
Two Hundred Years
of
Methodism in Wigan

Anyone who proposes to unravel the history of Methodism in Wigan owes a great debt to the researches of the Rev. C. Deane Little, who was one of our Circuit ministers in the early nineteen thirties. He patiently and carefully extracted a great deal of information from a variety of sources, some of which are no longer available. We acknowledge our debt to his industry and scholarship which has provided much of the material used in this account of our Methodist forbears. We also wish to thank the staff of the Methodist Archives and Research Centre in London and of the Metropolitan Record Office at Leigh.

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FOREWORD

Let me commend this booklet—"Two Hundred Years of Methodism in Wigan" to you. It is an excellent publication and we are deeply indebted to Mr. H. E. Thomas, B.A., affectionally known to us all as Bert Thomas, one of our tireless local preachers and Circuit Secretary, for the many, many hours of searching and investigating amongst the archives of Wigan Methodism to enable us to enjoy the reading of our own local Methodist history.

Who can measure the influence Methodism has had on Wigan during those 200 years? Amid all the other changes that have taken place from the Penny Farthing Bicycle to the Rocket on the Moon, Methodism has remained much the same because it has been dealing with the diverse minds of men which are always the same.

We are grateful to God for our Methodism and can best celebrate the past by rededicating ourselves to the present and the future.

With every Blessing,

Yours sincerely,

CLIFFORD W. CHESWORTH,
Superintendent Minister, 1976.

Eighteenth Century Wigan

The rise of Methodism in and around Wigan occurred during a period when far reaching changes in people's lives and work were taking place. South Lancashire was beginning to change from a thinly populated, little developed region to a busy manufacturing area producing coal, iron, textiles and machinery; developing canals, roads and railways; teeming with people and beset with many problems arising from rapid changes and conditions not previously experienced. Wigan was an important centre of these events and early Methodism in the town grew up with the industrial revolution.

When John Wesley first rode into Wigan in 1764 he came from Ince to Scholes, crossed the Douglas by a narrow bridge near an old water mill and climbed the hill up Millgate passing a coal pit where the College of Technology now stands. He turned left along the Wiend, a narrow winding street crowded with small shops and offices, to enter the Market Place. The town of those days straggled along the main road from Wigan Lane to Newtown, with another section following the Manchester Road along Scholes. A more select quarter of the town lay in Hallgate, behind the parish church. A great many of the people lived in cramped yards, closes, folds and rows, adjacent to the main road. Many of these, such as Marsh Lane, New Square, Little London and the Folly are well remembered by older citizens, having been demolished in the last thirty years or so. There was, of course, no electricity, no gas until 1823, drainage and water supply were haphazard and the fastest means of travel was by coach or on horseback. However the main Warrington-Preston road had been improved by a Turnpike Trust, and after 1760 a stagecoach undertook to convey passengers from Liverpool to Manchester in a single day.

The chief occupation of the folk who watched John Wesley ride into Wigan was coal mining, when women and children shared the hard work and danger; while in the cottages people toiled at spinning and hand loom weaving. A traveller of 1772 refers to the production of woollen blankets, checks, rugs and coverlets, fustians and calico. Among other crafts carried on in Wigan were bell founding, pewter work and clockmaking. For the textile workers great changes were imminent, the old spinning wheel was to be replaced by the machines invented by Hargreaves, Arkwright and Crompton. Cartwright's power loom and the use of steam engines meant that the old cottage industry was swallowed up in the growth of new factories. The Princess mill was the first to appear in Wigan in the 1780's, as others followed the town grew in size, but by later standards life must have been cruel and frequently short.

The First Methodists

The Rev. Deane Little maintains that our first known Wigan Methodist was William Langshaw who, about 1753 made the acquaintance of a devout cobbler whose praying so moved him that he began a Sunday habit of leaving Wigan at 4-00 a.m. in order to walk to Manchester, arriving at a chapel at Birchin Lane for a service beginning at 9 o'clock. Near Bolton he would meet a friend named George Escrick and these two would hide their clogs in a wood at Pendleton, where they put on the shoes they had carried, so as to arrive at the service looking like gentlemen. They remained for afternoon service and then walked home. With such enthusiasts as leaders it is quite understandable that meetings were soon being held in Bolton and later in Wigan. On 13th July 1764 John Wesley made his visit to the town and records in his journal:

'At ten I began to preach at Wigan, proverbially famous for its wickedness. As I preached abroad (out-of-doors) we expected some disturbance. But there was none at all. A few were wild at first, but in a little while grew quiet and attentive. I did not find such a civil congregation for the first time I visited Bolton!'

A few years later Wesley came again and the meeting was held in a room over an old playhouse in the Wiend. This building was later an iron warehouse for Messrs. Park and Co. and was demolished a few years ago. There the first Methodists met, they welcomed any travelling preacher who could come from Liverpool or Manchester and began to spread their faith and enthusiasm to nearby towns such as Aspull and Lamberhead Green. We know just a few of their names including that of one lady, Betty Brown of Cinnamon Row, Standishgate, who was held in such esteem that when she died in 1781 John Wesley hastened from Warrington to preach her funeral sermon.

Before long an ambitious scheme was put forward, they would build a meeting house of their own. It would be a costly enterprise, but William Longshaw offered £50 as did a local banker and goldsmith named Thomas Doncaster. Other friends subscribed as generously as they could and brought the total to £150 which, sadly, was quite insufficient for the project. But help was at hand in the shape of a young local preacher named Samuel Bradburn. The hour brought forth the man whom we must recognise as a remarkable character and one who made a great contribution to early Methodism not only in Wigan but through the whole country.

Samuel Bradburn, who later entered the ministry and won a great reputation as a preacher, became President of Conference in 1799. He

kept a journal which is still preserved in the Methodist Archives Centre in London and is a fascinating document giving glimpses of the author, his times and the people of his day. He tells how, on 1st January 1774 being then twenty two years old, and having been a local preacher for less than a year, he left his home in Wrexham and journeyed to Liverpool where he stayed with friends. Among these was a travelling preacher, John Morgan, who, because he was sick asked Bradburn to deputise for him in an area extending from Liverpool to Bolton and into Cheshire. Bradburn agreed and on Wednesday, January 5th made his first visit to Wigan where he preached from Numbers ch. 23 v. 10 probably in the room over the old playhouse in the Wiend. He served the area especially around Wigan and Bolton for a few months, and on April 4th at Manchester was introduced as a preacher to John Wesley, to whose sermons he listened intently during the next few weeks. His journal now tells of a decision of great importance:

'31st May, 1774—Wigan—When I came here to supply for Mr. Morgan I had no thoughts but of returning home when I had been the circuit one round, but meeting with so many kind friends who requested me to spend some time with them, and as I had nothing to hinder me and there being a prospect of doing good, I consented, and have continued chiefly here, and at Bolton and the adjacent places, ever since. When Mr. Wesley was here in April, it was agreed that a Preaching-house should be built without delay, as there was a considerable revival of the work of God. But as the subscriptions were not sufficient to defray the costs Mr. William Langshaw (who subscribed £50 himself) proposed to go through the principal Towns to London, and return another way to beg assistance of our Brethren, if I would like to go with him. This appears to me a great undertaking but it seems a providential call, and I have agreed to go. Next week we begin our journey . . .'

A Great Enterprise

On June 5th, Bradburn's morning text in Wigan was 'I will go in the strength of the Lord' and next day, carrying a letter of recommendation from John Wesley the travellers made the first stage of their journey by riding to Bolton. They continued by way of Manchester, Castleton, where their inn was 'a wretched place', Sheffield, Rotherham, Derby, Nottingham, Loughborough, Northampton and Barnet, reaching London on June 22nd. Bradburn preached twenty sermons during this month and was quite happy with the success of his mission and with the generous and friendly spirit of so many new friends.

July found him a little depressed however. He needed time for quiet and meditation and appears to think that too much company

distracted him. Then he fell seriously ill. In spite of suffering from headache and fever he preached at Westminster on July 17th but had trouble in getting back to his lodging. For two weeks he was desperately ill with a fever, but cared for by his friends, he gradually recovered and by mid August was again preaching every day and collecting money. The latter task he found distasteful but accepted it as a duty. While in London he was accepted as a regular Travelling Preacher and appointed to the Liverpool Circuit.

In September the two friends, riding by way of Oxford, Worcester and Birmingham returned to Wigan exhausted in mind and body but with their task accomplished. The sheer physical endurance of this enterprise is quite remarkable especially when one considers they often rode over thirty miles of rough road in a day, there was inevitable hostility in certain places, and the astonishing fact that in the space of about one year Bradburn preached about five hundred sermons.

Plans for the new chapel could now proceed. A piece of land adjoining the Parish Church which is now partially occupied by the National Coal Board offices fronting on King St. West was bought for £70. The approach was from Wallgate through the 'Buck i'th'Vine' yard. Presumably the inn of that name occupied the site where the Clarence Hotel now stands. Here building commenced on the new chapel with a two storey vestry, and the ever optimistic workers invited John Wesley to open the building on 25th July, 1775. Alas, a disappointment was in store. Shortage of cash caused a delay in the building and when the great day arrived the chapel was incomplete and roofless. Nevertheless Wesley, by now some seventy two years of age, preached to the people undeterred by 'an impetuous storm of thunder, lightning and rain which added much to the solemnity of the occasion'. The following year on 15th April 1776 Wesley came again to Wigan and preached in the now completed chapel to 'a very quiet and dull congregation'. Perhaps they were weary after their great labours.

An Early Sunday School

The Wiganers did not long remain quiet and dull. Another great venture was before them, the founding of one of the first Sunday Schools in the country.

Sunday Schools were a response to the appalling social conditions of many towns in the late eighteenth century. The growing population crowded into dirty, unhealthy yards and side streets and conditions which had been tolerated in the scattered cottages of a small village produced squalor and degradation when transferred to the industrial town. The children suffered heavily, there were no laws to protect them from exploitation and compulsory education was still a century away.

So in many towns and cities the brief years of childhood were spent in miserable conditions.

As ordinary schooling was out of the question for many children, Christians of various denominations tried to help the situation by opening Sunday Schools. The best known pioneer of the movement was Robert Raikes of Gloucester who opened a Sunday School in 1780, and it was only three years later when Samuel Baldwin, a pewter worker who was a member of the Methodist Society at the new Wigan Chapel, took the lead in setting up a Sunday School there. The example was followed in other parts of the district and a famous Sunday School was founded at Ridgeways in Bolton in 1785. The work was a combination of religion and charity. The principal need was to teach reading and the Bible was used as a textbook. The influence of these schools was deep and far reaching and is a wonderful tribute to the vision, hard work and practical ability of those early teachers.

Sunday School Anniversaries became great occasions, relations and visitors swelled the congregations and the services of noted preachers were eagerly sought for the great date, which provided the school's income for the year.

Times of Trial

The years following the death of John Wesley in 1791 were critical for Methodism. It was inevitable that the removal of his powerful and unifying influence would allow differences of opinion to come to the surface. Wigan did not escape these troubles and there was a period from 1794 to 1808 when the church was divided. Richard Condy, sent a minister by Conference, was not accepted by the newly formed Wigan Circuit and first one party then another had control of the premises. At one time the members were reduced to a mere handful and regular services were not possible. However there was still a hunger for the Gospel in Wigan and in outlying parts such as Lamberhead Green, Aspall and Hindley. The Sunday School also appears to have survived throughout this difficult period and in 1802 the Rev. James Wood, Chairman of the Liverpool district came to conduct the Sunday School Anniversary and later was able to send to Wigan a young man named William McKitrick. He came by Canal Packet from Liverpool to Wigan in February 1803 and going to Lamberhead Green on Sunday morning preached there to hand loom weavers and miners ' . . . a motley congregation, many a woman with a shawl wrapped round her head and a child on her bosom, and the men were nondescript in appearance. However I felt my whole soul drawn to them' wrote the preacher. These people had had no services for a long time and were called to this unexpected occasion by ringing the bell for twenty minutes.

McKitrick preached in Wigan in the evening and later did much good work both here and in his succeeding fifty five years in the ministry. Another notable figure at this time was William Atherton who entered the ministry from Lamberhead Green in 1797. He opened Standishgate Chapel in 1845 and the following year was President of Conference. He was commemorated in the 'Atherton' Wesleyan School in Lamberhead Green.

It is understandable that McKitrick described his Lamberhead Green congregation as looking poor and nondescript. The country was in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars. The introduction of new machines for spinning and weaving often caused hardship among the workers and wages were going down. Parliament's 'Combination Acts' of 1799 and 1800 made it a punishable offence for people to try to improve their wages or conditions of labour by banding together in a society and Trade Unions only became legal in 1824.

In spite of problems the church struggled and made progress. In 1812 Wigan was removed from the Leigh Circuit and regained Circuit Status. In that year the Rev. Sam Taylor of Bolton preached at the Sunday School anniversary. The children expressed a poignant appeal for a good collection in the words of their hymn

'Friends of the poor, to you
We look with weeping eyes
In hope compassion you will show
And help our miseries.'

To which the congregation responded

'Children your artless prayer
Affects the feeling mind;
And while we drop for you a tear
To you we will be kind.'

The Sunday School superintendent at the time was a cotton spinner named Thomas Hardman who became Mayor of Wigan in 1826 and 1828. By 1830 the School had a regular attendance of over 300 scholars. Other schools must have been flourishing also as we know from a handbill referring to the Coronation of William IV in 1831 that a great procession was held including scholars from Wesleyan and Independent Methodists Schools, the Parish Church, St. George's, two Baptist Schools, Hope Chapel, St. Paul's Independent and St. John's and St. Mary's Catholic Schools and others. The children assembled at their schools at half past seven in the morning and sent a flag and a written note of their exact number to the Mesnes. There they gathered at 9 a.m. to sing hymns before joining a bigger procession which left the Market Place at 11 a.m. to walk round Wallgate, Queen St., Chapel Lane,

Scholes, Wellington St., Millgate, Wigan Lanc, Freckleton St., and back to the Market Place. To us this looks like a very hard day.

Standishgate

Towards the end of the eighteen thirties it was decided to build a new Chapel and Sunday School and a few years of intense activity followed. William Yeomans, who had come to Wigan from Derby and had a grocer's shop in Wallgate near the chapel was one of the Sunday School Superintendents. He began the building fund 1839 by collecting £2-5-10, timing his appeal to take advantage of the distribution of the surplus funds by a Sickness Society. This type of mutual help society met an important need in those days when the Poor Law system could not cope with the problems of sickness and unemployment in the growing industrial towns. There must have been many in our congregations who were experiencing hard times in those days. The early eighteen forties brought depression to the cotton trade and a series of bad harvests meant great hardship. Bread rose to one shilling and two pence for a four pound loaf, sugar was sevenpence or eightpence a pound and tea was about sixpence an ounce. To realise the significance of these prices one should understand that many workers had a wage of about ten shillings a week, while a skilled man might work a week of sixty four hours for £1. Those who had no work were a great deal worse off. So the fact that big chapel occasions such as Sunday School anniversaries produced collections of about £10 is quite understandable. We have a sidelight on the events of the day when we learn that one of our Sunday School teachers, John Latchford, 'a good and well-dispositioned fellow was involved in Chartist trouble in Leigh and was imprisoned for six months. In 1846 the repeal of the Corn Laws which had kept bread at famine prices was a welcome reform, and a gradual improvement in trade marked the beginning of better times.

William Yeomans deposited his £2.5.10d. in the Trustee Savings Bank and the business of building up the fund for the new chapel began. The old Trustees Minute Book of 1844, preserved in the Metropolitan Record Office at Leigh, has pages of beautiful copperplate handwriting giving a list of subscribers. Some of the donations indicate great generosity by many people whose names were closely linked with Wigan Methodism. The Meek family were leaders in this respect. Joseph Meek, the Circuit Steward, was a draper and many Wiganers will remember when the family business was carried on at Meek's Cellars in Wallgate in premises now occupied by Barnes' Bookshop. It was a numerous family and several members, after starting in the drapery business, achieved distinction in other fields. George and Joseph Meek each gave £500 to the building fund, when a new shop was opened at Preston the

day's takings were donated. Other members of the family in Macclesfield and York, where James Meek was Lord Mayor, added their contributions. Half a dozen other people gave £100 each. They included William Melling, an ironmaster from Haigh, and William Altham, a grocer originally hailing from Clitheroe who was an enthusiastic worker. He played his violin in 'the fiddlers' pew' in the Wallgate chapel and was Sunday School secretary as well as holding other offices. It was in Altham's shop that the building committee used to meet every Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock and week after week the minutes reported that 'the building was proceeding satisfactorily'. A subscription for £10 came from Robert Daglish a one time Sunday School Treasurer. He was a notable engineer who in 1811 introduced the first locomotive to Wigan. It was a Blenkinsop rack rail type of engine which was used to haul coal from the pit head to the barges on the Douglas. This was some twenty years before Stephenson's famous Rocket was built for the Rainhill trials which preceded the construction of the Liverpool to Manchester Railway. Robert's son George Daglish, J.P., was also a worker in our Sunday School.

The subscribers' list includes A. F. Halliburton, Esq., of Whitley Hall £2, Lady Clayton of the Larches £2 who may have been friends rather than members of the church. Sixty four people raised £1 each and no doubt some stories of effort and sacrifice are concealed there, and so the list winds up with humble contributions of 3 pence. Special collecting cards swelled the total and the enthusiastic Willam Yeomans offered to add one shilling to every four shillings raised by his collectors.

The land for the new chapel was purchased from C. Scarisbrick, Esq., at a cost of £950 and Mr. Hanson the builder was paid £3,209.4.1d. The foundation stone was laid on 14th August 1844 and the opening services took place the following June.

The President of Conference, Dr. Bunting, preached in the old chapel on 9th March 1845 when collections were £80.8.9d. The following amounts were collected at the opening services at Standishgate:

June 25th	Rev. W. Atherton	£111.16.10d.
	30th Revs. Hannah, Payne & Everett	£166.12.11d.
July 6th	Revs. McDonald and Inglis	£118. 3. 0d.
	8th Rev. Dr. Raffles	£ 65.17. 9d.
	14th Rev. Dr. Newton	£190.19. 8½d.

Considering the conditions of the times these sums of money represent a very high level of effort and generosity even allowing for the fact that by this time many shopkeepers, small manufacturers and prominent citizens were numbered among the early Methodists.

It was reported in connection with the preparation for the new chapel that there were 150 members in the society, but the average number of hearers was 300. The other churches in Wigan were 3 Episcopalian, 2 Roman Catholic, 3 Independents, 1 Baptist, 1 Presbyterian, 1 Independent Methodist and a New Jerusalem church room. Their total accommodation was 9,150 sittings. By this time the population of the town had grown to 25,000.

Dissention

The general satisfaction at the opening of the new chapel was gradually overshadowed by disputes arising from the characteristic Methodist passion for independence and self determination. There were divided opinions about the building of a day school and some members regarded Conference as acting in an arbitrary fashion. The dispute culminated in September 1856 when a number of teachers, secretaries and workers in the Sunday School were dismissed from their offices and denied admission to the School which at that time catered for some 900 children. A group of 300 or 400 scholars and teachers marched away in procession singing "O for a thousand tongues to sing", and held a service in the public hall in King St., conducted by Mr. William Fogg. This was the origin of the Methodist Free Church. The Albion Inn in Millgate was purchased for a site for a new chapel, but was later sold. A position in Harrogate Street was considered but eventually in 1868 the King Street building, many of us remember, was erected. Among the leaders of the new church were the Melling family, well known local ironmaster, Amos Jacques, John and James Makinson and John Dainty. The King St. society was eventually reunited with Standishgate but the chapel was in use for about a hundred years.

Centenary Celebrations

By 1864 the Methodists in Wigan regarded their cause as a hundred years old, dating it from the first visit of John Wesley on 13th July, 1764. They held great celebrations and aimed at extinguishing all chapel debts in the circuit, which amounted to £3,186. Services began with a prayer meeting at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 13th July, 1864 and continued with enthusiastic meetings throughout the week. Former Circuit Ministers from far and near attended. A procession of witness was held on Saturday and on July 17th the Chairman of the District preached at 10-30 a.m. and at 6 p.m. with a circuit love feast in the afternoon. Leading officers of the church included such veterans of earlier struggles as Joseph Meek and William Altham, while such names as Henry Farr and Richard Christopher, more familiar to a later generation, also appear among the workers. A Society Steward

and Sunday School Secretary in 1864 was Abraham Lloyd who had a chemical works in Standish Lower Ground. He removed to Manchester and thirty years later became Lord Mayor of that city.

At this time the Sunday School had a branch in Burn's Yard in Scholes, where a favourite visiting preacher was Isaac Marsden a noted evangelist who pursued this calling as he travelled about the north of England on his work as a woollen draper. Soon afterwards there arrived in Wigan Thomas Holker, Thomas Dawson of Leck, and Oates and George Rushton of Bingley, all of whom worked for many years at Standishgate.

The Wesleyan Day School

During this period Methodism was making a great contribution to the life of Wigan through the work of the day school. Its foundation had been proposed in the last Quarterly Meeting in the old chapel on 31st March 1845. A collection in the following November raised £20 'towards the expenses of the outfit for the Day School' which began as an Infants' School in the vestries of the new chapel. The first teacher was Ann Siddell a young Methodist cotton worker who had lost a hand in a machine accident. After teaching for some ten years she was able, through the help of William Melling, J.P., and others, to go for training to Westminster College after which she returned to the work in Wigan. One of her early pupils was William Melling's son Samuel, who walked from his home in Brockmill Lane, and whom many of us remember as a formidable old man with a white beard attending services at Standishgate about forty years ago. He was then the senior Borough Magistrate.

The day school soon outgrew its premises and plans were made for a new building, though not without opposition from some members who feared that if they accepted a government grant for the building it would mean loss of independence. However the site in Dicconson Street was purchased from Lord Skelmersdale for £421. The foundation stone was laid on 30th May, 1855 and in the following January 700 people were present at the opening ceremony tea. The building was basically the one many of us attended, only the upstairs classroom on the Brick Kiln Lane side were built over the infants room in 1883. The little house adjoining was occupied by the minister or the headmaster and after 1902 by the caretaker.

The Meek family were again well to the fore in working for the new school, subscribing £600 towards the £1900 which was raised locally. The Wesleyan Education Committee gave £70 and the government grant was £1644. Joseph Meek became quite an authority on the

business of establishing and managing schools, his advice was sought by Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy. He helped to found Wesleyan Day Schools at Lamberhead Green, Hindley, Aspull, Platt Bridge and Newtown and was a prominent citizen of Wigan until his death in 1885. During his later years he was crippled with rheumatism but still came to services at Standishgate where he sat in a wheel chair.

In the eighteen sixties teachers were nearly all untrained and badly paid and often had to eke out a living by turning to other work as weavers, farmers, clerks or shopkeepers. Standishgate was more progressive than most in these matters, some ladies of the church helped the girls with sewing and knitting and one Mrs. Gardner conducted an evening class in 'various branches of domestic economy'. In 1869 a notable headmaster, Thomas Wainwright, took charge of the school and over the next twenty six years built up a great reputation which brought in many new scholars. Inspectors frequently praised the high standards achieved and the number of children on roll rose towards six hundred. Where did they put them all? The good work was continued by a series of very capable head teachers whose names are familiar. W. O. Fillingham, T. W. Wormall and A. Cowling were in charge until 1927 when, with changing educational ideas the children over eleven years old were transferred to Senior Schools and Miss N. Latham became head of the surviving Junior and Infant school. She was succeeded by Miss B. L. Moorfield and Miss Wilcock. Although the premises were acknowledged to be hopelessly inadequate such was the reputation of the school that there was a continuing demand for places by Methodists and others both in the town and further afield right until its final closure in January 1967.

The Wigan Circuit

The end of the Victorian era saw great activity in Wigan and the surrounding district. It was a great era of building and many of the old chapels, dismal and unimpressive places were replaced by new and attractive modern structures. In almost every case it is a story of great effort and sacrificial giving which enabled societies made up of working class people to collect the hundreds or thousands of pounds needed for the new premises.

In Standish, where the Methodists had since 1854 been using an old Quaker meeting house in a backyard they opened the new High St. chapel in 1898. Twelve years of effort had raised nearly all the £3,295 which the building cost. Two years later a chapel of similar design was erected at Blackrod, replacing one which had been used since 1816. In each case the men of the congregations worked in their spare time to dig out the first excavations before foundations were

laid and each Saturday the ladies provided them with a substantial tea in the Schoolroom. About the same time a small chapel was built at Appley Bridge, the land being secured by the friendly help of the Roman Catholic priest, Father Melling, who intervened when one of his flock was unwilling to sell land for a Methodist venture.

On the south east side of the town the population was increasing rapidly and Methodism must have been well established also, for fine new chapels were built at Hindley and Platt Bridge. Both places and large Sunday schools and day schools and made considerable contributions to the life of drab industrial areas.

The circuit chapel at Standishgate was also feeling the necessity for extended premises to accommodate meetings of the Wesley Guild, Men's Bible Class and social gatherings. So additional land was bought and the Wesley Hall was opened in 1903 new vestries were added and some alterations made to the interior of the church. Electric lighting was installed and a fine new organ was bought, then the building was redecorated at a total cost of £5,000. At this time Standishgate enjoyed a wide reputation for the quality of its musical service. Its organists included Richard Moss, A.R.C.O., Harold M. Dawber, F.R.C.O., Henry Reed, Mus.Doc. and Albert Knight, A.R.C.O. Some of these men achieved national reputation in music and established a tradition which has been worthily maintained up to our own time.

Perhaps we should consider these early years of the twentieth century as the heyday of Wigan Methodism as another of our ventures reached fruition at that time in the opening of the mission at Queen's Hall. Since 1882 Mr. & Mrs. Dawson, Mr. & Mrs. Fearn, William Harrison and A. Critchley had worked to form a tiny branch Sunday school in Scholes. They met first in Harrison's front room and later in a wood cabin. The work grew so quickly that eventually the leaders including T. Walker, S. Melling and W. R. Deakin took a controversial step by renting the Wigan Hippodrome for their Sunday meetings, at a cost of £7 a week. This was so successful that by 1907 a new centre, the Queen's Hall in Market Street, was built. A great deal of evangelical work was carried on in the mission and out of doors. Temperance was one of the great themes, and this was important as drunkenness had long been a tremendous social evil in the squalid areas of the industrial towns such as Wigan. Many lives were changed and many families were happier because of the work based on Queen's Hall. The story is recorded of a ragged drunkard who was converted at one of the Hippodrome meetings and immediately appointed himself as steward at the front door to urge all and sundry to share his experience. The stewards, rather embarrassed, tactfully found him a job to do where

he was less in the public eye. He was not to be discouraged however, and in a few weeks contrived to obtain clean and smart clothing, and again presented himself, asking "Now, sir, will I do for the front door?" He became a respected and valued member of the mission. This man's story illustrates the work done there, he was an illegitimate child, born in a workhouse, abandoned by his mother living all his life in squalid lodging houses and unlikely to be reached by the more traditional churches. Many such converts each subscribed 7/6, the price of a tip up chair, when the mission was opened.

Difficult Days

In the period following 1918 the expansion of earlier days could not be maintained. The years between the wars saw a gradual decline in the influence of churches generally. Social habits changed and fewer people were regular attenders. It became difficult for some smaller churches to pay their way and the burden on stronger causes was very heavy. The union of the three branches of the Methodist church, Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist was officially brought about in 1932, but few people wanted to see their own church closed in a programme of rationalisation so they carried on as before. In addition, the economic depression of the twenties and thirties followed by the war years added to the problems in industrial areas such as Wigan.

In difficult days Standishgate showed a wonderful resilience and in 1945 celebrated its centenary with a great series of services and meetings, including a procession of witness from the Buck i'the'Vine site to Standishgate. It was led by two of our great Methodists, Mr. R. Haydn Griffiths and the late Mr. Harry Hughes, riding on horseback and wearing the eighteenth century dress of our founders. In the 1950's, the Women's Fellowship, the Sunday School and Youth Club and the Tennis Club all gave enthusiastic support to the work of the church, meeting the questions and problems of the post-war era.

Whitley

The most important event of recent years was, of course the move from Standishgate to Whitley, a decision taken after a great deal of questioning and heart searching. Like many other churches in the centre of industrial towns Standishgate was beset with many difficulties. The area had changed from residential to business property; few of the congregation now lived near the church. The faithful travelled into town for services, but it was difficult to maintain children's activities, especially on evenings during the week. The day school had been taken over by the Education Committee and subsequently closed while the steadily rising cost of heating, cleaning and maintaining a huge old building was a millstone around the neck of the society.

In 1969 it was decided to move our place of worship to an area nearer the homes of most of our people, and to build a smaller modern church. The Rev. Cyril Cornah gave himself enthusiastically to lead this venture. Some busy months followed when many sites were considered. Some were too small or otherwise unsuitable, others were too expensive and eventually the present site in Spencer Road was selected. Visits were made to Blackburn, St. Helens, Billinge and other towns to view new churches and consider which type of building might be most suitable for us. At length Messrs. Pierrepont and Son were commissioned to prepare plans for the Whitley Church and after many meetings and discussions these were adopted and Mr. James Gee of Pemberton was appointed chief contractor for the work. We were able to include in the building programme a new manse adjacent to the church, and the sale of the property at Standishgate fortunately provided sufficient funds for the new venture to be completed without incurring any debt.

When the first stage of the building, the recreation hall, was completed in November 1970 activities were immediately moved to Whitley and a visitation campaign of the area was carried out. From the first it appeared that the church could meet a need in this developing area. The new hall was regularly full for Sunday services and week night activities were carried on, in spite of crowding and incomplete amenities until the whole building was finished in October 1971. The activities which had gone on at Standishgate continued with renewed vigour and in addition it was not long before a flourishing playgroup, Brownies, Guides, Cubs and Youth Group, along with a growing Sunday School, were making good use of the new premises and accommodation was proving inadequate to meet all the requests which were made.

Today's church under the leadership of the Rev. C. W. Chesworth is active and flourishing. The leaders try to meet the needs of all age groups and a variety of interests, to offer a chance of active participation in the work to as many as can accept, and in all this to maintain and encourage in our community those Christian standards which are needed just as much today as they were when John Wesley first rode into Wigan.