Father as he felt only God could give them the help and healing they needed. It all took its toll, but when God called my Father never failed to respond.

A True Help Mate

All this could never have happened without Mother's whole-hearted cooperation. She was always a steadying and enriching influence, supporting and encouraging in times of special difficulty. Though she had a home to care for and three little children, she played a worthy part in winning others for Christ. Whilst at Wigan a son was born to her, but, like her first born, he died of pneumonia. When he was still a baby Mother would take him in his pram to meet the women as they came out of their Monday meeting and chat with them and help them with their problems. She was never too busy to welcome them to our home if they were in special need, and always they went away with new heart and hope, trusting that God would see them through. At one time an alcoholic came regularly when the urge for strong drink was almost irresistible. Mother gave her tea and company and counsel. She never kept us children away from her as she felt we might be able to help her. After much prayer and patience and perseverance on the part of my mother the woman gave up strong drink altogether, and when we left she gave each of us children a copy of the Bible.

Ours was a home of mutual love and helpfulness, a home of prayer. On one occasion during family prayer, prayer was being offered for each of us in turn. When the turn of my younger sister came she piped up "and send her a dolly and some skittles" — Father was telling this incident to his class members during the week and one of them said, "Bless her! I'll see that that child's prayer is answered." She bought a dolly and she bought some skittles and my sister believed they had come to her directly from the hands of God.

Yes, prayer was real in our home and Sunday a special day. We went to

Sunday School both morning and afternoon as well as to the services and found nothing irksome about it all. Indeed they were happy days, and I shall ever be grateful to my mother for preparing us for Sunday School whilst Father was busy with his God-given task.

“Come ye apart and rest awhile”

God has so made us that we need rest from time to time amid the doing of His work.

The time came when Father had a nervous break-down. The doctor ordered three months’ complete rest. We went as a family to my grandfather’s cottage home in the village of Darley in Yorkshire. During those three months we children went to Sunday School and took part in the Anniversary. On our return to Wigan the Brass Band was out to welcome us. More hard work awaited my parents, until after seven years the time came for us to move. It is hard to realize all that had been accomplished in those seven years. The railway platform was crowded when we boarded the train and said our goodbyes. Many of the people who had found God through my Father’s ministry were heart-broken and in tears — “Will they be crying when we get to Sunderland?” said one of my sisters, “because if they are I don’t want to go.” — The train pulled slowly out to the singing of “God be with you till we meet again.”

Bi-centenary

“The old order changeth yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways.”

After my father left Wigan for Sunderland the work continued through the years — less spectacular, but just as truly *His* — years of faithful service owned and used by God.

In 1958 I was invited to take the services on Women’s Sunday. At the afternoon service I read, amid tense silence, a letter from my mother. The place was alive with memories.

Memorial Chapel

Next year, 1959, it was my privilege to open the Memorial Chapel, a

beautiful chapel built "To the glory of God and in loving memory of the fallen in the Wars of this Century, and all the Communion of Saints, who, having been one with us down the years have now finished their course and entered into the joy of their Lord."

At the public Meeting in the evening I was the speaker and chose as my text "Forgetting the things that are behind — I press on." A telegram was sent to Mother from that service which read:

"The congregation at the opening of the Memorial Chapel, Queen's Hall, send you loving greetings and rejoice with you in the many memories we share of God's redeeming grace. God bless and keep you."

R. Keen

Rev. Richard Keen was then superintendent of the Mission. Within twelve months the whole thing had been carried through. There were no special efforts, merely freewill offerings and sacrificial giving. Some forfeited a week of their holidays and gave the money thus saved.

Between the afternoon service and evening rally there was an exhibition in the Lower Hall where press reports could be read and old hymn sheets. There were class books there, bazaar and concert programmes, a list of brick layers, record of conversions, band instruments and photographs galore.

In 1973 there was a Flower Festival in the Hall representing the history of the Mission in flower arrangements by the Wigan Floral Art Club.

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This is not merely a story but a *call from God*.

No achievements of the past can take from us our task for today. Ours is a great heritage and a great heritage brings grave responsibilities. If we don't in this our day be the most we can be, we go back on all that life behind us, go back on the dreaming and the daring, the faith and sacrifice of nearly 100 years. There are glorious days ahead if we care to *make* them glorious. God's in His Heaven still. With faith in Him we need not look

back upon former days wistfully and wail the impossibility of things today. We face our own task and take up our own burden of responsibility with hope and confidence and self-respect.

Our task

And what a task *is* ours! We are living in a restless troubled world — a world torn by racial tensions, a selfish world where millions are hungry and homeless and illiterate, a world afraid where none may walk in happy safety, a world full of suspicion and distrust and hatred and strife.

But the world is still in the hands of God and His love will never let go. And the church is still His instrument for helping the lonely and the outcast and redeeming the lost. God can use us mightily in this our day when we are His unconditionally.

Can we pledge ourselves anew in the words of St. Augustine:

To my fellowmen	— a heart of love
To my God	— a heart of flame
To myself	— a heart of steel

* * * * *

This booklet would not be complete without Rev. Richard Keen's comments in the *Methodist Recorder* in 1960. He has very kindly given me permission to print them as an epilogue to the story of the "Wigan Miracles".

He writes:

"I owe someone an apology. Indeed I have 2,249 reasons for apologising. It happened this way. We decided that when we opened the

Memorial Chapel in the heart of our Central Hall we should hold at the same time an exhibition of our Mission's history across our first half century. We scoured the building. Every corner and cranny were searched. Storage spots that had not been disturbed for many a year were penetrated and swept, and indeed our seeking not only provided us with our exhibition material, but also gave us an excellent spring clean.

No one seemed to remember the existence of the book. But there it was tucked away on a back shelf. Just an ordinary exercise book that probably cost a very few coppers in 1904. On the outside was the title — "Converts Register 1904–1907".

I heard my congregation speak of the Wigan Miracles, of the great early days of the Mission when, under the leadership of the Rev. W. A. Harrison, wonderful things had happened week after week. But I had taken them with more than a pinch of salt. Every church of which I have been minister has been full to the doors — fifty years before my time, and, forgive me, sometimes I have wondered was it really so? Is not exaggeration one of the commonest of the Christian's sins?

Furthermore I had argued, if there were such happenings, it was probably all froth and bubble and very much on the surface. What was the good of seeing a response to the appeal week after week unless they were followed up and the converts were shepherded into the fellowship?

Thus reasoning I opened up the exercise book. It was crammed from cover to cover with the names of 2,249 converts from September 18th 1904 to August 18th 1907. And to think I had doubted the "follow up" work! Here were 2,249 names annotated under the following headings:

Number

Date

Name

Address

Description (i.e. man or woman, old or young)

Inquiry Room Report

Visitor's Report

Later Report

The honesty of the register was most refreshing. If the convert relapsed

the same night, they said so. If he seemed unstable they said so. There is indeed an economy in the comments of the visitors' reports that seem to underline the honesty. Elizabeth and Ellen were two sisters who came out together one Sunday; but the visitor, having called at their home, laconically reports — "Beggars". Of a certain William the visitor reports — "Unsatisfactory. Wants to be in the band." If they attended elsewhere that was the end of it, and there was no "Later Report," for this was not sheep stealing. But again and again the register states "Joined the Mission" and, better still, "Joined such and such a class." Rarely does the miracle of it all break through the restrained writing, but, occasionally the scribe cannot forbear and we read of Florence, "invited to Thursday class — Alleluia!" and of October 23rd, 1904, when eleven responded to the appeal, there is the comment "Grand day!" But soon eleven was to be a very small number and on November 19th, 1905, thirty-six names are recorded and this was a typical Sunday's catch.

This was, however, no mere Sunday activity. It is true that week after week as they packed the Hippodrome Theatre where the services were held prior to the building of the Central Hall, conversions took place. They could no more imagine going to an evening service without conversions that we can imagine going to a service without a collection! But as the classes became established, and as the Mission's out-going work developed, conversions took place so often on the week-days too. Imagine the thrill in the Mission in mid August, 1906, when conversions are recorded on the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 18th and 19th.

They did not just expect miracles to happen. They went out into the streets, the lodging houses, the pubs and the homes, and dragged in the raw material ready for God to do His work. In these days when some seem doubtful of the place of the Central Mission in modern Methodism we do well to remember that what was happening in Wigan was only typical of God's activity in all the large industrial centres where our Missions were being established.

Be cynical if you will, tell me that it did not last, remind me that many equated being saved from drink with being saved for Christ, say that it was but ephemeral emotionalism, but would that all our churches today

felt the need for such a register! Would that we were all going to church next Sunday expecting such things to happen, and would that we would know what to do in the Inquiry Rooms afterwards!

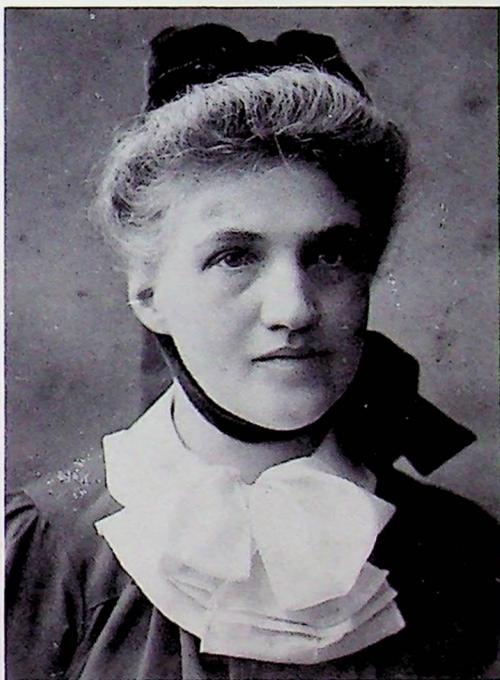
Did you ask where the Wigan Miracles are now? Many are in heaven, but I know where the grandson and grand-daughter of one of them are. The grandson is teaching in a Christian college in Ghana, and the grand-daughter is the wife of one of our missionaries in French West Africa. Would they have been there if one Saturday night early this century God had not compelled a man from the street to the foot of the Cross?

To God be the glory.

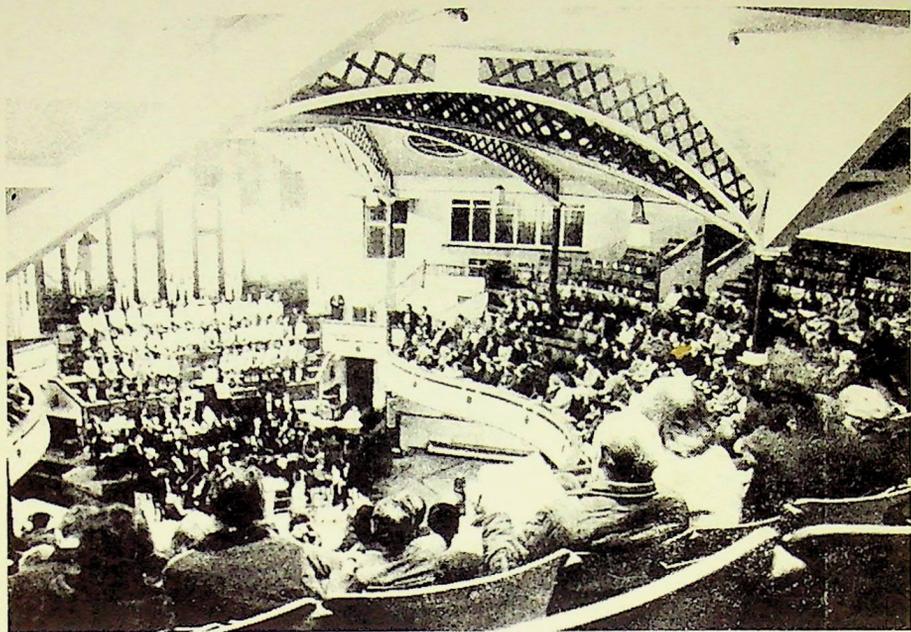
Richard Keen



The Hippodrome Theatre, Wigan.



Sister Florence Thornton.



A corner of Queen's Hall.



Rev. and Mrs W. A. Harrison and daughters Margaret, Connie and Muriel.