

Withington's other Methodist Church

An account of Burton Road (one-time Primitive) Methodist Church with personal memories

Kenneth Whittaker

First published in Withington Methodist News, September 2014

The Burton Road (ex-Primitive) Methodist church joined with the Wilmslow Road (ex-Wesleyan) church in September 1954. On the 60th anniversary of this union, I have brought together some historical information on the Burton Road church and added my own memories. Some readers will, I'm sure, have their own memories worth jotting down.

Though a fair amount has been written about the Wilmslow Road church, much less has been written about the smaller Burton Road church. This church building (1891) still stands. In 1956, it became the home of the Withington Community Association, and is now an Adult Learning Centre.

My Childhood Memories

I was born and baptised a Primitive Methodist as my father was a Primitive Methodist local preacher. In 1932, whilst I was still a baby, Methodist Union took place. Though the two Withington churches were now part of the same denomination, they still went about things in their individual ways. Indeed, until 1948 they were in different Circuits. Burton Road church belonged to the Great Western Street Circuit; Wilmslow Road church to the Oxford Road Circuit (called the Withington Circuit from 1940).

When, in the mid-1930s, it was time for me to go to Sunday School, it was the Burton Road one. My father used to take me as he was a Sunday School teacher there. We lived then in Fallowfield, but in 1938 moved to Withington. We continued to attend the Burton Road church and Sunday School. However, in early 1941, after the Christmas 1940 Manchester blitz, we evacuated ourselves to Heald Green to be near other family members. We attended the Heald Green Methodist church in Brown Lane until 1946, when we returned to Withington. My mother thought there would be more "going on" at the Wilmslow Road church, so we went there instead of back to the Burton Road church.

The earliest information on the Burton Road church that I have in my possession dates from 1926. I have two copies of a programme for the performance of Handel's Messiah on December 5th of that year. I suspect that my parents were in the augmented choir gathered for the occasion. At that time, the Messiah was performed annually.

The period between the wars was a thriving time for the Burton Road church. New housing was being built around it. I believe it was necessary at one time to have two sittings of the Sunday School. I have also been told that there were no empty pews at the church services.

I have two particular memories of the time I was in the Primary Department of the Sunday School. One is going to the home of the leader of the department, Mrs. Bagnall. I went to

learn how to recite a poem I had to perform at the Sunday School Anniversary. I later forgot the name of the poem, but Betty Harris did not, and a few years ago told me it was William Blake's Little Lamb, who made thee?

The second memory is of a Rose Queen pageant in which I was one of the page boys. The pageant was held in what was then the Methodist Ministers' Training College in Didsbury. I believe that, before my time, the scholars went by horse-drawn lorry to Ford Bank in Didsbury for an outing. The wagons we used had an iron framework on top of them so tarpaulins could be pulled over us if it rained.

The Burton Road church activities from before the war have all gone, like the church itself. However, the Primitive Methodist cause in Withington had been going for sixty years before I knew it. Admittedly, the local Wesleyans go back further, to 1792.

Early Days

The Primitive Methodists missioning of Withington, about 1875, was undertaken by members of the Upper Moss Lane church. There was no local church to preach in so they used whatever premises they could find. One building used was the Victoria Hall on Landsdowne Street (now Nuneham Avenue). The hall had just been built by the Independent Order of Good Templars, a temperance organisation. In my days, the hall had become known as Landsdowne Hall and was used by Rayburn's Dancing Academy. The building has now been demolished.

By about 1880, Primitive Methodism in Withington had become established enough to consider erecting a building. The first building took the form of an iron hut (the Victorian equivalent of a pre-fab). It was on Burton Road almost opposite the present building on the site which later became Donnet's plumbers, and is now (2014) Walsh's DIY store.

Although the Primitive Methodists had their own Withington church, money was in short supply. The South Manchester Gazette reported, in 1887, that the Sunday School Anniversary services that year had raised only £4 (admittedly, bad weather had not helped). However, the church was not without its activities. In January 1887, the usual Tea Party for scholars took place, with prizes and entertainment. Later in that year, a series of concerts was held with the purpose of raising money in aid of enlarging the recently set up library.

In the previous year, 1886, the Whitsuntide outing was to Matlock (presumably by train). At Christmas, the usual party took place.

By 1891, the Society felt able to build the premises that would last them out. The new building was basically a chapel at the front and a schoolroom behind. This was entered by a side door. In the chapel was an organ that was hand-blown. Mr Donnet (mentioned above as a local plumber) was one of the first organ blowers. Many years later, I took this job.

The new building not only helped the Church's activities, but also acted as home to the local members of the Independent Order of Rechabites (a temperance and benefit society). Activities included not only the usual Sunday School, but also the Burton Road Sisterhood, founded by Mrs. Pickett, and the Men's Fireside, founded by Mr. Noad.

My later memories

Although the Burton Road and Wilmslow Road churches were in the same Circuit from 1948, it was only after I completed my National Service in 1952 that I renewed my contact with the Burton Road church. I began to train as a local preacher in that year, and helped to take the services. Later I took the leadership role at the services. I met, for the first time, some of the young people at the church. I also was in contact with them through the 'Withington Churches Youth Council'. In the May 1953 newsletter, which I edited, the Burton Road members reported that facilities at Burton Road were limited, but they had been able to be successful at table tennis. I recall that they were also good at lawn tennis.

The last service I took at Burton Road as a local preacher was in June 1954, only a couple of months before its members united with those of the Wilmslow Road church. The congregation was, by then, very small.

The final rally and service was held on the weekend of August 28th-29th, 1954. I was able to be at both. The chief guest at the weekend was the Rev. Herbert Leggate. He was well-respected at Burton Road, and was perhaps its outstanding minister between the wars. At the time of the amalgamation, the minister of both churches was the Rev. Frank Harper.

The end of the story of the Burton Road church was in 1955 when a memorial chapel was opened in the South Transept of the Wilmslow Road church in May that year. The Burton Road Memorial Chapel commemorated the successful union of the two churches.

Although, with the rebuilding of the interior of the Wilmslow Road church in 1988, the memorial chapel has gone, there are still a few ex-Burton Road people or families associated with the present church. Those I remember from the past include the Quinneys, the Connellys, the Clarsons, the Richmonds, the Preens and the Harris family. The most notable lay figure in the years when I was associated with the Burton Road church was the Alderman Harold Quinney. In 1959, he became Lord Mayor of Manchester.

The Burton Road minister I most think of is the Rev. R.J. Smith, not just because he baptised me, but because he came back to Withington after the reorganisation of the Circuit in 1948.

I give thanks for the part Burton Road church and its people have played in my Christian Life.

Kenneth Whittaker