

# Hetton-le-Hole Herald

The Newsletter for Hetton Local History Group

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## Information & Calendar

The talk this month is about the History of Churches in Hetton and Easington Lane. To complement this the following article is part of a book written in 1911 entitled "True Stories of Durham Pit -life" by George Parkinson of Sherburn. George was brought up and lived for some years of his working life in the village of Lambton, later known as New Lambton. This excerpt describes how Methodism was adopted in the villages and expanded during the early years of mining from 1830-1850. The chapels played an important part in village life and no doubt influenced many individuals over a number of decades.

## The Formation of the Chapels

The miner's lot around 1840 included very long hours of labour, with very short hours of rest. No standard of age was fixed for boys entering the pit, but they were sent to work as early as six or seven years of age; not as it sometimes alleged, from mere heartlessness on the part of the parents

but under the pressure of growing family needs, which were very keenly felt in my early years, owing to the long-continued low rate of wages and the high price of provisions. Nor was any legal time limit fixed for their dark and dreary toil, so that, irrespective of ages or circumstances, boys were generally called from bed at three o'clock in the morning. Meeting at the pit mouth at four, they descended into the regions of darkness, where for thirteen or fourteen hours a day— and often for more – they abode in gloom, made visible by the feeble flickering light of a small tallow candle, or the still feebler reflection of the wire shaded Davy Lamp. Though sunrise and sunset duly followed in the world they had left behind, no gleam of daylight nor ray of sunshine illuminated their path, save on Sundays, for six months of the year.

Thus the Sunday became the veritable jewel of the week, when the cares and miseries of the work-days vanished from memory, and the joys of family life, of sunlight, and of unwonted ease made a little Paradise. One particular Sunday morning stand out very vividly in my memory. I was then a little over nine years of age, and on the Saturday night, after the six days rising at three a.m. And returning at six p.m. I sat, tired and weary, drowsily nodding by the fireside, exceedingly comfortable, with my feet on the bright half of a wagon wheel which served as a fender. On retiring to bed, I was asleep in two or three minutes. About five in the morning I awoke, under the impression that I had been called on to go to work; but I could find no pit clothes laid in their usual place before the fire, which was glowing in the grate. I saw no preparations for work going on, and I was just growing peevish when, turning around, I saw my Sunday clothes laid on the chair beside the bed, with my stock-

ings on the top, all in order for putting on. It dawned upon me that the day was Sunday, and with feelings of intense joy and satisfaction, such as no words could express, I sprang back to bed, and again drifted off to sweet and restoring sleep. Years after I told Peter Mackenzie this story, which he introduced into a lecture on the Sabbath, describing the scene and exclaiming in his own inimitable manner, "The poor bairn bounced into bed with a joy that napoleon never felt at Austerlitz nor Wellington at Waterloo.

Thus some of the happiest memories of my early days centre round the Sunday. Saturday night, for instance, was a time of preparation. All the week's work was done and everything connected with it, put out of sight. The whole night's rest lasting until daylight on Sunday morning, the one family dinner of the week, the Sunday school and the public services, all combined to create an oasis in the wilderness, filling the atmosphere

with welcome fragrance as it drew near. It was literally the day of days, a veritable Elim of wells and palm-trees, with a desert on either side as barren and desolate as Shur or Sinai to the Israelites of old.



The chapel at the end of the street—  
The Independent Methodist Chapel  
in Hetton-le-Hole This church was  
built in 1886 and replaced a smaller  
nearby building

In the early years of the 18th century the only provision for the religious needs of the coalfields centred on the parish churches, which were very few and far apart. As new collieries were opened, and large populations gathered round them, the existing churches were quite inadequate for the growing necessities of the case. But nothing was done and vast

numbers of people grew up without humanizing influences of either religion or education, and in consequence were the ready victims of vice in all its forms. The “Pitman’s Pay” , gives us a picture of rough manners, boisterous enjoyments, and hard life of the men of these days

When the great evangelist of that time ( John Wesley) came to preach the Gospel in the north, he found a virgin soil. From place to place he travelled to speak to multitudes who knew nothing of their own sinful, lost condition, nor of the means of salvation. Thus, when Methodist societies were formed, the members were in no sense Dissenters; they had nothing to dissent from. Methodism was the only agency that taught them, enlightened them, and fed their hungry souls.

The oldest and most familiar mental photograph in my memory is that of a square, red-tiled brick building at the end of a long row of miners’ cottages in my native village. This struc-

ture, being somewhat higher than other building in the place, had a prominence which naturally attracted attention where there was little else to notice. Two large windows in front, and a projecting porch covering the doorway between, marked it out as a special building both in structure and purpose. Though void of ornament and without architectural pretensions, that little unassuming Methodist chapel was the only place of worship, and its Sunday school the only place of education, in the village for more than sixty years of its history.

During those years the services held and the lessons taught within those rough brick walls won many souls for Christ, changed many lives and many homes, turning evil-doers into workers in the Master's vineyard, and helping to form Christian characters to carry on the work in years to come. Thus the little chapel, with these associations and memories of families and friendships from childhood to

old age, became as sacred and as much revered by the people of the village as St. Paul's Cathedral can be by inhabitants of London or St. Peter's by the citizens of Rome.



As population increased in the mining villages so did the congregations of the chapels so large imposing buildings were built. This is the Union Street Methodist Church in Hetton-le-Hole

The only place for social gatherings or recreation was a public-house, formed by uniting two cottages, which with a fenced cock-pit and a quoit ground at the front and a quiet place for pitch and toss just round the corner, provided opportunities for votaries of these sports, which, with the tap-room as their centre, were often accompanied by drunken brawls

and fightings, with all the demoralizing influences arising therefrom.

Beside the chapel the nearest places of worship were the church at Houghton-le-Spring, about two miles off to the east, and the more ancient church at Chester-le-Street, three miles away on the west. A chapel-of-ease at Penshaw, two miles and a half in another direction, was the parish church. From none of these, however, was any pastoral visitation conducted, nor were any religious services held for the people of New Lambton, who, like those in many other places, were literally left to sit in darkness and in the region and shadow of death.

Yet, just as the people which sat in darkness by way of the Sea of Galilee of the Gentiles eighteen hundred years before, saw the gospel light break on the shores of their lake and chase the darkness from the region, so in the 18th century the mining population in the colliery villages of

Durham and Northumberland by way of the Wear and Tyne saw that same gospel light, "the same yesterday, today, and for ever," breaking on the villages of Low Fell and Tanfield, Horsley and Plessey, Birtley, Biddick and Penshaw.

At Shiney Row, a village about one and a quarter miles away, the Methodist revival had "broken out," and the news spread to all the villages around. In the houses, down the pits, and at the street corners, conversations turned frequently on what was going on in Shiney Row. One man at Lambton determined to see for himself what the strange news meant, for he had heard that someone whom he knew had been "converted," and he was determined to see what this converting was like. On the Sunday morning, therefore, he walked to Shiney Row, and on entering the village met two men.

To his great surprise, no dogs accompanied them; they were dressed in their better

suits, and altogether had the appearance of men bent on important matters. "W'y, what-ten sort o' day had ye yisterda' lads? He called out to the men. "Eh ther's a bonny gam' on here," replied one of them, "What's the matter noo?" "The Methodies hes getten in amang huz, and som o' hus hes getten in amng the Methodies." " The bowlin match didn't come off yesterday, because baith Harry and Tom was converted last Sunda', there hasn't been a fight all the weekend."

The men were on their way to a meeting in some cottage, and they invited their questioner to go with them. In reporting his experiences he said, " We does thou think was the preacher, but Jack Raisbeck fra Lumley? He'd a white 'kucher, and my sang! He luk'd as good as a parson. He preached about the horrible pit, and, my word, getting to bank was a queer job."

He and his wife asked some of the Shiney Row men

to come and hold a prayer meeting in their house on the next Saturday night. This was the first Methodist service held in the village. People heard the singing, and came to their doors. Then "Jacky Raisbeck" came and preached. When the place came on to the Sunderland Plan none of the dwellers in Lambton had ever seen his name in print, and they flocked to look at the strange sight. The travelling preacher came on the Saturday, and the good wife made a special cake for his delectation. The little table was set in front of the window, covered with a 'ham' tablecloth. Everything though rough and coarse, was made spotlessly clean. The fireplace, bright with polished fire-irons and a glowing blaze, shone welcome. Behind the door a ladder led to the upper room or loft close to the tiles, which were not hidden by any plaster or wooden ceiling. The flooring board of the loft were laid loose upon the joists.

The host, sure that the house would be full, took up every third board in the loft, and

on the two remaining planks he placed forms, so that those upstairs could hear, though they could not see. Their heads touched the tiles in the roof, and movement was impossible, they were so closely packed. The ladder by which they climbed up provided seats for others, and the whole house was thus filled with eager hearers.



A small rural chapel in the Pennines. This lead miner's chapel was built in the countryside and served a very wide area

Thus a revival began in Lambton. Many were being saved, and the colliery viewer, Tom Smith, had the good

sense to see the converted men were punctually at the pit on a Monday morning instead of lounging at the public-house. He offered to alter Jacob Speed's cottage at the end of the row, so that it could be used as a chapel. The colliery workmen were sent, and part of the needful timber was provided. The roof was raised several feet, partitions removed and a gallery at each side and at the back was put up; two large windows put in, and the doorway protected by a small porch. Thus the chapel was provided which, with necessary alterations, has served its purpose to the present day.

Pew rent at the rate of 9d per quarter was charged for seats in the side gallery, the money thus raised being devoted to the provision of paper, pens and ink for the writing classes in the Sunday school. Eighteen shillings per quarter was the regular amount thus raised for some time.

The chapel thus created was the centre of all extra-

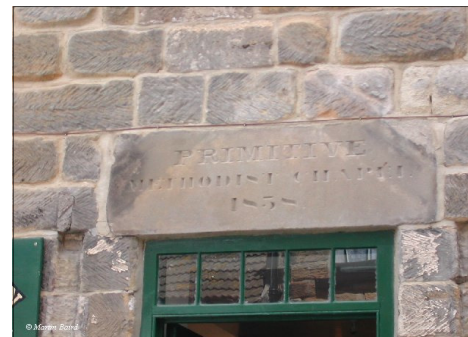
domestic life. Its only competitor was the public-house; and gradually, all that made for good living, high character and even the elements of education, found its home and sphere in the little sanctuary. The work was maintained at the cost of many sacrifices and much self-denial by the poorly paid pitmen, who found in the Methodist services their consolation amidst hardships and

**This excerpt from George Parkinson's Book– "True Stories of Durham Pit-life" gives a true and honest insight into the breakthrough of religion in the mining villages of County Durham. Methodism in all its forms was to reduce the brutal attitudes and action of the populace over the years and at the same time set a precedent for education as a vehicle which became established as a way of life and influenced the way in which our lives have changed over the years.**

their inspiration and hope for better things to come.



This chapel at Staithes when formed used an existing house. The doorway shows this feature. Primitive Methodist Chapel 1858



Converted house chapel Darwen Lancs